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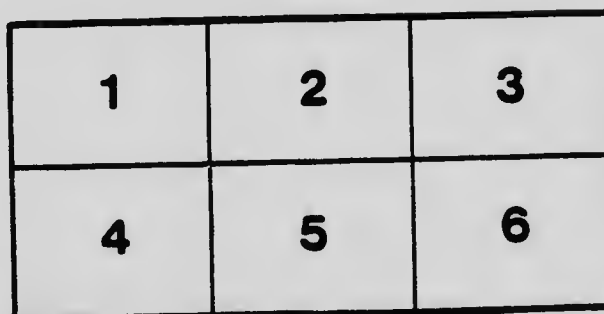
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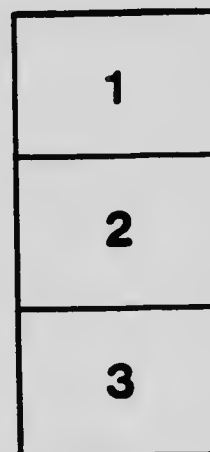
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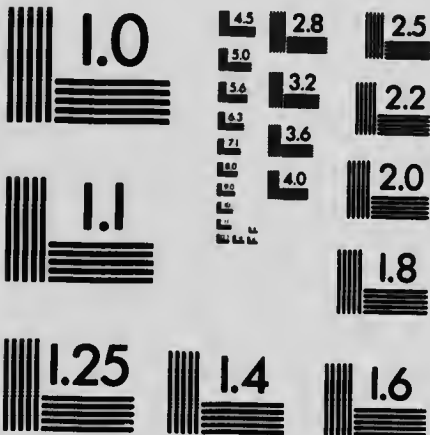
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A BAWN IN  
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HUGH W. SHARP

G. Wall.

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# A PAWN IN PAWN



# A PAWN IN PAWN

BY

**HILDA M. SHARP.**

*Author of "The Stars in their Course"*

**THE RYERSON PRESS  
TORONTO**

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TO  
THE MEMORY OF MY BROTHER  
CHARLES GORDON SHARP  
WHO WAS KILLED AT THE YPRES SALIENT  
FEBRUARY 5, 1916

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The convent of St. Monica's  
and its system of educa-  
tion are entirely fictitious.

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# A PAWN IN PAWN

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### THE MAKING OF A POET

SINCE the first dawn of the nineties a select few who understood what they were talking about had been saying among themselves that Julian Tarrant was the greatest poet that the century's latter end had produced. A rather larger outer circle, which did not understand, but knew that it ought to admire, had been telling the general public the same thing, more loudly, because with the less conviction.

As for the public itself, it accepted the information with docility, but, for the most part, never read his best work at all. But it read, and in some measure could even appreciate, his second-best—volumes of lyric verse, mostly written with a swinging lilt and the magic colours of drama in which his pen was always dipped—gems of style these also, though not for a moment to be compared with 'Prolyxo,' or 'The Brazen Tower,' or 'The Queen's Marriage Masque.'

But since an imperfect world does not always reward the best—or even the second-best—literature with a living wage, it followed that Julian, like many a man of genius before him, had had to turn his gift to strange uses at times. In his early twenties

Fleet Street had known him as a free-lance, ready to supply whatever literary goods might be in demand, at whatever price. In common with lesser men, he had haunted newspaper offices, hanging impatiently on the editorial verdict, urged thereto by hunger and an unpaid landlady in the background. In more restless and slightly palmier days, he had disappeared from London altogether, to reappear in—let us say, Stamboul or Pekin or Bogota, whence in vivid, unsigned prose he wrote of the many aspects of multi-coloured, alien worlds for the benefit of British news-readers, to whom matter was everything, and manner less than nothing.

From these self-exiles he would come back to London as suddenly and eagerly as he had left it, and generally all on fire to begin the writing of some important work whose dry bones, as they existed in his brain, were merely waiting to be clothed and jewelled in verse. It was on one such return that he fell ill for the first time in his life—so ill that for many weeks he was fighting against odds for bare life.

When the dreariness of convalescence set in, it brought in its wake all the sordid worries of doctor's bills, chemist's bills and every other sort of bill connected with sickness and stoppage of paid work. To keep the wolf temporarily at bay, Julian abandoned all ideas of the tragedy then crying to be written, much as a mother may abandon her crying child in order to seek work for its keep.

He might, of course, at this juncture have written to his one near relative and asked her tardily to forgive him for having turned out a poet instead of a prosperous puritan; but it probably never occurred to him to do that. Instead, he wrote a play in prose and a modern setting which he called 'The Last Laugh.' The writing of it took him about three weeks, where the tragedy might have taken twice as many months. And it was, of

course, a pot-boiler, in the literal sense of that vulgar word, and, as such, entirely contemptible in his eyes. But, all the same, it was rather a remarkable piece of work. The first manager to whom it was submitted accepted it at once, with the attached condition that the author's name should appear.

It had been running for thirteen months when Julian's grandmother died suddenly, and left him all the property she had possessed, which was considerable. And it came to him, in money's own mocking way, at the one moment of his life when, at last, and after long waiting, he neither wanted nor needed it.

As for the forgiveness her will implied, he did not want that either. Her sins against him, had she but known it, were quite as real as any he might have committed against her. For had she not done her unsuspecting, pious best to stifle at its birth that thing which the gods give only once in every long while to a mere mortal?

That they had bestowed it on one of the hitherto satisfactorily solid and stolid Tarrant breed was a fact of which in early days she was blissfully ignorant, or she might have done more harm than she did.

And, since the gift survived, you may say that she did him no harm at all, and you may be right. You may argue that a small boy who is housed and fed and clothed, and neither unjustly beaten nor starved—unless you count starvation of the soul—has nothing to complain of. And common sense, of course, sides with you. I do not propose to paint Mrs. Tarrant in any colours unbecoming to so good and painfully conscientious a woman. That it was goodness of a narrow and sunless sort was chiefly the fault of her generation—the generation which looked on life in general, and child-life in particular, from the standpoint of the late Mr. and

Mrs. Fairchild. In her eyes the heart of a child was a naturally naughty and deceitful heart. She must certainly have thought that 'of such are the Kingdom of Heaven' applied solely to the children of a remote, more sanctified period.

Almost from his cradle Julian was made vaguely aware that in his grandmother's religious code most things were 'wrong'—especially most beautiful and joyous things. On Sundays everything was wrong except church and meals, both of which were in extra-plentiful supply on those days. The smell of roast beef, like a sort of evangelical incense, seemed ever after to hang round the memories of those frequent church-goings and comings. For relaxation between meals and services he was permitted to read 'The Peep of Day,' and similar works, the chief interest of which lay in the fact that their writers seemed to be in the unique position of being able to state the precise ultimate destination of Balaam, Ananias and Judas Iscariot—and also of abandoned modern persons who drank or played cards or went to balls and theatres. He dimly and defiantly guessed that these pious imaginatives would almost equally have condemned that secret thing in himself which could make radiant even the solitudes and austerities of life, opening doors into worlds of wonder and delight.

His grandmother sent him to school, however; first to a private school chosen because it taught what she called 'the Gospel' (and very little else, I should imagine), and, later, to Charterhouse, for reasons not so easy to fathom—possibly to test his powers of sinking or swimming in the soul-imperilling currents of public-school life.

The current presently carried him and me into the same form; and it is an ironical fact that I was near the top of it, and he at the bottom, or thereabouts. Our friendship itself really began on the day I helped him over a tougher bit of Cæsar

than usual, and I remember that even my crude young powers of observation were arrested by the contrast between his ignorance as to the manner, and his interest in the matter, of the subject in hand. To put it more simply, this was a 'story' full of dramatic possibilities that he was trying to unravel, not a mere tiresome scholastic device for the gaining or losing of marks.

Later—it must have been at least a term later—in our friendship, we tentatively and suspiciously exchanged confidences as to the secret tastes which lay far below such surface matters as meals and games and work—and found that they were the same. I may say that much, I hope, without fatuity, since tastes are not for a moment to be confounded with talent, much less with genius. And the germ of that last easily-named, seldom-seen marvel was in the fragments of verse he showed me under solemn oaths of secrecy.

The secrecy came to a sudden end in the middle of the summer quarter three years later, but not through any infidelity of mine. Julian had gone home to spend the *exeat*, and he escaped its tedium by shutting himself into his room most of Saturday and all Sunday afternoon to finish the first act of the classic drama he had begun to write during the Easter holidays.

Mrs. Tarrant, seeking him there, demanded the unlocking of the door, and, being admitted, eyed with suspicion the un-Sabbatical litter of paper.

"Is this a scriptural examination that you have been set?" she inquired, without any *arrière pensée* of a sarcastic nature.

"No," said he.

"A holiday task of some kind?" she suggested, with reviving distrust of the religious soundness of modern school methods.

"No," he repeated.

She waived the question for the moment, and

told him that she had come to talk to him about his future. He was to leave school at Christmas, it appeared, and, after the New Year, to start work in a business house where the Tarrant interest still loomed large, though the Tarrant name no longer appeared in the firm. I forget what the exact business of the said firm was. If it was not cloth-making or silk-weaving or leather-working, it was something equally traditional and lucrative, I know; and, till a generation back, there had been Tarrants in it since Cromwellian or Stuart times. It was the most reasonable thing in the world, you will see, that their only descendant should be expected to walk in their easy and affluent steps.

But he thought the project an outrage, and when she had stopped speaking he said desperately:

"Grandmother, I want to go to the 'Varsity, when I leave school—Oxford, if it's all the same to you; but if you'd rather it was Cambridge, I don't really mind much."

"You cannot go to either," she told him, with decision that trod on the heels of a momentary surprise. "You would learn nothing there that would be of any use to you in a business career. It would be only a wicked waste of time. As it is, you are two years older than most boys are when they begin office work."

"I don't want to begin it at all," he said, launching his bomb. "I don't want a business career. I should never be any good at it."

She seemed amazed at the effrontery which could presume to question the wisdom of its elders, but she gave him the benefit of a generous doubt.

"Do you wish to go to college because you feel a call to be a clergyman?" she asked solemnly.

"No!" said he again, and stifled a sudden wild impulse of laughter.

"What do you want to do, then? You know

that you must do something. 'If a man will not work, neither shall he eat.'"

"I want to be a poet," he said in headlong haste, growing red and then pale.

But if this was another bomb it did not startle her as the first had done. It merely bewildered her a little. 'Poetry,' in her understanding, was represented by 'Casabianca,' 'We are Seven,' and other such sentimentalities—harmless and tune-ful, no doubt, but not for a moment to be considered from any serious standpoint. She was on the point of explaining to him firstly that poetry-making was not in itself a career at all (this, again, without any satirical intention), and secondly, that she did not suppose he could write it if he tried. But while she weighed her words her glance dropped to the papers he was still sheltering with his folded arms.

"Are you trying to write a poem now? On the Sabbath Day! . . . Let me see it!"

He let her see it, because he had no choice except to do so. The 'poem' was the unfinished first act of the since-famous 'Prolyxo,' which persons who enjoy using clap-trap words and phrases call a 'classic.' But Mrs. Tarrant had no suspicion that she was reading one of the finest writings of modern times. The long, cadenced beat of its pentameters were nothing to her but blank verse. In mere workmanship, therefore, it could not compete with 'Casabianca,' etc. But she recognized at once, and was shocked by, the immorality of its 'tone' and of the story. The limitations of an early-Victorian education may possibly have included the bare name of a mythical person known in pagan history as Helen of Troy. But in Julian's tragedy you meet the flesh-and-blood Helena, as it were, face to face—Helena the beautiful, the wanton, the triumphant stealer of men's hearts. In the last act of the finished play you see

Helena at the last, stripped of all the conquering charm, bound and impotent before the menace of death at the hands of another woman. But Mrs. Tarrant knew nothing of that Nemesis in Prolyxo's shape.

It needs no great imagination to fill in the details of the 'scene' which followed. The clash of two such violently contrasted forces—passionate Youth, on the one hand, outraged by the ruthless, non-comprehending exposing of its guarded secret : and, on the other, arrogant Age, also outraged in all its narrow infallibility of outlook—could only result in storm. Mrs. Tarrant no doubt denounced him—or, at any rate, his works—in whatever language her particular cult affects in moments of stress, and I have always understood that it does not mince words. She called him, it is to be feared, deceitful, impious, debased in all his views : what right, indeed, had he to any views or knowledge of life at all, at seventeen? One feels certain that she concluded by demanding of him the destruction of the manuscript, and his solemn promise never again to yield to the evil impulses which had urged him on its writing. . . .

It is even easier to guess what and how he replied to her—so easy, in fact, and so painful, that his share in the scene may be passed over quickly here. I am unregenerate enough to hope that sometimes, in after-life, Mrs. Tarrant may have remembered that hot, yet considered, indictment of his, and, all too late though it was, have seen some of its justice ; for she had been given the great privilege and burden of bringing up some one else's child, and, according to her outlook, had most miserably failed !

She left the room at last, telling him that she would never speak to him again till he had asked her forgiveness—no vain boast, though he never did ask it. When she was gone he gathered

together his manuscript and packed it, with as many other of his belongings as could be crammed there, into the week-end bag he had brought from school; and, with nothing in his pockets but a tip of ten shillings which some one had given him the day before, he walked out of the house and his grandmother's life.

He went to the London Docks and shipped as an extra hand on a coal-laden sailing-ship—not so much because it was the obvious course laid down by current fiction for any boy who ran away from home or school, as because his one incoherent need at the moment was to get right away from the very country which held his grandmother and everything of which she stood representative.

Six months later he wrote to me from a South American port—a characteristic letter, inasmuch as it revealed more by its reticences than by the facts it told. At that date, even more than at this, those that went down to the sea in merchant ships, as a working part of the machine, must often have found that they had also descended into hell. . . . But Julian merely said that life before the mast was pretty beastly in some ways, and that he had chucked it as soon as he could and got a job of sorts on shore. He did not add what sort of job it was, nor how paid, nor how long and in what straits he had waited for it. But he became articulate when he told me that he had finished 'Prolyxo' in the rough, and even quoted, for my benefit, Helena's dying defiance of Death—surely the most mature and finished piece of writing that ever took birth in such an execrable schoolboy hand!

I did not hear from him again, nor see him, for nearly seven years, and then we met by accident one morning close to Temple Bar, and took up the threads of our friendship just as though they had never been broken short. . . .

He was changed, of course. A religious up-

bringing of the ultra-rigid, coercive kind is, in my modest opinion, a dangerous upbringing. 'Thou shalt not,' applied to all the harmless pleasures of life, robs the harmful ones of much of their poison and menace. I have never asked, nor have I ever been told, exactly how Julian spent those first years of emancipation that went hand-in-hand with hardship and an ever-threatening starvation. Perhaps there were times when angels wept over him. . . .

But the gods watched over their own splendid gift, and somehow kept it unsoiled and unspoiled.

## CHAPTER II

### TRIMMER'S WOOD

FOR twenty-three years after Julian walked out of her house, Mrs. Tarrant lived in it alone, keeping her grip on life with something of the same tenacity which had always marked the views held within its narrow limits. She was ninety-six when she died, and her grandson was then forty—an age when, for most men, the past has left its mark too indelibly on the future for a trifling fact like sudden wealth to have power to erase it.

Julian's attitude towards his own altered fortunes, so you of the wise, workaday world may say, was that of an unreasonable child ; or—if you prefer it—the artistic temperament. The points of view have their similarities, no doubt. He did not go to his grandmother's funeral, and he ignored the family lawyer's hints as to the suitability of his sending a floral tribute (*sic*, as we say in the best journalistic circles) in token of respect to her memory. Possibly he told himself that a thing which has no existence does not call for a token.

The said lawyer, one Collins by name, was indeed a badly harassed man in those days. For the new client followed the precedent of no hitherto-known type of legatee. He betrayed no seemly delight in his inheritance, nor interest in the various satisfactory sources of his income ; and seemed relieved, rather than otherwise, when told that an odd three thousand or so had been invested long ago in a

foreign mining company which had, so far, never paid a dividend. And when attempts were made to lure him into legal interviews and conferences he was quick to see and evade the spread net. Worst and most unorthodox of all, he did not trouble to pay the conventional visit of inspection and retrospection to his old home, now his property to do with as he pleased.

He pleased to rid himself of it with as little delay and discussion as might be, and told the distracted Collins to push the matter through without any particular provisoes as to price or prospective tenant.

But in the end he did what should, doubtless, have been from the first the obvious thing—he went to live in it himself, driven to it, not by reason or inclination, but on the seventh-wave of one passionate hour's anger. Small causes lead up to important happenings, so the truism tells us. The causes, in this instance, included items so little epic in character as a fellow-lodger who took his pleasures vulgarly, and a wallpaper that outran all the nightmare dreams of all the ages' ugliness.

Julian's rooms just then happened to be in a corner house at the meeting of five streets, where the noise of traffic was so endless and immense that it enclosed you in solitudes as profound as any desert silence. 'Room,' it had been, in the singular—a fifteen-shillings-a-week bed-sitting-room—before 'The Last Laugh' was produced; and the landlady, with the tyranny typical of her profession, had made it a condition of tenancy that he should waste the best working-hours of the day in impatient pacing of the streets, what time the general servant cleared away the breakfast things and made the bed and swept the dust under the hearth-rug.

But those days were gone and the splendours of the first-floor sitting-room were now his. I, who am a mere normal person, with a normal and nervous sensitiveness to outward circumstance, would

have found its ornate and comfortless ugliness quite intolerable. But Julian in those days, as in these, spent three-fourths of his life apart in a world of his own making—a house of defence set very high above the sordid things of earth.

That was when work went well and his pen had to hurry to keep pace with his flying thoughts. But there were other dark days when his muse of the moment eluded him—and, of all fair ladies, who so baffling and coy, on occasion, as Calliope and Enterpe and Melpomene? At such times the marble-topped 'chiffonier' and 'what-not,' the wax flowers and woollen mats and antimacassars and oleographs all took on visibility and a shattering hideousness, and drove him forth on to Hampstead Heath or into the Temple Gardens, or to some Bohemian club or restaurant, according to the hour of day or night when endurance reached breaking-point.

It was on such a day that the downstairs lodger's piano arrived as an inmate of the house. The downstairs lodger, let me tell you, was a young man of irreproachably sickly and genteel appearance, who travelled in hams or collar-studs or something all the week, and sang in the chapel choir on Sundays. Julian said that he had an anæmic soul, and that he was the sort of person whom some one would some day murder in a fit of temporary, and wholly justifiable, insanity. This, of course, was the merest surmise. What is certain is that, on the evening of one of those desperate days referred to above, spent by Julian in writing and re-writing and again re-writing the last act of his latest—it may even have been his best—drama-poem, the fellow-lodger, with a perseverance which was its own only reward, practised elementary piano settings of 'In the Gloaming' and 'Safe in the Arms of Jesus' for three hours. . . .

Julian did not murder him. He murdered his own work of many weeks instead, tearing it page by page and casting it into the fire—a deed as senseless and mad and blind as is even the fierce, goaded instinct to kill. And early next morning he paid the week's and the next week's bill, and shook the dust of the rose-garlanded, mustard-coloured carpet off his feet for ever, and came round to tell me what he had done and what he was going to do.

It was Saturday, and that afternoon I went with him to see his home of the future and the past. Trimmer's Wood, the place was called. A century or two ago it must have been miles beyond the flood-line of London's brick-and-mortar tides. Now, it was only just beyond, and you got to it—unless you were in the position to spend reckless amounts of shillings on cab-fares—by the Underground. That is to say, you started underground, but you emerged 'ere long under open skies, amid green fields, and alighted at a semi-rural railway-station. And you walked to the house up a real country lane, between hedges of briar and elder and 'bread-and-cheese,' with a sentinel elm or sycamore to give grateful shade, here and there.

The house was square and Georgian, and opulently hung with reddening creepers, like a plain woman who has been given the saving sense of dress. But inside were all the ingredients needed for complete gloom and depression. Shuttered and dust-sheeted it seemed hostile enough. But when daylight was let in on it, and the brown holland shrouds were removed, it revealed only dignity without picturesqueness and decorum without beauty. And it was full of ghosts—not pathetic, wistful ghosts, nor pleasantly gruesome ghosts, but sad, dull, early-Victorian shades. I did not wonder at Julian's taciturnity to-day, nor that he had hated the place in the past and hesitated to face it again

in the present. I wondered only that his soul had ever emerged full-winged from so stifling a chrysalis. . . .

The butler, a gloomy relic of the late régime, bequeathed, apparently, to Julian with the other ghosts and the furniture, accompanied us from room to room, pulling off dust-sheets and drawing back closed curtains. His manner suggested an unengaging blend of servility and protest—the correct demeanour, perhaps, towards Julian in his dual character of new master and unwelcome prodigal. The disapproval probably felt itself justified when Julian presently said :

"It is a hot day. I suppose there isn't anything to drink in the house, is there?"

"Yes, sir," the man told him. "There is hairiated water of various kinds. Would you care for some?"

"No, I would not," said Julian, "but I remember there are cellars. Is there anything in them?"

"I could not say, sir. They 'aven't been unlocked for fifty years, so I hunderstand. But when my poor mistress died she gave the key into my wife's—which I ought to say, the cook's—charge, sir." (So there was another live ghost somewhere in the background, and Mrs. Tarrant had evidently had her own ideas as to where trust was, and was not, due!) "Shall I bring it to you sir?"

"Yes."

But when it came he took it and looked at it without interest, and then glanced up at me questioningly.

"Fifty years is a good long time," he said. "But if you—"

"No, thanks, I haven't that sort of thirst at present," I said. "But if you said tea—outside in the garden—"

"Of course! Tea—in the garden, somewhere—"

and as quick as you can," Julian said, dismissing the man and turning with relief to the sunshine beyond the open hall-door.

And once outside—or, at any rate, after one tour of Julian's kingdom—I found myself, not so much forgiving, as forgetting the cheerless spell which Mrs. Tarrant's long rule had laid on all those decorous rooms. For if the house was full of ghosts, the garden might well be full of fairies—and romance and rainbow dreams and all the lovely, unreal things that live on when facts die and are forgotten. And over my second cup of tea I told myself—and Julian; but I do not think that even my cheerful assurance penetrated his mood of the hour—that, after all, the house could be charming too, if only some one would trouble to remove the spell. Open wide the windows to the wind and sun! Cast into the outer darkness of an auction-room all that expensive mahogany and musty upholstery! Fill the place with living, laughing presences—a pert, pretty parlour-maid in place of the relic would alone work wonders—and see the difference you might make!

"Who was Trimmer?" I demanded of Julian.

"I have no idea," he answered. "I've never thought about it."

"And they call you a poet!" I exclaimed scornfully. "Imagination is supposed to be your long suit!—Why, he may even have been an ancestor of yours on the distaff—by which I don't mean your grandmother's—side of the family!"

I paused to sniff the soft but resolute little breeze that blew towards us from somewhere across unseen hills.

"I will tell you who Trimmer was," I mused aloud. "He was a genial soul in a bag-wig, with cane and snuff-box and quizzing-glass complete, and a jolly smile for his neighbours in the best of all possible worlds. Something of a student,

perhaps ; liking equally to commune with books and nature here, or to wage warfare of wits over a glass at the ' Cheese ' or the ' Cock '—hardly a *viveur*, when you remember that he lived in a day that applauded the cracking of a bottle more than was prudent, and a continent kiss or so for the pretty serving-wench at your tavern—a bachelor, I fancy——”

“ Why should you fancy that? What evidence is there to show that he was not a Calvinistically minded father of nine, who quarrelled with his neighbours and bullied his wife and children?—I don't suppose there ever was a Trimmer ! ”

“ Perhaps there wasn't,” I agreed, refusing to mourn my fancy's swift demise. “ Anyhow, there is no question about his wood, thank God ! ”

And there was not. Did I mention that it hid from view the outward-creeping menace of a sordid suburbia, and curved sheltering arms round the enchanted garden?—A garden that held, within its five-acre limits, lavender-beds and a lily-pond and a flagged terrace-walk, and baby lawns hiding between hedges of briar and lilac, and many other equally delectable features. . . .

“ After all, who cares what Trimmer was? ” I said. “ He was not born to be of the immortals any more than Richard Drewe was ! In twenty or thirty or forty years from now I shall be as dead and in as dark an oblivion as he is. And this place will have been turned into a Park-for-the-People ; and Cockney lovers will come on bank-holidays to have sixpenny teas in the garden and gloat from afar, Tantalus-fashion, over the ‘ot-ouse gripes in the green-'cuse.’ And they'll none of them bother their heads over a problematical Trimmer—they'll be far too busy pointing out to one another the bench that used to be Julian Tarrant's favourite seat, and the very rose-bush where he always picked his button-hole on

summer mornings. Yes, of course, it will probably be a seat you never sat on, and I know you never wore a button-hole in your life ! But what of that ? Isn't fame always built on the sands of such small inaccuracies ! "

Julian laughed—a derisive, rather than a friendly laugh.

"This seems to be one of your more inspired moments," he said. "Is that the end of the discourse, or is the moral still to come? "

"Yes, it's to come—and it's this : " I answered. And since he had laughed I let myself be grave. "Julian, old man, you've come back here in a mere temper—or perhaps in penance for a temper. What you are remembering about this place is that you owe it an unhappy childhood. But I am remembering that you wrote—or at any rate conceived—'Prolyxo' here. Lucky devils like you, who are allowed to write their little names on this big world, ought not to demand everyday trifles like happiness and content, that are too small to show when the pattern is finished. It's only a man's works that count—and yours, at any rate, will live after you."

"Telemachus is much obliged ! " said Julian.

## CHAPTER III

### THE COMPLETE HOUSEHOLDER

ONE evening, about a month after Julian Tarrant went to live in his own house, young Argent and I dined with him there. We dined with the windows wide open to the warm September night. And the disapproving butler—who answered to the inappropriate name of Merriman—shivered with ostentation every time he passed them. Fresh air, under the late rule, had probably been considered as perilous for the body as amusement was for the soul.

The *ménu* was of the old-fashioned order, its items few and excellent and excellently cooked. And the wine. . . . I wonder how much Mrs. Tarrant, that stern bigot, really knew of the perennially locked cellars above which she had her being for so many years. Surely her creed should have demanded the emptying of all those bins in libation on the altar of Total Abstinence! Or did she satisfy a more subtle sense of conscience by letting the wine spoil? However that may be, some 1815 sherry had survived the long captivity. We had a bottle of it that night. And if you think that a wide experience of Soho restaurants and *vin compris* makes a man's palate insensitive to better things, let me tell you you are wrong. I speak for myself, anyhow.

"To the Complete Householder!" I said, as I lifted my glass and looked towards my host.

"Thanks," he answered with his curtest laugh, and he leant back in his chair with a movement so impatient that it gave me to think.

I glanced at him again—more narrowly this time. On the wide desert of tablecloth between us was an oasis of four squat vases containing each a tight-packed, short-stalked little wad of flowers—the disapproving one's idea of artistic decoration, no doubt. A chandelier with unshaded gaslights in white globes hung above them, throwing its ruthless glare into every corner of the rather ruthless room. With the light on his face it struck me suddenly, and for the first time, that Julian looked older than his years—that he had already lost, rather than gained, something by the transplantation which I had made the peg on which to hang those airy rags of sententious philosophy.

I asked myself now, with misgiving, whether all this stolid and respectable Philistinism which newly compassed him about, were not, perhaps, as disastrous a background for a poet as were the lodgings he had left. By 'background' I meant, of course, a metaphorical one only, for Julian, thank Heaven, has never shown any disposition to dress or stage the part. He always wore his hair short and his nails clean. And he affected neither preciosities of speech nor eccentricities of ties and collars. Temperamentally, he was always a man of action no less than of dreams, and to the superficial observer the first showed the more plainly. He was—and still is, for that matter—a tall man, of strong, but not heavy build, with the slightly bent head of the student and the broad, erect shoulders of the athlete. His eyes were blue, full of strange gloom and fire; but his hair was black and so was his beard, which he wore close-cut and trimmed to a point, like a naval officer—or an Elizabethan. The latter comparison is the more apt. It is not mine, but that of

some one far younger and wiser in her sayings than I.

There is prevalent, I believe, among women, a superstition to the effect that all purely masculine entertainments—especially bachelor ones—are rollicking, gay, go-as-you-please affairs. Some of them may be. Ours seldom were in those days, except for the go-as-you-please element. We knew one another too well even to trouble to talk unless we had anything to say. That evening, for instance, in the library after dinner, young Argent lay at ease in a big chair, immersed in a volume of Swinburne which he had picked up, and enduring, rather than encouraging, the fulsome attentions of Julian's new dog—a curly, brown foundling of ambiguous ancestry. Julian had flung up one of the windows sash-high, and was standing there, moodily oblivious of his guests. As for me, I strolled about the book-lined room, telling myself that here, at any rate, was an apartment which Mrs. Tarrant can have seldom used, for within it I ceased to feel her ghostly presence. She had not even semi-modernized it with gas, nor banished her late husband's—or can it have been her father-in-law's?—choice of pictures—fine old prints and engravings in the plain gilt frames of their date.

On the other hand, the big writing-table, just beyond the lamplight, was untidy with foolscap and the odds and ends of paper that writing-folk use for random notes. I, too, sauntered towards the open window, saying :

"A good room to work in, isn't it, old man?—Subdued and dignified and spacious, and inviolably silent !"

"Not always either inviolable or silent," Julian answered, without turning round. "The irrepressible Collins was here talking most of the morning. I got a letter from him by the first post saying he

was coming, and he burst in on me before I had time to wire and stop him."

"So work was off for most of the morning?"

"For most of the day. That sort of thing puts me off. I lose the thread of what I'm writing when I'm made to listen to nonsense about stocks and mortgages and other things that don't matter!"

I shrugged my shoulders in a pity not quite fairly divided between an overworked professional man and his client, and replied half-heartedly:

"What can you expect if you won't meet him by appointment in your own time?" And he replied bitterly:

"You admit, then, that it *is* my own in these days?—the first I've ever had in my life to use as I please—time being one of the few things that money will buy!"

This time I paid his outburst the tribute of silence, that being man's poor equivalent for the sympathy which femininity seems to find it so easy to express by word or caress. I knew what he meant, of course. He had been given fire from Heaven. And, for the most part of the last twenty-three years, poverty had compelled him to use it to cook his daily bread. Perhaps he meant more than that. The fulfilment of dreams is another of the things that money will sometimes buy—when you are young. Yes, I understood. Was not I, too, on the threshold of forty that night in the nineties? . . .

I came back to the present from a swift retrospect journey into what I knew of my own past and what I dimly guessed of Julian's.

"What did Collins want?" I asked, absently.

"He wanted to tell me that he finds, now the will is proved, that I'm better off, even, than he thought. Practically every investment ever made for the old lady was sound. And all this"—he expressed with a brief gesture the house and garden

and the guarding paddock and plantation—"grows more valuable year by year. You see before you, in fact, a rich man. I suppose Collins came to congratulate me."—His voice took a more contemptuous tone—"I actually believe he expected me to get excited over the thing! . . . And meanwhile the royalties from that damned play are still coming in!"

His swift descent to bathos ought, of course, to have been the cue for some salutary ridicule on my part. But the disgust in his voice was far too real and deep to be so dealt with. I did not, in fact, feel any impulse to laughter. I nodded after a moment's pause, saying:

"Yes—I suppose so. I was there again, a couple of nights ago. The house was packed, as usual. It may be a damned play—by which you mean, I suppose, that it's colloquial and actable and popular—but it's a damned *good* play too. You probably wrote it by a happy fluke which you couldn't repeat."

"Heaven forbid that I should try!"

"Heaven forbid, by all means, since it's no longer necessary—thanks to all this." And I, in my turn, indicated the house and sleeping garden. "All the same, you've no right to an opinion at all. I understand you've never been inside the theatre since the last rehearsal."

"No, I haven't the slightest wish to see a lot of half-clothed women applauding the worst thing I ever wrote!"

"You are an ill-tempered brute," I said, laughing, "but you're right about the women applauding. The stalls and boxes seemed full of them—rather odd, that, when 'The Last Laugh' is so down on them."

"That's not odd," put in young Argent without looking up from 'Songs before Sunrise.' "Don't they always run after the man who's 'down' on

them? Ask the parson who preaches against them, or the doctor who openly thinks the whole lot of them bundles of sham and neurosis, whether his church or his consulting-room is ever empty of them ! ”

“ I’ll take your word for it,” I retorted with a deference meant to be withering, but which apparently left him unmoved. “ Ycur long experience of the sex—and indeed of life—makes your opinion valuable ! ”

He answered with a slight laugh that he had never heard that a man must be an octogenarian to know a few elementary facts about women ; and settled himself deeper in his chair. The dog, which had snuggled itself to sleep against his feet, woke, and taking the movement for long-courted invitation, jumped on his knee.

Julian had stepped across the low window-sill, and was standing on the flagged walk outside. I joined him there, and presently we went down the three shallow steps to where the moonlight glimmered like phosphorescence on the dew-starred lawn. The lights and noise of London seemed very far away at that hour. Gossamer filaments of mist moved over the slopes of the paddock in the garden roses and syringa and mignone, along their wide waves of perfume. Standing beside the lily-pond, and listening to the faint plash and ripple of some hidden, wakeful thing there, I felt the beauty and mystery of the night descending on me like an opiate, and perversely I shook it off, together with most of my convictions, saying :

“ After all, Julian, why sulk over the thing? The average sensible person would tell you it was well worth waiting for. You’re a poet, so of course it’s quite in character that you should talk high-falutin’ stuff about damned plays, and business affairs being nonsense-that-doesn’t matter, and so on. But this is a practical world, without much use

for beauty in the abstract. Surely you've lived in it long enough to know that, *while* you live in it, what you call 'nonsense' will count to you for more righteousness than the finest poem that ever was written. Who, except yourself, is really any the happier for—let us say that gorgeously faultless couplet on Danaë's sleeping smile?—Whereas this jolly place of yours, and the jolly, unearned income it represents, are concrete, comforting realities, to be passed on——"

"*Passed on!* Exactly—and to whom?"

Something passionate in the tone with which he broke in on my own mock vehemence made me turn quickly to look at him. I could see his face in the moonlight, but not its expression. . . . Once again there came that barely articulate movement in the water at our feet. Julian picked up a pebble, and threw it towards the tiny sound.

"I haven't a relation in the world," he said. "This place and the income you think such a sanctified thing were my grandmother's. They may go ultimately to swell the funds of some institution for decayed dogs or lost governesses, for all I care! But what I earn—that's different. I am fool enough sometimes, nowadays, to find myself thinking that life would seem a more satisfying sort of affair if one were working for some one—some young thing of one's own——"

He stopped, and I stared at him, startled. This, then, was the trouble—as commonplace and crude a one as though he had been some successful soap-boiler ambitious to found a family! But I read more into it than that—more, possibly, than was there—as once again my mind groped for light on that side of his life which I had never been shown. And at last I said:

"There is an obvious solution——"

"Then for Heaven's sake don't suggest it!" he returned hastily.

I did not suggest it, but I offered him another, tossing it to him as thoughtlessly and carelessly as he had tossed the pebble into the pond.

"Why don't you adopt a child?" I said. . . .

"Is that a suggestion—or a joke?" he demanded after a pause that seemed somehow portentous.

"Whichever you like. It was an idle word—the sort I understand I shall have to give account of in the Day of Judgment," I replied flippantly.

But he had not listened. He said slowly:

"I never thought of such a thing. When you talked of a solution I thought you meant—something else."

I opened my mouth to say: 'So I did,' but changed my mind and said nothing.

"How does one set about it?"

"Set about what?" I parried, uneasily. For it is disconcerting when the pebble one has tossed idly is picked up and weighed for a gem of worth.

"That solution of yours—adopting a child?"

"How should I know?" I answered with some petulance. "Ask young Argent. He's young and infallible enough to enjoy the responsibility of giving advice which may conceivably be taken! I'm not!"

## CHAPTER IV

### MILES ARGENT

LOOKING back across twenty years, I find myself wondering exactly why and how the inclusion of Miles Argent in our triple alliance came about. It is certain that many circumstances should have seemed against it. To state the most trivial one first, he was nearly a generation younger than we were. And, whereas we considered Bohemia, with all its prejudiced disdain of prejudices, our own chosen world, his was obviously the one for which Bohemia cultivates its most careful contempt. Tradition and Convention were the polite angels that had watched his cradle and now guarded his future. Eton and Oxford had done their best—and worst—with him. As a mere incident I may mention that his school and college career had been what is casually known as brilliant, and that he was now reading for the Bar, a profession which his uncle and grandfather had conspicuously adorned before him. His father, on the other hand, had been a diplomat of some note, and the boy's childhood and holidays had been mostly spent in foreign capitals where, among other assorted knowledge, he had picked up an astonishing fluency in two very useful languages.

We came across him for the first time at one of Lady Corchester's famous Sunday receptions, where exponents of the verbs To Do, To Have and To Be, respectively, were supposed to meet and commune together with mutual pleasure and benefit

all round. Julian went to them—or said he did—because in the *pre-*'Last Laugh' days a free meal—even if it were only some evanescent indigestibility snatched from a tea-room buffet, and washed down by over-sweetened champagne-cup—was a consideration. As for me, I enjoyed them (not the viands, but the human entertainment). It amused me to watch Position talking shallow profundities to Brains, and Brains, not so seldom as could be wished, doing obeisance to Position, while Wealth, as often as not, looked superciliously askance at both. (You apprehend, I hope, under which of the headings my hostess was kind or misled enough to invite me.)

Miles Argent was a cousin of sorts of the late Lord Corchester and a godson of Lady Corchester's. He was a third-year man, and it was the Easter Vacation on the night she, by who knows what devious means, entrapped him into acting host to her *olla podrida* of guests. She received them as usual at the top of the hideously handsome marblé staircase, and he stood beside her, well-dressed and well-mannered and most imperturbably detached—the finished product of an age which prided itself on holding hidden and well-leashed any enthusiasms or emotions it might happen to possess. But under his true-to-type good breeding there were some rather disconcerting differences. It was some time before I learned to label them correctly, and I dismissed them easily as a part of the pose. I thought it a pose, for instance, that, at his age, he should choose to beguile an idle hour with 'Songs before Sunrise' or 'The Brazen Tower' in preference to works of—let us say the 'Mr. Barnes of New York' *genre*. It certainly did not, at first, occur to me that he might be one of that inner, understanding circle already referred to. And so his mental attitude towards Julian puzzled and amused me. For he gave me his

friendship on the offhand, man-to-man terms which are youth's rarest compliment to the older generation. But he paid Julian a more subtle tribute still. It would be absurd to think of him harbouring any such *naïveté* as hero-worship, but something oddly like it showed at times through the chinks of his confident, competent modernism. Julian was unaware of it. He liked the boy—possibly even loved him. My own feelings towards him in those early days hesitated between a grudging interest and passive dislike. I need hardly say which of us took the least pains to be civil to him.

When we stepped back across the window-sill silence met us, unbroken except for an occasional snore from the dog, still sprawling across the new friend's knee in the ecstatic abandon of canine slumber. Young Argent was also asleep. The volume of Swinburne lay on the floor. Julian picked it up and threw it on the table with unnecessary noise. The boy woke—characteristically, without any effect of being startled or disturbed.

"Beastly rude of me," he murmured, and sat upright, pushing the dog off his knees. "The fact is, I've put in seven hours work to-day. And I was dancing the *Post Horn* at 4 a.m."

"Does that sort of thing amuse you particularly?" I asked. "I thought what they call the season came to an end two months ago. I suppose you think you can dance all night and read—or try to read—all day, and then pass your exams as well as if you were going about the thing rationally?"

He got out a cigarette and replied coolly and categorically:

"Yes, it amuses me—not very particularly though, now I come to think of it. It was a dance in the country, not London—my first night out since the Stafford House show in July, and probably my

last for a long time. I'm quite rational. The exams? Yes, I hope I'll scrape through somehow."

Julian, who was moving impatiently about the room, here struck in on our aimless talk:

"Look here, Miles! Dick says you're young and cocksure enough—or words to that effect—to answer any riddle put to you. Do you know how people adopt a child?"

"Of course. That's easy enough. You find it on your doorstep or in a snow-drift in the garden. It generally has a coronet marked on its clothes, and you haven't the heart to send it to the workhouse. The coronet is a softening influence, I suppose——"

"I'm talking of life, not books and plays," Julian said irritably. "It's not a joke. I—we want to know."

"I'm sorry; I didn't understand. After you with the match, Drewe. No, I don't suppose it's done quite like that in actual life."

He got up to take the nearly burnt-out match from me, and when he had lighted his cigarette looked up in a swift glance first at Julian and then at me, waiting, no doubt, for some indication as to why the question had been raised, and on whose behalf. And something prompted me to say carelessly:

"I want some topic that isn't already written to death for my next two columns in the *Stop-Press*."

The slight uneasiness which I had guessed at, rather than seen, in his face went out of it. He said:

"You seem to be on a good track. You're thinking of the Pawn-shop, I suppose. As far as I know, it's never been in print. If you write it up you'll be delivering the goods all right."

"The 'Pawn-shop'?" Julian said, in underlined query. I said nothing. As a journalist, it is my business to keep more or less abreast of social history in the making. But it is not the business

of the real man of letters, and Julian repeated his question.

"'Pawn-shop?' What is it? What do you mean?"

Argent looked towards me, but I would not see his look.

"It's a ribald name," he said, "by which a certain convent is known to the man-in-the-street—or rather, the man-at-the-club. It runs the usual sort of good works—a penitentiary or a home for old people, I forget which, and a so-called orphanage. But the orphans aren't really orphans. Most of them are the children of parents who—well, who haven't any business to be parents at all, or at any rate, not to those particular children."

I glanced at Julian and was not surprised to see him frown. He may or may not himself have trodden always unswervingly the strait, difficult road to Heaven. I did not know. It was not my business. But he had been born of Puritan stock. And, moreover, he had all the artist's fastidious distance for seeing sin thrust into ugly prominence.

"I understand," he said, with what can only be called a sneer. "You suggest that these children—sifted from the dregs of life, and with every sort of vileness, mental and moral and probably physical, in their blood—are to be had by any one for the asking. A desirable sort of heir to choose, upon my word! Mother, at best, I suppose, a diseased sot or an underfed, over-tempted little servant-drudge! And the father—God knows who!"

He had seated himself on the edge of the table, and I (designedly, for I wanted no finger in this pie) had taken an arm-chair at a little distance. Young Argent was leaning against the high chimney-piece, facing us. He heard Julian's angry speech out, his eyes on the slow, blue spiral of smoke from the cigarette in his hand. When the last indignant

word had been spoken he waited an instant, and then said quietly :

"You mistake the situation, sir. St. Monica's doesn't concern itself with repairing the indiscretions of the Great Unwashed. The mothers aren't usually either drunken degenerates or erring slaveys. Broadly speaking, they are pretty ladies lapped in every luxury, whose faces have been their misfortune. But they're not confined to any particular class. They may be society women or actresses or merely those fashion-plate looking persons you—glimpse on the promenades. The fathers, as you say, are God knows who. But I've heard that the convent makes it its business to know, too." . . .

"Why '*Pawn-shop*'? What is it supposed to mean?"

"It's fairly obvious, isn't it? As you suggested, these children are to be had by any one for the asking—any one who can give them a home, that is. And oftener than you would suppose some smart, well-turned-out woman calling herself Mrs. Jones or Smith or something non-committal, appears at the convent saying she is a childless wife or widow, and wants to adopt one of the 'orphans.' And if she can she picks out her own. If the nuns remember her they say nothing. I suppose they feel bound to foster the maternal instinct, wherever it grows."

"In other words, having rescued a waif, they throw it back to the wolves without any compunction whatever!"

"It isn't exactly a question of rescue. The nuns don't seek out the child. It's brought to them by its mother, or some other interested person, at a time when its existence is—inconvenient. . . . What a sentimental ass this dog of yours is."

He threw the cigarette end into the fire, and stooped down to pull the ears of the still importunately fawning mongrel, so dismissing the subject

under discussion. In my rôle of audience I looked from him to Julian with some interest. The subject had not, indeed, been a nice one, but that was not young Argent's fault: he had not introduced it. And—if I had not yet learnt to be generous to him, I could at least be just—I did not for a moment suppose his knowledge of it was of his own seeking. Reproduced in cold print, his information probably sounds cynically heartless and glib. In reality it was given incisively, but with all due gravity.

But Julian, in his then mood, chose to take it differently. He got to his feet with a rather violent movement, saying:

"You know too much! How old are you, Miles? Twenty-three? Barely out of the schoolroom! My God! And you try to be epigrammatic about sin at its most sordid and tragic! You prate of the maternal instinct! It is hateful that you should be so ignorant and know so much!"

I think I have intimated that there were times when I admired Miles Argent. This was one of them. For he kept his temper as he replied coolly:

"You seem to forget that I went to a public school and the 'Varsity, and that I belong to a club or two, and I'm not deaf. I'm reading criminal law, too, and it isn't watered down to suit young and innocent minds!—Were *you* barely out of the schoolroom at twenty-three?"

"I!" Julian repeated, startled. I glanced at him, and, with an inward laugh not made of amusement, glanced away again. No one but Julian knew what Julian had been at twenty-three, but—'*barely out of the schoolroom*' was good!

"What is that to you?" he said, and his easily lighted temper, which had been smouldering all the evening, blazed suddenly aflame. "You are pre-

sumptuous ! I'm not sure that you aren't a precocious young prig !"

Young Argent had relapsed into his former attitude against the mantelpiece, his eyes on the dog at his feet. Neither his attitude nor the direction of his eyes changed, but, in the instant of dead silence following on the incivility, his fair, tanned face flushed in an anger that was, once more, most admirably controlled. After a moment he leisurely removed a hand from his pocket and got out his watch.

"So long as you're not sure—" he said, his glance on the dial. "By Jove ! I didn't know my watch had stopped." (I could hear it ticking as he spoke.) "I shall have to run if I'm not to miss the last train. You're not coming, Drewe—stopping the night, aren't you? Good-bye, then, Mr. Tarrant, and thanks for a ripping good dinner. So long, Drewe."

He did not 'run,' but sauntered towards the door, the dog following at his heels. And I said to myself : "He has refused to take part in a 'scene,' but he reserves the right to feel insulted. He won't come back."

The same thought may have struck Julian, for he looked up and said in a tone that ignored, and so essayed to cancel, that of his last speech :

"Good-night, Argent. . . . That spaniel of mine seems to have taken an amazing fancy for you."

It was the offered *amende*. I wondered whether Argent would recognize it as such. He had reached the door, but he turned and looked the mongrel over from muzzle to stumpy tail. Its adoring, lustrous eyes were the only possible points to its credit.

"I had an idea it must be a dog of sorts," he said gravely. "I didn't know there was any more spaniel about it than—say, borzoi or Pekinese !"

The *amende* was accepted. Julian laughed and walked towards the door.

"I'll see you to the gate," he said.

When he came back—

"Why that Monna Lisa smile?" he demanded.

"For several reasons," said I. "I was remembering, for one thing, that dogs are supposed to be good judges of character. And I was telling myself that you are very like a woman."

"I? Good Heavens!"

"A woman," I explained, "when she's sure of a man's devotion—and values it—does all she can to strain it."

He went across to the mantelpiece and began to refill his pipe from the tobacco-jar that stood there.

"Miles Argent is your friend as well as mine," he said. "Devotion's a big word."

"Yes, it is. Julian, have you ever noticed—I don't believe he's noticed it himself—that your presumptuous, precocious young prig calls me Drewe unadorned, and as often as not addresses you as 'sir'? That is rather significant from a youth of his particular type. If he were some self-conscious young Latin or even a Briton of the 'intense' cult he would probably apostrophize you as 'master' in public, and offer you fulsome flattery. But it wouldn't necessarily mean any more."

"He's not a prig, of course," Julian muttered, still with his back to me. "If I'd ever had a son, I'd have liked him to be like Miles Argent."

"He wouldn't have been," I assured him. "You would never have married that type of woman."

He made no retort to that, but after a moment turned round.

"Look here, Dick, will you go to St. Monica's and get me one of those children?"

For a moment the effrontery took my breath away. When I recovered it I said:

"No, I'm damned if I will! Why should I? Go yourself if you want one."

"You say you're going to write the place up. That means a personal visit, I suppose?"

"It means nothing of the kind. Besides, I only said that because Argent seemed to expect some explanation of your irrelevant question."

"It wasn't irrelevant. You don't understand, Dick. I've really set my heart on this thing. And you've always been such a good pal; I thought—you see, it's the sort of thing that's so much easier to do by proxy."

"It's not easier for the proxy," I answered, softened but unrelenting. "And it's not the sort of errand I'd do for any one—not even for you."

## CHAPTER V

### CHARITY

THE odd part of it is that in the end I did do his errand.

I have always known that if ever posterity hears my name it will be only as that of Julian Tarrant's friend. But I have also always cherished a hope that it may at least recognize in me no mere blind worshipper and parasite. Yet I suppose there must inevitably be some Boswellian attributes about the friend of genius.

That is as may be. On the day I took my ticket to a Sussex country station I believe I was quite honest in thinking I went solely to seek material for that article which, after all, I meant to write. For I had mentioned the matter of St. Monica's to Mather of the *Stop-Press*, and he met it with enthusiasm. And one's editor's enthusiasm is not so every-day an affair that it can be lightly disregarded. . . .

It was September—the Golden Month—and Sussex is surely the Golden County. I threw my *Times* on the seat beside me, and in half-somnolent content watched the swift passing of cornfield and hop-garden, and woods whose warm tints ranged from yellow to ruddy-bronze—and, here and there, a red-tiled farm or cottage, flanked by the little squat, pointed tower that I told myself must be an oast-house.

It is the conventual county too. In a remote

pigeon-hole of my journalist's mind I found the names of half a dozen other religious houses which Sussex shelters. Pious with-drawers from the world have always shown an epicurean taste in scenery.

