

Whirlwind

H. C. M. Hardinge



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WHIRLWIND

BY
H. C. M. HARDINGE



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WHIRLWIND

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I

No. 0, Lennox Gardens was (and probably still is) one of those residences which a house agent would describe as "possibly the most perfect mansion in this much sought after district."

Now house agents, being directly descended from George Washington, are incapable of telling a lie. Conceive a more moving spectacle than a house agent endeavouring to tell a lie.

But the owners of No. 0 themselves would not call their house "a mansion"; yet I feel certain that every house agent would.

Let us, therefore, walk through the Square and form our own opinion concerning the truth of the matter.

It is a cheery-looking house, and in this pleasant month of June (didn't I say it was June? Well it is) every window flaunts a box of gay flowers that throw their petals down on your head while you wait for your ring to be answered and then look as innocent as new-born lambs and say, "Oh, you don't think we could do such a thing as that."

But, in truth, the house is neither to be let nor sold; and that is why Messrs. Lettem and Sellem have given us

an order to view. To send their clients gaily off after a house that is not in the market is an engaging trick of this well-known firm, who then call their clerks and typists together and cry "Rejoice with us, for we have sent a fool on his errand."

As a matter of fact No. 0 has been the town house of the Dalisons of Fordcombe ever since Lennox Gardens came into being as a possible place to live in. In that house, in old days, much entertaining had taken place; entertaining, however, of a very special kind. There was ever a very pleasant and dignified air about the proceedings that gave distinction and grace to those gatherings.

This may have been partly due to the fact that the Dalisons of Fordcombe were not only the heads of a very, very old family, but were also among the chief representatives of Roman Catholicism in England.

The parties, in the good old days before the war, had certainly been of the stately order. Maybe a Cardinal in his scarlet robes, or a Bishop in his purple cassock, would attend. Thus, one found not only the sociability of a family party, where everybody knew everybody else, but also something of the atmosphere of a court. One does not associate a jazz band with a Cardinal, and therefore no one looked for the first when the second might very likely appear.

But nowadays Mr. Dalison (a widower and no longer young) preferred to live at Fordcombe; and the maiden sister who had kept house for him ever since the early death of his wife infinitely preferred the country; so we shall not be very wrong in concluding that they were two quiet home-loving people to whom the excitements of London town appealed in vain.

There is, however, another, and the last member of

the family, who claims mention, and she is a very important person, indeed. This person is Kate Dalison, Mr. Dalison's only child.

Miss Katie was nineteen, and young ladies of nineteen—let them be even as charming as Katie—occasionally clamour for something more exciting than hunting and tennis and the other distractions of the countryside. So Margaret had come to Lennox Gardens and Ralph had come too (not so much from any desire to revisit London, but because he hated to be left behind), and Katie had been “presented” and her other aunt—her mother's sister—the great Duchess of Hampshire—that arbiter of the social aspirant's fate, had even given a dance for her, one of those small but oh, so terribly exclusive dances the outsider never hears of, and the papers only mention with bated breath.

The Duchess had no daughters of her own, and Katie found favour in her eyes. The child was attractive and successful and an heiress—three distinct passports to her Grace's interest. The Duchess offered to take her niece under her wing and do the right thing by her.

So Katie had departed to Grosvenor Square and Margaret and Ralph were free to return to Fordcombe.

But we have been kept waiting a very long time on the doorstep! and in the end the servant tells us the house is not to let. Instantly we are consumed with conviction that it is the one and only house in all London that would suit us.

Did we not catch a glimpse of a nice wide stair and a roomy, square hall, things we have always longed to possess and never have?

But I can describe the house accurately, for—since that day—Margaret and I have become good friends;

and she it was who told me a good many of the events in this history.

Had we got inside, and gone up the stairs, we should have heard two ladies talking in a little room on the right, and had we the rudeness to look in we should have seen Margaret herself; and talking to her (therefore back to us) another lady, who had dropped in to have "a word or two" with Margaret.

From the expression on Miss Dalison's face it would appear the "word or two" had already been spoken and had produced a somewhat disturbing effect.

Margaret's gentle face wore the look of one striving to solve a riddle, probably a simple catch that yet refused to be caught; while from the aspect of the visitor's back, from the osprey in her toque, and from the toque to the waist, she was quite clearly one of those who, having propounded a problem, insisted on an explanation.

Whether I am wrong in repeating a conversation that Margaret told me in confidence, I leave to your decision. I should certainly hate to have my own conversation thrown broadcast on the world; but if everybody did to others as they would be done by what a very dull world it would be, wouldn't it? Then, as a matter of fact, my conversations are seldom fit for repetition.

So far as I recollect, the talk that Margaret repeated to me must have been somewhat of this nature.

"Really, dear Augusta, now you ask me I'm afraid I don't know very much about the young man. But he's a charming boy, and I'm told popular. Desmond Antrobus asked me to be kind to him."

This last sentence had been an after-thought, and was meant to imply that Desmond Antrobus's voucher for

anyone should be ample guarantee for that person's social salvation.

Margaret Dalison, anyway, thought so; and she devoutly hoped "dear Augusta" would let the matter drop. But, though the wish was father to the thought, it was not even step-father to the hope that died promptly, surviving by some two seconds.

Augusta sniffed—audibly—she could not deny that an introduction from Antrobus covered all that was needed in the way of guarantee. It might, however—by one of those unfortunate oversights so common in these latter days, alas!—also cover a multitude of sins. By which Lady Alaburton did not mean those obvious sins so conveniently catalogued by the decalogue, but those far more important, unwritten crimes condemned by society.

I have said that Augusta had sniffed. It was an eloquent sniff, speaking louder than words. Margaret replied by repeating her original defence that "Desmond Antrobus had asked her to be kind to the boy." To repeat herself so soon was a certain sign of weakness, but Margaret settled in her dug-out because she felt her friend disapproved of something she had done. What that "something" might be she was totally unable to imagine, and the knowledge that Augusta Alaburton would be sure to enlighten her ignorance was no consolation. Augusta's methods of bringing light to bear on any darkness were singularly efficient, but often extremely drastic. They were so in the present case. Without uttering a syllable, but merely by means of a sniff, she had managed to convey a whole library of reproof.

Of course reproof can be, and very often is, thor-

oughly deserved. But who takes kindly to the dose administered firmly and at his own fireside?

But for once Augusta proved more merciful than was her wont. Perhaps she felt the uselessness of argument. Margaret would be sure to go her own way, if she thought by doing so she could be kind, and then maybe the restfulness of the little room and the gentle personality of the hostess gave the other lady pause. No one could be very insistent—much less aggressive—with Margaret for long.

When any of her old cronies thought Miss Dalison was doing something “not very wise,” and that was pretty often, she went to that charitable lady and began with exhortations but always ended with prayers. Margaret preferred to make a mistake and do a kindness to avoiding risk by not giving a helping hand. It was a pity should the recipient turn out worthless, but till she had proof she continued to help; and strangely enough she was more often right than wrong.

At this time, Margaret must have been somewhere about forty. She had a very graceful, youthful figure and the face itself was scarcely middle-aged, but too set, too serene, too lacking in expectancy to have been a really young face. So I think she must have been a little older than she appeared—in which case it might be better to leave well alone and not inquire further.

I have heard her described as “very sweet.” Usually the praise that damns. But I think in Margaret’s case the word is not misapplied; and of course there is a great difference between being “sweet” and being “sugary.” It is not the sugar’s fault that treacle is somewhat sickly.

A little ideal in her outlook, expectant of the highest

in the men and women of her world, but (inasmuch as she was herself of the world) Margaret looked for no impossible attainments in others.

Perhaps scarcely of her day? Maybe, yet she was not old-fashioned. Almost, it would seem, she lived in the present with the memory of some gracious past; and with this thought she was wont to sprinkle the ordinary quiet days of her life, thus endowing them with a charm and a courtesy very delightful and refreshing to meet.

She was like a white pillar rising slenderly in a wilderness, all that remained of some ancient cathedral. Exquisitely carved and chiselled, a masterpiece of design, still lifting up to heaven, still gleaming spotless, still indicative of something fine. Indestructible, unassailable, though the roof had fallen and wild animals went where once the priest had trod, and even the form of the old edifice, with the creed it stood for, be lost and irretrievably forgotten.

One who knew her well, one whom she had helped and comforted, whom the world condemned but she forgave, said Margaret Dalison was like a fountain of pure water, upspringing in a thirsty land that lay barren of trees, naked to the sun.

But the woman who sat in the big armchair close by could never be likened to anything so calm as a slender pillar or so refreshing as sweet waters in the desert. An up-to-date American hotel or the Falls of Niagara were more eloquent of her. She was vividly of the world and the world's ways, and never could she fathom the guileless, unsophisticated ways of Margaret. Even now she sat perplexed and bewildered at the unworldliness revealed by a chaperon who was "kind" to a young fellow before she had found out all about him.

“You seem to have wandered out of your century, Margaret! You should have lived along with Saint Elizabeth, whose lovers turned into roses.”

Margaret laughed. “I think you mean whose loaves turned into roses when her husband met her on her way to feed the poor.”

“Of course,” murmured Lady Alaburton. “How stupid of me.”

It *was* annoying! Augusta was a recent convert to Roman Catholicism and but scantily posted in the histories of that Church’s many saints. But it was especially tiresome to have betrayed her ignorance to a Dalison. They were—as the rather bewildered lady sometimes acknowledged in frank if rather despondent moods—“*real* Catholics.” It was their boast that even in the days of persecution it had never occurred to them to follow any other creed.

Their home had been confiscated by Henry Tudor, to be restored to them by Mary. Lost to them again in Cromwell’s time, it had been given back by Charles, for once just to a family that had yielded pretty well all it had to him and his.

And what a wonderful home is rambling old Fordcombe to this very day! Both by reason of its beautiful, unspoilt old age, its varied history and, not least of all, its gracious setting in woods and gardens. Such a dignity is there, such an aloofness from the glorified suburban mansion of the merely rich.

And the Dalisons had served their time in the state as well as in the field. If the banners and armour at Fordcombe spoke of ancient battles, the portraits told of Governors and Judges, Bishops and Cardinals, of great learning and authority. Then in our own

times, had not the heir of the house fallen gallantly in France?

“Well,” said Lady Alaburton, following a train of thought that had commenced with Saint Elizabeth, “after all, loaves are more useful to hungry people than roses, and anyway, it was very wrong of her to deceive her husband,” she added by way of brilliant after-thought.

“We must remember the kind of man her husband was.”

“Yes, some men can’t be managed by simple truth.”

This was not exactly what Margaret had meant, but she let it pass.

“Now this young man,” continued Lady Alaburton, who in her heart much preferred a highly presentable modern youth to any dead saint, however holy, “this boy, Aylmer Forsyth, don’t you really know anything about him?”

“Well, dear, I’ve told you who his sponsor was. Desmond met him on the rink at Mürren—we were all at the same hotel, you know. He asked me to be kind, so when we got home I asked one or two people to send him cards for their parties. He’s very popular.”

“Oh, yes, he’s asked about. That sort of young man always is—more’s the pity.”

Augusta sighed. She had only lately married off the last of three daughters, and knew the inexplicable talent young girls possess for falling in love with good-looking but ineligible young men. Violet, her youngest and prettiest child, had developed a positive genius for it.

“Of course, Sir Desmond is, well—Sir Desmond, but why is his secretary to be—oh, my dear Margaret,” cried Augusta, taking her fence with a rush, “how can you let him be so much with Katie?”

She had leapt and landed safely. The fox and the hounds, however, were well ahead, and she girded up her loins to pursue and overtake.

“But, my dear Augusta. Katie and Aylmer! they’ve known each other for ages. What *do* you mean?”

“What does one mean when one discusses a boy and a girl and asks questions about the youth? And as to knowing each other for ages, they can only have met about a year ago, or at the most two. That makes the present so dangerous; they get used to each other after that,” said Augusta, full of reminiscences as to the evil ways of Violet.

“But Katie’s a mere child.”

“This is her second season—that ages any girl and doesn’t explain the young man either. And really he does require explaining. Good-looking and charming? Yes, I know. It’s just *that* wants an explanation. Why is he?”

Lady Alaburton spoke as though good looks in a nobody were a sin. Perhaps they are in that code referred to at the beginning of the chapter. You must ask her ladyship, who is a most erudite Lord Chief Justice on such matters.

“Were he plain and uninteresting he would of course be negligible,” she continued. “Why women ask that sort of young man to their balls I can’t think. They dance much too well.”

The lady it seemed regarded balls as places where girls might get to know the right sort of man; the dancing was quite a secondary consideration, and young men, whose only recommendation was their nimble toes, of no consideration whatever.

“Who in the world is he?” she asked.

Margaret gave the cushion at her back a pat. For the life of her she could find no answer. And what did she care either? If Augusta wanted to probe into the status of an old friend's protégé, why not go to that old friend himself?

"He is Desmond's private secretary," she murmured by way of hint.

"Anyone might be Desmond Antrobus's private secretary," answered her ladyship with another sniff, which had almost degenerated to a snort.

"Oh, not quite *anyone*, I think. He must have brains, initiative, and be a gentleman."

"Exactly; and usually the most gentlemanly young men prove to be nobodies. I suppose they have a better education."

"I daresay you're right. You ought to know. You go about much more than I do."

"I had to," sighed Augusta with resignation. "*Three* girls, you know, but they're all gone now," she finished up cheerily. Do not imagine her three offsprings were dead. She meant to say that (entirely owing to her own super-human efforts) the three young ladies were now as happily married as three sisters could expect to be. She was fond of her daughters, but she infinitely preferred them married to single.

"You, you lucky creature, never married."

And then Lady Alaburton remembered that the reason why Margaret Dalison still remained Margaret Dalison was generally said to be because Desmond had never asked her to become Lady Antrobus.

How correct this gossip might be no one knew. The rumour had grown, as rumours do, till it had become a kind of institution and an article of faith. Certainly a

great friendship existed between the two. Antrobus consulted Margaret constantly and paid her the compliment of acting upon her advice. They corresponded and met frequently. What wonder if all their world had long expected to hear their engagement announced?

But society found itself still waiting. The difference in religion might at one time have been an obstacle. But then neither Margaret nor Desmond were very young any longer, and as to religious differences, any such little difficulty could easily be got over nowadays.

Antrobus was now about forty-five, and the friends had been intimate ever since their first meeting, some fifteen years ago. Then he was wild with ambition and making his first bid as a Parliamentary candidate. Margaret had been one of his most ardent canvassers, and during the nerve-shattering election fight she had given him all the enthusiasm and hope at her command and had prophesied for him the great things which had since been fulfilled.

A softer look came into her face even as she thought and spoke of Antrobus and recalled the almost boyish eagerness of the man when he had sought her good offices for his protégé.

“Boys want such a lot of kindness shown them, if people only knew; and they’re so grateful.”

So she had extended a helping hand to Aylmer. He was a singularly gallant lad and had soon found his way into her good graces.

A few months after the first meeting at Mürren Antrobus had made Aylmer his private secretary, and after that it was natural the youth should be much at Fordcombe, and time had but confirmed the excellent impression made in the beginning.

To women like Margaret youth has an irresistible appeal. It is the joyous expectancy of all good luck, the delightfully frank assertion of only one presence—that of an eternally good time, the impossible claim for complete immunity from all pain and sorrow—and for all happiness as its birthright, that proves so winning.

But Margaret's thoughts had flown to where many delightful things happened in a setting all sunshine and roses. It was the most harmless of meanderings; just a stroll into a promised land—or might we say a peep through some fine old gate at a pleasant garden?—and then a gentle opening and a delicate soft entrance, followed by a swift but not ignominious retreat.

“Why do you mention Aylmer and Katie together, Augusta?” she said, recalling herself to her surroundings.

“Well, you see, they were both at the Lancings' ball last night. You know, she was a Vere de Vere, and he made jute, or something people used in the war. Enormously rich.”

“I know the Vere de Veres, of course. Which of them is Mrs. Lancing?”

“Mrs. *Harry* Lancing, Margaret. These new people always put a Christian name in front. I suppose it's to make one feel there may be a respectable head of the family somewhere.” Lady Alaburton had got fairly launched now, and on a sea she knew by heart.

“I don't know all Katie's friends. Isobel is taking her out, as you know.”

“Well—hasn't *she* said anything?”

“No.”

“Mark my words, she will. Either the young man will have to explain himself or he'll be shown the door. I expect he'll be shown the door.”

"My dear, I hope not. But—there can be nothing serious. He's not a Catholic, to begin with."

"Exactly, and a nobody to go on with, and I imagine a pauper to finish up with."

"He has a charming little cottage near us," Margaret began, with the heartiest wish to say something kind. But Augusta nearly exploded with horror.

"A cottage! At Fordcombe! What sort of cottage?" she asked, breaking suddenly into a calmer voice, visions of certain elaborate edifices that aped humility under the name of "cottage" rising to her mental vision. "There are cottages—and cottages. Lena Arkwright's is charming. They think it was once a manor house, because there's an old baronial hall they use as a general sitting-room. Not many bedrooms—that's why it's a cottage—but Lena talks of adding a new wing; but building's so expensive, and she's just put in electric light and central heating. She's making the gardens out of an old orchard—charming. The butler's cottage is quite handy, and the chauffeur has a flat over the garage."

"I'm afraid Aylmer's isn't that sort of cottage at all," Margaret cut in when Augusta's flow failed somewhat. "It's a *real* cottage, built in fourteen hundred and something. There is an old barn communicating and that makes a charming room. He has a dear little garden full of sweet-smelling flowers. I don't think even our roses smell as good as his."

Lady Alaburton held a moment's eloquent silence before replying in scathing tones. "From your description I imagine the future Mrs. Forsyth will have to live on smells. I gather it will be roses in summer and cooking in winter."

What further argument she might have harangued on

the subject of young Forsyth and the pretty niece the writer of this strictly accurate chronicle knoweth not, for at the moment the door was opened to a visitor and the discussion came to an abrupt end.

The new arrival was a distinguished Prelate of the Roman Church. One met them at the Dalisons; charming, courteous, well-bred men of the world, who to Augusta Alaburton were surrounded with an atmosphere of almost mediæval authority.

When Monsignor gave her his pleasant smile and greeting she distinctly felt a flattering sense of her own importance. Here was a Prince of her own Church, one of great authority, whose influence at Rome was paramount, whom it was an honour and privilege to meet. Yet the old doctrine of intrigue, inseparable from the Protestants' thoughts of Rome, sometimes came back on her; and then she would remember that vested in this kindly personage was the power to hurl all manner of cursings at her head. Of course, Monsignor was incapable of so grossly underbred an act to a woman of her position, but she believed he could do it if he chose, and the knowledge gave Augusta little thrills. Altogether there was something much more efficient about it than anything the Church of England could show.

But naturally Margaret felt nothing of this. She greeted the Churchman as she might anyone else; but Lady Alaburton had on Monsignor's entrance instantly changed her whole expression to one of such cathedral-like solemnity as to suggest the lady's falling on her knees and making her instant confession.

Yet she really loved her new religion. To her it was quite the most fascinating thing in the world. She had

not begun to understand it, and therefore she was for ever finding some fresh diversion therein.

She groped and groped in it, much as she would grope in a lucky bag at a bazaar, and the things she fished up were often a surprise, sometimes a delight, and usually terribly puzzling.

One of her old friends had said, "Augusta treats her new religion as she might a good cook—she patronises each, yet goes in fear of both."

This cynical remark was not true. In spite of all appearances she did not patronise her creed. On the contrary, in her secret soul she sometimes doubted whether the prelates and great laity of the Roman Church in England took her quite seriously.

Even Margaret had only congratulated her quietly "on finding safety"; no one else had paid the slightest attention to her conversion, and the thought did occasionally protrude itself that her new co-religionists were a little wanting in cordiality. Surely a fatted calf of some kind should have graced the occasion!

Even now there was something lacking. She could not feel the same link connected her with Monsignor and Margaret that so obviously united them. She was with them, but not of them. On the occasions—very rare, I am afraid—when she indulged in heart-to-heart talks with what she called her "soul" she would confess, "It is just as if they had been born in the best set and I had merely pushed my way in."

After a few moments she rose and took her departure on a round of card-leaving at many houses. She was a woman who loved her London, a woman to whom society came before everything except her religion. Some people said it was a dead heat between the two, others that the

Church only won by a neck because society was somewhat winded.

There are people who put in a claim to God, as a sort of insurance agent, for their lost youth. And some change their religion under the impression the Almighty prefers that particular brand, and will, if they embrace it, immediately concede them some special favour.

And when everything goes on just as before they rack their brains to discover what means they can take to persuade the Omnipotent to regard them seriously and grant them those things they so strongly desire.

II

DOWN in the west of Sussex, in the land between the hills, there you will find Fordcombe.

It is but a little hamlet, very easily overlooked. But if you keep by the slow-flowing river you may by chance light upon it where it sleeps tucked away in the woods and downs.

The few cottages and farms are set here and there just where they will look their best. Old cottages with tiled or thatched roofs, lattice windows, gay gardens, bee-hives and flagged paths, and they gather together in twos or threes, some down by the river, others up on the hill by the church, while one or two stay in between as though uncertain which group to join.

Up by the church is the Manor House, where for seven hundred years the Dalisons have lived. Not a large place, but unique in its way, full of tradition, of fine old portraits, furnishings, carvings in wood and stone, of the smell of lavender, pot-pourri, ashes of wood fires.

The station is about two miles away, and they who know their Fordcombe are ever in expectation of the last turn in the road, for here is the great stone bridge, long, narrow, irregular, with many sharp-angled refuges, built in leisurely days by unhurried monks, and as sound to-day as in the hour of its completion.

From here we catch the shrill call of the peacocks in the high old manor gardens, or hear the cry of rooks in

the elms, and in winter, when the leaves are off the trees, get a glimpse of the old red chimney-stacks.

Cross the bridge, climb the hill slowly, leaving the road to Timbleworth, but going up under the sheltering trees to the right, and very soon—in fact directly you leave the green tunnel of the branches—the little church and the gate to the house stand before you.

The road continues, dips a hill to lose its way in the woods, first, however, passing once more by the river as though in final farewell. Out this way is another bridge, an old wooden affair, unsafe and unused now, and close by stands Aylmer Forsyth's cottage.

It was ever a delight to Antrobus to wander through Fordcombe woods or paddle up the reaches of the river and if the Dalisons were not at home he would run down to the cottage or put up with Fell, an old college chum with whom he had ever been in touch, and who now lived at Timbleworth and doctored that healthy spot as well as ministering to Fordcombe.

It had not been his original intention to enter on a career of finance. In early youth he had hoped to make a career in literature. He had a fine taste and still delighted in the company of men of letters. So he had laughed at a good banking account, under-rated the talents he really possessed, sneered at family influence, and set out to win his way along the road he chose to go.

But faith is not talent, and talent is far removed from genius. Yet Desmond had genius in abundance; but the kind of genius he possessed he had no desire to acknowledge. Accordingly that lady raised not a finger to stay him, but let him blunder along as best he could, while she sat with folded hands as patient as any Penelope, waiting the day and the hour when her prodigal should return.

Of course, he had failed. The quick, cheap successes he regarded as stepping-stones to greater things were but the delusive sprites that often lead mediocrity on to abandon him at last in a slough of stagnation. Better a colossal failure and a fresh start than a good start with nothing at the end.

And Desmond might have lived to know gradual disillusionment had no certain "things" happened that speedily disrupted his dream but brought forth a strength he had been but dimly aware of, and an ambition that gripped him till he fell trembling and bleeding at the feet of that deity who had waited with folded hands till her well-beloved son should return.

Then did Genius arise and comfort him, take him to her heart, show him the way to go, nor did she think to quit when possessing friends, position, undreamed success, all the world could give, he lay in his young secretary's garden, glad and happy to be once more in the quiet countryside.

And the "things" that had happened? The whys and the wherefores of all this change? They shall be narrated in due course, but this is neither the time nor the place. Sufficient that destiny will out, and be man as obstinate as any Antrobus "things" will always happen, some day and somehow, to force him back to where that destiny is waiting.

But now that most perfect time of special peace, when they who toiled all day relish the virtue of work well done, while they who neither toiled nor spun feel just as comfortably tired as though they had.

And just at that moment, when the sun shining, the garden smiling, and the world shouting with happiness, a pleasant-looking young fellow came out of the little

wood in time to see the housekeeper arranging the tea-things on the lawn.

If he had a pleasant appearance, he had also a singularly charming voice, the sort of voice that made people smile when they heard it and—as you have probably guessed—he was that same youth who so perturbed Augusta and against whom she had so strenuously warned Margaret.

Possibly, from a chaperon's point of view, she had reason. Young Forsyth's hair and eyes were dangerous. I'm not sure his skin was quite safe. But there could be no doubt whatever about his charm. You couldn't get away from it and Augusta considered charm in a person like Aylmer was a snare.

"Lots of letters for you, as usual," said this interesting young man, "and by good luck two for me."

"Thanks, Aylmer, and how's our lady of the Post Office?"

"Oh, well, I had to knock and knock before anything happened. Then at last she put her head out of the upper window and explained she had 'an 'eadache and was lying down.' Then I bought some stamps. One never asks Mrs. Corner for two things at once. Of course, she put her customary query, 'How many do you require, sir?' as though they were so many yards of ribbon. When I told her two dozen twopenny ones, and one dozen penny ones, she wrote it down on a scrap of paper and disappeared upstairs."

Mrs. Corner and the village shop were one!

Perhaps "shop" is somewhat of a misnomer. It would be more correct to say she lived in a cottage and sold things over a little counter. Her abode stood well back from the road, and at right angles thereto, giving it the

cold shoulder, as it were, in the way of a blank wall. Now, as the ivy that threatened in time to cover her window had already submerged the lower part of the cottage, it took a Columbus's turn of mind to discover the little slit through which letters (nominally posted) really fell on Mrs. Corner's parlour floor.

But none of these things troubled the good lady. Did not all the world know of her and her cottage, that she sold stamps and the cheaper kind of money orders, midst her lollipops and fly-papers? So if any stranger failed to discover this Selfridge's of Fordcombe he really had only himself to blame.

Antrobus soon skimmed through his letters.

"You'll have to answer them for me," he said to Aylmer.

Then the two men sat awhile in that companionable silence that is so pleasant between friends. The relations between these two were at once cordial and understanding. And combined with this most pleasant familiarity was the pride a young fellow of Aylmer's age must feel in the friendship given so generously by an elder in the position of his employer.

And, indeed, it was in the light of a parent that Antrobus frequently found himself regarding his young secretary. It pleased him to do those things for Aylmer that he would have done for his own boy; often and often he would think it would be worth while giving up a good deal of his hard-won gains could he (in exchange) claim such a clean-minded, unspoilt young fellow for his son. But what could there be—at first sight—between them? Antrobus, big with business, Member of Parliament; and Aylmer, merely a bright, ambitious youngster.

Desmond knew that Aylmer was fatherless. From

time to time the lad had given Antrobus some insight regarding his early life.

The father had evidently been one of those fascinating scoundrels who are only delightful outside their homes. A bad and cruel husband, his death after a short married life, had been a merciful release to Mrs. Forsyth. That mother—a delicate invalid who lived abroad in Southern Europe, and whom her son simply idolised—seemed to be Aylmer's only living relative.

The wonderful love that bound the rather lonely mother and the clever son, seemed very beautiful to Desmond. He often speculated as to what manner of woman she might be. That she was something quite unusual he was certain. He thought he understood her and pictured her still beautiful, very charming, intelligent; not one readily to make friends, but once she had accepted your friendship a trustful, interesting, delightful companion. Some day he must make her acquaintance.

And Margaret Dalison was drawn in just the same way. She, the woman whose girlhood was left behind; and he, the middle-aged man of the world—both recognised the oneness of this mother and son as something exquisite and pure, and what neither of them could ever know.

I think, perhaps, Antrobus held this knowledge somewhat more keenly than Margaret. If every woman is a potential mother of children, every man is a potential creator of them. The creative instinct is born in all men. The conservator is born in all women.

However, Margaret had known something of parentage in her relations with her niece. She had tended the child with all the love, all the pent up, smothered motherhood within her; and often had Desmond envied her.

But Margaret could have told him that great as had been her devotion, admirably as she had fulfilled her duty, magnificently as she had loved and lived, down in the depths of her heart was a voice crying no earthly voice had answered; and a hunger no earthly food had satisfied.

But she was an exceedingly happy woman, grateful for all the good that was hers. She showed her gratitude too, and in the most practical way, by using freely, and well, all these same good things; and only now and again the voice in her heart made itself heard and the hunger cried out to be appeased.

But we are getting far too sentimental and this is not going to be a sentimental story at all.

It all seems to have come at once. But when you have to take a dose of nasty medicine it is no good putting off the operation; and of all unpleasant things, love is the most exasperating. Every man in love feels something of a fool. Maybe, woman does also, but she has the compensation of feeling slightly improper as well; whereas a man feels so good as to be miserably uncomfortable. Let us therefore get over our love affairs quickly and proceed to more exciting adventures. Only first I will ask you to realise very fully there is nothing sloppy or sentimental in either Margaret or Desmond, and most emphatically not in that excellent young sportsman, Aylmer Forsyth. All three are ordinary, healthy, normal people whose lives happen to have fallen in pleasant places.

While Aylmer, still very young, stood at the threshold of his life and sniffed the pleasant fragrance of this jolly-looking and amusing world, Antrobus had wandered up and down its valleys a good many years after the "things that happened" had forced him to show the real

stuff within him, and whatever the experience he had gone through might be, he certainly emerged a far finer character, more sympathetic, more patient of infirmity, and of infinitely greater understanding.

But his own youth had gone down in the battle, nor was it till he and young Forsyth foregathered together that something of that lost inheritance came back to him.

There was an odd kind of resemblance between them, a trick of manner of speech which one or two intimates had noticed. This pleased the elder while it flattered the younger, so their connection became less and less the relationship of employer and secretary, and more and more that of an elder brother to one considerably younger.

Desmond, sitting in the garden with his young host, felt more of real "home" than he remembered to have felt for years, and looking at Aylmer (absorbed in a long letter from the darling mother in Italy) he said to himself that just such a son would he have chosen could he have had his way.

"Your mother well, I hope?" he asked, more for the sake of hearing the boy speak than anything.

"Quite well, thank you, sir. She's staying at Parazzi with some friends. They seem to have a topping place there!"

"Your mother must have many friends. I wonder if we have any in common."

"She's so quaint with her friends. She makes them rather easily in one way—that's her good nature—but no one seems to enter her life or be necessary to her."

Desmond had rather supposed this. He pictured her one of those sympathetic people who win the confidence of others readily because they never make real confidences themselves.

"You must meet her some day," Aylmer concluded. "I want you to so much."

"Nothing I should like better. Perhaps when you go home again you will ask me to run out and visit you. She must be a very beautiful woman from what you say. But you haven't any photograph?"

Aylmer laughed a little before answering. It was a pleasant laugh, just the infectious, boyish laugh you would expect of him. He blushed a little, too, when he began apologising for what must look very like vanity on his mother's part.

"That's her one conceit. She loves pretty clothes, and no woman ever looks better turned out. But she maintains the moment a woman's photographed she becomes a frump. And not even for me will she look dated. She's often told me that she was never photographed in her life."

Antrobus smiled. Mrs. Forsyth was evidently a woman with vision. He thought of certain old photographs in his own possession. There was a portrait of the lovely Mrs. Palliser. He had forgotten he possessed it, and at first could not recall whose likeness it was. Then he remembered, and the recollection had come as a shock! In what year of grace did people wear such clothes or possess a figure so quaintly shaped? He had begun to count the years and, counting, wondered how the lady did it! She was still a carefully young and perseveringly attractive woman! But how unmercifully the picture dated her, and, if she knew it was yet extant, what would she not give to destroy it utterly.

Yes, Mrs. Forsyth was undoubtedly a wise, if perhaps a slightly vain woman, but if as lovely and charming as

her son described, some little vanity might surely be forgiven her.

"I lunched in Lennox Gardens before leaving town," Antrobus said later on, "Katie was there and looking remarkably pretty."

"Oh, was she?" Aylmer replied. The tone of his voice might have sounded a little dangerous to a woman's ear—it was far too ostentatiously careless to be quite free from fraud. "I suppose she'll be coming home when the Dalisons return," he added.

"After a while," said Desmond. "But she'll see the season out with her aunt, and after the summer she and the Duchess are going to Scotland, I believe."

"Oh! are they?" answered Aylmer, looking away into the distance, "and I suppose as she's pretty and something of an heiress, her people expect her to marry someone who can give her all she's got already?"

"Her father will certainly look to her to marry in her own set, and, I imagine, in her own religion also. The Dalisons have seldom married out of it."

"There doesn't seem such a terrible difference in the two creeds to me."

Antrobus took a quick look at the boy. For a moment he wondered lest there might be a deeper meaning under Aylmer's questionings. But there was nothing in the lad's face to give any ground for suspecting he felt more than that good comradeship towards Katie usually existing between the modern boy and girl.

Desmond was glad. For though he knew his old friend would only desire his child's happiness, still, when the time should come for Katie to marry, he would certainly look for the lucky man to be one of his own

faith, to bear some similar good name, and hold something of his own tradition.

But Aylmer was throwing crumbs at the pigeons crowding and strutting and posturing round the tea table, pretending to ignore the existence of such a vulgar thing, yet, all the while, missing none of those rich buttery morsels that fell from the tea tables in gardens at that season of the year.

III

BEFORE we proceed any further with this veracious history, we must go back to No. 0 and see what happened there after Augusta had taken herself off on her little round of card-leaving.

Margaret had many visitors. Old friends came to say good-bye, or to arrange for re-unions later at Fordcombe or elsewhere, thus it was a busy time for Margaret, and it was late before she found herself alone.

Then Lady Alaburton's warning regarding Katie's intimacy with young Forsyth returned to her. She would have dismissed the matter as one of "dear Augusta's scares," had not certain remarks of Monsignor given some colour to the possibility that—this time—Augusta had not been altogether mare's nesting.

The priest had called that afternoon with the special intention of dropping a hint, and—with the most exquisite tact—had dropped it. Just a word of congratulation on the girl's success, and the happy eventualities to be expected at some future date. Ample to set Margaret somewhat fearful lest the girl's name should be too closely connected with someone whom their world would not consider quite a suitable match for the heiress of the Dalisons.

When the girl herself looked in later on, Margaret's first thought was how absurdly young the child looked to be an object of so much interest. But Katie's was not

the position of an ordinary girl. It was only natural the Roman world should be already speculating as to the ultimate fate of this child of nineteen.

Margaret greeted her niece very tenderly, but found it quite impossible to say any of the things that she had thought it might be her duty to say lest she clouded "the child's happiness."

The kind-hearted lady might have spared herself any anxiety on that head. It takes a good deal more than a gentle elder's remonstrance to disturb the equanimity of a young lady aged nineteen, and Miss Kate possessed some singularly well-formed ideas on life, and very definite ones concerning her own in particular.

But she was no objectionable, self-willed, and spoilt young thing. She adored her "Authorities" and she loved her home, too, and was full of directions regarding certain pets of hers which Margaret promised should be attended to.

And so Margaret decided to say nothing.

Even suppose the girl remained plain Miss Dalison all her life, her eventual position as "Miss Dalison of Fordcombe" would be one that many a married woman might envy. "It would have to be a very exceptional offer," thought Margaret to herself, and then pulled herself up for being the worldly-minded old maid she most certainly was not.

Maybe there came to her mind the remembrance of one who was not a good Catholic, but a very noble gentleman. Now if someone like Desmond—but younger and a Catholic—with the promise of a fine career and fully endowed, in short, with all the usual attributes of a fairy prince should happen along one day—say in two or three

years, not before, well, wouldn't that be a dainty dish to set before Queen Kate?

It is to be feared she was somewhat old-fashioned in her views. Permit me to remind you she was no longer very young, and that you will be a very clever woman if, at Margaret's age, you are not getting a trifle old-fashioned yourself.

Perhaps her very quiet, her amused observations of life, and her steady, fixed existence, lent her the charm that drew people so freely to her. For is it not a pleasant and a good thing to know a friend openly pleased at any chance that brings you together? Someone who is in no hurry to make off and greet a more interesting personage than yourself who at that moment has just entered the room?

"And you're having a really good time, dear?"

"Splendid. Aunt Isobel's awfully good. We're going to heaps of parties."

"And have you any particular partners? Anybody who dances better than the rest?"

Margaret thought herself quite Machiavellian in her method of approaching a dangerous subject tactfully. Whether Katie saw through the "tact" or not, she made no sign, and, if any favourite partner was in her mind, it would have taken a much cleverer woman than this simple-minded aunt to have discovered him.

"Jim Aldershot dances fairly decently, and he's always pleasant. Then there's Tony Chichester. But they're all alike."

"I'm afraid, my dear, none of us is very original that I'm aware."

Margaret felt a great relief, and, in her innocence, con-

cluded there was no occasion to fear any unwelcome lover as yet.

“Dear child! But I suppose, like all girls, you’ve some ideal? Now, haven’t you?”

But Katie didn’t rise to the bait. She sat a little thoughtful and just a little puzzled to “catch on” as to what Aunt Margaret was driving at.

“An ideal?” she murmured. “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think about that sort of thing. How funny you are, auntie.”

Yes! Very funny indeed, thought Katie; and wondered whether the quiet Aunt Margaret had possessed—in the long-vanished past—some ideal of her own! Katie believed the girls of those dark ages were really romantic in their ideas about men. Yet surely her aunt must know that girls didn’t go about nowadays peripatetic shrines of the ideal man?

And that’s just where the elder lady failed in understanding. Such an outlook as her niece’s was beyond her comprehension and would have seemed unnatural had it been explained to her. How should the world get on without romance? People might say what they liked, but she knew better.

Still, she did wonder a little at the callous outlook of modern youth, and could only guess how it had come about that things were so contrary to what she remembered in her own day.

Then she recollected her brother could never at any time have been considered a romantic figure. He was just a pleasant, average country gentleman, and probably Katie took after him.

Something of this she passed on to Ralph himself as they sat together after dinner that same evening.

“But, my dear,” said Dalison. “Why should Katie be the sentimental young person you think she ought to be? Boys and girls have no business to be anything except the healthy young animals they always remind me of. Like the lilies of the field they should just grow.”

The Squire of Fordcombe was what flippant young things described as “a jolly old sport.” Pleasant-voiced, pleasant-mannered and pleasant-faced, his company, be it said in all kindness, was also pleasant without being intoxicating. In fact an even pleasantness was his chief characteristic. He had others, such as humour, and a kindly disposition. But even these were only of the pleasant order. His kindness was of the easy-going, somewhat negative brand; while his humour was certainly never in the least unpleasant.

He was fond of his comfort and that, alas, was momentarily somewhat under eclipse. His pipe had gone out, as it always did after three puffs, and as usual on these occasions the matches were not at hand. He patted all his pockets, felt all over the chair, and looked vaguely down on the floor about him. Then his sister saw what was the matter and quietly handed them from the mantel-piece. Whereupon a great to-do of puffs and gasps, which exhibition always accompanied the lighting up of the squire’s pipe.

“That’s their business,” said he between his struggles, “just to grow”—puff—“and”—gasp—“when they arrive at mature age”—puff—“they’ll have to begin to grow young again, like you and me and some other dowagers we know.”

“My dear Ralph, what do you mean?”

“I mean to refer you to people like Louisa Shoring and Mrs. St. Ubbs. They must be both nearly seventy,

yet every year they grow more miraculously young."

"Poor things! I certainly hope I shall never be like them," said Margaret, with the slightest suspicion of contempt in her voice. "But they are rather marvellous," she added, not wishing to be harsh in her judgment. "No one would guess how old they really are."

"Indeed no. In spite of all temptation to be what they are, they yet remain what they originally were, but only, I think, with a great expenditure of brute force. But about Katie. Why do you expect her to have any sentiment at all?"

"Well, I don't know," Margaret mused, somewhat hazy how to express herself. "She'll marry some day, I suppose."

"Good heavens! Marry!"

Ralph sat suddenly upright. That is, he became as erect as an elderly gentleman may who is taken by complete surprise while reclining at his ease in an extremely roomy easy chair.

The spectacles that had hitherto maintained a precarious balance at the end of his nose, now lost their equilibrium and fell, secretively, somewhere between the chair and the cushions; while his pipe, irritated to distraction at the fresh interruption, gave up the ghost sullenly. Like many fathers of one child, especially if that only one be a daughter, Dalison had never realised the fact that his child was growing up. As to such things as weddings and young men anxious to be given in marriage, the possibility of their happening in his household seemed perfectly imbecile.

In a way the good, easy gentleman regarded marriage as a kind of disease. You might catch it or you might not. There was no real danger in it—many people took

it and recovered—but on the whole it was just as well to take proper precautions against it.

“Marry! Marry!” cried Ralph, as he retrieved his spectacles and picked up the review that he had been reading and that had seized with avidity at such a favourable moment to slide gracefully to the floor and crumple its pages. “Marry! Tut, tut! What next?”

The Squire hated the thought of any change. Life had, perhaps, been too kind to him. He could honestly say that he knew of nothing, possessing which, he would be happier.

He was perfectly content pottering about his old house and garden. He always found plenty to do—there were farms to inspect; the needs and comforts of the villagers to look after; all the many and various responsibilities of a country squire. He had, too, his shooting, and a little hunting. Not that he did much of either nowadays, and at no time had he been a very keen sportsman, but it had been expected of him and made an excuse to meet his friends and neighbours in a pleasant, leisurely way.

Fordcombe was a clannish place. Many of the farmers had lived on their farms from generation to generation, some of them almost as long a time as the Dalisons up at the house. But though the common pursuit of all was a strong and uniting tie, the one that clinched them together was the unity of creed. And this latter is a tie, the strength of which it is difficult to realise till we remember the Roman Catholic in England always regards the Protestant as an usurper and is therefore always a little on the defensive.

In Catholic eyes Fordcombe was a beacon that shone brightly and ever had shone; a light no persecution, no oppression had ever quite extinguished. Read the chroni-

cles, the country histories, and you will find that dimmed though the light may have been, utterly quenched it never was. Always it burned—maybe secretly—very privily and hidden, often in holes and corners as humble as must have been a distant manger of Bethlehem, but it burned. And now once again the old light shone forth upon the world. And, however you and I may disagree with the dwellers of Fordcombe as to the righteousness of their belief, we are forced to own there is a glamour about such places that goes far to justify the Catholic pride in them. Examples are they to be held up, memorials yet living to be honoured, shrines rescued from burning, snatched from destruction to be evermore revered and honourably tended.

Such was Fordcombe, hedged about with tradition, guarded by pious hands, maintained by a spirit that had never changed.

Perhaps a little stuffy the atmosphere? A little too redolent of feudalism? Somewhat overridden by the authority of Church and Squire? A trifle too reminiscent of those old days when Lords of the Manor could, and they would, chop off the heads of offending villagers and place them on their own gates as a warning as well as graceful ornamentation? Well, I dare say you are right. But remember there are very, very few such places left; and they are delightful to visit—for a few days.

IV

WHEN Antrobus returned to town after his week-end at Fordcombe, he thought he had exchanged a good deal that was very worth while for a rather empty show. His big house in Hill Street looked more than usually gloomy; very opulent, but cheerless, and, as he went up his thickly-carpeted stairs the evening of his arrival, it seemed like a tomb: "Sacred to the memory of Disillusion, who departed this life a crusty old bachelor." The next morning, fortunately, he had appointments in the City, and interviews to be well weighed, and conversations to be rehearsed beforehand, so altogether he had scant time for introspection.

One of those little clouds that so often overshadow the industrial situation of this hopeful world had loomed up suddenly and far too conspicuously to be pleasant, and Desmond's Parliamentary Secretary, bursting with importance and rumours of cabinet and lesser crises, was loudly demanding a spare half hour.

So Antrobus had much to occupy him, for of all slave-driven folk the financial magnate is most in bonds. That the slavery is self-imposed makes it no easier to bear.

In these latter years Desmond was a self-constituted slave. There was no necessity for this grind. He had all the wealth he could use, and the House had proved a field where—did he choose to devote his entire time to

politics—he could realise as great a success as he had already won in the City.

But if the chains sometimes galled, they *always* bound. Just as he began to see about retiring, just so soon would some tempting coup suggest itself; or some interesting proposition be propounded that required his co-operation to ensure success, and the ultimate possibilities of which so intrigued him as to prove irresistible. So he still went on, and the opportune moment never came.

Thoughts are our real actions; and Desmond's thoughts had so gripped on to finance and business that he was incapable of acting out any other ideals.

Now, as he journeyed Citywards, he knew that an unscrupulous firm had been for long trying its whole length to get the better of him over certain important foreign concessions, and this knowledge fired him to fresh energy. The matter was not only important, but a young, promising scheme; and if there was one thing about business that Desmond really loved, it was the excitement he got out of watching an infant darling find its feet and growing up a strong, healthy credit to his care. So, could we have looked inside the car that took him to his office, we might not have recognised in the Antrobus within the easy, flannel-clad lounge we first met in Aylmer Forsyth's garden.

One of the mysteries surrounding men of affairs in England is the way they can throw off the City and office and take on a new lease of life through the means of a pastime, or some outdoor interest.

Down in the country Desmond had slacked thoroughly, and entered entirely into the life about. He had enquired with intelligent interest as to crops and roots, cattle that had taken prizes, and cattle that were expected to do so

next time, and the result of spending a little time on trivialities was fresh vigour, added force, and a keener concentration on the real business of life.

I have told you that Desmond began his career with very other ideas from those which finally possessed him and led him on to the splendid position he ultimately held. When at last he entered the family business he did so for one, and only one reason. He was seized with a purpose, to make money as quickly and as abundantly as possible, and this was because his angel or his fate (call it what you will) had stood by his side, and pointing to the wreck of all his hopes and plans, had cried aloud, "Behold, what a pitiful end is this."

And he proved so eager a pupil that he himself had set fire to the ruins lest one stone of that rotten old building should stand upon another, set fire in a wild burst of rage, with a tortured, twisted sense of wrong, seeing nothing in true perspective, but all things out of focus—till only ashes were left of the blazing ruins, and he stood alone face to face with his future.

But he stood free.

Gradually, the fascination of City life got hold of him till he had no unkind thoughts for the old days, scarcely any regret for the burnt ruins, certainly no desire to build them again. He looked ahead; and had almost forgotten the woman who had so mercilessly thrown the house of cards in his face. She had passed out of his ken, almost out of his consciousness; it was of another woman he thought, one who did not crave luxury and excitement, but who was for ever a faithful comrade and a loyal friend. But our thoughts are our real actions, and must work themselves out.

Only during that last week-end at Fordcombe had Fell

urged him for the hundredth time to take the good that fortune offered.

“My dear old man, chuck it! This nigger’s life of yours isn’t worth a tinker’s cuss.”

So had the oracle spoken as the two men strolled across the fields rather late on the Sunday night towards Fell’s home at Tumbleworth.

“But what should I do if I gave up the City? What have I to fall back upon?”

“Marriage—and you haven’t far to look for it, either!”

Desmond laughed before he answered—not so gaily perhaps.

“Oh, physician, heal thyself. You’re lonelier than I am.”

“No. I deny that. You’ve shoals more friends and acquaintances, heaps more interests and engagements, but I’m the *happier* man. I ask nothing more than I have. A decent country life, a congenial occupation, adequate income, and good tobacco.”

And Desmond thought, if not a very lofty ambition it might perhaps be better than an ambition that o’erleapt itself, nor was it so very diverse from the life he had originally planned for himself.

“Let’s sit here for a bit,” he said. “I always liked this view, and it looks rather jolly to-night.”

The little lane had brought them to a stile, and from there the ground sloped somewhat steeply to the village in the plain where the doctor lived. A few lights could yet be seen in the cottages, and the moon, rising before them, lit up the river and the old mill-house, revealing in the latter an importance the daylight hid.

“It’s like this, Fell. I just can’t do anything but what

I am doing. I *must* go on. What have I to take its place?"

"I've told you."

Fell had a pleasant, soft voice, rather deep and round, that came out of his big frame with a slow drawl.

"You know as well as I. Why pretend you don't? Personally, I've always been a bit surprised at you for not—as it appears to me—quite playing the game."

"Not playing the game, am I?"

"No, it's not cricket. Here are you always hanging about—here or in town—and nothing further."

Antrobus puffed at his pipe awhile before answering. He knew quite well that Margaret was being referred to. And, perhaps, never before had Fell spoken with such deep conviction. To-night Desmond could not put him off with a laugh, or dismiss the matter lightly, nor was it pleasant to be told he was not behaving in an exactly straightforward way.

"You speak rather strongly, old son."

"Well, I feel strongly. I know I've a fatal habit of blurting out the truth. That's why I'm still in this rural spot and not practising in a big way in Harley Street. I suppose you never have *said* anything, by the way?"

"To Margaret? No, of course not. Haven't we both forgotten that she is a Roman Catholic?" Desmond answered, a little bitterly.

"There have been mixed marriages before, and it's not as though she were the heir or either of you were young."

And Desmond could not deny that, in that matter, anyway, Fell spoke the truth. And then he remembered with sorrow that even were a son to be born to him that night he could never hope to be the father to that son, when the

boy should be twenty-three, that he could be now, were he father to a lad of Aylmer's age.

"You never saw—her?"

"No, I was out of England, with Turner's expedition."

"Yes, I remember. She was the most beautiful thing God ever made."

Fell looked away across the plain. He had never known Desmond speak of the woman before, and wondered if some tenderness yet lingered with his friend for those old far-off days.

"Strange, isn't it, that so radiant a creature——" Desmond broke off abruptly. He caught himself speaking aloud, almost unconsciously.

"I'm falling into the conventional. Dear old man, hadn't we better leave well alone?"

"You never heard what became of—of her?" asked Fell, hesitating to mention a name Desmond himself seemed carefully to avoid.

"Nothing. I have no idea what has become of her. Good Lord! How I grew to detest her! Believe me, for a time she made me hate all women. I was very young! Well, I can truly say I feel no bitterness against her now. She's like some one I've never seen, but only heard unpleasant stories of."

"Then why let her ruin your life a second time?"

"Has she ruined it at all? Should I be where I am but for the line she took? She it was filled me with a perfect lust for success—not for myself, God knows, but just so as I could say, 'Look what I've done! See what I possess!' Thinking it over calmly," he added, reflectively, "I expect the world would say she'd made a man of me."

"The world be damned," affirmed Fell, in his quiet,

emphatic way. "What's the world to do with you, the *real* you? Nothing, and you know it. Is that big house of yours in town, home?"

"I never enter it without envying my own butler. He quits it every night and goes to a place he calls home."

"Exactly, that's just what you need, a place *you* can call 'home.' I do want to see this through, and I say again, it's not fair."

"Well, will it console you to know I've often wanted to tell Margaret something of the truth? But I lack the courage. Selfish of me, eh? But we're all selfish some way, and I'm afraid of losing her friendship. That's where *I'm* selfish."

"She'd understand. I can't believe she wouldn't. She's that sort."

"But think, man, think, how she would hate it all. Don't you see she *must*," Desmond cried, raising his voice a little, and speaking quickly. "What has she in common with that old nastiness?"

But Fell was quite unconvinced. As he sat thus in the moonlight, swinging his stick between his knees, he felt that in his own creed never more than one course could be right, and was, therefore, very clearly, the only one that should be taken.

And in his heart Antrobus confessed that Fell was right; only it was very hard to go back at this late time of day. What is done, is done. And, for the Lord's sake, let the unhappy past find what rest it may.

The two men rose and strode through the wheat, one behind the other, down the narrow path. Antrobus recognised the truth in all that had been said to him, and faced the difficulties and embarrassments that he would be forced to meet should he follow his friend's advice;

while that friend, guessing something of all this, most wisely held his tongue.

How hard, how impossible, it would be to lose one atom of the sympathy and friendship Margaret had given him, now, so many years! Their relationship had come about so casually it was difficult to analyse how it first began. He had always looked that they two would continue this intimacy all their lives. But he saw clearly how misleading his own position was; it had deceived the world and had deceived Margaret, the last in all that world he would mislead.

Walking through the fields this summer night with Fell's remonstrance hot within him, he found many mistakes, many injustices he had committed against the woman he loved; he had not meant to inflict them on her and if events were going too fast they must be pulled up. The coach must not go down hill too recklessly; but what if he pulled up short? It had been very pleasant travelling in Margaret's company. Would she alight and insist on going another road?

They were nearing the little village now; had passed through the wheat, and were crossing a bit of meadow that ran close behind some pleasant old farm buildings.

Here they paused a moment; the doctor's lodgings were handy, and the end of the walk had come.

Almost opposite, but a few yards down the road, was the miller's neat little red brick Georgian house, with its steep, short flight of steps to the narrow white door, fronting the very ancient mill that stood on a little island in the river and seemed to lean for support against its own wheel. Between came the weir and the wide space of troubled water, very white in the moon, while above

flowed the open lazy river, flush with its bank, and heedless of its coming, precipitous descent.

"You are quite right, Horace, and if I did wrong I am sorry. Anyway, I'll make amends now."

"I'm glad," answered Fell simply.

"Only, I can't tell her half. If I rake up the past I shall have to make hay of the present."

"Exactly. I see that. Quite."

Both were silent. Desmond was wondering what sort of crop his hay would make; and the other was thinking how like Desmond it was to do thoroughly what he had once made up his mind to see done.

"Look here," he said, after a little hesitation. "Suppose you say nothing to her until you are quite sure you can be free? You know! What I have so often urged before. Listen," Fell added quickly, before the other should have time to interrupt. "I have to be in town a night or so next week. Give me a line to your lawyers and let me act for you. You are a busy man, but I can do the preliminaries, and when you know, well, where she is and what chance you stand, then you can act yourself. How does that strike you?"

"And suppose everything turns out as you apparently hope? What then? Do you propose I should go to a woman like Margaret Dalison, and say 'I love you. My whole heart is set on making you my wife, but I'm not free. You and all the world think I am, but I'm not. In fact, I'm a living lie. I have a wife, and that wife is living. Years ago, before you and I ever met, when I was still a boy and of no importance whatever, she went off with another man because he was rich, very rich, indeed. But since I love you, since I want you for my wife, I'm going to rake up all the past; get my divorce,

and offer you marriage. Put crudely, that's what it amounts to. How the devil can I say that to Margaret or any strict Catholic either?"

Fell answered by two questions not so hard to answer as the one put to himself.

"Have you any right to go on posing as a widower? Aren't you wronging her by keeping the truth from her? Things have gone too far."

"I suppose they have. But I swear I don't know how it happened. It's all come about so gradually, so involuntarily, without any effort on my part and, God knows, without any on hers."

"Why on earth didn't you get a divorce at the time?" cried Fell impatiently. "When, as you say, you were unknown! No one would have cared then. Now, of course, there'll be columns in every paper."

"There'll be a hell of a row, yes," answered Desmond with a grim sort of humour, "but her father was my old tutor, and he begged me not to, hoped she'd come back, I think. As for myself, I didn't care. However, the old man's dead now. What if I had got my divorce twenty years ago?" he cried, turning again to Fell, and this time almost fierce in his eagerness. "What if I were free now? Don't you know how a Catholic regards marriage with a divorced man? It's sin, no marriage at all. Margaret would regard marrying me as nothing less than living in adultery."

"I think she'd understand."

"Oh, she'd understand; she'd pity; she'd be sympathetic. But what about our friendship? If the truth blows upon it won't some of the bloom vanish?"

"You must risk that. I'm convinced she ought to know the position. Good Lord! It's only honest!"

"Yes, only honest! and I'm going to tell her. But the righteousness of an act doesn't make its execution any pleasanter. Neither does it seem to improve my chances," Desmond added.

"According to you, your chance is nil, whether you speak or no. Others may differ, I'm one of them. I think you have sufficient interest in the Roman Catholic world to get over those same difficulties."

"It would certainly take all the interest I've got—a divorced man and a heretic! It's a hopeless combination."

"Well, put that aside. Miss Dalison ought to know, and I've got an idea in the end she'd be happier for knowing."

"I suppose," said Desmond, when at last they shook hands in agreement, and bade each other good-night, "I suppose I've been an awful coward over this. I've always taken the easiest way."

* * * * *

The little path back home across the meadow and up through the wheat seemed very steep to Desmond when he turned away towards Fordcombe and to Aylmer's cottage. Very steep and less friendly, while the long shadow of himself the moon cast before him took on grotesque and weird shapes.

What would, what could Margaret say?

"More and more it seems impossible to tell her one thing without the other. She must hear everything, and whether I get my divorce or no."

"I cannot go and say 'I love you. Shall I get a divorce?' I know her and her principles too well to believe she could ever marry me. The important thing is

for her to know the truth. But yet—Oh, religion, religion, what enigmas you have to answer for! Though my wife has sinned flagrantly, and not even from overwhelming passionate love but merely from greed, the woman I love is to be denied me!”

A little cloud floating idly in heaven, strayed before the moon, bowed, and passed on. It was only a little cloud, but the world looked very blank to the lonely man when the light of the moon was gone. The little path was so narrow, and it was not easy in the dark, and he went very carefully for fear of treading on the wheat.

And all the bad old times seemed to come trooping back, crowing in glee, hemming him round, and taking terrible vengeance for his long neglect.

Desmond saw himself a boy again, young for his age, and little more than Aylmer at that. He saw also the home he had made. It had not been much of a home, certainly, and the recollection made him smile, but such as it had been, well, it had been home.

“I was a young fool! I thought she loved me, I was absolutely confident! A cocksure, damned young fool, indeed!”

And now, vividly seen, as though indeed she walked in flesh beside him across the fields, glided the pale, dark-eyed girl. He knew again the scent of that chestnut hair, he could look into the depth of those violet eyes, mark the grace of a perfect form that could only belong to one slim girl. Hers was beauty that had nothing to do with prettiness. It was exotic, exquisite; of a charm and perfection that were very potent, and very potent because so artless and unconscious. Again she went beside him through the fields, and after all these years, unchanged,

unchangeable. She walked cheek by jowl beside him; he could feel her breath, hear her little breathing sighs. There she was going with the same old gliding walk, the same musical rhythmic stride, keeping equal pace with him, step by step.

Beautiful! Beautiful exceedingly! And even after meeting and mixing with many lovely Mrs. Pallisers, and famous Lady Flintshires, Desmond confessed not one of them could equal the ghost at his elbow, pacing silently beside him, step by step, touching his sleeve with hers, so close was she, yet unaware his thought had summoned her.

She was all-excelling, born, surely, of music and the sun. Yet woman also, woman to love, to hold if you could, but certainly to love, with a heart to respond, a brain to spur, a body to embrace, two lips to kiss, and eyes, oh! those eyes that held, enticed and tantalised!

Desmond felt again the thrill of the boy who first kissed those red lips, pressed that ruddy chestnut hair between his hands, and closed those eyes with kisses; nor in those early days was the boy lover quick enough to see how Eve met Aphrodite in those eyes.

Out there they were again in her father's garden, and her arms were round him, and she whispered—well, what boy lovers most desire to hear.

It is all so real, surely it must all be happening over again.

This could not be the teeming rich fields of Sussex, but was surely the dirty, prosaic, laurel-girt garden on the outskirts of a flat and sordid town? While they two, he, tall, athletic, goodly to the eye, and she, radiant in the light of a beauty even then compelling, stood once

more together. Ah, but he had felt so sure of her, and thought the garden Paradise itself.

* * * * *

The little path back across the meadow and up through the wheat was surely very steep to-night. He went alone now, and rested on that same stile where lately he and Fell had sat.

“Margaret, with your traditions, your lofty ideals, Catholic creed and conservative heart, you are, I think, a little severe, yet comprehending. Yes, without doubt, of most excellent and sympathetic understanding, but still Catholic, trained, governed, dominated by your creed!”

Kind she cannot help but be, but kindness is but little of itself. To be of any use it needs to be woven in a stronger mesh. Horrified, assuredly, and maybe resentful too! Yes, resentful to have so repellent a story told her.

“Yet if she loves me, ah, Margaret, but do you love? And is your love great enough to dare? There will be a hard battle for you. A battle with love, power, joy, freedom, light, and bigotry, creed, darkness, convention, fighting, hurtling together, and bruising, smashing the gentle heart they fight across. Margaret, who conquers? The eternal or finite? The immortal or mortal? Is life, God’s immeasurable gift, to be stifled? Life, that endless thing? Who conquers, Margaret? Who conquers?”

* * * * *

He passed through the little belt of trees out into the lane, and then, drawn with great desire, gazed up the short avenue towards her house, for though she was in-

deed far away yet something of her might linger there? And, standing thus, he thought, and thought, and thought, stared and thought.

Minutes passed, quarters, half hours; still was he there, gazing towards her home, for though she was far away something of her must linger there and would surely come to him.

Thoughts came crowding, long refused admittance, pushed aside, thwarted and strangled, now they herded in his heart; thoughts of love for this woman, thoughts of home and happiness, panting, hurrying they came.

Yet the night was silent to all the world; the little hamlet lay perfectly still, and the inhabitants of the cottages and farms rested in sleep, all things were very quiet while the unseen worlds vibrated to the throbbing reverberation of the strife. Unseen, unheard, the battle raged in Heaven: all good, all evil clashed. Inextricable confusion reigned, till suddenly, quite suddenly, a great calm fell, the warfare ended, and only a strain of music seemed trailing in the air.

* * * * *

It was very late. Swiftly he went home, swiftly and softly up the path, opened the door and glided in, firmly set and at last decided.

* * * * *

And all the world outside was white in the moon. No sign of conflict, no trace of mental battle, the crashing of theories, of creeds, the struggle of unseen armies in the air. The principalities and powers had fled, and only

the white moon looked down with hard, unsympathetic, cruel eyes.

She looked like a beautiful, amorous woman; a pale-eyed courtesan on blue velvet cushions, criticising her reflection in a glass.

V

SOME people there are acutely reminiscent of shop windows. I refer to those highly ornate and, to give them their due, effective arrangements that (because of their infinite variety) custom cannot stale or time get a chance to wither.

Augusta was such a one and ever kept her windows bright and smart.

She was, moreover, a perfectly contented woman, inundated with invitations to all the best houses; also to most of the *smartest*; not always quite the same thing.

These had come her way further back than she cared to remember; and she trusted they would continue till she departed for lands where, she understood, entertaining took a more serious form.

It pleased her to find herself still in the running. Loins girt, head up, elbows in, a little blown, perhaps, a little strained and panting, but still running gamely on. But there was always another lap and it was so long since she first started that she had quite forgotten what the prize was she was running for.

It is a safe rule to go by that only rich people can afford ingratitude, and another good axiom is this, that only the poor can afford to appear rich.

In self defence, wealth is forced to ape poverty or it ceases to be wealth.

Dives says he is sure "a moderate income is the highest happiness." Whereupon Lazarus offers to change places. Then Dives says he would not feel justified in shoving his responsibilities upon another's shoulders. Lazarus replies with something about the duty of bearing one another's burdens, but Dives closes the conversation by muttering "we should all do our duty in that state of life, etc., etc.," and remarks that Lazarus must see the new Rolls Royce.

And which of them really "pals up" with life? That boisterous, full-blooded young fellow, always quarrelling with his invalid step-brother, Existence.

The same holds good of Truth and Compromise. They quarrel so terribly whenever they meet, that no one ever entertains the two together.

To the average English mind, life runs best on the rails of Compromise, and therefore, anything that creates a jar, is to be deprecated. Now Truth, like most well-intentioned people, is seldom tactful. She has a way of running out into the road and shouting; and the poor soul only grows worse with time.

Truth is seldom received other than as a poor relation. In fact she is only really welcome when she comes so disguised that nobody knows her. When she comes as her naked self, nobody knows her either, and no wonder. She is regarded in the light of a woman who has run away with a charming man from a very dull and respectable husband. No one can blame her very much; but women are mortally jealous she had such power over two men as to get one of them to marry her and the other to elope with her.

Society being an easy-going dame, so long as all goes well, says to her servants: "Do anything you like,

only don't shock me." So, as nothing is ever so great a shock as Truth, for goodness sake let us hustle the poor, unclad lunatic back to her well, and when we have got her right down to the bottom, let us roll a big stone on the top and put a sentry on the top of that so that everything be proper and respectability reign triumphant.

Lady Alaburton was all for compromise and mediocrity.

Of course she admitted certain exceptions. Lord St. Osyth was one of them. But Lord St. Osyth was very wealthy and a celebrated collector, and his peerage was acknowledged even by war profiteers; no eccentricity could undermine his status.

He had said once at a dinner party that "originality was almost a lost art, so few people possessed it, and that it took a very clever person indeed to be original, but to be original and socially successful at the same time required unique genius. Some few succeeded and spent the rest of their time trying to conceal their cleverness; while there were yet a few who succeeded so well they got mistaken for really smart people."

Augusta had laughed with the rest without in the least knowing why.

"But, dear Lord St. Osyth, don't you think ordinary folk are so much easier? They ask nothing of us, and really this is not a time to listen to those who do."

St. Osyth turned his handsome grey head and smiled.

"A certain man may yet fall among thieves," he observed. "Only nowadays the good samaritans rush by in motor cars, so can hardly be expected to notice the poor man in the ditch."

It was something of this solicitude that all should continue in the admirably conducted manner she had been

accustomed to, that so roused her interest in the situation between Katie Dalison and Aylmer Forsyth.

The law of compensation did not appeal to Lady Alaburton. She considered the best thing you could do was to be "somebody and rich," say a peer in the position of St. Osyth. To be nobody and rich was not so good, but possibly with a little tact (it is wonderful what you can do with a hundred thousand pounds and tact), matters might be mended. But to be a nobody and poor was perfectly damnable, almost as damnable as being *somebody* and poor, and quite as ridiculous.

The Duchess also thought Katie not very wise and said so. Consequently when Aylmer presented himself in Grosvenor Square as Katie (naughty girl) had almost commanded him to do, he did not receive the same welcome Her Grace extended to the "somebodies and rich."

It must be admitted number 1,004, Grosvenor Square, was a somewhat awe-inspiring mansion. It radiated an atmosphere anything but exhilarating to youthful ineligibles; there was a hush about the place, and a singular but unobtrusive splendour. The servants trod the thick carpeted ways with the air of the head of some big furniture department, conducting the visitor past priceless cabinets and antique furnishings to finally indicate "a rare specimen of fifteenth century Spanish bedstead," when the client's only need is an enamel washstand for the slavey's bedroom.

I have never ascended the marble stair of 1,004, or watched the eloquent back of the butler as he preceded my way, without wondering if the flunkeys left in the hall were grinning behind my back at some solecism in my toilet that was to me entirely unknown. If I ever doubted those great ones approved of me, I was always sure the

Groom of the Chambers did *not*. But that he gave the Duchess his full approbation, I am certain. Her Grace was in all truth suitable to her surroundings. One might not think so at first glance, when she seemed almost insignificant! But at the second look you recognised that, though she was meant to be insignificant at her birth, that admirable woman had succeeded in getting "one up" on her Maker.

She was short, with rather doubtful features, and as to figure—shall we say she had to be careful? It was how she expressed it herself, so perhaps better leave it at that. She had never been handsome, never pretty, there was nothing to distinguish her from other people. But she was distinguished from other people, most pre-eminently so. Cheated at her birth, she clutched fiercely at her one asset. What there was of her she carried magnificently. Undoubtedly she had atmosphere. In most ways she was rather a stupid woman, but in one she was all excelling. She spoke little, but owned a perfectly priceless listening manner, and that won her a reputation for being charming.

She was not altogether unaware of her limitations, and when she chanced to find herself in conversation with anyone distinguished in any particular walk of life, she confined herself so far as she possibly might to a smiling silence.

She would listen graciously, her head the least inclined, so as to lose no word, and would wear her smiling silence, which, though maybe a somewhat homely affair, was quite an attractive arrangement, anyway, when met upon a Duchess.

However, she had also in her possession quite another sort of silence and used it unsparingly should occasion

demand. It was not so much a chilling silence that froze, as a vast expanse of cold ocean that engulfed you hopelessly in the waves of oblivion. It was the most colossal thing of its kind that ever happened, and has been known to terrify the more insignificant ex-monarchs of Europe.

The little lady would look at you silently and convey, as, by some electric force, total ignorance of who you were, absolute indifference as to what you might be, wonder at the audacity that brought you into her presence, but a certainty that some act of God would shortly remove you thence.

It was with this specimen that poor Aylmer had to contend when he paid his one and only call. In after years he was a frequent guest at one thousand and four, but he was a married man then, and extremely well to do, and never did the Duchess acknowledge recognising in that "charming fellow," the audacious youth who had once stood on the holy ground of her back drawing-room carpet.

The instant she caught his name the Duchess placed him. She rose from her chair, stood still, offered a limp hand, and was silent, and at once was telephoned to the wretched youth the intelligence that if there was one person in all London who should not have dared to enter that house under any circumstances whatever, Aylmer Forsyth was most assuredly that one person.

It was all beautifully done, without rudeness or arrogance. The manner of it amounted to genius.

