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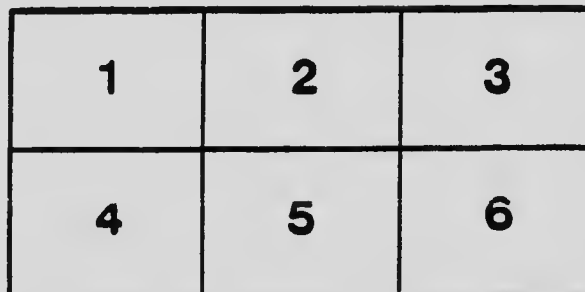
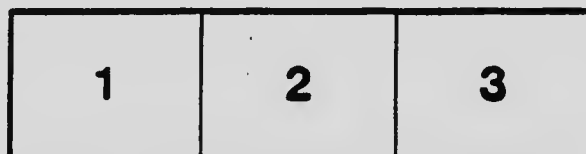
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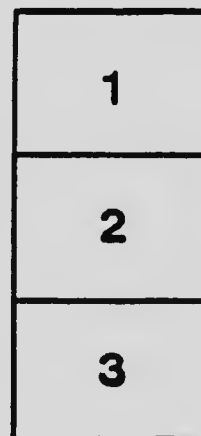
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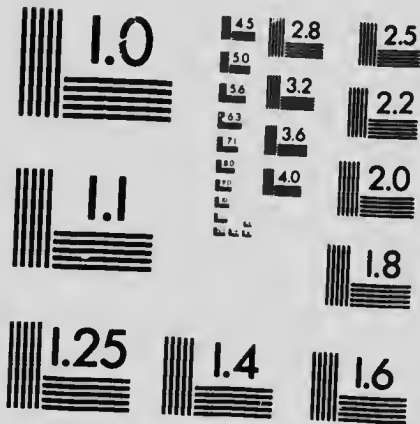
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Levity Hicks

CHAPTER I

SOCKITT'S

SOCKITT'S BOARDING ESTABLISHMENT lies on the north side of Gridley Square; and Gridley Square hangs, as it were, on the outskirts of Bloomsbury. Which is to say that it is not in Bloomsbury proper, although it aspires to be, and artfully hints at the fact in advertisements, and in other places. In the fanlight over every door in Gridley Square you will see a card announcing "Apartments"; and such population as drifts from time to time into Gridley Square is but a floating one—here to-day and gone on some coming to-morrow.

Gridley Square has a history. On the house at the corner, as you go out into that street which leads to a main and noisy thoroughfare, there is an unhealthy coloured lozenge set squarely between the windows, announcing that a certain man, whose name has been almost forgotten, once lived there, and giving the date of his birth, and that other date of his somewhat untimely death; and Gridley Square jerks a head in the direction of the lozenge, and pretends not to be proud about it. More than that, Gridley Square

holds itself select, in that it has a private garden in the centre of it, with a very old and dejected-looking tree at one end, surrounded by a battered wooden seat ; and with a worn grass plot extending down the length of it. There is a fiction in Gridley Square that at one time each of the houses had a key, which let the inhabitants jealously enough into this garden, and kept the surrounding commonplace neighbourhood staring in enviously through the railings. But the last key was lost ever so many years ago ; and now the rusty gate swings backwards and forwards on its hinges, and lets in anyone.

Sockitt's, on the north side, has always contrived to hold its own. There are other scandalous boarding-houses that have from time to time known the advent of brokers' men ; boarding-houses that have changed hands, while the original proprietors have drifted out into the world to find some other means of livelihood. But Sockitt's, in that sense, has always been Sockitt's—the kind of house that pays its way, and gets along, even with difficulties. Mrs. Sockitt, in her arm-chair in her own little private room at the end of the hall, might in some moment of expansion let you into a few secrets concerning good seasons and bad, and satisfactory boarders and unsatisfactory ones ; but save perhaps to Sockitt, mumbling over a pipe late at night, she prefers to be silent. And even Sockitt doesn't know everything.

Mrs. Sockitt is a martyr to an ever-increasing weight. She takes the matter good-humouredly enough, and with some philosophy, as she takes most things ; and when you look at her you see, dimmed and blurred, the blunted outlines of what must have been at one time a rather pretty woman. Looking at

her, and then looking at Sockitt, mumbling over his pipe in a smaller chair, and watching his wife furtively, you may perhaps, if you are of a romantic disposition, imagine some far-off and half-forgotten love story, when Sockitt was young, and Mrs. Sockitt fairly young also, and when her charms overcame the susceptible Mr. Sockitt. In which case you will to a certain extent be wrong.

Ever so many years ago, when Mrs. Sockitt was a Miss Somebody-Else, Bob Sockitt, who had a plausible manner and some share of good looks, and an aunt from whom he had expectations, wandered into the house that is now Sockitt's, with the dashing air of a man about town, and with the declaration that his luggage was coming after him. Making much of the aunt from whom he had expectations, and more still of his undoubtedly ready tongue and charming manners, Bob Sockitt decided to stay; and in due course married the lady. From which time he became a little seedily careless as to his dressing and his shaving; accepted a certain small amount weekly as pocket-money, and settled down for the rest of his days. Mrs. Sockitt accepted him as she accepted most other things of this life, and made the best of him—sighing only when it became necessary for her to tell him, in that little room at the end of the hall, exactly what she thought of him and his peccadilloes, the while she pretended to wish that she had never seen him, and had remained in a state of single blessedness.

In the actual working of the house, from a business point of view, Bob Sockitt has nothing whatever to do. There was a suggestion, ever so many years ago, when the energetic Mrs. Sockitt changed the name of the house in honour of her husband, that that husband

might be able to do something with what are mysteriously known as "the books"; but it was discovered that the effort caused Bob Sockitt's head to ache acutely, and that in most instances the totals were wrong. So that now Bob Sockitt comes and goes as he will, and is only useful in a vague sense when Mrs. Sockitt is obliged to fall back upon him, in a fashion of speaking, as someone to whom she can appeal in a last extremity in regard to any matter of business. "I must certainly speak to Mr. Sockitt about it," has a terrifying effect on occasion with people who do not know Bob Sockitt intimately.

The business side of the establishment is completed by Fanny—most cheerful maid-of-all-work (although she would not admit the title in the least as being applicable to herself)—and by Joseph, a youth who was originally designed for a page in some ambitious scheme that had birth in the brain of Mrs. Sockitt, but who has degenerated in the course of years into a hard-worked, shabby young man, who answers bells and opens the door, and, in an intensity of anxiety to do his best, is for ever to be found breathing hard over the polishing of boots or silver, or over the heads or necks of those upon whom he waits at table.

So in that quiet little picture you have a vision of Sockitt's—just as in some painted picture you might have a vision of some harbour to which all sorts of ships might come to their moorings for a little time, or might slip them and drift away again into the larger sea of the world. You may imagine Mrs. Sockitt waiting for all and sundry (provided always that references were satisfactory) and ready to receive them, and to let them go again when the time came for them to up-anchor and sail away out of her sight.

It was on one particular autumn evening that a woman sat on the old bench under the tree in the garden of the square, reading softly aloud out of a book. She was a thin, pallid woman of middle age, with that curious suppressed look that some women wear, and with a habit of casting her eyes downwards, save when, while talking, she would raise them quickly and disclose the wonderful grey depths of them. Now, as she sat in the garden under the old tree, she was reading to a child who sat beside her, and who followed the old fairy tale that she already knew by heart as breathlessly as she had ever done, knowing exactly what was going to happen with the turning of each page.

Miss Priscilla Meadows belonged to Sockitt's; which is to say that she had been there for more than two years—which is rather a long time for Sockitt's. She had come there one evening after dark, bringing the child with her in a cab; and it was noticed, by those who cared to think about the matter at all, that Miss Meadows had rather a scared look, and that never for a moment, until she was safely in the room that had been assigned to her with the child, did she release her clasp on the child's fingers. More than that, for quite a long time she did not go out into the streets until the dusk had fallen; indeed, for the most part she simply crossed the road with the child, and took her into the rusty garden in the middle of the square, and sat there with her, reading to her or talking.

Sockitt's would have held up hands of horror if it had known the real history of Priscilla Meadows and little Susette. Miss Meadows sometimes shuddered a little when she thought of it herself. It

is the simplest and most absurd story in the world, and yet the greatest and most wonderful thing that had ever happened in the starved life of the woman.

Priscilla Meadows had been a governess—of something of the old school. She had been in one family after another—remaining until the youngest girl in each case had arrived at that mysterious period when it was necessary that she should be “finished”; after which Miss Meadows had moved on somewhere else. She had not a relative in the world that she knew of, and she had sometimes thought with a little shiver of what would happen to her when younger women took her place, and she was no longer wanted.

It is not possible to imagine that anyone had ever been in love with Priscilla Meadows. True, she had the sweetest face one may imagine, and when she smiled the sweet gravity of it broke up, and a thousand little lights and shades seemed to pass over it. It merely happened that love had not come her way, and was not part of the scheme of things for her. If she had heard at any time the flutter of his audacious wings, she may be understood to have hidden herself a little, frightened until he had flown away.

Yet the curious thing about Priscilla Meadows was that she had really loved her work, for the simple reason that it brought her into contact with children. They were rude children sometimes, and openly snubbed and flouted her (learning deep lessons from their parents in those matters), but that had never made any difference. To Priscilla Meadows a child was the most beautiful thing and the most wonderful that had ever been put on the earth by a kindly God.

Lying awake alone in the darkness sometimes, she had wondered what it must be like to have a child

of one's very own—something that belonged to you, and regarded you as being first in its small universe. She had treasured that thought, and had had at times a little foolish dream that she hugged to herself—a dream of an invisible child that sometimes seemed to trot along beside her through the streets, clinging fast to her hand. In busy streets she would step aside a little, that those who would have jostled her should not stumble against the child.

It had been just at that point in her life when she was beginning to look with shrinking eyes out into a future that was rapidly becoming clouded that Fortune, looking at her perhaps a little pityingly or a little contemptuously, carelessly tossed her a scrap of the good things of life. A prosperous man, to whose daughter she had been governess years before, and who had never seemed to take the least notice of her, save in a chaffing, rather familiar fashion, died, and left her a legacy. It was the most staggering thing that could have happened to her, and it was such a good legacy that it gave her a tiny comfortable income.

The only reason suggested in the will was that Priscilla Meadows had at one time nursed her charge through a dangerous illness, and had helped to bring her out of it alive; but then Priscilla had liked doing that kind of thing, and had expected no reward.

Fortune was evidently extremely pleased with herself over what she had done; she looked about her for something else that should suit Priscilla Meadows. And, being in a freakish turn of mind, did the very thing that Miss Meadows would most have desired.

Priscilla Meadows was living at that time, just after the receipt of her legacy, in a tiny boarding-

house in Chelsea. There was no more reason why she should live in Chelsea than anywhere else ; the finding of the place had been purely accidental, and she had been guided to it because it suited her means. She thanked her stars when she had been there but a few days ; because a child was brought to it.

Priscilla saw the child almost at the moment of its coming to the house with its mother ; and, as she always did, she stood still shyly at a little distance, and watched it. That was her way with children ; she never gushed over them ; she simply stood and watched them, and thanked God for them.

This child was the prettiest she had ever seen ; a small elf of about four with dark curls and big solemn eyes. The mother was a sharp-mannered, handsome woman, who announced that she was only staying for a day or two, and that she was going abroad. Priscilla Meadows determined to make the most of the day or two.

The mother had watched with some amusement Priscilla's adoration of the child ; she was as contemptuous of it as anyone else might have been. But incidentally she struck up a sort of friendship with Priscilla, and even allowed her, to her intense delight, to take the child out. Priscilla held her head high that day, for the world was very wonderful, and she could look it squarely and proudly in the face.

She returned with the child to the little boarding-house in Chelsea—and faced a tragedy. In the first place, little Susette's mother had gone away ; and the landlady stared in some perplexity at Priscilla Meadows and the child. " I thought you were going to meet Mrs. Smithson at the station," she said.

Priscilla had gazed at her blankly, not understanding. "At the station?" she echoed.

"Yes—she said she had told you to take the child to the station and leave her there," said the landlady impatiently. "She's taken all the luggage, and I expect she's waiting. There's a note for you."

Priscilla had opened the note, and had read it as she stood there in the little hall, with the child holding to her dress.

"I'm making a bolt for it. The child is a drag on me, and I want to start afresh. Her father won't ever trouble about her; he's got a family of his own to think of. I made a slip, as many a woman has done; now I'm going to put things behind me a bit. I've got a chance with a better man—but he won't want anything to do with the child. You're precious fond of her, I know, and you're the sort that will probably be good to her. I shan't trouble you at any time.

"M. S."

Miss Meadows, with the note crushed up in her hand, and her breath coming and going fast, did some rapid thinking. She had not often had to make up her mind in a hurry, and she knew that she must make up her mind in a hurry now. The greatest thing in the world had suddenly happened, and she must be prepared for it.

"How foolish of me," she had said with a smile. "Of course I promised—and now Mrs. Smithson wants me to go off with her for a few days. I shall just have time to catch the train. Will you please get my bill ready? I like to clear up things as I go on."

She packed her few possessions, and she packed also the few things the child had in a little trunk.

Afraid for her very life of what might happen to put an end to this miracle, she sent for a cab and had the luggage put upon it; and told the man, in a voice loud enough to be heard by the landlady, to drive to Victoria Station; and when she was well away from the house, with the child there wonderfully beside her—she stopped the cab, and told the man to drive her to Bloomsbury.

So she came to Sockitt's in the dusk of the evening, with the child with her; and she invented an elaborate story as to a dead sister to whom the child had belonged. And that was why, for quite a long time, she trembled and glanced fearfully about her when she walked through the streets with little Susette clinging to her fingers; for perhaps that mysterious Mrs. Smithson might hunger for the baby after all, and might change her mind.

So perhaps those thoughts flitted through the mind of Miss Meadows as she sat on the old seat under the tree in the garden with the child beside her. Thoughts of the woman who had brought that child into the world; imaginary pictures of that woman making a new beginning—somewhere abroad—with a man who would not have wanted to have the child. Impossible dreams also of what little Susette was going to do in the future when she grew older (and oh! what a tightening of the heart over this!) and perhaps began to form new ties for herself.

"Uncle Levity is late to-night," said little Susette, waking suddenly from a dream of goblins and princes and dragons, and looking out through the railings into the square.

"Mr. Hicks is certainly very late," answered Priscilla.

Then, with the child holding to her hand, and the book of fairy stories in the other hand, Priscilla Meadows went across the worn patch of grass and opened the rusty gate—carefully closing it after her—and stepped across the road to Sockitt's. There was always a certain pride in the heart of Miss Meadows at this hour of the day—foolish pride, perhaps, but still forgivable; for most of the boarders had arrived for the evening meal; and Miss Meadows could sail through them, with the child clinging to her fingers, and could mount the stairs, even contriving sometimes to hum some foolish nursery rhyme. She was quite aware of the glances that followed her; and she was glad of that, because it meant in a sense incense on the altar of her beloved. And then the small and lovely limbs to be unclothed and bathed; a little white-clad figure kneeling beside a small bed; and then Susette nestling down to rosy sleep.

There were kindly people who whispered incredulously that Miss Meadows grew younger-looking every day.

Bob Sockitt did not come in to dinner. That was a habit that had begun because the habits of the man were irregular; and it had been kept up. Bob Sockitt had a "snack of something" whenever he should happen to come in; and he generally partook of it standing awkwardly in the little room at the end of the hall that was Mrs. Sockitt's sanctum. At which time it was his custom, if Mrs. Sockitt happened to be there, to entertain her with an account of the exact position of the country from a political and economic point of view—speaking for the most part with his mouth full, and with some considerable heat, and emphasising those remarks with a forward bend

of the body, and a fist softly banged upon the round table that was in the exact centre of the room.

Mrs. Sockitt in the meantime placidly punctuating his remarks with a casual "I dare say"—the while she thought strenuously about some matter of importance concerning the household.

To the sound of a gong that was smitten in the usual breathless fashion by Joseph the boarders straggled into the dining-room. Mrs. Sockitt, huge of bulk, stood at the head of the table, with slight inclinations of the head as each boarder seated himself or herself—with a special smile for Mrs. Ogg and for Miss Julia Ogg, who took places near to herself. Mrs. Ogg was reputed to have a considerable sum of money laid by; she paid her bill with a careless air that was a constant reminder to Mrs. Sockitt that she ought to have asked more in the first place; and she frequently went out accompanied by her daughter—growing perilously like her double-chinned mother—to places of entertainment in the evening.

Priscilla Meadows had taken her place at the table, sitting with downcast eyes, and with thoughts that hovered for the most part about a little bed in a room above in which a child lay sleeping; she scarcely noticed the beginnings of conversations round about her. There were men there who ate as though that was the business of their lives; there were tired-looking men who were obviously glad that the day's work was over, and that they had got back to that sorry substitute for home—Sockitt's. There were two empty places at the table, and Miss Meadows presently found her eyes wandering from one empty place to the other.

One empty place was a good one; it was next to

the chair occupied by Miss Julia Ogg, and in quite a comfortable spot when the winter should come on—protected from draughts, and in close proximity to the fire. The other place was at the end of the long table, at a corner where one would have to cramp one's knees to sit at all with any degree of comfort, and where only a small odd chair could be used.

Almost immediately after the boarders had assembled a man came quickly down the stairs, clad in evening dress. It happening that Fanny was close to the foot of the stairs, in an anxious endeavour to pass a certain dish to Joseph, who was waiting at table, the man stopped for a moment to encircle the girl's waist with his arm, to an accompaniment of giggles, and to the peril of the dish, before he passed on to the dining-room door. He was humming a little tune to himself as he opened the door, and went in, and took his place beside Miss Julia Ogg. Miss Meadows looked up for a moment, and then lowered her eyes again.

The new-comer was a tall, clean-shaven man, with dark hair that had a suggestion of curliness in it, and with very quick dark eyes. There was a certain largeness in his movements and a certain suggestion of exaggeration. He was the only man at that table in evening dress; but he dominated all at the table in other ways than by the difference of his attire. Miss Julia Ogg had looked up and smiled as he sat down beside her with a little whispered remark that was for her ear alone; Mrs. Ogg had turned her double chin in his direction, with the smiling expectancy of one who hoped to be entertained; Miss Meadows had raised her eyes again, and had watched him for a second or two before lowering them.

"Not playing to-night, Mr. Rutherglen?" suggested Mrs. Ogg.

He turned his quick bright glance upon her. "No—resting for the moment. I've got a big part coming along in a week or two; but one has to wait for parts that are suitable. I had a rotten thing offered me last week, and I simply refused to look at it. Of course, the terms were all right; but what's the good of a man who wants to make his way being on the stage for about ten minutes—and in one act. In one act, mind you," he added with emphasis, as he turned to Miss Julia Ogg.

"Absurd!" exclaimed the lady. "What chance do you get?"

There was a new boarder there that night, and he was seated opposite to Miss Meadows. She had thought, as she glanced at him on first coming into the room, how very boyish-looking he was; she thought now, as she looked at him again, that the expression that had seemed boyish was more that of a man keen and alert and eager, to whom life spells a great deal, and must spell more in the future. He was not a good-looking young man by any means, save in the sense that every honest strong face is good-looking; he had not a regular feature. The chin was too square and the nose too short; but when he smiled, as he did once at something that was said, he showed a splendid set of even white teeth.

"Mr. Rutherglen," said Mrs. Sockitt, in that voice that seemed always to be emerging from beneath a feather bed, "I don't think I introduced you to Mr. What-is-it——"

"Batchelor," murmured the new-comer.

"Mr. Batchelor—Mr. Rutherglen." Mrs. Ogg—

Miss Ogg—Miss Meadows——” The voice of Mrs. Sockitt trailed off as she glanced round the table and murmured various names.

Young Mr. Batchelor bowed, and there ensued the usual awkward silence that invariably follows such an introduction. In a sense young Mr. Batchelor appeared to be taking stock of his fellow-boarders, not in any quizzical sense, but rather because he was of that age that is keenly alive to everything and everyone about it. Rutherglen, leaning forward, and glancing along the line of faces till his eyes met those of the new-comer, challenged him :

“ Not in my profession by any chance, I take it ? ”

“ The stage ? ” Mr. Batchelor's eyes had narrowed, and he might almost have been said to be taking the mental measure of the other man.

“ Exactly. That's the sort of thing I do for a living.” The tone was contemptuous, but the dignity of the man was severely upheld.

“ Nothing half so exciting,” said young Mr. Batchelor, with a momentary flash of his teeth. “ I'm by way of beginning to be a medico. Kill or cure—with a faint sort of hope that there may be more of cure than kill. You amuse people, Mr. Rutherglen ; I'm out to patch 'em up.”

“ As a matter of fact,” murmured Mrs. Sockitt in her smothered voice, “ we get most of the professions, one way or another, here.”

Mrs. Ogg, casting about for something that should make some sort of light conversation, happened to notice that vacant chair at the most uncomfortable corner of the table, and remarked upon it. “ Mr. Hicks is late to-night,” she said.

“ Poor old chap—he's generally late— isn't he ? ”

said Rutherglen, adjusting his dress tie with long white fingers.

"It's that dreadful City, I suppose," said Miss Ogg, with a sigh.

Priscilla Meadows looked at the vacant seat and sighed—but inwardly. There had been evenings, over and over again, when she had sat in the garden of the square, and had heard outside the railing the footfalls of many passers-by—and had listened for the footfall of but one. There had been something of a world of meaning in her answer to the child when the child had commented on the fact that "Uncle Levity" was late that evening. It sung in her brain now—that song about Levity Hicks.

"Uncle Levity is late ! Uncle Levity is late !"

Dinner was finished, with that empty chair still unoccupied ; Mrs. Sockitt, rising cumbrously, gave the signal for the ladies to depart. That sort of thing was done in Bloomsbury proper, and that sort of thing must be kept up, if possible, on this its outskirts. Mrs. Sockitt did no more than guide her flock towards that door which led into a drawing-room that was all uncomfortable chairs and impossible pictures and a staring wall-paper ; with a sideways movement she made her own escape, and joined Bob Sockitt (at home at an unaccountably early hour) in her own little sanctum.

Mr. Horace Rutherglen, pausing for a moment in the dining-room, moved towards young Mr. Batchelor. Mr. Rutherglen, with an easy gesture, opened his cigarette case, and offered the contents to the new boarder.

"You can take it from me that it won't do you any good to sit in the drawing-room—at least, that's what

they call the place—and listen to the ladies," said Rutherglen in a confidential aside. "This is an off night with me, and I'll be glad of your company. I've got a tolerable sort of room upstairs, and if you like to come and smoke I'll be delighted to have your company."

"I should like to come very much," said the other quickly.

So the two men went up the stairs together, and turned into a comfortable room that had been made to look as much like a sitting-room as possible and as little like a bedchamber. The bed had been screened off by a couple of cheap paper screens; there was a writing-table and a comfortable arm-chair, and a few things of that sort. Horace Rutherglen dropped into the arm-chair, and signed to his new acquaintance to sit down also.

Young Mr. Batchelor, glancing with quick eyes about the room, seemed to glance also into the mind of the man who lived in it. There were one or two photographs, chiefly of ladies in theatrical costume, with flamboyantly affectionate inscriptions attached; there were a few illustrated weekly papers, and a big box of expensive cigarettes. Also some cards—of invitation and otherwise—were stuck in the frame of the mirror.

"Generally speaking, of course, I am out at this time," said Rutherglen, puffing at his cigarette; "but it happens that just now I'm not doing anything. A man can't afford to waste himself, you know; I simply dare not take any sort of shop that may be offered me; a fellow simply lowers himself. Well"—he snuggled down more closely and comfortably into the arm-chair—"and what do you think of Sockitt's?"

"I've scarcely had time to form an opinion yet," said Batchelor. "They seem rather like the ordinary sort of mixed lot one gets at a place like this—don't they? I like the quiet woman I heard someone call Miss Meadows."

"Oh—the usual type of old maid; one always finds them," said Rutherglen. "She's got a kid with her who's always about the place—a small niece, I believe."

"Who's the man—name of Hicks, wasn't it?—who wasn't there to-night?" asked Batchelor.

Rutherglen bent for a moment over his cigarette, and carefully and frowningly flicked off the ash. "Nobody in particular," he answered. "At all events, no one ever takes any notice of him. Chap in the City, I believe—in some sort of office—I suppose you like your sort of work—eh?"

"Tremendously," answered the other, with deep seriousness. "I want to go pretty far with it, if I can; I'm young, and I can work, and exams have seemed to me to come pretty easy. Yours must be a fascinating sort of job, I should think," he added.

Rutherglen shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, it's all right; it's the sort of life that a gentleman may take up; there is a certain fascination about it. Besides, after all, there's the public—watching you; and the public in these days demands a great deal."

There was silence between them for a little time; and then suddenly young Mr. Batchelor put a question through the haze of smoke that was between him and the other man.

"Why did somebody laugh when the man Hicks was spoken about at dinner?"

Rutherglen got up and strolled across to the mirror,

and adjusted his tie, and smoothed down his hair with one white hand. He addressed his answer to the mirror, keeping his back to the other man.

"Well—old Hicks is a bit of a queer sort. No one takes very much notice of him; he just comes and goes. And then, of course, his name always causes a little laughter; one can't think of it without smiling."

"His name?" Young Batchelor looked up at the other man with raised eyebrows.

Rutherglen turned round, with his back to the mirror, and with his arms stretched out along the mantelshelf. "Well—it's a queer name for a man, to begin with. Poor old Hicks had a father with something of a grim sense of humour, and something also of a strong religious feeling. So that poor old Hicks, when he was quite helpless, received the names baptismally of John Leviticus. In some fashion or other the John came to be dropped, and the Leviticus to be abbreviated. Therefore you have one of the soberest-minded men that ever walked this earth and took life seriously bearing the name of—Levity Hicks. Funny— isn't it?"

"Does he think so?" asked the other quietly.

"Oh—I don't think it troubles him; one gets used to these things. Besides, the man is not important enough for such a thing to matter to him in the least. Levity Hicks is not the sort of man that is ever likely to have to stand in the limelight."

Just at that moment there sounded a knock upon the door. At first Rutherglen did not appear to notice it; when it sounded a second time he called out a little impatiently:

"Oh—come in!"

The door was opened slowly, and a tall man came into the room. He glanced quickly at young Batchelor, and then drew back a little. "I—I beg your pardon; I thought you might be alone," he murmured.

"Oh—you can come in, Hicks," said Rutherglen, with a short laugh. "We're all friends here. This is Mr. Batchelor—new boarder. This, my dear Batchelor"—he indicated with a movement of his fingers the man in the doorway—"this is Levity Hicks."

And Levity Hicks walked into the room and closed the door.

CHAPTER II

A DAY WITH LEVITY

LEVITY HICKS was a tall, spare man, with unruly hair that might have been curly but for the extreme shortness of it, and with clothes that were worn to the verge almost of shabbiness. His was a grave face, save when now and then a curious slow, shy smile swept over it, and then went away again. There was an air about him that could not exactly be defined as one of timidity so much as suggesting that he was never quite sure of himself. He came now into the room a little haltingly, with just that quiet smile stealing over his features; it gave him for all the world the ludicrous air of a dog, not quite sure of his welcome, wagging his tail as he comes towards you.

"I thought you were alone," he said to Rutherglen. "It really doesn't matter—I only looked in. Another time will do quite well."

"Sit down," said Rutherglen masterfully. "We're not talking secrets. You're late to-night?"

"Working late. There's always plenty to do for a chap in the City. You don't happen to be in the City by any chance—do you, Mr. Batchelor?" he asked, turning slowly towards the other man.

Rutherglen broke in a little scornfully. "You've got an idea that everyone's in the City," he said.

"Our friend here is a medico—walking the hospitals and all that sort of thing."

Levity Hicks raised his eyebrows, and seemed properly impressed. "Indeed," he said. "You must see a lot of funny things in the course of a day, I should think, sir."

Owen Batchelor jerked out his short laugh. "Yes—quite a lot of funny things," he replied.

Levity sighed. "One doesn't see very much that's new in the City. Just grinding away at figures, and writing letters about things you're not interested in in the least—so many bales of this, and so many bales of that—— There, I beg your pardon, let's talk about something else."

"You're looking tired, Mr. Hicks," said young Batchelor in his kindly voice.

"I've had a good many hours of it to-day," said the other, with a sudden warm flush stealing over his face, in gratitude that he should be taken notice of. "Yes—now I come to think of it, I am rather tired."

"Have a drink, old Levity," said Rutherglen, jerking his head towards a long table that stood at one side of the room with decanters and glasses and siphons upon it. There was also a box of cigars and that big box of cigarettes.

Levity, who had seated himself, hesitated for a moment or two; then drew himself to his feet with a jerk. "Thanks—I think I will," he said. "I don't often—but to-night I think I will." He moved across towards the table as he spoke, with a smiling nod at Rutherglen, who lay in the depths of his easy chair.

"Take brandy, if there is any, Mr. Hicks," said young Batchelor quietly.

With his hand actually on the decanter Levity turned round with rather a surprised air. "Why brandy?" he asked.

"Oh—it's a quicker pick-me-up; better than whisky for your complaint."

"But I haven't got any complaint," answered the other, with a laugh.

"I didn't say you had," said Batchelor in his quiet, level voice. "You're only tired, aren't you? But I should make it brandy, if I were you."

Levity Hicks laughed. "All right; medical advice must be attended to, I suppose, especially when you get it for nothing. Is there any brandy here?" he asked of Rutherglen.

"The decanter this side," said Rutherglen lazily, without moving.

Levity poured out some brandy, and squirted some soda into it; and all the time the quiet, steady eyes of Batchelor watched him. Levity drank some of the mixture, and then turned with a smile towards the other men, leaning against the table and holding his glass in one hand.

"That's the stuff," he said. "It warms one. I'm glad I made it brandy; I was more tired than I thought."

"Hadn't you better sit down?" asked Batchelor.

"Thanks—I'd rather stand; I've been sitting all day," said the other, as he raised his glass again and drank. "You know," he added, with a queer laugh, "it wouldn't take so very much of this to make a fool of me. It goes to my head—and it makes me forget things. There isn't any beastly City—and no ledgers—and no idiots with the same old rotten jokes—yes—I'm glad I made it brandy."

He drained his glass, and set it down ; the diffidence with which he had come into the room was gone now, and as he dropped into a chair he was suddenly on an equality with the other men. He closed his eyes, and chuckled quietly to himself. "By Jove—it has gone to my head," he said.

"Don't talk like a fool," said Rutherglen, opening his eyes, and turning his head in the direction of Hicks.

"You were late getting in, Mr. Hicks ; did you find any dinner ?" asked young Batchelor quietly.

A flush stole over the face of Levity Hicks ; he opened his eyes. "I didn't want any," he answered. "I worked so late that I—I dined in the City."

"He very often dines in the City," said Rutherglen, getting up. "Now, Mr. Batchelor—what can I give you ? Or do I say Doctor ?"

"You don't say Doctor—yet," was the laughing reply. "And I won't have anything, thank you, unless it's a cigarette. I hope I'm not taking up your time," he added, as he strolled across to the table, and took a cigarette and lit it.

"Not in the least," answered Rutherglen, with a laugh. "I'm out of a shop at present ; in this beautiful profession one is sometimes out quite a long time. Sure you won't have a drink ?"

"Quite sure—thanks." He looked across at Levity, leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed. "He's asleep," he said in a lower tone.

Horace Rutherglen, in the act of mixing a drink for himself, looked round over his shoulder at Levity. "Poor devil !" he exclaimed. "I expect he's a bit knocked up. I let him come in here sometimes ; it's company for him. He doesn't meet many people

outside his own narrow world of desks and pens and rulers."

Batchelor was standing with his back to the mantel-piece, with his arms folded, smoking thoughtfully, and looking at the sleeper. Now that the face of Levity Hicks was relaxed it looked curiously worn and old for a man who was still young; there were drawn lines in it, and the mouth, slightly open, gave it almost a ghastly look. There was not the faintest sound of his breathing in the quiet room; he scarcely seemed to be breathing at all.

"Do you know anything about him?" asked Batchelor. "Has he any friends or relatives?"

"Not that I'm aware of," answered Rutherglen, bending over his glass for a moment. "There are lots of fellows like him—just drudges, who go on from one year's end to the other. In a way, of course, I've been rather a friend to him; I see a good deal of him one way and another. He's not a bad sort—and I—I rather like him."

"It's a good face," said young Batchelor thoughtfully. He came to himself with a jerk, and moved towards his host; he spoke still in that quiet, subdued voice. "Well—I must be going. Kind of you to have taken pity on a lonely man in a strange house."

"I hope we shall meet again," said Rutherglen. "And you must come down to the theatre one night—that is, of course, when I've got a shop—and see what you think of me. I'm told that there are certain parts I fit rather well. Good night."

He held out his hand, and the other man grasped it for a moment; as he did so he glanced sideways at the sleeping man in the chair.

"I don't quite like the look of him," he said. "He's

not merely tired ; his tiredness goes a little deeper than that. That was why I suggested brandy to-night ; there's something a bit queer with his heart."

"I shouldn't think so," said Rutherglen, with a frown. "He's strong enough—only he works a bit hard at times. I think you're mistaken."

"I'm not mistaken in the least," said Batchelor. "As a matter of fact, I've taken up the heart rather strongly ; I want to specialise later on, when I've had more experience. That's the sort of fellow"—he flicked his fingers softly in the direction of the sleeping man—"who might go off at any moment—just like the blowing-out of a candle. Are you going to let him stop here—or shall we rouse him, and send him off to bed ?"

"Oh—let him stop," answered Rutherglen. "I'm sure I don't mind."

"Well—I'm glad to think he's got one friend, at any rate," said young Batchelor, with a smile. "Good night—and thank you again."

Horace Rutherglen walked with his new friend to the door, and opened it ; shook hands with him again, and bowed him out with something of a flourish. Then he closed the door, and walked back into the room, and stood for a moment or two looking down at Levity Hicks. He looked down at him with rather an impatient frown ; finally shrugged his shoulders, and walked across to the table and mixed another drink. On second thoughts he picked up the glass that Levity had used, and mixed some brandy and soda for him. Then he crossed to the chair in which Levity sat, and dropped a hand on his shoulder, and shook him—not roughly or unkindly.

"Here—wake up, old Levity—wake up," he said

A Day with Levity

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Levity, coming out of a world of dreams and fancies, was for starting to his feet at once, with exclamations ; he was held down by the other man. Sitting up, and blinking at the light, he smiled up at Rutherglen, and laughed a little sheepishly.

"Have I—have I been asleep ?" he asked.

"Sound asleep," said Rutherglen. "Here—here's another brandy and soda for you ; it'll do you good."

Levity, with the glass in his hand, looked with a comical expression of dismay at the other man before drinking. "These are times !" he said whimsically. "It'll go to my head."

Half-way through the glass he set it down, and looked about the room. "Where's the other chap ?" he demanded, suddenly remembering him.

"He's gone to bed like a good boy," said Rutherglen. "That's where you're going presently, old Levity."

Levity took up his glass again. "Clever chap—that," he said, wagging his head over the glass. "You can see it in his face. Sort of chap I should like to depend upon in a crisis, or if anything was going to happen to me."

"What's likely to happen to you ?" asked the other a little gruffly, looking back over his shoulder at the man in the chair. "What's the matter with you ?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," answered Levity, with a raising of his eyebrows. "I'm strong enough—tough as leather."

Rutherglen had walked across to the fire-place, and was leaning there on the mantelshelf, frowning at himself in the mirror. He could see Levity seated

in the chair, staring straight before him, and balancing the glass on one knee.

"You always feel all right—don't you?" demanded Rutherglen at last, a little jerkily.

"Eh?" Levity brought his wandering thoughts back, and sleepily blinked his eyelids, and looked round at the other man.

"You've never felt, for instance, that there was anything wrong with you—never faint, or anything of that kind?" said Rutherglen to the mirror.

"Of course not," answered Levity slowly. "I get a bit tired sometimes—it's the long hours. I was a bit done up to-night. I don't know what our friend must think of me—falling asleep like that. It was the brandy—went to my head. This is going"—he chuckled softly to himself—"same way."

There was a pause while the two men kept their positions—the one facing the mirror, with his elbows on the mantelshelf, and the other seated in a chair with his glass on his knee. The silence was broken by Rutherglen in a low tone.

"By the way—did you get any dinner?"

Levity came out of a sleep into which he was falling, and blinked his eyelids, and drank slowly from his glass. "Just a snack," he said. "I was working late—and there wasn't time to get anything much. I'm all right; don't you worry about me."

Another long pause, and then Rutherglen spoke. "You could have had some dinner here."

"Didn't want any," said Levity. "Old Mother Sockitt doesn't charge for what I don't have—special arrangement. Consequently"—his tongue wandered round the words a little, and he chuckled to think that he was mauling them—"consequently, what I

don't have old Mother Sockitt can't charge for. Savvy?"

Rutherglen swung round suddenly from the mantelpiece, and spoke jerkily, and with a curious flush on his face. "Look here, old Levy—it isn't my fault."

Levy raised his eyebrows; then he drained his glass, and set it down on the table beside him. "Of course it isn't," he said. "What's the good of talking nonsense? If you could go and get an engagement—stands to reason you'd go and get it—doesn't it?" He hauled himself out of his chair, and stood rubbing his eyes like a big schoolboy before the other man. "I must go to bed," he said; "I shan't be fit for anything in the morning. Nice chap that little medico—clever chap. In the case of any crisis—or if anything happened to me—I'd trust that chap. Clever face he'd got. Good night."

The man in evening dress took a step towards the shabby one, and took him by the shoulder. "Look here, old Levy," he said, "I hate to ask it—but I'm down to the bedrock. Money seems to fly—and one has got to keep up appearances; they won't look at a man without. I can't get the sort of shop I want all in a moment, and I should throw myself back if I took something less than what I'd been having."

That little flicker of laughter had gone out of Levy's face; the grey, drawn look had come over it, as though a curtain had been dropped. "You couldn't manage for a few days, I suppose?" he asked.

"Damn it all, man—should I ask if there wasn't a good reason?" flared out the other. "There—I beg your pardon, old Levy," he added contritely, "but what's a fellow to do? If once I failed to pay

my bill here—think how they'd look at me, and what they'd say. There's no other fellow here that dresses as I do, or keeps up the appearance I do. I simply must pay my bills, and I must have money to spend. Once I get a shop, of course, you know that it comes rolling in."

"And also goes rolling out again," said Levity. "Besides—I've had to refrain from paying bills here—just once or twice."

"Oh—you!" Rutherglen laughed. "That's the sort of thing that's expected of you; you look the part. Conic—keep me going, old fellow—won't you?"

"Oh—yes—I shall keep you going, of course," said Levity. "Why else do I work overtime at so much an hour? why else do I tell lies about having dinners down in the City—— Good God, man! I nearly raided the larder to-night; I smelt food! It was the brandy that pulled me together—only I mustn't make a habit of it."

"Of course—if you're going to talk like that, there's simply an end of things," said Rutherglen. "I must find some other way, I suppose."

He turned away, and moved to his old position by the mirror; he dropped his arms on the mantelshelf, and his head on his arms. Levity Hicks shrugged his shoulders, and moved across, and dropped a hand on the other man's shoulder.

"Horace," said Levity, "when our father first looked on us—with an interval of five years between us—and saw, I suppose, that we were more or less good, he saw also that you were the frail one and I the other sort."

The shoulders moved a little under his touch im-

patiently, and he took his hand away, and stepped back.

"Our sainted mother also regarded that fact, though not in quite the same way. Our sainted mother believed in you. They started me badly, by giving me a name that could be twisted on the tongues of men into something a little absurd; they gave you one that might serve, although the double aspirate was unfortunate. Horace Hicks would scarcely do for the profession you decided to adopt after our father was no longer in a position to protest against it."

"Well—I had to change it," snapped out the other man, raising his head for a moment. "There was another man—a good deal more important than I was—with that name on the stage already. I had to change it."

"I'm not saying anything about that," said Levity. "Only do go a bit slow, my dear chap; give me a chance. I've felt mighty tired a few times lately—and I don't want to crack up. What's the least you can do with?"

"I want three pounds," said Rutherglen instantly.

"You'll have to make it two," said Levity, with a sigh. "I can't do more than that." He took out the coins, and touched his brother's elbow, and put them into the outstretched palm. "It's the most I can spare," he said.

"Thanks," said the other, ungraciously enough. "I'll try to make it do for the moment. And I say"—this as Levity was trailing out of the room sleepily—"you must look after yourself a bit more—not work so hard. We can't have you knocking yourself up, you know."

Levity's serious eyes dwelt on the other man for a moment with a curious expression in them; then he laughed. "No—it wouldn't do—would it?" he said; and went out of the room without further words.

He climbed up through the house to the topmost floor of it, and opened a door and went in. He scratched a match, and found a candle; the place was but little more than a garret, and one side of the roof sloped away sharply, so that he had to stoop in moving in that part of the room. There was a narrow bed and a washstand, and a chair and a little dressing-table—all of the simplest description. Levity Hicks crossed the room, and threw open the window cut in the sloping roof, and looked out at the stars.

"After all, perhaps I ought not to have been sharp with him," he said with contrition. "I'm five years older than he is, and I've had to take life more seriously than he has ever done. And it isn't like me to start grumbling at my time of life. Tired—that's what I am—dog-tired."

He turned away from the window, and threw off his clothes, and got into bed. At the last moment, just before blowing out his candle, he stopped to stare at the flame of it for a moment; and shook his head at it.

"I wonder what the deuce that medico chap was driving at to-night? Anybody would think that there was something the matter with me. Whereas I'm sound—sound as anything."

He blew out the candle, and dropped off to sleep. Yet he did not sleep well, and once or twice found himself awake, and sitting up in bed, and staring out at the night that was framed in the square window

at the other side of the room. Life was a problem—a stupid, dreary problem sometimes—and the best fashion of solving it sometimes troubled even Levity's dreams.

Very few of the boarders appeared at the breakfast-table as early as he did ; generally speaking, there was only one other man, who took no notice of him, and who, with a newspaper propped up against the cruet, bolted his breakfast and went out of the house without a word. Levity Hicks, refreshed with food, got his hat, and set off towards that mysterious City which swallowed him up for such a number of hours out of the four-and-twenty.

Ever so many years before, a certain John Hicks had been manager to that firm in the City towards whose old-fashioned offices Levity Hicks was now moving. To John Hicks the City and the firm were everything ; they were the greater part of his life. He had begun as a youngster in their offices as an office boy ; and he had worked his way up steadily and slowly through the years. He was that type of man to whom reference is occasionally made as being "one of the old school" ; a man who hated progress or change of any sort, and to whom the telephone and the typewriter were things for derision and scorn. The old firm of Notley and Kemp, to which his life had been devoted, were among the last to adopt those abominations ; and it is probable that their advent, late in his life, had done something towards putting an end to old John Hicks.

John Hicks had married late in life, to the wonder of those who knew him. He had married more as a matter of course than for any other reason, and his marriage had given a twist to his character, in that

it gave him something else to think about than the office. More than that, a great and grave responsibility had fallen upon him with the coming of a son.

He had named that son, as we know, John Leviteius; John, that the son might hand down the name he himself bore; and Leviteius, because he believed in the fine old custom of giving a child a name out of the Bible. There was no one standing by to point out to him in what fashion that name might be abbreviated.

From the time of the birth of young Levity Hicks there had been but one future mapped out for him; John Hicks had even mentioned the matter to the firm while the boy was yet in knickerbockers. He was to come into the firm, as his father had done before him, and was to work his way up; so much was settled. John Hicks became a man of importance for the simple reason that he may be said to have carried his devotion to the firm to such an extent as to breed a son to work for it.

And then all his calculations were knocked on the head by the coming, five years later, of another son. John Hicks had not reckoned on that; he had not thought of such a possibility. This second boy had to be provided for in some other fashion, because nothing must interfere with the career of the first-born. Some future had to be arranged for the other boy, and there was no profession or business with which John Hicks was acquainted save that of the firm of Notley and Kemp, General Merchants.

It has to be recorded that Mrs. John Hicks—usually speaking the most subdued and colourless of wives—woke up at the coming of her second son, and asserted herself. Perhaps she took advantage of the confusion

into which the second birth had thrown her lord; certain it is that from the first she took the career of the boy into her own hands. She would have no more scriptural names; she had him christened Horace. More than that, there was plenty of time for a profession to be chosen for him; it should be something lighter and brighter than that selected for John Levity.

Old John Hicks had just seen the dream of his life accomplished, when a wide-eyed, rather frightened boy mounted a stool in the office and began his duties, when an illness fell upon him, and he sickened and died. It was then discovered that, by a grinding care and economy, he had saved quite a considerable sum of money, and had some small investments; there was just enough to keep the widow going, and to educate the younger boy. Everyone said, of course, how extremely lucky the elder boy was in getting into such a position with such a firm; it was only his mother, who knew what the City meant, and had seen how it had worn down and ground hard the man who had married her, that sighed a little for the fate of John Levity Hicks.

But it could not be helped, and Mrs. Hicks tried to think that it was all for the best. The life of the one son was mapped out; she was free to arrange the life of the other—and of him she had dreams and hopes.

It was only natural that the real full name borne by the boy in the office should leak out; and then came the abbreviation and the new christening; he was "Levity Hicks" for ever more. More than that, as the years went on he came to understand that, though other clerks might come and go, and might make new

places for themselves in the world, he must stop where he was. He was an institution ; the firm pointed to him as they might have pointed to some particular article of furniture in the office. He belonged to them, body and soul ; they would have expected the dead John Hicks to rise from the grave if they had not kept the young man in the place that the father had provided for him.

How he hated it ! How he thought of all the dreary years that were stretching away before him—years during which he was to be chained to that stool in that office, working out the same dreary sums concerning bales of this and barrels of that ; writing the same dreary, stupid letters to people inquiring about goods and the prices of them. There were even times, when he grew older, when in a morbid fashion he saw his place vacant at last ; and saw the clerks subscribing together for a wreath that was to be sent, properly inscribed. Johnson would do that ; Johnson had done it once or twice already, and loved the job.

Meanwhile, of course, Mrs. Hicks was having her way in regard to Horace. She had never had her way in anything before, and Horace was the most wonderful thing that had happened to her. He amused her, to begin with ; and when, with a rising sense of duty, she would put before him some scheme for the future which should mean work, he could always coax her delightfully to put it off, and to turn her mind to something else. She would sit sometimes, with weak tears streaming down her cheeks from an overabundance of laughter, while the boy imitated various people he would be likely to meet in the businesses chosen for him, or in the professions he was in a vague fashion some day to adorn. The boy

had a rare gift for mimicry ; and that would have been so swallowed up and lost if he had gone into any such office as that in which Levity worked.

In a fashion that was inexplicable Horace drifted on to the stage. It is probable that even the delighted Mrs. Hicks did not realise it until she sat in a real theatre, and watched her boy come on to the stage to play a child's part in a Christmas show. She wanted to tell the people sitting to right and left of her that this was her son—flesh of her flesh ; she could scarcely restrain herself. Levity, coming home tired and a little dishevelled from the office, heard all about it, and wondered, and found himself indirectly in a new world.

After that there could not, of course, be any talk of putting this genius to commonplace toil ; he would simply be wasted. So, in the intervals of schooling (and not too much of that), Horace drifted on from one engagement to another, until he had grown into a lanky youth, too old for boys' parts, and too young for other parts. And about that time Mrs. Hicks, feeling that she had accomplished something after all, went out into the void, to look for the late John Hicks, and perhaps to excuse herself to him.