St. Monica's lay in the lowest wrinkle of the Downs, where, in spring, the gorse must have spread yellow as new-minted gold. The buildings were red-roofed—red-walled, too, at the moment; for round the windows in the quadrangle and up the cloister-pillars ampelopsis had clung and climbed in its own impetuous way. On the level ground the woods came close up to the demesne, and behind were the convent's own orchards of apple and cherry and plum.

The nun who answered the unmusical clamour of the bell I rang admitted me without demur—somewhat to my surprise; for in my ignorance of the Anglican rule I did not know to what extent these ladies might be *purdah* to masculine eyes. And, when I asked if it were permitted to speak with the Mother Superior, I was taken to a small room on the ground floor with a window high up in the blue-distempered wall. The floor was bare and bees-waxed, and the furnishing austere; but over the *prie-dieu* there hung a beautifully carved crucifix and, opposite, a framed photograph of the Sistine Madonna—and through the open window a bed of mignonette sent in its perfumed message.

The Reverend Mother was a woman of no guessable age, with shrewd eyes in a plain, strong face. She entered with my card in her hand, and offered me the other with a brisk word of greeting which, by some subtle, unspoken means desired me to state my business with as little delay as might be. Briskness and businesslikeness, rather than saintliness, were, indeed, the qualities which haloed her about. But that is the modern way. She was probably none the less—possibly the more—a saint because she lacked the rapt, devotee look.

We exchanged a courteous platitude or so on the beauty of the day and of the surrounding country. While we did so I found time to ask myself if I had really been fool enough to harbour the crude idea of 'interviewing' her on the methods of the 'Pawn-shop.' Seen from the ruthless distance of Fleet Street, the project had not looked unseemly. Now, it was unthinkable. So, when our civilities came to a pause, I said with what airy diffidence I could muster :

"I came here to-day on behalf of a friend who is interested in the children under your care. He has some thoughts of adopting one of them."

"Indeed, yes——?" said the nun.

She laid my card on the serge-draped table, and, leaning back in her chair with folded arms, and hands hidden in the sleeves of her habit, looked at me so straitly that I had much ado to keep my own regard from wavering. She can certainly never have heard a vulgar song of the day, entitled : '*It's not for me; it's for a friend!*' But 'friend' has been too often, and too convenient, a Jorkins in the world's history to escape the suspicions even of the other-worldly.

"My friend has made money lately," I explained, ponderously, "and is likely to go on making it. He has also, during the last year, been left property which represents something considerably more than a mere sufficiency. As he is unmarried, and without any near relations, it is natural that he should wish for an heir."

It sounded quite aldermanic. I almost conjured up for myself a picture of Julian transformed into something wholesale and chapel-supporting, clad in broadcloth and corpulency. But the Reverend Mother merely said "Yes?" once more, without removing her glance. I did not know whether she believed me or not. If the latter, she did not seek to disconcert me by inquiring my friend's name.

I remembered what young Argent had said as to no questions being asked of would-be adopters. She asked me one, however, in her direct, common-sense fashion :

"Is this friend of yours willing, then, to take one of our children, knowing no more of them, nor of their up-bringing here, than he can know at present? "

"On the contrary, Madam," I assured her politely, even while, in mental parenthesis, I was confounding Julian, "I am here as his representative to learn whatever you may be good enough to tell me about them. Whether he takes one of them or not depends entirely on what I see and hear."

She lowered her eyes thoughtfully at that, but not before I had seen in them the hint of a smile. It told me that she had what, in the world, had probably counted to her for wit, and was, even now, a rather adroit trick of fence. She said quickly :

"You are an experienced judge, then? You are not unmarried and childless—like your friend? "

I told her that it was my misfortune to be both, but that I happened to be the youngest of a large family.

"So nephews and nieces have been showered upon me since I was sixteen," I said. "Besides, I am lucky in having a good memory ; I can remember what childhood is like—from the child's point of view."

Her glance came back to me, winged with wonder rather than disapproval. And I reminded myself that philanthropy, even at its most generous and large-minded, has seldom considered the point of view I had mentioned of any particular importance.

But at least she was now convinced of the genuineness of my alleged rôle. In proof of it, she herself showed me over the orphanage—or rather,

Home, as custom mockingly calls all such temples of charity. I saw its dining-hall and nursery, its gymnasium and class-rooms—all relentlessly light and bright and clean, redolent of soap and pitch-pine; and the dormitories, which combined the maximum of hygiene with the minimum of anything hinting at luxury or adornment. I was shown the kitchen, too, and the good, plain abundant food in preparation on its spotless tables. And while a vague rebellious protest took shape in my secret heart, I knew all the time that I was being, as it were, tacitly challenged to find some fault somewhere. And of course I could find none—none that was reasonable, anyhow.

"You would like to see the children for yourself?" the Reverend Mother said when, our pilgrimage ended, we left that empty, swept, ungarnished nest. "It is their play-hour outside. I will take you to the sister-in-charge, and she will tell you anything you like to know about them."

Children at play! Does not the very phrase invite a vision of incarnate youth—of tossed hair and flying feet and eyes alight, and voices spent and breathless with the shouting and the fun; and laughter checked only by the briefest April storm of quarrelling or tears? . . . But the children of the Pawn-shop did not play like that. They ran, it is true, and shouted, and even laughed; but they did these things with an ordered air, as though keeping the rules of some well-taught game. They did not look unhappy nor cowed nor ill-cared for, but their well-being was of some vaguely negative quality that seemed more piteous than discontent.

The girls were in the orchard, and the boys playing rounders on some turfed open ground adjoining it. The sister-in-charge sat midway between, under an apple-tree, with some work in

her hands, over which her anxious eyes strayed continually to left and right. The Reverend Mother, when she had presented me and indicated the nature of my errand, left me with her, and, invited, I sat down on the bench beside her. She was probably a younger woman than her superior, but seemed older. When I had talked with her a little, I knew that she must have been born old and duty-loving, with no crumb of humour to leaven her un-subtle goodness. She had a Clydeside accent too—a thing which always intimidates me with its effect of moral worth.

It was pathetically plain that this sister carried her burden of responsibility heavily. She asked me whether I understood that a share of that responsibility would fall on the shoulders of any one brave enough to take one of the 'orphans.'

"Parents tell me that all children, even one's own, are a responsibility," I suggested, tritely, and with a grave nod she conceded the point, but went back to her own.

"These little ones are different. They need very special treatment. Each individual of them needs individual care and watching."

I turned to her in surprise. I had not credited any charitable institution with the giving of thought to individuals.

"Care for their souls," she hastened to explain. "Most of them are strong enough physically—they are not the children of the very poor. But they are born with a double heritage of temptation and sin—and dangerous gifts that lead to sin. It is for signs of these gifts that we must always be on the watch. Repression of every natural bent is the only means to save these unfortunate children from themselves."

"Repression!" I echoed, dismayed by the word and its chill significance. "What are these dangerous gifts, and how do you repress them?"

Beauty will out, I suppose, and so will charm—unless they are crushed by cruelty. And you are not cruel, here——”

“God forbid!” said she in horror, and paused. She took up her work with rather flurried fingers, and put it down again, and in a tone that was flurried, too, said:

“The Reverend Mother—for the sake of the children—finds out what she can of their—their parents. Many of them have been what the world calls gifted. And we are taught to make it our aim to stamp out everything possible of the parents in the children——”

She paused again and looked up towards where a boy of ten or eleven was fielding, a dozen yards away from us.

“You see that boy?” she asked. “His father is a famous baritone—an opera-singer. Lately we have had reason to fear that John himself has a *voice*.” (She lowered her own on the word as though she spoke of a menace.) “So we are doing all we can to keep him ignorant of it. . . . If he stops to listen at the chapel-door when Sister Mary Benedicta is playing the organ he is scolded for dawdling. And whenever he hums or sings at his work or play he is punished for making a noise. And when the other bair-rns are learning their new hymns or the par-rt-singing he has an extra arithmetic lesson instead. Repression is the only way. . . . Have I made it quite clear-r?” She finished on an anxious note.

“Admirably!” I assured her, and indignation made my voice unsteady. “It seems to be system brought to the very perfection of logic. I gather that if this boy, John, had happened, instead, to be the son of an eminent mathematician or scientist he would now be learning to dance or knit or play the piano!”

But the sarcasm glanced harmlessly off her

national armour. She said, doubtfully, that she did not know about dancing, but that *sair-rtainly* his thoughts would be turned into channels foreign to his instinct. And she added this rider :

"Science is not so dangerous as singing."

I wondered if that were so, and, if so, why, but I let it pass. The boy, John, had moved a little, and I could see his face. I thought that he, too, looked as though he carried a burden. Perhaps he did—the burden of an unborn talent. Still watching him, I said to the sister-in-charge :

"This *repression*—it may be all you claim for it, while it lasts—while its object is still with you. But what about afterwards?"

And she answered with a deep sigh :

"We try to do our duty by them while we have them. We can only give them our prayers—afterwards!"

"And love——?" I suggested, with diffidence. "Don't you give them any of that, as well as duty—and prayer?"

"But *sair-rtainly*!" she reproached me. "Is not love our very first duty towards them?—the charity that covers the multitude of sins!"

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## CHAPTER VI

### DANDELIONS AND TRANSGRESSORS

THE game of rounders came to an end, and the little boys scattered aimlessly over the field. The sister rose with a murmured word, and began to move about among them, alertly on the watch for the first symptoms of baleful 'gifts' and second-hand sins—so I told myself grimly.

The moment found me, in fact, in an uncharitable mood ; chiefly, I dare say, because I badly wanted my pipe ; but partly because I was peevishly aware that I had here to my hand all the ingredients for a fairly *piquant* dish to set before an editor, had I only felt free to use them, which of course I did not. And on the other hand, so far as concerned the gratifying of Julian's perverse whim, my day had equally been wasted. For I, no less than the sister-in-charge, had kept my eyes and intelligence alert during the last quarter of an hour, and I knew that if Julian really wanted a small piece of humanity to call his own (and I was very far from being sure that he did), he was the last man in the world to tolerate these sad products of intensive culture—plants from whom all the nature and impulse had been pruned away to make room for the fruits of holiness.

I fingered the pipe in my pocket wistfully ; then took out my watch, and sighed to think how few and far between the trains to town ran. Lastly I got up, and, turning my back on the sedate little

boys and their anxious guardian-angel, I strolled into the shade of the apple-trees and gave my waning attention to the girls instead. They were even soberer at play than the boys (were boys and girls never allowed to play together, I wondered?). Half a dozen of them were gathering fallen apples into a clothes-basket, without so much as a furtive bite, or a giggle, or scramble for the best and biggest trophies. Some older ones were skipping at the farther end of the orchard, with a white-veiled novice holding one end of the rope. And, seated on the ground, nearer me, was a tiny slip of a girl, all alone, threading dandelions into a garland.

Her shoulder was turned to me, but I could see her little hands moving, and the thin nape of her neck showing ivory-pale between her cropped, dark hair and the top of her frock that was like an ugly brown duster in pattern and texture. I leant against a tree and watched her, wondering idly whether all the natural Eve had been 'repressed' out of her, or whether the inevitable moment would come when, the wreath or necklet completed, she would crown achievement by the mystic rite of 'trying it on.' . . .

Suddenly into the midst of dull, uneventful peace, Incident broke, rude and hot-footed—a ridiculous incident. There came a fanfaronade of barks from the unseen road—then a flying streak of tabby across the orchard; and after it, leaping over the low hedge, a shape twenty times bigger, black and portentous!

Instantly, Eve-with-the-dandelions was on her feet, tense and terrified. She had not turned in time to see the cat; but she saw the black whirlwind charging, apparently, straight towards her. Casting her flowers from her, she took blind flight—taking it, of course, as her sex generally does,

into the very path of danger. The retriever, in the haste and passion of his own quest, either did not see, or had no time to swerve from, any object that might happen to bar his road. And he knocked her over in his stride.

I ran and picked her up, and, kneeling beside her with my arm about her, offered her such clumsy words of compassion and comfort as I have often used for my nephews and nieces in similar crises. She had fallen just where a gravel path crossed the turf. Her bare knees were cut, and one arm grazed ; and the hands that she held tightly pressed against the breast of her cotton frock were already staining it red. . . .

From my nieces at various stages of their extreme youth I have gained much valuable enlightenment on the vexed question of woman in the making. I have learnt, for instance, that, under that mask which civilization bids her don when she lets down her skirts and puts up her hair, she hides capacities for courage and cowardice, cruelty and tenderness, passion and deadly, callous calm, beside which those of mere man seem shallow, simple affairs. . . . But this feminine atom, even as I held her within the circle of my arm, was teaching me heartrending things which I never knew before. I could feel her body rigid, yet shaken with the sobbing terror she controlled—terror of the dog and of the fall—and, perhaps, of me. Her knees and the palms of both small hands were an ugly mess of blood and powdered gravel. I took out my clean handkerchief and gently wiped them, and she silently submitted, shrinking under my touch. I would have dried her tears, too, had I seen them, but she did not shed one. . . . Florrie and Renée and Nan and Christobel were all plucky tomboys in their time, not hypersensitive either to physical or mental distresses. But any one of them at six years old would have exorcised fear and pain with

Nature's own miracle of tears, and perhaps a soupçon of wholesome, naughty rage.

At that moment I knew, for the first time, that self-mastery in a mere baby is the most piteous thing to see, and that the cruellest thing well-meaning stupidity can do to a child is to teach it never to cry!

Meanwhile, of course, all the other little girls had gathered close about us, mildly curious and talkative. The novice, tall and graciously slim even under the ungraceful black draperies she wore, hurried up to see what might be the matter.

"What has happened?" she asked me civilly.

"You are not hurt, are you, Jane L.?" she added to the child with somewhat chill kindness.

"She has had a fright—and a fall," I said.

"But she is not making a fuss, I hope?—she is being a good girl?"

"She is the bravest little girl I have ever seen," I answered, and I tightened my arm a little.

The novice saw the movement, and her pretty face became a shade more austere. The child was trembling again. And I thought indignantly: "Surely they have not been wicked enough to teach her, already, that there can be danger in a man's caress!"

"You are a *very* brave little girl," I repeated gently, withdrawing my arm. "If I had had a tumble like yours I should make a frightful fuss. I should certainly have cried!"—(I could not say 'sworn,' with the novice standing by!)"—"What is your name?—Jane?"

Her lip quivered in response to the pity of my tone, then lifted in the glint of a smile, which showed her disfigured by a lost front tooth.

"Yeth," she nodded, "Jane L."

"Jane L.? What does L. stand for?"

The novice, youthfully officious, answered for her:

"We give them all plain names—Reverend

Mother thinks it best. But there are not enough plain ones to go round, so they all have second names to distinguish them from each other. There are several Janes. This one is Jane Lydia—after Mother herself. She is Reverend Mother's god-child."

"And how old are you—Lydia?" I asked.

She smiled again at the mingled eccentricity and wit of my address.

"Thikth," she said. Her faltering glance lifted and steadied to meet mine. And it startled me. Hers were beautiful eyes, dark and wonderfully lashed; but at the moment I hardly noticed that. What I saw was that their expression was as different from the clouded content in the other youthful eyes surrounding us as it was from the care-freedom in Florrie's and Christobel's.

Most of us mortals, I expect, are kept sane in a world where Life teems with impossibly beautiful and terrible things by the fact that we are sheltered, as it were, by a thick, surrounding curtain, only to be lifted by knowledge or experience. But for some lucky unfortunates the curtain is a mere veil, beyond which they dimly vision the grim or wonderful shapes moving, remote, yet always very near at hand. Looking in this child's eyes, I had to remind myself that she could never have met the abandon of cruelty and ecstasy and love and horror—she could not yet know that the world held these things—might even hold any or all of them for her. But the soul that slept in the depths of her eyes knew. . . . And I thought: "*How will the future use her?—that 'afterwards,' safeguarded only by the prayers of a handful of good women who once gave her charity and called it love!*"

A little later I was back in that small room where the odour of sanctity warred with the scent of mignonette

"I understand," the Reverend Mother answered when I had said my short say, "you have chosen little Jane—Jane L."

"Say, rather, 'J. Lydia,'" I parenthesized; and this time there could be no question that her eyes smiled.

"Jane is not a pretty name," she conceded unexpectedly, "but it is useful."

"But 'Lydia' could be both," said I. "It *shall* be both from to-day onwards. I can take her away this afternoon."

"You go too fast, Mr. Drewe. Before we let any of our children go there are certain formalities—preliminaries——"

"Yes?" said I, and hardened my heart, sure that I knew what she would say. Had I not heard it twice already in the last week? She continued in that direct, matter-of-course way that I had already learnt was characteristic of her:

"The children, as you know, are not orphans—they are more desolate than that. Most of them are brought to us as mere infants, and remember no other home. We seldom, or never, refuse to receive them, but it is always on the condition that we are told exactly who and what the parents have been or are. It is difficult enough"—she sighed sharply—"to fight against heredity, even when we know what we are fighting. If we did not, it would be impossible. And besides—we should be doing wrong if we made the way of the transgressor too easy."

She paused, and so gave me time to think of the frail craft which, adrift and rudderless on passion-tossed seas, had been forced to jettison what should have been their most precious cargoes. I spared a little of my pity for each one of those 'transgressors,' as in fancy I saw her sitting in this very room, answering, in cold blood, questions as to a

past—perhaps a first and only—shame. *Easy!* No, it certainly could not have been *easy*. . . .

"Besides,"—the repetition of the word brought my errant attention back—"any person who adopts a child from here has a right to know who she is."

"I waive the right," I said in haste. "I mean—my friend waives it."

"He may not wish to do so, Mr. Drewe."

"I will take the responsibility of supposing that he does," said I. "He doesn't believe in heredity—nor repression. And—a child's spirit is of such easily breakable stuff. If a man tried to—how was it you put it?—to fight against heredity, he would probably, in his clumsiness, destroy something of infinite value."

"Does he not wish, then, to do his duty by the child?"

"I have no idea, Madam. All I know is that he wishes to leave her his money."

She looked away from me, frowning—troubled, I could see, by my light dismissal of this side of the preliminaries. But there was another side. After a moment's silence she said :

"But I cannot let you take her away to-day. Before I give her to him I must not only know your friend's name—he must first send me at least two letters of reference from reliable persons who know him and the sort of home he will give her."

"References?" I repeated, taken aback, as I ought not to have been ; for what she asked was most reasonable. I might have known young Argent was wrong about that 'no questions asked.' "Do you insist on references even if a man's name is—or ought to be—a household word?"

During her last speech she had unlocked a cupboard in the wall, and taken from it a sombre volume which she had brought back to the table. Sitting down again she turned the close-written leaves, seeking a certain place. I think the book

must have contained stories told in the same ruthless detail with which the recording angel writes his. She looked up as I spoke, her finger still marking a paragraph.

"Is your friend's name a household word?" she asked, and added more quickly: "What is it? Who is he?"

"He is Julian Tarrant, the poet," said I.

I might have said it to the Caledonian saint in the orchard, and seen no effect whatever. But the Reverend Mother was clever as well as good. I had the satisfaction of seeing her face change wonderfully.

"You know his name—possibly his work, too?" I asked; and she bent her head in answer.

"And does it make no difference? Can't you let him off those references?" I persisted.

Because I was impatient her reply seemed a long while in coming. When it did come it was reluctant.

"It makes some difference," she said. "Perhaps—no, I will not insist on references in his case."

## CHAPTER VII

### THE RAPE OF THE BIRD

WHEN you were a child, did you ever—but of course you did! the child never lived who did not—take some wild thing, captive of your own skill or prowess, to have and to hold and to cherish—in fact, to give it the time of its life? It was a half-fledged thrush perhaps, not experienced enough to elude your well-meaning but too officious fingers, or a sea-anemone that, when you first spied it, was opulently spreading its fringed petticoats in the water. . . . You thought the bird stupid and ungrateful when it struggled in your hands, and you did not understand the anemone's obstinate reluctance to leave its rock and its pool. Later, the thrush in its cage ceased to struggle for freedom. It made no audible complaint. But it would not touch the tempting abundance of sugar and groundsel and fat bluebottles with which you had thoughtfully stocked its larder. Its toilette became unkempt, and its eyes dull at first, and presently, glassy. And then it died. As for the anemone, even though its pail of sea-water was furnished with far prettier seaweed and much choicer shells than its own rock-pool had been, it sat morosely at the bottom (looking not unlike a small morsel of raw meat), with all the lovely, pinky fronds tucked out of sight, and refused to give a sign of life. It looked so lifeless, indeed, that you never even knew exactly when it died. . . .

If you remember your feeling of unmerited self-reproach when you emptied the bucket back into the sea, or buried the bird in cotton-wool and a starch-box just beyond the parsley-bed, you may guess some of my mental discomfort when I took Lydia away from the only home she had ever known.

She and her minute luggage sat, side by side, on the seat of the railway carriage opposite me. The luggage was a mere brown-paper parcel. As for the child, she had been washed and brushed and put into a clean duster-frock just like the other, but seeming uglier in its starched stiffness. She wore, besides, a brown serge outer garment of some shapeless sort and an uncompromising hat of white straw with a brown ribbon round it. 'Charity' was written legibly all over her, blurring the fugitive, elfin charm which had shown through her distress and dishevelment in the garden.

The Reverend Mother before we left had taken her hand kindly—almost tenderly—and asked her whether she would like to go away with 'this gentleman who had been so kind to her.' And thus prompted, she had answered, 'Yes,' even while her eyes were saying a protesting 'No.'

And in the train I told her—just as, in effect, you told the bird—that she was going to live in ever such a nice and happy new home, where there would always be kind people and delicious food and pretty clothes; and a lovely garden to play in, and the most beautiful toys and dolls and books to play *with*. And all the time her big eyes watched me, with dread in them—dread of the unknown future and the half-guessed novelties towards which the train was hurrying her. "You don't mind coming away from St. Monica's, do you, Lydia?" I asked her in my folly. "You're not frightened, are you?" And this time it was her docile tongue which answered 'No,' while her eyes said 'Yes.'

But there were still no tears in them. The bird was quite quiet in its cage. But I could feel her spirit struggling against its captor all the time.

It was a wan and tired little creature that I lifted down from the train at London Bridge—so much so that, with spendthrift disregard for anything but her comfort, I dismissed the thought of more railway travelling and took her the rest of the way to Trimmer's Wood in a hansom.

Merriman opened the door to us with his own gloomy but ineffable air of insensibility to the vagaries of his (so-called) betters. Lydia was apparently invisible to him. He looked over her head at the view while I paid the cabman.

"There's a parcel in the hansom," I said, and waited till he had abstracted it. "Is your master in the house?"

"Yes, sir—in the library, sir; orders being that 'e's not to be disturbed till dinner-time—and not then if 'e's still working."

And Merriman sniffed. There were probably occasions when he and his consort talked over the new régime. He, no doubt, had his own opinion as to whether verse-making could legitimately be dignified by the name of 'work,' and she hers, as to the unpardonableness of letting a good dinner spoil for any consideration short of death or an earthquake.

"I shall risk disturbing him, all the same," I said. "Meanwhile," I glanced down at the child in some perplexity, "who will look after this little lady for the next ten minutes or so? Perhaps—there's a housemaid, isn't there? Will you ask her to come and speak to me a minute?"

In due time the housemaid, with a rather overdone air of taking-her-own-time-about-it-and-no-nonsense, made her appearance. She was a red-haired, red-cheeked, young person, with a

streamered cap worn at an inconsequent angle near the nape of her neck. When she saw Lydia she gave a stage start and pressed a red hand to her heart in the approved manner of one who has received a shock, remarking, *sotto voce*, that "Lor'! whoever'd 've expected to see *her*?" or words to that effect.

"This little girl has just arrived," I explained to her superfluously. "She may be going to stay here for a—er—for a bit. Mr. Tarrant has possibly not made any arrangements about her yet? No? Well, I'm just going in to speak to him now. In the meanwhile, she is very tired and, I expect, hungry. Will you look after her? Help her off with her coat and hat and get her some tea—or perhaps milk is the proper thing—and some bread and butter—something of that sort."

The housemaid looked at me with contempt. She also went through some of those obsolete contortions known to Victorian literature as 'bridling,' 'flouncing,' 'tossing' of the head, and again muttered something of which the only intelligible part seemed to be that she wasn't no nurse, and that running after children wasn't her work. My impulse was to box her ears, but in Lydia's interests I descended to diplomacy instead. I even assured her with fervid inaccuracy that she looked a kind-hearted girl, and that I could see that she was fond of children, and that I knew she would be good to this one. "You see that she has hurt herself," I finished.

The effect was all that could be desired, for the moment. Put-upon hauteur instantly became gushing and giggling familiarity.

"Well, I never! And so she 'as! Pore little thing, she do look tired, and no mistike, don't she, sir? You come along of me, there's a dear, and you shall 'ave yer tea in a couple of shakes, and an egg to it if Mrs. Merriman 'appens to be in a

good temper ! What's your nime ? Jane Lydia ? Well, I never ! And wot else ? . . . "

What else, indeed ! She might well ask that ! I frowned, as, volubly talking, and with a coy, confederate glance backward at me, she led the child away. Then I went slowly across the hall and down the passage to the library door.

Julian was standing by the window, looking out, but obviously blind to anything but his own inward vision. Foolscap, with the ink still wet on the topmost sheet, littered the writing-table behind him.

"What the devil !" he began as the door opened. "Oh ! it's only you, Dick. I told them I wasn't to be interrupted, but you're different. . . . I've begun 'Darnley' "—his voice quickened in thinly controlled excitement—"I told you my scheme for it, in the rough, didn't I ? (Aren't you going to sit down ?) I've begun in the middle, as I always do, working in that legend—it is probably too picturesque to be anything more—of Darnley at Mary Hamilton's execution—you remember ?—how he sprang up on the scaffold and picked up the head in his hands and kissed its dead mouth. . . . Listen, one minute—— ! "

He came to the writing-table, and, taking up a sheet of the manuscript, read aloud what he had written. And, almost for the first time in our lives, I was at pains to give him my attention. When he stopped and looked up, asking quickly : "Is it good ? " I answered mechanically that it was. Later I discovered that it was very excellent indeed.

"Yes, of course it's good. . . . Look here, Julian, a week ago you said you wanted to adopt a child from the 'Pawn-shop'—you had the effrontery to beg me to go and get one for you ; you said you'd set your heart on it. Were you serious ? "

"Child ? Pawn-shop ? " He looked up from an amendment which he was scrawling across the

margin of the manuscript, and came reluctantly out of the past into the workaday present.

"Yes, I meant it—then," he confessed with a laugh. "I was desperately sorry for myself that night—a poor devil of a Midas so weighed down and oppressed by increasing riches that I felt as though they were clogging all my brain. I believe I thought that the mere fact of knowing there was some one in the background to spend and inherit whatever I might earn would perhaps lift the weight. . . . But since then I seem to have got back into working order again. And after all, what's it matter who gets one's property when one's dead and can't see? . . . Have a cigarette, Dick. They're close to you."

"No, thanks. You *weren't* serious, then? You might have had the decency to tell me so!"

"But I *was* serious, I tell you. I've simply never given the thing a thought again. Besides, why should I tell you? You refused to help. Have you come to tell me you've thought better of it and are going to the convent for me, after all?"

"No, I've not," I answered. "I've come to tell you that I've been there already, and I've brought back a child with me, this afternoon."

He received the information in a petrified silence. Then he said with careful enthusiasm:

"You *are* a brick! That's simply splendid! How old is he? Not old enough, I suppose, to go to Eton, or somewhere, just yet? Thank Heaven! A boy can be as expensive a luxury to keep up as any one need want!"

"It isn't a boy. It's a girl."

This time he did not even try to veneer with outward gratitude the dismay he felt, but said violently:

"A girl! But it was a boy I wanted! Nothing was ever said about a girl!"

"Nothing was ever said about a boy, either!"

You called it '*it*'—which I have always been given to understand is the most insulting label even for a baby ! ”

“ You knew it was a boy I had in my mind—you must have known. What in Heaven’s name did you think I wanted, or could do with, a girl ? ”

“ I wasn’t thinking of you at all,” I said, suddenly realizing the fact, but without compunction. “ I was thinking of *her*. Listen,” I added in my turn.

And rapidly I told him the history of my day and its impressions, italicizing all that bore on the convent system—its chill logic, the relentless quality of its kindness. I was eloquent, perhaps, as any advocate must surely be when he has at heart the cause he pleads.

“ ‘ Repression of every natural impulse ! ’ ” I quoted bitterly. “ That’s the way they talk. Just imagine the unwarrantable meddling with a delicate mechanism which that implies ! ”

“ I don’t need to,” he answered shortly. And, after a pause, I nodded. Mrs. Tarrant would have considered an Anglican sisterhood several degrees more wicked, and much more certainly damned, than any Turk or infidel. But its methods were not so very different from hers, after all. . . .

As for Julian, that curt retort was his only spoken comment on my story. After a moment he got up and took a restless turn up and down the floor.

“ But I can’t keep her,” he said. “ A boy would be right enough—he would take years to grow up. He wouldn’t make unreasonable demands of fusion with one’s own life. But a girl— ! You say this child is small and crushed and frightened. She may be, to-day. But to-morrow, as it were, she’ll be a woman, as exacting and individual and permeating as any. And I have no use for women ! I don’t know enough about them.”

"You appear to know a good deal—or to think you do," I said, with some asperity. "And what does it amount to, after all? You accuse them of oppressive individuality. Yet you lump them as a species, in the old, cheap, cynical way!"

"A girl is an unknown quantity," he said, as though I had not spoken.

"The convent says she is not," I answered. "It says that, given enough knowledge as to her parents—their talents, temperaments, circumstances—logic will tell you exactly what the child is likely to become, and will indicate the antidote. For her soul's sake, you are expected to continue the convent's own repression game, on its own lines. That's why the Superior wanted to tell me who and what this child's people were. . . . But I said you didn't want to know, I said you didn't believe in heredity. By the way, do you?"

"No—I don't know. How should I know? I don't cultivate these modern crazes! But you were right to refuse to hear. If I keep her I'll keep her in ignorance. Then I can't be even unconsciously a party to their damnable system! . . . Let's go and look at her. I may as well know the worst at once."

We found the child enthroned at the dining-room table in a chair too low and too big for her small person. Tea—and an 'egg to it'—was spread plentifully before her, while the housemaid, seated sprawlingly near, with her arms on the table, plied her with teasing attentions and cross-questioning and the raillery sacred to her class and type.

"Well, you *are* a caution, and no mistake!" she was saying piercingly as we crossed the hall. "Got no appetite, 'aven't you—or is it just a proper saucebox you are? Used to better food, pr'aps, at that Home of yours! . . . Oh, Lor'!"

Our entrance was responsible for the exclamation, and Julian's short stare annihilated her and drove her in some haste from the room.

I introduced him to his vicariously adopted daughter, saying fatuously :

"This is the man I told you about, Lydia, who is going to be so kind to you and make you so happy. You are going to be his little——"

"My little guest," he intercepted, with swift civility. Like many men who are secretly contemptuous of women-kind, he was invariably courteous towards them. He looked down at her with shy, embarrassed and embarrassing scrutiny, seeking the right words.

"I hope that you are not very tired after your journey," he achieved gravely at last.

With a little gasp of sheer weariness the child edged backward against the farther arm of her chair, leaning on it. From the vantage of the thus added distance she gave him back her dark, unhappy gaze. The instinct for flight was in it. But she had been schooled never to obey instinct. . . .

"No—thank you," she answered on another in-drawn breath.

I laughed, but with a lump in my throat.

"She's a lady of six summers—not an elderly duchess!" I mocked him. "Can't you think of some more suitable *cliché*?"

He made another painstaking attempt.

"I hope you have enjoyed your tea—that they have given you what you like?" he asked the child politely, and, as usual, she made polite, quivering answer :

"Yeth—thank you."

But the mug of milky tea brimmed cold ; the beheaded egg was untasted. Only one small indented semicircle had been bitten out of the piece

of bread and butter beside it. The jam and cake lured in vain. . . .

The bird was not beating its wings uselessly against the novel bars. But it could not touch the sugar and groundsel I had so magnificently promised.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONFESSIONS OF A BACHELOR

THIS chapter, let me state frankly, is going to be entirely about myself and my own concerns—an offence for which I claim indulgence on the grounds that it will not be repeated. And first, lest you should think from what I have already written, that I exist solely to play Watson to Julian's Sherlock, I should like to protest that I have a row of my own to hoe, and that it does not leave me so very much leisure for meddling with other people's.

Parental authority meant it to be a legal row. It was in vain for me to point out that I had not the legal mind, and that the Bar is a profession to which many are called and few chosen. Authority carried the day, and I duly read, and ate dinners, and devilled for a not very eminent Silk, and even at long last was briefed for a solitary case of so puerile a nature that it fizzled out and never came into court at all. Then I threw up the whole thing and drifted into Fleet Street, and have stayed there, metaphorically, ever since—restlessly content ; discontentedly happy.

For I, too, had always dreamed of being a great writer. I have never quite got over the habit of dreaming it. But my literary dreams are not of the quality of Julian's. When they materialize the virtue goes out of them. They earn me no more than they deserve—to wit, my daily bread, and, with

luck, butter for the same. I have been, in my time, a jack of all the lesser literary trades, my wares ranging from the innocuously sweet verse that just fits the two-inch space in a weekly paper's patchwork page to the racily reported interview with the latest inventor or explorer, or the newest-risen star on the musical-comedy horizon. I have even sat on the heights of Olympus, where we write leaders and review books, sending forth from its anonymous safety our thunders and lightnings and the rarer radiance of our approval.

For the rest, I live in one of the shadowy cañons of Westminster, in the tiniest and oldest and oddest of houses, with an ultra-respectable Tory statesman on one side of me and a fashionable fortune teller-*cum*-spiritualist (darkly reputed to be also a *divorcée*) on the other. And in work and play I run up against a large assortment of persons and phases of life, in all of whom and which I am incorrigibly interested.

What more can any man want?—A wife?—Perhaps. . . My sisters (I am abundantly blessed with sisters) all have their individual explanations of the fact that I am unmarried. Maud, who is romantic and a matchmaker, insists on thinking that a well-dowered, stolid young creature whom I was once manœuvred into meeting at her house and who bored me to tears, refused me and broke my heart. And Alice, like the generous soul she is, tells people that Dick, poor fellow, living as he does from hand to mouth on journalism, is far too unselfish to ask any woman to share his precarious fortunes. Fanny, on the other hand, takes dyspeptic views of all the universe, including her relations, and *she* says that Dick is so wedded to a selfish bachelor existence that he would never exchange it for any woman's society.

Either—or, indeed, both—of the two latter surmises may contribute their share of truth to

the fact of my celibacy. But the explanation I give of it to my secret self is not quite like any of my sisters'. I am the man who, since he might not have the moon, would have nothing.

In my early thirties I spent a year in Brussels, ostensibly studying art, but really studying life among the artists. Like the rest of the world I went that summer to that flower-carnival they call the *Longchamp fleuri*. And there, all in a moment, for the first and last time in my life, I fell in love. . . . Her carriage passed me close in the Bois de la Cambre—a landau smothered in roses, and drawn by two black horses, rose-decked also to match her dawn-pink frock and hat and parasol. I could not describe her face if I tried for a year. It lives in my memory too vividly for that. All I can find in words to say of it is that it had the clear pallor and dark, downcast glance of a lovely nun—till she lifted it and smiled. But no nun's smile ever held a tenth of the heart-breaking gaiety and wisdom and sorrow of hers. There was an exquisite aloofness about her beauty that made me see her across a sort of enchanted distance which no passion might presume to bridge.

The mockery of it !

Later, I heard her name—a name that men spoke on a lowered note with a shrug and a laugh. A Most Puissant Prince had paid for the thorough-breds and the roses and frock and parasol—yes, and for the lovely siren-smile. Rumour said that he was not even the first man to be so privileged. . . .

I saw her many times after that—met her, too, and spoke with her, eagerly offering my insignificant wings to the flame. Even so, I never learnt to condemn her as I suppose I should have done, but, strangely enough, kept always my illusion of her unassailable remoteness. I thought of her—and still think of her—not as one who had sold her

soul, but rather as one who, like Undine, had never found it.

Perhaps, if I had never met her I, too, like many another undeserving man, might have persuaded some nice and irreproachable young creature to marry me, and order my dinners, and mend my clothes, and warm my slippers, and admire me and quarrel with me. She might have given me children of my own. I should have liked that, though I have an idea that the dinner-ordering and slipper-warming and other such domestic ritual would only have bored me. As it is, the divine dissatisfaction of a fantasy has held my heart against all more tangible comers.

But if a man can get along without a wife, he cannot do without women-friends, and I have had two better ones than most men can boast of—Ann Surtees and Lady Corchester.

Surtees was my nurse in early days, and in later ones my cook, housekeeper, counsellor and general safety-valve. She is, as her name should imply, a Northumbrian. So am I, for that matter; but, whereas my racial characteristics have long since been blurred by contact with the outer world and its interests, hers remain immutable—staunch and obstinate, like her convictions. To her the outer world is a mere husk, with Tyneside for its kernel. She still thinks London a barbarous, back-of-beyond, behind-the-times sort of place. It never awed her as, even yet, it sometimes awes me with its contrasts and immensities—the beauty and hideousness, the opulence and squalor and mystery and blatant vulgarity of it—above all, the secrets it is always hiding behind its closed doors and discreetly curtained windows. But Surtees, in her comfortable sanity, dismisses every London happening, from the luridest east-end tragedy to the most eccentrically staged society scandal, as ‘just

like them cockneys! Always doing something queer!'

The charwoman who comes to 'oblige' us on washing or cleaning days, but who otherwise serves in the most respectable Philistine circles, regards me in my character of 'writing-gentleman,' I am told, with a curiosity bordering on the morbid. But Surtees remains undazzled, even when she sees my opinions of best-sellers and cabinet ministers in print and the first person plural. There is a story of an old governess of the Bonaparte family who, after meeting several of her illustrious *ex-pupils*, was asked whether she was not nervous in the presence of so many kings and queens. To which she replied very reasonably that it was not possible to be afraid of kings and queens whom one had whipped. Allowing for the fact that I am not royal nor even famous, the story may serve to illustrate Surtees' attitude towards me. Not that she ever whipped me in my childhood. It is certain, however, that she occasionally slapped me and exhorted me to '*beehave*' or to 'give over' and to 'be a little gentleman, do!' And I suspect it is due to a sense of her own dignity rather than mine that her demeanour in later years is more restrained. But she still tells me without much dissimulation what she thinks of me.

She told me that very evening, as she waited on me at the meal for which I was always incurably late but which she, by some miracle, always managed to keep hot and eatable. While I ate it I generally talked to her, a familiarity which she never encouraged. But I did not care. A man must work off his depressions and elations on somebody, even if the somebody is too sensible to follow all the vagaries of his mental processes. However, what I had to say that night was only anecdotal. It was the story of my day's work for Julian (whom she tolerates as a man but rather despises as a

mere poet). She punctuated the narrative by non-committal observations such as: 'Well! I'm sure!' or: 'Did ever a body hear the like!'—And irrelevant ones, such as: 'Now, don't let them fritters get cold while you're talking, sir!' or: 'Will I fetch you a sup more coffee?' etc. . . .

Having finished the story I accepted the coffee, and as Surtees moved round the table, clearing away plates and dishes from it and the sideboard, I asked anxiously:

"Well? Do you think it'll be all right about that little girl?"

"However should I know, Mr. Richard?" said she, and my anxiety deepened. It was only when she thought my conduct more typically masculine (i.e. more foolish) than usual that she called me 'Mr. Richard.' There have even been occasions when she has so far forgotten herself as to revert to 'Master Dick.'

She was standing near the door by the tray, on which she was disposing silver and crockery to the best economy of space. I stared disconsolately at her back with its respectable, comfortable contours, and the little tight knob of grey hair which showed beneath her cap. Presently she turned round, and I transferred my stare to her face, which was a lined and homely one, remarkable only for a sort of kindly inscrutability.

"Is them nuns the only folks she's ever seen before, sir?" she inquired.

"Yes, roughly speaking—except for the other children, of course."

"She'll never have been alone with a gentleman before, likely—let alone two?"

"I suppose not."

The questions supplied their own comments on the answers, and I waited unhappily for the next one.

"I suppose Mr. Tarrant'll 've got everything ready for her?"

"Ready? What do you mean? What sort of things?"

"A nursery and such-like; and a nurse—a sensible body as'll understand children and what they like an' what's good for them."

"I'm sure I don't know—that is to say, no, of course he hasn't—yet. He's not had time. But there's a housemaid who's looking after her——"

"A housemaid?" repeated Surtees with suspicion. "She'll be a London gairl, likely?"

Remembering the certainty of the fact, I cautiously admitted the likelihood.

Surtees picked up the tray, and pushing the door a little wider with her elbow, insinuated herself and her burden half-way through it, before firing her last round.

"It's to be hoped that that poor bairn isn't crying herself sick at this very moment, Master Dick!" said she. And she left me severely to myself and my coffee, out of which all the savour had suddenly departed.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE EXPERIMENT THAT FAILED

CROSSING the Mall a day or two later, I met Miles Argent and asked him with rather malicious intention whether he knew that Julian had adopted a child. And though he took nonchalantly the news thus brutally tossed him, I could see that it came to him in the nature of a shock.

"Who, or what, put the idea into his head?—You, I suppose," he said, as we walked on together.

"In a way—yes, I dare say. But you fixed it there," I retorted.

"I?"

"Yes, with your talk of the Pawn-shop. He asked you how people set about adopting a child, and you told him explicitly."

"If I'd had a notion what he was driving at I'd never have told him anything! The Pawn-shop, of all places!—You don't mean that he's actually taken a kid from there?"

"Yes, I do. Why not?"

"Why not!—Because it's the last place on earth, as he said himself, to choose an heir from, if heredity counts for anything."

I said I was by no means sure that it did; and I asked him what alternative source, in his opinion, should have been tapped. And his answer to that was that Julian must certainly know of plenty of respectable people with small means and a lot of

children, who would only be too glad to spare him one of them.

"People with large families don't seem to be as eager to part with their superfluous children as we world-weary bachelors imagine," I reminded him. And he laughed, but rather impatiently, saying :

"You know well enough that this adoption game has been proved rotten over and over again. Look how it's always cropping up as a sidelight in courts of law, bringing endless bothers and complications with it. At best, it's generally a disappointment all round. Neither party ever seems to fulfil its obvious obligations."

"By 'obvious obligations,' you mean, I take it, proper provision for the child in case of the adopter's death?"

"Yes—that on the one hand ; and on the other, duty and gratitude and so on."

"It sounds rather a bald, commercial sort of programme," I commented. "However, you're going to Trimmer's Wood for the week end, you say. And so am I. We shall be able to bring the weight of our combined—or opposed—intelligence to bear on the situation. Perhaps, when you see this little girl——"

"Little *girl* !"

"Precisely."

We had reached St. James's Square, where our ways parted, and he stopped and regarded me blankly.

"What on earth," he asked, just as Julian himself had done, "will Mr. Tarrant do with a little girl?"

"That is what I look forward to finding out," I returned blandly.

But my feelings were not so airy as that. And it was chiefly with misgiving that I looked forward to seeing what Julian was doing—or not doing—with Lydia.

On my way from the station I found distastefully that I must elbow my way through a funeral crowd which had overflowed from the little churchyard into the lane. A hysterically weeping young woman was leaning on the wall, in obvious enjoyment of the show and her own sensibility ; while a small child in violently coloured raiment pressed closely to her side, as though in fear of separation. It was only after a second glance that I recognized Lydia and the Trimmer's Wood housemaid in their unfamiliar garb. Indeed, it was the sudden change which, at sight of me, crossed the pale little face under the garish hat that attracted that second glance of mine.

The housemaid, seeing me too, explained in a defensive whisper that they had come on the funeral unexpected-like, and had stopped because Lydia, never having seen one before, was that set on having a look. To which I replied without comment that she—the housemaid—could remain to look at it alone, and I would take her charge back to the house with me.

"Why did you want to look at the funeral?" I asked Lydia as we walked together up the lane. Her hand was in mine, and with a sharp little movement she half withdrew it.

"I didn't. It was Mith Norrith——" she began, and stopped.

"Who's Miss Norris?"

"*Her*,"—with a little backward gesture towards the sombre crowd we had left.

"Do you and she go to funerals on other days too?"

"Yeth—thome other days."

"And when you don't do that, you are joined in your walks by policemen or soldiers or butcher-boys, no doubt?" I insinuated gently, and she first nodded her head and then shook it, replying gravely :

"Not soldiers."

I looked down at her with a frown and a smile which she did not see, as I stopped to unlock the gate into the plantation for which Julian had given me a key of my own.

"It's nice and shady in here. I'm going to take my hat off. Won't you take off yours too?" I suggested, and she assented obediently, slipping the too-tight elastic from beneath her chin. A small wind came waveringly up the green twilight of the path to meet us, and ruffled her hair into soft disorder. It even whipped a fugitive colour into her cheeks.

Presently we sat down on a fallen log, and then and there I set myself to a wooing whose slow cautiousness was but the measure of its earnestness. It had become of infinite moment to me to open the shut door of her heart—to draw away the stoic fear that still veiled the secrets of her eyes. Using all the guile I had at my command, I made her answer (or evade answering—it was just as informative) questions which she did not suspect she was being asked, about her old life and the beginnings of this new one. I drew from her the list of strange and assorted things which she knew or could do, and plumbed her deep ignorance of ordinary childish lore. She could read and write, it seemed, and dust and sew and weed, and do long division. She knew various psalms and hymns by heart, and was familiar with stories out of the Bible and those about red-letter and even black-letter saints. But she had never heard of Santa Claus or the Three Bears, or "Carrots, just a little boy." She had never been to a party or a toy shop. And she knew nothing about the fairies. . . . A frog, dapper in his sleek, green kerseymeres, went hopping in hurried silence across the path streamward, and I said, carefully careless :

"I don't suppose he's really a frog. I expect he's a prince, turned into a frog by his wicked stepmother. But to-night, when the moon shines, he will meet the fairy queen. And she will kiss him and change him into a prince again—and they'll dance together at the fairy ball down there in that green place by the brook."

Her glance, mystified but alight, questioned me.

"Fairies?" she asked—just as the ordinary child might ask: 'Pantagonians'? or 'Cubists'?

So I told her briefly and broadly what fairies were, outlining their most salient habits and idiosyncracies. She listened, and then was silent, and then said:

"Are fairies something like angels?"

I gave the point scrupulous consideration.

"Something like," I hazarded, then. "But angels are always there, aren't they?—and quite real? And fairies are only sort-of-real. And they never come near some people at all. They are only fond of people who can think 'let's-pretend' thoughts. Can you, I wonder?"

And I *did* wonder. For without that 'let's-pretend' instinct life must surely be a very savourless affair for its owner. But the 'Pawn-shop' probably looked on imagination as a poison or a weed.

"I don't know," the child murmured. But there was something almost like childish laughter in her eyes. And the fear—of me, at least—had gone out of them.

We got back to the house just in time to see Miles Argent drive up to the hall-door in very smart style and a very smart new dog-cart. The gilded youth of that date had not yet been introduced to the headier joys of motoring. His coming waked the midday silence into life. Merriman, hearing his chariot wheels, came out to the door.

Rex, the spaniel-by-courtesy, instantly and vociferously materialized from somewhere. I, too, with the child beside me, joined the group. She hung back a little, gazing, however, with shy fixity at the newcomer. He was rather good to look at; did I forget to mention that? Already, because of those same good looks and his quite unstudied lack of interest in the rôles either of pursuer or pursued, women were doing their best to spoil him. Lydia had certainly never before seen anything so splendidly and carelessly arrogant as his young manhood. As for him, he gave her a short, passing glance as he greeted me:

"Good-morning, Drewe. I say, I'm most awfully sorry I forgot on Tuesday to tell you I'd drive you down to-day, if you cared about it. I thought of it this morning, but couldn't get hold of you. Mr. Tarrant's gone for a ride somewhere, so Merri-man tells me—forgot we were coming, most likely. I may as well drive round to the stable. . . . Are you being entertained by the heiress from the Pawn-shop?"

"Yes," said I, and added pointedly: "Her name is Lydia, and her hearing is perfectly normal."

"Is it? Sorry! Look here, if you'll lift her up, she can have a ride round to the stable-yard if she likes."

On the other side of the cart the dog was importunately and loudly insisting that he, at any rate, would come if he were invited, but the child showed no such eagerness, and I answered for her:

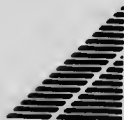
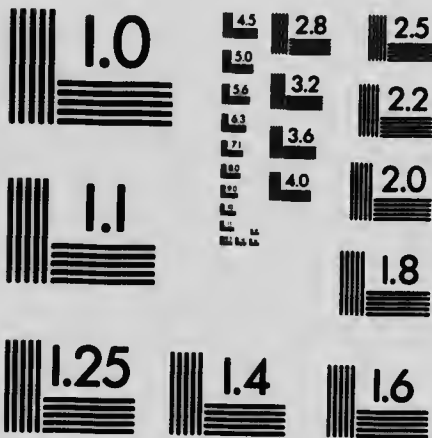
"She doesn't care to, I think—not to-day, anyhow. Perhaps when you are better acquainted, and if she likes you—" I glanced down at her and smiled. "I rather fancy she does like you a little."

Young Argent glanced at her, too, and from her to the dog, and laughed, lightly flicking at the latter with his whip.



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"I daresay," he said carelessly, "there seems to be something about me that appeals to mongrels."

On the late afternoon of that day, being alone with him, I arraigned Julian vicariously at the bar of Surtees' wisdom. I began by asking him mildly how the child-adoption scheme was working, and he answered abstractedly that it did all right; she was not in his way at all; she had evidently been brought up on the 'children should be seen and not heard' system.

"Yes. So were you, I have always understood. You should understand its merits better than most people!"

"*Touché!*" he acknowledged, with a laugh; but he looked troubled. "You know well enough what I think of the system. It has no merits!"

I pressed home my point and asked him some of those questions with which Surtees had so successfully routed me—about the nurse and the nursery, and so forth. And then I said:

"Why in the name of all that's cheap and nasty do you dress her in an Oxford-blue frock and a mustard-coloured hat trimmed with cherries?—or are they supposed to be moss-rosebuds?"

