TWO IN·A FLAT.

JANE·WINTERGREEN

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SARA JEANETTE DUNCAN

[1908?]

TWO IN A FLAT

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BY

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HAMMERSMITH

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I

HAMMERSMITH

IT is in Kensington, my flat. The flats of all simply situated women, I imagine, are in Kensington. By simply situated, I mean living in circumstances unvexed by any man. Perhaps there never has been a man about. Perhaps he never existed, or perhaps he is dead. This being your case, ninety-nine times out of a hundred your flat is in Kensington; if not it ought to be. Kensington furnishes a lonely life. There are compensations there—the babies in Kensington Gardens, the crocuses in the

Park. Not, probably, for bachelor girls. One would look for them rather about Baker Street, or in Bloomsbury, where, as everybody knows, the tobacco is cheap and reliable. But there is no need to exalt Kensington for single women of an age to vote. You have only to attempt High Street on the principal Barker side, any fine afternoon, to be convinced that there is not room for any more.

In my flat the only other person to be considered is 'Ammersmith. Providence sent me 'Ammersmith out of the Old Kent Road and the British Domestic Past the day I came into possession, early in the present century. I found her standing in the middle of things, a very definite little black-eyed woman, with her sleeves rolled up, and an expression of absolute disapproval, and a smut. It was her first flat and there was no scullery. She criticised it in this respect as soon as she had said good-morning.

You might as well expect a cellar, or a private chapel; but I did not say this to 'Ammersmith at the time. I felt I did not know her well enough. I asked humbly, instead, for a cup of tea, and 'Ammersmith inquired how I liked it. I said exactly one spoonful, and fresh boiled water above everything. I think she approved, though she was careful not to let me see it.

"Some ladies is more tryin' about their tea than others," she remarked with non-committal, turning to the kettle. "I'm pretty tryin' about it myself," she added.

That in itself was satisfactory. I like people who are tryin' about their tea. It is a dull palate that does not know how long the teapot has sulked under the cosy, and a poor spirit that is content to take it "just as it comes." People have all kinds of tests for their acquaintances—whether they read the *Times* or the picture dailies, whether they like Bernard Shaw's heroines, or believe in altruism as a working principle for the race. I watch their behaviour with a teapot.

As the flat grew cleaner, 'Ammersmith naturally grew dirtier, and in this connection she dropped a graphic word that also drew me to her. At the end of the day she surveyed herself severely.

"I shell 'ave to be pickled," she remarked. Would any ordinary person have made such an announcement? I thought not.

"I've got the worst off the taps, but they ain't what I call taps. It'll take a week to bring 'em up."

"Have you tried them with ammonia?" I asked helpfully.

"I ain't so wropt up in ammonia," replied Hammersmith, and I was made aware, once and for all, of the futility of suggestions.

"What are you wrapped up in, Hammersmith?"

"My own polish," she replied sturdily, "which it's take spirits of turpentine one ounce—I've got it wrote out at 'ome. My 'ead's not much good to me."

From the beginning 'Ammersmith made no attempt to cloak her feelings, and there were times when I was perilously near not suiting her; but in a weak moment she proposed to "sleep in" until I was out of my muddle. The muddle, I think, was the thing that attracted her, the cleansing and conquering and straightening out of the muddle. Providence had sent her by the day only, and her preference was to return to the Old Kent Road every evening, solely, I suppose, to guard her point of view, as it was an hour's journey and cost fourpence each way. But this was a handicap as against the muddle, and she laid it before me as such.

"I don't seem able to take 'old, not as I ought," she said, with a dissatisfied eye upon the kitchen wainscoting. "By the time I get along down and round, an' give you your breakfast at the hour which you wish it, 'm, the morning's gone, an' I've got to wash me dirty self in case of 'aving to open the door. So if it's just the same to you, 'm, I'll oblige you for a time—just till you're out of your muddle."

"I should be delighted, Hammersmith," I said truthfully.

"Yes, 'm. It's nothing new for me, 'm, obligin' ladies. There was meladyship at Addison Gardens—I obliged 'er for over two years. She was a very religious lady, meladyship was. I obliged 'er as head parlourmaid; I'm not clever, but there's pretty well nothink I can't do. Wonderful kind to the poor, I will say meladyship was, and a rare one for prayers. Whatever else they got she'd always give 'em a prayer with it. Up to the mornin'-room they 'ad to be took and there they'd get it. Every one that came, was the orders. It used to be nothin' but runnin' to the door all day lettin' in them poor."

"Dear me!" I said. "Well, well." I was not yet in a position to take liberties with anything Hammersmith told me.

"You'd think so, 'm, wouldn't you?" (I wondered if I had thought so.) "And there was the three Miss Crows. I was there for nine months obligin'. I see you like a bit of china, 'm—wonderful china the three Miss Crows 'ad. Thousands of pounds, an' years old it was. That was where Big Mary was 'ousemaid—she's waitress at Timley's now. I dessay I'd a bin with the Miss Crows yet only for Big Mary."

"Couldn't you get on together?"

"We 'ad a few words," replied 'Ammersmith with reserve, "and her and me parted. I can assure you, 'm, in these big places the servants is often more tryin' than the ladies. Then there was Mr. Bloomfield—pore Mr. Bloomfield, a beautiful 'ouse in Bayswater he'd just settled down into. Such a nice gentleman he was—I will say I've always 'ad nice gentlemen—and so partial to a bit of calves' liver, the same as I am myself, and lived only eight months to enjoy it. We was four there, and though I say it myself, pore Mr. Bloomfield wouldn't touch a potato that I didn't cook. Beautiful servants' rooms they was, and I 'ad the perfessed cook's bed. If that pore gentleman 'ad been alive to-day I don't say but what I'd a been obligin' him still.

Morning and night a glass of hot water the same as you, 'm; but it didn't save him."

So it was settled that Hammersmith should oblige me, quite as a temporary measure; and though the century, as I have implied, is not so young as it was, she is obliging me still.

I think she took them all on trial, pore Mr. Bloomfield, and the Miss Crows, and meladyship; and if they suited her she continued to perform for them the services they thought so little about. I am sure it was the human relation that counted with her; and I like to plume myself that it was the Miss Crows themselves, and not Big Mary, that she could no longer oblige; they were too cold, or too fussy, or too much taken up with their china. For two years, you see, she stayed with meladyship in spite of the dulness, and having so constantly to open the door to them poor; and she went on obliging Mr. Bloomfield, through the doubtful medium of a starchy diet, until all was over. I rejoice to think that though I am not a person of rank, and never offer a prayer to the poor, and seldom touch potatoes, she remains in solitary charge of me and my flat—it convinces me that there must be points about me of which I, and perhaps others, are but dimly aware. When I think of the establishments Hammersmith had been accustomed to where she obliged —never less than three, and once, at 'Ornby 'All, sixteen—when I think of the maids and the gamekeepers who brought deportment and gallantry into her daily experience, the tweenies she has disciplined and the second footmen she has snubbed, I am overcome by the fact that she consents to remain thus indefinitely in charge of my inglorious affairs.

So indeed is she. I have yet to learn precisely what her aspiration is, but I have been given to understand that she is very far at present from realizing it. More than once in her passage from mop to oven, from dishcloth to broom, she has paused to reflect aloud: "And 'ere am I—a dirty little general!" I hasten to assure her that she is my housekeeper, that I would not have such a thing as a general about me, that she holds indeed a post of such responsibility and honour as falls to the lot of few, but she has all the cynicism of the Old Kent Road for such blandishments.

"If I do the work of a dirty little general, I *am* a dirty little general," she assures me, staring the facts fiercely in the face; and if there is, as usual, a smut, I have to admit that she looks not altogether unlike one. But what general, little or big, was ever so competent, so trustworthy, so philosophic, so humorous, or occasionally so cross? What little general would swell with gratification at being told by the porter that she was more particular than what the mistress was? What dirty little general would herself wash out the best tea-table cloth for fear the laundry would shrink the linen and cockle the lace on it? No, I can't have it; and the next time 'Ammersmith describes herself in that way I must tell her she is indulging in a gross affectation of humility, which will give her pause, at all events till she thinks out what I am likely to have meant.

Besides, she is not without solace of her own meditating for this turn of Fortune's wheel. Looking round her band-box of a kitchen, where, nevertheless, the sun of Kensington often dazzles the saucepans, she spoke with approval the other day of the qualities of the range.

“And there’s no place like ’ome, ’m,” she added kindly, “be it hever so ’umble.”

I could only agree.

THE LUNCH COURTEOUS

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II

THE LUNCH COURTEOUS

LOOKING round at its peaceful content now—the sofa in its last abiding-place, the two armchairs where they are absolutely to remain, the Persian praying-carpet where the design really shows—it is an effort to remember the flat as it was when Hammersmith and I took possession of it, and I sat down on an empty packing-case to read advertisements addressed to those about to furnish. The sun of Lady Day came in on the bare floor, and far below, outside, an organ-grinder celebrated the spring. The paperhanger made leisurely snips at long curls of margin, and the house-painter dabbed soothingly at the doors that threw the drawing-room and dining-room into one for purposes of entertainment, while from the kitchen came the rhythm of Hammersmith's scrubbing-brush. A world of invitation lay before me, and there was no earthly reason to hurry, so I sat on the packing-box and enjoyed the advertisements at my ease.

I notice, since I have come to live in Kensington, that many cultivated persons abhor advertisements. I myself so seldom read them for pure literature that I am unable to share this distaste; and if you stand in need of their subject-matter there is no part of the paper, I think, that so appeals to you. But I have much to learn, in such directions, from Kensington. That is one reason why I decided upon Princess Gardens.

"No Deposit Required." It looked attractive, that feature, but on the whole I immediately decided against the hire system, and for reasons. I have always understood that if at any time your bankers refuse to advance you further the six shillings a week, back goes the furniture. The furniture meantime has sought your affections, and obtained them. For my part I grow foolishly fond of the objects that help one through life the way furniture does. But who knows when a crisis may not be precipitated in his affairs? Among other things an earthquake will do it. I remember one that destroyed the only security some friends of mine ever possessed in twelve minutes. It was in a tea-garden in the Kangra Valley. If they had been furnishing in London at that time on the hire system, back would have had to go the furniture. Then my own dispositions—they are not permanent. An impulse will visit me in the night, and in the morning I am obliged to take some kind of a ticket. For things that belonged to one, one would make—one would feel obliged to make—provision; but for these borrowings—these boarders at six shillings a week? No; back, I am convinced, at a heavy loss, would go the furniture.

I played agreeably with the idea of having my cab fare paid. There seemed something so largely daring on the part of the firm about it, a kind of "Heads you win, tails I lose" implication. Suppose I bought nothing—suppose my wayward fancy was not pleased—would they send me back in another cab? I dared to imagine they would. It looked fascinating, and I would have done my part but for the sudden recollection that if I went in a cab I could not go in an omnibus. Now, when I can go in an omnibus I never go in a cab. Not because I am poor. You must have noticed that the poorer people are, up to a certain point, the more cabs they can afford. Because I like it. Beside the comedy and fraternity of an omnibus the seclusion of a cab is mere dulness and isolation, and much more troublesome to get out of. Any furnishing company who could offer me omnibus privileges, who could undertake, for instance, to make it stop where I wanted to get out, would only have to let me know; but none of them seemed, as yet, to have thought of that.

The thing that really appealed to my imagination was the free lunch proposition of Messrs. Hammond and Drummond, that well-known firm. It seemed the very last touch of splendid indifference.

"Be seated and be filled!" one could hear Messrs. Hammond and Drummond exclaim.

"What is your chop to us?" It had an aspect, too—very pronounced—of beneficence. Would Messrs. Hammond and Drummond, or a senior representative of the firm, by any chance mellow the occasion by asking a blessing?

"For what you are about to receive the Lord make you truly thankful."

And would he walk among us afterwards in that stately way, his hands clasped under his coat-tails, with what the society papers call the "anxious solicitude" of a hostess, and just a touch of the complacency of a host?

"Enjoying yourselves?" he might ask, with pardonable pride. "A little more Brussels sprouts, madam? I'm sorry there is no cauliflower to-day—we find cauliflower most acceptable on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Tomato on Fridays, madam, with the fish. We always try to study religious susceptibilities, madam. No pudding to-day? Thank you, madam."

I considered it carefully. If I only knew Messrs. Hammond and Drummond, Messrs. Hammond *or* Drumond—even by sight—I felt it would be nicer. But neither of them would be there. One could not be sure even of the representative with the coat-tails. There would be, no doubt, an invisible brooding presence: but it would not be the same thing. Nothing to pay would perhaps mean nobody to tip. One would not dare to risk the haughty refusal of one's threepence. On the top of what one had received, it would be too much. We all have our feelings; most of us have our dignity. I thought of mine, and wondered whether it would sit down with me upon such a very general invitation. I would have to hand it to an attendant, with my umbrella. Then an odious calculation arose and spoiled the whole attractiveness by suggesting that I might possibly pay for my lunch in my bill, though it would not be mentioned there; and there was no need to feel so dreadfully indebted. I might even ask for a second helping and consider that I had not eaten the whole margin. But I really wanted to know how one would feel, so I put on my things and got the green 'bus, and arrived, and asked for the kitchen department.

"Would it be the turnery, madam, or the ironmongery?" asked the Very Politest young man; and I said I did not mind, because nobody wishes to show her ignorance, and I had never heard of a turnery. (I know now that it includes Noah's arks and housemaids' gloves, but what *is* a turnery?) And he conducted me through the drapery, through the provisions, through the china and glass, through, through, through, until at last we reached the pots and kettles, and I said, "*That's* what I want." When he handed me over to the Next Politest young man, and I bought three saucepans without stopping.

It is not a trifling enterprise to furnish the kitchen of a flat, either in the turnery or ironmongery. One thinks—I thought—that it would take about ten minutes, and come to, approximately, thirty-one and nine-three. I put down a fundamental pail, pot, and kettle, and added several things. But it is not like that. It grows and grows, and it takes a long, long time. I will swear, and so will many persons, that I never saw anything in a kitchen but a pail, pot, and kettle—it is the full kitchen octave, the fundamental epitome of the simple life, the embryo of that idea of the Right Hon. John Burns about the undesirability of having more than five hundred pounds a year. Since then, I imagine, he has been to Hammond and Drummond's in the ironmongery.

If it were not for the sizes one would know what to do; but there are at least three sizes of everything, and if you omit one, that will be the one that Hammersmith will infallibly say she ought to 'ave 'ad.

Then there are the kinds.

"Would you prefer it in zinc, madam, or galvanised iron, or plain? Or we have an article in a very superior quality of enamel paint."

You never know which you prefer it. I went on deciding and undeciding, taking all the sizes, even in pokers; and when anything was crystallised, and twopence three-farthings more on that account, I thought of my approaching gratuitous lunch and said I preferred it; and the young man was very patient, and continued to mention more and more articles that were absolutely essential, and I to agree. Presently I noticed, from various indications, that the time was getting on—a quarter to two—and he had not even remotely hinted at anything like refreshment. I began to think it odd, and when he said, "You will require a rolling-pin, madam," I looked at him penetratingly. What I really required was lunch, but he did not seem to see it.

"Patty-pans, bake-pans, pie-dishes, pudding moulds, you have omitted, I think, madam," he remarked blandly, apparently unaware of any omission on his part. I told him I would take them all, for by this time I had really no alternative. It seemed impossible to lunch anywhere but with Messrs. Hammond and Drummond. I had already replied graciously in my mind that I would be delighted.

"Kitchen scuttle?" he inquired, and I said "Oh! yes." But all he replied was, "Thenk you, madam."

I went desperately on to a coal-bin and step-ladder, quite expensive articles, and the young man looked gratified, but betrayed no hospitable instinct whatever.

"Is there nothing else you can suggest?" I prompted him gently.

"Well, madam," he said, and bit the end of his pencil, "I could, of course. It depends on the size of the place you have to put it in." * * *!

I could not, of course, explain that, and there was at long last nothing for it but to ask, with concealed sarcasm, to be shown the way out.

When I approached the street door one of the statues in long coats who support the dignity of Hammond and Drummond came forward to open it.

"I hope you have lunched, madam," he said.

"Thank you," I replied distantly. "It is a curious custom of your firm. Do you find it popular?"

"Oh! very, madam. Too popular, if I may say so."

"Really?"

"There are people who come here regularly, ask the price of a thing, and go straight to the lunch-room. They are known to us."

"Do you never remonstrate?" I asked.

"Oh no. We find it better policy to take no notice. Two days before Christmas a party of eight young ladies entered this establishment, bought one of those photo-frames at one-and-six, and had their tea off it—the 'ole eight!"

I am afraid I laughed aloud. I was sincerely gratified.

"Oh!" I said; "I see."

"Yes, madam. Thank you, madam," he replied mechanically. And the door swung to behind me.

I suppose they do not advertise that they will press you. Perhaps all they undertake is to give you lunch if you invite them to do so. I wish to do Messrs. Hammond and Drummond justice. But another time, I reflected, when I should go to clothe the flat in Axminster and Wilton and beryl and onyx and "suites," would I stay to lunch? Not though they should entreat me, in the indignant words of 'Ammersmith, to whom I related the matter, "on their bended knees."

THE LONELY KITCHEN

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III

THE LONELY KITCHEN

THERE is a vast amount to be said for flats. I feel sometimes as if I could never consent to be pinned down to the ground under a house again; but there is one thing to be added with firmness against them —they have no back door. You who have back doors seldom, I imagine, pause to value them or, beyond occasionally sending down, in a tone of tired patience, to know whether they are standing open, to consider them at all. You hardly notice the area bell. Ah! well, if I had a back door it might stand open indefinitely—yes, inviting the policeman — and if I had an area bell I should hear it every time with fresh satisfaction. It makes, you see, the natural outlet for the kitchen; and a kitchen without a natural outlet is something like a grievance.

