

The
CORDS
of
VANITY

James Branch Cabell

THE CORDS OF VANITY



"I ADORED WITHIN THESE FOUR YEARS PRECISELY A DOZEN GIRLS,
AND . . . WROTE VERSES OF THEM."

The Cords of Vanity

By

JAMES BRANCH CABELL



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TO
GABRIELLE BROOKE MONCURE

Plus sapit vulgus, quia tantum, quantum opus est, sapit.

"HIS HAS BEEN THE SUMMER AIR, AND THE
SUNSHINE, AND THE FLOWERS; AND GENTLE
EARS HAVE LISTENED TO HIM, AND GENTLE
EYES HAVE BEEN UPON HIM. LET OTHERS EAT
HIS HONEY THAT PLEASE, SO THAT HE HAS HAD
HIS MORSEL AND HIS SONG."

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PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

HE BEGINS TO WRITE AND TO READ

IT APPEARED to me that the present uncomfortable circumstances clamoured for betterment, and the obvious course was to apply to the one Person I had been taught to regard as universally capable. For my mother was always crying now over (though I did not know it) the luckiest chance which had ever befallen her, and that made me cry too, without knowing exactly why.

So the child, that then was I, procured a pencil and a bit of wrapping-paper, and began to write laboriously:

“DEAR LORD

“You know that Papa died and please comfort Mama and give Father a crown of Glory Ammen

“Your lamb and very sincerely yours

“ROBERT ETHERIDGE TOWNSEND.”

This appeared to the point as I reread it, and of course God would understand that children were not expected to write quite as straight across the paper as grown people; and the one problem was how to

deliver this, my first letter, most expeditiously, because when my mother cried you always cried too, and could n't stop, not even when you wanted to, not even when she promised you five cents.

I knew that the big Bible on the parlour table was God's book. Probably God read it very often, since anybody would be proud of having written a book as big as that and would want to look at it every day. So I tiptoed into the darkened parlour. I use the word advisedly, for there were not at this period any drawing-rooms in Lichfield, and besides, a drawing-room is an entirely different matter.

Everywhere the room was cool, and, since the shades were drawn, the outlines of its contents were uncomfortably dubious; and just where the table stood had been, five days ago, a big and oddly shaped black box with beautiful silver handles; and Uncle Phil had lifted me so that I could see through the pane of glass, which was a part of this funny box, while an infinity of decorous people rustled and whispered.

I remember knowing that they were "company" and thinking they coughed and sniffed because they were sorry that my father was dead. In the light of knowledge latterly acquired, I attribute these actions to the then prevalent weather, for even now I recall how stiflingly the room smelt of flowers — particularly of magnolia blossoms — and of rubber and of wet umbrellas. For my own part I

was not at all sorry, though of course I pretended to be, since I had always known that by ordinary my father whipped me because he had just quarreled with my mother and that he then enjoyed whipping me.

I desired in fine that he should stay dead and possess his crown of glory in Heaven, which was reassuringly remote, and that my mother should stop crying. So I slipped my note into the Apocrypha.

I felt that somewhere in the room was God and that God was watching me, but I was not afraid. Yet I entertained, in common with most children, a nebulous distrust of this mysterious Person, of which I was particularly conscious on winter nights when the gas had been turned down to a blue fleck of light, and the shadow of the mantelpiece flickered all about the ceiling, and the clock ticked louder and louder, and (I suspected) in prediction of some terrible event very close at hand. Then you remembered such unpleasant matters as Elisha and his bears, and those poor Egyptian children who had never even spoken to Moses, and that uncomfortably abstemious lady, in the fat blue-covered "Arabian Nights," who ate nothing but rice, grain by grain — *in the day time* — and called Mammy, and said you were very thirsty, and wanted a glass of water, please.

To-day though, while acutely conscious of that

awful inspection, and very careful not to look behind me, I was not, after all, precisely afraid. If God were a bit like other people I knew that He would say, "What an odd child!" and I liked to have people say that. Still there was sunlight in the hall, and lots of sunlight, not just long and dusty shreds of it, and it was *such* a nice hall.

I lay flat upon my stomach, having found that posture most conformable to the practice of reading, and considered the cover of this slim, green book; and the name of John Charteris, stamped thereon in fat-bellied letters of gold, meant less to me than it was destined to signify thereafter.

Puzzling matter I had found therein, but in my memory, always, one fantastic passage clung as a burr to sheep's wool.

Then I read again this

Fable of the Foolish Prince

"About those earlier happenings I choose in this place to be silent. Anterior adventures he had had of the right princely sort. But concerning his traffic with Schamir, the chief talisman, and how through its aid he won to the Sun's Sister for a little while; and concerning his dealings with the handsome Troll-wife (in which affair the cat he bribed with butter and the elm-tree he had decked with ribbons helped him); and with that beautiful and dire

Thuringian woman whose soul was a red mouse: we have in this place naught to do. Besides, the Foolish Prince had lightly put these commerces aside, and hours ago, when first the Fairy came to guide him; and therefore he, at least, could not in common equity have grudged an equal privilege to his historián.

“Thus, the Fairy leading, the Foolish Prince went skipping along his father’s highway. But it was bordered by so many wonders — as here a bright pebble and there an anemone, say, or, just beyond, a brook that babbled its entreaty to be tasted — that many folk had presently overtaken and had passed the loitering Foolish Prince. First came a grandee, supine in his gilded coach, with half-shut eyes, incuriously meditant upon yesterday’s statecraft or to-morrow’s gallantry; and now three yokels, with ruddy cheeks and much dust upon their shoulders; now a haggard man in black, who constantly glanced backward; and now a corporal with an empty sleeve, who whistled as he went.

“A butterfly guided every man of them along the highway. ‘For the Lord of the Fields is a whimsical person,’ said the Fairy, ‘and such is his very old enactment concerning the passage even of his cow-path; but princes each in his day and in his way may trample this domain at their discretion.’

“‘That is excellent hearing,’ said the Foolish Prince, and he strutted.

“‘Look you,’ said the Fairy, ‘a man does not often stumble and break his shins in the highway, but rather in the byway.’ . . .

“Thus, the Fairy leading, the Foolish Prince went skipping on his allotted journey, though he paused once in a while to shake his bauble at the staring sun.

“‘For the stars,’ he considered, ‘are more sympathetic.’ . . .

“Thus, the Fairy leading, they came at last to a tall hedge wherein were a hundred wickets, all of them being closed; and those who had passed the Foolish Prince disputed before the hedge and measured the hundred wickets with a variety of instruments, and each man entered at his chosen wicket, and a butterfly guided him; but none returned into the open country.

“‘For beyond each wicket,’ said the Fairy, ‘lies a crucible, and in ninety-nine of these is the man that enters it consumed, or else transmuted into this animal or that animal. For such is the law in these parts.’

“The Prince demanded how if one found by chance the hundredth wicket? But she shook her head and said that none of the Tylwydd Teg were permitted to enter the Garden. Only rumour had it that within the Garden there was a Tree, but whether the fruit of this Tree were sweet or bitter, no persons in the Fields could tell.

“‘Then why in heaven’s name need a man test any of these wickets?’ cried the Foolish Prince; ‘with so much to lose and, it may be, nothing to gain? For one, I shall enter none of them.’ But once more she shook her head.

“‘In your House and in your Sign it was decreed. Time will be, my Prince; to-day the kid gambols, and the ox chews his cud. Presently the butcher cries, *Time is!* Comes the hour and the power, and the cook bestirs herself and says, *Time was!* The master has his dinner either way.’ And the Fairy vanished, her radiancies thinning, as she talked with him, into the neutral colours of smoke, and thence dwindling a little by a little into the vaulting spiral of a windless and a burnt-out fire, until nothing remained of her save her voice; and that was like the stirring of dead leaves before they fall.

“‘Truly,’ said the Foolish Prince, “I am compelled to consider this a vexatious business. For, look you, the butterfly I most admire just now flits over this wicket, and then her twin flutters over that, and between them there is absolutely no disparity in attraction. Hoo! here is a more sensible insect.’

“And he cracked his heels together and ran after a golden butterfly that drifted to the rearward Fields; but there was such a host of butterflies about that presently he had lost track of his first choice, and was in boisterous pursuit of a second insect, and then of yet another; but none of them did he

ever capture, the while that one by one he followed divers butterflies about the cheery Fields.

“Then it was evening, and the sky drew up the twilight from the east as a blotter draws up ink, and stars were kindling everywhere, like tiny signal-fires, and a light wind came out of the murky east and rustled very plaintively in places where the more ambiguous shadows were; and the Foolish Prince shivered, for now the air was growing chill, and the tips of his fingers were aware of it.

“‘Even a crucible,’ he reflected, ‘possesses the minor virtue of warmth.’

“And before the hedge he found a Rational Person, led hither by a Clothes’ Moth, who was working out the problem of the hundred wickets in consonance with the most approved methods. ‘And very nearly I have solved it,’ the Rational Person said, in genteel triumph, ‘but it grows too dark for any further cyphering, and again I must wait until to-morrow. I regret, sir, that you have elected to waste the day, in pursuit of various meretricious *Lepidoptera*.’

“‘A happy day, my brother, is never wasted.’

“‘That appears to me to be nonsense,’ said the Rational Person; and he put up his portfolio, preparatory to another night in the Fields.

“‘Indeed, my brother?’ laughed the Foolish Prince; ‘then, farewell, for I am assured that yonder, as here, our father makes the laws; and that to dispute his knowledge concerning the qualities of butter-

flies were an impertinence.' And pushing open the wicket nearest to his hand, he tucked his bauble under his left arm and skipped into the Enchanted Garden, and as he went he sang.

"Sang the Foolish Prince:

"'Farewell, O Fields and Butterflies
And Happenings of Yesteryear!
For we espy, and hold more dear
The Wicket of our Destinies.

"'Farewell! O Fields ne'er found amiss
When laughter was a frequent noise
And golden-hearted girls and boys
Appraised the mouth they meant to kiss.

"'Farewell, farewell! yet for a space
We, being young, have had the Day,
That in our Garden nod and say,
Afield is no unpleasant place."

In such disconnected fashion, as hereafter, I record the moments of my life which I most vividly remember. For it is possible only in the last paragraph of a book, and for the book's people only, to look back upon an orderly and proportionate progression to what they have become; in life the thing arrives with scantier dignity; and one appears, in retrospection, less to have marched inevitably toward any goal than always to have jumped from one stepping-stone to its handiest fellow because, however momentarily, "just this or that poor impulse seemed the sole work of a lifetime."

Well! I have known at least these moments and the rapture of their dominance; and I am not lightly to be stripped of their recollection, nor of the attendant thrill either, by any cheerless hour wherein, as it will sometimes happen, all my personal achievements confront me like a pile of flimsy jack-straws.

THE CORDS OF VANITY

CHAPTER I

HE MEETS WITH STELLA

WHEN I first knew Stella she was within a month of being fifteen, which is for woman-kind an unattractive age. There were a startling number of corners to her then, and she had but vague notions as to the management of her hands and feet. In consequence they were perpetually turning up in unexpected places and surprising her by their size and number. Yes, she was very hopelessly fifteen; she was used to laugh, unnecessarily, in a nervous fashion that was exactly three keys higher than her natural voice, and when engaged in conversation she patted down her skirts six times to the minute.

It seems oddly unbelievable when I reflect that Rosalind—"daughter to the banished Duke"—and Stella and Helen of Troy and all the other famous fair ones of history were each like that at one period or another.

As for myself, I was at this period very old—much older than it is ever permitted any one to be afterward. I entertained the most optimistic ideas as to my moustache, and was wont to encourage it in

secret places with the manicure-scissors. I still entertained the belief that girls were rather unnecessary nuisances, but was beginning to perceive the expediency of concealing this opinion, even in private converse with my dearest chum, where, in our joyous interchange of various heresies, we touched upon this point very lightly, and, I now suspect, somewhat consciously.

All this was at a certain summer resort, which was called the Green Chalybeate. Stella and I and others of our age attended the hotel hops in the evening with religious punctuality, for well-meaning elders insisted that it amused us, and it was easier to go than to argue the point. At least, that was the view-point of the boys.

Stella has since sworn the girls liked it. I suspect in this statement a certain parsimony as to the truth. They giggled too much and were never entirely free from that haunting anxiety concerning their skirts.

We danced together, Stella and I, and conversed, meanwhile, with careful disregard of the amenities of life, since each feared lest the other might suspect in some common courtesy an attempt at — there is really no other word — spooning. And spooning was absurd.

Heigho! one lives and learns.

I asked Stella to sit out a dance. I did this because I had just heard Mr. Lethbury — a handsome man with waxed mustachios and an absolutely piratical

amount of whiskers — make the same request of Miss Van Orden, my immediately previous partner, and it was evident to my crescent intellect that such whiskers could do no wrong.

Stella was not uninfluenced, it may be, by Miss Van Orden's example, for even in girlhood the latter was a person of inordinate beauty, whereas, as has been said, Stella's corners were then multitudinous, and it is probable that those two queer little knobs at the base of her throat would have been apt to render their owner uncomfortable and envious of — let us say — more ample charms. In any event, Stella giggled and consented, and I presently conducted her to the third piazza of the hotel.

There we found a world that was new.

It was a world of sweet odours and strange lights, flooded with a kindly silence which was, somehow, composed of many lisplings and trepidations and thin echoes. The night was warm, the sky all transparency. If the comparison were not manifestly absurd, one would liken its pale colour to that of blue plush, rubbed against the nap. And in this radiance the stars bathed, large and bright and intimate, yet blurred somewhat, like shop-lights seen through a frosted pane; and the moon floated on it, crisp and clear as a new-minted coin. It was a mid-summer moon, grave and glorious, that compelled the eye; and its shield was faintly marked, as though some Titan had breathed on its chill surface. Its

light suffused the heavens and lay upon the earth beneath us in broad splashes; and the foliage about us was dappled with its splendour, save in the open east, where the low, undulant hills wore radiancy as a mantle.

For the trees, mostly maples of slight stature, clustered thickly about the hotel, and their branches mingled in a restless pattern of black and silver and dim green, that mimicked the laughter of the sea under an April wind. Looking down from the piazza, above the tree-tops, it was strangely like the sea, and it gave one, somehow, much the same sense of remote, unbounded spaces and of a beauty that was a little sinister. At times, whippoorwills called to one another, eerie and shrill; and the distant music was a vibration in the air, which was heavy with the scent of bruised growing things and filled with the cool, healing magic of the moonlight.

Taking it all in all, we had blundered upon a very beautiful place. And there we sat for a while and talked in an aimless fashion.

Then, moved by some queer impulse, I stared over the railing for a little at this great, wonderful, ambiguous world, and said, solemnly:

"It is good."

"Yes," said Stella, in a curious, quiet and tiny voice, "it — it's very large, is n't it?" She looked out for a moment, over the tree-tops. "It dwarfs one rather," she said, at length. "The stars are so big,

and — so uninterested.” Stella paused for an interval and then spoke with an uncertain laugh. “I think I am rather afraid.”

“Afraid?” I echoed.

“Yes,” she said, vaguely; “of — of everything.”

I understood. Even then I knew something of the frequent insufficiency of words.

“It is a big world,” I said.

“It’s all before us,” she went on. She had forgotten my existence. “It’s bringing us so many things — and we don’t know what any of them are. But we’ve got to take them — got to take them, whether we want to or not. It seems a little unfair, somehow. We’ve got to — got to grow up and — marry and — die, whether we want to or not. We’ve no choice. And it may not matter, after all. Everything will go on as before, and the stars won’t care, and what we’ve done and suffered may count for nothing — nothing!”

As you justly observe, a highly improbable speech for a girl of fifteen. One grants you that, for an ordinary girl, but in this case we are speaking of Stella.

Candour compels one to admit that both Stella and I were unusual children, because we were the sort of child which you were at fifteen. If you are quite honest, you will acknowledge that at this age you were a prodigy of some sort. We all were. And it is precisely this fact which now leads you to

question the probability of what has been recorded, and to deny to fifteen the power of thinking for itself. And why, pray? You were not an absolute ignoramus at fifteen, you know; you were aware of quite a number of things, if you will remember; and there were dry-throated times when the idea of death appalled you. But, of course, you were an unusual child. Other children are different.

The point which I wish to make is that they are not.

"Rob — are you ever afraid of dying?" Stella asked, upon a sudden — "very much afraid — Oh, *you* know what I mean."

I did. I was about ten once more. It was dark, and I was passing a drug-store, with red and green bottles in its illuminated windows, and it had just occurred to me that I, too, must die. So I said, "Yes."

"And yet we've got to — we've got to! Oh, I *don't* see how people can go on living contentedly when that's always drawing nearer — when they know they must die some day. Yet they dance and picnic and amuse themselves as if they were going to live forever. I — oh, I don't understand!"

"They get accustomed to the idea, I suppose" — after an unfertile pause. "We're rather like rats in a trap," I suggested, poetically. "We can bite the wires and go crazy, if we like, or we can eat the cheese

and make the best of it; either way, there's no getting out till they come in the morning to kill us."

"Yes," sighed Stella; "I suppose we must make the best of it."

"It's the only thing to do," said I, dolefully.

"Yet it is all so big — and so indifferent!" she cried, after a little. "And we don't know — we can't know! — what it has in store for us!"

"We'll make the best of that, too," I protested, stubbornly.

Stella sighed again. "Yes," she assented; "still, I'm afraid."

"I think I am — rather," I conceded, after reflection.

There was a very long pause now. Pitiful, ridiculous infants were pondering, somewhat vaguely, but very solemnly, over certain mysteries of life and death, which most of us have learned to accept with stolidity. We were very young, and to us the miracle of life was still a little impressive, and we had not yet come to regard the universe as a more or less comfortable place, thoughtfully constructed for us to reside in.

Therefore, we moved a trifle closer together, Stella and I, and were deeply miserable over the *Weltschmerz*. After a little, a distant whippoorwill woke me from a chaos of reverie, and I turned to Stella, with a vague sense that we two were the only

people left in the world, and that I was very, very fond of her.

Stella's head was leaned backward. Her lips were parted, and the moonlight glinted in her eyes. Her eyes were blue.

"Don't!" said Stella, faintly.

I did. . . .

It was a matter out of my volition, out of my planning. And, oh, the wonder, and sweetness, and sacredness of it! I thought, even in the instant; and, oh, the pity that there would be no second happening like this in all my life!

Stella was not angry, as I had half expected. "That was dear of you," she said, impulsively, "but don't try to do it again." There was the wisdom of all the centuries in this mandate of Stella's as she rose to her feet. The spell was broken, utterly. "I think," said Stella, in the voice of a girl of fifteen, "I think we 'd better go and dance now."

In the crude morning I approached Stella, with a fatuous smile. She apparently both perceived and resented this, which was queer, as she never once looked at me. There was something of great interest in the distance; she was flushed and indignant, and her eyes would n't, could n't, did n't turn for an instant in my direction.

I fidgeted.

"If," said she, impersonally, "if you believe it

was because of *you*, you are very much mistaken. It would have been the same with anybody! You don't understand, and I don't either. I hate you. Go away!" And she stamped her foot in a fine rage.

For the moment I entertained a most un-Christian desire that Stella had been born a boy. In that case, I felt I would have really enjoyed sitting upon the back of her head and grinding her nose into the dust, and otherwise persuading her to cry "'Nough!" This pleasure being denied me, I sought comfort in discourteous speech.

"Umph-huh!" said I, "you think yourself so smart! Umph-huh!"

Thereupon I wisely went away.

CHAPTER II

HE LOVES EXTENSIVELY

I SAW no more of Stella for a lengthy while, since within two days of the events recorded it had pleased my mother to seek out yet another resort. "For in September," she said, "I really must have perfect quiet and unimpeachable butter, and falling leaves, and only a very few congenial people to be melancholy with — and that sort of thing, you know," she concluded, vaguely. "I find it freshens one up so against the winter." It was a signal feature of my mother's conversation that you never understood, precisely, what she was talking about.

Thus in her train the silly, pretty woman drew otherwhither her hobbledehoy son, as indeed she had aforetime drawn an armament of more mature and stolid members of my sex. I was always proud of my handsome mother, but without any aspirations, however theoretical, toward intimacy; and her periods of conscientious, if vague, affection, when she recollected its propriety, I endured with consolatory apprehension of the ensuing and agreeable era of untrammelled negligence.

I fancy that at bottom I was lonely without suspecting it. I was an only child; my father had died, as has been hinted, when I was in kilts, for my infancy was spent in days of the evanished kilt; and with my mother I had never anything in common. I was accounted an odd boy; given to reading and to secretive ways, and, they record, to long silences throughout which my lips would move, shaping noiselessly the words they never articulated; and it was not until my career at King's College that I may be said to have pretended to intimacy with anybody

For in old Fairhaven I spent, of course, a period of ostensible study, as four generations of my fathers had done aforetime. But in that leisured, slatternly and ancient city I garnered a far larger harvest of (comparatively) innocuous cakes and ale, than of authentic learning, I imagine, and at my graduation carried little of moment from the place, save many memories of Bettie Hamlyn.

Not but that I had my other friends. In particular I remember those four of us who always called ourselves "The Three Musketeers," in flat defiance, just as Dumas did, of mere arithmetic. I think that we loved one another very greatly during the four years we spent together in our common youth. I like to believe we did, and to remember the boys who were once unreasonably happy, even now. It does not seem to count, somehow, that Porthos has taken to

drink and every other inexpedient course, I hear, and that I would not recognise him to-day, were we two to encounter casually — or Athos either, I suppose, for he has been so long in the Philippines.

And as for D'Artagnan — or Billy Woods, if you prefer the appellation which his sponsors gave him — why, we are still good friends enough and always will be, I suppose. But we are not particularly intimate; and, very certainly, we will never again read "Chastelard" together and declaim the more impassioned parts of it — and, in fine, I can't help seeing, nowadays, that, especially since his marriage, Billy has developed into a rather obvious and stupid person, and that he considers me to be disastrously unpractical and a bit of a bad egg. And, in a phrase, when we are together, just we two, we smoke a great deal and do not talk any more than is necessary.

And once I would have, quite sincerely, enjoyed any death, however excruciating, which promoted the well-being of Billy Woods; and he viewed me not dissimilarly, I believe. . . . However, after all, this was a long, long while ago, and in a period almost antediluvian.

And in this period they of Fairhaven assumed I was in love with Miss Hamlyn; and for a very little while, at the beginning, had I assumed as much. More lately was my error flagrantly apparent when I fell in love with someone else, and sincerely in love, and found to my amazement that, upon the whole, I

preferred Bettie's companionship to that of the woman I adored. Latterly I learned to accept this odd phenomenon much as I had learned to accept the sunrise.

Once she demanded of me, "I often wonder what you really think of me? Honest injun, I mean."

I meditated, and presently began, with leisure:

"Miss Hamlyn is a young woman of considerable personal attractions, and with one exception, unqualified by any accomplishments. She plays the piano, it is true, but she does it divinely; and she neither embroiders, nor sketches, nor recites, nor sings, or, in fine, annoys the public in any way whatsoever. Her enemies deny that she is good-looking, but even her friends concede her curious picturesqueness and her knowledge of it. Her penetration, indeed, is not to be despised; she has even grasped the fact that all men are not necessarily fools, in spite of the fashion in which they talk to women; it must be admitted, however, that her emotions are prone to take precedence of her reasoning powers, for she is not easily misled save by those whom she loves, since in argument, while illogical, she is invariably convincing."

Miss Hamlyn sniffed. "This is, perhaps, the inevitable effect of twenty cigarettes a day," was her cryptic comment. "Nevertheless, you affect me with ennui."

"For the mere facts of the case, she plainly demon-

strates, with the abettance of her dimples, to be an affair of unimportance; the real point is what she wishes done about it. Yet the proffering of any particular piece of advice does not necessarily signify that she either expects or wishes it to be acted upon, since had she been present at the Creation she would have cheerfully pointed out to the Deity His various mistakes, and have offered her co-operation, and have thought a deal less of Him had He accepted it; but this is merely a habit."

"Yes?" said Bettie; and she added: "Do you know, Robin, the saddest and the most desolate thing in the world is to practise an *étude* of Schumann's in nine flats, and the next is to realise that a man who has been in love with you has recovered for keeps?"

"It must not be imagined, however, that Miss Hamlyn is untruthful, for she is superior to truth, and when driven by impertinences into a corner, conceals her real opinion by expressing it flippantly; and thereupon you credit her with the employment of irony and the possession of every imaginable and super-angelical characteristic."

"Unless we come to a better understanding," Miss Hamlyn crisply began, "we had better stop right here before we come to a worse ——"

"Miss Hamlyn, in a word, is possessed of no insufferable virtues and of many endearing faults; and in common with the rest of humanity, she regards her

disapproval of any proceeding as a clear proof of its impropriety."

This was largely apropos of a fire-new debate concerning the advantages of cigarette-smoking; and when I had made an end, Bettie said nothing. . . . She minded chiefly that one of us should have thought of the other without bias. She said it was n't fair. And I know now that she was right.

But of Bettie Hamlyn, for reasons you may learn hereafter, if you so elect, I honestly prefer to write not at all. Four years, in fine, we spent to every purpose together, and they were very happy years. It were a desecration to record them.

Meantime, during these years I had fallen in and out of love assiduously. Since the Anabasis of lad's love traverses a monotonous country, where one hill is largely like another, and one meadow the twin sister of the next, to its last daffodil, one may with profit dwell upon the green-sickness lightly. I adored within these four years precisely a dozen girls, and worse than that, wrote verses of them.

I give you their names, and not the workaday ones, lest the wives of divers people be offended (and in many cases, surprised), but as they figured in these rhymes: Heart's Desire, Florimel, Dolores, Yolande, Sylvia, Heart o' My Heart, Chloris, Félice, Ettarre, Phyllis, Phyllida, and Dorothy. Here was a rosary of exquisite names, I even now concede, and the owner

of each *nom de plume* I admired for this or that peculiar excellence, and for this or that period however brief; and by ordinary without presuming to mention the fact to any of these divinities save Heart o' My Heart, who was, after all, only a Penate.

Her cognomen, in grosser circumstances, was Elizabeth Hamlyn; and it afterward became apparent to me that I, in reality, wrote all the verses of this period solely for the pleasure of reading them aloud to Bettie; for certainly I disclosed their existence to no one else — except just one or two to Phyllida, who was “literary.”

And the upshot of all this heart-burning is most succinctly given in my own not impeccable verse, as Bettie Hamlyn heard it summed up one evening in May. It was the year I graduated from King's College, and the exact relation of the date to the Annos Domini is trivial.

“Amen! thus ends the calendar,” I read — and “mouthing out my hollow oes and aes,” you may believe me —

“Amen! thus ends the calendar
Of fleeting loves more light than air —
And now Lord Love, that led afar
Into the fields that were so fair,
Is fled, and I no longer share
The indolent sweet summer days
With Heart's Desire, nor ever praise
Félise, or mirror forth the lures
Of Stella's eyes or Sylvia's,
Yet love for Dorothy endures.

"Chloris is wedded, and Ettarre
Forgets, Yolande loves elsewhere,
And in the grave where dead men are
The creeping worms find dainty fare
Amid Dolores's heavy hair,
And Time inures the roseate haze
That thinly veiled those woodland ways
Which Phyllis trod, as he inures
The heart that once was Phyllida's—
Yet love for Dorothy endures.

"I love her — yea, albeit the scar
And stain of lust smirch everywhere
Her heart, all through, yet from afar
I love her. This oft-handled ware
Of refuse maidenhood doth snare
My soul? — I love her. She betrays
My love? — I love her. The old days
Fall 'neath the feet of Time that cures
The old, old loves in many ways —
Yet love for Dorothy endures.

"Heart o' My Heart, though thine the praise
If aught of good in me betrays
Thee in me — whose love secures
My faltering feet on loftier ways —
Yet love for Dorothy endures."

For this was the year that I graduated, and the same Dorothy — I violate no confidence in stating that her actual name was Aurelia Minns, and that she had been, for some seven years, unluckily, the undisputed belle of Fairhaven — had within this very afternoon married a promising young doctor; and I was draining the cup of my misery to the last delicious drop, and, not unnaturally, writing such

bathos about it as only a youth of twenty is capable of evolving.

"Dear boy," said Bettie, when I had made an end, "and are you very miserable?"

I glanced upward from my manuscript, and mustered a Spartan smile. "If misery loves company, then am I the least unhappy soul alive. For I don't want anyone but just you; and I believe I never will."

"Oh—? But I don't count." The girl continued, with composure: "Or rather, I have always counted your — affairs, so that I know precisely what it all amounts to."

"Sum total?"

"A lot of imitation emotions." She added hastily, "Oh, quite a good imitation, dear; you are smooth enough to see to that. Why, I remember once — when you read me that first sonnet, sitting all hunched up on the little stool, and pretending you did n't know I knew whom you meant it for, and ending it with a really very effective, breathless sob — and caught my hand and pressed it to your forehead for a moment — why, that time I was thoroughly rattled and almost believed — even I — that ——" She shrugged. "But we grow old so soon!" she lamented, and regretfully, for at this time Bettie was very nearly twenty.

"Yes." The effective breathless sob responded to her actual encore. "I have not forgotten."

"Only for a moment, though." Miss Hamlyn reflected and then added, brightly: "Now, most girls would have liked it, for it sounded all wool. And they would have gone into it, as you wanted, and have been very, very happy for a while. Then, after a time — after you had got a sonnet or two out of it, and had made a sufficiency of pretty speeches — you would have gone for an admiring walk about yourself and have inspected your sensations and have applauded them, quite enthusiastically, and have said, in effect: 'Madam, I thank you for your attention. Pray regard the incident as closed.'"

"You are doing me," I observed, "an injustice. And however tiny they may be, I hate 'em."

"But, Robin, can't you see," she said, with an odd earnestness, "that to be fond of you is quite disgracefully easy, even though ——" Bettie Hamlyn said, presently: "Why, your one object in life appears to be to find a girl who will allow you to moon around her and make verses about her! Oh, very well! I met to-day just the sort of pretty idiot who will let you do it. She is visiting Kathleen Eppes for the Finals." And Bettie mentioned a name.

"That 's rather queer," said I. "I used to know that girl. She will be at the Wednesday dance to-morrow night, I suppose" — and I put up my manuscript with a large air of tolerance. "I dare say I have been exaggerating matters a bit, after all. Any woman who treated me the way that one did is

not, after all, worthy of regret. And in any event, I got a ballade out of her and six — no, seven — other poems.”

For the name which Bettie had mentioned was that of Stella, and I was, somehow, curiously desirous to come again to Stella.

CHAPTER III

HE RE-ENCOUNTERS STELLA

DEAR me!" said Stella, wonderingly; "I would never have known you in the world! You've grown so fa — I mean, you are so well-built. I've grown? Nonsense! — and, besides, what did you expect me to do in six years? — and, moreover, it is abominably rude of you to presume to speak of me in that abstracted and judicious manner — quite as if I were a debt or a taste for strong drink! It is really only French heels and a pompadour, and, of course, you can't have this dance. It's promised, and I hop, you know, frightfully. . . . Why, naturally, I have n't forgotten — how could I, when you were the most disagreeable boy I ever knew?"

I ventured a suggestion that caused Stella to turn an attractive pink, and laugh. "No," said she, demurely; "I shall never — never — sit out another dance with you."

So she did remember!

Subsequently: "Our steps suit perfectly — heavens! you are the fifth man who has said that to-night, and I am sure it would be very silly and very

tiresome to dance through life with anybody. Men are *so* absurd! Oh, yes, I tell them all — every one of them — that our steps suit even when they *have* just ripped off a yard or so of flounce in an attempt to walk up the front of my dress. It makes them happy, poor things! and injures nobody. You liked it, you know; you grinned like a pleased cat. I like cats, don't you?"

Later: "That is absolute nonsense, you know," said Stella, critically. "Do you always get red in the face when you make love? I would n't if I were you. You really have no idea how queer it makes you look."

Still later: "No, I don't think I am going anywhere to-morrow afternoon," said Stella.

So that during the fleet moments of these Finals I saw as much of Stella as was possible; and veracity compels the admission that she evinced no particular disapproval of the circumstance.

I said good-bye to Bettie Hamlyn rather late one evening. It was in her garden. The Finals were over, and Stella had left Fairhaven that same afternoon. I was to follow in the morning by an early train.

It was a hot, still night in June, with never a breath of air stirring. In the sky was a low-hung moon, full and very red. It was an evil moon, and it lighted a night that was unreasonably ominous.

We had talked of trifles resolutely for two hours, I think.

"Well — good-bye, Bettie," I said, at last. "I'm glad it is n't for long." For of course we were never to spend a month, at most, without seeing each other.

"Good-bye," she said, and casually shook hands.

Then Bettie Hamlyn said, in a quite different voice: "Robin, you come of such a bad lot. And I'm letting you go. I'm turning you over to Stellas and mothers and things like that just because I *have* to. It is n't fair. They will make another Townsend of my boy, and after all I've tried to do. Oh, Robin, don't let anything do that! But what's the good in promising?" she said, and wearily.

"And have I ever failed you, Bettie?"

"No — not me," she answered, and almost as though she grudged the fact. Then Bettie laughed a little. "Indeed, I'm trying to believe you never will. Oh, indeed, I am. But just be honest with me, Robin, and nothing else will ever matter very much. I don't care *what* you do, if only you are always honest with me. You can murder people, if you like, and burn down as many houses as you choose. You probably will. But you'll be honest with me — won't you? — and particularly when you don't want to be?"

So I promised her that. And, indeed, I believe it is the only promise which I ever tried to keep quite faithfully.

And all the ensuing summer I followed Stella from one resort to another, with an engaging and entire candour as to my ultimate purpose. I was upon the verge of my majority, when, under the terms of my father's will, I would come into possession of such fragments of his patrimony as he had omitted to squander. And afterward I intended to become excessively distinguished in this or that profession, not as yet irrevocably fixed upon, but for choice as a writer of immortal verse; and I dwelt at this time very feelingly, and very frequently, upon the wholesome restraint which matrimony imposes on the possessor of an artistic temperament.

Stella promised to place my name upon her waiting-list, and take the matter up in due season; and lamented, with a tiny and premeditated yawn, that as a servitor of system she was compelled to list her "little lovers and suitors in alphabetical order, Mr. Townsend. Besides, you would probably strangle me before the year was out."

"I would thoroughly enjoy doing it," I said, grimly, "and within the moment."

She regarded me for a while. "You would, too," she said at last, with an alien gravity; "and that is why — Oh, Rob dear, you are out of my dimension! I am rather afraid of you! I am a poor bewildered triangle who is being wooed by a cube!" the girl wailed, and but half humorously.

Stella's mother had closed Bellemeade for the year, however, and they were to spend the winter in Lichfield; and, to reduplicate her phrase, Stella promised to "think it over very seriously."

But I suppose I had never any real chance against Peter Blagden. To begin with, he had a childless and widowed uncle, who was popularly reported to "roll in wealth"; and in addition, Peter was notoriously dissipated, even apart from being seven years older than I was. No other girl of twenty would have hesitated between us half as long as Stella did. She did hesitate; and even now there is an odd, if scanty, comfort in the fact that Stella hesitated.

Besides, Peter was eminently likeable. At times I almost liked him myself, for all my fervent envy of his recognised depravity and the hateful ease with which he thought of something to say in those uncomfortable moments when he and I and Stella were together. At other times I could talk glibly enough, but before this seasoned scapegrace I was dumb, and felt my reputation to be hopelessly immaculate. . . . If only Stella would believe me to be just the tiniest bit depraved! I blush to think of the dark hints I dropped as to entirely fictitious women who "had been too kind to me. But then" — as I would feelingly lament — "we could never let women alone, we Townsends, you know ——"

They named her Stella, I fancy, because her eyes were so like stars. It is manifestly an irrelevant detail that there do not happen to be any azure stars in the firmaments. Indeed I am inclined to think that Nature somehow noted this deplorable omission, and created Stella's eyes to make up for it; at any rate, if you can imagine Aldebaran or Benetnasch polished up a bit, and set in a speedwell-cup, you will have a very fair idea of one of them. You cannot, however, picture to yourself the effect of the pair of them, as the human mind is limited.

Really, though, their effect was somewhat curious. You noticed them casually, let us say; then, without warning, you ceased to notice anything. You simply grew foolish and gasped like a newly hooked trout, and went suddenly mad and babbled as meaninglessly as a silly little rustic brook trotting under a bridge.

I have seen the thing happen any number of times. And, strangely enough, you liked it. Numbers of men would venture into the same room with those disconcerting eyes the very next evening, even appearing to seek them out, to court their perils, as it were — men who must have known perfectly well, either by report or experience, the unavoidable result of such foolhardy conduct. For eventually it always culminated in Stella's being deeply surprised and grieved — in somebody's winter-garden, for choice — never having dreamed of such a thing, of course, and regarding you only

as a dear, dear friend. Oh, she did it well, did Stella, and endured these frequent griefs and surprises with, I must protest, a most exemplary patience. In a phrase, she was the most adorable combination of the prevaricator, the jilt and the coquette I have ever encountered

Shortly afterward, for the seventh time, I asked Stella to marry me. Pretty much every fellow I knew had done as much, particularly Peter; and it is always a mistake to appear unnecessarily reserved or exclusive. She declined — with a fluency, by the way, that bespoke considerable practice — and subsequently, as the story-books have it, was wedded to another.

And Peter Blagden clapped the pinnacle upon my anguish by asking me to be the best man.

“For I have n’t a living male relative nearer than two cousins — praise God!” said Peter, fervently; “and Hugh Van Orden must be about half-past ten, whereas I class Jack Charteris among the more extensively qualified vermin.”

I consented, and it at least enabled me to see this episode of Stella’s life from the inside, and to find it — oh, quite like other weddings.

Something like this:

“Look here,” a perspiring and fidgety Peter protested, at the last moment, as we lurked in the gloomy vestry; “look here, Henderson has n’t

blackened the soles of these blessed shoes. I'll look like an ass when it comes to the kneeling part — like an ass, I tell you. Good Heavens, they'll look like tombstones."

"If you funk now," said I, severely, "I'll never help you get married again. Oh, sainted Moses in heaven! what have I done with that ring? There goes the organ. Good God, Peter, look at her! simply look at her, man. Oh, you lucky devil! you lucky devil."

I spoke enviously, you understand, simply to encourage him.

Followed a glaring of lights, a swishing of fans, and the hum of a densely packed, expectant humanity; a blare of music; then Stella, an incredible, immaculate vision, with glad, shamed eyes. My shoulders straightened, and I was not out of temper any longer.

"— so long as ye both may live?" ended the bishop.

"I will," poor Peter quavered, with obvious uncertainty.

Stella's eyes were filled with unutterable happiness and fear, but her voice was level. I found time to wonder at its steadiness, even though, just about this time, I resonantly burst a button off one of my gloves. I fancy they must have been rather tight.

"— and thereto," said Stella, calmly, "I give thee my troth."

And subsequently they were Mendelssohned out of church, to the satisfaction of a large and critical audience. I came down the aisle with Stella's only sister — who afterward married the Marquis d'Arlanges — and found her very entertaining later in the evening.

Yes, it was quite like other weddings — oh, quite like! I only wonder for what conceivable reason I remember its least detail, and so vividly.

CHAPTER IV

HE TALKS WITH CHARTERIS

IT WAS, oddly enough, upon the evening of the same day that I first talked against John Charteris. Yet the thing came about naturally enough, for the novelist was, as has been said, a cousin of Peter Blagden, and as such, one of the wedding guests at Bellemeade; and thus that evening, midway in the discussion of a contemplative cigarette, the little man came upon me seated on the terrace and gazing, rather vacantly, in the direction of the moon.

I was not thinking of anything in particular; only there was a by-end of verse which sang itself over and over again, somewhere in the back of my brain — “Her eyes were the eyes of a bride whom delight makes afraid, her eyes were the eyes” — and so on, as at night the traveller may hear his train jogging through a monotonous and stiff-jointed song; and in my heart there was just hunger.

Charteris had heard, one may presume, of my disastrous love-business; and with all an author's lust of passion, in others, chose his gambit swiftly. “Mr. Townsend, is it not? Then may a murrain light upon thee, Mr. Townsend — whatever a

murrain may happen to be — since you have disturbed me in the concoction of an ever-living and entrancing fable.”

“I may safely go as far,” said I “as to offer the proverbial penny.”

“Done!” cried Mr. Charteris. He meditated for a moment, and then began, in a low and curiously melodious voice, to narrate

The Apologue of the First Conjugation

“When the gods of Hellas were discrowned, there was a great scurrying from Olympus to the world of mortals, where each deity must henceforward shift for himself — Aphrodite in her hollow hill, where the good knight Tannhäuser sleeps as yet, it may be; Hephæstos, in some smithy; whilst Athene, for aught I know, established a young ladies’ seminary, and Helios, as is notorious, died under priestly torture, and Dionysos cannily took orders, and Hermes set up as a merchant in Friesland. But Eros went to the Grammarians. He would be a schoolmaster.

“The Grammarians, grim, snuffy and wrinkled though they might be, were no more impervious to his allures than are the rest of us, and appointed him in consequence to a duty; and it was, I glean of mediæval legend, that of teaching the First Conjugation. Then Eros donned cap and gown, took lodging with a quiet musical family, and set *amo*

as the first and model verb; and ever since this period has the verb 'to love' been the first to be mastered in all well-constituted grammars, as it is in life.

"Heigho! it is not an easy verb to conjugate. One has trouble enough stumbling through its manifold nuances, both active and passive, from the bold-faced 'I love,' the confident 'I will love,' the hopeful 'I may be loved,' and so on to the wistful, pitiful 'I might have been loved, if' — when each one of us may supply the Protasis as best befits his personal opinion and particular scars, and may tear his hair, or scribble verses, or adopt the cynical, or, in fine, assume any pose which strikes his fancy. For he has graduated into the Second Conjugation, which is *moneo*, and may now admonish to his heart's content, whilst looking back complacently into the first classroom, where others — and so many others — are struggling with the very verb, and breaking their shins over the very tenses, and are involved in the very conditions — verbal or otherwise — that aforetime saddened him, or showed him a possible by-way toward recreation, or played the deuce with his liver, according to the nature of the man.

"Eros is a hard, implacable pedagogue, and his scholars suffer for the fact. He wields a rod, rather than a filigree bow, as old romancers fabled — no plaything, but a most business-like article, well-poised in the handle, and thence tapering into

graceful, stinging nothingness; and not a scholar of his escapes at least a flick of it.

“I can fancy the class called up as he administers, with right good will, his penalties. Master Paris! for loving his neighbour a little less than himself, and his neighbour’s wife a little more. Master Launcelot! ditto. Masters Petrarch, Tristram, Antony, Juan Tenorio, Dante Alighieri, and so on. There are a great many in this class, you observe; and even Master David has to lay aside his Psalm Book, and go forward with the others for chastisement. Master Romeo! for trespassing in other people’s gardens. Master Leander! for swimming in the Hellespont after dark, which is a notoriously absurd and unhealthful form of recreation.

“Thus, one by one, they go into the darkened private office. The master handles his rod — eia! ’t is borrowed from the Erinnyes! — lovingly, caressingly, as a very conscientious man about the performance of his duty. Then comes the dreadful order, *Take down your breeches, sir!* . . . But the scene is too horrible to contemplate. He punishes them all, this schoolmaster, for he is unbelievably old, and with the years’ advance has grown a little querulous.

“Well, now I approach my moral, Mr. Townsend. One must have one’s birching with the rest, and of necessity there remains but to make the best of it. Birching is not a dignified process, and the endurer

comes from it both sore and shamefaced. Yet always in such contretemps it is expedient to brazen the matter out and to make as stately an appearance, say, as one's bruises will permit.

"First to the world ——"

But at this point I raised my hand. "That is facile, inasmuch as the world cares nothing whatever about it. The world is composed of men and women who have their own affairs to mind. How in heaven's name does it concern them that a boy has dreamed dreams and has gone mad like a star-struck moth? It was foolish of him. Such is the verdict, given in a voice nor kindly nor severe, and the world, mildly wondering, passes on to deal with more weighty matters. For vegetables are uncommonly high this year, and upon my word, Mrs. Grundy, ma'am, a lady as *is* a lady is nearly worried to death, what with that and the gas bill.

"No, believe me, the world does not take love-affairs very seriously — not even the great ones," I said, in a noble toleration.

And with an appreciative chuckle, Charteris sank upon the bench beside me. "My adorable boy!"

"But can't you imagine the knights talking over Launcelot's affair with Guenevere, at whatever was the Arthurian substitute for a club? and sniggering over it? and Lamoracke sagaciously observing that there was always a crooked streak in the

Leodograunce family? Or one Roman matron punching a chicken in the ribs and remarking to another: 'Well, Mrs. Gracchus, they *do* say Antony is absolutely daft over this new Queen of Egypt. Brazen-faced thing! with a very muddy complexion, I'm told, and absolutely *no* reputation! What *can* he see in her, I wonder? By the way, I hear your little Caius suffers from the croup. Now *my* remedy' — and so they waddle on to price asparagus."

Charteris said: "Well! we need not go out of our way to meddle with the affairs of others; the entanglement is most disastrously apt to come about of itself quite soon enough. Yet a little while and Launcelot will be running Lamoracke through the body, while the King storms Joyeuse Garde; a few months and your Roman matron will weep quietly on her unshared pillow — not aloud, though, for fear of disturbing the children — while Gracchus is dreadfully seasick at Actium."

