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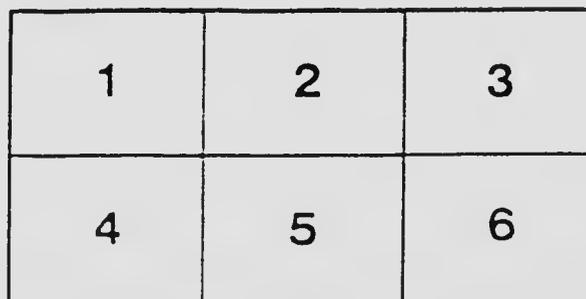
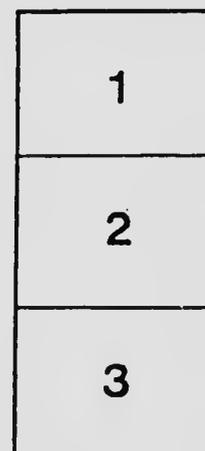
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Magpie

MAGPIE :: *By the*
Baroness von Hutten, Author of
"Pam," "Sharrow," "Bird's Fountain," etc.



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MAGPIE

CHAPTER I

IT is between seven and eight years ago that Mrs. Brankles, inspired woman, for the first time sent Mag to Pump Court.

It was an October evening, one of those opalescent, moist, evanescent-looking twilights, that somehow seem to be, of all twilights, the most becoming to the Temple.

I stood at my high window looking out on it, wondering if even May could possibly be more beautiful, and regretting that I could never decide this most important question, for the reason that I could never put a May and an October evening side by side, compare them like two pictures, and thus judge them.

My mood was as soft and mellow as the atmosphere—I was dining at the Lossells'; I had a new pair of shoes that combined the usually irreconcilable qualities of smartness and comfort; I felt myself to be an old young man, whereas in my bad hours I know myself to be a young old man; my only earthly anxiety lay in the fact that I had no clean white waistcoat until the faithful Brankles should come.

But it was a Thursday and on a Thursday she always did come, I assured myself, as I stood by the window visualizing the good soul's absurd face, and smiling at it.

Mrs. Brankles is not a plain woman, as a cow is a plain

beast ; she is not regularly and overwhelmingly ugly, as is the rhinoceros ; she is, with her huge, dough-like face, and her tight-packed, infinitesimal features, as crushingly ridiculous as is the hippopotamus. She was disconcerting, I felt sure, to her *vis-à-vis* in buses ; she might easily disintegrate a Salvation Army meeting.

(It is one of my minor happinesses that my laundress should not be only a master-hand at her work, but a so remarkable-appearing woman.)

The evening darkened, clouds began to gather, in a dramatic, inexorable way ; rain was coming, and I should have to have a taxi ; I had no clean white waistcoat, but I should have one. Brankles, the peerless Brankles, would come. She always did.

The church clock struck the quarter, and I started. The Lossells dine at eight, and they live in Grosvenor Place. Lord Lossell is not annoyed with guests who arrive late for dinner ; he simply waits for no one, and whoever the culprit may be, he or she has to join the party in the dining-room, which is, as most people know, not a cheering experience. I am a shy man, and the idea gave me a real shiver of discomfort. My faith in Brankles was hard to shake, but as I started to dress, it wavered.

It was twenty to eight when the door opened, doubtless following a knock I had not heard, and in came, bearing the basket I was longing for, not the basket's owner, but a much younger and extremely prepossessing female.

" Mrs. Brankles sent me with your waistcoat," this lady announced. " Mr. Brankles isn't very well, so the other things won't be done till Saturday. She hopes you won't mind."

I seized the waistcoat and put it on, murmuring some insincere expression of regret regarding the health of Brankles. The emissary looked at me in a knowledgeable way.

"He's had," she observed, "very little sleep the last two nights; the twins were born yesterday. Boys' "

"Oh, the twins——"

It is a preposterous fact that although Mrs. Brankles' unfailing weekly visit had given me every advantage of observation, I had never assimilated the idea that the contingency of twins was, so to speak, in view. However, I expressed for the afflicted father the sympathy that was plainly expected of me by the young creature with the freckles, gave her a shilling, snatched up my hat and coat, and preceded her down the stairs.

Beyond observing that she was very fat, very freckled, and emblazoned with fine, glowing eyes, I had in my haste hardly noticed her. We had gone down the first pair of stairs, I thinking that with any luck at all I should be able to reach Grosvenor Place by eight, when she made an arresting remark.

"I like," she said, with a deep and audible sniff, "the smell of this house."

She liked, this messenger of a Pimlico laundress, the smell of an old Temple staircase!

"What does it smell of?" I asked, regarding with disfavour the sudden onslaught of the hitherto only impinging rain, and opening my umbrella.

"I don't know," she replied. "*Oldness*, I should think."

Whereupon she, uninvited, stepped under my umbrella, and apparently quite as a matter of course, accompanied me through the archway, and up into Fleet Street.

I never walk up this bit of classic pavement without thinking of Goldsmith dying, in 1774, and the young Charles Lamb being born almost opposite, in the house over the way, only a year later—yet how much further back in history Goldsmith seems than Lamb!—I was still mooning over this idea when we reached Fleet Street, and a taxi drew up at the kerb.

I had not called it, and it amused me to see that my young companion had.

"How did you know I wasn't going in a bus?" I asked. She laughed.

"Not with those new shoes, on a night like this!"

I looked down at her. She wore a scant-looking blue frock, and a tight red cap, knitted or crocheted, from under which a cascade of black hair poured over her shoulders.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Margaret Pye."

I can still hear the pattering of the rain on the taut silk of my umbrella, as for the first time I heard her name.

"Pye!"

"Yes, thanks for taking me under your umbrella. Good-bye."

But I bade her come with me in the taxi.

"I will take you as far as the Buckingham Palace Road," I explained, and on seeing her face I blushed for the disgraceful old vehicle into which I helped her. It should have been a gold coach with rose-coloured interior.

As we made our way through the thick-clotted traffic she talked, bless her, how she talked!

She was nearly eleven; she lived in Blantyre Buildings, where Mrs. Brankles lived. Mrs. Brankles was very nice, wasn't she? And didn't she look like a currant-bun? She, Mag, lived with her father, who was a painter; he didn't paint much. She had no mother, she had reason to believe that her mother had died before she was born. For this domestic catastrophe I sympathized, but I was assured that whereas of course it was very sad for Mag's mother to be dead, it didn't make so much difference to Mag as it might have done, because of Madame Aimée, who lived in 133 on the top floor. Madame Aimée was sometimes called the Poor Thing, because half her face had

been burnt off, years before. She wore a sort of hood round her head, like the thing the nuns wear who come begging for the poor.

Miss Pye herself was, as I suggested, usually—in the Buildings—called Magpie, which she didn't mind a bit; she didn't mind most things; rain, for instance; she never minded rain; she hated a dusty wind, but loved a wet one. She didn't care for chocolates; it was figs she liked, all squashed flat in little wooden boxes; they came from Syria, which was such a beautiful name for a country; it would be a good name for a little girl baby, a very dark girl baby.

I asked her if she didn't think Smyrna a beautiful word, for it has always been one of my favourites, and has to me a spicy, honeyed, lucent sound—the Smyrna of my imagination has always been dear to me.

She agreed, adding that her father had once been at a place with a heavenly-sounding name: Besançon (this shibboleth she pronounced perfectly). She would go there some day, to see if it really was what it sounded like. After which, she reverted to the subject of Blantyre Buildings (by this time we were speeding up the Mall, the rain had ceased, and through a lingering light fog, the Palace looked very nearly beautiful, and the eyesore in front of it had become a fairy thing).

No dogs and cats were allowed in Blantyre Buildings, and no loose women. Loose Women, of course, were the women who didn't belong to any man. Yes, she'd love half-a-crown to buy figs, only she would like to spend half of it on chocolates for Madame Aimée.

* * * * *

These things and others I learned, before we parted at the corner of Buckingham Palace Road and Victoria

Street, but as I took off my coat in the Lossells' black-and-white paved hall, one great fact stood out in my mind.

This fact, considering the child who brought my waist-coat to me from the wash, was certainly a remarkable one. She was a lady.

CHAPTER II

AS the looker-on, the mere recorder of the story I am trying to tell, my own personality (vitaly interesting as it is to me) is of no great importance to the reader, but for simplicity's sake it will be as well to make a short statement about myself.

My name is Victor Quest. I was named Victor after her late Majesty Queen Victoria, with whom my dear father was all his life deeply in love. This story of my father's life would, told by the right person, make a very beautiful romance, but I cannot tell it.

It was a romance as delicate, as filmy, as the dew-spangled cobwebs on the grass on a sunny autumn morning. Of course my father had not only never known this lady, whom he worshipped, but he had never even heard her voice, and had never been nearer to her than the kerb is to the middle of the street, where the carriages go, yet she was the romance of his life.

He was fifty years old when he married, and I fear my poor mother was chosen for her apparent absence of personality. She was to keep his house, and, as events proved, to produce my sister and me, but she was not to disturb his dream; however, this has little to do with my story.

At the time when my acquaintance with the Blantyre Buildings people began, I was forty-nine years old. I am now nearly seven-and-fifty.

I am a briefless barrister, briefless to an extent which, if it appertained to taillessness on the part of a fox, or trunklessness on the part of an elephant, would ensure to that animal immense fame during its life, and, after death, expensive stuffing, and a place in some museum.

However, though the Law loves me not, I love the Temple, and as I have four hundred pounds a year of my own, and turn an infrequent penny by an essay or a short tale, I live with as great comfort as shabbiness in Pump Court. I am a happy man, for I love many things. I love books, prints, church music, paintings, chops with almost burnt tails, and, above all, many people, a large number of whom I don't know.

I loathe politics, men with names I never am sure how to pronounce, musical comedy, the perpetrators of certain chatty columns in certain illustrated papers, writing cheques, champagne, English ballads, and going out to tea.

As to the people I like, they are many.

There are certain houses, the names of whose inhabitants I don't know, and don't want to know, yet which are, to me, in a way, the abodes of intimates. The names I give these people in my mind are very probably more beautiful or more appropriate than the ones to which they answer.

Other houses harbour people whom I dislike. There is one woman with a hard face—you could break coals with it—whom I loathe as I loathe spiders, or as her two nervous, skinned-looking daughters appear to do. She, to me, is Mrs. Skinner. I often pass her in the street—we buy our cheese at the same shop—and it amuses me to think of what her amazement would be if she could know how I dislike and disapprove of her. The eldest daughter, Annie, will, I am sure, rise some cold morning at dawn, and slay her

sleeping parent, and Mrs. Skinner will deserve it. A mean, carping, bitter woman, bent on her own rights, selfish and cruel.

In a cheap little house in Primrose Hill—whither I sometimes walk, because Charles Lamb once sent some friends there at dawn, in the belief that they would find the Parisian Ambassador sun-worshipping at the summit of the eminence,—dwell a family that I love, whom I have named the Primroses; there are many daughters and several sons; the father, I think, is a bank clerk, a tubby, round little man, not unlike R. Wilfer, and they all love each other, and the girls wear each other's clothes, which seems to me to indicate a very high degree of affection.

These are two instances of my friends whom I don't know.

There are also people with whom I often talk, standing beside vegetable barrows, while they buy green-stuff, or resting on benches in the Embankment Gardens. These people are poor. I don't like them because they are poor, I like them as individuals. Some of them are very interesting and their stories are wonderful. It is also wonderful the way they trust me.

I happen to be perfectly trustworthy, and I want to know their stories, and ask them questions out of a sentiment which, while it must undoubtedly endure the name of curiosity, is, I think, not meanly curious.

But how do they know that I am trustworthy? It certainly is not my beauty that draws them. I am very tall, very thin, a little bald, and my large, bony nose—though I drink most moderately—is, there is no denying it, red. My eyebrows are peculiar and striking to a painful degree; they are of a fierce flaxen colour and so unmanageable that they hang down like bushes over my eyes. Hideous eyebrows! But the very common fascination of talking about myself is upon me, and I must brush it

away. In a word then, I am, except to myself, an unexciting, grotesque-looking, unsuccessful man; the only thing about me that can interest the reader is my love story, and I shall dwell on that as little as possible, for various reasons.

I will, at present, say only that although it has, I now see, been for many years a most useful though sometimes painful preoccupation for me, it has neither ruined, embittered, nor softened me; perhaps it was always too hopeless to do any of these things. And there's enough about that.

In setting out to write the story of Mag Pye up to date, I am undertaking a most interesting, but very difficult task. The tale, as I watched its development, had no consideration for my feelings, and instead of unrolling itself like a decent scroll, it twisted and recoiled in a most cussedly serpentine way.

I have, so to speak, learned in Chapter Four things I should by rights have become aware of only in Chapter Seventeen, whereas I have been left, say in Chapter Six, in respect to vital matters, in an ignorance that later has led me into great difficulties, and caused much unnecessary research into the past.

A story with two distinct mysteries would be difficult to manage by an amateur, even if it were developed in a straightforward manner, and this one's manner really is deviousness itself.

I have had the further disadvantage of knowing the story from every possible side. I have been told it by the three chief characters, two of whom were violently prejudiced in their own favours, the third of whom being as unreasonably favourable to one of the others.

However, one thing is certain; whether or no I can tell it properly, the story in itself is worth telling, so I shall get to work and do my best.

I shall tell it more or less as I heard it. It would be

simpler if I began twenty years ago at Concarneau, but the tale would in this way lose what to me is far more important than the old incident; the effects the incident had on the lives of the Blantyre Buillings folk. But for that old time in Brittany, Mag would never have existed, and Madame Aimée would never have known her. As to Edith and Bill Bettany, it is nearly as true that but for Mag and Madame Aimée their story would have been quite different from what it was.

But all this reads as if I were out for mystifying, whereas my object is to elucidate.

I will, therefore, while not choosing, as I have said, the most obvious method of elucidation—that of beginning the story at the beginning—I will tell it as it became known to me, and the reader—I hope there will be more than one—must bear with me, as I bear them, the different view-points of its different characters.

Having made my apologies and expressed my hopes, I will now begin.

CHAPTER III

MAG and I were friends from the first. At Christmas I took her to the Drury Lane pantomime, and she enjoyed it nearly as much as I did. A little later we went to see *Julius Cæsar*, which she did not at all like.

I fear she will never like Shakespeare, which, of course, is dreadful, but to balance this crime, she has the virtue of loathing musical comedy; (we are both of us, all for pantomimes, or legitimate modern stuff, melodrama for choice).

Another milestone on the road of our friendship was the event of my buying a hat for her, in Regent Street, that first May. It was a very nice hat, of brownish yellow straw, the colour of her freckles, and it had a tidy little bunch of sunflowers on it.

She looked a dear in it, her coarse black hair streaming from under the broad brim.

Madame Aimée is, I suppose, the real heroine of this book, but at the period of the sunflower hat, Madame Aimée was forty, and Miss Pye only eleven, so to Miss Pye we will concede the honours of the first description.

Truth compels me to admit that physically she was not, at that time, all that I could have wished. If I had had

my own way, she would have been slim—even skinny—rather than the over-rotund person she actually was. To put it bluntly, at eleven Miss Pye was extremely fat. She bulged, even her cheeks bulged, and her legs were awful!

Her eyes, of course, were already beautiful; clear, hazel eyes, with an odd sort of bluish shadow over them, and little streaks of gold, like the petals of a sun-flower, radiating from their centres. Her eyelids were then, as now, her only real, extraordinary beauty. They are thick, smooth, velvety things, which open and close without crumpling. They just fold away back, and only one clean cut line shows how they work.

The lashes are long and thick but straight, and she often looks down, as if her eyelids were heavy.

Her skin was at that time of an extreme ivory white, powdered over with millions of pale freckles, almost like gold dust.

Her mouth was large, of a good colour and texture; her teeth small, uneven and of a glittering white.

There you have her, a fat child of eleven, with fine eyes and thick ankles.

We were great friends, even at the beginning, and as she was extremely communicative, I soon knew about her almost as much as she knew herself; more, probably, in some ways.

Conversation such as the following used to take place:

Mr. Quest: Well, where do you buy your food?

Miss Pye: In the Pimlico Road, of course.

Mr. Quest: Shops?

Miss Pye: Barrows when there are any—only not meat. The barrow-men keep the meat under their beds at night—

Mr. Quest: Disgusting brutes!

Miss Pye: Yes—but you see they probably only have

one room, and wives and children all packed together—under the bed may be the only empty space.

Mr. Quest : No doubt it may—and do you cook too ?

Miss Pye : Of course I do. Father couldn't cook !

Mr. Quest : What do you have to eat ?

Miss Pye : All sorts of things.

Mr. Quest : Roast beef ?

Miss Pye : Bless you no— not *your* kind ! We have the tops of ribs roasted. We have beef-pies—that is good, with onions and gravy. Then we have toad-in-the-hole. It's a nasty name, but it's very good. It's made of—

Mr. Quest : (In an injured voice) : I know what toad-in-the-hole is made of—I've often eaten it.

Miss Pye : Have you ? (Pause.)

Mr. Quest : And what about vegetables, now ?

Miss Pye : Cabbage, and sprouts, potatoes, of course, and—greens. Peas sometimes ; grass never.

Mr. Quest : Grass ?

Miss Pye : Asparagus. I've never tasted them.

(When she did, shortly afterwards, she took to the delicacy as a cat brought up on skim milk might take to cream.)

Mr. Quest : What do you cook on ?

Miss Pye : A gas stove—not like yours. Ours is smaller, with only two rings, but it has an oven.

Mr. Quest : Can you make bread ?

Miss Pye explains that only millionaires *make* their own bread ; other people buy the produce of other hands.

She then resumed : " Sometimes I make a cake for Madame Aimée—without raisins, and with lots of spices."

I think it was here that I asked her to explain Madame Aimée to me. I knew that her friend was practically bedridden, that she had had her face badly burnt, but that was about all I did know, and in my thirst for knowledge I wanted more.

Mr. Quest : Try to tell me more about her.

Miss Pye : Well—she's old—and her eye is blue.

Mr. Quest : Her eye ?

Miss Pye : Yes. The other one is—gone. She wears a black thing over it, like court-plaster.

Mr. Quest : What does the poor creature do ?

Miss Pye : Mends.

Mr. Quest : — ?

Miss Pye : The linen—sheets and so on—for the inmates. The Corporal got her the job.

Mr. Quest : Who's the Corporal ?

Miss Pye : You *do* want to know a lot of things ! The Corporal's the Superintendent. He lives in the rooms at the right of the gate as you go in. And *he* (with indignation) has a dog !

Mr. Quest : There's injustice for you. I hope it is, at least, a nice dog.

Miss Pye : All dogs are nice, but Boomer is—Boomer is—not one of the nicest.

Mr. Quest : I see. Well, tell me more about the Corporal.

Miss Pye : He has the Omdurman medal, 21st Lancers.

Mr. Quest : Ha ! Ha ! And what are his duties, now ?

Miss Pye : He sees that the rules are kept.

Mr. Quest : Tell me about the rules. All about 'em.

Miss Pye : I don't know 'em. Because, you see, we never break 'em, father and I.

Mr. Quest : You must have read them.

Miss Pye : Oh, yes. They're stuck up—with thumb tacks—in all the flats, but really I don't remember most of them. One is, you pay the rent every week.