(After a pause.) "Have you seen Mr. Dalison lately?" Her Grace spoke with an air that suggested to have met Mr. Dalison *once* was sufficient honour for so unimportant a youth, and how he had contrived to do it again

not only beat her understanding, but was also a cause for infinite sorrow.

“Not since they returned to Fordcombe,” answered Aylmer. And then the Duchess took out her silence again and waited. She seemed to expect Aylmer to continue the conversation by himself, or to get up and go, anyway to do something less awkward than sit there till one of the servants came and wiped him up. And very likely he would have got up and run, as many a person far more conversant with Duchesses had been known to do, from that terrible presence, only Katie happened to be in the room, apparently fearless of her aunt, and smiling kindly in the background after welcoming him very prettily. The Duchess at length vouchsafed further speech.

“Aren’t you Sir Desmond Antrobus’s secretary?”

“I am one of them, yes.”

“Which one?”

“Oh, well, I hardly know, Duchess. You see, I do most of Sir Desmond’s private work.”

Aylmer could smile now, the humour of the situation began to dawn on him and he felt less like an animal torn from the wild and let loose in a dainty boudoir. As to Her Grace, she took no further interest in him at all. She managed, however, to convey her rooted conviction that if this singular person couldn’t explain which of Sir Desmond’s secretaries he was, why then, in her opinion, he had no business to be secretary at all!

Other visitors dropped in, and after a few words with Katie, Aylmer took his leave. He could have sworn the Duchess had forgotten he was in the room, and in saying good-bye had looked as though she wondered how so strange a creature had got into her house, and what the

servants could be thinking about not to have cleared it away before.

He had not called again at 1,004, Grosvenor Square. But he met Katie at many parties, and there is such a place as Ranelagh, with shady trees and pleasant ways. Further, are there not such things as occasional week-end house parties, and many another occasion which a young man can utilise if he is in love?

And he was in love, and of course Katie knew it. How could she help it? When twenty-three really falls in love and begins to regard one girl as something very special, twenty-three may be clever, but is never sufficiently clever to hide the fact from sweet and twenty.

As to the girl, that individual had not quite made up her mind. She certainly knew him better than any other man of her own generation, but knowing people well is not always a reason for being in love with them. If Aylmer asked her straight away she might find it a little difficult to answer. A girl often fancies herself in love for the strangest of reasons, and frequently denies it for reasons equally obscure.

A moonlight night, an extra good dance, someone proposing to another girl, a row at home, any one of these things coming at the psychological moment may turn the scale.

Anyhow, she thought it all great fun and Aunt Isobel, "the quaintest old thing in the world." Aunt Isobel meanwhile considered the way Aylmer constantly turned up, and in quite unexpected spots, exasperating and unnecessary. She had signified her opinion of him when he called on her, but here he was asking Katie for dances, as cool as you please, and at Flintshire House of all places. She presumed Antrobus had something to do

with it. How otherwise had Agatha Flintshire heard of young Forsyth? But there he was and apparently whole as though he had never been swamped in the terrible silence of Grosvenor Square. St. Osyth happened to be standing by and she remarked to him that young Forsyth seemed to dance very well. It worried her that he danced well. She knew her niece would never dance with a mediocre dancer, but this young man danced most unfortunately well, and Jim Aldershot and Tony Chichester had to content themselves with other partners.

She asked St. Osyth if he knew anything about Aylmer. St. Osyth was supposed to know everybody and might be able to enlighten her. But he knew nothing.

“He is evidently one of those young men one meets nowadays,” said his Lordship, “nobodies from nowhere who, as a rule, are considerably more presentable than somebodies from somewhere.”

The Duchess here smiled her pleasant smile and wandered on in her quiet even voice:

“A very nice looking young fellow, yes, one sees him about. Antrobus’s secretary.”

“Exactly,” answered St. Osyth. “His name is Forsyth, but I can’t place him. He is no relation to the Forsyths of Upton. In fact, he doesn’t seem to have any relations. Do you know where Antrobus fished him up?”

“On a rink, I believe.”

“A rink!” exclaimed his Lordship.

“Yes, quite a good one, I’m told, at Mürren you know. I understand Sir Desmond and he are almost like father and son.”

The old gentleman smiled. “Indeed,” he said, “I believe a good many people say so. The ages point to the possibility.”

“Oh,” said the Duchess. It was a very little Oh! A very small, deprecating Oh! But it conveyed volumes.

“Please don’t think I mean it’s probable. Personally I don’t credit the rumour one moment. There has never been any reason to suppose Antrobus anything but what he seems, his character stands too high, only, of course, well, it might be, you know.”

And as he spoke he screwed a glass into his eye and took a long hard stare at Aylmer, who, utterly unconscious of the interest he created, was enjoying himself hugely.

The Duchess also took a look. She did not believe in the relationship either. It was the first she had heard of it and she agreed with St. Osyth that Antrobus’s reputation stood far above such trivial gossip.

Still she could not help observing some faint resemblance in Aylmer to Desmond. So slight was it that she thought it could only have been born of St. Osyth’s remark.

“Are people saying that sort of thing?” she asked, as the dance over, she watched Katie and Aylmer go out of the room.

Lord St. Osyth looked bored, the subject did not interest him. “Dear Duchess, there has never been any suggestion that Antrobus is anything but the childless widower he appears—only—seeing his interest in the youth, some people, not of much count, wonder.”

“It’s strange he doesn’t marry again. I should have thought a man in his position would have required a wife of his own.”

The Duchess spoke of a wife as though she were an electric light fitting needed to brighten the house.

“Perhaps he prefers to borrow one. It’s probably more exciting if a trifle more expensive.”

The Duchess again smiled her little smile and remembered the gentleman who had spoken was himself reputed the greatest authority in London on the relative cost of his own wife and someone else’s.

At that same moment Augusta Alaburton sailed up. She had been down to supper and, on returning to the ballroom, had passed Katie and Aylmer in one of those cosy little sitting out places that were surely not intended by Lady Flintshire for heiresses to share with impecunious young men.

“How charming Katie looks to-night,” said Augusta. “I’ve just seen her with young Forsyth. Very well indeed, she looks, only the wee-est bit tired.”

“We ought to be going, and I promised to look in at Alicia Suffolk’s! Would you find my niece and tell her we are going?”

It was to a young man the Duchess spoke, who happened to be on tap. She had no idea who he was, but she presumed that he knew her and consequently her niece. Anyway he was a disengaged young man and therefore “something” to be made use of.

As a matter of fact the young man did know her by sight, and Katie a very little personally, but he was a sympathetic youth, and, passing by the alcove, saw nothing.

“What do you think about it?” Lady Alaburton asked St. Osyth, as the Duchess crossed the room to speak to some friends, who were sitting on a hard bench trying to look as if they enjoyed it.

“I never think. If I did I should have no time to notice anything.”

“Why don’t they put their foot down? Who is he? Who are his people?”

“I don’t think he’s got any—happy youth!”

“He must have people. A mother who’s delicate and lives in Italy. That’s nothing! I thought I knew all the invalids who live abroad,” she added in a way that implied she was genuinely aggrieved at knowing nothing of Mrs. Forsyth.

Now St. Osyth eyed his fair neighbour with more than usual interest. “Do you really? What an amusing set of acquaintances you must have. I’ve always understood the invalids who live abroad are too shocking for words.”

“Nonsense,” cried Lady Alaburton. “They know all the world and give the best dinners.”

St. Osyth nodded. “You destroy my last illusion. I thought them the most interesting of sinners. Those who, as you say, know all the world but are not called upon by his wife. So the boy’s mother lives in Italy, does she? Lucky woman! Someone said somewhere the most amusing people preferred supper to dinner, and though one dines better in Paris, Italy is ideal for supper.”

VI

AND meanwhile the interesting young people were sitting contentedly together, quite oblivious to what anyone might be saying about them. If they were love-making, it was a very silent and quiet form of that ancient art, but, very possibly, none the less efficient for that.

Forsyth felt it very delightful in that small intimate little alcove; delicious to feel the fragrance of her, and the dainty presence of her youth. Such intimacy was most refreshing, though rather inclined to go to the head.

And the thought grew strongly within him how very pleasant it would be to have such an one to look after; and to love or, should the mood take her, be ordered about by her in that pleasant proprietary way he thought so singularly charming.

Katie wondered at his silence, when normally he had plenty to say.

“A penny for them. What is it?”

“You’d spend a dreadful lot of pennies. I’m full of thoughts and can’t decide what to talk about first.”

“Let’s talk about ourselves then. Any news of your mother lately?”

“Funny you should ask that. I had a long letter only to-day.”

“How is she?”

“Top-hole, thanks. Isn’t it quaint? She doesn’t like my being Sir Desmond’s secretary.”

Katie looked up in a very genuine and natural surprise. "Whatever for?"

"She doesn't give any explicit reason. But she never liked my meeting him. In fact, she's urged me again and again to have nothing to do with him. I didn't dare tell her I'd become his secretary for quite a long while, and now she's written a long remonstrance—says she knows things against him."

"What sort of things?"

"That's just what she doesn't say. She's probably heard some cock and bull bit of scandal. Even a man like Antrobus can't go through the world without making enemies."

"But Sir Desmond! It's absurd!" Katie was a loyal little soul and was at once in arms on her friend's behalf.

"Of course if your mother knew him she'd never believe anything against him."

"She's quaint, you know. Can't bear a word of scandal. Rather like Miss Dalison that way. They've both the same clear thought of right and wrong. Then she lives awfully quietly; doesn't know the world; and besides, you see, I'm an only child so she still thinks me a kid and liable to be influenced for the bad. She writes very much as I expect your aunt would under similar circs."

Katie began to wonder what it must feel like to have such a mother. It was curious they were both only children; the one fatherless and the other motherless.

"I suppose you don't remember your father any more than I remember my mother?"

"No," answered Aylmer, in a very different voice to Katie's somewhat wistful tone. "I asked about my father once—but only once—she told me he was dead. She

could hardly bear to speak of him. He must have been a howling cad. I couldn't ask her again, even after all these years the thought of him was too much for her."

The distant music swelled up from below and entered the room where they sat, soft with shaded lights and the roses and carnations with which Lady Flintshire had strewed her stairs and corridors, and slung across doors and ceilings.

"I don't know why I should bore you with all this," said Aylmer. "But you said let's talk about ourselves. It's up to you now. Go ahead."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything! When are you going home to start with? I was down there the other week, and that priceless old dear, Mrs. Corner, thought you must be longing for 'a breath of air' and couldn't think how we existed 'all pent up together.' "

"How delicious of her, and not so far wrong either."

Then Katie asked after certain concerns of her own: dogs and horses, and hunting prospects; also there was a newly taken-in bit of park which a famous garden architect had long urged her father to make into a garden.

"Is it really like the picture Mr. Fraser made? I wish I could go home to-morrow and see it," said Katie.

"You'll miss all this. By the way, don't you want to dance?"

"Not just now, thanks."

Katie knew she had partners waiting and that it was rude to break her promises, but when one is talking about really interesting things it is a pleasure to forget one's duty.

Theirs can scarcely be called a romantic affair. But the passionate youth who woos with the ardour of a Byronic

hero has faded, along with coy maidens, out of existence. A few may linger—hanging on to the ropes of romance like strap-hangers on the tube, but for the most are they gone where the valentines of February 14th lie unburied and unsung.

But do not think that our two delightful young things were altogether without sentiment. Far from it. But a man of twenty-three and a girl of nineteen cannot be expected to realise the half of what is going on inside them. It is enough that they feel something pleasant and titillating.

So if Aylmer and Katie appear rather cold and in effect very ordinary young people, well—that is just exactly what they are. Two ordinary, but rather charming and well-bred people you may run up against any day and almost in any place.

But the poor Duchess has been waiting a long time in expectation of her Mercury's return with the errant niece in tow. He did come eventually, wearing the guileless look of Noah's dove when he brought that bit of green to decorate the Ark. He was of course "awfully sorry, Duchess, but he had been quite unable to find Miss Dalison anywhere." Thereupon her Grace dispatched a second emissary and bade him tell Katie that she was going for her cloak.

This second Ambassador had been hanging about for some time in the hope of getting that dance, long overdue, that Katie had promised him. He was one whom the Duchess delighted to honour; he was about twenty-seven, an age Her Grace considered a most suitable one at which a man should marry. But had Aldershot been even ninety-one she would have felt even that period of adolescence equally suitable. For the young man was

extremely rich, of the real old peerage and, in the eyes of all female Europe, a most desirable match.

Then he was Catholic, and, though she had no religion of her own, the Duchess quite realised the advisability of starting wedded life with some sort of mutual religion. Wise woman! It is better to have no creed at all than to marry on too many. Few are great enough to forgive another his creed, or understand the reason of his belief.

Aldershot had none of the sympathetic scruples of his predecessor. He set out to look for Miss Kate with every intention of finding her, and did so pretty quickly, carrying her straight back to her chaperon, who in her turn carried her off to Lady Suffolk's. The Duchess also carried off Lord Aldershot. She *called* it "giving him a lift," but it would have been nothing short of sheer rape had he not himself been so eager to go.

Perhaps this was the beginning of a little warmer feeling for the poor lover, left behind amongst Lady Flintshire's green plants, than Katie had ever felt before. And she snubbed poor Aldershot so that he felt like a worm before it turns.

The Duchess, however, was more or less content; a little snubbing wouldn't do this rich and pampered young man any harm. He was much too spoilt by mothers and their daughters, as it was, neither did he appear to resent Katie's treatment of him; on the contrary, it seemed to have a most admirable effect.

So she stayed a little longer at Lady Suffolk's than her "just looking in" might have suggested. She stood in the door and watched the dancers, as she had stood and watched night after night that season; listening with her little smile when anyone came up and spoke to her; but in reality giving only the slightest attention to what was

being said, yet earning credit all the while for a most attentive and charming listener.

And Aylmer went home to his rooms, lit his pipe, and began wondering what would happen were he to ask that dear girl to marry him.

If he wanted to take this young girl, hitherto so sheltered, so tenderly, lovingly, guarded, the spoilt darling of her own set into his own life, what had he to offer?

He looked round at his simple, unpretentious rooms; he recalled his pleasant but hardly palatial cottage, and the exchange hardly seemed fair.

He knew his mother was very well off, almost rich he believed, and would be ready and delighted to increase his allowance, nor would she miss the extra amount she gave him. But there were other obstacles he had never thought about before, but now they stood up before him on their hind legs and grinned at him derisively.

“Good Lord! What credentials have I to give? Who on earth am I? What family do I belong to? Have we no relations? No history in the world. Are we so utterly alone—we two—I and the mater? And a nice pleasant gentleman my father must have been! The Squire would naturally jump at the connection; any father of a girl like that would,” he finished off bitterly.

VII

WHOEVER voiced the great truth that, whereas it is easier to pray for our enemies than our friends, but our relations are past praying for under any circumstances, would have been quite unsympathetic to Aylmer's desire for something in the way of a relation, even to a cousin of the most Scottish degree.

Marriages are, we know, made in Heaven, and presumably Providence is so busy arranging these affairs that no time is left for the proper supervision of the results.

But the good intentions of Heaven are the devil's opportunities.

However, Heaven sometimes brings off a coup, and when the devil's asleep a man and woman win the Happy Marriage Stakes. Nor is this so very occasional, for the dear old gentleman is getting on in years, and people are not only no longer frightened of him, but even laugh at him. And ridicule can kill the devil as well as other things—anyway in France, and he was always considered French on the mother's side, that is, in England.

And so Aylmer sat in his room, pipe out, not thinking of bed, visioning estimable and fascinating relations, living respectably in houses as old and long-possessed as Fordcombe, rising with one accord to call him blessed. But except for his maternal grandfather he could call none to mind.

This one relative had seemed a very old man; also a

very silent one. Aylmer recollected a dreary, tiresome journey; and the house he and his mother had finally reached as singularly sunless and dull. He only remembered grave, serious people, and a gauntness about everything that hurt his child's mind and took away any desire to run about and laugh. But the curious change in his mother had been what most impressed him. She had appeared strangely shy, almost diffident.

As to his own father, tears stood in the boy's eyes as he remembered how bravely his mother had braced herself to tell him "everything he ought to know because he had the right to hear." But she had begged that once the subject was closed it should never be re-opened between them. Little she had revealed, but that little had been almost more than she could bear to tell.

Darling and best of mothers! Where is another like you?

Girls, of course, were another and different matter. Aylmer never thought to make comparison between Katie and his mother. He loved the girl as the mate he desired to take unto himself while his mother would ever remain *the woman* to whom he owed an almost unpayable debt, and that very debt—since it was unpayable—formed something of inequality in their relations.

Thus he came to the real cause of all the success and happiness he had won in his short life—the early training his mother had given. And all unconsciously by using the past "had," he put his mother a little in the background. Her work complete—it was time for him to go on alone, or not alone, as Fate decided.

But how he meant to repay her some day! To give her proof beyond contention—that all she had done so heartily had been well worth the doing.

How tolerantly she had borne with him! How wisely she had corrected him! With what tact she had led him out of boyhood into manhood!

Beautiful, graceful woman! Could you have seen into your boy's heart at that moment you would have understood how cordially he recognised all that your motherhood had been to him those first three and twenty years of his life.

* * * * *

Her last letter lay beside him on the table, the same letter he had mentioned to Katie only an hour or so ago at Flintshire House. He read it again, and with deeper understanding, keener insight. It began, as her letters always had begun, "My darling Boy," and from beginning to end but one thought ran through the whole, one object alone was in sight—the ultimate success, the lasting happiness of "my darling boy." And something he gathered of the spirit pleading in silence, telling the pathos of mother love, so strong in its weakness, so tender in its pride, and as he read he felt a truer wisdom, a keener vision, a firmer sense of independence. Yet he knew that something very fair had gone from him. For now he was more of a man, and in becoming more of a man he had also become a little of a judge.

The freer life of the past year, the intercourse with men and women of the big world, but above all, the new-found love for a woman (that great revelation only once to be revealed in life), and all the subtleties that appertain to marriage, these things took him from boyhood into manhood at one leap.

So, as he read his mother's letter, he weighed arguments; he saw fallacies, and the result of the whole could

be summed up in the one word, judgment. Aylmer had never felt more truly, tenderly, solicitous; only the simple trust, the ready careless acquiescence of his youth, had gone from him for ever.

He picked up the letter again, and read till he came to the passages about Antrobus, and then he noticed that, definite as her warning was she yet brought no particular charge against him. It almost seemed as though she had expected instant obedience, prompt submission to her greater knowledge and wider experience without any questioning, and Aylmer for the first time in his life found he was criticising his mother, weighing her arguments and finding them a little wanting.

“She doesn’t realise my luck, that I’m just beginning to get my nose in!”

And as he spoke there crept in unto him yet a little further a new, strange sense of protection. No longer dependent on his mother, constantly in the presence of a personality so commanding as Desmond’s, meeting with others of like character, much of their influence, their force and authority had been absorbed by his own mentality, and he felt a wider knowledge and a deeper experience was his than could be known to the gentle, anxious woman, so placid and unemotional in her life.

Yet while he pronounced sentence, he placed a halo and a crown upon her, and in some way, not quite to be defined, she seemed to stand more in need of his love than ever.

And the letter that had been so carefully read but a moment back fell to the ground, unheeded, and with all its incomparable love lay there forgotten, while Aylmer glanced into a wonderful book that was both new and very beautiful, for Katie was the heroine and he the hero,

and the course of true love ran smoothly, even as the streams of Fordcombe.

But at length the full sun stood forth, and the watcher turned sleepy though not tired to bed. Much had been taught him, and never could he be just what he had been before the lesson learnt in the early hours in that quiet little room.

* * * * *

Yet down in the south, in the land of flowers, and not far from the warm, clear sea, a woman sat planning a happy career for her son through the help of certain kindly influential folk. She made no doubt that he would come, she had even begun to count the days until she could have him again all to herself.

Undoubtedly a very lovely woman, and Aylmer had not exaggerated in his description. And the man who sat beside her, and bent somewhat with a proprietary air towards her, was clearly of the boy's opinion. What a delicious turn of the head! What a bewitching smile she lighted on her companion, and with what a soft little laugh she answered to his questions! You would never credit she had a lad of twenty-three.

At length she rose, and walked the full length of the terrace till she reached the house, and the man turned to watch her pass and see how graciously she went as one born moving gracefully before crowds. Hers was not merely the beauty of feature. There was a magic of movement and a charm about her that would remain when all else had gone.

Yes, it was a rare woman! Beautiful, vital, distinguished too. Only Aylmer had made one great mistake—he had underrated her judgment.

That woman on the terrace was quite capable of forming a correct opinion, nor would she have spent her energy warning Aylmer against Antrobus had she not known of some very adequate reason.

VIII

THE great difficulty in telling a story about people in divers parts of the world is the discursiveness in which the good folk indulge. While A goes rambling down the lane, B takes a short cut across country, and C—whose company we seek with tears—has whirled away over our heads in an aeroplane and is coquettishly landing in some unknown spot.

And now, behold! even the Dalisons, from whom one might expect some consideration, have packed up their trunks and gone off to Fordcombe; while Fell has chosen that very moment to pack his bag and run up to town!

The very first morning he was free he called on the eminent firm, Messrs. Dunstable, Ronalds and Willoughby, and informed them how Sir Desmond (who knew nothing of his wife's history after her departure) was now anxious to learn if he could get his freedom at this late hour.

But surely it is this very wife herself who demands more attention than an occasional and a casual reference to her existence?

But Desmond's wife is surely a wraith from another world? Well, I'm not so certain, she seems very real at the present moment. So real, indeed, that she can hold a very real mirror, and, with a smile so delightful we hope that too is real, she looks upon us as she bids us gaze into the mirror that we may learn what she has been doing

all this time. But I must warn you, we shall be far from the fragrance of roses and lavender, and very remote indeed from the settled order and dignity of such people as the Duchess of Hampshire, Lord St. Osyth, or even Augusta, Lady Alaburton.

If we see money lavished, it will not be the controlled and disciplined spending we met with at Flintshire House. But we shall see splendour and some extravagant settings and, if we find ourselves occasionally blushing at what we see, I will hope that while *I* understand you do not. And you, of course, will hope just the same about me.

Let us therefore begin, and so, step by step, come to the present moment, and thus on and down to the inevitable conclusion that must be when the human will sets itself up in defiance against the immutable.

And yet how extraordinarily fascinating are these same who defy the laws! How we secretly long to have but one quarter of their courage, one fraction of their audacity. There is surely something fine about rebellion. The sheep huddle contemptibly in their folds, but the "fiery untamed steed" races over the plain.

Desmond and his wife married at an absurdly youthful age and their mutual stock of capital had chiefly consisted of ardour and enthusiasm. Unfortunately, all this efficiency, instead of behaving nicely and uniting the young people, only served to pull them in opposite directions.

While he had been a boy undergoing the literary phase, so common to very young men, she had been longing to enter the world of riches and revel in luxury and plenty.

Why, then, did she choose so impecunious a bridegroom? Well! the lovely lady will give the true answer: "Just because I was in too great a hurry."

Poor child! At nineteen she had been in a very desperate hurry—and with all the strength of nineteen had battled madly, and ever silently—to get out of her poor, middle-class surroundings and into a wider, softer, more affluent life, a life, though unknown to her experience, vivid and quick to her understanding.

In their early days of courtship, Desmond would occasionally speak of certain of his relations, and Jessica very quickly discovered how enviably wealthy those same relations were; and what a very important position Messrs. Hobbs and Antrobus's firm held in the city.

Some fleeting glimpse had been caught by her of the glories displayed by the ladies of the house. She had read of a certain Hon. Mrs. Tom Antrobus, and her presence at sundry big parties. Nor was the firm loath to let the world at large know what excellent wares it had to sell. The very name smelt of money, and to Jessica's nostrils the scent had a very pleasant savour.

Later on she discovered "Cousin Hugh," the head of the firm, to be not only Desmond's cousin, but also his godfather, and—as though that were not enough—a bachelor and extremely attached to his erratic relation; nay, he had even made certain overtures to young Desmond which fairly dazzled the poor girl who only knew the rigours and restrictions of a poor, provincial rectory. Can you blame her if she cried: "Here is a chance not to be missed if it is going abegging?" When Desmond talked of books and his own ambition, Jessica would say: "Once his wife, I'll soon see those old manuscripts burned."

And thus she straightway broke one of the immutable laws, never thinking it would one day join together and prove a rod for her own back.

And what of Desmond's own family? What had they to say to this early marriage with an impecunious nobody?

Well, there had been much wagging of heads and dire bodings in a family conclave between the various members of the Antrobuses and the Hobbs. Desmond was voted a fool, and the presents his relations gave him when he married sufficiently expressed their opinion of him. Not one of them felt called upon to attend the wedding, or to take any notice of the young people when they came to live in town.

Here, however, Cousin Hugh had spoken with no uncertain voice. He announced that a family dinner party must be given in honour of the young bride, and a certain Aunt Elinor had agreed with him.

"Of course it is very sad that dear Desmond should have thrown himself away and given up all his prospects, but, after all, the boy has not married a barmaid and if you wish it, dear Hugh, it shall be done."

"It is only the proper thing, Elinor. Besides, we all want to see what the girl is like."

"We are not obliged to see much of her," said Aunt Elinor, in her comfortable, purring voice. "I hear she's lived at Towchester all her life."

For that matter Aunt Elinor had lived in Chester Square all her life, but she would have told you Chester Square was not close to anything that she was aware. Jessica would have answered that she knew very well what it was close to, and very intimately allied with; in fact, to her mind the two places were synonymous, but to have mentioned the name of this latter place—which possesses but one syllable and not many more letters—would have shocked Aunt Elinor who had only read of

it in the Bible—and Jessica would never dream of shocking anyone who might be useful.

“I want to see her,” said young Mrs. Tom. “These sort of freaks are always amusing if taken in homeopathic doses. Do ask them, Aunt Elinor, and Tom and I will come too.”

Mrs. Tom made this gracious offer with the kindly air of a great lady. She was a pretty little woman and knew it. She was a smart little woman and knew *that*. In fact, she was the one real star in the family. Greatly had Tom Antrobus risen in the esteem of his family when his engagement had been announced to Lord Ashurst's younger daughter. For though the firm was of old standing and the members thereof were wealthy, yet for one of those curious reasons so hard to define, the Antrobus family had remained obscure. Possibly they were too respectable.

Perhaps they hadn't quite enough money, perhaps they didn't care. Whatever the reason, there they were—somewhat like Mahomet's coffin, swaying between two worlds.

As Mrs. Tom seconded the proposal it was passed unanimously; but do not think that Aunt Elinor or Cousin Hugh were snobs. They were far too kind-hearted and simple. And after all, it is preferable to have connections born in the best bedroom to those who saw the light first in one of the attics, say what you will.

Aunt Elinor sighed a little as she looked at this pretty, self-assured and well turned-out young person.

“If only Desmond had waited. He is better bred and pleasanter than Tom. He too might have made a good match,” and then, as she caught Hugh's eye, “What he might have done for Desmond,” thought she.

“What he can do for Tom,” thought that gentleman’s wife.

It was whispered in the family that Cousin Hugh had once been in love with Desmond’s mother, and for her sake had never married, and that was the reason of his affection for his godson. Perhaps Aunt Elinor knew something of the truth. She was a romantic lady and always particularly cordial to the old bachelor who loved to sit in her pretty, comfortable drawing-room and look at the portrait of Desmond’s mother over the fireplace, at least, that is the impression I got from Miss Antrobus, who told me once: “Hugh always sat in a particular arm-chair whence he could see the picture in a good light.”

So the old gentleman beamed on Mrs. Tom and thought after all she had a kind heart, and was more than the piquante little person he had taken her to be.

Yes, Cousin Hugh, but you and your kind are always the victims of “piquante little women.” They twist you round their fingers and turn you inside out and put you back again—just as you were—all so quickly you never discover what’s been done to you.

Did you really think Mrs. Tom cared the least for Desmond or had the smallest desire to behold the new bride?

Was it not to her interest to gratify you? And as your heart seemed set on a family party, well, by all means you should be humoured. Also, dear sir, you will see how irretrievably Desmond has done for himself, and you shall sit through a whole dinner next to his plain, uninteresting, badly-dressed wife.

Oh, Mrs. Tom could picture the party in advance. Kindly host trying (and failing utterly) to put at ease the nervous, nondescript-haired, young person, whose one

idea of dress was economy, and who sat fidgeting with her bread, painfully upright, an apologetic smile on her unpowdered face. She will grow duller and duller (in spite of dear little Mrs. Tom's patronising endeavours to draw her out). Conversation will languish till it faints with the sweets and dies agonisingly amidst the peaches and grapes.

And then, after dinner, when the men—dimly aware all is not well—shall have joined the ladies, oh, then they will take refuge in a little music!

“Haven't we heard you play the violin? You *have* brought it? Oh, good!”

And dear, busy, bustling little Mrs. Tom (who is so sweetly trying to make things “go”) will hurry away to fetch it, and they will all listen to “dear” Jessica's music. (“Gounod's ‘Ave Maria’ or Raff's ‘Cavatina,’ I should expect. Can't I hear her amateurish, squeaky tones, and see her red elbows!”)

And when Jessica shall have finished her squeaking, then they will all clap their hands and cry “How sweet!” and Mrs. Tom (who is an admirable pianist herself) will not dream of playing after that. Then, thoroughly exhausted, they will all go home.

And all these kindly thoughts, thought Mrs. Tom (dear, cheery little soul) and smiled when she remembered Cousin Hugh had a real love for music and considerable knowledge thereof. And one day quite soon after, she will send a charming little note saying she thinks the new relation “sweet” and is so sorry that “dear” Jessica and Desmond cannot dine on the third (for the simple but unmentionable reason that they have not been and never will be asked). “But won't *you* come? No party! but Lamowski has offered to bring his 'cello.”

And, dear Cousin Hugh, you will most certainly go; and you will find a charming hostess (in a new frock from Paris, but you won't know that, only that "Maud looks very well to-night") and a very cheery host as well. The dinner will be excellent. The conversation will be easy and such as will make you feel young again.

And afterwards Mrs. Tom will play (and she *can* play); Lamowski will enchant you; and, finally, when the time comes to say good-night, Maud will beam sweetly and press your hand ever so slightly, and (almost before you are out of the house) will she discuss with her husband whether or no the hour has struck wherein he should break to you that "little matter of business" he has in his mind.

And you, good, easy man, will never see the little web the clever little spider spun, nay was even spinning as you handed her bread and butter at Aunt Elinor's.

Excellent woman! Pattern wife! Unselfishly striving after your husband's good! Would there were more like you!

But could you have seen Jessica Antrobus before this meeting at Aunt Elinor's, and could you have heard her play; would you have been quite so unselfish, and so unworldly in pursuit of your husband's advancements? I wonder!

IX

BUT before the dinner came the wedding, and I must tell you about that. Jessica had decreed a very short engagement, and when her bridegroom proposed this or that person as bridesmaid or guest, she quickly but very frankly negatived any such idea.

"It's a long way for them to come," she said, "and I don't want any bridesmaid except Sophie's little girls."

But the truth had been she was in mortal terror lest the two families met, and the contrast that Desmond's folk would present to her own shabby provincial belongings had uprisen in awful menace to her eyes.

Well could she picture the greetings and efforts of her relatives to entertain the distinctly overwhelming folk from town. Well could she imagine the awkward, overdone solicitude of the elders, and the gauche advances of the younger people.

And when, on the eventful day, she found herself standing at the chancel steps, and caught sight of her relations and their hats, well, she was more than ever thankful to have kept as many of Desmond's friends away as she decently could.

"Fanny's white frock is quite all right," she noted, "but why has she got that heavy puce coloured velvet hat? It quite swamps her small features which are rather pretty."

She longed to snatch the velvet complication off little

Fanny's head and change it for Aunt Methusaleh's girlish straw.

Aunt Methusaleh herself, shrill, skimpy and skittish, beamed and enthused on one and all. She talked, she ordered about! She inquired after absent relatives and waxed eloquent over the bridegroom's literary gifts!

"A genius, dear Jessica assures me. So interesting, you know."

Yes, I think Jessica showed wisdom in confining the invitations to as few of her relatives as possible.

The angels must laugh sometimes, or they would be for ever weeping, and the devil gets a lot of quiet amusement out of the celestial spheres, but I rather think he pities poor humanity upon the whole.

I'm sure he was sorry for Jessica and tried his best to make her life gayer; but that's all in the future, and we are still at the wedding, with Desmond nervous at the chancel, and the guests in the church all nodding and beckoning as they recognise each other dotted about.

And what a church! Nothing there to brighten the eye, rejoice the heart, or raise the mind to the glory of creation. One did not feel better, but rather the worse for entering a place wherein one could not lift up the heart in gratitude or praise, but which one left with an aching head, and general sense of depression.

But what is the light coming up the aisle from the open west door, as the choir comes slowly on singing "The voice that breathed o'er Eden?" What magnet is this that draws every eye and causes even the unimaginative congregation to feel in the presence of some visitor from another world—a world they revere while they deprecate, and are for ever uncertain whether connection therewith is a source of congratulation or shame.

Slowly she comes, perfectly self-possessed, glorious as a young queen. Even Desmond is astonished at her beauty. He could have sworn she had grown taller. She seemed to move forward without putting one foot before the other, and when she met him, and smiled, it was as though the sun shone. A little ripple of amazement passed over the congregation, and then it settled down to the business of the afternoon.

The patron of the living had given his vicar's daughter a couple of very beautiful white Chinese shawls, and these Jessica wore for her wedding dress, draped about her after an old picture.

The frock, perfectly in place at St. George's or St. Peter's, was for that very reason utterly unsuitable to its surroundings. And the fashion of it was a cause for scandal and sniffing amongst the relatives.

But Jessica was dressing the part for a future run in town, and not the solitary trial *matinée* in the country.

In London, when dining with her husband's people, she would be expected to wear her wedding dress, and she intended to do herself credit when she dined with her husband's people.

Thus passed she through the slightly scandalised friends, acutely divided between censure and a rather gaspy admiration, but altogether united in a very disturbing sense of astonishment at such a very wonderful bride.

And it was this frock she wore at her first dinner party, and admirably it suited her. I do not mean it was a very remarkable creation (Jessica had many a more marvellous garb later on in her life); it was simple, but extremely good.

Desmond had been for putting on white waistcoat and

making a gala of the occasion, but his wife had laughingly taken it out of his hand and given him dinner jacket and black tie instead.

“They said just a few relations—no party. Don’t let them think it’s a great occasion for us. It’s all very well for me to wear my wedding dress. The dinner, such as it is, is in my honour. As a bride I’m expected to wear it. Besides, I haven’t another.”

And like the good young husband he was, Desmond had done as his wife had ordered. But he had great qualms as he followed Jessica up the stairs and passed into the softly lit and comfortable drawing-room. However, there was Tom leaning against the mantelpiece and in the same dress as himself, and Desmond felt content again.

Little Mrs. Tom did *not* wear her best frock by any means that night; but most decidedly she had taken care to choose a very becoming one. And she saw to it that they arrived in very excellent time. She considered the best rôle for her to play would be that of a kindly, delightful, but distinctly smart woman of the world. To this end she had taken special pains to be *very* simple, but *very* distinguished and, as I have hinted, she had thoroughly succeeded.

Before the chief guests arrived, she spread a gentle gaiety, a modish worldliness. She sparkled with a hundred little graces, and delighted everyone—but especially Cousin Hugh—with the charm of her company. She made herself into a delightful picture and told Cousin Hugh an amusing anecdote (quite new and not altogether unconnected with Royalty). She kissed Aunt Elinor on both cheeks and some of the others on one, and then sat on a low stool by the fire, from the blaze of which she

sheltered her carefully arranged face by a delicate little fan held in a delicate and perfectly manicured little hand.

In short, to quote her husband's own words: "She spread herself freely to one and all."

The chief guests were late, conversation slacked, eyes glanced surreptitiously at the clock. Mrs. Tom grew angry.

She felt the effect she had created was wearing off. People wanted their dinner and not her flow of small talk.

Kind old Cousin Hugh said Battersea was a long way off. Aunt Elinor wondered what could have hindered the bride and bridegroom.

Then at last a ring, and a certain thrill of excitement stirred through the party. After all, it was a bride they were expecting! And one now a member of their family. They could not altogether avoid a thrill. Mrs. Tom prepared to annihilate the foe instantly and utterly. It was to be a short, sharp frontal attack under a screen of the sweetest of smiles.

Her husband saw himself sitting next the bride at dinner and wondered what on earth he should say to a raw girl from the country. Somewhat similar thoughts engaged the minds of others, even Aunt Elinor feared the party might be a mistake; and a certain Laura Hobbs picturing Jessica's awkward apologies voted the whole affair an unmitigated nuisance.

Suddenly Mrs. Tom had a brain-wave. Was the bride late on purpose? She was an unconscionable time coming upstairs, and bashful provincialism, if it chanced to be late (which it rarely did) usually stumbled over its frock in its haste to reach its hostess. No, this was the prerogative some petted beauty permitted herself.

And in truth, Jessica had had no intention of arriving except just in time to go down to dinner. Desmond it was who fidgeted and did the apologising—when the time came.

And when it came! When at last the butler threw open the drawing-room door, with an air, and announced: "Mr. and Mrs. Desmond Antrobus" so that it became nearly a shout of "Here she is and isn't she a beauty?" Heavens! What an eclipse did one and all endure!

Little Mrs. Tom stopped dead in the middle of a sentence. Surely this was a joke? This exquisite glamorous creature was the daughter of kings, not a child from a small provincial town no one had ever heard of.

Tom straightened himself and gave a pat to his tie. Frank wondered if Towchester did much in that sort of way, while Laura frankly stared. Aunt Elinor smiled, as though a great princess had come into the room, and Cousin Hugh hastened forward with both hands extended in welcome.

And Jessica? Far from apologising for being late, she condescended to accept the excuses of Aunt Elinor for the smallness of the party and, in lieu of being nervous, appeared to Mrs. Tom's sharp eyes actually to be putting Cousin Hugh at his ease, who was blundering over some old-fashioned compliment to this incomparable young goddess so evidently—and to Mrs. Tom's mind rather blatantly—above such things.

And Jessica stood, triumphant in her beauty, receiving their homage, like some gracious deity deigning to visit the temple her worshippers had raised to her honour.

To each in turn she gave her slow, dazzling smile, on each the lovely long-lashed violet eyes rested in kindly consideration; to this one she threw a word such as

“Desmond told me of you,” and the foolish fellow felt as proud as though his sovereign had spoken to him for five minutes.

Then the shapely white hand was given to Frank, who bent over it as would a favourite at an Imperial Court. Oh! and it was all done so perfectly, so naturally. There was no effort about it. Jessica was merely herself, obviously quite unconscious of her own charm and beauty and of the sensation she created.

So easy was she that when dinner was announced and she went down with her host, she continued her ripple of conversation. Smiling over her shoulder with a gay word for the couple behind. And her success continued through the dinner. Imperceptibly she became at once, and remained through the meal, the centre of attraction.

Where and oh, where was the nervous girl who would scarcely know which knife and fork to use? Where, and oh where, the fidgety smile and the nervous crumbling of bread? Where, too, the obvious anxiety to make a good impression, and the general ill-at-ease that surely this young thing from Towchester should have exhibited?

Where, indeed, Mrs. Tom?

You may swear in your inmost heart, and you will rightly swear, that this was the very first dinner party that Jessica had ever attended in her life. You may take your oath (and with a safe conscience) that never before had she trod on such carpets, or seen such silver, eaten such food, or been waited on so deftly and silently. She had never met till now such a smart woman as yourself, to be sure; nor had she ever been bathed in such comfort and ease. It was all quite new to her; her first experience of what wealth and taste could accomplish, and it was as different from what she had been brought up to

as your own surroundings, in your old home of Ashurst, were different to those of your father's kitchen-maid.

And yet the young person accepted it all as her due, and even contrived to give an impression that she would be more at home amidst greater luxury, greater wealth, and more distinguished company.

Aunt Elinor looked on with real kindness but some anxiety. This new revelation was something quite exceptional. She had seen others with as beautiful a skin, and Jessica's features were no more delicate than, say, the famous Mrs. Palliser's; yet Miss Antrobus could recall no one who combined so much in herself, no one with so much natural charm and dignity, or who could have contrived, as Jessica had certainly done, to give the drawing-room in Chester Square that atmosphere of a throne-room, and instantaneously turn the well-placed respectable guests into humble suppliants at the foot of that throne.

From the bride Aunt Elinor looked to the bridegroom. Bright and happy was he, delighted at his wife's success.

"He is a dear lad," thought the old lady, "but headstrong and obstinate. Was he the right man for such a wife? Would he know how to guide and govern and hold his own?"

Again Miss Antrobus looked at the young wife, and this time she shook her head. There was that about Jessica that made the dear soul afraid. Something, maybe, too suggestive of sovereignty—it was very indefinite, but quite palpable.

It seemed incredible such a miracle could have happened in such a place as Towchester. Aunt Elinor began to wonder if Jessica's proper sphere was not one where Chester Square, the Antrobus family, she herself

and all of them, would seem as dowdy and humdrum as Towchester and the vicarage must appear from the more lofty heights of Chester Square.

And Mrs. Tom! Well, she did not move in the great world for nothing. She too acknowledged the beauty and authority that held them all in its grip. She too wondered if it would be content to wait till Desmond's genius wove a wreath of laurel for its brow. Looking at her, Mrs. Tom thought Jessica would probably prefer diamonds to any amount of laurel.

Then Mrs. Tom looked at the host, beaming with pride and delight on his godson's wife. Mrs. Tom bit her lip.

And when the ladies went upstairs matters—from the enemy point of view—did not much improve there. When one or two ladies began talking about their engagements with the kindly intention of making the young bride uncomfortable—that young woman simply sat silent, looking extremely lovely and apparently quite content to listen.

One cousin, greatly daring, asked horrid questions about Towchester. But Jessica soon put her in her proper place. She explained everything and spared nothing.

“The rectory is dreadfully shabby,” said the candid young lady. “The Ecclesiastical Commissioners won't do anything.” And then she turned to the parishioners and gave such amusing sketches of those odd people that she became nearly as successful in the drawing-room as she had been in the dining-room.

I don't believe she enjoyed looking back on a detested past; possibly the experience was still too recent to be seen in its proper perspective; anyway, she was very glad when the men joined them.

“And have you brought your violin, Jessica?” asked Cousin Hugh.

“Yes; do you want me to play?”

“If you will, my dear.”

And with Jessica's music away flew Mrs. Tom's last hope. This extraordinary young woman was a musician! and in her husband's godfather she had an audience who could discriminate.

For him Jessica did her best, not only because he might be useful and helpful, and not entirely because he had been very kind and she was grateful, but because she had found a brother in art, who loved her music for its own sake.

And lo! Jessica became another woman! Gone the cool sovereignty, the “something” that had puzzled Aunt Elinor, and in place thereof stood a radiant, triumphant, passionate woman—glorious in her beauty, more exquisite than before.

To a fellow artist an artist always gives his best. Jessica played, rejoicing in the discovery of such a listener as her host. At first Mrs. Tom had accompanied, but Jessica warmed by the old man's enthusiasm, played from her repertoire works Mrs. Tom felt awe at the mere mention of and could no more have played at sight than she could have jumped over the moon.

Tom and Frank and the other men knew nothing about music and cared less. What they did know and did care about was the swaying figure, the movement of the lovely arm, the tilt of the head, and the wonderful things that looked out of the violet eyes.

When the hour of good-bye came, the host arranged for another dinner and a professional to play Jessica's accompaniments. Mrs. Tom offered to call and drive her

to Ranelagh. Laura Hobbs was insistent they should lunch together and do an afternoon's shopping. In fact, the whole family tumbled over itself to honour the new relation.

And to all, Jessica returned the same smile, the same gay little word; and as she had arrived, so she departed, amidst homage and praise, laughing and glancing up the stairs to Aunt Elinor and with a last nod and look for Cousin Hugh.

A veritable Cinderella, she went home to an untidy little house in an untidy little street (and oh! how loathsome it looked on her return!) to plan and contrive, and eat her heart out and begin to wonder—yes, to wonder—whether after all she had not married in rather a hurry.

X

BUT nothing came of the famous dinner. Mrs. Tom certainly kept her word and took Jessica to Ranelagh. But she only took her once. She failed to appreciate giving a poor relation a glimpse of Paradise, only to find that obscure relative more at home there than herself, and a recipient of the most flattering attentions from the archangels.

Neither had Laura Hobbs perceived the superlative joy of shopping with a woman who drew the eyes of all beholders from herself. Nor had Jessica found it humorous helping a tasteless woman with too much cash choose expensive clothes she longed for greatly herself, but saw no chance of possessing.

The two cousins had parted at the corner of Bond Street; the one to return home in her limousine, the other in a crowded Battersea bus. Laura to dine and dance at Claridge's, and Jessica to spend the evening endeavouring to turn a frock of loathsome cut into a Parisian model.

She didn't tell Laura this, she merely remarked: "How nice! I always like Claridge's, don't you?" as though she herself went frequently. But as a matter of fact, the poor girl didn't even know the way to it.

No wonder Jessica had come home rather cross that afternoon.

Occasionally they still received invitations to some of

the relations' houses, and what a success was Jessica's then. Some of Desmond's elderly relatives feared it might "turn her head." "How should it?" Jessica would say when Desmond repeated, half in fun, what had been told him seriously. "Of course, it was quite a nice party and much better done than I expected, but it was scarcely the sort of thing to be mentioned in the papers to-morrow."

And Desmond would only laugh, remembering her life before she married him, when an occasional tennis party of the smallest description was all she had to look forward to.

But these festivities fell off in course of time. It cannot be said she gave people much encouragement to look her up. The truth being she hated that people should see her in the mangy surroundings of Battersea.

From time to time an august relative would announce his or her arrival on a certain day to tea, and that meant for Jessica endless preparations.

"Sarah," she would explain to the "girl" who waited on them, "we shall want tea the day after to-morrow for three people! Have you—er—have you a clean apron?"

"A clean apron, m-m?" quoth Sarah, as though such things were only worn by the angels in Heaven.

"Perhaps Mrs. Fletcher will give you one. But I will cut the bread and butter and—er——" But it was no use going on. She knew the teapot would be the "best," a thing of unhealthy colour, with a loose and complicated knob atop the lid.

So she did not encourage visitors, except those Bohemian friends who cared not for Sarah's delinquencies. But they were people rather too reminiscent of her former life, and in time Jessica grew to loathe the sight of them.

Thus gradually—but very surely—the Desmond Antrobuses sank to the position of poor relations.

She became twenty-two one day! And when, after about two and a half years of married life, Jessica found herself contemplating the probability of twenty-two years more (at the very least, with nothing but an undistinguished grave waiting for her at the end, well, then Jessica began to think; and sometimes to mope. It must be admitted hers was not a very alluring prospect for a lovely woman to contemplate. Twenty-two knows very well that twenty-two is getting on for twenty-five—the halfway place to the dignified port of thirty.

Now a man may remain a boy till he's eighty, because Peter Pans only belong to the male sex. But girls are only girls by courtesy after thirty. Then they become young women, and more charming than ever, and nineteen, or twenty-two or any age they like at a moment's notice.

For let a man be as old as he feels, no woman is ever as old as she looks; she will tell you so herself, and if she doesn't know, who should?

Only the other day at a party, Lady Mary Gordon Jones was heard to say that of course to grow old was very sad. "But really, you know, to look old in these days is absurdly slipshod."

And yet the other night I saw Lady Mary looking distinctly older than she could have intended when she left home that evening. Probably her maid had left something out, if so, it was certainly remembered the next evening when her ladyship looked radiantly lovely at the opera—if your glasses were not too strong.

It is simple and easy for you, good Christian that you are who read this book, to condemn our poor Jessica and

say: "She should have been content with that state of life into which it had pleased God to call her." That is a question of what you call Life.

Jessica called Life "Something of infinite possibility. To be felt and lived, not stunted and blunted and finally extinguished."

See her now, with glowing resentful eyes. It is a dangerous and ugly mood. But was she altogether blame-worthy? And she really tried her best. She ordered her husband's dinners; saw to his comfort and even tried to darn his socks. But all the time she cried "*Cui bono*—" All the time she fretted.

The barmaid type of girl would have made a "scene" and "thrown things." Perhaps it might have been the best thing that could have happened. A good fight would have led to something, and a good conflagration is infinitely better than smouldering fire.

She should have been patient? That's an easy direction to give, and one very hard of execution when you are only twenty-two. Of course, with an adequate income, and congenial surroundings, the various little pin-pricks do not count very much. The house you live in may be tiny, but it is smart. You may have but one servant, but that one knows how to open the door, and announce visitors.

Your husband may be only hanging on to success by the hem of her garment, and that elusive nymph may even succeed in slipping his grasp. What of that? Have you not in your hand a bit of her raiment?

And verily it is something to have gained even that much.

Jessica could have been patient too, had she been in the right place. But she was far from it. She had thought

it would be quite a simple thing after marriage to get Desmond to take up a business career. But in that matter he proved adamant, and insisted on having at least a fair trial. Yet the good girl could not complain that she had married in ignorance. He had explained the life he meant to live. If she chose to marry on speculation, surely she had no one to blame if the speculation didn't come off?

"I detest small means. Our whole existence is squalid and drab," Jessica would say in a moment of petulance.

Alas! Such occasions grew more and more frequent.

Desmond would reply: "You speak rather strongly, old girl. Give us a chance."

He was a very charming boy in those days. But the charm only irritated a girl who was not of an age to see the tragedy of talent misplaced. To pity and judge fairly at the same time, to resent waste and not overblame the squanderer, takes the experience and understanding of a God.

"I loathe 'buses' and the tubes are detestable. Both are filthy and hideous. Then look at our lodgings. We have two tiny rooms in a tiny house in a tiny street. Look at Mrs. Fletcher! Look at Sarah!" And this is a fair specimen of another kind of outburst Jessica would occasionally vent.

And it must be confessed that if Mrs. Fletcher was not all she might be, Sarah was most certainly all she should *not* be. She was, alas, a sad slut and gave the impression of one born in that condition, who had never found sufficient time to get out of it. She never smiled, but sometimes giggled, when the milkman or baker called and the landlady was out of the way. Occasionally—as infrequently as Mrs. Fletcher could arrange it—Sarah

had an evening off. And, Heavens! How she "offed." Desmond thought her infinitely more pathetic in her cheap finery than when he met her racing up the stairs in heel-less slippers, filthy apron, and a pail of dirty water in each hand.

So it cannot be said that Jessica lived in an atmosphere conducive to optimism.

Then she knew quite well Desmond's power did not lie in the work he had chosen. She herself was far too good a musician not to recognise a brother artist in any of art's ways. His plodding industry, his painstaking exactitude—the mere fact that he was so steadily consistent damned him. His output always came up to the same competent, undistinguished standard.

"I admit there is no reason why he shouldn't write what he does; but there is equally no reason why he should! It is just like everybody else's work."

And she would put down Desmond's last story with a sigh of relief. She was sorry for him, very genuinely sorry. She could realise, through her music, what a disappointment there was ahead for him.

"Poor boy! It's really rather pathetic." For a few minutes she would feel quite a keen heartache, and she would pick up his work again with intent to read it through. But then the critical faculty of the artist would get the better of her kindness, and down the work went, henceforth to remain so.

"However much the critics back him, and they don't I am quite sure his epitaph at the end of his life will be 'Here lies Desmond Antrobus who also ran.' "

Which remark shows she had some glimmer of humour.

Jessica knew the harm critics could do. She also

realised that when it came to a question of genius, criticism counted for little in the end. Genius has a way of standing up and shouting, till it gets a crowd around that listens, and who cares for critics then?

And then considerable blame attached to Desmond. He obstinately stuck to a job for which he had no talent, while the talent he really possessed he allowed to rust. On the other hand he was young, and believed in himself. Perhaps he had scarcely had time to discover his mistake. And this was the first, and perhaps the greatest mistake of all, and Jessica had much reason on her side when she argued whether "The wife with a meagre income and a husband contentedly plodding a road he should never have entered, had a really happier time than she, who had all the world could give, but a husband who kept half a dozen mistresses?"

Oh, Jessica, Jessica, what are you thinking as you sit in your stuffy little room, what time the shrieks of the landlady in the full glow of some quarrel with poor Sarah ascend to your chamber? Is it not better to be respectable and uncomfortable than lapped in ease but also ungodly?

And you look so sweet and good sitting there in your usual place by the fire. The firelight just touches your face and there is no other light in the room.

"Is that sort of husband worse than mine in his way? Both live selfishly. The only difference I can see is that the man I picture lives selfishly but successfully, while Desmond lives selfishly but unsuccessfully."

Oh, Jessica, what are we to do with you? But she heeds us not and lets the thoughts flow on.

"As for love, neither of them knows what love is. Dull acquiescence on the wife's part, selfish indulgence on the man's are not my ideas of love. No, the woman is

merely resigned, like I am, and love is never resigned. Neither is it always happy. How can it be when it's forever seeking impossible heights? Were Paolo and Francesco happy? Romeo and Juliet resigned? Tristram and Yseult?"

By which we see Jessica has not only discovered disappointment in her marriage, but also that something more is wanted than "liking" before one can be happy. And this she thought was especially true if you lived in a horrid little house in Battersea.

This is not the place for discourse upon love, but surely the happiest love is that which contains some elements of worship?

Mary sat at the feet of her master because her love was mixed with adoration. While she loved she also worshipped, and probably her worship was greater than her love. In her gentle way she felt that to learn was her mission when the Master called.

She knew and believed. I sometimes wonder if Martha quite believed, but I am certain she did not know.

Did He who could divide five loaves and two small fishes so as to appease the hunger of five thousand, have any need that Martha should fuss about her larder? She prided herself on her housekeeping and, no doubt, with justice, only—as so often happens—the Guest came at an inopportune moment. She was busy with the washing of some fine damask clothes and had not looked for visitors.

So she bustled about, nettled that Mary did not offer even to lay the cloth, surprised that He, usually so considerate, did not chide the younger sister for leaving all to the elder, but most of all was she upset because she

had been taken unawares and her reputation for house-keeping was threatened with eclipse.

Forgive this quaint digression! Otherwise we had best part company at once, for I'm sure to do it again! It is almost inevitable, you know, in any history that attempts to state more than a few bald facts.

Had Margaret and Desmond met in their early youth it is quite likely they would have fallen in love; he might have gone on writing for magazines so long as he was able, and she would most certainly have continued worshipping all her days.

She was not a luxury lover. The thoroughbred aristocrat seldom is. And she would have been quite content to wait. I think she would have contrived better than Jessica; she would have found rooms somewhere in not too terrible a neighbourhood and have put something of her own fastidious nature into them.

Above all, she would never have been made to see that he only "also ran." Indeed, she would almost have persuaded him that he came in second, and very nearly first.

Of course, Desmond's powers put continually to a wrong use, would finally have folded their wings, and have crept stealthily away weeping that so fine an instrument was lost to them. And then he would have looked at Margaret wondering if, in her secret soul, she did not recognise his futility.

But how could she have a secret soul from the man she loved? So he would have had to play up to her and go on with his mistake; patch and contrive and pretend he would surely win next time (while inwardly he had long ago acknowledged that the prizes of the race would never be his).

But Desmond did not meet Margaret when they were

both young and pliable. He met Jessica, and married her; and so instead of a placid, uneventful life, came one of stress and turmoil; and from economy stretched to a point, he reached to wealth, position and great importance.

And Margaret?

Had she not been forced to wait and sit at the feet of her Master, would she have grown to the fine delicate lady we know?

A delicate lady with a large understanding and thought for others. A very simple but great lady, as I have met her in a London drawing-room with the scent of her carnations and roses of Fordcombe hanging about her; or, a very great but simple lady, pacing the high south terrace, or walking down the long pleached alley by the moat, where the pigeons strut in comic consequence and the kitchen cat, all tortoiseshell, with an ugly smut on his nose, has the audacity to intrude.

And here in her gardens, or in a wainscotted room, thick with the cultivated atmosphere of centuries, something she brings of the grace and dignity of a very regal court. But when I meet her in town at Lady Flintshire's or my lady Suffolk's, I ever see her just as the lady of Fordcombe, a very simple personage, but knowing well the ways and manners of a court.

XI

BUT delightful though Fordcombe may be, and charming as Margaret undoubtedly is, we cannot linger in her pleasant company but must visit the somewhat third rate lodging in Battersea and see how the good folks there are getting on.

Alas! For what do we see? Jessica may appear resigned, but is really in that state once known as that of passive resistance. She still performs her various little duties, at least those which affect her own comfort, but she has long ago ceased to mend Desmond's socks. She orders the dinner, because she has to eat it, and she endeavours to keep the room in some semblance of a state of grace, because she has to sit in it, and for all of this Desmond thinks her an object lesson to all young wives.

But Jessica knew she was an alien who had no business in Battersea at all, and she even began to think that Desmond, though doubtless all he should be, was, well, not quite of her world!

And that was a nice thing to think about her husband, was it not?

But our real relations are they we are most in tune with, not necessarily they we are akin to in the flesh; and our native home is where our thoughts would have us be, not always where the body finds itself.

And, therefore, some of us are widely separated from our own kind and pining exiles in a strange land.

And with many this is so irresistible, that, be they where

they may, they will, nay, they cannot help but must, move Heaven and Earth till they return again to the land they know.

Jessica was such a one. She was fixed in her determination to reach once more the land of her birth, the kingdom she owned, and the people over whom she would rule as queen.

In the first moment of her meeting with Desmond she thought that in him was found one from her own country, whose language she spoke and whose customs she understood; familiar with the life she knew but from which she had somehow got separated. But in those days Desmond was an idealist and not even his love could swerve him from the course he had set himself to run.

It certainly was trying, and she knew, Heaven knows how, that it was far better to be the wife of a rich stock-broker than the wife of a poverty-stricken peer with only his name to keep up his position, which, in itself, prevented him from keeping it up.

They had many a tussle before Jessica gave in, or one should say before she ceased fighting. "Give in" she never did, she was as fully settled in her convictions as her husband in his, the difference was that while he was content to plod and wait, she had every intention of gaining real affluence and without any undue delay.

Again Desmond was greatly in fault. He should have seen the error of his ways and the hardships to which he asked Jessica to submit. But the hardships were a joke to him, he rather enjoyed them. To him they were something of a new farce. To Jessica a very old and sordid tragedy. "I never knew you cared so much for money," he would say a little sadly, when something dimly dawned on him as to the real situation.

It would be at night they usually had their talks.

Desmond, tired, maybe, and feeling a little baffled, a little despondent, a little dissatisfied with his work. He had done his best, poor fellow, but knew it would have to be done all over again to-morrow. And the weather had been that curious compound of cold and mugginess, when the body is too hot and yet the hands and feet too cold. At such times Desmond would feel a cold bath might revive him, but a cold bath at nine o'clock in the evening doesn't sound attractive. So there he'd sit, feeling his head might at any moment split in many pieces.

And what about the girl opposite? What sort of day had she passed?

Well, in the morning she had interviewed Mrs. Fletcher, who had appeared before the remnants of the breakfast had been taken away, bearing a charger on which reposed fragments of the "cold mutting" that stuck to the said charger by the glue of its own gravy. It was a repulsive sight and a bad beginning for Jessica's day. She gazed from the uncleared breakfast table, with its remnants of eggs and bacon, to the "mutting." What on earth was to be done with it?

"'Ow habout an 'ash?"

Jessica remembered Mrs. Fletcher's hashes and shuddered. In those concoctions the meat had a curious habit of disappearing into a few hard little gristly curls that sank desponding in an ocean of pale water whereon strips of hard turnips swam superbly as though they were swans.

"I think, perhaps, we'll have it cold," said Jessica, "and a salad. That, at least," she added to herself, "will be eatable."

Mrs. Fletcher looked a volume. Folks that could eat

cold mutton in preference to an 'ash could not be real gentry. For the honour of her house, therefore, she tried again.

"Rissoles, now! 'Ow about a few tasty rissoles?"

Jessica remembered them also and clung more desperately to cold meat.

"Cold if you please, Mrs. Fletcher," she said firmly. "Mr. Antrobus is going out and I don't know when he will be back."

Foiled on the mid-day meal, Mrs. Fletcher fell back on her last line of defence.

"'Ow about supper then?"

But Jessica could bear no more and resigned herself to anything the landlady chose to do.

The morning had passed somehow, and after the "cold mutting" which had stuck in her throat and refused to be eaten, she had gone by 'bus and tube to a more central part of town, in pursuit of distraction. The weather had not improved, but she could bear the stuffiness of their little room no longer.

A dead sky overhead and mud underfoot, slushy and oily streets, and the air heavy as lead with a damp cold in it. Wealth on every side of her, and carefully ignoring her. Comfort, luxury, rolling in motor cars, turning up noses at the poor weary exile trudging with cold feet and holding up a bespattered skirt. Anon she passed between rows of brilliantly lighted shops full of beautiful things, from which lovely visions issued daintily to car and taxi, having, she felt certain, spent a fortune without thought.

Oh, far better to have stayed at home! Then what compensation had she to look forward to in the evening? There would be the mystery of Mrs. Fletcher's supper,

afterwards she and Desmond would sit alone, or someone might drop in for a chat. Neither prospect held any allurements.

Either the visitor would be a denizen of the bright world she longed to live in, some male relation or old friend of Desmond's, who called out of pity, or one of those terrible Bohemians who accepted them at their face value.

Jessica had begun to dread both types. The former because he showed up in the ghastly light of reality the poverty of their surroundings; the latter, because he enraged her, inasmuch as she was so obviously included as one of that out at elbows band.

Thus, almost any evening that winter, you might have beheld them sitting in their small room over a fire of cheap coal. And how Jessica hated that coal! It never burned properly, but usually gave forth a thick pungent column of fog-coloured smoke that flew rapidly up the chimney. She would often look across at her husband and wonder how so well bred a boy, used to far different surroundings, could be so carried away by ambition as to put up with such an existence.

Ah! But she reckoned without the sense of novelty it was to Desmond. All this experience was amusing to him, though for her it held something of the horror of a ghost that walks again when it had been thought to be well laid, and when she found herself, as she frequently did those days, facing the fearful thought of "this for ever," she had hard work not to cry out with rage and ennui! Her nerves were rasped, her taste outraged, and she would sit defiant, unyielding, but very strangely still and silent.

Now if you care for your garden you only plant the

flowers you think should do well there. This one in some sheltered corner, and that elsewhere, so it can meet with all the winds of heaven and thrive upon them. Further, you will not plant in unsuitable soil but will change the soil to suit the plant; and, even when all that is done, you will water your plant, and, maybe, fasten it up tenderly, so it may grow strong and straight and be a credit to you.

But what if all this had been done for Jessica? Who had been playing experiments with such a rare exotic? She should have been raised in some hothouse with other delicate wonderful things. She had never had a chance that I can see. To start with, she had been an utter alien in the place where she had been born. She had lacked all she needed of sun, of care, of culture, yet she had a great need for all these buried deep within her nature. Again we must ask, "Who dared play such a mad experiment and not look for failure?"

So let us remember this at those times when her boy-husband tried to explain his views to her and she answered with something more than impatience. I have owned he was not blameless, but after all he was an enthusiast, and only a youth, very different to the Antrobus we first met in Aylmer's garden. And he might have explained his ideals to Jessica till Doomsday, she would never have understood.

Yet he was very tender to her, very caressing, and would argue quietly, with a rather shy, elusive smile. But this was only another spur to irritate those nerves dancing like horses that long for a good stretching gallop, and only plunge the more at the rider's half timid pats and words. She would answer his gentle arguments in words somewhat like these:

"Don't for goodness sake talk as though I were a child.

I know you are clever. It's that that makes me what you call so difficult. If you chose you would soon make a good position. All your people laugh at you! This way we shall do nothing but just go on existing."

"I thought you believed in me. You used to say you did."

"I do believe in you, if you'd go the right way to work."

"You weren't used to luxury at home."

"Luxury's one thing; decent comfort another. And we know hardly a soul! We can't afford to! Look at me, Desmond, look well! Am I the sort of girl to keep buried alive?"

She had risen swiftly and stood erect before him. For the moment he was almost shocked at the revelation of so much loveliness, wherein there seemed ever something new, some fresh revelation to be found.

How straight and tall she looked in that tiny room; how lithe and supple. Her white throat (and the flower of the medlar was not whiter) rose like a slender marble shaft to support the dainty head. And the head itself?

Where was another so tantalising tilt of the chin? Or lips where the reddest of roses had bled? The delicate, sensitive nose; and the long lashed violet eyes that could shine like stars in a southern sea! The curious poise and turn of the head; all personal to herself, provocative and quite unstudied.

And not a bit of these was there Desmond did not love, from the swelling breasts to each curve and intimate line of her body, from the soles of her feet to the white arms and hands (a little outstretched to him, tapering, fragile, without a blemish), he worshipped her altogether.

"Aren't you a little proud of me?" she asked.

And it will be ever a mystery how Desmond resisted the appeal. But resist he did, and not even for her would he yield up what he took to be his birthright. Well, but you must remember she was his wife now. He possessed her, and that made so much difference. No woman has the same value to her husband as to her lover.

So now when she had appealed to his physical side, putting all her beauty before him, endeavouring to enmesh him and subjugate him with her body, she failed, because they were man and wife, and there was little mystery left about her.

“Give me a little longer,” Desmond pleaded sadly.

“You always end with that. We’ve been married over two years now! Two years! It seems an eternity.”

“As bad as all that?”

Then he would make love to her, and very charmingly and convincingly. He was a delightful lover in those days, not spoilt by too much practice. He had been rather a steady boy, as boys go. Had he had more experience in women he might have managed better.

“Can’t you be patient a little longer, Jessica?”

Now, unfortunately for Desmond, patience and Jessica had parted company at the church door on her wedding day. She had thought to escape through that door, but appeared only to have re-entered the old cage by another way. To her husband she was only a girl who had been used to nothing better than he could give her. He never realised that gems demand a suitable setting, and that rubies and diamonds are not usually set in copper.

So they drifted on, day after day, week after week, each month finding them a little further apart, she conscious of the separation, he, a little selfish in his occupa-

tion, unmindful of the quiet change and silent broodings of his wife. At times she felt it quite impossible to keep still. She would make a hundred excuses to go upstairs, and on reaching their bedroom would sit down on the bed in complete idleness till she could decently return and pretend she had been busy.

"Must you walk about?" Desmond would ask plaintively, when struggling with some awkward bit of work that refused to be accommodating. "I must get this article done to-night."

"I'm sorry!"

And having answered she would drop into the nearest chair.

"What do you expect to get for it?" she would ask, after a minute's silence.

"Five guineas with luck."

Five guineas! What was the good of five guineas? Even with luck? Then, after keeping as motionless as possible till her internal restlessness could be borne no longer, she would rise and make for the door.

"Do you want anything?" Desmond would enquire, feeling contrite.

"Nothing thank you," she would reply, and go out of the room. "How does he do it, how can he be so damnably philosophical?" she asked herself as she went quickly up the steep little stairs. "Where does he get this power to wait? To make me wait? If only he'd do what he can and not what he merely wants to do."

Then she would sit on the edge of their bed, almost suffocating, the breath caught in her throat, the fingers dug into the palms of her hands that beat a tattoo on the counterpane.

"I'm like an animal caught, trapped, caged," she cried

in her bitterness. "Just sufficient room to walk up and down. Caged in the midst of its own beautiful woods. Trees, river, long sweet grass, cool shade, glorious sun and freedom just out of reach. I'm like that—all I want, all I'm eager for, throbbing at the mere thought of, is just outside, and I'm beating my bars, trapped, fairly trapped."

A few hundred years ago she would have gracefully poisoned Desmond in some flowing bowl. And she would have done it because, obviously it was the best, indeed, the only thing to do. But we are a little more civilised now, or at least are supposed to be; but Jessica was very primitive, a primitive some mordaunt God had set down in the midst of conventional respectability.

When she felt calmer she would return to the sitting room and sit quietly by the fire, outwardly at any rate, studiously composed. She never made a scene, but she was full of drama. Desmond looking at her then thought he had been quite mistaken in supposing she had been a little upset; so it went on, and she would count the days till they were weeks, and the weeks till they became months.

Let us take a last look at this picture before us; Jessica sits by the yellow smoke that was called by courtesy, a fire. Do you notice a curious smile about her lips?

"She was always famous for her smile, wasn't she?"

"But what is the meaning of it?" I ask.

"It might mean anything."

"I'd give something to know the thoughts that work behind it."

* * * * *

The little house grew very quiet as the night crept on. The little back street ceased to be full of racket; only

there came the sound of drizzling rain upon the window.

Will Jessica's to-morrow be the same as to-day? Black, hopeless, headachy? Dragging its hours as a tattered slattern drags her brood of ragged children?

Will she go up to Bond Street again to look at gaily lighted shops? And will she have to wait till she can cross the street in mud and drizzle while a string of smart motors splashes by?

