

The GIRL IN
FANCY DRESS

J. E. BUCKROSE





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BY J. E. BUCKROSE

THE GIRL IN FANCY DRESS
YOUNG HEARTS
MARRIAGE WHILE YOU WAIT
THE TALE OF MR. TUBBS
THE SILENT LEGION
THE GOSSIP SHOP
THE MATCHMAKERS
THE ROUND-ABOUT
SPRAY ON THE WINDOWS
GAY MORNING
BECAUSE OF JANE
A BACHELOR'S COMEDY
THE BROWNS

NEW YORK
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THE GIRL IN FANCY DRESS

BY

J. E. BUCKROSE *friend.*

AUTHOR OF "THE GOSSIP SHOP,"

"YOUNG HEARTS," ETC.

Jameson, Mrs. Annie Edith Foster

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CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

A valuable French clock on the mantelpiece, which Mr. Walgrove had once bought at a furniture sale, pointed to half-past three of a January afternoon, and the fire-light in the open grate leapt up, causing a well-modelled calf in bronze gilt that supported the dial to stand out very clearly amid the shadows. Immediately beneath the clock knelt the young widowed daughter of the house, Feodora Keithley, who appeared to be performing an act of adoration, though as a matter of fact, she was only arranging the logs on the fire. Behind her stood her father, Mr. James Walgrove, a handsome, rather battered-looking man in expensive clothes. His head was slightly bent, so that the smoke from his cigar made a bluish haze in front of the bronze calf, almost with the effect of incense. A little farther away sat Mrs. Walgrove and the younger daughter, Marjorie, while the only son looked out of the window at the darkening afternoon. He was tallish, with a pale face, rather heavy-lidded eyes and black

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hair, and had a certain stiffness of gait left by rheumatism in the trenches.

"Well," he said, turning from the window, "I think I will get some letters written, as you insisted on my staying at home to greet our guest. I suppose the goose with the golden eggs will be here by tea-time?"

"Anthony!" said Feo over her shoulder. "If you are going to take it like that, you will simply spoil everything."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Walgrove, straightening her slim figure, which was still that of an angular girl. "When you consider what an effort we shall have to make, while you and your father are away at the office all day, it does seem rather too bad of you, dear."

"Especially as we're doing it more or less on your——" began Marjorie, when Feo tactfully bit off the end of the sentence with a sharp: "Oh! I must go and see if they have put any flowers in Cynthia's room." She rose. "It is so annoying to think that that tiresome little second cousin of yours should be coming on the same day, Father."

"Can't be helped," said Mr. Walgrove irritably. "You know how the Rector of the parish wrote. We couldn't let the girl starve while she was looking for another job. But I can't understand why she should give him *my* address. She has no claim on me. *I* have never done anything for her." Then at a sound from Anthony: "I don't see what you are laughing at. Nothing to laugh at in my remark is there?"

"No, no," said Anthony hastily, for he knew how kind they all wanted to be to him, now that he had come home with five good money-making years gone out of his life

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and with a stiff leg. "But about the fair Cynthia. She has gold, and you *do* hope she'll be a goose in one respect, don't you?"

"How can you be so foolish?" murmured Mrs. Walgrove, rather uneasily, for even before Anthony went out, he had always been a little tiresome and obstinate, though for a time they had forgotten all his faults.

He put his hand on her shoulder as he passed. "I'll behave, Mother. Trust me. By next week at this time, the golden goose will be head over ears in love with me."

As the door closed on him, Mrs. Walgrove sighed.

"I've almost prayed he and this girl may take a fancy to each other," she said. "And now he talks like this. One never knows what he will do. I wouldn't have him marry for money, of course——"

"No," said Mr. Walgrove. "But it would be a grand solution of the difficulty, for I can't give Anthony a share in the business to marry on, in the present state of things, unless I impoverish myself and the rest of my family. And I do not wish to do that."

Mrs. Walgrove, who was of a county family, while her husband had been the handsome son of a small local wine-merchant, looked as if he certainly must not expect a Vinder by birth to live in anything but a detached residence. "But it certainly does seem a compliment that my old school-friend should wish to entrust her niece Cynthia to us," she continued. "That shows, girls, how wise it is to keep up a correspondence, even when it appears to lead to nowhere. Now you see, when Mrs. Rayburn wants to let this child have a little youthful society, she naturally turns to me."

"Well, I can't understand it, considering you have not

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met for many years," said Feo. "But I daresay Mrs. Rayburn has become rather a crank with living alone in the country and seeing no one. Still, I wish to goodness the other girl were not coming at the same time."

"Cousin Nellie may not turn up today, after all," said Marjorie. "We don't really know whether she will not put her visit off until next week, you know. That would give Cynthia time to settle down before introducing this tiresome little creature to her."

"The little creature may be six foot high and eleven stone in weight, for all we know," said Feo. "But I do call it rather rough luck, Mother, having two unknown females thrown on us at once, even though one of them is a very desirable guest."

"Mrs. Rayburn's niece has no doubt been most simply brought up, like most young girls in her position," said Mrs. Walgrove, primming her thin lips. "I know we were at home."

And Feo responded to the suggestion that of course Mother's people *were* superior, by saying at once: "I hope this cousin of Father's won't be anything like that other one we met at Scarborough. Do you remember how perfectly awful she was? I can't see why we should be bothered with a relative we have never seen."

"The Rector of Appleby knows our Bishop," said Mr. Walgrove, "and he seems to be fond of this Nellie Walgrove. Our own name, too. We could not refuse to take her in for a few weeks until she found a situation as nursery governess or something. You know how unjust people are."

"Oh well, I am glad you invited Mrs. Robinson to tea this first afternoon, for she is so smart and such a good

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talker. This Cynthia-person will see we have decent friends at any rate," said Marjorie. "Now it is time we went to change, I suppose. Where's Chloe? I do hope she'll behave decently, Feo."

"I don't know why you are always so down on my child," said Feo, flushing. "I should have thought you would want to protect a poor fatherless——"

"Protect!" interposed Marjorie, with a laugh. Then she walked out of the room followed by her mother and sister. Mr. Walgrove went to speak through the telephone, which was placed in a corner of the hall, and then he also departed to the small smoking-room to read his paper. The hall was now empty but for the shadows, and the golden calf had ceased to catch the firelight.

A minute or two later, the charwoman came to tidy up the fireplace because the Walgroves were without a housemaid. She switched on the light and hummed to herself as she brushed up the cinders, thinking of the pleasant evening she would have at the Cinema, then she went out. After that, a thin, red-haired child with a tremendous length of black leg peered through a green baize door leading from the back regions. Almost immediately, there was the sound of a car stopping, and the child ran across the hall to open the door.

A girl came forward into the strong light, and even Marjorie might have pardoned Chloe's dropped chin and astounded stare in view of the spectacle which the visitor presented.

"Goodness!" piped the child, always articulate under any circumstances. "Is *that* how country cousins dress? No wonder Mother and Marjorie didn't seem very keen—I mean, when that awfully rich Cynthia was coming

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too. Where's your box? *Haven't you even got a box?*" she added in an increasing crescendo.

The girl shook her head, but beneath the preposterous straw hat trimmed with red poppies and black ostrich feathers, it could be seen that her glance was gay and amused.

"What do you know about Cynthia being rich?" she said.

"I know because she's going to stay here and marry Uncle Tony. He has no money and he's stiff after the war," said Chloe, staring up solemnly with her long, dark eyes under her mop of red hair.

"Oh, is he?" said the girl in an odd tone.

"At least we *hope* he will; though Granny was cross with him for calling Cynthia the goose with the golden eggs. It *was* rude, wasn't it? So you see we felt a little sorry you were coming to-day, too, because you most likely wouldn't have any aitches and would be a dreadful let down," continued Chloe. She paused and again regarded the new-comer. "I'm sure I don't know what Mother and the rest will say. You really do look so funny; like cook, only with a kind of girly face. Never mind, though—if they are too horrid, I'll just have you up in my nursery. But I say: where *did* you get such a kind of hat?"

"Same place as I got my dress, of course," said the girl, dropping a curtesy and making a cheese with the wide, grey fustian skirt.

"Hee! Hee!" laughed Chloe shrilly. "Only you mustn't do that when the people come to tea, you know, or else Mother will say you are unladylike. Mrs. Robinson is coming," Chloe dropped her voice reverently, "and she

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is the niece of a millionaire. Look here, this is how you must shake hands, my dear." And the stick-like arm and little thin paw were held out in travesty of Feo's best manner. "*Delighted* to meet you, Mrs. Robinson. Like that! See?"

The girl laughed out, a very sweet, heart-whole sort of laughter. "You are a funny little thing!"

Chloe frowned. "You wait a bit," she said. "If you say 'How do you do?' with that awful frock swirling round as you did just now, you'll be laughing on the other side of your face." She grinned once more. "That's what our charwoman says. I do think it's funny, don't you? Fancy seeing people suddenly smile across the back of their heads, 'specially if they were bald——"

But the girl was not listening, though her bright eyes remained fixed intently on the speaker. "What fun!" she was saying to herself. "They take me for a raw country cousin. Well, I'll be one!" Then, obviously in answer to the remonstrances of some inward monitor, "I don't care! They deserve it. Fancy bringing up a child so that she drops her voice when she mentions the niece of a millionaire—and planning to marry me to their money-grubbing son—— Goose with the golden eggs, indeed!" She began to laugh again, so gaily and infectiously that Chloe laughed with her.

"I say, you *are* a jolly one! Nobody would think you were ill and ground down with being a nursery governess in the depths of the country all your life, would they? You look as well, as well," said Chloe. "Oh, there's my cat mewling!" And she was away through the door leading to the kitchen.

The girl gave a hasty glance round and flew to the

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telephone: "The Station Hotel. I don't know the number. If you *could* be so kind——" A moment or two's agonized impatience. "Yes? Yes. I am Miss Cynthia Rayburn. Send Miss Rayburn's maid at once, please." Another wait, with sounds approaching from the staircase leading into the hall. "Emma! That you? I'm at Mr. Walgrove's. I had a spill into a wet ditch and borrowed some clothes, but I'm quite all right. No. You are *not* to bring the boxes on here as arranged: *not* to bring them—do you understand? Engage a room for me and stay where you are, until I let you know. Is that quite clear?" An evident remonstrance. "Oh, hang Godmother! No, I don't mean that." More argument, obviously, from Cynthia's frown. "But I tell you, I'm *not* doing anything foolish. I am here all right, and you are to stay there." A further and apparently more serious argument. "Very well, I promise to be with you before ten o'clock to-night at the hotel, but you are on no account to communicate with Mrs. Rayburn. There is no need whatever to worry. I am only going to give this family a much-needed——" She dashed the receiver down on the stand and turned to greet her hostess, who now stood in the wide archway leading to the stairs.

"Oh—er—how do you do?" said Mrs. Walgrove. "Chloe told me——" But it was evidently so much more than Chloe had told, that she could get no further.

Cynthia hastily sought an excuse for her presence at the telephone that would fit in with her new character. "I—I was just wondering what this queer thing could be. D-do you blow into it? I wanted to make it play a tune. I do love music!" she said artlessly. In her excitement she overacted the part of the country cousin to such a

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degree that any detached spectator would have put her down as a harmless lunatic. However, the agitated lady was so distressed to see her worst fears realized that she was capable of only one thought—that at all costs she must remove this guest out of sight before the other one should appear, for the first impression was all-important, and what would the heiress think of this terrible young person?

“So pleased to see you: but—but won’t you come upstairs at once and take off your things?” she said eagerly. “As you are not in good health, I am sure you will prefer to have a cup of nice hot tea in your own room.”

“How kind you are!” said Cynthia. “But do you know, I already feel much better, and the doctor told me to get as much cheerful company as I could! You see, when you only associate with pigs and cocks and hens—outside the family, of course—you get a tiny bit what I call farm-yardy; don’t you? So, if you please, I would rather stop down here.”

“But you look tired, you look *dreadfully* tired,” urged Mrs. Walgrove. “I’m sure you ought to come upstairs at once and——” She broke off, groaning inwardly: “Oh, this is the worst of a hall sitting-room!” And as Mrs. Robinson was ushered in she wished from the bottom of her heart that she had never caused the humble passage entrance of her earlier married life to be knocked into the morning-room and adorned with imitation paneling. Still, she advanced with all her usual precise “lady-likeness” of demeanour to greet the new arrival. Before the greeting was over, the daughters of the house came in, and they, too, stood for a second in the doorway, not unnaturally transfixed at the sight of the girl

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in the straw hat, black jacket and wide stuff skirt of the cottager's wife, which Cynthia Rayburn had borrowed after getting wet through. With her customary impatience, she had found it too tedious to wait for her own clothes to dry, and had rather liked the idea of showing herself in this comic get-up to the jolly, simple, good-hearted family whom she expected to find. When she saw the expression of Feo and Marjorie in the doorway, she felt very glad indeed that things had fallen out as they had done.

It was to this family, then, that the dear Aunt Harriet had sent her for a change from the jazzing, cigarette-smoking generation which the quiet country lady could not understand. Cynthia had come entirely to please Mrs. Rayburn, who clung to the memories of youth more and more strongly as the years passed by: and her own head was filled with those old tales of "When Millicent and I were girls," which she had heard all her life, and which had prepared her to feel very kindly towards "Millicent's" daughters. "Not people of your world, dear," Mrs. Rayburn had warned, "but simple and kind, I'm sure, from her letters. You'll see a little of what we were like when we were young at home——" And now as all this rushed through Cynthia's mind while she stood looking at the two young women in the doorway, she repented a little. Then Feo came forward and greeted the near relative of half a million with such effusion that Cynthia's sense of fun bubbled up again, and she determined to avenge both herself and that unknown country girl.

After all, she'd a right to get some amusement out of the affair, and they fully deserved what they were about

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to receive. . . . She stood meekly waiting her turn beneath the golden calf on the mantelpiece until her supposed cousins became aware of her presence and offered a tepid cheek, making it clear—even while they performed this act—that they were being “kind” to a little cousin out of a situation, who had been recommended to them by a friend of the dear Bishop.

Upon this Mrs. Robinson held out an almost cordial hand, because any one, even one quite nearly connected with a million of money, can be “nice” to an object of philanthropy without fear of complications: and the spoilt Cynthia then and there registered a vow never, never to be “nice” to any one dependent or poor again as long as she lived. Was *that* how it looked from the other end? Then how hard the discipline of life must be which taught you not to throw something very heavy with corners in the face of the person who was displaying the “niceness!” She angered herself ridiculously for the sake of the little country cousin who would have been treated so, and was filled with a sort of laughing vindictiveness.

“Just to think,” she said aloud, “that I was afraid of coming among such grand folks! And now you all behave as kindly to me as if I were that rich young lady you are expecting.”

“Sugar?” said Mrs. Walgrove in an icy tone. “My name is Millicent.”

“And a very nice——” began Cynthia, when she remembered with a start that her own supposed name had escaped her. “Not like my old name, is it?” she asked, rather breathlessly.

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"I think 'Nellie' is quite suitable," replied Mrs. Walgrove.

"Oh, Mrs. Robinson," interposed Marjorie, "did you notice Lady Walker at the last committee meeting? I really thought I should have expired. The way she tried to take the lead, when every one knows she only subscribed five shillings against your ten pounds."

"Insufferable woman!" said Feo. "I'm sure you were most forbearing, dear Mrs. Robinson."

"That just bears out what my Great Aunt used to say," said Cynthia cheerfully, not to be excluded by such unskilful tactics. "Money always talks sense, and that's why those who have it can talk any nonsense they like and get listened to: nobody hears *them*. She was a clever old lady, was my Great Aunt. You never knew her, Cousin Millicent, did you?"

"I did not. *Do* try one of these little hot cakes, Mrs. Robinson," urged poor Mrs. Walgrove.

"We had them made on purpose for you," added Feo, "you always say you like them."

"Delicious," said Mrs. Robinson. And in the end the four ladies closed in, as it were, drawing a barrier of hot-cake and conversation round them, and excluding the forward young person who sat a few feet away.

So Cynthia, who had had no lunch, fell upon the hot cakes destined for an oblation to a high priestess of the religion, and thus further outraged the principles laid down for the behaviour of a second cousin who is also a nursery governess and dependent on her hostess owing to a breakdown in health. By all the laws that govern human society, she should have waited until the plate was passed, and then have nibbled with seeming

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reluctance: but she was not aware of this, and had stretched out her hand for the third cake, when a movement of Mrs. Walgrove's caused her to glance round, and she saw Mr. Walgrove and Anthony pausing with the now familiar expression of worried surprise in the doorway. Immediately Mrs. Walgrove's clear accents cut the chilly atmosphere. "Henry! Here is your cousin, Nellie Walgrove." And the faint accent on the possessive pronoun left it to be assumed that the Vinder family could never have produced such an off-shoot, however poorly circumstanced.

Cynthia glanced towards Mr. Walgrove rather nervously, the blood rushing up through her fair skin. If he were kind, she could not keep this up; she would have to say at once that she had been led for the thousandth time in her life into a foolish practical joke. And yet, after all, she wanted it to happen so. As she rose from her seat, she felt the little twitching at the left corner of her mouth which had come there when she was in suspense, ever since she was a tiny thing waiting for a present to be unwrapped. . . . Now Mr. Walgrove's agreeable baritone travelled before him as he advanced across the polished floor. "Ha! How de do, Miss Walgrove? More kin than kind hitherto, I think: but I suppose we *are* cousins, two or three times removed." Then, with a brief handshake, he passed on to bestow his attention upon his other guest, banishing Cynthia absolutely and finally to that limbo where he relegated all women who were neither rich, socially important or smartly dressed. It was the first time that Cynthia had been treated quite in that way, and she did not like it. Then she remembered that this attitude was intended for the country cousin and not for

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Cynthia Rayburn: but that did not make her more inclined to forgive him. She quite unnecessarily failed to make allowances for the effect of the black cloth coat, poppies and ostrich feathers combined, on a mind susceptible to every social draught, and said to herself angrily: "Pompous ass! I'll make you sorry before I have done. Grinning your head off at that tiresome woman because she is well off! That poor, *poor*, little real cousin!"

So when Anthony came forward, she was in such a glow of indignation that she could scarcely bring herself to take his hand. Detestable money-grubbers! They should have one horrid quarter of an hour, anyway; but as for staying with them according to her godmother's arrangements—the idea was preposterous. She would certainly join her boxes at the Station Hotel before bed-time. Meanwhile, she would make the Walgroves supremely uncomfortable, which was, after all, a very light punishment for planning to entrap her into a mercenary marriage.

But as she returned Anthony's greeting and looked at his lean face, which had the sort of gravity which becomes tender or gay at once in the right company, her half-artificial anger flamed up into a real indignation. How could anyone having a face and eyes like that name her the goose with the golden eggs and design to marry her for her money? She felt that the outrage was far worse, coming from such a man, than it would have been from a lumpish fellow with no capacity for romance.

The ugly incongruity of it—like seeing an Arab yoked to a manure cart—further irritated nerves that were more shaken than she knew by the motor accident earlier in the day. Then across these whirling thoughts fell Anthony's careless: "Hope you had a pleasant journey,

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Cousin Nellie." After which he devoted himself to his tea with the same assiduity as his father to flattering Mrs. Robinson.

Mr. Walgrove was a social acquisition everywhere in Mabingstoke, and in all that progressive and enlightened city he reigned, *par excellence*, the pattern of the middle-aged buck. His iron-grey hair still waved a little, his teeth gleamed so agreeably between his handsome lips when he smiled, his nose and his legs were so straight, that even his wife felt gratified every time she saw him across a ball-room. As Cynthia listened to his conversation, she realized with what avidity those agreeable nothings would be poured out before her shrine if he only knew, and her anger once more began to be tempered by amusement. With eyes twinkling under demure eyelids, she leaned forward and said to him: "It does seem funny to see you sitting there!"

"Why?" said he sharply, surprised and annoyed at being interrupted in his conversation with Mrs. Robinson.

Cynthia chuckled. "Why, because Cousin Jane Ogle has so often told me about your selling your suit to a tramp for three halfpence and coming home in an old newspaper. And when she asked you why you did it, you lisped out: 'I doth love money tho', Couthin Jane.' She used to laugh like——"

"It never happened," interrupted Mr. Walgrove abruptly. "The old lady must have been wandering. I can't even remember such a person."

"Oh, you wouldn't," assented Cynthia cordially, "for Cousin Jane Ogle always used to say that there was nothing for slipping out of mind like poor relations: they

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seem spiritually greased, somehow. Don't you think they do, Mrs. Robinson?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mrs. Robinson very stiffly; and, indeed, this random shot made the blood of the Walgroves run cold, because it was known to all Mabingstoke that since the lady's rise in the world she had entirely cut sixteen of Mr. Robinson's near connections.

"I suppose you like a country life, Cousin Nellie?" interposed Feo hastily, for it being impossible to keep this terrible person out of the conversation, the only remedy was to try and introduce safe topics. "Chickens and so on?"

"Love them!" said Cynthia; then she glanced for a second at Anthony under her eyelashes, and perceived him to be looking bored. "Particularly geese!" she added. "Don't you love geese, Cousin Anthony?"

At first all five Walgroves looked startled: then they began to think that this extraordinary girl must have been sent to them because her late employers could not undertake the responsibility of dealing with a partially demented person. If so, the behavior of the clergyman, be he friend of the dear Bishop or no, had been most culpable.

"Why are you attached to geese?" said Anthony, after a pause.

"Oh, I don't know," smiled Cynthia. "I expect because I have always liked the tale of the goose with the golden eggs."

The Walgroves felt still more uncomfortable: it was a mere coincidence again, of course, and yet it seemed so odd. But Mrs. Walgrove exerted all her social tact

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to glide over the awkward pause. "How strange it is that if one mentions a thing once, some further mention of it so often takes place within a short time. It must be years since I spoke of that little story, and yet we only referred to it an hour or two ago."

"There is a great deal in those things that we don't understand yet," said Feo soulfully.

"Anyway," said Cynthia, with an emphasis for which her hearers naturally failed to see the reason, "I would rather be a Golden Goose than a Designing Duck."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Anthony. "I've met some rather delicious designing ducks."

Mrs. Walgrove frowned: for there he went again—laughing, as ever, in the wrong place.

"I suppose you understand poultry?" said Mr. Walgrove, intensely irritated by the knowledge that he had to make this creature the centre of conversation, lest worse should happen if she were left to choose her own topic.

"Of course I do," responded Cynthia. "Shall I show you how our old cock used to go?" And she rose from her seat, displaying to advantage the grey skirt and the black jacket. "Or perhaps you'd rather I said a piece?" For Anthony's laughter had changed her mood again and she was now mischievously engrossed in the fun of impersonating the country cousin, all trace of vindictiveness having vanished.

"Thank you: later," said Mr. Walgrove coldly. "By the way, Mrs. Robinson, we are expecting a young friend to-day—a Miss Cynthia Rayburn. Quite an heiress. I don't know how quiet people like ourselves——"

"But Cousin Jane Ogle always said anybody ought to

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be worth their meat when they went out," persisted Cynthia. "I don't mind saying a piece to amuse you, at all, and you do seem to want cheering up."

Once more there came a most inopportune sign of amusement from Anthony. Cynthia threw out her hand, struck an attitude that disagreed preposterously with her toilette, and declaimed—

"I stood on the bridge at midnight
As the clock was striking the hour,
And I wished to forget the prawns I'd had,
But that was beyond my power!"

In the frozen pause that followed Cynthia turned cheerfully to Mr. Walgrove. "I recited that because it was such a favourite with Cousin Jane Ogle. She said it touched her. She suffered from indigestion, if you remember?"

"Marjorie," said Mrs. Walgrove, in a dreadful tone. "Will you please show your Cousin Nellie to her room at once? I am sure she will like to rest and unpack."

"Thank you," said Cynthia, "but I would really rather stay here. You see, I can't unpack without any luggage."

"No luggage!" breathed Mrs. Robinson, startled into naturalness at last. For in her world a girl could do without her soul better than her clothes.

"You mean you have lost it!" said Anthony.

"No, I don't," said Cynthia, smiling on him. "It is like the Irishman's kettle: I know where it is, but I can't get at it for the moment."

"Then how do you propose——" said Mrs. Walgrove, rendered almost inarticulate by excess of feeling.

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Cynthia winked at Anthony: winked at the only son of the house—under that awful hat—in the presence of the niece of a millionaire. “Bless you, I don’t propose,” she chuckled; “I leave that to other folks.” But she felt the blood rising to her cheeks as she caught Anthony’s eyes fixed on her with a sort of questioning shrewdness, and she knew that she had overacted her part; that the others only failed to detect it because they were so concerned as to what she would say next, and so anxious that she should retire before the heiress was announced.

Then there was a loud ring at the front door, and the startling thought at once occurred to her that this was the real cousin. If so, now for the time of reckoning which had so often before followed on the vagaries of the spoilt heiress, though less often than she deserved, or else she would not have ventured into her present ridiculous situation—but it was only the postman. With heartfelt joy the Walgrove family heard the next words fall from Cynthia’s lips: “I think after all, I will go upstairs and take off my hat.”

For it was impossible to explain matters in the presence of Mrs. Robinson.

Marjorie accompanied the guest, abrupt and non-committal, mentioning bleakly that dinner was at seven and immediately going downstairs; but Cynthia did not give that unresponsive young lady more than a moment’s consideration. What really did concern her as she sat up there in the gathering darkness, looking at the grimy garden, was first what Anthony had really thought; and second, how she was going to extricate herself decently from the present *impasse*. But she made a firm resolution for the hundredth time in her life, that never again

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would she give rein to that side of her nature which was always leading her into trouble, and thus fortified, she went downstairs to face the consequences of her very last act of folly. From henceforth she would take her responsibilities as she had been so often warned that she must some day begin to do. No dressing-up; no practical jokes; only marriage with a rising politician—perhaps—and the other duties of her position in the world.

CHAPTER II

PIERROT AND A POLONY

Cynthia found the hall empty and in semi-darkness, which was annoying when she had braced herself to walk in upon the assembled family with the confession of the trick she had played upon them. Yet, at the same time, it was a relief; for she saw more and more plainly what an idiotic thing she had done. The well-known and always forgotten stage had in fact been reached when she repented bitterly and promised herself never, never, never—with an ascending intensity—to do it again. On looking back—as so often before—she was quite unable to understand how she could possibly have wanted to amuse herself in that way, because the whole affair appeared now entirely devoid of the colours which her lively imagination had given to it. She said to herself, standing there in the firelight which gleamed and glanced on her bright hair and on the loose cotton blouse lent by the mother of eight, that she must be possessed. Yes: that was it, no doubt. Some power inside her, and yet not of her, must possess her. Otherwise, why had she pretended to be the country cousin instead of herself—Cynthia Rayburn? She gave it up, and sighed deeply, staring into the fire.

When she turned away, there was Anthony standing silently near her.

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He had come in his thin shoes across the heavily piled carpet, and a gleam of firelight just caught his white shirt and part of the golden calf on the clock behind him. A distant electric bulb gave a faint illumination to the dimness of the hall.

"Well," he said, "and how are you getting on now, Cinderella?"

"Pretty well, thank you," said Cynthia; and at once that irrepressible Something in her began sitting up again and taking notice. It was not dead and done for as she had promised herself so faithfully. "Are you the Cat, the Fairy Godmother, or the Prince? I can't see by this light, but I rather think by the white on your chest you must be the Cat."

"You are mistaken," said Anthony, very solemn but for his twinkling, heavy-lidded eyes. "I am the Prince. You can tell that by the crown of my head."

"The crown of——" she began; then broke off. "You are a silly!"

"So are you, for that matter," said Anthony. Then he leaned down towards her and said in a stage whisper: "There is no Cousin Jane Ogle."

"What do you mean?" said Cynthia, startled.

"I beg your pardon," amended Anthony hastily. "I ought to have said she exists only in the same realm as you and me. How tiresome of me! Of course, she is really a Fairy Godmother—or a witch—so she goes beautifully with Cinderella. Can't think how I could be so dull——" They both turned at a noise without.

"That's the coach-and-four," chuckled Cynthia.

Then he was speaking again, touching her on the arm with his long slim fingers. "Cinderella!" he said. And she

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looked up at him, so gay and sparkling in the loose blouse and wide skirt with her pretty hair rather disordered that, for the life of him, he could not help adding: "Time you got ready to fly with me, you know, Cinderella."

"Where to?" she said lightly, feeling the electric touch of his fingers on her arm.

"To the country of Happy Marriage; the one you see at the end of Pantomime when you are eight," said Anthony with perfect gravity. "I'm sure you and I could find the way back there together, though armed Fairies do guard the sign-posts on purpose to mislead you when you grow up." He bent nearer still and suddenly kissed her round childish cheek. "Perhaps we'll try one day, Cinderella."

She pushed him away. "Oh, why did you do that? That's spoilt it all."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "I've not gone on in that way since I was a little boy."

"Good thing, too," said Cynthia.

"I mean the pretending, you know, not the kissing," he said. "It must have been something in you that led me on."

"Of course! The woman tempted me," said Cynthia.

"No. It was a sort of instinct that you knew the game too." Then he added in a different tone: "Not that I have the slightest excuse to offer for my behaviour." And he pressed a button, suddenly flooding them both with a rather garish electric light.

"You would not have done it if I had been the heiress you are all expecting," she said.

"No, I certainly should not," he answered.

"Then why did you?" she persisted.

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He looked thoughtfully at her. "I don't know—yes, I do. Perhaps I will tell you some day."

She stood looking at him, taking his measure—a strand of hair lay across her flushed cheek. "After all, I suppose you think cousins are sort of brothers?"

"No," said Anthony. "Not at that price."

"At what price?" said Cynthia.

"I don't purchase my absolution at the cost of being considered a brother," said Anthony. "I won't be a brother, Cinderella."

"Perhaps you are right," said Cynthia. "I never did hear of a Fairy Prince with a sister in all my life." Then she gave a little inward groan, adding to herself: "Oh, dear me! Now we've got to be real again with a vengeance." And now she sought for suitable words in which to tell her story, but they were hard to find. "I ought to tell you——" she began in a low voice, addressing his back, because he was putting wood on the fire.

He crashed down the log and a shower of lovely sparks flew up. "Talking of sisters—that was what I really had to explain to you. Feo and Marjorie hoped you would not very much mind being left alone, but the fact is, the whole family are dining at the Station Hotel this evening."

"The Station Hotel?" said Cynthia.

"Yes. Do you know it?" said Anthony, surprised.

"No. Yes. I know of it, of course. All town stations have hotels, don't they?" said Cynthia, recovering herself.

Anthony glanced at her with a glimmer of doubt in his eyes, but her clear, open look was not an encourager of suspicion. "A great many town stations have no

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hotels," he said. "But this is a good one, and as we are without a cook and a housemaid until to-morrow, my people had ordered dinner there on account of Miss Cynthia Rayburn."

Cynthia smiled at him in spite of her growing discomfort, because she thought the name seemed so nice from those peculiarly well-shaped, mobile lips.

"Is Miss Cynthia Rayburn so fond of eating as all that?" she said, after a pause.

"I expect she is no fonder than the usual fashionable girl," he answered. "But as the dinner at the hotel had to be paid for, they might as well enjoy it."

"Why are you not there too?" said Cynthia. Then she added gaily: "Oh, I know! I know! You must be here to receive great Cynthia in case she should turn up to-night." But a sudden unreasonable anger that he should be waiting for another girl—even though that girl was supposed to be herself—made her hot all over, for she was reminded that he and all the family awaited the goose with the golden eggs without caring at all what the real girl might be like; and she felt at that moment the bitterness which must come with riches, lest things be too unevenly divided for men to endure. . . . And yet he could be a Fairy Prince to her Cinderella in the twilight. She stood there, questioning him and life with those grey eyes that opened so roundly, like a child's.

"I hope you don't mind being left at home with me," he said, breaking a silence which threatened to become awkward. "The rest are all going on to the theatre afterwards as the tickets were taken. The play begins so very early in Mabingstoke that dinner had to be ordered for a quarter to seven, and Mrs. Robinson did not leave

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here until half-past six. They were in a great hurry, and told me to make all sorts of apologies to you."

Cynthia nodded. "Make your mind easy!" she said. "I have no desire to be of the party. And I suppose they were afraid I should look wistful if they told me what they were going to do, but I never do look wistful when I can't do things; I only look cross. Still, I quite understand. Angels wouldn't want to take a cousin out to dine in this get-up, would they?"

"Angels would have thought of lending you a gown," said Anthony quickly, "and I am sure the girls would have done so if they had not been in such a hurry. I do hope you won't get the idea that they mean to be unkind, just because they were a little off-hand in their manner when you first came. And after all, you had your revenge. You gave them Cousin Jane Ogle. Please don't think we any of us mean to be unkind."

"Of course not," said Cynthia quite gravely. "If you were, you would not be ready to take in a penniless cousin suffering from the effects of 'flu."

"We were all sorry to hear you had been ill, but you look better now, so I hope you are," he said. "Only you must not be in any hurry about taking another job, you know. I remember how rotten I felt after 'flu. You go slow and have a good, long holiday; and *remember*, we are all very pleased to see you."

"I think you are," said Cynthia, and she made the stress on the "you" so light that he could not remark on it.

Then came a rattle of crockery—both somehow felt that a moment of disagreeable reality was well over. As Cynthia watched a girl lay a small square cloth on the

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little table before the fire, she made up her mind to enjoy this meal before going back to the hotel. It was cowardly, of course, but she would telephone her confession, and then she would not be there to see how Anthony took it. She was less concerned about the rest of the Walgrove family because she had been spoilt by the glamour usually cast over her indiscretions by her riches, and she expected they would easily forgive even the rude quotations from Cousin Jane when they found out the identity of the culprit. But she knew that it would never be possible again to play Cinderella to Anthony's Fairy Prince, though her cynical belief in the power of her money tainted her thoughts even here. He might not "pretend" any more, but he would not resent her ridicule of his family when it came to a chance of securing the goose with the golden eggs. . . . Then she caught sight of his profile against the dark wall and something within her cried out: "No! Never that!" She felt that by some odd reasoning he would still reserve the right to condemn her, even if he married her for her money. He would see her as the purse-proud heiress who thought herself free to poke fun at poorer people because of that money. As she stood there looking at his clear profile against the wall, she would see him, with the eyes of the imagination, receding even as a husband into some mist where his wife would never find the real Anthony any more; her mind leapt to the true conclusion that only the purest accident had enabled her to find him now.

But Chloe's nurse—by an act of great grace and under protest—was taking the supper from the charwoman to place it upon the table before the hearth and Cynthia's spirits began to rise again; for the terrible pink polony,

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the dish of round cakes, the loaf, and the butter, the jug of water and glass looked so exactly like a meal in an old illustrated fairy-tale. She felt very glad now that she had put off the explanation until her return to the hotel. Then she heard Anthony's discreet murmur to the maid: "Another plate and glass, please."

"I understood you would take dinner at the hotel. I promised to look after Miss Rayburn if she came while you were out," said Nurse, tossing her head. "Those were the instructions I had from Mrs. Walgrove."

"Too much trouble to turn out," said Anthony, smiling at the girl. "I'll get the things if you'll show me where they are. I know you are short-handed."

"Oh, it's all right as long as you don't mind polony," said Nurse, elevating her nose.

She whisked out and in again with the glass and plate in a designedly amateurish manner, shut the door and left them to make what they liked of it.

"Come," said Anthony, setting a chair. "Shall we begin?" And as soon as Cynthia was in her place he, too, saw what she had seen, being thus delightfully brought back into the mood disturbed by Chloe's nurse. "I say, your hair won't do, you know," he said smiling across at her.

She clasped her hands tightly under the table and smiled back at him with those round eyes very wide open under the broad forehead. It was so lovely to have somebody to play with like this. Aloud she said, rather breathlessly: "Of course. Two long plaits."

And he felt an answering joy—ridiculous and yet most exquisite—the joy all men feel when loneliness between human souls is pierced for a moment, however trivial the

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means. That and the fun of it all. "Yes!" he continued eagerly. "Do you think you could? Or will it be too much trouble?"

Still smiling at him, but serious too, as one always must be in real play, she took the pins from her hair and let it fall in light-brown, soft ripples over the back of her chair, keeping the pins on her knee.

"Here, I'll plait it," he said. "I know just how it wants to go." And when he took hold of the soft, resilient strands, he actually had no thought beyond this delicious playing at a fairy tale. She could feel his long fingers braiding it deftly as she sat there, and an odd, pleasant sensation kept her quite still under his hands, as if she were a bird and he the charmer. When he had finished she gave a soft little sigh.

"Am I all right now?" she said, in a soft, rather clouded tone, quite unlike her usual, somewhat over-clear utterance.

He leaned toward her, his eyes on the round cheek he had kissed before. Then she knew the light touch of pursed lips again, but it was not a real kiss this time, she felt; only Pierrot kissing a girl in a Fairyland. She rose from her seat and began to cut the bread, conscious of his bright gaze upon her.

"How I wish I could paint you like that!" he said suddenly. "You're not Cinderella, after all, but the dearest goose-girl come to life. Come and look at yourself in this glass." And he pointed to one on the further wall.

She moved at once to do his bidding, but he could see that, for some reason unknown to him, his words had broken the charm. Her lips had taken a harder line, though the whole picture as she stood by him before the

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mirror in her full grey skirt and loose print blouse, with her round cheeks and the two long plaits down her back, was no less like the goose-girl in a fairy-tale than before.

“You’re not vexed at being called that, surely?” he said, feeling all at sea with this girl who understood so wonderfully one minute and seemed to be at fault the next. “I’ve loved the goose-girl since I was six, you know.”

He could see her wide eyes in the mirror, innocent—and yet thought and imagination stirring; with a shrewdness, almost, in the corners of her soft, girlish lips. He could not make her out—this little country cousin who had taught the farmer’s children in a remote spot ever since she left school—any more than she could understand how such a man as Anthony had brought himself to plan a mercenary marriage, or even to acquiesce in the plans of his family.

So Cynthia was a little indignant as well as curious when she sat down, though she had been used enough to needy suitors pursuing her for her money; still, she was curious and that has led to things happening between a girl and a man all down the ages. Anthony’s feeling was of a different kind, but he wanted to know about this girl with a keen ardour that was half tantalizing and half delightful. So they ate at the square table before the hearth, in the wonderful state of mind which comes of curiosity and youth, their bright glances meeting unexpectedly as they furtively took stock of each other like two fighters at the beginning of a combat.

And outside of all that—heightening the effect and yet concealing it—they were still playing at the fairy-tale game.

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"Will you have some sausage, Goose-Girl?" said Anthony. "It turned this awful pink because the Queen put too much red pepper in and then magic-ed it out again. But she couldn't change the colour, of course, because pink can't be removed by magic." His gaze went from her cheeks to her lips, then he touched the tip of her little finger as it lay on the cloth. "Don't you see why? It's the colour of love."

"You're talking nonsense," said Cynthia, flushing.

"I know I am," he said. "But I've done what I wanted, all the same. I'd forgotten just how lovely pink was."

"How can you——" murmured Cynthia.

"Be so silly?" he interposed; then he lowered his voice confidentially: "I'll tell you why. I can't help it. You thought Nurse was a scornful attendant of the young; but as a matter of fact, she was a witch with a white cap instead of a pointed one—for times move, even in Fairyland. When she whisked out, she laid a spell on me. I must be silly—or I die!" As he spoke, he edged a little nearer. "You're really in the same box, you know. Wait a minute or two, and you'll feel it coming on." He touched her hand lightly. "Now, don't you? Don't you?"—with his chin thrust forward and those eager eyes fixed on hers.

She wavered, doubting him. What did all this perhaps conceal? Then he removed his hand, as if he had felt her thought; and when she glanced at his face she saw the brightness fading out of it. In another moment, if she sat quite quiet, so, he would have changed under her eyes from this puckish playfellow to a rather worn and serious young man of business. With a sudden sensation of keeping hold physically of something that was vanish-

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ing away, she slipped her hand into his. "What are you?" She stopped short again, looking at him oddly. "Who are you like?" She paused. "Oh, I know. The picture of a Pierrot I once saw."

Anthony moved back from his eager attitude.

"Why not say the Pet of the Promenade at once?" he asked, rising abruptly from his seat. For how could she be at once such a disappointment and yet so responsive?

She also rose, and stood—as it seemed—leagues and leagues away from that fairy supper-table.

"Have you finished?" she said. "If so, perhaps we had better ring for the maid to clear away."

"Will you have a cigarette?" he said; and at that moment he almost regretted the dinner that he had foregone, the fairy banquet was ending so prosaically.

Cynthia hesitated; but it was obvious enough that the country cousin should not smoke if the character were to be properly maintained, so she shook her head, walking towards the mirror. "Wait a moment before you ring," she said, and with that she began to coil the two plaits round her head; but as she put in the hairpins, she could see his reflection also in the mirror, and he seemed to be watching her movements with a sort of whimsical regret in his expression.

"Good-bye, Goose-Girl!" he said softly.