Mr. Quest : What happens if you don't ?

Miss Pye : Nothing. At the end of the next week you go.

Mr. Quest : Good ! And the next rule ?

Miss Pye : No dogs, cats, or other wild animals—except canaries.

Mr. Quest : Ah ! And then ?

Miss Pye : Well, I remember about mat-shaking, of course. (Over the rails into the courtyard, you know.) You can only shake them between 7 and 10 a.m. *Mr. Quest*, what does a.m. mean ?

Mr. Quest : (Gravely) : It's Irish. Airly Morning, it means.

Miss Pye : How nice !

Drunken people, she went on, were not welcomed by the Corporal, and wife-beating, that salubrious pastime of the British lower classes, was distinctly unpopular. Quarrelling on the stairs, or in the galleries, was discouraged. Children might play and clamour and bawl on the concrete floor of the courtyard, round which the galleries run, all the week, but even they are constrained by the Corporal to remember the Sabbath day, and to keep it holy.

It struck me that the infant population of Blai.tyre Buildings must execrate the Seventh day. I wondered how they amused themselves, when not allowed to brawl, and bellow, and tumble over each other, in the courtyard. I also felt a pang of pity for their mothers, when obliged to pen them—and endure them—in the captivity of the one sitting-room.

Then we went back to Madame Aimée again.

She was, it appeared, old. Hair she had to all appearances none at all. The white thing under her chin—(I suggested the word wimple)—went over her forehead as well, and over this the afflicted woman wore a soft blue silk scarf, that completely hid the burnt side of her face.

"It's pinned tight," *Miss Pye* explained, "like the things the Virgin Marys wear in the National Gallery."

After this I learned certain details of the child's own life ;

of the occasional excursions on which her father took her to the great collections of paintings—the National Gallery, the Tate, Hertford House, and so on; and I made a mental note, to the effect that I must learn more about her father, when I had polished off Madame Aimée.

"Years ago her face was burned clean off," Miss Pye went on. "I mean half of it. Wasn't it awful, Mr. Quest?"

Mr. Quest: Horrible! Have you ever seen the scars Mag?

Miss Pye: Oh, no! I couldn't.

Mr. Quest: Are you afraid?

Miss Pye: Yes; only I'm not so afraid as father is. You know, father has never seen her yet, though she has lived there for seven years. He sends her a turkey every Christmas, and a plant on her birthday—because she is so good to me—but he won't go to see her, because he is afraid.

I rather sympathized with her parent, but I said nothing. For the moment he did not engage my imagination, whereas the woman with the burnt face did.

"What is her room like?" I asked after a pause.

Miss Pye: It's a beautiful room. There's a curtain with parrots on it, hung across, nearly in the middle of the room. That makes it into *two* rooms, you see. The bedroom part is very plain, but the sitting-room, is—oh, so pretty! The chair—it's a chair with a seat as long as a sofa—a chaise-longue, you know—is covered with lovely blue stuff, and the tablecloth has lace round it. And then there are the books.

Mr. Quest: Where are the books, my dear?

Miss Pye: On the walls, of course—lots and lots.

This puzzled me, my dear reader, as I am trusting it will puzzle you. Why should a "mender" in a Pimlico "Model Dwellings" have lots and lots of books?

When, however, it transpired that the lots and lots of books had come to Mag's friend as a legacy, I was relieved, and was glad to hear that the emolument contingent on the care of the communal linen was sufficient to ensure to the poor woman with the burnt face a very fair amount of comfort.

"She always has flowers," I was informed, "even in the winter."

Mr. Quest : Does she go out to buy flowers ?

Miss Pye : She never goes out. I buy them for her. At Stocks' in the road.

An odd feeling had come over me that many people will understand, chiefly, I fear, rather idle, useless people, like myself ; a feeling of such acute comprehension of the woman of whom I was thinking ; such a thorough, momentary oneness with her, that for the time I almost felt that I myself was the burnt French mender in her little room close under the roof.

The things I was looking at with my eyes grew misty and vague. There were no sharp edges in the room ; nothing looked solid. I could almost see across the vagueness, the parrot-strewn curtain, the "chaise-longue," on which I myself seemed to be sitting, and there was a feeling about me, as though I saw a soft, bright blue fabric.

"What flowers does she have ?" I asked suddenly, coming to myself with a jerk, as Mag's surprised gaze penetrated the odd atmosphere of "place," that hung about me.

Miss Pye : Del-phiniums ! That's the colour of her scarves, too. And her Sunday shawl. I think it's the very best colour of all.

* * * * *

MAGPIE

19

Ah well, so did the old painters, who, as the child knew, gave their Blessed Lady garments, and a veil, of that same celestial hue.

I was very brisk for a while after that, and I made tea and pretended to be hungry and matter-of-fact; for I knew that Mag's sharp eyes had observed the mental condition my capability for which I sometimes cherish as a strength and sometimes regret as a weakness, but which, in either mood, I am very shy of letting anyone see. And I felt as I spread large slabs of bread and butter with joyish relish, that I must know Madame Aimée.

CHAPTER IV

THIS was at the end of March, and it was a blowy chequered day in May, that I first beheld Blantyre Buildings.

My imagination had been greatly engaged with this human hive, ever since Mag had first named it to me, and this for more reasons than one.

Edith Lossell's father had built it, and, years before, I had heard of the place from him; he had even offered to take me to see it, and I had refused, because, merely as a building, it held no interest for me. Now, however, I knew about Mag and her father, Mrs. Brankles, and the Corporal, so it became a real place.

I had just come back from the country, where I had been for a dismal fortnight, and London was looking its very best to my enraptured eyes.

After an excellent lunch in a stuffy old inn in Fleet Street, I decided that I could do nothing better then, to celebrate my return, than to go and call on Miss Pye.

I therefore mounted a bus in Piccadilly, and we proceeded in state, and pomp—there is nothing more absurdly pompous in the world, than a bus,—to Pimlico or, as I learned from Mag to call it, "Pimilico." At the corner of Lower Sloane Street and the Pimlico Road

I broke off an interesting conversation with my neighbour, a delightful, sun-burnt sailor on leave, and got down.

It was a Saturday, and the shopkeepers were busy. The road was crowded with more or less shabby women, with more or less bulging baskets, and many children impeded my slow progress. Butchers' shops have always held a certain shuddering fascination for me, and I was standing in front of one, listening to a discussion about mutton, between a large woman and a small salesman, when I caught sight of Miss Pye herself in pursuit of the domestic avocation of Saturday shopping.

She did not see me; she was obviously bent, with all the grimness of her young character, on obtaining the greatest possible amount of nourishment for the least possible number of pennies.

She wore a rush basket on her left arm, and with her right forefinger she was poking a piece of meat. The meat displeased her, and she edged along the counter, seeking.

She wore a grey flannel frock—unpropitious material!—and her usual blue sailor hat. Her hair was tucked away under the hat, and I realized at once that this was a sly manoeuvre to lend age—and therefore importance—to her as a purchaser.

"The bone, too, please," she barked suddenly, with a strong Cockney accent.

She put the meat into her basket, and then, still without seeing me, moved up the street.

She was so engrossed in her occupation that it was perfectly easy for me, unobserved, to observe her.

At the greengrocer's she bought a pound of potatoes—each of which she personally selected, as a wily dealer in Hatton Garden might select diamonds—and a large, long lettuce, tied up with bast. For these articles she paid fourpence ha'penny.

The child's face was a study, as she proceeded on her way. Everyone has an indoor and an out-of-door face—even at the age of eleven.

The fitful May sun showed me Mag's out-of-door face for the first time, and I saw that though it was a round, not to say fat one, it was, from the structural point of view, oval. I divined a neat, well-turned jawbone, as she jerked her head back to survey the sky, and the little sunflowers of light in her dark eyes shone like wee stars, under the heavy lids. These promises of future beauty gave me great pleasure, for plain women always seem to me one of nature's greatest mistakes.

In a perfect world, every young female should be allowed at least a year of good looks, no matter what caricature of a face is to be imposed upon her later in life. And I rejoiced to see that the corpulent Miss Pye was, without a doubt, to have at least her day.

In the meantime, short, fat, and freckled, the very plain child stumped into the baker's shop, and choosing in the window a crumbly and golden Madeira cake, watched alertly while the young lady fished it out—stonily refusing two easier-to-get-at-ones—and embosomed it in the fair white paper of commerce. The cake did not go into the now crowded basket. Instead it was given the honour of hanging by its string to Miss Pye's right thumb.

When she issued forth from the shop, I approached and saluted her.

For a second she stared at me, non-recognition in her eyes. Then she smiled, her teeth shining like a good deed in a naughty world, and shifting the cake to the other hand, she greeted me warmly.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said. "I've finished the book."

"Like it?"

"Oh yes. Only of course it isn't true."

"Why not?" She was, I knew, as we turned off the road into a squalid street near the river, making for home.

"There aren't any real Lob-lie-by-the-fires," she answered in a tone so conclusive that it forced me to silence.

"Madame Aimée is reading it now. You *said* I might lend it to her, you know. She says there may be some in the fells—Lobs I mean—but I don't believe it. Mr. Quest, what are fells?"

Thus it came about that it was while I was trying to explain to a child who had never since she could remember been out of London, the nature and feeling of the upland empty country where the sky seems so near, that I first saw Blantyre Buildings.

It was on the wrong side of the road, and everything inside was left-handed. It was even more prison-like, more hopeless-looking, than I had expected. It was dark and gloomy as a ducal mansion in one of the great squares.

Six rows of windows, and one large door, broke the hideous façade. Over the door was a carved date, 1899.

So this was one of the last achievements of the architecture of the nineteenth century. As I stood looking up at it, the feeling of '99 came over me.

I had been in Pump Court even then, and even then I had known the Lossells. I was thirty, and had already begun to be known as an unsuccessful rather than as just a young barrister.

And Lord—the Honourable Hugo Lossell as he then was, was a brisk, clever, harsh, unpleasant man of fifty. His detestable home-manner had always struck me as utterly incompatible with his undoubted devotion to Charitable Causes, but of course I had learned to know, before that day in 1907 when I, for the first time, beheld this crystallization of his favourite idea of the Proper

Housing of the Poor, that no two qualities can be too incompatible to be welded together in one character.

At all events, tyrannical and petty as the man was at home, here was a large and concrete proof of the presence in his mind of generous dreams for the benefit of other people.

Blantyre Buildings must have cost ten thousand pounds, and every penny of this had come out of Lossell's own pocket. It is, of course, easy to say that he was a rich man, so rich that he never felt the loss of the money, but the fact remains that other rich men do not build homes for the poor, and that this unpleasant domestic tyrant had done so.

"Those are our windows," Miss Pye exclaimed, pointing upwards, "where the geraniums are—the pink ones." Then we went in.

The Corporal sat in his window as a seneschal might have sat in his at the gate of some old castle in baronial days.

He was reading the *Daily Mail*.

"That's Boomer," I said, as a head rather like a dog's appeared beside the man, and took a look at us.

"Yes, that's Boomer."

In a sudden gush of sunlight I stood in the courtyard looking up and about me. It was an enchanting place! Up to the top, round the whole quadrangle, were wide galleries, with a narrow-splatted railing, over which crept creepers, behind and through which grew flowers.

For real gaiety, Blantyre Buildings could give points to any residential flats I had ever seen.

To be sure, swarms of children roared and shouted in the concrete enclosure at our feet, but high up, in the sun, women sat and sewed among flowers. Bird-cages gleamed like gold where they were hung to the railings, and some where a bull-finch was piping.

It was amazing! It was Hugo Lossell who had achieved this wonder. Hugo Lossell, whom I had rarely heard say a kind word of anyone, and owing to whose petulance and opposition his daughter was still, at forty, unmarried; Hugo Lossell, whose daughter herself had told me that her mother had died not exactly of a broken heart, but just pestered and bored to death by her husband's small and unending tyrannies.

As I followed my small guide up the long, clean, stone stairs these things clashed in my mind.

"I'm very late with my shopping to-day," Miss Pye observed, opening her door with an immense key. "Father had to have a tooth out this morning——"

CHAPTER V

MISS PYE'S home consisted of four small rooms ; a sitting-room, two bedrooms, and a kitchen. One of the bedrooms was, I think, the smallest I saw in my life, and if the bed had spent its time as most beds do, on all fours, only a dachshund could have dwelt there.

This bed, however, stood on end by day, thinly disguised as a baby wardrobe, and thus making room for the wash-stand and a chair, which I was told spent their nights in the sitting-room.

" You see," my hostess explained, " I get up before father, and dress in the sitting-room ; then I make the bed, shut it up and bring back the wash-stand and chair, so it is all very comfortable ! " Which no doubt it was.

The chair, the accommodating bed, and the peripatetic wash-stand were all shabby and old, though not old enough to be called antique, but they were of mahogany, and to my joy there was in all the wee flat none of the pernicious burnt oak which for some reason has a dreadful and depressing effect upon me. There were, moreover, two pictures on the wall and a freshly starched chintz curtain of a vivid blue design at the window.

" Haven't you got a hair brush ? " I asked.

She laughed and opened the wash-stand drawer, wherein

lay, very tidily, a wooden-backed brush, an old clothes brush, and a new white comb.

"How funny of you to ask me that," she said, taking off her hat, and unpinning the lump of hair on her crown, "now come and see the kitchen."

It was all very small, very close-packed, but to me it seemed neither uncomfortable nor even cramped. I liked the shiny marbled stuff on the kitchen table, the scalloped paper on the shelves, and there was a thing like a scrap of chain-mail (for cleaning saucepans) that took my fancy. It was a charming place.

The "big" bedroom was furnished with good, plain furniture, too large for it, evidently thirty or forty years old, and the blue and white carpet was beautifully darned (Madame Aimée's work, I was informed).

The brushes on the high chest of drawers were of ivory, well made and good, though discoloured, and there was a shabby old leather case of razors that had never been bought by any but a gentleman.

"He painted most of the pictures himself," Miss Pye explained. "That's Italy."

It wasn't; it happened to be a very clever sketch of the Plaza San Fernando in Seville.

"Does he paint much, nowadays?" I asked with interest.

She shook her head. "Hardly ever. That box is full of old pictures, but he very rarely paints any more. Poor Father!"

I wondered why; for few men, who have once painted pictures with even the rather fragile charm of the little one hanging in the sun on the grey wall, ever give it up.

When we had finished the tour of the sitting-room—and a comfortable, shabby, clean place it was, furnished in a pleasant, piecemeal way, and enlivened with a big glass-

fronted book-case full of books—we went back across the little passage and sat in the gallery behind a screen of pink geraniums and ferns, and I sought information.

“ I should like to meet your father,” I began.

Miss Pye : You wouldn't like him much.

Mr. Quest : Why not ?

Miss Pye : Most people don't. You see, he never speaks.

Mr. Quest : Why doesn't he speak ?

Miss Pye : I don't know. I suppose it bores him to.

Mr. Quest : Perhaps I shouldn't bore him !

Miss Pye : (Seriously, but with no wish to be offensive) : Oh, yes you would.

This seemed pretty final, but I persisted, “ Describe him to me.”

Miss Pye : He's a small man, rather thin. He has a beard, and his hair is thin and rather long.

Mr. Quest : (Not impressed) : H'm !

Miss Pye : He's a broken-hearted man.

It sounds brutal, but at this remark my heart leapt for joy. Thin, bearded little men are, even in these smooth-faced times, to be met with every day, with no perceptible quickening of the pulse, but a broken-hearted gentleman, living in a model dwelling, at eight shillings a week, presents possibilities of interest. I waited.

Four canaries were singing in little golden palaces, and there was a clamour of children's voices—rather unpleasant are children's voices, I think, regarded merely as sound,—and as I waited I heard a lady a few doors away embarking upon a narrative career promisingly full of horror, about the arrival of a new citizen somewhere out 'Endon way.

“ ‘ Mrs. Grayson,’ 'e says, ‘ I'll tell you the pline truth——’ ”

What the plain truth was, as imparted to Mrs. Grayson,

I don't know to this day, for at that moment Mag Pye began her story.

"You see," she said, "there's a mystery about my mother."

I nodded, trying not to look as sorry as I, of course, felt. Mysteries about mothers are usually things of unhappy portent to daughters.

"Father never speaks about my mother," the child went on, and something in her tone grated on me.

She spoke, not as a child speaking of her mother, but rather as a reader speaking of an exciting character in a half-read book.

"I see," I murmured.

I can recall every detail of the objects on which my eyes rested, while I listened to her, as she went on; I was leaning back against the house wall, so that the railings of the gallery the other side of the courtyard seemed to lie flat against our own railings, making them look twice as high as they were.

The geraniums and creepers grew lavishly, nothing hung over the railings,—no cloths or clothes drying—and the heads of the women sewing by their doors gained value with the shadows out of which they shined.

It was that pleasant and romantic thing, the sight of hard-worked people resting.

And the generous sun, having decided to give up the game of hide and seek with which it had that day beguiled its earlier hours, shone steadily out of the distant sky.

"Father does advertisements now, and posters," Mag said. "He says they're very bad. He's too old. Youth will have its day, you know."

I nodded in recognition of this acquired bit of wisdom.

"They don't pay well, and sometimes we are very poor. When we are dreadfully poor, we go for long walks. Father says he ought to have been a gipsy, but is only a tramp."

"Tell me about your mother," I suggested.

"I don't know very much about her, except that she was very pretty. *Very pretty!*

"She had dark hair," the child went on, "and very small hands. I have her thimble, it is tight for me already, and I am only eleven."

"When did she die?" I asked gently.

There was a long pause, during which another isolated scrap of the life history of Mrs. Grayson reached my ears. At last Mag answered me.

"I don't know, but—I don't think she's dead at all."

Her reasons, produced by my persuasion, were not very powerful.

"He has never said she wasn't dead," she admitted, "but—I know that he *didn't go to her funeral.*"

"How on earth do you know that?"

"I asked him, only a little while ago."

In view of her relentless questioning, I began to feel sorry for the man. Supposing there were a mystery—it was probably no more than the usual pitiful, sordid one, of a runaway mother and a deserted child—I could sympathize with the poor fellow's shrinking from his daughter's persistent probing.

She sat there in the sun, her freckled face alert with interest.

"How could you ask him these things?" I said to her.

"Why not?"

In her young voice was a coolness that found my sympathy for her father.

"You say your father is broken-hearted," I said. "If you think that, how can you torment him with questions?"

She looked straight at me.

"I want to know," she said.

"You—you are interested about your mother?" I

asked her, remembering that I had disliked her former tone about her unknown parent.

Her eyes were very soft. "Oh, Mr. Quest, of course I am,—did you think I wasn't?"

I was a little confused. "You—didn't seem to be," I murmured.

Then her unusual practical sense flared up like a flame.

"What was the use," she retorted, "if she was dead? Now that I think she *isn't* dead, of course——" After a pause she added softly, "Perhaps I shall find her some day."

CHAPTER VI

A FEW days after my introduction to Blantyre Buildings, I went to see Edith Lossell.

I found her in her odd grey and silver room, sitting by the fire, with her cat on her lap. As I sat beside her I saw a beautiful woman of forty; a woman with a magical, strange face; a face that to me had always been the most beautiful in the world. And as we talked, for the first time I noticed, with a pang of grief, that her face was beginning, in a negative sort of way, to show that middle-age was close on her heels.

