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THE HAND ON  
THE LATCH  
*By Mary Cholmondeley.*



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To  
HOWARD STURGIS






## PREFACE

I HAVE been writing books for five-and-twenty years, novels of which I believe myself to be the author in spite of the fact that I have been assured over and over again that they are not my own work. When I have on several occasions ventured to claim them, I have seldom been believed, which seems the more odd as, when others have claimed them, they have been believed at once. Before I put my name to them they were invariably considered to be, and reviewed as, the work of a man; and for years after I had put my name to them various men have been mentioned to me as the real author.

I remember once, when I was very young and shy, how at one of my first London dinner-parties a charming elderly man discussed one of my earliest books with such appreciation that I at last remarked that I had written it myself. If I had looked for a surprised flash of delight at the fact that so much talent was palpitating in white muslin beside him, I was doomed to be disappointed. He gravely and gently said, "I know that to be untrue," and the conversation was turned to other subjects.

One man did indeed actually announce himself to be the author of "Red Pottage," in the presence of a large number of people, including the late Mr. William Sharp, who related the occurrence to me. But the incident ended uncomfortably for the claimant, which one would have thought he might have foreseen.

But whether my books are mine or not, still whenever one of them appears the same thing happens. I am pressed



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to own that such-and-such a character "is taken from So-and-so." I have not yet yielded to these exhortations to confession, partly, no doubt, because it would be very awkward for me afterwards if I owned that thirty different persons were the one and only original of "So-and-so."

My character for uprightness (if I ever had one) has never survived my tacit, or in some cases emphatic, refusal to be squeezed through the "clefts of confession."

It is perhaps impossible for those who do not write fiction to form any conception how easily an erroneous idea gains credence that some one has been "put in a book"; or if the idea has once been entertained, how impossible it is to eradicate it.

Looking back over a string of incidents of this kind in my own personal experience, covering the last five-and-twenty years, I feel doubtful whether I shall be believed if I instance some of them. They seem now, after the lapse of years, frankly incredible, and yet they were real enough to give me not a little pain at the time. It is the fashion nowadays, if one says anything about oneself, to preface it by the pontifical remark that what one writes is penned for the sake of others, to save them, to cheer them, etc., etc. This, of course, now I come to think of it, must be my reason also for my lapse into autobiography. I see now that I only do it out of tenderness for the next generation. Therefore, young writers of the future, now on the playing fields of Eton, take notice that my heart yearns over you. If, later on, you are harrowed as I have been harrowed, remember "*J'ai passé par là.*"

Observe the prints of my goloshes on the steep ascent, and take courage. And if you are perturbed as I have been per-

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turbed, let me whisper to you the exhortation of the bankrupt to the terrestrial globe, "Never *you* mind. Roll on."

When I first took a pen into my youthful hand, I lived in a very secluded part of the Midlands, and perhaps, my little world being what it was, it was inevitable that the originals of my characters, especially the tiresome ones, should be immediately identified with the kindly neighbours within a five-mile radius of my paternal Rectory. Five miles was about the utmost our little pony could do. It was therefore obviously impossible that I could be acquainted with any one beyond that distance. And from first to last, from that day to this, no one leading a secluded life has been so fatuous as to believe that my characters were evolved out of my inner consciousness. "After all, you must own you took them from *some one*," is a phrase which has long lost its novelty for me. I remember even now my shocked astonishment when a furious neighbour walked up to me and said, "We all recognised Mrs. Alwynn at once as Mrs. ——— and we all say it is not in the least like her."

It was not, indeed. There was no shadow of resemblance. Did Mrs. ———, who had been kind to me from a child, ever hear that report, I wonder? It gave me many a miserable hour, just when I was expanding in the sunshine of my first favourable reviews.

When I was still quite a beginner, Mrs. Clifford published her beautiful and touching book, "Aunt Anne."

There was, I am willing to believe, — it is my duty to believe *something*, — a faint resemblance between her "Aunt Anne" and an old great-aunt of mine, "Aunt Anna Maria," long since dead, whom I had only seen once or twice when I was a small child.

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The fact that I could not have known my departed relation did not prevent two of my cousins, elderly maiden ladies who had had that privilege, from writing to me in great indignation at my having ventured to travesty my old aunt. They had found me out (I am always being found out), and the phials of their wrath were poured out over me.

In my whilom ignorance, in my lamblike innocence of the darker side of human nature, I actually thought that a disclaimer would settle the matter.

When has a disclaimer ever been of any use? When has it ever achieved anything except to add untruthfulness to my other crimes? Why have I ever written one, after that first disastrous essay, in which I civilly pointed out that not I but Mrs. Clifford, the well-known writer, was the author of "Aunt Anne."

They replied at once to say that this was untrue, that I, and I alone, *could* have written it.

I showed my father the letter.

The two infuriated ladies were attached to my father, and had known him for many years as a clergymen and a rural dean of unblemished character. He wrote to them himself to assure them that they had made a mistake, that I was not the author of the obnoxious work.

But the only effect his letter had on their minds was a pained uprootal of their respect and long affection for him. And they both died some years later, and (presumably) went up to heaven convinced of my guilt, in spite of the unscrupulous parental ruridecanal effort to whitewash me.

Long afterwards I mentioned this incident to Mrs. Clifford, but it did not cause her surprise. She had had

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her own experiences. She told me that when "Aunt Anne" appeared she had many letters from persons with whom she was unacquainted, reproaching her for having portrayed their aunt.

The reverse of the medal ought perhaps to be mentioned. So primitive was the circle in which my youth was passed that an adverse review, if seen by one of the community, was at once put down to a disaffected and totally uneducated person in our village.

A witty but unfavourable criticism in *Punch* of my first story was always believed by two ladies in the parish to have been penned by one of the village tradesmen. It was in vain I assured them that the person in question could not by any possibility be on the staff of *Punch*. They only shook their heads, and repeated mysteriously that they "had reasons for *knowing* he had written it."

When we moved to London, I hoped I might fare better. But evidently I had been born under an unlucky star. The "Aunt Anne" incident proved to be only the first playful ripple which heralded the incoming of the "Breakers of the boundless deep."

After the publication of "Red Pottage" a storm burst respecting one of the characters — Mr. Gresley — which even now I have not forgotten. The personal note was struck once more with vigour, but this time by the clerical arm. I was denounced by name from a London pulpit. A Church newspaper which shall be nameless suggested that my portrait of Mr. Gresley was merely a piece of spite on my part, as I had probably been jilted by a clergyman. I will not pretend that the turmoil gave me unmixed pain. If it had, I should have been without literary vanity. But

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when a witty bishop wrote to me that he had enjoined on his clergy the study of Mr. Gresley as a Lenten penance, it was not possible for me to remain permanently depressed.

The character was the outcome of long, close observation of large numbers of clergy, but not of one particular clergyman. Why then was it so exactly like individual clergymen that I received excited or enthusiastic letters from the parishioners of I dare not say how many parishes, affirming that their vicar (whom I had never beheld) and he alone could have been the prototype of Mr. Gresley? I was frequently implored to go down and "see for myself." Their most adorable platitudes were chronicled and sent up to me till I wrung my hands because it was too late to insert them in "Red Pottage."<sup>1</sup> For they all fitted Mr. Gresley like a glove, and I should certainly have used them if it had been possible, and, as has been well said, "There is no copyright in platitudes." They are part of our goodly heritage. And though people like Mr. Gresley and my academic prig Wentworth have in one sense made a particular field of platitude their own, by exercising themselves continually upon it, nevertheless we cannot allow them to warn us off as trespassers, or permit them to annex or enclose common land, the property and birthright of the race.

Young men fresh from public schools also informed me that Mr. Gresley was the facsimile of their tutor, and of no one else. I was at that time unacquainted with any schoolmasters, being cut off from social advantages. But that

<sup>1</sup> One of these unknown correspondents wrote that their vicar had that Sunday begun — he would have said *commenced* — his sermon with the words, "God is Love, as the Archbishop of Canterbury remarked last week in Westminster Abbey."


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fact did me no good. The dispassionate statement of it had no more effect on my young friends than my father's denial had on my elderly relations.

I am ashamed to say that once again, as in the case of "Aunt Anne," I endeavoured to exculpate myself in order to pacify two old maiden ladies. Why is it always the acutely unmarried who are made miserable by my books? Is it because — odious thought, avaunt! — married persons do not open them? These two ladies did not, indeed, think that I had been "paying out" some particular clergyman, as suggested in their favourite paper, *The Guardian*,<sup>1</sup> but they were shocked by the profanity of the book. Soon afterwards, the Bishop of Stepney (now Bishop of London) preached on "Red Pottage" in St. Paul's. I sent them a newspaper which reprinted the sermon *verbatim*, with a note saying that I trusted this expression of opinion on the part of their idolised preacher might mitigate their condemnation of the book.

But when have my attempts at making an effect ever come off? My firework never lights up properly like that of others; it only splutters and goes out. I received in due course a dignified answer that they had both been

<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian*, April 11th, 1900. "Truth to tell, when I appreciated, with much amusement, the light in which one was expected to regard Mr. Gresley, I came to the conclusion that the authoress was paying out some particular High Church parson, who had perhaps snubbed her or got the better of her, by 'putting him into a book.' The poor feeble creature is described with appetite, so to speak, and when this is the case (with a lady writer) one is pretty safe in being sure one has come across the personal. Mr. Gresleys certainly exist, but only a woman in a (perhaps wholly justified) tantrum would speak of them as a type of the clergy in general." — THOS. J. BALL.



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deeply distressed by my information, as it would prevent their ever going to hear the Bishop of Stepney again.


My own experience, especially as to "Red Pottage" and "Prisoners," struck me as so direful, I seemed so peculiarly outside the protection of Providence, like the celebrated plot of ground on which "no rain nor no dew never fell," that I consulted several other brother and sister novelists as to how they had fared in this delicate matter. It is not for me to reveal the interesting skeletons concealed in cupboards not my own, but I have almost invariably returned from these interviews cheered, chuckling and consoled, by the comfortable realisation that others had writhed on a hotter gridiron than I.

George Sand, when she was accused of lampooning a certain *Abbé*, said that to draw one character of that kind one must know a thousand. She has, I think, put her finger on the truth, which is not easy to find; at least I never found it until I read those words of hers.

It is necessary to know a very large number of persons of a certain kind before one can evolve a type. Each he or she contributes a twig, and the author weaves them into a nest. I have no doubt that I must have taken such a twig from nearly every clergyman I met who had a *soupçon* of Mr. Gresley in him.

But if an author takes one tiny trait, one saying, one sentiment, direct from a person, there is always the danger that the contributor will recognise the theft, and if of a self-regarding temperament will instantly conclude that the *whole* character is drawn from himself. There is, for instance, no more universal trait of what has been unkindly called "the old-maid temperament" in either sex than the




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assertion that it is always busy. But when such a trait is noted in a book, how many sensitive readers assume that it is a cruel personality. If people could but perceive that what they think to be character in themselves is often only sex, or sexlessness; if they could but believe in the universality of what they hold to be their individuality! And yet how easily they believe in it when it is pleasant to do so, when they write books about themselves, and thousands of grateful readers bombard the gifted authoress with letters to tell her that they also have "felt just like that" and have "been helped" by her exquisite sentiments, which are the exact replicas of their own!

The worst of it is that with the academic or clerical prig, when the mind has long been permitted to run in a deep platitudinous groove from which it is at last powerless to escape, the resemblance to a prig in fiction is sometimes more than fanciful; it is real. For there is no doubt that prigs have a horrid family likeness to each other, whether in books or in real life. I have sometimes felt as the puzzled mother of some long-lost Tichborne might feel. Each claimant to the estates in turn seems to acquire a look of the original because he *is* a claimant. Has not this one my lost Willy's eyes? But no! that one has Willy's hands. True, but the last-comer snuffles exactly as my lost Willy snuffled. How many men have begun suddenly and indubitably in my eyes to resemble one of the adored prigs of my novels merely because they insisted on the likeness themselves!

The most obnoxious accident which has yet befallen me, the most wanton blow below the belt which Fate has ever dealt me, is buried beneath the snows of twenty years. But


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even now I cannot recall it without a shudder. And if a carping critic ventures to point out that blows below the belt are not often buried beneath snow, then all I can say is that when I have made my meaning clear I see no reason for a servile conformity to academic rules of composition.

I was writing "Diana Tempest." One of the characters, a very worldly religious young female prig, was much in my mind. I know many such. I may as well mention here that I do not bless the hour on which I first saw the light. I have not found life an ardent feast of tumultuous joy. But I do realize that it has been embellished by the acquaintance of a larger number of delightful prigs than falls to the lot of most. I have much to be thankful for. Having got hold of the character of this lady, I piloted her through courtship and marriage. I gleefully invented *all* her sayings on these momentous occasions, and described the wedding and the abhorrent bridegroom with great minuteness; in short, I gloated over it.

The book was finished, sold, finally corrected, and in the press, when one of the young women who had unconsciously contributed a trait to the character became affianced. She immediately began throwing off with great dignity, as if by clock-work, all the best things which I had evolved out of my own brain and had put into the mouth of my female prig. At first I was delighted with my own cleverness, but gradually I became more and more uneasy, and when I attended the wedding my heart failed me altogether. In "Diana Tempest" I had described the rich, elderly, stout, and gouty bridegroom whom the lady had captured. There he was before my panic-stricken eyes! The wedding was exactly as I had already described it. It

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took place in London, just as I had said. The remembrance that the book had passed beyond my own control, the irrevocability of certain ghastly sentences came over me in a flash, together with the certainty that, however earnestly I might deny, swear, take solemn oaths on family Bibles, nothing, nothing, not even a voice from heaven, much less that of a rural dean still on earth, could make my innocence credible.

I may add that no voice from heaven sounded, and that I never made any attempt at self-exculpation, or invited my father to sacrifice himself a second time.

As I heard "The voice that breathed o'er Eden" and saw the bride of twenty-five advance up the aisle to meet the bridegroom of forty-five awaiting her deeply flushed, in a distorted white waistcoat, — I had mercilessly alluded to his white waistcoat as an error of judgment, — I gave myself up for lost; — *and I was lost.*

But all this time, while I have been giving a free rein to my autobiographic instincts, the question still remains unanswered, Why is human nature so prone to think it has been travestied that it becomes impervious to reason on the subject the moment the idea has entered the mind? Once lodged, I have never known such an idea dislodged, however fantastic. Why is it that if, like Mrs. Clifford, one has the good fortune to evolve a type, no one can believe it is not an individual? Why does not the outraged friend console himself with the remembrance that if he is one of many others who are feeling equally harrowed he cannot really be the object of a malignant spite, carefully disguised till then under the apparel of a cheerful friendship?

I think an answer — a partial answer — to the latter




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question may be found in the fact that balm was never yet poured on a wounded spirit by the assurance that there are thousands of others exactly like itself. We can all endure to be lampooned. (I have even known a man who was deeply disappointed when he was forced to believe that he had not been victimised.) But to be told we are one of a herd! This flesh and blood cannot tolerate. It is unthinkable; a living death. That we who "look before and after," and "whose sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught"; that *we*, lonely, superb, pining for what is not, misunderstood by our nearest and dearest, who don't know, and never *can* know "Half the reasons why we smile or sigh" (unless indeed we are autobiographists. Then they know *all* the reasons) — that *we* should be confused with the vast mob of foolish sentimental spinsters, or pedantic clerics, or egotistic old bachelors!

Away! Away! The reeling mind stops its ears against these obscene suggestions.

The only alternative which remains is that an unscrupulous novelist has *heard* of us — nothing more likely — without being actually acquainted with us, and has listened to garbled accounts of us from our so-called friends: or has actually met us at a bazaar or a funeral, though of course he professes to have forgotten the meeting; has been impressed with our subtle personality — nothing more likely; has felt an envious admiration of what we ourselves value but little — our social charm; and has yielded — nothing more likely — to the ignoble temptation of caricaturing qualities which he cannot emulate. Or perhaps he has known us for years, and has shown a mysterious indifference to our society, an impatience of our deeper utterances which

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we can now, *at last*, trace to its true source, a guilty consciousness of premeditated treachery which has led him to strike us in a dastardly manner which we can indeed afford — being what we are — to forgive, but which we shall never forget. And if an opportunity offers later on, it is possible that an unprejudiced and judicial mind may feel called upon to indicate what it thinks of such conduct.

Perhaps only those whose temperament leads them to believe themselves ridiculed in a book know the rankling smart, the exquisite pain, the sense of treachery of such an experience. It is probably the most offensive slight that can be offered to a sensitive nature.

And if the author realizes this, even while he knows himself to be guiltless in the matter, it is probable, if he also is somewhat sensitive — and some authors are — that a great deal of the delight he may derive from a successful novel may be dimmed by the realisation that he has unwittingly pained a stranger, or, worse still, an acquaintance, or, immeasurably worst of all — an old friend.






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THE HAND ON THE LATCH




## THE HAND ON THE LATCH

*There came a man across the moor,  
Fell and foul of face was he.  
He left the path by the cross-roads three,  
And stood in the shadow of the door.*

MARY COLERIDGE.

SHE stood at her low window with its uneven wavering glass, and looked out across the prairie. A little snow had fallen, — not much, only enough to add a sense of desolation to the boundless plain, the infinite plain outside the four cramped walls of her log hut. The log hut was like a tiny boat moored in some vast, tideless, impassable sea. The immensity of the prairie had crushed her in the earlier years of her married life, but gradually she had become accustomed to it, then reconciled to it, at last almost a part of it. The grey had come early to her thick hair, a certain fixity to the quiet courage of her eyes. Her calm, steadfast face showed that she was not given to depression, but nevertheless this evening, as she stood watching for her husband's return, for the first distant speck of him where the cart rut vanished into the plain, a sense of impending misfortune enfolded her with the dusk. Was it because the first snow had fallen? Ah me! how much it meant. It was as significant for her as the grey pallor that falls on a sick man's face. It meant the endless winter, the greater isolation instead of the lesser, the powerlessness to move hand or foot in that all-enveloping shroud; the struggle, not for existence, — with him beside her that was assured, — not for luxury, — she had ceased to



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care for it, though he had not ceased to care for her sake, — but for life in any but its narrowest sense. Books, letters, human speech, through the long months these would be almost entirely denied her. The sudden remembrance of the larger needs of life flooded her soul, touching to momentary semblance of movement many things long cherished, but long since dead, like delicate sea plants beyond high-water mark that cannot exist between the long droughts when the neap tide does not come. She had known what she was doing when against the wishes of her family she of the South had married him of the North, when she left the busy city life she knew, and clave to her husband, following him over the rim of the world, as women will follow while they have feet to follow with. She was his superior in birth, cultivation, refinement, but she had never regretted what she had done. The regrets were his for her, for the poverty to which he had brought her, and to which she had not been accustomed. She had only one regret, if such a thin strip of a word as regret can be used to describe her passionate controlled desolation, immense as the prairie, because she had no child. Perhaps if they had had children the walls of the log hut in the waste might have closed in on them less rigidly. It might have become more of a home.