"But that does n't *prove* anything," I stammered. "Why, it does n't follow logically ——"

"Nor does anything else. This fact is the chief charm of life. You will presently find, I think, that living means a daily squandering of interest upon the first half of any number of two-part stories which have not ever any sequel. Oh, my adorable boy, I envy you your present misery so profoundly I am half unwilling to assure you that in the ultimate

one finds a broken heart rather fattening than otherwise; and that a blighted life has never yet been known to prevent acceptable happenings in conservatories and suchlike secluded places, or to rob a solitude *à deux* of its tiniest possibility. I grant you that love is a wonderful thing, but there are far too many emotions which stand toward love much as the makers of certain marmalades claim that their wares do toward butter — ‘serving as an excellent (occasional) substitute.’ At least, so you will find it. And, unheroic as it is, within the month you will forget.”

“No — I shall not quite forget,” said I.

“Then were you the more unwise. To forget, both very speedily and very frequently, is the sole method of rendering life livable. One is here; the importance of the fact in the eternal scheme of things is perhaps a shade more trivial than one is disposed to concede, but in any event, one is here, and here, for a very little while, one is capable of happiness. And it is a colourful world, Mr. Townsend, containing much, upon the whole, to captivate both the eye and the taste; a world manured by the rigid bodies of persons who have died in youth. Oh, their coffins lie everywhere beneath our feet, thick as sweets in a pudding, whithersoever we tread. Yet everyone of these putridities was once a boy or a girl, and wore a body that was capable of so much pleasure! To-day, disused, they lie beneath us, in

their coffins, these white, straight bodies, like swords untried that quietly rust in the scabbard. Meanwhile, on each hand is apparent the not yet outwasted instrument and one is here — ay, and one's fingers and one's nostrils twitch at times, even in the hour when one is most miserable, and much as yours do now."

For a long while I meditated. Then I said: "I am not really miserable, because, all in all, one is content to pay the price of happiness. I have been very happy of late; and whatever the blind Fate that mismanages the world may elect to demand in payment, I may not in reason haggle over the amount. No, by heavens! I would have nothing changed, and least of all would I forget; having drunk Nectar, one would not qualify it with the water of Lethe."

I rose, not unhandsome, I considered, in the moonlight. "The play is over, the little comedy is played out. She must go; at least she has tarried for a little. She does not love you; ah! but she did. God speed her, then, the woman we have all loved and lost and still dream of on sleepy Sundays; and all possible happiness to her! One must be grateful that through her one has known the glory of love. Even though she never cared — 'and never could understand' — one may not but be glad that one has known and loved her, the Only Woman.

"So to-morrow, like the person in 'Lycidas,' I am

for fresh fields, Mr. Charteris. And indeed it is high time that I were journeying, since she and I have rested, and have eaten and drunk our fill at this particular tavern; and now it is closing time. A plague on these foolish and impertinent laws, say I, and heartily; for it is cold and cheerless outside, whereas here within I was perfectly comfortable. None the less I must go, or else be evicted by the constable; so good-night, my sweet; and as for you, Madam Clotho, pray what unconscionable score have you chalked up against me?"

I grimaced. "Heavens! what an infinity of sighs, sonnets, lamentations, and heart-burnings is this that I owe to Fate and Decency!"

Charteris applauded as though it were a comedy. "In effect, Marian's married and you stand here, alive and merry at — pray what precise period of life, Mr. Townsend?"

"I confess to twenty-one at present, sir, though I trust to live it down in time."

"I thought as much. And I predict for you a life without achievements but of gusto. Yes, you will bring a seasoned palate to your grave — and I envy you. We open Willoughby Hall next week, and of course you will make one of the party. Good-night, you glorious boy." And the little man wheeled and departed.

"He said it," I more lately observed — "yes, he undoubtedly said it. And he wrote 'Ashtaroth's

Lacquey,' and 'The Foolish Prince,' and — Oh, may be, it is only a dream, after all."

My heart was pounding, but not with sorrow or despair or any other maudlin passion; and Stella was now as remote from the farthest frontier of my thoughts as was Cynara or Pharaoh's daughter.

CHAPTER V

HE REVISITS FAIRHAVEN AND THE PLAY

SO I went to Willoughby Hall, which stands, as you may be aware, upon the eastern outskirt of Fairhaven. My reappearance created some stir among the older students and the town-folk, though, one and all, they presently declared me to be "too stuck-up for any use," inasmuch as I ignored them in favour of the Charteris house party—after, of course, one visit to Chapel, which I paid a little obviously *en prince*, and affably shook hands with all the Faculty, and was completely conscious of how such happenings impressed us when I, too, was a student.

By a disastrous chance did Bettie Hamlyn spend that spring, as well as the preceding year, in Colorado with her mother, who died there that summer; and to me Fairhaven proper without Bettie Hamlyn seemed a tawdry and desolate place; and I know that but for Mrs. Hamlyn's illness—a querulous woman for whom I never cared a jot—my future life had been quite otherwise. For, as I told Bettie once, and it was true, I have found in the world but three sorts of humanity—"Myself, and Bettie Hamlyn, and the other people."

Yes, I wrote to Bettie, and punctiliously, though I had not ever seen her since that night when the moon was red, and big, and very evil. She had exacted that I write.

"But letters don't mean anything, Bettie. And, besides, I hate writing letters."

"That is precisely why you *must* write to me. You never do the things you don't want to do. I know it. But for me you always will, and that makes all the difference."

"Shylock!" I said.

"If you like. In any event I mean to have my pound of flesh, and regularly."

So I wrote to Bettie Hamlyn on the seventh of every month — because that was my birthday — and again on the twenty-third, because that was hers.

And I thought of many things as I walked by the deserted garden, where there was nothing which concerned me now, not even a ghost. I did not go in to leave a card upon Professor Hamlyn. The empty house confronted me too blankly, with its tight-shuttered windows, like blind eyes, and I hurried by.

Meanwhile, this was the first time that Willoughby Hall had been occupied by any other than caretakers for many years; and Fairhaven, to confess the truth, was a trifle ill-at-ease before the modish persons who now tenanted the old mansion; and

consoled itself after an immemorial usage by backbiting.

And meanwhile I enjoyed myself tremendously. It was the first time I was ever thrown with people who were unanimously agreed that, after all, nothing is very serious. Mrs. Charteris, of course, was different; but even she, like all the others, found me divertingly naïve and, in consequence, petted and cosseted me. I like petting; and since everyone seemed agreed to regard me as "the Child in the House" — that was Alicia Wade's nickname, and it clung — and to like having a child in the house, I began a little to heighten my very real boyishness. There was no harm in it; and if people were fonder of me because I sat upon the floor by preference, and drolly exaggerated what I really thought, it became a sort of public duty to do these things. So I did, and found it astonishingly pleasant.

And meanwhile John Charteris could never see enough of me, whom, as I to-day suspect, Charteris was studying and conscientiously, to the end that I should be converted into "copy." In any event it was just three weeks after Stella's marriage that Mr. Charteris coaxed me into Fairhaven's Opera House to witness a performance of "Romeo and Juliet."

I went under protest; I had witnessed the butchery of so many dramas within these walls during my college days, that I knew what I

must anticipate; and yet, at the conclusion of the second act —

“By Jove!” said I, in a voice that shook a little. “She’s a stunner!” I jolted out, as I proceeded to applaud, vigorously, with both hands and feet. “And who would have thought it! Good Lord, *who* would have thought it!”

Mr. Charteris smiled, in patronising fashion. “A beautiful woman,” he conceded, with his customary drawl — “an inordinately beautiful woman, in fact, but entirely lacking in temperament.”

“Temperament!” I scoffed, hotly; “what’s temperament to two eyes like those? Why, they’re as big as tennis-balls! And her voice — why, a violin — a very superior violin — if it could talk, would have just such a voice as that woman has! Temperament! Oh, you make me ill, Charteris! Why, man, just look at her!” I said, conclusively.

And Mr. Charteris looked, I presume. In any event, the Juliet of the evening stood before the curtain, smiling, bowing to right and left. The citizens of Fairhaven were applauding her with a certain conscientious industry, for they really found “Romeo and Juliet” a rather dull couple. The general opinion, however, was that Miss Montmorenci seemed an elegant actress, and in some interesting play, like “The Two Orphans” or “Lady Audley’s Secret,” would be well worth seeing. Upon those who had witnessed her initial perform-

ance, she had made a most favourable impression in "The Lady of Lyons"; while, at the Tuesday matinée, as Lady Isabel in "East Lynne," she had wrung the souls of her hearers, and had brought forth every handkerchief in the house. Moreover, she was very good-looking — quite the lady, some said; and, after all, one cannot expect everything for twenty-five cents; considering which circumstances, Fairhaven applauded her with a temperate fervour, and made due allowance for Shakespeare as being a classic, and, therefore, of course, commendable, but not necessarily interesting.

"Well?" I queried, when she had vanished, speaking under cover of the orchestra — a courtesy title accorded a very ancient and very feeble piano — "what do you think of her — of her looks, I mean? Oh, hang her temperament!"

Charteris assumed a most virtuous expression. "I don't dare tell you," said he; "you forget I am a married man."

Then I frowned slightly. I rather resented Charteris's flippant allusion to a wife whom I considered, with some reason, to be vastly too good for her husband. However, Charteris was the host, and it was Charteris who suggested, as a lark, our walking over from Willoughby Hall, to witness this performance of the Imperial Dramatic Company. Oh, beyond doubt, Jack Charteris had his good points, I thought.

I considered how near I had come to remaining with the others — for bridge! And I decided I had never cared for bridge. How on earth could presumably sensible people be content to coop themselves in a drawing-room on a warm May evening, when not two miles off was a woman with perfectly unfathomable eyes and a voice which was a love-song? Of course, she could n't act, but, then, who wanted her to act? I indignantly demanded of my soul.

One simply wanted to look at her, and hear her speak. Charteris, with his prattle about temperament, was an ass; when a woman is born with such eyes and with a voice like that, she has done her full duty by the world, and has prodigally accomplished all one has the tiniest right to expect of her.

It was impossible she was as beautiful in reality as she seemed, because no woman was quite so beautiful as that; most of it was undoubtedly due to rouge and rice-powder and the footlights; but one could not be mistaken about the voice. And if her speech was that, what must her singing be! I thought; and in the outcome I remembered this reflection best of all.

I consulted my programme. It informed me, in large type at the end, that Juliet was "old Capulet's daughter," and that the part was played by Miss Annabelle Alys Montmorenci.

And I sighed. I admitted to myself that from a

woman who wilfully assumed such a name little could be hoped. Still, I would like to see her off the stage . . . without all those gaudy fripperies and gewgaws. . . . merely from curiosity. . . .

"A most enjoyable performance," said Mr. Charteris, as we came out of the Opera House. "I have always had a sneaking liking for burlesque."

Thereupon he maliciously paused to present me to Mrs. Adrian Rabbet, wife to the new rector of Fairhaven.

"Such a sad play," she chirped, "and, I fear, sadly demoralising in its effects on young people. No, of course, I did n't *think* of bringing the children, Mr. Charteris — Shakespeare's language is not always sufficiently obscure, you know, to make that safe. Ah, poor Shakespeare!" she went on, secure in the knowledge of those incomprehensible four pages she had read that afternoon, preparatory to the evening's outing; "so sad to think of our greatest dramatist having been a drinking man! It quite depressed me all through the play to think of him hobnobbing with Dr. Johnson at the Tabard Inn, and making such irregular marriages, and stealing sheep — or was it sheep, now?"

I said that, as I remembered, it was a fox, which he hid under his cloak until the beast bit him.

"Well, at any rate, it was something extremely

deplorable and characteristic of genius, and I quite feel for his wife." She sighed pityingly, and endeavoured, I think, to recollect whether it was "Ingomar" or "Spartacus" that Shakespeare wrote. Mrs. Rabbet was not quite certain. "However," she concluded, "they play 'Ten Nights in a Bar-room' on Thursday, and I shall certainly bring the children then, for I am always glad for them to see a really moral and instructive drama. That reminds me! I absolutely must tell you what Tom said about actors the other day ——"

And she did. This led naturally to Matilda's recent and blasphemous comments on George Washington, and her observations as to the rector's dog, and Arabella's personal opinion of Elisha. And so on, in a manner not unfamiliar to fond parents. Mrs. Rabbet said toward the end that it was a most enjoyable chat, although to me it appeared to partake rather of the nature of a monologue. It consumed perhaps a half-hour; and when we two at last relinquished Mrs. Rabbet to her husband's charge, it was with a feeling not altogether unakin to relief.

We walked slowly down Fairhaven's one real street, which extends due east from the College for as much as a mile, to end inconsequently in those foundations, carefully preserved, which are now the only remnant of a building wherein a number of important matters were settled in Colonial days.

There Cambridge Street divides like a Y, one branch of which leads straight to Willoughby Hall.

Our route from the Opera House thus led through the major part of Fairhaven, which, after an evening of unwonted dissipation, was now largely employed in discussing the play, and turning the cat out of the night. The houses were mostly dark, and the moon, nearing its full, silvered row after row of blank windows. There was an odour of growing things about, for in Fairhaven the gardens are many.

Then it befell that I made a sudden exclamation.

"Eh?" said Mr. Charteris.

"Why, nothing," I explained, lucidly. And for all Mr. Charteris could see, this might have been the case.

It may be mentioned, however, that we were, at this moment, passing a tall hedge of box, set about a large garden. The hedge was perhaps five feet six in height; Mr. Charteris was also five feet six, whereas I was an unusually tall young man, and topped my host by a good half-foot.

"I say," I observed, after a little, "I'm all out of cigarettes. I'll go back to the drug-store," I suggested, as seized with a happy thought, "and get some. I noticed it was still open. Don't think of waiting for me," I urged, considerably.

"Why, great heavens!" Mr. Charteris ejaculated; "take one of mine. I can recommend them, I

assure you — and, in any event, there are all sorts, I fancy, at the house. They keep only the rankest kind of Virginia tobacco yonder.”

“I prefer it,” I insisted, “oh, yes, I really prefer it. So much milder and more wholesome, you know. I never smoke any other sort. My doctor insists on my smoking the very rankest tobacco I can get. It is much better for the heart, he says, because you don’t smoke so much of it, you know. Besides,” I concluded, virtuously, “it is infinitely cheaper; you can get twenty cigarettes all for five cents at some places. I really must economise, I think.”

Mr. Charteris turned, and with great care stared in every direction. He discovered nothing unusual. “Very well!” assented Mr. Charteris; “I, too, have an eye for bargains. I will go with you.”

“If you do alive,” quoth I, quite honestly, “I devoutly desire that all sorts of unpleasant things may happen to me.”

Charteris grinned. “Immoral young rip!” said he; “I warn you, before entering the ministry, Mr. Rabbet was accounted an excellent shot.”

“Get out!” said I.

And the fervour of my utterance was such that Mr. Charteris proceeded to obey. “Don’t be late for breakfast, if you can help it,” he urged, kindly. “Of course, though, you are up to some new form of insanity, and I shall probably be sent for in the morning, to bail you out of the lock-up.”

Thereupon he turned on his heel, and went down
the deserted street, singing sweetly.

Sang Mr. Charteris:

“Curly gold locks cover foolish brains,
Billing and cooing is all your cheer,
Sighing and singing of midnight strains
Under bonnybell’s window-panes.
Wait till you ’ve come to forty year!

“Forty times over let Michaelmas pass,
Grizzling hair the brain doth clear;
Then you know the boy is an ass,
Then you know the worth of a lass,
Once you have come to forty year.”

CHAPTER VI

HE CHATS OVER A HEDGE

LEFT to myself, I now began to retrace my steps. Solitude appeared to have mitigated my craving for tobacco in a surprising manner; indeed, a casual observer might have thought it completely forgotten, for I walked with a curious leisure. When I had come again to the box-hedge my pace had degenerated, a little by a little, into an aimless lounge. Mr. Robert Townsend, clamantly, was rapt with admiration of the perfect beauty of the night.

Followed a strange chance. There was only the mildest breeze about; it was barely audible among the leaves above; and yet — so unreliable are the breezes of still summer nights — with a sudden, tiny and almost imperceptible outburst, did this treacherous breeze lift Mr. Townsend's hat from his head, and waft it over the hedge of trim box-bushes. It was unfortunate, for, as has been said, the hedge was a tall and sturdy one. So I peeped over it, with disconsolate countenance.

"Beastly awkward," said I, as meditatively; "I'd give a great deal to know how I'm going to get it

back without breaking through the blessed hedge, and rousing the house, and being taken for a burglar or a madman. I wonder if there's a gate?"

"It is terrible," assented a quite tranquil voice; "but if gentlemen *will* venture abroad on such terrible nights ——"

"Eh?" said I. I looked up quickly at the moon; then back toward the possessor of the voice. It was peculiar I had not noticed her before, for she sat on a rustic bench not fifteen feet away, and in full view of the street. It was, perhaps, the strangeness of the affair that was accountable for the great wonder in my soul; and the little tremor which woke in my speech.

"— so windy," she complained.

"Er — ah — yes, quite so!" I agreed, hastily.

"I — I am really afraid" — with a suspicious gurgle — "that it must be a tornado. Ah," she continued, some strong emotion catching at her voice, "heaven help all poor souls at sea! How the wind must whistle through the cordage! how the — the marlin spikes must quiver, and the good ship reel on such a night!" She looked up at a cloudless sky, and sighed. Then she gurgled.

"Er — h'm!" I observed.

For she had come forward and had lifted my hat toward me, and I could see her very plainly now; and my mouth was making foolish sounds, and my heart was performing certain curious and varied

gymnastics that could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be included among its proper duties, and which interfered with my breathing.

“Did n’t I know it — did n’t I know it?” I demanded of my soul, and all my pulses sang a riotous pæan; “I knew, with that voice, she could n’t be a common actress — a vulgar, raddled creature out of a barn! You not a gentlewoman! Nonsense! Why — why, you ’re positively incredible! Oh, you great, wonderful, lazy woman, you are probably very stupid, and you certainly can’t act, but your eyes are black velvet, and your voice is evidently stolen from a Cremona, and as for your hair, there must be pounds of it, and, altogether, you ought to be set up on a pedestal for men to worship! There is just one other woman in the whole wide world as beautiful as you are; and *she* is two thousand years old, and is securely locked up in the Louvre, and belongs to the French Government, and, besides, she has n’t any arms, so that even there you have the advantage!”

And, indeed, Miss Annabelle Alys Montmorenci was of much the same large, placid type as the Venus of Milo, nor were the upper portions of the two faces dissimilar. Miss Montmorenci’s lips, however, were far more curved, more buxom, and were, at the present moment, bordered by an absolutely bewildering assemblage of dimples which the statue may not boast.

"I really think," said Miss Montmorenci, judicially, "that it would now be far better for you to seek some shelter from this devastating wind. It really is not safe, you know, in the open. You might be swept away, just as your hat was." Ensued another gurgle.

"The shelter of a tree——" I began, looking doubtfully into the garden, where there were any number of trees.

"The very thing," she assented. "There is a splendid oak yonder, just half a block up the street." And she graciously pointed it out.

I regarded it with disapproval. "Such a rickety old tree," I objected, sulkily.

Followed a silence. She bent her head to one side, and looked up at me. She was grave now. "A strolling actress is n't supposed to be very particular, is she?" asked Miss Montmorenci, slowly. "She would n't object to a man's coming by night and trying to scrape acquaintance with her — a man who would n't think of being seen with her by day? She would like it, probably. She — she'd probably be accustomed to it, would n't she?" And Miss Montmorenci smiled.

And I saw, with a great pang, that there were tears in her eyes, and, on a sudden, was abjectly ashamed of myself. "Why, you can't think that of me!" I babbled. "I — oh, don't think me that sort, I beg of you! I'm not — really, I'm not, Miss

Montmorenci! But I admired you so much to-night — I — oh, of course, I was very silly and very presumptuous, but, really, you know ——”

I paused for a little. This was miles apart from the glib talk I had designed.

“My name is Robert Townsend,” I then continued, simply; “I am staying at Mr. Charteris’s place, just outside of Fairhaven. So now, you see, we have been quite properly introduced, have n’t we? And, by the way,” I suggested, after a moment’s meditation, “there is a very interesting old college here — old pictures, records, historical associations and such like. I would like to inspect it, vastly. Can’t I call for you in the morning? We can do it together, if you don’t mind, and if you have n’t already seen it. Won’t you, Miss Montmorenci? You really ought to see King’s College, you know,” I added, severely; “it is quite famous, because I was educated there, and no end of other interesting things have happened within its venerable confines, I am told.”

She had drawn close to the hedge. “You really mean it?” she asked. “You would walk through the streets of this Fairhaven with me — with a barn-stormer, with a strolling actress? You’d be afraid!” she cried, suddenly; “oh, yes, you talk bravely enough, but you’d be afraid, of course, when the time came! You’d be afraid!”

I had taken the hat, but my head was still

uncovered. "I don't think," said I, reflectively, "that I am afraid of many things, somehow. But of one thing I am certainly not afraid, and that is of mistaking a good woman for — for anything else. Their eyes are different somehow," I haltingly explained, as to myself; then smiled. "Shall we say eleven o'clock?"

Miss Montmorenci laid one hand upon the hedge-top and slowly twisted off four box-leaves what while I waited. "I—I believe you," she said, in meditation; "oh, yes, I believe you, and I trust you, Mr. Townsend! But we rehearse in the morning, and there is a *matinée* every day, you know, and — and there are other reasons ——" She paused, irresolutely. "No," said Miss Montmorenci, "I thank you, but — good-night."

"Oh, I say! am I never to see any more of you?"

A century or so of silence now. Her deliberation seemed endless.

At last: "*Matinées* and rehearsal keep us busy by day. But I am boarding here for the week, and — and I rest here in the garden after the evening performance. It is cool, it — it is like a glass of water after taking rather bitter medicine. And you aren't a bad man, are you? No; you look too big and strong and clean, Mr. Townsend. And, besides, you're just a boy. A — even a strolling actress would trust you," she ended, handsomely, and gurgled once more.

"In that case," cried Mr. Townsend, "I shall say good-night with a light heart." And I turned to go.

"A moment," said she.

"An eternity," I proffered.

"Promise me," she said, almost harshly, "that you will not come again to the Opera House."

My brows were raised a trifle. "I adore the drama," I pleaded.

"And I loathe it. And I act very badly — hopelessly so," said Miss Montmorenci, with an idolent shrug; "and, somehow, I don't want you to see me do it. Why did you mind my calling you a boy? You *are*, you know."

So I protested I had not minded it at all; and I promised. "But at least," I said, triumphantly, "you can't prevent my remembering Juliet!"

She said of course not, only I was not to be silly.

"And therefore," quoth I, "Juliet shall be remembered always." I smiled and waved my hand. "*Au revoir*, Signorina Capulet," said I.

And I took my departure. My blood rejoiced, with a strange fervour, in the summer moonlight. It was good to be alive.

CHAPTER VII

HE GOES MAD IN A GARDEN

AND, oh, but it is good to be with you again, Signorina!" cried I, as I came with quick strides into the moonlit garden. I caught both her hands in mine, and laughed like an ineffably contented person. There was nothing very subtle about the boy that then was I; at worst, he overacted what he really felt; and just at present he was vastly pleased with the universe, and he saw no possible reason for concealing the fact.

It was characteristic, also, that she made no pretence at being surprised by my coming. She was expecting me and she smiled very frankly at seeing me. Also, in place of the street dress of Tuesday, she wore something that was white and soft and clinging, and left her throat but half concealed. This, for two reasons, was sensible and praiseworthy; one being that the night was warm and the other that it really broadened my ideas as to the state of perfection which it is possible for the human throat to attain.

"So you don't like my stage-name?" she asked, as I sat down beside her. "Well, for that matter, no more do I."

"It does n't suit you," I protested — "not in the least. Whereas, you might be a Signorina Somebody-or-other, you know. You are dark and stately and — well, I can't tell you all the things you are," I complained, "because the English language is so abominably limited. But, upon the whole, I'm willing to take the word of the playbill — yes, I'm quite willing to accept you as Signorina Capulet. She had a habit of sitting in gardens at night, I remember. Yes," I decided, after reflection, "I really think it highly probable that you are old Capulet's daughter. I shall make a point of it to pick a quarrel with that impertinent, trespassing young Montague as soon as possible. He really does n't deserve you, you know."

Unaccountably, her face saddened. Then, "Signorina? Signorina?" she appraised the title. "It *is* rather a pretty name. And the other is horrible. Yes, you may call me Signorina, if you like."

She would not tell me her real name. She was unmarried — this much she told me, but of her past life, her profession, or of her future she never spoke. "I don't want to talk about it," she said, candidly. "We play for a week in Fairhaven, and here, once off the stage, I intend to forget I am an actress. When I am on the stage," she added, in meditative wise, "of course everyone knows I am not."

I laughed. I found her very satisfying; she was

not particularly intelligent, perhaps, but then I was beginning to consider clever women rather objectionable creatures. There was a sufficiency of them among the Charteris house-party — Alicia Wade, Patricia Musgrave, Gabrielle Anstruther — and I thought of them almost resentfully. The world had accorded them — well, never exactly what they most wanted, but, at least, they had its luxuries; and they said sharp, cynical things about the world in return. In a woman's mouth epigrams were as much out-of-place as a meerschaum pipe.

Here, on the contrary, was a woman whom the world had accorded nothing save hard knocks, and she regarded it, upon the whole, as an eminently pleasant place to live in. She accepted its rebuffs with a certain large calm, as being all in the day's work. There was, no doubt, some good and sufficient reason for these inconveniences; however, not for a moment did she puzzle her handsome head in speculating over this reason. She was probably too lazy. And the few favours the world accorded her she took thankfully.

“You see,” she explained to me — this was on Thursday night, when I found her contentedly eating sweetmeats out of a paper bag — “the world is really very like a large chocolate drop; it's rather bitter on the outside, but when you have bitten through, you find the heart of it sweet. Oh, how greedy! — you've taken the last candied cherry,

and I am specially fond of candied cherries!" And indeed, she looked frankly regretful as I munched it.

I thought her adorable.

In fact, the moon seemed to shine down each night upon that particular garden in a more and more delightful and dangerous manner. And being then a perfectly normal and healthy young man, the said moonshine affected me in a fashion which has been peculiar to moonshine since Noah was a likely stripling; and my blood appeared to me, at times, to leap and bubble in my veins as if it had been some notably invigorating and heady tippie; and my heart was unreasonably contented, and I gave due thanks for this woman who had come to me unsullied through the world's gutter — unsullied, look you; there was no questioning that.

I pictured her in certain execrable rhymes as the Lady in "Comus," moving serene and unafraid among a rabble of threatening, bestial shapes. And I rejoiced that there were women like this in the world — brave wholesome, unutterably honest women, whose very lack of cleverness — oh, subtle appeal to my vanity! — demanded a gentleman's protection.

As has been said, I was a well-grown lad, but when I thought in this fashion I seemed to myself, at a moderate computation, ten feet in height — and just the person, in short, who would be an ideal protector.

Thus far my callow meditations. My course of

reasoning was perhaps faulty, but then there are, upon the whole, certain incidents in life more interesting and desirable than the perfecting of a mathematical demonstration. And so, for a little, my blood rejoiced with a strange fervour in the summer moonlight, and it was good to be alive.

Thursday was the twenty-third of the month, so upon that afternoon I wrote to Bettie Hamlyn, in far-off Colorado.

It was a lengthy letter. It told her of how desolate her garden was and how odd Fairhaven seemed without her. It told how I had half changed my mind and would probably not go to Europe with Mr. Charteris after all. Bettie had been at pains to expatiate upon her hatred of Charteris, whom she had never seen, in an earlier epistle, I may mention. It told her, in fine, of a variety of matters. And it ended:

“I went to the Opera House on Monday. But that, like everything else, is n’t the same without you, dear. The woman who played Juliet was, I believe, rather good-looking, but I scarcely noticed her in worrying over the pitiful fact that the Apothecary and the Populace of Verona had only one pair of shoes between them. Besides, Mercutio kept putting on a bath-robe and insisting he was Friar Laurence. . . . I would write more about it, if I had not almost used up all my paper. There is just room to say” — and so on.

This was, as I have stated, on Thursday afternoon. Upon the following evening —

“And why not?” I demanded, for the ninth time.

But she was resolute. “Oh, it is dear of you!” she cried; “and I — I do care for you — how could I help it? But it can’t be — it can’t ever be,” she repeated wearily; and then looked at me, and smiled a little. “Oh, boy, boy! dear, dear boy!” she murmured, half in wonder, “how foolish of you and — how dear of you!”

“And why not?” said I — for the tenth time.

She gave a sobbing laugh. “Oh, the great, brave, stupid boy!” she said, fondly, and, for a moment, her hand rested on my curling hair; “he does n’t know what he is doing — ah, no, he does n’t know! Why, I might hold you to your word! I might sue you for breach of promise! I — I might marry you! Think of that!” and her eyes grew big and moist as she herself thought of it. “Why — why, I’m not even a lady! I am only a strolling actress — a barn-stormer, and — and fair game for any man — any man who is n’t particular,” she added, with the first trace of bitterness I had ever observed in her odd, throaty voice. “And you would marry me — you! You would give me your name, you would make me your — your wife! You have actually begged me to be your wife, have n’t you? Ah, my brave, strong, stupid Bobbie, how many women must love you — women who are your equals, women who have a

right to love you! And you would give them all up for me — for me, you foolish Bobbie, whom you have n't known a week! Ah, how — how dear of you!" And she caught her breath swiftly, and her voice broke.

"Yes," I brazenly confessed; "I really believe I would give them all up — every blessed one of them — for you." I inspected her, critically, and then smiled. "And I don't think that I would be deserving any very great credit, either, Signorina."

"My dear," she answered, "it pleases you to call me old Capulet's daughter — but if I were only a Capulet, and you a Montague, don't you see how much easier it would be? But we don't belong to rival families, we belong to rival worlds, to two worlds that have nothing in common, and never can have anything in common. They are too strong for us, Bobbie — my big, dark, squalid world, that you could never sink to, and your gay little world which I can never climb to — your world that would have none of me, even if — even *if* ——" But the condition was not forthcoming.

"The world," said I, in an equable tone — "My dear, I may as well warn you I am shockingly given to short and expressive terms, and as we are likely to see a deal of each other for the future, you will have to be lenient with them — accordingly, I repeat, the world may be damned."

And I laughed, in unutterable content. "Have

none of you!" I cried. "My faith, I would like to see a world which would have none of you! Ah, Signorina, it is very plain to me that you don't realise what a beauty, what a — a — good Lord, what an unimaginative person it was that invented the English language! Why, you have only to be seen, heart's dearest — only to be seen, and the world is at your feet — my world, to which you belong of rights — my world, that you are going to honour by living in; my world, that in a little will go mad for sheer envy of blundering, stupid, lucky me!" And I laughed her to scorn.

There was a long silence. Then, "I — I belonged to your world once, you know."

"Why, of course, I knew as much as that."

"And yet — you never asked ——"

"Ah, Signorina, Signorina!" I cried; "what matter? Don't I know you for the bravest, tenderest, purest, most beautiful woman God ever made? I doubt you — I! My word!" said I, and stoutly, "that *would* be a pretty go! You are to tell me just what you please," I went on, almost belligerently, "and when and where you please, my lady. And I would thank you," I added, with appropriate sternness, "to discontinue your pitiful and transparent efforts to arouse unworthy suspicions as to my future wife. They are wasted, madam — utterly wasted, I assure you."

"Oh, Bobbie, Bobbie!" she sighed; "you *are*

such a beautiful baby! Give me time," she pleaded, weakly.

And, when I scowled my disapproval, "Only till to-morrow — only a little, little twenty-four hours. And promise me, you won't speak of this — this mad scheme again to-night. I must think."

"Never!" said I, promptly; "because I could n't be expected to keep such an absurd promise," I complained, in indignation.

"And you look so strong," she murmured, with evident disappointment — "so strong and firm and — and — admirable!"

So I promised at once. And I kept the promise — that is, I did subsequently refer to the preferable and proper course to pursue in divers given circumstances "when we are married"; but it was on six occasions only, and then quite casually — and six times, as I myself observed, was, all things considered, an extremely moderate allowance and one that did great credit to my self-control.

"And besides, why *not*?" I said — for the eleventh time.

"There are a thousand reasons. I am not your equal, I am just an ostensible actress — Why, it would be your ruin!"

"My dear Mrs. Grundy, I confess that, for the moment, your disguise had deceived me. But now I recognise your voice."

She laughed a little. "And after all," the grave voice said, which was, to me at least, the master-work of God, "after all, has n't one always to answer Mrs. Grundy — in the end?"

"Why, then, you disgusting old harridan," said I, "I grant you it is utterly impossible to defend my behaviour in this matter, and, believe me, I don't for an instant undertake the task. To the contrary, I agree with you perfectly — my conduct is most thoughtless and reprehensible, and merits your very severest condemnation.

"For, look you, here is a young man, well-born, well-bred, sufficiently well endowed with this world's goods, in short, an eminently eligible match, preparing to marry an 'ostensible actress,' a year or two his senior — why, of course, you are — and of whose past he knows nothing — absolutely nothing. Don't you shudder at the effrontery of the minx? Is it not heart-breaking to contemplate the folly, the utter infatuation of the misguided youth who now stands ready to foist such a creature upon the very circles of which your ladyship is a distinguished ornament? I protest it is really incredible. I don't believe a word of it.

"But you see, he loves her. You, my dear madam, blessed with a wiser estimation of our duties to society, of the responsibilities of our position, of the cost of even the most modest establishment, and, above all, of the sacredness of matrimony and the

main chance, may well shrug your shoulders at such a plea. For, as you justly observe, what, after all, is this love? — only a passing madness, an exploded superstition, an irresponsible *ignis fatuus* flickering over the quagmires and shallows of the divorce court. People's lives are no longer swayed by such absurdities; it is quite out of date.

“And I protest, loudly, my hand upon my heart, that it is true; people no longer do mad things for love, or ever did in spite of lying poets; any more than the birds mate in the spring, or the sun rises in the morning; popular fallacies, my dear madam, every one of them. You and I know better, and are not to be deceived by appearances, however specious they may be.

“Having attained this satisfactory condition we can well afford to laugh at all our past mistakes — yes, even at our own! For let us be quite candid. Was n't there a time, dear lady, before Mr. Grundy came a-wooing, when, somehow, one was constantly meeting unexpected people in the garden, and, somehow, one sat out a formidable number of dances during the evening, and, somehow, the poets seemed a bit more plausible than they do to-day? It was very foolish, of course — but, ah, madam, there *was* a time — a time when even our staid blood rejoiced with a strange fervour in the summer moonlight, and it was good to be alive!

“And, oh, my dear, how each of us will look back

some day to this very moment! And we are wasting it! And I have not any words to tell you how I love you! I am just a poor, dumb brute!" I wailed, for I was greatly moved.

"But, oh, I do! I *do*!" she said, and in a voice I cannot tell you of.

And still she would not promise anything; and I would give an arm, I think, could it replevin all the idiotic and exquisite misery I knew that night.

CHAPTER VIII

HE DUELS WITH A STUPID WOMAN

YET I approached the garden on Saturday night with an elated heart. This was the last evening of the engagement of the Imperial Dramatic Company. To-morrow the troupe was to leave Fairhaven; but I was very confident that the leading lady would not accompany them, and by reason of this confidence, I smiled as I strode through the city of Fairhaven, and hummed under my breath an inane ditty of an extremely sentimental nature.

As I bent over the little wooden gate, and searched for its elusive latch, a man came out of the garden, wheeling sharply about the hedge that, until this, had hidden him; and simultaneously, I was aware of the mingled odour of bad tobacco and of worse whiskey. Well, she would have done with such people soon! I threw open the gate, and stood aside to let him pass; then, as the moon fell full upon the face of the man, I gave an inarticulate, startled sound.

"Fine evening, sir," suggested the stranger.

"Eh?" said I; "eh? Oh, yes, yes! quite so!" Afterward I shrugged my shoulders, and went into the garden, a trifle puzzled.

I found her beneath a great maple in the heart of the enclosure. It was a place of peace; the night was warm and windless, and the moon, come to its full glory now, rode lazily in the west through a froth of clouds. Everywhere the heavens were faintly powdered with star-dust, but even the planets seemed pale and ineffectual beside the splendour of the moon.

The garden was drenched in moonshine — moonshine that silvered the unmown grass-plots, and converted the white rose-bushes into squat-figured wraiths, and tinged the red ones with dim purple hues. On every side the foliage blurred into ambiguous vistas, where fireflies loitered; and the long shadows of the nearer trees, straining across the grass, were wried patterns scissored out of blue velvet. It was a place of peace and light and languid odours, and I came into it, laughing, the possessor of an over-industrious heart and a perfectly unreasoning joy over the fact that I was alive.

“I say,” I observed, as I stretched luxuriously upon the grass beside her, “you put up at a shockingly disreputable place, Signorina.”

“Yes?” said she.

“That fellow who just went out,” I explained — “do you know the police want his address, I think? No,” I continued, after consideration, “I am sure I’m not mistaken — that is either Ned Lethbury, the embezzler, or his twin-brother. It’s been five

years since I saw him, but that is he. And that," said I, with proper severity, "is a sample of the sort of associate you prefer to your humble servant! Ah, Signorina, Signorina, I am a tolerably worthless chap, I admit, but at least I never forged and embezzled and then skipped my bail! So you had *much* better marry me, my dear, and say good-bye to your peculating friends. But, deuce take it! I forgot — I ought to notify the police or something, I suppose. I wonder if there *are* any police in this dear old sleepy place?"

She caught my arm quickly. Her mouth opened and shut again before she spoke. "He — he is my husband," she said, in a toneless voice. Then, on a sudden, she wailed; "Oh, forgive me! Oh, my great, strong, beautiful boy, forgive me, for I am very unhappy, and I cannot meet your eyes — your honest eyes! Ah, my dear, my dear, do not look at me like that — you don't know how it hurts!"

The garden noises lisped about us in the long silence that fell. Then the far-off whistling of some home-going citizen of Fairhaven tinkled shrilly through the night, and I shuddered a bit.

"I don't understand," I commenced, strangely quiet. "You told me ——"

"Ah, I lied to you! I lied to you!" she cried. I did n't mean to — to hurt you. I did not know — I could n't know — I was so lonely, Bobbie," she

pleaded, with wide eyes; "oh, you don't know how lonely I am. And when you came to me that first night, you — why, you spoke to me as the men I — I once knew used to speak. There was respect in your voice, and oh, I wanted that so! I had n't had a man speak to me like that for years, you know, Bobbie. And, boy dear, I was so lonely in my squalid world — and it seemed as if the world I used to know was calling me — your world, Bobbie — the world I am shut out from."

"Yes," I said; "I think I understand."

"And I thought for a week — just to peep into it, to be a lady again for a little seven days — oh, it did n't seem *very* wicked, then, and I wanted it so much! I — I knew I could trust you, because you were only a boy. And I was so hungry — *so* hungry for a little respect, a little courtesy, such as men don't accord strolling actresses. So I did n't tell you till the very last I was married. I lied to you. Oh, you don't understand!" she babbled; "this stupid, honest boy does n't understand anything except that I have lied to him!"

"Signorina," I said, again, and I smiled, resolutely, "I think I understand." I took both her hands in mine, and laughed a little. "But, oh, my dear, my dear," I said, "you should have told me that you loved another man; for you have let me love you for a week, and now I think that I must love you till I die."

"Love him!" she echoed. "Oh, boy dear, boy dear, what a Galahad it is! I don't think he ever loved me; and I — why, you have seen him. How *could* I love him?" she asked, as simply as a child.

I bowed my head. "And yet ——" said I. Then I laughed again, somewhat bitterly. "Don't deceive me, Mrs. Lethbury," I said; "it is kindly meant, I know, but I remember you now. I even danced with you once, some seven years ago — yes, at the Green Chalybeate. I remember the night, for a variety of reasons. You're Alfred Van Orden's daughter — your father is a wealthy man, a very wealthy man — and yet, when your — your husband disappeared you followed him to — to become a strolling actress. Ah, no, a woman does n't sacrifice everything for a man in the way you have done, unless she loves him."

I caught my breath sharply. Some unknown force kept tugging down the corners of my mouth, in a manner that hampered speech; moreover, nothing seemed worth talking about. I had lost her. That was the one thing that mattered.

"Why, of course, I went with him," she assented, a shade surprised; "he was my husband, you know. But as for loving — no, I don't think Ned ever really loved me," she reflected, with puckering brows. "He took that money for — for another woman, if you remember. But he is fond of me, and — and he *needs* me."

I did not say anything; and after a little she went on, with a quick lift of speech.

"Oh, what a queer life we have led since then! You can't imagine it, my dear. He has been a tavern-keeper, a drummer — everything! Why, last summer we actually sold rugs and Turkish things in Atlantic City! But he is always afraid of meeting someone who knows him, and — and he drinks too much. So we have not got on in the world, Ned and I — and now, after three years, I'm the leading lady of the Imperial Dramatic Company, and he is the manager. I forgot, though — he is advance-agent this week, for he did n't dare stay in Fairhaven, lest some of the people at Mr. Charteris's should recognise him, you know. He came back only this evening."

She paused for a moment; a wistful little quaver crept into her speech. "Oh, it's queer, it's queer, Bobbie! Sometimes — sometimes when I have time to think, say on long Sunday afternoons, I remember my old life, every bit of it — oh, I do remember such strange little details! I remember the designs on the bread and butter plates, and all the little silver things on my desk, and the plank by my door that always creaked and somehow never got fixed, and the big, shiny buttons on the coachman's coat — just trifles like that. And — and they hurt, they hurt, Bobbie, those little, unimportant things! They — they grip my throat."

She laughed, not very mirthfully. "Then I am like the old lady in the nursery rhyme, and say, Surely, this can't be I. But it *is* I, boy dear — a strolling actress, a barn-stormer! Is n't it queer Bobbie? But, oh, you don't know half ——"

I was remembering many things. I remembered Lethbury, a gross man, superfluously genial, whom I had never liked, although I vividly recalled my admiration of his whiskers; I recollected young Amelia Van Orden, not come to her full beauty then, the bud of girlhood scarce slipped; and I remembered very vividly the final crash, the nine days' talk over Lethbury's flight in the face of certain conviction — by his father-in-law's advice (as some said) who had furnished and forfeited heavy bail for the absconder. Oh, the brave woman who had followed! Oh, the brave, foolish woman! And, for the action's recompense, he was content to exhibit her to the yokels of Fairhaven, to make of her beauty an article of traffic. Heine was right; there was an Aristophanes in heaven. And then hope blazed.

"Your husband," I said, quickly, "he does not love you? He — he is not faithful to you?"

She was all one blush. "No," she answered; "there is a Miss Fortescue — she plays second parts ——"

"Ah, my dear, my dear!" I cried, with a shaking voice; "come away, Signorina — come away with me! He *does* n't need you — and, oh, my dear, I

need you so! You can get your divorce and marry me. And you can have your old world back again — the world you are meant for, the life you hunger for, Signorina! Ah, Signorina, come away — come away from this squalid life that is killing you! Come back to the clean, light-hearted world you love, the world that is waiting to pet and caress you just as it used to do — our world, Signorina! You don't belong here with — with the Fortescues. You belong to us."

I sprang to my feet. "Come now!" said I. "There's Anne Charteris; she is a good woman. She knows you. Come with me to her, dearest — and to-night! You shall see your father tomorrow. Your father — why, think how that old man loves you, how he has longed for you, his only daughter, all these years. And I?" I spread out my hands, in the tiniest, impotent gesture. "I love you," I said, simply. "I cannot do without you, heart's dearest."

Impulsively, she rested both hands upon my breast; then bowed her head a little. The nearness of her seemed to shake in my blood, to catch at my throat, and my hands, lifted for a moment, trembled with desire of her.

"You don't understand," she said. "I am a Catholic — my mother was one, you know. There is no divorce for us. And — and besides, I'm not modern. I am very old-fashioned, I suppose, in

my ideas. Do you know," she asked, with a smile upon the face which lifted confidently toward me, "I — I *really* believe the world was made in six days; and that the whale swallowed Jonah, and that there is a tangible hell of fire and brimstone. You don't, do you, Bobbie? But I do — and I promised to stay with him till death parted us, you know, and I must do it. He — I am all he has. He would sink even lower without me. I — oh, boy dear, boy dear, I love you so!" And her voice broke, in a great, choking sob.

"A promise — a promise made by an ungrown girl to a brute — a thief ——!"

"No, dear," she answered, quietly; "a promise made to God."

And looking into her face, I saw love there, and anguish, and determination. It seemed monstrous, but of a sudden I knew with a dull surety; she loved me, but she thought she had no right to love me; she would not go with me. She would go with that drunken, brutish thief.

And I suddenly recalled certain clever women — Alicia Wade, Patricia Musgrave, Gabrielle Anstruther — the women of that world wherein I was novitiate; beyond question, they would raise delicately penciled eyebrows to proclaim this woman a fool — and wonder.

They would be right, I thought. She was only a splendid, tender-hearted, bright-eyed fool, the

woman that I loved. But I loved her very folly — oh, the brave folly, the sacrosanct stupidity! My heart sickened as this quixotism rose between us, an impassable barrier. I hated it; and I revered it.