He ran a distracted hand through his short, thick hair.

"Is that how she's dressed? I hadn't noticed. I've hardly seen her the last day or two, and I've been thinking of other things. Norris came to me and said she didn't like to be seen out with a charity-child, and I gave her a five-pound note and told her to get her some suitable clothes."

"How much change did she bring you out of the fiver?" I demanded. "None? Of course not! Julian, that girl is as common as they're made, besides being a minx and a liar. She calls the child 'Lydia,' and insists on being called 'Miss Norris' in return. She takes her to funerals and

introduces her to the society of all the local errand-boys and policemen they meet in their walks. And she gives her her meals in the kitchen. I don't quite know how much that infant's powers of endurance are guaranteed to stand. But I shouldn't be surprised"—(I plagiarized Surtees shamelessly here)—"if they break down when she's in bed and alone. Any one can see that she is miserable and homesick. If she *does* cry when she's alone, and if Miss Norris catches her at it, I bet my bottom dollar the only consolation she administers is in the form of slaps or threats."

I was sitting on the low coping of the terrace-walk, and Julian stood before me on the lawn. As I finished speaking he made a sudden angry movement.

"Slaps and threats!" he repeated. "Do you really mean that, Dick? . . . Whoever looks after her, I won't have her hurt or frightened."

"Of course not," I sneered. "Your theories are all that's humane—so long as you're not put to the trouble of seeing them carried out!"

I had the satisfaction of seeing him look completely miserable. "You hit hard," he muttered.

"I'm hitting myself as well as you," I said. "Do you know what I told the child in the train the day she came? I told her she was coming to the happiest of new homes, where she would have all that the heart of little girl could desire. I described this place as a kind of paradise and you as a sort of beneficent genie and super-parent in one. . . . And the actual fact is that she has only exchanged the tyranny of a system for the tyranny of a servant. She must think me an unscrupulous dream-promoter!"

"You seem to have won her confidence, all the same. You've been well broken-in to children, haven't you, Dick? I haven't. I'm at least as frightened of her as she can be of me. If you

want me to own up and say that the experiment was a mere whim on my part and a mistake, I'll do it with pleasure. The best way to mend it is to end it, I suppose. . . . You wouldn't take her back to the convent for me, would you?"

"No, I would not. Pawn-shops don't send out their goods on appro, I fancy! She belongs to you now. If you want them to take her off your hands again you must approach them yourself this time."

He was silent for a few seconds, and then said:

"If she belongs to me, I make you a present of her. Take her home with you to-morrow evening, and keep her! I'm not joking—I mean it."

The mist-laden September dusk had fallen between us while we talked. I was glad of it. Meticulously and slowly I finished filling my pipe, and struck a match on the coping beside me.

"Thank you," I said. "But I don't happen to want her for my own. I am not like you—I don't find either my house or my income too big to fit my own personal needs."

The dressing-gong, which Merriman rebukingly insisted on always sounding for the benefit of a master who, as often as not, paid no attention to the summons to dinner itself, boomed loudly at that moment, and I got up mechanically from my seat, which had begun to strike a little damp and chill. I moved a pace or two along the terrace, and then moved back on a sudden impulse.

"But if you like," I said to Julian, "I *will* take her home with me to-morrow, and let Surtees look after her till you've set your house in order to receive her properly."

## CHAPTER X

### THE EXPERIMENT THAT SUCCEEDED

So she was moved to yet another square on life's board, that poor pawn from the Pawn-shop. I took her home with me next day, dressed once more in her 'charity' uniform and her pathetic submission to whatever eccentricity of gambit the adult mind might conceive. And I handed her over to Surtees.

That experiment, anyhow, proved a success. Surtees, in spite of a respectfully veiled reproof to me for my want of 'sense' in bringing home a visitor when a mysterious yearly festival known as the autumn spring-cleaning was going on, was transparently delighted to have a child to look after once again, and 'took to' her, as she herself put it, at once. I made a clumsy initial attempt to explain to her exactly the sort of care that was needed for Lydia.

"Not discipline," I said. "She has had enough of that to last her a lifetime. What you and I have got to do is to teach her to do all the things that come naturally to luckier children: to laugh and cry and make a noise—and be naughty."

"Gracious to goodness, sir!" said Surtees—her vocabularly contains the strangest expletives. "Just as if there wasn't far too many naughty children in the world already!"

"We've got to spoil her," I continued un-

deterred, "and cudgel our brains to invent 'treats' for her. You are to make your very nicest cakes and puddings while she's here, and give her plenty of milk——"

"She's a delicate-looking little thing—*that* thin and white!" interrupted Surtees eagerly, abandoning all pretences of severity. "A sup Parrish's food or cod-liver oil would do her no harm. Cod-liver oil picked you up wonderful that time you were so poorly after the measles."

"Did it?" I shuddered sceptically at the noisome remembrance. "But cream's just as good, I've been told, and it's pleasant to take——"

"Pleasant! It's sixpence a gill!"

"Is that all? Well, see how she likes it. And, look here, Surtees, Mr. Tarrant hasn't yet been in the mood to notice what she wears. But he *will* notice one day. I don't want to send her back to him dressed as she's dressed now. Get her some other clothes, will you—something more—that is, something like—— Upon my word! I don't quite know what to suggest they should be like!"

"Hoots, Mr. Richard!" was her assurance-giving reply. "Don't you bother your head at all about her clothes. What should a gentleman know about it, anyway? And wasn't I making or mending little ladies' dresses long before you was ever born or thought of?"

The latter statement was certainly inaccurate, since she cannot have been more than some fifteen years my senior. But it contained this enlightening piece of consolation: Surtees, who had probably never heard of one Thomas Carlyle, was not deceived at all by Lydia's unbeautiful disguise. She saw, in fact, within the duster-frock, not a 'charity-child,' but a 'little lady.'

And I had wasted breath in trying to tell her how to treat the stranger within our gates. For she knew. The wisdom which no amount of educa-

tion teaches showed her the way. I had remembered that her rule, in my youthful day, had been as strict as it was kind and just. But, on the same principle that turns a stern mother into an indulgent grandmother, she gave Lydia the 'spoiling' which is so wholesome for all of us at times—an emollient for heart and mind and brain alike. . . .

The date '1690' is carved over my front-door, which opens direct into my one sitting-room. A sort of cottage staircase takes you up into four small bedrooms, two on each floor, the one next mine being sacrificed to make a bathroom. Another narrow flight of steps, curtained off from my parlour-dining-room, leads downward to the basement. One of the rooms there contrives to look almost large, merely because its ceiling is so low. It ought to be the kitchen, but is, in fact (you have heard, through the medium of my youngest sister, that I am a selfish man), my working-room. In the smaller one next door to it, which does not contrive to look anything more than the tiny cupboard it is, Surtees lives and moves and cooks for my well-being—when she does not happen to be dusting or making beds or 'setting' meals upstairs. And all of these delightful domestic games Lydia was allowed to play with her.

During the first few days of the child's stay I sometimes left the door ajar while I wrote, for the interest of hearing their voices together. (Surtees' companionship was not in the least like that of 'Miss Norris.' She had somehow manoeuvred to become 'Nanny' to our guest from the first, while I was alluded to as 'Uncle Dick,' which I found entirely satisfactory.) I would hear, perhaps, a sound of something being earnestly stirred, varied by an occasional slop of liquid on linoleum, and a breathless voice saying :

"Oh, Nanny, I've thpilt another teeny bit. . . .

"Ith it done, do you think?" to which Surtees replied with enthusiasm :

"It looks beautiful, Miss Lydia ! However did you get it that frothy? But I'd give it a whisk or two more, if I was you. Your Uncle Dick is that particular about his queen-of-puddings." (I rather believe that was the pudding I always hated ; but no matter. Its sugary fluffiness was likely to appeal to a six-year-old palate.)

And another time it would be : "Well, now, Miss Lydia, whatever I'll do when you go away again, I don't know ! Many's the time I've said to myself : 'If only I'd got somebody to help me polish them brasses !'" And sometimes I heard Surtees telling her stories of her own youth, and the frequent escapades that apparently marked its progress. I had never been permitted to know what a delightfully naughty little girl she had been ; but Lydia was, and I grew used to the new phenomenon of her childish laughter, and the breathless eagerness with which she asked : "Oh, Nanny, and what *did* your mother thay *that time*?"

On the fifth day of her visit they both went shopping—most educating of all feminine experiences. When they returned, hung about with packages, their voices were hushed and happy on the stairs. Later, when I was changing my coat before going to bed in my own bedroom, I heard, above the sounds of running taps in the bathroom adjoining, Lydia's voice say anxiously :

"Does Uncle Dick *like* pink sashes, do you think?" And I heard Surtees assuring her, with the emphasis of ignorance, that pink was my favourite colour, and then initiating her into the mysteries of 'This little pig goes to market, and this little pig stays at home,' which a normally brought-up child would have learnt and forgotten almost before it could speak plainly.

Next day the sounds of furious sewing-machine

driving were an accompaniment to their talk ; and presently Surtees made bold to remind me that in less Bohemian circles little ladies are expected to 'come down to dessert,' and suggested that she should procure something to furnish such a course. I commended the idea, and I myself contributed a couple of peaches to flank the more homely apples and best-mixed-biscuits of her choice.

And at the proper moment she brought in our 'little lady' dressed in a white frock and pink sash and a new, shy happiness and prettiness. Her dark eyes asked me the question that Woman has been asking Man ever since Eve first acquired a wardrobe. And I answered it with grave respect, telling her how much I liked her dress, and implying—as Man has been doing ever since the date referred to above—how much I liked her in it. And she consented to sit on my knee and to accept from my hand a peach.

"Ith it an apple?" she asked wonderingly, as I peeled it for her.

"No, it is far nicer," I told her. "You take a bite and see."

She loved the peach. And she loved the story of Snow-white and the Seven Dwarfs, which it somehow inspired me to tell her. And it presently appeared that she loved my home and the quaintness and cosiness and dolls-house-ishness of it.

"And people?" I questioned. "Do you love any people, too?"

She nodded slowly, tracing the pattern on her plate with a forefinger and following glance.

"Who?" I asked.

"Nanny—and you."

"Thank you," I returned gravely, "I am very glad of that."

And I *was* glad. But I was dismayed too. For Julian, who should have had first place on her short list, held no place at all. It was he, not I, who

had rescued her from the Pawn-shop. What had I been thinking of to let her look on me or Surtees as anything but his agents?

From that moment I set myself to show him to her in his proper light. I explained to her that he had only let her come away that he might have time to get an even nicer home ready for her. (I made it my business to see that he *was* getting it ready, which meant that he had ordered Mr. Maple or Mr. Waring or somebody to furnish a room or two, with *carte blanche* as to cost, and that he was advertising for a nurse with every possible virtue.) Every 'treat' we invented for her—the doll I bought and Surtees dressed; her own new frocks; our visit to the Zoo with all its delicious terrors of roaring lions and bun-devouring bears and trumpeting elephants—all these were introduced to her notice as coming direct from Julian.

And the strategy succeeded. Surtees and I remained ever after her loved Nanny and Uncle Dick. But Julian was held in reverent wonder as something higher than either—the God in the Machine, the Provider of all good.

"What is she to call you?" I asked him one day. "'Father'?—'Daddy'?"

"No, of course not!" he answered, vexed and decisive. "If you're an uncle, I can be one too, if you like. She can call me 'Uncle Julian.'"

But she never did. She called him 'He' and 'Him,' with a capital H, and a falling inflexion in her voice, as you speak of God.

I went and saw the rooms at Trimmer's Wood when they were ready. The largest and red-reppiest of all the south bedrooms had been transformed into an upholsterer's Dream of the Perfect Nursery. Jack-and-the-Beanstalk chased Goody-Two-Shoes and Bo-peep all over the wallpaper.

There was the biggest dolls-house I ever saw, and a rocking-horse of overwhelming size and astonishing paces; and a fireguard warranted to baffle the most determined suicidal tendencies on the part of infancy. The night-nursery and the school-room were equally splendid, and so was the nurse. She valued her sterling qualities at fifty pounds a year, no less! And her references were unimpeachable. I saw them, and I saw her, and I came away rather oppressed by the perfection of both.

That evening as usual, in the last quarter of an hour before her bedtime, I told Lydia a story—her favourite one of all, 'Cinderella.' And, as usual during the telling, she sat quite silent and still on my knee, breathlessly intrigued. When I came to '*they lived happily ever after,*' she rewarded me only with that most flattering of all tributes, a long, satisfied sigh, without even raising her dreaming glance.

"Have you liked being here with Nanny and me, darling?" I asked her presently.

She lifted her eyes then—eyes like midnight skies, and a star in each.

"Oh, *yeth*!" It was a passionate assurance she gave me.

"But to-morrow you are going back to Mr. Tarrant—to your own home. Did you know that?"

Her eyes darkened. The stars went out.

"Are you coming too—and Nanny?" she faltered.

"Not to stay. Nanny will take you. But there's an awfully nice Nanny waiting for you there."

For a little she did not move or speak. I had no courage left to look at her. Then suddenly I felt her little form stiffen in my arms, as I had felt it that first day at St. Monica's—but with a difference. For then she had obeyed the rule which

said that crying was naughty. But now a month of sympathy had weakened those strong defences. . . . With her head turned against my shoulder, she surrendered to the storm, crying passionately. Her sobs shook her with their silent strength. . . .

If she had been older I might have comforted her, perhaps, by telling her the truth—that I, too, suffered intolerably because of her going. But she would not have believed me. She would have thought it just another of the everyday, legitimate lies invented to smooth the grown-up path. So I said instead, with the reckless sincerity of impulse :

"Hush, hush, Sweetheart! Don't cry so! It is all right. Nanny *shall* go too, and stay with you."

Surtees heard me say it. Her inscrutable eyes met mine over the child's stricken head. But she gave no sign of having heard. Later, however, when I found her folding and packing Lydia's small garments into an old suit-case of mine, I said desperately :

"Look here, Surtees, there's nothing else for it : you'll have to stay on with her at Mr. Tarrant's as nurse, for the present, anyhow."

She turned round with a stocking in one hand and a little shoe in the other.

"Well-and-I'm-sure! What next, sir? And supposin' I mightn't be willin' to be given me notice-like, and packed off sudden, to be a nurse, and me fifty-six come November!"

I realized the unwarrantable liberty I had taken, but I realized Lydia's forlornness more.

"You refuse to go, then?" I asked, crestfallen.

She stuffed the stocking into the toe of the shoe, and tucked both into a corner of the box. With her back to me thus she said :

"And what about yourself, sir? Have you thought whether you'll be comfortable with a new cook-general? She'll be a cockney, as li' ely as not,

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and she'll not can make girdle-cakes for you, nor even bread ; and when you're late for your dinner you'll find she'll not have kept n<sup>o</sup>think hot ! She'll be dishonest too, I shouldn't wonder, and she'll forget to air the sheets, and——"

"Never mind ! What's all that matter ?" I interrupted impatiently. "I'll get along all right. But that poor little girl—— ! I'm sorrier than I can say that you won't go——"

"Won't go ! I never said I wouldn't go ! You do take a body up that sharp, Mr. Richard. Why, if you hadn't been beforehand with me, I do believe I'd have had to give you notice, so's to go with'er, poor, wee bairn."

I stood confounded, as simple man must always be confounded by these *volte faces* on the part of more subtle woman. Then I murmured something of excuse for my own inconsiderateness and well-known selfishness.

"Selfish !" she echoed in disdain, almost as though I had laid claim to some soaring quality. "Selfish, do you call yourself, sir ? Well, all I can say, Master Dick, is that when folks thinks that other folks's convenience matters more than their own, they'll get called fools, more likely than not !"

I have since sometimes pondered that complicated utterance, and asked myself whether Surtees intended it for a tribute to my heart or an insult to my head.

I have never found the answer.

## CHAPTER XI

### LADY CORCHESTER

IN my less genial moments, when I convicted myself and my entire world of shams and pretences, I was wont to seek mental refreshment by calling on the most translucently genuine person of my acquaintance—which is an odd thing, perhaps, to say of an old woman who rouged and dyed (and, for all I know, tight-laced), and who treated air and sunlight as her most inveterate foes.

If Surtees had the characteristics of a locality, Lady Corchester was equally representative of a class and a period. She was the typical Victorian worldling—a type which, with all its faults and follies, was at once robuster and far more feminine than its latter-day descendants. When she was young women had privileges; they did not demand rights. They were more romantic, perhaps, than the modern girl, but less erotic—healthier in mind and body, though they had not learnt to be athletic or scholarly. Being women, of course they liked power, but they wanted it merely to use on, or for, or through some favoured male—not to rival him on ground which, by right-of-way, he has made his own for the last six thousand years or so.

The late Lord Corchester was a soldier famous for his gallantry—in both senses of the word. Society knew him as the most charming and selfish and soulless of men. But in '57 he held Meerpur for six months against the mutineers, in the face

of overwhelming odds and privations, and with a courage and resource which never flagged.

At home, meanwhile, his first wife was killing time and suspense by going out of one faint or hysterical attack into another, in an orgy of tears and sal volatile and smelling salts—partly, no doubt, because of her husband's peril, but partly also, poor lady, because rumour had it that the handsome and designing Miss Hallam-Haye—no woman ever described her in softer terms even in those days—was also one of the besieged ; just as though there had not been talk enough, already !

On the day the inner walls of the city were stormed and finally carried, Lord Corchester and the handful of men left him fought every inch of the backward way—most of them wounded, and all of them, especially their leader, performing incredible acts of valour. It is a matter of history that the relieving column arrived on the bloody scene as the defenders were making their last desperate stand outside the building which sheltered the white women ; and a matter of scandal (true or false, who knows?) that Lord Corchester, realizing the miracle that had happened, waved his dripping sword above his head—then, turning to the girl behind him, snatched her hand with a laugh, crying aloud in the rather theatrical fashion to which the whiskered paladins of that date seem to have been given :

" Saved, by God ! I thought the odds were fifty to nothing against us, Rose ! But I'm damned if you won't live to see me in the divorce court yet—and the sooner the better for us both ! "

(On the whole, probably *not* true, since Lord Corchester, though a sinner, seems to have had some pretences to being considered a gentlemanly one. But I quote the story for what it is worth.)

Twelve weeks later he was given the Victoria Cross, which he certainly deserved—and the news

that his wife was dead, which he as certainly did not. And Miss Hallam-Haye married him within the month—a fact for which Society has never forgiven her, nor ceased to wag prodigiously shocked heads over her conduct.

As for me, I have never thought the hints and innuendoes about her anything else than absurd. Rakes have been loved by decent women before now, and will be again. And no one could have known Rose, Lady Corchester, as well as I have done without being sure that she was essentially a decent woman, if an odd one. '*They say? What say they? Let them say!*'—That was her attitude towards the calumnies of which she was perfectly and derisively aware. It is an attitude which, in a woman, ensures her a few staunch friends and plenty of enemies. But to persons of spirit even enemies may be stimulating.

"They are all more afraid of me than I am of them," she once confessed to me with more contempt than triumph. "I let it be known that I have been keeping a diary since I was eighteen, and that it is full of scandals, and that I may one day publish it."

"But my dear lady, that is moral blackmail of the blackest!" said I with a laugh.

"It is nothing of the kind," she replied. "It is the best trump in the pack, if you like, or a weapon of defence——"

"Which you would never descend to use," I murmured.

"Of course not! Only hysterical creatures with grievances rush into personal print. But it's a useful weapon. You can see for yourself——"

It was on one of the famous Sunday evenings already referred to that she said it. And, obedient to the gesture of her fan, I looked at the thronged hall and staircase and thought of the distinguished names I had heard announced, and the civil insin-

cerities I had heard exchanged between hostess and guests; and I conceded the usefulness of the weapon. . . .

I called on her one afternoon and found her alone in a careful gloom and a pale muslin garment reminiscent of the one in the well-known picture of Miss Hallam-Haye in her beautiful and 'designing' youth. At sixty she was not beautiful at all. The artfully artless dress and the travestied pink-and-white of her complexion added to, rather than subtracted from, her age. Even on that point she had no illusions nor sought to delude others.

"That odious Smythe woman told me yesterday that Father Bertram Mayne calls me an old Jezebel," she laughed as she gave me a careless, jewelled hand—her hands were still beautiful—"I suppose he means that I paint my face. I am sure he has never seen me looking out of the window—Jezebel *was* the creature who was always looking out of the window, wasn't she? No wonder her head was tired! . . . I hope you have come to tell me that some one we know has been doing something outrageous. I am terribly bored to-day. What about my genius? I haven't seen either you or him for an age. What has he been doing lately?"

I groped for a chair in the rose-coloured twilight, and sat down near her. When she spoke of her genius she meant Julian, whom she, in common with several hundred other persons, claimed to have 'discovered.'

"He hasn't been murdering any one or embezzling anything," I apologized for him. "He has only moved into his own house, and begun a mas erpiece, and adopted a child."

Lady Corchester sat up briskly, shutting her fan with a snap. Her eyes—they, too, were still beautiful, and in oddly young contrast to the

enamel mask of her face—were certainly not bored.

"Miles told me all that, and told it uncommonly badly," she said. "Modern young men have no descriptive powers whatever. Begin at the beginning—tell me all about this child first."

So I told the tale of Lydia to yet another listener—one with what the American reporter calls a new viewpoint. Lady Corchester, on the surface at least, was frankly neither maternal nor a moralist. She was amused, not touched, by the story.

"What a very mad enterprise," said she. "Nothing would ever have induced me to adopt a child. People who are lucky enough to have been spared the annoyance of having children of their own ought to thank Heaven on their knees, instead of rushing into certain trouble over some one else's."

I replied with a non-committal shrug. I had heard her say that sort of thing before. For that matter, I had said much the same myself. So, in effect, did the fox in Æsop's fable.

"You had better talk to Miles about it," I said. "He hates it. He thinks Julian is taking an insane risk."

"Risk!" echoed her ladyship. "That is the one redeeming point of the thing. Risks are the salt of life. With mysterious antecedents like hers, this girl, in ten or twelve years time, will probably be a dangerously attractive enough young person to make a complete fool of her adopted father! He will probably marry her. And then one of two things will happen—his work will either go to pieces utterly, or be better than it has ever been in his life!"

I gasped for mental breath, and explained all over again that Julian wanted nothing but an heir—"but the feminine mind is incorrigibly persuaded that all roads lead to matrimony," I added.

"And men think they all lead to money," she

retorted. "An heir, forsooth! Has the child any promise of beauty? Miles tells me she hasn't, but he says her eyes are good, and that her ears and her hands and feet are small——"

"Did Miles see all that?" I exclaimed. "I thought you said he had no descriptive powers."

"No, he hasn't any. He couldn't even tell me whether she had the manners and appearance of a lady!" ('Lady' was still a permissible word to the Victorians.) "I should rather like to see this little creature for myself. I should like to see this Trimmer's Gate, or whatever it's called, too——"

"Splendid! Why not?" said I. "It's only a short drive, after all. Go soon, dear Lady Corchester. Julian will think himself highly honoured. And you will be charmed with the garden."

"I am not so sure of that," said Lady Corchester in her whimsical way. "Gardens don't appeal to me. They are so draughty, and there is generally so much daylight in them!"

## CHAPTER XII

### THE FAIRY-GODMOTHER

IT was Surtees who represented to her new master that his adopted daughter should, if only for seemliness, be given a second name. She went farther, and boldly opined that Tarrant was as good a one as any other. But he summarily quashed that last suggestion—I think because the Puritan blood in him, which he thought he despised, revolted against labelling flotsam from St. Monica's with a name so long and respectably borne.

He chose her another, however, by the easy and time-honoured method of opening a directory at random and fixing on the topmost name of the left-hand page. Had the oracle thus invoked indicated something like 'Stubbs' or 'Potts' as its choice, I do not say with any certainty that he would have obeyed it. But the name happened to be Lisle, which was quite inoffensive—even musical when linked with 'Lydia'—and Lydia Lisle she became from that day.

I am glad to think that our united bungling did result in giving Lydia's youth some of its belated birthright of happiness. Surtees, who bungled less often than most people where children were concerned, took care of that. Yet I was not satisfied. I had built for Julian a castle in the air, and peopled it with a father and daughter as mutually devoted as any whom Providence ever

originally cast for the parts. But Julian would not play his; that is to say, he played it only when he chanced to remember it, and with his conscience, not his heart, for prompter.

On one of her 'days out' Surtees came to see me. The sight of her sitting in my study, unfamiliarly black-bonneted and mantled and gloved, gave me a pang of home-sickness of which the poignant memory is with me still. I have even an idea that she shared it. She was, at any rate, human enough to have penetrated first into her own late domain, the kitchen, and to resent the presence there of her successor, who was the meekest and most effaced of women.

"That body's just told me she's from Tooting," she remarked, and Tooting might have been another name for Chinatown or the Levant from the disparagement of her tone. "I'm doubting she isn't what you think her, sir."

As she had no more idea than I had myself what I thought of the native of Tooting, the sinister hint was thrown away upon me. But I was a listener after her own heart when presently she told me in fluent, if rambling, monologue all about our waif.

Lydia had grown two inches, it appeared, since the first white frock was made; it had had to be 'let down' only that very morning; and she was looking a wonderful sight better for the Parrish's food and the cream.

"And she's pulled out another tooth, sir—not such a loose one, neether. I made bold to tell Mr. Tarrant as you gave her a sixpence for the last, and he gave her one too, and she was *that* pleased and proud, poor bairn. She thinks the world of him, though he doesn't take no notice of her scarcely. But he's kind enough when he remembers to think on. He bought her a coral necklace the

other day, and he has her down of evenings to dessert sometimes, like you did, though he seems too awkward-like to know how to talk to her, Mr. Merriman says. And several times he's forgotten all about her, and walked straight from his pudding into the library—and her all dressed ready to come down, having to be put to bed, after all! . . . Yes, she's disappointed—it's easy to see that, though she's not one to fuss or cry. Them nuns has taught her to keep her feelin's to herself. And I'm particular to tell her just what you said, I was to—how he's over-busy writing beautiful stories to remember things just like other folks do. And I tell her, when she's old enough to read them for herself, she'll think them the finest stories she's ever heard—and may the Lord forgive me for the untruth!" concluded Surtees, with pious conviction. And she added a rider:

"It seems to me poets isn't the most comfortable folks in the world to live with!"

"There were some Miss Miltons and also a certain Mrs. Shelley—and others—who would probably have agreed with you," I told her.

When she tied her bonnet-strings in preparation to depart she said:

"The bairn's happy enough—don't you worrit yourself about that, sir. But there's a time coming when she'll need a lady for a friend. Nurses is all very well, and gentlemen too, but neether you nor me can take her to parties when she's a grown woman, and teach her how to choose her grown-up dresses—and a husband."

Over my evening pipe I thought well over her words; I often paid her uncommon-sense that tribute. The time she had spoken of seemed, it is true, very far off, and yet, what is a paltry dozen years? I mentally reviewed all my sisters as possible friends and guides for Lydia's adolescence,

and for various reasons dismissed them all. I could think of no one else more suitable, and with rueful amusement I asked myself whether the terrifying task of choosing 'grown-up dresses' might, after all, fall on Surtees or on me, in default of expert opinion. As for the much more terrifying one of discriminating between suitors, I would have none of it. Julian was her adopted father. That should be *his* job.

Lady Corchester braved the fresh air and the daylight of Trimmer's Wood, and drove over one close October afternoon in a brougham, with shut windows, and myself for company by the way. On arrival, when her voluminous outer wraps had been removed, she was revealed in opulent satin and a shawl of Spanish lace. Above the improbable auburn of her hair she wore a feathered hat of the style immortalized by Mr. Leech in the pages of *Punch*. And, for crowning touch, she supported her rheumatic footsteps with the aid of a tall malacca cane whose knob shone resplendent gold.

We administered tea to her in the sedate drawing-room, where the shade of Mrs. Tarrant looking on must have denounced her passionately as a 'Jezebel,' actually echoing the opinion of that dangerous and fashionable sacerdotalist, Father Bertram Mayne!

Afterwards Lydia was summoned for inspection by, and presentation to, the visitor. Taking refuge then by me, and leaning against the arm of my chair, she slowly ate the cake which Julian, obeying my officious prompting, offered her. But all her interest was given to the wonderful apparition across the room, and the richness of its tints and textures, and the incomprehensible things it said. Lady Corchester, on her part, fixed the child with

her appraising regard. And presently she said, in her brusque way :

"Come here, little girl, and put my cup down for me."

Lydia went to her at once. She had been taught to do as she was told, which is the most difficult of all habits to break. Lady Corchester tilted up the child's chin.

"H'm—yes, fine eyes—which she will, no doubt, learn how to use!" she said, and looked across at me. "For a man, you haven't done so badly, Richard Drewe. I should have expected you to choose a pretty pink-and-white doll with a thick neck and a bush of blonde curls—the sort that inevitably turns into shop girls and chorus girls. This little creature may not be a beauty, but I see no reason why she should not do her share of destruction some day. At any rate, she can thank God she isn't a mere type!" She removed the detaining finger and thumb. "Now you can put the cup down for me, child. But first, tell me why you were staring at me just now. What were you thinking of me?"

Lydia had another well-taught habit of answering when she was spoken to. It was a rather terrific moment. Lady Corchester's appearance was not improved by a nearer view. But innocence has a curious tact all its own.

"I was thinking that you look like a fairy-godmother," said Lydia shyly.

Now there are, as every one knows, two kinds of fairy-godmother. There is the radiant, rainbow-winged, youthful kind, and there is the other, benign and ancient and overdressed, who, in appearance, is nothing more nor less than an old witch. But Lady Corchester fortunately did not pause to discriminate between the two. She was naïvely delighted.

"But you are very clever!" she exclaimed.

"That is exactly what I am. If you can only grow up fast enough I will be *your* fairy-godmother. I will take you to Court and present you to your sovereign, and perhaps—who knows—we will find a prince for you !"

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE SWORD AND THE PEN

THERE is a text which admirably advises you to 'withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour's house, lest he be weary of thee and so hate thee.' But in these thick-skinned latter days the average man does not vex his soul with such niceties, if the neighbour's house in question happens to lend itself pleasantly and conveniently to a casual dropping in.

As I am a completely average man, I used to take my welcome in Julian's home for granted, and shamelessly spent most of my Sundays and odd half-holidays there. Even Miles Argent, to whom, for one reason or another, most social doors stood importunately open, quite often threw over an afternoon's or evening's engagements, and descended on Trimmer's Wood instead. We were both there on a summer Sunday evening, two years later, which somehow sticks in my memory.

Julian and I were sitting on the lawn below the terrace. In my meddlesome, quarrelsome way I had been telling him how far his treatment of Lydia fell short of perfection.

"Those nuns," I reminded him, "said that whoever adopted a child was shouldering certain responsibilities. And they were quite right. But you shunt all yours on to other people. You think you have said the last word on the subject when you say she isn't in your way at all. But she ought

to be in your way. You and your plans and your work all ought to be sometimes upset for her."

"What are you driving at? She's quite happy, isn't she? Surtees sees to that. I give her a free hand——"

"I don't believe any servant—not even the very best—ought to be given a free hand with a child. Tell me honestly! Have you ever once, on your own account, given the child either a caress or a punishment?"

"I believe I generally kiss her good-night at bedtime, if I see her," he answered, with a laugh at his own literalness. "Surtees indicates it as a part of my duty. Punishment? Surely that's not required of me!"

"It's as much your duty as the other, if you want her to grow up good as well as happy," I assured him, with that clarity of vision which is apt to mark our sense of other people's duty.

The breeze brought the sound of church bells and the scent of hay to us. The paddock had been cut two days ago. Lydia and the dolls and I had eaten a ceremonious, if somewhat unsatisfying, tea there that afternoon. Miles Argent, who was far too young and magnificent for dolls and little girls, was strolling about the hayfield at this very moment, luxuriating in the clean, aromatic scent of it, after London's *pot pourri* of dust and creosote and food and cosmetics. We could see him walking up the slope between the long swaths. In the other direction we could see the churchward-bound Surtees, in her decent Sunday black, making for the short cut down the garden, with Lydia beside her as escort to the plantation-gate.

One of the things I have always found most lovable in Julian is his readiness to believe himself at fault, and to act on the belief. When the child reappeared near the far corner of the house he sat forward in his deck-chair and called to her:

"Lydia, I want you. Come here."

She had not seen us until she heard his voice, and she drew back startled, putting her hand impulsively behind her back.

"Come here when I call you! Come at once," he repeated, 'duty' lending harshness to his voice.

She came then, slowly, her little face set and her eyes wide, and her hand still hidden.

"What are you hiding behind your back?" he asked her.

"Nothing,"—the answer was tremulous and barely audible.

"Let me see your hands."

It was still the new duty-driven tone of his usually indifferent voice that terrified her and made her disobey. He dropped his pipe on the grass beside him, and with a sharp movement turned her round and opened both the small, shut palms. In one of them there was a peach, ripe and bruised.

Young Argent had reappeared on the terrace while the little scene took place. Lydia faced the discomfited scrutiny of three pairs of masculine eyes. But she had not the comfort of knowing of our discomfort.

"So you have been into the peach-house?" Julian said slowly.

"Yes."

"And you took this peach? Don't you know that that is stealing? You are not allowed to help yourself to any of the fruit, are you?"

"No."

"You have been disobedient then, as well as untruthful and dishonest"—Julian was obviously in a hurry to make an end of this unpleasant task. "If Surtees were here she would—would deal with you. As it is, I have no choice but to punish you myself. What is supposed to be your bedtime, ordinarily? Seven, or half-past, isn't it? Well,

it's six-thirty now. Go in at once, and go straight to bed."

And when she had taken passionate, shamed flight, he turned to me and said angrily: "I hope that satisfied you!" To which I replied with unreasonable asperity:

"Your grandmother could not have done it better!"

For the next five minutes we discussed the small offender. I maintained that the fault deserved pity rather than blame; deceit in small matters was one of the natural reactions of the repressive system. Argent said that the child had a furtive, secret air; he had noticed it from the first. She might always be counted on to deceive in great things, as in small. And Julian said impatiently that we were making more fuss over the matter than it was worth. All women lied, because all women were cowards!

And we all thought our respective criticisms prodigiously wise and just; not reflecting that we each judged her exactly as every man judges every woman—by the meagre light, that is, of his own individual love or dislike or indifference, whichever it happens to be. . . .

And, presently, home from church came Surtees, and upset all our theories and our self-esteem by the statement of one plain fact—namely, that she and the child had met Dobson, the autocrat of the garden, near the hothouses, and he had unlocked the door and taken them through, and had given Miss Lydia a peach.

"Then, why, in Heaven's name, didn't she tell me that?" cried the harassed master of the house.

"Because you frightened her," said I.

"Because she is naturally secretive," said young Argent. And Surtees was heard to murmur something about 'them nuns.'

"I've punished her for something she never did!

What excuse can I make to her for that? What am I to do now?" asked Julian.

"There is that alternative duty of yours," I suggested. . . .

So he went up to her. What he said to her I have no idea—something clumsy and inadequate, no doubt. But it did not matter. She, too, guided her criticisms by the light of her prejudices. And in her childish eyes 'He' could do no wrong.

That autumn saw the breaking of the storm in the South African teacup. We thought it, I remember, rather a tremendous happening. Was that because we had no sense of proportion in those c.d., civilized days? Or did we have it then, and only lose it in 1914, when we learnt to count men by millions and to measure victories and defeats by yards, and to think of Life and Death as mere pieces in a great Game called War?

Now, when we have been fighting for the freedom of the unborn, in a brotherhood of many nations, it is odd and unreal to look back and remember that in '99 we gloried in our 'splendid isolation'—that we laughed with tolerant contempt when we picked up any French or Belgian paper and chanced on paragraphs beginning in some such way as: '*Sans doute, les Anglais sont impayables*——!' (only they called us much worse adjectives than that!). What did we care? We knew, in our folly, that we should never be called upon to face any odds that we could not face alone!

Meanwhile, we talked much windy patriotism—we had our little elations, our depressions, our suspenses about this little war of ours. For all but a few of us they were very surface and endurable emotions. . . . The thing I like best to remember is that, even then, without any urging, the flower of the nation's manhood left its offices,

its farms, its ballrooms and football fields, to fight in its country's quarrel. . . .

Miles Argent went. He was given a commission in Corchester's Horse, the troop raised by his third cousin-once-or-so-removed, the present holder of the title. One of my nephews ran away from school and enlisted, the lucky young dog! Another, who had completed one year at 'The Shop' was sent, practically straight from there, out to the front.

Julian himself, after a restless month or two at home, told me jubilantly one day that he, too, had been given a 'job' out there, and was going as a war correspondent.

"Of course, the pen *isn't* mightier than the sword that's all nonsense," he said. "But it may be the next best thing, if they'll let you use it somewhere near the fighting line."

So he used his there for a year and a half. Talk about pearls——! No! I will *not* finish that tired old phrase! But, all the same, I do wonder how many out of the thousands who read those inimitable dispatches of 'our special correspondent' over their matutinal coffee and bacon, realized just how 'special' he was. Personally, I have always liked Julian's prose very nearly as much as his verse.

Lydia and Trimmer's Wood were left, meanwhile, to the joint guardianship of Surtees and the Merrimans, with myself for general overseer and court-of-appeal.

War or no war, that first summer of the new century gave me two whole weeks of happiness as perfect, perhaps, as humanity has a right to expect—happiness with a pang at the heart of it. An artist-friend lent me a cottage in a Yorkshire village huddled between heather and wood and sea. Lydia and Surtees and I lived the simple life there for a fortnight. And in my secret imaginings I

played a childish game of make-believe, in which I was a devoted father (not even adopted, but real) and Lydia my adored little daughter. It gave me an absurd thrill of joy when the lady of the post-office, in a wild flight of fancy born of the desire to please, assured me that my little girl had a great look of me ! . . .

It was my privilege to perform the introduction between Lydia and that mystery, the sea. It received her, on the evening of our arrival, blandly and on its best behaviour—a blue and silver sea, rippling and laughing and changing under the flattery of sun and breeze. But two days later she saw it convulsed with passion. Clinging to my arm on the windy ledge of rock, she watched the great grey-green rollers gathering speed and height and foam as they raced coastward, to hurl their savage strength against the cliff below.

"*Oh!*" Lydia gasped, and held my sleeve more tightly, half-hiding her spray-wet little face, and laughing with that same ecstasy of fear and delight that the lions at the Zoo had caused her.

It was a beautifully idle fortnight. I never wrote a word unless the word itself insisted on being written. I went for long tramps, or I lay about the sands of the little bay, watching Lydia paddle or dig or shrimp or play Prisoners' Base with the half-dozen children who had scraped beach-acquaintance with her. Sometimes I joined in the shrimping or the game myself.

One afternoon Lydia and Surtees and I had a picnic all by ourselves in the woods, and in the heart of them we made a wonderful discovery—a real waterfall that poured in a thin, silver stream down the face of a tall rock. We had tea near it, and Lydia could hardly eat hers in the pre-occupation its beauty and novelty caused her.

"I do ~~lost~~ think I like it better than the sea,

Uncle Dick," she said slowly, as though apologizing for a heresy.

And after tea she sat on where she was, still worshipping it—day-dreaming and singing to herself in a little underbreath way all her own which always gripped at my heart. And I, watching her and smoking my pipe, amused myself by making a little rhyme which presently I jotted down in my pocket-book.

"What are you writing, Uncle Dick?" she asked me, turning round at last.

"A sonnet to your eyebrow—what you call 'a bit of poetry'—all about you," I answered; and I read it to her. It went like this:

*When Lydia sings, is she aware  
She binds my soul with silken strings  
Which, if I could, I would not tear—  
When Lydia sings?*

*When Lydia sighs, could she but guess  
The day seems darkened to my eyes,  
Would sharing lighten her distress—  
When Lydia sighs?*

*When Lydia loves, will she be shy?—  
Or send her thoughts like homing doves  
To him; and fill with stars his sky  
Whom Lydia loves?*

Poor stuff, as you see. But she thanked me, as usual, with a long, satisfied breath and silence. When she broke it, she said:

"It is a lovely bit of poetry. I do think you are a very clever man, Uncle Dick!"

"Thank you," I replied, with the humility of unworthiness.

There followed another silence. Her thoughts travelled fast, and were suddenly arrested when they reached beloved ground. She said:

"Is the poetry *He* makes up as nice as yours?"

"Yes, a million times nicer!"

"Say me a bit, Uncle Dick!"

"You wouldn't understand it, Sweetheart. There are some things so wonderful and splendid that you have to learn how to like them. *His* poetry is like that. Wait till you are older."

"I don't want to wait. I don't mind a bit about not understanding it if it sounds nice."

Her cheek was laid coaxingly against my arm. I looked down at her, smiling in sympathy. I knew what she meant. The Book of the Prophet Isaiah makes me feel just like that. It is so beautiful that 'I don't mind about not understanding it.'

"I will read you a bit to-night," I promised.

And I did. I had Julian's latest play, 'Darnley,' with me at the cottage. And, secure in the knowledge of her non-comprehension, I opened it at random and read her the last scene of the first act. It is that scene in the little room at Holyrood, over-filled with people—the Queen and her Italian, and Darnley and Ruthven and the rest—filled, too, with all the fiercest passions; fear and anger, and the lust to kill. Plenty of people have written about it, but Julian's picture of it is a veritable orgy of splendid verbiage—vivid, but never florid. It is the sort of writing that quickens your pulse and makes the blood beat in your ears as you read. . . . I shut the book and looked at the child, and saw her bewildered, yet rapt.

"Well," I smiled, "do you like it?"

"Oh, yes!" There were no gaps now to disfigure the evenness of her pretty teeth, and trip up unwary sibilants. "It is *lovely*! It is like—I think it's something like the sea—when it's all rough and lovely and frightening."

A little stab of jealousy, not *of* Julian, but *for* the child herself, pricked me. She thought all the world of him, and he thought nothing of her at all.

"And mine?" I asked, teasing her. "Is my 'art of poetry' like the sea, too?"

She knitted her brows over the problem, gazing into the fire that we lighted at sunset for cheerfulness. Then she nestled up to me again.

"No—not like the sea," she said. "Yours is just like a darling little teeny waterfall! . . ."

So I need not have been jealous. After all, she had liked the waterfall best.

## PART II

### CHAPTER I

#### THE GAY GAME

ONCE in a long while my trade takes me on a flying visit abroad. It took me to Brussels for two nights one mid-May. A scandal in foreign news-circles was suspected, rather than actually known, to be looming ahead, and the *Stop-press* had given me, as it were, a sort of watching-brief for it.

The affair did not interest me in the least. But I gave a long, conscientious morning to it, collecting with the maximum of pains the minimum of trivial information. Then, having done all that on the coffee and rolls which my insular prejudice refused to call breakfast, I had lunch. And after lunch I made myself as spruce as a man of fifty with Bohemian tendencies may do, and went a-pleasuring.

I am, of course, perfectly aware that a *bona fide* uncle does not usually dignify by the name of pleasure a visit to his *bona fide* niece's school. Finding him in a foreign town, his orthodox middle-aged soul would certainly insist on *some* pretence at ruffling it while there—nothing really naughty, you understand; but something that, for his later solace, he may think of and darkly hint at as a mild orgy. But I have always been shamelessly unorthodox even in my pleasures. *Cabarets* and

all-night entertainments and improper songs and dances all bore me dreadfully. Besides, Lydia is not my *bona fide* niece.

Her school was in the Chaussée de Charleroi. Lady Corchester had chosen it. That is to say, she had written to a friend in Paris whose own granddaughter was being educated at it and who warmly recommended it. When Julian demurred at the idea of a foreign school, Lady Corchester was emphatic in disagreement.

"Present-day English schools, as far as I can make out, are run on a handsome-is-that-handsome-does system—a most heretical doctrine for a girl. What will hockey and algebra do for her except give her short-sight and a biceps and a stride and a snubbing manner, and useless things like that? A career? Fiddlesticks! There's only one career worth having for women! I have no idea what sort of learning this Brussels school teaches—none at all, possibly. But you may be quite sure the child will pick up all the really important things—how to put on her clothes, and carry herself properly, and take care of her hair and her complexion!"

Thus her pagan ladyship, who in worldly matters was certainly wiser than the children of light. My youngest sister should, I suppose, be counted among the latter. She is an evangelical clergyman's wife, and never lets you forget it. And *she*, in a long letter of unasked-for advice to me in the matter, gave it as her opinion that Lydia (whom she had never even seen) should be sent to a strict, old-fashioned English school, where sound religion and plain facts and healthy outdoor games were taught. It may be added that she thoroughly disapproved of my mixing myself up in our waif's affairs at all. Apart from all else—so in effect she reasoned—could there any good thing come out of a convent?

The afternoon was hot and brilliant. The cafés overflowed upon the pavements, under their striped awnings. A band in the distance played march-music, and the baskets of the flower-sellers made patches of colour and perfume everywhere. I bought a carnation and stuck it jauntily in my button-hole, because Brussels, all laughing and light of heart, insisted that I should play her own gay game. To me, ever since I first knew her, it always seemed that there was pathos under that gaiety of hers—in her gallant resoluteness to ignore the shadow over her past, and the blood and storms and tears with which she purchased her present. I did not know then, and no more did she, that the shadow was of the future, too!

My way took me—or I made it take me—along a certain avenue where there is a house I used to know. Through the wrought-iron gates at the side you can look into a garden where statues hide palely between the lilacs and syringas and wigelias; and there is a fountain and a stone bench beside it. There used, long ago, to be a dream-princess, too—sad and gay, like the spirit of Brussels. A wicked king had laid a spell upon her, and the garden was her prison. . . . I stopped at the gate and looked in, and for a moment or two let the ghost of an old pain have its way with me. . . .

But, thank God! I was fifty, and a cheerfully sober soul in these latter days. No more of the great emotions for me, at first-hand! So I pulled the carnation-stalk more securely through my button-hole, and tilted my hat a little, and turned away, humming under my breath the tune that the band had played. (There is, after all, a certain zest in playing the game Brussels plays, and playing it as well as you know how.) And presently, behold me in a typically Belgian *salon*, being talked to by the most enchanting of elderly preceptresses. She might have been a reincarnation of Madame du

Deffand, and her vocabulary of polite civilities for a complete stranger seemed to be inexhaustible and very idiomatic to my now unaccustomed ear. She had, also, a great many things to say about '*la petite Leedy*.'

Meanwhile, my impatient eyes were straying to the garden without, where, in the distance, four little girls were playing a game of tennis, while a tall, slim maiden, whose long, dark braid of hair swung in the breeze, leaned against the net-post and watched them. I wondered whether one of those small girls was Lydia. She must be as big as that by now, I thought.

At last, with unnecessary apologies for the fact, Madame left me, promising to send to me 'the little one.'

And the next moment, as it seemed, that tall young creature I had seen outside was in the room and had flung herself, laughing, into my arms !

Presently, sitting beside me on the black satin 'unsociable' that had an artificial nosegay sprouting from its centre, her cheek against my arm in the old way of her childhood, she said with a little shaken laugh :

"Is it a dream, do you think? I simply *can't* believe that you are really you !"

"On the contrary," I retorted, "it is you that are not really you ! I was looking for a little girl, not a tall nymph that might be seventeen——"

"But I *shall* be seventeen next week !"

"What? Nonsense ! I've been thinking of you as about thirteen or fourteen. Do you mean to tell me you've been at school four years?"

"Yes, nearly. It is horrid of you to make out they have gone so fast !" she said. "Uncle Dick, darling, I've missed you most dreadfully ! Haven't you missed me a little, too?"

"Horribly !" I assured her, with deep sincerity.

"But time flies when one's getting old. Has it gone very slowly for you?"

"Yes—no—I don't know. I'm quite happy here. Madame is an old angel, and the girls are mostly quite dears. And the holidays are *real* holidays, even when we do spend them at school. We have no lessons, and lots of treats—in the holidays, I mean. And last summer we went to Madame's villa at Blankenbergh, which was lovely, in a way. And this summer . . . I suppose *He* doesn't miss me, does he? He hasn't said he wants me to come home? Kathie Shield—that's one of the English girls here—had a letter from her father to-day saying she simply must come home; he couldn't exist another term without seeing her. I suppose that's because he's her real father——"

A wistful note had invaded the young gaiety of her voice, and now it faltered. It was lack of all conviction that made my own vehement as I answered her:

"Of course he misses you. No, that's nonsense what you say about 'real' fathers. Don't I love you, far more than any of my real nieces? But you must never forget that '*He*' is an exceptional sort of man, as different, temperamentally, from the ordinary domestic father as a—*a* hawk is from a domestic canary. And he's so much away. The South African business woke up the wandering habit in him again. He's talking of going to Japan this winter."

It was the most miserable of vindications, but she accepted it, saying:

"Yes, of course. He's wonderful, isn't he? The other girls just have generals and stockbrokers and vicars and things for fathers. But I'm much luckier." Her smile trembled a little. "And, do you know, he writes to me almost every week—not long, newsy letters like yours and Surtees', or funny, like Lady Corchester's, but very kind and polite."

And he sends me all the books he writes ! Isn't *that* good and kind? "

"Very," I answered with painstaking enthusiasm. But I hastened away from the subject of Julian, and told her how Madame had given permission for her to come out somewhere with me that afternoon. And she left me, delightedly, to get ready. She was not long away, but when she came back I saw that she had changed into a cool, white dress, and turned up the thick, dark braid of hair and tied it with a ribbon bow at the nape of her neck—"so as to make you feel almost as though you are taking out a grown-up person, Uncle Dick!" she explained, laughing, as she fastened the buttons of her glove.