No butcher, no baker, no milkman or grocer—none, in short, of the opportunities or varieties of life. (It is impossible to establish human relations of any interest through a whistle.) For all occupation, expansion, distraction, a kitchen. For sympathy a saucepan, for comfort a kettle, for appreciation a pot. A small kitchen, high above all human affairs, not unlike a prison. The sun comes in, certainly, and the sun can address you very pleasantly; but, unhappily, he can make no reply, and is, therefore, in a manner, not worth talking to. The taciturn hours, from eight, when Timley takes his shutters down, till seven, when he puts them up again—the arid stretch! And if you have rather a special weakness for human intercourse. And if you have been used to a number. At first, before we became better acquainted, there were occasions, 'Ammersmith assures me, when she nearly went off her 'ead.

There is no oblivion to this state of things for the other human being who occupies the flat, and knows herself to be its guilty cause and instigator—the person who made it, in its poor way, desirable at ten shillings a week, the person who is *responsible.* From the very first day, when you pleasantly depart from the supervision of matters to await tea in the drawing-room, you vaguely feel the discomfort of it, the abandonment of it — you withdrawn here, she solitary there, with the gulf between. The days to come press upon your sympathy and frighten your imagination, for the gulf is ordained, as narrow as you can make it, but it must be there; you cannot *live* with a little kitchen-maid however you may love her.

Faithfully, as you "settle down," it comes to pass as you foresaw. You settle down at one end, 'Ammersmith at the other. The "feeling" grows and grows, till it becomes a condition, an atmosphere, something to be reckoned with among the difficulties of life—the knowledge that on the other side of a partition or two, a few feet away, a little lonely fellow-being, with her work all done and her hands crossed in her lap, is finding the hours desperately long. You cannot enter the kitchen without an interior blush; you cannot ring the bell without summoning an accusing angel, who, nevertheless, is pathetically glad to come. * * *

Of course, you cast about you to remedy this state of things; nobody could endure it for ever. You go out craftily and buy a sixpenny edition of a novel of proved attraction, with a picture of the excited duchess and the perfectly innocent maid on the cover.

"How are you getting on with the story, Hammersmith? You don't seem very fond of reading."

"I ain't so fond of it as some, 'm. It's all very nice to sit down with a book, but when your mind is occupied with other things you can't, 'm, can you?"

Down below lies all the bustle, all the fascination of London. You make proposals involving a pleasant walk, and find them received with the touch of demur and favour attached to the doing of "arrands." 'Ammersmith gives you to understand that it is not what she was led to expect—arrands, at all events arrands of any frequency. It is a martyr who puts on her sailor hat and goes out to improve her spirits, you fondly hope, by the sight of the shop windows.

Very early in our history as an establishment I abandoned all conventional theories about Hammersmith's afternoon or evening out. She may go out on practically any afternoon or evening when her work is done—there is nothing in the world to keep her, and I am forever thrusting her liberty upon her. I fairly push her out; but does she go?

"It's too far to be runnin' 'ome except on a Sunday," she informs me. "And I don't know any of them around 'ere."

That is the affecting part of such survivals as Hammersmith—they never do know any of them. The new generation, with their boas and their boleros and their modish ways, what have they to say to a little black-eyed person with her rather stringy hair drawn tight back into a twist, and "respectable servant" written all over her old-fashioned figure and sober clothes? None of their ideas, be sure, does Hammersmith share, none of their refinements of behaviour toward the opposite sex. She, poor dear, artlessly and humbly admires them, speaks of them with vainglory as "young people nowadays"; but they consider her a frump, and do not readily bestow their acquaintance upon her.

The same thing, no doubt, operates with regard to admirers. The male eye seldom perceives the intrinsic in the brief opportunities of society; and I often feel, with commiseration, that it is so as to Hammersmith. She is not plain, and her favourite milkman calls her "Sauce"—only, alas! through the whistle—which tells its own tale; but with young women open to attention who dress like the models in shop windows, and use mysterious superiorities of grammar, is it likely that anything so hopelessly out of date should find favour where it is most inquired for? Long ago, when we first set up together, Hammersmith came to me once or twice for special leave of absence, explaining with ceremonious reserve that she had been "ast out to meet some one"; and I gave a glad and willing assent. But on each occasion she returned earlier than was natural, looking rather down, and bringing what I could not help thinking a consolatory bag of sweets—the Earl's Court Road provides more in almond squares than you would think for tuppence. And for a day or two she would be inclined to hint darkly that she hadn't given nobody much of a chance, waitin' about, it wasn't her way — until the unfortunate incident joined the accumulation of *spretæ injuria formæ* that the sex is rolling up to be avenged, or was more happily dissipated in a thorough treatment of the knocker. * * *

It is many days, however, since even a ghostly some one tantalised us in this way. I often long for his return. I often wish I could meet him in the flesh, there in the bewildering vortex of the Earl's Court Road, with the opportunity of saying, "Look, now, my good fellow, let *me* tell you what's what."

Not that Hammersmith pines. She wouldn't demean herself. She just sits.

Abandoning the elusive dream of "company," I turned hopefully to relatives. There are numbers of them there in the Old Kent Road; they ought to be available for any amount of solace. For a long time I could see that Hammersmith thought so too. She would do her best, as it were, to second my efforts to get them to come to tea with her or to spend the evening; and while we expected them and they didn't come she explained their superiorities until I felt intimately acquainted with each of them. I gathered that they all had done better for themselves in life than she had—Georgie went to business, Sid and Elf were "in the Post Office"—no doubt in the Department of General Delivery, but still—. Bella was a cashier, and the sister that was a widow was a monthly nurse with more than she could do. [Be quite sure of that in the Old Kent Road!] Some of them played beautifully. Perhaps they were not to be expected. Still, it did seem hard that Henery-to-mend-the-sink should be the only one to come. There was Min, who was always promising to bring the baby. There was young Sid, who broke his word on three separate occasions. The least thing would put them off—if it rained a little, or if any one dropped in. Hammersmith grew tired of making excuses for them—that Sid was beginning to think about the young ladies andcetera; he was growing so tall, Sid was, or that the baby, now she come to think of it, threatened a cold last Sunday. Finally she stopped asking them—intimated, indeed, that the limit had been reached.

"They needn't think they can come walkin' into this kitchen just when they've a mind," she informed me, and added bitterly, "Mine's a funny lot!"

The Marchioness of Carabas says that I ought not to allow it for a moment; but the result is that I *do* see more of Hammersmith than is quite necessary to a domestic idyll of two. It is astonishing, the number of subjects upon which such an one is entitled to make conversation, and Hammersmith avails herself of them all. Happily for me, the conventions, of which she is a staunch respecter, do not permit her to sit down in these marauding expeditions into my presence; were it otherwise I know not where we should arrive. As it is I have to steel my heart.

All is legitimate until after breakfast—entrances to set the table, entrances with the bacon, pursuits to say "I've taken it all down, 'm"—why "down" I can never discover—raids with more hot water, exits with the dishes, and remarks, and remarks and remarks. The morning paper, though held up like a palisade, avails me nothing in defence.

"Anything off the tradesmen to-day, 'm?"

"*You* know, Hammersmith, don't you? Take anything you require off them—if they don't mind."

"They're on'y too pleased, 'm. I'm sure

I'm always dancin' to that whistle. The washing soda's 'most out."

"Well, order some more, then. And bacon —I'm sure you want bacon."

"I ain't such a lover of bacon, 'm," with slight offence. (As far as I can make out, she eats nothing else, except marmalade.)

"And what will you 'ave for your dinner, 'm?"

"Eh!—my dinner? Oh, anything, Hammersmith. Anything there is—and if there isn't anything, get something."

"There's that half chicken, 'm—it's just as you left it."

"Dear me, Hammersmith, what *do* you live on?"

"I ain't touched it. Grilled, I thought, with some tomatoes, would be nice, and maybe one of them lemon soles you're so fond of filletted——"

"Do beautifully, Hammersmith."

"The fishmonger ain't been yet, an' when he does I thought I'd ask 'im when he brings it to let me 'ave the bones——"

"Bones?"

"Yes, 'm; they're nice for the sauce, just the goodness of them. And would you like a little stewed rhubarb—it's all in now? Would you, 'm?"

"Would I what, Hammersmith? I'm afraid I didn't hear you—I was occupied."

"Why no, 'm—you wasn't! You was only reading the paper. Then you'll *'ave* the stewed rhubarb?"

"Dear me, yes, Hammersmith. Certainly."

"Yes, 'm. You don't take much interest in your meals, do you, 'm? You often make me think of pore Mr. Bloomfield—he was *so* partickler."

And the situation is not improved by Hammersmith's being perfectly aware that she is trespassing on my time and patience, standing on one leg there in the door reminiscing about Mr. Bloomfield. There is a state of tension on both sides—I wondering how long I can support it, and she how long she can draw it out. She acknowledges this.

"Now you don't want to see me again to-day, 'm," she will announce as she departs. I used to smile feebly; now I say firmly, "No, Hammersmith." But it doesn't in the least matter what I do. Very shortly her dusty little black head will appear.

"Before you get busy, 'm, which are you goin' to wear to-day—your lace boots or your button shoes, so's I can give them a rub?"

And half an hour later:

"Do you want me for anythink, 'm?"

Yes, she knows quite well, poor little Hammersmith, where the limits are, and that she often oversteps them; but she is all ready with her explanation and apology. I get it whenever, for ten minutes or so, I bestow myself on her in her kitchen.

"It isn't as if there was a lot of us, and a 'all an' all that," she condones. "You couldn't then, 'm, could you, be runnin' in an' out like you do? But me being alone, of course you can."

She has not failed, either, to place the matter squarely before me.

"Someday I'll 'ear from the mistress," she tells me with tentative jocularity, "''Ammersmith, you 'ave a great deal too much to say. Remember your place.' And I daresay I *'ave* too much to say. But in these flats, with not a soul to speak to all day long, 'oo is there but the mistress? An' if you was a lady, 'm, like some, that would pass an' pass an' *re*pass, an' never be spoke to—well, I don't think I could, 'm, I reely don't."

I have mused much on the sense of station that enables those ladies to pass and pass and *re*pass—in dreams I see them doing it; but no, I agree with Hammersmith—I don't think I could either, I really don't.

THE AUTOCRAT OF THE COAL-CELLAR

IV

THE AUTOCRAT OF THE COAL-CELLAR

"YOU must absolutely not let him get on your nerves," said Juliet Delabelle, "or you will simply have to go. One got on my nerves once, in Regia Gardens, and I had to go. I was ashamed to confess it, and, besides, I didn't want to get the man into trouble, so I said it was the aspect. But I went."

We were speaking of the porter, the liveried—in the afternoons—porter attached to all advertisements of flats of a certain pretension, and the invariable feature of the lift.

"I'll think of what you say," I told Juliet; "I can't let him cost me a move. I'm just in."

We had been agreeing that the single last touch to make flat residence the ideal shelter for life in London was some automatic way of getting up that would abolish the porter. Constant hot water, by all means—a gift of the gods—but not constant porter. Nothing human should be constant. Juliet said it was a contradiction in terms. The hot water was negligible, like the gas and the electric light —you turned it on and gave it no more thought, you turned it off and were done with it; but the porter, oh, the porter was not. The porter had to be taken account of. He ought to be a mere agency, but he is human; a mere mechanical appliance, but he is quite likely, when you ring, to be at his tea, and come up wrested from it, wiping his mouth.

You take a liberty with humanity, you know you do, when you summon a fellow-being with that sharp, imperative stroke of the electric bell, to appear from the bowels of the earth, like a Jinn, and perform this service for you. You have a guilty timidity as he rises; the top of his head does not reassure you; you consult his bearing, as he unlocks the iron door, with an apprehensive eye.

"Good-morning, porter."

"Morning, 'm."

Is it going to be gruff or cheerful, that reply? And what do I care whether it is gruff or cheerful? But I do care—that is precisely the point. The whole atmosphere of life for the next three seconds depends upon it; and who will say that it makes no difference whether one begins the day by being lowered to the level of the earth in a box full of generated hostility, or not?

Then, as to further conversation. Is there to be any further conversation?

"Nice weather we're having!"

"Yes, 'm. We should be better of some rain, 'm."

Will that do? Has enough been said to establish good will and the brotherhood of man, in spite of invidious automatic employments? Or should one go on to agree about the rain? This you debate in the painful intimacy of the descending box till you get to the bottom. The porter probably turns his back in a pointed manner, as if to show that he neither expects nor requires conversation; but that is a solution good feeling will not allow you to accept. * * * The ground floor, the unlocked door, and escape!

"Thank you, porter."

"*Thank you, 'm.*"

Not for any gratification in coin—for your mere gracious condescension, it appears, in coming down in the lift. It is altogether too much, that last touch, and you hurry out into the fresh air and try to forget it. This every day, sometimes twice—three times. Juliet is quite right in advising me to take precautions.

It may be that your own relations with the porter—and it is in itself a grievance to have relations with a person not responsible to you—are not altogether equable. There is always that matter of the coals.

I am convinced that the flat of the future will have self-contained coals. When the psychology of flats is properly understood it will be realised that accommodation for coals, suitably situated, is a radical necessity. They have hitherto been constructed as if the single desire of the human soul was to soar, with a liveried porter. It is, perhaps, natural that a contractor should estimate inadequately for the soul, but this is a thing that can also be expressed in percentages. Who is superior to the irritation of perpetual pilfering?

"You'll want more coals, 'm, by to-morrow."

"Shall I, Thompson?" with extreme surprise.

"Yes, 'm," with hardihood. "There'll be enough for to-morrow," in handsome concession. "But I thought you'd wish to know a day before'and, 'm."

There ought to be enough for at least five days, you are morally certain. (I am not sure what a moral certainty is, but I know it can be applied to coals.) Were you not at Bournemouth for three days at the end of last week, and 'Ammersmith with her sister in the country? To say nothing of that mild Sunday when a fire would have been unbearable, either in the drawing-room or the dining-room. The exhaustion of the last half-ton is impossible.

But you do not say it is impossible. You might from the other side of the room, where there would be hurling distance for a glance; but not in the proximity of a small box, which you are dependent on the object of your suspicion to get to the bottom. Thompson knows this perfectly well, and that is why he selects the mid-descent to make his terminological inexactitude. You do not protest at all—you say you will see about it.

"Yes, 'm. Coals do burn away this weather, 'm." (It is as mild as mild.) "And such a price as they are, 'm!" (With solicitude.) "It's cruel 'ard on the poor."

But not on any porter—of that you are doubly convinced.

My present experience is that there is no elasticity about a half-ton of coal. It fits exactly into a fortnight, and no circumstance, such as one's absence from town for a week, lends it any power of expansion. You may burn wood for the whole period without affecting your consumption of coals in the least. The half-ton was measured for the fortnight, and the fortnight for the half-ton; that is the philosophy that governs the coal-cellars of flats.

I carried the point differently once, by a deed of derring-do, which often comforts me with the thought that I did it. The half-ton had lasted—and, as Hammersmith remarked, "it 'adn't been so wonderful cold neither"—exactly eight days. It was early in our installation, and Thompson, the porter, knew it was our first flat.

"About how many medium-sized buckets are there in half a ton?" I carelessly asked the young man at the Old Welsh Company's coal-office when I went to give the fresh order.

"It depends on what you call a medium-sized bucket," said the young man, with unnatural acuteness. I remembered that Thompson had warmly recommended the Old Welsh Company for coals.

'A bucket of medium size," I replied. "You must have seen them."

The young man looked at me with shifty sophistication, and said that he should say forty at the outside. "Paddy was a Welshman," I remembered, and was turning away baffled, when a sudden thought struck me.

"Tell your man," I said, "to let me know when he comes to-morrow, before he turns in the coal."

"Certainly, madam," he replied, with pity and patronage, "if you wish it. Best Families, madam, or Biggest Nuts?"

"Biggest Nuts," I said. "And don't send breadcrumbs, please, as you did last time." Which had an excellent effect, as a word to the point always has, upon the manners of Paddy.

I went home and selected a medium-sized bucket, and entertained for a short time, I confess, the unwomanly idea of asking 'Ammersmith to do it. This, however, I did myself the honour to discard, and next morning I was ready, the bucket in one hand and a shilling in the other, when the coals arrived.

There, when I reached the unfathomable bottom, were my indubitable five sacks, there was their irresponsible black deliverer, and there was the thunder-swallowing porter.

"I want you," I said with forced calm to the coal-heaver, "to measure the sacks into this." And I handed him the bucket and the shilling.

And I stood there till it was done. That was the trying part, knowing, as I did, what was going on inside the porter. But

I waited till I had counted the last of the *fifty-eight* buckets of coal.

"I never 'ad such a thing done to me 'afore," reverberated the porter as the last bucket went in. "It ain't pleasant, that's wot it ain't."

"I don't find it pleasant," I informed him. "But you ought to be delighted, Thompson. Now, you have only to send me up so many buckets a day, of which I shall keep account; and if there is any shortage, whoever is to blame," I said benevolently, "it won't be you, Thompson. I should think it would be a load off your mind."

Thompson said he did not mean to say it wasn't, so long as I did not suspect him of anything; and we agreed that it was necessary to keep a sharp eye on these coal companies, and parted upon apparently normal terms. But for some days after that I walked up and down stairs.

Also I achieved no permanent victory, for shortly afterwards Thompson (and him the father of a family, as Hammersmith justly observed), convicted of trifling with the affections of the parlourmaid in Number Fifty-Three, was relieved of his charge and left, carrying with him the whole moral effect of my experiment. Some day in July, when Hammersmith has used gas only for several weeks, and Wilkins, his successor, informs me that my coals won't last above a day or two, I may bring myself to the point of making it again. But it would lose its value as a glorious episode if one did it too often. Moreover I cannot dispense wholly with the lift.