Thus we two stood silent for a time. The wind murmured above in the maples, lazily, ominously. Then the gate clicked, with a vicious snap that pierced the silence like the report of a distant rifle.

“My husband,” she said, wearily. “I had forgotten that they close the bar-rooms earlier on Saturday nights. So good-bye, Bobbie. You—you may kiss me, if you like.”

So for a moment our lips met. Afterward I caught her hands in mine, and gripped them close to my breast, looking down into her eyes. They glinted in the moonlight, deep pools of sorrow, and tender — oh, unutterably tender and compassionate.

But I found no hope there. I lifted her hand to my lips, and left her alone in the garden.

I found Lethbury fumbling at the gate.

“Such nuishance,” he complained, “havin’ gate won’t unlock. Latch mus’ got los’— po’ li’l latch,” murmured Mr. Lethbury, plaintively — “all ’lone in cruel worl’!”

I opened the gate for him, and stood aside to let him pass toward his wife.

CHAPTER IX

HE JUNKETS IN DUBIOUS COMPANY AND PUTS HIS
TONGUE IN HIS CHEEK

IT WAS not long before John Charteris knew of the entire affair, for in those days I had very few concealments from this author; and the little wizened man brooded awhile over my misery, with an odd wistfulness.

"Child," he said, at last, "I envy you, in chief, your unhappiness, for I have lost, as you will presently lose, the capacity of being quite unhappy. To-day you think of life as being implacable; but you will soon discover that she is merely inconsequential, and that none of her antics are of any particular importance; and you will learn to smile a deal more often than you laugh or weep."

Then we talked of other matters. It was presently settled that Charteris was to take me abroad with him that summer; and with the thorough approval of my mother.

"Mr. Charteris will be of incalculable benefit to you," she told me, "in introducing you to the very best people, all of whom he knows, of course, and besides, you are getting to look older than I, and it

is unpleasant to have to be always explaining you are only my stepson, particularly as your father never married anybody but me, though, heaven knows, I wish he had. Of course you will be just as wild as he was, and I suppose that is to be expected, and I daresay it will break my heart, but all I ask of you is please to keep out of the newspapers, except of course the social items. And if you *must* associate with abandoned women, please for my sake, Robert, don't have anything to do with those who can prove that they are, in reality, only misunderstood, because they are the most dangerous kind."

I kissed her. "Dear little mother, I honestly believe that when you get to heaven you will refuse to speak to Mary Magdalen."

"Robert, let us remember the Bible says 'in my Father's house are many mansions,' and of course nobody would think of putting me in the same mansion with her."

It was the last conversation I was to hold with my mother; and I was to remember it with an odd tenderness.

Upon the doings of myself in Europe during the ensuing two years I prefer to dwell as lightly as possible. I had long anticipated a sojourn in divers old-world cities; but the London I had looked to find was the London of Dickens, say, and my Paris the Paris of Dumas, or at the very least of Balzac. It is needless to mention that in the circles to which

the, quite genuine, friendship of John Charteris afforded an entry I found little that smacked of such antiquity; I had entered a world inhabited by people who amused themselves and apparently did nothing else; and I was at first troubled by their levity, and afterward envious of it, and in the end embarked upon a sedulous attempt toward a twin flippancy.

I continued to be very boyish; indeed, I found myself by this in much the position of an actor who has made such a success in one particular rôle that the public declines to patronise him in any other.

It was during this first year abroad that I wrote "The Apostates," largely through the urging of John Charteris.

"You have the ability, though, that dances most gracefully in fetters. You will never write convincingly about the life you know, because life is, to you, my adorable boy, a series of continuous miracles, to which the eyes of other men are case-hardened. Write me, then, a book about the past."

"I have thought of it," said I; "but to what end? To succeed — ah, not only among the general but with the 'cultured few,' God save the mark! — it is now necessary to write not badly but abominably."

"What would you demand, then, of a book?"

I meditated. "What one most desiderates in the writings of to-day is clarity, and beauty, and tenderness, and urbanity and truth."

“Not a bad recipe, upon the whole. Write the book.”

“Ah,” said I, “but this is the kind of book I wish to read when, of course, the mood seizes me. It is not at all the sort of book I would elect to write, though. The main purpose of writing any book, I take it, is to be read; and people simply will not read a book when they suspect it of being carefully written. That sort of thing gets on a reader’s nerves; it’s too much like watching a man walk a tight-rope and wondering if he won’t slip presently.”

“Oh, people!” Charteris flung out, in an extremity of scorn. “Since time was young, a generally incompetent humanity has been willing to pardon anything rather than the maddening spectacle of labour competently done. And they are perfectly right; it is abominable how such weak-minded persons occasionally thrust themselves into a world quite obviously designed for persons who have n’t any minds at all. But I was not asking you to write a ‘best-seller.’”

“No, you were asking me to ‘hand on the torch,’ and be one of ‘the few rare spirits which every age providentially affords,’ and so on. That is absolute and immoral nonsense. When you publish a novel you are at least pretending to supply a certain demand; and if you don’t endeavour honestly to supply it, you are a swindler, no more and no less. No, it is all very well to write for posterity if it

amuses you, Jack; personally, I cannot imagine what possible benefit you will derive from it, even though posterity *does* read your books. And for myself, I want to be read and to be a power while I can appreciate the fact that I *am* a sort of power, however insignificant. Besides, I want to make some money out of the blamed thing."

"And Esau ——" Charteris began.

"Yes — but that's Biblical, and publishing a book is business. People say to authors, just as they do to tailors: 'I want such and such an article. Make it and I'll pay you for it.' Now your tailor may consider the Imperial Roman costume more artistic than that of to-day, and so may you in the abstract, but if he sent home a toga in place of a pair of trousers, you would simply discontinue dealing with him. So if it amuses you to make togas, well and good; I don't quarrel with it; but, personally, I mean to go into the gents' furnishing line and to do my work efficiently."

"Yes — but with your tongue in your cheek."

"It is the one and only attitude," I sweetly answered, "in which to write if you indeed desire to be read with enjoyment." And presently I rose and launched upon

A Defence of That Attitude

"The main trouble with you is that you have never recovered from being *fin de siècle*. And even so,

you have quite overlooked what is, perhaps, the signal achievement of the nineteenth century — the relegation of its literature to the pharmacopœia. The comparison of the tailor, I willingly admit, is a bad one. Those who write successfully nowadays must appeal to men and women who seek in fiction not only a means of relaxation, but spiritual comfort as well, and an uplifting rather than a mere diversion of the mind; so that they are really druggists who trade exclusively in intoxicants and hypnotics.

“Half of the customers patronise the reading-matter shops because they want to induce delusions about a world they know, and do not find particularly roseate; and the other half skim through a book because they have n’t anything else to do and are n’t sleepy, as yet.

“Oh, in filling either prescription the trick is much the same; you have simply to avoid bothering the reader’s intellect in any way whatever. You have merely to drug it, you have merely to caress it with interminable platitudes, or else with the most uplifting avoidances of anything which happens to be unprintably rational. And you must remember always that the crass emotions of half-educated persons are, in reality, your chosen keyboard; so play upon it with an axe if you have n’t any handier implement, but hit it somehow, and for months your name will be almost as famous as that of the man who invented a celebrated baking-powder.

“It is all very well for you to sneer, and talk about art. But there are already in this dreary world a deal more Standard Works than any man can hope to digest in the average lifetime. I don’t quarrel with them, for, personally, I find even Ruskin, like the python in the circus, entirely endurable so long as there is a pane of glass between us. But why in heaven’s name should you endeavour to oppress a poor humanity by inflicting on it one more battalion of morocco-bound reproaches for its unartistic indolence, whenever humanity goes into the library to take a nap? For what other purpose do you suppose a gentleman goes into his library, pray? When he is driven to reading he does it decently in bed.

“Besides, if I like a book, why, then, in so far as I am concerned, it *is* a good book. No, please don’t talk to me about ‘the dignity of literature’; modern fiction has precisely as much to do with dignity as vaudeville or billiards or the Prohibitionist Party has, since the object of all four, I take it, is to afford diversion to people who have n’t anything better to do. Thus, a novel which has diverted a thousand semi-illiterate persons is exactly ten times as good as a novel that has pleased a hundred superior persons. It is simply a matter of arithmetic.

“You prefer to look upon writing as an art, rather than a business? Oh, you silly little man, the touch-

stone of any artist is the skill with which he adapts his craftsmanship to its obvious limitations. He will not attempt to paint a sound or to sculpture a colour, because he knows that painting and sculpture have their limitations, and he, quite consciously, recognises this fact whenever he sets to work.

“Well, the most important limitation of writing fiction nowadays is that you have to appeal to people who would never think of reading you or anybody else, if they could possibly imagine any other employment for that particular vacant half-hour. And you cannot hope for an audience of even moderately intelligent persons, because intelligent persons do not attempt to keep abreast with modern fiction. It is probably ascribable to the fact that they enjoy being intelligent, and wish to remain so.

“You sneer at the ‘best-sellers.’ I tell you, in sober earnest, that the writing of a frankly trashy novel, which will ‘sell,’ is the highest imaginable form of art. For true art, in its last terms, is the adroit circumvention of an unsurmountable obstacle. I suppose that form and harmony and colour are very difficult to tame; and the sculptor, the musician and the painter quite probably earn their hire. But people don’t go to concerts unless they want to hear music; whereas the people who buy the ‘best-sellers’ are the people who would prefer to do *anything* rather than be reduced to reading. I protest that the man who makes these people read on until they

see how 'it all came out,' is a deal more than an artist; he is a sorcerer."

And I paused, a little out of breath.

"What a boy it is!" said Charteris. "Do you know, you are uncommonly handsome when you are talking nonsense? Write the book then. I never argue with children, and, besides, I don't have to read it."

It thus fell about that in the second European year, not very long after my mother's death, my first book was given to the world, with what result the world has had a plenty of time wherein to forget; even though, contrary to Charteris's advice, the *milieu* of "The Apostates" was, almost excessively, modern. Yet I endured my plaudits without undue elation, for I always held this volume to be, at best, a medley of adroit trickery and of extravagant rhetoric, inanimate by any least particle of myself — and its success, say, as though the splendiferous trappings of an emperor were hung upon a clothier's dummy, and the result accepted as an adequate presentation of Charlemagne.

In other words, it was the most unbridled kind of balderdash, founded on my callow recollections of the Green Chalybeate — not in the least bit accurate, as I was afterward to discover — with all the good people exceedingly rhetorical, and the bad ones

singularly epigrammatic and abandoned and obtuse. I introduced a depraved nobleman, of course, to give the requisite touch of high society, seasoned the mixture with French and botany and with a trifle of Dolly Dialoguishness, and inserted, at judicious intervals, the most poetical of descriptions, so that the skipping of them might afford an agreeable rest to the reader's eye. There was also a sufficiency of piddling with unsavoury matters to insure the suffrage of schoolgirls.

And a number of persons, in fine, were so misguided as to enthuse over the result. The verb is carefully selected, for they one and all were just the sort of people who "enthuse."

I was vexed, however, at the time to find I could not achieve an appropriate emotion over my own mother's death. I have never heard, though, of any rational excuse for the quite common assumption that children ought to be particularly fond of their parents. Still, my mother was the prettiest woman I had ever known, though without any claim to beauty, and I had always gloried in our kinship; and I recognised her nature to be generous and amiable when she thought of it; yet her loss had left no blank in my necessities; and the cablegram which announced the event roused in me only a regret that a comely ornament to my progress had been smashed irrevocably.

For a little I reflected as to whither she had

vanished, and decided she had been too futile and well-meaning ever to be punished by any reasonable Being. Yet how she would have enjoyed the publication of my book!—without any attempt to read it, however, since she had never, to my knowledge, read anything, with the exception of the daily papers. . . .

Charteris had returned to America in October, but I had elected to pass the winter in England. “Of course,” was Mr. Charteris’s annotation, “because it is precisely the most dangerous spot in the world for you. And you are to spend Christmas at Negley? I warn you that Jasper Hardress is in love with his wife, and that the woman has both an incurable habit of making experiments and an utter inability to acquire experience. Take my advice, and follow Mrs. Monteagle to the Riviera, instead. Cissie will strip you of every penny you have, of course, but in the end you will find her a deal less expensive than Gillian Hardress.”

“You possess a low and evil mind,” I observed, “since I am fond, in all sincerity, of Hardress, whereas his wife is not even civil to me. Why, she goes out of her way to be rude to me.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Charteris; “but that is because she lives in daily terror of herself. And what is the meaning of this, by the way? I found it on your table this morning.” He read the doggerel aloud

with an unkindly and uncalled-for exaggeration of every defect.

“Pity, I think. Pity for ignorance.
This woman here is five years older than I,
And, being own daughter of her century,
Is only flushed and wearied by the dance
That has set my blood a-leaping. She laughs here
Upon the dark piazza, listening
To my wild talk and, I think, pitying
My extreme youth, seeing in me a dear,
Amusing boy, though somewhat old to be
Still reading ‘Alice Through the Looking-Glass’
And Edwin Lear. So to the light we pass,
And I that have lived long in Arcady —
I that have kept so many a foolish tryst,
And written halting rhymes — feel stirring in me
Strange pity for this woman who tutors me,
And whose red lips so many men have kissed.”

“That,” I airily said, “is, in the first place, something you had no business to read; and, in the second, simply the blocking out of an entrancingly beautiful poem. It represents a mood.”

“It is the sort of mood that is not good for people, and particularly for children. It gets them shot too full of large and untidy holes very often.”

“Nonsense!” said I, but not in displeasure, because it made me feel like such a devil of a fellow; and I went to Negley precisely as I had planned.

“We were just speaking of you,” Mrs. Hardress told me the afternoon of my arrival — “Blanche

and I were talking of you, Mr. Townsend, within the moment we heard your wheels."

I shook hands. "I trust you had not entirely stripped me of my reputation?"

"Surely, that is the very last of your possessions any reasonable person might covet?"

"A palpable hit," said I. "Nevertheless, you know that all I possess in the world is yours for the asking."

"Yes, you mentioned as much, I think, at Nice. Or was it Colonel Tatkin who offered me a heart's devotion and an elopement? No, I believe it was you. But, dear me, Jasper is so disgustingly healthy that I shall probably never have any chance of recreation."

I glanced toward Jasper Hardress. "I have heard," said I, hopefully, "that there is consumption in the family?"

"Heavens, no! he told me that before marriage to encourage me, but I find there is not a word of truth in it."

Then Jasper Hardress came to welcome his guest, and I saw no more of Gillian Hardress during that evening, save from a distance.

CHAPTER X

HE SAMPLES NEW EMOTIONS

IT WAS the following day, about noon, as I sat intent upon my Paris *Herald* that a tiny finger thrust a hole in it. I gave an inaudible observation, and more lately observed a plump young person in white with disfavour.

"And who may *you* happen to be?" I demanded.

"I'm Gladys," the young lady responded; "and I've runned away."

"But not without an escort, I trust, Miss Gladys? Really — upon my word, you know, you surprise me, Gladys! For an elopement without even a tincture of masculinity is positively not respectable." I took the little girl into my lap, for I loved children, and all helpless things. "Gladys," I said, "why don't you elope with me? And we will spend our honeymoon in the Hesperides."

"All right," said Gladys, cheerfully. She leaned upon my chest, and the plump, tiny hand clasped mine, in entire confidence; and the contact moved me to an irrational transport and to a yearning whose aim I could not comprehend. "Now tell me a story," said Gladys.

So that I presently narrated to Gladys the ensuing

Story of the Flowery Kingdom

"Fair Sou-Chong-Tee, in a shady nook
Where crimson lilies grew tall and straight,
Met young Too-Hi, and her friends forsook
To elope with him when the hour was late;
But a powerful mandarin passed in state,
Named Hoo-Hung-Hoo of the Golden Band,
Who had wooed the maiden to be *his* mate —
For these things occur in the Flowery Land.

"Now Hoo-Hung-Hoo had written a book,
In seven volumes, to celebrate
The death of the Emperor's thirteenth cook —
So, being a person whose power was great,
He ordered a herald to indicate
He would blind Too-Hi with a red-hot brand
And marry Sou-Chong at a quarter-past-eight —
For these things occur in the Flowery Land.

"And the brand was hot, and the lovers shook
In their several shoes, when by lucky fate
A Dragon came, with his tail in a crook —
A Dragon out of a Nankeen Plate —
And gobbled the hard-hearted potentate
And all of his servants, and snorted, *and*
Passed on in a manner precipitate —
For these things occur in the Flowery Land.

"The lovers were wed at an early date,
And lived for the future, I understand,
In one continuous *tete-à-tete* —
For these things occur . . . in the Flowery Land."

Gladys wanted to know: "But what sort of house
is a *tete-à-tete*? Is it like a palace?"

"It is very often much nicer than a palace," I declared—"provided of course you are only stopping over for a week-end."

"And was n't it odd the Dragon should have come just when he did?"

"Oh, Gladys, Gladys! don't tell me you are a realist."

"No, I'm only a precious angel," she composedly responded, with an ineffable flavour of quotation.

"Well! it is precisely the intervention of the Dragon, Gladys, which proves the story is literature," I announced. "Don't you pity the poor Dragon, Gladys, who never gets a chance in life and has to live always between two book-covers?"

She said that could n't be so, because it would squash him.

"And yet, dear, it is perfectly true," said Mrs. Hardress. The lean and handsome woman was regarding the pair of us curiously. "I did n't know you cared for children, Mr. Townsend. Yes, she is my daughter." She carried the reluctant Gladys away, without much further speech.

For Gillian's Parthian comment in leaving me was flung over her shoulder, snappishly. "I wish you would n't imitate John Charteris so. You are getting to be just a silly copy of him. You are just Jack where he is John. I think I shall call you Jack."

"I wish you would," I said, as in contained emotion, "if only because your sponsors happened to christen you Gillian. So it's a bargain. And now when are we going for that pail of water?"

Mrs. Hardress wheeled, the child in her arms. "And it was only Jill, as I remember, who got the spanking," she said. "Oh, well! it always is just Jill who gets the spanking — Jack," she said.

"But it was Jack who broke his crown," said I; "Was n't it — Jill?"

It seemed a jest at the time. But we had made these nicknames a habit somehow before long, when just we two were together. And the outcome of it all was not precisely a jest.

She told me not long after this, "When I saw Gladys loved you, of course I loved you too." And I hereby soberly record the statement that to have a woman fall thoroughly in love with him is the most uncomfortable experience which can ever befall any man.

I am tolerably sure I never made any amorous declaration. Rather, it simply bewildered me to observe the great and shameless and irrational infatuation this woman presently bore for me, and before it I was powerless. I told her frankly I did not love her, had never loved her, and she merely said, "You are cruel!" and wept. When I attempted to

restrain her paroxysms of anguish, she took it as a retraction of what I had told her.

I would then have given anything in the world to be rid of Gillian Hardress. This led to scenes, and many scenes, and played the very devil with the progress of my second novel. You *cannot* write when anyone insists on sitting in the same room with you, on the irrelevant plea that she is being perfectly quiet, and therefore is not disturbing you.

I remember one of these contentions. She is pitifully rouged, and before me she is grovelling, as she must have seen some actress do upon the stage.

"Oh, I lied to you," she wailed; "but you are so cruel! Ah, don't be cruel, Jack!"

Then I lifted the scented woman to her feet, and she stayed motionless, regarding me. "You are evil," I said, "through and through you are evil, and I loathe you, and my flesh shudders with the contact of your flesh. Then teach me to be as you, for to-night the hands of my dead father strain from his grave and clutch about my ankles. He has the right because it is his flesh I occupy. And I must occupy the body of a Townsend always. It is not quite the residence I would have chosen — Eh, well, for all that, I am I! and at bottom I loathe you!"

"You love me!" she breathed.

Suddenly temperate, I thrust her brutally aside and paced the floor. "This is an affair of moment. I may not condescend to sell, as Faustus did, but of

my own volition must I will to give or to preserve that which is really Robert Townsend."

I wheeled upon Gillian Hardress, and spoke henceforward with chill deliberation. You must remember I was very young as yet.

"I have often regretted that the colour element of vice is so oddly lacking in our life of to-day. We appear, one and all, to have been born at an advanced age and with ladylike manners, and we reach our years of indiscretion very slowly; and meanwhile we have learned, too late, that an excessively prolonged adherence to morality trivialises the mind as hopelessly as any prolonged vice trivialises the countenance.

"I fear that this has been said by someone else, my too impetuous Jill, and I hope not, for in that event I might possibly be speaking sensibly, and to be sensible is a terrible thing and almost as bad as being intelligible.

"Meanwhile, I am young, and in youth — *il faut des émotions*, as Blanche Amory is reported to have said, by a novelist named Thackeray, whose productions are now read in public libraries. Still for a respectable and brougham-supporting person Thackeray came then as near to speaking the truth as is possible for people of that class. In youth emotions are necessary. Find me, therefore, a new emotion.

"I do not love you, understand — and your

husband is my friend, and I admire him. But I am I! I have endowments, certain faculties which many men are flattering enough to envy — and I will to make of them a carpet for your quite unworthy feet. I will to degrade all that in me is most estimable, and in return I demand a new emotion.”

CHAPTER XI

HE FINDS HIMSELF VEXATIONOUSLY TRAMMELLED

AND thereafter Gillian Hardress made almost no concealment of her feeling toward me, or employed at best the flimsiest of disguises. All that winter she wrote to me daily and, when the same roof sheltered us, would slip the scribblings into my hands at odd moments, but preferably before her husband's eyes; she demanded an account of every minute I spent apart from her, and never believed a syllable of my explanations; and in a sentence, she pestered me to the verge of distraction.

And always the circumstance which chiefly puzzled me was the host of men that were, to every sense, infatuated by Gillian Hardress. There was no doubt about it; she clamantly made fools of the staidest, if for no better reason than that the process might amuse me; and always she left me cold, and, to put the thing crudely, her allurements aroused in me alone absolutely no sensation save that of boredom. Often I used to wonder for what reason it seemed impossible for me, alone, to adore this woman insanely.

But indeed I wish to have done with this portion of my life as quickly as may be expedient. I am not particularly proud of it. I would elide it altogether, were it possible, but as you will presently see, that is not possible if I am to be frank with you. And, besides, I find that the more I write of myself the more I am affected by the same poor itch for self-exposure which has made Pepys and Casanova and Rousseau famous, and later feminine diarists notorious.

Were I writing fiction, now, I would make the entire affair more plausible. As it stands, I am free to concede that this chapter, and most of the preceding one, rings false throughout, just as any candid record of an actual occurrence invariably does. It is not at all probable that a woman so much older than I should have taken possession of me in this fashion, almost against my will. It is less probable that her husband, who was by ordinary absurdly jealous of her, should have suspected nothing and have been sincerely fond of me.

But then I was only twenty-two as being born goes physically, and he looked upon me as an infant. I was, I think, quite conscientiously childish with Jasper Hardress. I prattled with him, and he liked it. And so often, especially when just we three were together — say, at luncheon — I was teased by an insane impulse to tell him everything, quite casually, just to see what he would do.

I think it was the same feeling which so often prompted her to tell him, in her flighty way, of how profoundly she adored me. I would wriggle and blush; and Jasper Hardress would laugh and protest that he adored me too. Or she would expatiate upon this or that personal feature of mine, or the becomingness of a new cravat, say; and demand of her husband if Jack — for so she always called me — was n't the most beautiful boy in the world? and he would laugh and answer that he thought it very likely.

They were Americans, I should have said earlier, but to all intents they lived abroad, and had done so for years. Hardress's father had been thoughtful enough to leave him a sufficient fortune to countenance the indulgence of this or any other whim, so that the Hardresses divided the year pretty equally between their real home at Negley and a tiny château which they owned near Aix-les-Bains. I visited them at either place.

It was a pleasant fiction that I came to see Gladys. Regularly, I was told off to play with her, as being the only other child in the house. It was rather hideous, for the little girl adored me, and I was beginning to entertain an odd aversion toward her, as being in a way responsible for everything. Had Gillian Hardress never found me cuddling the child, whose sex was visibly a daily aggrievement to Jasper Hardress, however conscientiously he strove to con-

ceal the fact — so that in consequence “I have to love my precious lamb for two, Jack” — she would never, I think, have distinguished me from the many other men who, so lightly, tendered a host of gallant speeches. . . . But I never fathomed Gillian Hardress, beyond learning very early in our acquaintance that she rarely told me the truth about anything.

And also I should have said that Hardress cordially detested Charteris, just as Bettie Hamlyn did, because for some reason he suspected the little novelist of being in love with Hardress’s wife. I do not know; but I imagine Charteris had made advances to her, in his own ambiguous fashion, pretty much as he was apt to do, barring any absolute discouragement, to every passably handsome woman he was thrown with. I do know he made love to her a little later on.

Hardress distrusted a number of other men, for precisely the same reason. Heaven only is familiar with what grounds he had. I merely know that Gillian Hardress loathed John Charteris; she was jealous of his influence over me. But me her husband never distrusted. I was only an amusing and perfectly ingenuous child of twenty-two, and not for a moment did it occur to him that I might be in love with his wife.

Indeed, I believe upon reflection he was in the right. I think I never was.

"Yes," I said, "I am to meet the Charterises in Genoa. Yes, it is rather sudden. I am off to-morrow. I shall not see you dear good people for some time, I fancy . . ."

When Hardress had gone the woman said in a stifled voice: "No, I will not dance. Take me somewhere — there's a winter-garden, I know —"

"No, Jill," said I, with decision. "It's no use. I am really going. We will not argue it."

Mrs. Hardress watched the dancers for a moment, as with languid interest. "You fear that I am going to make a scene. Well! I can't. You have chosen your ground too carefully. Oh, after all that's been between us, to tell me here, to my husband's face, in the presence of some three hundred people, without a moment's warning, that you are 'off to-morrow'! It — it is for good, is n't it?"

"Yes," I said. "It had to be — some time, you know."

"No, don't look at me. Watch the dancing. I will fan myself and seem bored. No, I shall not do anything rash."

I was very uncomfortable. Yet at bottom it was the theatric value of this scene which impressed me — the gaiety and the brilliance on either side of her misery. And I did not look at her. I did just as she ordered me.

"I was proud once. I have n't any pride now. You say you must leave me. Oh, dearest boy, if

you only knew how unhappy I will be without you, you could not leave me. Sweetheart, you must know how I love you. I long every minute to be with you, and to see you even at a distance is a pleasure. I know it is not right for me to ask or expect you to love me always, but it seems so hard."

"It's no use, Jill —"

"Is it another woman? I won't mind. I won't be jealous. I won't make scenes, for I know you hate scenes, and I have made so many. It was because I cared so much. I never cared before, Jack. You have tired of me, I know. I have seen it coming. Well, you shall have your way in everything. But don't leave me, dear! Oh, I have given you everything, and I ask so little in return — just to see you sometimes, just to touch your hand some times, as the merest stranger might do. . . ."

So her voice went on and on while I did not look at her. There was no passion in this voice of any kind. It was just the long monotonous wail of some hurt animal. . . . They were playing the *Valse Bleu*, I remember. It lasted a great many centuries, and always that low voice was pleading with me. Yes, it was uncommonly unpleasant; but always at the back of my mind some being that was not I was taking notes as to precisely how I felt, because some day they might be useful.

"It is no use, Jill," I kept repeating, doggedly.

Then Armitage came smirking for his dance.

Mrs. Hardress rose, and her fan shut like a pistol-shot. She was all in black, and throughout that moment she was more beautiful than any other woman I have ever seen.

"Yes, this is our dance," she said, brightly. "I thought you had forgotten me, Mr. Armitage. Well! good-bye, Mr. Townsend. Our little talk has been very interesting — has n't it? Oh, this dress *always* gets in my way ——"

She was gone. I felt that I had managed affairs rather crudely, but it was the best I could do. I got my notion out of Mr. Kipling's "Story of the Gadsbys," I fancy; but in any event, and again like Gadsby, I simply had not dared to trust myself alone with her.

CHAPTER XII

HE ATTEMPTS THE HEROICAL AMONG THE CHIMNEY-POTS

I MET the Charterises in Genoa, just as I had planned to do. Anne's first exclamation was, "Heavens, child, how much older you look! I would scarcely have known you."

Charteris said nothing. But he and I lunched at the Isotta the following day, and at the conclusion of the meal the little man leaned back and lighted a cigarette.

"You must overlook my wife's unfortunate tendency toward the most unamiable of virtues. But, after all, you are clamantly not quite the boy I left at Liverpool last October," he observed, leisurely; "nor, indeed, did I expect to find you so. It is odd how far less important are one's actions in the immediate past than one's associates. Where are the Hardresses now?"

"In London for the season. And why is your wife rushing on to Paris, Jack?"

"Shopping, as usual. Yes, I believe I *did* suggest it was as well to have it over and done with. Anne is very partial to truisms. Besides, she has an aunt

there, you know. Take my advice, and always marry a woman who is abundantly furnished with attractive and visitable relations, for this precaution is the true secret of every happy marriage. We may, then, regard the Hardress incident as closed?"

"Oh, Lord, yes!" said I, emphatically.

"In that event I am desirous to hear the chimes at midnight once more. And, besides, I hear Francine is in Milan?"

"There is at any rate in Milan," said I, "a magnificent Gothic Cathedral of international reputation; and upon the upper gallery of its tower, as my guide-book informs me, there is a watchman with an efficient telescope. Should I fail to meet that watchman, Jack, I would feel that I had lived futilely. For I want both to view with him the Lombard plain, and to ask him his opinion of Cino da Pistoia, and as to what was in reality the middle name of Cain's wife."

Francine proved cordial; but John Charteris was ever fickle, and not long afterward an Italian countess, classic in feature, but in colouring smacking of an obvious renaissance, had drawn us both to Switzerland, and thence to Liege; and I was alone that evening, because Charteris had gone again to hear Mademoiselle Neroni, the new opera singer, concerning whom he raved so tediously. But I never cared for music greatly; and besides, the opera that

night was "Faust"; the last act of which, in particular, when three persons align before the footlights and scream at the top of their voices, and for a good half hour, about how important it is not to disturb anybody, I have never been able to regard quite seriously.

So I was spending this evening very sedately in my own apartments at the Continental, and meanwhile I lisped in numbers that (or I flattered myself) had a Homeric tang; and at times chewed the end of my pencil meditatively. "From present indications," I was considering, "that Russian woman is cooking something on her chafing-dish again. It usually affects them that way about dawn."

I began on the next verse viciously, and came a cropper over the clash of two sibilants, as the distant clamour increased. "Brutes!" said I, disapprovingly. "Sere, clear, dear — Now they have finished, '*Jamais, monsieur,*' and begun crying, 'Fire!' Oh, this would draw *more* than three souls out of a weaver, you know! Mere, near — By Jove! I do smell smoke!"

Wrapping my dressing-gown about me — I had afterward reason to thank the kindly fates that it was the green one with the white fleurs-de-lis, and not my customary and unspeakably disreputable bathrobe, scorched in various and unexpected places by the cigarette ashes of many years — I approached the door and peeped out into the empty hotel corridor. The incandescent lights glimmered mildly through a

gray haze which was acrid and choking to breathe; little puffs of smoke crept lazily out of the lift-shaft just opposite; and down-stairs all Liege was shouting incoherently, and dragging about the heavier and less valuable pieces of hotel furniture.

“By Jove!” said I, and whistled a little disconsolately, as I looked downward through the bars about the lift-shaft.

“Do you reckon,” spoke a voice — a most agreeable voice — “we are in any danger?”

The owner of the voice was very tall, and not even the agitation of the moment prevented my observing that, big as I am, her eyes were almost on a level with my shoulder. They were not unpleasant eyes, and a stray dream or two yet lingered under their heavy lids. The owner of the voice wore a strange garment that was fluffy and pink — pale pink, like the lining of a sea-shell — and billows of white and the ends of various blue ribbons peeped out about her neck. I made a mental note of the fact that disordered hair is not necessarily unbecoming; it sometimes has the effect of an unusually heavy halo set about the face of a half-awakened angel.

“It would appear,” said I, meditatively, “that, in consideration of our being on the fifth floor, with the lift-shaft drawing splendidly, and the stairs winding about it — except the two lower flights, which have just fallen in — and in consideration of the fire department’s recognised incompetence to extinguish

anything more formidable than a tar-barrel — yes, it would appear, I think, that we might go further than ‘dangerous’ and find a less appropriate adjective to describe the situation.”

“You mean we cannot get down?” The beautiful voice was tremulous.

And my silence made conclusive reply.

“Well, then,” she suggested, and cheerfully, after due reflection, “since we can’t go down, why not go up?”

As a matter of fact, nothing could be more simple. We were on the top floor of the hotel, and beside us, in the niche corresponding to the stairs below, was an iron ladder that led to a neatly whitewashed trap-door in the roof. Adopting her suggestion, I pushed against this and found that it yielded readily; then, standing at the top of the ladder, I looked about me on a dim expanse of tiles and chimneys; yet farther off were the huddled roofs and gables of Liege, and just a stray glimpse of the Meuse; and above me brooded a clear sky and the naked glory of the moon.

I lowered my head with a distinct sigh of relief.

“I say,” I called, “it is infinitely nicer up here — superb view of the city, and within a minute’s drop of the square! Better come up.”

“Go first,” said she; and subsequently I held for a moment a very slender hand — a ridiculously small hand for a woman whose eyes were almost on a level with my shoulder — and we two stood together

on the roof of the Hotel Continental. We enjoyed, as I had predicted, an unobstructed view of Liege and of the square, wherein two toy-like engines puffed viciously and threw impotent threads of water against the burning hotel beneath us, and, at times, on the heads of an excited throng erratically clad.

But I looked moodily down. "That," said I, sulkily, as a series of small explosions popped like pistol shots, "is the café; and, oh, Lord! there goes the only decent Scotch in all Liege!"

"There is mamma!" she cried, excitedly; "there!" She pointed to a stout woman, who, with a purple shawl wrapped about her head, was wringing her hands as heartily as a bird-cage, held in one of them, would permit. "And she has saved Jackie!"

"In that case," said I, "I suppose it is clearly my duty to rescue the remaining member of the family. You see," I continued, in bending over the trap-door and tugging at the ladder, "this thing is only about twenty feet long; but the kitchen wing of the hotel is a little less than that distance from the rear of the house behind it; and with this as a bridge I think we might make it. In any event, the roof will be done for in a half-hour, and it is eminently worth trying." I drew the ladder upward.

Then I dragged this ladder down the gentle slant of the roof, through a maze of ghostly chimneys and dim skylights, to the kitchen wing, which was a few feet lower than the main body of the building. I

skirted a chimney and stepped lightly over the eaves, calling, "Now, then!" when a muffled cry, followed by a crash in the courtyard beneath, shook my heart into my mouth. I turned, gasping; and found the girl lying safe, but terrified, on the verge of the roof.

"It was a bucket," she laughed, "and I stumbled over it — and it fell — and — and I nearly did — and I am frightened!"

And somehow I was holding her hand in mine, and my mouth was making irrelevant and foolish sounds, and I was trembling in every limb. "It was close, but — look here, you must pull yourself together!" I pleaded; "because we have n't, as it were, the time for airy badinage and repartee — just now."

"I can't," she cried, hysterically. "Oh, I am *so* frightened! I can't!"

"You see," I said, with careful patience, "we must go on. I hate to seem too urgent, but we *must*, do you understand?" I waved my hand toward the east. "Why, look!" said I, as a thin tongue of flame leaped through the open trap-door and flickered wickedly for a moment against the paling gray of the sky.

She saw and shuddered. "I'll come," she murmured, listlessly, and rose to her feet.

I heaved another sigh of relief, and, waving her aside from the ladder, dragged it after me to the eaves of the rear wing. As I had foreseen, this ladder

would reach easily to the eaves of the house behind the rear wing, which was fortunately of the same height, and form a passable though unsubstantial-looking bridge. I regarded it, however, disapprovingly.

"It will only bear one," said I; "and we will have to crawl over separately after all. Are you up to it?"

"Please go first," said she, very quiet. And, after gazing into her face for a moment, I crept over gingerly, not caring to look down into the abyss beneath.

Then I spent an apparent century in silent impotence, watching a fluffy, pink figure that swayed over a bottomless space and moved forward a hair's breadth each year. I made no sound during this interval. In fact, I do not remember drawing a really satisfactory breath from the time I left the hotel-roof, until I lifted a soft, faint-scented, panting bundle to the roof of the Councillor von Hellwig.

"You are," I cried, with conviction, "the bravest, the most — er — the bravest woman I ever knew!" I heaved a little sigh, but this time of content. "For I wonder," said I, in my soul, "if you have any idea what a beauty you are! what a wonderful, unspeakable beauty you are! Oh, you are everything that men ever imagined in dreams that left them weeping for sheer happiness — and more! You are — *you*, and I have held you in my arms for a moment; and, before high heaven, to repurchase that privilege I would consent to the burning of three or four more

hotels and an odd city or so to boot!" But, aloud, I only said, "We are quite safe now, you know."

She laughed, bewilderingly. "I suppose," said she, "the next thing is to find a trap-door."

But there were, so far as we could find, no trap-doors in the roof of the Councillor von Hellwig, or in the neighbouring roofs; and, after searching three of them carefully, apologetic but not ill-pleased, I suggested the propriety of waiting till dawn to be melodramatically rescued.

"You see," I pointed out, "everybody is at the fire over yonder. But we are quite safe here, I would say, with an entire block of houses to promenade on; and, moreover, we have cheerful company, eligible central location in the very heart of the city, and the superb spectacle of a big fire at exactly the proper distance. Therefore," I continued, and with severity, "you will have the kindness to explain what your motives were in wandering about the corridors of a burning hotel at four o'clock in the morning."

She sat down against a chimney and wrapped her gown about her. "I sleep very soundly," said she, "and we did both museums and six churches *and* the cannon-foundry to-day — and the cries awakened me — and I reckon mamma lost her head."

"And left you," thought I, "left *you* — to save a canary-bird! Good Lord! And so you are an American and a Southerner as well."

"And you?" she asked.

"Ah — oh, yes, me!" I awoke sharply from admiration of her trailing lashes. "I was writing — and I thought that Russian woman had a few friends to supper — and I was looking for a rhyme when I found you," I concluded, with a fine coherence.

She looked up. It was incredible, but those heavy lashes disentangled quite easily. I was seized with a desire to see them again perform this interesting feat. "Verses?" said she, considering my slippers in a new light.

"Yes," I admitted, guiltily — "of Helen."

She echoed the name. It is an unusually beautiful name when properly spoken. "Why, that is my name, only we call it Elena."

"Late of Troy Town," said I, in explanation.

"Oh!" The lashes fell into their former state. It was hopeless this time; and manual aid would be required, inevitably. "I should think," said my compatriot, "that live women would be more — inspiring."

"Surely," I assented. I drew my gown about me and sat down. "But, you see, she is alive — to me." And I dwelt a trifle upon the last word of this observation.

"One would gather," said she, meditatively, "that you have an unrequited attachment for Helen of Troy."

But an idea had come to me, and so I sighed a melancholy assent. The great eyes opened to their

utmost. The effect was that of a ship firing a broad-side at you. "Tell me all about it," said she, as coaxingly.

"I have always loved her," I said, with gravity. "Long ago, when I was a little chap, I had a book — 'Stories of the Trojan War,' or something of the sort. And there I first read of Helen — and remembered. There were pictures — outline pictures — of quite abnormally straight-nosed warriors, with flat draperies which amply demonstrated that the laws of gravity were not yet discovered; and pictures of slender goddesses, who had done their hair up carefully and gone no further in their dressing. Oh, the book was full of pictures — and Helen's was the most manifestly impossible of them all. But I knew — I knew, even then, of her beauty, that flawless beauty which made men's hearts as water and drew the bearded kings to Ilium to die for her, having put away all memories of distant homes and wives; that flawless beauty which buoyed the Trojans through the ten years of fighting and starvation, just with pure delight in gazing upon it day by day, and with the joy of seeing her going about their streets. For I remembered!" And I sighed effectively, as I ended.

"I know," said she.

"Or ever the knightly years had gone
With the old world to the grave,
I was a king in Babylon
And you were a Christian slave."

"Yes, only I was the slave, I think, and you — er — I mean, there goes the roof, and it is an uncommonly good thing for posterity you thought of the trap-door. Good thing the wind is veering, too. By Jove! look at those flames!" I cried, as the main body of the Continental toppled inward like a house of cards; "they are splashing, actually splashing, like waves over a breakwater!"

I drew a deep breath and turned from the conflagration, only to encounter its reflection in her widened eyes. "Yes, I was a Trojan warrior," I resumed, simply; "one of the many unknown men who sought and found death beside Scamander, trodden down by Achilles or Diomedes. So they died knowing they fought in a bad cause, but all rapt with a mad, wild joy, remembering the desire o' the world and her perfect loveliness. She scarcely knew that I existed; but I had loved her; I had overheard some laughing words of hers in passing, and I treasured them as men treasure gold. Or she had spoken, perhaps — oh, day of days! — to me, in a low, courteous voice that came straight from the back of the throat and blundered very deliciously over the perplexities of our alien speech. I remembered — even as a boy, I remembered."

She cast back her head and laughed merrily. "I reckon," said she, "you are still a boy, or else the most amusing madman I ever encountered."

"No," I murmured, and I was not altogether

play-acting now, "that tale about Polyxo was a pure invention. Helen — and the gods be praised for it — can never die. For it is hers to perpetuate that sense of unattainable beauty which never dies, which sways us just as potently as it did Homer, and Dr. Faustus, and the Merovingians too, I suppose, with memories of that unknown woman who, when we were boys, was very certainly to be our mate some day. And so, whatever happens, she

Abides the symbol of all loveliness,
Of beauty over stainless in the stress
Of warring lusts and fears.

For she is to each man the one woman that he might have loved perfectly. She is as old as youth, she is more old than April even, and she is as ageless. This Helen therefore goes about the world, like them, in varied garments, and to no two men is her face the same. Oh, very often she transmutes her fleshly covering. But through countless ages I, like every man alive, have followed her, and fought for her, and won her, and have lost her in the end — but always loving her as every man must do. And I prefer to think that some day ——" But my voice here died into a whisper, which was in part due to emotion and partly to an inability to finish the sentence satisfactorily. The logic of my verses when thus hastily paraphrased seemed deplorably vague.

"Yes — like Pythagoras," she said, a bit at random. "Oh, I know. There really must be some-

thing in it, I have often thought, because you actually do remember things at times."

"And why not? as the March Hare very sensibly demanded." But now my voice was earnest. "Yes, I believe that Helen always comes. Is it simply a proof that I too am qualified to sit next to the Hatter?" I spread out my hands in a helpless little gesture. "I do not know. But I believe that she will come — and by and by pass on, of course, as Helen always does."

"You will know her?" she queried, softly.

Now I had reached firm ground at last. "She will be very tall," I said, "very tall and exquisite — like a young birch-tree, you know, when its new leaves are whispering over to one another the secrets of spring. Yes, that is a ridiculous *sounding* simile, but it expresses the general effect of her — the *coup d'œil*, so to speak — quite perfectly. Moreover, her hair will be a miser's dream of gold; and it will hang heavily about a face that will be — quite indescribable, just as the dawn yonder is past the utmost preciousness of speech. But her face will flush and will be like the first of all anemones to peep through yonder black, good-smelling, and as yet unattainable earth; and her eyes will be deep, shaded wells where, just as in the proverb, truth lurks."

But now I could not see her eyes.

"No," I conceded, "I was wrong. For when men talk to her as — as they cannot but talk to

her, her face will flush dull red, almost like smouldering wood; and she will smile a little, and look out over a great fire, such as that she saw on the night when Ilium was sacked and the slain bodies were soft under her stumbling feet, as she fled through flaming Troy Town. And then I shall know her."

My companion sighed; and the woes of centuries weighed down her eyelids obstinately. "It is *bad* enough," she lamented, "to have lost all one's wardrobe — that new organdie was a dream, and I had never worn it; but to find one's self — in a dressing-gown — at daybreak — on a strange roof — *and* with a strange madman — is positively terrible!"

The madman rose to his feet and waved his hand toward the east. The dawn was breaking in angry scarlet and gold that spread like fire over half the visible horizon; the burning hotel shut out the remaining half with tall flames, which shouldered one another monotonously, and seemed dull and faded against the pure radiance of the sky. Chill daylight showed in melting patches through the clouds of black smoke overhead.

It was a world of fire, transfigured by the austere magnificence of dawn and the grim splendour of the shifting, roaring conflagration; and at our feet lay the orchard of the Councillor von Hellwig, and there the awakened birds piped querulously, and the sparks fell crackling among the apple-blossoms.

"Ilium is ablaze," I quoted; "and the homes of Pergamos and its towering walls are now one sheet of flame."

She inspected the scene, critically. "It does look like Ilium," she admitted. "And that," peering over the eaves into the deserted by-street, "that looks like a milkman."

I was unable to deny this, though an angry concept crossed my mind that any milkman, with commendable tastes and feelings, would at this moment be gaping at the fire at the other end of the block, rather than prosaically measuring quarts at the Councillor's side-entrance. But there was no help for it, when chance thus unblushingly favoured the proprieties; and in consequence I clung to a water-pipe, and explained the situation with a fretted mind and doubtful French.

I turned to my companion. She was regarding the burning hotel with an impersonal expression.

