

POMP AND
CIRCUMSTANCE
DOROTHEA GERARD





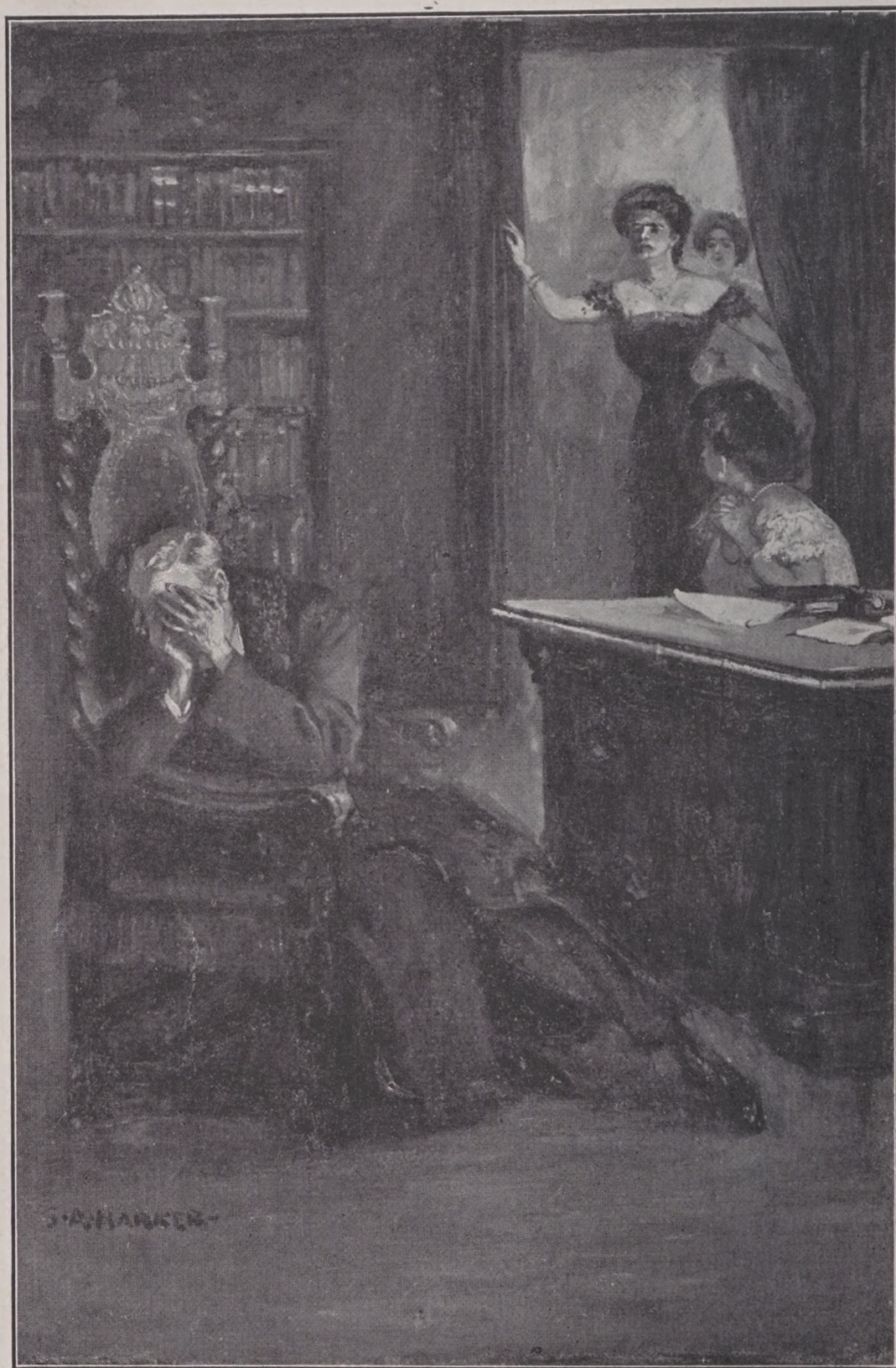
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POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE



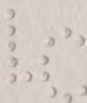
“Mrs. Harding, with the startled face of Gabrielle peering over her shoulder, stood in the doorway.”

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE

BY
DOROTHEA GERARD

(Madame Longard de Longgarde)

AUTHOR OF "THE THREE ESSENTIALS," "THE COMPROMISE," ETC.



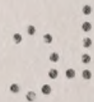
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Pomp and Circumstance

PART I

CHAPTER I

IN THE BALL-ROOM

“FRAU HARDING does this sort of thing very well, don't you think?”

“Mrs. Harding, you should say, if you care about staying in her good graces. She considers that the English flavour gives a *prestige*, you know.”

“Ah, to be sure! Well, *Frau* or *Mrs.*, she understands a hostess's business. Floor, food, flowers, and fiddles about as good as I have seen them anywhere this Carnival. The ‘Anglo-Saxon’ must be doing famous business.”

“It would need to,” came the retort, together with the dry chuckle of the critic—“always granted that to-night's bills are cashed. I put down the evening”—and through her gold-rimmed *lorgnon* the speaker swept the eye of a connoisseur

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round the room—"I put down the evening at not a kreutzer under a thousand florins."

"H—m!"

The second speaker in the dialogue collapsed into a pause, presumably filled with arithmetical calculations.

The scene upon which the two stout, middle-aged, much frizzled and much bejewelled matrons gazed was, nevertheless, worthy of other mental operations than addition and multiplication. For Vienna is the city not only of fair faces, lithe figures and a feminine taste in dress which has awakened Paris herself to the need of looking to her laurels—it is, above all, the city of perfect dancers—a fact which goes far towards reconciling the mere looker-on to his or her fate. The pulse of even the sleepest of chaperons could not fail to be at moments stirred by this whirl of young forms, so erect, so elastic, so refreshingly unconscious; for that standing dilemma of the average British cub—where and how to bestow his arms and legs with the *minimum* of personal embarrassment—is non-existent for his Austrian prototype. Add to this that he is musical to his finger-tips. The strains of the Strauss waltz, floating through a screen of hothouse flowers, were acting as directly upon the nerves of these young men and women as did the scent of the flowers themselves. The result, besides the harmony of movement, lay in many a blissful smile, in many

a frankly enchanted gaze; for the Austrian, even with money in his pocket, has not yet learnt to be ashamed of enjoying himself.

That most of those present had money in their pockets was proclaimed by the size and water of the diamonds in the room—usually displayed upon fat necks—as well as by the look of the women's gowns, of which the overwhelming majority—even at this fag-end of the Carnival—were obviously at their first night. Among the men black coats predominated—a circumstance which, taken in conjunction with the millinery and the jewels, as well as of an occasional unmistakably Semitic profile among the prosperous-looking men in the card-room, would, for a Viennese eye, have sufficed to label the gathering as one of the *haute finance*. Eminently a civilian affair. What uniforms were there had been mostly brought to the matrimonial market, and were being temptingly displayed before the eyes of heiresses.

“Yes—I daresay that's about the figure,” remarked the last speaker, after that pause. “It couldn't well be done under a thousand. She's going it strong this season. After all, when you have daughters to marry——”

She brought back her eyes from the brilliant scene to her neighbour's hard, brick-red face. Her own wide and jovial countenance, upon which the rice-powder showed as plainly as the flour on an unbaked pudding, visibly expanded, while the two

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small black eyes, which might have been two isolated currants half-buried in the dough, twinkled with enjoyment—for this branch of the subject promised good sport.

“As though she hadn’t been doing it for years past, while both the girls were in the school-room!” openly sneered the brick-red lady. Upon which she abruptly softened and graciously conceded:

“Small blame to her either for not living behind a screen. She’s quite worth looking at yet.”

“Not with Irma beside her,” gently corrected her companion. “Don’t you think that girl has wonderfully improved of late?”

“I don’t think she comes near to her mother.”

“Oh, don’t you?”

The jovial lady leant back, fanning herself slowly and immensely enjoying herself. That question of daughters to marry, which by a childless woman could be viewed with perfect detachment, was, as she well knew, a delicate point with her neighbour.

“The mother is more showy, if you like; but, to my mind, the daughter beats her entirely. Just look at her eyes!”

“Just look at the mother’s figure!”

“That grace of movement!”

“That stateliness of stature!”

For a minute or two the rival claims of mother and daughter flamed over two eager pairs of lips.

A casual listener might have supposed that Mrs. Harding was the idol of the brick-red lady's heart, whereas in reality she was precious to her only as an extinguisher to Irma's more inconvenient charms; just as her pudding-faced companion was using Irma herself solely as a pin wherewith to prod this mother of plain-faced daughters, just for the fun of the thing—unless possibly the grudge against Fate for not having given her daughters of her own had anything to do with it.

The climax came with the remark:

“Well, anyway, a good majority of the men seem to be of *my* opinion—Baron Kiraly among others. This is the second *cotillon* he has danced with her this week.”

The complexion alongside turned more distinctly apoplectic, while with the heaving of the ample bosom the diamond *rivière* seemed to spit fire. For Baron Kiraly was a *parti*, and at the outset of the Carnival there had been signs——

Her neighbour, remembering the excellence of the dinners given by the wearer of the *rivière*, took fright. Baron Kiraly was the biggest of the pins she had run into her victim's flesh to-night. Perhaps it was time to apply balm to the puncture. The sight of a fair-haired, angular-looking girl across the room determined the form which that balm was to take. It was somewhat hastily that she said:

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“But the younger one is nothing to speak of. Looks more bony than ever, now that they have put her into long frocks. Quite the English strain—and the wrong strain too, for the father is said to have been a fine man in his day. What has become of him to-night, by-the-by? Queer he shouldn't be here to do the honours of his own house.”

“Very queer! Some talk of an extra press of business. But business isn't usually done at this hour of night. Extraordinary idea to leave one's wife unsupported on such an occasion as this.”

“She doesn't seem to mind it much, does she?”

Just at that moment the floor automatically cleared, for the music had paused. Both pairs of eyes turned towards the figure in the opposite doorway. Mrs. Harding stood with slightly inclined head, listening to some suggestion of the *cotillon* leader, touching the next figure. Even had her comparative isolation not marked her out, she would probably have remained the most conspicuous figure in the room; and this not only because of her commanding stature and imposing bust, but also because of a certain brilliancy of appearance which caught the eye as unavoidably as does the glitter of a spangle. It was through the richness of its colouring, its strongly contrasted and strongly accentuated tints, that her irregular face agreeably surprised the spectator. The red on cheeks and lips was pure carmine, the brown

eyes full of golden lights, showing even in the whites a gleam as of mother-o'-pearl, to which the whiteness of the teeth flashed response; the dark eyebrows as sharply pencilled as though they were painted, the black hair lustrous as satin. The ample shoulders, generously displayed, rose massive as marble, and almost as dazzling, above the black velvet of the gown, its sombreness relieved only by one huge cluster of yellow roses. Mrs. Harding never made the mistake of dressing below her age, and had wisely renounced round dances years ago, well aware of the perils which, to complexions over forty, lurk in violent movement.

A fresh paroxysm of admiration came over the brick-red lady.

"It's no wonder, surely, if she has got him under her thumb! They say he is quite silly about her still. He'd be sillier yet if he saw her in that gown!"

She spoke truer than she knew. While the words were on her lips a man, who had let himself into the flat with a latchkey, was standing in a back passage, beside a door barely ajar. Through the narrow gap a section of the brilliantly lighted room was visible. The man—a middle-aged person, wearing an overcoat—stood rigid and unobserved for about a minute at his post, and during that minute his eyes never moved from the figure in black velvet. Had any one of the laughing,

chattering women caught sight of the apparition in the door-chink it is probable that she would have instinctively shrieked, in recognition of the skeleton at the feast; for what could this face of despair be seeking among all these mirthful countenances?

But public attention was otherwise occupied, which was why the man in the overcoat was able to pass unnoticed and unsuspected down the passage and to a room beyond.

"The toy-shop figure!" ejaculated the mother of daughters, as the music once more struck up. "Why, that in itself is an affair of fifty florins!"

"Only one more week of Carnival!" eloquently sighed Baron Kiraly, his black eyes no less eloquently fixed upon his partner's face.

Irma Harding laughed, dandling, meanwhile, upon her knee the penny doll which had fallen to her share in the toy-shop figure. "You're mistaken there, Baron! I mean to have ten years of Carnival yet, whatever the calendar may say. I don't intend to begin strewing the ashes till I'm twenty-eight. Don't you think that will be time enough?"

"I think that will be just twenty years too soon. You pretend to be eighteen now, but I don't believe it. Nobody over eight, at most, could handle a doll as you're doing this one. Tell me the truth, Fräulein Irma, you do play with them still, behind closed doors, don't you?"

“Oh, if that’s the way to tell ages, then you must be over a hundred, at least; for you evidently haven’t a notion what to do with your air-gun.”

“If it was a real gun I’d know in a moment what to do with it.”

“Frighten the old ladies?”

“No, soften the hearts of the young ones—of one young lady at least, by dying at her cruel feet.”

Irma made a little grimace, still dandling her doll.

“Don’t you know that blood-stains are ruin to a white dress?”

An hour later the *cotillon* had reached its final phase. Breathless men, their hands full of exquisite bunches of hyacinths and tea-roses, provided by Mrs. Harding’s munificence—and estimated by the brick-red calculator at a florin apiece—were hurrying across the floor, seeking out the ladies of their choice. This was the moment which irrevocably crowned the queen of the ball. In order to assign the sceptre of the evening to its rightful owner there was nothing to do but count the bouquets, as a red-skin might count his scalps. To-night calculation seemed superfluous. The mound of flowers steadily growing upon the seat upon which Irma Harding found no moment for repose settled the great question at a glance. As daughter of the house it could not well be otherwise—

so urged various young ladies with smaller collections of bouquets and longer breathing spaces between the waltz tunes. Yet even they were bitterly aware that this exceptional position was but one factor in her triumph of the evening, for Irma, while less brilliant, or, at any rate, less conspicuous, was unquestionably more beautiful than her mother. That somewhat overdone colouring, those violent contrasts, were here toned down by just that degree which makes for charm, rather than for mere effect. The shades of the hair were less intense, the rose of the cheeks less vivid, while in the more delicate oval of the face a pair of thickly fringed eyes shone so darkly that only at close quarters did the enchanted spectator discover them to be blue and not black. The dash of blue was the one hint she had taken from her Anglo-Saxon forefathers. In all else, in the delicacy of hands and feet, in the elasticity of form and ease of carriage, she belonged, physically, at least, to her mother's nation.

As now she passed from one arm to the other, Irma was visibly drinking her triumph in full draughts. The music, the lights, the admiration in the men's eyes, no less than the envy in the women's, all were ingredients in her cup of enjoyment. Earlier in the evening there had been a disturbing flavour in the cup, or, rather, there had been one ingredient wanting—the approving gaze of her father. Where was he? Why had he not

kept his promise of admiring her new frock? Always that stupid business! Evidently he worked too hard. He had been looking so worried lately; but, then, he always looked worried. Twice in the course of the evening she had escaped from the ball-room to look into his private room, only to find it empty. Why was he not returned from the bank? Surely he was not taken ill?

"Not a bit of it," was Mrs. Harding's serene reply when, in a fit of anxiety, Irma questioned her. "He'll be answering business letters in his office. So like him to put off things till these impossible hours. Just look after the guests, Irma, and don't trouble about your father. You know he always shirks when he possibly can."

But this had been hours ago. Since then every twinge of anxiety had gone down in the whirlpool of enjoyment; for care for the guests did not necessarily imply neglect of oneself. That the biggest *parti* in the room should, very obviously, be basking in the light of her smiles, could not but heighten intoxication. Not that Baron Kiraly's bold black eyes had done the smallest damage to her heart, or that she had any intention whatever of parting with her liberty in his favour, but simply that he represented for her the first handy object on which to try her woman's powers. Though she might not want him for herself, it was amusing to keep him from the others. That imp of coquetry which slumbers in all but a few exceptional

women's hearts flourished unavoidably in the too congenial surroundings. The same thing was going on on all sides. Having tried her hand at the game, and finding that she could play it at least as well as any other, it was not in human nature to desist. Let the ten years' carnival she promised herself last but two, and the unspoiled girl's heart would have become as light, possibly as damaged a ware, as any that beat beneath these many-colored gowns; for we are but the product of our circumstances (so we are told), and in *Vanity Fair* virtue, pure and simple, is not marketable. If there was anything in Irma Harding beyond gaiety, vivacity and an unlimited capacity for enjoyment, it ran fair risk of missing its way upon the primrose path she had hitherto trod, and which she hoped to continue treading. For how much longer? It was a question which she had never so much as put to herself—least of all thought of putting to herself to-night—to-night, with the ordeal so close already and so cruel! Under the brilliancy of the electric light how should she have discerned the shadow already fallen upon the future?—how, through the strains of the dance-music, have distinguished the footfall of approaching Fate?

"You will be on the ice to-morrow, or rather to-day—will you not, Fräulein Irma?" asked the amorous Baron, as the last, long-drawn note of the fiddlers died out among a whirl of skirts.

"That depends upon how much my feet hurt

me!" And the Queen of the Ball sank down breathless beside her mound of flowers, to rise again within the same minute at her mother's signal and do her part in the speeding of the parting guests.

Half an hour later Mrs. Harding looked round the abandoned room with the satisfied eye of a victorious general upon a vacated battlefield. Like a battlefield, too, the shining *parquet* was strewn with remains, though only of ribbons and faded flowers, which one of the hired waiters—unconscious representative of the inevitable "hyena"—was already beginning to collect.

"I think it has been a success!" the hostess pronounced.

Just then the clock of a neighbouring church struck clear through the frosty air.

"Four o'clock!"

Irma began to stretch her stiff arms above her head; then, at a sudden recollection, dropped them again.

"And papa? What *has* become of him? It's impossible he shouldn't be home yet!"

CHAPTER II

DURING THE BALL

IN a room at the end of the passage, to which the highest tones of the fiddles penetrated, shrill and yet faint, Edward Harding sat with his elbows upon the writing-table and his head between his hands. Beside him there lay a small steel revolver, which, after having locked the door and switched on the electric light, he had taken from the back of a drawer. He had not thought of removing his overcoat. For what he had to do it did not seem worth while; or perhaps the temperature of the room made its thickness welcome, for in the absorption of the evening's festivities the stove in here had very naturally been neglected.

The master of the house in which so brilliant an entertainment was taking place was a man of some fifty-odd years, tall, fleshless, with, in his somewhat narrow shoulders, that slight stoop which always betrays desk-work, fair hair much bleached already and very thin about the temples, and a haggard, over-mobile face, upon which the fine network of creases was ceaselessly playing into new

patterns. The mouth, seldom at rest for more than a few moments at a time, completed the disquieting effect of the face; while upon the whole man there hung that undefinably "hunted" look which proclaims a set of ruined nerves.

Presently he dropped his hands and drew towards him a sheet of paper. With the dance-music in his ears and the revolver lying close to his hand, he began to write precipitately.

"Isabella—my Queen, my one and only Love," —(it was characteristic of the woman he was writing to, that no one, not even her own husband, had ever attempted to curtail the name into either "Isa" or "Bella")—"I have just looked upon you—for the last time. Never have you appeared to me more beautiful. It is difficult to die with my eyes still full of that image, and yet it is more impossible to live. This is my confession. When you have read it you will understand—but will you forgive? Isabella, I am too weak to face ruin and disgrace, and that is what awaits us all—through my fault. It can only be my fault for not having succeeded. In the race of Life there is no mercy for those who fall by the way, and I have fallen.

"The details cannot matter. You never had patience for business affairs, my darling, so I will not weary you. But this you must know: seeing myself at the end of our own resources, and with the many bills pressing, I allowed myself to be

tempted into using some of the sums deposited in my hands. In the hope of retrieving our fortunes I speculated with them—and there was reason for this hope. God knows I acted in the firm belief of harming no one. But Fate decided against me. The money is gone—much more than the original sum; discovery is unavoidable before another twelve hours are past; and discovery means not ruin alone, but an ignominious exposure—and prison. That is why the revolver is now lying ready. Evidently I have no vocation for a criminal. The mere shame of the arrest would have killed me. It is easier to die by my own hand. After the hard fight of the last years—of the last months, in especial—that little steel instrument blinks at me almost like the eye of a friend. It promises rest, if nothing else.

“But, my love, my beautiful mistress, do not suppose that because I talk of a hard fight there is a single thought of reproach in my mind. It is myself only that I blame. If we have lived beyond our means it was only because I was too cowardly to admit to you our true position. Nor could I have borne to see my Queen in mean surroundings—not seated upon the throne which is her due. I cannot bear to see it now. I prefer to go. If I was not able to build up that throne I had no right to claim you. I am but paying the penalty of my presumption.

“But you? My one consolation in this final mo-

ment is the thought of your own small fortune. That will at least stave off misery; and the girls, of course, will have to work. My last prayer is that they prove a comfort to you. Dare I add to it the hope of forgiveness? When I think of what your life might have been without me, I can only ask you to think of me as leniently as you can. Do not let my end blacken your life. They are not black thoughts that fill my mind as I look into the past—they are golden thoughts. The happiness I enjoyed in gaining you is more than comes to the lives of most men. Even on the edge of the grave I still feel the glow of it upon me, and from the bottom of my heart I thank you for those moments of perfect bliss!

“Your unhappy and devoted

“EDWARD.”

With the last word he threw down the pen and once more took his head between his hands. Beneath the electric light the steel handle of the revolver flashed aggressively. There was nothing remaining to do now but to grasp it; but with the accomplishment of his confession the extreme need of hurry was past. A respite of a few minutes could alter nothing—just time enough for another mental look at that figure seen in the doorway, to take with him as a last draught of life into the shadows of death. Had he ever seen her more beautiful? Yes—once, perhaps, on that evening,

twenty years ago, when, in a box of the Vienna Opera House, she had first dawned upon his sight. That time it had been a white and spotless vision—the roses in her cheeks the only flowers that decked her; her brilliant eyes, her girlish grace, the only jewels that adorned. From the moment that his gaze had fallen upon her the events upon the stage no longer enjoyed his attention. Steadily, throughout the three acts, his eyes returned to that box in the first row, which for him contained all the beauty of the packed house. The *coup de foudre* in its most literal sense, and enduring, as lightning flashes are not in the habit of enduring. Looking back at it across the gulf of twenty years, and with those penetrating fiddle notes pricking into his consciousness like so many fine needles, he could still feel the thrill of it in his veins.

From that moment onward, and even before an introduction was obtained, he had been her slave. It was on that evening that he had discovered the real meaning of life.

There followed six months filled by the fluctuations of hope and despair. Isabella Feldegg, a recognised beauty of the circle in which she moved, was surrounded by suitors, among whom he could not, either socially or financially, claim the first place. True, his position in the old-established Anglo-Saxon Bank, which for half a century had been doing good business on Austrian soil, was even then a good one, his future more than as-

sured. But among his rivals were men with hundreds of acres to a titled name. When his homage was finally accepted he could scarcely believe his good fortune. Isabella's friends did not understand it at all; and a very few months after the marriage Isabella herself did not understand it, either. Over-susceptibility of the heart was by no means her weak point; but she had Hungarian blood in her veins, and Hungarian fancies are inflammable. The tall, fair-haired Englishman, with the regular features and the blue eyes—so different from her swarthy countrymen—had worked by contrast upon her imagination. His evident ardour had ended by carrying her off her feet—for a time. That time had sufficed to fill his cup of bliss—and to seal his fate; for Edward Harding was one of those men who are born to live neither for riches, fame, nor adventure, nor even for Woman in the abstract, but only for one individual woman. Sometimes men of this especial category fail to meet the exact woman who holds the key of their souls. In that case they walk through life desolately, even in the midst of what looks like success, vaguely aware of not being upon the right road. You can run against them any day wandering up and down both the highways and byways of life. Sometimes again they meet her, and then they become either the most fortunate or the most unfortunate of men, according to the quality of their subjugator. But even in failure and betrayal and wretchedness they

will die with the paradoxically satisfying feeling which comes with the consciousness of a destiny fulfilled.

All Harding's married life had been one long effort to procure to the expensive picture he had purchased the frame it deserved. And it was a very expensive picture, as he speedily discovered. Grown up as the spoilt child of her own family, Isabella had inevitably become the spoilt child of her especial circle. It was unthinkable that her position should in any way deteriorate. To slave for her pleasure had been the only pleasure Harding had ever known since she had deigned to cross his threshold.

That she should accept it all serenely, as no more than her due, could not chill him. Rather it fitted all the more perfectly into his conception of his "sovereign lady." Thus, with this gracious condescension, should a queen take the offerings laid at her feet. And yet, in all but this, the man was no fool. Outside the field of his love he was able to judge and to observe, within it only able to worship. For the value of any bonds on the money market he had a keen eye—none for that of a woman. Even when she began to talk, half-playfully at first, of the *partis* she might have made had she chosen—and this she began to do soon after the honeymoon—his blindness was not cured. In time the remarks became less playful and more fretful, without enlightening him further. The

rapture of finding himself the favoured one among so many had bred in him an ineradicable gratitude which not even she herself could destroy. Was it not enough that she should be faithful to him? Oh, truly, he was blest beyond his deserts.

Necessarily his attitude towards his daughters had suffered from the absorption of his dominating feeling. Though he had in him all the makings of a tender and affectionate father, they had been cramped by the passion of his life. You cannot do two things intensely; one of them is bound to suffer. The most selfless and disinterested of men, he had yet arrived at systematically disregarding the true interests of his children. For selflessness of this particular category often works like egoism towards all but the beloved object. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that it actually becomes a variety of egoism, since the object has grown into a second self.

Of late the material strain had been intensifying. Even the directorship of the "Anglo-Saxon," attained some years ago, no longer sufficed to fill the measure of his goddess's requirements. With the growing up of two daughters it was but natural that household wants should increase. Irma had to be brought out, and she should be brought out in a fashion worthy of such a mother. No petty jealousy of her daughter's younger charms disturbed Mrs. Harding. To be a leader in her circle, to shine as a hostess, to see the invitations

to her house scrambled for—such had been her dream, and in the attainment of it her own beauty was only one ingredient in many, since personal vanity did not happen to be her foible. She rejoiced quite frankly in Irma's good looks, as offering not only a better pretext for social display, but likewise as promising good things for the future. It was as though that social ambition which, in a moment of impulse, had been sacrificed to a passing sentiment, had drawn from the very defeat a more furious determination to assert its vitality.

This Carnival had been the last straw in Harding's financial burden. To say "No" to Isabella when she asked him for money had seemed to him so impossible that even a breach of trust had become possible. Thus only was it explicable that a man compounded of honesty and of the most delicate sense of honour had become a defrauder and virtually a thief, with no other escape from shame than that which lay in the small, round ball of the loaded revolver.

And now he took it up with a hand that was almost steady, for to be a moral coward is not necessarily to be a physical one. The dance-music had ceased. There had been sounds of closing doors and departing carriages. Four strokes of the clock; clearly the moment had come.

He shut his eyes for one instant—gathering his resolve into one supreme effort—then opened them.

again, bending his head sideways towards the door. A step in the passage, and now a quick knock.

For one moment he hesitated, with his finger on the trigger—was not his reckoning with life closed already?—then softly put down the weapon and, hastily throwing a sheet of paper over it, went to the door. It had come over him that perhaps, after all, Fate was about to grant him one more sight of the beloved face. It was a thought he could not resist. For that one moment he would be able to command his features.

Going to the door, he unlocked it, and, through the narrow chink, looked out with burning eyes. Immediately his restless under-lip fell.

“You, Irma?” was all he said, in a tone of flat disappointment.

CHAPTER III

AFTER THE BALL

HE had kept hold of the door-handle, not meaning to admit even Isabella; but his reckoning had been made without the keenness of Irma's young eyes or the impetuosity of her movements. Neither did he know what was written on his face. At the mere sight of it shapeless fear laid a cold hand upon the pulsing gaiety of a minute back. Pushing her way in, Irma faced him closely.

"Papa—what is it? You are ill? I was sure you must be. Why did you not send for me? What is it, papa?"

"Why should it be anything? I am busy, Irma. Run away to your bed, child!"

The miserable travesty of a smile could not deceive her.

"Yes, it is something. If you are not ill, then it is something else. Why have you still got your overcoat on? Have you only just come in? Is it anything about the bank?"

Her eyes went instinctively to the writing-table, and fell there upon the closely written sheet, which

in his perturbation he had even forgotten to fold together. Swiftly she moved in that direction, but he, guessing her intention, was before her. She saw another sheet pushed aside, caught the flash of electric light upon polished steel, and, even before she had recognised the shape of the thing in her father's hand, had sprung upon him.

There was the struggle of a moment between the girl in the white ball-dress and the man in the overcoat. One shot went off, lodging a harmless ball in the midst of a bookcase, and immediately afterwards Irma hurled the revolver into a corner of the room, and, falling on to a chair, burst into passionate though uncomprehending tears. She knew that she had saved her father's life, but she did not yet understand why she had had to do so.

Harding, too, had sat down, silent and with shaking hands, making no effort to recover the still loaded weapon. The crisis of excitement which had made it seem possible to kill himself in his daughter's presence was outstepped—a dull reaction close at hand.

Then, before a word had been spoken, there was a step and a rustle of skirts, and Mrs. Harding, with the startled face of Gabrielle peering over her shoulder, stood in the doorway.

“What is the matter? What has happened? Was not that a shot?”

At the sight the unhappy man once more covered his face. So this humiliation—the only one

he really feared—was not to be spared him, after all!

Yet, after a brief pause, he unexpectedly straightened himself and rose. Going to the writing-table, he took from it the written sheet and handed it to his wife.

“I wrote that for you, Isabella,” he said, with a final renunciation of all hope—even of the hope of mercy—which was not without its miserable dignity. “Forgive me for still being alive when you read it. This at least is not my fault. Irma came in just one minute too soon.”

Mrs. Harding, who, in view of the whispering servants at the end of the passage, had had the presence of mind to shut the door, took the sheet with a stare that was more of astonishment than of alarm. Once or twice in the dead pause that followed the paper rustled in her hand, and that, beside the roll of a carriage in the street, was all the sound—for Irma’s nervous sobs had subsided. Harding had turned away, unable to bear the sight of the change which he knew must come over his wife’s face.

It came before she had read many lines—the sudden widening of the eyes, the rush of dark blood to the face. For a moment after she had reached the last word she stood there fixed as stiffly as the bodies of those struck by lightning are said occasionally to remain immobilised into the most unlikely attitudes.

When she spoke at last it was with a curious thickness of tone, into which the excitement had not yet fairly struggled.

He began by only bowing his head.

“Is this true?”

Already the tone was rising and sharpening.

“It is true—unhappily.”

“We are ruined, and you are—a defrauder?”

“Isabella,” he said, with bleached lips, “I have written the words; will you make me speak them as well?”

“Answer me!” she commanded, her eyes, that were beginning to blaze, fastened hard upon his face.

“We are ruined, and I have broken my trust.” He said the words dully, mechanically, though they represented to him the very dregs in the cup of expiation.

For another moment she stood almost immovable, her mind struggling to take in the enormity of the thing. During that moment the blaze in her eyes turned slowly to a glare.

“Ruined—a defrauder—the end of all—ah, my God!”

Between the short phrases the yellow roses on her breast heaved tumultuously. “So this is the end of all!”

And then, regardless of the two startled girls' faces, the disappointment of a lifetime broke bounds. Beneath her superb exterior, behind her

majestic presence, there had always lived one of those common souls who seek their first relief in words and in gestures. The very vitality of her personality made the words loud and the gestures emphatic; for she had in her the blood of a race in which the elementary passions never lie very far below the surface. If at this moment she did not sink to the level of the typical virago it was only because the habits of education cannot be unlearned at so short a notice. Within the space of a few minutes the grievances of twenty years were unpacked; all that chronic grudge harboured against the man who, by crossing her path in her heedless youth, had robbed her of a more brilliant destiny, found utterance. So long as he was able to satisfy her wants he might be forgiven; but from the moment that he failed in the eyes of the world he was necessarily lost in hers. The sight of his despair, the depth of his self-humiliation, could not touch her, for the simple reason that she was not clearly aware of them. The fall from an hour ago—from five minutes ago—had been too rude to have let her as yet recover more than the consciousness of her own wrong. Had she seen him with the revolver in his hand, as Irma had seen him, it is probable that the sight would have appealed to her nerves, at least, if not to her sensibility. But not having seen him so, she could see nothing but this personal wrong, which, in truth, was great, since not even love can condone cow-

ardice. Nor was any tenderness for the culprit there to disarm her. What she had ever felt for the man before her had been no more than a flame upon a stone; and the flame, once burnt out, had left the stone unsoftened—at most, blackened by the ashes of the dead fire.

While she spoke he listened, pale as death, steadying himself by the back of a chair, yet unable to lower his eyes. In spite of all the shame of this bitterest of all moments, it was impossible to renounce the sight of his accuser. The passionate admiration carried the day over the crushing humiliation. So long as it was still granted him he would rest his eyes upon her. If her indignant glances killed him, so much the better; it was the death, of all others, he would have chosen. Even quivering beneath her reproaches, he could not but exult in her strength. Another woman would have broken down into hysterical tears, while she stood upright, pouring out her displeasure, as it became a queen to do. That it was a queenship that savoured more of the footlights than of the Court was a fact lost upon his lover's eyes. No thought of self-defence so much as visited him.

"I had no right to marry you, Isabella; I know it," he murmured sadly when, exhausted by her own passion, she paused at last. Upon which she said the cruel word:

"No—you had no right."

The girls, shocked and bewildered listeners, as

completely ignored as though they had been empty air, were only just beginning to read the true significance of the scene. Gabrielle, with pale blue eyes widely opened, had instinctively retreated as though before some physical danger, and stood flattened against the wall, looking in the first long dress she had ever worn—a dress which still mercifully covered her immature neck and arms—like a child that is too frightened even to cry. Irma was not crying, either, now. From the floor she had picked up the paper which from her mother's fingers had fluttered to her feet, and had bent her head over it.

And then there happened one of those things which do not happen more than once in a lifetime—if they happen at all. What passed within her soul during the few minutes which she took to read her father's confession does not come to every life. The anguish, the unarmed surrender of the words, seemed to reach down a hand, deep, deep down into an unsuspected abyss, to stir up things which she had never known to be there, to take hold of things which until then had not seemed to exist. It was one of those rapid and violent processes which, under the pressure of circumstances, sometimes, though rarely, effect what it takes years of normal life to reach, the sharp, painful birth of a woman's soul within what has hitherto been the individuality of a child. What she read here, written by a hand which had visibly jerked, was a revelation so sud-

den and uncompromising as to be almost blinding. It all depended upon whether the eyes that beheld it were strong enough or not to bear the merciless glare.

With the paper in her lap and her mother's reproaches ringing in her ears, she sat trying to review the case. She had always felt more leaning towards her father than her mother, perhaps because she had understood that her mother did not need her, while her father possibly might. Behind Mrs. Harding's regal indulgence she had divined a want of tenderness; but hitherto life had been too smooth and easy to let the lack of the true maternal accent become unpleasantly conspicuous. It was under the stress of this moment only that the latent impression became acute. As, with new eyes, she looked at the figure in black velvet, whose lips still moved and whose voice still rang out, she began to understand. And from there she looked towards her father—with new eyes, too, into which hot tears again rose suddenly. At thought of what the last minutes, the last hours—those hours spent by herself in laughing gaiety—must have been to him, an immense pity gripped her heart. Higher within her and higher were the two tides rising: the tide of pity on one side, of indignation on the other. And now, at another word of her mother's, they overflowed.

“My friends did what they could to prevent my marriage,” Mrs. Harding was bitterly saying, “and

yet they did not know that I was to end as the wife of a criminal."

It was then that Irma sprang to her feet.

"Not a criminal! No, it is not he who is guilty!"

With shining eyes she faced her mother.

Mrs. Harding, from sheer surprise, was silent for a moment. To do her justice, she had completely forgotten her daughter's presence. Then she spoke haughtily:

"You understand nothing of this, Irma. By the letter of the law defraudation is a crime. We are all lost."

"Oh, yes, I understand—far better than I ever did before, and I don't care anything about the letter of the law. It is not papa who is the real culprit; it is we who are guilty; we have been amusing ourselves while he has been toiling and—plotting to get the money we needed."

"Irma!"

The reproachful word came not from her mother, but from her father. It was with a sort of shocked surprise and a deprecating glance towards his wife that he greeted the advent of this unlooked-for defender.

Slowly Mrs. Harding measured her daughter from head to foot. *Was* this, indeed, her daughter?

"Why use the plural?" she asked, with an icy coldness succeeding to the heat of a minute ago.

“Why not tell me to my face that it is all my fault?”

Irma's lips moved impulsively and then tightly closed. But though the words hovering there were not spoken, Mrs. Harding could read them plainly in her daughter's unabashed eyes, and actually paled a little. To see a judge risen in her child was the last thing she had expected.

“Ah—so this is the gratitude I have earned for bringing you up as I have done, for giving you every social advantage in my power, for trying to secure your future——”

“Don't listen to her, Isabella; she doesn't know what she is saying,” pleaded the poor bankrupt. But Mrs. Harding did not even look at him; all her attention was now for this most astonishing daughter of hers.

“You had no right to bring us up as you have done, unless we had the money,” said Irma, unshaken. In the virulence of her new-born indignation there was no room even for just considerations.

“And could I know that we had not the money, when your father persistently hid from me the true state of our fortunes?”

The consciousness that the question sounded like an attempt at self-justification made the tone all the haughtier.

“He did that only because he was too fond of you. You made it too difficult to him to speak the truth.”

Once more the blood surged to Mrs. Harding's face. For a short space the ample figure in black velvet and the slight figure in white tulle, whose only ornament was the bunch of crushed and faded violets upon the breast, stood opposite to each other, eye in eye.

"You are a fool, Irma," broke out Mrs. Harding, after that pause. "What makes you interfere? Has your father thanked you for coming in when you did?"

"Perhaps you, too, think that I came in too soon?" asked Irma, with quivering nostrils.

"Irma!"

Mrs. Harding's eyes shifted a little as she said the indignant word. Was it perhaps because of the thought which might possibly be written in their depths—the almost unavoidable thought that a revolver-shot is often a wonderfully simple solution of impossible-looking situations?

Perhaps Irma had, after all, caught a glimmer of that thought, for some impulse made her just then move to her father's side, her hand upon his arm.

"Papa! papa! Ah, I am so glad I came in! I want you to live. You belong to *me* now."

Across the room Mrs. Harding viewed them from under artificially lowered eyelids.

"And what do you mean to do with him, now that he belongs to you?"

"I mean to save him in spite of himself."

"By going to prison with him?"

"No—I shall keep him out of prison. Tell me, papa," and she looked up into his face, her brows knit in the effort of thought, "is there no chance of replacing the money which you have—used?"

He shook his head vaguely.

"Is the sum so large? But perhaps part of it—there is mamma's fortune—would not that help at least to——"

Mrs. Harding laughed harshly.

"Really, Irma, you're a greater fool than I took you for, as though it were not bad enough to have nothing but dry bread remaining to put into my mouth, but you seem to expect me to throw even that away! The one mercy in the whole affair is that my money cannot be touched."

"No, no," said Harding, hastily, "not that—it is not to be thought of. Besides, it would only be a drop in the bucket."

As Irma looked from one to the other the revealing light burned brighter and brighter.

"Then, of course, there is nothing for it but flight. We can hide. People often do. The world is big. We shall go away somewhere where they cannot find us."

"*We?*" repeated Mrs. Harding, sharply.

"Yes, of course, *we*. Do you think I would let him go alone? I know how that would end."

"This is moonshine madness. You cannot mean to pass your life in dodging the police?"

"I mean to pass it where papa is."

Mrs. Harding, speechless, contemplated her daughter. Perhaps because she had never before seen her in the grip of a deep emotion she had never quite realised how beautiful she was. It was a recognition which added greatly to the exasperation of the moment.

"You?" she broke out in a new fit of vehemence, "*you* to live out your life in a hole! But you don't understand what you are doing, child! Don't you see that by devoting yourself to this—this unfortunate man you are identifying yourself with his cause? Let him fly, by all means, but let him fly alone. Your accompanying him would be but a useless sacrifice. He cannot be so great an egoist as to demand it. It is your whole future, every chance you have in life, that is in play—and those chances are small enough now, Heaven knows! As the daughter of your father it is not likely you will ever find a husband; but by his side and espousing his cause you are certain not to. Think, Irma, think before you commit this folly!"

Her rich voice vibrated with sincerity, and with what, for the moment, was true feeling. That which Irma proposed to surrender was in her eyes too precious not to arouse the mother in her.

For all answer Irma shook her head, and, drawing a little closer to her father, clasped her second hand around his arm. He had not spoken for several minutes, while his dazed eyes went from one

face to the other. They came back to Irma now, with an astonished gratitude beginning to dawn in their blankness. After the first shock, almost of displeasure, he was coming to realise that, after all, he did not stand quite alone, quite abandoned. As Irma felt his fingers stealing round hers with a furtive, clinging movement she was aware of a new glow, the strongest and purest emotion that had yet come to her life. It made her feel able for anything.

"Choose!" said Mrs. Harding, in a thinly veiled fury. "Choose between him and me!"

"I have chosen already. I will never let him go alone. It would be the same as putting back the revolver into his hand."

Mrs. Harding gazed for a moment longer at her daughter, and during that moment all those hopes which had been built upon the girl's beauty seemed to pass before her mind's eye, as in a mocking procession. What wonder that the pallor of rage should slowly overspread her face?

"Then you had better be quick about it," she said at last, with a final touch of brutality, "or else the police may be upon us."

"Yes—we shall be quick."

Irma laid her hand over her eyes, as though to clear her thoughts.

The next question was a sneer.

"And where do you mean to hide, if I may ask?"

"I don't know. In America, I suppose. Papa"

—and dropping her hand from his arm, she took hold of both his, pressing them hard together—“only pack your things, and leave the rest to me. You have a new time-table, have you not?”

She spoke in a quick tone of business-like decision, come to her on the spur of the moment, and already she was by the writing-table with the time-table in her hand.

“It had better be Hamburg,” she pronounced after a minute, during which the other members of the family—not excluding her mother—had stood looking at her in helpless silence. “Once there we can decide where to sail for. There is an express for Berlin at 7:20—it is not yet five now. Can you be ready to start by half-past six, papa? I shall change my dress, and Gabrielle will help me to pack. But”—her forehead went into a perplexed fold—“we need money, of course. Have you any at all?”

Harding signified mechanically that he had.

“That is well. And I will take what jewels I have. They may be useful. Now lose no time, papa, and I will lose none.”

She turned to the door; then, remembering something, turned back and walked deliberately to the corner of the room into which she had flung the revolver. Picking it up, she went straight past her mother with the weapon in her hand.

When, a few minutes later, with a dressing-gown wrapped around her, and her white ball-dress mak-

ing an untidy heap upon the bed, she was busy between an open trunk and many open drawers, Gabrielle's scared face appeared in the doorway.

"May I come in, Irma?"

"Of course you may. I've been waiting for you. There, just take out all the stockings in this drawer, and see how many you can pack into the corners of this tray."

Gabrielle slipped in; but it was not to look out the stockings—it was to throw her thin arms around her sister's neck and burst into tears.

"Ah, Irma, I can't believe it! It is all too horrible! And are you really, really going away?"

Irma kissed her, a trifle impatiently, as she disengaged herself from the clinging embrace.

"Yes, I am going; I have to go. But this does not make it easier for me, Gabrielle."

"But after you have taken him away could you not come back again?"

"Impossible! He needs me. He has nobody else; not even you, it seems. Do you, too, think him the only guilty person?"

Before the defiant flash of the eyes with which her sister turned upon her Gabrielle visibly shrunk; for she, too, had by this time grasped the chief facts of the family *débauche*, and, not being absolutely a fool, had drawn some conclusions. Her sharp, unfinished face, which was not without a sort of insignificant prettiness, became visibly disturbed.

"No; poor papa! I do not want to blame him. It must have been very difficult for him."

"And it was mamma who made it difficult. You must see that now, as well as I," said Irma, feverishly collecting handkerchiefs the while.

"I—I suppose so."

"Then why did you not stand by him now, in the study? Why did you not say one word in his defence?"

Gabrielle's washed-out-looking eyes shifted uneasily about the room.

"It wouldn't have done any good to speak. It would only have made mamma angrier. *You* made her angry enough already."

"You can't mean to say that you blame me for it?"

Irma's voice came up from the depths of the trunk before which she was now kneeling with laden hands.

"N-no. But I wonder at you. I find it so difficult to believe that *you* are going to have to run away from the police, and live, heaven knows how! Tell me, Irma"—and the angular child's face became as sharp in expression as it was in lines, as some fibre of business instinct (inherited, doubtless, from the English side of the family) pierced to the surface—"how *are* you going to live? I don't believe you have thought of that at all."

"Ah! I shall give lessons, I suppose. After all, I've learned a lot of things; *that* part of the money

spent is not lost, anyway; and I know several languages. When one is young and strong, and not a fool, there *must* be ways of gaining money."

"I wonder if I shall have to give lessons, too?" Gabrielle sighed.

She had sat down upon the bed beside the cast-off ball-dress, and, by way of assisting her sister, was reflectively turning over a boxful of ribbons which lay there. The business instinct does not necessarily always produce true helpfulness.

"Probably not. You will have the benefit of mamma's private fortune, you know."

She had not meant to be scornful; yet it is difficult not to speak scornfully when you feel so.

Gabrielle's eyes, barely dry, filled again with tears of mortification.

"How unkindly you say that, Irma! And when we are not going to see each other again for Heaven knows how long! Perhaps never again! I can't help it if I have not got as much courage as you, though I'm sure I like papa quite as much."

Irma got quickly to her feet.

"Gabrielle, I did not mean it! I'm just talking at random. It's all so bewildering. Of course you must stay with mamma and take care of her, and I will take care of papa. It is the only possible arrangement. But, ah, yes! it *is* hard upon us."

And, in the midst of the open boxes and the suggestive disorder of the room, the two sisters ran, weeping, into each other's arms.

PART II

CHAPTER I

UPON THE SHELF

“CERTAINLY, my dear, certainly—just as you like!” beamed Sir Christian Denholm over the top of his claret-glass.

It was his answer to his eldest daughter, who had just asked him to take her to the Whistler exhibition next day. It was his usual answer to most things asked of him—by women, at any rate, whether old or young—but especially young.

Sir Christian was a tall and highly ornamental old gentleman, with a fine aquiline nose, brilliant grey eyes, and snow-white hair of that fly-away sort which unavoidably suggests dandelion fluff. The elegance of his appearance, the perfection of his manners and the suavity of his disposition made him a marked man in every drawing-room. Urbanity and suavity are useful qualities, especially to diplomats, and it was in the diplomatic field that Sir Christian had gathered whatever laurels still decked his exceedingly fine brow. And yet even of

good things one can have too much. People who knew Sir Christian a little found it difficult to understand how he had made his career, since a diplomat must, after all, be able to say No, as well as Yes, and be the No wrapped in ever so becoming a disguise. People who knew him better thought they understood, and hinted, smiling, that Sir Christian had always been "a woman's man," and that there are few political pies in Europe into which a fair finger is not occasionally inserted. The *salons* of embassies not infrequently represent the field upon which, not the great battles, indeed, but the preliminary and supplementary skirmishes of diplomatic warfare, are waged, and upon this delicate ground a "woman's man" has occasionally got advantages not enjoyed by even the geniuses of the profession.

Yet the disadvantages were there, too. There were people who maintained that if asked by a sufficiently handsome woman to oblige her by handing over some such trifle as an English colony to the nation represented by her—the beauty's—husband, Sir Christian might be backed to answer: "Certainly, my dear, certainly—just as you like." In fact, it was asserted that his abrupt and somewhat premature withdrawal from the scene had been caused by some such incident. These same spiteful people quoted a story, dating from the days of Sir Christian's attachéship, according to which a certain award of honour, presented to him by a sovereign,

had been recognised by the side of some star of the ballet masquerading in male attire at an opera *redoute*. When asked for the loan of the quasi-sacred article, how else could he answer—the “star’s” eyes being very bright, mind you—than by his favourite formula? Indeed, it seemed not unlikely that, if awakened suddenly in the night, he would, with eyes still closed, begin by murmuring: “Certainly, my dear,” etc.