There was a will—a poor disjointed thing, but quite valid—leaving the little she had to Horace, who was then nearly of age. Levity Hicks looked after the small fortune until Horace should come to be twenty-one, and doled the money out to him sparingly ; Horace, arriving at the great day, took that small fortune into his own hands, and promptly proceeded to squander it. Such work as he did was so light and so easy that he could always depend upon bringing grist to his mill in the future.

And there you have the history of Levity Hicks and Horace, his brother (known on the stage as Horace Rutherglen), at the time when they stood together under the curious eyes of Mr. Owen Batchelor on a night in Horace Rutherglen's room in Sockitt's boarding-house.

The paving-stones of a little narrow court in the City that had been worn by the feet of John Hicks, and of John Levitus Hicks, his son, echoed to the tread of the latter on this morning when he turned towards the offices of Notley and Kemp and passed within. It was a hot and steamy morning, even so early as this. Levity Hicks was tired before ever the day began.

It began in the usual way, with greetings from fellow-clerks, and with the getting out of big ledgers ; and presently with the coming of the partners, who passed through the outer office into their inner sanctuary. In all the years Levity had never quite got over his awe of the partners ; his father had been used to speak of them with bated breath, as of beings in another sphere.

Once, indeed, on a never-to-be-forgotten occasion, Mrs. Hicks had gone to an At Home in the house of the younger partner—Mr. Kemp ; and had never quite recovered from it. No one spoke to her, and she sat in a corner and drank tea ; and the experiment was not repeated.

Levity Hicks was summoned once or twice into the inner office in which the partners sat at either side of a great desk ; Levity occupied a confidential position in the place. And each time he was summoned that curious flush mounted in his cheeks, and then died away again, leaving them white ; for Levity

had always been in awe of the partners. And when at last the hour approached for his lunch he went out listlessly into the streets, not caring greatly what he ate.

He had been having "something light" for two days; a certain feeling of recklessness determined him to have a more substantial meal. At the end of an hour he came back to the office, feeling the better for his meal; he worked better throughout the afternoon. There was always a certain amount of money to be earned in that place—which was understaffed for modern requirements—by anyone willing to remain later; and Levity was often willing. But on this occasion he had made up his mind to go home at the usual hour. The man was curiously tired, and his soul revolted against the dingy office and the stool that was his.

Yet when he got out into the breathless streets, and made his way towards Gridley Square, he was sorry, in a sense, that he had not remained in the office. He could have been alone there, as he had so often been; and here he was, in a jostling throng of people all making for their homes at the end of the day. At Sockitt's he could only sit about in the room that was dignified by the name of drawing-room, and wait till the gong sounded for dinner.

He turned into Gridley Square, and made his way slowly along the pavement. Even the scrubby garden, with its one great tree, had a refreshing look about it; Levity hesitated for a moment on his way to the house, and then he heard his name called.

"Uncle Levity!"

Little Susette stood inside the railings, holding on to them, and peeping through at him. Once or

twice before, when it had happened that Levity Hicks was early, he had gone into the garden, and had sat down there, and had talked with the child and with Miss Meadows. If anyone had told him that Miss Meadows, bending over the well-thumbed book of fairy-tales, or working with her needle, had felt her heart jump suddenly at the sound of his footstep, Levity would have laughed the idea to scorn; yet so it was. And now, while he fumbled with the rusty latch of the old gate, she sat still, with her eyes lowered; and just thought of him, coming across the grass with his hat in his hand. And she had scarcely ever spoken a dozen words to him.

"Good evening, Miss Meadows," said Levity, as he stopped before her, with the child clinging to his fingers, and wriggling her small legs about in a sort of spasmodic dance. "I've come into the place where I'm told, on the best authority, that most of the fairies live."

"Good evening, Mr. Hicks," said Priscilla Meadows, looking up at him for a moment. "I have heard that too."

Levity sat down on the old bench, and the child leaned against his knee; he put an arm about her slim young body, and somehow most of the troubles and worries of the day dropped away from him. He ought to have remembered before that Susette would be likely to be here, and that he would have a chance of talking to her. He did not talk much to Miss Meadows, because Miss Meadows did not seem to understand him, or to have any great gift of conversation. If he had known how her heart was beating—not a couple of yards from him!

There is nothing more strange than the mind of a

little child. No child on this earth ever received more passionate devotion than did little Susette from Priscilla Meadows ; and no child ever loved a woman so deeply in return. Yet beyond that Susette never went. Whether it was that Priscilla Meadows had never found the trick of it, or that it did not come naturally to her, as it might have done with a child of her own, it is impossible to say ; but she had never got to the real intimate soul of this child. Once or twice, as a child will, the mite had put out little delicate feelers, as it were—those little questions and suggestions that seem so absurd or so commonplace to one not understanding them, and are so instantly to be divined by the elect.

There had been no need to put out feelers in the case of Levity Hicks ; he was one of the circle. There was a very perfect understanding between the child and the man—so perfect, that Priscilla Meadows had never got within niles of it—and Heaven knows she had striven hard enough ! Levity himself, when Miss Meadows was there, had tried to draw her within the circle—stretching out hands to her which she failed to grasp, or only let go again immediately.

It was perhaps a merciful thing that Priscilla Meadows did not realise this defect in herself ; hers was a love that was content to give, and to ask nothing special in return ; that had been her attitude towards life always.

So now, when presently Miss Meadows moved away to the house, leaving Levity in charge of the child, their attitude towards each other changed in a moment. Not outwardly, but just in the fashion in which they began to speak.

“ Well,” said Levity, looking round at the child

with those deep eyes of his, "and how are the Folks?"

"The Folks is simply fine," answered the child.

"But the Humbly-dog-chap troubles me a little, Uncle Levity."

"I know," said the man, with a nod. "He always did, you know."

"He was here just a little time ago," went on the child softly. "He was lying quite close to Aunt Priscilla, with his head upon my knee; only of course Aunt Priscilla didn't see him; she never does. And the Humbly-dog-chap was dreadfully sorry for himself."

"Tell me about him again," said Levity. "It's quite a long time since you did tell me."

"He's one of the Folks," answered the child. "The Folks live in the garden, and they belongs to me. The Humbly-dog-chap isn't exactly a dog, because he's got blue eyes, and he can smile at you; also he can look as if he was going to cry."

"I remember now; and he lives in the bushes there, and never comes out for anybody else—eh?"

"'Cept me. It's the Top-dog-chap that he's afraid of; I have to keep the Top-dog-chap in his place. He only means it in play, but sometimes he hurts the Humbly-dog-chap. Then I have to scold him; and Aunt Priscilla wonders why I am talking, and thinks I am talking to myself."

"And how's the chap up in the tree?" asked Levity, with perfect seriousness.

"Oh—you found him," answered the child. "It was funny I had never seen him. You mean the Creepy-chap. I should never have noticed him if you hadn't told me."

"He's a shy sort of fellow, is the Creepy-chap," said Levity. "Besides, he's very much the same colour as the leaves."

"And when the leaves fall——" The child was prompting him in a delighted whisper; she wanted to hear the wonder again.

"Why, then, of course, the Creepy-chap goes higher up; that's how it is you don't see him in the winter. You see, when you look up through the leaves like this, from where you sit underneath, the tree goes up and up and up, until it makes you giddy to think how high it is; and I expect that part stops green, and doesn't wither. You wouldn't think it went up so far if you looked at it from the square outside——"

"But I don't; I only look at it from underneath," broke in Susette promptly.

"Yes—that's because you've got the proper spirit in you—the proper believing spirit," said Levity.

The child touched his knee softly, and he looked round at her. He saw that she had lowered her eyes, and was looking at something apparently on the ground at her feet. "Look!" she whispered.

Even then the man knew what to do. He bent forward, and stooped, and seemed to touch something a few inches from the ground. The child gave a deep sigh of contentment.

"Aren't his eyes blue?" she whispered.

"Wonderful!" said the man, straightening himself. "And now, as he's gone back to his home under the bushes, I think we'll go off to our home across the way."

As they went out of the gate together, the child holding to his hand, she lifted that hand for a moment,

and softly laid her cheek against it ; it was the sign of their perfect understanding, to which no words were necessary.

Miss Meadows took the child from him, and went on up the stairs. Levity thought, after all, that he would dine to-night—just by way of a treat. He was not so tired as he had been the previous night ; but he was in the house, and could not therefore very well make an excuse. The gong sounding just as he was beginning to feel that he had stood long enough in that horrible drawing-room, balancing himself first on one leg and then on the other, and half making up his mind to speak to someone, he went at the tail end of the procession into the dining-room. Young Batchelor, coming upon him at the door, linked his arm in his, and spoke in his quick, cheery fashion.

“Feeling better to-night, Hicks ?”

Someone turned sharply, and looked back at him ; it was Priscilla Meadows. Even while he blushed at being called attention to in this fashion, Levity had time to notice that Miss Meadows had looked at him in a startled fashion, and then looked away again.

“Oh—I’m quite all right, thanks,” he murmured.

“I was only tired, you know.”

He took his modest place down at the end of the table. He saw his brother seated at the other end, conspicuous in evening dress, and chatting gaily with Miss Ogg. As he bent over his plate, he smiled quietly to himself, and wondered what any of them would think if they knew that that brilliant, good-looking young fellow—Horace Rutherglen—was the younger brother of that shabby-looking, queer fellow—Levity Hicks.

For no one did know. Rutherglen had taken up his

residence at Sockitt's first of all, and it had been his suggestion that Levity should go there, and take that cheap garret afterwards ; he liked to have him on the spot. But no one suspected the relationship, and there was no reason why they should.

He remained in the dining-room with the men for a little time, smoking a cigarette, and looking now and then furtively at his brother. He became conscious that young Batchelor was watching him again, and he chafed under the scrutiny. Yet the younger man's voice was friendly enough when he drew a chair beside Levity, and sat down and spoke to him.

"I didn't mean to worry you," he said. "I suppose it's being awfully keen on my work ; I always want to interfere with other people, and know all about them."

"Oh—that's all right," said Levity quietly.

"I think you work a little too hard, Hicks," went on the other. "I took the liberty of talking to your friend Rutherglen last night about you, while you were asleep. Aren't you rather burning the candle at both ends ?"

"There's always a lot to be done—at the office. I'm used to it. You caught me last night at one of my bad moments—that's all."

Batchelor was quiet for a moment or two, puffing at his cigarette, and frowning a little over something he had in his mind. And at last he blurted it out, speaking in a quick, low tone that should reach Levity's ear alone.

"Look here—I wish you'd let a real first-class man run over you—vet you, you know. Every man should know something about himself—and take precautions."

Levity looked at him out of solemn eyes. "What should you think is the matter with me?" he demanded.

"Probably nothing at all—but on the other hand—there might be."

"Well—I can't afford to be vetted by a first-class man," said Levity, as though that closed the subject.

"My dear boy, you'd be on the free list. One of our fellows would do it for you, on a word from me—glad to do it."

"You seem anxious. What do you think's the matter with me?"

"I'm probably quite wrong—but I should advise you not to overstrain your heart," said the other slowly. "Lots of people have something wrong with the heart, in one way or another; and sometimes it doesn't matter, and sometimes it does. It's just as well to know."

"I—I'll think about it," said Levity. "Thanks all the same."

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

THAT highly respectable firm which had taken within its folds the late John Hicks as a boy, and had seen him grow into manhood and go on to death, and after that had taken his son in his place, was not a firm given to innovations. As has been said, it was only when such things became inevitable that the telephone and the typewriter forced a way into the office ; and even then they were regarded with suspicion, and were used sparingly. It was only the march of events, and the pushing competition of firms of a later growth, that compelled them to be used at all.

Generally speaking, a lanky youth, with untidy hair growing low over his forehead, and with the beginnings of a moustache, manipulated the rattling little machine in a corner of the outer office. He had been taught in one of the many schools, and he used to go listlessly into the partners' room when a bell rang, bearing with him a heavy notebook, wherein he took down in shorthand such letters as were dictated to him ; after which the banging, rattling machine did the rest under his swift fingers. As a matter of fact, the youth was not liked, apart from a somewhat repulsive personality, although it was recognised by the clerks that he had his uses. They

were for the most part elderly clerks, who had grown up with the firm, and who resented innovations as fiercely as did the partners themselves.

And then one day the youth fell ill. There had been premonitions of it for a time, in a wheezing, hacking cough; and various remedies had been recommended by various clerks; to all of which the lanky youth returned studiously impolite replies. Then a morning came when the typewriter was still and the lanky youth's chair vacant, and a note explaining his absence and enclosing a doctor's certificate.

There was, of course, no one that understood the machine, or that knew anything about shorthand; the lanky youth was suddenly hoisted into a position of importance. The work of the office got on somehow during the day; and late in the afternoon, when everyone was cross and generally upset, Levity was called into the inner office (rising with that flush on his face that was always succeeded by the deadly pallor with which he answered such a summons), and found the younger partner, Mr. Kemp, walking up and down the office, with his hat on, preparatory to leaving.

"Oh—Hicks—do you remember the name of the place from which we got young Green? We can't go on like this; we must have someone in to do the work."

Levity did remember, having once talked to the boy about it in an idle moment; he gave Mr. Kemp the name.

"I wish you'd look in on your way home, and get them to send someone down to-morrow morning—just temporarily—till Green gets back," said Mr. Kemp.

Levity Hicks, rather glad of the excuse of getting away a little earlier, called at the place, and opening a door, went in, to find the rattling, banging, and ringing of a dozen machines all in full swing. He murmured his requests to a business-like woman at the end of the room, and was assured that an operator, properly competent, should be sent down first thing in the morning. Then Levity strolled home.

In the morning, when the other clerks had assembled, and when it was within a few minutes of that hour when the partners walked in (they lived in the same neighbourhood, and always came up together by the same train), the seat in the corner before the typewriting table remained empty.

"They certainly promised to send," said Levity, with an anxious frown.

And then the door opened, and a girl came quickly in. Within the memory of living men in that office such an apparition had never appeared before; there was nothing there that should cause a woman to call under any circumstances. It is certain that neither of the wives of the old partners had ever been inside the place.

Clerks sat at their desks, with pens upraised, staring at the girl, who stood just behind the little mahogany flap that was raised to let clerks go in or out; she looked round with a puzzled air.

"I'm sorry I'm late," said the girl in a soft little voice; "they didn't tell me till this morning; they forgot all about it. Shall I come in?"

Levity gasped; this was the temporary typist. It had never occurred to him to demand that that typist should be of a certain sex; it was incredible

that anyone so utterly opposed to all the traditions of the office should drift in there.

"We didn't expect a—a lady," he said feebly.

"I don't suppose you did," said the girl, with another little laugh, as Levity, getting down from his stool, raised the mahogany flap to admit her. "You needn't be afraid; I'm quite used to work of this sort," she added, making her way straight to the table in the corner.

The eyes of every man were upon her as she took off her hat, and made her hair perfectly neat with a touch or two of the pins. The eyes of every man watched her as she set to work to get the machine ready. And just then the partners came in, one after the other.

There was a death-like silence in the office, while the two elderly men stood side by side, with eyes bulging, and looked at that apparition in the corner. It seemed for a moment that there would be an outburst; then Kemp said—shooting the words out as if they had been bullets straight at the unfortunate Levity:

"Hicks—I want you!"

Levity Hicks, who had been looking reproachfully at the back of the girl's fair head, as though blaming her for this happening, literally fell off his stool, and followed the partners into their room. If an earthquake had happened that had partially demolished the offices, and left Messrs. Notley and Kemp standing amid the ruins of it, they could not have looked more staggered than they did when they faced Levity Hicks.

"What is this, Hicks? Is it a joke?" demanded Kemp.

"No, sir—it's a—a lady—I should say—a girl," said Levity, with perfect seriousness.

"Did you order a girl?" demanded Mr. Notley.

"I ordered a typist," said Levity. "It didn't occur to me to suggest anything about the sex; I thought they only kept one sort. She says she understands the work, sir."

There was a gloomy pause, while the partners, after eyeing Levity severely for a moment or two, looked at each other. Then Mr. Kemp, who always did most of the talking when talking was to be done, shot out another command at Levity Hicks.

"Send her to me."

Levity came into the outer office, the cynosure of all eyes. Eyes followed him as he strayed across the office, and stopped beside the chair of the girl.

"Oh—if you please—will you go in?" said Levity.

The girl was evidently amused. Vaguely, as he looked at her when she got to her feet, Levity saw that her eyes were blue, and that there were little dimples at the corners of them—and other dimples elsewhere flitting about her face. In that moment it seemed that he had forgotten the office and the clerks and the waiting partners; he just stood looking at the girl, while she looked back at him.

"Oh, if you please——" he began again.

"Certainly," she answered briskly; and took up the notebook that was the property of the lanky youth, and went quickly across the office and entered the inner room.

Exactly what happened there no one ever knew; but within a short space of time she came out, and seated herself at the typewriting table, and started her work. That was a miracle in itself, because it

had seemed to be the sort of work that only the lanky youth could do. Her busy fingers flew over the keys ; and the men who had been used to the methods of the lanky youth marvelled at the speed with which the girl worked, and the ease with which a difficult and almost impossible business seemed to be done. Elderly clerks decided that here was something that could be spoken about to wives after supper that evening ; thinking it over more carefully, they decided that the matter was scarcely worth mentioning.

Mr. Kemp came out at the close of the day, and watched the last of the letters being written. In a fatherly way, Mr. Kemp congratulated the girl on the excellence of her work, and asked a few questions concerning how long she had been learning, and what, for instance, her actual speed was. She returned smiling answers, and Mr. Kemp, pulling a little at his grey moustache, said " good night " to the assembled clerks, and left.

Several of the clerks discovered that they had important work to finish that evening, and stayed later than usual. Reflecting, perhaps, that the girl would be there on the following day, if that young idiot Green did not happen to recover with indecent rapidity, they finally went away, leaving Levity Hicks bending over his books, and the girl finishing up her work.

" Did you get into trouble about me this morning, Mr. Hicks ? " came a quiet voice from the corner where the typewriting table stood.

Levity looked up with a start. " No—no," he said. " They were a little surprised. You see, I didn't know——"

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"That there were girls as well as men—eh?" she plunged in. "Have you been long in this office, Mr. Hicks?"

He nibbled the end of his pen, and looked at her across the desks with a half-whimsical smile. "Ever since I was a boy," he said. "My father was here before me; he was manager here. It's really rather a fine old firm."

Youth, looking at him out of puzzled and rather pained blue eyes, noted the shabbiness of him, and the droop of the broad shoulders, and perhaps the weariness in the eyes. Youth, having packed up her machine, and put away papers neatly, leaned against the edge of the desk while she drew on her gloves, and wondered a little about him. Youth had come, butterfly-like, into the dingy old place to-day, and could flutter away to-morrow if she liked; this man could not. In a vague fashion Youth was sorry.

"Do you work later than anybody else always?" she asked presently, with the last button fastened.

"Pretty often," he answered. And then, at sight of the laughing eyes and the dimples, he suddenly closed his ledger with a slam, and began to haul it off the slope of the desk. "To-night I've finished," he said resolutely.

"You really look so tired, Mr. Hicks, that I don't think it will do you any harm to be taken out of this place a little earlier than usual," said the girl. "You don't want to make a machine of yourself—do you?"

"That's pretty much what I am—isn't it?" he asked, looking round from his position at the safe, where he was bending to put in the ledgers.

"Well—so am I," suggested the girl, with a little quick laugh. "So much a machine that in this office to-day no single soul has asked me my name. Even the two old gentlemen in there have simply called me 'Miss.'"

"Well—what is your name?" asked Levity, greatly bold.

"I am Miss Delia Valentine," said the girl demurely; and Levity, looking at her, decided that the name absolutely fitted her to perfection.

"Well—you know my name already," he said, straightening himself, and locking the big safe. "Hicks, you know."

"What was the other name?" she asked.

"John." Levity's face flushed a little painfully as he spoke the unaccustomed name.

"That wasn't the name I heard them calling you to-day—the clerks, I mean," she persisted. "It was a funnier name than that."

"Oh—that's my second name; they rather make fun of it," said Levity, with a burning face. "You see, my father gave me the names of John Leviticus; and so the fellows call me——"

"I remember," she said softly. "That was the name I heard—Levity."

"Yes," said Levity lamely. "Which way do you go, Miss Valentine?"

"Oh—I'm just going to cut across to the tube," she answered.

He locked up the office; she stood waiting in the little narrow court outside for a moment or two until he joined her; they strolled out into the busier streets together. Levity, from his height, looked down at the hat below him, and at the fair, pretty

hair beneath it ; once or twice he caught a glimpse of a blue eye turned in his direction. And then she was standing on the edge of the pavement, with her hand held out to him.

" Good-bye ! " she said. " I shall see you to-morrow, and then you won't be so frightened of me."

" I'm not frightened——" But she was gone—dodging the hurrying traffic, and he was left there on the edge of the pavement, jostled this way and that by people anxious to get home.

She came the next day—and the next ; the lanky youth was still indisposed. On the second day she finished her work early, and left ; on the third day it happened, just as on the first, that Levity was putting away the ledgers as the girl prepared to go. She, too, had worked late that evening, and Levity, with a sinking of the heart, knew the cause ; the lanky youth would return on the morrow.

They walked together down the little narrow court, side by side, and so passed out into the noisier streets. The first real rush of the evening was over, and the crowds were thinning. It did not seem possible to the man at that moment that this little fairy-like being, with the blue eyes and the bright, quick fashion of speech, was going out of his life just as mysteriously and just as casually as she had entered it. He would not believe that that was possible. Even when she held out her hand to him and smiled at him whimsically, he would not believe it.

" Good-bye ! " she said.

" Shan't I see you ever again ? " he asked, retaining the hand.

" I don't expect so," she answered. " I go on

somewhere else to-morrow—and perhaps somewhere else after that. One gets quite used to it.”

She slipped her hand from his, and ran across the road ; at the other side, before she turned the corner, she looked back at him, and waved her hand—and was gone. Levity turned drearily homewards.

Levity thought about her a great deal during the succeeding days ; he wished harm would come to the lanky youth in the corner of the office, so that by some divine chance Delia Valentine might be brought back there again. That was a foolish dream, and he knew it ; and after a time it was a dream that faded. Only sometimes at night, when he was working alone in the office, did he glance towards that empty corner, and think of the girl who had sat there for three days, and then had fluttered away again.

He reached Sockitt's one evening just as the gong was sounding for dinner ; he slipped into the room after the others, and took his usual place. Glancing down the length of the table, he saw that Mrs. Ogg of the double chin and her daughter Julia were resplendent in evening dress. True, there was nothing very extraordinary about that, because they generally went out two or three times a week to some form of entertainment or other. It was only when, a moment or two afterwards, his brother came into the room, and took his seat between them, that a casual remark from Rutherglen caught his attention.

“ We've got plenty of time ; it doesn't begin till eight-thirty.”

“ I'm quite looking forward to it,” said Mrs. Ogg.

“ Awfully nice of you to take us,” said Miss Ogg.

"Oh—these people generally give me any seats I ask for," said Horace Rutherglen airily. "I've been in one or two of their shows, you know."

In due course Joseph the boy went to the hall door, and whistled shrilly for a taxi; and the ladies and Rutherglen packed themselves into the vehicle and went off. Levity was vaguely hurt—not for any definite reason, but chiefly because other people of all sorts and conditions could ride about in cabs and wear evening dress; and he was left here to kill time as best he might for a dreary evening. It happened even that young Batchelor, who had taken something of a friendly interest in him, and to whom he could talk, was absent that night.

He decided to go out; and having gone out wished that he had stayed at home. It was not much fun tramping round the gloomy Bloomsbury squares by himself, with only a few strolling pairs of lovers walking here and there. Levity wondered what sort of game that must be; that walking arm-in-arm with someone to whom it did not appear to be necessary to address words. Levity had never tried it.

He must have been walking for something like half an hour, when he found himself standing outside a theatre, and, after a moment or two of hesitation, went up a passage, and put down half a crown, and went into the pit. There were not more than a score of people in the pit, and the stalls were half empty. Levity sat down at the end of a row, and tried to fix his attention on a rather dreary musical comedy that was going on on the stage.

The thing was not interesting, at least to Levity, and he found his eyes wandering about the house.

Only two of the boxes were filled, and it was a little surprising to Levity to recognise, after a moment or two, Mrs. Ogg and her daughter seated in one of the boxes, with Horace Rutherglen between them. Levity had not known that they were coming to this theatre.

Mrs. Ogg and her daughter appeared to be vastly diverted by what was going on on the stage, and also to be preening themselves considerably for the benefit of the audience, and making the most of the conspicuous position they occupied.

When the act ended, which it did soon after Levity got to his seat, he had time to look about him, and see the people seated near him; on his entrance he had stumbled to a seat in the dark. And then he became aware, with a sudden and extraordinary leaping of the heart, that someone in the front row of the pit was leaning round, and bowing in his direction, and striving to catch his notice.

It was Delia Valentine. As Levity half rose to his feet in his excitement, the girl got up, and picked up her hat, and made her way out to the side of the pit, and came towards him.

"How do you do?" she said, giving him her hand. "I'm all alone, and I think it's ever so much nicer to have someone to talk to; I hate seeing things alone—don't you?"

"I was just thinking the same thing," he stammered, as she sat down beside him and turned her blue eyes upon him. "I say—it's pretty wonderful to see you again—isn't it?"

"Do you think every girl you ever meet is pretty wonderful?" she teased in a low voice.

"I—I don't meet many girls," he said blunderingly.

"I mean—not girls like you. What do you think of this?" He nodded towards the curtain, as if to indicate the play.

"I think it's fine!" she exclaimed. "But then this sort of thing to me is always fine. It's life and colour and movement and music; there's nothing grey or dreary about it. I go to theatres just as often as ever I can; I love it."

Levity was quite content to watch her glowing face, and to hear that soft little voice that was like music itself; he did not want to speak. She looked round the house, and commented on its bareness; and then she caught sight of the box in which Rutherglen and the Oggs were seated.

"Who's that good-looking man, I wonder, with the fat woman up there?" she asked idly.

Here was Levity's chance to show his deep knowledge of men and life generally. "He's an actor," he said promptly, "man I know rather well."

"No!" She regarded him breathlessly, and Levity felt properly rewarded. "Well—he's handsome enough—isn't he? Where does he play? Have I seen him in anything?"

"I expect you have; he's played in all sorts of things," said Levity. "Horace Rutherglen is his name. He's really quite a good actor."

Just then the curtain went up, and Levity, stealing glances at the girl beside him, noticed that she looked again and again at that box in which Rutherglen was seated. He felt vaguely disturbed; he wished that he had pretended ignorance of the identity of the man who had at first only interested the girl in a casual fashion. When the final curtain came down, he got to his feet with something of relief.

"As you're all alone you won't mind if I see you home—will you?" he said hopefully.

"Oh—I shall be quite all right, thank you; don't you bother about me," she responded gaily.

"But I want to come very much," he said.

"All the way to Brixton?"

"All the way to anywhere," he answered.

They had a glimpse of Rutherglen putting the ladies into a taxi as they walked past the front of the theatre; and Rutherglen was not so absorbed in that task but that he noticed Levity with the girl clinging to his arm for a moment; his eyebrows lifted in mild wonder. Levity did not mind that in the least; there were other people who could go about with ladies just as much as Rutherglen could—and prettier girls by far than Julia Ogg!

He thought a little bitterly that he would have liked to put Delia into a taxi, and to whirl her away to Brixton; but it was not to be thought of. Besides, the girl knew exactly which way to go, and swung herself dexterously on to a motor-bus, with Levity behind her. Inside the motor-bus several people looked at the pretty little creature seated at his side, and perhaps wondered that she had chosen such a shabby-looking escort. But in the friendliest fashion she chattered away to him, and it was the shortest journey that Levity had ever taken. It seemed no time at all before the bus was stopped at the end of a street, and they stood together in the darkness, with the huge vehicle vanishing in the distance.

"Here's where I live—third door down on this side. I live with an aunt who's nearly always asleep, except when she's eating, poor dear. Good night!"

She held out her hand to him, and he took it, and

held it for a moment. "Well, I know where you live now," he said, "and I shan't lose sight of you again, Miss Valentine."

"Well—perhaps I shan't lose sight of you," she said mischievously. "You see, you know such nice people—actors, and all that sort of thing."

He watched her as she went along to the house, and put a key in the lock, and disappeared. Even then, as she had done before, she looked back at him, and waved a hand gaily before she passed into the house; he remembered always that that was a pretty trick of hers.

"By Jove!—I'm young to-night! I've lived to-night!" said Levity to himself, as he started for home.

Arriving at Sockitt's, it occurred to him, as he went slowly upstairs on his way to his room, that he might look in and see his brother. This was a night of nights, and while it was in his mind to get away to his room, and sit there in the darkness, and think about the little creature whose hand he had held and the very breath of whose lips had been so near his own as they sat in the darkened theatre, he yet wanted, in this new excitement, to talk to someone. Not to talk about her, but simply to let people know that he wasn't quite the dull dog he was generally supposed to be, but someone that went out into the world, and snuffed up the full, free air of life with wide nostrils.

He knocked upon the door as he always did, and was bidden to enter. He went in, and found himself in a haze of smoke; and looked through it, to discover Rutherglen lounging in the arm-chair, and Batchelor seated cross-legged on another chair, with his arms

folded on the back of it. Rutherglen was half-way through a cigar; Batchelor had a briar pipe.

"Hullo!—old Levity; you can come in," said Rutherglen. "Also you can help yourself to a cigarette, if you want one—and to a drink."

Levity, being unduly excited, helped himself to a mild drink and took a cigarette. He had nodded to young Batchelor as he entered the room; and Batchelor had smiled back at him with that sudden showing of white teeth in his almost ugly face. Rutherglen continued to watch Levity through half-closed lids as Levity moved round the room, carrying his glass with him; for this was a new Levity that his brother had not before encountered.

"Who's the girl?" asked Rutherglen at last.

Levity did not like the tone. He had an instant vision of her, flitting down the dark little street in Brixton, and turning to wave her hand to him before the house swallowed her up; it was a vision so set apart from everything else in his life that he wanted to keep it, just as he saw it there, all to himself. He thought of her then, at that moment, with the aunt who was always asleep except when she was eating, and who yet represented a watch-dog-like sort of faithful guardianship.

"The lady is a friend of mine," he said quietly.

Rutherglen laughed, and turned his eyes lazily in the direction of young Batchelor. "Just hark to old Sobersides!" he scoffed. "When you see him creeping about in this place—and going off to the City quite nicely in the morning—you wouldn't think that he'd be walking about with a golden-haired baby——"

Levity had upset his glass. He must have risen in

some sudden hurry and excitement ; he stood there trembling strangely, and staring at his brother. Rutherglen had stopped speaking, and was watching Levity with a sudden change of face, almost as though he expected a blow. Only Batchelor sat perfectly still, pulling at his pipe.

"You'd better mix your drink again," said Rutherglen at last. "What the devil do you want to flare up like that for? Can't a man joke about a pretty girl—and devilish pretty she was, too, I can tell you, Batchelor—without his carpet being spoiled?"

"I don't want anything more—thank you," said Levity jerkily. "It was an—an accident. Good night!"

"Here—you old fool—you can't go like that," exclaimed Rutherglen, getting to his feet, and taking another glass, and rapidly mixing a drink. "Come on, old Levity; I'm glad to see you're waking up a bit. Let's drink her pretty health—whoever she is."

Levity took the glass; he almost smiled as he looked at his brother. For after all this was one of the ways of men, and no harm was intended. She was a pretty girl, and her hair was golden, and her eyes were blue; why shouldn't he be proud to think that that was so? He raised his glass, and nodded and drank.

"It wasn't much of a show, was it?" he said, to change the conversation.

"I didn't know you were there," said Rutherglen, staring at him.

"Yes—I went in the pit," said Levity. "I saw you in your box."

A little later on, when young Batchelor got up from his chair, and put his empty pipe in his pocket, and moved to the door, Levity moved also. At the last moment Rutherglen called Levity back again—quite in an easy friendly voice.

"I say," he said a little confusedly, when Levity was standing close to him, "I can't quite see the necessity for you to be taking girls to theatres; 't isn't quite in your line. It's different with me; it's part of my business."

A sudden hot, burning flush mounted to Levity's face; he stood quite still, looking at the other man. So much had happened that night—so much that had changed his view of life. "Taking girls to theatres" scarcely expressed the matter at all; and Rutherglen would never have understood. He thought of Rutherglen, with Mrs. Ogg of the double chin and Miss Julia Ogg, in the box at the theatre; he thought of the taxi-cab that had taken them there, and that other taxi-cab that had brought them back again. He was on the point of saying something that should express his own deep resentment—but after all it was not worth while. Rutherglen would not have understood.

"We lead different lives—you and I, Horace," he said quietly. "For God's sake don't let's get them mixed up."

He walked out of the room, leaving his brother to think over the matter; there was a strange heat and excitement in himself, and he did not quite trust himself to say more. It was rather a pity, he thought, that he had not gone off straight to his room, and so left Horace Rutherglen alone, for that night at least.

"Taking girls to theatres!" he muttered savagely to himself, as he sat on the edge of his bed in his narrow garret. "Taking girls to theatres——"

He got undressed slowly, and as slowly got himself calm. After all, what did it matter? It was no Miss Julia Ogg that he had taken to the theatre; it was someone else, snatched out of the great and beautiful world that spelled love and beauty and soft voices—and even motor omnibuses, where one had to sit close, and be jolted against one another!

Sitting, half-dressed, on the edge of his bed, he was roused by a slight tap at the door of his room. In an instant all resentment was gone from him; for surely this was dear old kindly Horace, come to make his peace with him, as he had done sometimes before. A stupid thing to quarrel with Horace—that last mistake perpetrated, wilfully enough, by Mrs. John Hicks.

Therefore he called out a cheery "Come in," and sat on the edge of his bed, waiting for his brother to enter. But it was not his brother; it was young Owen Batchelor, thrusting his head round the half-opened door with an apology.

"Awfully sorry—but I thought you wouldn't be asleep. May I come in? Thanks. I didn't get a chance of speaking to you just now, when you were downstairs with our friend Rutherglen; so I thought I'd come up. Met the girl Fanny on the stairs going up to bed—that girl works, doesn't she?—and she told me where I should find you. Snug little crib you've got here—all among the chimney-pots—eh?"

"There's only one chair," said Levity—"but won't you sit down? It's not a bad sort of room when

you're used to it ; but one is inclined to bump one's head a bit at first."

From sheer force of habit Batchelor had taken out a cold pipe, and had put it between his lips, and was pulling at it. "I ought to apologise for coming and worrying you at this hour of the night," he said—"but as a matter of fact I'm rather a persistent sort of devil ; at least, that's what people tell me. Those who like me, and believe in me, tell me that that persistency will take me far ; those who don't like me say other things about me. It's just that persistency that brings me up here to-night."

Levity, sitting on the side of his bed, wrapped his long arms about his shoulders, and laughed softly. "You haven't got that bee out of your bonnet yet—about me and my heart—and symptoms and things ?"

"My dear chap," said Batchelor, wagging the stem of his pipe at him, and grinning cheerfully, "every man, and every woman for the matter of that, on this earth of ours, has a right to make the best of things ; and in these days of science and medicine, and all the rest of it, we stand chances that our grandparents never stood at all. In other words, we've got a certain life given to us, and we want to make what we can of it. It's the only thing that ever is given to us, and we've got to catch hold of it, and to keep hold of it as long as we can."

Levity Hicks gripped his shoulders, and swayed himself backwards and forwards on the edge of the bed, and laughed. "What's a poor devil of a clerk—grubbing away for so many hours a day—toiling for someone else—got particularly to live a long life for ?" he asked, with a chuckle.

Young Batchelor put the cold stem of his pipe into his mouth, and rattled it softly against his teeth. "I thought I heard something about a girl with golden hair to-night?" he suggested softly.

Levity grunted. "Oh—as to that, it was just an accidental meeting—someone I'd met before. She doesn't touch my life; she doesn't belong to me in any way. Leave her out of it. What do you want to do with me?"

"Well—you've interested me a bit—just as a human specimen, if you like—although really it isn't that at all. I've gone out of my way to see one of our men about you; he's a chap who rather likes me, and he'll do quite a lot for me. And he says he'll see you—and sort of vet you; in a word, you'll be getting the sort of diagnosis that you'd only get, under ordinary circumstances, if you went up to his place in a motor-car, and pulled bank-notes out of your pocket-book. It's a chance in a lifetime, and I think you ought to take it."

Levity looked out, past young Batchelor's head, through the open window to where the stars were showing in the night sky. "I don't quite see why I should trouble," he said slowly. "I've rubbed on all right for a good many years; I'm thirty-two next month; I shall last out my time. It's very good of you—but suppose this chap simply frightened me; it might do more harm than good."

"He won't frighten you; he'll simply warn you," said young Batchelor earnestly. "Quite a lot of men go through life that have been warned and told that they have to be careful; and they go carefully in consequence, and they live to be old men. This man

won't frighten you ; you'll simply interest him as a case. And you'll be obliging me."

"How's that ?" Levity ceased hugging himself with his arms, and looked through the shadows at the other man.

"Well—this fellow knows that I am keenly interested in this particular branch of my work, and I have given him a rough diagnosis of what I call your case. If that diagnosis turns out to be wrong, that'll be my fault ; if it turns out to be right—that's a pat on the back for me. Selfish, if you like—but I want to please this chap very much."

"What will he do to me ?" asked Levity, after a pause.

"Simply examine you, and ask you a few questions ; and then tell you to put your clothes on again, and send you home."

"Well, it seems funny—but I'll do it if you like," said Levity, after another pause. "Although, for the life of me, I can't understand why you've taken all this trouble about a poor devil who drudges away with a pen in an office all day."

Young Batchelor got to his feet, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe on the ledge of the open window. "You interested me, my dear Hicks, the first time I met you," he said, speaking over his shoulder back into the room. "Every human being, for the matter of that, interests me—and a few of them in a special sense. You're one of the few. I knew in my own mind that you'd accept this offer ; to-morrow is Saturday, and I suppose you'll have some part of the afternoon free. Here's the man's card ; you're to go to him at four o'clock. Will that suit ?"

"When one comes to think of it," said Levity, with

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a laugh, as he stretched out his hand for the card, "you are rather a persistent young devil—aren't you?"

"Four o'clock to-morrow," said young Batchelor, with a short laugh. "Good night!"

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER

LEVITY HICKS came slowly down the steps of a house in a fashionable quarter of the town ; a man-servant had opened the door for him, and shown him out. Levity Hicks walked slowly, and almost as though a little dazed.

A motor-car had stopped in the street outside the house, and a young and pretty woman, exquisitely dressed, had got out of it, and was making for the steps. The footman still held the door in his hand, and Levity, as he stepped aside to allow the woman to pass, glanced at her for a moment.

" I wonder what he'll say to you ? " thought Levity.

He went on down the street slowly ; once he stopped, as though he would have gone back to ask another question. Yet, after all, what other question was there to ask ? Men like this did not make mistakes, and the thing had been so very clear ; there had been such an air of finality and certainty about it.

He remembered how, less than an hour before, he had come down that street, and had walked past the house once or twice, wondering if after all he should keep the appointment which young Batchelor had made for him. After all, he wasn't going to pay the man anything ; so much young Batchelor had arranged ; therefore, why not simply walk away from

the house, and make some excuse afterwards that he did not think it fair to allow a great man to attend him for nothing? There would be no harm done.

And then, almost before he knew it, he had found himself admitted to the house, and to the great man's presence. The great man had spoken extremely well of Owen Batchelor, and had predicted great things for his future. "Clever fellow—and a worker," said the great one.

And now it was all over, and Levity knew. Knew, to begin with, that young Batchelor had been right, and that he had heart disease in rather a bad form. There were certain things that he must not do; even poor clerk though he was, with others to please for his livelihood, he must not run to catch a train or an omnibus. He ought never to get excited; he must live his life as calmly as possible.

"There is no reason, Mr. Hicks, why you should not live to be an old man," the great one had said. "Fortunately for you, your occupation does not compel you to any great physical exertion; you can go on quite comfortably, and not worry, so far as your ordinary occupation is concerned."

"Oh—it's easy work, of course," Levity had said.

"Precisely. Of course, if you were placed in different circumstances, Mr. Hicks—if, for example, you were a very rich man, there would be certain things that you could do to render your life more placid, and therefore more safe, than that of an ordinary man. But of those things we mustn't talk. Just go on quietly in your own way, and remember the little suggestions I have made."

The great man had shaken hands with him, while

Levity stumblingly strove to murmur his thanks ; and then Levity had gone out of the house. And already he walked slowly, telling himself that he had a right to do so, because he was not as other men, who could hurry with impunity.

There was in his mind a curious, fanciful sorrow for himself and for that possible fate that hung over him. Other men would die in their beds, or by some mere accident of Fate ; he would go suddenly. He wondered a little what it would be like ; whether he would have just one sharp stab of pain, and so be finished with, or whether there would be no stab of pain at all. That was one of the questions he had meant to ask, but had forgotten.

He did not think that he would mention it to any of the men at the office ; the men at the office were so prone to laugh at anything concerning him. Besides, to begin with, they wouldn't believe ; there was never anything interesting about old Levity. He would have liked to tell someone ; it really was a strange thing, and an interesting ; in a sense, it set him apart from others.

So, in course of time, he came back to Gridley Square. It had been an oppressively hot day, with a hint of distant thunder in the air, and Levity was tired. The house would be unbearable ; the garden was the only possible place for a breath of air. Levity pushed open the gate and went in.

Someone else had chosen the garden of the Square also ; for here was Priscilla Meadows. She looked up at him as he moved across the worn grass ; and then the child ran out from behind the tree to greet him. The child and the man came together to where the woman was seated.

Priscilla looked up with a bright flush on her face. "You look tired, Mr. Hicks," she said.

Levity sat down, and put his hat on the seat beside him; little Susette had come between Priscilla Meadows and himself. "I am—very tired," he said. "And that's very wrong, because, you know, I'm never supposed to get tired at all."

Poor Levity said it with something of an air of pride; for here was someone he could tell at last. Not knowing in the least of that business when this woman had sat, evening after evening, and listened for his footfall, with a sudden uplifting of her heart, he proceeded, quite deliberately, and yet without knowing anything about it, to stab her, and to turn the knife round in the wounds he made.

"It's nothing very much," said Levity. "But I went down to-day to see a big man I was recommended to—very great specialist indeed—and he sort of ran over me."

She had looked at him quickly, and then had looked away again. The child, not understanding, was holding to his hand, and making a little play with his fingers, by doubling them and straightening them again.

"What is it?" asked Priscilla Meadows quietly.

"Heart trouble," said Levity, looking straight in front of him. "Of course, it won't happen; these things never do. Only this chap says that when the end comes—you know what I mean—it's going to be very quick. Sort of blowing out of a candle."

He had not meant to make it out to be so bad as that; and yet it was true. Nothing interesting had ever happened in the humdrum life of Levity Hicks, so that the man may be excused for talking about it.

Priscilla Meadows sat quite still ; the hand furthest from him gripped the edge of the wooden seat. For a moment or two she did not speak ; she was thinking, perhaps, of the great and splendid bravery of this man, who took the thing in such a casual fashion. She could not have done that herself, she argued ; she would never have been strong enough.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Hicks ? " she asked at last.

"Do ? " He looked round at her with a little raising of his eyebrows. "There isn't anything to be done. I've got to be careful—and slow—and not get excited—and that sort of thing. There's nothing to be done."

She looked at him with wide eyes across the head of the child. "You're not—afraid ? " she said in a whisper. And the child looked up at the man with a little puzzled frown.

"Afraid ? Why should I be ? " he asked, yet quite without bitterness. "You see, Miss Meadows, with anyone like myself there's such a little to leave behind. Just the drudgery of each day—although God knows I'm not complaining—and the going back to the same drudgery with each succeeding day. You remember the story of a man who had a great estate, and wonderful things of enormous value ; and some cynic said of it one day, when the owner was proudly showing it all—'What a lot to leave behind ! ' Well—I haven't got a lot to leave behind—and so it won't matter."

She was silent, sitting with her head bowed, and tracing out a pattern on her knee with one finger-nail.

"Not that I'm thinking about"—he glanced at the child, and changed the words—"about any ending

yet. I've gone on for quite a long time—I dare say I shall go on for quite a long time more. Nor is it likely that anything exciting will come into my life in any way; I'm one of the humdrum sort, and things don't happen to me. I didn't mean to frighten you, Miss Meadows," he ended.

"You haven't—frightened me," she said, glancing up at him for a moment. "Only please—you mustn't think of yourself as someone that just—just rubs along, and gets nothing out of life. There's something for us all—some chance."

Levity was leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, and his chin propped in his hand. "If there should ever come any chance to me," he said slowly, "it won't be in this life. I'm marked and sealed and arranged for; I was from the beginning. If it should happen that another chance is given me, it will perhaps be in some other life, for which this has been but the preparation. Does that seem strange to you?"

"A little. I don't quite understand."

"Most of us believe, or think—or hope—that this isn't all; that we don't end things here. It would be a little bitter if we did—if we weren't given the chance to make up the blunders, and even in a crude way to say that we were sorry for things we had done, and things we had said—wouldn't it? Time slips along and day succeeds day—and then the long night comes, wherein perhaps we dream; and some of the dreams may not be good. That's what I mean—though I put it but blunderingly."

Miss Meadows had thought of these things—thought of them, perhaps, when sometimes she knelt in church, with the child beside her—but only in a vague way.

This man impressed her by reason of the fact that in a sense—in a very special sense, indeed—he was already wedded to Death—and Death might claim the prize, such as it was, at any moment. The man spoke, by reason of that which threatened him, with a certain sense of authority.

Levity sat upright again, and looked round at Miss Meadows, and laughed. Also, in the return of his better humour, he encircled the child with his arm, and drew her close to him.

"So much for the little things that trouble me ; let's blow them all away," he said lightly. "I should not have spoken of them at all, but that the thing was fresh in my mind. Besides, these fellows—these doctors, I mean—even the best of them are mistaken. I shall be found, just grubbing along somehow, years hence, I expect."

"I expect so," said Miss Meadows cheerfully. And then to the child—"Now, little Susette—say good night to Mr. Hicks ; we must go in."

There was to be no intimate talk that night between the man and the child ; she kissed him silently, and went away, with backward glances. As she reached the gate Miss Meadows, in opening it, turned for a moment and spoke.

"It's very heavy to-night ; I think we shall have a storm," she said.

"I'm afraid so," Levity answered.

He did not think he would go in to dinner ; he did not want to sit among a number of people and eat heavy food. Perhaps a little later on he would go into the house, and would get something to eat ; at present he would rather stay where he was. He lounged back more comfortably against the tree, and

folded his arms and closed his eyes. It was very peaceful in the garden of the Square just then.

And that was why he never quite knew when it was that the Stranger came into the garden. As a matter of fact, Levity had thought himself quite alone there ; because it was not really an attractive garden, and very few people patronised it. So that when presently he roused himself, and stretched his arms, and sat up and looked round for his hat, it was a little disconcerting, in a mild way, to find the Stranger sitting about a yard away from him—not looking at him, but staring straight in front.

He had never seen the man before. He knew by sight most of the people who hurried away from the boarding-houses early in the morning, and hurried back to them at night ; but this was not one of them.

The Stranger was a tall man, bearded ; he wore his hair rather long, in the fashion affected by artists or musicians. He was dressed in dark and easy-cut clothing, and the warmth of the evening had caused him to take off his hat, and to drop it on the seat beside him. His was a fine head, with a rather high, well-formed forehead.