Her mind had taken its old mechanical bent, the trend of long habit as she looked out from that low window. How often she had stood there, and thought “If only we might have had a child.” And now by sheer force of habit she thought it yet again. And then a slow rapture took possession of her whole being, mounted, mounted till she leaned against the window-sill faint with joy. She was

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to have a child after all. She had hardly dared believe it at first, but as time had gone on—a vague hope, quickly suppressed as unbearable, had turned to suspense, suspense had alternated with the fierce despair that precedes certainty. Certainty had come at last, clear and calm and exquisite as dawn. She would have a child in the spring. What was the winter to her now! Nothing but a step towards joy. The world was all broken up and made new. The prairie, its great loneliness, its deathlike solitude, were gone out of her life. She was to have a child in the spring. She had not dared to tell her husband till she was sure. But she would tell him this evening when they were sitting together over the fire.

She stood motionless in the deepening dusk, trying to be calm. And at last in the far distance she saw a speck arise, as it were, out of a crease in the level earth—her husband on his horse. How many hundreds of times she had seen him appear over the rim of the world, just as he was appearing now! She lit the lamp and put it in the window. She blew the log fire to a blaze. The firelight danced on the wooden walls, crowded with cheap pictures, and on the few precious daguerreotypes that reminded her she too had brothers and sisters and kin of her own, far away in one of those southern cities where the war was still smouldering grimly on.

Her husband took his horse round and stalled him. Presently he came in. They stood a moment together in silence as their custom was, and she leaned her forehead against his shoulder. Then she busied herself with his supper, and he sat down heavily at the little table.

“Had you any difficulty this time in getting the money together?” she asked.

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Her husband was a tax collector.

“None,” he said abstractedly, “at least — yes — a little. But I have it all, and the arrears as well. It makes a large sum.”

He was evidently thinking of something else. She did not speak again. She saw something was troubling him.

“I heard news to-day at Phillip’s,” he said at last, “which I don’t like. If I had heard in time, and if I could have borrowed a fresh horse, I would have ridden straight on to — . But it was too late in the day to be safe, and you would have been anxious what had become of me if I had been out all night with all this money on me. I shall go to-morrow as soon as it is light.”

They discussed the business which took him to the nearest town thirty miles away, where their small savings were invested, — somewhat precariously as it turned out. What was safe, who was safe while the invisible war between North and South smouldered on and on? It had not come near them, but as an earthquake which is engulfing cities in one part of Europe will rattle a teacup without over-setting it on a cottage shelf half a continent away — so the Civil War had reached them at last.

“I take a hopeful view,” he said, but his face was overcast. “I don’t see why we should lose the little we have. It has been hard enough to scrape it together, God knows. Promptitude and joint action with Reynolds will probably save it. But I must be prompt.” He still spoke abstractedly, as if even now he were thinking of something else.

He began to take out of the leathern satchel various bags of money.

“Shall I help you to count it?”

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She often did so.

They counted the flimsy dirty paper money together, and put it all back into the various labelled bags.

“It comes right,” he said.

Suddenly she said, “But you can’t pay it into the bank to-morrow if you go to —”

“I know,” he said, looking at her; “that is what I have been thinking of ever since I heard Phillip’s news. I don’t like leaving you with all this money in the house, but I must.”

She was silent. She was not frightened for herself, but it was state money, not their own. She was not nervous as he was, but she had always shared with him a certain dread of those bulging bags, and had always been thankful to see him return safe — he never went twice by the same track — after paying the money in. In those wild days when men went armed with their lives in their hands it was not well to be known to have large sums about you.

He looked at the bags, frowning.

“I am not afraid,” she said.

“There is no real need to be,” he said after a moment. “When I leave to-morrow morning it will be thought I have gone to pay it in. Still —”

He did not finish his sentence, but she knew what was in his mind: the great loneliness of the prairie. Out in the white night came the short, sharp yap of a wolf.

“I am not afraid,” she said again.

“I shall only be gone one night,” he said.

“I have often been a night alone.”

“I know,” he said, “but somehow it’s worse leaving you with so much money in the house.”

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"No one knows it will be there."

"That is true," he said, "except that everyone knows I have been collecting large sums."

"They will think you have gone to pay it in as usual."

"Yes," he said with an effort.

Then he got up, and went to his tool box. She watched him open it, seeing him in a new light, which encompassed him with even greater love. "If I tell him to-night," she thought, "it will make him even more anxious about leaving me. Perhaps he would refuse to go, and he must go. I will not tell him till he comes back."

The resolution not to speak was like taking hold of a piece of iron in frost. She had not known it would hurt so much. A new tremulousness, sweet and strange, passed over her, — not cowardice, not fear, not of the heart nor of the mind, but a sort of emotion of the whole being.

"I will not tell him," she said again.

Her husband got out his tools, took up a plank from the floor, and put the money into a hole beneath it, beside their small valuables, such as they were, in a biscuit tin. Then he replaced the plank, screwed it down, and she drew back a small fur mat over the place. He put away the tools and then came and stood in front of her. He was not conscious of his transfiguration, and she dropped her eyes for fear of showing it.

"I shall start early," he said, "as soon as it is light, and I shall be back before sundown the day after to-morrow. I know it is unreasonable, but I shall go easier in my mind if you will promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Not to go out of the house, or to let any one else come



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in on any pretence whatever, while I am away," he said.

"Bar everything, and stay inside."

"I sha'n't want to go out."

He made an impatient movement.

"Promise me that come what will you will let no one in during my absence," he said.

"I promise."

"Swear it."

She hesitated.

"Swear it to please me," he said.

"I swear that I will let no one into the house, on any pretext whatever, until you come back," she said, smiling at him.

He sighed and relapsed into his chair, and gave way to the great fatigue that possessed him.

The next morning he started soon after daybreak, but not until he had brought her in sufficient fuel to last several days. There had been more snow in the night, fine snow like salt, but not enough to make travelling difficult. She watched him ride away, and silenced the voice within her which always said as she saw him go, "You will never see him again, you have heard his voice for the last time." Perhaps, after all, the difference between the brave and the cowardly lies in how they deal with that voice. Both hear it. She silenced it instantly. It spoke again more insistently: "You have heard his voice, felt his kiss, for the last time. He will never see the face of his child." She silenced it again, and went about her work.

The day passed as countless other days had passed. She was accustomed to be much alone. She had work to do, enough and to spare, within the little home which was to

## *The Hand on the Latch*

become a real home, please God, in the spring. The evening fell almost before she expected it. She locked and barred the doors, and closed the shutters of the windows. She made all secure, as she had done many a time before.

And then putting aside her work, she took down the newest of her well-worn books lately sent her from New Orleans and began to read:

Oui, sans doute, tout meurt ; ce monde est un grand rêve,  
Et le peu de bonheur qui nous vient en chemin,  
Nous n'avon pas plus tôt ce roseau dans la main,  
Que le vent nous l'enlève.

Que le vent nous l'enlève. She repeated the last words to herself. Ah! no. The wind could not take her happiness out of her hand.

A wandering wind had arisen at nightfall, and it came softly across the snow and tried the doors and windows as with a furtive hand. She could hear it coming as from an immense distance, passing with a sigh, returning plaintive, homeless, forlorn, to whisper round the house:

J'ai vu sous le soleil tomber bien d'autres choses  
Que les feuilles des bois, et l'écume des eaux,  
Bien d'autres s'en aller que le parfum des roses  
Et le chant des oiseaux.

That wind meant more snow. Involuntarily she laid down her book and listened to it.

How like the sound of the wind was to wandering footsteps, slowly drawing near, creeping round the house. She could almost have fancied that a hand touched the shutters was even now trying to raise the latch of the door.

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A moment of intense silence, in which the wind seemed to hold its breath and listen without, while she listened within, and then a low, distinct knock upon the door.

She did not move.

"It is the wind," she said to herself; but she knew it was not.

The knock came again, low, urgent, not to be denied. She had become very cold. She had supposed fear was an emotion of the mind. She had not reckoned for this slow paralysis of the body.

She managed to creep to the window and unbar the shutter an inch or two. By pressing her face against the extreme corner of the pane she could just discern in the snow light part of a man's figure, wrapped in a long cloak.

She barred the window once more. She was not surprised. She knew now that she had known it always. She had pretended to herself that the thief would not come; but she was expecting him when he knocked. And he stood there, outside. Presently he would be inside.

He knocked yet again, this time more loudly. What need was there for silence when for miles and miles round there was no ear to hear save that of a chance prairie dog?

She laid hold upon her courage, seeing that it was her only refuge, and went to the door.

"Who is there?" she said through a chink.

A man's voice, low and feeble, replied, "Let me in."

"I cannot let you in."

There was a short silence.

"I pray you let me in," he said again.

"I have told you I cannot. Who are you?"

"I am a soldier, wounded. I'm trying to get back to

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my friends at——.” He mentioned a settlement about fifty miles north. “I have missed my way, and I can’t drag myself any further.”

Her heart swung violently between suspicion and compassion.

“I am alone in the house,” she said. “My husband is away, and he made me promise not to let anyone in on any pretence whatever during his absence.”

“Then I shall die on your doorstep,” said the voice. “I can’t drag myself any further.”

There was another silence.

“It is beginning to snow,” he said.

“I know,” she said; and he heard the trouble in her voice.

“Open the door and look at me,” he said, “and see if I can do you any harm.”

She opened the door and stood on the threshold, barring the way. He was leaning against the doorpost with his head against it, as she had often seen her husband lean when he was talking to her on a summer evening. Something in his attitude, so like her husband’s, touched her strangely. Supposing he were in need, and pleaded for help in vain!

The man turned his face towards her. It was sunk and hollow, ravaged with pain, an evil-looking face. His right arm was in a sling under his tattered military cloak. He seemed to have made his final effort, and now stood staring dumbly at her.

“My husband will never forgive me,” she said with a sort of sob.

He said nothing more. He seemed at the last point of

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exhaustion. Through the dim white night a few flakes of snow fell upon his harsh, repellent face and on his bandaged arm.

A sudden wave of pity carried all before it.

She beckoned him into the house, and locked and barred the door. She put him in her husband's chair by the fire. He hardly noticed anything. He seemed stupefied. He sat staring alternately at the fire and at her. When she asked him to which regiment he belonged he did not answer.

She set before him the supper she had prepared for herself, and chafed his hard, emaciated dirty hand till the warmth returned to it. Then he ate, with difficulty at first, then with slow voracity, all she had put before him.

A semblance of life returned gradually to him.

"I was pretty near done up when I knocked," he said several times.

She dressed his wound, which did not appear very deep, wrapped it in fresh bandages, and readjusted his sling. He took it all as a matter of course.

She made up a little bed of rugs and blankets for him in the back kitchen. When she came back to the living room she found he had dragged himself to his feet, and was looking vacantly at a little picture of President Lincoln on the mantel-shelf. She showed him the bed and told him to lie down on it. He obeyed her implicitly, like a child. She left him, and presently heard him cast himself down. A few minutes later she went to the door and listened. His heavy, regular breathing told her he was asleep.

She went back to the kitchen and sat down by the fire.

Was he really asleep? Was it all feigned, — the wound,

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the story, the exhaustion? Had she been trapped? Oh! what had she done? What had she done?

She seemed like two people. One self, silent, alert, experienced, fearless, knew that she had allowed herself to be deluded in spite of being warned, knew that her feelings had been played upon, made use of, not even dexterously made use of; knew that she had disobeyed her husband, broken her solemn oath to him, plunged him with herself into disgrace if the money were stolen. And in the eyes of that self it was already stolen. It was still under the plank beneath her feet, but it was already stolen.

The other self, tremulous, inconsequent, full of irresistible tenderness for suffering and weakness even in its uncouthest garb, said incessantly:

“I could do no less. If I die for it, still I could do no less. Somebody brought him into the world. Some woman cried for joy and anguish when he was born. He would have died if I had not taken him in. I could do no less.”

Through the long hours she sat by the fire, unable to reconcile herself to going upstairs to her own room and to bed.

Once she got up and noiselessly took down her husband's revolver from the mantel-shelf and examined it. He had taken its fellow with him, and apparently contrary to his custom he had taken the powder flask with him too, for it was gone from its nail. The revolvers were always kept loaded, but — by some evil chance the one that remained was unloaded. She could have sworn she had seen her husband load it two days ago. Why was this numbness creeping over her again? She got out powder and bullets

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from a small store she had of her own, loaded and primed it, and laid it on the table beside her.

The night had become very still. Her hearing seemed to reach out till she felt she could have heard a coyote move in its hole miles away. The log fire creaked and shifted. The tall clock in the corner ticked, catching its chain now and then, as its manner was. The wooden walls shrunk and groaned a little. The small home-like sounds only accentuated the enormous silence without. Suddenly in the midst of them a real sound fell upon her ear; very low but different, not like the fragmentary inadvertent murmur of the hut; a small, purposeful, stealthy sound, aware of itself. She listened as she had listened before, without moving. It was not louder than the whittling of a mouse behind the wainscot, hardly louder than the scraping of a mole's thin hand in the soil. It continued. Then it stopped. It was only her foolish fancy, after all. There it was again. Where did it come from?

*The man in the next room?*

She took up the lamp and crept down the narrow passage to the door of the back kitchen. His loud, even breathing sounded distinctly through the crannies of the ill-fitting door. Surely it was overloud. She listened to it. She could hear nothing else. Was his breathing a pretence? She opened the door noiselessly, and went in, shading the light with her hand.

She bent over the sleeping man. At the first glance her heart sank, for he had not taken off his boots. But as she looked hard at him her suspicions died within her. He lay on his back, with his coarse, emaciated face towards her, his mouth open, showing his broken teeth. The sleep of utter

## *The Hand on the Latch*

exhaustion was upon him. She could have killed him as he lay. He was not acting. He was really asleep.

She crept out of the room again, leaving the door ajar, and went back to the kitchen.

Hardly had she sat down when she heard the sound again. It was too faint to reach her except when she was in the kitchen. She knew now where it came from — *the door*. Some one was picking the lock.

The instant the sleeping man was out of her sight she suspected him again.

Was he really asleep, after all? He had not taken off his boots. When she came back from making his bed she had found him standing by the mantel-shelf. Had he unloaded the pistol in her absence? Would he presently get up, and open the door to his confederates?

Her mind rose clear and cold and unflinching. She took up the pistol, and then laid it down again. She wanted a more noiseless weapon. She got out her husband's great clasp-knife from the open tool box, took the lamp, and crept back to the man's bedside. She should be able to kill him. Certainly she should be able to kill him; and then she should have the pistol for the other one.

But he still slept heavily. When she saw him again, again her suspicions fell from her. She *knew* he was asleep.

She shook him by the shoulder, noiselessly, but with increasing violence, until he opened his eyes with a groan. Then only she remembered that she was shaking his wounded arm. He saw the knife in her hand, and raised his left arm as if to ward off the blow.

"Listen," she whispered, close to his ear. "Don't



## *The Hand on the Latch*

“speak. There is a man trying to break into the house. You must get up and help me.”

He stared at her, vaguely at first, but with growing intelligence. The food and sleep had restored him somewhat to himself. He sat up on the couch.

“Take off my boots,” he whispered; “I tried and could not.”

Her last suspicion of him vanished. She cut the laces with her knife, and dragged his boots off. They stuck to his feet, and bits of the woollen socks came off with them. They had evidently not been taken off for weeks. While she did it he whispered, “Why should any one be wanting to break in? There’s nothing here to take.”

“Yes, there is,” she said. “There’s a lot of money.”

“Good Lord! Where?”

“Under the floor in the kitchen.”

“Then it’s the kitchen they’ll make for. You bet they know where the money is if they know it’s here. Are there many of ’em?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we shall know soon enough,” said the man. He had become alert, keen. “Have you any pistols?”

“Yes, one.”

“Fetch it, but don’t make a sound, mind.”

She stole away, and returned with the pistol. She would have put it into his hand, but he pushed it away.

“It’s no use to me,” he said, “with my arm in a sling. I will see what I can do with my left hand and the knife. Can you shoot?”

“Yes.”

“Can you hit anything?”

## *The Hand on the Latch*

“Yes.”

“To be depended on?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s darned lucky. How long will that door hold?”

They were both in the little passage by now, pressed close together, listening to the furtive pick, pick of some one at the lock.

“I don’t think it will hold more than a minute.”

“Now, look here,” he said, “I shall go and stand at the foot of the stair, and knife the second man, if there is a second. The first man I’ll leave to you. There’s a bit of light outside from the snow. He’ll let in enough light to see him by as he opens the door. Don’t wait. Fire at him as he comes in, and don’t stop; go on firing at him till he drops. You’ve got six bullets. Don’t you make any mistake and shoot me. I’ve had enough of that already. Now you look carefully where I’m going to stand, and when I’m there you put out the lamp.”

He spoke to her as a man does to his comrade.

That she could be frightened did not seem to enter his calculations. He moved with catlike stealth to the foot of the tiny staircase and flattened himself against the wall. Then he stretched his left arm once or twice as if to make sure of it, licked the haft of the knife, and nodded at her.

She instantly put out the lamp.

All was dark save for a faint thread of light which outlined the door. Across the thread something moved once—twice. The sound of picking ceased. Then another sound succeeded it, a new one, unlike the last, as if something were being gently prised open, wrenched.

## *The Hand on the Latch*

"The bar will hold," she said to herself, and then remembered for the first time that the rung into which the bar slid had been loose these many days. It was giving now. It had given!

The door opened silently, and a man came in.

For a moment she saw him clear, with the accomplice snow-light behind him. She did not hesitate. She shot once and again. He fell and struggled violently up, and she shot again. He fell and dragged himself to his knees, and she shot again. Then he sank gently and slowly down as if tired, with his face against the wall, and moved no more.

The man on the stairs rushed out and looked through the open door.

"By G—, he was single-handed!" he said.

Then he stooped over the prostrate man and turned him over on his back.

"Dead!" he said, chuckling. "Well done, Missus! — stone dead!"

He was masked.


The dirty left hand tore the mask callously off the gray face.

The woman had drawn near and looked over his shoulder.

"Do you know him?" said the man.

For a moment she did not answer, and the pistol which had done its work so well dropped noisily out of her palsied hand.

"He is a stranger to me," she said, looking fixedly at her husband's fading face.

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## THE LOWEST RUNG


*We are dropping down the ladder rung by rung.*

RUDYARD KIPLING.

**T**HE sudden splendour of the afternoon made me lay down my pen and tempted me afield. It had been a day of storm and great racing cloud wracks, after a night of hurricane and lashing rain. But in the afternoon the sun had broken through, and I struggled across the water meadows, the hurrying, turbid water nearly up to the single planks across the ditches, and climbed to the heathery uplands, battling my way inch by inch against a tearing wind.

My art had driven me forth from my warm fireside, as it is her wont to drive her votaries, and the call of my art I have never disobeyed.

For no artist must look at one side of life only. We must study it as a whole, gleaning rich and varied sheaves as we go. My forthcoming book of deep religious experiences, intertwined with descriptions of scenery, needed a little contrast. I had had abundance of summer mornings and dewy evenings, — almost too many dewy evenings; and I thought a description of a storm would be in keeping with the chapter on which I was at that moment engaged, in which I dealt with the stress of my own illness of the previous spring, and the mystery of pain, which had necessitated a significant change in my life, — a visit to Cromer. The chapter dealing with Cromer, and the insurgent doubts of convalescence wandering on its poppy-strewn cliffs, as

The page is framed by a decorative border of floral and scrollwork patterns. The title is centered at the top.

## *The Lowest Rung*

to the beneficence of the Deity, was already done, and one of the finest I had ever written.