She turned round with her bright hair shining like a coronet above her forehead, displaying the fine set of her head upon her shoulders. "Good-bye, Pierrot!" she answered lightly; but there was a wistfulness about those faintly smiling lips. Then she went past him with steps that grew slower as she approached the stairs. "It has been rather fun, hasn't it?" she said, looking back at him over

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her shoulder. "When you are vexed with me afterwards, you'll remember it was fun, won't you?"

And before he could ask her why he should be vexed, she had vanished up the stairs.

He stood at the foot of the staircase, looking up, puzzled by the accent of farewell to something happy that could never come back again which was in her tone. No woman had ever so piqued his curiosity before as this little country cousin. There was always a hidden meaning that lurked somehow behind her words, smiling at him puckishly, eluding him. He waited at the foot of the stairs lost in thought until Nurse came round the corner with a flick of crisp draperies and an unspoken demand for gratitude. "If you don't mind—we have finished now," he said, tactfully showing that he knew clearing away to be a voluntary act of grace on her part. Then, after a remark or two about the weather, he went off to the smoke-room where there was a gas-fire, an armchair and other appliances for reflection; and he reflected there with the door open, listening for Cynthia's footstep.

At last he heard it, and made himself wait a moment or two before leaving his seat to show that he had himself well in hand, for a little flicker of self-reproach was spurted up in his mind already, now that the fairy-tale atmosphere began to clear. It was becoming increasingly clear to him, as he sat in that cold and rather dreary room with the bluish, freshly lighted gas roaring in the ugly grate, that he had kissed—not a goose-girl in a fairy tale—but a little cousin from the country whose simplicity he ought to have respected. And yet—was she so simple? He went off into speculations again, staring at the row of blue flames, until the sound of the front door closing suddenly

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aroused him. Surely to goodness the girl hadn't gone out. She'd think the streets of Mabingstoke as refreshing as a country lane at evening, no doubt—but in that get-up, and with that face and hair! Some policeman would be taking her for a particularly captivating cook——

He was across the hall as he thus thought, and out in the wet street where it had just ceased raining. In front of him, casting a long shadow on the gleaming pavement as she passed a lamp, he could see Cynthia hurrying along as if anxious to escape any possible pursuit. And as she was very fleet of foot while he moved stiffly, though he was naturally so lithe and slimly built, he had to make an effort to come up with her.

“Stop!” he called from behind. “Where are you hurrying to?”

She stopped short and looked back over her shoulder as if she had indeed been pursued and caught against her will. “Oh!” she cried, startled. Then she recovered herself. “I'm—I'm going for a walk,” she answered. “I'm used to fresh air.”

“So am I,” he said carelessly. “I'll come with you, if I may. Hate walking alone.”

She turned with a laugh, though she did not really feel like laughing. “How can you! You know you love it.”

He laughed too. “Well, I do.” Then he added: “But I like walking with an agreeable companion better still.”

“If that's polite for me, I am not an agreeable walking companion,” she answered. “I walk fast and knock into people. Please, I think you had better not bother. I can easily find the Station——” She stopped

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short, for she had not intended to mention the hotel. "The railway station, I mean," she added hastily.

"I'd rather come," he persisted.

Then she stopped dead. "Look here; I don't want to be horrid. You surely don't think I can't take care of myself, do you?"

There was a silence. His eyes met hers in the light of the street lamp and she could feel herself flushing. "Oh, well, I was a goose-girl, then," she said, answering his look. "I never behave like that when I am my ordinary self, of course." She paused. It was intolerable he should think she let any man kiss her who chose. "I—I never *do* do it," she said. "No other man ever has—except one."

Immediately he felt an irritated curiosity concerning that one who had shared his privilege. Some curate or farmer's son in the village where she had lived ever since she grew up, no doubt. How could she have grown to be what she was, in such surroundings? But at any rate he did not intend to let her wander about a town like Mabingstoke alone at night. "Ah!" he answered gravely, "as you say, it was the Goose-Girl who let Pierrot touch her cheek."

She glanced at him sideways. "And both will forget? That's the happy part about Fairyland—there are no memories."

"But Pierrot, poor chap, is only half a fairy," said Anthony. "That is why he always looks sad beneath his gaiety. He remembers, but he has to seem as if he forgot his fairy friends."

"So long as he seems to——" She looked away from

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Anthony at a stream of silver made by the lamp on the wet road.

"He has to. He can't help it," said Anthony. "Life and work have him in thrall, you see. But the other half spoils that too. That's why he is mostly poor."

She stood still and held out her hand. "I'm sorry, Pierrot. I wish I could make you into a Fairy Prince or a successful, fat grocer, but you'll have to go on being mixed, I'm afraid. Now we must say Good-bye." And in spite of the hat with its funereal plumes nodding away among the red poppies she had an air of gracious dismissal, which made it very difficult for him to force himself upon her. However, he was not going to have her walking about those streets alone, perhaps even losing her way. "I'm coming with you to the hotel," he said doggedly.

"Oh, very well," said Cynthia in a voice of icy coldness.

So they threaded their way almost in silence through the streets which grew ever busier as they neared the centre of the town in which the railway station and hotel were situated. A hundred times Cynthia had it on her tongue to tell him the truth and let him go, but some inner compulsion stopped her before the words were actually spoken. She realized by the quickening of her pulses that she was afraid—not of angering, but of losing him altogether. If he could only have seen more of her, and come to like her better, perhaps he would have been able to understand how it had all come about, for he, too, was one of those who love fun, just for the sake of it. But as she glanced at his profile, she felt that his loyalty to his own people was as deep

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as his knowledge of them. He would be even less ready to tolerate her foolish joke at their expense than a man who was blind to their faults. Though he would see her side, and perhaps consider her sudden indignation natural, if she told him what Chloe had said, he would recede a long way off, just as she had pictured his doing earlier in the evening.

And yet it seemed that he really was planning to marry her for her money. By the time she got back to that once more, she gave up the problem—or thought she gave it up—and allowed him to follow her into the hall of the hotel, where a few groups of commercial travellers and business men were seated drinking and smoking, and she had actually reached the foot of the wide staircase when he caught up with her.

“Where are you going? Whom are you going to see?” he demanded, in an urgent whisper.

She looked down at him, frowning, and one or two men who knew Anthony well by sight glanced that way, but indifferently, for the hat and jacket proved in that rather dim light to be an effectual barrier to speculation.

“A friend of mine is staying here,” she said at last.

“What friend can you have here? I shall not allow you to go up unless you tell me who it is you are coming to see. You can’t stay here alone though you may think yourself unwelcome at our house. I won’t have it.”

“Her name,” said Cynthia, “is Emma Williamson.”

“But who is she? Where does she come from? Surely it is not somebody you have picked up in the train?” he said, so anxiously that the men in the lounge began to wonder a little, in spite of the hat.

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"No. She comes from the same village as myself," said Cynthia, then she continued with a little spurt of annoyance. "If I can't go and see an old friend without all this bother, I don't want to stay at your house, Cousin Anthony. Do you keep all your guests on a leash?"

"Will you let me see her?" persisted Anthony, unheeding.

"No." Cynthia laughed impatiently, but with a secret pleasure all the same in his care for her.

"Then, I shall go and ask for her at the bureau," he said.

She looked at him, half-grave, half-smiling. "I see I have undermined your faith in me. Very well, I will see you in the drawing-room in a few minutes, if you will go there. In a place like this, it is sure to be deserted."

And with that she went up the stairs, leaving him to wonder how she knew about drawing-rooms in such hotels as these. Could it be instinct? And yet even the keenest instinct surely did not run to things like this——

A man came up to him, forcing him to talk disjointedly for a few minutes and then he went up to the drawing-room on the first floor, where he sat grimly waiting for his charge in company with one old lady wearing a peculiar sort of ear-trumpet. Something grotesque about it and her added to his sense of the unreality of the whole proceeding, and he looked towards the door with an odd expectation of seeing something strange, though he knew there was no reason for it.

CHAPTER III

WISE WOMEN CHANGE THEIR MINDS

Cynthia paused with her hand on the knob of the bedroom door and tried to gather her thoughts together a little before encountering an injured and ejaculating Emma. Her plan of action was clear. She would change her things, send Emma down to supper after a sufficient explanation of the hat and jacket, and then go into the drawing-room to tell Anthony the truth. It would follow, of course, that he would return home in a rage, and her connection with the Walgrove family would come to an abrupt and untimely end.

But she suddenly remembered her godmother's part in the affair. Poor, dear Aunt Harriet, who had cherished this connection all these years in the remote fastnesses of Northumberland, because it was the last link she preserved with that youth of hers which now seemed to have been all sunshine and happiness. She had loved those letters and cards at Christmas mentioning names that meant nothing to her in this generation, but the mere spelling of which was like hearing news from the country of her youth.

Cynthia felt that moment as sad and angry with herself as any enemy could have wished, but Emma's cough behind the door roused her to the necessity for going inside, and as a gay carelessness seemed the only wear, she

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assumed it. "Well, Emma? Don't you like my new costume?"

"Goodness!" squeaked Emma: then—"Miss Cynthia! You've never been and had dinner at a gentleman's house in that! Why didn't you come here and change or send for me to come to you? What your poor, dear godmother——"

"Godmother would rather I looked ugly than caught my death of cold," said Cynthia briskly. "I stayed because—because it was difficult to get away."

"Then are you going back to-night, or what, Miss?" said Emma, folding her hands, drawing down the corners of her mouth and assuming the character dictated by Mrs. Rayburn—that of obediently respectful maid.

"I shall stay——" began Cynthia; when the queerest thing happened. Her tongue would not say the words she first intended and substituted instead: "I shall stay with Mr. and Mrs. Walgrove just for to-night. You had better remain here, because I expect I shall leave Mabingstoke in the morning."

Emma could not get used to the fact that Cynthia was her mistress, and not her charge in the nursery: she was also wanting her supper and had endured a certain amount of annoyance and uncertainty, so she said sourly: "I suppose I had better pack your bag then. What will you wear now?"

"My blue," began Cynthia, when she suddenly remembered. "No, that won't do. The old tweed I wear for tramping about in on wet days."

"That? To-night?" began Emma; but after a glance at Cynthia she resigned herself to doing as she was told. After all, if worse came of such a system, Mrs. Rayburn

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had only herself to blame. "I am sure your aunt would be grieved to think of you going out of an evening in such a costume, Miss Cynthia," she added.

"And a plain silk shirt," continued Cynthia. "Hurry up, please, Emma. I only want my suit-case with a few things for the night."

As she hurriedly changed her outer garments she told herself that she was going back simply because it was cowardly not to tell Mr. and Mrs. Walgrove the truth, face to face, after the way in which she had treated them. But there was Anthony waiting to see Emma in the drawing-room so as to make sure of that austere virgin's respectability. How was she to explain.

"Emma," she said, "young Mr. Walgrove is downstairs. He wants to see you."

"To see me?" said Emma, turning round from the bag over which she was bending. "What does he want to see me for, Miss?"

Cynthia's brain worked quickly, but she could not think of any convincing reason that could be conveniently given to her handmaid. "Oh, I think—he just wants to be pleasant," she faltered.

Emma pinched her lips together. "I don't doubt the young gentleman wants to be pleasant to anybody belonging to you, Miss," she said. "Lots of young gentlemen find that worth their while."

"I think it very nice of him," said Cynthia rather sharply, for she felt a prick somewhere within her at this outside recognition of the possibility which Chloe's indiscretion had brought so crudely before her as soon as she entered the Walgroves' house.

"Very nice indeed, Miss," agreed Emma with a meek-

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ness aggravatingly at variance with her expression, and yet impossible to rebuke.

"And, Emma—we need not say anything about your being my maid. You are just my companion, you understand?"

"But why? I aren't ashamed of being your maid," said Emma.

"I know," said Cynthia. "But I——" She seized the first rather futile explanation, "I do think it is time these silly social distinctions were done away with, don't you? Trend of the times and so on. I hate all that sort of snobbishness."

"That's as it may be," responded Emma. "What I can't see is, why you are starting with me to-night. I know it's not my place to say anything, but——"

"Don't," said Cynthia.

"Don't what, Miss?" said Emma.

"Don't 'but'! It is such a horrid verb when you make it into one, Emma," said Cynthia.

"It's all very well joking about verbs, Miss Cynthia," said Emma, "but I have Mrs. Rayburn to consider. She trusts me to look after you, in a manner of speaking, and I can't see my way to pretending I'm your lady-companion when I aren't. I never was one for pretending, and I aren't going to start now."

"Dear old Emma," smiled Cynthia beguilingly. "It's never too late to learn, you know."

But Emma was not beguiled. "Well, I can't do anything, of course. I can only say what I think."

"Only not to young Mr. Walgrove?" pleaded Cynthia. "I swear on my honour there is nothing wrong about it. It is only a joke."

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"If you'll excuse me, Miss," said Emma, "your jokes will land you in Queer Street one of these days. Then you'll be sorry."

"I am now," said Cynthia eagerly. "Oh, I am now. I only want to make things come right—at least, as right as they *can* come. Please, please do what I want this last time, Emma!"

"I heard that before, when you pulled the parrot's tail out and tried to put it back again ten years ago, and lots of times since," replied Emma. "But of course, if I have your *orders* to look like your lady-companion—your god-mother said I must remember I was your maid and not your nurse now, and she must take the consequences. Only, no lie passes my lips. You quite understand that, Miss Cynthia?"

"Yes! Yes! Oh, Emma, by the way——" She paused half-way across the room and glanced back over her shoulder. "There is that grey *crêpe de Chine* of mine. I shall not want it again. You can take it."

"But it is nearly new," protested Emma.

"Oh, I don't fancy it, somehow," said Cynthia, going out into the corridor.

Now she had not the exact intention of bribing Emma to be complaisant during the approaching interview, but her experience of how much in life can be bought, undoubtedly influenced her in bestowing the gift at that moment; and Emma was a conscientious woman, thinking herself above accepting a bribe—but she belonged to a family of married sisters who were a little inclined to speak of "Poor Emma!" So she longed to appear at a niece's forthcoming wedding in a gown of such modern cut and fine material, that pity would be altogether out of

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the question. Thus did the sunshine of wealth once more cast the inevitable shadow.

As Cynthia and her companion entered the hotel drawing-room with its bleak Chippendale and air of cold desolation, Anthony swung round from the window where he was standing and came towards them. He looked grave—rather annoyed at his period of waiting which had extended to half an hour—not in the very least like playing Pierrot to a Goose-Girl. And Cynthia suddenly felt nervous, rather as if she were confronted by a stranger on whose hat she had gaily thrown a pebble from an upper window, thinking him to be a friend.

“Oh, Mr. Walgrove, I think you and Miss Williamson have not met before.” Whereupon they exchanged greetings, Emma adding stiffly—influenced unconsciously by the grey *crêpe de Chine*: “Pleased to meet you, I’m sure.”

“I think we ought to be getting back,” said Anthony, taking out his watch. “If Miss Williamson will excuse us? My mother will be back from the theatre soon and she will naturally wonder where we are.”

Cynthia turned to Emma. “My bag has gone down to the taxi, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, M——” She checked the “Miss.” “Some minutes since.”

“Then you have found your luggage?” said Anthony. “Where was it?”

“I had it in charge,” said Emma, after a pause.

Cynthia’s readiness had deserted her. A blank disappointment swept chillily across her mood and all her gay pretences seemed frozen. Her one wish was that she had not allowed Emma to come down with her, then she would have told the truth and cut herself adrift from

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him and his family for ever at once. It might be cowardly, but it would at any rate have been better than this. The blood rushed up to her cheeks at her next thought: "Why not send Emma away and get it over?"

Then she saw his deep eyes under their heavy lids fixed on her face, and his gaze was no longer coldly aloof, but whimsically kind—as it had been when they sat at the little table before the pink polony. And she felt once more that she must choose the right time to tell him of the ridiculous trick she had played, so that she need not lose his friendship altogether. Meanwhile Emma folded her hands and looked down her nose in mute disapprobation.

"Well, we'd better be off," Cynthia said abruptly, feeling that if she stayed longer Emma's attitude would end in stifling every sensation but a desire for bed and safety. "Good-bye, Miss Williamson. See you to-morrow, of course."

She flitted away down the wide stairs, followed by Anthony. "Your friend seems rather reserved," he said.

"North-country, you know," said Cynthia.

And they went through the lounge, regarded with interest by the men who would not fail to see the change in her appearance, even though her coat and skirt and hat were of the plainest.

Anthony himself—who knew as little about women's clothes as a man could do with a couple of sisters—was struck by the light grace of her figure: and he vaguely wondered why, possessing these garments, she had elected to wear those in which she had first arrived. Still he regretted the queer costume all the same, and only in the dimness of the rather dingy cab did he begin to find again

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the girl who had stirred his emotions and his sense of fun earlier in the evening. But once or twice the tender roundness of her cheek as they passed a street light, or some cadence in her voice, made the whole scene live again in his imagination. She, too, was silent, and that allowed nature's work to go on unchecked by any dis-
ce for he could feel a touch of her shoulder against his arm as the vehicle swayed, and there was a very slight fragrance when she came close. He could not make out what it was, but it seemed more like a fresh smell brought from fields and hedges than anything bought in a bottle.

Slowly, the irritation and faint mistrust of her which had grown up in his mind while he was in the hotel, died down.

"I wonder——" he began.

"Oh, I don't know how——"

But they spoke together; and so Cynthia had to brace herself afresh for the effort she had been trying to make ever since they entered the cab. He peered at her troubled face and took her hand.

"What is it? Don't you think you are going to like being with us, little cousin?"

She bit her lip to keep the ridiculous tears back: she, who scarcely ever cried, even when it seemed the right thing! Why did he make it so hard? And how had he turned her into such a coward that she could not speak out the truth bravely? She had ever done so, after the worst of her past follies, sure in her heart that she would be forgiven because of her gaiety and kindness—and also because she was rich—though she did not know that she thought of that. For after all, he had let his family plan

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to marry him to the poor goose with the golden eggs, though he had first given her the name contemptuously. Thus she veered round again, saying to herself that she didn't care what he thought: it was only because she had let the thing go too far for once that she minded confessing. Nothing to do with Anthony himself.

But, against all reason, his name pulled at her heart-strings even as she thought it. She explained to herself that the cab was not the place for telling. How could she begin. "My dear Mr. Walgrove, I regret to say you are the victim of a little practical joke. Please forgive me. I am really Cynthia Rayburn!" Though it had seemed quite possible as she walked out of the hotel.

The fact was, that her faith in the power of that announcement was waning. Contact with Emma and the old life had restored it for a little while, but she began to feel sure that though Anthony might want her money he would not let his judgment be influenced by the fact that she possessed it. Perhaps the hall would be the best place, just where they had sat at supper before they came out. Again she felt a sudden impulse to get it over.

"I don't know how to tell you——" she began hurriedly, once more.

"Ah, here we are!" he said, as the cab stopped with a jerk.

He gathered up the bag and long coat which Emma had caused to be placed on the opposite seat, and paid the cabman, then gave the coat into Cynthia's hands while he found his latchkey. "I wonder if they are in yet," he said as he unlocked the door.

Cynthia did not answer, feeling a little breathless still

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from the recoil of that interrupted confession, and she was greatly relieved to find the hall empty.

As he switched on the light and said cheerfully: "Come to the fire. Blessing I stoked up well before we went," he turned round and noticed that she looked very tired. "I say, I should get off to bed before they come home. You are quite done up with your journey." For he imagined the railway travelling had wearied the poor child quite unused to it and suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be in poor health. "I'll bring a glass of hot milk to your door in a few minutes. I daren't ask Nurse." And he laughed, rubbing his hands.

She stood holding the corner of the mantelpiece. Now he mentioned it, she did feel absolutely worn out, while her shoulder had begun to ache badly from the motor accident earlier in the day. She simply could not try to make the best of a silly escapade to those rather critical and inimical women when she was feeling as she did now. A night's rest would make all the difference. It would be easy enough in the morning. So her mind went up and down in a see-saw fashion most unlike her usual clear decisiveness.

As she looked at the clock, she saw a yellow envelope addressed to Miss Nellie Walgrove propped up against it, but her glance passed on indifferently, for that mattered nothing to her. Then Anthony saw it and gave it to her. "Must have come just after we went out. Expect they want to know if you are lost on the way."

"Oh! but it is not——" she began, looking down at the telegram; when suddenly her face crimsoned. This settled matters. Now she must tell him, tired or not tired. "I can't open a telegram that does——" she began.

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"There they are!" he said warningly. "If you want to go, now's your time. Run!"

"Then you'll ask them to excuse me?" she murmured, and was away up the stairs with the telegram still in her hand before the door opened.

For, after all, she had found herself utterly unable to face the conjectures and surprises of the Walgrove family until she had had a night's rest. Her head ached as well as her shoulder, and emotions which she had not experienced before were stirring beneath the surface of her thoughts, confusing her judgment. She had an overwhelming instinct to get away into some place alone where she could put her mind in order before meeting those women, lest they should see something not visible to herself which she yet knew she wished to hide. A jumble of thoughts and emotions which she could not disentangle seemed to pursue her as she flung to her door and locked it against the world.

She found the room in darkness and slipped the telegram in her pocket while she felt for the switch near the door. Nothing in her indulged and sheltered life had prepared her for what she was feeling now, because her utter physical weariness combined with happiness and unhappiness—so queerly mingled she could not disentangle them—to confuse all her thoughts.

Then she heard a light knock on the door. "Cousin Nellie! Here is your milk. I have put it down on the mat. Mind you don't knock it over!"

"Oh, thank you."

"Good-night!" And there followed the sound of retreating footsteps.

She took in the milk and sat down on the edge of her

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bed, sipping it slowly. Soon a little of her fatigue was banished by the stimulating properties of the hot drink, and she held the glass between her two chilly hands, looking down at it with a little smile just curving her lips. What a good playfellow he was—and yet he could be so kind to a girl when they had finished playing. Anthony—that was a nice name, too. How clearly his profile had shown against the wall. . . . She felt the glass slipping and knew she had nearly fallen asleep as she sat there with it in her hands.

Some time later just before getting into bed, she remembered her handkerchief and groped for it sleepily in the pocket of her tweed skirt: then, suddenly, she was all alert and wide-awake again. Goodness! The telegram!

The address, "Miss Nellie Walgrove," stared her in the face as she stood there, hesitating whether to open the envelope or not. She would much rather have left it until morning, but after all a telegram was more or less a public communication that any one might read, and perhaps this concerned a matter of urgency which ought to be dealt with at once. She was half inclined to go out into the silent house and wake up some member of the family, but being by no means certain yet of the position of the different rooms, she feared to intrude on the slumbers of Mr. and Mrs. Walgrove.

As she stood hesitating thus, the clock on the corridor outside struck eleven. It was not nearly so late as she had thought and she unfastened her door with a sudden determination to go down, then heard voices—the sound of footsteps on the stairs. A sudden, irresistible recoil made her close the door smartly and stand behind it,

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panting a little, as if she had run a race and had been nearly caught. No; she neither could nor would start all the inevitable wonderings and discussions that must follow giving up the telegram, unless it were really necessary, at that time of night. Her fingers shook a little with cold and excitement as she tore open the envelope. If anything serious had happened, she must of course go at once to Mrs. Walgrove and tell her ridiculous tale, but without the spirit to carry it off decently. No one was dead: nothing serious had happened: the unpunctuated words danced a little before her eyes, but cheerfully:

“Arrive 11.10 to-morrow love and kisses John.”

Well, to-morrow might take care of itself! In the meantime she could get into bed at last and sleep—and sleep—and sleep—— Never in her life had she felt so sleepy, that she could remember. Almost before she had touched the pillow, she was off; but a little smile lingered about her mouth still, because of those silly words in the telegram. Love and kisses John. How ridiculous! Love—and—kisses——

She was fast asleep.

CHAPTER IV

LOVE—AND—KISSES—JOHN

Illegitimate fun at night is usually purchased at a price which mortals begin to pay first thing next morning. But Cynthia formed an exception to this rule; for however foolish she had been the night before, she always felt as gay as a lark when she arose—sure that everybody in this jolly, waking world would yet laugh with her, and say it was only Cynthia. Experience had taught her to expect this, because her indulgent godmother and her friends, and the elderly neighbors in the village, always did adopt that attitude. Some might, and indeed did, feel a secret annoyance at times; but she was so very generous with all she had, and so friendly, and above all so sure of everybody's approval, that this annoyance was hardly ever made manifest.

She hummed a little tune, therefore, as she dressed, and scarcely troubled to plan in what words she should make her avowal. For so much of a "next morning" attitude the night's rest had brought, that she was aware of the necessity for declaring herself with no possible delay. Up to this it would pass as a joke; but to prolong it further would create a situation altogether too compromising and serious. She had had her fun out of the Walgrove family—which they well deserved, considering that they had planned to get her and her money for

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Anthony. Of course, she had let the family down in the presence of the great Mrs. Robinson, but set that against the goose with the golden eggs, and she fancied they were about quits, with the balance, if anything, on the Walgroves' side.

She was doing her hair as these reflections passed through her mind and suddenly paused with a bright strand poised. Could Anthony have lent himself to such a mercenary plot? Was it really possible? Eyes—eager and shining—questioned her own from the glass. Then she dropped her eyelids and the red crept into her round cheeks as she remembered his kiss when they were playing at Pierrot and the Goose-Girl. No! No! He was not like that.

But he must have allowed Mrs. Walgrove and the girls to talk of the idea in his hearing. He could not have given it the scornful and emphatic denial which an honourable man ought to have done. She was finishing her hair-dressing now, so again her eyes—wide open and perturbed—still asked questions of the mirror; then a little subdued from the first high morning gaiety, she went on with her toilette.

Downstairs the party round the breakfast table had almost finished breakfast, for Nurse, in her capacity of temporary housemaid, had omitted to take Cynthia's hot water. Mr. Walgrove was glancing at the paper with the pair of horn-rimmed spectacles on his handsome nose, which the outer world never saw there; Anthony ate with an eye on the clock; Feo picked listlessly at a piece of toast and Marjorie enjoyed her breakfast, while Mrs. Walgrove consumed a good deal without enjoying it, despite her

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thin figure. They were in the midst of an argument concerning their guest.

"If you ask me," said Mr. Walgrove looking with bold blue eyes, a little faded now, over his spectacles, "Anthony's suggestion to take Nellie to this Fancy Dress Dance is simply ridiculous. At any rate, don't expect me to find the girl partners."

"And Cynthia Rayburn may turn up to-day," added Feo. "Then we shall not have a ticket to spare."

"Very casual of her to disappoint us without sending word," said Mrs. Walgrove.

"Oh, Mother, everybody is casual nowadays—especially girls with lots of money," said Marjorie.

"If Miss Rayburn does come, I will get another ticket," said Anthony.

"But what is she to wear?" objected Feo.

"So far as that goes," said Marjorie, with an amused glance at her brother, "there is the peasant's dress I wore ages ago at a bazaar. She could have it, if she liked."

"Well, on the understanding that we are not supposed to bother with her——" said Feo. Then she gave a little laugh: "Poor old Anthony! Always a tender spot for the under-dog."

Mr. Walgrove looked up with a slight sneer on his face—for he suffered from that perverted vanity which makes such a man unconsciously jealous of his own son's youth and unused chances. "A trait sometimes more correctly called a taste for the society of one's inferiors," he said. "I myself, have made it a rule in life never to cultivate any one who is not better than myself." What he meant was "better off than myself": but the fine sound

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of his words produced a little glow of paternal self-righteousness within him.

“Of course, nobody can choose their relations,” said Mrs. Walgrove, “but it does seem a pity that yours are so—so obtrusive.” For she managed to retain a position of ascendancy over her husband by some such occasional cracking of the Vinder whip, which enabled them to live comfortably together in spite of his rather florid but meaningless attentions to other ladies.

“Our cousin certainly did surpass everything at tea yesterday,” said Marjorie. “I began to wonder if she were quite all there.”

“Oh, you’ll find her quiet enough to-day, I daresay,” answered Feo rising. “She was nervous and excited; and that makes ill-bred people, unused to Society, either dumb or garrulous. She was probably as much surprised at her own behaviour afterwards, as we were at the time.”

“That may account——” began Mrs. Walgrove.

Then the door opened to admit the unwelcome guest, who entered with a light step and a pleasant greeting.

But almost instantly she became aware of three pairs of eyes fixed on her blouse and skirt, for at first glance the ladies of the Walgrove family could take in nothing but her changed sartorial appearance. Why—if the idiotic girl *did* possess a decent blouse and skirt—had she come arrayed like a cook in a comedy? They left the problem for the moment to attend to Cynthia’s needs at the table, and it was considered a further sign of her ill-breeding that she took the one sacred egg with which Mr. Walgrove always finished his breakfast, and began at once to consume it in silence.

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But no one could know that the eating of that egg was an exciting game of chance which Cynthia was playing with herself. If she reached the last spoonful before Anthony went out, he would still be there to hear her announcement that she was Cynthia Rayburn; if not, she would only have the others to conciliate—and in this morning's mood that seemed not very difficult, after all. She ate steadily, determined to play fair, but somehow the atmosphere round that breakfast table—an atmosphere cooled for the breathing of a tiresome and ill-mannered poor relation—began to act on her nerves, and destroy her careless gaiety, while her fleeting glances at Anthony showed him quite different this morning from what he had appeared to be on the previous night. She felt an intuitive certainty that no one at the table had seen that other Anthony excepting herself. It was an odd thought and a little thrilling—to feel she sat there mum-chance, knowing more about him than his own mother and father and sisters. She glanced again at his rather grave and self-contained face as he gathered his letters together, and with a sudden vague unhappiness became certain that she would never see the playfellow of the previous night any more, though this young man might come home to dinner and find her still there.

Only two spoonfuls left. Her heart thudded as the words formed in her brain ready to come forth. "I hope you won't be too vexed with me——" One spoonful. It would have to come now. She must play fair. "I hope——"

Then, across her words, Anthony pushing back his chair and smiling at her. . . . "You'll save the first dance for me to-night, Cousin Nellie?"

“Are—are we going to a dance?” she stammered nervously.

But it was Mrs. Walgrove who explained and she managed to make her husband understand that he ought to be very grateful indeed for the way in which she behaved to his unpresentable connections. And Anthony was passing Cynthia’s chair on his way out of the house by the time his mother concluded handsomely with the offer of a peasant’s costume, when he paused to add: “The very thing, of course, Nellie. You must take a stick in your hand and wear your hair in two long plaits. Then you can call yourself a Goose-Girl,” he said.

Cynthia sat quiet, her mind in a turmoil, and as she did not reply, he touched her shoulder. “Come, Goose-Girl, why so shy?” he said. “We’ll have great fun at the party.”

She caught her breath, biting her lip. Should she? Should she not? Then swung round towards him, flushed and smiling, her wide eyes all alight. “All right, I’ll come!” she said, and immediately she felt a glow of happiness run through her veins. She was not saying farewell to her playfellow, after all. They would have another evening’s fun together, come what might; then when it was all over, she would tell him her story and he would disappear for ever, though he seemed to be still near her. Already she knew enough of him to feel sure that he would be away in a flash to some inaccessible place whence he could not come back, even if he wanted to. The shyness of a spirit that no gold could ever tempt into a cage belonged to that Anthony; and some part of herself which in spite of her open frankness had always fled away from a near approach, made her understand

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this, though she could not sort it out and put it into exact words. She, too—the Cynthia who had sat the night before by the little square table—would go away somewhere and never come back, once this fancy-dress dance was over. The tricky, fleeting, chuckling impression of the whole was heightened by the very name he had given her, hitting by accident, as it did, upon the cause of that spirit of mischievous anger that had impelled her to play a practical joke upon the Walgrove family.

The front door closed; Mr. Walgrove took his papers to the fireside, and Marjorie went upstairs to unearth the peasant's dress. Mrs. Walgrove paused on her way out to say to her husband: "I shall certainly wire Mrs. Rayburn if Cynthia does not turn up some time during the day," and so retired to her housekeeping: and immediately a new problem ousted the Goose-Girl's shining dreams.

"Oh, Cousin Nellie," said Feo carelessly, "Nurse is busy and we are lunching out to-day. I wonder if you would take care of Chloe for the morning?"

Cynthia started, roused from the contemplation of the fresh problem presented by Mrs. Walgrove's words, but something in Feo's tone reminded her that a country cousin—who was also a nursery governess out of a job—would naturally be expected to perform such a duty without question. So she gave a reluctant assent, seeing quite well that her momentary hesitation had already made Feo set her down as "disobliging," and she realized, with a rather uncomfortable sense of new doors constantly opening in her mind, how hideously "obliging" some people had to be all their lives.

"Chloe will be ready at ten," concluded Feo, going out of the room.

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Cynthia sat down on a chair near the fire and at once became engrossed in trying to solve her two most pressing problems: firstly, how to prevent the Walgroves from communicating with Mrs. Rayburn; and secondly, how to keep Emma quiet for another twenty-four hours at the Station Hotel. After a few moments' intense concentration, she recalled a stratagem which a friend of hers in York had employed on a certain romantic occasion a year ago. She had not approved it at the time, but desperate people could not be choosers, and she decided to ring up this friend from the hotel as soon as possible. Emma could be dealt with at the same time. So far, so good. She glanced up at the clock and a third and more urgent problem flashed into her mind. "11.10. Love—and—kisses—John!"

It was obvious that she must go and meet that train, otherwise the sender of the wire would either come up to the house in search of his dear, or take the huff so that two loving hearts were estranged for ever. Love-and-kisses-John somehow sounded just the sort to retire and sulk in obstinate silence until poor Cousin Nellie grew faded and some mature spinster married him. Of course, Cynthia had no choice; she saw that quite clearly. But what she was to say to him when she did get to the station, must be left for the moment to decide.

Suddenly she remembered Chloe. What on earth could she do with that observant young person while she carried out her programme? Things seemed to fit in so easily for girls in novels when they were pretending to be somebody else. One after another events always fell out pat, making a neat pattern like a kaleidoscope every time, no matter how quick and fierce the upheaval. And

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here was she—with so much to set straight in one morning—burdened in addition with two such people as Chloe and Emma. At any moment now, that ever-faithful handmaid might be ringing up for news.

Cynthia glanced at Mr. Walgrove, who sat self-sufficient on the most comfortable chair, long legs stretched out across the fire, not bothering to address her. And this slight on the absent poor relation oddly enough stirred the sense of mischief in her again, raising her spirits and making her feel no longer doubtful or self-reproachful but glad she was making fun of such a party. And she now viewed her day in the light of an exciting game of chance, in which she, Cynthia, was pitted against all this old lot; and the prize another evening with Anthony—the Anthony whom they did not know while she did. . . .

“H-hem, Cousin Walgrove!” She coughed humbly, as she thought a humble dependent should. “How long does it take to walk from here to the station?”

He looked up, faintly surprised at being interrupted in his newspaper reading. “Oh! About half an hour. Going to see about the rest of your luggage?” he said. “Sure to turn up all right.” And he returned to his paper at once, for he naturally felt annoyed with Cynthia. She had behaved in a manner that placed him in the wrong position with his wife and family, and he intended to be civil while she remained under his roof, but no more.

Cynthia again thought how queer it must be when people were constantly treating you like that—but the reflection was only momentary, because her first pre-occupation was the time. Impossible to do all she had to do, unless she and Chloe started at once. So going

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quickly out of the room, she ran upstairs, tingling with excitement and hurry, feeling the sort of bubbling, indescribable sensation inside of her which had accompanied her in the days of her early youth, when she was off to bathe in the river, or visit the gypsies in the field at the end of Glead Lane, or do anything deliciously contraband. For two or three years past now, that sensation had remained more or less dormant, and she had thought it a happiness of the past, like her once extreme partiality for monkey-nuts. How perfectly lovely to find it alive and active as ever!

Engrossed in these emotions she was very soon hurrying the reluctant Chloe along those greasy pavements which never seemed to grow really dry during the winter in Mabingstoke, when suddenly the child stopped dead and whimpered out: "Cousin Nellie! My shoe hurts! I can't go any further. I want to go back home."

Cynthia gave a hasty glance at her watch. "You can't go home, Chloe," she said firmly. "There is not time. Here, don't cry! We'll get a cab."

"But I can't walk so far as the cab-stand. There are no cabs until you get there and it is ever so far. I want to go home," bleated Chloe, wagging a doleful hand at a butcher in a cart who saluted familiarly in return. "He knows Nurse," she explained tearfully. "Oh, dear, my foot does hurt." And she burst out afresh: "Take me home. I want to go home!"

"Knows Nurse!" In a flash Cynthia was across the road and addressing the butcher. "Can you drive us to the station? It's most urgent. Terribly urgent. I'll give you a pound, if you will." And she held out the note toward him.

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He looked down at her from his high seat, red and puzzled. "A pound? Are you the new nurse? What's your hurry?"

Then Chloe piped up from behind. "She's not a nurse—she's a sort of relation."

"Do take us," pleaded Cynthia, smiling at him anxiously, still holding out the note.

He gave his head a meditative scratch. "I don't know——"

"Please," urged Cynthia. "Miss Chloe has hurt her foot. I shall miss a most important appointment at the railway station. It's—it's an appointment with a gentleman from a distance."

"Ah!" said the butcher, grinning down at them both. "So that accounts for the milk in the coco-nut, eh? Well, I'm not one to leave a lady in a fix. Jump up, and I'll chance it."

Cynthia's smile and flush of gratitude caused the butcher to set his hat more jauntily than ever, Cynthia hoisted Chloe into the cart, and all three squeezed together on the little seat. The next minute they were careering gaily through the streets of Mabingstoke, the butcher naturally becoming rather gallant as they bowled along behind the strong pony. "Can't refuse a lady anything, you know: never could. Always getting into trouble for letting the pretty ones have more liver and kidneys than what I ought. Suppose it's how I'm made. Hope you'll be in time, Miss, I'm sure, for the sake of them you're going to meet."

But once Chloe interrupted his flow of gallantry by squeaking out: "Oh! There's Mrs. Robinson! She will be shocked to see you in a butcher's cart, Cousin Nellie."

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If she thought you were rather a funny person yesterday, what *will* she think now?"

"Who cares?" retorted Cynthia, with what Chloe felt to be an awful recklessness, and as they dashed up to the station gates, she added with a little wave of the hand: "Mutton for ever!" simply because she was no less intoxicated than Chloe by their hairbreadth escapes and rapid progress through the cheerful morning bustle of the streets.

"Get down as quick as you can," said the butcher, his own exhilaration beginning to die down as he thought of the meat to be delivered at the other end of town before mid-day. And a little later it was only the note still nestling in his waistcoat pocket which proved to him that this was all real and not a sort of agreeable nightmare.

Cynthia hurried her limping charge into the Station Hotel, gave hasty explanations to Emma, whose mouth was down at the corners again, and tried to escape: but that was not yet to be.

"Miss C——"

"Hush!" hissed Cynthia, glancing at Chloe.

With temper not improved by this interruption, Emma began again: "I'm sorry to disoblige, but I can't remain here. I can see the people in the hotel begin to think there is something doubtful about me."

"They couldn't, Emma," assured Cynthia. "No one ever could!" And her love of fun once more getting the better of her judgment she added with a chuckle: "The expression you have on now, Emma, would take you safely through anything. I do believe it is the very one that Una wore."

"I don't know who Una may be," retorted Emma, her

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attention distracted by Chloe. "But I will say that I never wore any cast-offs that weren't given to me by you and you ought to know it."

Cynthia put a hand on Emma's arm. "Dear old Emma, it was only my joke. See to this child's shoe and take care of her for half an hour and I swear I'll be as serious as ever you like. But if I stay talking here one more minute, I'm done."

Emma silently handed Chloe a chair and allowed it to be perceived that she would do her best: so Cynthia whisked away down to the telephone box and put in a trunk call. In this operation fortune at last favoured her, for almost immediately the bell rang and she was put in communication with a certain Julia Payne, the daughter of a cathedral dignitary in York.

"Julia," she said breathlessly, "no time to explain. Awful fix! Have you got a pencil? I want you to wire immediately to—now, take it down carefully—to Mrs. Walgrove, 16 St. Wilfred's Mansions, Mabingstoke. Have you got it? Now, the telegram:

"Sorry cannot come to-day, will wire again.—CYNTHIA RAYBURN.

Remonstrances evidently followed, for Cynthia burst forth impatiently: "Yes! Yes! I know I'm staying here, of course, but I want the wire sent from York all the same. Not the first time you have— Oh! for Heaven's sake *do* it, and wait for the explanation till later. No: there is *not* a man in it—at least—Julia, you know I've always stood by you. Thanks, old girl. Oh, nothing of that sort. Only a sort of joke. Yes; know I'm an idiot, always was—can't help it! Good-bye."

Cynthia turned round from the telephone, flushed but

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beaming. So that was all right. No fear of Mrs. Walgrove appealing to Mrs. Rayburn for information to-day, at any rate; and to-morrow might take care of itself. The next thing—she glanced hastily at the hall clock as she hurried through—the next thing was to dispose of Love-and-kisses-John. Incidentally, she must find out if possible when Cousin Nellie would come, and where she really was at the present time.