"Now I would give a deal," I thought, "to know just how long you would prefer that milkman to take in coming back."

CHAPTER XIII

HE FACES HIMSELF AND REMEMBERS

INTO the lobby of the Hotel d'Angleterre strolled, an hour later, a tall young man, in a green dressing-gown, and inquired for Charteris. The latter, in evening dress, was mournfully breakfasting in his new quarters.

Charteris sprang to his feet. I saw, with real emotion, that he had been weeping; but now he was all flippancy. "My dear boy! I have just torn my hair and the rough drafts of several cablegrams on your account! Sit down and try the bacon, since, for a wonder, it is not burnt — and, in passing, I had thought of course that you were."

But by this I was fast asleep upon the nearest sofa.

I was very tired, but I awakened about noon and managed to procure enough clothes to make myself not altogether unpresentable to the public eye. Charteris had gone already about his own affairs, and I did not regret it, for I meant, without delay, to follow up my adventure of the night before.

I never did, for as I left the Hotel d'Angleterre I came upon a woman, very ornately dressed, who was

about to enter an open carriage. I stared; and preposterous as it was, I knew that I was not mistaken. And I said aloud, "Signorina!"

It was a long while before she said, "Don't — don't ever call me that again!" And since the world in general appeared to be largely flavoured with the irresponsibility of dreams just then, it did not surprise me that we were presently back in the hotel, and alone in somebody's sitting-room.

"I have seen you twice in Liege," she said. "I — I suppose this had to come about. I would have preferred to avoid it, though. Well! *che sara!* You don't care for music, do you? No — otherwise you would have known earlier that I am Mademoiselle Neroni now."

"Ah!" I said, very quietly. I had heard, as everybody had, a deal concerning the Neroni. "I — I think, if you will pardon me, I will not intrude upon Baron von Anspach's hospitality any longer," I said.

"That is unworthy of you — no, I mean it would have been unworthy of a boy we knew of." There was a long pier-glass in these too-luxurious rooms. She led me to it now. "Look, Bobbie. We have altered a little, have n't we? I am unmistakable at least. 'Their eyes are different, somehow', you remember. You have n't changed as much — not outwardly. I think you are like Dorian Gray. Yes, as soon — as soon as I could afford it, I read every

book you ever talked about, I think. It was damnable foolish of me. For I've heard things. And there was a girl I tried to help in London — an Agnes Faroy ——”

“Ah!” I said.

“She had your picture even then, poor creature. She — she kissed it just before she died. She did n't know that I had ever heard of you. She never knew. Oh, how *could* you!” the Neroni said, with something very like a sob. “Or were you always — just that, at bottom?”

“And have you never noticed, Signorina, that every one of us is several people? And in consequence I must confess to have been wondering ——?”

“Well! I was n't. You won't believe it now, perhaps. And it does n't matter, anyhow.” Her grave voice lifted and was greatly changed, upon a sudden. “Bobbie, when you had gone I could n't stand it! I could n't let you ruin your life for me, but I could not go on as I had done before — Oh, well, you'll never understand,” she added, wearily; “and after all, what is the good of talking — now!”

We two were curiously quiet. “No, I suppose there is no good in talking now.” We stood there, as yet, hand in hand. The mirror was quite pitiless. “Oh, Signorina, I want to laugh and I cannot!”

But I lack the heart to set down all that brief and dreary talk of ours. How does it matter what we

said? We two at least knew, even as we talked, that all we said meant nothing in the outcome. Yet we talked awhile and spoke, I think, quite honestly.

She was not unhappy. "I don't sing very well, of course, but then I'm not dependent on my singing, you know. Oh, why not be truthful? And Von Anspach always sees to it I get the tenderest of criticism — in print. And, moreover, I've a deal put by. I'm a miser, *he* says, and I suppose I am, because I know what it is to be poor. So when the rainy day comes — as of course it will — I'll have quite enough to purchase a serviceable umbrella. Meanwhile, I have pretty much everything I want. People talk, of course, but it is only on the stage they ever drive you out into a snow-storm. Besides, they don't talk to *me*."

In fine, I found that the Neroni was a very different being from Miss Montmorenci — and yet how hideously like!

Then I left her. I had not any inclination just now to pursue my fair Elena. Rather I sat alone in my new bedroom, thinking, confusedly, first of Amelia Van Orden, and how I danced with her a good eight years ago; and of that other woman who had come to me, in remote Fairhaven, unsullied, through the world's gutter — because that much I yet believe, although I do not know — and of those execrable rhymes that likened her to the Lady in "Comus," moving serene and unafraid among a

rabble of threatening bestial shapes; and lastly, of another woman still, who would be with Von Anspach by this.

There was a *Matin* in the room, which contained a brief account of the burning of the Continental, and a very lengthy one of the Neroni's appearance overnight. Drearily, to keep from thinking, I read a deal concerning *la gracieuse cantatrice américaine*. Oh, there was no doubt that she had chosen wisely in forsaking Lethbury, and the tawdry round of village "Opera Houses." She had chosen, after all, and precisely as I had done, to make the most of youth while it lasted: and she appeared, just now, to harvest prodigally.

"*On jouait Faust,*" I read, "*et jamais le célèbre personnage de Goethe n'adore plus exquise Gretchen. Miss Nadine Neroni est, en effet, une idéale Marguerite à la taille bien prise, au visage joli éclairé des deux yeux grands et doux. Et lorsqu'elle commença à chanter, ce fut un véritable ravissement: sa voix se fit l'interprète revêue de la divine musique de Gounod, tandis que sa personne et son cœur incarnaient physiquement et moralement l'héroïne de Goethe.*"

And so on, for Von Anspach had "seen to it" prodigally. And "Oh, well!" I thought; "if everybody else is so extravagantly pleased, what in heaven's name is the use of *my* being squeamish? Besides, she's only doing what I am doing, and getting all the pleasure out of life that is possible. She and

I are very sensible people. At least, I suppose we are. I wonder, though? Meanwhile, I had better go and look for that preposterously beautiful Elena."

Then Charteris came into the room. "Jack," said I, "this is a truly remarkable world, and only hypercriticism would venture to suggest that it is probably conducted by an inveterate humourist. So lend me a quarter, if you have any American money about you, and we will permit pure chance to settle the entire matter. That is the one intelligent way of treating anything which is really serious. You probably believe I am Robert Townsend, but as a matter of fact, I am Hercules in the allegory. So! the beautiful lady or America? — why, the eagle flutters uppermost. I thought it would. Accordingly I am off."

"And you will cross half the world," said Charteris, "in the green dressing-gown, or in the coat which Byam borrowed for you this morning? I do not wish to seem inquisitive, you understand ——"

"No, I believe I 'm through with borrowed coats — as with yours, for instance. But I am quite ready to go in my own dressing-gown if necessary ——"

I wheeled at the door.

"By the way, I am done with you, Jack. I am fond of you, and all that, and I sincerely admire my chimney-pot coquette — of whom you have n't heard — but, after all, there are real men and honest

women yonder. And by God! I am one of that people."

"The Declaration of Independence," Mr. Charteris observed, "is undoubtedly the best thing in imaginative literature that we Americans have as yet accomplished; but I am sufficiently familiar with it, thank you, and I find, with age, that only the more untruthful platitudes are endurable. Oh, I predicted for you, and not very long ago, a life without achievements but of gusto! Now, it would appear, you plan to prance among an interminable saturnalia of the domestic virtues. So be it! but I warn you that the house of righteousness is but a wayside inn upon the road to being a representative citizen."

"You are talking nonsense," I rapped out — "and immoral nonsense."

"It is very strange," John Charteris complained, "how so many of us manage to reduce everything to a question of morality—that is, to the alternative of being right or wrong. Now a man's personality, as Bagehot properly observes, has many parts besides the moral area; and the intellectual, the artistic, even the religious part, need not necessarily have anything to do with ethics. A virtuous man is no more the perfect type of humanity than an intellectual man. In fact, the lowest and certainly the most disagreeable type of all troublesome people is that which combines an immaculate past with a limited understanding. The religious tenets of this class consist of an unshakable belief

that the Bible was originally written in English, and contains nothing applicable to any of the week-days. And in consequence ——”

I left him mid-course in speech. “Word, words!” said I; and it appeared to me for the moment that words were of astonishingly trivial import, however carefully selected, which was in me a wholesome, although fleet, apostacy of yesterday’s creed.

It was on the trip homeward I first met with Celia Reindan. I then considered her a silly little nuisance.

For I crossed the Atlantic in a contained fury of repentance for the wasted months; I had achieved nothing that was worthy of me, and presently I would be dead. Why, I might die within the five minutes! I might never see the lagging minute-hand of the clock pass that next numeral, say! The thought obsessed me, especially o’ nights. Once, in a grotesque panic, I rose and brutally pushed the minute-hand forward a half-hour. “Now, I have tricked You!” I said, aloud.

I wanted to live rationally — to live as these persons thick about me, who seemed to grow up, and mate, and beget, and die, in the incurious fashion of oxen. I wanted to think only from hand to mouth, to think if possible not at all, to be guided always by gross and obvious truisms in the conduct of my life, so that I must be judged at last but as one of the herd. “And what is accustomed — what holds of familiar

usage — had come to seem the whole essence of wisdom, on all subjects”; for I wanted just the sense of companionship, irrevocable and eternal and commonly shared with every one of my own kind. And yonder was Bettie Hamlyn. . . . “Oh, make a man of me, Bettie! just a common man!”

And Bettie might have done it, one considers, even then, for my entire mechanism was astir with a new impetus. Now, with a grin, Fate slipped the tiniest temptation in my way; to reach Fairhaven I was compelled to spend some three hours of an April afternoon in Lichfield, and upon Regis Avenue was to be met, in the afternoon, everyone worth meeting in Lichfield; and Stella drove there on fine afternoons, under the protection of a trim and preternaturally grave tiger; and the afternoon was irreproachable.

She did not recognise me. I stood with a yet lifted hat, as irresolute.

“By Jove!” said I, in my soul, “then the Blagdens are in Lichfield! Why, of course! they always come here after Lent. And Bettie would not mind, and it would be only courteous, and besides, Bettie need n’t ever know.”

So the next afternoon but one Stella was making tea for me.

CHAPTER XIV

HE BAITs UPON THE JOURNEY TO PERFECTION

YOU are quite by way of being a gentleman," had been Stella's greeting. Then, on a sudden, she rested both hands upon my breast. When she did that you tingled all over, in an agreeable fashion. "It was uncommonly decent of you to remember," said this impulsive young woman. "It was dear of you! And the flowers were lovely."

"They ought to have been immortelles, of course," I apologised, "but the florist was out of them. Yes, and of daffodils, too." I sat down, and sighed, pensively. "Dear, dear!" said I, "to think it was only two years ago I buried my dearest hopes and aspirations and — er — all that sort of thing."

"Nonsense!" said Stella, and selected a blue cup with dragons on it. "At any rate," she continued, "it is very disagreeable of you to come here and prate like a death's-head on my wedding anniversary."

"Gracious gravy!" said I, with a fine surprise, "so it is an anniversary with you, too?" She was absorbed in the sugar-bowl. "What a coincidence!" I suggested, pleasantly.

I paused. The fire crackled. I sighed.

"You are such poor company, nowadays," Stella reflected. "You really ought to do something to enliven yourself." After a little, she brightened as to the eyes, and concentrated them upon the tea-making, and ventured a suggestion. "Why not fall in love?" said Stella. The minx!

"I am," I confided, "already in that deplorable condition. And I ventured on sigh number two.

"I don't mean — anything silly," said she, untruthfully. "Why," she continued, with a certain lack of relevance, "why not fall in love with somebody else?" Thereupon, I regret to say, her glance strayed toward the mirror. Oh, she was vain — I grant you that. But I must protest she had a perfect right to be.

"Yes," said I, quite gravely, "that is the reason."

"Nonsense!" said Stella, and tossed her head. She now assumed her most matronly air, and did mysterious things with a perforated silver ball. I was given to understand I had offended by a severe compression of her lips, which, however, was not as effective as it might have been. They twitched too mutinously.

Stella was all in pink, with golden fripperies sparkling in unanticipated localities. Presumably the gown was tucked and ruched and appliquéd, and had been subjected to other processes past the comprehension of trousered humanity; it was certainly becoming.

I think there was an eighteenth-century flavour about it — for it smacked, somehow, of a patched, mendacious, dainty womanhood, and its artfulness was of a gallant sort that scorned to deceive. It defied you, it allured you, it conquered you at a glance. It might have been the last cry from the court of an innocent Louis Quinze. It was, in fine, inimitable; and if I were only a milliner, I would describe for you that gown in some not unbefitting fashion. As it is, set Beer and Paquin to dredge the dictionary, and they will fail, as ignominiously as I would do, in the attempt.

For, after all, its greatest charm was that it contained Stella, and converted Stella into a marquise — not such an one as was her sister, the Marquise d'Arlanges, but a marquise out of Watteau or of Fragonard, say. Stella in this gown seemed out of place save upon a high-backed stone bench — set in an *allée* of lime-trees, of course, and under a violet sky — with a sleek abbé or two for company, and with beribboned gentlemen tinkling on their mandolins about her.

I had really no choice but to regard her as an agreeable anachronism the while she chatted with me, and mixed hot water and sugar and lemon into ostensible tea. She seemed so out of place — and yet, somehow, I entertained no especial desire upon this sleety day to have her different, or, indeed, elsewhere than in this warm, colourful

room, that consisted mostly of dim vistas where a variety of brass bric-a-brac blinked in the firelight.

We had voted it cosier without lamps or candles, for this odorous twilight was far more companionable. Odorous, for there were a great number of pink roses about. I imagine that someone must have sent them — because there were not any daffodils obtainable, by reason of the late and nipping frost — in honour of Stella's second wedding anniversary.

"Peter says you talk to everybody that way," quoth she — almost resentfully, and after a pause.

"Oh!" said I. For it was really no affair of Peter's. And so —

"Peter is getting fat," I announced, presently.

Stella witheringly glanced toward the region where my waist used to be. "He is n't!" said she, indignant.

"Quite like a pig," I continued, with relish. She objected to people being well-built.

Silence. I stirred my tea.

"Dear Peter!" said she. And then — but unless a woman is able to exercise a proper control over her countenance, she has absolutely no right to discuss her husband with his bachelor friends. It is unkind; for it causes them to feel like social outcasts and lumbering brutes and Peeping Toms. If they know the husband well, it positively awes them; for, after all, it is a bit overwhelming, this sudden apprehension

of the simplicity, and the credulity, and the merciful blindness of women in certain matters. And, besides, a bachelor has no business to know such things; it merely makes him envious and uncomfortable.

Accordingly, "Stella," said I, with firmness, "if you flaunt your connubial felicity in my face like that, I shall go home."

She was utterly deaf to my righteous rebuke. "Peter is in Washington this week," she went on, looking fondly into the fire. "I had planned a little dinner for to-day, but he was compelled to go — business, you know. He is doing so well nowadays," she said, after a little, "that I am quite insufferably proud of him. And I intend for him to be a *great* lawyer — oh, much the greatest in America. And I won't ever be content till then."

"H'm!" said I. "H'm" seemed fairly non-committal.

"Sometimes," Stella declared, irrelevantly, "I almost wish I had been born a man."

"I wish you had been," quoth I, in gallant wise. "There are so few really attractive men!"

Stella looked up with a smile that was half sad.

"I'm just a little butterfly-woman, are n't I?" she asked.

"You are," I assented, with conviction, "a butterfly out of a queen's garden — a marvellous pink-and-gold butterfly, such as one sees only in dreams and

— er — in a London pantomime. You are a decided ornament to the garden,” I continued, handsomely, “and the roses bow down in admiration as you pass, and — ah — at least, the masculine ones do,” I added, lamely.

“Yes — we butterflies don’t love one another over-much, do we? Ah, well, it scarcely matters! We were not meant to be taken seriously, you know — only to play in the sunlight, and lend an air to the garden and — amuse the roses, of course. After all,” Stella summed it up, “our duties are very simple: first, we are expected to pass through a certain number of cotillions and a certain number of various happenings in various winter-gardens; then to make a suitable match — so as to enable the agreeable detrimentals to make love to us, with perfect safety — as you were doing just now, for instance. And after that, we develop into bulbous chaperones, and may aspire eventually to a kindly quarter of a column in the papers, and, quite possibly, the honour of having as many as *two* dinners put off on account of our death. Yes, it is very simple. But, in heaven’s name,” cried Stella, with a sudden lift of speech, “how can any woman — for, after all, a woman is presumably a reasoning animal — be satisfied with such a life! Yet that is everything — everything! — this big world offers to us shallow-minded butterfly-women!”

Personally, I disapprove of all such morbid and

hysterical talk outside of a problem novel; there I heartily approve of it, on account of the considerable and harmless pleasure that is always to be derived from throwing the book into the fireplace. And, coming from Stella, this farrago doubly astounded me. She was talking grave nonsense now, whereas Nature had, beyond doubt, planned her to discuss only the lighter sort. So I decided it was quadruply absurd, little Stella talking in this fashion — Stella, who, as all knew, was only meant to be petted and flattered and flirted with.

And therefore, "Stella," I admonished, "you have been reading something indigestible." I set down my teacup, and clasped my hands. "Don't tell me," I pleaded, "that you want to vote!"

She remained unreasonably grave. "The trouble is," said she, judicially, "that I am not really a butterfly, for all my tinsel wings. I am an ant."

"Oh," said I, shamelessly, "I had n't heard that Lizzie had an item for the census man. I don't care for brand-new babies, though; they always look so disgracefully sun-burned."

The pun was atrocious and, quite properly, failed to win a smile or even a reproof from the morbid young person opposite. "My grandfather," said she in meditation, "began as a clerk in a country store. Oh, of course, we have discovered, since, that his ancestors came over with William the Conqueror, and that he was descended from any number of

potentates. But he lived. He was a rip at first — ah, yes, I'm glad of that as well — and he became a religious fanatic because his oldest son died very horribly of lockjaw. And he browbeat people and founded banks, and everybody was afraid of him and honoured him. And I fancy I am prouder of Old Tom Ingersoll than I am of any of the emperors and things that make such a fine show in the family tree. For I am like him. And I want to leave something in the world that was n't there before I came. I want my life to count, I want — why, a hundred years from now I *do* want to be something more than a name on a tombstone. I — oh, I daresay it *is* only my ridiculous egotism," she ended, with a shrug and Stella's usual quick smile — a smile not always free from insolence, but always satisfactory, somehow.

"It's late hours," I warned her, with uplifted forefinger, "late hours and too much bridge and too many sweetmeats and too much bothering over silly New Women ideas. What is the sense of a woman's being useful," I demanded, conclusively, "when it is so much easier and so much more agreeable all around for her to be adorable?"

She pouted. "Yes," she assented, "that is my career — to be adorable. It is my one accomplishment," she declared, unblushingly — yet not without some slight substantiating evidence.

After a little, though, her gravity returned. "When

I was a girl — oh, I dreamed of accomplishing all sorts of beautiful and impossible things! But, you see, there was really nothing I could do. Music, painting, writing — I tried them all, and the results were hopeless. Besides, Rob, the women who succeed — the women with any personal achievement to their credit — are always so queer looking. I could n't be expected to give up my complexion for a career, you know, or to wear my hair like a golf-caddy's. At any rate, I could n't make a success by myself. But there was one thing I could do — I could make a success of Peter. And so," said Stella, calmly, "I did it."

I said nothing. It seemed expedient.

"You know, he was a little ——"

"Yes," I assented, hastily. Peter had gone the pace notoriously, of course, but there was no need of raking that up. That was done with, long ago.

"Well, he is n't the least bit dissipated now. You know he is n't. That is the first big thing I have done." Stella checked it off with a pink-tipped finger. "Then — oh, I have helped him in lots of ways. He is doing splendidly in consequence; and it is my part to see that the proper people are treated properly."

Stella reflected a moment. "There was the last appointment, for instance. I found that the awarding of it lay with that funny old Judge Willoughby, with the wart on his nose, and I asked

him for it — not the wart, you understand — and got it. We simply had him to dinner, and I was specially butterfly; I fluttered airily about, was as silly as I knew how to be, looked helpless and wore my best gown. He thought me a pretty little fool, and gave Peter the appointment. That is only an instance, but it shows how I help." Stella regarded me, uncertainly. "You understand?"

Of a sudden I understood a number of things — things that had puzzled. This was the meaning of Stella's queer dinner overnight, and the ensuing theatre-party, for instance; this was the explanation of those impossible men, vaguely heralded as "very influential in politics," and of the unaccountable women, too painfully condensed in every lurid shade of satin, and so liberally adorned with gems as to make them almost valuable. Stella, incapable by nature of two consecutive ideas, was determined to manipulate the unseen wires.

"Eh, it would be laughable," I thought, "were not her earnestness so pathetic! For here is Columbine mimicking Semiramis."

Yet it was true that Peter Blagden had made tremendous strides in his profession, of late years. For a moment, I wondered — ? Then I looked at this butterfly young person opposite, and frowned. "I don't like it," I said, decisively. "It is a bit cold-blooded. It is n't worthy of you, Stella."

"It is my career," she flouted me, with shrugging

shoulders. "It is the one career the world — our world — has left me. And I'm doing it for Peter."

The absurd look that I objected to — on principle, you understand — returned at this point in the conversation. I arose, resolutely, for I was really unable to put up with such folly. Yet, somehow, I was suggesting, idiotically:

"You love him?"

"Of course," she said. "Why?"

And, as she thought of him, it was very easy to see that she undoubtedly did.

"Oh, nothing — nothing in the world," I said, with an extremity of brilliance. "I just thought I would ask, that's all."

Whereupon I went away.

CHAPTER XV

HE PARTICIPATES IN A BRAVE JEST

STELLA drove on fine afternoons, under the protection of a trim and preternaturally grave tiger. The next afternoon, by a Lichfieldian transition, was irreproachable. I was to remember, afterward, wondering in a vague fashion, as the equipage passed, if the boy's lot was not rather enviable. There might well be less attractive methods of earning the daily bread and butter than to whirl through life behind Stella. One would rarely see her face, of course, but there would be such compensations as an unfailing sense of her presence, and the faint odour of her hair at times and always the blown scraps of her laughter, or the shreds of her talk, and, almost always, the piping of the sweet voice that was stilled so rarely.

Perhaps the conscienceless tiger listened when she was "seeing that the proper people were treated properly"? Yes, one would. Perhaps he ground his teeth? Well, one would, I suspected. And perhaps ——?

There was a nod of recognition from Stella; and I lifted my hat as they bowled by toward the Reservoir.

I went down Regis Avenue, mildly resentful that she had not offered me a lift.

A vagrant puff of wind was abroad in the Boulevard that afternoon. It paused for a while to amuse itself with a stray bit of paper. At last, it grew tired of its plaything, and dexterously tossed the considerable thing between the eyes of a sorrel horse. Prince lurched and bolted; and Rex, always a vicious brute, followed his mate. One fancies the vagabond wind must have laughed over that which ensued.

After a moment it returned and lifted the bit of paper from the roadway — with a new respect, perhaps — and the two of them frolicked over the close-shaven turf. It was a merry game they played there in the spring sunlight. The paper fluttered a little, whirled over and over, and scampered off through the grass; then, with a gust of mirth, the wind was after it, now gained upon it, now lost ground in eddying about a tree, and now made up the disadvantage in the open, and at last chuckled over its playmate pinned to the earth and flapping in sharp, indignant remonstrances. Then *da capo*.

Oh, it was a merry game — a tireless game that lasted till the angry sunset had flashed its final palpitant lance through the tree-trunks farther down the roadway. There were shuddering people in this place, and broken wheels and shafts, and a policeman with a smoking pistol, and two dead horses; and men were

lifting a limp, white heap from among the splintered rubbish.

Then wind and paper played half-heartedly in the twilight until the night had grown too chilly for their sport. There was no more murder to be done; and so the vagabond wind was puffed out into nothingness, and the bit of paper was left alone, and at about this season the big stars — the incurious stars — peeped out of heaven, one by one.

It was Stella's sister, the Marquise d'Arlanges, who sent for me that night. A wheezy hand-organ ground out its jigging tune below, as her brief note told me what the casual wind had brought about. It was a despairing, hopeless and insistent air that shrilled and piped across the way. It seemed very appropriate.

The doctors feared — ah, well, telegrams had failed to reach Peter in Washington. Peter Blagden was not in Washington, he had not been in Washington. He could not be found. And did I think — ?

No, I thought none of the things that Stella's sister suggested. Of a sudden I knew. I stood silent for a little and heard that damned, clutching tune cough and choke and end; I heard the renewed babblement of children; and I heard the organ clatter down the street, and set up its faint jingling in the distance. And I knew with an unreasoning surety. I pitied Stella now ineffably — not for the maiming and

crippling of her body, for the spoiling of that tender miracle, that white flower of flesh — but for the falling of her air-castle, the brave air-castle which to her meant everything. I comprehended what had happened.

Later I found Peter Blagden — no matter where. It is not particularly to my credit that I knew where to look for him. Yet the French have a saying of infinite wisdom in their *qui a bu boira*. The old vice had gripped the man, irresistibly, and he had stolen off to gratify it in secret; and, in fine, more grossly worded, he had not been sober for a week. He was on the verge of collapse even when I told him — oh, with a deliberate cruelty, I grant you — what had happened that afternoon.

Then, swiftly, his demolishment came; and I could not — could not for very shame — bring this shivering weeping imbecile to the bedside of Stella, who was perhaps to die that night. Such was the news I brought to Stella's sister; through desolate streets already blanching in the dawn.

Stella was calling for Peter. We manufactured explanations.

Nice customs curtsey to death. I am standing at Stella's bedside, and the white-capped nurse has gone. There are dim lights about the room, and heavy carts lumber by in the dawn without. A petulant sparrow is cheeping somewhere.

"Tell me the truth," says Stella, pleadingly. Her face, showing over billows of bedclothes, is as pale as they. But beautiful, and exceedingly beautiful, is Stella's face, now that she is come to die.

It heartened me to lie to her. Peter had been retained in the great Western Railway case. He had been called to Denver, San Francisco — and I forget to-day just why or even whither. He had kept it as a surprise for her. He was hurrying back. He would arrive in two days. I showed her telegrams from Peter Blagden — clumsy forgeries I had concocted in the last half-hour.

Oh, the story ran lamely, I grant you. But, vanity apart, I told it with conviction. Stella must and should die in content; and my thoughts were strangely nimble, there was a devilish fluency in my speech, and lie after lie flitted somehow into an entity that surprised even me as it took plausible form. And I got my reward. Little by little, the doubt died from her eyes as I lied stubbornly in the hushed silence; a little by a little, her cheeks flushed brighter, and ever brighter, as I dilated on this wonderful success that had come to Peter Blagden, till at last her face was all aflame with happiness.

She had dreamed of this, half conscious of her folly, she had worked toward this consummation for months past. But she had hardly dared to hope for absolute success; it almost worried her; and she could n't be certain, even now, whether

it was the soup or her blue silk that had influenced Musgrave most potently. Both had been planned to wheedle him, to gain this glorious chance for Peter Blagden. . . .

"You — you are sure you are not lying?" said Stella, and smiled in speaking, for she believed me infinitely.

"Stella, before God, it is true!" I lied, with fervour. "On my word of honour, it is as I tell you!" And my heart was sick within me as I thought of the stuttering brute, the painted female, the stench of liquor in the room — Ah, well, the God I called to witness strengthened me to smile back at Stella.

"I believe you," she said, simply. "I — I am glad. It is a big thing for Peter." Her eyes widened in wonder and pride, and she dreamed for just a moment of his future. But, upon a sudden, her face fell. "Dear, dear!" said Stella, petulantly; "I'd forgotten. I'll be dead by then."

"Stella! Stella!" I cried, and very hoarsely; "why — why, nonsense, child! The doctor says — he is quite sure, I mean ——" I had a horrible desire to laugh. Heine was right; there was an Aristophanes in heaven.

"Ah, I know," she interrupted. "I am a little afraid to die," she went on, reflectively. "If one only knew ——" Stella paused for a moment; then she smiled. "After all," she said, "it is n't as if I had n't accomplished anything. I have made Peter. The

ball is at his feet now; he has only to kick it. And I helped."

"Yes," said I. My voice was shaken, broken out of all control. "You have helped. Why, you have done everything, Stella! There is not a young man in America with his prospects. In five years, he will be one of our greatest lawyers — everybody says so — everybody! And you have done it all, Stella — every bit of it! You have made a man of him, I tell you! Look at what he was! — and then look at what he is! And — and you talk of leaving him now! Why, it's preposterous! Peter needs you, I tell you — he needs you to cajole the proper people and keep him steady and — and — Why, you artful young woman, how could he possibly get on without you, do you think? Oh, how can any of us get on without you? You *must* get well, I tell you? In a month, you will be right as a trivet. You die! Why, nonsense!" I laughed. I feared I would never have done with laughter over the bare idea of Stella's dying.

"But I have done all I could. And so he does n't need me now." Stella thought for yet another moment. "I believe I shall always know when he does anything especially big. God would be sure to tell me, you see, because He understands how much it means to me. And I shall be proud — ah, yes, wherever I am, I shall be proud of Peter. You see, he did n't really care about being a success, for of

course he knows that Uncle Harry will leave him a great deal of money one of these days. But I am such a vain little cat — so bent on making a noise in the world — that, I think, he did it more to please my vanity than anything else. I nagged him, frightfully, you know,” Stella now confessed, “but he was always — oh, so dear about it, Rob! And he has never failed me — not even once, although I know at times it has been very hard for him.” Stella sighed; and then laughed. “Yes,” said she, “I think I am satisfied with my life altogether. Somehow, I am sure I shall be told about it when he is a power in the world — a power for good, as he will be — and then I shall be very glad, because I helped him, just a trifle. So I ought to sing *Nunc Dimittis*, ought n’t I?”

I was not unmoved, nor did it ever lie within my power to be unmoved when I thought of Stella and how gaily she went to meet her death.

“Good-bye,” said she, after a little, in a tired voice.

“Good-bye, Stella,” said I; and I kissed her for the second time.

CHAPTER XVI

HE DECIDES TO AMUSE HIMSELF A WHILE LONGER

I CAME to Fairhaven half-bedrugged with memories of Stella's funeral — say, of how lightly she had lain in the grotesque and horrid box, and of Peter's vacant red-rimmed eyes that seemed to wonder why this decorous company should have assembled about the deep and white-lined cavity at his feet, and find no answer. Nor, for that matter, could I.

"But it was flagrant, flagrant!" my heart screeched in a grill of impotent wrath. "Eh, You gave me power to reason, so they say! and will You slay me, too, if I presume to use that power? I say, then, it was flagrant and tyrannical and absurd! 'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first, Loving not, hating not, just choosing so!' O Setebos, it was n't worthy of omnipotence. You know it was n't!" In such a frame of mind I came again to Bettie Hamlyn.

It was very odd to see Bettie again. I had been sublimely confident that we would pick up our intercourse precisely where we had left off, though; and this, as I now know, is something which can never happen to anybody. So I was vaguely irritated

before we had finished shaking hands, and became so resolutely boyish and effusive in my delight at seeing her that anyone in the world but Bettie Hamlyn would have been quite touched. And my conversational gambit, I protest, was masterly, and would have made anybody else think, "Oh, how candid is the egotism of this child!" and would have moved that person, metaphorically, to pat me upon the head.

But Bettie only smiled, a little sadly, and answered:

"Yes, I have read your book, and I dislike it, because there is not a bit of *you* in it. Of course I am glad it was the big noise of the month, and also a little jealous of it, if you can understand that phase of the feminine mind. I doubt it, because you write about women as though they were pterodactyls or some other extinct animal, which you had never seen, but had read a lot about. To roll it into a pill, your book seems pretty much like any other book, and it has made me hold my own particular boy's picture more than once against my cheek and say, 'You did n't write books, did you, dear? — you did nicer things than write books' — and he did. . . . I hear many things of you. . . ."

"Oh, well!" I brilliantly retorted, "you must n't believe all you hear." And I felt that matters were going very badly indeed.

"Robin, do you not know that your mess of pottage must perforce be eaten with you by the people who

care for you? — and one of them dislikes pottage. Indeed, I *would* have liked the book, had anybody else written it. I almost like it as it is, in spots, and sometimes I even go to the great length of liking you, — because ‘if only for old sake’s sake, dear, you ’re the loveliest doll in the world.’ There might be a better reason, if you could only make up your mind to dispense with pottage. . . .”

The odd part of it, even to-day, is that Bettie was saying precisely what I had been thinking, and that to hear her say it made me just twice as petulant as I was already.

“Now, please don’t preach,” I said. “I ’ve heard so much preaching lately — dear,” I added, though I am afraid the word was rather obviously an after-thought.

“Oh, I forgot you stayed over for Stella Blagden’s funeral. You were quite right. Stella was a dear child, and I was really sorry to hear of her death.”

“Really!” It was the lightest possible additional flick upon the raw, but it served.

“Yes — I, too, was rather sorry, Bettie, because I have loved Stella all my life. She was the first, you see, and, somehow, the others have been different. And — she disliked dying. I tell you, it is unfair, Bettie — it is hideously unfair!”

“Robin —” she began.

“And why should you be living,” I sternly said, but in half-conscious absurdity, “when she is dead?”

Why, look Bettie! even that fly yonder is alive. Setebos accords an insect what He grudges Stella! And you 're alive, and I 'm alive, and Peter Blagden is alive, and only Stella is dead. I suppose she is an angel by this. But I don't care for angels. I want just the silly little Stella that I loved — the Stella that was the first and will always be the first with me. For I want her — just Stella —! Oh, it is an excellent jest; and I will cap it with another now. For the true joke is, I came to Fairhaven to ask you to marry me — you who are 'really' sorry that Stella is dead!" And I laughed as pleasantly as one may do in anger.

But the girl, too, was angry. "Marry you!" she said. "Why, Robin, you were wonderful once; and now you are simply not a bad sort of fellow, who imagines himself to be the hit of the entire piece."

"I regret I should have sailed so far into the north of your opinion," said I. "Though, as I dare assert, you are quite probably in the right. So I'll be off to my husks again, Bettie." And I kissed her hand. "And that too is only for old sake's sake, dear," I said.

It was a long while afterward I discovered that "some damned good-natured friend," as Sir Fretful has immortally phrased it, had told Bettie Hamlyn of seeing me at the theatre in Lichfield, with Stella and her marvellous dinner-company. It was by an

odd quirk the once Aurelia Minns, in Lichfield for the "summer's shopping," who had told Bettie. And the fact is that I had written Bettie upon the day after Stella's death and, without explicitly saying so, had certainly conveyed the impression I had reached Lichfield that very morning, and was simply stopping over for Stella's funeral. And, in addition, I cannot say that Bettie and Stella were particularly fond of each other.

As it was, I left Fairhaven the same day I reached it, and in some dissatisfaction with the universe. And I returned to Lichfield and presently reopened the old Townsend house, and was received by Lichfield society, if not with open arms at least with acquiescence.

Depend upon it, Lichfield knew a deal more concerning my escapades than I did. That I was "deplorably wild" was generally agreed, and a reasonable number of seductions, murders and arsons was, no doubt, accredited to me "on quite unimpeachable authority, my dear."

But I was a Townsend, and Lichfield had been case-hardened to all Townsendian vagaries since Colonial days; and, besides, I had written a book which had been talked about; and, as an afterthought, I was reputed not to be an absolute pauper, if only because my father had taken the precaution, so customary with all Townsends, to marry a woman with enough money to offset his pedigree. For Lich-

field luckily was not aware as yet how near my pleasure-loving parents had come, between them, to spending the last cent of this small fortune.

And, in fine, "Well, really now ——?" said Lichfield. Then there was a tentative invitation or two, and I cut the knot by accepting all of them, and talking to every woman as though she were the solitary specimen of femininity extant. It was presently agreed that gossip often embroidered the actual occurrence and that wild oats were, after all, a not unheard-of phenomenon, and that though genius very often, in a phrase, forgot to comb its hair, these tonsorial deficiencies were by the broad-minded not appraised too strictly.

I did not greatly care what Lichfield said one way or the other. I was too deeply engrossed: first, in correcting the final proofs of "Afield," my second book, which appeared that spring and was in just the sugar-candy vein of "The Apostates"; secondly, in writing five magazine stories, in which the one point of resemblance was that She either fell into His arms "with a contented sigh" or else "their lips met" somewhere toward the ending of the seventh page; and, thirdly, in diverting myself with Celia Reindan.

That, though, is a business I shall not detail because it was one of the very vulgarest sort. It was, in fine, the logical outgrowth of my admiration for her yellow hair — she *did* have extraordinary hair,

confound her! — and of a few moonlit nights. It was simply the result of our common vanity and of her book-fed sentimentality and, eventually, of her unbridled temper; and in nature the compound was an unsavoury mess which thoroughly delighted Lichfield.

I had meanwhile decided, first, to write another and a better book than “The Apostates” or “Afield” ever pretended to be; and afterward to marry Rosalind Jemmett, whom I found, in my too-hackneyed but habitual phrase, “adorable.” For this Rosalind was an eminently “sensible match,” and as such, I considered, quite appropriate for a Townsend.

The main thing though, to me, was to write the book of which I had already the central idea — very vague, as yet, but of an unquestionable magnificence. Development of it, on an at all commensurate scale, necessitated many inconveniences, and among them, the finding of someone who would assist me in imbuing the love-scenes — of which there must unfortunately be a great many — with reality; and for the tale’s *milieu* I pitched upon the Green Chalybeate — where, as you may remember, I first met with Stella.

So I said a not unpromising farewell to Rosalind Jemmett, who was going into Canada for the summer. She was quite frankly grieved by the absolute necessity of my taking a rigorous course of the Chalybeate waters, but agreed with me that one’s health

is not to be trifled with. And of course she would write if I really wanted her to, though she could n't imagine *why*— But I explained why, with not a little detail. And she told me, truthfully, that I was talking like an idiot; and was not, I thought, irrevocably disgusted by my idiocy. So that, all in all, I was not discontented when I left her.

Then I ordered Byam to pack and, by various unveracious representations, induced Billy Woods to accompany me to the Green Chalybeate.

When I began to scribble these haphazard memories I had designed to be very droll concerning the "provincialism" of Lichfield; for, as every inhabitant of it will tell you, it is "quite hopelessly provincial,"—and this is odd, seeing that, as investigation will assure you, the city is exclusively inhabited by self-confessed cosmopolitans. I had meant to depict Fairhaven, too, in the broad style of "Cranford," say; and to be so absolutely side-splitting when I touched upon the Green Chalybeate as positively to endanger the ensuing existence of any reader, who presumed to peruse even a solitary chapter which treated of this resort.

But, upon reflection, I am too familiar with these places to attempt to treat them humorously. The persons who frequent their byways are too much like the persons who frequent the byways of any other place, I find, at bottom. For to write of any people

convincingly, it is always necessary either to have thoroughly misunderstood them, or else perseveringly to have been absent from their daily intercourse, until age has hardened the brain-cells, and you have forgotten what they are really like. Then, alone, you may write the necessary "character studies" which will be sufficiently abundant in "human interest."

For, at bottom, any one of us is tediously like any other. Comprehension is the grave of sympathy; scratch deeply enough and you will find not any livelily-coloured Tartarism, but just a poor and thoroughly uninteresting human being. And so I may not ever be so droll as I had meant to be; and if, in fine, you wish to chuckle over the grotesque places I have lived in, you must apply to persons who have spent two weeks there, and no more.

CHAPTER XVII

HE SEEKS FOR COPY

I HAD aforetime ordered Mr. Woods to read "The Apostates," and, as the author of this volume stated, from motives that were purely well-meaning. To-night I was superintending the process.

"For the scene of the book is the Green Chalybeate," said I; "and it may be my masterly rhetoric will so far awaken your benighted soul, Billy, that you *may* perceive what the more immediate scenery is really like. Why, think of it! what if you should presently fall so deeply in love with the adjacent mountains that you would actually consent to overlook the deficiencies of the more adjacent café! Try, now, Billy! try hard to think that the right verb is really more important than the right vermouth! and you have no idea what good it may do you."

Mr. Woods read on, with a bewildered face, while, with a straw, I very gently stirred the contents of my tall and savoury glass.

"Oh, I say, you know!" observed Billy Woods, as he finished the sixth chapter, and flung down the book.

"Rot, utter rot," I assented, pleasantly; "puerile

and futile trifling with the fragments of the seventh commandment, as your sturdy common-sense instantly detected. In fact," I added, hopefully, "I think that chapter is quite trivial enough to send the book into a tenth edition. In 'Afield,' you know, I tried a different tack. Actuated by the noblest sentiments, the heroine mixes prussic acid with her father's whiskey and water; and 'Old-Fashioned' and 'Fair Play' have been obliging enough to write to the newspapers about this harrowing instance of the deplorably low moral standards of to-day. Billy, do you think that a real lady is *ever* justified in obliterating a paternal relative? You ought to meditate upon that problem, Billy, for it is really a public question nowadays. Oh, and there was a quite lovely one last week I forgot to show you — all about Electra, as contrasted with Jonas Chuzzlewit, and my fine impersonal attitude, and the survival of the fittest, and so on."

But Billy refused to be comforted. "Look here, Bob!" said he, pathetically, "why don't you brace up and write something — well! we'll put it, something of the sort you *can* do. For you can, you know."

I flicked the ashes from my cigarette, with conscious grace. "And is not a judicious nastiness the market-price of a second edition before publication?" I softly queried. "Sybarite that I am, I have descended to this that I might furnish butter for my daily bread!" I refilled my glass and held the

sparkling drink for a moment against the light. "This time next year," said I, as dreamily, "I shall be able to afford cake; for I shall have written 'As the Coming of Dawn.'"

Mr. Woods sniffed, and refilled his glass likewise.

"For the reign of subtle immorality," I sighed, "is well-nigh over. Already the augurs of the pen wink as they fable of a race of men evilly scintillant in talk and gracefully erotic. We know that this, alas, cannot be, and that in real life our peccadilloes dwindle into dreary vistas of divorce cases and the police-court, and that crime has lost its splendour. We sin very carelessly — sordidly, at times — and artistic wickedness is rare. It is a pity; life was once a scarlet volume scattered with misty-coated demons; it is now a yellow journal, wherein our virtues are the not infrequent misprints, and our vices the hackneyed formulas of journalists. Yes, it is a pity!"

"Dearest Robert!" remonstrated Mr. Woods, "you are sadly *passé*; that pose is of the Beardsley period and went out many magazines ago."

"The point is well taken," I admitted, "for our life of to-day is already reflected — faintly, I grant you — in the best-selling books. We have passed through the period of a slavish admiration for wickedness and wide margins; our quondam decadents now snigger in a parody of primæval innocence, and many things are forgiven the latter-day poet if his botany be irreproachable. Indeed, it is quite time; for we

have tossed over the contents of every closet in the *menage à trois*. And I — *moi, qui vous parle* — I am wearied of hansom-cabs and the flaring lights of Broadway, even as so alluringly depicted in 'Afield'; and henceforth I shall demonstrate the beauty of pastoral innocence."

"Saul among the prophets," suggested Mr. Woods, helpfully.

"Quite so," I assented; "and my first prophecy will be 'As the Coming of Dawn.'"

Mr. Woods tapped his forehead significantly. "Mad, quite mad!" said he, in parenthesis.

"I shall be idyllic," I continued, sweetly; "I shall write of the ineffable glory of first love. I shall babble of green fields and the keen odours of spring and the shamefaced countenance of lovers, met after last night's kissing. It will be the story of love that stirs blindly in the hearts of maids and youths, and does not know that it is love — the love which manhood has half forgotten and that youth has not the skill to write of. But I shall write its story as it has never been written before; and I shall make a great book of it, that will go into thousands and thousands of editions. Yes, before heaven, I will!"

I brought my fist down, emphatically, on the table.

"H'm!" said Mr. Woods, dubiously; "going back to renew associations with your first love? You'll find her grandchildren terribly in the way, you know."

"It is imperative," said I — "yes, imperative for

the scope of my book, that I should view life through youthful and unsophisticated eyes. I discovered that, upon the whole, Miss Jemmett would scarcely serve my purpose. And I can't find any one who will."

Mr. Woods whistled softly. "'Honourable young gentleman,'" he murmured, as to himself, "'desires to meet attractive young lady. Object: to learn how to be idyllic in three-hundred pages.'"

There was no commentary upon his text.

"I say," queried Mr. Woods, "do *you* think this sort of thing is fair to the girl? Is n't it a little cold-blooded?"

I only smiled, because Billy is terribly burges at times. "And so to-morrow," said I, with an unshaken firmness, "I leave the Green Chalybeate in search of 'As the Coming of Dawn.'"

"Look here," said Mr. Woods, "if you start on a tour of the country, looking for assorted dawns and idylls, it will end in my abducting you from some rustic institution for the insane. You take a liver-pill and go to bed."

Next morning, however, I notified the desk-clerk, and, quite casually, both the newspaper correspondents, that the Green Chalybeate was about to be bereft of the presence of the distinguished novelist. Then, as my train did not leave till night, I resolved to be bored on horseback, rather than on the golf-

links, and had Guendolen summoned, from the stables, for a final investigation of the country roads thereabouts.

