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T H O M P S O N

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

THOMPSON

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

BY

ST. JOHN HANKIN &
GEORGE CALDERON



NEW YORK
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PREFACE

Though "Thompson" is not the result of a collaboration, I hope that it has something of the effect that St. John Hankin and I would have got if we had worked on it together.

Soon after his death, Mrs. Hankin sent me the MS. of the play as he had left it, and asked me to finish it. It was entitled "Thomson's Escape: A Rather Heartless Comedy." Act I was written out with a certain air of finality; the rest was a pretty full sketch, covering some twenty pages. I agreed with pleasure, because it was the sort of comedy-scheme that I should have liked to invent myself.

I allowed myself full liberty in dealing with his notes; carried out some of his directions (such as "Jim vague—drift—explains philosophy of drift—see what turns up"); and modified others that did not fit in with the central notion as I saw it. Nobody can quite fulfil another man's intention; besides, a playwright can never tell how his idea is going to "pan out" till he has finished with it. The middle and end are bound to have a retroactive effect on the beginning, and Hankin

himself would probably have altered many things which had an air of being settled.

In the original draft the scene of the first Act was laid by Hankin in the Lounge of a riverside hotel. Helen was a more matter-of-fact young lady than I have made her. Gerald was in the Navy. Miss Latimer was "Mrs." and his mother. Instead of a lion-tamer and a lion, there was a cockney stranger rescued by Gerald from drowning; and there was none of this plainly artificial business about an uncle leaving property—a pardonable piece of stage apparatus, I hope, for getting through with the business of plot where character, not plot, is the main thing.

If something of the fine dry Hankin flavour has been lost in the course of treatment, his admirers must forgive it as inevitable. Nobody regrets it more than his fellow-author,

G. C.

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

MRS. VAUGHAN

HELEN, *her stepdaughter*

MISS LATIMER

GERALD, *her nephew*

JAMES

FROHOCK

TWO PARLOURMAIDS, TWO COUNTRYMEN

The action passes at a small house at Maidenhead

ACT I

SCENE: *The drawing-room. It is noon on a sunny day in June, and the shady corners of the room are full of warm reflections from the garden, which is visible through the open French window.*

When the curtain rises, the only occupant of the room is HELEN VAUGHAN, a romantic-looking girl of about 22, who is reading on the sofa.

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Off.*] Don't be long, dear Miss Latimer. . . . You'll find me in the drawing-room.

[*Enter MRS. VAUGHAN, a pretty woman of about 35, charmingly dressed in summery garments and an elegant feathery hat. Her smile is sweet, her manner amiable, and her total effect is charming.*

So *there* you are, my dear! Such a lovely morning! Miss Latimer and I are just going for a little stroll. One really ought to get out before lunch if one can, if only to get up an appetite, oughtn't one? I do so hate sitting down to a good lunch and having no appetite. Won't you come too?

HELEN. No thank you, Mamma. I think I shall stay indoors. I am feeling rather lazy this morning.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, that's always a pleasant feeling, isn't it? Laziness may be wrong, but it certainly is very pleasant. . . .

[*Enter GERALD by the window, in knickerbockers, carrying a bag of golf-clubs. A tall, handsome sunburnt soldier of about 30; very simple, very straightforward, rather slow in thought and speech; the heroic type.*

Ah, *there* you are Captain Latimer! So you've been playing golf already. Well, I hope you won your game. Though no doubt I ought not to ask, for if you've lost you won't want to say, and if you've won you'll be too modest. I and Miss Latimer are just going out to take a little turn.

[*Enter MISS LATIMER, a rather grim and masculine old maid of 60; kind-hearted, strong-featured, deep-voiced, ill-dressed and out-spoken.*

[*To GERALD.*] Won't you come too?

GERALD. Many thanks. I should have liked it very much; but the fact is . . . I've got to clean my golf-clubs.

MISS LATIMER. I hope I haven't kept you waiting?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Not at all. We've plenty of time. And what is it like out, Captain Latimer? Not windy I hope.

GERALD. There's a little breeze, that's all.

[*Exit* GERALD.]

MRS. VAUGHAN. How tiresome! It will ruin my hat.

MISS LATIMER. You can change it if you want, you know.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I think I'd rather risk it than take such a desperate measure as that. So come along. [*To* HELEN.] Good-bye for the present, my dear; and mind you're not dull without us. Come, dear Miss Latimer.

HELEN. Good-bye; enjoy yourselves.

MRS. VAUGHAN. That I'm sure we shall.

MISS LATIMER. Which way? Down by the river?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh, nowhere near the circus, I beg; there are the most dreadful animals roaring in the menagerie there; it really is too alarming.

[*Exeunt* MRS. VAUGHAN and MISS LATIMER.]

HELEN goes to the window and waves after them.

[*Without.*] No, I propose that we go up through the beechwoods and examine the really enchanting windmill. . . .

[*Mrs. VAUGHAN's voice dies away.* HELEN returns from the window, looks in the glass and puts a hairpin into its place. Tucks up her legs on the sofa and returns with a sigh to her book. *Re-enter* GERALD.]

GERALD. Am I disturbing you?

HELEN. Not at all. Please come in.

GERALD. I have been guilty of a deception, Miss Vaughan. When I said that I had to clean my golf-clubs, that was a subterfuge. My caddie had already cleaned them. I wanted to be alone with you. Are you sure that I am not disturbing you?

HELEN. Quite sure. I was only reading.

GERALD. A novel, I suppose?

HELEN. No, I was reading poetry.

GERALD. Poetry?

HELEN. It is a little volume of Lamartine. I should be very glad to read you some of it if you understand French.

GERALD. At another time I should like it very much indeed, though I do not understand French. But now . . .

HELEN. Now?

GERALD. I have something to say to you, something very important.

HELEN. Yes?

GERALD. It is very difficult. I do not know how to begin.

HELEN. Is it something about yourself?

GERALD. It is about both of us.

HELEN. What can it be?

GERALD. Miss Vaughan, all this fortnight that I have been here I have been like a man in a dream . . . yes, like a man in a dream. I have not known you for long, that is true . . .

HELEN. About a fortnight.

GERALD. Yes. When my Aunt first wrote to me that her friend, Mrs. Vaughan, with whom she was sharing a cottage in the country for the summer, had a stepdaughter, I felt something queer, a sort of presentiment, at once. When she invited me to come down here to stay, I knew that I was in for it. Every day since I have known you it has got worse and worse . . . Miss Vaughan, I see in you all the most exquisite qualities of womanhood. I love you with all the love that my heart is capable of; I adore you; everything is changed for me since I have known you, the world, life, everything.

HELEN. Stop, stop!

GERALD. Are you angry with me?

HELEN. Of course not. Why should I be angry with you? But let me stop you before you get any further. I like you very much, Captain Latimer.

GERALD. Oh!

HELEN. Almost as much as any one I know . . .

GERALD. You are saying that only to be kind?

HELEN. No, I say it because I mean it. You say that you love me, you are going to ask me to love you in return . . .

GERALD. To marry me . . .

HELEN. It is the same thing.

GERALD. Very nearly.

HELEN. But it is impossible. I can never marry any one.

GERALD. *You* never marry any one?

HELEN. No, there was a man once, but he is dead.

GERALD. Oh, if I had known . . .

HELEN. How could you? I never talk about it. But since then I feel that I can never belong to any one but him. I shall always love him, and be faithful to him. I wear this locket in memory of him.

GERALD. Is that his hair?

HELEN. No, but I like to think it is; it is the same colour.

GERALD. Oh, Miss Vaughan, it is dreadful to feel that you have been through a great sorrow like this; you who should be sheltered from every kind of grief or harm. But if ever, as time passes, you should come to feel the burden of your solitude too much to bear . . .

HELEN. Do you imagine I could ever forget a man whom I have loved like that?

GERALD. Not forget him of course. But I thought that perhaps, some day . . .

HELEN. Please say no more. I cannot listen to you when you talk like that; it seems like being false to him.

GERALD. But I only mean . . .

HELEN. You can hardly understand how I feel about him I suppose. You are a man; and I don't think men feel things so deeply as women.

GERALD. But you mustn't imagine . . .

HELEN. If you understood you would never think that I could change or come to love any one else.

When a woman loves it is for ever; at least, I know that it is so with me.

GERALD. But really, Miss Vaughan . . .

HELEN. You are like Papa. Papa imagined that after a year or two I should forget. He believed that James would forget.

GERALD. Oh, that was impossible, I am sure.

HELEN. Who can say? But he had no time; in three weeks he was gone. Let us always be friends, close friends; but only promise me one thing, never, never, to speak to me of love again.

GERALD. Oh, Miss Vaughan, if you forbid me, I have, of course, no alternative but to obey.

HELEN. Thank you.

GERALD. But remember, if ever you want a friend to go anywhere or do anything for you, anything in the world, I am always there.

HELEN. Thank you, thank you. . . . Some other time I will tell you more about James; but just now let us talk of something else.

GERALD. Yes, let us talk of something else. Give me one moment first, to collect my thoughts.

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Without.*] Completely ruined my dear; three pounds positively thrown into the gutter.

[*Enter MRS. VAUGHAN and MISS LATIMER by the window.*]

Oh, Captain Latimer, what a wicked man you are! *Why* did you tell me it was a nice day with no wind?

GERALD. I think I said there was a little breeze.

MRS. VAUGHAN. A little breeze! It's a perfect gale. We positively had to run for shelter, didn't we? And East-windy too, which is of all winds the wind that I most detest. It ruins one's temper and one's hat.

[MRS. VAUGHAN *takes off her hat and looks at the apparently unruffled plumage regretfully.*

Look at that!

GERALD. Is it damaged much?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Have you no eyes?

MISS LATIMER. You ought to have changed it then, as I suggested.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And what would have been the use of that? A wind like this would ruin any hat, even the plainest sailor; and I never wear sailors. They don't suit me, do they Helen? I look a perfect guy in them. So when it's too windy for my kind of hat I simply have to stay indoors, that's all. Some people pretend to like wind, I know. There was a poet who actually wrote an ode to the North East Wind; Kingsley, wasn't it? It begins: "Welcome, wild North Easter?" Ugh! fancy, and a clergyman too! And he couldn't have been sincere about it because he was so sensitive to the cold that he ultimately died of a chill, which was evidently a judgment. Not that people pay any attention to what poets say a rule. Still, you never know, and

there may have been others who suffered through taking the poor gentleman at his word.

GERALD. There may indeed.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And oh, the animals down in the circus were roaring all the time in such a dreadfully alarming fashion we were both frightened out of our wits ; weren't we, dear Miss Latimer ?