It was not so much that she was beginning to look old, as that she was gradually ceasing to look young. As I have said, she was beautiful—even as an old woman she will be beautiful, for all her structure is good—her bones are delightful, and her soft, dark hair lay in silky folds round her small face; her odd, greenish eyes—eyes like a kitten's in shape, but full of dignity—looked as fresh as those of a girl, and her olive skin was free from lines.

Yet there lay on her that chilly spring afternoon a look of something past its prime. It is difficult to describe, for over-ripe is the obvious word, and over-ripe is wrong; it was rather a look of an "arrested" something. She had, poor soul, never quite ripened, and her green virginity was

that day visible. She looked a little chilled, a little ashen. My heart suffered a distinct physical pain, as my mind admitted this disloyal clarity of vision. Poor Edith!

"And how are Bob and Eleanor?" she asked gently, in her odd, husky voice.

Bob and Eleanor are my sister and brother-in-law, whom I had been visiting. My sister is an excellent woman, and I love her, but she is not the type to interest Edith Lossell, and Edith and I both knew that she was asking her question out of mere politeness.

"They're very fit," I answered in the imbecile jargon of our day, "the children are awfully jolly little beggars——"

There was a long silence, during which the fire talked to itself and Aucassin and Nicolète, the two love-birds, pecked at each other's beaks.

Edith and I are often silent, however, and neither of us felt any constraint.

Presently a recrudescence of the sinking fire sent a sudden glow over her face, and, looking twenty, and lovely as a dream, she smiled across at me.

"Well—Amigo?"

Now that name is one she dedicated to me over twenty years ago on a certain thunderous June night, as we sat on the balcony outside her drawing-room windows, and it is a name that means much, and is never lightly used.

"Dear Edith——"

Her smile deepened to dimpling point, and that is also a thing of rare occurrence. "Tell me," she said.

All this reads rather pretentiously, if not even preciously, but I must set it down, for such odd little scenes are woven into the fabric of my old affection for her, and they are not pretentious, or the other, worse thing!

It meant simply that she knew my head was full of something, and was willing to have me empty it to her.

So I told her about Mag.

She listened, as she always does, on those Amigo occasions, divinely, her lucent eyes like crystal wells.

When I had finished I waited, and at last she said gently, "It's very interesting, Victor."

"It is. I really went to see the father."

"He sounds an unsatisfactory parent."

"He does. But it would make most men unsatisfactory, to be a gentleman, and to live in Industrial Dwellings."

"You forget—they're father's dwellings."

"They are delightful, and I honour your father for having created them," I returned as seriously, for my beautiful Edith is not cursed with a great sense of humour, "but—they are Industrial Dwellings—and he is without doubt a gentleman."

"I wonder," she said dreamily, "who the mother was?"

Now, for some unanalysed reason, I had, in telling Mag's story, left out all references to her mother. Often and often since, I have wondered why I did this, and I have never been able to decide.

And then Edith went on to say, "I suppose she can hardly have been a lady—probably the poor man married beneath him, or something——"

I was conscious of a vague, unfocussed irritation.

"Why do you think that?" I retorted, "the child is fat, and ugly, and ignorant of the nursery graces of children of her father's class, but—she is certainly a lady."

Edith's eyebrows stirred. "I see," she said.

But she did not see, and I, still influenced by whatever had been the subconscious thought that had restrained me from telling her of the mystery about Mag's mother, said no more.

Instead, I asked her to play for me, and lay back in my chair as I had done so many hundreds of times before and let my unchained imagination bear me away into the

Might-have-been-but-wasn't-land, wherein is the city of my dreams.

Music does this to me sometimes.

Just opposite to where I sat—that is, on my left as I looked past the fireplace towards the piano, hung a little water-colour painting. I didn't know where it was painted; I have no idea in what land grew those dark-clustered, solid-looking trees. In the foreground lies a small oval lake, that shines in the one shaft of light that pierces the thick clouds, like a bit of burnished copper.

For many years that little picture had hung there, on the grey wall, and it was close-linked in my mind with the sound of Edith's playing. So I watched it idly, as she played.

She says—and I know it is true—that she's no great pianist.

She says she's always out of practice, and indeed I know many players who could beat her for force, brilliance, and swiftness. But in all the world there's nothing I more deeply enjoy than to sit there in the grey back room in Grosvenor Place, and listen to her music.

There is, in this my rapturous enjoyment, more than a simple, musical appreciation. There is, as well as that, much of gratified vanity.

For only when she plays thus, for me alone, does Edith Lossell allow to slip from her shoulders the mantle of reserve and pride that she wears as a barrier between the world and herself.

I remember, many years ago, hearing a Spanish diplomat describe her, in a discussion about many other famous beauties, and herself.

"Miss Lossell," the olive-green skinned man said, "looks like a woman of fire, and she is a woman of snow. To see her at the opera—and she is one of the women who listen to the music at the opera—one would expect her, of all

people, to be the most impulsive, the most *primesautière*, the most enthusiastic. But who has the honour of knowing this lady soon learns that she is of the most calm, the most unstirred,—”

And this magnificent testimonial is, to put into plain English, the opinion of most people.

“Cold as ice,” they used to call her, in the old days, whereas the younger generation, admitting her beauty, qualify it by the new catchword, “No temperament.”

No temperament, my poor Edith whom I had seen, in Bill Bettany’s day, shaken as the earth is shaken by an earthquake, her face hollowed and ravaged with anger, shame, and grief!

I had seen that, but only I. Not even Bettany, I believe, had ever really *known*. After all, his had been, although (or possibly because) the more dramatic, the more terrible part.

And somehow, as she played to me that afternoon, my mind was filled with pictures of those old days, pictures melting one into the other, shadowed and blurred, to each other, but all connected, all within one frame.

Edith as a girl, as I had first known her, slight, flexible, a golden-brown girl, whose amazing grey-green eyes challenged one’s imagination for descriptive words. Lucent they were—or lambent—they glowed, they glowered, they shone, they did everything but glitter. They never glittered.

And the now so rarely revealed dimples were, in those days, all aglowing and ablowing, in the garden of her face. Once, at a ball, I, who certainly had the proud distinction of being the worst waltzer who ever waltzed, trod elephant-like on the tail of her frock, tearing off what seemed some miles of shell-coloured gauze.

To her honour be it said that never were her dimples in finer feather than on that occasion, as I, nearly tearful, stammered out my heart-felt but useless regrets.

She was very kind about it. . . .

In spite of what I said in the first chapter, I had better declare now, once and for all, that Edith Lossell is my love story.

I wanted her love, and she could give me only her friendship, but I love her still and always shall, so now I need say no more about it.

And when her tragedy came, thank God I was there too, for I was of some small use to her, I know.

* * * * *

To get back, then, to the present of that day, nearly eight years ago, my sudden realization that the eve of my lady's long barren youth was in sight, brought to me a kind of exquisite grief. I wondered, as she played, if she knew. And, if she knew, did she care?

Did her face, in the silver-framed mirror I had seen, the June night I carried her, fainting, to her room, look to her the same as it had a few weeks ago, when I last saw her, or—had she seen, as I did, that odd, dried, burnt-out look that was coming over it?

Every man who loves, or has loved, will understand the wish that came to me; a wish that my dear might suddenly lose all her beauty, that by some accident she might be made helpless, so that I, only I, could love and care for her.

I wonder if even my deep devotion could, after all, stand such a test? It ought to, for it is many years since the thought first came to me, and yet—many men must have known the wish, and in the cases of wives and mistresses losing their beauty, or even, in the inevitable way of things, their youth, in how many cases does the man's devotion really survive? Alas, alas!

Before she ceased playing, the door opened, and Lord

Lossell came in. I had not seen him for some months, and he had changed.

He was a little thin, peevish-looking man, with an exasperatingly small chin. He wore clothes of the period of his father's young days, and in his voluminous black cravat gleamed the Wandover pearl.

Like that of all inexperienced story writers, my mind encounters the possibilities of many stories at once. The history of the great Wandover pearl is a romance in itself, but it has nothing to do with Edith, or Mag, or poor Bill Bettany, so I won't go into it.

Lossell was glad to see me. He always liked me, and poor and undistinguished as I am, I think that, other things being equal, he would not seriously have resisted Edith marrying me: Alas! such resistance was never necessary.

He was interested to hear that I had been inspecting the glories of Blantyre Buildings, and into his thin cheeks there crept a little wisp of colour, as I told him how greatly the place had pleased me.

"The system's right," he answered. "I'm convinced that it is the right system. People don't need only rooms, they need homes, and these little flats should be quite easy to make into homes. "How's Copley doing?" he added.

I didn't know who Copley was, and said so.

And then he explained that Copley was, in short, the redoubtable corporal.

I presented him with a moving, detailed, word-picture of the Buildings. I also made mention of Boomer.

"Why don't you allow dogs?" I asked.

Lord Lossell smiled. "Because, my dear fellow, although it is the fashion for people to rave about dogs, it is my strong belief that not more than one person in a hundred really likes them. I hate them myself.

They are vulgar, indelicate beasts with vile manners, and no manner at all. You may take my word for it, Blantyre Buildings owes a great deal of its popularity to the fact that people living there are not subjected to the pestiferousness of other people's dogs."

The tyrant was in his best form, and the fact that he kept in his library a moth-eaten old quadruped who was not only evil-tempered, but evil-smelling, whose years were many, and whose virtues none, had no bearing on the case. Oliver was his dog, and therefore no dog at all, but a person.

How many men are like that !

We talked for about half an hour, and then he took me downstairs, to see his latest acquisition. I bade good-bye to Edith, who since her father's arrival had subsided into the stiff, silent, bored-looking woman, whose rôle she sustained so well in the world, and a few minutes later I was examining a small picture, in a burnished gold frame, that stood under the bright electric light on Lord Lossell's writing table. I know very little about pictures, but I fell in love with this one at first sight.

It was a quiet little English landscape, of a square old house, embosomed in trees, a ruminating, blue-grey sky above ; the only bit of colour being the gold and scarlet signboard that swung from the eaves, proclaiming it to be a place of refreshment for man and beast.

"I should not mind," I said, "drinking a glass of ale under that elm."

Lord Lossell looked at me, his thin, dried lips twitching a little.

"Don't you recognize?" he said, "don't you know whose it is?"

I didn't.

"Bless my soul," he exclaimed, his voice rising, as it always does when he is annoyed. "I found it the other

day in Derbyshire, in a farm where I went in to wait while my man mended a broken tyre, and," he added, his light eyes stabbing at me in the intensity of his excitement, "it is a Bettany!"

My amazement was sufficiently great to satisfy even him. Frankly, I didn't believe him.

"How do you know it is?" I asked.

"How do I know! how do I know? Didn't I have the 'Windmill,' and 'Cross Roads' in this very room for six months before the Chantrey people bought them? Didn't I discover the man himself? Wasn't it undoubtedly owing to me that he ever painted 'Cross Roads'?"

I muttered something of which he might easily have understood nearly as little as I myself did. The question of Bettany's indebtedness to Lord Lossell was a vexed one, and to me personally always a seriously annoying one; for though it was owing to him that the poor fellow had painted his two great pictures, it was as certainly owing to him—although in what way I had never known—that Bettany had disappeared off the face of the earth.

I knew as much of the story as most people, probably more, but what it was that had happened six weeks after the purchase by the Chantrey Bequest of these two small pictures, whose appearance had turned the artist world utterly upside down some twenty years before, I had no clear idea.

I knew that Edith knew, but if, since that evening of the thunder storm, when she had broken down and told me—with the keenest suffering I had ever before or since beheld in anyone—that her engagement to Bettany was broken, she had mentioned the man's name to me half a dozen times, it was as much as she had done.

I often thought that her sudden fainting, when she dropped like a stone on the hearthrug, had been like the word "finis" at the end of the real story of her life, and

that the long, subsequent, quiet years were more in the nature of an epilogue than anything else ; so I had always resented Lossell's unknown but keenly-felt part in the tragedy.

As he stood crooning with joy over his new acquisition, my old anger flared up for a minute, and I needed all my self-control to keep myself from asking him what the blazes it was that he had dared to do, to ruin, as he undoubtedly had ruined, those two fine lives.

"This must have been painted before 'Cross Roads' and the 'Windmill,'" he said gloatingly. "It's not nearly so fine, of course, but it is a great find, I tell you, Quest."

Half an hour later I left him, and went out into the evening. The pale afternoon light looked thin and cold-blooded after the glare of electricity in the study, and there was a chill in the air.

I walked home, lit my fire, drew my curtains and sat down in the best armchair in the world, for a quiet evening with Charles Lamb's letters. Later I would sup, as Lamb himself often supped, on bread and cheese and beer.

CHAPTER VII

I LEARNED to know Madame Aimée a few weeks later, and found her to be quite one of those people whose friendship is a privilege.

Like most women who really influence others, she's very hard to describe. Physically, of course, the poor soul was capable of unmistakable labelling in very few words. A woman with only half a face presents few difficulties to the word painter, and the beauty of her solitary eye was so haunting and remarkable that many words could be made in a way to fit it. The wimple-like thing, snow-white, which bound her head, quite hid the burnt side of her poor face, concealing even the black patch of which Mag had told me, and the revealed eye and cheek—the mouth was happily uninjured—seen under the shadow of the blue veil that was draped over her head, were a charming, slightly lined cheek of a pleasant pallor, and the wonderful eye of a deep dove-like, grey blue.

It surprised me the first time I saw her, that a woman of her class should have had the wisdom to wear a nun-like, voluminous gown, of a coarse woollen material—not flannel, but loose-woven—of the beautiful blue of the darkest of delphiniums.

Never again did such understanding in Madame Aimée surprise me, for I had not been in her austere, clean-smelling, almost cloistral little room ten minutes, before I realized that I stood in the presence of an artist.

The hour I spent there was delightful. I possess a pretty thorough knowledge of the French language, of the beautiful and unashamed British variety. Wandering much in France on foot, or on a bicycle, I have learned to speak French in a way that gives me confidence to tackle pretty well any subject in that delectable tongue. Also have I listened to lectures at the Sorbonne and elsewhere, and come away with a fairly correct idea, I am sure, of the lecturer's meaning.

At the same time, I have no illusions as to the beauty of my accent ; I quite hear myself saying, for instance, Hellaine, when I mean to say Aylenne,—yet can I not subdue my tongue into these intricate delicacies.

The ear is willing, but the tongue is weak.

Therefore Madame Aimée's delight in finding that I *really* (as she engagingly expressed it) talked French, was at least equalled by mine on discovering that she really spoke English.

Half in half our conversation went on ; phrases begun by me in French blossomed into English, and her English beginnings as easily reached a sea of complete expression in her own tongue.

This diversity lent an added charm to our conversation, and I found in the quiet room, with its large ebony crucifix on the wall, its growing plants in the spotlessly clean windows, and its lavishly be-parroted chintz, an atmosphere perhaps best described as one of romantic homeliness.

Her voice too, was low and pleasant, and sometimes had an odd breathlessness, followed by a little break that though it was not beautiful, I yet learned to listen for.

She told me her story quite simply. She had married, and lost her husband within two years of her wedding. Then came her accident, and a few years after that she had come to live in Blantyre Buildings.

"That," she added smilingly, "is all."

The next time I went to see her, I took her a growing Easter lily, a lovely, graceful thing, covered with flowers, and grooved, pointed, green-white buds. This flower she loved, as I had known she would.

"They used to grow at home in France, when I was a child," she told me, her voice trembling. "I can see the garden now—little lizards sat on a broken wall; there were roses—and you know how strongly these lilies smell at evening. "Leur senteur le soir est si pénétrante——"

I like the word "pénétrante" as applied to the scent of lilies.

I then said to her with my fine robust English accent, "Oui, dans la soirée tous les odeurs sont plus forts."

It was raining that day of the lilies, and through the open window came the pleasant smell of rose-geraniums and earth from the carefully-tended window-boxes.

On the floor by the chaise-longue stood a large, deep, willow basket, filled with freshly-laundered household linen—sheets and pillow-cases, I think, for the most part.

Over a board on her knees, Madame Aimée had stitched an old sheet, with a large hole in it, and under the hole she had placed a piece of fair, new linen. As she talked, she was busy stitching this linen into place, and it interested me to see the neatness with which she curled up the raw edges of the tear and sewed them on to the new material.

Her small, brown, beautifully-tapered fingers looked almost magically skilful to me, and I said so.

She laughed. "Ah, M'sieu, sewing is one of the things

any woman can do. Many women say they can't sew, but that means only that they don't like to. There was a time when all I knew about a needle was that one end could prick you, and that the other end couldn't, but since then I have learned what the eye is for. One learns much as one grows older."

"I sew buttons on my clothes," I announced with pride, "but I have larger needles, and I wax my thread."

Again she laughed. "A sailor must have taught you that."

A sailor had, as it happened, and as I sat watching her sew, I remembered dear Joe Rollett, with a clearness in which I had not remembered him for years, and in the wake of my recollection of him, came memories of my little old sailing yacht, *Seagull*, of the light of the sun on the waves, the falling of the spray on my face, and the smell of frying bacon mingled with that of the sea.

So I was silent for a moment, and it was in silence that Mag found us, as she opened the door.

"Oh," the child exclaimed, and stopped short. "I didn't know you were here, Mr. Quest."

"Why should you?" Madame Aimée asked her. "Mag, if you have come to make my tea, I must request of you first to go downstairs, and brush your hair and wash your hands."

Mag was too unsophisticated to be embarrassed, and with a friendly glance, first at her admonisher, and then at her hands—palpably grubby hands—raced down the stairs, leaving the door open behind her.

I suppose I looked surprised, for the Frenchwoman said, as she took off her thimble and put it by the table: "You think I was rude?"

The sheet was very large, and without asking her I rose and took hold of the other end of it, and helped her fold it.

It smelt of soap, and just a little of hot irons ; a pleasant, wholesome smell, one that, freshened by a whiff of lavender, I thoroughly enjoy in my own sheets.

" You see, M'sieu," Madame Aimée went on thoughtfully, " there's no one to tell the child things like that, except me."

I nodded and gave my end of the neatly folded linen into her hands.

" She is at the age when a child needs a mother very badly," I said wisely. " It is a great pity Mag's is—dead."

She did not speak, and I went on.

" That is one of the things I came to see you about, Madame Aimée. I like Mag, and, if possible, I want to help her. She is an odd little creature, and unless I am very much mistaken there is the making of a fine woman in her. She has a brain, and she has a heart."

Have I said that the burnt side of the Frenchwoman's face was always in shadow? Now, in spite of her half bedridden condition, of the beautiful bandage round her head, and the veil's shadow over the good side of her face, it struck me as I watched her that there was an amazingly alert look about her.

She had drawn herself forward from the waist, and sat bolt upright, and I swear that at that moment she was beautiful.

Her voice trembled as she answered me, but it was a trembling of intensity, not of weakness.

" Ah yes, you are right," she cried, pressing her hands tight together. " There is much, much, in her, my poor child, more than you know ; and you and I, M'sieu, will help her together ; we will help her, *n'est-ce pas*, to grow up. The child must be taught to grow up so that she may know how to grow old."

As she spoke, a door slammed loudly somewhere below us, and Mag's voice reached us in a stave of song.