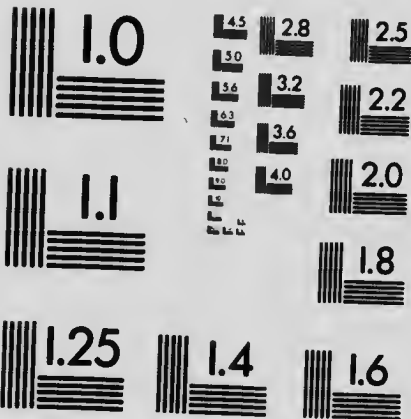
There was a mutter of thunder in the air ; a far-off faint glare of lightning, and then the thunder again. Levity almost had a thought that he would go in, and so escape the coming storm ; nevertheless he lingered, glancing furtively at the Stranger.

"We're going to have a bad storm," said Levity at last, half to himself.

The Stranger turned his head slowly, and looked at him with almost a smile. "The storm's a long way off yet—and lots of threatened things don't happen to us—do they ?" he said.



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The phrase struck Levity queerly ; it was almost an echo of what had been happening to himself that day. He found himself turning that phrase over in his mind, even while the Stranger went on speaking.

"It always seems to me that one's life here is of such little moment, and always the storms that threaten are forgotten when the sun of a to-morrow shines again for us. Storms threaten, and our skies are darkened ; but the world goes on, with all its mysteries and all its mistakes——"

"Yes—yes—mistakes," echoed Levity, staring at the Stranger.

"And perhaps some of the mistakes are not mistakes after all, judged from another standpoint."

The voice of the Stranger was deep and resonant and vibrating ; Levity turned a little more, to get a better view of his face. The mutter of the far-off storm continued about them. Presently the Stranger turned his head a little, and looked at the solitary man sitting there in the gathering darkness.

"It is not often that one finds a man sitting brooding or dreaming alone in this whirl and rush of a great city," said the Stranger.

"Yes—I was dreaming—and brooding, too," Levity surprised himself by saying.

"What were you dreaming and brooding about ?" asked the Stranger gently.

"Of Life—with its complications and mistakes and stumblings ; of Death—with all it holds for us—or doesn't hold."

"Mighty matters both," said the Stranger. "Are you afraid of Death ?"

"Well—isn't everyone ? Aren't you ?"

"The question was of yourself," said the Stranger.

"Every man born of woman is afraid of death—because Death means a giving-up of all we know and of all we understand. We hope and dream—and some of us believe that beyond the dark curtain is something else ; but we are never sure. Is that why you're afraid of Death ? "

"Yes—I suppose so," answered Levity. "If it comes to that, I've always been afraid of life."

"And yet would be afraid to lose it ? "

"You see—it's this way." Levity, who had not the faintest idea of how he had drifted into this conversation at all, and had quite lost sight of the fact that he was talking to a man he had never seen in his life before, went on with his argument gravely. "There are such a lot of things one does in this life—and then wishes undone, or done better. Suppose it should chance that I—went away out of it all to-night, leaving those things undone and badly done—that would be the end for me—wouldn't it ? "

"Not necessarily," answered the Stranger. "But go on."

"In some other world, of which now I know nothing, I might begin over afresh under new conditions—finer and better conditions ; but it wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be a taking-up of the things I understood—it wouldn't be a going-on with matters in which now I am keenly interested. All that I have striven for and hoped for and worked for here ; all the things that, even while I have bitterly complained about them, have yet been my life and my all—everything of that would be left behind. No heaven or hell to which I might go would compensate me for that."

"You don't know," answered the Stranger. "But

why are you so desperately anxious to stay in a world that has not, by your own showing, treated you too well ? ”

“ Just for the reason I have stated,” said Levity. “ Things that I have done might recoil on the heads of others things that I have begun might go on happening, with others to direct them, and I with no possibility of controlling them.”

“ Those who remembered you might work out your will—for love of you,” suggested the Stranger.

Levity shook his head. “ I’m afraid not,” he said. “ You see—I’ve had so little time to do anything ; all my life, so far, has been a sort of funbling—a reaching out after things I wasn’t strong enough to get to, or to hold on to ; it’s all been futile. And today I’ve had what one may call a sort of death sentence.”

The Stranger nodded slowly, quite as though he knew about that. “ And you, who have been afraid of life, are afraid of death, because it’ll take you out of life. Have you ever thought of the other side of the picture ? ”

“ What other side ? ” asked Levity.

It had grown very dark. The storm was passing, and there was now scarcely the faintest mutter of it. All the earth seemed intensely still ; there was no sound anywhere, scarcely even the rustle of leaf.

“ The little hurt that shall come to your body, and destroy that, does not destroy you,” said the Stranger. “ The soul of you—the will of you—the essence of you remains.”

“ Well—I know that—or I hope it,” said Levity in a low voice. “ That’s what we’re taught to believe

—isn't it? But even according to that belief my spirit, or my soul, or whatever name one gives it, is taken away from here, and from all that belonged to it in life."

"It may come back."

Levity looked round sharply. There was such a tone of conviction about the words that he was startled. "Come back?" he echoed in a whisper.

"To a dreamer sometimes it is given to come back. The will—the spirit of him—triumphing over all things, may bring him back to the place where he lived out his life. He may see again what he saw while he lived—may watch all that he left undone being done, for good or ill, by others; he may see all that was wrongly done being changed, or he may see the wrong perpetuated. That is the risk he takes; that, perhaps, is his bitter punishment for driving his headstrong will against other forces of which he knows nothing. But he may come back—and take the risks."

"That's a staggering thought," said Levity. "To come back again among men—to haunt old places where once one was sad, or one was happy, or one was merry—or one was afraid. To understand the values of things—this of which we thought so much dwindling away to nothing, and that we contemptuously tossed aside looming large. That would be a new world—wouldn't it?"

"It could be done; it has been done," said the Stranger.

"Has it?" Levity looked at him with awe.

"It has been done—but of the rest I will say nothing. There may be unhappy, wandering ghosts of men and women flitting up and down through the

dark places of the earth, finding no rest, although perhaps for ever seeking it. They had their chance of sleeping, like the rest, or of going out into the world of which Faith and Belief had given them glimmerings while they lived ; and they took another way. Yes—it can be done—but afterwards——”

“To come back,” muttered Levity, staring in front of him. “To see them all—to hear what they said, and what they did ; to know what they thought of one. To stand outside it all, and yet to be in it—alive—and yet dead. It’s a staggering thought.”

“One must count all the chances,” went on the Stranger ; and now it had grown so dark that only the greyish gleam of his face could be seen from where he sat on the bench. “One might come back and watch ; one might not be able to do anything. You might see hands raised to strike the innocent—and you powerless to interfere ; you might see vile wrong done, and you only a floating shape that could not stand between the wrong and the victim ; that is a chance you must take.”

“I should take it,” said Levity. “I know that I should take it. I should come back.”

He staggered to his feet as a blinding flash of lightning showed the lines of railings and houses for an instant ; then the thunder came, peal after peal, above him ; he turned round giddily. “By Jove !—it is a storm—isn’t it ?” he said, with a half-frightened laugh.

But there was no one there. He spoke again, and then groped forward for the seat ; found it, and walked round it.

“I say—where are you ?” he said feebly once or twice.

The Stranger

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But though he went all round the garden, making the circuit of the railing, he found no one. Finally he went out through the little clanging iron gate, and crossed the road, and went into Sockitt's.

"It's funny," said Levy, shaking his head.

CHAPTER V

THE COMPACT

SUNDAY at Sockitt's was a day quite unlike all other days. To begin with, there was a relaxing of the tension that belonged to the week. On ordinary days the matter of getting breakfast in the morning was one of rush and scurry ; for here, for the most part, the lives of the boarders, in the sense of the mere earnings of livings, depended upon the fact of whether or not breakfasts were ready to time.

Fanny in the kitchen, tight-lipped and strenuous, and barking instructions at the much-worried Joseph, knew what ordinary mornings meant ; so, for that matter, did Mrs. Sockitt. But on Sunday things were changed.

To begin with, by mutual consent everything was half an hour later—nor did it greatly matter if it was a quarter of an hour after that. Fanny even indulged in little light pleasantries with Joseph, and had a word or two to say to him concerning a wholly imaginary female with whom he was supposed to be desperately in love in an adjoining boarding-house. There was no time for anything of that sort during the week, but on Sundays one might relax a little. Fanny, watching a ball over her head that was wagging furiously, would shrug her shoulders, and take her own time about answering it.

"Oh—ring your old bell! Time was made for slives," Fanny would say.

The boarders would come down, especially in the summer, in easier costumes; the sort of thing you couldn't possibly wear when you started for the City. Bob Soekitt himself, with the inevitable pipe in his mouth, would go out into the little square of ground at the back of the house, and would suggest to anyone within hearing (for at least the thousandth time) that one of these days he was simply going to set to, and dig it all up, and get a plant or two into it; he wasn't at all sure but what a creeper over the end wall might improve matters. Bob Soekitt never got further than that; but when the autumn began to draw on he was full of plans for what could really be done when the spring came.

"Nothing like making a good beginning in the Spring," Bob Soekitt would say. "Then look at the result, when summer comes on you, and you can sit out under your own vine and fig tree, so to speak."

Matters slackened a little at Soekitt's after breakfast on Sunday. Young men strolled out with pipes, and ladies, if cordially inclined, occasionally met in each other's bedrooms, and discussed fashions and recent purchases. As a matter of fact, at Soekitt's, as elsewhere, everything turned on the middle of the day. For on Sundays you did not lunch in the middle of the day; you had dinner.

The smell of food began to pervade Soekitt's towards noon; and a little later that smell, wafted to the noses of boarders in various adjacent and incredibly distant places, brought them in. Soekitt's always did itself well on Sundays, and Mrs. Soekitt, understanding the business, catered nobly for a

hungry band. Even Bob Sockitt himself took no chances on Sundays; he was in the house at the stroke of two o'clock (having made sure of the time at the public-house that was at the corner of the street outside the Square), and although he ate his meat, from sheer force of habit, in Mrs. Sockitt's little room at the end of the hall, he yet plied a knife and fork with the best.

And after that dinner it may be said that a sort of lassitude fell upon Sockitt's, and held it in a kindly grip. People sought corners of the drawing-room, and, after a mere pretence of looking at illustrated papers or books, dropped unblushingly into slumber. Others sought bedrooms, on the pretence of looking for a handkerchief, or something of that sort, and were seen no more.

Mrs. Sockitt, for her part, dropped into her big easy chair in her little room, and went to sleep; Bob Sockitt stretched himself out on the hard horsehair sofa in the same apartment—and perhaps dreamed that he was the gentleman of leisure he ordinarily represented himself to be in public-house bars and other places where men do congregate.

A little later, while the afternoon was yet young, Fanny, in gay attire, came up the area steps (forgetting, the moment her feet had touched the pavement, that such things as kitchens and area steps existed) and set off into the world. Usually speaking, she was met by a meek young man at the corner of the Square, to whom her usual greeting took the form of an astonished—

“Well—an' w're on earth 'ave you sprung from?”

On one such Sunday—and a hot and breathless Sunday at that—Levity Hicks had been wandering

about London. He knew what Sockitt's meant on Sunday, and not even hunger would drive him to that house, filled with the smell of baked meats, and with no place save his garret where he could be alone. He would wait until the evening, and then would return for that meal ordinarily known as "supper"—a meal to which no one paid any particular attention.

Sunday was a day of days for Levity Hicks. On that day he need call no man master; he could take his way through the world of London, and feel that London, to a certain extent at least, was his own. For were there not parks in which one could sit, and was there not a gay parade of people, all out and moving and laughing and chatting, that Levity Hicks might see them doing it? He had enough of Sockitt's during the week; he could afford to let it alone on Sundays.

But just as a man obsessed by one particular idea may find that idea driving him, almost against his knowledge and his will, in one direction, so Levity Hicks, on this particular hot Sunday, found himself being driven in the direction of Brixton. He told himself over and over again that he was not going to Brixton, but that he might just as well stray in that direction as in any other. He argued almost fiercely with himself that a man has a perfect right to walk in any part of London he likes; why, therefore, should not a man turn in the direction of Brixton? There was no particular reason why he should go to any specific part of Brixton; one could think about that later.

Yet, having come to Brixton early in the afternoon, it was scarcely strange that Levity's feet

should take him in the direction of that street at the corner of which he had parted with Delia Valentine on the night when he had taken her home from the theatre. The street looked utterly different, in daylight, from that other occasion when he had seen it at night; but that Delia lived there, he might have thought it a commonplace-looking street. Halting at the very corner where he had left her, he wondered what she was doing at this particular time.

Levity would have been quite content to wait there an hour or more, on the chance of seeing her; but she was merciful to him, and presently, in the most amazing fashion, came tripping down the street; it was quite as though she had known that he was waiting. She gave a little quick exclamation of surprise when she saw him standing there, hat in hand; and then she laughed and blushed.

"Did you come down here to see me, Mr. Hicks?" she asked.

"I—I hoped that there might be a chance of seeing you," he stammered. "I've been rather lucky—that is, of course, unless you're going to see somebody—or to meet somebody. Of course, if I'm in the way——"

"I came out just to get away from the house and from aunt," answered Delia. "So that you see I am lucky too. Where shall we go?"

The mere thought of having this bewitching little creature as his companion for one long Sunday afternoon was so bewildering that in all probability Levity would have been content just to stand at that corner of the street, holding her hand, and looking into her blue eyes. But of course that would never do at all; and at last it was decided that they would mount to

the top of a 'bus, and go off to Hyde Park. In Hyde Park one could sit on a chair for the price of a penny; and in Kensington Gardens one could get tea.

It was a sort of dream ride that Levity took to Hyde Park that afternoon; he saw nothing of the streets by which they went, or of the people who mounted to the top of the 'bus, and left it again to be replaced by others. He saw only an occasional glimpse of the blue eyes of the girl, and the delicate outline of her profile. He had never been so happy in all his life before.

Even when at last they got to Kensington Gardens, and sat down at a little table, and had tea together, Levity did not remember his shabbiness. Delia had been so nice to him—so bewitchingly, tenderly kind; they might have known each other for years. They had talked of everything that could be talked about, and many times her eyes—soft and sweet and deeply blue—had rested on him with the quiet, long look of a friend. And then, while they sat there, she began to talk of something else.

"I'm getting tired out with my work—with dodging about from place to place—from office to office—and for ever banging away at a typewriter; I'm tired of it. I'm going to do something else."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Please don't laugh at me—and please believe that I am quite serious," she said. "I'm going to try to go on the stage."

He felt a sudden swift pang of jealousy, for no known reason. After all, as she had said, she moved about from one office to another, and saw any number of men every day of her life, and even

worked with them ; where was the difference if she chose another sort of work ? He found himself listening as she went on eagerly :

" I've thought it all out carefully. I shouldn't be a bit of good for the better sort of work—I mean playing in a real play ; I don't think I'm clever enough. But I've got a voice—really and truly a good voice—and I don't think that anyone can say that I'm actually repulsive in appearance—can they ? "

Levity certainly could not say so, with that face within a foot of his own across the table, and the pouting, provoking mouth asking the question. " I think you're beautiful," he said seriously.

" Thank you very much, sir," she murmured demurely. " That being the case, I'm going right ahead. I don't quite know how to begin—but I believe there are agents and people of that sort who would give one a start."

" You see," said Levity slowly, " it isn't the sort of thing to be rushed into, Miss Valentine. The work you're doing now is safe and regular—and it's work you understand, and that you have been trained for. Whereas going on the stage——"

" Is work that I haven't been trained for, but which will be a great deal nicer, with a great deal more fun in it," she broke in impatiently. " I seemed to know what you would say, and I quite understand ; but my mind is made up. And I want you to help me."

He stared at her in perplexity. " But how in the world can I help you ? " he asked.

" I've thought it all out ; and directly I made up my mind I thought first of all of you. I want some-

one who will show me the ropes—tell me the first thing to be done—perhaps even give me an introduction to somebody. Won't you send me to your friend Mr. Rutherglen ? ”

Levity sat very still, looking at her ; he wondered why he had not expected this before. He was combating the idea now strenuously in his own mind, because he knew what it meant. For the whole of this afternoon, and for possible delightful afternoons in a long future, she was to belong to him, in this sweet, intangible fashion, and to no one else ; he had picked her out of the world, as it were, and he alone seemed to know all about her.

And now that dream was rudely shattered. She was to go, in the first place, to Rutherglen—handsome, debonair Horace Rutherglen ; and after that she was to mix with all sorts of other handsome, debonair young actors, to whom her gay and laughter-loving beauty would appeal. Levity had thought of her going on through each day at her work among humdrum clerks. He was on a level with humdrum clerks, and could fight them on their own ground ; if she took up this other life she must be lost to him.

“ You told me that you knew Mr. Rutherglen very well,” she pleaded. “ He looked nice, and I am quite sure that he would help me—wouldn't he ? ”

“ Yes—I know him very well, and I dare say he would help you,” said Levity slowly.

“ And you won't mind giving me an introduction to him ? I wouldn't take up much of his time, and I would be very grateful for anything he did for me,” she persisted.

“ I'll see him, and talk to him about you, and ask him what is best to be done,” said Levity. “ Then

I can tell you myself what he says, and what is the best way to set to work." There was hope in Levity's heart that this might satisfy her, and that Rutherglen might not be brought into the matter, after all.

"Oh—but I did so want to meet him," said Delia, obviously disappointed. "I could ask him all the questions that are in my mind at once, and so save him a lot of time—and save you a lot of trouble."

"It wouldn't be any trouble at all," replied Levity. "But if you want to meet him I'll see what can be done. He's a curious sort of chap, and he may not want to meet you. I'll do my best."

"You're a dear!" she exclaimed impulsively. "If only I can do this, I'll love you for ever and ever."

"I wonder?" said Levity, with a flush on his face.

She laughed and coloured. "I'm very fond of you now, if it comes to that," she said. "You've been so nice to me—so gentle always. You're not a bit like other men I have met."

"Well—if I've been nice to you—what do you think you've been to me?" asked Levity slowly.

She looked at him out of eyes that were tender. She really was very fond of him to-day; there was something big and quiet and strong and peaceful about him; besides, he was going to help her. "Do I mean such a lot to you as all that?" she asked quietly.

"You mean more to me than anyone has ever meant in all the world," he answered. "I didn't think it was possible that anyone could mean so much. And I'm afraid—desperately afraid that I may lose you, so that I shan't mean anything more in your life."

"You won't lose me," she said, with a little gay laugh. "I'm going to stick to you very tight, just

as you're going to stick to me. I'm not often really and truly glad about things ; but I think I was more glad to see you this afternoon than I have been about anything for a long time. And that's funny—because we've seen so little of each other at any time."

He knew the number of her house and the name of the street ; had he not made careful note of both ? He would write to her when he had seen Rutherglen ; he might see Rutherglen even this evening. He hid that fact of the relationship between them, or that they lived under the same roof, as he had hidden it from everyone else. He had no real part in the life of his more brilliant brother, save in that matter of financing him from time to time.

So the glorious time came to an end ; she would not even let him see her home. "I do want you to see your friend, if you possibly can, to-night ; think how I shall be counting the time until I hear whether he will see me or help me. I know it's selfish, but I'm sure you won't mind. You can see me into the 'bus, and I'll wave a hand to you ; and, as you know, the 'bus puts me down at the very corner of the street."

"I could take you home, and still be back in time to see him," he pleaded.

"I have given you quite a lot of my valuable time this afternoon, and I'm not going to give you any more," she said banteringly. "Here's the 'bus, and if I don't hurry I shan't get a seat. Good-bye !"

She was gone, with that quick wave of the hand, and he was standing there in an empty world, looking after her.

Save for that little tingling, disturbing remembrance

that he had got to talk about her to Rutherglen, Levity was decidedly a happy man that evening. It being a hot day, most of the boarders had seized the opportunity to get away, if only in the afternoon, to friends and acquaintances, or on excursions of one sort and another; they would not be back until late. Levity had the dining-room and the cold meats and a depressed salad almost to himself. Mrs. Sockitt, at the end of the table, speaking in that voice which always seemed to come from beneath a featherbed, spoke of the great heat, and of how it had affected her personally.

"You see, not to be vulgar, Mr. Hicks, I've got quite a lot to carry," she said good-humouredly, "and I must say that my weight, in this sort of weather, is a bit trying. Between ourselves, it's good for the house, Mr. Hicks; gives it a more comfortable look, as though you got yourself pretty well fed. How some people can put up with a skinny landlady beats me; to my mind, it always gives the game away at once."

Levity answered now and then with a laugh or a word; his mind was elsewhere. Resolutely he put from him the remembrance that he must talk to his brother about Delia Valentine; he would think only of the wonders of that afternoon, when he of all men had had tea in Kensington Gardens with the most beautiful girl in the world—someone who had said, even jokingly, that they would love him for ever and ever!

He knew that he must fulfil that promise made to Delia to talk to Rutherglen about her. After all, it might be possible that Rutherglen would not be interested in her, and would simply suggest that she

should go to So-and-so to have her voice tried, or to Somebody-else, who was a good agent ; and there the matter might end. He pictured Delia listening for the postman's knock ; and after all there was some compensation in being able to write to her on any subject.

He was wandering about aimlessly in the dining-room, looking at pictures he already knew by heart, when he heard his brother come in. He knew it was Rutherglen at once, because under all circumstances Rutherglen cultivated an art of cheerful whistling everywhere. He whistled now as he came into the house, and, after looking for a moment into the drawing-room, and nodding smilingly to anyone who was there, went up the stairs to his room—two at a time. Levity waited for a moment or two, and then followed him.

Horace Rutherglen had had a day up the river with some friends ; he was in boisterous spirits. He greeted Levity with a smile, and begged him to come in and make himself comfortable ; he began with a glowing account of what a day it had been, and of the crowds, and the sun, and the river, and the pretty faces, and all the rest of it. Levity could have told him a tale worth two of that, but refrained.

"I want you to do me a favour, Horace," said Levity at last.

"Anything—anything, dear old boy," exclaimed Rutherglen. "I'm in the best of moods to-night, so take advantage of me."

"Someone was asking me to-day about going on the stage—and what was the best thing to do to begin with."

"Wait outside stage-doors, my boy, and try and

catch a man who's going in," said Rutherglen. "He may listen—and, again, he may not."

"That's not quite what I want," said Levity. "You see—this is a lady, and she wouldn't care to do that sort of thing."

Horace turned round with a gleam in his eye. "Oho—a lady? Where have you been picking up ladies who want to go on the stage, old Levity?"

"This is a friend of mine," said Levity seriously. "She's a nice girl—and a good, straight girl——"

"Of course—of course; they all are," said Horace, with a laugh.

"I don't think I'd better ask you any more," said Levity.

Horace Rutherglen came across the room, and dropped his hands on his brother's shoulders, and shook him rallyingly. "My dear old chap—can't you take a joke?" he cried. "Of course, she's the nicest and the sweetest and the purest and the best girl in the world—and I'll help her with pleasure, if I can do any good. Who is she—and what is her name?"

"You saw her the other night—some time ago when I went to the theatre; the night you took Mrs. Ogg and her daughter, and had a box."

"I remember," exclaimed Horace, with sudden interest. "I remember distinctly. A very pretty girl."

"Very pretty indeed," said Levity.

"Of course I'll help her," said Rutherglen. "Where's she to be found?"

"I can write to her; I could make an appointment for you to see her, if that's necessary," replied Levity, a little grudgingly.

"Yes—I think I'd better see her," said Rutherglen.

"Look here—I'll tell you what ; you'd better send her up to me at the theatre. I didn't tell you ; I signed yesterday for an engagement with Caxton—jolly good engagement, too. Let her come up to the stage-door, any time after eleven, and ask for me."

"It's very good of you," said Levity. "I'll write to her to-night."

"Do, by all means. Tell her to ask for me at the stage-door," said Horace. And then he added—"I've got a fine part, old boy, and I've put up my terms a bit. They don't get Horace for nothing these days, I can tell you."

He had moved across to the sideboard, and was taking up a decanter ; Levity spoke quietly, with a glance at the door, as though fearing a listener. "I say, Horace—when do you think you'll be able to let me have some money ?"

Horace frowned as he poured out some whisky and squirted soda into it. "Well—it isn't likely that I can let you have money now, when I've been out of an engagement for some time—is it ?" he said impatiently. "Give a fellow a chance, for Heaven's sake."

"But if you're doing better as regards terms it seems to me that you might be able to stretch a point, and let me have some money," pleaded Levity. "I don't want to rub it in, old man, but you've had rather a lot from me, and I want some of it back."

"Why do you want it back ? you've always been willing enough to let me have what I wanted."

"As a matter of fact"—Levity had taken a glass from him, but was not drinking ; he stood looking down into the liquid—"as a matter of fact, I've had to—had to borrow some at different times, when you

pressed me rather hard for it—and I want to pay it back.”

“Who did you borrow it from?” asked Rutherglen, standing with his back to the other man.

“Oh—just a friend. Of course, I can’t keep him waiting for ever. You will think about that—won’t you?”

“My dear old boy”—Rutherglen turned round with his glass in his hand—“I’m always thinking about it. It’s a great worry to me—and you’ve been so decent about it, whenever I’ve asked you, that it troubles me the more. You shall have some at the very first opportunity; I’ll go slow, and save a bit on purpose.”

“Thanks very much,” said Levity gratefully. “I wouldn’t ask you, if it wasn’t so pressing.”

“Of course I’ve got to get clothes for this new part—and that’s a bit of an expense,” said Rutherglen. “But I promise you I’ll do my best. Don’t you worry. Cheero, old boy!”

He raised his glass, and Levity, with a smile, raised his glass also.

A knock at the door, and young Batchelor came in at the invitation of Rutherglen. He nodded smilingly to both men, and sat down, shaking his head at the suggestion of a drink.

“I only looked in for a moment,” he said. “By Jove!—hasn’t it been hot to-day? How are you gettir, on, Hicks?”

Owen Batchelor had taken an even deeper interest in Levity since he had heard the specialist’s report about him; apart from all other things, he was proud that his own judgment should have been upheld.

“Oh—I’m all right,” said Levity, with a laugh.

The Compact

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"Don't you worry about me. I shall take care of myself, and I shall live quite a long time. I'm tougher than you think."

Rutherglen looked round quickly. "Why—what's the matter with old Levy?" he asked. "You're not harping on that same string, are you, Batchelor?"

"Our friend Hicks has been to a man to whom I recommended him, and has been, as one might say, vetted," said Batchelor lightly. "Bit of a leg-up for me, because the big man has endorsed what I already had said about him. Hicks has got a heart."

"A heart for pretty girls, I suppose you mean," said Rutherglen, with a laugh.

"Not exactly that; quite another sort of heart," answered the young man. "He's got to take care of himself, and he's got to be careful not to get excited. Nothing to be afraid of, because there are quite a number of people going about the world in just the same condition. If he's careful"—Batchelor dropped a hand on the shoulder of Levy Hicks, and gave it a grip—"he's going to live quite a long time, and he need not worry about his future."

There was a silence in the room. Rutherglen, standing with his back to the sideboard, was glancing from one man to the other with a look of frowning perplexity; he did not seem to understand. Young Batchelor had gone across to the window, and had thrown it open a little wider, to get what air there was coming out of the Square.

"I didn't know there was anything absolutely the matter with old Levy," said Rutherglen at last. And then, as if appealingly—"There isn't anything the matter with you really—is there?" he asked.

Levy sipped at his glass, and then set it down.

"It seems that I'm more important than I imagined myself to be," he said, with a laugh. "One of these days I may pop off quite suddenly—and very quickly."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Rutherglen.

"Well—we hope so," said Levity quietly. "At any rate, even if I did pop off in that fashion, I should come back again."

"Come back again? What do you mean?" It was Owen Batchelor who spoke.

"I shouldn't simply clear out, and leave all sorts of things to go on happening without me," said Levity, sitting up in his chair, and leaning forward a little eagerly. "I believe that a man can do that; I mean that a man may come back, out of that world we vaguely call Death, and may take his place again, in a spirit sense, among the men and women he has loved and has lived with."

"Old Levity Hicks—you're talking rubbish," said Rutherglen again.

"Go on, Hicks; I want to hear you," said Owen Batchelor.

"Well, you see—it's this way." Levity leaned further forward in his chair, and rubbed his long hands nervously together as he went on speaking. "When I heard the other day, from this chap that Batchelor sent me to, that it might happen to me that I should go out like the mere snuffing of a candle, I got worried. I had never thought of my life ending like that; I wanted to prepare for things, and to know, in a sense, exactly when I was going. It didn't seem to give a fellow a fair chance. I thought about it a great deal—things I hadn't done well, and things I'd blundered over, and things I had forgotten to do at all. And it was when I was thinking of all that,

and trying, in a fumbling sort of way, to figure out what I should do with the time that was left to me—it was just then that I met the man who told me all about it."

Owen Balfour, leaning forward in his chair, with his square, ugly chin gripped in one hand, nodded slowly, and watched Levity Hicks. "Go on, Hicks," he said. "I want to hear about this."

Levity Hicks rubbed his hands together again and laughed softly. "You see—the funny thing was that I didn't even know the fellow. I met him just by chance—and we got talking. He seemed to know a lot about me—and also a lot beyond what we might call the actual life we know. He told me of what might happen after—after a chap was dead."

There was another long pause in the room; it seemed that, each in his different way, the two men were listening and waiting.

"He said that if a man willed it strongly—and wished it strongly—he might come back. There wasn't to be any particular heaven, or any particular hell for him; he was to have his chance of coming back again, among the people he had known and loved and hated; he was to work out some sort of salvation for himself on this round earth of ours. It's difficult for me to tell you quite how he expressed it"—Levity looked round upon them, and shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands—"because he put it so much better than I can hope to do. But he said that a man might have a chance to come back, and to work out some of the problems that he hadn't been able to solve in life. On the other hand, he might come back, and have to stand aside—like a sort of poor, unhappy, ineffectual ghost—and so do

nothing. A fellow had to take his chance of that ; it was one of the risks he ran."

"It sounds pretty interesting," said young Batchelor. "Who was the man ?"

"That's the funny part of it : I don't know. I met him in the garden in the Square here, and talked with him ; and then all in a moment he was gone—just as if it had been a sort of dream, and I had never seen him at all. But it was awfully fascinating ; he filled me with all sorts of ideas I had never had before, and with all sorts of queer longings. By Jove !"—Levity got to his feet, and rubbed his hands together, and looked round with bright eyes at the other men—"if they snatch me away suddenly, without giving me a real chance, I—I'd like to come back."

"Others have tried that game—or pretended that they had tried it," said Rutherglen. "All sorts of old legends carry out that idea ; but nothing of it is true. We finish our little lives on this planet ; of the rest we know nothing."

"Well—of course I'm an idiot, and a dreamer, and all the rest of it ; but somehow this man impressed me," said Levity. "Perhaps I'd never thought about things before ; he made me think about them while he talked to me. Look here"—he leaned forward, and spoke with sudden earnestness to Rutherglen, who was watching him—"would you come back if you got the chance ?"

"Don't be a fool," said Rutherglen roughly. "What's all this talk of ghosts and spirits, and coming back from the grave ? We know it can't be done."

"I think it can," said Levity quietly. "Would you come back ?"

Rutherglen picked up his glass and drank ; he

The Compact

III

caught the serious eyes of young Batchelor upon him, and he laughed, and set down his glass, and spoke without thought. "Oh—if it were possible—I'd come back," he said.

Levity drew a long breath. "It's a staggering thought," he said, using the words he had used to the Stranger in the garden. "If one might come back again, and see what had happened—that would be strange—wouldn't it? Would you swear that if you had the chance you'd take it? would you swear that you would come back?"

Horace Rutherglen looked round about him nervously; he caught the serious eyes of young Batchelor fixed upon him. "Why not?" he asked. "It's a grim sort of joke, old Levity—but why not?"

"A grim sort of joke, as you say," said Levity, with a strange excitement upon him. "Why not write it down? why not make our compact here to-night, you and I, that the first one of us that passes the border-line, and goes out into the darkness, shall, if he can, come back again? It can be done."

Horace Rutherglen, with a glance at Owen Batchelor, walked across to the sideboard, and picked up his glass, and drained it. "You're in a funny mood, old Levity," he said jerkily. "What do you want me to write?"

"All a joke, of course—but let's set it down," said Levity. "Let us write down that compact: that the first of us—you, my friend Rutherglen, and I, Levity Hicks—the first of us that dies shall, if he can, come back again among the people and in the scenes he has left. Will you do that?"

Rutherglen pulled open a drawer in the table, and drew out a sheet of paper; he found a pen and ink,

and, with a wink at young Batchelor that was suggestive that he was humouring this amiable madman, put the paper and the pen and ink before Levity Hicks.

And Levity Hicks, after staring in front of him for a moment or two, and nodding his head slowly once or twice, as thought matured in his brain, began to write down what was in his mind.

Then the three of them read it together. Levity Hicks with seriousness; Horace Rutherglen with some laughter; Owen Batchelor with seriousness also.

The brothers signed it—Levity Hicks in his clerkly hand, and Rutherglen with a flourish. And at the bottom of the paper, as a witness, Owen Batchelor wrote his name also.

CHAPTER VI

LOVE IN IDLENESS

It was only after Levity had been for some time in bed in the dark that night, too excited for sleep, after all the events of the day, that he remembered he had not written to Delia Valentine, making the appointment with Rutherglen. It was too late to catch any post at that hour ; he would have to write in the morning.

He did not like the idea of writing at all, and of putting her in touch with Rutherglen ; yet not to do so would be inexcusable ; she might justly argue that Levity, despite his promise, did not really want to help her. Therefore, the following morning, before he started for the office, he wrote a short note, and posted it on his way down town.

" MY DEAR MISS VALENTINE,

" I spoke to my friend Mr. Rutherglen about you last night, as I promised. He will be very glad to help you, if it is possible ; and if you will enquire at the Planet Theatre for him any day after eleven o'clock I expect you will find him there ; he is rehearsing for the new play. I hope you will have good luck.

" Your very sincere friend,

" J. L. HICKS.

" P.S.—Yesterday was the happiest day of my whole life. You don't mind my saying that, do you ? "

He posted the letter, and from that time waited in the hope to hear from her. He would not speak to Rutherglen himself on the matter, because a vague hope was in his mind that after all Delia had not gone to the theatre, and that Rutherglen had not seen her; he cherished that hope as the days went on.

He saw his brother only at odd moments now; Horace Rutherglen was rehearsing, and sometimes appeared at dinner at Sockitt's, and sometimes not. Presently, when the play should have been produced, Horace Rutherglen would not appear at dinner in the ordinary sense at all; special arrangements would be made for him by Mrs. Sockitt (who was immensely proud of this brilliant boarder) in order that he might dine at an earlier hour.

He appeared at dinner one night, with much talk about the tremendous day he had had, rehearsing hard; everybody looked at him, and wondered about him; and Miss Julia Ogg could scarcely get through her meal. And suddenly Rutherglen leaned forward, and addressed Levity Hicks directly. His talk had been generally to all the table.

"I saw that young friend of yours the other day; I'll do my best. I sent her to my own agent, with a note. I should say she was rather clever."

All eyes were turned upon Levity, whose face was burning. "Thank you very much," he murmured, without looking up. "I think she's clever, too."

"I should have thought that anyone so busy as you are, Mr. Rutherglen, could scarcely find time to help other people," said Miss Ogg admiringly.

"In this profession, Miss Ogg, we help each other whenever we get a chance; one never minds doing a

little thing like that. Besides—for a girl—and a comparatively friendless girl at that ! ”

This was a taking of the matter of Levity's hands with a vengeance ; already saw himself, in the eyes of the table, as someone set aside by a greater man. His thoughts went back to that night when he had sat in the pit of a certain theatre, and had been proud to be able to tell Delia Valentine who the handsome man in the box had been. It was that which had started all the mischief.

And still there was no sign from Delia. Levity Hicks had set the address of the office at the head of his letter, and of course Delia knew that place well enough ; still she did not write. Once or twice, on hot evenings, he went to Brixton, and lingered unhappily at the corner of that little street where he had parted from her ; but no swift-footed little figure came out of the house and advanced towards him. He was in a mood once or twice to make enquiries at the house ; but he did not know the exact quality of the mysterious aunt who looked after Delia ; and so he hesitated on each occasion, and at last turned away, and went home.

Never a man who saw things quickly until they were absolutely thrust before his vision, it was scarcely likely that Levity would notice things that went on at the boarding-house. Hints and rumours—and there were always hints and rumours, and even bits of scandal, floating about Sockitt's—passed him by, and left him unheeding. Had he been a man to notice more, he might have seen something which had happened to Miss Julia Ogg.

Certainly he had seen one evening a boarder lean across the table and murmur something about “ good

wishes" and "congratulations"; but he did not know what it meant, and it was not his concern. It was only after dinner, when the ladies had rustled away into the drawing-room, that young Batchelor, pulling up his chair beside Levity's, and offering his cigarette-case, began to speak of the great matter.

"Well," said young Batchelor ironically, in a low tone—"so love has flown in at the window at Sockitt's—hasn't it? Quite an idyll—eh?"

"Really, I—I hadn't noticed," said Levity. "Who is it?" He asked the question carelessly, because he was not greatly concerned with love in any form it might take at Sockitt's.

"What—you don't mean to tell me you haven't heard?" exclaimed young Batchelor. "Why, it's the talk of the place—and Mrs. Ogg is swelling to twice the usual size with importance."

"Oh—it's Mrs. Ogg—is it?" said Levity innocently.

"No—it is not Mrs. Ogg," said young Batchelor, with a short laugh. "Open your eyes, my dear Hicks, and see what is going on round you. Our friend, Horace Rutherglen, is engaged to Miss Julia Ogg."

Levity wanted time to think about that; it was so sudden and so staggering. He tried to account for it; tried, in a whimsical fashion, to think what sort of words Rutherglen must have addressed to Miss Julia Ogg when he proposed to her. He wondered a little that his brother had not mentioned the matter to him; he was vaguely hurt by that treatment.

And then, quite suddenly, he found himself smiling with a great feeling of relief. After all, this disposed of Horace Rutherglen completely; this set him apa-

as a man bound hand and foot, and not to be reckoned with at all. Little petty jealousies dropped away from Levity Hicks ; and he was suddenly serenely satisfied. He was quite glad, in fact, that Horace Rutherglen had made up his mind to marry Julia Ogg. With that thought uppermost in his mind, he heard young Batchelor go on talking.

"He's a wily bird, is our friend Rutherglen," he said. "There's a method in whatever madness he professes at the moment. You can trust Rutherglen to come out on top every time. The profession of an actor is a bit precarious, you know—and one wants solid backing of some sort. Heaven forbid that I should be spiteful, but Julia Ogg is not every man's money. But our friend Horace need never want for at least a crust."

"When—when did it happen?" asked Levity, more for the sake of saying something than because he desired any information.

"My dear fellow—it's been happening ever so long—only you wouldn't be likely to see it. There's a ring on the lady's finger now ; she may be described as being simply that ring and blushes. And you're the only person in the house that has needed to be told about it."

"I never notice these things," said Levity, with a little laugh. "Still, I'm very glad that Horace—that Rutherglen should be happy ; I must congratulate him when I see him ; it's the proper thing to do, I suppose ?"

Owen Batchelor turned a queer look upon him. "Yes—it's the proper thing to do," he said. And then he added—"I suppose you're quite sure in your own mind that Horace Rutherglen is very happy ?"

Levity Hicks turned upon him wide eyes of astonishment ; there was almost a look of pain in them. " But he loves the girl—and he has asked her to marry him ; of course he's happy," he said.

" I honestly think that you are the most wonderful thing that ever came to Sockitt's," said Owen Batchelor. And Levity wondered what on earth he meant.

There coming no reply from Delia Valentine, and there being no result from those journeys to Brixton, Levity one evening, a little sore at heart, wrote again. A gentle, rather pathetic letter ; he was only anxious to know how she was getting on, and whether there was any prospect of her getting an engagement in the new profession she was striving to adopt.

And this time there came a reply—a little hurried scrawl, telling him that she was going to a voice trial (he hadn't the least notion what she meant) and that she would let him know as soon as anything happened. Levity had picked that letter out of the stiff official correspondence at the office, and had hidden it away until he could have time to read it unobserved. He read it over and over again. It seemed so wonderful to have a letter from her at all. There was only one thing that troubled him a little, and that was a post-script at the end of it.

" Mr. Rutherglen has been perfectly sweet to me."

Levity did not like that bit ; it jarred against all the rest. Surely Horace Rutherglen had done all that was necessary in introducing the girl to the agent ; it was the agent's business to do all the rest. Rutherglen ought to be reminded that he was an engaged

man, and could have nothing to do with anyone else but Julia Ogg.

The time drew on for the production of that play in which Horace Rutherglen was to appear; the actual night arrived. Mrs. Ogg and her daughter were going, having booked seats quite a long time before; and one or two of the boarders were going to wait outside, and get into the pit. It was even rumoured (though it was probably quite untrue) that Bob Sockitt was going down, to "have a look at the house"—not probably with any deliberate intention of going inside, but rather to get an idea of public feeling generally.

There was a great deal of noise and talk and laughter late that night at Sockitt's; it was understood that Horace Rutherglen had brought Julia Ogg and her mother home after the performance; and there had been something in the nature of a light collation and a bottle or two of wine. Levity, hanging over the balustrade at the top of the stairs, had heard something of the noise and the laughter, and had afterwards seen the people coming up and going to their rooms.

It was difficult to get hold of Rutherglen after that; he got up very late, and came home very late; in no sense did his hours fit in with those of Levity Hicks. But poor Levity had desperate need to see the man; and that was why, on one occasion near to midnight, he knocked softly at the door of Rutherglen's room.

Rutherglen crossed the floor of the room, and opened the door, and looked out. Seeing only Levity Hicks, he frowned a little with annoyance at being disturbed; then stepped aside, and grudgingly told Levity he might come in.

"You're a bit late, old Levity—and I'm tired," said Rutherglen. "What is it?"

Levity decided to be diplomatic; one must not rush at a disagreeable matter all in a moment. Therefore he held out his hand to his brother, with a smile, and spoke of that matter which had not yet been broached between them.

"I haven't had a chance yet, Horace, of congratulating you upon your engagement," he said.

"Did you come up here to say that?" asked the other, with a short laugh. "Because, if you did, you could just as well have saved it for another time."

"I only wanted to do the civil thing," said Levity, abashed. "I'm sure she's quite a nice girl, and she must be very fond of you."

"All right—we'll take all that for granted," said the other impatiently. "The girl's all right, although she bores me to tears; but that's not her fault, poor dear. To put it bluntly—and I don't see why I shouldn't put it bluntly to you—Julia has got money. She's an only child, and her mother is a widow; and I want money, and have always wanted it. I shall have a chance, one of these days, to go into management; but I shall want some money to start with. I shall lick the lot of 'em at the game, with my looks, when I do start; but I don't want to be handicapped at the beginning. There you are; that's honest, at all events."

"I thought you were probably fond of her," said Levity slowly.

"That's just the sort of thing you would think," retorted Rutherglen, with a laugh. "Not that it matters; you're at perfect liberty to think what you like. What else did you come about?"

Levity rubbed his thin hands together slowly ; his lips were working a little. " I—I hate to come and bother you, Horace—but there's that money."

" What money ? " asked the other ; and his eyes were hard.

" You know what I mean, Horace ; I am sure you must think about it, and worry about it—just as I do. I'm in a hole ; if I can't get that money, I don't know what is going to happen to me ; I'm just afraid to think."

Rutherglen had taken an impatient turn about the room ; he stopped now, and stared at his brother curiously. " Why—what's the matter with you ? " he asked. " You're looking white and ill. What's wrong ? "

Levity beat his hands softly together ; he did not look at Rutherglen at all. " I'm afraid," he said again softly. " The—the man I borrowed it from wants it back ; he's not likely to wait. You see, when first I began letting you have money—ever so long ago—that was my own ; that was money I had earned. I went shabby on your account ; when I ought to have bought things I put off buying them, because I wouldn't use the money. You were always wanting some, and it had to be found, in some fashion or other."

" That's right—rub it in," said Rutherglen, a little bitterly.

" I didn't mean to rub it in ; I've never even meant to remind you of it," said Levity gently. " But now I simply must have the money—I mean the money I have borrowed. The amount of it frightens me."

" I've only been a week in this engagement, and

I had a lot to pay off," said Rutherglen. "I simply haven't got any spare cash at all. How much do you want?"

A gleam of hope came into Levity's eyes. "I've borrowed—about thirty pounds—a little more, in fact. If you could let me have that——"

Rutherglen burst out laughing. "Thirty pounds!" he exclaimed. "I couldn't possibly do it; it's out of the question. If this piece has anything of a run I might be able to let you have a little—later—in a month or two, perhaps——"

"My God!—can't you understand?" cried Levity. "I must have it; it's imperative!"

"Why—what's the matter with you?" asked Rutherglen, in a changed voice. "What have you been doing?"

But Levity Hicks had sunk in a sort of crumpled heap into a chair, and had covered his face with his hands. He seemed to sway a little as he sat there, and he murmured something that was unintelligible. Rutherglen, badly frightened, strode quickly across to the side table, and poured out some brandy; got Levity's head up, roughly but not unkindly, and held the glass to his lips. He drank with difficulty, but some colour came back to his face.

"Don't do that again," said Rutherglen, breathing rather hard. "You know that you've been warned about that. There now—pull yourself together. Don't make a fuss about nothing; I tell you you shall have the money right enough, so soon as it can possibly be managed; I'm not going to leave you in the lurch."

Levity still sat huddled up in the chair: presently he straightened himself a little, and leaned back

and closed his eyes. Rutherglen was watching him furtively.

"I'm all right now," said Levy. "It was a bit sudden—wasn't it? I didn't know what was coming over me for a moment. I'm all right now."

"You startled me for a minute," said Rutherglen. "And look here, old chap—there's nothing for you to worry about. I'm the last man in the world to land a fellow in a hole; I don't do that sort of thing. You've helped me at different times, and I don't suppose I shall have to come on you again. As for this other matter—this thirty pounds—I regard that as a debt of honour, and it'll be paid up. Now you'd better give me your arm, and go to bed."

Levy Hicks got slowly to his feet, leaning on his brother's arm for support. He smiled a little sheepishly as he moved slowly towards the door. "I say—you're very good to me," he said gratefully. "I had no right to fly out at you like that; it served me right that I should have got that stab."

"You just tell the man you borrowed the money from that he's got to wait a bit, and that he mustn't worry you about it; you're not strong enough to worry, old Levy. By the way, who is the man?"

"No one you know," answered Levy, with his face growing a little white. "Just a friend—that's all; a man in the City."

Rutherglen helped him up to his room; nor did he leave him until he had seen him undressed and in bed. The thin face against the pillows looked drawn and ghastly—much as it had looked on that night when young Batchelor first saw the man in Rutherglen's room, lying asleep. Rutherglen went out of the room now, and closed the door, and went down to his own.

"By Jove!—he gave me a bit of a turn," he said, as he mixed himself a drink, and dropped into a chair. "Just as if I shouldn't give him the money like a shot if I'd got it; I simply shouldn't hesitate a moment. I can't do impossibilities."

Rutherglen quite comforted himself with the idea that if the money was actually there in his hands he would be more than delighted to pass it over to Levity, and so relieve the latter's mind. When one came to think of it, that was almost as good as actually paying the money.

And Levity made no more attempts, for quite a long time, to get any money out of his brother. He knew that that was not to be done; some other way must be found. He went through the dull routine of his work at the office, day in and day out—working late whenever he could, because that meant extra money. He saw but little of Rutherglen; he had no particular reason for going to his brother's room at night; for that brother, in an engagement, was always home very late.

That bell which summoned Levity to the partners' room at the office summoned him one day for a new and it would seem a pleasant reason. Mr. Notley sat at his side of the wide desk, and Mr. Kemp at the other; Mr. Kemp, having his back turned towards the door, swung his chair round a little as Levity went into the room. Notley nodded at Kemp, as an indication that the junior partner should act as mouthpiece; and Kemp cleared his throat, and looked up quietly at Levity Hicks.