Guendolen elected to follow a new route this afternoon, shortly after leaving the hotel; and knowing by experience that any questioning of this decision could but result in undignified defeat, I assented. Thus it came about that we circled parallel to the board-walk, which leads uphill to the deserted Royal Hotel, and passed its rows of broken windows; and went downhill again, at Guendolen's election; and thus came to the creek, which babbled across the roadway and was overhung with thick foliage that lisped and whispered cheerfully in the placid light of the declining sun. It was there that the germ of "As the Coming of Dawn" was found.

For I had fallen into a reverie over the deplorable obstinacy of my new heroine, who declined, for all my labours, to be unsophisticated; and taking advantage of this, Guendolen had twitched the reins from my hand and proceeded to satisfy her thirst in a manner that was rather too noisy to be quite good form. I sat in patience, idly observing the sparkling reflection of the sunlight on the water. I was elaborating a comparison between my heroine and Guendolen. Then Guendolen snorted, as something rustled through the underbrush, and turning, I perceived a Vision.

The Vision was in white, with a maddening pro-

fusion of open-work. There were blue ribbons connected with it. There were also black eyes, of the almond-shaped, heavy-lidded variety that I had thought existed only in Lely's pictures, and great coils of brown hair which was gold where the chequered sunlight fell upon it, and two lips that were very red. I was filled with a deep pity for my tired horse, and a resolve that for this once her thirst should be quenched.

Thereupon, I lifted my cap hastily; and Guendolen scrambled to the other bank, and spluttered, and had carried me well past the Iron Spring, before I announced to the evening air that I was a fool and Guendolen's entitlement to various quite picturesque and derogatory epithets. And then I smiled.

"Now, Robert Townsend, you writer of books, here is a subject made to your hand." And then:

"Only 'twixt the light and shade
Floating memories of my maid
Make me pray for Guendolen."

After this we retraced our steps. I was peering anxiously about the roadway.

"Pardon me," said I, subsequently; "but *have* you seen anything of a watch — a small gold one, set with pearls?"

"Heavens!" said the Vision, sympathetically, "what a pity! Are you sure it fell here?"

"I don't seem to have it about me," I answered,

with cryptic, but entire, veracity. I searched about my pockets, with a puckered brow. "And as we stopped here ——" I looked inquiringly into the water.

"From this side," observed the Vision, impersonally, "there is less glare from the brook."

Having tied Guendolen to a swinging limb, I sat down contentedly. The Vision moved a little, lest I be crowded.

"It might be further up the road," she suggested, demurely.

"Oh, I must have left it at the hotel," I observed.

"You might look ——" said she, peering into the water.

"Forever!" I assented, rather fatuously.

The Vision flushed. "I did n't mean ——" she began.

"But I did," quoth I — "and every word of it."

"Why, in that case," said she, and rose to her feet, "I'd better ——" A frown wrinkled her brow; then a deep, curved dimple performed a similar office for her cheek, as I sighed pathetically. "I wonder ——" said she, with some hesitation.

"Why, you would be a bold-faced jig," said I, composedly; "but, after all there is nobody about. And, besides — for I suspect you of being one of the three dilapidated persons in veils who came last night — we are going to be introduced right after supper, anyway."

The Vision sat down. "You mentioned your sanatorium?" quoth she.

"The Asylum of Love," said I; "discharged — under a false impression — as cured, and sent to paradise.

"Oh!" said I, defiant, "but it *is*!"

She looked about her. "The woods *are* rather beautiful," she conceded, softly

"They form a quite appropriate background," said I, with some irrelevance. "It is a veritable Eden, before the coming of the snake."

"Before?" she queried, dubiously.

"Undoubtedly," said I, and felt my ribs, in meditative wise. "And *immediately* after — Well, of course you are acquainted with that famous bull about the fairest of her daughters?"

"It is *quite* time," said she, judicially, "for me to go back to the hotel."

"It is not good," I pleaded, "for man to be alone."

"I have heard," said she, "that — almost any one can cite Scripture to his purpose."

With extreme gravity I thrust out a foot for inspection. "No suggestion of a hoof," said I; "and not the slightest odour of brimstone, as you will kindly note; and my inoffensive name is Robert Townsend."

"Of course," she submitted, virtuously, "I could never think of making your acquaintance in this irregular fashion; and, therefore, of course, I could

not think of telling you that my name is Marian Winwood."

"Of course not," I agreed; "it would be highly improper."

There was an interval; and I allowed myself a chuckle.

"I am country-bred," said she, in flushed explanation; "and you are *simply* ——"

"A citizen of no mean city," I admitted.

"— horrid," finished she. "And it is more than time for me to go to supper," she concluded, with a deplorable lacuna, as it seemed to me, in the deduction.

"Look here!" I remonstrated; "it is n't six yet." Incautiously I exhibited my watch to support this statement.

"Oh!" she cried, with wide, indignant eyes.

"I — I mean ——" I stammered.

She rose to her feet.

"— I will explain ——"

"I do not care to listen to any explanations. Why should I?"

"— upon," I firmly said, "the third piazza of the hotel. And this very evening."

"You will not." And this was said even more firmly. "And I hope you will have the kindness to keep away from these woods; for I shall probably always walk here in the afternoon." Then, with an indignant toss of the head, the Vision disappeared.

I whistled. Subsequently I galloped back to the hotel.

"See here!" said I, to the desk-clerk; "how long does this place keep open?"

"Season closes October the fifteenth, sir."

I told him I would need my rooms till then.

CHAPTER XVIII

HE PROVIDES COPY

SO IT was Billy Woods who presently left the Green Chalybeate. I stayed out the season.

Now I cannot conscientiously recommend the Green Chalybeate against your next vacation. Some sixty years ago, and even fifteen years ago, it was frequented equally for the sake of gaiety and of health. To-day it is simply a beautiful and tumble-down place where invalids congregate for the sake of the nauseous waters — which infallibly demolish a solid column of strange maladies I never read quite through, although it borders every page of the writing-paper you get there from the desk-clerk — and a scanty leaven of persons who come thither, apparently, in order to spend a week or two in lamenting “how *very* dull the season is this year, and how *abominable* the fare is.”

But for one I praise the place, and I believe that Marian Winwood also bears it no ill-will. For we two were very happy there. We took part in the “subscription euchres” whenever we could not in time devise an excuse which would pass muster with the haggard “entertainer.” We danced conscientiously beneath the pink and green icing of the ball-

room's ceiling, with perhaps a dozen chaperones — whom I always suspected of taking in washing during the winter months — lined up as closely as was possible to the door, as in preparation for the hotel's catching fire any moment, to give us pessimistic observal. And having thus discharged our duty to society at large, we enjoyed ourselves tremendously.

For instance, we would talk over the book I was going to write in the autumn. That was the main thing. Then one could golf, or drive, or — I blush to write it even now — croquet. Croquet, though, is a much maligned game, as you will immediately discover if you ever play it on the rambling lawn of the Chalybeate, about six in the afternoon, say, when the grass is greener than it is by ordinary, and the shadows are long, and the sun is well beneath the tree-tops of the Iron Bank, and your opponent makes a face at you occasionally, and on each side the old, one-storied cottages are builded of unusually red bricks and are quite ineffably asleep.

Or again there is always the creek to divert yourself in. Once I caught five crawfishes there, while Marian waited on the bank; and afterward we found an old tomato-can and boiled them in it, and they came out a really gorgeous crimson. This was the afternoon that we were Spanish Inquisitors. . . . Oh, believe me, you can have quite a good time at Chalybeate, if you set about it in the proper way.

Only it is true that sometimes, when it rained, say,

with that hopeless insistency which, I protest, is unknown anywhere else in the world, and Marian was not immediately accessible, and cigarettes were not quite satisfactory, because the entire universe was so sodden matches had to be judiciously coaxed before they would strike; and if you happened to be writing a fervid letter to Rosalind Jemmett, let us say, the ink would n't dry for ever so long — why, it is true that in these circumstances you would feel a shade too like the wicked Lord So-and-So of a conventional melodrama.

Yet even in these circumstances, reason told me that the Book was the main thing, that the girl would be thoroughly over the affair by November at latest, and at the cost of a few inconsequent tears would have meanwhile immeasurably obliged posterity; and I knew that no man may ever write in perdurable fashion save by ruthlessly converting his own life into "copy," since of other persons' lives he can, at most, reproduce but the blurred and misinterpreted by-ends, by reason of almost any author's deplorable lack of omniscience. Yes, the Book was the main thing; and yet the girl — knowingly to dip my pen into her heart as into an inkstand was not, at best, chivalric. . . .

"But the Book!" said I. "Why, I must be quite idiotically in love to think of letting that Book perish!" And I viciously added: "Confound the pretty simpleton!"

So the book was builded, after all, a little by a little. For hardly an evening came when after leaving Marian I had n't at least one excellent and pregnant jotting to record in my note-book. Now it would be just an odd turn of language, or a description of some gesture she had made, or of a gown she had worn that day; and now a simile or some other rather good figure of speech which had popped into my mind when I was making love to her.

Nor had I any difficulty in preserving nearly all she said to me, for Marian was never a chatterbox; yet her responses had, somehow, that long-sought tang it was n't in me to invent for any imaginary young woman who must be, for the sake of my new novel, quite heels over head in love.

And I began to see that Bettie was right, as usual. I had written about women hitherto as though they were "pterodactyls or some other extinct animal, which you had never seen, but had read a lot about."

And now, in looking over my notes, I knew, and my heart glowed to know, that I was not about to repeat the error.

So the Book was builded, after all, a little by a little.

"It will be very dreadful," sighed she, in a tired voice; "for we have to stay a whole week longer, and I shall come here every afternoon. And there will be only ghosts in the woods — wistful, pathetic ghosts of dead days — and I shall be very lonely."

“Dear,” said I, “is it not something to have been happy? It has been such a wonderful summer; and come what may, nothing can rob us now of its least golden moment. And it is only for a little.”

“You will come back?” said she, half-doubtingly.

“Yes,” I said. “You wonderful, elfin creature, I shall undoubtedly come back — to your real home and claim you there. Only I don’t believe you do live in Indiana — you probably live in some great, gnarled oak hereabouts; and at night its bark uncloses to set you free, and you and your sisters dance out the satyrs’ hearts in the moonlight. Oh, I know, Marian! I simply *know* you are a dryad — a wonderful, laughing, clear-eyed dryad strayed out of the golden age.”

“What a boy it is!” she said. “No, I am only a really and truly girl, dear — a very weak and frightened girl, with very little disposition to laughter, just now. For you are going away — Oh, my dear, you have meant so much to me! The world is so different since you have come, and I am so happy and so miserable that — that I am afraid.” An infinitesimal handkerchief stole upward to two great, sparkling eyes, and dabbed at them.

“Dear!” said I. And this remark appeared to meet the requirements of the situation.

There was a silence now. We sat in the same spot where I had first encountered Marian Winwood.

Only this was an autumnal forest that glowed with many gem-like hues about us; and already the damp odour of decaying leaves was heavy in the air. It was very like the Tosti thing translated out of marine terms into a woodland analogue. The summer was ended; but "As the Coming of Dawn" was practically complete.

It was not the book that I had planned, but a far greater one which was scarcely mine. There was no word written as yet. But for two months I had viewed life through Marian Winwood's eyes; day by day, my half-formed, tentative ideas had been laid before her with elaborate fortuitousness, to be approved, or altered, or rejected, just as she decreed, until at last they had been welded into a perfect whole that was a Book. Bit by bit, we had planned it, I and she; and, as I dreamed of it as it would be in print, my brain was fired with exultation, and I defied my soul and swore that the Book, for which I had pawned a certain portion of my self-respect, was worth — and triply worth — the price which I had paid. . . . This was in Marian's absence. . . .

"Dear!" said she.

I looked up into her eyes. They were filled with tender, unutterable confidence that thrilled me like physical cold. "Marian," said I, simply, "I shall never come back."

The eyes widened a trifle, but she did not seem to comprehend.

"Have you not wondered," said I, hoarsely, "that I have never kissed you?"

"Yes," she answered. Her voice was quite emotionless.

"And yet — yet ——" I sprang to my feet. "Dear God, how I have longed! Yesterday, only yesterday, as I read to you from the verses I had made to other women, those women that are but pale, colourless shadows by the side of your stanch, vivid beauty — and you listened wonderingly and said the proper things and then lapsed into dainty boredom — *how* I longed to take you in my arms, and to quicken your calm blood a little with my kisses! You knew — you must have known! Did you sleep last night?" I queried, a sharp note in my voice.

"No," she answered, dully.

"Nor I. All night I tossed in sick, fevered dreams of you. I am mad for love of you. And yet once only have I kissed — your hand. Dear God, your hand!" My voice quavered, effectively.

"Yes," said she; "I remember ——"

"I have struggled; and I have conquered this madness — for a madness it is. We can laugh together and be excellent friends; and we can never, never be anything more. Well! we have laughed, have we not, dear, a whole summer through? Now comes the ending. Ah, I have seen you puzzling over my meaning ere this. You never understand me thoroughly; but it is always safe to laugh."

She smiled; and I remember now it was as Mona Lisa smiles.

“For we can laugh together — that is all. We are not mates. You were born to be the wife of a strong man and the mother of his clean-blooded children; and you and your sort will inherit the earth and make the laws for us poor weaklings who dream and scribble and paint. We are not mates. But you have been very kind to me. I thank you and say good-bye; and I pray that I may never see you after to-day.”

There was a sub-tang of veracity in my deprecation of an unasked for artistic temperament; the thing is very often a nuisance, and was just then a barrier which I recognised unquestioningly; and with equal plainness I perceived the pettier motives that now caused me to point it out to Marian. My lips curled half in mockery of myself, as I framed the bitter smile I felt the situation demanded; but I was fired with the part I was playing; and half-belief had crept into my mind that Marian Winwood was created, chiefly, for the purpose which she had already served.

I regarded her, in fine, as through the eyes of future readers of my biography. She would represent an episode in my life, as others do in that of Byron or of Goethe. I pitied her sincerely; and under all my lower nature, held in leash for two months past, chuckled, and grinned, and leaped, at the thought of a holiday.

She rose to her feet. "Good-bye," said she.

"You — you understand, dear?" I queried, tenderly.

"Yes," she answered; "I understand — not what you have just told me, for in that, of course, you have lied. But I understand you, my dear, Ah, believe me, you are not an uncommon type — a type not strong enough to live life healthily, just strong enough to dabble in life, to trifle with emotions, to experiment with other people's lives. Indeed, I am not angry, dear; I am only — sorry; and besides, the summer *has* been very happy."

I returned to Lichfield and wrote "As the Coming of Dawn."

I spent six months in this. My work at first was mere copying of the completed book that had already existed in my brain; but when it was transcribed therefrom, I wrote and rewrote, shifted and polished and adorned until it seemed I would never have done; and indeed I was not very anxious to have done with any labour so delightful.

Particularly did I rejoice in the character for which Marian Winwood had posed. Last summer's note-book here came into play; and now, for once, my heroine was in no need of either shoving or prompting. She did things of her own accord, and I was merely her scribe. . . . I would vain-gloriously protest, just to myself, that the love scenes

in this story were the most exquisite and, with all that, the most genuine love scenes I knew of anywhere. "By God!" I would occasionally say with Thackeray; "*I am* a genius!"

Besides, the story of the book I knew was novel and astutely wrought; and its progress caught at once and teased your interest always, so that having once begun it, people would read to the end, if only to discover "how it all came out." I knew the book, in fine, could hardly fail to please and interest a number of people by reason of its plot alone.

I ought to have been content with this. But I had somehow contracted an insane notion that a novel is the more enjoyable when it is adroitly written. In point of fact, of course, no man who writes with care is ever read with pleasure; you may wade through a page or two perhaps, but presently you are noting how precisely every word is fitted to the thought, and later you are noting nothing else. You are insensibly beguiled, in fine, into a fidgety-footed analysis of every clause, which fatigues in the outcome, and by the tenth page you are yawning.

But I did not realise this then. And so I fashioned my apt phrases, and weighed my synonyms, and echoed this or that vowel very skilfully, I thought, and alliterated my consonants with discretion. In fine, I did not overlook the most meticulous device of the stylist; and I enjoyed it. It was a sort of game; and they taught me at least, those six delight-

ful months, that a man writes admirable prose not at all for the sake of having it read, but for the more sensible reason that he enjoys playing solitaire.

I led a hermit's life that winter; and I enjoyed it. Night, after all, is the one time for writing, particularly when you are inane enough to hanker after the perfect speech, and so misguided as to be the slave of the "right word." You sit alone in a bright comfortable room; the clock ticks companionably; there is no other sound in the world except the constant scratching of your pen, and the occasional far-off puffing of a freight-train coming into Lichfield; there is snow outside, but before your eyes someone, that is not you exactly, arranges and redrills the scrawls which will bring back the sweet and languid summer and remarshal all its pleasant trivialities for anyone that chooses to read through the printed page, although it be in Nova Zembla.

Then you dip into an Unabridged, and change every word that has been written, for a better one, and do it leisurely, rolling in the mouth, as it were, the flavour of every possible synonym, before decision. Then you reread, with a corrective pen in hand the while, and venture upon the whole to agree with Mérimée that it is preferable to write one's own books, since those of others are not, after all, particularly worth reading in comparison.

And by this time the windows are pale blue, like the blue of a dying flame, and you peep out and

see the sparrows moving like rather poorly made mechanical toys about the middle of the deserted street, where there is neither light nor shade. The colour of everything is perfectly discernible, but there is no lustre in the world as yet, though yonder the bloat sun is already visible in the blue and red east, which is like a cosmic bruise; and upon a sudden you find it just possible to stay awake long enough to get safely into bed.

Thus I dandled the child of my brain tenderly for a long while, and arrayed it in beautiful and curious garments, adorning it with far-sought words that had a taste in the mouth, and would one day lend an aroma to the printed page, and rejoiced shamelessly in that which I had done. Then I went out and sought the luxury of a Turkish bath, and in the morning, after a rub-down and an ammonia cocktail, awoke to the fact that there were breakfasts in the world which sent forth savoury odours, and awaited the coming of ravenous humanity.

A few weeks later, I sent for Billy Woods and informed him that Robert Etheridge Townsend was a genius; and waved certain typewritten pages to demonstrate the fact. I added, as an afterthought, that the novelist aforementioned was a blackguard.

Subsequently, I read divers portions of "As the Coming of Dawn" aloud, and Mr. Woods sipped Chianti of a rare flavour, and listened.

"Look here!" he said, suddenly; "have you seen 'The Imperial Votaress'?"

I frowned. It is always annoying to be interrupted in the middle of a particularly well-balanced sentence. "Don't know the lady," said I.

"She is advertised on half the posters in town," said Billy. "And it is the book of the year. And it is your book."

At this point I laid down my manuscript. "I *beg* your pardon?" said I.

"Your book," Billy repeated, firmly; "and scarcely a hair's difference between them, except in the names."

"H'm!" I observed, in a careful voice. "Who wrote it?"

"Some female woman out in Indiana," said Mr. Woods. "She's a George Something-or-other when she publishes, of course, like all those authorines when they want to say about mankind at large what less gifted women only dare to say about their sisters-in-law. I saw her real name somewhere though, and I distinctly remember it began with an S — Why, to be sure! it's Marian Winwood."

"Amaimon sounds well," I observed; "Lucifer, well; Barbason, well; yet they are devils' additions, the names of fiends: but — Marian Winwood!"

"Dear me!" he remonstrated. "Why, she wrote 'A Bright Particular Star,' you know, and 'The Acolytes,' and lots of others."

The author of "As the Coming of Dawn" swallowed a whole glass of Chianti at a gulp.

"Of course," I said, slowly, "I cannot, in my rather peculiar position, run the risk of being charged with plagiarism."

Thereupon I threw the manuscript into the open fire, which my love of the picturesque rendered necessary, even in May.

"Oh, look here!" Billy cried, and caught up the papers. "It's infernally good, you know! Can't you — can't you fix it — and — er — change it a bit?"

I took the manuscript and replaced it firmly among the embers. "As you justly observe," said I, "it is infernally good. It is probably a deal better than anything else I shall ever write."

"Why, then ——" said Billy.

"Why, then," said I, "the only thing that remains to do is to read 'The Imperial Votaress.'"

And I read it with an augmenting irritation. Here was my great and comely idea transmuted into a rather clever melodrama, and set forth anyhow, in a hit or miss style that fairly made me squirm. I would cheerfully have strangled Marian Winwood just then, and not upon the count of larceny, but of butchery.

"And to cap it all, she has assigned her hero every pretty speech I ever made to her! I honestly believe the rogue took shorthand jottings on her cuffs.

There is a land where lovers may meet face to face, and heart to heart, and mouth to mouth — why, that's the note I wrote her on the day she was n't feeling well!"

Presently, however, I began to laugh, and presently sitting there alone, I began to applaud as if I were witnessing a play that took my fancy.

"Oh, the adorable jade!" I said; and then: "*George Dandin, tu l'as voulu.*"

Naturally I put the entire affair into a short story. And — though even to myself it seems incredible — Miss Winwood wrote me a very indignant letter within three days of the tale's appearance.

CHAPTER XIX

HE SPENDS AN AFTERNOON IN ARDEN

I HAD vaguely intended to marry Rosalind Jemmett so soon as I had completed "As the Coming of Dawn"; but in the fervour of writing that unfortunate volume, I had at first put off a little, and then a little longer, the answering of her last letter, because I was interested just then in writing well and not particularly interested in anything else; and I had finally, to do me justice, forgotten the young lady's existence.

Now, however, my thoughts harked back to her undeniable comeliness and, above all, to her two millions; and I found, upon inquiry, that Rosalind had spent all of May and a good half of April in Lichfield, in the same town with myself, and was now reputed to be engaged to Alfred Chaytor — an estimable person, but more popularly known as "Sissy" Chaytor.

And the rumour gave an additional whet to my intentions. So I called upon the girl, and she, to my chagrin, received me with the air of having danced with me some five or six times overnight; and our conversation was at first trivial and, on her

part, dishearteningly cordial; and, in fine, she completely baffled me by not appearing to expect any least explanation of my discourteous neglect. This, look you, when I had been at pains to prepare a perfectly convincing one.

It must be conceded I completely lost my temper; and shortly afterward neither of us was speaking with excessive forethought; and either of us languidly advanced a variety of observations which were more dexterous than truthful. But I followed her to the Moncrieffs that spring, in spite of this rebuff, being both attracted by her person and her money, and insufferably provoked by her unshakable assumptions of my friendship and of nothing more.

It was perhaps a week later she told me: "This, beyond any reasonable doubt, is the Forest of Arden."

"But where Rosalind is is always Arden," I said, politely. Yet I made a mental reservation as to a glimpse of the golf-links, which this particular nook of the forest afforded, and of a red-headed caddie in search of a lost ball.

But beyond these things the sun was dying out in a riot of colour, and its level rays fell kindly upon the gaunt pines that were thick about us two, converting them into endless aisles of dusty, palpitating gold.

There was a primæval peace about; only an evening

wind stirred lazily above, and the leaves whispered drowsily to one another over the waters of what my companion said was a "brawling loch," though I had previously heard it reviled as a particularly treacherous and vexatious hazard. Altogether, I had little doubt that we had reached, in any event, the outskirts of Arden.

"And now," quoth she, seating herself on a fallen log, "what would you do if I were your very, very Rosalind?"

"Don't!" I cried, in horror. "It would n't be proper! For as a decent self-respecting heroine, you would owe it to Orlando not to listen."

"H'mph!" said Rosalind. The exclamation does not look impressive, it may be, but it certainly placed Orlando in his proper niche.

"Oh, well," said I, and stretched myself at her feet, full length — which is supposed to be a picturesque attitude — "why quarrel over a name? It ought to be Gamelyn, anyhow; and, moreover, by the kindness of fate, Orlando is golfing."

Rosalind frowned, as dubiously.

"But golf is a *very* ancient game," I reassured her. Then I bit a pine-needle in two and sighed. "Foolish fellow, when he might be ——"

"Admiring the beauties of nature," she suggested.

Just then an impudent breeze lifted a tendril of honey-coloured hair lightly and tossed it over a low, white brow — and Rosalind's hair has a curious

coppery glow at the roots, a nameless colour that I have never observed anywhere else.

"Yes," said I; "of nature."

"Then," queried she, after a pause, "who are you? And what do you in this forest?"

"You see," I explained, "there were conceivably other men in Arden ——"

"I suppose so," she sighed, with exemplary resignation.

"For you were," I reminded her, "universally admired at your uncle's court — and equally so in the forest. And while Alfred — or, strictly speaking, Gamelyn, or, if you prefer it, Orlando — is the great love of your life, *still* ——"

"Men are *so* foolish!" said Rosalind, irrelevantly.

"—— it did not prevent you ——"

"Me!" cried she, indignant.

"You had such a tender heart," I suggested, "and suffering was abhorrent to your gentle nature."

"I don't like cynicism, sir," said she; "and inasmuch as tobacco is not yet discovered ——"

"It is clearly impossible that I am smoking," I finished; "quite true."

"I don't like cheap wit, either," said Rosalind. "You," she went on, with no apparent connection, "are a forester, with a good cross-bow and an unrequited attachment — say, for me. You groan and hang verses and things about on the trees."

"But I don't write verses — any longer," I

amended. "Still how would this do — for an oak, say —

"I found a lovely centre-piece
Upon the supper-table,
But when I looked at it again
I saw I was n't able,
And so I took my mother home
And locked her in the stable."

She considered that the plot of this epic was not sufficiently inevitable. It had n't, she lamented, a quite logical ending; and the plot of it, in fine, was not, somehow, convincing.

"Well, in any event," I optimistically reflected, "I am a nickel in. If your dicta had emanated from a person in Peoria or Seattle, who had n't read the production, they would have sounded exactly the same, and the clipping-bureau would have charged me five cents. Maybe I *can't* write verses, then. But I 'm quite sure I can groan." And I did so.

"It sounds rather like a fog-horn," said Rosalind, still in the critic's vein; "but I suppose it is the proper thing. Now," she continued, and quite visibly brightening, "you can pretend to have an unrequited attachment for me."

"But I can't ——" I decisively said.

"Can't?" she echoed. It has been mentioned previously that Rosalind is pretty. She was especially so just now, in pouting. And therefore, "— pretend," I added.

She preserved a discreet silence.

"Nor," I continued, with firmness, "am I a shambling, nameless, unshaven denizen of Arden, who has n't anything to do except to carry a spear and fall over it occasionally. I will no longer conceal the secret of my identity. I am Jaques."

"You can't be Jaques," she dissented; "you are too stout."

"I am well-built," I admitted, modestly; "as in an older case, sighing and grief have blown me up like a bladder; yet proper pride, if nothing else, demands that my name should appear on the programme."

"But would Jaques be the sort of person who 'd —?"

"Who would n't be?" I asked, with an appropriate ardour. "No, depend upon it Jaques was not any more impervious to temptation than the rest of us; and, indeed, in the French version, as you will find, he eventually married Celia."

"Minx!" said she; and it seemed to me quite possible that she referred to Celia Reindan, and my heart glowed.

"And how," queried Rosalind, presently, "came you to the Forest of Arden, good Jaques?"

I groaned once more. "It was a girl," I darkly said.

"Of course," assented Rosalind, beaming as to the eyes. Then she went on, and more sympathetically: "Now, Jaques, you can tell me the whole story."

"Is it necessary?" I asked, and with meaning.

"Surely," said she, with sudden interest in the structure of pine-cones; "since for a long while I have wanted to know all about Jaques. You see Mr. Shakespeare is a bit hazy about him."

"So!" I thought triumphantly.

And aloud, "It is an old story," I warned her, "perhaps the oldest of all old stories. It is the story of a man and a girl. It began with a chance meeting and developed into a packet of old letters, which is the usual ending of this story."

Rosalind's brows protested mutely.

"Sometimes," I conceded, "it culminates in matrimony: but the ending is not necessarily tragic."

I dodged exactly in time; and the pine-cone splashed noisily into the hazard.

"It happened," I continued, "that, on account of the man's health, they were separated for a whole year's time before — before things had progressed to any extent. When they did progress, it was largely by letters. That is why this story ended in such a large package."

"Letters," Rosalind confided, to one of the pines, "are so unsatisfactory. They mean so little."

"To the man," I said, firmly, "they meant a great deal. They brought him everything that he most wished for — comprehension, sympathy, and, at last, comfort and strength when they were sore needed. So the man, who was at first but half in

earnest, announced to himself that he had made a discovery. 'I have found,' said he, 'the great white love which poets have dreamed of. I love this woman greatly, and she, I think, loves me. God has made us for each other, and by the aid of her love I will be pure and clean and worthy of even her.' You have doubtless discovered by this stage in my narrative," I added, as in parenthesis, "that the man was a fool."

"Don't!" said Rosalind.

"Oh, he discovered it himself in due time — but not until after he had written a book about her. 'As the Coming of Dawn' the title was to have been. It was — oh, just about her. It tried to tell how greatly he loved her. It tried — well, it failed of course, because it is n't within the power of any writer to express what the man felt for that girl. Why, his love was so great — to him, poor fool! — that it made him at times forget the girl herself, apparently. He did n't want to write her trivial letters. He just wanted to write that great book in her honour, which would *make* her understand, even against her will, and then to die, if need be, as Geoffrey Rudel did. For that was the one thing which counted — to *make* her understand ——" I paused, and anyone could see that I was greatly moved. In fact, I was believing every word of it by this.

"Oh, but who wants a man to *die* for her?" wailed Rosalind.

"It is quite true that one infinitely prefers simply

to see him make a fool of himself. So the man discovered when he came again to bring his foolish book to her — the book that was to make her understand. And so he burned it — in a certain June. For the girl had just liked him, and had been amused by him. So she had added him to her collection of men — quite a large one, by the way — and was, I believe, a little proud of him. It was, she said, rather a rare variety, and much prized by collectors.”

“And how was *she* to know?” said Rosalind; and then, remorsefully: “Was it a very horrid girl?”

“It was not exactly repulsive,” said I, as dreamily, and looking up into the sky.

There was a pause. Then someone in the distance — a forester, probably — called “Fore!” and Rosalind awoke from her reverie.

“Then—?” said she.

“Then came the customary Orlando — oh, well! Alfred, if you like. The name is n’t altogether inappropriate, for he does encounter existence with much the same abandon which I have previously noticed in a muffin. For the rest, he was a nicely washed fellow, with a sufficiency of the mediæval equivalents for bonds and motor-carriages and country-places. Oh, yes! I forgot to say that the man was poor — also that the girl had a great deal of common sense and no less than three long-headed aunts. And so the girl talked to the man in a com-

mon-sense fashion — and after that she was never at home.”

“Never?” said Rosalind.

“Only that time they talked about the weather,” said I. “So the man fell out of bed just about then, and woke up and came to his sober senses.”

“He did it very easily,” said Rosalind, almost as in resentment.

“The novelty of the process attracted him,” I pleaded. “So he said — in a perfectly sensible way — that he had known all along that it was only a dainty game they were playing — a game in which there were no stakes. That was a lie. He had put his whole soul into the game, playing as he knew for his life’s happiness; and the verses, had they been worthy of the love which caused them to be written, would have been among the great songs of the world. But while the man knew at last that he had been a fool, he was yet swayed by a man-like reluctance against admitting it. So he laughed — and lied — and broke away, hurt, but still laughing.”

“You had n’t mentioned any verses before,” said Rosalind.

“I told you he was a fool,” said I. “And, after all, that is the entire story.”

Then I spent several minutes in wondering what would happen next; during this time I lost none of my interest in the sky. I believed everything;

my emotions would have done credit to a Romeo or an Amadis.

"The first time that the girl was not at home," Rosalind observed, impersonally, "the man had on a tan coat and a brown derby. He put on his gloves as he walked down the street. His shoulders were the most indignant and — and hurt things she had ever seen. Then the girl wrote to him — a strangely sincere letter — and tore it up."

"Historical research," I murmured, "surely affords no warrant for such odd attire among the rural denizens of tranquil Arden."

"You see," continued Rosalind, oblivious to interruption, "I know all about the girl — which is more than you do."

"That," I conceded, "is more than probable."

"When she realised that she was to see the man again — *Did* you ever feel as if something had lifted you suddenly hundreds of feet above rainy days and cold mutton for luncheon, and the possibility of other girls' wearing black evening dresses, when you wanted yours to be the only one in the room? Well, that's the way she felt at first, when she read his note. At first, she realised nothing beyond the fact that he was nearing her, and that she would presently see him. She did n't even plan what she would wear, or what she would say to him. In an indefinite way, she was happier than she had ever been before — or has been since — until the doubts

and fears and knowledge that give children and fools a wide berth came to her — and *then* she saw it all against her will, and thought it all out, and came to a conclusion.”

I sat up. There was really nothing of interest occurring overhead.

“They had played at loving — lightly, it is true, but they had gone so far that they could not go backward — only forward, or not at all. She had known all along that the man was but half in earnest — believe me, a girl always knows that, even though she may not admit it to herself — and she had known that a love affair meant to him material for a sonnet or so, and a well-turned letter or two, and nothing more. For he was of the kind of man that never quite grows up. He was coming to her, pleased, interested, and a little eager — in love with the idea of loving her — willing to meet her half-way, and very willing to follow her the rest of the way — if she could draw him. And *what* was she to do? Could she accept his gracefully insulting semblance of a love she knew he did not feel? Could they see each other a dozen times, swearing not to mention the possibility of loving — so that she might have a chance to reimpress him with her blondined hair — it *is* touched up, you know — and small talk? And — and *besides* ——”

“It is the duty of every young woman to consider what she owes to her family,” said I, as absent-

minedly. Rosalind Jemmett's family consists of three aunts, and the chief of these is Aunt Marcia. Aunt Marcia is a portly, acidulous and discomposing person, with eyes like shoe-buttons and a Savonarolan nose. She is also a well-advertised philanthropist, speaks neatly from the platform, and has wide experience as a patroness, and extreme views as to ineligibles.

Rosalind flushed somewhat. "And so," said she, "she exercised her common sense, and was nervous, and said foolish things about new plays, and the probability of rain — to keep from saying still more foolish things about herself; and refused to talk personalities; and let him go, with the knowledge that he would not come back. Then she went to her room, and had a good cry. Now," she added, after a pause, "you understand."

"I do not," I said, very firmly, "understand a lot of things."

"Yet a woman would," she murmured.

This being a statement I was not prepared to contest, I waved it aside. "And so," said I, "they laughed; and agreed it was a boy-and-girl affair; and were friends."

"It was the best thing ——" said she.

"Yes," I assented — "for Orlando."

"— and it was the most sensible thing."

"Oh, eminently!"

This seemed to exhaust the subject, and I lay down once more among the pine-needles.

"And that," said Rosalind, "was the reason Jaques came to Arden?"

"Yes," said I.

"And found it ——?"

"Shall we say — Hades?"

"Oh!" she murmured, scandalised.

"It happened," I continued, "that he was cursed with a good memory. And the zest was gone from his little successes and failures, now there was no one to share them; and nothing seemed to matter very much. Oh, he really *was* of the sort of man that never quite grows up! And it was dreary to live among memories of the past, and his life was somewhat vexed with disapproval of his own folly and hunger for a woman who was out of his reach."

"And Rosalind — I mean the girl ——?"

"She married Orlando — or Gamelyn, or Alfred, or Athelstane, or Ethelred, or somebody — and, whoever it was, they lived happily ever afterward," I said, morosely.

Rosalind pondered over this *dénouement* for a moment.

"Do you know," said she, "I think ——"

"It's a rather dangerous practice," I warned her.

Rosalind sighed, wearily; but about this time a dimple occurred in her cheek.

“— that Rosalind must have thought the play very badly named.”

“‘As You Like It’?” I queried, obtusely.

“Yes — since it was n’t — for her.”

It is unwholesome to lie on the ground after sunset.

“I had rather a scene with Alfred yesterday morning. He said you drank, and gambled, and were always running after — people, and were n’t in fine, a desirable person for me to know. He insinuated, in fact, that you were a villain of the very deepest and non-crooking dye. He told me of instances. His performance would have done credit to Ananias. I was *mad*! So I gave him his old ring back, and told him things I can’t tell *you* — no, not just yet, dear. He is rather like a muffin, is n’t he?” she said, with the lightest possible little laugh — “particularly like one that is n’t quite done.”

“Oh, Rosalind,” I babbled, “I mean to prove that you were right. And I *will* prove it, too!” And indeed I meant all that I said — just then.

And Rosalind said: “Oh, Jaques, Jaques! what a child you are!”

CHAPTER XX

HE PLAYS THE IMPROVIDENT FOOL

NOW was I come near to the summit of my desires, and advantageously betrothed to a girl with whom I was, in any event, almost in love; but I presently ascertained, to my dismay, that Rosalind was thoroughly in love with me, and always in the back of my mind this knowledge worried me.

Imprimis, she persisted in calling me Jaques, which was uncomfortably reminiscent of that time wherein I was called Jack. Yet my objection to this silly nickname was unfortunately a mischancy matter to explain, so that perforce I was compelled to put up with a trivial and unpremeditated, but for all that a daily, annoyance; and I fretted under it.

Item, she insisted on presenting me with all sorts of expensive knick-knacks, and being childishly grieved when I remonstrated.

"But I have the money," Rosalind would say, "and you haven't. So why shouldn't I? And besides, it's really only selfishness on my part, because I like doing things for you, and *if* you liked doing things for me, Jaques, you'd understand."

So I would eventually have to swear that I did like "doing things" for her; and that — somehow — in consequence she had a perfect right to give me anything she wanted to.

And this, too, fretted me.

And meanwhile I was seeing a deal of the Marquise d'Arlanges. She was Stella's only sister, as you may remember, and was that autumn paying a perfunctory visit to her parents — the second since her marriage.

I shall not expatiate, however, concerning Madame la Marquise. You have doubtless heard of her, and in any event, practically every Sunday's issue of the cheaper New York papers contains a picture of her — very shrewd and hawk-like, even in that smudgy reproduction — and a column or so concerning her last achievement. For Lizzie has not, as yet, found a time wherein to be idle; she has been busied since the hour of her birth in acquiring, first, plain publicity and then social power, and every other amenity of life in turn. I had not the least doubt that she will eventually die an empress.

She was at this time still upon the preferable side of thirty, and possessed a decided *penchant* for gossip, cigarettes, and admiration. About two years previously she had arrived at Monaco with an apologetic mother, several letters of introduction, and a Scotch terrier; and had established herself at the

Hotel de la Paix; and before the end of a month Miss Ingersoll had reached a decision, had purchased her Marquis, much as she would have done any other trifle that took her fancy, and had shipped her mother and Stella's back to America. Lizzie retained the terrier, however, as she was genuinely attached to it.

Her marriage had been happy, and she found her husband on further acquaintance, as she told me, a mild-mannered and eminently suitable person, who was unaccountably addicted to playing dominoes, and spent a great deal of money, and dined with her occasionally. In a sentence, the marquise was handsome, "had a tongue in her head," and, to utilise yet another ancient phrase, was as hard as nails.

And yet there was a family resemblance. Indeed, in voice and feature she was strangely like an older Stella; and always I was cheating myself into a half-belief that this woman I was talking with was Stella; and Lizzie would at least enable me to forget, for a whole half-hour sometimes, that Stella was dead.

"I must thank you," I said, one afternoon, when I arose to go, "for a most pleasant dream of — what we'll call the Heart's Desire. I suppose I have been rather stupid, Lizzie; and I apologise for it; but people are never exceedingly hilarious in dreams, you know."

She said, very gently: "I understand. For I loved Stella too. And that is why the room is never

really lighted when you come. Oh, you stupid man, how could I have *helped* knowing?" a surprised marquise demanded. And I was really astonished, for she is not by ordinary the sort of woman who consents to be a makeshift.

I said as much. "And it *has* been a comfort, Lizzie, because she does n't come as often now, for some reason ——"

"What — what do you mean?" the marquise said, in a low voice.

The room was very dark, lit only by the steady, comfortable glow of a soft-coal fire. For it was a little after sunset, and outside carriages were already rumbling down Regis Avenue, and people were returning from the afternoon drive. I could not see anything distinctly, excepting my own hands, which were like gold in the firelight; and so I told her all about

The Indulgences of Ole-Luk-Oie

"She came, that first time, over the crest of a tiny upland that lay in some great forest — Brocheliaunde, I think. I knew it must be autumn, for the grass was brown and every leaf upon the trees was brown. And she too was all in brown, and her big hat, too, was of brown felt, and about it curled a long ostrich feather dyed brown; and my first thought, as I now remember, was how in the dickens could any mediæval lady have come by such a garb, for I knew, somehow, that this was a woman of the Middle Ages.

“Only her features were those of Stella, and the eyes of this woman were filled with an unutterable happiness and fear, as she came toward me — just as the haunting eyes of Stella were upon that night wherein I had, more lately, babbled nonsense to the moon.

“‘Oh, I have wanted you, — I have wanted you!’ she said; and afterward, unarithmetically dimpling, just as she used to do, you may remember: ‘*Depart-dieux*, messire! have you then forgotten that upon this forenoon we hunt the great boar?’

“‘Stella!’ I said, ‘O dear, dear Stella! what does it mean?’

“‘You silly! it means, of course, that Ole-Luk-Oie is kind, and has put us both into the glaze of the mustard-jar — only I wonder which one we have gotten into?’ Stella said. ‘*Don’t* you remember them, dear — the blue mustard-jar and the red one your Mammy had that summer at the Green Chalybeate, with men on them hunting a boar?’

“‘They stood on either corner of the mantelpiece,’ I said; ‘and in the blue one she kept matches, and in the other ——’

“‘She kept buttons in it,’ said Stella — ‘big, shiny white buttons, with four holes in them, that had come off your underclothes, and were to be sewed on again. One day you swallowed one of ’em, I remember, because you *would* keep it in your mouth while you swung in the hammock. And you thought it would

surely kill you, so you knelt down in the dry leaves and prayed God He would n't let it kill you.'

"'But *you* were n't there,' I protested; 'nobody was there. So nobody ever knew anything about it, and especially you ——' For I had just remembered that Stella was dead, only I knew it was against some rule to mention it.

"'Well, at any rate, I'm *here*,' said Stella, 'and Ole-Luk-Oie is kind; and we had better go and hunt the great boar at once, I suppose, since that is what the people on the mustard-jars always do.'

"'But how did you come hither, O my dear ——?'

"'Why, through your wanting me so much,' she said. 'How else?' And I understood. . . .

"So we went and slew the great boar. I slew it personally, with a long spear, and with Stella clasping her hands in the background. Only there was a nicked place in the mustard-jar, where I had dropped it on the hearth some fifteen years ago, and my horse kept stumbling over this crevice, so that I knew it was the red jar and the buttons we were riding around. And afterward I made a song in honour of Stella — a song so perfect that I presently awoke, weeping with joy that I had made a song so beautiful, and with the knowledge I could not now recollect a single word of it; and I knew that I could never make again a song one-half so beautiful. . . .

"Since then Ole-Luk-Oie — or someone — has been very kind at times. He always lets me into

pictures, though, never into mouse-holes and hen-houses and silly places like that, as he did little Hjalmar. I don't know why. . . .

"Once it was into the picture on the cover of that unvarnished pamphlet the manager of the Green Chalybeate sends in the spring to everybody who has once been there. It was very odd.

"It is a picture of the Royal Hotel, you may remember, as it used to be a good ten years ago. Both fountains were playing in the sunlight — they were torn down when I was at college, and I had almost forgotten their existence; and elegant and languid ladies were riding by, in victorias, and all these ladies wore those preposterously big sleeves they used to wear then; and men in little visored caps were riding by, too, on tall old-fashioned bicycles — just as they do in the picture. Even the silk-hatted gentleman in the corner, pointing out the beauties of the building with his cane, was there.

"And Stella and I walked past the margin of the picture, and so on down the boardwalk to the other hotel to look for our parents. And we agreed not to tell anyone that we had ever grown up, but just to let it be a secret between us two; and we were to stay in the picture forever, and grow up all over again, only we would arrange everything quite differently. And Stella was never to go driving on the twenty-eighth of April, so

that we would be quite safe, and live together for a long, long while.

"She would n't promise, though, not to consent when Peter Blagden asked to be introduced. She just giggled and shook her sunny head. She had n't any hat on. She was wearing the blue-and-white sailor-suit, of course. . . ."

But a servant was lighting up the front-hall, and the glare of it came through the open door, and the room was just like any other room again.

"And *you* are Robert Townsend!" the marquise observed. "The one my mother does n't approve of as a visitor!"

Madame d'Arlanges said, with a certain lack of sequence: "And yet you 're planning to do just what Peter Blagden did. He liked Stella, she amused him, and he thought her money would come in very handy; and so he, somehow, contrived to marry her in the end, because she was just a child, and *you* were a child, and he was n't. And he *always* lied to her about — about those business-trips, even from the very first. I knew, because I 'm not a sentimental person. But, oh, how *can* you stoop to mimic Peter Blagden! For you 're doing just what he did; and, as always, it is almost irresistible to have the chance of reforming a man who has notoriously been 'talked about.' Yet it is just to-day I see that for Stella's sake you won't lie as steadfastly to Rosa-

lind as Peter did to Stella. It is none of my business of course; oh, I don't meddle; I merely prophesy that you won't."