But this (the sword-of-honour incident) was ancient history, belonging to the time before there had been any Lady Denholm to consider.

There was no Lady Denholm to consider now. She had succumbed to malarial fever during the term of her husband’s Roman appointment. To make up, there were two Miss Denholms, both small and fair-haired, with delicate, high-bred features of a slightly shiny whiteness which suggested porcelain, and almost of the grain of porcelain, too. With the aid of that hair and of that skin it was not hard to reconstruct the dead mother. The comparison to Dresden china figures was equally obvious; it “jumped to the eyes,” in the French turn of phrase. Both were training severely for diplomats’ wives. It was the only thing worth living for, as matters struck them. And what wonder, either, seeing that the air of embassies was the only air which their mental lungs had learned to assimilate? Bred upon alliances and suckled upon *ententes cordiales*, their youthful years had, even in the nur-

sery, been filled with the names of statesmen of all nations, their youthful heads been patted by the most various sovereigns; stray threads of diplomatic gossip had been worked into the very samplers of the schoolroom; while the transformation of scene brought by each new appointment gave to life a touch of exalted vagrancy, full of pleasant surprises. The shelving of Sir Christian, a year back, had been a bitter moment. It was quite a comfortable shelf, as, indeed, the look of the dining-room attested; but it seemed painfully flat after the stimulating ups and downs of cosmopolitan existence. They loved England, of course, since it was their country; but they discovered that they had loved it better when seen from a French or Russian perspective. There they *were* England, while here no more than undistinguishable British atoms. Not even the London season could offer compensation for so much loss of personal importance. What excitement could a ballroom hold compared to the commotion of a wired *chiffre* arriving in the dead of night? And how could Hurlingham vie with the trepidation of an audience in times of crisis, when war or peace might hang upon the turn of a phrase to be uttered within the next hour by the same lips that have just said "Good morning" to you?

No, there was nothing for it but to try and re-enter the promised land, by the matrimonial gate, of course. Neither Chrissie nor Cissy doubted that their time would come. Meanwhile they worked

hard—at languages, principally, as well as at an intelligent study of politics. Also at the acquisition of those social virtues—likely to be useful to the hostess of such a *salon* as both dreamt of one day presiding over; though, could they have seen themselves “as others see us,” they would probably have recognised that a Watteau shepherdess attire would have been their most becoming costume, and to lead about a white lamb—by a blue ribbon, of course—their true vocation in life. Probably they would have looked best upon a mantelpiece. A pair of them, too! Nothing could have been more complete. Yet, not seeing themselves—maybe, mercifully—they dreamed on their dream, unhampered by doubts.

The person who sat at the foot of the table bore a certain responsibility for these dreams. This was old Lady Aurelia Mulhampton, the Dresden shepherdesses’ grandmother, privately known to her friends as “Lady Mummy.” She had a long, narrow face, which, by candle-light, showed the tint of a lemon, and which daylight deepened very nearly to that of an orange; a mouth that had grown almost invisible owing to the disappearance of its natural supports, and a pair of wickedly bright, little, black eyes—the only things about her not visibly octogenarian. Whatever hair she might still happen to possess was entirely covered by a costly lace cap, from under which not so much as a wisp escaped to humanise the parchment countenance.

Since her daughter's death she had presided over Sir Christian's household, far more successfully than poor Edith herself had ever done. The widow of a distinguished diplomat, and having for many years had the satisfaction of seeing whole *corps diplomatiques* tremble before the utterances of her caustic tongue, she had successfully married her only child to one of the profession, and hoped in time to see her grandchildren treading the path which was rapidly becoming hereditary. Diplomacy, which, after all, consists in getting the better of other people, suited her down to the ground. But though she had chosen her son-in-law herself, she was not particularly proud of him. Privately, despite his superficial brilliancy, she considered him more or less of a fraud. To ruffle his tiresome serenity by introducing some thorny question was her especial delight. She had a whole collection of these little bones of contention which it was her habit to produce whenever her nervous system demanded the stimulus of a dispute.

Since his retirement the bones of contention were more frequently produced. It was, indeed, hard to forgive him for his virtual disgrace. Despite her eighty-one summers (or, perhaps, winters), Lady Aurelia was the member of the family who fretted most visibly upon the shelf.

Yes, Christian had ended disappointingly. But, luckily, there was Vincent. Upon Vincent Lady Aurelia placed even greater hopes than upon his

father. The future, which, with his abilities, his ambition—and, of course, the “right sort of marriage” to help—Vincent was bound to attain, formed the brightest star upon the horizon of the fallen family. The discussion of the possibilities open to him was the staple subject of conversation which neither wearied nor grew stale, and to which—Whistler being disposed of—the talk at the dinner-table had returned, as surely as does the river to its course.

“I wonder if there is any news to-night? Vincent is so late,” said Cissy, casting a glance at a folded napkin before an unoccupied chair.

“He expected to get away from the Foreign Office by seven, but evidently he has been kept. That may mean anything, you know. Perhaps another battle in Manchuria?”

Chrissie’s eyes sparkled at the prospect.

“A battle in Manchuria wouldn’t be nearly as interesting as a vacancy in a secretaryship,” mumbled Lady Aurelia over her minced chicken—the only preparation of food which her unarmed jaws could grapple with. “Lord Cleghorn as good as promised him the next one. But it all depends under whom. A secretary has no chance under a chief who is a fool, and we’ve got several fools representing us just now.”

“It will be hard not seeing him and not getting the news first-hand,” said Chrissie, wistfully. “But, of course, he cannot miss a good opportunity. If it

was New York, now, that would be nice; for he might pick up an American heiress, and he needs an heiress, doesn't he, granny?"

"He needs a woman who knows how to sit at the head of a dinner-table, and who won't blush up to her ears when an Emperor or a Sultan or a great Mogul speaks to her."

"Americans never blush, granny."

"Shows their sense. He's welcome to his Yankee, so long as she doesn't smell too hard of salt pork or tallow candles. Or he may go in for connexions instead of money, if he has a fancy that way. A handle to a name comes in quite as usefully as a gold-bag, at times. I'd give him plenty of tether. The only thing he mustn't do is to marry a country bumpkin. In that event I get straight into my grave. A woman who doesn't know how to put on her clothes and who babbles of green fields would blast the career of a Talleyrand. And now I beg that Cissy should cease making bread pellets, as they are beginning to get upon my nerves."

"Green fields," be it here parenthetically observed, stood very low in her ladyship's graces. It was the air of capitals that was the breath of her nostrils, inhaled for so long as to produce a distinct antipathy to things rural. "Live in the country and keep a trap! You can't get much lower than that!" she had been heard to comment upon the life-programme of a young couple of her acquaintance.

"They're pretty, though, sometimes, the country

bumpkins," remarked Sir Christian, smiling as though at an agreeable recollection. "Braxton had a wife of that sort, I remember. It's true that she didn't know how to put on her clothes, but she had the most wonderful complexion."

"And it's true, too, that he left the service a long way before the top of the ladder, isn't it?"

"Not because of that, dear lady, I think."

"Oh, no, to be sure. He made a fool of himself in some other way, didn't he? At the Valaville Conference, if I remember right. I wonder if it was by letting out that there was nothing remaining to confer about, since each delegate arrived with his signature in his pocket?"

The Valaville Conference was one of the favourite bones of contention—maintained by the dowager to have been a hollow farce, planned for the purpose of affording some extra good dinners to certain *bon vivant* statesmen; for "Lady Mummy's" tongue could not always keep off even *the* profession—an aspersion upon the honour of his sex as well as of his calling which even Sir Christian's suavity could not tamely swallow.

Upon his bland face the effect of the remark was as visible as that of a stone flung into smooth water.

"But there was plenty to confer about, I assure you," he protested with pained dignity. "Nothing but the preliminaries had been settled. Europe was expecting it. To call it off at the last moment would

never have done. It is always impolitic to disappoint public expectation."

"I expect it would have been more impolitic to disappoint the appetites of a few of your colleagues, and after the *chef* had been engaged, too! Call it the *vol-au-vent* conference, and be done with it! Hi, hi!"

"I assure you, my dear Lady Aurelia——"

"As if I didn't know what the assurances of your profession are worth!" chuckled her ladyship, with that detachment from the trammels of that same profession which she was able to exercise whenever it served ends. Nothing, in fact, amused her so much as to throw stones—or, at any rate, pebbles—at the idol of her heart.

"But what has the Valaville Conference to do with Vincent's future wife?" interposed Chrissie, seizing upon what seemed to be a good opportunity of practising the gentle and strictly diplomatic art of arbitration.

"Leave me alone with Vincent's future wife! Don't oppress me with her! Don't choke me with her! Give me room to fall!" ejaculated Lady Aurelia, waving a pair of skin-and-bone hands above her empty plate, as though to ward off a thronging crowd. Both the ejaculation and the gesture were familiar to her intimates, though, as a matter of fact, it was Lady Aurelia who more frequently crowded upon her fellow-creatures than they upon her. Neither—the space asked for being

granted—had she ever betrayed the least intention of falling.

“I’m dead sick of Vincent and his future wife. And now I beg that Christian should pass the Madeira with the least possible delay.”

The Madeira had been passed and drunk, and dessert was on the table, when the electric bell buzzed shrilly.

“Vincent!” cried both Dresden shepherdesses in one breath, while Sir Christian, laying down his fruit-knife, turned expectantly towards the door, which within the same minute opened to admit the son of the house.

“At last!” said the family in general, partly with their eyes and partly with their lips. Even Lady Aurelia’s black orbs twinkled in a way which scarcely accorded with the satiety proclaimed a few minutes back.

“Haven’t deserved my dinner, have I? And yet I mean to have some!” laughed Vincent, as he first grasped his father’s hand and then, in foreign fashion, kissed that of his grandmother—nodding affectionately to his sisters the while.

Sir Christian’s heir, aged twenty-five, without being quite as conspicuously ornamental, was at least as imposing-looking as his father. If his eyes were less brilliant, his eyebrows less sweeping and his nose less decorative, he made up for it in other ways. Upon the shoulders of an athlete—though somewhat more loosely carried than athletes usually

bear themselves—the compact brown head, just touched with gold, seemed small, and yet was well in proportion with his height. The clean-shaven, clear-cut features might have been called boyish but for a certain disharmony between the sunny, hazel eyes and the somewhat too massive jaw, which, at moments, had a trick of obstinately squaring. In such moments the thin mouth could be grim, and, with the hazel eyes darkening in sympathy, all the brightness of the physiognomy was shut up out of sight. His sisters were fond of saying that Vincent had two faces, his playing face and his working face. It might have been as correct to say the face given him by nature and the one developed by circumstances, the only question to decide being which of the two represented the real Vincent. On the whole he looked more like the captain of an eleven or the stroke oar of a university boat than a diplomat.

“Much you’d attain if you only got your deserts,” remarked Lady Amelia in a growl which was not meant to be affectionate, but which sufficiently betrayed the whereabouts of the weak spot in her withered heart.

The hazel eyes went round the table.

“Wasn’t Cousin Minna to have dined here to-night?”

“She was. Cried off because of some meeting or other.”

“Never mind Minna now. Rather give an ac-

count of yourself. What's the last political plot you've been hatching? And whom have you been telling lies to so hard as to forget the dinner-hour?"

"I haven't been telling lies to anybody," said Vincent, with sudden sharpness, while upon the brightness of his face there descended the periodical shadow.

Lady Aurelia rocked her spare body from side to side in an access of spasmodic hilarity.

"Your *naïveté* is beyond anything, Vincent! Why, the lies are half the fun!"

"Anything new?" hurriedly questioned Chrissie, recognising dangerous ground.

"Nothing beyond what was in the evening papers."

"Ah, I don't mean about the war, but about yourself—any new opening?"

"Well, the newest thing is that I've come to a decision."

"Ah! Tell us all about it while you eat. We'll smoke our cigarettes here, so as to be able to look on," she urged; while Henders, the butler, brought in with his own hands a miniature edition of the dinner, carefully kept warm for the hope of the family.

The cigarettes was one of the cosmopolitan habits cultivated, not because either Chrissie or Cissy at all enjoyed smoking, but because there are some countries in which it is considered dowdy not to

smoke. And since one could not know what the future——

“Am I to talk with my mouth full?”

The momentary shadow had flown. It was the playing face with which Vincent put the question—the white teeth well displayed, the hazel eyes brimming gleefully.

“Of course you are.”

“Really, you’re very stupid to-day, Vincent,” quavered Lady Aurelia. “Allow me to beg that you should come to the point.”

“All right, granny! It’s only that I’ve made up my mind to learn Hungarian.”

The family face fell all round.

“Is that all?”

“Yes—for the present. But it’s to lead to more, I hope. You evidently haven’t been following European events as closely as Asiatic ones. They’re going it strong, Kossuth and his lot. Cleghorn thinks the movement, once started, will prove irresistible. Within a measurable number of years—possibly of months—they will have gained their point—which is virtual independence. That, of course, means separate representation—a new Embassy at Budapest. And that again means that attachés who can talk Hungarian will be at a premium. See? It’s my own idea. Rather neat, I think. What do you say to it, granny?”

He looked towards his grandmother as to the chief authority present.

Lady Aurelia executed a toothless smile.

"I say that you're not quite as blind as a bat. It'll take a little time before I despair of you yet."

"Thank you. That's all I wanted. And now the next thing I've got to do is to look out for a Hungarian teacher."

"An excellent plan!" beamed Sir Christian, while Chrissie and Cissy revived under this new light cast upon the situation. The idea must be good if granny approved of it.

"An advertisement would be the best thing, I suppose. I expect it will be a deuce of a matter to find a good Hungarian teacher in London. If I wanted to learn Chinese or Malayan, I've no doubt I'd be overwhelmed with offers. But who takes Hungarian lessons nowadays?"

"I know!" cried Chrissie, abruptly, abandoning the cigarette she had been struggling with. "You won't need the advertisement. I've just remembered. Herr Hartmann was saying the other day that his daughter speaks Hungarian."

"Who is Herr Hartmann?"

"That old German who gives us lessons. At least, he's an Austrian; but he speaks German perfectly, and English, too, for the matter of that. In fact, we began by taking him for an Englishman. However, he sticks to being an Austrian. He has been in London quite a short time, and both he and his daughter give German lessons. It said so in

the advertisement. But he says that she speaks Hungarian, too."

"H-m! That might do. And have you seen this young woman?"

"No; and I don't know about her being young. Probably she's an *alte Jungfer*, for the father is quite old; at least, he has got an absolutely white beard, and looks rather ill, too, or rather wretched, or something."

"And he's a possible sort of person?"

"Oh, a gentleman—isn't he, granny?"

"The wreck of a gentleman, you mean."

"Well, as long as the daughter isn't the wreck of a lady—I should rather object to being put through my verbs by a person with a past. It mightn't be proper, you know."

"I should object to the process far more if carried out by a person with a future," said Lady Aurelia, incisively. "But I almost think Herr Hartmann's daughter can be taken on trust. He doesn't look like the father of chickens."

"He's coming to-morrow," remarked Cissy.

"To be sure he is! We'll open negotiations. You must give us your days and hours. And, by the bye, where are the lessons to take place?"

"Here, by all means," decided Lady Aurelia, who had, perhaps, been reflecting. "Even an *alte Jungfer* would probably object to going to your rooms—they're a prudish lot, those Germans—and, of course, you would object to going to hers."

"I'm agreeable," said Vincent, vigorously attacking his cutlet.

And thus, light-heartedly, the resolution was taken.

CHAPTER II

ANTIGONE

THE 'bus was packed, inside and out; the hanging-straps much in request, the toes of the sitters proportionately endangered; yet, despite the unrest of exits and entrances, despite even the complication of wet umbrellas brought in by each newcomer, there existed in this miniature, moving crowd a centre of interest, as a certain unanimity in the direction of glances amply proved.

This centre was to be found under the brim of a grey felt hat, which looked rather more "superior" than the average of hats met in 'buses. No other than a girl's face—very young, very fresh—its freshness set off by a pair of the darkest eyes which ever had the right to call themselves blue. It was towards the corner in which she sat that most heads, of both sexes, showed a propensity for turning, almost as steadily as the needle to the magnet; it was at this point that the usual circular glance with which the newcomer takes stock of his companions stopped almost automatically, to pass on again hurriedly if the person was discreet, to fix

itself, more or less openly, if he were the reverse. To be able to stare even furtively at a beautiful woman is, after all, a treat not lightly to be foregone, and a rare mitigation of the weariness of 'bus-travelling. The treat was granted to many to-day, for she had come from a long way west. The conductor, a wizened, little, grey-haired man with a scarlet button of a nose, was beginning to look upon her almost with a proprietor's eye, and in deep approval. Unquestionably she conferred distinction upon the 'bus. "Such a beauty as we 'ave in here!" he felt inclined to whisper to each passenger that pressed past him.

Upon the girl in the grey hat both the approval and the indiscretion were lost. Visibly she was too deep in her own reflections to be aware of either. Not exhilarating, these reflections, apparently; for more than once the delicate, dark eyebrows drew together, and every now and then the red underlip trembled, as lips are apt to tremble when tears are near, and then was worried back into quietude by a set of small, white teeth which, for all their whiteness, gleamed a trifle fiercely. Down the whole length of Brompton Road she sat staring out of the window opposite with fixed eyes which probably saw little of the shop-windows in which the gas, just lit, flared successively upon cheap blouses and petticoats, upon joints of beef and mutton, upon the wax busts in the hair-dressers' windows. It was not until Brompton Road had melted into Cromwell

Road that she appeared, with a sort of jerk, to return to actualities.

Room was made for her to pass, almost reluctantly; the wizened conductor's hand put at her disposal for descent, behind her back more than one comment exchanged.

The 'bus rolled on, and she stood alone on the pavement, and now, at last, profiting of the privacy of the crowd, eased her feelings with an unmistakable sigh. It was a sigh more full of an angry impatience than of anything else, and it was with an angry impatience, too, that she now gathered her skirt into one hand, while in the other she balanced her umbrella, for the April evening remained persistently wet. The umbrella had a silver handle, but there was a fresh rent in the silk, and the wind was driving the rain straight into her face, and the packet of books under her arm was an encumbrance, and, altogether, life had frequently been very much easier than the form under which it presented itself at this moment.

Fortunately, the remaining distance was not great, and the narrow side-street of Cromwell Road—a street to be called “dingy” only because there exists no stronger suitable adjective in the English language—saved her, at any rate, from the jostle of the evening crowd. Here the sooty brick wall on either side was identified as houses only by the doors and windows piercing it at regular intervals. Without this advertisement a stranger to London

might have easily mistaken them for the walls of a prison-yard. Some one with a sense of humour had christened the spot Filbert Gardens."

Upon the doorstep of one of these painfully individualised houses the bearer of the umbrella stopped and rang the bell, with another sigh, this time of relief—of a premature relief, however, since a second and a third application to the bell was needed before slipshod steps became audible. The steps flew, however, and the door was torn open to a width obviously intended as a compensation for tardiness.

"Lor', Miss 'Artmann! If I'd known it was you!" The face which looked out upon the newcomer was adorned with a welcoming grin. A set of painfully irregular teeth, each leaning in its own individual direction—somewhat after the fashion of gravestones in an ancient burying-ground—looked almost as alarmingly wild as did the unkempt hair, innocent of cap. The attire was even dirtier, the hands even redder, and the nose even lumpier than the average of these features in the "general" of third-class London lodging-houses; but the breadth and obvious sincerity of the grin made up for everything—or might have done so, had other circumstances not been so particularly trying to-night.

"You might have known it was me, if you had taken the trouble to look at the clock," said the girl in the grey hat, with the sharpness of fatigue. "I'm late enough, as it is."

The grin was extinguished by a look of almost comical consternation, while the small, pig-like eyes became abject.

"I'm that sorry, miss, I can't tell ye!" she humbly protested. "And you so dhreadful wet! Why, it's got on to yer hat—yer ghrand, pritty hat! Sure, I was tellin' Mrs. Martin but yesterday that there's no hat loike it in the whole of Brompton Road! I'm thinkin' there must be a hole in your umbreller, entirely! Just you give it me sthraight off your head, and I'll take it to the kitchen fire. For the love of the saints, give it me, mysweet young lidy!" pleaded Pattie, the purity of whose brogue had, owing to a long metropolitan residence, become considerably contaminated by cockney vowels.

Upon the blue-eyed girl's face impatience and amusement struggled visibly—for the red hands showed signs of appropriating the hat by brute force, if need be—but in the end she burst out laughing.

"There—take it, in heaven's name! Only, mind you don't put it in the fire by mistake. And, Pattie, I'm sorry I spoke so sharply; but, oh, you don't know how tired I am!"

"Shairply?"

Pattie, overwhelmed by so unprecedented a thing as an apology, seemed ready to collapse on the floor, hat and all. "*That's* not what Mrs. Martin calls shairply. Sure, onless her hand's in it, as well as her tongue—or, maybe, her toe, whiles," added

Pattie, with a wink of her tiny eyes which indicated a perfect appreciation of the humour of the situation—"she doesn't think she's spoken to me at all. The idea of your bein' sorry! Holy Saints! And after such a bad day as you must have had of it! You 'ave had a bad day, 'aven't you, miss?"

"Baddish. But I daresay you've had a worse one."

The blue-eyed girl was actually smiling again.

"Me, miss? What's that to do with it? Sure, I'm used to it, aren't I? But any one can see that you're not. The red hands waved in a manner perilous to the grey hat. "It's in a foine coach you should be rhidin', and not in a dhirty 'bus. Any one with half an eye can see——"

"Hush, Pattie! Nobody has got any business to see anything! Is my father come in yet?"

"Not he, miss; though I put on the foire, as you told me to. And you'll be wantin' your supper, I'm thinkin'?"

"Not until my father comes in."

The blue-eyed girl opened a door off the narrow entrance, and, groping her way to the mantelpiece, put a match to the gas and looked about her.

The forethought which had lit the fire in the grate had not stretched to the maintenance of it, for which reason the room was distinctly chilly. Needless to say that it was also ugly, with that intrinsically mean and sordid ugliness which is a *specialité* of the cheap London lodging. There

was the usual narrow mantelpiece of painted wood, with the usual glass vases and china baskets upon it, the usual dim table which had once been shiny, the usual straight-backed chairs and unreposeful sofa; while it would have been as hazardous as it generally is to form a conjecture as to the original colour of the narrow chintz curtains, or the original pattern of the much-trodden carpet. Yet, beside this rockbed of fundamental features there were a few touches noticeable which spoke of attempts at a sort of superficial correction; to these belonged the primroses in the vases, and a couple of bright cushions on the sofa. An iron bedstead and a tin washing-table proclaimed the room to be a bedroom, but the presence of a quaint Japanese paper screen and of some books upon the table indicated that it was expected to play the sitting-room as well.

Having looked about her, Miss 'Artmann, otherwise Irma Harding, first applied herself to coaxing back into flame the embers in the grate by means of the dregs of the coal-scuttle. This successfully achieved, she put a few chairs straight, pulled the least uncomfortable of them to the fire, fetched a pair of slippers from behind the screen and put them to toast, pulled out a few faded primroses and re-settled the others, and finally turned up the gas a little higher. It was not until she was satisfied, comparatively speaking, with the look of the room that she retired to the one alongside—a much smaller one, with its window to the backyard, and

with not even the pretence of a fire in the grate—to divest herself of her damp jacket and boots.

Presently she was back again, and, sitting down before the fire, proceeded to think out the latest thing in difficulties, one of the many which had strewn the fugitives' path since the day on which, under cover of the morning's shadows, they had left the house in the Vienna Ringstrasse.

How long ago it seemed, that winter dawn full of the hurry of packing and the poignancy of farewells! How far away, already, that moment at which she had got into the cab, alone with her dully passive father! Until they reached Hamburg, late that night, he had retained the same dazed expression of face which had been there during the terrible family scene. It was the sight of the shipmasts on the *Elbe* which seemed to bring him back to reality. No decision had yet been come to as to their further destination, and Irma now called for one. During the whole of the day's voyage everything had been left to her, but to decide the main question she did not feel competent, though she urged New York, as the most obvious thing. But here an unlooked-for opposition met her—Harding pleaded for London. It would be just as safe, he assured her, since for years past he had been practically expatriated. So long as he kept clear of the quarter of the city in which was situated the mother establishment of the "Anglo-Saxon," and where his face was known from his flying business visits, there

really existed no danger. And he dreaded the long sea-voyage. The eagerness of his arguments betrayed some thought behind. But Irma did not guess that this thought was the dread of putting the ocean between him and the woman he still adored. With only the Channel between, the hope of a meeting—if only a final one—did not seem so utterly extravagant. Not even the scene after the ball had been able to shatter the idol, though it could not fail to tear off some of its glittering veils. In truth, it had not really altered the respective positions of husband and wife, but only intensified them. It was not for her goodness or her generosity that he had loved Isabella, but just because she was Isabella, and she remained Isabella still. Passions of this description are nearly allied to monomania, and monomaniacs, as is well known, are not susceptible even to the plainest demonstration.

So London it had been. And London had swallowed them up as tracelessly as only London can. What other stomach, indeed, could so perfectly digest the miscellaneous morsels flung to it daily?

The hunt for the defrauding bank director had passed harmlessly over their heads and across the ocean to their originally proposed place of refuge. That “doubling back” from Hamburg had proved a far more effective measure for throwing off the scent than either of them had imagined.

London pavement, then, was the battlefield on which the life-struggle was to be fought out. It

was a sharper and, in especial, a meaner and less picturesque battle than Irma, in her ignorance, had supposed. Did she, for this, regret having accepted the challenge of Fate? With her hand upon her heart she could have answered, No. For any such defection her spirit was too high, her motive too sincere. Yet, it was inevitable that after the exaltation of the critical moment reaction should follow. Excitement cannot persist, though purpose may. Having actually done the thing, she was, at moments, seized by a sort of panic, as of a person who, having swung himself to the pinnacle of a high rock, wonders, giddily, whether he will be able to keep his balance at that height. But these were but moments of weakness, ever and again triumphed over by a stronger emotion—the instinct of protection towards the poor, bruised man whose only moral support she knew herself to be. Having forced him to live, against his own will, she felt bound also to help him to live. The weight of responsibility thus thrown upon her had, as with the stroke of a hammer, transformed her personality, just as a stroke will steady and fix that which it does not break down. And yet it would probably be truer to speak of a revelation rather than a transformation. That stroke of the hammer might as easily be supposed, by shattering the crust of superficial qualities, to have brought to light the true substance of the soul beneath. If it is true that nothing can be taken out of a sack but what is in

it, then it would be equally true that Irma was brave and generous and unselfish even in the days when she appeared to be only gay and good-natured and pleasure-seeking; but it had wanted the blow of the hammer to discover it even to herself.

To see the wrecked man gradually regaining his hold upon life, to mark his humble gratitude, was reward enough for all sacrifices—or, at any rate, for all those which had yet been asked. When, with a smile that was sadder than a sigh, he would call her his Antigone, her heart beat high. This Antigone meant to do even more than the other Antigone had done, for she meant to fill up by her devotion alone the hole that had been torn in his life; and in the sanguine enthusiasm of her years, and despite the blankness of the eyes which wandered wearily, as eyes are apt to wander which have lost their real object of vision, she actually believed she would succeed.

A primary necessity was, of course, that he should never guess at her moments of discouragement. In truth, the effort of maintaining a smiling face had not been over-great so far, for the situation still bore that character of newness which, at eighteen, makes up for a good deal. It was almost possible—at moments, anyway—to persuade herself that they were only playing at being poor.

But to-day's events might easily bring the game unpleasantly near to reality. Her best lesson had just been called off, the lesson which, together with

her father's two hours a week in Sir Christian Denholm's house, had proved the *pièce de résistance* of their modest existence. Not even the first days in London had held so critical a moment as this; for during those first weeks there had still been some ready money, thanks to which they had been able to advertise so judiciously as to secure almost immediate occupation. The lessons at the Denholms had been an extraordinary piece of luck, and so had her own employment in the house of a motor manufacturer who had already motored himself into his second million, and did not mean to stop before his tenth. The son and heir, aged seven, was being trained to represent the "Cerberus" motor on the Continent, for which purpose the German language was naturally indispensable. The somewhat brusque dismissal given to-day had been explained by a change of plans which was obviously a pretext. It was not the plans which were at fault, as Irma easily guessed, but her pupil's bachelor uncle—likewise partner in the "Cerberus"—who, having chanced to come in during one of the lessons, had developed in his nephew's progress an interest which the family obviously considered suspicious. Oh, Irma understood quite well. She had not been through a Vienna carnival for nothing. And yet how innocent she felt of even the faintest desire to attract the attention of the well-washed, well-groomed, well-nourished young Cræsus! She knew how to do it—ah, yes! quite well—had she

not practised upon Baron Kiraly? But she was no longer quite the same girl who had exchanged bantering remarks with the black-eyed Baron, and she was already too anxious about her daily bread to endanger it by playing any foolish pranks.

Instinctively, at this point of her reflections, she raised her eyes to the mantelpiece. There, among the vases and baskets, was throned that same penny doll which she had danced upon her knee during the "toy-shop figure" of the *cotillon*, and which, in the hurry of the precipitate packing, had got thrown into her box by mistake, with its wooden leg entangled in her lace handkerchief. It was with a curious sort of pang that she had discovered it at the end of the voyage, and set it up deliberately on the most conspicuous spot of the room. The little wooden atom in the spangled pink skirt and with the bead necklace around its thin neck seemed to her like the embodiment of all that brilliant time which lay behind her, the very personification of the gay Vienna carnival. It could harm no one, not even her father, if she occasionally refreshed herself by a fancy excursion into that region of lost delights. Pattie, from the first, had succumbed to the charms of the pink doll.

"What's her name, miss?" she had asked on a certain day on which Irma had discovered her giggling in front of the mantelpiece.

"Her name? I think her name is Vindobona," said Irma, after a pause, as spontaneously the clas-

sic name of the beloved residence rose to her mind.

From that day on "Winderboney"—the nearest that Pattie could achieve—had become a personage. To dispose of the spangled figure in what she considered to be the most becoming positions, and to put her wooden limbs through contortions as excruciating as those of the most highly paid acrobats, was to the "general" a source of never-ending delight. To-day, butterfly fashion, she was hovering on one leg in the middle of a primrose bunch, with arms stretched wildly overhead. To Irma's disturbed imagination the gesture seemed one of distraction.

"Lessons! Lessons! Help! Help! Give me new lessons! Pupils to the rescue!" the pink doll seemed to be shrieking; and the fancied cry mingled in Irma's mind with a very real desire to throttle the fat and smiling Mr. Potts, junior.

The bitterest part still remained—that of telling her father of the lost lessons. And yet she wished he was here already to be told. With the anxiety of her new-born solicitude she listened for his ring, and, when it came, sprang up with an alacrity which easily forestalled Pattie, who, to judge from the nature of the sounds proceeding from lower regions, was being severely belaboured by Mrs. Martin's tongue, if not actually by her hands.

"Another saucer, probably," thought Irma, as she sped to the door; for Mrs. Martin was most

emphatically *not* "mistress of herself" when china fell, and the amount of china which fell under Pattie's care defied calculation—she belonging to the category of people whose fingers are best described as "all thumbs."

"So late, papa! You must be drenched. Come in quickly. Your slippers are beautifully toasted, and supper will soon be here—at least, I hope so, if Pattie has left enough plates whole to serve it on."

All the worry of a moment back was swept out of sight. She must tell him of the loss, of course, but, at least, she would tell it to him with a smile on her lips.

"What has kept you so long?"

"Various things: a block in the street, a wrong 'bus I got into. Then I left my umbrella at the bookshop where I was choosing a grammar and had to tramp back for it."

"Poor papa! Are you very tired?"

"Not more than usual," said the present Herr Hartmann, in a tone which betrayed complete indifference on the subject. Then, while Irma helped him out of his overcoat: "And how have you fared, Irma?"

It was the usual comparing of daily notes between the exiles.

"Oh, pretty well. I'll tell you all about it presently. But first get comfortable, and I'll ring for supper. I *do* hope you've not overdone yourself."

She looked at him critically, much as an anxious

mother might look at a delicate child. In her affection, indeed, for the being who, both physically and mentally, was so much weaker than herself there was more of the maternal than of the filial.

The Herr Hartmann who presently sank down on to the chair before the fire and passively allowed his feet to be put into the slippers which Irma, now kneeling on the floor, held ready, was a come-down even from the Mr. Harding who, on a February day, now two months back, had taken a revolver out of a drawer. The dull eyes lay deeper in the sockets; the stoop was no longer that of a man who bends *over*, rather of one who bends *under*, a thing. The beard which mercifully covered the uneasy mouth had grown as white as that of a man of seventy—a disguise in itself. Yet were the weary eyes not without occasional gleams of a sort of tender surprise. One of these gleams came to them now as he watched Irma on her knees. It was so unusual a thing to be waited on that it astonished him anew each time.

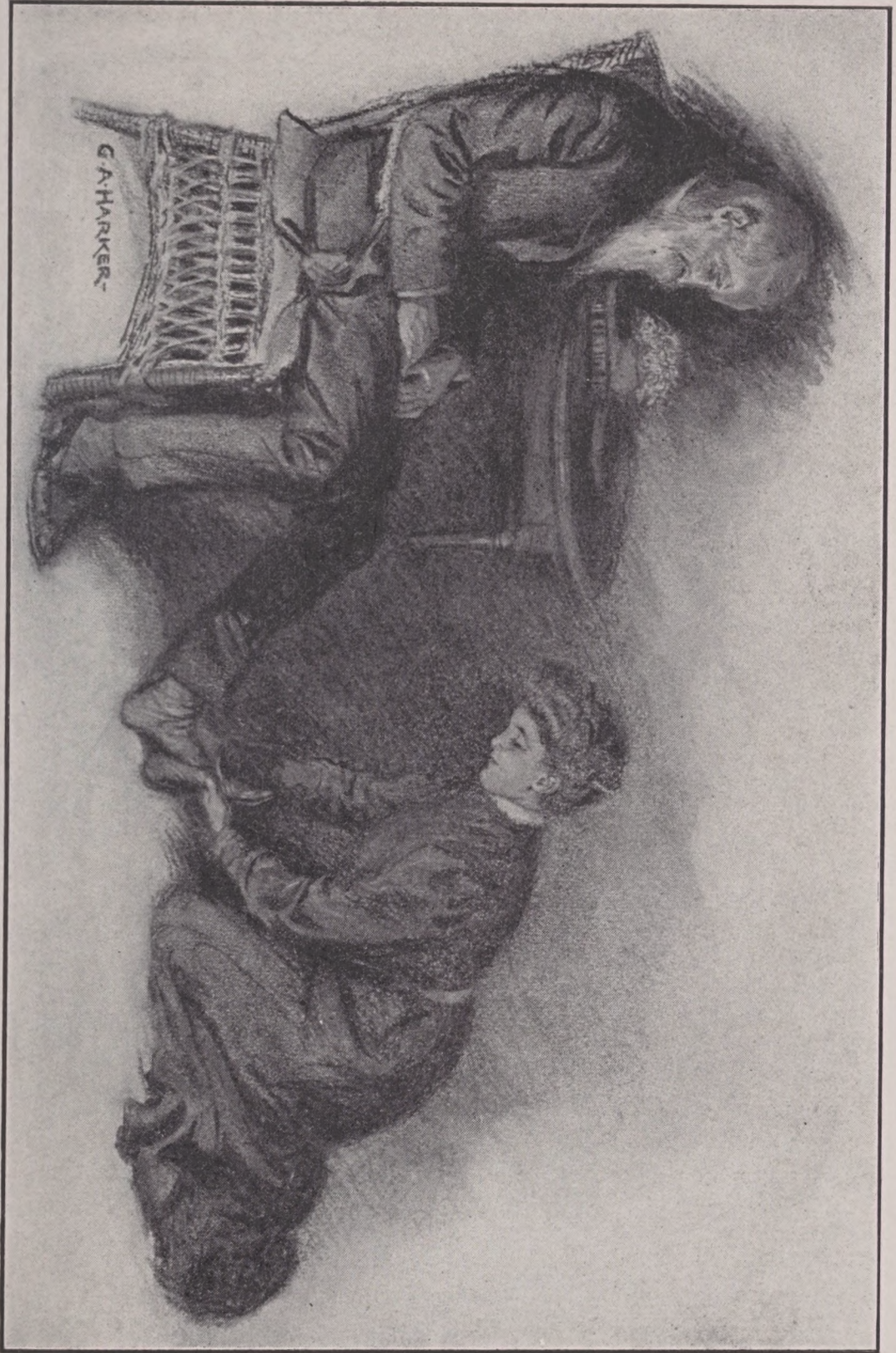
Suddenly he stooped forward and patted her brown head.

“You’re a good girl, Irma! And I’ve got a good piece of news for you, too!”

Irma looked up, flushing with pleasure, more at the praise than at the promise.

“Have you, papa? Out with it, then! I’m rather in want of something good.”

“Well, what do you say to a new pupil? And



“Passively allowed his feet to be put into the slippers which Irma . . . held ready.”

do you feel able to play the Hungarian mistress as well as the German?"

Irma got rapidly to her feet.

"A new pupil? But, papa, that is just what I've been praying for! Tell me about it quickly! Boy or girl? What age? How often a week? Will they pay well? Gracious, how mercenary one does get, to be sure!" And her laugh rang out as merrily as in the days of prosperity.

"They'll pay very well; and it's a boy, but rather a big boy, I gather, since he's in the Foreign Office."

Irma's face fell.

"Oh, a young man. I've had rather enough of young men for the present. There are certain inconveniences attached to the species."

"I've thought of the inconveniences, and I've stipulated that the lessons are to take place in the presence of the grandmother, a regular double-dyed old dragon, whose mere look ought to be enough to extinguish any flirtatious inclinations on the part of the grandson. But I didn't think it necessary to mention your exact age; it might have frightened them off, though it seems he's very keen about the lessons. He's a diplomat who, for some professional reason or other, wants to learn the language. It's rather a chance; but if you don't like the idea, of course we can cry off."

"Cry off? Not for worlds!"

All Irma's spirit of enterprise had risen to the surface.

"I'll keep the diplomat in order, never fear, papa, even without the dragon's intervention. Of course, she'll suspect me of wanting to make eyes at him—they always do; but I don't mean even to give him a chance of discovering what colour my eyes are; they shall be continually glued to the book—just you see if they won't! And I'll brush my hair smooth and coil it tight and make myself look as spinstery as I possibly can. Oh, how tiresome people are, and how much more convenient a plain face would be—in my profession of life, that is to say."

"Hadn't you something to tell me?" asked Harding, as he watched her, with his faint smile.

"Ah, that doesn't matter now. It's only that I've lost a pupil, that Potts boy, you know. I was rather down in the mouth about it when you came in because of the hole in the budget. But the diplomat fills up the hole beautifully. I say, papa, what faces they'll make when I come into the room! I'll bet anything they're expecting the regular accomplished old cat. I hope that shock won't be too great for them. No, after all, I don't want to be plain, but I'm going to be terribly proper!"

As a proof of which Irma clapped her hands and took a waltz-turn round the dim table and almost up against Pattie, who at that moment appeared with the supper-tray and woefully swollen eyes. The child within Irma, though generally invisible nowadays, was not yet dead, after all.

"What was it, Pattie—a saucer?" she queried,

breathless but sympathetic. "Mrs. Martin seemed to be in very fine form."

"A—a soup-thereen, miss," gasped Pattie; "the same as I broke last week."

"Pattie, you're a genius! Most people only break things once. How do you manage?"

"And sure a thereen has two handles, hain't it?" remarked Pattie, with a touch of offended dignity, as of one whose powers are being unrightfully doubted.

"To be sure! But what a pity it's only two, Pattie! What are handles there for, I should like to know? But cheer up, Pattie—this simplifies the future considerably! *Without* handles it'll be ever so much easier to drop than *with* handles, you know!"

Against this suggestion the gloom on Pattie's face was not proof. Indeed, a saving sense of humour was among the boons which a merciful Providence had shed upon an otherwise not rosy lot. So instantaneous was the display of the crazy-looking teeth, so abrupt the burst of laughter, that Irma's intervention alone saved the plates from the fate predicted for the remains of the tureen.

CHAPTER III

THE PUPIL

DESPITE her brave speeches, it was for Irma a nervous moment when Henders, with a dignity of demeanour before which—in her unfamiliarity with the genus “British butler”—she secretly quailed, preceded her up the thickly carpeted staircase in Eaton Place and into the presence of Lady Aurelia. Not of Lady Aurelia alone, for—with the exception of the pupil himself, who had not come up to time—the family, by a sort of tacit understanding, had gravitated towards the morning-room. Vincent’s Hungarian lessons, considering their purpose, could not be regarded otherwise than as a family event.

When—Henders, after the announcement of “Miss 'Artmann,” having closed the door behind him—Irma found herself opposite to a very old lady with a dark yellow face, she instinctively dropped a curtsey, and then checked herself half-way, remembering that this was not Austria, while the consciousness of her blunder, as well as of the presence of three other people in the room, caused the pink roses in her cheeks to deepen to crimson.

The dead silence which followed her entry, though possibly flattering to her vanity, was nevertheless disturbing. Each of the four people present was virtually gaping—mentally, if not physically, and each after his or her fashion. Lady Aurelia's eyes had narrowed to pin-points, the ex-Ambassador's chronic smile became paralysed upon his lips, while the animated Dresden figures drew nearer together, visibly flurried.

Of course it was Lady Aurelia who recovered first.

"You are Fräulein Hartmann?" she enquired, after that brief and speechless pause, while her yellow hand groped for her eyeglasses.

"Yes, I am Fräulein Hartmann."

"Well, I shouldn't have thought so," decided the dowager, having found and used her glasses; and, devoid of logic though the remark might be, it nevertheless very fairly represented the impressions of the rest of the spectators.

"Will you allow me to help you out of your jacket?" asked Sir Christian, quite himself again now—more than himself, in fact, since the sight of such a face was almost enough to make the "woman's man" forget his white hairs.

"Thank you. And my pupil?"

Her eyes went round the room with the question, but fell only upon Chrissie and Cissy standing close together and still regarding her in undisguised astonishment. There they hung for a moment wist-

fully. Girls of her own age, and living in the same sort of social paradise in which she had once lived, or one, at any rate, on the same level of material comfort—well cared for, jealously guarded, not exposed to the accident of rude encounters. Her heart tightened at the quick comparison. But these were not her pupils, nor the old lady, nor the old gentleman. There was nothing in the room that could be construed into a diplomat.

“Your pupil will be here directly. The lesson takes place in this room. I think you will find that table convenient. You have books with you, I presume?”

“Nothing but a dictionary, as yet; but I have ordered a grammar. I was not prepared for giving Hungarian lessons, you see; but I shall manage meanwhile.”

“Christian,” remarked Lady Aurelia, who had been impatiently watching her son-in-law’s manipulations, “I beg that you leave that jacket alone; and I likewise beg that you leave Fräulein Hartmann and me alone. I wish to consult with her about her method of teaching; and, at any rate, we can’t do with so much public.”

Thus unambiguously ordered from the room, Chrissie and Cissy retired regretfully; for they had hoped to pick up a few Hungarian crumbs, which—who knows?—might come in useful some day. And, besides, Fräulein Hartmann’s hat had a *cachet* of its own, which would have been worth while study-

ing. They were followed by their no less regretful father.

"I have brought a copy-book," said Irma, in as professional a tone as she could muster; for this *tête-à-tête* with the "Dragon" was more than she had bargained for. "Dictation is indispensable, of course. I see there are plenty of pens, and I suppose there is blotting-paper, too?"

There was no answer, and she looked up nervously, to find Lady Aurelia regarding her with a hard, unwinking stare.

"You have very fine eyes, my dear," was all the answer made to the remark about the blotting-paper.

Irma flushed hotly.

"Rather early in the acquaintance for the remark, eh? Perhaps it is, but at my age one doesn't usually care about losing time. I therefore take the liberty of repeating that you have very fine eyes. Allow me to add that I hope you know how to manage them."

"I—I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do—unless you're a fool, which you don't look. I said *manage*, mind, and not *use*. Any idiot could use eyes like that; but it takes brains, as well as will, to keep them in order. I hope you can do that, for if you can't your pupil will have to get his Hungarian lessons elsewhere."

Irma audibly gasped. "Lady—Lady——"

"Aurelia," supplemented the dowager, calmly.

"Lady Aurelia, I didn't expect to be——"

"In case you are thinking of saying 'insulted,' I should recommend you to reconsider the expression. Pointing out plain facts isn't an insult, so far as I know, and the fact of your being a young woman and my grandson being a young man may, I think, be considered as beyond dispute. These are circumstances under which the acquisition of languages is apt to suffer. In fact, to be plain with you, if I had seen you before to-day I would never have consented to the arrangement."

"Neither would I, if I had known," burst out the quivering Irma. "And I am quite ready, even now, to break the engagement, if you so wish it. I can go away at once—this minute—there is still time——"

But in this she was mistaken; there was no more time, for just then the door was flung open, and Vincent, a little breathless from having, in the consciousness of his tardiness, taken two steps at a time, stood on the threshold.

"I am sorry, granny," he began, and then stopped short, staring with almost unmannerly breadth at the beautiful, angry girl in the middle of the room, whose quivering lips, shining eyes and heaving bosom presented a picture of emotion so unconventional as almost to startle, among these conventional surroundings. What was she doing here? What had his grandmother been doing to her? Where was the German spinster? The ques-

tions darted through his mind like the zigzags of lightning. He was on the point of saying, "Will you introduce me?" when Lady Aurelia, in somewhat trailing accents, remarked:

"This is your pupil, Fräulein Hartmann," whereupon he executed what was probably the most awkward bow of his life—one not at all up to the height of professional traditions. Even a diplomat could not be expected so quickly to readjust the differences between the *alte Jungfer* in his mind and the Hungarian teacher, such as she presented herself in the flesh.

With a sort of wrathful haughtiness, Irma inclined her head, scarcely glancing in his direction. If there were any electricity in the air, such as is supposed to accompany the first contact of two human atoms who, from all eternity—blindly, deafly, ignorantly—have been travelling towards each other, to meet at the appointed spot and in the appointed moment, it was lost upon Irma, overlaid by the acuteness of the recent annoyance. Just as plain and sharp as was his impression, just as faint and blurred was hers. If she had burst upon his sight, he had no more than dawned upon hers, and not with any accompanying pleasure; for the indignation against the grandmother could scarcely help including the grandson. So this was the precious youth who was to be guarded from the danger of her glances? Well, they would soon be able to estimate the extent of that danger. She would look at

him so little that, even meeting him in the street, she would not know him again. And so little did she look at him on that first day that she had no more than a dim remembrance of rather remarkably broad shoulders and a rather remarkably small head.

"We were discussing—methods of teaching," observed Lady Aurelia, unperturbed.

"Ah! and you seem to have been having some differences of opinion on the subject," laughed Vincent, beginning to recover from the shock just received, though it was only much later that he discovered what the nature of that shock had actually been.

"Only a very slight difference," said the unblushing dowager. "And," she added, with a meaning look towards the girl, "I believe Fräulein Hartmann has now perfectly grasped my intentions."

Irma met the small, black eyes, and for a moment visibly hesitated. In the next she turned to the table and put ready the copy-book. During that moment she had thought of what her father's face would be if she was obliged to tell him that the hope of this lesson, too, was lost.

"We had better begin at once," she said, stiffly. "I have marked a list of easy words in the dictionary to start with. I suppose you know that Hungarian is about the most difficult to acquire of all European languages, since it has no relation to any other?"