Were those her thoughts behind that curious smile? as she sat by that yellow smoke that was called by courtesy a fire, sat on and on, very quiet, dangerously quiet, very dangerously quiet, if Desmond had only known.

XII

BUT occasionally Desmond and his wife would have an evening off and go out, just like Sarah.

On these occasions, Mrs. Fletcher would confide to her friends and neighbours (people she was careful to inform her lodgers she "'ad to know yer know though she'd always 'eld 'er 'ead 'igh in Battersea") over a glass of "somefin' 'ot" that, though it was all very well "for young people to enjoy each other, still the way that Mrs. Hantrobis undressed of 'erself, was enough to make her black cat blush."

It was on one of these evenings off that our young people went to a house of a painter friend who had lent his studio for a "Reunion of the British Tea Table Poetical Society."

And to her dying day Jessica was haunted with the vision of that party and shuddered afresh every time the visitation took place.

The host was a good-natured fellow enough, a bad painter, but a charming man, one of those bachelors who contrive to mix with the rag-tag of Bohemia, yet keep their end up socially.

And it was entirely to please Bellamy and for the sake of "the rag" that Desmond had urged his wife to go to the "soirée." But Jessica's sense of humour was in abeyance that night, and the whole affair proved merely the culminating crisis to a long series of lesser ones.

The cheap dresses of the women (fearful and fantastic

arrangements of what looked like curtains and antimacassars switched hastily from their proper places and hurtled around the wearers) merely made her angry while the wearers themselves in their frantic efforts after "an artistic effect (which only resulted in a highly successful study of the untidy), raised a horrible loathing for the whole lot, host, party and guests alike; and I fear her own husband was not entirely excluded.

Heavens! Had she come to this? Was this the sort of thing she had to look forward to? Was she to regard herself as lucky in being one of such a third-rate, vulgar and utterly commonplace set?

(And only the night before, according to the *Morning Post*, the Hon. Mrs. Tom had worn a frock of, well, never mind what, except that antimacassars had no place thereon.)

"And why have some people put on fancy dress?" she wondered to herself. "They haven't even the excuse of looking beautiful. That Don Juan in black cotton velveteen. He looks much more likely to run away from a woman than to run after her."

In truth, it was a curious conglomeration. Jessica's eye fell on a stout dame arrayed as a Dresden Shepherdess, and concluded the disguise must have been donned because the lady had nothing else to wear.

"I suppose she would tell me there were middle-aged shepherdesses, even in the days of Watteau. There may have been, but he forgot to paint them."

There were also present two or three soulful youths, and several impudent looking boys. These last were dressed in cheap Charles Surface suits and lace ruffles, cheaper still; but while their clothes were inexpensive their complexions represented considerable outlay.

An unattractive man came up and spoke to Jessica and thought his dare-devil manner beyond measure irresistible. Jessica thought him more common than usual, snubbed him and moved on.

The one thing that roused her to a faint sense of amusement was the way the women had undone their hair.

Some heads looked as though the hair, originally piled high on the top, had slipped down, not so much out of malice as out of pique. Jessica was astonished at the amount of tired hair she saw about her. There were arrangements that had quite obviously started out on their career with the loftiest of ambitions, but the stress of life proving too much the attempt had been given up when but half accomplished, while other hair had certainly fulfilled the poet's vision and climbed from their dead selves to wigs and fronts and other things.

Some fell in flowing curls, some were bobbed, but one and all, red, black, brown or peroxide, gave the impression (and a totally wrong impression it was) that the owners had but lately leapt from their beds and forgotten all about hair doing whatever.

But the frocks had one redeeming virtue. One and all were obviously ashamed of their owners and wept away from them like strange seaweed. Some gowns sported bits of lace, which looked very surprised (as well they might be) at finding themselves where they did; or artificial flowers and beads wrangled for the mastery. These last looked as though they had been thrown at the frock, and, most obligingly, had stayed thrown. Or else clung desperately to hair and brow. Great was the hilarity of the guests; out were they to enjoy themselves. Badinage flew; masculine hands were playfully smacked

by the reproving paws of females into whose ears something "naughty" had been murmured.

But the real fun began after the refreshments. The ham sandwiches, blanc-manges, hot coffee and sweet lemonade worked sad havoc in that brainy throng. There was a stout gentleman of immense tonnage (reported to be an excellent dressmaker in the daytime) who someone prevailed upon to go to the piano and play "something of Chaminade." This he instantly did and with a light, nay, a "feathery" touch.

No sooner had he finished than a sombre but vivid youth promptly wedged himself under the stout gentleman and commenced the prelude to a passionate song "about the love he met at the Gate of Death, and to whom he gave a rose," which in the last verse turned out to be his own soul and not a rose at all. But the stout gentleman had had no intention of resigning the piano. He had merely risen to bow his acknowledgment and be pressed for further efforts. Forced now to remove a space or two, he would have recaptured his coign of vantage the instant the youth had discovered the rose was his soul, had not someone else slipped in and prepared elaborately to accompany a tall, and rather scraggy, damsel, dressed in one of the curtains from her window, or, possibly, the counterpane off her bed, trimmed with an arrangement of moulting feathers. After this, our stout friend retired to the refreshments and sipped lemonade, which as time went on, if it grew weaker as regards lemons, grew stronger and stronger in water and sugar.

A lofty yell cut the air! The damsel had begun to sing! Sing! I beg your pardon! We did not merely *sing* at, well, whatever the festivals were called. Oh, no! We "rendered," We had soul. We had temperament! We

had brains! and worked them hard. Hold tight! Don't breathe! Once more she dashed into the breach. At least her mouth was wide open, but surely something dreadful had happened? The pianist went on, but the lady seemed to have lost her voice, and nothing came forth from the mouth that opened and shut in a face distorted with agony.

"Who is she?" asked Jessica, of one of the soulful youths near her.

"A Miss Rosalie Foljambe. Don't you know her? She is an established artist."

"She hasn't much middle register," Jessica observed, as the lady boomed suddenly somewhere in the bass, only to return quickly to higher altitudes.

But Jessica's companion concluded from her banal remark about register (as though voices were kitchen stoves), that she was nothing but "an exquisitely beautiful doll." So he left her to listen to the art of Miss Foljambe, who continued to soar on high or grovel in the depths, avoiding the notes that so uncomfortably lay in between, with the confidence of "an established artist."

Perhaps the really great moments of the night were those wherein some member recited his own poetry. (Now and again he recited someone else's, but always with an air of having begun by accident and in mistake for one of his own.) Now, if these works lacked aught in poetry, they atoned for that omission by any amount of eroticism. The most countrified mouse required no interpreter, while each member of the British Tea Table Poetical Society felt one with the great historic lovers of the past.

There was only one woman with whom Jessica Antrobus had the slightest feeling in common. This was a Mrs.

Welsh, a patroness of Bellamy's who had sat to him for her portrait and had conceived it the right thing to fall a little in love with him. Mrs. Welsh was fascinated by the extraordinary beauty of her neighbour. A quick eye took in the simplicity and inexpensiveness of the frock; but then how refreshingly free from eccentricity it was. The good lady felt herself safe in confiding to Jessica that "she thought Bohemianism might be carried too far."

Now when, in the years that came, Jessica looked back on this party, she thought that then it was she had realised the limit of her endurance. It was the last straw that broke the back of her patience.

Perhaps a party is not a very important event in itself, but this affair at Bellamy's studio had come at the psychological moment for Jessica. She had looked forward to so very different an existence; to comfort, well appointed houses, pleasant week-ends, motors, dances, occasional dinners at amusing restaurants.

She was very young and youth is terribly impatient. It can never believe that life at the ponderous age of forty is just as enjoyable as ever it was at the more sprightly twenty. It wants its fun all along the line; and when youth is coupled with such undoubted beauty as Jessica's there is some justification in the demand.

But how had she gathered these ideas? Where had she learnt the ways of a life to which she was not born?

She had spent all her days in one of those dreary, straggling, overgrown villages, that try to wriggle themselves into a town. And one's only thought in passing through Towchester was a devout hope that, the houses being all obviously jerry-built, they would soon fall down, and, under no circumstances whatever, would be put up again.

On the outskirts of this dreadful place stood Jessica's home, the only serious rival to the church in hideosity.

The rectory boasted an alleged garden, the blissful abode of slugs and snails. It was sooty and untidy, and offered no possibilities of improvement. There was a "sweep" before the front door, and some hopeless and forlorn laurels. In front of the principal windows on the other side four flower beds on a strip of lawn; the rest of the domain consisted of kitchen garden with asphalt paths divided from "the garden" by more leggy laurels, and the whole was bounded by a wall covered with a rank ivy consecrated to spiders and their webs.

The interior of the house matched exactly with the outside. Badly proportioned rooms opened from ill-paved passages from one of which a steep pitch-pine staircase led to the upper rooms. Jessica remembered the thin carpets, and chairs that gave no ease, paper and paint that strove for priority in a claim for instant reparation. But against any such drastic proceeding the faint and faded furniture cried aloud, pointing out in agony that were paint and paper renewed, tables and chairs, to say nothing of carpets and curtains, would be put disastrously out of countenance.

And this was the only home that Jessica had ever known. Her father (and her mother before her marriage) had always been used to just such homes. Both seemed content. Her relatives were all poor, had always been poor, and looked for nothing else but poverty. They considered a poor clergyman's position to be vastly superior to that of a rich tradesman. They were as much shut away from reality as any nun or monk in convent or monastery. Jessica had watched them carefully tabulated their shortcomings and shuddered as she did so.

Yes, among such folk, in these same surroundings, had she been raised. Then whence, oh whence, came that innate longing, that true knowledge of a life made up of luxury, as distant from that she had led as an Emperor's palace is different from an Irishman's mud hut?

Jessica was too young to notice how the dull stagnation had sapped her father's energy, and how the conviction that life held nothing in the future for him had taken away any sense of humour, of beauty, or desire for better things. Most of their neighbours were in the same category, and when she remembered that Jessica shuddered again!

Suppose she too became in time like unto these? She would have been a hopeless idiot not to have recognised the beauty she saw in her glass, or to have denied the curious fact that not the surliest ruffian in the village or the most incorrigible "drunk" but grew somewhat awkward and shy if she so much as only smiled on him; but suppose in time she became . . . No! It makes me shudder too.

She had only one real pleasure in life. The girl had a passion for music. She loved everything that was beautiful, but music was an obsession with her.

Even in that she was different from all her relations and friends. She could not abide the oratorio. Consequently she was not considered "really musical, you know," by the various cousins and aunts who warbled "Gems from the oratorios" which they sang from a paper book with a jaundiced cover.

Occasionally they were really very modern and played fantasias on "Faust" or "Carmen." But though they would perpetrate these dreadful "arrangements" in their more rakish moments, it was always with an apology and

with a sense that, while it was all very well to play a selection from these works, neither "Faust" nor "Carmen" was the sort of thing they would care to go and see themselves.

How Jessica marvelled at the brain that took Jane or Susan to a ballad concert when they might have heard Kreisler at the Queen's Hall. How she would further marvel when Susan (or Jane) returned with some terrible ballad she had heard and thought, most unfortunately, she could sing.

Poor girl, she had but one friend who sympathised. A man who had started life with great ambitions and was now content, nay, glad, to be organist at Towchester. He could talk of the great artists he had heard in former days and introduced her to Beethoven and Bach; and now and again, when funds were not very low, she would buy modern stuff, Debussy, Ravel, and yet others. And then how she longed for some better lessons than those poor old Hitchcock could give her!

For Jessica played extraordinarily well. Hitchcock was a musician and though he bullied her, sparing her nothing, he very often admitted she played nearly as well as some of the great ones up in town.

As to her own people, they considered the violin waste of time.

"Why don't you learn the harmonium, dear Jessica? Then you could play in your father's church," murmured Aunt Anne.

"Yes, dear! No one plays the violin except professionals," added Cousin Emily, and felt she had said that which damned the instrument for ever.

"I wish I could play like one of them," cried Jessica, drawing shrieks and groans in her rage from her fiddle.

“My dear!” beamed Aunt Anne effusively, as though talking to a child. “You don’t quite mean that. No doubt some professionals are most worthy people. Unfortunately, we know, the majority lead very sad lives.”

With which sweeping, uncharitable, un-Christlike remark, the lady felt however worthy the said professionals might be, however great their reputations, or welcome their presence in the most exclusive society, in no possible circumstances whatever could they be placed on a par with people like herself, or Mrs. Ronalds of “The Rhododendrons.”

“Madame Cantatrice has been staying with the De la Meres,” snapped Jessica viciously. Now Lord de la Mere was Lord Lieutenant of the County and in the eyes of Jessica’s circle could do no wrong.

“Really,” exclaimed her relatives, “we didn’t know that dear Lady de la Mere ‘took up’ those sort of people.”

“Oh, she has been staying with Prince and Princess Charles,” they added, in reply to a further broadside from Jessica. This was a shock it took quite a minute to get over, when fortunately one lady had a brilliant idea with which to comfort the other.

“Royalty,” she said, “have to know all sorts of people.”

Still, it was very odd; very odd and most upsetting, but they calmed themselves by asking another young relative to play “Faust.” This was at once a concession to Jessica and a solace to themselves. Then they finished up with the latest ballad, “The Roses round the Altar” and went to bed, firmly convinced that theirs was a more refined taste than “poor Jessica’s.”

Another thing that was laid to Jessica’s account was that she liked music which they did not even pretend to understand.

Jessica's sure firm bowing and the sounds she made were truly "out of place," and as they went upstairs to bed, Aunt Anne would whisper to Cousin Emily:

"What an extraordinary girl is Jessica!"

"Well, yes, but she always was, you know."

Therefore was Jessica considered "strange" and "peculiar," but I fear she didn't care. To Jessica her relations were nothing in the world but so many awful warnings.

Living so much in herself, her unhappy fiddle had to express all her joys, her longings and her defeats. Like all possessors of temperament, music was both her bane and her comforter, and her happiest hours (and her most wretched) were spent with little Hitchcock.

He also was a warning. He, like all the rest, led a down-at-heel existence. Yet once upon a time he had had great ambitions. Nothing had come of them. A sad-coloured wife who at one time had thought she could sing, but had found she could only produce children, may have had something to do with these blighted hopes.

Jessica thought so and put her down on her list of warnings. Heavens! How many little Hitchcocks were there? For ever there seemed a new baby. And how untidy and dirty they all were!

There was one thing, however, Jessica contrived to do very thoroughly, though it would have astonished her extremely to hear she had done it. The thing she had done was this: odd as Jessica's relations might think her, they one and all stood considerably in awe of her.

The patron of the living had called her "extraordinarily beautiful"; and his word was beyond dispute. Yet the aunts and cousins confessed that they thought he had for once slightly exaggerated in applying the word "beau-

tiful" to Jessica. "Beautiful" was a word they reserved for royalty and duchesses. It was a state of perfection in which princesses and duchesses were born, and, they believed, lived and died. Anyway, it was something quite beyond *their* powers to achieve. The patron had never called any of them even good looking, and I am not sure that they did not consider that in being "extraordinarily beautiful" Jessica had not usurped some of the privileges of the aristocracy. They were doubtful whether it was "really good style" to be so vivid as their cousin at Towchester. They all agreed upon one thing, however, agreed most unanimously and heartily, and that one thing was that "Jessica was proud and gave herself airs."

Now to do her justice, Jessica never at any period of her life had the slightest intention of doing anything of the kind, but when you take no pains to propitiate your belongings and merely catalogue them as "awful warnings" some such effect is bound to happen.

No wonder they failed to comprehend her. She didn't understand them either, for that matter, and in a different way was just as much afraid of them. She was always haunted with terror lest, as time went on, she might become like unto them. She would lie awake, terrified, lest she grew skimpy and wispy like her Aunt Anne, or pinched and apologetic like Cousin Emily, or, worse fate of all, beaming and effusive like terrible Aunt Methusaleh.

XIII

I THINK we must now really pay a little more attention to the husband who has been far too much neglected hitherto. But really Desmond's life has not held much of interest to chronicle.

He had joined a Bohemian club and found it amusing, if not all he had imagined. He was much disappointed to find the art life of London split up into little cliques, each of which considered itself the only true light and all the others false beacons.

He also frequently looked in on Aunt Elinor, usually on his way home from newspaper or magazine offices. She was generally at home, and always kind and cordial.

"Why don't you bring Jessica to see me?" she asked him one day.

"I proposed meeting her here, Aunt Elinor, but she is lunching out with some friends of hers, and going with them to Queen's Club to see the sports."

Miss Antrobus looked a little grave at hearing this. She did not approve of husbands and wives having separate friends.

"You must both come and dine here one evening," she said, "and I will ask some pleasant people to meet you. Who is Jessica with to-day?"

"I believe the host is Basil Lethbridge. You know him, I think."

Aunt Elinor did know him, as a man with a great deal of money and not very much reputation, or rather, he had a great deal of money and too *much* reputation, of an unsavoury kind; and Miss Antrobus did not hesitate to let Desmond know that she did not consider him the sort of person "a beautiful young woman like Jessica" should go about with.

"I think, my dear boy, you should have been of the party."

"We dine with him on Friday, I believe, at the Savoy. They dance there, you know, and Jessica likes dancing."

"That is natural at her age," nodded Aunt Elinor, and turned the conversation on to Desmond's work.

But she had set him thinking. He too disliked Lethbridge. But he could not shut Jessica up like a nun in a convent. The most he could do would be to caution her.

But when he did, Jessica laughed.

"You goose, are you getting jealous? What a compliment! And I thought you were becoming the usual husband who forgets all about his wife after the first six months."

"Well, old girl, be careful in choosing your friends."

Jessica pouted. "Much choice I've got, haven't I? Lethbridge is a pleasant fellow, and his party was rather good fun. Do you expect me to sit at home all day and mend your raiment?" She laughed as she held up for his inspection a half-mended sock. This was an unusual occupation for Jessica those days, and Desmond likened her to the picture of "The Young Wife" or "The New Penelope," or any of the paragons of domestic virtue.

"It's awfully sweet of you," he said, as he sat himself on the arm of her chair and put his arm round her.

Jessica thought he was a very pleasant fellow, a husband one could be proud of, and like sufficiently well. It really was quite a pity he was such a fool.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” asked Desmond.

“Fairly. It did not amuse me to see our elderly champions trying to appear as young as their foreign rivals. They reminded me of girls of forty at a dance.” And Jessica was very nice and kind to Desmond all that evening, and he thought “What a dear” she was, and that she loved him very, very much.

Truth to tell, she was feeling a little compunction. Lethbridge had gone rather far that day. It had been very exciting, she had come home tingling with a new sensation. The experience was flattering, and made her very pleased with herself. Evidently the door of escape was not so firmly barred as she had thought. Give it a little push and it might open. But to do her justice, this was a door she had never thought of opening. Even now she turned away from it, but it was rather thrilling to know it was there.

And Lethbridge was a fine fellow. Altogether Jessica had been carried out of herself, and had returned home rather more radiant than usual. But she felt just a wee bit sorry for her pleasant boy of a husband (and that was just the worst thing she could have felt), and without any intention of pose had set herself down to darn his socks and try to steady her nerves. And so Desmond found her on his return from his talk with Aunt Elinor.

* * * * *

Of all her new relations the only one who made any appeal to Jessica was Cousin Hugh. He had insisted on giving her some excellent and expensive violin lessons,

and now she played more finely than ever, and for this she was very sincerely grateful. But she had grown very fond of the kind old man for other reasons. She appreciated his criticisms, and profited by them, and, indeed, many a young artist of greater genius than Jessica paid heed to those strictures, with considerable profit to his art.

But she liked him also for his quiet sympathy. He seemed to understand, as he very well did, and she could discuss Desmond with him in a manner impossible with anyone else.

She went to see him the very Friday when she and Desmond were to dine and dance at the Savoy. She was rather unexpectedly excited at the thought of meeting Lethbridge again, and felt she needed the soothing calm and gentle acceptance of things as they were that she found at Cousin Hugh's. It is all very well to know a door of escape is open to you, but no one wants to be pushed through it, and certainly not before the time.

So she took her violin, and wended her way to the house in Hans Place.

"I do like Hans Place, and the way it plays at being a cathedral close," thought Jessica, as she waited for the door to open. It was a delightful day in very early spring, and crocuses were up in the garden, tiny buds on the trees, while sparrows hopped about, knowing the time of worms was at hand. There was also a tradesman's cart a few doors down and this also provided the cathedral atmosphere. There is always a tradesman's cart waiting in a cathedral close.

It was a pleasant house. Jessica approved of the square hall, the big blue and white china dragons, the general well-to-do country house effect. You went down

three steps into the long book-lined library that looked into a little garden at the back, but first passed through the front hall, and up two steps towards the shallow oaken stair.

“Cousin Hugh does himself remarkably well,” commented Jessica, and not for the first time.

She went into the library, and was warmly welcomed. It was a room of much comfort, thick carpeted and warmly curtained, a very pleasant place indeed.

Upstairs was a room referred to as “drawing-room” and “music room,” indiscriminately. It depended on what mood you were in. Very soon they went to this room, and Jessica played. But, somehow, she did not get the result from the visit she had hoped for. The stimulus of Lethbridge was too big to be put to rest easily. Jessica longed to make her fiddle groan and shriek and to express herself in some difficult complicated work. Suddenly she astonished her host by improvising a cadenza utterly out of keeping with the work she had just finished.

“My dear child!” exclaimed the old gentleman, his hands raised in horrified deprecation. “What in the world are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, I was improvising.”

“But you mustn’t improvise with Mozart. I remember Joachim in ’82 saying——”

But Jessica knew exactly what Joachim said in ’82. She was very, very fond of Mr. Antrobus, but after all she knew all his stories by heart.

“I know, I know,” she cried. “It’s perfectly barbaric of me. But I felt so like it. I don’t feel a bit Mozartian to-day, but wild and Bacchanalian. What do you think of this?” she added, tucking her fiddle under her chin

again. "It's nothing much, and I've added some bits of my own."

And then she broke into something that was certainly "nothing much" from the academic point of view and yet was a good deal from another.

It was reckless music with chaotic crescendoes that represented nothing but annihilation. There were long, weeping notes, wild, restive passages, as of some animal caught and caged, with eyes blind with rage shaking the bars of his prison. And the hopelessness of it all was there, and the lonely aching heart, and the sick longing and the frantic measured pacing to and fro of the beast. The vision of wild woods, of tangled jungle, cool white foaming rivers to be leapt, and caverns secret in the mountain side. The glare of the desert, and the heat of the nights, the setting of the sun, the sky pale with the faded blue of hydrangeas, with delicate greens, while closer to earth strange orange, scarlets, curious yellows, and against these palms and trees of the oasis crowding together, growing ever thicker and assuming a depth of green almost unreal in its intensity.

All, all was there, with the delicate mauve clouds that float so easily upon the sky, where the great blue fades to white.

Musically it might have been all wrong. There were discords, intervals, arpeggios, changes of key and rhythm that took Cousin Hugh's breath away. Yet he too felt the magic of it; and he almost feared as he listened, for there was a depth of passion in Jessica he had not suspected, a power he had underrated, and an intensity of emotion that made him grievous and fearful for her.

Suddenly she stopped. The story was done, and the spirit that possessed her passed on, leaving her a little

white, a little limp, a little as though she had come out of a trance. She could not have played another bar had her life depended on it. It would have been something banal; something for a child that barely knew its notes, that she would have played.

“I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“I can’t do it always. Now and then I can, and it’s a great relief.”

Then there was a little silence. Jessica was a little shaken, and sat quietly on a stool. She did not want to talk just then, and Cousin Hugh understood.

Presently they were told that tea was ready in the library, and went down at once to that pleasant room.

Jessica’s mood changed with the change of atmosphere; she could have purred like a cat when she found herself in that comfortable chair with beautiful china and silver before her, the sort of bread and butter Mrs. Fletcher wot not of, and the hot scones sitting happily in the fender.

“It’s good to be you and it’s good to be here,” she said, “and I’m glad you liked my music, though, I know, taking it to pieces, it was all wrong.” She spoke all in one breath, and helped herself to a hot cake as she did so. She had worked off the suppressed excitement for a time, and was once more a well-balanced young woman.

But her host did not refer to her music again. It had upset and disturbed him, and opened up visions in his guest that he would rather not behold.

“Let us talk of Desmond,” he said. “How is he getting on?”

Jessica pouted, and took a bite of her scone.

“Same as ever. . . . He’s just finished a novel,” she added.

“Have you seen any of it?”

“I read a chapter or two,” she said dryly.

Cousin Hugh gathered she had thought little of the “chapter or two.” He said nothing, and Jessica said nothing. Then after a pause——

“He sent it to Messrs. X. & X.,” she continued, mentioning a publishing firm of the highest repute.

“I wish we could persuade him to give it up. I should be delighted to do all I could for him.”

“I know, dear Cousin Hugh. You’ve been awfully kind. I shall never forget all you’ve done for us. I’ve done all I can,” she went on, “I’ve even agreed with everything he says in the hope that man’s natural obstinacy would make him change his mind.”

Then she rose and walked to the window. She supposed she ought to be going, yet she lingered, loath to leave that pleasant house.

“Why are clever men so stupid, Maestro?” she asked, giving her cousin a name she had long ago christened him by. “Oh, don’t laugh. You know quite well what I mean. Desmond has great capabilities. Why will he pursue the one career for which he has no talent?”

“Are you quite sure he is doing that?”

“Quite; so are you. He has the finicking exactitude of the incompetent.”

Jessica came back to the fire, and spoke very seriously and with deep meaning.

“It’s no use you and I pretending, Cousin Hugh. He has no style, no individuality. His work reads like a lecture, and when he tries to be funny I could sob. Oh, how sincerely I wish he’d never had anything published. He might learn the truth then.”

“It would be very hard for him, dear.”

“Will it be any less hard in the end? Isn't it terrible how the gods mock one? Genius they leave to struggle, putting every difficulty in his way. They let him err again and again while they dazzle mediocrity and lure it to its ruin with a pretence of better things to come.”

“You mean, don't you,” answered Cousin Hugh, “that the gods ignore mediocrity altogether, but train genius in the only school in which it can learn.”

“It's a wonderful thing. I'd like to be the wife of a struggling genius.”

“My dear girl! You'd be driven mad in a month!”

“I'm not so sure,” Jessica replied. “I've a huge respect for genius; I think I should remember it was a sacred thing.” She spoke very slowly and very quietly, and there was a little awe in her voice that stopped the smile about Cousin Hugh's lips. Maybe she was right.

“You have a touch of genius yourself, erratic, perhaps,” he added.

Jessica only smiled. Among her faults we cannot include conceit. Flattery never turned her head, another proof of her genius, perhaps.

“I suppose,” said she, thinking of Cousin Hugh's remark on the hard school genius has to travail in, “I suppose genius is a freak of nature, which nature should be left to develop her own way.”

“Like a pearl in an oyster?”

Jessica laughed.

“Perhaps you are right, and brilliant cleverness is the better of the two. It wields to its own use opportunities the other never sees.”

“But genius never takes opportunities: it makes them
_____”

“And usually for others! Meanwhile, I feel like cry-

ing 'Make my path straight.' The other day I passed a poor woman looking into a jeweller's shop. She was very pretty, but she looked so hungry——"

"And looking into a jeweller's shop?"

"She was only hungry for the lovely things she saw there. I sympathised with that woman. I'm hungry for them too."

She stretched her arms wide, in eloquent, involuntary action, and dropped them at her side.

"You are a dear," she continued, and meant it too. Her heart warmed to him at that moment; something of his commiseration, his understanding she knew. She had a friend in him, and, in her way, was really rather devoted to him.

"When I say that kind of thing to Desmond he gets shocked. *You* don't get shocked, Cousin Hugh! *You* don't think it awful of me to want all the beautiful things the world can give, do you?"

Who could resist the child who spoke such hopeless sentiments in a voice full of the sound of the cooing of doves? The words were so naïvely spoken. It seemed to Jessica a matter of course that all these things should be hers.

"What are these things sent for except to be used?" she asked, but never waited for an answer.

"Oh! I've prayed 'Lead us not into temptation' time out of mind, when I was a good little girl at home. But I always found temptation led *me*. Temptation is a funny thing, Cousin Hugh. It has a way of always appearing right."

Perhaps she did not quite mean all she said. But the thought that she would dine and dance with Lethbridge that night had returned and disturbed her.

"Let us talk of something else, something nice and pretty," she said.

"One of Desmond's actor friends looked in last night. He's back from America, and says the sleeping arrangements in the trains are weird. In the upper berth you freeze to death, and in the lower you boil like an egg on the radiator. I should rather like that. Fancy feeling one's inside turning to a beautiful golden yolk!"

"I hope you don't mean all you've said, my dear. I don't think you do. Just now you are working off a little irritation, is it not so?"

And Jessica wondered where he had learnt all he knew.

The soft spring day, weary with its unusual exertion, was creeping away, and the crocuses looked as if they realised their appearance had been a little premature.

To Jessica the long, low library looked very soft in the gathering darkness, very soothing, rather pale-toned and like an old bit of tapestry, rich and harmonious, but faded and of another world.

Suddenly she bent down and kissed the old man.

"I shall always love you, Cousin Hugh."

"I hope you will, my dear. I hope most certainly you will."

Jessica's sudden impetuosity had touched him. She did not usually display so much affection.

"I must be going now," she said, putting the precious violin in its case. "I have to get home and dress."

"You are going out to-night?"

"One of our rare but wild orgies," she laughed. "We are dining with Basil Lethbridge at the Savoy. We shall eat, drink and dance, and return in good time to our chaste abode."

"Do you see much of Lethbridge? My dear child, a

great many have begun to drop him. His reputation—— Doesn't Desmond know?"

"M— yes," muttered Jessica, as she closed the violin case. "He enjoys a reputation that deprives a woman of hers if she is seen alone with him. But Desmond will be there and another woman to make a fourth. Is he so very bad?" enquired our innocent young creature.

"I've told you what a good many people have begun to do," answered the other.

"Don't you think people are apt to condemn as sin what they have no inclination to do themselves," she asked a little wistfully. "I believe that's how sin came into the world. Somebody did something somebody else didn't like, and he said it was wrong. Do you know, I'm sorry for Lethbridge."

* * * * *

Jessica wended her way home, wondering how it was that the man with too much reputation and the woman with none at all should yet meet on a common ground.

And why should we point the finger of scorn if the rich and generous Lethbridge found scope for some of his liberality in the untidy little home in Battersea?

Perhaps Jessica rather enjoyed the sensation of playing with fire. It was her first experience, and though "the burnt child dreads the fire," the *unburnt* child always thinks it can strike a light.

Every woman is said to love Don Juan because she wants to reform him. But it must be quite understood that he does not reform too quickly, in fact, it is almost better if he doesn't reform at all. A good thing may be overdone, and too sudden a change in the habits of a lifetime is bad for the health.

But it is a dangerous game altogether. Show me a saint reforming a sinner, and I will show you the first act of a tragedy.

Jessica, however, had no intention of reforming Lethbridge. She had an idea that reformed rakes, though they might make the best husbands, would probably turn out very stingy friends.

And it is very doubtful if Lethbridge himself knew what reformation was. If he did, he might have defined it as a sort of old-age pension to keep the wicked out of hell.

And as Jessica sat in the Battersea 'bus, in the midst of a row of more or less tired working people, who stared at her as one they neither could, nor would if they could, hold any truck with, she laughed to herself at Cousin Hugh's cautionary words. Yes, she certainly enjoyed striking matches and watching the glow creep up till it nearly burnt her fingers.

She was ignorant that half the world goes wrong simply from lack of variety. It is not that vice is so alluring as that monotony is so terribly repulsive. He who sees the sweets of life spread on every hand yet is debarred from his proper share, is he who most greedily eats of the forbidden fruit.

Next day Cousin Hugh called on Aunt Elinor, and sat in his favourite chair, from whence he could see the portrait of Desmond's mother in a good light.

"She was a charming woman," remarked Aunt Elinor, inclining towards the picture.

"One of the most delightful I ever knew." It was all Cousin Hugh ever permitted himself.

Then Aunt Elinor led the conversation to Desmond,

and very soon the two grey heads were wagging together in close confabulation as to how they could help this obstinate young man who refused any help from anyone.

XIV

THE Savoy has an appeal that surely no other restaurant knows. There is a gaiety and light-heartedness, with a dash of Bohemian element about it that is its very own.

Some restaurants are so pompous that hosts greet their guests as though about to proceed to a state funeral; while the guests themselves feel they should have brought wreaths.

But at the Savoy people are not afraid of laughing and raising their voices, and, as a matter of fact, they do both.

Jessica thought the place looked very bright on her arrival, and more of a contrast than ever to Battersea. Everyone had the air of always living in such places, and of not only going to them occasionally, as she did herself. And then, how cheerily they talked. But they were not so occupied with their conversation they had no time to notice Jessica. Her appearances in such places were so infrequent that few could tell who she was, though almost everybody wanted to know. So she created something of a sensation when she appeared; and as she went slowly down the long lounge towards the restaurant, a little silence fell on the laughing groups, and all eyes were turned to look, and all sorts of rumours were circulated regarding her identity.

Jessica passed on, perfectly aware of the sensation she created, and showing no sign whatever that she knew.

Lethbridge was one of the few people from the out-

side world Jessica had encouraged to call at the untidy little house. She found him easy to entertain, and he could put her "on to a good thing," which was useful. The accuracy of his stable information was undoubted. Then he was good-natured and generous, if rather stupid, and was probably some ten years her senior. I don't think she cared much about him really.

"Your dancing isn't your strong point, is it?" she observed, when, later in the evening, he smashed his way through the ballroom.

"Such a bally crowd. Let's go and sit out somewhere."

"Thanks! I prefer your dancing to your conversation."

"What! Is it as bad as all that?" And he roared with laughter at his perception of Jessica's obvious remark, as though he had discovered something of great value.

"He is stupid," thought Jessica. "I wonder if all men are?" And her eyes fell on Desmond, dancing with the lady who had made the fourth at dinner.

But Basil was stupid in an accepted way, and Desmond in a way that made successful people shrug their shoulders. And that makes a great difference.

As the two couples passed, it struck Desmond that there was something very opulent and assertive about the big burly man.

It was not a type he cared for, but Jessica seemed to have a predilection for the kind.

Later on, Desmond's partner retired to repair a torn frock, and he waited, hanging around the pillars at one end of the room till the damage was made good. And then Aunt Elinor's words came back to him and he remembered that he had certainly never heard of anything very much to Basil's advantage.

And as he watched his wife and Lethbridge, he heard, just in front of him, a woman whisper something to the man who was sitting beside her. It was just a little short mocking remark as to Lethbridge and the woman he was dancing with, and the man laughed back, as though he agreed. As their backs were to him, Desmond moved in order to see the speakers' faces and found the man to be known to him as a friend of Lethbridge's. Probably the two had discussed Jessica together, handled her character lightly; it must be so for the man to have laughed and have answered the woman as he did.

Again he saw them in the distance, Jessica held by Lethbridge as they one-stepped down the room. And then he read more than perhaps was as yet altogether written there. Lethbridge seemed to hold Jessica unnecessarily close. But she was her cool, unconscious self, looking up to his face and smiling the curious little smile you and I noticed as she sat by the fire one evening not so long ago.

Desmond remembered that evening and recalled how irritated she had been. He recollected other evenings when she had spoken sharply; almost (if such a thing were possible) she had "nagged" him. Yet all this discontent and fault finding was surely not natural to her?

It was all very strange, she had always hated "scenes." What could have come over her?

In these days she practised her violin hard, upstairs in their bedroom, as she had ever done. But it was no longer the even, systematic practice of old. Now she improvised and played wild, mad music (such indeed as we heard in Hans Place that very afternoon).

Often he had put aside his work and listened to the

strange sounds from upstairs that half disturbed, half fascinated.

One thing he was sure of. Her intimacy with Lethbridge must cease. He was beginning to think for the first time about his wife, ceasing to accept her as the simple vicarage girl he had met and fallen in love with, and realising there was a good deal more in the beautiful girl than the daughter of a small provincial town, so clever in "picking up" the manners and ways of the people he had been born and bred amongst.

"How extraordinarily beautiful she is, and how that fellow knows it," and he leaned against the pillar watching her swaying lightly to the music, as though dancing had been invented for her special pleasure.

* * * * *

"I want to speak to you before we go upstairs."

They were home now. Lethbridge had driven them back in his car. Jessica had been gayer than ever and had prattled away, keeping their host in a roar of laughter from the Strand to Battersea. Now they were home again. The hooter of the car could be heard as Lethbridge turned the corner at the end of the road.

Desmond opened the door of the little sitting room, and when his wife had passed in, he followed and lit the lamp. The room looked very mean and small after the Savoy. The lamp gave a feeble light as though it resented being lit at such an unusual hour. The pettiness of the house, its out-at-elbows expression, suddenly swamped Jessica.

"I want to go to bed," she said. "You can have nothing to say important. Won't to-morrow do?"

"May as well get it over," answered Desmond.

He had fixed the lamp now. The chimney and globe were friends again, and he turned to Jessica, not quite sure how to begin. She saved him the trouble.

“What’s the matter?”

Then her eye was caught by a parcel lying on the table. It was a registered parcel, evidently arrived by the last post.

Desmond saw it too and perhaps a little clutch caught at his throat. The great hope had come back—returned with “Messrs. X. & X.’s compliments and thanks.”

Jessica shrugged her shoulders.

“Sorry,” she said carelessly, “but I must own I expected nothing else.”

Indeed, she looked for all the masterpieces to come back.

“Well, Desmond, what is it? If you’re going in for a long pow-wow, I tell you plainly, I can’t bear it. I shall scream.”

But Desmond was still looking down at the manuscript, hardly able to realise it had come back.

“I’m awfully sorry about this.”

“The manuscript? Oh, that!” She spoke with contempt and her lip curled. At the moment she was heartily sick of books of every kind, and of Desmond’s in particular.

And the novel lay between them, laughing in its wrapping. Rejected manuscripts always laugh the first time they come back. After the second or third expedition they grow to look pathetic, and towards the end of their career, limp and negative, taking on the appearance of broken-down cab-horses.

But Desmond had not meant to talk about his book.

“I want to speak about Lethbridge. I want you to see

less of him. Don't do it suddenly, of course. You can do it gradually. That's all."

He spoke with an unusual air of authority. Perhaps the sight of his rejected book had flicked him into showing something of a fighting spirit. He had never used that firm tone of command before, and very likely at some other time Jessica might have appreciated and admired the change, and then all might have gone well with these young people. But that hour was not the psychological moment, and she was feeling extraordinarily tired, more so than such an evening should account for, and she felt also at complete variance with everything that had to do with her daily life, and that, alas, included Desmond and his book. Quickly she looked round the room. "What a hole it is," she thought.

"You understand, Jessica?"

But Jessica laughed. She was almost glad if Desmond was going to quarrel at last. It would be a means of letting off steam.

"Drop Lethbridge? Whatever for?"

"I heard something at the Savoy, no matter what. But a man I know by sight and the woman with him were coupling you together in a way I can't stand. I'm sure you see what I mean."

"I see you want me to give up one of the few people with whom I can feel any genuine friendship."

"But now you know the sort of man he is. And everybody knows it, even people like Aunt Elinor."

"What nonsense! What does she know of the world?"

"A good deal more than you, Jessica. And I tell you I know——"

But Jessica cut him short by rising abruptly and going to the door.

“One moment, please.” Again that new, firm tone of authority, peremptory, yet courteous.

This was the Desmond his people knew, for whom they had once held such hopes! And almost against her will, she had to listen.

“Those two were discussing Lethbridge’s character _____”

“Pulling it to pieces, you mean. I didn’t know you listened to gossip.”

Jessica was inwardly seething. Desmond’s new manner irritated her. She was also desirous to say something cutting, but to her disgust found she was being merely peevish.

“To listen to such gossip——”

“They were not gossiping, Jessica, not in that sense, they were discussing what they both knew: Lethbridge’s reputation, *your* reputation. Wondering what sort of accommodating husband I might be. *Now* will you do as I ask?”

“No.” She spoke in the moment without thought. But in the mood she was in then, had Desmond asked her to be unusually gracious to Basil she would most likely have said no.

“But your name—yourself—were discussed. The situation between you and this man taken for granted as the worst.”

“Lots of people are talked about with no shadow of reason,” she answered. “He’s a kind friend, and you are simply making yourself ridiculous because of some foolish remarks you heard a jealous woman make.”

“They were merely saying what apparently everyone knows. They were talking as people do about what admits of no contradiction.”

“Are you referring to my reputation now?”

“I am referring to his. I met Townsend afterwards. I pointed out the woman to him. She had been Lethbridge’s mistress.”

“That explains it, doesn’t it?”

“He also told me that what I’d heard about Lethbridge was true.”

“How interesting! But must you go on and on saying the same thing over and over again? The woman was jealous because she saw me and Basil together.”

“No, she was not. She was merely disgustingly amused.”

“Anyway, they can’t have been people that matter. And is our position so prominent we need to be careful not to set tongues wagging?”

Desmond had been first surprised, now he began to grow angry, and the woman inwardly rejoiced. For had not one of the links that bound her threatened to snap? But sad to relate, otherwise she was not the least disturbed. It mattered nothing that her character was held in somewhat low esteem, and the worst possible construction put upon her conduct. Indeed, I fear that instead of feeling regret at such unenviable notoriety, she was just a little flattered. She turned and looked at Desmond and saw with real amusement the surprise written large upon his face. A little contempt stole into her own for the puritanism in his character. She spoke.

“Why such a fuss about a careless word, probably forgotten by the woman long since?”

Then a wish to defy Desmond came, and she asked:

“Am I to be kept like a Sultana—shut up in this wonderful harem?” And she gazed round the small shabby sitting room, at the central round table, and the lamp

smoking to the ceiling, which both had been too occupied to notice. She had nothing but supreme scorn for the whole affair, and it must be owned she looked extraordinarily out of place in it.

“You know perfectly well that’s nonsense. I don’t ask much—I insist on this one thing. You will give up this man’s acquaintance. After all, you are my wife.”

“Your wife, oh! There’s no need to remind me of that. Every day’s experience rubs it in.”

“Well, then, understand I will not have my wife’s name bandied about——”

“Oh,” she interrupted fiercely, all her old sense of revolt, her hate of their sordid life, rushing to her lips, “for God’s sake don’t talk like the hero in one of your novels. I really couldn’t stand that. What on earth does it matter how people talk about us? How can it hurt us? What position have we? What shall we ever have?” she added bitterly.

And Desmond made no answer. He did not understand this tall defiant girl who poured out such biting, sarcastic words. Where was the young girl from the small provincial town who knew so little? And which of the two—ah! which indeed?—was the real Jessica he had married?

Instinctively he righted the lamp that smoked and stank so viciously, and instantly the room took a deeper gloom. To put up a fight against a woman is hard for any man—unless that man has something of the brute in him. Desmond was very much a boy at heart. Just then he looked very young and boyish indeed, and he felt helpless, as a man might who, swimming far out to sea, beyond the sight of land, on looking round discovers the

boat he thought to be accompanying, has suddenly, inexplicably, disappeared.

And Jessica knew that Desmond was hurt and surprised and disappointed in her, and she was angered. She would far rather have met her master, but she only saw before her "a nice boy" who was desperately in love with her, and somehow she longed to wound him.

And then his eye fell on that manuscript that lay and winked at him. The work that took so long, that he was so very sure would prove the first step to fortune. There it lay—carefully sealed and registered! What a mockery! It was almost comic!

Could Jessica at that moment have spoken but one gentle word, have forgotten herself for only one instant, how very different this story might have been. But it was not in her character at that age. She was young, with all the hardness of youth strong upon her. She could only feel the anger of a woman when she finds her menfolk fail her—the contempt of the mediæval woman when she watched her champion go down before her in the lists. She was angered with the man who dared to hold her from the gratification of her desires, yet contemptuous of him in that he so entirely failed in strength that should force her to obey his legitimate commands. She was modern to her finger-tips, yet mediæval to the core. Modern, she would go down into the street, seize on this, grab at that, whatever caught her fancy. Mediæval, she disdained to struggle and looked for one to do the hard work for her.

She rapped smartly the parcel, eloquent in its muteness, flamboyant with stamps and label, string and blue lines of registration,

“What shall we ever know,” she said again, “but this, and this, and this, over and over again?”

“It’s only one. There are other publishers.”

“To treat it exactly as these have.”

The words were hard, but the voice that spoke them sounded harder still. He had never thought that soft voice of hers could take so fine an edge. He felt somehow extraordinarily young, of utter insignificance. She, on the other hand, looked older than she was. It was part of the change that had come to her. She had now a look in her eyes as of one who saw things back in the past and, so seeing, could look also into the future. As old as the ages was that look—primitive—prehistoric—that of the hundreds who knew the game—was hers at last.

Jessica felt she was hurting. It was a new and wonderful sensation. It thrilled her, taking away any feeling she had had of weariness. She knew she had recovered the kingdom at last; and she laughed that her entrance thereto was through the heart of a man. She would go that way or any way, so long as she might go.

“You will never succeed. Never! Never!” she cried.

“Jessica!”

“I know it as well as I know we two are in this room. Every time you take up your pen to write you are writing your own death warrant! You are trying to do something for which you have only taste, little talent, and no genius. It makes me mad to see the foolishness, the futility, the waste of it all. I’ve had nearly three years of this squalor. I cannot—I will not—go on waiting. You have no right to ask me with my youth, my beauty, my right—yes, my right—for all that should be mine. Had you listened to what everyone told you, we should

now be in comfort and not suffering this meanness. I loathe with all my soul this cheap furniture, cheap food, cheap clothes. There is misery in cheapness," cried poor Jessica, ignorantly quoting a great philosopher. "And I've borne just as much as I can."

Her complaint had poured out like a torrent. All the irritation, the nervous excitement, the packed emotion that hitherto had escaped in music took form and fashioned itself into words.

"Why bring that up now? It's beside the point."

"It's the very point itself."

"I'd no idea, I never thought—"

And Jessica looked at him and laughed, her long fingers impatiently tapping the manuscript. What did it matter what he thought or imagined? Did she not see freedom before her? Did she not scent the delightful rosy fields of ease, and was not the glamour of the world opening upon her? And she made the man before her wince.

Yes, the old soul was roused at last—that soul wise with æons of time and it whispered: "Now is your hour—now—now or never."

"For the sake of a moment's pleasure, you don't mind what people say. That's the position you're prepared to face," cried Desmond.

"Position! Position doesn't appeal very much. There's always someone got a better! It's *life* I ask."

Then came a sudden change. A break and sob in the voice, and quickly her face was hidden in her hands and, to her own intense surprise, she burst into sobs, long, deep, shaking sobs, that were half pity for herself, and half chagrin and anger that she wept.

Instantly he was with her, instantly his anger melted

into loving words, and seeking to comfort her, he took her tenderly into his arms.

But the feel of him was fire on a wound, and for the moment she almost hated him. That curious distaste for her husband a woman often feels at such times was strong upon her; tired as she was, the late hour, the excitement, the elation, the touch of this man with whom she knew she had finally broken, filled her with repulsion and loathing for him.

“Let me alone, Desmond.”

“Jessica.”

“Do you hear me? Let me alone.”

He had her in his arms, her shrinking body warm to his own, and while all the male in him rose in desire for her, the woman herself, with unnatural strength, wrenched herself free and, passing quickly out of the door, went to her room!

And that action raised the man to the full sense of his manhood. Was he to be balked, outraged and indecently cheated out of his rights? Three steps at a time he was up the stairs and at their bedroom door.

“Open the door,” he cried.

“Be careful, Desmond. Be careful, I say.”

“Open the door. Do you hear me?”

He rattled the handle, shook the door. Nothing from the other side. What was she doing? Should he break in? That would rouse the whole house, create a scene—most probably a scandal.

Better, perhaps, to do nothing till morning. He went back to the little sitting-room and fell into the one easy chair.

XV

THERE can be no two opinions as to who carried off the laurels in this first pitched battle between husband and wife. It had been a very complete triumph for the lady. As to which of them may have won a moral victory, that is another question. But who cares about a moral victory? It brings no kudos with it. It is, after all, merely a form of self-righteousness.

And now I have to relate something that must distress any right-minded person. That something is that Jessica slept exceedingly well that night, and woke up the next morning feeling thoroughly refreshed for her night's sound sleep.

But it took a good deal to keep Jessica awake. She always tumbled off to sleep the instant her head touched the pillow; and why, indeed, should she have kept awake that night when she had just come to a settlement of her plans and saw her way clear before her?

It is not peace and certainty and a sense of well-being, but their contraries keep us awake.

Jessica had seldom felt so much at peace with herself. What more natural, therefore, than that she should sleep?

And after the somewhat tempestuous ending of the last chapter, and the sad state of discord in which we left our young people, it is delightful to record a scene of reconciliation.

Let, therefore, the right-minded person, who has no

doubt been virtuously shocked at the dormouse-like propensities of Jessica, take heart again and watch with you and me the beauty of conjugal felicity as it showed itself in Battersea.

Jessica had barely awakened the morning after her quarrel with Desmond, when she heard his voice calling to her from the other side of the locked door.

"I've brought you your breakfast. Please open the door."

Jessica was so astonished that she jumped up and did as requested before she knew what she was about. This attention on Desmond's part was quite unexpected, and she permitted herself the luxury of a little gratitude. I wish I could add and of a little contrition also.

"It's awfully good of you," she said, when, having let him in, she had curled up in bed again. "I really am tired to-day. I am sure I don't know why."

"Perhaps you'll be better after breakfast," Desmond suggested.

"You are a good fellow," she answered. She was sipping her coffee and felt sympathetic to all the world. The coffee was strong and hot for once. She presumed Desmond had seen to it specially. "What made you trouble to wait on me like this?" she asked.

"I was sorry—for last night. I didn't want anyone to think there'd been a row."

"How like him! Anything to keep up appearances," she thought; and said aloud: "What does it matter what Mrs. Fletcher thinks? I'm afraid you must have spent a wretched night."

Jessica could not help but be amused. The idea of Desmond sitting up all night in that uncomfortable sitting-room in his dress clothes conjured up unique visions.

She was feeling very comfortable herself and enjoying her breakfast immensely.

Meantime Desmond was stripping rapidly, taking off creased, untidy shirt and putting away the ruffled clothes till they could be properly pressed and ironed. They looked very garish in the daylight—almost disreputable. Jessica lay back in her bed and lazily took a good look at her husband.

“Do you know you’re a very good-looking fellow?”

Desmond only smiled for answer. This complimentary talk of his wife was a strange continuation of last night’s outburst. The same idea must have occurred to Jessica, for presently she said:

“I really couldn’t help it. I had to be alone last night.”

“That’s all right.”

Now Desmond had brought Jessica her breakfast, not merely to throw dust in the landlady’s eyes, but also to have it out about Lethbridge once and for all. But how was he to do that if Jessica took this line? And yet I’m sure she meant well, and think it very proper of her to want to make up their differences.

“Have a cup of coffee and some toast? For once it’s not burned. Be a lamb and do as your wife tells you,” and she held out a nice piece of buttered toast for his acceptance.

And really are we to be blamed if at first we fail to recognise in this sweet and engaging young person, the hard and unsympathetic female of the night before who uttered such appalling sentiments and finished up the proceedings by shutting the door in her husband’s face?

Now is she all softness and sweetness and seduction.

She reminds me of a cat in the sunshine, lying on its back and purring to one to come and play. Desmond thought her irresistible, but he also thought her—well, something else. Evidently she had not allowed their quarrel to interrupt her rest: and while he had been pacing the room below half the night, she had let nothing interfere with her slumbers. Clearly she was unrepentant, and while he felt the full charm of her he recognized, and with something of a shock, that she left him rather cold and, for the first time, critical. Charm she never so cleverly, or cajole ever so adroitly, Desmond could not forget the episode of the night quite so speedily.

“I’m going to have a bath,” he said, taking no notice of the proffered toast. “When I’ve come back and dressed, I’d like a word with you.” And almost as he spoke he left the room.

“How tiresome,” sighed Jessica.

For Jessica had no intention of allowing any re-opening of last night’s discussion, if she could help it. Desmond might “like a word,” but it would not be her fault if that “word” were ever uttered.

Accordingly, when Desmond returned, washed and shaved, and looking more himself, he found his wife already up and, in her turn, waiting for the bath.

“How long you’ve been,” she cried.

“I didn’t know you’d be up.”

“I feel rested now. Your kind attentions, dear boy.” And off she went before he could say another word.

However, she supposed that after all the talk was inevitable. Desmond seemed determined on that point, she thought, foolishly. Why not continue as though nothing disagreeable had happened?

“But I intend,” said the lady, “that the skirmish shall take place at a time that suits me.”

Now, as a matter of fact, she had not spent the whole night in sleep.

Before she had sought her couch, Jessica had steadily reviewed the situation, and finally decided what she meant to do. That was a great weight off her mind. But she didn't mean to do it just yet. In that case, how silly to quarrel with Desmond about what really didn't matter if she really *had* made up her mind? It is far pleasanter to be “nice” with people; even if they happen to be relations.

“Why live in a state of unfriendliness while we *do* live together? It would be disagreeable for me, and not pleasant for him. After all he's a nice boy. I don't want to hurt him more than can be helped.”

Which shows she really was kind at heart, and was only cruel through force of circumstances.

“I should like his last recollections of me to be pleasant,” she said to herself, as she slipped into the bath and began what is called to “luxuriate” therein.

It is a great thing to have the courage of one's convictions. Before dropping off into the refreshing sleep of innocence, Jessica had fully thought out her plan of campaign. And the moment she made her decision, she jumped into bed with a delightful and hitherto unknown sense of power. She had chosen a somewhat adventurous road; none could say exactly what might happen; but at least it would be exciting, and the travelling thereof easy, with everything made pleasant and comfortable. It looked a smooth, soft and fragrant way, and oh, how sore her feet were with limping down the flinty, thorny, narrow path! Where was the fun of hobbling over stones

after a quixotic husband, when motor cars, special trains, and palaces of light and beauty were to be had for the taking!

No wonder Jessica felt gay and light-hearted, and splashed joyously in her bath.

“A fool and his ways are past finding out,” she quoted, and added to herself, “A fool and his wife are soon parted.”

Mrs. Fletcher’s bathroom was used for many purposes besides ablutions. It was called “the bathroom” because it sounded well, but it might just as well have been called “the boxroom” or “the housemaid’s room,” or “the lumber room.” With its collection of pails, brushes, old bags and broken chairs, it partook of the nature of all these, and its only claim to the title of “bathroom” was the common little zinc bath in a dusty corner.

Still, Jessica managed to do fairly well. Such soap, such salts, such powder, such odds and ends of comfort as she deemed absolutely essential to cleanliness her Towchester friends would have gazed on with awe, would maybe have considered effete, if not a little indecent. Yet Jessica knew of infinitely nicer salts and soaps, but at prohibitive prices. Then, were there not creams? Yea, and maids? Experts in massage? And how on earth could one powder one’s own back?

Splashing and looking down at her limbs, Jessica dreamed visions of sunken marble or silver baths. And she wondered which was the more expensive!

Said she to herself: “Dark blue—lapis lazuli—and walls of marble also. And I don’t see why one should not have plants in the room. They would be pleasanter than Mrs. Fletcher’s pails. But the room would be large and in its way as beautiful as one’s boudoir. I would

have nothing ugly in it. All the accessories would be kept in a cabinet off the bathroom itself. Just the sunk bath and a few plants and a marble bench for one's bath wrap! Dear me! How delightful it is to have such simple and expensive tastes."

Then she slowly got out of the water that was no longer warm, and wrapped herself in a quite ordinary bathgown, and went without her maid, or powdered back or massage, or manicure either, and many other "odds and ends of comfort" her soul demanded.

Thus did she return to her bedroom to find Desmond had finished dressing and was waiting to re-open the affair of the night before. But she knew now in what manner of way to treat him, and disarmed him by her contrition, and bamboozled the poor fool completely with her humbleness.

"Dear old boy," the sweet girl cooed, when Desmond began hesitatingly and awkwardly to explain how "I hate to have a row with you Jessica. I didn't sleep a wink all night for thinking about it." "Dear old boy, need we rake all that up again?"

And she went up to him and put her hands on his shoulders and smiled up at him, all soft and yielding; and then her arms went round his neck, and kissing and coaxing, she smoothed his face into smiles.

"Didn't it sleep a wink for thinking of its horrid wife? Yes, I know I was tired, but that's no excuse. Do smile and be your old self, and I promise to be a perfect wife and do all my lord and master commands. Do."

Charming picture, is it not? What could be more edifying than the repentant wife properly submitting to an injured husband? Fresh, sweet and scented from her bath, she cuddled to his arms and took her first real

lesson in the art of Delilah. She let her hair brush his face and raised her lips till they just *didn't* touch his own. She smiled all devotion and gazed with eyes all love, and pressed her body, that the robe more revealed than hid, close to his, and looked in very truth a sweet, repentant child asking forgiveness for some trifling fault.

“You are so beautiful, dearest, you must be careful of jealous tongues. Oh, my dear, I didn't realise you were so beautiful.”

What else should a man, young and lusty, flesh and blood, do, but let Delilah shear him as she chose? It had been a great lesson. She had learnt a lot, and put the finishing touch by freely owning that she “had been foolish and that it would be much better not to see quite so much of Lethbridge in future.”

“Only do it gracefully, darling. It would look odd to dismiss him suddenly.”

She was sitting at the rickety little dressing-table by that time, doing her hair before the peculiarly coloured mirror provided for that purpose. Samson was shorn, his tresses were all about her, so she had time to attend to her own. Her arms, round and white, were raised to lift the thick masses of that glory. They showed to singular advantage in that position.

“Leave it to me,” said Jessica. “I can manage it quite well without hurting his feelings.”

Thus, happy in his mind once more, Desmond left the room, and as he went out of the door she blew him a kiss. She really couldn't be expected to get up. Besides, she had had enough study, and was ready to throw her book aside, Delilah was always a good girl at her lessons, quite a model pupil in fact.

So Desmond closed the door behind him and left her

to her dressing. And that moment down came the arms to her lap, the whole mass of coppery loveliness tumbled over neck and shoulders, away flew smile and sparkle from her eyes as she gazed and gazed again at the face gazing back from the cheap little lodging-house mirror.

She looked long and steadily, studying with impartial eyes, as though the face she saw was that of some rival she would criticise. But however detached, however unbiassed, however severe she would be in her strictures, she could find no fault in the face so serenely looking from the mirror as though it were real and itself studying the face of her who sat so calmly in her chair.

Some women love to toy with their gems, appraising their value out of sheer sensual satisfaction in their possession.

Jessica, having no jewels, gazed at her own loveliness, appraising and valuing it. She weighed each item separately and compared it to other beauty she had seen, endeavouring to be honest and just.

When she had done this she rose and stood opposite the little wardrobe's long narrow strip of glass that just managed to reflect her figure at full length. Then quickly and deliberately slipped off her covering till it fell to the ground and, stepping from it, she stared at the naked white body, going right up to the glass that she might examine better the picture before her.

"You are very beautiful, even in that beastly glass," she said.

Again she took a mental inventory and, as before, with severe criticism. There was no conceit in her action, no sensual gloating, no lascivious desire either. She was merely accurately cataloguing the goods she had to sell. She had no intention of letting them go cheap.

Therefore she worked very minutely. Even her feet were bared, and her hair was thrown well down her back lest it should get in the way of her vision. She rather believed that "poets had written sonnets to the lovely feet of certain women." Personally she did not think a foot was a very attractive object. Still, poets had raved about them and might again. And very carefully did Jessica examine hers.

No! There was nothing amiss with either of them. Small, white and slim, they matched her hands.

"One should visit a chiropodist at least once a month. I suppose a good maid would do in between. But I don't like the idea of the same person doing my hands and my feet, somehow."

It will be noted Jessica's ideas were growing!

Then she proceeded to her calves, noting the slim ankle and sweep of line up to the thigh. She felt them firm and strong, but feminine. There was no question they could be a boy's, and certainly they were not like Desmond's.

"They are absurdly smooth," she thought, as she passed her hands over them. "They feel like a beautiful white statue." A contrast to Desmond's, which she remembered as rough and hairy. "There is a good deal in contrast," she murmured, turning so as to see herself in profile.

Then she examined each leg as a whole. Straight, firm, beautifully curved, right up to the waist. No, there seemed no fault at all!

Carefully turning again lest anything escape her, she noted the delicious little valley running down between the little rising hillocks of her breasts. The little valley was so light, so shadowy, it was like a little cloud riding be-

tween two full moons, or like a little dark stream dividing the hills, and they themselves were like beds of lilies crowned with a little rosy shrine. Then she stood back to the glass and looking over her shoulder laughed at the straight line down her back, to be lost in the round white flesh that curved in such a fine sweep to join the strong pillars her little feet supported. Once more, face to face, with her reflection, she raised her arms above her head and drew herself to her full height. And now her little breasts looked like doves, standing on tip-toe, ready to take their flight. Her lips were parted in laughter at sheer joy in their own loveliness, her eyes danced like fireflies in the deep blue of a summer night. Wonderful, wonderful, the head; and wonderful, wonderful, the long hair like spun copper. A man might hide in that hair, and it fell in ripples down her back like flowing water. She threw back her head, and saw the long, graceful neck stretch as asking for a lover's kiss.

Very exquisite. So exquisite that we who look feel nothing but a complete satisfaction at the sight of so much loveliness. Yet Jessica was very candid. "She could do with a trifle more filling out." That was all to the good, however. There was plenty of time before her, and what she saw was very good and worth many pearls and tiaras.

One more look, one more smile, and turn, and then she put the inventory in some mental safety place, and proceeded with her dressing in the most prosaic and commonplace manner you could imagine.

She came downstairs humming a little song and was so sympathetic about the returned masterpiece that the author was almost persuaded into a conviction regarding the ignorance of most publishers' readers,

“Why not send it to Y. & Y., darling? But must you really go out this morning? Can’t you stay at home?”

“I have to see Hawkes about some short stories. I told you yesterday, you know.”

She had quite forgotten, but you wouldn’t have her confess to such carelessness, would you?

“How stupid of me. Yes, of course. Won’t this afternoon do?”

“I’ve the whole day full, I’m afraid. I shall probably lunch with Maxwell at an A.B.C. in Fleet Street. He’s going to introduce me to ‘The Mayfair’ people.”

“Oh, my dear, will you be away all that time?” Jessica’s face fell. “Never mind, I’ll have a good practice and see if you want any mending done.”

Desmond was intensely amused at the idea of Jessica being so domestic, but he supposed she wanted to atone for last night. He laughed all the way down the street, all the way to the city; in fact, he frequently wearied his brother scribes with descriptions of how that wonderful girl was “sitting at home making my socks more secretive than they were.”

Unfortunately the picture had no reality in fact. What did “that wonderful girl” do the instant he went down the street and almost before he had turned the corner? Well, Desmond, she took stock of you, just as a while ago she had taken stock of herself, and she came to the conclusion that, nice as you might be, you didn’t quite compensate after all.

Desmond did not turn at the corner and wave. Still, should he have done so, no doubt but her critical expression would have changed to smiles. She might even have gone so far as to kiss her hand to him. Who knows? She was very lovingly disposed that morning,

But Desmond pursued his way without looking round, and naturally Jessica went back into the house when he disappeared. But not to see if anything wanted mending, at least, I'm afraid not! As a matter of fact, by that time any such idea had passed out of her mind. What did *not* pass out of her mind, however, was that, very cleverly, she had ascertained all Desmond's movements till tea-time.

Now if he should be spending the day hanging about editors' offices, and if he was going to lunch at an A.B.C. in Fleet Street, he would not be likely to see her lunching at the Ritz with a man he didn't like.

But she had her practice first, a steady, methodical, hard grind that would have delighted her old music master, and did not, as it had done on numerous occasions lately, reduce Sarah to a state of pulp and upset Mrs. Fletcher till she "jest felt nohow."

Her practice over, Jessica felt the satisfied feeling of the artist who knows she has done well. She had found out something more of technique, had put a something more into her work than she had ever put before, and that was a very satisfactory feeling indeed.

Then she went to the nearest call office and 'phoned confirming the luncheon engagement she had left more or less open the night before.

But even in doing that she contrived to convey the impression that she would be conferring a vast favour in eating an expensive and specially ordered menu instead of the cold "mutting" that would be awaiting her at home. She had no wish to create the effect. But the man at the other end, when told "that Mrs. Antrobus would lunch at 1.30" felt most extraordinarily honoured.

Then last of all Jessica returned home and had a good

think how she could make herself more than usually attractive for this very particular luncheon.

Whatever she did the result was eminently satisfactory. At least Lethbridge thought so, as she sat opposite him scarcely eating the very priceless food before her, what time Desmond was hastily swallowing an unpleasant bun and cup of coffee that held an aroma somehow suggestive of tea. It was rather a sharp contrast, perhaps, but as Jessica had said to herself only that morning, "There's a good deal in contrast."

Looking at her host she had all the sensation of a cat playing with a mouse before eating it. This does not mean that Lethbridge was regaling Jessica on cold mouse. They do not serve mice at the Ritz, though I do not doubt that we have often eaten it in Soho. But there it was called "cold quail in aspic," and I'm sure we never noticed the difference.

And if this sounds repulsive, take to heart the moral, and do not eat cold quail either in aspic or Soho. It is quite easy not to do so. On the other hand one is perfectly safe with *hot* quail. The first mouthful will betray the difference between hot quail and hot mouse. But cold quail can be most deceiving.

Jessica thoroughly enjoyed playing with the situation. It roused a sense of the dramatic she had not known she possessed. It gave her a cosy, satisfactory feeling to know she could advance by one step from something like penury to something almost approaching splendour. It was a step, too, that could be only taken once. And that made it so interesting.

Now Jessica had not taken that inventory in the morning for the mere pleasure of making a catalogue; she had done it from set purpose and one not altogether uncon-

nected with that easy and pleasant movement that would take her into more congenial surroundings. But she would not go at once, and certainly not unless it was made well worth her while.

She knew that while she had in her pocket little more than her 'bus fare home, one word from her and hence forth she need want for nothing. The feast was spread and was hers to taste. The meal was tempting. It was hard to refrain. But she was artist enough to appreciate a preliminary walk round the tables first.

Then it was all reprehensible and wrong, and that was half the fun of it! Oh, yes, half the pleasure of eating stolen fruit lies in the stealing. Very childish—we are all children at heart—and of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. Then she realised it was a joy never to be repeated. Once she chose her seat and took her place she would have to remain where she had sat. She might move up or down, even with luck from side to side, but it would be the same table, and much the same fare, only with the early glamour gone.

So all Basil's entreaties and suggestions and plans Jessica turned aside with a jest. But not so lightly as to make him feel ridiculous, or so severely as to make him feel snubbed.

It was an amusing game, and she had never known before how easily a man could be bluffed. She was learning that now for the first time.

"Last night, and I could have sworn you'd made up your mind," said the man.

"I have too great a mind to be made up quickly," replied the woman.

"Then you'd better begin seeing about it pretty soon."

It was not a nice speech and Lethbridge was growing

sulky. But that only made Jessica want to laugh. However, she had not done with him yet, and meant to get him into a better mood again before she finished. To this purpose she played about with her empty liqueur glass till Basil took the hint and proposed "another brandy and curacao."

When these refreshments arrived, however, Jessica found she could not manage hers and insisted on Basil drinking both.

It's wonderful what an extra glass will do when you've had enough already.

"How much longer are you going to keep me hanging about?"

Now Jessica meant to take the chair that Lethbridge offered, but not to grab what should be taken delicately and with the air of an epicure. But he was not yet quite in the mood she meant to leave him in, which was to be something between doubt and certainty, with two to one on certainty.

"It's rather a lot you ask—to run away with you—don't you think? If I go, well, the future becomes rather an unknown quantity, doesn't it?"

Then she thought of her equivalent for pearls and diamonds, and the remembrance gave her power. "One doesn't bolt with the milkman unless his cans are full of cream, and one of them at least is coming your way."

By which we see that if our Jessica occasionally failed in exhibiting the gentleness of the dove, she could be relied on to give an excellent exhibition of the wisdom of the serpent.

Warmed with the champagne and food, and really set on the woman who, as yet, was any man's, Lethbridge leant forward and renewed a former proposition.

But Jessica spread out her hands eloquently and assumed her most innocent air.

“My dear boy, suppose I don’t want to marry you after the divorce? Or you might be tired of me then, well, where do I come in? I couldn’t go back to Desmond like one of Bo-peep’s sheep. This little experiment you propose means much more to the woman than it does to the man.”

“I’ll double my offer. What’s more my solicitor shall settle the money on you the day you join me. That’s good enough, surely.”

It was more than good enough and surprised her considerably. She had only looked to be quite sure where she would land when she leapt, but if the rich man chose to call “Diamonds,” she felt fully justified in doubling.

And so she smiled, and looked very sweet and pathetic, and a little petulant, as though she were not yet sufficiently hardened to yield, and indeed had never meant anything like this and wondered if it were yet possible to lead him to a higher life. But all the while she was only considering if he were good for a better bid.