The arrival platform became crowded with a rush of people from the 11.10, just as she reached it; and for the first time she suddenly realized a terribly weak spot in her plan of campaign. She had not the remotest idea what Love-and-kisses-John was like. The platform cleared so rapidly that she had scarcely time to make up her mind to accost any particularly likely-looking gentleman before he vanished among the crowd. Very soon, she was left there with only two persons of the male sex, besides the railway officials: one a lank countryman of a horsey appearance, and the other a tall, pink, well-built curate, somewhat too stout for his obvious youthfulness, with blue argumentative eyes and a rather heavy jowl which gave promise of the obstinacy of a mule.

Cynthia unhesitatingly chose the curate, and caught him up just as he reached the barrier. "Excuse me," she panted, incoherently, "but I wonder if—are you Love —— That is——"

The curate whirled round in an annoyed surprise. "Yes, Madam?"

"Oh, I only wondered—that is to say—Are you expecting Miss Nellie Walgrove?" she continued.

The curate's face cleared, he had quite naturally been suspicious of that unsolicited "Love." "Yes. At least,"

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he corrected himself conscientiously, "I rather hoped I might find her here, though I received a letter just before leaving which led me to suppose that she had put off her visit. I thought perhaps my wire of yesterday might have been forwarded on to her from Mr. Walgrove's by some chance."

"It was not," said Cynthia. "I am staying there and I know it was not. So I thought I'd come to meet you and save any misunderstanding, you see."

"Ah!" said the curate. "Then what did happen to the telegram?"

"It—it got put aside, somehow," faltered Cynthia, who liked to speak the truth about actual facts.

The curate rubbed that obstinate chin: then glanced at the station clock.

"I think I might just have time to run up to the Walgroves'."

"No! No! I'm sure you have not," said Cynthia excitedly. "I know you can't do it."

He viewed her with disapproval mingled with surprise. "I don't see why you say that," he remarked. "My appointment with the Bishop on Platform No. 2 at twelve o'clock can scarcely be known to you."

"Of course not. I—I only wanted to save you the trouble of going such a long way for nothing. They are all out," said Cynthia eagerly. "I feel perfectly sure they are all out."

"Um! That places rather a different complexion on the matter," said Love-and-kisses-John, frowning and rubbing that obstinate chin. "I really don't know——" And he glanced at the clock again.

Cynthia waited in an agony of apprehension lest any

member of the Walgrove family should by some ill-fate enter the station and see them together, but it would be worse still if he went up to the house. Then she had a sudden wave of inspiration. Curates—tea—the two things always went well together. “Oh, there is such a nice little tea-room across the platform. Won’t you have a cup of tea while you wait?”

He hesitated; but, like many virile young men who deny themselves stimulants, he was fond of tea at all hours. “Well, perhaps I might as well,” he said, not too gallantly. And in a trice, Cynthia had him sitting opposite to her in the tea-room, which after all was not nice, and smelt of the dead flies of many seasons: still the tea was not so bad and the cakes looked eatable.

“By the way,” said the curate, putting down his suitcase, “I suppose you know Miss Nellie Walgrove?”

“Only by reputation,” murmured Cynthia rather absently, because she was engaged in deciphering the name on the label of the suit-case. Ah! She’d got it! The Rev. John Henderson—and then she saw by his expression that she must add something more to her reply. “I know the Walgroves are looking forward to a visit from their cousin. They seemed to expect her yesterday.”

“Just as I thought,” said the Reverend John Henderson. “I was afraid there had been some little misunderstanding. As a matter of fact, my—er——Miss Nellie Walgrove is remaining at Midgeley, a place about thirty miles from here, until to-morrow afternoon.” He paused and blushed up to the roots of his nice, crinkled fair hair. “Perhaps I should tell you that Miss Nellie Walgrove and myself have only recently become engaged to be married.” At which naïve explanation Cynthia

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beamed upon him so very kindly that—accustomed perhaps to too much attention from Sunday School teachers and others—he again became grave, not to say pompous. “Our engagement is quite recent,” he added in a very keep-off-the-grass tone. “It took place only the day before yesterday to be quite accurate.”

“How delightful!” said Cynthia warmly, and indeed she meant it from her heart. He was so exactly what he ought to be—*dear* Love-and-kisses-John! And she looked so very like kissing him herself, then and there, with her round cheeks flushed and her eyes shining into his, that he hastily drank up the rest of his tea, glanced at the refreshment-room clock and said he must be going at once.

But as he rose, he automatically took out his own watch, comparing it with the clock. Then his fair face turned crimson with deep annoyance, and it was then he showed his fitness for his office, because he said nothing stronger than “Hang!” though he obviously wrestled with other words less evangelical.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Henderson?” said Cynthia anxiously.

“Matter!” said he, and he wrestled again. “I’ve missed the Bishop,” he burst forth after a strenuous pause. “The clock in this abominable place has stopped, and I’ve missed the Bishop.”

“He may be there still,” cried Cynthia, picking up bag and stick and starting to run out of the door. “Come on. Number 2.”

“No use,” said the curate, joining her after a hurried inquiry. “Train gone!” And they stood blankly there on Platform 2.

“You can write and explain,” suggested Cynthia at last.

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“There’s nothing to explain,” said he bitterly. “I had only to take a note from my Vicar, who is a personal friend of the Bishop, and to deliver a similar message. My own belief is that my Vicar hoped it might possibly lead to something. He is greatly interested in my *fiancée*, and we can’t marry on my present income.”

Cynthia said nothing. So this was the connecting chain which she had broken. The curate—Cousin Nellie—the Vicar—the Bishop—a country living—bliss. She felt very self-reproachful, but the young man frowned at her in such a disdainful way that at last she revolted. “After all,” she said, “I didn’t stop the clock.”

He struggled to be just, he *was* just—with a great effort. “No, of course not.” But it was evident that he wanted get away from her as soon as possible, and for ever. “Well, I must bid you Good-day,” he said, and stalked off down the station.

“Stop! Stop!” she cried. “We can’t leave it like this. Where are you going to?”

“I am joining Miss Nellie Walgrove at Midgeley,” he replied stiffly. “I only stayed here on my way through in order to—to see the Bishop.” And poor Love-and-kisses-John faltered so disappointedly that Cynthia could have cried herself in sympathy.

“Oh, do cheer up,” she urged. “I’ll think of something. As sure as I’m a living girl, I will. I’m pretty good at getting into scrapes, but I’m really splendid at getting out of them.”

“For Heaven’s sake,” said he, almost dropping his bag, “don’t be so mad as to think of attempting to see the Bishop. You’d ruin me. The only favour you can possibly

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do me, is to leave things alone." And this time he really did go to his train, leaving her there staring after him.

She waited a moment, deep in thought, then walked slowly towards the hotel entrance, bracing herself to tackle the difficult combination of Chloe and Emma, and opened the door of the hotel bedroom to find Emma seated by the window sewing, with an air of having washed her hands of the whole business, while Chloe stood gloomily by the dressing-table, fingering the shining gold and tortoise-shell articles that lay upon it.

"Now, Chloe, come and let us have lunch now," said Cynthia with artificial liveliness, forestalling difficult remarks.

But Emma was not to be pushed aside like that.

"May I have a moment with you out in the corridor?" she said glumly.

"Not now," said Cynthia. "So very sorry. Not a minute to spare, Emma. I'll ring you up from Mr. Walgrove's later."

Emma muttered something, in which the words, "Mrs. Rayburn—Responsibility—Old enough to know better"—were alone intelligible.

"But that's just what I'm not, Emma," said Cynthia, smiling ingratiatingly into that austere countenance. "You never get to be that until the silly jolly things seem *only* silly, you know."

"Sooner the better," emerged now from a string of unheard comments.

But suddenly Cynthia's bright face changed with that odd unexpectedness which attracted some people, but which Emma found only a puzzle and annoyance. "No

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need to hurry me, Emma. One more night of it, and then I have finished."

"You mean you're going to accept Mr. Miller?" said Emma eagerly, forgetting her ill-humour all at once. "Well, poor gentleman, I'm sure he has shown patience enough——"

"What? Is Cousin Nellie engaged already?" piped up Chloe, open-eyed. "Nurse thought——"

"Never mind Nurse," said Cynthia, seizing Chloe's hand. "Come along, dear. What would you like for lunch?"

"Fried sole and *meringues*," said Chloe without a moment's indecision.

"That's right," beamed Cynthia, "I like people to know their own minds."

But Chloe was back again with a less convenient topic. "Isn't that lady coming to have lunch with us?" she said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Oh, she—er—prefers having it somewhere else," said Cynthia.

"She thinks herself too grand for us, I s'pose," said Chloe in rather an awed tone. "I noticed what expensive things she had on the dressing-table. She must be very rich. Mrs. Robinson is very rich too, and that makes her dreadfully particular about where she goes out to lunch, Mother says."

"Money's not everything," said Cynthia.

"It's what I want when I grow up, anyway," said Chloe. "Look at the different way you get behaved to if you're poor, and if you're rich. Doesn't that show?"

Cynthia looked down at the little dark-eyed creature

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with an uncomfortable sensation that made her say rather sharply: "Most of the heroes in the world have been poor, Chloe."

"Then I don't want to be a hero," said Chloe. "You wait and see how much more fuss they make about Miss Cynthia Rayburn than they do about you. Then you'll wish you were rich too!"

"Chloe! What a hateful way to talk!" said Cynthia, fretted to exasperation by this repeated touching of a spot which was already a little sore.

For though she had always known the value of money—as rich people mostly do—she had also felt that even as a beggar-maid she must have been marked out for preferential treatment. It was not only the money, but *she*, Cynthia, whom the world delighted to make much of, and even without it her place in life must be agreeably above the crowd. Now for the first time she wondered.

But when Chloe made some naturally childish remark about the decorations of the hotel, the impression receded into the background of Cynthia's thoughts and she began to look forward to the Fancy Dress Ball in the evening with a thrill of excitement and anticipation such as she had never felt in her life, even before the most elaborately planned entertainments. It suddenly seemed a tremendous lark to be wearing somebody else's cast-off costume, and to be going as the Poor Relation—the very apotheosis of that "dressing up," and playing at beggars and old women, which had been a prime amusement of her rather lonely childhood. But behind all—dimly seen among the golden haze where lived Alice and the White Cat and the dear friends she had got to know before she

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could remember—there gleamed a white Pierrot. He was, in a sense, no more real than Sindbad; and yet it was her knowledge of the real man waiting for her to find if she could, that made a second-rate Charity Ball in a muddy, north-country town an adventure of the imagination. Without being aware of it, her instinct had led her to detect a capacity for romantic love—which is love of body and spirit both—which she had power to kindle if she could get near enough. She experienced the workings of natural selection in the way only possible to those who have within them the elements of romance.

CHAPTER V

THE FANCY DRESS BALL

The legend, "Fancy Dress Optional," on the tickets, allowed the sprinkling of black coats and middle-aged evening dresses to somehow accentuate the peculiar air of artificiality and effort which hung about the company, caused by a mass of people thinking intently of their own clothes and the effect of them upon others.

Cynthia stood rather hidden behind the two girls, Feo attired as a nondescript Eastern lady and Marjorie in some travesty of a bandit that permitted baggy trousers and a cap with a tassel. For the first time in her life, Cynthia had leisure to look on at a ball without her attention being dissipated by the give-and-take of talk and laughter. Young men came up and were eagerly greeted by the sisters, while Mrs. Walgrove smiled her tight little smile and stood erect near by without saying much. As girls were too numerous and partners scarce, they did not introduce Cynthia; it was quite enough for her to see all the amusing costumes and the gay scene generally. Mr. Walgrove was already displaying a really excellent leg in knee-breeches to his lady friends in another part of the room, and Anthony, detained by his business excursion into the country, had not yet arrived.

Cynthia knew that he had returned very late from his business, and was content to wait until he arrived with-

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out dancing, the very queerness of the situation appealing to her, because of that love for adventures of the mind which was so deeply a part of her character, hidden beneath the froth and sparkle visible to her friends. She was experiencing now the indescribable little thrill and quickening of the vitality which comes from finding out things, even the merest trifles, to then see them all glowing and alive, instead of dead facts found by somebody else and laid out in a row. Her eyes dilated, her cheeks flushed and her lips parted slightly as she looked round her. The sense of unreality grew upon her. How funny—how awfully funny, if you could only see all these people as they thought they were! Mrs. Robinson, for instance—she had declined to see Cynthia, and no wonder, Cynthia thought, after tea yesterday, and the butcher's cart this morning—there was one *actual* Mrs. Robinson, rather fat and short-necked, with a certain redness of nose already shining through the powder and too many pearls in her Marie Stuart head-dress. Then there was the other Mrs. Robinson-as-she-thought-herself, standing just behind; tall, fascinating, reposeful, like one of those superhumanly tall and graceful ladies in the fashion papers. Cynthia found it a rather exciting and tremendously interesting game to watch the Ones and imagine the Other Ones. Then she suddenly felt, beneath the jolly sense of fun and stirred interest, a cold air of strangeness, because no one can travel in these lonely places without feeling that—and she caught a glimpse of a further thing. She, herself, would never see the Other Cynthia, only the creature of her own imagination; the same that Mrs. Robinson saw of herself. Perhaps it was not safe to push further along

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those paths; perhaps a girl might become confused, thinking what she knew the ghost, and the other the reality. It gave her now the oddest sensation of being in a grotesque world peopled with beings who saw some one standing in her place whom she herself would not recognize if she had their vision——

She was so engrossed in these imaginary excursions that she started to feel a touch on her arm. Then Anthony's voice said close to her ear: "Well, Goose-Girl, a penny for your thoughts! This is the third time I have spoken."

Her expression was for a second a little dazed, as it is when travellers come back from those places where she had been. But it cleared quickly, and she was all gaiety and happy interest—those thoughts nearly forgotten already, though the effect of them was to remain. "Not worth a penny," she said gaily. "Sort of Scottish blasphemy, if you know what I mean. I was thinking Burns talked sheer nonsense when he called it a *gift* to see ourselves as others see us. I think it would be a curse!"

He glanced round the room. "That's pretty severe! Are we as bad as all that?"

She shook her head, laughing. "I didn't mean the fancy dress, and I included myself. It's just—well—it just gave me a queer feeling to realize I can never see myself as every one else sees me. I can't explain. Let us talk about something else."

"Are you ready?" He put his arm round her, and they moved off among the crowd. "So that's what was troubling you, was it? Wait until this dance is over and you shall know exactly what you looked like then

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to one fellow-creature, at all events. Cousins can speak the truth to each other, you know."

Suddenly she felt a little spurt of anger on behalf of the real Cousin Nellie. He had no business to flirt like this with a poor little country girl who had never been anywhere and whose head might be so easily turned. It seemed difficult to understand how he could, being the man she thought him.

"What's a man's cousin to him?" she retorted. "I know. Something a little spicier than a sister and a little safer than a friend."

His face remained grave, but his eyes had a gleam of amusement in them under those heavy lids, and he regarded her with a secret feeling of not being able to make her out, though she seemed so simple. How came she to say things like that? You'd think the life of a nursery-governess would not have provided exercise enough for such verbal quips. How much did she really know about life?

"A little safer than a friend! That applies to both sexes," he replied. "I'm glad you feel that." He saw the childish round of her cheek as she turned and his voice changed. "It's true, though. You can trust me, Nellie."

The "Nellie" disturbed her again. Where were they drifting? What was he, really, at the bottom? She gave a probing prick to his vanity.

"Let us stop, please," she said abruptly.

"Sorry!" he said. "I know I'm not much of a dancer now."

As she remembered how he had gained his stiffness and the red deepened in her cheeks, he could feel the slim

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fingers suddenly tighten on his sleeve. "Oh, I didn't mean that! I want to sit down," she said hastily.

"You seem to manage all right. No fear of my trying any of these new dances," he responded. But involuntarily his tone implied that he had been hurt and was now appeased.

At that her face cleared and the spirit of happy mischief awoke again in her. "Oh! we do dance in our village sometimes, in our own pre-historic style," she said.

They were both smiling as they passed Mr. Walgrove on their way to a long corridor which was arranged as a sitting-out place, and that elderly gallant discontinued the pleasantries he was exchanging with a very *décolletée* and mature shepherdess, to look with marked disapproval at his son. All the daughters of the best business houses in the city to choose from—an unassailable social position created for him by the untiring efforts of his father and mother—and here Anthony must needs go philandering with a second cousin who had no manners and no money! It was enough to anger any father.

Mrs. Walgrove also glanced at the pair as they went out through the high doorway with much the same feelings. What was the use of her striving to keep the family right above the ordinary, one-servant Ford-motor-car level of her acquaintance, if her only son refused to consort with desirable partners who sat round the walls waiting for him to address them, all glorious in toilettes that showed to the meanest capacity how tremendously their fathers had prospered during the war? No wonder she felt bitter as she stood there with every hair in its place, and an intense consciousness of her own erect

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slimness as compared with the bulging outlines of other matrons. To add to this, her daughter Feo came up and whispered impatiently: "Just look at Anthony, Mother! He is making a perfect fool of himself with that girl. I got Diana Medway to keep a dance for him, and he has never been near her yet. And his only excuse is that she has a bad-tempered nose."

"What nonsense!" whispered Mrs. Walgrove, glancing cautiously round. "I like a girl with plenty of spirit."

"Well, I can't help it now, if young Robinson does get Diana and her hundred thousand down. I've done my best, making up to her whenever I came across her, and talking to her about Anthony's perfections. I shall do no more for him."

And the next moment she was swaying again in her partner's arms, her hot, dark eyes half-veiled and her mouth like a red bar across her pale face. Two men watched her from the doorway through which Anthony and Cynthia had just passed. "I wonder why that girl doesn't marry again? It's not faithlessness to the departed, and she's the sort——"

"Not going to let herself go cheap. Waiting for the highest bidder, no doubt," muttered the other. "I say, that's rather a good-looking girl Anthony Walgrove went by with just now. Who is she?"

"Oh, some little governess they have brought out of kindness, so the fair Feo told me. Not a bad-hearted sort, Feo." And they walked away together toward the smoking-room.

Anthony meanwhile had found a quiet corner with which he had long been acquainted, where two chairs stood between a screen and a group of palms. It was

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called "Proposal Corner" by the youth of the city, and when it was occupied, a certain unwritten code obliged all other couples to give it a wide berth. Anthony had previously avoided it because of this sentimental notoriety, but he knew that his present companion could not be embarrassed by a fact of which she was unaware, and he felt an extraordinary desire for a long uninterrupted conversation with her. He had no reason for it in his mind, and he was, indeed, not conscious how deeply he did desire it, until the deceiving glint, in the half-light, of a fan left behind on a chair, caused him to imagine for one second that the place was already occupied. He felt a sudden sense of baffled anticipation which literally turned him cold and then hot again before he came near enough to see it was only a half-opened fan.

Cynthia sat down without the slightest suspicion of what he was feeling—a little laughter, indeed, still bubbling up among her thoughts at his obvious surprise that she should be able to dance decently.

"How pretty the dresses are!" she said.

"And so appropriate!" he answered, sitting down by her. "I always think a Fancy Dress Ball shows a great deal about human nature, don't you? It often shows the part that men and women secretly desire to play in life, and can't. That fat, dumpy woman without charm as Mary Queen of Scots, for instance; she is not wholly ridiculous, seen in that wistful light, is she?"

"I suppose not," said Cynthia. "But your theory only applies to those who are free to choose their costumes. If you go as 'Night' because you possess a black gown,

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and the silver moon can be made for next to nothing, that is no sign of anything, is it?"

"Yes," said Anthony. "It is a sign of a want of originality and a sense of dignity. The lady might just as well have made baggy calico trousers and called herself an Apache."

"Well, we talk a lot about originality, but what is it?" said Cynthia.

"Depends on the sort," said Anthony. "I read the other day that real originality is what made God think of flowers, and mock originality is what makes a man walk down Piccadilly with his tongue out."

Cynthia smiled at him through the faint light, not speaking. What a dear he was! And yet there was that other side of him which allowed him to make a fool of his poor little Cousin Nellie! The music came softly from outside and there was a scent of flowers somewhere not far off. A sense of realities slipping away from her again pervaded her whole being. And some subtle intercourse of feeling must have passed between them, of which they had no direct perception, for she heard his voice in her ear, quite differently attuned from that in which he had spoken the previous time: "Well, what is it now, Goose-Girl?"

"I was just feeling happy, Pierrot," she answered with a sweet seriousness, and as she said this, she realized that she meant it. Let the future take care of itself, she would let herself be happy to-night.

Touched and charmed by her attitude to a confusion of the senses which was more delicate and yet deeper than any he had known before, he took her hand very lightly between his long fingers.

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"I promised to tell you what I thought of my new cousin," he said, "but I can't find the right words, after all. She's really exactly as I used to picture the girls in fairy-tales that I read when I was ten years old."

She smiled at him again, thinking it was only for to-night. She'd let herself go, and say and do whatever pleased her. She'd be as silly as she liked, for just this one night out of all her life. "That's a lovely thing to be—a boy's dream come true," she said softly.

"Everything has once been a dream," he said, gazing at her with blue eyes that looked black in the dim light. "It has to be, you know, before it becomes a reality. The first flint-arrow was a dream—the last great factory built in America was also a dream. When a man meets a girl, and loves her all in a minute, it is because he has dreamed of her."

Love—there he had got it! For to talk of love to a woman is the beginning of the sentimental journey. To the happily married woman past her first youth it brings a thrill of adventure without risk; to the girl a glimpse of the mystery which He and She could solve if they chose; to the old woman a chance to tell somebody how she, too, once was young.

Cynthia looked down at the long fingers playing with her hand: "Love!" she said slowly. "That's all very well in fairy-tales, where you can have a carriage made out of a pumpkin and a cottage of gingerbread."

"There's Aladdin's Cave in Fairyland, too. You might chance on that. But I can't, somehow, fancy you hung round with gold and rubies." He spoke quietly, still playing with her hand—not seeming exactly to think of what he was saying. "No. A common under a grey

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sky; and the little white cottage, where you will live when you are married, just on the edge of it. That's you, Goose-Girl. Money would only spoil you."

"Would it?" She drew her hand away abruptly and he was puzzled to understand the expression that passed across her face—until it occurred to him that she was thinking of her poverty and feeling hurt by this allusion to it. The loneliness and uncertainty of her future, which her manner and something about her generally had prevented his realizing before, now became an actual, important fact to him.

"Of course, you feel you'd like to have the chance of letting money spoil you," he said. "Don't worry about that. You ought to be glad things have made you what you are and not a self-satisfied heiress—like Diana Medway, for instance."

Still she remained grave. "You think so?" she said, looking down the long corridor and listening to the music. Then she turned to him again. "Do you actually consider that a great deal of money is bound to spoil a girl's character?"

"I don't know. I suppose not necessarily," he answered. For they ceased now to be clever with each other—no more flashing wings and spreading tails; they talked simply of real things.

"But you like poor people best, Anthony?"

It was so seldom she used his name that her speaking it stirred him, as well as a faint wistfulness in her tone which he was at a loss to account for. "Yes, I do," he said. And he gave his reply with a certain warm seriousness that—complicatedly—pleased her for the absent Cousin Nellie, and vexed her for herself.

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"But surely a nice rich girl might be as desirable as a nice poor one: and with all the rest on top of her niceness!" she argued.

He looked at her curiously, whimsically.

"You're a queer child. Now you are taking a brief for the moneyed girl. No, I don't think she ever can be so nice, because she has learnt too soon what money can buy in the world."

"Then you would never marry an heiress?" she said, turning over the empty programme on her knee.

"Not if I know it!" he said.

"But why not? If she were a really delightful girl and you liked her?" persisted Cynthia.

"Oh, vanity, I suppose," he said. "Desire to be the predominant partner. At any rate, I should want to be on an equality."

"But very few wives have financial equality with their husbands," Cynthia replied. "I call that attitude of yours ungenerous. If you had a million, you wouldn't mind marrying a girl without a penny, and you would not expect her to object."

"That's different," he said with finality.

"I don't see it. You simply decline to accept a position which you would expect a girl to accept as a matter of course."

He looked round at her and smiled. "I say! Here we are actually beginning to quarrel about the rights of heiresses! But you were so in earnest that I got quite heated too, for the minute."

"You seem to think they must be horrid." She paused, irritated unreasonably by his attitude. "Anyway, your family don't hold the same views."

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"Ah!" He smiled again. So *this* was what it all came to! "You've been hearing about their plans for me and the fair Cynthia. I suppose that imp Chloe gave the show away."

"Well, Cynthia may be a charming girl. Perhaps when you see her, you'll wish their plans might succeed."

"Never!" He shook his head, laughing. "But don't let us talk any more about money. Such an unfairy-like subject does not suit you a bit. Tell me instead how Red Riding-Hood and Cinderella were when you last saw them? They are such old friends, and I so seldom meet anybody from Fairyland."

She looked down. No, it would not come back—that atmosphere of happy nonsense.

"Dear little Goose-Girl," he said, bending toward her flushed averted cheek and touching it very lightly with his finger-tip. "Don't let us think about real things to-night any more. I realize that you had a hard time at that dreary old farm, teaching those dull children, and I have a none too roseate future to look forward to. So let us have another night in Fairyland. Whatever comes in life, memories can't be taken from us, you know."

"But we may have them spoiled," she said gravely, almost sadly.

He looked down at her—curious, delighted and yet vaguely uneasy. What had she done or suffered—this girl among those farming people in a remote village, that she could speak with such conscious knowledge. Had any boor among them played her false and so spoilt memories of tenderness in moonlit lanes? But he could not think it. She seemed so untouched.

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Then the music started again in the ballroom, no longer plaintive, but gaily discordant. In a moment Cynthia's mood changed. Her receptive emotions took in at once the message of that unharmonious tune which jangled forth: Dance! Dance! For to-morrow we die! She jumped up from her seat. "Come on! Pierrot does not really belong to Fairyland. He belongs to what's happening in there. People whirling round in fancy dress, and a band playing——"

"That, and a garret," he agreed, rising and following her.

"It's the garret that makes him so charming, of course," she answered over her shoulder. "I agree with you about money there. A rich Pierrot would resemble a nymph in a fur coat."

"Then you do like this poor Pierrot after all?" he said lightly, putting his arm round her to dance down the almost empty corridor.

"Poor Pierrot, indeed! With three good meals a day and woollen underwear! I'd like you better still if you looked cold and sad," she retorted.

So they whirled in among the Eastern ladies and Watteau shepherdesses, gayer than they had been before, and yet vaguely conscious of having lost something; their minds were seeking the way back to that earlier mood which had vanished like dew when the sun gets high. But the knowledge that they had once experienced this mood together bound them with a delicate thread that neither time nor absence would break, because it could stretch out to such an infinite fineness. And they still felt the indescribable sensation of having approached each other in the spirit more closely than is usual in the ordi-

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nary intercourse of human beings. They were excited, charmed, and yet ready to be angry with each other for no reason.

After one turn round the room, Anthony was stopped by Feo's hand on his sleeve. "Oh, I want to introduce Mr. Medway, Nellie. Anthony ought not to have hidden you away like that. I have been looking for you everywhere. Mr. Medway, this is my cousin, Miss Nellie Walgrove."

Cynthia bowed stiffly, suddenly realizing the extreme awkwardness of the situation in which she had placed herself. At the best, she would be making a nine-days' wonder for the whole Walgrove circle. What folly to have come to this dance where she was bound to be introduced to a certain number of people as Nellie Walgrove, though up to the present her programme was most unusually white and empty.

A fresh train of thought rushed into her mind at the sight of the empty programme. If only these people had known that she was Cynthia Rayburn the heiress, there would have been scribbled hieroglyphics near every dance on that blank space. So it was not *she, herself*, who was always so sought after, even when she appeared at a ball in a distant county where the men were mostly strangers. And the knowledge was unpleasant, because she had always felt an agreeable subconscious conviction that she would be equally sought after without a penny.

Then her partner was speaking to her—agreeably enough, but condescendingly—in a "Well-how-are-you-getting-along-little-girl?" sort of style to which she was totally unaccustomed; for he had obviously been asked

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by Feo as a favour to dance with her and admired himself for his own good nature.

"I suppose you won't have done any of these new dances? Mrs. Feo tells me you are fresh from the country," he said; and he subdued his terpsichorean supremacy to a plain waltz with such an air of stooping to a beggar maid, and looked round the room so immensely pleased with his own appearance in pale blue satin, powder and patches, that that fatal spirit of mischief to which Cynthia had said Good-bye for ever only five minutes ago, now re-entered the empty place, only the more wickedly active for a brief exodus.

"Are those new dances very, *very* difficult?" she said in a meek voice.

"'Pends whether you've a talent that way," he said graciously, feeling her attitude was right. "Now, when I had had only one lesson, the lady-instructress told me I was a born dancer. Not that I take any credit to myself. It's a talent, like anything else."

"How nice that yours happens to be in your feet," said Cynthia, looking up at his rather stupid face with simple adoration.

"Well, I suppose I am pretty good. Must be good at something—ha! ha!" And so becoming did he think her proper gratitude that he actually added: "Look here! If you can manage just to keep going, I'll show you a few steps. Something to take back to the country, that—eh?"

"How good of you!" murmured Cynthia, as he began to execute some fancy steps, leading her after him. "Oh, is that it? I think I can do that."

"Quite good, upon my word! But of course that is

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the easiest," he said. "Now when you get to *this!*" And he made some strange passes with his left leg. "Bit more complicated, that, eh?"

"May I try? Will that do?" said Cynthia, humbly eager.

"Excellent!" said he. "Really, Miss Walgrove, you are quite a little wonder. I could make a dancer of you in no time."

"It's you who are such a wonderful teacher," said Cynthia.

"With a talent like that," said Mr. Medway pirouetting his best, and feeling no less inspired than when he was with the lady-instructress, "you ought to be in the profession, not governessing down in some forsaken hole in the country. I must speak to the Walgroves."

Then Cynthia glanced involuntarily across the room to the place where Mrs. Walgrove sat, and as she caught Anthony's eyes fixed upon her, she realized that once more that silly imp inside her had led her into making a mistake, for both Anthony and his mother wore on their faces an expression of faint surprise. She knew, as well as if she could hear them speaking, that they wondered how on earth a little nursery-governess had learned to dance like that in a remote country place.

"Ah!" said Mr. Medway with satisfaction when she purposely made a mistake. "I thought you couldn't keep it up. Got wrong there, didn't you? But you would make a dancer in time, all the same," he concluded encouragingly. For it was agreeable to find that no girl, however gifted, could pick up in a few minutes what had taken him many toilsome evenings to acquire. "Better try a waltz again, I think."

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As she whirled round and round amid the motley crowd, Cynthia felt more and more a sense of unreality. The dress she wore was neither her own, nor belonged to her everyday existence, while the man who held her was a Dresden China shepherd from a mantelpiece—she became suddenly engulfed in a strange loneliness that almost frightened her. Where was the Cynthia she had known all her life? Was that person a phantom girl who never had really existed for anybody but herself? Was *this* the real Cynthia—as she would be, without the wealth and social position which had always veiled her from the eyes of the world? Was she just a rather foolish girl, very alone, who did not matter vitally to any one but an elderly woman who never left the house? And her thoughts veered round to her god-mother, who expected Mrs. Walgrove to have remained during all these years the same as she was at school when a dull composure passed for sincerity. The glamour of youth still shone on Mrs. Walgrove's letters, because the two women had scarcely ever met since those days in the little old-fashioned school under the shadow of the Cathedral, and Mrs. Rayburn had wanted Cynthia to see something of her own youth before all trace of it disappeared. She thought no doubt—dear Aunt Harriet—that an entirely new environment might steady the judgment of an impulsive girl who had to make an important decision, and help her to see things in focus.

At last Mr. Medway's voice interrupted the stream of reflection that seemed to flow through her mind as they whirled. "I must introduce you to some of the other men. 'Fraid the best dancers will all be filled up, though. Still, when I tell them how you and I——"

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'Oh, please don't trouble. I would rather not dance with them. I should not get on so well with any one else,' interrupted Cynthia, realizing once more with a startled annoyance that she had done exactly what she wished to avoid in thus making herself a subject for conversation.

"Sorry my own programme's full," he said, holding her a little closer and smiling down with the air of a conqueror. "Wish it wasn't! Get booked up before I can look round, somehow."

For a second Cynthia felt very angry. This blatant creature actually thought she was dying to dance again with him! Then she remembered that this was entirely her own doing and ceased to blame him—you shouldn't stroke a cat if you don't like to hear it purr.

Aloud, she said: "I mean, I am not going to dance any more this evening."

"Why not?" he said.

She looked down. Argument would only increase the difficulties of the situation. "I'd rather not."

"Oh, you mustn't be so shy, you know," he said. "Soon cure you of that if you stay here long, you know."

"I'm going away to-morrow," she answered, speaking so gravely that he felt a half-contemptuous pity for her as he left her seated on a bench and hurried away in search of his next partner. Poor little beggar! She evidently didn't like the idea of going back to teach kids how to read and write: no wonder!

Anthony saw Cynthia sitting alone for a moment before the music started again and the whirling figures hid her from his sight; but occasionally he could catch a glimpse of her figure against the light wall, her head bent a little, her slim hands laid on her lap. Cinderella now——

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Why must she always remind him of a girl in a fairy-tale? He did not allow himself to be drawn across the room to her side because he felt puzzled and suspicious. He could not make her out. She seemed so simple at times, and yet she could look up as she had done at that conceited ass, fooling him, as any one could see. And how had she ever learned to dance like that, with such exquisite grace and precision? Oh!—he came back to it again with a sense of baffled annoyance—he could not make her out at all. Well, it didn't matter to him. He'd leave her alone.

Then Marjorie stopped and spoke to him. "Feeling seedy, Anthony?"

"No, thanks."

"Feo says you really ought to go and speak to Diana Medway. She will be awfully offended."

"Let her!" said Anthony. "Quite enough if Feo marries Medway!"

"You can't blame us for wanting to see you married to a nice girl," said Marjorie.

"Is Diana Medway nice? She always seems to me to be as stupid as an owl," said Anthony irritably, unable to help watching for those brief glimpses of Cynthia.

"O Anthony! She is not brilliant, of course, but there is something awfully charming about her," said Marjorie, really believing what she said, and shocked that even her brother whom she loved should call a girl with a hundred thousand pounds an owl. "You always find fault with her. The last time it was her nose. And I know you think I pretend to like her because she is well off. But that is not true. I really do like her." She paused, then

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continued: "I saw Medway dancing with Nellie. How good-natured of him!"

"He seemed to enjoy it," said Anthony.

"Oh, that was his kind-heartedness—just like Diana," said Marjorie. "By the way, Mother is terribly annoyed. Mrs. Robinson says she actually saw Nellie and Chloe driving through the streets yesterday morning at a break-neck pace in Wigsby's butcher's cart. All three of them were laughing and talking. What will that girl do next? I do think it is hard on poor Mother having Father's awful relations foisted on to her like this!"

"Perhaps the butcher's cart is an ordinary means of conveyance in the wilds where Cousin Nellie comes from," he said.

"Of course you make excuses for her," said Marjorie shortly. "Well, mind your passion for defending the under-dog doesn't lead you into trouble this time. I rather think Miss Nellie is a minx."

With that she went off to her mother, leaving Anthony still at his place in the doorway. Had his sister spoken truly? When Nellie was dancing with Medway it certainly looked like something of the kind. But when she had talked to him in the nook at the end of the corridor, she was quite different from that; and yet she was not the same girl as the one with whom he had played at fairy-tales the night before. Again he said to himself he would leave her alone, and he started to make his way between the wall and the dancing couples to the corner where Diana held her court during the intervals, attired like Cleopatra in a really beautiful gown. But before he was half-way there, his feet took him in spite of himself toward the little figure seated alone on the

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bench by the wall. Suddenly, he felt sure she was all he wanted her to be. An extraordinary sense of lightness and happiness came over him as he hurried eagerly up to her and saw her passive attitude change at his approach. She was Cinderella—she was the Princess who married the youngest son—the fairy-tale girl under a dozen names whom he had seen as he sat hunched up before the nursery fire, with the little ones playing on the floor, after he came home in the late afternoon from his first school. The little boy he was then, pale, blue-eyed with eager ways, rose up so plainly before him that he could think he had been outside himself, and had seen himself there by the fire. Then the sudden flash of memory went as it came and he forgot it. The moving figures all so brightly coloured; the perfumes, the soft rounded cheek of the girl near him—these were all he remembered now. And even before he spoke to her, Cynthia somehow felt he was back again—this other Anthony whom she kept finding and then losing—the one she might any minute see vanish for ever.

“Isn’t it a pretty sight?” he said. “No need to pretend to be real here, Cinderella.”

She smiled at him. “Oh, it’s Cinderella now, is it?”

“It’s all of them I ever loved,” he answered. “That’s why I couldn’t help kissing you when we first met. I said I’d tell you the reason some day.”

“You didn’t look as if you loved me much when I was dancing,” she said, trying to speak lightly, for it must not get serious again. The essence of a fairy-tale was that it could never influence your real life——

“That was because I had forgotten you were Cinderella as well as the Goose-Girl,” he answered. “The minute

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I remembered that, I knew of course that you could dance all the most difficult Court dances without ever being taught. It was perfectly natural. What did the Fairy Godmother make that particular gift out of, Cinderella?"

"A leaf that blew in at the cottage door when she opened it," said Cynthia.

They laughed together, too engrossed to notice that Mr. Walgrove was regarding them with a frown, and they were startled when he stood in front of them.

"Can't you find any partners, Nellie?" he said. "Anthony, see what you can do. I left it to you."

"I'm sorry," said Anthony, suddenly realizing that he had made no effort to promote his cousin's enjoyment of the ball other than dancing with her himself. "Of course, there'll be plenty of men——"

"Not at this hour of the night," said Mr. Walgrove. "Your mother has had enough of it. She is going home in a few minutes."

Cynthia rose abruptly, seeing a way out of the situation that was once more becoming difficult.

"I'd like to go, too. You won't mind, will you? I have enjoyed it all immensely, but I would rather go home now."

And at that reply, Mr. Walgrove's annoyed creases were smoothed out as if by magic; he smiled quite indulgently as he said to his disturbing relative: "Sensible girl! Not used to such rackety doings, hey? Well, you'll get a good sleep and feel none the worse for it in the morning."

"Nonsense! You can't go yet, Nellie," said Anthony. "Mother won't hear of it, I know. You must stay."

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Cynthia shook her head. "No. It's been lovely. But I *have* to go at twelve, you know."

"Is that the rule at dances in your world?" said Mr. Walgrove, ready to be very pleasant indeed, out of sheer gratitude for her departure.

"Yes," she said, then smiled back at Anthony over her shoulder. "*You* know that, don't you?"

He nodded, making no further answer because of his father, and Mr. Walgrove stayed by Cynthia's side until she had repeated her decision to Mrs. Walgrove, who also unbent. Indeed, both husband and wife felt more agreeably inclined to their guest than they had done at any time since the beginning of her visit.

Cynthia emerged from the cloakroom, a little in advance of her hostess, to find Anthony waiting in the draughty entrance with a concerned pucker in his forehead. "You're going home because you think you're not wanted," he said quickly. "You're as proud as Lucifer."

She laughed. "What other name will you call me next? But I've simply loved it, and I had better go before I turn into an ordinary girl again, and you are disappointed." She looked at him more closely. "Anthony, don't be vexed! I *want* to go."

Then they saw Mrs. Walgrove approaching and he said hastily: "Will you come with me to the Pantomime to-morrow afternoon? They say it is a poor show—but will you come?"

She hesitated. "I can't promise. I don't know whether——"

But Mrs. Walgrove's near approach caused Anthony to break in upon her reply with what he had to say,

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lest he should be overheard. "Meet me at the theatre doors at half-past two. I can't get home to lunch." And as she still stood looking away from him, he added urgently: "Do try! I was going to take Chloe, but she has a children's party on. I do want you to come."

"I don't care much for Pantomimes," murmured Cynthia, as she turned to meet Mrs. Walgrove.

"Anyway, I shall be there," he whispered, then added aloud: "Tired, Mother?"

"One of my tiresome headaches," said Mrs. Walgrove, taking her son's arm, to the taxicab, while Cynthia walked behind, wondering what would have happened before half-past two on the following afternoon. There seemed no possible chance that she and Anthony would be entering the Theatre Royal, Mabingstoke, for the purpose of witnessing a performance of "Cinderella."

CHAPTER VI

THE LADY OF LOVE-AND-KISSES-JOHN

As Cynthia drove along the shining, wet streets looking out of the window and answering the few remarks which Mrs. Walgrove made from an obvious sense of duty, she saw nothing but closed shops, empty pavements and all the drab ugliness of Mabingstoke at midnight, at that time of the year. Cinderella herself, when she ran home in her rags after the light and glamour and princely attentions, was not more forlornly conscious of having left a happy scene that she might never enter any more. Cynthia realized that there would probably be a letter from the real Cousin Nellie on the breakfast table in the morning, which would banish the Anthony she cared for, in a flash—no less dramatically than an evil enchantress in red tights. But no fairy princess would come in at the end to bring him back; she would have to go all through life without seeing him again, even though somebody looking just the same should call upon her once a week.