MISS LATIMER. Quite.

MRS. VAUGHAN. However, I have no time to talk about poets or animals now. I must hurry to my room and try to repair the ravages of the climate as best I can. Will you come and help me, Helen, my dear ? I am sure it will take at least two of us, to say nothing of my maid, to make me presentable by lunch time.

HELEN. We'll soon put you to rights, Mamma.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, I'm glad you're so hopeful, my dear. You're always so useful about straightening things when they're rumpled ; and I always think that's a sort of special gift. Some people have it, and some people haven't. I haven't got it in the least, I'm sorry to say. As long as my things are perfectly new I'm all right.

[*Exeunt HELEN and MRS. VAUGHAN.*

[*Without*]. But directly I've worn them once or twice, and especially if I've been caught in what Captain Latimer is pleased to call a breeze, but I can only describe as an equinoctial gale . . .

[*Her voice dies away.*

[GERALD *sits brooding in a corner.* MISS LATIMER *has settled down and is knitting, as she is during the greater part of the play.*

MISS LATIMER. Thinking, Gerald?

GERALD. Yes.

MISS LATIMER. What about?

GERALD. About golf.

MISS LATIMER. Humph! . . . You certainly don't look like a man who has just come into £1500 a year.

GERALD. I don't feel like it.

MISS LATIMER. I've been wondering ever since breakfast why I'm not to say anything about your Uncle Jack having left you his money.

GERALD. Oh, I may as well own up. I've just been proposing to Miss Vaughan.

MISS LATIMER. Proposing!

[GERALD *nods.*

Well, and what did she say?

GERALD. She refused me.

MISS LATIMER. She what?

GERALD. She refused me.

MISS LATIMER. Are you sure?

GERALD. Oh quite, quite sure; there was no mistake about it.

MISS LATIMER. And pray what has that got to do with your Uncle Jack?

GERALD. I didn't want to insult Miss Vaughan by seeming to think that such a paltry question as money could make the least difference to a young lady of her delicacy of feeling.

MISS LATIMER. I see. Well, well, I thought she liked you.

GERALD. I think she does; at least she said so.

MISS LATIMER. Then what's the reason?

GERALD. There's another man.

MISS LATIMER. Another man? I've seen no other man.

GERALD. He died two years ago. She has never got over it. She says that she feels she can never love any one else.

MISS LATIMER. Humph! . . . Well, I hope you don't mean to go glooming about the place like a young Hamlet, for if there's one thing that I dislike more than another it's gloomy people; and I'd just as soon you didn't stay with me at all.

GERALD. My dear Aunt, don't imagine that I mean to give way to melancholy. I hope I shall bear my sorrow as becomes a man. It isn't her fault. I don't want to make her miserable by going about looking wretched.

MISS LATIMER. Well, that's a comfort.

GERALD. For the moment I am upset a bit, of course. But I shall go down by the river and walk it off; and in an hour or so I hope to return as if nothing had happened.

MISS LATIMER. Well, mind you're not late for lunch. . . By the by, now that *that's* over, I suppose I needn't let concealment, like a worm in the bud, prey on my damask cheek any longer?

GERALD. How do you mean?

MISS LATIMER. I can let them know about your Uncle Jack's property?

GERALD. No, please no!

MISS LATIMER. And why not, pray?

GERALD. I shouldn't like to seem as if I were parading my delicacy of feeling in having kept it dark until I had proposed to her.

MISS LATIMER. Well of course they'll guess; for I shall have to go into mourning.

GERALD. Oh no, you mustn't do that.

MISS LATIMER. What, not go into mourning for my own brother-in-law?

GERALD. No please, I really must ask you not to. It would give the whole show away.

MISS LATIMER. But my dear boy!

GERALD. You must promise me that, Aunt Harriet.

MISS LATIMER. But really Gerald, this is bullying. You early Victorian cave-man! Are we toys? Can't I wear what I like?

GERALD. If you put on a black dress I shall go straight back to India. On my word of honour as an officer and a gentleman.

MISS LATIMER. Hoity toity!

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Without.*] Just run down and cut me a few roses, there's a dear.

GERALD. You promise? ²/₄

MISS LATIMER. There's Mrs. Vaughan.

GERALD. I think I'll be off.

[*Exit* GERALD.]

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Without.*] And mind you don't tear your frock among the bushes as I always do. [*Entering by the door.*] Here I am! What a relief to be tidy again.

MISS LATIMER. Was that Helen you were talking to?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, I was just sending her out to get a few roses for the piano.

MISS LATIMER. She seems a most dutiful daughter.

MRS. VAUGHAN. She is indeed; and I always feel like a mother towards her, although she's only a girl, and of course I'm not her real mother, and step-mothers are always expected to beat them, according to the story-books. But then no doubt one shouldn't believe story-books any more than one does poets, should one? Indeed, I sometimes doubt if we ought to believe anything; though if one doesn't——

MISS LATIMER. That's a sad story about her engagement.

MRS. VAUGHAN. To Mr. Thompson you mean? Yes, very sad. But that's a long time ago; and these things will happen, won't they? So we must put up with them. Of course it's not so easy to do that when they happen to oneself, but fortunately most things necessarily happen to some one else, and then it's easier, isn't it?

MISS LATIMER. What did you say his name was?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Thompson, James Thompson. All Thompsons seem to be christened James, don't they?

Just as all Browns are called Thomas, and all Grants Alexander.

MISS LATIMER. And who *was* this Mr. Thompson?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh, he was John's secretary. Though why John should ever have wanted a secretary at all was always a mystery to me; but he says he must have some one to tear up his letters. At first he had a lady to do it, but she was most deplorably good-looking, and in every way quite unsuited for the post. So I naturally insisted on John's getting rid of her and engaging a man instead. But Helen fell in love with him almost directly, which was even worse; at least, John said it was worse. And of course he hadn't a penny; so what would they have had to live on?

MISS LATIMER. But surely, he had his salary as secretary?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, of course. But naturally John paid him as little as he could, because he didn't want to pauperise him. And of course Mr. Thompson did as little work as he could, so as not to pauperise John. So you see that left him all the more time for Helen; and he really was quite nice-looking of a kind, which was a pity no doubt, but what can you do? And the upshot of it was that John went back to having a lady secretary again, though I am glad to say a very painstaking Scotchwoman of about forty-five.

MISS LATIMER. And why did Mr. Thompson go away?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, you see, I had found out

all about it, because I happened to come into the room while he was kissing her hand, and naturally, I told John, and when it appeared that there was nothing for them to live on, I insisted on John telling them that the engagement must be broken off at once.

MISS LATIMER. Well?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, they were both very nice about it and saw John's point of view; for it's quite plain that young people must have money nowadays or else they'd starve; and old people too for the matter of that. Don't you think we acted for the best?

MISS LATIMER. I think you acted like a pair of brutes!

MRS. VAUGHAN. Brutes?

MISS LATIMER. There they might have been happily married; instead of which . . . Why didn't your husband pay this Mr. Thompson enough?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, if he took it I suppose it was enough, or he wouldn't have taken it. We didn't force him to be John's secretary, you know.

MISS LATIMER. If your husband wanted a secretary he ought to have paid him a big enough salary to marry on, otherwise he was being underpaid. How are young men to marry if they aren't paid enough to marry on? And how is the country to go on if young men can't marry, I should like to know?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well I'm sure I don't know. It's no good asking me. But at any rate one thing was certain; *John* didn't mean to give them any money,

and there was an end of it as far as he was concerned ; for, once John makes up his mind about a thing, you can talk yourself black in the face but it won't affect *him*. So there they were ! And however much you may theorise, one does so hate being hungry and having to do without things ; at least I do, though they say that the poor get used to it, which is certainly a fortunate thing, for us at any rate. So Mr. Thompson went away, and the next thing we heard of him was that he was drowned.

MISS LATIMER. Drowned ?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, practically.

MISS LATIMER. Practically drowned ?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, in the "Gothenburg," on the way to America. John advised him to go to America ; he said there were so many openings there. Not that John knew anything at all about America ; still, he advised him to go, and I quite agreed with him ; for of course the further off he went the better for all parties. So Mr. Thompson took his advice ; and when the ship was wrecked he was . . .

MISS LATIMER. Practically drowned.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Exactly.

MISS LATIMER. And hasn't she got over it yet ?

MRS. VAUGHAN. No. You see the circumstances of his death were rather romantic, and anything like romance appeals irresistibly to Helen. When the ship went down he might have saved himself quite easily ; he seems to have been a splendid swimmer.

But instead of that he devoted himself to saving other people; he rescued three of the women by swimming with them till the boats were able to pick them up; and it was in trying to rescue a fourth that he lost his own life, for up came a shark and of course that was the end of *him*. Poor Helen was dreadfully upset and subscribed to a Press Cutting Agency which sent her extracts from all the newspapers giving accounts of what Mr. Thompson had done; and there she lay on a sofa for weeks, pasting them all into an album and reading them over and over again. We tried every sort of thing to rouse her, change of scene, Teneriffe, Broadstairs, tincture of quinine; nothing was any use. And since then she spends her time reading the most³ depressing poetry that she can find and playing the piano with both pedals down, and vows she will never marry at all, which is naturally very annoying for us.

MISS LATIMER. Then you wanted her to marry?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well you see, John and I both agree that grown-up girls are really rather a nuisance than otherwise about the house. Not, of course, that dear Helen isn't a sweet child and makes herself most useful, but still it would be more satisfactory for all parties if once she were comfortably settled. And I should never have offered any opposition to this match with Mr. Thompson if I had imagined she was going to be like that; and really would rather that she had been happy with the man she loved, or at any rate a widow, however poor, than

treat the house as a kind of nunnery or nursing home.

MISS LATIMER. I should think so indeed!

MRS. VAUGHAN. But there's no calculating on girls. For if ever there was one that I had expected to be like other girls it was Helen, instead of which she turns out quite feminine like they used to be in the early Victorian days; though really from all one hears one hardly knows if people in the early Victorian days were half as early Victorian as we have always been led to suppose they were.

MISS LATIMER. I have no patience with her; I should like to shake her.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I'm sure I'm delighted to hear you say so.

MISS LATIMER. I call her a romantic idiot to go maundering on like this for two years over a man that's dead. When you and your old curmudgeon of a husband refused to let her marry this Thompson, if she had had any spirit she ought to have run away with him at once.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But isn't that romantic?

MISS LATIMER. Not a bit; that's practical common sense.

Enter GERALD at window.

Well Gerald, what is it?

GERALD. I say, I hope you won't mind . . .

MISS LATIMER. What has happened?