While her glance was thus downcast I looked at her, bewilderedly seeking the child I had known. Somehow, I had expected she would always be a tiny thing—mouse-like and bird-like in her timidity. But now I was looking at a young stranger who wore the opening petals of maidenhood with a quaintly foreign finish, quite different from, yet no whit less alluring than, the elfin grace of her childhood. As for her little pointed face, it made me think of the queen who wished for a daughter 'as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony.' Lydia had a delicate irregularity of feature that defied every book of beauty ever printed. But her skin was healthily pale, her lips as healthily red, and her hair of that fine, lustreless cloudy black, neither straight nor curling, that you so seldom see. And her eyelashes—

She lifted them at that moment, and her eyes were still startlingly the eyes of Lydia the child. Behind the radiance of the moment they still held secrets and that fateful sensitiveness to Life's lightest touch which it is so much better—and perhaps so much duller—to be without. . . .

"Well?" she smiled. "I'm quite ready, Uncle Dick. And what are we going to do?"

And because it was May, because it was Brussels, because the eyes that questioned me were young and dark and laughter-veiled, I answered with a laugh too:

"We are going to be idle and frivolous. We are going to have tea—or its equivalent—at Van Hille's, and we are going to drive in the Bois or somewhere, where we can talk without interruption. But first we are going to buy a hat——"

"A *hat*?"

"A dawn-pink hat," I explained gravely, "the most ethereal pink you can imagine. It is your birthday next week. I suppose you are under the delusion that you are almost a woman. And I have always understood that a woman experiences the nearest possible approach to human ecstasy when she tries on hats. Consider twenty minutes of perfect ecstasy my birthday present to you."

"I won't do any such thing," she cried, and in tender indignation squeezed my arm with both hands, just as she used to do of old. "Haven't you told me heaps of times that you are poor? And isn't this hat I've got on nearly new? It cost fourteen francs in the Boulevard de Hainault! And I won't *let* you spend your sad money on giving me ecstasies, as you call it, you darling, quaint thing!"

## CHAPTER II

### A DAWN-PINK HAT

HOWEVER, I had my way. My whims are rare, but generally obstinate. So we bought the hat, and bought it, in spite of all her pretty protestations, in the Montagne de la Cour.

Considered sartorially, it was the Perfect Hat. I state this confidently on the authority of the *chic* high-priestess who sold it to us. (She was a person of discerning enthusiasms.) And she could not restrain herself from assuring me rhapsodically that Mademoiselle my daughter looked all that there was of delicious in it!—a veritable *élégante* of whom any *papa* might be proud!

As for me, the only knowledge of clothes I have ever learnt is from the hints dropped divergently on the subject by Lady Corchester and Mr. Thomas Carlyle. But—because it was Brussels, because those young eyes that the surrounding mirrors, like so many magnets, drew to them, were dark and beautiful—the sight of Lydia in her pink hat had its effect on me also—worked, in fact, a miracle. It made me feel, suddenly, sad and young and gay and very old.

She was flushed with the pretty, conscious triumph of her own prettiness when we came out into the street, and a little incoherent in the mingling of her gratitude for the frail gift and her reproaches to me on the extravagance of giving it. But I stemmed both by saying, teasingly ;

"Well, and wasn't I right? Doesn't five minutes of millinery fulfil all your feminine ideals of happiness?"

"Of course!" she mocked in sympathy. But mockery is not natural to sixteen-and-three-quarters, and she added as though despite herself: "No, not *all* my ideals. I have two better ones left."

"Two!" I questioned. For every schoolgirl knows and dreams of one. But the other——? "Two?" I repeated, after a pause.

But she shook her head and would not tell me. . . .

We went to Van Hille's—which my youngest sister assured me later had become known as a rendezvous for non-respectable people. (Odd, isn't it, the breadth of information which these narrow well-doers manage to pick up?) And we drank cream-frothed chocolate and ate luscious *tartines-russes* and *rhum-babas* and *chous-à-la-crème* to our hearts' content, and in blissful ignorance of any problematical 'il' that might 'prowl and prowl around.'

And afterwards we drove in the Bois, and talked of many things, like the walrus and the carpenter. And many persons—a handsome officer of the *Guides*, for one—turned their heads to look after the face under the pink hat. And I told myself with an odd mixture of regret and expectation that Lydia the child was indeed gone, and that the fairy-tale which always seems to lie in the hollow of girlhood's pretty hands, to use as they will, might begin at any moment now.

"Tell me," she said, all demure renunciation of Monsieur the captain's bold, soulful stare, "everything that has happened to you all—to every one I know—while I've been away."

So I did my best. We talked at length about

Julian (there was no help for it) and Surtees and Lady Corchester, etc.

"And Mr. Argent——?" she asked, presently. "Do look at that chestnut-blossom, Uncle Dick. Isn't it too lovely for words!—Does he come to Trimmer's Wood as much as ever?"

"No, not quite so much—very seldom, in fact. He hasn't got time. He's one of the most brilliant juniors at the Parliamentary Bar, and up to the eyes in work. I'd forgotten he was an old friend of yours."

"He wasn't ever a friend," she answered with decision. "He never used to take any notice of me at all—I expect he thought little girls a bore. I only remember him speaking to me once in my life, and that was the evening before he sailed for South Africa, when he came to say good-bye to *Him*. I expect I stared at him—I'd never seen anybody in khaki and spurs and things before. And just as he went away, he turned round and said: 'Well, so long, Lydia Languish.' Do you know"—she smiled—"I didn't like him a bit, but I used to think him frightfully handsome. I daresay he wasn't, really, but children admire people that no one else does, don't they?"

"I believe they do," said I. "But in this case you had the majority with you. Most people were agreed on the subject of Miles Argent's good looks, I believe."

"And by now I daresay he's fat and bald," she said, with a little shrug she had learnt to use.

"Who do you know in Brussels, Uncle Dick? Some one took off his hat to you just now."

"The hat probably covered one of the brains I was trying to pick this morning," I answered. "I don't know any one else in Brussels but you, at the moment."

But I was wrong about that. Next morning,

just outside the Gare du Nord, whom should I meet but Bill Denyer, my youngest sister's youngest son. Now, Fanny is my least favourite sister, but her son happens to be my favourite nephew, and I was as pleased to see the boy as I was surprised. I asked what brought him to Brussels (he works for a foreign mining company in Central Africa), and he told me he had just got home on leave, and had to see one of the directors, a certain Baron Z——, on business.

"—Rather a slippery old bird," he explained. "He's trying to cheat and corrupt me by being rather too civil—you know the dodge. I dined with him last night, and he did me no end proud. He's got a perfectly topping house in the Rue de la Victoire, full of topping old things——"

"Including a topping daughter—not old at all!" I said, refraining, mark you, from the senility of digging him in the ribs. "You're in luck, my boy! Mademoiselle Z—— is considered one of the sights of Brussels."

"Is she? She's not a patch on the little girl I saw you driving with yesterday afternoon," he retorted. "You do know how to choose the goods, and no mistake! Come now, Uncle Dick, own up! Who is she?"

"So they were *your* brains under the hat!" I murmured. "That was a certain Miss Lisle. She's at school here. And she's my niece by adoption."

"Your niece by adoption—that's an awfully unsafe relationship," he scoffed. "Lisle? Isn't that the name of the kid your friend Tarrant adopted—that my mother thinks is going to damage the morals of every one who comes near her?"

"The very same," I replied. And, for some reason, he laughed. The next moment he was grave, and we talked of other things. But just as we parted he said, suddenly:

"I say, Uncle Dick, do you believe in the rot they call love-at-first-sight?"

I replied with insouciance that I could believe the phenomenon possible—in Brussels, on a May afternoon, and added, obviously: "Why?"

He laughed again. His good-looking young face reddened.

"I believe I've been and gone and done it—that's why!" he said, with a naïve mixture of shame and bravado. "It's rotten luck for me that you're crossing to-day. But—look here, Uncle Dick!—you'll introduce me, some time, won't you?"

"Some time—yes," I promised, easily, remembering, with a novel sense of responsibility, that by the time Lydia came home he would probably be safely back at his work. 'Some time' was equally likely to mean 'next year' or 'never.'

Or would fate arrange things otherwise? Was this, peradventure, the beginning of the fairy-tale? And if so, would young Bill Denyer, who is a third son, have the luck that proverbially belongs to such—in the fairy-tales?

## CHAPTER III

### THE DÉBUTANTE

NEXT spring Lydia came home for good. And, even before she came, Julian's life was once more made to suffer some slight disturbance on her insignificant account.

This time it was Lady Corchester who applied the goad. For the purpose she put herself to the inconvenience of descending on Trimmer's Wood in person. She even invaded the sanctity of the library and the golden morning hours. Heaven only knows at what (to her) unaccustomed hour she must have risen in order to do so, since her toilette never belonged to the rapid, impressionist school of art.

She talked to Julian, so he afterwards told me, in language which he did not in the least understand—a strange, technical tangle of worldly wisdom, from which the terms 'chaperon,' 'dress-allowance,' 'presentation at Court,' etc., emerged with vague but quite unconsoling familiarity.

"And you must remember that your house will now have a mistress," she admonished him in the tone and manner which occasionally reminded one that she was, after all, a great lady as well as an oddity. You will have to dress for dinner, and eat it at the appointed time, and come into the drawing-room afterwards to listen—and be sure you pretend to enjoy!—while the child plays or sings

or whatever she does. And it will all be exceedingly wholesome for you ! " she ended, and let the severity relax into a smile as she added :

" You look as though you were regretting that you ever adopted a daughter at all ! "

" I have been doing that for the last twelve years," said Julian, with ominous restraint. I think I have already mentioned that he was always civil to women. He did not even permit himself to glance either at the clock or the writing-table.

" And speaking of drawing-rooms," her ladyship continued, " that is another thing she will want."

" I don't quite understand you, Lady Corchester. There's a drawing-room here already, of course. You have seen it, I believe."

" I have ; and I hope never to do so again," she retorted with spirit. " A musty museum of obsolete atrocities, warranted to produce nervous depression in any girl of the period ! She must have a suitable place in which to receive society when it comes to call on her, as I warn you it will do. You will have to come out of the clouds now and entertain your fellow-creatures, whether you like it or not ! The maddest of all modern crazes is this incomprehensible one for gardens and fresh air and rushing out of town on every possible pretext. And when London once discovers that Trimmer's Wood is hiding not only a real, live poet, but a pretty, attractive young woman as well, it isn't likely to leave you alone ! "

" Good God ! " cried the real, live poet, exasperated out of the polite tension he had hitherto maintained. It had probably never occurred to him to think of Lydia as a young woman—still less as an attractive one. And the double possibility called up visions so chaotic and disturbing that the egoism of poor genius shrank before them aghast. He saw his sacred morning silences shattered by the sounds of piano-practice or violin-tuning, or, worse still,

piercing soprano scales ; the afternoons a nightmare of teacups and well-dressed, chattering invaders. And the evenings—you may at least spare him some of your pity for his future evenings as he pictured them ; for Lady Corchester had told him that, since he refused to harbour a resident chaperon, he would sometimes have to take his adopted daughter out himself !

However, the new era, when it dawned, did so quietly enough. Lydia arrived in the chill hours of a March morning, almost as wan and quenched, after a bad Antwerp-Harwich crossing, as she had been on her first forlorn homecoming, years ago.

For the rest of the day she was invisible. She rested in the pretty white bedroom which had been prepared for her, and slept a little, and watched a pertly-respectful maid unpack for her, and (this is mere guesswork on my part) was prodigiously home-sick for Surtees. Did I mention that Julian had returned that loan of mine as soon as her charge had gone to school ?

In the evening a revived Lydia came downstairs to dinner. That first *tête-à-tête* meal seems to have been a formal and formidable, rather than a friendly one, with decorous conversation and frequent embarrassing silences. He was painstakingly kind and courteous ; she, shyly and sedately responsive to every slightest changing shade in his manner towards her—interpreting each one correctly, too, no doubt, since that *clairvoyant* gift specially belongs, paradoxically enough, to the imaginative.

And Lady Corchester had raised no false alarm in him on the point. The child had unquestionably grown up, if the length of her skirts and the fashion in which her hair was swathed about her small head were reliable signs. But 'pretty' ? 'Attractive' ? He looked at her and doubted, not knowing, poor

clever simpleton, that there is a kind of beauty—and that not the least alluring—which needs the light and warmth of approval to make it glow.

"I am looking forward to your giving me some music after dinner," he said to her with conscientious untruthfulness, mindful of his well-taught lesson.

"Are you? I am sorry. You see, I am not musical," she answered with politeness that matched his perfectly. And he probably sighed his relief. . . .

"And was it true? *Aren't* you musical?" I asked her afterwards, when she described that first evening to me.

"No—I don't quite know. I love to hear other people do things——"

"Then you must be either very musical or very *unmusical*!" I exclaimed cheaply. Don't you even 'play a little'?"

"I can struggle through a waltz or an accompaniment," she smiled.

"Or sing?"

"Just to myself—or you—or Lady Corchester."

"They why in the world not to Julian, if he wants you to?"

She laughed, but rather tremulously, turning her head away.

"Because—he doesn't want me to," she answered unanswerably.

She was presented at the May Drawing-room by Lady Corchester, who in her time probably broke hearts, but never yet broke a promise. She made *me* promise to bring Julian, without fail, to her house late on that important evening that he might see his adopted daughter as her sovereign had seen her.

So we went there together, and being earlier than we need have been, awaited their return with what

impatience we could muster—scant enough, as you may suppose, on Julian's part.

Speaking for myself, I found the waiting very well worth while. Social pageantries do not come my way often enough to breed any sort of contempt in me. Lady Corchester, for instance, according to her lights had done full honour to Lydia, their Majesties and the occasion. Never have I seen her so flauntingly defiant of Time, so peacock-hued as to attire, so bedizened and jewelled and fantastic! The sight of her made one feel that perhaps a social godmother of less conspicuous position and history and appearance might have been better—that the Cinderella who went to Court under that aged and gaudy wing must have had to face a somewhat severe ordeal.

And yet, I don't know! A dramatic entry on to whatsoever stage is always an asset! Comparisons, far from being entirely odious, may have their lurking piquancy, not to say romance. And, after all, to be inconspicuous is to be—well, inconspicuous. And who of us moderns wants to be that? If the ordeal *were* an ordeal I fancy our débutante had come through it triumphantly enough. The resplendent crowd at the Palace, even including the select little band of personages themselves, must have been unimpressible indeed if they did not give a second glance to the contrast between her gracious youth and the absurdly young, pathetically old, apparition that accompanied her.

And what shall I say of Cinderella herself, in her opulent setting of this one great night? She was quiet, yet radiant—stars in her eyes, Nature's scarlet in her parted lips. Those endless yards of white satin gave her a quaint, transient stateliness; the vaporous veil lent her mystery; her bouquet was a barrier of perfume to keep her remote from ordinary mortals for this one night. To-night, at least, in the heady security of her own loveliness she

could meet even that loved, feared guardian of hers without restraint—could use all the pretty airs and graces in girlhood's armoury and disregard their effect on him. But I dare swear she watched for it, all the same !

As for Julian, his glance followed her. And it was bewildered—like that of the inexperienced chess-player when the pawn which has crept slowly and insignificantly across the board under his unobservant eyes suddenly becomes a queen.

## CHAPTER IV

### I SIT AMONG THE DRAGONS

FOR the next six months, at any rate, Julian had no just cause for complaint. The smart callers did not arrive in the threatened battalions. And the mornings were as silent as any poet could wish. Lydia, who had confessed herself, once for all, 'not musical,' never so much as opened the piano except at such times as she knew him to be miles beyond earshot. He might almost have summed her up in the old odious, tolerant phrase by saying that she was not in his way at all.

The few people who did come to call on the young mistress of the house as often as not found her out. She spent a good deal of her time with Lady Corchester who, having taken a brand-new and very gallant lease of life for the purpose, was enjoying her fairy-goddaughter's success hugely. For it *was* success, so she assured me when I went to see her one October evening in response to a telephone message from her maid.

It was six o'clock, and I was shown up into her bedroom. It was a vast apartment, but, in spite of its wide horizons, its present atmosphere was one of midsummer heat, flavoured with eucalyptus and Parma violets and camphorated oil, and strange, unknown perfumes—overpowering, but not entirely unpleasant. A Titan fire roared up the chimney. Heavy curtains covered every door and window where a draught could possibly enter. The dress-

ing-table was triple-mirrored and many-lighted, and held an array of gold-topped bottles and pots and jars, besides an unabashed length of auburn hair. A 'front' of the same rich hue had slipped awry under the laced and ribboned trifle which Lady Corchester had donned, in obvious haste, for my reception. In the carved four-poster, with its curtains three-quarters drawn, she sat propped up on her pillows, a shawl huddled round her—looking, in spite of the coquettish boudoir-cap, just a rather pathetic 'rag and a bone and a hank of hair'—the last not even her own!

"I've had bronchitis," she explained with husky cheerfulness, interrupting my sympathy and inquiries. "At least, my doctor says I have. But I suspect he is only trying to frighten me into keeping my bed and taking his ridiculous physic——"

"He would certainly say you shouldn't be talking," I remonstrated.

"Nonsense! Why do you suppose I asked you to come, if I didn't mean to talk? Did you know that I was to have taken Lydia to Mrs. Sloane's dance to-night. It is one of these so-called small autumn dances that are the fashion nowadays. I suppose I can't go. But I won't have her disappointed, and I won't let her go alone, in the way girls are allowed to do in these days. So *you* will have to take her!"

Dismayed, I protested: "I? It's impossible! I don't know Mrs. Sloane. I've never chaperoned anybody in my life! I shan't know any men to introduce to her!"

"You won't need to. Her card is probably half full already, and you will bring her away long before the finish. Have I ever told you that the child is what, in my young days, would have been called a 'success'—and not a mere *succès fou*, either. The people she appeals to are mostly the people who count. Heaven knows who or what

her parents were ! (I wish you did, too, by the way, and could tell me !) But she must have good blood in her, somehow. I tell you, Richard Drewe, when I am sitting among the other dragons at a dance, shivering in my diamonds and a thorough draught, at an hour when an old woman like me should be in bed, I prevent myself from being bored by studying the modern girl. And I have discovered that she is generally either a frump or a romp. She has lost the art of keeping a man attracted by keeping him at arm's length. When he asks her for a dance she thinks he is doing her a favour instead of begging one. I have actually heard a girl say 'thank you,' when the music stops ! But, thanks to me and her own instinct, *our* girl is not like that ! "

Which was a recklessly long speech for a person recovering from bronchitis. Lady Corchester did penance for it by an equally long fit of coughing, and with a gesture commanded me to search among the embarrassing mysteries of the dressing-table for a box of lozenges. Meanwhile, I digested the varied items of enlightenment which she had offered me, and found them to my taste. It pleased my sense of justice that one who, at her first coming into a hostile world, had found no place, no rights, no welcome awaiting her, was now conquering it, nevertheless. I liked, too, to think that there might be 'good blood' in her, and that she appealed to the people who count. You are to understand, if you please, that when Lady Corchester used that phrase it was not in its usual snobbish or insolent sense. People who 'counted' with her were people who could interest, whether by circumstance or achievement or personality. The circumstance, it is true, might be a mere accident of birth, sinister and secret, like Lydia's own, or hung about with the trappings of tradition and honour. I hazarded a guess that

Lady Corchester, who had her own private defiance for a pharisaical world, had her own plans for the particular sort of achievement with which our waif should astonish it. She had once boldly prophesied that Lydia would 'do her share of destruction.' To that end, personality—in other words, her youth and charm, and that unusual, fugitive prettiness of hers—should be her weapon. A girl may be born to no name at all. In all fairness, then, let her win and wear the very best she can, *if* she can! This, as I read it, was Lady Corchester's secret thought.

Her maid came in to give her a dose of the 'ridiculous physic' and shake up her pillows; after which Lady Corchester, in her gallant way, took up the thread of her discourse as though it had not been broken.

"So you take her to Carlton House Terrace, and that's settled," she began; and I had not the nerve, or perhaps the heart, to say it was nothing of the kind. "You will know one man, anyhow. Miles is sure to be there. Muriel Sloane is making a dead set at him, just now, I'm told. She is forty and a feminist, and has a daughter out, but it takes more than that to cure a born flirt. However, Miles is quite flirt-proof, and hopelessly spoilt, as you know! I wonder, by the way, what he will think of Lydia. He hasn't seen her since she grew up. You remember, when she was a child, he was like what's-his-name in the Bible, and prophesied nothing but evil concerning her. And he thought her an ugly duckling——"

"He didn't condescend to think of her much, I fancy. And now I suppose you have been insisting to him, woman-like, that she has turned out a swan!"

"I have done nothing of the kind! All he knows from me is the bare fact that she has left school. I always let sleeping prejudices lie!"

"Do you? I wish to Heaven there were more people like you. You are a wonderful woman," I said, in all sincerity.

I got up to go. And while I still held that fragile, heavily ringed hand of hers, I said gently:

"Julian should be very grateful to you for all the pleasure you are giving his—daughter."

Lady Corchester drew her hand away in real annoyance.

"Fiddlesticks! You don't suppose, do you, Richard Drewe, that at my time of life I have suddenly developed an attack of unselfishness and philanthropy? You know well enough that I like a gay life. It is entirely to amuse myself that I try to give Lydia what your slipshod modern slang calls a good time. And besides,"—her late bronchial trouble, or perhaps something quite different, lowered her voice suddenly to a fainter, huskier note—"there is something about the child herself that I find extraordinary—lovable. She—you will despise me for a sentimental old fool, I suppose, if I tell you that the other day, when some one who hadn't studied his *Debrett* or *Who's Who* asked me if she were my granddaughter—I was delighted!" . . .

. . . Well, well! Her ladyship was her ladyship, and I am merely a poor journalist. But I always knew we had an idea or two in common, for all that!

I rather enjoyed my evening. Its duties were not arduous. Lady Corchester had talked of 'sitting among the dragons'; but that must have been the purest rhetoric. Out of my small store of knowledge on the subject, I gather that the modern chaperon needs no single qualification for the part, beyond a name to lend, should the occasion demand it. She is no longer expected to alternate between frightening off undesirable males and

taking the desirables, as it were, by the scruff of the neck and forcing them on her charge's notice. The modern Miss, I understand, manages, or mismanages these things for herself.

The modern Miss——! I was slowly garnering a little knowledge of her at that time. For had I not lately been privileged with the friendship of several young and greatly differing ladies, all aged eighteen, and all called Lydia Lisle?

One of these—the one I saw least often—was an old friend. She was a little girl masquerading in the clothes, and some of the manners, of a grown-up; a creature of childishly varying moods, always unchildishly held in check. Once in every long while she came to my Westminster doll's-house. 'Do you remember?' was the antiphon of our song as she poured out my tea, or watched Surtees make girdle-cakes beforehand in the kitchen, or ran up and down the stairs, exploring the familiar, oddly shrunk geography of my kingdom.

Then there was the pretty Brussels schoolgirl, but half-emerged from the inevitable chrysalis of schoolgirl conventions, to whom the great and small things of Life were alike 'lovely' or 'ripping' or 'the limit.' And there was the sedate young mistress of Trimmer's Wood, wistfully and watchfully guarding its silence for Julian; careful never to be 'in his way.'

Lastly—no, I will say, fourthly—there was the rather dazzling young person who, in Lady Corchester's day, would have been called a success. Fine feathers, as you have heard, could make her very exquisite. With them—possibly by the alchemistic aid of that same success—she had learnt to wear the fine and finished *mondaine* air that can seem so gracefully careless and is really, I fancy, the antithesis of artlessness.

Which—or did any?—of these Lydias best

represent the soul that still hid in her dark eyes, I wondered.

(Absurd and infatuated, do you call me, sir or madam? The chit, you say, was probably no different from the average girl, except for her first uncalled-for entrance on to life's stage. I am willing to concede it, if you like. The best thing to wish for a beloved is that she should be as like her fellows as possible. But, for that matter, even the most normal and shallow of us is compact of many selves—one more real than the rest. And it is my trade to be inquisitive.)

So, with my garrulous thoughts on her, I watched Lydia, in misty-white, dance a modern measure which I will not risk inaccuracy by naming. Was that particular year the age of the Boston or the bunny-hug, the turkey-trot or the one-step? For the life of me, I cannot remember. Whatever the dance was, it was far more graceful than its name. When, in a brief interval between partners, she came across to me in my archway, I pointed out Miles Argent to her.

"You see, he is not, so far, either fat or bald," I said.

"No, he looks just the same," was all she had time to say before another impeccable black coat-sleeve bore her away.

Presently Argent caught sight of me and, at a saunter, made his imperturbable way across the crowded floor towards me. At a few yards' distance I saw his path blocked by a minx with a loud voice and an arch manner, who began by accusing him of 'trying not to see' her, and went on to inquire where in the name of goodness everybody had got to, to-night—one didn't know a soul! Suggestively she swung by its cord an obviously half-empty programme. But practice had made him adroit in evading the obvious, in this particular

form. Women had been running after him all his life. The fact was so patent and familiar that it had never either vexed or elated him. Neither had it bred in him an orthodox contempt for the fair pursuers. His attitude towards women was far deadlier than that. It merely assumed that the sex was an open book. Conceive the insolence of it ! Here was one who knew as much as any man at or within the Bar about arbitrations, patent cases, compensation cases and such-like. And he supposed he knew all there was to know about women, too ! . . .

"A bit out of your beat, this, surely?" he said, when he had joined me and we had exchanged a word or two.

"A bit, yes," I agreed. "My duty as an uncle brought me here. It was not considered seemly that my—er—niece should come unattended. As a matter of fact, she knows her way about at this sort of show far better than I do."

"I daresay." He let the explanation pass, and I did not embroider it. I had intended him to ask my niece's name, but I was not going to gratify a curiosity that did not exist. Instead, I asked him whether it was true that he was leaving the Parliamentary Bar, and he said he was thinking of it. You couldn't crowd in all the work he'd been doing, and do it decently. Besides, he'd half promised to contest Bridchester in the Unionist interest. And in his turn—we had not met for a week or two—he questioned me about my own doings and Julian's.

"I'm told he'll be in the next birthday-list," he said. "Don't let him refuse an honour if it's offered ; he's quite capable of it. As a nation, we don't often bother to give laurels to anything but commerce, nowadays. It would be a pity to snub us when, for once in a way, we're trying to appreciate art."

"I'll use what small influence I have with him. You have just as much. I suppose you're at Trimmer's Wood pretty often?" I added disingenuously.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Then you probably know I'm not."

"Why not?"

"No time."

That, too, was disingenuous. It was not his real reason, and he was carelessly aware that I knew it. I glanced at him as he leant against the doorway beside me. Yes, he was much the same to look at as he had been as a quite young man. Time, as it passes, changes some of us, and merely develops others. Miles Argent was one of the latter, on and below the surface. In spite of his brilliant record and abilities, he wore his thirty-five years very lightly. They had neither thickened nor coarsened him. His figure was as erect and vigorous and unobtrusively well-dressed as ever, his speech as nonchalant and incisive. The few lines about the corners of his eyes and well-cut mouth only lent him an added distinction. There was still, too, something about him which challenged my complete liking—I suppose because it still defied tabulation.

He said, watching the moving crowd beyond the archway:

"There's a girl here to-night who is rather well worth watching. She knows how to dance!"

"Who is she? What's her name?"

"I have no idea, except that it's probably foreign—French, I should say. She is a more finished article than the average British *jeune fille*. There she is——"

I followed the direction of his look, and was silent for a moment or two. Then I said airily:

"Many thanks! I am vicariously flattered that

you approve of her. I am taking her away after this waltz is over. But I'll introduce you to her first, if that's what you want."

"You're taking her——? Oh, I see, she is the niece you spoke of. Yes, please introduce me."

So when I went in search of Lydia he followed me; and I made the presentation, mumbling names quite in the approved inaudible fashion.

Lydia was standing up in readiness to go, and slowly waving a huge feather fan. Her little head, with its rather un-English arrangement of dark hair, was held higher than usual, and the waltz just over had left her cheeks slightly flushed. She transferred the fan to her left hand and leisurely offered him the right, saying:

"But I know Mr. Argent already."

When Lady Corchester said that her godson was spoilt, she meant, it is to be presumed, spoilt for matrimony. She found no fault with his manners. But at the moment he was surprised into saying:

"Surely not——" Something warmed his cool regard as it rested on her. "It is not possible that I should have forgotten you," he added with a deference that most admirably stopped short of any more intimate emotion.

The feather fan was waving again. With the tip of a white brocade slipper Lydia was slightly tapping time to the music, which had begun once more. The movement struck lights from the slipper's paste buckle, drawing the eye to the slender arch of the instep beneath it. Accident?—or design? How on earth should I know!

"But why is it not possible?" she asked lightly. "One changes. I have changed a lot."

He was looking at her with a rather puzzled interest. Now, he showed some amusement too.

"You mystify me very much, Miss—er——?" The interrogatory glance was for me, but I would not see it. "It is absolutely unpardonable of me

to need reminding, but—I wish you *would* remind me all the same. Won't you describe yourself to me as you were before you—'changed a lot?'"

He smiled. Lydia smiled too.

"I heard you describe me yourself, the first time we ever met," she answered. "You said: '*There seems to be something about me that appeals to mongrels!*'"

"I said . . .? *Good Heavens!*"

You may remember that in the days of his confident, competent youth I had always wanted to see Miles Argent dumbfounded. I had my wish now. He bit his lip, reddening from chin to temple. But his eyes were still on her—searching his own memory, no doubt, and seeking to verify her incredible statement.

Lydia, meanwhile, had turned a little aside and was speaking with one of her late partners who, like a certain famous character, was eagerly and ardently 'asking for more.'

## CHAPTER V

### CINDERELLA AT HOME

"So he actually noticed her for himself ! Said she was worth watching ; and called her—what was it you told me he called her ? Yes, ' a more finished article than the average British *jeune fille*.' But that is excellent ! "

Thus Lady Corchester, two days afterwards, when I was summoned to drink tea with her by her boudoir fire. And when I went on to tell her of the climax to that re-introduction episode, she said that, too, was excellent, and laughed so much that she made herself cough, which presently alarmed me into pealing the bell for her maid and the physic.

But by the time she had recovered her breath she had changed her mind, and she declared that Lydia's *riposte* was, perhaps, not so very excellent, after all.

"Not," she said, "that Miles didn't deserve it, if only for the folly which makes a man always take for granted that what a child doesn't understand it doesn't remember. Why, I can remember things that were said before me when I was four or five ! But all the same—and you may say what you like, Richard Drewe—coldness towards himself only makes a certain type of lover more ardent, and so does actual dislike, of course, sometimes. . . . But I never yet met the man who, so to speak, wanted to kiss the hand that discomfited him. It is an error in judgment to make a clever man look a fool."

"But what is all this talk of lovers and kissing of hands?" I cried, bewildered. "Can it possibly be a parable by which you are trying to tell me that you have plotted for your godson to marry my niece-by-courtesy?"

To which she retorted that it was no such thing—that her plotting, if I liked to call it by so rude a name, had quite different aims. But that all the same—and I might say what I liked—it would be exceedingly wholesome for Miles, and interesting for the onlooker, if he were to fall headlong and hopelessly in love with some one after all these years!

And I retorted, laughing outright now, that that was the worst of women. They would always persist in hoping that the Ethiopian, given enough provocation, might sooner or later conceivably change his skin!

On a Saturday afternoon, some three weeks later, time being presumably once more at his disposal, Argent dropped in at Trimmer's Wood quite in the old manner—and yet not quite in the old manner, either. For he was punctilious in remembering that the house had now a mistress and to ask for her by name on his arrival.

She was not at home, Merriman informed him. And I see no reason to suppose that the fact caused him any particular disappointment. Nor do I imagine that he and Julian, those oddly kindred souls, accorded her more than, if as much as, the barest mention during the afternoon they spent congenially together. For though they met so much less often than of old, their friendship was as close as ever. It burned with a steady flame somewhere far below the undemonstrative surface. Neither of them troubled, I imagine, to analyse its origin. It was a purely superficial, yet somehow significant, outward sign of it, that Julian once told me Miles

—who, mark you, had no creative gift, and whose lines had fallen in the most materialistic of places—had 'a natural ear for the music or discord of words' such as you did not often meet with. He (Julian) would trust it any day before his own. . . .

For that matter, I thought I knew of some one nearer to him than Argent who had an instinct as true—more passionate though perhaps less tutored. Had I not found it out long ago, when she was only eight years old and I had read her that scene from 'Darnley'?

Since Lydia had no resident chaperon she was too young, so Lady Corchester had decreed, to have an 'At Home' day. But people who wished to see her, or had a secret ambition to meet her famous guardian, became aware that she was usually to be found in on Sunday afternoons. Lady Corchester made no objection to that. She said, indeed, that it was very good both for Julian and 'the child' to have some practice in entertaining, however informally, before they were faced with the real thing. To the sinister threat contained in the last three words Julian was obstinately deaf. Sufficient to the day was the evil of having once a week to assume civility and hospitality towards the strangers who casually, and confident of a welcome, invaded his house. He manfully accepted this penance as a part of the duty he had shouldered twelve years ago when he had had the folly to introduce a petticoat into his life.

As for me, I made a virtue of inclination, and heroically agreed to lend him my support whenever possible. I was at Trimmer's Wood so often, indeed, that I had almost forgotten I was a visitor at all. As you know, I had never soared to the suave behaviour of such.

The Trimmer's Wood drawing-room was no

longer a 'museum of obsolete horrors.' The combined taste of Lydia and Lady Corchester, aided by the more orthodox genius (if I may be allowed such a contradiction in terms) of Mr. Maple or Mr. Waring or somebody, had made it a pleasant and pretty—even a comfortable—room, sublimely regardless of period. Behold us there at tea—Lydia, Myra Sells, Julian, myself and a certain Mr. Hope-Goring—on a cold, windy Sunday in December.

Cinderella in her own drawing-room, doing the honours of her own tea-table, seemed at once older and younger, sweeter and far less dazzling than Cinderella-at-the-ball. There was the slightest hint of timidity in her graceful, gracious young charm which that self-possessed little lady had lacked. I suppose that the cares even of informal hostess-ship seem rather an anxious affair when you are only eighteen and a worldling of seven months' standing. To-day she had a headache to which she would not own, or perhaps it was merely a mood which she would not share. It is certain that she had put on her least becoming dress—surely a sign of abstraction or depression! And she had an obviously forced attention for Mr. Hope-Goring, who sat beside her. He, it was plain, had reached that phase when it does not matter what a woman—or rather *the* woman—says or does or wears. He was an immaculate, but otherwise insignificant, youth of the pattern which nature and a Bond Street tailor between them turn out by the thousand. His possessions and position, however, were significant enough to satisfy any girl, so Lady Corchester told me later. I hoped, perversely, that they would not, on their own unaided merits, satisfy Lydia.

Miss Sells, meanwhile, was seated, with much display of serviceable ankles, on the padded top of the high fender, talking exclusively to Julian, who could not endure her. I have it on this young lady's own authority, that she was Lydia's greatest

friend ; a fact—if it is a fact—for which I account, just as one accounts for all incompatible marriages, by the convenient word propinquity. Her father was the recently arrived vicar of the parish, and she had been a big girl when Lydia was a small one, at the school in the Chaussée de Charleroi. She was a young woman of the strapping, striding, predatory sort, with a bold, brown eye and a fine, fixed British red in her cheek, and a you-would-never-guess-I-was-a-parson's-daughter-would-you manner. A breezy downrightness seemed to be her selected rôle in life. It is a rôle which can be as sycophantically adjusted as any other to suit the supposed preferences of whoever happens to be the most worth-while person present.

To-day, Julian, in spite of his fifty-odd years, held that proud position easily—or shall I say uneasily—till Miles Argent came. She had just followed up an audacious comment on his infrequent appearances at church by assuring him that *she* did not blame him—she knew that nearly all poets and artists and things were atheists ! By the way, *was* he an atheist ? (He was not, but he did not trouble to inform her.) For her part, she didn't mind the prayers and hymns, though p'r'aps they were a bit of a back-number. But she had no use for sermons in general and poor old Dad's in particular. By a short conversational cut she rushed from thence to her own destruction by telling him that while, of course, she was most awfully keen on all his writings—books and poems alike—she thought 'The Last Laugh' was far and away the best of the whole lot, being absolutely IT ! She had been to see the revival of it at the Realm only yesterday afternoon ; and how splendid in it ? Wasn't it the handsomest of his hero?

His reply to that, which I should have

liked to hear, was nipped in the bud by the entrance of Merriman, who gloomily announced: "Mr. Argent."

The latter's coming re-arranged us a little, turning the stream of our attention. Mr. Hope-Goring regarded him with suspicion, Miss Sells with naïve admiration and a suddenly flagging interest in Julian, which must have relieved him greatly. Lydia got up from behind the tea-table to receive the new guest. She introduced him to the closely attendant Mr. Hope-Goring, who, with politely concealed reluctance, went, at her request, to ring the bell for fresh hot water, so losing his place at her side. For the next few minutes she was isolated with the new-comer, ministering to his material wants and exchanging with him such small talk, served up with just so much animation, as decorum demands. The lady of the house may not permit herself to be listless and silent with a comparative stranger.

From across the big room, out of earshot, I watched them with speculative amusement, remembering Lady Corchester's fantastic speech. No adjective more ill-fitting than 'discomfited' could possibly have been applied to him at that moment. And as for that other absurd hypothesis of her ladyship's, it was not justified by the most embryonic symptom. Nor did I wish it to be. I had Lydia's word for it that she had never liked him. And I do not enjoy seeing waste, even of affection.

Julian, escaping while he could, went across to the neighbourhood of the tea-table. Myra Sells threw away the stump of her cigarette and lighted another.

"I'd bet anything you are thinkin' that a clergyman's daughter shouldn't be spendin' all her time smokin'!" She divided the remark perfunctorily between me and Mr. Hope-Goring, neither of whom

were thinking about her at all. Nor was she, for that matter, about us. She got up from the fender, her restless gaze measuring the distance which had denied her a desired introduction. Then she, too, walked across to the other group.

"Awfully sorry, darlin', but I'm afraid I'll have to be gettin' along," she remarked, without, however, suiting the action to the word. And, since she was standing, and speaking to Lydia across Argent, it was obvious that he must get up and offer her his seat, and equally obvious that the desired introduction should be made.

"If you are goin' back to town by train I can wait, if you like, and show you a short cut to the station," she said to him then, hopefully.

"Thank you very much, but I could not think of troubling you. And, in any case, I mean to walk back," he returned adroitly.

"What! In this beastly wind—at this time of day!" she exclaimed, and then remembering, no doubt, that men are popularly supposed to admire the open-air girl who never catches cold or any other ailment, added hastily: "You're like me, I expect: never happy indoors, whatever the weather's up to. Not like *this* lazy kid,"—this with a hurried parenthetical squeeze of the greatest friend's waist. Is it not universally known that an embrace between women has an inflammatory effect on male emotions?—"who's never so happy as when she's frowstin' in the house. If you'll believe it, Mr. Tarrant, I came here this afternoon after a five-mile stretch with my dogs—Dad tries to rope me in for Sunday-school, but I'm not havin' any!—and I went straight up to her room, without knockin', and there was Miss Lydia, writin' away, in the cold, with a shawl huddled round her. Not a bit pleased to see her little Myra, either, were you, old thing? Said she was busy with the household accounts—/ *don't think!* The account-book was there all right,

but it's my belief, if I'd managed to get a look inside it, I'd have found a love-letter !”

How is it that the small word, love, spoken however low or carelessly, in whatever company, never fails in its electric effect? And Miss Sells' voice was never low. Mr. Hope-Goring, who was favouring me with some not very original views on the weather, broke off and threw towards his ladye a startled look. I glanced at her, too. So did Julian and Miles Argent—an effect not surely intending by the oncoming Myra. Under our gaze Lydia grew faintly pink. What else should eighteen do? Otherwise she was unruffled by the crude banter. She said that if she was lazy on Sunday afternoons, so were several other million people; and that Myra knew she went out as much as any one—more, perhaps.

“You were out the day I called last,” Argent said, moving round to the other side of the table and so disengaging himself from Myra's immediate neighbourhood. “I was told you were in town.”

“In town !” cried the irrepressible one at that. “My sacred aunt ! Yes ! An' what I want to get at is, who is she always rushin' up there to meet, on the strict Q.T.? Why, I wouldn't do it for any one. Crowds, an' dressin'-up-in-my-best, an' that meeting-under-the-clock business aren't in my line. What I say to *my* boys is : ‘If you *can't* be happy without my sweet society you've just got to look for it on the golf-links, or go for a run with me an' the dogs !’—that's what I say !”

To create a specially designed atmosphere is a difficult thing, apt to fail even in the hands of a skilled psychologist. The impression Miss Sells intended to convey was, I feel sure, merely one of herself as the best, hall-marked make of English girl—a Diana-of-the-uplands, not without admirers in the background. The effect actually produced was one which centred round the other girl, and

it was subtly one of mystery, vaguely hesitating on the borders of deceit. None of us, I imagine, seriously supposed that Lydia was clandestinely meeting, or corresponding with, some young man. But an atmosphere, as I say, had been created ; and it is a thing which clings in its own impalpable way.

Julian was frowning. Lydia, on the other hand, though her cheek still kept its vexed, fugitive colour, gave her friend a very small smile in no wise remarkable for its fondness.

"You are in great form this afternoon, Myra dear," said she. And Julian added shamelessly :

"Quite so. It is too bad that you insist on leaving us, Miss Sells."

"'Insist' was good !" murmured in my ear Mr. Hope-Goring, while the reluctantly departing guest was being seen out to the hall-door. And he went back to snatch a moment more with Lydia before his own going. Argent came across to me and the fire, and Julian, returning from the hall, joined us. He was still frowning.

"That is a girl I have no use for, to borrow her own detestable language !" he said. "What in the name of reason ever started such a friendship?—a fastidious child like Lydia, and a girl of that type !"

So Myra had done Lydia a service after all ! I was glad that Julian had seen and commented on the contrast. I was glad that he had done it before Argent. . . . Glancing across the room I could see that the last half-hour, or something in it, had slightly altered Lydia's mood. She was being kinder to her young admirer. I saw her smile as she listened to what he was saying. (He was probably asking her whether she sang, or whether she ever skated at Prince's, or whether she liked this, that or the other. Is it not with these and similar poignant questions that enamoured

youth of his sort paves the way for the one Great Question?) She had also, for once, consented to take a cigarette, though she hated smoking, and had accepted with equanimity Lady Corchester's dictum that it was a stupid and graceless habit for young girls. . . . I found myself irrelevantly wondering at what age she had first looked up in a dictionary that word she had remembered, though she had not understood it.

When I got home I looked it out myself. '*Impure. Of mixed breed. An animal of mixed breed. (A.S. Mang—a mixture.)*' Thus my dictionary gives it. Argent had used the word carelessly, secure in the supposition of her un-hearing ignorance. But the sting of it—for me—lay in its half-appositeness. What had Lydia made of it? I wondered. No more than a random, slighting shaft probably.

But the train of thought led me farther. When—and of whom—would she ask her first tentative question about her own birth?

## CHAPTER VI

### LAURELS

AT the New Year Julian became Sir Julian. Lady Corchester, perhaps, had pulled a wire or two. Her godson, who numbered some powerful persons among his acquaintance, may have done the same. Or it is even possible that a Government prodigally impartial in raining titles on the just and the unjust, reminded its sovereign about that time that a mere poet might with propriety be included with the usefuller mayors and ex-grocers and party-financiers and discoverers of Poles or serums who enter the modern knightly lists.

Julian himself, as Miles Argent had predicted, showed no eagerness for the offered honour. But four, at least, of his friends were so delighted that, between them, they cajoled or bullied him into accepting it and enduring the lesser ones it brought in its train, ranging from the Vagrant Club dinner, at which he was the guest of the evening, to the congratulatory call of Miss Myra Sells.

"And you may bet anything," said that enthusiast in peroration, "that jolly old Teddy"—thus, outrageously, she referred to the first gentleman in the land—"has been to see that toppin' play of yours, 'The Last Laugh,' and *that's* what's done the trick!"

The dinner referred to above was much like most other banquets of the kind. We Vagrants,

considered as individuals, are many of us very nearly as odd as we like to think ourselves. But when we meet as a body we carry the conventions to the verge of frumpishness. Our after-dinner speeches are as prosy, and their jests as unremarkable for spontaneity, as any I ever heard. (Since the majority of us pursue literature in one form or another, I suppose we reserve our best scintillations for professional uses.) And though our lady-guests and members probably smoke as much as we do in everyday life, it is our decorous custom to dismiss them soon after the cigars and cigarettes appear, in the good old Victorian way.

Lydia was my guest, and she was lovely that night, in a dress of lustreless, gauzy black with that perfection of '*ligne*' which only the French artist in clothes can achieve—a very unsuitable garment, I think I hear you say, Madam, for so young a girl! But you do not know how triumphantly the adorable young whiteness of Lydia's skin showed against all that sombreness. Besides—can a woman err when she repeats in her dress the tones of her hair? The only notes of colour about her were the scarlet of her pretty mouth and the red of the ruby solitaire earrings she wore, the latter being Lady Corchester's Christmas gift to her. . . . '*As white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony.*' Looking at her, I was reminded once again of the fairy-tale queen's passionate prayer.

My guest was all that a guest should be in her pleasure and appreciation of what, to her, was, after all, a novel scene. She was young enough to feel excited by the mere near presence of so many people who 'did things.' She thought it delightfully and incredibly human of the famous detective-story-writer to spill the salt and then throw some of it over his left shoulder, just as she herself or I might have done. And she was vastly intrigued to learn that the little sandy man opposite, who was

so careful to restrain his fair neighbour from automatically rising to her feet when the toast to 'the ladies' was drunk, was a well-known professional entertainer. I had not the heart to tell her that when, with much 'business,' he jotted down an occasional note on his cuff he was probably only playing to the gallery and not, as she supposed, laying up treasure for the future.

But the evening's crowning joy and thrill for her was the moment when the chairman, himself a distinguished painter and *littérateur*, proposed the health of 'Our guest, Sir Julian Tarrant, whose fame will be as great in our descendants' day as it is in ours,' etc. . . . And when *He* replied to the toast—he was no golden-tongued orator in spite of his splendid gifts, and hid his shyness and hatred of the task under a rather abrupt, harsh manner—I am sure she thought it the most wonderful, wise and witty speech of the lot.

Julian was sitting a long way off in the seats of the mighty, at the short table which crossed the top of ours, forming the usual T. Miles Argent, who was present as the guest of Gerrard, K.C. and novelist, was at our table, a few places farther down, on the same side. When the women had gone he moved up into Lydia's vacant seat beside me. It appeared he had a piece of inside information on a certain subject which in a day or two would be common property to the Press. I could have it prematurely, for what it was worth, if I liked, to serve up to my particular rag. ♣ Which I did, next morning, as you may be sure.

"You are doing your duty as an uncle, again, I see," he said as I pocketed my note-book and struck a match.

"By no means," said I. "Julian is doing the heavy father for once. I am taking my pleasure and acting host to a very pretty lady."

"Pretty enough," he acquiesced without enthusiasm.

I looked at him quickly. I have not Lady Corchester's admirable restraint in the matter of prejudices.

"—In a style that you don't admire!" I said.

"Don't I?" He smiled slightly. "Perhaps I don't. It is a rather unusual and arresting one, anyhow."

"And well-bred," I insisted.

"Yes—it has that appearance."

"You are generous, upon my word, in your admiration!" I exclaimed in my quarrelsome way.

"You may even bring yourself to admit, next, that she has a natural charm and grace, all her own!"

"I will admit it with pleasure, if you like, though I don't know much about it, at first hand. I've seen her once or twice, that's all."

We had pushed our chairs a little back from the table, and he was sitting sideways in his, with his arm along the back. All around us was a sheltering wall of confused talk and laughter and drifting blue smoke. Argent, glancing idly up the long table to the one athwart it at the top, said:

"Sir Julian is looking well, just now—better than I've ever seen him, I think. Public success and appreciation are rather healthy things, after all."

Thus he dismissed the subject; but I brought him back to it.

"Private happiness is a better one, by far," I said. "Don't forget that he has a home of his own now, for the first time in his life."

"I wonder," he replied, knowing perfectly what I meant; he was always quick enough in the up-take. With his head tilted back he blew a meditative ring or two into the air, and, after an instant, added:

"I've seen Miss Lisle and Sir Julian together,

She appears all that is dutiful. He is all that is kind and polite. But he hasn't the slightest real affection for her—fortunately."

"What makes you think that? And why in God's name, 'fortunately'?"

He ignored the question in his imperturbable, annoying way.

"I understand she is a favoured *protégée* of Cousin Rose," he said. "Is any one else officially supposed to be looking after her? If so, I wonder she is allowed to roam about town alone as she does. What brings her in so often?"

"I don't know. Does anything? Ask your Cousin Rose; parties—frivolities, I daresay," I suggested.

"I don't think so. I lunched at Buckingham Gate on Monday, and Miss Lisle was not mentioned. But at three o'clock or so I overtook her in Oxford Circus and walked half-way down Bond Street with her."

"She was probably on her way to meet Mr. Hope-Goring under the clock somewhere!" said I with the ponderous sarcasm by which we indicate quotation marks.

"I wonder," said Argent again, and added surprisingly:

"I saw them together, yesterday, close to Hunt and Roskell's."

I was startled, but I countered flippantly:

"Why not? You had the luck to overtake her at the top of Bond Street! Why shouldn't he have the luck to overtake her at the bottom?"

"Young Hope-Goring's luck is quite good enough—and, in my opinion, a good deal better—without that," said Argent. "His uncle allows him five thousand a year, I'm told, and will leave him a million or two when he dies. And he's next man in for the baronetcy. If Cousin Rose is manœuvring a match in that

quarter she should in fairness tell him the risk he runs."

"The risk! And what risk, precisely?" said I, refusing to understand. "Do you suggest that there is insanity or consumption in Lydia's unknown family?"

"It is quite possible!" He laughed, but only momentarily. "I wasn't thinking of her health. I don't imagine the convent was, either, when it insisted that the forewarned-and-forearmed policy was the wisest. It was cheek, on my part, I suppose, to have had any opinion at all, in those days, on my elders' affairs. But I always thought Sir Julian made a suicidal mistake in refusing to know anything about her, when he took her!"

"For that matter, you thought it a mistake his taking her at all!"