"Yes, I know it's a hard nut to crack, but I mean to crack it, all the same."

"It is also unmelodious."

"You're not encouraging, Fräulein Hartmann," smiled Vincent. "But I'm not to be frightened off. At the rate your country is going ahead we shall have to count with her, and therefore with her language."

"Hungary is not my country," said Irma, as stiffly as before.

"I thought you were half a Hungarian?"

"Only a quarter, at most."

"And more than a quarter English, I should think, to judge from your speech?"

"Yes," began Irma, and then stopped, colouring painfully. The English element was just the thing that it was prudent to keep out of sight. "That is to say, no. There is only a little English blood in the family," she said confusedly. "We are Austrians."

Vincent hastened to abandon a ground which evidently held some unexplained cause of embarrassment.

"Even as an Austrian, Hungarian affairs must interest you deeply. What is the popular idea as to Hungary's chances of independence?"

"Oh, you are not going to talk politics, are you?" asked Irma, with a look of unmistakable alarm, "for I don't know anything about them."

"So much the better," interposed Lady Aurelia's

voice from the background. "I understood that this was to be a Hungarian lesson, and not a political conference."

Biting her lip hard, Irma sat down, while the fragments of the professional manner, which, unavoidably, had suffered both from the embarrassment and the alarm, were hastily gathered together.

"Since you have no knowledge at all of the language, we shall have to begin at the very beginning. I am afraid you will find the lessons rather tedious."

"I think not," remarked Vincent, with a conviction which his grandmother inwardly marked, without by any means digesting.

Pupil and teacher were now sitting opposite to each other, with a narrow table between—(Lady Aurelia had already resolved that it should be a broader one next time)—and Irma had taken a firm hold of the dictionary.

"I say, Fräulein Hartmann," observed Vincent, as a sort of corollary to his last remark, "how many lessons do you think it will take me to get along at all in Hungarian?"

"I really cannot say. I have never had a Hungarian pupil before, as I tell you. But I daresay that in about twenty-four lessons you could manage to get yourself understood."

"Twenty-four lessons, at two a week," calculated Vincent, aloud; "that adds up to about three months. Yes, I feel a presentiment that it won't take less than that."

"Will you be so kind as to write to my dictation?" interrupted the teacher, coldly. "I shall begin with the simplest forms of speech: *Igen*—Yes; *Nem*—No."

"*Igen*," mused Vincent; "surely that is the most aggressive form of acquiescence I have yet met with! Two syllables, too! Every other nation I am acquainted with acquiesces in one syllable."

He was bending to his task now, with his "working-face" on, the lips hard-set, the laughter sternly banished from the hazel eyes. A vision of Budapest, and of the possible post to be there attained, had risen to blot out the face at the other side of the table.

During the half-hour that followed, Lady Aurelia, with one eye upon the *Times* leader and the other upon pupil and teacher, found no occasion for verbal remark, though possibly some for mental comment.

"Well, what do you think of her, granny?" asked Chrissie, at the very earliest moment at which it became possible to put the question.

Like a stream whose dam has been removed, the family had flowed back into the morning-room. There was no one there but Lady Aurelia, now, for the departure of the pupil, in a hansom, to the Foreign Office, had well-nigh coincided with that of the teacher, on foot, to the nearest 'bus stand.

"I think she is a good deal prettier than is at all convenient."

"One of the finest girls I have seen for a long time," endorsed Sir Christian, with the confidence of a connoisseur.

"Isn't she? And I'm sure her hat is a Vienna hat—it's got such a particular *chic*. Why, she doesn't look poor at all."

"She hasn't been poor for long, that's clear—and not from her hat alone," added Lady Aurelia, thinking of the defiant gleam in the eyes which had faced her, of the haughtiness of that brief inclination. "Life hasn't had time to tame her yet, and her clothes haven't had time to sink to the level of her fortunes. They hail from better days, evidently—and not from distant ones, either. I shouldn't mind *that* if it wasn't for the wearer. How much Hungarian do you expect Vincent to learn under her tuition? Not likely he'll keep his eyes to his book much, is it, with that face two yards off?"

"No easy matter, indeed," admitted the ex-Ambassador.

"But Vincent is so steady," objected Chrissie, "and so taken up with his career."

"He didn't look particularly steady when he came in an hour ago and found her standing in the middle of the room, like an outraged queen; for I had been giving her some friendly advice."

"Well, he must have been surprised, of course, and he can't help admiring her. But you know what his principles are, and his ideas about marriage——"

“Marriage!” almost shrieked Lady Aurelia, with an hilarious parting of her sunken lips. “What a goose you are, Chrissie!”

“Then it’s only a ‘flirt’ you’re afraid of? But—would that really matter much, so long as he learns Hungarian?”

Lady Aurelia chuckled. It was a remark which she might almost have made herself, though, to do Chrissie justice, she was not in the least aware of its cynicism.

“A spice of admiration may be an excellent incentive to learning,” insinuated Sir Christian.

“There’s something in that; and so long as it remains a spice, and doesn’t become harmful, I’ve no objection. But the line of demarcation isn’t always visible to the naked eye. And now I beg that these remarks cease for the present and that I be granted some repose after the strain of the last hour. Don’t press upon me, all of you! Give me room to fall!”

CHAPTER IV

MR. HEKETES

VINCENT was enjoying himself greatly. Doubled over a sheet of foolscap, across which his pen travelled swiftly, with pigeon-holes to the right of him, pigeon-holes to the left of him, an inkstand as deep as a small well in front of him, and to his rear another table with another pen travelling over another sheet, he was literally revelling in his task. It was one of those moments at which his profession appeared to him to be entirely desirable, as distinctive from others in which he found it chiefly perplexing.

The task before him was congenial, partly because it was difficult—and he loved tackling difficulties—a polite but forcible warning to a certain South American State regarding its “perky” behaviour in a recent commercial episode, joined to a more or less veiled hint of what would follow if the warning were disregarded. The first rough draft had been too tame, the second too fierce. Now Vincent was to be allowed a shot at the happy medium. In his hands the prickly problem of raising

the ghost of a naval demonstration without pronouncing the name of the thing had been entrusted.

"Let them catch a sight of ship-masts between the lines," had said to him the personage who at that moment represented Great Britain's recognition of the existence of other nations, "and let them hear the rattling of lifted anchor-chains, but not yet that of ammunition. Even the glimpse of a single cannon-ball might make them nervous, and nervous people are apt to blunder. You understand?"

"Perfectly," said Vincent, as he withdrew from The Presence.

And that was why he was now enjoying himself so greatly.

To-day's work seemed like another step on the way to that high place which he meant to occupy some day. The class-stamp of the various homes in which he had spent his holidays between spells of Harrow and Cambridge had worked upon him more radically even than upon his sisters. Before he was fifteen he had begun to yearn for the possibility of that power which he saw his father wielding. An instrument only, strictly speaking, but an instrument on whose fine edge so much depended, and which at moments had to work automatically, so to say, unable to await the touch of the hand that guides it.

Of his capacity for the work he did not doubt, nor seriously of his vocation. How should he, with the family chorus ringing in his ears, with the fam-

ily eyes fixed upon him in an expectation that was so obviously hopeful? Were they not unanimous? No—not quite. Cousin Minna's voice had, somehow, never exactly joined in the chorus; which provoked him all the more that he could not ascribe this abstention to want of sympathy. But Cousin Minna was abnormal, which usually stands for unreasonable, and some of her ideas were distinctly dowdy. Even she had never told him that he was too stupid to be a diplomat; and he would not have believed her if she had. About *that* part of the matter, at any rate, he was serenely confident. The canker-spot of his character was, in truth, a certain vanity of intellect, hungrily on the alert for a field of display; and what field more grateful for the purpose than Diplomacy? Which more obviously pointed out by family tradition?

He had thrown himself upon it with all the *verve* of an intrinsically buoyant nature. Possibly he might make too spontaneous a diplomat—it was his danger—but he would never make a vacillating one. International difficulties he would tackle as joyously as he would a stiff hill-climb, and lift weights of ponderous discussion with as little apparent effort as the dumb-bells. His unlikeness to the traditional article stood rather in his favour. A certain breeziness of manner and openness of countenance comes in very useful at times when joined to the essential capacities; the quick insight, the necessary mental “pounce” upon the passing

moment; above all, the indispensable self-command. Already was favour to be read in the eyes which looked on him from above—envy in those which viewed him from a kindred level. His little mark was made already. Remained the big one. If here and there some unanalysable—or, at any rate, unanalysed—discomfort stirred somewhere in the background of his mind, it was not very hard to smother it under a load of work. Despite the sunny, hazel eyes, work had hitherto tempted him ever so much more than play—in contradistinction to his father, who had always found time to play beside his work—not always to the advantage of the latter. Nor did the playthings which his father had chosen exist for him—as playthings, anyway. No misogynist, oh, no!—and not a taint of the bear about him; frankly pleased with the sight of a beautiful face, but, because the business of his career had hitherto kept his blood cool and his head clear, able to enjoy the spectacle without disturbance. He saw no reason to fly, as do those nervously aware of their susceptibility. Even he could allow himself an evening's flirtation, just as the man who is sure of himself can safely indulge in that glass of brandy which to the habitual exceder would be fatal. Cause for total abstinence there was none, and the less so as “the right sort of marriage” figured conspicuously in his programme of the future. Judge, then, if Chrissie had been right in calling him “steady.”

This blessed independence of the "sex" which had been his for twenty-five years he still believed in his possession; for, although the Hungarian lessons had been going on for three weeks now, Vincent was still serenely unaware of what had happened to him on the day of his eruption into the morning-room of Eaton Place. That the lessons had become a delight he knew, indeed, but found nothing more easily explicable. Was not his progress manifest? And were not affairs in Hungary developing in exact accordance with his calculations? With the new Embassy at Budapest peeping out of the clouds, what wonder that the days of lessons in Eaton Place should have become red-letter days?

It was one of those red-letter days to-day, which was partly the reason why Vincent was actually whistling softly to himself while he allowed the anchor-chains to rattle between the lines of the "memorandum." The weather, too, might have helped to uplift his mood, for May had come into the land, and even pushed into the town; and each time he lifted his head, St. James's Park, young and green, and looking delightfully out of place here, seemed to be smiling at him with a friendly understanding. The breeze which, through the open window, pleasantly fanned his labouring brow and gently fluttered the sheaves of the legendary red tape (which, by the bye, is pink) hanging ready

over the knobs of the drawer-handles, smelt not exclusively of soot.

“Yes—that point may be considered settled.”

Strangely enough, this sentence, framed in the secretary’s mind, did not apply to the intimidation of the South American State, but to the colour of the Hungarian teacher’s eyes. At first he had taken them for black, yet not all Irma’s discretion had been able to prevent his discovering that they were blue.

“It’s the size of the pupils that does it,” he decided, even while dictating terms to the distant rebel; “that, and the shadow cast by the lashes. I wonder if I shall see many eyes like that when I am *secretary* at Budapest—or *chargé de affaires*—who knows?”

And yet these three weeks had removed no single social barrier between teacher and pupil. The table between them had even grown broader, the duenna’s eagle eye, if possible, sharper—all the sharper, perhaps, for being disappointed in its expectations. Fräulein Hartmann’s professional manner seemed to be consolidating. Once only Vincent had heard her laugh—one of those rare moments at which she forgot that she was a teaching-machine and remembered that she was a human girl. It had been apropos of that ridiculous “*Igen*,” which particularly tickled Vincent’s sense of humour.

“It’s got a family resemblance to a sneeze,” he

declared. "Whoever can have invented it? Somebody with a cold in his head, I suspect."

It was then that Irma had laughed; and immediately Vincent had mentally agreed with his grandmother that the girl could not have been poor for long. That laugh dated as plainly from better days as did the clothes.

But the question of the "*Igen*" was not threshed out yet, it seemed.

"I believe I've discovered why the Magyars need two syllables to their 'yes.' It's because they take longer to acquiesce than other nations. Not fond of knocking under, as poor Francis Joseph must know well by this time. Am I right, Fräulein Hartmann?"

"It may be. I have really never thought about it."

"Then think about it now, please, for I want instruction. I maintain that your nation—that is, the nation which owns a quarter of you," he corrected—"takes so long about saying 'yes' because it doesn't like saying it, being by nature contradictory. Is that so?"

"Well, I fancy they prefer saying '*Nem*,' on the whole," admitted Irma, with a little imp of a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth, and with another little imp, which she had thought long dead, jumping up, like a jack-in-the-box, to take just one peep through the window of her eyes. Maybe it

was at that moment that he had discovered their real colour.

But these half-steps off the strict path of duty were brief and rare—and not one of them could afford Lady Aurelia the much-desired pretext for interference. Except in the handing of copy-books across the table, their hands had never so much as touched, since Fräulein Hartmann remained rigorously intrenched behind the foreign fashion of a mere bow; and in the matter of the copy-books she was evidently not encouraging, as Lady Aurelia had guessed from an occasional quick contraction of the eyebrows.

Last time there had been a rather annoying incident connected with this very point—an inkstand brushed by Vincent's sleeve, and which, toppling over, had sent a thin, black stream straight in Fräulein Hartmann's direction. She was on her feet in a moment, but not before the ink was dropping on to her grey tweed dress.

"Oh!" she said, regarding it with vexation, as quick tears started to her eyes, oblivious of all else for the moment.

Vincent was beside her already, volubly remorseful.

"My fault! Quite my fault! What a prodigious ass I am, to be sure! Oh, Fräulein Hartmann, I'm so sorry! But perhaps it won't leave marks! *Can you forgive me?*"

With a good deal less than his usual presence of

mind he was daubing his handkerchief upon the stained skirt—generously spreading the fatal black in all directions.

Irma moved back sharply, while at the same moment his grandmother's voice recalled him to both reason and propriety.

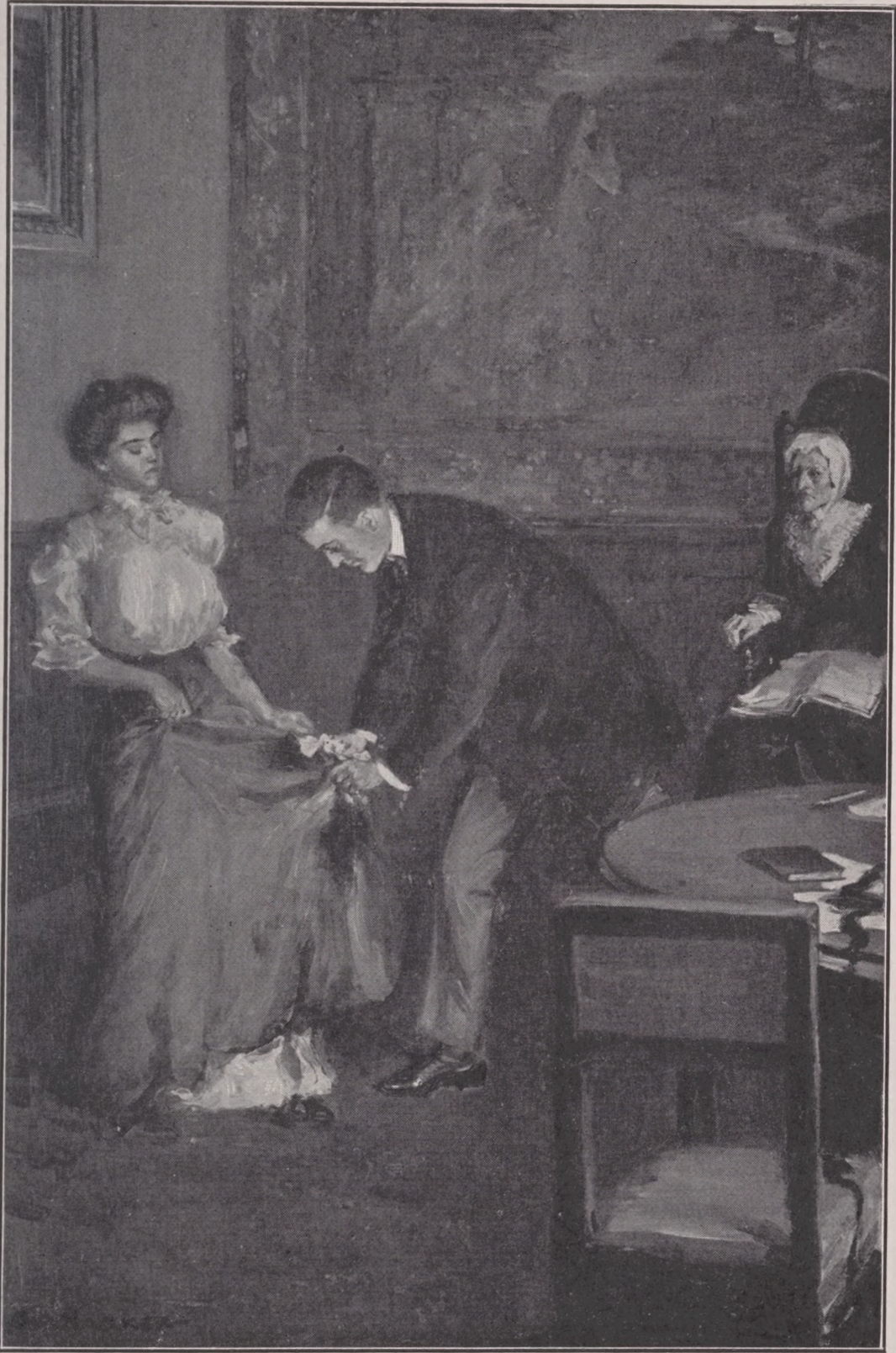
“Unless you want to ruin Fräulein Hartmann's dress completely, I should recommend you to ring for Sarah and leave the treatment to her. She can bring a sponge.”

“It will be no use!” said Irma, in a tone whose almost tragic note sharpened his remorse tenfold. To her the incident *was* well-nigh tragic, since the grey tweed was the most serviceable of those gowns packed so hurriedly in Vienna at dawn of day. “The dress is spoilt.”

“Then I'll give you another,” said Vincent, again without reflecting. “At least,” he modified, warned by a swift uplifting of the dark head, “*we* will give you another—won't we, granny? It's a clear family debt, since this one has been immolated on the altar of the family's interests.”

“Thank you, I do not require any dress,” said Fräulein Hartmann, with the most direct look he had yet had from her—(no, it must have been this moment, after all, that settled the question of the eyes)—and with a flame of anger before which he felt ready to go down into the dust.

The sponge was brought, and, during the remainder of the lesson, restitution not again referred



“With a good deal less than his usual presence of mind he was dabbing his handkerchief upon the stained skirt.”

to. But at the end Vincent lingered for a few words with his grandmother.

"You know, granny, we can't allow this," he tackled her straightway. "You'll have to invent some way of settling about that dress. Positively I can't have Fräulein Hartmann suffering on account of my awkwardness."

"In that case I should recommend more circumspection in the future. For the present an application of lemon-juice is all I can suggest."

"The dress will never be the same again."

"Very likely not."

"She will have to buy a new one."

"I daresay she can afford it. The pay for these lessons is rather abnormal."

An impatient sniff was heard. The reminder that Fräulein Hartmann was actually in his pay grated against something or other within him.

"She can't be abnormally well off, anyway," he said, in a tone which matched the sniff, "or she wouldn't be giving lessons. Any one with half an eye can see that she's been trained for quite other things. Just look at her carriage! Just look at the turn of her head!" (all of which things Lady Aurelia had looked at exhaustively already). "A *Reine en exile*, that's what she is. It's enough to convert one back to fairy tales and to the disguised princess business. It's always the real princess that suffers most, you know. I'll wager anything she couldn't sleep with a pea in her bed, and

there I've gone and put a whole handful of peas into her bed to-day. Dolt that I am! Why, there were actually tears in her eyes!"

Lady Aurelia made no remark; but, after one good look at her grandson, lowered her own eyes, perhaps to prevent any too easy reading of the resolution which at that exact moment touched the height of ripeness.

That had been a week ago, for, owing to a pressure of work, he had been obliged, last Friday, to send an apology to Eaton Place, where, indeed, his face had not been seen since the last Hungarian lesson. A whole week without the acquisition of a new Hungarian word! Small wonder that his zeal should be even keener than usual.

During the short drive the recollection of the ink-stained dress returned to throw its shadow on his pleasure. How discover a way of making good the loss, while sparing her susceptibilities? An anonymous gift would be too transparent, even supposing he had her address. Some pretext for raising the price of her lessons? Rather a prickly question, that, too. Would the old father be equally difficult to tackle? he wondered. He began to wish that he knew the father.

For one moment after he had opened the door of the morning-room it seemed to him as though his wish were accomplished; but—as happens in moments of accomplishment—the impression was joined to a disappointment that was almost dismay.

For in the mahogany-visaged, fiercely moustachioed and dishevelled-looking individual who rose at his entrance he was unable to recognise his conception of the sort of father that Fräulein Hartmann was likely to have. This looked more like an elderly gypsy caught fresh upon a *puszta*, and stuffed anyhow—without previous ablutions—into ready-made clothes two sizes too large for him. Upon his manly breast there flowed a concoction of purple and green which met the spectator like a square blow in the eye; and about his swarthy person there floated an odour of tobacco whose quality suggested the refuge of the pocket-handkerchief—the scented one, by preference.

From this terrifying-looking personage Vincent, dumb with surprise, looked inquiringly at his grandmother.

“This is Mr. Heketes, who has kindly undertaken to replace Fräulein Hartmann, prevented from pursuing her engagement.”

Nervousness was a thing to which Lady Aurelia, on principle, never owned, and to which it was not on record that she had ever succumbed. Nevertheless, Vincent, well acquainted with the grandmotherly symptoms, thought he detected a certain jar in the voice which, to his ear, spoke of a conscience not absolutely at rest. It took him but one moment to review the probabilities of the situation, another to recover his scattered wits—as Lady Aurelia knew by the characteristic squaring of the jaw.

“It is very obliging of Mr. Heketes,” he said, speaking from some suddenly reared pinnacle—presumably of ice-blocks, and with every inch of his physical height telling, in a way it had not told but a moment ago—“to have taken the trouble. But I am sorry he should have been inconvenienced for nothing. I was coming to tell Lady Aurelia that, in view of a very busy time in our department, I have decided to suspend the lessons for the present.”

He made the announcement with a coolness as secure as though it were not the fruit of a moment’s inspiration. In her heart of hearts Lady Aurelia did unwilling homage to so unimpeachable an exhibition of “cheek.”

Mr. Heketes’s complexion had darkened perceptibly.

“I—I haf bin incaged,” he muttered beneath his moustache.

“Not by me. I much regret the inconvenience you have suffered through my relatives mistaking my intentions. Naturally you shall have full compensation for the loss of time. How much do I owe you for this morning’s excursion?”

The black eyes began to roll ominously. “It wass to haf bin two times a week——”

“How much do I owe you?” repeated Vincent, with an increase both of politeness and iciness, and producing his purse.

“It wass to haf bin ten shillings a time, but——”

“You have upset other arrangements—I quite understand. Will a five-pound note cover your loss? I’m glad I happen to have one here. And now I should advise you not to lose another moment in making up for lost time.”

Walking to the door, he opened it deliberately, his hard-shut mouth smiling in queer fashion.

From the five-pound note in his hand Mr. Heketes glared back at Vincent. The combination of purple and green heaved in a way which betrayed the agitation of the bosom beneath. For a moment a jump straight at Mr. Denholm’s throat seemed not unlikely. With his eye he measured him, and—perhaps as a result of the measurement—decided to walk out through the open door.

At the little scene Lady Aurelia had looked on, passive, and actually smiling. For the life of her she could not help enjoying Vincent in a rage. Such grand, clean-cut rages they were—as different from the ordinary conception of rage as is white-hot iron from red.

A glance into the future seemed to show her her grandson ushering out the representative of some inimical State with just this same “grand air.”

The door closed upon Mr. Heketes, Vincent took one rather deep breath, as though after a deed accomplished, and then turned to deal with his grandmother. He found her chuckling.

“That’s *me* you’ve put out of the door, you know,

Vincent—it isn't poor Mr. Heketes at all. I wager anything you think it's my fault, somehow."

"I certainly think this arrangement is your doing."

The voice was not so icy as the one used for Mr. Heketes, but, in its unlooked-for mildness, quite as eloquent.

For all answer Lady Aurelia took from the table at her elbow an open note, which she handed across with something of a flourish.

"Read that, and you will see the falseness of the accusation."

She watched him while he read, glad to think that neither street nor number figured above the date. After all, there was no particular need to furnish him with a clue to the recent teacher's whereabouts.

This is what Vincent read:—

"MAY 2nd.

"DEAR MADAM,

"You will, I trust, excuse me if I tell you that I find myself unable to continue the lessons in your house. Mr. Denholm will, no doubt, be able to find another teacher.

"A line releasing me from my engagement is requested.

"Yours faithfully,

"IRMA HARTMANN."

“Curt enough, eh?” queried Lady Aurelia, noting the change upon his face.

“What did you do?”

“Sent her the line requested, of course; what else could I do? and set about hunting for another Hungarian teacher—a stiff job it was, too; and this is all the thanks I get for it!”

She uttered a cackle of a laugh.

“I don’t mean now—I mean before. What did you do in order to make her write this note? It’s the note of a person who has been insulted.”

“Insulted?” repeated the dowager, with a perfect command of countenance, marking another access of secret admiration; for this piercing of the motives of his relatives promised well for the future reading of the mind of alien statesmen. “What earthly object could I have in insulting a person who was getting you on so nicely in the language? However deficient her experience, her aptitude is obvious,” was graciously added. As matters stood, her ladyship could afford to be magnanimous. “You know how anxious I am for you to get on with your Hungarian.”

“I know you are anxious—about various things.”

“Which is no reason for trying to look like Irving just before he starts:

“ ‘Look here upon this picture, and on this.’

“Really, Vincent, you’re too tragical for the oc-

casian; and I haven't either poisoned my brother nor married a murderer."

"Perhaps I am," said Vincent, catching an abrupt sight of himself through her eyes. What was it all about, after all? A change of teacher. Quite harmless, if it had not been done behind his back. Of course, it was only the deception that riled him.

"I'm anxious enough about your Hungarian to regret the very neat way in which you juggled that brown man out of the room. You weren't serious, of course, about the giving up of the lessons?"

"Of course not," Vincent admitted, almost in his every-day manner. "But this is a matter of principle."

"The question is: Where are we to get another teacher from?"

"The question is: Am I a free British subject or not?" asked Vincent, between a jest and a warning. "I object to having my teachers chosen for me—at least, sometimes I do. And, anyway, I couldn't put up with that unwashed brigand. Neither his taste in neckties nor in tobacco falls in with mine. I'll find a teacher for myself."

"Certainly, my dear, just as you like," murmured Lady Aurelia, in so close a copy of the ex-Ambassador that Vincent was betrayed into a laugh such as Irving had certainly never uttered. On the whole, she was well contented with her share of the victory.

On the street again, Vincent stood for a moment

on the pavement, reflecting. The friendly terms on which he had parted with his grandmother had not deceived either of them. Each had decided outwardly to waive their cause of dissension, but each was aware that the cause was there, and consequently remained watchful. During that moment upon the pavement Vincent felt both wronged and baffled—also disappointed. Presently the sight of a vacant hansom, an enquiring countenance, an uplifted arm, seemed to give him an idea.

“Six, Fortague Street,” he said as he mounted. And to himself: “I’ll see what Cousin Minna says to it.”

“Six, Fortague Street,” was an address he frequently gave when in want either of comfort or merely of a listener.

CHAPTER V

“CLEAN WINE.”

“THE greatest beauty that London contains—that’s what my own Precious is; and as for brains and manners—nothing to come near them for ten miles around.”

“Is that meant for me or for De Wet?” enquired Vincent, met upon the threshold of Miss Bennett’s little, box-like drawing-room by the above address; “because in the former case I agree.”

Cousin Minna and De Wet were taking tea in *tête-à-tête*, she being a quite unremarkable spinster with her first bloom behind her—if, indeed, that rather opaque-looking skin had ever bloomed—he a very remarkable toy-terrier—in his own opinion, anyway, and presumably in that of the judges who had once awarded him a second prize at a provincial dog show. In the matter of deterioration of character those judges had much to answer for—that prize having gone straight to De Wet’s ridiculous head. From being merely harmlessly conceited he had become offensively so; compliments touching his appearance were expected by him as much as a

matter of course as he expected his dinner; nor—after the pattern of the wicked queen in the fairy tale, who daily interrogated her mirror as to the supremacy of her beauty over all ladies in the land—was there any chance of his retiring to his basket for the night until assured anew by his mistress that not another dog in the metropolis was fit to hold a candle—or, perhaps more appropriately, a bone?—to him. By rights he ought to have been called Apollo; instead of which, South African news—rife at the time of his appearance on the scene—had caused him to be named De Wet; the fitness of the appellation being justified by Minna on the ground that the Boer general was practically invisible, and that the toy-terrier could not well be much smaller than he was without sharing this invisibility. With a view to bringing him more up to date, there had lately been some talk of rechristening him “Togo”; but, considering that even the Serpentine at midsummer sent him into shivers of terror, the idea had been dropped as inappropriate.

Minna looked at her cousin critically.

“What is it you have come for?—to be scolded or patted on the back?”

“As if you ever patted me on the back! I’m not a toy-terrier, alas!”

“That means that you are aware of deserving a scolding. Give an account of yourself! It strikes me that I haven’t seen you for about a hundred years—not to speak to, anyway.”

"Minna, I've got a grievance."

"Sit down and tell me about it. But, first, please say a word to De Wet. Don't you see that he's just quivering to be taken notice of? I can't conceive what induces people to trample upon an innocent dog's feelings in this barbarous fashion. Just mention that he's the flower of his generation, and it will be all right."

"And you think it right to pamper such vanity?"

"A means of self-defence. Unless you put his mind at rest about his looks his eye will haunt us all the time we're talking."

The toll of compliments and caresses having been somewhat impatiently paid, and the canine atom contentedly withdrawn to the hearthrug, Minna felt at liberty to turn her attention more exclusively to her cousin.

"So you have a grievance. Against whom?"

"Against granny. She's been plotting."

"Does she ever do anything else? But I must ask again: against whom?"

"Against me, of course; that is to say, against my freedom of action. Why shouldn't I take Hungarian lessons—or ancient Celtic lessons, for the matter of that—from any teacher I choose?"

"From which I gather that the plot is directed not against you, but against the Hungarian teacher. What's she been doing to her?"

"That I don't know exactly. But she's stung her into giving up her engagement. She denies it, of

course, but that makes no difference. Just listen to this."

There followed a vivid sketch of the recent interview. When it came to the ejection of Mr. Heketes, Minna laughed in a way that always did Vincent good. She was generally described as a "comfortable" person, but her laugh distinctly held the very cream of this comfort. After the laugh, while he still spoke, the steady grey eyes left his face to wander to the fireplace, before which the morsel of canine flesh lay luxuriously stretched, gorged with flattery and bread-and-butter.

"Of course, she suspects a flirtation. As if she hadn't had a thousand proofs of my incombustibility!"

"Yes, she knows you—but the girl?"

"The girl? Ha, ha! I tell you, Minna, she isn't a girl at all—not in the ordinary flesh-and-blood sense, anyway; I've sometimes thought she's made of wood. As prim as a Puritan, I tell you; never gives one a chance of shaking hands with her, and never even looks in my direction, if she can help it."

There was a certain wrathfulness in the tone which did not escape Minna's ears, though her eyes were still on the fireplace, and which failed to surprise her for the reason that she had happened to come in during one of the Hungarian lessons. Miss Bennett and Lady Aurelia did not invariably agree upon all points, but in this instance Minna found

herself quite appreciating the dowager's motives. It had struck even herself as—to say the least of it—quaint that Vincent should be taking lessons from a person with all the makings of a professional beauty.

“Why don't you say anything, Minna? I thought you were going to help me?”

“To another Hungarian teacher?”

“Bother that! I'll beat one up fast enough. But what I would like you to do would be to give Fräulein Hartmann a lift, somehow. She's been hunted out of Eaton Place—whether directly or indirectly alters nothing—and losing two guineas a week so suddenly *must* make a difference to her; and, besides, her best dress is spoiled by *me*.”

“Do you want me to give her another?”

“I shouldn't advise you to try, unless you want to be withered up, same as I was last week. But couldn't you procure her other lessons? German ones, of course—she knows both languages. It worries me to think of her possible situation—and she may have given up other chances for this lesson, don't you see? It's quite natural, surely, that I should feel rather guilty about it all, and anxious that she—and her father, of course—shouldn't suffer on this account.”

“Quite natural.”

“And I'm sure she's not used to being poor. If you had seen her——”

"I have seen her," said Minna, in her very quietest manner.

"To be sure! Well, don't you agree with me that she's not the sort of person one likes to think of as in a pecuniary fix?"

"Not at all the sort of person. What is her address.?"

Vincent looked discomfited, also slightly embarrassed.

"I haven't got it. Granny managed everything, you know. Of course, the girls will have it, since the old man is their German master; but if I ask for it they'll jump to all sorts of conclusions, of course."

"I see," said Minna; and, together with a suspicious jerk at the corners of her lips, there followed a mental rider:

"So that's why I am to ask for it, I suppose. Well done, Mr. Diplomat!"

Then aloud:

"Well, there's no use for the address until I have some pupils to suggest. I'll look about me first."

"Thank you, Minna," he said, with a fervour of which he was not in the least aware, though she was. "That's a load off my conscience."

"So much the better. But, meanwhile, take my advice, and don't attempt any unloading on your own account. I happen to understand your motives, but other people mightn't. I am quite sure it

would be more—diplomatic, let's say, to leave the negotiations to me."

She was looking at him straight now, with eyes which seemed to be absolutely transparent with truth; and true they were, indeed, though it was a woman's truth, which means only as much of it yielded up as is considered fit for male perusal.

He acquiesced readily, conscious principally that the last thread between him and the Hungarian teacher was not irrevocably severed. Yet, even while he acquiesced, he frowned, for the stress laid upon a certain adjective grated.

"What makes you say 'diplomatic' with that high and mighty sniff? Doesn't it smell good?"

"On the contrary; it's just a trifle too heavily perfumed for my taste."

"With what? Roses? Violets?"

"No—incense. The family seems to have been particularly busy over the burning of it lately. I understand from Chrissie and Cissy that your prospects are more dazzling than ever. In fact, I'm beginning to wonder how any one can look at you without getting sunstroke."

"*You* can, anyway. But, joking apart, things *are* looking up. This very day I was given one of the most thorny jobs a-going—the construction of a bomb with the appearance of a sweetmeat; and I've a notion that the chief will want to kiss me when he reads the draft. The other fellows had bungled it completely."

"Ah!"

Minna was leaning back in her chair, rather lazily, it struck Vincent, throwing atoms of sugar to the atom of a dog on the hearthrug.

"It means a step of the ladder, unless I'm mistaken. I do believe now that I have every chance of the Roman secretaryship—*en attendant* Budapest.

Minna threw another morsel of sugar without answering.

"Minna, you're enraging! Do leave that infernal dog alone. You might at least pretend to get up an interest in my career. You used to care about what happened to me."

"Are you and your career identical?"

"Of course we are. But look here—I'd like this threshed out, if you please. Whatever you are, don't be sphinx-like. It's not the first time I've caught you sniffing. What's there behind the sniff?—that's what I want to know. Do you really mean to say that you doubt of my success?"

The question was put with a serious wonder which, in its supreme self-confidence, brushed the *naïve*.

"I don't doubt about your getting to the top of the ladder, if that's what you mean by success."

"Then what?"

"You really would like me to say what I think?"

"I think I should like to strangle you if you don't."

"Well, then, my inmost conviction is that you're about as well adapted to be a diplomat as a porcupine is adapted to be a pocket-handkerchief."

Across the tea-table Vincent stared at his cousin with a countenance emptied for the moment of intelligence by the force of sheer surprise. Thus stares a person who, without warning, receives a slap on the face, and has not yet had time to get angry.

"Your similes are vigorous," he conceded, as his senses returned to him, and looking all the grimmer for the sudden smile. "I'll trouble you now for the grounds of your belief. Why am I not suited to be a diplomat? Nothing wrong with my thinking machine, mind," he added, with a quite discernible note of warning in his voice.

"No; you're not too stupid—I agree there." ("Thank you," murmured Vincent, in an ironical *sotto voce*.) "You've got the mental qualifications, I think, but not the moral ones."

"Which means?"

"Which means that though, as I have already remarked, I quite believe in your getting to the top of the ladder, I think you will be paying too high a price for it."

"What price?"

"I rather fancy it will be the price of self-respect."

Vincent pushed back his chair impatiently and got up.

“I thought it was that! You’ve given it me before, but never quite so plainly as this. The old fable of accredited Machiavellists! We’re a set of snakes, aren’t we?—plotting day and night for the undoing of our fellow-creatures! Really, Minna, I have hitherto given you credit for being a grown-up person, but you seem to see bogeys as easily as does a nervous baby.”

“If you’re *not* plotting day and night,” replied Minna, unmoved, “for the good of your country, and consequently for the undoing of other countries, then you’re not doing your duty—that’s all.”

Vincent, hands in pockets, and looking several sizes too large for the room, was trying to find a clear space wherein to relieve his feelings by means of physical exercise—not successfully. He now turned with a movement of exasperation.

“Out of your own mouth I condemn you! What more than his duty can a man do for the earning of self-respect?”

“Nothing, when it’s Fate that imposes it. But in the case of a career the duty is self-chosen, isn’t it?”

“And no honest man would choose it, you mean? That comes to saying that all the Corps Diplomatiques of all the world are liars and intriguers by nature, and that self-respect is a quality not to be found within the walls of an embassy?”

Minna laughed again, as comfortably as ever.

“There you go again! Much too headlong for

a diplomat! *I* never said that the profession at large is devoid of self-respect—I merely hazarded the opinion that *you*, personally, would find some difficulty in preserving the article, under the circumstances.”

“Your reasons, please!” fumed Vincent, turning and returning upon the eight square yards of clear space.

“It’s this way it strikes me: some people have got the knack of keeping their private and their official morals in water-tight compartments; you haven’t got that knack. For these people there’s nothing degrading about telling official lies, or half-truths, or whatever you choose to call them, or making mental reservations, or shuffling and fencing and juggling with words generally, which in any diplomacy worth the name I hold to be an indispensable art. For you this same practice *would* be degrading, because you would be acting against your own inner convictions—violating some instinct within you which I don’t believe you’ll ever be able to kill. You were always rather a prig in the matter of truth-speaking, you know. Don’t I remember during those Easter holidays you spent at Merriton the half-astonished, half-scandalised face you used to make when mamma, giving her order for the afternoon, would say to the footman, ‘Not at home for any one to-day, mind, William.’ ‘But, Aunt Sophy, surely you *are* at home?’ you would object, wide-eyed. And when she told you she had a head-

ache and did not want to be disturbed: 'Then why not *say* you have got a headache?' Oh, you were killing, in your way. And the peaches—surely you remember the story of the peaches, Vincent?"

The grunt which came from the perambulating figure could have stood equally for assent or the reverse.

"You and Hal Thornley had been visiting the peach-houses—in the gardener's absence, of course, though in my company. Just as we were successfully withdrawing, the head man barred our passage. I can hear his tones still, threatening, though respectful:

"'Now, I'm not going to do you young gentlemen the disgrace of turning out your pockets before the young lady; I'll content myself if you will give me your word of honour as gentlemen that there's no peaches in 'em!"

"'I give you my word—not one!' said Hal, without a moment's hesitation, and looking the gardener straight in the eyes; whereas you first turned scarlet, shifted from one foot to the other, and finally, tearing your cap off your head, sent half a dozen peaches bobbing off your shoulders to the ground.

"Previous experience had taught Hal that a cap is sometimes a safer *cache* than a pocket. You had been quite pleased with the cleverness of the idea, but you couldn't act upon it when it came to the scratch, even though it didn't entail telling a lie—in words. But you *could* knock Hal down, and

squarely, too, when he called you a tell-tale. In those days you were certainly not of opinion that '*la parole a été donnée à l'homme pour déguiser sa pensée*'; and I don't believe you're any different now. You're the sort of person who likes playing *cartes sur table*, as distinguished from those who enjoy having cards up their sleeve. You're quite able to get them up your sleeve, and, if it happens to serve your end, I believe you'd do it; but your rather hyper-sensitive conscience would be protesting all the time, as I'm quite sure it protested against the white lie you told Mr. Heke—something or other about giving up the lessons. No need to knock down my furniture, though"—as Vincent lunged blindly against a bookcase—"even if I have happened to hit a nail upon the head. *That's* where I see the danger to your self-respect. It's a question of individuality, I maintain. The same thing applies to the stage. For some women publicity is a moral degradation, for others not. Just the other day I was reading in the biography of some celebrity about the agonies she underwent each time she was called upon to make a spectacle of herself, and of her most sacred emotions. People seemed to think her a martyr—to me she appears despicable. The moment that she *felt* degraded she *was* degraded. The higher or the lower actress—that is, the one who is either carried out of her personality by her art, or the one who simply doesn't rise to the level of scruples—is all

right. It all depends upon whether you are doing the thing with conviction or against your conviction. I don't know if I can make my meaning clear?"

"You're doing your best, anyway."

"I've heard enough about embassies to know that they're nothing if not hotbeds of intrigue—political intrigue, of course, which the world has agreed to consider respectable. The crooked paths may be frightfully interesting, I've no doubt; but you've got to learn to turn and twist before you can follow them comfortably, and, somehow, I can't quite see you wriggling round the corners. How do you like the idea, for instance, of having secret rendezvous with a spy anxious to sell his country into your hands, or of bribing some menial soul to let you have the pickings of a ministerial paper-basket, and that same evening sitting at the table of that same minister and exchanging with him smiling *banalités*?"

"Those horrors don't exist in English diplomacy."

"Don't they? Then English diplomacy must be several lengths behind Continental. It's no wonder we're considered so *naïve*. But never mind the paper-basket—that's the small dirty work. It's much bigger work, of course, to give solemn assurance of your—that is, of your country's peaceful intentions, while behind the convenient screen that same country is arming to the teeth; but is there any radical difference between the two jobs?"

“Minna, you’re horrible! I won’t listen to another word. Don’t imagine you’ll persuade me that I’m on the wrong tack. Why, this morning, while I was drafting that note, no fish in the sea could have felt more completely in its element than I did. Oh, no—I *know* I’m a born diplomat.”

“And would the note be acted upon if disregarded?”

“Wouldn’t it just!”

“Ah! that’s why you felt in your element. You knew it was no *pose*, but an over-board business, and you were only too glad of the chance of calling a spade a spade, instead of having to pretend that it was a walking-stick or a sun-shade.”

Vincent frowned portentously.

“Ridiculous! Why should I have gone into diplomacy if I didn’t feel that way?”

“Because you’re in love with place and power, and because diplomacy—for family reasons—offered the line of least resistance.”

“Power—ah, yes! I don’t deny that. But can a man be in love with anything nobler? Minna, you don’t know the delight of feeling that you are master of your task, and master, consequently, of a whole lot of men. Pawns on the political chess-board—that’s what the mass of them are, and your hand to be the one to move them some day, perhaps—who knows? The step from an embassy to a minister’s bench has been taken before now.”

Minna’s eyes followed him as, faster than ever,

he turned upon the clear space, smiling straight into his visions.

"It's not power in the abstract that you're in love with, but with your personal power in the concrete. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, you're suffering from a disease popularly known by the name of swelled head. One of its symptoms is an unquenchable thirst for flattery. You scoff at De Wet because of his greed for compliments, but you're quite as bad, really."

"I get none from you, anyway."

"Because you're not a toy-terrier, as you lately observed yourself. I've resigned all hope of uprooting De Wet's conceit, but I still occasionally dream of curing you. That's another reason why I can't gush over your choice of a path of life. There's too much pomp and circumstance about an embassy, and there's nothing so bad for a swelled head as pomp and circumstance."

Vincent, giddy with turning and returning, fell on to a chair, laughing a little ruefully.

"A comfortable sort of person to come to for sympathy, in truth! I don't in the least understand what makes me come to you, Minna!"

"I think I do. It's because you get no incense here. Apt to become a little choky at times, you know. Instead, you get what the Germans call 'clean wine,' and you can't help approving the flavour of it—another proof that you're a square peg in a round hole."

“But you just said that my thirst for flattery was unquenchable?”

“So it is; but man is a composite animal, you know, and the better part of you is not yet quite choked off by the other.”

“Thank you. I think that is about as much ‘clean wine’ as I can carry for the present. Any objection to changing the subject?”

“None whatever. I’ve another lying all ready. Do you know that Bob Rendall is in town?”

“Is he? I knew that he was on his way home.”

Minna stirred the dregs of her tea rather thoughtfully.

“Has it ever struck you, Vincent, that that man is a hero?”

“A hero? You’re beyond me, Minna. Where, in the name of all that is inappropriate, do you discover anything heroic about old Bob?”

“It’s drab-coloured heroism, if you like—heroism *incog*, I should call it; but it’s the right article, all the same. Just think of the existence he leads and *how* he leads it! Have you ever heard him complain of any single thing in the world?”

“Oh, he’s an excellent drudge, no doubt. No one but a drudge could stand that life.”

To judge from the tone of his voice, the subject of Bob Rendall’s qualities did not grip Vincent’s attention very hard; and almost in the same breath he said:

"You won't forget about Fräulein Hartmann, will you?"

There was less danger of Minna forgetting than Vincent at all knew.

Once more *en tête-à-tête* with De Wet, it was Fräulein Hartmann who filled her mind exclusively. One glimpse of her quite sufficed to awaken in any one with an æsthetic sense the desire for a second. After Vincent's visit the desire became a longing.

Women with broad, opaque faces and square, solid figures will rarely own to anything warmer than a cousinly sympathy for male relatives who are, moreover, their juniors by some five or six years. It is, therefore, probable that even *en tête-à-tête*—not with De Wet, but with her own soul—Minna had never given the right name to her feeling for Vincent. Her sense of humour alone would have acted as a preventive. But her love (for that really was the right name, whether she knew it or not) did not rejoice in the orthodox blindness attributed to that passion, but was, on the contrary, rather inconveniently far-seeing—quite alive to certain defects of construction in its object; which was, perhaps, as much the reason of its having awakened no response as was the plain face itself. As for hope, she had never even glanced in that direction. Here, too, her sense of humour had stepped in savingly; and what between this and common sense, and, perhaps, also an absence of passion in her nature, she certainly could lay no claim

to unhappiness. The future without Vincent might be a little grey, but it would not be coal-black. It was not *her* future she was anxious about, but *his*. She, too, had a "right sort of marriage" in her mind for him, but not exactly the same sort as had Lady Aurelia. Sometimes she would wonder how long Vincent's immunity from woman would last, and whether, when it ceased, it would be his head or his heart that carried the day. Until now she had watched in vain. To-day, for the first time, it had occurred to her that possibly that immunity had reached its limit. As she sat alone in her tiny drawing-room the desire to know a little more about the first girl who seemed to have made something like an impression upon Vincent grew keen, perhaps only out of a sort of jealous curiosity. Of afterthought there was, so far, none in her mind. Even to her "dowdy" notions a paid teacher appeared too many miles below Vincent; but the curiosity was not to be gainsaid. And, besides, it was a measure of prudence. Only by her promise to play Providence to the Hartmanns could she hope to keep Vincent from taking the *rôle* of Providence into his own hands. And that must, at all costs, be avoided. It would not be fair upon the girl.

"But she certainly *is* a beauty," said Minna, aloud, to the fireplace; upon which De Wet, to whose consciousness the familiar expression penetrated, wagged his thread of a tail in his sleep.