"We have been talking, Hicks, about you this morning—quite in an informal fashion," he began.

Levity's face that had been flushed when he entered

the room, had taken on a strange pallor; he knew that the eyes of the partners were upon him. "About me, sir?" he ventured; and felt the colour coming back into his face.

"Yes. You have been here a good many years, Hicks—eighteen, to be precise—ever since you were a boy. Your father was an honoured and valued servant of the firm, and it has always seemed a fine thing that you should belong to it also."

"You are very good, sir," murmured Levity, with a slow feeling of relief stealing through his mind.

"We, on our side, have perhaps been a little careless—a little neglectful, I might almost say. Your work is important, and you are a little apt, I fear, to overtax yourself. For instance, while other clerks make arrangements concerning their holidays, however brief that holiday may be, you remain in London."

"I don't—don't care about holidays," said Levity.

"Hard work suits me, I think."

"That's as may be—that's as may be," said Mr. Kemp, with a wave of the hand. "This year, however, we'll change things. You will take a holiday—let us say a fortnight—and don't let us see you anywhere near the premises during that fortnight," he added playfully, wagging a finger at Levity.

There was a long pause. Properly speaking, of course, Levity ought to have professed his gratitude; but his thoughts seemed to be far away—leaping ahead of this moment, as it were, and going on into the future. It was as though someone else were speaking in that quiet room when at last the man got out words.

"I don't think—I'm quite sure I don't want a

holiday. Thank you very much, gentlemen—but I don't need a holiday. I'd rather go straight on with the work."

"This year, Hicks, you will take a holiday," said Mr. Notley, speaking for the first time. "That will do—thank you."

Levity went out of the room, closing the door after him. Instantly Kemp swung his chair round, and faced his partner across the broad desk.

"Well—did you see his face?"

"I'll not believe it," said Notley, with a shake of his grey head. "I'll never believe that of the son of John Hicks?"

"Well—we shall see," said Kemp in a low voice.

"While he's away for his holiday his books can be examined, and we shall know."

Levity went back to his desk, and sat down there with the air of a man who has received some stunning blow; he seemed dazed. Mechanically he took up his pen and went on with his work, not knowing in the least that he was writing at all; he only came to himself when the clerk seated next to him nudged him, and reminded him that it was his lunch hour.

He got down from his stool, and changed his coat, and found his hat and went out of the office. It was something to get into the fresh air—anywhere away from those endless ledgers and letter files, and all the rest of the hideous paraphernalia of his slavery. He stumbled rather than walked through the outer lobby of the office (which was always dark, and in which new customers invariably lost their way for a second or two) and so out into the narrow court. There, going blindly, he almost stumbled against someone to whom he murmured an apology as he passed on.

And then someone caught him by the arm, and held him. So much was that the expected thing in his mind, that he stood still for a moment, with his eyes closed; and then, opening them, looked into the blue eyes that were laughing and dimpling at him delightfully—and so came suddenly and safely to the surface again.

"I simply had to come down and see you," said Delia, all in a breath. "Over and over again I've been coming down to see you—making up my mind that I would wait until you walked out of that stupid old office, where you stew and stew from morning till night; and then I would make you take me to lunch. That's what you're going to do now, you funny, dreaming person; you're going to take me to lunch, all amongst the men—and I'm going to sit opposite to you, and tell you about the wonderful things that have happened to me—while I remember the dull and doleful things that used to happen, in the days when I, too, was in the City, and tapped away at a horrid typewriter for a living. Wake up, you funny, dreaming man—because I'm hungry!"

Quite suddenly all his world had changed. He knew that she alone (and perhaps one little child in a garden that sat under the tree that nearly reached the sky) had the power to do that; and now, suddenly, he found himself walking through a city that was not a city at all, but just a place of enchantment.

"This is very wonderful," said Levity Hicks, as they turned into the street.

"Everything about me, and all that I do, and all that I wear—every bit of me is very wonderful," she said, clinging to his arm. "And I'm very glad that you appreciate me. Where are we going to lunch?"

Ordinarily speaking, Levity Hicks lunched anywhere that was cheap and hurried. Sometimes he stood with a crowd of other men, and had a sandwich and a glass of ale—sometimes he had something more substantial. This being a day of days, when Beauty demanded to be fed, something else must be done. He knew a place, at which he had often glanced as he walked past—a place of mirrors and sumptuous joints and real red wine ; for once, out of the span of all the days, he might surely go there. Greatly daring, he pushed open the doors, and went in. And now Levity held his head high, and looked all men in the face.

They found a corner and sat down. The place was pretty full, and they were all men there ; save for a barmaid behind a semicircular bar at one end of the room, Delia was the only woman there. That did not really matter to Levity Hicks ; nothing mattered to him to-day.

“ You haven’t asked me why I came all the way down to the City to see you—and what my great news is,” she said, when presently the waiter was putting dishes before them.

“ It’s quite sufficient that you are here, and that you have come all the way to the City, and have dug me out, and are now sitting looking at me,” said Levity. “ I don’t ask for particulars at all.”

And just then he knew that his face had suddenly flushed, and then had gone deadly pale again. For a man so like Mr. Kemp had come in by the swing-doors, and had taken his place at a table, that for a moment Levity’s heart had seemed to stop, and then to go on beating furiously again.

“ What’s the matter ? ” asked Delia quickly.

"Nothing—nothing at all ; I'm only a little tired," said Levity.

For after all, when the man had taken off his hat, and hung it up, it was not Mr. Kemp at all, but an utter stranger. Levity settled down to his meal, although, if the truth be told, he ate but little.

"I felt that I couldn't write ; I'd simply got to come down and see you. I am really and truly and absolutely on the stage ! What do you think of that ? "

It being evidently necessary that Levity must express a proper amount of surprise and wonderment, he expressed them duly. And then she went on to tell him what the theatre was, and how she had been rehearsing for some weeks, and how the production was quite near at hand.

"Of course, to begin with, I'm only in the chorus—but I've got the sweetest frocks you ever saw in your life ; they're simply dreams. Also, if you please, I was called out the other day, and given an understudy. And it's all delightful and nice and jolly—and I have two little pounds a week for it—or I shall have when we begin."

"I'm delighted," said Levity. "But then it was certain from the first that you would get on."

She made a little laughing grimace at him. "Thank you very much, sir," she said. "And do you think that I am in the least like a certain miserable, mouldy, peevish little typist you once knew and deigned to take notice of ? Answer me quickly ! Am I ? Am I ? "

The mischievous face was close to his across the table ; and Levity Hicks was no longer a poor clerk, with trouble hanging over his head, but a man who

lived and loved, and was far away from a dreary world of ledgers and letter files.

"I never knew that sort of typist," he said softly. "She's always been exactly the same to me, and she always will be. Just the brightest and sweetest girl that ever came into a dingy office, and made us all understand how dull and stodgy and old-fashioned we all were. Why, I could kneel at your feet for thinking about me, and coming down here to-day to look me up and tell me your great news."

"You'd better not kneel at my feet here," she said, with a twinkle. "Because there are quite a number of men looking at us—to say nothing of the barmaid—and we might create quite a sensation. I simply wanted to come—because I knew how pleased you'd be. Whenever I have anything pleasant to tell, I always feel that I want to come to you, and to tell you all about it."

"That's splendid; I like to think that," he said. "And look here"—this in a sudden burst that was not like Levity at all—"I'm going to call you 'Delia.' I always think of you as 'Delia,' and I don't see why, with old friends like us, I shouldn't call you by that name."

"I should love you to," she murmured. "And I shall do the same. I shall call you by your name, too."

The mischievous, laughing blue eyes at the other side of the little table held his own; he would not have cared if the room had been packed to suffocation with men, all staring at him, and all wondering who the girl was with him.

"That's fine," he said. "I shall like that."

"Levity!" she whispered, leaning across to him, and laughing.

"Yes—I like that—from you," he answered.

"Oh—I've been having such a busy time," she went on presently. "What with rushing down to rehearsals, and having to see about clothes—and making new friends—and all the rest of it—it's been delightful. And oh—by the way—I saw your friend again the other day."

"My—friend?" he asked vaguely.

"Yes—Mr. Rutherglen. I met him accidentally just outside the theatre—and he took me out to lunch. How he did make me laugh! I quite disgraced myself. We went to the Trocadero—and had the loveliest time. By the way"—the roguish eyes looked up at his solemn face for a moment—"your friend is a bit of a flirt."

"Oh—that's only his way," said Levity. "Besides, he's no right to flirt; he's engaged to be married."

"Yes—he told me—poor old boy! Told me he'd been dragged into it, and couldn't help himself; he gave me a description of her and her mother; that was when I laughed so dreadfully. He was so funny! He told me, in the most serious manner, that he meant to make her the best of husbands. Really, it was a most riotous lunch; I only felt a wee bit ashamed of it afterwards."

Levity sat silent; and after a moment or two she put her hand across the table, and touched his, and looked into his eyes. "You're not hurt with me? You don't mind?" she asked.

"Why should I be hurt with you? Why should I mind? I suppose you've got a right to do just as you like—haven't you, Delia?"

There was another pause, and then she went on again, almost pleadingly: "It wasn't a bit like this

lunch—not half so nice. That was only a silly, trivial thing—just a lark. This is something I shall remember—this room, and you with your solemn eyes—you’ve got eyes just like the eyes of a dog that looks up at you when it thinks you’re going to scold it. I wonder if you know how fond I am of you, old Levity ? ”

“ You put me quite apart from everyone else—don’t you ? ” he said. “ You told me that once, and I’ve never forgotten it.”

“ Quite apart from everyone else in all the world,” said Delia. “ Do you think there’s anyone else for whom I would have come back into the place of torment and slavery to-day ? Therefore rest content, old Levity—and don’t get even a little tiny bit jealous.”

Levity was ten minutes late on his return from lunch. He had begun to hurry after leaving Delia ; and then had suddenly remembered that he must not do that, and had moderated his pace. And now he was back again in the office, on his old stool ; and fronting him that which had been his torture for so long.

For now that the bright face of the girl was no longer before him, he had time to think, and to remember. While he had talked with her there could be no shadow at any time between them ; there could be no remembrance of any wrong he had done, and for which he must inevitably pay.

But now he knew in his own mind exactly what was happening—exactly what was advancing steadily and relentlessly towards him. That brief interview with the partners to-day had given him the first inkling of it ; under the kindly, friendly words lurked

the suspicion of what he had done. It was no more than a suspicion yet ; but it could presently be turned into a certainty, and then Levity Hicks was doomed.

The thing rode upon his bent shoulders all the way back to Sockitt's. He was earlier than usual, and was doubtful whether or not he would dine to-night ; he was in no mood for it. Hesitating for a moment, he turned into that garden in which he had sat so often, and in which, on one strange and memorable night of storm, the Stranger had talked with him. Levity sat down there on the bench under the tree in the gathering darkness, and leaned forward, and dropped his face in his hands ; and so sat very still. There was no one else in the garden that evening.

He was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he did not hear the gate open, and did not see Priscilla Meadows and the child come into the place. Priscilla stood still, just within the gate ; there were some stunted bushes there, and she stood in shadow amongst them. She released the hand of the child, and little Susette stole softly forward towards that still figure on the seat. Priscilla Meadows stood still, and watched.

Levity did not raise his head as the child came close to him, and put a light, small hand on his shoulder. She began to talk gently to him, as she might have talked to a child that was hurt or in pain.

"Uncle Levity—you've come home tired."

"Dreadfully tired," he said in a low voice, without looking up. "Tired of all sorts of things. Of life—and work—and worry. But don't you mind about me. How are all the Folks ?"

"The Humbly-dog-chap has come crawling out

from the bushes—very slowly, because he didn't want to startle you ; and he's lying here just at your feet, trying to make you take notice of him."

"Yes—he always was sympathetic," said Levity. "I'm looking at him—between my fingers——"

"That's why he's wagging his tail," said the child. "The Folks is all about—and the Creepy-chap has come right down from the tree where the leaves are always green ; he's sorry, too. Uncle Levity—you might look up ; and then they'd all be pleased."

Levity raised his head, and turned his haggard face in the direction of the child. Then suddenly he took her into his arms, and held her close, and looked at her, and laughed softly.

"Why isn't it just a world of children ? " he asked softly. "Why isn't it a world of make-believe and shadows and dream-fancies—with never a heartache in the lot of it ? Why do we strive and scheme, and plot and plan, and cheat and steal, and buy and sell ? Why—God meant better than that in the beginning, when he gave us our chance and set us in a garden—didn't He ? "

"I 'spect so," said the child. "You laughed just then ; does that mean that some of the pain has gone away ? "

"Most of it, thank you," he answered. "Kiss me, sweet—and send away the rest. Who's that by the gate ? "

"Aunt Priscilla," answered the child.

"Then I expect she's come to look for you, to put you to bed. Send the Folks home."

"You wave your hand, and the Creepy-chap goes up the tree ; you clap your hands very softly, and the Humbly-dog-chap goes back into the bushes. And

you stamp your foot (not hard, so as to frighten him, but just to make him understand that he must do as he's told), and Top-dog-chap goes home too."

All of which the child did with the utmost solemnity as she spoke, and then laughed shyly, and kissed the man with a mere fluttering touch of her lips, and sped across to where the woman stood by the gate. They turned back together, after a moment, towards Levy, and he rose and stood before them.

"I hadn't seen you, Miss Meadows," he said, not even knowing that she had been standing there in the shadows, and had witnessed the little scene.

"I always like to see you with little Susette," she answered. "That was why I didn't disturb you. I think you're almost as fond of this poor garden as we are," she added.

"Oh—it's somewhere out of the world," answered Levy softly. "Streets and houses—houses and streets; and here we get away from things a bit. Just somewhere out of the world; and God knows one needs that sometimes, Miss Meadows."

She thought then, as she had thought before, how wonderful it must be to be a little child, that could creep innocently into the arms of some loved one, and comfort him and whisper to him. A foolish thought; and yet to-night, while this tired man stood in the shabby old garden, and looked at her, her heart ached for him, and her longing was all to be able to comfort him or help him. It seemed quite a long time that they stood there, with the child clinging to the woman's hand, looking at each other in the gathering dusk.

And then she started suddenly, and made a movement towards the gate; she checked a sigh as she

moved. "Little Susette—it's time for bed," she said. "Are you coming in to dinner, Mr. Hicks?"

"I don't think I shall," he answered. "I think I'm just going to sit out here a little longer."

When she turned at the gate and looked back at him, she saw that he was still standing there vaguely in the shadow—and it seemed to her that he was the loneliest figure in all the world.

CHAPTER VII

THE GARDEN OUT OF THE WORLD

MISS PRISCILLA MEADOWS knelt beside that small bed in an upper room in Sockitt's Boarding House wherein little Susette lay asleep. She had come up again after dinner to see that all was well with the child ; and now, in the twilight of the room, she knelt beside the bed, and whispered softly something that the child could not hear, and yet that was in its. " a passionate question.

" Tell me, little Susette, out of your deep knowledge, how you talk to him, and what you say to him ! Teach me to get at the heart of him—to reach the child's heart of him, as you can do ! I am groping on the outside of things with him always ; teach me, little Susette, to understand and to know."

It was a queer prayer to be spoken under Sockitt's roof ; and for a long time after she had whispered it Miss Meadows knelt there, with her face hidden against the bedclothes, and with her hair that was prematurely grey touching the hand of the child as it lay outside the coverlet. And presently she got up, and went softly out of the room.

In the drawing-room Miss Julia Ogg was pounding the piano, and was singing the very latest love-song from the newest musical comedy ; Priscilla Meadows, pausing at the door for a moment, knew that Mrs. Ogg

would be seated in the only good arm-chair, by right of her position, and would be glancing complacently at her daughter. The drawing-room at Sockitt's was no place for a warm evening; and Priscilla Meadows went quietly out of the house and across the road, and in through the gate into the garden of the Square. Her hand shook a little as she closed the gate and looked about her; then she advanced to the seat, and saw that there was no one there.

She sat down and folded her hands in her lap, and waited. There was a bravery in her that had never been in her before; she was as one facing desperate odds. All her life, save in that one moment when she had taken the child for her own, and had held her as it were against the world, had been a thing of common-places—a genteel slipping through life that was not like life itself. She had no experience of such a business as this; for this, she told herself, was a man's work. In that, of course, she was quite wrong; but then Miss Meadows had quite a lot to learn in matters of life and of the world generally. Which was perhaps for the best, after all.

Across at Sockitt's, where the windows were open, she could hear the sound of the piano, and now and then Julia Ogg's voice rising on a high note and dying away again. Once a pair of lovers, that had strayed from the world outside, came into the Square, and paced along slowly; they even stopped for a moment or two outside Sockitt's, to hear Julia Ogg and the piano. But in the garden all was very still, and one seemed to be shut away from the actual streets.

And then at last he came. She knew his step as he came along the pavement, and she had a fear that he might go into Sockitt's after all. But instead he

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crossed the road ; and her heart leapt to the clang of the little old rusty gate that admitted him to the place. She saw him as he moved across the grass towards the bench ; she waited expectant until he should stop before her and see her.

"Why—who's that?" was his greeting. And she rose to her feet and faced him.

He was glad to see her ; so much was evident. He gave a little low pleased laugh—perhaps of relief that it should be no one else. Then, as he dropped to the seat, she sat down beside him. She had no time now, as she might have had on another occasion, to wonder what some of the boarders at Sockitt's would have said, had they seen the two of them together on the old seat under the tree in the darkness.

"I've been walking a long way," said Levity presently, speaking out of the darkness. "I don't know where I went—just round and round, and up one street and down another. I was getting away from myself."

If she could have put her hand upon his shoulder, as the child had done ! If she could have brushed his cheek with her lips, and whispered to him not to be afraid !

"You were trying to get away from yourself just now—when you were with little Susette in the garden here," she said softly. "'Somewhere out of the world,' you said."

"Yes—that was it—somewhere out of the world. I've never been able to face things—to face life ; I've only taken things by half measures. I can't come to grips with problems ; I let things crush me. And—oh, my God !—they're crushing me to-night !"

He sat very still for a moment or two ; and then he

got up and began to walk rapidly away. She rose quickly, scarcely knowing what she did, and went after him, and suddenly caught him by the arm. He turned about quickly and looked at her ; and then suddenly he laughed—a queer, odd, jerky laugh.

"You must tell me what's the matter," she said, surprised at the firmness of her tones.

"There isn't anything to tell," he answered. "I've got to face things, just as everyone else faces them ; that's part of the game. It's all right, Miss Meadows—and I'm very grateful. You've always been—very kind to me—you and little Susette have been the pleasantest things I've known—— Will that girl never stop howling ? " He looked across to where the lights were showing behind the blinds of Sockitt's, and from which direction the rising and falling notes of Julia Ogg's voice floated out to them.

"Never mind that ; please listen to me," she said, almost sharply. "If only for little Susette's sake—little Susette, whom you and I love very dearly—I want you to let me help you. I've never done anything for anybody in all my life yet—except perhaps for the child, and that was different—and I want to help you. I don't know what I should say to you, or how I should put the matter, Mr. Hicks ; it's so difficult. But you did say just now that this was somewhere out of the world—didn't you ? Please believe now that we stand out of the world—apart from it. Talk to me as if we were dream people."

He laughed again, but with a little note almost of tenderness in the laughter. "Somewhere out of the world," he said. "That is a pretty fancy—isn't it ? You are talking to me as sometimes little Susette talks ; she must have caught it from you."

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Her heart leapt ; that little haunting prayer to the sleeping child had been answered. She could touch his fancy, as she could touch him in no other way.

" Here, as we stand then—out of the world—two dream people—tell me what it is from which you are trying to escape," she said.

" In the world itself (because this is not the world really—is it ?) I've got my life into a muddle. There are good things in it—sweet and wonderful things—but there is a burden laid upon me that is greater than I can bear. It doesn't give me a chance."

" What is the burden ? " she asked.

" I've borrowed—taken some money that doesn't belong to me. I only took a little at first—and then a little more—and a little more yet. And to-day I knew that I was suspected—for the first time. They'll find out—and then——"

He left the sentence unfinished, and turned away. Once more she went after him, just a step or two, and once more she caught hold of his arm. " You must tell me everything—everything that is happening to you in that world outside," she said. " What made you take this money ? you didn't take it for yourself ? "

There her intuition was swift and sure, and the certainty with which she had struck at the heart of the matter startled him. It had not seemed possible that she should have guessed that ; and he knew that, in loyalty to his brother, he must stem the current of her thoughts, and turn them in another direction.

" Do you think it's likely that I should—steal for anyone else ? " he asked. " I've been living carelessly—recklessly ; I haven't stopped to think."

"You have taken the money for someone you thought needed it—some woman, perhaps, who was in trouble or in a difficulty?"

"No," he answered, shaking his head. "I just took it for myself. Just a bit at a time, as I have said. And I didn't realise that it had mounted up to about thirty pounds. It's grown like a snowball."

"What will you do about it?" she asked, after a moment or two.

"There isn't anything to be done about it," he answered. "I've been weak; I haven't grappled with the thing. Mine is a special department at the office that doesn't come much under the notice of the partners; and I've been hoping that it would just drag on, and not be found out—until, I suppose, some sort of miracle should happen to put it right again. One hopes always for miracles, and they never happen in these days. Now they've told me—at the office, I mean—that they're going to send me for a holiday (I don't generally take holidays, Miss Meadows), and, of course, that means that they'll go through my books and—and find out things."

"And then?" She was relentless in getting everything from him, even though she tortured him.

"Well, then—there'll be another case in the papers of a trusted servant who has had a good salary (they always have good salaries, these trusted servants, according to the newspapers) who has shamefully betrayed his trust, and taken what did not belong to him. It's like the old silly rhyme that I used to laugh at—only I don't laugh at it now. Do you remember?—

'He that takes what isn't his'n,
If he's copped must go to prison.'

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"Don't!" she said quickly, with a little gesture, as though she would have covered his lips. "Mr. Hicks—you must let me be your miracle; you must let me lend you this money. I can do it—I can do anything just to help you. Please!"

He stood, trying to pierce through the darkness and to see her face; the thing was so wonderful. This sudden offer, coming from the last person in the world he would ever have thought could spring up to help him, was something that for a moment bereft him of speech. He stood stupidly staring at her, until at last she went on—eagerly, quickly, in the manner of a child that does not stop to think of what words it is using. "To please me, Mr. Hicks—and little Susette. She won't know, but it will be just the same as if she did; you're so fond of little Susette—and I'm so fond—I mean that I like you so well; I couldn't bear that anything like that should happen to you. We are the two dream people to-night—standing out of the world—two people apart. So that I can do what anyone else might not do—to save and to help my—my friend. I can do it so easily; I am one of the lucky people that has money, and does not have to work for it. Please, Mr. Hicks."

"I couldn't do that," he said at last, slowly. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and it's dear and wonderful of you; but I couldn't do that. We may call ourselves dream people to-night—but tomorrow I go out into the world again—with thirty pounds of your money to save me from being branded and punished as a thief; that is what I should wake up to. No, Miss Meadows; I must worry through my own trouble somehow or other; I couldn't let a woman—a friend help me at all."

"If the worst comes to the worst, and you can save yourself at the eleventh hour—will you come to me then?"

He considered that point for a moment; then he nodded his head slowly. "If the worst comes to the worst, and there is nothing between that and—the other thing, I will come to you," he said. "And even as it is, you have taken a great load from my shoulders; I shall sleep to-night as I have not slept for quite a long time. Give me your hands, please, and believe that I am thanking you from the depths of my heart."

They groped for each other's hands, and for a moment stood there, close together. Then Levity said, with a little quick sigh—"Well—I suppose we must go out into the world again—eh?"—and turned towards the gate.

"Yes—I suppose so," she answered, moving after him.

He had almost reached the gate, when he turned again towards her; it was just with an impulse of friendliness, and perhaps a desire to show her how tremendous was his confidence in her, above all other people in the world.

"There was something else," he said. "This has meant such a lot to me—all this worry and trouble, I mean—because it has seemed lately that things were straightening out for me, as they have never straightened out before. Something came into my life that I had somehow missed through all my days—the sort of thing that comes to other men, and yet had passed me by. You'll know what I mean?"

"Yes," she said; and her voice seemed to come from quite a long way off.

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"She came into my life quite by accident—something far more beautiful and more wonderful than I deserved. That's why I wanted to get straight, and make a proper start again. I've never told anyone else about this—and I've never even told her, although I know that she understands. I just tell you, Miss Meadows, because you're different. You're the one friend that I've got. I'm glad to have had this talk with you—in the garden that is out of the world"—he laughed softly as he held open the gate for her to pass through. "God bless you!"

In her room that night at Sockitt's, where little Susette lay asleep in a tiny bed in the corner, Miss Meadows stood for a long time looking at the flame of the candle. Her eyes were very soft, and a smile hovered over her lips.

"It doesn't matter about anybody else," she said softly to herself. "I am content with so little. I am his friend, and I can help him; he will turn to me in his need as he cannot turn to anyone else. It doesn't matter at all about anyone else. No one else counts."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BUTTERFLY

THERE was one drawback to life at Sockitt's ; there was no privacy. As Mrs. Ogg, for instance, put the matter—" If you did want to talk to a friend a bit private-like there was always somebody close to you, sticking ears out to listen."

Therefore, in any great matters that required to be discussed, such discussion was done in bedrooms late at night ; or, if it became actually necessary to see a friend on private matters, one went outside Sockitt's to do it.

Mrs. Ogg, dressing in her room one Sunday evening, and assisting her daughter also in the final rites of her toilet, voiced this matter before setting out on a private mission. Mrs. Ogg and Julia were dining that night at a restaurant, and Horace Rutherglen was the guest. A table had been engaged, and everything arranged ; but Mrs. Ogg knew in her own mind that she was not going to meet Rutherglen simply from motives of entertaining, but rather for a more businesslike reason.

" Heaven forbid that I should want to get rid of you, my dear, or that I should want to hurry things up too much—but I know what men are," said Mrs. Ogg to the mirror by the aid of which she was adjusting her hat. " I know what your poor father was like ;

it was just dilly-dally, shilly-shally from morning till night ; if it had been left to him we should never have got married at all. Lucky for both of us we each had money, and so when it came to the last I made arrangements myself, and told him what day it was to be."

" Things have altered a lot since your day, mother," said Julia, with a laugh.

" No, they haven't—not a bit," retorted Mrs. Ogg. " A man likes his freedom just as long as he can keep it, and a bit longer than some of us choose. You needn't be afraid that I'm going to upset Master Horace at all ; I'm simply going to tell him that the sooner things are arranged the better, and that I don't hold with long engagements. You've got money, my dear, and the man is not fool enough to forget that fact."

" You're not unkind enough to say that he's marrying me for that—are you ? " said Julia.

" I haven't said so ; I'm not going to say so. Besides, what's it matter what he's marrying you for, if you're fond of him, and he's a nice sort of fellow ? The only thing is that in his profession he is constantly meeting young and pretty girls—and I don't want you to run any chances. You trust your mother, and you won't go far wrong."

" Well, I suppose I've got to, anyway," pouted Julia.

Rutherglen was waiting for them at the restaurant ; he had been out all day, and had dressed at his club. He certainly looked very handsome as he smilingly greeted them, and Mrs. Ogg more than ever made up her mind that to-night should see a final arrangement made. She would choose her

moment, and then would broach the matter with firmness.

They proceeded to their table, Horace Rutherglen twice bowing to people he knew, and seated themselves. The dinner proceeded in the ordinary way, to the accompaniment of a good deal of laughter; and it was not until coffee had been served, and Rutherglen was smoking, that Mrs. Ogg spoke of the business that was in her mind, and that had really hovered in the air, as it were, all during dinner.

"Now, my dear Horace, as we're sitting here nice and comfortable and friendly, I do want to speak to you about a matter that's got to be spoken about some time or other," began the lady.

"I am all attention," he said, leaning forward across the table. "I suppose it concerns Julia and myself?"

"It does—and it's nice of you to make the thing easier. You see, Julia's only got me in the world, and I'm getting on a bit. It's no use shaking your head, because you know it's true. Julia will always have enough to live on, and a bit over——"

"That is a consideration I have not thought of for a moment," he interpolated hastily.

"I don't suppose you have," she went on serenely; "but it may as well be spoken of all the same. Only I don't want to leave Julia alone in the world——"

"Well—you're not going to die yet a bit, mother darling," exclaimed Julia.

"Nobody said I was—and please don't interrupt," said Mrs. Ogg. "But what I want to say is this: that I can't see any reason why you two young people should wait about for a long time, just for the sake

of waiting. You've got all your lives before you, and you've got to make the best of 'em."

"My dear Horace—please don't think that I've been putting mother up to this," said the girl in real distress. "But you know what she is—and she won't let things alone."

"I think your mother is perfectly right, my darling," said Rutherglen. "As for the money—that doesn't matter in the least, so far as I'm concerned, although I am glad, for your sake, to know that you are well provided for. There's no actual reason, of course, why we should rush into matrimony in a violent hurry; at the same time, one doesn't want to wait too long."

"Why wait at all?" broke in Mrs. Ogg. "You needn't be afraid, Horace, that I shall come and live with you; I hope I know myself better than that. But just a little flat, somewhere near the West End, and you can be as cosy as cosy. Julia will have four hundred a year of her own—and there's something else that's in good ~~circumstances~~ ^{circumstances} in her name besides. Therefore, as I say—what is there to wait for?"

Horace Rutherglen had not dreamed that it would be so much as that; this was just like his luck, he told himself. After all, Julia Ogg was not bad-looking, and she dressed well, and had a style about her. Horace Rutherglen felt that he had much to congratulate himself upon.

"Well, Julia—what do you say?" he asked. "You know what my feelings are towards you—and, for my part, I think the sooner the better."

"Mother makes it very awkward for me—with all this talk about how much I'm worth——"

"My darling girl, have I ever for one single instant

dwelt upon that side of the question. Even before your mother, I don't mind saying that I hadn't the ghost of a notion that you were worth a lot of money when I first told you—well—you know what I told you."

"Of course I know," said Julia, with a blush and a quick raising of her eyes to his. "And so long as you understand that this is not my doing, however much I should like to be married to you, of course, it's all right."

"There you are! Now what is all the fuss about?" exclaimed Mrs. Ogg, beaming upon them. "We'll have the wedding just as soon as things can be got ready and arranged. And you needn't be afraid of me, Horace; as I have told you, I shan't be in the way, and I shan't be for ever interfering. 'Live and let live' is my motto, and I'll stick to it."

The matter thus amicably settled, and all parties being satisfied, the conversation drifted in other directions, and at last centred itself, as it generally did, upon Sockitt's. The various people in Sockitt's were talked about; their manners and their dress and their methods; and Rutherglen caused a great deal of suppressed giggling from the ladies by the clever imitations he gave of the various members of the household.

"One thing does surprise me," said Mrs. Ogg—"and that is how anyone like that Mr. Hicks stops on, from year's end to year's end—and how he manages to live. Mrs. Sockitt did tell me once that she has a special arrangement with him, so that he doesn't pay for meals he doesn't have; and I suppose that is why he stops away such a lot."

"Poor devil—he doesn't have the best of times,"

said Rutherglen. "That sort of man works jolly hard, and yet doesn't get very much out of life."

"Somebody told me once that you had been very good to him, Horace—made a sort of friend of him," said Julia.

"Oh—nonsense ; I've only been civil to the chap. He's a shy sort of bird—and he likes to come into my room sometimes when I'm at home, and have a chat and a drink. There's nothing in that."

"It's all very well for you to make light of it, but it must mean a great deal to him," persisted Julia. "I shouldn't be surprised if you have helped him in other ways."

"Don't let's talk about it," said Rutherglen. "A man doesn't talk about those things."

"Well—we can put two and two together, I suppose," said Mrs. Ogg, with a smiling nod.

Meanwhile, on that same Sunday, and perhaps for some time before, Levity Hicks, the man of whom they talked so lightly in the restaurant, had come to a great resolution. He had thought it over a great many times—first of all as something to be dismissed instantly—something with which he would have nothing to do ; but afterwards it had appealed to him again and again. And it was no less a matter than that he should leave Sockitt's.

He had lived there a long time, and he really liked the place. He liked Mrs. Sockitt's easy, good-humoured way of doing things ; and it was good to be near his brother Horace. At the same time, he saw that he must make an end of it some day, and that the sooner he made an end of it now, under existing conditions, the better it would be.

In the first place, he could live much more cheaply

in some other fashion. Not that Sockitt's was dear ; but, in view of the fact that everything was dear, so far as poor Levity was concerned, it was too expensive for him. If he took a little room somewhere—just a place in which to sleep—he might get his meals in almost any haphazard fashion at a trifling cost. And then, perhaps, if he worked a little harder even than usual, the load of debt might be paid off, before it was too late. He wondered he had not thought of this plan before.

The second thought occurred to him guiltily enough, and he tried to believe that he did not feel it at all. He wanted to get away from his brother. The old admiration for him was not dead ; it was only the bitter injustice of the whole thing that worked upon Levity. Horace took his way gaily through the world, while the other man went shabby ; and Horace drew out of Levity's pockets every shilling he could beg or demand. There was a passionate desire in Levity Hicks to get away, and to make a fresh start. Later on, perhaps, he might come back ; but for the moment he wanted space in which to breathe and time in which to think.

His mind was fully made up, too, over another matter. If the worst came to the worst, and the partners really discovered his defalcations, Levity knew very well that he could not face the consequences. In a childlike, blundering fashion, he had made up his mind that he would run away. They would find him at Sockitt's easily enough ; but he might hide himself somewhere in London, and not be discovered. It was a blundering plan, certain to fail, but it was the only plan Levity could formulate. He would be like a child, pretending that he was

safely hidden, and knowing all the time that he must assuredly be found; he could play that game of make-believe as well as he could play any other.

And now, on this Sunday, he had made up his mind that he would give Mrs. Sockitt notice. Mrs. Sockitt had been kind to him, in her heavy fashion, and perhaps a little sorry for him. He had had a thought at first that he would just slip out of the house, and get away without telling anyone; but that would not be quite fair to Mrs. Sockitt.

It was in the afternoon that he knocked at the door of the little room at the end of the hall that was Mrs. Sockitt's sanctum, and, getting no reply, turned the handle, and went in. Mrs. Sockitt was not there, but Bob Sockitt, in his shirt-sleeves, was stretched upon the horse-hair couch, flat on his back; weird sounds were proceeding from him, and his limbs were twitching and jerking as if in a sort of nightmare.

"Oh—I beg your pardon," said Levity.

Bob Sockitt, with a final jerk and a final gurgle, rolled his legs clear of the sofa, and sat up, blinking his eyelids at Levity. He moistened his lips with his tongue once or twice, and closed his eyes and opened them, and at last became sufficiently wide-awake to get out the words:

"Mrs. S.—not in at present. Matter of fact—gone to tea—lady friend."

Levity backed towards the door. "It doesn't matter," he said nervously. "I'll look in again. It really doesn't matter in the least, thank you."

But Bob Sockitt, left in charge as it were, was not to have his little brief authority snatched from him even on a somnolent Sunday afternoon. He pulled himself upright, and reached for a coat that had been

dropped on to the floor; shook it, and put it on. Then, giving a twirl to a moustache that had a perpetual droop to it, he faced Levity with an air of importance.

"Mrs. S. would like to have a message left," he said. "In a sense, I represent Mrs. S.—in a business sense. When Mrs. S. comes back she will naturally say to me—'Robert,' she will say, 'what's been going on? In the internal arrangements of the house, Robert,' she will say, 'what has happened?'"

"Oh, I see," said Levity. "Then in that case you might tell her that I really came to give notice—to say that I was leaving."

Bob Sockitt thought this out very carefully for a moment or two, looking sleepily at Levity; then he shook his head. "Mrs. S. will be upset," he said. "Mrs. S. doesn't like seeing people go; she's told me so. You come and you go—and you never think about Mrs. S.'s feelings—or even my feelings. Why should a man be allowed to come and to go without thinking about what the feelings of others really are? That's a nice point, young man."

"I think Mrs. Sockitt will understand," said Levity, getting nearer to the door. "And she will know that I wouldn't think of upsetting her for the world."

Bob Sockitt held up a warning finger, and shook his head. "I was merely putting a case, young man," he said. "I like putting cases—it's a little habit of mine. Logic is a sort of hobby with me; I could have made money at it if I had ever had the time to give to it. Well—I'll tell Mrs. S."

"I should like you to mention, please, that I don't wish her to speak of it to anyone else," said Levity.

"I want to go away quietly; I don't want to make any fuss about it."

"Your wishes shall be studied, as the wishes of everyone in this house have always been studied by Mrs. S. and by me," said Bob Sockitt. "That's what's made the name of the house, in a manner of speaking—that and strict attention to what I may call the delights of the table. There's no other little thing that I can do for you, sir, in the absence of Mrs. S.?"

"Nothing more, thank you; I'm very much obliged to you," said Levity, reaching the door this time, and opening it. "Good afternoon, sir."

As he closed the door, he had a vision of Bob Sockitt, aimlessly allowing the coat to slide again from his shoulders, the while he prepared himself for again lying down on the couch.

With that business ended, Levity Hicks came to the great determination that he would go down to Brixton. It was something to do, at any rate, and he might be so fortunate as to see Delia, as he had on that one memorable occasion before. He began, almost for the first time, to wish that he were not quite so shabby-looking; the sunshine found out places in his wearing apparel that would not have been noticeable on a darker day. But perhaps Delia would not mind that; she had never seemed to mind it on the other occasions on which she had met him.

He came again to the corner of the street, and looked wistfully down at that third house on the right. A bolder man might have gone to the house, and knocked, and asked for her; Levity shyly waited, in the hope that she would emerge. It took him quite half an hour to make up his mind that perhaps, after

all, there was nothing very wrong in knocking at the door of a house in which resided a young girl that he knew, and whom he had even had the temerity to call by her Christian name. Even then, he went past the place once or twice; and when his hand was finally raised to the knocker, he almost took to his heels and fled.

But after all there was nothing so very alarming about the matter. A neat little maid-servant opened the door, and stood looking at him while with some difficulty he got out the name; and then she stood aside for him to enter. Miss Valentine was at home.

The girl opened the door of a little sitting-room; and there on a couch, with one slim ankle crossed over the other, and with a book held before her eyes, was Delia. She lowered the book quickly as the girl announced "Mr. Hicks"; but she made no attempt to get up. Instead, as the little maid closed the door, she stretched out her hand to him, with a little surprised uplifting of her eyebrows.

"Well?" was all she said.

"I thought you wouldn't mind if I just—just looked you up," he faltered. "I—I happened to be down this way, and so I thought——"

"You do sometimes happen to be down this way—don't you, Levity?" she asked mischievously. "There—you needn't blush; I'm delighted to see you. I'm all alone this afternoon, except for the girl; Auntie has gone out, and won't be back until suppertime. Do sit down and talk to me—and we'll have tea."

Therefore he sat down on a low chair, with his knees almost up to his chin, and talked to her. Per-

haps it would be more reasonable to say that he looked at her, wondering at the dainty loveliness of her, and the brightness and the sparkle of her. He forgot, as he always did in her presence, every trouble he had in the world; he was simply with her, and that was sufficient. Her soft eyes dwelt on his—and she teased him divinely about himself; and yet was never cruel, and the mischievous words had never a hint of spite in them.

“Why don’t you hate me, Levity? I’m always making fun of you, and seeming to laugh at you. Why don’t you hate me?”

Her hand, hanging over the side of the couch, was very near to him; he took it in his own. “You don’t really laugh at me,” he said. “You only do it for fun. As for hating you—you know I don’t.”

“Are you quite sure?” she asked him.

“Yes—I’m very sure indeed of that.” He raised his eyes suddenly and looked at her; and something in the blue depths of hers stirred him as he had never thought he could be stirred. He moved suddenly, still holding to her hand, and dropped on his knees beside the couch. “How can I hate you?” he whispered huskily. “I love you better than anything in the wide world.”

“I know,” she whispered. “Haven’t you carried it in your eyes always—and isn’t it in the very tone of your voice always when you speak to me? I’ve known it all the time.”

“You told me once that you set me apart from others—and it has been wonderful to think about that—to know that you were my friend. You’re such a gay little butterfly—it seems like sacrilege to touch you. You can’t know how I love you, and how I

dream about you, little Delia—always—even when I walk through the streets.”

“I know,” she said again. And then mischievously, with her eyes twinkling—“What are you going to do about it?”

“Now you’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not—I’m not,” she said quickly, holding to his hand, and drawing him nearer to her. “I’m too fond of you to laugh at you. But it’s just my nature to tease you; I can’t help that. Lean nearer to me; I want to whisper.”

With the soft breath of her upon his face, and with the blue eyes of her looking into his own, he bent nearer; and suddenly she put an arm about his neck, and drew him down, so that their lips met. “I love you,” she whispered. “You’re the best man in all the world.”

And presently he still knelt there, holding her hands, and putting them against his face, and striving to tell her all that was in his heart. For this was not a little room in a little house in Brixton; this was Love’s Kingdom that had suddenly sprung upon them, in fairy-like fashion; and Levity Hicks could never be sad or tired or worried any more. He had not dreamed that this was possible; his head was lifted among the stars, and the earth was very far below.

With the aunt, who was a mere shadow of whom he knew nothing, absent from the place, it seemed as though the house belonged to them. The little maid brought in tea, and discreetly retired; and then there was Delia, looking at him across the table, and beginning again to tease him—though now more gently and more tenderly.

"And we shall be dreadfully poor—at least, until I become a big leading lady, and take you out in my motor-car (they're ever so much better even than taxis, because they don't bump you so much; at least, so I've been told), and I'll teach you how to write a play for me——"

"I really believe I could write a play, if I settled down to it," broke in Levy, greatly elated.

"Of course, you could do anything, old darling. And then you could sit in the box on the first night, and I should come in front of the curtain and bow, and thank the audience prettily on your account and on mine; and we should ride away on our motor-car, and laugh to think that we ever sat in a funny little house in a ridiculous little street in Brixton, and talked about love and all the rest of it; or that I ever banged away on an old typewriter, while a lot of men stared at me."

"Thank God for the old typewriter," said Levy, "or I might never have seen you at all. And that seems impossible now—doesn't it?"

"One of these days, old Levy, you'll do something big," said Delia across the table to him. "I feel it in my bones."

"I know I shall," he answered gaily. "All my life is changed now; you've lifted me up. I can look the world in the face; there's a new spirit of restlessness come upon me. No man was ever so blest as I am; no man ever had such a chance as I have. I shall do great things in the future—I shall launch out a bit."

"Old Levy!" she said softly, with her eyes upon him. "Old dreamer!"

The little maid was stowed away in her own quarters when Levy finally left the house. It was

Delia who let him out ; and Delia drew his face down close to hers, in the little narrow hall of the house, and kissed him. " I shall love you for ever and ever," she whispered. And then put on his hat the wrong way about, and broke into peals of laughter, and pushed him out of the door, and closed it upon him. And he went home to Sockitt's with his head up among the stars.

During the next day or two Levity Hicks was a busy man. In the first place, he had to find a new lodging, and it had to be a lodging which should, before all things, be cheap. Life had changed for Levity, as he had said ; and now he had someone for whom to work, even in the vaguest sense, for the future. He had set about, in odd moments, chiefly in the evening, to find a room.

In the second place, that production in which Delia Valentine was to appear had already been announced ; and Levity had had an excited note from her, in which she told him all about it, and in which also she added that she simply hadn't got a minute to see him or anyone else. After the actual production she would have lots of time, and they could meet as often as he wished.

It was difficult to find a lodging, and the time was short. He used to go into many rooms, in those few days, attended by landladies of various sorts ; wheezy landladies, who complained of stairs ; and garrulous landladies, who told him of their own personal troubles ; and sour landladies, who did not seem to mind whether they let the room or whether they did not. And at last he came to one particular house that seemed to promise something better.

It was in a little street, turning out of another little

street near Gower Street. It was a narrow little house, but clean ; and there was a room to let in it. Levity rang the bell, and a little, bright-eyed woman, peering at him through glasses, answered the summons and invited him inside.

"It's right at the top of the house," she said.

"I don't mind that a bit," Levity answered. "I like top rooms."

She piloted him up the stairs ; he noted as he went how clean and fresh the house was. Arriving at the very top of the stairs, she opened a door, and pointed the room out to him. He went in to look at it.

This was the room of his dreams. It was beautifully clean, like all the house, and although the furniture was of the cheapest kind it was sufficient. Levity began to have a vision of himself, seated here in the one rather shabby but deep and comfortable wicker chair, and reading or smoking ; this would be a home for a man. And then he wondered what the price would be, and if presently he would have to apologise for having troubled the landlady, and go away to make search elsewhere.

But the terms were such as suited his purse, and were really absurdly low. The landlady would get his breakfast for him in the morning, and would look after the room ; the whole thing was arranged in five minutes. Levity Hicks settled the matter, and came out of the house a very happy man.

"All my luck is changing," said Levity. "Things are simply coming my way. I've been along in a groove ; and now I'm getting out of it."

There were three more days for him at Sockitt's ; and now, when the time was drawing near, he was really sorry to be leaving the place. He had not said

a word about it to anyone, and his own importance in the house was so small that the matter had not been mentioned. Such place as he occupied would soon be filled, and Levity Hicks forgotten. And then he turned to the brighter side of the picture, and thought of the little room that was to be his own for the future—a room in which he could lie hidden from all the world !

With all these matters completed, and with only that nightmare concerning the thirty pounds looming in the background, to be shaken off more easily now, for a time at least, Levity went one evening to the theatre where Delia was. It was the second night of the piece, and that piece was a success. He did not go into the theatre itself, but waited about, when the performance was nearing its close, in a little side street in which was the stage-door.

He did not go to the stage-door itself ; he would see her come out, and then could speak to her, and could surprise the sudden glad look in her eyes. There were other people near the stage-door ; men waiting about, and smoking, and one or two in evening dress. Levity did not care to go and thrust his way through them ; he was quite willing to wait.

And then, while he waited, a man came up the street quickly, and turned in at the stage-door. Levity was quite near then, and he recognised the man at once ; it was Horace Rutherglen. He heard what was said as the man with a nod to the door-keeper, stopped for a moment in the little passage.

“ Has Miss Valentine gone yet ? ”

“ No, sir ; she’ll be down in a minute, I expect,” answered the man.

Levity stood hesitating, not knowing what to do.

By all the rules of the game, he ought to have thrust his way through into the place, and have spoken to his brother, and have challenged his right to be waiting there for Delia Valentine. The right belonged to Levity, and to no one else.

But then, with a man like Levity, that was a dear and precious secret to be guarded ; it was not a thing to be blurted out where other men might hear it. From the point of view of the casual outsider Rutherglen had as good a right to meet Delia as anyone else ; and he was exercising that right now. The man waiting unhappily outside in the darkness felt that he could do nothing.

She came out at last among a knot of girls ; detached herself from them to meet the man standing with raised hat before her. " I thought I'd look you up and see how you were getting on," he said. " I finish early at my show, and so I came round."

Almost Levity hoped that she might see him ; but she did not. She came out with Rutherglen, looking up into his face with her bright, eager glance, as they walked away together. Rutherglen hailed a taxi out in the broader street, and got in with the girl, and drove off.

" Well—it wasn't her fault," Levity argued. " I ought to have let her know that I was there. Of course she was glad to see him ; he helped her in the first place."

He determined that he would go down there on the following evening. But it had been an evening when he was compelled to work late, and in some fashion he misjudged the time, and got down to the theatre after she had left. One or two belated ones were coming out ; and the doorkeeper, with his duties

nearly over for the night, glanced at the round-faced clock in his little office, and answered Levity carelessly enough.