There was, for all we knew, the rest of our own lives, and all of Mag's, in which Madame Aimée and I could arrange our unspoken compact about the child,—but I am sure she felt as I did, that there was not a moment to be lost, that things must be settled at once.

Driven by an irresistible impulse I seized the little delicate hand held out to me, and stood as still as if I had been on oath.

"We will, Madame Aimée, you and I between us—we will."

She leant back as if exhausted. Her breath came quickly and Mag entered to find me in the tiny kitchen getting a glass of water for our half-fainting hostess.

"Oh, what have you done to her, Mr. Quest?" the child exclaimed reproachfully, flying to a shelf and taking down a bottle.

"You have been exciting her, and her heart's bad. We never allow her to be excited——"

In a moment or two Madame Aimée had recovered and Mag had lighted the gas stove, and while the kettle boiled she prepared coffee. The coffee was excellent, and the next half-hour uneventful and pleasant.

Sitting on top of the bus on my way home (for the rain had stopped) I reflected that as I was trying to take care of Mag, and Madame Aimée was trying to take care of Mag, and Mag was taking care of Madame Aimée, the chances were that before very long one or the other, or both of them, would be trying to take care of me—and that was a pleasant thought.

CHAPTER VIII

HAVING decided that Mag must be educated and brought up, the next question was how she was to be educated and in what way she was to be brought up.

Bringing up another man's child might strike one as a rather difficult and not particularly agreeable task, but I confess that from the first any fear of any possible interference on the part of Mr. Pye never occurred to me.

A parent he undoubtedly was, but I assumed, and for once I was perfectly right, that as a parent he was a negligible quantity.

I do not believe in girls' schools, so I never had the slightest wish to remove Mag from her home environment ; besides, even if I had had such an idea, I knew that Madame Aimée, my partner, would never allow me to carry it out.

I was much pleased to find that Mag's knowledge of French, while naturally possessed of no very perfect grammatical basis, was a knowledge of the most useful kind. She spoke colloquially and fluently, with an accent very much better than my own. It transpired also that she had read a good deal in French, although the choice of the books she had borrowed from Madame Aimée's library would probably not have been commended by Sir Frederick

Harrison or Mr. Gladstone. For instance, among others, she was devoted to "Candide."

I do not think that this masterpiece or Renan's "Vie de Jésus" had hurt her in any way; but it was clear she must read much and she must learn other things as well.

Now for a rich man to undertake the education of any young creature must be a beautifully simple thing. Masters and schools of the very best in every department are, of course, close at hand on all sides in this our dear old London. But I am a poor man, and Madame Aimée a penniless woman, so our difficulties were manifold enough to make our undertaking far more interesting than it would have been had it consisted only of the necessity of choosing the various channels through which should flow the information necessary to the fertilization of the small patch of virgin soil we were endeavouring to enrich.

Moreover, book-learning was by no means the only thing I wished to impart to the invisible Mr. Pye's very visible and audible daughter. Book education is all very well, but to my mind, it is a not very important part of the possible whole. I wanted Mag to know books and people, but, above all, I wanted her to know Mag.

I had always longed to have a finger in the pie of my sister's children's education, but my proffered digit proving unwelcome, I had long since withdrawn it, and listened stoically, when necessity arose, to the utterly dull and useless lists of historical dates, unmusical music, and shop-worn fags of wisdom produced by the young Thornton and Gisella and Maud for my benefit.

Mag, I decided, was not to learn lists of dates; she was not to learn a chronological list of facts about England, and another chronological list of facts about France, and so on about different countries, without contemporaneously connecting these divers facts. It seems to me that the knowledge of my sister's children about history might be

compared to a fabric consisting exclusively of warp, or perpendicular lines. What I wanted was the woof as well—the horizontal lines that make of the history of any period a sound, solid fabric, and this I meant Mag to have.

She must learn natural history, of course; she must learn about trees and plants, but I hate Latin words for simple English things, and I mean her facts to be to her real and full-blooded, and not merely, as my school facts were made to look to me, dry bones full of rattle and dust.

Madame Aimée would teach the child to sew and other womanly things of that kind. Later, should a talent of any kind develop in her, I hoped that she would have a mental soil deep and enough fertilized to plant it in.

How many young people of the present day have as mental equipment but one talent, scantily rooted in a barren mental field. It is as if one planted a rare bulb in an ash-heap.

Full indeed of ideas was I in those days. Ideas as fine-sounding and superior as the above, and many were the long talks Madame Aimée and I had together over the perfecting of our duckling. Hen-like, no doubt, we cackled together, taking, of course, not the slightest heed of the vital fact that the very reason we were so keen on educating Mag was that Mag was one of the people who was bound, in the very nature of things, to educate herself.

One warm August afternoon we unfolded to the child our magnificent plans for her future. She listened politely, and then, when we had finished, put one question:

“Who’s going to take care of father?”

I looked at Madame Aimée and she looked at me.

“You see,” Mag explained, “he has his breakfast at half-past nine, and then a little after ten I have to get him off to his work. Then I have to make his bed and sweep and dust; then I have to come up and help Madame Aimée; then I have to do the shopping, and once a week,

of course, I do the washing and ironing. Then father has his lunch at one, and at two I stroke his head until he goes to sleep, and then I come up to Madame Aimée and do her shopping, and then——”

“ For goodness’ sake be quiet ! ” I burst out. “ This is awful. Do you mean that you never have a moment to yourself ? ”

“ It is all to myself,” she answered, “ up to now. I was only wondering when you meant me to learn all those things.”

* * * * *

We reconsidered, Madame Aimée and I. Even if we had wanted to, we could not have afforded to give Mag a servant to do her work and look after her father, and even in the interests of education the day could not be made to contain more than a certain number of hours. As it was, this looked to us, from the child’s point of view, pretty full.

“ Why don’t you have a talk with her father ? ” I suggested at last. “ Explain to him what it is we want to do and see if he can manage to take up less of her time. He must be a preposterous creature.” Madame Aimée nodded.

“ And what is it he does ? ” I went on. “ What is this wonderful work to which she gets him off a little after ten every morning ? ”

“ He goes to some place in the City and makes sketches for advertisements. Did you ever see that picture about ‘ Soapine,’ the black child with half its face scrubbed white ? He did that, for instance. But there is no use asking him anything.”

She added that although the man had never been civil enough to call on her, she felt that she knew him very thoroughly, and she had no doubt that the garrulous and

expressive Mag had unconsciously described her father with great thoroughness to her friend.

Madame Aimée and I parted, deciding to give the difficulties of the situation our profoundest thought, and to meet again in a few days.

On my way downstairs I saw that the door of Pye's flat was open and I went up to it, meaning to see if Mag was at home. Looking down the little passage into the open sitting-room I saw a man sitting in his shirt-sleeves by the window, and, knowing it must be Pye, I knocked. He was looking straight at me, apparently, but did not answer. Thinking that the noise of the traffic perhaps prevented his hearing me, I went a few steps down the passage and spoke.

"Excuse me," I said with great politeness, "I am sure you are Mr. Pye——"

The man moved in an odd way, leaning forward a little in his chair, but did not speak. At first I thought he was drunk, then, reproaching myself for this uncharitable suspicion, I decided that he must be ill, and, turning, withdrew softly, to meet Mag, who carried a large jug of milk in her hand. I explained my presence, adding my fear. She laughed. "Oh no, he's not ill—it's Saturday, you know." Grinning cheerfully she led me to the kitchen, where the kettle was boiling for tea.

"What do you mean—Saturday?" I asked.

"Well, he always goes to sleep on Saturday afternoon; he always has done."

"But he looks very odd."

"He always looks like that, Saturday afternoon," she answered, laughing. "It's some stuff he sticks into his arm with a little squirt. He thinks I don't know, but I do. I've often seen him do it—medicine of some kind."

So that was it. I said no more, but bade her good-bye, and going back to the stairs, knocked on Madame Aimée's

door. She didn't answer so I opened the door quietly. I was sick with disgust at what I had seen and heard.

To come back into this quiet place was what going into a church must be to many fortunate people.

Madame Aimée had lain down, the burnt side of her face on the pillow, her delicate profile outlined on the blue of her veil. For a moment she lay quiet, then looked up at me—her one eye was full of tears.

"Ah!" she said in French, "you know, you have seen—you have seen him? *Mon pauvre ami! Mon pauvre ami!*"

I was startled by the intensity of her sympathy with my horror.

"Yes," I said, "it was a dreadful shock. I care nothing about him, the swine, but to think of the child and her ignorance, and the blow it is bound to be to her when she finds out."

To my surprise she smiled as she sat up and folded her hands in her lap.

"It is of him I was thinking," she said gently. "It will not hurt Mag, and it will kill him, and he has died many deaths already,——"

I had no sympathy for Pye and said so, adding, "But I thought you didn't know him? How can you be sorry for him?"

She pointed to the crucifix. "I don't know," she said, with that odd break in her voice, "Judas Iscariot, the wickedest man of all, yet shall I not be sorry for him?"

CHAPTER IX

ENGLAND is a country of pure morals and impure vowels. There are those who might deny the purity of the morals, but surely there lives not the man with soul so dead as to refuse to acknowledge that as a nation our vowel sounds are rotten to the core. It is all very well to talk about the Cockney accent, but the phrase is one of the grossest injustice, considering that the same dreadfully misshapen "o's" and "i's" are to be found flourishing like the green bay tree in certainly half of our fair English counties. The "i" is a wretched step-child of pronunciation. To hear the most frequently-used word in the language, the pronoun "I," pronounced as "Oi" is a thing to make the most nasal American strut with national pride, and few are the lower middle and lower-class inhabitants of this dear land who can accomplish the shibboleth "around."

Mag, I determined, whether or no she had time enough for history planned on my noble lines, whether or no she was ever to do anything at mathematics, was at least to pronounce perfectly. At the present moment her French accent was better than her English one, although I already suspected that she treated me to a worse pronunciation than was absolutely necessary to her. So I decided to

take her to plays that thus she might learn the correct if somewhat over-precise pronunciation of her native tongue as it is heard at our best theatres.

However, she loathed Shakespeare, as I have said before, so I gave up that plan, for which I substituted two weekly readings with myself. First we read "Oliver Twist," then we read Andersen's "Fairy Tales," then we read "Peter Pan," and then we read "Buster Brown." She liked "Buster Brown" the best. It was quite obvious to me then that she would never be a literary light. However, I soon began to suspect that she had a very real, natural taste for pictures, and one day in November, when I had known her just about a year, I took her by appointment to see Lossell.

I had, with some skill, interested him in her, and rather subtly made him feel that, if she was clever, it would be in some way due to him, because she was living in the house that he had built.

"I should like you to see what you think of her taste in pictures," I had told him. "She has been many times to the National Gallery, and once in a while to the Tate. Her father is a second-rate painter, with, it appears, certain decent adorations, and, as I know nothing about pictures myself, I thought perhaps you would let her see yours."

To do him justice, Lossell agreed at once and very kindly. For a child of twelve to like pictures of any kind was unusual, and, what was more, he happened to be, at the moment, without a particular hobby. So he invited us to lunch that Thursday, and to lunch we went.

It was a cold, foggy day, and the pavements were filmed over with that curious shiny glaze that seems as much a peculiar attribute of London, though it doubtless isn't, as the fog that we share, even as we share our National Anthem, with several other countries.

It was the first time that season that I had worn my winter overcoat, and I smelt slightly of moth balls.

Mag was resplendent in a new frock ; dark blue it was, with particularly nice little lawn collar and cuffs, and round her fat throat she wore a row of those gold beads of which the world seemed to be full twenty odd years ago, and which since have so mysteriously disappeared.

She had on a new hat which I had given her ; a very nice blue hat covered with what looks like fur, but is part of the fabric, rather fluffy stuff it is, and under the hat, I knew, was tied on top of her head a handsome blue silk bow. Nothing on earth at that period could have made her legs other than columnar, but her stockings were smooth and unwrinkled, and her large shoes neatly polished. She also wore gloves, and I knew, from personal inspection, that her nails were whiter than they had ever been in their lives.

It is sad to be obliged to confess that this condition of her nails was due to an almost violent persuasion on my part. She had already washed her hands when I arrived at the flat, and the fact that her nails were not immaculate made no difference to her.

" I have washed," she said. " Why do you make such a fuss about my nails ? "

" Because," I returned stiffly, " they are disgusting." But my attempt to arouse her feminine pride was a failure ; she had no feminine pride to rouse. Joyfully she laughed at me, and her laugh was a shout.

" All right," she said, in her kindest voice, a minute later, " I don't mind, I'll *boil* my hands if you want me to. You're so good to me, I don't mind doing even silly things to please you."

So the " silly thing " was done, and the hands rescrubbed, and with pride I ushered her in at the Lossells' door.

It was one of the shocks of my life when Miss Pye, just as

I was handing my hat and stick to Pruffles, Lossell's old butler, dashed at him, knocked my hat out of his hand, and gave him a sound kiss.

"Oh, Mr. Williams, Mr. Williams," she cried, "I *am* glad to see you! It's ages since you have been to Blantyre's. I don't believe you have ever seen the twins at all."

Pruffles' face was scarlet; his expression would have wrung pity from the heart of an Indian brave on the war-path.

"Beg pardon, sir," he coughed behind his large, fat hand. "Now be quiet, there's a good girl, do!"

"It's quite all right, Pruffles," I assured him hastily. "Come along, Mag."

Mag was standing on one foot, tearing from her immaculate hands the gloves I had given her.

She refused to come along. "Why do you call him Pruffles?" she asked. "His name is Williams—Arthur Williams, isn't it, Mr. Williams?"

It was as if a Mr. de Courcy Montmorency on the stage had been hailed by some Philistine as "Bill Jones."

"In private life, sir," the wretched butler murmured to me, with an agonized circular glance at the surrounding doors and staircase, "my name is Williams."

"He's," Mag cried, "Mrs. Brankle's brother, and he used to be a perfect dear. Are you going to have lunch with us, Mr. Williams?"

"Oh, my Gawd!" was Pruffles' only rejoinder, addressed to his own hand. "Oh, my Gawd!" and, forgetting the gentler amenities, I dragged Mag across the black-and-white floor and knocked at the study door. Lossell was waiting for us, and Mag, to my relief, behaved beautifully.

"We have nearly been the death of poor old Pruffles," I explained, as the fat child sat with extreme gentility on

the edge of a crimson and gold Venetian chair. "It appears he is an old friend of Mag's, and in the rapture of reunion, she insisted on kissing him. Then she asked him if he was going to have lunch with us."

"Well, is he?" she put in.

Lossell laughed. Everybody has his sense of humour somewhere, and this episode struck him as very funny.

"No," he answered, "he isn't. He's my servant, you see, and he will wait on you at lunch."

"Also," I added severely, "be careful you don't frighten him into an apoplexy. He's fat and scant of breath."

"Like Hamlet," said Mag.

She had certainly never read *Hamlet*, and I am as certain that I had never mentioned that much-discussed metaphysician to her. Yet it is perfectly true that she recognized the little tag. I was just beginning to learn that she had this superficial quickness, and that, moreover, she seemed literally never to forget anything. She had the kind of mentality that always gives its owner the reputation for far greater cleverness than he or she deserves, but I had already begun to make up my mind that she should not be allowed, on the strength of it, to stop learning at a certain point, as many of her kind do, and feed, so to speak, for the rest of her days on her undeserved laurels.

Lunch passed off happily—Lossell and I talked of many things, and Mag was engrossed not only with eating, which occupation gave her obviously the purest and most intense pleasure, but also in observing the small niceties and elegancies of her situation. It delighted me to see that she made not one single mistake with her forks, and that she squeezed her bit of lemon verbena in her finger-bowl, and pressed it with the tips of her fingers in a way that was almost a ludicrous imitation of Lossell.

Little by little even Pruffles regained his serenity, and once, when he said to her in the course of his duties, "Salad.

miss?" she refused his offer (for salad was a thing she got at home) with a hauteur and absent-mindedness worthy of a princess in a fairy tale.

"Don't you like Pruffles any more?" I asked once, when he was out of the room.

"Course I do," she replied calmly, "in private life."

CHAPTER X

LORD LOSSELL'S house in Grosvenor Place is by no means a large one, as so-called great houses go. On the other hand no sane person could call it small, and there are deep rooms on either side of the broad entrance hall.

The staircase, to my mind very ugly, of carved wood that was growing seventy years ago, branches off at the top and swings round in an antler-like fashion into the upper corridors. This manœuvre repeats itself, leading up to the second floor, and there, just over the big drawing-room, the present man's father built himself, some forty years ago, a very fine and adequate picture gallery. It is, as a picture gallery should be, a place of straight lines and beautiful proportions. It has also the inestimable quality of looking over the Palace Gardens, and thus allowing all the sun and light there is to pour through its vast, uncurtained windows, full against the treasures on the opposite wall.

The collection is a small one, but it is very interesting, Lossell's taste, I believe, is particularly sound, and it is quite in accordance with my theory of the simple way in which utterly irreconcilable qualities can be mingled and welded in one character, that the dry, hard, rather sour

little man loves best of all pictures of the most romantic type.

His father had been an adorer of the Dutch School, and also bought the Warburton Holbein when a young man. To him also the gallery owes two Metzus, a Teniers, and the most beautiful Van Ostade I ever saw in my life, called "Au Coin du Feu."

The present man, nowever, has added "Une Conversation Gallante" of Fragonard's, that is as deliciously and exquisitely naughty as anything that very great painter ever achieved. Then there is a Pastoral of Lancret, and the Rousseau "Une Clairière" is the most perfect exposition of the Woodland Spirit—one can almost smell the leaves underfoot and hear the birds overhead—that I know anywhere. There is only one religious picture in the gallery, and that, oddly enough, is by an Englishman, Ford Madox Brown, and was given, Edith told me, by her mother to her father, shortly before her death.

As we went upstairs after lunch my mind was thick with a flock of confused and darting thoughts. What on earth could my poor little Magpie make of this delicate and recondite collection of pictures? She had told me of her visits to the National Gallery and the Tate, but I myself knew so little of these great "London Prides" that I could not judge of her knowledge or comprehension.

Lord Lossell's lot was of a type so unobvious, so personal to the two men who had achieved it, that I feared the taste of Pimlico might prove unequal to it.

Lossell was very kind: he was in his best mood that day, and it was clear that he liked Miss Pye. It was very cold in the gallery; the sun had come out and a reddish light blazed in at the windows. The highly polished floor looked like a mirror.

By way of beginning proceedings, Miss Pye of Pimlico, just as she stepped over the threshold, fell down with a loud

crash that seemed to shake the house. We both sprang to pick her up, but she refused to be helped, and lumbered to her feet with the sprawling action of a dog on the ice.

"Hurt yourself?" I asked with some concern.

"Horribly. What makes the floor like that?" she asked. Then, before she was well balanced on her feet again, she gave a cry of joy, and dashed across the room. "That's a Holbein," she said. "I know it is. It's exactly like the one at the Tate. Doesn't it look exactly like Pruffles?"

It did, though the likeness had never struck either Lossell or me before. There was Pruffles, with his little eyes and his big jowl; Pruffles with his pinched mouth, all too small for his face; Pruffles with large, thick, dewlaps; only instead of the staid habit of the domestic servant, Holbein had painted him in rusty and battered armour.