CHAPTER VI

THE "MURRICLE"

THE cold lunch was on the table—in Irma's hand Gabrielle's last letter. Her upper lip curved scornfully as she read, for among the qualities laid bare by the moral earthquake of last February was a sort of haughty intolerance for anything that fell short of the highest standard of action. Nothing but first-class sentiments and acts could hope to appeal to her nowadays. It was this which had divided her from her mother, and which, logically speaking, ought to have divided her from her father, too; only that here its force was counteracted by a very passion of pity—just as one law of nature is liable to be paralysed by another, of which the gruesome exhibition known as "looping the loop" furnishes the most telling object-lesson. In Gabrielle's case the pity had not sufficed to paralyse the intolerance, perhaps because, in spite of Mrs. Harding's private fortune having proved sufficient to ward off the dreaded necessity of active bread-winning, Gabrielle pitied herself so persistently. Out of her sister's letters it was not hard for Irma

to evolve the *pose* adopted by her mother—that of a social martyr whose life is forever galled and blighted by the chain which binds her to a criminal. It was she herself who insisted most loudly on the criminality. It was not in whitewashing her unfortunate husband, it was in blackening him yet further, that she saw a hope of at least partial social salvation. The more public the repudiation of the crime and the man, the less chance did there seem of being identified with either. The spoiled child of former days, received back into the bosom of her forgiving family, readily joined her voice to those who had begun by saying, "I told you so!"

At the sound of her father's ring Irma crumpled up the letter in her hand. There were things hinted at there which she would rather keep from the bankrupt's eyes.

"Papa, what is it?" she asked, with a pang of alarm, for upon his tired face fresh failure was written.

"Just the usual thing; another lesson gone." He sat down, smiling rather forlornly.

"Which lesson?"

"The one at Eaton Place. It seems that the two young ladies have made such marvellous progress under my tuition that they are now in the happy position of being able to do without it. Thus Lady Aurelia informed me this morning, wreathed in smiles—or in something that was meant for smiles, I suppose, though teeth are usually considered an

essential part of the performance. It seems rather difficult to hit off the right medium with one's pupils, doesn't it? If they don't get on fast enough you're told that you have evidently not got the knack, and if they get on too fast, then they can do without you. Result in both cases: the sack."

He laughed as desolately as he had smiled, while upon his unrestful face the fine network of wrinkles played into a succession of patterns.

Irma kept her lips tight-closed for several moments, not because she had nothing to say, but because she was afraid of saying too much. She thought she understood—better than her father did. It was not because the Miss Denholms were getting on too well with their German that her father had to be dismissed—it was because he *was* her father. The scene which had led to her own evacuation of the house in Eaton Place started up again in her memory—not differing vitally in detail from that which Vincent's knowledge of his grandmother had helped him mentally to reconstruct. It had not been a violent scene, but it had admirably fulfilled its purpose. Lady Aurelia never wasted power, and she had accurately measured the degree of susceptibility of the object to be operated upon. Where an insinuation sufficed, why insult? When a pin-prick served, wherefore make a mess with a dagger?

The day on which Vincent had been obliged to miss his lesson had furnished the welcome oppor-

tunity. Behind the shield of a friendly, almost motherly warning touching the necessity of prudence for girls in her position, it had been quite easy to plant the shaft. The ink-stained dress, too, had come in very usefully; since, obviously, a young man might be suspected of wishing to seize on the pretext for a gift, which, in Fräulein Hartmann's own interest, she would earnestly advise her not to accept. A certain degree of admiration on his side was surmised, was, indeed, pronounced to be unavoidable, considering the Fräulein's looks—which Lady Aurelia handsomely acknowledged—but since the difference of station placed honourable intentions out of the question, her ladyship considered that she was only doing her duty in putting Fräulein Hartmann on her guard against the wickedness of the world. No girl of her culture would like being made a fool of—would she?

The result, perfectly foreseen, was that Irma, having flung back Lady Aurelia's advice in her face, left the house in a rage against the grandmother, which naturally embraced the grandson, and, having torn up three notes in succession, at last produced one whose cold reticence had been considered fit even for Vincent's inspection.

Accept his gifts, indeed! What did that hag take her for? At every fresh reminder the tremor of rage shook her anew. It came over her again now, as in the latest development she recognised the same hand. A measure of prudence, clearly.

So long as her father frequented the house the connexion could not be considered finally severed. How disgusting the world was! Could they never let one forget for a minute that one was a woman and that there are such things as men in the world?

To her father, fearing to alarm him, she had told a cock-and-bull story touching the cessation of the Hungarian lessons; and now—for the brave front must be maintained—she talked gaily, though slightly at random, about the pressure of the “season,” which naturally reacted unfavourably upon the acquisition of languages, and of a new agency which promised marvels in the way of employment. Finally she sent him off to the one afternoon lesson that still remained him, not quite so despondent as he had come in. So long as he was in the room she kept it up. Once alone, she sat down with her face in her hands, a prey to one of the rare fits of discouragement in which she occasionally indulged. Around her the silence was broken only by the strumming of a wheezy piano on the first floor, and by the flow of Mrs. Martin’s observations, which had a habit of rising chronically from the bowels of the earth. The hum of traffic in Cromwell Road seemed like the voice of a river sweeping past the foot of the deserted street.

With one leg jammed into the frame of the dim mirror above the mantelpiece, Vindobona sprawled against her own image. By this time the pink skirt had absorbed so much London soot as to be no

longer very pink, and, owing to the frequent application of Pattie's thumb, the flat nose showed a chronic smudge; but, for all that, the little doll was as nimble as ever—though to-day her antics were unmarked, overshadowed by anxious thoughts.

Occupation had been failing lately, and something else had been failing, too, as Irma could not help seeing—her father's health. Even to her inexperienced eyes he looked like a man whose physical power of resistance is broken as well as his mental. It would require rest, care, comfort; instead of which he had to tramp the streets in search of bread. Oh, it was bitter! And probably it would grow bitterer yet. Want, which had as yet kept at a decent distance, seemed to be drawing indecently near. Already the first illusive gloss was off the novelty of the experiment, just as the freshness was gone from the relics of her Viennese wardrobe. Even her boots were all worn through from much treading of the pavement, and English boots were so terribly expensive!

A hundred sordid details rose to her mind, and each detail added a new sting to "the thought of the morrow." One of those panics was upon her in which she always saw herself poised upon a high rock, with an abyss at her feet. Instinctively she shut her eyes. Was there nothing to clutch? No hand to steady herself by? Where find comfort? At the new agency, perhaps?

As she formed the thought she got up. Yes—

she must go to the office. The mere thought of giving up the battle was ridiculous.

An hour later she had left the agency—without the comfort expected. The chances of employment were even smaller, the fee greater, than she had expected, and the stare of the young man in charge had been distinctly impertinent. The sensation of being a straw upon the torrent of life had seldom been so strong upon her—that sensation which, during the first weeks of her London life, had filled her with an unreasoning terror, not of the hurrying crowds, but of losing hold of her own identity. One human atom seemed to be so utterly irrelevant to the bulk of the human monster filling the streets. It appeared incredible that each should possess its own consciousness, its own hopes and fears, and joys and troubles. The terror was upon her again to-day, perhaps because it was a Saturday crowd, that is swollen to a Saturday size and in the orthodox Saturday hurry. The red and yellow and green posters with the latest news of the Russian fleet's progress towards its doom, which she had seen that morning laid out neatly upon the pavement, with little mounds of dirt acting as paper-weights upon the corners, had long since been stamped to rags by horses' hoofs and gone to make bright the rubbish-heaps. At the street corners the 'bus conductors sang their siren's song as fervently as ever did mermaid luring voyagers to her cave—shamelessly making eyes at every likely looking old lady, until

some breathless question as to the vehicle's destination abruptly extinguished all personal interest.

"Light Blue's yer colour," would be all the disappointed representative of Dark Blue might condescend to utter before turning his back, if, indeed, he condescended so far.

To-day the transpiring tempters' songs passed unheeded by Irma, since, alas! there was no hurry; she might as well spare her pennies. No pupil waited for her anywhere. With a slower step than usual she threaded her way down Brompton Road, half-dazed by the crowd, and yet only dimly aware of it.

"Only a penny, lidy!"

Irma turned her head, to meet the dog-like gaze of a woman in a battered sailor hat, with a shrivelled baby in one hand and a bunch of dusty boot-laces in the other. At the same time she became aware of a sound close enough to penetrate through the rush of the traffic, and infinitely more soothing. She discovered that she was straight in front of what she knew to be the Brompton Oratory, though she had never set foot within it. A simple connexion of ideas sent her thoughts straight to Pattie, for it was Pattie who had told her that benediction at the Oratory was "that beautiful you 'ad to cry, whether you wanted or no." And other things, too, Pattie had told her, on the day on which she had discovered the slavey transfixed with astonishment before the small silver crucifix which Irma had hung

at the head of her bed. The attitude resembled that in which she had been surprised before "Winderboney," only that here the grin was replaced by a deep gape of wonder.

"Oh, miss, is it a fact? You are one of us? Holy saints, what a treat!"

The face she turned towards Irma was almost cut in two by the breadth of the grin.

"What do you mean by 'one of us'?"

"Why, a Roman Catholic, to be shure!—what they call a Papist in these parts. It's the thing Mrs. Martin always ends with when she's used up all the other words. You wouldn't have that croocifix there if you weren't. Oh, the ghrand treat! the ghrand treat! I might ha' known it by your sweet looks. And shure Mrs. Martin will 'ave to 'unt for a new word now; how ever could she abuse me for bein' what her own lodger is? Oh, it's a blessed thing, miss, isn't it, to belong to the blessed Church?"

"Yes, of course," said Irma, a little hurriedly. Though she had learnt her *Catechism* all right and undergone all the indispensable ceremonies, she had never felt acutely conscious of the blessing to which Pattie referred. In the social circles in which the Hardings had moved the mention of religion in everyday life would have been considered as indecent as its open denial. You went to mass Sunday if the weather was fine, partly because other people went, and partly as a tacit protest against growing

Socialism. Otherwise you left those things in a respectful seclusion. Even the silver crucifix—the orthodox offering of every Austrian mother to her daughter on the occasion of her first communion—owed to a vaguely sentimental value the fact of being there at all. It required Pattie's unexpected delight to make Irma even very clearly aware of its presence in her room. It was then that Pattie had begun to gush about the Oratory, and in a burst of confidence had pulled out from below her dress a piece of twine upon which were suspended about half a dozen medals of different sizes and various metallic compositions. Ere this Irma had wondered what it was that jingled so about Pattie; now she considered the mystery penetrated.

"If it wasn't for these," Pattie told her, "I'd never get through the day at all. Here's St. Florian—the one against fire, you know. It's he who don't let the linen get singed when it's hung to dry. And here's the blessed St. Anthony, who helps me to find the things I've lost; and——"

"And is there no saint to mend those you have broken?" asked Irma, not sorry for the opportunity of airing a little irony—a wasted effort, needless to say.

"It would need a murricle to do that, miss, you know," said Pattie, with the sincerest of sighs. "And Father O'Donovan says the time for murricles is past. But they do kind o' shove you up, somehow. And when things are worse than usual

—such as when I broke the washing-basin in the best bedroom—and the medals don't seem enough, I take a dose of the organ at the Horatory first time I've the chance. It *do* drive all Mrs. Martin's words clean out of my head, it do. And that stuff they burn at benediction makes me feel so wunnerful good, with its holy smell. I'd like to keep enough of it to last me the week; and I keep sniffin' it up until I'm bound the peiple beside me must think I've a cold in the head."

At the recollection the teeth reappeared in full force.

It was this that came back to Irma when the woman with the baby roused her from her abstraction.

"Makes you cry, whether you want to or no."

On the whole, Irma would rather like to cry. It would at least be a change from the chronic gulping down of unpleasant emotions. Things were undoubtedly "worse than usual." Should she try Pattie's remedy? After a moment's irresolution she turned quickly towards the steps.

The tears promised by Pattie did not come, held back, perhaps, by the sense of publicity; but something else came instead—a gradual and yet swift appeasement, which descended upon her spirit, without reasoning and without apparent reason, as a calm once fell upon the lake of Genesareth at the voice of One who bade the elements be still. As she knelt among the crowd, with the strains of

Tantum Ergo rolling past her ears, forming no articulate prayer, for none would come to the unpractised lips, Irma knew of no ground why the future should look less black than five minutes ago; she knew only that all these people about her had come to seek what she was seeking, and that, in the sense of community, a little of the weight had been lifted. Perhaps, after all, there was something to clutch at. These worshippers seemed to think so, at any rate. It was all very illogical, of course, and the merest tyro in the school of modern thought could have told her that this was but a natural effect upon her senses of music and lighted candles; but, for all that, it was comforting. Here, where Pattie had so often laid in her fresh store of courage and of the "holy smell," Irma, too, groped blindly for courage. It would be something to have Pattie's courage, beside which her own seemed to herself to shrink into insignificance. She had at least the consciousness of a high duty performed, the rapture of a sacrifice—but what had Pattie if she had not *this*? "A mother, miss?" she had once said, in answer to a question of Irma's. "Yes, I suppose I 'ad a mother, same as other people, but I don't rightly rec'lect any one ever belongin' to me." It was conceivable that that rough, red hand might require something very visible, very tangible, to clutch at. In this light, even the bunch of jingling medals became a trifle less ludicrous. Undoubtedly Pattie had a worse time of it than she had. And

so probably had that woman outside with the baby, to whom she now remembered with a pang that she had given nothing. Would she be there still? she asked herself anxiously; and when, a few minutes later she found her at her post, rejoiced with a pleasure that seemed quite out of proportion with the cause. The wearer of the sailor hat got more than merely the pennies saved from the 'bus, and got it, too, without any diminishment of her stock in trade; for, after one glance at the bootlaces, Irma decided that, after all, she had not sunk quite so low as *that* yet.

"I wonder if it has never occurred to her to strangle the baby with the bootlaces?" Irma mused, as she pursued her homeward way, with the image of the horrible little withered face dancing before her mind's eye. "At first sight it would seem the most appropriate use to put them to."

And then she remembered the mother's eyes, and wondered how many things it had taken to give them that dog-like look. And so it happened that she went home thinking not exclusively of her own difficulties.

Upon the table there lay a letter which the four o'clock post had brought. In a large, legible hand she was informed that Miss Bennett would be much pleased if Fräulein Hartmann would appoint an hour at which it would be convenient for her to call, in order to settle about some German lessons which Miss Bennett wished to take.

Irma read the note twice over, and then burst out laughing, a little excitedly. It almost looked, didn't it, as if one of those "murricles," which even Pattie admitted to be out of date, had actually come to pass?

"But who the dickens is Miss Bennett?" thought Irma, "and how the dickens is she aware of my existence?"

CHAPTER VII

THE "OUTING."

"MINNA, I've just looked in, in order to——"
Barely within the doorway he stood still, doubting the testimony of his eyes.

Meanwhile, from beside a table covered with books and with writing apparatus, Miss Bennett rose, a little hurriedly.

"Ah, it's you, Vincent? How stupid of Wilson not to turn you off! I told her to leave us undisturbed during the lessons. You know Fräulein Hartmann, of course; she is helping me to work up my German. The rust is ever so much thicker upon it than I imagined."

The variation from Minna's usual placidity amounted—for her—almost to flurry.

"I am delighted to hear it," said Vincent, accomplishing a bow; though whether the delight applied to the rust or to the removal of it was not made evident.

The bow was returned—from an almost arctic distance; and then Irma, wondering whether he had noted and drawn any false conclusions from her

first flush of pure astonishment, began to gather together the books.

"It is scarcely worth while beginning a new dictation to-day, is it, Miss Bennett?"

Minna's answer was rather eager: "No, I think not. You would like to be released, I am sure. I shall expect you on Monday."

Irma half got into one of her gloves, and then looked about for her parasol.

"I will hold it for you while you put on your gloves, if you will allow me," said Vincent, dexterously possessing himself of the article. But the demand in the gesture of her outstretched hand only became more imperative.

"Thank you—I will put them on as I go down." She had almost reached the door, when he said, with a fair though spasmodic imitation of jocularity:

"You haven't told me yet how you are satisfied with your pupil?"

"Which pupil?"

"Miss Bennett. She is my cousin, you know, so, of course, I feel responsible for her progress."

"No, I didn't know," said Irma, and, making some prim little remark about "suitable improvement," she went out.

When Vincent turned back he found Minna looking at him with recovered composure and some symptoms of severity about the set of her mouth.

"Now, Vincent, please let it be clearly understood

that this is the last time you walk in upon my German lesson."

"How can I help walking in upon it when you operate in this underground fashion? Did I as much as know that you were having German lessons?"

Vincent, looking utterly unsnubbed, had settled himself comfortably in a chair. That his humour had by no means suffered from the reproof could be inferred from the fact that unsolicited—though as gingerly as though he were handling a new-laid egg—he lifted De Wet to his knee.

"So ignorant was I of your movements that I turned in here with the express purpose of inquiring whether you had found any pupils for Fräulein Hartmann."

"It was because at this dissipated season I couldn't find any that I sacrificed myself, though you know as well as I do that I have about as much use for German as for air-balloons. I'm not destined for diplomacy, you know. It was your description of the forlorn pair of foreigners which pushed me to do it; so the least you could do would be to let me get as much of my money's worth out of the lessons as my anti-linguistic talents permit of."

"Minna, you're a brick!" was all that Vincent observed, as he very gently stroked the toy-terrier's ears.

"If by that you mean that I'm more blindly trustful in human nature than granny is, then you're

mistaken. Good-looking girls having to earn their own bread have quite enough to cope with without their ideas being unsettled by unnecessary notice. And this girl is more than merely good-looking. Why, I believe"—and Minna relaxed a little—"that since she comes here De Wet's nose has been distinctly out of joint. If there were beauty-shows, instead of only dog-shows—but never mind that. There's another point: The girl is not only good-looking, she is also good."

The straight look she gave him was one of those defensive looks—not of her person, but of her sex—with which even the plainest woman arms herself at moments.

"I know she is," Vincent said, with a note almost of gratitude in his voice. And he knew it, too. How? Let any young man who has sat opposite to a girl half a dozen times with only a table between them answer the question. Any one short of an idiot—or possibly a saint—will within that space—and be it under the eyes of ten watchful chaperones—have formed a probably correct idea as to the moral value of the girl.

"For which reason," summed up Minna, with a return to her judicial manner, "I shall expect you to shun *my* door between four and five on Fridays."

"And Mondays," completed Vincent, but not aloud, and with a gaiety of heart which the prohibition had entirely failed to damp.

"All right, Minna; I'm not dreaming of unset-

tling any one's ideas. But it's a comfort to think that—that the old father is not in any want. I ran against him once in Eaton Place—looks awfully ill and *stricken*, somehow. Seems to be walked off his legs, too. They live miles off, I suppose?"

"Somewhere beyond Brompton," said Minna, not considering it a case for precision.

"That means a cut through the Park," ran on the inner monologue. Indeed, considering the respective positions of Fortague Street and Brompton Road, that cut seemed unavoidable.

Upon Minna's face as she tidied up the copy-books there lingered a slight frown. It had not been necessary to tell Vincent that compassion for the foreigners had not been the only motive of her action. Neither did she wish to betray that curiosity, being satisfied, had given way to a personal interest which strengthened with each new meeting. Already she was beginning to understand that it might be difficult for any young man—even such a young man as was Vincent—to shake off an impression received from this vivid and strong individuality. The recognition could not but increase a certain uneasiness of conscience. A slightly guilty feeling towards the family in general shadowed her. Prudence, indeed, seemed to point out a quick severing of the connexion, a vanishing back of the disturbing atom into the whirlpool of London as the only absolutely safe course. But exactly in measure as she recognised the danger grew her de-

sire for further exploration of the atom which had achieved what so many much more "desirable" atoms had failed to achieve. Lady Aurelia, as it was, had raised her eyebrows to invisible heights over Minna's German lessons—but Minna was the one member of the family whom she had never been able to control.

Meanwhile, Irma, with a slight upward tilt of her chin, was pursuing exactly the way surmised by Vincent. Twice a week, lately, her homeward road had afforded her glimpses of the season's glories, in the shape of smoothly rolling carriages, of flashing harness, of hats and frocks, at which her eyes gazed as might those of Peri at the lost Paradise.

To-day she did not see these things. The surprise of Vincent's appearance was still upon her. Though having recognised Miss Bennett as the lady visitor seen once at Eaton Place, the relationship was a revelation, and awoke certain reflections not unrelated to misgivings. Those "intentions" so insultingly hinted at by Lady Aurelia might, after all, not be a mere hallucination of her senile brain. It was this thought which had stiffened her in Vincent's presence, and it was this which had tilted up her chin and lit a warlike spark in the shadow of her eyes. Make a fool of her, indeed! Let him just try! His intrusion to-day, and the well-simulated surprise, was the first move in the game, no doubt, and the next would be an "accidental" meeting. Who knows whether he was not

following her already? Irma's ears strained nervously for every step in the rear which bore any suspicion of hurry. When she found herself at the other side of the park, unmolested, she fetched a deep breath, and, but that dignity forbade, would have dearly loved to cast a glance backwards, for pure curiosity's sake.

Friday's lesson—to which she could not but look forward with a certain trepidation and with doubts which cast their shadow even upon that nice, kind Miss Bennett—passed with a reassuring eventlessness. But this time on the homeward way a start was not spared her, for, half-way along the walk she followed, her eyes picked out from among the advancing group a single, frock-coated figure which she knew, and approaching at a pace which denoted leisure.

“Now it is going to begin!” she said to herself, while some little imp of excitement leaped to her throat, and instinctively she locked her teeth and took a firmer grip of her parasol handle, as though of a weapon. It was only after their ways had crossed—with a good three feet between—that both her fingers and her teeth relaxed. Beyond a quickly inquiring glance in her direction nothing had happened, not even a conventional elevation of his hat—a neglect which struck her as offensive to mere civility until—several paces beyond the spot of meeting—it flashed upon her that this was not Vienna, and that the initiative of recognition had

lain with her. She gave an irritated little bite to her lip. "I do wish they would have one rule for bowing in all countries," her angry thought ran. There was no object, of course, in direct rudeness, and might give the ridiculous impression that she was afraid. Well, she would make up for it next time—if there was a next time. Scarcely likely that their paths should cross again.

When the unlikely thing came to pass, which it did, not on the occasion of the next, but of the next but one lesson in Fortague Street, Irma marshalled all her social powers with the object of producing a bow which should satisfy civility, while absolutely discouraging approach. It was a question for very nice balancing, and, if the truth must be told, the critical blend had been practised at various odd moments before that same dim mirror in which "Vindobona" had been steadily admiring her charms for three weeks past. "Politely forbidding" was the combination she aimed at. When the moment came it turned out more forbidding than polite; and, whether for this or for any other reason, there were no signs of approach either on this or on any other of the occasions on which, in her bihebdomadal crossings of the park, the unavoidable salutation was exchanged. No more than the orthodox straight uplifting of the faultless hat, with scarce so much as a quick turn of the eyes in her direction. After the third or fourth repetition of the performance Irma began to laugh at herself. Here she was

going about armed to the teeth against the possible "intentions" of a person who very evidently had no intentions at all, and who, plunged as he, of course, was in the vortex of London society, had probably only the vaguest consciousness of her existence. There was a note of irritation in her laugh; and no wonder, since she was feeling mildly ridiculous. It was all that yellow-faced old woman's fault for striking a false alarm. Even in these chance encounters she would doubtless find fresh fuel for suspicion. Were they actually pure chance? The question would occasionally obtrude, only to be pushed aside. What could it matter, since, clearly, the diplomat was triumphantly innocent of any desire of "making a fool" of her? So much the better!—ah, yes, of course—ever so much the better.

By the time Irma had reached this eminently satisfactory conclusion summer was advancing, the pavement growing hotter and the 'buses stuffier than ever. The longing for green spaces and that mountain air which she had never missed at this season tugged uselessly at the girl. A change—a little change—any sort of change! her youth muttered rebelliously under the dusty daily round.

The change tarried; yet one Saturday evening there came a slight surprise in the shape of a note addressed in a round, childish hand, vaguely familiar.

“DEAR FREILEIN,

“Uncle says that praps yood like to see the beasts at the Zoo and Sundays the best day because of not beeing so big a crowd. So here is the order sined because you cant get in Sundays without a director says so.

“Your affecshonat pupil,

“TOM POTTS.”

“Just fancy that!”

In the height of her astonishment Irma said it aloud.

Tom Potts was the same small boy the cessation of whose lessons had been the first blow descended in Spring, and “Uncle” was, of course, the individual who had been the cause of this cessation. To the grudge she felt against him he owed the only place he had ever occupied in Irma’s memory. But in face of the piece of paper signed “Joseph Potts” the grudge showed signs of melting. An expiation? Perhaps. It really was rather kind of him to have thought of the Zoo—all the kinder as he, too, during all these months, had shown no further signs of an unwelcome approach. Another false alarm. And the employment of his nephew as a secretary showed a tact with which she would not have credited him. Sunday? Why, to-morrow was Sunday, and the weather promised well. Already the weariness of the long, hot afternoon was wiped from Irma’s face. At the mere prospect of such a thing

as an "outing" her eighteen years had reasserted themselves. After months of drudgery even the Zoo bore a promise of dissipation to which in old days a ball had scarcely reached. Her first bit of London sight-seeing—of London of which she knew a few streets by heart, and of the rest as much as of the care of the African continent. Her father? Surely he would not object. The Zoo on Sunday was scarcely to be accounted one of those public places which he naturally shunned. And the change would be as good as a tonic to him—she was sure of that. If any question rose in Irma's mind as to the perfect wisdom of accepting Mr. Potts's offer it never became articulate, strangled at birth by the craving for that "outing" which she was conscious of having richly deserved.

When, therefore, Mr. Harding came home it was not to have his advice asked, but to be confronted by a *fait accompli*, Pattie having run to the pillar-post at the corner with the note of acceptance, in time for the last post.

"We've both of us worked hard enough to deserve a treat, papa, don't you think?" Irma argued. "We'll see the lions fed, and we'll keep our crusts from supper for the monkeys—or perhaps they'd prefer nuts? You will like to go, papa, won't you? It's in a beautiful park, you know, and perhaps we'll see real green trees again there."

"I like everything that my Antigone likes," said Harding, smiling his unquiet smile. His own in-

instinct would have led him to keep in the shadows; but the first terror of discovery had long since worn off, and the sight of Irma's radiant face was decisive. It was not much of an opportunity for paying off the tiniest installment of that debt of gratitude incurred towards his own child, and whose weight was not the least of his trials, but such as it was he took it.

* * * * *

“Fräulein!”

Irma was standing in front of a cage containing a bored-looking baboon, whose interest she was vainly endeavouring to arouse in the walnut in her hand, when, amidst the human and semi-human chattering around her, the address met her ear, or, rather, rose to it, from a considerably lower level.

Until this moment all had gone splendidly. There had been no difficulty about the 'bus, no hitch about the admission; a shower in the night had laid the dust; the bears in the pit had climbed just at the right moment; the most exotic birds had left their dark corners to prune their brilliant feathers in the welcome sunshine; the elephants had been condescending, and even the boa-constrictors had exerted themselves sufficiently to convince Irma that they were not stuffed specimens. So far her “treat” had gone without a blemish. But now——

The bright face on which the unmixed enjoyment was so plainly written turned towards the speaker, and became, as a first result, frankly astonished.

“Oh, Tom—you here? With whom——”

But there was no need to complete the question, since close behind Tom, who, indeed, appeared to have been put forward in the guise of a social buckler, stood Mr. Joseph Potts in person, with a curve of his rosy lips which waited only for the signal of recognition to become a smile, and a well-gloved hand half-way towards his shining hat.

“I am so thankful to you for having made use of the order,” he murmured, as he carefully uncovered his flaxen head.

“Oh, I see!” Irma said it with a certain blankness. “Yes, it was very kind of you. This is Mr. Potts, papa, whom I think you don’t know.”

Having spoken, she gave one of those little, fierce bites into her underlip which were the habitual outlets to angry emotions. Abruptly the glory of her Sunday afternoon was extinguished, and extinguished in mockery, too, since she had the very distinct sensation of having walked into a trap. Almost she could have slapped her own face for her stupidity. Kindness and good nature, indeed, when nothing but the most crying inexperience could excuse her for not having recognised in the Sunday order the assignment for a *rendezvous*! If any doubt on the subject remained, the look in the motor manufacturer’s eyes would have made short work of it. They were remarkably round eyes; and, whatever might be the case in business hours, at this moment they were melting in the most unbusiness-

like fashion, almost to the liquidity of the typical baby's eyes. Not unlike a magnified baby, in fact, was the junior partner of the firm of Potts Brothers and Co., being plump and chubby, with round, rosy cheeks, thickly set with dimples, and shining, apparently, from the recent application of soap. A giant baby fresh from its bath, and miraculously furnished with all its teeth. Beside him the seven-year-old Tom, though chubby, too, looked quite elderly; for Tom copied his father and not his uncle, which resulted in measured movements and a solemnity beyond words, as befitted a small person on whom it had been early impressed that his one business in this world, for which he could not too soon prepare, was the making of money. When seen beside his father he could be taken for a miniature model of the full-sized article, one of those costly mechanical toys, perhaps, constructed for modern children—while the round-eyed uncle might stand for the very child that would delight in the toy.

“We have been through all the houses, positively through all the houses,” he explained smilingly to Irma, who had chucked the nut into the baboon's cage, there to take its chance.

“No doubt Tom enjoyed the animals,” she said, as loftily as though she herself were quite above any such enjoyment.

“It was not the animals we were after.” The significance of the accent was so unmistakable that

Irma felt positively grateful to her small ex-pupil for breaking in just then with a serious warning.

"Uncle, there is only five minutes' time till the sea-lions are fed."

"Yes, let us go to the sea-lions," decided Irma, weakly.

An attempt made at the exit from the monkey-house to draw Tom's hand through her arm proved a failure. The ease with which he paired off with her father seemed to point to previous instructions. Evidently it was not as secretary alone that the miniature business man had his uses.

As beside Potts, junior, Irma walked towards the sea-lions' pond, she began to wonder whether Potts, senior, was aware of his son and heir's epistolary performance, and whether he would get a full account of the visit to the Zoo. The scent of bribery and corruption seemed to her all the more ripe in the air, as a good part of the walk to the pond was occupied by an explanation concerning a Continental business journey from which Mr. Joseph Potts had only just returned, and the insinuation that but for this circumstance she would certainly have heard from him ere this.

"I don't believe there's only one sea-lion," observed Tom, having for several minutes intensely and unsmilingly watched the manœuvres of the agile monster, reappearing with magical rapidity upon the stone edge of the basin from each header after the flashes of silver which started from the big

basket on the keeper's arm. "I think there are two. He wouldn't come back so quickly."

"With enough horse-power, why not?" mused Mr. Potts. "Talking of horse-power, Fräulein Hartmann," and his round eyes came back from the stormily disturbed pond to Irma's face, "do you know that we have just turned out an improved 'Cerberus,' with sixty-four power, with which we expect to knock the Frenchmen out of the field? You didn't know. Ah, perhaps you don't read the *Motor News*?"

"I didn't know there existed a *Motor News*," said Irma, a trifle crossly, for her spoiled holiday rankled, "and if I ever make a nearer acquaintance with motors it will probably be by being run over by one."

His round eyes became two globes of wonder.

"Is it possible? You have never been inside a car?" He was staring at her as at a natural phenomenon and, at the same time, a person worthy of the deepest compassion. "We came along at a splendid pace to-day. Oh, if you would permit me——"

"Uncle, it is time for the real lions now," broke in Tom's grave treble, after consultation with a gold repeater which need not have disgraced the broadest city waistcoat. Yet, though obviously determined upon sound business principles, to get the full benefit of his afternoon, the mannikin's thoughts, even on the road to the "real lions," were

still at work upon the problem of the ubiquitous sea monster.

"I don't believe there's only one," he confided to Mr. Harding, even while pressing towards the spot to which the hollow thunder of hungry roars guided them easily.

Before the lions' summer quarters, jutting out peninsula fashion from the main building, and therefore accessible on three sides, the comparatively select Sunday public, hailing largely from the nursery, was pretty fully assembled. A fearful and delightful expectancy lay upon many of the juvenile faces making a ring round that caged terror, while at the shock of each fresh roar some small hand would unconsciously grasp tighter a fold of the maternal skirt or the paternal coat.

"There is room here," said Mr. Potts, guiding Irma to the least encumbered side, "unless you mind the smell," for even here in the open the rank wild beast odour filled the nostrils unpleasantly.

"I don't mind it for a few minutes. Papa, do you? Tom, stay beside me," she said imperiously, possessing herself of the small hand, by way of a safety measure. Why should not Tom come in useful to her, too, as well as to his uncle? "Oh, how horribly yellow his eyes are! And how hard he stares at Mr. Potts!" she added in her own mind, with an irresistible inner chuckle. "I am sure he is thinking how good to eat the dear gentleman would be."

To judge from the fixity of the yellow glass eyes, under which the motor manufacturer himself began to fidget uncomfortably, the big lion close by seemed to be quite of Irma's opinion. Nothing less than the meat-laden basket's appearance on the arena was needed to divert his royal attention.

"I hope the spectacle is not offensive to you," Mr. Potts was murmuring in Irma's ear. "Some ladies dislike the sight of the raw meat. Indeed, it is not precisely appetizing." A slight grimace disturbed his rosy face as he said it. Obviously the raw meat was not to his taste. He himself looked, indeed, as though he had been fed exclusively on bread and milk.

"No, I don't mind," said Irma, impatiently.

"But perhaps your father does? He is not looking very well."

Irma, turning her head quickly, saw that her father, with a deadly pale face, was leaning so heavily against a bar in front of him as to make it seem probable that without its support he would have fallen. Instantly both the lions and Mr. Potts became things of unimportance.

"Papa! what is the matter? Are you ill?" she asked urgently, above Tom's head.

His eyes were staring straight through the cage, and out at the other side, glued, it would seem, to a group imperfectly visible through the double row of separating bars. Twice his lips moved before he managed to say, in a whisper audible to her alone:

"It's Greyson, and he may see me any moment."

With panic clutching her heart, Irma peered through the breadth of the cage, filled now by a monstrous crunching of bones. She knew that Greyson was the London manager of the "Anglo-Saxon." What she saw was a stumpy gentleman with pepper-and-salt side-whiskers, and with a small, fuzzy-haired girl clinging on to each of his arms in what was evidently an ecstasy of shivers.

"That man with the girls?"

He nodded.

"But he hasn't seen you yet?"

"Not yet."

"Come away quickly. They are busy with the lions now."

Dropping Tom's hand, she took hold of her father's arm and attempted to support him.

"Allow me!"

Mr. Potts's vigorous aid was, for the moment, not unwelcome.

"Your father is not well, I see. It is that horrible meat, or perhaps the smell."

"Yes, yes—the smell," said Irma, vaguely. "We must get home at once. How far is it to the 'bus?"

"The 'bus? It is not to be thought of, Fräulein Hartmann. Just look how white he is! My car is at the entrance; you will allow me, surely——"

"Ah, no—we can get a hansom."

"Even if there happens to be one about—it's Sunday, you know; he wouldn't be nearly so com-

fortable in a hansom as in my car; the 'Cerberus' neither vibrates nor smells, upon my honour it doesn't, and cushions as soft as any sofa."

Had Irma been a possible purchaser, he could not have more eagerly reeled off the virtues of the article.

All the way to the entrance, during which Harding spoke nothing and dragged heavily at his arm, Mr. Potts was praying fervently that no hansom should be in sight. It proved to be one of those rare prayers which find a direct hearing.

"You see, Fräulein Hartmann—there is nothing for it but my car."

He tried to say it with a not too indecent exultation over the so fortunate combination of circumstances.

"Oh, well, all right—if it doesn't take you too much out of your way," said Irma, with the indifference of recklessness, lost to all minor considerations by the sight of her father's waxen face.

Half an hour ago it would have been hard to believe that she could take her very first motor drive with such a complete absence of interest in the subject itself. The dust-mask and goggles of the carefully turned-out chauffeur failed to amuse her, and the speed with which they set in motion rejoiced her only because she saw therein escape from a possible pursuit. She would have liked the vehicle better still had it been closed, for by the mere collapse of her father's figure she could guess at his

longing for a dark corner. It was only well beyond Regent's Park that, with a new stab of pity, she asked herself whether the pursuit had ever been a real danger. Even if the eyes of the grey-whiskered gentleman had actually rested upon her father's face, would recognition have ensued? Had not suffering conspired with that snow-white beard to weave as effectual a mask as the one worn by that ridiculous chauffeur?

Meanwhile the "Cerberus" contained at least one happy person. And even Tom, unduly curtailed though he had been of the end of the lions' feed, was too busy with his problem to feel the disappointment keenly.

"I don't believe there was only one," was the final confidence made to his pillow that night.

CHAPTER VIII

BOB RENDALL

"IF there's one thing that upsets my moral equilibrium more than another," ruminated Vincent, at the conclusion of a church parade, whose thinness attested the waning season, "it's the wrong sort of sermon."

At the park entrance he stood still, deeply considering.

"Now, I wonder if Eaton Place is expecting me to lunch? Hum! I suppose so. If I could count upon unmixed family they could have me and welcome. But when are they unmixed nowadays?"

Rarely, to say the truth. Of all the meals eaten lately at the paternal board not one had been eaten *en famille*. Let him cross the threshold at what hour he chose, a visitor was sure to be in possession—a different one almost each time, but all belonging to that well-defined class which in his grandmother's mind crystallised into the right sort of wife. Fair ones and dark ones, tall ones and short ones—evidently he was to be given a wide range of choice. To a mildly chronic persecution of the sort he had

been hardened for long, but within the last two months it had become acute. Heiresses positively swarmed nowadays in Eaton Place, and girls with connexions lurked in the very corners of the room. No explanation had ever been given of their presence, and none asked. Lately, however, the heiresses had been left to the tender mercies of the ex-Ambassador.

"Of course, I don't want to mangle granny's feelings," mused Vincent, conscious of a strong desire to shun the domestic table, and with eyes which vainly plumbed the Sunday crowd for familiar faces, "but if a fellow could get hold of a decent pretext——"

A hand falling heavily on his shoulder caused him to turn his head.

"Vin, by Jove! What luck! My last chance, too."

His hand was in that of a bearded giant, and being wrung to the point of physical pain. In spite of the pain Vincent's face cleared.

"Splendid! Just what I want! You're my pretext, Bob!"

"Your how much?"

"My pretext. Never mind. We toddle straight to my club. I annex you—no, 'commandeer' is the right word, isn't it?—for lunch."

The giant consulted his watch.

"All right. I'm yours for a couple of hours. Packing all done, and only a few fellows to look

up. I say, what luck to run against you, old boy! I wasn't even sure whether you hadn't cleared out for your summer holiday; or are you kept too busy at your intrigue-spinning business to be given play-time?"

"I can have eight weeks' leave if I choose to ask for it," said Vincent, with a trifle of stiffness, induced by the word "intrigue." Bob, too! It was absurd. "But I'm not sure about it yet."

Soon they sat on either side of a tiny table *à deux*, with many good things to eat and drink, and with Piccadilly—the subdued Sunday Piccadilly—wherewith to amuse their eyes.

"Make the most of English food while you have it," explained Bob, by way of apology for his appetite, which was perfectly in proportion with his frame, and above the napkin which he had inserted into his collar and spread carefully over his Sunday waistcoat. Distinctly colonial he looked among the correct London silhouettes, the smallpox marks with which his broad face was closely pitted emphasising the flavour—for where except in out-of-the-way corners of the world is such disfigurement not obsolete?—and giving him at the same time a vague resemblance to some weather-beaten stone figure upon which the drip of many showers has been at work. Even the yellow-brown beard lent itself to the illusion, marking as it did the tints of those mosses which love to gather upon coarse-grained stone. Besides all this, Bob Rendall had what some one

had once described as "screamingly honest" grey-blue eyes, and a smile which, despite defective teeth, contrived to be fascinating. The describer of the eyes had likewise said that he looked "like somebody's best friend"; but, in point of fact, there was no monopoly to his friendship, since it belonged to everybody.

Becomingly presently aware that Vincent was not keeping pace with his achievements, his fork dropped sympathetically.

"I say, old man, this won't do—off your feed, are you? Is this the effect of overwork or of overplay? I've never before known you meditative except over politics. A penny for your thoughts, my boy!"

"Eminently Sabbatical thoughts at this moment. I actually happen to be meditating upon the sermon I heard this morning."

"Hum!"

Bob squinted at him doubtfully, for the departure was new.

"And the subject?"

"The abode of the blessed. Giving us his ideas of Paradise, you know. By-the-by, I find there's nothing for gauging a person's character like questioning him on his conception of eternal bliss. The golden city, or the jasper city, or whatever the material is, don't seem to be much in fashion just now. Privately, I believe that the happy hunting ground of the Indian is the ideal cherished by most

of my countrymen—a sort of glorified pheasant-preserve or deer-forest—it's the only really sporting version when you come to think of it. The ladies, I suppose—to judge from the amount of garden catalogues about—would vote for the Garden of Eden, with angelic gardeners, of course, and unlimited spring-bulbs. But our man to-day was much more go-ahead than that—talked of nothing but 'soaring through space' and the 'whirl of pinions.' I fancy he had a flying-machine in his mind's eye, or at the very least a manageable airship. Something very much up-to-date, anyway. No place in particular, but getting about as fast as possible from one place to the other, seems to be his private idea of bliss."

"Ha, ha! You don't seem to agree with him. Any idea of your own?"

Vincent seemed to be looking for the answer in the depth of his claret-glass, which he slowly emptied.

"None very definite about the locality, I think, or any preference for city or garden, so long as the company was all right."

"And what would be the appearance of the company?"

"They would have to have blue eyes, I think, and black lashes."

Bob let out half a guffaw, and then stopped it, looking about him as though with a sudden consciousness of his whereabouts.

"Oh, I see! Sounds a bit Mahomedan, doesn't it? Houris, you know, and that sort of thing."

"Why not?" said Vincent, with a smile that almost achieved the flippancy it aimed at—yet with his next word he dexterously turned the talk.

"And your idea? Let's hear what notions of Paradise South Africa breeds."

"To me heaven stands for the place where there are to be no more partings." Bob said it with a sudden gravity which touched on wistfulness.

"To be sure! You're fresh from down there, aren't you?" said Vincent, looking at his friend in quickening sympathy. Knowing what a place partings took in this man's life, he could weigh the meaning behind the words. At the same moment some other words, spoken by Minna not long ago, returned to his mind. "Drab-coloured heroism," she had said. It had never before struck him that there might be some truth in this conception of the big, simple-minded fellow, who always looked so cheerful, and plied so good a knife and fork; but a certain note in the voice which had just spoken betrayed things behind. "A hero incog"—was it possible? More attentively than he had ever done before, Vincent looked at his friend, glancing back at his history the while.

A pretty commonplace history on the whole. Nothing either very dramatic or very sensational about the failure in life of these old family friends; a self-inflicted failure, too, since it was in attempting

to double a very comfortable competence that the speculative head of the house, seized by the Stock Exchange mania, had landed himself and his dependants in indigence. The only son, brought up to expect millions, finished his education just in time to become the sole support of his parents. Circumstances combined to add exile to his other trials. For fifteen years past he had been managing a large Transvaal farm for a rich Boer, who allowed him a trip home every three years and gave good enough pay to let him keep his aged parents in comfort, though not good enough to leave room for his own settlement in life. Even had the profit been bigger, the thing would have remained an impossibility, for the "little girl" to whom his troth had been plighted since boyhood was the only person available to look after the old people, and would as surely have refused to desert her post as it was certain that he would never ask her to do so.

That plighting of the troth was an old affair now, so old that the delicate profile of the "little girl" was already sharpening, and that among her golden hair some premature silver threads gleamed. Neither was it a public matter, though both Vincent and Minna owed their initiation to a burst of confidence, having, however, to bind themselves over to dead silence towards the old people.

"What's the use of telling them?—would only make them feel uncomfortable," Bob had argued, when opening his heart to the younger man, than

whom, despite his forty-odd years, he was in many respects younger. "She couldn't leave them alone in any case. They were kind to her in the days when they still had something and she had nothing—so, of course, she can't turn her back upon them now that they've all got nothing together."

So things continued as they were; and every three years Bob had the opportunity of noting how much of the bloom had got rubbed off the flower he had hoped to gather in the morning dew—and the partings grew sadder, but not less brave; and old Mr. Rendall blessed Heaven aloud for having given him so dutiful a son, and more loudly still for having so nobly supported him in his up-bringing—for even in the recognition of Bob's qualities this imperturbably self-satisfied old man contrived to annex the chief credit. "Tell me what sort of son you have and I will tell you what sort of a father you are!" he would triumphantly fling at the head of less fortunate parents, while pottering about the garden of the comfortable cottage in which Bob had settled him, quite as happy in watching his roses as he had once been in studying the Stock Exchange columns, and blissfully unaware of being in any way the recipient of a sacrifice. It was so natural that a good son should not let his parents starve, and, in particular, a father who, but for the cruel persecutions of fate, would infallibly have made of his son a millionaire. The mere happiness of having him for a father seemed, in Mr. Ren-

dall's opinion, to outweigh all other obligations. Even had he known that Bob and Lucy entertained for each other more than cousinly feelings, it is not likely that his equanimity would have greatly suffered. But the circumstance escaped his notice, in which point he was probably less guiltily egoistic than the large, lazy Mrs. Rendall, who had her suspicions regarding the condition of Lucy's heart, but kept them to herself because she disliked emotions, and salved her conscience by reflecting upon the fewness of the years lying presumably before her, and which she craved only to live in peace.

To Bob and Lucy the situation seemed quite as much a matter of course. In fulfilling so clear a duty they had never been able to discern anything out of the common. And, of course, it was clear—so clear that “not to do it would be to be a brute,” as Bob himself had once put it. But it was not the thing done; it was—Minna had said that—the *way* of doing it. By the carriage of Bob's head, by the readiness of his smile, it might have been supposed that the burden on his shoulders was but a feather's weight. And the “little girl's” pluck was equal to his. In the weary years of separation those in the secret would ask themselves: did it ever occur to them that the opening of two graves would mean deliverance? Humanly speaking, it seemed unavoidable; but if the thought ever rose, it had never got translated into as much as a fretful word, nor even into one of blame for the hare-brained enter-

prises responsible for the ruin. The usual drop of bitterness which goes to the composition of even good-natured men seemed to have been forgotten in Bob's case.

Something of all this Vincent considered, while watching the size of the cheese chunks which the other was disposing of. Was it because of his invincible appetite (as though so huge a frame could have subsisted on less) that the idea of sentiment seemed so hard to fit into Bob's personality?

"So you're off to your drudgery for another three years? Or has it stopped being drudgery? Maybe you're a fanatic farmer by this time?"

Bob laughed knowingly.

"Give me a bit of land of my own, and you'd see the fanatic fast enough. What with the soil and the climate and the new opening up of the country it's the place to breed the species. But it's difficult to be fanatical about another man's ground, though I don't believe I could do better for my own."

"And no chance of getting that bit of your own?"

"None," said Bob, with a decisive shake of his big head. "The building of the nest isn't a bit nearer than when I spoke to you last."

The hand with which he stretched for his wine-glass gave a slight but expressive jerk.

"But there are mouthfuls a-going, I tell you!" he went on, with kindling interest. "Mouthfuls that are being scrambled for already! If ever there

was a country with its future written plainly on its face it's the Transvaal."

"Oh, yes, we've done a good deal, no doubt," said Vincent, with a tepidity which increased Bob's warmth, sending him off into a panegyric of South African resources, in which ostriches, peaches and diamonds aptly represented the three natural kingdoms.

"For a fellow with a bit of capital in his hand it's a found bargain—capital, brains—and a free hand," added Bob, with a half-sigh, quickly repressed. "But, mind, I'm not complaining," he carefully corrected himself. "There are lots of fellows worse off than I. Give me an English master, and I'd not have a word to say. This man is quite one of the decent Boers, but somehow we seem to be talking different languages. But as for complaining—no. Isn't it enough to have got tacked back again on to dear old England? Why, it scarcely feels like exile now! And such a country, too!"