"She left about three minutes ago ; you must have just missed her. Left with a friend that called for her."

Levity came out into the little street, and looked about him, wondering what he should do. Something must be done ; and almost unconsciously he began to rattle the money that was in his pockets. Then, with a sudden impulse, he walked quickly out of the little narrow street ; he hailed a taxi, and gave the address at Brixton, and was driven there. He was quite reckless now ; he must know what was going on.

He dismissed the vehicle at the corner of the street, and went slowly down the street until he came to the house. Another taxi stood outside ; and the driver in his white coat was leaning against the railings of the house, smoking a pipe ; Rutherglen must be inside. Levity wanted to see the girl—was longing to see her, in fact ; but there were difficulties in the way. There was that aunt he had never met, and who probably knew nothing whatever about him ; and there was Rutherglen, whose handsome eyes would look him over, and laugh at him. Then, too, there was Delia—Delia, who might justly say that he did not trust her even after all she had said to him. No—this was not the way at all ; he had no right to rush in and demand explanations ; he must wait.

So he waited in a purposeless fashion—even getting back out of sight when presently the door opened, letting out a stream of light, and Delia stood there to

say good night to the man who had brought her home. And then, when that good night came to be said, it was, after all, an innocent enough matter.

"Good night, Mr. Rutherglen—and thank you so much for bringing me home. I shan't let you do it again; it isn't fair to bring you out of your way like this."

"Oh—we shall see about that," said Rutherglen laughingly. "Good night, Miss Valentine."

The door of the house was closed, and Rutherglen paused for a moment on the pavement to light a cigarette. The driver walked to the front of his car to start the engine; and at that moment Levity stepped up beside the other man, and spoke.

"Horace—I want to speak to you."

Horace Rutherglen started violently, and dropped the match he was holding. "Why—what on earth's this?" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I've got a greater right here than you have," jerked out Levity in a low voice. "I can explain to you, if you give me the chance."

"Well—I don't know what it's all about—but I can't stand arguing with you in the street," said Rutherglen.

The driver had started his engine, and now stood, with the door of the taxi open, waiting for his fare to get in, and looking curiously at Levity Hicks. As Rutherglen made a movement towards the cab, Levity moved also, and spoke again.

"I can explain—if you'll give me the chance," he said.

"Well, you'd better get in then," said Rutherglen. "I suppose you've got to get home somehow."

It was Levity who stood aside, and it was Levity

that gave the address to the driver. Even as he seated himself beside Rutherglen, there was in his mind only one thought : that he must make this man know and understand exactly what his position was with regard to Delia Valentine. There must be no mistake here ; he had been robbed of so much, but he would not be robbed of this. Fortunately for that growing excitement that was working up in him, it was Rutherglen that began the business, in a casual, laughing fashion that for the moment calmed Levity.

"What the devil are you wandering about down in these parts for ?"

"What the devil are *you* wandering about down in these parts for ?" echoed Levity, with sudden bravery, as he sat in his corner of the vehicle.

"I brought a lady home ; what have you got to say about it ?" demanded Rutherglen, puffing at his cigarette.

"I don't want to quarrel with you ; God forbid that I should ever do that, Horace," said Levity steadily. "But she belongs to me. That sounds incredible, I know ; but I love her—and she loves me. She's the only thing I've got on God's earth that hasn't been taken from me ; and I've got to cling to her. If you take her away from me, you leave me naked—you leave me with nothing that is worth having."

There was a pause, and then Rutherglen laughed in the darkness of the vehicle. "Aren't you taking things a little too seriously, old Levity ?" he asked. "I'm not denying that you're fond of the girl ; anyone might be fond of her, if it comes to that. As to being in love with her—you don't mean to tell me that you've any thought of that sort of thing ?"

Levity drew in his breath quickly, and licked his lips. "I shouldn't have any other thought of her," he said. "You've always looked upon me as someone of no account——"

"Oh—my dear fellow——"

"Yes, you have. Nothing that was good in life could ever happen to me. I stood outside all that. I was something to be laughed at—a poor drudge, to be plundered when you wanted money—to be given a drink to sometimes; but, for the rest, to be set aside. I didn't count in the scheme of things—did I?"

"My dear old Levity—don't raise your voice, and don't get excited," protested Rutherglen, with a laugh. "There's nothing to get excited about."

"She's all I have in the world; and she belongs to me," said Levity, with a change of manner, and with elaborate patience. "I know you don't mean anything; but I want you to think for a moment of me. You've had the prizes of life: you've had the fat times and the good times, while I have had to stand aside and take what came to me. Give me a chance, Horace; the world is wide enough for us both— isn't it?"

Horace Rutherglen flicked the cigarette ash out of the window; he did not look at his brother. "If I am to be reprimanded and preached at every time I see a pretty girl home, life will scarcely be worth living," he said at last. "You don't understand my world, my dear Levity, any more than I understand yours. This girl amuses me, and interests me; and, after all, we are in the same profession. What more natural than that I should run round to see her, and should bring her home again to her little place

in Brixton? Properly speaking, you haven't the time for that sort of thing—have you?"

"Leave me something in a grey world that belongs to me," said Levity in a low voice. "She loves me."

"My dear old boy," said Rutherglen, with a hand suddenly dropped upon the other man's knee—"she loves everything in life that is pleasant and kindly and gracious; she's just out for all the fun she can get. For Heaven's sake, don't let us quarrel about her; she'd be the first to laugh at us if we did that. Didn't you send her to me?—and wasn't I able to help her, and get her into this show, in which she seems to stand some sort of chance? If I am to be hauled over the coals every time I speak to any pretty girl I meet, life will be rather a solemn thing for old Horace—won't it?"

"You don't understand," said Levity Hicks.

They went on in silence until the taxi turned into Gridley Square. Then Horace Rutherglen got out, and paid the fare demanded, adding to it a generous tip; Levity got out after him. As Horace Rutherglen fumbled for his key, he dropped an arm suddenly around the shoulders of Levity Hicks, and shook him rallyingly.

"Dear old boy," he said—"I'll play the straight game with you; I've never done anything else. I've blundered a bit at times, but I've never played anything but the straight game, and I never will."

"Yes—I know that," said Levity. "It was just that you didn't know about it—and didn't think about it."

"Just that I didn't know about it, and didn't think about it," said Rutherglen. "Now, you just come up to my room, and have a drink before you go to

bed. We've been bothering and upsetting ourselves about nothing, old boy ; and life's too short for that— isn't it ? ”

He put his key in the lock, and opened the door ; thrust Levity in with a boisterous push at his shoulders ; and went in after him. The door closed on them both.

CHAPTER IX

THE GO-BETWEEN

"WE'VE always been pals, dear old boy, and we always shall. If anything went wrong with you, I'd look after you——"

That was what Miss Priscilla Meadows heard on the staircase of Sockitt's late that night; the voice of the speaker was the voice of Rutherglen, and Miss Meadows knew that he was talking to Levity Hicks. She had seen the two men come in together.

Miss Meadows had been sitting in her room, doing some simple sewing for little Susette; she was not tired, and she had no wish to go to bed. She had heard the taxi drive up to the house, and had pulled aside her blind, and peeped out for a moment, wondering who could be so late. And she had been witness to that comfortable, friendly gesture with which Horace Rutherglen had encircled his brother's shoulders with his arm.

As the men came up the stairs, she had stood for a moment just within the door, and then had opened the door a mere crack, with a half-intention of intercepting Levity Hicks, and speaking with him, late though it was. Finding Rutherglen with him, and the two evidently proceeding to Rutherglen's room, Miss Meadows carefully closed the door, and

went back into the room. But as she went back she formed a sudden resolve.

She had waited, day after day, for that moment to come when Levity Hicks, driven to the last extremity, should come to her, and accept her offer to help him. She had the money ready, and she only waited for that moment, when she would gladly put it into his hand; that would be one of the great moments of her life. And yet the days had gone by, and he had not spoken.

"He'll never do it," said Miss Meadows to herself. "It's just because I'm a woman; he'd take it from a man. That's his pride. He'll never take it from me; he'll suffer shame and imprisonment rather than that."

She cast about in her mind for some other method. She thought at first that she would put it in his room; just a little packet of notes that he would find and could use. And then she knew that such a plan must fail, because he would at once guess that, as she alone knew the amount he needed, so she only could have put the right sum there.

Once she made up her mind to write to him, enclosing the notes, and begging that he would use them. She thought that, with the actual temptation of handling them, when his need was so desperate, the thing could be accomplished; with such a sum in his hands he would not send the notes back. And then, after all, she did nothing, and simply waited in a fever of anxiety until that moment should arrive when he would seek her out and ask for the money.

She had made opportunities for him to see her; she had been frequently in the garden of the square. But though more than once she saw him walking along

the pavement outside, he never opened the little gate and came in across the worn grass, as once he had done. And still she waited with patience.

Now, to-night, she stood in her room, with her hands clasped, and her face glowing, telling herself, in her simple soul, that she had found the way. He would not take money from her, because she was a woman ; he would take it from a man, if that man happened especially to be his close friend. She had often noticed, and had heard others comment on the fact, that Levity Hicks was frequently in Rutherglen's company ; others had laughed at the idea of the brilliant fellow making a friend of the humble, shabby one. But that very fact showed Miss Meadows that Rutherglen must be really rather a fine sort of fellow ; she liked him for it. Others might have snubbed Levity Hicks, and indeed others did ; but Mr. Rutherglen made a friend of him.

To-night she had seen them enter the house together ; she had overheard Rutherglen's hearty, cheery voice speak those words that were like a message to herself.

" We've always been pals, dear old boy, and we always shall. If anything went wrong with you, I'd look after you——"

Well—something had gone wrong with Levity Hicks, and apparently this good friend of his did not know. This good friend, who had promised to look after him, was the very man for the work. Miss Meadows would trust him with the notes, and would tell him that Levity Hicks had need of the money. She need not tell him the real truth about the matter ; for that would be to betray a confidence. She would just explain that the money was wanted, and that

would be sufficient. He could invent what story he liked for himself.

"Besides," said Miss Meadows innocently to herself—"he's an actor and will know how to pretend better than anyone else could do."

With a mind at peace Priscilla Meadows undressed and went to bed; and dreamed of Levity's face of joy when he should thus miraculously have his troubles lifted away from his shoulders.

Saturday was Levity Hicks' last day at Sockitt's. Mrs. Sockitt, and even Bob, had kept faith with him, and the matter had not been talked about. He went to business as usual, having arranged with Mrs. Bell, his new landlady in the little house in the little street near to Gower Street, that he would take possession of his room for the first time that evening. His box was a small one, and he could easily lift it out, with the aid of Joseph, and put it on a cab, and go away without making any fuss about it. On Saturday afternoon the boarders were scattered a little, and he would not attract much attention.

Then, at the last moment, he changed his mind about that. He would not give Mrs. Sockitt his new address, because there was still at the back of his mind that vague, childish idea about running away and hiding himself; so that this was a matter for secrecy. Instead, he arranged with her to send the box by the carrier to Euston Station. A subtle plan this, over which Levity chuckled; because Mrs. Sockitt, or anyone else, might think that he was going into the country, or even out of the country, by way of Euston Station.

Thus it happened that when Levity Hicks walked out of the house in the usual way on that Saturday

morning to go off to the City, he walked out of it, as he believed, for the last time.

Miss Meadows watched him go in a very fever of unrest ; she was longing to put into execution that rapidly conceived plan of the previous night. She trembled when she thought of what she had to do, because as a matter of fact she had scarcely ever spoken to Rutherglen, save perhaps for the very briefest of salutations. But she would screw her courage to the sticking-place this morning, and get the business done.

Rutherglen always came down later than anyone else to breakfast, and for that reason usually had the dining-room to himself. Sometimes Julia Ogg contrived to be there at the same hour ; but she had a shrewd suspicion that Horace Rutherglen did not greatly care for her company at that hour of the morning, and therefore, for the most part, she kept away. On this particular morning fortune favoured Miss Meadows ; she opened the dining-room door, to discover Horace Rutherglen, with his breakfast practically finished, a cigarette between his lips, and a newspaper in his hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Rutherglen," she said timidly.

He glanced round at her, and took the cigarette from between his lips, and smiled. "Good morning, Miss Meadows," he said ; replaced the cigarette, and turned again to the paper.

It was when he became conscious that she was standing at the other side of the table, looking at him, and that her face had a curious flush upon it, and that her eyes were very bright, that he laid aside the paper, and looked up at her. He had not, of course, the least

notion of what she was going to say to him ; he wondered what was the matter with her.

"Mr. Rutherglen—if I might speak to you for a moment—please."

"Certainly," he answered slowly. "Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," said Miss Meadows, lowering her voice and glancing at the door of the room. "It won't take me two minutes to explain—if no one comes in."

Wondering more and more, he got to his feet. Still holding the paper in his hand, he looked at the woman curiously, and seemed half inclined to laugh. The idea that she could have anything of a secret nature to confide to him was absurd ; and yet women of all sorts and sizes and ages had said ridiculous things to him from time to time. One never knew what might happen.

"I don't suppose anyone will come in," he said quietly.

"If they do, it might be awkward," said Miss Meadows, looking at him squarely out of her deep eyes.

"If anyone comes in, as the matter is so very important, I shall be pointing out this bit of news to you in the paper, Miss Meadows. There's nothing distinctly wrong in that, and you can laugh and go away, if you want to. How will that do?" He was still on the verge of laughter himself.

"That will do as well as anything else," she answered him seriously. "I knew that you would be clever about it ; your profession teaches you that—doesn't it? It's about—about Mr. Hicks."

He was vaguely disappointed ; the business had

promised to be so much more interesting than that. Yet he wondered what this woman had to do with old Levity, and how exactly he was to be dragged into the business himself.

"Levity Hicks is a friend of mine," he said.

"I know—I know ; that's why I've come to you," she said eagerly. "I know that you're the best friend he has—and I've always thought how wonderful it was that you should take up with him, and be kind to him——"

"Oh—the dear old chap interests me, and I'm a bit sorry for him," said Rutherglen.

"Sorry for him ? That's the word—isn't it ? I'm sorry for him too, and I know—a little at least—what his sorrow is. You, who are his friend, won't mind my speaking of it, I know."

The busy brain of the man was working hard to discover exactly what this woman meant, and what she wanted. Had the fool, Levity, been talking ?—and was it possible that she had come to plead his cause over the matter of that money Levity had given him from time to time ? An impertinence, if that was the case ; he would know exactly what to say to her. On the other hand, her tone was not one of accusation ; the matter might be something else altogether.

"I should like you to speak of it," he answered her gently. "I'd do a great deal to help old Levity Hicks."

"Yes—yes—I know you would ; I'm quite sure you would," went on Miss Meadows eagerly. "If you'll forgive my saying so, he's such a child in the ways of the world—and that is why he blunders, and makes mistakes. I may speak quite confidentially to you, Mr. Rutherglen ?"

"We are tiled in here, Miss Meadows ; I shall

“speak of nothing outside this room—or indeed, in the room itself,” he assured her.

“Thank you.” She came a step nearer to him. “I happen to know—by the merest chance—that Mr. Hicks is in trouble—over a matter of money. He owes some money—quite a large sum for him—to a friend. It’s difficult to explain; I’ve only heard it by chance. But if he cannot get this money—for his friend—it may be a little awkward for him. I’m not suggesting he would get into trouble, or anything of that kind; but he would be worried about it. And we don’t want him to worry—you and I—do we?”

“Heaven forbid!” said Horace Rutherglen. “I knew nothing about this, Miss Meadows, I assure you; it pains me. What do you suggest that we should do about it?”

The easy, confidential fashion in which the man took her instantly into his confidence, and into a partnership that should be all for the good of Levity Hicks, won the woman over immediately. She had not known that Horace Rutherglen was such a good-hearted fellow.

“We want to help him—don’t we?” she went on eagerly. “It’s foolish of me, I know, Mr. Rutherglen; women—don’t understand these things. But I thought it might be possible that Mr. Hicks would let me help him—with a loan.”

Horace Rutherglen, still with that busy brain of his alert, pursed his lips, and smiled, and shook his head.

“Yes—I know,” said Miss Meadows, a little sadly. “Men won’t do that sort of thing—will they? I was so anxious to do something for him—to lift the load

of worry and trouble from his shoulders ; and I know that he wouldn't let me. Will you do it ? ”

She had reached the crowning-point of her mission ; she flung the question at him breathlessly. He turned his head, and looked round at her ; saw the eager light in her eyes, and jumped to one ludicrous, instantaneous conclusion.

“ The old fool's in love with him ! ” Aloud he said, in measured tones—“ If I can do anything to help poor old Hicks I'll do it gladly, Miss Meadows. If I were a rich man myself——”

“ I can let you have the money,” she broke in eagerly. “ It's thirty pounds—and I have it here.” She took an envelope from a little bag, the chain of which she had been fingering nervously, and held it out to him. “ It is here—the thirty pounds.”

His astonishment was swallowed up, in that first moment, by a curious awe of her—an awe which he did not understand himself. He had seen this gentle maiden lady seated always modestly in her place, and scarcely speaking to anyone ; and now, suddenly, she had laid her soul bare before him, and had told him, as strongly as if in actual words, the secret of her heart. That it was a laughable secret did not matter ; he only thought with amazement that such a woman should do such a thing at all. He had some difficulty in controlling his features to the right expression.

“ And you want me to give this money to him ? ” he asked, balancing the envelope in his hand, and looking at her gravely. “ Won't that be rather difficult ? ”

“ You will know what to do,” she said quickly. “ You are his friend, and a man ; he will take a loan

from you when he would not take it from anyone else. It will be our secret, Mr. Rutherglen—just yours and mine. You can do it so well; you can make him take the money, and so lift this trouble off his shoulders. Will you do that?"

"Oh yes—I'll do it, Miss Meadows," he said. "It will be difficult, because, of course, I wouldn't hurt the dear old chap's feelings for the world. Levity Hicks is a sensitive sort of fellow, and he may refuse to take the money; one never knows."

"But not from you, Mr. Rutherglen. He'll take it from you," she said.

"Yes—I think I can manage to persuade him," said Rutherglen, putting the envelope in his pocket in a business-like fashion. "It's awfully good of you to take all this interest in him—and, of course, I'll keep your secret. It would never do for old Levity to guess where this money came from—would it?"

He was on the verge of spluttering laughter at the thought of that ridiculous love-story as he said the words; but he controlled his face. It was amazing to him that she should answer him so seriously.

"No—of course—he must never guess," she said.

"And I thank you more than I can say, Mr. Rutherglen. You will do it at once?"

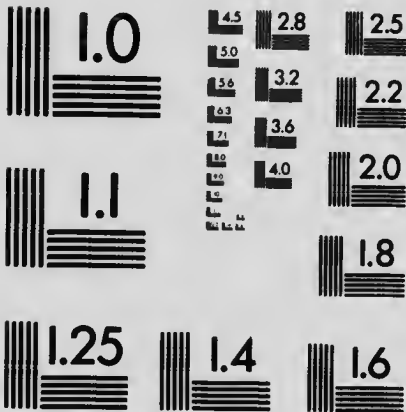
"At the very earliest opportunity," he assured her. And she smiled at him, and went quickly out of the room.

His first duty was to assure himself as to the contents of the envelope. He took it out of his pocket; and within, sure enough, were six crisp Bank of England notes for five pounds each. He blew a gust of silent laughter as he thrust the envelope back into his pocket.



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"By George—the women do seem to run after old Levity!" he said to himself. "This is about the rummiest go I've ever struck in my life. This wants quite a lot of thinking about. I'm not quite sure that it will do to trust Levity with all this money; I'm not quite sure that he wants it. Perhaps I'll let him have a bit to go on with. At any rate—I'll think about it."

Levity Hicks did not work late on that Saturday afternoon; like a child with a new toy, he was eager to get to that room that was his home—eager to see what the new sensation of possessing it was like. He got a meal cheaply, and then went off, with a strange new sense of freedom upon him. He lighted a pipe, and sat down in that big, comfortable wickerwork chair, and tasted the full delights of it all.

"I ought to have done this before," he said. "I know in my own mind that I'm going to be very happy here—happier, perhaps, than I have ever been in all my life."

He thought of Delia; and that thought brought him suddenly to his feet, with a smile on his face, and a great stretching of his arms above his head. There was Delia to be worked for, in some vague, intangible fashion; Delia to be fought for.

Yet, after all, it was a little lonely, seated up there with only the distant noises of the streets floating up to him. Although he had not talked to people very much at Sockitt's, there had yet been company of a sort—fellow beings close to him. He would get used to this solitude in time, but he was not used to it yet. He drifted out into the streets.

It was perhaps natural that his feet should take him, after all, in the direction of Gridley Square, and

of Sockitt's. The dusk had fallen, and the Square was quiet ; he would linger in it for a little while—just for the last time. Not at Sockitt's itself ; he had done with that, and had even given up his key. Instead, he pushed open the gate of the garden, and went in, and walked across to the old bench and sat down.

It was to be a lonely day for Levity in any case ; for there was no one here. After a little time, seeing lights begin to show themselves in the windows of Sockitt's, and hearing the jangling piano, under the touch of Miss Julia Ogg's fingers, begin its evening music, Levity decided that he had had enough of this new sort of loneliness, which shut him even outside Sockitt's ; he would go home. He came out of the garden, and closed the gate behind him, and turned away.

At the very corner of the street, as he was going along with bent head, someone spoke his name, and a hand was laid on his arm. Looking up, he saw it was young Owen Batchelor.

"Hullo, Hicks ; where are you going to this time of night ?" asked Batchelor.

Levity hesitated, and smiled nervously, and finally said—"Oh—just for a walk—that's all."

Levity never had been able to hide his feelings ; and now he faltered so much over that little statement that Batchelor looked at him curiously, with a puzzled expression on his face. "Hadn't you better go in, and rest for a bit instead ?" said Batchelor. "Or shall I walk with you ?"

"Look here—there's nothing the matter with me," said Levity, with sudden peevishness. "You're always suggesting that there's something the matter with me, and I don't like it."

"Oh—I'm sure I'm very sorry," said Batchelor, with a quick laugh. "I won't speak of it again. Good night!"

Suddenly, as Batchelor moved away, Levity felt the desperate need of someone to whom he could speak—someone he could make a link of, as it were, between himself and Sockitt's. Sockitt's had meant a great deal in his life, and in leaving it he was leaving much behind. On an impulse, he stepped quickly after the other man, and called out—

"Oh—I say——"

Batchelor turned, and waited for him to come up; he did not speak. When Levity reached him, it seemed almost as though he had repented of that sudden impulse, for he stood for a moment fidgeting with his feet, and looking at the top button of young Batchelor's waistcoat.

"I'd like to tell you—if you'll keep it quite to yourself," began Levity, after a moment of hesitation. "As a matter of fact I—I'm running away."

"What on earth for?" asked Batchelor, in amazement.

"I've taken a room—somewhere else; it'll be cheaper and—and better in all sorts of ways. I didn't want to make a fuss about it, and so I haven't given the address to anybody. But I'd like to tell you—if you'd care to have it."

"I'd like very much to have it; I want to keep in touch with you," responded the other heartily. "I would like to look you up sometimes, if I may."

"And I'd be glad to see you. It's near Gower Street. No. 7, Farnham Street. It's rather a nice place, and very clean. But don't tell anybody else—will you?"

"Of course not, if you don't wish it," said Batchelor.
"No. 7, Farnham Street; I won't forget. And I'm sorry you're going."

"So am I—in a way. Good night." Levity moved off quickly round the corner, and was gone.

Perhaps the best comment that could be made concerning Levity's position at Sockitt's is the bald statement that for some days he was not missed at all. He had been in the habit of coming in to meals so irregularly, and he had so often been late, and had gone up to his room without troubling anyone, that no one noticed his absence. He had always breakfasted earlier than most of the others, so that he was not missed at that meal; and the only being that was puzzled by his absence was Miss Priscilla Meadows. And even she imagined for a few days that she must in some fashion have been unlucky enough to miss him.

For Miss Meadows was anxious. Not with any feeling of doubt as to Rutherglen or his honesty; she was merely anxious to see that new look of contentment and gladness on the face of Levity Hicks, and to know that she had been able to make that change in him. So that, in a sense, she searched for him in a vague way, and waited on the old bench in the garden in the hope that he might come.

Miss Meadows was too timid to seek out Rutherglen, and, indeed, rather seemed as though he avoided her. Once or twice, when she had almost pathetically run him to earth, as it were, he would dexterously escape by going in search of Julia Ogg, or by joining some group of people, and getting into quick conversation with them. Miss Meadows felt, of course, that that was accidental, and she did not blame Rutherglen.

It may be said at once that Rutherglen's position at that time was a curious one. The notes in their envelope reposed in his pocket ; as yet nothing had been done with them. He did not blame himself for that, because he had not seen Levity, and he meant to do something about the matter when Levity should walk into his room, in the old casual fashion, to talk and smoke. It would be time enough to arrange about the matter then—perhaps to hand over a five-pound note to Levity, to cheer him on his way a little. Five pounds would go a long way with a man like Levity Hicks. To hand over such a sum as thirty pounds to a man like Hicks would be simply absurd ; he wouldn't know what to do with it—or if he did, he would simply be paying back this friend of whom he had borrowed, and who had dunned him a little.

It was on the third day 'ter Levity's flight that the first temptation came to a man willing enough to be tempted. Someone who dressed with Rutherglen at the theatre spoke in casual conversation of a horse that was running in the two-thirty race the next day ; and ruefully wished he had something to " put on it."

" It simply can't be beaten—and then, look at the odds ! If I had a fiver I'd put the lot on it."

Horace Rutherglen had a fiver—several fivers, in fact. He thought of them, folded away neatly in their white envelope, just as Miss Meadows had given them to him. He began, in a casual fashion, to speak to the man who had mentioned the horse, and to make further enquiries about it ; and the man waxed enthusiastic. And when he found the opportunity, Rutherglen got the white envelope, and took a bank-note from it.

" I'm going to have a flutter," he said, with a

curious flush on his face. "Can you get this on for me?"

"Lucky devil!" said the other, as he took the note. "You've always got money. Put it on for you? I should rather think I could!"

By one of those curious chances, occasionally to be met with in racing and in other matters, the horse did not win; it was not even placed. The man who had told Rutherglen about it scratched his head, and declared that he could not understand it. As his failing to understand it did not vitally affect the lost five pounds, Rutherglen could merely shrug his shoulders, and philosophically remark that it might have been worse.

"I must really hunt up old Levy, when I get home to-night, even if he's asleep, and give him some of that money," he said to himself resolutely.

Nevertheless, it being the middle of the week, and Horace Rutherglen being in consequence somewhat short of money, he found it convenient to change another of the notes—till the end of the week.

Levity Hicks, in his first pride at finding himself in his new lodging, had written to Delia Valentine, giving her his address. It was the first love letter he had ever written, and he wrote it straight from his heart.

"MY DEAREST GIRL,

"This is the first time that I have written to you since the great thing happened, and it seems so strange and yet so wonderful that I should be doing it now. When it is finished, and has gone into the letter-box at the corner of the street, I shall be thinking of how it will travel to get to you; and last of all, where you will sit to read it, and what you will look like while you read it. My heart will go with it every step of

the way, and I shall be running, as it were in spirit, along beside the postman ; and waiting outside other houses while he delivers other letters that do not matter to me in the least.

"Oh—my little love—I am looking again into your blue eyes, and I am hearing you say again that you love me. There were never such words spoken on this earth before ; they have changed and strengthened and purified me. Whatever happens to us both, in all the chances and changes of our lives—perhaps after we have grown old together, and have been through storm and stress and joy and laughter and tears, I shall still hear you, like a far-away echo, saying that to me, and I shall still always be looking into eyes that are blue.

"I have taken a new lodging—a little, tiny place, up ever so many stairs—a little nest under the tiles. I'm going to work harder ; there are all sorts of plans buzzing about in my head concerning what I mean to do for you. I am very poor, as you must know ; yet love is never poor. I wouldn't change with the richest man in the kingdom. Some day—soon, I hope—when I've got this bandbox of a place a little more attractive-looking, I'm going to ask you to come up and see me, and bring that aunt of yours with you. I set down my address at the bottom of this ; and while I write it seems to me that you are sitting over there by the window, and looking out over the roofs, and turning occasionally to look at me, and to smile out of your blue eyes while I write. Only that, of course, is nothing but a dream fancy.

"Good night, beloved of my heart. I bless you for what life means to me now.

LEVITY.

"7, FARNHAM STREET,
"GOWER STREET."

He waited for her reply. Half a hundred times he guessed what she would say—and blushed to find himself guessing. This tender little phrase, or that, she would employ ; and it would be all a charmingly written echo of what she had said to him in the little sitting-room at Brixton. He would go out on the staircase, when the postman's knock resounded through the house, and would listen, in the hope that presently Mrs. Bell might come up, bearing a letter for him. Afterwards, when no one had been near him, he would creep down the stairs into the little narrow hall, to see if by chance a letter had been overlooked ; and then, finding nothing, he would slowly climb the stairs again, and go into his room, and shut the door. It was all right ; she would write to-morrow.

Once he went down to the theatre in search of her, and contrived somehow, while he was waiting at some distance from the stage-door down the little, narrow side-street, to miss her. The stage-door keeper actually smiled when this shabby, eager man asked for Miss Delia Valentine.

"You're not in luck, sir," said the man, turning to attend to another enquiry. "She's been gone about five minutes."

And then, one day, a letter at last. Mrs. Bell, smiling at him through her spectacles, handed it to him herself as he entered the house ; and even Mrs. Bell could have told what sort of letter it was he had been expecting, and that here it was at last in his hand. He took it upstairs with him, trying to walk slowly and carelessly, and to whistle a tune.

He tore it open when he got inside the room, and pulled it out delicately, and spread it open. And this is what he read :—

"MY DEAREST OLD LEVITY,

"I have tried ever so many times to write to you, and I couldn't do it. I can't do it now, not so that it says anything I want to say. Oh—my dear—it's the hitting some old dog that has crept up to you, and expects to be petted; that's how I'm hitting you to-night—and I'm hurting myself more than I'm hurting you.

"It won't do, old boy; I'm afraid of it all. You're not the sort to push and struggle and strive in the world; you'll let other people do the pushing and striving and struggling. I can't live in top rooms; I can't be poor. I've been poor all my life—with that sort of poverty that I hate. I'm beginning to live at last—the only life I'm fit for. I'm with the lights and the music and the laughter at last—and oh—how I love it!

"I won't insult you, as some might do, my dear, by telling you that you'll find someone else who'll treat you better. You've only found me, poor old Levity, in all your pilgrimage so far, and I know that you won't even look for anybody else. If you were rich, there isn't anyone else should come between us; but I know, with every fibre of me, that when I'm poor I'm horrid, and I would bite or hurt or maim anything I loved; I can't help it. I was made for the sunshine and the soft winds; I can't bear hardships. I can't bear 'busses (do you remember how we used to ride on them, and all the talks we had? I loved them then)—not since I've had taxis and an occasional motor-car run.

"There you have me, and you'll say that it isn't a bit like me; but I know that it is. And if I made the great experiment with you, I know well that in

the years to come you'd say that I had been right, and that it would have been better to let me go.

"There has been no one like you in all my life, old Levity; and in all the days to come I shall catch my breath a little when I think of you. But no more than that.

"Forgive and forget me; I shall not see you again.

"DELIA."

He stood there for a moment or two with the paper in his hand, staring at it. Then he walked across to the window, and looked out over the roofs with eyes that saw nothing.

"Oh—my God!" said Levity in a whisper.

CHAPTER X

THE LAST DITCH

DELIA had thought, after all, that she would not send that letter. It might be better to let things drift ; to let him come seeking for her at the theatre, and gradually to understand that she was avoiding him. To let him wander unhappily down to Brixton, and arrange matters so that she need not see him. After all, she could not, she felt, deal the man a sharp blow ; she could not hit that big, faithful dog that crept to her feet, and looked up into her eyes trustingly. Far better to let things drift.

And then the sincere honesty of her drove her to the writing of that letter after all. In her gay, happy-unlucky life she might deceive others, and might flout them, and fling them aside ; Levity was not for that sport. Levity had brought his clean, fine soul to her, and had shown her something of its depths ; Levity deserved something better. So, with a struggle, and with something of tears, and something even of a poor, pitiful laughter for herself, she wrote the thing at last, and went out, and posted it.

Even before it disappeared into the maw of the pillar-box she hesitated for a moment or two before she dealt that blow at him. But the letter went in, and Delia went home.

It is scarcely necessary to say that after that she

looked out a little eagerly at the theatre for his coming. She did not want him to take the matter badly or hardly ; there was no reason in that. Besides, there were things to be explained between them—apologies to be made, and perhaps little words of comfort added to a letter which now, on reflection, she felt to have been crude. She looked for him almost with eagerness, and yet with dread each night, as she came out through the banging, swinging stage-door.

But Levity did not come. He had fought his fight—humbly and yet with strength. All that she said was good and right in his eyes ; in this great matter of love there must be no half-measures. Her love must be as great as his had shown itself to be ; and through their enchanted land she must march shoulder to shoulder with him ; or fall out of step, and leave him to march alone. So much, by dim groping, Levity Hicks understood. She had told him that it could not be, and her woman's soul knew best on that matter. It was not for him to go to her, or to plead or argue.

Strange and inconsistent as it may appear, she was almost in a mood, once or twice, to go to that address he had given, and to seek him out. This silence told her nothing ; she could not tell whether he was suffering, or whether merely his pride was wounded, and he had dismissed her from his thoughts. She wanted to know all that ; she wanted to understand exactly where she stood, so far as he was concerned.

Yet in the end she hesitated, and drew back, and did not go. The matter troubled her, and one or two comments were made, by those who knew her, on the change in her. Comments, above all, were made by

Rutherglen, who came now and then to the theatre to meet her and to take her home.

"You want a holiday, Miss Valentine," he said one night. "You're not quite used to this game yet, and you don't understand what it takes out of you. You want a holiday—if it's only for a day."

"Oh—I'm all right," said Delia promptly. "A little tired, perhaps—but that's all."

They were sitting side by side in a taxi that was threading its way, with much sounding of the horn, towards Brixton. Glancing at her as she sat beside him, he saw her profile, cut cameo-like against the night; he moved a little nearer to her.

"Why don't you let me take you for a holiday—just for a day?" he said.

She had been thinking of Levity, and wondering a little what he was doing, in that room of his under the tiles, or in some other place in which perhaps he was unhappily wandering. She came to herself with a start, and looked round at him with a smile.

"Oh—it's sweet of you—but I don't think I want a holiday just yet." And then, quite inconsequently—"Do you ever see anything of your friend Mr. Hicks these days?"

The notes remaining in the white envelope seemed to press suddenly heavily against Horace Rutherglen's side. "Very little," he answered. "I thought you saw more of him than I did."

"I don't see very much of him. I expect he's too busy," she answered carelessly.

Rutherglen smiled to himself in the darkness of the cab. He had not seen Levity lately, certainly; but then he was so very rarely at Sockitt's at all. He had smiled to think of Levity's boasting about this girl—

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of his love for her, and hers for him. That was like old Levity—dreaming of things that couldn't possibly happen.

"Look here—why don't you let me take you for a run one day?" he went on. "I'm going to buy a car; and I know pretty well how to drive one. We'll have a run out into the country—say on Sunday; find some food at a little country inn—and get back in the evening."

She gave a last sigh for Levity, and turned, with new brightness, to Horace Rutherglen. "It would be lovely," she said. "Can we?"

"Of course we can. I'll arrange it all, and I'll run down to fetch you. We'd better start pretty early, and have a good day; you can leave the route to me."

"Of course," she answered him, smiling. "So that I am motoring, and rushing through the country, and getting away from the noise and heat of London, I don't mind where it is."

"At ten o'clock on Sunday morning then," he said, as he held her hand for a moment at the door of the little house in Brixton. "You'll be quite safe with me; I know how to manage a car."

Like a little silver thread through the warp of her troubled thoughts there ran always in Delia's mind the thought of Levity Hicks. There was so much to go upon—so much to remember about him. In her memory of him she was back again in the little office in the City, working hard at a typewriter; or she was sitting on a summer Sunday afternoon in Kensington Gardens, having tea with him; or again she was lunching in that expensive place in the City, where she was the only woman save for the barmaid; and

always it was Levity sitting with her that understood her perfectly. There had never been any jarring note about Levity.

And then she thought of him all alone in that room he had described. If he had written to her, and had stormed at her or upbraided her, she could have borne that, because it was what she deserved. If he had written and pleaded with her, and promised vague things for the future that should make their joint fortunes, she might have smiled at that, but still she would have understood. It was the silence that troubled her and hurt her.

She was thinking of all that when the Sunday morning came, and she prepared for the outing. The obedient aunt simply heard that she was going out for the day, and shrugged her heavy shoulders, and perhaps reflected that she would be left alone in peace for some hours. She knew that Delia's way of life had changed a great deal of late ; but she had not yet grasped what the change meant. So that Delia got to bed at some time or other, and the house was securely closed, the obedient aunt did not trouble.

Delia was in a strange humour when she heard the car stop outside, and saw Rutherglen get out. On the previous night she had quite made up her mind that Levity Hicks would be waiting, in his shy, awkward fashion, at the stage-door ; something told her that so much was certain. She had gone down rather earlier than usual, having hurried with her dressing ; and had been certain for a moment that she saw him outside, standing in the shadow of the wall. She had hurried out—only to find that the man was a stranger, and quite unlike Levity Hicks. For perhaps the first time in her life she had been rather tearful when she

went to bed ; Levity Hicks wasn't treating her at all well.

" I wouldn't mind so much if he would just write, and say that he forgave me," she thought inconsistently. " It's stupid to sulk over the matter ; I was quite fair and honest with him."

So that Horace Rutherglen had need of all his charm to drive away the clouds from Delia's mind as they started on their journey. Yes—she was quite well, thank you ; only a little tired. The fresh air would do her good. No—(this more gaily)—he was to look after his driving, and not mind her ; she didn't want to be smashed up, and have horrible bruises and scars and all the rest of it.

Vaguely she remembered, as they drove along, the names of places ; but concerning them she did not greatly trouble. Singing through her brain, like a melody that was not to be forgotten, was the thought of Levity Hicks ; and yet that melody came, as it were, resentfully, and she hated herself for being compelled to sing it. And so at last, with the charm of the day and of her companion, and the glory of sweeping along country roads, leaving lesser people standing gaping, she told herself that she had forgotten about Levity Hicks, and that, for this time at least, she would shut him out of her remembrance.

They came to an inn a little off the beaten track ; and there a bustling landlady had prepared lunch for them, and it was laid in a garden under spreading trees. Delia had become quite gay again ; she laughed as Rutherglen seated himself opposite to her —almost as she might have laughed if, in some impossible fashion, Levity had been there instead, and had been looking out of his deep eyes across

the table at her. But Levity did not drive motor-cars.

It was late when they began lunch, and they lingered a long time over it. Delia began to feel that she had not treated Horace Rutherglen too well. In a sense he had been very good to her; she remembered all the trouble he had taken to introduce her to an agent; she recollected his kindness in coming down to the theatre late at night, and driving her home, again and again, to Brixton. The warm heart of her melted towards the man who was always giving up his time to do something for her, or to give her pleasure that few other people even thought about. In sudden contrition she looked at him soft-eyed across the table under the sheltering trees.

"You're always being very good to me," she said.

"That's what you're in the world for, little Delia," he said. "You don't mind being called Delia—do you?" Then, as she shook her head and laughed, he went on—"You're not a bit like any of the other girls; there's something so fresh and fine about you. I think about you, little Delia, more than is good for my peace of mind."

Such a phrase could not, of course, go unanswered; it suggested all sorts of things. She leaned towards him a little, and looked at him out of the blue depths of her eyes. "Why should you think about me at all?" she asked softly.

"I suppose because I can't help myself. Heaven knows I've tried to set you out of my life, and to forget all about you; I've thought of duty, and of what I ought to do—until my brain aches with thinking. To-day I made up my mind that for an hour or

two I would just pretend that I was running away with you—and that we would forget all the rest.”

“Forget all the rest?” she echoed dreamily, without looking at him.

He leaned a little nearer to her. “I mean—all the other people. We might pretend at least that all the other people didn’t matter—for an hour or two. We might pretend, little Delia, that we were just a little bit in love with each other.”

“Only pretence—of course?” she teased. But he was the wrong man to tease, and he did not understand what she meant.

“Why pretence—if it comes to that?” he whispered. “It’s true enough, as far as I’m concerned. I’m more in love with you than I’ve ever been with anyone in all the world. I’d sell my soul for you.”

It was an easy phrase, meaning nothing on his lips; but his eyes were seeking hers, and his hand held hers across the table. She looked at him a little sorrowfully; perhaps she wondered why this business of love must be always such a sad affair. Nothing seemed to go straight in it somehow or other.

“Oh—we mustn’t take each other too seriously—must we?” she said, striving gently to withdraw her hand. “We’ve lived in the sunshine to-day, you and I; don’t let’s spoil it all.”

They went for a walk, quite a long time after lunch was ended, and in the perfect summer weather Delia presently found herself seated under some trees in a wood, with the man lounging at her feet. And there, in a sense, they jested with love—just toyed with it, as some light, fantastic thing that could be tossed from one to the other, and laughed at a little, and

sighed over a little more. And, the long afternoon drawing to a close, Delia presently suggested, with something of a startled air, that it might be well if they began the journey homewards.

"We've got a long way to go, and I don't want to be late," she said.

"The homeward way won't be half long enough," he said, laughing up into her face. "And I didn't think that you'd be so glad to get rid of me, Delia."

"I shan't be glad at all to get rid of you," she answered him, with a flicker of laughter.

They strolled back to the inn, and Rutherglen got the car ready, and they started off. He would go by a different route homewards, he suggested; a road that was really shorter than that by which they had come. And with the entering upon that road disasters began to fall upon them.

In the first place, something seemed to go wrong with the car. It became necessary for Rutherglen to get out on a lonely road, and attend to the engine; and when he got back into the car, and started it again, with a frowning face addressed straight before him, the car crawled along—going by fits and starts, as it were, and sometimes stopping altogether. And so, as the evening shadows were falling about them, they got to another inn, and Rutherglen turned the car into the stable yard.

"Get the lady some tea, please," he said; and stabled the car to see what could be done with it.

Delia, crossing from one room to another in search of her tea, saw Rutherglen at the end of a passage, talking to the landlord; she wondered what he could be saying. She drank her tea, and then stood at the window in the gathering dusk, looking out, and

wondering how long it would be before the car was ready. Rutherglen came back into the room, and closed the door ; he dropped into a chair, and laughed, and cast a furtive look at her.

"Bit of a nuisance, little Delia," he said. "I've been at the thing for the last quarter of an hour, and I can't knock any sense out of it. She won't budge."

"What do you mean?" she asked very slowly, turning round from the window.

"I mean, little girl, that we're stuck here—for the night," he said, with another laugh. "It's a bit lucky that we got as far as this, with a roof over our heads, before we broke down. Had your tea?"

There was a tense silence in the room, while Delia turned back to the table, and picked up her gloves, and began to put them on. "I've had all I want, thank you," she said at last. "If the car won't move, we must get home by train. That's simple enough."

"Mighty simple—only it happens there are no Sunday trains," he answered.

The hand that buttoned the glove trembled a little, but she kept her gaze resolutely fixed upon the button, and spoke as steadily as she could. "We shall be able to get home somehow or other; we must. It can't be a great way to London, and in any case I am not going to stop here."

He got up quickly, and tossed his cigarette out of the window, and came across to where she was standing. "Look here, little Delia—what is there to make a fuss about?" he said. "You and I are good pals, and if we meet with a misfortune like this let's make the best of it. I'll whip you off home in the morning
——"

"Then you could start now—if you wanted to," she flared out at him.

"If I wanted to," he echoed, with a laugh. "But suppose I don't; suppose I find it ever so much more jolly staying here with you—just the two of us all alone? By God—I'm mad about you, little Delia; there's never been anyone like you in all the world." He was leaning forward across the table, and she was looking into his eyes, with her own widened. "I'll be good to you, and we can have a fine time together—a good old Bohemian time. I've got to marry this other girl, because she's got the money, and she can help me; but you and I together——"

Her courage was coming back to her; her woman's wit had leapt to her aid. Almost she smiled at him, and yet kept him at bay, with the table between them. "You seem to have made up your mind about things; you seem to have arranged everything," she said. "Don't come near me; I hear someone coming."

The landlord had appeared at the door; Horace Rutherglen turned quickly towards him. Delia heard Rutherglen say, as he moved out of the room with the landlord—"Yes—we shall have to stay here tonight; I expect you can make us comfortable."

They were gone, and the door was closed. Something stirred in Delia that had not stirred before; a grim spirit of defiance. She went to the door, and opened it; the flagged passage outside was empty. She made for the front door of the inn, and by chance met a sleepy-eyed ostler lounging there.

"I suppose there's time to get the last train to London—isn't there?" she asked casually.

"You've got a quarter of an hour, miss—and it

won't take you ten minutes to get to the station," said the man civilly. "Just at the bottom of the 'ill there, miss, and sharp off to the right."

"Thank you," said Delia, and turned into the road.

So Rutherglen had lied to her, and the thing had been carefully arranged. She set her teeth as she went on down the road, looking straight before her. She knew what it all meant now, and in her heart, now that fears were passed, there was a great gladness. It was almost as though a song sang there—a song the music of which was greater and better than any she had known.

"Levity! Old Levity!"

She kept a watchful eye upon the booking-hall after she had taken her ticket; she determined that she would not go back to the inn, nor should Rutherglen travel with her, if by chance he turned up at the station. She would, if necessary, appeal to the station-master. But the train came in, and she took her seat; the train started for London, and Rutherglen had not appeared.

Only when she was seated alone in the compartment did the high courage she had shown give way, and she burst into a fit of hysterical weeping. She turned round, and laid her head against the back of the seat, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"You fool! You little bitter fool!" she said to herself over and over again under her breath.

The outburst was over before the train neared London, and she was quite composed. More than that, she was almost happy; for now she knew what to do. She was going to Levity—that night, without a moment's delay. Levity would understand, and there would be no need of words between them. She

was impatient for the train to get into London ; she must find Levity at once.

There was a bitter letter—a thing that must have hurt and stung—to be explained away ; and it seemed that she could only explain it away in his arms, and with her lips against his.

She remembered the address that had been on his letter ; she drove there straight. She knocked at the door, and smiled at the little woman in spectacles who opened it ; she put her question impatiently.

“ Does Mr. Hicks live here ? Is he at home ? ”

“ Yes, miss. Mr. Hicks is up in his room—unless you'd like me to tell him, and bring him down ? ”

A sudden absurd memory of a phrase in Levity's letter to her, suggesting that she should some day come to see him, and bring her aunt, flashed for a moment through Delia's mind. She laughed. “ I think I'll go up ” she said quickly.

She ran up the stairs, leaving the landlady looking up after her ; she stopped outside that door that must be his, and knocked upon it. She heard a movement in the room, and then a man's steps ; the door was opened, and Levity stood there, looking out at her. He fell back a step as she advanced towards him with her eyes shining.

“ Old Levity ! I want you.”

And then, in some fashion that was miraculous, and yet was not miraculous at all, she was in his arms, and was clinging to him. She had not meant at first to tell him the story ; that should be kept to herself, as something to be forgotten. But now, with his arms about her, and on the safe shelter of his breast, she told him everything—told him as a child might have done that had been beaten or wronged.

"He told me—told me he was going to marry the other girl—because of the money. He didn't want—didn't want to marry me; I was to be——"

He put his hand upon her lips, and 'topped her. "It's all right," he whispered—"it's all right. That's all over and done with; we're going to forget all about it."