From this picture my protégée made a round of the room, saying little, but apparently missing nothing. She paused a very long time at length beside a small canvas on which a master-hand had painted two young girls in two shades of blue—poor children, possibly peasants, standing in a corn field.

I had never noticed the picture particularly, but now, as I watched Mag, I seemed to see it through her eyes and I stood as quietly as she, studying the tender, delightful thing.

"Whose is it?" I asked in an undertone.

Lossell shook his head. "Hush," he said.

We watched for a time, and then, without a word, Mag went on. She spoke intelligently and with enthusiasm about "Le Village oublié." She liked the portrait of "Miss M." by Lawrence, and she made another long pause before a La Thangue, but when at the end of her survey our host asked her which picture she liked the best, she stood still in the middle of the room, disadvantageously lighted by the sun, her little figure as broad as it was long,

her hat crooked, her feet, wary of the treacherous floor, planted firmly apart, and pointed to the cornfield where two young girls stood.

"That one," she said.

I don't think I have ever seen Lossell so pleased about anything. For one moment I thought he was going to kiss the child, but he didn't.

"She's right, by Jove; she's right, Quest!—that's a Maris, and a Matthew Maris at that. I bought it for five hundred pounds and I was offered one thousand eight hundred for it the day before yesterday."

Mag's cheeks, I saw, were deep red.

"I—I love that," she stammered. "It's—it's beautiful. May I bring father to see it?"

Perhaps papa was a little more than Lossell had bargained for; however, he at once acceded with the greatest politeness to her fluttering request, and began drawing her attention to different pictures.

There was a little Stanfield of which he was very fond, and he showed it to the child as gravely as if she had been some great connoisseur.

"How do you know all this about pictures?" he asked her at length.

"I don't know much," she answered. "But my father does and we often go to the galleries. I think it's a wonderful thing," she added, "that one can see pictures without paying. Father says music ought to be like that too."

This was a new thing whom I did not know, and I was as pleased with her as might be with her daughter a mother at a ball, when the girl unexpectedly turns out to be a fine dancer.

Suddenly the child turned to me.

"Mr. Quest," she said, "did you ever see Tuke's 'Autumn Sunset' at the Tate?"

I had certainly seen it, because I had been many times to the Tate, but I hadn't the faintest recollection of it, and said so. After that they left me out of the conversation, and presently we went downstairs and partook of tea and, some of us, of appalling quantities of cake.

I was a rather humiliated man in spite of my pride in my protégée, as I walked back to the Temple that night, and never in my plans for the child's future, in my deep interest in her had it ever occurred to me to ask her herself what she intended to be, and Lossell, who, for his narrow-heartedness, his crochety ways and his ungenerous temper, I had always somewhat despised, had, by one question, drawn from the girl such a blaze of interest and passionate intention as all my well-meaning efforts had never elicited.

"Are you going to paint?" Lossell had asked her. Her mouth was full of chocolate cake, and the corners of it not innocent of creamy tea, but oh, the glow in her eyes as she looked at him and gave her answer!

"Yes," she said.

CHAPTER XI

INTO the summer sky of my post picture-gallery mood, flashed with hideous suddenness the horrors of the Roop episode—indeed, the Roop episode was really a dreadful thing, and deserves very careful characterization. Clarity being, to my mind, the greatest of all literary virtues, and literary subtleties being in any case quite beyond my powers, I will tell it in a few words.

One night shortly before Christmas I took Mag, by way of an experiment, to see a play that the year before had pleased me very much. *Pinkie and the Fairies*, at His Majesty's.

I enjoyed it very much, in spite of the blow I sustained on finding that Miss Terry's part was very inadequately acted by a novelist whose books I have always considered inferior, and Mag herself, although she had little patience with fairies, behaved very well, and was immensely pleased with the waterfall in the second act. We sat in the upper circle, munched sweets, and between the acts I pointed out to her various celebrities whom I knew by sight, and some whom I didn't. When I had told her that an old gentleman in the stage box was the Prime Minister, and that the fat man with him was the Shah of Persia in disguise, and when I had pointed out to her rapt gaze a

handsome lady in a rose-coloured cloak whom I assured her was no other than Miss Marie Corelli, of whose books she was a fervent admirer, I felt that I had done my best to ensure her an evening not devoid of thrill. Personally I loved Pinkie, and, but for the exception already mentioned, it was admirably acted.

The music is of a kind I fully appreciate, being tuneful, merry, and, to my ear at least, well orchestrated. Besides, I, unlike Mag, love fairies and all that unto them pertains. So, unmindful of the blow about to fall on me, I led, at the end of the performance, my young charge out into the Haymarket. It was snowing, and a cold, clammy night. In my character as genial host I was prepared to pander to her passion for taxis, but as we had loitered on the way because she insisted on observing at close range a little boy I assured her was the Prince of Wales, we found we had difficulty in getting one of those noble vehicles, and, after waiting for some time, we started to walk up to Piccadilly. We crossed this thoroughfare and I hailed a taxi which had stopped at Scott's with a load of people.

"Come along," I said to Mag, and moved towards the curb. At that minute a girl approached us, walking alone. I can see her now as distinctly as I saw her then. She wore a dark coat and skirt and very white furs that I believe to be fox. On her head was a little hat made of crimson petals of some kind, and from under the hat billowed and waved voluminous, well-oiled, violently bleached hair. She carried a little red handbag and her gloves were new and shiny. With pity I observed the foolish, ugly coating of powder on her poor face, and the lurid smear of her scarlet lips. There was no mistaking what she was.

I had reached the taxi door and opened it, when, to my horror, Mag, with a loud cry, dashed at the girl.

"Oh, Pansy," she cried, "what fun to meet you!"

To do her justice, Pansy Roop looked most unwilling

to stop, and I heard her say that she was in a hurry. Evidently she did not know Magpie.

"Where are you going all alone at this time o' night?" she went on. "We have just been to a play at His Majesty's. Very nice, though it's a children's play, and we are going home now in a taxi. Mr. Quest," she added, turning to me, obviously asking me as a mere matter of form, "this is a great friend of mine, Pansy Roop's her name, and she lives at Blantyre's. Can't she come home with us?"

It is hard to say what I should have done if Miss Roop had not come to the rescue.

I had bowed, recognizing the introduction, and there I stood like an idiot. The poor little thing held her bag, tawdry and cheap as herself, and yet seeming, even in that hasty moment, to have something of her own pitiable quality, close to her breast, and under the powder—cheap, horrid, flaky powder—I saw her blush.

"Thank you very much, Mag," she said, "I can't come now—I—I've got to go somewhere. Good-night." And she rushed on into a sudden flurry of snow and disappeared among the crowd.

Mag settled herself comfortably in the taxi.

"Wasn't it funny, our meeting her?" she said. "She's such a nice girl, and I do like her. She came to Blantyre Buildings about a month ago, and I suppose she's on her way to see her mother now. Her mother's married again, and her stepfather doesn't like Pansy, so she only goes to see her at night when her stepfather's out. He's a night-watchman at Peter Robinson's."

In the darkness I mutely bowed to Miss Roop's powers of invention, and a minute later Mag had forgotten all about her and was eagerly criticizing the play we had just seen.

I left her at the door of the Buildings, as I had been given to understand, through her, that her father didn't welcome

visitors and had in particular a singular disinclination to make my acquaintance. But I thought about the child and her undesirable acquaintance until late that night, and I should have gone to see the woman the next day but for the fact that an old friend turned up from the Cape on his way to Scotland, and kept me busy for twenty-four hours.

Thus it happened that late the next night, after seeing Oliphant off at Euston, I went back to the Temple and strolled about for a few minutes in Fountain Court, as is my way before going to bed. My mind was full of my old friend and the other old friends our meeting had recalled, and I was in one of my foolish, forlorn moods, when I feel old and useless, and when my undeniable idleness and lack of success take on a very black aspect.

It was a mild little grey evening, and a young moon cast a pleasant, frail light on the fountain. I think I was mooning about Ruth Pinch and poor Tom, when a shadow struck across the path at my feet. Someone touched my arm, and Pansy Roop stood before me.

"You are Mr. Quest?" she said, and there was in her voice something of timidity.

"I am."

"I—I got your address from Mag Pye, and I knocked, and no one answered, so I have been walking up and down waiting for you. I saw you come over here, and——" She broke off, biting her lip. "Could I speak to you for a minute?"

Of course I said that she could, and stood waiting for her to begin.

There was in her voice and aspect something not quite Cockney; something almost rustic under her horrid livery, and the kind moonlight lent to her a sort of passing purity.

"It is about Mag, I suppose?" I said, to help her.

"Yes—sir," she added, after a moment.

"Let's walk up and down," I said. "We shall be less conspicuous."

"It's not my fault," she blurted out,—“her knowing me, I mean. I didn't want to, but a bird I have got out of its cage and ran along the gallery, and she caught it, and then—how could I help her speaking to me?” she ended passionately.

I hardly knew what to say—who would have known what to say? Whatever the woman was, she had come there, stealing the time from her dreadful vocation, to talk to me, Mag's friend, about Mag.

"You see, don't ye—you do see?" she urged, peering up at me, the red plush bag ground together in her gloved hands.

"I think I do," I answered, "but I don't know what to say to you, Miss——" I had forgotten her other name, so I added "Pansy."

At that her poor, thick, smeared mouth quivered into a smile that was not unpleasing, and there were tears in her eyes.

"You must tell her," she said, "you must tell her she must not know me. I can't do it. I—you see, it was wonderful for me, her liking me like that. I *can't* tell her."

"If I told her," I answered, as gravely as I felt, "she wouldn't understand."

She nodded. "No, of course she wouldn't. Neither would I at her age. I'm only ten years older than her now."

There was silence for a while, during which time the fountain plashed and tinkled in the moonlight. Finally the girl said, clearing her throat:

"Well, I don't know what to do. She runs in and out of my rooms; it's no place for her. What shall I do?"

"Couldn't you live somewhere else?" I suggested, feeling a perfect brute as I did so.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I thought you'd say that, and I made up my mind if you did, I would. You see, it's cheap and it's central there. But I know what you mean. I've liked knowin' her. She's gay, and I like gay people. Some people call *us* gay, but, oh, my God, we aren't! We laugh a lot,—we've got to,—and I suppose some of us is happier than we would be in a factory or a shop—I dunno——"

There was another long pause, during which I had never been more uncomfortable in my life.

Finally Pansy Roop gave another heave of her shoulders and laughed, a loud, piercing little laugh that, to my nervous, upset imagination, seemed for a moment to hush the sound of the fountain. Then she took a powder-puff out of her bag and applied it lavishly to her face.

"Well," she said, "so long, Mr. Quest. I'll do it—I'll move. After all, they wouldn't let me stay there if they knew—that corporal, I mean. He thinks I am an actress! I'll be off."

I held out my hand to her. "Thank you, Miss Roop," I said, "you are doing the right thing, and I am very grateful to you. I wish I could do something for you in return."

Her face softened again. "You can," she said eagerly. "I'm going to tell her that I'm going back to live with my mother. I'll say my mother's 'ad a stroke. Lord, the stuff I've made up to tell her! Would you mind if she ever mentioned me to you, just to—to just—back me up?"

"I will certainly back you up," I said. "Where have you told her your mother lives?"

"In Camden Town. You won't forget, will you? I'll tell her I've met you—may I,—sir?"

"Yes."

I held her hand for a moment and looked at her as kindly as I could.

" I think you know," I said, " that you have now been very good."

She gave a dreary laugh.

" Me—good ! " she answered. " Well, so long." With a little click of her heels she turned and marched off up towards Fleet Street, out of my life and Mag's.

Poor little passing ship !

CHAPTER XII

I SPENT Christmas at Wandover, as I have done for many years—Wandover is Lord Lossell's place in Hampshire. It is a pleasant Georgian house in a hollow at the foot of a high, pine-covered hill. There is a terrace in front of it with hideous and delightful urns at the corners, in which flowers grow in summer, but which in the winter remind me of cremations. The door is very fine under its Doric porch, and the hall, like the one in Grosvenor Place, is paved with large black-and-white stones. When a number of people are standing in these halls I have always an irresistible desire to divide them into kings, pawns, and castles, and set them at a game of chess. It is an odd thing that two out of Lossell's three houses should have this chess-board floor, but it suits him in a way, and he seems to have more character, more individuality down here in the country than anywhere else. He looks exactly like a Georgian squire who happens not to be of the usual boisterous, roystering, hard-drinking type. Horace Walpole would have liked him, I think, and Walpole would have looked splendid in the chess-board halls.

We were a small party for Christmas. There was old Lady Houndie, Middleton Treffry, Sir Max Cohen, and Lord and Lady Malpas.

With the exception of Cohen, these were all old friends, and old Lady Houndle and Treffry had both spent several Christmases there before.

Lady Houndle is one of those old women whose constant presence in desirable houses is a matter of wonder to some thoughtful minds; she is dull, disagreeable, most unornamental, and has not even the virtue of well-meaningness. Why she is invited I have always wondered, but not only do I often meet her in my own more or less humble circle, of which circle, I may add, Lossell is, socially, the shining light, but I constantly read about her in the papers as being one of house-parties in very good houses indeed. A disagreeable old woman, who has lived in the great world all her life, can be, as everybody knows, amazing good company. But old Lady Houndle is as dull as ditch-water, therefore, one asks oneself, why?—and for answer one gets only the echo of one's own voice.

However, there she was, and her detestable little dog, Papillon, a nasty, yapping, not very fragrant animal, who spent most of his time choking, and even occasionally went to the length of being sick on the rug.

Middleton Treffry, I had once said, might be called the Samuel Rogers of his generation. He knows everybody, and though he is a fresh-faced old fellow, very spry on his legs, he seems to have known everybody's grandfather as well, to say nothing of their grandmothers. By an occasional fugitive twinkle in his venerable eye, I gather that he may have known the grandmothers better than the grandfathers.

He has a charming little house in Park Place, St. James's, where he gives luncheon parties at which one is perfectly certain to meet only the cleverest men of the moment and the most beautiful women. His collection of miniatures of beautiful girls is, of course, famous, for he has always had plenty of money, and they have been painted by the

best painters of their periods. I love the little white room of which the walls are practically covered with small squares of black velvet on which hang, delicately mounted in silver-gilt, the ivory ovals. It is a very comprehensive record of the beauty in this country and France during the last fifty years, and any woman whose picture makes part of it is very sure to be proud of the fact, and to count it among her best assets.

Sir Max Cohen is as new a British product as Treffry and dreadful old Lady Houndle are old ones. There have been Treffrys and Houndles ever since there were English kings, but only in Queen Victoria's time, to go back very far, did the Max Cohens arise. He is a Jew banker, immensely rich and of no family at all, though he once told me that he derives from the Ghetto at Frankfurt. But who, on reading this, pictures him as plethoric, vulgar, and smelling of money never made a greater mistake in his life. He happens to be a small, delicately-built man, with absurd, unsure legs and a very large head, with little of the Hebraic about it. His eyes are light brown; the little hair he has of a peculiarly silky quality, and also light brown in colour. He is gentle, almost shy in manner, and afflicted with a stammer. At that time I, personally, didn't like him much, because he was always hanging about Edith Lossell, and that bored me, because I wanted her to myself at Christmas time. But even then I could not help recognizing his odd, illusive charm, and the immensity of his learning. Now I have done my duty by him.

The other two members of the party, Lord and Lady Malpas, are invited every Christmas exclusively, I am sure, because they are relations of the late Lady Lossell's. Malpas is a fat, red man who likes to kill things, and Lady Malpas is a suffragette. I used to wonder why Malpas never feels inclined to kill her!

I arrived at Wandover just before dinner on the 24th, and was promptly taken into the servants' hall to assist in the final decoration of the Christmas tree for the tenants' children, the yearly appearance of which was one of the odd inconsistencies of Lossell's character. Never was a less genial man, and he certainly doesn't like children; and yet, year after year, he not only gives the children this very elaborate party, but attends to all the details himself and makes his guests help him.

As usual, I found the whole party assembled in the room—Lossell himself was standing on a ladder, attaching a crimson star to the topmost peak of the very large tree. Edith and Lady Malpas were tying up gifts in parcels, and Malpas was wandering about, a huge figure in hideous check clothes, a whisky-and-soda in his hand, talking about the horns of some ibex he had killed a few weeks before, in the Caucasus.

I sat down by Edith, who had been away from town some time, and whom I thought looking very tired, and set to work helping her.

"Did you have a decent journey?" she asked.

"No," I said, "it was bitterly cold and I couldn't get any tea." This was a device, simple but cunning, to get her to myself for a bit, but it failed. She sat there very quietly, with her little air of lassitude, the light blazing down on her smooth dark hair, and sparkling on her rings, tying up the endless parcels.

Lady Houndle was not present, and I inquired with carefully concealed hopefulness whether we were to be deprived this year of the pleasure of her company. Malpas burst into his great roar.

"No such luck," he answered, and for a moment I felt a pang of sympathy for him.

"Oh, George!" remonstrated his wife, "you really are too bad!"

I watched her curiously, for I had read in the papers not long ago an account of her being arrested for breaking a window in Bond Street, and subsequently scratching a policeman. Malpas's new joke (and he always had one which he ran to earth and drove everyone to madness by repeating) was that in view of his wife's recent prowess he himself went in fear of his life.

"Steer clear of Hermione," he said to me jocosely, "she will have her hammer out in a minute; she has had a special pot'et made for it in her petticoat."

This time it was Edith who murmured "Oh, George!" and the scene went on in all its lugubrious likeness to other Christmas Eve scenes in the same room, and as I had often done here at that hour of the day, I told myself that I should have to flee, and that I should never live through it. But even as I thought this I knew that nothing short of an earthquake could get me away from Wandover a minute sooner than I was obliged to go.

"Is Treffry coming?" I asked.

"Yes, but he doesn't get here till to-night," answered Lossell, descending from his ladder and overhauling a box of coloured candles. "This'll be your job, Quest," he went on, handing me a basket full of the nasty, treacherous little coloured, metal clips with which the candles are fastened on to the tree. I rose obediently and set to work.

An hour later I had a few minutes' talk with Edith, and learned that she had not been well and that she had had a miserable time in Devon.

"Uncle Ralph is very hard to bear nowadays," she explained. "He is drinking dreadfully and poor Monica is in despair."

"She oughtn't to have married him," I growled. "Why did she have to marry a man thirty years older than herself?"

Edith looked at me oddly. "Don't you know, Victor?"

she asked. "Do you really not know why she married him?"

"I suppose because he was rich and she was poor——"

She shook her head with a queer little smile.

"You are a blind old thing," she retorted gently. "Monica Gray married my Uncle Ralph because she loved him."

"Get out," I jeered, "she couldn't possibly have loved him, horrible old man!"

"Yes, he is horrible, but what I say is true, nevertheless."

We were silent for a moment, and then, urged, impelled by a sudden impulse that I knew, even while I couldn't restrain it, to be disastrous, I blurted out: "Edith, do you think Bettany is dead?"

She stared at me almost as if I had struck her.

"Victor, why on earth did you ask me that?" she said, with a kind of stammer.

I was disproportionately ashamed of myself, but I stuck to my guns.

"I'm sorry, dear. I was talking to a man the other day who knew him, and he didn't seem sure whether the poor fellow was dead or not, but rather thought he must be."