GERALD. The fact is, I met a chap I know down by the river . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. Then I hope you asked him in to lunch.

GERALD. That's just it.

MRS. VAUGHAN. How delightful. I always think it is so much more amusing to see strangers at meals than people one knows quite well. Though of course one's supposed to like one's own friends and relations best; still, it isn't a matter of affection when you're eating.

GERALD. Well, I'm glad you don't mind.

[*Exit* GERALD.]

MRS. VAUGHAN. And now I must go and find the glasses to put Helen's roses in. And you, dear Miss Latimer?

MISS LATIMER. What about me?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Aren't you going to titivate at all?

MISS LATIMER. Well, perhaps I'd better go and put my hat straight.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I should; or take it off.

[*Exeunt talking.*]

And I must say I think it's very talented of your nephew to come across a friend when he's out walking in such a very out-of-the-way little place as this; for who would have supposed . . . [Voice dies away.]

[*Enter* GERALD and JAMES by the window.]

JAMES is a cool-looking individual of about 30, dressed in flannels, and carrying a French novel.

GERALD. Don't be shy, old chap, there's no one here.

JAMES. Will my punt be all right?

GERALD. As safe as a house.

JAMES. I oughtn't really to be here all all; I promised to lunch with the Bertrams up at Road's End. But it doesn't really matter; I'll go there some other day.

GERALD. How funny our meeting again like this. I thought you'd settled in America.

JAMES. So I have; but I came over on business.

GERALD. Business?

JAMES. Yes, I and another chap, a man named Balgarnie; such a ripper; you ought to meet him; we've got a mine we found in Mexico, at least he found it. We're over here trying to float it as a company, at least he is . . .

GERALD. Well, I am glad you have come down here.

JAMES. The fact is, I ought to be helping Balgarnie; but I met a man in town who was coming down here for the week end; oh, such a nice chap, you can't think! So I just ran down . . . And what are you doing here?

GERALD. [*His face falling.*] Oh, I've been playing golf.

JAMES. And what does the household consist of?

GERALD. My dear chap, there's the loveliest creature here that you ever saw. Oh, if you only knew . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Without.*] My dear Miss Latimer,

I only wish that my hats took so little time to take on and off as yours do.

JAMES. Who the devil's that?

GERALD. That's her mother.

[Enter MRS. VAUGHAN and MISS LATIMER.

MRS. VAUGHAN carries two flower vases full of water which she puts down on the table.

Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Thompson; Jimmy Thompson who was up with me at . . .

JAMES. Mrs. Vaughan! I thought as much.

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Shrieking and falling on the sofa.*] Ah! It's him.

MISS LATIMER. Gracious! Who's him?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Mr. Thompson who was drowned; Helen's fiancé; the man who was eaten by a shark.

JAMES. Eaten by a shark?

GERALD. You, Thompson?

JAMES. I assure you I was never eaten by a shark.

MISS LATIMER. She's fainting.

GERALD. Good heavens!

MISS LATIMER. Quick, some water! Put up her legs! Throw it in her face.

MRS. VAUGHAN. No, no! I'm all right. Only when somebody you know lies mouldering at the bottom of the Atlantic, suddenly turns up in flannels in a drawing-room, and offers to shake hands with you, it's apt to be rather a shock. [*Sitting up.*] But I must go and warn Helen, or this will be too much for

her, poor child. I must break it to her gently bit by bit.

MISS LATIMER. Stay where you are ; I'll do it.

MRS. VAUGHAN. No, no ; let me go. I can't trust anybody but myself.

[*Enter HELEN at the window with her arms full of roses.*]

Helen, here's Mr. Thompson turned up again !

HELEN. Ah ! [*Dropping all her roses and holding out both hands to JAMES.*] You, James ?

JAMES. Miss Vaughan ? How delightful to meet you here. This is simply ripping.

HELEN. Then you weren't drowned after all ?

JAMES. Drowned ? Of course not. Why should I be drowned ?

HELEN. In the wreck.

JAMES. What wreck ?

HELEN. The "Gothenburg."

JAMES. Me ? But I never was on the "Gothenburg."

HELEN. Then you weren't in the shipwreck at all.

JAMES. No, not in any shipwreck.

HELEN. But the papers said you were.

JAMES. Said *I* was ?

HELEN. Yes, you James Thompson. They said you saved three lives and perished in the act of trying to save another.

JAMES. The deuce they did ! What a lark ! Well, it must have been some other Thompson, that's all.

HELEN. Well, it is nice to see you again !

MRS. VAUGHAN. Goodness, how quietly the child takes it. I thought at least you'd faint, as I did, very nearly.

HELEN. I'm much too happy to faint.

JAMES. Fancy my finding you all again like this; it really is ripping!

[*A bell rings.*]

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, any way, there's the lunch-bell; and as it's a joint, the sooner we go in the better; for to my mind there's nothing so apt to spoil a good leg of mutton as waiting in the cold till it's all little lumps of fat swimming about in the gravy like the people in that shipwreck in which it appears that Mr. Thompson didn't take any part after all.

[*During this speech the characters form procession and make for the door to go to lunch.*]

CURTAIN.

ACT II

An hour later. In the garden under the shade of a big tree. JAMES, HELEN, MRS. VAUGHAN, GERALD. JAMES is reading aloud from a scrap book of newspaper cuttings. HELEN and MRS. VAUGHAN listen with rapt attention and utter exclamations of delight and horror at the most thrilling places.

JAMES. "And now when it seemed at last that thanks to Thompson's exertions all had been safely got into the boats and the word was about to be given to bend to the oars, a thrill of horror ran round the company as a woman's figure suddenly emerged upon the taffrail of the sinking ship, making desperate gestures of appeal."

[*Enter two PARLOURMAIDS with coffee and milk.*
Coffee, hurrah! I love a cup of coffee after lunch.

HELEN. Don't stop.

JAMES. Where was I? Ha! "It was the Captain's wife who, having been confined to the sick bay by an attack of fever, had been forgotten in the confusion of the moment." Eh! That was very

careless of the Captain to forget her ; after being so careful too about the pickled pork and whisky.

HELEN. Go on.

JAMES. "Thompson, though still panting from his recent exertions" ——

Enter MISS LATIMER, knitting.

MISS LATIMER. Hm ! Mr. Thompson reading to you ? What is it ?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Sh ! It's Helen's newspaper cuttings about the shipwreck.

JAMES. Now, you listen to this, Miss Latimer ; it is most impressive.

HELEN. Go on, go on.

JAMES. You don't mind my cigarette ? "Thompson, though still panting from his recent exertions, soaked and shivering from his immersion, leaped to his feet to perform still one more feat of heroism." Too many feet there ; it doesn't scan.

HELEN. Don't make comments, but go on.

JAMES. "For one moment the intrepid hero stood gazing towards the frantic form that stood beckoning him to his death" ——

HELEN. Ah !

JAMES. That's ripping, isn't it ? "Beckoning him to his death. . . Behind him lay safety" ——

HELEN. Ah !

JAMES. "Before him yawned the mighty ocean," . . . evidently bored with the whole proceedings ; rather blasé about shipwrecks, don't you know.

HELEN. Give me back the book, James; you're laughing at it.

JAMES. On my word I'm not, er, Helen; I'm as serious as a judge.

HELEN. You have no reverence for the heroic.

JAMES. Haven't I though? I tell you I feel proud of my name when I think of him standing there with the blood of all the Thompsons coursing through his veins —

HELEN. Don't you see how wonderful it was of him, after already twice risking his life, not to think of his own safety, but to go straight back —

JAMES. My word, yes!

HELEN. Without even waiting to get his breath . . .

JAMES. His not to reason why,
His not to stop and dry;
Back in the ocean
Plunged Mr. Thompson.

HELEN. Give it here. [*Taking the album.*] I won't have sacred things made fun of.

JAMES. I say, don't be angry. I didn't mean any harm. This is capital coffee of yours, Mrs. Vaughan.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, I must say that after all one's heard about the wreck and everything, and how very heroic Mr. Thompson was and met with his death in such an odd way, it is a great disappointment to find it wasn't you after all.

JAMES. You put it so nicely, Mrs. Vaughan, you make me feel almost sorry myself. But, unfortunately, you see I went by the *Heidelberg* instead,

because I heard they fed you better there than on the *Gothenburg*; which shows that in spite of the instructive stories to the contrary that we heard in our youth, one isn't always punished for being greedy.

MRS. VAUGHAN. It seems hardly fair to Helen, after joining the Press Cutting Association and everything.

HELEN. Oh, Mamma!

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, my dear, a guinea's a guinea for all you may say, and the press-cuttings have certainly been a source of great pleasure to all of us, so long as we thought it was *our* Mr. Thompson who was drowned.

JAMES. Oh, I can quite understand it. [*To HELEN.*] Are you quite comfy?

HELEN. Yes, thanks.

JAMES. Have this cushion.

HELEN. No, thanks.

JAMES. [*Putting it behind his head.*] I wish you would; but if you won't——

MRS. VAUGHAN. And now tell us about your life in America.

JAMES. Oh, there's not much to tell.

HELEN. Oh, yes! and the prairies and the buffaloes and the Red Indians. Tell us of some of your adventures in the prairies.

JAMES. The prairies? Oh, that's those big open spaces. Well, I'm rather afraid I didn't have any adventures in the prairies. I was in the towns most of the time.

MRS. VAUGHAN. In the towns ?

HELEN. Oh, how does it feel to see your first buffalo ?

JAMES. Oh, there aren't any buffaloes out there now.

HELEN. No buffaloes ?

JAMES. They're extinct ; fizzled out ages ago.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But, my dear Mr. Thompson, don't destroy a world of pleasant illusions for us. No buffaloes ?

JAMES. There are only two left. They're in the Zoo in Regent's Park.

HELEN. Only two left !

JAMES. None others genuine : see the signature on the label.

HELEN. But the Red Indians——

MRS. VAUGHAN. *They* exist, at any rate.

JAMES. Oh yes, they exist all right. But they wear billycocks and blue serge dittos now, play bridge, and ride about in tramcars. You can't tell them from the Irish.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But don't they scalp people ?

JAMES. No more than the Irish do ; not so much, in fact.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I'm afraid the world has lost half its picturesqueness.

JAMES. Yes, we've come too late. It's rather rough.

HELEN. But what does it matter, so long as it is full of brave men ready to do brave things. You may not have been wrecked or scalped or anything,

but if you were, I know that you would show the sort of stuff that you are made of.

JAMES. Ah, I should indeed.

HELEN. I know that you are as brave as a lion.

JAMES. Now, my dear Miss Vaughan, you mustn't make me look ridiculous. You know I couldn't face a field-mouse if it showed fight.