"Yes," he answered quietly in a tone which told me as plainly as words that he thought so, still. And he leaned forward to toss the stump of his cigarette on to Lydia's dessert-plate. There followed a moment's pause.

"After all," he said, then, carelessly, "those things you mentioned just now—beauty, charm, grace, and so forth—are only some of the things you would expect in a girl from the Pawn-shop. One, or both, of her parents probably had them too."

"Some of the things, you say? There are others, then? What are they?"

"I wonder!" said he for the third time. People round us were moving, and he, too, got up, frowning a little as he stood still to dust an invisible grain or two of ash from his coat-sleeve. But, as we followed in the drift of the crowd towards the ante-room, he turned to me suddenly with a smile I had seldom seen him wear—frank and boyish and utterly unlike his cool, everyday one, and said in a low voice:

" Anyhow, she is awfully lucky—any one would be lucky—to have your loyalty and friendship, Drewe. It would take a pretty big thing, I fancy, to strain either."

We separated at the doorway. When I next caught sight of him he was standing talking to Julian and the only black gauze (or whatever it was) dress in the room.

And, of course, even before I had time to think it over, I knew that he *had* answered that unanswered question of mine. His concern was not for Lydia nor young Hope-Goring, nor any other wight who might haply come to her siren-call. It was for Julian, whom he, Miles Argent, loved and admired above all other men. And Julian—oh most fortunately!—was safeguarded by indifference from any hurt she had it in her power to do him, whether it were the everyday, incontinent lie, or the sudden scandal and ingratitude of flight from his protection. . . . If you were reasonable you took the world you lived in as you found it. You did not, for example, expect the Pawn-shop's wares to be anything but frail! If they were also decorative, what of that? A thoughtless phrase-monger might say that even such beauty was a joy for ever. But you, with distrust at your elbow and all your critical faculties in working order, could give it the moment's meed of admiration, and pass on, and forget it.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCERNING SECRETS

I THINK it must have been at the end of that same week that I sat one afternoon before the fire in my ground-floor parlour. My pipe was in my mouth and the black kitten on my knee, but I was not enjoying either. I was in the idle, irritable mood that follows when you have just torn up an effusion which you were complacent about yesterday and might have been complacent about to-morrow, but which the temporary sanity of to-day tells you is only the futile result of wasted time.

The front-door bell rang, and, without putting down pipe or kitten, I hoisted myself out of the big chair and went across the room to answer it. Thank goodness! nobody whom Surtees would dignify by the name of 'company' ever invades my bachelor kingdom. Julian looks in sometimes, or Argent, or some other man with whom I am on comfortably off-hand terms, and at rare intervals comes a red-letter day that brings Lydia. This was such a day. She stood on my doorstep, and smiled, and said :

"Are you at home, Mr. Drewe? Or am I interrupting a very important inspiration? If so, I'll go down and have tea with Nanny, and we will talk in whispers and be as quiet as mice. . . . Oh! but you are an *angel*!"

The last words were addressed, as you may

suppose, to the kitten, not to me. But I felt no jealousy. For when the door was closed behind her she clung to me childishly, saying :

"I'm so thankful you're not out. I've been wanting the luxury of a talk with you all day. All the way in the bus I *prayed* that you would be in. Do you think that profane of me, or only babyish?"

I thought it entirely sweet and wise, I told her, adding :

"*I've* been wanting that talk, too. But don't flatter yourself that you are a luxury to me ! You are a necessity—one you taught me I could never do without, when you first stayed here as a little girl. Please sit here."

"In your chair? Certainly not. I will have my own." And she slipped away from me and pulled in the little bent-wood one Lydia the child used to sit in. But before she sat down she stood an instant, still and slender, beside it, and looked at me with a little odd, arrested smile, murmuring :

"What dear things you say to me. I know they're just nonsense, of course ; but they smooth my ruffled feathers, all the same."

She tossed her furs and wraps aside, and sat down, and I forbore to ask her the obvious question. But while we had tea—(It occurs to me, by the way, that in these rambling recollections I have suddenly struck a vein of meals for which I ought to apologize)—I said with Machiavellian detachment :

"And now for your adventures ! Where did that bus of yours bring you from? Buckingham Gate, no doubt? And how is Lady Corchester?"

"I don't know—I haven't seen her just lately. No, I didn't go to lunch there. I had some coffee and a bun in a great hurry at an A.B.C. that crossed my path just at the right moment. That's why I'm eating such a huge tea now. Won't

you have another cup? Then please light your pipe again. You know I like it."

I did so, and, not to be diverted by any evasive trifling, remarked carelessly:

"Not seen her lately? How is that? Have you quarrelled? Or don't you come into Town much now-a-days?"

She stirred her tea thoughtfully, sipped it, then added a little more milk, and said slowly:

"I come about three times a week. But the days aren't very long yet, are they? I never seem to have much time left over from—things—"

"Things—? Shopping? The dentist? The dressmaker—things like that?" I suggested inquisitively.

"Yes, like that—more or less."

"You are rather a mysterious young person," I remarked drily, after a second or so of silence.

She put down her cup quickly and looked at me with troubled eyes.

"Sly, do you mean?" she asked. "Secretive?"

"God forbid!" said I, without any particular conviction.

The kitten had curled himself to sleep on the hearthrug. She stooped and lifted him on to her lap, and absently stroked his soft fur, her eyes downcast.

"When I was little somebody once said I was naturally secretive," she said at last, very low.

"Who on earth—?" I broke off to search my memory vainly. "And how do you know it was said?"

"Surtees told me. . . . What is this kitten's name? Edward?—Doesn't Edward purr or snore, whichever it is, in the most fascinating, comfortable way when he's asleep, like a kettle when it's just going to boil. . . . Uncle Dick"—she kept her eyes lowered—"I wasn't quite truthful just now; at least—I haven't been shopping or trying-

on or having my teeth stopped, to-day. I came for another reason—one that people might think silly. They couldn't think it wrong."

"Of course not! That goes without saying," I hastened to say. But I was uneasy, still. What if, after all, it was *not* by accident that she had met young Hope-Goring, last Monday? What if she 'had an understanding,' as it is colloquially phrased, with him? No one, I reflected gloomily, could call that 'wrong.' But neither—and the reminder was a beam of light and warmth to my gloom—could any one with claims to worldly wisdom call it 'silly.' "

The cold March daylight that lasts so long was giving out by now. It was only its rival, the fire, that showed us to each other. I got up and pulled the curtains, and Lydia knelt down and stirred the fire to a blaze.

"Don't let us have any other light," she said. "Uncle Dick"—she waited while I came back to my chair—"I've been wondering if I should tell you a secret. Shall I?"

"Rather!—in your own time." The gloom descended on me again for a moment, but I spoke lightly. "Is it *the* secret, by the way, or only a secret?"

"*The* secret?"

"Secrets," I explained, "are things that you acquire and get rid of by the dozen, every day. But nearly every one, sooner or later, has one that is *the* secret—something which, though hidden, is big enough to sweeten or embitter a whole life."

After a long pause she nodded. She was still half kneeling, half sitting, on the rug at my feet. Edward, the embodiment of exquisite egoism, slept in the curve of her left arm. With her right hand she shielded her face from the fire. Beyond that acquiescent, acceptant nod, she had made no

movement. Nor could I see her eyes. But I felt the mute sympathy of the question she was asking me. . . . I was looking into the fire. The blaze had died again to the glow of a burnt-out passion—the wistful red of a dream. It was Fernande's face I saw there—the face I had once thought like a pensive, beautiful nun's—till she smiled. It was the memory of her smile that could still quicken my heart or make it heavy as lead. . . . No! not even to myself could I answer Lydia's unspoken question. . . .

Out of the dusk her voice presently emerged, precipitate and shy.

"But mine is only '*a*' secret. It is just that—that—I am learning a way of earning my living——"

"*What!*" I forgot the past, the dream, Fernande herself. I stirred the dull red to a blaze and threw on a log—a chunk of old ship's timber that sweated tar and oil and salt in the heat. The flames curled long tongues round it instantly, lighting the whole dim room. They lit Lydia's averted profile, too, in spite of the slender, shielding hand. "Earning a living! How, and where, and, above all, why?"

"Shorthand—typewriting; that sort of thing. It's called 'book-keeping.' I go to classes at a place——" She told me meticulously about the classes and the place. Her shy, shaken voice steadied over the dry details. But I interrupted them ruthlessly by demanding once more—why?

"Because—I've told you. So that I shall know how to earn my living some day."

"When Julian dies, you mean?" It jarred a little, this care of hers for the morrow.

"*Dies!*" The shocked amazement of her exclamation made it plain that into her thoughts of *Him* mortality had never dared intrude. "No—why should I plan about that? He is always strong.

He is never ill, or even tired," she assured herself and me, *agitato*.

"Of course. Why, indeed? That's what I'm asking you."

Stupidity made me speak with a clumsy, impatient banter. It even made me think her answer irrelevant when it came.

"I think He'd let me go away, if I wanted to."

"Where should you want to go? And, for the third time, why?"

"Because——" She had moved a little. Her shoulder and the merest outline of her cheek were towards me, now. And she had lifted the kitten, nestling her chin into his silken-soft coat. Her voice came to me muffled and barely above a whisper, but I could hear the hint of tears in it.

"You said just now that I was necessary to you. But—if I waited and tried and prayed all my life—I'd never be necessary to *Him*," she said.

What could clumsy stupidity say to that? I could think of nothing—no kindly lie that would serve. I could only put my arm about her shoulders, as an uncle may, and she moved a fraction nearer, leaning against my knee. And in the following silence the memory came to me of Julian's face and demeanour on the night of the Vagrants' dinner, as contrasted with the look he had worn on that other night, years ago, when Argent and I first dined with him at Trimmer's Wood. And, comparing the two memories, I was able to say with sincerity:

"You think he would be happier if you were not there? I swear he would not! He is more content, now, than I have ever known him."

"Content isn't happiness.; it's only a sort of substitute, isn't it?" she murmured in her wise young way. "If I were his real daughter I expect I might be able to get near enough to him to give him some real happiness, but I can't. I don't

think he is a very happy man, Uncle Dick. I'm almost sure he has one of those '*The*' secrets—the bitter kind."

And I told her soberly enough that I had sometimes thought so too, adding:

"But it might be more bitter without 'you'! You're nearer to him than you think, perhaps. And—he's kind to you, Sweetheart, isn't he?"

"Kind! Oh, *yes*." Love and loyalty lent passion to her voice. "He is everything that is good and kind. Think of those lovely furs he gave me at Christmas. And there was the new furniture for my bedroom—the thickest, velvetiest carpet you ever saw! And I have all the books and things I want, and I may go where I like and have taxis everywhere—and then there's that extravagant allowance. . . . And—" a tremulous laugh broke the culmination of her rather piteous catalogue of kindnesses—"sometimes he even pats my hand or my shoulder and calls me 'little girl.' And I don't believe my being there actually worries him. I'm not in his way." (Odd, that she should have used that particular phrase!) "It's just that he doesn't really—*need* me one bit, any more than you need Edward."

And, again, silence. For how could I insult her by telling her that she had fulfilled his only conscious need of her, that she was all he required her to be; an ultimate dumping-ground for a superfluous fortune; a convenient peg on which to hang trappings bought with money that would otherwise have irked him intolerably. If she was anything more to him than that, he had yet to find it out.

## CHAPTER VIII

### INCIDENTAL

YOU will imagine, if you please, a row of asterisks—let us say three, each one representing twelve months. Which brings us to nineteen hundred and thirteen, that year of wistful memory. Most of us, I expect, look back to it with a more or less passionate regret for our own ignorance of a bliss whose sands were so ruthlessly running out. It is quite inconceivable, yet true, that we grumbled a good deal at the weather—it was a cold, grey spring, and a wet, grey autumn. From our comfortable chairs in the club window we comfortably called Mr. Lloyd George rude names and shook prophetic, not-much-concerned heads over the activities of suffragettes and Irish politicians. . . . Meanwhile, the young among us were light-heartedly learning First-Aid and the Tango—with as little thought of an ultimate purpose for the one as the other—and being warned occasionally by reluctant guardians against a sinister, prowling, lurking monster called the White Slave Traffic.

Meanwhile, also, Miles Argent had exchanged his stuff gown for a silk one, and had made his maiden-speech in the House, and was building up a reputation for brilliance (the word seemed fated to follow him everywhere) at the Common Law Bar. I still saw him pretty often, and so did Julian; but he only came at long intervals to Trimmer's Wood.

He had taken to spending the whole of the Long Vacation in the north, or Scotland. He was a cool shot and a deadly one, and always had invitations enough and to spare.

If my memory serves me, the Morecambe case came on that spring. Morecambe, you will recollect, was the Bloomsbury chemist who, having married at middle-aged leisure, repented with such headlong haste that he was reckless in his selection of the drug with which he repaired that matrimonial error. The effect of it on his wife and her week-old son was as easily traceable as it was tragic and intentional. Followed his trial and sentence and ultimate deserts. There remained to be dealt with the case of Miss Levison, the nurse, who was, there can be no manner of doubt about it, accessory after the fact. It happened that I reported the affair for the *Stop-Press*, and so sat out the whole of her trial. In its endless siftings and reiterations it was nearly as wearisome as any other criminal case—and this in spite of the fact that his Honour Judge Gelding, most admired of all licensed, learned jesters, was on the bench; in spite, moreover, of the prisoner's striking appearance. She was a slip of a thing, sensationally young and haggardly pretty, and pallid with fear. The becoming uniform of her profession lent a spurious pathos even to her guilt. But what really saved Press and public alike from boredom was the way in which Argent, K.C., conducted the defence, obtaining an acquittal in the teeth of preconception and every seemingly damning circumstance.

For my own part, I had seen Miles ply his trade before then. I was present when he got the Great Southern Railway Company their verdict and some forty thousand pounds damages. And I heard his masterly, merciless cross-examination of Ferrall in

the Belford forgery case. It was in reference to the latter, I believe, that some one put it on record that he was a born prosecutor. But this was the first time I had ever seen him fight for a fellow-creature's life, and I was interested. . . . I took down his address to the jury, word for word, in shorthand. It was as fine and passionate a piece of eloquence as I ever heard, in which not a point was missed, not a fact misrepresented ; facts and points were merely made audaciously to serve Miles Argent's purpose.

But the passion was a matter of word and phrase only, to which his manner was in cool and considered contrast. You cannot imagine Miles condescending to histrionic gestures and approved inflexions of voice ! He was none of your lost-to-the-stage advocates. His power was in his restraint. You seemed to see a jury bewildered, yet convinced that here was a learned judge, an excellent young man, who *must* be right, whatever the real judge in his summing-up might sanely hint to the contrary.

But the news-reading public only saw the printed word, and for twenty-four hours, at any rate, felt that a new hero had been discovered to it ! . . .

"The papers are full of it !" Lydia, with a little catch of excitement in her voice, said to me next day when I went to Trimmer's Wood. And she showed me a page of the *Daily Mirage*, which flaunted a portrait of Mr. Justice Gelding wearing the famous smile, and another of Miles Argent, looking handsome and rather insolent in his wig and gown ; and yet another of Cora Levison, looking exactly what she was at the trial—a very tragic young woman with her back to the wall. The legend underneath the portraits gave a history of the trial in tabloid form, and most subtly suggested a modern Perseus saving with the divine sword

of his eloquence a wronged Andromeda from that dragon, the Law.

"Yes, they're making a lot of it," I answered, handing the *Mirage* back.

"But not too much?" she asked quickly.

"No; it was a fine enough performance," I said, with a smile and a shrug.

"'A fine enough performance'!" She knitted her brows over the lukewarmness of my praise. "I wonder why you call it that? It seems to me splendid. And you have always liked Mr. Argent, and I'm afraid I haven't—very much. I've thought him—not exactly conceited, but too efficient, somehow—too sure of himself. I suppose I've been prejudiced and unjust; women often are, aren't they? I never should have believed him capable of *this*."

"Capable of what?"

"Of that." She nodded towards the *Mirage* where it had dropped on the floor. It was plain that *she* was looking at that mental picture of Perseus. We were standing in the hall, by the big table that was littered with flowers—primroses in bowls, and fresh-cut daffodils ready for the blue jugs and tall, glass vases. Lydia carried one of the bowls across to the drawing-room, and, coming back, began to fill the jugs and vases with water, careful that the flood-level should only reach a certain point. Her voice when she spoke next had fallen very low. She said:

"It must be the most wonderful thing in the world for a man to know that he has saved an innocent woman from a fate like that!"

I agreed. I did not tell her that it was even more of an achievement to have saved a guilty one, nor that Argent's attitude towards his interesting client probably savoured of cynicism rather than knight-errantry.

And 1913 brought Bill Denyer home for a year's leave—rather French leave, he explained, laughing, yet rueful. The *Société Minière des Deux Nations* is not generous to its employees. They are machines which must never need anything more than running repairs if they do not wish to be scrapped. On the other hand, the climate of Central Africa, I have been given to understand, is healthy enough for the white man, up to a certain point. But the point is reached at the end of a four years' continuous sojourn, at the outside, but preferably, three. The Company's doctors insist on this inconvenient fact, but the Company itself does not admit it, except in the case of its more irreplaceable men. If Mr. Denyer wished to take a holiday he could do so, of course, but he must not expect his place to be kept open for him. His four years' contract was at an end. If he wished to renew it, he could apply, if he liked, to the S.M.D.N. in a year's time.

In the meanwhile, he had his freedom, and he had some savings, and, disdaining useless thought for the morrow, he meant to enjoy both. He came home second-class, and the sea and wind and good-living and joyous idleness of the voyage drove the last lingering remains of malaria out of him, so he declared.

The parental parsonage is on the Northumbrian coast, and he spent a dutiful fortnight there, and then came up to London. My sister, in a letter I had from her about that time, announced and lamented the fact. She said that by leaving home just then he was depriving himself of no fewer than three tennis-parties and a small dance, not to mention a picnic and the choir concert; but that she supposed it was futile to expect young men of the present day to be content with simple, healthy pleasures and unaffected country people. She only hoped that he was not going to spend his time

at night-clubs, and his money on chorus girls! (Her notions of vice are regrettably crude.) Between the lines of her letter I read an anxious appeal to me to keep an eye on her son.

As a matter of fact, Bill had come to town for three distinct and harmless purposes: to see the people at his Company's London office about some arrears of pay; to see his tailor; to see me—not entirely for my own sake, as you shall learn.

On the third morning he presented himself, spruce and well-groomed and altogether pleasant to look upon. That one thing, at least, may surely be said for the much-abused public-school type of Englishman. He may work for his living at the ends of the earth, with not a soul of his kind to speak to, year in, year out. 'Shorts' and a vest or a sweater may be his daily wear, with, probably, a beard thrown in. And ten days after his arrival in England you will meet him in Piccadilly, looking as though he had been sauntering there for a twelvemonth. He will wear the latest cut in clothes with all the familiarity of long acquaintanceship, and tilt his hat at the approved angle, and talk to you in the current slang of the current jest and scandal—and all without effort or self-consciousness.

And Bill, at any rate, had not lost his youth out there in the wilds. He was in most ways as much a boy now as he had been when I met him that day in Brussels. A woman might have envied him the smoothness of his skin under the sunburn. She would certainly have envied the colour of his hair, which was exactly like the tint of the mahogany of the sixties.

"I'm twenty-nine," he said in answer to my question, "though I didn't know it myself till the other day. You lose count of birthdays out there. What with the getting-back-to-nature game, and the niggers looking on you as a cross between the Almighty and a rather strict head-master and

policeman and doctor rolled into one, you get to feel a 'bit of a patriarch. And, to balance that, I expect, the reaction makes you rather play the kid on the boat coming home. I figured it out that I must be about twenty-seven; but the mater says I'm twenty-nine, and I suppose she ought to know! . . . I say! How simply top-hole!"

He was roaming about the room, and it was Lydia's photograph he had picked up. In it the wonderful lashes were cast down, lengthened yet more by their own shadows. A film of tulle or tarletan, or whatever the stuff is called, draped her shoulders, the folds loosely caught together by her left hand.

"So she's still Miss Lisle?" he said, after a long pause. "She's not changed much, has she?"

"Changed? How the dickens should you know? You've never seen her!"

"Yes, I have. I saw her with you in Brussels, five years ago. And you promised to introduce me some day. Look here, Uncle Dick, why not to-day—or to-morrow?"

"Why not? Well—shall we say because you're hardly in a position to marry yet, are you, old boy?"

"Who said anything about marriage?" he asked, and reddened over the word.

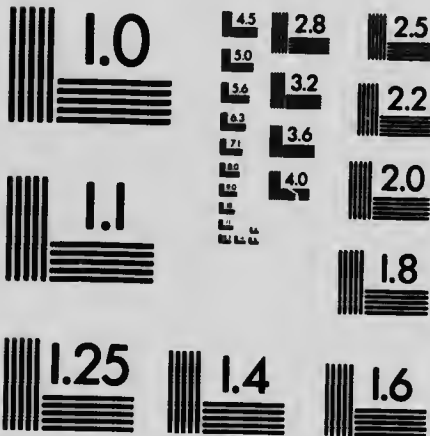
"It's generally the desired end of courtship!"

"Who said anything about courtship, either? Can't one—can't one want another look at the prettiest thing one's ever seen without expecting to have it to keep? . . . D'you know, I put in three solid hours at the Tate Gallery yesterday, simply gloating over the Turners and things. And I'm never likely to be able to buy even a second-rate picture for myself! You"—he turned to replace the portrait on the mantelpiece, and spoke with his back to me—"you don't suppose I'm ass



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enough to think that a girl like that would even *look* at a chap like me ! ”

Who was I to disagree with reasoning so reasonable? I have no gift whatever for stage-managing the emotions of youth. I promised to take him to Trimmer's Wood on the Sunday following. In the meanwhile I did my best to provide an antidote, translating my sister's letter somewhat freely. I made him move his belongings from the hotel to my minute spare bedroom. And in the evenings I took him (or we took each other) to the more daring of the revues and variety shows. Since he wanted to see unattainable beauty, let him have his fill of it !—lovely, provocative faces trained in the very technique of allurements—exquisite forms and limbs taught to move exquisitely (and without any undue reluctance in their display). There was the haunting music, too, that goes to young heads like wine. . . . I even took him to a night-club, which bored us both far more than it amused us. But all that passed the time—no more. Lydia's photograph seemed to have made him proof against all more exotic attractions. I can hardly suppose that my sister would have been reassured by the knowledge !

On Sunday we went to Trimmer's Wood. There were a few other people there, as usual. We had tea out on the lawn in the cool green dusk under the tulip-tree.

My nephew was a success, as Lady Corchester might have phrased it. He made Lydia laugh, which, I have always been given to understand, is an excellent beginning with a woman. Undesignedly he made Miss Sells forsake all other and cleave to him for a great part of the afternoon ! And Julian liked him. He, who was himself a born wanderer, was interested in any one who, whether for work or play, had voluntarily stepped out of the beaten track. He asked questions, draw-

ing the boy out, appreciating, you may be sure, the diffident reluctance of the answers. He knew, none better, that your really nice young Briton hates to talk of himself and his own experiences, however exciting or picturesque or unusual. Before we left, when he and I were having a word or two together, a little apart from the rest, he said to me :

"Bring that young fellow again soon, if he'll come—if he doesn't find us altogether too dull and tame here."

"Dull and tame ! He made me bring him, in fulfilment of a promise he exacted from me five years ago."

"For what possible reason? "

"For the oldest and most obvious and unoriginal of reasons. He once saw Lydia driving with me in Brussels when she was a schoolgirl—but a very pretty schoolgirl, Julian, though you may not have noticed it !—and fell in love with her. Has it never occurred to you, my poor Bartimeus, that she is the type of woman whom men fall in love with at first sight? "

It was plain that it had not occurred to him. Yet he was a poet. He had written wonderful things of Helen and of Mary Stuart. . . . Our young people were playing croquet. A youth whose name I forget or never heard was in the act of negotiating a hoop, while Lydia watched the stroke. Miss Sells, meanwhile, talking loudly to all and sundry, was looking at Bill ; and Bill was looking at Lydia. (Thus an older and more ironical game than croquet has ever been played.) Julian looked at her too, with the dawning of a new respect, a rather disturbed interest, in his eyes.

"So you may not be burdened with her for ever—or even for long," I said.

"When have I ever said she was a burden? " he asked sharply. "If you think she is, you are wrong ! I like to see her about the house and

garden. I like to find her here when I come in or stop work. If she were gone I should miss her more than you suppose. The place would seem strange and empty without her."

I am sure he meant his tribute to be a handsome one, but I met it unhandsomely. I said :

"For that matter, so it would if somebody removed the library bookcases, or if the tulip-tree blew down in the night !"

A very digressive chapter, you will say. And it is true that the Morecambe case, introduced here, is only an episode, and so, perhaps, is Bill Denyer. But in defence of my garrulity, I contend that neither are what an old professor of literature whom I once knew would have called purely episodal. Fate, you see, is so extravagant with her ingredients. For the mere modifying of a young girl's prejudice, or to give her significance in hitherto different eyes, she will not hesitate to throw a mulder into the scale, or to bring a young man back from almost the other side of the world !

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CAGE-DOOR

IT is not the craftsman's occasional tool that he loses or breaks or wears out. But neither, thank God ! is it always the most indispensable of all. When Julian was first confronted with the spectre of blindness there were not wanting among his acquaintances well-meaning blunderers who, out of an easy and unimaginative well-being, tried to cheer him with the reminder that he was luckier than numbers of brain-workers before him. It might, in fact, have been his brain, not his eyes, that had given out ! After all, was not Milton blind ?

Not that Julian was blind ! The thing was a spectre only ; and at first he treated it as most spirited persons treat physical disabilities, with a rather indignant contempt. It was not to be supposed that he, Julian Tarrant, was going to be stopped in his work by such trivial and temporary annoyances as headaches and sensations as of something being tied into knots behind his eyes whenever he used them !—I forget the precise symptom but I think those were two of them.

But when the spectre became too insistent in its methods to be longer ignored, Julian reluctantly consulted an eminent and urbane personage living in Harley Street, who asked him the usual questions and applied the usual tests in a black-draped magician's cave at the back of the consulting-room. After which, he preluded his verdict by the suggestion that Julian was 'run down' and 'out of

health.' Julian repudiated the insult—he had never been run down in his life! He had only once before been out of health! The oculist looked politely incredulous and politely said, 'Quite.' He then introduced the spectre by its proper name, adding a warning that it might even become a substantial reality if it were not treated with the respect it demanded. Julian, in short, must not use his eyes for the next six months. He might think as much as he pleased. (Other eye-specialists would probably forbid him to use his brain at all for a time, but this one, so he himself declared, always erred on the side of leniency.) But he must wear darkened glasses for the next six months at least, and give his eyes complete rest.

Julian told him impatiently that that was an impossibility. The work he was doing was not a piece of crochet that could be put aside and taken up at will! If it were not finished now it would never be finished at all!

The oculist murmured something in indulgent concession to what he called the artistic temperament, which he should have known is the term most likely to infuriate any genuine artist. *Let* the play—(he was right, was he, in supposing that the work in question was one of Sir Julian's incomparable plays? Classic, this time, was it, or another gem in a modern setting?)—*let* it, whatever it was, never be finished, then! As a medical man, he could assure Sir Julian that the delay, by benefiting his eyes, would benefit his general health, and therefore his work too. He would turn out far better stuff at the end of the six months than he would do if he struggled on now against odds. A newer and finer play would rise—might he suggest?—from the ashes of the other. . . .

And so forth. He was honestly trying, you see, this kindly, great man, to suit his tone to that of the greater man who was his patient. But it was

hopeless ! They were exactly like two persons shouting to one another in different languages across an impassable chasm !

All the same, remarks that you pay two sovereigns and a florin in ready money for the privilege of listening to, are apt to linger in your mind longer than their intrinsic worth seems to warrant. In the course of the next few days Julian grudgingly repeated the gist of the interview to Argent and to me. And one of us told Lady Corchester. And being in our several ways and degrees persons of everyday common sense, of course we all sided with the doctor. Our sympathy with the patient we showed in the rather peremptory, hectoring form which British concern is apt to take.

"It's beastly rough luck, of course," said I. "But, after all, it's only for six months. Why don't you go for a voyage?"

"I daresay I shall, when I've finished the book and the tragedy," he answered shortly.

Argent said : "Look here, Sir Julian, you can't let this trouble go farther. If it's only temporary, as you say, so much the more reason for giving yourself a chance. And if . . . after all, what does it profit a man if he gives the world a masterpiece and loses his own eyesight?"

"Very aptly quoted!" applauded Lady Corchester, in all good faith. It was she who, by some outrageously feminine diplomacy, had convened the meeting. "I don't pretend to be a religious woman, and I don't know the scriptures by heart as you appear to do, Miles ! But in the only sermon I ever heard Father Bertram Mayne preach, he said the Bible contained more sound, practical sense and advice than any other book that ever was written. And I believe he was right. Not that it's always infallible. There's something somewhere, isn't there, about an eye for an eye and

a tooth for a tooth? The last part is all very well, if you have a dentist who knows his business. But even modern surgery isn't likely to be able to give any one a new eye, in our day—unless it's a glass one—and that's what you've got to bear in mind, Julian. Meanwhile, the thing for you to do is to have an amanuensis of some kind. I have one myself for an hour a day, and I find her invaluable. Yes, glare at me as much as you please, my dear man. You have my leave to swear, if it does you any good. I am perfectly aware that it is much easier to dictate an invitation to dinner or an answer to the Vicar of John O'Groats or somewhere, who wants a subscription towards a new church, or a bicycle to carry him to it when it's built, than it is to dictate imaginative work. But it's better than nothing in the circumstances. And I believe I could find you the suitable sort of young woman."

"Thank you," he replied; "I know the sort of young woman quite well. She would drive me mad before we even began—I should say 'commenced!' She would be certain to say 'commence' and 'sufficient!' And she would address me by name at every possible opening. . . . '*I am quite ready to commence, Sir Julian.*' '*Is that sufficient for this morning, Sir Julian?*' . . . And she would have the usual limited vocabulary. I should spend all my time spelling words to her that she's never heard—or, at any rate, used—before. It's quite——" He broke off and ran his fingers through his hair. "I beg your pardon, all of you; yours especially, Lady Corchester, for my bad temper. You are all very kind to trouble about me. But, you see, there's no need. I'll worry through all right. These doctor-chaps always make the most of things. They don't expect you to take them too literally. . . ."

There followed some days of adversity for

Trimmer's Wood. The first two, Julian spent perversely and closely at work; most of the third and fourth, in savagely pacing up and down the flagged walk, wearing the prescribed glasses. On the fifth, still wearing them, he started for a long ride, and, returning without them, shut himself into the library once more. By that time he knew that any attempt at compromise had failed, though he would never have admitted it.

On the sixth day, when I paid a lightning visit to Trimmer's Wood to see how they were faring there, Lydia—a pale, shaken Lydia, with agitation sternly held in leash—met me at the door and drew me quickly into the drawing-room.

"Yes. He's out there on the terrace, walking up and down as though he were in a cage," she said, when she had told me the history of that week. "I think He *feels* like that. Oh! Uncle Dick, do try and see if you can't open the door for Him a little! But first, *please* tell me what the doctor said to Him, if you know. I feel sure He's seen some one, but, of course, He hasn't said a word to me about it."

I told her:                      knew of the verdict and what I had gathered depended on Julian serving his sentence, and

"It's a wonderfully light one, you know, compared with what it might have been. And, sweetheart, you've got to play your part and persuade him to patience and obedience. Lady Corchester and Miles and I have all lectured him. It's your turn, now."

"Lectured Him!" (And the sudden lift of her chin and the flash in her tone and eyes all said: 'you dared!') For a moment she looked past me through the little window at the far end of the room which gave on to the terrace where 'He' was pacing his cage. Then she turned to me again, indignant tears in her eyes.

"You think he isn't bearing it well—that He's taking it like an unreasonable child? Can't you see that it's his *mind* that feels all in the dark just now. He's torn two ways. Some days he thinks that doctor was just making light of it to reassure him, and that he's going blind and *must* do all the work he can *while* he can. And other days he thinks it's all just nerves and nonsense, and that if he takes no notice of the headaches and things they'll pass off."

"How do you know all that? Has he told you?"

"*Told* me! Is it likely? I believe he fondly thinks"—a little choked laugh broke the sentence—"that I don't even *know* he's having frantic headaches. He gave me the silliest, most elaborate explanation of the shade and the glasses that you ever heard! How do I——? Oh! just '*because*,' as we used to say at school."

I went out to Julian, and joined him in his walk. We talked about indifferent things. The obscuring shade blotted out half his individuality, but in every strong line and tone and movement of him I read the signs of temporarily conquered nerves. And I could not open the cage-door the merest inch! Suddenly I introduced the secretary question that Lady Corchester had first raised. And he irritably said again all the things he had said then, with amplifications. I listened, and then said:

"I know a girl who is none of those things you describe. In the first place, she has that natural instinct for the real thing in a phrase or idea that you say is so rare. She knows all you've written almost by heart, I should say; and she *doesn't* think 'The Last Laugh' is your Waterloo! She's passed examinations in shorthand. And she's as quiet as a mouse or a shadow.' You could think aloud and forget she was in the room. She—"

I paused, and with a reckless relish of my own irony, added: "she would never be in your way at all!"

I do not remember what he said to that. It was, at any rate, to the good that he did not curse me for my officiousness. Presently I said I must go; and he went back to the library, and I went back to Lydia.

"He must have a secretary," I began abruptly. "You are the mistress of his house. You must insist."

She smiled faintly.

"Myra offered to be his secretary. She told him she was 'awfully hot stuff' at taking down dictation quickly."

I was not listening. I said:

"Have you kept up that shorthand of yours that was to earn you a hypothetical living? I told you not to forget it—that it might come in useful some day."

She caught her breath painfully. Startled colour invaded her cheek.

"Yes, but—you don't mean . . . ?"

"How many words can you take down a minute?"

She faltered an answer, while the sudden colour all ebbed again.

"Go to him, and tell him that. Ask him to let you be his scribe or his dictaphone or whatever he likes to make of you."

"*Oh! Uncle Dick!*" And after a rather long, distressed silence:

"Do you think I should ever dare suggest such a thing, in cold blood?"

That, of course, was the question. In cold blood? . . . But Lady Corchester had said it was good blood, too; and the hall-mark of good blood is primarily its capacity for courage. And without

the alloy of fear what courage is there worth the name? . . . I took the tense, cold little hand that had closed on the arm of her chair and answered gently :

"Yes, I think you dare, darling. The rest of us have done a lot of talking. But you are the only one who has any real help to offer him. If he doesn't want it he can but refuse it."

'Help'—that small word worked the magic. We went together across the hall, and I waited while she knocked at the library door, and saw it close behind her.

After what seemed several years she came back to me, still whiter than usual, but with the light of tears and laughter in her dark eyes. And when I said : "Well? Is it all right?" she nodded.

"I think so. But oh ! Uncle Dick, I'm sure my interfering was the very last straw to him ! He was most dreadfully surprised and polite, and took such pains to say the correct, grateful things. I felt certain he was going to say 'No.' But—somehow, in the end, he said 'Yes.' We are going to try, anyhow."

## CHAPTER X

### THE DISCOVERERS

So she came at last into her own, or a part of her own. She had been called his adopted daughter—the mistress of his house. But those can be very empty titles. Had it ever occurred to him to make a catalogued list of his possessions, he might have given her first place among the most decorative and least useful of them. He had certainly not yet learnt that she was in the least necessary to him.

He began to learn it now, as the experiment began to work. As to that working, I know almost nothing about it, except by its results. I have done some guessing, of course. Julian has dropped a chance enlightening word or so, and Lydia a few—but only a very few—more. The little I really know mostly concerns the first day *she* entered on her secretarial duties. That first day! Imagine the ordeal of it for both of them! She was nervous, but she did not show it in any of the ways he expected of her sex. She did not cough nor fidget nor rustle, nor prompt him by faltering reminders of her readiness to begin. It was her waiting, patient silence in itself that drove him mad that first morning—hurried and flurried and scattered those winged things called thoughts, which are so impetuously bold in their coming, so swift to take timid flight. When at last he put into desperate speech a dozen lines and *she* had put them on paper,

you would have said the following silence differed not a jot from that which had preceded it. But Julian felt the difference. After all, in his own way he was made of as highly sensitized material as she was. Through the unfamiliar, encompassing dusk he suddenly seemed to see her mind opened, and to know her thought—and that it was as unerring as it was instant and instinctive. He said at last :

“ Have you got that down? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Read—please read it aloud.”

She did so, slowly, a little unsteadily, but clearly.

“ Tear it up, please. It’s no good. . . . *You* were thinking that? ” he suddenly demanded.

“ No. I—was thinking that it was—good, but not good enough—for you.”

If her voice hesitated her hands did not hesitate at all as she tore out the leaf and tore it across. He was quick to note that. He stared towards the place her voice came from. He could hardly see her. Yet, perhaps, he was really seeing her for the first time. After a moment he crossed the room towards her.

“ I’ll leave it for to-day,” he said with an impatient sigh. “ No—don’t go just yet. Do you mind if I smoke? . . . Thank you——” He was fumbling along the mantelpiece for his pipe and the matches. She found both and gave them to him.—“ Thanks,” he said then again, and dropped into the arm-chair opposite her. When the pipe was alight he said surprisingly :

“ I’m told you do me the honour of reading all I write. Is there anything among any of it that you think markedly better than what you’ve just torn up?—anything, in fact, good enough”—he smiled—“ for me, as *you* are good enough to express it? ”

Curiosity, not vanity, must have prompted the

question. He was not in the least vain. Besides, of what possible value could her opinion be? And . . . well, you know of her love and her fear and her courage where he was concerned. You may guess, as I do, her feelings as she eagerly, yet diffidently, told him of those special 'bits' of his 'poetry' that had been her special favourites long before she understood them. And his curiosity deepened. Presently, with a gentleness not usual to him, he led her on to speak of other writers—minstrels of the past from whose works brief extracts are irreverently learnt, and as irreverently forgotten, by the average schoolgirl. And here, too, a very un-schoolgirlish instinct guided her taste.

"Who told you to like *that*?" he asked her sharply, once. "No one?" and fell silent, wondering still. For this little ship, remember, had not passed him by in the night. He had watched it built. It had sailed the seas beside him. . . .

"You won't want me again, will you?" she asked him wistfully when she left him. "The plan is a failure, isn't it. I'm not any use to you?"

But he hastened to say that it was not so. (He had never broken his rule of kindness and courtesy towards her. He was not going to begin to do so, now.) They would try again, he said, if she didn't mind.

They did try again; and presently, I gather, the thing began to work. By that you are not to suppose that it worked perfectly. I cannot imagine even the best secretarial aid being anything but a rather sorry crutch for the creative artist. A poet, of all men, should surely work in solitude. Thus, only, will the shy, thronging denizens of a dream-world come to him to be given life—perhaps immortality. . . . Julian's tragedy, I fancy, except for a fragment here and there, remained untouched in those days. But he achieved a good deal of

his second-best at its very best—more fragmentary verse of the lyric-and-legend sort. Most of it probably grew into being during his long, solitary rides and walks, and was then dictated fully fledged. He finished the book, "A Chiel in Araby," too. Any one, I suppose, with a lucid mind and ordered memory can dictate actual facts and experiences, though it is true that every one cannot clothe them with life and fire and colour as Julian could. . . .

Through the window, myself unseen, I watched them one afternoon at work. The day had dawned chilly and mistily, and a wood fire had been lighted in the library. Lydia sat on the rug before it with her note-book on her knee, and—or did I fancy it?—a new content in her eyes. Julian was walking up and down the room—thoughtful; sometimes frowning; speaking seldom; but no longer unhappy and irritable in his restlessness. For Lydia had opened the cage-door. That, of course, was the one result of the experiment that really mattered, not the completion of this book or that. I had recklessly prophesied that he would be able to think aloud and forget she was in the room. But a better thing than that had come to pass. Whether he knew it or not, she had given him one of the best gifts of womanhood—comradeship. Whether he knew it or not, he could not have done without her now. . . . And as for her—had she not once revealed to me that a woman's most crying need is to be needed? . . .

It so happened—or so she declared—that she was rather tired of London and parties that summer. It would be 'a shame,' she said, not to make the most of the garden when it was at its loveliest. Nor was she to be lured away even when August came, bringing with it a country-house invitation from a school-friend. (For just suppose she went, and He were to need his secretary!)

. . . . .

"You know, Uncle Dick," said Bill, just one short month after he landed in England, "I'm getting awfully fed up with the idea of loafing round doing nothing particular for a whole year. I simply can't stick it. I'm going to join the Flying-school at Farndon, if they'll have me."

I agreed as to the probable boredom of a twelve-months' unrelieved idleness, but said that if he must learn something he was a young juggins not to learn something more useful!

"Flying's going to be jolly useful in the long-run—you'll see," he said, and laughed. "Anyway, it will be more fun than pottering endlessly round the parish, paying calls on people who say they knew me when I was '*that* high,' or playing singles with the curate——" He broke off to add hastily: "I don't mean to say that I'm not most awfully keen on tennis, but you understand. . . ."

"Perfectly," I assured him solemnly. And I did! Farndon is not a thousand miles from Trimmer's Wood; and on summer afternoons Lydia sometimes had a few young people in to tennis. And Julian, you will recollect, had given him a general invitation to come over whenever he pleased or could. He had a warmer welcome to give him now than ever. For into his own temporarily darkened life this young man could bring the breath of a new romance—romance at its most modern and fantastic. Julian, at any rate, did not think man's wish to fly either useless or presumptuous. Had he been thirty years younger, the lure of it might have caught him also. He set himself eagerly to learn a language—that strange, new language of the air which war has made in some sort familiar to us all, but which in 1913 was unknown to any but to flying-men themselves, who had made it. When my nephew and Julian met they discoursed in the oddest terms. You heard of a *nacelle*, a 'joy-stick,' a 'quirk'—

of controls and pusher-machines and struts and 'prop-swinging.' And there were the wildest and slangiest-sounding verbs : to bank ; to nose-dive ; to spin ; to pancake ; to crash. Julian delighted in the uncouth syllables as though he had found a new word-music !

Miles Argent was another person who did not go far afield that summer. He spent part of August in Hertfordshire, at Chester's Magna, with the Corchester cousins, and went on from there to other friends in the same neighbourhood. Reversing the usual order of things, however, he returned to London for the week-ends, so as to be able to spend Saturday or Sunday with Julian. That was his real reason. I forget his alleged one.

He happened to come to Trimmer's Wood on that early-September day when I eavesdropped—or spied—through the library window. While I stood there he came along the terrace, and he stopped for a moment and followed my glance, and then sauntered on.

I found him a few minutes later sitting on the sun-warmed flags in the rock-garden, that sloped to the lily-pond. He was smoking the inevitable cigarette, and he had picked up a handful of pebbles, which he was languidly throwing, one by one, at a red-hot-poker growing solitary among the ribbon-grass forty feet away across the water. I wondered what he was thinking of the little scene in the library, or whether he was thinking of it at all. Because he volunteered nothing, and because I am incorrigibly interested in my neighbour's affairs, I presently remarked in the casual way with which one transparently approaches a supposedly unsympathetic audience :

"Rather a pretty sight—her devotion to him and his new dependence on her."

"Very pretty," he agreed. "That sort of picture

always is ; always has been. Youth and crabbed age ! The fresh young girl supports the steps of afflicted genius ! It is guaranteed to be always becoming and never to fail in its appeal. Every woman—every Christmas-number editor—knows that."

He tossed six or seven pebbles in rapid succession. Each one hit the flaming target full in the middle. The last knocked it off its stem. I watched him, with a growing anger, telling myself that the action—the emotionless, effortless accuracy of it—was somehow typical of him. Lydia had been right. He was not a prig ; he was not even conceited ; but he was 'too sure of himself—too efficient.' As yet, he had never, so far as I knew, failed or been foiled in anything. Efficiency does not prevent a man being likeable. But it may be the one thing that prevents him from being lovable.—Thus, sententiously and angrily, I tried, not for the first time, to put him in his proper pigeon-hole.

"Do you insult her by supposing that she is posing for effect?" I asked.

"No," said he coolly, and added : "I don't insult her intelligence either, by supposing that she doesn't know it *is* effective."

And that was all the satisfaction I got out of him, for the time being.

That was a quiet week-end. All London was still away. Every house nearer at hand seemed to be shut up, too. But, possibly because it was the last leisured time we four spent together, the trivial happenings of those two days come back to me very easily. I remember that the weather, for once that year, was perfect as perhaps only September weather can be, with dewy mornings veiled in white mist, and a burning, midday sun that dried the dew in the open and scattered the last shred of mist. Only in the shade every

leaf and every flower-head kept jealously its cup brimful all day.

That Saturday afternoon Miles drove us out far into the country in his new Daracq, which had brought him from Hertfordshire the day before—Lydia and I in the tonneau and Julian beside him. Even a temporarily blind man can have his share in the joys of swift flight through space.

And when we came home Lydia found that a thrush had flown into the loosened tennis-net and was hopelessly caught there. Distressed, she tried to free the frenzied little claws and struggling wings, which by now had contrived a very miracle of entanglement. Then Argent made the same vain attempt, and so did I. And then up came Julian and asked what was the matter; and when he had been told, and had heard the catch in Lydia's voice as she said: "If we go on much longer, I *know* we shall end by breaking his little wings and legs——!"

"Then cut the damned net and have done with it!" he exclaimed. "I beg your pardon humbly, little girl; but I hate the thought of anything being hurt almost as much as you do. Miles, your knife, if you have one. What am I saying—You must do it yourself, of course."

He did it quickly and deftly, and then gave the unfettered captive into Lydia's outstretched hands.

"You poor, *poor* little thing!" she muttered to it. "Yes, you shall go in one second. But can you fly, I wonder, when your heart is beating like that? And will you ever get over the shock to your poor, darling little system?"

There was an April smile under her down-dropped lashes. The veil-like strings of her motor-hat hung loose, framing her head and shoulders in dark, luminous blue. She held the thrush softly in both hands, close to the soft hollow just beneath her little pointed chin. I could have sworn that

at that moment she was thinking of nothing but the bird. Then some perverse impulse made me glance from her to Argent, and with an irritation unreasonably divided between them, I wondered whether he were telling himself that here was just such another cheap, pretty, conventional picture as is given away at Christmas time with your *Graphic* or *Pears' Annual*. . . .

There was no dew, that night. But there were the stars, thick and brilliant in the velvet blackness of the sky. And it was as warm as June. Julian and I sat on the terrace after dinner. Subdued light came through the open window behind us. So—subdued also—did the sound of Lydia's song. That was another discovery he had lately made—that she could sing, and that he liked it. Whether Argent liked it, too, I did not know. He had been moving about the garden, the red point of his cigarette marking his loitering progress, and now had come back to the terrace and was leaning against the window-frame near us. When Lydia got up from the piano and crossed the room, he stood aside to let her pass, saying civilly :

"Thank you so much, Miss Lisle. If you'll wait just one moment, I'll fetch you out a chair."

"She can sit here," said Julian, and he actually drew her down on to the arm of his own seat—one of those wicker chairs with wide, flat arms where the scholar may put his book or the convivial man his glass. "'*Viens près de moi*——'" laughingly, almost caressingly, he quoted the words she had just sung. (Was he remembering, late in the day, that he had once been told it was his duty to 'listen and pretend to enjoy when the child played or sang?') "I like that song. And she doesn't sing it badly, does she, Dick?—eh, Miles?"

Miles agreed that it was charming. He had brought out a chair and was standing behind it,

facing us, with his arms folded on its high back. As for me, I said nothing. I had heard somebody sing that song—to some one else—many years ago. . . .

But I would not think of that now. . . . I reminded myself, instead, of the first time Julian ever entertained Miles and me together, here, on another September night very like this one. London had crept much nearer, since then. In another ten years Julian's kingdom would be a mere enchanted island in a sea of bricks and mortar. But the enchantment still held. You could still hear the fairies rustling and whispering among the ribbon-grass and the water-lilies, unconcerned by the too-near factory buzzers. Far in the sky above us a star fell, swift and suddenly. Far to the west of us a green rocket shot upward from some suburban fair or flower-show. An owl shrieked mournfully and was answered by the hoot of a passing motor-bus on the high road, half a mile away. It was a garden of the oddest contrasts. When one of us said something of the kind, Julian nodded.

"Yes—I tried to make a rhyme about it yesterday. But it was a failure. I made my scribe throw it in the fire."

"It wasn't really a failure," said his scribe with gentle defiance. "And it is ridiculous to call it a rhyme! It was a poem—an almost perfect poem."

"'Almost' perfect?" said Argent. The light from the drawing-room window was on his face, and I saw him look at her in amusement.

She answered gravely:

"If it had been *quite* perfect He would have known. He wouldn't have wanted to destroy it. But . . . I felt as though I were throwing a—  
a jewel into the fire."

"Perhaps you were," said I. "Perhaps she

is right, Julian. And what business have you, on your own judgment, to destroy a valuable jewel simply because it has a flaw in it? Can't you remember it, anyway, and let us hear it?"

"No, of course I can't.—I'm sorry. Perhaps *she is* right. She has an impertinent way of being sometimes right, I find."

Lydia said:

"If you are sorry—if you want them to hear it, I could write it out again. I think I remember it."

"You? Surely you didn't take the trouble to learn it by heart, before burning it!"

"No, not exactly. But you see"—she spoke low, almost apologetically—"when I've once written a thing down (poetry I mean, not prose) it seems, somehow, to be written on my mind, too. I can generally remember it."

"A very unusual gift, surely," murmured Argent. And Julian said:

"No, don't write it. Say it to us, now, if you really remember it. I'm beginning to be rather curious to see this 'flawed jewel' of mine again," he added with a laugh.