She glanced round at Mrs. Walgrove, who sat with closed eyes, looking very tired. Should she make a clean breast of it now and get it over? The disclosure was bound to be most unpleasant, however well stated; while no possible explanation could prevent her appearing rude, rather mad, and a perfect fool. The reflections

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which ought to have attended her waking on that first morning after her escapade were there now in full force, and she did most bitterly condemn herself for having given way to such an idiotic impulse. Never again! So long as she lived and had her being, she would never more be guilty of "dressing-up," playing any sort of silly joke, or behaving in any way differently from her neighbours. She was older now—she felt at that moment intolerably old and disillusioned—and her day for such things was past. She must put them away as she had done her dolls and her fairy-tale books a few years ago. Life *had* to have less fun and magic and colour about it as you went on.

Then a sudden joyous patch of colour leapt out at her from a blank wall. It was only the poster for the pantomime with the word "*Cinderella*" across it in big red letters and a golden coach underneath, but it sufficed to change Cynthia's mood. She pictured that afternoon in the dim theatre, with the fairy-tale going on before their eyes, and the eager children all round them. It would be far better than the ball; better than the supper before the fire on the first night; something between the two, intimate and yet glamorous—she must have it, like the spoilt child of fortune she was, who had always received what she wanted.

"What were you going to say?" murmured Mrs. Walgrove, rousing herself; for all this had passed through Cynthia's mind between one aimless remark and another.

"Oh," she answered. "Only thank you. I enjoyed myself so much."

"I'm glad of that. Of course, it would be a wonderful

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sight to you," responded Mrs. Walgrove. Then she drew her cloak together because the cab was approaching the house. "Had you any supper?" she added, as they went in.

Cynthia hesitated. No: of course she had not had any supper—how funny! But Mrs. Walgrove, mistaking the cause of her hesitation, for once desired to spare her feelings. "Young men were so scarce," she said. "I believe even Marjorie had not got a partner for the supper dance before we left. But Anthony might have seen you had some refreshment. There was plenty to be had at the buffet. I'm sure he would, if he had thought."

"Of course he would," said Cynthia. "But I'm glad he didn't. May I have some of these biscuits and a cup of tea? I see they have left a kettle."

"Please help yourself," said Mrs. Walgrove. "And if you don't mind, I will go straight upstairs to bed. The noise and the lights have given me one of my sick-headaches."

Cynthia made the proper replies and in a minute or two was alone in the hall, sitting by the same little square table at which she had supped with Anthony. How still it all was! The clock made quite a loud noise in the quiet. The wood of some piece of furniture gave a sudden crack. And as she knelt to build up the fire against the return of the others, she did indeed bear a resemblance to a Cinderella in an old-fashioned fairy-tale book, with her shortish, bunchy skirt and laced peasant's bodice and softly rounded cheeks. This girl who had been cared-for every hour since childhood found something fascinating and adventurous in being there all alone

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in the middle of the night with no one to care if she went or stayed. She sat down by the hearth on a low chair and stretched her feet to the pleasant warmth, resting her head back on the cushion, trying to see into another kind of girl's life—quite different from anything she had experienced. How nice if you could get right inside of all sorts of lives! . . . The things you would find out!

Her eyes closed: very soon she was asleep and really dreaming. She dreamt that Mrs. Robinson came in at the door, dressed like a fairy godmother, excepting for her tiara and tortoiseshell lorgnettes. And she tried to catch mice to turn into carriage-horses, but could not find any. The suspense while Mrs. Robinson crawled under tables and behind chairs with her tiara still erect and her fairy godmother's cloak flowing out behind was simply horrible. And yet Cynthia felt convinced that she would never, never see Anthony again unless those mice were found. Horrid little eyes began to peep out everywhere. Mrs. Robinson suddenly swooped round—and Cynthia woke up with a start to hear the sound of a car panting before the house. She glanced at the clock. Half-past two; so the others must be home again. Before the latchkey rattled in the door, she was running upstairs, but the ache of those moments in the dream when she feared never to see Anthony again, still lingered somewhere about her, and her face looked pale and startled in the glass when she went to take down her hair. She began to be afraid of what she felt. Never before had her feeling for a man slipped away beyond her own guidance, for impulsive though she might be, her hand

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and head had always been cool and steady enough to keep the reins.

But sleep—as ever—restored her self-confidence, and she went downstairs next morning with a fair certainty of being able to “carry it off,” even if that dreaded letter from Nellie Walgrove did appear on the breakfast table. She resolutely turned her mind away from speculations about Anthony and went on to consider the effect she would make on the rest of the family. Though she did not say so to herself, she knew that her money would immediately envelop her, in their sight, with a golden veil through which they would not be able to see her shortcomings very plainly, for thus far had her possession of wealth influenced a natural young girl’s view of human nature.

When she reached the breakfast room, Anthony had already gone out, and Mr. Walgrove was eating there alone. Mrs. Walgrove nursed her sick-headache upstairs and the two girls were not yet down, so after a perfunctory inquiry as to whether she were tired, her host relapsed into the acrid silence natural to a gentleman of fifty-six who has been playing for several hours in a heated room, exposed to draughts, at being a gay twenty-five. When the postman came up the path, he remarked irritably: “Post late!” and went out to take the letters.

Cynthia put down her piece of bread and sat perfectly still. Was this moment to end it all? Would there be a letter from Cousin Nellie among the batch? She heard him go straight upstairs, open and close his wife’s door, and after a brief space come down again. Immediately afterwards, Chloe’s flying footsteps sounded on the stairs

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and her shrill voice shouted: "Come back! Granny wants you!"

Cynthia rose and went out into the hall. She could not keep still any longer. After what seemed an interminable pause that door above opened and shut again, and Mr. Walgrove came down the stairs from his wife's room. Cynthia moved forward to meet him, her eyes eagerly searching his face. Then Chloe piped up from behind: "Grandfather! Granny says you are to be sure and remind Uncle Anthony to come home for lunch. Diana Medway is coming."

A feeling of relief so intense as to make her feel quite faint swept over Cynthia. So there was no letter from Nellie. Then she gathered her wits together, for at all costs she must get out of that intolerable luncheon party without mentioning that she had arranged to meet Anthony.

"Chloe!" she called. "Will you please tell your Granny that I am going out for the day? I hope she will not mind."

Mr. Walgrove looked at her with a slightly roused attention.

"Are you lunching with that friend of yours at the Station Hotel? My wife intended to call on her this afternoon but for the sick-headache."

"No need for you to trouble—rather a recluse," stammered Cynthia, appalled at the idea of that meeting.

"Oh, we should certainly show her some attention," said Mr. Walgrove, quite with his best air. "She seems to be a very nice woman, from what Chloe says."

"*Gold* on the hair-brushes and things!" added Chloe.

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"Some of us will certainly call on Monday," said Mr. Walgrove, getting into his overcoat.

"Oh, Monday!" Cynthia left it at that, for by Monday afternoon it would not matter, because by then she herself would have left Mabingstoke and all the results of her folly behind her.

As the front door closed on Mr. Walgrove, Cynthia found Chloe looking up at her with a most odd, rueful, shrewd expression on the little pointed face. "No more going out together for *us!*" she said. "The butcher's cart did it. They think Mrs. Robinson is dreadfully upset. It was rather a low thing for you to do, Cousin Nellie. But I expect you visit with butchers and people like that at home."

"Yes, I do. The butcher in our village is a great friend of mine," said Cynthia.

"Um!" She gazed up consideringly. "Well, I like you. I should be rather sorry to see you a butcheress."

Cynthia laughed, but she felt pity too. "You shall come and see me whoever I marry, if they will let you," she said, patting the little thin shoulder.

Chloe glanced at her sideways, with the queerest look out of those big, dark eyes. "It won't be Uncle Anthony will it? That would be so very convenient."

Cynthia started and turned red. What could this uncanny child possibly mean?

"What nonsense!" she said sharply.

"Well! Mammie and Auntie Marjorie said it," retorted Chloe. "I mean, they said *you* wanted to, and they seemed afraid he *might*. They said he always did take notice of people who were common and nobodies."

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She paused and added casually: "Of course they want him to have Diana Medway. She is so awfully rich."

"But you wouldn't like Uncle Anthony to marry somebody not nice just because she was rich?" said Cynthia.

"Nearly all rich people are nice," answered Chloe in perfect good faith. "When Mummy says 'a nice person' it means she is rich."

"But what about me?" said Cynthia. "You say I am nice."

"Oh!" said Chloe, "I often like them poor and common myself, you know. Look at Nurse, and the butcher's boy! I was only talking about grown-up people."

With that she ran off, while Cynthia went upstairs to put on her coat and hat, preparatory to going out.

As she opened the wardrobe to take down her coat from the peg, she saw the skirt still hanging there which she had worn on first arrival, and that reminded her of her promise to return the garments as soon as convenient. Perhaps the old woman would want that awful hat and coat to wear at church on the morrow. And all at once Cynthia had a plan ready to hand which would fill up the morning until it was time to meet Anthony: one, moreover, which would keep her safely away from Mabungstoke and all chance of undesirable encounters. She determined at once to hire a car at the Station Hotel, request Emma to accompany her by way of placating that injured female, and lunch at some inn outside the city before going to the theatre.

Like all Cynthia's plans, it was full grown as soon as hatched, and she rummaged impatiently in drawers and bag for a piece of paper in which to wrap the clothes, but not finding any, she made them into a parcel with

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the grey skirt outside and hurried from the room. But in passing the dressing-table, her arm caught a little book lying there and caused it to fall on the floor. As she picked it up, the pages fluttered open, but she had no time to glance at them or at the inscription written inside by the wise old man who had prepared her for Confirmation. And yet she might have done well to glance at the inscription again, for the words were those of another wise man, Samuel Johnson. "We may take Fancy for our companion, but it must follow Reason as our guide."

She had been fully conscious of their meaning when they were written in that book, but the knowledge in some way never reached deeper than her intellect, and had not really influenced her at all. So she put the book back on the dressing-table and ran down the stairs with her bundle in her arms, ready to pursue Fancy as a guide and let Reason look out for itself, after her usual habit.

Emma was at first lugubriously opposed to the jaunt. She felt bilious. She had a slight toothache. She had stockings to mend. But Cynthia's buoyant good nature had been restored by that quick walk through the streets with the bundle under her arm, and she was able to disperse the gloom sufficiently for all practical purposes. Before long, therefore, the two were speeding along in an excellent car with a not-too-haughty chauffeur and the sharp air of a spring morning about them. It was only when they had returned the old woman's clothes, and had been gratefully waved at from the cottage door on departing that Emma began to turn restive.

"What! Go on to Midgeley, Miss. Whatever for?"

"A—a relation of the Walgroves lives there. I have a message to give her," said Cynthia.

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Emma relapsed into an injured silence and the car sped between the brown hedgerows with the fine branches standing clear against a pale blue sky. It was only when they approached the little village that Cynthia began to wonder how she should find the house in which the real living Nellie was staying. For this was her object. She had suddenly decided, when told at the hotel bureau that Midgeley lay only ten miles beyond her original destination, that this would be the only way of ensuring complete happiness for the afternoon. Otherwise, every stir among the audience, or the sight of a programme-girl pushing between the ranks of people, might herald disillusion. She would fancy it was a message from the Walgroves demanding her immediate return because the real Cousin Nellie had either written or arrived in person. This suspense would spoil this very last excursion into Fairyland, and she was bent on making sure: the details were best left to the chance of the moment.

Her first attempt succeeded, for the general shop had information about a young lady stopping at the Vicarage, and Cynthia returned joyfully to the car. But as they went on again, she became conscious of something truly portentous in Emma's manner, and with a desire to conciliate she said pleasantly: "Best of a little place: everybody knows everybody else."

The words seemed to release a spring in Emma's anatomy. She jerked round and said in a tone of forlorn exasperation: "I can't make neither head nor tail of this! You were asking for Miss Nellie Walgrove; and you seem to be making out at Mr. Walgrove's that you're called that. I may be poor, but I have a conscience, and I'm going to communicate with your godmother this

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day when I get home. Who would she blame if you went and did anything? Why, me, of course. *I* ought to have taken care of you. As if anybody could!"

"But I'm not doing anything wrong, Emma. I swear I'm not," said Cynthia earnestly. "You've never known me deceitful yet, have you?"

"No," said Emma: then she sighed pensively, obviously out of the depths of some sentimental experience. "But we're all putty in the hands of the men, when it comes to the point."

"I'm not," said Cynthia. "You know I'm not, Emma. You know you don't think—I'm putty enough."

"Ah! you don't value a handsome gentleman as you ought, because he makes too much of you," said Emma darkly.

"But when I tell you everything is all right, you really ought to trust me," said Cynthia. "I'd trust you with my soul, you know."

"Well, I suppose I can't do anything else," muttered Emma, still unconvinced.

When they drew up at the Vicarage gate, she remained in the car while Cynthia went up to the door and inquired if Miss Nellie Walgrove were staying there. The maid replying in the affirmative, Cynthia found herself in a largish drawing-room filled with small ornaments, which yet gave an impression of stuffy bleakness.

But in the brief interval of waiting she suddenly realized that she had not the faintest idea how to begin. Her plan formed during the drive, of stating the exact truth and throwing herself upon the merciful comprehension of another girl who would also have a taste for a frolic, became ridiculous and untenable in face of

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these stiff cushion covers and innumerable small china ornaments.

The door opened before she had thought of a fresh expedient, and immediately she saw that the real Cousin Nellie could be told nothing. The girl's uncompromising mental attitude was such—standing there very erect, with clean, red, slim hands by her side and pointed chin a little raised—that it was positively visible outside. It even, for a moment reduced Cynthia to feeling as like a pricked bladder as any unsuccessful jester ever felt in this world. The puckish, will-o'-the-wisp light which plays round the meanest joke when it is our own, giving it colour and joyousness, dies out instantly in the mere presence of some people, though they never say a word. And this slight girl with an agreeable, pink complexion and brown eyes, had such a presence. As Cynthia stood there tongue-tied, she said in a cool little voice which just matched her face and figure: "The maid said you wished to see me. Please sit down."

When she moved, her third finger with the ring on it caught the light, and despite the predicament in which Cynthia had entangled herself, she felt a little, sudden rush of inward laughter. That was Love-and-kisses-John's! How dared he? Then her own embarrassments enveloped her again. "I—that is—I am staying with the Walgroves. My name is Cynthia Rayburn," she said.

"Oh, the maid did not tell me the name correctly," said Nellie Walgrove. "My *fiancé*"—she glanced down at the ring—"told me he had seen you." And from her expression, and a certain added stiffness, it was only too clear to Cynthia what the opinion of the Reverend John Henderson had been about herself.

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"I'm so sorry: so very sorry," she said, suddenly remembering the Bishop and Platform 2. "I will do all I possibly can to put that right, Miss Walgrove."

Cousin Nellie smiled, and Cynthia did not condemn the quality of the smile when she recalled that delightful sequence—Bishop—country living—bliss—which she had destroyed.

"It seems a pity," replied the victim of Cynthia's indiscretion, "that you have come all this way to express your regret. It is very good of you. I hope to be over in Mabingstoke myself next week."

"Oh!" Cynthia gave a tiny gasp and flushed from brow to chin with the intensity of her relief. No warmth or eloquence in the world could have sounded so delightfully in her ears as those few stilted words which opened up such an easy way out of the embarrassing situation. She could just go on letting Nellie believe that she had come for no other reason than to show regret for having muddled the interview with the Bishop, and no further explanation of her visit would be necessary at present. "I believe you are coming to stay with the Walgroves soon?" she said.

"I am hoping to do so," said Nellie with precision. "But Mr. Henderson may come over on Monday for a few days, in which case my kind friends here have invited me to remain. I am intending to write to Mrs. Walgrove as soon as I know for certain what Mr. Henderson's plans are."

In spite of Cynthia's pre-occupation, she saw how happy those two were going to be together, for the youthful pompousness inherent in the young man would be constantly fed by a wife who even now mouthed her

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“Mr. Henderson” with such an air of self-satisfied importance. It was easy to imagine how she would say “The Vicar,” and how very satisfactory they would both be in every way to each other.

“You have never seen your relations, I think, Miss Walgrove?” she said.

“No.” As Nellie paused, her eyes lightened a little and a slight flush animated her pale cheeks. “To tell you the truth, I have never felt I was wanted, and I am not particularly sure of my welcome even now. I broke down in health and nobody wants to keep a governess who requires waiting on, and so it was arranged that I should go there. I was not engaged to be married at that time. Circumstances have altered. So I came here for a few days because my host and Mr. Henderson have been very close friends since they were curates together in Manchester.”

But the part of the whole concisely delivered speech that really reached Cynthia was just one sentence: “Nobody wants to keep a governess who requires waiting on!” It opened such a vista into this girl’s life that she had an almost irresistible impulse to put her arm around that unyielding little figure and blurt out: “Never mind! Never mind! You are going to be fairly comfortably off. You are going to have a dear little house with a garden and a lawn in front. You’re going to make up for everything now.” But for once she restrained the impulse, deterred by the certainty that Nellie would dislike such a proceeding very much indeed, besides considering her insane. So she only murmured politely: “Delightful, of course! I hope you will be very happy.

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Do you wish me to mention your engagement to the Walgroves?"

"I think not, please. In fact, I was sorry when Mr. Henderson told me he had mentioned it to you, because I feel we ought to await the consent of his father who is in India before making the matter public. But we had only become engaged a day or two before." She paused. "I suppose he couldn't help talking about it." And again something in Nellie's expression showed her to be after all subject to the common weaknesses and emotions of mankind; but the next second she added firmly: "Of course, if any question should be asked, you are at liberty to tell the truth at once. I dislike any sort of deception."

"Of—of course," faltered Cynthia. "But I had better not detain you any longer now. I have said I am sorry that I lost the Bishop—I mean, made Mr. Henderson lose the train."

Her voice died away into nothingness.

"Must you?" said Nellie without any great pretence of regret. "I see your car is outside. Good-bye."

Cynthia came away down the path and seated herself by Emma in a somewhat spiritless fashion. Could she be so foolish and altogether unsatisfactory as Cousin Nellie had made her feel? Perhaps she was. Perhaps only her money kept other people from seeing it, or letting her know they saw it. She glanced aside at Emma, bearing with glum patience all her vagaries. Would even the faithful Emma stand these things if she were not extremely well paid?

But the car moved quickly through the sunny air, the country inn where they were to take an early lunch was soon in sight and Emma grew visibly less depressed. By

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the time they had finished their meal, she was speaking quite favourably of the invention of motor cars, and she stepped almost jauntily into her place when they set forth again.

Cynthia also began to throw off the effect of her visit and her spirits rose in a sort of crescendo movement with every mile that brought her nearer to Mabingstoke. Now she realized that all her suspense was at an end, and she would have her Sunday afternoon in Fairyland undisturbed by any *contretemps* connected with the real Cousin Nellie. Another thought that she would not pretend to notice was beneath that, giving a glamour to the prospect of a pantomime in a local theatre that she would have been the first to find ridiculous a week ago. It was the secret hope that those hours together might so enchant that Anthony whom she knew and others did not, that he could not vanish if he wished.

She dropped Emma near the hotel and went straight on to the theatre, looking out eagerly for Anthony's figure in the doorway: but he was not to be seen. Immediately, she recalled Mrs. Walgrove's message to him, for the first time since it was uttered. It had seemed to her at the time so utterly improbable that he should break his appointment with her for the sake of lunching with Diana Medway. But supposing he had done? Supposing he had telephoned to the house after her departure that he would be unable to take her to the theatre? He was in his father's office, and there might have been a row on the subject which made it seem not worth while.

Then he came out of the swinging doors and hurried eagerly towards her.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE PANTOMIME

The theatre had not been redecorated for some time and the smoke and damp of the long Mabingstoke winter seemed to hang about the stalls and the pit, so that those looking down from the dress circle saw a faint greyness over the dulled colours of the curtain and over the bleak prospect of drab hats and heads in the stalls. As Cynthia settled herself in her place she felt a sense of dullness creeping over her to match the surroundings, while the staleish air after the crisp breeze through which she had come seemed to take the sparkle out of her happy anticipation. She began to think she had expected ridiculously too much of this afternoon at the pantomime.

Perhaps something in her mood reacted upon her companion, for he suddenly found himself talking to her as if she had been any of the girls in Mabingstoke with whom he was acquainted. A river seemed to have unrolled itself like a strip of carpet between them and they threw nothings at each other from either bank. They felt disappointed in each other, vaguely irritated perhaps because they had expected so much.

"I always think matinées must be so tiring for the performers," he said, making conversation.

"Yes. Should you like to be an actor?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't act. It would be more in your line."

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"Then you think I could act?" she said.

"I know you can." He paused and his tone altered: became less superficial. "Didn't I see you that first afternoon?"

She turned toward him, a little startled.

"What do you mean?"

"No need to ask me!" He glanced sideways at her. "Only you rather overacted the part, of course."

"You—you knew all the time?" She caught her breath, staring at him with wide eyes.

"How could any one fail to do so?" he answered. "It was obvious to the meanest intelligence that you were not pleased with your welcome, and were determined to be as 'impossible' as my mother and sisters could have feared."

She leaned back in her seat. Then he had not found out: and yet she knew quite well that she would never have a better opportunity to explain her point of view. Only that would mean either leaving the theatre, or remaining there with everything spoilt, and a faint hope still lingered in the back of her mind that the afternoon might turn out as she wished after all—things so often did! Her experience of life had so far taught her to expect the fulfillment of her wishes and she turned to Anthony with renewed confidence.

"I was rather awful," she acknowledged. "No wonder your family felt annoyed. I am afraid they did not explain my behaviour in the same way."

"No. They think it was due to nervousness. I suppose some girls unused to Society do talk fast and make fools of themselves generally when they feel shy," he answered.

"Perhaps it was that," suggested Cynthia.

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He shook his head.

"No use trying to bamboozle me, my cousin. If Mother and the girls were not so full of their own concerns they must have noticed that you were acting—and acting pretty badly too. You have never been at all like that since. In fact, you dropped the character as suddenly as if you had walked off the stage."

"It was nice of you to be sorry for me," she murmured.

"Couldn't help it," he said. "You were so quaint in that queer hat, and so flamingly angry about something. By the way, where has that hat gone to? I should like to see it again."

"You never will!" she said, and began to feel light-hearted in proportion to her former depression. For this afternoon, at any rate, she was safe.

"Why can't I see it once more? Something I particularly fancied about those feathers," he said.

"Oh, because it is a country hat. Not meant for a place like Mabingstoke."

"Some day you must wear the whole costume again, just to please me. Will you?"

"Couldn't!"

"But if I ask you?"

"I'm sorry. I have sent it back to the country."

He leaned a little toward her, gradually recapturing that in her which had first attracted him. "I say, Nellie, one of these days you and I will go into the country and we'll play at fairy-tales again, as we did that night before the hall fire. Only this time it shall be early summer, and a green common with daisies, and those tall poplars just come into leaf." As he talked, he experienced that curious ease of mind which comes very seldom to any

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one, and to many people not at all. He could talk nonsense exactly as it bubbled up to his lips, without thinking—sure that the one listening to him would follow and be pleased. It gave him the same sudden, jocund sense of freedom that a child knows when he throws up his cap and rolls among the daisies: and Cynthia could answer him with an equal absence of self-consciousness. It is a moment that comes sometimes to two people who are attracted by each other and may never return even though they marry. An unforgettable moment. So they talked while the orchestra tuned up, and the fiery little conductor with bent head and broad shoulders waved his arms like a big excited spider, between them and the footlights.

Then the curtain began to rise, and as the feet of the actors appeared on the stage, the delighted laughter of expectant children swept across the house: so clear and sweet it was, that it freshened even that stale air, and set people thinking of a spring wind across a bluebell field.

Anthony ceased talking now, and they just sat still side by side, with the coloured figures flitting about the stage in front of them and that clear laughter rippling out at every old joke which belonged to the dawn of life. For the children discriminated unerringly; they knew there are only seven jokes in the world, and they rejected the futile attempts to manufacture more with a critical precision unspoilt by the grown-up desire to laugh at any price. This pageant of fairies, ugly sisters, pumpkins and a golden coach went on beautifully for them, not interrupted at all by the dingy commonplaceness of the dialogue, because the things that happened

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were all they cared about. Sweet Cinderella near the fire made them love her, and the funny man sitting down hard and pulling faces as he rubbed the injury made them laugh. It was like being back in the Golden Age to be in Mabingstoke Theatre that Saturday afternoon, though the pantomime had not been a great success among the older citizens, and nearly every one there of mature years had come only to bring children.

As Cinderella went off to the ball, all white and silver, a tiny boy behind Cynthia suddenly piped out: "Mummy! I'm going to marry Cinderella when I grow up. May I?"

Anthony glanced back at the little eager lad with an amused tenderness, then whispered to Cynthia: "I know just how he feels."

"So do I," answered Cynthia, "because I fell in love with Dick Whittington at my first pantomime. I can just see him still, sitting on a stone with his little bundle near, and the bells ringing. Reason has assured me since that he was a mature lady with a rather raucous voice, but I don't listen to reason."

She felt the touch of his long fingers on her wrist.

"No: just the same little maid in that way still, aren't you?"

Then a song on the stage obliged them to be silent again, and Cynthia was very content to sit quietly near Anthony, feeling the light pressure of his arm sometimes against her own, and permeated by the consciousness of his physical and spiritual nearness. What they had said was nothing—it never had been anything—but she felt she had captured him now, the elusive Anthony that only she knew: after this he was not going to dart away from her any more, leaving the man whom

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the rest of the world took for the real Anthony in his place. She felt certain of him now. He could not vanish into those remote distances after being so near for so long. They were bound together by a cord that must always draw him back in the end.

Her very fears and speculations seemed even ridiculous, after a time. It was only, no doubt, that she did not know him well enough. These foolish ideas about him were just the creations of her own fancy.

The interval—the lights suddenly flaring up—disturbed the flow of thoughts that slipped easily across a mind grown lazy with happy sensations. She was almost reluctant to begin talking about the performance.

“So you did go to a pantomime when you were little,” he said. “I thought you had always been buried in the heart of the country.”

“Did you? Well, I lived in the country but I went to a town sometimes,” she said.

“You will have to tell me your whole history from the beginning one of these days,” he said.

“The simple story of——” She broke off, just in time. “Of Nellie, of course,” she concluded.

But she was sorry to have spoken that name because it reminded her too forcibly of a slim, red hand with a new engagement ring upon it, and all the complications which lay beyond. Still, even those did not seem to matter now so much as they had done in the morning, and his next words lulled her once more into a trance of happy security.

“Well, we must have the story when we go for that walk into the country,” he said. “Just the occupation for a holiday.”

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"But shall you and I ever have a holiday together?"

She almost held her breath when she had said that, knowing she had spoken with too much meaning. How would he take it? Would he answer like most other men whom she had known, either flippantly jocular or too much in earnest?

His voice fell so lightly on her ears that it gave her almost a sense of being repelled. "Of course we're going to have a holiday together. Don't you know Cinderella's coach will come back for us two when it has taken that happy pair to the palace of Happy-ever-after?"

"Will it?" said Cynthia: and she sighed and smiled together.

"Then we'll have a child's dream of a honeymoon," he went on. "You must remember what that was like when you fell in love with Dick Whittington at seven."

The momentary sense of rebuff passed, and her eager fancy responded to his again, though wistfully. "Yes, I remember now: playing every day with the one you love best, no lessons, and the sun always shining."

He glanced sideways at her flushed cheek. "There is still one thing that has not changed much, then. I know I still want my honeymoon to be like that."

A solo here prevented further talk, and once more they sat silent together, watching Cinderella try on the shoe and marry Prince Charming, though the golden coach had to be imagined, because the Mabingstoke Theatre did not run to horses on the stage; and the children's laughter still kept rippling through the theatre when anything pleased them, as if a wind from Fairyland had set the bluebells in a field all ringing—so clear it was, and so untouched by life. At last the perform-

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ance was over. The children had to come straight away from the wonder of glittering fountains with lovely ladies rising out of silver shells, into the gloom of a Mabingstoke winter evening, but they did not feel it and were all chattering and bright-eyed like a flock of happy birds. Anthony and Cynthia also felt the damp, chill air strike in their faces as they walked along to find a cab, but they were older, and some of the magic had faded already from their minds. Directly they had seated themselves in the taxi, Anthony took out his watch.

"The fun's over, Cinderella," he said. "Now for the row at home. Were they very much annoyed when I did not turn up for lunch?"

"I don't know. I lunched with my—my friend whom you met at the hotel," she answered.

"Of course! I saw you drive up with her in the car," said Anthony, "now I come to think of it. She seems kind-hearted," he added. "A neighbour, I suppose?" For it had been obvious to him, even at a casual interview, that Emma could not have been Cynthia's friend excepting by force of circumstances.

A sudden jerk prevented the necessity of a direct reply, and Anthony returned to the subject of the luncheon. "They'll think I did it because I wanted to avoid Diana Medway."

"Well, you won't mind so very much their being a little annoyed about that, shall you?" said Cynthia.

"No," said Anthony, "but they only do it because they are fond of me and think Diana's—or somebody else's—money will make me happy. What does bother me, is that they may blame you for being the innocent cause."

"Oh!" Cynthia laughed lightly. "I'm the siren who

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has led you away from the path of mercenariness, am I?"

He looked at her curiously. He was blessed, once more, if he knew *what* she was: but he did not say so. But anyway she obviously did not care whether his relatives were angry or not, which was a comfort. And yet he felt a vague contradictory sense of irritation on their behalf, that it should be so. For his mother and sisters had taken this girl in when she had no other asylum, after all, and they were not treating her with any actual unkindness. His family loyalty, or pride, or whatever it might be called, was stirred by the casual way in which she set aside his mother's possible annoyance, though he had been so ready to fight for her when he thought she was being neglected.

"They only do it for my sake," he repeated.

"Of course," she answered. "Your people would naturally want you to see more of the heiress. Propinquity is everything. Goodness knows, how many plain girls have been urged on to victory by that saying of Thackeray's—is it Thackeray?—that any woman without a positive hump can get any man living, given a fair chance. Well, Mrs. Walgrove wants to give Diana the fair chance. You can't blame a fond mother for that."

"I don't," said Anthony, rather shortly. "But you are mistaken in thinking any of them would wish me to marry a girl whom I didn't really care for. They would want me to be happy, before everything else."

"Not to marry for money, but to love where money is—like the Lincolnshire farmer," added Cynthia, with growing irritation, impelled to answer in this way by the slight shade of—not exactly pompousness, but pompous-

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ness translated into terms of Anthony—that marked his demeanour.

“I don’t know why you should sneer at my mother for wishing her son to have a rich wife,” he said. “It is quite natural enough, after all.”

Cynthia looked at him angrily, not knowing quite how far his feeling of loyalty toward his own had inspired this argument. “Then you are fortunate in having two strings to your bow,” she said. “I thought it was to be the other heiress, Cynthia Rayburn. But of course you may not like her when she arrives.”

He turned round upon her, pale with anger.

“Do you believe that tale?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she added, also losing her temper a little. “You seem to approve.”

“If you think in that way about me, I wonder you care to be my friend,” he said. “Certainly I don’t wish to be yours.”

“I was only joking,” she answered hastily, suddenly afraid of the consequences of her thoughtless words. “As you say, it is no doubt only because they love you, and want you to have everything in life that you can desire.”

“They may seem mercenary, but beneath it all there is something quite different,” he said; and after a pause went on with rather an effort. “It came out when I was fighting. I hadn’t realized it myself before. But I know now that if any one could have come to them then, with millions in one hand, and the certainty of my returning safe in the other, they wouldn’t have hesitated for a single instant: not one of them would.”

“No.” She looked at him and then away, saying quite

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gently: "I'm sorry, Anthony, you're right to stand up for them."

The next second she felt the touch of his fingers in her hand, and heard him say quickly: "I know they don't appreciate you as they ought to do. But they don't know yet, how dear you are, Nellie."

"Then you do like me, after all?" She was biting her lips, and very near to tears: she, the casual, light-hearted Cynthia who had hurt several men badly and never even realized their pain.

"Like you!" He slipped his arm round her. "My dear little girl!" And he kissed the flushed cheek nearest to him just as the car rushed into the lamplight near his father's door.

But he had a question about her in his mind, even as he helped her out of the car; and she also was wondering whether he had often kissed other girls in that easy way without any intention of asking them to marry him. When they sat together in the dimness of the theatre she had felt no doubts at all, but she could not get back into Fairyland any more now, though her dream of happy love was still very like that of the children—to play every day with the one you loved best and always in the sunshine.

CHAPTER VIII

CUPID'S RELUCTANT MESSENGER

When they entered the drawing-room Mrs. Walgrove was seated alone by the fire in an attitude which made Cynthia exclaim to herself: "Kitty, a fair but frozen maid!" For indeed the words of the charade in Jane Austen's novel did apply rather wonderfully to Mrs. Walgrove at that moment, because that justly irritated lady of the house might have been frozen into that very attitude, in that very chair, at a prim and angular twenty; and might have so remained getting sallow and greyer, but otherwise to all outward seeming unchanged, up to the present time. The idea of her with a baby always appeared incongruous and a little unseemly, though she was there opening her lips to address her son.

The involuntary inward laughter which so often bubbled up in Cynthia at awkward moments, dispelled in this instance the apprehensive and irritated frame of mind with which she came into the room. Mrs. Walgrove in that unbending attitude was an inconvenience, of course—but she could be considered amusing, viewed in the right light; and, after all, she was truly fond of Anthony.

But while Anthony's excuses were received with attention, even though he was plainly in disgrace, Cynthia's own explanations were passed over very lightly. It was

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impossible not to be aware that the Walgrove ladies had been only too glad to let her follow her own devices so long as she kept out of the way of their guests. That the only son should have failed his family in order to take this ill-behaved poor relation to the pantomime was, however, really rather too much for Mrs. Walgrove's patience.

"I hear the performance is very stupid," she remarked. "And I do certainly think it strange that you never said a word about going, Nellie. I am, I hope, modern in my ideas, and I don't expect my young guests to be tied to my apron strings. But I must confess it seems odd to me that you went off for the day without mentioning the pantomime at all."

"You were in bed when I left," said Cynthia. "We only arranged to go late last night, and there was nobody about this morning but Mr. Walgrove." She smiled. "And he didn't seem very conversational at breakfast."

"Oh, I am the culprit, Mother," said Anthony lightly. "It was I who suggested the jaunt, so please don't scold Nellie." He went up to her chair and stood near her. "I'm sorry if I spoilt your party though, Mother. I thought it was only the Medways."

"It was 'only' the Medways, as you say," responded Mrs. Walgrove. "But they entertain us very handsomely, and I wished to make the luncheon pleasant for Diana in return. However, what is done can't be undone. I trust you enjoyed your treat."

"It was lovely," said Cynthia: and with that she went upstairs.

As the door closed, Mrs. Walgrove turned to her son.

"I know you only mean to be kind, Anthony. But it

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would be a great pity if you were to turn that girl's head and make her unhappy afterward. You see, she has never been anywhere or seen anything."

"All the more reason why she should have a bit of fun now, isn't it?" said Anthony.

"Now, dear, do be sensible. I am sure you don't want Nellie Walgrove to fall in love with you; and she is just the sort to misunderstand. People in her position, who have never received any attention, always do make too much of any little politeness. It would not surprise me in the least to find she expected you were going to propose to her."

He stood there, smiling at her in that queer way of his which she liked and yet could never quite understand. "Do you really think she is so far gone as all that? Perhaps she contemplates proposing to me. In spite of her backwoods education, she strikes me as having a very modern mind."

"Oh! I don't care what sort of mind she has! I can't make her out and I am not going to try," said Mrs. Walgrove impatiently. "Your father wished to have her invited, and in one way or another we could not get out of it: but there is no need for you to constitute yourself her champion, and I give you fair warning that she will not take your kindnesses as you mean them."

"I'm sorry for that." He was still standing there with that odd look on his face. "But, after all, I can't blame her, because I don't know exactly how I mean them myself."

"What!" cried Mrs. Walgrove; but even so she made no violent movement. "You can't possibly mean to tell me you have taken a serious fancy to her?"

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"No, not serious. But I'm not at all sure I have not taken a comic sort of fancy to her." He paused. "I'm like you, Mother—I can't quite make her out; and yet I'm unlike you, because I keep trying to do it."

Mrs. Walgrove went pale and her hands trembled. "Anthony! You're falling in love with her: she is miles beneath you: she is not worthy of you in any way. It would break my heart, and your father's too, to see you marry any one so utterly unsuitable. Besides you can't afford to marry a girl without a penny. We live up to our income, and your father is quite unable to give you a large share in the business. Besides that——" she hesitated and went on in a low tone, glancing at the door. "Nobody knows, not even the girls; but we owe a good deal of money, one way or another: a big bill at the wine-merchant's, and another at his tailor's—and I have been obliged to let the grocer's books run on until I am afraid to look at them. Still, there are the girls to think of: when they are settled we can economize."

"I ought to have been told these things. Why was I left in the dark?" he said rather sternly.

"Your father thought—I believe he was afraid you would begin to insist on a different way of living, and you know how he likes to appear lavish." There was a faint contempt in her tone.

"But the girls' dresses! And that dinner at the Station Hotel the other night! The whole thing appears to me simple madness," he went on.

"Your father will never forgive me if you let him know I have told you," she said. "He is peculiar in that way, and he will consider I have lowered him in your

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eyes. But you see now how impossible it is for you to marry a girl without money."

"But if I marry one with money, I suppose we can't all live on her fortune," he said. "I don't see that it would help the situation much, so far as you are concerned."

"It would be a great weight off our minds," said Mrs. Walgrove. "As it is, your father knows he ought to allow you a share in the business, and yet he can't afford to do it."

"But that would make me dependent on my heiress—when I get her. I don't like that prospect either," he answered.

"If you really loved the girl, you would not mind," said Mrs. Walgrove. "Some heiresses are pretty as well as rich."

Anthony shook his head. "Get the fair Cynthia out of your mind, Mother. I do not intend to go in for her when she comes—if she ever does come——"

"Why make up your mind like that beforehand?" said Mrs. Walgrove.

"Because she strikes me as a casual young person who is not fitted to make a deserving fortune-hunter happy, Mother."

"Oh, you make a joke of everything!" said Mrs. Walgrove impatiently. "It is of no use talking to you."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm not joking about your side of the question, Mother; only my own. The last thing you can take from a man is the power to jest at his own ill-luck, and I have not got to that yet. But I can and will see that matters are put straight for

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you. We must sell out certain investments and live rather more quietly: that is all you have to fear."

Mrs. Walgrove said nothing; but at that moment she fervently agreed with her husband that Anthony was one of those unfortunate natures who are bound to make sleeping dogs bark loud enough for the whole world to hear, if they are allowed in at the awaking. She now regretted having laid so much stress on a financial position which had not altered greatly since the early days of her marriage. But it was too late now to set matters right again. Anthony was too shrewd to be deceived, once he had got the clue.

"You'll say nothing to your father to-night, Anthony?" she pleaded.

"No, I shall not have time, for I must go up now to dress for the dinner given by the demobilized Officers of our Regiment in Mabingstoke," he said. "But don't you worry, Mother! Things will shape themselves all right after a while. I'll make it my business to see those debts are paid."

Mrs. Walgrove sighed. She knew he would. But she wished from the bottom of her heart that he were not quite so lax where she might wish him to be rigid, and rigid where it would be so much pleasanter to have him a little easy.

However, as she had always been niggardly in small matters, she considered herself economical, and did not blame herself. There were certain things a family of her standing must have—she went on the system that the best is always the cheapest in the end, priding herself on it—but such people are apt to enjoy the best, leaving the end to be arranged for by somebody else.

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In the drawing-room after dinner she still sat very erect with her fancy work, looking more than ever like the "frozen maid" of Cynthia's imagination—for she remained narrowly immature, in spite of all her experience of life—and the remains of her sick headache still throbbed behind her temples, rendering her disinclined for conversation.

Mr. Walgrove put on his glasses and read his paper for a time; then, as there was no spectator but Cynthia, who did not count, he allowed himself to nod comfortably in his armchair like any other middle-aged man verging on the elderly. Feo and Marjorie had gone out to play bridge at the house of a neighbour, so Cynthia was free to read her book and to pursue her private train of meditation.

The room was so quiet, with only the faint click of Mrs. Walgrove's needle and an occasional snort from Mr. Walgrove, that after a while Cynthia began to be hypnotized by the little regular sounds and the stillness. Her thoughts ceased to move, and she sat there feeling as if she might go on like this for ever and ever. Her former, coloured, various life seemed the pretence, and this the reality. She had to tell herself that it was she, Cynthia Rayburn, who sat meekly there in the attitude of a poor relation between Mr. and Mrs. Walgrove, for she somehow felt her own personality oozing away from her in this airless quiet.

Then came the whirr of a front-door bell, which was made to ring in the hall as well as in the back regions of the house. Mr. Walgrove sat up with a start, buttoned his waistcoat, removed his glasses and prepared to act the gay cavalier once more. The whole atmosphere

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changed in a twinkling, as if they three had been under an enchantment and that ring at the door had broken the spell.

"I do hope it is not any one calling," said Mrs. Walgrove hastily. "My head is not right yet, and I wanted to go early to bed."