But those lights had made an astonishing difference. And so, "But why not?" said I. "It is the immemorial method of dealing with savages; and surely women can never expect to become quite civilised so long as chivalry demands a man say to a woman only what he believes she wants to hear? Ah, no, my dear Lizzie; when a man tries to get into a woman's favour, custom demands that he palliate the invasion with flatteries and veiled truths — or, more explicitly, with lies — just as any sensible explorer must come prepared to leave a trail of looking-glasses and valueless bright beads among the original owners of any unknown country. For he does n't know what obstacles he may encounter, and he has been taught, from infancy, to regard any woman as a baleful and unfathomable mystery ——"

"She is never so — heaven help her! — if the man be sufficiently worthless."

"I rejoice that we are so thoroughly at one. For upon my word, I believe this widespread belief of feminine inscrutability is the result of a conspiracy on the part of the weaker sex; and that every mother is somehow pledged to inculcate this belief into the immature masculine mind. Apparently the practice originated in the Middle Ages, for it never seemed to occur to anybody that a woman was particularly

complex before then. Though, to be sure, Catullus now ——”

“This is not a time for pedantry. I don’t in the least care what Catullus or anyone else observed concerning anything ——”

“But I had not aspired, my dear Lizzie, to be even remotely pedantic. I was simply about to remark that Catullus, or Ariosto, or Coventry Patmore, or King Juba, or Posidonius, or Sir John Vanbrugh, or perhaps, Agathocles of Chios, or else Simonides the Younger, has conceded somewhere, that women are, in certain respects, dissimilar, as it were, to men.”

“I am merely urging you not to marry this silly little Rosalind, for the excellent reason that you *did* love my darling Stella even more than I, and that Rosalind is in love with you.”

“Do you really think so?” said I. “Why, then, actuated by the very finest considerations of decency and prudence and generosity, I shall, of course, espouse her the very next November that ever is.”

The marquise retorted: “No — because you are at bottom too fond of Rosalind Jemmett; and, besides, it is n’t really a question of your feeling toward *her*.”

I declared that I detested paradox. Then I went home to supper.

But, for all this, I meditated for a long while upon what Lizzie had said. It was true that I was really

fond of Rosalind Jemmett; concerning myself I had no illusions; and, to my credit, I faced what I considered the real issue, squarely.

We were in Aunt Marcia's parlour. Rosalind was an orphan, and so lived in turn with her three aunts. She said the other two were less unendurable than Aunt Marcia, and I believed her. I consider, to begin with, that a person is not civilised who thumps upon the floor upstairs with a poker, simply because it happens to be eleven o'clock; and moreover, Aunt Marcia's parlour — oh, it really was a "parlour" — was entirely too like the first night of a charity bazaar, when nothing has been sold.

The room was not a particularly large one; but it contained exactly three hundred and seven articles of bijouterie, not estimating the china pug-dog upon the hearth. I know, for I counted them.

Besides, there were twenty-eight pictures upon the walls — one in oils of the late Mr. Dumby (for Aunt Marcia was really Mrs. Clement Dumby), painted, to all appearances, immediately after the misguided gentleman who married Aunt Marcia had been drowned, and before he had been wiped dry — and for the rest, engravings framed in gilt and red-plush of "Sanctuary," "Le Hamac," "Martyre Chrétienne," "The Burial of Latané," and so on.

Then upon an easel there was a beautiful painting of a peacock, perched on an urn, against a gilded background; but this deceived your expectations,

for it was framed in blue plush. Also there were "gift-books" on the centre table, and an album, with a metallic title nailed to it, which contained calumnious portraits of the entire family, separately enthroned upon the same imitation rock, in all the pride of a remote, full-legged and starchy youth, and a little painfully "coloured by hand."

"Do you know why I want to marry you?" I demanded of Rosalind, in such surroundings, apropos of a Mrs. Vokins who had taken a house in Lichfield for the winter, and had been at school with Aunt Marcia, and was "dying to meet me."

She answered, though in some surprise: "Why, because you have the good taste to be heels over head in love with me, of course."

I took possession of her hands. "If there is anything certain in this world of uncertainties, it is that I am not the least bit in love with you. Yet, only yesterday — do you remember, dear?"

She answered, "I remember."

"But I cannot, for the life of me, define what happened yesterday. I merely recall that we were joking, as we always do when together, and that on a wager I loosened your hair. Then as it tumbled in great honey-coloured waves about you, you were silent suddenly, and there came into your eyes a look I had never seen before. And even *now* I cannot define what happened, Rosalind! I only know I caught your face between my hands, and for a

moment held it so, with tense fingers that have not yet forgotten the feel of your soft, thick hair — and that for a breathing space your eyes looked straight into mine. Something changed in me then, my lady. Something changed in you, too, I think.”

Then Rosalind said, “Don’t Jaques —!” She was horribly embarrassed.

“For I knew you willed me to possess you, and that possession would seem as trivial as a fiddle in a temple . . . Yet, too, there was a lustful beast, somewhere inside of me, which nudged me to kiss you, say! But nothing happened. I did not even kiss you, my beautiful and wealthy Rosalind.”

“Don’t speak of the money,” she wailed. “Why, you *can’t* believe I think you mercenary!”

“I would estimate your intellect far more cheaply, my charming Rosalind, if you did otherwise; for, in perfect frankness, I am. I wanted to settle myself, you conceive, and as an accomplice you were very eligible. I now comprehend it is beyond the range of rationality, dear stranger, that we should ever marry each other; and we must not. We must not, you comprehend, since though we lived together till the end of life, we would even then die utter strangers. For you, dear clean-souled girl that you are, were born, I think, that you might be the wife of a strong man and the mother of his sturdy children. The world was made for you and for your offspring; and in time your children will occupy this world

confessedly, and make the laws for us irrelevant folk that scribble and paint and design useless and beautiful things, and thus muddle away our precious lives. No, you may not wisely mate with us, for you are a shade too terribly at ease in the universe, you sensible people."

"But I love Art," said Rosalind, bewildered.

"Yes — but by the tiniest syllable a thought too volubly, my dear. You are the sort that quotes the Rubaiyat. Whereas I — was it yesterday or the day before you told me, with a wise pucker of your beautiful low, white brow, that I had absolutely no sense of the responsibilities of life? And I really have n't, dear stranger, as you appraise them; and, indeed, I fear we must postpone our agreement upon any possible subject, until the coming of the Coquecigrues. We see the world differently, you and I — and for that same reason I cannot but adore you, Rosalind. For with you I can always speak my true thought and know that you will never for a moment suspect it to be anything but irony. Ah, yes, we can laugh and joke together, and be thorough friends, but if there is anything certain in this world of uncertainties, it is that I am not, and cannot be, in love with you. And yet — I wonder now?" said I, and I rose to my feet and paced Aunt Marcia's parlour.

"You wonder? Don't you understand even now?" the girl said, shyly. "I am not as clever as you, of course; I have known that for a long while,

Jaques; and to-night in particular I don't quite follow you, my dear, but I love you, and — why, there is *nothing* I could deny you!"

"Then give me back my freedom," said I, upon a sudden. "For, look you, Rosalind, marriage is proverbially a slippery business. Always there are a variety of excellent reasons for perpetrating matrimony; but the rub of it is that not any one of them insures you against to-morrow. Love, for example, we have all heard of; but I have known fine fellows to fling away their chances in life, after the most approved romantic fashion, on account of a pretty stenographer, and to beat her within the twelvemonth. Besides, no rational person would willingly entrust the fan, much less the happiness, of the woman he loved to any creature half so frail as he knows himself to be."

I paused to inspect the china pug-dog which squatted on the pink-tiled hearth and glared inanely at the huge brass coal-box just opposite. Then I turned from these two abominations and faced her with a bantering flirt of my head.

"And put it that I marry some entrancing slip of girlhood, what am I to say when, five years later, I discover myself irrevocably chained to a fat and dowdy matron? I married no such person, I have indeed sworn eternal fidelity to an entirely different person; and this unsolicited usurper of my hearth is nothing whatever to me, unless perhaps the

object of my entire abhorrence. Yet am I none the less compelled to justify the ensuing action before an irrational audience, which faces common logic in very much the attitude of Augustine's famed adder! Decidedly I think that, on the whole, I would prefer my freedom."

It was as though I had struck her. She sat as frozen.

"There is — as always, Jaques — another woman, then?"

"Why, in a fashion, yes. Why — yes!" I said; "and also, in a large part, because I am really fond of you, Rosalind."

She slipped that paltry ring the jeweller had charged to me from her finger. "Good-bye!" she said, and her voice broke. "Oh, and I had thought ——! Well, as it is, I pay for the luxury of thinking, just as you forewarned me, don't I, Jaques? And you won't forget the hall-light? Aunt Marcia, you know — but how glad *she* will be! I — I feel rather near to Aunt Marcia to-night," said Rosalind.

She left Lichfield the next day but one, and spent the following winter with the aunt who lived in Brooklyn. She was Rosalind Gelwix the next time I saw her.

And Aunt Marcia, whose taste is upon a par with her physical attractions, inserted a paragraph in the "Social Items" of the *Lichfield Courier-Herald* to

announce the breaking-off of the engagement. And for a long while afterward was Suetonius my favourite author, for he alone appeared, at times, just to suggest some glimmering of what Aunt Marcia merited. And since Tiberius, say, had never had Aunt Marcia to deal with, I condoningly perused his rose-water treatment of malefactors, and reflected that if he had known Aunt Marcia, this man might have, quite possibly, invented something really equitable.

And I remembered that the last request my mother made of me was to keep out of the newspapers—"except, of course, the social items."

CHAPTER XXI

HE DINES OUT AND IS IMPEDED BY AN ANCIENT SUPERSTITION

WITHIN the week I had repented of what I termed my idiotic quixotism, and for precisely nine days after that I cursed my folly with emphasis. Then, without warning, I realised on a certain evening that in breaking off my engagement to Rosalind Jemmett I had acted with profound wisdom, and unfolded my napkin, and began:

“Do you know I did n’t catch your name — not even this time?”

She took a liberal supply of lemon juice. “How delightful!” she murmured, “for I heard yours quite distinctly, and these oysters are delicious.”

I noted with approval that her gown was pink and fluffy; it had also the advantage of displaying shoulders that were incredibly white, and a throat which was little short of marvellous. “I am glad,” I whispered, confidentially, “that you are still wearing that faint vein about your left temple; I approve of it.” She raised her eyebrows slightly and selected a biscuit. “You see,” said I, “I was horribly late. And when Kittie Provis said, ‘Allow

me,' and I saw — well, I did n't care," I concluded, lucidly.

"It really is funny," she confided to a spoonful of *consommé à la Julienne*.

"After almost two years!" sighed I, and happily. But I continued, with unutterable reproach, "To go without a word — that very day ——"

"Mamma ——" she began.

I recalled the canary-bird, and the purple shawl. and almost groaned. "I sought wildly," said I; "you were evanished. The *propriétaire* was tearing his hair — no insurance — he knew nothing. So I too tore my hair, only I did it metaphorically; and I said things. There was a row. For he also said things: 'Figure to yourselves, messieurs! I lose the Continental — two ladies come and go, I know not who — I am ruined, desolated, is it not? — and this pig of an American blusters — ah, my new carpets, just down, what horror!' And then, you know, he launched into a quite feeling peroration concerning our notorious custom of tomahawking one another —

"Yes," I coldly concluded into Mrs. Clement Dumby's ear, "we all behaved disgracefully. As you very justly observe, liquor has invariably been the main curse of the South." It was of a piece with Kittie Provis to put me next to Aunt Marcia, I reflected.

And mentally I decided that even though a portion

of my assertions had not actually gone through the formality of occurring, it might very easily have happened, had I remained a while longer in Liege; and there ensued a silent interval and an entrée.

“And so ——?”

“And so I knocked about the world, in various places, hoping against hope that at last ——”

“Your voice carries frightfully.”

I glanced toward Mrs. Clement Dumby, who, as a dining dowager of many years' experience, was, to all appearances, engrossed by the contents of her plate. “My elderly neighbour is as hard of hearing as a telephone-girl,” I announced. She was the exact contrary, which was why I said it quite audibly. “And your neighbour — why, *his* neighbour is Nannie Allsotts. We might as well be on a desert island, Elena ——” And the given name slipped out so carelessly as to appear almost accidental.

“Sir!” said she, with proper indignation; “after so short an acquaintance ——”

“Centuries,” I suggested, meekly.

She frowned — an untrustworthy frown that was tinged with laughter. “One meets so many people! Yes, it is frightfully warm, Colonel Grimshaw; they really ought to open some of the windows.”

“Er — haw — hum! Did n't see you at the Anchesters.”

“No; I am usually lucky enough to be in bed with a sick headache when Mrs. Anchester entertains.

Of two evils one should choose the lesser, you know."

In the manner of divers veterans Colonel Grimshaw evinced his mirth upon a scale more proper to an elephant; and relapsed, with a reassuring air of having done his duty once and for all.

"I never," she suggested, tentatively, "heard any more of your poem about ——?"

"Oh, I finished it; every magazine in the country knows it. It is poor stuff, of course, but then how could I write of Helen when Helen had disappeared?"

The lashes tangled. "I looked her up," confessed their owner, guiltily, "in the encyclopædia. It was very instructive — about sun-myths and bronzes and the growth of the epic, you know, and tree-worship and moon-goddesses. Of course" — there ensued a flush and a certain hiatus in logic, strictly speaking — "of course it is nonsense."

"Nonsense?" My voice sank tenderly. "Is it nonsense, Elena, that for two years I have remembered the woman whose soft body I held, if only for a moment, in my arms? and nonsense that I have fought all this time against — against the temptations every man has — that I might ask her at last — some day when she at last returned, as always I knew she would — to share a fairly decent life? and nonsense that I have dreamed, waking and sleeping, of a wondrous face I knew in Ilium first, and in old Rome, and later on in France, I think, when the

Valois were kings? Well!" I sighed, after vainly racking my brain for a tenderer fragment of those two-year-old verses, "I suppose it *is* nonsense!"

"The salt, please," quoth she. She flashed that unforgotten broadside at me. "I half believe you need it."

"Why, dear me! of course not!" said I, to Mrs. Dumby; "immorality lost the true *cachet* about the same time that ping-pong did. Nowadays divorces are going out, you know, and *divorcées* are not allowed to. Quite modish women are seen in public with their husbands nowadays."

"H'mph!" said Mrs. Dumby; "I've no doubt that you must find it a most disagreeable fad!"

I ate my portion of duck abstractedly. "Thus to dive into the refuse-heap of last year's slang does n't quite cover the requirements of the case. For I wish — only I hardly dare to ask ——"

"If I were the traditional fairy," meditatively said she, "I could not, of course, refuse the usual three wishes."

"Two," I declared, "would be sufficient."

"First?"

"That you tell me your name."

"I adore orange ices, don't you? And the second?" was her comment.

"Well, then, you're a pig," was mine. "You are simply a nomenclatural Berkshire. And the second is that you let me measure your

finger — oh, any finger will do. Say, the third on the left hand.”

“You really talk to me as if ——” But this non-existent state of affairs proved indescribable, and the unreal condition lapsed into a pout.

“Oh, very possibly!” I conceded, with caution; “since the way in which a man talks to a woman — to *the* woman — depends by ordinary upon the depth ——”

“The depth of his devotion?” she queried, helpfully. “Of course!”

I faced the broadside, without flinching. “No,” said I, critically; “the depth of her dimples.”

“Nonsense!” But, nevertheless, the dimples were, and by a deal, the more conspicuous.

I bent forward; there was a little catch in my voice. Aunt Marcia was listening. I wanted her to listen.

“You must know that I love you,” I said, simply. “I have always loved you, I think, since the moment my eyes first fell upon you in that — other pink thing. Of course, I realise the absurdity of my talking in this way to a woman whose name even I don’t know; but I realise more strongly that I love you. Why, there is not a pulse in my body which is n’t throbbing and tingling and beating contentedly just from pure joy of being with you again, Elena! And, in time, you *will* love me a little, simply because I want you to — is n’t that always a woman’s main reason for caring for a man?”

She considered this, dubious and flushed.

"I will not insist," said I, with a hurried and contented laugh, "that you were formerly an Argive queen, if you don't like. That was a paraphrase of my verses, I confess — but Helen has always been to me the symbol of perfect loveliness, and so it was not unnatural that I should confuse you with her."

"Thank you, sir," said she, demurely.

"I half believe it is true, even now; and if not — well, Helen was acceptable enough in her day, Elena, but I am willing to Italianise, for I have seen you and loved you, and Helen is forgot. It is not exactly the orthodox pace for falling in love," I added, with a boyish candour, "but it is very real to me."

"You — you could n't have fallen in love — really ——" said she, quite unconvincingly.

"It was n't in the least difficult," I protested.

"— and you don't even know my *name* ——"

And I laughed easily. "I know, however, what it is going to be," said I; "and Mrs. 'Enry 'Awkins, as we 'll put it, has found favour in the judgment of connoisseurs. So after dinner — in an hour ——?"

"Oh, very well! since you're an author and insist, I will be ready, in an hour, to decline you, with thanks."

"Rejection not implying any lack of merit," quoth I, and grimly. "This is damnable iteration; but I am accustomed to it."

And by this, Mrs. Provis was gathering eyes around the table, and her guests arose, with the usual outburst of conversation, and swishing of dresses, and the not always unpremeditated dropping of handkerchiefs and fans. Mrs. Clement Dumbly bore down upon us now, a determined and quite generously proportioned figure in her notorious black silk.

"Really," said she, aggressively, "I never saw two people more engrossed. My dear Mrs. Barry-Smith, you have been so taken up with Mr. Townsend, all during dinner, that I have n't had a chance to welcome you to Lichfield. Your mother and I were at school together, you know. And your husband was *quite* a beau of mine. So I don't feel at *all* as if we were strangers ——"

And thus she bore Elena off, and I knew that within ten minutes Elena would have been warned against me, as "not quite a *desirable* acquaintance, you know, my dear, and it is only my *duty* to tell you that as a young and attractive married woman ——"

"And so," I said in my soul, as the men redistributed themselves, "she is married — married while you were pottering with books and the turn of phrases and immortality and such trifles — oh, you *ass*! And to a man named Barry-Smith — damn him, I wonder whether he's the hungry scut that has n't had his hair cut this month, or the blanc-

mange-bellied one with the mashed-strawberry nose? Yes, I know everybody else. And — and Jimmy Travis is telling a funny story, so *laugh!* People will think you 're grieving over Rosalind. . . . But *why* in heaven's name is n't Jimmy at home this very moment — with a wife and carpet-slippers and a large-sized bottle of paregoric on his mantelpiece — instead of here, grinning like a fool over some blatant indecency? He ought to marry; every young man ought to marry. Oh, you futile, abject, burbling twin-brother of the first patron that procured a reputation for Bedlam! why are n't *you* married — married years ago — with a home of your own, and a victoria for Mrs. Townsend and — and bills from the kindergarten every quarter? Oh, you bartender of verbal cocktails! I believe your worst enemy flung your mind at you in a moment of unbridled hatred."

And I snapped the stem of my glass carefully, and scowled with morose disapproval at the unconscious Mr. Travis, and his now-applauded and very Fescennine jest.

I found her subsequently inspecting a bulky folio with remarkable interest. There was a lamp, with a red shade, that cast a glow over her, such as one sometimes sees reflected from a great fire. The people about us were chattering idiotically, and something inside my throat prevented my breathing properly, and I was very miserable.

"Mrs. Barry-Smith" — thus I began — "if you 've the tiniest scrap of pity in your heart for a presumptuous, blundering and unhappy man, I pray you to forgive and to forget, as people say, all that I have *blatted* out to you. I spoke, as I thought, to a free woman, who had the right to listen to my boyish talk, even though she might elect to laugh at it. And now I hardly dare to ask forgiveness."

Mrs. Barry-Smith inspected a view of the Matterhorn, with careful deliberation. "Forgiveness?" said she.

"Indeed," said I, "I *don't* deserve it." And I smiled most resolutely. "I had always known that somewhere, somehow, you would come into my life again. It has been my dream all these two years; but I dream carelessly. My visions had not included this — obstacle."

She made wide eyes at me. "What?" said she.

"Your husband," I suggested, delicately.

The eyes flashed. There was an interval. A view of Monaco, to all appearances, awoke some pleasing recollection. "I confess," said Mrs. Barry-Smith, "that — for the time — I had quite forgotten him. I — I reckon you must think me very horrid?" But she was at pains to accompany this query with a broadside that rendered such a supposition most unthinkable. And so —

"I think you ——" My speech was hushed and breathless, and ended in a little click of the teeth.

"Oh, don't let's go into the minor details," I desperately pleaded.

Then Mrs. Barry-Smith descended to a truism. "It is usually unwise," said she, and with the air of an authority. And latterly, addressing the façade of Notre Dame, "You see, Mr. Barry-Smith is so much older than I ——"

"I would prefer that. Of course, though, it's none of my business."

"You see, you came and went so suddenly that — of course I never thought to see you again — not that I ever thought of it, I reckon ——" Her candour would have been cruel had it not been so reassuringly earnest. "And Mr. Barry-Smith was very pressing ——"

"He would be," I assented, as after consideration. "It is, indeed, the single point in his outrageous conduct I am willing to condone.

"— and he was a great friend of my father's, and I *liked* him ——"

"So you married him and lived together ever afterward, without *ever* throwing the tureen at each other. That is the most modern version; but there is usually a footnote concerning the butter-plates."

She smiled, inscrutably, a sphinx in Dresden china. "And yet," she murmured, plaintively, "I *would* like to know what you think of me."

"Now, in any other woman," I thought — "in *any* other woman that would have been vulgar."

And I set my teeth and faced the imminent danger bravely. "Prefacing my remarks," said I, in a level voice, "with the announcement that I pray God I may never see you after to-night, I think you the most adorable creature He ever made. What matter now? I have lost you. I think — ah, desire o' the world; what can I think of you? The notion of you dazzles me like flame — and I dare not think of you, for I love you."

"Yes?" she queried, sweetly; "then I reckon Mrs. Dumby was right after all. She said you were a most depraved person and that, as a young and — well, *she* said it, you know — attractive widow ——"

"H'm!" said I; and I sat down with abruptness. "Elena Barry-Smith," I added, "you are an unmitigated and unconscionable and unpardonable rascal. There is just one punishment which would be adequate to meet your case; and I warn you that I mean to inflict it. Why, how *dare* you be a widow! The court decides it is unable to put up with any such nonsense, and that you 've got to stop it at once."

"Really," said she, tossing her head and moving swiftly, "one would think we *were* on a desert island!"

"Or a strange roof" — and I laughed, contentedly. "Of course," I then continued, rapt in meditation, "we will spend the honeymoon in Liege. Yes — say three days in Paris — there is a piece at the Palais Royal they tell me is not half-bad — and then we will return to Liege." I caught my breath, as

joyously. "Meanwhile, a ring — a heavy, Byzantine ring, with the stones sunk deep in the dull gold. Yes, we'll have six stones in it; say, R, a ruby; O, an opal; B, a beryl; E, an emerald; R, a ruby again, I suppose; and T, a topaz. Elena, that's the very ring I mean to buy to-morrow as a token of my mortgage on the desire of the world, and as the badge of your impendent slavery."

Very calmly she regarded the Bay of Naples; very calmly she turned to the Taj Mahal. "An obese young Lochinvar," she reflected aloud, "who has seen me twice, unblushingly assumes he is about to marry me! Of course," she sighed, and almost tolerantly, "I know he is only an irresponsible maniac for otherwise ——"

"Yes — otherwise?" I prompted.

"— he would never ask me to wear an opal. "Why," she cried, in horror, "I could n't think of it!"

"You mean ——?" said I.

She closed the album, with an extremity of firmness. "Why, you are just a child," said Mrs. Barry-Smith, and, oh, how familiar it sounded! "We are utter strangers to each other. Please remember I may have an unbridled temper, or an imported complexion, or a liking for Ibsen, for all you know. What you ask — only you don't, you simply assume it — is preposterous. And besides, opals *are* unlucky."

"Desire o' the world," I said, in dolorous wise, "I

have just remembered the black-lace mitts and reticule you left upon the dinner-table. Oh, truly, I had meant to bring 'em to you — Only *do* you think it quite good form to put on those cloth-sided shoes when you 've been invited to a real party?"

For a moment Mrs. Barry-Smith regarded me critically. Then she shook her head, and tried to frown, and reopened the album, and inspected the crater of Vesuvius, and quite frankly laughed. And a tender, pink-tipped hand rested upon my arm for an instant — a brief instant, yet pulsing with a sense of many lights and of music playing somewhere, and of a certain man's heart keeping time to it.

"If you were to make it an onyx ——" said Mrs. Barry-Smith.

CHAPTER XXII

HE IS URGED TO DESERT HIS GALLEY

SHE had been a widow even when I first encountered her in Liege. I must have passed her dozens of times, only she was in mourning then, for Barry-Smith, and so I never really saw her.

It seems, though, that "in the second year" it is quite permissible to wear pink garments in the privacy of your own apartments, and that if people see you in them, even accidentally, it is simply their own fault.

And very often they are punished for it; as most certainly was I, for Elena led me a devil's dance of jealousy, and rapture, and abject misery, and suspicion, and supreme content, that next four months. She and her mother had rented a house on Regis Avenue for the entire winter; and I frequented it with zeal. Mrs. Vokins said I "came reg'lar as the milkman."

Now of Mrs. Vokins I desire to speak with the greatest respect, if only for the reason that she was Elena Barry-Smith's mother. Mrs. Vokins had, no doubt, the kindest heart in the world; but she had spent the first thirty years of her life in a mountain-

girdled village, and after her husband's wonderful luck — if you 'll permit me her vernacular — “in being let in on the ground-floor” when the Amalgamated Tobacco Company was organised, I believe that Mrs. Vokins was never quite at ease again.

I am abysmally sure she never grew accustomed to being waited on by any servant other than a girl who “came in by the day”; though, oddly enough, she was incessantly harassed by the suspicion that one or another “good-for-nothing nigger was getting ready to quit.” And her prevalent desire in life, apart from doing manual labour for the people she was fond of, was to have supper served a quarter of an hour earlier to-night, “so that the servants can get off.”

It was, and is, the oddest thing I ever knew of that Elena could have been her daughter. Though, mind you, even to-day, I cannot commit myself to any statement whatever as concerns Elena Barry-Smith, beyond the mere assertion of her beauty. I am willing to concede that since the world's creation there may have lived, say, six or seven women who were equally good to look upon; but at the bottom of my heart I know the concession is simply a verbal one. For she was not pretty; she was not handsome; she was *ad unguem* beautiful. Indeed, I sometimes thought her beauty overshadowed any serious consideration of the woman who wore it, just as in admi-

ration of a picture you never think to wonder what weave of canvas it is painted on.

Yes, I am quite sure, upon reflection, that to Elena Barry-Smith her beauty was a sort of tyrant. She devoted her life, I think, quite simply, to the retention of her charms; and what with the fixed seven hours for sleep — no more and not a moment less — the rigid limits of her diet, the walking of exactly five miles a day, and her mathematical adherence to a predetermined programme of massage and hair-treatment and manicuring and face-creams and so on, Elena had hardly two hours in a day at her own disposal.

She would as soon have thought of sacrificing her afternoon walk to the Jackson Monument and back, as of having a front-tooth unnecessarily removed; and would as willingly have partaken of prussic acid as of candy or potatoes. She was, in fine, an artist of the truest type, in that she immolated her body and even her own preferences in the cause of beauty.

Nor was she vain, or stupid either, though what I have written vaguely sounds as though she were both. She was just Elena Barry-Smith, of whom your memory was always how beautiful she had been at this or that particular moment, rather than what she said or did. And I believe that every man in Lichfield was in love with her.

But, in recollection of any person with whom

you have had intimate and tender intercourse, the preëminent feature is the big host of questions which you cannot answer, or not, at least, with certainty.

Besides, she was not only beautiful but exceedingly well-to-do likewise, since her dead father and her husband also had provided for her amply; and Lichfield sniggered in consequence, and as a matter of course assumed my devotion to be of an astute and mercenary origin. But I had, in this period, a variety of reasons to know that Lichfield was for once entirely in the wrong; and that what it mistook to be the pretext for, was in reality — so we will phrase it — the almost unnecessary augmentor of a very genuine insanity.

Meantime Elena was profoundly various. I told her once that being married to her would be the very next thing to owning a harem. And in consequence of this same mutability, it was as late as March before Elena Barry-Smith made up her mind to marry me; and I was so deliciously perturbed that the same night I wrote to tell Bettie Hamlyn all about it. I was very dithyrambic; and you would never have suspected I had lived within fifty miles of Bettie for an entire two years without attempting to communicate with her, for very certainly my letter did not even touch upon the fact. I was, in fine, supremely happy, and I wanted Bettie, first of all,

to know of this circumstance, because my happiness had always made her happy too.

The act was natural enough; only Elena telephoned, at nine the following morning, that she had altered her intention.

"My regret is beyond expression," said I, politely. "I shall come for my tea at five, however."

She entered upon a blurred protest. "You have already broken my heart," I said, with some severity, "and now it would appear you contemplate swindling the remainder of my anatomy out of its deserts. You are a curmudgeon." And I hung up the receiver.

And my first thought was, "Oh, how gladly I would give the wealth of Ormus and of Alaska just to have my letter back!" But I had mailed it overnight — shuffling to the corner in my slippers, and without any collar on, in the hushed middle of the night, because my letter had seemed so important then.

"Will you not have me, lady?" I began that afternoon.

"No, my lord," she demurely responded, "for I've decided it would be too much like living in my Sunday-clothes."

And "I give it up. So what's the answer?" was my annotation.

"Oh, I'm not making jokes to-day. Why *are*

you so — Oh, as we used to say at school,” she re-began, “*Que diable allais-tu faire dans cette galère?*”

“I was born in a vale of tears, Elena, and must take the consequences of being found in such a situation.”

She came to me, and her finger-tips touched my hand ever so lightly. “That is another quotation, I suppose. And it is one other reason why I mean not to marry you. Frankly, you bore me to death with your erudition; you are three-quarters in love with me, but you heed a deal less what I remark about anything than what Aristotle, say, has observed concerning the same topic. Oh, that I should have lived to be jealous of Aristotle! Indeed I am, for I have the misfortune to be hideously in love with you. You are so exactly the sort of infant I would like to adopt.”

“Love,” I suggested, “while no longer an excuse for marriage, is at least a palliation.”

“Listen, dear. From the first I have liked you, but that was not very strange, because I like almost everybody; but it *was* strange I should have remembered you and have liked the idea of you ever since you went away that first time. But it happened in this way: I had found everybody — very nice, you know — particularly the men — and the things which cannot be laughed at I had always put aside as not worth thinking about. You like to laugh, too,

but always I have known — and at times the thought maddens me — that you could be in earnest if you chose, and I *can't*. And the thought makes me a little sorry and tremendously glad, because, quite frankly, I *am* head over heels in love with you. That is why I don't intend to marry you."

And I was not a little at sea. "Oh, very well!" I pleasantly announced, "I shall become a prominent citizen at once, if that's all that is necessary. I will join every one of the patriotic societies, and sit perpetually on platforms with a perspiring water-pitcher, and unveil things every week, with felicitous allusions to the glorious past of our grand old State; and have columns of applause in brackets on the front page of the *Courier-Herald*. I will even go into civic politics, if you insist upon it, and leave round-cornered cards at all the drug-stores, so that everybody who buys a cigar will know I'm subject to the Democratic primary. I wonder, by the way, if people ever survive that malady? It sounds to me a deal more dangerous than epilepsy, say, yet *lots* of persons seem to have it ——"

But Elena was not listening. "Oh, I don't really *mind* your never achieving anything worth while. No woman ever really does, though she has her preference, and pretends, of course, to mind a great deal. What I actually mean is this: You don't marry just me. I — I have very few relations, just two brothers and my mother; yet, in a sense, you

know, you marry them as well. But I don't believe you would like being married to them. They are so different from you, dear. Your whole view-point of life is different ——"

I had begun to speak when she broke in: "No, don't say anything, please, until I'm quite, quite through. My brothers are the most admirable men I ever knew. I love them more than I can say. I trust them more than I do you. But they, are just *good*. They don't fail in the essentials of life, but they are remiss in little ways, they — they don't *care* for the little elegancies of life. Even Arthur chews tobacco when he feels inclined. And he thinks no *man* would smoke a cigarette. Oh, I can't explain just what I mean ——"

"I think I understand, Elena. Suppose we let it pass as said."

"And mamma is not — we'll say, particularly highly educated. Oh, you've been very nice to her. She adores you. You won *her* over completely when you took so much trouble to get her the out-of-print paper novels — about the village maidens and the wicked dukes — in that idiotic Carnation Series she is always reading. The affair was typical of both of you, I think."

"But, oh, my dear—!" I laughed.

"No, not one man in a thousand would have remembered it after she had said she did think the titles 'were real tasty'; and I don't believe any

other man in the world would have spent a week in New York, rummaging the second-hand bookstores, until he found them. Only I don't know, even yet, whether it was really kindness, or just cleverness which prompted you — on account of me. And I do know that you are nice to her in precisely the same fashion you were nice to the Negro cook yesterday. And I have had more advantages than she. But at bottom I'm really just like her. You'd find it out some day. And — and that is what I mean, I think."

I spoke at some length. It was atrocious nonsense which I spoke; in any event, it looked like atrocious nonsense when I wrote it down just now, and so I tore it up. But I was quite sincere throughout that moment; it is the Townsend handicap, I suspect, always to be perfectly sincere for the moment.

"Oh, well!" she said; "I'll think about it."

That night Elena and I played bridge against Nannie Allsotts and Warwick Risby. I was very much in love with Elena, but I hold it against her, even now, that she insisted on discarding from strength. However, there was to be a little supper afterward, and you may depend upon it that Mrs. Vokins was seeing to its preparation.

She came into the room about eleven o'clock, beaming with kindness and flushed — I am sure — by some slight previous commerce with the kitchen-fire.

"Well, well!" said Mrs. Vokins, comfortably; "and who's a-beating?"

I looked up. I must protest, until my final day, I could n't help it. "Why, we is," I said.

And Nannie Allsotts giggled, ever so slightly, and Warwick Risby had half risen, with a quite infuriate face, and I knew that by to-morrow the affair would be public property, and promptly lost the game and rubber. And afterward we had our supper.

When the others had gone — for my footing in the house was such that I, by ordinary, stayed a moment or two after the others had gone — Elena Barry-Smith came to me and boxed my jaws soundly.

"That — that," she said, "is the one way to deal with you."

A minute ago I had been ashamed of myself. I had n't room to be that now; I was too full of anger. "I did make rather a mess of it," I equably remarked, "but, you see, Nannie had shown strength in diamonds, and I simply *could* n't resist the finesse. So they made every one of their clubs. And I had n't any business to take the chance of course at that stage, with the ace right in my hand ——"

"Arthur would have said, before he'd thought of it, 'You damn fool ——!' And then he would have apologised for forgetting himself in the presence of a lady," she said, in a sorry little voice. "Yes, you — you *have* hurt me," she presently continued — "just as you meant to do, if that's a comfort to you. I feel

as though I'd smacked a marble statue. You — you're the sort that used to take snuff just before they were guillotined, and when *they* were in the wrong. And I'm not. That's always been the trouble."

"Elena!" I began — "wait, just a moment! I'm in anger now ——!" It was not much to stammer out, but for me, who have the Townsend temper, it was very hard to say.

"You talk of loving me! and I believe you do love me, in at any rate a fashion. But you'll never forget, you never *have* forgotten, those ancestors of yours who were in the House of Burgesses when I had n't any ancestors at all. It is n't fair, because we have n't got the chance to pick our parents, and it's absurd, and — it's true. The woman is my mother, and I'll be like her some day, very probably. Yes, she *is* illiterate, and a vulgarian, and at times ridiculous. She had n't even the wit to notice it when you made a butt of her; and if anyone were to explain it to her she would just laugh and say, 'Law, I don't mind, because young people always have to have their fun, I reckon.' And she would forgive you! Why, she adores you! she's been telling me for months that you're 'a heap the nicest young man that visits with me.'"

Afterward Elena paused for an instant. "I think that is all," she said. "It's a difference that is n't curable. Yes, I simply wanted to tell you that much, and then ask you to go, I believe ——"

I went homeward almost physically sick with rage. I knew, even then, that, while Elena would forgive me in the outcome, if I set about the matter properly, I could never bring myself to ask forgiveness. Oh, if only she had been in the wrong, how eagerly I might go back and submit to the extremest and the most outrageous tyranny she could devise!

But she had been in the right. She had humiliated me, with a certain lack of decorum, to be sure, but with an entire justice; and to pardon plain retaliation is beyond the compass of humanity at large, I think. At least, it ranks among achievements which have always baffled me.

CHAPTER XXIII

HE CLEANS THE SLATE

IT WAS within a month of this that Jasper Hardress came to America, accompanied by his wife. They planned a tour of the States, which they had not visited in seven years, and more particularly, as his forerunning letter said, they meant to investigate certain mining properties which Hardress had acquired in Montana; and not unstirred by trepidations, I had met them at the pier.

For I was already in New York, in part to see a volume of my short stories through the press — which you may or may not have read under the title of “The Aspirants” — and in part about less edifying employments. I was trying to forget Elena. It was not in me to apologise, except in a letter, where the wording and interminable tinkering with phraseology would enable me to forget it was I who was apologising, until a bit of nearly perfect prose was safely mailed; and, vanity apart, I knew she would not read any letter, because Elena comprehended that I always persuaded her to do what I prompted, if only she listened to me.

As it was, I talked that morning for an hour or more

with fat Jasper Hardress. Even now I find the two errands which really brought him to America of not unlaughable incongruity.

For, first, he came as an agent of the Philomatheans, who were endeavouring to secure official recognition by the churches of America and England of a revised translation of, at least, the New Testament.

He told me of a variety of buttressing reasons — which I suppose are well-founded, though I must confess I never investigated the matter. He told me how the Authorised Version was just a paraphrase, abundant in confusions and in demonstrable mis-translations from the Greek of Erasmus's New Testament, which, as the author confessed, "was rather tumbled headlong into the world than edited." And how the edition of Erasmus itself was hastily prepared from careless copies of inaccurate transcriptions of yet further copies of divers manuscripts of which the oldest dates from the fourth century merely, and is in turn, most probably, just a liberal paraphrase, as all the others are, of still another manuscript. And so on.

So that the English version, as I gathered, may be very good English, but has not a leg left, scarcely, when you consider it or as a safe foundation for superiority, or pillorying, or as a guide in conduct.

I suspect, however, that Jasper Hardress some-

what overstated the case, since on this subject he was a fanatic.

And as he feelingly declaimed concerning the great Uncials, and explained why in this particular verse the Ephraem manuscript was in the right, whereas to probe the meaning of the following one we clearly must regard the Syriac version as of supreme authority, I could well understand how at one period or another his young wife must inevitably have considered him in the light of a rather tedious person.

And I told him that it hardly mattered, because the true test of any indefatigable church-member was the ability to believe that when the Bible said anything inconvenient it really meant something else.

But actually I was not feeling over-cheerful, because Jasper's second object in coming to America was to leave his wife in Sioux City, so that she could secure a divorce from him, on quite un-Scriptural grounds. Hardress told me of this at least without any passion. He did not blame her. He was too old for her, too stolid, too dissimilar in every respect, he said. Their marriage had been a mistake, that was all—a mismating, as many marriages were. She wanted to marry someone else, he rather thought.

And "Oh, Lord! yes!" I inwardly groaned. "She probably does."

Aloud I said: "But the Bible — Yes, I *am* provincial at bottom. It's because I always think in

nigger-English and translate it when I talk. It was my Mammy, you see, who taught me how to think — and in our nigger-English, what the Bible says is true. Why, Jasper, even this Revised Version of yours says flatly that a man —”

“Child, child!” said Jasper Hardress, and he patted my hair, and sensibly it crinkled under his touch, “when you grow up — if indeed you ever do — you ’ll find that a man’s feeling for his wife and the mother of his children, is n’t altogether limited by what he has read in a book. He wants — well, just her happiness.”

I looked up without thinking; and the aspect of that gross and unattractive man humiliated me. He had reached a height denied to such as I; and had, by some odd turn, suggested old Père Goriot exhibiting to Rastignac the new apartments in the Rue d’Artois; and inwardly I cursed and envied this fat Jasper Hardress. . . . I would have told him everything, had not the waiter come just then.

And the same afternoon I was alone with Gillian Hardress, for the first time in somewhat more than two years. We had never written each another; I had been too cautious for that; and now when the lean, handsome woman came toward me, murmuring “Jack ——” very low — for so she had always called me, as you may remember — I merely raised one hand in protest.

"No — that is done with, Jill. That is dead and buried now, my dear."

She had remained quite motionless; only her eyes, which were like chrysoberyls, seemed to grow larger and yet more large. There was no anger in them, only an augmenting wonder.

"Ah, yes," she said at last, and for the first time seemed again to breathe; "so that is dead and buried — in two years." Gillian Hardress spoke with a laborious precision, like that of one struggling with a foreign language, and articulating each word to its least sound before laying tongue to its successor.

"Yes! we have done with each other, once for all," said I, half angrily. "I wash my hands of the affair, I clean the slate to-day. I am hideously brutal, and — I am sorry, dear. But I talked with your husband this morning, and I will deceive Jasper Hardress no longer. The man loves you as I never dreamed of loving any woman, as I am incapable of loving any woman. He dwarfs us. Oh, for God's sake, go and tell him, that he may kill us both!"

Mrs. Hardress said: "You have planned to marry. It is time the prodigal marry and settle down, is it not? So long as we were in England it did not matter. But I am here, and Mr. Townsend desires no entanglements just now that might prevent an advantageous marriage. So he is smitten — and conveniently — with remorse." She began to laugh a little. "And he discovers that Jasper Hardress is

a better man than he. Have I not always known that, Jack?"

Now came a silence. "I cannot argue with you as to my motives. Let us have no scene, my dear ——"

"God keep us respectable!" the woman said; and then: "No; I can afford to make no scene. I can only long to be omnipotent for just one instant that I might deal with you, Robert Townsend, as I desire — and even then, heaven help me, I would not do it!" Mrs. Hardress sat down upon the divan and laughed, but this time naturally. "So! it is done with! I have had my dismissal, and, in common justice, admit that I have received it not all ungracefully."

"From the first," I said, "you have been the most wonderful woman I have ever known." And I knew that I was sincerely fond of Gillian Hardress.

"But please go now," she said, "and have a telegram this evening that will call you home, or to Kamchatka, or to Ecuador, or anywhere, on unavoidable business. No, it is not because I loathe the sight of you or for any melodramatic reason of that sort. It is because, I think, I had fancied you to be *not* completely self-centred, after all, and I cannot bear to realise I am a fool."

"You accuse me of selfishness," I cried. "Ah, let us distinguish, for there is at times a deal of virtue in this vice. A man who devotes himself to any particular art or pursuit, for instance, becomes more and

more enamoured of it as time wears on, because he comes to identify it with himself; and a husband is fonder of his wife than of any other woman — at least, he ought to be — not because he considers her the most beautiful and attractive person of his acquaintance, but because she is the one in whom he is most interested and concerned. He has a proprietary interest in her welfare, and she is in a manner part of himself. Thus the arts flourish and the home-circle is maintained, and all through selfishness.”

I snapped my fingers airily; I was trying, of course, to disgust her by my callousness. And it appeared I had almost succeeded.

“Please go!” she said.

“But surely not while we are as yet involved in a question of plain logic? You think selfishness a vice. None the less you must concede that the world has invariably progressed because, upon the whole, we find civilisation to be more comfortable than barbarism; and that a wholesome apprehension of the penitentiary enables many of us to rise to deaconships. Why, deuce take it, Jill! I may endow a hospital because I want to see my name over the main entrance, I may give a beggar a penny because his gratitude puts me in a glow of benevolence that is cheap at the price. So let us not rashly declare that selfishness is a vice, and — let us part friends, my dear.”

And I assumed possession of the thin hands

that seemed to push me from her in a species of terror, and gallantly lifted them to my lips.

The ensuing event was singular. Gillian Hardress turned to the door of her bedroom and brutally, as with two bludgeons, struck again and again upon its panels with the back of either hand. She extended her hands to me, and everywhere their knuckles oozed blood. "You kissed them," she said, "and even to-day they liked it, and so they are not clean. They will never again be clean, my dear. But they were clean before you came."

Then Gillian Hardress left me, and where she had touched it, the brass door-knob of her bedroom-door was smeared with blood.

When I had come again to Lichfield I found that in the brief interim of my absence Elena Barry-Smith, without announcement, had taken the train to Washington on an impeccable morning, and had in that city married Warwick Risby. This was, I knew, because she comprehended that, if I so elected, it was always in my power to stop her half-way up the aisle and to dissuade her from advancing one step farther. "I don't know *how* it is——!" she would have said, in that dear quasi-petulance I knew so well. . . .

But as it was, I met the two one evening at the Provises', and with a glib congratulation. Then straddling as a young Colossus on the hearth-rug, and with an admonitory forefinger, I proclaimed to

the universe at large that Mrs. Risby had blighted my existence and beseeched for Warwick some immediate and fatal and particularly excruciating malady. In fine, I was abjectly miserable the while that I disarmed all comment by being quite delightfully boyish for a whole two hours.