“Charming specimens of humanity, you and I, aren’t we?” she murmured with something like a sigh.

Now the man had a very genuine passion for this woman. Also a great desire to be the first in the field. Sooner or later she would go off with someone. It had become almost a point of honour with Lethbridge to be the first! He knew her type, and had little respect for it.

Jessica picked up her gloves. On the whole she had not played her game so badly. Surely it was legitimate that if a man, especially a rich man, chose to take a wife from her happy home, he should be made to pay pretty smartly for the experience.

But Lethbridge was not exactly a man to be trifled with.

“I’m darned sick of all this shilly-shally. I’m off to Paris next week and then to the south. The yacht’s there. If you care to come, say so. If not, we’ll part pals, that’s all.”

Jessica drew on her gloves slowly. It was up to her to say “yes,” or some wiser woman might take her place at the table.

And as she stood by the little round table with that little enigmatical smile we know so well upon her lips, I think she felt a little sorry things were not otherwise, and such an irrevocable step necessary. She looked out of the window towards the Green Park. A faint fog crept about the bare trees, the grass looked dirty and no sun lifted the heads of the crocuses. It was warm in the restaurant, but a treacherous wind waited round the corner outside, and Lethbridge had spoken of the golden south and yachts.

“You ask a good deal. After all, I have a conscience ——” And at that moment I think she really had.

“Funny it should begin to wake up now.”

“I don’t think I realised——” She broke off and he rose in his turn.

“I’ll give you till Tuesday. Not a day more. Till then, we won’t see each other. Better sit at home where it’s quiet, and decide whether its blissful charms outweigh my offer. Now, where do you want to go?”

But Jessica didn’t want to go anywhere, except home, and she wanted to go alone, and insisted on parting at the restaurant door. This desire was quite genuine. Now it had come to the point, she was almost ready to draw back.

In after years, many a year after this little scene at the Ritz, Jessica cried in remorseful sorrow, "No woman ever really wants to go wrong." Whether that be true, or whether it was wrung from her own agony, who can tell? I think in the bottom of her heart she had quite decided what to say when Tuesday came. The fog, the dreariness, the monotony of her life, didn't seem very alluring beside the gaiety and excitement of the life her lover offered. Yet there was a little regret tugging at her heart, and a tiny voice not yet utterly stifled.

Perhaps Jessica thought it was only her epicurean desire to dally as long as possible with the goods the gods provided, that made her hesitate. Yet may we not hope that it was something better? May we not, perhaps for the last time, give her the benefit of the doubt? But, alas for the tiny voice! Jessica thrills at the thought of her first kill.

For in reality it was she that had done the hunting. From the moment they met, her beauty, her charm, her wit, all were spread to capture him. It was instinct. No blame attached to her, and besides, everybody did it. The difference between the majority and Jessica was, that while other people's hunting gear was an every-day rig out, hers was of a most superior kind and warranted to kill at sight.

When Lethbridge left the Ritz he was firmly convinced that he had played his cards to perfection. Foolish fellow! Jessica had known all along when to encourage and when to snub you. She had known within the quarter of an inch how far to go. Also, and quite as important, she had known how far to let *you* go. You might be an expert, but in Jessica you had met a genius.

When you sat down to luncheon, had you the slightest intention of doubling your offer?

Extra drink or so? Who proposed them?

Once upon a time there was a man, and once upon a time there was a woman, and at the same period of history, there appears to have been just one, and only one, apple tree——.

“But that is quite another story.”

“I quite agree, Reader. But——”

“There was also a serpent,” you murmur.

“Please forbear to drag red herrings across my path. I say there was one special and exclusive apple tree. And if Eve adventured first, she never rested till Adam followed after. And what would you have thought of him had he refused? And suppose he had beaten his wife and called her a fool for her pains? Wouldn't you write him down an ass and a prig of an ass at that?”

* * * * *

When Desmond returned home that evening he found Jessica sitting by the fire, her hands folded on her lap, her little smile upon her lips.

“Lazy! What about that mending?”

“Dear! Your things are too far gone. You must really get some new.”

Oh, Jessica! What an inspiration! You are a shocking bad lot. But all the same there is something about you I can't help liking.

XVI

IT will be remembered that Jessica had decided to go home and to go alone. This sounds innocent and coy, but I fear Jessica's walk home that afternoon was not of the kind the poet has told us is so maidenly. It was not a pleasant walk. Whatever the artistic results of London fogs, and artists of high repute tell us they are great, they do not raise the spirits of those who walk in them.

People had taken to furs and thick overcoats again. Winter had returned suddenly, it was altogether a most dis-spiriting, uninspiring afternoon, and Jessica believed that Basil's yacht was reported to be most exquisitely fitted up.

And as she drew near home and noticed, as who could help doing, the squalor and meanness of Battersea, it was really very curious how quite remarkably well fitted up Jessica came to the conclusion Basil's yacht must be.

It was said in the last, and highly interesting chapter that she had done all the hunting. She had wanted a little amusement and had found the developments rather exciting. Oh, excitement, excitement! What sins can be laid at your door! It is a desire to know once more the old clamorous life of the flesh the lust to be possessed; the old heat of the blood once more rampant and roaring and mocking the little bolts and stays convention would set up. Pagan? But who is not a pagan at heart? And our modest Jessica was very pagan in spite of her birth

and upbringing, or possibly, somewhat because of them. Yet she looked a perfectly respectable young woman as she walked along the streets. In what did she differ from that charming little lady who looked up quickly in Jessica's face as they passed one another just now? Yet exactly the same old barbarous spirit was in both only in one it took the form of a longing for self-indulgence, and in the other an utter disregard of how any animal suffered provided she had her ospreys, and seal-skins and her hunting and shooting.

Now Jessica had once made a little plan. The most innocent of little plans! Indeed, it was more like a game for children. The most censorious could find no harm in it. And this was dear little Jessica's dear little plan. It was, if ever she suddenly became rich, to take a long, polite, and formal farewell to poverty. Were she certain a perfectly appointed home and well-drilled, efficient, servants attended her, that her wardrobes were full of beautiful clothes, that an exquisite dinner with the best of silver and table linen and all that goes to make the difference between dining and feeding awaited her, this is what she had decided to do.

For one week she would abstain from taking possession. She would wear her oldest clothes and even go without a bath every day. She would eat cheap food at cheap restaurants, and during the most crowded hour when noise was rampant, and the service more than usually execrable. She would travel by tube and 'bus when they were super full, and she would have one room in a horrid street, having stipulated that the house contained at least one teething baby. She would carry her own parcels home. She would arrive there hot and dusty, long for a cup of tea and be given frightened

water in a chipped cup. She would sleep in a lumpy bed, and be kept awake by the baby and its quarrelling parents. In fact, there was no end to the sordid and cruel ugliness she would not revel in. And all the time she would purr to herself, "This need not be. I could end it now. Waiting for me is a lovely house, flowers, jewels, cars, a box at the Opera, Paris frocks, all the resources that modern civilisation provides."

But, at the end of the week, what a transformation! Cinderella's was not half so fine. Her's was too sudden, too flamboyant, melodramatic. Jessica always thought the Fairy Godmother lacking in a sense of high-brow drama.

She herself would spend the hot day, for, of course, it would be hot, in peregrinating streets filled by hawkers and their barrows, and where yells and shouts abounded. She would grow tired and sticky, and she would eat where, and what, no respectable person would on a hot day.

Possibly she would get more sensation out of a day of drizzling rain. But, heat or cold, towards the end of the afternoon, that hour when hawkers and their customers would be most at variance, the baby teething its loudest, and life unutterably loathsome, oh, then would Jessica retire to her room and open a box containing clothes of wonder! But first she would undo certain parcels from whence would appear soap, of a rarity! A little perfume, a little powder, bath salts, certainly, and many other things, all of the most perfect!

And when all was ready and nothing forgotten, Jessica would gaze at the whole and, behold! It would be very good.

After many ringings of the cracked bell, at length,

would appear, like an apparition from a coal mine, the poor little genie of the kitchen, all smuts and snuffle, to know what "the lidy" wanted.

Jessica would then inform her that, with the exception of the things on the bed, everything she had belonged to the genie, with certain largesse beside, if she could but be persuaded to bring sufficient *really* hot water to make a bath.

The genie would not believe a word she had heard and emphatically decline the responsibility of providing a bath "it not being Saturday." After much cajoling, and, perhaps, a visit from the landlady to find out "worts the matter," a large tin basin and hot water would appear. Into these Jessica would throw her salts and soaps and et ceteras, and then proceed to wash herself very carefully all over.

It cannot be said she would have a bath, but she would certainly clean herself thoroughly, and for this once the effect would do. She would then dry herself with perfect towels, out of one of the parcels, and slowly and luxuriously dress herself. (I had forgotten to mention she would shampoo her hair and have a most excellent manicure, but these things are a matter of course.)

When all was done she would pay her bill, tip the genie, sweep a profound curtsy to the room, descend the stairs, being careful not to touch the railing or the wall, and then enter a taxi that should take her to Rumpelmeyers for tea. But an ice, or cup of coffee, would be enough. Rumpelmeyers would be a good place for her car to call and whirl her away to the perfect house, warm with fires, sweet with flowers, rare china, costly furniture, where orderly servants would instantly bring her tea exquisitely served with thin bread and butter and succulent cakes.

Oh! the sudden delight of that easy chair and the clear bright fire and the perfection of a beautiful home!

But what the little genie did with the salts and manicure set Jessica never troubled to think. She was always generous with what she didn't want. But I imagine the scent was used up in one colossal splash, while I am sure that Jessica's old clothes are being worn by that poor little slattern at the present hour. And never does she put them on without a kindly thought of "the lidy" who seemed to be the very incarnation of one of the heroines in the Heartache Series of novelettes. As to the landlady, when she saw that magnificently arrayed figure of Jessica coming down her stairs, what should she think but that her opulent-looking lodger had been "ruined." That night at the Pictures, she watched the alluring progress of a "vampire," and, nodding her head sagely, murmured "Er to the spit!" and "er" Jessica remained in the lady's memory ever after.

Such was the harmless little comedy Jessica had planned. She recalled the details as she crossed and went down St. James Street. The end had come rather more suddenly than she had planned, and for that she was sorry. She had hoped to play a little longer. The "cat and mouse" game is an amusing pastime—for the cat!

But she knew her hour had struck, yet, for some inscrutable, indefinite reason was loath to count the strokes. What must be will be. Why bother?

She examined one or two of the shop windows and even went a little way down King Street. There was a jeweller's shop in that quarter where jade was most temptingly arrayed on soft grey velvet, in a manner to madden the lover thereof, who lacked the wherewithal to buy. Quite recently she had stood and gazed therein and seethed

inwardly that so much more existed between herself and its contents than the plate glass and iron bars the jeweller had set up. Now she had but to instruct Basil what to buy and it would be hers.

Rapidly she built up a vision of herself in soft grey velvet, or perhaps ivory white—on second thoughts why not both?—perfectly cut and perfectly plain, as a background to jade earrings, necklace and ring. Should there be a touch of the green in the hair? Eventually Jessica decided for a coronet of jade. It would be more original. Yes, she would have a grey frock, and a coronet of jade. Of course, in that case, she would wear no other jewels, not even one jade ring. Bear arms and neck and the jade coronet alone!

From King Street she turned towards Jermyn Street. There was no occasion to hurry home and window-gazing had developed a fresh interest. "What sybarites men are! Who are the men who wear these things?" she wondered as she gazed into a well known hosier's.

It was a gorgeous brocade of various rich colours, and it lay heaped up in the middle of the window, close by a wonderful silk tissue of every colour, with threads of gold and silver running through. This, too, was heaped up and showed gold, or many colours, or black and gold as the folds caught the light.

But Jessica did not linger very long at the haberdasher's. So soon as she had decided that an opera cloak of the brocade, lined with the tissue, and trimmed with ermine, might be worn occasionally, she passed on into Piccadilly and Bond Street, going up one side of the latter street with intent to return down the other. This was quite a pleasant sensation. In all the luxury about she now had a share. To-morrow she could have a car as good as any

she saw. She need no longer envy Mr. Tom her electric coupé, or Laura her excellent Lanchester.

“Funny, those two women should cross my mind now. I wonder what they are doing, and what they’ll say, if I go?”

She liked to keep up the fiction of an “if,” but it was dying rapidly. She knew quite well she would go to Paris and to the South where the yacht lay. She had a little twinge of conscience at the thought of Cousin Hugh. I think she bade a mental good-bye to him with something like regret, and I know she was always sorry she had caused him pain. But what will you? What must be will be!

Meanwhile she walked in poverty, and, like the virtuous children in story books, she envied no one.

Then she thought of her husband—her husband—how funny the words sounded now. Much stranger than when she spoke them first on her wedding day. She had married him as a means of getting away from home—now she was going to get away from him. Dimly she wondered if her whole life would be spent periodically “getting away” from one home to another, each in turn to prove a failure.

She tried to analyse her feelings for Desmond. On the whole she liked him, but felt no closer tie than for a pleasant companion who had once taken her down to dinner. The place thereof would know him no more. That was all.

This came as a little bit of a shock to Jessica. Could it be she was heartless? Was she incapable of feeling this thing called love that a woman was expected to feel for her husband as a matter of course?

Was she nothing but an adventuress? She recalled

how she had gazed into all the shop windows, and the extravagant purchases she had pretended to make.

“But an adventuress would want all the diamonds sparkling at her from the windows, and I only proposed a jade coronet.”

Besides, she much preferred pearls. She had seen a few earlier in the day she had thought “would do.” She would have diamonds, of course, but, thinking of the rows on rows of rings, tiaras and necklaces, Jessica had decided the settings were vulgar and she would wait till she got to Paris, where jewellery was really understood.

“I am *not* an adventuress, but I love adventure, and a soft, warm, comfortable life.”

And she fell to dreaming and forgot to play her part in the comedy. It was her cue at that moment to be noticing barrows and evading decayed vegetables. She should have been overloaded with parcels and returning to that lodging where dwelt the teething infant. But her thoughts had wandered to an advertisement she had seen in a Tourist Agent’s window, illustrating the beauties of winter in Algeria. It was vilely coloured, and everything that could be connected with Africa had been centred in that one spot. But it conjured up visions of real sunshine, of bright, glittering seas, of picturesque, novel surroundings, of a careless, free, untrammelled existence in beautiful sunny places. And Jessica forgot the foggy, drizzling weather, but remembered that Basil had said his yacht was in the South, and she believed it was quite luxuriously fitted up.

“I am not an adventuress,” she repeated, “but I love change, and there’s an excitement in wondering how things will pan out. If we’ve each a destiny, why not let destiny lead?”

And she wandered on homewards till she found herself, sooner than she had expected, standing, latchkey in hand, before her own front door.

Then she took a look up at the house; then up and down the street. She did not recollect ever doing that before. She supposed she had hated it too much and had, therefore, avoided any study in detail. Heavens! What a place it was! It really had no single redeeming point, and she had lived there—how long?

Then she put the key in the latch and let herself in, took off her hat, gave the fire a poke, and sitting before it let her thoughts run on.

“I don’t feel anything of yesterday about me. I seem to be in a room I knew a very long time ago and had almost forgotten. Even Desmond is beginning to be only a memory. When he comes in by and by he will be like someone risen from a dead world. Yes, I’m another girl to the Jessica of yesterday, even of this morning! I feel excited, and rather elated, but quiet and content, and above all, absolutely sure the right thing, the one and only inevitable thing, is going to happen.”

And in that mood Desmond found her when he came home, and made the remark at the end of the last chapter.

You will perceive Jessica had only thought how the coming change might affect her material surroundings. It had not entered her head to picture what life might be as the mistress of a man like Basil Lethbridge.

But it did occur to her when Desmond, tired with his weariful day, proposed going to bed early. And, when a little later, they were lying side by side, Jessica thought again, and her thoughts were far too exciting to allow her to sleep all at once.

She suddenly realised that in a few nights it would be

Basil who would expect to sleep with her; Basil's kisses would be on her lips; *his* arms round her body; *his* hands fondling her; *his* limbs against hers. That was something she had not fully grasped! How would she like that? And she lay perfectly still, gazing into the dark room, as still as the sleeping man at her side. But she could hear his breathing; could almost see the outline of his body under the bed clothes, and that dark place on the pillow was his head, she supposed. Lightly, her hand passed over it. His hair was soft and fair and, she remembered, slightly wavy. Basil's was quite different. He was very dark, and his hair was quite straight, brushed off his forehead. She tried to imagine how she would feel were he there at that moment in Desmond's place. The strange body of a man next hers in the night. He was surely stronger than Desmond. Yes! Surely very much stronger.

And she wondered how he would treat her when she was once in his power.

And all the while Desmond's deep, regular breathing, soft and regular, seemed like the ticking of a very quiet clock telling the seconds as they slipped away.

Jessica stretched her whole body. She was quivering; something like quicksilver seemed running through her, for Basil was very strong, and she adored strength. How would he express himself once he was her lover? It would be very interesting to see, very exciting, too!

Then she remembered she was still Desmond's wife, still in the untidy little house in the untidy little street. And Jessica stretched herself again; but this time slowly and luxuriously, happily. She rather enjoyed the sensation of being still where she was. It was another scene out of the little comedy. The finale would be as rehearsed,

and the result also. And it was the result that really interested her.

And yet, even now, she would not avow her intention of leaving Desmond. She lied to herself, as a good many people of blameless repute can and surely do. Well, that would teach her how to deceive others.

Then she wondered if, after all, she wanted Basil's love.

Suddenly she turned and caught her pillow in her arms, buried her face in it; bit it, viciously, while she lay quivering, and again she seemed alive like quicksilver, shaking, twisting, wriggling. Then quickly she put the pillow back behind her head and lay, shivering.

"Good heavens! What is it? What do I want after all? Something besides gewgaws, and beautiful things, and a soft and gay life! It's a man's passion! Strength greater than mine! A personality harder, more masterful!" And for the moment she almost hated the man who slept so quietly at her side.

Then a moment later she felt no sensation at all. Only rather weary and as though nothing mattered. Why should she hate Desmond? He and his life with her were nearly done.

"It is very simple after all," she wound up, "very simple indeed—very, very simple—very, very, indeed—simple, indeed."

And with this satisfying conclusion she dropped off sound asleep, and was soon breathing as quietly as the man whom she still called husband. Dear little Jessica! Sweet little Jessica! After such a day, who would deny you some repose!

XVII

By this time you are probably as weary of Battersea as is our somewhat hectic leading lady. Battersea has neither the faded charm of Bloomsbury, nor the out-at-elbows good humour of Chelsea. It is, in short, just Battersea, and when that is said, all is said.

Patience awhile and we will be off too, and visit scenes of splendour, remote from Battersea, and wherein nothing cheap doth intrude, along of Mrs. Desmond, who we know perfectly well has already begun to pack.

And, when she went, dear Mrs. Desmond did so with no compunction whatever. She might have been going to pay a call, or to spend an afternoon making music with Cousin Hugh, so utterly unmoved was she!

Of course any right-minded young person would have had at least one twinge of conscience. But what can one say for a lady who not only never hesitated a moment when the time came, but felt a very intense and profound relief when it did?

She had her breakfast in bed that morning: this had become a habit with her; and Desmond brought it to her on a tray. That had become a habit with him.

As usual she thanked him prettily, and so entirely composed was she, so much her every-day self, that before she knew what she was about, she had put her arms round his neck and had begged him "not to be late for tea."

And then she remembered that she was going to run

away and wouldn't be home for tea, neither that day nor any other day.

"Good heavens!" thought she. "What have I said?" And she was really very sorry and hoped Desmond wouldn't think afterwards she'd been a hypocrite.

When he left the house, she rose as usual and after breakfast had a long discussion with Mrs. Fletcher concerning that night's supper.

"No. *I shall not be at home to-night,*" said this miracle of composure, and never a hair turned as she spoke. "But I want Mr. Antrobus to have something nicer than usual. What can you suggest?"

Mrs. Fletcher, when called upon for something "really nice" could never soar above pork chops. They were the stars in a firmament of food, to which she would hitch the wagon of her imagination.

Well, pork chops may be excellent things, but hardly the food to tempt a man whose wife has just eloped. Eventually Jessica thought out quite a decent little meal and made Mrs. Fletcher wonder at the interest she took.

Afterwards, Jessica feared she had been a little extravagant. However, she quite sincerely hoped that Desmond would like it, while she joyed at the thought that her partakings of similar diet were done for ever.

She was glad to find herself not quite without heart. She had begun to fear she must be. It was the last thing she could do for him and she had done it with the solemn mien of one who carries out the last wishes of the dead.

And dead to her Desmond was. It was a terrible state of mind, and she knew it, but whip up her sluggish conscience as she might it gave no response. Perhaps the poor thing had fallen down dead in sheer horror at belonging to such a dreadful person.

Lastly, she took another look through her wardrobe. She had bought a few new things these latter days, but those had been sent to Basil's rooms where she would call for them. These "few odds and ends" ("to go on with till I reach Paris") had been carefully chosen and came from those secretive places far too famous and too expensive to advertise. Basil paid the bills, and smiled when he paid.

When she came to examine, nothing seemed worth while taking away, but she made a thorough inspection before deciding. Like Mrs. Gilpin, though she was on pleasure bent, she had a frugal mind.

For a moment she thought to pack her wedding dress. The shawls were extremely good, and would never be out of date. But it showed signs of wear and Jessica considered she didn't want it any more.

So, in the end, she left the house with only what she stood up in. But first she gave a last look round the bedroom.

"Horrible!" was all she said.

Then she went downstairs and, putting her head in at the sitting-room, looked at that.

Then she nodded to the furniture, and the fireplace, noticed one or two deficiencies she didn't remember noticing before, and then let herself out of the house, and, without once looking back, made her way to the Carlton, where Basil was waiting to give her luncheon.

And that was the last time Jessica ever saw Battersea, except on those occasions when she passed between Victoria and Dover. At those times she was wont to pull down the blinds. She thought it looked so sordid.

So she went, wherever her destiny might lead. She had heard the call and had obeyed. For good or ill she

had taken the road she was bound to take sooner or later. Frightfully romantic, wasn't it?

* * * * *

That night as she and Basil were whirled through Battersea in the boat express, Jessica persuaded herself that she could see Mrs. Fletcher's chimney as the train rushed past.

"Just over there!" she cried; "I'm sure that must be the street."

And so for the present, Jessica, au revoir!

* * * * *

When Desmond came home and found his wife still out, he only wondered why, if she were not returning herself, she had so urged that he should not be late for tea, that morning. He thought he need not have hurried so desperately after all.

In due course dinner appeared, but, as we know, Jessica did not. And then Desmond grew a little anxious. And then Sarah told him Mrs. Antrobus had said she would be out for dinner. And then Desmond wondered why she had vouchsafed no word of explanation. He looked round the room and even went upstairs to see if she had left a note on her pin-cushion. But he found nothing, and dinner was getting cold. He had had no proper luncheon and it was useless worrying, so he sat down and ate his dinner.

He rather enjoyed his dinner. It was not till after the meal that Jessica's explanation arrived. It came in a note sent by special messenger from the Carlton. Its arrival was beautifully timed. Jessica was always considerate when it cost her nothing.

She had had the grace to be brief, but the note said all that was necessary. When you consider, what could she say beyond the truth? And if Jessica did possess any virtue at all, it was her honesty. Unfortunately the occasions when truth was possible had always been so few in her experience. However, she was quite truthful in her letter to Desmond, and told him she had gone away and wasn't coming back any more. She admitted her failure as the wife of a poor man, that her conduct must appear heartless, but she feared she had no heart, and she hoped whatever pain he might feel at first, he would come to see one day that she had acted in both their interests. It was quite a short note: but, as you see, it said everything that was necessary.

And the first thing Desmond thought to do was to save Jessica's reputation. Not for the world would he have Mrs. Fletcher discuss his wife.

He rang the bell and told Sarah "that Mrs. Antrobus had been detained by a sick friend and would not be home that night."

But Mrs. Fletcher, to quote her own words when she recounted the tale later to eager friends, "jest tossed 'er 'ead!"

"Sick friend! Mark my words, I sez to Sarah, I sez SHE'S GORN!! And GORN she was. I said as she'd never come to no good, leavin' an 'ome as a queen might live in" (thus did Mrs. Fletcher regard her front parlour), "but I sez to Sarah, I sez, SHE'S GORN!"

Desmond, partly to keep up the fiction that nothing was wrong, and partly to focus his thoughts the better, spent the evening pretending to read a book.

And ever his thoughts went round and round in a circle. By the time her letter had reached him, she was out of

England and beyond recall. There was the insult, and the outrage to pride and love. But worse than the crumbling to earth of all his hopes, far worse was the death blow she had dealt to all those ideals he had cherished of her. And this hurt him beyond the power to tell of it.

As he sat, at first stunned, trying to get some order out of chaos, a royal rage against the woman who had done this outrageous thing came and swept him as a hurricane sweeps the desert. He was furiously, madly, angry. On what had he been expending all this love of his? On a creature who had left him, not because of passionate love, but for the soft, pleasant things her husband could not give her.

Was this the Jessica he had loved?

Little things came back to him, little incidents. He remembered their quarrel in that very room after they returned from the Savoy only a few nights before.

"She must have been planning it even then."

There was no pretence at keeping up appearances now. No pretending to read. He felt no desire to call her back. He had loved her with the love of the eyes. The love of a boy for a woman.

"What a boy I was!" he cried, and in those words lay the root of the matter. He had loved as a boy, had put a halo round her as boys do to the women they love——. Well! She herself had torn off her halo and now she stood before him as she was, just a wonderful piece of flesh and blood, but without heart: cold, callous, and calculating.

"She couldn't wait. She knew what to expect when she married me!" And then he suddenly wondered would this have happened had he done as she had so often begged?

Well, luxury-loving souls cannot wait. They expect everything to fall into their laps at once. And strangely enough it usually does. Not theirs to climb the tree laboriously, and pluck the fruit carefully. They look for others to climb trees and throw fruit into their outstretched hands.

The Cleopatras, the Ninons, the Barbara Villiers, are not for the ordinary, civilised man. They are the throw-backs to days when passion was not a crime but beauty was enthroned. They make their own laws; neither are they, nor ever can they be, merely the property of their subjects. They are absolute and not constitutional monarchs.

It was life Jessica wanted. Beauty of dress, dainty food, the best to be had of music, painting, sculpture: the power to travel, and to travel at her greatest ease, the opportunity to visit famous cities, and view great scenery, these things meant life to her.

She was never meant for such as Desmond. Nor, perhaps, is her kind meant for any one man. So much they demand, so much is absolutely needful to them, just as space and air are necessary for the eagle's flight.

But all this, Desmond could not feel at such a moment. He had loved with his eyes and worshipped with his heart. A youth's love! And now he suddenly seemed a middle-aged man, and mind and judgment stood up, arraigned, condemned, while his love lay bruised and bleeding, and his heart wept of anguish.

And a cry went up within him of indignation, that his pride, his honour, his love, and faith in a woman's honesty should be so remorselessly trampled in the dust.

But he found before long that the world was not merely filled with Lethbridges and Jessicas.

His godfather came forward at once, and insisted on Desmond making his home in Hans Place. Aunt Elinor was tact itself. And little Mrs. Tom (after a long confab with Laura Hobbs, wherein the two ladies heaped all manner of abuse on the runaway's head) showed Desmond the truest kindness, and, after the most charming of little notes, left the boy alone.

But she didn't leave the subject alone. None of the dear women left it. Oh, dear no! They put it in their pockets by day and under their pillows by night, and devoured it till nothing was left. Then they made another like unto it and started all over again.

Said Mrs. Tom to Laura Hobbs: "I said from the first there was something *not quite*, you know!"

Laura knew exactly and nodded acquiescence. Quoth Laura Hobbs: "Bad style, Maud. Handsome, of course. but bad style!"

Maud didn't quite agree. She had always acknowledged Jessica's beauty, if she did find it convenient to forget that the "something" she had noticed in Jessica on their first meeting was not exactly the same "something" she meant to imply at the present moment.

"I think she was handsome," drawled Mrs. Tom.

"I always admitted her good looks," replied Laura. "That's why it seemed such a pity she should touch up her hair."

"Oh, do you think . . .?"

"My dear Maud! That copper tint, oh, very effective! *Too* effective to be real."

"It generally goes with that white skin."

"*Both* are probably sold together. I hear her extrava-

gance knew no bounds. They tell me he's snowed under with bills."

Now that was an unnecessary sin to lay at Jessica's door. She really had been very good about spending money. Indeed, one of the reasons she had gone was in order to have more to spend.

And so she was discussed and pulled to pieces, till, poor girl, she had no more looks left than she had reputation, alas! If her portrait had been painted as these gentle ladies described it, I am certain no one would possibly have recognised it for Jessica, except themselves.

Then they fell to talking of Desmond; and "pitied him," and were "fearfully sorry." But they had to be truthful and say "he never understood her." And some of them began in their hearts to look down a little on the poor boy, and to hold him for something a little cheap since his wife had run away, a thing that after all they were, secretly, rather proud one of their sex had had the pluck to do.

The men consoled in the usual men's way. That is, they said nothing at all, but went somewhat out of their way to be cordial. They asked him a good deal to their houses, and offered him a day's hunting or shooting. In fact, Desmond found himself on his old footing and being treated as he had never been since his marriage.

Yet amidst all this sympathy and consideration, Desmond felt himself to be quite dreadfully lonely. There was only one man he could have confided in fully, and that was Fell. But, as we know, Fell was far away.

And Desmond rather longed for that quiet, sympathetic comrade; but all he could do was to write a long letter, explaining what had happened and, manlike, ask Fell not "to bother to answer." And when Fell read the letter,

amidst the ruins of a prehistoric city in China, the already confirmed bachelor was more settled in his convictions than ever.

There were, also, letters from the fallen away one's family. The horror, the shock of the scandal to them can be well imagined. Jessica's name was never mentioned by any of them. If obliged to refer to her they would do so as "that woman." They were kind people and meant well, and it was not their fault if they were rather dowdy. At least they endeavoured to do their duty as they conceived it.

Desmond was touched by their letters and never forgot their kindness. There came also a heart-broken letter from the vicarage and over that Desmond and his cousin had a consultation.

"I've had a letter from Jessica's father," said the younger man. "I'd like you to read it," and he handed it over to his elder. It was indeed a pitiful letter. The letter of an honest man who felt bowed to the earth with shame. He implored Desmond not to divorce his child but to forgive "till seventy times seven." This was bad advice and Desmond was all for giving Jessica her freedom and thus enabling her to marry and start afresh.

But she herself didn't care. She wrote from Paris saying: "I am quite aware my conduct must appear unpardonable. But I can't help it. I've tried to feel sorry, but I can't. I've been honest in my way and I'm glad of that. As to divorce, it makes little difference to me whether you do or don't. I can never have social position and don't want it."

A perfectly correct, very succinct and quite shameless statement of the truth.

Again from the vicarage came an earnest appeal.

“Those whom God hath joined.” “Jessica will surely repent. Let her know she yet has an anchor left, that there is somewhere she may return.” And with many quotations from scripture, and in language made eloquent with grief, the old man persuaded Desmond not to proceed with the divorce.

But Desmond made it understood that if Jessica did repent she must never appeal to him. Towchester might be open to her, and to her father she could go, but never would he take her back himself. So you see how severe the blow was to him.

* * * * *

“I want some work, Cousin Hugh,” he said one day. “I want to go into the firm.”

“That’s good hearing.”

“I want money and position. And when I’ve got all this I mean to go to her and say: ‘There you are! What do you think of me now?’ ”

“You speak rather bitterly.”

“Well, I feel rather that way. Shall for a good bit, I expect. But you see I’ve learnt such a lot lately. I seem to have grown up quite suddenly.”

“And your literary work?”

Desmond hesitated a moment before answering.

“That seems to have gone. The desire to write, I mean. I’ve been thinking lately if I’d not stuck to it so obstinately, if I’d done as she asked, things might have turned out differently. The fault is a good deal mine.”

“But she knew what sort of life you intended to lead when she married you. Even had you agreed to her wishes, you would only have done so with half your heart.

Your mind would have been elsewhere, you would always have fancied that perhaps. . . .”

Cousin Hugh hardly knew how to finish. Desmond did it for him.

“. . . I'd missed my real vocation? I wonder! I want to make thousands and thousands. I want to prove to every one. . . . You, Tom, Frank, all the lot, that I'm not merely to be pitied. I'm sick of pity.”

And so it came about that Desmond took up the work for which he had real aptitude: something, indeed, of genius.

Then did that patient Penelope, she of the folded hands, rise with exceeding joy and take her darling to her heart and teach him till he began to astonish older heads with his quick decisions and the wisdom of his acts. Yes, Genius was with him now, lit his path so that he might see to run where others stumbled; gave him wisdom so that what appeared insuperable difficulties were to him but shadows of the prize ahead.

His reputation grew. He became known beyond the limited family circle. Tom said: “Desmond would go far,” and Mrs. Tom, first incredulous then amazed, and finally awed, asked Desmond to her most exclusive little dinners. And when, in due time, Cousin Hugh passed on, and Desmond found himself possessed of the house in Hans Place and a considerably augmented income, she never murmured at the legacies left to her own children, but admitted “The two had lived so long together, ever since ‘that dreadful woman’ and goodness knows what's become of her,” etc., etc.

At Mrs. Tom's, Desmond met Lord Ashurst, then in the Government. He persuaded Desmond to enter Parliament, and, as we know, he did stand, and thus it was he

met Margaret Dalison. But this is looking ahead somewhat.

As the years went on, and success came to him, Desmond gained confidence, and a charm of manner, lacking perhaps in earlier years. Very possibly his old struggles, the times when he had been shown the door none too kindly, taught him consideration, so that when it came to be his turn to indicate the way from his presence he always tried to do so in as gentle a manner as possible.

Yet he was not one of those magnetic personalities the public reads about in the "Heartache Series" of novelettes, that draw all men and most things to them without an effort.

Inch by inch he fought, stumbling often, nearly falling sometimes. But inch by inch he won, till we find him honoured, courted, flattered and placed, where none had ever dreamed to see him, and far higher than any Antrobus had ever thought to attain.

"No family he might not marry into," said some of the now obsequious relations; "only you know there's a sad story in the background."

But that story was very dim and hazy now. There was some idea that "Cousin Desmond had been crossed in love," otherwise the old tragedy was well-nigh forgotten until now, after all these years, it lifted up its head again and cried aloud.

Yes, and cried insistently. And the more he got to know Margaret, the more her friendship began to mean, the more she (all unconsciously) was soothing and binding up the remnants of what he had once called love, so more vehemently did that old sore cry aloud.

And Jessica?

"Good heavens! What about her?"

All Desmond could find to say as the thoughts of her crowded in his mind was simply this :

“Dear me! I wonder what she looks like now?”

All the years there had been no word or sign from her. He had not the remotest idea how life had treated her. Whether she walked the streets a beggar, or reigned queen in some wealthy but Bohemian set. All the feeling for her he had was just a curiosity to know what she looked like now.

He remembered her as something very lovely, but that was years ago and he wondered “what she looks like now.”

* * * * *

Yes, it is actually twenty-three years since Jessica whisked through Battersea and tried to identify Mrs. Fletcher's chimney from the train.

That good soul had long since gone to a land where “something 'ot” is said to be always ready, and Sarah had married the milkman and become clean.

Would you care to hear something of Jessica's career? Of how she fared while Desmond was winning fame and fortune?

Then let us go into the cinema (there is no need of a magic mirror these days) and take a glimpse at a few episodes, only, as we have seen the first part already, let us discuss the lady a little till we come to the parts we haven't seen.

I should be glad, somehow, if you could whisper that you don't really think Jessica is a bad woman. I, myself, am far from putting all the blame on her. I think Desmond was to blame also and, whatever he became afterwards, was inclined to be a bit of a prig during his mar-

ried life. Of course he was very young and didn't understand her, but, after all. . . .

"His relations might have been a bit kinder, and I can't say hers were exactly stimulating."

I admit that. But if he had gone into business it would have been to please his wife, not himself. He would always have looked back with regret. Altogether it was one of those disasters so much easier for outsiders to judge. They know exactly what ought to have been done. Had they been in the others' place of course all would have gone well. But this way we can argue till Doomsday. It *did* happen and there's an end of it.

And Jessica's mistake was thinking money brought happiness. Most paupers hold the same error, and perhaps it does bring a certain imitation. Poverty naturally brings nothing. I have met jollity, but never happiness without a little cash.

XVIII

WHATEVER the end the sinner may come to eventually—and it is not always a bottomless pit—one cannot deny that the erring one often puts in a very good time before that end, desirable or undesirable, is reached.

Now, as all things come to an end in this vale of tears, is it better to dance to the end “rose bloomed and violet crowned,” richly appavelled and gaily bedight, or sit in sackcloth and ashes? Surely happiness is the highest power of religion?

So if that is the goal to which all creation is slowly evolving is it not well to bring some of that admirable quality into our lives now?

If you are really happy in sackcloth and ashes; if it is healing and uplifting to wail—most surely lamentation will be your lot till that time when some more Christian thought wakens within you.

But should your idea of the greatest happiness be somewhat parallel with that of Jessica's, then such will be your Heaven until you realise there is something better. Now, between ourselves, of the two states of mind I infinitely prefer Jessica's.

I make no excuses, palliate nothing of her sins, or her heart-breaking misconception as to the real uses of life, yet she, I stoutly maintain, is floundering more surely in the direction of the land of glory, and holds a juster

vision of creation's goal, than the man declaring himself naught but a miserable sinner.

She is out of her course. Her sense of beauty is perverted. She is putting her life to wrong uses. But her heart sings songs of triumph. There are roses in her path, and the sky is high above and full of the songs of birds, and blue as a sapphire's heart.

Life, at the time we take up her story again had become like unto one of those clear, clean southern seas the water-babies wash thoroughly every night. A sea of opal lights, full of mysterious palaces and unknown adventures.

Strange men, strange women dwell there. Large eyed, straight haired and strong. Moving in rhythm, weaving spells that have no meaning for those who are not children of the sea.

Dive through this enchanted sea. Take what first comes to hand. Rejoice in the strange and half savage things you find. And then up to the blue and warmth atop to a greater glory, a life more wonderful than all.

Go on Jessica, there is only one way to salvation, one gate in the end, but many ways lead thereto.

And we may as well acknowledge straight away that since Jessica commenced diving in the sea and experimenting with the things she found there, she had become a much happier and more contented young person.

* * * * *

Evidently this is her bedroom. But what a bedroom!

It is not very large and holds very little furniture, but what there is has been specially made for the room and even Jessica had felt a little ashamed when Lethbridge

showed her the bill. But how could she know it would cost so much?

Certainly, she has realised her dream of a marble bath in a silver shrine. One catches a peep of the water temple through a high archway in the bedroom. And then what a sweet, innocent picture our Jessica makes, amidst a pile of pillows and on the softest of down. (Please note carefully the quality of the linen, and what do you imagine is the value of the lace?) The little breast softly rises and falls, and the breath comes oh, how gently, as it feels its way tenderly through the slightly open lips, red and sweet are they, fragrant too, and pouting like a baby's.

Was there ever a vision of greater happiness or sweeter content?

But how dare she, sinner that she is, sleep calmly as an angel? Rather should she lie awake and weep bitter tears of regret for the innocence and discomforts of Battersea. Alas! our Jessica neither wakes, weeps or regrets. Why should she?

She regards her world as Paradise. True, it grows a tree of knowledge. But the taste of the fruit is very sweet and, far from causing any indigestion, has opened up fresh vistas of delight. In short, this flagrant sinner is without an anxiety in the world.

But is she so terrible a sinner? What outrage has she committed offensive to her ideal?

That ideal may be totally wrong. Everything about her is wrong. To my mind, as well as yours, her whole life is an example of wilful naughtiness! But poor Jessica had no higher ideal to strive after.

So let us call her "poor Jessica," and not be the first to cast a stone. She is at least struggling to the light; and though it be a false beacon, it is the only one she

knows. Surely it is better to worship false Gods than to deny them all? Nor let us forget that Heaven is full of Saints, of the most undoubted sanctity and unassailable position, who have fought their way there out of greater wildernesses than the one so fascinating to Jessica.

* * * * *

Every morning brings a fresh sensation, a new realisation of expensiveness, of quiet, studied order. It is still a novel sensation to hear no hurried Sarah clattering to and fro; no lodger stridently demanding his boots, or Mrs. Fletcher waking the house with raucous voice.

“To be thorough is a great thing. Could I spend three times what I have, I should only triplicate the house. Nothing could be more perfect than it is. One might, of course, have a private orchestra, or better still, a string quartette. That is certainly an idea, I must think about it.”

From which it is evident that Battersea and the untidy little house are left very far behind. She had decided to forget them once and for all, and had very definitely done so the instant she saw the last of them.

On that occasion she had said: “I belong only to the present moment in which I live. None other has any claim upon me, neither the past nor the future.”

And this, I imagine, to have been Jessica's way of taking no thought for the morrow—oh, certainly, she had entered upon the path of righteousness, if, like a crab, she walked somewhat sideways.

Came a soft tap at the door, too low to wake a sleeper; sufficiently loud to catch the ear of one who only dozed.

Enter a maid, all softness and smiles, with a tray of

rolls and exquisite chocolate, a maid dainty yet strong, the very person to wait in such a room; and forthwith flies any spectre of Sarah who might have been hanging around with a cold cup of pale brown tea.

“What scent will Madame use to-day?” asked the successor of Sarah, as she put the rolls and chocolate by Jessica’s side.

Jessica tried to stir herself, but could only think how pleasant it was to be roused to sip such chocolate, handle such china, and dilly with such brioches and butter.

How different to those other wakenings in a room untidy with clothes, with obtrusive shoes, and all the paraphernalia, inseparable from a small room wherein two sleep and dress, and where there was barely room for one.

“I will *not* remember those days. To remember ugly things brings ugliness to one.”

And a very sound philosophy, too, Jessica. You speak wiser than you know. Progress is all in all. Far better plant new flowers than tend dead ones. Dig and manure your garden and wonderful things will grow there.

“What scent will Madame use to-day?”

Really, Sophie must be answered.

“What did I use yesterday?”

“Extract de Mille Fleurs, Madame.”

“Then we won’t use it again just yet. Suggest something.”

Jessica remembered very well what she used yesterday, but she was too lazy to think; also it was good for Sophie to utilise her own brains.

“Madame has not used the *Mille et une nuits* lately.”

“That,” said Jessica, really roused to some show of interest. “Is *not* a scent for the morning.”

Sophie smiled approvingly. She was the very last thing in efficiency, and had even been able to teach the intuitive Jessica a thing or two. She had merely thrown out the suggestion in order, once more, to test her mistress. Sophie liked Jessica, she admired her beauty and her taste. "Madame may be cocotte, but she is *Grande cocotte*, she has an air, atmosphere."

"Would Madame like her own special perfume? That so wonderful invention of Monsieur Clement that he distils for Madame's sole use?"

Yes! Think of it!

Nowadays, if you please, we have our own scent that a famous chemist has thought out for us with much labour and travail of brain. A subtle, strange and individual scent; and sold only to ourselves and those to whom we give a gracious permission to buy. Oh, only the most exquisite and expensive things are admitted within Jessica's chaste doors these days.

Then she remembered that Basil had friends lunching. Racing men, an American millionaire, two or three women who would never have been admitted into the portals of the Antrobus family.

"Let us be simple to-day, Sophie. Give me some of that Italian amber."

"But it is finished," exclaimed Sophie, eloquently spreading her hands. "Madame surely remembers——"

Jessica interrupted quickly. "Madame does *not* remember; I told you always to see I was well supplied."

"*Mais Madame, je suis desolé——*"

"Never mind your desolation," Jessica recovered her good humour very speedily. "Write to Rome for some more at once. After all, I think we'll use Clement's mess!"

“Mais oui, Madame. C’est un parfum très chic,” and a good many other distinctive qualities according to Sophie, who began bustling about with her preparations and her words could not be caught.

And those preparations! First she went through the arch towards the bathroom, but paused in a small glass-panelled octagonal room that lay between.

Sophie cordially approved this room as one could see oneself before and behind, at every angle, and without trouble. Sophie took a good look at the fifty odd reflections of herself and saw how all was well.

Then she opened a glass panel, and lo! a tiny room beyond lit up by electricity, automatically by the opening of the door.

“Madame has decided on that so curious scent, this, therefore, is the peignoir for to-day,” thought the maid, and took a soft silk wrapper of many colours, so deeply woven, they glimmered or disappeared according to the wearer’s movements.

Then Sophia went to another cupboard of innumerable shelves, and took spray, soap, salts and powder, all of the same special scent.

The gown and spray she carried back to the bedroom, sprayed first the window curtains, then the room, and especially the bed till Jessica murmured, “Enough, Sophie. That will do.”

Then the bath was prepared! That low, wide, deep basin, wherein the water always seemed of a special cleanliness. And by that time a curious, but not enervating smell, as of a thousand flowers, filled the little suite of rooms, and when Jessica at last rose and stepped into her bath that too was full of the same scent.

Yes, I fear it was all vastly superior to anything Mrs.

Fletcher had to offer, and I cannot deny that Jessica enjoyed it hugely.

The ritual, I can call it nothing less, of Jessica's ablutions, was also far more ornate than her splashings of former days. How, though the tongue of men and of angels were mine could I bring before you her soft dalliance, till Sophie, accurately timing, warned her that five minutes were up.

I simply can't, not that I am shy, far from it. Perhaps if I take another glance.

Jessica gets out of her bath, and, being quickly dried, lies on a padded marble slab, while Sophie rubs a soap powder into her skin, firmly, systematically, and thoroughly.

First the right foot, then up the leg to the body and, when that is done Sophie does the same by the left foot, up the leg also to the body. Then the body itself is massaged till the powder is rubbed in firmly, systematically, thoroughly.

Then Jessica turns over and the same operation is repeated over again, and when it is all finished she returns to the bath, this time for a cool shower that washes the soap all away leaving her body cool, soft and velvety, exquisitely elastic.

That portion of the ritual done, there follows a sort of after service wherein Sophie fetches the unguents and a big powder puff, and when she is through with these, then, but not till then, like a rose from the night, a Goddess from her sleep, Jessica stands forth and turns unto the day.

"A simple frock, Sophie. That new thing from Doucet's. By the way dinner is early to-night. I am going to the Opera."

"And the ball, Madame?"

"I shall come home to dress after the opera."

Oh, yes! Jessica had her box at the opera, and was going to a costume ball at a famous sculptor's. A marvellous costume had been specially designed for her. Paris ransacked for suitable gauds, but, on the whole, she opined the result would justify the trouble. She knows she will look lovely, she will meet all the world, fill his wife (?) with envy, and will go there in her new Rolls-Royce.

An hour or so later she was entertaining a somewhat motley crowd at luncheon. The men, distinctly overwhelming in their obvious possession of wealth, were mostly of the jockey type, and would appear to be more at ease on the racecourse, though it must be confessed they seemed very much at home where they were.

And our shy young mouse made a most admirable hostess. She had the right word for everybody, and chatted and laughed and kept the ball rolling, with all the charm and atmosphere of some great ambassadress at an Imperial Court. What did she care that she was a social outcast? In her opinion it was far better to reign Queen and rule in her own world than to be merely a lady of honour to some woman greater than herself.

"I wonder if you will ever want to go back," a woman had once said to her. "I mean back to your old world, our world!"

Mrs. Annerley was considerably older than Jessica, and had much the same history. Jessica liked her, she was a woman of wide interests and the similarity of their careers had drawn them together.

"I haven't much to go back to," Jessica had laughed. "My old friends wouldn't know me now."

"You may regret that later on," the older woman replied. "You are so young yet. Wait till you reach my time of day and find yourself with nothing."

For a moment Jessica misunderstood and stared at Mrs. Annerley's pearls, which alone were worth something.

"I didn't mean financially," the other smiled. "I meant without belongings. My day has long passed and I have very few friends. One is a little lonely sometimes without somebody to attach oneself to."

"It is not very pleasant to be entirely at the mercy of one man's caprice. It's hard enough to keep him when your only hold on him is your love, and it's doubly difficult if your hold is only on his money."

"Yes I suppose it is. But Basil and I get on all right. He's not jealous and I'm not bored."

"Take care, my dear, it's never the other way about and *he* gets bored and you jealous."

Jessica merely shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose when a man gets bored the remedy is in his own hands. But if it is the woman a third is needed to unravel the skein."

Some of this talk came into her mind as she played hostess to that refined and distinguished circle. One of her guests was a pretty woman, but, alas! for her, perilously jealous, and the object of her jealousy was a young Irish girl, very fresh and lovely, still new to the set wherein she found herself.

And the poor unhappy wretch was, in the eyes of all the other women, obviously boring her "husband" and continually doing the wrong thing. May be she was feeling out-of-sorts, anyway, she was quite unable to play her part naturally. But "gay" she knew she had to be at any

price. And thus, she over-acted, and for the first time the man recognised his thralldom; and seeking freedom, turned for relief to simple and demure Eileen, who looked like a fairy out of a child's story book.

But that shy, gentle exterior hid a very grasping little mind, and the baby-like mouth, so soft and yielding now, could take a very decided and straight line if it chose, while the blue guileless eyes could glint like steel if the greedy little soul was angered. But this happened very seldom. Little Eileen knew the value of her child-like appearance and played up to it for all she was worth. She was unattached at present and was "chaperoned" by the only woman much over thirty at the table. A woman who had found that if she wished to keep in "the swim" it was increasingly necessary to accompany something young and beautiful.

Any amount of tears of rage had been shed, before she had recognised this unpleasant fact. She had sat for hours in front of her glass trying one, and then another experiment to recall her vanishing looks; and finally, in a fit of ungovernable fury she had smashed the glass. But in the end she realised her day was done, and very sensibly retired from any active part in the play, contenting herself with teaching others how to act and merely claiming a percentage on the "salary" received.

"I wonder if I shall ever come to that," thought Jessica, who knew very well that Laura Spearmint had brought Eileen because a certain American millionaire had been expected. "It's rather a low down game, and yet! if Basil had never turned up I might have been very glad of just such a friend."

Laura was speaking at that moment and her clear high voice rose above the others as she spoke words intended

for Eileen's benefit, but which also came from the place where most people are supposed to have their hearts.

"One should make the most of one's day and not trust to luck for the next."

"Aren't we told in the Bible to make hay while the sun shines?" asked Eileen in her soft little lisp.

The American broke in here with a wise remark most applicable to the occasion.

"The man who makes the most of the present will find his future takes care of itself," said he. "That's sound philosophy. For to-morrow is only the result of to-day. The man who looks after his business well to-day need have no fear that his business won't look after him well to-morrow."

A little silence fell on the company. No one present cared for business, at least not in the American sense. Business might mean solid cash! Or it might mean diamonds, but most certainly it did not mean sitting in an office all day, thinking out schemes for money making. Fortunately, Lethbridge came to the rescue with some fresh information regarding the favourites for the Grand Prix and the conversation swerved round to lighter and more congenial matters.

XIX

THAT afternoon Jessica rested in her little all black "rest room," as was her wont before any strenuous night. She lay half asleep, every nerve relaxed and with a band of black ribbon across her eyes, so they might show no sign of tiredness when she went forth to dazzle.

And as she rested she dreamily followed her thoughts, taking up each in turn, playing with it, and then dropping it.

Her life was exciting, and she would miss that if she and Lethbridge drifted apart and no one turned up to take his place. But there was no fear of that. She had but to make a sign. More than one wealthy wooer was waiting to be her lover.

But she was quite willing to play the game with Basil. She had some remnants of honesty left. Then men did not appeal to her. She preferred them to women, that was about all that could be said for her emotions.

She remembered Mrs. Annerley had once said something rather pathetic about growing old alone in the world.

"Some day I may feel that," thought Jessica. "Some day I may want to get back and be a respectable as well as a charming woman. I think people would appreciate me. I see myself, a good-looking, rich widow, always beautifully dressed, and pre-eminently respectable."

Jessica sighed somewhat over the word respectable. It had an uncomfortable sound.

“If I’m to be *really* respectable, I suppose I shall have to give up dressing so well as I do now.” And she doubted if she would know how to do that. She loved clothes, and decided not to grow too respectable, anyway, not all at once.

“I wonder how one starts? I must spend a lot on charity. They say it covers a multitude of sins, or I might take a house and give dinner parties, only how should I get people to come to them?”

Now she had a very adequate reason for wishing to know what her best course would be under such altered circumstances, but it is so very remote that she need not worry about it yet.

“There’s a lot of truth in what Laura said,” thought Jessica, following yet another train of thought. “It’s what I feel myself. One must make the most of one’s own day. We all get on the shelf in the end, someone comes along, and finding us in the way puts us there and perhaps mutters, ‘What a funny old-fashioned bit of goods!’ Well, if it’s a well-cushioned shelf, what’s the odds?”

Very philosophical, Jessica! But I rather think you will put up a fairly strenuous fight before you yield your sceptre to some younger rival, should that day ever come. But, when one is about twenty, it is easy to think we will be wise at eighty.

A secure position in the days yet to be seemed easy of accomplishment at that distance, and if the terrible disclosures old acquaintances might make occurred to her, she dismissed the fear of any discomfiture by repeating “that no one will recognise me twenty years hence.”

Twenty years seemed a long way to look ahead: and indeed at her age, which of us does not think the same?

Then she came back to the real reason why (twenty years hence or so), a quiet but beautiful country home, with pleasant neighbours, and perhaps a little hunting and shooting, might be very desirable things to possess.

It was a reason she never forgot, but kept tucked away in a corner of her heart and brought forth and played with whenever she found herself with nothing else to do. And as she responded to the caressing insistence thereof and as she lingered over the whispering words in her heart, a sweetness strayed upon her lips, and a tenderness stirred within her that Desmond had never known and Lethbridge most certainly never suspected.

Her life and the things thereof faded, and she floated away beyond the confines of her house, beyond the city, far away, oh, far away, till she found a shady, sheltered village in the South. And there a little white house, very simple, very cosy, and altogether sweet in a setting of roses and honeysuckle, hollyhocks and other old-fashioned flowers, meet for the setting of little white houses.

Bees, too, were there, humming round the open windows, busy among the flowers collecting for the hives whose tips just show above the wide hedge of lavender.

It might be the house of some nice old lady, or romantic old bachelor who had finished with the gay world. And yet there was an elusive atmosphere of youth about the little place winking self-consciously at the sun. No self-respecting *old* person could have lived in such a merry twinkling little house. It was too gay and frivolous. Something more sober for old age, I think, something with less of the sun and more of the moon about it.

Perhaps the gardener could have told us; or that

pleasant faced nurse in her neat white dress, crooning to the beautiful little baby on her knees, might know.

Oh, but of course! This little white house belonged to Monsieur Bébé.

All that order, that neat, fresh simplicity, that careful fencing off of everything not perfectly in keeping with sweet babyhood itself, was for that wonderful, beautiful, little baby boy.

And then, in her thoughts, Jessica picked him up from the nurse's lap and carried him in her arms, going to and fro between the lavender hedges.

And this is why, twenty years or so hence, a country house with a little hunting and a little shooting seemed a very desirable thing.

Dreams! Dreams! But what is the world without you!

How on earth Jessica proposed to carry out her plans she never troubled to think. One thing only she was determined on—her boy should always adore his mother, and be to her what only a son can be to his mother. Neither should he ever feel the lack of father, brother or sister. She will be all these, and guide, philosopher and friend as well—she is fully convinced on those points.

No wonder with these pleasant thoughts Jessica forgot the present. She was in fact very far from Mr. Lethbridge, and remoter still from the excitement of her feverish life of constant competition; and constant pandering to one man's desire. But as yet the fascination of making a man dance to whatever tune she liked to play, had all the element of novelty. And the innocent young lambkin had discovered she could pipe quite a lot of tunes. She would pipe away as artlessly as the lark executing his fantasia in the sky. And every time she piped a man would dance, and every time he danced she

smiled, and every time she smiled the poor fool thought "she loved him." And then she would grow tired of playing that little tune and would play another. Then would another man dance while she turned her back on the first and forgot all about him. Then would he go out and hang himself.

But she has seen other women pipe in vain. Already she had marked—and to her credit let us add had pitied—that furtive look of agony in the face of a woman, fearful of to-morrow, tortured by the sight of a younger, fresher face entering her field. What is the use of putting up a board: "Trespassers will be prosecuted," when you lack the means to carry out your threat, and when the field is really no longer yours?

"No woman should put herself in that position," says the excellent matron in the row behind us as we watch the reel unfolding.

All very well from her point of view, and the good woman has been sharp enough to tie *her* man up in church. And if he should find married life a curse, and run away, well, she would be an injured woman and he a wicked man!

But if Lethbridge forsook Jessica she would be a wicked woman still, while he might marry your own dainty self.

Ah, what a lucky creature is man! His past always fades in time, while his future ever remains his own. But for such as Jessica, the past never quite fades, and the future lies at the mercy of anyone.

But let us take another look at the little white house, and the young mother so admirably concerned on her babe's behalf.

We have not seen many pleasant pictures of poor

Jessica. It has been very difficult to discover in that luxury-loving, sensuous soul, the germ of something nobler. Herself, her comfort, her well-being were pre-eminently the Gods of her idolatry. But this little Monarch, so beautiful, strong and healthy, she knew (and gloried in the knowledge) was something that claimed her as nothing else in all the world could do, and commanded something within her that could never be shared with any of the outside world.

And pray do not shut this book up with a bang, exclaiming "Impossible! She would hate her child, put it out to nurse and forget all about it."

Well, so far, she has certainly not shown one redeeming point, unless it be her simplicity, her naïve acceptance of what she conceives to be right and natural. I freely admit my poor Jessica is about as bad a lot as you can hope to find. She is greedy, she is callous; with brain and talent she puts to no good use. She might do you a good turn if the doing interfered nothing with herself, but the bitterest tale of woe would not rob her of a particle of sleep.

I give you all that, and then ask you to go out one day when the sun is shining and notice how the darkest shadows lie next the highest light. It is always so. It is the old story of the wheat and tares.

"But a woman of that character could never be so exemplary a mother. You insult us by suggesting it."

Aha! There is the rub! It insults you in your womanhood to be told that though she be the very worst of wives, Jessica is also the very best of mothers.

But few are altogether saints, and fewer still are altogether sinners.

Nor is Jessica the common type of woman who sells

her body to the highest bidder so that she may live expensively. She had taste—judgment—a keen critical faculty. There was nothing vulgar about her mind. If she spent lavishly, she spent beautifully also.

Social convention denies such a love, and claims that a bad wife must also prove a bad mother. And the fact that she may prove the tenderest teacher and gentlest, ablest of guides, is something Society prefers to pass over in silence.

And Jessica was still holding her baby in her arms when Sophie took it upon herself to warn her mistress how time was flying. And something there was, some added grace in the lithe, slow movements, some new beauty in the smile, made even the maid exclaim in astonishment!

“But Madame is ravishing! What has she done to herself?”

“Nothing, you silly woman, but dream awhile. White velvet and pearls, Sophie.”

* * * * *

It was an excellent, fair figure that finally went into dinner, tall and slim in its soft white velvet. Yes, very youthful and girlish; and very gracefully it received later on at the opera, only insisting on silence during the acts.

The opera was not in Lethbridge's line, so Jessica had asked two people, a woman and a young author, to dine and accompany her thither. They made a merry party, whose three bright brains kept the talk on an amusing and intelligent plane.

Radiant, too, was Jessica at the dance. She arrived very late. Had she not to go home and dress first? And

to rub her face with some liquid that was warranted "to refresh the skin and keep it free from the enervating effects of the ball-room?"

The host was shortly leaving Europe to hold an exhibition in America, and the ball was a farewell party to the whole Art world of Paris, and part of the greater world as well. He received his guests dressed as a cave man, which costume chiefly consisted of a club. His favourite model was held to him by one arm and leg by a golden chain. Otherwise she wore nothing—but her perfectly good figure. People said it typified their relations.

The gaiety was somewhat out of hand when Jessica arrived, but late as was the hour and occupied as everyone appeared to be, her entrance was as brilliant as ever.

She called herself "Potiphar's wife" and looked extraordinarily effective. Her dress revealed and concealed and glimmered and glinted in a way that was—well, worthy of Mrs. Potiphar. The designer had taken infinite pains, museums had been burrowed, libraries overhauled, shops ravished to find the right tissues and colours. These he had himself draped upon Jessica, watching carefully that all was done as he had planned, and when she entered the ballroom her success was instantaneous. She was superb, triumphant, and she knew it.

Where was her rival, the lovely Claire de Brisson now? That lady had come as the Queen of the Peacocks and a great success had been hers, her dark eyes had glowed and she had all the men at her feet—till Mrs. Potiphar arrived!

But what use to tell of all the glories of the night? We have all been to such balls, and know the crashing of the mad, merry music; the shuffle of dancing feet, the excitement, the flushed faces, the laughter and talk, while

merry jests pass, and pranks are played, and devil a care has anyone. It was all very wonderful and quite different from the reunions of the British Teatable Poetical Society.

Jessica danced with the rest and passed little Eileen with her American millionaire. She was having quite a success too, and had (on Jessica's advice) adopted the costume of "La Dame aux Camellias." "A big crinoline, and a frock—fluffy, soft, white—with little gloves of the period, and a little old-fashioned tight bouquet of camellias. Some in your hair and some on your bodice," Jessica had suggested, when urging the suitability of the character to Eileen's demure little person.

"Real cute, and the most perfectly lovely peach in creation," had been the American's summing up.

And the "most perfectly lovely peach" looked down and blushed while calculating on the exact number of millions he might be relieved of.

If the dance was noisy when Jessica arrived, it grew Bacchanalian as time went on. The Queen of the Peacocks had long ago lost most of her feathers; while Mrs. Potiphar began to wonder whether she was Mrs. Potiphar decked out to allure Joseph in all her glory, or Eve before the Fall.

Louder the music and faster. Coloured lights fell on the dancers. Wilder, merrier, noisier, more and more fantastic, more and more impossible the revel. Lethbridge lowered his hot flushed face, till his mouth was barely separate from Jessica's cool, tantalising lips.

"Mrs. Potiphar! Mrs. Potiphar!"

The shouts came from a balcony that ran round the room and showers of roses were flung at her.

"Mrs. Potiphar! Mrs. Potiphar!"

The shouts came again, and the host's pupils, dressed

like himself as cave men, made a rush into the centre of the room, and snatching Jessica from her partner, carried her in triumph upon their shoulders round the room, and round again!

The idea of Potiphar's wife appealed to those light hearts, and the lark, started by a few boys, caught on, and spread through all the noisy crowd that soon formed a procession and danced round the room, beating cymbals, blowing on horns, playing any improvised instrument that suggested itself while cries of "Madame Potiphar! Madame Potiphar!" almost drowned the music of the band.

Lethbridge got her back in the end, breathless, dishevelled, her dress torn, and her jewels scattered. Laughing, gasping for breath, she gave herself up to him, and he carried her off there and then, hot for her, rampant to possess his own.

* * * * *

The little white house has gone to sleep long ago, its little shutters closed, and the bees are silent in their hives. It had nothing in common with all that noise and glitter, with the brilliant fêted woman, the crashing music, the mad dancers, the lights, the joys, the triumphs, and the disappointments. And to make one triumph like Jessica's, how many failures are needed?

Nothing with all this had the cool little house to do, set away in the shrubs and dew-drenched lawns, and less than nothing with the man who almost crushed the woman in his arms, whispering hoarsely:

"You devil, you devil. Kiss me again, you devil."

Proud of her he was, proud that his bargain had proved

so successful, and it was a late, late hour next day when an exhausted, unshaved, tousled man rolled out of bed and stumbled towards the bathroom.

And a much, much later hour it was, before a trim and faultless maid thought well to inquire in her soft and deferential voice:

“What scent will Madame use to-day?”

But Madame had no intention of rising even then. It was not till late in the afternoon that Jessica’s bell rang, and once again Sophie put the inevitable query.

“What scent will Madame use to-day?”

“Lily of the Valley,” answered her mistress, still feeling a little languid and wishful only for simplicity.

But a few days after these lurid events Jessica suddenly decided to shut up house.

“I want rest and change,” said dear Jessica to dear Basil.

“All right,” he answered. “But come back soon.”

And as he saw her comfortably settled in the train:

“Give the youngster a kiss from his godfather and tell him he’s the only male thing I’m jealous of.”

“That’s really very nice of you,” answered Jessica, quite touched for the moment. “I’ll give your message exactly.”

It was late autumn and winter’s feet had already trodden the tips of the hills. Beeches, oaks and chestnuts had shed their summer leaves to give place to finer, greener clothes they hoped to wear next spring. These each tree was making slowly, with infinite patience, and no little talent.

But how lovely are the woods in winter! How the shape of each tree stands out against the red of the passing sun! How finely do they rise from the crisp leaves

thick as sands about the sea. And as we rustle our way through the deep places of the woods, something of summer comes back in the smell of the warm dust rising as we go.

Beautiful crisp, sharp woods of winter, crackling and splintering under foot, what shelter for little scampering things do your leaves provide!

Thoughtful, kindly woods! Brown and rugged, thin but comely, with here and there a yew and here and there a holly. And winding in and out, as though it had no business there, a little trickling water, trespassing and timorous, yet greatly daring withal, beating through cobwebby ice delicately woven in frost.

There is a silence in the winter woods that summer with her jolly court can never know. There is a silence in the winter birds more deep, profound and sweet than any song the blackbird sings; and there are people in the winter woods busy as any midsummer Puck, while songs are heard as loud as any pæans of the spring, and multitudes whisper in the winter woods that are silent in the noisy summer days.

Now if we make no sound, we may hear the little people move amidst the bracken; not the folk we knew in summer, who passed with pageantry and song. Such are the children of the sun, the roysterers. These little brown people are the keepers of the earth, and toil they ever so hard the winter through their work is never done. They tip the holly tree with berries; hang the hips and haws out on the branches; and see the ice is broken in the little pools in quiet places, so birds may get more easily to drink.

Comes now, loping through the byways of the forest, a low figure, flaming like a torch, streaming, creeping in

and out the woods, or like a tongue of fire that steals in secret through the rafters in the roof.

Silently and stealthily, very warily and cannily, to some unspoken destination.

So calm the life about us, so organised and well apportioned, yonder sudden scuttling of some hurried little person breaks upon us like an outrage and we start as though at thunder.

There he goes, way on ahead, across the bank on our right in that whirl of leaves! All brown fur and startled eyes!

Yet this is the hour of safety, the hour when the pale moon, looking like some great primrose, comes out to salute the sun, who stands in full state and then passes on to function in another world. The huntsman has long ago called off his hounds; you may see them winding along the lanes to kennels, each dog doubtless thinking of his bed of straw and discussing the day's sport as thoroughly as the followers riding in twos and threes behind.

The man with the gun can see no longer; his thoughts are turned from killing and stray towards the comfort of his own fireside. A tacit armistice has been proclaimed; there is nothing to fear from men, only a little later they may have to be careful of each other.

The little people, however, are still busy putting things to rights, even occasionally snapping off a branch sharp in their eagerness to have everything snug before the last flickers of the light go out.

Now the birds warm their nests for the night, and the blue comes creeping up from the valley. No sound is there until the silence shrieks like some tortured thing as a rush of flame reels, rocks and roars, heaving across

the land suddenly from out the hill to pass, thudding, into the distant night.

Up comes the blue shroud and hushes the world to sleep again and mends the broken silence. No nightingale breaks the stillness of a winter night; no dog barks from farm or fold; nor cattle, restless and hot, low their complaints.

Yet someone walks abroad when you least think anyone is there. Someone who notices every blade of grass, and every twig on the tree, and loves the tops of the little furrows in the ploughed land, but most of all, I think, is he enamoured of the big rough hedge where the bramble leaves yet cling.

He is a great craftsman and cuts the world out in silver to hang upon the brow of the night, or diadem the forehead of the sun.

But let us get clear of the woods. It is growing late and we hinder those who yet have work to do.

Out on the uplands we may linger if we will, mark the hills washed into purples, the great shadows and pale streaks of light, and everywhere the tingling, pulsing, energy that now lies down to rest.

There is no wind to-night, only a cold air breathing.

The earth hangs in an ocean of air, like a great ship she navigates through space, sailing in silence—and to what port? To-night, the earth might be some mighty primeval god, housed in a monumental shrine. A god alone in space, awful, silent, waiting the worship overdue.

Is there not some great dead, laid out in state, down there in the valley? Are there not prophets on the hills? Are there not watchers in the woods? Are we alone, you and I?

And overhead the yellow moon wanders vaguely up and down her empty halls.

The moon is like a yellow lily to-night. She hangs in the air as the earth hangs. But the earth is alive, and the moon is dead. The moon is heavy, and dull, but the stars are like the twinkling feet of dancers. The moon is like the palace the revellers have left. The stars are the lights of heaven seen through little windows.