"Dashed nuisance," muttered Mr. Walgrove, rising, straightening himself and preparing to go forward with his usual air of robust gallantry. But it was only Nurse in her promenade toilette, who announced in a manner purposely amateur, to show that it was a favour that she had opened the door at all: "Some one to see Miss Nellie Walgrove. I think she says she is a maid."

Cynthia jumped up, flushing crimson.

"Oh, I know who it is. I'll come." And she was preparing to hurry from the room.

"A maid! Does your friend keep a maid, then?" said Mrs. Walgrove, and it was obvious that she regretted not having already called on Cynthia's friend at the Station Hotel.

"Yes," said Cynthia hastily, very anxious to get away and see what had moved Emma to disobey her express orders.

"Is she an old friend?" pursued Mrs. Walgrove.

"Oh, yes; one of the oldest I have," replied Cynthia over her shoulder.

"I shall certainly call on Monday," said Mrs. Walgrove, with her hand to her forehead. "I hope you will be sure to explain——"

But Cynthia had closed the door now and was hurrying across the hall. On the exact spot where she and Anthony had supped together on that first evening in

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Fairyland, Emma now stood, looking less fairy-like than anything that could possibly be imagined. There was respectability, protest, the visible working of an outraged conscience in every line of her; but Cynthia thought it best to try and take the high hand.

"Emma! I thought I made it clear that you were on no account whatever to come here."

Emma pursed her lips and allowed a thin voice to trickle through them.

"I am aware of your orders, Miss. But it was a case of Mr. Darnley Miller or me, and I thought you might prefer me."

"Mr. Miller!" Cynthia stood aghast. "You don't mean to say he is at the hotel?"

"He arrived this evening: like a roaring lion, neither to hold nor to bind," said Emma, still letting her phrases come forth under protest.

"But what's he come for? Who gave him my address?" said Cynthia.

"He had your address from Miss Julia," said Emma, leaving the unnecessary question about his purpose in coming unanswered.

"Hang Julia!" exclaimed Cynthia. Then with a glance at the drawing-room door, she lowered her voice: "I told Miss Julia I was at the Station Hotel when I rang her up, but I never dreamt of this happening."

"No, Miss," said Emma, non-committal: clearly she washed her hands of the affair. "Mr. Miller wanted to come up to see you here this evening, but I have kept him back so far. I said you were engaged. But it was as much as I could do. He'll be here directly after

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breakfast to-morrow morning, inquiring at the front door for Miss Cynthia Rayburn."

She spoke more freely now; and with a certain amount of gruesome satisfaction: perhaps this would be a lesson.

"But he must not come," said Cynthia earnestly. "Tell him I shall be engaged every moment of to-morrow. I simply can't see him. Make him see that I shall be very greatly annoyed if he forces himself upon me."

"That won't make any difference," said Emma. "You know what he is. He has come to see you, and he will see you—if he has to climb the church steeple after you to do it."

"I never heard of anything so preposterous, hunting me down like this!" said Cynthia, conscious that Emma spoke only the naked truth. "What *right* has he to do it?"

Emma's silence apparently was eloquent, for Cynthia went on more blusteringly still: "Oh! I know that he thinks he has. But you are aware, Emma, that Mr. Miller and I are nothing more than friends."

"Of course, it isn't for me to express no opinion," said Emma stiffly. "But as you ask me, I thought you was having him a month on trial. I understood you came here, away from all your friends and things, to get matters into the right focus. At least, that was what I seemed to understand from Mrs. Rayburn before we left home." Here Emma relaxed into a less dignified style. "Your aunt would be in a nice way if she could see you focusing on that young Mr. Walgrove instead."

Cynthia gazed at the fire for a moment, puzzled how to proceed, feeling acutely the difficulty of having a person to deal with who was a sort of domestic mermaid—

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one half old nurse, and the other superior lady's maid.

"At any rate," she said, "I can't have Mr. Miller here. You can tell him that from me. I shall be leaving this house on Monday morning, and I will lunch with him at the Station Hotel before my train goes."

"And me keep him chained up all Sunday at the hotel!" said Emma. "It can't be done. You'll have to see him before Monday morning or he'll be here, sure as my name is Emma." She paused. "A joke's a joke, Miss Cynthia; but this is going a lot beyond. It has lasted so long now, that you'll make a serious business of it if you don't mind, and then your Aunt will be very angry, though she has always been so easy with you. She won't like you having played off a joke on this Mrs. Walgrove that she was at school with, for she thinks a lot of her, though they don't ever meet. Your best plan is to make a clean breast of the whole affair to-night, and have done. You never used to be bad at taking your punishment when you'd exceeded the mark—though you'd have been better for a bit more of it—and you'll have to go through some unpleasantness now. Best get it over."

"Not to-night," said Cynthia. "To-morrow morning, Emma. I'm sure to-morrow will be better." For she had made up her mind to go for a walk with Anthony in the morning, when she would tell him the whole truth from the beginning; after all, he would probably laugh with her, and they would come home greater friends than ever— She argued thus to herself, not quite convinced, when Emma, with bewildering suddenness, turned round and presented the lady's-maid portion of her personality once more.

"As you please, Miss, of course," she said distantly.

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"What message did you say I was to take to Mr. Miller?"

"Tell him——" Cynthia broke off and pondered. She knew as well as Emma that Darnley Miller possessed what his fond mother called character, and his friends uncurbed self-will; he was very able and ambitious, and could even restrain his temper if absolutely necessary for the success of the purpose in hand, as he had shown in his courting, and he possessed an undoubted attraction for women of all sorts. There was no doubt that the incorruptible Emma would not have been blinded by the golden dross he bestowed on her, even though it does—as the Psalmist says—blind almost all men's eyes, more or less, if it had not been for his virile personality and a sort of animal magnetism which such men often possess. She was indeed acting directly as love's messenger on behalf of Mr. Miller, though she was not quite conscious of her errand, and certainly did not feel she had been influenced by him.

"I was to give you these chocolates," she added, whipping out a large box from under her cloak. "They are your favourite sort. He is a thorough gentleman—I will say that for him."

"Yes. He's kind," said Cynthia in a troubled voice as she took the box. "I don't know——" Then her glance fell on the telephone receiver and she had an inspiration. "Go back and tell him I will speak to him on the telephone. But he is on no account to ring *me* up. Do you understand?"

"He won't be in," said Emma. "He told me he was going out, and wouldn't be in until late."

"All right; I'll speak to him about twelve. Will you wait up and catch him as he comes through the hall, if

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you can? Tell the head porter you have a message for him."

"Very well, Miss." Emma was now immersed in gloom again, and spoke as became the perfect maid. "Then I shall see you on Monday morning? Am I to pack before you come?"

"Yes; and tell them to have the bill ready," said Cynthia. "We shall leave Mabingstoke by the 2.55, directly after lunch, and I will write to Mrs. Rayburn to-morrow, explaining that we are returning home at once. I shall not inflict myself on Mrs. Walgrove after I have explained who I am."

"You could hardly expect the lady——" began Emma, when the drawing-room door opened.

"Oh! Good-evening," said Mr. Walgrove; then turning to Cynthia, he added grandly: "Mrs. Walgrove wondered if your friend's maid would care for any refreshment. Nurse is no doubt having some tea and would be very glad to see her."

"No, thank you," said Cynthia, casting an agitated glance at Emma, for all sorts of terrifying possibilities rushed through her mind at the suggestion. Supposing Anthony came in earlier than he was expected to find the lady who had been introduced to him as mistress now figuring as maid. Supposing Nurse got Emma into her parlour and began spinning a web of questions from which it was impossible to escape. "Oh, thank you very much, but I am sure she will want to get back immediately."

Mr. Walgrove disregarded Cynthia's intervention and once more addressed himself to Emma. "You prefer to go?"

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"If you please, sir," said Emma discreetly.

"Then you will tell your mistress when you get back, that Mrs. Walgrove hopes to have the pleasure of calling on her on Monday?" he continued, not to be deterred from impressing himself upon this outward and visible sign of an assured income.

Emma said nothing, and it was plain that she declined to be a party to this affair of there being a mythical mistress at the hotel. Any chance word, in fact, might produce an explosion, for Emma was at the far end.

Fortunately Mr. Walgrove took her silence for abashed consent, and going back to his comfortable seat by the fire, left Cynthia to usher her seething handmaid out of the house.

"I suppose you asked for Miss Nellie Walgrove?" she whispered, opening the door.

"No, I didn't," retorted Emma. "I wasn't going to let such a lie pass my lips. I said I wanted to see the young lady who was staying here."

"I am sorry, Emma," said Cynthia. "I know this is all very unpleasant for you. I never thought when I started that a simple joke would land myself and you in a hole like this. I'll never do it again, Emma."

"You've said that so often before, Miss Cynthia," said Emma, softening a little. "It's what you've been saying ever since you could talk. But you'll find yourself in a box where being sorry won't put things right again, if you can't remember you are a young lady with a position to keep up."

Cynthia's face clouded, and for a few seconds she looked unusually grave. "I'm afraid, Emma, I have got there now. There'll be a horrid quarter of an hour to

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go through here before I can make them understand that it was all a joke."

"No wonder," said Emma. "Nobody could understand; but I suppose you have let it go on and on until you daren't own up. It's true what a tangled web we weave, when once we venture to deceive!" She paused, and added in quite a different tone: "Then I will give your message to Mr. Miller. Have you any other orders, Miss?" After which, with a discreet Good-night, she at last went down the steps.

Cynthia stood still for a moment, her hand pressed to her head. Emma's change of demeanour had been unusually quick, even for her, because the poor woman was annoyed as well as seriously anxious about the situation in which her mistress had placed them both. Cynthia quite realized this, but she almost wished that Emma had never been so strictly enjoined by Mrs. Rayburn to remember she was no longer an old Nurse, but the "own maid" of a young lady in Society. Those efforts to be distantly respectful one minute, followed by scoldings the next, were enough to upset a mind that was already somewhat crowded with other pre-occupations.

But it was necessary to go back to the drawing-room, and, when there, to listen to Mr. Walgrove's comment upon the unprepossessing manner of the maid, and to Mrs. Walgrove's plan for calling on and entertaining the mistress, until ten o'clock. Finally Mrs. Walgrove's headache drove her upstairs, whither she was soon followed by her husband, who was still feeling the effects of the previous evening's exertions. Cynthia had no excuse for remaining below, and was obliged to fall in with her hostess's suggestion that a long night's rest

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would also be a good thing for her. Then Mr. Walgrove opened the door for his guest and turned out the light.

Cynthia suddenly remembered, as she walked upstairs, a queer Early-Victorian book that she had seen years ago in the bookshelves at home, called *From Jest to Earnest*, and she tried to remember what the inside was about, but could not. In any case, those Victorian maids never had a chance to be adventurous like their Georgian great-granddaughters, so it did not really concern her in the least whether the end of the story were happy or not. But she was glad, all the same, to have some vague memory of bliss and orange blossoms.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN THE CLOCK STRIKES TWELVE

The bedroom was cold, but Cynthia wrapped herself in the eider-down and prepared to read until about five minutes to twelve, when she intended to creep downstairs to the telephone in the hall and fulfil her promise, for she knew quite well that no amount of notes or messages would restrain Miller from seeking her out before Monday morning, unless she did so. Only distinct orders in her own voice could avail anything. She must first soothe him down with promises of a meeting on Monday, and then make it quite clear that if he called on her before that time he would be unwelcome.

As she lay there the book fell from her hand, and she began to think about Darnley Miller. Could it be possible that only last Thursday morning she had almost fancied herself in love with him? Had she really been at Mabingstoke only since Thursday afternoon? With a sudden rush of emotion she felt that the world had changed altogether in those three days. She must have known Anthony longer than that. Then she experienced one of those strange moments in life when people *realize* for the first time things that they have *known* since childhood. A door in a painted wall seems to open, where no door was suspected, and a vista appears. So Cynthia realized that the laws of time actually are overcome by

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the spirit, and that days or weeks do not matter in love. She had seen this often enough in her omnivorous reading, but it had not meant anything to her. Now, with a sudden glorious surprise, she took in its uttermost meaning. Whether she had known Anthony for three days or three years mattered absolutely nothing.

She lay there smiling and wide-eyed, staring at the wall-paper without seeing it until sounds in the house disturbed her, showing that Feo and Marjorie had returned. It was still early—only about eleven—but they had played a friendly game of bridge with some neighbours who did not care for late hours. Probably they, too, were rather fatigued after the previous night, for they came up to bed almost at once, and the house again lay quiet amid the decreasing hum of the Mabingstoke streets.

Cynthia began to feel a little nervous about going down into the hall, but it had to be done, otherwise Miller would be champing on the doorstep like an untamed steed just as the family came down to breakfast. She could imagine his strong voice ringing through the hall: "Is Miss Cynthia Rayburn at home?" Followed by a vigorous assertion that she was there even if denied by the maid, and a request for the lady of the house which would force an explanation at a most inopportune moment. At all risks, she must prevent any chance of that happening. Anthony must be told in her own way, and in her own time; then he would understand. But if the ridiculous facts were thrown at him in the presence of Darnley Miller, he might take it all wrong. Anthony was still mysterious to her, though she felt him so close and intimate, and that frightened her a little even while it drew

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her on. She could not be sure how he would like her being Cynthia Rayburn and an heiress, though all the time she felt it ridiculous to doubt that he would be glad. Ordinary common sense proved that a nice girl is not less nice when she turns out to have a large fortune. But here Cynthia came up against cold doubt again. Had Anthony ordinary common sense, or was his a different sort?

Anyway, an explanation between them in the blank breakfast-room, with Miller forming a third and the family for an audience, was quite unthinkable.

She felt worried and nervous when she emerged from the room, candle in hand. Involved in this maze of fantastic happenings of her own creation, she began to feel that nothing was solid or certain. But as she crept softly down the dark stairs, the old childish stirrings that she used to feel when playing at robbers in the wood at home began to move in her. The anxious frown between her eyebrows cleared, and her lips curled up a little at the corners. The old, bright-eyed, half-frightened, half-rapturous expectation took hold of her again when she heard a tall cabinet give a loud "pop" as she passed: vague memories of strange animals coming out of doorways in the dark and following her—the steps making sounds never heard in the daytime—— When she peered into the dimness of the hall she would scarcely have been surprised to see a little grey man in a steeple cap blowing up the cinders of the dying fire. Cuckoo! Cuckoo! A Swiss clock somewhere in the distance struck twelve. She was all ready to follow the bird into Fairyland, as she had done when she was little. Then the other clock—the one with the bronze calf on it—

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chimed out clear and sharp. Dreams were dispelled and Cynthia went to the telephone.

Her voice sounded strangely loud as she asked for the number and said she would hold the line. Being so late, the line was free, and Miller answered almost immediately.

“Yes, I’m so sorry. So good of you to come on purpose to see me,” said Cynthia, in a sort of stage whisper.

“Can’t hear! Got a sore-throat?” he said quickly. “If *that’s* why you want me to keep away I shall come on at once, and see that you have a doc——”

“No, no. Quite all right,” interrupted Cynthia more loudly. “Only it’s too late and the household are in bed. I don’t want to make a row. They—they don’t know you are in Mabingstoke at all.”

She could hear a satisfied chuckle. “Oh, I remember! The friend of your Aunt’s girlhood, of course. You were to bathe in Mid-Victorian prunes and prisms, and the austere simple life, while you thought things over; so I gathered. Well——” His voice changed, and even through the telephone she fancied a slight holding of the breath. “*Have* you thought?”

“I’ll talk to you on Monday,” she answered uneasily.

“Cynthia! You don’t really mean that I am not to see you until Monday? Anyway, I shall come to-morrow on the chance.”

“But you mustn’t! You must not! I shall never speak to you again if you do,” said Cynthia.

“Surely the old girl can’t object to Sunday visiting? If she does, she had better go back into the Ark and stay there by herself. She should not invite girls to stay,” he remonstrated.

“It is not that at all,” said Cynthia. “I am going out.”

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"But you're not going out to breakfast."

"No." Desperately, Cynthia saw that the picture of him raging there on the doorstep while the bacon cooled, had been no exaggerated one. "But I am going out immediately afterwards. And anyway it would not be convenient for you to come here."

"I can't make it all out," he insisted.

"Then don't try!" said Cynthia, suddenly losing her temper. "I have promised faithfully to lunch with you at the hotel on Monday on my way home and explain all about it, but if you can't possess your soul in patience and do as I ask until then, you must do the other thing. Only you need not regard yourself any longer as a friend of mine in that case. I have given you no right——"

"Oh, if you take it like that, of course——" His tone sounded easier, as if he knew now what all the trouble was about—no doubt resented any shadow of interference with her independence just at this moment, because she was inwardly sure that she had found her master. Little, spirited thing! He rather liked it in her. "All right, I'll take a run into the country tomorrow, and lunch with a man I know about thirty miles from here. Will that do?"

"I'm sorry to seem so horrid," said Cynthia, mollified at once.

"Well, I like your horridness better than any other girl's niceness, you know," he said.

"I wish——" began Cynthia, when she heard the noise of a latchkey rattling in the lock. "Oh, good-night, I must go now," she concluded hastily. "See you on Monday." Then she clashed down the receiver into its socket and turned toward the door. It would be Anthony com-

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ing home from his dinner, just at this unlucky moment. Now he would wonder what she was doing, of course, and begin to ask tiresome questions.

But he did nothing of the sort. "Oh!" he said lightly, after a brief peering into the gloom lit by her one candle. "It's you, is it? I thought at first it was a house fairy dusting the hall while everybody slept. I felt so delighted on mother's account—servant question settled, you know—for I hoped to induce her to take you on the situation permanently."

"So sorry!" said Cynthia, suddenly feeling quite happy. It was so lovely to have some one think just the same sort of things. Had they once played together in Fairyland long ago when they were too little to bring back any memories? Now Darnley Miller would have asked all sorts of stupid questions. "How do you think you were going to persuade her to stay?" she continued gaily. "No fairy could possibly breathe in this place where everything is so expensive and well padded. They want little draughty houses with the wind blowing down the chimney and red bricks on the floor."

"Of course," said Anthony. "I didn't think of that."

Cynthia looked at him over the candle in her hand, and it cast a beautiful rosy light on the curve under her chin, leaving her eyes shadowy. "How would you make the fairy housemaid want to stay?" she said.

He came nearer; and as he looked down at her, the pale face with the dark lock of hair on the forehead and heavily-lidded eyes also caught the upward glow of the candle. "I wish I knew," he answered.

"Knew what?" The lights and shadows flickered as the candle shook very slightly in her hand.

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"Well——" He paused and held the other side of the candlestick. "The way to make her want to stay."

"How should I know?"

"Anyway, you shall see me try," he said.

She laughed and left the candlestick in his hand. "How ridiculous you are!"

"You've been slow in finding that out. My best friends have known it for years," he answered.

"Still," she said, "I'm not a bit like a fairy."

"No," he said. "I don't think you are!"

She was suddenly grave, looking at him with a question in her eyes. Was all this delightful nonsense just a sign that he did not care enough to ask what she was doing down there alone with all the house asleep? Would Darnley Miller's tiresome, direct questions have denoted more real feeling? Was the whole thing, from beginning to end, only Pierrot taking his pleasure out of the passing moment? Was there nothing real in it at all?

"I must be going upstairs again now," she said soberly; and she gave him a plain fact to reassure herself. "I came down to use the telephone. I had——"

Both started and looked toward the stairs. Mr. Walgrove in soft bedroom slippers and dressing-gown was advancing rather cautiously down them. And at first he saw only his son, candle in hand. "Oh, that you, Anthony? We thought we heard voices. Your mother got nervous and——" He broke off as his more accustomed eyes made out Cynthia among the shadows. "Nellie! You here?"

"Yes," said Cynthia meekly.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. Then he tramped down to the bottom of the stairs, switched on

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the light and caused the enchanted dimness to vanish in an instant. The three people there stood harshly revealed as an elderly gentleman with his bald place unconcealed, a young man in evening dress holding a candle, and a girl who was supposed to be in bed and asleep. The next instant a fourth person appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Who is down there?" drawled Feo. "What's going on?"

"Robbery with violence," said Anthony.

"Don't be foolish, Anthony," said Mr. Walgrove.

"I came down to speak to a friend on the telephone," said Cynthia. "I'm very sorry to have disturbed everybody."

"I daresay you are," said Feo, rather unpleasantly.

Then Mrs. Walgrove also emerged, holding her brow. "Really, this is most inconsiderate," she said. "You all know what a dreadful headache I have had during the day, and now I am thoroughly roused I shall have no sleep all night. I heard voices, and as I knew every one but Anthony was in bed I thought there were burglars in the house. That charwoman we had to-day was a stranger; and with so many burglaries about——"

"Well, I must confess I should have thought your friend might have waited until to-morrow," said Mr. Walgrove.

"Anyway, it seems rather fortunate you were obliged to do it just at the time Anthony came home," said Feo, going back toward her room. "Always nice to have company when you are telephoning."

"If you think I came down here to waylay Anthony, you are mistaken," retorted Cynthia, flaming out at the

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subtle insult in Feo's tone. She saw at once what this woman thought her—the type of nursery-governess of whom one reads in old-fashioned books, who desperately pursue sons of the house into dark corridors and shrubberies in the hope of entrapping them into an indiscretion which may lead to marriage. For the facts of life were known plainly enough to Cynthia, though they rested lightly on the surface of her mind because she had not yet learned to apply them.

“What had you to telephone about at this time of night?” said Mrs. Walgrove, tall and precise in a dark kimono, but with her fringe in curling pins.

“About going out to lunch,” said Cynthia.

“Utterly unnecessary!” said Mr. Walgrove, glancing uneasily at his wife—both began to feel alarmed lest their son should really be going to make a fool of himself about this girl.

“Lunch unnecessary? Oh, I always enjoy my mid-day meal,” said Cynthia with unpardonable flippancy; her only excuse being that she had practically never been addressed in this tone before.

“When I requested my wife to invite you to my house,” boomed Mr. Walgrove, also beginning to lose his temper, “I did not anticipate this sort of thing——”

“What sort of thing?” said Anthony. “It is not a crime to telephone to a friend at twelve o'clock at night, Father. And it was entirely my fault that Nellie remained down here a few minutes talking to me. I wouldn't let her go upstairs.”

“Nonsense!” said Mr. Walgrove.

“How could you prevent her?” said Mrs. Walgrove.

“I held the other side of the candlestick.”

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Anthony looked at them composedly and spoke in such a quiet tone that they did not realize how angry he was; but Cynthia, who was close to him, could see by his lips that he was at white heat.

"Like a farce with a chambermaid," muttered Mr. Walgrove disgustedly. "I didn't think you went in for that sort of thing, Anthony."

"I tell you," said Anthony trying to restrain himself, "that I kept Nellie down here, and if you wish to blame anybody you must blame me. I don't know what you're all driving at. I think you must be mad. I won't have it. Do you hear? I won't have her insulted in this way."

"No one meant——" began Mr. Walgrove: but Anthony was not to be stopped.

"I'll make Feo apologize," he stormed. "Mother, you ought to apologize. It's disgraceful! We get a girl here, in bad health, unprotected——"

"No one can say she seems run down now," interrupted Mrs. Walgrove, irritated beyond all discretion by that bitter experience of a mother when her son first leaves her side to defend another woman. "I begin to wonder if ill-health was the real reason for her leaving her last situation, or if she——"

"Stop!" interrupted Anthony. "I won't have it. Do you hear? I won't have it!"

"Hush!" said Cynthia, pale and distressed at the sight of mother and son quarrelling over her. "I daresay it did look bad. And you must remember I am a stranger to you all. Your mother might naturally think that—I—I wanted to flirt with you. It has seemed like that since I came here, hasn't it?"

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"I won't have you spoken to in that way," repeated Anthony, breathing quickly.

"Anthony!" cried his mother in a voice they had never heard from her before. "What is this girl to you?"

"I don't know yet, Mother," he said, ominously calm all of a sudden. "But I am going to find out to-morrow." Then he turned to Cynthia. "Will you come out for a walk with me to-morrow afternoon?"

Cynthia gave one quick glance and slipped past them, saying neither Yes nor No. Whatever had to be thrashed out between herself and Anthony should be done alone, not with Mrs. Walgrove as a spectator: for she instinctively knew that Anthony's calm was only rage gone inward, and she would not listen to a repetition of a proposal forced out of him by circumstances, when he might regret it in the morning. Her own pride revolted at the bare idea of it, even while she glowed at the romance of his attitude towards the little governess without home or friends whom he believed himself to be defending. She was bewildered between her thoughts about the imaginary Cousin Nellie she had first pictured, the real one whom she had afterwards seen, and that other one whom Anthony imagined her to be. A queer sense of unreality and confusion went with her up the stairs—that slipping away of personality which most imaginative people experience at least once in their lives—and she seemed to be standing outside of herself, watching all this happen to somebody else.

But the feeling was only momentary, and had passed before she reached her own room. Then she was only conscious of an intense satisfaction that something had kept her from telling Mr. Walgrove she was Cynthia

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Rayburn. Chiefly, because she felt Anthony must not be told like that—but also because she was fiercely angry with the Walgrove family and glad to let them believe for a few hours that their only son had been driven by their interference into a foolish marriage with a designing and penniless young woman. Was *that* the side life turned to girls who were pretty and poor and had no one to stand up for them? Oh! when she was married, and middle-aged, and had a house, how decent she would be to girls, even those who seemed silly, if they had no one to back them up!

She walked up and down the room like a tigress in a cage at first, but little by little her wrath subsided. She recalled once more how Anthony had looked when his mother asked what there was between them. Did he really love her or not? What would he tell her the next day when they walked out together? As she remembered his kisses, and the touch of his long fingers on her hand, she felt doubtful. Men who meant seriously by girls did not kiss them on first meeting as he had done. Still he might believe the same of her, and she had never allowed herself to be treated in that way by a man in her life before. That was no proof. There was such a thing as love at first sight: and besides, he saw in her all those fairy-tale girls he had loved the whole of his boyhood—

The spark of light thus kindled began to grow and grow until at last it flooded her mind like sunrise, and every thought took on tints of rose-colour. He had kissed just because she seemed to him the girl he had loved all the time. As she lay there, she pictured him at nine years old, with his black head bent over the story book, and her heart went out to him with a new tenderness.

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Dear Anthony! He should have his princess and his golden coach and his palace—or the modern equivalents—and they would live happy ever after.

As she fell asleep, it was the smile of a mother that curved her innocent lips—the smile which means true love: and her last waking thought was of what she hoped to give.

CHAPTER X

THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE

If a person who had never seen the sea before were to walk at low tide on sands covered with footprints, sand-castles and other signs of human occupation, and were then to return in a few hours when they lay blank and untrodden by the foot of man—he or she might share the sensations of Cynthia when she came down to breakfast next morning. For it seemed as if that midnight scene had never taken place. Anthony handed the toast to his mother rather more attentively than usual, Mr. Walgrove kept mentioning the Sunday paper which had not yet arrived, and Chloe, who was allowed down to breakfast on this day of the week, engrossed most of the conversation.

Cynthia had no clue as to what had taken place in the hall after she went upstairs to bed, but it was clear enough that some sort of general agreement had been arrived at by the entire family. Was Anthony in it? Or had the rest determined to let that queer episode be as if it never had been, feeling that opposition would only make Anthony more “ridiculous”? Chloe—who might as a rule be trusted to let daylight into any corner that the family wished to keep dark—was so engrossed in a contention about going to church that she left the world, for once, to manage itself unaided. “I don’t see,” she repeated,

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“why grown-ups should stay at home from church any more than little girls.”

“I went when I was little, Chloe,” said her mother.

“Like you ate porridge, but as soon as you needn’t, you didn’t,” retorted Chloe. “When I’m grown-up——”

“Be quiet, Chloe!” said Mrs. Walgrove. “Cousin Nellie will take you. Won’t you, Nellie?”

“Yes, if you like,” said Cynthia, smiling into the frowning little face that had such a look of Anthony.

“I don’t see how we can have any fun on a Sunday,” said Chloe doubtfully. Then a smile began to glimmer in her great, sombre eyes. Perhaps Cynthia would think of something jolly, even in spite of Sunday and church. There were no butchers’ carts, of course, but any sort of outing with Cynthia seemed to open up a range of undreamed-of possibilities.

Then Grannie spoilt everything by saying: “I think I shall go too.”

And Cynthia, despite her preoccupation, was almost unable to stifle a chuckle; for it was so evident that Mrs. Walgrove had followed Chloe’s train of thought, and that she also felt an ordinary walk to church and back might provide food for adventure. “I really believe she thinks I’m capable of standing up in the middle of the sermon and throwing my Prayer Book at the parson. No wonder, poor woman!” said Cynthia to herself. Which conclusion proved that her anger had died down in the night, as usual, and that she was able to make allowances.

Anthony said not one word to Cynthia which the most ingenious mind could interpret as a sign of sentimental interest. “Marmalade? Won’t you have some more

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toast?" Not even the solicitor of Mrs. Bardell could have made anything of that; and all his brief remarks, passing over the expanse of white cloth, seemed to be chilled and sterilized as if they had crossed a frozen plain.

She put on her hat and coat in a most extraordinary state of mind—not knowing if Anthony had actually meant to tell her on the previous night that he was going to take her for a walk to-day in order to ask her to be his wife, or if she had given some absolutely mistaken interpretation to a hasty remark. Everything in her life so far had seemed so clear and straight—so amenable to her arranging—that this sense of powerlessness bewildered her. She fumbled with the buttons of her gloves as she came down into the hall, feeling physically unnerved and uncertain of herself.

All the family were grouped near the fire-place in the hall, with the bronze clock tick-ticking in the midst of them. Feo held the box of chocolates which Cynthia had left downstairs on the previous night, and was just opening it. "I wonder where this came from? Oh, here is a card! Darnley Miller! Who's Darnley Miller? Is he a friend of yours, Marjorie?"

"Look!" piped Chloe. "There's some writing on the back of the card."

"Oh, please," said Cynthia, hurrying forward. "I'm so sorry. It is mine."

"Yours?" said Marjorie bluntly. "I didn't know you had any men friends in Mabingstoke. But perhaps it came by post?"

"It came last night," said Cynthia, slipping the card into her Prayer Book, and she added quickly: "Do take them, Feo. I don't want them."

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"It's an awfully expensive box," said Chloe. "As expensive as the one Mr. Medway bought Mummy for Christmas, and he has oceans of money. Is this gentleman rich, Cousin Nellie? Where does he live? I wonder why people talk about having oceans of money, don't you?"

Anthony glanced once at Cynthia's face, and then looked down at his niece. "I can tell you that, Chloe. They think about the bottom of the sea, and imagine all the gold that ever was sunk in shipwrecks since the beginning of the world. That's why you talk about oceans of money."

"I do wish, Uncle Anthony," said Chloe impatiently, "that you wouldn't be so silly."

"But all niceness has silliness on its other side," argued Anthony, willing to keep her away from the subject of Darnley Miller. "That's why so many people miss the nice silliness."

"Mummy," said Chloe indignantly, "make him talk sense!"

"'Fraid I can't just now, Chloe," said Feo in her slow way, lighting a cigarette, for she knew well enough that Anthony was only talking to cover Cynthia's embarrassment; also that he was aware of being understood and did not care.

"Chloe dear," said Mrs. Walgrove, "have you got a clean pocket handkerchief? It is time we were going."

"Mind you say a word for me, Chloe," said Marjorie.

"Here, Chloe," said Mr. Walgrove. "Here is your money for the collection."

So they all spoke directly to the child, using her to tide over their own constraint as a party of grown-up

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people very often will do. But at the door, whither Anthony had followed the church-goers, he remarked in his ordinary tone: "I think it will be fine after all. Still inclined for a walk this afternoon, Nellie?"

The blood rushed to her cheeks, but she forced herself to reply with a fair imitation of his carelessness: "Oh, yes! I always enjoy a good walk."

"Half-past two—too early?" And as she shook her head, he added: "I'll be here at half-past, then."

Mrs. Walgrove turned to Cynthia as they walked away down the path: "Anthony often goes for a walk on a Sunday afternoon. He gets the girls to go with him sometimes; but if any one is staying here, they are glad to be let off."

"Yes—are they?" responded Cynthia, aimlessly, for she was not attending to what she said.

Supposing, she thought to herself, this public invitation to walk had been settled on as a means of putting the whole ridiculous affair on the right footing. That would, of course, be a sensible and not undignified way out—for Anthony and herself as well; and perhaps it had been decided on last night when the first heat of his annoyance passed off.

Cynthia glanced at her companion, feeling that Mrs. Walgrove could be very tactful and discreet, within narrow limits, when nothing happened to upset her judgment; perfectly able to either propose or fall in with such a plan, and never normally employing such crude methods as she had used the night before in her sudden anger and alarm.

She even passed fitting remarks on the road and the weather as they went along, though annoyed by her self-

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imposed task of seeing that her husband's tiresome relative did not lead Chloe into any mischief or further disgrace the family. Butchers' carts were not available to-day, but she felt that this girl might easily find something else equally undesirable.

Chloe, however, filled in the gaps in the conversation, and at last Cynthia took her place in the middle aisle, feeling that Mrs. Walgrove might well bear a little more anxiety, before being rewarded for giving reluctant house-room to a country cousin by finding she had achieved the heiress without knowing it. Cynthia pictured, rather cynically, how original and charming they would all find her stupid, practical joke when it suited them to do so, and she felt exasperated to think that she had to do just what they had planned or give up Anthony.

But little by little the quiet of the service soothed her excitement, and her real sense of humour made her able to see, with a certain amusement, how her joke had turned boomerang-like against herself. Her aunt Harriet had always told her she would one day fall into a trap of her own setting, and she had done it now with a vengeance.

After a while she began to dream of the walk in the afternoon; and she was unconsciously influenced by the evidence of wealth near her, and perhaps by her neighbours' thoughts, to feel once more that wealth gave people a sort of right to preferential treatment, even by the little god who is supposed to be utterly impartial. And her gay certainty of herself was so restored before they left church, that she was capable of good-humouredly putting Mrs. Walgrove out of her misery, if it had not been necessary to tell Anthony first.

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But when she got home the pendulum swung back again; for in Anthony's actual presence, she could not help being aware of things in him on which she could not calculate. And when, finally, they set out together for their walk, she was nervous and garrulous—talking fast about everything they saw, without much regard to his replies. The afternoon was sunless and the deserted streets looked blank and grey in a keen wind; there was nothing to invite sentiment. Cynthia wondered how long they were going to walk like this at a round pace of four miles an hour, chattering about nothing, with grit in their teeth from the dusty wind. Would they just be going on and on like this, then turn round and quick march home to tea? It certainly began to look like it.

At last she grew silent. They were nearing the outskirts of the town now, and a real brook ran by the roadside. After a while they saw a little, old red-brick bridge that crossed the brook and led to a garden which had been a cottage garden only a few years ago. Lavender stalks were there, and box-edgings to the path, while the colour-washed house had a door in the middle and a window on either side. A woman was looking out of the window, and she nodded to Anthony, then appeared at the door.

"Come in, Mr. Anthony," she said cheerfully. "So you've brought a young lady with you? Are you wanting a cup of tea?"

"This is my cousin, Miss Nellie Walgrove," he said. "Nellie, this is the very first friend I ever had. She knew me when I was going to marry Cinderella, though I never told her a word about that, did I, Nanny?"

"Hear him?" laughed the jolly old woman, leading the

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way in. "Always one to talk a lot o' nonsense, Miss Nellie. But I can see him now—all crouched up near the nursery fender with his nose in a book."

Cynthia's eyes glowed as they met those twinkling old ones. She felt she knew exactly how he had looked then, too, though she had never seen him as a child. "He'd always have that black hair rumpled up on his forehead," she said.

The old woman looked very keenly at her for a moment, then turned away. "Well, kettle's on. I never know when Mr. Anthony's coming, and when he isn't."

Cynthia spoke to Anthony, not looking at him. "So you often bring your mother's visitors here on a Sunday afternoon?"

"Not many of them," he answered.

The old woman spoke with her back to them.

"You're the first, Miss Nellie; only he doesn't want to make you proud by telling you so."

"She's a relation, you see," said Anthony lightly.

Cynthia opened her lips, and then closed them again, but she wished very much that she had made everything straight with Anthony on the way here, for the atmosphere of the little house seemed to make any sort of deceit, however harmless, seem out of place. "I'm glad you brought me," she said simply. Then to the old nurse: "Anthony and I began by having a meal together the first night I arrived. Everybody else was out, so we had supper on a little table just like yours before the fire."

"We played at being a Pierrot and a Goose-Girl," he went on. "It was great fun, Nanny."

"Oh, you and your fun!" chuckled Nanny, putting the

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teapot down on the table. "Do you know, Miss Nellie, he went on playing he was a horse, and standing outside shops on one leg, and neighing when spoken to, until he had to be sent to bed for it. You couldn't stop him no other. But he ought to have got cured by now, poor lad, after all he's been through. It near killed me when he was out in the war, Miss Nellie." And tears came into her eyes.

Cynthia's own brightened with answering emotion, but she said lightly: "You didn't punish him enough, Mrs. Walker. I shouldn't a bit wonder if he still stands on one leg and neighs, when he is by himself."

"And he used to give me such names, Miss Nellie. (Have a bit of this home-made apple-jelly, do!) One time it would be a witch and at another something else—and no power on earth wouldn't stop him talking to me as if I was the one he said. I'm sure I don't know where he gets it from. There was never no nonsense of that sort with Miss Feo and Miss Marjorie, nor I don't believe neither Mr. nor Mrs. Walgrove went on like that when they was little, either."

"I'm a changeling," said Anthony. "When I was in my cradle——"

"For goodness' sake!" said Nanny, throwing herself back in her chair and laughing heartily. "I do believe he'd begin again now, at his age, for tuppence, Miss Nellie. I do believe he would indeed. He'd better be a horse than a changeling."

"You've never seen one," said Anthony. "You don't know what they're like. I do. They are very interesting fellows when they grow up."

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“What do they do?” said Nanny. “Plague their old nurses’ lives out, I expect.”

Cynthia sat rather silent, listening to the merry talk that went on between these two. She was conscious of being admitted to a delicate intimacy between this young man and this old woman which charmed her and yet made her ashamed of having anything to conceal. She was afraid of jangling it by a false note. But as she sat there, her feeling for Anthony gradually changed from a girl’s fancy to something far deeper and more lasting. He seemed so boyish and kind—not at all the Fairy Prince or the Pierrot, but a man who would be very good to the girl he married. When they turned to her, she could not reply as she would have done at any time of her life before this day. Nanny looked at the soft eyes and tremulous lips with understanding—even while laughing at Anthony’s ridiculous speeches—and almost hoped Miss Nellie might be the one, in spite of the lack of money. Mr. Anthony was a lad to have his heart broken by the wrong wife, even if she were a good wife—though nobody wouldn’t ever know it.

When tea was over she went rather stiffly to the corner cupboard and brought out a little bag of lavender which she presented to her young guest.

“That’s a sign of high favour, Nellie,” said Anthony.

“It’s a sign I hope you’ll come to see me again, my dear,” said the old woman. “Not that it’ll be here, though, because I am leaving this house and going to live with my niece. They say I’m too old to live alone, though I’m sure I feel hearty enough.”

As they went away down the road, Anthony said: “Do you see why I brought you here?”

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"I'm glad you wanted me to know her," said Cynthia.

He shook his head. "Wrong guess! Try again." He put his hand through her arm and made her stand still. "So you like the little house? I'm so glad, Nellie, because—I want you to live in it with me!"

She started and he could feel her; but he could not know how her happiness was clouded by the thought that they could never live together in the little house, as he had planned. Then she let that go; she would not spoil this sweetest moment of her life—which could never come back again—by arguments and explanations that could just as well be made three hours later. She belonged to a generation that takes its fun and lets the paying go. But the words that sprang to her lips were quite different from any she desired to say. "Oh, Anthony, you're sure you *want* to? You're sure you're not doing it just because of what they said to me last night?"

"That certainly brought things to a climax earlier than I intended. I might have thought I was not justified in taking a wife yet," he said straightforwardly. "But you are the only girl I ever wanted to marry. I don't mean I have never felt drawn towards a girl before, but I have never wished to marry. I don't believe men do, as a rule, until they want a girl so much they can't help it. It's different from a girl. She thinks of marriage first and finds the man after. Don't you see?"

"You're sure you would have wanted to marry me in the end, even without what happened last night?" said Cynthia.

He glanced up and down the lonely road; then put his arm round her. "You really *are* a Goose-Girl! Can't

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you see I fell head over ears in love with you at first sight?" he said.

Then a pedestrian appeared in the distance round the next corner and their moment was over. "Dash it! A man who lives near us," said Anthony. "He's short-sighted, but not quite short-sighted enough." And he had to let her go.

"O Anthony, it is so wonderful! I can't believe it," she said.

"I'll tell you the rest to-night," he said. "But the marvellous thing really is that you care for me."

"I never expected to fall in love in this way," said Cynthia. "I saw an old book at home, just before I came away, called *Of Loving at First Sight*—and I remember thinking, how silly!"

"I know the book," he said. "Waller's lines to the Lady would just suit you."