CERTAIN PROSPECTS

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CERTAIN PROSPECTS

ONE grows fond of these high perches; I don't know why, unless it is because of the security they afford from motor-cars. From the middle of the crossing it is impossible to despise a motor-car, but from a fifth-floor window they are objects of pity and patronage, aimless, violent, erratic things, that emit insane sounds and have no minds of their own, but run like galvanised, headless bodies about the streets below. At this height one can dislike a motor-omnibus without being afraid of being found out and run over; one can look down upon them with hostility and freedom and ease. My friend the Marchioness of Carabas, who has always lived in Kensington, though not in a flat—not she!—has invented a new adjective for people who delight in these vehicles; she calls them "motorious"; and they seem but half pleased.

The advantage of the fresher air is counter-balanced, I think, by the smuts. The atmosphere may be purer above, but it is cleaner below. It is a good, strong, brothy air anywhere in London, isn't it? Wholesome and nourishing, if only you get enough of it, and refrain from artificial thickening beyond that provided by the chimneys. I take no great notice of the air—to do so, I find, is to invite pulmonary complaint. But the fifth floor may command a view, as ours does, of a sort undreamed of by the first or second. Our view has not many natural features—only, in fact, one single old apple-tree, which whitens in a little courtyard every spring in memory of some perished orchard of Kensington—but it is very full of incident, If 'Ammersmith were one to be looking out of the windows, which she assures me she isn't every time she reports anything of interest, she might indeed spend the 'ole of her time doing it. We could see the Great Wheel at Olympia until it rolled away into the Cockney limbo; and it was something to lift us out of the prosaics of this present, which has mainly to be dusted, to remember that we were once atop of it, out there in the ether, with a young man. We can see the approach to an underground railway station, with trains running in and out, and when the sun is shining on the station roof it reminds Hammersmith vividly of the country.

We happen to be a corner flat—it makes

a great deal of difference to the entertainment, and there is one aspect in which we are confronted by other tenements, where they have the most extraordinary ways of behaving. They seem to think, at that altitude, that they are beheld only by the eye of Heaven, and can do what they like, if I am to believe Hammersmith; and she has never yet told me an untruth. There is a certain lady—at least we are willing to call her such—who flagrantly, morning after morning, in a blue dressing-gown and curling-pins, pulls up her own blinds. But the great objection, Hammersmith informs me, to these flats opposite, is the habit the maids there have of looking across at our windows. It makes her quite indignant of a morning.

"There's always one of 'em a-starin' in," she says. "You'd think, 'm, wouldn't you, in flats of that size they'd know better."

"They *are* rather bigger than this one, Hammersmith," I reply discreetly.

Down below is all the comedy of the street, and Timley's shop-windows in a row, with serried ranks of every human need, and placards so large and plain that Hammersmith has only to refer to them to keep our own tradespeople to the mark of competitive prices.

"We've no right to be payin' tuppence for new-laids now, 'm. They've been eighteenpence a dozen at Timley's this week back."

From our point of vantage we can also study the fashions. "The 'ats is beautiful at Timley's this morning, 'm. That one at seven an' elevenpence"—with bashful bravado—"I *'ave* a mind to run in an' try it on."

All sorts of bargains we make out at Timley's and consider at our leisure, unintimidated by Timley's young ladies and gentlemen, who are doubtless surprised at the directness of our manner and the determination of our choice when finally we approach them.

And the omnibuses roll by, and the boy with the monkey comes, and we observe whether trade is good with this pair or the policeman severe, and our friend at the kerbstone sells toy balloons to the many, many perambulators, and our other friend at the corner extends eternally a mute hand with herbs in it, and we wonder how he lives, in view of the small demand there seems to be for field products. He appears to be able-bodied enough, and Hammersmith finds his patient resignation insupportable. She would like, she says, to shake him.

"Why don't you go to the 'Ouse?" she apostrophises him. "Better than standin' there in the rain, day in an' day out." Once a wandering Nebuchadnezzar in a silk hat bought up his whole stock, and we felt relieved about him for days.

And sometimes through it all comes the clang and dash of a fire-engine, splendid, irresistible, turning all heads; and seldomer, but often enough, a motor accident (these we look up in the Sunday paper and ascertain whether or not they ever speak again). And once or twice, even here in the Princess-haunted borough of Kensington, the absorbing and to Hammersmith peculiarly afflicting spectacle of an arrest.

"You should 'ave 'eard the pore gentleman 'oller, 'm, when 'e was took away! Two policemen they was, strappin' 'im down; a cruel sight it was. You could see he was a gentleman by 'is clothes; a nice light suit 'e 'ad on. I did feel so sorry for 'im."

Public morals have so improved of late years, I gather, that policemen have developed a new scent for "cases."

"They'll walk you off for anything nowadays. A few years back pore creatures might be lollin' up against the lamp-posts, an' the police wouldn't take no notice. Now they'll 'ave you for nothink. I dare say the pore gentleman '*ad* 'ad a drop too much, but see 'ow 'ot it was, Saturday! But there—*they* don't make no 'lowance."

Hammersmith is a true anachronism—I don't know what they would say to her in the Fabian Society. She seems to think misfortune much more to be sympathised with, unbecoming conduct much more deplorable, in what we now feel so shy about calling the upper classes. Recent accounts of a peer in a criminal court troubled her seriously, and though in the abstract she would stand fiercely for equal justice for gentle and simple, she was crestfallen at the sentence, having hoped all along that the peccant nobleman would be let off "on account of the example." Which example I did not inquire; it is useless to pursue a good heart into the labyrinth of logic. She listened with an air of repressed but severe disapproval to the scrimmages of the suffragettes, and her brief comment was, "They didn't ought to be allowed 'm, did they? Not ladies." We who have gathered up our skirts really ought to behave well—it is the least we can do.

It is something, too, to live in the blended world of sound that reaches the fifth floor. It is never as blended as it was on the day you took the flat, because the windows are always closed then, and you think the quiet ideal until you settle in and open them. But it is distinctly attuned, as it never can be below. There is so much of it that it muffles itself, and just hoarsely sings a song of London all day long. Certain notes penetrate, the first cry of "*Straw*b'ries! Ripe *Straw*b'ries!" and "Extra Speshul!" Also on a wet day the inevitable, cheerful whistle of a boy somewhere out in the rainy street. If I return to earth in rainy weather, and am greeted by the sound of a boy whistling, I shall know that I am born in England.

And through all this comes every hour, from the fifth floor opposite, the note of the cuckoo, melodious though mechanical. I have always understood that an imitation cuckoo was not a thing to live with, any more than a real parrot; but it makes, far up like this, a very desirable neighbour. It must belong, I think, to the lady who affronts Hammersmith's vision in the blue dressing-gown and curling-pins—she is the sort of person to whom it *would* belong—and I hope she enjoys it as much as I do.

Through two thicknesses of red brick wall and high above Timley's delivery carts, it comes singing across, a most idyllic fraud, and stirs us sweetly with the thought of April hedges which it never saw.

Hand-organs and street cries are duly prohibited down below, but it seems we are better than our prohibitions, for the hand-organs come. And, soaring up to me here, the sudden hand-organ is just one more gay note of spring. There are advantages about an uncultivated ear; it is not everybody whose blood runs faster and whose spirits rise at a hand-organ. It is London's *allegro*, a proletarian invitation not to be too gloomy over unearned dividends, with a hint that any income taxed is better than none scot free. It will dissipate a cloud upon the brow of Hammersmith like a charm; at her crossest it will bring her to the window with a slow, unwilling smile.

"We mustn't complain, 'm—we 'ad a good piece o' sun this morning, and a beautiful organ as you could wish to 'ear."

One is rather inclined to think of the hand-organ as the last resource of helpless and Italian misery; and I imagine it was once; but we have fallen upon other days. Juliet Delabelle, who waves her right of private charity in the faces of all the sociologists, was recently moved by the spectacle of a decent-looking man and woman operating one of these heart-softeners. But she had no money about her, so, being near her abode, she brought the woman along with her to give her something, and questioned her as they went as to how she came to such a pass, being so respectable.

"Can't your husband get any work at all?" asked Juliet.

"He 'ad his wages reduced, madam," was

the civil reply. "He was in the gas-works, and they cut 'is wages down to eighteen shillings a week. What was eighteen shillings a week to us?"

"You gave up eighteen shillings a week to buy a hand-organ and tramp the streets?" exclaimed Juliet.

"No, madam, we hire it. Eighteenpence a day it costs us, and two shillin' on Saturdays. We can just keep ourselves, madam, with self-respect, which we couldn't with 'im at the gas-works on such pay as that."

"And I," relates Juliet, "who supposed that a hand-organ belonged to the itinerant as the clam-shell belongs to the clam—because it had always been in his family! The really demoralising part of it," she added, "was that, having brought her to the door, I *had* to give her sixpence, and, as she had struck me dumb with amazement, I could find nothing to say to her. After all, her business was legitimate enough—the exploitation of fools like me."

There are no hand-organs at night—they know better, I suppose—but with the dusk beneath our flat there often comes the plaintive twang of an old harper, which mounts naïvely, tenderly, out of the de-vulgarised and empty streets. He, too, knows the hour that accords with him—he would be lost in competition with the transports of Timley. It is a shabby and fugitive joy that he brings, but it is of the family of joys, and Hammersmith and I listen with sentiment, saying nothing until he has done. The pathetic vocalist, on the other hand, who also visits the neighbourhood under cover of the stars, wakes quite other response. We decline to be harrowed by him and his operatic airs—he makes too open, too palpable, too outrageous an appeal; we shut the window. Hammersmith would as soon 'ave the cats. Personally, I would sooner have them, for the cats' is the voice of nature rejoicing in mystery and adventure —untaught and untainted, its pathos has no pecuniary aspect. It is an intolerable liberty, this intrusion of the human voice, this unasked contact with an insincere tenor personality on the pavement, this invading and ridiculous sentiment that takes your mind off your book as a smell of fried onions might take your appetite off your dinner. Nevertheless, it comes regularly when the weather is fine; for nearly always a window goes up in the flat opposite, and a coin of the realm goes down. There are people, it seems, who like to have their emotions assaulted after dinner, people who begin the day flagrantly in a blue dressing-gown and curling-pins.

* * *

Still, he counts as an amenity of the heights, the night singer, because he would be so much worse below. There are many amenities, so many that already, I understand, numbers of flat-dwellers have developed the simplicity of rooks in their requirements —a low rent, a high bough, a short lease, and they ask nothing more.

MY "NATTOME" DAY

VI

MY "NATTOME" DAY

WE have a weekly function in our flat. Do not think, because our habits are not as grossly expensive as some, that we are unaccustomed to the usages of society or live an inch beyond the pale of the conventional and the approved. It is not necessary to give dinner parties to occupy a considered place in an estimable circle. Besides, with regard to dinner parties, as Hammersmith pertinently observes, "'Oo is to know?" It may be the merest separate accident that everybody is uninvited. Whereas, if no opportunity existed at five o'clock, people might very well think it strange.

Hammersmith, who has designations of her own, calls it my "Nattome day." Early I found that she knew what was what about such occasions, that she had been accustomed to them at meladyship's, and also at the Miss Crows', where, nevertheless, they never used the best china. I am more thankful for this than I can say, for the task of reconciling Hammersmith to any departure from the normal is one from which I have learned to shrink. She is worse than Conservative, she is Cobdenite in her attachment to established ways of doing. Things come to pass, of course, before she has had time to get used to them, just as tariff revision may occur before certain people have entirely adapted their minds; but when this happens I like to be in the country.

Far from being an innovation and unwelcome, the day fell at once into its place as, after Sunday, the most important in the week. Dispositions are made leading up to it. "I'll leave the windowsandcetera till Tuesday, 'm, Wednesday being your Nattome day. We might as well 'ave them bright." Or, "You won't forget, 'm, to leave word the 'lectricity's run out of the bell again, before Wednesday."

The date is also expected, I find, to be kept in a manner sacred. To the rash proposal of a friend to dine, Hammersmith will suggest with gloomy firmness, "You aven't forgot, 'm, it's your Nattome day?" She limits me thus to one festivity per diem when it is the high solemnity that circles round the teapot. I don't know whether it was meladyship or the Miss Crows that laid down the rule in the matter; but I've got to abide by it.

I won't deny that the drawing-room gets an extra touching up on Wednesdays. We do not profess—it would be impossible where only one is kept—to live up to that polish on the fire-irons every day of the week. Nor shall any false pride lead me to conceal that we often do with the dining-room fire of a Tuesday, in order that the special benediction bestowed by Hammersmith and the char upon the apartment of ceremony may remain intact until the appointed hour. Hammersmith says apologetically that it gives the curtings a rest. Coal smoke is bad for curtings, and what flat dweller in these tempestuous islands is safe from that occasional black plague of soot that a high wind will drop over the most private interior? "The down-draf' is somethink terrible in these flats," Hammersmith says, and we run no risk of it on

Wednesdays, if a cold hearth o' Tuesdays, papered up with the *Times*, will keep it out.

"It mayn't be as 'andsome as some," she will tell me, looking round her in the final dusting of Wednesday morning, "but it's got the gloom of cleanliness, that I *will* say."

So it has, happily dissipated by the flowers of spring. Every bit of furniture moved, I promise you. "Nothink be'ind anythink." Upon one or two objects of decoration, however, Hammersmith reserves her opinion, and I have no reason to think it is favourable. They are classic, inadequately draped in all but the artistic eye, and, I fear, in Hammersmith's, deplorable. One of my Tanagras, poor little dear, has absolutely nothing on, and in my presence Hammersmith stonily averts her eyes. When I am not there to take offence she rates the image soundly—I have overheard her.

"Ain't you rude, though?" she addresses my poor plaster Venus, who cannot answer back. "A pretty way *to sit for your photograph!*"

Her tone to the Tanagra is really unmeasured. "You're a beauty, you are!" (I should not like to be thought immodest in the Old Kent Road). She is particularly hostile to the statuettes on my Nattome day. I am sure she hopes visitors do not notice them, though how they can help it! Nothing of the sort, I imagine, had ever to be dusted at meladyship's, still less at the Miss Crows', whose Dresden shepherdesses, garlanded and petticoated, Hammersmith frequently and somewhat invidiously recalls.

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At half-past three the fire is lighted; at four I take my seat. I am aware of a perusing eye.

"You 'aven't wore your carbuncly brooch for three Wednesdays, 'm,' with just a touch of grievance on behalf of the carbuncle brooch.

"I washed your second best lace 'angkerchief a-purpose this morning, 'm. 'Ave you got it?"

The tea-table, as to cress sandwiches, bread and butter, and the iced walnut cake that came over with the American heiress—she couldn't live without it—is already spread. As to the hot thing—scones or teacake or crumpet or whatever—I suppose it will again appear in Hammersmith's own good time and way. Personally, I should like it to greet the first arrival, even at five minutes past four; but it was evidently not so at meladyship's, for I can never bring it about. Even the teapot comes in at that hour with strong reluctance.

"Well, 'm, they don't expect it, do they, not before 'alf-past?"

"What a way to treat people, Hammersmith—according to their expectations!" I protest. And Hammersmith looks gratified, as she always does when she doesn't quite understand, and compromises on the teapot; but not a whiff of scone, teacake, or crumpet enters the room until the proper Nattome hour of half-past four.

She has the success of these little functions so at heart, dear Hammersmith. Her part of the interest—how small it is! Just to sit in her clean kitchen—furiously clean on Nattome days—in a fresh cap and apron, with her hand upon the toasting-fork, her eye upon the clock, and her ear, so to speak, upon the tingling summons from the front door. Just to help off some more or less expensive furs or a more or less recalcitrant overcoat—she prefers the overcoat—

and, advancing six inches into the drawing-room, nervously to mispronounce the name attached to it, with the further excitement of having to "come in" with boiling water or a fresh teapot, or to draw the blinds! Only that, and yet——

"I don't suppose we shall 'ave many to-day, 'm; the weather's so bad. Pouring torrints, it is. People 'll think twict before they come out, not if they ain't obliged."

On a really bad day she is quite depressed, though steadily hopeful, till half-past four, of a clearing. On a bright Wednesday her note of congratulation sounds as she pulls up my blinds in the morning.

"I dare say there'll be a good few to-day, 'm; the sun is out beautiful."

She also keeps an eye on extraneous influences, and calculates their effect. Drawing my attention to an omnibus far below, rolling Cityward with a load of yellowbedecked young persons of both sexes, she lately discovered a regrettable coincidence.

"It's Primrose Day! *They'll all be going there!*" she said disappointedly. I don't remember how far Lord Beaconsfield and his statue deprived me of my guests that afternoon, but any deficiency was certainly put down to him, and the same thing was laid to the door of the Lord Mayor and his procession. We keep an eye on these alternative attractions, and we don't like them to happen on a Wednesday.

And after the first one or two arrivals I detect a look of elation, a note of triumph in Hammersmith's announcement of a visitor. however far it may be from describing her. From certain hints and admissions I have come, though not openly, to the conclusion that she has assisted—how deplorably—at Nattome days when nobody came—when meladyship, in solitary state, meditated a fresh prayer for the poor, or the Miss Crows, with drooping feathers, sat in a semicircle and consumed their own crumpets.

So I feel an enhanced satisfaction when my day at home is duly honoured, in the knowledge that for the shrewd little person in the kitchen it has not been altogether dull either.

After the number of arrivals, Hammersmith measures the success of these occasions by the amount consumed at them. She has a deep-seated enthusiasm for seeing things eaten up, and I have known her to second my efforts to persuade people to have things if she happens to be handing them. Once, when the only bishop I know persisted in refusing buttered toast, "It's all 'ot, sir," said Hammersmith, in the justly aggrieved tone of one who might be suspected of passing off cold toast upon an ecclesiastic. The bishop yielded in surprise and took two pieces, at which Hammersmith gave me a victorious glance and departed upon her laurels, without, I am happy to say, another word.

When all is over, when we have finally settled the tenure of the present Government, and the hollow mockery of the threepenny remission — who earns any money in Kensington?—and how far patient Octavia with her prepared nails may practise on policemen's visages—when the last hand is pressed and the last word is said, and the last visitor for the last time attempts to take his leave by the door into the bathroom, Hammersmith comes discreetly in and surveys the scene with a pleased, moved expression.