"I want you to marry me, dear—at once—when you like," she whispered. "I don't mind the poverty; I can work as well as you. But I want you to marry me."

"When you say the word, darling," he whispered, with his lips on hers.

And then presently she sat down in the big wicker-work chair, and laughed, and then cried again, and then laughed again. She admired the room immensely, and said she had never seen anything like it in all her life. And wasn't it just the sort of room that Levity would have chosen!

They might have remained there for quite a long time—Delia seated in the chair, and Levity kneeling beside her—had not a knock come to the door, and the voice of Mrs. Bell been heard outside. Levity scrambled to his feet, and opened the door; the landlady spoke apologetically.

"Oh—if you please, sir, I'm that sorry to disturb you—but there's a gentleman downstairs that was wishful to see you—and I didn't care to send him up, sir."

"A gentleman—to see me?" asked Levity, in some astonishment.

"Yes, sir—name of Batchelor, sir."

"Oh!" Levity turned back into the room, and spoke to Delia. "It's a great friend of mine"

a doctor fellow. He's the only man who's got my address. I should like to see him."

"You are quite welcome, sir, to come down to my sitting-room," said Mrs. Bell. "It's quite at your disposal. The gentleman's there now, sir."

"Let's go down and see him," said Levity to the girl. "I want you to meet him. He's a good friend of mine."

They followed the landlady downstairs. And there was Owen Batchelor, very much surprised at seeing Levity accompanied by a very pretty girl, and very glad to see Levity. Levity introduced Delia; and young Batchelor smiled in his delightful fashion at her. And then Levity spoke solemnly.

"Batchelor—this is the dear girl who is going to be my wife."

Owen Batchelor nodded quickly, and glanced from one to the other as Levity went on.

"There isn't anyone like her in all the world. Of course I'm poor—but one of these days I shall make money; I'm bound to get on, now that she's beside me."

"I congratulate you both most heartily," said young Batchelor. "Hicks has been a lonely chap for a good long time, and he'll be all the better for someone to look after him. I think he's a very lucky man."

"I think that I am the lucky one, Mr. Batchelor," said Delia. "I'm not half good enough for him—not a little bit good enough."

"Don't you take any notice of her," said the happy Levity.

"Well—I'm not sorry I came," said Batchelor—"but I really think that, quite apart from that, I've

called to see Hicks at the wrong time. Therefore I think I'll take my leave. I only just happened to be in this direction, and I thought I'd come in. I hope we shall meet again, Miss Valentine."

"I hope so indeed," responded the girl.

"Of course you'll meet again," said Levity. "You'll be our special friend; there isn't anyone else. And I say, Batchelor"—he lowered his voice a little, and spoke more earnestly—"there's something I want to say to you, and I want to say it before Delia."

"What is it?" asked Batchelor, with a quiet, steady look at the other man.

"It's just this. You know more about me than anyone else—and we've always got on pretty well together, even in the little we've seen of each other. I want you to promise me that if anything should happen to me you'll stand Delia's friend."

"Why—what's going to happen to you, old Levity?" asked the girl.

"One never knows. Nothing may happen at all; but in this mortal life of ours we never know what may come along. And I shall like to know that you'll have a friend, if you want to turn to one."

"Miss Valentine may be very sure of that," said Owen. "And I am very flattered and proud that you should have put me in such a position."

"Then that's all right," said Levity, in a lighter tone. "And now, my dear, I suppose you'll be wanting to go home to that aunt of yours. You've had a tiring day. If you'll excuse me a moment, I'll just get my hat, and we can go. Perhaps Batchelor's going our way."

"I'm going any way," answered the other, as Levity went out of the room.

Alone with the girl, Batchelor began naturally to speak of Levity in the few moments given them. "He's a fine fellow, Miss Valentine—a very fine fellow indeed. He's one of the most unselfish men I think I ever came across."

"I'm sure of that," she answered earnestly.

"If I may say so, Miss Valentine, you must look after him, and see that people don't impose upon him. Also you must look after him in another sense, and see that he doesn't work too hard. He's not over strong, I'm afraid."

"He said you were a doctor," said Delia quickly. "You don't think there's anything the matter with him?"

"No—nothing at all; he's only got to be careful. If it comes to that, we've all got to be careful, haven't we?" And just at that moment Levity returned to the room.

The three of them went out together, Delia walking between the two men. There had been a little chat about Delia's work at the theatre, and what she hoped to do in the future; they had made merry over the idea that some day she would be a very great actress. And then, at a corner of a street, Owen Batchelor had insisted on parting from them, saying that here lay his way, and he could go no further with them. But one night he would go down and would see the piece in which Delia was playing.

Levity Hicks lay long awake that night, after he had returned home, thinking of Delia. When he remembered the story that she had sobbed out against his breast, a deep and fierce resentment sprang up in his mind against Rutherglen; he wanted to stand before him, with a new might and a

new strength, and punish him physically for the insult put upon the girl. But that gave way to another feeling—a feeling of pity and contempt for the beaten man, who had lost her after all. It was a wonderful thought that she should have turned, with the instinct of purity, straight to Levity; that the insult that had been offered by the other man should have sent her straight to Levity's arms, sure of her refuge. The world was very fine to-night, and Levity lay there, not wishful for sleep, so only that he could dream, and see far away into a future that spelled hope and Delia.

He carried those visions with him down into the City in the morning; even the City was less hateful now. In the City he had first met Delia of the blue eyes; and even the dingy old office was sanctified and glorified because she had been there. Almost he wanted to say to some of these clerks—these sober-minded clerks who had married equally sober-minded women in distant suburbs—almost he wanted to say to them—

“Do any of you remember that pretty little girl who drifted in here one day to do the office type-writing—that girl you all stared at so? Well—she loves me; she belongs to me; I'm going to marry her.”

Happily, of course, he refrained, and only hugged that dream to himself. But it sweetened and strengthened all things for him that day; he was no longer afraid of life or of its problems; he took his natural place among men who lived and loved.

That imperious bell, summoning him to the partners' presence, had lost something of its old terrors. His face no longer flushed and then paled as

he went in through the awful door ; he could fight all things now. Even when he received a command that was unexpected, the sudden blanching of his face, for which the younger partner at least was watching, did not appear.

"Hicks—we want you to get your books balanced up before you go for your holiday," said Mr. Kemp, with an awkward appearance of carelessness. "Mr. Notley and I are anxious to do things on a more strictly businesslike basis ; and although we have the most implicit trust in all our people —still we have decided to have everything properly audited by an outside man. It saves trouble, and we know exactly where we are. You can be ready in time ? "

"Certainly, sir," said Levity. "I shall be ready in time—and I think you'll find everything quite straight."

There was no flushing or paling of his face now ; he spoke with almost an easy confidence. Mr. Notley glanced at the junior partner as Levity Hicks, with a little inclination of the head, walked out of the room.

"There's nothing much the matter with Hicks," said Notley, with a grim nod. "You're over-suspicious, Kemp."

"We shall see," said Mr. Kemp, turning to his desk.

Levity Hicks was excited, but almost light-hearted. Things were coming his way ; everything was right with him. A little time ago he would have trembled and been afraid ; he would have had to put into action that plan—that futile, innocent, childish plan of running away. Now that was no longer necessary ; there was someone in the world who

would help him—someone who understood, out of her fine, loyal friendship for him, his desperate need; someone who was a rock on which he could rely in the last extremity. And that last extremity was here now.

It was a little simple thing to do. Just the putting in of figures that had been omitted, and just the paying in of certain money to the firm's account. After that Levity, with no further drain upon him, would be free to take up the old simple life again—a clean man, dreading nothing.

Levity dined cheaply at a place he knew; and then, as dark was falling, he made his way again towards Sockitt's. He knew how Miss Meadows sketched out her time; he knew exactly at what hour he should find her in the garden of the square. He had prepared the little speech he would make her, so that she might easily understand that at last the difficulty had arisen, and he could no longer dare to wait before returning the money. Also he knew exactly how much, by working overtime as often as possible, he would be able to afford to pay her back, week by week. He had the whole thing cut and dried; and in his sanguine heart he knew that she would smile upon him, and believe him, and give him the money.

He came to the garden, and opened the gate, and went in. She had not come yet—she who, had he but known it, had waited evening after evening, on the chance of hearing his footsteps. Levity sat down on the old bench, and looked at the lights that were beginning to show in Sockitt's, and thought of the days that now seemed so far away. He hoped that Miss Meadows would come soon; he wanted to get back to his own little room in Farnham Street.

It had grown quite dark when he heard the click of

the gate, and saw her come, like a shadow, across the grass towards him. He rose then, and stood waiting for her; and she greeted him with no surprise as she took his hand. It was quite as though she had known that sooner or later he must come back to that place, and talk with her again. The hand he held was trembling; but Levity Hicks, filled with his own thoughts, did not notice that.

"I've been looking for you for quite a long time, Mr. Hicks," she said, with a little tremulous note in her voice, "I've just been wondering and wondering how it is that I have seemed always to miss you—in the mornings, and in the evenings, and even on Sundays."

"Well, you see, Miss Meadows—I've left Sockitt's," he said. "Hasn't anybody noticed that I wasn't there?"

She shook her head vaguely. "I had no idea that you had gone," she answered. "This comes as quite a surprise to me."

"Oh—yes; I went away to find another lodging—something cheaper and—and quieter. I shouldn't have come back to-night, but that I thought there was a chance that I might see you."

Her heart leapt, and then was still again. "Shall we sit down for a few minutes?" she said.

They sat down on the old bench side by side. Over at Sockitt's the jangling piano was sounding as usual, and the voice of Julia Ogg was rising and falling. In the garden under the trees it was very dark and very still. Miss Meadows, waiting for him to go on speaking, wondered if by some chance he had guessed or discovered from whom Rutherglen had had the money, and whether he meant to reproach her, or to

thank her. She sat breathless, waiting to hear what he would say.

"I dare say you remember, Miss Meadows—some time ago, when I told you that I was in difficulties—I dare say you remember that you very generously offered to help me," he began.

"I remember it well," she answered rapidly. "There is no need to speak of it, I assure you. It was such a little thing, and I'm so glad to have been able to do what you wanted, Mr. Hicks."

"You said that if ever the need came, Miss Meadows, I was to go to you—as to a friend—and you would let me have the money. Of course I never meant to come to you at all, Miss Meadows; I never would have come to you, if it had been solely for myself. But if any disgrace falls upon me now—it must fall on someone else as well; and that has made me afraid. I would have put up with my punishment willingly enough; because I was only an ordinary fellow, and it didn't matter very much what happened to me. That's what made me so grateful——"

"You are not to thank me; you are not to say anything about me," she said hurriedly. "I'm only so glad that it was in my power to help you."

He was a little bewildered, but he went on patiently. "And so I've come to you to-night—to the woman who offered to stand my friend, if I was in desperate need, and to lend me the money. Will you—can you, Miss Meadows, let me have the loan of that thirty pounds—please?"

CHAPTER XI

THE MAN WHO HAD NO CHANCE

PRISCILLA MEADOWS had got to her feet, there in the darkness of the garden, and Levity Hicks had mechanically risen also. He did not know what was the matter; he only vaguely understood that something had gone wrong, and that his little hope of succour from her had been shattered. Something had risen in his throat that seemed to tighten there and hurt him; he waited patiently for what she would say.

"I didn't want to offend you, Miss Meadows," he said at last, when he found that she did not speak. "Of course, if it isn't convenient, we need not say any more about it." He spoke humbly, and would have turned away, with a little halting bow.

But she caught at his arm as he was moving. "Mr. Hicks—you haven't had the money?" she asked quickly.

He stood in front of her, bewildered. "I haven't been near you, Miss Meadows," he said patiently. "How should I have had the money? I didn't even ask you for it, after that day when you said I might have it if I needed it."

"And no one has been—no one has come to you with the money? You are sure?"

He looked at her vaguely, and shook his head. "I

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don't understand," he said. "I didn't expect anyone to come to me with the money; who should do that? If I badly needed it, I had made up my mind that I would come to you; there was no one else in my world who would help me."

"But hasn't Mr. Rutherglen——" She faltered on the name, and stood looking at him.

"Rutherglen?" His voice hardened, and he looked at her queerly. "What should Rutherglen have to do with it?" he asked.

"Mr. Rutherglen was your friend," she faltered—"your very special friend. And when I was afraid that you wouldn't take the money from me—from a woman—I thought it might be possible to let Mr. Rutherglen pretend in some way that he had got this money, and would let you have it."

"You gave it to—to Rutherglen?" he said very slowly. And through his mind, while he spoke the words, pictures seemed to flash. Of Rutherglen riding about in taxis; of Rutherglen hiring a motor-car, the better to be able to work an infamous plot against Delia Valentine; of Rutherglen, with the power in his hands to do this little service for the man he had plundered all his life, and yet not doing it. That which had gripped his throat before, and hurt him, gripped it now.

"Yes—I gave it to Mr. Rutherglen; he was to invent some excuse for giving it to you. Haven't you had it? hasn't he said anything about it?"

Levity shook his head slowly, without looking at her. Some old instinct of loyalty to his brother was rising within him—an instinct to keep this woman, who was outside their lives, ignorant of anything shameful he might have done.

"You see—I went away from Sockitt's without telling anybody anything about it; so that Rutherglen probably hasn't had a chance of finding me. I expect he's got the money all right; I'll manage to see him to-night, and ask him about it. It's good of you, Miss Meadows, to lift this worry off my shoulders like this; I can't thank you enough. It's sure to be all right with Rutherglen. When did you give him the money?"

"More than a week ago," answered Miss Meadows.

"Oh—it's sure to be all right," said Levity. "I've been away from Sockitt's for more than a week."

"That accounts for it," said Miss Meadows, with a sigh of relief. "I'm so sorry I should have gone about the thing in such—such a roundabout way; but, of course, I did it for the best. And you are not to trouble about paying me back; any time will do for that. How have you been getting on?"

He answered her vaguely, scarcely knowing what he said. His mind ran on his brother, and on the fact that that money had been in his hands for more than a week. Of course, as Rutherglen got up so late, and came home so late, and as none of his hours fitted with those of Levity Hicks, it was possible that he might have been searching for Levity and yet not have found him—or he might have been waiting for Levity to go to his room, and see him late at night, as he had done so often.

But Horace Rutherglen had had thirty pounds in his hands for more than a week.

"Rutherglen won't be home yet a bit," he said presently to Miss Meadows. "I think I shall take a stroll, and come back later, when he's at home. And

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please let me thank you again for your great kindness ; I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"I wish with all my heart that I had given the money straight to you," said Miss Meadows.

"I almost wish you had," said Levity Hicks slowly.

He opened the gate for her to pass through ; he smiled at her as she crossed the road towards Sockitt's. And then he took his way out of the square, and into the broader streets. He moved a little unsteadily, and he felt strangely tired and old. Above all, he knew the vital necessity of holding himself in check, and composing himself as much as possible.

"I may be quite wrong about that ; he may have the money waiting for me," he told himself again and again. "Horace would know how sorely I needed the money to put myself straight ; Horace wouldn't do a thing like that."

And then would come the remembrance of Delia Valentine, sobbing out her story on his breast ; and again would come the tightening of his throat, and the sudden, heavy beating of his heart. But he must be calm ; he must hold himself in hand. It would never do to go on like this ; he would be fit for nothing when presently a momentous interview was before him.

So he made the effort to soothe himself. He would think of all the pleasant things, and of all the good possibilities. In the front rank of all the pleasant things there was Delia—Delia who loved him, and who had laughed at the thought that now she might be discontented with his poverty. Delia who had

crept to him as her sure refuge, and who had asked him that he would marry her—now—at once. What was Rutherglen against that?

Then there was the possibility that the money was still intact. After all, Rutherglen was earning a good salary; and Rutherglen knew of Levity's desperate need. Horace—that brother whom he had helped again and again out of difficulties—Horace wouldn't do a thing like that, when a woman had trusted him. The thing, when one came to think of it calmly, was incredible.

And so on that weary cycle of thought that led always back to the same point: that Rutherglen had the notes, and that the brothers must meet to-night. All else was mere conjecture; Levity must wait until that time of the meeting; until then he knew nothing.

He got back to the square at last, and so to an unhappy wandering up and down outside Sockitt's. He knew that it must be an hour at least before Rutherglen returned; but still he must stay here, and watch the house; otherwise he might miss his brother altogether. He suddenly remembered that he had no key; the key had been given back to Mrs. Sockitt when Levity left the house. It would never do for Levity to ring the bell, and to demand admission again to Sockitt's; he had done with Sockitt's for ever. He must wait outside until Rutherglen appeared, and then must go in with him. That was the simple and the quiet and secret way. They could not talk of all that was between them with Sockitt's to listen.

He had been leaning against the railings, and almost as it seemed his head had nodded to slumber. He wanted to get this business over—this trouble-

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some business that was tiring him, and that after to-night should have no concern with the new, real life he was beginning. The thirty pounds stood between him and safety; and, now that the time had come for him to claim it, it was such a little thing. He would meet his brother, and get the money, and go away again. Now that Delia understood, he would not even speak of her to Rutherglen; that should be a thing apart.

Out of the mists that formed his dreams someone approached, and touched him on the arm. He came to himself with a start, and found that he was facing Owen Batchelor. He could not understand for a moment what young Batchelor was doing there at all; until it was borne in upon him that Batchelor belonged to Sockitt's, and was therefore quite naturally going home.

"Why—what are you doing here?" asked Batchelor.

"I'm just waiting—to see Rutherglen," answered Levity. "Only a little matter of business; but I must see him to-night. I've been—been waiting about."

"I should rather think you have," exclaimed the other. "Do you know that it's been raining? You're quite wet."

Levity touched his shoulder with a stupid, awkward gesture, and then laughed. "'Pon my word, I hadn't noticed," he said. "I am a bit damp—aren't I? I expect he'll be here directly."

"I think you'd better come into the house, and come up to my room," said Batchelor. "You can't stand about here; it's coming on more heavily and you'll get a soaking. Come on—I'll let you in."

It seemed strange to Levity Hicks to be crossing the threshold of Sockitt's again. But there was no one about, and they mounted the stairs together—Levity going softly, as though fearing that someone might discover him. Outside the door of his brother's room he paused, and jerked his head towards it, and spoke in a whisper.

"I almost think I'll wait for him in here," he said. "I don't want to keep you up; I can wait here as well as anywhere else. I shall be all right."

Owen Batchelor went in with him. Batchelor put up the lights, and saw to it that Levity had a comfortable chair. Batchelor seemed to be vaguely troubled about Levity; he did not seem to like leaving him. He lingered, on one pretext and another—sometimes making as if to go, and then coming back again, and wandering about the room. Finally, Batchelor came to an anchorage near to that side table on which the decanters were placed, and from there cast a furtive look at the other man.

"Would you like a drink, Hicks?" he asked jerkily.

The suggestion had instantly appealed to Levity Hicks; he had half started from his chair. Then he shook his head as he sank back again. "No, thanks—no—I don't think I will," he said. "Rutherglen mightn't like it."

"Oh—that'll be all right; I'll explain to him that you needed it," said the other, with the decanter in his hand.

"No—I won't have it," said Levity, almost violently. "I'm all right. I'll just wait here until he comes in. You won't mind if I ask you not to stay

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—will you? I've something—something just a bit private to say to him. You won't mind?"

"No—I won't mind," answered Owen Batchelor. "Only take things easily, old chap; don't upset yourself. Good night!"

He stooped over Levity, and grasped his hand. Levity held on to the hand for a moment, and looked up into the ugly, anxious face.

"It's good to know that you're a friend—to her and to me," he said slowly. "One doesn't get many friends in this qucer world. . . . It seems funny that she—bright little butterfly—should have lain in my arms for a moment and kissed me—doesn't it? I'm such a qucer old chap to have that sort of thing happen to me. . . . Good night!"

Levity sat for a long time in the easy-chair there in the silent room. Every now and then he roused himself, to drag before his mind the actual scene that must be constructed between Rutherglen and himself. So many phrases as to this—and so many phrases as to that. He wanted to get it all clear and concise and exact; he wanted to know exactly where he stood. He remembered now, as he looked round the room, exactly where Rutherglen had stood at different times—now lounging in that chair, and now standing in an easy attitude by the fireplace—and now leaning against the side table, with a glass in his hand. Apart from these little skirmishes which had meant his vain attempts to get money that was due to him from his brother, this would be the first occasion on which, in a sense, they had come to grips. He wished that he felt better and stronger for the encounter.

And then he thought of Miss Meadows in the

garden of the square—Miss Meadows, who had so unexpectedly proved his friend, and had come to his rescue. If by any chance Rutherglen, after taking that money from her, had used it——

He got up at the thought of that, and began to pace about the room. He must be strong for what was coming ; his hand reached out for the decanter, and he poured some brandy into a glass, and raised it to his lips. Some of that gripping tightness that had been at his throat so long relaxed, and the blood in his veins seemed to flow more easily. He should have taken young Batchelor's advice, and used this stuff before.

Down below in the house a door banged softly ; a walking-stick rattled into the umbrella-stand ; and then steps sounded upon the stairs, mounting upwards, accompanied by a cheery whistling. The handle of the door was gripped firmly, and turned ; and Horace Rutherglen swung himself into the room.

He stopped dead on seeing Levity standing near to that side table, with a glass in his hand, looking at him. Not the Levity he had known, with a furtive manner and an apologetic air upon him ; but a new Levity, with eyes that were bright, almost, as it seemed, with ironic laughter. A Levity that had to be dealt with.

Rutherglen recovered himself in a moment, and came forward into the room. The apparition of his brother had been so unexpected, and there were so many things concerning him to be reconstructed in one's mind, that for a moment Rutherglen scarcely knew what to say. So he jerked out a surprised—"Hullo ! How did you get in here ? "

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"I just got in," said Levity, slowly draining his glass and setting it down. "I wanted to see you."

"What do you want to see me about?" asked the other, moving across the room, and taking up a cigarette with a hand that fumbled a little, and then getting a light for it. "Where have you been this week past?"

"That doesn't matter much—does it?" said Levity. "Were you particularly anxious to see me?"

It almost seemed as though they circled round each other in that room, as two animals waiting to spring upon each other might have done. If one moved this way the other moved that, as though to avoid him; and yet those movements were performed almost mechanically.

"I don't know that I've been particularly anxious to see you," said Rutherglen. "You've got a bad habit of coming at awkward times, when a man is tired out, and wants to go to bed. What is it now?"

"There's a little matter of an account to be settled between us," said Levity, putting a hand to his collar, and pulling it away from his throat, as though it pressed there and hurt him.

"I don't know what in the world you're driving at," blustered Rutherglen. "I don't know what possible account there can be between you and me. Hadn't you better let it wait till the morning?" He turned away and moved towards the fireplace; and went through a business of setting his tie straight with the aid of the mirror.

"It won't wait," said Levity slowly. "If anything, it has waited too long. It's got to be settled here, to-night—with other things. With a long list of things."

"What bee have you got in your bonnet now?" asked Horace, affecting a drawl.

"It's the same old bee," said Levity. "It's been buzzing there for a long time, and I haven't noticed it. To-night the buzzing is like the roaring of the sea—and it's making itself heard so that it drowns everything else. To-night we've got to have a settling-up, Horace; it can't wait any longer."

Rutherglen turned round from the mantelpiece, and looked at Levity frowningly. "It's rather a new game for you—to bluster—isn't it?" he asked. "Let's know what it is exactly that you want, or that you demand, and then I can talk to you. If it comes to that, what the devil right have you to come in here, talking to me in this fashion?"

"Drop that!" cried Levity, with a rising colour. "I've been patient long enough; I've been the dog that's been whipped and sent to heel long enough; from to-night all that's done with. I take my place in the world, with my right to live in it—as good a right as you have. Where is the money that belongs to me, and that was sent to me?"

Rutherglen laughed. "Ah—now we're coming to it," he said. "You waste such a lot of breath, my dear Levity; why couldn't you say what you wanted at once? What money are you talking about?"

Again that suffocating, throbbing feeling was rising in his throat; Levity fought it down, and strove to speak calmly. "A dear friend of mine—the best in the world—trusted you with money to be given to me. She thought—she knew that I shouldn't take it from her; and so she trusted to the honour of a gentleman to pass it over to me—a little innocent fraud on her part. I want that money, please."

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"Anything else?" asked the other insolently.

"Perhaps I wrong you—perhaps I've been impatient without cause," said Levity, more quietly.

"Perhaps you've got the money here, and are going to give it to me. If so, Horace, I take back what I have said as to that; I take back every word."

"I don't want you to take back anything," said Rutherglen aggressively. "I'm not going to deny that I've had the money; this old fool that's got a soft corner in her heart for you, I suppose, handed it over to me, and told me that she'd be glad if I'd give it to you. It's surprising what a woman will do, even at her age, when she's got that sort of foolishness in her about a man—isn't it?"

"Don't say too much," said Levity, dropping out his words slowly, and looking with sombre eyes at the other man. "Don't say anything about her—because such a beast as you can't hope to understand what she is, or what she meant. She did that for me. Don't talk about it—but let her have the money. It's mine."

Rutherglen, leaning against the mantelpiece, with his arms extended along it, laughed quietly as he looked at Levity. "My dear fellow—you should have come to me a week ago; I might have talked to you of money then," he said. "What did you expect me to do with thirty pounds, just dropped into my hands when most I needed it? I changed the last fiver this afternoon."

There was a dreadful silence in the room, while Levity stood clasping and unclasping his hands, and looking at his brother. In the room above Owen Batchelor, who had been going nervously to his door, and listening to that murmur of raised voices,

wondered at the stillness, and almost came out on to the landing to see what had happened. And then while he waited and listened, the voices went on again.

"Do you mean to say that it's all—gone?"

Rutherglen nodded. "All but a sovereign or two," he answered.

"Do you know what I wanted it for? Do you know what it was that she got it for?" Levity licked his dry lips, and drew in his breath sharply.

"I don't know—unless you want it to pay off that friend from whom you borrowed."

"That friend from whom I borrowed was the firm," said Levity slowly. "I've taken money that didn't belong to me—and I've taken it for you. I've stolen it—bit by bit—coin by coin—and I wanted to put it back——"

"Don't raise your voice like that," broke in the other quickly. "The house is asleep."

"What do I care who knows or who hears?" cried Levity wildly. "I've stolen it—for you. For you—and your dinners—and your lunches—and your fine clothes—and your women—and your motor-cars—I've gone hungry and shabby for you—and you've given me a drink sometimes—a drink that I'd paid for. I've got to get my books ready at the office—because they're going to find me out. Then they'll make an example of me—the most trusted man in the place—the man whose father was there before him; they're going to make an example of me, I tell you. They'll stick me up shamefully in a dock, for all men to stare at; and they'll send me away, with other felons, in a prison behind bars. My God!—that was my chance—and you've stolen that from me—as you've tried to steal everything else!"

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Owen Batchelor had opened his door, and was coming quietly but swiftly downstairs. He paused outside the door of Rutherglen's room, and waited there with a tense face.

"I suppose you're talking about that girl—eh?" said Rutherglen, with a laugh. "Did she come back to you?"

"She came back to me; she told me all the story. She would have come back to me in any case—even if she had come back broken and shamed, to hide her face. Thank God that didn't happen. But you tried—you beast!—you tried to bruise and hurt the immortal soul of her—because you knew that she belonged to me. You couldn't do that—could you? You failed there."

His voice had risen to a scream. Owen Batchelor, outside the door, opened it quickly, and stepped in; closed the door, and advanced quickly to Levity. With a swift look from one man to the other, he laid his hand on Levity's arm.

"Steady!—steady! You mustn't do it. Be quiet! Be quiet!"

But Levity shook him off; he pointed a shaking forefinger at his brother. "Look at him!" he cried. "Look at the man that has pulled at me, and fawned on me, and dragged me down—and yet spurned me while he dragged me down! There was one thing I wanted in the world—in my quiet, humble way: it was to live cleanly and decently, so that no finger might point at me. He wouldn't let me do that; he made me steal for him. There was one other thing I wanted—and that I got, by God's mercy. A good woman loved me; and he tried to smirch her soul, as he has smirched everything else that has ever been mine

or that I've ever craved. Look at him, I say!—look at my brother!"

He made a sudden spring, as though he would have got at Rutherglen; he swayed a little as Owen Batchelor caught him. "Steady! Steady!" said Batchelor, in a sort of hissing whisper.

There were curious blue lines and blotches about Levity's lips; he rocked and swayed, and sank to his knees. He seemed to know what was coming for he cried out a sort of pitiful prayer——

"God—give me—a chance! Not yet—not yet I haven't—lived! Give me——"

He sank lower, and rolled over suddenly on to the floor. Owen Batchelor dropped beside him, and began fumbling with his waistcoat.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Rutherglen, in a harsh, shaking whisper.

"He's dead," said Batchelor, looking up at him quietly.

CHAPTER XII

THE GREY FACE OF FEAR

ONCE before, in the quiet history of Sockitt's, Death had descended upon the house ; but then Death had come quietly, stealing in, and leaving an old, old man in his bed—a man to whom the visit was almost welcome. That had been nothing ; Sockitt's had gone hushed for a little time, and had lowered its voice ; and then, with the grim thing out of the house, had become the usual Sockitt's again.

But the passing of Levity Hicks was different. This matter of an outcry at midnight ; the rousing of the house, and the rushing off of someone for a doctor ; this was a matter of dread and fear and quaking. People in strange toilets huddled out on to the staircase, and asked breathless questions ; and then were thrust out of the way, as a quiet, grave-faced man came into the place, and went up the stairs, and entered Rutherglen's room.

Of course there was nothing to be done, save to confirm what Owen Batchelor had said. Levity Hicks had died suddenly of heart failure, just as had been predicted. He had been visiting his friend Horace Rutherglen, and had died in a moment.

Miss Priscilla Meadows, in her room with the child, did not for a time know what had happened. She heard the running of feet, and the opening and

shutting of doors ; but she did not want the child disturbed, and kept throwing anxious glances at the little bed in the corner of the room, and nervously wishing that the house would settle down and be still again.

Someone passing outside the room met another boarder, and stopped for a whispered word or two. Miss Meadows went to the door of her room, and opened it, and peered out ; seeing only two women there, came out, and closed the door behind her.

"What is the matter ?" she asked.

One of the women was Mrs. Ogg, and her face was tragic, and she seemed to have been crying. She threw up her hands with a gesture that, under other circumstances, would have been almost comical.

"Dead ! Gone in a moment !" said Mrs. Ogg.

"I suppose there wasn't any quarrel—or anything of that sort ?" suggested the other woman.

"They seem to say not," said Mrs. Ogg. "It's a dreadful thing to have happened to Sockitt's, must say."

"Who is it ?" asked Miss Meadows. She was glad to think at that moment, in a vague, indefinite way, that there was one person it could not possibly be, because he no longer lived at Sockitt's ; and that person was Levity Hicks. No one else mattered very greatly.

"What—haven't you heard, my dear ? It's that Mr. Hicks," said Mrs. Ogg.

"It can't be—you've made a mistake," said Miss Meadows, after a moment, during which she stared from one woman to the other. "Mr. Hicks doesn't live here now ?"

"It seems he was visiting his friend Mr. Rutherglen

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—Horace, as we call him," said Mrs. Ogg, "and dropped dead all in a moment. Such a frightful thing for poor Horace; so upsetting. I must go back to Julia; she does take these things so dreadfully to heart." She went bumping off, with slippered feet, towards her own room.

The other woman said a word or two concerning the tragedy, and then also went to her room. Miss Meadows did not know what it was that had been said; she stood there, with one hand pressed against the side of the door, and swaying slightly, with her eyes closed. Then, in a drcary, broken, listless fashion she began to make her way towards that room that was Rutherglen's. She met young Batchelor coming out.

"Won't you please tell me what has happened?" she asked.

"It's poor Hicks," said Batchelor in a low voice. "I'd warned him about it, but it was no good. He got in a frightful state of excitement—and was gone—like that." He snapped his fingers softly as he spoke.

"Dead?" she said, in a toneless voice.

"Yes. The doctor's in there now. I say, Miss Meadows, hadn't you better get to bed? You're looking ill."

She stood looking at him in a queer way, quite as though she did not see him, or perhaps did not know who he was. Then she laughed—a strange laugh that seemed to shake and twist her; and suddenly pitched straight forward at him. Batchelor was quick enough to catch her, and so save the full force of the fall; but he almost went down with her. He laid her on the floor, and ran to the door of the first room, which

happened to belong to the Oggs, and knocked upon sharply.

"Come out here, somebody," he commanded.
"Miss Meadows has fainted."

They got her to bed, marvelling that the child slept through it all—only stirring once in her sleep, and then turning over, and going off soundly again. Mrs. Ogg, with a gentle touch, arranged the bedclothes. Mrs. Ogg, glad to be of use, would sit up for the remainder of the night with Miss Meadows.

Bob Sockitt, roused from his slumbers, and suddenly hoisted into a position of importance by reason of the fact that he was, in a sense, the proprietor of the establishment, was naturally incensed when he came to have time to think about it, and to talk about it, that Levity Hicks should have died Sockitt's at all. "What I argue, sir, is," Bob Sockitt would say to anyone he could buttonhole, the whole he twisted his drooping moustache out of the way of his lips—"what I argue strongly is, sir, that it was not a right and proper thing to do. There was a time when he lived in the house, when he would have had perfect right, from a logical point of view, to die in it. But he no longer lived here; he had gone to some other place, and he ought properly to have died at that other place. The mere fact of his coming back here at all, sir, upsetting the establishment in that way, may be regarded by Mrs. S. and by me in the light of a liberty. That's what I argue, sir."

Mrs. Sockitt had no such words as these to use. Mrs. Sockitt was tearful and she was sorry. She held an impromptu court in her little room at the end of the hall, clad in an unaccustomed dressing-gown, and listened to what all and sundry had to say. And

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the good woman summed it up finally in her own fashion.

"Oh—I'm sorry. He was a good sort, was Mr. Hicks—with a nice word for everybody. He didn't get much out of life; he never seemed to have his chance, somehow."

Rutherglen had been moving about in the hall; they were making preparations for him to sleep in another room. The words came to him through the open door; he stopped suddenly, as though he had been shot. He remembered the words cried out by Levy at the last moment—

"Oh—God—give me a chance. I haven't lived!"

But business must go on, even though men die inappropriately, and to the trouble and annoyance of living ones. Sockitt's resumed its ordinary aspect in a very little while; and even those of its members that had attended the inquest ceased to speak of it, or to give their own accounts of how, had they been in the position occupied by the Coroner, they would have put their questions and would have managed the affair generally. As to that inquest, one little incident may be allowed to stand out, before the affair is dismissed.

Horace Rutherglen had, of necessity, been an important witness. He had expressed deep sympathy for Hicks; a man he had known casually for some years, and had, in a sense, befriended. He understood that the man was a poor clerk in an office in the City; and he did not seem to have many friends. He had not known very much about him, except that Hicks used to come in sometimes at night for a chat; Hicks was rather a lonely man. On the night in question he had got rather excited; they were

arguing about some trivial matter, and had taken opposite views. He quite forgot what the matter was now.

"According to the doctor's evidence, this might have happened at any time; we are not concerned with what the argument was. I take it that it was quite a friendly argument?" Thus the Coroner, in an easy conversational fashion.

"Oh—quite friendly," said Rutherglen.

He left upon the mind of the Coroner and the Jury the impression of a good-natured, kindly fellow, who did not mind being bored, even late at night after his own exacting work was done, by this poor lonely clerk, who had taken a fancy to him, and had, in a sense, forced his friendship upon him. Rutherglen stood very well in the limelight on that particular occasion.

Owen Batchelor walked away from the court with Rutherglen. Rutherglen would have been glad to avoid him; for this was the one man who had been present on that last night, and who had heard the words that were spoken. The Rutherglen who walked along beside the man with the kindly, clever, ugly face was not the Rutherglen who had given evidence but half an hour before.

"It's a funny thing," began Owen Batchelor, "that poor old Hicks should have got that strange idea in his head at the last, about you, and what you had done—isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" asked Rutherglen sharply.

"I think you remember the rather wild things he said—about his having stolen money for you," went on Batchelor, in his quiet, persistent voice. "Also about your having tried to upset him over a girl he

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was in love with ; I don't remember it exactly, but the impression is rather clear in my mind."

"Do you mean to suggest that a man on the point of death is absolutely to be relied upon in any statement he may make ?" demanded Rutherglen. "The thing's absurd."

"Hicks wasn't at the point of death then ; he was quite clear in what he said," went on Owen. "Also that remarkable thing he said at the last moment—about you being his brother."

Rutherglen burst out laughing. "Why—of course he was speaking figuratively," he exclaimed. "Am I to be worried and badgered and bothered over this thing, now that it is all over ?" he went on, with rising heat. "This is the reward one gets, I suppose, for taking pity on a poor shiftless creature that hasn't got a friend in the world. My nerves are all on edge, Batchelor ; for God's sake let the matter alone. Levity Hicks is dead—and I'm sorry. But I didn't kill him, and it isn't exactly my fault."

"Still, it's rather strange that he should have got that idea into his head, if there was no truth in it. When I first came into the room, on the night of his death, he struck me as a man labouring under a strong sense of injury."

"You didn't say anything about this at the inquest just now," suggested Rutherglen.

"Poor Hicks died of heart failure ; and he's done with," said Owen quietly. "I might have touched on something that would have raised some old scandal about him—and perhaps about you. There was no good to be done by talking about it, and therefore I held my tongue. I'm asking you privately, because naturally I am very much interested."

"I quite see your point," said Rutherglen, "and therefore I might as well explain. Poor old Hicks was not connected with me in any way; we were simply acquaintances. From time to time, when he was hard up, I had—I had lent him money. Not very much—but just to keep him rubbing along. My profession is a precarious one, and I couldn't always let him have what he asked for. So he got the idea into his head that I had robbed him, by not giving him so much as he had asked for. Is that clear to you?"

"It sounds nice and plausible," said Owen quietly.

Rutherglen paused for a moment, and looked round at the other man doubtfully. But Owen Batchelor, striding along with his hat on the back of his head, bore a face that was inscrutable.

"Then it happened that he introduced me to a girl to whom he had taken a fancy," went on Rutherglen. "I can't tell you whether or not she had taken a fancy to Hicks; it doesn't seem possible, but still she may have done. She was a pretty little thing, and she was anxious to get on the stage; she was a typist, or something of that kind. I went out of my way to do her a good turn; and necessarily I had to see her once or twice while getting her an engagement. Hicks got furiously jealous; and there you have the meaning of that."

"I've met the lady," said Owen quietly, "and I have reason to know that she was very genuinely devoted to poor Hicks. Now that I know that the positions are reversed, and that you were the benefactor of Hicks, and not he of you, it clears away doubts—doesn't it?"

"Doubts? Do you seriously suggest, my dear

Batchelor, that a man in my position would be borrowing money from a poor fellow like that ? ”

“ I suggest nothing,” said Owen, looking round at him with a perfectly blank expression. “ It isn’t for me to suggest anything at all. Poor Hicks has gone where he’ll settle up his little accounts, I imagine, and tell his poor story ; some day you’ll have to tell yours.”

“ Look here—this is my way,” said Rutherglen, stopping suddenly at the corner of a street. “ Good day to you.”

“ Good-day ! ” said Owen cheerfully. He whistled softly to himself as he walked away.

The death of Levity Hicks, which might have been thought to have been something, after the first nine days’ wonder of it, so unimportant as to be dismissed with a shake of the head and a sigh, was destined to trouble others for some time to come. Rutherglen had had, by reason of his position, rather good notice taken of his kindness to this poor clerk ; and Sockitt’s too, in its way, was proud of him. Yet there were still things to be reckoned with.

Rutherglen, sitting at his late breakfast one morning alone in the dining-room, heard the door open, and did not even trouble to look up from his newspaper. It was only when he became aware that someone was standing at the other side of the table, facing him, that he rather nervously moved the paper aside, and looked up, to see Miss Meadows. He remembered another occasion on which she had stood there ; vaguely he seemed to know what was coming.

“ Good morning, Miss Meadows,” he said abruptly.

She did not return the salutation. “ I’ve been trying to speak to you ; this is the first chance I’ve

had," she said. "We need not be careful about any subterfuges now, Mr. Rutherglen; I don't mind if anyone comes in. I want to know about the money."

"I fear I don't understand, Miss Meadows," he said, biting upon the cigarette that was between his lips. "What money do you refer to?"

"I gave into your hands a sum of thirty pounds—to be given to Mr. Hicks in order that he might discharge a debt. Did you give him that money?"

The man laughed, and got up from his chair. "Really, Miss Meadows—the question is just a little offensive," he said. "I am, I trust, a man of honour, and the money was given to me for a certain purpose."

"Did you give Mr. Hicks the money?" she persisted, a little breathlessly.

"Of course I gave him the money," he replied.

"I don't believe you," she said surprisingly. "He came to me on that last night—that night he died; he asked me to let him have the money. He had not had it; and he came to me, because I had made him promise that if he was in desperate straits—and only then—he would come to me and ask for it. Did you give him the money then, Mr. Rutherglen—on that night he died?"

"He had had it before," he faltered.

"He had not had it before; I saw him a few hours before his death. Did you give it to him that night?"

He came a step or two nearer to her, with his hands upon his hips; he looked down at her frowningly. But Miss Meadows stood her ground, and looked at him undaunted.

"Look here, Miss Meadows," he said, "I decline to

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be cross-questioned by you." His face was white, and something hard was beating in his temples. "Hicks is dead, and has taken his troubles with him, if he had any. I don't think we need discuss the matter any further."

"I won't discuss the matter any further with you," she said bitterly. "You are so mean and poor a thing that you could rob him in his deep need—and now you can lie about it. You lied about him at the inquest."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he exclaimed, turning away.

"I am going to the place where he worked, and I'm going to find out if it has been discovered that he took this money, and if he paid it back."

"And then?" He looked at her curiously.

"If it has not been paid back I shall know that you have stolen it; and I shall pay it again to them, to clear his good name. He would have wished me to do that, I know." She turned, and went quietly out of the room.

Rutherglen laughed. "I knew the old fool was in love with him," he said. "Well—it doesn't matter to me, anyway; she won't get her money back, for the simple reason that I haven't got it to give to her."

So it happened that, for the second time in its history, the firm of Notley and Kemp was electrified by the appearance of a lady within its sacred precincts. Priscilla Meadows, by a little adroit questioning, had been able to discover in what office Levity Hicks had worked; and now she stood there, outwardly calm, and asked if she might see Mr. Notley or Mr. Kemp. The business was quite private.

It was a difficult matter for her to gain admission to that holy of holies. Once or twice messages were sent out, asking her business ; but in each case Miss Meadows firmly refused to state it except to the principals. And so at last, after much shaking of heads, the rules that never were to be broken were broken, and Miss Meadows was shown in to where the two elderly men were seated. She wondered how often poor Levity Hicks had come in here ; her eyes swam a little with tears as she looked at the two men.

" I've come to speak about Mr. Hicks, who was a clerk here," she said.

Mr. Kemp placed a chair for her ; that was the sort of thing that was expected of Mr. Kemp. Then he sat down again, and twisted his chair round, and looked at her.

" I want you, gentlemen, if you will be so good—I want you to tell me something about Mr. Hicks. I want to know that when he left here—when death took him from here—that everything in his work—in his books and accounts—was all right."

Notley stole a glance at Kemp, and Kemp returned the glance. Then, while Notley made marks upon his blotting-pad with a pen, Kemp cleared his throat, and looked round at this strange visitor.

" We must know first of all, Miss "—he looked at the card on the desk before him—" Miss Meadows, what particular interest you have in asking the question, and in what way it concerns you."

" I was his friend," she said, with a little break in her voice. " I knew something—a very little—of his life. It cannot do any harm now to anyone to know the truth ; I want to know the truth very much."

Notley stayed his scribbling pen, and once more looked across at Kemp. Kemp returned the look, and then turned his gaze upon Miss Meadows.

"We had believed the late Mr. Hicks to be a faithful friend and servant of the firm—just as his father had been before him," he said. "But since his death we have looked into various matters, and we find"—he glanced at Notley as if for assistance, but Notley did not raise his head—"we find that the accounts are not as straight as we could—as we could have wished. We make no suggestion of fraud—or anything of that kind—but still—there it is."

"What is the amount?" she asked quietly.

"It is about thirty pounds," answered Kemp.

"And you are quite certain that it was not repaid—this amount he had overlooked—by Mr. Hicks?"

"Absolutely certain."

"I want to tell you that Mr. Hicks had this money in his hands—ready to pay back—on the night of his death. That was Saturday, and therefore he could not go to any bank, or do anything with the money. I have it here; I have brought it with me."

She was fumbling with nervous fingers at the bag she carried; there was complete silence in the room. The two partners were staring at each other as she got out the notes, and got up quickly from her chair, and laid the notes on the desk.

"But we cannot permit, madam——" began Kemp hastily.

"This is the money he would have brought to you," she said; and now the light of triumph upon her thin, worn face was splendid. "I was his friend; I cannot do less than carry out what would have been his wishes. You have not believed in him; you have

thought he was a thief, just because there had been some mistake in his accounts. This will set it all right. I want to clear his good name. He was my friend."

She had so taken them by storm, and all this was so much out of the ordinary routine of business life, as they knew it, that they were swept off their feet. This calm, gentle creature, who had but one idea at that time in her mind, and went straight to it, without turning by a hair's breadth from the course she had mapped out for herself, was a being against whom the ordinary business arguments availed nothing. They had had vague thoughts of impressing upon the office generally, and clerks in particular, the enormity of this offence, even though it had been committed by a man who could no longer answer to any ordinary tribunal for it. She, on her side, had the passionate determination to see the name of this poor obscure clerk cleared in the eyes of his little world; and no firm of Notley and Kemp should stand between her and that great determination. So that in the end they bowed her out—jointly—through a wondering office of clerks; and she carried with her a paper, jointly signed by them, to the effect that all had been well with the accounts of a certain J. L. Hicks, deceased, and that they deeply deplored the loss of a faithful servant.

So much had Priscilla Meadows done for the man for whose footstep she had forlornly waited, many and many a night, in the shabby garden of Gridley Square.

That shabby garden of Gridley Square grew shabbier as the months went on, and the leaves were stripped from the tree under which Levity Hicks had sat and talked with Miss Meadows and with the child

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And as the time went on, and the months waxed and waned, and the winter was drawing nigh, there grew a rumour—just a mere little breath of a rumour—that Sockitt's was haunted.

It is impossible to say exactly how or when the thing first started; it had not been there one particular morning, and yet it was there, full-fledged, one particular night. It is possible that Joseph, that breathless, eager, anxious boy who polished the boots and the silver, and attended to other matters, first started it, in a whisper to Fanny the maid-of-all-work; it may have come even from one of the boarders. But it was there, and it was added to furtively now and then as time went on.

It began in a curious fashion. That garret which had belonged to Levity Hicks had not since been tenanted; it was not a profitable "let," and Mrs. Sockitt had not troubled about it. Some small matter had taken Joseph up to that top floor—or perhaps he had merely looked into an empty room that was near to his own sleeping place; he had come down perplexed and trembling, and had had to be shaken to some degree of ordinary common sense by the indignant but frightened Fanny.

"I opened the door all of a sudden. It was near dark; there wasn't much light comin' from outside. But 'e was there—sitting on the side of 'is bed, with 'is face in 'is 'ands. I almost forgot fer a moment that 'e was dead; I was goin' to speak to 'im, an' ask 'im if anythink was the matter. An' then 'e was gorn."

Fanny carried the matter, as an interesting item of news—something that should attract attention—to Mrs. Sockitt; and Mrs. Sockitt, thinking of the

house, and of boarders then resident and yet to come, sternly forbade Fanny to say anything about the matter. If there was any more nonsense with Joseph he would simply have to take himself off, and look for a situation elsewhere.