Soft hands beckon to us from the mist. Strange people are concealing themselves in the mist. They gather together in the shade of the trees. No man has seen them, neither may we see them, but we know most certainly they are there. Who are these strange people moving and waving to us from the mist? Who bid us leave them to their solitude? What matter who they are? We must obey. Let us leave them to their lonely world! We are far from home. Let us go.

* * * * *

Welcome burst of light at the wide hall door and gushing warmth that rushes out to meet us! Come, pull up chairs to the big log fire, spread hands to the hearty flame, let comfort get hold upon us, so we forget those vague forms still creeping outside in the mist.

* * * * *

This is the inmost sanctuary. The other rooms are but outer courts, but this sacred place is where His Majesty deigns to receive his subjects.

We are privileged to enter and watch the proceedings of the court, therefore I pray you to come with me.

He is a fine, sturdy little man, pink and glowing from the bath, struggling cheerily in his mother's arms.

“Darling,” cries the enraptured mother.

Gurgle and chuckle and crow and broken little words for answer.

“He gets stronger every day, nurse,” cries Jessica, delighted to feel the strong arms struggle and the sturdy kicking of the little legs. “He grows in the night, like—like, what is the most beautiful flower that comes up quickest, my darling?”

But nurse is quite matter of fact, like all thoroughly efficient people.

“He’s stronger than a flower, madam. He’s like a hoak. Feel those arms, and look at his legs. There’s muscle!”

Jessica does as nurse bids; she has done it often before and will again, and ever with increasing pride.

“You’re not to say it to please me, nurse, but did you ever see a finer child at his age?”

“Never, ma’am, and I’ve nursed many.”

And Jessica nearly raised the woman’s wages on the spot. I am not going to discuss the order of the bath, with its sweet performances and ministrations, and its no less sweet little naughtinesses.

Beautifully, perfectly, does Jessica play her part, but it takes a long time, so often has she to stoop and kiss the exquisite little body on her knee.

“Quicksilver and gold, all wrapped about with beauty,” sings Jessica. “Mother’s delight and everyone’s envy, and her own, own ownest one,” and many other silly things which show her to be soft headed if her heart is made of more durable substance.

But the hero of all this loving ceremony suddenly decrees for bed. A small thumb goes into a small mouth and Jessica carries her boy into the night nursery, and

walking softly up and down, sings her child to sleep, the little head nestling at her breast and her own lovely face bending down close to his.

She sings the old, old nursery songs: "Little Jack Horner," and "Here we go gathering nuts and may," and one or two of the old, old nursery hymns: "There's a home for little children." Many a time had she sung it when, as the vicar's daughter, it had been incumbent on her to attend the children's services at Towchester. Words and music seemed banal then. Now they had a charm, almost a tenderness and certainly a wistful appeal, as asking for a little kindness.

"And a more perfect mother, I have never seen," says nurse to her underling as the two women set the bathroom to rights.

She was a most estimable woman born to nurse children, to be adored by them in their babyhood, bullied, and obeyed by them as they grew older, confided in by them in after years, though possibly still held a little in awe since she ever told them exactly what she thought of them.

"There's a Friend for little children." If the painters who so constantly and vainly sought permission to paint her portrait, could have seen Jessica then, surely they would have chosen to picture her with that light in her eyes, that smile about her lips, that tender strength in the enfolding arms, and the unstudied poise of the graceful head.

There are many pictures of Madonnas and many are very beautiful, but I know none so wistful and in its own way so pathetic, or wherein so much mother love is shown.

And when you hear of the sins and follies and the wel-

ter of degradation that Jessica passed through, never forget the picture of this most admirable of mothers singing her child to sleep with the hymns of childhood, content and happy, proud of her motherhood, and with a look on her face no man ever knew.

But it is over now. The monarch of all he surveys is sound asleep, and Jessica has given the last little tuck to the little clothes, the last kiss on the little cheek, and for the last time, the little thumb has been, oh, so gently, removed from the little mouth. One last look round, a few little pleasant words and smiles, and Jessica leaves the two nurses to themselves.

Oh! those little words and smiles of Jessica! They fall from her as easily as dew upon the flowers of May, and yet, what havoc they can work!

There is one man who has been in love with her for years, just because she gave him a smile in the theatre!

He told me it was the way she turned, and looked, and smiled; and when I asked what she'd said, he replied: "Nothing, we were only of the same theatre party, and I never got a word with her all the evening."

What wonder then, that when she really set herself to be pleasant she should succeed to such perfection? To her dying day the nurse remembered the picture of Jessica bending over the nursery fire, smiling and saying something kind, and she would tell you "she don't remember exactly how it was, but it was quite different to the manner of any other lady I have known."

Warm with her work in the nursery and feeling the need of fresh air, Jessica picked up some furs in the hall and took a quick walk in the garden before settling down for the evening.

"How perfectly lovely it is!" thought Jessica. "And

underneath this ground lots of things are growing, all sealed up safely till the right time comes to let them out. It's like a busy man in his office. Great schemes, great plans are going forward in his brain."

That evening after her simple dinner, simple and short—but need it be said most excellent?—Jessica took out her fiddle and played to herself for hours.

Softly she played, though the drawing-room being an addition to the house, no sound could reach the nursery. Occasionally, she amused herself with sudden little impromptus; she was not performing for the benefit of any musician, not even strictly for her own pleasure. She was in reality talking out loud, thus she was led to take a theme and improvise—she never remembered her variations—could not have played them even a second time.

"When I am old and grey," thought she, with the assurance of youth that only believed in its own eternity, "when the boy has grown up, we will live together. He must go to Eton"—oh, Jessica!—"but he must know French, and when he knows French he shall go to Italy. Oh, I want to be something wonderful to my boy." Here the fiddle went suddenly into a labyrinth of arpeggios. "He must always love me, and I will, I will be the best mother in the world to him. I must get hold of a man who can be a real friend to him in the future. He will want someone to tell him where to go for collars and ties and boots. But in all essentials my boy will always be mine."

The violin changed the tune and it was a delicate air went forth on the winter night.

"When he is a little older, when *I* am a little older, it will be time to settle down. After all, it might be wiser to stay abroad. People don't ask so many questions.

England might be difficult, besides I hate the climate. Then the boy must swim and handle a boat. Still, there's no hurry—Che Sara, Sara.”

Then she put her fiddle away and, sitting by the fire, looked into the blazing logs and built plans for that nebulous by and by, yet such a great way off.

This little white house knew nothing of ostentation. Jessica's taste was too good to permit the intrusion into her country cottage of the splendour and sumptuous appointments of her city home. But it was obviously the home of a rich young widow, who, it was understood, had taken the house chiefly for her child's sake. It was very simple, but very good, and consequently quite extraordinarily expensive. The neighbours knew that Mrs. Lethbridge was English and therefore, they also knew, mad, in any case far too young and pretty to bury herself alive. She often came to stay, was a perfect mother, and a charming neighbour. As to anything more: “Have we not told you she is English, and, of course mad!”

The next day passed happily, but quietly, mostly in attendance on His Majesty, and when evening came round there was again the dinner alone, and another evening—alone also.

That night Jessica brought out some new and difficult music that she meant to work up during the long evenings. It proved quite exciting and the time passed quickly. She was surprised to see how late it was. The new composer was complex but extraordinarily interesting. “What a pity there is no one with whom she can talk him over.” Yes, indeed! H'm!

The next day was a repetition of the last, but feeling a little triste, Jessica invited the local doctor and his wife to dinner. Good, worthy people, and the hostess did her

best to entertain them. It was somewhat of an effort, but ten o'clock struck at last, and the visitors, with their early country habits, rose on the first stroke to depart.

"I wonder if the time will come when I, too, shall think it the right thing to say good-night the instant the clock strikes ten," Jessica wondered when once more she found herself alone and sitting gazing into the great log fire. "Really, the way those two good people hurried off to their bed was almost indecent, but they're kind, dear souls. Life must be very easy in a village like this, very healthy too. I wonder how the boy would like to be a farmer? I might buy a farm. Fresh eggs and cream are so good."

But even as she spoke, she yawned. The house was surely curiously silent. Jessica rose impatiently and looked out into the night. How solemn! How portentous! Very vast and eternal, and singularly aloof, as though it despised her and her little plans, her little life and everything about her. It was all so black and big, it seemed to engulf her! She drew the curtains and, strange! but the same curious air of expectancy, of aloofness, had crept into the house. Even her tables and chairs appeared to be gazing at her, much as a dog squats watching his master.

"It's absurd, but everything seems to have life. Petrified, but with horrible active brains, and they dare to criticise me. I could imagine they were making up their minds about me, and the moment I go upstairs they will begin picking me to pieces."

She went into the hall. The same quiet, scrutinising, watchful eyes were there also. She went back into the drawing-room and took up a book and sat down to read. It was a new book, one that had created a good deal of

stir, and Jessica was very anxious to read it. After two minutes she put it down—a log had fallen with a crash that seemed to her tense ears a most colossal noise.

“Why should the country get on one’s nerves? Do we town folk lose a certain sense? Does some little nerve in us get atrophied?”

Eventually she went to bed, feeling that every stick of furniture in the house disapproved of her. She peeped into the nursery on her way and found all very still save for the breathing of the occupants.

Jessica had no maid at the little white house. Sophie would not have been in the picture, besides she would have talked and that would never have done, so Jessica put herself to bed and rather enjoyed the, by now, somewhat novel experience.

Next morning was one of those very still days without any wind, or sun, but with a certain amount of light and a certain amount of cold air.

Jessica went out and found the silence more than she could endure. She would have shaken the trees if by so doing she could have put some life into them.

“These trees are most superior persons,” she said as she walked quickly through the woods for the sake of exercise and because there was nothing else to do. “They remind me of elderly dowagers, impregnable, patronising, and without the minutest sense of humour.”

Finding luncheon by herself intolerably boring, Jessica adjourned to the nursery and shared her own meal with the nurse. Jessica insisted on nurse acting as hostess, and altogether she quite enjoyed herself.

In the afternoon the car took her for a little drive, and brought her back for tea, and for that meal (and for the same reason) she again invaded the nursery.

Then came the bath and concluding rites, all dutifully and delightfully performed—but after that? When she found herself alone—or dear! oh dear! She thought the evening would never close.

“I’m perfectly happy in the nursery, but I can’t live there,” sighed poor Jessica. “Nurse wouldn’t like it. She’s an expert at her job. That’s why she’s here, and experts hate amateurs messing around.”

She picked up the book of the night before, but couldn’t fix her attention on it for two minutes. She picked up her fiddle, but struck such a wail of anguish the poor thing might have been possessed.

“It was just nine when I began to fiddle last night and the night before that. If I fiddle every evening at nine, some time when someone was here, I should smash it over my visitor’s head. I know I should.”

Poor Jessica! Already bored to the verge of tears. And yet with what real joy did you not hasten to pay one of your by no means infrequent visits to the little white house! How impatiently you spun along the road from the station! And how the whole world caught the blazing joy within you when you held that soft little crowing person in your arms once more.

Your love is just as great, your tenderness as true, your devotion undiminished—and yet—and yet . . .

When she got herself into bed that night, she sighed resignedly: “I am a most unnatural mother,” and turning over, fell into her usual sound and healthy sleep.

The next day Lethbridge received a wire that his truant would be back for dinner. The servant who took her telegram thought she was wiring to her maitre d’hotel.

XX

CUSTOM is very curious, it gives one even stranger bed-fellows than adversity! There is nothing one cannot get accustomed to in time, and our turtle doves became so used to each other, and the connection lasted so long, that the liaison became almost respectable. Indeed, they threatened to sink into graves which, if not exactly honourable, could not be stigmatised as altogether unhallowed.

In time they might even have wanted to go and get married, and who could blame them? One must do something, and marriage would have been a new experience, and might have turned out quite a success. You never can tell. True, there was once a couple who never had a word till they foolishly decided to marry. That spoilt an otherwise perfect arrangement. Each felt the other had taken a mean advantage of a moment's weakness. I believe they even took to flinging things at each other's heads! Ah, well! You never can tell.

And this might have befallen our loving couple, but for a sad accident. One day, when hunting in Leicestershire, Basil broke his neck. That upset things. They could never be the same again, could they? Not after that.

Jessica was deeply grieved, and wondered if she ought not to wear widow's weeds? Her friends said it was quite unnecessary, but, on the whole, she thought it would

look better, and ordered the most expensive, and becoming, that could be got. She was also genuinely touched at the nice little sum bequeathed her, and the letter he had left with his solicitor to be forwarded in case of his death.

He thanked her for the good time they had had together. He had grown much fonder of her than he had thought possible, and trusted she had never regretted their union either? He said he was sorry sometimes, in his better moments, for the husband she had left, especially "considering all the circumstances which might have drawn them together perhaps." It was a good letter, and Jessica appreciated both it, and the writer's motives; she also appreciated the nice little sum in ready money which came quite unexpectedly and more than paid for her weeds.

"I never expected anything. He had been more than generous. Poor fellow. He was a good chap." And she had serious thoughts of settling down, and leading a quiet and godly life, and refused all invitations for quite a long time.

However, Jessica never turned fully the leaf she had half turned over.

She was still young, and a hundred hands pulled her back, so in the end she allowed herself to be pulled. About that time she began to travel far and wide, and penetrated where few women had ever been. But ever she soon returned to Europe. A few months in Uganda or China were enough. From Japan she went to America, but wherever she went success followed her. In the States she was offered fabulous sums by theatrical managers to appear at their theatres. But theatrical life seemed wearisome and overrated. The salary and advertisement were

both magnificent, but then she did not stand in need of either.

Still, no one denies the phenomenal success of a certain film entitled "The Vampire Vamped," was entirely due to the much featured "Lovely Mrs. Anning" who played the vampire, and bore a striking resemblance to the Mrs. Desmond Antrobus of a few years before.

However, this is all as it may be. Only when Jessica left America she was certainly a much richer woman than when she landed there.

She still dreamed dreams, but always the time was not yet. At twenty-two she had given herself till thirty-two, well, what is thirty-two after all, when you are thirty-four? Besides she had grown somewhat acclimatised to her life, I don't think she could have quite given it up altogether.

About that period of her career, she began to hear rumours of Desmond. At first the news came as quite a surprise. She had almost forgotten him. But as he rose in importance, she was bound to hear about him, and when he stood for Parliament she grew quite interested.

But it was the news of a stranger, and when she met his portrait in the papers, she was shocked to see how he was ageing. She flew to the looking-glass! fearful lest she might show signs of a similar tendency. Thank heavens! If the girlish lines had vanished, they had only merged into those of a very lovely woman. Jessica put the glass down with a sigh of relief.

"Poor Desmond, I suppose it's the life he leads," she said. "We were no good together. We strangled each other. Our epitaph should be 'United they fell, divided they rose.'"

Jessica made a rapid calculation and was quite astonished to find how long ago it was since she had left that horrid house in Battersea. Good heavens—it must be quite—how old was her boy? Yes, quite a long, long time.

She looked in the glass again, very carefully, very critically. Really it was wonderful. A glow of satisfaction warmed her heart at the sight, and she sat down to write to that same boy, now doing quite respectably at a very excellent school.

She herself at that time happened to be yachting about Greece with some friends. “Charming people, dear boy,” she wrote, “and a most beautiful yacht. The host is a man of great wealth, a good fellow, and does us all extraordinarily well.”

There was no mention of a charming hostess! There very seldom was on these occasions. But Jessica knew quite well that self-praise was no praise.

There was a curious bond between the mother and son. The love, the care and thought of former years had not been wasted. Her passionate love for her boy was returned fully by the young schoolboy who was enormously proud of his beautiful mother.

Sometimes he wondered if she wasn't a little lonely. He knew she visited pleasure haunted places during his school term, but she did not seem to make many real friends. True, there was a certain Mrs. Annerley, a quiet, dignified, old lady with wonderful white hair, and there were two or three others. They were kind to him, and quite charming to his mother, but the boy thought they were rather old and uninteresting.

I think on the whole Jessica had practically solved the problem of leading two lives. It took a bit of contriving.

But she had certainly grown a harder woman. It amused her to steal another woman's man. It amused her to get all she could from some fool and give nothing back, and she found an excitement in playing one man off against another, and hoodwinking both.

She could afford to be a little reckless. She was a very rich woman now, and just as years ago she had said "Social position is nothing, there is always someone with a better," so now she made the discovery, "however rich the lover you quarrel with to-day, there is always a richer round the corner."

But not many ladies can afford to play with their bread and butter in this airy, fairy fashion; but Jessica was rather an exceptional lady. She was Queen in her own kingdom. The gilding of the palace might be somewhat tarnished, the splendour rather more opulent than regal, still it was a kingdom, and one of the most ancient in the world.

But for only one of all the courtiers who crowded her court did she ever feel any respect; and once only had her heart been touched, once and once only had she caught a glimpse of that elusive thing named love.

She was well over thirty then, and he was the merest boy, very Saxon, very fair, very English.

It is by no means a happy experience for Jessica. The boy first dazzled, flattered, carried off his feet, became rapidly disillusioned. He was distinctly sane, and when Jessica over-acted her part, as every woman does who falls in love with someone much younger than herself, the boy grew visibly bored. He was ashamed of the costly presents she showered upon him. It galled him to be taken about and paid for as though he were one of her goods and chattels. It riled him to be chaffed about any

girl acquaintances she might have seen him with, the truth being, she was terribly jealous and sought to find out if she had a rival. The boy resented her treatment, and grew (to use his own vernacular) "fed up." So one fine day Jessica received a large parcel and a small, very boyish, stiff little note, thanking her for all her kindness, but adding, "I don't feel I can accept all these presents. It's awfully good of you, but I'd rather not."

"Never again," cried Jessica. "Never again! Fancy my being such a fool as to fall in love with a boy! I grew jealous, and showed it. I overdid the whole thing. The moment a woman allows a man to think himself indispensable, she becomes cheap. He feels so secure that he takes time to look at the rest of us."

Evidently she had been betrayed into becoming a bore! She was—well, how old was she? Something over thirty. She was still magnificent, still a reigning beauty, still the Queen she was ten, twelve, or a few more years ago. But the boy was barely twenty, and, above all, she had bored him.

She got over it in time. (In quite a short time to be truthful.) And ever after she treated boys as though she was their elder sister. In fact was a very good friend to more than one. They all became her slaves, and she quite enjoyed mothering or sistering them. She was a good soul really, but occasionally she lost her balance.

She had a great heart, yes, a very big great heart, but clasped, clamped, chained with iron, a little key could open it. And that little key was in the hands of a child, a child now grown to boyhood.

May we not call that heart of Jessica's her temple, her cathedral? Therein dwelt the immortal part of her; very different from the material, feverish, pleasure-loving

creature that haunted the golden, glittering, gorgeous palaces of joy.

And in one of the corridors of such a palace was it that Jessica met with her great adventure.

He was called the Toreador. He was not a toreador; in fact no one quite knew what he was, but most certainly he was not that.

How he got into the palace at all was ever a mystery; apparently his sole credential was his ability to riot when the rioting was rowdiest, and feast when the feast was most rich.

Some said he came from the east, vaguely aware the east covered a multitude of sins. Others that he came from the Argentine, full well knowing the Argentine covered a multitude of millionaires. But whether he came from north, south, east or west, nobody really knew.

But wherever the revellers revelled most wildly, where the dice flew quickest and the wine flowed fastest and the dance was danced most nakedly and unashamedly, there was he, the wildest, most drunken and abandoned of the lot.

A thousand stories gathered about him. It was said he was insatiable regarding women, that his mistresses led the lives of slaves. He was the laughing stock of all, and the fleeced of most who met him.

Jessica, feasting at a rich man's table, found he was regarding her with much the expression she imagined a farmer would scan the prize cattle at a show.

She caught his eye and involuntarily she smiled. To her chagrin the possible purchaser made no response, but, having run his eye over her, proceeded to examine the other exhibits.

Now this was the greatest feast the rich man had ever

given. Flowers hung in great festoons, or twined in garlands about the pillars or the portals of the doors. Banks of sweet blossoms, flowering plants, were set about the rooms, wine flowed in fountains; wine was as plentiful as water in the sea. Delicate fruits were placed on tables of gold set with precious stones. Music rose from dark green bowers. Songs rose from delicate throats, trilled like silver flutes and brought the groves of ancient Greece before one. Over all shone lights, and all around the revellers laughed and joyed.

And through the mazes of the palace, through the carved and golden doors, beneath silver ceilings, past tapestried walls, treading silken carpets the softest that ever the east could weave, moved Jessica, the Queen of all that court.

At this period I think she had developed her greatest beauty. The time was past when she danced all night, and gone the days when Madame Potiphar would be carried round the room, but still certainly, most certainly, she reigned Imperial Empress of the Feast, and the Toreador thirsted for her when he marked her great success.

The dance went on. The lights turned brighter and fresh petals fell from hidden places. The Toreador saw nothing of the delicate splendour. The subtle art of opulent magnificence treated as nought by the certain rich man who gave the feast. He knew but to drink strong drink and eat rich food greedily as animal feeds on animal and passion grows with passion. He looked again at Jessica, and her white body gleaming through tissues proved more exciting than naked beauty unadorned.

There was a cool green place, where water tinkled, open to the night, bared to the great big stupid moon, and a few stars shaking as in fear. Passion was sleeping there, with one eye open. Opportunity lurked in the background, ready to spring.

Rose up scent of syringas, lilacs, orange and lemon groves. The air hot, heavy, silent, thick with desires; with dead pagan passions waiting their rebirth.

Cool, green, sequestered place! How set about with cunning traps! Oh, little place of green, how other art thou to that which thou would'st seem.

Here, unlooked for, unexpected and unsought each found the other. She, halting for an instant's breathing space, he half drunken, brutalised, bestial, blood-shot eyed, flaming cheeked, openmouthed. He made a sound, something between a grunt and a bellow, swayed, staggered, and stumbled towards her.

Behold them! Intoxicated with pleasure, doped with the din of the revel, clinging breast to breast, lip to lip, so close no trail of breath escaped.

Oh, certain rich man who gave the feast, was it for this you made that place of green? Open to the night and few stars shaking as in fear?

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Now came an experience undreamed of in Jessica's philosophy. Ever in too great a hurry, this time she had rushed into a union that soon proved not so much union as bondage.

That night of the feast, with the sound of the band, the wild jollity in her ears, the ferment of wine, and her senses dancing to the piping of her blood, straight he

had carried her off unresisting; and nauseating, obscene, had been the revelation of the man.

She had had her experiences, but nothing so vile, no such unbridled passion, or lustful exhibition had come her way before. Unspeakable were the terms in which he showed himself.

She speedily learned that he was nearly always in a condition bordering on the madness of drink. She was ashamed of him, ashamed of her association with him, humiliated at their ghastly orgies, but she cowed before him like a dog. She dared not defy that heavy jaw, that thick, black, crisp hair, those glistening, blood-shot eyes.

He would strip her and make her stand naked before him. Then he would cover her with ropes of pearls, strings of diamonds, rubies.

She despised him for the blatant vulgarity with which he squandered money, and Jessica suspected he was recklessly throwing away some quickly made fortune, yet with all her reputation the very horror of her position held something that appealed.

By day sickened, revolted; by night yielding utterly, stunned by the sheer brutality of the man. Even while she loathed, she enjoyed the depth of degradation into which she had sunk. She had met her master and she liked being mastered. He would beat her, kick her, black her eyes for her and she took it all without a murmur.

One night they supped late at a restaurant and some old friend of Jessica's crossed the room and spoke to her. She had found it wise never to speak to any man when the Toreador was by. To-night she could not help herself, and she knew she would have to pay.

The Toreador sat glowering and drinking; then he

broke into the conversation and insisted on going home there and then. He raved in the car like a maniac and shook her till she could hardly see. Arrived home, he dragged her upstairs like a bundle of clothes. He ran so quickly that she fell. He dragged her to their room, kicked open the door, flung her down, and with hands and teeth, tore every flimsy rag off the wretched, expostulating, terrified woman.

He did not trouble to turn on the light. By the street light through the window Jessica dimly saw something animal, swarthy, twitching, with distended eyes, black hairy limbs, raining blows, making sounds in no language that she knew. Sick, sore, half dead she lay, the shreds and tatters of her draperies strewn the floor and a broken necklace scintillating like a miniature milky way across it.

At last he got up, at last he had thrashed her enough, at last he got into the bed. From there he whistled as to his dog, and the woman writhed across the floor till she pulled herself up upon the bed beside him.

The next day, all the long long day, stupid, dazed and stunned they lay, drugged as with opiates. The room wrecked, broken furniture, smashed mirrors and torn clothes, a pitiable exhibition, soulless and senseless; a laugh for devils but a cause for tears in Heaven.

And yet he held her. Though every instinct rebelled, she was powerless to go. For the first time she had met her master.

For the first time she knew what physical fear meant. To all men hitherto she had been a Queen, to this one man she was nothing but a body for his gratification.

He vulgarised her and she knew it. She shuddered when he came near; she loathed him as a poisonous

reptile, an obscene beast to be hunted down and slaughtered ruthlessly, and yet she was fascinated while she was appalled.

After two months the bonds snapped that held her. It was a very little mouse gnawed the net that bound the lion and you may think it a very little thing that freed Jessica from her mental tyranny.

One day the Toreador threatened to break her violin over her head.

Now Jessica's fiddle was one of the few in the world to be called a violin. She had bought it years before and nearly beggared herself in the buying. Its pedigree was undoubted; every newspaper had heralded its advent into the market. It was practically irreplaceable. Ropes of pearls, diamond tiaras, rubies, emeralds, were on every hand, but no money in the world could buy what only once in a life-time stood up for sale.

Suddenly a complete metamorphosis! An entire reversal of their relations. How she cajoled, how she threatened, bribed, promised, was always a mystery and didn't matter. What did matter was that at last the precious instrument was safe in her hands, and hidden securely. And as she laid the case in its place of safety, Jessica suddenly felt herself again. Something seemed to crack, and she was once more sane and capable of clear thought.

"What was I sinking to?" she asked herself. "What in God's name was I becoming?"

And now, just as long ago in the little Battersea house, she had examined her face in the glass, so she passed it in review again. But with how different a result.

"Good God! My skin looks yellow, my eyes bleary. Who would know me?"

Who indeed? Not even her own son could he have seen her then, and the thought of that fair-haired good-looking boy rose up before her, and with the thought Jessica bowed her head and wept.



She slipped away that afternoon. There was a frantic packing of clothes, a feverish ransacking of drawers and cupboards, and finally she found the key of the safe and rifled that.

It was full of jewellery. There were plasters of emeralds, diamonds, pearls, rubies, sapphires incongruously mixed together. Every single item was hideous; together worth more than one King's ransom, for if the Toreador had execrable taste, Jessica knew his knowledge of gems was quite unapproachable.

"He must have spent a fortune on gems," said Jessica, gazing at the mass before her. "He can't go on like this."

With which last remark we will leave her, while rapidly she swept the lot into an open bag, locked it securely, and with that in one hand and the fiddle in the other, descended to a taxi already laden with her trunks, gave the first address she thought of, and left that experience behind her with a mind fully made up to forget it.

She was for ever deciding to forget something. She never saw an ugly sight without instinctively turning aside to look at something pleasant. But she determined not alone to forget the whole thing but to profit by the lesson also.

Knowing our Jessica as we do, we may doubt whether

the lesson she had learnt was exactly the one Providence would have wished her to take to heart.

But then the language of Heaven does not translate very well into the language of Earth, and even in the original the meaning is often somewhat obscure.

XXI

AMONGST the many houses our young friend had rested the soles of her feet in from time to time was an old palazzo in Southern Italy. She had bought it long ago, falling in love with the romance of it, but it was long since she had been there, indeed, sometimes she forgot all about it. She remembered it now and made straight for it after her flight from the Toreador. There she could recuperate and recover her sanity of mind and body. She seemed to have gone through a series of tremendous hurricanes of late, and to need some quiet harbourage where she could rest, where too, perhaps, henceforth she might lead a dignified existence in pleasant and suitable surroundings under the warm Italian sun.

“I am not so young and don't want balls and orgies any more, I really believe I've reached the time when I want to settle down.”

But, bless us! Surely we remember she has said that any time these—how many years?

Still, maybe something of zest had gone out of the old life. She was content now to hold her state and to receive artists, musicians, men of the world, and talk—and talk well—to each on his special subject. To be called “the most beautiful woman in the room” would, she thought, henceforth satisfy her ambition.

So she determined to go easy in the future and devote herself more and more to the boy who was growing up

and needed a home where he might bring his friends. And she found it remarkably pleasant to receive the respectful, friendly, greeting of her Italian chauffeur, to pass through her own woods and groves of orange and lemon trees. The nightmare of the last few months began fading into oblivion. Very soon it would appear as an experience that must have happened to somebody else. Very soon she would quite forget the Toreador and be her old, healthy self again. And how delightful! How convenient! What a blessing to be gifted with a memory under such excellent control!

If she began to take life more quietly now, it was because she began to grow up. And if her appearance was almost miraculously youthful, well, it would be a pity if all that massage and all those beauty treatments had shown no result.

"It is rather pleasant being Lady Bountiful," Jessica commented with herself one day as she strolled about her garden. "Very nice to feel established. I wonder I have not been here oftener."

It is a pity you don't know Landolfo. If you knew that delectable place you too might wonder why Jessica had not gone there oftener.

High in the mountains it leaned over its own great hills and shouted to the sea, but sneered at the towns below, too lazy to climb up into the hills.

The road that led to it must have come from somewhere once, but by the time it reached Landolfo it had quite forgotten where that somewhere was.

It was not what might be called in the centre of things. But it didn't want to be in the centre of things; it hated the very idea, and just to avoid that sort of thing it had run away and hidden in the mountains.

So the road had some trouble in finding Landolfo and only got there after exceeding great difficulties. It was easy running by the sea. But when it came to winding up the mountains, well, there were ravines to jump and cataracts to avoid; (sometimes these came and washed you away and then there was a nice how-do-you-do), and the poor little road got very tired before it reached its journey's end.

But having decided to reach Landolfo, it made no bones about it, but ran on over bridges, through gorges, yet ever looking back to that beloved sea, that shimmering mirror spread to catch the sun and blind any who dared look therein.

Now come the orchards and vineyard terraces, perched in inaccessible spots; formed with elaborate labour. Surely a touch and they go hurtling to the sea.

Who had sufficient pains to form them? Who hoped to turn rock into vine and gather figs from thorns? There they perch, tier upon tier, like a flock of green birds waiting for a sign, ere they spread their wings and fly away.

And all this husbandry in the land of gaunt mountains; monuments of days when the earth was yet hot and fires burnt fiercely within her. These remains from upheavals, vomitings of fire, belchings of lava that yet again may mock the labour that wrought this little world of useful beauty.

And little houses are there also, white, pink or yellow, each with its terraced patch (nobody could possibly reach them unless he flew), oh, ever so high up, on pinnacles and peaks; one would never be surprised to see them rise and fly away.

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When last I visited Landolfo I walked there with an artist friend. My thoughts centred on a shady seat and a drink. But I had been there before and the other man had not and he felt no desire to sit in the shade and drink, he preferred to enthuse over the red tiled houses that crawled over each other like children playing together on the floor.

I hoped to call him to reason by pointing out the Cathedral. I trusted the sight of that mutilated fragment might cool his ardour, but I forgot the great bronze doors.

“Magnificent, magnificent!” he cried. “And yonder is the belfry. By jove, that anyway is hardly touched.”

And it was magnificent;—and sleepy, and dazzling. An occasional fig tree falling over a staring wall, or else perhaps a vine went rambling, and in the piazza the sun lay white, panting and alone. Later on it would get up and crawl away, leaving Landolfo to the night breezes that climbed the valley softly, coming by the chestnut woods and orange groves.

Jessica’s palazzo lay behind a grey wall and snuggled in a mass of green. In Italy’s mediæval days it had played a great part; now it was of quite moderate size nor of any architectural merit. Its sole interest lay in its romantic history and its position, which was, and must ever remain, without compare.

However, the old square entrance tower yet stood lovely with spiral columns. And one other lofty tower in the garden to remind us of the past.

And through the entrance tower and down the short, broad walk, where palms and ferns crowded into such welcome shade, we reached the little oblong cortile where above stone and brick course rose the slender double columns of white marble.

And what a place it must have been. Unique in Italy, it is still a glory. But mutilated, mutilated, dear friends, to make kitchens!

Jessica had often longed to carry out a full restoration, but could not discover an architect with sufficient knowledge to be trusted. But, after all, it was the garden and the views that really mattered.

Out from the shade of the Belvedere one looked into a world enchanted by the sun, out far to sea, out far beyond the little towns, that nestled and cuddled each other two thousand feet below, out beyond the domed towers of the Annunziata, out to where the blue sea lay clear as the eyes of youth, glinting in the golden light that fell glittering down.

Surely even from that high place we could count the pebbles at the bottom of that miraculous sea, where only crystal vessels, with silken sails full set, and sweet voiced ladies singing, have a right to go. Out we gazed, and strove to pierce the hazy witchery of light in search for that old land beyond where legends said that mighty ruins of great temples lay. There in that unknown country altars lay cast down and columns prone. Grass grew where sacrifices burned; and where the priest once thundered maledictions on a multitude, that trembled at the interpretation of the God's, slim lizards ran their busy way.

But round about us flowers and green shade, moss and fern contending, ordered disorder and sweet disarray, a gentle rioting, and clear water trickling over stony ways.

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The pleasant old gardener padded his barefooted way along sandy paths, down long flights of steps to the lower

garden. A pleasant old gentleman, as gardeners should be; proud too of his work and with very legitimate right.

"Does the Signora spend much time here?" my friend asked.

"She is usually here for the young Signore's holidays!"

And then he proceeded to tell us little stories of how Jessica and her boy went every day to swim, motoring there and back in time for lunch.

"The Signora rises early as an Italian. After collazione she and the young Signore spend always the morning together. She is very beautiful, our Signora, but will you not visit the lower gardens? There are two ways. Let us go by one and return by the other."

And down we went, leaving the prodigal roses that rushed up marble columns, and waved their hands from thence to their more timid kind below.

Fountains and pergolas, paved with blocks of marble. Lilies, violets, ran along the sides, lemons hanging amid thick leaves overhead, while the sun, filtering through, fretted a purple pattern on the sightless floor.

Beautiful! beautiful old place. With feet planted in the sea, and Heaven for your crown, set about with loveliness; not the least lovely in this land of lovely gardens.

And just as for the hundredth time we turned for one more look our guide hastily drew aside down a side path and so round by a back way to the entrance gate; for he had caught sight of a lady coming towards us and whose presence he had clearly not expected.

But we had seen a vision too, and of a tall, slim figure all in white and carrying a large parasol that shielded a head crowned with very lovely chestnut hair. I confess to having looked back once. It was the first time I had

seen Jessica and I remember I wondered then what voice would pass those lips if she might speak.

So once more we found ourselves in the little cortile, very exquisite, and a little tropical. Without, thick dust and heat almost insupportable; within, cool trees spread their shade, fountains fed the air, and in place of dusty roads, broad terraces of marble.

“I hope my gardener has not hurried you?”

A voice behind us. A voice, soft, with a kiss in it.

We mumbled some apology for our lengthy stay and acknowledged her kindness in allowing visitors into her garden.

“I am always glad to let anyone in who really loves flowers. You are fond of gardens? Understand them?”

As she spoke she glanced from one to the other, smiling without favour, yet each of us took the speech unto himself.

“Yes, we understand gardens, and notice many plants very rare in Europe. They must have been brought here specially?”

“That is so. It is, of course, quite a little place. But is that any reason why it should not be as perfect as it can be?”

With all our eyes held by the vision in white, we emphatically assured the lady that all was most perfect. She smiled again. Did she guess that we referred more to herself than to the garden?

“I should have liked to have restored the house,” she added, gazing up at a bit of wall partially glimpsed through wisteria.

“It is very well as it is, is it not?”

“It passes.” Then, having had enough of our society, she looked on us again and dismissed us gracefully.

“You’re sure you saw everything? Guiseppe sometimes hustles, I’m afraid.”

She cast a funny little look at the old fellow, who we were sure under no possible circumstances could be accused of hustling.

“Not at all, and we are delighted to have had this opportunity of seeing so much beauty.”

It was not I, but the other man said that. He flattered himself he had a flair for turning a neat compliment. I thought him rather an ass myself.

Did she catch his meaning? Was there the least little gleam in her eye? The least little quiver to her lip?

Chi lo sa? She had done with us. She gave us a charming little nod, and set us going down the avenue; herself, no doubt, instantly forgetting what manner of men we were.

And only a few weeks ago, this stately, thorough-bred lady, so “grande dame” in every line, in every movement, and in every tone of her voice, had lain stiff and sore, black and blue on her half wrecked bed open to the lust of a semi-lunatic.

How can we reconcile the two creatures? Let him who first said “Every woman is at heart a rake,” answer the question.

But whited sepulchres are not confined to Palestine and lilies can grow upon a dung heap.

* * * * *

Very soon a young fellow came whistling through the gardens. Quite an ordinary young fellow according to English standards. He was a type. Blue eyed, fair haired, clad in immaculate whites, with sleeves rolled up above the elbow and collar open a little at the throat. He

had been down to bathe and the walk up, even at this hour, had been extraordinarily hot. Yes, quite an ordinary type, but he had a certain air of distinction, and there was a certain charm about him that he must surely inherit from his mother.

“Hungry, dear boy?”

“Very.” Had a topping swim though. I can dive as well as Pepino now.”

“But you will be careful. Pepino is older than you and a Landolfano. They are born half fish, I think.”

“Well, I’m getting on. My muscles grow bigger every day.”

Pepino was the boy’s own particular attendant and adored his master; and, being Italian, was not only a good all round servant, but considered himself a sort of relation. He had no idea of not being always in this master’s employ. Had he not taught the Signore all he knew about horses, guns, boats, swimming, all that really mattered?

So in that pleasant way days slipped to weeks, and one day the fond mother had to see her boy off to school again. There was no tearful leave taking. The boy was happy at his school and went off cheerily, while she, well, she only sought his happiness and was well content so be he found it.

But she looked to a day when school and college would be over, when he would take up some profession that would not keep him too long from home.

“I must find him something. He has no particular bent. He is just a dear, fresh, jolly boy.”

And, indeed, she had kept him unspotted from her world, had clung to his love, and valued his respect above all things. Thus passed her days, autumn grew old and

yet the same sun blazed; and there was the same blue sky, the same profusion in the garden, only now the plants gathered a little towards each other, and grew a little tired and wearied with their own profusion.

And for once Satan found nothing for idle hands to do. Possibly he considered she had worked enough for the time being. And then one day Jessica read in her paper the first announcement of a musical festival to be held in the city of X.

The festival was in honour of a great composer's centenary; and would take the form of a series of orchestral concerts, each under the leadership of one of the greatest conductors of the day. Many eminent artists were engaged. Nor would these performances be hastily organised, but thoroughly and systematically rehearsed well ahead of the festival itself.

Jessica put down her paper and considered of these concerts. She had not heard any good music for months. Why not run over to X., stay for the festival and return to Landolfo afterwards?

"I've quite determined to cut the old life," she said to herself. I'm going to settle down and keep a few friends who'll be useful to the boy. There can be no harm in going to the festival. Quite the contrary. Music is said to elevate the mind."

So Jessica took tickets for the series and engaged a suite of rooms at the "Magnificent," and in due time found herself sitting enthralled concert after concert, feasted as she had not been feasted for long.

But she was far too distinguished and beautiful to remain unnoticed. Many questions were asked and she almost threatened to become an integral part of the festival.

Now amongst the many amateurs whose word carried weight, even with the eminent professionals, was the old Prince of Thrace. Not that he was so very old, but his hair was white, and he stooped a little. But then he was very tall, and tall people frequently do stoop. He had a most excellent appearance. One to be inquired after if you were so ignorant as not to know him; one to be imitated if you were so fortunate as to be able.

From the first he had noticed Jessica, and one day he asked a mutual acquaintance to present him to her. Jessica of course knew him well by sight and reputation, as, indeed, he also had known of her, and when the handsome old man stood bowing before her, I think even she felt a little thrill of pride at this fresh feather in her cap. She had known other princes; had once even attracted the attention of a crowned head. They had all proved much as other men with the same vices and virtues, if any. But the Prince of Thrace was pre-eminently an aristocrat in mind and she was flattered that so fastidious a patrician should seek to know her.

The acquaintance, begun in a concert hall, naturally started out on the subject of music. The Prince suggested they should meet at supper after the concert when some of the performers would be joining them. Jessica consented and proved by no means the least musically intelligent in that intelligent company.

The friendship rapidly ripened. The Prince found her a most interesting companion, which he had not expected, while she appreciated the deep respect with which he always treated her. After the Festival he persuaded her to go to the Riviera. She lived there very quietly, but the Prince was so constantly with her, that people began to talk, and Jessica returned to Landolfo.

There he visited her and was charmed with the place and the well-bred hospitality he met. I don't know what his relations may have been with his hostess. I am inclined to think purely platonic.

There was even a rumour at one time of their marriage, but I don't think that entered into either of their calculations. He proved, however, the best of friends and helped Jessica most efficiently in the matter of her boy.

"He is a charming fellow, your son," said the Prince. "I like his frank manner, he has breeding and courtesy, somewhat rare qualities I fear nowadays." And when she heard this praise Jessica felt she had not striven in vain. And the old courtier had meant it. He had been surprised at the boy's pleasant ease and good manners. Indeed, the more he saw of that house the more surprised he grew and by so much the more did he appreciate the mother.

He found them an extraordinarily interesting couple. They provided a problem to which, wise old man that he was, he could see no solution.

"She has kept him quite apart. He knows nothing of her life but what she has chosen to tell. But what can the future hold? I wonder if she can really pull it off?"

So he would think as he sat smoking lazily and watched the tall, slim youth gaily chaffing the extraordinarily youthful mother over yonder by the Belvedere.

"She hasn't changed since I first saw her," continued the old gentleman, "she never will, much. What an ornament she would have been to any rank in society. She could have filled any position you like to name. And there's no house so pleasant to stay in as this, and no one whose society I prefer to my hostess's."

Yet he ended his thoughts with another sigh, and he murmured "Poor woman."

Perhaps he had expected an exciting denouement shortly and that accounted for his interest in mother and son. If so, I'm sure he would have been the first to regret it; but as a matter of fact, the years slipped quietly by without anything happening.

And still she looked absurdly young to have a lad of twenty-one. But Jessica never acknowledged old age. She regarded it as a germ it was quite unnecessary to catch provided one took proper care.

Consequently, old age had no terrors for her, and consequently, when it should have come and knocked at her door, it merely paused at her garden gate; bowed, and passed on.

XXII

APOLOGIES are always out of place, and especially when insincere, therefore I make none because that dear mobile Jessica of ours has taken so much of our time, and the progress of that child's pilgrimage occupied our attention almost to the exclusion of the real story.

Yet other folk have a claim upon our interest. But as these have not yet touched Jessica's life they have dropped somewhat into the background. But we must attend to them now, for we have arrived at the epoch when we left Aylmer Forsyth hopelessly in love with Katie Dalison, and when Desmond's old friend had gone up to town to see what could be done regarding a divorce.

In fact, we have arrived at the very beginning of our story, and a breathless chase it has been to overtake it.

I hope you have not forgotten Augusta, Lady Alaburton, or Her Grace of Hampshire, pretty Miss Kate, or pleasant young Aldershot? Because here they all are journeying down together for Goodwood races, with neat and expensive-looking luggage, three maids, and one man, who looks much more the belted earl than his master.

The dowdy little person with the birdlike face, who walks down the platform to the reserved carriage as though she were a queen on her way to her coronation, and gives to the guard and the porters and the newspaper boys and the maids, and her niece, the look of her attendants, and even to Augusta, Lady Alaburton, the

appearance of a mistress of the robes—that little person is the great, the only, Duchess of Hampshire.

She didn't show many of the Vere de Vere characteristics, except that "repose" which one and all of them strove to emulate ever since the days of Lady Clara.

Augusta accompanied the Duchess because she was going to stay with Her Grace, and Katie was there because she was going home. And Jim was there because it was pleasant to travel with Katie. Finally they were all there because the season was over and "nobody was there, you know."

So the guard had smirked, and Her Grace had smiled, Augusta stared, and Katie nodded, while Jim's man did the tipping. When Lady Alaburton had settled in her corner, and the little Duchess was enthroned in hers, Augusta smiled at the passing landscape as though she were at a private view, and had to say something polite about the pictures.

"How delightful the country is," babbled Augusta.

She was the sort of female who, on arriving at a country house, gurgled to her hostess over "the deliciousness of the park," and then asked about the trains to town.

"Your gardens must be in perfection," she continued. Vaguely it came to her that Templeton was famous for something, and Templeton being in the country she supposed it must be gardens.

The Duchess smiled, and dropped a few words sideways. "We stay about six weeks, I think. Then His Grace goes to Scotland."

"Scotland's delightful when the shooting begins," murmured Lady Alaburton.

And here the conversation threatened to flag.

As Augusta had taken the trouble to mention the landscape, Her Grace had a look at it herself. She seemed agreeably surprised at what she saw, and said she had thought nature more limited.

Then Augusta, who considered the landscape had received sufficient attention for one day, plunged into more congenial matters, with the air of one who, having done her duty, might now act as inclination prompted.

“The Soames haven’t brought that match off. I suppose they can’t give the girl enough money. It would be splendid for her. If Ilkley doesn’t marry John would succeed, or anyway his boy be Lord Sheffield one day.”

“I don’t suppose Lord Ilkley will marry,” murmured the Duchess, faintly interested.

“Oh no—half mad and over fifty—that is, half the time you know, the rest of ’em are sane enough. No nonsense about John. Great pity! Such an old family!”

But whether it was a great pity that Lord John was not as mad as his elder brother, or what, the Duchess had no time to discover, for Augusta took up her parable and proceeded on her way.

“Soames’ girl’s quite nice. You don’t know them? Oh, you should! New, you know, new, very new, but pleasant. I don’t know where they picked it all up. But people do nowadays. Quite different before the war. Mrs. Soames is very charming,” she added in a softer voice, recollecting many good meals at that lady’s house.

“Have you heard where they come from?”

“Oh no. What does it matter? I was nice to the girl. Called her Sonia. Means nothing, and sounds friendly; one never knows whom that sort of girl may marry. They say Mrs. Soames objects because of Ilkley . . . Lord John’s debts? Thousands, aren’t they? Yes, so they

say! Well, they can't expect the girl to marry into a family like the Steleknyves without paying for it. But these new people are so particular. After all, it's rather clever of them. Makes them a sort of exclusive set of their own, you know. Wonder how they found out their worth? Really very clever!"

And lost in admiration, Lady Alaburton fell into silent contemplation of the cleverness "of those sort of people."

Meantime Katie and her cavalier were getting on very well, so well indeed that Jim began to fear she "really liked" him, and nothing more. Still he plodded his way in the modern manner of love-making, and talked of nothing even remotely connected with love.

He was going to a certain big country house in the neighbourhood of Goodwood, and he soon got busy over the various entries for the Cup.

"Back Ozone for a place. He's safe for that, but Lollypop is going to win."

"What about Belphegor?"

"Not got an earthly. Bet you six to one Lollypop wins."

"Right. Gloves if I win! Same size as usual."

"Ten's or two's?"

"Guess."

From racing to hunting was an easy step and Jim tried hard to persuade Katie to do a little hunting in his own country.

So they talked and entertained each other till they arrived at the parting of the ways; and the maids bustled; and Jim's man hustled; smart footmen hurried up, the guard was obsequious, the station master deferential, the porters humble, and the engine driver faint from excitement!

Oh! It's a lovely thing to be a member of the British aristocracy after all! Especially if you belong to the genuine brand!

As Katie spun homeward and sniffed the warm, pungent smell of hay, and saw the dog-roses rambling through the hedge, and the great friendly cattle grazing and munching, much like old toothless Jessop at his door, who touched his hat as the car passed, Katie may well have wondered if "it didn't take a lot of beating."

There were the downs, and there the low, flat land, and there the river went, meandering to the sea, and with no particular desire to take the nearest way.

A different land this to that about Landolfo! Pastures for vineyards wrested from the rock. Well-watered meadows for the torrent no one used. Cattle standing in kingcups, and suggesting thick cream and yellow butter, for one occasional cow kept in her pen and never seen. A land of order for a country that is more or less a land of odds and ends.

As Katie's car went slowly over the bridge, whose monkish builders would certainly have regarded such a conveyance as a chariot of fire but of Satanic origin, she could hear the peacocks calling in the manor gardens, and the rooks cawing and cawing, and she could see them whirling around and about, expostulating, directing haranguing, arguing.

Up the hill and in at the lodge gate, down the short avenue, across the moat and so into the forecourt where all the sun seemed to be wandering about, and all the roses in the world to grow, and all the white pigeons to strut up and down.

I would not thank you for the Lord Lieutenant's great big nineteenth century palace for all its Rubens and Van

Dycks. Indeed, had I my choice, I should prefer Fordcombe even to the ducal castle set on a hill, amidst oaks and hanging woods, and very regal and incomparable it is.

"Aunt Margaret, you darling! How glad I am to be home again," cried Katie to that lady who came out to meet her.

A smile and word to the butler, and Katie went into the wide, high old oaken hall. Oh, that high old oaken hall! Rich with Elizabethan furnishing, great blue and white china, and sweet with the ashes of wood fires! How very beautiful it was, and how excellent the great carved stairway that showed through the door at the further end.

* * * * *

Now, before Miss Katie had been home three weeks, she realised that things were happening that called for a considerable amount of tact on her part.

Though Goodwood had come and gone, Aldershot had not gone with it, and the most guileless could not fail to see the magnet that attracted him. Margaret saw it, and Ralph saw it also when his sister pointed it out to him.

The Duchess herself motored over and pointed the moral. She was followed by Augusta, who fairly stared it out of countenance. She hunted the squire even to his private sanctum.

Having prostrated the brother, the intrepid female proceeded to lay Margaret low, and right nobly she succeeded.

"I'm sure Augusta meant well."

"Because she's embraced our religion she needn't embrace our private affairs too," growled Ralph, when he and Margaret compared notes later on.

Margaret would have let matters rest, but the squire had been waiting to let off steam, and now let it rip.

“According to those two old women, half the young men in England want to marry my daughter, a mere child.”

“She’s grown up, dear.”

“So are we. But we don’t think of marrying, I hope.”

But at that remark a little colour came into Margaret’s face. If she never allowed herself to think of marriage she could not deny that some thought very like unto it sometimes crossed her mind.

She had her woman’s instincts; above all, her woman’s intuition, and she would have been less than woman and more than human had she not sensed the betrayal of Desmond’s heart.

But it is not with the aunt and her delicate reticence we are just now concerned, but with the niece, whose methods are more direct and whose modernity has no use for silence when speech is golden.

One morning she invaded her father’s room during the prohibited hours of ten to twelve. It was a legend that for those two hours the squire retired to the room on business purposes intent, and was on no account to be disturbed.

That day his chief business seemed to be to glance at “The Field,” and read therein the merits of a new patent food for cattle.

His nose was somewhat in the air and his mouth what is termed “pursy.” The squire had not much faith in these new foods. He put down the paper, relighted his pipe, and opened his memorandum book. And therein he found an entry “to go and see the estate carpenter about mending the little wooden brige across the river.”

(You haven't forgotten the little wooden foot-bridge that made a quick cut between the Manor and Aylmer's cottage?)

"Dear, dear! How could I forget. The river's very deep there. It must be seen to at once."

He was genuinely annoyed at his own remissness, and when Katie came and announced "Sir Desmond was spending the week-end at the cottage, Father, and Aylmer would like us to go to supper on Saturday," the old gentleman was quite off his guard and forgot why it was that the cottage had been tacitly considered of late to be as it were "out of bounds."

"Saturday! Saturday!" he muttered. "Aren't we doing something on Saturday? Have you spoken to your aunt?"

Katie had not spoken to her aunt. She, too, had an idea, born, perhaps, of a guilty conscience, that the cottage was "out of bounds," and she had her own ideas as to the best method of removing the interdict.

"Darling, your pipe's gone out, and it's very bad for you to suck an unlighted pipe."

"Bless me, so it is! There's something wrong about this pipe. It never draws properly!"

"Try again, dad," his dutiful daughter suggested, and held up a lighted match.

The squire commenced making sucking noises that were peculiar to himself, and during this operation (it lasted fully two minutes) clouds of tobacco smoke filled the room.

"Let me see!" he said. "Saturday! What are we doing on Saturday?"

"Nothing, I think. Sir Desmond's really coming down on business. That's why he's going to Aylmer's instead

of coming here. He feels more independent at the cottage."

"Independent! Independent!" the squire exclaimed, pishing and pshawing. "What does he mean? He could have this room. He'd be quite independent."

Katie gazed at the welter of disorder on her father's table, and, remembering the constant entries of herself and Margaret (despite the legend), and how very lonely her father would feel if they really lived up to the "business" theory, thought Sir Desmond would be less disturbed at the cottage.

"I expect he likes to be quite by himself, father. I hear the croquet lawn is in splendid condition," she added carelessly.

Now Ralph's passion for croquet almost amounted to sin. It was also a theory of his that Aylmer's lawn was always in better condition than his own.

"Well! Well! Everybody's lawn seems better than ours. I only hope it will be a fine day."

Katie thought it best to accept this somewhat nebulous reply as an affirmative, and went in pursuit of her aunt.

She found Margaret in the garden, throwing grain to the already over-fed and pampered fowl.

Katie knew that Aunt Margaret might not be quite so easy to manage as the dear old man who always fell so ready a victim that after she got her own way his daughter always felt she ought to go and tell him what she'd done.

Still Aunt Margaret didn't present any really serious difficulty. A little coaxing, a little diplomacy, and the "awful deed" would be done.

"I met Aylmer in the village just now. He wants us to go to tea on Saturday. I said we would. We're not doing anything, are we?"

Now Margaret, while distributing largesse to peacocks and pigeons, was also trying to stifle the voice of Augusta that cried loudly within her. It was therefore a little untoward to have the young man's existence thrust suddenly upon her notice.

"Tea, my dear?" she murmured, in an effort to gain time.

"Yes, and supper afterwards, like we used to do. Sir Desmond's coming. Sort of picnic, you know."

"Have you asked your father?"

"I spoke to dad. He wants to go. He told me to speak to you."

A gleam of mischief shone in Katie's eye. She knew exactly what agitated these two darling people.

"I've heard nothing about it."

"He's going to write, of course," Katie put in hastily. "But as we happened to meet he asked me, and I said I thought we'd nothing on."

What could Margaret do? She knew they had no engagement and she knew that Katie knew they hadn't.

"I don't think there's anything for Saturday——" began Margaret, and was going to make some hesitating excuse when her niece clinched the matter by slipping her arm into her aunt's and marching her off to another part of the garden.

"Then that's all right. Let's go and talk to Crockford. He's shaving the upper terrace till the poor thing's nearly bald."

At luncheon the girl managed to hint that it was a long time since Aylmer had been asked up to the house, and did the authorities think such behaviour quite kind? What would Sir Desmond say when he came down on Thursday, and found any coolness?

“Coolness! My dear child!” father and aunt exclaimed together.

Well, then, what had Aylmer done? He was quite hurt, and felt he must have offended them somehow.

“Oh no, my dear. How could he think so?” Surely Katie had misunderstood.

Well, perhaps he had not said that, but Katie was very glad they would go on Saturday. Very glad of the accidental meeting that morning and of the chance to put things right.

The authorities felt that somehow they had done wrong. The kindest of people, not for worlds would they hurt the feelings of the least among their acquaintance.

Margaret thought she had listened too intently to Augusta, and before she drove out that afternoon she sent a very affectionate little note in answer to Aylmer’s invitation.

Ralph merely “pished.” He felt that somehow he had been “managed,” how, he couldn’t tell. But he felt it. He rather suspected Katie, she looked so preternaturally good.

He began to realise his daughter was grown up. He almost wished she would marry. If this sort of thing was the result of her growth, then the sooner somebody else was responsible for her the better.

The meeting that morning between Katie and Aylmer had not been altogether the unexpected encounter the authorities had been led to imagine. I’m afraid Miss Katie had been up to her tricks! To be accurate, they need not have met at all. But Katie chanced to pass Mrs. Corner’s cottage, and thus to see, sitting outside in a state of abject boredom, Aylmer’s bulldog, who rejoiced in the name of Freddy.

Now if Freddy worshipped his master he adored Katie. Directly he caught sight of her, which was not immediately, he began a series of contortions which would have done credit to a professional acrobat. Silent, like all his kind, he advanced to his deity, wriggling and twisting his ungainly body, snuffling and, I'm afraid, slobbering, while smiles wreathed his wrinkled face, that shone with affection that can only be described as disgustingly sentimental.

Now Miss Katie opined that if the dog was outside the master was probably inside. And being always ready for a chat with Mrs. Corner, what more natural than to go in and have one now?

"So you've come back, miss," said Mrs. Corner, in a voice that suggested extreme regret.

"We can't spare Miss Katie for so long a time again, can we, Mrs. Corner?"

The lady looked from one to the other without a smile or any visible sign of intelligence. But then she had never been known to smile or to show much intelligence either.

"I expect you enjoyed yourself in London, miss. People usually do, I believe. I once stayed with Corner's sister at 'Ighgate. There seemed a great deal of noise. Didn't you find it very noisy, miss?"

"Not so very. But Lennox Gardens is quiet on the whole."

"Indeed! I daresay. I don't know that part."

And Mrs. Corner hugged her folded arms closer to her side, and drew dignity, as a mantle, about her. Thus she conveyed the impression that any part of town she didn't know must be a region considerably off the map. Her Grace of Hampshire couldn't have done it better.

“But you’ve been very gay down here too. They tell me the flower-show was a great success.”

“I daresay, miss. I couldn’t go. Oh yes, the shop was shut—it being ’oliday. But I ’ad an ’eadache so stayed at ’ome.”

“I’m afraid your headaches don’t get any better,” said Aylmer.

“I can’t say as they do, sir,” Mrs. Corner answered, unbending somewhat from her Junoesque majesty. “Indeed, they gets more frequent and constant. I only sleep in a chair with six pillowses and a bonnet box.”

“What! Don’t you go to bed at all?” asked Katie.

“I couldn’t do it, miss,” rejoined the invalid, much as though she considered going to bed was an act of indecency. “What might you be requiring?” she continued, in a tired voice very like the Duchess’s.

“A few stamps, if you please,” answered Katie.

“And how many could you do with to-day?”

“I think six will be enough this morning.”

Mrs. Corner hesitated for a moment, and appeared to be calculating whether she had that amount on hand.

“*Ordinary* stamps?” she queried, “or stamps for abroad?”—a vague place she believed mostly inhabited by heathen.

“Quite ordinary, please,” replied Katie gravely.

Mrs. Corner thereupon climbed the steep little stairs that led from her shop to the upper regions from whence soon came sounds of infant expostulations.

“Good heavens! Is the baby playing with the stamps?” exclaimed Aylmer.

“If he is I’m sure he’s only allowed to have the quite ordinary ones.”

“He doesn’t seem to want to give them up,” Aylmer

replied, as fresh screams and yells uprose. "Your letters will have to wait, I expect."

"I think she's moving the plate chest now," suggested Katie when, after a moment's silence a sound as of the dragging of a ponderous something, which might be a double bed or a super-innovation trunk from the noise created, vibrated overhead and then ceased.

"Silence! Ah, what has happened now?" cried Aylmer, dramatically.

"She's counting the stamps. I hope she won't return with one short."

A minute or so and Mrs. Corner came down, having made no mistake.

"Why do you keep the stamps upstairs? It must be such trouble going up for just one or two."

"No, sir. People don't seem to want them very often now," was the reply, rather as if stamps were better made than they used to be and therefore did not require renewing so often. "And I think they goes mostly to Stillborough. When I undertook to act as postmistress," she continued in a way that implied she had only taken the post from purely patriotic motives and at the earnest personal request of the Prime Minister himself, "I asked the Postmaster-General where he thought I'd better keep the stamps for safety, and he suggested somewhere in a box upstairs."

The good soul was not altogether romancing. She *had* written to the postmaster in the county town; and some facetious clerk had suggested that "under the bed would probably be a place secure from burglars." And in a large tin box, and under Mrs. Corner's bed generation after generation of stamps were put to rest.

Katie went out of her way to be as charming a com-

panion as she could that morning, and succeeded to admiration.

Somehow or another she and Aylmer seemed to have drifted apart lately. She couldn't explain how it had happened, but the old intimacy and comradeship had fallen on evil days and gone lame, and now she was surprised to find what a pleasant fellow Aylmer was, and not only amusing but interesting, and the boy, as he walked along the white dusty road beside her, realised once again that no other girl could ever be quite the same to him.

But, if those two thought all the world was May, they were followed by a bulldog who saw no beauty anywhere but panted and snorted for desire of the cool grass and drinking trough in his comfortable home.

That grass, also cool and soft to the feet, likewise grew by the roadside, was unnoticed by Freddy. He could only take in one idea at a time and the idea that dominated his mind that moment was, that come what might, he must follow his master wherever he went.

So he padded along close to Aylmer's heels, superbly oblivious to the pleasant little pools and puddles over against the hedge that a terrier would have pounced upon at once as sent by Heaven for the quenching of canine thirst.

XXIII

THAT afternoon Ralph went down to the carpenter's yard. It was not a great way but it took him some time. He met Tomkins of Crossways and had a chat with him, then he saw Peters of Gabriels and delayed a bit to talk about the coming cattle show at Windhurst.

And whom should he meet after that but his head keeper. With him he turned back because the poor man was mightily disturbed over the deprivations of foxes and had to be appeased. Foxes were sacred at Fordcombe, as once were cats in ancient Egypt. The Squire promised to write to the M.F.H., and when he had soothed his keeper he made yet another fresh start.

At length the yard was reached and there in front of him lay all the sawn trees, and those yet waiting their further undoing.

The Squire sniffed the fresh gummy odour and rather enjoyed it, and as he stepped over planks and brushed aside shavings (he had been asked to "step this way and see a bit of wood just right for that there old bridge"), he felt quite knowledgeable, and stroked his chin and agreed with the carpenter "that there bit of wood was just right for that there old bridge" and would do nicely.

And mean time what was Katie doing?

I suppose if she had lived sixty years ago she would have spent her afternoon in doing a little embroidery, or in practising her music. I suppose a well brought up

young lady never went a walk alone in those days? But being what she was and born, well, when she was, she carried her golf clubs into the park and set out for a steady round.

And a considerable portion of time had passed when she noticed a tall loosely knit figure coming towards her from the gardens.

She was not surprised, in fact she rather expected him, only she hoped he would not be silly.

"James Arbuthnot Cyril Sebastian, tenth Earl of Aldershot," she murmured, while he was yet a great way off. "You're quite a nice boy. You're all right, perfectly all right, but I'm afraid you don't appeal." That's what Katie thought to herself as she waved her club with a cheery "hullo!"

"Hullo," called Jim. "What luck?"

"Rotten," cried Phyllis.

"Hard lines," shouted Strephon.

Oh, shades of all sensitive females! Shades of the heroines of nineteenth century novels! What do you think of your slangy successors?

"Rotten!" called Katie, and at the sound all the shades stopped their ears under their bonnets and fled away as fast as their many petticoats allowed them.

"Better luck next time," continued Jim, as he joined Katie. "What did you do that last hole in?"

Then Jim proposed a match. He was a very decent golfer, and Katie willingly let him show what he knew and help her improve her game.

"I shall never be a Miss Wethered, though, shall I?" she said.

"Well, I'm not exactly a champion either. Seems to me we make rather a good couple."

"Oh, do you?" remarked Katie, rather feebly.

"Don't you think we're fairly well matched?"

At this juncture discretion seemed the better part of valour, and Katie deliberately drove her ball into a distant clump of rhododendrons.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Aldershot. "What on earth made you do that?"

"I'm so sorry. Do you mind retrieving it?"

As she watched him on hands and knees pushing his way amongst the rhododendrons, Katie thought to herself, "He'll never ask me to marry him after that."

When Aldershot at last returned her ball she proposed adjourning to the house and the two strolled back to the gardens and down what was always known as "Lady Katherine's walk," a broad green way bordered by tall yew hedges.

Her ladyship had been a belle and wit in her day and was Katie's great great great aunt and had written much very elegant verse containing more elegance than wit.

But if her wit had rather worn by now, her beauty still remained in Reynolds' picture of her that hung between the windows in the hall.

Now whether Jim proposed coming across the park, or in Lady Katharine's walk, history telleth not. But if you ask me, I think the deed was done when the young people were having tea, and without any of the oglings or "killing glances" of her ladyship's day.

Katie lounged in her chair, smoking a cigarette, when she should have sat at her tambour frame and have made pretty play with hands and the silks.

"Good Gad, miss! How you flick the ash with your little finger. Monstrous vulgar, by my soul!" exclaimed the shade of Lady Katharine Dalison, who, all unseen,

paced the terrace "to catch me a breeze this mucky mid-summer weather."

"Uncross your legs, child, and why loll you thus? To your sampler, girl."

But the words of a ghost may not enter material ears, and Jim and Katie are quite unaware of the presence of the namesake of old.

"I say. This is top hole. We two—like this—what? Think we'd always get on?"

Katie looked with innocent wide-open eyes.

"But of course. I hope we'll always be friends."

"Oh! Bar chaff. I meant more than that."

"Have another cigarette."

"No thanks. I say—I wish you'd say yes."

"Must you ask again, Jim? Let's agree you've said nothing and done nothing and we're just as we were."

"Nothing doing, eh?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm awfully sorry."

"You won't mind if I try again, some other day?"

"You'll only get the same answer. I like you awfully as a pal, but anything further's out of the question."

"By Jove! That's straight."

"Well, you want me to be straight, I suppose. Now have that other cigarette you refused just now and talk of something else."

And that's the way they did it. Or something like it. Jim lit his cigarette and tried to realise he'd been "turned down, by Jove, but she did it awfully nicely, all the same," and Katie racked her brain to think of something to say that should sound sisterly and yet be kind.

But her ladyship! Red in the face and flashing of eye was she.

"Was ever so impudent a hussy? To refuse a coronet

and so amiable a nobleman. I warrant she'll answer for it to her father. Had I been thus headstrong the Duke my father would have had me soundly whipped and shut up with naught but bread and water to my meals. But these, alas, are degenerate days. And now I mind me how the girl cannot even hear," she continued to herself, "I will to the walk and read again that dedication of Sir Namby de Pamby. 'Tis very elegant indeed.

"Ah! Fordcombe! Heavenly spot
Framed by such beauty, nor by Jove forgot."

And so her ladyship faded away into the distance.

Then the Squire came round bringing Fell with him, and they were soon joined by Father Wilfrid, the chaplain, who had charmed Augusta during her week-end.

One morning she had conveyed him to the Upper Terrace and there had paced him up and down while she related a certain "faux pas" she had unwittingly committed recently in Italy.

"I forgot it was Friday and ate some macaroni, you know. It had little bits of liver. I tried to pick them all out, but I couldn't you know."

"Why should you if you were hungry," answered the priest. "I presume you were hungry? How beautiful that clematis looks against that grey wall." And he had actually stopped in admiration before an old gate post half smothered in purple blossom, and had apparently considered the eating of a little liver on Friday as of no importance.

Then Augusta felt she would never understand her church. She had always imagined Friday to be what she called a meatless day. Yet there was Father Wilfrid

(whose orthodoxy was beyond dispute) dismissing her important communication and rapturously beholding a clematis.

"Yes, very," she had murmured, "very." But so forlornly, the kindly priest had taken pity on what he inwardly termed "the enthusiasm of the neophyte" and allowed her ten minutes' talk on doctrinal matters. Then he found that he had to say his office and left her to realise that after all there was nothing like the church and she was very glad she had joined it.

But she ought to have taken it up earlier.

"It's everything to begin young," she sighed; and had then set about the harrying of the Squire.

It was a pleasant group gathered round the tea-table. One felt sure that they would never be betrayed into saying or doing anything vulgar for the sake of being momentarily "smart," or seek to make themselves conspicuous or get paragraphed in newspapers. None of them desired notoriety in cheap markets.

"Sir Desmond is coming down to the cottage, I hear," said Father Wilfrid. "I wonder if he will have any special news to give us?"

"He's coming to visit Camoys, I believe," said Fell, mentioning the name of the Lord Lieutenant and his place. "He lunches there Friday."

Then the car crossed the moat bringing Margaret, who had been paying calls.

"What a happy party you look," she said, as she took the tea Katie poured for her.

"Been calling, Miss Dalison?" asked Jim.

"Yes. Such nice people. They were all out."

Margaret hastened to explain herself. "I mean they are charming, and were not at home."

"Quite so, had they been at home you would not have thought them charming."

"Now Ralph, you know what I mean——"

"You left no doubt about that, Auntie——"

"I've some news for you," said Fell presently. "*The Mrs. Longridge* has arrived at the Grange."

A silence fell on the company. Father Wilfrid's face never changed, but Ralph and Margaret visibly froze, Jim and Fell exchanged glances, while Katie looked into her cup.