But I was dissatisfied with the preceding chapter, and as usual went for inspiration to nature.

It was late by the time I reached the upland, but I was rewarded for my climb.

Far away under the flaring sunset the long lines of tidal river and sea stretched tawny and sinister like drawn swords in fire-light between the distant woods and cornfields. The deathlike stillness and smallness of the low-lying rigid landscape made the contrast with the rushing enormity and turmoil of the heavens almost terrific.

Great clouds shouldered up out of the sea, blotting out the low sun, darkening the already darkened earth, and then towered up the sky, releasing the struggling sun only to extinguish it once more in a new flying cohort.

I do not know how long I stood there, spellbound, the woman lost in the artist, scribbling frantically in my notebook, when an onslaught of rain brought me to my senses and I looked round for shelter.

Then I became aware that I had not been watching alone. A desolate-looking figure, crouching at a little distance, half hidden by a gorse bush, was watching too, watching intently. She got up as I turned and came towards me, her uncouth garments whipped against her by the wind.

The rain plunged down upon us, enveloping us both as in a whirlwind.

"There is an empty cottage under the down," I shouted to her, and I began to run towards it. It was a tumble-down place, but any port in such a storm.

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“It is not safe,” she shouted back; “the roof is falling in!”

The squall of rain whirled past as suddenly as it had come, leaving me gasping.

She seemed to take no notice of it.

“I spent last night there,” she said. “The ceiling came down in the next room. Besides,” she added, “though possibly that may not deter you, there are two policemen there.”

I saw now that it had been the cottage which she had been watching.

And sure enough, in a broken shaft of sunshine which straggled out for a moment I saw two dark figures steal towards the cottage under cover of the wall.

“Why are they there?” I said, gaping at such a strange sight. For I had been many months at Rufford, and I had never seen a policeman.

“They are lying in wait for some one,” she said.

It flashed back across my mind how at luncheon that day the vicar had said that a female convict had escaped from Ipswich gaol, and had been traced to Bealings, and it was conjectured was lurking in the neighbourhood of Woodbridge.

I took sudden note of my companion’s peculiar dark blueish clothes and shawl, and the blood rushed to my head. I knew what those garments meant. She pushed back her grizzled-hair from her lined, walnut-coloured face, and we looked hard at each other.

There was no fear in her eyes, but a certain curiosity as to what I was going to do.

“If I told you they were not looking for me,” she said,

## *The Lowest Rung*

“I could not under the circumstances expect you to believe it.”

I am too highly strung for this work-a-day world. I know it to my cost. The artistic temperament has its penalties. My doctor at Cromer often told me that I vibrated like a harp at the slightest touch.


I vibrated now. Indeed I almost sat down in the sodden track.

But unlike many of my brothers and sisters of the pen I am capable of impulsive, even quixotic action, and I ought in justice to myself to mention here that I had not then read that noble book “*The Treasure of Heaven*,” in which it will be remembered that a generous-souled woman takes in from the storm, and nurses back to health in her lowly cottage, an aged tramp who turns out to be a millionaire, and leaves her his vast fortune. I did not get the idea of acting as I am about to relate from Marie Corelli, the head of our profession, or indeed from any other writer. But I have so often been accused of taking other people’s plots and ideas and sentiments that I owe it to myself to make this clear before I go on.

“You poor soul,” I said, “whatever you are, and whatever you’ve done, I will shelter you and help you to escape.”

I felt I really could not take her into the house, so I added: “I have a little stable in the garden, quite private, with nice dry hay in it. Follow me.”

I suppose she saw at a glance that she could trust me, for she nodded, and I sped down the hill, she following at a little distance, with a shrieking, denouncing wind behind us. I walked as quickly as I could, but when I got as far as the water meadows my strength and breath gave way. I was

The page is framed by a decorative border with floral and scrollwork motifs. The title is centered at the top.

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never robust, and always foolishly prone to overtax my small store of strength. I was obliged to stop and lean my head on my arms against a stile.

“There is no need for such hurry,” she said tranquilly. She had come up noiselessly behind me. “There is not a soul in sight. Besides, look what you are missing.”

She pointed to the familiar fields before me which we had yet to cross, with the Dieben winding through them under its low red brick bridges, and beyond the little clustered village with its grey church spire standing shoulder high above the poplars.

The sun had just set, and there was no colour in the west, but over all the homely wind-swept landscape a solemn and unearthly light shone and slowly passed, shone and slowly passed.

“Look up,” said my companion, turning a face of flame towards me.

I looked up into the sky, as into an enormous furnace. Gigantic rolling clouds of flame were sweeping before the roaring wind like some vast prairie fire across the firmament. As they passed overhead the reflection of the lurid light on them was smitten earthwards, and passed with them, making everything it traversed clear as noon, the lion on the swinging sign of the public-house just across the water, the delicate tracery of the church windows, the Virginia creeper on my cottage porch.

“I have only seen an afterglow like that once in my life,” my companion said, “and that was in Teneriffe.”

A few moments more and the sky paled to grey. The darkness came down with tropical suddenness. I made a movement forwards.



## *The Lowest Rung*

“Shall I not be seen if I follow you through the village in these weird clothes?” she said civilly, as one who hesitates to make a suggestion. “Where is your house?”

“My cot—it is not a house—is just at the end of those trees,” I said. “It is the only one close to the park gates. It has Virginia creeper over the porch, and a white gate.”

“It sounds charming.”

“But how on earth are we to get there?” I groaned. “And some one may come along this path at any moment.”

The dusk was falling rapidly. Candles were beginning to twinkle in latticed windows. A yellow light from the public house made an impassable streak across the road. Cheerful voices were coming along the meadow path behind us. What was to be done?

“Go home,” she said steadily. “I will find my own way.”

“But my servant?”

“Make your mind easy. She will not see me. I shall not ring the bell. Have you a dog?”

“No. My dear little Lindo—”

“It’s going to be a black night. I shall be in the porch half an hour after dark.”

She went swiftly from me, and as the voices drew near I saw her pick her way noiselessly into one of the great ditches and stand motionless in the water, obliterated against a pollard willow.

I hurried home. My feet were quite wet, and even my stockings, a thing that had not happened to me for years. I changed at once, and took five drops of camphor on a lump of sugar. It would be extraordinarily inconvenient if I were to take cold, with my tendency to bronchial catarrh.

## *The Hand on the Latch*

I have no time to be ill in my busy life. Was not "Broodings beside the Dieben" being finished in hot haste for an eager publisher? And had I not promised to give away the Sunday-school prizes at Forlinghorn a fortnight hence?

It was half past six. My garden boy was pumping in the scullery. He kept his tools in the stable, and it was his duty to lock it up and hang the key on the nail inside the scullery door.

Supposing he forgot to hang it up to-night of all nights! Supposing he took it away with him by mistake! I went into the scullery directly he had gone. I made a pretext of throwing away some flowers, though I had never thought of needing a pretext for going there before. The stable key was on its nail all right. I looked into the kitchen where my little maid-servant was preparing my evening meal. When her back was turned I snatched the key from the nail, dropped it noisily on the brick floor, caught it up, withdrew to the parlour, and sank down in my arm-chair, shaking from head to foot. My doctor was right indeed when he said I vibrated like a harp.

The life of contemplation and meditation is more suited to my highly strung nature than that of adventure and intrigue.

My servant brought in the lamp, and I hurriedly sat on the key while she did so. Then she drew the curtains in the little houseplace, locked the outer door, and went back to the kitchen.

There are two doors to my cottage, — the front door with the porch leading to the lane, and the back door out of the scullery which opens into my little slip of garden. At the bottom of the garden is a disused stable, utilised by me to

## *The Lowest Rung*

store wood in, and old boxes. The gate to the back way to the stable from the lane had been permanently closed till the day should come when I could afford a pony and cart. But in these days novels of not too refined a type are the only form of literature, if they can be called literature, for which the public is eager. It will devour and extol anything, however coarse, which panders to its love of excitement, while grave books, dealing with the spiritual side of life, books of thought and culture, are left unheeded on the shelf. Such had been the fate of mine.

The rain had ceased at last, and the wind was falling. My mind kept on making all sorts of uneasy suggestions to me as I sat in my armchair. What was I to do with the—the individual when I got her safely into the stable, if I ever did get her safely there? How about food, how about dry clothes, how about a light, how about everything? Supposing she overslept herself and Tommy found her there in the morning when he went for his tools. Supposing my landlord Mr. Ledbury, who was a magistrate, found out I had harboured a criminal, and gave me notice just when I had repapered the parlour, and put in a new back to the kitchen range. Such a calamity was unthinkable. What happened to people who compounded felonies? Was I compounding one? Why was not I sitting down? What was I doing standing in the middle of the parlour with the stable key in my hand, and, as I caught sight of myself in the glass, with my mouth wide open!

I sat down again resolutely, hiding the key under the cushion, and calmer thoughts supervened. After all it was most improbable, almost impossible that I should be found out. And once the adventure was safely over, when I had

## *The Hand on the Latch*

successfully carried it through, what interesting accounts I should be able to give of it at luncheon parties in London in the winter! My brothers would really believe at last that I could act with energy and presence of mind. There was a rooted impression in the minds of my own family that I was a flurried sort of person, easily thrown off my balance, making mountains out of molehills (this was especially irritating to me, as I have always taken a broad, sane view of life), who always twisted my ankle if it could be twisted, or lost my luggage, or caught childish ailments for the second time. Where there is but one gifted member in a large and commonplace family an absurd idea of this kind is apt to grow from a joke into an *idée fixée*.

It had obtained credence originally because I certainly had once in a dreamy moment got my gown shut into the door in an empty railway compartment on the far side. And as the glass was up on the station side I had been unable to attract anyone's attention when I wanted to alight, and had had to go on to Portsmouth where the train stopped for good before I could make my presence and my predicament known. This trivial incident had never been forgotten by my family. So much so that I had often regretted the hilarious spirit of pure comedy at my own expense which had prompted me to relate it to them.

Now was the time to show what metal I was made of. My spirits rose as I felt I could rely on myself to be cautious, resourceful, bold. I sat on outwardly composed, but inwardly excited, straining my ears for a sign that the fugitive was in the porch. I supposed I should presently hear a light tap on my parlour window which was close to the outer door.

## *The Lowest Rung*

But none came. More than an hour passed. It had long been perfectly dark. What could have happened? Had the poor creature been dogged and waylaid by those two policeman after all? Was it possible that they had seen us standing together at the stile, where she had so inconsiderately joined me for a moment? At last I became so nervous that I went to the outer door, opened it softly, and looked out. She was so near me that I very nearly screamed.

“How long have you been here?” I whispered.

“Close on an hour.”

“Why didn’t you tap on the window or something, I was waiting to let you in.”

“I dared not do that. It might have been the kitchen window for all I knew, and then your servant would have seen me.”

“But the kitchen is the other side.”

“Indeed! And where is the stable?”

“At the bottom of the garden, away from the road.”

“How are we going to get at it?”

“We can only get to it through the garden, now the back way is closed. I closed it because the village children —”

“Had not you better shut the door? If any one passed down the road they would see it was open.”

“It’s as dark as pitch.”

“Yes, but there’s a little light from within. I can see you from outside quite plainly, standing in the doorway.”

I led her indoors, and locked and bolted the door.

“What is this room?”

## *The Hand on the Latch*

“The houseplace. I have my meals here. I live very primitively. My idea is —”

“Then your servant may come in at any moment to lay your supper.”

I could not say that she seemed nervous or frightened, but the way she cut me short showed that she was so in reality. I was not offended, for I am the first to make allowance when rudeness is not intentional. I led the way hastily into the parlour.

“She never comes in here,” I said reassuringly, “after she has once brought in the lamp. I am supposed to be working, and must not be disturbed.”

“I’m not fit to come in,” she said.

And in truth she was not. She was caked with mud and dirt from head to foot, an appalling figure in the lamp-light. The rain dripped from her hair, her sinister clothing, her whole person. She looked as if she must have hidden in a wet ditch. I gazed horror-struck at my speckless matting and pale oriental rugs. I had never allowed a child or a dog in the house for fear of the matting, except of course my poor Lindo, who had died a few months previously, and whom I had taught to wipe his feet on the mat.

A ghost of a smile twitched her grey mouth.

“Is not that the *Times*?” she said. “Spread it out four thick, and lay it on the floor.”

I did so, and she stepped carefully on to it.

“Now,” she said, standing on a great advertisement of a universal history, — “now that I am not damaging the furniture, pull yourself together and *think*. How am I to get to the stable? I can’t stop here.”

She could not indeed. I felt I might be absolutely

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powerless to get the muddy footprints out of the matting. And no doubt there were some in the houseplace too.

“If I go through the scullery I may be seen,” she said, the water pattering off her on to the newspaper. “So lucky you take in the *Times*. It’s printed on such thick paper. Where does that window look out?”

She pointed to the window at the further end of the room.

“On to the garden.”

“Capital. Then we can get out through it, of course, without going through the scullery.”

I had not thought of that. I opened the window, and she was through it in two cautious strides.

“Now,” she said, looking back at me, “I’m comparatively safe for the moment, and so is the matting. But before we do anything more get a duster — a person like you is sure to have a duster in a drawer — just so, there it is. Now wipe up the marks of my muddy feet in the room we first came into, as well as this, and then see to the paint of the window. I have probably smirched it. Then roll up the *Times* tight, and put it in the waste-paper basket.”

She watched me obey her.

“Having obliterated all traces of crime,” she said when I had finished, “suppose we go on to the stable. Let me help you through the window. I will wipe my hands on the grass first. And would not you be wise to put on that little shawl I see on the sofa? It is getting cold.”

The window was only a yard from the ground, and I got out somehow, encumbered in my shawl, which a grateful reader had crocheted for me. She had, however, to help me in again directly I was out, for between us we had for-

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gotten the stable key, which was underneath the cushion of my armchair.

The rest was plain sailing. We stole down the garden path to the stable, and I unlocked the door and let her in.

"Kindly lock me in and take away the key," she said, vanishing past me into the darkness, and I thought I detected a tone of relief in her brisk matter-of-fact voice.

"I will bring some food as soon as I can," I whispered. "If I knock three times you will know it's only me."

"Don't knock at all," she said, "it might be noticed. Why should you knock to go into your own stable!"

"I won't, then. And how about your wet things?"

"That's nothing; I'm accustomed to being wet."

I crawled back to the cottage, and managed to scramble in by the parlour window, only to sink once more into my armchair in a state of collapse. I had always entered so acutely into the joys and sorrows of others, their love affairs, their difficulties, their bereavements, I had in this way led such a full life, that I was surprised at this juncture to find my nervous force so exhausted, until I remembered that ardent natures who give out a great deal in the way of helpfulness and interest are bound to suffer when the reaction comes. The reaction had come for me now. I saw only too plainly the folly I had been guilty of in harbouring a total stranger, the trouble I should probably get into, the difficulty that a nature naturally frank and open to a fault would find in keeping up a deception. I doubted my own powers, everything. The truth was, but I did not realise it till afterwards, that I had missed my tea.

I could hear my servant laying my evening meal in the houseplace. In a few minutes she tapped to tell me it



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was ready, and I rose mechanically to obey the summons. And then to my horror I found I was still in morning dress. For the first time for years I had not dressed for dinner. What would she think if she saw me! But it was too late to change now. I must just go in as I was. My whole life seemed dislocated, torn up by the roots.


There was not much to eat. Half a very small cold chicken, a lettuce, and a little custard pudding, fortunately very nutritious, being made with Eustace Miles' proteid. There was, however, a loaf, and butter and plasmon biscuits on the sideboard. I cut up as much as I dared of the chicken, and put it between two very thick slices of buttered bread. Then I crept out again and took it to her. She got up out of the hay and put out a gnarled brown hand for it.

"I will bring you a cup of coffee later," I said. I was beginning to feel a kind of proprietorship in her. She would have starved but for me.

My servant always left at nine o'clock, to sleep at her father's cottage just over the way. I have a bell in the roof, which I can ring with a cord in case of fire or thieves.

To-night she was of course later than usual, but at last she brought in the coffee, and then I heard her making her rounds, closing the shutters on the ground floor, and locking the front door, — at least trying to do so. I had already locked and bolted it. Then she locked the scullery door on the outside, abstracted the key, and I heard her step on the brick path, and the click of the gate. *She was gone.*

I always heated the coffee myself over the parlour fire. It was already bubbling on the hob. Directly she had left



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I went to the kitchen and got a second cup. I felt much better since I had had supper; and as I took the cup from the shelf the fantastic idea came into my mind to ask my protégée to come in and drink her coffee by the fire in the parlour. I must frankly own it was foolhardy, it was rash, it was even dangerous. But there it is! One cannot help the way one is made, and I am afraid I am not of those who invariably take the coldly prudent course and stick to it.

I turned the idea over in my mind. I could put down sheets of brown paper—I always have a store—from the door to the fire, and an old macintosh over the worst arm-chair which was to be recovered. Besides, I had not had a good look at her yet or made out the real woman under the prison garb. That she was a person of education and refinement may appear hardly credible to my readers, but to one like myself, whose *métier* it is to probe the secrets of my own heart and those of others; to *me* it was sufficiently obvious, from the first moment, that though I had to deal with a criminal she was a very exceptional one, and belonging to my own class. I went out to the stable and suggested to her that she should come in.

“How do you know that I am not a man in disguise?” came a voice from the darkness, and it seemed to me, not for the first time, that she was amused at something. “I’m tall enough. Just think how stupendous it would be if when I was inside and the door really locked I proved to be a wicked, devastating, burglarious male.”

“I wish you would not say things like that,” I said. “On your honour, *are* you a man?”

She hesitated, and then said in a changed voice:

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"I am not. I don't know what I am. I was a woman once, just as a derelict was a ship once. But whatever I am I am not fit to come into a self-respecting house. I am one solid cake of mud."


Something in her reluctance made me the more determined. Besides, one of the truths on which I have insisted most strongly in my "Veil of the Temple" is that if we show full trust and confidence in others they will prove worthy of that trust. Her coming indoors had now become a matter of principle, and I insisted. I even said I could lend her a dressing-gown and slippers, so that her wet clothes might be dried by the kitchen fire.

She murmured something about a good Samaritan, but still demurred, and asked if I had a bathroom. I said I had.

That decided her. She seemed to have no difficulty in making up her mind. She did not see two sides to things, as I always do myself.

She said that if I liked to allow her to go to the bathroom first she would be happy to accept my kind invitation for an hour or so. If not, she would stay where she was.

Half an hour later she was sitting opposite me in the parlour, on the other side of the wood fire, sipping her coffee. I had not put down the brown paper or the macintosh. It was not necessary. Her close-cropped curly grey hair, still damp from the bath, was parted, and brushed stiffly back over her ears. It must have been very beautiful hair once. Her thin hands, and thinner face and neck, looked more like brown parchment than ever as she sat in the lamplight, my old blue dressing-gown folded negligently

The page is framed by a decorative border with floral and scrollwork motifs. The title is centered at the top.

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round her and taking picturesque folds, which it never did when I was inside it. Those long gaunt limbs must have been graceful once. Her feet were bare in her slippers, — in my slippers, I mean. She looked rather like a well-bred Indian.

It was obvious that she was a lady, but her speech had already told me that. What amazed me most where all amazed me was her self-possession.