In the firelight, (we were sitting in the library) I saw her pale.

"Who—who was it?" she asked.

"Oh, nobody you know. Do you remember that child I told you about—Margaret Pye?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was her father."

I saw that she wanted to know more, although she could not bring herself to question me, so I went on, looking into the fire:

"He happened to mention that he had been fainting in

Paris in 1887-89, and said he knew Sparling, so I asked him if he had ever met Bettany."

Still she was silent.

"He hadn't known him very well," I resumed, for I knew she was waiting, "and he didn't seem to admire his work as much as we all did, but he said he had seen a good deal of him at one time."

That was all the man had said, but I felt I ought to go on. However, I had no more to tell her, and continued to look away from her until she moved.

"I think," she said slowly, "that he must be dead, Victor."

Then she moved to the door and opened it. Before she left the room she added quietly, "I hope he is."

CHAPTER XIII

THE holidays passed, once I was resigned to certain of my convives, pleasantly enough for me. Treffry, as usual, was a storehouse of delights. He is one of those people who, though they never consciously shine, or, to carry the simile further, give out light, yet, by the mere force of their own personality, illumine the way for their fellow-travellers.

On several occasions I had the luck to take a long walk with him, and I knew from long practice just how to get him started on reminiscences. I told him that in my own mind I had likened him to Sam Rogers, the breakfast-party man, but I added that I had reconsidered, and come to the conclusion that henceforth I should regard him as my own particular, private Crabb Robinson.

The old man laughed gently.

"Where, oh where," he said, "is my Charles Lamb; where even is my Mr. Coleridge?" I loved him for the "even." However, he was not at all unwilling to talk when one wanted him to. It is a very different thing from the way in which most conversationalists impose their flow of words on weary, or often violently unwilling, hearers, and many interesting things did I hear from him,

of the old days long before I was born or heard of. What a way one has of measuring periods of time by one's own life!

I do not think I am particularly egotistical, although I am naturally deeply interested in my own affairs. At least I am most certainly quite sure of my own insignificance, and yet the yard-measure in my hand, when I read or listen to old stories, is always a measure of my own life; perhaps most people are so. For instance, while this old man, whose diaries, I am sure, will one day be regarded as the most important social documents of his time, was telling me about the wedding festivities of Queen Victoria, and her handsome German bridegroom, instead of applying for verification of dates to, for example, the year of her own accession, or even of her own birth, there was I counting up on my fingers and arriving at the illuminating conclusion that the events took place exactly twenty-three years before I was born.

"My father," I said, "was a great admirer of Queen Victoria."

"Who wasn't?" ejaculated the gallant and loyal old man.

But I persisted. "Oh, that, of course. But my father,—he was a solicitor in Lincoln's Inn,—loved her."

Mr. Treffry laughed gently. "Did he? How romantic!"

"It was romantic naturally. He, a poor, middle-class gentleman, who was never even presented to the Queen,—indeed, I have heard him say that he never so much as heard her voice,—and yet I am convinced that in all his long life he never cared for another woman."

"Rather hard on your mother, wasn't it?"

We were walking through a plantation of young trees on the outskirts of the park, and the westering sun fell full on the old gentleman's well-bred, debonair face.

"I remember Lord Palmerston telling me——" he said; and off he went at a genial mental jog-trot, traversing gaily the hills and dales of the social old days. He ended up with the rather spicy anecdote of one of Lord Lossell's aunts, and then, with a mental bounce unlike his usual methods of procedure, he spoke of Edith.

"Edith," he remarked seriously, "is growing old."

I was silent, for I was trying to think of the right thing to say.

"Haven't you noticed it?" he went on. "In the last few months she has really aged. Ah, the pity of it!"

"Yes," I agreed.

"By the way, Quest, has Lossell shown you that new find of his, that picture?"

I nodded. "The Bettany?"

"It is no more a Bettany than it's a Raphael," he replied with fine scorn, standing still, as was his way when much interested.

"Why do you think that?"

He was a man of such quick, vivid thought that pauses in his conversation were usually dramatic ones, instead of the pauses of the seeker for words. Yet now I felt that he was verbally feeling his way.

"I can't quite tell you how I know," he said at last, "but I am pretty sure. You know, Quest, there was always a mystery about that fellow. I knew him fairly well at the time."

I looked at him eagerly. "I know. I have always felt it and it has always been just beyond my grasp. Tell me what you think, Mr. Treffry."

We had reached, in the course of our walk, an odd little summer-house built like a temple, and here, in the mildness of the sunny winter afternoon, the old man and I sat down, and he talked.

"I knew them all before you did," he began. "Gerald Lossell and I were at Eton together, and Mark, this man, is my godson, as of course you know. He is an odd fellow, but I think you are one of the people who know that he is not so black as he paints himself. When he married poor Lily Vidal I was at the wedding. I remember that wedding well,—my boots were too tight and I suffered the torture of the damned.

"Well, of course you have heard that Lily was not happy. She was a sweet creature, and her little face had an odd old-fashioned way of changing colour with every thought,—sometimes it was paper-white, and sometimes of an almost painful glow. I do not think she was ever called pretty, and the little prettiness she had soon faded after her marriage. I can remember Edith from the very day of her birth. By the time she was twelve she was beautiful, as women are beautiful, not children. I remember the softness of her hands, the swansdown look of her lovely throat, the narrowness of her feet. I shall never forget her feet as her skirts became longer, and they in that odd way young girls' feet have, grew more noticeable as they grew less visible. At nineteen she was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and her beauty was the more arresting, the more remarkable, because it was not at all classic. It is a strange beauty, Quest, irregular, odd, not according to Hoyle, so to speak, and yet it *was* the greatest beauty! For two or three seasons,—and I suppose you came along about that time,—she was undisputedly and undisputedly the most lovely girl in London.

"Then Bettany appeared."

The old man paused, leant back in his seat, and looked at me reflectively. "Did you know him in those very earliest days?" he asked.

"Yes, I—happened to be present when he was intro-

duced to her. That was at Cathcart's, the day her portrait was shown before being sent to the Academy——"

" Bless my soul, were you indeed ? Well, I don't know how you felt about Bettany,—I personally always liked him,—but I didn't believe in his pictures. By Jove ! I can remember now how I felt when I first saw ' Cross Roads.' "

" It was a wonderful picture," I murmured.

" It was indeed. ' The Windmill ' is good—a fine piece of work ; but ' Cross Roads,' of course, lifted him up into the higher regions, where only the best painters dwell. However, it was before this, of course, that he and Edith fell in love with each other."

" Bettany fell in love with Edith," I declared, " the moment he first set eyes on her. It was the clearest case I ever saw in my life."

The old man nodded. " Yes, that must have been in March, wasn't it ? "

I laughed. " It was the 28th of March, 1888," I said.

Treffry, who was looking down, raised his heavy, languid eyelids very slowly and looked at me.

" You have a good memory," he said dryly, and after a pause he went on :

" You were at the dinner the night that the engagement was announced, weren't you ? "

I nodded.

" Well, in that case you will never have forgotten her face. Did you ever in all your life see a face so radiantly happy ? "

It occurred to me to wonder what he would have thought if by chance his sharp eyes had found it worth while to investigate the expression on *my* face at that famous dinner. Even now, after twenty years, I can feel the stiffening of muscles, and the queer chill that had settled over my mouth and chin as I sat opposite Edith.

" I have often wondered," he went on, " what the trouble really was, but I never dared ask her."

" Why didn't you ask Lossell ? " I growled, clearing my throat. " It was his fault in some way."

The old man looked at me mildly. " Do you think so ? I always had an idea that it was an individual quarrel between Edith and Bettany."

He rose. " It's getting a little too chilly for my sapless bones. Shall we walk on ? "

As we made our way across the grass towards the avenue he continued :

" It was an amazing thing, wasn't it ? They were only engaged four months in all. I have often wondered," he added, sharply turning, standing still and looking me straight in the eyes, " whether the poor fellow may have been jealous of you."

I burst out laughing.

" Of me ! Dear Mr. Treffry, I never had the luck to make Bettany or anybody else jealous. Well, do you remember his face ? "

He nodded. " Yes, he was a good-looking fellow, though he had the bluest chin I ever saw ; I believe he shaved twice a day,—well, as I say, I often wondered whether he disliked your friendship with her."

We had reached the steps of the terrace and stood still, looking up at the house, which, in the sudden withdrawal of the sunset warmth, looked chill and austere.

Remembering his redoubtable diary, that was said already to extend to fifty-two volumes, and which would, without doubt, be published on his death, I thought it well to disabuse the old man's mind of any illusions about Miss Lossell and myself.

" Listen, sir," I said, detaining him, " Edith cared so absolutely for Bettany, that if the man had been a congenital idiot he could never have mistaken her friendship

with anyone else—I have always been convinced myself that it was she who broke the engagement."

He gazed up at me eagerly, his minutely-wrinkled face alight with interest.

"You think so? You think it was her doing?" he said.

"Ah, well, perhaps you are right. But you can't deny that he adored her. I never in my life saw a man so devoutly in love."

"Nor I."

Then, as we went slowly up the steps to the door, he continued:

"Do tell me, there's a good fellow, what your theory is. If she threw him over, why do you think she did it?"

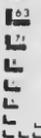
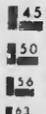
But I had had enough of the conversation, and in his avidity I sensed the diarist. However, he was an old man who had always been kind to me, and I liked him.

"I have," I said, gently closing the conversation as we reached the house, "no theories at all about it, Mr. Treffry."



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CHAPTER XIV

AND here it is necessary that I should go back, as I warned the reader I should have to do, and explain how it was that I had heard about Bill Bettany from Mag's father.

After learning that Pye was a morphinist I made no effort to see the man. That vice happens to be one that is peculiarly abhorrent to me. It is so much worse than drinking, because after all, the primary reason for drinking must, in nine cases out of ten, be the comparatively excusable one of conviviality, whereas the morphine fiend, with his horrid little needle, deliberately, in a minute way, operates on himself every time he takes his stuff. There is nothing genial in operations. Can you, for instance, imagine one fiend saying to another, "Come along, old fellow, have a squirt on me!" It was hideous to think of; a young girl dependent on the protection of a man with such a bestial weakness, but on the other hand, even in those days, it never occurred to me that Mag needed to be taken care of; she was of the kind that takes care of other people, and, luckily for her, hers was the bravery not altogether of fortitude, but also of that of indifference. She seemed quite unmoved about her father's Saturday indulgences, and I had no intention of blundering into

another man's business, and but for a mere hazard, many months might have passed without my again setting eyes on Mr. Pye.

The hazard consisted of a very small scrap of orange skin left on the steps of Blantyre Buildings, just outside Mr. Pye's door. One might trace the history of the orange-skin and the orange on which it grew. Say it came from Jaffa—there is something delightfully Old Testament in the name Jaffa—the orange may have been picked by an Arab and carried in panniers on a camel to the nearest station. I am rather vague as to geography, but it must have coasted Palestine on its way to Europe; possibly it landed at Marseilles and spent a few hours on the quay there, almost within smell of the bouillabaisse in the restaurants. Then I see my orange dashing across France and arriving in England. Where oranges and other tropical luxuries land on our shores, I have no idea, but should think probably at Southampton and Portsmouth.

At all events, up n.y one came to town and was dumped from the wholesale into the retail trade, and found itself one day in a humble shop in the Pimlico Road. There it was probably bought by a slatternly lady with a bulging basket, and presented as a rich gift to one of her offspring. Having eaten the orange, and being reluctant to give up the joys of mastication, the child was, I imagine, sent downstairs on an errand while still chewing a bit of the peel. Then the hand of Fate intervened; the child suddenly had enough of orange peel and dropped a small fleck of it on the stairs, whereupon I, coming down from Madame Aimée's with no intention whatever of seeing Mag, as I was in a hurry, slipped on that bit of peel and came down with such force on my right elbow that for a moment I could not get up, and lay sprawling, almost sick with pain. It was then that Mag's father chanced to come up the stairs. He came to my rescue with great kindness,

helped me up, retrieved my hat, and on seeing that I really had had a bad shaking, insisted on my going into his sitting-room to rest a bit. He made me sit down on the sofa and out of a cupboard produced a bottle of whisky, from which he poured me a generous and most welcome drink.

"Sorry I haven't any soda," he said, "but I don't run to that nowadays."

As I grew better I watched him carefully and found that I liked him. Mag's description was as outrageously unflattering as descriptions by one member of a family of another so often are. He was a small man, but he was well-built; he wore a rough, pointer^d beard, and his hands were of the short, spatulate type often seen in artists. His sad, deep set eyes were not bad in expression, and his voice was pleasant.

"You got a pretty bad fall," he said presently.

I nodded. "I did. I had just been calling on a neighbour of yours, Madame Aimée." He was filling his pipe and nodded indifferently as I spoke.

"Ah, yes, she's a very nice woman, I believe. She's been a good friend to my little girl." He drained his glass and added, rather more expansively, "and she needs friends, poor child."

"If you will allow me to say so," I observed, "she has one in me, as well as in Madame Aimée. I am a great admirer of your daughter, Mr. Pye."

He looked up sharply. "Then you must be Mr. Quest?"

"I am. She is a delightful child."

He shrugged his shoulders. "A good little thing. I am sorry she is not going to have any looks."

It was odd, for it was I who felt the indignation that he ought to have felt had I decried Mag's appearance.

"She's beautiful eyes," I expostulated, "and delightful hands."

" Ever noticed her legs ? "

I could have boxed his ears, but Mag's arrival with a leg of mutton put an end to the strain. She insisted, to my great discomfort, on tying up my elbow with a handkerchief soaked in some liniment, and was very voluble about the hideous danger I had just passed through.

Pye paid very little attention to either of us after that. He sat by the fire smoking and brooding, apparently over not very pleasant dreams.

Mag glanced at him presently. " Do you like him ? " she asked.

I started, but I need not have done so, for he didn't hear her. It was one of his characteristics that, sitting in the presence of others, he was so deep in his own thoughts or dreams as to be quite unconscious of what was said about him. I don't know whether this is a quality usual in people who take morphine, but it was very characteristic of Pye, and I have often observed it in him.

In the kitchen before I left I told her that I did like her father, whereupon she nodded gravely and dropped the subject.

It was some days after this that I had with the man the talk to which I had referred to Edith—I don't remember exactly how the subject of Bettany came up, but I must have shown surprise that he should have known the great painter, for he laughed and said rather whimsically, " Ah, Mr. Quest, in those days Bettany was not the famous man he afterwards became, nor was I the down-at-heel failure I am now ; things were more equal then."

It was then that he told me, in answer to my question, that he believed Bettany was dead. " No one has heard of him for many years," he said, with an indifferent, conclusive little shrug.

* * * * *

The next move in Mag's story was, oddly enough, due to Sir Max Cohen. That queer little Hebrew dandy arrived at Wandover two days after Christmas, and in overhearing some remark of Lossell's to me about Mag, he asked who she was. It was then that I first realized the depth of the impression the child had made on Lossell. Instead of allowing me to explain my own protégée, he took the matter out of my hands completely.

"She's a poor child in London that Quest picked up somewhere——"

"I didn't; she picked me up," I protested mildly.

"—And brought to see my pictures. She's very young—how old did you say, Quest?—ah, yes, twelve last month—and I think she is going to be an artist of some kind, at least she has a tremendous *flair* for pictures. She doesn't simply *look* at them, she *sees* them, and shows the nucleus of a very fine taste. They move her strangely, as well; she really loves them."

"Has she drawn anything?" asked Cohen.

I shook my head. "No, not so far as I know. Her father's a broken-down painter, and a morphine fiend, and he seems to have shown her more pictures in the last two or three years than most people see in a lifetime."

Cohen gazed at me thoughtfully, his clear, light-brown eyes full of mild interest, and I was about to speak again when Lossell, who had left the fire where we were sitting (we were in his study, just before dinner), came back, carrying a big sheet of paper in his hand.

"This came this morning," he said, with a jarring, rather irritating little laugh of triumph.

We looked at it in silence.

"She sent it to me as a gift," Lossell explained, "in return for a box of colours and some brushes I sent her."

He had not told me of the box of colours, and I had not

seen Mag for over a fortnight, so I had known nothing of the gift until then.

Why the child had chosen as the subject of her offering an American Indian engaged in the congenial task of scalping a settler, was hard to guess. It was almost as certain that she had never seen an American Indian as it was that she had never seen a settler in process of scalping. The feather head-dress of the brave looked very shaky, and the blanket wrapped round him was not, to my idea, of warpath fashion. To tell the truth, I was not very much impressed by the work, until Cohen, disregarding me utterly, turned to our host.

"That is clever," he said. "It is better than clever. That chap is really standing on his feet. See the way she's thrown the weight?"

"Quite so, and the values are good, so far as they go," Lossell answered.

I was a little nettled at being so completely out of it, so I made a disparaging remark about the settler. Once more no one paid the slightest attention to me, so I puffed at my pipe and tried to pretend that I didn't care.

"You might bring her to my house some time," Cohen suggested mildly, turning to me. "I should like to talk to her. I might be able"—he hesitated, with a little modest air that was very endearing—"to be of some use to her."

I thanked him, and said I would most certainly bring her. Lossell nodded cordial approval, and it did not escape me that in this matter he was behaving better than I had done a minute ago. After all, it was he who had practically discovered Mag's gift, if it was a gift, and yet he was handing her over to his artistic superior with a generous finality that I had been quite unable to compass. These things make a man feel small, but are, doubtless, salutary.

However, as it happened, it was not Mag who went to see Sir Max, but Sir Max who called on Mag.

It appears he got her address, quite simply, from Lossell, and as he afterwards told me, chancing to find himself in the neighbourhood of Pimlico, he went to see the child.

He told me a long time afterwards more about the interview than he bothered to communicate to me at the moment.

"It was," he said, as we sat one night in his little orchid-house in Green Street, "washing day in Pimlico, and Miss Margaret was up to her elbows in frothy blue water. Water bluer than any sea, though I don't know what made it so" (the gifted Mr. Reckitt was not known to Sir Max, but I knew what made the water blue). "The room was very steamy, not to say damp," the little man went on, "and mutton was roasting in the oven. It was very domestic, very—what shall I say?—*gemütlich*—you must remember, Mr. Quest, that I am born a German Jew—she was glad to see me, when I told her I had come from you and Lord Lossell. Her manner," he added, incidentally as a little passing tribute, "was exquisite."

"It is," I grunted with satisfaction, "when she wants it to be."

"She could not leave her washing just at first. It was a question of some garment of her father's, but in a few moments she dried her arms and led me into the *salon*. She was quite charming, even in those days, when she was so outrageously fat, and of course the room itself was delightful. She showed me the different 'works' she had accomplished since the day of the Indian brave, and there was enough in them to rivet my interest. But the most delightful thing of all was my discovery of the undoubted 'Bettany' hanging over the chest of drawers. You remember it?" he asked me sharply. I didn't, and said so.

"It isn't a good one," the great connoisseur went on; "not even as good as 'L'Abreuvoir,' which, as you probably know, I own, and which is by no means the equal of 'Cross Roads' and 'The Windmill,' but it was undoubtedly a Bettany, as her father, who had been asleep in the next room, and came in as I was examining it, assured me."

"He knew Bettany," I put in.