'Some other nymphs with colours faint,
And pencil slow may Cupid paint,
And a weak heart in time destroy:
She has a stamp and prints the boy.'

That's what you did to me, you know."

"Did I? O Anthony!"

They were nearing the short-sighted gentleman now, and began talking again to hide their happiness from him.

"I'm very glad you liked the little house," said Anthony. "Some girls would think it inconvenient and too far from the residential part of the town. You're sure you do like it?"

"It is the dearest little house I ever saw," she answered;

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and almost wished she were indeed going to this yellow-washed cottage with a window on either side of the door and the green shutters.

“My father’s grandfather lived and died there, but we don’t say much about it,” continued Anthony. “You never begin to boast of small beginnings in Mabingstoke until your endings are tremendous; and we Walgroves have never got beyond the medium. Nanny has lived there for the last ten years; but the house actually belongs to me—all the landed property I ever shall possess, I daresay.” Then his voice deepened, and she felt a note in it penetrate to her inmost heart. “All the time we were having tea I kept thinking of you and me there by ourselves, Nellie.”

Nellie—that last word spoilt everything. Should she tell him now and get it over? After all, there was nothing to be so ridiculously afraid of. Anthony could not object to finding he had wooed a Goose-Girl and found a Princess, with a palace and a coffer full of gold. No sane man could—but though she argued thus, she had a little, cold doubt in the bottom of her heart that would not be dispersed. Then she saw the short-sighted gentleman suddenly wave his stick in greeting.

“There! I know what it will be,” murmured Anthony. “He has made me out at last, and nothing will prevent his turning back with us. He’s impervious to hints. His short-sightedness has gone inwards.”

And truly enough, the pedestrian began to call out before he reached them: “Well met! Well met! Now we can walk back together. I was wanting to see you, Miss Marjorie.” He came a step or two further. “Oh,

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I beg your pardon. I thought it was Miss Marjorie. My sight——”

“This is Miss Nellie Walgrove, my father’s cousin,” said Anthony.

“Yes! Yes! And how do you like Mabingstoke?” said the gentleman, reassured; for, as it was only a cousin, he felt he might join them after all.

Cynthia replied mechanically, thinking how very awkward it would be when the situation had to be explained to the Mabingstoke people whom she had already encountered. She ought never to have placed herself and them in such a false position. It had not been fair, either to the Walgroves or to their friends with whom she would afterwards come in contact.

Anthony bore the chief burden of the conversation as they walked three abreast through the grey streets. The early dusk was beginning to fall, and their footsteps clanged drearily along empty pavements where workmen thronged during the week. But Cynthia’s horizon was gradually filling with lovely colours as she walked silent beside her lover. Love had never risen over the edge of the world before as it was doing now—they were the first ever to see those subtle tones of rose and violet—it had never been just like that for any other lovers since the beginning of time—

So she felt, as Anthony tramped along discussing the great tramway question, which was agitating the city, with that unconscious old man of the sea; and so millions have felt before. Yet feeling is often a short cut to truth, and she had happened on it; for the dawn of love in human life is indeed as everlastingly different as the dawn of every day.

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“Well, Good-bye! Good-bye! Trust we shall meet again,” said the neighbour at last, breaking in upon her thoughts. “You must come and have tea with my wife,” he added kindly, because he considered her a nice quiet girl, who would, no doubt, be fond of knitting.

Anthony touched her wrist as the neighbour went off, and she turned quickly towards him, again experiencing the thrill which contact with those long fingers always gave her. “I only want to make sure you are real flesh and blood,” he said. “I can’t help having a sort of feeling that we are people in a sort of fairy-tale after all—with the last chapter just overleaf.”

“Can’t you?” She smiled at him; then the smile faded slowly. “Well, perhaps you’re right,” she answered. “I have something to tell you after tea, Anthony.”

“Why not now?” he said, looking down at her with a whimsical smile—liking her so and yet tenderly laughing at her—which is the attitude that belongs only to the true lover. “Foolish Goose-Girl, have you been selling some of your eggs to buy yourself a ribbon for the fair? I’ll have to punish you to-night.”

“It is serious,” she said, looking away from him.

CHAPTER XI

THE UNEXPECTED THAT ALWAYS HAPPENS

TEA was just over when they went in, and the various members of the family were seated about the hall reading, smoking and eating Darnley Miller's chocolates. Feo wore something clinging and fluffy, while Marjorie's dress was more in keeping with her mental outlook—for, like many dull people, she had determined as she couldn't be merry to make rather a show of being wise. Meanwhile Chloe kept eating "just one more," being reproved for it sharply but with no deterrent effect, and Mrs. Walgrove sat engrossed in a magazine which assumed that every normal reader possessed maids, motor-cars and a Pekinese dog.

"Had a pleasant walk?" said Marjorie. "I suppose you went to see Nanny, did you, Anthony?"

"Yes. Cheery as usual," said Anthony. "She and Nellie got on like a house on fire."

"Oh!" Marjorie glanced at Cynthia. "We are all devoted to her," which in truth they were—though they made rather a parade of an old retainer so very presentable.

"A delightful old woman," said Cynthia mechanically. For the atmosphere seemed heavy with the dull things they had been thinking all the afternoon, and it weighed on her though she was so happy. "I think I'll go up

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and take off my hat," she said. And when she came down again, the hall was occupied only by Mr. Walgrove. But in a few moments there was a ring at the bell and he rose hastily, desiring to escape.

"Ridiculous nonsense, our having thrown the morning-room into the hall," he muttered; "might as well live in a cottage with the room door opening on the street." And he left Cynthia to answer the bell, feeling that as he was giving her an asylum, with great personal annoyance to himself, she could do him that service, at any rate.

"Is Mrs. Walgr——" began the dark figure on the doorstep; then suddenly broke off. "Oh, it's you, Miss Rayburn. So you are still here?"

"Miss Walgrove!" exclaimed Cynthia, glancing behind her. "Oh! I—I—before any of them come, I have to tell you something. There's no time to explain, or to put it in the right way. But indeed, indeed, I only meant it for a joke, and because I resented the way they thought they were treating you."

Nellie Walgrove pulled away sharply from Cynthia's detaining hand—as well as she might—for the words did in themselves sound utterly meaningless. "How could they treat me badly when I was not here?" she said. "Please tell Mrs. Walgrove at once——"

"But I *can't* tell them till I have explained," said Cynthia desperately. "They—they thought it was you, when it was really me, because—because I told them I was you."

Nellie receded a few steps. "You told them you were me! What do you mean?"

"I know it sounds utterly mad. I've no time to explain. I'll tell you everything later on. I only want to

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beg you and pray of you to go away for a couple of hours——”

“But I’m only here for a couple of hours,” interrupted Nellie. “I came over with my friends from Midgeley for the day. The Vicar was preaching here this morning, and we are being sent back by car at six o’clock,” she continued, naturally surprised and offended. “I just thought I ought to run in and see the Walgroves as I was in Mabingstoke. I did not desire to appear rude after their invitation, though——”

“Then you can still go back and they’ll never know you have been,” cried Cynthia. “Oh, thank goodness! Now I can make everything perfectly right and let you know to-morrow before lunch. I promise you I will.” And she put her hand on Nellie’s arm, urging her towards the door.

“I certainly shall not go away without seeing the Walgroves, if that is what you mean,” said Nellie very coldly, disengaging herself. “There seems to me something very strange in all this. You use my name without being able to give any satisfactory explanation, and are evidently anxious to get me out of the house.”

“I know it must seem odd. But I swear it was only a joke to begin with,” urged Cynthia.

“I see no joke at all,” said Nellie.

“Oh! It’s not one *now*, worse luck!” said Cynthia. “The fact is, I’m engaged to Anthony Walgrove, and *he* thinks I’m you, too!”

But if you really are Cynthia Rayburn, the heiress, why didn’t you say so?” said Nellie. “They would not have liked you any the worse for that, I should imagine.”

“Well, I was——” She heard sounds. “I can’t go into

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it now. But if you'll only go away quietly, I'll get Love-and—I mean Mr. Henderson—a living. A sure as we stand here I will. One that has a house with roses, and a study looking out on the lawn——”

“If you could get him made an *Archdeacon*, I would not sell my conscience, nor would he,” said Nellie, rendered doubly temptation-proof by the conviction that Cynthia had no more power to bestow a living than a slice of the moon—but meaning it, all the same.

Cynthia swiftly glanced at the slim, red hand now encased in a glove and thought of the chin of Love-and-kisses-John. It was perfectly true. Strangely enough wealth had no power over these two people, and it was vain to cajole or bribe. She threw herself upon the mercy of another girl in love.

“Look here; it's dreadfully important that I should tell Anthony myself in my own way. He—he's different from some people. I don't know how he might take it. I don't care about the Walgroves. They'll be all right, as soon as they know, because of the money. But he is——”

“Oh, Mrs. Walgrove,” cried Nellie, hurrying forward as that lady walked precisely down the stairs, “I can't make out what has happened. I am Nellie Walgrove, of course—and yet this young lady says she has pretended——”

“Pretended!” ejaculated Mrs. Walgrove aghast, all sorts of suspicions rushing through her mind. Then she turned to Cynthia: “Is this true?”

“Y-yes—at least—— It really is not as bad as it seems, Mrs. Walgrove. I know I behaved in a perfectly ridiculous manner, and I never meant to go on masque-

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reading as Miss Nellie Walgrove for more than just tea-time—but you know how you get led on from one thing to another,” said Cynthia. “I’m really most awfully sorry and ashamed. I am indeed.”

“Who are you, then?” demanded Mrs. Walgrove.

“I——” Cynthia moistened her lips, and her troubled gaze went past Mrs. Walgrove to Anthony, who had just come in with his father and sisters from the dining-room. “I’m Cynthia Rayburn.”

“That’s unbelievable,” said Mr. Walgrove. “You must think of some better tale than that, young woman.”

“Oh!” She pushed back her hair impatiently from her forehead. “I never knew what a fool I was until now I have to tell about it! Anthony, do, *do* try to understand! I had a motor spill on the way here, and an old woman lent me some clothes because I was thrown out into a deep ditch and got wet through. My maid was to join me at the hotel with the luggage, but I didn’t know if she had arrived or not, and so I came straight on here. She is the friend whom I have been to see, and if she had not been so used to my nonsense she would have gone away. You can ring her up now, and she’ll tell you——”

“Was she the woman you introduced me to that first evening at the hotel?” said Anthony evenly; but Cynthia’s heart fell at the tone of his voice, though she could not have told why.

“Yes. But I—I’d got started being silly then, and I didn’t want to spoil our dance, the next night,” she faltered.

“It could have spoiled nothing, surely, to let us know you were the girl we were all looking out for,” said Marjorie.

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"What put the idea into your head—if you *are* Cynthia Rayburn, that is?" said Feo.

"Chloe. That is, she quite naturally took me for a poor relation when she saw me in those awful clothes. And I thought it would be a lark to play at being the country cousin. Of course, I had never seen Miss Nellie Walgrove. I just did it for a joke, and then it went on and on——" She looked round her appealingly. "You know how things do go on and on." But no one, apparently, did know.

"There's something more we have not been told," said Feo. "Did Chloe inform you that we wanted Anthony to marry the heiress, by any chance? Because if so, and if you really are Cynthia Rayburn, that might make you feel inclined to take a rise out of us."

"If we ever did mention such a thing, it was only because we love our boy and want him to have the best of everything," pleaded Mrs. Walgrove, suddenly so humble that it hurt and exasperated Anthony.

"I know that," said Cynthia gently. "I do wish I had not done it, Mrs. Walgrove."

"I still can't understand why you kept it up so long," said Marjorie.

"No," agreed Cousin Nellie. "I must agree that there seems to have been no possible object in such a course of action."

"What was your reason?" said Mr. Walgrove, relenting slightly from his magisterial attitude. "I can understand a young lady of high spirit doing such a thing on the spur of the moment—not being without experience of jokes and so on myself. But to keep it up from Thursday to Sunday——"

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Cynthia looked at Anthony, but he did not help her: then at the faces where condemnation was being overlaid by the hope of favours to come: and, lastly, at the real Cousin Nellie, who remained just the same. Well, she'd got to blurt it before them all now, instead of whispering it to Anthony alone: perhaps that was her punishment. "I kept on," she said, "because I fell in love with Anthony on that very first evening—when he took the part of the poor little defenceless thing he believed I was, and gave me supper before the fire. And—and I thought—He's so queer in some ways, you know—I thought he might be put off if he knew I was the heiress you'd talked to him about. I did so want to have the dance with him, just the same. I didn't want to spoil it all. And—and after that, I got so afraid of losing him." She held out her hands with an unconsciously dramatic gesture. "Anthony, *you* can see how it was—can't you?"

"Go to her, Anthony," murmured Mrs. Walgrove. "The dear child! All impulse."

He went forward without eagerness, and Cynthia saw he was very angry; that his loyalty to his own people made for the moment a sort of shield which she could not pierce. She had mocked at them for weakness he knew them to possess, and there lay the sting.

"I think you might have told me this afternoon," he said.

"O Anthony!" she said, and began to cry softly. "I was so happy; I was afraid of anything being different, just because I was so happy."

"Anthony!" cried Feo. "I think it is beautiful. Don't you see how beautiful it all is?"

"I consider it utterly incomprehensible," said Nellie.

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Cynthia laughed tremulously, wiping her eyes. "This part has been dreadful at any rate."

"But it is over now," said Marjorie kindly.

"Yes." Anthony put his hands in his pockets because they shook and he could not prevent them. "That's the best of a fairy-tale. There's always another just as pretty overleaf. I hope your next will be a very sweet and happy one, Miss Cynthia."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Walgrove abruptly. "What are you talking about, Anthony? Can't you see she means it?"

Anthony shook his head. "You surely don't think I am going to take advantage of a child like this, with a huge fortune and all the world before her." He paused; then turned to Cynthia with an obvious effort. "I blame myself. All this is my fault as much as yours. But I'm not going to let your whole future be ruined by a silly practical joke. I didn't mean to marry you when I kissed you that first evening, and I might never have asked you but for what was said last night when they found us downstairs in the hall. Our engagement was a kind of accident, and we can both forget it. There is no need to offer home and protection to Miss Cynthia Rayburn: it's all the other way on. I'm saying this now, so that every one will understand the affair who knows anything at all about it."

"Then—then you did ask me because you felt you had to?" said Cynthia.

"Of course not," interposed Feo. "Anthony only wants to leave you free because he finds out he has inadvertently captured the affections of an heiress under his father's roof. Just like him!"

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"You know how perfectly ridiculous he is," added Marjorie.

"I expect he thinks of what people will say," added Cousin Nellie in her cut-and-dried little way. Then she turned to Mrs. Walgrove: "It was very kind of you to invite me to stay with you, but my friends at Midgeley have begged me to remain on there for a time. My plans are altered, owing to my engagement."

The discreet triumph, with which she brought that out, proved her to be human like the rest, after all, and Cynthia again felt more drawn to the girl for it, despite her own troubles.

"I have met Mr. Henderson, a clergyman who is certain to do well in his profession," she said.

"What! You know him?" exclaimed Marjorie.

"Yes," said Nellie, with some natural bitterness. "Miss Rayburn made him miss the Bishop at the Mabingstoke Railway Station. She took him into a refreshment-room without a clock to have tea and cake, and kept him there until his train had gone."

"You make me sound as if I were a film lady decoying him to his doom. I didn't know the clock had stopped, either. But I'm awfully sorry it happened," said Cynthia.

"Oh, it's a joke to you, of course," said Nellie, "but it probably means the loss of an appointment to my *fiancé*."

"I said I'd make things right, and I will; I promise I will," said Cynthia.

"Please keep to facts," said Nellie. "You no doubt think money will do everything, but it will not restore to my *fiancé* his lost chance. You may imagine you can buy him a living, but he would not accept one procured in that way, even if it were possible. You had no right

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to make fun of us all just for your own gratification without caring whom you injured; but money makes people selfish and callous: I don't envy you. I'd far rather wait and be poor with a clear conscience like John and myself. I——"

"I'm sure, my dear," interposed Mr. Walgrove, bringing his gallant manner to bear on this inconvenient relative of his, who stood there perfectly calm, with no heightening of colour, no raising of her voice, but an apparently inexhaustible stream of words flowing from her—like a stone image over a wayside spring. "I'm sure you know by this time that people behave unaccountably when they are in love. No doubt the excellent gentleman to whom you are engaged has already said and done things which you and he will think foolish twenty years hence. Only an unattractive woman fails to understand the follies of love."

"No amount of love," said Nellie, "would ever have made me dress myself up and pretend to be somebody else. But I suppose everybody to their own taste." She paused, glancing at the clock. "I am afraid I must be going to join my friends now."

"We shall see you again?" urged Mrs. Walgrove, with a sudden access of cordiality. "I hope you will come and see us when Cynthia has gone."

"Anthony, open the door for your cousin," said Mr. Walgrove, shaking his relative's hand with unfeigned relief.

When the farewells had been said, Anthony turned from speeding the parting guest to see the girls and Mrs. Walgrove buzzing round Cynthia like bees round a honey-pot. But they were not insincere, as he thought them,

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because her wealth had already thrown a glamour over her past actions and they did indeed genuinely consider the whole thing to be the spirited escapade of an original young woman—such a trick as one reads about in magazine stories. But Anthony did not realize all this, and he felt humiliated by their sudden change of demeanour. It hurt his pride, making him more abrupt and cold than he would otherwise have been. His first impulse was to clear out and leave them to make the best of the situation; but a strained note in Cynthia's voice, though she seemed her gay and undaunted self, caused him to stay where he was. A final explanation would have to come, and the sooner the better.

Even now Feo was paving the way for the inevitable interview between Cynthia and himself. "Well, I suppose it is time I went upstairs to say good-night to Chloe," she remarked.

"If you don't, you'll have her downstairs in her night-gown before you know where you are. Chloe isn't the sort of lady who waits where she's put," said Marjorie. And she also moved towards the stairs, just as a small figure rounded the turn towards the upper landing. "Oh, what did I tell you?"

"Go back to bed, Chloe; Grannie will come to you," said Mrs. Walgrove. But sharp little Chloe detected the signs of good temper in everybody and presumed upon them, capering cheerfully on as if nothing had been said, and calling out as she came: "Cousin Nellie! Cousin Nellie! Nurse says you're somebody else. *Are* you somebody else?"

The group advancing toward her stood stock still.

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"Nurse!" exclaimed Feo. "What does Nurse know about it? Where did she hear anything?"

"We both did," said Chloe candidly. "On the way to the bathroom we stopped because we heard such a talk going on down here. You can't help hearing things on the way to the bathroom unless you put your fingers in your ears!"

"This preposterous hall-sitting-room!" ejaculated Mr. Walgrove. "They have been hanging over the bannisters. I always disliked it, though you would insist upon it, Millicent." And he felt almost glad it had proved a nuisance, because his wife had so ruthlessly used her weapon of superiority to obtain it, hinting that she had always been accustomed to such country-house amenities, while he, of course, was not.

"Well," said Cynthia, coming forward. "You'll have to remember the new name, Chloe. I'm not any different, you know."

"No," agreed Chloe, "but they won't so much mind you being like that now, Nurse says, because you have so much money."

Cynthia laughed, then saw the frown on Anthony's brow and flushed a little. Of course, it was perfectly horrid, really.

Feo spoke sharply. "What nonsense you talk, Chloe!"

"Why is Nurse at home on a Sunday night?" said Marjorie, changing the subject.

"Oh, she has a cold, and preferred going out this morning instead," said Feo.

"She talks to Chloe a good deal too much," said Mr. Walgrove.

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“Hush!” said Mrs. Walgrove, glancing up the stairs. “She is most dependable. Go back to Nurse, Chloe.”

“But is it true Cousin Nellie—I mean Cynthia—is going to marry Uncle Anthony?” said Chloe.

“We hope so,” said Feo.

“And did he know all the time she was a rich lady?” Chloe persisted. “Nurse says he——”

“Of course not,” said Feo. “Go upstairs at once.”

Something made Chloe feel that her mother meant it this time, so turning tail she at once began to climb back to the upper regions saying as she went: “I *told* Nurse it was a real secret.”

There was a pause, everybody hoping Anthony had not noticed; then Feo followed her daughter, the other members of the family quietly disappeared under various pretexts, and Anthony and Cynthia were left alone.

CHAPTER XII

SEE-SAW

Cynthia watched Anthony as he stood near the mantel-piece with the firelight on his black hair and pale face. She had no clue as to what he was thinking, but she feared. It seemed to her that the other Anthony whom she loved might be receding under her very eyes into those places where she could never follow, and she not sure of it until she tried to find him. The silence grew oppressive, empty no longer, but charged with all sorts of things which hovered and could not be clearly seen— influences that drove her back from the boundaries of that retreat to which he had somehow strangely withdrawn. At last she could bear it no longer.

“Anthony,” she said, “the others have forgiven me and I have injured them most; can’t you?”

He shifted his position and looked down at her gravely.

“What for? For thinking you loved me, Cynthia?” he said. Then he glanced towards the stairs. “I wonder if Nurse is still employed in wearing out that carpet between the nursery and the bathroom. Shall we go and sit over there, out of her range?”

He pulled forward a chair shaded by a screen and sat down beside her. “You must see that what you have told us changes the situation,” he said.

“Yes,” said Cynthia quickly, hurt by his attitude. “You

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are generous enough to give, but not generous enough to take—is that it? When you thought I was the poor little dependent who needed your protection, you were all right, though you knew you were imprudent: for you saw yourself as the Fairy Prince and me as Cinderella. But can't you make up your mind to be the wandering Younger Son who gets a Princess? I can understand your being angry with me for the trick I played on your mother, but surely you can't want to punish me for that by making me unhappy all my life."

"If I thought I should do that——" he said. "But I know it is not so."

"You didn't think that when we walked home from the little house two or three hours ago. I have not changed since then," she answered.

"Perhaps not, but I did not see you as you were," he said. "I thought you needed taking care of, Cynthia."

"Oh! You needn't pretend!" she cried. "I won't believe you did it, only for that. You *did* fall in love with me. Have you forgotten what you said about loving at first sight?" She had risen and stood back from him, glowing and with eyes aflame. "No!" she concluded triumphantly. "You remember. Anthony, how could you be so mean as to try and deny having ever loved me?"

"I don't deny it," he sighed. "We have both been living for three days in a sort of fairy-tale, and now we have fallen with a bump into real life. It was delightful—it always will be the most delightful memory of my youth, I expect—but it was unreal, Cynthia."

"Anthony!" She strained after the other Anthony who was going so swiftly beyond hail. "You know the unreal

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things are the real ones nearly always—I don't need to tell you that."

He shook his head. "Perhaps—while you're in it—but when you're once out of it——"

The pause seemed to fill the room—to press round her until she could hardly breathe. "This is what I always knew," she said in a low voice. "You wondered why I stayed on so ridiculously from hour to hour, always making up my mind to go and yet not going, when a few words would have made everything plain and easy. We'll, I'll tell you. I see myself, now. I was afraid of this happening. But I thought when I once had you, you couldn't go."

"I took advantage of your quick imagination," he said heavily, for his mind had ceased to follow hers, and they were saying meaningless things to each other across a void, as they had done at the theatre. "It was all very well to cover my design up with fairy nonsense, but I ought not to have made love to you that first night, as I did. You were only a child, at the mercy of the first man who knew how to get near enough to kiss you and was cad enough to do it!"

"Oh, stop! stop!" said Cynthia, in a low voice. "Why do you see it like that now? Don't spoil my memory of you. That's even worse than losing you. You had no more design in doing what you did than I had. Why accuse yourself of such odious things?"

"It's true," he said.

"No," she answered. "Not for you and me, as we were then. O Anthony! How can you let my money change everything like this? You think you despise it, and yet you are more affected by it than any of them. I'd

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give it all away if I could, and if it would do any good. But you *can't* want me to behave like a stupid person in a second-rate movie. That's not the sort of unreality that is ever real——”

“You know I don't,” he said. “Such an act of folly would make my position absolutely intolerable. Even if we married, I should have to go through life feeling I had done you a great injury. Every single time I saw you short of money, or bothered about household things, I should have to know it was my fault.” He paused, then went on—for there is no one so brutally clear-sighted as the man who has just come out of glamour—“I should get to hate you.”

“You never loved me,” she answered bitterly. “It was the other Anthony. The one I shall never see any more.” Then she got up and walked away across the hall.

He watched her go, and once she quickly looked back at him. She reached the foot of the stairs. It seemed to her impossible that he should let her go like that. She went up one step. He *must* follow her. She mounted another. Now he would call. She strained her ears with listening, but would not look round again. At last she heard his voice speaking softly at the bottom of the stairs. “Can you come down again for a minute? I'm going out to-night, and perhaps you will not be down before I leave in the morning. I expect you will be going away to-morrow?”

She turned and came slowly down until they stood close together. “Yes, I'm leaving to-morrow morning. I had already arranged to do so before——”

She paused, and the tears which she could not keep back came into her eyes, though she tried to keep her

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voice steady. For in spite of her love and regret there was a thread of tinsel which was so twisted up with her life that she could not escape it—a feeling of offence that she should not have all she wanted when she was so well able to pay.

“You’re unhappy now,” he said. “But, believe me, in a few months’ time this will seem just like a dream. The time has been so short. You were pretending to be somebody else all the while. Before next year it’ll seem just like a play you once acted in. No more than that.”

She stood looking down, touching the carpet with the point of her toe; then she stopped doing it and looked up at him. “And you? What’ll you be thinking then?”

“Much the same, I expect,” he answered baldly: adding, as if the words came in spite of himself: “I shall always want you to be happy. You seem made for happiness.”

“Then you want me to forget you?” she said.

There was a slight pause; she saw his profile very stern and clear against the wall. “Yes,” he answered; “that’s the best thing you can do for us both.”

But the deep sadness could not be kept out of his voice, and to Cynthia those undertones sounded like joy-bells ringing so loudly that they hurt. She went very white and seized his hand in hers. “O Anthony! How can you be so cruel? You’ll spoil both our lives for nothing. I shall never marry if I don’t have you, never! You’ll just have to think of me as a lonely old maid, getting sourer and sourer——” She broke off, half-laughing, half-crying. “You know we couldn’t either of us ever think of anybody else. You know we couldn’t, Anthony. If I thought I’d forgotten you and was going to kiss somebody else, it would all rise up again in a minute directly

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they touched me. So you see it's no use. You've *got* to have me, because you've made me belong to you and I can't take myself back."

"You think so now," he said, taking his hand away, but not before she had felt it tremble. "In time you'll come to feel differently."

"Never!" she said. "I have never cared a scrap for any other man in my life, though there was one I thought I might marry before I came here. That was one reason why Aunt Harriet wanted me to stay with Mrs. Walgrove. She imagined it would all be rather quiet and simple here, entirely different—and that I could make up my mind better than when I was doing the ordinary round."

"Then you did think of marrying this man?" said Anthony.

"Only because he was suitable and made such a terrific point of it," urged Cynthia eagerly. "I thought I must marry some time, and I didn't seem any good at falling in love. I thought I was not that kind."

"But what about him?" said Anthony.

"Oh, he quite understood," said Cynthia. "*He* rather thought I was not that kind too."

"O Cynthia!" said Anthony, smiling at last. "You ridiculous Goose-Girl! No man ever could think that of you. You're made for love."

"Don't!" said Cynthia, suddenly beginning to cry heart-brokenly.

"Don't what?" asked Anthony.

"Why, smile at me in that awful way as if it hurt you inside—and all for nothing. I c-can't—bear it."

"Hush, dear! Now!" He put his arm round her and drew her head against his shoulder. "I can't bear to see

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you cry like this, either. We shall have to think out something different. Look here, how would it be if you were to let me know at the end of a year—supposing you still feel as you do now? Neither of us would be bound in any way, but we could meet again and talk things over. How would that be?"

"You're saying that because you don't believe I ever shall write," answered Cynthia. "You just want to let me down easily. But I don't care. You'll find out." She paused, pressing her forehead against his shoulder. "How can you be such an obstinate, awkward person, when you know you really are fond of me, Anthony?"

She felt his grasp tighten: then the sudden whirr of the telephone close at hand caused them to spring apart. Anthony went to the telephone.

"Yes! Yes! Miss Rayburn is here. I'll tell her." He turned to Cynthia. "Mr. Darnley Miller wants to speak to you."

She flushed deeply with surprise and annoyance. "When I told him——" she said, taking the receiver. "Yes, I am still here: but I thought it was arranged—— Oh! Never mind: business first, of course. See you when I get back to Aunt Harriet's. No! No! It is not the slightest use your coming up to-night. I am engaged. We couldn't possibly have any talk together. Good-night." She hung up the receiver and turned to Anthony, crimson-cheeked and speaking with nervous quickness.

"A neighbor of ours who is staying at the Station Hotel. He wanted to come up to-night, but I couldn't be bothered with him. I had promised to lunch with him to-morrow, but he finds he has to leave early in the morning on some important business."

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“He seemed very anxious to see you,” said Anthony.
“Oh yes. But his motto is:

‘I could not love thee, dear, so well,
Loved I not business more.’

He always thinks what he can buy for a woman out of the profits is the best means to win and keep her affection. He will express himself like this—‘Rolls-Royce, I love you; diamond and sapphire set, I adore you; a house in Grosvenor Square, my heart is yours for ever.’ Impossible to misunderstand——”

“Cynthia,” he interrupted, checking this flow of nervous nonsense, “how long has this man been at the hotel?”

“Only since yesterday afternoon.”

“He’s the one you came here to—to consider, is he?”

“Yes,” admitted Cynthia. “At least, I believe I liked him; and—until I met you—there seemed no reason why I shouldn’t take him in the end. But Aunt Harriet must have seen I didn’t really care for him, or she would never have made such a wild plan as sending me here out of the way of everything to think it over. You see, she’s not so awfully old herself—not for a great-aunt, because she became an aunt when she was eight. And I rather fancy she muddled her own love affairs somehow when she was young, though she married Uncle Rayburn and they were quite all right. But I daresay she looks back now, and realizes that being quite all right is not enough.”

“So it was to him you were telephoning when I came in last night?” pursued Anthony. “What made him ring you up at an hour when everybody was presumably in bed?”

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"He didn't. I rang him up," said Cynthia, becoming a little defiant. "And I did it at that hour because I didn't want any one to hear me. It's not *my* fault that you have your telephone in a spot like a market-place."

"How did you know he would be about?" pursued Anthony. "I suppose Emma arranged it when she came last evening in the character of your friend's maid?"

"Yes, she did," said Cynthia. "Oh, don't be so judicial, Anthony! Can't you realize that I did it all because I was afraid of putting you off? I somehow felt from the first how tiresome you could be, you see. But you ought to be very glad indeed that I did come downstairs last night to ring up Darnley. Otherwise you and I would never have been found in a Mid-Victorian state of impropriety, and your people would never have said things—and you would never have stepped gallantly forward like a hero by Miss Charlotte Yonge, to defend my honour!" She put her hand on his arm and smiled up at him. "Silly old boy; can't you see how splendidly it has all worked out for the best? I know, for certain, what every rich person wants to be convinced of; that you loved me for myself alone. You've given me that in life, above and beyond what I had every right to expect. I've really known the happiness of being Cinderella in addition to all the rest. You've given me more than my share, Anthony."

He looked down at her, doubtful and troubled; moved by the delicate pleading as any man of imagination must have been, and yet not knowing how far he could trust her—or rather, how far she was deceiving herself under the influence of a passing emotion. Was it just the romantic fancy of an undisciplined girl who was unconsciously ready to do anything to get what she wanted—

pricked on by the unusual sensation of being denied? He was not going to take advantage of a state of mind produced by behaviour on his own part which would have been most unscrupulous, had it been calculated.

"Cynthia," he said at last, "we must not do anything in a hurry. Let it be as we arranged. You are as free as air—but if at the end of a year you care to write to me, I promise to come to you and talk things over again. If you don't, I shall perfectly understand. The whole thing will be a little episode which you have every right to forget. I shall not consider I have the slightest reason to feel injured if I hear you are engaged to another man. You thought a week ago you might marry Miller; now you believe you wish to marry me. Very likely it is just that you are generous-hearted and want to be kind. More girls marry for that reason than any one knows."

He was so anxious really to leave her free—not to influence her by any emotion of his own—that his words sounded far colder than he dreamed of.

"You mean," said Cynthia, growing very white, "that because I let you kiss me so easily I should let another man do the same. Well—that's what girls are always told to believe of men—that they judge by that standard. Now I see it is true."

"Not in my case," said Anthony. "You are absolutely mistaken. I couldn't be so disgustingly ungrateful and ungenerous." But his words had the sounding emptiness of those we shout out to convince ourselves by their loudness, for he knew in his inmost heart that she had hit the truth—that he was not exempt from that universal rule.

And she was not convinced. "No good, Anthony," she said sadly, her spurt of anger dying down. "We must

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just leave it. I can't do any more." She paused, glancing towards the dining-room door. "You'd better tell them at once that everything is off, hadn't you?"

He flushed all over his face—a most unusual thing for him, with his thick pale skin. "You're right. It's as well for them not to have more triumphant announcements to throw into the fire than is absolutely necessary," he said; bitterly aware that Cynthia must have noticed the quick change of attitude on the part of his family—that sudden flop upon the knees before the golden calf.

"You might say I shall be leaving directly after breakfast for the hotel," she continued. "I shall settle up there and leave by an early train. Perhaps your mother won't mind if I stay in my room to-night."

"Without any supper?" he said. "You needn't do that," he added quickly. "I'm going out."

"Without any supper!" she echoed, a streak of fun flashing across her mind, though she was so miserable. "Oh, of course we can't either of us be so silly. We belong to the twentieth century, where people have more common sense in some ways than they used to have, though they may not be so picturesque. Let us both eat a good supper, and think how much more agreeable it is to be Anthony and Cynthia than Romeo and Juliet."

But just then Mr. Walgrove solved the question by coming out from the drawing-room. "We can't expect you to care about the flight of time, Anthony," he said in his best manner. "But your mother informs me the supper has been waiting for half an hour, and we ordinary mortals feel we could do with a little cold beef."

"All right. Just come back to the drawing-room a

SEE-SAW

minute," said Anthony; then, following his father in, he shut the door.

About a quarter of an hour later, the gong sounded. But when Cynthia came down from her room to join the family party, and to meet—as she feared—useless discussions and remonstrances, it became evident at the first glance that Anthony had somewhat managed to seal their lips on the subject. Partly, as she rightly surmised, by appealing to their affection for him, which was real enough to make them exercise unusual self-control; but also perhaps by allowing them to believe that if they wanted a wealthy sister-in-law, their only chance of getting one was to leave Cynthia alone.

At all events, they did behave with almost superhuman discretion: Mr. Walgrove's gallantry was restrained within the narrow limits of pressing on her the juiciest slice of beef, and being active with the mustard, while Mrs. Walgrove talked of Mrs. Rayburn and gave all sorts of little personal histories for Cynthia to retail when she reached home next day. Feo made little drawling remarks about Chloe's fondness for Cynthia—praising under a cloak of seeming to find fault—and Marjorie was quite genuinely cordial, for she felt already that she had really always at the bottom of her heart liked Cynthia, and that she could soon love her like a sister.

So after supper they all sat quite comfortably together in the hall again, talking about the journey in the morning, hoping it would be a fine day, wondering if the snow-drops would be out yet. As Cynthia listened and answered—listened and answered—with Anthony's pale face in the distance, and the Cuckoo clock striking the hours, and the place growing hot and airless with the radiator as well as

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the fire, she began to think that if Dante had ever known such an evening he would have added another circle to hell. To go round and round in a hot place lighted by electric light, with your head bursting—constantly listening to, and answering futile questions and a clock going Cuckoo! Cuckoo! At last Feo suggested bed, and that mercifully put an end to it.

The strain had been so great that solitude was at first such a relief as to seem almost like happiness. But little by little the deeper ache in her heart made itself felt, and she began to think that even if she did end by marrying Anthony, she could never be sure of him. He might always retreat—that Other Anthony whom she loved—into some remote world of the spirit, leaving her to find out he was gone only because she could not touch him. The whole thing was confused, unhappy, strange; she longed for next day when she could get away home.

CHAPTER XIII

AN EPISCOPAL EPISODE

Cynthia was in the taxi on her way to the Station Hotel; and for the moment she did not even think of that odious parting with Anthony over a half-eaten egg at breakfast time, because she was so intensely thankful to be free from Mrs. Walgrove's tearful embrace on the doorstep. For at the last moment that poor lady had been quite overcome by seeing so much money go out of the family, and had frankly wept. "Dear Cynthia—so high-minded but always so tiresome—still I've cared for him more than them all put together. He would never forgive me if he thought I had said a word, but I can't help it. I don't know what you have quarrelled about, but I know he loves you, my dear."

Cynthia had murmured something non-committal and escaped to the taxi, feeling more uncomfortable than ever before in her life, so that her heart still thudded and her feet were cold when she reached the hotel bedroom, where Emma stood by the window with red eyes and an open newspaper.

"Good-morning, Emma," she said, feeling the selfish annoyance the kindest experience on being confronted by somebody else's worries when they are full to the brim of their own. "I am sorry to see you are in trouble."

"Thank you, Miss, it is nothing of any importance,"

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sniffed Emma—so entirely the perfect maid that Cynthia's heart failed her.

"Look here, Emma," she said. "If there is anything really wrong, tell me; you know I shall be sorry. Otherwise, there really is not room for two afflicted souls in this apartment."

Emma took up the paper and smoothed it, placated by Cynthia's tone, but too engrossed in her own affairs to grasp the allusion to her mistress's perplexities. "You see that announcement in the deaths: 'Samuel the beloved husband of Mary Harboard.' Well, it might have been me."

"But you're surely not crying because you're not dead?" said Cynthia. "I'm feeling pretty horrid, but even I have not got to that."

"I mean, of course," said Emma, "that I might have been the one to put the announcement in. We were nearly engaged when I was a young girl, only it didn't come off. People all used to think he'd say 'Snip' if I said 'Snap'!"

"But you didn't?" said Cynthia, mechanically, staring with a sense of heavy depression through the window at the poster on a wall opposite, advertising a *bal masque* to take place that evening on behalf of the dependents of Mabingstoke men who had fallen in the War.

A girl in a yellow domino and a mask made a patch of bright colour in the pervading drabness. Gradually it recalled to Cynthia's mind that this entertainment had been one of the inducements held out to her by the Walgroves to remain at least one more night. She smiled bitterly to herself. Indeed she was in no mood to watch Mabingstoke playing at Carnival. Then she became aware that Emma was speaking.

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“And so, of course, I couldn’t do any more, Miss Cynthia, could I? It’s no use going on saying ‘Snap’ when the other one won’t say ‘Snip.’ So I told him in the end I wouldn’t have him if he was the only man left. He was rude back, but he’s gone now to where such things don’t matter, and I shall always think somebody made mischief.”

“Poor Emma!” said Cynthia, rousing herself to speak kindly—for she had imagination enough to know that this middle-aged woman was trying to fill up a blank space in her memory where young romance should have been. “I daresay you are better off as you are. He would, no doubt, have turned out odious.”

“He did from what I can hear,” said Emma, “but you can’t help feeling things.” Then she sighed, dismissing the subject. “Shall I see about the luggage being taken down, Miss? If you wish for any refreshment before we start, there is a tea-room on the platform.”

“Tea-room on the platform——” The words echoed in Cynthia’s mind blankly for a moment before the connection that caused an inner discomfort became clear: then she exclaimed aloud: “Goodness! Love-and-kisses-John! Emma, I can’t possibly go by this train. I must wait until the next. Did you wire to Mrs. Rayburn?”

“No, Miss,” responded Emma. “Our plans have been changed so often I thought it wiser to postpone wiring until the luggage was on the platform. Mrs. Rayburn said I was to remember I was a maid and not a keeper, and I have: but I do think when she spoke them words——”

“She was put out at the time,” said Cynthia. “You

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know what a lot she thinks of you. You shouldn't let a little thing like that rankle."

"Oh no, Miss," said Emma.

"What's the good of saying 'Oh no,' with injury simply sticking out all over you like—like the arrows on that saint you see in picture galleries whose name I forget?" cried Cynthia, exasperated. "I'm worried to death myself. I'm just as anxious to get away from this beastly hole as you possibly can be."

"I don't know what's been going on, I'm sure, these last three days," said Emma agitatedly, "I can't make head or tail of it, but I feel it my duty to mention——"

"Mention anything you like, Emma," said Cynthia, "but order me a taxi now at once. I am obliged to go and call upon the Bishop of Mabingstoke." Then she saw Emma's dropped jaw and in spite of her exasperation and unhappiness began to laugh. "I'm not going to try and lead the Bishop astray, Emma. I believe he is a married man with a hooked nose and six children."

"I give it up," said Emma, walking towards the door. "But another time Mrs. Rayburn must find you somebody else to go away with. The responsibility is making me so worked up inside that I don't digest my food, and my constitution won't stand it."