I wondered what her impression of me was, as we sat, such a strangely assorted couple, one on each side of the fire. Did I indeed seem to her the quixotic impetus, and yet withal dreamy creature, which my books show me to be? But I have often been told by those who know me well that I am much more than my books.

“I have not sat by a fire for how many months?” she said, her black eyes on the logs. “Let me see, last time was in a lonely cottage on the Cotswolds. It was a night like this, but colder, and a helpless old couple let me in, and allowed me to dry my clothes, and lie by their fire all night. Very unwise of them, was n’t it? I might have murdered them in their beds.”

I began to feel rather uncomfortable.

“You are not undergoing a sentence for murder, are you?” I asked.

She looked at me for a moment, and then said:

“The desperate creature who escaped from gaol three days ago, and who was in for life for the murder of the man she lived with, and whose convict clothes I am wearing, — whose clothes, I mean, are at this moment drying before your kitchen fire, — is not the same woman who is now drinking your excellent coffee.”

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“Do you mean to tell me you have never been in prison?”

“Yes, for a year; but I served my time and finished it four years ago.”

I wrung my hands. I was deeply disappointed in her. Her transparent duplicity, which could impose on no one, not even so unsuspecting a nature as mine, hurt me to the quick.

“Oh! you poor soul!” I said, “don’t lie to me. Indeed it is n’t necessary. I will do all I can for you. I will help you to get away. I will give you other clothes, and money, and we will bury these — these garments of shame. But don’t, for God’s sake, don’t lie to me.”

She looked gravely at me, as if she were measuring me, and seeing, no doubt, that I was not deceived, a dusky red rose for a moment to her face and brow.

“It is not easy to speak the truth to some people,” she said, her eyes dropping once more to the fire, “even when they are as compassionate and kind as you are.”

“Truthfulness is a habit that may be regained,” I said earnestly. “I myself, without half your temptations, was untruthful once.”

To associate oneself with the sins of others, to show one’s own scar, is not this sometimes the only way to comfort those overborne in the battle of life? Had I not chronicled my own failing in the matter of truthfulness when I foolishly and wickedly took blame on myself for the fault of one dear to me, in my first book, “*With Broken Wing*”? But I saw as I spoke that she had not read it and did not realise to what I was alluding. I have so steadily refused to be interviewed that possibly also she had not even yet guessed who I was.

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“I am sure, I am quite sure,” I went on after a moment, “that there is a great deal of good in you, that you are by nature truthful.”

“Am I, I wonder? Perhaps I was so once, in the early untroubled days. But I have told many lies since then.

She drank her coffee slowly, looking steadfastly into the fire, as if she saw in the wavering flame some reflection of another fire, on another hearthstone.

“How good it is,” she said at last, putting her cup down. “How dreadfully good it is, the coffee and the fire, and the quiet room, and to be dry and warm and clean! How good it all is! And how little I thought of them when I had all these things!”

She got up and looked at a water-colour over the low mantelpiece.

“Madeira, is n't it?” she said. “I seem to remember that peculiar effect of the vivid purple of the bougainvillæa against the dim clouded purple of the hills behind.”

“It is Madeira,” I said. “I was there ten years ago. Perhaps you have read my little book, — “Beside the Bougainvillæa.”

“My husband died there,” she said, looking fixedly at the drawing. “He died just before sunrise, and when it was over I remember looking out across the sea past the great English man-of-war in the harbour to those three little islands — I forget their names; and as the first level rays touched them, the islands and the ship all seemed to melt into half transparent amethyst in a sea of glass, beneath a sky of glass. How calm the sea was, — hardly a ripple! I felt that even he, weak as he was, could walk upon it. It was

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like daybreak in heaven, not on earth. And his long martyrdom was over. It seemed as if we were both safe home at last."

"Had he been ill long?"

"A long time. He suffered terribly. And I gave him morphia under the doctor's directions. And then when he was gone, not at first, but after a little bit, I took morphia myself to numb my own anguish and to get a little sleep. I thought I should go mad if I could not get any sleep. I had better have gone mad. But I took morphia instead and sealed my own doom. But how can you tell whether I am speaking the truth? Well, it does n't matter if you don't believe me. I am accustomed to it. I am never believed now. And I don't care if I'm not. I don't deserve to be. But I suppose you can see that I was not always a tramp on the highway. And at any rate that is what I am now, and what I shall remain, unless I drift into prison again, which God forbid, for I should suffocate in a cell after the life in the open air which I am accustomed to."

She shivered a little, as if she who seemed devoid of fear quailed at the remembrance of her cell.

"You are wondering how I have fallen so low," she said. "Do you remember Kipling's lines — 'We are dropping down the ladder rung by rung.' Well, I have known what it is to drop down the ladder of life clinging convulsively to each rung in turn, losing hold of it, and being caught back by compassionate hands, only to let go of it again; fighting desperately to hold on to the next rung when I was thrust from the one above it; having my hands beaten from each rung, one after another, one after another,

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sinking lower and lower yet, cling as I would, pray as I would, repent as I would."

"Who beat your hands from the rungs?" I said.

"Morphia," she replied.

There was a long silence.

"Morphia, — that was the beginning and the middle and the end of my misfortunes," she said. "What did I do that gradually lost me my friends, — and I had such good friends, even after my best friend, my sister, died. What did I do that ruined me by inches? In Australia I have heard of evil men taken red handed, being left in the bush with food and water by them, bound to a fallen tree which has been set on fire at one end. And the fire smoulders and smoulders, and travels inch by inch, along the trunk, and they watch their slow, inevitable death coming towards them day by day until it at last destroys them also inch by inch. What had I done that I should find myself bound like those poor wretches? I cannot tell you. Morphia wipes out the memory as surely as drink. I only know that I was in torment. Faces, familiar and strange faces, some compassionate, some indignant, some horror-struck, come back to me sometimes, blurred, as by smoke, but I see nothing clearly. I dimly remember fragments of appeals that were made to me, fragments of divine music in Cathedrals where I sobbed my heart out, — broken, splintered, devastating memories of promises made in bitter tears, and endless lies and subterfuges to conceal what I could not conceal. For morphia looks out of the eyes of its victim. I knew that, but I thought no one could see it in mine, that I could hide it. And I have one vivid recollection of a quiet room with flowers in it, and latticed windows, but I don't know where



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it was or how I came there, or who were the people in it who spoke to me. There was a tall woman with grey parted hair in a lilac gown. I can see her now. And I swore before God that I had left off the drug. And some one standing behind me took the little infernal machine out of my pocket, and I was confronted with it. And the tall woman wrung her hands and groaned. How I hated her. And in my madness I accused her of putting it there to ruin me. And some one—a man—said slowly, "She is impossible. Quite impossible." That one memory stands out like a little oasis in a desert of mirage and shifting sand and thirst. I should know the room again if I saw it. There was a window opening into a little paved courtyard with a fountain in it, and doves drinking. But I shall never see it again. And the drug became alive like a fiend, and pushed me lower and lower, down, always down, until I did something dreadful, I don't know now exactly what it was, though the prison chaplain explained it to me. But it was about a cheque, and I was convicted and sent to prison."


"Then you have been in prison *twice*?" I said, anxious to make it easy for her to be entirely truthful, for I could not doubt the truth of much of this earlier history.

She did not seem to hear me.

"There is no crime," she went on, "however black, that I did not expiate then. If suffering can wash out sins I washed out mine. I, who thought I had so many enemies, have no enemy. No one has ever injured me. But if I had the cruelest in the world I would not condemn him, if he were a morphia maniac, to sudden enforced abstinence and prison life. And I could not die; I am very strong by


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nature. I could neither die nor live. It was months before I saw light, — months of hell, consumed in the flame of hell, which is thirst. And slowly the power to live came back to me. I was saved it spite of myself. And slowly the power of thought returned to me. I had time to think. My mind drifted and drifted, but I got control of it now and again, and then for longer intervals, as my poor body reasserted itself from the slavery of the drug. And I thought, I thought, I thought. And at last I made up my mind, my fierce, embittered mind. And when I came out of prison I took to the road. Even then there were those who would have helped me, but I steeled my heart against them. There was a strange woman with a sweet face waiting at the prison door, who spoke kindly to me. But I distrusted her. I distrusted every one. And I did not mean to be helped any more. I had been helped time and time again. To be helped was to be put where I could get morphia, where I had something, if it was only my clothes, which I could sell to get it; where I could *steal* things to sell to get it. If I had any possessions I knew that some day, not for a time perhaps, but some day, I should sell them and get morphia somehow. They say you can't buy it, but you can. I always could in the past, and I knew I always should in the future. But on the road — in rags — a tramp — down in the dust — in the safe refuge of the dust — there it was not possible. There I was out of temptation. There I could not be burned in that flame again. That was all I thought of, to creep away where the fire could not reach me. And I felt sure I should not live long. In my ignorance I thought the exposure to all weathers, and privation, and the first frost of winter would

The page is framed by an intricate, symmetrical decorative border. It features a central horizontal band with a repeating floral motif, flanked by vertical columns of similar patterns. The corners are adorned with large, detailed floral designs, including what appears to be a carnation in the bottom right. The overall style is reminiscent of early 20th-century book design.

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bring my release quickly. But they did not. They gave me new life instead. I came out in spring, and I begged my way to Abinger forest, and nearly starved there; but I did not mind. Have you ever been in Abinger forest in the spring, when the whortleberry is out? Can the Elysian field of asphodel be more beautiful? Perhaps to others they might seem so, but not to me. My first glimpse of hope came to me in the woods at Abinger in a windless, sunny week at Easter. The gypsies gave me food once or twice. And I ate the scraps that the trippers left after their picnics at the top of Leith Hill where the tower is. And I lay in the sun by day, and I slept in a stack of bracken by night, and my strained lips relaxed. And I, who had become so hard and bitter, saw at last what endless love and compassion had been vainly lavished on me, and I was humbled. I had somehow got it rooted into my warped mind that I had been cruelly treated, betrayed, abandoned by my friends, by everyone. I had tried hard to forgive them, but I could not. I saw at last that it was I who had been cruel, I who had betrayed, I who needed forgiveness. And I asked it of the only friend I had left, the only friend who never forsakes us. And peace came back, and the deep wound in my life healed. It seemed as if Nature, who had forgotten me for so long, had pity on me, and took me again to her heart. For I had loved her years ago, before my husband died. When the weather broke I took to the road, and the road has given me back my health, and much more than health. I can see beauty again now; and there is always beauty in the hedgerow, and wherever the road runs there is beauty. In the open down, beside the tidal rivers with their brown sails creeping among the butter-



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cup, everywhere there is beauty. And I can sleep again now. I learnt how to sleep at Abinger. I had forgotten how it was done without morphia. O God, I can sleep; every night, anywhere. It's worth being a tramp for that alone, to be able to sleep naturally; to know in the daytime that you will have it at night, and then to lie down, and feel it stealing over you like the blessing of God. I used to wake myself at first for sheer joy when it was coming. And then to nestle down, and sink into it, down, down into it till one reaches the great peace. And no more wakings in torment as the drug passes off, waking as in some iron grave unable to stir, hand or foot, unable to beat back the suffocating horror and terror which lies cheek to cheek with us. No more wakings in hell. No more mornings like that. But instead the cool, sweet waking in the crystal light in the open air. And to see the sun come up, and to lie still against the clean, fragrant haystack and let it warm you. And to watch the quiet friendly beasts rise up in the long meadows. And to wake hungry instead of that dreadful maddening thirst. And to *like* to eat, how good that is, even if you go fasting half the day! But I never do. The poor will always give you enough to eat. It hurts them to see any one hungry. Yes, I have dropped down the ladder rung by rung. And now I have reached the lowest rung. And it is a good place, the only safe place for wastrels such as I, the only refuge from my enemy. There is peace on the lowest rung. I can do no more harm there, and I have done so much. I was ambitious once, I was admired and clever once, but I found no abiding city anywhere. Temptation lurked everywhere. I was driven like chaff before the wind. . . . But now I have the road. No one will take

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the road from me while I live, or the ditch beside it to die in when my time comes. I am provided for at last. I lead a clean life at last."

She sat silent, her dreamy eyes fixed, her thin hands folded one over the other. I looked at her with an aching heart. What strange mixture of truth and lies was all this! But I said nothing. What was the use.

And as we sat silent beside the dying fire the great inequality between us pressed hard upon me. I, by no special virtue of my own, God knows, on one of the uppermost rungs of life; she — poor soul, poor soul! — on the lowest.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed eleven.

She started slightly, looked at it, and then at me, as if uncertain of her surroundings, and the shrewd, sardonic look came back to her face.

"I am keeping you up," she said, rising. "I think your strong coffee has gone to my head. This outburst of autobiography is a poor return for all your kindness. I had no idea it was so late or that I could be so garrulous, and I must make a very early start to-morrow. Shall I go into the kitchen and put on my own clothes again? They must be quite dry by now."

"Oh, let me help you!" I said impulsively. "Let me get you into a home, or help you to emigrate. Don't go back to this wandering, aimless life. Work for others, interest in others, that is what *you* need, what *I* need, what we *all* need to take us out of ourselves, to make us forget our own misery."

"I have half forgotten mine already," she said. "To-night I remembered it again. But I have long since put it

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from my mind. I think the moment for a change of clothing in the kitchen has arrived."

She spoke quietly, but as if her last word were final. I found it impossible to continue the subject.

"You will never escape in those clothes," I said. "You have n't the ghost of a chance. If you will come into my room I will see what I can find for you."

I had been willing to do much more than give her clothes, but I instinctively felt that my appeal to her better feelings had fallen on deaf ears.

She followed me to my bedroom, and I got out all my oldest clothes and spread them before her. But she would have none of them.

"The worst look like an ultra-respectable district visitor," she said, tossing aside one garment after another. It was the more curious that she should say that, because my brother-in-law had always said I looked like one, and that my books even had a parochial flavour about them. But then, he had never really studied them, or he would have seen their lighter side.

"I had no idea pockets were worn in a little slit in the front seam," said my visitor. "It shows how long it is since I have been 'in the know.' No doubt front pockets came in with the bicycles. No. It is very kind of you; but except for that old dyed moreen petticoat the things won't do. I always was particular about dress, and I never was more so than I am at this moment. You don't happen to have an old black ulster with all the buttons off, and a bit of mangy fur dropping off the neck? That's more my style. But of course you have n't."

"I had one once of that kind; it was so bad that I could

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not even give it away. So I put it in the dog's basket. Lindo used to sleep on it. He loved it, poor dear. It may be there still."

We went downstairs again, and I pulled Lindo's basket out from under the stairs.

The old black wrap was still in it, but it was mildewy and stuck to the basket. It tore as I released it. It reminded me painfully of my lost darling.

"The very thing," she said with enthusiasm, as the dilapidated travesty of a coat shook itself free, — "quiet and unobtrusive to the last degree. Parisian in colour and simplicity. And mole colour is so becoming. Can you really spare it? Then with the moreen petticoat I am provided, equipped."

We went back to the kitchen again.

"What will you do with them?" I said, pointing to her convict clothes, which had dried perfectly stiff, owing to the amount of mud on them. How such quantities of mud could have got on to them was a mystery to me.

"It certainly does not improve one's clothes to hide in a wet ditch in a ploughed field," she said meditatively. "I will dispose of them early to-morrow morning. I picked a place as I found my way here."

"Not on *my* premises?" I said anxiously.

"Of course not. Do you take me for a monster of ingratitude? I'll manage that all right."

I suddenly remembered that she must have food to take with her. I went to the larder, and when I came back I looked at her with renewed amazement.

My dressing-gown and slippers were laid carefully on a chair. The astonishing woman was a tramp once more,

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squatting on the brick floor, drawing on to her bare feet the shapeless excuses for boots which had been toasting before the fire.

Then she leaned over the hearth, rubbed her hands in the ashes, and passed them gently over her face, her neck, her wrists and ankles. She drew forward and tangled her hair before the kitchen glass. Then she rolled up her convict clothes into a compact bundle, wiped her right hand carefully on the kitchen towel, and held it out to me.

“Remember,” I said gravely, taking it in both of mine and pressing it, “if ever you are in need of a friend you know whom to apply to. Marion Dalrymple, Rufford, will always find me.”

I thought I ought not to let her go away without letting her know who I was.

But my name seemed to have no especial meaning for her. Perhaps she had lived beyond the pale too long.

“You have indeed been a friend to me,” she said. “God bless you, you good Samaritan. May the world go well with you. Good night, and thank you, and good-bye. If you’ll give me the stable key, I’ll let myself in. It’s a pity you should come out; it’s raining again. And I’ll leave the stable locked when I go. And the key will be in the lavender bush at the door. Good-bye again.”

I did not sleep that night, and in the morning I was so tired that I made no attempt to work. I had of course stolen out before six to retrieve the stable key from the lavender bush, and hang it on its accustomed nail. I looked into the stable first. My guest had departed.



## *The Lowest Rung*

I spent an idle morning musing on the events of the previous evening, if time thus spent can be called idling. It may seem so to others, but in my own experience these apparently profitless hours are often more fruitful than those spent in belabouring the brain to a forced activity. But then I have always preferred to remain as the great Molinos advises — a learner rather than a teacher in the school of life. Early in the afternoon, as I was on my way to the post-office, my landlord, Mr. Ledbury, met me. He looked excited, an open telegram in his hand.

“Have you heard about the escaped convict?” he said. “She has been taken. She was traced to Bronsal heath yesterday, and run to earth this morning at Framlingham.”

He turned and walked with me.

He was too much taken up with the news to notice how I started and how my colour changed. But indeed I flush and turn pale at nothing. All my life it has been a vexation to me that a chance word or allusion should bring the colour to my cheek.

“Poor soul,” he said. “I could almost wish she had made good her escape. She got out, Heaven alone knows how, to see her child, which she had heard was ill. But the ground she must have covered in the time! She was absolutely dead beat when she was taken. And she was not in her prison clothes. That is so inexplicable. How she got others she alone knows. Some one must have befriended her, and given them to her, some one very poor, for she was miserably clad, and the extraordinary thing is that though she was traced to the deserted cottage on the heath yesterday, and taken at Framlingham to-day, her prison clothes were found hidden in my wood-yard, *here* in my

## *The Hand on the Latch*

wood-yard, by Zack when he went to his work. And this place is not on the way to Framlingham. How in the name of fortune could she have hidden her clothes *here?* ”

“ She must have wandered here in the dark,” I suggested.

“ I don't understand it,” he said, turning in at his own gate. “ But anyhow, the poor thing has been caught.”

My story should end here. Indeed to my mind it does end here. And if I have been persuaded by my family to add a few more lines on the subject, it is sorely against the grain and against my artistic sense. And I am conscious that I have been unwise in allowing myself to be overruled by those who have not given their lives to literature as I have done, and who therefore cannot judge as I can when a story should be brought to a close.

I need hardly say that I often thought of my unhappy visitant, often wondered how she was getting on. A year later I was staying with a friend in Ipswich who was a visitor at the prison there, and I remembered how it was to Ipswich she had been brought back, and I asked to see her. My friend knew her, and told me that she had made no further attempt to escape, and that she believed the child was dead. It had been an old promise that she would one day take me over the prison. I claimed it, and begged that I might be allowed to have a few words with that particular inmate. It was not according to the regulations, but my friend was a privileged person. That afternoon I passed with her under that dreary portal, and after walking along interminable whitewashed passages, and past how many locked and numbered doors, my friend whispered to a warder, who motioned me to a cell.