And after a little pause she repeated it to us—slowly, as one repeats a thing not yet quite familiar. Her low young voice had depth as well as sweetness. It gave the long cadences their full due. The poem was in sonnet form; and it was beautiful, with a thread of vehemence running through it, which a sonnet should not have. Therein, I suppose, lay the imperfection, and, perhaps, the beauty also. . . . When she had finished none of us remembered to thank her. But after another instant's silence, I said:

"She is right, Julian, isn't she? From to-day on I think you'd better let your scribe be your censor, too."

"What a fuss about a few dozen words!" said

Julian. It was Miles, this time, who contributed no spoken comment. He was still watching her, but I thought he did so with a difference. Since he had been re-introduced to her at Mrs. Sloane's dance, what attention he had had for her had been that of an expert for a suspected atom under the microscope—a thing interesting chiefly because of its hidden power to harm. But now the atom was showing signs disconcertingly foreign to its supposed species. . . .

The owl gave once more its ghostly cry, then flew across the lawn. We could hear the heavy beat of its wide wings. Lydia got up with a little shiver.

"Cold, little girl?" said Julian. "You'd better go indoors."

"—Or walk about," said Argent, coming out of his abstraction and straightening himself. "Have you ever seen a glow-worm, Miss Lisle? There are quite a lot down by the gate into the plantation this evening. Won't you come and look at them?—It's quite dry down the garden."

She murmured a word of assent and went with him. He had tossed his cigarette away. Only the glint of her white dress, now and then, and the sound of their voices told us their whereabouts. . . . I smiled to myself in the darkness—pleased to think that even Miles Argent's infallibility was not proof against the making of discoveries. . . .

A week later Julian sailed for New York, *en route* for who knows where. He did not know, himself. To start with an open mind, ready to go wherever and whenever the mood of the moment urged, constituted the vague sort of freedom he wanted. The book was finished. So, also, was his patience with Harley Street and its childishly simple, yet irksome dictates. He had been extraordinarily patient in obeying them and enduring

his life of semi-darkness and dependence. What he did not realize was that it had been far less miserable and wearisome than he could ever have supposed possible.

And his eyes were wonderfully better. He was ready to concede that, though he refused ungratefully to give the credit to any one or anything but time and nature.

Argent and I saw him off at Euston. And, oddly enough, it struck me then that, when it came to the point, he was, after all, reluctant to go. Every other time I had known him to leave England he had left it eagerly. But this time he said nothing of his plans for the immediate future. It was all: "*When I come home—*" "And you'll write to me sometimes, you fellows, won't you?" he said, more than once. "Tell me what you're all doing. I'll manage to let you know, more or less, where I am."

And just as the last doors of the last carriages were being shut, he leant out of his, and said to us:

"Be good to my little girl, while I'm away."

## CHAPTER XI

### S.O.S.

IT was the twin-screw, thirty-thousand-ton steamer—shall we say *Hesperus*?—that sailed the wintry sea. And her skipper had taken with him some two thousand souls, including Julian Tarrant, the poet. Time had been when the latter would have preferred the rough adventure of a tramp or 'wind-jammer' to the fastest and most luxurious liner that ever tempted Neptune to do his worst. But—lest you forget the fact—he was now nearing sixty, and his taste for wandering had unaccountably got stale. He wanted to get home quickly, so his last letter said.

But, as it turned out, he would have done better to have taken the tramp and its tedious, zigzag course. For in mid-Pacific, latitude unrecorded, the *Hesperus* struck a submerged wreck, which tore a gaping, mortal wound in her. . . . A heavy sea was running, and the list was so great and immediate that the boats on the starboard side were useless. As for the rest, the attempt to lower them resolved itself into a mere mad race with time. For the engine-room was flooded—the wireless operator had been drowned at his post before any answering sign had come to his S.O.S.—fire had broken out somewhere amidships. Hundreds of scorched or panic-stricken passengers jumped overboard. Hundreds more must have gone down with the ship. . . . You begin to remember that

tragedy-of-the-seas? If so, you will recollect that one solitary boat-load of dead and living was picked up, a week later, by a 'Frisco-bound cargo-boat.

All that became known later. At first there reached England only one of those mysterious, sinister whispers of disaster that come no one knows whence or how. But they gathered in force and reality when the ship neither answered calls nor was sighted. Then that boat-load, as we know, was picked up, and news began to filter in. To filter in, did I say? It positively poured in, overflowing into special editions of the evening papers. Those were still the piping times, when we had time and leisure to print and read such things. There was the usual 'Story-of-a-passenger's-experiences,' in all its reiterated, little-varying forms—in most cases, a curiously tangled and untechnical account of his or her sensations and surmises and theories. Not one of the crew had survived to tell a more coherent tale. And there were all the usual reported incidents—dramatic, terrible, pathetic—that seem common to every shipwreck.

But I need not repeat all that here. You have, alas! read the sort of thing so often that it is familiar *ad nauseum*. And you know, too, though not at first hand, I hope, all about that ghastly ritual at the shipping offices, where pale, agitated, suspense-ridden crowds clamour or wait patiently, hour after hour, for the turn to ask a question and be answered—what?

We, perhaps, were more fortunate than many others, in that our suspense was shorter-lived. We had some definite news of Julian's last moments. Several among that surviving boat-load had seen him after the collision. Was he not a marked man? He had been one of those (they said) who were making futile efforts to impede, since it was impossible to quench, the flames. And while they

worked a tiny, terrified child came flying all alone through the veil of reddened smoke, shrieking the name of some one he would never see again. It was Julian who caught him up as he ran past, and carried him over to the ship's side whence the boat was just being lowered, and dropped him into the arms of the nearest woman, saying: "He has lost his mother; be good to him." . . . The boat was lowered and reached the water safely. Five minutes later its occupants saw the *Hesperus* plunge, bows down, into the sea, while the flames still lighted the crowded faces on her decks. . . .

I think it was that particular tale-of-a-survivor which, even though it destroyed all hope, brought the first faint comfort to Lydia. Death, it seemed, had removed him to an infinite and impassable distance. But that incident of the child—the kindly, commonplace humanity of it—brought him suddenly nearer. And was not his last reported speech even a sort of message to her, just because it echoed the outward sound of those other last words of his at Euston station?

She had been very brave all that fortnight since the first vague rumours of tragedy came—too brave. It made me afraid for her when I saw the same set, rigid look on her little face, day after day. She had insisted on coming with me on all those hopeless quests to the city. And she had insisted, too, on returning each evening to Trimmer's Wood —'lest any news might come there first.'

But to-night she let me take her home with me to Surtees. And when that good soul opened the door to us, who shall say what hitherto muted string was touched by the homely sight of her? When the door was closed behind us, Lydia's courage seemed suddenly to break or wilt. She exclaimed chokingly: "Nanny! I can't bear it!" And, being caught and held close in those kind arms,

she cried at last long and exhaustingly, just as she had once cried in this very room years ago. And, as then, Surtees and I exchanged concerned glances over her head.

" . . . There there, now, Miss Lydia, my dear ! Don't you go tryin' to keep it back. My poor bairn, Nanny understands. . . . Mr. Richard, there's no call for you to be lookin' like that ! A good cry'll do her more good than anythink. It's keepin' feelin's bottled up over-long as turns them sour, to my way of thinkin' ! . . . And I'm going upstairs in a minute, Miss Lydia, hinney, to get the bath ready. A real hot bath, and a nice sup of hot milk after you're in bed is what you're needin' ! "

Perhaps they were. The needs of the body and the soul are so oddly interchangeable. I congratulated myself that at any rate I had for the second time had sense enough to give her into more competent hands than my own.

And the storm had, after all, refreshed and strengthened, not broken her courage. It had only broken down the stricken silence of that first fortnight. She was able now to speak of her beloved—in sorrow and passionate regret, it is true ; but there were no more tears to confound my masculine sensibility. And she consented with grateful docility to stay on with us for a while. Most of the days I was obliged to be out and about. But Surtees, with one of her Heaven-sent inspirations, started the spring-cleaning which—all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding—I know that her own soul loved. And Miss Lydia of course must needs clean pictures and wash china, and dust and sort books, and help in the thousand kindred household tasks which are popularly supposed to tide a woman over adversity as his daily work tides a man.

All the English-speaking world mourned Julian Tarrant. That was a proud thought! But it was to the few who really shared her own grief that Lydia turned in those days—to Lady Corchester and me, and even to Miles Argent. He, too, was doing his best, I think, to 'be good to' Julian's 'little girl.' He used, almost whenever the pressure of work allowed, to come in and see us in the late afternoons or evenings. And, remembering that 'He' had always welcomed him, she made him welcome too. Besides, however greatly they might differ otherwise, she and Argent had, at any rate, two big things in common—love of Julian, and love of books.

But you cannot, I gather, go on spring-cleaning a six-roomed doll's-house for ever, even if its master is an irresponsible bachelor who makes the very dickens of a havoc among his belongings. Sorting and tidying-up come to an end. Lydia said one day, with a finality that could not be countered, that it was time she was going 'home.' There were heaps of 'things to see to' there. "It would be hateful," she said, "to think that I was neglecting His house just because"—a little catch of the breath and a pause here—"He wasn't there to see."

So she packed up her clothes, while Surtees protestingly folded. And I bargained that, at any rate, I was still to be allowed to come for the week-ends to Trimmer's Wood as I had got into the spoilt habit of doing all these years. And Argent, still mindful to be good to her, asked if he might sometimes walk over on Sunday afternoons to see us, or perhaps bring the car and take her for a drive.

And Lady Corchester, when I told her, nodded and winked away a tear, (she missed her genius sadly, but ladies who assume a complexion when they have it not indulge in crying at their peril), saying :

"Better let her go. It isn't an uncendurable

thing at her age to be alone with your trouble—a trouble like that, I mean. I am not a religious woman,” said Lady Corchester, making the usual disclaimer with conviction, “but even I draw a distinction between the troubles God sends us and the troubles we make for ourselves and each other. It’s those that have the bitterness, or the sting, or whatever Shakespeare or somebody calls it. Death may break hearts, but it doesn’t do what is much worse, and break spirits.”

“How do you know that?” I asked. “Your spirit has never been broken!”

“How do *you* know that?” flashed her ladyship. “Surely you give women credit for enough cleverness to be able to hide their breaks, wherever they are, from the public! And let me tell you, hiding them doesn’t necessarily make them hurt any less! . . . But you are quite right; my spirit is of the tough, indea-rubber kind. That child’s isn’t. Mark my words, Richard Drewe: her spirit is fine, but I think it’s as brittle as glass—”

“I hope you are wrong about that!” I exclaimed quickly. “Or, if you are right, I hope no one will ever teach her to find it out.”

“I hope so, too,” said Lady Corchester, manipulating with great care a lace-edged handkerchief. “But the world is full of iron pots, as you know perfectly well.”

## CHAPTER XII

### THE INTESTATE HABIT

THAT, then, was the last we were ever to hear of the manner of a great man's passing ; so the special paragraphs preached, and so we believed. But not all of us—not Argent, for example. He said :

"I know there are nine hundred and ninety-nine chances to one that he is dead ; but there's at least one that he's alive. That boat must have drifted an incredible way out of the ordinary course. Why shouldn't another have done the same? And there are thousands of uninhabited islands in the Pacific. You think that a fantastic notion? I daresay it is, but you see . . . Sir Julian meant more to me than any man I've ever known, and I refuse to believe that he has gone out like that, all in a moment, without a sign or a trace !"

There, you see, is where temperaments differ so confoundingly. It was the very quality of his love for Julian that made him refuse to believe he had lost him. It was the quality of Lydia's that made her hopeless from the first.

And no one but Miles, after the first few months had gone by, had any doubt at all about the matter—not even those cautiously moving solicitors, Messrs. Collins & Son. I think it must have been in April that I went one day to their office, in response to a letter asking if I would make it convenient to favour them with an interview at any

hour or place that would suit me. Collins senior—the same harassed Collins of former days—received me. He wished me, it appeared, to inform him (he was as fond of long words and well-worn phrases as ever) whether I knew of our poor friend Sir Julian having made any will during recent years, and, if so, where it was to be found. Failing that, as I had been more intimate with the deceased than any other person, (he understood), would I undertake to search among whatever papers of Sir Julian's I could lay hands on, in the hope of discovering such a document. He was sure that it was unnecessary to remind me that in the interests of the young lady our poor friend had adopted it was impossible to exaggerate the importance of leaving no stone unturned, etc. . . . If nothing were found it would mean that she was left totally unprovided for.

"Do you mean to tell me," I cried, aghast, "that there is no will of his in your own keeping—that you don't even know for certain whether a will exists? Surely you should have insisted on his making one!"

"My dear sir, of course I insisted! Over and over again I have represented the importance of it to him. But you know his dislike of all business matters! He always said there was no hurry—he had no time—would see about it at the next opportunity. It is a curious and regrettable fact, Mr. Drewe, which any one of my legal colleagues would endorse, that the lay mind seems to have a superstitious idea that by making its will it is signing its own death-warrant. It is very regrettable——"

"It is damnably careless!" I broke in hotly.

Mr. Collins was shocked—not so much by the words, I think, as by the sentiment.

"Oh, come," said Mr. Drewe! "We must not go so far as that. *le mortuis* . . . 'you know—and

allowances must be made for the artistic temperament. Our poor friend was a remarkable personality—one might go so far as to call him a genius in his own line, I suppose. . . . I am not a great reader of poetry myself, but I am told that his work was very far above the average. . . . I repeat that we must not judge him by the usual standards."

Mr. Collins blew his nose—a purely professional and rhetorical action—and proceeded in a series of well-chosen *clichés* to hymn Julian's great attainments. He thought, I suppose, good old man, that since the circumstances forbade the offering of any 'floral tributes' other than words to the honoured dead, by all means let them be as flowery as possible.

But as for me, it was all I could do to endure to listen to him just then. Julian was *my* dead. My world was empty without him. . . . And now I was angry with him. To mourn, and yet be angry—do you know what a knife in the heart that can be?

I have said already that I have not the legal mind; nor have I a business mind. So I went to Argent, who has the first, and presumably the second, since, I suppose, the greater includes the less. And he had been, in his way, quite as 'intimate with the deceased' as I had. Perhaps *he* knew where or whether Julian's will existed.

But he did not. And I said:

"Then you must go through his papers with me. If it *does* exist, you or I or both of us are almost certainly his executors. And anyhow he'd rather we did it than any one else."

But our search availed nothing. . . . This is the point—is it not, Mr. Reviewer?—where you smile indulgently or sardonically, and make ready to launch that famous shaft of yours (it is use, I fancy,

that keeps it looking so new and bright) about what you are pleased to call the lost-will-habit. But stay your blue pencil, if you please. For this will was not lost. It did not exist—had never existed. . . .

"Once," I said slowly to Argent, "in the days of your precocious youth, you told me that in adopting children certain obligations were laid on either party to the transaction, and that neither, as a rule, fulfilled them. 'Duty and affection,' wasn't it, on the one hand, and a 'proper provision for the future' on the other. It is easy to guess which side you thought would prove remiss in this case. And you see you were wrong."

"Yes, I see that," he answered. He was locking up the safe in the corner of the room, and he drew out the key as he spoke, but for a moment remained standing there thoughtfully, his underlip between his teeth.

"This means, of course," he said presently, turning round, "that Miss Lisle gets nothing at all, except by the possible generosity of Sir Julian's next-of-kin, whoever he is. Do you know anything about him?"

"Nothing but his name, which is Blenkinson, and that he's a fifth cousin or so of Julian's, and a partner in that north-country firm. Collins told me that much."

"Well, let us hope he will have the decency to see that he only gets all this by an accident, and that it's up to him to do something for her. In the meanwhile, we can't keep her in the dark about this business. Some one will have to explain her position to her." He had come back to the writing-table and was helping me gather together the scattered papers and put them back into drawers and pigeon-holes. "It will be rather a facer for her, I'm afraid. She thinks herself something of an heiress, I suppose?"

"I haven't the slightest idea!" I got up and rang the bell. "Or rather, I have a very strong idea that she has never thought anything at all about it. Yes, I'm afraid she'll have to be told. . . . Look here, Merriman, I wish you'd find Miss Lisle, and tell her I'm very sorry to trouble her, but I'd like her, if she's not busy about anything particular, to come to the library for a minute about a matter of business."

"Very good, sir."

Merriman disappeared, and Miles moved towards the open window, saying:

"Then I'll clear out. Drewe, old man, I wish you well over a very unpleasant task!"

"You will do more than that," I answered, and caught him by the sleeve as he passed me. "You'll see me through it! This job is just as much yours as mine. We'll tell her together."

"Just as you like, of course," said he. "But I can't see why. She will probably hate my being here."

"I don't care. I'm not thinking of her feelings at the moment, as it happens. Look here, Argent, you're taking this business of the will to heart, whether you admit it or not. But why? Isn't it because you loved Julian, and you'd like, now he is dead, to be able to weigh him in the balance and find him not wanting in anything? Instead of which, you find he has been careless to the point of heartlessness. Isn't that what you mind?"

"Well—and if it is, what then?"

"Well, I want you to stay and see for yourself that that is what *she* will mind most, too—not that she's penniless, but that she was so little to him that he left her to the mercy of any chance charity!"

"Are you going to put it to her like *that*?"

"Of course not! But what does it matter? The fact is the same, however it's put."

He had no time to answer, for the door opened, and she came in. . . . I did not beat about the bush so very much. I began by asking her for form's—or delay's—sake whether Julian had ever told her where to look for any papers of his in the event of his death. She answered 'no,' as I had expected. And then I told her how he, supposing, as he had every reason to do, that he was good for another ten or twenty years of life at least, had always put off making his will. With Mr. Collins' authority at my back to lend me conviction, I assured her that the average man always does so procrastinate, till circumstance forces his hand. I also assured her very solemnly that Julian never had any other intention than to leave her all he possessed. But—but—— After all, as I had said to Argent, the fact was brutal, however you put it; and I have no gift for that cat-and-mouse business known as 'breaking' things to people! I interrupted myself to say:

"But you knew that, of course? You have taken it for granted that you were his heiress?"

"I—no—I—oh, Uncle Dick, I never thought about it! I never—you know I never thought about his—*dying*. . . ."

Argent, forced against his will to be present, had remained standing beside my chair, his frowning gaze following the pattern of the carpet. But now he looked up and gave her a swift, keen, questioning glance. It was to punish him for that glance that I turned to him and said:

"Tell her what I'm driving at, Miles. It's more in your line than mine."

He made no demur, but told her, straightforwardly and with a kindly informality—I will do him that justice.

"It's the most rotten luck, Miss Lisle. By all moral rights you *are* Sir Julian's heiress. But by some unexplainable oversight, he never took any

steps to put his known intentions in order, or if he did we can't trace it. I am sorrier than I can say to have to tell you this means that legally you get nothing. But it was an oversight only—you quite understand that?"

"Yes, quite. Of course I quite understand." She took it quietly and gallantly, just as I had known she would. But she was proud. She would not let Argent see even what I had promised he should. As for him, he looked disturbed and puzzled both. After a moment he moved round the table and sat on its edge, facing her chair:

"Don't let it worry you, Miss Lisle," he said gently. "It is probably not nearly so bad as it sounds. Besides, you're among friends. And Drewe and I have officiously appointed ourselves your—what shall I say?—guardians? We're going to see what can be done. So you mustn't mind too much."

She got up from her chair then, with her most spirited and *mondaine* little smile, which she divided between us, saying:

"Of course not! And thank you so much for telling me about it truthfully, and for being so kind—both of you. And you needn't be in the least sorry for me, except"—the smile was suddenly wiped out—"for losing Him. And that is the same for us all." (It was generous of her to say that, for of course it was *not* the same.) "Heaps of girls I've met earn their own living, and love doing it. I don't mind that part a bit. . . . I think if you'll both excuse me I'll go now. I'm in the middle of doing the flowers."

Argent went to the door with her and opened it for her. When he came back he still kept the rather puzzled look. It is possible that he was asking himself whether her attitude was real or assumed. If it was real it was rather fine. If it was assumed it was, perhaps, not less fine. . . .

There is really nothing to be said about Mr. James Blenkinson, except that he was the antithesis of his illustrious kinsman. In other words, he was firstly and lastly and all the time a business man. My acquaintance with the species is not wide enough to let me say whether he represented its most usual type. There was, at any rate, no hypocrisy about him. His view of the situation which had brought us together kept a nice balance between greed on the one hand and a quixotic chivalry, on the other. He did not deny—indeed he stated very plainly—that the fact of Julian's having died intestate was a fortunate one for his next-of-kin. He was comfortably enough off, but the business needed fresh capital. He was equally quick to see that the same fact was an ill-wind for Lydia, and that it was 'up to' himself to temper it. "I want to do the right thing by her," he said more than once. The phrase seemed to be a sort of business catch-word with him, and its perfect sobriety describes him far better than I can.

He outlined his notion of the 'right thing,' and it seemed generous enough. And he added that of course he would wish Miss Lisle to continue living at Trimmer's Wood until she married or, otherwise, as long as she cared to.

"You see, I am anxious to do the right thing by her," he perorated inevitably, and Mr. Collins and I both hastened to assure him that he was doing the thing uncommonly handsomely. And we parted on a note of mutual goodwill.

What we had all of us forgotten to reckon with was the fact that there are persons—usually young persons—so misguided that they do not at all wish to be handsomely done by. Lydia listened to all the plans for her welfare, and said that it was all most extraordinarily kind, but that of course she could not accept any of it—neither the suggested allowance nor the lot of Trimmer's Wood. There

was a gentle but unshakeable finality in her voice which I had met before, and knew to be proof against all argument. I knew, too, that she was thinking: '*I would have taken it from Him, but not from any one else.*' And I guessed that, even after all these years, she remembered dimly the bitter taste of charity. Had it not flavoured the bread-and-milk of her childhood? I groped for suitable words, and, finding none, said:

"If I beg you, as a great kindness to me, to come and be *my* adopted daughter, and cheer Surtees' and my old age, I suppose you would say of course you couldn't do that either? You'd call it charity, I daresay!"

"Darling Uncle Dick, of course I shouldn't call it anything so silly! I'd call it by its proper name, which is 'love,'" she smiled. "But—no, I couldn't do that, either. I'd like to come to you for a little, if you'll have me, until I find some work, but when I do"—mark the splendid optimism of youth, which said 'when,' not 'if'—"I must go."

"Work! In Heaven's name, what sort of work does the likes of you expect to find?" I exclaimed. And she answered calmly:

"I am going to be somebody's secretary."

I said that idea all came of pride and folly. . . . And Lady Corchester said, later, that very likely it did, but that it certainly came of good blood, too.

"Show me a person who will accept anything from anybody, and I will show you some one who never had a grandfather, in the social sense of the word," she said in triumphant disregard of all possible data. "And the child is perfectly right. She is going to be somebody's secretary—she is going to be mine, if she'll consent to have me as an employer. It's the *employees* who make all the terms nowadays! I don't know whether I've mentioned it to you before, Mr. Drewe, but I've been meaning for some time to engage a permanent

secretary. Sounds like a War Office official, doesn't it! My hands are getting so rheumatic that I can hardly hold a pen. And you know the size of my correspondence!"

"No, you have not mentioned it before, dear lady, for the excellent reason that you never thought of it till this moment!" I retorted. "And you are no more rheumatic than Lydia herself. A much denser person than she is would see through such a transparent offer at the first glance!" . . .

And of course she must have seen through it. But she accepted it, all the same. She knew, I suppose, that there were a hundred ways in which she could really be of use to her sometime fairy-godmother. And perhaps she saw this seeming charity also in its proper guise of love.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE INVIOLATE GARDEN

BUT Lady Corchester made another discovery even less convincing than was the fiction of her rheumatism and consequent dependence. Having lived for sixty years in London, she suddenly, and for the first time, became aware that it did not suit her from June onwards. Its atmosphere and the rush and bustle of it had some pernicious effect on her heart—or it may have been her head or her hands or her legs! It was country air that she needed. “Not unadulterated country where you never meet anybody who has ever heard of anything that’s happened outside the parish during the last six years or so,” she explained. “What I want is to be *of* London but not in it, as it were.” She pondered quite admirably for a moment, and with an air of sudden illumination said :

“I wonder whether that Blenkinfield person or whatever-his-name-is would be willing to let Trimmer’s Wood to me, just as it is, for a few months?”

I said non-committally that it was possible ; one could but ask him. Even I have not the temerity to insult Lady Corchester by accusing her openly of self-immolating motives for any plan or action. But it is, perhaps, not irrelevant to mention here that there was at that time a certain amount of talk, public as well as private, being bandied as to the probable ultimate fate of Trimmer’s Wood.

People wrote to the papers about it, urging that it should be bought by the nation—for that very purpose to which, in a moment of derisive prophecy, I had once destined it. Some of the letter-writers called it a 'beauty spot' and others called it a '*rus - in - urbe*.' Either term suggested horrible visions of cockney accents and bank-holidays and paper-bags and orange-peel—to me, anyway. I can only guess what Lydia thought. She kept a stoic silence. And, meanwhile, Miles still thought perversely that Julian might still be living somewhere and return sometime. And there was always one chance in a thousand that Miles was right.

Lady Corchester was born with a genius for getting her own way, and for getting it quickly. She was seventy-seven on the fifteenth of June, and the date found, not only her, but her own special atmosphere transferred to Trimmer's Wood. 'Atmosphere' may be taken as literally as you please. Except to eat and sleep, or, closely veiled and cloaked, to take a rare airing in a brougham or a rarer turn round the garden, she never stirred from the drawing-room. And on the hottest days there was always a fire and there was never an open window—'because the country air is always damp and treacherous, whatever it may seem!' And the room was always filled with the heady, breath-stealing flowers—stephanotis and heliotrope and syringa—that she loved. Such heats and perfumes as conquer the senses of ordinary mortals might have been oxygen to the robust ones of Lady Corchester!

But 'atmosphere' may serve, also, to remind you that she must be 'of' the world, though no longer in it. Trimmer's Wood still mourned its late master. It was neither seemly nor to be expected that it should entertain or be entertained on large and formal scales. But that was no

reason why it should shut itself away from its friends ! So London was encouraged to visit it more often than ever before. The Buckingham Gate Sunday evenings had ceased to exist officially for some years ; but some of their most faithful habitués had kept up the custom. They were still the 'people who count,' and they came now to Trimmer's Wood in twos or threes—to dine ; to lunch ; to wage scintillating warfare of wits with Lady Corchester in the stifling drawing-room, or to stroll with Lydia in the still inviolate garden, on which a greedy public had its eye, and might one day set its foot.

And Miles came, of course, when he could. His venerable relative had never found him lacking in such proper attentions. Above all, many young people came. Lady Corchester had always liked to surround herself with youth. And small, semi-impromptu tennis-parties were quite compatible with mourning which had run a six-months' course, even if garden-parties were not. Exercise and companionship were essential to young people ; and Lydia must not be allowed to dream too much. She was far too fond of solitude and dreaming, so Lady Corchester said with conscientious severity. At the back of her mind, however—or, more probably, well in the foreground of it—was that same idea which she had once expressed long ago ; namely, that there is really only one career worth having for a woman. If a girl must earn her own living, how can she earn it more sensibly and easily than by a suitable marriage ? There is more than one translation for the word 'suitable,' and Lady Corchester's was not as worldly as you might suppose. She startled me one day by saying :

"I have fallen in love with that nice, good-looking nephew of yours, Mr. Drewe. If Lydia should ever do the same I think I will give her a *dot* ! You would *like* her to marry him, I suppose ? "

"I suppose so—yes, I'm sure I should," I answered. "He's my nephew—my favourite nephew. And he's what they call a white man, through and through. But he is nothing of a match. Surely *you* wouldn't like it?"

"I should like her to do what I did myself, and marry the man she loves," said Lady Corchester, with a defiance which seemed to add in parenthesis: 'whether he is white or black!'—And you may remember that rumour had painted Lord Corchester very black indeed!—"But *is* he the man man she loves? I see no signs of it, so far."

"Neither do I—no more than I do of her falling in love with Merriman, or the Vicar—or Miles," said I.

"Miles?" echoed her ladyship sharply. "What put Miles into your head?"

"The fact that he has just this moment come into my sight, I suppose," I answered, "and perhaps because I know she has never liked him very much, nor he, her."

I was standing by the window, and I could see two white figures—Miles and Lydia—walking slowly up the lawn. He had returned out from town on the chance of a game of tennis, and he and Lydia had won two sets before dinner against Myra Sells and the new, athletic curate. It was dusk now, outside, but not too dusk to see that when they came to the shallow terrace steps they paused, as though reluctant to mount them. Lady Corchester reached for her gold-top cane and came across to the window and looked out also.

"So they dislike each other, do they?" she said presently, and made an odd little sound between a grunt and a sigh and a laugh. "But you may dislike a person very much, and not dislike his society—or hers—at all! What do you suppose they are talking about?"

"Books, I daresay—or Julian."

"Books! If you begin on books you may get almost anywhere. But—Julian, you say? It seems to me that if two people waste their time talking about a third it isn't likely to lead them anywhere at all!"

"Where do you want it to lead them?" I asked her, knowing perfectly well. "It seems to be leading them to friendship. Isn't that far enough?"

"Friendship!" She made the same sound as before, and now it was unmistakeably a grunt. I do not need to remind you that the Victorians were entirely sceptical of friendship between the sexes, on the desirable side of forty. Their girls did not risk—as it was thought—either their lungs or their looks in the dangerous night-air and a *solitude-à-deux*, except to conjugate a more ardent verb. So Lady Corchester said "Friendship!" with scorn, and added very lucidly:

"Miles is an uncommonly handsome fellow who does not look a day over thirty-three or four! And Lydia——"

"——is perfectly equipped to do her share of destruction, just as you once prophesied! But you need not be afraid that she will destroy Miles. Doesn't he belong to the generation which thinks it discovered the doctrine of heredity all by itself? If he ever gathers grapes he will see to it first that they grow on genuine vines—not on the thorns and thistles that are the Pawn-shop's speciality!"

"I am not in the least concerned for Miles's safety," said Lady Corchester tartly. "And what, I should like to know, have grapes and thistles to do with it? A man falls in love whether he likes it or not—and so does a woman, for that matter. That's one of the reasons why the attractive girl with a dozen admirers is just as likely to be an old maid as the girl with none. She's very apt to choose for herself—outside the dozen."

The two white figures had turned the corner of

the house by now. Lady Corchester went back to the fire, and I followed her, saying with a laugh :

"It is Lydia's peace of mind, then, for which you fear? Just because she spends fifteen minutes in civilly sharing the garden and the stars with a male acquaintance who isn't either stout or bald !"

"I fear nothing of the kind ! It was you who talked nonsense about leading them to friendship. All I am trying to say is that two people may walk along the same road and not necessarily get to the same place. And if one of these two—who, you tell me, dislike each other—travels farther than the other, I'd rather it was not Lydia. . . . But, anyhow, August is almost upon us. In a fortnight the scene and the company will be changed for all of us. Perhaps—who knows?—Mr. Right may be doing a cure at Buxton, at the same hotel the child and I are going to !"

I looked at her in amusement, tempered with some envy. Her imagination was as agile and changeful as the darting flight of some brilliant insect—a priceless thing to have kept for close on eighty years !

"Let us hope, in that case, that his complaint will be as romantic a one as possible !" I answered.

As for me, I do not belong to the match-making gender. I was selfishly in no hurry for 'Mr. Right' to appear, even if his other name should haply chance to be Bill Denyer. But Lady Corchester had set me, too, thinking—wondering whether among Lydia's 'dozen' admirers any one had yet succeeded in sowing what the song sentimentally describes as 'a tiny seed of love, in the garden of her heart.'

I thought it well over, according to my lights, and with relief told myself that it was not so—yet.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE GREAT HIATUS

IN a fortnight, did Lady Corchester say? And a changed scene, forsooth! She should have said 'a few hours—a changed world.' For we had been a blind, careless world, laughing at our clearer-visioned soldiers and prophets, and calling them scare-mongers. But now, at last, on an unforgettable date of July, we looked up and saw plainly the suspended sword.

The intolerable suspense of the days that followed is unforgettable too—a matter of history. Every man who was a true man expected that England would do her duty; yet dreaded in furtive shame of soul lest she should shirk it. . . .

She did not shirk it. It is unbelievable that she can ever have dreamed of shirking it. She merely paused an instant, as it were, to look at the rudely flung gage—that unprovoked, insolently vaunted glove-of-mail, before she stooped to pick it up. It was surely no more than seemly that she should give a fraction of time to the counting of the cost, even though she meant to pay it, whatever it might be! Was she not going out to meet a menace veiled and terrible and without any precedent?

But the sword in falling cut the world's history in two—cut the thread of lives—broke hearts and hopes and ideals and futures. Showed humanity to be wickeder, crueller, more lustful of blood and

gain than ever before ; but showed it, too, to be capable of courage, endurance, dauntless patience beyond all parallel.

It showed, too, perhaps, how suddenly and swiftly the known and normal may be swept away and the abnormal accepted as a familiar fact, almost without a backward glance. Obsolete things like romance and torture and the threat of invasion and starvation had come out from between the covers of old books to take forceful possession of the earth. Obsolete words belonging to that most obsolete thing of all—WAR—began to thread our everyday speech. We had been told that science, civilization, international politics, had all made real war impossible. And now the impossible had happened, as it always does, thus defied and dared.

But it is not for me to write on that tremendous theme, England-at-Arms. I should say too much, and there would not be one shred of value in any of it. Am I not sixty years old and a stay-at-home? And there are literary giants in these days (some of them the merest boys in years), who have themselves descended—or ascended—into the hell man has made of the earth and the air and the sea, and the waters under the sea. It is they who, with sword and pen, on pages curiously wrought in blood and tears and laughter—bravest and most touching of all trinities—have written, and are still writing, the only true philosophy and history of the Great War.

As for us stay-at-homes, we heard, moved but unamazed, of that army that slipped away in the night, like a phantom host, without noise and pageantry. We heard, too, of that other army, immeasurably bigger, that was growing day by day. And, like a nation of ants recovering from the first shock of disturbance, we set ourselves to find, each one, some small task that might help towards

the stupendous whole. It was not easy in those early days. England's attitude towards her willing children was that of the stern, harassed mother who says : " Child, don't bother ! Get out of my way and keep quiet ! Can't you see I'm busy ? " If a man was too old or too infirm to fight, he could sit on a committee or help to organize a hospital. A woman, if she were young enough and fit enough and free enough, could nurse (within certain strictly defined and jealous limits). If not, she could sew. So said England—a typical parent in that she was slow to believe her sons and daughters (especially her daughters) were grown up and capable of tackling as big a task as she liked to give them.

Meanwhile, I do not think I knew a healthy man under military age who did not hasten to join the colours. One of my nephews already commanded a battalion of infantry in France. I wore a black band round my sleeve for another. He fell during that immortal Retreat that was so nearly annihilation, and became, instead, a triumph. Miles Argent asked for a commission, and was refused. He was too old, they said. They said it to many in those first days—to some of my nephews among others. And most of these wasted no more time in importunities, but enlisted—in the Public Schools battalion ; the Sportsman's battalion ; the Inns of Court O.T.C., it might be. Some of these would-be soldiers gave themselves the benefit of a year or two in the matter of their age ; an inaccuracy winked at by the military authorities—and probably, also, by the recording angel.

And all over the country girls were re-learning that First-Aid so blithely learnt and forgotten a year or two ago. You saw them going to classes—poring over little black manuals—practising the lost art of bandaging.

And oh ! the vast amount of sewing and knitting that those first weeks saw ! At Trimmer's Wood,

Lydia and Myra Sells cut out shirting and calico, and machined seams, all day long. And the maids left their work to sew. As for Lady Corchester, she knitted endlessly—you remember that her hands were so rheumatic that they could not hold a pen!

Thanks to a slight, lucky accident—he called it lucky, now—Bill Denyer had not availed himself of the *Société Minière's* generous permission to apply to them for fresh work when the year at home was up. Now, he was a commissioned officer in the Royal Flying Corps; and there came a day when he was given ninety-six hours' leave. He spent one of the last of them at Trimmer's Wood. I knew why he came, but Lydia did not. She only saw that he was a very gallant figure in the cross-wise-buttoned tunic and the little cap set at a rakish angle, with the old glamour of war about him, and the new glamour of those who dare—not only the sun, like Icarus—but death and darkness and the malice of both Man and Nature.

"Say good-bye to her for me, Uncle Dick," he said, when I bade him God-speed. "Not that it's worth saying good-bye, really! We're going to wipe the floor with those blighters and be back before Christmas, if not before—you'll see!"

"Of course!" said I. We actually used to say things like that at first—with conviction, too. But the conviction lessened a little each time we said them. . . .

"No, I never guessed. I didn't know," Lydia said, when I gave her the message. "I wish I had known. If I had, I should have said good-bye to him—differently."

"Differently?" I repeated. And Lady Corchester looked up quickly from her knitting. "How—'differently'?"

"I don't know. But—I just said 'good-bye.'"

I'd like to have wished him good luck, too, and a safe return."

She left her sewing and knelt down to poke, unnecessarily, the unnecessary fire. Lady Corchester stared at her averted profile a moment, and then took up her grey muffler again.

"We will send Mr. Denyer a parcel sometimes," she said briskly. "He liked that walnut-cake at tea. And we can put in a pair of socks and a book or two, and some chocolate—that sort of thing."

Lydia nodded, absently and unhappily, still kneeling on the hearthrug.

"It's all so unfair," she murmured. "The soldiers are doing everything. They're not only in danger—there is all the mud and rain and discomfort, too. And we're not sharing any of it! We're not even doing anything for them—nothing that's any real help!" She glanced scornfully at the heap of grey flannel she had left on the window-seat.

"Fiddlesticks! You can pray for them, child!"

"Do *you* pray for them?" I put in, surprised out of good manners.

"Certainly!" said Lady Corchester, as briskly as before. And she forgot to add the usual rider to the effect that she was not a religious woman.

## PART III

### CHAPTER I

#### THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION

THE war found for me, too, at length, an inglorious little job or so, to be done in my spare time. So I could not go to Trimmer's Wood as often as I had been wont. But I went there one October afternoon, by invitation, to stay the night.

It is a day of which every trivial detail remains obstinately fixed in my remembrance. When I arrived I was told that Lady Corchester was in bed with a slight cold, but would be downstairs to dinner. In the hall a bandaging practice was going on. Lydia, armed with a book-of-the-words, was reading out stage-directions, and Myra Sells was putting them into effect on the person of the new curate. He was a big, boyish, hearty creature, with the trail of the playing-fields still over him. I feel sure it was by no wish of his own that he was not training for a soldier, like every healthy and right-minded young layman of his age and type. He bore the present inactive use to which he was being put with praiseworthy courage, tempered only by expostulatory 'Oh! I say's!' and 'But look here, you know's!'

"For goodness' sake, do try to keep still and hold your arm out straight, Mr. Moore!" said Myra. "I can't possibly do it up decently if you will let it go flop like that, every second!"

"But I say! look here, you know! You told me it was broken; so how the—how on earth do you expect me to hold it out?" said Mr. Moore not unreasonably. "I think you're jolly ignorant, Nurse! I'm probably in a state of collapse by now, and you ought to be holding smelling salts to my nose and dosing me with brandy!"

"Brandy! That just shows all you know about it! Brandy's an absolute back-number, nowadays! If you were really sufferin' from shock I'd wrap you in blankets and put hot bottles to your feet."

"Would you, by jove? But suppose the accident came about when you were on the top of an alp, or in a balloon or a canoe or somewhere? You mightn't happen to have a hot-water-bottle about you. What would you do then?"

I do not remember what Miss Sells said she would do then. I rather think it was at this juncture that she threw a cushion at the supposed victim of her surgical skill, and that he threw it back at her, and that the practice ended in horseplay. Before that, Lydia had cast aside her little black text-book and had drawn me over to the comparative privacy and quiet of the window-seat. It was a month or more since we had met, and now I sat beside her, delighting once more in the sight of her—the voice of her—all the elusive, provocative, wistful charm of her. I had seen her sometimes wearing fine feathers and the brilliant moods such as a woman puts away for special occasions and persons, just as she puts her jewels. To-day she looked a mere schoolgirl, in her white blouse and narrow russet skirt and brown, buckled shoes. And her mood was a sober, rather absent one. But under it, now and then, I fancied I glimpsed something half-hidden and radiant, like the fitful flame that shows through a smoky fire—as though that absent mind of hers dwelt in some pleasant, secret place. Because I saw no reason for it, it gave me

to think a little. Yet I was glad. She had mourned long enough for Julian. Time *does* heal, however much we repudiate the truth of the truism as applied to our own troubles. And even the shadow of war's wing should not brush away all the dreams of youth. *Did* she dream too much? Surely not. The dream that never comes true—and how few, alas I come true—is better than no dream at all.

Meanwhile, she was telling me schoolgirlishly that it was lovely to see me again, and asking me what I had been doing all this while, and what London was doing.

"The war has marooned us here," she said. "We never see any one, now. Everybody is too busy."

"Including yourself."

"Oh! I——" She made the impalpable little movement that for want of a better name is called a shrug, and that so few English-speaking persons can achieve gracefully. "I sew! But when Conyngham Hall is ready" (a big house in the neighbourhood that was being turned into a convalescent hospital for soldiers) "I'm going to nurse there. It is settled that we are to go on duty for a fortnight at a time, for the half day. So it won't be very hard or splendid work."

"You will find it quite hard enough," I answered, "on the top of your housekeeping duties. Don't overdo it, Sweetheart. And so you see no one now? Hasn't Argent been, lately?"

"No, not very lately. I should think it's about five weeks ago that he came. I daresay he's busy, too—in khaki, perhaps, by now."

"He wasn't when I last saw him; but it's only a matter of time, I suppose." And then she asked me what was the latest news of Mr. Denyer, and I showed her, with some pride, a field post-card I had received from him that morning. They were

curios in those early days, and it was the first either of us had yet seen.

Merriman came in with some letters on a tray, which he brought over to her. Without any design to do so, I saw the handwriting on the topmost one. It was the topmost one, that is, on the tray, but not as it lay on her lap.

"An extra post, surely?" I asked; for Trimmer's Wood had hitherto remained obstinately rustic in having only two deliveries a day. But she said it was not really extra; it came now instead of at seven.

We had tea early, because Myra said that she and the curate must simply fly, as the choir-practice was at a quarter to five. (I have discovered, by the way, that this young lady is a far better daughter both to the parish and her 'poor old dad' than she thinks it becoming to make out.) When they had taken their noisy departure, Lydia went upstairs to see if Lady Corchester was awake and wanting anything. And I strolled into the garden.

It had been one of those days when October, spendthrift of her little store of sun and warmth, perversely chooses to squander it all at once. The sky was of the very blue that woos the lark; the breeze as soft as any that brings you the first flower-scented breath of spring. Instead, it was bringing the red and yellowed leaves fluttering from the trees, and sending those already fallen in little rustling eddies along the paths. In the kitchen-garden dahlias and chrysanthemums and phloxes and Michaelmas daisies flamed like jewels in their setting of opulent, autumn gold. In the paddock some cows were grazing in stupid, somnolent content. And I thought with a sigh that it must be rather nice to be a dahlia or a cow, to-day—to see the world round you look so fair and quiet, and not to know that war had come to spoil it!

I entered the house by the library window, stepping over the low sill as I had so often seen Julian do. The unused, orderly emptiness of the room gave me the same new pang as it always did now. Yet it did not look uninhabited. The furniture was not kept sheeted, nor the shutters closed; and Lydia still put bowls and jars of flowers there. If you have no grave of your beloved to tend, it is the next best thing, perhaps, to have a shrine. . . . I went over to the bookshelves that stretched all across one wall, and from among the volumes of Julian's own works took one out at random. It was a book of short poems written many years ago. . . . The library door was ajar, and in the hall I could hear Merriman clearing away the tea-things and making up the fire. Some one ran quickly down the stair, and I heard Lydia say:

"Will you send Christine up with her ladyship's tea, please. And, Merriman, if any one calls and asks for me, I am—you can say I am in the garden."

With my finger to mark the place, I shut the book and went to the door. She was standing by the hall-fire, with her back to me, and was reading—re-reading, I fancy—one of her letters. As I looked, she folded the letter and, thrusting it into the pocket of the jersey she had put on over her thin blouse, turned quickly to the door leading to the outer entrance.

I drew back, some unformed impulse telling me not to follow her just yet. . . . I dropped into one of the big chairs and opened my book again—a wonderful book, full, perhaps, of the faults of immaturity; but full, also, of its fire and truth and vivid, delicate force. It had the power of all great art, that can prison you for a moment or two within the phantom walls of its creation. For a little I forgot there was a war—forgot even the little world in which I lived. I heard no step

cross the hall, nor looked up till Argent spoke to me. Then I laid the book down reluctantly as he closed the door behind him.

"Surely an unexpected pleasure?" I remarked. "I suppose you have been told that Lady Corchester is in bed?"

"Is she? I'm sorry," he returned perfunctorily. "No, I've seen no one yet. The side door was open and I came straight in. Finding you alone is a piece of luck I didn't expect."

My interest woke drowsily at that. It was unlike Miles to walk into a lady's house off-handedly. And something about his tone and manner struck me as odd—not excited nor agitated, but just—odd.

"Nothing wrong, is there?" I asked.

He came and stood with his back to the empty grate near me, leaning his shoulders against the high mantelpiece.

"Yes—no, I'm not sure. I'd rather say it's something I don't understand. Perhaps you do. I wanted to see you, on the chance. I rang you up at your own house, and was told you were here. That's why I came."

"So urgent! Well?"

"Did you see a notice in the *Observer*—or anywhere else—of a book of poems by a new writer that Longwood's were bringing out this week? No? Well, I did, and I bought a copy. I've had no time to look into it till to-day. Here it is."

His right hand had been behind his back. He held it out to me now, with a book in it—rather a small, thin book, bound in dark blue. I opened it at the title-page and read aloud: "'The Lost Dryad; and other verses; by T. W.'—'T. W.' is modest, anyhow; he doesn't call his verses poetry. *Are they poetry?*"

"Read some of them, and see," said Argent, still with that 'odd' note in his voice.

So I opened this book, too, at random, and

began to read—and read on, and then looked up, amazed and bewildered.

"Julian!" I exclaimed under my breath.

For remember, that I came fresh from reading that long-ago work of his; and these poems of this new writer might have been part of it, so like they were in style and essence, if not in actual theme—but Julian had had such countless themes! These verses, too, had that same fine passion and restraint that together make vitality, and the very faults that make perfection.

Argent nodded.

"Yes; that leaps to the eye instantly, doesn't it?"

"Julian . . ." I repeated, still dazed by the revelation. "And 'T.W.' stands for Trimmer's Wood, of course. But—how can it be Julian, unless he's alive, somewhere? You still think that?"

"I've thought it possible, all along, as you know."

"But how can this be Julian's?" I persisted. "If he's alive, why should he keep his friends in ignorance? And why should he publish this anonymously?"

"What makes you so sure he published it himself at all?" said Argent.

"You mean to suggest that some one has stolen it?"

"Some time ago I read a review in *Punch* of a novel called 'Jaffery,' of which the reviewer said he guessed the end very early, because he started with the advantage of having once read 'The Giant's Robe'—I have the same advantage," said Argent very drily. "When I read part of that book this morning my first idea was that it was Sir Julian's work, and that it was the first step towards definite news of his being alive. I went straight to Longwood's and demanded to know who had written it. They said, of course, that they regretted they couldn't tell me. The writer was

anonymous and wished to remain so for the present. Then I asked them point-blank if he were Sir Julian Tarrant, and they denied it with surprise. That's odd, isn't it?—that the unmistakableness of the style had never occurred to them till I pointed it out. But what I said flustered them a bit. The upshot of it was that in the end they told me the poems were by—a woman." He finished slowly and moodily, his eyes on the ground.

"Well?" said I for the second time.

He gave me no answer to that; and I did not press for one. I did not, in fact, want him to tell me whether or no Longwood's had given him the woman's name. I said:

"Why have you come to me? What do you want me to do?"

He did not answer that either for a moment. Then he said:

"I want you to see Miss Lisle—ask if she can explain it in any way. She knows you better than any one. She's more likely to con——"—he bit his lip and, I think, changed the end of the word—"confide in you than in any one else."

"You mean that, without our knowledge, he left these poems in her charge and they've been stolen from her?"

He threw a quick, short glance at me.

"Perhaps. There's always room, even for improbabilities."

His voice was as hard as I had ever heard it. His face was hard and set, too. Who touched Julian touched Miles Argent—I knew that. If some one had robbed Julian after his death, he—or she—need expect no mercy from Argent!

"I am not going to ask her anything about it," I said with vehemence. "I have no gift for cross-examination, thank God! . . . If you want her, you will find her down the garden."

A very curious look crossed his face, but he only said:

"I would rather see her here. If you know where she is, won't you at least go and find her and bring her in?"

I wanted to refuse—to say I washed my hands of the whole matter. But I did not. Whether the inconceivable thing he thought were true or not, she would need a friend by her. . . . I said I would go, but before I stepped over the window-sill I turned round, and my mental discomfort found outlet in an irritable irrelevance.

"Why on earth do you always call her 'Miss Lisle'? Why not 'Lydia'? You've known her since she was a baby of six. She must look on you as a sort of godfather."

He laughed then, but it was not a particularly pleasant laugh to hear.

"Whoever else godfathered her entrance into Trimmer's Wood, I don't think you can ever say I did!" he replied with deadly accuracy.

I went slowly and heavily on my quest. The garden seemed chilly now—the sky's blue had faded to a cold slate-grey. . . . I found her leaning on the little gate that leads into the plantation, her shoulder turned to me. She stood so still, and her skirt and knitted coat were so exactly of the same brown-golden tint as the branches above her and the bracken beyond, that for a moment I did not see her. She did not hear me, either, as I came down the narrow, turfed path between the chrysanthemums, until I stepped on to the gravel just behind her. Then she turned with a start, a startled, transient pink in her cheeks.

"Uncle Dick!" Could she have been expecting to see some one else? But she was pale again in a moment, and she smiled as she held out towards me a cluster of flame-pink roses, saying:

"Look—the very last roses of summer. Dixon says there will be a frost to-night."