HELEN. Rubbish, James. I know better.

MRS. VAUGHAN. No buffaloes and no Red Indians. . . . Then what did you do when you left New York?

JAMES. Well, you'll hardly believe me, but I worked.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Worked!

JAMES. Flattering incredulity!

HELEN. What work did you do?

JAMES. Oh, anything that came along. I was all sorts of things; such fun! I mined a bit, ranched a bit, was usher in a school for a bit. Then I met a fellow who was going to California, such a nice chap! So I went there for a bit. Then I met Balgarnie, who was going to Mexico, so I went there for a bit. That was when we discovered the mine.

MISS LATIMER. You seem to have gone pretty much where anybody led you.

JAMES. Oh, but you don't know Balgarnie; such a ripper; top-hole! With a devil of a will; I was simply hypnotised.

MISS LATIMER. But haven't you got a will too?

JAMES. Me? Of course I have; you musn't make fun of me. I'm all will. But Balgarnie's the sort of

chap who simply sweeps you off your legs. Some people are like that : magnetism or something.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But hadn't you any plans ?

JAMES. Plans ? Hundreds of 'em ! But somehow or other they never came off ; they never do ; haven't you noticed that ?

MISS LATIMER. Well, I must say, it sounds a poor-spirited backboneless way of going through life to me ; but then perhaps I'm old-fashioned.

JAMES. Oh, not a bit ! I believe in Providence, that's all ; I go where the current floats me. I'm the modern man, the latest thing, the good social animal.

MISS LATIMER. Well, I must say, if that's the latest thing, I'm glad that I am not modern. I prefer the out-of-date sort of man who sets his mind to a thing and goes on till he gets it.

JAMES. Oh, you like heroes ?

HELEN. Of course James, we *all* do !

JAMES. Well, I can't help feeling sorry for them myself, cast adrift in this unromantic world of ours, with nothing in their line left to do. There's still an armed burglar now and again, or a runaway horse ; but very seldom, and generally up the wrong street. The result is that the poor beggars spend most of their lives sitting on office stools, totting up somebody else's profits in a ledger, without ever getting a chance.

MISS LATIMER. Well, I'm only a woman, Mr. Thompson, so no doubt I don't see things so clearly

as you do with your masculine mind ; but at any rate women will always prefer men who do brave things.

JAMES. Well you know, the hero doesn't really make much of a husband, They're so often only at their best when there's something heroic to do. There was Aylwin Vavasour for instance. [*To GERALD.*] You remember Carrots? He rescued a good-looking heiress from a mad bull in the most thrilling circumstances. She married him and has regretted it ever since. When there are no mad bulls about he's rather a disagreeable fellow than otherwise to live with ; never does a stroke of work, smokes in the drawing-room and puts his legs on the mantelpiece. Or take Toby Strutt who knocked a man down in Oxford Street for being rude to a lady ; and was fined twenty shillings or a month at Vine Street for disorderly behaviour. No ! the fighting instinct is out of place in this police-ridden civilisation of ours. It's all very sad ; but I'm afraid we've got to put up with the world as we find it. Now tell us something about yourself, Latimer, old chap. What have *you* been doing all this time?

GERALD. Oh, nothing much.

MISS LATIMER. [*Proudly.*] Gerald has received the D.S.O. for service on the Afghan frontier.

JAMES. Ah, yes, there's still a corner there. Congratters, old chap. Are you going back ?

GERALD. In two or three months.

JAMES. You'd better hurry up. I hear the Afghans are all taking to pianolas and goloshes.

MISS LATIMER. Half-past two! I'm going to walk three times round the shrubbery and then settle down somewhere and get a little serious knitting done.

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*To* MISS LATIMER.] Come back here. I'll get rid of the others. I want to have a good talk with you.

[*Exit* MISS LATIMER.]

Now I am sure that you two old schoolfellows must have a thousand things to say to each other; school-fellows always have; and most of them, of course, quite unfit for ladies to hear. So don't you think it would be a good idea if you went for a walk?

JAMES. A1! We'll go for a walk, old chap.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Helen has letters to write for the afternoon post, I know.

HELEN. Oh, no, mamma; I haven't any letters to write.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, you have, my dear; your Aunt Harriet would be dreadfully disappointed if she didn't get a nice long letter from you to-morrow morning. Come along. [*To* JAMES *and* GERALD.] Good-bye, then, for the present.

[*Exeunt* MRS. VAUGHAN *and* HELEN *with parasols up.*]

[*Without.*] It certainly seems a pity to go indoors on such a lovely day with the garden smelling so sweet, but unfortunately one can't spend all one's day in the open, unless one's a wild animal, or a gardener, or something of that kind. . . . [*Voice dies away.*]

GERALD. [*Shaking JAMES by the hand.*] My dear chap, I know all.

JAMES. The deuce you do! All what?

GERALD. About you and Miss Vaughan.

Enter MISS LATIMER.

MISS LATIMER. Once! [*Exit MISS LATIMER.*]

JAMES. Lord! She gave me quite a jump. Is she always like that? What about me and Miss Vaughan?

GERALD. You love her.

JAMES. Of course I do; she's charming, isn't she?

GERALD. I know how you were parted.

JAMES. Oh! . . . Oh, that's an old story.

GERALD. She loves you just as much as ever.

JAMES. How nice of her! That's her manner; she's always like that. What a ripping day! [*Yawning.*] I must find a quiet corner somewhere in the shade.

GERALD. But you're coming for a walk!

JAMES. A walk? Oh, no, I say old chap, you must let me off; I'm that sleepy.

GERALD. But you said you were going for a walk.

JAMES. That was just to shake off the women.

GERALD. Good heavens! to shake off the women.

Enter MISS LATIMER.

MISS LATIMER. Twice! [*Exit MISS LATIMER.*]

JAMES. Heavens! There she is again. Of course, I'll go if you insist, but the fact is, I always have a nap after lunch.

GERALD. A nap!

JAMES. Isn't there a hammock anywhere?

GERALD. Yes; there's one in the orchard.

JAMES. The very ticket. Which way?

GERALD. This way. You're a most mysterious man.

JAMES. Don't you worry about me. You'd better have a snooze too on a day like this.

GERALD. I never sleep in the day time, not even in India.

JAMES. Don't you really? What a hearty chap you are! I wish I had your stamina.

[*Exeunt talking.*]

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Without.*] You do walk so fast. Really, I can hardly keep up with you.

MISS LATIMER. [*Without*] It's nearly over.

[*Enter MRS. VAUGHAN and MISS LATIMER.*]

MRS. VAUGHAN *with gardening gloves,
basket and scissors.*

Three times! They've gone. Let's sit down here again.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I was so upset, my dear, I could hardly utter a word all lunch, so I think you'll admit I really must have been very bad. How could one imagine after he had been safely swallowed by a shark, that he would turn up again in this way? It quite reminds one of Jonah and the whale. How surprised Jonah's friends must have been at his coming back when they all supposed they had seen the last of him. Nobody seems to have thought what a terrible shock it must

have been for them, to say nothing of the whale. No, once people get swallowed by fish it is more satisfactory in every way if they remain so; then you know where you are.

MISS LATIMER. Where *they* are, you mean.

MRS. VAUGHAN. If only I could make Helen write letters all day; or if only she would fall ill suddenly; but one mustn't hope for that again so soon, as she's only just well. Really, dear Miss Latimer, I don't know *what* to do!

MISS LATIMER. What I can't understand is, how the mistake ever arose.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Ah, our being so certain that it was our Mr. Thompson. No, of course that *was* a mistake.

MISS LATIMER. The shipping company ought to have known. I wonder the papers didn't say.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, yes. Well, the fact is that we weren't really sure that it *was* our Mr. Thompson.

MISS LATIMER. Not sure?

MRS. VAUGHAN. We didn't *want* to be sure.

MISS LATIMER. Didn't want to be?

MRS. VAUGHAN. No. Now you're shocked, dear Miss Latimer; but there really is no use in being shocked as I tell John. John is always being shocked. It was all for Helen's sake. You see, if we had made inquiries and all that, we might have found that it *wasn't* our Mr. Thompson after all, and what would have been the good of *that*? We didn't want Helen

to worry about him any more; so what a good plan it was if only he was finally disposed of in some way. That was *my* idea. As soon as I saw the wreck in the *Mail*, with James Thompson's name among the missing, I took it in to John, and said, There! Well John said this and that, and he said we ought to inquire before telling Helen; for Helen never reads the papers, and would have known nothing about it if we hadn't told her. So I said, "No John, inquiries are unnecessary, for if it's our Mr. Thompson they'll make no difference, and if it isn't, we'd much rather not know." It took John a long time to see it; John isn't quick: but so it was settled in the end. Helen was dreadfully distressed, poor child, which was only natural; but I fully expected that she would soon get over it; for one can't go on grieving for ever, can one? Indeed, I often find it hard to go on grieving long enough; it's so much easier to look on the bright side of things; and surely, if Mr. Thompson was really dead, nobody could expect Helen to consider herself engaged to be married to him, could they? The fact is that everything would have worked very well if only this other Mr. Thompson, who now turns out to have been a perfect stranger, had managed to get drowned in a more normal and unobtrusive kind of way. At first the papers merely said he was missing, and there's nothing very romantic about that, is there? It might happen to any one. Then came these accounts . . . He really does seem to have behaved splendidly.

MISS LATIMER. Poor fellow!

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, and it was a great surprise to all of us. For Mr. Thompson had never displayed the least symptom of heroism as John's secretary; not of course that there was much opportunity in the sort of work that he was doing for John. And it really was very unfortunate; for Helen is so fanciful. If only he had died quietly in his bed, she wouldn't have felt it in the same way; but when there were columns about him in the halfpenny papers, and even the *Times* had a little paragraph, she said that she could never be another's because her heart was buried with him, though of course he never was buried at all, unless you count the shark.

MISS LATIMER. I only wonder you never found out the mistake before.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well you see, John had made him promise not to write to Helen, as it wouldn't be the thing if they couldn't be married. And Mr. Thompson kept his word. Men are always so honourable in that sort of way, don't you think? Besides, they're never fond of writing letters, especially if they happen to be secretaries. And it all comes round to that again, what do you advise me to do now?

MISS LATIMER. Well my dear, I must candidly confess that I don't think much of this Mr. Thompson of yours.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Why, to tell you the truth, neither do I.

MISS LATIMER. He seems a very flabby sort of individual to me.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Then you advise me to send him to the right-about?