Now, *the Mrs. Longridge* was a pretty lady who had got herself into a pretty mess in a not very pretty divorce case, and this was the lady who had taken the Grange for the summer.

It was a comfortable modern place with a few acres round it, and was the only bit of property thereabout that was not Dalison owned. To the Squire it was Naboth's vineyard and Naboth had let it to this most undesirable tenant.

"I wonder what she's like?" said Katie.

"Awfully smart. I saw her once or twice about town," said Jim.

"Why on earth does she want to come to a place like Fordcombe?" demanded Margaret.

"Perhaps she wants a quiet place to think things out in. I expect she's got a lot of thinking to do," answered Jim.

"Well, it's only for the summer, but I do wish some nice people would take the place permanently."

"I wish the owner would sell," sighed Ralph, who would have given much to round off his property.

"Well, I must be trotting," said Jim. "Been here an inconceivable time."

And he lifted his long length out of his chair and made

his farewells. Margaret could not see there was any difference in his good-byes to Katie than in those to herself. At the moment the girl happened to be stooping down. She was giving a saucer of milk to the excessively hideous kitchen cat that always obtruded itself on state occasions, and was indeed usually to be found anywhere except in the kitchen. The stooping would naturally account for the slight colour in her cheeks, and Margaret came to the conclusion that whatever she and Jim had discussed that afternoon the one thing they had not talked about was the ethics of love and marriage.

Very established, very settled and composed, the little group upon the terrace. Typical of all that is solid and best in what is called Society, and goodness gracious, what can possibly upset that unstudied order and unhurried ease? It is all so smooth, so well groomed and finished. The result of many centuries of comfort and good living. They have accepted life as it was handed down to them, and they will pass it on in their turn, a little added to perhaps, a little changed, maybe, but most certainly when the time comes it will be handed down unspoilt, for generations yet to come.

Yet at that moment Destiny had decided that her hour had come to strike, and merciless, irresistible, came nearer and nearer, and faster and faster, upon that unthinking little group.

XXIV

DESMOND came down on the Friday and dined that night at the manor.

It was a happy time for Margaret. He seemed more his old self, more like the friend she had known so long.

He had much to tell her of present plans. There was considerable stir (if you remember) in the political situation; and Desmond gave Margaret little peeps behind the scenes, knowing he could rely on her discretion.

And thus they slipped into reminiscences of old days, of that first electioneering campaign, now so long ago, which had made them acquainted.

“I prophesied success for you from the first; see how right I was.”

So it was a happy trio that took its way next afternoon to Aylmer's cottage. And as it is the first time we have been inside ourselves, let us take a good look round.

A very excellent old barn had easily been incorporated into the main building, and with its fine timbered roof made a room almost worthy of the manor; it was wide, cool, and well, but not over furnished.

Katie at once proclaimed her intention of acting as mistress and began by re-arranging Aylmer's flowers.

“My dear child,” her aunt expostulated. “I really think you might leave Aylmer's house alone! It seems to me very delightful as it is.”

Katie was holding a vase of blue delphiniums in her hand, searching for an advantageous spot to place it. "Like all bachelor establishments," said she, "it needs a woman's touch."

Margaret was slightly shocked; really Katie said things at times that rather took one's breath away.

"I wish you could always look after the place," said Aylmer. "What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," Katie answered, and she stooped to pat a somewhat somnolent Freddy lying in front of the fireplace, wondering why it was not lit. Freddy was not at all sure that he approved of all these visitors. One at a time he enjoyed, but in his opinion more than one created great confusion in the house.

Then they all went into the garden, and the Squire soon made discoveries regarding the difference between his own and Aylmer's lawn.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Desmond had had a somewhat exciting luncheon. Augusta had been of the party and had seized the opportunity to slip in a few home truths.

"Your Secretary," she had said. "Charming boy Who is he, dear Sir Desmond?"

"One of the best I can assure you——"

"Yes, of course. What's his family? Or has he merely dropped from Heaven? Can't think, you know," continued her ladyship, "how Margaret can allow the girl to see so much of him. Only the other day the Duchess told me with tears in her eyes, positively with tears in her eyes, she was sure it was a mistake."

"Do you mean the young people might fall in love?"

"My dear man," cried her ladyship, who away from

the influence of her Church or any contact with her co-religionists, invariably slipped back into the worldly old woman she was, "men are never in love. They may be in trouble; they are often in debt, but never in love except with themselves."

"They'd make a good looking couple," murmured Desmond.

"But suppose they don't remain a couple. You men always want to marry where you shouldn't, never where you ought."

And the lady gave him a glance to see if the arrow went home. "Aggravating creature," thought she to herself. "Still clinging to the memory of his dead wife, or more likely someone else's. These old romances may be delightful in theory, especially in these days of deceased wives' sisters, a type of woman I never heard of till I became a Catholic, but in real life this clinging to the dead is morbid and unpleasant."

When Desmond, in due course, found himself crossing the fields on his way back to Fordcombe, he thought the young people should make a beautiful thing of life should they decide to fashion it together their own way.

"Should it be only a question of income, that could readily be solved if the lad were not too proud. There would still be the matter of two religions. But who on earth is the boy after all? One can hardly expect a man to give his heiress away to somebody who, as Lady Alaburton put it, is 'merely dropped from Heaven.' "

He paused a moment and looked at the roof of Fordcombe red and glowing in the summer afternoon. Even at that distance a certain order, a settled course in life seemed to exhale from it. Was it likely it should all be handed over to a youthful stranger?

Then he fell to thinking of his own prospects.

Since he had finally decided to make the plunge and ascertain Jessica's whereabouts, and, if he possibly could, get his divorce, life had seemed brighter, more worth the living. The time seemed to have come when he might begin to think of taking his ease, and pave the way for a comfortable old age.

Destiny seemed very bright also on the croquet lawn of Aylmer's cottage. Katie and Aylmer partners against the elders, while Fell stood watching the conclusion of the match.

Almost I am tempted to lay down my pen and go no further, but conclude the whole with the old fashioned tag of "So they married and were happy ever after."

This ought to be the fate of all pleasant, kindly folk, ought it not? And I do hope you have taken Aylmer and Katie to your heart! Sparing some of course to Margaret, and Desmond too.

The two marriages seem so right, so ideal, that I think they really *ought* to happen. Don't you think so?

But Fate had reached Fordcombe even while we have been thinking. As we stood on the hill, by Desmond's side and looked towards the bright valley, and pictured that gay little gathering upon the lawn, and imagined how we might quickly end with marriage bells, and orange blossoms, Fate was fully bent on frustrating our good intention.

Yes, alas! With callous stride the great Master came pacing rapidly to Fordcombe, for things were not proceeding there according to the law, and therefore a catastrophe must happen, and he would be there to see.

And first he came in the guise of a man, and secondly in the garb of a woman. They came from opposite parts

of the earth. The man truly, only from London, the woman (even then standing on the deck of a cross-channel steamer) from a long way off. And neither had the least idea what the other was about. The woman indeed had never even heard of the man's existence.

He might be said to be the herald, and he came to knock on Aylmer's door, the forerunner announcing Destiny.

Yet he was quite an insignificant looking little man, merely the youngest partner in the firm of solicitors Messrs. Dunstable, Ronalds and Willoughby.

He knocked, and rang the little electric bell he found hidden away in the ivy round the porch.

No one answered! *We* might think, knowing whose instrument the gentleman was, that the cottage inmates had some presentiment of evil and were loath to give him admittance.

But Destiny, when his mind is once made up, is not to be denied, and therefore forced the insignificant young man to knock and ring again.

Capitulation!

Mrs. Pritchard opened the door and the insignificant young man from London asked to see Sir Desmond Antrobus.

(Even then there was a faint resistance. A last beating of baffled wings, a last flutter of weak hands.)

Sir Desmond was out.

"I have to catch the seven-thirty train back. When will he return?"

"Can't say."

(It almost seemed that Destiny might be defeated after all. Well, if you think that, you don't know Destiny. He is like a great eagle, and once he poises for a swoop, vain are all the flutterings of baffled wings. And he never

makes mistakes. He knows his hour to the fraction of a second, and knows his victim too, and just how much that sufferer must bear.)

So Mrs. Pritchard without thought or intention but that the law might be fulfilled informed the young man that "Mr. Forsyth was in."

The gentleman was evidently struck. The name seemed familiar.

"Forsyth, Mr. Forsyth?" he queried.

"Yes! Mr. Aylmer Forsyth. Sir Desmond's Secretary. You can see him."

"Thank you. I should like to. Much obliged."

And the Herald went briskly into the house, and Destiny scored the first point in the game.

"Forsyth"; the Lawyer repeated the name as if amazed. "How very singular. Quite a coincidence." Then aloud he added:

"I am Mr. Willoughby. Perhaps you had better take my card."

"Sure," responded Mrs. Pritchard in her slow way. "I'll say you wish to see him," and Destiny grinned at the excellent way he had moved another pawn.

Mr. Willoughby occupied the time till Aylmer should arrive, appraising the value of the contents of the room, and he came to the conclusion that young men who were private secretaries to leading public men, seemed to do themselves fairly well. "But no doubt Antrobus would put his secretary on to many a good thing."

"You wish to see me?" said a pleasant voice behind him.

Mr. Willoughby turned and was surprised to see so young a man.

"Sir Desmond has gone to Camoys Park. I don't

expect him for some time. Is there anything I can do?"

"I came on a matter of which you are doubtless aware. We received instructions some time ago to ascertain the whereabouts of Sir Desmond's——"

But this was evidently something the chief had not thought it necessary to tell him, and was therefore something he had no business to know. Aylmer interrupted quickly.

"Excuse me, but I think this must be a private matter. I know nothing of Sir Desmond's private affairs."

Willoughby laughed.

"I see. It was a Dr. Fell who called upon us in the first place with instructions from Sir Desmond."

"Dr. Fell happens to be here now. You can see him if you like."

"If I could," murmured Mr. Willoughby. But Aylmer was already shouting to Fell to come along, and the good doctor, thinking some patient had sent for him, came into the house.

"This gentleman wishes to see you," said Aylmer, "as Sir Desmond's out. Mr. Willoughby."

Having introduced them Aylmer went on to a little loggia beyond the window. There he was out of ear-shot yet within call should he be wanted.

"I think you called some time ago at our office on behalf of Sir Desmond Antrobus."

"I did, and gave your firm certain instructions."

"We carried out those instructions, and I came to-day to give Sir Desmond the result of our inquiries."

Willoughby knew all about the doctor, and that in speaking to him he was practically speaking to his firm's client.

“Well Doctor, as Sir Desmond thought all along, Lady Antrobus is alive. We have also ascertained the lady’s movements up to a few months ago. Sir Desmond can get his divorce all right, Doctor. This letter has the particulars up to date.” And Willoughby handed Fell a rather voluminous envelope.

“You are quite sure a divorce is possible?”

“There can be no difficulty whatever! The lady has had a remarkable career, and is at present living under the name of——,” and then something made Willoughby pause. It may have been that he caught a glimpse of Aylmer, outside, whatever it was, he hesitated, and Fell filled up the pause.

“He is sure to be back before long. It might save time if you would look in again.”

“I will try and do so. Good-bye Doctor.”

“Good-bye,” answered Fell.

Willoughby saw Aylmer, and being a polite man would say good-bye to him also.

“Won’t you have a whisky and soda, or something?” asked Aylmer.

“No thank you. I’ll return later, on the chance that Sir Desmond comes back in time to see me. Good-bye Mr. Forsyth,” and now he almost stumbled over the name.

Aylmer felt nervous for some reason; why should the lawyer be so anxious to see Antrobus? And then Fell—Aylmer had never seen Fell look so serious before.

“There’s nothing wrong is there?” he asked.

Fell started from his reverie, and slipped the letter into his pocket.

“No. Nothing wrong.” And he strolled over to the piano and started playing “La Cathedrale Engloutie,”

To look at him you would never have suspected he had an ear for music. But he was in truth a very cultivated musician with a pretty taste in the best music.

“Of course,” continued Aylmer, “if there’d been a woman—I suppose there isn’t a woman anywhere?”

Fell smiled, and played something Debussy never wrote.

“My sweet youth. Women are everywhere. Haven’t you noticed them?”

“I think I have seen them here and there. Well, I hope it’s all right, and he gets over it.”

“He talks of a woman as though she were a thorny hedge,” murmured Fell.

And just then the subject of their conversation came in.

“Back already?” cried Fell.

“If you’d been a moment earlier, sir, you’d have met Mr. Willoughby, your lawyer, he was frightfully keen to see you.”

“Willoughby! Oh has he been here?” replied Desmond. “Well I met the telegraph boy instead. A wire for you Aylmer. Any letters?”

“A whole pile over there, sir,” Aylmer answered, and opened his telegram.

One glance and the room echoed with a shout of joy.

“It’s my mother! She’s coming here! By the 6.15. She’s wired from Dover! And I thought she was in Italy.”

His mother! And the next thought he had was one of Katie. He would be able to show his mother to the girl he loved! And what a splendid mother! How delighted the Dalisons would be! How she would love Katie!

Then as Desmond and Fell said how they looked forward to meeting his mother, it suddenly flashed across

Aylmer's mind, how strangely hostile she had always been about Antrobus.

Ah well! She would meet him too, and learn how mistaken she had been! How very lucky they would all be down at Fordcombe together.

"I must tell Mrs. Pritchard," he cried. And he hurried out of the room, bent on loving preparations for his mother's advent.

And that night, little Mrs. Cheltenham, returned to her home in the garden suburb from a month in Switzerland, told her husband she was quite certain that the tall distinguished looking woman on the steamer must have been the Princess X. whose portrait she had seen in the *Sketch*, and who was expected shortly in England.

On the other hand Mabel Flapper was perfectly sure that "Darling Lily Longford," the famous Cinema Star, was on the boat when she crossed from Calais.

"Such a love! Such a pet! I nearly asked for her autograph."

"Wonder who the devil she is," Sir George Alaburton had said to himself. He knew the Princess and Lily Longford too, but this lady was quite another person. He had tried to read the names on her luggage label, but all he could see were the initials "J. F." which didn't help him much.

But the tall distinguished looking woman had seemed quite unaware she was creating a mild sensation. Possibly she was used to being the centre of attraction and hardly knew people were looking at her.

XXV

WE must pause a moment. Alas! My poor brother! But only a little pause! And consider of Jessica and what she felt when she first learned that Aylmer had met Desmond. Well, she had a very bad quarter of an hour. Her world and the Antrobus *milieu* seemed divided by so wide a gulf that the possibility of their meeting had never been taken into her serious consideration.

She forgot, if she ever realised, that Aylmer, as a young man going out into the world, was bound to make his own friends. She forgot the smallness of English Society and how circle touches circle; she forgot her boy was bound to meet someone who moved in the Dalison-Antrobus set, and she forgot above all, that the very education, the very upbringing she had given Aylmer was just the very preparation needed to fit him for the friends and society he soon found for himself.

Immediately she received his news she sat down and wrote a long letter insinuating that Desmond was an unsuitable companion whose acquaintance had better be dropped.

It was not a clever move. She should hardly have mentioned Antrobus, but have found some very good excuse to get Aylmer back to Italy where she might have found him some safe, pleasant job through one or other of her influential friends.

But Jessica was not really very brainy, and that letter was one of her mistakes. It was just the letter to call for the reply it received, and that was a good-natured, chaffing answer to her fears. The mother felt hurt, almost annoyed. The boy ignored her point of view as of no moment.

She wrote again, but she forgot the youth was only twenty-one and having the time of his young life: skating, bob-sleighbing, ski-ing, tobogganing by day, and dancing all night. His answer, when it came, held all the old affection, but had quite evidently been written hastily. And there was no mention of Antrobus! Did that mean the acquaintance had been dropped, or was the boy simply careless of her anxiety?

But if there was no reference to Antrobus in that particular letter, there were plenty in Aylmer's subsequent epistles. She began to dread what she might read; and when she learnt he had become private secretary to Antrobus, then, oh then, our harassed Jessica felt fear, real, trembling fear, for the first time in her life.

And besides fear, she felt something very like anger. Did the young fellow think his own judgment infallible that he treated hers almost with contempt?

And all the while she was living on thorns lest the ruin of her plans came crashing about her head. But those very plans had never been carried out. Time and again had she meant to start afresh, to make a real home somewhere. First she had thought of England, then she had wandered to Landolfo. But though Aylmer had loved Landolfo as a schoolboy, he could not be expected to settle down in such a place at his age! However, Jessica was never wont to spend much time in thought. Very quickly she came to a decision, and first she begged the help of

her old Prince and a post was found for Aylmer, one that would take him out of Desmond's influence. Thereupon she hastened off to England, never for one moment doubting but that her presence, her personal word, would do the work her letters had failed to accomplish.

* * * * *

"So the young man's going to present us with a relation at last—if it's only a mother! I must say I think it's about time." It was Ralph Dalison who spoke, patting his sides in the hopes of discovering the whereabouts of a secretive box of matches.

"Yes, I suppose it is," said Fell, who had brought the news on to the lawn.

The voice of the host was now heard in the land summoning them all to tea, and, as they moved towards the house, Margaret thought what a cheery, bright young fellow Aylmer looked. She supposed it was the thought of his mother's visit.

And Aylmer admitted to himself that it was a very pleasant thing to be able to say: "My mother will be here shortly," and very proud was he of possessing so presentable a parent. Very pleasant, too, the kindly words of Miss Dalison, the no less cordial little speech of Ralph's and, above all, the look he caught in Katie's eyes.

Desmond was at once seized upon by the Squire to give some information concerning "the present deplorable political outlook." He was, however, crudely interrupted by his flippant daughter.

"Dad, dear, this is not a magistrates' meeting."

"Please, Ralph, no politics."

The Squire looked from one to the other of his women-kind and decided that few women took any interest in their country's welfare.

"Very well," he sighed. "I will cease to cast pearls before—h'm—ladies. Still, I must say——"

"Don't, father!"

"My dear child, you speak with all the authority that belongs to a wife."

"Ah!" said Katie, thoughtfully, "I suppose a wife does make a difference in a man's life."

"Well—yes—usually. A good wife is as important as a good cook. The difference is that one clings to us while we cling to the other."

"You darling!" exclaimed Katie. "Do let me know when you cling to Mrs. Stilton again. I'd love to see you at it."

"In all my recollection I can recall no government so hopelessly incapable of commonsense," murmured Ralph, returning to his mutton.

"All governments are incapable," said Fell from his corner.

Antrobus refused to be drawn, however, and eventually the Squire asked if he wasn't to have his revenge. Antrobus had letters to write and Margaret was tired; so finally a match was fixed up between Ralph and the doctor against the two young people.

"You mustn't stay too long, Ralph," his sister called after him.

Margaret sat in the loggia and watched the four go up the little garden towards the lawn. Her attention was chiefly concentrated on the younger people.

In some ways she could wish nothing better for Katie. All she knew of Aylmer was in his favour—unfortunately

that all was very little. And thinking of Katie made her think of Fordcombe and the country round.

"It is a goodly heritage," she thought. "I know no countryside more attractive."

And so, too, thought Jessica, whose car was threading its way in and out of the Sussex lanes, heading to Fordcombe.

"I had no idea it was so beautiful," said she. "It is totally unlike anything in any other country."

And I think she felt a certain pride in the thought that this was her country after all. With all its faults, all its mistakes, this amazing country was hers. These healthy-looking peasants were *her* country people. She might well be proud of them.

"I wonder why we English take such a pride in belittling our native land. I've done it myself. No wonder foreigners can never understand us."

Meanwhile, Margaret had decided to take the present opportunity of speaking to Desmond of his protégé.

"If you're not frightfully busy, could you spare me a minute?" she asked, as she stepped into "the barn."

"I'm snowed under with letters, but go ahead."

"I'm worried a little—about Katie."

"What's the young thing been doing?"

"Perhaps it's not altogether her fault. Oh," added Margaret suddenly, "I do wish this cottage wasn't quite so close to us."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, what about it?" And Antrobus looked at her with a twinkle in his eye.

"What about it? You don't seem surprised."

"Lady Alaburton sat next me at luncheon to-day," replied Desmond, by way of explanation. And Margaret understood.

“What do you and Ralph think?”

“Oh, we’d no idea of anything. It was something Isobel and Augusta said.” And here she ended with what sounded like a sigh. Of course, Augusta and Isobel had only spoken from kindness. She could almost wish they had not been so very kind. Such kindness as Augusta’s for instance, was almost brutal. To have one’s duty thrust so prominently before one was rather irritating, especially if one knew it to be one’s duty.

“We both like the boy so much, only—who is he?”

Desmond ignored the question and seized on the first part of her reply. He thought her looking very pretty and sweet with the little air of perplexity about her; indeed, he thought of her so much that he had no thought just then for anyone else and had quite forgotten a certain letter lurking in his pocket.

“I’m glad you like him. I want you to like the people I like.”

“He’s a dear. I think you must have been like him at his age.”

“Ah! I never was twenty-three. I remained seventeen till I suddenly found I was seventy-one. But that’s another story. What about these young folk?”

“If only we’d not gone to Mürren, none of this would have happened,” said Margaret ruefully. She remembered that she had never wanted to go to Switzerland. She disliked snow, even when seen through the windows of an efficiently warm hotel. But Katie had been so keen and the expedition had been primarily for her.

Before Desmond could offer any suggestion as to what might have chanced had things been quite other than what they had been, they were joined by Ralph, who appeared to be somewhat heated and out of temper.

Events on the croquet lawn were not going at all well. Aylmer's lawn was by no means in that state of excellence he had been led to suppose, and he entertained grave doubts about the hoops. They did not seem *quite* of regulation size. In fact, he would be very much surprised if they were not considerably narrower than the majority of hoops. Finally, his ball had been sent to "the edge of beyond" by an unfilial daughter.

"A cigar, or I shall swear," cried the unfortunate man. "The modern child has no sense of that duty which I at least was taught to be due to ageing parents. And the lawn wants rolling badly."

"Yesterday you said ours wanted mowing," said Margaret, smiling. "We were just talking about Katie—and Aylmer, you know," she added.

"Ah, yes," said the Squire, as he helped himself to a cigar from a box on a side table. "Very right, very proper indeed. (Puff.) What can you tell us, Desmond? (Puff.) In these days one doesn't look for a man to have a grandfather, but this youth doesn't seem to have had even a father." (Puff, puff, puff—crowds of puffs.)

"Perhaps not. I wonder how Mrs. Forsyth managed," Desmond remarked.

"He may have heaps of charming relations," put in Margaret, ever wishful to be kind.

But the Squire was still a little peeved. Even his cigar refused to draw properly and was burning down one side.

"Well, where are they?" he exclaimed.

Not knowing, Margaret observed that: "Of course the family might have died out."

"Then," cried her brother triumphantly, "we should at least be shown the tombstones."

“My dear old friend,” said Desmond, “I never thought you worldly before.”

But Ralph’s good humour was being rapidly regained. He had lit another cigar (he could prove quite an expensive guest in little matters), and was getting considerable satisfaction out of it. To be called “worldly” was the very last thing he wished to be.

“Nor am I,” he expostulated. “But this is most serious. I understand that young Aldershot is—what is the word?—*épris* with Katie. Now Aldershot is, well Aldershot, while young Forsyth is, after all, well—young Forsyth. Oh, very charming, but if there’s anything between him and my girl, I really must know more about Prince Charming than that he is—well—charming.”

This was a long speech for the Squire and there seemed no ready-made answer to it. Some idea filtered through Desmond’s mind that traditions and obligations might prove rather sorry shackles and something of this he might have said, but Katie had worked her wicked will and it was now Ralph’s turn to play, as Fell, mallet in hand, came into the room to tell him.

“My turn?” exclaimed the old gentleman, jumping up from the chair in which he had seated himself. “Good gracious! I wonder where Katie has sent me now.” And he careered down the little garden path, cigar in mouth, happily unconscious it had gone out.

But time was getting on and Fell had one or two patients to visit.

“Would you take my place?” he asked Margaret, when he had explained.

“I ought to be going, too,” she answered. “I had no idea it was so late.”

“How busy you all are,” said Desmond from his seat

at the writing table. "I consider this Martha-like mood of everybody most uncalled for."

"Somebody must do something," sniggered Fell, as he made to leave the house. "We're not all of the idle rich."

XXVI

MARGARET would have also gone but Desmond stopped her.

"Must you really go?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so. I've interrupted your work shamefully."

"My work be ——. What's the exact word? All the same, I insist on going with you, if only to the gate."

And so they went together into the garden.

And suddenly Desmond became again the grave, pre-occupied man she had met so often lately. The man absorbed with care of which she knew nothing. It was something that he seemed to wish to keep to himself and not confide to her. As though he closed a door between them, leaving her in the cold, shutting her out in the darkness. Had she but known it the outer darkness in which she stood and the loneliness that seemed to stifle her was as the sun at noonday and the company of seraphs to the blackness in Desmond's heart, and the isolation of his desert places.

Yet not for worlds would she encroach or force her friendship should he wish to stand alone. But it hurt a little. He seemed to regard her friendship as something to be taken out only on fine days. She knew very well it would not spoil in foul weather, and could stand a good deal of rough and tumble.

Looking up she saw the trouble in his face, and at length she spoke.

"Why must I be treated to a sort of picnic intimacy by my friends, Desmond?"

So kind, so gentle was she that for a moment he hesitated. They were standing close together by a little side gate that led out into the lane. The trees were thick and high, and met together overhead. It was a very sheltered place, a very meet spot for such a confidence as he had to give. It was very quiet, very still, only the late sun thrust golden fingers through the leaves and touched the branches and the undergrowth.

"Perhaps—some day—I may have a story to tell you, if you'll listen," he said.

"Of course I will," Margaret answered.

And the sun came further down. And a stray bird twittered to its nest. And the trees pressed their heads yet nearer together. There seemed a spirit of expectancy abroad. Surely this was the time and place to tell his history, to take her to him, press her to his heart!

But there was another destiny for these two. So Desmond did not speak that the law might be fulfilled.

"Then that's understood," he murmured. "I shall come."

The words struck Margaret almost with the force of a blow. It was hard when one had tried to hold out a helping hand to have it thus turned aside. There remained no sunshine in the thicket now, only a cold rain falling.

"Quite," she said, and passed out through the little gate.

Desmond called her back.

"Yes?" she enquired, hoping he had repented.

"I forgot something. Perhaps I spoke rather casually

about Aylmer just now. If there should be anything in the affair, go gently with the boy, won't you? I know him so well, and at his age love is such a terrible business."

So it was only for someone else he asked her sympathy, for somebody he seemed to care for most in all the world. It was with rather a forlorn little smile she answered.

"How fond you are of Aylmer."

"It is one of my many regrets that I haven't a son like him."

Now to her quick ear there was a world of sorrow in that sentence. It was the hopeless regret of the childless man who, having all things, had yet no one to follow in his steps. And suddenly she saw the pathos of this successful, much sought after man, in the loneliness of his soul! How poor in the midst of wealth, what a failure in the hour of his success. And she saw also how the whole structure of Desmond's career was built on a foundation of futility, and this revelation made her own hurt a very little thing. Here was something needing help, infinitely pathetic, struggling in a big loneliness.

It was with a little impulsive gesture, almost maternal, that she spoke.

"Desmond. You're not in any trouble?"

"Why should you think that?" he answered.

"Instinct, perhaps, or a woman's curiosity."

"I should never attribute curiosity to you. In any case, don't worry. I'm thinking of making a fresh start and I'd like to come when the slate's clean and waiting for a new story. I wonder if you'd help me with the lurid bits?"

She was glad to see that the momentary gloominess had vanished. She had seen something of his real mind,

if only an instant's vision, and she was content now to wait for whatever he might have to tell, until such a time as he saw fit to speak.

"Choose your own time, Desmond. But I fear I'm not much good at purple passages."

And she gave him a friendly little nod before continuing her way up the hill, and Desmond stood and watched her with a curious tugging at his heart till a bend in the lane took her out of his sight.

Even then he lingered a little; then he turned, and feeling happy inasmuch as he felt sure of himself, he went back to the house and his much neglected work.

He went quickly up the path, quickly across the little paved garden in front of the big windows of the barn, and so preoccupied with his own thought was he that the sound of fingers running over the notes of the piano as though trying the quality of the instrument never reached his ears. Now on the wall facing the window was a large old mirror so placed that it reflected not only the great doors of the barn and the garden out beyond, but the face of anyone at the piano.

The slanting sun poured in at this hour, sending a great ray of light across the polished floor and up the opposite side of the room, and anyone standing in the garden door cast a long shadow on the piano.

Desmond came so quickly, so lightly, the player had no idea of another's presence until that long shadow fell suddenly across the room, then, looking up, their eyes met in the mirror, and stayed there glued to one another. And so they both stared, gazing at each other in the mirror.

* * * * *

When Mrs. Pritchard heard the bell for the second time that afternoon, I believe she said "Drat!" She was busy

over "something extra" in honour of her master's mother, and decided "Whoever it was must just wait."

But when she did go to the door, and when she learnt who the visitor was, she was all smiles and courtesy.

"A real lady. I should say so, and grander than Miss Dalison, who was a very sweet and kindly lady. But Mrs. Forsyth had a way with her that made you feel yourself a queen." Indeed, for the rest of her life she never ceased singing the praises of Jessica, and these only grew more marvellous as time went on.

Surely this coming to her boy's home was one of the most beautiful, yet piteous things Jessica had ever done. Beautiful in that it held something of the nature of a sacred pilgrimage. Piteous in its inevitable futility. It was beautiful in its expectancy, beautiful in its beginning, most pitiful in its ending.

Oh! But that I could make you feel one-tenth of the joy and love that filled that mother's heart, as she walked up the little path and knocked for admittance at her son's door.

And then it suddenly occurred to her that this would be the first time that son had ever acted as host to his mother. It was a delicious thought. She loved to linger over it. Aylmer had always come to her. Now it was his turn to shelter her; and well she could picture his delight at such a task.

She took a good look at the little place before she knocked and rang. It seemed to smile upon her. It was all simple, all beautiful. The original builder had sought no effect. Time, perhaps, had helped him a little; had pulled the cottage down here, or given a little tug there, and had persuaded that rose to run up the chimney-stack, and wave a red flag there. Jessica thought it was all quite

delicious and she felt some of the feelings of a devout Moslem when first he beholds the domes and minarets of Mecca.

"No tea, thank you," she replied to Mrs. Pritchard's hospitality, "and don't tell Mr. Forsyth I am here yet."

Jessica wanted to spin out her pleasure, playing with it like the epicure she was, but Aylmer had gone as far as the Manor with Ralph and Katie, and Mrs. Pritchard said so.

"What a perfectly delightful room," Jessica exclaimed, when she entered "the barn," "and how unexpected."

"Yes, ma'am," Mrs. Pritchard answered. She would have much preferred a proper ceiling herself and not have had "them timbers showing." "It was all right for the gentry, but for her part she liked to be respectable."

"I hired a car at the junction instead of waiting for the train for Stilborough. That's why I'm so much before my time. You've always been with my son, I think?"

"Yes, ma'am, ever since Mr. Forsyth came and my husband died."

The two events were always closely connected in Mrs. Pritchard's mind. Perhaps she sometimes thought that as Pritchard's death had to be one day it was just as well that it happened when it did.

When Mrs. Pritchard left and she had time for a good look round, Jessica felt a curious sense of Aylmer's presence, as though he must be close beside her. The place was full of him.

"Nothing is overdone, everything is just right," she commented. "I wonder who helped him with the flowers? That looks like a woman's hand."

Well, we know who was responsible for them, as Jessica will very likely ere long. Then her eye fell upon a

photograph and she crossed the room to have a closer inspection. It was one of Margaret Dalison, but Jessica, seeing it was not the face of a young woman, put it down, taking no further interest in it.

Then she saw the grand piano, which looked a good one, and smiled as she saw it.

“Dear boy! What a piece of extravagance when he only vamps fox-trots and one-steps.”

She herself went at once to read the maker's name and try the tone. It was a good name, none better, and she slipped off her gloves and ran her fingers over the keys.

“Quite decent. Very decent, indeed,” she decided. And again her fingers ran up and down.

Then a strange thing happened. A moment ago the sun had been streaming in at the open door and now, behold, a long shadow had fallen right across the place where she stood.

She looked up to see what it was, and as she raised her eyes they fell on the mirror opposite, and she remained gazing into it as though it had mesmerised them. She did not start, indeed, she made no movement at all. She simply stared at a face reflected there, a face she knew from pictures in illustrated papers, though the face she looked on was grimmer than in the photographs, and the eyes looked as though they had seen a ghost.

She ceased strumming on the piano, very slowly, quite unconscious whether she played or stopped, then turned, and after more than twenty years stood once more face to face with her husband.

How little she had changed. A certain fullness here and there, a certain dignity and authority that comes with the years; that was about all.

Even as she turned had not Desmond felt something

of the old thrill at the graceful bend of that lovely neck? She was certainly one of the wonders. How in God's name was it done? And what in God's name was she doing here?

It was a mistake, of course. He remembered now—the Grange—she was a friend of its dubious tenant and had mistaken the house; that explained everything.

For one horrified moment he had thought "this must be the adored mother from Italy." Then the absurdity of confusing two such different women, and his long conviction of the sweetness and sanctity of Aylmer's mother rose up and shamed him, and Desmond's one thought was to get the woman out the house as quickly as he could. But his hesitation had given Jessica an advantage. That lady found herself not so terribly at a loss. She had for so long looked for a catastrophe so much worse, that this meeting came somewhat in the nature of an anti-climax. Indeed, they might even come to some understanding, if Desmond had grown into the sensible man she expected.

XXVII

AND she was still smiling when she broke the silence, that threatened to become quite awkward, by saying, in the most charming and perfect manner, "How do you do?"

When Desmond heard that musical voice, it seemed quite impossible so many years had gone since he had heard it last. At once rose to his eyes, vividly, insistently, across the desert years, the mirage of an untidy little room in an untidy little house. Chairs covered with clothes, an ugly washstand, a cracked glass on the dressing table. And, most clear of all, the sight of a young fellow off "to see an Editor chap," kissing his wife good-bye. And the wife's arms are round her husband's neck, and she whispers, "don't be late for tea will you, dear?" And looking on Jessica she seemed hardly to have changed at all.

Yet all the happenings of the intervening years lay thick upon them. And as he realised this woman was indeed the Jessica of old, he found that he could look on her dispassionately, as though she were somebody with whom he had nothing to do.

And Jessica thought that, but for the illustrated papers, she would never have known Desmond again he had grown so much older. But he had also improved. There was an atmosphere of success about him. Now Jessica

liked successful men, she had frequently found them of great use, and Desmond rose in her estimation.

Thus it was these two met again, and thus it was they took each other's measure.

Did you expect a start? A cry of horror! A mutual exclamation of "You!"

Well, people may be full of dramatic possibilities and yet remain entirely free from melodrama. Drama comes to all of us. Melodrama is what we strain after.

But I doubt Jessica was so easy in her mind as she tried to imagine herself.

This Desmond, standing just inside the garden door, looked very self-possessed and determined, very much as though he had his foot upon his native hearth and meant to turn this unwelcome intruder off it. He reminded her of the few men she had met and been unable to influence, and Jessica had no use for that kind of man.

* * * * *

"Get out." Desmond had taken three steps to her and coolly, authoritatively ordered her out of the house.

Such language, such treatment was quite other to her recollection of Desmond. When she had thought of him at all, it had been as a sort of patient dog. But he seemed to have grown into quite another sort of animal.

"How dare you take that tone to me?"

The moment the words were out of her mouth she regretted them. They were shrewish, second-rate, unworthy of her and savoured of bravado.

But, alas! and alack! our poor Jessica hadn't developed along the lines of dignity.

Often in her battles in the past she had found a little temper a very useful ally.

She was still a well-bred woman, but the simple dignity which should be hers without her troubling to think about it, had become a something she had to remember; and very often, in moments of great excitement for instance, well, quite candidly, it was something she not only forgot, but didn't care a hang if she did forget.

But her sense of humour was as keen as ever, and suddenly it rose up now. The situation all at once struck her as being distinctly amusing. Surely all the cards were in her hand? "You mean to turn me out?"

How can I describe the quiet assurance with which Jessica spoke now? A moment back she was ill at ease, now she was all smiles as though she had a little secret that mightily amused her.

But she did not continue long in this comfortable state of mind. Desmond was determined to end the unpleasant interview and get her out of the house with all speed, before the rest of the party returned.

"This lad is in my service. He is young enough to be my son. I feel responsible for him. Now, what are your relations?"

"The friendliest," with a beaming smile.

"Has he been your lover?"

The possibility of such a point of view had never occurred to Jessica. The horror of it! The grossness, so suddenly revealed, forced a cry of horror from her.

"Oh, no! No!"

Desmond mistook her completely and read her very genuine indignation as mere acting—rather over-done—perhaps he was a hard judge, but remember how well she had acted years ago when she had put her arms round his neck and had said "You won't be late for tea?"

He had never quite forgotten that little episode, or ever

quite forgiven the woman for her lying. Alas! he would never have believed she had spoken without thinking and had been ashamed as soon as she had spoken.

“Do you wish me to make your stay impossible?”

Jessica stared, frankly astonished. How could he force her to go?

“You mean you’d turn me out?”

“Of all the men in the world,” she murmured only half audibly, “you are the last I ever wanted to meet again. And to think I should do so—here.”

There was such a genuine ring of abhorrence in her voice that almost Desmond smiled. Such sincerity was quite refreshing.

“Why interfere at all?” said Jessica, “I’ll go as soon as I can. Will that do?”

Now Desmond had learnt in his journey through the world, that a woman never compromises unless she knows that she is beaten; therefore, being translated, her words meant that “I will do as you tell me in a few minutes, sneak away quietly and disappear as I came, but you mustn’t expect me to do so all at once.”

“Forsyth is expecting his mother in about half-an-hour. I do not intend you should force him to introduce you to her—and others. If you insist on remaining, I shall tell them who and what you are.”

“You’d give me away to him? Tell him everything?”

“Everything. I have learnt today the sort of life you have been leading.”

This is what she had feared so long, what she had come to England—to Fordcombe to prevent. But she had never looked for anything like this. She had dreaded some accident, some idle word, or act, some little coin-

vidence that would reveal the truth. Never for one moment had she dreamed that Desmond would himself deliberately disclose the truth.

If there was any lingering doubt in her mind, Desmond's next words finally drove it out.

"Certainly! However painful to myself."

"I can't go! It would look so odd—how could my disappearance be explained? If only you'd keep silent."

"No." Desmond rapped out the word, impatient at the woman's obstinacy.

"I mean till I'm gone. Let us compromise. I'll go right away—just as you order. But you must let me see him alone first." Jessica looked at Desmond and smiled almost wistfully, and even with a certain amount of pathos. She had often been told of the power of her smile. And probably had as large an assortment of that useful article as she had of tears, of which she had every conceivable variety. And why not? It's well to be armed at all points when you are, well, what Jessica had become. And she looked very irresistible; but Desmond remembered Margaret, of whom poor Jessica knew nothing, and thus lacked the key to the situation. So for once, soft, coaxing voice and glance were wasted.

"Only give me an hour, then it shall be your turn, let me have one hour."

"Half-an-hour then! A quarter! Five minutes only!" She was pleading now, making no further demands, but throwing herself on his generosity.

"Not one instant. If you remain, I explain everything. Now, do you understand?"

What could be done with such a man? However, she held the ace of trumps. He might take these few paltry tricks, but the trick that should win the game, that must

be hers. And remembering this Jessica said, "You seem to think it will be an easy thing to turn me out. I think you are mistaken. I shall wait."

She had not to wait long.

Abruptly! Sharply! Without warning! Thus the door burst open, and a young fellow, buoyant, jubilant, effervescing, sparkling, with light in his eyes and swiftness in his feet, broke into the room.

"Mater!"

One word! One look! One instant flash of revelation and—like Paul of old—Desmond stood groping, almost blinded by the truth so suddenly revealed.

"Mater!"

There was no mistake! The boy had rushed to Jessica, hugged her, laughing and talking at once. No, there could be no mistake! Jessica had forgotten Desmond's very existence.

"Dearest boy!" and there was a world of love in voice and look.

"How wonderful. How did you get here so soon?"

"I motored. Kiss me again, you dear."

A hug and a merry boyish laugh.

"Where's Sir Desmond? Oh, there you are, sir. Suppose you've introduced each other. Look here, I must go and wash. Back in a sec'. This is great."

Quick as he had come, as ardent, as impulsive, he was out of the room and up the stairs, hurrying, as he best knew, to get back to those two dear people whom he had left, standing face to face, the woman with the light of triumph in her eyes, the man dumb, dazed and surely dreaming.

This then had been her secret! This then was why she had stood her ground; this it was that could make her

laugh and say it would not after all be so easy to turn her out!

And Jessica, who for a moment had very nearly forgotten Desmond, remembered him now, and turned and looked upon him.

She was feeling very secure. The cards were all falling as she would wish. Very soon it would be time to play her ace of trumps.

XXVIII

WHEN she looked at Desmond she was, to do her justice, really shocked at the change she saw in the man. Gone was the self-possessed man of the world, and in place thereof stood a man of straw, hesitating, uncertain. For Desmond's mind had ceased to work. Like a fine piece of delicate machinery it had suddenly jarred into a standstill. He could but repeat to himself, "This woman—this wanton—is the adored mother."

And Jessica knew the time had come to play her ace and settle the business once and for all. It was with undoubted truth and with all sincerity, even as one with great authority, she looked Desmond squarely in the face and answered his unspoken question.

"I don't believe it."

"There are such things as birth certificates, you know. Oh, he's your boy right enough."

And somehow Desmond had ceased to doubt her. There was so much honesty, so much unfeigned sincerity in that slow, silvery voice of hers. And then his own manhood, the fatherhood within him confirmed her. Dazed and stupid he might be, but he no longer denied—instead, he was struggling to adjust his mind to this astounding thing, so pregnant with possibility.

He was like an explorer landing on the shore of some

uninhabited island, unmarked on any map, discovered unwittingly and in the night. A country full of the unexpected, of dark forests, of storms—far other to the lotus land he sought—and yet with sunshine lighting up the mountain tops.

And Jessica knew nothing could prevent every one of her shafts from going home.

“Weren’t you exactly like him at his age? Not so much in looks, but in little mannerisms, little tricks of speech and character? He is twenty-three. He was born—soon after we—parted.”

“My son! My son!”

Good God! Only that afternoon had he been longing “for a son like him,” and now that very boy, that frank, manly lad was indeed his very son. It was more excitement that Desmond felt at that moment than anything else. The potentialities, the possibilities all crowded so thickly round him, they shut out the real situation from his line of vision. The God-sent fact shouted in his ear as might the trumpet of Gabriel in the ear of some Old Testament Saint, and so filled his world with sound he could hear nothing else.

“My son! My son!”

So fiercely shone the truth that Desmond was lost, and stumbled mentally, as a man blind from birth, receiving the gift of sight, beholding men like trees walking, and mountains that were but little stones, would hesitate how to go.

Then Desmond recalled the woman whom he had almost forgotten in his excitement. And, remembering, he realised something of the immensity of his problem.

“What are you going to do?”

Yes! In God’s name what could he do? Climb the

housetops and shout the truth to all the world? How could he do that under the boy's own roof? Yet it was equally impossible to let the thing drift.

"The situation is impossible," he cried. "He thinks you perfection. He idolises you."

"Well?"

Jessica had no doubt about the answer. "If he really cares for the boy he won't hurt him," or so she thought.

But Desmond remembered Margaret, and stammered a little as he answered.

"There are all—these—others——"

"What others?"

"Dalison—his sister—his daughter."

To Jessica these were but names she remembered to have read in Aylmer's letters. People of no importance, therefore to be swept aside should they prove troublesome.

But Desmond was doing some hard thinking. Was Margaret to meet Jessica, touch her hand, be kind and gracious, and doubtless ask her up to her own home?

"You don't understand," he answered. "You couldn't. Good God! What is the right thing to do?"

Jessica was growing impatient. Aylmer might return at any moment, and she wanted Desmond's promise of silence first. To her it seemed incredible that he should even hesitate. Surely, never would any man tell his own son (a son he had only just discovered) that the adored mother was no better than a prostitute?

So she had thought, until she heard Desmond wondering what the right thing to do might be.

"Oh, but that's you," she cried. "Not the *easiest*, not even the *kindest*, but the *right* way. At least, you'll do nothing in haste?"

"I must think—I tell you I don't know—I must think."

And nothing further could she get out of him. He would commit himself to no promise, or give her any guarantee. Still, she had gained time, and that was everything. And she would be able, with luck, to contrive that talk with Aylmer, for which she had travelled all the way to England.

As to the boy. What need to describe his happiness? Happiness that came with almost overwhelming abundance, for while going with Katie and her father, Providence, that sometimes takes young lovers under special protection, had sent the Squire's Bailiff across their path with business that admitted no delay. So the Squire had stayed behind while the two young people went on alone, and somehow, well—Aylmer had contrived to do a little more than merely pave his way.

Now Cupid, when once he has taken a fancy to you, has many helps to give; and many kinds of arrow fill his quiver. A look can be more eloquent than words, and silence prove more powerful than speech.

In silence lovers learn what cannot be translated. Music is born in silence; even the solid earth we know, reveals some beauty that we have not seen before. In silence burdens fall away; grief flies to some dark place, and the road that stretched so dreary, dark and toilsome, hard to tread and difficult to see, now blossoms into Paradise. Moss for stones; roses for thorns; rare fruits where brambles grew; sunshine for darkness; cool trees, running brooks and joyous company in place of what had seemed a desert yesterday.

In such a silence man can read his fate and, reading, learn his possibilities. Great hopes are born in silence, high ambitions bred, and the prophecy of that estate waiting the smallest of created things, no longer looms

a visionary's dream. Where, oh man, are your limitations? Where the summit which you may not reach? What unattainable when nothing but your thoughts can limit you? What you look for, that you will acquire, and what you strive for, some day will you grasp. Only in the still, small voice God speaks.

And even so had our nice young people walked, and learnt all manner of nice things in the way it is meet for nice young lovers to learn.

And if the girl felt a radiance in wood and field, and joy bubbling like a spring, the boy was no less conscious that to-day was not as yesterday.

There had been times when both had forgotten the presence of their elders. Dalison had wondered, and thought them flippant. Margaret too had wondered, but her conclusion had been other than her brother's. It had excited and thrilled, but also worried her. It was very beautiful, very bright and sunny, only, well, "the sunshine always cast a shadow where it went."

* * * * *

Aylmer thought the Squire joined them all too quickly. It had been delicious standing under the elms and watching the sun slant down the heavens.

I think we should not be intruding if we also stood there awhile. It is so beautiful an evening, the loveliest hour of all, when the sun seeks every nook and corner before bowing in good-bye.

A burnished light on cottage walls, the corn more golden yet, the rich pastures deeper, greener than before.

The cows go home, each to her stall, each in due order of precedence. The sheep begin to huddle in the fold;

the boy, taking the horses to water, perched sideways on the harness, whistles; or shouts to a distant comrade.

The day's work is done, everything is aware of it and very content to have it so.

The great horses take their last drink. Well they know their evening round. Watch them go with certainty to the water and gingerly enter therein. What a pleasant sight, those long glossy necks and soft brown noses stooping down, and what a satisfaction in the long drawn drink. How they possess the place, and oh! with what consummate aloofness do the outraged geese gaze another way!

Yes, it is pleasant, this lazy hour at the end of the day. And to Aylmer there seemed everywhere a very beautiful peace like a benediction and a healing balm; a song of thankfulness; a psalm of praise for all the good things life had sent.

And if his cup of joy seemed fairly full then, had it not filled to overflowing when he learnt how his mother had already arrived?

And now he was hurrying all he knew to return to the two dear people he had always desired should meet.

"I suppose you know one another quite well by now," he called gaily, offering cigarettes to Antrobus, who took one and forgot to light it. "Mater! I've got a party!"

"A party! But, dear boy, I haven't a frock."

Aylmer grinned. "I expect you've brought a rag or two along. It's top hole your turning up like this. You complete the show! Doesn't she, sir?"

Jessica had sat herself close to the big open fireplace. Aylmer's hand was on the back of her chair, himself perched on the arm thereof, and thus I think they made a very pretty picture.

"Don't be absurd, Aylmer."

"Well, I feel absurdly happy you know," the boy answered. And the words rang in Desmond's ears all the evening.

"Do come and play, or do you want to go upstairs?"

"Not just yet. I'll play if you like."

The very last thing Jessica wanted just then was to leave the father and son together, so she very gladly jumped at Aylmer's suggestion.

"But I don't profess to play the piano you know," she added, the musician coming out in her even at such a crisis.

"Oh, not as you do the fiddle. But come and vamp something."

Jessica was much amused. "Desmond looks fit to hang himself, and certainly the position is rather difficult. Perhaps a little music till dressing time may ease the situation."

And with this kindly thought, the sweet woman followed her son to the piano. I think she rather exaggerated the grace of her movements. There was "a liquefaction" as Herrick has it, about her that was surely not altogether natural. I think she posed a little for Desmond's benefit. Just to let him see how confident she felt of her position.

Our darling was the simplest, most unaffected creature in the world, but when a particular effect called for a little underlining, no one knew how to do it better than our adorable Jessica.

She had picked up a few tricks in the course of her career, and some of them had become so natural to her, that she played them off occasionally quite unconsciously. So cool the voice, so exquisite the turn of the head, so perfect the smile—could it all be done without a little

rehearsing? I think it was a trifle more mechanical than it used to be before she'd been told so much about it. Again, Desmond could see her walking down the stairs at the famous dinner party at Aunt Elinor's. With just that turn of the head had she spoken over her shoulder to little Mrs. Tom following behind! Ah! How long ago! Well, if a little more mechanical than of old it was still full of fascination, and certainly incomparably superior to any other woman's art.

"Do you care for music, Sir Desmond?"

"You wouldn't ask that if you knew him better."

"Perhaps not, dear boy, but you forget we've only just met." And then Jessica smiled graciously upon her husband.

"What would you like?" she asked.

It was done on purpose—of course—a bit of bravado and he knew it.

"Whatever you like, Mrs. Forsyth. A musician should always play what he feels most in the mood for."

Whether she felt in the mood for what she played, we cannot tell for she has not taken us into her confidence; but it was very modern, very gay, and rather provocative.

And as she played the sun gradually faded into a thousand tender colours while dark shadows crept among the rafters and gathered in the corners, stealthily feeling their way like a silent band of ghosts who only ventured out by night.

The player changed into a curious tuneless melody, one of those strange outpourings of the zeitgeist—music that broke all the old rules, and yet kept the spirit of the law.

And Desmond, watching the boy hovering round his mother could scarcely keep from crying out "Thou art my beloved son."

Everything explained itself now. The instant mutual liking; the friendship that had blossomed so spontaneously, the affection so speedily born of that friendship, all this stood in no need of unravelling now.

And the music went on, softly and often so slowly it seemed to pass into silence. The shadows gathered courage and came further and further into the room. Then all the garden fell away, retreating from the house, and all its glory faded with that last yellow gleam contracting in the west. And Desmond looked with eyes of love upon the young, slim boy who was his very own flesh and blood.

And as Desmond watched, the problem before him seemed to grow almost impossible of solution. If he claimed his son, he would have to denounce the mother. If he divorced the faithless wife, it would surely almost break his boy's heart. Then there were Margaret and Katie, whose fate seemed bound up with that of this woman, and in a short time they would be in that very room, and Aylmer would introduce with pride "My mother." And Desmond could picture how perfectly Jessica would play her part.

She went on playing, and, musician that she was, almost forgot her surroundings in the music that she loved so well.

She forgot she was in an old English house, forgot even Desmond and her boy's hero-worship of him. She only knew Aylmer would accept the post she had come to offer and would make his home with her away in the rampant gorgeousness of blazing Italy, where little draughts and puffs of wind don't come sneaking round corners to take one unawares.

Even then she felt a little draught. Mrs. Pritchard

was the cause thereof. She had entered quietly with a card for Desmond, or a letter, or something that lay upon a salver.

"The gentleman would like to see you, Sir Desmond."

Desmond took the card and read the name engraved on it: "Mr. Felix Willoughby."

Softly the notes went on falling, telling their tale of love and passion, singing of mountains, forest and stream, the great waterfalls, and long hot summer nights.

In the darkness Aylmer's white clad figure loomed out somewhat like a ghost as he leaned upon the piano, and looked down on the black robed figure of his mother who merged more and more into the gathering darkness.

"What shall I tell the gentleman?"

Mrs. Pritchard was impatient to get back to her kitchen, and that "something extra" she had decreed.

"Tell Mr. Willoughby I am sorry I cannot see him now. Say I will write, when I have quite decided what to do."

The music still went on, still rose and fell and told its tale of love and passion, singing of mountains, forest and stream, and Desmond remembered a certain letter that lay forgotten in his pocket and the iron entered into his very soul.

XXIX

THUS did this happily re-united household pass the time in what was surely a truly ideal fashion.

The wife and mother entertained her family with her delightful talent, her son devoured her with eyes of love, while the husband and father sat wrapt in the music that lovely and accomplished woman played.

What a scene of domestic felicity! How English! How inspiring!

But let us follow our trio up Aylmer's stairs, and see what they are really like when the masks and make-up are off.

To begin with Jessica. That spotless matron had ceased to feel much anxiety on account of her husband. She could not see what he could hope "to gain" by telling Aylmer the truth. And if there was nothing "to be gained" why on earth should he (or anyone else for that matter) bother to do a disagreeable thing? Such was Jessica's way of looking at matters. Desmond had been a very good friend to Aylmer, and might continue in that capacity if he liked.

"What has he to gain by any other?" she asked herself. "Surely we two can effect some arrangement?"

But, dear Jessica, some people are so organised that justice sways them more than any hope of gain. And

you didn't know your boy was in love with a charming girl, or your husband thinking about divorce and re-marriage with another lady, the very antithesis of yourself. Had you known all this, I don't think you would have felt quite so confident and secure.

But she felt certain some arrangement could be made and the truth kept from Aylmer. No mischief had been done so far. All she needed was Desmond's promise to hold his tongue. She would certainly persuade Aylmer to go back with her. She had inducements to offer, very great inducements. She felt very pleased with herself as she thought things over.

Now in the next room Aylmer had been whistling and singing away, filling the cottage with merry, if not always very tuneful, song. Jessica had rejoiced to hear it, not only because it betrayed the boy's happy state of mind, but also because she hoped it would not be without its effect upon his father.

Who could have the heart to shatter so much happiness?

Yes, it all looked very simple, and from her point of view it certainly was. But then you see she was completely ignorant of the one or two little complications that have crept (and I can't think how) into this ambling narrative of the countryside.

Desmond had indeed heard young Aylmer whistling and very well he understood the meaning thereof. It certainly made the solution of his problem a good deal harder.

That "right thing to do," which Jessica disregarded in so characteristically light-hearted a fashion, had followed him upstairs and now sat on the edge of the bed dangling its legs and sniggering in Desmond's face.

“Aren't I a funny fellow?” it cried. “Don't you wish I'd take the mask off my face and show you what I really am?”

He enjoyed himself immensely did Mr. Right Thing To Do. He had a thousand tricks, and so chameleon-like a nature, Desmond found it impossible to decide what manner of thing he was.

“I cannot prevent these people coming to-night, and I'm certainly not going to make a scandal. But should Aylmer remain in ignorance? Suppose I let her go? Can I, the instant her back is turned, sue for a divorce? Hardly! One doesn't do that to any woman. If I divorce her Aylmer must learn the truth. Well, I suppose it would be a knock-out blow. Yet if there is anything serious between him and Katie, then I'm in honour bound to tell her people.”

Aylmer's guests arrived in good time, prepared to be friendly, even cordial, and when they met Mrs. Forsyth, the cordiality expanded into something nearly approaching warmth.

For Jessica intended her boy's party to be a success. These six people were old friends, and she had the difficult task of fitting at once into an already completed company. But that troubled her little. It was Desmond she feared might prove a wet blanket.

So the hostess (I suppose she was hostess?) set forth to be as captivating as she knew how. Never had she taken such trouble. Even when the Prince of Thrace first dined at her house she had not exerted herself so greatly. But Jessica was really desirous these people should enjoy themselves, and she wanted her boy to be pleased with the part his mother played. She was very grateful to them also. Well did she know that type of aristocracy.

In just that *milieu* she would have placed her son, and very prettily, very gracefully, had she thanked the brother and sister for their kindness "to my boy."

And, when they sat round the table, it looked like being a very happy party.

Margaret could never be jealous of any woman, and readily confessed she had never met anyone better bred, or better turned out, or indeed, more captivating than Mrs. Forsyth, while Katie could hardly take her eyes off this dazzling person. She was so young herself there could be no question of rivalry with the elder woman, besides, was she not Aylmer's mother and therefore a woman apart?

Dalison, who had been prepared to be a little critical, was possibly the first to fall a victim. As to Fell, well, he and Jessica had talked music before dinner and found their tastes agreed, so she had no difficulty where he was concerned. But how in the world did she know how to draw out the Squire so that he shone as the sun at noon-day? And how did she know the things that most interested Margaret?

Goodness knows! But she had a genius for that sort of thing.

Desmond, watching her turn so easily from one to the other, now speaking to Fell, and then drawing Margaret into their talk, not neglecting the Squire either, and even (with oh! what a flattering smile) asking Katie what she thought—Desmond, watching this, remembered a certain dinner party given in honour of his wife (oh! thousands of years ago), and as he thought thereon he smiled!

Just in that way had she turned from one to the other of her new relations, just in that same confident, grace-

ful manner had she smiled on (and subjugated) Aunt Elinor. Even so had she drawn out Tom, and reduced Cousin Hugh to willing servitude.

Yes, she had met Puccini; once, in Vienna. It had been very interesting, and the Viennese opera, taking it all round, was certainly one of the best in the world. The orchestra, quite perfect. Perhaps they lacked really great voices but the performances were wonderfully balanced. No! On the whole she had been disappointed in the Metropolitan, New York. The Americans were still a little too fond of noise. An American woman who was supposed to be musical had said to her, "We have the biggest orchestra and the biggest theatre. It's no good sending us anything but the biggest voices." "And you know," continued Jessica, "I hope it wasn't very rude but I couldn't help saying 'What a lot of charming talent you must lose.'"

From music in America she turned to life in America.

But she didn't stay long in the States, she travelled back to Europe (almost by aeroplane, she got there so quickly) and on purpose to enable her fellow guests to talk besides asking questions.

"I wonder if you met—oh! but you must have—a very dear friend of ours, Ermyntrude Fitz Howard," asked Margaret. "She is nearly always in Florence."

This was rather a jar. Lady Ermyntrude was so well known that it was quite unnecessary to mention the name of her villa or where it was. Both were equally famous, the one for her parties, the other for its magnificence. Jessica knew her ladyship by name, of course, and the villa too, by name! which was about all she was likely to know of either.

"Unfortunately, Lady Ermyntrude was away when I

was in Florence. So I never met her," said Jessica, who knew quite well she had no more chance of meeting Lady Ermyntrude than she had of being crowned Queen of England. "I was so sorry. She has the Villa Boccaccio, hasn't she? I hear it's quite wonderful." And feeling the ice of Florence rather thin she skated gracefully off to Siena. Siena was not far and provided much food for conversation; but, best of all, there were no exclusive social pillars there to stumble up against.

But even when she talked about Siena she decided it was quite time Desmond took his share of talk, so she told a little story concerning the Fascisti of that town (at least, she adapted a story that really belonged to Florence), and thus came to Italian politics and threw the ball to Desmond. She knew nothing about politics herself. To her mind politics were invented to keep unpopular statesmen in office. However, the Squire took up the cudgels and very soon he and Desmond were arguing to their hearts' content.

But Jessica was careful to avoid places like Florence or Rome or Cannes in the future.

And Desmond did not get much chance to keep silent, even had he wished. Jessica frequently appealed to him. "You must know better than I," or "What do you think, Sir Desmond?" How funny it sounded to call him *Sir* Desmond! Jessica rather enjoyed it, and did it again. While to herself she said: "Heavens! if only these people knew!"

"I wonder if our host is going to follow up his excellent food with coffee," said the host's mother later on. "And if so, don't you think it would be pleasanter outside?" she added, turning to Margaret. Margaret thought it would be much pleasanter outside and so with a

little smile and nod to each other, the two ladies gave the sign that dinner was over.

“That’s through all right, anyway,” was Jessica’s mental comment, as she followed Margaret through the barn and out on to the loggia.

The men had no wish to sit over their port alone and very soon followed to find Margaret and Jessica in close confabulation as though they had been bosom friends for years.

Aylmer caught sight of Katie’s white frock in the distance (she had wandered off, not being interested in her elders’ conversation) and, on the excuse of some message to Mrs. Pritchard, slipped away.

Katie had really intended returning to the house before the men came out; and thought Aylmer might imagine she had strolled away on purpose to give him that opening she knew he was waiting for. She was a little annoyed therefore, to see him striding down the path towards her. But she liked to feel he was looking for her, and I can’t say she tried to hide very much.

“Isn’t my mother splendid?”

It didn’t sound exactly like a lover’s talk, and Katie wondered whether she felt pleased or disappointed.

“She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” she answered cordially.

“And she’s as good as she is beautiful.”

“And as charming as both.”

After which brilliant prelude, a little pause! Aylmer felt awkward and was certain he looked an idiot. Now, the young lady was thinking “how nice he looked in his dinner jacket and how well he held himself.” And she had never noticed before his voice had such deep tones. And while they stood thus—awkwardly enough (but Ayl-

mer any way was new to this sort of thing)—came from the cottage, sweetly and fully, floating out surely and firmly on the summer night the sound of a violin played by a master hand.

There could be no doubt about that. The first long drawn note, the first sure attack, proclaimed it; and everyone of the listeners knew it, and settled down to listen to music that amateurs seldom hear. Fell accompanied. No great executant, he had that comprehension that is the birthright of the born accompanist. Before two bars were over Jessica knew she had nothing to fear. Mistakes he might make, but he would follow, linger when she lingered, hurry when she hurried, in fact give her all the support she needed. So she decided to give of her very best that night. She liked the doctor. He was steady and wise and broad-minded—oh, she had not read men for twenty years without learning to sum up a simple soul like our doctor at a glance. He was just the elder companion she would like her boy to have. Altogether she began to feel quite fond of everybody—she was ever a friendly soul.

“I’m sure we shall be missed,” said Katie.

“What of it? Isn’t it topping out here?”

“I’d love to live always in the country,” Aylmer continued presently.

“But your work is in London. Some day you’ll go into Parliament and become Prime Minister.”

“To be heckled by one’s own party and kicked by all the others.”

“Don’t laugh! No one should laugh at his own work.”

“I wasn’t laughing. I love my work. But I’d love it much more if I had someone to work for.”

Having once plunged in, Aylmer struck boldly for the

shore, and before Katie realised the eventful moment had come, Aylmer had both her hands in his and was pleading eloquently, peremptorily.

“Of course heaps of men love you, lots of them are rich, like Aldershot, but all rolled into one can’t love as I do——”

“Aylmer—please——”

“It is yes—isn’t it?”

“Let me go—someone’s coming.”

Someone was coming and Katie knew it! She couldn’t free herself, neither did she want to; yet she had no wish to be seen by anyone either.

“Katie! Say yes!”

“Yes,” she answered, quite forgetful of the footsteps very close upon them now; footsteps that belonged to two astonished people who felt horribly intrusive on these singular proceedings.

“My dears!”

It was Margaret spoke first. Under cover of the music, she had spoken to Ralph about the young people, and the two had gone apart and had stumbled on the very possibility they had been discussing.

“My dears!”

But there was only one “dear” before them now! Katie had slipped away and left Aylmer to do the best he could alone.

“We were taking a little turn,” said Margaret, with the kindly thought to give the boy time. “Your mother’s music makes this lovely night more wonderful, and—er—and—here we are,” she concluded somewhat obviously.

“Yes,” said Ralph—“and—and—er—here are you and—wasn’t Katie somewhere here also?”

“I—I—was just—er showing her our carnations and

roses and things," said Aylmer. "We're awfully proud of them. Mrs. Pritchard puts all the old tea leaves and soot she can find to the roots."

"And was that *all* you and Katie could find to talk about?"

"No, sir, it wasn't. I told her I loved her and wanted her for my wife."

It was very bravely, very gallantly done in the end, and both the elders felt no one could have spoken more creditably. But though he was somewhat prepared to hear such words, Ralph was very much taken aback when he did hear them.

"Marry," cried the worthy fellow, gazing round him in earnest search for a chair. "Let me sit down!"

"You're not going to say 'no,' are you, sir?"

There was such anxiety in the voice that yet tried hard to be steady and normal, the squire felt he was being taken at a disadvantage. At heart he was the kindest soul and would not hurt a fly before that fly had worried him into desperation. And this evening he was far from feeling worried; indeed, he had seldom found himself in so genial a mood. The dinner, though simple, had been excellent, the wine far better than his own (as well it might be, Desmond having bought up a certain famous cellar, half of which he had presented to Aylmer). He had met a woman who had not only listened to him but had made him talk better than he had known himself talk for years. So Aylmer's plea fell on fruitful soil, and Ralph hastened to reassure him.

"No! No, my boy. No! Certainly not," he said quickly, and then instantly began to hedge. "That is—not all at once!"

"Thank you! Thanks awfully!"

Exactly what he was being thanked for the Squire would very much have liked to know. 'Was this young man thanking him because his suit had not been peremptorily refused? Or was he saying thank you because he took it for granted consent had been given? Then the Squire felt it was rather hard that this thing should have happened to him while he was Aylmer's guest. It put him at a disadvantage which he would not have felt in his own house, and gave him a sense of "being had." He felt fussed and moved restlessly in his seat.

"This is a most uncomfortable chair," he said with more candour than politeness. He rose as he spoke and crossed over to where an extremely hard, if picturesque, stone seat circled an old apple tree, near the edge of the lawn.

"We mustn't be hasty, must we?" he continued, finding some relief in the change of position. "There's a great deal to be considered."

"Shall I leave you and look for Katie?" Margaret suggested.

"Oh, please don't go, Miss Dalison. Of course, you know I'm not rich, but no one could care more than I do——"

"Yes! Yes! I'm sure! Quite sure!" the Squire interrupted.

The question of money did not particularly interest him. There were other far more vital matters to be thought about.

"And I am the last to stand in the way of her happiness, but still, there are things, that is—you understand me." He wound up and looked at Margaret for help.

"Sir Desmond thinks so highly of you, and that of course carries great weight with us."

But the Squire had begun to fidget again. Margaret knew the sort of questions he wanted asked perfectly. They had discussed them only that evening. They were questions that, now it had come to framing them, he considered Margaret's "womanly tact" would find the right expressions for at once. But instead of using that heavenly gift, she was talking entirely beyond the point.

"Yes! Yes!" he interrupted. "But that is not exactly what I meant. I—er—have you—I have met some Forsyths at——"

But Aylmer saw what was coming. The inevitable question, "Who the devil are you?"

It was not being put so crudely, but Aylmer felt that had the Squire spoken as he would have liked to speak, "Who the devil are you?" was exactly what he would have said.

"They were no relations of mine. I haven't any," Aylmer answered, almost with defiance. "If it's my family you want to know about I'd better tell you straight away I don't believe I've any relations in the world except my mother! Well! What about it? Sir Desmond doesn't seem to think it matters!"

It was well delivered, straight from the shoulder. He owned himself a nobody and stood before them, a straightforward, sincere lad, only desirous to be taken on his merits.

But before Ralph parted with such a treasure as Katie, even Aylmer acknowledged he had every right to know a little more. After all, he had wondered himself occasionally what tendencies he might inherit! From an eugenic point of view the Dalisons might well think the prospect somewhat dubious.

"You musn't misunderstand me," said the Squire, glad

to have got the worst over. "After all, there is no hurry, doubtless your mother a most delightful mother too—can tell me all that is necessary. Bless my soul!" continued the amiable and astonished man. "Katie was only a baby yesterday. It seems incredible that anyone should be in love at her age, and of course I only want to be kind." (The Squire felt he was being borne away by some unknown current but could perceive no way of steering his craft back to safety. The stone seat was proving uncommonly hard, really extraordinarily hard. Margaret looked far more comfortable in the chair he had vacated, but he could not very well ask her to give it up.)

"If only he could show a healthy, honest, yeoman stock, I shouldn't care," said he, in his perturbed mind. "But how can I give my girl to someone who has merely—merely—told me he loved her?"

"You see," he continued aloud, "I know so little of you, Oh! What I do know is *quite* satisfactory—most delightful—only—well, it doesn't go very far. Margaret," he wound up at last, getting himself off a seat and out of a situation that both caused him great discomfort. "On second thoughts, *I* will look for Katie. You will express my meaning more concisely than I can myself—and—and—dear me——," he added, gazing round about him—"Dear me! Yes! Indeed! Mrs. Pritchard's carnations do great credit to her soot, very great credit indeed."