"I shouldn't wonder. It's turning cold, and that coat of yours doesn't look very warm. You'd better come in." And I added with elaborate detachment: "Argent is here."

She turned aside to break off a dead rose-head or two from a bush we were passing.

"Is he? But we needn't go in because of that. I expect he is up with Lady Corchester."

"It is you he wants to see," I said.

I was not looking at her, but I thought—or feared—that I heard her draw a sharp breath.

"Then why——?" she began, and stopped. Her 'why' was easy to understand. If a man wishes to see a lady he usually goes to seek her instead of summoning her to his presence, unless . . . I answered quickly and without a due regard for truth:

"No one knew where you were; so I offered to go and look for you."

We walked to the house almost in silence. Once I glanced at her averted profile, and found it inscrutable. It was on my mind that I ought in some sort to 'prepare' her, as it is called, for what was coming. But I was still seeking words when we reached the library door.

Argent had crossed to the window since I left him and was standing there, looking out. The big writing-table was between him and the rest of the room. It was a position that had its strategical value. As Lydia entered, he turned round and murmured a word of polite and conventional greeting, which in some adroit, unobtrusive fashion seemed to cover the fact that he made no movement towards her. I wondered what he would do if she offered him her hand, as would be natural enough for the lady of the house. But she did not put him in that dilemma. I think I have said before that she had that fateful sixth sense which registers instantly the slightest rise or fall in the psychological tem-

perature. She hesitated for the fraction of a second just within the door, and then went composedly over to the leather-covered chesterfield at right angles to the fireplace, and sat down there. The book of new poems lay on the arm of it where I had left it, but if she saw it she gave no sign of doing so. She and Argent had barely exchanged a word or a glance. Her face and her attitude were both composed and natural. Yet in the slight pause, I seemed to see her buckling on her armour, as though to meet some known or unknown enemy.

"There is something I must say to you," Argent began.

"Yes? Is it about—another matter of business?" she asked.

"We can call it that, if you like," said he, and went on abruptly: "When you were acting as Sir Julian's secretary, he wrote—or rather dictated—a good many short poems, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"What became of them?"

"They were published—but you know that."

"I know some of them were; but were those all he wrote?"

"They were all he kept. He wrote others that he made me tear up as soon as they were written. He said they were no good."

"And you? Did *you* think they were no good?"

"I? I knew he must know best."

"Not necessarily. . . . Have you ever written any verse yourself?"

If any of his questions startled her, she had self-control enough to conceal the fact. She answered quietly, but flushing momentarily.

"I have—tried, sometimes."

"When? How long have you been trying?"

"I don't know. All my life, I think—I mean, since I was about seven or eight."

"And no one ever knew it or guessed?—not even Drewe?"

"No."

"An extraordinarily well-kept secret!" said Argent, and paused, and then said: "Have you read that book over there?"

She *must* have seen it when she came in, for her glance turned to it instantly and quickly. She said:

"I have read some reviews of it."

"Really? It was only published three days ago! Do you know who wrote it?"

"How could I know? It is anonymous, isn't it?"

"It did not occur to you that Sir Julian wrote it?"

For the first and last time during his cross-examination, she answered a little wildly:

"Why should *that* occur to me? Is it like *His* writing?"

"It is incredibly like," said Argent slowly.

"But he is dead. How could it possibly be his?"

He did not answer. His silence was his comment on the fact that he had asked her three questions to which she had evaded a direct reply—an unforgivable thing in any witness. He was still standing with his back to the window, his hands behind him and his glance on the various objects on the writing-table. His manner to her had been neither brutal nor hectoring. It was merely the direct, incisive one I had often seen him use in court. Except that he did not look at her as he asked his questions, he might, indeed, have forgotten that he was not in court. But the exception was a very notable one. It would have told me, had nothing else done so, that he hated his self-imposed task. Already he had carried the situation to the verge of the impossible. He must have

known—and so must she—that, however it ended, it must end their short-lived friendship also. But he went on :

"That is all you are going to tell me, then, about the book?—that you have read some reviews of it?"

"What makes you ask me that?" said Lydia, very low. "Why should you think I know anything of it?" And he answered without lifting his eyes :

"Merely because Longwood's tell me that you wrote it."

So breathless a silence followed his statement that—to me, at any rate—it was like some physical oppression. Then Lydia said in a low, deliberate voice :

"And you don't believe it?"

He looked up at her then—the swift, searching look that an expert might give to a perjured witness.

"No," said he, as deliberately. . . .

There was something in the room that I did not understand—some point at which they joined issue that baffled me utterly. Argent was very pale. Lydia was a Lydia I had never seen before. She, too, was pale. Her head was held a little higher than usual. Her dark eyes were darker with a sort of defiance—half sullen, half questioning ; wholly secret. It was the defiance, I thought, of a fighter who knows he has lost what he is fighting for, yet will not surrender. And all her little face was so pitifully hard—far harder than Argent's. Hardness like that in a girl's face could only be worn as armour. What hurt—or fear—was she hiding? . . . As though my gaze drew hers, she suddenly turned to me.

"Do *you* believe it, Uncle Dick?" she said.

And I answered : "My dear, I believe whatever you tell me." I would have said that, at that

moment, with or without conviction. But it happened to be true.

Argent had sat down in Julian's chair, and was leaning a little forward, his arms folded on the table. While she spoke to me his glance followed her, but he removed it when she turned to him again.

"Tell me what you believe," she said, in a colourless voice.

"Belief is too strong a word. . . ." He hesitated a moment as though he were seeking another. "I know from yourself that you have an unusual gift of memory where verse is concerned. Your critical sense is unusual too. What I—suggest is that Sir Julian wrote poems he thought bad, and that you knew to be good—that you destroyed them in his presence and by his wish, and wrote them out later, from memory—and later still published them as your own."

"I see, but—you couldn't prove any of that—unless I confessed I did it."

"No, I couldn't. You are perfectly right."

"And if I confessed—" The cluster of *Lyons Rose* had still been in her hand when she entered the room. Now it lay on her lap, and she was slowly stripping off the petals one by one—"would you make any allowances for me? I haven't any money of my own. If I wanted to make a little by using something somebody else had thrown away as rubbish—would you call that stealing?"

He glanced up quickly. Plenty of men, as is well known, demand more than an uncertain and elastic sort of honour from a woman. But Argent was not one of them.

"I should try to call it sophistry," he said. "Yes, I should try to make allowances, of course."

"You mean you would try to remember that

nothing can be expected of me, because I came out of a charity school—probably out of a slum before that. . . . It is because I'm somehow—different from most of the people you know that you have asked me all those questions—and disbelieved my word ! ”

“ What ! You really think me such a—you really think that ? ” he exclaimed. And once more I found myself feeling a little breathless. They were rather confusing with their quick ‘ you-believe’s ? ’—‘ you-think’s ? ’.

“ I know it,” she answered. “ I’ve always known that you distrusted me. But—don’t you guess that I’ve distrusted myself too—for the same reason—because I don’t know who I really am ? My parents may have been just respectable, poor people. But they may have been thieves or drunkards, or anything ! I don’t know what temptations I ought to be on my guard against. But, at any rate, stealing from a dead person—a person I cared for as I did for Him—isn’t one of them ! ”

She spoke quite quietly, but with a thread of passion running through her voice. They were looking at one another now, steadily enough. Argent was on his feet again. His face was not easy to read. He may have been thinking that this, at any rate, was not the demeanour of guilt. Or he may have been reminding himself that it is the demeanour of all others behind which a deficiency of moral sense oftenest takes cover. I did not know. And while I still groped in the dark, I saw Lydia’s gaze suddenly go past him in a fixed, dilated stare towards that part of the garden that the window framed. She sprang up from her seat with a little stifled cry, scattering all her lapful of petals.

“ Who—*who is that ?* ” she said almost inaudibly.

Obedying the compelling magnetism that is always in another person’s stare at some unknown object,

Argent wheeled quickly round to follow the direction her eyes took. Hastily I moved over to his side and looked out, also.

And we saw Julian come up the terrace steps and across the flags to the open window.

## CHAPTER II

### JULIAN SETTLES THE QUESTION

WHEN your novelist tells you that he will draw a veil over this or that poignant scene, you are, of course, indulgently aware that he does not do it to spare either your blushes or your sensibilities. He does it to save himself trouble or evade a difficulty. Half a century, or less, ago, he could temporarily ring down the curtain by making his heroine—or even his hero—swoon. But we know by now that flesh is not so conveniently weak as all that! The painful moments of life are apt to find us very fully conscious.

For myself, I admit shamelessly that if once more I resort to an asterisk or so, it is not out of consideration for anybody except myself. It is the paralysing difficulty of describing what we all thought and said and did during the next fifteen minutes which bids me consign them to obscurity.

Try to imagine the thing! Here was a man, supposedly dead, appearing with confounding suddenness to the three persons who loved him best and had mourned him most. And not one of the three but must have wished most passionately that he could have chosen any other moment in life for his returning! The strain of the last half-hour was near its breaking-point for all three of us. So great it was that even the tremendous fact that he was alive seemed at that instant unreal and of secondary importance. It should be counted

to us for righteousness, I think, that our most coherent thought just then was that, however great the effort of deception might be, we must let him see nothing amiss between us.

Meanwhile, for the benefit of any who are impatiently and sceptically demanding 'why' and 'how' and 'where,' I may as well give, once and for all, the bare outline of Julian's story. When the ship went down, he went down with her, and in the chaotic welter of torn, dismembered metal and splintered wood was knocked senseless by a blow on the head, while one arm was ripped open from wrist to elbow. He came to himself in an open boat, (Argent had been right—another boat *had* survived), into which he had been dragged. Its other occupants were six Lascars, one sickly old clergyman, one Scotch Labour Member of Parliament, eleven women and children of varicus nationalities and stations of life, and a dead baby. One of the women bound up Julian's arm as skilfully as the circumstances allowed. She and the other women (and the parson, too, for that matter) astonished him by their high courage and quiet cheerfulness. Even the children were wonderfully good and patient, till the water gave out. The Labour Member wept and prayed sometimes. The Lascars wept too, but did not pray. If any one of us is tempted to criticize, he should perhaps remind himself that life at sea in an open boat for any length of time is notoriously one of the worst forms of human suffering.

They ran aground at last on a tiny bit of dry land, which contained, among other sparse blessings, a few sheltering trees and a spring of fresh water. Before that, the boat had been lightened of over three-quarters of its human load. Courage, alas! does not miraculously prolong life. Neither do prayers and tears. . . . After three weeks on this little island the inhabitants had dwindled still

further. But Julian and one Lascar were picked up at length by a tramp steamer which plied exclusively between little-known, tropical coast villages with disreputable black-and-tan populations. That was a matter of indifference to Julian. He was in the oblivion of brain fever when the captain of the tramp had him summarily dumped on shore at one of these so-called ports. What happened to him there I do not know. He probably does not know himself. But out of the vagueness there presently emerges, clearly and transfigured, the memory of a rather common little missionary of much-mixed pedigree. The care and hospitality he gave out of his poverty to this homeless, penniless, (nameless, for all practical purposes), sick stranger was Christ-like, and certainly Christ-taught. It did not stop short even of trusting him with the loan of some of his own small and slowly earned savings. With that help Julian got to the China coast, and at the British Consulate at Shanghai had the luck that belongs to all travellers—he ran across an old acquaintance.

And the rest of the adventures of Julian—how with more borrowed money he started homeward by the Trans-Siberian Railway; how he arrived in Berlin on the very day Britain declared war; of his internment and subsequent escape—are they not written by himself in a book that was published in the winter of 1916?

One thing I can record about his homecoming. It is that I saw him at last take glad and eager possession of the castle-in-the-air that I had built for him so many years before. In other words, it was plainly Lydia, whether he knew it or not, whom he had most longed to see. He and I did most of the talking that first fifteen minutes, but his glance was straying to her all the time. She was as pale now as any fictitious fainting lady of the

fifties. Julian fell silent suddenly. His eyes dwelt broodingly on her face, and then he looked at me and then at Argent.

"Well? It's your turn now to give me news," he said. "Tell me first what's wrong."

"Wrong!" I temporized feebly. "What the—what do you mean by 'wrong'?"

"I'm not blind now, whatever I may have been once," he returned. "Do you suppose I didn't know, directly I stepped in at that window, that I was interrupting something very like a scene between you three?"

There was no help for it! He was one of those people that you cannot deceive, even for their own good. And, after all, he would have to know, sooner or later. But neither of the others answered, and when he said 'Well?' again, in the old impatient way, it fell to me, the looker-on, to enlighten him. I did it precipitately, avoiding so much as a glance for either of the two whom the revelation concerned.

"It's a misunderstanding of some sort. You see that book? Longwood's have just published it, and they told Argent that it was written by—Lydia! And it's good, Julian—so good that Miles believes the poems are not her own at all, but discarded ones of yours."

He heard me out before he turned, stern and incredulous, first to Lydia, then Miles.

"Upon my word! A very curious accusation!" he said coldly to the latter. "You must think yourself uncommonly sure of your ground to have brought it! And you. . . ." His gaze, half troubled, half questioning, returned to Lydia. "So you claim to be a poetess?"

She nodded, as a child might do, without speaking or lifting her eyes; she had knelt down and was gathering up—blindly, I think—the scattered petals on the floor. He scrutinized her for a

moment, and then crossed the room to the sofa and picked up the book that lay there.

"I will soon settle this question!" he said.

She looked up instantly then. Colour rushed all across her face. . . . And the impulse came to me to take a risk. She loved him better than any one in the world; and she thought she meant very little to him. Was not this, then, the moment of all others to show her she was wrong—if she were wrong? So I said:

"Stop one minute, Julian! Is that the only way you can settle it?"

He paused, met my look and caught my meaning.

"You are right. No, it is not——"

With her hands full of rose-leaves, she was standing close beside him, and he suddenly laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Look at me, child," he said. "Longwood's say you wrote this book. Do you say so, too?"

"Yes," she replied, very low.

"Then it must be true—that settles it. And now, for Argent's satisfaction, let us see. . . ."

The moments while he turned the pages, glancing here and there, were probably few, but they seemed endless before he closed the book.

"I see nothing here that I have ever seen or heard before," he said.

Perhaps you wonder what Argent found to say to her then. He found nothing at all. For once in his life he had made a colossal mistake. And his punishment was the knowledge that it was the sort of mistake that no apology can either mend or mitigate. Lydia need not have been afraid that he would put her to the further ordeal of listening to one from him. Yet it was she who extricated herself and him from any possibility of further speech together. She left the room with a leisurely

murmured word as to the necessity of telling Lady Corchester Who had come, lest some of the household, discovering its master's presence, should spring the good news too dramatically upon her. This time Argent did not follow her to the door to open it for her. But he watched her go, and when she had closed it behind her he took the opportunity she had given him and went away, too.

It was I, not Julian, who went out with him to the side door, where he had left the car. I stood by, and watched him get into his coat and do something to the lamps—in silence, since we are of the sex which knows that you make a bad thing worse rather than better by talking about it. It was dusk now. The garden wore the softly blurred effect of a charcoal drawing. But the sky was luminous with stars; the air hinted crisply of coming frost. And a little silvery sliver of new moon floated lazily on its back just above the trees. It was the uncertain light, perhaps, that made Argent's face, bent above the lamps, appear so set and strained. He straightened himself, and looked round him into the shadows. And something made me suddenly remember a night, years ago, when I had mentally said of him: *"He has refused to take part in a scene, but he knows he has been insulted. He won't come back."* Now it was he who had made the scene, and he who had offered the insult. And he knew it. But he only said to me:

"There's no place quite like it, is there? And now there's no longer any fear of its being on the market, thank Heaven!"

He turned round sharply, as though to include the house in that lingering valedictory glance. And as he did so the gleam of a lantern moving up the lane showed for an instant through the thinned leaves of the shrubbery. And I thought I heard him utter a stifled word.

"That must be the postman," he said aloud.

"I'd quite forgotten.—Look here, Drewe, there's a letter I wrote, before—I mean, I wrote to Miss Lisle this morning. I don't want her to have it. Get hold of it if you can and destroy it for me, will you, before she sees it?"

I opened my mouth to tell him there was no longer an evening post, but I changed my mind for no very coherent reason.

"Yes, I'll do my best—if it comes to-night," I said, instead.

"Thanks." He went round to the front of the car to start the engine, then opened the door and took his seat. "Good-bye," he called over his shoulder as the car slid forward. He meant me, I daresay, to take that good-bye to myself, but I knew better.

"Good-bye," I answered for Trimmer's Wood.

### CHAPTER III

## OF FERNANDE

"SHE hasn't stolen my poems. But I believe she has stolen my style," Julian said next morning.

"Or inherited it," said I.

But he was not listening to seemingly idle interruptions. He had spent the last hour in reading 'The Lost Dryad And Other Verses,' and now, leaning back in his chair, with his hands behind his head, and his pipe, which had gone out, once more alight, he was giving to Lydia the writer a consideration that he had never given to Lydia the mere girl.

"After all," he said presently, "she is not the first young author who has begun by unconsciously imitating some one else. And why not? All the other arts have their periods of training—years spent in learning the technical drudgery and conventions that individuality has got to be built on. But the would-be writer can only put himself to school by studying and admiring the right—or more often the wrong—people. It's the quality of his own natural literary instinct by which he really stands or falls. Individuality comes soon enough—too soon, as a rule. And for that matter, it seems to me that she's got something already in these poems of hers that I haven't—something I wish I had."

I nodded after a moment's thought, and then said :

"Perhaps. Only I think you did have it once."

"So you've seen it too? I might have known you would!"—He laughed, amused and interested, the egoist that is in every artist roused—"Tell me what it is, then, if you know; for I don't."

"How should I know, either? It's no more than an atmosphere. You could call it soul; passion; faith-in-humanity—no, none of those labels fit. They're too substantial."

"Passion?—You mean enthusiasm—splendid intolerance. But those are among the things one outgrows. You forget that I'm an old man now, Dick."

I did not answer for a moment. There was something I had made up my mind to say to him that morning, before I left. But there was something else that I meant him to tell me, first; and I meant him to tell it me of his own accord. An easy enough programme to plan; but in the fulfilment about as easy as that old problem about the horse and the water! Now, while I paused, I was asking myself whether here were a possible path to what I desired. To find out, I took one bold yet tentative step along it. I said:

"Tolerance may be only another name for disillusionment. . . . And did you become an old man, all of a sudden, when you were thirty-three?"

"*Thirty-three!*" It might have been some magically sinister number, from the startled violence with which he flung it back at me. "What the devil do you know—or think you know—about me when I was thirty-three?"

"Nothing," said I; which was not quite true. For I did know one fact, and I had guessed some more. "What I do know is, that for some reason (or none, if you prefer it), something went out of your writing that year and never came back."—And that, also, was not quite true. For the change had been less in his work than in himself, and it had been very subtle and hidden. In

making it my text, I felt like some charlatan fortune-teller who, primed with secret information, pretends to discover his subject's past in the cards or tea-leaves.

With an impatient movement he sat forward in his chair, muttering :

"Some reason—or none. And you jump to the conclusion that it's—the usual sort of reason, I suppose."

I replied with a shrug : "It doesn't require much 'jumping.' A man of your temperament isn't still a bachelor at fifty-seven because he's never yet come across any of those—'usual reasons,' as you call them."

"And you ! What about you ? Your temperament is no colder than mine !"

I let it pass. We might come to that again, presently. He did not press the point. It was his own past trouble, whatever it was, that filled his thoughts as he got up and took a restless turn up and down the room. He walked with his head and shoulders more bent than of old. In the morning light I could see, too, that his face was thinner and more lined, and his thick hair greyer than it had been a year ago. This last long adventure of his had left no iron in a soul that throve on adventure. But it had aged him, outwardly. Perhaps, too, it had broken down some wall of reserve between him and his kind. It is a fact, anyhow, that in another moment I found myself listening to a story he had never told any one before. He prefaced it by saying bitterly that it was a crude story—that it began with cheap sentiment and ended exactly like a *feuilleton*—not that he ever read *feuilletons* ! . . .

I learnt that he saw her for the first time in a Paris crowd. He was waiting for a break in the traffic to cross the road, and so was she—just in

front of him. Before he saw her face he was idly fascinated by the pretty ease and elegance of her poise and the way she wore her plain, rather shabby, dark dress and little hat. He could see the curved line of one cheek, too, and one small close-set ear, and a curl of dark hair. . . . Over her arm there was slung a large cardboard box. He took her for one of those thrifty, dainty, much-hymned Paris shop girls, and would have thought no more of her; but in the middle of the road Fate sent a sudden back-wash of traffic to confuse her. And in that moment of hesitation the box she carried was jerked off her arm and beneath a passing wheel. Julian, still close behind her, rescued it, and restored it to its owner when he had seen her safely over to the opposite pavement, close to the big station. She turned to thank him then, and her loveliness took his breath away. Her wonderful eyes smiled as she spoke, but there was something tragic behind the smile that touched him to a quite disproportionate pity—that pity which is so closely akin to something more ardent, no doubt.

She went into the station, and impulse made him follow her at a little distance, screened by the crowd. At the booking-office he was near enough to hear the name of the station for which she took her ticket. As she moved away he saw, too, that her eyelashes were wet.

Poor little *midinette*, crying over her spoilt finery, was she? . . . Unaccountably but persistently the remembrance of her came between him and his work, all that afternoon and evening. (He was doing a series of specially commissioned and quite well-paid articles just then.) It even came between him and his sleep. Two days later, calling himself contemptuous names, he packed a bag, and he, too, left Paris for that little place in the forest whose name he had heard for the first time forty-eight hours before.

It was a tiny place, consisting of a tiny church and a tinier *presbytère* and a few scattered cottages, and a slightly bigger cottage dignified by the name of 'hotel.' There were three guests at the latter besides himself. The first was an artist, who only put in fleeting and grudging appearances at meals. And the second was an elderly lady who was 'studying' something, and who, to look at, was the typical '*mees Anglaise*' of continental caricature—only she happened to be a Swede. And the third called herself Mademoiselle Lebrun. The dining-room was the only living-room of this little hostelry. The forest was your *salon*. And you talked with your fellow-guests as a matter of course. Julian and Mademoiselle Lebrun, introduced by Fate already, marvelled together, you may be sure, at the coincidence of this second meeting. On the third day she consented, granting the favour with an aloof, little gracious air that entranced him, to walk with him in the forest. On the fourth day, sitting under a tree, while a sudden shower pattered with passionless futility on the great branches overhead, she confessed reluctantly to him that she had really run away from Paris—that she was very unhappy. Reading between the lines, he gathered that she had an employer whom she had learnt to hate; and he guessed why and set his teeth. Like any love-sick boy, he was sure that no pretty woman should be allowed to work, except in the shelter of her home.

Within the week he told her what she, being a woman, of course knew already. And the passion of her surrender, when she put it into words, astonished and swept him off his feet as even her exquisiteness and charm had not done. Love?—Yes, but certainly! Other men, she admitted, had professed love for her before; but not . . . they were not like him! He had awaked something in her that

she had not even guessed was there—" *Me I adore thee!*" she whispered in vehement, soft refrain.

They were married, and he brought her to England, or rather to Wales. (Did I remember that summer he spent in Wales, because he had a play to write and wanted to be alone?) Well, he *was* alone—with her. They had agreed that they would not spoil those first months by sharing the secret with any one. (Was I sickened, by the way, with all this sentiment?—there was not much more of it, now.) But he did not write the play, or, at any rate, not much of it. He was living a play instead—a farce, had he but known it. You may guess—as I had to do, for he told me very little—what those three months were like. I gather that it was love in a literal cottage, with very little thought for the morrow. His earnings of the Paris articles were more than sufficient for this day of happiness. . . .

One evening she was pale and listless. For several days she had been unlike herself, too tired to be gay. To-night, when he questioned her anxiously, she would admit nothing but 'a quite little headache.' But presently she looked at herself in the glass and, smiling in mock despair, exclaimed: "But what an affair, my friend! I find myself ugly to-night. And if I grow ugly I shall be insupportable to thee. Thou wilt not love me any more!" And at that he gave her the assurance that thousands of men before him have given thousands of women, quite convinced, themselves, that it was true; it was not for her loveliness but for herself that he loved her—because she was good and pure—the sort of woman (and I am sure he said it with reverently lowered voice and glance) that a man would like to be the mother of his son, if he ever had a son. . . .

Next day he walked across the hills to the

nearest little town, which was seven miles away, to get some things they wanted. And—this is where we come to what he called the cheap melodrama—when he returned she was gone. The fire was burning, and the cottage neat, and the table set for supper. She had spared him none of the conventional details—not even the letter left for him on the mantelpiece. He read it. (Was it any wonder, he asked me, if it had altered his outlook on life?) He had once called her, in his thoughts, a pretty shop girl. But the name she gave herself was a far more slighting one than that. She told him that she was not good and pure. The letter amplified that statement with cruel and searing candour. She was not poor, either—she was shamefully rich. Lastly, and as a mere incident, she mentioned that some one else had married her, 'at the beginning,' when she was sixteen, and that she had no reason to suppose he was dead.

From first to last she had fooled and deceived Julian, you see, and for no better and no newer reason than that she loved him, and could not bear to lose him. But it was even less to be borne that he should go on thinking her 'good' and 'pure'—and the rest. . . .

That was what had hurt him so unforgettably, too—not the fact that she was a sinner, but that she had all along seemed a saint. He asked me whether I could ever have imagined it possible for a woman like that to wear her loveliness with so aloof and cloistered an air! And I said sombrely that I could. *That* was not quite true, either. If I had not seen, could I have imagined?

"So now you know," he ended with a rather harsh laugh. "There's the 'story of my life.' And I've kept up the rôle of the *feuilleton* hero in spite of myself. I am the man who has gone

about the world despising all women, because one woman once deceived him ! ”

I murmured something *banal* and inarticulate that was meant for sympathy. Then, because the contempt in his voice had seemed all for himself, I asked with diffidence :

“ Do you still despise them ? ”

He walked the length of the room before replying, and then said :

“ No—not now. I suppose I’ve outgrown that, too. You see—I was with those women on the boat, and I saw. . . . And then there’s the child—Lydia. . . . ”

“ The child, Lydia ? ” I echoed softly. “ Has *she* made some amends to you, then, for what—that other made you suffer ? ”

“ Yes. You know she has, thanks to you. ”

“ How should I know ? It’s the first time you’ve ever thanked me. You gave me very small thanks when I first brought her to you, seventeen years ago ! From first to last, Julian, your treatment of her has been a disappointment to me. ”

“ My treatment ? I’ve treated her kindly, surely ? She’s had all the rights and privileges of a daughter of the house. Her life’s been happy enough here, I hope. If she’d had a father of her own, what more could he have given her ? ”

“ He could have given her love, perhaps. ”

“ Love ! That isn’t made to order ! It wasn’t in the bond ! ”

“ No ? But it *was* in the bond that you were to leave her your money. Yet you’ve waited seventeen years—you’ve gone to the other side of the world more than once, running more than normal risks—without troubling first to secure her even such small provision as decency demands ! ”

His face changed at that.

“ Yes. I know. That’s unpardonable ! If it’s any satisfaction to you to hear it, I remembered

that when we were trying to fight the fire on the *Hesperus*; it was the last thing I thought of when the ship went down. And in the boat and on the island I used to tell myself that I must manage to get home alive somehow, to put it right. Afterwards, when I was sick in that hell of a coast village, I did draw up a rough sort of a will, in the hope that it might come through, even if I didn't. I'm going to Collins this very afternoon."

"I'm glad of that. I suppose you know that if she had actually done, for want of money, what Argent thought she had, it would be you who had driven her to it!"

"She would never have done it!" he exclaimed, so hotly that I instantly forgave him every sin of omission towards her. But I had set my heart on his saying far more than that. So I went on inexorably:

"You've made her of so little importance and interest in your life that you've never even wanted to know who she is."

"Well? What of that? You didn't want to know that either. You refused to hear."

"Yes. She was a child then. I forgot that she'd grow up soon and begin to ask questions—not of us, but of herself. Julian, we don't know what fears we may have left her to go through, alone!"

And I told him what she had said to Argent yesterday. In saving her from any suspicion of the bar sinister across her birth, we had managed clumsily to withhold, also, the extenuating circumstance of her gentle blood.

"You understand her far better than I do. You always have done," Julian said. "You should have adopted her for yourself, not for me. I offered to give her to you once, by the way—do you remember that?"

"Yes. I'm not likely to forget that you tempted

me as I've never been tempted before or since ! You hadn't even the grace to know how hard it was to refuse the offer. . . ." I got up and went to the window, where I stood for a little, looking out and seeing nothing. Presently I turned round and said to him :

" But if you offer her to me now, I'll take her."

He was still moving restlessly about the room, but he stopped short and looked at me, his brows knitted.

" Is that what she wants? " he asked sharply.

" Not that I know of. Is it what *you* want? "

" You know it isn't ! I deserve that question, just as I deserve all the things you've said about my treatment of her all these years. But they don't hold good any longer. You've wanted me to love her.—Well, I do love her now—as much, I believe, as though she were really *my* own child. I wish to Heaven she *were* my own."

" *Do* you? "

" Yes, but—if it comes to that, do you suppose I don't know that you wish, even more, that she were yours? And you've loved her all along. If it's a question of who deserves her, there *is* no question——" He broke off, and, as I made no answer, added : " You, at any rate, ought to have married and had children of your own. Why are *you* still a bachelor at fifty-seven? "

" Do you want to know? It's because I set my heart on something I knew I couldn't have. It's for the same reason as yours—yes, I'm saying it literally ; *the same reason*. I was like you ; I fell in love with an exquisite lady who . . . didn't Argent once call them ' ladies whose faces have been their misfortune ' ? "

" Like me, you say?—ignorantly? "

" No—yes. I knew who she was within the first half-hour. It didn't make any difference, except. . . ."

He was not listening. "What was her name?" he demanded in a quick, low tone.

"Fernande la Fère."

"What!" His hand, which had been on my shoulder in a sort of rough caress, dropped to his side. "*Fernande!* You, too!—You . . . ?" His eyes were searching me; his sudden silence was asking me an agonized question. I returned his stare and answered his question, in silence, too. And he gave a long sigh and moved away. . . .

You find it absurd, this excursion of two old men into the more passionate past? The average man, you say, does not so easily display the scars of an old emotion. It is true. But remember that I had deliberately and in cold blood manœuvred the conversation, to serve what I thought a necessary end. And the end was not yet here.

"Julian?" I said, breaking a silence that had become intolerable.

He turned round slowly.

"Well?"

"I do know who Lydia is. I didn't know it when I chose her out from among all those other children. But when the Mother Superior said you must be told, and I refused on your behalf to hear—*she* refused to take my refusal. . . . I'd have told you then, or any time, if you'd cared to know. I couldn't tell you as long as you only just tolerated the child's presence in your house! She's——"

"Well?"

"She's Fernande's daughter."

"*My God! And yours?*"

"No—yours!" said I.

## CHAPTER IV

### "WHEN LYDIA SIGHS"

I DO not know exactly when, nor how much, nor in what words he told her. That, at any rate, was not my business. My own reward for all the meddling I had done came the first time I heard her call him 'Father.' Though I had worked for that moment, I had dreaded it, too. For how should I answer the questions she would be most sure to ask? How could I tell her that her mother was exquisite, alluring, on the surface proud and sweet and cold—and not hint at all the rest she was? If she wondered why I had kept a secret all these years from the man whom it most concerned, I could not tell her that I was only waiting till I knew he deserved to know it! And if she asked me whether she were like Fernande, should I answer 'Yes, thank God!' or 'No, thank God!?' Either would be true.

But I need not have been afraid. 'I have no idea whether Julian had told her that I, too, had loved her mother. But I know that she knew it. That uncanny, clear-visioned sixth sense of hers told her. It was her fear of hurting me that saved me from the questions most difficult to parry. She only asked me one that in the least resembled any that I had expected of her.

"You knew them both," she said. "Am I like either of them?"

"Your eyes and hands and voice and movements

are like hers," I told her reluctantly, "and I suppose your mind is something like his."

"Like *His*?" Her smile was quick and amazed and glad. But it went out as I added: "I'm thinking of those poems of yours." It dismayed me to see how instantly she shrank away from the mere mention of the poems. But I pretended not to see. I continued lightly, yet in all seriousness:

"But the realest, nicest part of you isn't like either of them. Don't run away with the dramatic idea that I picked you out from all those other children because I saw a likeness in you to any one I knew. I didn't. I wanted to take you away with me the instant I saw you, because you were like yourself and nobody else."

She squeezed my arm in silent acknowledgment of the tribute, but said rather wistfully:

"All the same, I wish I were more like Him."

"'Him'?" I questioned teasingly. And I tilted up her chin that I might look into the eyes that were so like Fernande's.

"I mean—Father," she said in a whisper. And the smile dawned again.

That was the point where, so far as I was concerned, I might say my *nunc dimittis*—write '*Finis*,' and so leave them to 'live happily ever after.'

But filial devotion, in whatever degree reciprocated, is no more the beginning and end of the story in real life than it is in books. In those days, scanning the immensely swollen columns of marriage notices in the daily papers, I used to hope very fervently that Lydia, at any rate, would not meet and wed some young soldier in the hurry that was the order of the day. I should have liked her to marry my nephew, Bill Denyer, in some dim future, but not from admiration or glamour or excitement—what in my young days was vulgarly known as scarlet-fever. When love came to her I wanted it to go far deeper than that.

But if the girls of 1914 married in haste, their leisure for a possible repentance was often piteously short. Do you remember how thickly London was sprinkled with youthful war-widows in the spring of 1915? You saw them everywhere—slim, palely smiling nymphs in their 'teens or scarcely out of them, looking the more pathetic and childish for the incongruous, sombre livery. For many of them it must have been a matter of months since their pretty hair had hung down their backs. Now, from piquantly sorrowful little hats crêpe veils floated instead to the crêpe hems of their brief, narrow skirts. They wore their grief very gallantly, those young mourners for the gallant dead. And if few of them wore it for ever, that should surely be a reason to congratulate rather than deride.

Julian said that the rather pell-mell rape-of-the-khaki-clad in the early days of the war was the obvious and natural result of a starved patriotism. England has never been reckoned a military nation; but the militant spirit in her women sleeps so lightly that the first breath of war wakes it. Our women, from the first, were fretting to be mobilized—to stand, in some active capacity, shoulder to shoulder with the men who were fighting for them, whether in the field or the munition shops. Sewing shirts or knitting socks for far-distant fighters on sea and land did nothing to allay that un-sensuous fever. On the other hand, if you might not nurse a soldier, or, still better, *be* a soldier, the next best thing was to marry one! Then, at any rate, you might feel that you were lending—perhaps giving—England a man.

And, meanwhile, was there any feminine pity too great for the men who would, but could not, fight? Or any disdain deep enough for those who could but would not?"

I was walking along Whitehall with Miles Argent one morning in January, when an impudently

pretty flapper barred our way. A knot of red, white and blue ribbons fluttered at her breast, and she carried carefully a little box. Her glance passed my wrinkles and grey hairs by, and rested on Argent. As I have said before, women generally found him worth glancing at, but this minx seemed to see something repellent in his fine good looks. Her rouged lip lifted in exaggerated contempt. She opened her little box just wide enough to insert a finger and thumb, and, extracting a white feather, handed it to him in a delicate, brutal silence. If he was taken aback, he did not give her the satisfaction of seeing it. He accepted the insulting offering without demur, and even murmured a polite word of thanks. Nevertheless, glancing at him as we walked on, I thought that the incident had vexed him, as indeed it very well might. He caught my eye, and I said hastily :

"I wonder how long that indiscriminate sort of impertinence will be allowed to go on?" What I really wondered was why he, of all men, laid himself open to it.

He answered : "It will go on, I suppose, as long as there are idle young women with so little business of their own that they think they've a special mission to manage other people's."

"Or until all the men are in khaki who ought to be !"

He frowned at that.

"Half the people who get these things"—a sudden puff of wind came, and he let the scrap of white fluff float away on it—"deserve them, and the other half don't. Men who went out with the first Expeditionary Force are given them when they're at home on leave and in mufti! And I know a man who's been moving Heaven and earth unsuccessfully ever since August the fourth to get somebody to pronounce him fit for active service. The last doctor who overhauled him told him he had

about six months more to live. And he was hardly off the doorstep before some girl gave him a white feather—not the first he'd had, either ! "

I thought it over, and then, rushing in where no one else, except perhaps an ignorant, cocksure flapper, would dare to set foot, I said :

"But *you're* not on leave ; and you're perfectly fit ; and you're *not* moving Heaven and earth to get out to the Front."

He turned with a slight laugh to look at me. I should have been better pleased if he had been indignant. But he only said coolly :

"How do you know that—any of it? As the position is at present, they won't have me. I've applied for a commission more than once and been refused."

"Although you fought in South Africa ! Well, well ! However, it's the minority who get commissions straight off, nowadays, and quite right, too ! The rest enlist and work for them. Shall you? "

"No," he answered after an instant's pause. I made no comment, and presently he added :

"It's obvious, as somebody said to me the other day, that we'll win the war quickest, not by indiscriminately shoving every suitable and unsuitable man into the army, but by finding out the job every one's best fitted for, and putting him at that. I've come to the conclusion that perhaps I can serve my country in some more useful way than soldiering, in the ranks, anyhow. I'd make a very ordinary sort of Tommy. . . . I must leave you here, Drewe. I've got to see a man at the Foreign Office."

He stood still, and I stopped, too, and stared at him incredulously.

"What in the world do you want to be finer than an 'ordinary Tommy'—a fellow who does his duty and obeys orders whether they're possible or impossible?" I exclaimed. "And as for your 'somebody'—do you mean to tell me there are still

people who talk that obsolete sophistry—who think any one but the fool of the family is wasted on the Army? God bless my soul! Isn't fighting the job that every man who's physically and mentally sound is best fitted for by Nature, if he's worth calling a man at all——!" I stopped; not so much because I was ashamed of my vehemence—already the war was wearing the veneer off the speech even of smooth-tongued folk; how much more, then, from that of quarrelsome, meddlesome Richard Drewe?—as because the expression of his face was still not quite what I should have expected it to be. "I beg your pardon," I added, with more restraint. "I'm apt to forget that a man of my age isn't in a position to be criticizing a man of yours on such a point. You think, I suppose, that I've been talking what's called in these days 'hot air'?"

"On the contrary," he returned very civilly, "I was wondering why you don't tell me straight out that you think I'm suffering from what's called in these days 'cold feet'!"

I continued to regard him for a moment, and then said slowly:

"I suppose it's because I *don't* think it."

"Thank you," he answered, and suddenly smiled in the way that always makes my heart go rather grudgingly out to him.

Why, I wonder, are we not all taught the inverse, more difficult aspect of that trite saying that to understand all is to forgive all? I, alas! for my part, seldom pause to remember that where I do not understand I have no right to judge. I remembered it when Miles had left me. And I tried to make amends by assuring myself large-mindedly that he must have some very valid reason for remaining content with a civil life at such a time. But *was* he content? Looking back on his de-

meanour during our fifteen minutes' walk together, I was not so sure. I went mentally over our conversation, phrase by phrase. He had said: 'How do you know that—any of it?' carelessly indifferent as to what I might make of it. For that matter, I might even suppose, if I pleased, that some hitherto unsuspected disease had marked him down for rejection by the army. Perhaps the man of his story with six more months to live was himself? Absurd! No crock ever looked as he did! On the other hand, he had an appointment that morning at the Foreign Office. The somebody he had quoted might quite conceivably be translated: 'Somebody.' What if. . . .?

I was on my own doorstep by that time, in the act of slipping the latch-key into the lock. But a sudden thought arrested me, weighting all my consciousness with one grave question. It was a moment or two before I turned the key and entered. Then, as suddenly, I laughed. I was glad that, at any rate, I had had the sanity to tell Miles I did not really suspect him of the disease which an elegant modernity has named 'cold feet.'

It was a young man's war. The phrase was new then, and many of us resented it. Julian, for one, could not understand why grey hair and an occasional rare return of fever and eyesight a little the worse for wear should prevent a man from being a good war correspondent. The authorities, on their side, could not be expected to understand that great poets do not grow old. But if you strain long enough at a leash of red tape it will sometimes be slipped for you. Julian was at last allowed to go over to France for a visit confined between strict limits of time and place, and to write about what he saw there.

It happened just then to be one of Lydia's fortnights off duty. So she came to stay with me. I

had only seen her once since my nineteen hours' visit to Trimmer's Wood in October. And the change I saw in her troubled me—all the more because it was impalpable, impossible to describe in any terms of words. She did not seem exactly ill nor spiritless. She spoke and laughed and moved as usual. Easiest, perhaps, to say that something about her reminded me, more than it had ever done since, of the little girl I had first seen, long ago, at St. Monica's, who had been taught that all emotion is weakness—that you can conquer it only by allowing it no outlet. Now, as then, it was something in her dark eyes that betrayed her. I tried to tell myself that because she was the dearest thing in life to me I was unduly fanciful about her, that I saw more than was there. So you may imagine my annoyed concern when Surtees said one day :

"I doubt Miss Lydia's not herself, sir."

"Of course she's not," I snapped. "We're none of us ourselves, just now. We're the nation's selves, or we ought to be."

I am sure she said 'Hoots !' under her breath, but aloud she was all respect and mildness.

"I don't like to see her gettin' pale and thin."

"Nonsense ! She was always pale. She was never fat. Where's your memory gone? She wasn't any fatter a year ago than she is now !"

"Maybe not—I'm not sayin' she was. But she wasn't so thin. And she had a nice healthy colour in her lips, anyway. They're gettin' a white, pinched-like look now. It'll be a good job and no mistake, Mr. Richard, when we get them Germans told off, and the hospitals is all shut up and the young ladies is safe back in their own respectable homes at nights !"

"Miss Lydia doesn't do any night-nursing, if that's the notion you're tilting against."

"I'm not sayin' she does. But folks can lie

awake worriting in their own beds just as easy as anywhere else ! It's plain to me, Master Dick, that she's either ailin' or else she's got something on her mind—or, maybe, somebody."

That might easily be, alas ! In those days anxiety and strain were the portion of the young as well as of the old. And I knew that one man, at least, was fighting for Lydia in France as surely as any knight who ever went to the wars with his ladye's glove carried at his helm. If she were losing her sleep and some of her pretty looks for Bill Denyer's sake, I could forgive him and even be glad. But I did not think her trouble was quite of that sort.

A letter came from him while she was with me—no heroics in it ; not one hint of personal danger or adventure or 'shop.' But he told me at some length of the splendid 'rag' they had at mess on Christmas Day. He tried to describe the lacy loveliness of the carving on the west doorway of a famous, outraged cathedral. And he told me with curt, cold fury the story of some French refugees—an unspeakably tragic, monstrosous thing. Because of that last bit I did not give Lydia the letter to read. But I read the rest of it aloud to her, and from behind the page glanced at her, hoping furtively that I might see her colour quicken and her eyes light. But I saw neither—only a relaxed, softened look on her face as she listened. She sat with her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, and her brooding gaze on the knitting that lay idle in her lap.

I turned back to the beginning of the letter.

"There's a postscript written across the first page that I nearly missed," I said. "It's about you."

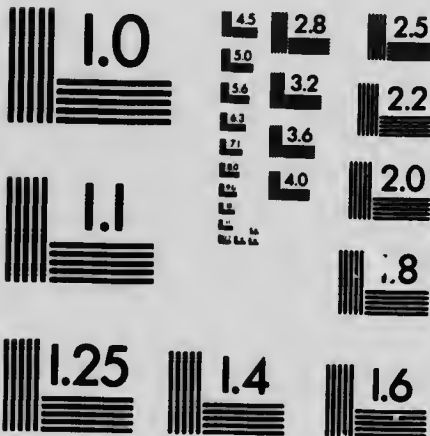
"About me?" She lifted her head with a smile—no more.

"Yes. Here it is : '*Every time I read Miss Lisle's poems I think them more ripping. It's not*



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*just because they're hers, either. And it's not only my own idea. My copy's been so much lent out that it's nearly coming to bits. Tell her that any one who can write stuff like that is really helping the people out here. I hope there's more of the same sort to follow soon. . . .* Is there?" I asked her gently.

She only shook her head. The new, tense look had come back to her little face. As for me, I fell to remembering a day at Trimmer's Wood when I had told myself that her soul dwelt apart in some radiant, secret place of its own. My guessing had not even skirted it. But that same afternoon the place had been raided, its treasure revealed and questioned and insulted. Yet, if any one had emerged triumphant and vindicated from that sorry episode, surely it was she. Then, why. . . .?

Troubled, I watched her take up her work again, and presently, not too abruptly, I said :

"Surtees thinks that you're either not well or else that you are worried about something."

That startled her.

"I'm not ill," she declared quickly.

"Something on your mind, then?"

"No—I mean, the war is on everybody's mind, isn't it? How can any one be quite happy, knowing that every single minute of the day and night dreadful things are happening?"

"My dear, if it comes to that, dreadful things have been happening, somewhere, every minute ever since the world began!"

"I know. I've often thought of that. Sometimes I've thought of it suddenly, in the middle of a game of tennis or when I'm waltzing. And then I've wondered whether God really means us to enjoy such things when there's so much suffering that we're not even sharing—much less helping!"

"Never wonder that! The opportunity to help and share is never very far off. There's more

than enough trouble to go round, always, Heaven knows! . . . And as for the war being on every one's mind--'I *don't* think!' as your friend, Miss Sells, would say. I met her in the street yesterday, walking between two *ultra*-temporary-looking officers, and she was telling them at the top of her voice that she was havin' the time of her life. They looked as though they were, too. Most of the soldiers do look as though they hadn't a care in the world, I've noticed."

"The soldiers--yes, but, Uncle Dick, isn't that just because they *are* soldiers? It's because they're doing the greatest thing of all. They've nothing to regret."

"Well, but you're doing your bit too, for that matter."

"Such a big bit!" she said with scorn. "But I'm not giving everything. I've lots of time left to think."

There was a note of finality in her voice which forbade, rather than invited, a question. So I let the subject drop. But I thought about her the more. What she had said of the war and its ever-present oppression was the truth, I knew, but was it the whole truth? I thought not. I guessed that she had her own private burden to carry as well as her share of her country's. And one's own is apt to be the heavier.

## CHAPTER V

### "*PER ARDUA AD ASTRA*"

ONE day Lydia and I had been to lunch with Lady Corchester and were walking home. The pavements were dry, with diamond-glints of frost here and there ; a few fine flakes of snow were beginning to drift slowly down. Lydia was reminding me of one of Lady Corchester's odd sayings, when her laugh suddenly broke off short, and I felt her press close to my elbow as she said, quick and low :

"Uncle Dick, don't let's stop, please ! I'm dreadfully cold. I'd like to get home quickly before the snow really begins."

I glanced at her, surprised, and was just in time to see the fugitive colour dying out of her cheek before she turned it from me. Looking straight before me, in search of explanation, I saw a man coming towards us, and saw that it was Argent. As for her, she completed her broken sentence, ignoring that slight hiatus, but kept her head averted till he was almost abreast of us. Then she turned it, and, with the air of recognizing indifferently some mere acquaintance, bent her head in a sedate, yet careless little gesture of salutation. It was very well done, though not, perhaps, quite well enough to blind him as to its significance. Perhaps it was not even meant to do so. Just for a moment I had thought he was going to stop. I am sure that was his impulse. But his eyes, as he approached us, were intent on Lydia's face.

Then his own changed, and he lifted his hat and passed on.

We, for our part, continued our way and our conversation precisely as though the encounter had not been at all. Neither of us made any reference to it nor to him. Is it not the lady who tacitly decides these matters?

She could not speak of the book, and she would not speak of Argent. Those were my data. And Surtees, who is not in the least clever, but only very, very wise, had once declared that 'bottling up feelings turned them sour.' The usual and euphemistic term is 'bitter,' and even I am wise enough to know that a secret bitterness is a more corroding thing than sorrow.

That night after dinner Lydia sang to me—gay little songs, for the most part, and sung with spirit. That was one of the things that was hurting me just then—that she was so resolute when in my company to wear her clouds inside out, as the rhyme has it—humouring the well-known sensitiveness of my sex to anything like tears or sighs. But I could have borne it far better if she had sung something heart-rending like '*Obstination*' or 'Tipperary,' even if she had broken down in the middle of it. So I was relieved, for once, when the pretty voice ceased and she shut the piano and came back to the fire.

'It is half-past ten—time for little girls to be in bed,' I said.

'Not quite. I think that clock of yours is fast, Uncle Dick.'

I laughed. "That's what you used to say when you really *were* a little girl; when you used to bargain with Surtees to let you stay for just one more story."

She took the bait instantly.

"Tell me one now," she said.

So I told her the story of the man with the one talent. When I had finished it she threw me a swift, startled glance; then, slipping down from her chair on to the fur rug, sat there for a little, silent and downcast. I could not see her face, but presently she said in a low voice:

"Why did you tell me *that*?"

"Because it occurred to me that perhaps you'd forgotten it."

"Do you mean you think it applies to me? Does the talent in the Bible mean just—a talent?"

"My dear, that is a question each one of us has got to decide for himself."

"I am doing other work."

"That's true. But it doesn't fill all your time, you said. You've still lots of time to think. Then why not think of more poems, and write them?"

She waited an instant and then answered with the inimitable little shrug that must have descended to her direct from her French mother:

"If I never wrote another line, the world wouldn't be any the worse off!"

"I'm not so sure of that. Besides, are you the one and only exception to the rule that an artist loves his art for its own sake—that it demands *must* be listened to and obeyed? Were you only thinking of the public weal and the public taste when you wrote about your lost dryad?—A pretty fancy that, Lydia, and better than just pretty—human and moving, too."

"No, I wasn't. I did enjoy doing it . . . then. But then. . . ."

"But then Argent came along and spoilt the whole thing for you with a few blundering, unjustifiable words!—Was that it?"