Vincent listened rather dreamily to a second panegyric, this time of rolling velds, towering gum-trees and waving mimosa-bushes.

"And as for the sport!"

Bob had to fetch a breath before feeling competent to do justice to the glories of springbok and bustard.

"Not that a fellow often gets the chance of a shot," he admitted, in conclusion. "A Boer farmer

has a most excellent idea of getting his money's worth out of either beast or man."

Close questioning elicited a few further facts—such as that Bob's quarters were a one-chambered hut, that he had to be in the saddle by five every morning, that the post arrived once a week, and that the nearest Englishman lived twenty miles off; for the pathos of the existence of "everybody's friend" was added to by the fact of severance from all friendship. "The life of a galley-slave and of an exile rolled into one," decided Vincent within himself, while saying aloud:

"And that sort of life satisfies you?"

Bob appeared to be conscientiously looking for a truthful answer.

"Isn't 'satisfy' a rather big word? I've told you that it's not like working for oneself. But there—it's something, isn't it, to have a plain job cut out for you, and to feel that you can do it? One doesn't feel absolutely useless, you know," explained Bob, with engaging shamefacedness.

"I suppose so," said Vincent, watching the other's face in a way which betrayed some latent interest. "Yes, your job is plain, anyway. No twists and turns about *your* path of life, anyway. Bob, you've never been bothered with ambition, I suppose?"

"Ambition? You mean wanting to make a name in the world? All very well for the fellows with brains like you, Vin, but not for the people like

myself." This with a glance of deferential admiration for his friend, for Bob belonged to the most fervent believers in Vincent's future.

"Some of those Boer girls are handsome, aren't they?" asked the other abruptly, after a long, attentive gaze. "Have you never grown weak in their hands, or are the hands too big for the purpose?"

Bob's stare became acutely reproachful.

"Vin! This from you! And when you know about the little girl?"

"Does her image actually suffice to overshadow all her Boer sisters? Three years are a long interval."

Vincent was still closely studying the face opposite, possessed by a quite new curiosity concerning the strength of Bob's attachment, or, perhaps, of the affairs of the heart generally.

"It might be fifty years," said Bob, very low and very gravely, "and it would make no difference."

"Ah!"

Vincent leaned forward, with arms folded on the table, intent upon losing no word.

"So the feeling can be as strong as that, can it? I've heard of such a thing as constancy, but I don't think I ever before met it in the flesh. And yet I wager you've had your opportunities. They like big men out there."

Upon this Bob became confused, and, presently, hard pressed, confessed that there was one of his

employer's daughters—and a fine girl, too—whom he could have any day for the asking.

“The father would give her to you?”

“And a slice of ground into the bargain. He has too many daughters to be particular.”

“Bob, you must be awfully fond of that little girl,” said Vincent, suddenly thoughtful.

“I can't help it,” pleaded Bob, almost in apology. “It's just that nothing else counts beside her.”

Vincent took one more long look into his friend's face, then shook himself and proposed an adjournment.

“My last London day,” said Bob, as they descended the club steps, and sending his glance about him with the sweeping movement of a net, seeking to catch as many fragments of home-pictures as it could be got to enclose. As, rather silently now, they strolled about the Sunday streets, Bob was storing up these fragments to live on for three years more.

“Last time I was home,” he remarked, presently, “the tube was the newest thing. This time it's the motor-'bus. What will it be next time? You pampered sons of civilisation can't imagine how amusing the motors have made the streets for us—almost as amusing as a live toy-shop where all the mechanical toys are being trotted out together. I'm never tired of watching them. Very few about to-day. Ah—there! Just stop a moment, like a good boy, and let me have my stare.”

They had reached the corner of Park Lane, down which a particularly smart-looking motor-car, guided by a particularly grotesque-looking *chauffeur*, was approaching at top speed.

"Awfully neat thing, that!" grinned the delighted Bob, in the rush of air which followed the tumultuous vehicle. "Eh, Vin?"

Looking round for an answer which delayed, Bob perceived that his friend was standing apparently rooted to the edge of the pavement, with fixed glance drawn in the rear of the vanishing car.

"What are you glaring at? Friends of yours?"

Vincent visibly pulled himself together.

"No—of course not. I was only wondering at the pace. You'll be off, I suppose, now, won't you? And I'm afraid I have some calls to pay."

The parting was more abrupt than seemed quite explicable to Bob.

The calls, however, were not paid, for the reason that Vincent was too busily occupied in exercising his mind over what he had just seen. Even in that instant of swift passage he had clearly recognised Fräulein Hartmann, with her father beside her, and had been vaguely aware of a young man and of a small boy. For this strange fact—whose strangeness, to be sure, was no earthly concern of his—he felt pushed to find an explanation.

A young man and a motor—these were the elements of the problem; a private motor, obviously, and—as seemed logical to suppose—belonging to

the young man. Another inference frequently drawn from the proximity of a young man and a young woman likewise presented itself for consideration. Well, she was beautiful enough to make anything seem possible, so why not the capture of a rich youth?—and, even from that flying glimpse, Vincent had gathered the impression of blatant prosperity. Yes, but the boy? Absolutely he did not know where to put the boy. *A pater-familias?* The aspect had been too conspicuously youthful to support the hypothesis. To be sure, he might be a villain—and in that case—in that case it likewise was no concern of Vincent's. And yet he was aware that the unriddling of the riddle had become necessary for his peace of mind.

“To-morrow is Monday!” he concluded his reflections.

Next afternoon, in the middle of the German lessons in Fortague Street, there was the sound of what appeared to be a slight scuffle outside the drawing-room door, upon which Vincent walked in unannounced by the baffled Wilson, and looking entirely unabashed.

“My dear Vincent!” began Minna, but, noting the set of his mouth, merged her protest into a question as to whether he had brought any news from Eaton Place.

“No news,” said Vincent, with what looked like perfect coolness; “only a farewell message from Bob Rendall. You need not move, Fräulein Hart-

mann—I shall not interrupt for long. Bob Rendall was that big man with the beard whom you perhaps noticed yesterday at the corner of Park Lane,” he added, turning more deliberately towards Irma.

“Park Lane?” she repeated, meeting his piercing look of inquiry with one of obvious incomprehension, her fingers pausing in the turning over of a page.

“So she did not see me,” noted Vincent, while pursuing:

“Yes. I was not aware that you liked motor-driving. But unless you want to be brought up for excess of pace I should advise you to look after your *chauffeur*.”

At sight of the rush of blood to her face the veiled bitterness of his tone translated itself into a somewhat merciless smile.

“My *chauffeur*! Oh, I see—you mean Mr. Potts’s *chauffeur*.”

(“Potts!” Down went the name into a mental notebook.)

“A friend of yours?” he asked, and by the proud astonishment in her eyes became aware that he had put the question as though he had the right to an answer. Hurriedly he attempted to get rid of this undue earnestness of tone, much as the air-shipper will lighten his balloon by throwing ballast overboard. Without waiting for her answer, he said, forcing another smile:

“Perhaps it was to amuse the small Potts that

you were going so fast?—for there is a small Potts in the question, isn't there? A pupil, no doubt?"

But the attempt at carelessness did not nearly come up to his usual efforts in that line.

"He has been my pupil, but I don't give him lessons now."

"Perhaps it is the papa who is rubbing up his languages?"

"Mr. Potts is not his papa—I mean, not this Mr. Potts—only his uncle."

"Ah! Capital institution for small boys, bachelor uncles are!"

Against his own will his glance had again become inquisitorial, as with drawn brows and narrowed pupils he waited for the correction of the word, on which he had laid an imperceptible stress. But no correction came, and in the displeasure on Irma's face confusion was plainly mingled.

It was at this moment that Minna, till now a silent observer of the scene, interposed with some question touching Bob Rendall. It relieved the tension enough to preserve conventions, but not enough to ensure a normal ending of the interrupted lesson, Fräulein Hartmann's disturbance being too evident to let Minna wish to detain her. Though Vincent had not even sat down during the short dialogue, it was, after all, Irma who, under cover of an improvised excuse, first withdrew.

For some moments silence reigned in the small,

crowded drawing-room. Then Vincent turned to Minna and said, with recovered calm :

“Minna, I think I shall ask for those eight weeks’ leave, after all.”

“I think you had better,” said Minna, and for the moment that was all that passed between them.

That night, or, rather, next morning, on his return from one of the last gatherings of the season, Vincent elaborated the train of thoughts started in that remark.

“This won’t do, Vin, my boy,” he apostrophised himself while stretching between the sheets, “absolutely this won’t do! High time to clear out for a bit. What are the facts? A young person who gives lessons is seen by you in a motor-car. Instantly you require to know who the motor belongs to, and now that you know it you’re not a bit happier. You’ve ascertained that he’s a bachelor. Well, what of that? And supposing his intentions to be matrimonial—which that guilty heightening of colour certainly seems to imply—in what way can that possibly regard you? A man who can purchase a motor-car of that description is probably at liberty to purchase whatever sort of wife pleases him. But *your* path doesn’t lie in the direction of penniless and nameless teachers—*never* can lie in that direction. Oh, yes, it’s time to clear out. By Autumn it’s ten to one the Roman secretaryship will be vacant, which will put half Europe between me and—her. But *en attendant* I go.”

Now that he faced the situation he did so fully—making no pretense about the feeling that possessed him, and which he now knew to have possessed him ever since the first meeting—for Irma had made upon him something of that same sort of instantaneous impression which her mother had once made upon her father. Both Irma and Isabella belonged to the order of women whose victims go down at the first blow. Yet, unlike Edward Harding, Vincent had no thought of surrender. He had always known that some such battle would have to be fought some day. All sorts of arguments and principles were lying ready for the occasion, like weapons diligently furbished. Well, he would use them—that was all. A couple of months on Scotch moors, or, better still, on that Norwegian river, to which a standing invitation—of diplomatic origin, of course—gave him free access, would be all that was required.

“It’s got to be got over, same as distemper,” Vincent coolly argued. A dose of sulphur usually cured sick puppies. It was therefore to be expected that a dose of Norwegian salmon would prove of equal service to the human puppy.

“I’ll secure my ticket-of-leave to-morrow,” he decided, just before turning over. “This day week I may be off—and meanwhile I’ll steer clear both of Fortague Street and that particular line of the park.”

Suddenly he laughed out loud.

“What a good boy am I! What a perfectly reasonable and model youth—and *how* pleased granny would be!”

He laughed again almost convulsively—a note of self-scorn ringing through that of self-approval.

PART III

CHAPTER I

“CERBERUS” GOES A-WOOING

FILBERT GARDENS was agitated to the depth of its dingy brick heart.

Not that this was the first invasion of its almost cloistered precincts by this smartest of smart motors—for midsummer had witnessed the apparition more than once—but that for quite two months past it had been watched for in vain. Its resuscitation was at least as sensational as had been its original appearance. At almost every second window, piercing the *pseudo* prison walls, were to be seen noses flattened against panes, eyes gloating upon the details of the shining and mysterious vehicle—for to be shaved by a motor in the street, and to see one standing at your neighbour's door, are two separate and distinct experiences. Children were being held up to see and tremble before the goggles of the hairy monster—the *chauffeur* having on this chilly October day donned his winter coat. Not a person in the street in whom the presence of this

embodiment of luxury did not induce an increase of self-respect, and not a landlady who was not bitterly asking herself why lodgers with "motor visitors" should fall to other people's share and not to her own. The dwellers on the first floor of the house so honoured, a family which described itself as "artistic," who had taken to bowing to Irma at the time of the motor's first appearance, and dropped the habit with its disappearance, began to think seriously of scraping acquaintance with the "foreigners." Mrs. Martin herself, whose face and figure were barely familiar to her lodgers—they knowing her chiefly as a voice—had toiled up from subterranean regions, and stood on the doorstep, holding converse with the hairy man, and gathering upon her broad person all the reflected glory of the incident; while behind her Pattie's ecstatic grin expanded unrebuked.

Meanwhile, within the sitting-room-bedroom, Irma was having a "bad quarter of an hour."

"I cannot, Mr. Potts—really, I cannot," she pleaded, in growing distress. "I am truly touched by your offer, believe me, and, of course, I cannot doubt your affection, since beyond myself I have nothing to give. But it is impossible for me to—to do what you want."

"But I am offering to *marry* you," said Mr. Potts, with his globelike stare of surprise, and triumphantly underlining the great word. "You cannot have properly understood me; I am proposing

to lead you to the altar, all right, and to give you my name, and all that sort of thing. I don't expect my family to be over-pleased, of course. They want me to marry money, because of the firm. But I don't see why a man shouldn't marry whom he chooses, so long as he can afford it, and I can do that, thank Heaven!"

A modest little pull upwards of his spotless collar punctuated the gratitude.

"Blow the money, I say, so long as the connexion is respectable, and I haven't the smallest doubt that you can give me every assurance on that point. Your grace and—and your charms quite make up for the want of fortune, in my eyes," he added, in tones which, despite their melting quality, betrayed some of the condescension of the king towards the beggar-maid.

"You are very kind," said Irma, hovering on the verge of a burst of nervous laughter.

"Not at all; I mean it, really—upon my word I do. I should have spoken two months ago—that time after the—Zoo—you know—only that William whisked me off on another business journey—a got-up job, I do believe, just to get me out of the way. But William can't keep me out of London forever, and he'd better not try!"

The baby face crumpled into a frown which did not seem able to threaten anything worse than tears.

"I've taken the very first opportunity of coming

—upon my word I have, Miss Hartmann—or—or surely I may say ‘Irma’ now?”

“Oh, no, *please* not!” murmured Irma, moving back apprehensively, for the enamoured motor manufacturer was leaning forward in his chair at an angle well-nigh perilous.

He gazed at her aghast, the dimples in his pink cheeks slowly disappearing, his liquid gaze, so to say, solidifying.

“You cannot mean that your refusal is serious? Have you understood that——”

“That you wish to marry me—yes, perfectly,” said Irma, in whom exasperation was gaining the upper hand. “I should have thought that my refusal was as plain as your offer.”

For a moment longer he remained in his forward position, with rosy lips dropped apart, so naïvely taken aback by the rebuff that again Irma had to struggle for gravity. Then came the explosion.

“But, Miss Hartmann, you can’t have considered, you can’t have grasped what it is that you are refusing! It’s not only that we could make our honeymoon in the ‘Cerberus,’ scouring Europe, mind you, at the rate of sixty miles an hour, and any corner of it you fancy—Alps, Pyrenees—nothing need stop us, since the ‘Cerberus’ laughs at hills—but that you’d never need to sit behind a horse again, unless you want to. Why, I’d undertake to teach you the trick yourself in a week. Any child can manage our engines—that’s the beauty of them

—and since we have put in the steel cylinders, and the beaten brass water-jackets——”

“Thank you, Mr. Potts. I am sure there will be plenty of candidates for that honeymoon, but I do not intend to compete.”

“You surely don’t mean to say that you *dislike* me?” he asked, struck by a new idea. His appreciation of the “Cerberus,” as a rule, rather swamped his appreciation of his own person, or, more properly speaking, identified itself with it. At this moment, however, the personal question penetrated.

“Oh, no, not at all,” said Irma, hastily, as averse to wounding so unconscious a conceit as she would have been to hurting a child. “It is not that. But—I cannot marry. There are reasons. My father——”

“I have thought of that,” broke in Mr. Potts with magnanimous eagerness. “Your father could live with us. There is plenty of room, and really I should not object at all. Mr. Hartmann seems such a quiet person; I am sure we should get on all right; and any one can see that he is highly respectable. Even William cannot possibly object to the connexion.”

In a species of desperation Irma got to her feet. It seemed the only way of ending the interview.

“Thank you again—thank you,” she said, a trifle convulsively. “Really, you are very generous. But it’s no use talking. It just cannot be.”

Perforce risen, he looked at her with a new attention.

"You are agitated, Miss Hartmann—only to be expected. Perhaps I have been too sudden. Don't be anxious—I am going. But I don't accept this as your final decision. I shall give you a month to think over it—a whole month—and then I shall come back again."

"It will be no use," protested Irma, but to deaf ears. Nothing seemed to convince Mr. Joseph Potts of defeat. He went out at last, with self-satisfaction almost restored—smiling already at the victory which he considered not endangered, but only deferred. It was but natural, after all, that a girl in Irma's position should be struck foolish by the honour done to her, and in her astonishment should doubt her ability to fill the place offered. But a month's quiet reflection would help her to believe in her good luck.

The "Cerberus," followed by the eyes of half the dwellers in Filbert Gardens, had barely panted round the corner when Pattie had to open the door again—to a pedestrian this time.

"Surely that was Mr. Potts's motor that I met just now?" asked Harding, entering with rather more animation than was his wont. "Has that young man turned up again? What does he want?"

Behind the assumption of carelessness a certain suspense pierced.

Irma turned, her face still full of the distress of the recent scene.

"Oh, papa, he wants to marry me! It is such a bother! You can't imagine how worried I am."

"To marry you?"

Harding stood stock-still, looking hard at his daughter. "He has actually made you a formal proposal? No mistake about it?"

"Not the shadow of a mistake. He explained it three times over. I expected him to spell it out next."

"And you, Irma?"

He seemed to catch his breath after the question.

"I? Oh, I tried to let him down as easily as I could. I hope I wasn't too rude, but I had to be distinct."

"You refused him off-hand?"

"Of course. What else could I do?"

Harding laid aside the hat he had till then been holding in his hand, and slowly let himself down into a chair.

"Yes—what else could you do?" he repeated heavily and bitterly; "chained as you are to a fugitive and a criminal—bearing a name stained forever—how could you venture to grasp the gift of Fate? Oh, to think that I should stand between my own child and her fortune!"

"Papa!" cried Irma, between laughter and tears, startled by so unwonted a breach in the monotonous grey wall of his habitual reserve; "but you are

not standing between me and anything! I swear to you that I am sacrificing nothing. I could never marry Mr. Potts, even if—if nothing had happened."

She was kneeling beside him, gently forcing up his bowed head, in order to give him the assurance of her eyes. It was a long and mistrustful look which he took into those eyes, but slowly it brought him conviction.

"And yet it is a wonderful chance!" he said, in a tone that had now become speculative. "The man is a good sort, I think, and he seems sincerely attached to you. And there can be no doubt about his fortune, I suppose?" he added, with a touch of hesitation, and looking away now from Irma's face.

"Oh, he's hugely rich, I believe."

"And riches don't tempt you at all?"

Irma fell into a momentary reflection.

"Ah, yes—they tempt me; but—not in Mr. Potts's company."

"And yet his attachment must be very genuine," persisted Harding, his eyes once more shifting from beneath his daughter's look, while the play of the fine wrinkles on his face betrayed the uneasy working of some thought behind.

"I believe it is genuine."

"And quite disinterested, of course. The circumstances prove that up to the hilt. A man like that might even be ready for sacrifices, might he

not? There is no doubt, at any rate, that he could afford them."

"What sort of sacrifices, papa? I don't understand. What are you thinking of?"

"Just a passing idea. Stained names have been washed clean ere now by a pecuniary sacrifice; and it requires no more than that to put right the wrong I committed. If these people were satisfied—the unfortunates who were my victims—I could show my face again. Your mother even might forgive me—perhaps; or, at least, I could die with the knowledge that the shame was lifted."

He spoke in an almost breathless hurry, a faint streak of red appearing in his sallow cheeks and about his sunken temples. Since the day of their common flight it was the first plain reference to that load of unliftable shame under which he dumbly fretted; and, even to his daily companion, the fever of his tone was a revelation. In silent expectation she gazed at him, waiting for the further words which she saw trembling on his lips.

"Just an idea, you know. In summer, that time after the Zoo, when he came back to inquire after my health—it was so clearly a pretext—I could not help thinking—— Just supposing, now, that you *had* felt any sympathy for this young man—if it *had* been possible for you to think of him as your husband—what a wonderful chance that might have been—always supposing that he actually is the man to—to come up to the occasion."

He gave her a sharp look of inquiry, which Irma, despite her aching heart, could not but answer with a smile, the image of Mr. Joseph Potts being still too fresh in her mind to let the humorous side of the situation keep decently out of sight.

"I see, papa," she said, softly laying her hand upon his; "but you needn't regret my want of inclination, for of one thing I am quite sure: Mr. Potts would never be the man to make your dream come true."

"No—I suppose not—it was only an idea," said Harding, all the eagerness gone abruptly from both voice and face. "Probably it will never come true. How should it? It would have been too good for real life—the debt to those unfortunates and the debt to you blotted out at one stroke! Such things don't happen!"

"To me?"

"Yes—yes—the heaviest of them all. Your youth eaten up by my age—your spotlessness blackened by my sin—and no chance of repaying! Oh, it stings, it stings!"

Groaning, he covered his eyes with his gaunt hands, but not before Irma had caught in those pale blue eyes a look she had never seen there before—a look in which something like anger seemed mixed with the anguish, and which she could not explain, never having yet undergone the galling pressure of benefits unredeemed.

Even without this understanding the impression

left by the interview was a painful one. She knew now that her father was less consoled, less resigned even than she had dared to hope. Deep pity seized her anew, so deep as to set her ruminating as to whether, under given circumstances, she could ever have accomplished the sacrifice of becoming Mrs. Joseph Potts, and to end by feeling grateful that he was so obviously *not* the man for the occasion. Poor Mr. Potts! How easy it was to picture the horror upon that baby face at the hearing of her real name! The horizon in which commercial respectability loomed so big would certainly never be able to embrace her family misfortune. Even it appeared a question whether the exigencies of that spotless business conscience, which nothing can disturb more deeply than any tampering with the almighty dollar, might not compel him to communicate with the police. To a generous silence he might possibly stretch—certainly not to more.

The Mr. Hartmann whom he pronounced “respectable” might hope for a place at his board; but the defrauding bank director—oh, horror!

No, *that* marriage would always have been impossible. If any marriage ever were possible, it could only be one in which her father would, so to say, be taken over in the bargain—in which, instead of losing a daughter, he would gain a son. Which would presume a very great love, and also a complete independence of the opinions of men, and of their favours.

Here, without any apparent reason, Irma began to think suddenly of that day in Fortague Street when she had last seen Mr. Denholm. On that occasion she had made an astonishing discovery—she had discovered that this man was in her power. Up to what point? Of this she could not be sure. It depended upon his own powers of resistance; for obviously he was resisting. She had seen it all within the few minutes of their brief interview, read it in the intense question of his eyes, in the would-be scorn of his tone. Of dark motives his reserve of attitude had by this time absolved him. What then? Far, far in the back of her head Irma had brought away from that interview an idea that, if she chose to put out her powers, she might possibly overcome the resistance; but even in the moment of recognising this she had decided that the powers should not be put out. Why? Because he was indifferent to her? The answer dragged. But that was neither here nor there. The real reason for her instant decision was the manifest impossibility of the thing. She did not belong to herself; she belonged to her father. In the moment of espousing his cause she had renounced all private happiness.

And once more she had armed herself against a danger which apparently did not exist, since upon the meeting in Fortague Street there had followed a great blank, not enlivened by so much as a single encounter in the park. Whether the traceless dis-

appearance of "the diplomat" meant voluntary flight or official transference to some foreign post mattered little. The chapter was evidently closed. On the whole it might be wisest to consider the matrimonial chapter generally as finally closed, and to rehearse the *rôle* of old maid, which she had hitherto thought synonymous with "old cat." Yet some old maids were not a bit like cats—Miss Bennett, for instance, whose absence from London helped to make the late summer months drag so heavily. Such bright spots those two days a week had been. For in Fortague Street she was treated not like a teaching-machine, but like a human being. Without having asked a single indiscreet question, or, indeed, any question at all, Minna had somehow managed to convey to the girl the impression of an almost motherly interest in her person and her doings. Hitherto Pattie had been the only thing in the shape of a friend which the wilderness of London had afforded the exile. Even now Pattie still kept her humble place, but Miss Bennett bade fair to fill another, hitherto perforce vacant.

All the emptier the months during which London, for all its sweltering life, presented some of the features of a burnt-out volcano. The fever of gaiety, the plotting of social intrigue, the hot pursuit of success, of invitations, of eligible husbands, had left behind it a dryness and exhaustion of which the dusty leaves and the closeness of imprisoned air seemed but the material expression. To a stranger's

eye the streets might seem full; to that of the initiated they were empty, though only in fashion's haunts were the symptoms glaring—in lowered blinds, in areas once lively with the clatter of plates and the hiss of cooking-pots, now animated only by some emaciated cat, hunting for some possibly forgotten bone of past banquets. In the park, 'Arriet's plumed hat took triumphant possession of what had once been the seats of the Mighty, while in the desecrated Row indescribable females in home-made habits bumped along gleefully upon hired hacks.

The weariness of it all was enhanced for the exiles by the acuter anxieties of this almost breadless season. Harding had found temporary employment as foreign correspondent in a shipping office. With this, and with the advance upon the lessons to be resumed in autumn, which Miss Bennett had pressed upon Irma, it had been possible to get through the summer—but not much more than possible.

Another thing without which it would have been difficult to get through the summer was the Oratory; for Irma's enforced idleness left her too much time to think, too much leisure to worry over such things as her father's health, for instance. More than once, alarmed by his bloodless face and dull eyes, she had urged medical consultation; but from this Harding shrunk obstinately, having since the *rencontre* in the Zoo become more conspicuously nervous regarding possible recognition. Lately,

Irma had got into the habit of carrying these private worries to the same spot where she had for the first time in her life consciously prayed. It was a strange fact that contact with her own faith had come to her only in this country of "heretics"; and yet not strange, since convictions, either religious or political, burn ever the brightest beneath the breath of antagonism. Here, in the enemy's country, she saw fervour for the first time, emanating from people who in a friendlier atmosphere would probably have sunk to the somnolent laxity of her former experiences. At its touch her own drooping faith put out fresh blossoms, and so conscious was she of her gain that she got as far as an experiment upon her father. Shyly and shamefacedly, seeing him in the depth of one of his despondent fits, she had suggested a visit to the Oratory. Harding, though visibly surprised, made no resistance—just as little as he had resisted when at the time of his marriage he had, for the "simplification" of matters, been asked to adopt Isabella's faith. But the experiment was a failure. So plainly did Irma read this in the wandering eyes that the attempt was not repeated. That flower of faith which in her young heart had so joyfully struck root could find no foothold in this weary and wornout soil, exhausted by a life of money-making, sucked dry by a human love that verged on idolatry. Where a goddess reigns supreme there is small room for a god.

The long, empty time was over now. Even be-

fore the reappearance of the "Cerberus" one or two former pupils had resumed their lessons, Miss Bennett among others. By a certain blankness of feeling following upon that first lesson in Fortague Street, Irma became aware that she must have gone there in a state of subconscious expectation. That had been a week back, and the blankness persisted, quite illogically; for that there should be no mention of the "diplomat," and no encounter in the park, was surely the natural and probable event. Most likely he was composing treaties—or whatever it was that diplomats composed—at the other end of Europe—if in Europe at all. Strange how long the coming winter seemed under the illumination of this quite disconnected fact. Even life itself had taken on a trick of stretching out before her mind's eye with the monotony of a road that has no turn—and with something of its greyness, too.

CHAPTER II

THE "SHOW"

A KEEN, clear September day under that peculiarly northern sky which has the pale, greenish-blue tint of a bird's egg, with the hum of wind in the pine-trees on the heights married to the tinkle of water in the depths, in a union which will never know divorce, and with Vincent Denholm, *minus* a necktie, on his back upon the gentian-spangled hillside, taking deep breaths of the perfect air.

"Yes, I am cured," he was confiding to the nearest pine-tree—a knowing-looking veteran with flowing lichen beard. "Just shows how much depends on taking a thing in time. Never felt cooler or more reasonable in my life—which isn't saying little, my hoary friend, though it may amuse you to shake your head at me. Nothing like air of this quality, combined with plenty of exercise, for quashing anything in the shape of fever. The distemper is over, and the puppy is going in future to be a healthy puppy, and to do its little tricks all right. The dose of sulphur has sufficed, and I can go back safely to that confounded Foreign Office, which

hasn't found me a ticket yet, hang it! Mercy, how blue those gentians are, and how the pine-branches stream out against the sky! If you half-shut your eyes they don't look like pines at all. Let's see—what is it they *do* look like?"

* * * * *

And a month later, another day: a murky October day, this, with "London grease" as plentifully spread upon the pavements as butter is, in unthrifty households, spread upon bread; and overhead a grey vault, which did not drip down in rain only because it was apparently still hesitating as to whether it had not better dissolve into fog.

In Vincent's attitude and appearance as great a contrast. Far from sprawling in easy attire, he stood to-day rigidly upright, in garbs of ceremony, gazing upon a spectacle which, though possibly less soothing, appealed to him far more directly than had done the Norwegian hillside, and the enjoyment of which he owed to a certain royal, or semi-royal, foreigner, who had lately betaken himself from an earthly kingdom to a heavenly one—or so, at least, it was politely taken for granted. The august foreigner having been a Catholic, the tribute to his memory necessarily entailed the presence of the *corps diplomatique* and of various ministerial personages at a papistical place of worship—in this case the Brampton Oratory.

Many were the state coaches that followed each other down Brompton Road, and dense the crowd

about the gates to watch the descent of personages resplendent in the uniforms of all countries, with breasts blazing with orders as thickly set as the flowers in a carpet-bed; so over-decorated, some of them, that it seemed a wonder they did not sink under the weight of their honours. In the matter of an object-lesson upon the text of the clothes making the man, nothing like the *corps diplomatique* in full fig for giving it. Here it is that an assembly of what, without the attending circumstances, would be a collection of more or less used-up old worldlings—with the pallor of bureau-work fighting upon their flabby faces against the marks of high living, and with the atmosphere of the Court more than of the bureau, and of the *boudoir* more than of the Court floating about their betressed and perfumed persons—are turned by suggestion into the very symbols of power. And not to the vulgar public eye alone. Vincent himself, a part of the pageant—though but a modest and quite unresplendent part—was vividly conscious of the impression. In those old men with the pouched eyes and the shaky legs, whom the gorgeous footmen were so respectfully assisting to alight, he was looking at his own future—*minus* the shaky legs, which he confidently hoped to escape. They were not Prince A——, or the Marquis de B——, or the Duke of C—— to him, as little as to the gaping crowd; they were Germany, and France, and Russia—they were Power personified; and yet not such power as he hoped

some day to personify—since to stand for the British Empire surely meant to touch the pinnacle of human ambition.

Even the sparkle of the diamonds upon the decorations, even the plumes upon the head-coverings, did their part. It was with a flash of that self-scorn which sometimes visited him that Vincent recognised it. Call it a “sham” as much as you like—it did what it was meant to do. The solemnity of the requiem mass could not but heighten the impression. Seldom had Vincent felt in a better humour with himself and his profession than when, in the wake of his chief, he descended the Oratory steps.

And then, abruptly, right into the middle of his vision of the future came a shock, dealt by a pair of eyes seen swiftly in the crowd, and lost again, and yet more than merely seen, actually *met*, during that one passing moment. No mistake possible. As at the stroke of a stage director’s signal, the “show” sank out of sight and a single face usurped its place. The first sensation had been one of unreasoning joy, the second of painful distaste. To see her in the closely packed crowd, jostled by the mob of both sexes, offended something within him. He did not know whether it was the pleasure or the displeasure which had set a-going this strange thumping motion behind his frock-coat. Whichever it was, it sent him home tongue-tied, and with his victorious humour considerably dashed.

And this not a month since he had lain on his

back on the hillside and confided his recovery to the pine-tree, which, by the by, had wagged its beard at him, as he now distinctly remembered! Disconcerting, to say the least of it.

Sitting down to think it out over a solitary pipe, he began to understand a few things; for instance, why, of all the mountain flowers, he had never been distinctly aware of any but the gentians, looking at him from out of the grass like so many blue eyes; and why the pine-branches streaming out against the sky had tantalised him with visions of dark tresses unbound and floating in the breeze—tresses which, of course, *he* would never see unbound, though some luckier man might—some man who would not require to sacrifice his private feelings to his career. For, of course, they were going to be sacrificed. No thought of surrender had yet touched him. A hard fight was it going to be, instead of the mere skirmish he had fancied? Well, so much the worse, or perhaps so much the better, and how much sweeter the victory!

His lean jaw set so grimly that he all but bit through the pipe between his teeth. But the thought which followed was coloured by a certain self-distrust gathered from late events.

“All the same, I wish that appointment wouldn’t hang fire much longer. I’ve a notion that the air of any other capital would suit me better just now than that of London.”

* * * * *

“Bob Rendall?” said Lady Aurelia, with a protesting uplifting of her yellow hands; “whatever you do, Minna, my dear, leave me alone with Bob Rendall! What do I care whether you’ve had a letter from him or not? All about planting and sowing, of course, and oxen and pigs, and just when I’m thanking my stars on my knees for getting away from farmyards and fields and greenstuff in general, and beginning to feel like a human being again, instead of a dairy-maid. I beg that you do not press Bob Rendall’s virtues upon me. Whatever you do, give me room to fall!”

Poor Bob had never stood high in Lady Mummy’s graces, representing as he did an aggravated example of that type of degraded person who “lives in the country and keeps a trap”—only that in this case the country was the veldt, and the trap presumably an ox-waggon. The yearly purgatory of country-house visits barely absolved, and reveling in the first glee of recovered town sensations, the dowager could not possibly spare attention for people of this description. London was, of course, not as good as St. Petersburg or Paris, but it stood miles above the various “Halls” and “Castles” recently endured, and in which it had been her sad lot to sit out conversations upon such distressingly rural topics as the best arrangements of herbaceous borders, and even discussions upon the respective merits of Plymouth Rocks versus Speckled Bantams.

“In the country,” as Lady Aurelia was accustomed to define the situation, “it either rains, and you can’t go out, and have to sit in a room full of dogs and gardening catalogues and conversation to match, which is bad enough; or else it doesn’t rain, and then you are expected to go out and admire the results of the catalogues, which is much worse.”

“Let Bob Rendall go to the—you needn’t look at me so hard, Cissy; I’m not going to swear, but only to remark that he had better betake himself to the kopje or the kraal, or whatever it is they call their things out there, while we discuss more thrilling topics—in first line this morning’s show. That’s what I want to hear about. I’ll never forgive that knee of mine for keeping me out of it. As if it couldn’t have reserved its pranks for one of the times in the country, when one’s bed is one’s best refuge, anyway! But no, it must trick me of one of the few chances of seeing them all in a bunch together!”

(“They,” as in this household is almost superfluous to specify, stood for the *corps diplomatique*.)

“Oh, it was lovely!” said Cissy, with the rapturously regretful sigh of the outsider who has not always been an outsider; for what was even Vincent’s presence in the pageant beside the glories of former days? After having felt oneself an integral ingredient in the European Concert, it is not easy with a good grace to take a seat among the ordinary public.

If Cissy's sigh was not echoed by Chrissie it was only because at this moment she was occupied in replenishing the cup of a tall young man with a silky black moustache and shiny hair brushed so close to his head as almost to present the appearance of a neatly fitting black satin skull-cap. This gentleman, too, had formed part of the morning's pageant, being the Conte Guido Galliani, *attaché* to the Embassy of His Majesty Victor Emmanuel.

Yet Cissy's sigh found an echo—in the ex-Ambassador, who had not been able to resist the temptation of lacerating his own feelings by contemplating the spectacle which to him represented the past, just as plainly as to his son it stood for the future.

"A fine sight, undoubtedly. In fact, I had no idea how fine a sight it was," he added, with his winning smile, "until I saw it from the outside, so to say."

"But I want an account from some one who saw it from the inside. The Conte—hum, the Conte seems pretty well occupied; always a pity to disturb an *entente cordiale*, I say. But there's Vincent. Where is Vincent? Why is the boy lurking in the shadows? Doesn't he know that I'm waiting for his impressions of the show? Now, don't try and tell me that it left you cold!"

"No, it didn't leave me cold at all, granny; quite the reverse."

"Could so much pomp and circumstance leave any but the most hardened philosopher cold?"

It might have been by mere chance that Minna's eyes and those of Vincent encountered just then. Yet it was as a challenge that he took the words, and answered them as such.

"Outward form, if you like; not a thing in itself, but the expression of a thing. So long as there is something worth expressing behind it I don't see how you can logically call the form empty."

"Dear me, was I calling it anything?" asked Miss Bennett, innocent-eyed.

"Talking of pomp and circumstance," mused Sir Christian, lost in reminiscences, "all this is nothing to the Russian way of doing things. Now, I recollect during my St. Petersburg time——"

"Oh, Vincent, do you know what the Conte is saying?" broke in Chrissie's voice from the tea-table. "He has just been offering to stake his soul—or his gold watch, I forget which—upon the chances of separate Hungarian representation within the next five years."

"Then you mustn't give up your Hungarian. By the by, how is it getting on?"

Cissy had asked the question before she remembered that it might have been better not to ask it, and looked apprehensively towards her grandmother, who, owing to the obstacles to mastication presented by a slice of plum-cake, had been kept out of the talk for some moments.

"You couldn't expect it to get on in Norway," said Vincent, a trifle irritably, as it struck Minna.

“And you aren’t contemplating putting him through an exam., I hope,” cut in Lady Aurelia, sharply, having by this time overcome the plum-cake. “I want to hear more about the show, Vincent. Nothing original about the condolences, I suppose? Did the Marquis use his pocket-handkerchief? He’s a dab hand at crocodile tears. Any *bon-mots* a-going? Next to treaties, there’s nothing like mourning services for *bon-mots*, I notice.”

But if Lady Aurelia had meant to get away from Hungary, as a possibly delicate ground, her efforts were not seconded by Minna, who just then bluntly remarked:

“I’ve been reading a book about Hungary, a German book, called ‘Die Legion Klapka.’ I can read German quite decently now, you know; and with a future ambassador to Budapest in my relationship, I naturally consider it my duty to study the Hungarian question. It’s an awfully enlightening book.”

“Ah, ‘The Legion Klapka,’” said the Conte, drawing near, with interest plainly piercing upon his pale, intelligent face. “Yes, it is enlightening, is it not? It geeves you so good an idea of the national situation.”

But for the occasional dragging of a vowel—vain attempts at the softening of a barbarous tongue—the Conte’s English was perfect.

“Yes. But it enlightened me on other points, too: for instance, Bismarck’s prodigious genius in

the matter of making fools of his allies, as well as mincemeat of his enemies. The skill with which he egged on the Hungarian rebels to form their illicit battalion, and the neatness with which he dropped them, exactly like a hot potato, in the moment he found that he could do without them, fills me with wondering admiration."

"Yes, yes," agreed the Conte, eager and bright-eyed, "he was our master—no doubt of it."

"And yet, to look at his face, you would take him to be just a good, honest bulldog."

"That's the beauty of it," chuckled Lady Aurelia. "Nothing like a bulldog face for throwing dust in the eyes."

"It was a political necessity," said Vincent, who had been moving uneasily on his chair.

"What was? To bribe soldiers to break their oath of fealty, behind your adversary's back, while before his face you keep up all the forms of legitimate warfare? If those are political necessities, then—why, then, I'm rather glad I'm not in politics," finished Minna, with her comfortable laugh.

"All is fair in love, war—and diplomacy," said Sir Christian, while an airy gesture of his white hand seemed to wave aside all such petty considerations.

"Even things which, called by their names, would be blackguardism in private life?"

"Ah, but we don't call things by their names," smiled the Conte, brilliantly and sweetly. "We

would be unworthy of our profession if we did that. We follow the evangelical counsel of being wily as the serpent, you know."

"And leave out the other half about the dove? I see."

"Really, Minna," laughed the gleeful dowager, who would, perhaps, have been enjoying herself less if she had thought of observing Vincent's face, "you're not up to the rudiments of the trade. Why not bring out the copy-book at once and tell us that honesty is the best policy?"

"You're forgetting your Georges Sand, Minna, my dear," put in Sir Christian, with a playfully admonishing shake of his fluffy white head. "Don't you know that '*La franchise d'un diplomate serait le mensonge d'un particulier?*'"

"Excellent! excellent!" laughed the delighted Conte, showing a set of teeth as delicate as those of a woman and as incisive-looking as those of a squirrel. "That's what I always say; we're the licensed liars, just as the soldiers are the licensed murderers."

"Oh, Conte, that sounds almost wicked," said Chrissie, with a glance of not too severe reproof, while Vincent put in sharply:

"But our license only extends to white lies."

"The colour of the lie seems to me to be entirely a subjective question. To some people I imagine that all lies are always black."

Minna did not look at Vincent as she said it; but nevertheless he bit his lip, as at the sting of a shaft.

"Only to the fools," decided Lady Aurelia. "Why, it's the quintessence of the game of life, which is just one big humbugging of other people, as we all know."

"And then it is so amusing," put in the Conte, all smiles. He called it "amioosing," which in no way obscured his meaning.

"Isn't it, just! Oh, it's the serpents that have the best time of it, depend upon it, and not the doves. No sport half so good as leading people about by the nose, without their knowing that they are being led about, eh, Conte?"

Vincent got up and walked to the window, where he stood drumming upon the panes with all his ten fingers at a time. His grandmother had a knack—quite unconsciously practised—of bringing out the baser side of his profession, which never failed to disturb him; but it had never disturbed him quite so much as to-day. That delight in intrigue for intrigue's sake—almost making an end of what should have been but a means—was just now peculiarly irritating, perhaps because since the discovery of the morning his nerves had not quite recovered their balance.

Into the midst of his angry reflections broke his father's musical laugh.

"Ha, ha! I should think it was good sport! When I remember the way we led them about by

the nose at the Mareggio Conference, during my Roman time! Didn't we just make them dance to our pipe—ha, ha!"

"And, better still, the way you all of you together conspired to lead Europe about by the nose at the *Vol au Vent* Conference. Just as though you hadn't good enough dinners at home!"

Recognising the bone of contention, the ex-Ambassador's face put on its cloak of official dignity.

"My dear Lady Aurelia, I'm tired of explaining that——"

"Then suppose you don't explain, but leave us to form our own conclusions. That paper-cutter, now, the very one you're holding in your hand, Conte, do you know its origin? No? Why, it's Christian's *souvenir* of the Valamów Conference; the only thing he could secure—inkstands, penholders, and even blotting-pads all gone before. They scrambled for things at the end, you know; had to carry off relics of those happy fourteen weeks; though, personally, I should have thought the *menus* were relics enough. I'll wager the Conte doesn't know why a Russian meeting-place was *de rigueur*. Do you, Conte? Just because caviare doesn't carry well, as every *gourmand* worth the name knows; and because several high statesmen considered that they wouldn't have exhausted the experiences of life if they went to their graves without having tasted the article fresh. Upon my word,

I've a mind to call it 'Caviare Conference,' for a change."

In the burst of laughter which followed, the outraged ex-Ambassador's protests were drowned, no attention being over for him—unless, indeed, Lady Aurelia's muttered "*Farceur!*" may possibly have been directed to his address.

"How amioosing! Oh, how amioosing!" assured the Conte, with an instinctive laying of his hand upon his heart, as the most eloquent means of emphasising his delight.

* * * * *

"I am sure the Conte Galliani will make a charming ambassador," said Minna to Vincent, as together they descended the stairs; "and such a *happy* one, too! Coming my way? No?"

"No, I am not coming your way," said Vincent, with a certain stiffness; and, having ceremoniously helped his cousin into her hansom, he walked off solitary, in quite a different mood from the one in the morning. He was not feeling at all pleased with Minna; and, what is more, Minna knew it, and yet smiled to herself in the depths of her hansom in an obviously impenitent fashion.

CHAPTER III

IN THE HEART OF THE FOG.

“ARE you sure you hadn't better give it just another quarter of an hour? It *may* lift yet; it often does before evening.”

“It has lifted a little already. I am afraid that quarter of an hour would just encourage it to come down again. Thank you, Miss Bennett, but my father may be getting anxious. I promised to be home by daylight, though this isn't daylight really.”

It was anything but daylight. The gas, which had not been turned off since morning, showed duski-ly brown window-panes; and even in the closed space a certain dimness floated, giving a slightly woolly outline to things in general. De Wet, perhaps aware of the unbecoming atmosphere, was living up to his name by having disappeared bodily into his basket, where he lay shivering under an embroidered cover.

“A hansom?” suggested Minna, but not hope-fully.

“Who's to find it? And how is it ever to find Filbert Gardens? I was told a story the other day

of a hansom-driver who had got off his seat, in order to lead his horse, and who couldn't find it when he was down, but wandered off into the fog, leaving his unfortunate fare stranded. No, no—there is nothing for it but to grope one's way, and that one can only do upon one's feet, you know."

"I wish you had not to grope it alone, though," said Minna, with a sigh of dissatisfaction.

Irma smiled gratefully. This was one of the moments that cheered her with the sense of sympathy.

"Thank you, Miss Bennett. To hear you say that is almost as good as having an escort. But I'm getting quite used to it now—really, I am."

"Was it not uncomfortable at first?"

"Very," said Irma, frankly. "You see, abroad it's different, and mamma was always so particular."

"Is it long since you lost your mother?"

"I have not lost her; she is alive."

Irma stopped short. It was the first direct question which Miss Bennett had ever put to her, and suddenly she realised that, of course, her well-wisher must take it for granted that she was motherless. Her face both flushed and hardened, while she spoke quickly:

"She is in Austria. Probably I shall never see her again. Yes, the fog is a little better; I really must go. Don't be nervous about me, Miss Bennett. What is to happen to me, after all?"

"I don't know. All sorts of things happen. I

forget how many people have walked into canals during this week."

"Well, I'm not going near the canals, and I shall give the Serpentine a wide berth. Good-bye, Miss Bennett."

There was something apologetic in Minna's parting pressure of the hand. She could not say what had forced that question to her lips. Evidently her curiosity on the subject of this girl was still far from satisfied.

Downstairs, upon the door-step, Irma stood for a moment, like a person summoning courage to take a header into water. This was the fourth consecutive day during which London had had to take the existence of the sky for granted, and was beginning to have serious doubts regarding that of the sun. The degrees of gloom varied, but persisted, occasionally mocking the victims with the faint resemblance of a release, only to smother them afresh. On the whole, it was much like living under a huge blanket which is held by the four corners, and being lowered and raised at the sweet will of the holders. Delicate lungs wrestled with the atmosphere, and even eyes that were not delicate smarted under its persistent sting. All day long the gas and electric lights made ineffectual yellow and white blotches upon the darkness; all day long the dwellers by the river were wearied by the foghorn's monotonous voice, which to impressionable minds always has in it something of a cry of distress. That almost

theatrical appearance of fog-bound London was becoming habitual. People and things appeared and vanished like something in a murky transformation scene. On the comparatively deserted pavement each pedestrian might think himself alone, until another appeared beside him, standing up as though out of a trap-door.

Irma, with the plan of streets well before her mind's eye—since to her body's eye they were veiled—steered cautiously for the Marble Arch. Before she had reached it the blanket had come down again as low as ever. It was her ears as much as her eyes that warned her of the closeness of Oxford Street. Just as she was wondering whether her nerve would ever rise to the ordeal before it, she ran against something which she took to be a walking mountain, but which revealed itself as an arm of the law, and, in some inexplicable way, was spirited across in safety.

“The Marble Arch?” she asked her huge protector, rendered huger by the uncertainty of outline.

He moved a vague arm in a given direction, and was simultaneously swallowed back into the fog.

If Irma did not miss the Marble Arch to-day it was only because of the familiarity of the ground. Nevertheless, having reached it, she had another moment of hesitation. Her usual line to Albert-gate was shortest, but would not Park Lane be safer in such darkness as this? she asked herself, gazing into the yellow sea before her.

"See you across, lidy?"

Irma turned with a start. At her elbow stood a shabby, stumpy, grey-bearded individual, inquiringly touching his hat. The gesture was humble and the grey beard confidence-inspiring. Through the yellow gloom it shone like a label of respectability.

"Will it be safe?" she asked doubtfully.

"Sime as Bank of England."