And thus with considerable easing of his mind Ralph took himself from a scene he had found both painful and difficult. He left the situation entirely to Margaret and quieted his conscience (that shouted "Coward" in a most unseemly manner), with the thought of how "her wo-

manly tact" would surely bring matters to a right conclusion.

But Margaret knew perfectly well he had left her to do what he lacked sufficient courage to do himself.

"I've your good wishes anyway, Miss Dalison."

"You have my good wishes always," said Margaret. "But—well, dear boy, you belong to a different creed to ours."

"I shouldn't dream of interfering with Katie's religion. After all, this is the twentieth century, not the sixteenth——"

"That is so, of course." But Margaret remembered that a Catholic had always been master at Fordcombe. "Have you ever been told how like you are to Sir Desmond?" she said suddenly.

"I'm supposed to be like my mother."

"But you are curiously like him too."

Margaret spoke almost to herself as though her thoughts were not about Aylmer or Katie or anything to do with the present time. She thought that love had come to these two while still they stood on the threshold of their lives. Love had met love and was not forced to shiver in the cold, or take up his daily burden all alone. Why was it? Was it quite just?

Yet while she seemed to rebel a tender love for the love she felt in the boy and joy in the beauty thereof, swept suddenly over her, carrying her right out of herself.

"Oh, you two children," she cried. "You're both absurdly young! What will your mother say?"

A confident laugh that was a boyish echo of the mother's answered her.

"She'd agree to anything I wanted," Aylmer said confidently.

“Yes, I can understand that. And there’s no one else to interfere?”

“How kindly you put it,” he answered, gratefully. “I’ve never heard of a solitary relative.”

The music had stopped almost abruptly, that music without form, yet not formless, had ended almost painfully. It raised a picture of some lofty shrine once the crown of some great capital, now desecrated and deserted, untended, unserved by acolyte or priest. Where once the fretted roof had been the feet of the winds could pass. Where suppliants once knelt the wolf had found a place, and the owls’ hoot alone was heard where once hymns rose triumphantly to Heaven.

As Margaret heard the last bars of that hopeless music, so desolate, so forlorn, as of something fallen far from greatness, there suddenly came to her the sense of complete loneliness, like darkness falling in midday. For the moment this intense loneliness cut like a knife; a cold knife, icy cold. Whence came it? Wherefore? For a moment it was unbearable—then passed—whence?—whither?

And to Desmond also the music had spoken. Spoken of all the years gone by, and the strife and the storm and the stress of them. The music spun pictures of desolate shores and sullen seas, and ships adrift and rafts heaped with dying men. Men mad with thirst upon a thirsty sea, wherein great fishes swam and bided for their time. Men mad with thirst with wild protruding eyes and mumbling words no earthly language knew.

And then he thought of battlefields and what he’d seen and heard of the great war. He heard the distant crackling of artillery; the sniper’s solitary shot after the victory. He saw a disembowelled man, half crazed,

dragging his body (torn as by a wild beast) a little way, to steal another's water, lapping the blood of an enemy, the furnaces of hell hot within him. And on the melancholy music passed in hopeless, helpless apathy, since there was nothing to be done and nowhere was there any hope.

There was nothing but silence on the plain, the silence of some great convulsion suddenly struck mute, and piles of bodies, putrefying, stinking, piles on piles, north, south, east and west, with horrid wounds, grinning mouths, and twisted faces. Horribly contorted figures mixed with horses in the last agony, and mercilessly mutilated. And, over all, the silence that was curses petrified; while a cold, inquisitive moon came slowly out and looked around and gloated.

Life seemed very like his visionary battlefield, strewn with the bodies of those who had fought and failed, fought for what they hardly knew and failed since fate intended that they should fail, having no further use for them at all. Desmond saw a face among the dying, very like his own, and heard a voice, that surely must be his, cry "Margaret," and as he heard, he felt an agony as of all pain that stabbed him with one relentless thrust, then left him, like one of the wounded in his own vision, agonising on his battlefield.

Margaret moved quickly down the garden. The pain was gone, she was herself and normal. But the strange experience had not left her quite untouched, nor could she speak to Aylmer as though she had felt nothing.

She turned away, pointing to a dim figure in the distance.

"That must be Katie," she said. "Won't you go to her?"

And Aylmer left her. From whence could that icy cold have come? And why to her? Was Desmond suffering? And suffering so terribly that she could feel it even in that placid, pretty place? Ah, what would she give—even unto the whole world—could she have the right to tend him in his sorrow and comfort him in his grief.

And then she caught a glimpse of Aylmer in the distance, at that moment going with Katie hand in hand. And in her bitterness she cried: "Has love only eyes for youth that he should go to those two children and leave me so pitilessly to my loneliness?"

XXX

THERE was no more music. The player had put down her fiddle, for the music she had just made held a special appeal and she was always loath to play anything after it.

“That was wonderful,” said Fell. “Is it really over?”

“I think you’ve had enough,” she smiled.

“But you go to-morrow! Or rather, must you really?”

She shrugged her shoulders a little as she answered:

“I’m a confirmed wanderer. Now you are all dear, restful, stay-at-home people. Do you know, just now I could almost envy you?”

Fell looked up at the beautiful figure leaning against the piano and thought:

“She ought to have someone to take care of her.”

By which it may appear that the confirmed bachelor was falling a little in love with our lady of bewitchments. But men so often thought that she ought to have someone to take care of her!

But she was not thinking of him, nor of Desmond, and not even of Aylmer; for the music was yet with her, and she was a little tired from the emotion it had roused. For music takes toll of the performer as well as the listener. I believe as she stood in the quiet of that summer night she was thinking how there was certainly a great tranquillity and peace about her.

“There is something extraordinarily well-bred about it all. If I had started life in this manner I think I should have been happy.”

But Fell was talking—saying something she hadn't heard. She clutched desperately at her attention and gathered he was discussing the English weather.

“Oh, it's not always like this,” she said.

“No, indeed, sometimes it blows or rains. It has even been known to snow.”

Jessica laughed and gave a funny little shudder.

“What an awful prospect. Don't you get terribly moped?”

“Oh no. Home, sweet home has its charm, you know. I wish you'd try it. But I fear it wouldn't be in a country like this.”

“Who knows?” she said, and there was a little wistful expression in both face and voice. “Sometimes even I feel a little lonely, a little as though your ‘Home, sweet home’ may be something more than a pretty sentiment.”

Fell swore afterwards there had been tears in her eyes as she spoke, and very likely he was right. At the moment she was certainly sincere. She could imagine life at Fordcombe very beautiful—not so exciting as the one she had led hitherto, but infinitely more dignified. She had foreshadowed some similar existence years ago when she had owned a little white house in the south, and she wondered, as she remembered, who might be living there now.

But all Fell realised was that here was a very sweet woman who played like a musician and said she was rather lonely.

“I think as a plain man . . .”

“Well? Why don't you go on?”

"I wonder what you would say if I tried to persuade you?"

A little not unkindly laugh answered him and Jessica moved towards the garden. But as she went she turned with that indescribable tilt of her head to say a word over her shoulder. (Oh! Jessica, how could you!) But I don't think she did it purposely—not that time. If the habit of years proved too strong, was she to blame for that? Habit is second nature, and doubtless she was quite ignorant she had trotted out a pet effect for the country doctor's benefit.

"You're awfully kind," Jessica said, letting her hand rest on his arm, and thereby reducing him to abject slavery. "And you've been such a good friend to Aylmer. Boys of his age want a friend like you."

And Fell swore he would do anything on earth for the boy.

"I'm so glad," and then Fell grovelled in his soul and swore to erect a shrine sacred to one woman.

"But I never met so many charming people all at once before. Mr. Dalison's a dear, and his sister too."

"Another stay-at-home for which our poor should be devoutly thankful."

"Yes, I can imagine that." And then: "A great friend of Sir Desmond's?" she added.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. Old friends anyway."

"I see," she said, in a singularly dry voice.

Fell had put a rather disagreeable thought into her mind; one that might, if there were any truth in it, prove a nuisance.

"And here she is. Miss Dalison, didn't Aylmer tell me you sang? I've monopolised the piano shamefully."

"Your beautiful music has quite put me out of con-

ceit with mine. How wonderful this modern music is."

"I play a good deal of the old too. It's good for one. Modern stuff is apt to run to the emotional. But do sing. It might chase the gloom from Sir Desmond's brow. He's hardly spoken the whole evening."

Margaret smiled.

"Politics are rather too exciting just now perhaps. But you wouldn't know that, you've been away so long."

Jessica was far from being interested in politics, and wanted to question Margaret.

"Didn't I hear you had ordered him a rest?" she asked the doctor. "You might go and cheer him up. He's over there. I think you should," she added as Fell yet hesitated.

"If you order me . . ."

"I command."

So Fell left the women together and crossed over to Desmond.

"Let us sit down," said Mrs. Forsyth, choosing an easy chair and indicating another beside it. "You must let me thank you again for all your kindness to my boy."

"Oh no, boys always rather appeal to me, and yours is so particularly charming and clever. Sir Desmond prophesies great things for him."

For a moment Margaret wondered whether this was a good opportunity to put those few questions she had in her mind regarding the Forsyth family. But on second thoughts she concluded it was hardly the time or place.

"That is very flattering," Jessica answered. "Sir Desmond Antrobus is an old friend of yours, I think."

"Yes, a very old friend."

"He is very silent to-night," the graceful, elegant Mrs. Forsyth continued, looking across to where Fell and

Antrobus had been joined by Aylmer and Katie. "He belies his reputation."

"I think he's tired. He has a very responsible position."

"Exactly, and doubtless he comes to you for a little sympathy sometimes. Oh, but why not?" she added in reply to some little demur from Margaret. "It is only natural, such old friends as you are."

The party was now completed by the Squire, who came trotting down the path as Jessica was thinking how to dispose gracefully of Margaret, having discovered all she wanted to know about the lady's friendship with Desmond.

When the Squire had elected to look for Katie he had really intended only to keep out of her way. He opined neither of them wanted to meet just then so he returned to the house by the most moonlit spots, knowing that so they could avoid each other without appearing to do so.

It was with real relief he found himself again with people whose antecedents he need not scrutinise, and who could have no intention whatever of marrying with his daughter. And here, too, was that delightful Mrs. Forsyth! Life was smooth, life was good again; and he fully capable of enjoying it.

"So this beautiful night has tempted you out, Mrs. Forsyth?" he said, pulling a chair up to her side.

"Yes," answered Aylmer, who was not very far off. "To-night she thinks she might almost be in Italy."

"It's years and years since I was there!" sighed the Squire.

Jessica proceeded to enlighten him still further on the present condition of that country, while Margaret joined the group at the other end of the loggia.

But Jessica soon got bored with continually saying: "Ah, but it's not like that *now*——," or "Yes, it must have been delightful in those days, but of course *now* ——," or "There's a train there and several large hotels. Oh, it's quite a smart place *now*." Besides, she was rather afraid lest he should ask awkward questions about her acquaintances abroad, and she couldn't be perpetually saying that all the people she ought to know and didn't, had either died or left. Then it occurred to this mirror of tact that it might be well to propitiate Miss Dalison and that Aylmer should ask for a little of that lady's music. Then when it was over Jessica herself would come in with compliments and request for more. She could do that sort of thing to perfection—no one better—and she knew it.

So she rose with a word of explanation to the Squire and called to her son.

But Aylmer was very occupied telling Katie over again all the things he had told her before, and didn't hear his mother. And then she noticed—well, something a mother would notice very quickly—something, however, Jessica had never calculated on being called upon to notice.

Good heavens! What was there in the air of the place people found so stimulating? But she wouldn't spoil his fun. If he wanted to flirt, let him. So she appealed to Fell and asked him if he possessed no parlour tricks.

"I could frivel like a butterfly," answered he, coming nearer his divinity. "But to-night I prefer to hover like a bee about a rose."

In the general laugh that greeted this inane remark (which the Squire exclaimed should have been left for him to make), Jessica's spontaneous laugh rang out mer-

rily. She was mightily amused! But the laugh ended in a little cough, and this time Aylmer heard it.

"You're catching cold, mother. Where's your wrap?"

"On the piano."

And the boy hurried in to fetch it.

"There's a breeze getting up and you're not used to our changeable climate," said Fell, with a little air of authority, begotten of being a doctor. "Hadn't you better go in?"

"If I do this when it's fine, what should I do when it's raining and snowing and misting?" Jessica laughed.

"Perhaps we shall be able to persuade you to play again," said Katie, rather shyly.

Jessica turned to look at her, and, this time very carefully. Yes, a very pretty, well-bred girl, and the face was sensible too—distinctly the child was attractive.

And Jessica smiled very kindly upon her, as on one her darling delighted to honour, if only with a mild flirtation.

"And you can listen from the garden! Music and moonbeams——"

But at that instant Aylmer came out of the house and put the wrap round his mother's shoulders.

"See what a careful son I have," she laughed as she turned to re-enter the house.

Now, as she went, she noticed that Desmond lingered, and it occurred to her that his obvious avoidance of her (or what she took to be his avoidance) might be noticed by the rest of the party and considered odd. So she paused on the steps, as the others passed in, and called as though she remembered something she had forgotten to say.

"Oh! Sir Desmond!"

“Don’t you think,” she said, dropping her voice so that only he should hear. “It would be better to at least keep up the fiction of good manners between us? You’ve hardly spoken to me once.”

“I shall be very glad to do so, when the others are gone.”

It was a direct challenge, and as that she accepted it. She had little fear as to the result. All her weapons were burnished. This was a call to battle and she would answer.

“Very well.”

Aylmer called at the moment and Fell might be heard at the piano. “At once, dear boy,” and then she gave Desmond her dazzling smile and in a clear, high voice said “So sorry you can’t give him a longer holiday.”

But that last was said because she had caught a glimpse of Margaret in the garden and thought it well to add those few words. She wondered to herself, was it only a sentimental friendship or no? She rather thought the former. She couldn’t imagine a *grande passion* in that stuffy and highly respectable atmosphere.

And perhaps we should not err if we infer that our Jessica had already grown weary of the quiet beauty and settled ease she thought so enviable awhile ago. Or was she just a little rattled? Who can tell and what does it matter? She was playing and, as always on those occasions, looking magnificent. Let all the world listen, and observe.

Again she had chosen music her audience did not know, and again Fell accompanied like one entranced.

And Desmond, as he watched her, swaying slightly with her music, master of her fiddle, master of her audience, even he—bitter as were his thoughts—would not

take back the words he said, crossing the fields one night with Fell, "She was the most beautiful thing God ever made."

Even he was fascinated both by the music and the player.

Yet he had not stood there very long before a voice asked softly: "Is anything the matter, Desmond? And if so, won't you tell me?"

Margaret simply *had* to speak. She was yet under the spell of that strange experience a few moments back and was very certain some bad news had reached him, and yet he remained so aloof, so self contained, that she put her hand almost timidly on his arm. Only that afternoon he had hinted at some grief, some trouble, and she would help him if she could. He did not look at her, but still stared at the violinist standing in the lighted room.

He looked unutterly lonely; and was it a trick of the moon that made his face look years older than he was?

"Won't you tell me, Desmond?"

Why should he not turn and claim the sympathy that stood there waiting at his side with hands outspread and running over and waiting to be of use?

But for the first time in his life Antrobus did not wish to speak to Margaret. Perhaps he was afraid, and feared what he might say did he accept the gift she was offering so readily. Nay, but he feared lest her presence should break him down, and so he dared not even look at her. He had that before him that would need every atom of courage, every particle of strength.

All the evening he had spent in doubt that had been very near to agony. Never before had he found himself so placed that he could see no way out. Never before had he dwelt in darkness that admitted no gleam of light.

And in the end it had all been settled so quickly. Jessica had said, "You've hardly spoken to me once."

And he had replied instantly, "I shall be very pleased to do so when the others are gone." That was all.

And now Desmond knew that he would have everything out with Jessica, aye, and with Aylmer too; and on the result would depend what he had to say to Margaret.

He would be just to himself—to Margaret, aye, even to Jessica—just, but no more.

"Mercy! What mercy has she ever shown? 'They who live by the sword shall perish by the sword. And the sword that kills is not the material but the spiritual weapon that one day turns its point against its bearer's heart.' I will not be hard, I will not be vindictive. But, by God, I will be just."

And Margaret whispered almost timidly—lest he misunderstood her motive—afraid—(oh, surely not of any rebuff, Margaret), yes, afraid, that she might fail in understanding; but most of all lest she might not ease that overburdened mind.

And that was why Desmond could hardly hear her when she whispered, "What is the matter, Desmond? Won't you tell me?"

XXXI

AT length Desmond turned away from the brilliant figure with the violin.

“If you want to be kind, the kindest thing you can do is to leave me alone, Margaret.” The answer was almost curt, yet, at that same moment, Desmond had to exercise all his self control not to answer as his heart dictated.

“I beg your pardon. I am sorry.”

She had come so diffidently, so tenderly, almost as a mother to her child, only anxious to help and comfort, but he had answered roughly—he did not want her sympathy.

And Desmond knew exactly how she felt. She was hurt, grieved. She thought he had failed to understand. In reality he only longed to take her in his arms.

“Don’t go!” The words came like a cry. He hardly knew that he had spoken. The words had been wrung from him by something outside himself. And instantly she recognised the pain in that appeal, and all her resentment fell away while all the woman came into her eyes.

“Desmond!”

“At least, don’t go thinking I misunderstand. But—I’m afraid of myself. You had better leave me to fight it out alone—as a man should. Only, for God’s sake, don’t misunderstand.”

But it was her turn to insist, her turn to step down

into the arena and fight, if fighting there was to be. There was no diffidence about her now, no fear lest her words fail or Desmond misconstrue her meaning. Fear vanishes at the first flicker of Truth's lamp, and Margaret knew herself in the presence of something very real and very big, something she might not grasp even when it had been told, but something she had a right to know.

"Tell me all about it. Begin right at the beginning and we will see what can be done."

She spoke in the most ordinary tone she could. She wanted to give him confidence, and already Desmond felt the load easier.

"What a dear woman you are! If I took you at your word, I wonder what you'd say."

Margaret looked up and smiled, and that smile should have given confidence. It showed the happiness she felt in helping the man she loved when he was down on his luck. And she was happier than she had been, for had she not claimed her right to help? And she would prove herself worthy of her privilege.

"You can have nothing to tell me I ought not to hear. I could never believe that even from your own lips. Now, what's it all about? You know I don't want to force your confidence; but we've always talked things out together, haven't we?"

"I know. And you're everything that's kind and good and true. And I'm longing to come and tell you——"

But words failed him, fleeing like hunted things, he had no control over one of them.

And Margaret waited, letting him take his own time, wondering what this thing could possibly be that weighed so heavily upon him. She thought of everything, finance,

politics, but nothing seemed adequate. She knew that had he lost all his fortune, even so big a blow would not bowl him over as this thing he was struggling so hard to tell had evidently done.

So there was silence between them, and silence, too, all round them: only from the house the violin came singing. But out where they two stood all was very quiet. The breeze had fallen, and no late bird chirped. Even the stars stood still, and in that silence Desmond found the words to speak.

“After all, dear, we’re no longer children, you and I, I think we can both of us face facts. Well, it’s like this, I love you, oh, so dearly, you can’t tell. I love you so. But I’m not free. You think I am, everybody does, I believe, but I’m not. My wife is still living.”

The music still went on working out its own device. The things in the garden were asleep, and the stars yet shone in heaven as though no grave announcement had been made that revolutionised the world. Nothing in nature cared, it did not count in the great scheme of things that in one aching heart a budding hope lay bleeding to its death.

Had Desmond not spoken in quite so cool a voice; had his manner been less calm, and the whole thing not stated in so prosaic a manner, I say that Margaret would not have believed him. But the brutal simplicity of the statement, the bald fact so nakedly laid out for her inspection, placed before her without disguise, pretension or extenuation, claimed her belief. She felt the full force of the blow, or thought she did. She fully grasped the facts, all of them, and somehow she was not surprised. It almost seemed she had expected something of the kind. It was not a blinding revelation, but merely the confirming

of something already half suspected. She felt a little numbed, a little stupid, and unable to say anything, and it was curious how unnatural she felt, and how incongruous she seemed there in that peaceful garden; or else it was that everything around her was itself out of place. She could not decide which it was, but something of that sort certainly. And what strange, sad music someone or other was playing, surely a very great way off.

And then she found that she was talking in a voice that was curiously calm and steady, and yet that, too, sounded a great way off. She found herself listening to it, just as she had caught herself listening to that strange music someone was playing softly, and a great way off.

“I see. But I didn’t know. I thought she died.”

And then—oh, then—in a moment, Margaret realised that she felt giddy, as though she had been standing on the edge of a precipice, looking sheer down thousands of feet quite calmly, and getting suddenly dizzy was falling headlong over.

“I didn’t know,” she repeated. “I thought she died.”

“We parted years ago. Ever so long ago.”

And now the confidence has passed from the woman to the man. With the first words he spoke Desmond regained his self-control.

“I’d been living in a fool’s paradise,” he said, “a happy one, but a very foolish one. And then I came home one day to find she’d gone off with another man, a very wealthy man. She didn’t care about a divorce, but I’ve ample grounds, and now——”

“Oh, please! please!”

It was a very pitiful cry born of a sob and the aching pain at her heart. She had thought the blow had fallen,

but only now she began to feel the full force of the stunning shock he had dealt her. Little by little, yet all too quickly, the truth was rising up and taking shape before her, materialising in the knowledge, the certain, accurate knowledge, that this man standing at her side, telling her the tragedy of his married life, this man so inexpressibly dear, for whose love she had so piteously hungered, this same man, hers materially, was spiritually as far removed from her as heaven is separate from hell.

“He has a wife!”

The words shouted at her, she could hear nothing else, give attention to nothing else. “He has a wife, and divorce is not allowed a Catholic. You must root up any thought of love and cast it out. You must break those strong tentacles winding round your heart, even though that heart is dismembered in the struggle. And your whole world must return to chaos if his be the force that binds the whole together. For he has a wife. There is no divorce to a Catholic. He has a wife.”

So spake the voice of conscience. But, even as she listened, Margaret wondered what manner of woman this wife might be.

“You turn away with loathing,” Desmond groaned. “What else should you do? You who’ve led so sheltered, almost cloistered, a life? I’ve always held you half a saint.”

“If I were that I could bear to hear, and I should understand—the saints are very pitiful—they have learnt so much. But, as it is, I’m horrified. Yes, Desmond, quite conventionally horrified. I’d almost sooner have never known.” And then her pride and injured love rose up in anger. “Why did you speak of love at all, with this between us?”

Yes, Margaret was angry—the gentle, reticent woman—that her womanhood should be so outraged; and she, cheated of the heaven that was hers so short a while ago. When Desmond had said, “I love you, oh, so dearly,” she had taken the words as the messages of angels; now they echoed in her heart as the mockeries of devils. She had been led to love where loving was sin. Surely she had been trapped, and she had let this man see what now she strove to hide from her own soul; and from her God Himself, if that were possible.

Yet, in her heart she knew that, bitter as the aftermath might be, the fruit of this tree of knowledge was sweet as honey in the mouth. Yes, it was very sweet to know that Desmond loved her. “Oh, so dearly, you can never know!” Yet the voice within never ceased but bade her continually remember, “You must never think of love, only of friendship, a cool, calm, stagnant friendship. If any stronger feelings come then you must *put him right out of your life*. It must be as though you two had never met.”

But, Holy Mary! Where was the power that could conquer love? What might could take her thoughts and train them other than to the way they knew? The fig grown on the southern wall gives fruit abundantly. Must it then be hacked away and trodden under foot?

“I wanted you to go,” Desmond went on. “I asked you to, I think. I was not master of myself and feared what I might say. Do you imagine I’ve forgotten how you think of divorce? Only last night Katie spoke of Mrs. Longridge, and I took up the cudgels—purposely, I admit—to hear what you would say. You said, ‘In our Church there is no such thing as divorce.’ Oh! but I love you—love you—love you! And you love me, too.

You cannot, if you are honest, deny it. You love me, and, my God, Margaret, I just worship you."

Desmond had caught her hands in his, and now he raised them, almost in reverence, to kiss, and sank before her like a penitent praying to some saint, sweet and inaccessible, "If I have sinned, forgive me!"

And she had no force left within her, not one little bit of strength, not one little pitiful atom of power with which to fight her battle. Nothing was left to her but the sense of a great, great love, and the terrible knowledge that such love was sin. Even prayer had left her. She could neither think nor pray. She only knew the creed her Church had taught, could only feel the power of generations of that faith within her. At that moment Margaret knew nothing, heard nothing but the cry of her heart and the voice of her religion; nor could she feel anything but the doctrine her Church had bound about her, and love that was a sin.

Oh! how sweet it was, this mild, forbidden thing that crept beseeching to her feet! How wonderful the words it spoke, and the gentle touching of its hand. So beautiful a thing! So soft to stroke, so terrible to strike. How dearly could she hug it to her heart were not her hands so closely bound, and how her feet would run in welcome to that darling guest were they not so inexorably tied.

And Desmond knelt and supplicated for just one sign of love. It was very pitiful, and Margaret felt him stronger in his weakness than had he used a multitude of words.

And still he held her hands, his head bowed low upon them. He seemed to find some rest, some consolation thus; it even seemed that something of his desire went out from him and that way entered Margaret.

“Surely,” she thought, “the bitterness of love is not in going unrequited but in sacrifice.” And as the thought so came, and as she looked upon that well-loved head bent low in humbleness, slowly she stooped to where her lover knelt.

“Surely one kiss is not a sin—and he may never know.” She would but pass her lips across his hair, so they might have some one personal thing between them!

And then she remembered that, as her hands and feet were bound, even so her lips were sealed. She might not kiss the little thing that craved for love, and hung about her knee, nor might she touch the lover whom she might not love.

And as she remembered she drew back. Drew herself up and took away her hands, while all the sacrifice of the Madonna rushed into her heart, and all her faith, her love for Mother Church and that Mother’s teaching shone in her up-turned eyes.

“That, too, is sin,” she heard some voice exhorting her. “He is not, cannot ever be for you. Someone you do not know is placed between you, and all the doctrine of the Church—that Church you reverence as you adore—stands by that *other woman’s side*.”

Strange mockery! Strange irony! But it was the law she knew—the only code she understood.

And you, too, Reader, you too understand if so be you belong to Margaret’s Church. And if not—if, either happily or unhappily (I make no decree) this doctrine is one beyond your comprehension, then I claim from you only the acknowledgment that such a law exists, and many millions, all the world over, believe in it. Many millions live up to it, people infinitely better than you or I, more charitable, more helpful, who are indeed lights

shining in darkness. There is no need to ask the pity, or seek the sympathy of such as these. They know; they understand. But you others, I do beseech, if you are incapable of comprehending, at least admit the fact, and give your sympathy to the victim of that fact.

“Desmond! Your wife! You are bound to her!”

“Is that what your religion teaches? Do you mean to send me away because of your old traditions, old beliefs, and doctrines?”

Desmond spoke sternly, almost rudely, and Margaret wondered if he, too, was going to turn against her. She needed no words of his, no persuasion to make her love him more.

And now she knew that only one thing was left. She had to go and never meet him again until she could truly say she felt no love but only friendship, and that time she knew would never come. This colossal fact overshadowed everything. It stood like some gigantic, volcanic rock, poised and ready to fall and to destroy them both in a slow and horrible death.

“I don’t think you realise all your story means to me. It’s against all I’ve been taught, or believed in, all my life.”

“Am I to be tied to a woman who left me, not only for one man but many? Am I to suffer all my days for the folly of the boy I was? I refuse to suffer for a folly that was not a sin but a mistake. Am I never to see spring and summer again, but only winter for the rest of my life?”

For one moment he almost carried her with him. For just one moment Margaret faltered, but for one moment only. And then her love for that ancient Church, that creed so inflexible and so in-bred in her, the doctrine of sacrifice on which that creed is built, focussed all their

united and immeasurable force upon her, and strong in all the teachings of the years, she answered him.

“My heart is not mine to give, but God’s to take. If we are one at heart, then I must tear mine out, though both break in the parting.”

Well she knew the truth of what she said. Though her love died, even that poor gift she must render back to God, as Jacob rendered back his only son.

“Did happiness ever stay with those who grasped unlawfully? Suppose I married you? Why, Desmond, I’d disappoint you in every way.”

“Margaret, that’s absurd.”

“We might have one happy year together, but, after that, I should feel that in the eye of God I was your Mistress, not your Wife.”

“What are you saying? Such talk is a hundred years out of date.”

“And those very words of yours, Desmond, show the gulf between us. To you a hundred years out of date—to me, vital and undying.”

And Desmond knew that so indeed it was to her. Even one who was but Catholic in name would look on her marriage with him as adulterous. Though no blame attached to him, though he had only freed himself from a woman whose life was no better than that of a woman of the streets, he would still be that woman’s husband, and Margaret, if she married him, would be denied the rites of her Church, be ostracised by her fellow Catholics.

“You make your God a horrible tyrant,” he cried, in his bitterness. “Is there no mercy in His law, no sympathy for His own creation?”

“I believe there is infinite mercy in His law,” she answered. “But we must live according to His law.”

So those who believe as Margaret believed (and again I pray you to remember there are many millions hold that faith), God is a kindly Father, but an austere Head of His House; One of infinite mercy, yet capable of severe condemnation. To others God is Spirit, the still small voice that guides from out the wilderness to the oasis, the light that lightens the darkness, "Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light," and in Whose dictionary the word "condemn" is not.

"You mean to go, to keep us apart?" he said. "Don't you think that's rather hard, and, forgive me, but isn't it quite other to the teachings of Christ?"

"You must try to see with my eyes, to understand with my heart."

"I can't believe such things! I love you! You cannot send me from you. Can you find it in you to deny you love me?"

"I don't think you should ask me that."

"I have every right to ask it. *You* are my God-given woman; *I* am your God-given man; and I'll never let you go. As I hold you now, I will keep you always."

And then he took her in his arms, roughly, almost brutally. For that moment he was not accountable. The stupidity, the uselessness of such a dogma (for so it seemed to him), the wickedness of it and the wanton destruction that would decimate their love enraged and blinded him. Anything so mediæval was surely impossible in the twentieth century. Yet he knew he had always feared it.

If only this iron theory were something tangible he might get hold of and throttle, get his fingers round and choke, how easy it would be! But this, this thing of words, beat him. Margaret was as one groping blindly

for her path, the voice of reason sounding afar, coming she knew not whence.

And Margaret lay quite passive, without movement or effort to release herself. How could she in that grip of steel? And all the woman in her yielded; all the soft delicious woman gave herself up to mere sensuous delight, and she was all her lover's, his to kiss, to fondle, to hold. If only she might die thus, suddenly, painlessly, how beautiful would such an ending be!

But she had many days to live, many years to drag to their conclusions as best she might, and with all she had most hoped for—all she had so loved—not only an impossibility, but something she might not even think. No wonder that she only longed that this could be the end! To die without a struggle, without a parting worse than death.

But behind her stood a greater force than Desmond or any lover knew, a power that boasted centuries of might; nor was it merely in her blood but rather in her very life. And the power of that invincibility lay hold upon her. A touch on the shoulder, a whisper in her ear, and Margaret became again, perhaps unwilling, mistress of herself but willing slave to her belief.

“Let me go, Desmond.”

“Never!”

“Let me go, please.”

“You do not wish me to let you go.”

“Yes, I do. You are only holding my body, nothing more.”

“That's not true. Why do you say such a wicked thing?”

“Nothing in the world will make me marry you.”

She stood free again. She had spoken so quietly, so

irrevocably, that Desmond had been deceived—as she had meant he should be.

“Nothing in the world,” she repeated, very bravely, and looking straight into his eyes.

“While my wife lives! So I’m to be bound to that woman who might have sunk to the level of the streets had not luck been with her.”

“Her way of life is no excuse for you or me. You’ve been honest with me. I’ll be honest, too. I do love you and I’m too proud of my love to deny it. But—but——”

She could not quite control her voice and she felt weak and feeble. But surely hers was no contemptible figure that stood bravely weaving an heroic little smile, valiantly fighting against itself for what it held to be eternal truth.

“And I am only to have the knowledge of your love?”

“Don’t ask for more just now. Remember that, however sweet the knowledge you have given me, you are uprooting a doctrine, a faith in my heart that has grown with my growth, become part of my very soul. You must have patience with me, dear.”

And the man saw that, though he might take her again to his arms and though his strength could conquer hers, she would yet be invincible. Very brave, very pathetic, she stood with the dignity that comes to all who fulfil their ideals.

Indeed, between them was a great gulf fixed that neither of the two might cross.

And the simplicity, the sincerity of what she said went straight to Desmond’s heart. No protestation, no appeal, no declaration of faith could have so deeply moved him as those few simple words.

She stood before him a beautiful image of sacrifice, de-

terminated to follow the still small voice that whispered courage and comfort to her heart.

And Desmond would not have it otherwise, not now when his youthful flicker of passion had died, and the ardour of the young man he no longer was had yielded to the man of middle years, whose heart might still be young, but whose judgment had matured.

“This is the Margaret I have always loved. It would be another Margaret, a woman I did not know, who would give herself against her sense of right. I would not have her other than she is, Sweet Saint Margaret.”

And how indeed can the work of generations, or the incalculable weight of great authority, fall to a moment's passion?

But it was a knell to both of them, a cry in the night crossing desolate seas. Good-bye to love, to hope, to all that might have been. And so they stood in silence, fearing to look on one another, fearing to take each other's hands, fearing above all how much that word “Good-bye” might mean. So neither spoke nor moved, but stood there mute and looking helplessly upon the ground. Only the music from the house went on and sounded a litany of farewells, as little choir boys chanting “Hear us, good Lord.”

At length Margaret held out her hand.

“Good-bye,” she whispered.

“Good-bye, Saint Margaret, good-bye.”

For a moment their hands touched, clasped together. A little pause. A little silence. And yet no look from eye to eye. A little silence. A little pause. A little stifled sob in either heart; then quickly, surely, without another word or sign, Margaret passed out into the darkness underneath the trees.

And still the music sang its litany of shattered hopes and dreams melted into thin air. It sang of love, with broken wings, dying, like a wounded bird fluttering in dead leaves. And still he stood, immovably fixed, gazing into the darkness underneath the trees where Margaret had passed.

XXXII

WHEN at last the music ceased Fell came out into the garden, preceding the others by some three seconds.

“Star-gazing?” he laughed.

“If you like,” Desmond replied, pulling himself together. “By the way, can you put me up for to-night?” he added, and then, as the rest of the party joined them: “Please say nothing to Mrs. Forsyth.”

That lady came out of the house at once, followed by Ralph and Aylmer carrying a tray of drinks.

“I’m speeding the parting guest,” she said. “Mr. Dalison says they must go.”

“Alas, and alas, dear Mrs. Forsyth, I’m afraid it is so,” said Ralph. “Katie has gone already. Where is Margaret, Desmond?”

“Margaret has gone too. She had a headache, and asked me to make her excuses,” answered Desmond, and then to Jessica: “She didn’t want to disturb your music.”

“That was very sweet of her,” she replied, not believing a word she was told. “I’m so sorry.”

And then the Squire, on shaking hands with this wonderful woman, felt as though he were being graciously dismissed by some very royal lady. “A brilliant woman, an ornament to any Society,” and never dreamed what sort of Society she usually ornamented. And, indeed, she felt very royal, very triumphant. She had enjoyed it all enormously; even the unusual experience of mixing with

folk like the Dalisons, as one equally well placed with themselves, had not been without its agreeable sensation.

And now it was all over; but the Squire and his sister would always talk to the end of their days about "that delightful Mrs. Forsyth, who played the violin so beautifully."

True, she had still to persuade Aylmer, but she anticipated no difficulty there, and very little with Desmond either. Perhaps she was a little too flushed with success, a little too confident of her powers; but think how extremely lucky she had always been, and how brilliantly she had carried off the evening.

Therefore, she smiled very sweetly upon the Squire as upon a very pleasant gentleman she liked but whom she would never see again, and never miss either. And once more she said something pleasant regarding her pleasure in meeting him, and sent a polite message to Margaret, and then sat her down at peace with all men and wondered why Fell yet lingered around. And the Squire started for home and took Desmond with him. He had to unburden himself to somebody, and Desmond lay conveniently handy.

But it was some time ere Fell realised he was in the way! And when he did he tried to arrange some future meeting.

"May I call on you in town?" he asked, on bidding his hostess good-night, "or perhaps we shall run across each other in Italy. I thought of going there next holiday——"

And then it flashed across her mind what it was that ailed this poor, simple fellow. Well did she recognise the symptoms. Who, indeed, was a better judge? But that evening she had been too occupied to notice the

flags of distress our poor doctor had spread upon the winds.

So the sight of them now came with surprise and, it is a delight to add, some regret. She hoped things were not so bad as her experience told her they probably were.

"In that case," she answered, "let us say 'a rivederci,' " and gave him her kindest smile into the bargain. It was done with the best motive, but it sent him home full of foolish dreams. But had she snubbed him he would have been equally unhappy. In sooth, the path of lovely woman is beset with snares.

"Most pleasant man," said Jessica, as she watched the doctor's retreating figure. "But what a leech for sticking."

"You shouldn't be so fascinating," said Aylmer, looking at her with a good deal of content and pride.

"Silly boy! But it is rather a charming frock," she added, looking down upon it with a pleasure that was naïve and childlike.

"Who on earth looks at that?"

"All the women! And the men recognise it by instinct."

"You worldly minded old thing!"

And then the two had a good laugh. The unique sympathy that bound them had brought about a curious relationship. Aylmer regarded his mother almost as an elder sister. She had so shared in all his boyish sports and pleasures, he had never thought of her merely as a parent but as the comrade she had determined from the first to prove.

Those who knew her well and appreciated her (alas! they were very few), saw something very pitiful in her devotion. They realised it was impossible the boy should go through life in ignorance.

But Jessica rejoiced that all was well; and I am quite sure she was exceedingly grateful, and thanked her God (whoever he might be) very heartily indeed that so much happiness was vouchsafed her.

It seemed to both that neither had changed in the two years since they had met. They picked up the old broken intimacy exactly where they had dropped it.

Jessica, alone with her boy, felt how one they were, how he was still her child, and how easy it should be to arrange matters as she thought fit.

But in spite of all his comradeship, all his sympathy, she found it hard to begin. Perhaps this very camaraderie made it less easy for the mother to dictate to the son.

And just as she was hesitating, and feeling for the right word, it suddenly dawned upon her that this boy was somehow different to the boy she had expected to find. She had last seen a youth, now she met a young man. She had looked to find in the cottage a rather unconventional establishment. It would not have surprised her had there been an insufficiency of knives and forks, and a lack of many things that most housekeepers would consider essential. How very different had the reality proved. There was almost a superfluity of comfort. Perhaps she rather wished it had been otherwise and that her son had had to ask her advice and her excuses. Then she would not have felt he was so grown up.

“Your friends are charming,” she began at last, “and your wigwam delightful. I’d no idea you lived in such splendour. How have you managed it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It just came. But what luck you turned up to-day. Only, why didn’t you say you were coming?”

"Made up my mind in a hurry. I usually do, you know. Perhaps I'd a longing to see my boy again. You're quite well and happy?"

"Top-hole, thanks. Couldn't be better."

He certainly looked healthy enough, his mother thought, as she looked to where he had squatted on the ground at her feet. And such a frank, wholesome face it was that it did her good to look at it. "He'll be kind to women," she said to herself. She was used to judging men quickly and accurately.

"How's everybody at home? How's Pepino?"

"Pepino's very well, and sent 'Saluti' and wants to know when the Signore is coming back and going to boat and bathe again."

"Oh, before long, I hope. But you—you're not really running away to-morrow, are you?"

"H'm!"

"What, come all this way for only one night?"

"To be quite truthful, I've only come from Paris. Hats and frocks and fal-lals generally."

"Extravagant woman!"

"One must have one's chiffons, darling. It was there your last letter reached me," she added more seriously, and at last, coming to the crux of the matter.

"My last? That must have been the one telling you I wanted to keep my appointment?"

"But, my dear, how could you take it at all? I'd so often told you to see as little of him as possible, and yet you accepted this offer, and when I wrote begging you to give up you seemed to laugh at me. I can't understand it. How could you, dearest?"

"But you never gave any reason for your dislike, Mater."

Now this was a very simple remark, but it came with something of a shock. It was the first time her authority had been disputed, the first time her wisdom had been questioned, and she fancied, rightly or wrongly, that she saw him smile, a little humorous smile, as though what she said was rather trivial.

“Wasn’t my wish enough?” asked Jessica gently.

And now there could be no doubt that Aylmer was smiling. Not unkindly, oh no! but just a little indulgently. It suggested that this might be someone very dear and precious but just a trifle out of touch with life.

He answered her, taking the white delicate hand she had laid on his shoulder in his own strong hand.

“Dearest, you must remember I’m old enough now to make my own friends. I’m a man, not a small boy, to be dictated to.”

Aylmer spoke very respectfully. Yet Jessica felt incensed. Yet it was not Aylmer’s answer that jarred. It was an almost inaudible little voice in her heart that whispered to her of the passing of her motherhood.

“Yes, that is true,” she answered. “I’d forgotten you were twenty-three.”

“No wonder! I wasn’t with you, and you’d only the glass to remind you.”

But Jessica didn’t join in his laugh this time. She was trying to adjust her ideas to the new Aylmer, whose acquaintance she was making for the first time. It was a very charming Aylmer, but she would have liked he had remained a boy a little longer. And perhaps for the first time she wondered whether she might not have come too late.

But she was always a good fighter, and dismissed the

thought at once; but all the same, her reply betrayed her fear.

“Who’s taught you to make pretty speeches, Aylmer?”

“Heaps of people! Couldn’t possibly remember half. But seriously, you’ve never given me any reason why I should break with Antrobus. Surely I can pick and choose my friends for myself?”

Jessica leaned back in her chair and smiled a little, for she noticed in this grown up son of hers a little boyish hurt, and she rather liked it. It made him hers again, for it took five years off his age at least, and made him very young. And yet she knew he was no longer the Aylmer she had known, and was altogether very different to the boy she had expected to meet. And as she looked she sighed a little and her answer, when it came, was no reply to his question.

“How far you’ve travelled since I saw you last,” she said.

And then Aylmer rose to his feet and stood before her, rejoicing in his manhood.

“Well, I’m getting on. I’m finding my feet. It’s glorious to know one’s firmly planted on the first rung of the ladder, and it only depends on one’s own pluck to reach the top. And I shall. It’s only a question of patience and time.”

Even in the uncertain light she could see how his face was flushed with enthusiasm and his eyes bright with excitement. The boy’s ardour attracted her, his certainty in his own destiny arrested her, and in sheer astonishment at what she found she cried before she knew:

“Heavens, Aylmer! How you have developed!”

Now nothing she could have said could better have pleased him. He knew his mother had regarded him as

an immature youth and he was delighted to find her growing undeceived.

"I'm glad you said that; I did hope you'd think so. You can't think how much I want to be a credit to you. Also, I may as well confess it," he added with a laugh, "I'm most frightfully ambitious for myself."

But, even as she caught something of his enthusiasm, and though she loved the ardour of his voice, and smiled at the flushed eager face, Jessica felt each word as a surgeon's knife cutting the heart out of her body.

"What fools we mothers are," she said at length. "What hopeless idiots. Our boys go away for a year or two and we expect to find them what they were. It's the difference in the generations, the younger is ever eager to press forward while the elder dreads to go on. I couldn't have believed," she added, staring up at her son, "you'd change in so short a time."

"Hope you don't object," the boy laughed back.

Jessica hardly knew, but she accepted the situation, knowing it was inevitable. She had made a silly mistake, one common to all mothers, that must be her excuse. She rose and put her hands on the lad's shoulders. She would have liked to give him a good hug but felt it might be resented by this stalwart young man.

"No, she didn't object; she'd been silly to forget what a difference two years made at his age. He was no longer a boy, much less a child!" And she faltered a little saying this, knowing that with the words she yielded up all the sweet privileges of her motherhood.

They had been hers so long, and very dear to her, but she had made the most of them. And now, well, she would make the most of this splendid son. After all, it sounded better than her "boy." Though boy he must

ever remain in her heart; but this knowledge she kept to herself.

So she continued speaking very gently, and with a little pretty touch of apology, and as little like a parent as she could help. But she was not quite successful. It is always thus. However old the child may grow, however emancipated it may become, there ever remains the old discipline—sleeping I grant you but there all the same—the old authority over the child born in the mother at her child's birth.

“Listen to me,” said Jessica, “you very grown up young person. Twenty-three is not so very old, and, as I'm your mother, I must be older still, shall we say, at the very least, twenty-four? and wise accordingly. My dear, dearest of boys, you have always believed and trusted me?”

If it was easy for her to prove fascinating to total strangers, how much easier was it for her to be irresistible to one she loved sincerely? For the poor soul was all compact of mother love. It showed in every look, every word; Aylmer knew it even in the touch of her hands.

“Why, of course I have always believed it,” and he took her tenderly in his arms.

“Then you must do so now.”

“About Antrobus—why?”

“Dearest, I never told you much about your father, but you know he was an unusually brilliant man, good looking, fascinating to meet—no one——”

But she could get no further. It was all so much harder than she had expected. She had not thought to *lie* to her son. She hated doing it. She had lied long ago, when he was a child. But that was different, one did not always tell the truth to a child. But to lie to this youngster

who radiated honesty, hurt. Pressed as she was, and driven into a corner, she couldn't say the words. They choked her, and, with a little sob her head fell on the boy's neck.

Aylmer tried his best to soothe the grief he did not understand. He could not know she was moved because of her need to lie, and not at the recollection of a bad husband.

"I know, I know. Don't rake it all up again."

"Aylmer, I am your mother, always remember that, and trust me, believe me, whatever happens. Remember, through everything you've been my first thought; the only living thing I have to love. Whatever's been, whatever I've done, I've clung to you, lived in you. Oh, Aylmer."

God knows what she had intended saying when she began, or what fears or premonitions haunted her, but surely she had not meant this half-hysterical, pitiful outburst, which amounted pretty nearly to a plea for mercy where, as yet, there was no need. Perhaps this new strength in Aylmer unhinged her, or maybe the knowledge that her empire had melted away, nay, even the soothing words he tried to calm her with, all may have contributed to bring those tears into her voice. For a moment she lay passive in his arms, trying to realise that her boy saw now with the eyes of a man and not the sweet adoring eyes of childhood.

"Dearest, what's the matter?" whispered Aylmer. "You know I can never forget you, and all you've been and done. Why talk of my father now?"

"I must, because if I lost you I should lose everything. And that's what I'm dreading—yes, I see it beginning. Already your love is mixed with a little patronage. You

treat my advice lightly. It's this—this Antrobus—coming between us. He—he—Oh, Aylmer, he's so terribly like your father."

"But my dear," the boy answered bewildered, "Antrobus has always stood for everything that's splendid. It's impossible."

And again the mother felt her words were being weighed, and her fears dismissed.

"Why impossible?" she asked, almost sharply.

"Well—think—what can you possibly know against him?"

"I met a woman once she told me her story."

"It's incredible!"

"It's true. And he knows that I know. That's why he's been so absent-minded all the evening."

"There's never been a word, not even a whisper, against him."

And then, in a flash, he saw wherein lay his mistake, and he laughed at his own stupid forgetfulness. Some woman had met his mother, and of course had been believed. And he felt all the tenderness of great wisdom to stumbling ignorance.

"You dear simple credulous soul," he cried, taking her into his arms again. "Why such a woman would get round you at once, of course, you'd believe any pitiful tale."

But when she found herself being taken into his arms and being downright petted, then Jessica could almost have screamed. She loathed the sense of protection she received and through all the caressing words ran that tone of patronage that chafed her so.

"You believe, you trust, this man before me, your mother?"

"Where's your proof? Besides, I couldn't believe it. He's too splendid. Only in my last letter I told you he was more like a father than——"

"Aylmer, what are you saying?" she cried out almost in pain. "Oh, it's just what I dreaded, this ascendancy he's won. Why must you believe him before me? It's monstrous, unlike you! And, you see if he doesn't try to put himself right with you, very likely this evening. Oh, my dear," she went on, all tenderness once more for this stubborn youth, every atom of her resentment gone, "you are so confident, so wise in your twenty-three years. Yet after all, you know, you are only a child to me."

If anything could have made amends for what was very like anger in the beginning of her speech, the gentleness at the end would have atoned. The poor soul was a creature much at the mercy of her moods, and Aylmer's obstinacy (that was what she would have called it had she stopped to think) had jangled her nerves.

Had she taken so much care, spent so much thought in the past, to have all that work undone in a few short months? And, irony of ironies, had Desmond's been the hand to pull her work to pieces? Yet gently, tactfully, as she thought to have spoken in the end; it was not a wise finish. She felt so much the mother, so very much the elder in the knowledge of her wide and varied experiences that she could not help but smile at the second-hand wisdom of Aylmer's three and twenty years.

And Aylmer rather resented the implied slight and was a little hurt that his mother refused to take him seriously.

"I owe Sir Desmond everything," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Give up your post. Go back with me to Italy." Aylmer stared.

"Oh, but I couldn't."

Never in her life had Jessica seen anyone show such utter amazement, or heard sentence passed with such finality. Yet she persevered. She had not got so far to be beaten in the end.

"Aylmer! Not to please me?"

"But it means giving up my career, friends, everything."

"Does this post of yours seem so wonderful?"

"Why, of course! It's extraordinary luck for a man of my age."

"I never thought for one moment that you'd refuse me. I thought you'd be delighted."

"Do you ask because of Antrobus? Really, mater, it's absurd. Even if your story were true how could it touch me?"

How, indeed? It was not as though Aylmer were a young girl who had stumbled on an undesirable chaperon. Jessica knew she had no answer. Yet she simply dared not go away and leave Aylmer and Desmond together in daily, almost hourly commune. And bitterly did the unhappy woman regret she had ever let the boy go. But how could one foresee events?

"I want you out of England, out of this man's way. I can't bear to think of you constantly thrown together. Aylmer," she pleaded, "I never thought I should have to speak twice. I thought you and I were one, that I'd only have to ask. I thought you'd love it."

Aylmer did not want to hurt his mother and he began to see now how much it all meant to her. He could not quite understand why she was so implacable against Antrobus. It didn't seem to him quite fair. But good women were like that, he knew. It was something that

had to be accepted. But he couldn't think of leaving England. That was beyond his power to do now, even if he had wished it, and he didn't. Landolfo looked no less beautiful, Pepino no less the good fellow to boat and swim with, but he saw it all with different eyes. Italy was the sort of heavenly place to go and die in, or, better still, pass your honeymoon in.

"I've got my work," he said quietly, "my career now, and that's here, in England."

"I have found you another, more brilliant, perhaps."

But Aylmer didn't even care to hear what it might be. It was not so much his career after all he was thinking about, but a certain girl not fifty miles away.

"I can't give up England."

He felt very miserable, poor boy, for he could see his mother was suffering. She seemed at a loss what to do or say, and yet was so very insistent to gain her point. And he felt in his mother a soft subdued sorrow as for something lost, a tender yearning after that which had been but would never come again, and a very pathetic effort to forget.

"Oh, Aylmer! I'd give up all the world for you. Can't you do this for me?"

Ah! But it is one thing to give up the world when you have little further use for it, and quite another when you have just realised what a very happy place that world can be.

"I'm awfully sorry——" But, somehow, it wasn't easy to explain about Katie.

"You've debts? Some entanglement?" And Jessica smiled indulgently. Debts and entanglements had a way of tripping up youth and were the first things that occurred to her.

But Aylmer only turned away very sorrowfully.

“No. It’s not that. You make me feel a brute. I’m going against all you wish and we’ve not met for so long. But, well, I can’t help it.”

Then Jessica remembered, at last, that little episode a short time back in that very place when she had called and he had not heard, because he was talking to a young girl. Even then, she had wondered for a moment, now she was almost certain.

“Is it?” she asked. “Tell me, my dear, please, please tell me. Is it Katie Dalison?”

He was glad she asked and though he did not answer in words, Jessica knew.

“So that’s it.”

Someone else had taken her place, someone with greater authority, whose call he would answer, nay, whose call he was *bound to answer* before he would even listen to her own. She felt suddenly very lonely, very sad, and very undecisive. The world seemed to have grown old, it looked a tawdry, shabby thing, painted and made up. Surely she had no further use for it? It was time for her to give up the masquerade.

“You make me feel a howling cad,” the boy said, in a low miserable voice. “We’ve not met for ages and I seem to be going against everything you want me to do. It’s rotten bad luck.”

Yes, rotten bad luck, but he knew he was doing the only thing he could do.

But though Jessica may have felt a little pang at her heart (as I believe every mother does on like occasions), she could not resist the appeal he made to her. To be in love at his age was very right and proper, and his mother could already rejoice that his eye had fallen on so

charming a girl, and hope that all would go well with him.

Of course she had not known of this when she had spoken. It altered everything and Aylmer must not think she did not rejoice with him or grudged him his happiness. Twenty-three he might be, and in love with a girl, and his heart might be full of that love. Still, oh still, he would always be her boy. The child must ever remain hers. That was something no girl could take away.

“Have you spoken to her?” she asked quietly. “Have you said anything to her people?”

“Yes. To-night. They’re awfully kind.”

“Only to-night? Then, had I been earlier—Aylmer! I’ve lost you, Aylmer!”

Oh, but she had never meant to say that, it broke from her unawares and brought the boy to her side at once. Yet now it was said, what use to deny it? And it was a relief to give way a little to her regret.

“Yes, my day’s done. My sun’s set. Oh, boy! boy! If you could only know what you are to me.”

And let us remember that in Aylmer Jessica had stored all her love, all her tenderness, every good quality she possessed. And if she felt at that moment what the boy stood for in her life, almost as a revelation; and if she appears a little selfish in her love, let us remember also that except for her son there was no living thing she had to love, no living thing she had to live for and, above all, let us not forget that his had been, not only the one honest love she had ever known, but a light that had lighted her darkness, and led her safely over many troubled waters.

But for that light, Jessica might have become, like so

many of those others, wrecks upon that hard and cruel coast. What wonder that she said, "If you could only know what you have been to me."

He couldn't understand; but his arms were round her, and he told her she was "quite, quite wrong." But Jessica knew men very well by now and though this son of hers was something very special, yet still he was a man, and, well, she had too much experience not to know.

But she looked into his eyes and smiled, and her arms were about his neck, and in her heart she prayed "Please God he never learns the truth."

"That is something you never can know and I can never explain. No! You will never learn, not even if in time you have a boy of your own. And perhaps I don't want you to know. Would it surprise you to hear that I am two people, that one side of me craves for music and warmth and all that's bright and beautiful in the world, while the other only asks for rest and peace, and a little happiness?"

"You mustn't think I shan't love you as much as ever. Of course I shall. Perhaps, in some ways, more than ever. Only this is a different sort of thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear, quite different. A greater love. But do you think any mother realises that before her time?"

"Why go to-morrow? Stay here and learn to know Katie. I want you to love her, you know."

"The doctor said 'Home sweet home' had its charms. I dare say he was right. What do her people say?" she added, after a pause.

"Well, I think they want to know something about us. Who are my people, mater?"

Who indeed? She had expected the question, and had her answer ready pat, cut and dried.

"We have no relations, we are all alone, we two."

"Just we two—sounds a little lonely, eh?"

But the woman felt that very soon she might be lonelier yet. A little sob, a little catch in her throat; and Aylmer is all solicitude.

"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing. Good-bye, Aylmer."

"Good-bye? Good-night, you mean."

"Yes, of course, I meant that! Suppose her people, by any chance, were to say 'No.' What then, Aylmer?"

"Oh, if they did that—I can't think," he said.

So she bowed to the inevitable and accepted the change that must colour all her life. It was very much what she herself had spent long hours planning, only it was not to have happened quite so soon, and not in this way either.

And the girl's people had asked questions. Well, she supposed she could satisfy them, or would she have to ask Desmond's help? It was rather complicated, but there was always a solution somewhere if one looked carefully.

And then she drew Aylmer on to talk of his future, and thus they grew very intimate, for all the old good understanding came back to them.

But when Jessica learnt what an heiress Katie was, when she began to realise that her aunt was no less a person than the great Duchess of Hampshire while an uncle was the famous Cardinal Dalison, and when she grasped that all this lovely country, that wonderful old Manor that Aylmer had sent her pictures of, I say, that when Jessica realised that some day all this would be Katie's, then I think her heart failed her a little.

It was a goodly inheritance, a great deal for a boy like Aylmer to win. It was not too much, of course,

only what one might expect for such a paragon, but well, there might be considerable difficulties indeed were the Dalisons the kind of people she took them for.

But there was no occasion to say that now. So she listened to Aylmer's recital of Katie's praises, and even began to think that if any girl could be good enough, then it was just possible this girl might be the one.

And so they both forgot that Desmond Antrobus had ever been a bone of contention between them. In fact they had no idea that such a person existed, much less that he was that very instant watching them from the darkness.

And then he made a little noise before coming forward so as to attract their attention.

"Still up, Mrs. Forsyth? If you wish to speak to me I am entirely at your service."

And Jessica was delighted. "By all means let them have their little talk, and she won't detain Sir Desmond long."

She has quite made up her mind what attitude to take, and thought she knew very well how to close Desmond's mouth, should he be so ill-advised as to insist on blurting out the truth.

XXXIII

THE boy's enthusiasm had proved so contagious that Jessica also had begun building for the future, and had very absolutely forgotten Antrobus and all he stood for. So his sudden appearance made her, for one moment, feel like one who, swimming in a golden sea, suddenly strikes a little cold current.

But Aylmer kissed his mother; lit a cigar, and went off for a stroll. And where should he stroll but up towards the little church in the park! From there he could see into the Manor gardens. It was not really late, and by chance he found Miss Katie walking in them.

But further I refuse to inquire. Besides it is far more important and far more interesting, to watch the proceedings of the other two.

Desmond proposed they should go into the house, but Jessica preferred to stay outside. The night was darker than it had been, for great clouds were coming out of the west, marching like an army of giants, well drilled, manœuvring smartly, very mysteriously, shod with silence.

"Well?" asked Jessica.

"Dalison has been talking to me about his daughter and Aylmer."

Shot the first. The low boom of cannon in the distant hills, the first cool, well-aimed shot of the battle.

"You mean she and Aylmer are in love? I've heard

all about that," Jessica answered lightly, almost gaily. She enjoyed the little triumph at being before Desmond with his information.

Had she paid him the compliment of remembering his rigid adherence to what he considered right, she might have paused a little before becoming somewhat unduly elated. But her easy nature never allowed her to look ahead, or to worry very much about what other people might think either. She had decided in her own mind, that if Aylmer was really in love, she herself must stand aside. She would always be a little jealous of the other woman but she would still be his mother, and would always understand him better than his wife, and that comforted her.

"You may have seen that Dalison likes the boy," Desmond continued, talking rapidly, "and, personally, has nothing whatever against him. There is, of course, the religious question. The Dalisons are Catholics. Anyway, I have great influence with the family, and I think it would go sufficiently far even in that direction."

"You are very kind."

And Jessica meant it. Desmond's good offices were what she would most desire; and lo! he proposed them without a word from her!

"Then it's all settled? The Dalisons approve?" and Jessica half turned as though to go.

"If the girl's heart is set on the match there would be only one vital obstacle. I think you can guess what I mean."

But Jessica preferred not to guess; she began to perceive that this businesslike method of Desmond's presented something more serious than an expression of facts she already more or less knew.

"I suppose you refer to Aylmer's comparative lack of means?"

"Money is quite a secondary consideration. Dalison wants to know, and very naturally, something about Aylmer's father."

The roar of the battle had grown considerably louder, and the enemy had come to closer quarters; there were even unmistakable tokens that he threatened to carry her first outpost, but she had been prepared for an attack in that quarter, and had her defence ready.

"Has Mr. Dalison asked you—anything?"

He nodded.

"And what did you say?"

"I told him he'd better come to you."

"You did? Whatever made you say that?"

Her poor perverted mind was unable to understand such chivalry on an enemy's part. It was ingrained in her nature to strike the best bargain she could. She had observed the women who did not look very sharply after Number One usually found that no one looked after them. It was a hard and repulsive truth but the truth as she knew it.

So she wondered what on earth Desmond could have been thinking about to let so fine an opportunity of achieving an easy victory slip by.

"I was unprepared," Desmond replied, and then he added, "perhaps I thought you ought to know first."

And then she noticed that Desmond had used the word *first*.

"Why did you say first?" she asked.

"I meant before——"

Surely she must know what he had meant?

And she did know. Desmond meant to speak out!

"You are *not* going to tell them?"

He felt a sort of grim humour when he heard Jessica's question.

"What sort of a man do you take me for?" he replied.

If she answered truly, she would say "You fool! When the easy way is so clear why create needless trouble?" And she hastened to explain what she considered the easy way.

"But *you* know nothing! How should you? We never met before to-day! *I* shall say my husband died abroad soon after my marriage, and hadn't a relation in the world. It's so simple."

Desmond stood amazed. Would she never understand that he was forced to speak of what he knew? But he had forgotten that Jessica was rather good at finding ways out of difficulties, and usually they were ways of pleasantness.

"Dalison must be told the truth."

"That *is* the truth."

"Your story would not hold water. What about *your* family? Are you going to pose without relations also? But apart from that he must be told the whole, unvarnished truth."

Jessica found the fight would be a little tougher than she had thought. Clearly Desmond was still harping on "the right thing to do." And she felt the contempt of the casuist for one who insisted on raking up mud instead of patting it down nicely, and beating it smooth and firm.

"Can't you see how far, far better it is to let things go on as they are?" she asked. "Think how well it has worked up to now."

Desmond answered instantly: "I tell you I *cannot* keep silent. Dalison has asked me what I know, and I

am in honour bound to tell him. These are friends of years. We are constantly with each other, no friendship could be closer or truer. Do you imagine I am going to turn round upon them and cheat them? How could I meet them when I knew in my heart I had deliberately deceived them, yes, that's what it means, deliberately deceived them?—and to shield *you*—had tricked them out of knowledge they had every right to know!"

"Why need they ever learn that?" said Jessica; "the facts are only known to you and me. Why fuss and worry over something that in all probability will never happen?"

"Whether they found out or not is beside the question," Desmond replied. "Dalison has asked me certain questions I am in honour bound to answer. I tell you again I have no intention of lying to my best friends in order to spare you. *Now*, do you understand?"

And Jessica did begin to understand. She saw her plans and schemes brushed aside like cobwebs. She saw a very determined and masterful Desmond.

And then she remembered if Dalison refused to consent, Aylmer would ask the reason! What explanation would Desmond give? How bitterly she regretted having come to Fordcombe. Her story might have been accepted from a distance; and once the marriage had taken place, Desmond's tongue would have been silenced.

But the dominant thought of all was, "What was Desmond going to tell Aylmer?"

"You're set on this?" she asked. "You'll tell them I'm—as good as your divorced wife? What are you going to tell Aylmer?"

"I'm going to acknowledge my son——"

"Desmond!"

"Why should I not? He *is* my son!"

"But if you do that—he must know the truth also."

"Well, he is twenty-three, he is old enough to hear it."

They stood close together and their voices were never raised. One questioned, the other replied, and they stood so still, so very still, they seemed almost as quiescent as the trees about them. Only the great battalions overhead came up quickly, marching and counter marching, silently hiding away the moon, until she held them back to see what was passing down below.

"Oh no, whatever happens he must never learn that. I've kept him apart from my life always. He has no idea! Not the least suspicion."

But Desmond stood before her as unbendable as a pillar of steel, and his words stabbed her like an assassin's knife that thrust again and again into a body already half dead.

"He is my son. He must learn his parentage. You have told him many lies on that head. It is time he heard the truth."

And now Jessica's nerves began to play her false. She began to flounder and the next words stumbled over her lips, escaping like prisoners in the dark, as silently and stealthily as possible.

"Desmond," she whispered. "Listen, just one moment. Have you thought of the consequence to him?"

"The consequence to whom?"

"To Aylmer! If you do this, you will break his heart."

It was a good move. He had thought of Dalison, of Margaret too, and of himself a little, but he had not thought of Aylmer with his mother's mind.

"Do you suppose I want to tell him?" he asked.

“Then why do it? You’ve heard him talk of me! You know how he idolises me! Me!—his mother. Do you suppose he’ll be grateful to you? Oh, tell these others if you must, but not—my boy.”

Believe me or not, as you please, but at that moment Jessica forgot herself, forgot her adoration, the care that for so long had kept a shield between Aylmer and the truth. Her craving for his love, and her clinging to his respect, all these great Gods of her existence went down before the one thought that this torture must not be given to her boy.

And Desmond saw nothing but all the mother in her pleading.

“What you ask is neither fair to him nor to me,” the man answered. “How *can* the facts be kept from him? I am in honour bound to tell the Dalisons and Aylmer will ask me what I said! You talk about his respect, his love for his mother, the idol he has made of her. Idol indeed! Is he to continue idolising when all the time it is only a horrible sham he worships?”

“Sham! Sham! No, it’s far from that. You only see one side of me, that of the faithless wife. You forget I am also a true and faithful mother! There’s been no sham there. Ask him! Ask him!”

“There’s no need. I know it.”

“If you tell him, he won’t believe you,” cried Jessica.

“He must believe with the proofs I have.”

“What proofs?”

“Enough for——”

But Desmond could not go on. The woman had just spoken of herself as mother, and indeed he had never doubted her there. Her motherhood was a most beautiful reality, an honour to all mothers. And recognising

that, how could he torture the already agonised woman further? And she had pleaded so eloquently, so fervently, that had it not been that Margaret sat throned in his heart, and every atom of him gave service to his Queen, Desmond might have sought some compromise.

It was Jessica who spoke.

“You mean enough for—divorce——” she whispered.

Desmond did not answer her. What was the use? She had guessed.

And now if you have felt sympathy for the mother, I cannot but fear you will have little, if any, for the woman.

Twenty-three years ago and Desmond remembered Jessica as always quiet, perhaps a little cold: certainly the very last to make a scene. But in the years gone by she had passed through all kinds of adventures, and one cannot live commonly and remain oneself uncommon. So it was quite another Jessica to the one he remembered who turned and faced him now. She was no longer a broken, pleading mother to excite pity and compunction, but a raging, angry, jealous woman, with a voice grown almost raucous; and very careless how she spoke. For Desmond was her husband, the first man she ever knew, and however vile a wife may be, her husband *is* her husband, and in the bottom of her heart she is always *jealous* of him.

“So *that's* it,” she cried. “*That's* what it all means! All your love of truth, your sense of honour! Now we know! Now we understand! Good God! Who are you to talk of shams? You care nothing for Aylmer, you'd break his heart! Pretending he ought to be told. That it's wrong he should think a sinner a saint. My God! And all because you want to have this other woman.”

Jessica stood trembling with passion. For that instant all her refinement fell from her, she became a virago of the streets dressed in the clothes of a duchess. He would scarcely have known her.

“Don’t speak of her.”

“And why not, pray? Aren’t we out to have the truth? Very well then, let’s have it all for Christ’s sake.”

“Can’t you see it’s out of the question for me to divorce you now? You are his mother, I am his father. If I divorced you I don’t think I could look my son in the face again. To rake up the scandal, and break his idol *publicly* would be dealing a double blow—like hitting a man when he’s down. Neither could we be happy, she and I, snatching our happiness from our children.”

“How do you mean?”

She had calmed down as suddenly as she had flared up. It had been a moment of swift, blind fury. A moment that showed her boy sacrificed to Desmond’s longing for *another woman*. A moment when she marked herself supplanted, defeated by *another woman*; one her inferior in looks and wit, and certainly no younger than herself, who conquered through one asset only—and that the only thing lacking in her own armoury. And the thought lashed her to frenzy. It only lasted an instant, but the mischief was done, she could never again raise the same compassion in Desmond for herself, as did the distracted mother so eloquently pleading for her motherhood.

“If there was a scandal, the facts about us were known, discussed, and paragraphed largely in the papers, is it likely Dalison would consent? The girl is only nineteen and no one’s life ends at that age. There are difficulties enough already, but I may smooth them over,

on one condition. That is, you go away quietly, right away!"

"You mean out of his life? To never see or hear of him again?"

"Can't you do this for Aylmer?"

But Jessica was thinking what life would mean without a sight of her boy, without a word, but with the knowledge that he knew her for what she was.

"To live on, alone, knowing he thinks me infamous?"

"Say knowing the truth."

"Oh, you and your truth!" she cried angrily. "You'd sacrifice all the world to Truth. And you wouldn't even tell the truth." She added sadly and without bitterness, "No, my dear Desmond, you wouldn't. Not one quarter of the truth."

"You may trust me to do you every justice."

Once again Jessica had become the calm, dignified woman; despairing maybe, but not yet desperate; and this quiet woman, speaking softly and slowly, commanded respect, even when confessing her own iniquity. Jessica smiled when Desmond promised to do her justice.