MISS LATIMER. Not at all. It isn't we that have got to marry him; it's Helen. It doesn't matter whether *we* are in love with him—the question is, is Helen?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Of course she is, desperately.

MISS LATIMER. Then there's no more question about it. I advise you to let them marry.

MRS. VAUGHAN. You do?

MISS LATIMER. I do.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, I'm delighted to hear you say so; for the fact is, my dear Miss Latimer, that that is the very thing I had made up my mind to do, and I should have felt extremely vexed if you had disapproved of my decision. And if Mr. Thompson hasn't any money . . .

MISS LATIMER. Then Mr. Vaughan will have to help them.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Exactly what I felt. Poor John! he does so dislike parting with money. All English parents do, and very likely foreign ones too for the matter of that. However, I daresay it won't be much; after all, we may find that Mr. Thompson is quite rich by now, for I must say he seemed to be wearing a very nice suit, and he's quite good-looking of a sort.

MISS LATIMER. Well, I hope they'll be happy.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I see very small prospect of that; but, of course, you never know, for girls have such

odd tastes nowadays. I should certainly have preferred her marrying somebody more ordinary, like your nephew Gerald.

MISS LATIMER. I should hardly have called Gerald ordinary.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh no, not in that sense, of course.

MISS LATIMER. But in any case, there's no question of that now.

MRS. VAUGHAN. No, since Helen lays it down that it's got to be Mr. Thompson or no one, I see no other way out of it.

MISS LATIMER. Excuse me, please; I've come to the end of my wool; I must go in and get some more.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And if you see Helen, would you mind telling her to make haste with her letters and come out here. I want to talk to her.

[*Exit* MISS LATIMER. MRS. VAUGHAN *cuts flowers and sings.*

Enter JAMES, *yawning.*

Good gracious! Whatever are you doing here? I thought you were miles away. I really must say that you have the most extraordinary talent I ever knew for turning up when you're least expected.

JAMES. I was just thinking of getting back to my punt.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Are you going on the river?

JAMES. Yes.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, in that case, the best thing that you can do is to take Helen with you.

JAMES. Take Miss Vaughan with me?

MRS. VAUGHAN. She loves going on the river

JAMES. I should like it of all things. But are you sure you don't mind?

MRS. VAUGHAN. I shall make no objections now. In fact, I withdraw my objections to everything. I didn't approve of your engagement to her before . . .

JAMES. My engagement?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, your engagement to Helen?

JAMES. My dear Mrs. Vaughan . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. No, let me speak; I have been silent too long.

JAMES. But I . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. I didn't approve; nor did John. Still, we can't go on forbidding things for ever; and as you and she have been faithful to each other all this time, I shall not oppose your being engaged any longer.

JAMES. Why, of course, if you insist . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. And I do hope you will make her a good and faithful husband.

JAMES. Can you doubt it?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Of course, I don't think it an ideal marriage.

JAMES. No, no!

MRS. VAUGHAN. Nobody could. Still, if Helen has set her heart upon it . . .

JAMES. But do you really mean that Miss Vaughan . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. She has somehow got it into her head that she can't be happy without you.

JAMES. Has she, really? Well, upon my word, that is really ripping of her.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Now let us waste no time, but get at once to the business side of the question; for John will expect me to be able to tell him what settlements you propose to make on his daughter.

JAMES. Oh, settlements!

MRS. VAUGHAN. You have some property to live on, I suppose?

JAMES. Well, not very much I'm afraid just at present.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But this gold-mine . . .

JAMES. Why, to be caudid, there's some doubt about the gold-mine.

MRS. VAUGHAN. What sort of doubt?

JAMES. First, as to whether there's any gold in it; and secondly, as to whether it's really ours. But I dare say it will turn out all right. Who knows? I may be a millionaire in time.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And failing that?

JAMES. Nothing.

MRS. VAUGHAN. No expectations? No wealthy uncle who is going to make you his heir?

JAMES. They've rather gone out, those uncles.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Like the buffaloes. . . . Well, this is certainly rather discouraging. As the child's mother

I am bound to consider what you're going to live on, *who* you're going to live on . . .

JAMES. Oh, I expect it'll be all right. Why worry? People always say one's going to starve, but one never does. But what will Mr. Vaughan say to the business?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh! John will certainly disapprove; but then he always disapproves of everything, so we shall have to put up with that as best we can. No, let us regard the thing as settled.

JAMES. It's very kind of you. I can't tell you how flattered I am. I had no notion, when I turned in here for lunch, that I should find myself engaged to be married by tea-time.

MRS. VAUGHAN. It certainly is a most romantic story; most romantic . . . And here comes Helen. Talk of the Angels . . .

Enter HELEN.

Helen, my child, I have changed my mind, and now withdraw all my objections to your engagement.

HELEN. Engagement, Mamma?

MRS. VAUGHAN. To Mr. Thompson; or rather James, as I suppose I ought to call him now.

HELEN. But, Mamma!

MRS. VAUGHAN. I have made up my mind not to stand in the way of your happiness any longer.

HELEN. Oh Mamma!

MRS. VAUGHAN. I should much have preferred your marrying some one else, but it's no use crying

over spilt milk; so give me a kiss, my dear; and I will go in and write all about it to your father. He will think it most unwise; but it seems to be the best that we can make of a bad job; and I can only trust that you will not live to regret what I am bound to regard as a very rash undertaking.

[*Exit* MRS. VAUGHAN.]

JAMES. Well, so it seems we're engaged to be married.

HELEN. So it seems. Don't you like it?

JAMES. Don't I like it! You delicious person . . . Everything conspires together, a perfect day, a perfect place, the smell of roses, and then . . . Helen, you don't know how happy I feel!

HELEN. Do you really?

JAMES. After two years of separation, two years without you.

HELEN. And have you missed me all the time?

JAMES. Every moment, pretty nearly every moment.

HELEN. Are you sure? Have you never been in love with anybody else all that time?

JAMES. Now come, don't let's ask each other silly questions. Let's enjoy ourselves. Shall I come and be Mr. Vaughan's secretary again?

HELEN. Oh! Papa wouldn't have you. He's got a lady-secretary now—he says he prefers it.

JAMES. I don't wonder . . . Helen, you've got the most agitating hair I ever saw, and your hands simply make one giddy. Do you remember how I kissed them once? How could I dare!

HELEN. Of course, I remember.

JAMES. And is it true that you've often thought of me since then?

HELEN. [*Laughing.*] Now and then!

[*A roaring without.*]

Oh! James, what's that?

JAMES. Nothing, some motorist. But tell me . . .

HELEN. It sounded like a wild beast roaring.

JAMES. That's what I say—a motorist. But I want to know something more . . .

[*A gun goes off.*]

HELEN. Oh! James! what's that?

JAMES. They've punctured.

HELEN. I'm rather frightened.

JAMES. Don't be frightened! you look so lovely when you're frightened. It isn't fair! [*Kissing her.*] Don't be angry—it was your fault.

HELEN. Oh, James!

JAMES. Can you forgive me?

HELEN. What shall we do now?

JAMES. Let's go off in the punt.

HELEN. Somewhere right away—what fun!

JAMES. I *am* glad I didn't go for that walk!

HELEN. What became of Captain Latimer?

JAMES. He had to go without me.

[*HELEN laughs.*]

What's the matter?

HELEN. I can't help laughing when I think of him stumping along the road there all alone.

JAMES. While we . . . Do you know, Helen, I

don't believe there were ever two people so absolutely made for one another. . . .

VOICES. [*Without.*] Open the gate. This way You'll be all right in a minute.

JAMES. Hullo, what the devil's this?

[*Enter GERALD and two COUNTRYMEN, supporting FROHOCK.*]

Why here's Latimer back again.

HELEN. Oh, and a stranger with him.

JAMES. A handsome stranger.

HELEN. He's all wet. What can have happened?

JAMES. What's up? Who is this?

GERALD. It is a lion tamer.

JAMES. A lion tamer?

GERALD. From the Circus.

[*PARLOURMAIDS run in.*]

HELEN. Oh, and is he killed?

FROHOCK. No, I'm not killed; I'm only frightened. Give me some brandy, there's a good fellow; I'll be better soon.

HELEN. Get some brandy, Mary, quick!

[*Exit MARY.*]

FROHOCK. Let me lie down.

HELEN. Oh, what has happened? What can we do?

GERALD. A lion has escaped from the menagerie at the Circus.

HELEN. A lion? That's what we heard roaring.

JAMES. The motor-car.

HELEN. Oh, what shall we do? We shall all be eaten!

GERALD. There is no danger. I have killed the lion.

HELEN. Killed it? You have killed a lion?

GERALD. I shot him with a gun.

JAMES. The puncture.

GERALD. The Territorials were passing; I borrowed a gun.

HELEN. Oh, James, do you hear that? Captain Latimer has killed a lion.

Enter MRS. VAUGHAN *and* MISS LATIMER.

MRS. VAUGHAN. It really is extraordinary; every time that Captain Latimer goes for a walk he brings home some one more interesting than the last.

MISS LATIMER. Why Gerald, whatever have you been doing now?

GERALD. Oh, nothing; I just happened to meet this gentleman . . .

JAMES. That's all; the most ordinary thing in the world. He just happened to meet a gentleman running down the road with a lion at his heels; quite a common spectacle about Maidenhead.

MISS LATIMER. A lion! Good Heavens! A live lion?

GERALD. Yes, it was alive, Aunt Harriet. But this gentleman wasn't on the road; he was in the middle of the river.

MISS LATIMER. And the lion . . .

GERALD. Was on the bank just going to jump at him.

MISS LATIMER. But, good gracious, what was the man doing in the middle of the river?

FROHOCK. Preparing to bob, madam, when he jumped.

HELEN. Just fancy! Captain Latimer *killed* the lion.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Killed the lion?

HELEN. He took a gun and shot him.

FROHOCK. Are you sure the beastly thing is dead?

GERALD. Dead as a door-nail; I shot him right through the heart.

HELEN. Oh, it's too wonderful, too delightful! One can hardly believe it's true.

MISS LATIMER. But what was the lion after this gentleman for? Didn't he like him?

FROHOCK. Couldn't stand me, madam; singled me out at once and made a bee-line for me, as soon as he got out of his cage.

MRS. VAUGHAN. It's too thrilling for words; and anything more providential than the lion getting out and preparing to jump on this gentleman just as Gerald came by cannot be well imagined.

MISS LATIMER. There's an old-fashioned man for you, Mr. Thompson.

HELEN. I'm proud to have you for a friend.

MISS LATIMER. And now, my dear Gerald, I think that the best thing you can do is to take our visitor indoors and give him a hot bath.

GERALD. Well, perhaps I had.