"And you are sure of the way?"

"Sime as my packet."

"Very well. I will give you sixpence for taking me to Albert-gate."

"I'm your man, lidy," said the old man cheerily, and began to move forward. "Just you sticks to me, and never fears!"

Circumstances making propinquity appear advisable, it was but natural that the guide should keep barely half a pace in advance of the guided. After a time, Irma noticed that his head turned rather frequently from side to side, and that he appeared to be peering through the gloom, perhaps in order to verify the direction.

"Are you sure we are going right?" she once asked anxiously, to which he replied as encouragingly as before:

"Just you sticks to me!"

After another five minutes he seemed to be walking slower and looking about him more carefully. Fearing to hurt his feelings by a renewed inquiry,

Irma held her tongue, but in her heart of hearts began to fear that he had missed the way. Nor was there any soul near of whom guidance might be obtained. Since entering upon this walk they had not met another person. The park seemed as deserted as though it had been midnight instead of the middle of the afternoon.

All at once the man stood still and faced round.

“The first thing I’ve got to say, lidy, is that if yer scream I’ll knock yer down.”

He said it so quietly and in so completely everyday a manner that Irma, though she heard the words, did not at once grasp the meaning.

“How do you mean?” she asked mechanically, yet without conscious alarm.

“I mean just that it would be better not to make a fuss. Work has been awful bad lately, and a pore man like me ’as to tike wot comes ’is way. That’s wot I be meanin’.”

For an instant Irma did not feel her heart beating; in the next it seemed to be hammering all over her body. She had seen his face, with the distorted mouth and the glistening eyes, fixed greedily upon her fur-trimmed jacket—one of the last remnants of Vienna splendour—and at the sight of her own monstrous imprudence confronted her with a sensation compounded of rage and shame.

“What is it you want?” she asked, with artificially steadied voice.

“Nothin’ much—only yer jacket, and yer purse,

and yer watch, and yer rings, and yer bracelets, if so be ye 'appen to 'ave any about yer. No call to look frightened, lidy. I'm not goin' to 'urt yer—so long, that's to say, as yer makes no fuss. I'll just trouble yer to 'and them things over—thinkin' as I do that you'd prefer doin' it yerself. But I've no objection to 'elpin' ye, if ye're agreeable. Only keep bearin' in mind that at the first hulloa ye let out ye'll find yersel' on yer back. No mortal good starin' about yer, lidy. There ain't many folks takin' walks to-day."

For it was Irma now who turned her head from side to side, wildly trying to pierce the yellow curtain, painfully lending an ear for a possible approach—uselessly, though, since the throbbing of her own pulses filled all her hearing. For all that she could see and hear, she was alone with this old ruffian in the heart of the fog—as much at his mercy as ever was traveller at the hands of the highwayman upon the loneliest country road.

Plunging her hand into her pocket, she held her purse towards him as though it had been a ransom. He clutched it, and said more roughly already:

"The jacket now, and I'll trouble you to look shairp. I've no mind to be disturbed over my work."

Irma measured him with a look of reluctant inquiry. Despite his grey beard, he did not look feeble; but neither was she feeble. For one second the thought of resistance shot through her. Then

she caught sight of his face again and saw his fists square. With trembling fingers she began to unbutton her jacket, and at once felt herself roughly assisted in the task. In another moment it had been stripped from her shoulders. Of the muff the grey-bearded robber had already possessed himself.

“The watch, now!”

“It’s only silver!” pleaded Irma. The gold one brought from Vienna had long since gone to fill up a hole in the domestic budget.

“’And it out, I say.”

She fumbled at the chain, almost blindly; but even while her fingers jerked over the task her head flew up once more. Were those her pulses mocking her, or was that rhythmic beat of a step behind the curtain? It was a glance into her plunderer’s face which gave her certainty, and with that certainty courage flamed again through her veins.

With a quick half-step backwards, she raised her voice, shouting with all the strength of her young lungs; but only once, for the second “Help!” was already stifled by a rough hand upon her mouth. But her ears were not closed, and with their help she became as plainly aware of the unmistakable approach of help as of the furious oaths being muttered close at hand.

“Where? where? Hold fast! I’m coming!” a man’s voice came to her from out of the mist, and the sound fired a new sense of resistance. Desperately she now struggled, with her hand closed

over the watch which, with his left, the man was attempting to add to the plunder. The thought of biting the fingers which closed her mouth was vividly present to her mind—but impossible because of the tightness of the pressure. In another moment it was abruptly removed; another and a more fearful oath sounded in her ear; another grab—an ineffectual one—made at her watch; a new figure, almost unnaturally tall, surged up close at hand in the usual trap-door fashion, and through what appeared to be another trap-door the grey-bearded robber vanished. Trembling and gasping, Irma let herself go against what presumably was a supporting arm.

“Gone? Which way did he make off?”

The rescuer was taking the deep, short breaths of one who has run hard.

“I’ll catch him yet.”

But with the movement he made, Irma’s hold upon the sleeve beside her tightened.

“Don’t, don’t leave me alone!” she implored, with the frankness of terror. “Let him go—never mind, but I can’t stay alone!”

“All right; I’ll stop here. Don’t be frightened, Fräulein Hartmann; he sha’n’t touch you again.”

Looking up into the face bending above her, Irma realised that it was Mr. Denholm’s arm to which she was clinging. The discovery did not particularly impress her. She was too excited just then to be much surprised at anything.

"Thank Heaven!" she murmured vaguely. "You came just in time."

Her teeth chattered between the words. Without knowing that he did it, he laid one hand over the shaking fingers still clutching his sleeve. It seemed the most obvious way of quieting her disturbance.

"Have I come in time? It doesn't look like it. How you are shivering! Good Lord, your jacket is gone! Did that ruffian——"

For the flash of a second the idea of pursuit again presented itself for consideration, only to be dismissed as hopeless.

"Wait a moment, Fräulein Hartmann."

He disengaged his arm from her fingers, not without a little gentle force, and getting quickly out of his overcoat, held it ready for her.

"What does that mean?" she asked, blankly.

"It means that you are to put this on."

She looked from it to him, and back again, doubtfully.

"But I can't do that."

"You can, and you must. It is certainly more feasible than walking home in that flimsy dress."

"But you?"

"I have a warm coat; I will take no harm."

"But it will look ridiculous," objected Irma; and the remark was a most hopeful sign of returning self-command.

"It won't look anything, because nobody will see

it. We're only shadows to each other to-day; and, besides, it's getting dark already. You can't mean to say, surely, that your vanity prefers the risk of catching a certain cold to the look of an unbecoming garment? Are you going to keep me waiting much longer, Fräulein Hartmann?"

Before that tone of cool and almost severe command Irma discovered herself to be helpless. Without another word, and with something like a sigh of comfort, she slipped into the coat still tepid from contact with another human body. Here was warmth as well as safety. And here, too, was much more space than she required, for the collar mounted beyond her ears, and the sleeves descended to her finger-tips, while beyond each shoulder an unexplored cave seemed to bulge stiffly.

"Oh, how funny I must look! At any rate, I won't miss my muff."

The laugh which escaped her was like medicine to her shaken nerves.

"Are you sure you won't catch cold?"

"Quite sure. And now I suppose we had better be moving on. I wonder in which direction Brompton Road lies?"

"Are you going to Brompton Road, too?"

"I am. And it would simplify matters if you took my arm. It's the only guaranteed way of not losing sight of each other."

Irma obeyed, still a little dazed, while Vincent,

for another moment, used his eyes and ears tentatively.

"We're not on the Albert-gate line at all; of course, he naturally preferred greater seclusion. Well, we can but try our luck and hope for the best."

They moved on cautiously.

"How fortunate that you should have been in the park, too!" said Irma, guiltless of after-thoughts, and busy only with the opportuneness of her rescue.

"Most fortunate. I followed you—I mean that I happened to be behind you when you came to the Marble Arch, and it struck me that it would be just as well to keep you in my eye. So many accidents are heard of in this weather. But the fog beat me. I didn't even make out that you had a guide. It was a frightful bit of imprudence—if you will allow me to say so"—came the correcting clause. "But it's clear you don't know London yet."

"It was the grey beard that did it. He looked such a respectable old man."

"Old?"

Vincent repeated the word with a note of satisfaction.

"He was old, was he?"

"Oh, quite old—almost venerable, in fact. And I daresay he was very hungry." Irma's forgiving mood rather surprised herself; nor was it easy to understand what had become of that angry rebellion

of a few minutes back, in which she had been ready to use even her teeth.

“And did he—did he make himself very obnoxious?”

“Not so very. He was almost polite; though he helped me out of my jacket rather quicker than I liked.”

She laughed again, and this time Vincent joined.

“Did he get anything beyond the jacket?”

“My muff and my purse—but *that* will have been a disappointment. I don't believe there was a whole shilling in it.”

“You will have to get a new jacket,” said Vincent, thinking aloud.

She sighed, “Yes,” though somehow not feeling nearly as depressed as by rights she ought to be, considering what a really serious thing was the purchase of a new Winter jacket. Having glanced at the subject, she decided not to spoil the present moment by premature reflection—simultaneously becoming aware that there actually was something here susceptible of being spoiled. That angry feeling which had accompanied the talk about the inkstand dress was to-day conspicuous by its absence. And what of the distrust once felt of this same man, at whose mercy she knew herself to be as absolutely as a short time back she had been at that of the grey-bearded ruffian? If the recollection had come near her she would probably have disbelieved it. But it did not come near her. Without reasoning

and without reflection, she knew herself as safe by his side in the heart of the fog as she could ever have been by that of her father in the glare of daylight. She was tasting the unwonted presence of a protector—a thing so often missed; so distinctly yearned after; and so sweet was the experience that other things sank away beside it. It was a universal relaxation of a will which had done much hard work within the past year—of a set of nerves strained beyond their due. She was content to walk on with him thus unresistingly through darkness and solitude, wherever he might choose to lead her. Nor was she aware of any impatience regarding the termination of their wanderings.

For, despite Vincent's perfectly honest efforts to hit off Albert-gate, it turned into a desultory and mostly haphazard tacking about in the double-shadows of fog and dusk, in the course of which they occasionally stumbled over wires, occasionally ran against trees, or, by the want of resistance under their feet, discovered that they had left the path—all of which accidents struck them both entirely in the diverting and never once in the provoking sense. The scorn which on his side, the haughtiness which on hers, had marked their last meeting were as things that had never been. Rather, they seemed like a pair of children having an adventure, out of which all the alarm was

eliminated and nothing remained but the enjoyment.

"It's rather like playing at babes in the wood, isn't it?" laughed Irma; "only without the wicked uncle."

"Oh, but the wicked uncle was there—you're forgetting. He's perhaps sold your jacket by this time."

"To be sure—I was really forgetting." Somehow that part of the adventure seemed far away already.

"And what happens if we don't find that Gate? Will we be locked out, or what?"

The question was quite serene. Even though she had wanted, she could not feel frightened any longer.

"We'll find it fast enough—too fast, probably." But the last words did not achieve articulate pronunciation.

So rare were the shadows which slipped past them, even in the more frequented paths now reached, that it was almost the same as having Hyde Park entirely to themselves. From time to time they would stand still and strain their hearing for the sound of traffic, as the only available means of guidance; and once, finding themselves suddenly on the very edge of the Serpentine, he instinctively grasped the hand upon his arm, as though with the thought of shielding her from a danger.

A minute later dull points of fire began to prick

through the gloom. To Irma they seemed part of the decoration of the fairy tale in which she had been living for the last half-hour—though in reality they were pointing to her the way out of the fairy tale, being the lights of Knightsbridge, struggling into sight.

It was rather silently that the linked couple stepped out of Albert-gate. With the coming of darkness the fog had lifted sufficiently to let lamps and lanterns resume their usual functions, for which reason the night promised to be ever so much more transparent than the day had been. Abruptly Irma was visited by the acute consciousness of her strange attire.

"It seems to me so horribly light here," she complained, shrinking.

Upon which Vincent, rather knowingly:

"I know a remedy against that."

"Do you? What is it called?"

"By-ways. We've only got to avoid thoroughfares and to slink along the worst-lighted openings we can find, of which, fortunately, the choice is large in this, our brilliant metropolis. Tell me where you wish to be landed, and I'll manage, all right."

"Filbert Gardens, off Cromwell Road. But, Mr. Denholm," said Irma, rather precipitately, "you needn't go further; really, I can manage by myself now—I am so used to going about alone."

"And my overcoat?" laughed Vincent.

"To be sure; I had forgotten."

"Looks rather as though you meant to treat me as you have been treated, does it not?"

They laughed again together; upon which Irma discovered that her hand was still resting within Vincent's arm, and attempted shyly to withdraw it.

"What's that for?"

"It doesn't seem necessary now, does it? I won't lose you here."

"Just as you like, of course; but it strikes me that if you don't want the overcoat noticed it is better to keep close."

He said it in so admirable a tone of detachment that Irma decided to leave her hand where it was. To insist on the withdrawal would now have assumed a taint of prudishness.

When they had got into the by-ways Vincent appeared to be ruminating, with the result of presently asking:

"You don't go about alone after dark, as a rule, do you?"

"Not when I can help it; but I can't always do that, you know."

The lantern under which they passed just then revealed a frown of displeasure.

"And have you never had disagreeables—besides to-day, I mean?"

Another lantern exposed a quick flush.

"I don't let them become disagreeables."

After that the silences grew longer; but the fairy-

tale atmosphere seemed to have spread from the fog-drowned park to these narrow streets, in which even the cabbages exposed at the doors of humble greengrocers looked to Irma's eyes as though they might have been grown in some witch-garden—why, the witch herself was occasionally to be caught sight of behind a counter, framed in a very cave of greenery—while the cod and flounders flabbily spread in the windows of third-rate fishmongers gleamed as mysteriously under a stray gas-jet as though they had all been enchanted princes caught in legendary fishermen's nets.

In time, by dint of mechanically given directions, Filbert Gardens was reached.

They were on the door-step already, and the bell had actually been rung, when Vincent turned again to his companion.

"I wish you would promise me something."

Her eyes asked "What?" though her lips were silent.

"Never to be out after dark alone. You don't know London, but surely your father ought to."

She did not answer—not because it had occurred to her that he had no right to demand any promises, but because she was honestly at a loss what to say. Before she had found it the door was opened—by her father, in obvious agitation.

"Irma? Thank God! I have been in such anxiety; it is nearly six o'clock. You are not alone?"

"This is Mr. Denholm, papa; he met me in the

park. I have had an adventure, but nothing has happened to me—thanks to Mr. Denholm.”

“Please come in,” said Harding, earnestly. “I cannot thank you in the street. What a fortunate chance! What sort of adventure, Irma? Dear me, child, what have you got on?”

“That’s part of the adventure. You shall hear all about it; only you must promise not to laugh at me when you see me in the light.”

Yet it was Irma herself who laughed when, a minute later, she saw herself in the mirror above the mantelpiece, with a dwarfed head growing out of what seemed to be a cross-breed between a board and a sack.

In the next moment she turned again in sudden confusion, for in the mirror she had caught sight of Mr. Denholm standing in the middle of the miscellaneous apartment and casting a rapidly scrutinising glance at its tell-tale contrivances. In that moment she wished that it had been possible to say good-bye to him on the door-step; but the overcoat alone would have ruled out that idea, let alone a decent sense of gratitude. She began to take off the offending garment in a hurry, Vincent meanwhile giving Harding a brief account of the episode in Hyde Park. All the time he spoke, and without again looking about him, he was vividly aware of the poverty-marked details of the room, as well as of the gallant efforts that had been made to conquer them—for which reason, and though



“Yet it was Irma herself who laughed when . . . she saw herself in the mirror.”

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nothing appeared in his face, he spoke with a pang at his heart.

"How fortunate! What an extraordinarily fortunate chance!" Harding repeated more than once; a remark to which Vincent neither assented nor demurred, refraining only from any observation calculated to throw a doubt upon the purely accidental nature of the occurrence.

The invitation to sit down was not accepted, perhaps because he had become aware of a certain embarrassment about Fräulein Hartmann's manner, contrasting, oh, how strangely! with the *insouciance* of that wandering in the fog. It would be as well to deliver her from his presence just then, which would simultaneously liberate him from the father's quite superfluous gratitude. Having recovered his overcoat, he therefore took leave briefly.

"And this is all the home she has!" he mused, as he went. "And that white-haired wreck her only protector!"

His steps lagged, as though unwilling to leave the precincts of the dingy "Gardens," while a dreamy warmth seemed wrapping round spirit and body alike—the fault of the overcoat, perhaps, whose pleasant glow made the bodily presence of the last wearer appear to persist.

Almost at the last house, he was roused from idle thoughts by a penetrating and persistent "toot," and simultaneously a pair of brilliant eyes, glaring through the haze to which the fog had melted,

turned the corner. It scarcely needed the well-known panting sound, nor a whiff of the now familiar scent, to announce the presence of a motor-car. Vincent looked at it sharply as it leisurely passed him, having already slowed down. A motor-car had an uncomfortable place somewhere in his memory. This was not the identical vehicle met in summer, being a closed brougham; but the face seen for a moment at the window belonged to the category of rosy, round faces which the one upon that other motor had likewise done.

In a fit of curiosity he looked over his shoulder. So far as he could calculate, the motor-brougham had stopped before the identical house which he had just left. A doubt on the point being recognised as irritating, Vincent found it more satisfactory to cross the street and make himself miserable by the full assurance. Having got it, he made for the nearest hansom-stand and drove home, feeling as though his soul had suddenly become a shuttlecock which some very happy feelings and some very unhappy ones were recklessly beating about from side to side.

CHAPTER IV

THE SURRENDER

MISS BENNETT had just laid ready the copy-book and the German grammar against the impending lessons, and De Wet, having weighed the merits of the hearthrug *versus* those of his basket, had just decided in favour of the latter, when the door-bell rang, peremptorily.

Minna glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“Fräulein Hartmann already? It wants twenty minutes to the time.”

She went to the window—a window with real glass panes in it, in place of the mock brown paper of recent times, the fog having lifted some days back—but the visitor had already been admitted.

A minute later she turned at the sound of the opening door.

“*You*, Vincent? This isn't your usual hour. I was expecting anybody but you.”

“And wanting anybody but me, too, it would seem, to judge from the consternation of your face. It's no use, Minna; I know this is your room, but I am *not* going to be turned out of it this time.”

"The fact is," said Minna, with an unusual touch of awkwardness, "I'm getting ready for my German lesson. In about a quarter of an hour——"

"You expect Fräulein Hartmann—I know. But there's plenty of time before that, and I want to talk to you—yes, you're a paragon in looks, from the tip of your nose to that of your tail——" (this *par parenthèse* to De Wet, planted, expectantly, before him). "Are you going to ask me to sit down, by the by, or am I to take that part for granted?"

He had taken it for granted already.

"Does that mean that you are resuming ordinary civility? I suppose you are aware that you haven't been near me since the day I ventured to express a favourable opinion upon the Conte Galliani's future."

"Haven't I?" said Vincent, abstractedly caressing the toy-terrier, his eye meanwhile showing none of the responding bellicose spark usually kindled by such challenges.

Minna looked at him closely.

"What is it, Vincent? What have you come for? Do you want me to do anything for you?"

"Yes. I want you to lend me your drawing-room."

"When?"

"To-day."

"For how long?"

"For half an hour."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I am going to propose to Fräulein Hartmann in it."

Before the quietly spoken words Minna sank back quietly in her chair, not like a person having received a blow, rather like one yielding to the pressure of a strong hand laid upon her chest.

"What has happened, Vincent?" she asked, low and rather huskily.

"All that has happened is that I have given up fighting. I imagined I was stronger than *it*, whereas it turns out that *it* is stronger than I am. I honestly believed that I had left its corpse in Norway, buried under the gentians and the fir-trees, instead of which I discover that it's as alive as ever, and that the gentians and the firs were part of it, all the time."

"When did you discover this?"

"On the day they buried that royal old sinner. She was in the crowd at the church-door, and our eyes just met. That was the discovery, but not yet the surrender. You mustn't think me as easily floored as all that. I meant to stick it out, and I thought I would—till Tuesday."

Minna's eyes asked questions, though her lips did not move. As though incommoded by their expectant gaze, Vincent got up, and, wandering towards the fireplace, stood there with his elbow on the mantelpiece, and his hand shading his eyes, while he spoke down into the glowing coals.

“That was the last day of the fog, you know. I was on my way here—not with any idea of a meeting, since I had no clue to your present arrangements, but just because I felt that a bit of a squabble with you might be stimulating. At the corner she passed me, not seeing me, though I made her out, right enough, fog and all. I knew at once that she would be coming away from here, and I followed her. I didn’t mean to speak to her—I swear I did not; but I hated the idea of knowing her alone on such a day. I suppose I tried to put it down to the account of Christian charity; anyway, I followed her, losing her and recovering her off and on as far as the Marble Arch, and then losing her for what seemed like good. Still I walked on, on what I believed to be the line to Albert-gate, but which, fortunately, turned out not to be that, since the ruffian who had undertaken to guide her across had, of course, struck a more remote path. Sometimes I thought I heard steps in front of me, and sometimes I thought I didn’t; and at last—to cut a long story short—there came a call out of the thick of the fog, and I arrived just in time to see the man making off with her jacket and purse, and to help her to keep on her feet.”

“Good God!” said Minna, below her breath.

“That’s what I felt like, too. This is the bad part of the story; now comes the good, for it was quite half an hour before we found Albert-gate, and during that half-hour she held to my arm, and

I could almost feel her heart beating through my own overcoat, which, of course, I had made her put on. But she did not seem frightened, thank Heaven! and we laughed a good deal over our adventures. And then I took her home, of course, and had to submit to being thanked by the father; and—well, that's just how it was, Minna; don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Minna, in that same low voice.

"Since I have felt her holding on to me like that, and belonging to me, so to say," went on Vincent, smiling down into the grate, as though he saw pictures in the fire, "I have found out that I can't do without her. It's a complete knock-down, I admit it—perhaps an ignominious one. I'm not sure that there isn't a touch of the black arts in it. I'm positive, anyway, that that overcoat of mine is bewitched. I can't put it on now without thinking—all sorts of things. Upon my word, I do believe it's that confounded garment that has done it all!" laughed Vincent, with a touch of entirely superficial anger.

"And you have quite decided to ask her to marry you?"

Minna spoke with her face bent over De Wet, now nestling upon her lap. It was she who now appeared to be inconvenienced by the meeting of the eyes, not being absolutely certain of what might be written in her own. Of course, she had always known that something like this would come some

day—had even wanted it to come; but even to such clear-sighted people as Minna it is always difficult to know in advance exactly how much a thing will hurt.

“Would I be likely to be making this exhibition of myself if I had not decided?”

“But your career?”

He laughed derisively.

“What miserable duplicity is this? As if you were not capable of seeing my career go to the dogs, without turning a hair! I dare you to look me in the face and deny it!”

Apparently Minna still felt some difficulty about looking him in the face, but she had not yet done with an elaborate resettlement of the cherry-coloured ribbon-bow which to-day enhanced the toy-terrier's charms.

“It isn't duplicity; it is——”

“A sense of responsibility towards the family? I know. But make your mind easy—the career is all right. I've thought it all out—been doing nothing else since Tuesday, in fact. It's only one item that I am striking out of the programme—the one granny calls 'the right sort of marriage,' but which—since Tuesday—seems to me the wrong sort. The programme itself stands upright. Connexions are good things, of course; but I'll get to the high places without them—trust me for that! It only means a rather harder fight, and I like fighting. I'll do it, Minna; see if I don't!”

He looked, as he said it, magnificently obstinate enough to do it, having paced round from the fireplace now, and standing there with squared shoulders and jaw, and hands which seemed to have mechanically clenched in the depths of his pockets.

"Besides," argued Vincent, with that sort of vivacity which makes for self-conviction—"it isn't nearly so mad as it looks. However obscure her family may be, there is absolutely nothing to be objected to her person. She would not only shine, she would *reign* in any drawing-room. Can you imagine any more perfect impersonification of a future ambassadress?"

His eyes challenged Minna with the question.

"I am not saying that I can. No, there is no objection to her person, but, Vincent, there may be other things."

Minna spoke with evident hesitation.

"I am not sure that her mother is not under a cloud. It was only the other day that I discovered the existence of the mother; and Fräulein Hartmann seemed distressed in mentioning her—said she would probably never see her again. Her parents seem to be permanently separated. I shouldn't mention it if I did not think that you should do with open eyes whatever you do."

Vincent made the impatient gesture of one who waves something tangible but trifling to one side.

"Bother the cloud! It's not the mother I want to marry—it's the daughter. You're as well aware

as I am that these sorts of clouds are not unheard-of in the most exalted circles. Conjugal differences in the older generations could not possibly hamper the 'career.' Why, even in our own persons such things are almost *regu*, so long as they are correctly managed. No, Minna, it's no use throwing little sticks in my way. I've a vast opinion of your judgment, as you know; but on this occasion I did not come to ask for advice, but to state an intention. I mean to marry Fräulein Hartmann—if she will have me, of course." The last words were obviously an afterthought.

"And have you any reason to suppose that she will have you?"

Vincent gazed back at his cousin, haughtily surprised. It was clear that the contingency suggested had not been seriously considered. With the arrival at his own rather tremendous resolution the matter had appeared to him to be clinched. In the midst of her own trouble Minna could not suppress a passing smile, so clearly visible to her mind's eye was the "swelled head" at that moment.

"Well, we'll soon see about that. Even if she likes me ever so little, it isn't likely, is it, that she would say 'No?' And she did not seem to dislike me the other day."

"And have you thought of what granny will do to me if she hears that I have been instrumental——"

"You haven't been instrumental. Whether here

or in another place, I meant to do it—only I think it would be better here. I gathered from her talk the other day that she would be here to-day, and that's why I am here. In their lodgings—such awful lodgings, Minna—it would be much more awkward—for *her*; and I couldn't be sure of finding her alone, since the sitting-room seems to be the old man's bedroom as well. I'm haunted by the picture of her in that horrible Filbert Gardens—makes me think of a jewel in a rubbish-heap. And she's the sort of woman who needs surroundings—who is sure to suffer from the want of them. That's why I have asked for the loan of your room. If you say 'No,' I'll do the thing, all the same, of course, only it will be in a more uncomfortable and perhaps in a more unsuitable manner."

The eyes of the cousins met with a start, for just then the door-bell rang. Then, without a word, Minna rose and went quickly towards the door.

"It's better than making an excuse later," she whispered, as she passed him.

He snatched at her hand and kissed it, serenely unaware of his cruelty.

"Thank you, Minna—thank you!"

She smiled, not quite as calmly as she would have wished, and escaped upstairs.

She could not remember his ever having kissed her hand before, though she had often seen him kiss that of his grandmother.

"I suppose it is about time to begin cherishing grandmotherly feelings," she half-laughed, while dashing her hand across her eyes.

There was no fire in her bedroom, and mechanically she took up a shawl. The mounting steps, the opening and closing door, the descending steps of Wilson—all was plainly audible in the small, thin-walled house. Trembling a little, partly with cold, Minna sat down, with closed eyes, behind which the scene being enacted under her feet, and of which even the tones reached her in a faint murmur, began to picture itself against her will. It was one of the moments in which her sense of humour came victoriously to her aid.

"This is being left out in the cold, with a vengeance!" she laughed, pulling her shawl about her. "Was ever woman before turned out of her own drawing-room for exactly this purpose, I wonder?"

"I will give him half an hour by the clock," she had begun by saying. But the half-hour was far from past when the drawing-room door opened again and quick steps descended—not Vincent's steps. That could only mean that he was alone in the drawing-room, and possibly in need of her.

Instantly Minna became aware of nothing but alarm on his account. Flinging off the shawl, she hurried down.

Vincent, with his back to the room and his hands in his pockets, was staring hard from the window.

"Alone, Vincent?" asked Minna, from the doorway.

"Yes, alone," he said, with an excellent show of coolness. "And, oh, by the way, Fräulein Hartmann said she hoped you would excuse her to-day; she did not feel quite up to the lesson."

"That means?"

"That means that she won't have me." He turned now, and, seeing his face, Minna knew the coolness, for all its excellent show, to be but a hollow sham. She went close up to him and took his hand.

"Vincent, I am sorry. I wish I could have done something."

Her voice shook with earnestness. To see him suffer was so much worse than suffering herself. But, besides the wounded look, there was something else upon his face—a cloud of perplexity which almost overshadowed the pain.

At the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand, the sham coolness wavered. She could see him taking his underlip between his teeth in order to steady it.

"Then you were mistaken, after all, in supposing that she cared for you?"

A puzzled frown dug a line between his brows.

"That is the strange part of it, Minna. I don't believe even now that I was mistaken. I know you think me inordinately conceited; but, upon my soul and honour, I believe, after to-day, that I am

—well, *not* indifferent to her. I don't believe she would have been so upset, nor have refused me so vehemently, if it were so."

"Then what reason did she give?"

"None. Simply that she would not have me. I have a notion that there is some obstacle in the way."

"What sort of obstacle?"

"A very tangible one," said Vincent, with bitterly contracted lips, "nothing less than a motor-car."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I scarcely know myself, but I have my suspicions. That time in summer, when I burst in here, you perhaps remember some talk about a motor in which I had seen Fräulein Hartmann? It was that meeting and the state of mind it disclosed in myself which sent me off to Norway. Well, on Tuesday, when coming away from Filbert Gardens, I met the same motor—no, not the identical vehicle, but one with the same man inside it—and I saw him enter the house I had just left. That man is called Potts, and Potts & Co. are about the biggest motor manufacturers in the United Kingdom, as I gathered from some talk in the club the other day. This man—the junior partner—is a bachelor. Do you follow me?"

"Of course I do. But if she cares for you?"

"She may care for money more. I'm in no dan-

ger of starvation, of course, but compared to Potts I'm a beggar."

Minna's eyes kindled fiercely.

"And you could still desire her, knowing her mercenary?"

"No. But I do not know her mercenary yet. She may be sacrificing herself for her father's sake. Supposing she has accepted him already, and feels herself bound?"

"I see. But somehow I find it difficult to think of her selling herself, even for her father."

"So do I. And that's why I think—no, I don't know what to think"—broke off Vincent, flinging back to the window.

Minna sat down and reflected. She was almost as puzzled as Vincent, and that Vincent was yet more puzzled than wounded was clear from his unexpected attitude under the repulse. If that repulse had been ascribed to indifference, his *amour propre* would have been smarting much more obviously.

"Vincent," said Minna, after a minute.

"Well?"

"Would it do you any good to get light upon the situation?"

"Of course it would; but that's impossible."

"I don't think it is. Lately I have got pretty intimate with the girl, and I have been such a model of discretion that I think I can allow myself a little indiscretion for a change. I believe I could find

out about that motor—I mean whether it's really that that's in the way. Do you authorise me to do so? I should not bring you in at all, of course; it would be a quite independent inquiry."

Vincent turned impulsively from the window.

"Ah, Minna, I always said you were a brick! If you could manage to do that——"

But Minna, with a short laugh, put her hand behind her back, almost as though she were afraid of its being saluted for the second time to-day.

CHAPTER V

THE "BOUDOIR HERALD"

THE line to Albert-gate presented to-day no difficulties, which was fortunate, for Irma, flying from Fortague Street as though from a deadly peril, had no attention for the details of her surroundings. Her body might be in Hyde Park; her spirit was still in the little box-like drawing-room between whose four walls Mr. Denholm had just asked her to become his wife, and been told with a vehemence into which surprise had startled her that this could never be.

For, despite the episode of Tuesday, the surprise had been great. The *tête-à-tête* in the fog was a thing by itself which could have no bearing upon the morrow—so it had seemed to her. It had been too like the fairy-tale prince arriving just in time to rescue the princess from the dragon or the ogre to justify any expectation of a sequel in real life. And, lo! to-day the prince had in sober earnest, and in broad daylight, offered her his person and his name. She would not have been a woman if her heart had not bounded with the pride of the

thought, though at the same moment that same heart contracted with the pain of renunciation. That the man whom she had seen a few weeks back with the reflected glory of a great and significant ceremony upon his person, while she stood humbly among the crowd, should not think himself above stooping towards her and drawing her from her lowly place to his side, filled her with a great astonishment. That moment at the church door had been for her, too, as well as for Vincent, loaded with revelations, though of a different category. Until then his professional life had scarcely existed for her, diplomats being to her an unknown quantity which she had never had occasion nor need to investigate. That they represented countries, and were supposed to keep other countries in good humour, she knew in a general sort of way, but nothing more. Into the financial circle in which her parents moved not even an *attaché* had ever strayed; Vienna society being almost as strictly classified as Chinese *castes*. The sight at the Oratory door had opened new horizons. Upon her as much as upon any other atom of the gaping crowd, the footmen and the state-coaches, the uniforms and the decorations had done their work. And when in the midst of the pageant and part of it she had recognised her quondam Hungarian pupil, a sharp mixture of two feelings had been the result; joy at seeing the man whom she had been thinking of as translated to distant climes still present in her own

world, and pain—none the less real for being unacknowledged—at realising the gulf which separated them.

That *he* did not look upon the gulf as unbridgeable had been proved to-day. But *she* knew better; knew enough, at any rate, to realise that this was not the only possible sort of marriage for her—the one in which her father could find a place. In so worldly an existence as Mr. Denholm's must necessarily be—and apparently so public a one—that quiet nook in which the stricken man could end his days, unmolested and untroubled, could ever be forthcoming. Hence her instant and instinctive rejection of Denholm's suit, without so much as a halt for the consultation of her own feelings. At best it could be but an empty ceremony, seeing that they must not be allowed to fall into the balance. That would be a disloyalty to the task undertaken, and she could be anything except disloyal.

With tight looking lips and head held even higher than its wont, Irma went swiftly on her way. If to-day she had at last sounded the depth of her own sacrifice and understood what it was that she had undertaken when she had chained her life to that of the defrauder, there was nothing in her face to show it. If anything, it had but tightened her grasp upon her resolution.

With the thought of her father came the thought of the necessary concealment. To keep him in ignorance of the latest episode was of primary impor-

tance. She had seen him so deeply disturbed about that other offer of marriage that she shrank from repeating the experience; the more so as she was not certain of being able to reassure him here in the way she had been able to reassure him there. He might catch a glimpse of a sacrifice—though even to herself she had not explicitly admitted that the sacrifice was there—and that must not be. In order that it should not be it would be necessary to show a particularly bright face this evening, and to talk of as many unessential subjects as possible, for fear of essential ones coming up.

With this idea in her mind Irma stopped in Brompton Road, in order to spend three-pence upon chrysanthemums and another three-pence on one of those society papers in whose columns she occasionally recreated herself by following the pranks of the upper ten thousand. The lightly dished scraps of elegant gossip served by the "Boudoir Herald" were a distinct aid to conversation.

The room was still deserted when she reached it; and having flung a few drops of brightness upon its dinginess, by means of the chrysanthemums, Irma settled down to the "Boudoir Herald" with a dogged attention which strove to exclude all private and personal thoughts, but did not entirely succeed. Despite her strained will, a face seen recently came between her and the printed paragraphs—a man's face with astonishment and pain written upon its clear-cut features, and with proud reproach looking

at her from out of the luminous brown eyes. With such words as: "Is this your final decision?" or: "Will you not give me a little hope, if nothing else?" ringing in her ears, it was difficult to feel vividly interested in the fact that Lord and Lady Branchmaine had been entertaining the hugest shooting-party ever known at Branchmaine Castle, or that the prowess of a certain young lady not explicitly named, but referred to playfully—and for the initiated of course transparently—as "the golden-locked Diana" had apparently brought to her feet one of the biggest *partis* of the season. "Run her fox to earth, and secured a brush of solid gold," was the way the "Boudoir Herald" put it. Neither the pretty chats upon the latest craze in table-decoration, nor the more serious articles—as became a serious subject—upon winter fashions were able to hold Irma's interest to-day. But presently, right through the mists of her inattention, a heading caught her eye:

"The latest diplomatic *on dit*."

Instantly the wandering thoughts concentrated. Lately, and more especially since the sight at the Oratory gates, anything in which the words "diplomatic" or "diplomacy" figured was sure of her attention. Already she had become an expert in picking them out of newspaper columns. It was a way of completing the impression then gained, of enlightening her own profound ignorance on the subject of what was apparently so dazzling a career.

Within the last weeks she had learnt something about the presenting of diplomatic "notes," and a good deal about the brilliancy of ambassadorial entertainments. It was unavoidable that she should now pounce upon the only paragraph which promised interest.

It proved more interesting even than she had surmised. Here the "Boudoir Herald" undertook, with many winks and shrugs—to be read between the lines—to confide to its readers the *real* reason of an abrupt change recently made by a certain Continental country at an important diplomatic post—for the "Herald" was broadly international in its collection of gossip. The noble Prince, picturesquely described as the representative of "the home of the *torreador* and the mantilla," who had lately been brusquely removed from a capital which, even to Irma's uninstructed eyes, clearly stood for Vienna, was not suffering because of any blunder of his own—or rather yes, because of the chief blunder of his life, which he had committed when he selected his second wife. There was not a word to be said against the lady's conduct, nor her education, but a good deal against her origin, at least by such connoisseurs of pedigrees as are Austrian aristocrats. Other lesser Courts had accepted her without inquiry—swallowing her with their eyes shut, so to say, but not so Vienna. It was bad enough that the *Señora* should have been of *bourgeois* origin, as the herd of old *Gräfinnen* infallibly nosed

out, but when it transpired that she had actually trodden the boards, a miniature revolution broke out in every Vienna drawing-room. That they, the wearers of seven and of nine-pointed crowns and possessors of family trees growing into the sky, should be expected to pay the highest marks of honour to a person once having been the servant of the public, *cela dépassait les bornes*. It was all very well to talk of the impersonality of an ambassador; against the theory there was nothing to be said, but in practice—no, in practice, it did not work—at any rate not in Vienna. The social situation, strained for some time past, had reached its climax at a Court reception, during which the unlucky *Señora* had upset a glass of water over the velvet robes of a particularly blue-blooded old *Gräfin*, and having excused herself on the score of “nervousness,” the old *Gräfin*, losing her temper, had snapped back: “You, nervous? Why, I thought you were used to public appearances!”

By the time the *bon-mot* had flown round Vienna society it was thought time to withdraw the Prince from his post; and no other suitable one being free at the moment, it seemed likely that the eminent diplomat would for the present be placed *à disposition*.

Down to the last word of the paragraph Irma read attentively, and, having finished it, let the paper sink onto her lap while she reflected. There was some food for thought, and also something a

little perplexing about the state of affairs here revealed. Further enlightenment would be welcome. Perhaps her father could give it. She began to await his return with a new impatience.

When at last he arrived, dead tired, from the distant shipping office at which he still worked as correspondent, there were first his comforts to be seen to, also there were certain roundabout ways to be followed in order to lead up "naturally" to the subject aimed at. For on no account must he guess at a personal interest in the matter. That would betray everything. Fortunately, despite her ignorance of diplomacy as a career, she was a woman, which means that she required none of that professional training by which alone the male diplomat can be turned out.

Having, therefore, with admirable liveliness, served to her father the crumbs of society gossip, and regardless of the fact that his interest in these topics was *nil* (what could that matter so long as he could be persuaded that hers was huge?), and having posted him up in all the new crazes, she proceeded to draw the circle close by exclaiming:—

"Oh, here's an article about Vienna, papa—that may interest you. It doesn't mention names, but it calls it 'the gay city of the blue river,' which, of course, means that. It's about the Spanish Ambassador there, and some story about his wife; but I don't quite believe what they say. Listen!"

Harding sat passive and unprotesting.

"Is it not ridiculous of them?" asked Irma at the end; "*if* it is true, of course. What can it matter about her want of family, and even about her having acted, so long as she behaves herself? Do you think it possible?"

"Is what possible?" inquired Harding, rousing himself to the attention that appeared to be expected.

"That Austrians could be as unreasonable as this. It strikes me as an aspersion cast on my nation, don't you see!" she finished with an explanatory laugh.

"There's no pride like the Austrian pride of birth."

"Yes, but if she's good enough to be the wife of an Ambassador, then surely she's good enough to be their guest. You see it says expressly that there was nothing against her character."

"I believe an Austrian Countess could more easily forgive a hole in a character than a hole in a pedigree," smiled Harding.

"Could such a thing happen anywhere but in Austria?"

"Not in the same way, I fancy. But, whatever his past, that man would probably find himself hampered. You see, a diplomat's wife is too much a part of his functions to be ignored. If he is wise he will select her almost as carefully as the Sovereign or the heir to the throne chooses his consort. All the social part of the business falls to her.

That's why they nearly all marry titles. To have a lot of tame Counts or Princes running in and out of the house, with the freedom of blood-relations, cannot fail to give an *éclat* to the position."

"Then the Spaniard cannot have been very wise."

"No, he cannot. In that fierce light which beats on Embassies almost as broadly as on thrones I don't see how he could hope to keep the stage episode dark. And he must have known the danger to his career, since an ambassador cannot afford to have his wife insulted, his honour being, so to say, identical with that of the country he represents."

"He must have been very fond of her," mused Irma.

"Yes, that must have been it."

Through the dullness of Harding's pale blue eyes a spark of interest kindled into sight.

"When you are fond of a woman nothing matters, of course."

His thin lips pressed each other almost out of sight.

"Too great a love—just so; and now he is paying for it. Poor fellow!"

He smiled pityingly, like a man who knows all about it.

"Will he not get another post?"

"It does not seem convenient to give him another at present, as they say. And even when a vacancy comes there will have to be much weighing and considering of whether his wife will do for the post

as well as he. Oh! he tied a dead weight to his foot when he married her, and no mistake."

In the silence which fell father and daughter were each so busy with a private train of thought as almost to forget the other's presence. Irma followed her own reflections with elbows on knees and hot cheeks pressed between her two hands, for the agitation of the afternoon was not yet spent. She had wanted to be enlightened—so she told herself, with frowning gaze fixed on the fire—and now she was enlightened—beyond her desires. Those few words of her father's had told her more about the life of a diplomat, and consequently of Vincent Denholm, than she had ever guessed at before. Such careers as his could be either made or marred by a marriage, it would seem. And yet he had proposed to marry her. That meant that he loved her to that particular point where "nothing mattered," as her father put it. The recognition would have been a joy had it not brought with it another—that of the impossibility of ever becoming his wife. By the dull stab at her heart she knew that until this moment hope had not been quite dead; that despite that instinctive "No" spoken in Miss Bennett's drawing-room, a hidden thought of possible reconsideration of the decision had been sneaking about somewhere out of sight. But this was the *coup de grace*. It was now only that the absolute impossibility stood unveiled and naked before her—now only that the gulf revealed itself as for-

ever unbridgeable. For this was no question of a merely obscure origin, nor of the exercise of a profession honourable though discredited. It was a dishonoured name which she would be bringing to her husband; a name which could be cast up in his teeth any day, just as the stage had been cast up in those of the Spanish ambassador. A diplomat could not afford to have his wife insulted; which meant, of course, that he could not afford to have for his father-in-law a defrauding bank-director marked down by the international police.

No, no—this was the end of everything, of course. That Spanish actress had apparently been able to make up her mind to spoil the career of the man she loved, but Irma Harding would never do that.

Of the man she loved? Even so. For the moment in which she recognised him as irretrievably lost to her was also the one in which she looked her own secret in the face.

CHAPTER VI

“IGEN OR NEM?”

“6, Fortague Street,
“Friday Evening.

“DEAR VINCENT:

“I’ve been as good as my word. The desired light upon the situation has been turned on. You should have seen me tackle her, which I did straight out, with what any one of your professional training would probably call ‘brutal directness’; but you know how stupid I am about ‘disguising’ my thoughts. I therefore inquired point-blank whether I might count on the continuance of the lessons or would have to look out for another German teacher. Then, when she opened her eyes rather wide, I explained that reports had reached me—conveyed, of course, by the usual ‘little bird’ (which in this case couldn’t well be anything higher than a London sparrow)—touching a certain motor-car which had been noticed in Filbert Gardens—since, even in London, things are occasionally noticed—and of the conclusions drawn therefrom, which had led me to suppose that Fräulein Hartmann would soon be

more pleasantly occupied than in driving German grammar into such thick skulls as mine. Upon which she laughed and confessed. One-half of our surmises—that of the motor-maker's infatuation—is correct, but the other half is nowhere. It seems that she has said 'No' twice already—having given him two *Körbe* (baskets), as she puts it—which is the German rather practical way of paraphrasing a refusal. That time you met the motor at the corner was the occasion of the handing over of the second of these 'baskets.' She tells me that he threatens to propose once a month, for the future, and that she has got an unlimited supply of 'baskets' ready for him—and this in spite of having actually been promised an exclusively 'motor' honeymoon. She is getting quite learned, it seems, about 'worm drives' and 'bevel gear.' She was both amused and amusing about it all. To hear her laugh was to feel assured that, whatever else blocks your path, it is not the motor. I suspect it's no more than some exaggerated idea about her father, and not wanting either to abandon him or burden her husband with him. She seems to me the sort of girl who could rise to quixotism. But I don't see why the obstacle need be insurmountable. The old gentleman is a gentleman; and I imagine that if the presence of the father is all the price you have to pay for the possession of the daughter, that price will be cheerfully paid.

“Conclusion: Go in and win!—always supposing

you to be in the same mind you were in on Friday. I've cleared away the shadows, I think; it's for you to steer by the light obtained.

“Your affecte. cousin,

“MINNA BENNETT.

“P. S.—Do you by any chance require the loan of my drawing-room? Next German lesson takes place on Tuesday. *Avis au lecteur.*”

“Three whole and entire days till Tuesday!” was the *résumé* Vincent made of the letter as, with eyes that were already shining, he laid it down.

And forthwith he began to fume at so extraordinary an arrangement as a day having the ridiculous number of twenty-four hours, and each hour the absurd contingent of sixty whole minutes. For, viewed from the depths of Friday night, Tuesday, of course, looked centuries away. Three entire days before he could—do what? Propose over again to a girl who had already presented him with one of those “baskets” of which she evidently possessed an inexhaustible provision.

A rejected suitor pleading for the favour withheld had always appeared to him an ignominious spectacle; he was learning now the radical difference between an objective and a subjective point of view.

As matters turned out he had not to wait till

Tuesday, cruel Fate being kind enough to shorten the suspense.

It was on the very next morning that, having business in the city, the first sight which met his eyes as he stepped out of his banker's door into the teeth of a peculiarly bitter east wind was the cadaverous face of Herr Hartmann, journeying eastwards in a closely packed 'bus. This presumably meant his absence from Filbert Gardens for at least half a day, and might possibly mean the daughter's solitary presence there. Instantly the vision of the shabby dwelling-room stood before his mind's eye with sudden, compelling force. A single figure shone out of its mean frame. From that distant point to the spot upon which he stood invisible fibres seemed to be stretching, strong as cords, adhesive as tentacles, all drawing him in one direction. Remembering the three nights which separated him from Tuesday, and reflecting upon the quality of the sleep enjoyed during the one just passed, Vincent came to a sudden resolution. Might not that vision of the face in the 'bus have been the finger of Providence, and could this not be the moment which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune?

Within a minute he sat in a hansom, his face turned westwards, his heart beating as hard as though he had been sixteen instead of twenty-six.

Good luck favours not only the brave, but also the resolute—up to a certain point. It was only when Pattie, with eyes so widely torn open as to ap-

pear of almost normal size, said: "Miss 'Artmann? Yes, sir, she's in her room"—that it occurred to Vincent how very improbable it had been that he should find her at home at this hour.

"Will you ask her whether she will receive me?" said Vincent, pulling out a card; but already Pattie, whose fault was not slowness, had flung wide the door alongside.

"A gentleman for you, miss," she triumphantly proclaimed, and promptly shut them in together.

Barely across the threshold, Vincent stood still, in momentary diffidence, while from a chair beside the fire Irma rose precipitately, a half-darned sock between her hands, while scissors and cotton dropped unheeded to the ground.