But even Mrs. Sockitt's admonition did not quite end the matter. The rumour was in the air, and it helped to recall the tragic death of the man who had been a humble figure among them all, and whom they were inclined to forget. The thing was never spoken of in any ordinary outward way ; there were whispers.

Fortunately, perhaps, for Sockitt's, the matter died down, and was forgotten. There came a change of boarders, in one or two instances, during the winter new interests arose round that table in the dining room over which Mrs. Sockitt presided ; there were but few who remembered Levity Hicks. Above all things, for the saving of the house of Sockitt, Horace Rutherglen remained, keeping his old seat between Mrs. Ogg and her daughter Julia. It might almost be said that Sockitt's had come to itself again, and had forgotten the only real tragedy that had ever come within its ken.

The play in which Horace Rutherglen had had a part, and in which he had made something of a success, had come to an end ; so that Sockitt's saw more of him. He made a brilliant appearance at dinner from time to time ; and that marriage with Miss Julia Ogg, that had been postponed during the period of his engagement at the Planet Theatre, was now definitely arranged to take place at an early date. Mrs. Ogg had tightened her lips, from time to time, as that business had been postponed, and her manne-

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towards Horace Rutherglen was not quite so openly cordial as it had been.

Owen Batchelor, getting back to Sockitt's late one evening after dinner was ended, and looking tired and spent, had made hurried arrangements with the good-natured Mrs. Sockitt to have a meal spread for him at one end of the dining-table. Joseph had been clearing away, and the other men had distributed themselves about the house. In the midst of his meal Owen Batchelor, glancing up at the opening of the door, saw Rutherglen come in. He had seen very little of Rutherglen for some time past—perhaps because, for his own part, he had been very busy, and his hours somewhat irregular; perhaps because, on the other hand, since that conversation between Rutherglen and himself they had rather avoided each other.

But now Rutherglen strolled down the length of the room, and seated himself near to Batchelor. "You don't mind my cigar—do you?" he said. "I'm at a loose end to-night, and am bored to death with my own company."

"Smoke away, by all means," said the other, going on with his meal.

There was an awkward silence for a minute or two; and then Horace Rutherglen leaned forward across the table, and spoke. "I say—I hate to think that there should be any coolness between you and me."

"Is there?" asked the other blandly.

"Well—perhaps not exactly a coolness; only we used to be rather friendly, in a way—a month or two ago. You were a little unjust to me over the death of poor Hicks."

"Pardon me—I don't think so," said Owen. "Let

us call it a little misunderstanding on my part, if you like. It's a matter that is done with and ended, why talk about it?"

"Exactly what I think," responded Rutherglen eagerly. "You see, Batchelor, I'm not particularly fond of the fellows in this place; they're not my sort. I got on all right with old Levity Hicks—and I hoped that I should get on all right with you."

"Why not?" asked Owen quietly, looking at his plate.

"That's good," exclaimed the other. "I see that I've been under a wrong impression. Look here—I'm all alone to-night; come up to my room, and have a chat and a smoke—will you?"

"I'll be delighted," said Owen, still without looking at him.

So it happened that presently Owen Batchelor found himself in that comfortable room upstairs with a cigar between his teeth, watching his host out of half-closed eyes. That host was standing in his favourite attitude by the mantelpiece, with his arms spread out along it. Owen Batchelor thought of another night, when they had been together in that room, and when Levity Hicks had fallen asleep in his chair, and they had commented upon him in whispers.

"You still keep the same room, I notice," said Owen, breaking a silence.

"The same room? What do you mean?"

"Well—some people might not have cared to live on here—after what happened," said Owen, pulling thoughtfully at his cigar.

"Good heavens, man, if people shifted about that account, half the rooms in London would

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empty," exclaimed Rutherglen impatiently. "I'd forgotten all about it; what do you want to rake it up for?"

"My dear fellow, I'm not raking it up; it only just occurred to me to mention it. I haven't been in this room since. Forgive me if I have touched on any sore point."

"Oh—I don't mind," answered Rutherglen. "I suppose it's part of your profession to have to think about all this sort of thing; you're brought up to it. For my part, I'd rather forget the disagreeable things of life and think of the pleasant ones. That's part of my nature; I cast off troubles pretty lightly, thank Heaven!"

"Yes—I've noticed that," said Batchelor quietly.

Again a silence fell between the two men. Owen Batchelor smoked placidly; Rutherglen moved about in a nervous fashion, talking disjointedly; then presently he spoke, and with an effort.

"You know I'm going to be married directly—in about a month," he said. "I shan't be sorry to be quit of this place; it's got on my nerves a bit. You hit the nail on the head just now when you spoke about my living here in this place where Hicks died; I have felt it at times, I can assure you. I shan't be sorry to get away from it."

He started violently, and turned about with an exclamation, as a gust of wind shook the window of the room, and a patter of rain fell smartly upon the glass. "I'm glad I'm not out in this," he said. "It's going to be a beast of a night. I'm glad we're safe indoors. Let's cheer ourselves up a bit, and forget gloomy thoughts. Can I give you a drink?"

"Thanks—I've had a hard day; I think I will.

You'll like to know that I'm getting near the end of my exams ; I shall be fully fledged directly."

"Delighted, I'm sure," said Rutherglen carelessly. He held out a glass to the other man as he spoke.

"Thanks," said Owen Batchelor.

"It's good to be young, and have the world before you—isn't it ?" went on Rutherglen. "I've made a bit of a hit in this last play ; I'm not going to look back now. I've got my chance. Did you happen to see any of the notices ?"

"I'm afraid not. Those things are not read in my line," said Owen Batchelor. "Were they good ?"

"Splendid ! I've never had better in my life. I've got some of them here ; I'll show you."

With his cigar between his teeth, Rutherglen bent down, and pulled open a drawer in his writing table. Batchelor, glancing round, saw that the drawer held a confused heap of papers, among which Rutherglen, tossing them from side to side, was searching. Suddenly he straightened himself with a frowning face ; Batchelor saw that he held a sheet of paper in his hand.

"What the devil's this ?" muttered Rutherglen in a low voice.

"What have you found ?" asked the other.

"By Jove—I'd forgotten this," said Rutherglen, moving away from the desk, and coming out into the middle of the room. "It's a bit uncanny, when one remembers what has happened."

"What is it ?" asked Owen again.

"Do you remember a night when Hicks wrote out a paper—and got me to sign it, and you to witness it ?" said Rutherglen, still with his eyes fixed upon the sheet in his hand. "Some nonsense about coming back."

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"Is that the paper?" asked Batchelor.

There came another gust of wind at the window, and again the patter of raindrops; it might almost have been said that some light, ghostly hand was tapping there.

"Yes—this is the paper," said Rutherglen. "It reads queerly now, after what has happened. Old Levity Hicks is in his grave—and this is what he wrote down; this is what he meant to do—if he could."

"Let's hear it," said the other. "I've forgotten."

Rutherglen began to read; his voice was curiously hushed as he went over the carefully written sentences:

"I, John Leviticus Hicks, am setting down here all that is in my mind concerning the future. Not the future as men know it, but that other future that is beyond our knowledge. When, in the course of nature, it shall happen to me that I die, and pass out of the world of men, it is my determination to come back again, if such a thing be possible. It is my firm belief that the spirit of me may return, for a time at least, to the little place I have held in life; and the conviction is strong upon me that out of the Unknown I may come back by the clear exercise of my will. I have had warning that this is possible, and I shall try to accomplish it."

"And here's his signature," said Rutherglen, in a low voice. "And underneath he has written in a few lines, which I also have signed."

"I declare that, as the above-named John Leviticus Hicks is my friend, should I pass away first I will come back to him, if it be possible."

“And here’s my signature—and yours as a witness
— How that window rattles !”

Owen Batchelor had picked up the paper, which had fluttered from Rutherglen’s fingers to the floor : he was looking at it curiously. “I wonder ?” he said at last slowly.

“What do you mean ? What do you wonder ?” asked Rutherglen sharply.

“Hicks was a queer chap, and he left quite a lot of things unfinished in what he calls his little place here. Suppose he did come back ?”

“Don’t be idiotic. You know that’s quite impossible. You, as a scientific man——”

“My dear fellow, we are never able to say that anything is impossible,” answered the other gravely. “That which to-day we laugh to scorn, and call impossible, becomes to-morrow the property of the man in the street ; that’s gone on for all the ages. I can conceive some poor, beaten, troubled soul like that of Levity Hicks struggling back through forces greater than itself to accomplish this thing, in however poor a way. I wouldn’t be too sure.”

The rain pattered softly at the window again, and Rutherglen started, and looked round. “I’m all on edge to-night,” he said jerkily. “That stupid paper has upset me ; I’d forgotten all about it. Poor old Hicks is in his grave ; that thing”—he pointed towards the paper which the other man held—“that thing is no more than any old letter, written by some dead hand, and worthless now. I want to forget all about it. Give it to me.”

He almost snatched it from Owen’s hand—made as if to tear it across ; and finally crumpled it up hastily, and pitched it into the fire.

"There—that's done with," he said.

Owen Batchelor laughed. "One might almost think that you are afraid of it," he said.

"I'm not afraid in the least; it was only done by way of a joke," said Rutherglen. "I must have another drink; I've got a fit of the horrors." He turned to that side table, and mixed for himself, with a hand that shook a little. Happening to turn in the direction of Owen Batchelor, he surprised him sitting alertly upright, with his head thrust a little forward staring into the shadows at the end of the room. So intent was his gaze that he had apparently forgotten all about Rutherglen.

"What are you looking at?" asked Rutherglen sharply.

Owen Batchelor turned round with a jerk, and as he did so he drew in his breath hard. "Nothing—nothing at all," he said. "I was thinking about something. I think I'll say good night."

He got up from his chair, but Rutherglen laid a detaining hand on his arm. "I say—you're not playing any tricks on me—are you?" he asked. "It'd be doing a rather low-down thing to try and frighten a man over a stupid thing like that paper I burnt. You know it's all rot—don't you?"

"I wasn't thinking about the paper," said Owen, with an involuntary glance again towards that further end of the room.

"What the devil are you staring at?" whispered Rutherglen, gripping his arm heavily. "Do you see anything?"

"Do you?"

"Of course not. Only you'd shake the nerve of any man with this kind of thing. Let's drop it, please."

"You seem to be pretty easily shaken," retorted the other. "We've been talking about things that are a little beyond us, I expect. I shall go to bed."

"That's it—let's be sensible," said the other eagerly. "It was only that infernal paper that started us off like this. Good night!"

"Good night!" said Owen, touching the other's hand for a moment before he went out of the room.

Rutherglen went to the door with him, to say good night again; and Rutherglen kept the door open for a little time after he had gone back into his room. Once or twice, when a coal dropped in the grate, or when the window rattled, he started, and shivered, and looked about him. But presently some of that fear was gone from him; and he undressed and got to bed.

But even there, while he lay in his bed, looking out past the screen that was set round it, and watching the last dying embers of the fire, that dread was still upon him. The weird shadows of the furniture, thrown on walls and ceiling, seemed to take strange shapes, and to mock him, and to dance about him. Even when he dozed a little, it was only to start up again uneasily, and to peer into the shadows; and once to ask, in a querulous whisper, who was there.

Owen Batchelor in his room, undressing slowly, put a problem to himself, and worked it out carefully, in that clear, alert, clever brain of his.

He was certain in his own mind that, as he had sat there in Rutherglen's room, he had seen, coming out of the shadows, the vague figure of the dead Levity Hicks. He knew that his nerves were in fine condition; and he argued with himself at first that it was mere imagination, and that the reading of that paper,

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written by the dead man, had called up the vision. It was possible that that which had seemed out of the power of any man had been accomplished, and that something in the likeness of Levity Hicks had come back. But it was not that which puzzled him, and not that problem which he tried to work out.

Levity Hicks had been laughing.

CHAPTER XIII

THE STRANGER AGAIN

LEVITY HICKS, at one moment strongly, clamorously conscious of life surging and beating through his veins, had received that sudden stroke of which he had been warned, and, so far as the conscious world was concerned, was gone. The poor husk of him—that which had struggled and fought poorly and meanly among men for the rights of a man—was something to be huddled away, with the small pomp and ceremony allowed to us all, into the earth.

Levity Hicks, going out past all thought or remembrance or care of Sockitt's or the small world in which he had moved, went out, for a time, into Nothingness. While the world that he had known went humming on, and while souls were born into it, and men and women died out of it, the soul of Levity Hicks flitted, invertebrate (if the expression may be used) as in life—drifting.

He was in a world of complete silence. That was the first amazing idea that came to him—the first conscious feeling. Shapes flitted past him, and were gone ; and in that world of Nothingness to which he belonged, and in which he floated, undirected and feebly groping, there was no sense of light or of sound. Nor had he at that time any desire to be anything

that should remove him, or the vague spirit of him, into any other plane.

And then, in some fashion, the spirit of Levity Hicks changed. It was a subtle change out of that place of silence and greyness—where there was no sound, and where there could, it seemed, be no light. It was as though mere intangible, fragmentary clouds of memory floated past him, to be recognised for a moment, and then to be gone, before he could grasp at them. They came back in other shapes, floating mockingly past him—only to elude him again. But they never changed the grey silence that was all about him.

The struggle to which something was silently urging him had not then begun ; when it did begin, he found himself feebly fighting against forces too great for his strength. Wholly intangible forces, against which, in a fashion, he blundered, and was flung aside, and lost himself ; but always he came back, with a vague notion that the struggle must be begun again. He knew then, for the first time, that he was only one of many struggling in the same fashion, and all seeking different paths through that grey silence—seeking them, as he felt instinctively, with groping movements and with some despair—the despair that he was beginning to feel himself.

Over and over again he knew that he was on the right path ; and on each occasion those gigantic intangible forces were upon him again, and he was fighting ; and then he was lost. All had to be begun again ; and yet each time he found himself beginning more patiently, and with more hope.

Time and Space were annihilated ; they meant nothing to him. Nor, with no memory to guide him,

did he realise actively that he was dead ; he knew nothing beyond this present condition in which he found himself. Yet never for a moment did his purpose fail, no matter how often he was flung back and had to grope his way again.

He began at last to grope with more confidence. Those floating, wispy clouds of memory could be grasped, and could, in some strange way, be fitted together ; he was building them about him, as a sort of barrier against the gigantic forces that were again threatening to sweep him aside into oblivion. So, in that vague fashion, he fumbled his way back again to something that was almost a tangible thing to be grasped.

For instance. The roving spirit of him would catch at something—a mere floating memory—that vaguely reminded him of some place where he had been, or which he had touched in some existence that was forgotten, save for just that memory of it. And then, while he sought wildly to grasp at it, it was swept past him, and he had drifted on to something else—a stronger memory, that after a flash was lost like the others.

And now the depths of that grey silence which had seemed to envelop him were broken up and scattered. Sounds vague and strange, and which belonged to those memories he had drawn about him, seemed to float to him—sounds which were suggestive of something he had known, and had forgotten. He could not formulate nor arrange them yet in any sequence ; they were mere gusts of sound, suggesting but little. But in a vague fashion he was linking them together, as he had linked the memories he had caught up out of the void, and was making

something out of them that was beginning to be understandable.

And at last, on a spinning, dizzy world to which in some fashion he had got back, he found himself alone, in a darkness that was familiar, and in a garden.

He did not yet fully realise where he was, nor what had happened. Once, in some mysterious fashion, he had been in a place like this ; so much he remembered. There had been vague shapes in this garden, and he had come in contact with them from time to time, though under what circumstances he could not tell. All that concerned him then was that he had won back—though for what reason he could not yet understand—and that the long effort had exhausted him, and left him for the time without that power of struggle that had been with him so long. But the threads of memory were being gathered swiftly into his spirit hands now, and he was beginning to understand.

He had been in this place once when the soul of him, chafing against the body that was weary, had first conceived this thing, and had unconsciously set out to accomplish it, even in that far-away time. Even as that thought came to him, memory sprang alive ; for there, beside him on the old seat under the tree from which all the leaves were gone, was the Stranger.

"I—I've come back," said Levity Hicks, speaking, as it seemed then, in his own voice for the first time.

The Stranger nodded. "Yes—I knew that you would come back ; I knew that you would make the great experiment. You were not content with what you had suffered in this place before—you were not content to go away, and to rest and to forget."

"There were things that I had not done—and

others that I would willingly have done better. I never grasped life as other men did—never warmed my hands at the fire of it ; I was always afraid of it."

"And now even Death rejects you, and sends you back," said the Stranger. "You poor, wandering thing, what do you think you're going to do?"

"I don't know yet ; there has been no time," said Levity Hicks.

"Do you come back in love or in hate?" asked the Stranger.

"I don't know—yet," said Levity. "Perhaps in both. Those things have gone past me for a time ; I have no grasp of anything yet. You were wiser than I was before, and now I seem to know you better, and to understand you. Will you teach me what I shall do?"

The Stranger shook his head again. "I cannot do that," he said. "All that you desire to know must be discovered for yourself—and must be worked out, painfully and slowly and with struggle, by you."

"Listen," said Levity eagerly, bending towards the other. "I know that I died, as men die, and that I left this earth and went away. Those who knew me, and loved or hated me, or merely tolerated me—those people, believing me dead, if they should by any chance see me, will fear me. Isn't that so?"

"Go on," said the Stranger.

"I had in life one great and passionate desire," went on Levity—"that someone might love me. I drew love to myself once—and that was from the pure soul of a little child ; I drew love to myself again, and that was from a woman."

"Are you sure?" asked the Stranger.

"I don't know," said Levity uneasily. "I was sure

about the child ; I thought that I was sure about the woman. But what I want to make clear is this : that if in this shape in which I now am I should stand before any of these people, they must take me for what I am—a spirit not of earth. They would fly from me with horror.”

“ You chose to come back to earth ; your desire was so strong that you have accomplished that. You must take the consequences of what you have done ; you must work out such salvation for your spirit as is in you. No one can help you.”

“ Is there no one that can touch hands with my spirit hands, and understand me, and not be afraid ? ”

“ Yes,” answered the Stranger promptly. “ Someone who has loved you with clear and perfect understanding may do that, and may not be afraid. But you must wait. Many things are possible to you now that you do not understand ; you will see much that you never saw before. You will suffer as you never suffered before, because you still hold to the earth, where men suffer and have suffered through all the ages ; and yet your feelings and your powers are greater.”

It seemed to Levity Hicks that he sat for a long time there in the darkness of the garden, with the silent Stranger beside him. There were so many things he longed to ask and to understand, and yet it seemed that he could not formulate his questions.

“ I came back,” he said at last slowly, “ in the hope that I might do a little better some of the things I had tried to do when I walked among men. Is there any power left in me that shall enable me to do that ? ”

“ Yes—and that power is greater than you know.

It is a power for good and for evil ; and you must wield it as you might have done while you lived—blunderingly or not, and guided by yourself alone."

"I may see people whom I loved on earth here stricken down ; I may see them in trouble and in sorrow ; must I stand aside then, and do nothing ?"

"Sometimes you must do that ; that is one of the risks you were to run ; you remember that I told you of that when you lived, and when I saw you in this place before. I told you that it might happen that you should stand aside, and look on, and be powerless to help or interfere."

The Stranger was moving away. Fearfully enough, Levity Hicks detained him.

"Only one other question. Time flits so fast, and I may see all those in whom I was interested—all I loved—all those whose little hopes and fears and joys were partly mine ; I may see them all go, and I be left—a wandering spirit—alone here. Is there no hope that there may come an end for me ?"

"Yes," answered the Stranger. "When you shall have accomplished that which, vaguely and blunderingly, you set out to do, and shall feel that those you loved, or those in whom you had any interest, need you no more, you may go. What the manner of your second passing may be I may not tell you."

The Stranger was gone ; and Levity sat there in the darkness on the old seat, with his head dropped in his hands. Vaguely he knew that now at last he was back again in his old shape and in his old dress ; at least, so it seemed to him then. Almost it seemed also that anyone coming there must see him, as they had seen him in the flesh, and must cry out at the sight of him.

He became aware that there was someone else in the garden—standing quite near to him. He looked up presently, and saw that it was a stranger—a woman. Vaguely, too, he seemed to know that this was one like himself—something not of earth. He got to his feet, and faced her.

“Who are you?” he asked.

He saw that she must have been comparatively young, and quite pretty, although such prettiness as she had must in life have been coarsened.

“I was the mother of little Susette,” she answered him. “I left her, and went away; I didn’t trouble then what became of her. I wanted my chance of happiness; I didn’t care about anything else. A man had promised that chance to me, as a man had promised it before; I was always ready to believe that tale. And so I went away, light-hearted, leaving the child.”

Vaguely, as he looked at her, there floated from Sockitt’s across the way the jangle of the old piano, and the voice of Julia Ogg in a song he seemed to have remembered; everything was just the same as it had ever been. Levity Hicks could almost have laughed at the incongruity of it.

“And when I died I would have given anything—everything—my hope of heaven—for just a touch of the child’s lips on mine, and of her little arms about my neck. That was my punishment then. Sometimes I come back here, and see her; but she never sees me. Perhaps if I had loved her a little better on earth, she might see me.”

“Do you think—do you think she’ll see me?” asked Levity quickly.

“Yes—I think she will,” answered the woman.

"You loved her and understood her. If you win back to anything at all, you may win back through the child. Try."

She was gone, leaving Levity alone again in the garden. He sank down upon the seat, and covered his face with his hands, and strove to make some sort of prayer.

"Give me back something that was mine—let me not wander lonely here in this place. Take me away again—anywhere—anywhere—rather than that!"

He started to his feet and opened his eyes. And lo!—he stood in a world, not of gloom, but of brilliant winter sunlight. It was almost like a day in spring; there was a breath of spring in the air about him. And over there, where the little rusty gate swung upon its hinges, Miss Meadows was pushing the gate open; and little Susette walked by her side.

They came straight towards him. And now, as he drew back, trembling and afraid, he could almost have cried out with sudden delight. For there, gambolling about the feet of the child, and running backwards and forwards from the child to him, were those strange dream creatures with which he and little Susette had peopled the old garden of the square. There was the absurd, trembling creature of the blue eyes and the crouching body—that Humbly-dog-chap, beloved of little Susette; there was the Top-dog-chap, a little aggressive, and always having to be kept in order by the child. In her fanciful way the child was doing that just then; Levity knew it by the movement of her hands.

And coming down the tree, from amongst those leaves that were out of sight and yet were green and fresh all the year round, came the Creepy-chap.

The Stranger Again

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When, in the time that was past, little Susette had asked more than once that question that must always be asked in the grim business of death by children—"What has become of Uncle Levity?" she had always received the answer in a low voice from Miss Meadows—"Uncle Levity has gone away."

Now, as she came to the seat, she looked round at Levity Hicks standing there. He trembled and was afraid; for here was the great test! He stretched out a hand to her.

She smiled—the sweet, long, slow smile of childhood—and stretched a little along the bench, and seemed to touch his hand with hers. She spoke in her clear, childish treble.

"Aunt Priscilla—you said that Uncle Levity had gone away?"

"Yes, my darling," came the quiet reply.

"He's come back," said the child. "He's here—close beside me."

Levity Hicks fell upon his knees in the old garden, and hid his face against the childish hands.

CHAPTER XIV

DANGER

IN broad daylight, and with a head that no longer ached from sheer weariness, Owen Batchelor had had time to think about matters clearly. Not that he had not thought about them before ; as for instance on that evening when he had sat in Horace Rutherglen's rooms, and had seen in the shadows something that was like the dead Levity Hicks—something that had seemed to laugh mockingly at Horace Rutherglen. He had told himself clearly then that that was no illusion.

In the broad light of day, however, he viewed the matter with different eyes. In that room where poor Levity Hicks had died, he had read that strange writing which declared that Levity Hicks would come back ; doubtless he had been a little overwrought as he read it, and doubtless, too, the nervous condition in which he found Rutherglen had contributed to a certain nervous tension on his own part. So much was easily accounted for.

Then, again, the room had been in partial darkness, and he, too, had been in a condition to believe that shadows might take shape. He determined to dismiss the matter as something incredible and impossible—something that the scientific mind, no matter how crudely developed, could not for a moment entertain.

Nevertheless, what he had seen, or what he imagined he had seen, had taken strong hold on young Batchelor's imagination. Levity Hicks was dead; yet Levity Hicks, from the grave, might call unconsciously to those he had left behind. And he was calling now, with no uncertain voice, to Owen Batchelor.

"It's good to know that you're a friend—to her and to me."

That was what Levity Hicks had said, in that moment of expansion when, in the little house in Farnham Street, he had introduced Delia Valentine to his friend Owen. Owen could almost see him now—the tall, shy, blushing fellow—bringing the girl forward into the room and introducing her; he could hear the tones of his deep voice as he spoke. That was the best thing Hicks had done—the only thing that raised him to a level with his fellow-men. He had been in love; in some miraculous fashion he had come out of his groove, and had found his mate, and had dared to dream dreams that were woven about her and about himself. And in the end Fate had laughed at him, and struck him down, and sent him out of the world.

"If the poor chap loved her, as he must have done, it wouldn't be surprising that he should strive to come back," said Owen to himself. "He said that she was all alone in the world—and I was to be her friend."

In all the time since Levity had died Batchelor had forgotten that; Levity's death had seemed to close down so many things, and to shut out so many more; and Batchelor had not thought about it. He blamed himself a little now; he pictured the

girl in sorrow and in trouble, with no one to whom she could turn in her grief.

And then he remembered the little, obscure paragraph, in a newspaper or two, about a man who had died suddenly, and whose name was given as "J. L. Hicks." Was it not possible that she had not even heard that Levity Hicks was dead at all; for was she not something quite apart from his life at Sockitt's, and his life generally, as Owen Batchelor had known it?

But the thought of the poor broken love-story—so queerly begun and so quickly ended—haunted Batchelor's mind. It had been, from an ordinary point of view, something a little ridiculous and a little impossible; for how was that poor drudge, who could scarcely contrive to feed himself, to marry and to support a wife? Perhaps, however, Batchelor forgot that part of the scheme, and saw only in the little story he had so vaguely touched just a little pretty romance that need not come near to practical things at all.

He remembered the little house in Farnham Street near to Gower Street; he wondered if by chance the girl had ever gone there again. He could not get the idea of her out of his mind; the little, dainty, pretty creature that had seemed the last person in the world to belong to anyone like Levity Hicks. And from picturing her, as he had seen her come into the room beside Levity, and blushing and dimpling as she was introduced, he began to wonder what had become of her—this girl who had no friends beside himself—and how the world was treating her.

From that thought of Levity Hicks and of Delia Valentine, it was but an easy step to go back one

evening, when he was free, to that house where once before, on a casual invitation, he had called to see Levity Hicks. And by the time he had got to the house, in its little narrow street, and in its commonplace surroundings, any such fanciful idea as that Levity Hicks should have come back to a mundane and prosaic world was very far away indeed.

Mrs. Bell, the landlady, answering his knock at the door, peered at him shortsightedly through her spectacles—remembering him vaguely, perhaps, as someone she had once seen, and yet not in the least knowing who he was. There was but one thought always in the mind of Mrs. Bell, who had a precarious living to make; and that was that any young man who appeared at the door of the house must inevitably be seeking for a room or rooms.

Owen Batchelor introduced himself. "I don't think you remember me," he said. "But I once called to visit a friend of mine who had a room here. A Mr. Hicks."

"Yes, sir; I don't often forget a face," said Mrs. Bell, with a nod or two of her head. "Would you please to step in, sir?"

So Owen Batchelor stepped in, and found himself in that little sitting-room in which once before he had waited to see Levity Hicks. And for the moment it almost seemed that the door might open, and Levity Hicks might come in smiling, bringing that pretty girl with him.

"I remember now, sir," said Mrs. Bell. "You came on a day when a young lady called to see Mr. Hicks; you was the only two visitors Mr. Hicks ever had. Well do I remember it, sir." She paused for a moment, and shook her head, and sighed, as one

remembering past lodgers who had not always treated her as she perhaps deserved. "Mr. Hicks, sir, did not treat me well."

"How's that?" asked Batchelor.

"I took a fancy to that gentleman, sir—took a fancy, I did, from the first; which only shows, in a manner of speaking, how one may be deceived. To go out of the place without any explanation—and never to pay what was due to me—and never to come back."

"It surely isn't possible that you don't understand that Mr. Hicks is dead?" said Owen Batchelor.

"Dead, sir? I've never heard a word of it," said Mrs. Bell, in amazement.

"He visited a house in which he had lived for several years—called to see someone there. He died quite suddenly. I do not think anyone knew that he had lived here in your house, even for the few days during which you knew him—except perhaps myself. I—I was about the only friend he had; there was a little money in his pockets—and I paid what poor expenses were necessary."

"Dear—dear—to think of that," exclaimed Mrs. Bell. "'In the midst of life,' sir, isn't it always?"

"Did he owe you very much money?" asked Owen.

"Bless you, sir—nothing to speak of; only a few shillings. It was more that he should go away, and never let anybody have a word from him, that upset me. Why, even the poor young lady knew nothing about it."

"The young lady?"

"Yes, sir—the young lady that came here that day when you called, sir. She came not so long back."

and asked for Mr. Hicks ; and I had to tell her just what I've told you ; that he had gone away, and that I knew nothing about him."

" It's a great deal my fault, I'm afraid," said Owen. " I ought to have come to see you a long time ago—to explain what had happened. I'll gladly pay whatever is due from him."

" That's all right, sir ; it don't matter a bit, now that I know. But to think of Mr. Hicks dead and gone—and that poor young thing not knowing what had become of him, and asking me questions I couldn't answer. Smiling cheerful over it, she was, sir, just in her pretty way ; but I could see that she was upset."

" I'll contrive to see her myself, and let her hear the news, if she doesn't know it already," said Owen. " Please let me know what it is that is due, and I will pay it at once."

She told him, reluctantly enough, what the little amount was ; and he put it into her hands. On the very point of leaving the house, he asked a question casually. " By the way—did my poor friend leave anything behind—I mean in the shape of belongings, or clothing, or anything of that sort ? "

" There was a small portmanteau, sir ; Mr. Hicks didn't have many belongings," answered the woman. " It was locked, and I've never touched it from that day to this. Being always, if you could understand, sir, with a sort of hope upon me that one day he might walk in and explain what had happened."

That old battered portmanteau was fetched by Mrs. Bell ; and Owen Batchelor, setting it on a chair, essayed to open it. The lock was a common one, and presently he found that one of his own keys fitted it ; he threw the portmanteau open. While he looked

through the contents, Mrs. Bell, standing at a little distance, threw in a few remarks which should better explain her position.

"I really can't say, sir, that I ever bother much about newspapers—unless it should be a murder, or anything of that sort. So that, you see, I shouldn't notice anything about poor Mr. Hicks, even if anything had been put in."

"There was nothing but a short paragraph, giving the result of the Coroner's inquest," said Batchelor, without looking up. "And, of course, you'd scarcely be likely to notice that."

"No, sir—of course not," assented Mrs. Bell.

There was, after all, but little in the old portmanteau. A few spare articles of clothing, and some letters, and some rough calculations on a scrap of paper concerning money. There were some old and faded photographs—one of a gentle-faced woman that must have been Levity's mother. But that for which Owen sought, half unconsciously, was not there; a letter from Delia Valentine. He felt that such a letter might give him a clue to where the girl was to be found.

But that letter which Delia had once written to Levity, and had afterwards so splendidly revoked, must have been destroyed by him.

In the end, Owen sealed up those few papers and the photographs in an envelope, and took charge of them. Mrs. Bell parted with him at the door of her house almost tearfully.

"This'll teach me, sir, never to think ill of anyone again," she said. "I've had hard thoughts in my mind this long time past over poor Mr. Hicks; and him resting in his grave all the time."

In the great wilderness of London it seemed impossible to Owen Batchelor that he should find the girl again. That description of her, going to the house to enquire about Levity, and getting no answer to her questions, haunted Batchelor; it was all so pitiful. It was but another of the many blunders into which Levity Hicks had been forced—another of the many things he had left uncompleted.

It was by the merest chance that Owen Batchelor remembered that Delia had been playing in a musical comedy, and remembered, too, the name of it. Why had he not thought of that before? Here was surely the chance to find her. He cast his eyes down the theatrical advertisements in the newspaper, and discovered that the piece was still running, although the last performances were advertised.

There was a *matinée* that day, and Owen Batchelor went. From his seat he recognised the girl singing in the chorus; he thought she looked thinner than she had done; but that might have been merely fancy. After the performance he went round to the stage-door, and quietly waited there.

Delia came out at last, a little after the others; Owen saw that she was dressed in black. As he moved towards her the momentary thought was in his mind that she must know, after all, about Levity's death. As he spoke her name she turned sharply, and then held out her hand to him, with a dawning smile that changed to a brighter one as she came to a full recollection of who he was.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said. "I can't tell you how glad I am."

"Where can we go where we shall be quiet?"

asked young Batchelor, in his quick, capable way. "I want to talk to you."

"Well—I've got to get something to eat between the shows," she answered, with a little laugh.

"Perhaps you'll come with me," he suggested. "We can find some quiet place. I've got such a lot to talk to you about. Come along."

The strength and the energy of the man seemed to dominate her; she who had always been a little willing to lean on someone else. Owen found a quiet restaurant, and a table in the corner of an almost deserted upper room, and they sat down. He said nothing to her until the meal had been ordered; he watched her as she peeled off her black gloves.

"Now tell me about yourself," he said, in what was, had he but thought of it for one absurd moment, the very best professional manner.

"I don't want to talk about myself," she said, with a little fleeting glance at him out of the blue eyes. "I want you, please, to tell me something about—Mr. Hicks."

He saw that her lips were trembling as she looked down at the glove. "Tell me first what you know about him," he suggested.

She looked up quickly. "Nothing—absolutely nothing," she said querulously. "I don't know what it all means. Once I know I treated him badly, though I tried to make up for that afterwards. I was really and truly very fond of him, and yet he went away, and left me without a word."

"And you don't know anything about him?"

She shook her head. "I went to the place where he lived—that house where I met you; but the woman knew nothing about him. She simply told me that

he had gone away, and had never come back. Then I went down to that place in the City, where he worked ; and I waited there, in the hope that he would come out ; but I never saw him. I didn't like to go in there and ask about him—because once, for a day or two, I worked there ; and they would have recognised me, and would perhaps have laughed at me. I could not have borne that. Won't you please tell me if you know anything about him, Mr. Batchelor ? ”

“ Presently,” he answered. And then, in a quiet voice—“ I see that you're in mourning, Miss Valentine.”

“ Yes,” she answered, with a wintry smile. “ My poor old aunt died a little time back ; the only relative I had in the world. She was really very old.”

“ When first I saw you at the theatre this afternoon, Miss Valentine, and saw you in black, I had a thought that you must know——”

“ Know what ? ” she broke in, in a quick whisper.

“ Can you bear a shock ? I came to see you this afternoon, to tell you something—and your black dress told me, or seemed to tell me, that you knew already. About poor Levity Hicks.”

“ Not—not dead ? ” she said, staring at him across the table.

He nodded slowly. “ You did him an injustice when you thought he had left you, or had forgotten you. He died quite suddenly—just as I knew in my own mind he always must die when the call came. He was gone in a moment—like the blowing out of a candle.”

She put her elbows on the table, and rested her face for a moment in her palms, hiding it. Then she sought

for her handkerchief, and while he looked away he knew that she was crying softly to herself. It did not matter ; there was no one else in the room.

"Poor old Levity," she said at last, with a choking sob. "I didn't know ; I didn't understand. And I treated him so badly. He deserved so much from me—and I used to laugh at him. I was never kind, as I might have been—and now I can never tell him so. He'll never know anything about it."

Owen Batchelor, while she cried softly into her handkerchief, looked past her in that room in which they were alone. For there stood Levity Hicks. The thing was as clear as anything could be for a moment ; and it was as if Levity Hicks moved towards the girl, as though he would have comforted her—this little butterfly that had teased and provoked and kissed him alive, and who wept for him now that she knew he was dead.

"Come—don't cry any more," said Batchelor, in his steady voice, still looking past her at the figure. "We don't know everything, Miss Valentine ; and perhaps poor Levity understands, after all."

He decided to make an experiment. It was a cruel experiment, in a sense, but he wanted to test himself. If this thing were an hallucination, there must be some reason why it appeared to him ; he wanted to know whether the girl would see it also. He trembled for the result, but was quite determined that the experiment should be made. The figure still stood there, almost beside the girl.

"Come—you haven't dried those tears yet," he said lightly. "I want you to look at that picture behind you ; they do these things crudely in these restaurants—don't they ?"

She wiped away the last of the tears, and laughed a little consciously, and turned her head. She looked at the picture with her clear eyes for a moment or two, and then turned again to Owen Batchelor with a face that showed no signs of terror or disturbance, save for that storm of tears that was passing.

"Oh—it's not so very bad," she said. And Owen knew that the figure had not been visible to her.

It may be said at once that Owen Batchelor was puzzled. He knew in his own mind that in some vague, intangible way the spirit of the dead man had come back again, as he had said he would, in an attempt to take up again the threads he had dropped when he went out of life. And yet this girl, who had meant so much to him, and who had loved him, had not been able to see him, as Owen Batchelor had seen him. There must be some curious reason for that, and he wanted to know what that reason was.

"I'm sorry to have upset you," he said gently. "But, of course, I know how fond you were of him, and how much he meant to you. I ought to have been more careful in breaking my news."

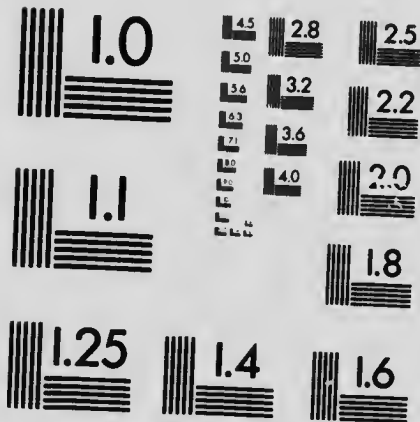
"Oh—it wasn't that; it was something else, I think," she answered, after a momentary pause, during which Batchelor had seen that the figure was still there. "It was a little self-pity—a little condemnation of myself, I think. Heaven knows, Mr. Batchelor, I try so hard always to be honest with myself—and I've tried so hard always to be honest about poor Levity. It hurts me now, more than it ever did, to think that perhaps I did not love him as I should have done."

Owen Batchelor laughed softly. "You're reproaching yourself for nothing," he said. "Just because the



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poor fellow's dead, you feel that you might have done so much more for him while he lived. That's quite a natural thought."

"You don't understand me," she said quietly. "I was sorry for him—sorry for his trouble, and sorry that life seemed to mean so little to him. I have told myself since that that wasn't love; it was something else. It was just because I wanted to help him—and I was the only one in all the world that could do that. That's why I'm trying now, when it is too late to be honest about it, even to myself. I didn't love him."

The figure was gone.

"I am sorry to hear that you are all alone in the world, Miss Valentine," he went on presently, changing the conversation. "You're young to be that."

"Oh—I shall be all right, thank you," she answered cheerfully. "I've taken a tiny lodging for myself near to where poor Levity used to live. There are always work going, you know," she added. "Are you quite, quite sure that your friend never guessed for a moment that I wasn't really and truly and deeply in love with him? It would hurt me much to think that he should ever have known the real truth. I tried so hard—and yet it was hard at all—to be fond of him; that's what brought the tears to my eyes, to think that I did not do enough for him."

"I wouldn't let that worry you," said young Batchelor. "So many of us in this world try to live up to high standards, and fail. By the way, I see that your piece is ending almost at once; what will you do after that?"

"Oh—I shall find something," she answered.

"There's sure to be something starting pretty soon. I've always had to earn my living, although, of course, while I was with aunt it wasn't quite so difficult. She had a little annuity that kept a roof over our heads ; but, of course, that died with her. Don't you worry about me, Mr. Batchelor."

"If I worry about you, it is only because I remember that I was Levity's friend," he answered gently. "See—I'm going to set down here my private address ; it's a boarding-house in Gridley Square, Bloomsbury—the house in which poor Levity died, by the way ; and you can write to me, if at any time I can be of assistance to you." He was scribbling on a card as he spoke.

She looked across at him with a little puckered frown on her brows ; his head was bent over the card. "You say that that was the house in which Levity died ? You said just now that he died in a moment. Were you there at the time ?"

"Yes—I was there," answered Batchelor, without looking up. "There were just three of us—myself, and poor Levity Hicks, and a man—another friend of his—named Horace Rutherglen." He looked up, and held out the card—"There's the address, Miss Valentine," he said.

"Did you say that Mr. Horace Rutherglen was there ?" she asked, holding the card between her fingers without looking at it.

"Yes—a friend of Levity's. You speak as though you knew him ?"

"Yes—I know him," she said slowly. "Thank you for the address, Mr. Batchelor ; it is nice to know that one has a friend." She put the card carefully away in the little bag she carried. Still with her eyes

upon the bag as she fastened it, she asked a question without looking up. "There had not been any trouble between Levity and—and this Mr. Rutherglen, I suppose?"

"Why do you ask that?" he asked sharply.

"For no particular reason," she answered. "Only I thought perhaps that there might have been some trouble between them. I know Mr. Rutherglen—slightly," she said.

She began to draw on her gloves again; she looked across at Owen with soft eyes that smiled upon him in friendship. "It's nice to have seen you," she said. "I've been eating my heart out—wondering and wondering, and being really very lonely; I haven't known sometimes what to do. I'll be so glad to see you if by chance we meet."

"There must be no chance about it," he answered gaily. "I'm not going to lose sight of you any more."

"Thank you—very much," she said, with a smile and a blush. "And I shan't be lonely again, because I shall know that there's one friend to whom I can turn."

"If only for Levity's sake," he answered her solemnly.

"If only for Levity's sake," she echoed.

He walked back with her to the theatre, and left her at the stage-door; she would wait in her dressing room until it was time to get ready for the stage. The last he saw of her then was when she looked back at him as she went in, and waved her hand for a moment, with a smile. It was a gesture that had been familiar to poor Levity.

By a mere coincidence Delia was destined to have another visitor that day. During the evening performance a card was brought up to her with the name "Horace Rutherglen" upon it; she frowned a little.

impatiently as she read the name. She was in no mood for Horace Rutherglen at that time; he did not chime in with any of the events of that particular day. She told the messenger impatiently that she would not be able to see the gentleman; and turned a deaf ear to the teasing comments of the other girls in the room.

But when she went down at the close of the performance she saw, as she descended the last flight of steps, that Rutherglen was lounging there, against the wall near the stage-door. He took off his hat, with almost an appearance of humility, and yet with a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"I waited in the hope that you would see me," he said in a perfectly respectful tone. "I only want to speak to you for just a moment."

"I don't want to speak to you," she said quietly, in a voice that should not be overheard. "I sent you down a message; wasn't that sufficient?"

"Not from you to me," he answered, with a touch of insolence in his tone. "I'm not used to being treated in this fashion, and I don't see that I have quite deserved it."

They were outside the stage-door now, in the little narrow street. Safe from the observation of prying eyes, she stopped, and faced him. "What do you want?" she asked.

"To be treated nicely," he answered with a little light laugh. "I came to talk to you about all sorts of things—about old Levity, for instance."

"Levity is dead," she said swiftly.

"Yes—and he died in my arms, poor chap," said Rutherglen. "Oh—we were friends at the last, although you may not believe it."

She had heard so much at least from young O. Batchelor ; that Rutherglen had been present at time of Levity's tragic death.

"Therefore, is there any great harm in an friend coming to see how you are getting on ?" suggested gently, as they strolled on, side by side. "I know that your show is closing, and you'll be wanting to get another shop, little girl. I helped once before, and was jolly glad to do it ; I might be able to help you again."

"I don't think I want your help," she said.

"Oh—you might ; one never knows," he answered. "I'm in your black books, I suppose, because I was carried away, and said things I ought not to have said to you. Do you suppose I haven't repented of that, and been bitterly sorry for it ? There are certain conventions one has to observe, and I'm told as you know, to a girl I've got to marry. I was nervous when I said what I did ; but that won't prevent my being friends, I'm sure."

"I don't think I need your friendship—thank you !" she said. "I shall be able to get along right, thank you, Mr. Rutherglen. Good night !"

He stood in a wind-swept street, looking after the little black-clad figure ; he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. It was rather a new thing for him to be repulsed ; it woke in him something that had never stirred before.

"Tantalising little baggage !" he said to himself. "Doesn't need my friendship—eh ? We shall see about that. Still mourning for old Levity, I suppose. You always drew me more strongly than any other woman I've known ; I must keep an eye on you, little Delia."

He let himself in at Sockitt's very late, and rattled his walking-stick into the umbrella-stand, and hung up his hat ; and went up the stairs without troubling to muffle his tread. He opened the door of his room, and turned up the lights, and started across the room towards that side table where the decanters were.

Young Batchelor, not yet in bed, heard somewhere in the house a muffled scream, and the crash of an overturned glass ; then someone came plunging along the carpeted corridor, and knocked sharply at his door. Before Batchelor could speak, Horace Rutherglen had stumbled into his room, with a white face and shaking limbs.

"Why—what's the matter with you ?" asked young Batchelor, looking at him curiously.

"He's there—in my room ; I saw him clearly !" exclaimed Rutherglen, looking fearfully towards the door.

"I say—pull yourself together," answered the other quietly. "Who's there ?"

"Old Levity," spluttered Rutherglen. "I just crossed the room to get a drink—and when I turned, there he was, leaning over the back of a chair, just as I've seen him do many and many a time. And he was laughing at me !"

"There's something wrong with you," said Batchelor, laying down his pipe, and moving towards the door. "Let's go and have a look at this new wonder." But his face, as he said the words, was curiously grave and had a strained look.

They went back to Rutherglen's room, and went in, Owen Batchelor leading the way. But there was nothing there ; the room was quite empty save for themselves.

CHAPTER XV

THE VISION OF MISS MEADOWS

For quite a long time matters had not been progressing with any degree of satisfaction between the triumvirate composed of Mrs. Ogg, her daughter Julia and Horace Rutherglen. And it has to be admitted that the fault lay, for the most part, with Horace Rutherglen, and in some small degree with Mrs. Ogg. Julia did not count very much, because, in all negotiations concerning her future, Mrs. Ogg regarded her daughter as something of a cipher.

Julia sometimes petulantly blamed her mother for interfering too much in a matter which directly concerned herself; while Mrs. Ogg angrily declared that someone had got to interfere, and that someone must alternately "put their foot down," or "screw things up a bit."

Rutherglen took his course easily enough, without any very great regard for the feelings of either of the ladies. There was time enough, he told himself; and he had put off the matter so often, on one pretext or another, that there was no earthly reason why he should not put it off indefinitely, if it pleased him to do so. Presently, when he actually wanted Mrs. Julia Ogg's money, he might consent to fetter himself, but that could be done at very short notice, and at the last extremity. So far as Julia herself was concerned, Horace felt that he was perfectly safe.

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Poor Mrs. Ogg from time to time addressed remarks to the mirror in her bedroom, and to her daughter Julia impartially, concerning Horace Rutherglen and all his ways; and Julia listened with what patience she might, sometimes throwing in a word in defence of him, or in excuse of herself. And so the time dragged on, and nothing happened.

That lack of privacy at Sockitt's was responsible to some extent for Mrs. Ogg's troubles. There was no getting hold of Horace Rutherglen, save by taking him outside the house; and he had an easy way of slipping out of engagements, even after they were made, by sending a telegram or a message at the last moment, and giving a plausible explanation afterwards. So it came about that on one of those occasions when Horace Rutherglen would be certain to be at home in the evening, Mrs. Ogg issued her secret instructions to the willing Mrs. Sockitt—those instructions simply being that Mrs. Ogg should “have the dining-room” for a certain time after dinner. As Rutherglen always stayed longer in the dining-room than anyone else, and as the other men would on this particular occasion not be likely to intrude, and could be kept, if necessary, out of the way by the diplomatic Mrs. Sockitt, Mrs. Ogg felt that all would be well.