I must tell you, though, that Mrs. Vokins patted my hand when nobody else was looking, and said: "Oh, my dear Mr. Bob, I wish it had been you! You was always the one I liked the best." For that, in view of every circumstance, was humorous, and hurt as only humour can.

So in requital I mailed to Mrs. Risby some verses on the following morning. This sounds a trifle like burlesque; but Elena had always a sort of superstitious reverence for the fact that I "wrote things." It would not matter at all that the verses were abominable; indeed Elena would never think of this; she would simply set about devising an excellent reason for not showing them to anybody, and would consider Warwick Risby, if only for a moment, in the light of a person who, whatever his undeniable merits, had neither the desire nor the ability to write "poetry." And, though it was hideously petty, this was precisely what I desired her to do.

So I dispatched to her a sonnet-sequence which I had originally made in honour of Stella. I loathed sending Stella's verses to anyone else, somehow; but, after all, my one deterrent was merely a romantic

notion; and there was n't time to compose a new set. And moreover, "your eyes are blue, your speech is gracious, but you are not she, since we who change — and change how utterly! — till I, no longer I, you, no more you," and so on, was absolutely appropriate. And Elena most undoubtedly knew nothing of Murger. And Stella, being dead, could never know what I had done.

So I sent the verses, with a few necessitated alterations, to the address of Mrs. Warwick Risby.

I had within the week an unsigned communication which, for a long while afterward, I did not comprehend. It was the photograph of an infant, with the photographer's address scratched from the cardboard and without any decipherable postmark; and upon the back of the thing was written: "His has been the summer air, and the sunshine, and the flowers; and gentle ears have listened to him, and gentle eyes have been upon him. Let others eat his honey that please, so that he has had his morsel and his song."

I thought it was a joke of some sort, and kept the photograph until the jest should come to light and I retaliate; and indeed, after a brief puzzlement, I never gave the affair a second thought.

CHAPTER XXIV

HE REVILES DESTINY AND CLIMBS A WALL

BUT now the spring was come again, and as always at this season, I was pricked with vague sweet longings to have done with roofs and paven places. I wanted to be in the open. I think I wanted to fall in love with somebody, and thereby somewhat prolong the daily half-minute, immediately after awakening in the morning, during which alone I was not conscious of Elena Risby's existence.

So I decided I would go to Gridlington, whither Peter Blagden had forgotten to invite me. He was extremely glad to see me, though, to do him justice. For Peter — by this time the inheritor of his unlamented uncle's whole estate — had, very properly, developed gout, which is, I take it, the time-honoured appendage of affluence and, so to speak, its trade-mark; and was, for all his wealth, unable to get up and down the stairs of his fine house without, as we will delicately word it, a displayal and, at times, an overtaking of a copious vocabulary.

I was at Gridlington entirely comfortable. It was spring, to begin with, and out of doors in spring you always know that something extremely pleasant is

about to happen, and that She is quite probably around the very next turn of the lane.

Moreover, there was at Gridlington a tiny private garden, once the recreation of Peter Blagden's aunt (dead now twelve years ago), which had remained untended since her cosseting; and I in nature took charge of it.

There was a wilding peach-tree in the place, which I artistically sawed into shape and pruned and grafted, and painted all those profitable wounds with tar; and I grew to love it, just as most people do their children, because it was mine. And Peter, who is a person of no sensibility, wanted to ring for a servant one night, when there was a hint of frost and I had started out to put a bucket of water under my tree to protect it. I informed him that he was irrevocably dead to all the nobler sentiments, and went to the laundry and got a wash-tub.

Peter was not infrequently obtuse. He would contend, for instance, that it was absurd for any person to get so gloriously hot and dirty while setting out plants, when that person objected to having a flower in the same room. For Peter could not understand that a cut flower is a dead or, at best, a dying thing, and therefore to considerate people is just so much abhorrent carrion; and denied it would be really quite as rational to decorate your person or your dinner-table with the severed heads of chickens as with those of daffodils.

"But that 's only because you are not particularly bright," I told him. "Oh, I suppose you can't help it. But why make *all* the actions of your life so foolish? What good do you get out of having the gout, for instance?"

Whereupon Mr. Blagden desired to be informed if I considered those with-various-adjectives-accompanied twinges in that qualified foot to be a source of personal pleasure to the owner of the very-extensively-hiatused foot. In which case, Mr. Blagden felt at liberty to express his opinion of my intellectual attainments, which was of an uncomplimentary nature.

"Because, you know," I pursued, equably, "you would n't have the gout if you did not habitually overeat yourself and drink more than is good for you. In consequence, here you are with a foot the same general size and shape as a hayrick, only rather less symmetrical, and quite unable to attend to the really serious business of life, which is to present me to the heiress. It is a case of vicarious punishment which strikes me as extremely unfair. You have made of your stomach a god, Peter, and I am the one to suffer for it. You have made of your stomach," I continued, venturing aspiringly into metaphor, "a brazen Moloch, before which you are now calmly preparing to immolate my prospects in life. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Peter!"

Mr. Blagden's next observation was describable as impolite.

"Fate, too," I lamented, in a tragic voice, "appears to have entered into this nefarious conspiracy. Here, not two miles away, is one of the greatest heiresses in America — clever, I am told, beautiful, I am sure, for I have yet to discover a woman who sees anything in the least attractive about her — and, above all, with the Woods millions at her disposal. Why, Peter, Margaret Hugonin is the woman I have been looking for these last three years. She is, to a hair, precisely the sort of woman I have always intended to make unhappy. And I can't even get a sight of her! Here are you, laid up with the gout, and unable to help me; and yonder is the heiress, making a foolish pretence at mourning for the old curmudgeon who left her all that money, and declining to meet people. Oh, but she's a shiftless woman, Peter! At this very moment she might be getting better acquainted with me; at this very moment, Peter, I might be explaining to her in what points she is utterly and entirely different from all the other women I have ever known. And she prefers to immure herself in Selwoode, with no better company than her father, who is an ungodly old retired colonel, and a she-cousin, who is somewhere on the undiscussable side of forty — when she might be engaging me in amorous dalliance! That Miss Hugonin is a shiftless woman, I tell you! And Fate — oh,

but Fate, too, is a vixenish jade!" I cried, and shook my fist under the nose of an imaginary Lachesis.

"You appear," said Peter, drily, "to be unusually well-informed as to what is going on at Selwoode."

"You flatter me," I answered, as with proper modesty. "You must remember that there are maids at Selwoode. You must remember that my man, Byam, is — and will be until that inevitable day when he will attempt to blackmail me, and I shall kill him in the most lingering fashion I can think of — that Byam is, I say, something of a diplomatist."

Mr. Blagden regarded me with disapproval. "You 're a damn cad, you know, Bob," he pensively observed. "Now most people think that when you carry on like a lunatic you 're simply acting on impulse. I don't. I believe you plan it out a week ahead. I sometimes think you are the most adroit and unblushing looker-out for number one, I ever knew; and I can't, for the life of me, understand why I don't turn you out of doors."

"I don't know where you picked up your manners," said I, reflectively, "but it must have been in devilish low company. I would cut your acquaintance, Peter, if I could afford it." Then I fell to pacing up and down the floor. "I incline, as you have somewhat grossly suggested, to a certain favouritism among the digits. And why the deuce should n't I. A fortune is the only thing I need. I have good looks, you know, of a sort; ah, I 'm not

vain, but both my glass and a number of women have been kind enough to reassure me on this particular point. And that I have a fair amount of wits my creditors will attest, who have lived promise-crammed for the last year or two, feeding upon air like chameleons. Then I have birth — not that good birth ensures anything but bad habits though, for you will observe that, by some curious freak of nature, an old family-tree very seldom produces anything but wild oats. And, finally, I have position. I can introduce my wife into the best society; ah, yes, you may depend upon it, Peter, she will have the privilege of meeting the very worst and stupidest and silliest people in the country on perfectly equal terms. You will perceive, then, that the one desirable thing I lack is wealth. And this I shall naturally expect my wife to furnish. So, the point is settled, and you may give me a cigarette.”

Peter handed me the case, with a snort. “You are a hopelessly conceited ass,” Mr. Blagden was pleased to observe, “for otherwise you would have learned, by this, that you ’ll, most likely, never have the luck of Charteris, and land a woman who will take it as a favour that you let her pay your bills. God knows you ’ve angled for enough of ’em!”

“You are painfully coarse, Peter,” I pointed out, with a sigh. “Indeed, your general lack of refinement might easily lead one to think you owed your millions to your own thrifty industry, or some equally

unpleasant attribute, rather than to your uncle's very commendable and lucrative innovation in the line of — well, I remember it was something extremely indigestible, but, for the moment, I forget whether it was steam-reapers or a new sort of pickle. Yes, in a great many respects, you are hopelessly parvenuish. This cigarette-case, for instance — studded with diamonds and engraved with a monogram big enough for a coach-door! Why, Peter, it simply reeks with the ostentation of honestly acquired wealth — and with very good tobacco, too, by the way. I shall take it, for I am going for a walk, and I have n't any of my own. And some day I shall pawn this jewelled abortion, Peter — pawn it for much fine gold; and upon the proceeds I shall make merriment for myself and for my friends." And I pocketed the case.

"That 's all very well," Peter growled, "but you need n't try to change the subject. You know you *have* angled after any number of rich women who have had sense enough, thank God, to refuse you. You did n't use to be — but now you're quite notoriously good-for-nothing."

"It is the one blemish," said I, sweetly, "upon an otherwise perfect character. And it is true," I continued, after an interval of meditation, "that I have, in my time, encountered some very foolish women. There was, for instance, Elena Barry-Smith, who threw me over for Warwick Risby; and Celia Reindan, who had the bad taste to prefer

Teddy Anstruther; and Rosalind Jemmett, who is, very inconsiderately, going to marry Tom Gelwix, instead of me. These were staggeringly foolish women, Peter, but while their taste is bad, their dinners are good, so I have remained upon the best of terms with 'em. They have trodden me under their feet, but I am the long worm that has no turning. Moreover, you are doubtless aware of the axiomatic equality between the fish in the sea and those out of it. I hope before long to better my position in life. I hope — ah, well, that would scarcely interest you. Good morning, Peter. And I trust, when I return,” I added, with a chastening dignity, “that you will evince a *somewhat* more Christian spirit toward the world in general, and that your language will be rather less reminiscent of the blood-stained buccaneer of historical fiction.”

“You’re a grinning buffoon,” said Peter. “Your’re a Jack-pudding. You’re an ass. Where are you going, anyway?”

“I am going,” said I, “to the extreme end of Gridlington. Afterward I am going to climb the wall that stands between Gridlington and Selwoode.”

“And after that?” said Peter.

I gave a gesture. “Why, after that,” said I, “fortune will favour the brave. And I, Peter, am very, very brave.”

Then I departed, whistling. In view of all my

memories, it had been strangely droll to worry Peter Blagden into an abuse of marrying for money. For this was on the twenty-eighth of April, the anniversary of the day that Stella had been killed, you may remember.

And a half-hour subsequently, true to my word, I was scaling a ten-foot stone wall, thickly overgrown with ivy. At the top of it I paused, and sat down to take breath and to meditate, my legs meanwhile bedangling over an as flourishing Italian garden as you would wish to see.

"Now, I wonder," I queried, of my soul, "what will be next? There is a very cheerful uncertainty about what will be next. It may be a spring-gun, and it may be a bull-dog, and it may be a susceptible heiress. But it is apt to be — No, it is n't," I amended, promptly; "it's going to be an angel. Or perhaps it is going to be a dream. She can't be real, you know — I am probably just dreaming her. I would be quite certain I was just dreaming her, if this wall were n't *quite* so humpy and uncomfortable. For it stands to reason, I would not be fool enough to dream of such unsympathetic iron spikes as I am sitting on."

"Perhaps you are not aware," hazarded a soprano voice, "that this is private property?"

"Why, no," said I, very placidly; "on the contrary I was just thinking it must be heaven. And I am tolerably certain," I commented further, in my

soul, "that you are one of the more influential seraphim."

The girl lifted her brows. She sat upon a semi-circular stone bench, some twenty feet from the wall, and had apparently been reading, for a book lay open in her lap. She now inspected me, with a sort of languid wonder in her eyes, and I returned the scrutiny with an unqualified approval in mine.

And in this I had reason. The girl was eminently good to look upon.

CHAPTER XXV

HE RECONCILES SENTIMENT AND REASON

SO I regarded her for a rather lengthy interval, considering meanwhile, with an immeasurable content, how utterly and entirely impossible it would always be to describe her in the ensuing action.

Clearly, it would be out of the question to trust to words, however choicely picked, for, upon inspection, there was a delightful ambiguity about every one of this girl's features that defied such idiotic make-shifts. Her eyes, for example, I noted with a faint thrill of surprise, just escaped being brown by virtue of an amber glow they had; what colour, then, was I conscientiously to call them?

And her hair I found a bewildering, though pleasing, mesh of shadow and sunlight, all made up of multitudinous graduations of some anonymous colour that seemed to vary with the light you chanced to see it in, through the whole gamut of bronze and chestnut and gold; and where, pray, in the bulkiest lexicon, in the very weightiest thesaurus, was I to find the adjective which could, if but in desperation, be applied to hair like that without entrenching on sacrilege?

And, in my appraisal, you may depend upon it, that her lips were passed quickly over as a dangerous topic, and dismissed with the mental statement that they were red and not altogether unattractive. Whereas her cheeks baffled me for a time — but always with a haunting sense of familiarity — till I had, at last, discovered that they reminded me of those little tatters of cloud which sometimes float about the setting sun — those irresolute wisps that cannot quite decide whether to be pink or white, and waver through their tiny lives between the two colours.

To this effect, then, I discoursed with my soul, what time I sat upon the wall-top and smiled and kicked my heels so gently to and fro among the ivy. By and by, though, the girl sighed.

“You are placing me in an extremely unpleasant position,” she complained, as wearily. “*Would* you mind returning to your sanatorium and allowing me to go on reading? For I am interested in my book, and I can’t possibly go on in any comfort so long as you elect to perch up there like Humpty-Dumpty, and grin like seven dozen Cheshire cats.”

“Now, that,” I spoke, in absent wise, “is but another instance of the widely prevalent desire to have me serve as scapegoat for the sins of all humanity. I am being blamed now for sitting on top of this wall. One would think I wanted to sit here. One would actually think,” I cried, and raised my

eyes to heaven, "that sitting on the very humpiest kind of iron spikes was my favourite form of recreation! No — in the interests of justice," I continued, and fell into a somewhat milder tone, "I must ask you to place the blame where it more rightfully belongs. The injuries which are within the moment inflicted on my sensitive nature, and, incidentally, upon my not overstocked wardrobe, I am willing to pass over. But the claims of justice are everywhere paramount. Miss Hugonin, and Miss Hugonin alone, is responsible for my present emulation of Mohammed's coffin, and upon that point I am compelled to insist."

"May one suggest," she queried gently, "that you are probably — mistaken?"

I sketched a bow. "Recognising your present point of view," said I, gallantly, "I thank you for the kindly euphemism. But may one allowably demonstrate the fallacy of this same point of view? I thank you: for silence, I am told, is proverbially equal to assent. I am, then, one Robert Townsend, by birth a gentleman, by courtesy an author, by inclination an idler, and by lucky chance a guest of Mr. Peter Blagden, whose flourishing estate extends indefinitely yonder to the rear of my coat-tails. My hobby chances to be gardening. I am a connoisseur an admirer, a devotee of gardens. It is, indeed, hereditary among the Townsends; a love for gardens runs in our family just as a love for gin runs in less

favoured races. It is with us an irresistible passion. The very founder of our family — one Adam, whom you may have heard of — was a gardener. Owing to the unfortunate loss of his position, the family since then has sunken somewhat in the world; but time and poverty alike have proven powerless against our horticultural tastes and botanical inclinations. And then," cried I, with a flourish, "and then, what follows, logically?"

"Why, if you are not more careful," she languidly made answer, "I am afraid that, owing to the laws of gravitation, a broken neck is what follows logically."

"You are a rogue," I commented swiftly, in my soul, "and I like you all the better for it."

Aloud, I stated: "What follows is that we can no more keep away from a creditable sort of garden than a moth can from a lighted candle. Consider, then, my position. Here am I on one side of the wall, and with my peach-tree, to be sure — but on the other, is one of the most famous masterpieces of formal gardening in the whole country. Am I to blame if I succumb to the temptation? Surely not," I argued, very earnestly; "for surely to any fair-minded person it will be at once apparent that I am brought to my present very uncomfortable position upon the points of these *very* humpy iron spikes by a simple combination of atavism and injustice — atavism because hereditary inclination draws me irresistibly

to the top of the wall, and injustice because Miss Hugonin's perfectly unreasonable refusal to admit visitors prevents my coming any farther. Surely, that is at once apparent?"

But now the girl yielded to my grave face, and broke into a clear, rippling carol of mirth. She laughed from the chest, this woman, laughed well-nigh boyishly. And perched in insecure discomfort on my wall, I found time to rejoice that I had finally discovered that rarity of rarities, a woman who neither giggles nor cackles, but has found the happy mean between these two abominations, and knows how to laugh.

"I have heard of you, Mr. Townsend," she said at last. "Oh, yes, I have heard a deal of you. And I remember now that I never heard you were suspected of sanity."

"Common sense," I informed her, from my pedestal, "is exclusively confined to that decorous class of people who never lose either their tempers or their umbrellas. Now, I have n't any temper to speak of — or not at least in the presence of ladies — and, so far, I have managed to avoid laying aside anything for a rainy day; so that it stands to reason I must possess uncommon sense."

"If that is the case," said the girl "you will kindly come down from that wall and attempt to behave like a rational being."

I was down — as the phrase runs — in the twink-

ling of a bed-post. On which side of the wall, I leave you to imagine.

"For I am sure," the girl continued, "that I — that Margaret, I should say — would not object in the least to your seeing the gardens, since they interest you so tremendously. I — I'm Avis Beechinor, you know — Miss Hugonin's cousin. So, if you like, we will consider that a proper introduction, Mr. Townsend, and I will show you the gardens, if — if you really care to see them."

My face, I must confess, had fallen slightly. Up to this moment, I had n't a suspicion that it was not Miss Hugonin I was talking to: and I now reconsidered, with celerity, the information Byam had brought me from Selwoode.

"For, when I come to think of it," I reflected, "he simply said she was older than Miss Hugonin. I embroidered the tale so glibly for Peter's benefit that I was deceived by my own ornamentations. I had looked for corkscrew ringlets and a simper in Miss Hugonin's cousin — not an absolutely, supremely, inexpressibly unthinkable beauty like this!" I cried, in my soul. "Older! Why, good Lord, Miss Hugonin must be an infant in arms!"

But my audible discourse was prefaced with an eloquent gesture. "If I'd care!" I said. "Have n't I already told you I was a connoisseur in gardens? Why, simply look, Miss Beechinor!" I exhorted her, and threw out my hands in a large pose of admiration.

"Simply regard those yew-hedges, and parterres, and grassy amphitheatres, and palisades, and statues, and cascades, and everything — *everything* that goes to make a formal garden the most delectable sight in the world! Simply feast your eyes upon those orderly clipped trees and the fantastic patterns those flowers are laid out in! Why, upon my word, it looks as if all four books of Euclid had suddenly burst into blossom! And you ask me if I would *care!* Ah, it is evident *you* are not a connoisseur in gardens, Miss Beechinor!"

And I had started on my way into this one, when the girl stopped me.

"This must be yours," she said. "You must have spilled it coming over the wall, Mr. Townsend."

It was Peter's cigarette-case.

"Why, dear me, yes!" I assented, affably. "Do you know, now, I would have been tremendously sorry to lose that? It is a sort of present — an unbirth-day present from a quite old friend."

She turned it over in her hand.

"It's very handsome," she marvelled. "Such a pretty monogram!"

"Eh? — oh, yes, yes!" said I, easily. "P. B., you mean? That stands for Perfect Behaviour, you see. My friend gave it to me because, he said, I was so good. And — oh, well, he added a few things to that — partial sort of a friend, you know — and, really — why, really, Miss Beechinor, it would em-

barrass me to tell you what he added," I protested, and modestly waved the subject aside.

"And that," my meditations ran, "is the absolute truth. Peter did tell me I was good. And it really would embarrass me to tell her he added 'for-nothing.' So, this far, I have been a model of veracity."

Then I took the case — gaining thereby the bliss of momentary contact with a certain velvet-soft trifle that seemed, somehow, to set my own grosser hand a-tingle — and cried: "Now, Miss Beechinor, you must show me the pergola. I am excessively partial to pergolas, you know."

And in my soul, I wondered savagely what a pergola was, and why on earth I had been fool enough to waste the last ten days in bedeviling Peter, and how under the broad canopy of heaven I could ever have suffered from the delusion that I had seen a really adorable woman before to-day.

But, "She is entirely too adorable," I reasoned with myself, some three-quarters of an hour later. "In fact, I regard it as positively inconsiderate in any impecunious young person to venture to upset me in the way she's done. Why, God bless my soul! my heart is pounding away inside me like a trip-hammer, and I am absolutely light-headed with good-will and charity and benevolent intentions toward the entire universe! Oh, Avis, Avis, you

know you had n't any right to put me in this insane state of mind!"

I was, at this moment, retracing my steps toward the spot where I had climbed the wall between Gridlington and Selwoode, but I paused now to outline a reproachful gesture in the direction from which I came.

"What do you mean by having such a name?" I queried, sadly. "Avis! Why, it's the very soul of music, clear and sweet and as insistent as a bird-call, an unforgettable lyric in four letters! It is just the sort of name a fellow cannot possibly forget. Why could n't you have been named Polly or Margaret or something commonplace like that, Avis — dear?"

And the juxtaposition of these words appealing to my sense of euphony, I repeated it, again and again, each time rolling out the syllables with a more relishing gusto. "Avis, dear! dear Avis! dear, *dear* Avis!" I experimented. "Why, each one is more hopelessly unforgettable than the other! Oh, Avis dear, why are you so absolutely and entirely unforgettable all around? *Why* do you ripple all your words together in that quaint fashion till it sounds like a brook discoursing? *Why* did you crinkle up your eyes when I told you that a yet unbotanised flower was a *Calycanthus arithmeticus*? And *why* did you pout at me, Avis dear? A fellow *cannot* forget things like that. And,

oh, dear, *dear* Avis, if you only knew what nearly happened when you pouted!"

I had come to the wall by this, but again I paused to lament.

"It is very inconsiderate," said I, "very! She might at least have asked my permission, before upsetting all my plans in life. I had firmly intended to marry a rich woman, and now I am about as capable of doing it as I am of scaling the heavens yonder and purloining one of the stars. I am going to marry Avis Beechinor, if she 'll have me; and, if she won't, I am going to commit suicide and leave her a pathetic little note, forgiving her in the most noble and wholesale manner for irrevocably blighting a future so rich in promise. Yes, that is exactly what I will do. And if she 'll have me" — and here I paused, with an intake of the breath, and for a single heart-beat considered that roseate improbability — "good Lord, if she will have me! Why, I would n't change places with the Pope of Rome or the Czar of all the Russias! Ah, no, not I! for I prefer, upon the whole, to be quite immeasurably, and insanely, and unreasonably, and unadulteratedly happy! Ah, Avis! dear, *dear* Avis!" I pleaded to the bland and cheerful morning air, "please be accommodating and have me!"

Then I started somewhat: for, on the bench where I had first seen her I perceived a book lying open. It was the book she had been reading when I inter-

rupted her, and I now picked it up with a sort of reverence. I regarded it as an extremely lucky book.

Subsequently, "Good Lord!" said I.

For across the open pages — serving as a book-mark, according to a not infrequent shiftless feminine fashion — lay a handkerchief. It was a flimsy, inadequate little trifle, fringed with a tiny scallopy black border; and, in one corner, the letters M. E. A. H., all askew, contorted themselves into any number of flourishes and irrelevant tendrils.

"Now M. E. A. H.," I reflected, "does not stand, by any stretch of the imagination, for Avis Beechinor. Whereas it fits Margaret Elizabeth Anstruther Hugonin uncommonly well. I wonder, now ——?"

I wondered for a rather lengthy interval. Then I laughed, a little bitterly.

"So Byam was right, after all," said I. "And Peter was right, too. Oh, Robert Etheridge Townsend, your reputation must truly be malodorous, when at your approach timid heiresses seek shelter under an alias! 'I have heard a deal of you, Mr. Townsend' — ah, yes, she had heard. She knew I would make love to her simply because she was wealthy. She thought me just the sort of man that every clear-eyed person thinks me — even Peter! — and she defended herself. It is rather a nasty business, this coming face to face with what you have made of your life."

And my then face, I think, was not a jester's face,

for all that I presently flung back my head and laughed.

“Eh, well!” said I; “I will let no sordid considerations stand in the way of my happiness! I will marry this Margaret Hugonin even though she *is* rich. You have begun the comedy, my lady, and I will play it to the end. As there is a God in heaven, you are the woman I love, and you are the woman I am going to marry!”

CHAPTER XXVI

HE ADVANCES WITH THE APPROBATION OF BOTH HIS
SENSES AND HIS WITS

WELL?" said Peter.

"Well?" said I, defiant.

"What's the latest quotation on heiresses?" Mr. Blagden demanded. "Was she cruel, my boy, or was she kind? Did she set the dog on you or have you thrashed by her father? I fancy both, for your present hilarity is suggestive of a gentleman in the act of attendance on his own funeral." And Peter laughed, and unctuously, for his gout slumbered.

"His attempts at wit," I reflectively confided to my wine-glass, "while doubtless amiably intended, are, to his well-wishers, painful. I daresay, though, he does n't know it. We must, then, smile indulgently upon the elephantine gambols of what he is pleased to describe as his intellect."

"Now, that," Peter pointed out, "is not what I would term a courteous method of discussing a man at his own table. You are damn disagreeable this morning, Bob. So I know, of course, that you have come another cropper in your fortune-hunting."

“Peter,” said I, in admiration, “your sagacity at times is almost human! I have spent a most enjoyable day, though,” I continued, idly. “I have been communing with Nature, Peter. She is about her spring-cleaning in the woods yonder and everywhere I have seen traces of her handiwork. I have seen the sky, which was washed overnight, and the sun, which has evidently been freshly enamelled. I have seen the new leaves as they swayed and whispered over your extensive domains, with the fret of spring alert in every sap-cell. I have seen the little birds as they hopped among said leaves and commented upon the scarcity of worms. I have seen the buxom flowers as they curtsied and danced above your flower-beds like a miniature comic-opera chorus. And besides that ——”

“Yes?” said Peter, with a grin, “and besides that?”

“And besides that,” said I, firmly, “I have seen nothing.” And internally I appraised this bloated Peter Blagden, and reflected that this was the man whom Stella had loved; and myself, and remembered that this had been the boy who once loved Stella. For this, as I have said, was on the twenty-eighth of April.

And the next morning I discoursed with my soul, what time I sat upon the wall-top and smiled and kicked my heels so gently to and fro among the ivy.

"For, in spite of appearances," I debated with myself, "it is barely possible that the handkerchief was not hers. She may have borrowed it or have got it by mistake, somehow. In which case, it is only reasonable to suppose that she will miss it, and ask me if I saw it; on the contrary, if the handkerchief is hers, she will naturally understand, when I return the book without it, that I have feloniously detained this airy gewgaw as a souvenir. And, in that event, she ought to be very much pleased and a bit embarrassed, and will preserve upon the topic of handkerchiefs a maidenly silence. Do you know, Robert Townsend, there is really the making of a very fine logician about you?"

Then I consulted my watch, and subsequently gave a grimace. "It is also barely possible," said I, "that Margaret may not come at all. In which case — Margaret! Now, is n't that a sweet name? Is n't it the very sweetest name in the world? Now, really, you know, it is queer her being named Margaret — extraordinarily queer — because Margaret has always been my favourite woman's name. I daresay, unbeknownst to myself, I am a bit of a prophet."

But she did come. She was very much surprised to see me.

"You!" she said, with a gesture which was practically tantamount to disbelief. "Why, how extraordinary!"

"You rogue!" I commented, internally: "you know it is the most natural thing in the world." Aloud I stated: "Why, yes, I happened to notice you forgot your book yesterday, so I dropped in — or, to be more accurate, climbed up — to return it."

She reached for it. Our hands touched, with the usual result to my pulses. Also, there were the customary manual tinglings.

"You are very kind," was her observation. Afterward she opened the book, and turned over its pages expectantly, and flushed a proper shade of pink, and said nothing.

And then, and not till then, my heart consented to resume its normal functions. And then, also, "These iron spikes ——" said its owner.

"Yes?" she queried, innocently.

"— so humpy," I complained.

"Are they?" said she. "Why, then, how silly of you to continue to sit on them!"

The result of this comment was that we were both late for luncheon.

By a peculiar coincidence, at twelve o'clock the following day, I happened to be sitting on the same wall at the same spot. Peter said at luncheon it was a queer thing that some people never could manage to be on time for their meals.

I fancy we can all form a tolerably accurate idea of what took place during the next day or so.

It is scarcely necessary to retail our conversation. We gossiped of simple things. We talked very little: and, when we did talk, the most ambitiously conceived sentences were apt to result in nothing more prodigious than a wave of the hand, and a pause, and, not infrequently, a heightened complexion. Altogether, then, it was not oppressively wise or witty talk, but it was eminently satisfactory to its makers.

As when, on the third morning, I wished to sit by Margaret on the bench, and she declined to invite me to descend from the wall.

"On the whole," said she, "I prefer you where you are; like all picturesque ruins, you are most admirable at a little distance."

"Ruins!" — and, indeed, I was not yet twenty-six — "I am a comparatively young man."

As a concession, "In consideration of your past, you are tolerably well preserved."

"— and I am not a new brand of marmalade, either."

"No, for that comes in glass jars; whereas, Mr. Townsend, I have heard, is most prominent in family ones."

"A pun, Miss Beechinor, is the base coinage of conversation tendered only by the mentally dishonest."

"Besides, one can never have enough of marmalade."

"I trust they give you a sufficiency of it in the nursery?"

"Dear me, you have no idea how admirably that paternal tone sits upon you! You would make an excellent father, Mr. Townsend. You really ought to adopt someone. I wish you would adopt *me*, Mr. Townsend."

I said I had other plans for her. Discreetly, she forbore to ask what they were.

"Avis ——"

"You must not call me that."

"Why not? It's your name, is n't it?"

"Yes — to my friends."

"Are n't we friends — Avis?"

"We — we have not known each other long enough, Mr. Townsend."

"Oh, what's the difference? We are going to be friends, aren't we — Avis?"

"Why— why, I am sure I don't know."

"Gracious gravy, what an admirable colour you have, Avis! Well — I know. And I can inform you, quite confidentially, Avis, that we are not going to be — friends. We are going to be ——"

"We are going to be late for luncheon," said she, in haste. "Good morning, Mr. Townsend."

Yet, the very next day, paradoxically enough, she told me:

"I shall always think of you as a very, very dear friend. But it is quite impossible we should ever be anything else."

"And why, Avis?"

"Because ——"

"That"—after an interval—"strikes me as rather a poor reason. So, suppose we say November?"
Another interval.

"Well, Avis?"

"Dear me, are n't those roses pretty? I wish you would get me one, Mr. Townsend."

"Avis, we are not discussing roses."

"Well, they *are* pretty."

"Avis!" — reproachfully.

Still another interval.

"I — I hardly know."

"Avis!" — with disappointment.

"I — I believe ——"

"Avis!" — very tenderly.

"I — I almost think so — and the horrid man looks as if he thought so, too!"

There was a fourth interval, during which the girl made a complete and careful survey of her shoes.

Then, "You must give me until to-morrow, Mr. Townsend," and a sudden flutter of skirts.

I returned to Gridlington treading on air.

For I was, by this time, as thoroughly in love as Amadis of Gaul or Aucassin of Beaucaire

or any other hero of romance you may elect to mention.

Some two weeks earlier I would have scoffed at the notion of such a thing coming to pass; and I would have demonstrated too, and logically enough, that it was impossible for Robert Etheridge Townsend, with his keen knowledge of the world and of the innumerable vanities and whims of womankind, ever again to go the way of all flesh. But the problem, like the puzzle of the Eleatic philosophers, had solved itself. "Achilles cannot catch the tortoise," but he does. It was impossible for me to fall in love — but I had done so.

And it pricked my conscience, too, that Margaret should not know I was aware of her identity. But she had chosen to play the comedy to the end, and in common with the greater part of trousered humanity, I had, after all, no insuperable objection to a rich wife; though, to do me justice, I rarely thought of her as Margaret Hugonin, the heiress, but considered her, in a far more comprehensive fashion, as perhaps the one woman in the universe whose perfections triumphantly over-peered the skyiest heights of preciousness.

CHAPTER XXVII

HE ASSISTS IN THE DIVERSION OF DIVERS BIRDS

WE MET, then, in the clear May morning, with what occult trepidations I cannot say. You may depend upon it, though, we had our emotions.

And about us, spring was marshaling her pageant, and from divers nooks, the weather-stained nymphs and fauns regarded us in candid, if preoccupied, appraisement; and above us, the clipped ilex-trees were as about a knowing conference. As for the birds, they were discussing us without any reticence at all, for, more favoured of chance than imperial Solomon, they have been the confidants in any number of such affairs, and regard the way of a man with a maid as one of the most matter-of-fact occurrences in the world.

"Here is he! here is she!" they shrilled. "See how they meet, see how they greet! Ah, sweet, sweet, sweet, to meet in the spring!" And that we two would immediately set to nest-building, they considered a foregone conclusion.

I had taken both her firm, warm hands in salutation, and held them, for a breathing-space, between my own. And my own hands seemed to me two

very gross, and hulking, and raw, and red monstrosities, in contrast with their dimpled captives, and appeared, also, to shake unnecessarily.

"Now, in a moment," said I, "I am going to ask you something very important. But, first, I have a confession to make."

And her glad, shamed eyes bemocked me. "My lord of Burleigh!" she softly breathed. "My liege Cophetua! *My* king Cophetua! And did you think, then, I was blind?"

"Eh?" said I.

"As if I had n't known from the first!" the girl pouted: "as if I had n't known from the very first day when you dropped your cigarette-case! Ah, I had heard of you before, Peter! — of Peter, the misogynist, who was ashamed to go a-wooing in his proper guise! Was it because you were afraid I'd marry you for your money, Peter? — poor, timid Peter! But, oh, Peter, Peter, what possessed you to take the name of that notorious Robert Townsend?" she demanded, with uplifted forefinger. "Could n't you think of a better one, Peter? — of a more respectable one, Peter? It really is a great relief to call you Peter at last. I've had to try so hard to keep from doing it before, Peter."

And in answer, I made an inarticulate sound.

"But you were so grave about it," the girl went on, happily, "that I almost thought you were telling the truth, Peter. Then my maid told me — I — I

mean she happened to mention casually that Mr. Townsend's valet had described his master to her as an extraordinarily handsome young man. So, then, of course, I *knew* you were Peter Blagden."

"I perceive," said I, reflectively, "that Byam has been somewhat too zealous. I begin to suspect, also, that kitchen-gossip is a mischancy petard, and rather more than apt to hoist the engineer who employs it. So, you thought I was Peter Blagden — the rich Peter Blagden? Ah, yes!"

Now the birds were caroling on a wager. "Ah, sweet! what is sweeter?" they sang. "Ah, sweet, sweet, sweet, to meet in the spring."

But the girl gave a wordless cry at the change in my face. "Oh, how dear of you to care so much! I did n't mean that you were *ugly*, Peter. I just meant you are so big and — and *so* like the baby that they probably have on the talcum-powder boxes in Brobdingnag ——"

"Because I happen to be really Robert Townsend — the notorious Robert Townsend;" I continued, with a smile. "I — I am sorry you were deceived by the cigarette-case. I remember now; I borrowed it from Peter. What I meant to confess was that I have known all along you were Margaret Hugonin."

"But I'm not," the girl said, in bewilderment. "Why — why I *told* you I was Avis Beechinor."

"This handkerchief?" I queried, and took it from

my pocket. I had been absurd enough to carry it next to my heart.

“Oh ——!” And now the tension broke, and her voice leapt an octave to high, shrill, hysterical speech.

“I am Avis Beechinor. I am a poor relation, a penniless cousin, a dependent, a hanger-on, do you understand? And you — Ah, how — how funny! Why, Margaret *always* gives me her cast-off finery, the scraps, the remnants, the clothes she is tired of, the misfit things — so that she won’t be ashamed of me, so that I may be fairly presentable. She gave me eight of those handkerchiefs. I meant to pick the monograms out with a needle, you understand, because I have n’t any money to buy handkerchiefs for myself. I remember now — she gave them to me on that — that first day, and I missed one of them a little later on. Ah, how — how funny!” she cried, again, with a tense, pitiful shiver; “ah, how very, very funny! No, Mr. Townsend, I am not an heiress — I ’m a pauper, a poor relation. No, you have failed again, just as you did with Mrs. Barry-Smith and with Miss Jemmett, Mr. Townsend. I — I wish you better luck the next time.”

I must have raised one hand as though in warding off a physical blow. “Don’t,” I hoarsely said.

And all the woman in her leapt to defend me from this vital shame. “Ah no, ah no!” she pleaded, and her hands fell caressingly upon my shoulder; and she raised a penitent, tear-stained face toward mine;

"ah no, forgive me! I did n't mean that altogether. It is different with a man. Of course, you must marry sensibly — of course you must, Mr. Townsend. It is I who am to blame — why, of *course* it 's only I who am to blame. I have encouraged you, I know —— "

"You have n't! you have n't!" I barked.

"But yes—for I came back that second day because I thought you were the rich Mr. Blagden, you understand. I was so tired of being poor, so tired of being dependent, that it simply seemed to me I could not stand it for a moment longer. Ah, I tell you, I was tired, tired, tired! I was tired and sick and worn out with it all!"

I did not interrupt her. I was nobly moved; but even then at the back of my mind some being that was not I was taking notes as to this girl, so young and so desirable, and now so like a plaintive child who has been punished and does not understand exactly why.

"Mr. Townsend, you don't know what it means to a girl to be poor!—you can't ever know, because you are only a man. My mother — ah, you don't know the life I have led! You don't know how I have been hawked about, and set up for inspection by the men who could afford to pay my price, and made to show off my little accomplishments for them, and put through my paces before them like any horse in the market! For we are poor, Mr. Townsend — we are

bleakly, hopelessly poor. We are only hangers-on, you see. And ever since I can remember, she has been telling me I must make a rich marriage — *must* make a rich marriage ——”

And the girl's voice trailed off into silence, and her eyes closed for a moment, and she swayed a little on her feet, so that I caught her by both arms.

But, presently, she opened her eyes, with a wearied sigh, and presently the two fortune-hunters stared each other in the face.

“Ah, sweet! what is sweeter?” sang the birds. “Can you see, can you see, can you see? It is sweet, sweet, sweet!” They were extremely gay over it, were the birds.

After a little, though, I opened my lips, and moistened them two or three times before I spoke. “Yes,” said I, very quietly, “I think I understand. We have both been hangers-on. But that seems, somehow, a long while ago. Yes, it was a knave who scaled that wall the first time — one who needed and had earned a kicking from here to Aldebaran. But I think that I loved you from the very moment I saw you. Will you marry me, Avis?”

Oh, the wonderful, tender change in her face! “You care for me — just me?” she breathed.

“Just you,” I answered, gravely.

And I saw the start, and the merest ghost of a shiver which shook her lovely body, as she leaned

toward me a little, almost in surrender; but, quickly, she laughed.

"That was *very* gentlemanly in you," she said; "but, of course, I understand. Let us part friends, then — Robert. Even if — if you really cared, we could n't marry. We are too poor."

"Too poor!" I scoffed — and my voice was joyous, for I knew now that it was I she loved and not just Peter Blagden's money; "too *poor*, Avis! I am to the contrary, an inordinately rich man, I tell you, for I have your love. Oh, you need n't try to deny it. You are heels over head in love with me. And we have made, no doubt, an unsavoury mess of the past; but the future remains to us. We are the earthen pots, you and I, who wanted to swim with the brazen ones. Well! they have n't quite smashed us, these big, stupid, brazen pots, but they have shown us that they have the power to do it. And so we are going back where we belong — to the poor man's country, Avis — or, in any event, to the country of those God-fearing, sober and honest folk who earn their bread and, just occasionally, a pat of butter to season it."

The world was very beautiful. 'I knew that I was excellent throughout and unconquerable. I moved more near to her.

"For you will come with me, won't you, dear? Oh, you won't have quite so many gowns in this new country, Avis, and, may be, not even a motor-

car; but you 'll have love, and you 'll have happiness, and, best of all, Avis, you will give a certain very undeserving man his chance — his one chance — to lead a real man's life. Are you going to deny him that chance, Avis?"

Her gaze read me through and through; and I bore myself a bit proudly under it; and within me, I gave thanks to God that my heart was all filled with love of her, and that the new-born manhood in Robert Townsend could meet her big brown eyes unflinchingly.

"It would n't be sensible," she wavered.

How I laughed at that! "Sensible! If there is one thing more absurd than another in this very absurd world, it is common-sense. Be sensible and you will be miserable, Avis, not to mention being disliked. Sensible! Why, of course, it is n't sensible. It is stark, rank, staring idiocy for us two not to make a profitable investment of, we 'll say, our natural endowments, when we come to marry. For what will Mrs. Grundy say if we don't? Ah, what will she say, indeed? Avis, just between you and me, I do not care a double-blank domino *what* Mrs. Grundy says. You will obligingly remember that the car for the Hesperides is in the rear, and that this is the third and last call. And in consequence — will you marry me, Avis?"

She gave me her hand frankly, as a man might have done. "Yes, Robert," said Miss Beechinor,

“and God helping us, we will make something better of the future than we have of the past.”

In the silence that fell, one might hear the birds. “Sweet, sweet, sweet!” they twittered. “Can you see, can you see, can you see? Their lips meet. It is sweet, sweet, sweet!”

But, by and by, she questioned me. “Are you sure — quite sure,” she queried, wistfully, “that you would n’t rather have me Margaret Hugonin, the heiress?”

I raised a deprecatory hand. “Avis!” I reproached her; “Avis, Avis, how little you know me! That was the solitary fly in the amber — that I thought I was to marry a woman named Margaret. For I am something of a connoisseur in nomenclature, and Margaret has always — *always* — been my pet detestation in the way of names.”

“Oh, what a child you are!” she said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HE CALLS AND COUNSELS; AND CONFIDES AND
CONSIDERS

I AM now," said I, in my soul, "quite immeasurably, and insanely, and unreasonably, and unadulteratedly happy. Why, of course I am."

This statement was advanced just two weeks later than the events previously recorded. And the origin of it was the fact that I was engaged to Avis Beechinor now, though it was not as yet to be "announced"; for this concession alone had Mrs. Beechinor wrested from an indignant and, latterly, a tearful interview. Yes, I had called at Selwoode, in due form; and in transit for the door had been pounced upon by an excited and comely little person in black.

"Don't you mind a word she said," this lady had exhorted, "because she is *the* Gadarene swine, and Avis has told me everything! Of course you are to be married at once, and I only wish *I* could find the only man in the world who can keep me interested for four hours on a stretch and send my pulse up to a hundred and *make* me feel those thrilly thrills I've always longed for."

"But surely ——" said I.

"No, I'm beginning to be afraid not, beautiful, though of course I used to be crazy about Billy Woods; and then once I was engaged to another man for a long time, and I was perfectly devoted to him, but he *never* made me feel a single thrilly thrill. And would you believe it, Mr. Townsend? — after a while he came back, precisely as though he had been a bad penny or a cat, but he had been in the war and came home just a night before I left, wounded and promoted several times and completely covered with glory and brass buttons. He came seven miles to see me, and I thoroughly enjoyed seeing him, for I had on my best dress and was feeling very talkative. Well! at ten I was quite struck on him. At eleven perfectly willing to part friends, and at twelve *crazy* for him to go. He stayed till half-past, and I did n't want to think of him for days. And, by the way, I am Miss Hugonin, and I hope you and Avis will be very happy. *Good-bye!*"

"Good-bye!" said I.

And that, oddly enough, was the one private talk I ever had with the Margaret Hugonin whom, for some two weeks, I had believed myself to be upon the verge of marrying; for the next time I conversed with her alone she was Mrs. William Woods.

"Oh, go away, Billy!" she had then said, impatiently. "How often will I have to tell you it is n't decent to be always hanging around your wife?"

Oh, you dear little crooked-necktied darling!" — and she remedied the fault on tiptoe — "*please* run away and make love to somebody else, and be sure to get her name right, so that I shan't assassinate the wrong person to-morrow — because I want to tell this *very* attractive child all about Avis, and not be bothered." And subsequently she did.

But I do not forestall her confidences, lest I get my cart even further in advance of my nominal Pegasus than the loosely-made conveyance is at present lumbering.

And meanwhile Peter Blagden and I had called at Selwoode once or twice in unison and due estate. And Peter considered "Miss Beechinor a damn fine girl, and Miss Hugonin too, only ——"

"Only," I prompted, between puffs, "she keeps everybody, as my old Mammy used to say, 'in a perpetual swivet.' I never understood what the phrase meant, precisely, but I somehow always knew that it was eloquent."

"Just so," said Peter. "You prefer — ah — a certain amount of tranquillity. I have n't been abroad for a long while," said Mr. Blagden; and then, after another meditative pause: "Now Stella — well, Stella was a damn sight too good for me, of course ——"

"She was," I affably assented.