"Mr. Denholm—oh, have you brought a message from Miss Bennett? Or perhaps it is my father you want to see? I am so sorry—he is out."

She spoke in patent agitation, with quick, vivid flushes passing across her startled face.

"I know that he is out. That is why I came. I will go away at once if you order me; but I should like to put a question first. It is a question which I would have put the other day if you had given me time."

Earnestly and steadily he looked at her across the room.

"What question?" she faintly asked

"When you said 'No' to me on Tuesday last, was it what people call an 'insurmountable aver-

sion' to my person which prompted you? That is what I should like to know?"

There was an attempt at lightness in the tone—not over-successful. Nor did the answer come at once. Mechanically she turned back to the sock she was darning—perhaps for the sake of having something over which to bend her face—and made a stitch blindly; but even across the room—for they stood with its whole width between them—Vincent could see how her fingers were shaking.

"Irma!" he said very low, in a tone that was loaded with both tenderness and reproach.

Then she looked up; and with the meeting of their eyes her defences fell. In three strides he had crossed the floor and taken her hands—sock and all. There was one long trembling sigh as she let herself go, half falling against him, with passion in her eyes, and on her cheeks the mingled red of passion and of that shame with which even the purest love is shadowed. For one long, perfect moment their lips met in one of those kisses in which two souls seem to mingle as palpably as two bodies touch.

"I have not lived till now!" was the thought flooding the man's mind. "Ah, to die after this!" hummed through the woman's veins as much as through her head.

"My love!" he breathed into the small ear discovered somehow within reach of his lips.

"My love!"

Two words only, and yet they had broken the spell. Within his arms she stiffened suddenly, bending back her head in order to fix him with scared eyes.

"I am not your love—no, no—not that! I was forgetting."

"My love—and soon to be my wife," he murmured, half drunk still from an excess of joy. "You will be my wife, Irma?"

Almost violently she tore herself free, pushing him from her with her two hands.

"Never! I can never be your wife!"

She was retreating before him; the ecstasy of a moment ago blotted out on her face by a kind of horror.

Abruptly sobered, Vincent gazed in alarm, startled by the vehemence of both words and action.

"But—just now?"

"Just now I was mad. Be generous, and forget!"

"Forget!" He laughed harshly. "It is so likely I will. It is so much my habit to propose to young ladies that such a trifling episode will easily be lost count of."

"Oh, I know; but in time—in time," moaned Irma. "It was only because I was not prepared. Oh, why did you take me by surprise!"

"I thank my stars that I did, else I might not have found out your secret. For you love me, Irma; deny it if you dare!"

Her lips parted, and closed again. The denial

would not cross them. Though she had wanted it, she could not give the lie to her own heart—could not take back the confession of that mad kiss which still throbbed in her veins. For so black a perjury she was both too honest and too proud.

“Granted that I could forget, would *you* forget, Irma?”

His piercing glance seemed to cut the answer out of her heart as with a sharp knife. Whether she would or not, she must meet it; and suddenly the needed strength came.

“No, I would not forget. You would not believe me if I said I would. The other day I was not sure of what I felt; but to-day I know.”

She looked at him steadily now; self-mastery regained by a violent effort of will.

“And, knowing it, you still give me the same answer as then?”

“The same. It can make no difference. Don’t ask me to explain—I cannot. But I cannot marry you. I can never marry anybody.”

“You need not explain. I understand. You are thinking of your father, of course; you do not want to leave him. But neither need you; I have thought of that, too. With all my heart I am ready to be his son.”

She looked at him gratefully—far more gratefully than she had looked at Mr. Potts on a somewhat similar occasion.

“How good you are! But——”

"I am not good; I love you—that is all. Irma, don't keep me in pain. Let me know my fate quickly. Yes or No? *Igen* or *Nem*?—which is it to be? The two syllables, please! not the one! Don't you remember how I said that Hungarians must be fonder of saying No than Yes, because they took longer to assent than to deny? Take as long as you like, but say the right word at last. *Igen*, Irma—is it not *Igen*?"

But there was no responding smile upon her face, though he was beside her once more and had retaken hungry possession of her hands.

"It is your father, is it not? You do not want to leave him? Have confidence in me, my love! Tell me all!"

She drew away her hands, quite gently this time. Her quiet, and the heavy sadness in her eyes, frightened him far more than her vehemence of a minute ago had frightened him.

"It is not what you think. The matter is not so simple. Even if my father were to die to-day, it could make no difference. The impossibility would remain. I can never be your wife."

For a moment longer he studied her face, then turned, with a puzzled frown, to vaguely perambulate the room. Something about her manner bore in upon him a sense of hopelessness. He had an idea that her heart was breaking, together with the conviction that nothing would break her will.

"An impossibility? There is no such word in

my dictionary. An impossibility simply means an obstacle, and obstacles are made to be removed, or knocked aside, or trampled down. But in order to trample effectively one would need to know its nature. If you could tell me more——”

“No, no—I can tell you nothing.”

“Then I will find it out for myself.”

“No, no!” she said again, with a note of terror in her voice. “Do not do that! It would change nothing—only make it worse.”

“Is it another man?” he asked, well-nigh roughly, watching her with jealous suspicion.

“No.”

“Will you swear to me that no other man has anything to do with this impediment?”

“Yes; I swear.”

He looked into the transparently truthful eyes, and was convinced, but all the more deeply puzzled.

Having taken a few more aimless steps about the room—for neither of them had thought of sitting down during the brief and agitated interview—Vincent halted at last beside the mantelpiece, his eye caught by a somewhat unusual object which, with that aggressive distinctness of certain details in moments of mental excitement, had jumped into his field of vision.

“What is that?” he asked in accents of the profoundest astonishment, pointing to a dingy little wooden figure tricked out in skirts which presum-

ably had once been pink, and, to judge from the convulsive clasp of her match-wood arms, striving to swarm up the stem of a brass candlestick—May-pole fashion.

Irma looked across the room, and half smiled.

“That is the Past,” she said, with a bitter twitch at the corners of her fair lips.

“Ah! and what you call the ‘impossibility’ dates from the past, too, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“And she—this creature—knows all about it, no doubt?”

“She was a witness,” said Irma, falling into the lighter tone—though it was but a false lightness—which the talk seemed to be taking. “Oh, yes, of course, she knows all about it.”

“Will you do me a favour, Fräulein Hartmann? Some ladies are merciful enough to bestow a flower or a ribbon upon a rejected suitor. I crave the possession of this doll.”

Irma smiled wearily, thankful for that “Fräulein Hartmann,” and yet illogically wounded by it.

“Oh, take her, of course. But she is very grimy.”

“Which is enough to tell me that, though she may be *the* past, she is not *your* past,” said Vincent, with another straight look into her eyes, while he deliberately pocketed Vindobona.

“She isn’t a talking doll, I suppose, more’s the

pity; for if she was, I might yet get the truth out of her regarding that obstacle."

"It is I who want a favour now, Mr. Denholm."

"Well?"

"Will you give me your word not to try and find out anything about the obstacle? It would make me much happier."

Her eyes pleaded almost humbly, yet very obviously in vain.

"I am sorry not to be in the position of bestowing happiness upon you, Fräulein Hartmann; but, having an objection to breaking my word, I certainly do not mean to give it on this occasion."

The touch of grimness in the tone blended perfectly with the new ceremoniousness of manner; and it was ceremoniously, too, that presently he bowed himself from the room. A most conventional ending to what had begun—to say the least of it—unconventionally.

Alone again, Irma fell into a chair with a feeling of exhaustion, dominated by an exultation that would have liked best to cry fiercely aloud. What mattered her prostration, since the victory was gained? Had she not conquered her own love and his? Had she not saved his career for him, in the teeth of his own opposition, against his own will? The first rejection had been made, in the main, for her father's sake; the second one was for his own. And he did not guess it; he *must* not guess it; for such knowledge might undo her work. After to-

day she could not help speculating upon the extent of the sacrifices he might be ready to make. All the more needful that she should be strong, be firm for them both; all the more needful to keep him in his ignorance. And then there was the opposite contingency likewise to be considered: the contingency of his weighing the sacrifice required, and deciding against it; of his examining the objection and accepting it as final—a thought from which her woman's pride shrank fearfully. Of the two possibilities it would be hard to say which would be worse: that of seeing him prefer his career to her, or that of seeing him prefer her to his career, and of knowing herself the wrecker of his life. It was an *impasse*, whichever way she turned. "No, no; he must never know," she said, with her face between her hands. The mere thought of being branded in his eyes, of standing before him as the avowed daughter of a defrauder, was insupportable.

Let the tears flow now—they could no longer weaken her resolve. And yet how nearly she had failed! Thinking of that mad moment into which that drop of sun-steeped Hungarian blood flowing in her veins had betrayed her, her cheeks burned, but also her heart exulted. With a lifetime of renunciation before her, could she regret entirely that one moment of possession? Whatever happened now, however dark the years to

come, when she heard happy people talking of their happiness, she would at least know what they meant. She, too, would have been in Arcadia, if only between the space of two breaths.

CHAPTER VII

THE VERDICT

"CAN I have a few words with you anywhere in private?"

Irma looked about her rather hopelessly in the passage to which she had followed the small, neat doctor, with the compact, iron-grey head. The character of the passage, on to which gaped both the lower and the upper staircases, did not seem to guarantee the privacy desired.

It was Mrs. Martin who unexpectedly played the *Deus ex machina*—the upper portion of her person surging suddenly into sight from the nether regions.

"This way, miss, please. You are kindly welcome to my sitting-room, if it be so as 'ow the medical gentleman don't hobject to stepping downwards."

Since the first appearance of the motor-car Mrs. Martin's affability towards her foreign lodgers had been steadily on the increase.

The medical gentleman not objecting, the descent was made to the apartment which Mrs. Mar-

tin called her sitting-room, but whose original destination had probably been that of a storeroom or china closet—a narrow strip of a space, whose brick floor was insufficiently clad with rag carpets, whose whitewashed walls bloomed with Christmas supplements, and where the gas had to be turned on even for midsummer visitors, in place of the window which did not exist. Here, within walls which had never known a glimpse of daylight—let alone a ray of sunshine—with the smell of the dinner of all the lodgers in her nostrils, Irma was to listen to words whose terror seemed to be punctuated by the hiss of the pots in the adjoining kitchen.

The very first glance she met across the small round table, which the family Bible and the family album divided equally between them, gave her a start: it looked so alarmingly sympathetic, which, of course, meant that there was something to sympathise about.

“There is nobody else—no older relative, I mean—with whom I could have this talk?”

“Nobody,” said Irma, with sinking heart. “Please tell me quickly: is he very ill? I thought it was only influenza?”

The neat, little, iron-grey doctor coughed neatly behind his well-cared-for hand.

“It *is* influenza; but it is not *only* influenza. The attack is not by any means a virulent one. It is not

the influenza that is the point; it is the state of the heart."

"Is there anything wrong with his heart?" asked Irma, precipitately, losing colour a little.

"When was your father last examined medically?" asked the doctor, with a doctor's practised evasion.

"Examined? Oh, I don't know; not for years, certainly. I don't remember his ever being examined at all."

"I see," said Dr. Hockins, with gently closed eyes. He made a habit of this when listening to a report, as though willing to save the victim from the embarrassment of his rather penetrating gaze—something after the fashion of certain priests when receiving a confession, and in order to spare the blushes of the penitent.

"And during the past year did you not observe that his health was—ah—failing?"

He opened his eyes and closed them again, after one inquisitorial glance.

Irma's heart contracted sharply.

"Of course I did. I did everything I could to persuade him to see a doctor, but he would not. He is—there are reasons which make him extremely shy of seeing anybody."

"I see. That is a pity. A few months ago there might have been a chance of checking the evil. It has probably existed for some years, but I date the chief ravages from within the last year. You will

probably know whether any particular cause of worry has occurred within this space. This form of affection is usually due to mental causes."

This time he shut his eyes very tight while awaiting the answer.

"Oh, he has had causes," said Irma, with a quick heave of her bosom, a bitter curve of her lip. Then, as though in dread of possible self-betrayal:

"But what *is* the evil? Is there really any danger?"

A very kind glance met her from the keen eyes opposite.

"My dear young lady, it would not be right of me to conceal from you that this is not the way the question stands. Rather I should put it: Is there any hope?"

Speechlessly Irma sank against the hard chair-back, gazing wide-eyed at the mouthpiece of fate.

In the short pause that followed something clattered to the ground in the kitchen alongside, and Mrs. Martin began to scold in her habitual scream, which, at a recollection of the visitors close by, sank abruptly to a spluttering whisper.

"Your father is not an old man; his age would be nothing if his constitution had not been undermined—probably by adverse circumstances. The influenza in itself would also be nothing, and may even yet prove a benefit by having served to disclose a state of affairs which should have been

looked to long ago. My fear is that it has disclosed this too late."

"Oh, doctor!" said Irma, just audibly. "What am I to do?"

"Have courage, in the first place—for the sake of the patient, since it is upon your shoulders alone that the burden seems to lie. As for the rest—my dear young lady—it is difficult for me to say; but if there are any—ah—dispositions to be made, it might be as well not to lose time."

"Then you really think he is going to die?"

"My respect for the resources of nature is far too great to let me 'really think' anything. It resolves itself into the question of whether the heart is or is not up to the work which still stands before it. It is a question to which I must reserve my answer; but I am afraid—I am very much afraid that it will be wisest for you to be prepared for the worst."

Irma leaned forward, and right across the Bible and the album stretched her clasped hands towards the doctor.

"But you will do everything—everything to save him, will you not?"

Dr. Hockins smiled, a little pityingly, for so much *naïveté*. As if the pleadings of a daughter had anything to do with the conscientious exercise of a profession!

"I will do my duty, my dear young lady. It will be your part carefully to follow the directions

given. Our first object must be to feed the engine which keeps the machine a-going—in other words, to strengthen the heart.”

Technical details filled the last few minutes of the doctor's visit. Irma drank them in thirstily, and with a pang saw the house-door close upon his dapper person; for now she was alone with the coming shadow; the wrestle with the King of Terrors, of whose approach the little doctor had served as herald.

For one minute she took refuge in her own small bedroom, and there struggled for composure; for the blow just received had come upon her like a thunderclap, as it is apt to come upon the young and healthy who have chanced never to see death, and to whom its very existence seems so distant as to be scarcely a reality. She had been anxious ere this, but not seriously alarmed, used as she was to her father's chronic feebleness.

That day of bitter east wind on which Vincent had caught sight of Harding in the City 'bus had been the last on which he had gone to his work. That same evening he had come home in a state of exhaustion quite distinct from the daily fatigue, and next morning, after a restless night, had made a vain attempt at rising, peremptorily cut short by Irma. Both to her and to him it had seemed at first nothing more than a bad cold, for whose combating the various hot infusions recommended by Mrs. Martin would probably prove sufficient;

though Pattie, personally, put more confidence in the virtue of the medals which, just outside the door, she conscientiously dipped into every cup of *tisane* sent up by the landlady; besides smuggling the saintly effigies—of which she fortunately possessed an ample store—into the most unlikely places. It was not until St. Benedict had been discovered at the bottom of a cup of camomile tea, and St. Michael had come to light from between the sheet and the mattress, where he had been affording the patient anything but peaceful nights—that Irma became aware of these practices, and, in spite of Pattie's tearful assurance that the first of these holy men, in particular, was "a ghrand person for colds," sternly abolished them. When, after four days of assiduous dosing, her father had fainted right away in her arms while she was settling his pillows, Irma threw the *tisanes* overboard as well, and, sweeping aside the sick man's objections, insisted upon having a doctor. And now from this same doctor's lips she had learnt the truth; for although he had not denied her hope, she had scarcely any remaining. It was so much more likely that he had said less than more of his actual thought.

And all this time the sick man lay alongside waiting for his verdict. Yes, she must be strong, and without delay. With the thought, her eyes went to the silver crucifix above the bed—no longer the empty sign it had been in days of prosperity. If

she knew now where strength lay she owed the discovery to adversity—and to Pattie.

As she stepped into the shadows that were redolent with the breath of the eucalyptus kettle steaming away upon its hob, Irma was attempting to conjure to her lips one of those mechanical smiles which so many daughters and mothers and wives have worn on similar occasions—a smile whose intent is to deceive, but which is so fatally liable to degenerate into a grimace. It was her way of arming herself against the look of anxious expectation which she expected. But as she rounded the screen, placed so as to intercept a possible draught from the door, it was another sort of look that met her. Already at the door Harding's impatient "Is that you, Irma?" had touched her with a passing surprise; and now her astonishment deepened; for the sick man, raised upon his elbow, with flushed face and eyes brighter than she had seen them for long, was gazing eagerly towards his daughter.

"Oh, papa—lie down; you will tire yourself."

"No, no—never mind that. Why have you kept me waiting so long? What have you and the doctor been talking about? Don't you think the subject might have a certain interest for me, too? I could see by his questions that it's more than a cold. How much longer does he give me? Out with it, Irma."

It might have been the surprise of the unexpected tone that overthrew Irma's hastily run-up

defences. Before she was aware of what had happened she had sat down beside the bed and burst into tears.

Immediately a gaunt hand stole over hers, in which her face was hidden.

"Don't cry, Irma!" came the hoarse, feeble voice.

"You're a good girl, and it isn't your fault. Can you actually imagine that you are bringing me a bad piece of news? Why, it's the best possible news that could reach me. For shame, Irma! From your bright little head I should have looked for more perception. What did he say? what did he say exactly? Is the verdict clean-cut? Did he put the black cap on to pronounce it?"

He still stroked her fingers soothingly, coaxing her with the pleading of his voice, into which there came a note of warning as he added:

"Mind, I have a right to the truth!"

And presently he drew it from her—in part. The existence of danger was admitted, the necessity of being prepared; and what she did not tell him he knew already—through her tears. With a strange smile on his thin lips he listened, lying back now upon the pillow, his eyes exploring the ceiling with a gaze as far-reaching as though no ceiling were there.

When she was silent he drew one of the long, laboured breaths which it tortured her to hear, and again turned his face towards her.

"You will wire to her, Irma, will you not?" he said more quietly, and still with those unnaturally brilliant eyes. "When she knows it is the end, perhaps—perhaps she will come."

"Papa!" said Irma, below her breath.

"You do not think so? Perhaps I have no right to ask her. But at the end, you know, Irma, at the end; when she knows she is going to be quit of me for ever. After all, she did love me once. It would be the last favour. And, oh, to look into her eyes again—to touch her hand but in passing! Perhaps even to hear her forgive me! It would be easy to die then."

So much enchantment lay upon the white-bearded face, so deep a craving spoke out of the hoarse eagerness of the voice, that Irma stared, as though at a revelation. And with the astonishment mingled a pang. So, after all, for all the sacrifices wrought, for all the affection expended, she did not really count in his life. If she stood second in his thoughts, it was only with an immense interval between her and their first object. She knew now that he had never for a moment ceased to hanker secretly after his idol. The very fact of her having been the cause of his moral ruin seemed only to have riveted the chains which bound him to her. For the daughter who had saved him he might feel deep esteem and profound gratitude, and affection, too, of that obvious, unavoidable sort which fathers feel towards daughters who are also

“good girls”; but all the passion in his soul belonged to the wife who had ruined and spurned him. Upon the thought of her he hung as does the beaten dog upon the eye of his master. It was almost as though the very burden of gratitude oppressed him too much to let paternal love expand, for to all but the most ignoble or the noblest of natures gratitude is ever the heaviest of burdens. We feel more at ease with those who owe *us* something than those to whom *we* owe something—which is why we generally prefer the society of our debtors to that of our creditors.

“Yes, it had better be a wire,” Harding said, as huskily and as eagerly as before. “Did he—did the doctor say anything about a hurry?”

Then, as Irma shook her head passionately:

“Still, it had better be a wire. You will write it at once, Irma, won’t you? Have you any forms? And put it plainly, mind. For if you don’t put it plainly enough she may not think it necessary to come.”

As she moved reluctantly towards the table his eyes followed her.

“How fortunate I am not in New York, now! You never guessed what it was that put me against the idea, did you?”

The pale-blue eyes took on a passing sharpness. He tried to laugh, but had perforce to cough instead.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SUMMONS

"A TELEGRAM for you, Isabella," said a large, dark woman of masculine aspect, entering the room in which Mrs. Harding, in a peignoir, was occupied in laboriously piling up the masses of her black hair before a looking-glass. Until the ruin she had always had a maid to do it for her; and the daily struggle with her abundant tresses marked a daily accentuation of the bitterness of her loss. But the toilet-table itself bore almost the same face as in old days, for silver-backed brushes remained, of course, a necessity of life, and the number of powder-puffs and crystal-boxed cosmetics clearly showed that, even in exile, the beauty remained conscious of her duties towards herself.

She turned now quickly to her sister, a little of the brilliant colour fading out of her cheek.

"From London?"

"Yes."

"Give it me."

She tore the paper open with fingers visibly unsteady; but Amelia, watching, saw the terror in

her eyes fade, replaced by something more like perplexity.

“What is it? They haven’t caught him, have they?”

“No, thank heavens, they haven’t caught him, but he is ill. Irma seems to think he is dying. She asks me to come.”

There was a short silence, filled by thoughts which it is not likely that either of the sisters would have consented to put into words. Mrs. Harding, the crushed paper sunk to her lap, sat looking past the mirror and out towards the flat landscape, bare almost as a table, which was all the window framed, and with only the huge, slanting arm of a draw-well cutting the horizon.

“What will you do?” asked the elder sister, after that pause.

“I don’t know. I am considering.”

“Would not a meeting—such a meeting, too—be horribly painful, for him as well as for you? You have your health to consider, Isabella, mind.”

The large brunette spoke with something of maternal authority, and with a glance which, coming from under those thick black brows, surprised by its tenderness. The spoilt child of erstwhile had evidently not exhausted all the favours of fortune.

“Horribly painful—I know. But, after all, it isn’t quite easy to say No at such a moment. And it is probably the last time.”

“Just think of the distance!—and at this sea-

son! Really, Isabella, for a man who has ruined you——”

“I am thinking of it. But it is not the man alone—there is Irma.”

“How do you mean?”

“If I don’t go, and if—anything happens, Irma remains lost to me. She will not come back to me—I have read that out of her letters—certainly not if I refuse to fulfil her father’s request. But if I go she may be a little touched, and I may be able to persuade her to come back with me. And I want to get Irma back. She has mad ideas, but she has a face that would make any man forgive them. If there is any hope for us in the future it lies with Irma; certainly not with Gabrielle. The poor child takes after her father. You see what I mean, Amelia?”

“Yes, I see; and I see also that I shall have to let you go. Will you take Gabrielle with you? She won’t be much of a help.”

“Not in travelling; but possibly in persuading her sister. Yes, I shall take her.”

“Do you want any money, Isabella?”

“No, thank you. Do you suppose I would let you pay my journey? That would be bitterer far than eating your bread.”

In answer, the big, masculine woman stooped to kiss her beautiful sister, and immediately hurried off to her well-stocked larder, in order to decide which of the fat geese and prime capons

which hung there almost as thickly as in a poulterer's shop would be best adapted for provisioning the travellers.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Harding was already packing, feebly seconded by Gabrielle—in tears. The impending ordeal, notwithstanding the bustle of this sudden journey, had something in its favour. To one used to the movement of town life, existence in a Hungarian *puszta*—be it ever so plentifully fed—could not but flavour of the monotony of the landscape. A break, even a disagreeable one, was not absolutely unwelcome. It was a piece of good luck, certainly, to have a sister so hospitable, and married to the owner of so many miles of maize-fields and of rich cattle-pasture that generosity scarcely ranked as a virtue; for where such an abundance of fatted calves and pigs and chickens were a-going, the presence of two people, more or less, could really make no difference. Also, in spite of an occasional reference, made for decorum's sake, to the flavour of the bread eaten, that bread scarcely tasted bitter at all in Isabella's mouth. But at hard cash her particular sort of pride drew the line. With the consciousness of this reserve, and with the chorus of indignant pity ever sounding in her ear, she had found existence endurable during the last year—endurable, but not exciting. A rush across Europe would at least have the merit of variety.

* * * * *

In a closely packed carriage of the Dover line, the lamp overhead, which had just been lit, fell, among other things, upon the face of a beautiful, weary-looking woman approaching middle age, and upon that of her immediate neighbour, a fair-skinned, disconsolate-looking girl's face, with the stains of fresh tears upon it. The woman's face was not only weary, but likewise ill-humoured; for the journey had been long and hurried, and—contrary to former experience—taken second-class. Every journey of the past had been enjoyed among the orthodox red-velvet cushions, whose colour alone seems a badge of fortune's favours—its fatigues eased by all the resources of modern travel. But this time first-class tickets had been out of the question, and a sleeping-car not to be thought of. Small wonder that the erstwhile enjoyer of fortune's favours should feel aggrieved and out of place—for the rush across Europe had, by this time, lost all its prospective attractions—and almost unavoidable that her thoughts of the man to whom she owed the discomfort should not have perceptibly softened.

"Is this London?" asked Gabrielle, as dimly seen roads, heaving like rigid billows on either side of the raised causeway, began to press close, picked out by points of light. At moments the sea of masonry would open, to disclose a gas-lit street, in which bird's-eye glimpses of men and vehicles, of

shop-windows and flaring advertisements could be caught.

"I suppose it is London. You had better collect the wraps instead of staring."

Gabrielle sighed tremulously.

"I wonder if papa"—she began in a whisper.

"Collect the wraps, Gabrielle."

At Victoria another bad moment with the luggage, not calculated to improve Mrs. Harding's temper. It had always been her maid who looked after such trifles as this; whereas here, apparently, she was expected not only to give her personal attention to the matter, but, in accordance to the barbarous English fashion, to stand in a jostling crowd and point out her box to a bungling porter.

Deeply exhausted, she leaned back at last in the four-wheeler that was taking them to Filbert Gardens. As to what might possibly be awaiting her there she was too genuinely tired to dwell upon it, though, beside her, Gabrielle trembled with the terror of the unknown.

With the stopping of the cab she opened her eyes. The driver was climbing down from the box with the rheumatic slowness peculiar to the four-wheeler cabman. Before he had reached the ground the door had been opened with a promptitude which plainly spoke of a look-out held.

There was a cry from Gabrielle: "Irma! It is Irma herself!"

In a moment she had become nimble; and by the

time Mrs. Harding reached the doorstep the sisters were withdrawing from their first embrace.

“Well?” asked Mrs. Harding, a little breathless.

Impetuously, with a momentary blotting out of the past, Irma’s arms were flung around her mother’s neck.

“Oh, mamma—thank heavens—he is better! The doctor thinks the danger is past—for the present. He is really better, and seeing you will make him quite well. Oh, thank you for coming!”

“Better?” said Mrs. Harding, and, after that one word, was silent, perhaps aware of a discord in its tone.

“You will come in at once, will you not? He is waiting.”

“But our things, Irma! You will let me dismiss the cabman first, I suppose. Do we lodge here?”

“No—there is no room. I have taken a room for you at Number forty-two; a private hotel; only a few doors off. Pattie, tell him where to take the boxes. And now, mamma, this way.”

“I should liked to have washed my hands first. You forget how far we have travelled.”

“No, I don’t, but the suspense is bad for papa; I am sure it is. Why, we had to give him morphia—this last night—in order to keep him quiet. Do you think it matters to him whether your hands are washed or not? This way, mamma, please.”

Softly she opened the door alongside, and, fol-

lowed by her mother—too tired to cope with such impetuosity as this—stepped into its shaded light.

“Papa,” she said, stopping before the sheltering screen, as though to spare him the witness even of her eyes at this supreme moment, looked to with so much bliss and so much agony—“mamma has come. Here she is.”

Then, stepping back, she left the passage free, and taking Gabrielle by the hand, hurried her into her own room alongside, leaving husband and wife face to face and alone.

What words were spoken during the conjugal *tête-à-tête* it is not for an outsider to guess. Meanwhile, between the sisters other words, less poignant, but perhaps as significant, were passing.

“Oh, Irma—after all! I was beginning to think that we should never meet again! Have you had a very bad time of it? You have grown so thin!”

“*You* haven’t grown thin; why, you have almost grown fat;” laughed Irma, with her arm around her sister, while they cowered together upon her narrow bed, the one chair in the room being of forbidding appearance. To feel Gabrielle’s cheek against her own gave her a thrill of half-forgotten emotion. The voice of a common blood was calling louder than she had expected it to call.

“Oh, not *fat*, I hope!” said Gabrielle, uneasily. “It’s so ugly to be fat. But, really, at Serelmes it *is* rather difficult to avoid it. Aunt Amelia is always pressing one to eat; and the butter is so fresh

and so good and the chickens so beautifully stuffed!"

Irma laughed again; she could laugh now, at last, after two days of mental anguish.

"Poor Gabrielle! What an awful predicament to be in! I have been spared that, at least. I don't remember anybody pressing me to eat within the last year, except Pattie; and, considering that the things to eat were usually cold mutton or dry toast, the invitation was not very difficult to resist. One of your stuffed chickens now and then wouldn't have been a bit amiss."

Gabrielle's eyes filled with the ready tears.

"Oh, Irma, how dreadful! To think that you have actually been hungry! Oh, if those chickens were mine to send! But you must never be hungry again. You will come back with us this time, will you not, Irma?"

Instantly Irma's arms relaxed in their clasp.

"Don't begin that way, Gabrielle! You know quite well that I cannot leave papa; less than ever now, with his health so precarious."

"But if—if anything were to happen to papa? You would come with us then?"

"Nothing is going to happen," said Irma, fiercely. "Have I not told you that the danger is past? He is going to get quite well again."

"Well, then, if he is quite well again, you could leave him, could you not?"

Putting her hands upon her sister's shoulders, Irma looked her in the face.

"It is mamma, is it not, who is making you say this?"

Gabrielle coloured helplessly.

"Oh, I would have said it at any rate. You know how I wanted you to stay with us on—on that terrible day in Vienna."

"But it was mamma who told you to persuade me now?"

"She did say that you might listen to me more than to her; and that it is her one wish to take you back with her."

"Ah! now I understand why she came."

Abruptly Irma's face had hardened.

"I didn't expect she would come when I sent that telegram; but now I understand. It is quite simple."

"But surely you cannot blame her, Irma?"

"I do not blame her for anything she has done to me. It is not *me* she has harmed."

"And you still think that—that it—the whole misfortune, I mean, is more her fault than papa's?" asked Gabrielle, with humble uncertainty.

A year of the double chorus—of pity of her one parent and condemnation of the other—had brought Gabrielle to the point of *wanting* to consider her father alone guilty and her mother wholly innocent, as being the theory which most conveniently squared with such enjoyment of life as still

remained open to her. But, owing partly to a trace of real affection for the culprit, her object had not been entirely attained. For Gabrielle was one of those unfortunate people cursed with a sense of justice uncoupled with the courage of living up to their convictions, and quite devoid of that convenient coarseness of moral fibre which made her mother invulnerable. Hence the standing torment of self-reproach. In spite of much mental debate, she had not arrived either at quite condemning her father nor quite forgiving her mother for her conduct in the crisis.

Something of the chronic struggle was visible on her face just now, even to Irma's eyes.

"I have not changed my mind," she said a little brusquely. "And to think of them at Serelmes sitting around the fire of a winter's evening and all throwing stones at him makes my blood boil. Do you ever try to turn off the stones, Gabrielle?"

Under her sister's piercing glance Gabrielle hung her head.

"How can I—against so many?"

"I see. Poor papa!"

Irma's nostrils were quivering now, as she measured the figure beside her with a glance from which tenderness had been banished by a more dominant feeling.

But in that moment the hand of the fair-haired little egotist stole into her own.

"Do you think it wrong of me to stay with

mamma, Irma? Ought I to go away from Serelmes?"

As Irma looked into the pale-blue, pleading eyes her own softened. That moral intolerance which was the defect of her qualities made it hard to be patient with a creature of so different a make. But for nursery memories it is probable that she would not have been patient. But, the nursery memories being there, she kissed her younger sister almost stormily, though with the conscious superiority of one who embraces a child.

"Wrong? What an idea! It's the most natural place in the world for you to be at. Of course you must stay with mamma. But mind about the butter and the chickens, Gabrielle!" she added, with so affectionate a contempt that it was scarcely contempt. "It would be a pity to spoil your figure. Just now it is very becoming, but you ought not to get much plumper than you are."

Gabrielle, though visibly relieved, yet sighed under the stress of this new-born alarm.

"Oh, yes, that *is* the danger. I know I was too thin before, but it would be worse to get too fat. Oh, I shouldn't like to take after Aunt Amelia! It hasn't really harmed me till now, has it, Irma?"

* * * * *

Later in the evening, while Gabrielle was sitting beside her father's bed and Irma had accompanied her mother to No. 42, another short talk took place.

Mrs. Harding had come out from the interview with her husband rather pale and with something not easily analysable smouldering in her eyes. The moment that the door of the hotel bedroom was shut she turned upon her daughter.

"Was that summons genuine?" she asked briefly and somewhat aggressively—"or was it a sham?"

"What do you mean, mamma?"

"I mean was he really so ill as the telegram said, or did you make it seem worse in order to force my hand?"

"Mamma!"

Irma's eyes began to blaze.

"I want to know the truth—that is all."

"The truth is—I will swear it, if you like—that Dr. Hockins told me three days ago that he had next to no hope of saving him; that he might die at any moment."

"Then what has produced the change?"

"The hope of seeing you, I believe." There was a quiver as of scorn in Irma's voice as she said it. "He began to rally from the moment he knew that you were coming. It seemed to give him strength to fight."

"There doesn't seem to be anything the matter with him just now except an influenza."

"There is much more the matter with him, really. His heart is all wrong; but this crisis is past, and he may live for years, the doctor says, with proper care."

Mrs. Harding sat down somewhat heavily, leaning her aching head against the chair-back.

"I don't feel just now as if *I* was going to live for years," she said, with a half-laugh, which did not ring agreeably. "That journey has half-killed me, I can tell you. I shall go back, of course, as soon as I have rested. A case of influenza scarcely calls for three nurses, does it?"

"As you like, mamma," said Irma, in a voice as hard and far more icy than her mother's. Since the talk with Gabrielle the merit of the summons obeyed had lost all value in her eyes, and hotter than ever burned the old indignation.

CHAPTER IX

TWO SPHINXES

“MEN in great place are thrice servants—servants of the Sovereign or State, servants of fame, and servants of business; so as they have no freedom, neither in their persons, nor in their actions, nor in their times. It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty; or to seek power over others, and to lose power over a man’s self. The rising unto place is laborious, and by pains men come to greater pains; and it is sometimes base and by indignities men come to dignities. The standing is slippery——”

With a jerk of impatience Vincent closed the book. What an unspeakably priggish idea it had been to turn to Bacon’s essays as a means of filling up the quarter of an hour which—having dressed for dinner in Eaton Place—he found upon his hands! The result proved almost as irritating as one of Minna’s lectures. Viewed as a distraction from pursuing thoughts, the evening paper would certainly do much better.

To the evening paper, accordingly, he turned;

and presently—having taken in the telegrams and more or less assimilated the leader—fell upon a paragraph headed “An Austro-Italian Incident.” This “Incident” consisted of the arrestation by the Austrian authorities of one Giuseppe Fernaldo, an artist by profession, who, though a naturalised Austrian, continued to call himself Signor Fernaldo, and had been further illustrating his undying attachment to the country of his ancestors by selling to the Italian *attaché* at Vienna the plans of various fortifications, drawn with admirable accuracy during a would-be sketching tour in Dalmatia. The man who had sold the plans was good for six months’ imprisonment; the man who had bought them, at most for a reprimand from his own chief for not being judicious enough in the choice of instruments. The dirty work had to be done, of course; but how could one be so stupid as to select a bungler who lets himself be caught with the mud still fresh upon his hands!

Vincent tossed the paper aside—almost into the fire. The news of the day promised to be almost more irritating than that voice out of the past, and queerly illustrative of it, too. That *attaché* was one of those, presumably, who “by indignities” would “come to dignities”—since, of course, he would take his lesson to heart. And this between allies, who lost no opportunity of embracing, publicly, upon as high a platform as possible! Nor would the purchaser of the plans require to miss a

single Court ball on that account; and probably not a single smile of the aged monarch whose subjects he had been bribing and whose hospitality he was enjoying. Ugh! It *was* just a little revolting at moments.

“How Minna will be gloating over me if she sees that paragraph!” laughed Vincent, “on the wrong side of his mouth,” while a movement of generous disgust passed over him. Upon which he lit a cigar, and, giving up reading as a bad job, fell to his chronic occupation of these last days: that of thinking of Irma Harding, and brooding over the pretended obstacle which stood between them.

“And you are supposed to know all about it!” he apostrophised Vindobona, whose grimy pink petticoats now graced his private mantelpiece, throning in the midst of pipes and cigar boxes, something like a London-grown rose with the soot sticking to its petals. “She expressly called you a witness.”

The possession of the little wooden doll was the solitary satisfaction of the moment, the one slender thread between him and Irma. If nothing else, it was an object which her fingers had touched frequently, most likely, and to which—to judge from that word about “the Past”—she attached some symbolical meaning. Yet, stare at Vindobona as inquiringly as he would—and that he should so stare was the best proof of the state of his intellect,

and consequently of his affections—her sharp wooden features remained those of a sphinx.

“Would an application to the father be any use, I wonder?” he was musing, when into the midst of necessarily fruitless meditations there fell a bomb in the shape of another note from Minna.

When he had read it he sat for some minutes with the sheet between his fingers, thinking so deeply as to have become motionless.

For Minna’s note ran thus:—

“DEAR VINCENT,

“I have received a piece of news which I feel bound to pass on to you at once, not knowing in how far it may affect your resolutions. Fräulein Hartmann had missed two lessons already, on the ground of not being able to leave her father, who had what she took to be mere influenza. To-day, however, she tells me, in a few hurried lines, that the doctor had discovered some affection of the heart—of old standing, apparently—and that matters had looked so bad that she wired for her mother, who came two days ago, but is going to return to Austria almost immediately, the danger having meanwhile passed.

“I thought you would like to know this. In fact, I feel that you have a right to do so.

“Your affectionate cousin,

“MINNA BENNETT.

“P. S.—Mrs. Hartmann seems to be lodging in a private hotel in the same street.”

When Vincent had sat still for a little while his back straightened perceptibly, and he drew out his watch.

“To-day always remains a safer investment than to-morrow,” he muttered. “A message to Eaton Place will get me off.”

He was on his feet already, his resolve clear-cut. For this was an unlooked-for chance. Until now, while determined to hunt down the mysterious “obstacle,” he had not known in which direction to start. Was not this the Finger of Providence at its old work? It was to be expected that Irma’s mother should be fully informed; probably better informed than the father, who for the moment fell out of the calculation, since one cannot cross-question a man barely escaped from the jaws of death. Therefore, Irma’s mother—who herself was a little mysterious—must not be allowed to leave London without having been persuaded, or entrapped, or forced into an interview. Vincent was in no humour to stick at trifles, as any of his relations could have seen by taking account of the set of his features. Mrs. Hartmann was not a wooden doll, and therefore could not possibly be as sphinx-like as that creature upon the mantelpiece. It was even possible that Mrs. Hartmann herself was the “obstacle.” In this case, too, the “witness of the eye”

would be the best means of illuminating the situation. The thing was obvious; and, judging from Minna's P. S., not to himself alone.

Ten minutes later he was on his way to Filbert Gardens in a mood which had swept all squeamish considerations of appearances to one side, bent only on seizing the unhopèd-for opportunity, by the hair of its head, if need be.

Owing to the fact that Filbert Gardens possessed a single specimen of the commodity, the identification of the "Private Hotel" presented no difficulties. Vincent, indeed, would have cheerfully rung every bell in the square—excepting only that of No. 38, where he dared not present himself; but, in point of fact, he had only to ring at two.

Mrs. Hartmann? Yes, the foreign lady lodged here, but she had stepped over to No. 38, just four doors off. If the gentleman——

But the gentleman cut the suggestion short by inquiring when she might be expected to return.

"She came in yesterday at ten," explained the scraggy housemaid, who had opened the door. "But it's likely she'll come in sooner to-day, seein' as 'ow she's leavin' to-morrer."

"To-morrow?" repeated Vincent, in a sort of panic.

"Yes. For the Conternont."

The word was self-consciousness. It was not every day that Continental passengers passed that way.

"I prefer to wait for her here. You have some sort of sitting-room, I suppose?"

"We've got a droring-room," corrected the scraggy maiden, almost reproachfully, "with two sofas in it."

Just outside the door of the "droring-room," Vincent drew out his card.

"When Mrs. Hartmann comes in give her this card, and tell her that I wish to speak to her upon an urgent matter. She may be surprised, as she does not know my name, but I *must* see her. You understand?"

The fierceness of the whisper in which the last words were spoken was a good deal softened by the coin which glided into the scarlet hand, intercepted on its way to the door-handle.

The scraggy housemaid looked at the coin and blushed. Coins of this colour were even rarer between these walls than Continental travellers.

"In course I understand, sir," she assured him, with the respectful wink of a withered eyelid. "You'll see her, sir—never you fear!"—and flung wide the door of the room with the two sofas, into which Vincent stalked, recklessly indifferent as to the possible conclusions touching his relations with Mrs. Hartmann which the half-sovereign might be calculated to suggest.

Besides the two sofas—one of which was occupied by two women in earnest consultation over a parcel of patterns—the "droring-room" contained

a dozen chairs, evidently not planned with a view to lengthened physical repose, and three tables, upon which various magazines dating from not further than a year back invited to agreeable leisure. Upon one of the chairs Vincent sat down, and waited grimly, for close upon an hour, making no plans for the impending interview—that was best left to the spur of the moment, he considered—but chiefly conscious of how nearly he had missed this precious chance; and, alas, prosaically reminded, by prosaic sensations, of the vulgar fact of not having dined. Occasionally the door would open to admit some person, usually of the gentler sex, who, by virtue of a cotton-lace collar, or a ribbon-bow at the neck, evidently considered herself to have “dressed” for dinner—or else to let out a similar specimen of womanhood. Except the two women with the patterns, who were too deep in agonies of indecision to have any attention to spare, they one and all cast curious glances towards the young man in the immaculate evening suit, sitting solitary and rigid, like a soldier at his post; but to him their existence was evident only as an annoyance. Would the room be clear when Mrs. Hartmann came? To have to say in a whisper that which he had to say would not make matters easier. During that hour the guests in the two-sofa room shifted more than once, all except the choosers of patterns, who played the part of a social rockbed. Once or twice Vincent looked impatiently

in their direction, for they appeared to be settled for the night.

And, in fact, they were the only intruders remaining when at last the door opened to admit a person of quite a different stamp from the wearers of the cotton-lace collars: a tall, dark-haired woman in a fur cloak and cap, holding a card in her hand, and looking about her inquiringly and seemingly in some agitation. At the first glance Vincent knew who she was. Yes, of course Irma would have a beautiful mother; yes, this was Irma's bearing, Irma's beauty matured and somewhat coarsened—but not Irma's eyes, he told himself, as, advancing to meet her, he saw the face close.

"You wish to speak to me?" she asked coldly, but within her eyes an alarm which puzzled him.

Vincent bowed.

"I have an important communication to make to you. If you will come to the end of the room——"

He glanced towards the women on the sofa, still, fortunately, engrossed.

"About my husband?" asked Mrs. Harding, quickly.

"No; about your daughter."

"Oh!"

She took a rather deep breath, and the alarm left her eyes. Until this moment she had suspected a private detective, a very well-dressed one, to be sure, but she believed that to belong to the exigencies of the profession.

Without any further objection she sailed across the shabby carpet, towards the further end of the room, and sat down upon the second of the sofas with the air of a queen taking possession of a throne.

“Well?” she said, turning to Vincent, while, in her attitude of expectancy, bewilderment still clearly had its part.

Drawing one of the unreposeful chairs close to the sofa, Vincent sat down, and deliberately leaned towards her, at an angle which allowed of a lowering of the voice.

“Mrs. Hartmann,” he said very plainly, though nearly in a whisper, “I do not want to keep you long, for I know you are on the eve of a journey. Therefore I will go straight to the point. I have taken a liberty; but I think you will forgive me for it when you hear what I have to say. But first let me ask: have you, perhaps, heard my name from your daughter?”

Mrs. Harding glanced at the card in her hand and shook her head.

“No, Irma has not spoken of you.”

“Well, then”—his heart sank a little at the dashing of what had been a thought of hope—“I must just speak of myself, and of what I have done. I have twice asked your daughter to marry me.”

“To marry you?”

The wonder in her tone suddenly turned to interest. Her great black eyes took rapid and closer

stock of the man before her, and the practised glance approved.

"Yes, and she has twice refused me."

"I see. And you want me to intercede for you? But I am afraid I cannot boast of any influence upon my daughter," said Mrs. Harding, with a bitter contraction of the lips.

"No, it is not intercession I require; it is information. If intercession could have done it I should have gained the day, for I know that she loves me."

Mrs. Harding's brilliantly white teeth were displayed in a smile that was a little pitying—the smile of one who *knows*.

"That is what men like to think when they are refused. Are you sure your self-confidence is not deceiving you? Excuse me, but you seem to have a fair portion of it."

"I have it from her own lips that she loves me."

"She says that she loves you, and yet she refuses to marry you? Does that sound credible?"

"Not in the least; nor explicable either. She tells me that something stands between us—some impediment in the way—that she will never be able to marry. That is why I have insisted on speaking to you. You are her mother. It is not likely that you should be ignorant of the nature of this obstacle. I cannot doubt that you will want to secure her happiness; and I think you may be able to tell me how best to attack this impediment—for I

mean to attack it. I hope you will help me to gain her—if you judge me worthy of her,” he added, with the usual afterthought, and once more lowering his voice, which, unconsciously, had gone up by a tone.

Mrs. Harding sat rigid, the rich red fading slowly out of her face.

“Irma said that?” she asked, with lips that moved stiffly.

“Yes. I thought at first that it was no more than a strong reluctance to leave her father; but she said to me plainly that even if her father were dead the impossibility would remain.”

To himself, watching Mrs. Harding’s face and the convulsive clutch of her fingers upon the table edge, he said: “Whether she tells me or not, she knows.” And at this new evidence of the reality of the hindrance his heart grew heavy.

“I am horribly indiscreet, I know,” said Vincent, in the forced whisper in which they were talking; “but please to remember that the happiness of my whole life—and I believe of hers, too—is in play.”

Mrs. Harding spoke only after a pause. With eyes fixed upon the opposite wall, she had appeared to be inwardly debating.

“Perhaps you are indiscreet; but, then, you are in love—very much in love, apparently,” and she sent him a glance of close inquiry. “I don’t mind your indiscretion, since it allows me to be indiscreet, too. I, too, have questions to ask before I answer

yours. Whether Irma's feelings are concerned I do not know; her future certainly is; and you must remember that I know no more than your name. How am I to be assured that you are in a position to secure to Irma a life of comfort and of the—the regard which she ought to enjoy?"

The great black eyes became acutely expectant. Doubtless the cut of his evening coat—not to speak of his manners—was reassuring in the extreme, and yet left the field of conjectures inconveniently wide.

Vincent sat up in his chair and almost laughed. Of course! How stupid of him! He ought to have thought of that before. That he should not have begun by reassuring the mother upon such vital points was only another symptom of the ravaging effects of love upon his mental faculties.

He explained briefly, and perhaps a trifle haughtily, while Mrs. Harding attentively listened, visibly impressed by the mere words "Diplomatic Service," though to her, as well as to Irma, the subject was a foreign one.

"I am daily expecting my nomination to a secretaryship at a foreign Embassy," he finished, as modestly as he was able.

"Ah! and those sort of secretaries become Ambassadors in time, don't they?"

"I mean to become an Ambassador, at any rate."

"Ah!" she smiled approval on him. "But meanwhile—you have something to live on, I suppose?"

"Not as much as I should wish; but, besides my pay, which will soon be eight hundred a year, I have another eight hundred of my own."