"They *'ave* been good with the bread and butter," she remarks, as she gathers up the teacups. "It's generally such a lot of it left, an' though I try to eat it to save it, I find it dreadful bilious when it's cut so thin.

An' that gentleman—the plain-looking one—did you notice 'ow he enjoyed the muffin, 'm? Three times he 'ad it. To see 'im with it was a treat."

A "NOSEY PARKER"

VII

A "NOSEY PARKER"

WHAT is a "Nosey Parker"? It is not a complimentary epithet, because Hammersmith uses it to describe the porter, and there never was a porter yet upon whom Hammersmith would waste compliments.

"'E's a regular 'Nosey Parker,' 'e is," she says constantly of Wilkins, in some unexplained connection with postcards, visitors, luggage of persons perching for the night in the flat.

"I told him it wasn't none of *my* business," she adds, with an emphasis that must have carried significance even to a "Nosey Parker."

The fact is, Hammersmith is hostile to all porters. I suspected it in the way she used to treat Thompson, a perfectly inoffensive person once you forgave him the coals and the parlourmaid of Number Fifty-Three's broken heart. I was sure of it when she presented the same front of war to McNab, late of a distinguished Highland regiment, who certainly did bring a Scotch aroma into the lift, which tenants eventually complained of; and now her attitude to poor Wilkins leaves no sort of doubt about it. Hammersmith has the animosity for porters that cats have for dogs; it is enough they are porters, and when I happen to see her at the front door with her back up, and making as if to spit, I know without inquiry that Wilkins is on the other side of it "leaving word" that the lift is out of order, or the hot water will be cut off till four o'clock. He must uncommonly hate leaving word at our flat. I wonder he doesn't send the boy.

Besides, she generalises about it openly. "I don't want to have nothink to do with no porters," she says with plain decision.

"*Mrs.* Wilkins" (or *Mrs.* McNab, or *Mrs.* Thompson; it is a married dynasty in Princess Gardens) "I like well enough, poor thing, but Mr. Wilkins" (or Mr. McNab, or Mr. Thompson) "I don't like, and never shall. I don't say I'm not civil to 'im"—she never is—"but with them porters if it isn't one thing it's another. And if you'll believe me, 'm"—darkly—"they ain't never the same before your face to the language they use behind your back. There was that poor lady across the 'all, that was so bad with the influenza; I'll never forget that Mr. Thompson, 'ow 'eartless he was. 'It's well to be 'er,' he said to me, 'an' lay abed with a cold.' 'You don't know,' I said, 'what influenza is.' I said, 'Wait till you've 'ad it yourself, and you'll talk different about any pore soul, if she *is* a lady, that's struck down with it.' They're all very civil to ladies' faces goin' up an' down in the lift, but I shouldn't like to see you put too much confidence in any porter, 'm. I really shouldn't."

Hammersmith's own loyalty is unimpeachable, takes the form, indeed, of being much more flattering to me in my absence than I could possibly suspect from anything she lets fall when I can hear her. So I must be on my guard with Wilkins.

One little good word she usually has for them, at all events during the first few days of their installation.

"'E's a stonish teetotaller," she announced to me when Wilkins succeeded the Highlander.

"A what, Hammersmith?"

"A stonish teetotaller, ma'am. Never takes a drop of nothink," with an air concessive but stern, saying clearly that although staunch teetotalism might be a very good thing in its way, Wilkins need never expect to presume upon it. And soon, all too soon, followed by destructive criticism culminating in the serious charge of being a Nosey Parker.

This looks as if it were a mere matter of temperament, as if porters were not *simpatica*, as we say in Kensington, to my excellent maid; but there are, of course, reasons. For flat-dwellers, and especially for their Hammersmiths, the porter is the Warden of the Marches, the tyrant of all approach. He it is who sends up, with a summoning whistle, the coals in the morning in exchange for the dust and rubbish of the day before; and if any one thinks that operation naturally void of friction, let him once overhear it, either from above or below. The whistle itself assumes an irritating, domineering personality.

"Oh yes, I'm 'ere," 'Ammersmith will reply to it with temper, *sotto voce*, "Don't be in such a 'urry!"

It was a particularly imperative whistle, and almost invariably—I noticed from the next room—Hammersmith would answer it back like that before she put herself in proper communication with it. No doubt to her it was the voice of the porter, who was merely blowing into it below, as innocent as an acoustic. I tried not long ago the substitution of a whistle of different disposition; I chose one with rather a long and plaintive note, and the experiment was quite successful. Hammersmith answered the wail immediately with a touched expression. It appeals, I am sure, to the fount of emotion which springs as eternally in the Old Kent Road as in any other part of these islands. I am not without hope that even Wilkins, standing in his iniquities at the other end, may eventually profit by it; but that will require time.

Then there are the privileges of the lift. It is the unwritten rule, and none complain of it, that the maids of the higher perches go downstairs on what Hammersmith calls their flat feet, though on demand the porter must bring them up. But to have the courage to claim this a young person must have attended a board school and graduated in modern socialistic principles and French millinery at single prices. I believe there are two such who do not hesitate, Sunday after Sunday, not only to ask to be taken up, but to ring to be taken up, and who calmly wait, in all the impressiveness of their best clothes, until Wilkins answers their summons. Hammersmith brings me awed if critical report of them.

"I can assure you, 'm, what with the pearls round their necks and the lace andcetera on their 'ats, if it wasn't for 'earing them speak I should 'ave taken them for ladies. You would never think they was domestics."

But Hammersmith—honest little survival—is still a domestic, and has a world of sensitiveness where they exert mere callous rights. If Wilkins "offers," well and good, but if he doesn't, after no long instant of hesitation, she shows him an independent pair of heels. We are taught by the ancients—in Kensington we avoid mentioning their names as savouring of intellectual snobbery—that there is a compensation for every material satisfaction voluntarily foregone. It is Hammersmith's to reflect, next morning, that she hadn't after all stooped to "trouble 'im," and to register the single separate occasions, with all their attendant palliations, on which she had thought fit to take a different course.

Imagine also the complications with this policeman of the staircase over the occasional visit of a brother or a nephew. Such arrivals are all sober male relations. Hammersmith has not imported the "follower" from the early nineteenth century; at least, he does not follow at close range. There is "'Elf" and "Sid" whom I have already celebrated, her sister's sons, and there is the worthy Henery, husband to another sister, who came one evening to deliver us from a difficulty with the kitchen sink. It developed a crack in the night, inexplicably to Hammersmith. ["It isn't as if I was what you'd call spiteful to a sink," she advised me.] So Henery came, and you may consider any self-respecting member of the I.L.P., invited by a liveried porter, who apparently thought more of himself on that account, to state his business at the foot of the stairs! It is essential, this precaution; it protects us from all kinds of impostors and touts, but how urge this upon Hammersmith in connection with her respectable belongings? Her view is that Henery carries it in his face what he is, and him twenty-six years with the firm, and only late twice to his work in all that time. Presented with a watch he was at the twenty-fifth year, with a 'scription on it that Wilkins could read if he didn't believe her. And didn't he be'ave just the same to Mrs. Chicory when she went home last Friday taking them skirts to be machined? Run right down the street after 'er, he did, right down the public street. "Stop!" he calls out, Mr. Wilkins does. "What might you 'ave in that bundle?" he asks. "Nothink of yours," says Mrs. Chicory, quite took aback, as well she might be, pore soul. In another minute, she said, she'd 'ave said something to him, but he said, "Oh, I suppose you're the seamstress at Number Fifty"; so she said, "Yes, I *ham* the seamstress at Number Fifty, which it's nothing at all to you. People turned their 'eads to stare," Mrs. Chicory said.

I have great faith in Hammersmith's knowledge of human nature as far as it goes, and I believe Wilkins is a Nosey Parker. His nose is of the Parker kind, long and red, and rather thin; his eyes are large and round, and suspicious, and every time he closes his lips he puts two and two together. Soon after his arrival he made a provocative reference as he "brought me up" to his last job. I asked him what that had been.

"A maile attendant, madam. Travellin', that is, with gentlemen that's what is called *non compos mentis.* You might call this a harder job, but it's easier work. Watch 'em, you 'ave to, like a cat watchin' a mouse, or they're maybe hoff overboard, and then where are you? I give it up, madam, on that account. Too wearin', it was."

When I reported this to Hammersmith she seemed to think it accounted for a good deal. Her imagination has worked upon it until she now believes that Wilkins was at one time a keeper in a lunatic asylum.

"It was there he got 'is artful ways," she assures me, "off of them pore creatures he's 'ad to do with. Very cunnin' they are, them pore silly things, and people do get it off them, they do indeed, 'm."

But though she can explain almost all Wilkins's peculiarities by habits of mind contracted "when he was in the 'sylum," it does not make her more indulgent to them.

The fundamental note of Wilkins is resentment—suppressed and mild if everything is ideal from a porter's point of view, unmistakable if Forty-Nine has let the hot water run to waste, or Fifty-One has asked four times about the message left by the gentleman who called when she was out and said absolutely nothing as to that misfortune. Wilkins suffers from chronic grievance.

"Rather too 'ot to be seasonable, madam," he remarks as you begin the ascent.

Not a bit, you assure him. You found the wind rather cold.

"It's enough to cut you to the bone, madam," he agrees, indignantly.

I asked him, when the elections were on, where his municipal sympathies were, and he fixed me with a distrustful eye.

"Whichever side gets in, madam, I don't see as it will do me any good," he told me;

and added, with depressing humour, "A man in my position can't afford to 'ave an opinion."

His position alters a good deal in the course of the day, and I should think there would be some point at which he could feel entitled to the franchise; but I imagine the belief was the mere cynical trapping in which a pessimistic mind admired itself.

I am afraid I encourage Wilkins in freedom of expression, which naturally brings consequences.

"I 'appened to pick up a valuable bracelet on the stairs last week, madam," he told me bitterly the other day. "I made inquiries, and discovered the owner—a friend of a lady in these very flats. I took the trouble to restore it to 'er immediate. Carried it in me own 'ands to 'Ampstead. And I got *a polite 'Thenk-you.'*"

What consolation was there to offer for such a disappointment, reflecting, too, as it plainly did, upon a member of my own caste—"a lady in these very flats"! How at once point an austere moral and administer a disciplinary snub? These are things you cannot do if you have allowed Wilkins to make remarks at random, as I fear I have done.

Wilkins is really unreasonable at times in the expression of his general sense of getting less than he is entitled to. He has a young wife, who presented him a short time ago with a son. Here, at least, was matter for unmixed felicitation, I thought, as I asked after Mrs. Wilkins and the baby.

"Both doin' well, madam, I thank you kindly," he responded; and added, fixing me with gloomy injury, "The nuss says it's a very *small* child, madam."

His tone and eye distinctly invited me to explain this invidious circumstance, and inquired whether there was anything he could do about it.

The single instance in which I have known Wilkins to express true gratitude was connected with this event. Hammersmith was affected by its occurrence to propose making a custard for Mrs. Wilkins, to which I gave a natural assent. She bore it to the ground floor herself, declining to trust the boy, who was on duty, and delivered it to Wilkins, who took it very civil. Next day she went down for the dish, and came up with a distinctly ambiguous look.

"Well," I said, "did Mrs. Wilkins enjoy the custard, Hammersmith?"

"She ain't there, ma'am! She's in a nussing 'ome. Mr. Wilkins 'ad it 'imself. He said it was a beautiful custard as ever 'e tasted."

Hammersmith struggled with a shamefaced smile, while I laughed openly at her.

"Now he's 'ad it, he's 'ad it," she summed up, "and I don't begrudge it 'im. He brought me up in the lift hisself," she added, with a touch of vainglory. "Offered to."

MRS. FASKIN, EDUCATED

VIII

MRS. FASKIN, EDUCATED

IT is an exiguous flat, and probably a dirty one, that does not run to an occasional char. These little modern abiding-places, partitioned off for the habitation of one or two, certainly are manageable by a single servant—it is their great advantage—but the weekly, even the fortnightly, char represents the oil in the machinery, the luxury of having something done by somebody else. However narrowly one must contrive, there is always a margin over expenditure—the char indicates and occupies the margin. In London, at all events, there is no better investment for surplus half-crowns. Two-and-six and her meals, and your flat rises about you a temple of fresh paint, discreet with the incense of yellow soap. As one grows older I suppose one's extravagances grow simpler. Now, I boast the profoundest indifference for the temptations of Timley—hardly look in—but I own I have great difficulty in passing a respectable char.

I dwelt many times upon the desirability of chars before I could induce Hammersmith to lend an encouraging ear. She has a bristling hostility to strangers, and the char would be a stranger.

"You can't put no confidence in their references nowadays; they write them themselves," she informed me, and "There's all kinds goes to these registry offices. I've never set foot in one of 'em meself — never 'ad to," with stinging superiority.

Compunction seizing her, "O' course she may be as honest as I am myself, 'm. I don't say she isn't, but 'ow is anybody to tell—they all get their edjucation nowadays. Besides, 'm, with this size of a place for two —I should get all of a muddle. It ain't as if we 'ad a scullery."

The scullery is 'Ammersmith's last trench, her final line of defence, and I would retire acquiescent or under protest, as the case might be. London smuts, however, are in the long run victorious over the stoutest heart; and there came a day when she approached me with an injured look and a distant manner.

"I'm thinking, 'm, that if this flat's to be kep' as it ought to be kep' I shall 'ave to 'ave a charwoman in occasional. It's a small place, as you may say, but there's a wonderful lot of items to it; and I get down an' round as quick as most, but I can't do more than the impossible. I don't say but what you could get some one that could * * *."

So, after vainly proposing it for weeks, I allowed a charwoman to be wrung out of me.

When she came to be engaged she wore brown kid gloves and a green coat after Liberty, and called me "Madam." I so much prefer a charwoman to call me "Mum." Also, to go properly with Hammersmith one step below, she should have been frowsy and rusty. I felt it was hard upon Hammersmith to introduce this superior being to scrub under her. I feared she would feel the anomaly. She didn't. She gave Mrs. Faskin a shrewd, appraising look as she let her out, and her single word of comment fell as the latch clicked.

"Edjucated."

I am a little subject to winds of doctrine, and this steady current of Hammersmith's, setting adversely to the dearest of modern theories, is distracting.

At the moment of Mrs. Faskin's appearance upon our horizon she was just entering upon the serious experience of life. She had been a housemaid in upper middle-class circles, one without a care except for the Deccan rug in the hall, without a responsibility except toward the Oriental plaques over the drawing-room door. One whose wages sufficed for her adornment, whose adopted larder provided bacon and to spare, whose young man represented treats and other high lights of life, and whose joy or despair was dictated by the weather on her evening out. Brown eyes and a nice colour—it was her blossoming time, one of those humble plants that find the sun below stairs. Then she married

Alfred, who was a 'bus-washer -- what unsuspected avocations there are!—and life culminated in three rooms in the North End Road. And Alfred washed his 'buses all night —which, when one reflects, is the time they would *have* to be washed—and slept all day, and awoke to winkles for tea. I imagine they did not do so many 'Alls, the grocer being imperative to deal with, but they went out together to call upon friends, and assisted at all public functions from the kerbstone. The dent had not yet come in Alfred's billycock hat, and he still found himself worthily occupied in washing 'buses. Who would think that Mrs. Faskin would ever be reduced to seek half a crown a day as a char? Nobody, I am sure, but ironical Destiny.

I heard about it from Hammersmith, who, after presenting the most barbarous front to the newcomer for two hours, suddenly dissolved into sympathy.

"Her 'usband's out of work. 'E took a night off without leave; he was so wore out after going in a procession with them unemployed, an' they give 'im the sack, as the saying is. I'm sorry for Mrs. Faskin, but notice did ought to be took of a thing like that, didn't it, 'm?"

One was forced to agree that it did. So a mere indiscretion of Faskin's introduced Mrs. Faskin to the realities of life, which begins to grow grey for her, one perceives, from that hour. Poor little wayside flowering of kid gloves and a green coat after Liberty!

She was a pleasant, talkative, futile creature, and Hammersmith's compassion was tinged with contempt.

"When it came to puttin' tea-leaves down the sink I 'ad to speak out," she would tell me, or "You'd 'ardly think, 'm, would you, that that paint had been washed this very morning? But I can't deny Mrs. Faskin done it, for I seen 'er with my own eyes." She ran about at Mrs. Faskin's much too high heels like an indefatigable terrier snapping out the most pointed hints. I used to expect the worm to turn, but the only remonstrance I ever heard was, "Well I never!" or "You *are* petickler!" We are taught that you cannot take custard with a hook.

Hammersmith rather liked the custard, however she took it, and I kept Mrs. Faskin on long after her futility had been amply shown for the sake of the expansion she brought to the kitchen. I rejoiced to feel, if I entered there, that I interrupted confidences, things unseemly for me to hear, as it were, in the actual revelation, but which would often reach me, duly attenuated, later.

"She says 'er 'usband don't understand

'er," Hammersmith informed me with a solicitous air one day. "I ast her did 'e drink, but she wouldn't go so far as that, she said. I don't think they're very 'appy together. He's been out of a job a long time."

I suppose she was bound to come with "edjucation," the *femme incomprise.*

Mrs. Faskin showed herself educated not only in her polite ways with the tea-leaves and the paint, but also in her nuances of expression. Hammersmith did not encourage me in the kitchen on Mrs. Faskin's days, but the flowers were an exigency; they had to be done, and so I overheard many a proof of what I allege; for my presence would only stem, not wholly check, the stream of her loquacity.

"You spark of 'umanity!" she would smilingly address the kitten in its gambols upon the floor, when poor, uneducated

'Ammersmith could think of nothing better than "Get out from under my feet!"