Behold, therefore, Horace Rutherglen, seated comfortably in the one big arm-chair in the dining-room, with a leg over the arm of it, and with a cigar in his mouth and an evening paper in his hand; and behold the door of the dining-room opening, and Mrs. Ogg unexpectedly sailing in, followed somewhat reluctantly by her daughter.

Horace Rutherglen turned his head slowly, and

observed the two ladies ; moved himself to a more elegant position in the chair, and lowered his paper. "Hullo!" he exclaimed, with the cigar still between his teeth. "Anything the matter? What's up with Julia?"

"You're the matter, Horace," said Mrs. Ogg, in her most majestic manner. "You're making me the laughing-stock of Sockitt's, and you've been getting Julia talked about for quite a long time. If it wasn't that Julia was so soft-hearted, the thing might have been settled ages and ages ago."

"I perceive," said Horace, resuming his former position, and laughing a little, "that I am in for what is commonly known as a talking-to. It's the sort of thing one has to expect, I believe, from one's mother-in-law."

"I'm not your mother-in-law yet," said Mrs. Ogg, sharply.

"No—but you expect to be," said Horace. "To save a lecture, wouldn't it be better to get to the point at once, without any beating about the bush? And may I suggest that you shouldn't raise your voice because in all probability some of the boarders may find it convenient to be in the hall at this present moment; and I don't care about my private affairs becoming the property of Sockitt's."

"Well—then—why don't you be reasonable, Horace?" exclaimed Mrs. Ogg, almost tearfully. "Goodness knows, it isn't my nature to go worrying people; it's wearing to the flesh and upsetting to the spirits. But go on like this any longer I won't."

"I observe that you say nothing, Julia," said Horace.

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Miss Julia Ogg flashed him one glance—a glance which might have meant contempt or challenge or amusement or anything else; and then lowered her eyes. “I suppose that mother is quite capable of taking care of the matter,” she said.

“So it appears,” retorted Rutherglen. “I suppose you both know how I’ve been situated recently; what with being in an engagement, and then having to look for engagements—and the possibility of going on tour; all these things are upsetting. I haven’t had time to make my plans for the future at all.”

“Well—you’d better make them now, then,” said Mrs. Ogg. “Goodness knows, I don’t want to be ratty about it, but I want something done—and that quick.”

So it may be said that that triumvirate resolved itself into a committee of three—with one silent member. Julia Ogg said nothing, save to answer in monosyllables any question propounded to her. And in the end Horace Rutherglen put on his hat, and went out for a walk, having kissed Julia before his departure; and Mrs. Ogg appeared satisfied. That night it was known throughout Soekitt’s that at last the matter had been arranged, and that the wedding would take place without further delay.

It was on the following afternoon that Miss Julia Ogg went out alone. Chancing to meet Mrs. Sockitt in the hall, Julia smilingly explained that she did not quite know when she would be back; she had some shopping to do, and did not wish that her mother, who was lying down, should be disturbed. Mrs. Sockitt afterwards declared that Miss Julia Ogg seemed a little excited, and stammered a little over her words.

The dinner-hour arrived, and Julia had not returned.

Such a thing had rarely happened before, save when mother and daughter had gone out together. Mrs. Ogg was a little perturbed, and Rutherglen glanced more than once frowningly at his watch. After dinner the boarders sat in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Ogg more than once commented on the fact of Julia's absence, and conjectured, half fearfully, that something must have happened to her. She had remarked this with growing conviction for about the twentieth time, when a double rat-tat at the door announced the advent of a telegram.

They could hear the messenger whistling to him on the front steps, with the door open, while Mrs. Ogg, in something of a silence, opened the telegram. "All right, thank you," she said faintly; and the messenger clattered down the steps, and the door closed.

"Julia has met some friends. She may not be home until to-morrow," said Mrs. Ogg; and after a minute or two rose from her chair and rustled out of the room.

Mrs. Sockitt alone at that time guessed the contents of the telegram. She felt it her duty to go pondering up the stairs, and to knock at Mrs. Ogg's bedroom door, and to hope and pray and trust that nothing was the matter. Mrs. Ogg, almost in a state of collapse, pointed feebly to the telegram which lay upon the dressing-table; and Mrs. Sockitt picked it up, and wheezily read it out half aloud:—

"Shall not return to-night. Perhaps not at all. Letter which explains will follow.—JULIA."

"And the mother I've been to that girl all these days!" exclaimed poor Mrs. Ogg.

It was understood the next morning that Mrs.

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had kept her bed. Mrs. Sockitt, scenting tragedy in the air, and almost trembling, as she had trembled in years gone by, for the fate of Sockitt's, hovered between her little room at the end of the hall and that room occupied by Mrs. Ogg. And so at last, in a moment of expansion, was allowed to read a letter which had arrived from Julia that morning, and which, crumpled and tear-stained (the tears were Mrs. Ogg's), had been kept under Mrs. Ogg's pillow.

MY DEAREST MAMMA,

"You did it all for the best, as you've always done everything for the best for me; but there has come the breaking-point, and I can't stand it any longer. I was always fond of him, as any girl might be for a man a little out of the ordinary, as he was; but you wouldn't see that the time had come when I couldn't cheapen myself any longer. I felt sometimes, when you were talking about me, and urging him on, and wanting to know when he would marry me—oh!—I felt sometimes as if you'd stripped the clothes off me, and was showing him what he was buying. So I made up my mind to-day to get off, and have done with it all.

"I'm to marry Cousin George. We've always had a sort of sneaking fondness for each other, although you have called him a wastrel, and all the rest of it. But I think George has got a heart somewhere in him—and he's good-natured, and he sometimes means what he says. I'm sick of Sockitt's, and Horace, and all the rest of it, and I'm going to have a try somewhere else. There don't seem to be many men about, in my sense of the word, at least; I had to jolt Cousin George up to persuade him to elope with me.

But he'll do the square thing, and I shall try to be as happy as I can. Life's a lottery, and I've drawn something at any rate; let's hope it may be something of a prize.

“Ever your loving daughter,
“JULIA.”

“A ne'er-do-weel—a rank outsider!” said Mrs. Ogg sniffing hard. “Sort of boy and girl affection between them when they were children—nipped in the bud as I hoped, as they grew up. You know the type of man, my dear: blue eyes and a weak chin, and laughs in the middle of everything he says. And the mother I've been to that girl all my days!”

The atmosphere of Sockitt's was decidedly uncomfortable. Horace Rutherglen, when he took his place at the table, found glances—contemptuous and pitying—cast in his direction; and, although he carried the thing with a brave front, it was none the less unpleasant. Questions in low voices were addressed to Mrs. Sockitt at the head of the table as to how Mrs. Ogg was getting on, and whether or not she was “bearing up.” It was when it had been definitely announced that Mrs. Ogg had risen from her bed, and would again take her lonely place at the table, that Rutherglen decided that he would seek shelter elsewhere.

Mrs. Sockitt was sorry to hear that he was going, but then Mrs. Sockitt was always sorry to hear that anyone was going. He had been the one boarder of whom she had plumed herself a little, and of whom she had boasted to boarders more commonplace. But Rutherglen had made up his mind, and the moment he arrived when, with his numerous and expensive items of luggage, he went away from Sockitt's for ever.

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Sockitt's was recovering from that blow, when Mrs. Ogg, invading the sacred precincts of Mrs. Sockitt's private room, deposited herself limply on the couch, and declared her intention of leaving also. "The place don't seem the same to me now, my dear," said Mrs. Ogg tearfully. "I can't sleep o' nights, or if I do I keep on waking up in the dark, and calling out to Julia, and finding that she isn't there. It's true I've heard from her, and she's been married by special licence, all fit and proper and regular; but still it isn't the same as having her with me. Consequently, I shall go where all is fresh to me, in a manner of speaking, and where there's nothing to jog my memory, or to remind me of things unpleasant."

Sockitt's was emptying fast. In addition to that neat announcement in the fanlight over the hall door, Mrs. Sockitt, in some alarm at the prospect of dwindling profits, inserted a small but attractive advertisement in a daily paper, announcing the charms of Sockitt's to all and sundry who might care to read.

Miss Priscilla Meadows and the child had the house almost to themselves for a few days, save for one or two unimportant persons, who have not concerned this story, and for Mr. Owen Batchelor. Miss Meadows was not sorry that some of the people were gone; not that it greatly mattered to her, for the child, and her memories, and perhaps her dreams, were all that concerned her quiet life. And just now she had something new to dream about, and to wonder about, and to speculate upon.

That new wonder had been the strange, uncanny talk of little Susette concerning the dead Levity Hicks. When the first sheer horror of the thing had gone by, Miss Meadows was confronted with the amazing fact

that there was no horror in the mind of the child and no fear. Whatever it was that had appeared to her, or that she had dreamed, was nothing of which she was afraid ; it was something which she accepted in the ordinary natural course of events—fitting with her childish day. She had always been a strange child, with strange dream fancies which Miss Meadows had striven painfully to understand.

Miss Meadows knew full well that there had always been a curiously strong understanding between the child and Levity Hicks. It is true to say that Miss Meadows had never been jealous of that, as she might have been ; she had tried to think that she and the child and Levity Hicks had been drawn insensibly together—a little company set apart from the world. In that overpowering love which she had gradually come to feel in her secret heart for Levity Hicks she might perhaps quite unconsciously, and without real scheming, have felt that the child was a link between the two of them.

Just as once before, at a time when she knew that Levity Hicks was in trouble, she had prayed beside the bed of the child that that child might teach her the way to reach the man, so now she prayed in her secret heart, and with no actual words upon her lips, that little Susette would draw her near to the spirit of the dead man, if by chance he existed in spirit. She was not afraid ; love taught her more than theory. She was only passionately anxious to know and understand.

This could not have been any mere dream fancy on the part of little Susette ; of that she began to be sure. The small child, always a little lonely, had played little tended small games, all of her own invention, for

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time to time ; and poor Miss Meadows had blunderingly tried to follow her therein ; only to be hopelessly left behind. She had even heard something about those strange play-creatures of which the child had spoken, and of which, as she knew, little Susette had talked to Levity Hicks ; but the governess was still strong in the woman who had never known what youth meant ; and so it had come about that she had not understood.

Levity Hicks had come again to the garden in those bright cold sunshiny days of early winter ; and Miss Meadows had walked there with the child, with the sole purpose in her mind of fathoming this thing, if she could. For it was strange and awful, in a sense, that while she strolled up and down that worn grass-plot, with the child holding to her hand, something else that had once been Levity Hicks walked up and down on the other side of the child, and was not to be seen by Miss Meadows.

" Who is it that you look up at as we walk along ? " Miss Meadows would ask.

" Uncle Levity," came the instant reply.

There was a clutching at the heart of Miss Meadows, and a gasp almost of fear ; and then again that striving to understand.

" But, little Susette, Uncle Levity has—gone away."

" And now he has come back again," answered little Susette. " He walks along here beside me—and the Folks are with us. And nowadays Uncle Levity is generally smiling, though sometimes he looks a little sad, until I jerk at his fingers, and make him forget that he is sad."

" Child—in God's mercy—do you see him now ? " whispered Miss Meadows.

"Why—of course I do. . . . Why are there tears in your eyes, Aunt Priscilla? And there—I declare to goodness if you haven't frightened him away! He's gone again."

It was that always. There was no sign of fear or dread or panic; whatever it was that appeared to the child, and walked with her in the old garden in the square, was a thing to be welcomed and watched for and waited for eagerly. And still Miss Meadows, with a heart that ached for the memory of the dead and longing to creep within the magic circle in which little Susette walked day by day, was kept outside and beat feeble hands against invisible bars.

And then there came a night when little Susette lay asleep, and when Sockitt's seemed asleep too. Something—some force she had not understood before, and did not understand now—seemed to be drawing Priscilla Meadows away; there was something calling her. She could not sleep; she had not even attempted to undress. She took the latchkey that admitted her to the house; and, looking to see that the child was asleep, and that the shade and nightlight was burning, stole out of the room, and out of the silent house into the square.

It was a brilliant night of stars, with a clear moon sailing high overhead. There was no breath of wind anywhere; all the world was hushed. Even the distant sound of traffic that, generally speaking, sent its echo into Gridley Square from the noisy street outside seemed hushed to-night; there was no footfall even on the pavement. Miss Meadows had muffled herself in a heavy cloak; she went—she could not have told why—straight across the road, and through the little old rusty gate, and so into the

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garden. And there, under the stars, she stood and waited.

And she was Youth again. She was all that she had never been ; she was compact of vague dreams that had filled her youth, and had been laid aside—mere memories that were half forgotten. She stood there under the stars, and it seemed in some strange way that she had come into her heritage at last—the heritage that belongs to each one of us, and yet it is so seldom grasped and held. And this time it was Levity Hicks that came to her—and not to little Susette, sleeping in safety, with the shaded nightlight beside her.

"So you see me now?" said Levity Hicks, standing there under the stars. "And you're not afraid?"

"Was the child afraid?" she whispered. "Oh—my dear—could I fear you?"

She saw that his eyes were smiling ; she knew, in some vague fashion, that his hands were touching hers, and holding them in a clasp that was real to her.

"I came back . . . I think this must have been one of the things I meant to do . . . I had not understood before ; all my life I had been throwing away the precious things, grasping at the shadows. . . . How wonderful you are—and how your eyes are shining ! I thought once that there were tears in them—but there are no tears now. I had looked for them all my life—and now I have found it."

She was alone again in the garden under the stars—and yet never to be alone again while she lived. Her eyes were shining, as he had said, and her face was raised to the silent heavens.

"God—I thank Thee !"

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN WITH THE UGLY FACE

THAT gay butterfly that had ever loved the sunshine and had lived from day to day, with no thought for the morrow, was in difficulties. Delia Valentine was beginning to find the world a harder place than she had imagined it to be.

That aged aunt, that had lived for eating and sleeping, had never meant very much in the affections of Delia ; and her death meant simply a displacement of ordinary events, necessitating a change. Even freedom had meant something to the girl ; she was earning enough to keep her going, and the life and the excitement pleased her.

That news of the death of Levity Hicks had wounded her young heart for but a little time ; he had become only a gentle memory. Always treating herself and others with perfect honesty, she had told the strict truth when she declared to Owen Batchelor that she had never really loved Levity Hicks ; she had described her feelings perfectly. It had seemed a shame that the poor fellow who had loved her had been so suddenly swept out of life, before he had known what the best of life meant ; but with that little sadness and that little sighing for his untimely fall the matter had ended.

Even with the ending of that engagement in which

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she had been so long, the future did not loom heavily before Delia. She told herself that she was glad of a rest—glad to know that for a little time, at least, she need not feel that she was engaged every evening, and must perforce arrive home late at night. Her lodging was a cheap one, and it would not be a very long time before she had secured another engagement.

Perhaps it is scarcely necessary to say that Delia had not saved anything—at least, nothing appreciable. She had always dressed smartly and prettily; and there had been mourning to buy at the time of her aunt's death. True, she had sold the furniture of the little house; she hated the look of the horrible old early Victorian things that had been the prized possessions of her aunt, and that seemed to carry hideous memories of dull days spent in their midst for Delia. Knowing but little of such matters, she had placed herself in the hands of a plausible dealer, who had given her practically nothing for the little household, and had kindly offered to remove it all, without giving her any trouble in the matter. And that money had gone, like all the rest.

By the time Delia had finally made up her mind that she really ought to look at things seriously, and find an engagement, she found that most engagements had been arranged. The agent to whom Rutherglen had originally sent her shook his head and pursed up his lips; he mentioned one or two things that she could have had a week ago, but which were now gone. However, he would bear her in mind, and would drop her a line if anything happened.

The money she had was dwindling, and even light-hearted Delia began to grow a little anxious. She took to going to the agent's offices more frequently,

and waiting about in a bare room that was lined from floor to ceiling with photographs, more or less affectionately signed, and in which a subdued girl, with a perpetual cold, worked hard at a typewriter. Delia remembered the days when she had worked at a typewriter, too, and had sometimes earned quite a lot of money. Of course, it wasn't possible that she would ever have to go back to that; she shuddered at the thought; but still that was always something to fall back upon. These other people, who lounged about in the agent's waiting-room, and button-holed him every now and then when he came out of his office, had no such double chance as Delia had.

The agent sent her from time to time to all sorts of extraordinary people with a view to an engagement. The agent, being a much-worried man, with quite a number of people about him anxious to obtain employment, sent Delia out recklessly; so that despairing people, at sight of her smiling face with its blue eyes, would tear their hair, and wonder, with strong language, what the agent thought was required for a heavy tragedy part or an emotional mother.

"My child—it's a mistake, and they ought not to have sent you. Now, if it had been for that other part you would have been perfection; but we've filled that a week ago."

The time came when Delia was a little behindhand with her rent. It was all right, she assured the landlady, with a smile; it was only quite temporary, and she was expecting some money at any moment. In her heart she told herself that even if she got an engagement there would be weeks of rehearsals before she received a single penny. But Delia had always looked just about an hour or two ahead of her, and

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absolutely refused to believe that things could be as bad as they might appear, if she cared to think about them seriously.

She decided that while she was waiting for that engagement she would go back to the old business of typewriting. It was annoying, and even humiliating to have to do that; because she had bulked rather large in the imaginations of those girls who had been her former companions, and who spoke of her with something of awe as having gone on the stage. But Delia was brave, and Delia did not mean to starve.

They were a little doubtful about her at the typewriting place where she had been before. As a matter of fact they had more people looking for work than they could accommodate; besides, so many firms nowadays employed a regular staff for that sort of work, and did not depend on casual labour. They, too, would keep her name before them, and would let her know if anything promising came their way.

It was on one of those days—a wet and windy one—when she was emerging from the door of the agent's offices, that Rutherglen saw her. Rutherglen had again been snapped up for a part, and the world, so far as he was concerned, was looking rosy again. He saw the black-clad little figure, holding her dainty skirts out of the mud, and balancing an umbrella; he smiled to think that she was at the old business again of looking for work. After a moment's hesitation he walked into the agent's office, and asked to see him.

"I don't want anything for myself," he said, after shaking hands with the man. "I'm fixed up, as you

know. But I'm looking for someone, on the chance of being able to do her a good turn. Little friend of mine; I sent her to you originally. Delia Valentine."

"Why—she was here not a moment ago; she's always here," said the man. "But I've told her that there's nothing doing just now; everything's filled."

"Do you happen to have her address?" asked Rutherglen carelessly. "I might be able to do something for her, although, of course, I should put it through you, as a matter of business."

The agent had the address, and he wrote it down on a slip of paper and handed it to Rutherglen. Rutherglen glanced at it, and put it in his pocket; he noticed that it was in a street near to Gower Street.

"Don't say anything to her about my having enquired," said Rutherglen. "She'd only imagine that I'd got something for her, and was going to make her fortune suddenly, or something of that sort."

"Right you are," said the man. Rutherglen laughed to himself softly as he went out. After all the game was always in the hands of the man, if he played it carefully.

It happened that night that Delia Valentine, in a sense, had her back to the wall; and that wall was the wall of a dingy room at the top of a house not very far from that other house in Farnham Street in which Levity Hicks had lived. The poor little butterfly, so sure of herself, and so certain that her gay wings would take her through the world without any trouble, had been suddenly wounded, and had been suddenly shown that there were hard and solid facts to be faced. A landlady who, for her own part, had had a desperate struggle to keep going at all, had found the little

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butterfly with an ultimatum. And yet, knowing what life was for a woman, had done the thing with something of kindness.

"God knows, my dear, I wouldn't turn you out for the world—but what's a body to do? You can't pay; and there's them outside as would be glad to come in, and take the room, and give me good money for it."

"I know that," Delia said faintly. "Of course that's reasonable. But it will be such a little time before I have money in my hands again, and can pay you—such a very little time. I only want you to give me a chance."

"I might ask that myself, miss," answered the woman. "Give me a chance, if it comes to that. This is my living; this is all I've got, and every shilling means something. That's London—that is; that's a big city, where men and women have got to fight, and make the best of things. It's a fair old give and take, when you come to think of it—ain't it?"

"Give me until to-morrow," Delia had pleaded; and so had ended the discussion.

That had ever been Delia's way—the line of least resistance. Anything might happen to-morrow—everything must happen. God and Fate and all other things that ruled the world must stir on her behalf—to-morrow; life couldn't be so cruel to her as it promised to be to-night. She would wait.

Poor Levity Hicks, if he had lived, would have done something for her in some vague fashion. True, Levity had been poor, even as she was; but Levity would have done something. It was so pitiful that he should have died, and left her lonely; it would have

been good, at such a time as this, to go to him, or call him to her ; and so, in purposeless fashion, had cried out her sorrows on his broad, shabby bread, and in that way have got rid of some of them.

It was an easy transition of thought from poor Levity Hicks to that friend, Owen Batchelor. Any rough and hard contact with the world, Owen Batchelor was to stand her friend ; so much poor Levity Hicks had arranged. She should have thought of him before. Once she remembered he had scrawled his address on a card, and had given it to her.

She hunted for the card, but failed to find it. In a careless fashion she had heaped together scraps of memoranda, and old letters, and cards of one sort and another ; but his was not to be found. And though even while she hunted for it, she told herself that she was glad to think that she had lost it. Not glad to be out of touch with him ; only glad with a relieved feeling that it was not possible for her to apply to him for help. The thought of that was out of the question.

She was still vaguely going on with her sea-sickness when the landlady climbed the stairs again, and knocked at the door. The landlady was still aggressive, and yet there was a subtle change in her manner.

"There's a gentleman called to see you, miss," said the woman. "Quite the gentleman, I might say. He's an old friend. I've asked him into the parlour ; if you cared to step down you could see him."

"What name did he give ?" asked Delia, with a faint hope that perhaps this might be Owen Batchelor.

"Not so much as the whisper of a name did give me, miss," answered the woman.

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Delia went wonderingly downstairs. She opened the door of that mysterious apartment known as the parlour, while the landlady, after lingering for a moment or two, disappeared in the direction of the basement. Delia, advancing into the room, did not see for a moment who it was that had visited her; and then suddenly behind the door she saw Horace Rutherglen standing, smiling at her, and bowing.

"What do you want?" she asked, making a movement again towards the door.

"Miss Valentine—it has taken me quite a long time to find you; and I have been very patient in my search," he said gravely. "Don't be hard on me; I've only come here now with a strong and earnest desire to help you. Don't I know what our work is like? how we've got to wait, and starve if need be; don't I understand all that side of it? That's the side of it you understand now— isn't it?"

"It is the side of it that I am prepared to face," she answered him bravely. "I do not forget, Mr. Rutherglen; I never shall forget. You thought once that you could do what you liked with me; you thought that I was helpless, and that I didn't understand. Well—I understand now; and I'm going to fight this thing out alone. I'm not afraid."

"You're very much afraid," he said, with a laugh. "You're up a tree, my dear, and you're dreadfully frightened of what life means for you in this great city, if you don't get something soon that will bring in the money."

"I'm not frightened at all," she answered. "You pretended once to be my friend—and once you helped me. Why do you come now, to laugh at me, and to taunt me, because you think that I am helpless?"

"Oh—come, my dear—be reasonable—and don't talk nonsense. I don't come to taunt you, and I most certainly am not laughing at you. But you have studiously turned your back on me; and that is a condition of things I don't like. I want to help you, if I can—because, as you know, I'm dreadfully fond of you."

"You can leave that part out altogether," said Delia quickly.

Rutherglen shrugged his shoulders. "Oh—very well; I don't mind," he answered. "But for goodness sake let us be friends. I'm getting on, and doing well; and I don't want to climb up the tree alone. I've got lots of chances to help you; people listen to me in these days. Let us at least be friends, Miss Valentine."

"I don't want to quarrel with anyone," said Delia slowly, after a pause.

"That's right—that's right; I see that we're beginning to understand each other. I shan't give up the hope that some day you'll forgive me that little temporary madness of mine, and let us go back to the old footing, when we were the best of friends. I'm glad to think that I know where you are to be found; I must see if I can't stir up some of my friends to do something for you. There—that's straight enough—isn't it?"

She had been very lonely for a long time, and very hopeless. And this man smiled at her out of his kindly, bright, dark eyes; and no one else had smiled at her for quite a long time. A little fluttering and a little tearfully, she put her hand into the hand so frankly held out by him, and found it held in a warm, strong clasp.

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"I'm not ungrateful; it is good of you to take any trouble about me," she said.

"Why shouldn't I take trouble? we're both rowing in the same galley," he responded. "I'll set things right for you as soon as I get the chance. As I have said, I made one slip in one mad moment—and it's taken you a long time to forgive that. I'll wipe it out; I'll make you forget it. Cheer up, little Delia; I'll see you through, somehow or other."

A little tearfully, and with most of her fears dismissed, she left him on the point of going out of the house, and went up to her own room. And Horace Rutherglen, guessing with a very fine intuition exactly what the position was, waited for a moment or two in the hall, until the landlady, all alive with curiosity, emerged from the basement to meet him.

"A young friend of mine; I've known her for years," said Rutherglen, in his easy way. "You understand, please, that if it's difficult for her to meet expenses here . . . well, you understand."

"Yes, sir." The woman's eyes were eager, and she looked into the face of this pleasant-mannered, handsome fellow with a new hope.

"I don't want you to be hard on Miss Valentine; you've got nothing to fear. Is she, for instance, in your debt at all just now?"

The landlady named the sum; and, large though it was in the eyes of poor Delia, it was small enough in all conscience. Rutherglen, in a lordly fashion, put his hand in his pocket, and counted out the amount; and waved aside all idea of a receipt.

"Only you've got to understand that I won't have the lady worried," he said frowningly.

There had been but one thought in the woman's

mind: that of money overdue and unpaid; and here suddenly was a gold mine. In her deep satisfaction she was almost flippant over the matter. "Lor' love you, sir, do you think I should worry the lady? Only a bit anxious, I was, because the best of us mayn't be able to pay bills when the comes along. She can stop here as long as she likes the pretty!"

Rutherglen went away, humming a tune, and swinging his stick as he walked. And the landlady returned to her basement, and in a vague fashion thanked Providence for handsome gentlemen with money in their pockets. And Delia had a new hope in her heart for the future.

Poor, careless butterfly! It never occurred to her that there could be any special reason why suddenly the landlady should be all smiles again, and why she should wave aside any apologies as to the non-payment of bills. Delia was not to worry about that any time would do in the future. Didn't the suddenly friendly landlady know what the profession was, and how difficult it was at times to make both ends meet? For Rutherglen had impressed upon her that it was quite unnecessary for any mention to be made to Miss Valentine of what he had done. Rutherglen had no wish to be overwhelmed with thanks.

And so, in that easy fashion, Delia drifted on. She went down each day and saw the agent; and sometimes the agent sent her to impossible people who had nothing to offer her; and sometimes he made her vague promises, quite in good faith, which were never fulfilled. But something was going to happen to-morrow for Delia; and in the meantime

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the landlady was quite pleasant and quite cheerful—and did not bother her in the least—but those ever increasing bills.

"No one can say I'm not making a fight for it," said Delia to herself.

Rutherglen came again—and yet again; and each time the landlady hesitatingly named the amount due, and Rutherglen paid it. To Delia the man was perfectly friendly and perfectly charming; he begged her not to worry about things, and assured her that he was doing his very best to find something for her.

"I'm keeping my eyes open, little girl; only things are so rottenly slow just now," he said.

"It is very kind of you," she said, with something of the old distrust of him falling away from her.

And then there came a day when his manner had changed a little. It was a shade more familiar; and with the familiarity was mixed a certain fine contempt. After all, he felt, the girl was a little fool to take things so much for granted, and to look at him out of those innocent blue eyes of hers, and pretend that she knew nothing. That time had come when he must speak plainly.

"Well—and how are you getting on?" he asked, after they had shaken hands.

"There's a promise of a tour presently—but nothing at the moment," she answered. "I'm getting a little frightened, Mr. Rutherglen; I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Oh—you're all right; I shall see that nothing happens to you," said the man. "I don't let my pals go to the wall."

"You couldn't do that—I mean, you couldn't help

me in that way," she said quickly. "I was thinking of money."

"Well—what else do you suppose I was thinking of?" he asked her, with a laugh. "I also was thinking of money; we all need it, and we all get it in various ways. Look here, my dear"—he lowered his voice, and glanced towards the door—"why can't you be reasonable? Look what I've done for you; am I to get no return, but just to be held at arm's length, and rewarded with a smile or two?"

"I thought you were trying to help me—out of kindness—out of friendship?" she faltered.

"Friendship! Kindness!" He threw back his head, and laughed. "What's the good of those to anyone? As for trying to help you—well, I've been helping you pretty substantially for some time past."

"I don't understand you," she said.

"I'll make it plainer. How do you imagine that you've been able to live on here during these weeks unmolested? Do you think your landlady is an angel from heaven, or that she runs a charitable institution?"

"You don't mean——"

"I mean that I've been paying your bills—and am quite willing to go on paying them; only I want something more than a touch of the hand from you in return. If it comes to that, I don't see why it's necessary to run a second establishment. I've a mighty cosy little flat near to Charing Cross, and there's——"

"Stop!" she cried out at him. "Stop, I tell you. You don't know what you're saying. I've a blind little fool—but no more than that. I'll give you money somehow, and I'll pay you back. I've

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been drifting ; I haven't thought about things. You shall have the money, Mr. Rutherglen ; I didn't understand before."

She turned away, white-faced ; and in a moment the man had crossed the room, and had taken her in his arms, and was whispering all that he would do for her, and all that he meant by what he called his love for her.

She got away from him, and stood at bay against the wall of the room ; and now the blue eyes were blazing. "Go away from me !" she cried. "Go away from me. I never want to see your face again. You shall have your money—every penny of it."

"And pray, how are you going to get it," he asked. "Because I'm not paying any more here, and I shall let your landlady know that it's useless to depend upon me. They've got a nasty trick of turning people into the streets, these landladies, and detaining such things as they possess, in order to get something towards paying their bill."

"I don't care," said Delia.

"Not now, perhaps—but you will," answered Rutherglen quietly. "I've said that I won't see you go to the wall, and I'll keep my word." He took a card and a pencil out of his pocket, and scribbled something on the card. "There's my address," he said, putting the card on the table. "When you've tried everything else—and it won't take you very long, if I know anything of you—come to me there, little girl. You'll be very welcome."

He put on his hat and went out of the room. In the hall he was met by the landlady, who spoke suavely to him ; Delia heard his reply.

"Go to the devil !" cried Rutherglen roughly ; and

went out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

The landlady came into the little sitting-room ; her face was hard. "Anything the matter with your young man ?" she asked icily.

"He's not my young man," said Delia, in a shaky voice ; and went past the woman, and out of the room up to her own.

She stood there by the window, wondering what she should do. She had often wondered that, but not quite in this fashion. There was to be no to-morrow now to which she could put off things ; to-morrow had come. There was a sixpence and a few coppers in her purse ; and that was all. The landlady had been providing meals—day after day, just as they were ordered, and the little money Delia had left had gone for small outside expenses. She wished now passionately that she had not lost Owen Batchelor's address she could have depended upon him. He had been poor Levity's friend, and he had promised to look after her. What a bitter fool she had been !

She heard the landlady's footsteps on the stairs and the woman came in without even knocking. She held a folded paper in her hand, and she laid it upon the table. "I will trouble you for the amount at once, please," she said.

"I haven't any money," said Delia, as firmly as she could.

"I suppose not," broke out the woman, with her voice rising. "I've seen your sort before. Now that you've had a bit of a dust-up with your fancy man, that's been paying for you all this time, I suppose you'll wait till someone else turns up to help you. I'll tell you——"

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It ended, of course, in the only way it could end. Delia Valentine walked out of the house in the clothes she stood up in, and with nothing in her purse. She had put down that sixpence and the few coppers on the table before the landlady, and had seen it angrily swept into a corner. It was growing late when she came out of the house and faced the world ; but Delia held her head high, and declared that she didn't mind in the least ; something or someone would help her.

On one point she was firmly determined ; and it took a great deal to make the little butterfly firmly determined on any point. She would not go to Horace Rutherglen, even if she died in the streets.

She had never faced life like this before, and had never understood what it meant. To be absolutely homeless and penniless ; to know that she faced the night that was coming rapidly, without the prospect of the warm shelter of a bed and a roof, and a door between her and the world. When she had walked proudly out of the house she had not realised all that this meant. But now London was a great, hideous, echoing place, laughing at her and mocking her. She went on through the streets mechanically—coming back always, in some curious fashion, to that neighbourhood near to Gower Street in which she had been lodging. After all, that was the only place she knew as home, and in some vague way it might happen that even the landlady might relent, and let her sleep there for one more night at least.

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On that night Owen Batchelor, asleep in his bed at Sockitt's, dreamed a dream. In some unaccount-

able way he dreamed that he was out in Gridley Square in the dead middle of the night, and that he could not understand why he was there at all. He had an impression in his mind that something was urgently required of him, but he could not tell what it was. And then suddenly there came to him, out of nowhere as it seemed, the figure of Levity Hicks. He was just about to speak, in the most ordinary way, to Levity Hicks, with the full understanding that this was the old Levity, who had not died at all, when he started fully awake, and sat up in bed.

Owen looked at his watch, which was lying beside his bed ; it was nearly three in the morning. For some reason or other he got out of bed, and stood there looking about him in a dazed way ; he could not make out what was the matter with him. He had a feeling almost as though he had been badly frightened by something, and that that something had passed leaving only the terror of it behind. With a sudden hurry upon him that was as unaccountable as the terror by which he was obsessed, he began to dress himself. And when he was dressed he went swiftly downstairs, and got his hat ; opened and shut the door quietly ; and so stood on the pavement outside.

"Just like the dream," he muttered to himself. And as he spoke he saw a man moving along on the other side of the pavement.

That was curious, because he had not seen the man a moment before. There was something familiar about the hunch of the broad shoulders, and the way in which the hands were carried drooping at the sides. The terror was gone now from Owen Batchelor ; he felt it to be vitally necessary that he should overtake that man on the other pavement, and

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should come up with him, and should look into his face.

He found, however, that that was aggravatingly impossible. Even if he broke into a short run, that man was just in front of him, although he had not seemed to increase his pace. And they were going now at a great rate, through street after street, in a London that was almost silent.

Exactly when it was that he first saw the woman, Owen Batchelor did not know. He had been so intent upon that figure of the man, and so filled with the necessity for not losing sight of him, that he had not noticed the woman until, after quite a long time, he saw that she was going along in front of the man. She turned off once or twice, in a purposeless way ; and the curious thing was that she walked quite close to the man, without taking any notice of him ; and yet, when she saw Owen in the distance, she made off quickly in quite another direction. He wondered what she could be doing abroad in the streets at that hour. And still they went on in that order : the woman always in front, swiftly avoiding any solitary man she happened to meet ; the man with the hunched shoulders after her ; and Owen Batchelor last.

And now they had come to one of the bridges that spanned the river ; and the woman had stopped. A policeman, who seemed to spring out of nowhere, spoke to her, and Owen saw that she answered him quickly, and seemed to satisfy him, and then went on again. Something in the quick turn of her head as she spoke to the man had aroused a sudden interest in Owen. He went on more swiftly after the woman, determined that now it was as vitally necessary he

should see her face as it had been that he should see, at one time, the face of the man.

And so she came to the end of the bridge, and looked swiftly back over her shoulder; she had not seen Owen, who had dropped back into the shadows. But when she flung out an arm on the parapet, and laid her head upon it, he knew just what the meaning of that gesture was; and in an instant had raced across the road, and had seized her by the shoulders; and had twisted her away from that dreadful glance at the dark river flowing far below.

And it was Delia Valentine.

"What are you doing? What were you going to do?" he whispered, as he held her close.

She burst into a flood of tears; the little form in the black dress was shaken by sobs. "I was going to kill myself; there was nothing else for me to do," she said. "The dreadful streets frightened me; life was suddenly an awful thing, from which it was good to escape. But not now"—she clung to him, and turned her face away from the river—"not now. Thank God you found me. I wonder how it happened that you found me?"

He did not reply to that; he was leading her away from the river. But he knew now who the man had been that had called him out into Gridley Square, and had run before him all the way to find Delia. The man was gone now; but Owen knew that it had been Levity Hicks.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BROTHERS

Six months had gone by, and summer was upon the land again. Even Sockitt's felt the influence of summer, and opened its windows a little wider, and gave a new set of boarders the prospect of the garden in the middle of the square, and of its possibilities as a place of rest. Not that the new boarders were impressed by it; there were other gardens to be found, and Miss Meadows alone remained faithful to it.

Miss Meadows would remain faithful to it, because it must not be left, with the chance that Levity Hicks should come again and find her gone. Some day, perhaps, that must happen; but she would cling to the place until she knew that the possibility of his coming, as he had come once in the moonlight and under the stars, was a possibility that could exist no more.

Little Susette had ceased to speak of him. Often Miss Meadows, watching the child, would see her, with her chin propped on her small hands, looking into the shadows of the garden with wide, solemn eyes; but Miss Meadows knew that little Susette watched, and watched in vain. And still Miss Meadows waited, as though for something she knew must happen.

Traditions are carried on even in a place like Sockitt's ; because all the boarders do not go at once. People are spoken about who have long since dropped out of the ranks ; and so it happened that once or twice a certain Mr. Horace Rutherglen, who had once cut a figure there, was spoken about. And Mrs. Sockitt, at the head of the table, spoke once, suddenly and surprisingly, in that voice which seemed always to emerge from beneath a feather bed. Mrs. Sockitt did not usually express opinions, but when she did so those opinions carried weight.

"Had a good chance, that man ; the best of chances. Good looks, which he's done his best to drink away ; a fine voice that went in the same direction. I happen to know the place where he's been lodging, and so I know something about him. My word—what a figure of a man he was !"

Miss Meadows, sitting in her place at table, thought of Horace Rutherglen, and of how, in that very room, he had unblushingly lied to her concerning the money which she had tried to send in secret to poor Levity Hicks.

"I dare say you remember him, Miss Meadows?" said Mrs Sockitt, suddenly calling painful attention to Priscilla. "A tall, fine man, with a big voice."

"Yes—I remember him," said Miss Meadows, with that sudden flushing of her face which always appeared when she was addressed unexpectedly.

"Well—he's got himself into hot water ; and he's made a bolt for it," said Mrs. Sockitt. "It's a matter of fraud, or something of the kind, and I believe they're looking for him. It's rather a mean sort of fraud, too—something to do with a woman, I believe."

It makes me feel quite sorry that the man was ever at Sockitt's at all."

Sockitt's was noisy that night, or so Miss Meadows thought; and another, like unto what Julia Ogg had once been, was banging on the old piano, and making an attempt to sing something from the latest of all the musical comedies. Little Susette, in her room upstairs, was quietly asleep; outside the night was glorious. Miss Meadows took her key, and wrapped a light cloak about her, and stole out into the garden.

There was no one there; only now and then, as happened in the summer time, a pair of lovers strolled along the pavement, content just to be together, with no need for words. Miss Meadows sat down on the old seat under the trees, and looked at the lighted windows of Sockitt's. She had no expectation that anything would happen; presently, when the house was quieter, she would go back, and would go up to her room.

And then she saw him coming across the grass through the shadows; and she rose to greet him. It seemed impossible, but the dear face looked older, and was lined a little. Only the eyes smiled at her in the old friendly fashion.

"This is for the last time," he said to her, as their hands seemed to touch in the darkness. "I shall come again no more. All that I tried to do is nearly done; to-night sees the end. But I could not go without coming back to you—here, in this place that means so much to both of us. When I go, you will not think of me as dead?"

"I couldn't do that," whispered Miss Meadows. "I couldn't." And then, as she clung to him—"Is there no world in which we may meet?"

"I don't know," he answered her sadly.

"I will pray—I will hope," she whispered. "Somewhere—no matter when—we shall meet. I will hope and pray."

"Hope and prayer will move mountains and worlds," he answered. And then, for the first and only time, it seemed to Priscilla Meadows that he put his lips to hers for a moment there in the dark garden.

And when she opened her eyes she was alone.

On that same night a man walked swiftly down a side street which led to the river. A villainous side street, with a low-browed, evil-looking public-house at the end of it, staggering half-way into the river on timbers that were thrust into the bed of it. A place that had not the best of reputations, and that had got itself into trouble more than once with the police. The man seemed to know the place, and, after a moment of hesitation outside in the narrow street, pushed open the doors, and went in. There was a Babel of voices inside, and the atmosphere of the place was hot and heavy.

The man called for brandy, and drank it; he was keeping a look-out for the landlord, who was on the other side of the bar. Presently the landlord—a heavy, beetle-browed fellow—came across, and caught sight of him; nodded shortly, and looked at the round-faced clock above his head.

"It's all right, sir," he said in a hoarse whisper. "You know where your room is—right away at the top. Jim shall call you in plenty of time; the tide turns at four. She lies out in the river, and I've settled about the boat and everything."

"That's all right," answered the other, in a whisper.

almost as hoarse as that of the landlord. "They've made it a bit hot for me these last few days; I didn't think they were going to set the pace like this; I shall be glad to be out of it."

"You'll be out of it, guv'nor—and with a few miles of water between you and 'ere easy enough," answered the other, with a chuckle. "You're not the first, by any means."

"What'll you have?" asked the customer.

"I'll 'ave the same as you're 'aving," answered the landlord. "An' I suppose you'll 'ave another yourself—eh?"

"Well—it does rather put courage into a man, and knocks away some of the horrors—doesn't it?"

The customer went upstairs to his bed, not too steadily, a little time afterwards. He remembered the room to which he had been directed, and he opened the door and went in. He struck a match, and lit a candle that stood on a rickety round table in the middle of the room; he shrugged his shoulders as he looked at the bed in the corner, with an old torn coverlet thrown over it. Then he took out a cigarette, and lighted it at the flame of the candle; and began to smoke, looking about him round the room.

"A pretty nice come-down for poor old Horace Rutherglen—this," he muttered to himself. "They've hunted me like wolves this past few days; and I don't intend to see the inside of a jail for anybody. If a man could only go back a bit—just to that time when he was well off—and didn't know it. Didn't I have my chance once! Things have gone so rottenly wrong with me lately. Once let me get out of the country, I'll make a start somewhere else, and do well. Only let me get out of the country."

He began to pull off his clothes, and to lay them across the one chair that was in the room. As he took off his waistcoat, he felt in a pocket of it, and took out a tiny glass phial; weighed it in his hand for a moment, and stood looking at it, with a grim smile upon his lips. He put it down on the table beside the candlestick.

"If the worst comes to the worst——"

He lay down upon the bed, half dressed as he was, and slept. There was a skylight above his head, leading out to the roof; and a slant of moonlight came in through that, and fell upon the man as he lay stretched out on the bed. Once, as it seemed, some shadow crossed that skylight, and hung there for a moment, and then was gone again; but the sleeper did not wake.

His sleep was uneasy, and more than once he turned and twisted, as though striving to get himself into an easier posture. Once he came fully awake, and raised himself on his elbow, and looked about at the strange room, not realising where he was; then dropped back on to his pillow, and slept again.

The house was curiously still when presently he found himself awake again, and sitting up on the bed. Somewhere down below him he could hear the soft lapping of the tide against the old piles which supported the house. The candle, which he had left alight, had burned itself out; but a full bright moon shone in through the skylight over his head. He sat there, peering into the shadows, and licking his dry lips. It had seemed to him, in that first moment of waking, that something had moved in the room.

"Who's there?" he asked.

There was no sound, and after a moment or two

he got to his feet, sleepily rubbing his eyes, and looked about for the rest of his clothes. He picked up the waistcoat, and began to put it on; and was suddenly oppressed again with the feeling that there was someone in the room. He stopped, with the waistcoat over his shoulder, afraid to look behind him, and yet feeling the sheer vital necessity for doing so. At last he swung round, and looked again into those shadows at the end of the room.

Something was advancing towards him—coming steadily straight towards the table. Rutherglen drew back along the side of the bed, until he stood against the wall at the head of it, and under the skylight. And then, bending forward a little, he saw what it was that stood by the table above the burnt-out candle, looking at him with solemn eyes. It was Levity Hicks.

That shadowy thing Rutherglen had seen before, on a night in his room at Sockitt's, had been something different from this. Here it seemed as though the dead man stood alive—strong and firm and tangible.

Rutherglen shrank away from him, and drew back closer to the wall, flattening himself against it.

"Well—Brother Horace," said Levity Hicks; and it seemed to the wretched man who watched him that the voice came from a great distance.

"What are you?" stammered Horace Rutherglen. "What do you want?"

"I've come to find you, Horace," answered Levity Hicks. "I've waited a long time; I've come through a great deal. You don't believe in me even yet; if you could escape from this room, and get out into the world, and see the sunshine, and hear men talk and laugh, you'd swear that you'd never seen me at

all. Oay you won't go out any more into the sunshine, or hear men talk and laugh; we end things, you and I, to-night."

"What are you going to do? What do you want with me?"

"Do you remember, ever so long ago, we made out a paper—you and I—declaring that one or other of us would come back? Do you remember that? I see that you do. Well—I came back—and I've been watching all sorts of things since then."

"I won't believe it," stammered Rutherglen. "You're nothing; you're a shade—a shape—a figment of my imagination."

"We shall see about all that," answered Levity Hicks. "You had your chance, Horace—a bigger chance than ever I had; to-night you've come to the end of your tether. Do you remember how you stole from me, and drove me nearly frantic with despair? Do you remember how, in that fashion, you drove me to my death? Do you remember how you robbed a gentlewoman who loved me, and who would have saved me from what was hanging over me—do you remember that?"

Rutherglen was silent. He was shaking in every limb, and seemed to be clinging to the bare wall behind him. After a pause, Levity Hicks went on again.

"Do you remember, you dog, how you drove that child out into the streets—penniless and hopeless? She nearly killed herself that night; but a good fellow found her, and has made her happier, perhaps, than she has ever been before. There's a heavy load upon you to-night, Horace; you've gone about damning souls."

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Rutherglen, in a whisper.

"I'm going to take you with me," answered Levity Hicks. "Are you ready?"

Rutherglen moved a few inches from the wall; it seemed as though he was preparing to spring at that grim figure standing behind the table. "I don't believe in you; you're not there. You died ever so long ago. I'm not afraid of you," he spluttered.

"Come on, then; I'm waiting," said Levity Hicks.

The other man made a rush at him; then stopped with a cry, and covered his face with his hands. Perhaps he felt that when he looked again the figure would be gone; but when his hands fell away from his face Levity Hicks still stood there, grimly waiting.

And then suddenly Rutherglen, with a sort of snarl, leapt forward, and snatched up that little phial from the table, and wrenched out the cork with his teeth. He laughed as he shot the cork out of his lips, and put the phial between them, and drained it. Then he flung the little phial into a corner of the room.

"Now—what will you do with me?"

"You know me now—don't you?" said Levity Hicks. "You are so near to death that you can see one who has touched death."

Rutherglen was swaying about drunkenly, and had slipped to his knees, holding on to the edge of the table. The figure of Levity Hicks seemed to loom larger over him. With a sudden desperate fear, Rutherglen staggered to his feet, just as Levity Hicks closed with him, and held him.

"Where are you taking me? Let me go," cried Rutherglen, struggling with him, and swaying about.

"Come on," said Levity Hicks grimly. "I'll show you. I know the way!"

And there was only a dead man lying huddled up on the floor of the room, with the moonlight streaming in through the skylight upon him.

THE END

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