MISS LATIMER. [*To the two COUNTRYMEN.*] And I'm very much obliged to you for escorting my nephew home, and I hope you'll go at once to the nearest public-house, and drink his health in a pot of good wholesome ale [*giving them money*].

COUNTRYMEN. Thank you, ma'am.

[*Exeunt COUNTRYMEN.*]

MRS. VAUGHAN. And I think, if you don't mind, I'll ask you to go in by the back-door, which I'm sure is very irregular for a hero, but one can't be too careful with other people's carpets, though if I had my own way it should be under a triumphal arch of roses with *Væ Victis* on the top, and Helen scattering flowers on the path before you as you walk.

[*During this speech exeunt MRS. VAUGHAN, MISS LATIMER, FROHOCK, and GERALD. HELEN stands gazing after them.*]

JAMES. Well, shall we make a start now? . . .
Helen!

HELEN. [*Waking from her abstraction.*] Yes? . . .
Oh, isn't it wonderful!

JAMES. I say, shall we start now?

HELEN. Start? Where for?

JAMES. The river. We were going out in a punt if you remember.

HELEN. Of course!

JAMES. But it's just as you like. If you'd rather not go . . .

HELEN. Not go? After all these years? O James,

how could you think it! We'll sail together away, away into fairyland.

JAMES. Rustling through the water-lilies, through the cool smell of the water; and I'll lie gazing up into your wonderful eyes . . .

HELEN. Oh, but you'll be busy punting.

JAMES. Punting? Catch me, on a day like this!

HELEN. But how are we to get along?

JAMES. We'll drift, we'll drift, little friend; that's the best way to get about.

HELEN. Oh, James! Fancy! A lion!

CURTAIN

ACT III

The same scene as ACT I. A week later. HELEN at the piano; MISS LATIMER knitting. JAMES smoking a cigarette at his ease on a sofa, half-hidden.

HELEN. [*Singing.*]

O blow ye winds of winter, blow,
And cover me with spotless snow ;
And tear the branches from the tree
And strew the dead leaves over me.

MISS LATIMER. That seems a very doleful sort of song.

HELEN. Yes, it is sad.

MISS LATIMER. It's the sort I used to hear my old Aunt Maria singing when I was a little girl.

HELEN. They're coming in again.

MISS LATIMER. Humph!

JAMES. Don't stop, I'm enjoying myself.

HELEN. [*Singing.*]

For ah! my spring of life is flown,
And I must live alone, alone ;

Never again the sun shall shine
Upon this broken heart of mine.

[*Enter* MRS. VAUGHAN *with big rolls of wall-paper; she joins in the last words of the song.*

MRS. VAUGHAN. Bravo, bravo both of us! What a charming song it is!

JAMES. Jolly.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But I must interrupt you now for something very important; for the patterns have come for the drawing-room wall-paper, and the great question arises: are we to have it pink to match the carpet, or blue to match the curtains? For if we have it pink to match the carpet it is sure to swear with the curtains, and if we have it blue to match the curtains it is sure to swear with the carpet. So which shall it be?

JAMES. Under the circumstances, Mrs. Vaughan, everything seems to point to white.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But that will never do, because we've had the dado distempered a pale coffee cream.

JAMES. Then I give it up; I leave it to you; I have absolute confidence in your judgment.

MRS. VAUGHAN. What am I to do with him, Miss Latimer? He's always like this.

JAMES. After all, what do wall-papers matter? I shall be too busy looking at Helen to notice them.

MRS. VAUGHAN. These two young people leave absolutely everything to me. You'd think it was I and not they who was going to be married. Upon

my word, I doubt if they'd get married at all if it wasn't for me. I've had to take the house, furnish it, paper it, paint it and everything. The result is, of course, that I am absolutely worn out, a perfect wreck; what I should do without my Magnetophosphoro I cannot conceive.

Enter a PARLOURMAID with letters.

Dr. Wapshot says. . . . What's that, Mary?

MARY. It's the post, mum.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Mary, bring me my Magneto-phosphoro at once.

JAMES. And Mary, has the newspaper come?

MARY. Not yet, sir.

[Exit MARY.]

[MISS LATIMER drops a number of blue press cuttings on the floor.]

HELEN. Oh Miss Latimer, they're press-cuttings! Oh, I can guess the subject! About your nephew. . . .

JAMES. Latimer and the lion!

HELEN. Oh Miss Latimer, have you subscribed to an agency for that?

MISS LATIMER. Well my dear, you subscribed to an agency for cuttings about Mr. Thompson and the sharks.

[Enter MARY with koumiss and Magnetophosphoro.]

JAMES. *[Picking up a slip.]* "The King of Beasts at bay in Berks."

MISS LATIMER. Give that back to me at once, Sir!

[She takes it from him.]

JAMES. [*Jumping on a chair and reading another slip.*] "Although adventures with lions do not strictly come within the purview of a paper devoted to poultry farming" . . . From the "Hen Fanciers' Gazette."

MISS LATIMER. How dare you, sir! Come down at once, or I'll pull you down!

HELEN. Come down, James, come down! [*To MISS LATIMER.*] You must let me paste them all in a book.

[*Exit MISS LATIMER.*]
There now you've made her angry! How can you be so stupid James?

MRS. VAUGHAN. [*Mixing medicine.*] Two teaspoons three time a day mixed to an even paste in 6 or 8 spoonfuls of sterilised koumiss; and then I must lie down and rest for half an hour. Otherwise Dr. Wapshot says he cannot answer for my life.

MARY. If you please, mum, Miss Florence has just arrived.

MRS. VAUGHAN. The dressmaker? It's my new frock! Where is she, Mary?

MARY. She's upstairs in your room, mum.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I'll come at once.

HELEN. And what about your Magnetophosphoro?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh, you must drink it yourself. I can't stop for that. [*Going.*] Now at last I shall be able to wear something decent again, instead of going about looking a perfect show, as if I had come down to the country to wear out somebody else's old clothes.

[*Exit talking.*]

HELEN. Well James?

JAMES. Well my pet?

HELEN. You haven't . . . you haven't said good morning properly yet.

JAMES. I was waiting for the opportunity. [*Kissing her.*] Now this is my idea of absolute bliss; to be down in the depths of the country, far, far away from all the turmoil of life and politics and business. I wonder why the newspaper's so late to-day.

HELEN. What do we want with newspapers?

JAMES. What indeed, my lovely one? How nice and cool your hands are. I like cool hands. [*Kissing them.*] What a jolly ring that is. Was it a present?

HELEN. Yes.

JAMES. Who gave it you?

HELEN. You did; at least I like to think you did. When I thought you were drowned I bought it so as to feel as if we were really engaged.

JAMES. A demned uncomfortable moist attachment, eh?

HELEN. Oh, James, think of all those poor women!

JAMES. Oh, damn those poor women! I didn't save them, I tell you. I am sick of that Thompson who wasn't me, the wrong Thompson, the usurping Perkin Warbeck Thompson. I shall never get the rascal out of your head.

HELEN. I wonder what he was like, poor fellow.

JAMES. Cast in an heroic mould, no doubt; something on Latimer's lines, I shouldn't wonder.

HELEN. Yes, but I always picture him as rather smaller.

JAMES. Dear Helen!

HELEN. Dear James!

JAMES. That's right. Shut your eyes. It helps the illusion.

HELEN. What illusion?

JAMES. That I'm the other Thompson, the one who was like Latimer, only rather smaller.

HELEN. James, I believe you're jealous!

JAMES. Me? Never! I've read of people being jealous in novels, but I've never . . .

HELEN. [*Angry.*] Then I don't believe you've ever really been in love!

JAMES. [*Piqued.*] Me never in love? Why I never knew such a man as I am; I'm always falling in love.

HELEN. [*Jealous.*] So that's the sort of man you are!

JAMES. Deeper and deeper in love, I mean, with you.

HELEN. Oh, is that true James?

JAMES. Can't you see it for yourself?

HELEN. You're so nice and kind to me. Dear James! I do love you so; but somehow I wish you were more . . . more . . .

JAMES. More what, my pet?

HELEN. More English, more mediæval . . . I can't express it exactly; but I do so want you to live more up to my ideal. Surely that's what women are for?

JAMES. Of course, to give ribbons for their knights to wear in the tourney; to be an inspiration and a battle-cry: "Helen for ever, to Hell with the rest!"

HELEN. Please don't laugh at everything, James.

How splendid they were, those old knights, going about ridding the world of monsters.

JAMES. Like Latimer and the lion, eh?

HELEN. I think the less said about that the better. Captain Latimer was saving lives, while you were lying asleep in the hammock.

JAMES. Well, well, it takes all sorts to make a world. It wouldn't do if we were all heroes. You must have cowards, too; otherwise when there's a fight who's to run away?

HELEN. [*Impatiently.*] Of course, of course.

JAMES. Besides, after all, who knows if heroes really do any good? We don't really know if Frohock was in any actual danger.

HELEN. What, right in the water, with the lion lashing his flanks on the bank?

JAMES. Oh, lashing his flanks! He may have been only wagging his tail . . . rather pleased at finding Frohock, and only waiting for him to get out and lead him back to his cage, when up comes the gallant Captain with a gun . . .

HELEN. You know you're talking nonsense.

JAMES. And any way, the loss of a valuable lion was a serious thing for the poor circus proprietors, who have brought an action against Latimer for £500. . . .

HELEN. It's an abominable shame!

JAMES. Which they'll win, mind you. He'll have to stump up.

HELEN. And I suppose you approve?

JAMES. Whereas if Frohock had been killed, his mother wouldn't have got more than £300 at the most under the Employers' Liability Act.

[HELEN takes loose pink cuttings from an album and shakes them into the waste-paper basket.

What are you up to ?

HELEN. I'm throwing away the second volume of the cuttings about you and your wretched little shipwreck. I fortunately hadn't stuck them in yet.

[She gets MISS LATIMER'S blue cuttings and a paste-pot.

JAMES. You spiteful little creature! Just because I tell you the unromantic truths of real life . . .

HELEN. I never thought much of those shipwreck adventures anyhow; anybody can jump into the water.

JAMES. But think of the sharks! Next to the bite of the anopheles mosquito they say that a shark's is the most dangerous. . . .

HELEN. Besides, after all, you weren't there at all; whereas Captain Latimer certainly was.

JAMES. Well, that does make a difference, I must allow.

HELEN. Oh, I wish I had your sang-froid! If I said I wanted to break off our engagement, I believe you'd only laugh.

JAMES. Ah, don't be angry with me, my little Helen. I was only teasing.

HELEN. [*Falling into his arms.*] Oh forgive me, forgive me, James!