We would converse sometimes, Mrs. Faskin and I, while Hammersmith, in a manner, looked on, respectfully attentive. She was full of tattle about the theatres. I think in her dreams she lived the tinsel life of the stage. She named, with obvious pride, the three or four melodramas she had seen, and pressed them upon me. "You really ought to see it, madam—it's a *beautiful* play"; she would look up from her mopping, with a reminiscent spark in her sunken eyes, to assure me. She had her favourite actors and actresses, and was absorbed in the marriage of Miss Edna May. She proved, there in her ineffectual suds, the practicability of living another person's life. All sorts of intimate views she took.

"I wouldn't like to be married to George Alexander," she averred; "he always takes the lover's part, madam, and he makes an *ideel* lover." She shook her sophisticated head.

"It's all sham," observed Hammersmith, impressed.

"So it may be," retorted Mrs. Faskin from the floor, "but I often say that, as his wife, *I* couldn't stand it—unless I acted with him."

It wasn't sham to her.

She had nearly always read a halfpenny paper, and could tell us in detail of the movements of Royalty. She often spoke handsomely of King Edward's "kind 'eart"; and on one occasion she invited my opinion as to whether the Prince of Wales would make as successful a monarch as his father. The shop windows were her pageant of life, and supplied many of her choicest phrases. "Education" had given her a smattering of the meaning of luxury—she lived pathetically on the alluring outsides of things. I imagine she has many parallels.

I hope their 'bus-washers dally less lightly with that task. Her Alfred, I grieve to say, had made small effort, when I saw her last, to recover what she called his "position." She spoke with protest in this connection of a great public benefit.

"Those free libraries are all very well, madam; but the men just go there and *sit*, if they 'appen to be fond of readin', and don't look further."

One figured, not without indignation, her 'bus-washer turning the pages of the *Review of Reviews* while she dipped and mopped and dipped again. * * *

In the end I fear the canker of misunderstanding worked its worst. She came to me to announce herself reluctantly no longer available, as circumstances had compelled her to go "in altogether." She had obtained a situation as general, which excluded, in so far as the 'bus-washer was concerned, the particular. Let us hope he found his way back to the yard.

INTIMATE VIEWS

IX

INTIMATE VIEWS

HAMMERSMITH has not married, and it would have been unnatural and suspicious had she never explained this circumstance. She drew me artfully on to express wonder, looked satisfied, and immediately took sly advantage of it.

"Lots ain't," she told me. "You 'aven't yourself, 'm."

It was a disconcerting flank movement. I rallied feebly.

"But I'm not a good cook, Hammersmith."

Hammersmith assured me that that wasn't

everything, and gave me a moment to think of another excuse. On my failing to take advantage of it she flirted her dish towel—I was warming my goloshes by her kitchen fire—and said—

"It isn't that I couldn't 'ave 'ad."

"I'm sure it isn't," I responded cordially.

"The first—well, the first, as you might say, that *ast* me—was a bricklayer, a very respectable man. A widower, 'e was." And Hammersmith looked silly, as if a widower's attentions were more compromising than another's.

"Did you object to him because he was a widower?"

"Yes, 'm. 'E 'ad fifteen children."

"*Fifteen*, Hammersmith? You exaggerate!"

"No, 'm. I wouldn't do such a thing, 'm. Married twict he was; an' I thought to myself, 'Why should I 'ave the worry of other people's children?' Besides being elderly."

"I suppose he *would* be elderly," I murmured.

"Yes, 'm. An' the other was a jobbing carpenter. Only three he 'ad."

"Wives or children, Hammersmith?"

"Now, ma'am, how you do go on! He'd only buried one. A good steady fellow 'e was, too, always in work—'ardly knowed what it was to be slack."

"But you couldn't quite fancy him?"

"I didn't fancy 'im one way or the other, 'm. He was well enough in 'is way, I dessay. But the lady I was with, she advised me to 'ave nothing to do with it. So long as it was only walkin' out or Olympia now and then, she 'ad no objection to make; but if it was to come to me 'aving 'im, she couldn't advise me to do so. I think she 'ad a prejudice against him, 'm."

"Ah!" I said. "Poor fellow! Perhaps she didn't want to lose you, Hammersmith?"

"No, 'm. I expect she didn't," was the calm and amazing rejoinder. Here, if you like, was the revelation of an attitude in life. To be moved to dismiss a swain—if a widower can be a swain; I am not certain—by the mere adverse opinion of "a lady"! A certain touchingness in that, a real dependence. But to see through the lady all the time! That seemed to destroy the idyll, to reduce it to an absurdity.

"I'm afraid you didn't like him either, Hammersmith, and were glad of her disapproval."

"Well, 'm, I 'ad to give 'm 'is reason, hadn't I? I'm getting on now," she continued, with pretended ruefulness. "Sometimes I think I shell go abroad."

The connection could be grasped without difficulty.

"They often do," I told her.

"Who, 'm?"

"Persons wishing to marry."

"Oh! I wouldn't marry a *black*, 'm. Not if it was ever so. I've seen 'em, there in Earl's Court, with their funny ways of doin', pore ignorant things! I couldn't—not a black. If I 'ad the choice of a foreigner"—she let her imagination range—"I'd choose a Frenchman."

So the *entente*, I thought, has really penetrated.

"Why, Hammersmith?"

It was for an obscure and not too generally accepted reason.

"Because they use soap," she replied. "But a Japanee! Oh, I couldn't—the Ex'abition was enough!"

"The Japanese are our trusted allies, Hammersmith."

"Yes, 'm. But trustin' and marryin' isn't the same thing, is it, 'm?"

"Perhaps," I said severely, "you would not be able to make a Japanese happy?"

It was a new view, and she polished the lid of the teapot to unnecessary splendour while she turned it over. Then, tossing her chin, she went unerringly to the point.

"I wouldn't 'ave nothink to do with 'is chopsticks," she averred.

The feminine instinct is so sure.

From various remarks of a wide philosophy, based on the lot of others, I gather that she does not consider herself altogether to be pitied.

"I don't mind workin' fer myself," she says with conviction, and "It's all very well for a little while," and "Marriage is a lottery, as the sayin' is," and "I'd 'ave to *like* 'im—I wouldn't be one to get married just to be able to say so."

Yet there are times, I am sure, when she envisages the matter with sentiment and treats it with hesitation. After delivering herself at length of these general principles the other day, she paused with suspended duster and gazed into space with a semi-hypnotised expression and an absent smile.

"What are you thinking of, Hammersmith?" I was irresistibly impelled to inquire.

"Loveandcetera," said Hammersmith, without turning a hair.

But I think she places the real romance of life in other relations. Her devotion to myself is one of which I can never hope to be worthy, and her tales and mementoes and photographs of past mistresses, produced with a softened eye and a moved inflection, are infinite. They always end, these histories, with "Pore Mrs. So-and-so!" and a sigh, no doubt for the impermanence in this world of all situations. The "ladies"—Heaven help us!—of her experience in life no doubt have some evolutionary charm to her which justifies her admiration. She stands, perhaps, for the British principle that makes government by an aristocracy still possible in these islands. One might go further, and say that in her way poor dear Hammersmith is the innocent embryo of a snob. It is clear to me that she likes me best in my best clothes—I feel sometimes that I am a satisfaction to her æsthetic sense and a gratification to her family pride, and sometimes that I am not.

"I like to see a lady look smart," she confesses, and her comment on the action of a pair of Anglo-Indian couples who "chummed," in the guileless fashion of their coral strand, in Number Fifty-Four, was "Funny ways—for gentry." She keeps us in our place.

Sentimental to the core if not to the carpenter. Desperately inclined to dwell upon first times and last times and anniversaries. As the time approached when she would have been in my service a year she made references to the date with increasing emotion, and when it arrived she announced it with tears in her eyes. Hammersmith's tears frequently get as far as that, but I am glad to say no farther. Unlikely considerations will bring them there—frequently the description of a favourite dish. What is there that touches the heart in calves' head properly dressed, or a tasty little bit of boiled bacon? I will swear that Hammersmith's eyes invariably fill when she dwells upon these delicacies. It is an obscure pulse of gratitude to Heaven, I suppose, for providing them.

"Them's the feathers of the first pheasant I ever cooked for you, 'm"—they were in her hat. The humble, faithful adornment! And, as touching the realities and terrors of life, quite unmoved and casual. An acquaintance died in hospital recently, and I heard a cheerful, interested account of it.

"She 'ad 'er tumour taken away from 'er * * *"

It is astonishing, if you live in a flat, how many objects present themselves in a day for feeling reference. This morning I found her apostrophising the taps. "Dear little things," she called them. She does keep them bright, and perhaps, in their less loquacious way, they reciprocate her affection.

AUTRES MŒURS

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X

AUTRES MŒURS

IT must be set down that the tradesmen's lift is tryin'—tryin' at both ends. There is always the question of what shall be sent up in the lift and what shall have the privilege of the stairs and the front door; and if you think to settle a matter like this by some such formula as potatoes the back lift, chiffons the front door, you are desperately mistaken. There are flats whose front doors are denied even to the postman, and thereby lies a tale of great vanquishing; but it must adorn another page. In general it may be taken that "the owners" or "the Company," or whatever, prescribe the unquestioning use of the kitchen lift for everything but Dukes. Even a Duke, if he were delivering a brown-paper parcel, would be questioned; but if he had a card about him and a birth certificate to show to the porter he would no doubt be allowed to walk up, entirely as a concession to his rank, and not, be it understood, in any way to the firm he represented. It is entirely a matter of favour and interest with Wilkins. I have known carrots and turnips, on terms of intimacy with Wilkins, to ring the front-door bell, and collect on delivery, the very day that saw my best black silk, in torrents of rain, apply for admittance at the kitchen window. The company objects to the wear and tear of small commerce upon its stair-carpet—the merest drugget—and Wilkins appears to think this reasonable. Life and your lease offer only one opportunity for *revanche*—a moving out. When that time comes there is something intensely human in the feeling with which you watch the sideboard bumping down, step by step, in the arms of stout proletarians in dirty boots, and observe the expression of Wilkins as he contemplates the paper-chase trail of straw and packing that leads from your door to the sacred portal on the ground floor. I know this can only occur once; but I always look forward to it.

It is so difficult to use a parcel lift, and especially its whistle attachment, with unvarying politeness, even if you are the fishmonger, whose very existence depends upon an agreeable entreaty. It all arises from Hammersmith's inability to confine her communications to the speaking-tube. It is too impersonal; she is too much a woman. She will answer the whistle hanging out of the window and *viva voce;* and when she has anything peremptory to say, as she generally has, the distance of six storeys does not soften it. One by one they have followed Wilkins under the ban of her displeasure—the butcher, the baker, the milkman, all have fallen out with her. There remained only the grocer.

"'E *is* a nice, civil young man, the grocer's young man is," she often told me. "'I don't 'ear a word o' what you're a-sayin' of up there, ma'am,' he says this morning. I'm sure I 'oller loud enough."

But there came a day when I perceived strained relations even with this knight of insinuating temper.

"I will say for 'im that he used to be pleasant to deal with," confessed Hammersmith. "But I dropped a bundle of kindlin' wood on 'is 'ead one day, and he ain't never been the same since. I 'ad the same misfortune before with some tomatoes, but he didn't seem to cherish it the way 'e does the wood. I suppose they was soft."

Human relations, we may observe, are nowhere easily perfect. The complication of ripe tomatoes or kindling wood in the upturned visage from a height of six storeys would seem to be insurmountable; and I sympathise with the grocer's young man. But not aloud.

"He ought to make a better parcel of his tomatoes, Hammersmith."

"Yes, 'm, he did. I told 'im so when I 'pologised, but I don't know whether he 'eard me."

Nevertheless, I am inclined to agree with Hammersmith that the manners of petty commerce are lamentably different from what they used to be. The Marchioness of Carabas, with whom Hammersmith is in humble accord upon many points, can hardly contain herself about them; she uses the strongest expressions; even her sense of humour becomes paralysed with indignation. That is what becomes of having a hereditary tendency to expect the world to approach you on bended knees—you are unable to adapt yourself to modern conditions. I do not go as far as she does; my bonnet stays in its place, and my sense of humour remains perfectly operative; but I do feel, and do not mind expressing, a certain irritation.

There is no escape from the halfpenny advertising circular, unless you sneak out of the directory like a thief; and whether you would be permitted so to sneak is more than doubtful. If you make a rule of destroying unopened everything that comes under a halfpenny stamp you run the risk of missing quite important social intimations, the world having for some time condescended to this form of economy with cards. Besides, do they not—the advertisers—now approach in square, thick, Mayfairish-looking envelopes addressed with the last refinement, and travelling under a pink and proper penny stamp? Monograms also they wear, and presently will arrive with crests and seals, which we shall break to find a wine merchant or a turf accountant lurking inside. However, the point is that there is no getting away from them. One may, therefore, be legitimately aggrieved by the language in which some of them are couched:

"Chances are," an enterprising upholsterer addresses me in April, "that you will be doing some spring cleaning this year. Now, I am going to convince you that I can beat your carpets and remake your mat tresses 15 per cent. cheaper than any other firm you can employ."

"You will find my card inside," I am informed by a manufacturer of aerated waters "with a stamp on it. Just post it back to me, with your requirements on the back, *to-day.*"

There is an omnibus on the Hammersmith route that I never get into without being conspicuously invited by the advertiser of a hair specific to use my common sense. He tells me that if I think so-and-so I do not use my common sense, and he suggests that it was given to me to be used—for his benefit. I suppose he thinks this candour engaging. No doubt the spring-cleaner and the soda-water maker imagine their happy familiarity of phrase will create a friendly feeling and a new customer. If I sent for them I should expect them, in consistent sequence, to slap me on the back or chuck me under the chin. What, indeed, might I not expect them to do?

In the shops, too—not, perhaps, the very best, but in many quite good enough to know better—a new freedom of manner toward customers has come in with the century, which the young gentlemen who use it no doubt think vastly agreeable. They bend over the counter; they regard you with lustrous, sympathetic eyes; they are oppressively caressing in manner; in their desire to express every amenity they almost breathe in your face. Or they are colloquial, condescending, and finish every sentence of explanation with "See?" The shopping world is uniformly a sister, or a cousin, or an aunt to them; they execute little gambols of intercourse as they tie up your parcel. The other day a mild-looking, grey-haired lady of Kensington—she might almost have lived in the Square—very old-fashioned in appearance, was explaining to one of the curled darlings of a well-known shop in High Street some defect in an article she had bought.

"It is very inconvenient," she said, appealingly.

"You bet it is!" the youth replied. I heard him myself. I could have boxed his ears, and looked indignantly for the glance of gentle surprise, which was the only response I expected. But Kensington will hold its own against the rising flood of modern impertinence.

"You mustn't speak Hindustani to me," she told him briefly, "I don't understand it."

The Marchioness herself could not have done better.

I suppose it must pay—the democracy must like it. There must be a shopping public that enjoys being fondled. And if we of Kensington proper imagine that it is our selections that build up the departmental prosperity of High Street, we cherish a foolish delusion. The unit from Hammersmith and Acton, that anchors its perambulator before the windows of that thoroughfare at its narrowest point—it is she who works, like a coral insect, at the fortunes of Timley and others who flourish there. Affluence is democratised; the multitude have money to spend, and spend it; and against the gratification of the multitude Kensington proper may hold up its hands in vain. No doubt there are numbers of persons to whom kindness from such beautiful young men as grace the twentieth-century counter from the rear does not appeal in vain.

Or it may be the outcome of the curious, self-destructive tendency that is to be observed in what used to be the upper classes, the aristocracy, and so on. The formalities of intercourse with persons "beneath" one have become anachronistic and absurd. Persons stepping into motors under coronets will address the under footman as if he were a younger brother. We are so desperately afraid of thinking too well of ourselves that we are on chaffing terms with the scullery-maid, and give orders apologetically, "Oh, do you mind?" As to the British workman, we treat him with consistent servility as if in the act of canvassing. Our fear of snobbery is such that we hardly dare utter the title of an acquaintance. A timorous person of this sort the other day mentioned "a friend of mine—a man named Lytton." It has become bad form to be aware of social distinctions. The new idea is based on conscientious scruples and buttressed by the terror of being ridiculous, and between one thing and another there will soon be, as the Marchioness justly observes, "nothing left." Our caste system has already become a shell, venerated only in the society newspapers, and presently persons who value the differentiations of class will be obliged to remove to America to enjoy them.

"IN LADIES' OWN HOMES"

XI

"IN LADIES' OWN HOMES"

I CANNOT say whether it is because we are a Royal borough, with Court doings, but we have a newspaper in Kensington. It takes little or no notice of anything that happens east of the Albert Hall, and has therefore the more space to devote to matters of true or domestic importance. Its sphere of influence embraces the Town Hall and Dr. Stanton Coit, but that is unavoidable. It also stretches far into West Kensington, whence we draw the serious reinforcements of life. The registry offices are almost wholly recruited from that direction; laundries flourish there, and all Covent Garden appears to rattle thence at screech of dawn. I don't know how many of the inhabitants of that Arcadia, except Sir William Bull, read the Kensington paper; but they all advertise in it, in long, long columns of little notices, making propositions that would never venture into the big dailies. It was there that I found Mrs. Chicory, who said she was a good fit.

"A good fit. In ladies' own homes. 2s. 6d. per day."

That was exactly what I wanted to pay for a good fit, so I sent Mrs. Chicory a post-card.

She received me in the dining-room with caution and reserve, and I saw at once that I had to do with a person of character. When I bade her be seated she said she preferred standin', thank you, although breathless with the stairs, the implication being, until we had come to something like an arrangement. A respectable woman, with china-blue eyes and a red face. When her mouth was closed it was very firm, suggesting that circumstances had made it so, though she continually pursed her lips as one who had many matters to revolve and consider. Her eyes were sternly and directly blue, yet her nose was generous and impulsive; and she wore a fringe and a hat, at fifty. It was plain that she suffered from contradictions of character, and found a great many things in life that she could never be induced to put up with. I wondered at once whether 'Ammersmith would not be among them, and instinctively, before we proceeded to explanations, I shut the door. Not that 'Ammersmith ever demeaned herself to listen; but it gave one greater freedom.