"— and I'd be the very last man in the world to

deny it. But still you *do* prefer ——” Then Peter broke off short and said: “My God, Bob! what’s the matter?”

So I think I must have had the ill-taste to have laughed a little over Mr. Blagden’s magnanimity in regard to Stella’s foibles. But I only said: “Oh, nothing, Peter! I was just going to tell you that travelling *does* broaden the mind, and that you will find an overcoat indispensable in Switzerland, and that during the voyage you ought to keep in the open air as much as possible, and that you should give the steward who waits on you at table at least ten shillings — I was just going to tell you, in fine, that you would be a fool to squander any money on a guide-book, when I am here to give you all the necessary pointers.”

“But I did n’t mean to go to Europe exactly,” said Mr. Blagden; “I — I just meant to go abroad in a general sense. Any place would be abroad, you know, where people were n’t always remembering how rich you were, and were n’t scrambling to marry you out of hand, but simply really cared, you know, like she does. Oh, may be it *is* bad form to mention it, but I — I could n’t help seeing how she looked at you, Bob. And it waked something — Oh, I don’t know what I mean,” said Peter — “it’s just damn foolishness, I suppose.”

“It’s very far from that,” I said, and I was genuinely moved, just as I always am when pathos,

preferably grotesque, has caught me unprepared. This millionaire was lonely, then, because of his millions, and Stella was dead; and somehow I understood and laid one hand upon his shoulder.

"Oh, *you* can't help it, I suppose, if all women love by ordinary because he is so like another person, and all men because she is so different. My poor caliph, I would sincerely advise you to play the fool just as you plan to do — oh, anywhere — and without even Mesrour. In fine go Bunburying at once. For very frankly, First Cousin of the Moon, it is the one thing worth while in life."

"I half believe I will," said Peter. So he was packing in the interim during which I pretended to be writing and, in reality, was considering the obdurate fact that, whilst Avis was in England by this, I could not decently leave America until those last five chapters were finished. And so, in part as an excuse for not scrawling the dullest of nonsense and subsequently tearing it up, I was also considering the unquestioned fact that I was in love with Avis, and upon the verge of marrying her, and was in consequence, as a matter of plain logic, deliriously happy.

"For when you are in love with a woman you, of course, want to marry her more than you want anything else. In nature, it is a serious and — well, an almost irretrievable business. And I shall have to cultivate the domestic virtues and smoke

cheaper cigarettes and all that, but I shall be glad to do every one of these things, for her sake — after a while. I shall probably enjoy doing them.”

And I read Bettie Hamlyn’s letter for the seventeenth time.

For Bettie had answered the wild rhapsody which I wrote to tell her how much in love I was with Elena Barry-Smith. And in the nature of things I had not written Bettie again to tell her I was, and by a deal the more, in love with Avis Beechinor. The task was delicate, the reasons of my not unnatural change were such as you may creditably transmit in a personal interview only during which you are particularly boyish and talk very fast.

Besides, I don’t like writing letters; and moreover, there was no real need to write. I was going to Gridlington; what more natural than to ride over to Fairhaven some clear morning and tell Bettie everything? I pictured her surprise and her delight at seeing me, and reflected it would be unfair to her to render an inaccurate account of matters, such as any letter must necessarily be.

Only, first, there was the garden of Peter’s aunt — which sounds like an introductory French exercise — and then Avis came. And, somehow, I had not, in consequence, traversed the scant nine miles that lay as yet ’twixt me and Bettie Hamlyn. I had always meant to do it the next day.

And the next day after this I really did.

"For I ought to tell Bettie about everything," I reflected. "No matter if the engagement *is* a secret, I ought to tell Bettie about it."

When I had done so, Bettie simply shook her head. "Oh, Robin, Robin!" she said, "how did I ever come to raise a child that does n't know his own mind for as much as two minutes? And how dared that Barry-Smith person to slap you, I would like to know."

"Now you're jealous, Bettie. You are thinking she infringed upon an entirely personal privilege, and you resent it."

"Well — but I've the right to, you see, and she had n't. I consider her to be a bold-faced jig. And I don't approve of this Avis person either, you understand; but we poor mothers are always being annoyed by slushy, mushy Avises. I suppose there's a reason for it. She'll throw you over, you know, as soon as *her* mother has had an inning or two. That's why she took her to Europe," Bettie explained, with a fine confusion of personalities. "Only she just wanted any quiet place where she could take aromatic spirits of ammonia and point out between doses that she has given up her entire life to her child and has never made any demands on her and has n't the strength to argue with her, because her heart is simply broken. We mothers always say that; and the funny part is that

if you say it often enough it invariably works far better than any possible argument."

I told her she was talking nonsense, and she said, irrelevantly enough: "Setebos, and Setebos, and Setebos!" I don't think very highly of Setebos sometimes, because he muddles things so. Oh, well, I shan't cry Willow. Besides there *are n't* any sycamore-trees in the garden. So let's go into the garden, dear. That sounds as if I ate in the back pantry, does n't it? Of course you are n't of any account any more, and you never will be, but at least you don't look at people as though they were a new sort of bug whenever they have just thought a sentence or two and then gone on, without bothering to say it."

So we went into Bettie's garden. It had not changed. . . .

Nothing had changed. It was as though I had somehow managed to push back the hands of the clock after all. Fairhaven accepted me incuriously. I was only "an old student." In addition, I was vaguely rumoured to write "pieces" for the magazines. Probably I did; the old students were very prone to vagaries after leaving King's College; one of them had even gone to Shanghai and had settled there — and Shanghai, in common with most other places, Fairhaven accorded the negative tribute of just not absolutely disbelieving in its existence.

Nothing had changed. The Finals were over; and with the noisy exodus of the college-boys, Fairhaven had sunk contentedly into an even deeper stupor, as Fairhaven always does in summer. And, for the rest, the unpaven sidewalks were just as dusty, the same deep ruts and the identical puddles which never dry, not even in mid-August, adorned Fairhaven's single street, and the comfortable moss upon Fairhaven's roofs had not varied by a shade.

Nothing had changed. In the precise middle of the campus Lord Peniston, our Governor in Colonial days, still posed, in dingy marble; and the fracture of that finger I had inadvertently broken off the night Billy Woods and I painted the statue all over, in six colours of a vicious disharmony, was white and new even now. Kathleen Eppes had married and had left Fairhaven; otherwise the same girls were already planning their toilets for the Y. M. C. A. reception in October, which formally presents the "new students" to society at large; and presently these girls would be going to the Germans or the Opera House with the younger brother of the boy who used to take them thither.

Nothing had changed — no, not even I was changed. For I had early discovered that Bettie Hamlyn did not care a pin for me in myself. She was simply very fond of me because, at times, I reminded her of a boy who had once gone to King's

College; and her reception of me, for the first two days, was unmistakably provisional.

"Very well!" I said.

And I did it. For I knew how difficult it was to deceive Bettie, and in consequence my least faculty rose to the challenge. I did not simply mimic my former self, I was compelled, almost, to believe I was indeed that former self, because not otherwise could I get Bettie Hamlyn's admiration. Had I paused even momentarily to reflect upon the excellence of my acting, she would have known. So I resolutely believed I was being perfectly candid; and with constant use those older tricks of speech and gesture and almost of thought, at first laborious mimicry, became well-nigh involuntary.

In fine, we could not wipe away five years of course, but with practice we found that you would very often forget them and for quite a while.

I had explained to Bettie's father I was going to board with them that summer. Had I not been so haphazard in the progress of this narrative, I would have earlier announced that Bettie's father was the Latin professor at King's College. He was very old and vague, and his general attitude toward the universe was that of remote recollection of having noticed something of the sort before. Professor Hamlyn, therefore, told me he was very glad to hear of my intended stay beneath his roof; hazarded the speculation that I had written a book which he

meant to read upon the very first opportunity; blinked once or twice; and immediately lapsed into silent consideration of some Pliocene occurrence which, if you were to judge by the expression of his mild old countenance, he did not find entirely satisfactory.

So I spent three months in Fairhaven; and Bettie and I read all the old books over again, and were perfectly happy.

And what I wrote in those five uncompleted chapters was so good that in common decency I was compelled to alter the preceding twenty-nine and bring them a bit nearer to Bettie's standard. For I was utilising Bettie's ideas without subterfuge. She did not have the gift of putting them on paper; that was my trivial part, as I now recognised with reverence.

"Of course, though, you had to meddle," I would scold at her. "I had meant the infernal thing to be a salable book. To-day it's just a stenographic report of how these people elected to behave. I have n't anything to do with it. I wash my hands of it. I consider you, in fine, a cormorant, a conscienceless marauder, a meddlesome Mattie, and a born dramatist."

"But, it's *much* better than anything you've ever done, Robin ——"

"That's what I'm grumbling about. I consider it very unfeeling of you to write better novels than I

do," I retorted. "But, oh, how *damnably* good that chapter is!" I said, a little later on.

"Do you know that 's just what I was thinking," said Bettie. . . .

All in all, we were a deal more than happy during those three months.

Meantime, being in love, I refined upon my notions of love with the ingenuity of an Elizabethan.

As when I meditated:

"I *am* in love with Avis — oh, granted! I am not the least bit in love with — we will euphemistically say 'anyone else.' But confound it! I am coming to the conclusion that marrying a woman because you happen to be in love with her is about as logical a proceeding as throwing the cat out of the window because the rhododendrons are in bloom. Why, if I marry Avis I shall probably have to live with her the rest of my life!

"What if that obsolete notion of Schopenhauer's were true after all — that love is a blind instinct which looks no whit toward the welfare of the man and woman it dominates, but only to the equipment a child born of them would inherit? What if, after all, love tends, without variation, to yoke the most incompatible in order that the average type of humanity may be preserved? Then were the one passion we esteem as sacred simply the delusion of any other beast in rutting-time. Then were we, with

the pigs and sparrows, just so many pieces on the chess-board, and our evolutions just a friendly trial of skill between what we call life and death.

"I love Avis Beechinor. But I have loved, in all sincerity, many other women, and I rejoice to-day, unfeignedly, that I never married anyone of them. For marriage means a life-long companionship, a long, long journey wherein must be adjusted, one by one, each least and tiniest discrepancy between the fellow-wayfarers; and always a pebble if near enough to the eye will obscure a mountain.

"Why, Avis cannot attempt a word of four syllables without coming at least once to grief! It is a trifle of course, but in a life-long companionship there are exactly fourteen thousand trifles to one event of real importance. And deuce take it! the world is populated by mere men and women, and the poets are only specious and abandoned rhetoricians; for it never was, and never will be, possible to love anybody 'to the level of everyday's Most quiet need by sun or candlelight.'

"Or not to me at least.

"In a sentence, when it comes to a life-long companionship, I prefer not the woman who would make me absolutely happy for a twelvemonth, but rather the woman with whom I could chat contentedly for twenty years, and who would keep me to the mark. I'm rather tired of being futile; and not for any moral reason, but because it is n't worthy of *me*.

In fine, I do not want to die entirely. I want to leave behind some not inadequate expression of Robert Townsend, and I do not care at all what people say of it, so that it is here when I am gone. Oh, Stella understood!

“Now Bettie ——”

I arose resolutely. “I had much better go for a long, and tedious, and jolting, and universally damnable walk. Bettie would make something vital of me — if I could afford her the material ——”

And I grinned a little. “‘Go, therefore, now, and work; for there shall no straw be given you, yet shall ye deliver the tale of bricks.’ Yes, you would have sore need of a miracle, dear Bettie — but, then, I have achieved a greater miracle in only five short years!”

I started for that walk I was to take. But Dr. Jeal and Colonel Snawley were seated in armchairs in front of Clarriker’s Emporium enjoying, as the Colonel mentioned, “the cool of the evening,” although to the casual observer the real source of their pleasure would have appeared to be an unlimited supply of chewing-tobacco.

So I lingered here and gleaned midst leisurely expectorations much knowledge as to the fall crops, and exactly how it was that “Tilden never got in,” and a liberally-spiced biography of the wife of a celebrated general, upon whose staff the Colonel had

served during the War — and there has never been in the world's history but one war, so far as Fairhaven is concerned — and how the Colonel "walked right in upon 'em, by God, suh!"

Then half a block farther on, Mrs. Rabbet wanted to know if I had "ever seen such weather," and to tell me exactly what little Adrian said the other day, because "it would make such a funny story." Only she could never quite decide whether it happened on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, so that, after precisely seven digressions on this delicate point, the *dénoué-*ment of the tale, I must confess, fell rather flat.

And then Mab Spessifer demanded that I come up on the porch and draw some more pictures for her. The child was waiting with three sheets of paper and a pencil all ready, just on the chance that I might pass; and you cannot very well refuse a cripple who adores you and is not able to play with the other brats. You get instead into a kind of habit of calling every day and trying to make her laugh, because she is such a helpless little nuisance.

And tousled mothers weep over you in passageways and tell you how good you are, and altogether the entire affair is extremely tedious; but having started it, you keep it up somehow.

In fine, it is a symbol that I never took the walk which was to dust the cobwebs from my brain and make me just like all the other persons, thick about

me, who grow up, and mate, and beget, and die, in the incurious fashion of oxen, without ever wondering if there is any plausible reason for doing it; and my brief progress was upon the surface very like that of the bedeviled fellow in "Les Facheux." Yet I enjoyed it somehow. Never to be hurried, and always to stop and talk with every person whom you meet, upon topics in which no conceivable human being could possibly be interested, may not sound attractive, but in Fairhaven it is the rule; and, oddly enough, it breeds, in practice, a sort of family feeling — if only by entitling everybody to the condoned and matter-of-course stupidity of aunts and uncles — which is not really all unpleasant.

So I went home at half-past seven, to supper and to Bettie, in a quite contented frame of mind. It did not seem conceivable that any world so beautiful and stupid and well-meaning could have either the heart or the wit to thwart my getting anything I really wanted; and the thought elated me.

Only I did not know, precisely, what I wanted.

CHAPTER XXIX

HE HAS A LETTER FROM AVIS, AND PARTICIPATES
IN DIVERS CONFIDENCES

I WAS in the act of writing to Avis when the letter came; and I put it aside unopened, for in plain truth I had never found the letters of Avis particularly interesting reading.

"It will be what they call a newsy letter, of course. I do wish Avis would n't write to me as if she were under oath to tell the entire truth. She communicates so many things which actually happened that it reads like a 'special correspondent' in some country town writing for a Sunday morning's paper—and with, to a moral certainty, the word 'separate' lurking somewhere and spelt with three E's, and an 'always' with two L's. No, my dear, I am at present too busy expressing my adoration for you to be exposed to such inharmonious jars."

Then I wrote my dithyrambs and sealed them. Subsequently I poised the unopened letter between my lengthy fingers.

"But remember that if she were here to *say* all this to you, your pulses would be pounding like the pistons of an excited locomotive! Nature, you are

a jade! I console myself with the reflection that it is frequently the gift of facile writing which makes the co-respondent, — but I *do* wish you were not such a hazardous matchmaker. Oh, well! that particular Rubicon is miles behind.”

I slit the envelope.

I read the letter through again, with a redoubling interest, and presently began to laugh. “So she begins to fear we have been somewhat hasty, asks a little time for reconsideration of her precise sentiment toward me, and feels meanwhile in honour bound to release me from our engagement! Yet if upon mature deliberation — eh, oh, yes! twaddle! *and* commonplace! and dashed, of course, with a jigger of Scriptural quotation!”

I paused to whistle. “There is strange milk in this cocoanut, could I but discern its nature.”

I did, some four weeks later, when with a deal of mail I received her next letter, which was the last I was ever to receive from Avis Beechinor.

Wrote Avis :

DEAR ROBERT

Thank you very much for returning my letters and for the one you wrote me. No I believe it better you should not come on to see me now and talk the matter over as you suggest because it would probably only make you unhappy. And then too I am sure some day you will be friends with me and a very good and true one. I return the last letter you sent me in a separate envelope but as I destroy all my mail as soon as I have read it I cannot send you the others. I have promised to marry Mr. Blagden and we are to be married on the fifteenth of this month

very quietly with no outsiders. So good bye Robert. I wish you every success and happiness that you may desire and with all my heart I pray you to be true to your better self. God bless you allways. Your sincere friend,

AVIS M. BEECHINOR.

I indulged in a low and melodious whistle. "The little slut!"

Then I said: "Peter Blagden again! I *do* wish that life would try to be a trifle more plausible."

But, as drowning men are said to recollect the unrecallable, I had vividly seen in that instant the two months' action just overpast, and all its three participants — the thin-lipped mother, the besotted millionaire, and the girl yet hesitant between new ideals and the habits of a life-time; and besides, in the old garden yonder. . . .

So very carefully I refolded the letter I had just read, to keep it as a salutary relic; and then:

"Dear Avis!" said I.

And I saw there was a letter from Peter Blagden, too. It said, in part:

I am everything that you think me, Bob. My one defence is that I could not help it. I loved her from the moment I saw her. . . . You did n't appreciate her, you know. You take, if you will forgive my saying it, too light a view of life to value the love of a good woman properly, and Avis noticed it of course. Now I do understand what the unselfish love of woman means, because my first wife was an angel, as you know. . . . It is a comfort to think that my dear saint in heaven knows I am not quite so lonely now, and is gladdened by that knowledge. I know she would have wished it —

I read no further. "Oh, Stella, Stella! they have *all* forgotten. They all insist to-day that you were an angel, and they have come almost to believe that you habitually flew about the world in a night-gown, with an Easter lily in your hand — But I remember, dear. I know you 'd scratch her eyes out. I know you 'd do it now, if only you were able, because you loved this Peter Blagden."

I found Bettie in the moonlighted garden, but in the company of Josiah Clarriker, Fairhaven's leading business-man, and whom, it was an open secret, Professor Hamlyn, although vaguely of course, desired her to marry.

"I was just recalling to Miss Hamlyn's attention," Mr. Clarriker more lately resumed, "the beautiful lines of our immortal poet, Owen Meredith, which run, as I remember them:

"I thought of the dress she wore that time
That we stood under the cypress-tree together,
In that land, in that clime,
And I turned and looked, and she was sitting there
In the box next but one to the stage, and dressed
In that muslin dress, with that full soft hair
And that jessamine blossom at her breast."

"That is a very beautiful sentiment," said Mr. Clarriker, "and I have always been particularly fond of that piece. It is called 'Aux Italiens.'"

"Yes, I have been previously affected by it," said I, "and deeply."

“And so — as I was about to observe, Miss Hamlyn — you will notice that the poet Meredith gowned one of the most beautiful characters he ever created in white and laid great stress upon the fact that her beauty was immeasurably enhanced by the dainty simplicity of her muslin dress. This fabric, indeed, suits all types of faces and figures, and is economical withal, especially the present popular mercerised waistings and vestings that are fast invading the realm of silks. We show at our Emporium an immense quantity of these beautiful goods in more than a hundred styles, elaborate enough for the most formal occasions, at fifty and seventy-five cents a yard, and — as I was about to observe, Miss Hamlyn — I would indeed esteem it a favour should you permit me to send up a few samples to-morrow, from which to make a selection at, I need not add, my personal expense.

“You see, Mr. Townsend,” he continued, more inclusively, “we have no florists in Fairhaven, and I have always considered candy to be extremely indigestible, though of course we are compelled by popular prejudice to handle it — but only as a side line.”

“And that,” said I, when Mr. Clarriker had gone, “is what you are actually considering! I have always believed Dickens invented that man to go into one of the latter chapters of ‘Edwin Drood.’ It is the

solitary way of explaining certain people — that they were invented by some fagged novelist who unfortunately died before he finished the book they were to be locked up in. As it was, they got loose and annoy you.”

“Oh, I have seen worse,” said Bettie, as in meditation. “It’s just Josiah’s way of expressing the fact that I am stupendously beautiful in white; and he is, after all, a deal more considerate, say, than you. For instance, I was crazy to go to the show on Tuesday night, and Josiah Clarriker was the *only* person who thought to ask me, even though he *is* one of those little fireside companions who always get so syrupy whenever they take you anywhere that you simply can’t stand it. The circumstance both prevented my acceptance and accentuated his devotion; and quite frankly, Robin, I *am* thinking of him, for at bottom Josiah is a dear.”

I laid one hand on each of Bettie’s shoulders; and it was in my mind within the moment that this involuntary act was that of one fond comrade with another, and had not any sexual tinge at all.

“You are to marry me as soon as may be possible,” said I, “and preferably to-morrow afternoon. Avis has thrown me over, God bless her, and I am free, — until of course you take charge of me. There was a clever woman once who told me I was not fit to be the captain of my soul, though I would make an admirable lieutenant. She was right. It is under-

stood you are to henpeck me to your heart's content and to my ultimate salvation."

"I shall assuredly not marry you," observed Miss Hamlyn, "until you have at least asked me to do so. And besides, how dared she throw you over ——"

"But I don't intend to ask you, for I have not a single bribe to offer. I merely intend to marry you. I am a ne'er-do-well, a debauchee, a tippler, a compendium of all the vices. I'm not a bit in love with you, and as any woman will forewarn you, I am sure to make you a vile husband. Your solitary chance is to bully me into temperance and propriety, with precisely seven million probabilities against you, because I am a seasoned and accomplished liar. Can you do that bullying, Bettie—and keep it up, I mean?"

And she was silent for a while. "Robin," she said, at last, "you'll never understand why women like you. You'll always think it is because they admire you for some quality or another. It is really because they pity you. You are such a baby — no, I don't mean the boyishness you trade upon. I've known for a long while all that was just put on. And, oh, how hard you've tried to be a boy of late!"

"And I thought I'd fooled you, Bettie! Well, I never could. I'm sorry, though, if I've been so clumsy ——"

"But you were doing it for me," she said. "You were doing it because you thought I'd like it. Oh, can't you understand that I *know* you are worthless,

and that you have never loved any human being in all your life except Stella Blagden, and that *yet* you have not ever failed me! If you were an admirable person, or a person with commendable instincts, or an unselfish person, or if you were even in love with me, it would n't count of course. It is because you are none of these things that it counts for so much to see you honest with me — sometimes — and even to see you scheming and play-acting — and so transparently! — just to bring about a little pleasure for me. Oh, Robin, I am afraid that nowadays I love you *because* of your vices!”

“And I you because of your virtues,” said I; “so that there is no possible apprehension of either affection ever going into bankruptcy. Therefore the affair is settled; and we will be married in October.”

Then, and only then, my hands were lifted from her shoulders. And we began to talk composedly of quite impersonal matters.

It was two days later that John Charteris came to Fairhaven and there I met him the same afternoon upon Cambridge street. The little man stopped short and in full view of the public achieved what, had he been a child, were most properly describable as making a face at me.

“That,” he explained, “expresses the involuntary confusion of Belial on re-encountering the anchorite

who escaped his diabolical machinations after all. But, oh, dear me! have n't you been translated yet? Why, I thought the carriage would have called long ago, just as it did for Elijah."

"Now, don't be an ass, Jack. I *was* rather idiotic, I suppose ——"

"Of course you were," he said, as we shook hands. "It is your unfailing charm. You silly boy, I came to Fairhaven because I heard you were here, and because I have been foolish enough to miss you. Anne and the others don't arrive until October. Oh, you adorable child, I have read the last book, and every one of the short stories as well, and I want to tell you that in their own peculiar cheap and silly line the two volumes are masterpieces. Anne wept and chuckled over them, and so did I, and with a quite equal lack of restraint; only it was over the noble and self-sacrificing portions that Anne wept. And — I congratulate you, I really do."

"Of course," I sulkily observed, "if you have simply come to Fairhaven to make fun of me, I can only pity your limitations."

He spoke in quite another voice. "You silly boy, it was n't for that at all. I think you must know that I have read what you have published thus far with something more than interest; but I have wanted to tell you this in so many words. And I shall look forward to the accomplishment of what I have always felt sure that you could do. I am very, very glad.

More so than I can say. And I had thought you must know this without my saying it."

The man was clamantly sincere. And I was very much pleased. And, in fine, we became again, upon the spot as it were, the very best of friends.

It was excellent to have Charteris to talk against. The little man had many tales to tell me of those dissolute gay people we had known and frolicked with; indeed, I think that he was trying to allure me back to the old circles, for he preoccupied his life by scheming to bring about by underhand methods some perfectly unimportant consummation, which very often a plain word would have secured at once. But now he swore he was not "making tea."

That had always been a byword between us, by the way, since I had long ago applied to him the phrase first used of Pope—"that he could not make tea without a conspiracy." And it may be that in this case he spoke the truth, and had come to Fairhaven just for the pleasure of seeing me and for nothing else.

"You are very well rid of the Hardresses," he adjudged. "Did I tell you of the male one's exhibition of jealousy last year! I can assure you that the fellow now entertains for me precisely the same affection I have always borne toward cold lamb. It is the real tragedy of my life that Anne is ethically incapable of letting a week pass without partaking of a leg of mutton. She is not particularly fond of it,

and indeed I never encountered anybody who was; she has simply been reared with the notion that 'people' always have mutton once a week. What, have you never noticed that with 'people' to eat mutton once a week is a sort of guarantee of respectability? I do not refer to chops of course, which are not wholly inconsistent with depravity. But the ability to eat mutton in its roasted form, by some odd law of nature, implies a quite inseparable habit of paying your pew-rent regularly and of changing your flannels on the proper date. However, I was telling you about Jasper Hardress —" And he repeated the story of their imbroglio in such a fashion that it sounded farcical then.

"But, after all, you *did* make love to her, Jack."

"I have forgotten what was exactly the last observation of the lamented Julius Cæsar," Mr. Charteris leisurely observed — "though I remember that at the time it impressed me as being uncommonly appropriate ——"

Meanwhile he and Bettie got on together a deal better than I had ever anticipated.

Charteris, though, received an ensuing confidence far too lightly. "You are going to marry her! Why, of course you are. Ever since I encountered you, you have been 'going to marry' somebody or other. It is very odd I should have written about the Foolish Prince so long before I knew you. I daresay

I am a bit of a prophet. But, then, I helped to mould you too — a little ——”

And resolutely Bettie said nothing except the most complimentary things about him.

But I trapped her once.

“Still,” I observed, when he had gone and she had just completed a dilation upon how perfectly delightful Mr. Charteris was, “still he shan’t ever come to *our* house, shall he?”

“Why, of course not!” said Bettie, who was meditating upon some cosmic question which required immediate attention. And then she grew very angry and said, “Oh, you *dog!*” and threw a sofa-cushion at me.

“I hate that wizened man,” she presently volunteered, “more bitterly than I do any person on earth. For it was he who taught you to adopt infancy as a profession. He robbed me. And Setebos permitted it. And now you are just the man I’m going to marry — Oh, well!” said Bettie, and more sprightlily, “you are rather a dear even in that capacity. Only I wonder what *becomes* of all the first choices?”

“They must keep them for us somewhere, Bettie dear. And that is probably the explanation of everything.”

And a little hand had snuggled into mine. “You do understand without having to have it all spelt out for you. And that’s a comfort, too. But, oh ——!” said Bettie.

CHAPTER XXX

HE ALLOWS THE MERITS OF IMPERFECTION

I WAS quite contented now and assured as to the future. I foreknew the future would be tranquil and lacking in any particular excitement, and I had already ceded, in anticipation, the last tittle of mastery over my own actions; but Bettie would keep me to the mark, would wring, in fine, from Robert Townsend the very best there was in him, although not painlessly, and it would be this best which would endure, and unalloyed, in what I wrote. I had never imagined that for the ore smelting was an agreeable process; and I faced the future ardently.

One day I said, "To-morrow I must have holiday. There are certain things that need burying, Bettie dear, and — it's my last holiday, believe me. It — oh, well! it's just the funeral of my youth I want to go to."

"And to-morrow?" Bettie said; for she knew well enough of what event to-morrow was the anniversary, and it is to her credit she added: "Well, for this once ——" For of all the women whom I had loved, there was but one that Bettie Hamlyn had ever envied. And this was on the eve of Stella's birthday.

Next day a woman in mourning — in mourning fluffed and furbelowed and jetted in such pleasing fashion that it seemed flamboyantly to demand immediate consolation of all marriageable males — viewed me with a roving eye as I heaped daffodils on Stella's grave. They had cost me a pretty penny, too, for this was in September. But then I must have daffodils, much as I loathe the wet, limp feel of them, because she would have chosen daffodils. . . . Well! I fancied this woman thought me sanctioned by both church and law in what I did — and viewed me in my supposedly recent bereavement and gauged my potentialities — viewed me, in short, with the glance of resigned and adventurous widowhood.

My faith (I meditated) if she knew! — if I could but speak my thought to her!

“Madam” — let us imagine me, my hat raised, my voice grave — “the woman who lies here was a stranger to me. I did not know her. I knew that her eyes were very blue, that her hair was sunlight, that her voice had certain pleasing modulations; but I did not know the woman. And she cared nothing for me. That is why my voice shakes as I tell you of it. And I have brought her daffodils, because of all flowers she loved them chiefly, and because there is no one else who remembers this. It is the flower of spring, and Stella — for that was her name, madam — died in the spring of the year, in the spring of her

life; and Stella would have been just twenty-six today. Oh, and daffodils, madam, are all white and gold, even as that handful of dust beneath us was when we buried it with a great flourish of crêpe and lamentation, precisely two years and five months ago. Yet the dust here was tender flesh at one time, and it clad a brave heart; but we thought of it — and I among the rest — as only a costly plaything with which some lucky man might while away his leisure hours. I believe now that it was something more. I believe — ah, well, my *credo* is of little consequence. But whatever this woman may have been, I did not know her. And she cared nothing for me.”

I reflected I would like to do it. I could imagine the stare, the squawk, the rustling furbelows, as madam fled from this grave madman. She would probably have me arrested.

You see I had come to think differently of Stella. At times I remembered her childish vanity, her childish, morbid views, her childish gusts of petulance and anger and mirth; and I smiled — oh, very tenderly, yet I smiled.

Then would awake the memory of Stella and myself in that ancient moonlight and of our first talk of death — two infants peering into infinity, somewhat afraid, and very puzzled; of Stella making tea in the fire-light, and prattling of her heart’s secrets, half-seriously, half in fun; and of Stella striving to lift

a very worthless man to a higher level and succeeding — yes, for the time, succeeding; and of Stella dying with a light heart, elate with vain dreams of Peter Blagden's future and of "a life that counted": and, irrationally enough, perhaps, there would seem to be a sequence in it all, and just a whiff of tragedy, so faint and yet so pungent.

And I would depicture her, a foiled and wistful little wraith, very lonely in eternity, and a bit regretful of the world she loved and of its blundering men, and unhappy — for she could never be entirely happy without Peter — and, I feared, indignant. For Stella desired very heartily to be remembered — she was vain, you know — and they have all forgotten. Yes, I am quite sure that even as a wraith, Stella would be indignant, for she had a fine sense of her own merits.

"But I am just a little butterfly-woman," she would say, sadly; then, with a quick smile, "Are n't I?" And her eyes would be like stars — like big, blue stars — and afterward her teeth would glint of a sudden, and innumerable dimples would come into being, and I would know she was never meant to be taken seriously. . . .

Heigho! let us avoid all sickly sentiment.

You see the world had advanced since Stella died — twice around the sun, from solstice to solstice, from spring to winter and back again, travelling through I forget how many millions of miles; and

there had been wars and scandals and a host of *débutantes* and any number of dinners; and, after all, the world is for the living.

So we agreed unanimously that it was very sad, and spoke of her for a while, punctiliously, as "poor dear Stella"; and the next week Emily Van Orden ran away with Tom Whately; and a few days later Alicia Wade's husband died, and we debated whether Teddy Anstruther would do the proper thing or sensibly marry Celia Reindan: and so, a little by a little, we forgot our poor dear Stella in precisely the decorous graduations of regret with which our poor dear Stella would have forgotten us.

Yes, even those who loved her the most deeply have quite forgotten Stella. They remember only an imaginary being who was entirely perfect, and of whom they were not worthy. It is this fictitious woman that has usurped the real Stella's place in the heart of the real Stella's own mother, and whom even Lizzie d'Arlanges believes to have been once her sister, and over whom Peter Blagden is always ready to grow maudlin; and it is this immaculate woman — who never existed — that will be until the end of Avis's marital existence the invariable standard by which poor Avis is measured and found wanting. And thus again the whirligig of time, by an odd turn, brings in his revenges.

And I? Well, I was very fond of Stella. And the woman that they all speak of to-day, in that hushed,

hateful, sanctimonious voice, I must confess I never knew. And of all persons I chiefly rage against that faultless angel, that "poor dear Stella," who has pilfered even the paltry tribute of being remembered from the Stella that to-day is mine alone. For it is to this fictitious person that the people whom my Stella loved now bring their flowers, and it was to this person they erected their pompous monument — nay, more, it was for this atrocious woman they ordered the very coffin in which my Stella lay when I last saw her. And it is not fair.

And I? Well, I was very fond of Stella. It would be good to have her back — to have her back to jeer at me, to make me feel red and uncomfortable and ridiculous, to say rude things about my waist, and to bedevil me in divers ways. Yes, it would be good. But, upon the whole, I am not sorry that Stella is gone.

For there is Peter Blagden to be considered. We can all agree to-day that Peter is a good fellow, that he is making the most of his uncle's money while it lasts, and that he is nobody's enemy but his own; and we have smugly forgotten the time when we expected him to become a great lawyer. We don't expect that of Peter now; and we say, some of us, that he is nearing the end of his tether. At any rate, his infatuation for Avis Beechinor was then tolerably apparent. And as Stella loved him —

Well, as it was, there was only I to bring the daf-

fodils to Stella. She was always vain, was Stella; it would have grieved her had no one remembered.

Then I caught the afternoon train for Fairhaven, and went back to my capable fiancée.

But I walked over to Willoughby Hall that night and found Charteris alone in his queer, old "writing-room." When I came into the apartment he was mending a broken tea-cup, for he peculiarly delighted in all such comminuted labour; but at sight of me his vexed countenance altered into the fond young look my coming would invariably provoke, and he shoved aside the fragments.

We talked for the most part of trifles; but apropos of nothing, Charteris said, "Yes — but, then, I devoted the morning to drawing up my will." And I laughed over his meticulous forethought.

The man rose and with clenched fist struck upon the littered table. "It is in the air. I swear to you that, somehow, I have been warned. But always I have been favoured — why, man, I protest that never in my life have I encountered any person in associating with whom I did not visibly condescend, and with reason to back me! Yet to-day Death stands within arm's reach, and I have accomplished — some three or four little books! And yet — why, 'Ashtaroth's Lacquey,' now — Yes, by God! it is the perfect speech such as few other men have ever written. I know it, and I do not care at all even

though you other little men should always lack the wit to recognise the perfect speech when it confronts you. But presently I die! and there is nothing left of me save the all-inefficient testimony of those three or four little books!"

I clutched his arm and protested he had overworked himself.

"Eh, well," he said, and with that easy laugh I knew of old; "in any event, I have been thinking for a whole two hours of my wife, and of how from the very beginning I have utilised her, and of how good and credulous she is, and of how happy I have made her ——! For I have made her happy. That, that alone, is the preposterous part of *everything*," he said.

"Why, yes; Anne loves you very dearly. Oh, I think that everybody is oddly fond of you, Jack. No, that is n't a compliment, it is rather the reverse. It is simply an instance of what I 've been brooding over all this afternoon — that we like people on account of their good qualities and love them on account of their defects. I honestly believe that the cornerstone of any genuine affection is the agreeable perception of our superiority in some one point, at least, to the beloved. And that is why so many people are fond of you, I think."

He laughed a little. "And *de te fabula* — Yet I must distinguish. You think me a futile person and not, as we will put it, a disastrously truthful person,

and so on through the entire list of all those so-called vices which are really just a habit of not doing this or that particular thing. Well! it is no longer *à la mode* to talk about God — yet I must confess to an old-fashioned faith in His existence and even in His amiability. I believe He placed me in this colourful world, and that He is not displeased because I have spent some happy if unfruitful years therein. I have bequeathed posterity merely the chance to spend an enjoyable half-hour or so over one or two little books. That is not much to claim, but it is something.”

John Charteris was talking to himself now.

“Had I instead the daily prayers of seven orphans, or the proud consciousness of having always been afraid to do what I wanted to — which I take to be the universally accredited insurance of a blissful eternity — or even a whole half-column in the New York papers about what a loss my premature demise had been to all America — or actually all three together, say, to exhibit as the increment of this period, I honestly cannot imagine any of the more intelligent archangels lining up to cheer my entry into Paradise. I believe, however, that to be contented, to partake of the world’s amenities with moderation as a sauce, and to aggrieve no fellow-being, except in self-protection, and to make other people laugh as often as you may find it possible, is a recipe for living that will pass muster even in heaven. There

you have my creed; and it may not be impeccable, but I believe in it."

I told him, as I did so often, that he was talking nonsense; and afterward we chatted for a good three hours — quite at random and disposing of the most important subjects, as was our constant usage when in argument, in a whole half-sentence.

It was excellent to have Charteris to talk against, and I enjoyed it.

CHAPTER XXXI

HE GILDS THE WEATHER-VANE

BUT I would not go with Charteris the next morning when he came by the Hamlyns' on his way to King's College. I could not, because I was labouring over a batch of proof-sheets; and as I laboured my admiration for the very clever young man who had concocted this new book augmented comfortably, so that I told Charteris he was a public nuisance, and please to go to Tillietudlem.

He had procured the key to the library, for the College had not opened as yet, and meant to borrow an odd volume or so of Lucian. Charteris had somehow evolved the fantastic notion of treating Lucian's Zeus as at bottom a tragic figure. He sketched a sympathetic picture of the fallen despot, and of the smokeless altars, girdled by a jeering rabble of so-called philosophers, and of how irritating it must be to anybody to have your actual existence denied. Did I not see the pathos of poor Zeus's situation?

I informed him that the only sensible pathos in life just at present was a personal inability to disprove the existence of all people who bothered me when I

was busy. So Charteris went away, and I got back to work.

Life was very pleasant. The book was going to be good, quite astonishingly good.

And yonder Bettie waited for me, and I could hear the piano that proclaimed she was not idle. I was ineffably content; and at ease within a rather kindly universe, taking it by and large.

So I decided I had worked quite long enough.

But as I reached out toward the portières, a man came into the room, entering from the hall-way. And I gave a little whistling sound of astonishment and hastened to him with extended hand.

"My dear fellow," I began; "why, have you dropped from the moon?"

"They — they told me you were here," said Jasper Hardress, and paused to moisten his lips. "My wife died, yonder in Montana, ten days ago last Thursday — yes, it was on a Tuesday she died, I think."

And I was silent for a breathing-space. "Yes?" I said, at last, for I had seen the shining thing in Jasper Hardress's hand, and I was wondering now why he had pocketed the toy, for just a little, little while.

"It was of a fever she died. She was delirious — oh, quite three days. And she talked in her delirium."

I began to laugh, and presently made as to applaud, as though I were witnessing a play. "Yonder is Bettie and my one chance of manhood; and blind chance, just the machination of a tiny microbe, entraps me as I tread toward all this. Heine was right; there is an Aristophanes in heaven."

I said, aloud: "Well, you would n't have me dispute the veracity of a lady, Hardress?"

But the man did not appear to hear me. "Oh, it was very horrible," he said, dully. "Oh, I would like you, first of all, to comprehend how horrible it was. She was always calling — no, not calling exactly, but just moaning one name, and over and over again. He had been so cruel, she said. He did n't really care for anything, she said, except to write his hateful books. And I had loved her all my life, you understand. And for three whole days I must sit there and hear her tell of what another man had meant to her! I have not been wholly sane, I think, since then, for I had loved her all my life. And it is n't my honour that I mean to avenge. It is Gillian that I must avenge — Gillian who died because a coward had robbed her of the will to live. For it was that in chief. Why, even you must understand that," he said, and half as though he pleaded with me.

And yonder Bettie played — with lithe fingers which caressed the keys rather than struck them, I remembered. And always at the back of my mind

some being that was not I was taking notes as to how unruffled the man was; and I smiled a little, in recognition, as Bettie began "The Funeral March of a Marionette". . . .

"Yes," I said; "I think I understand. There is something to be advanced upon the other side perhaps; but that scarcely matters. You act within your right; and, besides, you have a pistol, and I have n't. Oh, man, man!" I cried, in a shrill voice; "for God's sake, make an end of this!"

Jasper Hardress said: "I mean to. But — they told me he was here? Yes, I am sure that someone told me he was here."

I think I must have reeled a little. But my brain was working automatically. Gillian Hardress had always called me Jack; and Jasper Hardress was past reason; and yonder was Bettie. And —

"Jasper," someone was saying, and that someone seemed to laugh, "we are n't living in the Middle Ages, remember. Oh, man, I tell you, the whole thing's preposterous! Just on a bare suspicion — just on the ravings of a delirious woman ——! Why, she used to call *me* Jack — and I write books — Why, you might just as logically murder *me*!"

"It is my shame that I had planned to. Oh, only for a moment, you dear boy. I was not quite sane, I think, for at first I suspected you of a treachery which in my sober senses I know of course you never dreamed of. And I'd forgotten you were just a

child — But she was quite conscious at the end,” said Jasper Hardress, “and when I — talked with her, she told me it was Charteris whose son we christened Jasper Hardress some two years ago ——”

I said: “I never knew there was a child.”

“It only lived three months. I had always wanted a son. You cannot fancy how proud I was of it.” He laughed a little here.

“And she told you it was Charteris! In the moment of death when — when you suspected me, she told you it was Charteris!”

“It is different when you are dying. You see — Gillian knew that eternity depended on what she said to me then ——” He spoke as with difficulty.

“Yes — she did believe that. And she told you——!” And I comprehended how Gillian Hardress had loved me, and my shame was such that now it was the mere brute will to live which held me. But it held me, none the less. And now, besides, I saw the one solution.

“I — I suppose I can’t blame you,” I said — “for if she *told* you, why, of course ——” Then I barked out: “He was here a moment ago. You must have come around one corner, in fact, just as he turned the other. You will find him at Willoughby Hall, I suppose. He said he was going straight home.”

For I knew that Charteris was at King’s College; and, I assured myself, there would be time to warn

him. Only how much must now depend upon the diverting qualities of Lucian! For let the Samosatan flag if only for a moment, and Jack would be leaving the College presently; and there is but one street in all Fairhaven.

I had my hand upon the garden-gate, and Hardress had just turned the corner, when Bettie came upon the porch.

"Well," she said, "and who's your fat friend, Mr. Sheridan?"

"I can't stop now, dear. I forgot to tell Jack about something which is rather important ——"

"Gracious!" Bettie Hamlyn said; "that sounds like shooting. Why, it is shooting, is n't it? I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it were the Monnachins and the Massawomeks and all the other jaw-breakers attacking Fairhaven, just as they used to do, and affording both of us an excellent chance to get scalped in time for dinner. So I don't mind confessing now that it was against precisely such an emergency I declined to turn out an elaborate suite of hair; and *now* I expect the world at large to acknowledge that I acted very sensibly."

"It's much more likely to be some drunken countryman on his monthly spree," I answered. "And I suppose, after all, my business with Charteris will wait for a while. And besides, Bettie, you're such a *dear*. And if you'll come down into the

garden at once, I will explain a few of my innumerable reasons for advancing the assertion."

Standing upon the porch, she patted me ever so lightly upon the head. "What a child it is," she said. "Oh, well, I'll come for half an hour. Just wait until I get a hat."

But I detained her. "Yes, what a child it is — or rather, what a very busy bee it has been, Bettie dear. For his has been the summer air, and the sunshine, and the flowers; and gentle ears have listened to him, and gentle eyes have been upon him. And he has let others eat his honey — which I take to include all that was n't in the world before he came, as — as someone used to say — so that he might have his morsel and his song. And sometimes it has been Sardinian honey, very bitter in the mouth—and even then he has let others eat it—"

"You are a most irrelevant infant," said Miss Hamlyn. "And of course if you really *want* to drag me down the steps, and have the only fiancée you just at present possess laid up by a sunstroke —"

EPILOGUE

HE VIEWS HIS HANDIWORK, AND NOR IN PRIDE NOR
IN DISSATISFACTION

SO I waited there alone. Presently I must tell Bettie everything, because she was Bettie, and it was not fair I should have any secrets from her. "Oh, just be honest with me," she had said, "and I don't care *what* you do!" And I had never lied to her; at worst, I simply had not told her anything concerning divers matters about which I was very glad she had not happened to ask any questions. But this was different.

Dimly I knew that everything must pivot on my telling Bettie. There was no danger now that anyone would ever know; it was impossible that anyone could ever know: and therefore I must tell Bettie.

I must tell Bettie and abide what followed. She had pardoned much. It might be she would pardon even this, "because I had been honest with her, when I did n't want to be." And in any event — oh, even in her loathing! — Bettie would understand and know I had kept faith with her at least. . . .

It was the season of harvest. The leaves were not yet turned, and upon my face the heatless, sun-

steeped air was like a caress. The whole world was at full-tide, ineffably sweet and just a little languorous: and bees were audible at either hand, as in a humorous pretence of vexation.

The world was very beautiful. I must tell Bettie presently, of course; only the world was such a comfortable place precisely as it was; and I began to wonder if I need tell Bettie after all?

For it would make her so unhappy; and never in my life have I been able to endure the contact of unhappiness.

THE END