## The Lowest Rung

A woman was sitting on her bed with her head in her hands.

“You have not forgotten me, I hope,” I said gently. It may be weak, but I have never been able to speak ungently to any one in trouble, whatever the cause may be. I have known too much trouble myself.

She raised her head slowly, pushed back her hair, and looked at me.

I had never seen her before.

I could only stare helplessly at her.

“But you are not the woman who escaped last October?” I stammered at last.

“Yes,” she said apathetically, “I am. Who else should I be? What do you want with me?”

But I was speechless. It was all so unexpected, so inexplicable. I have often thought since how much stranger fact is than fiction. The more interested one is in life and in one's fellow-creatures the more surprises there are in store for one. With every year I live my sense of wonder increases, and with it my realisation of my own ignorance. As I stared amazedly at her, a change came over her face. She looked at me almost with eagerness.

“You didn't take me for 'er, did you?” she said hurriedly, — “'er as 'elped me. Did you know 'er? She ain't copped, is she? Don't tell me as she's copped, too.”

“I thought you *were* her,” I said. “I don't know what I thought. I don't understand it.”

“She found me on a dirty night,” she said, “in a tumble-down cottage. I'd never seen her afore. But she crep in and found me and tole me there was a watch kep for me at Woodbridge. And she changed clothes with me, so as to

## *The Hand on the Latch*

give me a bit of a chance. Mine was fair stiff with mud, for I'd laid in a wet ditch till night, but they showed the blasted colour for all that. And she give me all she had on her, her clothes, and a bite of bread and bacon, and two-pence. And it was n't as if we was pals. I'd never seen her afore. She stuck at nothing, and she only larfed at the risk, for they'd have shut her up for certain if they'd caught her. She said she'd manage some'ow. And she 'eartened me up, and put me on the road for Wickham, and she said she'd dror away the pursoot by hiding the prison clothes somewhere in the opsit direction where they could be found easy by the first fool."

"She did it," I said.

"And how did she spare 'em? She'd nuthin' but them."

"I gave her some more. If she had been my own sister I could not have done more for her."

"And she worn't caught, wor she?"

"Not that I know of. No, I feel sure she never was. I helped her to get away."

"I was took in spite of all," said the woman, "and by my own silliness. But I seed my little Nan alive fust, and that was all I wanted. And I don't know who she was nor what she was. She tole me she was a outcast and a tramp and a good-for-nothing. But there's never been anybody yet, be they who they may, as done for me what she done. She'd have give me the skin orf her back if she could 'ave took it orf. And it worn't as if I knowed her. I'd never set eyes on 'er afore, nor never shall again."

I have never seen her again, either.



## THE UNDERSTUDY

*The only form of human love that atrophies the heart is the love of self.*

**M**ARION WRIGHT sat in the centre seat of the third row of the stalls, shivering in spite of her sables. It was the dress rehearsal of her first play, that play on which she had spent herself to the verge of mental bankruptcy.

The nauseating presentiment of failure, the distaste and scorn of her own work, were upon her, which the artist never escapes, which return as acutely after twenty successes as in the hours of suspense before the first essay. Marion's surroundings were not of a nature to reassure her. To her unaccustomed eyes the empty, dimly lit theatre, swathed and bandaged in dust-sheets, looked ominously dreary. Had any one ever laughed in this shrouded desert? The long lines of stalls huddled under their wrinkled coverings stretched before and behind her. The boxes were shapeless holes of pallid grime. It was as if a London fog had trailed its dingy veil over everything. There was a fog outside as well, and the few electric lights which had been turned up peered blurred and yellow. An immense ladder, three ladders tied together, reared itself from the stalls to the roof. Something was being done to the lights on the ceiling. Tired-looking men in overcoats were creeping into the orchestra, thrusting white faces under screened lights and rustling papers on stands.

Marion had the theatre to herself except for a few whisperers in the back row of the stalls — her maid, an attend-

## *The Hand on the Latch*

ant, one or two actors of minor parts who did not appear in the first act, and a few costumiers.

It was fiercely cold, and she had not slept for several nights. She wished she had never been born.

A magnificent-looking woman, wearing her chin tilted slightly upwards, was squeezing herself and an immense fur coat towards her along the stalls, and sat down beside her. This was Lenore, the leading lady.

She turned a colourless, beautifully shaped face and heavy eyes with bisted lashes towards Marion.

"I suppose we shall have to wait about two hours for Mr. Montgomery," she said apathetically.

"Does he always keep people waiting?"

"Always, since he made his great hit in *The Deodars*."

There was a moment's silence.

"Mr. Montgomery does not like his part," said the leading lady tentatively, hanging a hand in an interminable white glove over the back of the stall in front of her.

Marion's face hardened.

"It's not a sympathetic part," she said, "but an artist ought not to think of that."

"No, it's not sympathetic," acquiesced Lenore, turning up her fur collar. "It seems as if the principal man's part never *is* sympathetic in a woman's play. If the central figure is a woman, the men grouped round her are generally prize specimens of worms. I wonder why. In your play, now, Maggie's everything! George does not count for much, as far as I can see. Even Maggie had not much use for him."

"She loved him," said the author, with asperity.

"Did she? Sometimes when I'm playing Maggie to

## *The Understudy*

Montgomery's George I wonder if she did. And I just wonder now and then if I would have thrown him over as she did. I mean for good and all. It seems to me — if she'd cared for him, cared *really*, you know — ”

“She did,” interposed Marion, harshly.

“Wouldn't she have quarrelled and made it up again? Would she have been quite so hard on him?”

“Yes, she would. Think, just think what she must have suffered in the third act, the scene at the Savoy, when, loving him as she did, trusting him as she did, she saw him come in with — ”

“Well, I expect you know best,” said Lenore, whose interest seemed to flag suddenly; “anyhow, she suffered, poor thing. Women like her always do, I think.” She rose slowly. “I may as well go and dress. I suppose we shall be here till midnight.”

The orchestra struck up.

“Anyhow, she suffered.”

The violins caught up the words and dinned them over and over again into Marion's ears. Women like Maggie, women with deep hearts like herself — for was not Maggie herself? — they always suffered, always suffered, always! — said the violins.

The manager suddenly appeared in front of the curtain and walked swiftly over the little bridge from the stage to the stalls. He was a small, sturdy, thin-lipped, choleric man who looked as if he were made up of energy; energy distilled and bottled. Some one had said of him that his hat was really a glass stopper, which might fly off at any moment.

It was off now. There had evidently been an explosion. He held a note in his hand.

## *The Hand on the Latch*

“Montgomery has given up the part,” he said. “He was odd at rehearsal yesterday. I felt there was something wrong. He said he had no show. Now he says he’s too ill to come — bronchitis.”

The sense of disaster which had been hanging over Marion all day slipped and engulfed her like an avalanche. She felt paralysed.

“Then the play can’t go on,” she said.

“If it had to happen, better to-night than to-morrow night,” said the manager. “Montgomery is as slippery as an eel. I don’t suppose he has got bronchitis; but I have no doubt if I rushed over there at this moment, I should find him in bed with a steam-kettle. He would play the part.”

“What will you do?” gasped Marion.

“Do?” he said. “Do? There’s only one thing to do. Go through with the play! It will start in two minutes, and we shall see what the understudy can make of it. He’s as clever as he can stick, and he’s word perfect, at any rate.”

“Who is he?”

“A Mr. Delacour; at least, that’s his stage name. He’s been in America for the last five years. Clever enough, but a rolling stone. He’s not to be depended on, poor devil; but it’s Hobson’s choice — we’ve got to depend on him.”

The manager sat down beside her and clapped his hands.

The lights suddenly burned up behind the curtain, the curtain rose, and the play began.

Some plays, some books, some men and women, possess a mysterious force which, for lack of a better word, we call vitality. Those who possess it not call it by all manner of ugly names. But, nevertheless, it is the great gift, the power



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that overcomes, which makes life on a large scale possible, which makes the soldier, the lover, the saint, possible. Most of us are only half alive. Our work is half dead. We deal in creep-mouse sentiment, and call it love. We write pathetically of our impotence to live, and call it resignation. We who have never been young compare notes with each other on how to remain senile and call it the art of growing old.

But others go through life, and spend themselves on it, piece by piece, with ardour as they go. These are the teachers—only they never teach. They know. If we want to learn anything, we can watch them. And some of us, again—and this is the hardest fate of all—come into life inadequately equipped, not provisioned for a prolonged journey. What little we have, and what little there is of us, we expend on the first part of life, having nothing left for middle age.

Such a woman was Marion. She had talent, and she had, besides—as the manager beside her had divined—one live play in her. But he doubted whether she had more than one. She looked insolvent, a dweller in the past, crippled by an acute memory. No doubt it was this self-regarding memory which had resulted in the play. It was obviously a personal experience, and as she was rich enough to share the risk of producing it, he was more than ready to put it on. It was full of faults; it was melodramatic, it was amateurish, but it was passionately alive. The pit and the gallery would love it; and if the stalls found it a little cheap, what of that? He had considerable *flaire*. He believed it would succeed.

He glanced once or twice furtively at the handsome, un-

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happy-looking, richly furred woman beside him — no longer young, “past youth, but not past passion,” with much of the charm of youth lingering in her graceful erectness, her pretty hair, her delicate pallor.

She had told him feverishly that the only thing she cared for — had ever cared for — was art, success, fame. He had heard something like it often before.

He wished, with a half-sigh, that a little of that uneasy, egotistic ambition might have been instilled into the heart of Lenore, for whom he had a compassionate, bottled-up attachment of many years' standing.

Poor Lenore! What an actress, and what a hopelessly womanly woman, still mourning the providential demise of an impossible brother who had lived on her.

She was on the stage now, looking about seventeen, all youth and garden hat and white muslin.

Marion's face twitched. She was living her own youth over again.

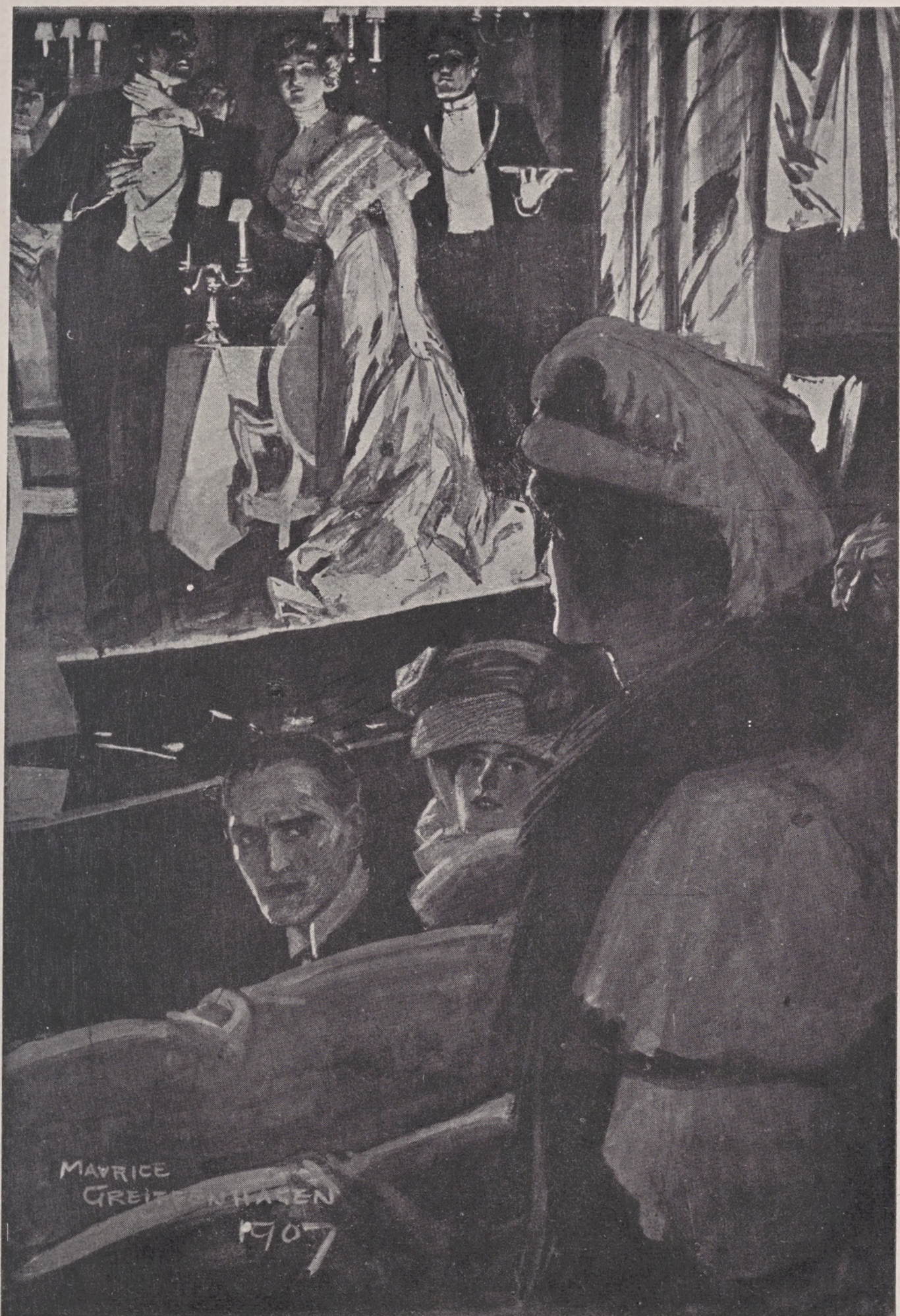
There was a pause. Lenore picked a rose to gain time, and looked into the wings.

“Delacour!” roared the manager, bouncing up in his stall and then sitting down again.

“We cut it here,” said Lenore, advancing to the footlights, “and he does n't know. It is not his fault. He's waiting for his cue. See, Mr. Delacour! Leave out that bit about the daisies, and come on at ‘happiness.’”

The understudy came on, and Marion's heart thrust suddenly at her like a rapier, and left her for dead, staring in front of her.

This was no understudy. This was the original George of the drama when it was first acted. Marion saw the



“ ‘That last sentence is not in the part’ ”

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lover of her youth come on and kiss Lenore's hand with the same gesture with which he had once kissed hers — in the sunshine, in a Kentish garden, beside a lavender bush, with a bumble-bee in it, ten endless years ago.

He was hardly changed — a little thinner, perhaps, but not a day older in his paint; the same reckless, debonair creature whom Marion had loved, who had wounded her and grieved her, whom she had discarded at last with bitter anger, whom she had never forgotten, whom she remembered with anguish.

The curtain was down before she recovered herself, and the conductor was waving his baton.

The manager turned to her with some excitement.

“If only he can keep it up!” he said. “Delacour puts life into the love-making. He makes love well, don't you think?”

“Admirably.”

“If only he can keep it up!” repeated the manager.

Through the two acts which followed, the understudy kept it up. He did more. He acted with an intensity that made the rest of the play somewhat colourless. At the end of the scene at the Savoy, just before the curtain fell, he added a sentence of his own.

In a second, before she knew what she had done, Marion had sprung to her feet, and had said in a harsh, loud voice:

“That last sentence is not in the part.”

The play stopped. The hurrying waiters with dishes stood stock-still and gaped, as astonished as if the interruption had been in real life. Some of the supers at the little tables in the background got up to see what was happening.

## *The Hand on the Latch*

Delacour, wineglass in hand, came forward to the footlights, and their eyes met.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "You say it is not in the part. I thought it was. I will omit it in future."

"You will do no such thing!" bawled the manager, leaping to his feet and shaking his fist at him. "Omit it! Why, Miss Wright, it's an inspiration. Gets him the whole sympathy just at the critical moment. And what a curtain! Good God! What a curtain!"

"Isn't it?" said Lenore. "Leave out my bit at the end altogether, and make *that* the curtain. Don't you agree, Miss Wright? And, look here, Mr. Delacour, take the front centre here."

"Start again at 'falsehood,'" said the manager briskly to Lenore. "Now, then, everybody. Sit down at the back there. Now —"

The play started again. Marion, astonished at her own violence, ashamed, shattered by conflicting emotions, speechless, could only bow her approval of the change, not that the manager cared a pin whether she approved or not.

*Was Delacour acting?* Marion knew that he was not. And as the play proceeded it changed in character. The words were the words she had written. Many of them were the words he had used himself, but his passion transformed them. They took on a new meaning. It was Maggie who was becoming a mean figure in spite of her grandiloquence — perhaps because of it. Her rigid principles, her petty, egotistic pride, her faultless demeanour jarred on the audience. Lenore, like a true artist, caught the novel side of the situation and emphasised it. Her

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Maggie dwindled, dwindled, until the man held the stage alone, dominated it. Marion had never before seen his side of the miserable drama in which her happiness had made shipwreck, had never before seen her own character in this light. It was as if he were saying the truth at last, defending himself at last — which he had never done in real life.

Finally repulsed, silent under her scornful invective, Delacour gathered himself together and went off magnificent in defeat.

The curtain fell for the last time.

The tiny audience, strengthened by the rest of the cast who were not needed in the final scene, broke into rapturous applause. The manager, excited and radiant, clapped with the rest.

“He’s immense! He’s immense!” he kept on saying. “Delacour’s the making of it. He’s immense! Hang Montgomery! He may have bronchitis till he’s blue. Delacour makes the play. I will fetch him!”

He disappeared behind the curtain, and in a few minutes reappeared, dragging Delacour with him to introduce him to Marion.

“We have met before,” she said faintly, putting out her hand.

“Did we ever really meet?” he said gently, taking it for a second in his.

He seemed quite exhausted. Now that she saw him close at hand, he looked much older. And his face was grievously lined, deteriorated.

She tried to thank him, to express her gratitude for the way he had extricated them from a great difficulty; but

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her words were so hesitating and frigid that the manager broke in, shaking him warmly by the hand.

Delacour bowed his thanks, murmured something conventional, and was gone.

Every one was in a hurry to go, too. Marion remained a moment longer, talking to the manager, and then they went together through the royal box to the private entrance, where her brougham was waiting. Just as they reached it, he was called away, and an attendant let her out.

Waiting beside her brougham, in the rain, holding the door for her, was Delacour, in a shabby overcoat, his hat in his hand.

Again their eyes met in a long look. His, sombre, melancholy, humble, had a great appeal in them.

She seemed encased in some steel armour which made movement and speech wellnigh impossible. She thanked him inaudibly.


He shut the door, said "Home" to the coachman, and turned away.

The carriage drove off.

Then something in Marion snapped. Her other self, the poor woman in her whom she had denied and starved and browbeaten, pounced upon her and called out suddenly, desperately :

"Forgive him! What is life without him? Think of the last ten years! Has there been one day in all those grinding years when you have not longed to see him? Has there ever been one day when you would not have given up your ease and luxury for a cottage with him? And now he has come back into your life. He still loves you. Are you going to lose him again? You were vindictive, and



The page is framed by a decorative border with floral and scrollwork motifs. The title "The Understudy" is centered at the top.

## The Understudy

you know it. Go back now and kneel down in the wet street and ask him to forgive you. Quick! quick! — before it is too late!”

The other woman in her, the woman who had discarded him, stopped her ears.