It explained a great deal to learn that Mrs. Chicory had been "in the theatrical line" as wardrobe woman to a travelling company. It was wearin' certainly, but profitable, and she only gave it up because of her husband's health. He was up in years when she married him, and had gone, it was to be supposed, further up, so that now he couldn't be left—at least she didn't see her way to leaving him—alone in the house. I confess I found it attractive — that theatrical experience. Some obscure ambition no doubt stirred within me to be garbed like the Misses Vanbrugh at 2s. 6d. per day—and one might fall short of that and still be very original. It was impossible, too, not to sympathise with Mrs. Chicory in the dull alternative with which life had confronted her—compelled to resign an occupation, all changes and chances, all imagination and footlights, an occupation deriving half from the professional and half from the artistic, and all from the happy Bohemian, and step down to ladies' own homes during the day and a venerable tie in the evenings. It *was* hard, and I reflected to her face, while we took each other's measure, that people in novels have by no means a monopoly of the problems of life. Nobody could put poor Mrs. Chicory into a novel; yet at the call of duty she resigned all her tinsel activities, pursed her lips, and was true.

"Half a crown a day, I think, you ask," I said, by way of closing.

"And me 'bus fare," replied Mrs. Chicory, firmly. "A penny each way 'll be tuppence."

Pathetic stipulation! It made one, somehow, ashamed of the half a crown a day, which seemed quite adequate remuneration for Mrs. Faskin. It must be so near the edge of the possible when the earner makes a point of her 'bus fare—a penny each way. I assented, I hope not without a blush; and

Mrs. Chicory said in that case, if convenient, she would come the next day.

When I told Hammersmith she put down two plates with an unnecessary clatter. There are so many ways in the kitchen of showing irritation.

"To-morrow's your Nattome day," she told me with asperity.

"Dear me, so it is! I must send her a postcard and tell her to come on Friday instead."

"Friday's Mrs. Faskin's day."

"So it is. We'd better say Saturday."

"People generally scrub of a Saturday—the linoleums an' that, down an' round—for Sunday. I know I've done, since I've *'ad* it to do."

"I don't care tuppence, Hammersmith. You are simply cross. She shall come to-morrow if it is my Nattome day," I said, with that indication of temper that always mollifies Hammersmith, as showing, I suppose, that I, too, am human.

"I ain't cross, 'm. I'm only dis'greeable," after a moment of concentration on the plates.

"In some ways dis'greeable is worse than cross."

"I don't know 'oo is to cook 'er a 'ot dinner," she observed, with an air of detachment. "She won't expect a cold lunch such as you would put up with, 'm."

"Shall we ask Wilkins?" I suggested.

The name of Wilkins will always take Hammersmith's mind off her other troubles.

"I'd like to see 'im in my kitchen!" she retorted with bridled fury, "pokin' 'is long nose into my saucepans an' makin' 'imself familiar. I'd rather cook a dinner for twenty. I dare say, 'm, if you leave it to me, I shall manage. I ain't as clever as some—— "

"Be careful, Hammersmith," I interposed.

"If you did yourself an injustice I should never forgive you."

"Oh, don't talk about for*give*ness, 'm. We 'aven't got to *that*," replied Hammersmith, with a shocked expression.

"It isn't *her* fault," I went on, with seeming irrelevancy, "that she has to go out and give trouble, sewing at ladies' houses. She was once in a different walk of life. But she married——"

"Beneath 'er?" interposed Hammersmith concernedly.

"Much older than herself; and now she has to——"

"Support 'im."

The ready conviction proclaimed that 'Ammersmith could have told Mrs. Chicory all along how it would be. I assented, and there was a moment's pause, while I continued to pick the over-tired narcissus out of its green glass vase, and Hammersmith concealed various things so that she would know where to put her hand on them. I could tell by her back that she was relenting. When she presently spoke, it was in a tone of the deepest injury.

"I'm sure I don't want to do no pore soul out of a job. I'd rather lose me own, such as it is."

So Mrs. Chicory came, and when it transpired that she was not above having her meals in the kitchen, and expected nobody to wait on her, hand and foot, she became an accepted institution.

Mrs. Chicory was not a good fit. No doubt her advertisement was true to her aspiration, but I cannot think she will ever achieve it. She has far too much temperament to be even a passable fit. The good fit has a geometrical, effective mind, which leaves nothing to the imagination. A good fit has no resource beyond that virtue. Not so Mrs.

Chicory. When her bodices do not fit she drapes them, and pretends that was her original intention. No good fit, moreover, could possibly "alpeekay" the way Mrs. Chicory does. It was a question of an old grey velvet dress to be freshened up with some Oriental flower embroidery, and Mrs. Chicory saw at once that it should be "alpeekayed" on in "trails."

"You can often alpeekay a thing when it's too far gone for anything else," was her maxim; but, as a matter of fact, she preferred it by instinct. She would a great deal rather appliqué than hem or darn; and she adored doing it in trails. She would cobble my stockings to get at her trails, until I was obliged to point out that the æsthetic was not the sole value in life. Poor Mrs. Chicory, she had every sign of temperament. She maintained with me relations sternly functional, and seldom unbent further than to "'ope that didn't go into you, madam," with reference to a pin; but as time went on, and she took more and more meals in the kitchen, she imparted to Hammersmith many an intimate view of life.

"Gran'-children, she 'as," Hammersmith told me; "but she don't encourage 'em about the 'ouse. She says one fam'ly is as much as any woman should be ast to bring up. She don't profess to be fond of children, Mrs. Chicory don't. She says it ain't in 'er, and it never was."

"She is evidently an unusual type, Hammersmith," I said solemnly.

"Oh, now, don't you be 'ard on Mrs. Chicory, ma'am. There's many a worse, as I often tell her. She says she knows she ain't pleasant-mannered, but 'aving to do with all them young theatre people as she 'as 'ad, she says if you wasn't firm you was nowhere. She used to be told she 'ad a pleasant smile, but between losin' her teeth and 'aving to 'old her own for so long with those young people, she says she don't never expect to 'ear it again."

Mrs. Chicory hadn't entirely lost her pleasant smile, but it came adventitiously, as if when she happened to remember it; and it had a funny fixity, exposing, with a kind of bravado, exactly the right number of porcelain pearls. It was the smile of her youth, on which she had been complimented, and she put it on, like a brooch, now and then, to adorn the weary tracts of middle age. It was not an insincere smile, but its dazzle was certainly mechanical, and it made one feel uncomfortable, as if it hid profoundly cynical views of human experience. Often, too, it would cover a last pitch of exasperation, as when a bodice would neither fit nor drape. I came to prefer Mrs. Chicory plain.

"I will say for 'er she enjoys her meals," Hammersmith would allow handsomely. "She eats 'earty," a claim to consideration which my excellent cook would never disallow. By steadily enjoying her meals Mrs. Chicory won not only liking from Hammersmith but commiseration. Mrs. Chicory's domestic news became as familiar to me as my own.

"Her lodgers is leavin' 'er," Hammersmith reported heavily. "People that 'ave been with 'er thirteen years. Put the notice under the door they did—Mrs. Chicory says it's a wonder 'er 'usband 'adn't swep' it up. It's upset her something terrible—she ast for a cup of tea the minute she got in. The next lot she gets she says she'll say to 'em straight, 'Are you changeable?' and if they say they are she'll refuse 'em."

"Quite right too."

"Yes 'm. She 'as to 'ave lodgers, the place being too big for just the two of 'em. She'd 'ave give it up long ago, she says, but for Mr. Chicory bein' so wrapped up in the bit of garden. She won't leave durin' Mr. Chicory's lifetime, but she says she notices him growing feebiler, and many things may 'appen before the spring. She can't always trust 'im to take a parcel now. He forgets where he's a-going to."

In bad weather Mrs. Chicory becomes actively pessimistic and uses violent expressions when she takes off her things.

"She ain't got a dog's life, she says," Hammersmith informed me to-night, in the moralising tone with which she clears away the dishes. "When she came in this mornin' she said if it didn't clear shortly, for two pins she'd commit suicide. I give 'er a cup o' tea, and told her I 'ad as tender a mutton chop as ever she seed, and a nice little bit o' pastry left over for a couple o' dumplings for her dinner."

"What did she say to that, Hammersmith?"

"She said the dumplings would go well with the chop," said Hammersmith.

THE NOTE OF KENSINGTON

XII

THE NOTE OF KENSINGTON

THERE is a great deal of lilac in Kensington—lilac in the gardens, lilac in the square, lilac in ideas and character and behaviour. The inhabitants seem to wear other colours; but look again, and you will see that their souls are garbed in lilac. They cast upon you lilac glances, gentle and fragrant, from which you can easily guess the colour-note of their minds. I am sure they give lilac entertainments, and plan their lives in varying shades of the same hue. I have even fancied I noticed a tinge of lilac in the manners of Mr. Timley's assistants, though this may have been imagination. * * *

You get the impression that there are other colours in the world, or rather that there *were*, but that you have done with them in Kensington. The reds and the blues and the yellows riot in Piccadilly, and a graded colour belt lies between, on either side of the Albert Hall. You may have all its psychic benefits for twopence any day you like to take your temperament for an airing on the top of a green omnibus from St. Mary Abbott's to Piccadilly Circus. Sometimes, I confess, I find it desirable to do this.

It is a charming shade, lilac; but it has grown, in Kensington, too emblematic. From a pretty taste it has become a symbol. We slope, you know, in Kensington, gently down, down hill. We begin to retreat from the rude vigour of the Bayswater Road, and we almost hurry down the Broad Walk. We are not, of course, the dregs of Chelsea; but our slope is undeniable, and we do not deny it. We are rather pleased about it. We hear the legions thunder past, and pour out tea again. Some of us, a privileged few, where the lilac can hardly be distinguished from the grey, can remember the flavour it had from the silver teapot in the house in Young Street that wears a tablet now, and tell how Mr. Thackeray would openly boast that teapot the handsomest in London. Being Thackeray, he had, of course, the right to think so; but being anybody he would think so now. We all canonise our teapots in Kensington. They hold for us that sacred stimulus that gives us our view of life, and enables us to see how appropriately we live here, being what we are.

How pleasant it is in this region of the bells of St. Mary Abbott's! I should say that those live in Kensington who keep their kitchen clocks by St. Mary Abbott's. Others may be quasi, or so-to-speak, or within-a-penny, but not true dwellers. In Queen's Gate they are too rich, in Melbury Road too distinguished, in Onslow Square too worldly, in Lexham Gardens too dull, in Cromwell Road—oh! too dreadful. In Kensington proper we are not rich—save the mark! We are almost convinced that we wouldn't like to be, so patent to us is the vulgarity of wealth. Infinitely, *infinitely*, would we rather be poor than vulgar, if one can be called poor who has a powdering closet for a china cupboard. Very vastly do we prefer our ideals, or perhaps our capacity for having ideals, to other people's motor-cars. (Curious, by the way, how this modern conveyance throws into relief the quality of the human beings in it. When it *is* deplorable, I mean, it is so very deplorable. One wonders whether such persons were simply lost before in the redundancy of horsed traffic, or whether they never took the air until the motor arrived to persuade them that they would enjoy it.) To continue. Doubtless it may be that a large income could be administered, as it were, to its own refinement, and should the demand present itself we would possibly not quail before it; but the experiment would be a dangerous one, like marrying a man to save him, and we would make it trembling. Of course, the man should have his chance. * * *

Nor do we make any claim to distinction in Kensington. We are not sure, indeed, that distinction is at all to be coveted, that it does not also lead, in its more subtle fashion, to vulgarity in its more insidious form, let us say vulgarity of soul. It is so loosely conferred—is there anything more ridiculous than the way, year after year, fresh genius is discovered and thrust upon an unwilling public? And once established it is so mobbed by the general, by people obviously unqualified to have an admiration, by the absolutely undiscriminating. You will excuse us if we are a little inclined in Kensington to be stand-offish, and even contemptuous, with contemporary talent under these circumstances, to find it intrusive and preposterous and mirth-provoking. We have often, indeed, a short way with it. I have seen two or three such reputations shrivel up before the witticisms of a single Sunday afternoon. Enthusiasm of that sort should be postponed until it can do no harm. When Mr. Bernard Shaw, for example, is well dead, and free from his absurd conceit and other impertinences, we will begin to consider his claims. When Miss Terry has ceased to marry we will think about hers. To hope to be distinguished and alive and well and disposed to matrimony at the same time is more than can be tolerated with patience. We are compelled to apply our fundamental rule in these matters, our deepest conviction, which is that the people of real distinction are all dead.

Something like it we are inclined to concede—bear with our weakness—to persons living in "the Square," the ministers, as it were, of our high altar. To keep alive a laburnum in London, there, if you like, is distinction in purpose and achievement—that is the sort of thing we think worth doing in Kensington. And to live in the perpetual benison of the gracious and dignified past. They have priests' holes in them, some of those houses in the Square; if you are thought very worthy the family may show you their priests' hole. Residents there may be picked out in High Street by the appearance they have of their heads being turned

—not from self-approbation, from the habit of looking backward.

I cannot hope to live in the Square; my history is not good enough: people have already blushed for my dates. Besides, if you have ever shown yourself capable of a flat!—— But I quite feel the force of what I imagine to be the general idea, that such people as these are unknown to the world only because they choose to be. That is very characteristic of us in Kensington, the potentiality that so many of us feel toward literature and the arts. We dislike, as I have explained, the rewards of fame, and we could not endure to fall short of our own ideals, so we refrain; but we feel that such things are always beautifully our province. It would be impossible not to feel it, in the face of knowing so well how things ought to be done and seeing so plainly when they are done badly.

As well there is so much to inherit—why attempt to add to it? Perhaps here we lack courage—it is a virtue we make no great pretension to, in Kensington, a virtue of the strenuous life, the life of primary colours and the Strand. But we have our tastes and certain sonnets that suffice us. Shakespeare bears no addition. So long as our discreet bookshelves hold Evelina and Dr. Johnson, Miss Austen and Peacock and "The Rose and the Ring," we can get on without doing anything ourselves—we can put the temptation aside without a pang. We prefer to live upon these accumulations, just as we prefer to live upon our incomes, also "made" some time ago, and to which, though by no means what they were, we have never found it desirable to add anything either. No, we have no instinct, none whatever, for "output." We draw faithfully upon the Great Dead Ones, and amuse ourselves with the essences and flavours of other people's success—temerarious persons with no capacity for repose.

Worldly, of course, we are not; we have shared the elms of the "Gardens" with Princesses too long for that. We believe in the aristocracy when we think about them; but we do not often think, I am afraid, of anybody except ourselves and the King. Perhaps the thing that most touches and delights us is a little intimate story of the King. The Marchioness of Carabas often has such an anecdote, and when she tells it one always feels that she is a real Marchioness. She had this, the other day, to hand with the muffins. A little girl chatting with his Majesty volunteered her address.

"I live near Whiteley's," she told him.

"Ah!" said King Edward, with ready sociability; "I live near Gorringe's."

And everybody in Kensington knows it now. But you can't call that worldly.

Nor are we, I fear, particularly religious. We have played with too many cults to take any of them quite seriously. We like an Archbishop and the bells of St. Mary Abbott's. We read Pater and St. Augustine. Many of us have relations in Oxford. More than this I cannot say.

Political? Not in any advanced or aggressive sense. A female suffragist among us has to defend her views. But we know what we think of what we are coming to unless the middle classes make a stand. We wish somebody would go and find the middle classes and tell them to do so. We ourselves are most willing to make a stand; but we are such a remnant, so detached, so hopelessly — we hope — old-fashioned. There is no use in depending upon *us*. Still, as far as may be in these impossible days, we have our political interests. We keep a shrewd eye upon the Prime Minister; and I wish it were proper to report the things we say about Mr. Winston Churchill. The present Government, I assure you, come off very badly at our tea-parties—withering we are. Of course, they will pass, like an unpleasant dream, but meanwhile it is irritating to see them there, making mistake after mistake. Politics do irritate us—modern politics. We are not much afraid, nevertheless, of the decay of England's greatness, so long as she possesses an Army, a Navy, and a House of Lords—though we wish the King would be a *little* more particular about peerages.

* * *

Gently down, down hill—the haunt of retirement, the scene of repose. Pensioned repose. Who does not know that elderly gentleman of High Street, tall, humoristic, with an aquiline red nose and a white moustache, who has held commands? His blue eye is dimmer than it was in Secunderabad, and the firmness of his tread is a little self-conscious, as he goes to leave an order for coals at Timley's or to lodge an appeal with the income-tax collector in the Earl's Court Road. And our own Lady of Kensington, the original type, who can mistake her, or go forth without seeing her? In a long black cloak that has nothing to say to the fashions, and a shady black hat that is nothing but a shady black hat, she slips along the pavement like the sibylline shadow of other days. She has delicate features under the hat, and rather a satirical expression—one feels a little uncomfortable at the thought of her opinion of the motley about her.

Retirement and repose, tempered by Timley's carts, which minister to such needs as we still have. A scent of lilac, a long memory, a dish of tea. I have a friend who is wont to declare that Kensington is a halfway house to the grave. That is putting it roughly—I should say it was much nearer, but none the less agreeable for that.