JAMES. There, there!

HELEN. I seem to be mad at times. I can't see you as you really are. All the nobility that is hidden away in you . . .

JAMES. It's so well hidden.

HELEN. I saw it all so clearly when I thought you were drowned. . . .

JAMES. Eaten, my pet.

HELEN. [*Angry.*] Drowned, I say! I prefer drowned. Am I never to have my own way?

JAMES. There, there! Have it as you like.

HELEN. You're always trying to annoy me. No, no! Don't go away! Darling, darling James, I've got a secret I want to tell you—a great secret.

JAMES. And what's the great secret, my own?

HELEN. We're to be married much sooner than we thought.

JAMES. To be married?

HELEN. Papa consents. [*Showing him a letter.*]

JAMES. Dear Papa!

[*Reading the letter and smiling.*]

HELEN. And Mamma says, the sooner we get it over it the better.

JAMES. Have it out like men, eh? And when's it to be? Come, let me know the worst.

HELEN. In a fortnight.

JAMES. In a fortnight? From when?

HELEN. From now.

JAMES. Good Lord! But you can't do it! Why, dammy, the banns alone take three weeks.

HELEN. There won't be any banns. Mamma's sent up to London and got a special licence.

JAMES. That woman thinks of everything! Oh, why the devil can people never let well alone? Change, change, change! As soon as you get into one happy state everybody bands together to hustle you out into another.

HELEN. What do you mean, James? Are you dissatisfied?

JAMES. Me? No, indeed! I'm the only contented man I know. All I ask is for things to go on for ever as they are.

HELEN. But they can't.

JAMES. Here were we, as happy as two birds. I was engaged! Engaged to be married to Helen Vaughan . . . What poetry! What bliss! I only ask to be engaged to Helen Vaughan all my life. But no, they're not satisfied; they all begin worrying at once, getting a house, talking of drains . . . Drains! Choosing chintzes and wall-papers . . .

HELEN. I don't believe you really want to be married!

JAMES. Then, think of the wedding! Think of the bridegroom in a new frock coat and an idiotic smile. . . . Oh, Thompson, Thompson! The great, wonderful Thompson of the "Gothenburg," I mean, not this pitiful reality here; I defy even you to look a hero at your own wedding!

HELEN. We needn't drag him in, James.

Enter MARY with the Daily Mail.

MARY. Oh, I beg pardon, sir.

JAMES. Come in, come in! Everybody apologises.
Is that the paper? *[Exit MARY.]*
A fortnight, dammy, only a fortnight to enjoy this quiet haven, far from the tumult. . . . Hullo, Somerset had to follow on; Kennedy got 6 wickets for 35 . . .

HELEN. If you want to read the newspaper you'd better go into the garden.

JAMES. You're not angry with me? Now, come, Helen . . .

HELEN. Ah! Don't touch me!

JAMES. Why, what's the matter?

HELEN. I hate you! I hate you! *[Throwing herself into his arms.]* Oh James, James! It's all so different from what I expected!

JAMES. What is?

HELEN. It is; you are; everything is. Oh, go away! Don't you see I want to be alone?

JAMES. I can't bear to leave you like this; but if you really mean it . . .

HELEN. No, no! Don't go! I can't bear to be left by myself.

JAMES. Well, what the devil *am* I to do, then?

Enter GERALD with golf-clubs.

GERALD. Oh, I'm sorry, I'm afraid I'm interrupting you.

JAMES. Not a bit. Don't apologise. We were just having a chat; laughing and joking together, eh?

GERALD. I was only passing through.

JAMES. You're looking rather gloomy, old chap.

GERALD. I've been topping everything this morning.

JAMES. Ah, you must get down to them, you must get down to them! Here's a letter for you. I was just going to have a look at the newspaper in the garden.

[He goes out at the window. HELEN goes to the piano and sings again softly. GERALD reads his letter.]

GERALD. As I hoped! My application is granted: it is my recall to India.

HELEN. *[Singing.]*

For ah! my spring of life is flown,
And I must live alone, alone . . .

[She cries.]

GERALD. Miss Vaughan in tears! This is too much. Tell me what I can do for you.

HELEN. Nothing; go away!

GERALD. In two days I shall be gone from here; but if a lifetime of devotion . . . Oh, Miss Vaughan, since this is our last farewell, may I, just once in all my life . . .

[He kisses her hand.]

Enter MISS LATIMER, dressed in black.

MISS LATIMER. Well Gerald?

GERALD. Aunt Harriet, I think I ought to explain . . .

MISS LATIMER. It certainly seems to need an explanation.

GERALD. I trust you don't imagine . . .

MISS LATIMER. I imagine nothing.

GERALD. I was only . . . Why, you've gone and changed your dress.

MISS LATIMER. Run along, and don't talk gammon to me!

[*Exit* GERALD.]

HELEN. Don't be angry with me, Miss Latimer.

MISS LATIMER. I'm not in the least angry with you, my dear. But oh, how I should like to know what is going on in that funny little head of yours!

HELEN. I don't think I know myself.

MISS LATIMER. What are you crying for?

HELEN. I don't know.

MISS LATIMER. There, there; now sit down like a good girl and tell me: Are you very much in love with Mr. Thompson?

HELEN. Yes, of course, I am.

MISS LATIMER. When did you first fall in love with him?

HELEN. Years and years ago, when I was quite a little girl.

MISS LATIMER. Quite a little girl? But you've only known him three years.

HELEN. Yes, but I was in love with him before.

MISS LATIMER. Before you knew him?

HELEN. I used to imagine the man I was going to be in love with; I wrote all about him in my diary.

MISS LATIMER. Oh!

HELEN. Then, when I met James I knew at once that it was him.

MISS LATIMER. I see; he was just like him, was he?

HELEN. Yes; at least, not exactly like, of course.

MISS LATIMER. No, one couldn't expect that. And when were you most in love with him, before you met him or after?

HELEN. Oh, Miss Latimer, of course it was after.

MISS LATIMER. And most of all when you thought he was drowned?

HELEN. Yes, that was when he seemed most like the man in my diary. . . . I sat up last night reading it.

MISS LATIMER. Reading what?

HELEN. My diary.

MISS LATIMER. So that accounts for it!

HELEN. How do you mean?

MISS LATIMER. This Mr. Thompson didn't quite carry out . . . Oh, you stupid little idiot! Here you are going to be married in a fortnight and you detest the man you're going to marry!

HELEN. No, no! I adore him!

MISS LATIMER. You positively detest him.

HELEN. No, at the bottom of my heart I love him just the same as ever.

MISS LATIMER. He's not the same man as the man you've been in love with at all; that was a man you

made up for yourself, combined with another who was drowned! Oh dear, oh dear! what's the good of being in love with people who are dead, or people who aren't born yet? That's morbid—that's ridiculous. One ought to be in love with people who are alive—nice healthy people that one can marry and be comfortable with.

HELEN. Don't scold me.

MISS LATIMER. No, no. I've been through it all myself. I kept a diary once.

HELEN. Oh, was there a man in your diary too?

MISS LATIMER. A man, my dear? There were hundreds of them. I was a perfect Mormon . . . in my diary. Now, I'll tell you what I'm going to do; I'm going to get this wedding put off for a little while, till we've had time to think it over properly.

HELEN. Can weddings be put off?

MISS LATIMER. Weddings by special licence can.

HELEN. Oh, if one could! Just to give me time to get back into my right mind again.

MISS LATIMER. The only thing is, how to set about it.

[MRS. VAUGHAN *laughs without*.
There's your mother. I'll talk to her about it.

HELEN. Oh, Miss Latimer!

MISS LATIMER. Now, give me a good hug and run up to your room.

HELEN. Oh, if only I were going to be an old maid like you!

MISS LATIMER. So you shall, my dear. You're just

cut out to be an old maid. We'll sit side by side and knit stockings together.

[*Exit HELEN by one door ; enter MRS. VAUGHAN by another, in a new gown and toque, looking her best.*

MRS. VAUGHAN. There! What do you think of that?

[*She turns about, exhibiting her frock, talking about it volubly, and looking into a glass. At last she notices MISS LATIMER'S clothes.*

But *you've* got on a new frock, too! Dear, dear, a mourning frock! It's wonderful how becoming mourning is to some complexions. I often wish I were in mourning for somebody. And I think I like your waist up there; they have been getting lower now for years, until one sometimes wonders where they will stop. And if one may ask, dear Miss Latimer, who is it that you are in mourning for?

MISS LATIMER. For my brother-in-law, Jack Everard.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh dear, I'm sorry it's for such a near relation.

MISS LATIMER. Ah, well, of course there are compensations for all our misfortunes. He was a cantankerous old fellow and quarrelled with all his relatives. It was quite a surprise when we heard he had left all his money to Gerald.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Left all his money to Gerald? Why, when was this?

MISS LATIMER. About a week ago.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But I never heard a word about it. Why all this mystery?

MISS LATIMER. That was Gerald's doing. He was modest about it.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Modest about his uncle dying?

MISS LATIMER. No, about the money.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And how much did it amount to?

MISS LATIMER. About £1500 a year.

MRS. VAUGHAN. £1500 a year!

MISS LATIMER. And a house in Devonshire.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But, my dear Miss Latimer, it's quite a fortune.

MISS LATIMER. Yes, he has become quite a *parti*, hasn't he? However, I've something far more important to talk of now. Matilda, this wedding can't possibly come off.

MRS. VAUGHAN. What wedding?

MISS LATIMER. Helen's wedding.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Whatever do you mean? Helen's wedding not come off?

MISS LATIMER. By hook or by crook, it's got to be stopped.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And why, pray?

MISS LATIMER. Because it would be a sin; because your daughter is not in love with Mr. Thompson.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Not in love with Mr. Thompson?

MISS LATIMER. How could she be? How could anyone be?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Why, he's one of the most charming . . .

MISS LATIMER. He's only a half-man ; he has no soul.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Hasn't he? Why really, I've known him for a long time now, and I've never noticed anything of that kind.

MISS LATIMER. And as for Helen, she's not only not in love with him, but without knowing it, she's in love with some one else.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh no! Oh dear no!

MISS LATIMER. It's a fact.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Who do you mean then?

MISS LATIMER. Gerald.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Captain Latimer? Why, whatever makes you think that?

MISS LATIMER. Only ten minutes ago, when I came in here there he was kissing her hand.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Kissing her hand? Oh dear no! There must be some mistake.

MISS LATIMER. Not on my part. Of course *he* may have mistaken her for some one else, or *she* may have mistaken him for Mr. Thompson. But there didn't seem to be any mistake about it.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But then . . . then in that case. . . . Surely it seems as if *he* must be in love with *her*?