I saw her shrink away from the mention of his name, just as she had shrunk from that of her own work; but she let the question pass without assent

or contradiction. It was a conversation of very eloquent silences. With her shoulder still turned to me, she said at last in a small, strangled voice :

"You don't understand, Uncle Dick. I—I've always loved writing—trying to write. But now I think I hate it. You see . . . it was something that belonged to no one but me—I can't explain—I think it was something like a child to me . . . and——"

"And you mean to tell me that if you had a child, and some one hurt it, you'd turn against it too?—have nothing more to do with it! Then, upon my word, I don't think you deserve to be a mother at all!" I cried. And I put my arm round her shoulders to belie the harshness of the words. But she drew herself away, and, with a sudden, yet quiet movement, not unlike that of some graceful feline, twisted round in her lowly seat, so that now she faced me. She gave back my regard steadily and rather stonily. Do you remember how once, eighteen years ago, I had taken great pains to open the closed door of her heart? I felt, now, as though it had been shut in my face!

"That's what—he made me think that day," she said. And I knew that, for once in her life, 'he' did not mean Julian. "And if I don't deserve to be a mother, isn't it better that I shouldn't ever have any more children?"

I stared at her, not knowing what to say—or rather, how best to say it. Under the surface of my mind was the irrelevant thought that I should like best of all to see a real child in her arms some day. But I said :

"No, it isn't ; and for two reasons—your duty towards yourself and your duty towards your neighbour. Lydia, I'm a selfish, peppery old curmudgeon, but do you know what has been my most earnest wish and prayer, ever since I've known

you? It's that you may find happiness—the real, genuine thing.”

(The door seemed to open then, just a chink. She lifted her hand and laid it for the fraction of a moment over mine as it rested on the arm of my chair.)

“—But I'm only too well aware that you may miss it,” I went on. “Plenty of us do. It's such an elusive, tenuous thing, and the supply has never been anything like equal to the demand! And if you missed it, Fame might be your substitute—a poor one, it's true, but even so, a better one than is given to most people.”

“Fame?” Interest woke languidly, in spite of her. “Could I be famous?”

“I don't see why not. Those verses of yours, if I'm any judge, to say nothing of Julian, may have some of the faults of inexperience, but they are true poetry. The divine spark is there, right enough. You may live to be the Mrs. Browning of the twentieth century!”

She gave a little laugh, but sobered instantly.

“And my duty towards my neighbour? How does it affect *them*?” she asked, with grammar unworthy of a poetess.

“It seems to affect one section of them, at any rate, very inspiringly and consolingly,” I told her. “Do you forget Bill's letter?—How he said he had read and re-read your book and liked it better every time? And that he spoke for his brother-soldiers as well as himself?”

I told her, also, of an article I had lately seen in a literary paper, which said that the war, which was destroying so much that was fragile and beautiful, yet seemed to be putting poetry in its rightful place again—that it was no longer the medium of thought beloved and understood only by the few. The very Tommies in the trenches read poetry—and good poetry, too—to-day.

The door was really opening. Her breath and her colour quickened. She had not really turned against her own child. Presently we were talking together about books as eagerly and unself-consciously as two young mothers talk about their babies. . . .

"And you will go on writing, soon, if it's only for the sake of the men at the Front?" I said to her when we parted that night at the door of her room. And she answered, with a tremulous little laugh:

"I'll try—if it's only for yours."

It was soon after that that my nephew came home on leave. He spent the first and last nights of it with me, and a part of his first and last days at Trimmer's Wood. . . . And I saw him off at Victoria. The train was late in starting, and the station was full of fog and raw, early morning twilight, and the usual uncouth music discoursed by an orchestra of coupling-chains and news-vendors and milk-cans and piercing, shrieking steam-escapes. We walked up and down the platform, impatiently making our voices heard in the tumult of last-moment futilities. But presently, stopping and fumbling in his pockets for a match, he said to me in the lowered voice a short lull allowed:

"Uncle Dick, I asked her to marry me, yesterday."

"You did? Yes. And she said——?"

"She said 'no,' of course," he answered quietly, and struck a match. As he held it to the cigarette between his lips the flame lighted his face, and I saw that it was as steady and controlled as his voice and his hands. But that meant courage, not coolness.

"Poor boy. Bill, old man, I'm sorrier than I can tell you. I'd have liked—I'd rather it were you than any one."

"Would you, really? Thanks, Uncle Dick. But I'm no 'poorer' than I was this time yesterday. I knew all along what she'd say. That's why I left it till the last."

"Then, why——?" I began.

"A girl has a right to be told," he answered shortly.

A queer thing, chivalry! Its code changes as quickly as the changing generations. There was a day, we are asked to believe, when you carried your lady's heart by assault, theatrically threatening her extinction, or your own, as the penalty of her refusal. On the other hand, when I was young (it was rather a pinchbeck, artificial period in some ways), there was a polite maxim to the effect that if you aimed to be a 'true gentleman' you must not knowingly put a lady to the pain of refusing your hand—the pain being, of course, a purely hypothetical factor in the case. But now—'a girl has a right to be told'. . . . After all, the man best worth loving, or being beloved by, should be a man first and a gentleman second. . . .

"You will ask her again next time you're at home," I found myself saying haltingly.

"I'll do nothing of the kind," he answered quickly. "I'm not going to pester her into disliking me. I'd rather have her friendship than nothing at all."

"They say a woman's 'no'. . . ."

"I don't believe it!—Not in these days, anyhow, not unless a girl was rather weak—or not straight. You can't imagine *her* playing the coquette with a man on his way back to France, knowing that when he's there he's apt to be rather up against odds of sorts. No, it's final right enough, I'm afraid."

"'Odds,' you say!"—I looked at him quickly. "Bill, you'll run no unnecessary risks because of this? You'll not throw your life away needlessly?"

"You bet I won't!" His laugh was indignant as well as amused. "That sort of thing simply isn't done in the best circles nowadays! It's not considered cricket in this old war to throw away anything needlessly—not even your own life, and still less your machine. If a chap in any branch of the Service went in for doing V.C. stunts for their own sake, he'd get into no end of a row—and quite right, too! No, you'll see me turn up here again in another four or five months, with luck."

But I did not. A fortnight after he got back to his squadron I heard of his death. Somewhere above the clouds, five miles across the enemy's lines, he was terribly and mortally wounded; yet managed to bring back his blood-soaked, bullet-riddled machine into safety. . . . Sentiment, in this decadent age (we know it is decadent, because enlightened survivors from another have been insisting on the fact for years) may be taboo; romance, a thing to be tilted at with ridicule and irreverence. Heroism might be an indecent word, so carefully is it eliminated from the speech and thought of modern youth—*but* the thing itself lives, thank God, as lustily as ever!

I went myself to Trimmer's Wood to tell Lydia, thinking that perhaps 'a girl has a right to be told' such things, also. I showed her some of the letters my sister had sent on to me—kindly letters full of the usual kindly, sincere, set phrases. . . . 'The life and soul of the mess.' . . . 'One of my best officers' . . . 'popular with every one' . . . 'a loss felt keenly by us all' etc.

And Lydia cried, sorrowfully and admiringly and pityingly—not heart-brokenly.

That was a Sunday. And when I got home I went, as I often do, to evening service at the

Abbey. A famous divine preached a very simple sermon. I forget the text. There are a hundred that would have fitted the theme. So, equally, would the Airmen's own motto. England, we were reminded, was at her blackest hour. The dawn seemed very far off. Victory might never come. The danger was lest she should forget that beyond the darkness there was light—the ultimate purpose of God—the solving of the Great Riddle. . . .

And we sang 'The Son of God goes forth to war'—a hymn that has always seemed to me far too stirring to be set to the sighs of the meek and passive persecuted. Its measured swing suggests, rather, the rhythm of marching feet and the clash of defiant arms. To-day, with war so real, permeating, encompassing, the soul revolts against the idea of a 'tyrant's brandished steel' being met with bowed heads! The war, God knows, has had its martyrs no less than its soldiers—a long, immortal roll of known and unknown names. The things they suffered are considered too unspeakable for a sensitive public to be told in full. But I like to think that even these died resisting and reluctant. . . .

And the last verse my fancy dedicates to the Airmen—the gallant boys who, with a laugh and a jest on their lips and, perhaps, a shyer, more solemn thought in their hearts, go up so eagerly to meet Death somewhere in the clouds or the shell-torn darkness—climbing the steep ascent of Heaven—the difficult way to the star . . .

## CHAPTER VI

### ARGENT GOES DUCK-SHOOTING

ON a night in February, after a long day's work and an early, nondescript meal 'somewhere in Soho,' I had an impulse to go round to Argent's rooms, on the chance that he was there.

I found him in his bedroom, in the act of packing a small suit-case. He had just come in from dining with his Cousin Rose, he told me, having managed to get away directly the meal was over.

"Going out of town to-morrow?" I asked.

"No—to-night. A train somewhere about mid-night from Liverpool Street. This is awfully decent of you, Drewe; I'm delighted to see you. I shan be more than a moment over this, if you'll make yourself comfortable in the meanwhile. There are cigars on the mantelpiece in the other room, and the whiskey's in the dresser-cupboard."

"Thank you; I'm not in any hurry for either." I remained standing where I was, leaning on the foot-rail of the bed and watching him. Something lying under the suit-case, but none quite covered, caught my eye and arrested my interest.

"Liverpool Street," I mused aloud. "Is it permissible to ask where you're going and what for?"

"A small place up on the east coast—I don't suppose you've ever heard of it." He pressed the snaps of both locks down, turned the keys and withdrew them, then straightened up, adding nonchalantly and surprisingly:

"I'm going up there for a bit of duck-shooting."

"The deuce you are ! . . . I didn't know, by the way, that you shot duck with a revolver !"

That actually disconcerted him just for a moment. He stared at me, then laughed and said :

"Didn't you? But sport's not much in your line, after all, is it?"

"Perhaps not. But I've got a fairly mixed bag of superficial information—that's my trade !" I retorted.

"It's cold here ; come back to the fire," he said. And taking the suit-case off the bed he followed me into the next room, and put it down near the outer door.

Argent's sitting-room was one of the pleasantest, most comfortable places I have known. It had structural advantages, to start with, such as an Adam fireplace and a thick-walled window-recess rather like that in an Oxford college. It spoke, too, in an unostentatious way of its owner's catholic tastes. A tall book-case stretched across one wall. The others were nearly covered with sporting prints, proof-engravings, framed photographs of school and college groups, and *Vanity Fair* cartoons—stars of the legal firmament. The shelves of the oak dresser held some good blue china, and there was a fine oak settle, too, at right angles to the fireplace. And in all the odd corners of the room there were guns and fishing-tackle and rackets and foils and such-like. On the hearthrug an undersized fox terrier of no particular points or breeding slept dreamlessly. This was Kitty—except for Julina, the most intimate friend, I do believe, that Argent had ever had. You may remember that animals always adored him. This one had adopted him years before, when she was a stray and a puppy, following him to his home and insisting on making it hers thenceforth.

He had got out the whiskey and glasses and brought them over to the table. A book was lying there, open and face down, also a litter of newspapers. He picked up the book and tossed it on to a near-by chair, and the paper on the top of it. "Two fingers or three?" he asked me.

"One, please," said I, and he brought the glass over to me. I had the arm-chair beside the fire, and he sat in the corner of the settle. Thus we remained for a little in sociable silence, his absent glance on the flames, and mine on him. He was leaning back, his pipe between his teeth, and both hands lightly clasping the ankle that rested across his knee. He wore an old dark blue blazer, with a cardinal's hat on the pocket, over his dress-shirt. The firelight and the easy attitude, and the shabby coat with its adolescent associations, all combined to make him look many years younger than his actual age that night—just the type of man, I told myself rather ruefully, that looks its splendid best in uniform!

Kitty woke with a long, luxurious yawn and stretch, and trotted straight to her master. But presently, turning as though disturbed by something alien and hostile, she saw the suit-case, and must needs investigate. For a minute or two she sniffed unhappily round it, then came back to him; and, with her fore-paws on his knee and her reproachful gaze on his face, said to him with all the inarticulate eloquence at her command: "What is the meaning of it? Why didn't you tell me? What is it you're trying to keep from me?"

In sympathy with the dog's uneasy curiosity, I said suddenly:

"I've never somehow pictured people of your profession setting out on their adventures with prosaic, everyday luggage like that!" and I pointed to it with the stem of my pipe.

"People of my profession? Do you mean the Bar?"

"No, I don't! I mean this temporary job of yours that you and whoever's behind you think you're best suited for. I may as well tell you that I've guessed what it is!"

"Guessed wrong, probably."

"I don't think so. I can put two and two together as well as the average person."

He refrained from the obvious and time-hallowed retort, saying only:

"Kitty is pretty good at guessing too."

He took a drink and pushed the glass farther from him, thus making room for her to jump up on the seat beside him.

"There's no earthly need for you to fuss, old lady," he said, caressing her. "It's not for long, you know."

"How long?" I demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know—it depends."

"On the quality of the sport?"

"Quite!"

I pushed my chair a little back from the heat of the fire.

"Look here, Argent! This—duck-shooting we'll call it for the sake of argument—I've always understood that it's an exciting and interesting game if you're good at it, but most infernally risky and uncomfortable."

"It hasn't any discomforts to compare with the trenches!"

"You *have* compared it with the trenches, then, in your own mind? P'r'aps you'd even have preferred the trenches?"

"Yes—of course I should."

"Anyhow, its risks compare pretty evenly with those of the trenches. I suppose you'll admit it's dangerous?"

"If you like. Most sports are, if you're careless."

"—or unlucky ! . . . You're working in a fog as often as not, aren't you?—punting along in a horrid, squelchy mess that's more marsh than water? Suppose you *were* careless or unlucky—suppose things went wrong, in short, and there was an upset and you found yourself drowning in all that mud ! You couldn't either swim or call for help ! You'd be swallowed up and never heard of again."

His eyebrows drew together slightly.

"Yes, the mud's the damnable part of it," he said between his teeth. But a moment later he looked up with a smile.

"Why do you insist with such ghoulish brutality on my possible demise?"

"I had a fancy for letting you know I *have* guessed right, I suppose. And besides—you remember that white-feather incident? I said some unjustifiable things to you then. I've rather wanted to apologize to you."

He said, looking down at the dog and gently pulling her ears in the way she loved :

"I could have got a commission, I daresay, if I'd gone on importuning. And of course there was always the ranks. But they—that is——"

" 'They' is quite good enough for me. Well——?"

"I was only going to say, they brought a good deal of pressure to bear on me as regards this other business. They made out I'd special qualifications——"

"Precisely ! Such as a French accent like a Frenchman's and a German accent like a German's—and so forth !"

He lifted his glance for an instant, saying, half amused, half vexed :

"You *are* rather good at guessing."

"And the village I've never heard of and that

dapper suit-case are just red herrings, I suppose? Or does the village really exist, and is it a jumping-off place?"

"I wonder!" said he, and rose with a laugh. "If you don't mind, I think I may as well go and get into some other clothes now. Yes, you can come, Kitty, if you want to."

She wanted to, of course, and I was left alone. But the remembrance of his laugh stayed with me, reminding me vaguely of something Lydia had once said about the soldiers and the reason for their content. Perhaps it was not really the old 'House' blazer that gave Miles his look of youth that night.

I got up and strolled idly about the room, looking at the newest photographs on the mantelpiece and the latest additions to the book-case. I lifted the newspaper, too, to see what book Miles had been reading and left open and tossed aside when I came. It happened to be a small volume, called 'The Lost Dryad and Other Verses.' . . . He came in while it was in my hand, and disdaining any pretence of not having seen it, said:

"Has she been ill? I've been wanting to ask you that."

"She——?" I inquired, with raised eyebrows.

"Miss Lisle—or is she called 'Miss Tarrant' now?"

"She's called just 'Lydia' by her old friends!"

"So you've told me before."

"You mean you never aspired to be a friend of hers?"

"Do I? Yes—perhaps that's it." His voice was moody, illegible. "Has she been ill?" he repeated.

"Not that I've heard. Why?"

"I met her in the street again yesterday—no, I don't mean to speak to. And I thought she looked—I thought she was changed——"

"Towards you, do you mean?"

I saw with malicious satisfaction that that thrust went home. But he answered quietly :

"That, of course. That was to be expected. But apart from that—I've no right to ask, but—did your nephew's death hit her hard? Was there anything between them?"

"Only friendship, as far as she was concerned. On his—I suppose any one could see how it was with him! But he never had a chance, as he very well knew. No, they were only friends."

"I'm glad of that," said Argent.

He crossed to the fire and stood with his back to it, leaning against the mantelpiece in his favourite attitude.

"She hates me, I suppose?" he said shortly.

"I really couldn't tell you. I don't think I've heard her mention your name for the last four months."

And *that* went home. He bit his lip, then after a slight silence said :

"You're so good at putting two and two together. If I told you I—loved her, I suppose it would turn out that you'd known that all along!"

Once or twice before now he had contrived, in his careless, emotionless way, to tell me startling things. His manner now was almost as careless, even a trifle mocking, but it was somehow not emotionless. The matter, at any rate, was not! I could only stare at him stupidly for a few seconds, and then say, stammering for sheer bewilderment :

"All along? No, I certainly never knew that! You're not joking, are you? And what do you mean by 'all along'?"

He made a slight, impatient movement, and turned a little from me, resting one arm along the edge of the mantelpiece.

"I don't know—yes, I do. I mean just what I said—all along; since the very first time I saw her grown up. Do you remember that dance you

took her to? . . . No, it's not exactly a joke! It's more in the nature of a death-bed confession, if you like! You've been rubbing it into me that I may bungle my job and disappear from the scene. I don't admit the likelihood, of course, but it'll do as my excuse for boring you this once with my private concerns. Heart-to-heart talks aren't a vice I'm often given to, I believe.

"No, they are not," I conceded. "Miles, I—I don't know what to say. I'm amazed, but I'm tremendously interested too. You see, I——"

"You believed I disliked her, and that that's why I kept out of her way—at first. Well, I tried to believe that, too. You know, I've always thought myself cold-blooded—level-headed, whatever you like to call it. I had a vague notion that if ever I married it would be for deliberate, definite reasons. But at that dance——"

"The most un-original, wonderful thing in the world happened to you, and swept you off your feet, just like anybody else—was that it?"

"It happened to me six years ago," he reminded me with contempt that was plainly all for Miles Argent, "and I spent the first four of them in resisting and resenting it. All that time I hadn't the least intention of ever marrying her. If you call that being swept off my feet—yes, I was! . . . You needn't trouble to tell me that my attitude towards her has been an insult all along. I'm perfectly aware of that."

I hesitated before answering. I was trying to reconstruct the past, to adjust what it had seemed to what I now heard with bewilderment it actually had been. And I was able to say:

"It has been irreproachably civil on the surface, anyhow. And to be secretly afraid of a woman's charm isn't necessarily to insult her."

"Yes, it is. I'm not calling myself names for the sake of getting you to contradict them, Drewe.

What I'm trying to get off my chest is that I spent four years in telling myself that she wasn't good enough for me ! That can't sound any more insolent and inconceivable to you than it does to me . . . now . . . when I——"

His abrupt silence was more eloquent than any speech I ever heard him make, which is saying a good deal. There was all the passion in it, or I thought there was, that his voice and movements had always so admirably lacked. Hopelessness, too ; the very thing that Lady Corchester had once said would be so salutary for him. And I, in my folly, you may remember, had retorted with something about Ethiopians. . . .

Miles removed his arm from the mantelpiece, and very deliberately brushed the dust from his sleeve, remarking in precisely the same tone as he had used a moment ago :

"The person who theoretically keeps these rooms clean is a lady with no professional conscience whatever !—Have another drink, won't you, Drewe? "

I shook my head, and watched him go in a rather mechanical way to fetch the decanter and syphon, and put them back in the dresser-cupboard. He also shut the doors of the book-case, which I had left open. I spoke to him across the room.

"Not good enough for you, you said? You meant because of the 'Pawn-shop'?"

"Yes. And all it stood for—all I thought it stood for."

I nodded. I knew quite well all he had once been so sure the Pawn-shop stood for.

"I distrusted her all those first four years, but I couldn't keep away from her. I told myself it was Sir Julian I went to Trimmer's Wood to see. I knew pretty early in the day what had 'happened to me,' as you call it ; but I thought it was curable if taken in time—not to be named in the

same breath with what I'd always felt for him."

He came back to his old seat in the corner of the settle. The dog was curled there, watchful, not sleeping. She snuggled closer to him, only half content, knowing, perhaps, that if she closed an eye now, she might wake to find him gone. After a pause :

"Four years, you've talked of. Then what about the last two?" I said.

But he answered quickly :

"No, I can't talk about the last two, even to you. You've loved her and understood her always. But I—it's only in the last two years that I've learnt to know her. That autumn when Sir Julian went to the States and she used to stay with Cousin Rose, I saw a lot of her. And after the *Hesperus* was wrecked I set myself to try and gain her friendship. . . . But I didn't want her friendship. . . . I was going to ask her to marry me that day in October—the day Sir Julian came back."

"*That day!*" The memory of it was still painfully clear in my mind. "What in the name of reason do you mean?"

"Nothing in the name of reason! Haven't I explained how used I'd got to thinking Julian counted for more in my life than any one else ever would? Well, when I read those poems that morning, and was sure he'd written them, and then when Longwood's told me—what they did, I suppose it acted on me like a sort of metaphorical concussion! I forgot all that had gone immediately before. I only remembered that I'd always been sure that she would live to deceive and injure him in some way—and that I'd been right. And he was dead—not here to. . . . Oh, I can't explain! It's unexplainable, I know! I suppose no one ever made such a mad mistake as I did!" . . .

"You asked me just now what had changed her.

I think *you* did. You've set her the hardest task in the world—that of forgiving somebody who's never asked for forgiveness.—I take it you haven't asked for it?"

"I've tried—on paper ; a dozen times at least, and torn the letters up. I've set myself an impossible task, too. . . . What's the time?"

He looked at the watch on his wrist, and got up to compare it with the clock on the mantelpiece. While he stood there with his back to me, I said to him in a low voice :

"It seems to me you must have had rather a hell of a time—since last October!"

"Yes," he said quietly, "I've been most awfully miserable."

That answer, in its unadorned, almost boyish sincerity, broke down the last of my defences. Till now I had never been sure whether I really liked him. Now I knew. It was, besides, prodigiously interesting to have lived to hear Miles Argent, of all men, calling himself mad—mistaken—miserable!

"I'll have to be off in two minutes," he said, turning round. "You'll come with me to the end of the street, won't you? I'll get a taxi there. And, Drewe, I wonder if you'd mind taking Kitty home with you? I generally leave her with the man on the next floor if I'm away, but she frets a good deal, poor little brute. I'd rather you had her."

I said I should like to have her, and he got a lead and snapped it on to her collar. Then he put the wire guard on the fire, locked Lydia's book away in a drawer of the writing-table, and fetched his own overcoat. And I watched him, my heart heavy with the strangest medley of feelings. I should have liked at that moment to put some of them impetuously into words ; but that, of course, is one of the things which, as Bill might have said, is 'simply not done' between modern Englishmen.

The heavier and more solemn your thoughts, the lighter and sillier must be your speech. That is the rule, and it is seldom broken. So, looking at Miles, and asking myself forebodingly whether I should ever see him again, I said with mock gravity :

" You don't go disguised as a tramp or an elderly clergyman from the start, then? "

And he replied in the same tone :

" Not from the start. My false beard and the grease-paints are in the suit-case ! " He picked it up as he spoke. " You'd better go down those first steps before I turn out the light. "

We walked the length of the street in silence, but as the taxi he had hailed was tacking across towards the kerb, he turned to me and held out his hand.

" Good-bye, Drewe, old man. "

" Good-bye—no, I'll say it in its proper form for once ! ' God be with you, ' Miles. And good luck. "

" Thank you. " He got into the cab, let down the window quickly and leant out, saying :

" If it *shouldn't* be good luck—if I don't come back, tell her—— "

But I could only guess what I was to tell her, for the taxi slid away noisily just at that moment, taking him and the end of his speech with it.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE CASE FOR THE DEFENCE

LYDIA and I walked one morning in the garden at Trimmer's Wood. It was spring, lilac and wall-flower scented ; a lark climbed, singing, up the infinite blue. The sun, pouring through immature foliage, made the wood a luminous green and golden glade—green of young beech and gold of budding oak. From a distance above and beyond the lark came faintly the raking, harsh insistence of an aeroplane engine ; a reminder, if you should be in need of such, that though all this fair prospect pleased, man was still very vile.

The wood was so well fortified against a marauding civilization, that it had its actual carpet of bluebells—we call them wild hyacinths in Northumberland. Lydia had picked an armful of them to put in the blue china bowls in the hall. Now, on our way back to the house, we paused by mutual consent beside the pond. The paths that edged it were edged in turn with deep, gorgeous tapestries of rock-flowers. Under the surface of the water a patch of ruddy-orange hung motionless in a dark-green shadow. That old carp might have been the reflection of one of the red-hot-pokers that would later flame, perhaps, among the ribbon-grass. The thought struck a reminiscent note in me. I looked at Lydia. She had seated herself on the stone that jutted from among the rock-flowers. Behind her, a laburnum flaunted its yellow tassels.

The bunch of bluebells lay on a tussock of purple aubretia. Among all that riot of growing, glowing colour she seemed the only wan and lifeless thing.

Something made me think of Argent just now," I said. "Have you or Julian seen anything of him lately?"

"I haven't," she answered evenly. She had learnt by now not to start nor wince nor flush at the mention of his name. But I reflected, not for the first time, that the young softness which had gone out of her face on a certain October day had never quite come back to it.

"Neither have I—not since February. He told me then that he was just off to shoot duck."

"What?"

I had used my statement as certain advanced physicians use a galvanometer, and it had succeeded. That 'What!' of hers, eloquent of so much behind it, was torn from her against her will.

"No, he's not in khaki yet," I said, in answer to her thought. "But—you remember that day he came over here in October, when he——"

I saw the hands she had loosely clasped round one raised knee tighten.

"You ought to know I'm trying to forget it," she exclaimed, goaded to irritability. "I don't want to talk about it—ever!"

"And you call that trying to forget it! Putting away an ugly or disagreeable or terrifying thing in a cupboard in the room you're living in, and locking the door, isn't *forgetting* it!"

Her eyes, lifted to mine for one instant, told me she had found that out. They were still the dark, beautiful eyes of her childhood, where mystery seemed always hesitating on the edge of impulse, and always withdrawn.

"Perhaps it's myself I'm really trying to lock up in the cupboard," she murmured, with an admirably airy little laugh. "I suppose I must

have been rather—rather fond of myself before—that day. But you couldn't go on being very fond of any one who could seem—the sort of person he made me seem then." (Once again I knew that 'he' did not mean Julian.) "I'm like a sort of ghost that I can't get away from."

I stared at her helplessly for a moment, then fell back on man's last resort and retort when he is fighting a losing battle for a woman against herself.

"You're too introspective," I said.

"No—*re*-trospective," she corrected me gently. "But I've told you, I'm trying not to be. I never meant you or anybody to see—anything." The end was on a rather piteous note.

"I didn't see—I felt it, because I love you. . . . Look here, Sweetheart, you're sensitive, and that's a splendid thing to be, within bounds, because it means that you're a more perfect, finely balanced instrument than the phlegmatic, thick-skinned sort. But to cultivate over-sensitiveness, consciously or unconsciously—that's to ruin the instrument!—make it of no use to anybody!"

Her lower lip had been caught between her teeth as she listened. She released it to say, in a very small voice:

"Can it ever be mended—when it's once spoilt?"

"It can be mended with a tonic," I answered, shamelessly changing the metaphor.—The faint smile that momentarily tilted the corners of her mouth was surely a healthy sign.—"Treat yourself with good, strong doses of common sense. It's an old-fashioned remedy, but there's nothing like it, after all. Remember first, that Argent is a lawyer—a person, that's to say, who theoretically believes every man innocent till he's proved guilty, but who actually and automatically believes precisely the opposite! Remind yourself, too, how very well prepared you were for what happened. You always knew him to be—what was it? Not

exactly conceited, but far too confident ; too sure of himself and his own opinion, and sceptical of other people and theirs. After all, it's not as though you'd lost anything of any importance. It's not as though you and he had ever been friends. And as for that day in October, *you* had the best of that. Your opinion of him was amply justified, and as for his of you, as he showed it then, it was valueless, because it was mistaken. You have a right to be angry, but you have no need to grieve."

She got up, reaching for her flowers with a rather blind, groping movement.

"The bluebells will die, if I don't put them in water," she said.

I let her go back to the house alone. I was not pleased with myself. When you set yourself to probe for the iron in a friend's soul, it stands to reason that you must give pain. But to probe and hurt and still find nothing—that is surely unpardonably cruel and clumsy !

I followed her, ten minutes later. She had finished arranging the flowers, but was still in the hall, gathering stalks and leaves and dead débris into a newspaper. This she carried away ; then ran upstairs to wash her hands and take off her holland apron. When she came back I was sitting in the window-seat, looking at *Punch*. She crossed the hall slowly and stood in front of me, and spoke to me rather breathlessly :

"Uncle Dick, I've been thinking about—I mean, I can't bear you to think me worse and sillier than I am. You don't understand. It wasn't like what you said, just now. We *had* got to be friends ; I mean, I thought we had. And I *wasn't* prepared ; I ought to have been, I suppose, but I wasn't. I had a letter from him—from Mr. Argent, just before. He said I should know why he was coming. But

somehow I never. . . . Look at it, and say if you think I should have known ! ”

While she spoke, one hand had been hidden in a fold of her skirt. Now I saw there was a letter in it, which she was holding out to me.

“ You mean I’m to read this ? ”

“ Yes.”

I took it from her. I had seen it once before—had, indeed, wasted a certain amount of wonder over its unknown contents. Later I had forgotten all about it.

It was very short. It had no formal beginning, but ran something like this :

*I must see you. There is something I want to say to you. I think you must guess what it is. I shall manage to get to Trimmer’s Wood, somehow, to-morrow morning at latest. But I will try all I know to make it sooner. With luck I might even get to you before this letter.*

*I am, yours always,*

MILES ARGENT.

I remained with my eyes on the words for a much longer time than the actual reading of them took me. It was a short note, but, even so, it was unnecessarily long. The gist of it was all in the last six words ! If Miles had not already told me his secret, this letter of his would have told it. As for her . . . I wondered whether she, too, at last, was consciously or unconsciously giving away a secret—THE secret. While I wondered, I heard her saying :

“ If this letter had been yours, would you have guessed ? ”

I did not look at her as I answered :

“ I certainly shouldn’t have guessed from it that he was coming to say—what he did say.”

I folded the letter and gave it back to her. She took it—hesitated a moment, then tore it into tiny

bits and dropped them behind the ferns that filled the empty grate. There seemed something symbolic and final in the action. I could see that she was trembling as she turned to me again.

"I know what you're thinking!" she faltered. "You are wondering how I can be so morbid and self-centred as to worry about a—I suppose it's really quite a little thing—at a time like this, when other people are suffering real, terrible things, and the soldiers——" She stopped suddenly, as though some significance in the last word had silenced her.

"You are wrong," I said. "I was thinking something quite different. "But I believe I see what you mean. Tell me—if some man now fighting had once offended you very badly, should you still go on feeling bitter against him?"

"Bitter? No, I shouldn't dare. He might be dying—or dead. A soldier is always in danger."

I nodded. "That's so. May I smoke? Thank you." I was filling my pipe with deliberation, and when it was ready I got up and slowly crossed over to the mantelpiece where the matches were. I got one out, struck it, and used it and threw it behind the ferns; and with the most glorious, overdone detachment I have ever achieved in my life, remarked:

"For that matter, I suppose Argent is in as much danger of dying at any moment as any soldier of the lot of them!"

Not the probe this time, you see, but the galvanometer again! I glanced at her, and thought what a clever fellow I was getting. I glanced at her again, and thought she was going to faint. Then I put down the pipe on the corner of the mantelpiece—you do not need, I suppose, to be told that I had never wanted one less—and going to her, lifted the cold little hand that hung by her side.

"You're *not* selfish nor morbid. You're all that's

plucky, and I've bullied you shamefully. But you know there's only one way to treat ghosts and skeletons, and that's to take them out of their cupboards and have a good look at them, and air the cupboard. That's why—— "

She was not listening.

"What did you mean just now? " she demanded in a whisper.

"Wait one moment, and I'll tell you. Come and sit down here." I drew her over to the window-seat. "I've known for a long time that that affair of Argent-and-your-poems was on your mind, and it puzzled me why you should have taken it so hard. Now I'm beginning to understand. There are two reasons, aren't there? The first is that you can't forgive yourself for the shock it was to you—*'for it is not an open enemy that hath done me this dishonour: for then I could have borne it . . . but it was even thou my companion.'* . . . Was *that* the sort of thing? "

She was still not listening. If she had ever been in danger of losing herself in a maze of which herself was the centre, that danger was passed.

"What did you mean about—him? " Her voice was sharp with pain and fear.

"I'm coming to that. Lydia, darling, you must listen to this ; this bears on it. The other reason, I take it, is that you can't forgive Argent for standing aside and doing nothing when his country is in trouble. Tell me—in the days when you didn't like him much, before you thought of him as a friend, did you ever think him a coward? "

"No."

"Then why do you suppose he didn't join up when all the other men you know did? "

"I—don't know."

"Neither did I, till four months ago. He told me then it was because he thought he could serve England in some more useful way than fighting."

"More useful!" Disdain, instant and revivifying, coloured her voice now. "Doing his ordinary work, did he mean?—'Business as usual'? I hate that sentence!"

"I'm certain Argent hates it just as much."

"Then what did he mean?"

"He didn't tell me. But I guessed. Can't you?"

"No. How should I? Tell me, Uncle Dick, please."

"Think a bit! He's got courage, coolness, resource, to say nothing of brains. And he speaks French and German without a trace of foreign accent, so I'm told. In what way could all that be most useful?"

There was an instant of dead silence.

"*A spy?*" she said then. "Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. But why call it that? 'Spy' is such a sly, mean, skulking sort of word, only fit to give an enemy. It suggests a person who spends his time listening at keyholes and opening other people's letters. Is that what you're thinking?"

"I—was thinking it would have been far better to have enlisted."

"It would have been far easier!—And the most frightful waste of material. The men who work for the British Secret Service in war time need every soldierly quality, and a good many others as well."

"Do you know where he is—what he is doing?"

I shook my head. "As somebody once said: 'The most secret thing about the Secret Service is its secrecy'—or words to that effect. I know nothing. And if we win the war, and if Miles comes through, I don't suppose we shall know much more then. Persons who do gallant deeds are so annoyingly reticent about them!"

"*Gallant deeds?*"

"Are you as conventional as you seem at this

moment?" I exclaimed with considered impatience. "Can't you recognize a brave man unless he's decked out in laurels and pageantry? Look here! Suppose Miles *had* enlisted. And suppose he had risked his own life in some special way—in carrying a wounded man out under fire, for instance—shouldn't you admire him for that?"

"Yes—of course. Shouldn't you?"

"Certainly! But now, listen. A soldier goes into battle surrounded by his comrades. When he's not fighting he's one of a very merry crowd. And he's always in touch with home. His country is at his back whether he's sick or wounded or dying. If he dies he is buried with honours. If he's taken prisoner his country still watches over him to the very utmost. . . . But a spy—we'll stick to your word—works not only in difficulty and danger, but in absolute loneliness, and surrounded by enemies. His country says to him: 'See here; if you do this or that for me successfully, I'll pay you well, but you mustn't expect public recognition of your services. And if you get into trouble you mustn't come to me for help. I wash my hands of you if you're caught.' And you know—Lydia, you do know, don't you?—what happens to a spy, if he's caught!"

I had said the last words gently and very low. But the answer she made to them was almost inaudible. It came from behind the slender hands with which she had covered her face.

When the probe has found the iron—when the galvanometer has revealed the secret hurt—then is the time to employ softer, more merciful methods.

I left her alone for a little—even crossed the room to retrieve and re-light my pipe. Without the slightest attempt or comprehension, I read half a page of *Poetry*. But presently, looking up

and seeing that her hands lay in her lap again, I spoke to her.

"Argent gave me a message for you, just as he was leaving for—whatever his destination was."

"A message! For me? What was it?"

"That's just what I can't tell you." And I explained. "And, in any case, it was only meant to be given in certain contingencies. But there's something you may like to know. We were talking about you—we talked a good deal about you, that last night—and he told me he'd tried, over and over again, to write and ask you to forgive him for his mistake; he called it a mad mistake—but had torn all the letters up. I suppose he thought it was impossible you could forgive him. He said, too, that he'd been miserable ever since October. . . . I'm telling you these things for what they're worth."

But I did not look at her, nor wait to see what they were worth to her. I threw *Punch* on the table and knocked out my pipe, and without any effect of undue precipitation, I flatter myself, sauntered across the hall to the outer door. . . .

## CHAPTER VIII

### "WHEN TO COME BACK . . ."

DURING the summer of 1915 I used sometimes to wake up in the fine, cool dawns and wonder whether at that very moment, perhaps, Miles Argent were being marched out to face a firing-squad, somewhere. Only a year ago what a far-fetched, fantastic notion that would have been. But now it was only a matter-of-course part of the crazy pattern with which Fate was erasing civilization.

Lying awake, I used to find myself wondering, with a queer, impersonal sense of unreality, what that early-morning adventure would feel like, if you were the principal performer. Not much worse, on the whole, I dare say, than having to watch the slow approach of death from the pomp and circumstance of your own sick-bed. Possibly, even, a little less terrifying than a visit to your dentist . . . unless every one of those rifles blundered.

I think the difficulty and the unreality came of the effort to fit so finished a product of modernity as Miles into a scene so crudely violent. . . . An adjective with which, in the old days, certain covertly-admiring reporters were fond of qualifying his unruffled demeanour in court rather haunted me just now. The word was 'insolent,' and it was a gross misfit, just as you might expect from the limited, reach-me-down vocabularies which produced it for lack of a better. But now I recalled it with a certain rather shamefaced zest. If, by some

mischance, the last honourable ignominy of his temporary calling should be Argent's fate, I hoped his manner of meeting it would strike those German marksmen just like that!

And at this point I very often smiled a little, and turned over and went to sleep again—not, I ask you to believe me, callously. You surely would not have me insult Miles by my pity! 'Sweet and decorous' seems a phrase too gracious and gentle to use for the sordid brutalities of modern warfare. But I suppose the privilege of dying for your country remains the same, whatever the circumstances.

But when I thought of Lydia—that was different. Wondering whether she, too, was wakeful in the short, summer night, I used to tell myself passionately that Argent *must* come back, if only to finish that unfinished message of his. It was unthinkable that his last words on earth to her should be the ones he spoke that day in the library at Trimmer's Wood.

I hardly ever saw her now—or Julian, or any of the people I knew best. We were all so busy in our several ways. As she had once said, the war had a way from the very first of keeping you apart from those you most cared for.

But in September she came to stay with me again for a few days. Julian was away, and her hospital was not needing her. This time not even Surtees made any comment on her changed looks. The 'strain of the war'—the strained expectancy on most faces—those were among the things we had come to take for granted now.

But although—or even, perhaps, because—the change in Lydia which had been impalpable eight months ago was now more definite, it did not trouble me as it had done then. For one thing, she no longer made that heart-breaking effort to speak and

smile, or sing about the house, just as though nothing were wrong with her. A veil had been torn down between us—not the last veil of all ; but perhaps the last but one. We did not say anything in words to one another of what was most in our minds in those days. There was no need. We said it all in our frequent silences.

In the mornings, when I had to be out, Lydia used to take Kitty, the little fox-terrier, along the Embankment or into St. James's Park for exercise. My two guests got on well together from the first. I used to fancy that Lydia came in from those walks wearing a softer, serener look. I could almost believe that she talked of her fear in actual words to Kitty. If you are lucky enough to have won a dog's love and sympathy, it is a splendid confidant. It will never betray, nor argue, nor interrupt with the depressing treatment known as trying-to-cheer-you-up. It only understands, and mourns with you. And poor little Kitty was mourning on her own account, I have no doubt.

One evening after tea we were sitting in the firelit dusk, just as we had done hundreds of times before, I in my arm-chair, and Lydia half kneeling on the fur rug. The dog was curled on a fold of her skirt, drowsily restless under the slow, caressing movement of her hand. We had been speaking last of some long-ago happening—nothing of poignant or personal interest to either of us. But for five minutes neither of us had said anything at all. And it had grown too dark to read, and we were in no humour for lights. Suddenly Lydia said in a perfectly steady, colourless voice :

"Uncle Dick, I suppose it is practically certain now that Mr. Argent is dead?"

"Dead ! No !" I exclaimed, with the more vehemence because at that very moment I had been

thinking that very thing. "What makes you suppose anything so senseless?"

"You saw him last in February, and now it's September, and no one—not even Lady Corchester—has had a word from him, or heard anything of him, since then. If he's really doing what you think——" She stopped, and I hastened to fill the break:

"You didn't suppose he was going to keep up an animated correspondence with all his friends and relations, did you? Or perhaps you thought he'd send a wire once in every while—to Lady Corchester, say, from Brussels: '*Arrived safely. Comfortable journey. Have my eye on Von Bissing. Expect go Essen Friday night.*' . . . Something of that sort!"

It was a paltry, painstaking attempt to make her smile, however reluctantly, and it succeeded. But the smile was very faint and momentary. She said:

"All the same, I can't help thinking some news would have come if he were alive." She turned towards me quickly in the dusk, and added: "You think that, too, in your secret heart!"

"Nonsense! I don't! Of course, I don't!"

But I did, and she knew it.

Kitty had stirred, ears pricked, as though at mention of the beloved name. She was making queer little whimpering sounds that seemed to question us. And Lydia leant down to whisper:

"And you, Kitty? Do you think that, too, or do you know something we don't?" And as the little dog turned towards her voice, she pulled it into her arms and held it closely there.

Her eyes went back to the fire that had burnt to a dull, red glow. Presently she said, speaking low and slowly, as though in some involuntary communing with herself, rather than with me:

"When I was little I used to make up stories—no, they were more pictures—in my mind about

him. I imagined some of the men in stories and history like him—St. George and Absalom and Paris and the Young Pretender. . . ." She gave a little, choked laugh at the oddly assorted company. "Do you remember the first time you ever told me fairy-tales—in the wood, soon after I came from the convent? There was one about a prince ; you took great pains to explain to me just what a proud, splendid, handsome prince should look like ; and when we went back to the house Mr. Argent was just driving up to the hall-door. I thought he must be a prince—the very one you had been telling me about, and when he said I could ride round to the stables if I wanted to, I *did* want to dreadfully. But I was far too shy. . . . And, Uncle Dick, you know when you came to see me at school I said to you that I supposed by then he was fat and bald? But I knew he wasn't. I'd seen a portrait of him in a picture-paper only the week before. . . ."

Her voice went out in silence. It was the nearest she had ever come to lifting that last veil of all. But it was enough. It was a child's untrodden garden, then, of which Argent had taken ignorant possession, once and for all ! I wondered how long *she* had known it.

That night I had a late appointment of some importance with a man who was passing through town. Lydia was dining with Lady Corchester, and as I did not know how long my own errand might take me, she was to be sent back alone in the brougham—not a moment later than half-past nine ! For Lady Corchester—who, mark you, had herself been branded 'fast' by the Victorians--would not budge an inch from her condemnation of the modern girl's fearless habit of adventuring alone, anywhere and at any hour, afoot or awheel.

As it happened in the end, I could have fetched

Lydia home myself, for my man rang me up to tell me that he had to leave London that evening, and to propose that we should therefore dine together at his hotel and get through the business while we ate.

Even so, it took us all our time. We only finished the discussion outside on the steps of the hotel entrance, while the taxi that had been called for him ticked away twopences impatiently by the pavement.

When he had gone, I remained for a few moments, standing there indecisively. A boy ran up the steps with the latest edition of the evening papers. I bought one and turned back into the hotel to read it. As I opened it, a man came out from a curtained archway opposite, and crossed the hall to the letter-box. . . . If I had been a Frenchman, I suppose I should have rushed to him—embraced him—greeted him with ecstatic incoherencies out of my great relief. As it was, I dropped my paper somewhere, and took a few quick steps forward to intercept him, exclaiming:

"Hullo, Argent! You're back then, at last!"

And all *he* said was:

"Drewe! Why, what luck! What are you doing here? Look here, have you dined? Yes? Then come in here. It was empty when I left it just now."

He led the way through the curtained-off lounge and into a small writing-room beyond it, where there were arm-chairs and a fire and no one using either.

"When did you get back?" I demanded. "And is it for good? You're not staying here, are you?"

"Last night. I may have to be off again in a couple of days or so. Yes, I'm stopping here. It wasn't worth while going to my own place, and the club is too full of inquisitive people. I've

just this minute been writing to you, Drewe. I wanted to see you before leaving town again."

"I should hope so, indeed!—What has the sport been like, by the way?"

"It's been all right—a bit boring at times." His tone made it clear that he was not to be decoyed into talking 'shop,' even in obscure or flippant terms. "Drewe, how—what are they all doing at Trimmer's Wood?"

"Just carrying on, like most other people. The gardener's two boys have enlisted. And Julian is doing something at the Admiralty just now. But perhaps you knew that?"

"No. And—?"

"Lydia? She still nurses at Conyngham House every other fortnight."

"Is she—quite well?"

"I think so. She doesn't complain of anything. . . . Miles, do you mean to go away again without seeing *her*?"

He did not reply for a moment, then said:

"I've no more reason now than I had before to suppose she'd care to see me."

I, too, hesitated. It was not for me to give him a reason—or, at any rate, not the best reason of all.

"There's something, by the way, that perhaps I should have told you sooner," I said. "You know that day you were at Trimmer's Wood last autumn—the last time you were ever there, I believe—when you left I went out with you to the side door? We were standing by the car when a light went down the lane that you took to be the postman's, and you asked me to keep back a letter you'd written to Lydia early that morning before you'd read the poems."

"Yes—well?"

"I happen to know she'd had it already, that's all. The post comes in about tea-time, now. I

saw Merriman give her the letters, and I saw your handwriting on the top one."

"Good God!" said Argent. It was about the only time I ever heard him shocked out of his self-control.

"What did she—I mean, how did she——"

"—take it? You want to know what she did? Let's see! She poured out the tea just as usual, so far as I can remember, and sped some parting guests, and went up to see Lady Corchester. But I fancy she must have read her letter in her own room. When she came down again, I overheard her tell Merriman that if any one called and asked for her, she would be in the garden. It was down the garden that I found her, if you recollect, when you sent me to fetch her."

This time he did not say anything, but got up and went across to the window, and with a quick, rather violent movement, as uncharacteristic as the sharp exclamation of a minute ago, pulled one of the heavy curtains back, regardless of possible lurking 'specials' in the street. I understood. The night outside was very black, and there are things which are so much easier to see in the dark. . . .

"I suppose you never—saw the letter? She never mentioned it to you?" he asked, after what seemed an interminable silence, without turning round.

It is the easiest thing in the world, as a rule, to combine accuracy with discretion, and I answered:

"She only told me you'd written to say you were coming, and that she would guess why; but I gathered that she wasn't prepared for what you did say, all the same."

He made no comment on that either. Presently, however, he turned round.

"Twice at the beginning of this year I met her point-blank in the street—once alone, and once with you. She didn't cut me, but she managed to make

it plain that she was not going to give me an opening for any apology or explanation. Besides, as I said before, what explanation could there be for saying what I did—right on the heels of the letter?"

"There might be an explanation for the letter. . . . Miles, did you ever have any fancy for Owen Meredith? Anyhow, do you know a poem of his called 'Resurrection'? The end goes something like this, as near as I can remember:—

*For I think, in the lives of most women and men  
There's a time when all would go smooth and even,  
If only the dead could find out when  
To come back and be forgiven."*

"What do you mean?" he asked in a low voice.

"Lydia thinks *you* are dead. Perhaps—who knows?—this may be your moment. . . . I must be going, Argent. She is staying with me now. I want to be home in good time."

He came back across the room.

"May I go with you?" he asked, "or is it too late?"

The words seemed to have more than a surface meaning. So did mine as I answered:

"It's late, certainly, but not too late, perhaps. Yes, come, Miles."

When I pulled out the latch-key and pushed the door open, I saw that it was dark within, except for the firelight. Had Lydia not returned yet, then? Or had she come and gone straight to bed? I went half way up the stairs, and seeing a light show beneath her door, called to her. She opened the door and stood on the threshold, saying:

"Yes, I've just come back. Are you going to work, or shall I come down for a little?"

"Yes, please come down," I said, and I retreated to the level again.

She descended the first steps of the narrow stair very slowly. The wavering light from the candle in her hand blinded while it illumined her. She was quite *en grande tenue* that night . . . as white as snow, as red as blood, as black as ebony . . . a beautiful, rather stately young person. Against the glowing red of her ruby earrings and the black of her low-cut dress and soft, lustreless hair—gloom behind and above her—her face seemed as ghostly-pale as a flower in the dusk, her eyes very big and sombre.

Half way down she suddenly stopped and stood quite motionless. She had moved the candle higher—farther from her, widening its dim circle of light. Miles took a step forward out of the shadow where he had been standing behind me. Neither of them spoke, but I heard the sharp intake of her breath, and I saw a look on his face that I had never seen there before.

Without removing his glance from her, he moved to the foot of the stairs, resting one hand on the rail and the other against the wall at the level of his shoulder. The action was no arbitrary barring of her way. He had not come to-night in the rôle of confident, favoured lover. There had been a day when she had once waited for him in a garden . . . but that day was past. He was here as a penitent, a suppliant, not to demand her love, but to ask—very humbly—her pardon.

But the less must include the greater. For how could he explain the letter, unless he made it clear beyond all doubting that the thing it had seemed to ask was the thing he still wanted more than anything else in life?

Now, looking into her eyes, did he begin to guess that he, for his part, brought her a gift she would think of value? . . .

Neither of them seemed to remember I was there.

I do not think I remembered it myself for those few seconds of silence—they were only seconds, after all. The gloriously original excuse I murmured about a forgotten letter that I must instantly go downstairs to write was superfluous and unheeded.

I went across to the curtain that screens the basement stair, lifted it, looked back one moment, then dropped it behind me.

**THE END**

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