IN SEASON AND OUT OF SEASON

XIII

IN SEASON AND OUT OF SEASON

I WISH London had more respect for the chronology of flowers, and would cease to adorn her sooty bosom with them out of all their times and seasons. She is a luxurious old person, London, too luxurious. She sits there in her geographical position and picks anything she likes from anywhere, and fills her shops and streets with it, so that with her eternally green Park for a background she has no longer any prescriptive winter or summer, only longer or shorter days, colder or warmer weather. I would not demur at the shops. One can step into a shop as one steps across the Channel, into another climate; and one is prepared for it. It is the first business of a shop to be exotic, and whether it offers ginger from China or lilies from France it is only doing what we are in the frame of mind to have it do. It does not matter to me what time the lilac blooms in Sloane Street. But the red and rugged old women who sit cheeselike under their umbrellas at convenient corners, they and their wares touch all out-of-doors with the colour and the scent of gardens; and I complain that when they offer me leggy yellow tulips in December I am the victim of a false note and a misleading impression. The tulips may turn black in the face and die before I get them home; or in pure numbness of fingers I may drop them on the way. If it were possible to be irritated with a flower, which it isn't, there might be something like a reason in its presenting itself at the wrong time of the year.

"Go back," one is inclined to say with affectionate firmness, disentangling, as it were, the tendril from one's heart, "and wait your hour. Don't you know that you belong to April?"

I was going to say that the spring flowers are the worst offenders in this respect; but as it cannot be good for a tender constitution to be exposed to an alien sky in a low temperature and the mercenary companionship of an old woman in a rusty bonnet, I had better charge them with being the saddest sufferers. Tulips and daffodils begin their ridiculous tale of spring in January with single and double perjury. Bunches of narcissus, white and yellow, come soon after, and there are always those flattering, mendacious tulips; while hyacinths positively usher in the winter. However, they do it mostly in pots, which suggest nursery treatment in ladies' drawing-rooms. One would no more expect the truth about the season from a hyacinth than from an azalea or a milliner.

The first anemones do mean something, especially on a mild February day. They report spring somewhere hard by; for they obviously come from out of doors, in their shabby little damaged bunches, red and purple, which open so gratefully for a drink of water when you get them home. Violets we have ever with us, and have long established their perpetual claim upon the heart. Besides, November violets have been transmuted into poetry, after which, of course, there is nothing to be said. Roses and lilies are accepted miracles at any time of year. They are not to be confined to a calendar; they just happen. But I confess a certain added friendliness for the flowers that "come in" when one expects them to come up, like the dear April cowslips, the poppies, the larkspur, the mignonette of June, and the autumn chrysanthemums, too wet and cold and pungent to be gathered anywhere but in our own belated gardens.

I feel it is wrong to cavil at Covent Garden, for London life would indeed be a desert without it; but as well as playing fast and loose with our most cherished associations in this way, it must answer another grievance. It is too much of a licence, but it is also too much of a law. It says to all our flats for one period of the year, "You shall be decorated with daffodils, for daffodils are cheap in the Channel Islands," and wherever you dine or lunch or tea in a radius of a month or a mile, the floral object is the more or less papery daffodil, hardly taking the trouble to conceal that it was bought in dozens, with ninepence of "green" to give it a country air. I speak of flats like mine and 'Ammersmith's, where only one is kept, and where ninepence is a good deal to give for green, and it has to last. For more ambitious establishments more expensive blooms, but my point is that they are all prescribed. They become almost a convention, suggest their price, sink to the level of Brussels sprouts. I seriously intend to banish flowers entirely from the flat for, say, three days, in order to forget this commercial aspect, and welcome them again as the only pure wonder of the world. If one were not given so many coppers in omnibuses I would have done it long ago.

Flowers ought, of course, to be unexpected, characteristic, not inevitable and unvarying, in any room. They are symbols, I am sure, of exquisite thoughts and graceful deeds, and should have the spontaneity of these. How gross and damaging is our handling of such hints as we are given in this world! What must an angel think of a market-gardener! I wonder if the cheapness of white lilies quite compensates us for the dulled perception that comes with it. We look at our overflowing barrows and marvellous shop-windows through a senile cataract of custom, and miss, in the ability to buy a score, the capacity to adore one. No doubt we do. Still, I suppose we know the same disadvantage toward all sorts of other miracles—clouds and the west wind, sunlight and the sea, poetry and music, and the soul of St. Paul. We must endure our callosities, and keep as alive as we can, as sensitive as we may. In New York, I believe, flowers are desperately unattainable. One must economise all the summer to make sure of a single rose at Christmas. I am afraid, when it came to the point, I would not exchange our plenitudes for the added rapture of that extravagant blossom.

Cheap as flowers are in High Street, they are never so cheap that there is no force in Hammersmith's argument that she knows localities where they are cheaper. Often, of a Saturday night, she will sally forth, with her old sailor hat and her second best gloves and unlimited discretion up to a shilling. It's a 'bus ride to her Elysium, and once more I implore her to go on the top. I have never yet prevailed. She gives me to understand that while ladies are a law unto themselves, she has never felt "able to," presumably with modesty. Nor does it move her in the least to call her a funny old thing and speak of doctors' recommendations. Hammersmith will go respectably inside.

I can't make it more than a shilling, because as a purchaser Hammersmith is so far from fortunate. It is the same whatever she buys; they cozen and hoodwink and browbeat her into anything. For polite solicitation she has absolutely no denial, and I have long ceased to send her to a certain winning young man at the grocer's, whose invention as to his customer's needs is remarkably long. ("He said he would reelly like us to 'ave it, 'm—it's somethink entirely new.") She brings home all sorts of unnecessary novelties from this cozener, but she lays out the shilling with great fidelity; and it is odd what poor little weary bunches will sometimes be foisted off on her.

"I got all that for threepence," she will proudly announce of a faggot of wallflower, all woody stem and tumbling blossom, and positively smelling of the costermonger. She is fond of wallflower—it is her "fav'rite."

"I bought a piece with the first money I earned," she sentimentally remembers. "I 'ad it in my 'at."

Poor 'Ammersmith — I'm afraid it is a fatal preference, and may never leave her.

Syringa is another of her affections.

"It has a sweet smell," I replied about it, moderately.

"Don't it, 'm! A beautiful smell I call it—like a 'ospital."

We are always handing our own susceptibilities on, and being surprised that they fail to operate. Hammersmith is acquiescent, but not particularly grateful, for a fresh kitchen posy. She likes better, I think, to rescue the pick of the outcasts from the drawing-room, and give them another day in a tumbler of water on her dresser. That appeals to her thrift and benevolence; and no doubt it is rather these qualities in herself that she admires when she looks at the result. She has a general, abstract approval of flowers, but none the less hates giving up her kitchen table to them on carnival days of fresh supplies.

"They do waste a lot of your time, 'm, don't they?" she hints in the grumble key, and "It ain't as if there was a scullery."

"Sing a song of scullery," I retort, with feigned indifference. "The kitchen is quite good enough for me."

"There now, as if I was sayin' anything against the kitchen," she protests aggrievedly. "They're messy things, flowers are. Not but what we should miss 'em."

I have no great sympathy with the window-box form of decoration when the window-boxes are "supplied," as they generally are, at so much a foot, and changed so often during the season. From the public point of view, of course, it is very gay and pleasant; but I am looking at it from the inside. As far as the proprietor or lessee of the window-boxes is concerned they are a perfunctory show, like bunting, and while they gratify the æsthetic sense, do no good to the heart. Such benefits are harder to come by; you must wait and watch and water.

With these views, Hammersmith and I tried to bring window-boxes up by hand. Harris, the jobbing carpenter who is such a comfort, made the boxes out of an old packing-case. We bought the leaf-mould by the pound—it was surprisingly dear—and planted seeds, among them six interesting and mysterious ones from India. They were flat and shining and looked like scarabs—Hammersmith said she was glad to see them under ground before they turned into black-beetles and got away. Out of regard for their tropical antecedents we put that box on the kitchen mantelpiece;

and when all six suddenly shot up there Hammersmith took it as a personal compliment, and made their interests her own. They certainly came on remarkably; her statement was that she couldn't turn her back without their taking advantage of it; and when she left the kitchen she didn't know what she would find when she came back. They developed into creepers and hung over the box, entangling themselves with the toasting-fork and threatening the saucepans. I could hear Hammersmith talk to them about their "imperence." Finally they were turned out into the mildest weather we could find, and for two days they continued their remarkable promise. Then, one morning, they vanished, at first sight as unaccountably as they had come. Traces, however, revealed themselves to the inspecting eye, and a marauding wing returned to complete the evidence—pigeons. Not often was such a salad prepared for them; and they remembered it gratefully and practically while a seed sprouted in our casements. Hammersmith, who has a lively sympathy with everything that has to look for a living, declared that it was "more 'n you could expect of 'em" not to devour our decorations.

"London's a funny place," she moralised over the empty boxes. "There ain't anybody can do just as they like in London."

My invaluable domestic does sometimes rub it in.

THE DOOR OPPOSITE

XIV

THE DOOR OPPOSITE

WE are not the very top flat; there are tenants above us again. Although, as Hammersmith remarks, what with these cement floors people are so fond of using nowadays there might almost as well be nobody there, for all you can tell of what they are doing. It is hard on Hammersmith that the single effective feature of the building should so defeat her, for in other respects she considers it "run up very temporary." And she is the daughter of a line of working carpenters, so when she lays an accusing hand upon a partition I am sure she knows.

For a long time they lived in their lofty seclusion, the people above; and nothing came through the cement floor except the hour when the young person went to bed —she kicked off her boots unmistakably at ten, and Hammersmith would remark "Now *she* is gone, I might as well go too"—and the fact that early in April they treated themselves to a new drawing-room carpet. The putting down was done by themselves and lasted two days. Hammersmith used to linger over her dusting in order that she might complain of the tacking, which almost, I was given to understand, drove her silly. Apart from that, she approved of the purchase with reference to the time of year.

"They'll get the beauty of it," she remarked; "*they* won't 'ave it tracked over all though the dirty weather," with a disparaging eye upon my Amritsar rug which had come to live with us at Christmas.

"They're laying the old one down in the maid's room," she came in to announce a day or two later. "I can 'ear the young person doing it ; and *she* ain't troubling herself to put in any more tacks than she can 'elp. I'd been off my 'ead by now if she 'ad done."

"Do you think you will ever get to know that young person, Hammersmith?" I used to ask hopefully; and Hammersmith would always reply "Oh no, 'm! Not 'ere in London. It don't do to pick up with next door people in London. It ain't like the country. You don't know what class they may be."

"They are professional people, I believe, Hammersmith. Quite respectable. The gentleman is an architect."

"You can't go by that, 'm. There's all sorts," replied Hammersmith darkly. "It don't do to trust nobody, not if he was a Hem-P, nowadays. Not that the young person mightn't be as respectable as I am myself. She ain't changeable, that's one thing. I saw 'er shakin' out the rugs the day I came to you, 'm. She must have some patience."

This attitude of remote observation and mutual reserve could not, in the nature of things, continue for ever; and I rejoice to say we are now on terms—kitchen terms—with not only the flat above, but the flat below, and what Hammersmith calls "the door opposite." With regard to the young person above, it was the tradesman's lift, she reported to me, that "broke the ice."

"When it came to me takin' in her bacon and 'er taking in my greens the same day, we '*ad* to laugh," Hammersmith confessed.

Once you have laughed over bacon and greens what retirement is possible on either side?

"She is as nice a young person as you could wish to meet, but she 'as a dreadful leg. She's been twict to 'ospital with it," continued Hammersmith.

Where the natural plunge is at once to such intimate considerations one understands the value and necessity of caution. Most of us would take months, if not years, to arrive at a leg. We do not fear the casual relation in consequence.

Acquaintance with the door opposite arose out of a trifling emergency which was a beaming pleasure to Hammersmith.

"The lady's got friends to tea, 'm, and the young person 'opes you would be so kind as to let her 'ave a drop o' milk, theirs 'aving soured on 'em. She'll return it immediate." Upon which I deliberately encouraged Hammersmith to borrow an opposite egg, which she, I noticed, did not return immediate, but waited until she had smartened up for the afternoon. After that we obliged each other so constantly, the tenant opposite and I, that we exchanged mutually guilty glances in the lift, as much as to say, "If you'll bow, I will." When it came to a bit o' dripping on my side and a fish-kettle on hers I made up my mind that I would take the initiative ; but as it happened, I never saw her again.

The approach that really flustered us was made by an emissary from the flat below. You may picture Hammersmith's state of mind, and mine, when, after an agitated parley at the door, she came to me with a look of alarm and an indubitable blush.

"If you please, 'm, they've sent from number Fifty-Five to know if they can use our messenger call. They 're *expectin' a little stranger.*"

I said we should be delighted, and so we were, but I think Hammersmith felt that a liberty had been taken with us, and that if it were a subject one *could* enlarge upon she would have something to say.

So now that warm-hearted little porcupine has a neighbourliness all about her, which she regulates in her own prickly way. The young person from above drops in for an hour of an evening; the young person opposite invites to Olympia; there is an adumbrated scheme for a Sunday at Hampton Court with the cook at Fifty-Five, when her responsibilities as to chicken broth at all hours grow a little less onerous. It is all pure profit and relief to me. With a tripping step I go along the passage and note the light under the kitchen door. * * *

We want all the geniality we can get in London. We are naturally situated so that we can never have too much of it, any more than we can of the sun. Nobody may hope to draw for himself any sort of embracing circle in London, big enough to provide him with the certainty of seeing at least one known face when he goes out into the streets. That is ever an adventure, like plunging into an unfamiliar sea; the only person you can count on meeting in London is London herself. She is always a friend and a companion to you; but you cannot be a friend and a companion to her, so the relation is one-sided and takes the place of nothing. Her streets, I often think, returning to them, are like the passages of one's own house; but that does not people the house with souls recognizant.

Hence the pleasantness of another little focus of hospitality in the kitchen. I believe the feudal system would compensate me for the electric light or almost anything—the expansion of family feeling in it, hearth within hearth, all warmed by the common interest, all sharing the sacred fire.

I have mentioned Harris, the job carpenter, and that he was a comfort. There are always small betterments that are possible in a flat—a shelf here, a valance-board there, a pair of cupboard doors to make an invaluable retreat for saucepans under the sink. One realises these possibilities, but looks helplessly abroad at the great impersonal agencies of London to carry them out. Which of these would stoop to so small a matter, and having stooped, what might not follow after in the way of a bill? But Harris comes and makes you incident to a job near by. Harris has a foot-rule in his pocket, tools handy, unsuspected sources of supplies in the Earl's Court Road. Allow Harris five minutes in which to scratch his head, and he can give you an "estimate" as valid as the Town Hall, which will never be more than seven-and-sixpence, materials included. I speak of our Harris only, but there must be others; he has every mark of a type. His face has a broad and honest look, his hair curls above it. He is slow of thought, slow of word, slow of act. You think nothing will ever come out of so much meditation; but when you return in the afternoon the job is done, and Harris is washing his hands in the kitchen. He is cheerful, with a hint of patience. Hammersmith has confided to me that she doesn't think he is very 'appy in his 'ome life. She also gives him the character of being a nice, respectful man to have about the kitchen, not like some, and is fertile in suggestions which require his presence. I once surprised Hammersmith in the zenith of her satisfaction. It was the hour that invites to tea and buttered toast, and Hammersmith sat presiding at the clean-spread kitchen table, Mrs. Chicory on her right hand, Harris on her left. I withdrew in haste, muttering an apology.

In this connection it was Hammersmith that explained to me the psychic or real value of umbrellas.

"I like a umbrella," she remarked, rolling mine up for me affectionately, "it's company."

I realised that I did too, and for the same reason. It's company. Always beside you in the throng, keeping your pace, returning your grasp, with a comforting promise of protection, it is a special providence, your umbrella, unfailing squire of single women. When Hammersmith lends me her umbrella, which has happened more than once, I have rather the feeling—shall I confess it?—of walking out with her young man.

Umbrellas are one thing—larks are another.

Hammersmith has a sister who has flown from the Old Kent Road. She is the wife of a relieving officer, which is social position; but she lives in the country, which is deplorable. There in the country she has her own house and garden, he being a man, I understand, who has always done well for himself, and a good husband as a person could wish to be tied to; but there, it can never be like London in the country. Mrs. Pole her name is, and he gave her as beautiful a set of furs a year ago last Christmas as you could wish to see. A bad digestion Mr. Pole's is, and not having any children Liza worries about it more than she has any call to do. With all these worldly advantages, Hammersmith gives me to understand that she wouldn't change places with Liza. Nevertheless, a Sunday in the country now and then is "a change"; and when I indulge in a week-end, Hammersmith, with elaborate precautions to ascertain the "convenience," will sometimes bestow herself on Mr. and Mrs. Pole. She comes back with an air of importance which is a pleasure to see, a large, tight bunch of flowers, a bundle of rhubarb, or a precarious paper bag of eggs, sent by Mrs. Pole for me to accept of, if I *will* accept of them. I don't know what would happen if I hesitated for an instant, but I never do.

And the last time Hammersmith returned from the country she brought with her a family of young larks. There they were in their nest, just as Nature left them when a chance murderer cut off their mother and Mr. Pole discovered them by the noise they made. They were meant to starve; Nature never expected Hammersmith—trusted rather, perhaps, to Mr. Pole, who wished to do away with them immediately as most merciful. But once having opened wide their mouths in the sight of Hammersmith this was not likely to happen. She made herself their Providence, under me; and I, though I clearly foresaw their fate, could only smile upon the misplaced idyll of a nest of larks in the kitchen of a London flat.

"They shall 'ave their three meals a day," Hammersmith stated severely, as she made them comfortable in a corner of the dresser, "an' when they begin to be tiresome I'll show 'em the window, that's all."

Alas! the three meals a day! Bread and potato and hard-boiled eggs they consisted of—a nutritious mixture, no doubt, but perhaps a trifle heavy for larks. I pointed out to Hammersmith that it was rather her duty to go out into High Street and dig for worms; but she chose to take this as a pleasantry, and only poked in more eggs and potato. She said you could see them growing, and you could indeed. Tighter and tighter, rounder and rounder, more and more congested they grew from hour to hour, for they assimilated their doom with greed, opening wide their yellow bills whenever their godmother came near them. In vain I urged upon her that she was taking unfair advantage of a mechanical provision of nature; stuff them she would and did. They died one by one, at all sorts of odd times, taking base advantage of her back being turned. She came complaining to me of each decease, hiding her sorrow in annoyance.