“No, no! I had good reasons for breaking with him. They hold as good to-day as ten years ago.”

“Very well,” said the other, scornfully. “Then never dare to tell yourself again that you ever loved him. Let that lie cease. Your love was only pretty words and pride and self-seeking, and a miserable streak of passion. What do you care what happens to him? Don’t go back. You don’t care for him. You never cared. Never, never. And he knows it. He is telling himself so now — at this moment.”

She stopped the brougham. She trembled so much that she could hardly tell the man to drive back to the theatre. He turned slowly, the horse evidently reluctant, and in a few minutes she was once more at the private entrance. The door was closed. No one was to be seen in the little *cul-de-sac*. The lamp over the door was out. She got out and rang — once, twice, and yet again. Then she realised that every one else had hurried away as precipitately as she had done, for the dawn was already in the sky. She dragged herself back into her carriage and drove home, shaking in every limb.

After all, it did not matter. She would get his address from the manager first thing to-morrow and go straight on and see him, and sacrifice her pride, and beseech him to take her back. She had been too proud. She saw that at last. She would say so. She saw at last that resentment is disloyalty. She would say so. She was so sick of her

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present life that she would say anything. And he loved her still, thank God! And — thank God, too — she was rich. And it was obvious that he was poor. She had much to share with him. And she was still attractive. Other men still wished to marry her. She was pretty, still. All that she had, all that she still was, she would give him. And this long nightmare of the last ten years would pass at last, as that other nightmare of her youth had passed — her wretched home, with a drunken father and a heartbroken mother. That had passed, though at the time it had seemed as if it would endure for ever. Her parents had died, and her vulgar, kindly, rich aunt had adopted her. And now this second nightmare was at an end too. The ache would go out of her life, the long daily hunger and thirst would cease. There would be no more dreadful homecomings after evenings of amusement; no more sick recoil and despair at waking and seeing the pale finger of the dawn upon the blind. She would be happy at last!

Marion cried herself to sleep that night. Next morning, as early as she dared, she was at the theatre. The manager was going through his usual paroxysm of anxiety and ill-temper which preceded a first night. He could hardly find time for a word with her. There was a hitch in the scenery of the last act; the lighting was not yet repaired; one of the actors of the minor parts was ill, for whom an understudy had not been provided; and the head scene-shifter had sprained his wrist.

“I won’t keep you,” said Marion, as he hurried up, fuming; “I only want Mr. Delacour’s address. I should like to see him at once — to — to talk to him about his part. There are a few points —”

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“Delacour’s address?” said the manager. “Don’t know it. Oh, yes, of course!” He tore a little notebook out of his pocket. Then he suddenly looked up at her. “Don’t go to him. Send for him, if you like, or see him here. He’ll be here in an hour — at least, he will be if Smith is worth his salt. I’ve bribed him to keep a lynx eye on him day and night, and bring him up to time. But don’t go and see him. I suppose you know he — ”

“He’s married?” gasped Marion.

The manager laughed scornfully.

“He *drinks*, my dear lady. He drinks. He’s only just out of an inebriates’ home. But don’t alarm yourself. If he’s watched, I daresay we shall manage all right. I hope to goodness we shall! Don’t look so scared. Smith has charge of him, and he is accustomed to the job. He was quite sober last night. I hear he always is after an outbreak. You’re going home? Well, I think you’re right. Yes, very cold here now. Quite right not to stop. See you again later.”

Marion drove home and shut herself up in her room. There was no need to lock the door. She was alone in the world, alone in her handsome, empty house, where she had always been alone, even before her aunt died and left it to her. . . . She would always be alone now. Only yesterday she had hoped — what had she not hoped! She had seen him there in imagination changing this weary house into a home, brilliant and faulty as ever, lovable as ever, beloved as ever, surrounded by her lavished adoration. She had seen their children running along its wide passages, playing in its empty hall.

And now.

*He drank.*

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She shuddered. She had seen drink once. She knew. Never while she lived would she forget what her home had been like. The past crowded back upon her with all its vileness and nausea, all its unspeakable degradation and violence, wrapped up with maudlin sentiment and cheap tears. The sweat stood on her forehead.

What an escape she had had! To think that if it had not been for that chance word of the manager's she would by now have pledged herself irrevocably to a drunkard, waded back into the slough from which she had emerged. Oh, what a merciful fate it had been, after all, which had parted them! How faithless she had been all these years! How little she had realised how the divine love and wisdom had watched over her, had shielded her!

"Oh! thank God! Thank God!" she groaned. The other self in her, the poor dying woman in her, arose on her deathbed and screamed to her, screamed insane things. If a certain voice is too long ignored, its dictates seem at last insane.

"Take him back all the same!" gasped the dying voice. "Marry him. Devote yourself to him day and night. Cure him. Set him up. You love him. Love can do it, if anything can."

"I can't do it," groaned Marion. "Mother tried, but it was no good."

"Then do as she did, try and fail."

"I can't. He would break my heart."

"Let him break it."

Marion strangled the terrible, urgent voice with fury, and then cried as if her heart would indeed break. The silenced voice spoke no more.

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The play was a great success. Delacour, who had recently returned from America, was the making of it. Lenore was the first to acknowledge it, though his success was at her expense. Her part seemed only as a foil to the sombre splendour of his.

The play ran and ran.

Delacour made no further effort to speak to Marion. He avoided her systematically. He, on his side, was watched, was spied on, was protected from himself, was never given a chance of yielding to temptation. His self-imposed gaoler loved him. He was very lovable. The manager was enthusiastic. Ignorant people said he was reformed. It almost seemed as if he might grasp the great position to which his talent entitled him. But how often before he had fallen just when he was doing well! No one could depend on him. His record in America gradually became known. It was a record of hideous outbreaks and cancelled engagements.

By dint of the strenuous will of others, to which he yielded himself, he was kept on his feet through the whole run of the play.

And then, released from surveillance, exhausted in mind and body — he fell again.

He blazed like a comet across the theatrical world and then set as suddenly as he had risen.

Marion heard of it and shuddered. She had had a narrow escape.

She never wrote another play — at least, she never wrote another that pleased a manager. She said she had not time. In spite of her success, she felt a distaste for things theatri-

## *The Hand on the Latch*

cal. And perhaps she found that success is not as warm a garment for a shivering life as she had expected. There is a little fleecy wrap called affection, within the reach of all of us, which she might have donned. But, as she often said, there was, unfortunately, no one for whom she had much affection. She was alone in the world. Her interest in the theatre was gradually replaced by religion. Once she heard with real regret that Lenore had lost her memory, and chloral was hinted at as the cause. She thought of trying to save her, of making an earnest appeal to that better self which, according to Marion, exists in all of us. But when she made further inquiries about her, with a view to rescuing her, she was daunted by the discovery that Lenore had been privately married to Delacour for some time past, and that her declension, which was really due to drink, dated from the time of the marriage.

A year passed. Delacour began to make fitful reappearances, then more frequent ones. He took and kept regular engagements. But his wife returned no more.

Presently Marion's own play was revived with success. It was one of Delacour's greatest parts. And Marion went to see it, hidden behind the curtains of her box.

The years since she had last sat in that box had not dealt kindly with her. Her discontented face showed that she was one of the many victims of arrested development, still hampered in middle age by the egotistic longings of youth. In youth we all want to receive instead of to give, to be loved, to be served, to be admired. Middle age is the time to reverse engines, the time to love, to serve, to give rather than to receive. Marion had not learned that elementary lesson of life. We all recognize them at sight, the nervous,

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fretful faces of the middle-aged men and women who want to be loved. And love knows them, too, and — flies them.

The manager, somewhat pinched and grizzled, as from a long fast, came in to see her between the acts, and growled out his disapproval of his leading lady.

“She’s nothing to Lenore,” he said.

“Is she too” — Marion sought for a charitable word — “too ill to act?”

“She is too ill to act,” said the manager. “She will never act any more. She is dying.”

There was a silence.

“She is dying of drink,” he said; “and if there is such a place as heaven, she is very near it. And if there is such a person as God, I hope she will say a word for me when she gets there.”

Marion did not speak. She was horrified.

“She would marry Delacour,” said the manager. “I begged her to marry me. Over and over again I asked her. But she said I could do without her, and Delacour could n’t. They fell in love with each other at this very play when it was first put on. I saw it coming, and it spelt disaster for her. But it was the real thing; and when the real thing comes, we all have to knock under to it. It does n’t come often. Most of us are quite incapable of it. I have only seen it once or twice. I dare say I have never felt it, though I should have liked to take care of Lenore, and not let her work so hard, and make a garden for her. She loves flowers and running water. I made the garden just on the chance, but she has never seen it. Down in Sussex it is, with a little old-world cottage in it. It is a pretty place. Pergola · small cascade with rustic bridge;


## *The Hand on the Latch*

fishpond, with green-tiled floor to show up the gold-fish. And a rose garden. I should have liked her to see it. But she and Delacour! It was like a thing in a book. They fell in love, and he behaved well. He wouldn't marry her. He said he knew he couldn't cure himself of drink — that his will was too weak. But she was determined to marry him. She said her will was strong enough for both of them. 'I don't know about her will. I think it was her love which was strong enough. He gave in at last and married her. I know I shouldn't have held out as long as he did. And for a little while things went well. He was at her feet. He told me it was the first time any woman had ever cared for him. For a little while I almost hoped — and then, in spite of his love for her, in spite of everything, he began to drink again. Then she told him that what he drank she should drink, and she stuck to it. If he drank, she drank the same. If he "nipped," she did the same. When he got drunk, she got drunk. It was kill or cure. And he loved her. That was her hold over him. It took time, but she broke him of it. He suffered too much seeing her kill herself for his sake, and it steadied him. He *had* to give it up."

"Then, now — why doesn't she give it up, too?"

"She can't," said the manager, his face twitching. "She was too far gone by the time he was cured. She had not his physique. She was absolutely played out. She is dying, and they both know it. But she does not mind. She has saved him. That was the point. She is perfectly happy. She does not care about anything else. He is a great actor. She has lived to see him recognised. Some women wouldn't have risked it. But I suppose a woman





## *The Understudy*

will take any risk if she loves ; at least, women like Lenore will."

"And does he — in spite of this — does he love her still?" said Marion, with dry lips.

The manager was silent.

"I did not think any one could care as much for Lenore as I did," he said at last, "but Delacour does — he cares more."

# SAINT LUKE'S SUMMER

## PART I

*When the world's asleep,  
I awake and weep,  
Deeply sighing say,  
"Come, O break of day,  
Lead my feet in my beloved's way."*

MARGARET L. WOODS.

WHEN first I knew Aunt Emmy I suppose she was about twenty-eight. I was ten, and I thought her old, but still an agreeable companion, infinitely pleasanter than her father and her brother with whom she lived. She was not my real aunt, but her father was my great uncle, and I always called her Aunt Emmy. Great Uncle Thomas and Uncle Tom were persons to be avoided, — stout, heavy, bullet-headed, bull-necked, throat-clearing men, loud nose-blowers, loud soup-eaters, who reeked of tobacco when it was my horrid duty to kiss them; and who addressed me in jocular terms when they remembered my existence, of which I was always loath to remind them. With these two horrors whom she loved Aunt Emmy lived. She was wrapped up in them. I have actually seen her kiss Uncle Thomas when it was not necessary, when he was asleep; and she admired Uncle Tom very much too, though she seldom kissed him, I believe by his wish. He used to say something about sister's kisses being like cold veal. I don't suppose he invented that himself. He was always picking up things like that out of a rose-coloured paper, and firing them off as his own. Uncle Tom

## Saint Luke's Summer

was tall and portly and a wag out of office hours, with a moustache that in spite of all his efforts would not turn up, but insisted on making a melancholy inner semicircle just a size smaller than the rubicund circle of his face. How I hated kindly, vulgar Uncle Tom. I used to pray that he might die before the holidays. But he never did. I see now that Uncle Tom was far, far worse than Uncle Thomas, who had had a stroke, and was a kind of furious invalid who could not speak clearly or eat anything except things that were bad for him. But when I was a child, and first began to spend my holidays in Pembridge Square, I regarded them both with the same repulsion.

Aunt Emmy was different. I know now that she must have been a remarkably pretty woman, but I did not notice that at the time. But a faint indefinable fragrance seemed to envelop her. I loved to stroke her soft white hand, and to turn the emerald ring on her third finger, and to lean against her soft shoulder. Aunt Emmy's cheek was very soft too, and so was her full silky hair, which she wore parted all her life, though it was never the fashion to do so that I can remember, though I am told it is now the *dernier cri* among the *débutantes*. Aunt Emmy had a beautifully shaped head and the whitest brow and neck that I have ever seen. And she had a low voice and was very dignified. I do not think that she was a very wise woman, or that she had ever wrestled with the deeper problems of life, or that the mystery of pain had ever caused her faith to totter. But she was very good to live with. She devoted herself.

She never had her own way in anything that I can remember. The house never represented her. The furni-

## *The Hand on the Latch*

ture was leathern and velvet, and stout looking, the kind of furniture which seems to aim at being more or less exact moulds of the forms of middle-aged men. The armchairs were like commodious hip baths in plush. Aunt Emmy and I were lost in them. I remember once walking as a child through the wilderness of armchairs at Maples and thinking they all looked like Uncle Tom. A good deal of Utrecht velvet had gone to the upholstering of that house in Pembridge Square. It was comfortable, airless, flowerless, with gravy coloured walls. As I grew older I wondered why it was all so ugly and dreary. But I found there were less means than I had supposed, and though the cooking remained excellent, flowers and new chintzes were dispensed with as unnecessary. Aunt Emmy opened a window surreptitiously now and then, but Uncle Thomas and Uncle Tom hated draughts, and they did not get off to sleep so quickly after dinner if the drawing-room had been aired during the meal. The dining-room windows were never opened at all, except when Uncle Thomas was too unwell to come in and Uncle Tom was away.

Many men had wished to marry Aunt Emmy — not only sedentary professional men in long frock coats full to the brim of the best food, like Uncle Tom, but nice lean, hungry looking, open-air men who were majors or country squires or something interesting of that kind, whose clothes sat well on them, and who drew up in the Row on little skittish curveting polo ponies when Aunt Emmy and I walked there. I once asked her, after a certain good-looking Major Stoddart had ridden on, why she did not marry; but she only said reprovingly with great dignity,

“ You don't understand such matters, my dear, or you

## Saint Luke's Summer

would know that I could not possibly leave your Uncle Thomas."

I was silenced. I felt with bitterness that this could not be her whole reason for celibacy, but that owing to the purely superficial fact that my hair was still in a pigtail she supposed I was unable to comprehend "lots of things" that I felt I understood perfectly, and on which my mind was already working with an energy which would have surprised her had she guessed it.

By this time I worshipped Aunt Emmy, who represented in my somewhat colourless orphaned existence the beautiful and romantic side of life. Aunt Emmy looked romantic, and the contrast between her refined, gentle self-effacement and the commonplace egotism of her two men was of the glaring nature which appeals to a young girl's imagination.

I never forgot Major Stoddart, and when I was eighteen, and had left school, and was living in Pembridge Square, I had the good fortune to come in for the remains of a scene between Aunt Emmy and Uncle Tom — the very day after I had turned up my hair.

It was at luncheon, to which I came in late. Uncle Thomas was in bed with gout, and Uncle Tom did not consider me of enough consequence to matter. He had not realized even *now* that I was a grown-up woman. Looking back after all these years, I am not sure that he was not astute enough to hope that I might prove an ally.

"What you have got to do, Emmy, is to think of the future," he was saying, scooping all the visible eggs out of an aspic pie. "It's no manner of use living only in the present. You think this comfortable home will go on

## The Hand on the Latch

forever, where you have lived in luxury. It won't. It can't. It's not in the nature of things. I saw Blackett yesterday (Blackett was the doctor), and he told me that if the governor's gout rises, and nothing he can do can keep it down, he won't last more than a year at longest. In the nature of things," Uncle Tom continued, bolting half an egg, "I shall then marry. In fact — in short —"

"Has Miss Collett accepted you?" said Aunt Emmy, tremulously.

Miss Collett was a person of means and of somewhat bulged attractions for those who admire size, of whom Uncle Tom had often spoken as a deuced fine woman.

"She has," said Uncle Tom. "I made pretty sure of that before I said anything myself. Nothing immediate, you understand, but eventually — when the old governor goes — I don't want to hurry him, Lord knows — but when the old man does pop off I shall — bring her here."

I looked round the room. I had seen Miss Collett, and the mahogany and ormolu dining-room with its great gilt mirrors seemed a fitting background for her.

"I am very glad, dear Tom," said Aunt Emmy. "I think you and she will be very well suited, and I am sure she is very lucky, though I suppose I should never think any one *quite* good enough."

"Oh! that's all right," said Uncle Tom. "And as for the luck, it's all on my side."

He did not really think this, I knew, but it was the right thing to say, so he said it.

"But I am not thinking only of myself," he continued. "There is you to be considered."

Aunt Emmy dropped her eyes.

## Saint Luke's Summer

"You mean where I shall live," she said faintly.

"Just so. Just so. You speak like a sensible woman. We must not forget you." Uncle Tom was becoming visibly uneasy. "And I may as well tell you now, old girl — prepare your mind beforehand, don't you know — that the governor has not been able to leave you as much as he wished, as we *both* wished. The truth is, what with one thing and another, and nearly all his capital tied up in the business, and this house on a long lease and expensive to keep up, with the best will in the world the poor old Pater *can't* do much for you."

"It will be enough," said Aunt Emmy.

"It will be the interest of seven thousand pounds at three and a half per cent," said Uncle Tom, brutally, because he was uncomfortable, "about two hundred and thirty pounds a year."

"It will be ample," said Aunt Emmy. I knew by the faint colour in her cheeks that the conversation was odious to her. "Dear Tom, let us talk of something else."

"We will," said Uncle Tom with unexpected mental agility and with the obvious relief of a man who has got safely round a difficult corner. "We will. Now, how about Colonel Stoddart?"

My heart beat suddenly. I was beginning to see life — at last.

"There is nothing to say about him," said Aunt Emmy.

"A good chap and a gentlemanly chap," said Uncle Tom, urbanely, leaning back in his chair. "Eton, the Varsity, and all that sort of thing. Quite one of ourselves. Old family and a warm man. And suitable in age. *My* age. Thirty-nine. (Uncle Tom was really forty-one.)

## The Hand on the Latch

You're no chicken yourself, you know, Emmy. Thirty-eight, tho' I own you don't look it, my dear. Well, what's the matter with Colonel Stoddart, I should like to know?"

"Nothing."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, for he tells me you refused him again only last week. Now, look here. One moment, please. Don't speak. I call it Providence, downright Providence," and Uncle Tom rapped the table with a thick finger. "And yet you won't look at him. I don't say marry him out of hand. Of course," Uncle Tom added hurriedly, "you can't leave the old Pater while he is above ground. There's no question of that. But I *do* say, give the fellow a chance. He's been dangling after you for years. Tell him that some day —"

Aunt Emmy rose from the table, and laid down her napkin.

"Now, look here, old girl," said Uncle Tom, not unkindly. "Don't get your feathers up with me. Think better of it. You know this sort of first-class opportunity may not occur again. It really may not. If it is n't Providence, I'm sure I don't know what it is. And I believe your only reason for refusing him is because of Bob Kingston. Now don't fly in the face of Providence just out of a bit of rotten sentiment which you ought to be ashamed of at your age."