The inner sensation hinted at by the maid was equally experienced by the mistress as the taxi stopped before the imposing gateway of the Palace: but Cynthia left the driver there with instructions to await her return and walked as bravely as she could up the smooth drive towards the house, framing her inquiry beforehand. How should she put it? "Is the Bishop at home?" No, that sounded a little too offhand. "Is His Lordship at the

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Palace?" That was not quite right either. Before she had decided the imposing door swung open and a manservant—who was just like what a bishop ought to be in outward appearance—appeared on the threshold. "Could I see the Bishop at once on urgent private business?" said Cynthia, with sufficient outward composure.

The butler looked at her for a moment as if she had asked him for the candles off the Altar to light her to bed with; then he replied in a steady, even tone: "His Lordship is not at home to visitors this morning. If you write to him he will probably make an appointment to see you."

"But I am leaving Mabingstoke at half-past one," said Cynthia. "Mine is most urgent business connected with the Diocese."

The man looked at her without the slightest change of countenance, but he thought to himself that he saw daylight now. No doubt this pretty young woman wanted to complain of some clergyman in the diocese who had either been making love to her—or not making enough love to her—as the case more probably might be. Such things cannot be entirely unknown to the *entourage* of bishops of the Church of England. "I am sorry, Madam, but I cannot admit you," he said firmly but respectfully.

"But you must," urged Cynthia. "It is about a living. I have a living in my gift, and I wish for the Bishop's advice."

"Is the encumbency in this diocese?" inquired the butler.

"No-no," said Cynthia. "But the point on which I wish to consult the Bishop was——"

"Excuse me, Madam," said the butler, now quite convinced that she was lying to get inside those stainless

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portals, "I must ask you to put your request in writing. Good-morning." And he closed the door.

Cynthia rushed forward, but was confronted by a blank oaken surface which had withstood weapons a great deal more effective than an umbrella without suffering. Then she seized the hanging chain and pealed the bell violently, but there was no response. She kept on peeling—and at last the door opened again, displaying the butler supported by a footman, with a fleeting impression of an ecclesiastical nose and eyebrows somewhere in the background which instantly disappeared.

"His Lordship has been informed," said the butler sternly, "and must positively decline to see you. He begs you to put anything you have to say in writing, when it shall have his immediate attention." During this speech the footman behind looked slightly scared—though he was a brave young man who had fought for his country—because he remembered the days before the War when ladies did things with hammers and bombs, and he thought they might be beginning again.

"Writing is no good," said Cynthia. Then she looked appealingly at the two men and made a last frantic appeal. "Oh! If you have wives or sweethearts—either of you—do beg the Bishop to see me. My errand concerns the whole happiness of two young lives. You must know that however much you love, it is impossible to live on air; and a curate's stipend is only air thickened enough to keep a family from actual starvation. Please——"

But the remark about thickened air had shown the butler that Cynthia was not only forward and love-lorn, but—as he put it to himself—slightly off her chump. He closed the door again hastily.

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By this time, Cynthia saw that the only sensible course was to retire and write a letter to the Bishop, but her blood was up and she recklessly dragged the chain once more, pulling until the big, old-fashioned bell could be heard pealing even through the massive door. She'd make them open the door again if she died for it! She was past caring about anything but her immediate desire.

Suddenly the door swung back, and Cynthia was confronted by a hook nose and two immense, bristling eyebrows. Nothing more than that was visible to her at first as she stood there. It was like a nightmare endowed with a smell of tobacco, for the Bishop still had in his hand the early pipe he permitted himself before starting on his labours.

"P-please," faltered Cynthia, "I just wanted to speak to you. It—it is very urgent."

"It seems so," said His Lordship grimly. "May I ask whether you think you are likely to attain any object you may have in view by creating a disturbance of this nature?"

"No," said Cynthia, "but there seemed no other way. I wished to consult you about the bestowal of a living in my gift."

The Bishop's harsh face grew no less harsh, but his glance softened a little. It was as Jenkins had surmised—the girl was slightly unbalanced. But what on earth were her people doing to let her wander about the place making commotions of this sort? After a moment's hesitation, he said abruptly: "Pray walk this way. I can spare ten minutes." For it was necessary to obtain the poor creature's name and address, of course, and Jenkins evidently could not be trusted to do it.

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He took the precaution of leaving the door of his study slightly ajar, so that his chaplain, a tall, thin young clergyman in an adjoining room, should be witness of the interview. Then he motioned Cynthia to a seat and asked her name.

"My name," she said, "is Cynthia Rayburn, and I have a living at my disposal: that of Haythorpe, in Westmorland."

The Bishop's eyebrows became positively startling, but he waited until she had finished and then took up a clerical directory from the table. It was as she had stated. The benefice of Haythorpe was in the gift of Miss Cynthia Rayburn, who had inherited it from her father. "What proof can you show me," he said, "that you are the lady here mentioned?"

"Here is my card," she said, handing it to him; and as he remained doubtful, she added: "Do you know Mr. Walgrove?"

"Yes; at least, my wife is acquainted with Mrs. Walgrove," he said.

"Then if you really don't believe me," said Cynthia, "you had better ring up Mr. Walgrove's office. I only left their house at ten o'clock."

The Bishop looked at her with those penetrating eyes which seemed to glare out from behind his immense eyebrows with such extraordinary effect. "You appear to think you can treat a church benefice as you would a house for sale," he said. "Are you not aware—even if your story is true—of the immense responsibility that rests upon you?"

"Of course I am," said Cynthia, eagerly seizing the point. "That is one great reason why I wish to be re-

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lieved of it. I desire to place the gift in the hands of the Lord Chancellor, or the Bishop of the Diocese. I know I'm not up to finding the right man for such a post."

The Bishop rubbed his chin and meditated. She seemed fairly sane after all. Should he call his wife and see what a feminine brain could make of it? But some instinct warned him that his helpmeet—a slender, dark lady with beautiful hands and a genius for giving evening parties, where, as the great Boswell has it, "All was literature and taste without any interruption"—would not be useful in this emergency.

"That is not your only reason," he said abruptly.

"No," replied Cynthia. "The fact is, my Lord, I want to get the Reverend John Henderson a nice little country living, with a lawn in front of the house, in this Diocese. If you can arrange that, I'll hand over to the Church the presentation of Haythorpe, which really is a very good one."

"But if your story is correct, why not give Mr. Henderson Haythorpe at once and have done with it?" he said.

"My Lord," said Cynthia earnestly, "the girl he is going to marry simply can't bear me. It is my fault, of course: but we never could go on living, one at the Hall and the other at the Rectory, all our lives. We should get to throwing hymn-books at each other in church."

The bishop looked down at his hands, which were pontifically folded; but not before Cynthia had seen a gleam in his eyes that encouraged her a little. "What you suggest is not within the range of practical politics," he said. "But if you don't like the young lady——" He

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paused. "I can hardly suppose—— Will you forgive me if I ask you to put your motive plainly?"

"Very well," said Cynthia, "I suppose I must. Do you remember arranging to meet Mr. Henderson on Platform 2 last Thursday?"

The Bishop glanced towards the folding doors where his living engagement tablet sat ready to come forth at the slightest nod, but he decided to use his own memory. "Let me see! Of course! Of course! And the young man unfortunately missed me. I had his letter of apology next morning. He was lunching in a room without a clock. Quite understandable!"

"I was the one to blame," said Cynthia. "He is engaged to a second cousin of the Walgroves, and I went to meet him, and took him into a room for tea. I—I was particularly anxious he should not go up to the Walgroves' that day, because I was pretending to be the second cousin to whom he was engaged."

The Bishop—who had rather a headache that morning, or he would not have been at home—pressed his hand to his forehead. He began to think he would have to call in the chaplain after all. "How could you pretend to the Walgroves that you were the Walgroves' cousin?" he said. "They would find you out in a minute."

"They'd never seen her, or me either: and we were both expected on the same day. I turned up and she didn't—so I—I thought I'd just pretend to be her," concluded Cynthia, faltering a little.

"Yes," said the Bishop. "It does sound rather impossible, does it not?"

She looked at him and ventured: "That's because it's

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true. I'm quite sure you have found out that nothing is so impossible as plain truth."

"What made you do it?" he responded after a pause.

"I wanted to take a rise out of them," she acknowledged. "I'd had a motor spill and was dressed up in some clothes belonging to an old cottage woman, so the maid and the child took me for the country cousin. Then something the child repeated concerning their intentions with regard to me, made me very angry indeed. I didn't reason it out. It just happened, somehow."

The Bishop was silent again for a few moments. He had a great knowledge of human nature and he began to think she was honest. "One fact emerges," he said at last. "If it can be arranged that your responsibilities as regarding the Church of England are placed elsewhere, it may be a good thing. But such a solution seems improbable. No doubt all your affairs are in trust."

"But it can be arranged, if you will help me," urged Cynthia. "You see, we've not got to the point yet. If Mr. Henderson had met you on Platform 2, I understand there was just a chance that you—you might have had a living up your sleeve that you would think suitable for him. I kept him too long over his cup of tea and spoilt everything. He can't marry: not without a living. So if you won't help, I shall have to go all my life feeling I have sundered two loving hearts, or else I shall have to put up with detesting her at the Rectory."

"He appears to be a most estimable clergyman," said the Bishop. "Don't you think you will take the latter course in the end?"

"I've no doubt I shall," said Cynthia ruefully. "But it won't work, and they'll never understand the people.

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Cousin Nellie will always be thinking they mean to be rude, and keeping up her dignity. They need some one whose dignity is too robust to be easily hurt."

She caught a penetrating gleam again. "You know your own people?" he asked.

"Of course I do: I love them," she answered.

He smiled for the first time. "Perhaps they have loved you too much," he said. "Or rather—for that can never happen—they have admired you too much. You have not learned, my child, to control the first impulses of an undisciplined heart."

"I'm—I'm always sorry after," said Cynthia, looking down.

"Ah! People depend too much on repentance without penance nowadays," he said. "But in this instance, at any rate, you have done everything you could to set things right"—he paused—"short of actually knocking my butler down, that is to say."

Cynthia made a quick movement forward. "Oh, then you *will* try what can be done? I'll tell my lawyers to write to you."

He shook his head. "We'll leave all that. If you see fit, and it is possible for you to do as you wish later—all well and good. But you must not go away from this room feeling as if you had done a 'deal' in incumbencies. I had already decided to present Mr. Henderson to the living of Wellsdene on the recommendation of his Vicar." The Bishop stood up, the twinkle in his eyes quite distinctly visible now. "I had occasion to visit Wellsdene recently. There is a lawn before the house."

He walked with her to the door, and for once she had

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scarcely anything to say: but on parting she said in a very low voice: "I *will* try, you know."

"I'm sure you will," he said. "Don't be discouraged. Eager hearts always make mistakes that other people avoid, but they make the world worth living in. God's blessing go with you!"

Cynthia went down the path feeling very serious, and on the way to the station her thoughts were of a very sober character, in spite of her satisfaction concerning the future of Love-and-kisses-John and his future bride.

CHAPTER XIV

AN HOUR'S AMUSEMENT

Before Cynthia left the Palace she saw already that there was no possible chance of catching the 1.35 train from Mabingstoke, and resigned herself to the inevitable scene with an indignant Emma, surrounded by boxes on the railway platform. But no scene took place, for Emma was past any such demonstrations, and accompanied her mistress back to the hotel in a mood of such impenetrable gloom that Cynthia's apologies did not seem to reach her through it. "So sorry—no other train reaches Haythorpe to-night—might have gone on to York and slept there, but hotels all so full nowadays and no certainty of rooms."

Thus Cynthia babbled on the stairs, and in the bedroom, and again in the little sitting-room adjoining: to all of which remarks Emma made no reply, only presenting slippers and novel with an impartial: "What dress shall you require this afternoon?" as if to say Cynthia might go out in a nightdress and peacocks' feathers without exciting any special comment from *her*.

"I have been to see the Bishop of Mabingstoke on business and the Palace is five miles away—much farther than I expected," said Cynthia. "That is why I missed the train. I could not hurry the Bishop, of course."

"Indeed, Miss?" said Emma, not placated at all as Cynthia hoped by the mention of this dignitary.

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"He was very kind indeed," pursued Cynthia.

Emma made no reply, but attended silently to the fire and as silently and discreetly withdrew to the door which divided the sitting-room from the bedroom. "I will go and have my lunch before I unpack, Miss. Yours will be served here in a few minutes."

"Emma!" cried Cynthia. "I do believe you think I am telling a lie."

"I should never presume to think such a thing, Miss," said Emma. Then she closed the door softly and went away.

Cynthia ate her lunch and read her novel, then had an early tea to fill up the time, for she did not wish to encounter any of the Walgrove family or their friends, and so felt obliged to remain in those two rooms. The grey, late January day was darkening before five o'clock, and she sat aimlessly staring through the window, which had the same aspect as the one she had lately occupied. The immensely tall young person on the poster in domino and mask grew fainter and fainter as the foggy twilight thickened, and a gleam of firelight for a moment caught the gold bag on the table near, giving her wandering thoughts a new direction. What was the good of money if you couldn't buy what you wanted with it? She'd far rather be the poor girl Anthony thought her—going to live with him in the little Gingerbread House—than as she was now. But then she would never have known the proposal was only forced out of him by the impulse to stand up for any one whom he thought unfairly treated, and one day she would have found out that it was not love but pity. The Gingerbread House would never have held them both after that discovery, and she was thankful

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now that it had come in time. No doubt she would get over it eventually as other girls had to do. The glamour might be off things to a certain extent, for good; but you could not expect to keep that all your life. There were heaps of other interests for women in these days, and they were no longer dependent on the affections alone. Men had died and worms had eaten them, and women too, but not for love.

Still she would like to have had some sort of final explanation with Anthony before setting out on that emotionless future. The loose-ended way in which the affair had been left worried her very much: if only everything could be talked out between them just once, her mind would be at rest. She hated inconclusive endings like this. Anything *definite*, even if it were unpleasant.

Then a lamp was lighted outside and the tall young person emerged again more clearly. Odd, how the theatrical posters seemed to make all the vivid colour there was in drab Mabingstoke. She remembered that one of Cinderella.

Her heart gave a great jump as the name passed through her mind, and the peaceful, ordered, emotionless future vanished from her mind's sight like smoke. It couldn't be true that she would never see Anthony again. The idea of their lives being lived quite apart had been just contingency that fate might have in store, like being killed by a street accident—no more real than that. Now it became suddenly real, she could not bear it. She must do something. She must see him again. And now, back of her thoughts, she knew why she had not gone on to York and broken her journey there, rather than endure this futile turning back and remaining the night in Mab-

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ingstoke, a prisoner in her own sitting-room. She had had the tremendous, unconscious faith in something happy coming which always belongs to bright natures that have known little misfortune, until catastrophe actually overwhelms them. Added to this, her faith in the power of money had been shaken a little, but not destroyed. She still felt—entirely without knowing it—that she had a right to be happier than the majority because she was so much better off.

She went up to the window and stood wistfully looking out at the poster. If only she had allowed herself to be persuaded by the Walgroves to remain another night with them, she would have been wearing a domino herself. And the dance must have afforded some chance for her to have a last explanation with Anthony, because he was bound to be present owing to the object for which the ball was to be held. No Mabingstoke officer who felt as Anthony did would fail to do his best for an affair which was given on behalf of the orphans of Mabingstoke men fallen in the War. In fact, though she and Anthony had been too occupied with other topics to talk about the ball, she now remembered to have heard that Feo was ordering a black mask and domino for him. The masks were to be removed at twelve, when the Mabingstoke citizens might be supposed to have capered their fill in the cause of charity.

As Cynthia stood there she pictured the crowd with herself going in and out among them. It really would have been easy to disguise herself, because she could make her voice deep and drawling—just like that pretty gypsy woman who used to be with the caravan at the end of Glead Lane. Often, when she was a little girl, she had

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got into disgrace for visiting the gypsies. She tried a word or two to see if she could still do it. Yes; she had not forgotten. She wished she were going to the ball instead of waiting here. Should she go after all? Nobody need know. No doubt she could get tickets in the hotel.

But of course it was ridiculous to think of such a thing. Anthony had no desire to see her again, and she certainly had no intention of forcing her society upon him.

She pressed her forehead against the pane of glass. The poster lady glimmered faintly through the damp air.

"I don't care!" said Cynthia, at last; "I'll go! I don't care for Emma or anybody." But perhaps mindful of her interview with the Bishop she added to herself: "Emma shall go with me. Even Aunt Harriet would think it all right if Emma went too. She'd chaperone anybody in safety through Venusberg on a Bank Holiday."

The treat in store, however, was not yet revealed to the proposed recipient, who only knew that she had to accompany her mistress on a brief shopping expedition to the draper's shop nearest at hand. As they passed a leather shop, Cynthia paused and looked in at the window. "That is rather a nice hand-bag, Emma," she said casually, "I have been wanting to give you a new one. Would you care to have it?"

Emma hesitated; but she was human though honest, and it is not in human nature to refuse a thing you often have longed for, the acceptance of which can do no possible harm to any one. "You are very kind, Miss," she said, compromising by not being at all eager.

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"It will be so nice for you to keep the tickets and things in when we are travelling," said Cynthia, when they emerged with the bag. She was genuinely pleased, partly because she liked giving, but also because this transaction restored her unconscious faith in the power of money: or rather, in the ability of those who had a lot of it to, somehow or other, get what they wanted in life.

So the next difficulty was tackled with more assurance. "I think I shall go and see this masked ball to-night, Emma. It is for a good cause and much better than sitting all the evening in the hotel. And I want you to come with me."

"Do they let spectators in?" said Emma; a little doubtful, but making no further objection.

"Oh yes; they'll let us in all right if we just put masks and dominos on," said Cynthia in an airy way.

Emma stood stock-still in the street. No handbag on earth was going to make her do that. "No, Miss Cynthia. Not if I am to get myself up like that person on the advertisement bill. I must draw the line somewhere."

"But the charm of that is that no one will see either of us," urged Cynthia. "We can just sit down in some corner and look on at the fun without any one being the wiser. I want you to come too, because even Aunt Harriet would not mind if she knew you were with me. I don't want to do anything foolish. I have made a firm resolution not to; and I think you might try and help me, Emma. I could easily have gone without you, of course. But I would rather do the proper thing."

"Well," said Emma, unaware that she heard echoes of the Bishop and feeling a little puzzled. "I'm sure I'm the **last** to want to stop you trying to do that." She paused

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and broke out afresh. "But I don't like the thoughts of making myself such a figure of fun."

"You'll be no worse than me," said Cynthia. "Everybody will be the same. And just imagine what a lark it will be looking on at it all, with nobody knowing we are there."

Emma shook her head; but perhaps after all it was best not to quench the trembling flame. "If you are set on going, Miss, I shall accompany you as is my duty," she said, returning with bewildering abruptness to her most aloof attitude.

So they entered the shop where an elderly and rather garrulous shopman attended to their wants. "Yes, Madam. Dominos this way. Tremendous run on them for the ladies, though it appears the gentlemen fight rather shy. We got a consignment down special for the affair to-night. Wonderful thing, two Fancy Balls in Mabingstoke in one week; but we move with the times, we move with the times." And there was something that touched Cynthia in his shuffling walk and his eagerness to be brisk lest he should lose his job. But after all he had only three dominos left to show, and they all alike—a sort of green which nobody had chosen because it was so ugly, accompanied by black masks edged with cheap lace. Even Emma could see that there was no unholy lure about these garments, and she actually hastened back to the hotel to shorten her own with some slight anticipation of enjoyment. After all, as Cynthia had said, it might be rather amusing to sit and watch the dancing from a safe corner, and she was further reassured by the fact that Cynthia did not put on dance slippers, but kept on the black suède

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ones with dull silver buckles which she had been wearing all the afternoon.

The ball started early, as was the custom in Mabin-g-stoke, and by eight o'clock cabs and cars were stretching from the big Assembly Rooms right round the corner to the doorway of the hotel which opened upon the street. Dry pavements made it easy for Cynthia and her companion to walk the short distance, and they slipped out of the hotel almost unnoticed amid the throng of people coming in by train from the suburbs who crowded the hall of the hotel. Girls giggling, middle-aged women feeling self-consciously adventurous, an odd man or two in domino and mask carrying it off with bravado and talking about the South of France, where they did this sort of thing properly.

The same atmosphere prevailed in the huge Assembly Rooms, where the numbers rapidly grew too large for any good dancing. The majority of the men were in ordinary evening dress and Cynthia from her seat by the wall heard Mr. Walgrove explaining this phenomenon to a partner. "The original idea was, of course, that ladies wore these masks and dominos because they didn't wish their friends to know that they were out. Ha! Ha! The twentieth century has changed all that, my dear lady; the fair are now the brave."

Emma also heard and was surprised. "You'd wonder a gentleman as old as that one there should go on setting hisself like a young cock on a manure heap," she whispered, relapsing utterly into the vocabulary of her early youth.

"Look at that yellow domino," said Cynthia, willing to divert Emma's attentions from Mr. Walgrove's gallantry.

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"She said something to a man just now that startled him."

"The one that's put on a voice like a peahen?" said Emma. "I should take shame to be running about and making such a silly of myself. Ah!" She lowered her voice still further and added in a flurry: "There's that gentleman—Mr. Anthony Walgrove—the one you introduced me to as your lady-friend."

"Never mind," said Cynthia. "He can't possibly recognize either of us." But in spite of the careless tone she felt the sudden thud of a heart that would, in spite of her, welcome the man she loved.

Then the yellow domino hid him from her and she heard the high voice suddenly squeaking in Mr. Medway's ear: "Where's that girl you kissed and threw away last summer?"

Upon which that *debonair* gentleman lost his nerve, grew red and flustered, replied angrily: "I never did—I don't know what you mean!" and walked away in a huff.

Cynthia's eyes began to sparkle. For here was the chance which she had been seeking from the first moment she entered the room, though of course she had not actually owned, even to herself, that she was here to get speech with Anthony once more before leaving Mabingstoke. She turned ingratiatingly to Emma: "I wonder if you would mind being alone just for five minutes. It would be rather fun to mix in the crowd and say things to one or two of the people. There would be no danger of my being recognized. You remember how I used to talk just like the gypsy down Dead Lane when I was a school-girl."

"I might have known you didn't mean to sit quiet here for long," said Emma: then she pursed her lips. "Of

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course, you will do as you wish, Miss. I shall be here when you require me."

Cynthia checked an impatient speech. "Well, I shall not be more than a few minutes," she said; and immediately mixed with the crowd for fear of further protests.

At first she allowed herself to go with a stream that was moving towards the door leading to the sitting-out rooms, but soon the strangeness wore off and she felt able to pursue her search for Anthony without any embarrassment. Indeed, a sense of expectation and adventure began to take hold of her, and all else was lost sight of in the knowledge that a few minutes at most must see her talking to Anthony once more. Everything grew immediately brighter with that thought, as if sunshine had suddenly burst upon a dull scene. The people were kind, the band was spirited, even Mr. Walgrove with his heavy gallantries was a jolly part of the whole.

At last she saw Anthony, who was not wearing a mask, and her courage ebbed a little, for he looked grave and rather aloof, as he usually did in repose. She felt nervous again when she touched his arm, and could scarcely command the deep drawling note of the gypsy woman which she had assumed. "Penny for your thoughts!" she said.

He swung round as if startled: then after a pause he said lightly: "Not worth it! What were yours?"

"I was wondering why you stood there looking so serious. Won't you dance with me? I have no friends here."

"I won't repay your kindness so badly," he said. "I am no dancer. But perhaps if you have no friends, you won't mind sitting out with me for a little while."

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"I may be able to dance, but not to amuse you," she answered. "You don't want me."

"No; but I want to," he said.

"You've said that to a girl before to-night," she answered.

"Yes." He paused. "But she *was* the girl before." Then he went on: "Won't you come and sit down? I know a nice place at the end of the corridor."

"Ah! I suppose that's where you took the girl before. I hope she was nice," said Cynthia in that low carrying contralto.

He led the way, but the place was already occupied and they sat down on two basket chairs near a rusty palm. "Nice, did you say?" he asked. "Well, she was rather. You see she liked fairy-tales and I grew up on them myself. As a matter of fact, every charming girl I met seems to me like Cinderella, or the Goose-Girl, or some one of my old loves." He glanced round, then put his hand on hers. "For instance, I'm beginning to feel that *you* are the Princess who was condemned to wear a mask, because the Evil Enchantress was jealous of her complexion. I can't help it being like that. You must forgive me."

For she had shaken off his fingers abruptly.

"I hope you always make it clear that you are only telling fairy-tales," she said commanding her voice with difficulty. "Some silly girl might believe you."

"No," he said. "That's just the charm of the whole thing. They never do believe me. So no hearts are broken."

"Then you don't believe in real love?" she said, staying with him against her will.

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"Depends what you mean by it."

"Have you——" she paused—"Have you never felt anything more than a passing fancy for any of these fairy-tale girls then?"

He looked down. "Only a passing fancy," he said. "Never more than that."

The band wailed, the violins seemed to draw across her heart with an aching sweetness.

"Aren't you rather sorry?" she said.

"Sorry!" he echoed. "Oh no; for I can go on always loving each one, just as I do Cinderella and all my other lovely girls. None will ever grow fat or old or anything I don't want them to be."

"But supposing one remembers?" said Cynthia, the words slipping out before she could keep them back. "What will she do all these years?"

"She'll forget me."

"But if she doesn't?"

He smiled down at her with the old, whimsical smile, hurting her unbearably. "If she doesn't quite forget me, she'll become Patroness of a League for Preventing Children reading Fairy-Tales, I daresay," he answered.

Cynthia opened her lips when an M.C. approached with an apology and some remark to Anthony about the arrangements for supper. That checked the outburst which seemed inevitable, giving her time to consider. She rose and went away while the two men were speaking.

"I'm so sorry, Green Domino. See you again," he called after her, and the next minute she was hidden from him among the crowd that surged in from the dance just over.

For a little while she felt unable to think or speak, letting herself drift with a stream that was going toward

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the buffet. The glare, the voices, the moving figures all seemed now a long way off; the slip-slip-slip of feet on the polished floor when the dancing started again was sickening in its monotony. She was a strong girl, and yet she felt physically sick and faint as she sat down by Emma—listening to that slip-slip-slip on the floor. She felt she would always hate that sound as long as she lived. At last Emma's voice reached her, rather tart and impatient: "Have you had enough, Miss?"

"Yes," said Cynthia grimly; and the sick faintness rolled back at the faint stir of a queer inward laughter, though it was at the expense of her own overwhelming unhappiness. "I've had enough."

"Not," acknowledged Emma, on the way out, "that it hasn't been better than sitting in the hotel all night. I'm glad I went. The more you go out the more you learn, of course. I saw you speaking to Mr. Anthony Walgrove. He'd be surprised to find you here still, I expect."

Cynthia murmured some inarticulate reply, but Emma was now feeling cheerful and garrulous. She had been to a masked ball in costume and had emerged alive and unscathed, and it would be an experience to refer to casually in housekeepers' rooms or when visiting her relatives for a long time to come. "Your Aunt can't have a word to say about it with me there," she said. "I can tell her you never spoke to anybody but Mr. Anthony——"

"I am glad you enjoyed it," said Cynthia, pressing her hand to her forehead. "But I have got a splitting headache, and when we get in, I must go straight to bed. I don't want anything." And in spite of Emma's remonstrances she adhered to this decision.

Only when she was alone dared she allow herself to

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take in what that conversation with Anthony really meant. The incredible truth that he went on just in the same way with every girl who took his fancy emerged as clear as daylight. Even when they had supper together that first evening, he was only doing what he had done many times before. Oh! how could he? How could he? She bit her handkerchief, holding back her sobs. He was not worth crying for.

But that was the worst agony of it—that he was not worth crying for: she had not even a happy memory left to keep.

Then something in her defended him against herself. At least, he had not tried to marry her for her money—but perhaps that was because he did not want to lose his freedom: he preferred to make fairy-tale love to any girl who caught his fancy, like the Pierrot that she had first thought him. His pale face—with the heavy eyelids and beautiful mouth and the lock of black hair on his forehead—was so plain upon the darkness of the room, and when she shut her eyes she still saw him.

CHAPTER XV

THE LADY OF THE MANOR

When Cynthia awoke next morning the first object that met her eyes was the ugly green domino laid across a chair. Its tawdriness seemed somehow to epitomize her experience of the previous night. She looked back almost with a sense of wonder at the girl who had followed the old shopman between the long counters, thinking herself unhappy and yet still full of belief in herself and in human nature. Since then those two beliefs had received a staggering blow, of which she would keep some mark all her life long, whatever might come after. As soon as it was fully light she got up, feeling too restless to wait for Emma to come in, and went along the corridor to the bathroom. They were to leave at 9.40, and she had a feverish anxiety lest anything should happen again to delay her journey. Her other emotions had worn themselves out for the time being, and she was chiefly conscious this morning of a sick distaste for the drab streets of Mabingstoke and a hope that she might never look on them again.

As she returned from the bathroom, along corridors smelling of smoke and fog where the electric light still fought with the increasing day, she was vaguely aware of a tall figure in a dressing-gown who bolted out from a room in the usual hunted manner of the modest male

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obliged to seek his bath in regions where ladies may abound. Neither looked directly at the other, of course, but in scurrying past the unfortunate gentleman let a large sponge fall just in front of Cynthia's feet. "Beg your pardon," he mumbled, then gave a tremendous start; muttered "Good-morning," and tried to hurry on.

But Cynthia would not let him. "I'm sorry to detain you, but I absolutely must," she said firmly. "Will you be kind enough not to let the Walgroves know you have seen me, Mr. Henderson?"

He at once felt himself so immensely astute—as a very simple-minded man nearly always does do, on scenting a mystery—that he almost ceased to be conscious of his dressing-gown. "I don't think I can promise until I know the reason of your request," he answered. "There has been so much that is incomprehensible. Your taking my *fiancée's* name, for instance——"

"That was stupid, of course," said Cynthia. "But everything is going to be all right in the end. I suppose you got a wire from the Bishop?"

"Why—what can you do——" Henderson stared at her as if the very snail on his pathway had turned round and said something derogatory to his dignity; aghast, annoyed and yet striving to remember that the same Hand had made them both. "I can scarcely believe that the Bishop has acquainted you thus prematurely with any intention he may have," he said stiffly. "May I ask when you saw him?"

"I called at the Palace yesterday," said Cynthia, thinking to hearten him. "It's perfectly true. I *am* so glad, Mr. Henderson."

"You called at the Palace!" said Henderson. "You

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don't mean to say he was willing to see you without an appointment?"

"He was not," said Cynthia. "Anything but," she added. "Still, I did see him, and we spoke about you."

"I trust you explained that our acquaintance was of the slightest," said Henderson, very pink and erect in his long dressing-gown, with his thick hair standing up like a crest over his forehead.

Cynthia could not help laughing to herself, though she was feeling so miserable. It was so like Love-and-Kisses-John. "You needn't be afraid. He thoroughly understands that we are not intimate," she said. "I don't think you will find I have done you any harm, though." Then her own unhappiness swept back upon her like a wave—every one knows how—engulfing her in its aching dullness. "I should be sorry to leave Mabingstoke feeling I had injured you or Miss Nellie Walgrove," she said wearily. Then a lady emerged cautiously from a room close at hand, and made Henderson become once more acutely conscious of his hair and his dressing-gown, so with a hasty Good-morning he passed on, leaving her planted.

She stood a moment, looking after him. How long ago seemed that morning at the railway station; all the fun and zest of life still untouched by disillusion—then she turned back to her room, haunted by a fear lest anything should happen again to prevent her leaving Mabingstoke.

Even when she was safely in the train, with the wire already sent to Aunt Harriet, announcing her arrival that evening, her nerves still fluttered at the sight of a telegraph boy calling up and down the platform. But at last they were off; and at first the relief from that ridic-

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ulous suspense seemed almost like returning happiness. The day was pleasant—trees, fields and houses covered with a light hoar-frost and sparkling in the pale sunshine, and when the train reached York, people were going about with pink cheeks and cheerful voices. After changing there, Cynthia sat near the carriage window while Emma went to buy a paper. Suddenly she caught sight of Darnley Miller coming along the platform, looking into each carriage as he passed. "Ah! here you are!" he said when he saw her. "Good-morning. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"You seem to take it as a matter of course to find me here," she said, shaking hands. "Did you come just on the chance?"

He shook his head, smiling, and straightened himself.

"I don't leave things like that to chance," he said.

"Surely Emma didn't wire you?" said she sharply.

"No; don't blame Emma. She had nothing to do with it."

"Then who had?" persisted Cynthia.

"Well, if you will know——" he laughed—"I bribed the hall porter at Mabingstoke so heavily that the poor fellow couldn't refuse. I daresay he'd been in love once himself. I told him to send me a wire to the hotel here when you left, in case you should pass through while I remained in York. I'm here on business."

"Oh, here is Emma," said Cynthia, leaning out. "Emma, it is time you got into the carriage."

"Good-morning, Emma," said Miller, with a jolly condescension which she admired as being just the right thing from a gentleman to a maid. "Got plenty of fashions to study, eh?"

Emma responded very amiably and seated herself in

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the far corner of the carriage. This, now, was the sort of admirer she could understand a young lady taking a fancy to; and she immersed herself in a newspaper so as to give him his chance. But when the train was about to start, he got in also. "I think I'll come a little way with you," he said.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Cynthia vehemently. "You'll be left kicking your heels for hours at a country railway junction if you do. Do get out. There's time yet. This is perfectly ridiculous!"

He settled himself in his place and smiled at her as the train glided off. "I know it is ridiculous—with all I have on hand. You don't suppose I do this sort of thing often, do you?"

"I suppose you do whenever it pleases your fancy," said Cynthia rather shortly.

He leaned forward and lowered his voice—not that he cared twopence about Emma, but he did not know how Cynthia might feel, "You know you are the one girl in the world for whom I would have set aside an important business engagement," he said seriously.

"That's what you all say." She paused and stared a moment out of the window. "But there is always the girl before—and the girl after."

"Who's been telling you that?" he said. "Sounds as if it had come out of a second-rate society play. At any rate it is not true of me, Cynthia."

She did not answer, and he refrained from spoiling the effect of his remark by adding to it. After a while a very pretty woman, passed down the corridor, and he said in quite a different tone: "You wouldn't think that was a business woman and public speaker would you? The

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old saying with us that a girl has too much brains to be bonnie wouldn't hold good nowadays. Wonder why all the artless Mid-Victorian misses hid their brains; they must have had 'em all the same."

"It was the instinct of self-preservation working," said Cynthia. "They knew they had to seem silly if they were to get married, and there was nothing else for them to do. We should all turn pea-green in time if something ate us up if we didn't match the surrounding pastures. That's why people get a uniform drab in little country places—the gossip-spider gobbles up the coloured ones."

"Ha! Ha! Rough on the country that!" said Miller. He thought she meant to be amusing, and so he laughed, though he was not amused. But he was aware of the figure she would make at the head of his table talking nonsense to those who happened to like it, and of her power to advance his career socially, financially and politically. She was the one woman he had ever met who was exactly adapted to fill that place in his life, and he was determined to have her. Without her, that solidly brilliant future ould be incomplete. Besides, he was in love with her. He was madly in love with her, of course; so he told himself as he sat opposite to her, and so he thought, not knowing what it was to love. He felt that he was no fortune-hunter looking out for an heiress, because his own fortune was nearly equal to hers now, and would be greater. Still it was right that his wife should have money, brains and beauty, otherwise she would not fit into the plan of existence which he had made out for himself from his earliest youth. Thus he reflected, sitting there with the strong light on his active well-nourished figure, his hearty complexion of an even pink, his reddish-

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brown hair and excellent clothes. He was so taut, controlled, intensely virile, that his ardent admiration could not fail to soothe any woman whose vanity had been badly hurt by a lover, as well as in her affections.

Cynthia was obliged to feel her love must be worth a great deal, after all, if this man wanted it so badly; and the sting of sore vanity certainly eased a little as he continued to pour this healing balm upon it. She saw him there—radiant, confident and yet eagerly grateful for the least encouragement, with his very appearance suggesting power, affluence, efficiency, success, expensive motor-cars, dinners at palatial restaurants—the pride of life as she knew it. He caught her intent gaze and leaned forward; then hesitated. After all, it was impossible actually to propose again before Emma. Not that *he* minded, but girls—even the cleverest and most level-headed of them—were apt to be unexpectedly romantic, and he might do more harm than good. So he began to talk instead, about a speech he intended to make in the House on the following night. “I wish you could have gone over it with me,” he said. “You’re so quick-witted. If only a time ever does arrive——” He paused. “They’ll say marriage has brought Miller out and no mistake,” he ventured.

“I wonder you can fit everything in,” said Cynthia, passing that over. “One would think you had enough to do without standing for Parliament.”

“Oh, I like to have a lot of irons in the fire. Enjoy being in it up to the chin, you know. So will you when you once begin.” He rose as he spoke, for the train was slowing down at the station where he had to alight. “See you again before long. I’m coming home next week end. By the way, I hear they are getting up a play all in a

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hurry for the Winbury Golf Club—greens want a lot of doing to, pavilion redecorating, and so on. They'll be overjoyed to hear you are back. I think they are stuck for a Lady Teazle because Eve Waddington has measles. You've played it before, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Cynthia, "but I don't want to again."

"Well, you'll see." He had his foot on the step. "Good-bye until Saturday then."

"You'll have hours to wait here, I'm afraid."

He laughed. "You bet I shall not. Find some means of getting away." He smiled at Emma in her corner. "You trust me for that!" Then he lowered his voice: "But if I am stuck here for some hours I shan't care. I have had my reward."

The train moved away from the platform, and she looked back at him as he stood there—confident, prosperous, full of affairs, but making her his first object. As she waved a farewell to him, she realized all this, then leaned back in her place and turned to Emma. "I hope Mr. Miller will not have long to wait."

Emma gave a murmured assent; but her partiality for Darnley Miller forced her to add after a moment or two: "Now that's what I call a real gentleman. No half and half about him. Did you notice his beautiful socks, Miss Cynthia?"

Cynthia shook her head, smiling, and took up a paper. The train rushed smoothly along, with the hedgerows giving place to grey stone walls, and the country-side beginning to look bleaker—more like home. She sat half-hypnotized by the swiftly moving landscape, and the events and scenes of the past four days passed through her mind, not in sequence, but in a confused medley that made her

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memory ache. At last they reached Wynton, the station for Haythorpe, where every one from the station-master to the most lately-joined newspaper-boy knew that this was the girl to whom nearly the whole of Wynton belonged. The new little town with its hotels and boarding-houses and clean, wide streets stretching away towards the magnificent golf-links that were at the root of its popularity as an inland holiday resort—all had been the growth of one generation; while the road leading to Haythorpe remained just as it had been in the time of Cynthia's grandfather, when her aunt by marriage, who now lived with her, had been a young bride. Long before the end of the six miles which separated Wynton from Haythorpe, the last sign of modern improvements had disappeared; and the narrow lane leading up to the Hall, with low stone walls on either side, and the dark wood away to the east had, on this darkening winter afternoon, an air of rather austere loneliness. Everything was as it had been three hundred years ago, and that short run in the car from the station seemed like going back into a dead past out of the lighted and jangling present. So at least Cynthia felt it to-night—though she had been used to the old house all her life, and had often come back to it with joy from places far gayer than Mabingstoke.

When the wide door of her own house opened—the light streaming out upon her as she walked up the stately steps—she had a feeling of having been away for a long time. That was her chief thought as she embraced Mrs. Rayburn; that she couldn't only have been away since last Wednesday. But of course there were questions to answer. Yes, it had been all right, but a week-end was sufficient. Surely, Aunt Harriet did not seriously expect

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her to stay a whole month. People didn't pay such visits nowadays. She knew she ought to have written—— But it happened most fortunately that Bumpy, Mrs. Rayburn's dog, was indisposed, for though the good lady loved Cynthia most sincerely, still Bumpy was in a way more in the foreground of her life, together with Parker, her maid. So awkward questions were put on one side for the moment while details of Bumpy's sufferings were given. For Mrs. Rayburn had shirked effort during so many years that she was now a prisoner within walls of her own building, never going away from home and very seldom receiving any guests in the house. Cynthia had grown up with all this and never thought of questioning it. Aunt Harriet was "not equal to" having people to stay, and there was an end of the matter. She herself could get all the gaiety she wanted elsewhere without any trouble.

Thus it was that Bumpy's illness and the unfortunate accident to Parker's false teeth screened Cynthia's mood from Mrs. Rayburn's perceptions on first arrival. But after dinner, with Bumpy more at ease, and Parker's absence not felt for the moment, Mrs. Rayburn fixed her large faded blue eyes on her niece, settled her ample figure into a more comfortable angle and began to inquire about her old school-friend.

"Perhaps I ought not to have made such a personal matter of your going, Cynthia," she said. "But I was afraid Darnley Miller would rush you into marrying him before you really knew whether you wished to do so or not, if you stayed where he could get at you. And I knew the atmosphere of the Walgroves' home would be so different from anything you were used to that it would act as a mental change of air—clear away any cobwebs,

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you know. But I don't wonder you found it too dull. I remember the only time I ever stayed with Millicent Vinder, before she was Mrs. Walgrove, of course—they had high tea and family prayers. It all seemed so good and simple. I was eighteen and had just left school, and I remember we both had old rose zephyrs that summer, Milly and I. I suppose she has altered very much. Dear me! I can't think of her as old. She is the only school-friend I have kept up with at all, and we only write at Christmas-time. But I'm sure she would be kind."