Mrs. Harding fell again into a train of reflection, from which Vincent's urgent voice aroused her.

"Your questions are answered, Mrs. Hartmann; but you have not yet answered mine. You have not told me whether you know what the obstacle is?"

"Yes, I know!" she said abruptly, and so loud that the two women with the patterns, who, having at last made up their undecided minds, were leaving the room, looked round with a stare.

"And can you remove it?"

She rose impetuously, as though to escape his persistent eyes.

"No—I cannot remove it."

"It is real, then?"

"It is only too real. I can do nothing, I fear. This I can tell you: *I* am not the obstacle!" She laughed harshly, her head thrown back, a glance of proud self-justification thrown at the man in whom she divined a possible accuser. (Is it not the wife who is always suspected, before the husband?) "Oh, Irma, my poor Irma! What a sacrifice of a life! And to think of the folly which has caused it!"

She stood before him with eyes blazing, and hands clenched by her side in the best tragedy-queen fashion. Probably she had said more than

she meant to, being clearly in a rage. Turning, she took a few hasty steps in the room of which they were now the sole occupants. Vincent, who had risen when she did, gazed at her in a mixture of admiration and of unreasoned repulsion. It was when she met his look that the effort to recover herself became evident.

“You will excuse the agitation of a mother who sees a daughter’s happiness hanging in the balance,” she said, forcing a smile, though her bosom still heaved. “I sympathise with you, believe me; but I cannot help you. I don’t know whether anything can help you and Irma—but I fear not.”

CHAPTER X

THE APPEAL

IT was a little before ten o'clock next morning when Mrs. Harding and Gabrielle, in full travelling attire, leaving the cab with the luggage at the door, entered Number thirty-eight. Their train left Victoria at eleven precisely, which allowed a small margin for the final leave-taking.

Wrapped in an old dressing-gown, the convalescent cowered over the fire which Irma had carefully mended, previous to putting on her hat; the improvement in the patient making it possible for her to see the travellers off, and thus partly replace the maid whose services Mrs. Harding so sorely missed.

When Gabrielle had been repeatedly folded in her father's rather limp arms—her pocket-handkerchief being in full play the while—her mother took her by the shoulder, not over-gently.

“There—that is enough, Gabrielle! You will be wanting some last words with your sister, no doubt. You had better go to her. There will be no time for talking at the station.”

It was Mrs. Harding who shut the door behind Gabrielle, before returning to where her husband sat, following her movements in some astonishment; for during these last painful days—which both had judged too painful to prolong—the avoidance of *tête-à-têtes* had been her chief care. He awaited her now, silent and passive, with inquiring eyes. There were signs of a new and acuter anger about her to which he had no clue.

When she was close he took her hand—gloved already—and held it for a moment.

“Thank you, Isabella,” he said slowly, in his enfeebled voice, in which the agitation of approaching separation was less evident than a great exhaustion both of body and soul.

“Thank you for coming. It must have been a great sacrifice. Be sure that I appreciate it.”

She pulled her hand away, her black brows knitting.

Again he looked at her with his forlornly questioning eyes.

“Isabella, must we part in anger? I have ceased hoping for your forgiveness, but is it too much to ask for your toleration? You seemed able to bear the sight of me yesterday—or was that only because I was on my back?—and there is no new cause that I know of——”

“There *is* a new cause!” came over Mrs. Harding’s quivering lips in a burst of exasperation,

under which her heart had been swelling for hours.

“Oh, you don’t know what I learnt yesterday!”

Under the vehemence of her tone he sank back in his chair, wide-eyed and cowering a little, as a man on whom many blows had fallen cowers before the fresh one which he divines coming, without knowing from which side it threatens.

“I cannot be long about it; there is no time. I had a visit from Mr. Denholm. I suppose you know who Mr. Denholm is?”

“Denholm? Yes. That is the man that took Hungarian lessons from Irma.”

“And also the man that wants to marry her. Do you happen to know that?”

“To marry her? Are you sure? I had no idea. It was Mr. Potts who wanted——”

“Another? I daresay; and another impossibility, of course. The long and the short is that Mr. Denholm has twice proposed to Irma, and that she has twice refused him, while admitting that she loves him, but telling him that something stands between them—that she can never marry. He came to ask me whether I could throw any light on the matter. I declined, of course; how could I do otherwise? But don’t you see what this means? As long as Irma is tied to your fate, what can be her chances of happiness? I don’t know that, even separated from you, she can hope for much now in the way of a marriage, since the name remains; but by your side she cannot be other than

a social outcast. That is what I foresaw in Vienna when I wanted to keep her back—when I called upon you to go away alone—to disappear out of her life. And the world is so big nowadays, there are so many new countries to vanish into. It may not be too late yet; I do not know. I'm afraid matters are pretty hopeless, especially taking his position. I don't know much about diplomats, but I fancy they have to choose their connexions carefully. Still, there is no saying—if you were gone there might be found a way."

The haste with which perforce she spoke made the words more precipitate and the exposure plainer and consequently more brutal than had lain in her intention. Now she paused sharply for an answer; but Harding sat still, his powers of speech and even of motion momentarily checked by astonishment; for the disclosure had about it the completeness of a revelation. Perhaps because the plump figure of Mr. Potts had blocked the way to other suspicions he had never even glanced at this possibility. Now he was remembering various things—that return in the fog—those questions about diplomats—yes, the circumstantial evidence tallied. Probably the thing was true.

"Edward—say something!" urged Isabella. And then, meeting that empty gaze, checked her own words under an inner movement which possibly was akin to remorse, or rather to that awe with which tyrants are sometimes seized at a close

sight of their victims. Sunk there in the chair, with his white face almost of the same tint as his white, disordered beard, with the deep, deep lines about the desolate eyes and the attenuated nose, he looked so defenceless and so broken that the absurd superfluity of striking a creature so stricken already came over her, with the nearest approach to shame of which she was capable. She had loathed the thought of him for close upon a year now; and since last night she had been hating him afresh as the obstacle to Irma's happiness—or, at any rate, to her future; and yet, convinced though she was of the rightness of her cause, some vague need of self-justification stirred unexpectedly.

"You had to know. How could I be silent when Irma is concerned?" she said, in a tone from which some of the harshness was gone—and sincerely, too; for in this woman in whom the wife had been dead for so long the mother undeniably lived—chiefly for Irma, the inheritor of her own beauty, the embodiment of a possibly brighter future.

"And even for yourself it would be better to go—to America, I suppose. It would be less painful for you than your present position. You would need to regain your strength, of course, first," she added, with an effort at magnanimity. "But perhaps in spring—when the cold is past—I could give you the passage-money, if that is the difficulty. I shall be able to manage that. Don't you see that

it would be better for you, Edward? And safer, too."

The cloak of decency thrown over naked facts had been snatched at almost unconsciously.

"Don't you understand me, Edward?"

"Yes, I understand you," he said, with suddenly recovered quiet, and with a look which, her robust nerves notwithstanding, Isabella could not forget till the end of her life.

"Mamma, it is high time!" said Irma, opening the door. "You will only just catch the train, as it is. Papa, are you sure you have everything you want? I shall be back in two hours, at latest, and Pattie will answer the bell any minute."

A few minutes later Irma sat beside her mother in the cab, a heightened colour still burning in her cheeks, and stealing an occasional inquiring side-glance at Mrs. Harding. Those few minutes with Gabrielle had likewise for her held a revelation. She had learnt from her sister the fact of last night's visit, and even the name of the visitor, since Gabrielle had found the card on the dressing-table and been inquisitive enough faithfully to preserve the inscription in her memory. At the motive of the visit she could partly guess, but not at its result. He had announced his intention of investigating what she called the "impossibility" and what he called the "obstacle." How much had he discovered? A question to her mother might have

settled the point, but against the idea of putting it her pride revolted.

* * * * *

Huddled together in the arm-chair, and not having yet stirred out of the attitude in which his wife had left him, Edward Harding sat and laboriously reflected. The disclosure just heard had been bad, but the fashion of the disclosure had been worse. Now that the first astonishment at the news was past he was not thinking so much of the impediment to Irma's marriage, he was thinking of the appeal made to him, and which the fact of this impediment had provoked.

Upon the feverish excitement which had preceded the arrival of Isabella had followed a space of the blackest disappointment which had yet come to this life so full of disappointments. He had had the vision of his goddess, craved for, but he knew that it would be the last in his life. He himself could not even wish for a repetition of it. These last days had been too cruel. Already in the supreme moment of meeting something had jarred within him. The surprise at his recovery had to his super-sensibility smacked too much of disappointment. Out of the stereotyped and conventional congratulations upon the fortunate turn of his illness he had heard the unspoken and probably unacknowledged reproach for having recovered. And this time he read the symptoms as he had never read them before. From the vantage-

ground of the edge of the grave on which he had so recently stood he had gained an insight, never his before—death being in truth the only true valuer of life. The shadow of the tomb, barely withdrawn, had strangely widened his vision. At last he was beginning to judge his idol. Until now a wavering belief in her generosity had still persisted. Even the atrocious scene in his study at Vienna might, by stretching many points, be ascribed to the impulses of the moment—to overstrained nerves. There had been many months to ease the strain, to lessen the bitterness. Finding him on his sick-bed might awaken mercy. It was now only that hope had definitely died; now only that he knew himself spurned for ever. How much simpler, to be sure, if he had not recovered; simpler for himself and for others! For Irma, for instance, whose happiness might possibly have been thereby assured, but, above all, for Isabella, in whose side he would always be a thorn, who was so beautiful still, and, delivered of him, would doubtless find another and worthier husband. A sharp sting of jealousy touched him at the thought, of such jealousy as is felt at twenty, and rising triumphant above bodily weakness; for the idol, even with its feet of clay revealed, still dazzled him with the beauty of its face. He could partially judge her, but he would never be able to resist her. It was his intellect which had freed itself, but neither his heart nor his senses. To her advantage

he was ready to sacrifice himself, and by the sacrifice might, perhaps, wipe out the moral debt incurred. And Irma, too, poor Irma, she would be paid, at least, in part. For her, too, that which he thought of would be a deliverance, though she might not recognize it as such. Irma was different from Isabella—a true and tender woman. Was Isabella a woman at all? and not rather a beautiful monster! Ah, but how beautiful a monster!

He closed his eyes the better to conjure up the vision of the face which had been his undoing. Even in this vital moment the “good girl” remained a bad second in his thoughts. Strict justice she should have from him, strict and full justice, but it was not her image around which his thoughts twined.

Yes, he would disappear, it was the only thing to do, but not to America. From America a return was conceivable, and for him there must be no return, since his place in the world was gone, and his occupation. What should the worshipper do before an empty shrine? The idol was broken, may be; it had shown itself to be a dead thing; but that simply meant that he could not go on living.

Ah, if he had that revolver which Irma had taken from him once! What could have become of it? He had never seen it since. He suspected Irma of having dropped it overboard during the crossing from Hamburg. A revolver did the thing so quickly. But what chances had an invalid,

watched over so assiduously, of procuring himself another? There were other ways, of course. His eyes went vaguely round the room in a search which felt itself hopeless, and presently fastened themselves on the array of medicine bottles on the table. The morphia! To be sure! The sleeping draught prescribed by Dr. Hockins! How had he not thought of that at once? Why, that would do even better than the revolver, would make no mess, and quite a painless process, he believed. This way, too, nobody need ever know that it was not an accident. Ah, but supposing Irma had locked it away.

Laboriously he rose to his feet and tottered over to the table, where a fit of coughing forced him to pause and to hold on to its edge until quiet returned. Then, his eyes still full of a blinding moisture, he groped about with his trembling fingers among the bottles. Ah, here it was, mercifully. Irma's suspicions must have gone to sleep, else it would not be here. Carefully and jealously he put the bottle aside and sat down to think.

"Let me see, which will be the best way?"

With his elbows on the table and his chin upon his clasped hands, whose wrists, painfully emaciated, protruded from the sleeves of the faded dressing-gown, he began to make his plan, his brain already working at high pressure. In a moment his eyes, so empty a minute ago, had taken

on that sharp, almost cunning, look of the criminal who meditates his crime.

It would have to be done before Irma's return, of course; else she might take away the bottle, as she had taken away the revolver. She might be back before twelve, and it was getting on to eleven now. And then there was another thing: Dr. Hockins, who might be expected to look in even earlier than that. His furrowed brow knit in intense reflection.

Presently he stirred with the decision of a man who has found what he was looking for, and, reaching for the blotting-book, dipped a pen in ink and began to write: two notes, of which one was addressed to Vincent Denholm at the Foreign Office, the other to Dr. Hockins; this latter but a few scrawled lines:

“By your charity, and as you hope for mercy yourself, deal mercy unto me, and let me die in peace. It was the greatest mistake you made in your life when you got me over that attack. I am trying to remedy that mistake now. To my daughter—and to others—it remains, of course, an overdose, taken by mistake.”

Owing to the debility of his fingers it took him rather long to write the two notes. Having closed both, and holding the one addressed to Denholm, he tottered back again to the fireplace.

The promptitude with which Pattie answered the bell spoke of the stringency of Irma's commands.

"You will take this to the pillar-post at once, please," he said, with unwonted imperiousness. "And when Miss Hartmann comes in you will tell her that I am lying down. I have had a bad fit of coughing and have taken my sleeping-draught. She knows that I slept little last night. I would rather not be disturbed. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. A fit of corfin'? You'll be wantin' your lime-blossom tea, I'm thinkin'. Shall I fetch up a cup? I won't put no medal in it—I promise you faithful, Miss 'Artmann 'as forbidden me that; but if you would let me——"

"No, I want nothing. Only take the letter at once, do you hear? At once!"

The thought of bribing her to silence crossed his mind, but was rejected as superfluous and possibly dangerous.

Pattie gone, he first placed the note for Dr. Hockins beside his bed—ready against a possible intrusion, despite the word passed to Pattie; then took up the selected bottle and eagerly scanned the superscription: "Ten drops in water at night."

"I suppose a tablespoonful will be enough? Is there a spoon? Yes."

He considered the advisability of locking the door; but here also decided in the negative. A locked door would awake suspicions, and might

cause him to be disturbed—too soon. A look at his watch told him that it was close upon eleven, and by twelve Irma might be back. Clearly there was no time to lose—though he had no idea of how fast the drug might work.

The taste was horribly bitter, taken thus without water, as he did in his haste; besides, might not water weaken the effect? With a little grimace of repulsion he wiped his mouth and his white beard, on to which a drop had fallen. Perhaps it would be wiser to wash the spoon? The use of a spoon might contradict the theory of the overdose. Going to the washing-table, he rinsed it out carefully, and further went through the precaution of placing a tumbler with the remains of the diluted dose usually taken at night beside the bed.

Then he returned to his chair, scarcely aware of any fatigue after these unwonted exertions; for the nervous tension easily supplemented physical strength. And now he began to wait—somewhat disappointed at the absence of an immediate effect, and scarcely convinced of having taken any vital step. But for the bitter taste still in his mouth he might have doubted the reality of his own action.

Presently Pattie was heard returning. But her steps, instead of making straight for back regions, paused before the door. There was a knock.

“What is it?” asked Harding, in a tone of sharp annoyance.

It was a wire, which Pattie had met in the street.

He opened it with a certain indifference; what had he to do with wires any longer?—but as he read his eyes brightened. The message was from Irma, and told him that, the eleven o'clock train having been missed, the travellers would take the next Continental express, at one-thirty. Therefore she could not be home till after two.

“It is well. Don't come in again. I shall be lying down immediately.”

“Yessir. And I thought you'd like to know that the letter just caught the eleven o'clock clearin'. They was just fillin' the sacks as I came up.”

“All right, all right! Now go!”

He remained with a pleased smile on his face. More than three hours before Irma could be looked for! Surely the stars were fighting for him!

But *were* they fighting for him? Why did he feel nothing yet? Would a second spoonful be necessary? At the thought he repeated the recent grimace. That taste was so horribly bitter. He would wait a little longer. And the fire was so pleasant. How agreeable this glow running over his skin!

He rubbed his hands softly, a new feeling of buoyancy mounting within him. Not for many, many years, certainly not since his hair had begun to bleach, had he felt so curiously light-hearted as he was feeling just now. How well he had managed this! How simple it was, after all! Would

Isabella shed one tear? After all, she *had* loved him once. That day, when she kissed him for the first time, her lips had glowed like coals. He could feel the glow now—all over him. And nothing became her like white—though she never wore it now. It made her almost too dazzling. There—leaning upon the velvet-covered edge of the box, with the electric light upon her black hair, and all the vast opera-house no more than a frame to her beauty. Had any woman ever reigned as she reigned? But was she not leaning too far? Would she not fall? Were those the tiers of boxes beginning to revolve?

He carried his heavy hand to his head as though to stay the growing dizziness—yet even the slight act was a struggle. Oh, how good it would be to stretch oneself out, with a pillow beneath the head! And there was a bed somewhere, but so far off! His suddenly weary limbs, aching now like the limbs of a beaten man, yearned towards it, and yet could not decide themselves to move.

“But I cannot die here—I should fall into the fire!” shot through his mind in the lightning track of expiring thought amidst the closing darkness.

With a final effort of will he dragged himself out of his chair, and, groping half-blindly forward, fell upon the bed with a deep and trembling sigh. And almost immediately the room slipped from his consciousness—and with it the world.

CHAPTER XI

THE PROMISE

"ONE O'CLOCK," noted Vincent, as he descended the staircase of the Foreign Office. "Shall I take the news straight to Eaton Place? It ought to come in well as a luncheon dish. Berlin, of all places in the world! Best comment on the opinion entertained up there of your humble servant. Not likely they would put an idiot to Berlin just now."

The thought was triumphant, but the eyes were not quite so triumphant as they would have been some months ago under this same contingency, for at that time the "good" appointment had appeared to be the one thing wanting to his happiness, while now another thing was wanting. Neither could he, after last night's interview, feel that he was any nearer gaining it. Irma's mother, though more animated, had scarcely been less sphinx-like than Vindobona herself; and the one positive impression to be gained from her demeanour was that the obstacle did not exist in Irma's imagination alone.

Before he got to the foot of the staircase he had decided that the news of his appointment would

keep till evening. Somehow the prospect of Lady Aurelia's toothless smile of delight was not congenial just then.

Before a table white with letters he stopped abstractedly, from force of habit. There was a post just in, and the harvest still untouched.

"Vincent Denholm, Esq.—Vincent Denholm, Esq."

His practised eyes went to the right spot at once. Quite a little mail; but nothing that promised interest. All tiresomely familiar handwritings—all except a cheap-looking envelope with a shaky superscription which held no place in his memory. Standing before the table, with his unlighted cigar between his teeth, he carelessly opened the missive—which he strongly suspected of being a begging letter—and read as follows:

"Dear Sir:

"I have just learned that you love my daughter, and that she returns your affection, but refuses to marry you because of an impediment in the way; I feel it my duty to let you know that *I* am the impediment. The matter is very simple. My name is not Hartmann, but Harding, and I am not Austrian, but English. I am that Edward Harding, the quondam director of the Austrian branch of the Anglo-Saxon Bank, whose name you may have seen in the papers about two months ago as that of a defrauder, signalled to the international police.

The papers did me no wrong: I *am* a defrauder. If there be a God, he knows that when I touched the deposits in my hands I did so with the full confidence of being able to replace them; but I cannot expect men to believe me. Yet I do not want you to think me quite base. I had no intention of surviving my disgrace. If I have done so it is Irma's fault. It was she who took the revolver from my hand, who bore me away from the spot of exposure—and who, by living for me ever since, has morally forced me to live. Her mother did what she could to show her the folly of her resolution, but nothing could stop the sacrifice. By her mother's side she could have lived at ease and unmolested, yet she chose to be the companion of the guilty wretch I am.

“But it has been a useless sacrifice; a mere postponement of the only possible end. I cannot live knowing myself a dead-weight on my family. I am the impediment everywhere. But the impediment will have been removed—so I hope—by the time this reaches you. I don't know whether my death is really helping your cause, since in your career names have to be spotless; but I imagine that a dead criminal will be less in your way than a living one.

“Besides, it is far easier to die than to live. If it were not for the thought of the wretches whom I have injured, perhaps ruined, I could almost die content. Had I a son he might have worked and

cleared my name from reproach; but a son has been denied me—perhaps mercifully, for who knows whether he, too, might not have turned against me? It is not certain that he would have had Irma's golden heart. I leave the matter in your hands. You will know whether or not her happiness is a thing to be attained. If she questions you, you must remember that it was a mere mistake about the medicine.

EDWARD HARDING."

With his cigar still between his teeth, Vincent read down to the last word of the supposed begging letter. For a brief space his horrified eyes remained fastened to the quivering line in which the signature died out, while the fact revealed upon the cheap sheet of letter-paper took gradual possession of his incredulous mind. After that pause of astonishment, which seemed to himself quite a long interval, though comprising in reality but a few seconds, his numbed mind felt itself suddenly whirled off in a very witches' dance of fast and furious thought. Amazement, compassion, admiration, horror, all circled wildly about him—but chiefly horror. This letter, even at the highest computation, could not have been written more recently than two hours ago. And within those two hours—what?

Making precipitately for the door, he signalled to a passing hansom. Out of the chaos of sensa-

tions one urgent need stood out intelligibly—that of staying the hand of the suicide.

“Drive like the devil!” he called to the man, having given the address; and, scarcely seated, sat well forward, with the fare in his hand, as though to lose no second at the other end.

But, though “Cabby” came up nobly to the appeal, the distance between Downing Street and Filbert Gardens is not to be traversed in mere seconds. During that headlong drive, more than once in danger of being interrupted by a grieved-looking policeman, Vincent’s wild thoughts, despite himself, and almost unknown to himself, began automatically to range. To arrive in time was the one conception occupying the surface of his mind; but below this surface many other things moved and dawned; and in the background of his consciousness, piece by piece, something like a vision of the future emerged, tentatively as yet, and almost timidly, yet with a curious persistence. Even while muttering to himself, “Will I be in time?” and with his thoughts bent feverishly on Filbert Gardens, he caught glimpses of things which seemed to have nothing to do with the present emergency—of Bob Rendall’s weather-beaten face, among other things—and of horizons which certainly were not those of that desolate street.

He had all but torn down the bell before Pattie, with streaming locks, and eyes swollen to a size

which usually signified some more than normal disaster to Mrs. Martin's crockery, opened the door.

"Mr. Harding—no, I mean Hartmann?" asked Vincent, feeling every heart-beat as a separate stab.

Pattie, who was clasping a hot-water bottle to her breast, set up a subdued howl.

"Oh, pore gentleman! pore gentleman! You can't see him, sir—he's that ill! Taken too much of his medicine, the docthor says. And Miss 'Artmann not come in yet! It do be awful!"

She was rocking her body from side to side, and with it the bottle, as though it had been a sick baby.

"Hurry up with that hot water!" came sharply from an open door close by; and Vincent, pushing past the girl, made his way into the sick-room, where Dr. Hockins, in shirt sleeves, was bending over a passive figure on the bed.

"Is he alive?" asked Vincent, breathing as hard as though it was he who had done the running instead of the cab-horse.

The doctor glanced keenly at his disturbed face.

"You know?"

"I know. But of course it must be prevented. Can I be of any use?"

"Yes, you can—by taking hold of that other arm and imitating my movements exactly. Artificial breathing," he briefly explained. "Natural breath far too superficial—shove that bottle against the feet"—this to Pattie—"and tell Mrs. Martin to

get some black coffee ready—as strong as she can brew it.”

At the clammy touch of the limp hand Vincent could not forbear a shudder. With his dressing-gown half stripped from him, Harding lay outside the blankets, his head tilted back upon the pillow, his sunken features of a bluish pallor—with a narrow line of yellow-white visible between the half-closed lids, and a barely perceptible rising and falling of the bare chest, veiled by the unkempt white beard.

For several minutes the doctor and his improvised assistant manipulated in silence. Then first one, then the other, in close imitation, paused.

“What was it?” Vincent ventured to ask in a whisper.

“Morphia. No need to lower your voice; the louder you speak the better.”

“Is there any hope?”

“Only in so far as where there is life there always *is* hope. I’ve taken the usual steps—whether in time or not I don’t know. The state of the heart complicates matters extremely.”

“Will he not return to consciousness at all? I have something to say to him; something I *must* say to him.”

“If consciousness returns he is probably saved. All depends on breaking the coma.” He glanced at his watch. “Time for another camphor injection.”

A few seconds after the injection had been given, Dr. Hockins, whose finger was upon the patient's pulse, looked significantly at Vincent; and Vincent, though aware of no change, gazed with breathless expectation at the livid face upon the pillow. With a breath that was almost a groan the bloodless lips parted. Another moment, and the waxen eyelids trembled and slightly lifted, only to drop again heavily.

"Now! Now! Pull him up—rub his arms! Leave him no peace!" commanded the little doctor, with suddenly set teeth. And together they dragged the unresponsive body into a sitting posture.

"If you have anything to say to him say it now. It may rouse him."

"Mr. Harding! Mr. Harding!" almost shouted Vincent into the dying man's ear. "Can you hear me?"

There was another quiver of the eyelids, and again they went up, gradually disclosing the pale, china-blue iris within which the shrunken pupils showed like the heads of two black pins. Fixedly, yet without expression, they fastened themselves upon the face bending so close.

"I am Denholm—Vincent Denholm—you remember me? I got your letter—the letter you wrote this morning. You understand?"

He paused, looking eagerly for signs of comprehension. At the word "letter" he had thought to

see something like a light passing through the eyes. They became more fixed, but also more attentive. It was evident that memory was at work.

“You remember what you told me in your letter?”

There was a faint movement of the head, enough to assure Vincent that the stupor had been pierced.

“You must not die, Mr. Harding; there is no use in your dying, and no sense. I have come to tell you that I shall marry your daughter the very moment she will have me.”

He paused again—not because he had remembered Dr. Hockins’s presence, which, indeed, never for a moment struck him as an impediment to free speech—but because the pale lips were moving.

“Your career?” came at last in tones which he could only catch by bending his ear to them.

“My career will consist in securing her happiness; I have no other to pursue, since I mean to renounce Diplomacy. By to-night my resignation will have been handed in.”

He spoke the words without haste, with an almost superfluous distinctness, calculated to reach the sick man’s mind, and partly also his own. For until this moment he had taken no clear account of the ultimate form adopted by those wild thoughts whirling within him during the recent drive. He had not yet known the definition of the cosmos which had come out of that chaos. For the process had been a subconscious one, playing

itself out in the depths while the more evident of his reasoning powers were busy with the necessity of getting to Filbert Gardens before the irretrievable had happened. Now only he knew that, from the first, his resolution had really been fixed. Of course, he could not be both Irma Harding's husband and the representative of his country—that much he had grasped from the first. He would never expose either her or himself to the possible insults which in high places the name of Harding might entail. One of the two desires of his soul must fall; nor had he hesitated before the issue. That rush of admiration for nobility of soul which only noble souls can feel had joined hands with love to tear down in one moment the wishes of years. And in the admiration a little shame mixed. Beside her uncalculating sacrifice how small his merely personal ambitions looked! Against the thought of being beaten in generosity by a mere girl his manhood revolted. Did he love her less than she loved her father?

The light-blue eyes with the tiny pin-heads in the centre had been torn open now to their full width.

“It is not you who are the obstacle to our happiness, Mr. Harding, it is I—or rather that stupid career of mine. Therefore it must go. My life will be full enough—with her—and with something else. For listen: you say you have no son to clear your name—well, I propose to be that son,

and to do what he might have done. I have some capital of my own, quite enough to start me. I shall go somewhere where work still pays—to South Africa, probably—I have a friend there; I shall work, and Irma will work with me, I know, until the last farthing is paid of the debt you incurred, until not a person remains who can utter your name with reproach. Will that satisfy you?"

He smiled with the question, pleased and surprised at the precision with which even the details of the plan had already worked themselves out in his mind.

A vibration passed over Harding's features. The blue-nailed hand groped towards Vincent's; the eyes, with suddenly dilated pupils, in which the pin-heads had spread to exaggerated patches—a sight at which Dr. Hockins frowned unseen—were fixed upon the speaker's face.

"You will do this?"

"So help me God, I will! Your honour shall be made as bright again as your son himself could make it."

"Then there is a God, after all."

The words died into a sigh—a long, quivering and supremely contented sigh. The pale blue eyes disappeared once more behind the withered lids, rolling heavily downward, like the curtain at the end of an act.

"Go on talking!" said Dr. Hockins, whose attention had for several minutes been as completely

absorbed by the patient's pulse as though the most ordinary discussion in the world were proceeding alongside.

"Mr. Harding! Have you not understood? Rouse yourself, in God's name! There is no need to die now!"

A strange smile—something like a smile of comprehension—twitched the thin lips.

"There is no need to live"—Vincent just made out the words, and then, bending lower, caught the groaning whisper of a name; but the name was not Irma's.

"A return of the coma," grumbled Dr. Hockins. "Here, lend a hand again!"

A minute later he stopped his movements and pounced upon the pulse.

"The corfey, if you please," quavered Pattie, at the door.

"We do not need the coffee now," said Dr. Hockins, as quietly he laid back the inert form upon the pillow.

CHAPTER XII

“IGEN”

A HOWLING winter wind rattled the windows in their sockets; but Irma heard nothing of it.

Alone in the little box-like drawing-room, with the toy-terrier nestling upon her knee—for De Wet, mortified vanity notwithstanding, had found it wiser to make the best of the situation, much as his namesake had on another occasion done before him—she sat and pondered. Her thoughts were still in the bleak, leafless cemetery where yesterday an unhappy man had been laid to rest—her eyelids still smarting from the tears that again and ever again welled up from her desolate heart. Just at first they had refused to flow. The shock of the sight awaiting her on her return from Victoria station had been too violent for immediate tears. With professional plausibility the story of the overdose had been told by the little doctor and ostentatiously accepted by Irma—in how far believed in the doctor himself preferred not to inquire. Something, too, had pierced to her understanding about another visitor, departed shortly before her

return, and she had even guessed at his name, but without attention over for puzzling out the possible connexion between apparently independent facts. It was another point which absorbed her thoughts.

“Pattie, tell me—is it my fault?” she sobbed, when at last the tears would come. “You see, if I had locked up the medicine he could not have—taken the overdose. How can I ever feel happy again?”

The two girls were upon their knees beside Irma’s bed, above which hung the little silver crucifix, and Pattie’s work-worn arms were around Irma’s swaying figure. To drag her off to the crucifix and almost to force her down upon her knees was the only thing which had occurred to poor, distracted Pattie; for Pattie, you see, was wofully unlearned. She had no store of rationalistic arguments wherewith to grapple with a grief so wild and so fresh; she could do no more than stretch out clasped hands towards the figure of a bleeding God, whose very wounds seemed to speak of compassion with bleeding hearts.

It was here, too, that the delivering tears had come, mixed up at first with a half-hysterical inclination to laugh; for Pattie’s version of the Our Father, into which she had plunged headlong, appealed to other senses besides the sublime.

“Hour Father, who hart in ’eaven,” scarcely sounded familiar at the first hearing; but at the

second already Irma had begun to cry, partly for company's sake, for Pattie was gulping hard between each word.

"You've got to feel 'appy again!" said Pattie, almost fiercely. "You're one o' those that's planned out for 'appiness—that beautiful as you are! The thing ain't, rightly speakin', no business of yours. If the pore gentleman was to take an overdose, then he'd take an overdose, whether or no the medicine were locked away," she explained, with a magnificent disregard of logic. "When the hour's struck nothin' can stop a thing. It's what I'm allays sayin' to Mrs. Martin about them cups and saucers. 'I do believe you do it on porpoise,' she says to me, when one o' the things jumps out o' my hands. And I answers her: 'I never do nothin' on porpoise, Mrs. Martin; it's just that their hour's bin and struck.' And I do believe it's the same with people as with cups."

"And yet you cry over the cups and saucers, Pattie—you know you do," argued Irma, to whom Pattie as a fatalist was new.

"That's only becos' it's more 'andy to give advice than to foller it," admitted Pattie, with a sigh. "But my hintelligence be against it, all the time. If I'd done it on porpoise, then my conscience would be stingin' me to bits, of corse. But you can't do more than your best, can ye? And why should I cry becos' plates are slippery? Oh, you

mustn't go by me, miss; I'm not one o' the clever ones."

And, incredible though it appeared to Irma herself, the robustness of this elementary philosophy had helped to dissipate the morbid doubt. If the hour had really struck, then to take away the bottle would have altered the end as little as had done the removal of the revolver—if the end had been what she fearfully divined. Could he have gone on living after the final disappointment, so patent to her watchful eyes—the two painful days just passed? You can't do more than your best—that was true, though Pattie had said it. Slowly and heavily the orphan's head began to bow under the decree of fate.

* * * * *

And now she sat in Miss Bennett's drawing-room, alone with De Wet, trying to think out the future. Since the evening of the terrible day in which Minna—unexpectedly announced—had, almost by main force, carried her off from the house of death, this was the first moment at which she had had the courage even to glance at what was coming. A bleak and empty prospect indeed. To her mother's side nothing would induce her to return; for "I should tell her one day that she is a murderess—I know I should," she argued—and that had better not be. Neither could she stay here any longer, despite Miss Bennett's incredible kindness—and this for all sorts of reasons, but

chiefly because of the danger of meeting Vincent Denholm. For that ordeal she was not sure that her strength would suffice. Even to hear his name spoken would have shaken her with the regret of an impossible happiness; but she had been spared even his name—for which circumstance she was more grateful to Miss Bennett than for everything else. She wondered whether she ought even to stay in London. To make a fresh start elsewhere might be easier—for them both. How if, after exploiting her German, she were now to exploit her English? Perhaps in France? She would consult her patroness.

It seemed an answer to her wish that the door should open just then.

“Miss Bennett,” began Irma, without turning, resolved to brook no further delay, “I have just been thinking——”

She stopped and glanced fearfully over her shoulder, for the step on the carpet was not Minna’s.

The first instinct was the stupid and cowardly one of flight. Indeed, she began by pushing the toy-terrier off her knees, as though preparatory to rising, yet, after a hasty movement, sank back again, with the colour all gone from her face and her eyes almost hard. One look at Vincent Denholm had told her that, if needs be, he would put himself between her and the door.

“I do not ask you to forgive me,” he was saying

gravely, before she had succeeded in quite collecting her wits. "I know that you will do so when you hear the reason of my intrusion. I have a message to deliver from your poor father—no, not exactly a message, but a communication to make concerning his last moments. I do not know whether you are aware that I was with him—at the end?"

Incapable of speech, she made a vague movement with her head.

"I think you would like to know that he died content—I might almost say happy."

Her blue eyes fixed him wide and wondering.

"I was able to take a heavy weight from his mind by a promise I gave him. It is right that you should know what that promise was. It was the promise to clear his name from the stain which misfortune has brought upon it."

"You know?" asked Irma, precipitately, all the blood rushing back to her face.

"Yes, I know."

"But how—— Oh, I understand."

And she thought she did. The question as to how much her mother had told him seemed answered now. And he thought it wisest to let it stand at that answer.

"That is why you went to him?"

"Yes, that is why; and, by the mercy of God, I arrived in time."

He stooped suddenly and softly took her hand.

"You will help me to clear his name, Irma, will you not?"

At his touch, despite all after-thoughts, she thrilled, yet the passionate trouble on her face showed that the after-thought was there. And then she asked the same question which Minna Bennett as well as her dying father had asked:

"Your career?"

"Spare me that word! I'm beginning to hate its sound. My career is a thing of the past—not of the future."

"What do you mean?"

"That I have decided to let my country get out of its foreign embroglios without my valuable assistance, and to be a free man, instead of a public servant."

For a moment astonishment kept her rigid, then, as the full consciousness of what this implied came over her, she snatched back her hand.

"Ah—because of me! I am spoiling your life! No, no—it must not be!"

"It already *is*. My resignation was handed in a week ago. I have no more business inside the Foreign Office—in fact, my place is filled already—and I have no special business outside of it, either, unless you so will it."

"Oh!" groaned Irma, her face in her hands, yet beating but feebly now against the invading flood of happiness. In her heart hope raised its head, while in her ear his earnest voice pleaded.

“And my promise, Irma? Surely you forgot my promise! How can I do what I pledged my word to do unless you give me the right? Can a stranger undertake what a son alone should do?”

* * * * *

A little later, while they sat in the twilight, alone still, except for the much-disgusted De Wet—for in comparison to the seat lately occupied even his gem of a basket appeared cold and comfortless—Vincent, as at a sudden recollection, put his hand in his pocket and drew therefrom something shapeless and pink.

“What,” began Irma, and then laughed softly. “Oh, it’s Vindobona.”

“Is that her name? She wouldn’t tell it me. I put her into my pocket to-day, I believe with some idea of restitution; but now it strikes me that destruction will be more appropriate. You told me she was the past, and *we* have only to do with the future.”

Rising, he went over to the fireplace and dropped the little pink bundle into the coals. Together they watched the thing which stood for the Past flare up and fall to ashes—gaudy spangles, black stains and all.

Then, after another long silence, came Irma’s hushed question:

“His last words—you heard them—what were they?”

Vincent's arm held her a little closer.

"One of the last things he said was, 'There is no need to live,' and he smiled so extraordinary a smile as he said it. I had told him that there was no need to die, since all would be well; and that was his answer. And after that—at the very end—he spoke a name."

"What name?"

"It sounded like Isabella—I could not be sure."

Irma fell silent again. A little more of the weight had slipped from her heart. Whatever part the discovery of her love had played in the last act of the tragedy, her woman's instinct told her that it was but a subordinate one. Henceforward she would at least be spared the consciousness of her happiness being built upon a grave. Pattie had been right when she had said that it was no business of hers, rightly speaking.

And presently even the details of that happiness began to unroll.

"You will not mind going away far—very far with me?" Vincent had asked, and she answered with a sigh of deliverance:

"Oh, as far away as possible from all the old things!"

Then he spoke of South Africa, and of the plan already formed and much elaborated during the past inactive week—of turning his capital to account there.

"It's a country flowing with milk and honey,

from all accounts. Of course, I know nothing about obtaining the milk or collecting the honey, but I've a friend out there who has been at it for years. We'll make him pick us a likely bit of land, and, of course, it is he who must manage it for us. I told him all about it by last mail. Poor old Bob! I believe he'll jump straight out of his skin when he gets my letter. The last time I saw him he told me that to get under an English master would crown his wishes. I shall tell you his story another time. Capital, brains, and a free hand—that was all a man wanted, he said, to make a pile over there."

Again they sat silent, while the wind rattled unheeded at the windows, and the glow of the fire grew brighter in the darkening room.

"And another thing he told me on that occasion was that to have a plain job cut out for you and to feel that you can do it was worth a good deal. I've got my job cut out now, and I believe I can do it. Not much pomp and circumstance, I suspect, about growing peaches and breeding ostriches, but a good deal more hard cash, I should say, than about composing treaties."

He laughed happily, then fell into drawing pictures of the unknown land and of its exotic beauties, to which she listened with the wondering smile of a child hearkening to a fairy tale. And under his words the fairy tale glowed, and with it his own heart, as it had not been able to glow during

the difficult days just passed. For that there had been too many threads to tear, too many bonds to sever. The inevitable pangs could not shake the fixed resolve, yet they had been there all the same. But whatever regrets had assailed him in the blank intervals between the two lives, while common decency kept him out of her presence, were now vanished—drowned in the blue of her eyes.

* * * * *

“Spoiling his life?” said Minna Bennett at a late hour that night—that intrinsically confidential hour at which dressing-gowns flow and hair-brushes are in play. “Put that ridiculous idea out of your head, once for all! You’re *making* it for him, I tell you.”

“How?” asked the incredulous Irma, who had just been airing her scruples.

“Quite simple. Nothing more organically unfitted for the Artful Dodger than Vincent can be imagined—and a diplomat is just a duly accredited variety of the article, you know—yet the mere necessities of the case would have made an Artful Dodger of him in time—at the expense of his character. For people of his priggish devotion to truth—and with Vincent it amounts to an idiosyncrasy—the diplomatic mountain is a slippery one to climb. As likely as not he would have come a nasty moral cropper.”

Here Minna was interrupted by the necessity of sneezing, a very natural necessity, considering the

time she had spent in her unheated bedroom that afternoon.

“He thinks he is happy now *only* because he loves you, but it is also a little because he knows that an inner conflict is ended. To my mind, it is not your father’s honour alone that he is saving by renouncing what men call ‘honours’—if honour means being true to oneself. I have been hoping for something like this for years. Ah, my dear, you cannot imagine how grateful I am to you—and how glad!”

As a proof of which Minna’s good-night embrace left a strangely moist feeling upon Irma’s cheek.

* * * * *

But the end of Vincent’s ordeals was not yet. For several days more he was to go about remorsefully asking himself whether a charge of at least moral manslaughter would not darken the rest of his days, whether the spectre of his stricken grandmother were not to haunt all future nights—for shocks of this description are not easily weathered at eighty-two.

When, with infinite precautions, it was broken to Lady Aurelia that Vincent had not only refused the Berlin secretaryship, but simultaneously sent in his resignation, she had, after a brief but awful pause, vindicated her perspicacity by putting that same question which a Roman Catholic Archbishop is said to have put to a priest of his diocese who

had just employed ten minutes in elaborately setting forth the conscientious grounds on which he found himself forced to renounce communion with Rome:—

“What’s her name?”

The name, being presently forthcoming, sent her into the nearest approach to hysterics of which her wiry nerves were capable, coupled with the loudly proclaimed intention of getting straight into her grave, and the earnest request of being accorded room to fall. Pending the grave, she got into her bed meanwhile, after having boxed the ears of the handiest victim, who happened to be her maid, and—so it was reported in the servants’ hall—refraining only from scratching out the corresponding pair of eyes because, owing to the superior nimbleness of youthful limbs, she had been unable to reach them.

Then for days a complete *débacle* reigned in the orderly existence of the house in Eaton Place, at whose door the family doctor’s brougham was to be seen night and morning, and in whose hushed chambers Chrissie and Cissy discussed the awful turn of affairs in whispers, and occasionally in tears; though it was afterwards remembered that Chrissie’s eyes, at least, had never actually been red, and that the deepest moans over the destruction of the family hopes, uttered by her sister, had failed to depress her completely. Poor Sir Christian, whose fluffy white hair seemed inclined to fly

straight off his head before this blast of adversity, and who went about quoting examples of just such inappropriate matches as this, of which he had taken cognisance either in his "Roman" or his "St. Petersburg" time, was little attended to in these days. It was almost the solitary occasion in his life that, being asked for something—that is (as a mere matter of form), by Vincent for his consent—he had not unhesitatingly acquiesced.

"But, of course, he's only got to see her again in order to say, 'Certainly, my dear—just as you like!'" groaned Lady Aurelia under her bed-clothes—a supposition which subsequent events corroborated.

For nearly a week Vincent walked the streets with at least a modified edition of the mark of Cain upon him. It was the Conte Galliani whom he had to thank for the removal of that mark; for if the Conte had not chosen this exact juncture for coming out with a declaration, at which Chrissie did her best to look decorously surprised, there seemed every chance that the Dowager would have made good her promise by using her bed as a mere stepping-stone to her grave.

But when "Lady Mummy" heard that her eldest granddaughter's hand had been formally demanded in marriage by the brilliant young *attaché*, she proceeded abruptly to reconsider the position. It seemed, after all, that there was something still

worth living for; since, apart from his evident abilities, the Conte was a *parti* in every sense of the word, lacking neither the money nor the connexions likely to give him many desirable "lifts."

Accordingly, less than three days later, Lady Aurelia's lemon-coloured face—looking now like a lemon that has been very badly squeezed—reappeared in the Eaton Place drawing-room. She could not rest until she had pressed to her heart the new hope of the family; the old one having, by this time, actually received a contemptuous sort of assurance of toleration, if not of forgiveness. As for persuasion, she had not so much as attempted it—another proof of perspicacity.

"So you have decided that to live in the country and keep a trap is the proper way of filling up existence?" was the greeting extended to the prodigal, together with an indescribable glance from the wickedly black little eyes.

To which Vincent—very much on the grin—replied that it all depended upon whom you had to drive in the trap. For half an hour he gladly endured remarks of a similar scathing description; so thankful to be spared a possible self-reproach that his grandmother's remarks appeared to him almost as "amioosing" as they did to the Conte—a state of affairs which was distinctly hard on "Lady Mummy." Unable to get a rise out of the son, she perforce fell back upon the father. But

so much elation did there lie in the air, so universal was the atmosphere of peace and good-will, that even the "Vol-au-vent"—no, the "Caviare Conference" was produced in vain to-day.

EPILOGUE

FOR the fourth time within an hour Bob Rendall went back into the house, in order to assure himself that the table-cloth and the napkins were still in their places, and that the salt-cellar had not been forgotten; also to try and make up his mind whether the rocking-chairs looked better facing each other or the window. On the whole, he inclined to the window, on account of the magnificence of the view, filled by the swelling lines of the veldt and bounded by the blue-grey fortress of the mountains. On the other hand, again, there were reasons to suppose that the occupants would prefer the look of each other's faces to the finest panorama a-going; in which case——

Having given little shoves to the chairs and little pulls to the white calico curtains draping the windows, Bob went out again on to a verandah littered with wood-shavings, and, shading his eyes with his hand, stared hard in one direction. Upon a boulder-strewn knoll at some hundred paces' distance a black, immovable figure was to be seen, sharply silhouetted against the glorious blue of the sky. It was at this sentinel figure that Bob gazed

expectantly—to turn away again presently with a restive groan and attempt to cheat impatience by an aimless but vaguely beatific stroll round the premises.

The opening era was altogether so far superior to the one lately closed as almost to suffice for the happiness of one whose demands upon happiness had never been great. In default of getting his own "little girl," to know that Vincent had got his was almost the next best thing on the list—that, and the English master sighed for so long—and that master his own old Vin! What wonder that his weather-beaten face, under the broad straw hat which clothed him so much better than a "chimney-pot" ever could do, should wear a grin which threatened to become chronic?

Add to this the consciousness of not having failed in the task imposed. He had done well for Vincent, and he knew it. His prophetic eye, sweeping round what was as yet but a builder's yard with only the dwelling-house under roof, with the out-buildings mere carcasses of wall, with stacks of bricks, sheets of corrugated iron, and ponds of liquid mortar making havoc of the ground between, saw it all as it would presently be. The establishment was not even to be described as "new"—far more truly as "future." The word was writ large over its untidy yard, its pegged-out garden space, its roughly cut approach, and over the provisional pen above whose walls of loose

stones two prize ostriches craned their long necks. But to Bob's experienced optimism the future was almost the present. With his mind's eye he could *see* the peach and orange trees that would make the landscape perfect by filling out the bare foreground; and already he calculated the progeny of that feathered couple in the pen.

Having bestowed a "mealy" upon each of the future patriarchs (and all but got his fingers bitten for his pains), Bob decided to take another look at the sitting-room, which, together with the adjoining bedroom, represented the only inhabitable spaces of the house.

All right there; the salt-cellar still in its place, and the napkins, strangely enough, not having played any pranks in his absence. After another moment of deep consideration he turned the rocking-chairs decisively towards the window, through which the glorified panorama of the sunset had caught his eye, gave a tug to the bunch, or, more properly speaking, bush, of mimosa which occupied the centre of the table—Bob's idea of table decoration—and once more went out for another consultation of the sentinel. For the how many'th time the manœuvre was being repeated it would be hard to say; nor was this time the last. It was just when he had finally, and this time irrevocably, decided that the chairs had, after all, better be turned towards each other, that, hearing a shout, he made

for the verandah, in time to see the knoll bare and the black figure racing towards him.

“At last!” he breathed into his big beard, his big heart already in his mouth.

Then, as he got ready to wave his hat:

“Upon my word, it’s almost as good as though the little girl herself were coming!”

But at that he caught back his breath with a feeling very close to self-reproach.

“No—not quite!”

THE END









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