"I'm sure you would intend to be fair, but you couldn't be, nor any man alive I think. Who can tell the truth about such as I? I know exactly what you would say. You would remember I am his mother, and that I have been a *good* mother, you would do me every justice in that capacity, and I thank you, very heartily thank you. But you forget it's just in that capacity I need no defence. He knows all you could say already, and a good deal more than you could tell him. And then you would say I was your wife, that I had left you for riches and comfort, that I had been this man's mistress one day, and that man's the next."

"You needn't suppose I should say more than I need," Desmond interrupted.

"But it would be the truth. That truth you so adore, and I don't quite see how you could avoid it once you began. After all, you have ample justification! But it wouldn't be the whole truth. No, not one half, and not, oh, not by any means the most important half. *That* you can never tell him because you could never understand. And you never will. Neither could he, and that's the bitterest part of all."

It was a moment or two before she could steady her voice to speak, she felt beaten, and knew she was, yet must she try to make things clear.

"You'd laugh if I told you I never really wanted to go wrong, that if I'd seen one ray of sunshine, or glimmer of hope, in those old days, it would not have happened. I don't think it would. Then there was the child. I didn't want him. I didn't want a third in those tiny quarters. It wasn't till afterwards, when that wee mite was put into my arms, I knew what he was going to be in my life. I tell you I never wanted to go wrong. It came gradually, little by little, a suggestion to-day, another to-morrow, till I got used to the idea. I wonder how many weeks the serpent took tempting Eve?—I'm sure she didn't take the apple the first time, or even the second.

"You'd never believe that at times I have loathed myself and my life. That I have had an utter contempt for it all. But that would be the truth. No woman not a born fool ever wants to be bad. But one day we meet a man whose nature is parallel with ours, then there comes a moment of dazed excitement, of wonder, of curiosity. Oh, an impossible, primitive, mad moment, when we forget all we've learnt, forget we are anything but flesh and

blood. Animal, if you like, but to *us*, above all, it's an *ignorant* moment. Then the man rides away as cool as you please, a lord of creation. It's the woman loses the game, and by that time there isn't another left to play. *That's* what you'd have to tell him if you wanted to tell the whole truth."

Very reminiscently, as out of her own past, she had spoken, hardly above a whisper. Desmond listened, and believed. He also pitied the woman so abject in her confession. But pity and belief were not all he knew. He had memory too, memory for Margaret—for what he must in honour do.

Jessica's voice trailed away into the silence. She thought of many things just then, of what had been and of what might have been; and then again of what was happening that very moment, why she was there in the garden at Fordcombe, and she remembered the terrible thing that threatened her.

She turned to Desmond, not so much pleading, as "rubbing in" a great fact, with every quick, emphatic word she spoke.

"I tell you I never wanted to go wrong. Not in my heart. But you don't know how hard it is to get back, or how people, circumstances, combine to stop you. You don't know what a poisonous drug excitement is, nor how the knowledge of our position—women always realise things too late—drives us to extremes. I can't help my temperament. I'm only what God made!"

Desmond gave the only answer he could, but as gently as he was able. "This is only painful to us both. I can only repeat the truth must be told. It can't be hid just because the telling will cut him to the heart."

He looked for another appeal, another outburst, or

some effort to retrieve her fortune. But Jessica only made a little gesture. She acquiesced. She saw the uselessness of any further effort. He would do what he thought right. She had no power to stay him. Aylmer would have done the same in his father's place. She was the sinner, and her portion was with other sinners.

"I suppose everyone would agree with you, would say I deserved my punishment, and that I'd only brought it on myself. And perhaps that's true and right enough, from your point of view. But remember! I'm still a woman! Still a mother! And every atom of the mother in me cries for him! You shan't blackguard me to my own son!"

No! She couldn't endure that. Quietly she had spoken. Meekly she had accepted the sentence pronounced, but as she proceeded, as she recalled she was indeed woman and mother, an indignation possessed her, and it was with superb assurance she turned and told this man who tortured her "You shan't blackguard me to my own son."

And for a moment this wretched woman, by turns pleading eloquently, vehemently, insistently, pathetically, to be left the love and respect of her child, moved Desmond to profound pity.

"Jessica! There is no other way. Not one of us can help ourselves. It is Fate. The result of past acts. Throughout your life you have done whatever amused you, without one single thought to the future."

"I've never dared look into the future. What sort of future can there be for such as I? We live for one thing only, men's smiles. We can never have many women friends and those we have we're jealous of, or they of us, and so we live for men. I've seen it often—I know it—

believe me, the woman growing old, afraid of every new day, with nothing of her own, when her only occupation's gone. One day we discover we're not quite so young. We usually find that out suddenly, in a flash. *I* found it out to-night. *Aylmer* showed me! I'm still good looking, but very soon they'll begin to say 'Isn't she wonderful. How on earth does she do it?' and then——"

Jessica ended with an expressive half contemptuous shrug of the shoulders that spoke of the nothingness of the unwanted woman.

What indeed have the Jessicas to look forward to but the dragging out of an unnecessary life in a world that has forgotten them?

They have no purpose, when their day is done. They hang like the dead garlands of last night's feast, waiting to be carted away. Other revellers come, who only know the last night's sport to mock at it, and they cry "what are these dead garlands doing here? Let in the sun and air, and clear the room for a different dance to-night."

"Desmond, I'd looked to be so different. I'd always hoped my boy would be mine through life. I've lived in him! The better part of me is there. Don't kill that! The vilest woman in the world would be an angel to her son, and I'm not so bad. Don't take him from me."

She made no attempt to touch him. She stood very still just where she had always stood. Neither did she try to be pathetic. There was no acting whatever in anything she did. She felt too keenly to play a part. She remained herself, a woman, sensual, luxury loving, swayed by emotions, but as she had said, "not so bad." She had spoken very simply, and in that very simplicity proved most touching.

"Jessica—can't you see? It's too late."

If Desmond had spoken less gently, she would have had a greater hope. But, the gentleness in him showed his inflexibility. And time was passing. At any moment Aylmer might return. *Why* must all her sins come together crowding for their reward?

And as she saw the hopelessness of changing Desmond's mind, she felt a numbness creep upon her, and yet, a last wild desire to save for herself the little bit of happiness that life still held. And so she made one last effort, one more frantic appeal not to be cast into utter darkness. She hardly knew what she said, or indeed, what further plea to make. She spoke indeed at random, often quite incoherently, feeling her futility, yet frantically anxious to be reprieved till at the last she broke down utterly; passionately weeping, sobbing inarticulate prayers.

"Don't take him from me! What else have I in the world? You have so much, but his love, his respect, oh, they mean everything to me—you don't know. Why, but for him I might have sunk to the gutter. My life's not been all one triumph! But always I had him, always I had that anchor. And he loved me so as a child. Oh! it was so beautiful to know that one thing loved me honestly—one thing didn't know—and—and—and then—Oh, Desmond! Desmond! I know I've been a bad wife—any man's mistress were he rich enough—but, whatever I've been, I am his mother. I can't lose his respect, his faith. I love him! So much, I daren't tell you he was born. I thought you'd take him from me! I've been the best of mothers. I love him! He belongs to me! I'm his mother! I love him! He's mine."

Gone the confident, radiant creature. Gone the grace, the charm, the alluring personality. Aye, and gone, too,

the youth and beauty. It was a white, haggard, broken, beaten woman, middle-aged and years older than she of an hour ago, who lay sobbing and grovelling at Desmond's feet, expostulating, entreating, endeavouring to move him to some show of pity. She used no guile of sex, no subtle art, nor did she seek to hide her face, swollen red with tears; she used no weapon whatever except—and that unconsciously—all the tragedy of a broken heart.

But Desmond, even while he pitied the mother, was a merciless judge of the woman. For, alas! alas! poor Jessica, your very justification as mother was your condemnation as woman. The contrast was too glaring, too insistent to pass unnoticed. Desmond remembered how she had cheated him of his rights as parent, and to save herself even now had implored his silence with tears and supplications.

And as he remembered he cried, "Is he not my son as well as yours? You've had your share in him; now it is my turn."

"Only let me keep his faith—his love."

"Think of all *my* love, my hungry love for a son, a love that's gone unsatisfied these three and twenty years. Is that to be denied? You say he'll not believe. He must. Get up."

And almost roughly he pulled her to her feet. She clung to him, babbling weakly.

"Don't take him from me. I can't help my nature. But don't take him from me—don't take——"

"That will do—go in."

And, half supporting, half carrying this hysterical creature, he led her towards the house. But, beside herself as she was she still held to the one grim fact, that on no account must she leave Desmond alone with Ayl-

mer. Instinct taught her one chance remained and she took it—desperately—hardly knowing what she did.

Her arms were round his neck and her tear-stained face, twisted into a horrible grin, the caricature of itself, was lifted close to his.

“You used to love me. You used to love me. I am still your wife.”

It was so ghastly, such a revolting exhibition, that Desmond felt almost nauseated. This leering woman who sought to fascinate him as she had fascinated others, brought the memory of his dishonour back upon him with the resistless might of an avalanche. He put her from him quickly.

“It’s too late. You cannot kindle a fire from burnt-out ashes. Twenty-three years ago you wrecked my life. Now once again you come between me and my chance of happiness. I *can’t* divorce you! I can’t make *him* suffer as *I* have suffered. And you—you, I say, and only you are the cause of it. Yes, *you* who have never for one instant troubled how your conduct might react upon others. Yet now, when the inevitable result proves more than you can bear, you come back and ask me to be pitiful. Why should I show pity to you? Why, in God’s name, am I to be compassionate? What consideration have I ever had from you? You’ve robbed me of my wife; would you rob me of my son as well? The craving for paternity is born in all men. Nature was strong in me. When we met he didn’t seem a stranger. I’ve yearned to him, grown to love him as my own. It was scarcely a surprise to hear he was. It explained so much. And now, when I have to tell him who his father really is, I have to tell him also who you are. My God! How shall I find words to say it?”

"Then—then——" whispered Jessica.

It was such a pitiful little hope that scarcely dared to raise its head, and Desmond crushed it immediately. Her tears, her pleadings could not turn him from that straight and narrow path that lay before him. If he had pity for the mother, he knew none for his wife.

"What! Are you to escape scot free? You, whose thoughtless life has brought this misery on all of us? I'm sick of the cant that would have us ever shelter the woman and makes men pretend to commit adultery so their wives who have, can keep some show of reputation. It's rotten humbug, and, what's more, it's an unjust usurpation on the woman's part. Humbug! For no one believes in it. Unjust, for on the innocent is piled the guilt. What right have you, what excuse have you to ask pity and forgiveness? If you claim the right to follow your own desires, don't cavil at the road those fancies lead you. Don't be surprised if some day you have to pay for your fun. Your time to pay has come now. You'd refuse, and put the past behind you. It just can't be done. The past won't be dismissed so easily. It clings so us, haunts us always, aye, haunts the whole world and every man and woman in it. There is no death, there is no future, only ever the past again and again, in some form or other, present, always with us, always waiting, one day to claim its toll."

"What are you going to do? Let me know that any-how."

"I've told you—tell the facts."

And she stood and stared at him, stared at him helplessly, knowing she had hoped up to this last, and realising she'd hoped to no purpose.

Her great eyes were fixed and staring, and her lips

twitched yet said nothing. She tried, only a dry rattle in her throat, and Desmond went on ruthlessly.

"Silence is impossible. Whatever comes to him, to me, to any of us. I'll have no more lies. The truth shall be told *now*."

"Now! Now!"

"Yes, now!" And he went to the house and opened the door.

"Not to-night!"

"Yes, to-night. I'll wait here and tell him. We'll finish the business quickly. None of us can be much the worse, whatever happens," he added, grimly.

But Jessica stood unable to move. Tears fell unchecked down her face. She swayed a little; tottered; held to a garden chair.

"He'll not believe you," she whispered.

"He *shall* believe me."

And so for a moment they stood and gazed at one another. Never would they understand each other. Even the child who should have healed all wounds was only made a bone of contention. What ironic force ever threw these two together?

"He may return at any moment," Desmond said. "Hadn't you better leave us together?"

Reader, can you understand how, even then, Jessica simply could not leave Desmond and Aylmer alone? Had *you* been in her place, what would you have done? Would you have left the field clear for Desmond's explanation? Would you have gone to your room and there have waited in an agony of apprehension? Speculating on what Desmond said, how Aylmer answered? Waiting till one or other came and knocked at your door, and you looked up to see if the worst was over, or was not yet

begun? Or would you have been brave enough to defy Desmond, and to determine that, come what might, you would remain and abide by the result?

Jessica chose the latter way.

“No! If I can stop you to-night——”

“Nothing can——”

“But if I can put it off to-night, there mayn’t be another chance.”

“You can’t put it off.”

She turned to him again. Even now she could not credit him.

“You’d never tell him—before me.”

“Even before you.”

“It’s too brutal—it’s inhuman!”

And then a bright, cheery voice broke across their speaking, like a fresh breeze from the sea over the strained atmosphere of a dry and thirsty land.

And, lo! Aylmer was upon them, as light-hearted and free from care as though he thought this the best possible of all best possible worlds.

XXXIV

THE sudden incursion of this serene, light-hearted presence hurt the two elders as might a burst of gay song hurt the prisoner in his cell. It was as though they stood in the presence of some spirit, very vivid and alive, that should be let alone to go its own bright way.

"I'm glad neither of you turned in," said Aylmer, drawing a chair near to them. "I've something to tell you both."

But he didn't tell them. He sat, cigar in hand, happily humming a little tune. "And I'm specially glad you're here, Sir," he added, looking at Desmond. "Because you've been so awfully good, you know, and all that, and, well, I want you to know, and you ought to, that, well, I'm engaged."

And Aylmer took a long pull at his cigar to cover his nervousness. "I'm engaged." What a banal phrase it seemed! All the trumpets of heaven should have sounded. To be engaged might happen to anyone. The unusual part of *his* engagement was the extraordinary good fortune he had in winning a girl so far superior to every other girl. That was a thing that had never happened before.

"By Jove, what luck!" he exclaimed, as this wonderful fortune occurred to him.

And now more and more impossible it was to speak, and Jessica wondered if she would get a respite yet.

"I'll tell you all about it," said the boy, too full of his own happiness to notice the silence of his elders. "When I left you I strolled up towards the manor, and she was there and so, well, I want you both to know we thoroughly understand each other. Mater, congratulate your only child."

He went to her and, stooping to kiss her, he found both her hands were taking his head between them and drawing it down until her lips touched his.

"I'm so glad. I hope you'll be so happy."

"Don't think her good enough, I expect, eh?" He laughed lightly. "I'm the luckiest man in all the world."

And though Desmond said nothing he saw how piteous was this very simple, but very poignant, human problem. The woman was so obviously sincere in her selfless love that almost consumed her; the boy, clean and straightforward and happy in his natural love for a nice girl, while he himself, the father, who cried out to take his son to his heart, yet found himself standing, axe in hand, waiting to strike.

"I've told Katie everything," Aylmer explained, glad he could say so honestly.

"Everything?" cried his mother, for the moment forgetful how very little Aylmer's everything could be.

"Well," he answered, "I explained I'd no relations—you told me that, mother—I said I imagined I'd dropped from heaven, and she told me not to be conceited! And then I told her what a lot I owed to you, sir, and that I'd prospects and all that."

And now Desmond began to realise that with every word his son spoke, his own mouth was becoming more firmly closed. Yet the lad must not continue in his Fool's Paradise. How gladly would Desmond hold his tongue!

How gladly allow Jessica to smooth everything over were such a course compatible with honourable treatment of his friends.

“You mustn’t be too quick, my boy,” Desmond said. “We’re not out of the wood yet, you know.”

“Oh, you mean her relations. Yes, you once said something about that. That won’t trouble us much. Miss Dalison is with us and that means a lot—Katie’s Katie, and, by George, what have I done to deserve such luck!”

Oh, the confidence of youth! The confidence and arrogance of youth when it’s in love! And oh! The confidence and arrogance and colossal impudence of youth in love and accepted of its choice! Why, only that very week Aylmer would have given half the world to solve the problem, and now just because of a young girl’s “yes” he could actually laugh away that very same difficulty.

Now Antrobus had almost forgotten the presence of his wife. So filled was he with pitiful sympathy for this dear lad, that the sinner who was the real cause of the catastrophe entirely slipped his mind.

And she felt something like a very madness of contrition and catching her husband’s eye, made some little weak, imploring sign for silence.

And for one second of time Desmond hesitated, as if at the last moment seeking some way out. Just so must Abraham have paused sword in hand. But no voice broke the silence of the night, neither was there any ram caught in a thicket near at hand. The sacrifice was demanded, and Desmond must offer up his only son.

One instant he hesitated; then raised his arm and struck; struck hard, crashing, smashing a pitiless rain of blows that was yet more merciful than hesitating measures.

“Aylmer! This can’t go on.”

He stood behind the boy, still happily lolling in his chair, cigar in mouth, and glass on the little table at his side.

“What can’t go on?”

“Sir Desmond means, you mustn’t be so sure. Her father, her relations . . .”

It was a sad little effort; the last flicker of Jessica’s strength. She could not finish, and with a little broken moan she sank back again into her seat.

“I wonder what you two have been saying about me?” Aylmer queried.

And then Jessica sent a little message to him.

“Remember what I told you only to-night.”

“Oh, that!” answered the boy lightly. But he had got her meaning, that Desmond “might seek to put himself right with you.”

Desmond did not answer Aylmer’s question of “What can’t go on?” but came speedily to the climax of his argument. One comforting thought he had, and that was that though the boy must receive this wound (and a terrible, throbbing, tearing wound it would be), he himself would be the first to staunch, the first to bind. The sooner, therefore, the axe fell, the sooner could it be flung aside, and so much quicker could the executioner turn comforter.

And then Desmond believed that though the boy would lose the ideal mother of a dream, he would gain a father in reality. Hitherto had they groped towards each other in the dark, now the light streamed upon them, while Nature, the mother of them both, stood by, waiting to join their hands.

“I’m very glad if you’re going to be happy, Aylmer,

very glad indeed, but there may be difficulties. Her relations are very proud, very exclusive, they are people in the very best, not merely the smartest, set. You must remember that . . .”

Desmond had been standing behind the boy's chair; now he came round and sat down opposite, at the other side of the table, and leaned across towards his son.

Desmond went on, while Aylmer sat and smoked as he listened.

“I'm going to tell you a little story. You may think it has nothing to do with you and your affairs, but it has, a very great deal. Please give me all your attention.”

“Right you are, sir.”

Desmond hesitated, and Aylmer looking up, since no reply came, found the elder man gazing at him with a wonderful light upon his face, a look of love, of pity, yet one of pain and sorrow, too.

“I say, sir—you're sure there's nothing wrong? Don't worry about me.”

“Why not? Don't you know I look on you almost as my son?”

“You're too good!”

Surely we may think that both felt the tie uniting them more deeply than they knew?

And away from them, almost forgotten, out there in the deep shadow, sat a woman, with clasped hands, praying and praying, to some God whom she knew not. Nor did she even know she prayed, but pray she did, though it was but a whisper: “Aylmer! Aylmer!”

“Before I begin, tell me . . . have I proved anything but your friend? Your loyal friend?”

“Never, sir!”

"Then give me your hand and tell me you believe in my friendship and in my honesty to you."

"Why, of course," answered Aylmer.

Then the two men clasped hands across the little table, and the father held the lad in so tight a grip the boy could not understand. And the curious moon leant out of the Gate of Heaven to see what tragedy they played down there in the little garden under the Sussex downs.

"By the way, have you an enemy, sir? Anyone who fancies she's got a grudge against you? Because someone's been blackguarding you to the mater."

Antrobus looked across to the deep shadow where he could just distinguish the black-robed figure of his wife.

"I told my son—I told him."

But Aylmer treated it almost as a joke and gave his own interpretation. "Of course, it was all a lie. My mother believes every pitiful tale she hears."

But Desmond had not taken his eyes off the black figure in the dark, nor did he seem to hear the boy speak.

"You told Aylmer this?"

"Yes."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

And then he grimly realised how the lad's mind had already been prepared against the story that nevertheless must be told. He remembered also how she had educated Aylmer to think the very worst of the supposedly dead father.

Oh, she had been clever; very clever indeed, but not quite *wise* enough.

"She doesn't really believe it. She doesn't know you like I do. I thought you ought to know, that's all. What about the story?"

“Oh, my story! It’s very simple, quite short and not at all original. It happened to a man I knew when he was your age. He was exactly twenty-three, like you. He had the same happy temperament, he was clean minded, and believed the best of men and women. In many ways you are exactly like him. For instance, he too felt very deeply and took things to heart, perhaps too much. Well, he married, for love, a very beautiful girl, of singular charm, very great fascination. Aylmer, do you know there are women who cannot resist excitement? Who marry for the experience?”

But the black figure in the dark had risen. It was herself picked so ruthlessly to pieces; analysed to her face. She lost control of herself a little and staggered to her feet.

“I—I—Aylmer!”

In truth both the men had forgotten and, rising, turned simultaneously towards her.

“You would leave us,” said Desmond. “I forgot you for the moment.”

He had no desire to be unnecessarily cruel, so again he offered her a chance to go. But Jessica had quickly pulled herself together. If she is to be racked, then she prefers to know the worst at once. Not go and wait and cringe in her room. But Aylmer decided for her.

“Don’t go, mater. I have an idea this has something to do with your story.”

“Mine?”

“Yes; the one you just told me—you remember.”

“That was perfectly true, Aylmer,” she added quickly. “Let us go in. Why should we stay here? Let us go——”

But the boy had inherited a love for frankness from his

father, and very quietly, but with much authority, waived the suggestion aside.

“No! Let us hear both sides.”

And Jessica again felt the loss of that grip she used to have. Hopelessly, she sank back into her seat.

“Yes?” asked Aylmer, and turned again to his father.

“The man’s wife was such a woman. She was disappointed in her marriage, anxious for money and luxury and so, one day, she left him for a wealthy lover. For her father’s sake, everything was hushed up. They each went their own ways, she took some other name and went abroad. For twenty-three years they drifted apart, never meeting, never hearing of one another, and then, after all that while, unexpectedly . . .”

“Well?”

Now Aylmer had been gripped not so much by the story as by the manner of its telling, Desmond had spoken with a very curious intentness, with such earnest conviction, that he focussed Aylmer’s attention. And Aylmer was very ready to hear; he believed Antrobus to be telling his own story, of which his mother only knew one side. The faithless wife had gone abroad, and then the two women had drifted up against each other, and his mother had accepted the woman’s version: that was how Aylmer saw matters.

Desmond continued:

“By that time the father had died and the man had met someone else. They loved each other heart and soul; they were made for one another. And the man had ample grounds for divorce.”

“He’ll go for it, won’t he—that man?”

“He can’t. It wouldn’t be playing the game. Listen, Aylmer. He found he had a son by his wife, the woman

who'd left him, who was leading a life no better than a prostitute's."

"A son! I see!" But Aylmer could not follow. He knew Desmond had no son.

"Yes, a boy he'd met under another name. An honest, manly fellow he'd grown to love. Neither knew the relationship between them, but the natural tie drew each to the other. There was more than ordinary friendship, or affection, between these two. Well, this son was engaged to be married. How could the father damn his son by dragging the mother through the mire?"

"Why not?"

The query rang out sharply. Aylmer felt uncomfortable, almost reluctant, to learn more. Yet he could not have rested without knowing all there might be to learn. This was certainly Antrobus's own story. Desmond told it with the force and power no other man's story could evoke. Yet how could it affect himself?

And the place was so very quiet. There seemed an uncanniness out that night. Fleeting, Aylmer thought of that still figure in the background. Was that a sob he heard? Impossible! And all the while his eyes were held by that stained, terrible face, that stared so steadfastly into his own, leaning out across the little table through the blackness of the night.

For it had grown dark. There were no stars, even the moon had gone, and hid somewhere at the back of heaven, as though afraid of something going to and fro upon the earth. And certainly the garden was full of strangeness; full of fantastic things.

Aylmer could not turn away from Desmond's eyes. It was like looking into a crater, fires were there waiting to flame up. It was like looking into a well where some great

star had fallen. Tears were there and many other things not to be read. And in the quiet voice of Desmond was a depth and meaning untranslatable, yet comprehensible. It held the force and magnitude of subterranean waters boiling and foaming in the hollows of the earth. Waters yet throbbing with the pangs of the world's travail, slowly coming out of chaos. There was an anger and rebellious justice in the voice, as of some great beast lashing in sullen rage at its prison bars; or the cry of some crime unavenged that claimed a judgment.

And the figure was so still; it did not make the slightest movement, only it sat there in the darkness and looked at Aylmer so that he could not turn away.

Yet whatever was out that night, whatever was coming, Aylmer knew that thing was coming to him also. The very atmosphere was full of warning, stretched tight as if in another moment there must be some great crack.

The lad leaned towards his father across the little table. The two men's faces nearly touched. And Desmond's voice sank a little lower, a little deeper, and a little sterner, too, as he took up his tale again.

"You ask why not drag out the mother's life? Listen! What do you suppose the girl's people would have said? What do you suppose (were it possible in your case) the Dalisons would say?"

And then the boy put down his cigar very carefully and paid great heed to that burning end flaming well out beyond the little table. He was curiously methodical just then, and felt nothing of the disquiet of the moment past. And he was all attention. There was far more in the story than he had supposed. What that might be he could not have told, but in some inconceivable way most certainly the story concerned him also,

Aylmer put his elbows on the table, and rested his chin upon his hands, and waited for the elder to continue.

But Desmond sat immovable, and looked at his son. And it was all so very quiet. One blade of grass whispering to another, one leaf falling would have made a noise. And then the boy asked: "Who was he?"

"Presently! Presently!" The tension was broken and the voice took up its burden.

"Listen carefully. The son thought this father dead, had been taught to believe it better so, that he had no relations in the world, except his mother, who lived abroad and carefully guarded him from the truth. But the girl's people asked questions. She was young, very young. She was an heiress with very happy prospects. Much was expected of her. They asked with perfect propriety: 'Who is this boy who would marry into our family? Where does he come from? What are his antecedents?' Remember, they were exclusive people in the best, not merely the smartest, set."

The man's words fell slowly, almost monotonously in their evenness, yet every one had found its mark, every sentence done its work.

Now Aylmer seemed taken by panic. Suddenly he loudly called to Desmond, yes, almost shouted: "Who is he?"

"Presently! Presently! You shall hear everything," and the man held such authority the boy was forced into a sullen silence. And then once more the man took up the tale.

"The father found, partly by chance, that the boy was his own son, by the wife he had more than a right to divorce. His love for the boy cried for recognition, but beyond all that he was bound in honour to tell the truth, to the girl, to her people, to the boy himself,"

And then as he spoke those last words the man's voice faltered for the first time. Slowly he ended, for the tale was told, and the end was reached. It remained for Aylmer to add the sequel, and so he waited for what might follow. And nothing happened. The silence grew unbearable. It seemed interminable to Desmond. Would the lad never speak?

And still they stared into each other's eyes, father and son, silent, each instinctively fearing the end.

Then Aylmer spoke huskily: "Tell me—who was—the father?"

But Desmond did not answer, and the silence went on.

"Why don't you answer me?"

But Desmond only answered with a look, and again the silence fell. Then Aylmer, leaning wide across the table, almost thrusting his face into his father's, whispered: "You!"

Then the spell about them split. The boy's head fell upon his arms across the table, and none could see the agony upon his face.

His father rose, went round to him and put his arms about him. "My dear, dear lad."

It was the moment he had waited for. That for which he had longed. That it had come so cruelly, he could not help, but the cruelty was over; now he could raise the bowed head, and comfort the stricken heart.

"It's not true!"

"Aren't we alike? Don't you *feel* the truth of it?"

Aylmer had risen and he stood, shaking, shivering, holding the table for support. "It's not true!" he whispered again. And the woman in the background rose, longing to go to her son, but dreading how he might look upon her, what words he would say, and yet, poor soul,

never had her heart so gone out to him as when she saw the young head bowed in agony.

He heard her move; and his hand went out as if commanding her attention.

“Say it isn’t true!”

“It is true,” she said.

Then Aylmer gave way. “Oh, my God!”

The words came miserably, brokenly, hopelessly. It was the sob of one past surprise that Fate could deal such pain. They held no meaning. They were merely the expression of the climax.

“Oh, my God!”

But Jessica could feel. She was with him in an instant. Forgetting her fears, careless how he received her, she was by his side, kneeling, clutching at him, pouring out her vindication.

“No! No! my darling! It’s *not* true! Not all of it! Remember what I told you. You *do* remember, don’t you? You see now why I told you, don’t you?”

And Aylmer turned to the kneeling woman, and took her hands in his, and looked into her eyes.

“And he, my hero, the man I honoured, almost worshipped?”

And Aylmer dropped her hands and turned blindly to the house. He wanted to be alone, quite alone, like a wounded animal.

But Desmond was in his path. This was not to be the end, this turning away in solitary grief? He put out a hand to stay the boy.

“Let me go, please.”

Aylmer had stopped abruptly, as though his father had a magician’s touch that turned to stone.

And now *Desmond* caught the boy and looked swiftly

into the averted face. He wondered at the curt, dry voice, the change in the lad, and was afraid.

“Boy, what is it? Why do you look like that? What’s the matter?”

“Let me go, please. I don’t want to hear any more.”

“Lad, I had to tell you. You must know that. Katie has to know. Her people, too. Aylmer!”

And then something happened, entirely unforeseen by either the father or the mother. I don’t think either of them knew exactly what they had expected, but certainly they had neither of them looked to see what suddenly, swiftly, Aylmer did.

While his father had been speaking he had stood very still, only shrinking a little at the touch of that hand upon his shoulder, and answering a little breathlessly. Yet all the while a fire had kindled within him, and now blazed forth, leaping the control he sought to place upon it.

Suddenly, swiftly, he turned, and the two men stood face to face. Then Aylmer sprang at his father and struck him across the mouth. And again and again!

“You Beast! You beast! You beast! To lie to me like that!”

Now Jessica had remained crouching where Aylmer had left her. But when she heard him now, she rose with a little cry of joy. She had not lost him. Her mother love had conquered. She held up her head once more, honoured, respected, loved.

But Desmond staggered under the blows, then struggled with the boy and forced him down into a seat.

“Aylmer, you savage! You fool! Great heavens! Can’t you see you had to learn? Face it like a man!”

But the fire that had flamed so fiercely had burnt itself out, and it was a cold but shaken lad that answered back.

“Sir Desmond, I’m sorry for what I did just now. I’m ashamed. It was so utterly beneath me, to touch you. Do you know, I’ve always thought I’d like to kill my father. But, somehow, you don’t seem worth it.”

“You must believe . . . ”

“Oh, I quite believe you are my father. *She* said so—it’s the rest . . . ”

“The rest?”

“Yes. That’s the sort of lie my father *would* tell. You forget I’ve known my mother all my life, *you* only a short time. Whose word should I take first? I want you to understand I’m going to stick to my mother.”

“Have I no claim upon you? What right have you to condemn me off-hand? If you don’t believe me, go to my lawyers.”

“I’m not going to your damned lawyers for my mother’s character. I’ve always known the sort of man my father was. This is just the hellish lie he would delight in. He is the very last man in the world I’d believe.”

And Jessica took Aylmer’s hand almost timidly. She felt such gratitude, such exaltation, there was scarcely room for this wonderful, unlooked-for joy.

But Desmond looked at the boy he loved. “So this is the end?” he murmured.

“Yes! This is the end. Oh! *She* knew you—the real you! Not the man I was fool enough—but that’s over. I’m going back to Italy with her to-morrow. As for Katie, if she sides against me, she may go with the rest. I’m cutting it all and leaving this hell of a place behind me!”

“Aylmer, for God’s sake . . . ”

But Jessica stood between them. “He is of age. Let him choose between us.”

Aylmer looked to his father. Then he turned and looked at the mother, the beloved, insulted mother, then back to the man who had sought to blackguard that mother with lies.

“That it should be you—you—of all men!”

Desmond took a half step towards the lad. But Aylmer backed away with a stifled sob. Backed away from his father, then went quickly into the house.

“Aylmer!”

But Jessica followed, shut the door in Desmond's face—shut it fast and sure—and neither wife nor son heard the cry:

“Aylmer! My son! Aylmer! My son! My son!”

XXXV

OUR erratic story now bids us be in three places at once. We can follow Jessica and Aylmer to their rooms or watch Desmond, or go with Margaret to her oratory and see her fall upon her knees in that quiet place seeking some comfort for her soul.

But, if you please, I would prefer not to intrude upon that tender conscience. We may be sure that courage and peace were vouchsafed her and that is sufficient to know.

As to Jessica, whatever thankfulness she felt, it did not, I am sure, cause any falling upon *her* knees. But she certainly felt great joy at her victory and could scarcely realise that she was, as she termed it, "safe." She had looked for that mysterious "call of the blood" one hears so much about, to unite father and son, but the tie had snapped at the first strain put upon it. Antrobus was no longer the hero, while she, the liar, the social out-cast, the leper, who had poisoned her son's mind whose guilt was admitted, yea, even by herself, sat triumphantly enthroned.

Ironical—but possible. If you tell me the situation is not possible, I tell you in my turn you are coming to a very hasty conclusion. Do you never read the newspapers? Do you never go about and hear people talk?

Presently she put out her light, and going over to the window drew aside the curtain and peeped out. The white flowers in the garden looked whiter, the dark

shadows were almost black. It was all very quiet, no white owl fluttered like a ghostly lamp against the dark, only a few stars sentinelled the palace of the moon, nothing moved save those few clouds that looked like great birds sailing on vast wings, and there was that bent and broken figure, very still, very sorrowful and lonely, lying, as it had fallen, across the little table, arms flung wide and head bent down upon them. It looked almost terrible; it was so still, so silent. It was not natural to be so still, not canny to be so terrible in silence.

Jessica wondered "what will he do now"? And a little fear came that she had perhaps succeeded too easily. Yet how fallen were the mighty. What wretchedness in that abandonment. The night was warm and she drew her curtain back a little, venturing to lean out further yet.

Suppose Desmond had been taken ill? Or his heart suddenly failed? Suppose he were dead? Should anyone be called? Was there anything she ought to do? She had never seen death in any form and the thought of death was revolting. Yet she really felt quite anxious about Desmond.

And just as little trivial things will come to us in moments of great tension, so in the middle of her wonder Jessica noticed the patches of black upon the grass next patches of cold white where the moon lay thick upon the dew, and it was beautiful. Like a charcoal drawing, black and white with something of monkish austerity. Jessica shivered a little but continued looking out until a little bat flew by, and then flew by again as if anxious to further an acquaintance with her. Then she withdrew her head and fastened the blind across the window so the little bat might not wander in.

And eventually the figure rose and stumbled across the fields till it knocked at Fell's door.

* * * * *

The next day the news reached the Manor. It came in two letters from Aylmer sent by hand in the course of the morning. One was addressed to Ralph, the other to his daughter. The Squire received his at that post-prandial hour when he retired to his "study" and his "business."

But business, tobacco, pipe and matches were all forgotten as the Squire read, and re-read, that most distressing letter.

"Dear, dear! Antrobus got a wife! But she's dead! Mrs. Forsyth—Lady Antrobus! That charming woman." And the Squire blushed a little as he remembered how very charming he had thought the lady. "Why aren't they living together? Incompatibility of temper, I suppose. Why should the boy be going away with her?"

He read the letter again, and the kindly Squire felt very sorry for the boy. Clearly there had been some catastrophe at the cottage, and Aylmer had written a very proper letter, and released Katie. Perhaps, after all, everything was for the best, and meanwhile this experience would be a lesson to them all. And he repeated the comforting if ambiguous phrase "it would be a lesson to them all."

But the matter refused to be dismissed. "Why had Lady Antrobus never claimed her position? Why had she taken another name? Was she divorced? Was Desmond divorced? And Aylmer was only known as Forsyth, yet his real name was Antrobus."

The Squire was very far from wishing to sit in judgment on anyone, but he could not help knowing that the

wives of men in the position of Desmond Antrobus did not usually assume another name without some very good reason. He remembered the Grange and its undesirable tenant, and began to wonder what there was about Fordcombe, that ladies with mysterious pasts and lurid presents found so congenial.

Then he took up a hat and went out, meaning to distract his thoughts by giving some unnecessary orders to Crockford, but he found himself pacing up and down Lady Katharine's walk because it was unlikely he would be disturbed there and he could endeavour to sort matters out quietly.

But very soon he noticed a stray feather on the grass (the last sheddings of the peacocks' tails), and that feather led to another feather, and before long he had quite a handful and nowhere to put them down. Thereupon he returned to the house to leave them indoors. And just as he reached the hall his sister came in from another door, and at once Ralph shifted the burden to Margaret's shoulders.

"Can you believe it? Can you understand such a thing?" exclaimed Ralph, as Margaret read Aylmer's letter.

The two had gone into the study to talk more privately. Indeed it was an astounding letter, but it accounted for all that she had learned from Desmond the night before.

This was the letter Margaret read:

"MY DEAR MR. DALISON.—You have always been so kind and especially so last night, that I feel I must write at once and tell you of certain circumstances which have arisen, and must alter the whole course of my life. I find that Sir Desmond Antrobus and my mother are husband and wife

and that my real name is Antrobus. They parted about the time I was born under circumstances I need not enter into. But it is quite clear that I cannot continue my secretaryship, and it is equally clear, at any rate to me, that my place is with my mother. I cannot explain any further, and of course, I realise that any hope I may have had of making Katie my wife is now quite out of the question, and I am writing to tell her so."

"At any rate he gives up Katie," said the Squire. "That at least is satisfactory."

"But if Aylmer is Desmond's son he is of quite good family, and has a very distinguished father. He will be very rich. Many people would be glad to have such a son-in-law."

This had never occurred to Ralph. He didn't quite like having it pointed out to him now.

"But the mother?" he exclaimed. "And he means to go with her."

"Oh! But he mustn't! He mustn't!"

Margaret spoke from her better knowledge. It would never do for Aylmer to ruin his life in that way.

"I don't see, my dear, that it's any business of ours to interfere," said Ralph.

But Margaret's thoughts had flown to Desmond. She was thinking how he must be suffering and would he write or come to her? She had felt something almost approaching a twinge of jealousy when she had said to him "How fond you are of Aylmer." Well! This news fully accounted for his affection!

"Would you speak to Katie?" Margaret realised that Ralph was expecting an answer. She would do so at once, but the girl coming in at that moment spared her the trouble.

Katie knew, by Aylmer's letter to herself, that her father would also receive one, and the moment she entered the room she knew the letter had already been not only received but discussed.

"You have had a letter from Aylmer, haven't you, father?"

"Yes, my dear, a very proper letter. Nothing could be better. It does him great credit."

"Well, dad, what about it?"

"What about it? My dear child, hasn't he told you? He's going away with—er—with his mother."

"I don't see why, because Aylmer's father and mother can't get on together, he and I shouldn't."

Katie loved her "dear old authorities" very dearly. They were "perfect pets," but belonged to another world, and she had no intention of allowing them to upset hers.

And then Margaret spoke, and told what she knew of the history of "Mrs. Forsyth," and what she had to tell was quite sufficiently damning.

"I think that settles it," said Dalison, when his sister had finished, a little flushed and excited after her recital. "No wonder the boy releases you."

It was a nasty blow to Katie. She was only nineteen, innocent, but not ignorant. She had never had any contact with the seamy side of life, and, coming face to face with it thus, it hurt. Ralph saw the trouble in her face and went to her with all the kindness of his warm heart.

"Katie. You will see things as I do. You know I only want your happiness. But I could not, I really could not, consent to such a marriage. There are so many difficulties—besides the mother—and—and—of course if she were out of the way, if she consented never to communicate with either of you again——"

Heavens, thought the Squire, what was he about to say? He had meant to comfort Katie and bid her be brave, but before he had fully thought how to express the love and sympathy he felt, he found himself nearly consenting to an engagement he imagined he was most anxious to break off. He had only stopped just in time. He was no good at that sort of thing. Why had not Margaret "helped him out"?

But Margaret did help him out. At that very moment she said—"And then Ralph? What then?"

As usual, it was not quite the help he wanted, but it would serve. He could compromise.

"I might think it over. It's not Aylmer's fault his mother's what she is. And after all he's Desmond's son. But while he takes this line—well—my dear—you must be a sensible girl."

Dalison considered he was firm, yet kind, and exceedingly diplomatic. And just then he caught sight of Crockford mowing the lawn, and instantly the Squire "providentially" remembered his forgotten orders, picked up his hat and passed through the window, happy in the thought that the affair, so far as he was concerned, was done with.

"It will blow over," he said to himself. "Blow over, and settle down."

But where it would blow over, or on whom it would settle down, he never stopped to consider.

"Dear old dad," said Katie, watching her father's retreating figure, "he's given us a loophole already."

"You mean should she consent to your father's terms? After all, she has been a splendid mother, and suppose Aylmer refused? And what do you propose to live on, Katie? I doubt if Aylmer has anything beyond what his

mother allows him. And I imagine he will give that up now, and he is not the man to live on his wife's money."

"It does seem rather a mess, but I don't see how it alters Aylmer," said Katie.

She was a plucky child and believed that circumstances could always be made to give up their dead, if only one went the right way to make them.

Now, as she spoke, she saw Fell cross into the forecourt and join the Squire, and they stood together awhile shaking their heads, and Katie knew they, too, were discussing the situation. Presently her father passed on and Fell stood in the window seeking admittance.

"Is it true Mrs. Forsyth is Sir Desmond's wife?" she asked as Fell entered.

"I'm afraid so," he answered. "I've always known she was alive and living somewhere. And I also knew why they had separated. I've been urging him for months to get free."

"In that case, I suppose there'd be rather a scandal. That makes things—awkward."

Katie smiled very bravely and nodded to Fell as she went out of the room. No one would have guessed, to look at her, how nearly the catastrophe to Desmond touched herself.

"What a sport that girl is," cried Fell, in admiration, when the door had closed behind her.

"She is very brave," answered Margaret. "Well?"

She had been longing to hear of Desmond, she guessed the two friends had met and talked things over.

"Desmond came to me last night. We hammered it out every way till all hours. The boy means to go with his mother. Won't believe anything against her."

And then Fell came to his real objective, and asked Mar-

garet straightforwardly to go and help this friend who seemed quite broken up. "I can't help him," said Fell, "it's a woman's work to do that."

"But of course I'll go."

Margaret rose at once. She could not sit at home and nurse her own grief when much greater sorrows were calling for her ministry.

The night before she had vowed to God, by the faith that was in her, not to see Desmond again unless she could meet him only with simple friendship. With what agony, what tears, she had offered up her heart, we may guess very well. But finally she had found the compassion and help she had sought, and now her love for the man was consumed in pity for the father, a pity so much greater and finer that it gave her a new strength, and a surer peace, than any she had known for many days.

"But," said Margaret, pausing half-way towards the door, "this poor boy. He's throwing everything away."

"You know what Desmond is! He offered his proofs but won't force them. Aylmer and his mother leave Fordcombe this afternoon."

"But what future is there for him? It seems such a waste!"

She would have given much to save Aylmer from himself had it been possible. And then, as she lingered, trying to think of some helpful plan, the door was opened and a servant asked her "if she would see Sir Desmond Antrobus, who was in the drawing-room."

But before we follow Margaret to her interview with Desmond, we must return once more to Aylmer's cottage, and see how our friends there were feeling after their night's rest.

XXXVI

WHEN Jessica had safely shut the little bat out and at length "sought her couch" (that I believe is the correct phrase), she fell at once into her usual guileless sleep. But if *she* had slept well, Aylmer most certainly had not. There were rings under his eyes and a haggard look in his face that told of long hours of unrest.

"We will go to London this afternoon and on to Italy as soon as possible," were almost the first words he said.

"But your home, your things," cried Jessica.

"I shall get Fell to have them sold."

And then he had asked a very curious question. "By the way, mother, what money have you?"

"Why, my dear, plenty."

"I mean, what money from grandfather?"

"Nothing. About two hundred and fifty a year possibly. Why?"

But Aylmer was doing some rather hard thinking, and Jessica examined again the boy's white face that had so startled her when she first caught sight of it. Aylmer smiled to her across the breakfast table with a fixed, forced smile, and, in her turn, Jessica began to think.

"I shall go up to the Manor and say good-bye," said Aylmer, later on.

But to this remark his mother made no answer.

* * * * *

Now let us go back to the Manor and follow Margaret into the drawing-room where Desmond is waiting.

The first greetings over, the first phrases uttered, and Desmond found it easy to go on.

The windows were open to the summer, and the room sweet with flowers, very fair in panelling and carved plaster ceiling, and rich with china and old furniture.

But Desmond felt little of its beauty that morning. Very quietly he told Margaret all that had happened, yet without any self pity, but as it were repeating facts for which he sought some explanation.

"But you've found your son," Margaret said, "and when he has had time to think then he will acknowledge the truth, he cannot help himself."

"He's sent in his resignation. They go away to-day. After all, from his point of view, he's right to stick to her. Only I'd not thought of it. That was absurd, because, with his ideas, it's the only thing he could do. But I'd never thought of it."

As Margaret listened to the slow voice and remembered the strong personality of yesterday, all the maternity in her love rose and challenged the right of the sinner to work such havoc as this before her.

There is no sterner judge than a righteous woman roused, and no severer condemnation is ever meted out than the punishment she deals the sinner of her own sex.

"Desmond," she asked, "Desmond, is she to go scot free? That woman who has hurt every one of us?"

He had never seen her in this mood and was surprised. He had forgotten that every woman is pitiless at heart.

"I'm neither saint nor angel," she continued, and then wondered how to point out that if Aylmer went with

Jessica no one was benefited, and everyone suffered, except the mother.

But Desmond had begun to understand.

“We are tied, my dear! He has refused to listen, but, as you say, sooner or later he must know, and in my heart I’m clinging to the hope it will be soon. Then he’ll come back, and he and Katie may be happy. But if I divorced his mother, the scandal would always stick to them, and how could you and I be happy, even if you married me, knowing our selfishness had spoiled our children’s lives. Besides, we elders have no right to stand in the way of youth.”

“It never occurred to me you were not young. But we are both of us—getting on.” Margaret began to feel faded, and to recognise the touch of old age upon her. And she shivered a little, as one shivers sometimes on a sunny day and with no reason.

“I came to tell you this and also something else. So long as I live I shall always love you. But, after to-day, don’t let us speak of it again. There will be no need. You and I have a sweet sacred thing hidden away deep in our hearts. Let us keep it holy.”

And thus they sealed the pact between them, and if they renounced much they gained more than they gave up, in their defeat that was a spiritual victory.

And then the fighting instinct lifted its head once more, and it was something of the old Desmond come back that sprang to its feet and stood looking down on Margaret.

“What have I done,” he cried, “that my love for my boy, even my love for you, should be turned into a curse? Is there some unknown, unforgivable sin of my fathers, the third or fourth generation back, and God now collects His debt with interest?”

“Desmond, you don’t mean that!”

“Don’t I? I think I do. Don’t tell me it’s the visitation of a blessed Providence. I could believe in Providence better without it.”

But though it pained her, she was glad to see the tree was bending back and, after the storm, would stand tall and straight again.

“Desmond! Do something for me! Show yourself the good fighter you are. I know the battle’s hard for you. All the more glory for the victor. Am I to fight your battle and mine also?”

It was almost a confession; it was certainly an appeal. Desmond responded instantly. He knew to what she referred when she spoke of her own battle, and as he looked into her eyes, smiling so bravely into his, he very solemnly promised she should never have cause to be ashamed of him again.

“And now, it’s good-bye, don’t you think?” he said.

Margaret trembled a little, but her voice was quite steady when she answered.

“For awhile perhaps it would be better.”

And just as he turned away, had almost reached the door, another visitor was announced.

“Mrs. Forsyth.”

And Jessica entered upon her name, careful to give Margaret no time to announce herself as “not at home.”

For an instant Margaret stood amazed. Then turned with the full intent of bidding her visitor go. But, instead, she found herself gazing at a woman far more mistress of the situation than she herself; one without any of the effrontery or the audacity that, under the circumstances, might have been looked for; a woman, standing just inside the door, perfectly dressed, perfectly self-pos-

sessed, a distinguished personage of undoubted breeding, with a little flitting, deprecatory smile upon her lips. And if Margaret wondered how this pariah managed to look as though she were a welcome member of the family, Jessica knew she meant no harm but was, on the contrary, about to do a very heroic thing. She was the first to speak.

"I almost expected to see you here," she said, looking at Desmond. "Well, it will save another explanation."

But Margaret had recovered herself, and it was in the coldest voice she hinted that Jessica was presumably there for some definite purpose.

"If you would give me two minutes."

Now the words, as written, looked like a request; but as Jessica spoke them they sounded like the wish of a very great lady, who never doubted for one moment that she would be obeyed.

"You must excuse me if I wonder what we can possibly have to discuss," answered Margaret. And if Jessica's voice had been that of a great lady who knew her wishes were commands, Margaret's was that of a Princess who barely recognised the existence of the great lady at all.

It was a little passage of arms wherein Margaret held the better weapons. It was certainly a difficult atmosphere for Jessica. I think she must have felt rather as the devil must feel when he revisits heaven and finds himself surrounded by nothing but angels.

"Please don't send me away till you hear why I've called," she said.

It was a very disarming little reply and so beautifully spoken that Margaret would have put herself in the wrong had she done as she would have wished.

And Jessica still smiled. She expected nothing less than the treatment she had received, but still it was a new experience to be snubbed.

Having gained an opening she proceeded as expeditiously as she could. If her presence was resented by Margaret, she herself certainly had no desire to stay longer in the house than she need.

“I wanted to ask if you would give this letter to Aylmer when he comes to say good-bye. Will you?” and Jessica held out a little letter. “It’s rather important. I’ve written what I haven’t the courage to tell him to his face.”

And then Margaret, aye, and Desmond, too, looked up at her quickly. What could she have to say she lacked the courage to speak? But Jessica still stood before them with her curious little enigmatical smile; and nothing was to be read in her face.

“Why have you written?” Desmond asked. “You haven’t——” But he dared not voice the hope within him.

But she guessed very well what he meant and turned to him with a little reassuring nod. And when she answered him it was in the same sweet low voice and charm and ease, as though they merely spoke of the weather, or the theatres, or any ordinary matter. And if once or twice her nerves got a little edged, and she answered a little satirically Margaret always admitted the speaker never for one instant lost her singular charm. And these are the words that Jessica spoke, as though they were of no moment.

“Yes! You are right! I’ve said good-bye to him. He doesn’t know, but I have.”

And then indeed the little smile vanished and the voice sank so low as to be scarcely heard. Then, too, Jessica’s

courage ebbed away and left her very friendless and forlorn and feeling as a sailor marooned on a desert island would feel, watching some ship sail past, unmindful of him, back to the homeland he can never hope to see again.

But Jessica was quick to dissipate any idea of pity. She had no desire to excite that amiable but irritating virtue, and with a little shrug and gesture of her hands, almost foreign, she said:

“You’ve won, that’s what it comes to! I came a cropper at the last fence.”

“Your repentance comes a little late,” he answered.

Jessica replied instantly and emphatically:

“I don’t repent, not the very least bit in the world. You’ve won—that’s all—but *I* repent of nothing.”

And a very shocking, immoral confession! But, alas! Jessicas do not repent, they only regret. Two very different states of mind. And Jessica didn’t look even regretful. Straight and tall, and beautifully garbed, she stood, gracefully at ease, mistress of herself, very victorious, and the least bit in the world annoyed at being classed with those who whine.

“Don’t run away with the absurd idea I’m contrite,” she continued. “I have no intention of going into moral mourning. It’s quite simple—I’ve played and lost. I give him up. I take myself off. And everyone can live happily ever after.”

Personally, I am very glad that Jessica remained consistent. I could not have borne to see her turning to tears. I don’t think I should quite have believed in them. Nature moves slowly, and characters do not turn suddenly in the night like milk. Whatever faults we have noticed in Jessica, and I do not think we have glossed many

of them over, inconsistency was surely not among the number. So why look for sudden remorse and soulful sniffings at the odour of sanctity?

I am grateful to her that she did not teach me to despise her, as yourself would have done had she suddenly repented, there being obviously nothing else left to do. As it is you may dislike her, but I doubt it, you may say you never wish to hear of her again (and I doubt that also), but if you are truthful, I defy you to tell me you despise her.

And why is your thorough-going sinner always received with such consideration in heaven? Even the devil finds a hearty welcome whenever he has time to go there.

The only thing that puzzled Desmond was, why should Jessica throw up the game just when it was hers? And when he asked her this she looked at him for a moment and, in her turn, put this question——

“Do you really think it was?”

And then Jessica found all the elasticity and lightness gone out of her. She sat in the first chair at hand; she could not have stood another moment.

“He made me,” she whispered.

Then Margaret went swiftly and radiantly to Antrobus and cried:

“I *said* he must know the truth.”

But if her own defeat was hard, another woman's triumph was impossible. Very quickly Jessica replied, and it was more the moan of some animal that knew the death blow has been dealt than a defiance.

“He doesn't! He doesn't! That is—not quite. Don't you understand? He suspects, that's all, but enough.”

Jessica paused, she found it difficult to get her breath;

She had to strain for it, and try to keep her voice steady, and to show a brave face to those two people who were so terribly in the right.

When the race is lost; when the winner is seen dashing past the winning post, while thunderous cheers come rolling along the course, it is hard to answer to whip and spur with another gallant spurt.

Jessica realised that she hadn't a ghost of a chance; she knew she was done, but tired and worn, dazed and dead, she yet went gamely on.

"That's what brought me here. What nothing else, not even the truth, could make me do, this has."

Again she broke off for a little breath. Whip and spur were merciless. Her eyes were blinded so she could scarcely see, yet she must go on. There was more to be told, more to be explained, and then, well, she would not be beaten too badly if she could help it.

She must get to the end somehow, and finish up among the losers. She forgot the spectators. She never knew that as she struggled on they began to feel first sorry and then pitiful. She scarcely saw them; all she could see as she gazed out before her was the white boyish face with rings under the eyes. And she only felt very, very tired, and that she must go on because it would be so disgraceful to give up.

"I shall never forget last night; his wonderful championship of his mother. You two *good* people can never know what that meant to me, and I made, oh, such resolves for the future."

Again that little strain for breath, and again the response to whip and spur.

"This morning we tried to meet as though nothing had happened. We talked trivialities. But we'd both had time

to think and I was nervous, anxious, terribly. He mooned about, white and haggard, trying to be bright. It was the most ghastly thing I've ever known. Now and again he'd look at me when he thought I shouldn't notice. I can't face that look, the moment I saw it I knew he'd begun—to suspect."

And Margaret, picturing what the meeting with Aylmer must have been, the mutual suspicions, the mother fighting with her fears, and the final, horrible, conviction, felt only admiration for the courage that forced Jessica to go through the scene once more, detail by detail, with her conquerors.

Yet she didn't feel very much of a conqueror. This agonised, beaten yet courageous mother, who told her story so simply, so straightforwardly, so without self-pity, and showed the full splendour of her motherhood in one supreme act of oblation, wiped out the figure of the unrepentant Magdalen.

"Oh, I've been such a fool," cried Jessica. "Last night I begged him over and over again to say he believed and trusted me. I couldn't help it. I'd have held my tongue if I wasn't such a fool."

Poor Jessica!

Well! She had said all she had come to say. Now she was at liberty to go.

"You won't forget the letter?"

"I'd rather not—far—far—rather not——"

And then, very earnestly she appealed to the hesitating Margaret.

"I don't want to see him again! I'm afraid of what I might read in his eyes. When I caught sight of his face this morning I could have screamed. I didn't, of course, I smiled to show how happy we were together and he—tor-

tured his lips to smile back. He proposes we shall go away together. If we did that I should be living on the edge of a precipice, in constant dread of slipping over. Then I'd forgotten till we met again how old he is. He *must* find out."

And this time Margaret did not turn radiantly to Antrobus. She felt a certain admiration for the dignity and simplicity of this splendid sinner, and to speak a word of sympathy would be insulting.

So Jessica, even when she had lost all she had striven for, when she was in very truth an outcast, and only where she was on sufferance, alone, friendless, loveless, yet was she not to be pitied, for there was something very fine about her.

Then Desmond asked her plans, and wanted to know what she finally decided to do.

But Jessica had decided nothing, except to leave Fordcombe before Aylmer knew.

"You see, I'm not a repentant Magdalen, only one who's lost her game."

"Then—I can do nothing?"

"I'm afraid not, Desmond. I couldn't live and see his confidence and love gradually weakening. Then he'd watch, and 'guard' me." Then she turned to Margaret again: "And, we've forgotten your niece."

"I don't think we need talk of her," said Desmond a little coldly.

Jessica smiled.

"As hard as ever, Desmond?" And then turning to Margaret added: "And you? I wonder if you two are so much better than I? Suppose one of your, shall I say screws, the least bit in the world tightened up, and what might either of you become?"

And neither of them could find a suitable reply at the moment, and all Margaret said was :

“Aylmer shall have his letter.”

And Jessica looked at her and understood. Then all the mother rose within her and, with all the mother's jealous hunger for the darling only child she cried: “I want him to be happy!” And then again she cried: “Oh! But I want so badly he should be happy.”

And the cry went straight to the heart of her hearers.

“If he came with me, in time, as years went on, he'd begin to wonder: ‘Was it all quite worth while?’ He couldn't help it. Always there'd be we two. The girl he loves and the woman, who's only his mother, to be weighed in the balance, and, as time passed, *I* should count for less and less. He'd hardly know when he first began to wonder: ‘Was it all quite worth while?’ But *I* should know. That's the tragedy of motherhood, to love our sons so wildly, and one day to find it's not in nature they should give us that greater love reserved for some other woman. I want him to be happy.”

That was her only thought; the key to her every action. And to gain that end she would proclaim her own infamy, forfeit his love and what she perhaps valued more, his respect, she would stand forth naked to his censure, she would hide nothing but admit everything because she wanted “so badly that he should be happy.” Only she asked not to witness her own degradation.

For a second she stood wrapt in the thought of her boy's happiness and her face shone with the glory of her sacrifice, as though it had been the face of an angel.

Then she looked at Margaret and asked very simply :

“Were you in my place could you do for your boy what I am doing for mine?”

And Margaret being a very truthful person, barely hesitated before replying:

"No! I *couldn't* do it."

"I thought not. After all, I'm made of stronger stuff."

Then she looked from the woman to the man, and back again to the woman.

"Somehow," she said, "I'm rather glad of that."

"And I can do nothing?" cried Margaret.

"Nothing," answered Jessica, "I can't become religious to order." And then she saw that Margaret really wished to be helpful and understood, if only a little.

"That was horrid of me. You mean to be kind."

And so a little seed was sown that could, however, never grow very much. Yet these two respected one another, I think, though they must ever be poles apart.

Jessica looked again at Desmond, and then once more to Margaret. The humour of the situation pleased her. (And say what you will, tragedy is but the shadow of humour.) After all, she had not been so very badly beaten.

"Good-bye."

But it was not quite that yet. There was another ordeal before her, one she had sought to escape, and for which she was utterly unprepared. Just as she moved to leave the room she found herself face to face with her son.

He had come, as he had said he would, to say good-bye. It was an ordeal, but one he had to pass, only he had not expected to meet his mother, or his father, and he was face to face with both.

"I came to say good-bye," the boy said. "You've been tremendously good to me, Miss Dalison, ever since we met, far too good. My mother and I are going away."

She's probably told you?" It was hard for him. He didn't know what to say or do, and felt terribly young and inexperienced. All he fully realised was that he could not endure to look at either his father or his mother.

"Would you say good-bye for me to Mr. Dalison—and—and—and will you tell Katie, please, I shall always—always——"

But some words will not be spoken. Aylmer had to bite his lip hard, and look up quickly. "I can never forget this house and all the kindness of it, never——" he added huskily.

And then it was that Jessica was made to know how thoroughly she had wrecked her boy's life. For all her sin she received full justice at that moment.

And Desmond said: "Have you no word for me? Not even good-bye?"

But Aylmer did not answer; neither did he look at his father, but stood quite still, his eyes upon the ground.

And then Jessica did a very fine thing. She reminded Aylmer that his father was speaking, and wouldn't he answer? And she added that she would go alone, she wanted him to stay. And maybe Aylmer wondered at the extraordinary gentleness, and the sweetness of the voice that seemed, were it possible, to belong to someone of another world; and perhaps that was why he looked up suddenly at her. But why did he look away again so quickly? What had he read in his mother's face?

"We—we—had better go, I think," he muttered.

But Jessica was quite determined to go alone.

"Dear, you cannot go with me."

For in the lad's eyes she had seen the look of that morning, and she was afraid.

"Dear, look at me! Dear! you love and trust me?"

“Why do you ask? You’ve asked that so often.” Aylmer spoke almost impatiently. “Why shouldn’t I believe in you? Don’t ask any more,” the boy commanded, “it maddens me.”

And then Jessica understood, yet had to be convinced. And when she had looked a little while in silence, she went to him and very tenderly put her hand upon his shoulder, and turned him so that she might look into his eyes. And so, for one instant, their eyes met.

Then Aylmer hid his face quickly in his hands and cried “Mother!”

And that was all. And Jessica’s lips formed the word she could not speak—“Good-bye.”

“I’ll follow directly.”

“Very well! Very well!”

She had nothing more to say, and yet she did not go. And then she said:

“Boy—kiss me!”

And very kindly he turned to her, very kindly and gently indeed, but without any emotion, hardly with affection. And his mother remembered the warm love of yesterday. She kissed him solemnly, very slowly and quietly.

Thus she took her sacrament of farewell, and, without a look, a word, a touch, groped her way towards the door.

She barely knew that Margaret hovered full of sympathy and pity; barely knew she passed out of the room, and out across the shady hall, but she noticed the pungent smell of the wood ashes; and the sunshine in the forecourt struck her as something harsh. Then on she went, out into the bright and happy world.

On she went, seeing nothing, only knowing she must get away.

She crossed the road and went by a path that led through the fields; on she went, a finished, middle-aged woman, who showed every day of her years. No one would have looked at her twice now. She was only a woman of about forty, rather youthfully dressed perhaps; a little bent, her one claim to beauty a pair of haggard eyes that must have been lovely once.

On she went, across the fields, and over on to a certain little wooden bridge. There she paused. It was such a quiet, placid, contented stream that flowed below. It asked for nothing, it wanted nothing, but to continue its even happy way.

How happy too, the cattle that stood knee deep to drink of that slow stream! And there were birds flying about and singing, and one sang, oh, so loudly, right up close to the sun. It was a very happy world, and she had no part in it. It was a world that might almost be called heaven, and yet she had no share in it. She must be then some spirit from another world. And now came little gay sounds from some farm, and close at hand the long-drawn intaking draught of the cattle. It was all very beautiful, very alien and had nothing whatever to do with her.

Yet thoughts came to her, one behind the other, and why or how they came, who could tell? They were certainly not the thoughts you would expect her to have at such a moment. She was rather astonished and wondered why on earth she thought of Towchester, and her father, and her early life. Surely her mind had received some shock, that it was so utterly unable to control its thoughts? Then she remembered Desmond coming to study with her father. Dear! What a good-looking fellow he had been. She had married him, and

they had lived in some dreadful little rooms—in Battersea, wasn't it? But what had all this to do with her? And how loudly that little bird sang right up close to the sun! And there had been a very kindly old gentleman whom she had called Cousin Hugh. Jessica remembered them all, even little Mrs. Tom was not forgotten.

“I wonder what's become of her?” thought Jessica.

Cousin Hugh came into her mind again and again. Why was that?

And, suddenly, she saw herself again as Mrs. Potiphar, carried round the room in triumph by the sculptor's pupils. Good heavens! What a phantasmagoria! She wondered if the host of that night remembered that ball, or had any recollection of herself or her triumph on that occasion.

Then the Toreador passed in review, and horrid lurid episodes. What a life she had led. What a vagabond she had been! What unmentionable scenes she had been through, and how curiously clean and peaceful was this quiet sunny English meadow. And what was she doing there herself? And how curiously her head was throbbing.

And suddenly, quite suddenly, she saw a little white house, altogether sweet, in a setting of roses, and honeysuckle, and other old-fashioned flowers meet for the setting of little white houses.

And then as Jessica thought of the little white house, the throbbing in her head ceased and she found that tears were pouring down her cheeks. That had been a happy time, and, thank God, she had no shame in the remembrance. She was glad she had not forgotten the little white house! Though it was all, oh, so long ago! and the darling incomparable master of it all! He too,

belonged to the long ago. He had become a boy, who, in turn had become a youth, and he, why, he was gone too, now, and she had absolutely nothing left to call her own. Nothing in the world except some very beautiful jewels, some costly frocks, some expensive furs, a car or two, a palace in Italy and plenty of money in the bank. And what did that all amount to? There was no one whose love she had, no one whose respect she could claim. She was utterly alone, and she would be alone all her days. No one to write to even, and no one to whose letters she might look forward. She had nothing and she was nothing. All the past, all her successes amounted to just that—nothing!

And again she said it—"I am nothing! I am nothing! My God! Nothing!"

Henceforth her life would flow on like the stream, monotonous, uneventful, with rather a muddy bottom.

And the thought that came to her the night before when talking to her boy in the garden—the thought how "the world had grown old, that it was time she gave up the masquerade"—returned to her; only now it was a thousand times more insistent, and a million times more dominating.

Well! She'd drunk the wine, only the dregs remained, better to fling them away before their taste grew too bitter in her mouth.

And she had been right when proclaiming herself an "unrepentant Magdalen." She repented nothing, for herself, only grieved—with tears of blood—for the havoc to her boy's happiness.

But was there nothing she could do? Was she so utterly defeated? Was there no hope anywhere at all?

And again the throbbing of her head beat out the

words, "The world is old—old—old— The masquerade for you is done."

And then came another ghastly, unfaceable truth,—Aylmer knew. And she had lost his love, forfeited his regard.

He would learn, and read, the lives of other women—horribly akin to hers; then would he wonder (how could he help it?) if she too had been as wanton—or—perhaps worse! God! Impossible to live with that before her! Live! Why should she live? What had she to live for? The reason for her life had snapped—the use for her broken—better—oh! far better obey the decree, "The masquerade for you is done."

Yes! Maybe one thing yet remained for her to do,—and, that done, somewhere would be peace, and a place where she might start again. Surely that was the solution? Desmond had said "her time had come to pay"; well—so be it—if thus she bought Aylmer's happiness.

So far as she could tell—her head was throbbing so it was hard to think—one remaining act called for its fulfilment—and called more vehemently with every passing moment.

And she held out her arms in welcome—rejoicing she had yet this thing to do—this last supreme sacrifice that she—and only she—could offer on the altar of Aylmer's happiness.

"I want him to be happy."

Oh but it was good! So very good! Thus would she put the cornerstone to her motherhood—and carry out her mother love to its full accomplishment.

And he would be pitiful. Yes! God bless him—she felt secure of that.

“Perhaps he’ll love me again—when he’s learnt to pity.”

Jessica had a fleeting vision of cool, green waters, of cows in a meadow drinking leisurely, of a little white house, and the song of a little bird that sang loudly close to the sun, all these were inextricably muddled up, and then——

XXXVII

WHEN Desmond, Aylmer and Margaret were alone, it was Aylmer who broke the silence.

“Do you know why she wanted me to stay?”

“She left a letter for you,” answered Margaret. And when Aylmer had read it, the paper slipped from his hands and he stood quite still as one struck suddenly blind and seeing nothing.

Then Margaret picked it up and, having read it, passed it to Desmond, whispering:

“Go to him.” And then she left the father and son together.

And this was all that Jessica had written.

“Every word your father said last night is perfectly true.”

In those words she accepted and renounced everything.

“When I began to think, I couldn’t believe it of you. I just couldn’t,” said Aylmer brokenly. “Then she kept on asking ‘Did I believe her?’ so questioningly, so pathetically. It was ghastly.”

“I couldn’t speak to you just now. I couldn’t trust myself. I’d to remember—hard—what I am to her. I hoped, if I were with her, that perhaps——”

And just then Fell came rushing up to the window, and made signs to Desmond to go to him.

“What is it? What has happened?” he asked.

And Fell answered in a frightened, croaking whisper.

“I saw it—the bridge. You know—the little wooden bridge. She was right in the middle, leaning over. Two men passing shouted, she turned and then, quite suddenly, she—she——”

But something had reached Aylmer.

“What do you mean?” he cried.

“You mustn’t, you mustn’t!” Fell shouted, and would have held Aylmer forcibly, but the boy knew something terrible had to be met.

“Let me go! Fell!”

And as Aylmer rushed towards the window, his father stayed him.

“Aylmer!”

“Father!”

And the two went together till they came to where three or four men stood by the river bank with a long, black, draggled, dripping something on the ground amidst them.

And Fell alone in the room that looked strange with its flowers and pretty things and sunshine streaming in, wondered “Did she know? Did she know?”

THE END

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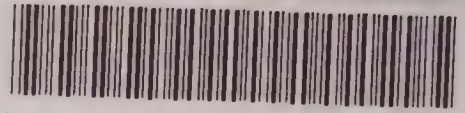
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