Cynthia hesitated; it was plain that she could so easily destroy that one sheltered, flowering spot in Mrs. Rayburn's youth which a dull creeping autumn had left behind. "They have moved with the times, of course," she said. "But—but, Aunt Harriet—I did something very foolish. I'd had a spill in the hired car, and got wet, and borrowed some awful clothes from an old woman——"

"My dear! I hope they were clean!" interrupted Mrs. Rayburn.

"Yes," said Cynthia. "But the point is, I turned up at the Walgroves' in these things, and the little grandchild took me for a country cousin whom they were also expecting, and had never seen. They evidently didn't much want her, and made sure beforehand that she would be awful because she was poor, which seemed a bit unfair. So the idea flashed into my mind all of a sudden, that it would be good fun to pretend to be the country cousin—as I was in those clothes. So I did."

"I'm sorry for that," said Mrs. Rayburn. "It seemed to be showing a want of respect to people less well off than yourself, Cynthia. But I suppose they forgave you when they knew?"

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"They did," said Cynthia. She waited; should she say anything about Anthony? Certainly, she would not tell how "Millicent" had planned to marry her to him because she was rich. "I think they all forgave me but the son; he thought I'd been making fun of his mother and resented it."

"Quite naturally," said Mrs. Rayburn. "I am rather ashamed that the girl I brought up should have done that, dear. Your sense of fun runs away with you. However, so long as Millicent is not really offended, I suppose we must make the best of it. That is always the way, Cynthia; you do these ridiculous things and then people forgive you, so you never learn any better. Like those poor Miss Tappers in the village, when you were only ten——"

The flow of reminiscence this started ran its even course until a maid came in with a further favourable bulletin about Bumpy's health; after which Mrs. Rayburn dozed and Cynthia went to the shelves where she ran her fingers along the backs of the old books that had been the friends of her girlhood. She was in a mood almost placid, induced by the warmth and ease and familiarity of her surroundings after strain; secretly surprised to find that she was not suffering, and yet afraid to tell herself she was free from pain, lest it should come on again.

Then her glance fell on the dull, gold title of a book on the lower row—*On Loving at First Sight*. And immediately the pain stirred, increased in agony, was upon her in all its might again—everybody knows how, who has suffered. She could have cried out, for it was like a physical stab. During a few seconds, the shelves before her ran into each other and she felt the ground sway under her feet. Like a picture flashed on the wall, she saw the road

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leading from the Gingerbread House, with Anthony and herself walking on it. She stood outside herself and saw both of them as if she had not been in the body at that time and had watched them together. Then from a long way off came Mrs. Rayburn's voice, concernedly speaking to a servant about Bumpy's arrangements for the night. After a pause, and a closing of the door, she turned to Cynthia: "You look tired, my dear. Won't you have a glass of milk and go to bed?"

So a few minutes later Cynthia was in her own room, with the furniture and all the little belongings that had surrounded her from childhood round her, and the white bed under the blue canopy waiting for her to sleep in. A wood fire burned in the grate, causing a thousand leaping gold and red flames to blink in the polished woodwork of table and bureau and dressing-table: reflected beautifully in the long looking-glass of the dark mahogany wardrobe. It drifted across her mind how often she had stared into that mirror, wishing she were Alice, and imagining what there was to see beyond. Then a sudden, overwhelming sense of loss drowned every other feeling. She'd lost all those dearest little friends of her youth, too. There would never be anything but pain any more in remembering Cinderella and the rest; the very memory of the happy hours she had spent reading about them and dreaming about them was to be avoided for the rest of her life as something that held a hurt in it. And all this because of a man who had made light love to her one night, and to one whom he believed to be another girl the next. What she had taken to be a lovely secret link between those two, which no one else in all the world could ever know about, was nothing but a part of his usual armoury of flirtation.

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She had thought of him—the Anthony she loved—as receding from her into some far place where she could not follow if she disappointed him. She had kept up a stupid pretence, just to try and make sure of his love before that happened. And now he had proved to be only a creature of her own imagination. He had never existed.

She was now in front of that long mirror, taking off her dress; and she stood still with one hand to her throat, surrounded in the reflection by all those leaping golden lights. The rising sobs that she kept back seemed to choke her. Anthony! Anthony! She could not help her whole soul crying out just once, after the departing lover of her dreams. Then she heard her aunt knocking at the door. “Come in!” she said wearily, sitting down by the fire.

“Ah!” said Mrs. Rayburn, rubbing her hands, “I am glad to see you have a nice fire, dear. I have just been down to see how dear Bumpy is, and I thought I would just come in as I passed. You looked so tired when you went upstairs. By the way, you never told me why you actually left the Walgroves after all. I understood you to say they were not offended. Did you not like the son?”

Cynthia looked down at the fire. “Oh, yes,” she said, “I liked him; but he doesn’t think much of me.”

“How odd!” said Mrs. Rayburn. “I suppose he has no sense of humour. But it doesn’t matter, does it? You are never likely to see him again.”

CHAPTER XVI

A CHARITY PERFORMANCE

Two days later a letter came from Mrs. Walgrove to Mrs. Rayburn, which was a really masterly example of the art of saying nothing about a difficult subject in a great many words, without offence. There was a shorter one on the same lines for Cynthia, who was thus able to feel that her aunt could now go on comfortably reviving memories of girlhood every Christmas as before. A third letter from Mabungstoke in an unknown hand ran as follows:—

“DERE SINTHIA,

“I wish you wold come back and mary Uncle Anthony. I don't like that Diner Medway though she is so Rich. But you are Rich too. Nurse is riting the address. She sed she wold for you turned out a reel Lady in the end. I expect you gave her a 1 pound Noat.

“Yours affeshly

“CHLOE.

“P.S.—I wish you wold come back. I wish you wold mary Uncle Anthony if you had not 2*d*.

“P.S.—I am afeared it is no good. I heerd Uncle Anthony tells Mums that he did not want to mary ennybody.”

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Cynthia smiled at the queer little letter, though almost every word touched a sore place in her heart. No wonder that the Walgrove attitude towards money—which appeared in this poor child like an hereditary disease that can no longer be hidden—had produced an abnormal reaction in Anthony. She still felt sure that he would have stuck to her if she had been as poor as he originally believed her to be, though he might secretly have regretted the impulse which led him to shackle his freedom. But this wealth of hers which gave her a right to so much in life had actually made it easy for Anthony to throw her over. With an alacrity she could not disguise from herself, he had let her go back again into a world where she could have everything there was, without any assistance from him. She had obviously not been worth the price. He preferred his freedom and his fairy-tale flirtations with any girl who took his fancy.

She listened to the latest news of Bumpy, who was now almost restored to health, and then went upstairs to consult with Emma about a wedding-dress for the gardener's daughter. She and this pretty girl had been playmates as children, and before this visit to Mavingstoke she had been nearly as deeply interested in the trousseau as the future bride. Now a sort of fog seemed to envelop everything to which she turned, taking colour and interest out of the days. But life had to be gone on with, and there was no time to sit brooding.

Immediately after luncheon she drove over to Wynton, where the rehearsals for *The School for Scandal* were to be held, and witnessed in action that desire of the moth for the star which is never so clearly displayed as in amateur theatricals. They show with such naïve openness

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why the plain girl wants to play Juliet and the fat little man, whose romance nobody can take seriously, craves to take the part of Romeo. They desire for once in their lives to seem what they have always longed to be.

Cynthia had acted Lady Teazle before and was word perfect, so she took over the part with very little trouble. Her acting was really excellent for an amateur, while her laugh in going off the stage after her interview with Sir Peter was so fresh and natural that her fellow-actors applauded. She was pleased and responsive as usual, though a certain wry thought of what Anthony—who had condemned her crude presentation of the Country Cousin—would say of this legitimate performance, touched that aching string in her heart which something always seemed to be pulling.

On the actual night of the entertainment she stood before the long mirror looking so lovely in her brocade and powder and patches, that Emma actually felt stirred at the sight of so much beauty, though she had helped in putting it together. Youth, love, wealth, gaiety—all the things Emma's life had lacked stood there before her, as she knelt fingering a fold of the flowered petticoat—and involuntarily tears came into her eyes for what she had missed. But she herself did not know they were for that. She only said to herself she needed a tonic, or she would be getting like Cook who cried if you looked at her though so stout and red in the face.

But she had forgotten that odd moment by the time she reached her place in the body of the hall at Wynton, where she sat near Cook and Parker, all three feeling very proud of Miss Cynthia, and quite understanding the enthusiasm of Mr. Darnley Miller, who came in late. They all made

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sure the magnificent bouquet of pink roses handed to Lady Teazle had been brought by him, and Parker said she heard he had exceeded the speed limit most of the way along the Great North Road in order to get there at all. "He's the sort," said Emma, "that would hire an aeroplane to bring Miss Cynthia rolls from London for breakfast if she fancied them. That's the sort of young man for me."

"Me, too," agreed Cook. "None of your 'I'm willing if you are' style about him. If he'd only lived in the time of that play they're acting, he'd have popped her into a coach and away to Gretna Green as soon as look at you."

"I hope she'll have him in the end," said Parker. "Do you think that she will, Miss Williamson?"

Emma pursed her lips, endeavouring to appear full of information which she would not let out. "My young lady has a great many admirers," she said. "There was an Earl going out before breakfast at one house we stayed at to gather violets for her, and his man told us nobody could be fonder of his bed. I couldn't say nothing as to her intentions, I am sure."

"Well, for my part," said Cook, "I think Mr. Miller'll manage it. A female likes to be taken in a rush, whether she's an heiress or one like you and me, Miss Williamson."

The opinion of the audience being so much the same, general interest was concentrated on Miller, who sat in a front seat, with his pink face heightened a little in colour, and glowing with health, energy and success. All conceded the right of a man who had got so much to have more, and they already saw Cynthia and her husband skyrocketing through the higher heavens of the international

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plutocracy with "Interests" of every kind streaming comet-like in their wake.

Cynthia herself felt this surcharged mental atmosphere and that, together with the constant, hidden strain of trying to keep away thoughts of Anthony which buzzed round again like bees after each dispersal, wrought her up to a high pitch of nervous excitement. The pupils of her eyes were so dilated that they shone black under the powdered wig, sparkling most brilliantly; her voice vibrated with a fluty clearness through the hall—never in her life had she acted anything near so well. But she was aware all the time of an underpain only just rendered bearable by the counter-irritant of excitement. Every now and then she became conscious of a mass of pale, blank oblongs that she knew were faces, with now and then a glare of spectacles catching a gleam of light, or a mass of dark hair making crude shadow. Once Miller's face emerged from the rest; then that of an unknown woman with white hair—a smiling girl in blue—a lad with an enormous set of yellowish teeth; just as the light happened to fall upon them. She knew she was surpassing her best as she stood behind the screen waiting for the most dramatic moment of the play, while the audience felt that odd thrill which is a not-yet-understood result of magnetism. She stepped forward; and they almost held their breath, so delighted were they with the little current running from one to another and tickling the emotions. Then—suddenly—Cynthia faltered in her words. She recovered herself and went on with her part, but the current had been cut off. The audience saw her for what she was, an ordinary, good amateur, helped by a charming appearance;

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and she continued to say the words with smiles and pretty gestures as she had been trained to do.

But she was now afraid as well as unhappy—afraid of her own vivid imagination, which had been allowed to develop unchecked during her childhood and girlhood. She had imagined too often the little green men peeping in the rides of the wood, and wild beasts following her out of each door as she passed at twilight down the darkening stairs—all those playmates that had given her such a half-fearful delight—and now she was paying for it. For in this way her imagination had gained power to play her the terrifying trick that caused her almost to break down in her part, and she had actually seen Anthony's face, starting out with absolute clearness from that palely gleaming mass. She realized that her obsession must have caused her vivid image of him to take shape, and the physical sensation which this produced for the moment was horrible. The whole place went dark and she was seized with a deadly feeling of sickness. The world had seemed full of eyes that hurt as they stared at her, pressing her down: then with a stupendous effort of will she managed to gather her powers together and go on.

But twice during the next few minutes a return of that sick horror came over her like a wave for an instant and then passed. Was she going out of her mind? Had she so given reins to her imagination that she might now become the victim of a fixed idea?

She shuddered—speaking her words without life or sparkle—trying to keep down her thoughts. And beneath her fear was a desolating sadness. All the memories of those fairy-haunted dewy lanes and summer woods were now made hideous. He had not even left her those mem-

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ories. They would all seem now to have been leading to this intolerable end.

At last the play was over. Lights went up in the hall and Cynthia immediately was surrounded by tangible flesh-and-blood people who talked of supper. The nervously excited mood of the earlier evening, and the overwrought distress of the last half hour now gave place to a third state of mind, far more favourable to Miller's hopes. His virile, material personality seemed so attractively safe and normal. She had an indefinite feeling that with him there Anthony's face could not suddenly gleam out again at her and cause her such agony. For this man whom she could not forget was after all only a phantom. He had never lived save in her imagination. It was weak and despicable to go on enduring this pain for the loss of that Anthony of her imagination, who was no more real than Cinderella or the Fairy Prince. The true Anthony Walgrove had tried to make love to a stranger on the very first opportunity after parting from her. He had no ambition: no forcefulness: he was just Pierrot——

She walked with Miller down the long passage which connected the concert hall with the big, new hotel, and as it was narrow and people perforce walked in couples, Miller now had the opportunity which he had motored up from town to obtain. Fortune always seemed to favour him, so he thought to himself, because he was always taking risks and working hard to propitiate Fortune.

"You were simply splendid," he said.

"Glad you thought so," said Cynthia lightly; but her face was white under the paint and her eyes shone with a curious, unnatural brightness. "It was very good of you to take such a lot of trouble to come."

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"I'd go anywhere to see you, as you know," said Miller, whose brilliant powers did not run in the direction of producing new flowers of speech for his lady. "I once saw a book called *Round the World for a Wife*, or something of that sort, and upon my word, Cynthia, I'd chuck up Parliament and all, and circle the planet like a shot, if I thought you'd be silly enough to think any better of me for it. But when I do make that trip I most ardently hope that you will be of the party."

"I have sometimes thought it would be rather fun to get up a party," said Cynthia. "Julia Waddington——"

"I mean a very small party," he interposed.

"Well, not more than half-a-dozen. When you get a lot of people they always quarrel," said Cynthia speaking quickly.

"I quite agree," he said, then glanced round, and saw another couple close behind them. "I have to leave tomorrow after an early lunch. May I call on you about eleven? We'll talk about the trip then, shall we?"

"All right. Castles in the air are better than none, I suppose," said Cynthia, laughing excitedly.

"My castles in the air usually materialize in the end," said Miller.

They were entering the hall of the hotel as he spoke, so Cynthia was spared the necessity of answering. "Oh, what a crowd of people!" she said. "I suppose they have come down for the week-end for golf. Isn't it wonderful, when you think this was only a sleepy village thirty years ago? Aunt Harriet said they used to turn round to look at a stranger in the street."

She talked fast about trifles as they passed through the hall to the dining-room, where supper was laid for the

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performers, and Miller walked by her side in a glow of satisfied achievement. He was going to get what he wanted in the way of a wife, as he had always done in other affairs since leaving school. A post on the staff in France: never a scratch, though he was not at all wanting in courage—only with the instinct of self-preservation tremendously developed. He had begun to plan before he entered the dining-room how he would further develop Wynton and turn the whole place into a little gold-mine for owner and tradespeople alike. He felt an immense swelling of pride as he took his seat by Cynthia, realizing that everything he touched turned to gold. Even his love turned to gold. For he was in love with Cynthia, after a fashion.

He filled her glass and entreated her to eat instead of playing with the food on her plate, in such a proprietary fashion that everybody at the table considered them engaged. Cynthia's obvious excitement confirmed this idea, as did her over-bright eyes, her rather shrill laughter, her abrupt silences and foolish speeches.

Julia Waddington—whose bold blue eyes and wide mouth did not accord very well with powder and patches, though she managed to wear the air of a beauty—remarked on this from the other end of the table. "Poor old Cynthia! Got it badly. She has eyes for nobody but Miller. Well, you can only be young once!"

Her companion laughed. "No novelty to you, eh? I expect you made eyes at the parson when he christened you. And think of the stream of men you have done it to since."

"Never included you, anyway," retorted Julia.

"No, that's why I'm so bitter; green-eyed monster, of

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course," said he. And after this fashion they continued to amuse themselves, their conversation punctuated by exclamations and gusts of laughter.

Cynthia also appeared to be delighted with Miller's obvious pleasantries, laughing before they were over his lips, and keeping those over bright eyes almost the whole time on his face. Those to whom her behaviour seemed foolish thought her a little off her balance with the excitement of the performance and a love-affair approaching its climax. If—as Julia observed—she had eyes for nobody but her lover, this was after all but a pretty and natural attitude on the part of a girl either just engaged or about to become so.

Indeed, her nervous concentration on Miller finally made him almost uneasy. He began to think that there was something queer about it—something beyond the ordinary excitement of a girl. Why did she keep on staring at him like that? He was not a nervous man himself, but he began to feel uncomfortable.

"Do look at Julia," he said at last. "She seems in great form."

The words had the desired effect, and Cynthia's odd gaze was removed for the moment, but she seemed almost afraid to look about her lest she should see something that she wished to avoid. And indeed this was exactly what she did feel. That sudden starting out—as it were—of Anthony's face from that dim mass of faces in the audience, had given her a shock. She had seen it so in the darkness last night when she fell asleep, and when she awoke in the small hours, and it was becoming an obsession. She feared her imagination, which had always given her such joy.

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But Miller's robust materialism somehow made her feel safe. She felt sure that image of a disordered fancy would not intrude between her eyes and his face, but if she gazed away towards the crowd or the flowers or the blank wall she might perhaps see it again. She felt violently determined to rid herself of an infatuation for a man who did not love her, and whom she had only loved because of the qualities with which her imagination had endowed him. This nervous obsession was but the fitting result of an affair that never had had any reality. She turned to Miller with a desperate assurance of his power to help her to get over it. When they two once got out into the full stream of life together, all this misery would be blown clean away into the past.

Then they were rising from the table. Again she had that odd sense of standing outside herself, of hearing herself speak as if she were some one else: "Oh no, not at all too early. Then I shall see you about eleven."

Some one brought the bouquets which had been given her, and she carried Miller's roses, while he took the others. The band was playing in the hall as they passed through on the way to the car; people stared and smiled, or came forward with words of congratulation on the performance. There was a sort of feeling about, that the band might appropriately strike up the Wedding March. As the car went off, leaving Miller on the steps of the hotel, the lively Julia murmured to her companion: "Hardly seems decent for him to let the bride go off like that, does it?"

Cynthia waved her hand and then leaned back in the car, answering Emma's remarks at random, and thinking every minute to see Anthony's pale face stand out with appalling clearness from the starlit fields.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GOD IN THE CAR

Considering the events of the previous night, no wonder Darnley Miller hummed "The Voice that breathed o'er Eden" while he performed his toilette, and came buoyantly down to the hotel dining-room with something bridegroom-like about him. He looked even sprucer than usual; though his apparel always did resemble, if not the lilies of the field, those long-stemmed roses from a florist's shop which are just a little too perfect to please.

He ate heartily, conscious of being healthier, more energetic and more successful than any one else present, and he considered with zest the improvements that must be made when he was married to the owner of the place. He did not forget that glowing figure in the foreground, but his ardour could not render him blind to all the rest, and he saw the joys of marriage with Cynthia no more and no less clearly than the joys of developing a fine property. After breakfast indeed, when he strolled out awaiting the car which was to take him up to Haythorpe Hall and bliss at eleven, his thoughts of Cynthia and her belongings were merged in a sort of sunshiny glow which left the one inseparable from the other; perhaps the girl even retreated a little, while the glorious possibilities of the rising inland pleasure resort grew more distinct. But at any rate he pictured her as always there, assisting at a triumphal

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progress during which the happy couple were to snatch from Fate as they whirled along the most magnificent amusements, honours, titles and properties which this planet could afford.

Cynthia herself, after a good night's rest, began to see the future stretching before her in something of the same fashion. The bright morning light streamed in through the ten windows of the disused ball-room which had been added to Haythorpe Hall in the reign of George the Fourth, and those strange, dark thoughts of the previous night seemed to have vanished like bats in the sunlight. She felt strong enough now to keep them out of her mind: they were only the last end of a foolish dream that had never had any foundation in reality. Her lonely childhood—when she had perforce made friends of dreams—was responsible for the whole thing, and she was lucky to have escaped in time. Then her eyes fell on the high double door which now happened to be open and her bright glance widened. Just so she had stood here a hundred times during her childhood, picturing Cinderella coming in with the Prince.

The next moment she turned sharply and walked down the room with heels tapping on the polished wood, the dreaming softness quite gone from a face which had suddenly become shadowed with a possibility of hardness—not yet hard, but betraying that shadow. Her thoughts were vivid enough to be seen from the outside—She'd done with that nonsense! All the joyous little playmates who had made her childhood so happy and full of fun that she was never conscious of her loneliness, must now be banished into the past. They had very nearly led her into breaking her heart for a dream. So she forced herself to

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dwell on the approaching interview with Miller, feeling that he was the best protection against any return of the old foolishness. It was not yet eleven o'clock, but she felt restless, and as she was always intolerant of suspense, the heavy minutes tick-ticking from the great clock in the hall drove her out into the garden to await Miller there.

Her mind was not exactly made up, but she knew quite well that he would probably have persuaded her to accept him before she returned to the house, because everything within her, save one little urging somewhere at the centre of her being, now made her wish to do so. But it was sad that the threat of hardness in her face kept deepening as she passed each nook and bush that her fancy had before peopled with friends.

But the faint blight which had gradually grown on her from earliest youth, owing to her having more money than other people, was of a sort that spreads very rapidly. She was no longer in danger of thinking money could buy everything, but had reached the further stage of feeling a little contempt for all those things money cannot buy—the attitude of mind that is indeed the narrow gate through which a rich person enters so hardly into the heavenly places.

The drive down which she went branched into two at a yew tree, one path going directly towards the main entrance to the park while the other approached the Wynton road by a side gate: and she hesitated a moment, standing at the meeting-place of the two paths, with the yew casting shadows upon her and upon the short grass. There was a rustle in the dark branches, and she remembered the old woman she used to picture there—a kind witch, with

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an owl and a broomstick, who sold charms to make people happy, strung together from those little red yew-berries you must not eat—and the very feeling and scent of past sparkling mornings came back to her. Then a reaction made her begin to hurry along the path towards the side gate, for she was sure Darnley Miller would come that way because it was the most direct; he always chose the shortest and most direct route to reach his object. All of a sudden the old, half frightened sensation of dangers lurking and following which she must run to escape, most oddly took hold of her now. She hastened towards the safety and comfortable materialism of Darnley Miller, just as she had once fled from the dark stars to the lighted drawing-room, with the safe click of tea-cups and Aunt Harriet knitting. The sound of the side-gate clanging was as welcome to her as the clatter of cups had been during that last lap across the great twilit hall, and she rounded a group of laurels with flying feet and wide eyes, just the same.

Then she stopped dead. "Anthony!" she gasped. But she felt he was not real; he was but a figure thrown on the green bushes by a trick of her imagination: the epitome, somehow, of all she was trying to run away from.

"How do you do?" he said easily. "You look as if I were a ghost."

The blood which had receded, leaving her very pale, came rushing back into her cheeks. "I—I—— You startled me," she said.

He held out his hand.

"Isn't that solid enough?"

"Yes." She paused, then added in spite of herself: "Why have you come?"

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“To see you, Princess—and how you were accommodating yourself to the one crumpled rose-leaf under your nine feather beds. But I gathered last night you had already ceased to feel it.”

Her face changed. “Then you did wonder——” But before the sentence was finished, she remembered how soon he had made love to that other girl at the masked ball. “Oh, you need not think I am going to start it all over again,” she said. “I know you for what you are, now. I love fun. I always have done. But if anything could make me hate it, it would be your incorrigible frivolity.”

He glanced away for a moment, then looked at her with that whimsical smile which she detested herself for once having loved and for being moved by still. “Those are brave words,” he said. “Incorrigible Frivolity! And no one can say you are not dramatic. First there was the Country Cousin—which you must own was a poor performance—then Lady Teazle, and now the Didactic Princess.” He held out his hand. “So we’ll ring the curtain down on that, Princess. Good-bye!” And the next moment she stood alone by the clump of laurels, almost wondering if the interview had been as imaginary as others which had taken place there years and years ago. The whole thing had been no less unreal and fantastic—Anthony himself seemed as little burdened with the human standards of life.

Then she suddenly felt a hot wave of indignation sweep through her from head to foot. How dared he come and talk to her in his old way after all that had passed between them! He had only one virtue as a lover—he would not marry for money—and that just because he would not

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sacrifice his freedom. She went on with head erect towards the gate, glad that she could hear Miller's footsteps crunching briskly on the gravel and not approaching noiselessly as Anthony's had done on the short grass. The man she was going to marry ought to be as different as possible from the hero of that preposterous week-end adventure.

Miller called out to her in his round, full voice before she reached him—not quite the conquering lover yet, but with that as well as everything else bound to come his way. "I say! You really ought to provide a 'bus or something to take your rejected suitors away when you turn 'em off so early in the morning. Not safe to leave them walking about the lanes. I nearly ran one down just a bit further down the road."

Cynthia felt startled. "Was he hurt?" she said.

"Not much. Only unmistakable symptoms of a broken heart. Walking straight down the middle of the road with his hands in his pockets and his hat over his nose. 'Pon my word, I came round the corner and was right on to him almost before I saw him," continued Miller, finding in this topic something which gave an added zest to his own interview with Cynthia, for though he liked everything there was in life and meant to have it, he would not have enjoyed success so much if others had not been obliged to envy him. "I offered to give the poor chap a lift, but he declined. Said he was only a bit stunned and would be all right in a few minutes."

"Then he really was hurt?" said Cynthia quickly.

"Oh no; nothing to matter. I have sent the car back to the front gate, so if there were anything wrong my chauffeur would see as he passed." He paused. "But I

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didn't come here to talk about a man on the road, Cynthia. I came to ask you about our trip round the world."

She laughed nervously. "Oh, that takes some thinking about."

He came nearer and took her hand. "I'm ready to start now, you know. I have been waiting for this moment ever since you grew up, Cynthia. I shall never forget that day when I saw you in your first evening gown with your hair twisted round your head instead of loose. I wanted you from that minute. I knew straight off, that you and I could have a splendid life together."

She drew a little away from him. "But supposing I had not liked you? You seem so sure of everything; but that might have happened, you know."

"Thank the gods, it didn't," he said. "But I never felt sure of you at all. That's where you make the mistake. I only hoped I might win you some day if I tried hard enough, because I am a lucky devil and generally do get what I want in the end. I knew you were a tremendous prize in the matrimonial market, but I should have loved you just the same if you hadn't had a penny." And when he concluded thus, he actually thought he was speaking the truth.

Cynthia heard this ring of sincerity in his voice and was influenced by it. "If a rich girl was all you wanted, you would have found one somewhere else, of course," she said. Still, for the life of her, she could not make the words sound anything but stilted and unreal, even to herself. Again she experienced that odd sense of standing outside herself and hearing herself say those unmeaning, stilted words which were to decide the whole course of her future. It was as if a marionette were pronouncing

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a death sentence. But her thoughts recoiled from the simile with such violence that her mood altered. She was no longer outside herself—a sort of bewildered spectator, but in the midst of a turmoil of feeling which she could not understand: she was only bewildered and miserable, with something aching terribly at the back of her mind. Then she became vaguely conscious of the nearer odour of good tobacco and expensive soap. “Do you really think you hurt him?” she said.

He moved back, turning red across his face as if he had been stung with a lash. “Are you harping on that fellow yet? Who is he?”

“Anthony Walgrove. You ought to have been more careful.” Suddenly—emotion running before thought—she felt furiously angry with Miller: hated to think of him coming along triumphant in his powerful car, knocking down Anthony on the road. Yet justice forced her to see Miller was not to blame. Anthony ought to have looked out. “He is the son of the people with whom I was staying at Mabingstoke,” she explained, softening her abruptness.

“Does this mean you like him, then?” demanded Miller. “I ask you to marry me, and you——”

“I want to marry you, Darnley,” said Cynthia. “I mean to marry you.” Her voice faltered. “But you must have a little patience with me. I—I don’t want to get engaged this morning.”

He gave a short laugh at this anti-climax, though he was still very angry. “You’re not playing fast and loose with me?”

“Indeed, I am not,” said Cynthia earnestly. “I do wish to marry you, but you must——” She paused. “I

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want you to understand now that I'm not in love with you."

"Are you in love with anybody else?"

She hesitated, anxious to be perfectly honest.

"No. I don't think I have it in me to feel as some girls do. I have never been in love with a *real* person, and I don't believe I ever shall be." She flushed deeply—it was so difficult to explain a dream to Darnley as he stood waiting there in all his prosperous forcefulness—and yet it was that quality in him she wanted, to keep her safe from the dangers into which dreams led her. She must try to explain. "I fell in love with Dick Whittington at the pantomime when I was a little girl," she said, "and I fancied myself in love with my own idea of a man later on. But one was not a bit more real than the other. I found that out very soon. Only—I don't want you to be disappointed—after——" But she could not make it sound sense, even to herself, so no wonder he passed it over without comprehension.

"So long as there's nobody else I don't care," he said. "I have not the slightest doubt that we are cut out for one another. Never have had, since you were old enough to think of marrying. And I'd sooner have you a bit over-imaginative than not," he added handsomely. "Sort of complement to me. Make us get on all the better. My imagination all runs to business, you know. I shall leave the soulful side of the establishment to you." He gained command of his irritation as he spoke, and by the end was quite good-humored; pleased with himself, as usual, and pleased with life. If Cynthia wanted a bit more rope, she should have it, though all this was very annoying when he had such a lot of important business on hand, and de-

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sired ardently to put his love affair into its proper pigeon-hole, neatly docketed "achieved."

Cynthia was conscious of this attitude, and responded to it, feeling once more how safe she would be with him. He would keep her for ever from straying out of the glorious stream of life where were pleasure, change, excitement, power, notoriety—all the pride of the fair—into those musty corners where you found nothing but sadness and dreams. She was so glad to have this defence against her own weakness that she felt very kindly towards Miller. When he said: "A girl who doesn't dislike a man she is going to marry, will soon come to love him all right——" she believed that he might be speaking the truth.

At any rate, she was ready to take the risk—only not to start this morning. Then a faint honk! honk! in the distance caused Miller to glance at his watch. "I must be going now," he said. "I told the man to sound the horn if I didn't turn up. Guessed I should be so engrossed as to forget the time, you see. And I have an appointment this afternoon which may make a good deal of difference to my future and—" he pressed her hand—"yours. I like to think I shall be taking you along with me, Cynthia."

She returned the pressure, looking at him gravely: it was rather splendid and exciting to feel she was going to be carried along in that triumphal progress.

A few steps away, he turned round to wave to her, and called out: "We've not fixed up about our trip round the world, after all. Do that next time."

She waved back, smiling.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ROAD

IN returning to the house Cynthia again passed the clump of evergreens where the drive forked to lead in the direction of the side gate. She hurried on at that point because she did not wish to think about Anthony, or to feel again the anger against Miller which began to stir within her at sight of the lane where Anthony had been knocked down. An instinct of self-preservation urged her to leave all that behind her and to hold on to the recollection of the interview just over. She wanted—as she had said—to marry Miller, for he could satisfy that part of her which had slowly matured side by side with her girl's dreams. He could ensure her obtaining from the world that very best of everything—which she subconsciously always felt she had a right to, because she could pay for it—and he would justify her in that contempt for things with no money value in which she had been glimpsing at once a solace and a protection. She was voluntarily closing on herself—as she walked slowly across that lawn—that narrow gate through which some rich people do, after all, keep the power of going in and out.

But as she passed the open windows of the ball-room which was still airing in the sunshine, a sudden picture, complete to the last detail, sprang into her mind. For no

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earthly reason that she could understand, she saw Anthony's face as it had suddenly stood out to her vision among the sea of faces in the audience on the previous night. The pale oval, the heavy lids, the curved mouth and the streak of black hair on the forehead—they interposed themselves now with almost startling reality between her eyes and the long row of open windows.

Then her thoughts went back to Miller and the accident in the lane. Supposing Anthony were more hurt than Miller imagined, and even now lay by the road-side, needing help. Now she could see his pale face turned up to the blank sky. Oh, but this was ridiculous! The chauffeur would have seen him. Besides Miller had said he was all right. But Miller might *think* so. She found herself walking swiftly back towards the side entrance without knowing that she had turned, her thoughts going on in front of her: at last she began to run, trying to keep pace with her fears. But when she emerged upon the lane there was nothing, and her excitement dropped dead like a shot bird. She felt an odd calm that seemed to stretch away and away, filling all her future. That was the end of it, then. She gave a deep sigh of relief and walked with quiet, even footsteps, intending to go round by the lane to the front gate; unconsciously anxious to avoid endangering this mood by passing the clump of laurels again. A sort of bright, calm lightness pervaded her mind. This, then, was how people felt—as one so often read—when they had left the fevers and turmoils of adolescence behind: she was glad to have reached that stage—soberly thankful for the prospect that stretched out in front of her—most thankful to be sure of a protection against endangering it. Instinctively she felt that

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the gods she was going to serve brooked no divided worship, and that Miller was the man most fitted to keep her heart fixed. They'd have everything—they two together. Her quick imagination began to exercise itself at once on the pageant of their future lives. There was nothing—nothing they couldn't expect: nothing too splendid to look forward to.

Her steps quickened again, keeping pace with her thoughts. She did not look about her, being so engrossed with the inward vision: but a thrush suddenly trilling out caused her to turn her head as she reached the corner of the lane, and there she saw Anthony. For a moment she felt he was unreal, because he remained sitting still on the grey wall and looked so exactly as she had seen him in her mind a few minutes ago. Then he called out cheerfully:

“Still here, you see.”

“Why are you waiting here?” she said.

“Oh!” He paused. “I'm just waiting for a man,” he answered easily.

“I'm sorry Darnley Miller's car knocked you down,” she said, hesitating between going and staying.

“My own fault,” he answered. “I'm stiff and slow at moving, you know.”

There followed a brief silence: then she burst forth suddenly:

“I don't know why you came. Why can't you leave me alone?”

“I told you why I came,” he said. “I wanted to make sure we had not sent you home really any the worse for your visit to Mavingstoke. You'll think me a conceited fool, but after you had gone, I began to be almost afraid

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lest I might have made you a little unhappy. I see now that it is not so, and I am very glad."

"You can talk like that?" she cried. "Oh, no wonder I believed in you! You don't know that I stayed a night longer in Mabingstoke after leaving your house."

"Yes, I do. Henderson told Nellie, and she brought the news to us. He didn't wish to begin his marital experience by keeping a secret from his future wife, so she said."

"I can see her saying it!" responded Cynthia. "Well, I may as well tell you another thing now. I went to the Masked Ball in the evening for an hour."

"Did you?" said Anthony.

"Did I?" she echoed. "Oh, you can have no sense of shame! I was the girl in the green domino that you made love to there, though you'd sworn only twenty-four hours earlier that you loved me."

"How curious!" he said.

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked, then her voice faltered a little. "I don't know how you could—you talked to her just as you did when—I mean before."

They were near together now, gazing into each other's faces.

"I believe you knew—all the time?" said Cynthia suddenly.

"Do you?"

"You did know it was me all the time," she repeated.

"Well, if I did——"

"Why on earth did you behave like that?"

He withdrew his gaze and a rare flush coloured his face; she could hear him breathe deeply.

"I saw you would be better free from the entanglement

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into which an impulsive freak had led you, so I did my best to finish off the job neatly," he said. "Seriously, Cynthia, I saw you were inclined to marry me upon an impulse that had no more depth in it than the one that prompted you to play the part of Country Cousin. I didn't want to take advantage of that, and I didn't want to lay up misery for either of us. You see I have proved myself in the right. I gather you have already arranged a far more suitable marriage."

But she did not seem to hear what he was talking about. She stood there, eyes shining, the rich red flooding from brow to chin. "Anthony! You knew all the time. Oh, I am so glad! I am so glad!" And she began to cry, the tears rolling down her cheeks as she still gazed at him.

"You mean you are glad you can think well of me?" he said gently, taking her hand. "That is like you, dear little Goose-Girl. I believe I came because I hated so for you to think badly of me. I want you to go on thinking too well of people all your life."

She held his hand fast: for here he was again—the real Anthony whom she loved and whom she could not live without. "You must marry me, unless you want me to think badly of everybody," she said, sobbing. "I need you if I am to make the best of myself and my life."

"But what about Miller?" said Anthony, drawing his hand away. "I supposed you were engaged to him."

"Only three-parts engaged," said Cynthia eagerly. "And he can look after himself. He is sure to get somebody richer and nicer. You know what he is. He'll be all right. But our only chance of being happy is to marry each other. I know it is, Anthony."

He took her hand again, smiling as she loved to see him.

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"I wonder if you are right, Goose-Girl. The other would be the more sensible way for both of us, you know. I don't think I am cut out for the post of hanger-on to a rich wife, and you would shine as the partner of the sort of man I shall never be."

"Anthony," said Cynthia, "you believe you care less about riches than I do, but you care more. I never hesitated a minute—until I thought you didn't love me. But it is so much more important to you, that you want to let it ruin our lives. You are more like your own people than you imagine, Anthony. They think too much of it in one way, and you in another. You can't really love me, after all, or you would not mind taking my money. I shouldn't care a bit, if I had not a farthing. I should delight in feeling I owed everything to you. But my property comes into my own hands when I marry, and there will be plenty of hard work for you to do, so you need have no fear of not earning your living. Oh, I hate all this talk about money. We are letting it take the very loveliness out of being in love."

"We won't do that. Come and sit by me on this wall, Cynthia." He spoke very gravely, putting his arm round her. "I love you with all my heart and soul."

"O Anthony! My dear, dear old Anthony!"

"After all is said and done," he said emerging from a state of inarticulate rapture, "there is one bright side to your being an heiress: we shall not be obliged to have a long engagement."

"That's true," agreed Cynthia. "I never did approve of long engagements."

"But I suppose you'll want a grand wedding?" he continued. "Well, after all, every bride must have her day."

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And I daresay you owe that much to your own people about here, who are so fond of you."

"Yes. There'll always be that side of things for both of us, Anthony," said Cynthia. "I really mean to try my very best to make everybody dependent on me as happy as we are. I can't succeed, but I mean to do all I can."

He held her closer. "Our honeymoon will be our very own, though. Where shall we spend that?"

She thought a moment before answering, sure that anywhere would be all right with him, and yet wanting to please him. "I know," she said joyfully. "I've got it! A little inn I once lunched at in the Yorkshire Dales, in the very midst of all the loveliest, wildest country, with fresh cheese and plum-cake for lunch, and the nicest landlord, with red cheeks and a round sort of voice, just like you see in old-fashioned Christmas Annuals. I noticed a young couple there, who seemed to be on their honeymoon, and I thought then, it was a lovely place for one. It will be great fun to pretend we are just two young people like that, not too well off, and nobody curious about us."

"What about all the new frocks?" said Anthony, smiling down at her.

"Shan't take them!" retorted Cynthia, eagerly following out her idea. "I shall wear that plain coat and skirt I had at Mabingstoke and—and——Oh, I know—thick black woolen stockings of the kind that somehow bag round your ankles. No heiress on a honeymoon could have a more complete disguise than that."

He laughed. "Dressing up again! Dear little Goose-Girl, I can see you when you are seventy, larking about with a broomstick and a cap out of a cracker, and pretending to be a witch to amuse your grandchildren."

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"That's a long way ahead," said Cynthia.

And for a few seconds they both sat quiet, gazing down the long road they hoped to tread together and which looked so full of sunshine. Then Cynthia remembered what Anthony had said when she arrived.

"That man you are waiting for has not turned up yet," she said. "Rather a blessing he didn't. Who is he?"

"I don't know," said Anthony.

"Waiting for a man you don't know!" said Cynthia. "You are an old silly!"

"Not at all," said Anthony. "On the contrary, I found when I had walked a few yards that my ankle was sprained, so I sat quietly down to wait for my preserver—like a young lady in an Early Victorian novel."

"That abominable——" began Cynthia: then she stopped short. "After all, I feel I should like to kiss both Darnley Miller and the chauffeur," she concluded.

"Not so free with your kisses! They belong to me now," said Anthony. "But I'm afraid poor Miller will be in need of consolation."

"I have behaved badly to him," said Cynthia. "But it was your fault."

"I don't know how you came to love me so," he said.

And they embraced again, almost solemnly this time. Then she went away down the road to bring some one to take him into the house; but as soon as she was out of his sight, the old feeling came back to her that she could never be entirely sure of him—that he might at any moment slip away from her into those remote places of the mind. Well, she'd follow——

THE END





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