My brain reeled. I had never heard of Bob Kingston. I said, "Good God!" to myself, not because it was natural to me to use such an expression, but because I felt it was suitable to the occasion and to a person whose hair was done up.



## *Saint Luke's Summer*

"Tom," said Aunt Emmy, her soft eyes blazing. "I desire that you will never allude to Mr. Kingston again."

She left the room, and I did the same, with what I hope was a withering glance at the open-mouthed Uncle Tom, who for days afterwards interlarded his conversation with the refrain that he was blessed if he could understand women.

But I dared not follow Aunt Emmy to her little sitting-room at the top of the house. She who was almost never alone clung, I knew, to that tiny refuge, and it was an understood thing between us that I might creep in and sit with her a little after tea, but not before.

So I raged up and down the empty gilded and mirrored drawing-room, finding myself quite unable to reconcile the situation with my faith in a beneficent Deity, and then consoled myself by chronicling my tottering faith in my diary. I wrote a diary until I married. Then I suppose I became more interested in life than in recording my own feelings. At any rate I discontinued it.

At last, when Aunt Emmy did not come down for tea, I took her up a cup.

She was sitting in a low chair with her back to the light. I could see that she had been crying, but she was quite calm. She had a suspiciously clean pocket-handkerchief in her hand. Her sitting-room was a small north chamber under the roof, but it was the place I liked best in the house. On her rare expeditions abroad, before Uncle Thomas had become too ill to be left, she had picked up some quaint pieces of pottery and a few old Italian mirrors. The little white room with its pale blue linen coverings had an atmosphere and a refinement of its own. It

## *The Hand on the Latch*

was spring, and there was a bunch of daffodils near the open window in a blue and white oil jar with *Olé Scorpio* on it.

Aunt Emmy drank some tea, and remarked that I made it better than she did.

“Your Uncle Tom has a very kind heart,” she said, looking a little pugnaciously at me. “It is so like him, just when he might naturally be taken up with his own affairs, to be anxious about me.”

We each knew the other was not deceived.

I longed to say, “Why not marry Colonel Stoddart?”

I had only seen him on horseback. I did not know how he looked on the ground, but I would have married him myself in a second if he had asked me, partly, no doubt, because he was a little like Lord K. . . . the hero of my teens, to whom I had never spoken, and partly because he was the exact opposite of Uncle Tom. How Miss Collett *could!* — how anybody could! — yet Uncle Tom always talked as if he had only to choose among the flower of English womanhood, and the stouter and more repellent he grew the more communicative and conscientious he became about his fear of raising expectations in female bosoms which he might not be able to gratify. How I scorned Uncle Tom when he talked like that, knowing as I did, but neither he nor Aunt Emmy knew I knew — it was always like that, they always thought I did not know things — knowing as I did that Miss Rose Delaine and Miss Wright had both refused him. I did not realise in my intolerant youth that the anxiety of some middle-aged bachelors to still appear eligible, the way their minds hover round imaginary conquests, has its pathetic side. Looking

## *Saint Luke's Summer*

back, I believe now that Miss Collett was not by any means poor Uncle Tom's first choice, but his last chance. And perhaps he was her last chance too.

"I know father is dying. I have known it some time," said Aunt Emmy, and her face became convulsed. "He spoke so beautifully about it only yesterday. And I have known for a long time that Tom and Miss Collett were likely to come to an arrangement."

She had not a grain of irony in her, but no word could have been more applicable to Uncle Tom and Miss Collett than an arrangement. One felt that each had measured the other by *avoirdupois* weight, and had found the balance even.

"Is Uncle Thomas opposed to your marrying?" I ventured to say, with the tact of eighteen.

"No, my dear, that is what is so wonderful. He was so dreadfully against it long ago — once — indeed until quite lately. But it's no use speaking of that. But now he is quite anxious for it, so long as I don't leave him. He wants me to promise Colonel Stoddart, but to tell him that I could not leave my father during his lifetime, which of course I could n't."

"Won't Colonel Stoddart wait?" I said, waxing bolder. I had slipped down on the floor beside her and was stroking her white hand. I hoped I was saying the right thing. I was adoringly fond of her, but I was also eighteen, and this was my first introduction to a real romance. I was feverishly anxious to rise to the occasion, to have nothing to regret in retrospect.

"I daresay he would. I think he said something about it," she said apathetically.

## *The Hand on the Latch*

I remembered a beautiful sentence I had read in a novel about confidences being mutual, and I said reproachfully, "Aunt Emmy, I have told you *all* about Lord K.; won't you tell me, just me, no one else, about Mr. Kingston?"

And she told me. I think it was a relief to speak to some one. I held my cheek against her hand all the time. It seemed that a sort of demigod of the name of Kingston had alighted in her life when she was nineteen (I felt with a pang that I had still a whole year to wait) and he was twenty-one. Aunt Emmy waxed boldly eloquent in her description of his unique and heroic character, shyly eloquent in her dispassionate indication of his almost terrifying beauty.

I think Aunt Emmy became a girl in her teens again for a few minutes, carried away by her memory and by the idolizing sympathy of the other girl in her teens at her feet in a seventh heaven at being a confidant. But in one sense, on the sentimental plane she had never ceased to be a girl. She and I viewed the situation almost from the same standpoint.

"Aunt Emmy, *was* he tall?"

"He was, my love."

"And slender?"

My whole life hung in the balance. I had all a young girl's repulsion towards stout men.

"He was thin and wiry and very athletic, a great rider."

I gave a sigh of relief.

"Did his—it does not really matter"—(I felt the essentials were all right and that I must not ask too much of life)—"but did his hair curl?"

## *Saint Luke's Summer*

Aunt Emmy drew out of her bosom a little locket, hanging by a thin gold chain, with a forget-me-not in blue enamel on it, and opened it. Inside was a curl of chestnut hair. It was not tied in the shape of a curl; it was a real curl.

I looked at it with awe.

Aunt Emmy answered my highest expectations at every point. I had never seen that enamel locket before. Yet I divined at once that she had worn it under her clothes, as indeed she had, day and night, for how many years? I felt that I would not care how it ended, happily or unhappily, if only I might have a romance and a locket like that.

"He gave it me when we parted eighteen years ago," she said, her voice quivering a little.

I knew well that lovers always did part. They invariably severed, "severed for years." I was not the least surprised to hear he was gone, for I was already learning "In the Gloaming," and trilled it forth in a thin, throaty voice which Aunt Emmy said was remarkably like what hers had been at my age.

"Why were you parted?" I asked.

"He had not any money, and he had his way to make. And he had an uncle out there who wanted him to go to him. It was a good opening, though he would not have taken it if it had not been for me; for though he was so fond of horses he was not the kind of person for that kind of life,—sheep and things. He cared so much for books and poetry. And your Uncle Thomas was very much against my marrying at that time,—in fact, he positively forbade it. You see, mother was dead, and your Uncle

## *The Hand on the Latch*

Thomas had become more dependent on me than he was quite aware until there was a question of my leaving him. Men are like that, my love. They need a woman all the time to look after them and listen to their talk and keep vexatious things away. And he was always a most tender father. He said he could not bear the thought of his only daughter roughing it in Australia. He said he would withdraw his opposition if — if — Bob — Bob was his name — came home with a sufficient fortune to keep me in comfort in England.”

“And he never did?”

“He went out to try. I felt sure he would, and he felt sure he would. At twenty-two it seems as if fortunes can be made if it is really necessary. And I promised to wait for him, and he was to work to win me.”

I could not refrain from shedding a tear. It was all so beautiful, so far beyond anything I could have hoped. I pressed Aunt Emmy’s hand in silence, and she went on:

“But there were bad seasons, and though he worked and worked, and though he did get on, still you could not call it a fortune. And after five years had passed he wrote to say that he was making a living, and his uncle had taken him into partnership, and could not I come out to him. He had built an extra room on purpose for me. Your Uncle Thomas was terribly angry when the letter came, because he had always been against my emigrating, and he forbade any further correspondence. Men are very high-handed, my love, when you come to live with them. We were not allowed to write after that. Do you know, my dear, I became so distressed that I had thoughts — I actually contemplated running away to Australia.”

## *Saint Luke's Summer*

"Oh, why didn't you?" I groaned. That, of course, was the obvious solution of the difficulty.

"Very soon after that your Uncle Thomas had his stroke, and after that, of course, I could not leave him."

"Could not we do it still?" I suggested. Of course I took for granted that I should be involved in the elopement, as the confidential friend who carries a little reticule with jewels in it and sustains throughout the spirits of the principal eloper.

"*Now!*" said Aunt Emmy, and for a moment a violent emotion disfigured her sweet face. "Now! Oh, my child! all this happened fifteen years ago, when you were a toddling baby."

"I wish to heaven I had been as old then as I am now," I said, with clenched hands. I felt that I could have vanquished Uncle Thomas and Uncle Tom and all this conspiracy against my darling Aunt Emmy's happiness.

"And is he still — still —?" I ventured.

"I don't know whether he is still — free. I have not heard from him for fifteen years. Uncle Thomas was very firm about the correspondence. He is a very decided character, especially since his stroke, and I have ceased to hear anything at all about him since his mother died, twelve years ago."

To me twelve years ago was as in the time of Noah. Yet here was Aunt Emmy to whom it was all as fresh as yesterday.

"When she died," said Aunt Emmy, "she was ill for a long time before, and I used to go and sit with her. She was fond of me, but she never quite did your Uncle Thomas

## *The Hand on the Latch*

justice. When she died she sent me this ring." She touched the beautiful emerald ring she always wore. "She said she had left it to him, and he had asked that she would send it to me. It had been her own engagement ring."

"Why don't you wear it on your engaged finger?"

"I did at first. It was a kind of comfort to me. But Uncle Tom was constantly vexed with me about it. He said it might keep things off. He is a very practical person, Uncle Tom, — a very shrewd man of business, I'm told. So to please him I wear it in the daytime on my right hand."

By this time I was shedding tears of sheer sensibility.

"I have thought of him day and night; there has not been a night I have not remembered him in my prayers for nearly twenty years. It will be twenty years next April. How could I begin to think of any one else *now* — Colonel Stoddart or any one? Uncle Tom is very clever, and so is your Uncle Thomas, but I don't think they have ever *quite* understood what I feel about Mr. Kingston."

An electric bell in a little box over the door rang in a furious manner.

Aunt Emmy was on her feet in a second, smoothing her fair hair at the Venetian mirror.

"Your Uncle Thomas is awake," she said, "and is ready to be read to. He never likes being kept waiting."

This seemed to be the case, for as she left the room the electric bell rang again more furiously than before, and I shook my fist at it.



# Saint Luke's Summer

## PART II

*If some star of heaven  
Led him by at even,  
If some magic fate  
Brought him, should I wait,  
Or fly within and bid them close the gate?*

MARGARET L. WOODS.

**T**HE following year I suddenly married a soldier, the only young man I knew, and I knew him very slightly, and went out to India with him. I did not forget Aunt Emmy, we corresponded regularly; but I was young and my life was a very full one. I had seen nothing of the world till I married. I had a child. The years rushed past, joyful, miserable, vivid, surprising, happy years in spite of the fact that my husband was not remarkably like Lord K. in appearance, and not in the least like the "plaister saint" with whom I had hurried to the altar on such slight provocation.

During these years Uncle Thomas died, and Uncle Tom married, and Aunt Emily wrote to me that she had taken a little cottage in Abinger forest against her brother's advice, and how in spite of his opposition — how much it must have cost her to oppose him — he had forgiven her and presented her with the most expensive mahogany bedstead and bedding that Maple could supply, — "so like him."

I wondered vaguely once or twice whether there had been any question of her marrying Mr. Kingston, but there was no mention of him in her letters, and I did not like to ask. I knew that she was very poor, but presently my

## *The Hand on the Latch*

heart was gladdened by hearing from her that a distant relation had left her a legacy, and that she was now comfortably off.

Then suddenly our life was darkened. Our child died. I struggled with my grief, became ill, and was sent home. Aunt Emmy urged me to go straight to her. She and Uncle Tom were my only near relations in England. He also offered to take me in for a time. He wrote with real kindness. He had a child himself. And his wife wrote too. But I need hardly say that I took my sore heart and my broken health straight to Aunt Emmy.

It was late in August when I arrived. The honeysuckle was still in bloom on Aunt Emily's white cottage, standing in its little orchard in a clearing in the forest. She was waiting for me in the porch, and I ran feebly to her up the narrow brick path between the tall clumps of hollyhocks and Michaelmas daisies; and she drew me into the little parlour and held me closely to her. And the years rolled away, and I was a child again, and she was comforting me for my broken doll.

With the egotism of youth I fear I had not given a thought to Aunt Emmy's new home until I entered it. I knew that she was happy in it and that it had once been a gamekeeper's cottage, but that was about all. Nowadays everyone has a cottage. It is the fashion: and literary men and women, tired of adulatory crowds, weary of their own greatness, flee from the metropolis, and write exquisite articles about their gardens, and the peace that lurks under a thatched roof, and the simple life, lived far from shrilling crowds but near to nature, and *very* near to the Deity. Fortunate Deity!

## *Saint Luke's Summer*


But in the days of which I am writing cottages and their floral and spiritual appurtenances were not the rage.

I never realized until I saw Aunt Emmy in a home of her own how much taste she possessed or how pretty a cottage could be. It did not try to look like a house. It was just a cottage, standing amid its apple trees, now red with apples, with its old well half-hidden in clumps of lavender. The little dwelling itself, with its low ceilings and long oak beams, and dim colouring and quaint furniture, had a certain austere charm, a quiet dignity of its own. The sunny air came softly in through wide-open latticed windows, bringing with it the scent of mignonette. There had never been a breath of air in the house in Pembridge Square. *Olé Scorpio*, that friend of my youth, looked peaceful and complacent in a little recess in which his soft colouring and perfect figure showed to great advantage against a white-washed wall in shadow.

Aunt Emmy herself, in a gown of some dull white material, with a little grey in her rippling parted hair, seemed at home for the first time in her life. She looked a shade older, a shade thinner in the face, her sweet eyes a little sunk inwards. But her tall figure had retained all its old soft dignity and beauty of line. Looking at her as she poured out my tea for me, I suddenly felt years older than she.

This bewildering impression deepened as the days went on, and a protecting, wondering compassion became part of my affection for her.

During the years I had spent in India I had seen a good deal of both sides of that motley amazing fabric which we call life. I had felt the throbbing of its great loom. I had



## *The Hand on the Latch*

touched with my own shrinking hand the closeness of the texture, had marked the interweaving of the alien strands, had marvelled and been dismayed, had marvelled and been awed, had seen the dye of my own blood on one dim thread, the gold of my own joy on another. The sheltered life had not been mine.

But Aunt Emmy had not moved mentally by a hair's-breadth. All her expansion, if expansion it could be called, had taken form in her house and garden. I had not been a week under her roof before I found that Mr. Kingston occupied exactly the same position in her life as he had done in Pembridge Square. She had brought down her romance to adorn her new home just as she had brought down *Olé Scorpio*, in cotton wool. Each had their niche. Perhaps it was unreasonable in me to expect to find her different. I had not expected it. But I had become such a totally different person myself that her attitude to life, which had appealed to me as so romantic and natural when I was eighteen, now appeared irremediably pathetic, visionary, out of touch with reality. Perhaps, however, it was I who had become disillusioned and matter of fact. I saw with a kind of pitying wonder that her youthful romance still supplied to her, as it had done since she was nineteen, a certain atmosphere of pensive, prayerful resignation, a background for ethereal day-dreams. Her peaceful days were passed in a kind of picturesque haze, like the mist that, seeming in itself a rosy light, sometimes veils a tranquil September sunset.

She was evidently very happy, but it was equally evident that she did not know it. From words she let drop now and then I saw that she still imagined she was bearing the

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heavy cross of her mutilated youth. But to me it seemed as if some tender hand had lifted it from her shoulder.

"Aunt Emmy," I said, yielding to an ignoble curiosity in the second week of my visit, as we were picking the lavender together, "when Uncle Thomas died I had thought I should hear of your marrying Mr. Kingston."

"I also hoped it, my dear," said Aunt Emmy, snipping the lavender into a little basket, held in a loose, white-gloved hand.

I dared not look at her.

"Mr. Kingston has not written," she said after a moment.

"But did you write and tell him you were free, and still in the same mind?"

"I did not. I thought it might be awkward for him in case he were — after all these years — contemplating some other possibility. I did not want to embarrass him. But your Uncle Thomas's death was in all the papers, and many of his relations are acquainted with us. I have no doubt the news reached him."

Of course it had. I had felt that it was hardly to be expected that Mr. Kingston should have kept after twenty years, more than twenty years, the same vivid memory of his early love that she had done. His silence proved that he had not done so. I looked at Aunt Emmy. How pretty and graceful and remote she looked, and how young her face was under the shadow of her charming garden hat, tied with a soft black ribbon under her chin! As long as she was not confronted with any one really young she had no look of age. It was difficult to believe that she was forty-four. And he must be forty-six. It was too late.

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Middle-aged marriages are risky affairs enough when the rubicon of forty is within sight. But when it has been passed — !

As I looked at her I hoped with all my heart that he would not come back to disturb her peace of mind and dislocate her life afresh.

But astonishing to say he did come back ; and there was some adequate reason, I have forgotten exactly what, for his not coming earlier. At any rate, it was adequate.

When I came down to breakfast a few days later Aunt Emmy held a letter towards me with a shaking hand. Her lips trembled. She could not articulate.

“Am I really to read it ?”

She nodded.

It was a charming letter, written in a delicate, refined hand. Mr. Kingston had not heard of her father's death till the day before he wrote. He had been away up country for a year, broken shoulder, etc. He was starting for England at once. He should travel almost as quickly as his letter. He should present himself at Pembridge Square and learn her address directly he landed. His ship was *The Sultana*.

I took up the morning paper.

“*The Sultana* arrived yesterday,” I said.

I looked at the envelope. It was directed on from Pembridge Square.

“Tom will give him my address,” said Aunt Emmy, faintly. “I wonder how he knows I am not living there now. *He will — arrive here — to-day.*”

She looked straight in front of her, through the open windows, to the hollyhocks basking in the still September

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sunshine. A radiance lit up her face, like that which perhaps shone on Christian's when at last across the river he saw the pearl gates of the new Jerusalem.

"At last," she said. "After all these years! After all these dreadful, dreadful years."

An unbearable pain went through me. It was not new to me. I had known it once before, when I had seen my child sicken. Why did it return now?

The radiance passed. A pitiful trembling shook her like a leaf. Her eyes turned helplessly to mine, frightened and dimmed.

"I forgot I was an old woman," she said.

I kissed her hand. I told her that she was handsomer than any one. She was very dignified and gentle.

"You are very kind to me, my dear, and it is sweet of you to feel as you do. I believe, as you say, that I am still nice looking. But the fact remains that it is nearly twenty-five years since we have seen each other. I was nineteen then. And oh! I suppose I ought not to say it, but I *was* pretty. People turned to look at me in the street. And now I am forty-four."

"But he is older than you, is n't he?"

"Two years. What is two years! We were the same age when we were young. But a man of forty-six is younger than a woman of forty-four."

I was silent. There was no contradicting that obvious fact.