"Yes—I didn't like the father," Cohen went on.

This I quite understood. Cohen, with all his charm, all his exquisite mental valour, could of course never feel even the reluctant superior pity that I felt for poor Pye. However, it had interested him to talk with the man of his former friend, and apparently Pye had been more communicative to him than he had to me. No doubt the fellow thought me a rank Philistine, whereas even he would have heard of Sir Max Cohen, the great critic and buyer of pictures.

At all events Cohen on that occasion had definitely made friends with the two Pyes, and it was owing to his swift and capable mention that Mag was freed by her father from her duties to him for four mornings in the week, in order that she might repair to the studio of the man Cohen had chosen as her first instructor.

The next time I happened to be at Blantyre Buildings on a Wednesday, I met, to my astonishment, the plum-duff-like Mrs. Brankles, who was engaged in swobbing, in a seamanlike manner, the gallery outside the Pyes' flat.

Having exchanged the compliments of the day, Mrs. Brankles and I had a few moments' conversation, during which I learned that hers was now the task of purifying and embellishing the Palazzo Pye twice every week.

"Magpie," she informed me gaily, "has gorn for a p'inter, so I go and clean up for 'er—eight shillings a week I get from the gentleman. P'raps," Mrs. Brankles added sentimentally, "p'raps 'e'll marry 'er some day."

"Who'll marry whom?" I growled.

"The gent; 'e might marry 'er, Mag, I mean. She won't be so pl'ine when she's not so fleshy."

I nipped this romance in the bud by telling her—which was perfectly untrue—that Sir Max Cohen had a wife and four lovely children, all of them girls, and named after flowers.

Mrs. Brankles sighed with delight. She loved a romance, as, to do them justice, do most women of her class of life, however poor and unhappy their own married lives may be. There is something rather wonderful in this, when you come to think of it.

* * * * *

I have said nothing for a long time about Madame Aimée, but it is not because she had lost her importance in Mag's life. She had been ill, poor soul; so ill that I had not been allowed to see her for several weeks. Indeed, Mag had been going to the studio in Thurloe Square for over a month, before I had an opportunity of discussing the situation with Madame Aimée, and then, to my surprise, I found that this devoted friend was not greatly pleased with the turn events had taken.

"But don't you think," I asked, "that it's a good thing that the child should have proper lessons in painting?"

She looked at me anxiously. "I don't know," she said, "it's all so difficult—*la vie est tellement compliquée.*"

I tried to cheer her, but I failed. She was depressed, and her poor face was sadder than I had ever seen it before, as I took my leave. On this occasion I deliberately stopped at Pye's to see if he had come in. He had, and I told him about Madame Aimée.

"She's so kind and such a true friend to you both," I

urged him. "I really wish, Mr. Pye, that you would see her and explain that you are pleased about what Cohen is doing for Mag."

"I don't know her," he said coldly. "I have never set eyes on the woman."

I disliked him intensely at the moment.

"I know," I returned as gently as I could, "and Mag has told me that you dread the sight of her burnt face. I quite understand that—I know that artists are very sensitive. But I assure you that there is nothing in the least shocking about her poor face."

He waved his hand. "I have never suggested such a thing, Mr. Quest."

For a moment I was conscious of a violent desire to ask him whether he believed that a burnt face could possibly be as horrible to him as was, to me, the fact that he was an opium eater. However, this remark would have done no good, and I am glad to say I didn't make it.

"You told me yourself," I persisted, in spite of the horrid consciousness that I was making myself thoroughly disagreeable to the man, "that she'd been a good friend to Mag. Really, Mr. Pye, I do think that it would be very decent of you to let her see that you do not consider me a blundering mischief-maker for having introduced Cohen to her."

He shook his head, a softer expression in his melancholy eyes.

"It could do no good, Mr. Quest, and it would distress me. I can't bear even to think of—burnt human flesh."

So I gave it up and went my way. The man was hopeless, but doubtless he himself did not know what a monster of ingratitude he must seem to anyone who knew of Madame Aimée's tender, unselfish love for his neglected little girl.

I read de Quincey that night, trying to understand something of the workings of the mind of people who take morphine, but I gained little comfort, for it occurred to me suddenly that de Quincey at least had the grace not to use a piece of mechanism to achieve the condition he longed for—he drank his opium out of a coffee-cup.

CHAPTER XV

A FEW days ago I re-read what I have written and I found that I have failed in my chief object, which, as I have called the book after her, it is hardly necessary to say was the rendering of Margaret Pye not only important to the story, but attractive.

I suppose even an accomplished novelist might find difficulty in explaining that most illusive of qualities—charm. That I have failed absolutely in doing it is as patent to me as it could be to anyone else.

Mag was, when we first met, exactly what I described her: fat, managing, capable, a little lady, without any of the early educational graces that should have been hers by birth, at least from her father's side. I have described her beautiful eyes as well as I know how, and I have, I think, made it clear that she was destined one day to become physically attractive, even if not remarkably pretty. But I have given no feeling of the odd fascination that she had, from the first, not only to me, but for those of my friends and acquaintances whom, as has been seen, she met soon after Mrs. Brankles brought her to my notice. So, after much pondering over my failure, it occurred to me to do what many a wise man has done before—ask for help in my difficulty, and I wrote letters to Lossell, Sir Max Cohen, and Madame Aimée. This is what I said in them:

" May, 1916.

" DEAR ———,

" I have been thinking about our friend Magpie, and endeavouring to explain her to myself. She has from the first so charmed me that it annoys me to find that I am quite incapable of making clear that charm to other people. Will you therefore write to me wherein you think lies, and lay even seven years ago, that charm and attractiveness? Needless to say, we will not mention this discussion to the child herself, therefore you may speak quite freely.

" Yours, etc.,

" VICTOR QUEST."

The sending of these letters seemed to me a most excellent idea, a plan probably fertile of the necessary elucidation, and it pleased me that I should have been able to apply to three people so absolutely unlike as the three I have mentioned. Their view points were bound to be not only unbiassed, but also, I thought, more characteristic than would be, about a matter of comparative unimportance to them, the view points of almost any other group of three of whom I could think. It stood to reason that a rich and philanthropic peer, a rich Jewish connoisseur of pictures, and a poor French invalid of obviously humble origin, would look at the matter from very varied standpoints. I told Edith what I had done, and she was greatly amused.

" You should have asked me what I thought," she suggested.

" No good at all, my dear! You—that's different."

She nodded. " I know. Yet I know why she interested you at *the very first*."

" Why? "

She laughed. " Because, dear old thing, almost everyone does! But she interested you in a very personal,

very close way, because you are—a natural-born father.”
Then she added, her beautiful eyes lit with amused malice,
“ I used to wonder if you would ever fall in love with her.”

“ No, you didn’t,” I returned gravely. I couldn’t go into the matter deeply, because, of course, she didn’t know that I was writing a book, so I said no more, and this morning the three letters arrived.

“ DEAR QUEST,” Lossell said,

“ What an odd fellow you are ! If you don’t know why our friend fascinated us from the first, even though she was fat, how on earth should I know ? However, I can tell you why she always interested me—because it was my belief, after that first masterpiece of prairie life, that somewhere within her was some kind of artistic gift. Besides, I liked her voice and her eyes, and knew she was going to be very pretty some day. Events have justified this latter belief, as we both know. She was looking lovely at the Malpas wedding yesterday.

“ I hope this’ll satisfy you.

“ Yours sincerely,

“ LOSSELL.”

Sir Max Cohen said :

“ DEAR QUEST,

“ Margaret Pye interested me in the beginning because she was extremely individual. Also she struck me as being sincere to a remarkable extent. Glenny had told me, after the first lesson, that she had undoubted talent, and with it the concomitant, rather unusual in a child, of great industry. While the talent may not have turned out as great as I at first hoped, it is, as you know, sufficiently greater than that of most young painters, male or female, to make me feel very grateful to you for having drawn my attention to her.

" I don't know whether you have seen her last little picture, but to my mind it is remarkably good for a girl of her age—is she eighteen or nineteen?—and as you ask me about her charm, I may as well add that as far as I am concerned, my personal liking and delight in her would not materially decrease if she never painted another picture in her life.

" Come and dine with me one night. I am very busy just now and so am not going out much, so any time will suit me if you will let me know beforehand.

" Yours very truly,

" MAX COHEN."

These two letters I did not feel particularly elucidating. I could have said as much myself. Madame Aimée's was as bad. She simply said :

" CHER MONSIEUR " (I will translate it),

" Mag interested me because I love her ; because she is more to me than anyone in the world ; because she makes up to me for much that I lost in my youth, largely by my own fault.

" I hope that you will soon have time to come and see me again. I have some new sketches of the child's I would like to show you."

Then she thanked me for some flowers I had sent her, and a cocoanut cake (she has a passion for cocoanut), and hoped that I would come and see her soon.

I sat for a long time over my cold bacon and eggs, reading and re-reading these letters, which were distinctly disappointing, but finally I realized that it is as difficult to describe personal charm as it is to describe the scent of a flower ; and it pleased me to think that the personal charm

of every individual may almost be called a scent, whereas no one can deny that the scent of a flower is its greatest charm.

So, having failed in describing Mag up to the present, I think I will henceforth give up all attempts to convey that most elusive quality of hers, and be a little more explicit regarding her various doings. But before I go back to where I left off it gives me great pleasure to record a little adventure I had this very afternoon, the day of the letters.

I had been to an afternoon concert at the Queen's Hall, and was walking along Regent Street. It was a wet May day, summer having set in with its usual rigour ; an icy blast every now and then blew my umbrella nearly out of my exasperated grasp, and I was very cross.

I had not liked the music much ; it had been, I suppose, a little too good for me, and the pianist had irritated me. I won't tell his name, but he struck me, with his unnatural-looking hair and staring black eyes, as being like a flannel lion on a pen-wiper. Also, I had had a sharp passage-at-arms with my particular *bête noire*, Lady Houndle, whom I met on coming out. I am certain she grows more disagreeable as she grows older, and no doubt she thinks I do. But our mutual dislike grows more intense every time we meet, and I detest her companion almost as much as herself. The old lady, although now very fat and pretty decrepit, beat me as usual in the wordy war, for she is hampered by no idea of limitations. There is nothing that violent old woman can't say, whereas, naturally, there is a great deal that I feel bound to keep pent within my smouldering breast. So my temper was none of the best when, at the corner of Vere Street, I collided with another foot-passenger, who slipped and would have fallen had I not caught her by the elbow. The handle of my umbrella shot out backwards under my arm, completely separating me from my victim, and when I had disentangled myself

and was proceeding to apologize, I literally gasped with astonishment to find that that victim was Pansy Roop.

She looked older and shabbier, and the wet had washed the powder off her face, which was of an unlovely, porous texture ; but she had the same pitiful, brazen smile, a little less pitiful and a little more brazen than of old, and I noticed that her gloves—and on the other two occasions of my meeting her, her gloves had been remarkable for their immaculateness—had holes in the ends of the fingers and were distinctly grubby.

When we had shaken hands and inquired for each other's healths, she said suddenly, " I'm glad to see you, Mr. Quest. Indeed I am. I wish—I suppose you wouldn't come and have a cup of tea with me ? "

Naturally, but a little to my shame, perhaps, I pleaded another engagement, for I certainly didn't want to go home with Pansy Roop. But a look in her face smote me before the lie was well out of my mouth, and murmuring something inarticulate about putting off my friend, I turned and went back with her.

She lived up several flights of stairs in some new flats near Mortimer Street, and in a few minutes I found myself sitting in an armchair, while she made tea on a gas-ring. It was the first time in my life that I had ever found myself in such an environment, and only by putting certain inevitable thoughts resolutely out of my mind could I carry off the situation decently. It is an odd thing that whereas, during the first fifteen minutes of my call I was acutely, almost passionately miserable, I suddenly, at the end of that time, found the misery to have passed off, and we sat, the poor little thing and I, drinking our tea in a simple, friendly fashion that at any rate on my part completely laid the evil ghosts of the place.

True to her fondness for red, Miss Roop's little coat and skirt, cut, even I could see, in an exaggeration of the

present fashion, was of an unmitigated crimson. It was cloth such as coachmen's coats are made of—a material meant to be smooth, but that in this probably cheap incarnation, was rough all over, with infinitesimal balls of fluff. She wore a string of large glass pearls, and her hair, which looked dry and metallic, was less abundant than before.

"How d'you think I look?" she asked suddenly, smiling up at me in a way that was obviously meant to be bright.

"I think you look very tired."

She laughed without brightness.

"Tired? I am. You look pretty much the same, Mr. Quest. I've never forgot your face, somehow, and you were very kind to me that night by that fountain. D'you remember?"

Then she asked me about Mag, and I told her all I knew. She was deeply interested, and delighted to hear of the child's success.

"I suppose," she said, when I paused at last, "you'd be offended if I—if I said something—sir?"

I knew that the "sir" was, so to speak, an apology, before the act, and accepted it as such.

"You might try," I answered.

"Well, I've often wondered"—she twisted her fingers nervously—"if you wouldn't marry her some day."

I laughed. "My dear Miss Roop, Margaret Pye is eighteen, and I happen to be fifty-six."

She looked at me, her soft, painted lips parted a little, her eyes full of rather shrewd speculation.

"That wouldn't matter," she said, "you'd be safe."

Now I'd not had the slightest hesitation in telling her my real age, and heaven knows that I see my own rather grotesque face as clearly as anyone can see it. Also, I have always endeavoured to be a law-abiding, God-fearing citizen. Yet the fact remains that I rather resented

this poor little harlot's calling me "safe." For the moment it made me wish to be a devastating Don Juan, a chartered menace to the safety of homes ; a social pirate. However, I said nothing of all this, and rose to go.

I thanked her for her hospitality and asked her, as well as I could, how she herself was getting on. It is difficult to inquire into the prosperity of a lady of this class.

She, it appears, was not unhappy. Since I had seen her she had had a very good time. She had even been to Paris. She added other illuminating but unprofitable details which I will not repeat, from which I gathered that she had become quite resigned to life and what it had done for her, and felt no need for pity or even sympathy. Perhaps this was just as well, but I could not help regretting the wistfulness and unexpressed shame of her manner that night in the Temple. It was after she had opened the door—I had shaken hands with her—that she made her great remark.

"I have missed Magpie, Mr. Quest," she began. "Nobody ever interested me as much as she did."

Here was my chance. I had forgotten, and now I remembered.

"Can you tell me just *why* Mag interested you so much?" I asked the girl. "I know it's very difficult to explain——"

She laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"If everything was as easy to explain as that! It's as simple as rolling off a log—there wasn't a person in Blantyre Buildings that Mag didn't interest the way she interested you and me, Mr. Quest, and of course the reason is, *we interest her so much.*" And I knew that she was right; that where the noble lord, the Jewish connoisseur, and the little French woman had failed, poor Pansy Roop had succeeded.

It is the Magpie's passionate and sometimes even pestiferously persistent interest in everyone she knows that gives her the quality I have so lamentably failed to describe.

And this brings me back to our story, which I take up, after this incursion into 1916, back in the good year 1910.

CHAPTER XVI

SO here we are back again six years ago, Mag going three times a week to old Glenny's studio in Thurloe Square ; Mrs. Brankles keeping the house in order in her absence ; poor Pye celebrating his Saturdays and Sundays in his old dreadful way ; Madame Aimée just recovering from her long, wearying illness, and I jogging along much as usual in the Temple.

About two years after the day when I had first met Mag, I went through what I might as well confess to be an almost annual performance with me. I took Edith Lossell to lunch and asked her to marry me. If I had a thousand pounds for every time that I have distressed and embarrassed that dear woman by urging her to do this thing, for which I know she has not the slightest inclination, I should be a rich man. But it is always the same with me ; for months I go on, one day very much like the other, content, even if not quite happy, with my books, my insignificant writings, and my equally unimportant little personal interests. There are times when I am even, for a few minutes, gloriously, almost triumphantly, full of joy, as, for instance, when I read certain scenes in Shakespeare, certain essays of Lamb, certain phrases of Hazlitt ; and I have never known the day so dark that it could not be lightened by a few poems that I love.

It would interest nobody to hear what these poems are, but one or two of them are Wordsworth's, and one is Tom Moore's, and "The Old Familiar Faces" of dear Charles Lamb, sad as it is, and conclusive, holds for me a never-failing delight.

Thus, as I have said, my days file quietly past, and then there comes over me a restlessness, a curious, inarticulate misery, and my pipe loses its flavour, and the most beautiful, curly-tailed chop its interest. Sometimes I do not at first recognize this behaviour as indicating loneliness, but find gradually that that is what it is. I *am* lonely; I am incomplete; and the thing I want, the thing without which I shall never be happy, is Edith. On these occasions I always go and ask her to marry me, and she, dear lady, always refuses me in the gentlest and sweetest and most affectionate way.

"Dear Victor," she usually says, "I do wish you wouldn't do this, it only upsets and distresses both of us."

This last time, I remember telling her how sorry I was to bother her, but that I was utterly unable to help it.

"It is a kind of autumn demonstration," I added. "It is a sort of mental equinox that comes tearing over me." And then I asked her, "Are you really perfectly sure that you never could say yes?"

"Perfectly sure, dear Victor."

We were silent for a while. "I have always been perfectly sure," she added.

It was a fine, clear, cold morning, and we were walking in St. James' Park. I remember she stopped on the little bridge and, turning, looked up at me.

She wore a grey fur coat, chinchilla, I think, and a little crumpled grey velvet hat, under which her beautiful eyes shone like lakes, and like lakes, I knew, they held their secrets.

"Don't you think," she went on, "that you might try to get over this—this habit?"

"Which do you mean, the habit of loving you, or the habit of asking you to marry me?"

Her thin, wonderful face flushed.

"The habit of asking me, my dear. I am afraid I am too selfish sincerely to wish you to get over caring."

My love for her is so deep, so comprehensive that at these words I felt a thrill that was almost happiness, and almost triumph.

"If you really mean that——" I burst out. She held up her hand.

"Hush! I do mean it, but, after all, it is only because I am very selfish. Can't you—won't you—oh, please *do* believe that I could never marry you."

Suddenly, across the Park, down the slope from Piccadilly, I saw a smart, light-grey figure coming towards us on oddly uncertain-looking legs.

"Does that mean you could never marry only me, or that you could never marry anyone?" I asked roughly. She hesitated.

"You know," said Edith slowly, "that I loved Bill, and if I lived to be a million years I could never love anyone else, Victor."

"I know, I know," I interrupted hurriedly, for the grey figure was approaching. "What I mean is, could you ever *marry* anyone else?"

She smiled, and the lines round her eyes were very visible. "I have often tried," she said, "to marry—tried, I mean, to make up my mind to say yes to the one or two who have wanted me—and they have not been many, Victor—I am not very popular."

"Well, do you think you ever will?" I urged.

There was a long pause, during which the man the other

side of the bridge came quickly towards us ; he had seen us now.

Edith looked up at me. In my wildest dreams I could never conceive of loving a woman who could look levelly into my eyes.

" I will be truthful with you," she said slowly. " You deserve it. There is one man whom I might possibly accept if"—she laughed softly—" he ever asked me."

With jealous certainty I knew whom she meant.

" Why could you marry him ? "

She looked bravely at me and told the plain truth—sometimes such an immensely difficult thing to do.