"I've put the last of them little things in the ash-pail, 'm, drat 'em."

It was only when I assured her that I would come to a similar end if I ate all she wanted me to, that she picked up the corner of her apron, and I saw I had made an unfeeling jest. * * *

After that came William Black. He was a kitten, the most self-contained, sceptical, independent kitten that ever took up its abode with weak and expansive human beings. He came from the Old Kent Road where he had been too much for the baby—he was that kind of kitten. No baby would have any chance with him, though only six inches of cathood he knew his mind so well. Hammersmith, with her old-fashioned ideas about cats, thought it would be nice to name this one Flossie; but I, who dislike a contradiction in terms, preferred William as more descriptive. The innovation went hard with Hammersmith, who for some time abused the new-comer as "that-William-or-wotever-she-may-be-called"; but in the end it was established.

He was a problem—William. Hammersmith introduced him in the guise of a transient guest, on his way, come Sunday, to a niece at Shepherd's Bush; but on Sunday it was no weather to turn a cat out into;

and if it had been I suspect Hammersmith would have found some other good reason for postponement. But a cat in a flat! No roof, no garden walls, no privacy, and no adventure, the very staircase desperately forbidden! Absolutely no society—you cannot dignify with such a name the pug opposite, who goes out on a lead. I asked Hammersmith if she would not feel for the cat dreadfully in such unnatural confinement, and her reply was that suitable provision could be made. * * * So I assented, with power to revoke when William should be grown up and want employment.

"We have no mice to offer him, Hammersmith; you know that," I told her.

"No, 'm," she returned, with a hint of regret. "It ain't reasonable to expect 'em in these new buildin's; but it's 'omelike, a mouse, ain't it, 'm?"

I always think that cats reflect, in an extraordinary way, the character of the people they belong to. The cat of Juliet Delabelle is friendly, coquettish, affectionate; that of the Marchioness of Carabas distinctly full of her own importance, in the secondary way of a Court favourite. Hammersmith's cat has immediately absorbed her personality, which is not surprising, as she talks to it all the time. She has taught it good manners, and no mistake, if threats can ride upon an accent, also obedience, and to keep out from under her feet.

"I should miss that little thing now," she told me before a week was out, "it's company."

She will also defend it from imaginary aspersions. "It *is* a clean little thing," she will acknowledge, with that tear in her eye that comes at such odd summonses. Most severe, in her account of it, is her discipline.

"I've just give that there William such a 'idin'," she frequently informs me. "On the table she was. Oh, *you* know, don't you?" apostrophising William, who licks his paws with perfect equanimity by the fire.

It is as well that William is indifferent by nature, for she addresses him in terms of playful ferocity which might well get on his nerves. Affection is coy in the Old Kent Road and takes primitive forms of expression.

"I'll cut your 'ed off!" she exclaims, for the mere pleasure of simulated fury, holding the little black thing at arm's length; and William, curling in temporary helplessness round her hand, stares back at her with phrases in his yellow eyes just as unmannerly. * * *

Yes, William has grown very like Hammersmith, whose temper, as I have often hinted, is uncertain. She knows when she is cross as well as anybody; and she knows also when William is put out. He was banished from the drawing-room the other day with hard words because, in her very dusting presence, he had jumped into a forbidden fern. Repenting, I called him back, but he kept his course along the passage to the kitchen, hugging the wall with lowered tail, and took no notice.

"Dis'greeable," explained Hammersmith, understandingly.

SUB-LET

XV

SUB-LET

IT is November again, and the chrysanthemums have ousted everything else from the old women's baskets. Sheaves of chrysanthemums, never the worse for the mud and the rain, glowing at every turn of the wet, grey streets, as if they rather enjoyed the weather. I believe that if, like Hammersmith, I had a "fav'rite" among flowers, there would be little to choose for me between the chrysanthemum and another—any other. I think it the bravest flower, the least self-conscious, the most provocative, with that refreshing pungency of scent, to a vigorous and hopeful outlook upon life. And more than any flower one wants to caress it with face and fingers. Chrysanthemums in gardens are irresistible. I, for one, can never pass them without touching their cool petals. A beatitude comes forth from them, and at their contact I am sure some evil microbe perishes in the system.

It is a happy provision that there are plenty of chrysanthemums, for there is very little else at present, as my special old woman informs me, "to fall back on."

"Flowers is very tryin' just now," she tells me, "an' so dear that it's no pleasure to sell 'em. Look at them vi'lets now, fourpence a bunch! Folks grumble fit to break your 'eart."

And last week turned suddenly, prematurely, to withering winter. Winter so severe that one huddles into the omnibus, winter with down-drafs and all sorts of detrimentals. Hammersmith deplores her little chapped hands, which are much too fiercely active for long confinement in housemaid's gloves. She is rather proud of these useful members, and considers their state with ruefulness.

"But there," she says, "it's weather for 'ands!"

So she goes to it with a stout heart, which does her much credit considering the importance she sets, like all born Londoners, upon the exiguous sun. I remember her reaching a real height, or touching a real depth, of philosophy in this connection, though it was May then. We were deploring the hard luck of youngest brother Tom, who had lost his job, and him with five depending on him.

"I told him 'e 'ad the best of the year to look forward to," said Hammersmith reassuringly.

Poor Tom, with five depending on him,

expected to take what he could out of the prospect of fine weather!

But no such consolation spreads before us now. On the other hand, all the prophets talk of a long, hard winter; and already in the distance may be heard the dreary tramp of the unemployed—Tom, no doubt, among them. Government is supposed, in advance, to be in desperate straits to cope with the situation. It seems unsympathetic to leave the unemployed; and I have also a scruple which inclines me to stay and see Government through its straits. Another impulse, however, of the kind to which I am subject—it is in my system and ineradicable—strongly suggests a point of view in Sicily. After all, the *Times* can follow one. And a slight but troublesome bronchial complication comes to the aid of the second impulse.

To some people, no doubt, it is simple just to avoid the winter by going to Palermo.

To me it means sub-letting. To me it means disposing of Hammersmith. What revenges are theirs, these functionaries of the lower plane! Does not every project take them into account? Is there the least thing that can be put in motion without a wary eye upon them? What will Hammersmith say when I tell her I am going to take the liberty—if I can get it—of sub-letting? How shall I put it? I lie awake revolving these things.

A brief word, a high line, and march out.

"Hammersmith, I am leaving London for the winter, and intend to sub-let the flat. I will consider what I can do about you." That would be dignified, final—and a horrid jar. Would she not "give notice" then and there? Would she not be justified in giving it?

Hammersmith, in the early days, constantly gave notice. She did not use that disagreeable expression, but when anything upset her she would look like a falling barometer for an hour and then say, "I don't want to put nobody out, 'm, but I've been thinking it over ser'ously, and I don't really think I *can*. Of course I'll stay with you till you're suited." And I would expostulate, and say, "Oh, nonsense, Hammersmith, of course you can. A capable person like you. And what do you suppose I could do, now, with an ordinary servant?" It was gross, I admit, but effective. Hammersmith would turn away mollified, and shortly after would be considering the contingency of spending her life with me. But in the end it became clear that this flattering function only tempted to give notice the more, so the next time she did it I said calmly, "Very well, Hammersmith, I will advertise in the Kensington paper this week." She went out of the room in a startled manner; and next morning came into my presence with a humility which she did not feel and a ceremony which was quite unnecessary, and said in an injured voice, "Do you *ser'ously* mean me to leave, 'm, after all these months which I've done my best, though I don't say I'm as clever as some——" Since then such a likelihood has never been "ser'ously" mentioned by either of us, but now——

"I don't seem to get rid of my cold, do I, Hammersmith?"

"No, 'm. You won't try my remedy, which it's honey one dessert-spoonful——"

"Now Hammersmith, the idea of your setting yourself up against the doctors! I'm afraid, as Dr. Jackson says, it will cling to me the whole winter if I don't go away. In fact"—hastily—"I am thinking of going abroad for the winter."

Hammersmith is doing something at the dresser, with her little roundish back to me.

It does not turn, the little roundish back; it stands there in its blue cotton and gives no sign; but it becomes very expressive. I look out of the window.

"Yes, I think I must get out of England for the winter."

Still the invidious comment of immobility and silence. I make a weak appeal.

"Don't you think I ought, Hammersmith?"

"Well, 'm, you've got nobody to think of but yourself, *'ave* you?"

Alas!

"I thought you might give me some advice, Hammersmith."

"Oh, don't go abroad to please *me*, 'm, and don't stay at 'ome to please me. I don't want nothink done on *my* account."

"I see I must take the responsibility upon myself," I remark, and heave a sigh.

It is effectual to this extent, that Hammersmith turns round.

"I've always said if you was to shut up the flat at any time there ain't enough dust-sheets."

"I shouldn't shut it up, Hammersmith. I should sub-let it."

Round goes the back again, with disapproval written all over it.

"Strangers 'ere!"

"They might be strangers."

"I've never been where they let. Fam'lies generally shut up their places. Caretaker I '*ave* been."

"You've always lived with such grand people, Hammersmith; there is no contenting you," I say with asperity. "You see, I'm not a fam'ly."

"You'll say it ain't none of my business, and no more it ain't; but if I speak my mind, 'm, which you always say you wish, I don't 'old with lettin'. You don't know what they may bring with 'em nor what they may take away. There was the lady in Fifty-Two that let in the spring to parties from Jamaica, and when she came back they was in 'orrible numbers and 'ad to be fumigated."

"We'll take our risk. We needn't show it to anybody from Jamaica. But it's you that I'm thinking about, Hammersmith. What is to become of you?"

"Oh, don't you worry about me, 'm. I 'ad a letter only yesterday from the oldest Miss Crow, askin' kindly after me and whether I could oblige there for a time. Not but what——"

"Not but what?'

"I should miss the door opposite."

"I think you would," I reply, for I am no friend to the Miss Crows, who have picked at my peace of mind with more than one letter.

"And that young person would miss you too, I'm afraid."

"That's the worst of flats. You get so taken up with the different young persons. There's partings as well as conveniences. Once I leave you, 'm, I don't think I shall ever go into another."

It is the moment for the whole of my direful proposition.

"Well, Hammersmith, if they're nice people I don't see why you *should* leave. They may be very glad to keep you on."

At first blush the idea, as I expected, is quite intolerable. For Hammersmith's part, she doesn't like "new faces." Further, she is convinced that all prospective tenants will bring "their own." Further still, such prospective tenants are not at all likely to take to her, "irrytable" as she confesses herself to be, and over-fond of plain speaking. In addition to which there might be a gentleman; and she doesn't at all know whether she could get used to a gentleman again, not 'aving 'ad one since pore Mr. Bloomfield. Not but what she thinks a passage always looks better with a gentlemen's hat hanging in it. No more is it to be supposed that she relishes the prospect of handing her saucepans over to others—the others of strangers—to leave standing, day in and day out, nor yet her silver, nor yet her brass, to get a lick and a promise — for what do *they* care? Finally, if she made room for others, whatever would become of William? He couldn't go back 'ome, that was one thing; he was big enough to eat the baby now.

I have been to all the neighbouring agents, and left "particulars"—"three bed, two recep., kitchen, bath, lift, electric light, hot water laid on. One servant will remain if desired." Privately I have made up my mind that she by whom Hammersmith is *not* desired may desire the flat in vain. If the Athenians ever sub-let, be sure it was only to such Bœotians as would respectfully appreciate the tutelary divinity. The young men at the agents' took down the particulars with an air of extreme lassitude, a manner which seemed to assure me that I was one of hundreds in these parts, and nothing was at all likely to come of it; but somehow I had hopes. When I analysed my hopes I found they centred upon Hammersmith. Other flats, even with four bed, three recep., might sigh in vain; they had no Hammersmith.

When the door-bell rang next morning at half-past nine, she who was bringing in breakfast, cried, "There! Some one to see the flat!" and would not answer it until she had put on a clean apron; but it was only the man to collect the electric-light bill. We had in that way a great many false alarms. Once the bars were down, so to speak, we expected troops of persons to take advantage of it. We had only to look abroad from our windows at London roaming below, obviously hungry and homeless, to be sure of that.

But it was days before anybody came; so long that Sicily had receded out of the map of Europe for me, and I had begun to consider the English Riviera and other such make-believes as are possible to persons who have failed to sub-let. Then I returned one afternoon, to be admitted by Hammersmith with a strong suppression of excitement.

"There's been a gentleman to look over the flat. I showed him all down and round, and he didn't take it; but 'e said it was as beautiful clean a little flat as ever he see, an' if it 'ad a smoking lounge 'e would be tempted. And he gave me a shillin'," she added, as if it were rather a silly joke on the part of the gentleman. "An' I said, 'Thank you, sir,'" as if that were the humorous way of accepting such a silly joke. "And there's the shillin'" indicating it, with a triumphant finger, on the kitchen table.

In the course of long and varied experience Hammersmith could have little doubt left about the significance of tips; but she gave me quite the feeling that she had no wish to claim undivided property in that shilling. At all events there it was, exposed on the kitchen table, the spoil of the afternoon.

"That was benevolent of him," I remarked with detachment. "Put it away, Hammersmith. I may wish to borrow it to-morrow."

"Oh, I can let you 'ave more than that, m," sweeping it scornfully into her pocket.

Nothing produces such complacency in Hammersmith as to go to her for small change. Dearly she loves to produce her fat leather purse and dispense it; and invariably she wishes to let me 'ave more than that.

"And I owe you ninepence already, for stamps, yesterday," I reminded her.

"Oh, I shall get it, 'm. I'd trust you as I would myself," she assured me in all sincerity; and I might pocket the compliment as she did the shilling.

"The gentleman looked tanned, so I said to 'im, 'I dare say I'm mistaken in supposing you come from the West Indies, sir?' not wishing to ask 'im straight out. And he looked surprised, and said 'No—was you expectin' any one from there?' I said not exactly, but I might say we was lookin' out for them, which was no more than the truth. 'Owever, it wasn't no use, 'im wanting a smoking lounge above all, though he did admire the paint; and as I let 'im out I thinks to myself, 'There's more than one fish in the sea,' and now that one's found the way they'll be coming in their dozens."

They did not come in their dozens, precisely; but for the next ten days enough of them came to make life a theatre of new and enthralling interest. One imagines after a while that the world has no excitements left in it. Do not come too absolutely to that conclusion until you have tried to let your flat and had nibbles. It lends, I assure you, a new aspect and a new importance to everything. One eschews Portugal onions, however sympathetic, because it is so difficult to keep the smell of them inside the kitchen. A fresh interest attaches to the brass and to the way the pictures hang. The rugs must lie straighter, the flowers be fresher than ever —ten to one you purchase a five-and-sixpenny azalea in a pot to lend charm to a dingy corner. You know all the delightful uncertainties of the spider superintending her parlour, and when the flys arrive with inspection orders from the agent, at however inconvenient an hour, you do not disguise your satisfaction. At least I did disguise it if I happened to be busy—upon these chapters, for instance, in the relaxation of a dressing-gown—I disguised it in the linen-closet. I would go into the linen-closet until Hammersmith had shown the bathroom; she would then inveigle the visitors into the kitchen, by way of explaining the larder arrangements, and I would nip into the bathroom. But I felt it none the less; and none the less eagerly, the moment the door had closed upon them, I demanded of Hammersmith her impressions.

"They seemed dreadful pleased with it, 'm, especially the lady; but if you ask me, I don't expect anything to come of it—they 'ad a great deal too much to say." * * *

"It was two ladies, 'm, leastways dressed very rich, with scent to knock you down, an' one of them kep' a sayin' 'Wherehever should we put the butler?' But if they was really ladies then I don't know 'em." * * *

"An' she said, 'Why, there's no scullery!' . . . kind of complainin'. 'No,' I told her, 'there ain't no scullery, 'm, and in a place of this size you 'ardly miss it.'" * * *

Oh, Hammersmith! * * *

When it was possible I rather liked showing the applicants over myself, Hammersmith hanging on the rear, or darting ahead to pull a blind straight or "take up" some hypothetical dust. There was quite an extraordinary pleasure in that, when the visiting public sat and admired the tone of the wall-paper, and the arrangement of the books and pictures, and regretted, so profoundly and politely, that there wasn't a third bedroom *besides* the maid's room—otherwise nothing could be more charming. When they saw that it *was* charming, that was the point—when the casual, unaccredited eye reflected sympathy and pleasure—there was, I suppose, an artistic satisfaction in it. The poor spider, whose ways we hold in horror from infancy, has also, perhaps, just such a moment of æsthetic triumph.

On the eleventh day, in desperation, we reversed the matting in the hall; Hammersmith said it was getting grubby.

"Turn the best side to London, 'm," she advised me, "an' don't be down-'earted."

So we turned the best side to London, and I went out through a December fog to a tea-party, where I knew I should accost every sufficiently familiar face with "*Do* you know of anybody that wants a perfectly delightful flat for the winter?"

Because it becomes an obsession to let your flat, and what you yourself become I do not like to think. Everybody hastily promises to make a note of it, and I have known one or two real friends who did. However, on this occasion I am proud to say there was no need. Hardly had my returning key clicked in the latch before Hammersmith was pouring it all out. An aunt and a niece it was from the country, old-fashioned gentry, and asked her immediate was she the one that would consent to remain. And they said it would suit them in every respect, including William, they 'aving recently lost their cat through old age. And they asked would the lady mind putting away everything of value, as they didn't like more responsibility than they could avoid.

"And they didn't say chimneys, so I didn't say down-drafs," concluded Hammersmith.

"But there—it don't happen once in a month."

* * *

As I write I have the fresh picture of her standing in the open door wishing me a good journey, while Wilkins, looking expectant, informs me that all the luggage has gone down. She assures me, behind the corner of her apron, that I can go with an easy mind, and I know I can. We shake hands sincerely, and as I sink in the lift with Wilkins I hear her close the door. I shall be glad when she opens it for me again.

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