"He will probably come by the 4.12 train," said Aunt Emmy, rising. "If you don't mind, as there are so many preparations to make, I will leave you to finish your breakfast. I have had mine."

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She left the room, and I stared at her empty plate. I was not hungry, either. I was frightened for my dear Aunt Emmy.

And yet she was so yielding, so selfless, so absolutely uncritical, that if any woman could marry late she was the woman. She could have lived with a monster of egotism without finding it out. Had she not devoted herself to two such monsters most of her life? And perhaps Mr. Kingston was not a monster. Aunt Emmy arranged the flowers early, as she only could arrange them. I was only allowed to fetch the water and clean the glasses. A certain pony cart was sent to Muddington with the cook in it to buy a tongue, and a Stilton cheese, and a little barrel of anchovies, and various other condiments which Uncle Tom approved. Uncle Tom's tastes represented those of his whole sex for Aunt Emmy.

I insisted on her eating some luncheon, but this was barely possible, as in the midst of it a telegram was brought in from Mr. Kingston to say he should arrive by the 4.12 train.

After luncheon Aunt Emmy went to her room. I followed her there half an hour later to give her a note, and found her standing in the middle of the floor looking at all her gowns laid out on chairs.

"I am afraid you can only think me very silly, my dear," she said, with a sort of humble dignity. "I wished to consult you, but I did not like to; but as you *are* here, and if you don't mind my asking you — but a relation can often judge best what is advantageous — which gown *do* you think suits me best, the grey voile, or the lilac delaine, or the white serge?"



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I decided on the white serge, and long before the dog-cart ordered to meet him could possibly arrive Aunt Emmy was sitting, paler than I had ever seen her, beside a wood fire in the parlour in the soft white gown I loved her best in, pretending to read. She had lit the fire, though we were not in the habit of having it till later in the day, because she thought Australians might feel chilly.

"I don't know how it is," she said at last, laying down the book, "but I seem quite blind. I can't see the print."

I could not see the needle-work I was bending over either. But that was because senseless tears kept on rising to my eyes, do what I would. Aunt Emmy's eyes had no tears in them.

"It is very petty of me, I know, but I do hope he has not grown stout," she said presently. "But of course it is to be expected, and if it is so I must try to bear it. It could not make any *real* difference. Your Uncle Tom is the same age, and of course he is not — he really is *not* as thin as he was."

"Was he ever thin?"

"N-no. But Mr. Kingston was — at least not thin, but very spare and agile-looking."

At last the sound of wheels reached us. Aunt Emmy clasped the arms of her chair convulsively.

"I daresay he has not come," she said almost inaudibly.

The wheels stopped. I went into the tiny hall.

A tall, spare, distinguished-looking man with a weather-beaten face and peculiarly intent, hawklike eyes was at the gate, and I went out to greet him. As he took off his cap his crisp hair showed a little grey in it. He was delightful to look at.

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I don't know what I said, but I mumbled something as I shook hands with him and pointed to the parlour door. He nodded gravely and went in, hitting his tall head against the low lintel. Then he closed the door gently, and I went to my room and locked myself in.

When I went into the parlour an hour later at tea-time I found them sitting one on each side of the fire. I wished with all my heart that they could have been sitting together at this moment after the marriage of their daughter. Both had cried a little I could see. He certainly had. They got up when I came in and stood together on the hearth,—a splendid-looking couple, dwarfing the white room with its low ceiling.


What they must have been in youth I could well imagine.

I was reintroduced to him, and I am not sure, though they were both smiling at each other, that they were not relieved by my entrance with the tea. He handed her her cup and waited on her with the deferential awkwardness of a man who has not been in women's society for years.

"I am a rough fellow, Emmy," he said once or twice. But he was not rough. He was charming. He did not fit in at all with my preconceived ideas of "Colonials." And it was quickly evident to me that his tender admiration of Aunt Emmy still survived. I was partly reassured. Perhaps, after all, he had brought happiness with him.

.....

Saint Luke's summer was glorious that year, and it was nowhere more wonderful than in the forest. One still golden day followed another, the gossamer-threaded sun-



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shine flooding the glades of yellowing and amber trees, spilling itself headlong amid the rusting bracken, and losing itself in the tiny foliage of the whortleberry, which, all its little oval leaves ruddy as a robin's breast, was imitating the trees, like a miniature autumn forest underfoot.

Aunt Emmy and Mr. Kingston walked daily in the marvel of the forest, and it seemed as if the autumn sun shone kindly on them. Sometimes on her return there was a bewildered look in her face which I did not understand, and I wondered whether indeed all was well, but I put the thought away, for his love for her was beyond the possibility of doubt, and had not her love for him coloured her whole life?

And yet —

Once I saw him take up *Olé Scorpio* with a careful hand and then replace it in its recess with its spout pointing towards the room. Presently, when he had gone, she gently moved it back to its former position, exactly *en profile*, and the senseless idea darted through my mind as I watched her do it that if her romance were moved from its niche she would instinctively wish to do the same, — to readjust it to the angle from which she had looked at it so long.

As the days passed and the first shyness between them wore off, the primitive life he had led for so many years showed itself in a certain slowness of speech, a disinclination to make acquaintance with the neighbours, and an increasing tendency to long, tranquil silences with a pipe in the garden. But, wonderful to say, it had not apparently blunted him mentally; and he actually cared for books. Unfortunately there were almost no books in the cottage. How he had kept it I cannot imagine, but he certainly had



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retained a quickness of apprehension which made him half unconsciously adapt himself to Aunt Emmy and her little habits in a way that astonished me. It was she who showed herself less perceptive as regarded him. But this she never divined. She had got it rooted into her small, graceful head that he would naturally wish to converse principally about his farm. And in spite of scant encouragement she continually "showed an interest," as she herself expressed it, in sheep and water creeks, and snakes and bush fires. He was always perfectly good-natured and ready to answer, but I sometimes wondered how it was she did not realise that she asked the same question over and over again.

"Uncle Bob does not seem to care to talk much about his farming," I ventured one day. "Perhaps he wishes to forget it for a little while."

"My dear," said Aunt Emmy, rebukingly, "when you are as old as I am you will know that the only thing men really care to talk of *is* their business. My dear father always talked of stocks and shares and — and — bonuses. He said I could not understand about them, as indeed I could not, but it interested me very much to listen. And your Uncle Tom, as you may remember" — I did indeed — "did the same. It is natural that Mr. Kingston's mind should dwell on agricultural subjects."

Presently wicked men began to mow the bracken with great scythes and to carry it away in carts which tilted and elbowed their way down the mossy, heather-fringed tracks. Here and there the down-stretched arms of the firs caught the topmost fronds of bracken, and swept them from their murdered brethren, and held them precariously suspended, only to drop them when the first wind went by.

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I left the cottage for a week to visit my husband's relations, and when I returned the forest was bare. An undefinable sadness seemed to brood over it and to have reached Aunt Emmy as well. Mr. Kingston had also been away to visit his relations and had returned, and was staying at the little inn on the edge of the forest, from which he could more readily run up daily to town to have his shoulder massaged which still troubled him.

Aunt Emmy told me all this in her garden where she was dividing her white pinks. I knew she intended to make a fresh border, but the action filled me with consternation.

"But, Aunt Emmy," I said, the foolish words jolted out of me by sudden anxiety, "will you — will you be *here* next spring?"

I could have struck myself the moment the words were out of my mouth.

The trowel dropped from her hand.

"Oh, no!" she said confusedly. "Neither I shall. I was forgetting. I shall be in Australia."

She looked round the little garden which she had made with her own hands, and back to the white cottage, up to its eaves in Michaelmas daisies, which had become such an ideal home, and in which, poor dear, she had taken a deeper root than she knew, and a bewildered pain passed for a moment over her face. It was as if she had been walking in her sleep and had suddenly come in contact with some obstacle, and had waked up and was not for the first moment certain of her surroundings.

"He is more to me than any cottage," she said, recovering herself with a little gasp. "I had hoped, perhaps, he

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would have come and lived here, and let me take care of him after all his years of hard work. But it was a selfish idea. He has told me that he cannot leave his work or his uncle who has been so kind to him, and who is very infirm now — partially paralysed, and needing the greatest care. I shall — let the cottage.”

“What is the place in Australia like?” I said with duplicity, for of course I knew by this time exactly what it was like. But I wanted to change her thoughts.

She led the way indoors and pointed to a sheaf of unmounted photographs. I took them up and examined them as if for the first time. My heart sank as I looked at the inoffensive figure of the poor old uncle in the verandah, whom Aunt Emmy was of course to nurse. The house which that hard-working old man had built himself stood nakedly upon a piece of naked ground. There was not a tree near it. Beyond were the great cattle yards and farm buildings and what looked like an endless shrubless field; and on the right was the new two-windowed room, no longer very new, which Mr. Kingston had built seventeen years ago for Aunt Emmy. I knew how much labour that hideous addition meant, which was a sort of degraded cousin many times removed from the pert villa drawing-rooms, peering over Portugal laurels on the road from Muddington. I knew that Mr. Kingston had papered and painted that room with his own hands. I knew also, but Aunt Emmy did not, that he had repapered and repainted it several times while it waited for her. And yet by no wildest effort of the imagination could I picture Aunt Emmy living there, though her heart had been there all her life.

A sudden rage rose within me against the deceased

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Uncle Thomas, and against this other decrepit uncle, waiting to be nursed.

I laid down the photographs, and went a turn in the forest, leaving Aunt Emmy sitting idle in her gardening gloves. My foolish words had stopped her happy activity. I was angry with myself, with Fate, with Australia, with everything, and not least with Mr. Kingston.

Everywhere in the bare glades little orphaned families of bracken held their arched necks a few inches from the ground. Even in their bereavement they too had remembered that it was autumn and their tiny curled fronds protecting their downcast faces were golden and ruddy. As I turned a corner I suddenly caught sight of Mr. Kingston a few paces from me looking earnestly at one of these little groups. I did not want to meet him just then, and I half turned aside, but he had already seen me, and he gave a gesture of welcome and I had to stop.

My anger subsided somewhat as he came up. He looked harassed and as if he had not slept.


"And so you are back," he said. "I was just wishing that you were at the moment I caught sight of you. If you think it possible that a word or two could be dragged out of such a silent enigmatical person as yourself I should like to have a little talk with you."

I could not help liking him. His keen eyes were kindly though his face was grave.

"What do you want to talk about?" I said bluntly.

"What an unnecessary question. What can I want to talk about except Emmy?"

I was silent. I felt more uncomfortable about the whole affair than I had done yet, and that was saying a good deal.

The page is framed by an ornate, decorative border. At the top and bottom, there are horizontal bands with repeating floral and scrollwork patterns. On the left and right sides, there are vertical columns with similar patterns, and the corners are filled with large, detailed floral designs featuring leaves and flowers.

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Mr. Kingston led the way down a little track to a place where the trees grew so close together that the murderous scythes had not been able to get in among them. Here the bracken had been unmolested, and was going unharassed through all its most gorgeous pageant. Great fronds of ivory white, of palest gold, of brownest gold, of reddest gold upreared themselves among the purple waves of the heather, wearing the stray flecks of the sunshine-like jewels on their breasts. We sat down on a fallen tree round which the bracken had wrapped its splendour.

“How extraordinarily beautiful it is,” he said more to himself than to me, putting out his long, artistic hand, gnarled and hardened with work, and touching a pale frond with a reverent finger. “I am glad to have seen it once more. It is twenty-five years since I have seen an English autumn.”

There was a moment's silence, and then he went on without any change of tone:

“And you are thinking, you sad-faced downright little woman who are so afraid that I am going to make your dear Aunt Emmy unhappy, you are thinking that you did not take a precarious seat on this trunk in order to hear a possible enemy descant on the beauties of nature.”

I was astonished at his penetration. My own experience, gleaned entirely from the genial little egoist whose wife I was, had taught me that men never noticed anything. I had had no idea that I had shown the fear of him which I felt.

“And yet you are my only possible ally,” he went on; “my only helper, if you are willing to help me in the somewhat difficult task which I have in hand.”



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"You mean marrying my aunt?" I said.

"No," he said, looking at me with a kindness which made me ready to sink into the ground with shame, "I can do *that* without assistance. Emmy, God bless her, has been ready to marry me any time this twenty-five years, and, poor soul, she is ready now. She has not the faintest idea what she would be in for if she did, but she is ready to risk it."

I was silent. I was bewildered for one thing, and I did not want "to put my foot in it" again immediately for another. And there was really no need for me to speak, for he went on slowly, looking full at me:

"What I have to do if I can is to save Emmy's romance for her."

I could only stare at him.

"For twenty-five years," he went on, "that dear woman has lived on her love for me. It has coloured her whole life. I know what I know. It has been her support in all the endless years she nursed that cruel old egoist her father, who would not let her marry me, when we *could* have married seventeen years ago. But it is not *me* that she wants now, tho' she did want me for many years; it is the thought of me — if you can't understand without my saying it I can't make you — it's her romance which is important to her, and which I want to keep — at all costs."

"My darling Emmy," he said, and there were tears in his hawk eyes, "the most unselfish and devoted, the sweetest, the humblest, and the most beautiful creature I have ever known. And she has given up everything out of constancy to me, home, children, everything, no, not for me exactly, but for a dream, for an ideal, for something of which I was to her

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the symbol, but which I no more resemble than I resemble that frond of bracken."


He turned his face away.

"It would have been all right if they would have let us marry when we were both still young and I had got a home together," he went on, "but now it would be inhuman to root her out of her little home and drag her across the world, and try to transplant her into my rough place. How rough it is I see now that I have been back in England. I did not know it was so uncouth when I lived in it. It's the only life I'm accustomed to, the only life I'm fit for now, tho' it was sorely against the grain at first. I don't think I could have stuck to it except for the hope of marrying her some day. But I see now the only life I'm fit for is not fit for her. And I can't give it up. I can't desert my poor old uncle who is growing infirm and depends on me entirely."

"Why did you come back?" I groaned.

"I came back," he said, "because I have cared for her and worked for her all my life. And because I heard that her beast of a father had left her almost penniless, and that fat Tom had married and turned her out. And until I saw her again from day to day I did not realise the nature of her feeling for me. I came back to offer her what I had, not that it was much, hoping to marry her, and take her back with me. . . . But that is not what would make my Emmy happy *now*. What she needs is to go on in this perfect little doll's house, this little haven, thinking of me, and praying for me, and tending her flowers, and mourning like a dove in its tree because we are parted."

It was exactly what Aunt Emmy needed. I could not

A decorative border with floral and scrollwork patterns surrounds the text. The top and bottom borders are wider, while the side borders are narrower.

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have put it into words, but this strange man had done so.

“You will not speak,” he said, “but you agree with me for all that. I had to make sure you agreed. Your confirmation is all I wanted, and now I have it.”

It was not that I would not speak. I could not speak. I was thinking of the room in that horrid wooden house which he had built for her.

After a few minutes he went on quietly :

“I think the thing for me to do is to be ruined, only partially of course, not enough to make her miserable, and to hurry back to Australia without her at once for the time being, and from there to write regularly by every mail, nice letters, they cannot be forbidden now ; but never to come back any more. A bank has just failed in Australia in which I had money. The situation can be arranged.”

I looked away from him.

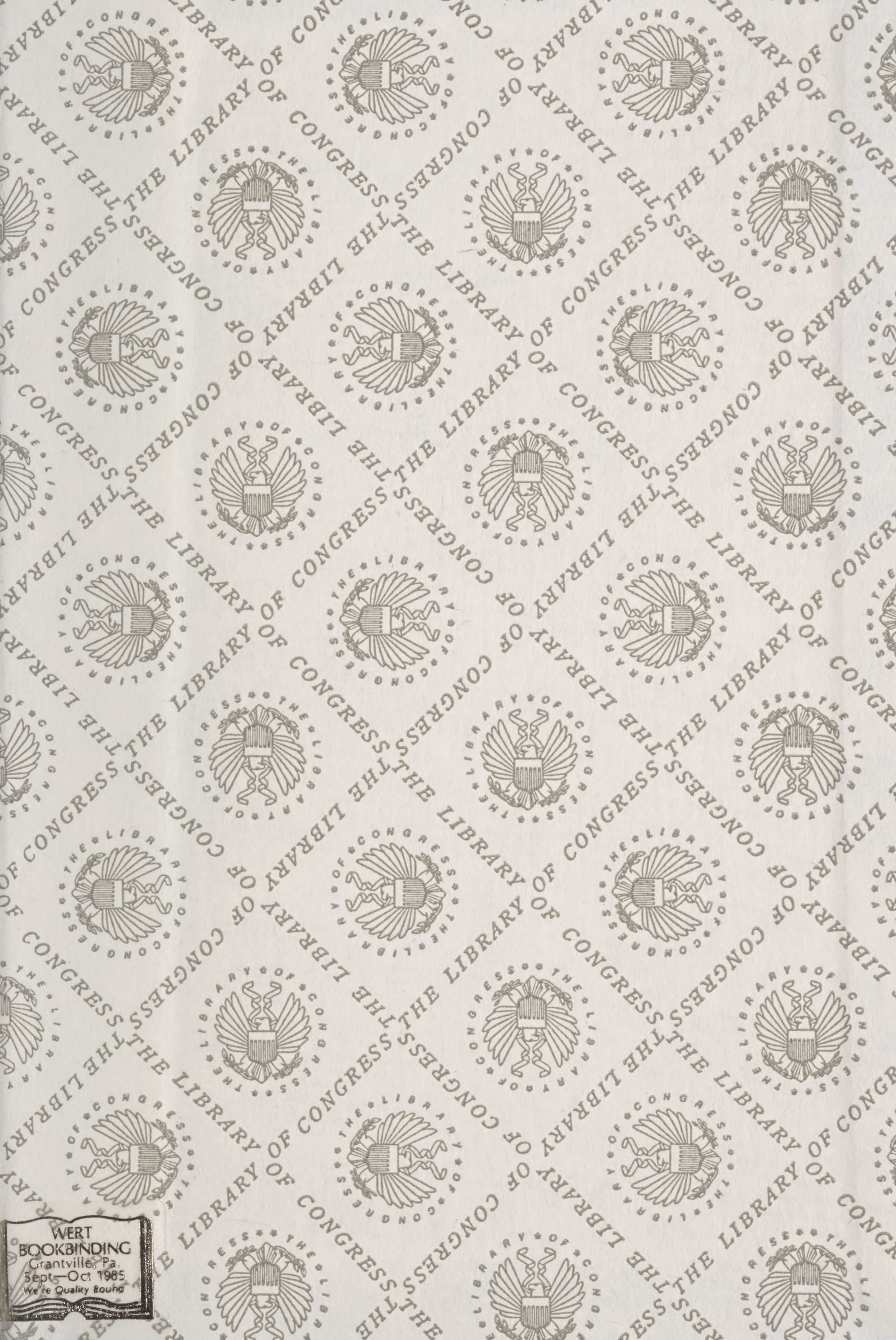
“I owe it to her,” he said.

THE END



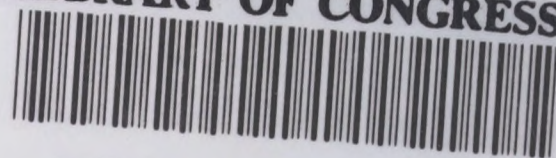






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