MISS LATIMER. It does seem like it, doesn't it? The more so as he proposed to her a week ago.

MRS. VAUGHAN. He proposed to her? But she never told me a word.

MISS LATIMER. A girl's mother is the last person in the world that she's likely to confide in nowadays.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But if she's in love with him, whatever made her refuse him ?

MISS LATIMER. She refused him because she thought she was in love with Mr. Thompson. But a week of his company has been enough to dispel *that* illusion ; and now at last, at the bottom of her heart, I believe she knows that Gerald is the right man.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Then why don't they do something ?

MISS LATIMER. Because Helen's a goose and Gerald's a hero out of an old-fashioned melodrama, always ready to sacrifice himself and everybody else if there's a sufficiently bad reason. It comes of all those six-penny novels people read in India. The white ants eat all the more expensive books, so they can read nothing but trash. No, we must help them . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. How delightful it would be. . . . Gerald is such a dear boy ; and fifteen . . . But what about James ?

MISS LATIMER. Give him the sack.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh dear, oh dear, why is everything so complicated nowadays ? If only duelling were still in fashion . . .

MISS LATIMER. My dear Matilda !

MRS. VAUGHAN. Think how it would simplify matters if dear Gerald were to kill James, or even if James were to kill dear Gerald. Oh dear, oh dear ! And will he leave the army now ?

MISS LATIMER. Not yet. He's going back to India for a time.

MRS. VAUGHAN. To India; fancy! How Helen would adore India! She is so romantic. If places are only distant and disagreeable enough, she wants to go to them at once. The snakes and scorpions would be a positive delight to her.

MISS LATIMER. But my dear Matilda, we are being a little "previous." We've got to stop this marriage with Mr. Thompson first.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Perhaps I had better speak to him about it.

MISS LATIMER. I fancy that's the usual thing.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But what am I to say?

MISS LATIMER. Tell him the truth.

MRS. VAUGHAN. No, no; I never like to tell the truth if I can avoid it. I shall tell him that John refuses. He doesn't of course; he's delighted; but that is evidently the most tactful course! James, I will say . . .

MISS LATIMER. There he is coming up the path.

MRS. VAUGHAN. O, heavens! You must help me, Miss Latimer.

MISS LATIMER. No thank you, I'm going to write letters in the morning-room.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Oh dear, oh dear, I foresee the most dreadful scene. His despair will be something terrible to witness.

[*Exit* MISS LATIMER.]

[*Enter* JAMES, with newspaper, from the garden.]

JAMES. Hullo, where's Helen?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Come here, James ; I wish to speak to you.

JAMES. Dear me, what a solemn exordium ! That's a lovely new frock of yours.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I am going to be very truthful with you.

JAMES. How dreadful it sounds.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Prepare yourself for a serious blow.

JAMES. Let fly !

MRS. VAUGHAN. The fact is that I have heard from my husband this morning.

JAMES. Aha !

MRS. VAUGHAN. And he refuses his consent to your marriage with Helen.

JAMES. Oh ?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Positively refuses it in spite of all that I can say to the contrary. He is very firm. You know my husband. I am very sorry of course ; but I cannot fly in my husband's face. I'm afraid you'll be very angry. You'll think it very unreasonable of him . . .

JAMES. Unreasonable ? Not at all.

MRS. VAUGHAN. You don't think so ? You're not angry with him ?

JAMES. Why should I be ? It's just what I should do myself in his place. I seem to be about as ineligible a son-in-law as you could easily have found him.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well really, it is very kind of you to say so.

JAMES. I've no money and no prospects. I'm not even a hero. It was the other Thompson who was the hero, and perhaps he had money too; in which case it's a pity he was drowned.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well really, you take it so nicely that you encourage me to be a little more candid.

JAMES. Yes do! You see Helen showed me Mr. Vaughan's letter, consenting enthusiastically. Now what is it really?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Well, really, James, since you drive me to it; it isn't John; it's Helen herself.

JAMES. She disapproves?

MRS. VAUGHAN. I have discovered, to my great chagrin, that Helen is no longer in love with you.

JAMES. She's not?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Unfortunately, no.

JAMES. There you are! I was afraid it wouldn't last. How jolly it was for the time! So she doesn't want to marry me after all?

MRS. VAUGHAN. That's just about what it comes to.

JAMES. When did she tell you?

MRS. VAUGHAN. It wasn't me; it was Miss Latimer she told.

JAMES. Oh Miss Latimer's in it?

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes.

JAMES. Then that settles it. If Miss Latimer's against me, it's all over. I pass.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Now let us have no scene, I beg.

JAMES. What do you take me for?

MRS. VAUGHAN. It certainly seems an ill-chosen

moment to tell a man a fortnight before his wedding that his bride wants to break it off.

JAMES. It's the very best moment if it hasn't been done before. Poor little Helen!

MRS. VAUGHAN. I know how you must feel.

JAMES. Oh, me? Oh, as for me, to tell you the truth, in a way it's a kind of relief to me.

MRS. VAUGHAN. A kind of relief! What do you mean?

JAMES. Ever since I arrived here a week ago I've felt that I was in a false position.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Why what has happened?

JAMES. I wondered if I oughtn't to say something.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Come James, be more explicit.

JAMES. Well you see, when you, so to speak, betrothed Helen and myself; for I think you'll admit that we didn't have much hand in it ourselves . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. Go on, go on!

JAMES. The fact is that I was already . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. Yes, yes!

JAMES. I was already engaged to be married to somebody else.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Engaged to be married to somebody else?

JAMES. Yes, a girl I met in America; a Miss Fish, Millicent Fish, one of the Kentucky Fishes. There were two Fishes went over in the Mayflower and settled in Virginia . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. Engaged to a Miss Fish!

JAMES. Such a nice girl! Not so artistic as Helen,

but with that charming freshness that they have in the Southern States.

MRS. VAUGHAN. But do you dare to sit there and tell me that all the time you have been philandering here with Helen you have been engaged to a girl in America?

JAMES. A Miss Fish—Millicent Fish—one of the Kentucky Fishes. There were two Fishes who . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. But, how dare you? Why didn't you tell us at once that you were engaged already?

JAMES. Well! really, Mrs. Vaughan, you gave me no time. I came in to lunch at half-past one, if you remember, and by four o'clock the whole thing was over.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Helen had a right to know.

JAMES. So had Millicent. But it wasn't very easy to tell either of them under the circumstances.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I naturally imagined you were still in love with her.

JAMES. So I was! So I am! I adore her! If I hadn't been engaged to Millicent there's nothing I should have liked better than to be engaged to Helen. It was the combination of the two that made it so awkward.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And what did you mean to do in the end?

JAMES. Oh, I hadn't any plans. Anything short of bigamy. I hoped to keep out of that.

MRS. VAUGHAN. It is too terrible that I should have been deceived like this! I like a man to be faithful! Why weren't you faithful to Helen?

JAMES. But you told me to go away and forget her. You remember? Those were your very words. Well, I went away and though I didn't actually forget her, I consoled myself with some one else. Wasn't that what you meant?

MRS. VAUGHAN. You heartless wretch! Are you ready to be engaged to every girl that comes along?

JAMES. Oh, no! How can you think it of me? She must have the right coloured eyes.

MRS. VAUGHAN. And what are the right coloured eyes, pray?

JAMES. Well, it's a kind of chestnut with complications. Whenever I meet that, I'm done for. Unfortunately, it's not an uncommon shade.

MRS. VAUGHAN. You had better hurry back to America at once. Young men like you ought to live in Utah.

JAMES. Now, really, Mrs. Vaughan, you mustn't be hard on me. The fact is, I seem to have behaved very well in extremely trying circumstances. If any one is to blame, it's you.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Me! indeed!

JAMES. If it hadn't been for you, none of this trouble would have arisen at all. Under pretence of being a little airy, flibberty-gibberty coquette, you are the most designing, meddling, managing busy-body that ever went about poking their pretty finger into other people's pies. Who was it said I had been shipwrecked? Who was it said I had saved people's lives? Who was it threw us into each

other's arms a week ago? Who was it made up that ridiculous scene two years ago, when she and I were made solemnly to abjure an engagement which we neither of us had the slightest idea we had ever entered on?

MRS. VAUGHAN. But I saw you myself.

JAMES. Oh, the slightest flirtation. Upon my word, is no one safe? I shall warn Latimer.

MRS. VAUGHAN. No! no!

JAMES. If any one comes into a room and finds him kissing Helen's hand . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. They have! He was!

JAMES. Well, marry them then.

MRS. VAUGHAN. I will. It's as good as settled!

JAMES. So that's it, is it? I have a rival! I might have known!

MRS. VAUGHAN. Ah, you're angry at last!

JAMES. On the contrary; that sets my mind at rest. I had some remorse at the thought that I was leaving Helen perhaps to tedium and solitude; but now that I know there will at any rate be no solitude, whatever the tedium . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. That's right! Abuse your rival.

JAMES. Come, we mustn't quarrel; just when I am off.

MRS. VAUGHAN. You are off?

JAMES. I shall go at once.

MRS. VAUGHAN. To-day?

JAMES. I shall start for America this afternoon if there's a boat; and there I shall stay for good.

MRS. VAUGHAN. You'll stay there? [*He nods.*]
You won't come here any more? [*He shakes his head.*]
Dear Mr. Thompson! The idea that I shall never see you again has created quite a revulsion of feeling in me. I positively like you now. I'm sorry you're going. You do make things so easy.

JAMES. How pretty you look in that hat!

MRS. VAUGHAN. It isn't a hat. But whatever will people say?

JAMES. I don't care. I don't subscribe to a press-cutting association.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Ah, you satirical creature!

JAMES. Well, I hope she'll be happy with Latimer. He's a noble fellow. He always reminds me of one of the characters in the Old Testament. You remember what Jacob said of Issachar? He was so brave, so good, so patient, he called him a strong ass . . .

MRS. VAUGHAN. A strong ass?

JAMES. A strong ass between two burdens.

MRS. VAUGHAN. Me and Helen I suppose? You wicked man! Well, I suppose I must forgive you now. Would you like to say good-bye to Helen?

JAMES. No, no! I'll simply vanish. I'll just step back into my punt, like Lohengrin, and go. Good-bye. [*Glancing round.*] Is nobody going to come in?

[*He kisses her hand, and goes out by the French window, waving his hand, and smiling.*]

Good-bye!

MRS. VAUGHAN. Good-bye!

CURTAIN.

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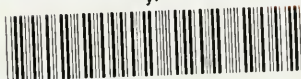
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