" Because if I married him—this particular man—I should not be wronging him ; I should never have to pretend that I cared for him, and that would not hurt him because he doesn't love me."

" Not love you ! " I burst out. He had reached the end of the bridge by now.

Suddenly her face softened, and curved and dimpled into the old face of long ago, in such a wonderful way that I heard myself catch my breath.

" He loves me in his way," she said, laying her hand on my arm, " but oh, my dear, dear old Victor, my dearest and best of friends, can't you understand that that way isn't *your* way ? "

A second later Sir Max Cohen had joined us, and was showing us, with the delighted simplicity that makes him so charming, an amber-headed stick that he had bought at a sale the day before. It had a little hole just below the crutch and the little hole was lined and edged with ivory, and through the ivory was passed a black silk cord, from which hung a little tassel. It had belonged to some great beau of the Regency, I forget which one, and the little millionaire was as pleased as a child with it.

He was on his way to Queen Anne's Gate, but at once

announced that if she would allow him, he would walk home with her, as he wanted in any case to see Lossell.

So I left them there on the bridge, and crossed the Park and went through Clarence Gate, where I stopped for a word, as is my habit, with the lodge-keeper's handsome and delightful Irish wife, and up St. James' Street.

I was lunching with Middleton Treffry.

CHAPTER XVII

MISS PYE'S birthday is in December. A horrid date for a child's birthday, as it naturally involves the unification of birthday and Christmas gifts. Her twelfth birthday, which arrived a month after our acquaintance, was celebrated with Madame Aimée; I don't remember what she did on her thirteenth, although it was the occasion on which Lossell had sent her the famous box of colours; but on the following one, her fourteenth, to which we have now come, we had a grand jamboree at my chambers.

After my talk in St. James' Park with Edith, which took place towards the end of September, I was seized with a bad attack of "go-fever," and as I had just sold an extremely dull article on Aztec feather-work, and was thereby some twenty pounds to the good, I left England to its own devices for six weeks, and went to Belgium for a walking tour.

It would not interest anyone particularly to know just what my itinerary was, but for several weeks my headquarters were at St. Hubert, in the Ardennes, a quiet, cobbled village, boasting a large church, and one of the finest legends of all, I always think, to say nothing of an excellent little inn, where the cooking and wine are of

the very Belgian bourgeois best, which is going pretty far.

I walked for hours every day, climbing hills, plunging through vast woods, and lying on my face in the sun, in huge, lush, overgrown meadows.

I made friends with a charming chap named Charlot, octroi officer at St. Hubert, and as he was a friendly soul, I met, through his kind offices, several charming provincial bourgeois families, thus learning a little of that hardest of all things to achieve, a knowledge of the private life of the people of any foreign country.

Dr. Vincent, a charming, pot-bellied little man, who had been chief doctor of the countryside for over forty years, was a mine of story and legend, and his married daughter, Germaine, one of the handsomest people I have ever seen, confided to me many culinary secrets, of which I meant to make use at home, and also gratified me by praising my French.

Father Yves, of the great, ugly, empty church, a fervent, mystic youth, who was, oddly enough, interested in politics in a very keen way, was another whom, in the French phrase, "I greatly frequented."

Then there was the avocat, Maître Berlicourt, a bad-tempered, shrewd old bachelor, with a six-inch sole to one of his shoes, and an amazing knowledge of jurisprudence.

After dinner we used to sit outside the inn on the cobblestones, our wooden chairs tilted against the house wall, and drink coffee and liqueurs and discuss politics, and religion, and philosophy. It was a pleasant time, spent in a pleasant place, and I must not forget to mention Dr. Vannes, the apothecary. His repertory of Rabelaisian and quite untranslatable stories would have rejoiced any London club smoking-room, and it was his habit to gather and preserve in sand, by an odd process of his own, the wild flowers of Belgium.

When I left St. Hubert, I walked to Bouillon, and put up at an inn there for about a week, going through the Tunnel to France several times, and wandering about the battlefield of Sedan. There was a high plateau near by, on the extreme edge of which it pleased me to lie in the sun, and watch, a quarter of a mile below in the valley, hundreds of washerwomen hanging out, to dry and to bleach, hundreds of thousands of pieces of linen. It was odd how the linen shone and almost sparkled in the autumn sun, and somehow the sight of these busy women accentuated to me the delights of my utter and guiltless idleness.

I wrote few letters during this time, and received almost none. There was nobody who really needed news of me. My sister had her husband and the children, one or two of my friends, whom I have not mentioned because they have no bearing on this story, were either happily married or as happily engrossed in their work, and those whom I have mentioned were busy and contented with their own affairs. Mag was safe in the hands of MaGame Aimée and Cohen, and good old Glenny and Edith—well, I wrote once to Edith, and walked some miles in the blazing sun to fetch her letter from the *poste-restante* at Namur, where I read it as I ate my dinner in a corner of a huge, ill-lighted dining-room in one of the principal hotels. Her letter was exactly what her letters always were, kind, interesting, almost sisterly; we had always been more intimate on paper than we were when together, but used as I am to the fact that she cares nothing for me, and never will, I can even now never read a letter from Edith without a horrid, illogical little pang of disappointment. Once I wrote myself a long and ardent love-letter, and signed it "Edith," but I burnt it very quickly, for it was not only foolish and a little impertinent, but it was quite useless to quiet the ache that for many years has been a part of myself.

From Namur I walked to Brussels by way of Waterloo, taking my time every day, and thoroughly enjoying myself, and then, I am glad to say, I trekked to Louvain and spent a few days in that most beautiful of cities. It is curious that I should have sat at *table d'hôte* next a German officer, holidaying there with his bride. He was a cultivated man, quite unlike one's conventional idea of a German; he had beautiful, slim, pointed hands, narrow feet, and looked high-bred almost to the point of degeneracy. His wife was a charming American girl who was obviously afraid of him. I used to look at her and wonder how she, fine, robust creature, could fear this wire-drawn, nervous man. However, she did, and her hasty accession to all he suggested, the painful, hurried voice with which she tried to anticipate his slightest wishes, made an uncomfortable impression on me. I remember one phrase of his—I know German fairly well, though I don't pronounce it properly—was "*Bei uns*," meaning, roughly translated, "with us."

The poor girl came down to lunch one day without gloves, although she carried her jacket in anticipation of a carriage excursion of some kind. When she protested against his wish that she should go upstairs and fetch gloves, he used this phrase. "*Bei uns*," he said, scowling, his small mouth almost disappearing as he compressed it, "*Damen tragen Handschuhe*;" which meant, "With us, ladies wear gloves." Somehow I never forgot the little scene, and I have often wondered whether she ever learned to hate and rebel against the little phrase. That to me seemed so oddly ominous: "*Bei uns!*"

I made one or two excursions with this German and his wife—to Malines, to a village near Mästricht, where there was a fine painting by someone whose name I forget, and to a celebrated inn, where we lunched, but I left Louvain sooner than I would have done, if they had not been there. Like most other people, not German, I had never liked

Germans, but this exceptionally well-bred young man—there was no doubt about his breeding, and I looked up his family in an old "Gotha" in the reading-room—gave an odd impetus to my dislike of the nation.

The last night I was there we took a walk, and stood for a few minutes in the moonlight, looking at the University buildings. The young countess was very much impressed by the beauty of the scene, but her husband was in his worst mood and contradicted every word she said with a shortness and disdain I had rarely heard.

"But surely it is beautiful, Berthold? I have never seen anything more wonderful."

He laughed harshly. "Bah! You have never even seen Cologne, to say nothing of Rotenburg and Nuremberg."

She said no more, and I wondered if he hoped by that method to inspire her with the love of his Fatherland. He was a Prussian officer, and I have often asked myself if he was one of those who enjoyed the soul-satisfying spectacle of the destruction of Louvain a year ago.

Travelling is, of course, one of the most valuable of human experiences, because it alone can substitute for soul-grinding, reiterative thoughts, the freshness and restfulness of new interests.

As I have said, I have never managed to get through the autumn without a bad time, because of Edith, although early in each year I solemnly decided that I will not walk into the jaws of death, into the mouth of hell, by proposing to her again. No one knows better than I what an imbecile proceeding these self-invited annual rebuffs are, and yet I can no more help going through them than I could help eating if I were starving, and food were set before me.

However, my walking tour on this occasion was very helpful, and after just the first few days, as delightful. I

saw many beautiful pictures, enjoyed much wonderful scenery, made a great number of more or less interesting acquaintances, and one or two more or less permanent friends, and when, early in December, I came back to London, to find the dear old place a perfect pudding of mud and steamy rain, I felt years better, and centuries more cheerful, for the change.

It was delightful to find out all the different things that had happened to all my different friends and acquaintances during my absence. There was a new baby at one of the houses whose inmates I do not know by their real names (I learned it in this case), and through the baby I managed, with some adroitness, to become acquainted with the mother, who, I learned, drew fashion pictures for a certain evening paper, and who herself wore the most hideous clothes I had ever beheld. Flannel is an outrageous fabric, I can't bear to touch it, and I hate its colours; yet this delightful Mrs. Dennis, whose pictures (I have looked them up) are really full of charm, repeatedly presented herself to my resentful view in garments of that poisonous material. The baby, however, was a perfect love, and after meeting the father, who was an electric-light specialist at Harrod's, I was allowed to see him in his bath (the baby I mean, not the father).

The Lossells were still away, of course—they would not be back till after Christmas, and I, not being due at Wandover for over a fortnight, had plenty of time to look up everybody else.

Madame Aimée was the first one I went to see, and she was full of pride and delight in a picture Mag had painted for her. This work represented a brewer's dray very realistically treated, and the near horse, a huge white Shire horse, had slipped in the mud and was "down." It was the best thing the child had done, although I dare say technically faulty, but the horse was a real horse, with muscle, and

thickness, and action, and the little picture was really and pleasantly true to life.

"What a horrid subject," I said.

"Oh, but this is nothing, Madame Aimée laughed; "it is a great secret, and you mustn't tell her, but she's doing a series of murders."

"Murders?"

"Yes, called 'The Pistol,' 'The Knife,' 'The Bottle' and 'The Rope.' She's only sketched them as yet," my hostess went on, with more amusement than I had ever heard in her voice, "but really, Monsieur, they are going to be quite dreadful, particularly 'The Rope!'"

"Does he hang her?" I asked, with some anxiety, for it didn't sound a picture that would be destined to much popularity. Madame Aimée shook her head.

"Oh, no, it's she who hangs him. It was a case in the papers about a year ago, and it appears Mag has always cherished the idea. Don't you remember the woman in Shoreditch who hanged a little boy?"

I shuddered. "What a disgusting child Mag is!" But Madame Aimée laughed at me. "These ideas so *saugrenues*," she declared reassuringly, "these ghastly and bloody ideas, are of her age. She despises all thoughts soft and beautiful for the moment. Her ideals are blood-thirsty."

"How is Pye?" I asked presently.

"He has never been to see me—I can tell you little about him. But Mrs. Brankles says he seems troubled and uneasy."

I answered brutally that it struck me that a man who deliberately went on an opium spree every week of his life had no right to expect sweet mental serenity.

"The day will come," I added, "when Mag will realize how shocking is this morphine business."

The Frenchwoman sighed. "I think," she said, "the poor child is beginning already to see."

I did not know whether to be glad or sorry for this bit of news, but I meant to investigate its truth, and it was owing only to a chapter of insignificant accidents that I had no chance of sounding Mag on the subject for a full week, when, as I have said before, I had a birthday party for her in my chambers.

CHAPTER XVIII

THERE is a long step, in the life of a young female, between the ages of fourteen and fifteen. At thirteen it seemed to me Mag had been a little girl, a child, a kid, a brat ; and now she was about to be fourteen, and I felt that henceforth she would be a girl, a young girl, almost a " Miss." Therefore it behoved me, as her self-constituted guardian, to celebrate this birthday with becoming solemnity.

The Lossells were to come (they had promised to run up for the purpose), Max Cohen, of course, would be there, and dear old Glenny. It would have given me great pleasure, had it been possible, to have Madame Aimée make one of the party, but she assured me of the infeasibility of the idea.

" Yes, I could be carried up the stairs," she said, " and it is most kind of you to suggest it. but I should be too tired, Monsieur—my heart does not allow of my sustaining great fatigue without punishing me severely."

I bowed to her decision, and in her place invited dear old Treffry.

It was a very pleasant party, though perhaps I, as host, should not say it. Mag's chiefest joy in life as yet being

the joy of the table, I laid myself out to provide her with delectable food. We had a cold turkey, stuffed with chestnuts ; we had a very brown and crumby-looking ham ; we had a certain kind of crisp rolls, fresh from the baker, which Mrs. Brankles had skilfully torn open, stuffed with butter and popped into the oven just before we wanted them ; we had lobster salad with mayonnaise, the lobster being merely an excuse for the sauce, which Mag loved with a passion that would have admitted of her eating it out of a tub, if such a thing had been possible ; and we had ices from Gunter's.

There was also punch, made by myself, after a rather famous recipe of one of my great-uncles. We, of the family, try to believe that this beverage was a favourite of George IV. in the days of the Regency, but I myself, in my secret soul, can find no convincing proof that my Uncle Hubert, the pride of the family, and a most audacious old reprobate, could ever, even in his zenith, possibly have risen to the heights of carousing with Royalty.

However, it is a very good punch, and diluted to the debased modern taste, and then still further diluted for the benefit of the lady of the evening, cut a noble figure in the huge Canton bowl that was one of the joys of my father's life.

I had filled my rooms with flowers, and at Mag's place at supper stood my gift to her—a gold wrist-watch, with a many-linked expanding bracelet.

Mrs. Green, who, as she genially put it, " did " for me, and had done for many years, presided in the kitchen, assisted by the gifted Brankles ; a large box of chocolates stood on the table in the sitting-room, fires burned in all the grates, and on the whole nobody could have wanted pleasanter or more comfortable-looking rooms in which to give a small, highly select party.

Dear old Treffry was the first to arrive. I had not seen

him for some months, and he was full of news. He had not grown a day older, and his delightful, humorous, kind face had the romantic and pathetic freshness of a winter apple. The fine old fellow was absolutely free from the affectations that beset many clever and popular men of his age; best of all, he possessed none of the ghastly juvenility that seems irresistible to some men. And he had seen all the new plays; heard the new symphony; been to three weddings; even, poor old gentleman, narrowly escaped being involved, as witness, in a very wide-bruited divorce case. He had had a very interesting summer and autumn, and I thoroughly enjoyed it at second hand, as we sat by my sea-coal fire. He was very much interested in Mag, and also expressed his satisfaction in the thought of meeting Edith, whom he had not seen for some time.

"I believe you know," he said, not without a good-natured slyness, "that that little Jewish chap has his eye on our Edith."

"Ha," I answered with fine scorn, "have you only just discovered that? I've known it for over a year."

"Bless my soul! you don't say so! She won't marry him, will she, Quest? I like him, you know, and he's an immensely clever fellow, and as modest a man as ever I met, but somehow I shouldn't like her to marry a Jew."

I laughed, but the thought made me uneasy, for I had never forgotten what she had said to me on the bridge in the Green Park. To be sure, she had not named Cohen, but from the moment she began to speak I had been pretty sure whom she meant, and if I had had any doubt it would have been routed by the look in her face as he came up behind her, and she, turning, suddenly saw him.

"I have no idea what she will do," I said slowly, "but would add this, Mr. Treffry: I'd give my soul to have it make her happy."

"So would I, Quest, so would I. It will be delightful to see her again in any case. Ah! there's somebody now."

But it was not the Lossells, it was Cohen, and a few minutes later old Angus Glenny arrived, looking as usual with his long, unkempt beard, and his wild, curly hair, as if he'd been walking for hours in a high wind.

Mag was late, and I couldn't understand why, for as a rule she possessed the courtesy of punctuality in a rather striking degree, and I knew that she had been delighted at the prospect of at last meeting Edith.

However, the next knock brought Lossell, and, to our great disappointment, without his daughter.

Mr. Treffry lamented loudly over her defection, and Lossell explained that he feared he had no really good excuse for her, beyond the fact that she had a cold, and had felt too seedy to leave home. We sat, a little damped by this news, gathered close round the fire, five men none of whom, even Cohen, could otherwise than by courtesy have been called young, waiting for the arrival of a child of fourteen. Suddenly it struck me that this would be a good time to find out exactly what Glenny thought of his pupil, and I asked him.

The old Scotchman looked at me thoughtfully.

"She has talent," he said, "great talent, and she has industry, but up to the present I can't tell ye, Mr. Quest, whether or no it will prove a practical, working gift."

"How do you mean?" asked Lossell shortly. He was not inclined to like Glenny.

"I mean, 'ord Lossell, that I have known many people who have, with far less talent than Margaret possesses, a kind of accessory gift that I may call the gift of self-production, who have, through it, achieved far more than she ever may; and that, on the other hand, I have known people with far greater gifts than hers, fail to achieve what she almost undoubtedly will."

Lossell frowned impatiently, and Cohen, lighting a cigarette, interrupted, his modest voice and delicately selected words acting like balm on the two irritated men.

"He means," he explained, with his little stammer, "that Mag's gift may prove unproductive. That it may consist chiefly of her seeing and feeling with high artistic beauty, things that she cannot draw or paint, isn't that it, Glenny?"

Glenny nodded and twisted his rough beard with both hands. "Aye," he assented.

To change the subject, I think, Treffry asked me at this point what news there was of Pye.

I shook my head. "I know very little about him, he's an unsociable brute, and although there's a certain charm about him I have never tried to know him any better."

"There's nothing so depressing in the world," added Treffry softly, "as a broken-down gentleman——"

"Except," put in Cohen, laughing, "the thing expressed by that frightful phrase I always think the most terrible phrase in the English language, 'the decayed gentlewoman.' Fancy," he added dreamily, "that put into any other tongue—'Une dame pourrie,' 'Eine verfaulte Dame,' 'Una signora——' Horrid!"

We laughed, for he spoke with a real, catlike disgust, and his delicately aquiline nose was wrinkled fastidiously.

"I have never even seen Pye," Lossell observed a moment later. "He drinks, or something, didn't you say, Quest?"

"Morphine" I answered.

"Is he coming to-night?"

"Good heavens, no! I never even asked him; he has quite disassociated himself from Mag."

"A very poor specimen of a father," criticized Treffry.

"By the way, Quest, does the child know about her father?"

I threw my cigarette into the fire and looked at the clock.

"Yes, she knows. It was she who told me."

"How dreadful!" This from Cohen.

"Less dreadful than you might think," I answered. "She didn't seem to mind. She's an odd little creature. I suppose she doesn't realize the horror——"

"She will when she's older."

I wondered about this and said so, adding, "She's curiously unsensitive in some ways. She doesn't seem to mind things much."

"Then she's no artist," commented Lossell, "but I don't believe you are right, Quest."

The discussion might have gone on for some time, but that at that moment Mag arrived. She came bounding in with a somewhat elephantine grace, but beaming with joy at seeing us all, and ready with a hearty kiss apiece for me and Glenny, and a friendly man-to-man handshake with the others.

She had grown taller, and, I thought, a little less massive, though that may have been the effect of a charming, loose, cream-coloured frock of some woolly material *not* flannel, in which I recognized the taste and skill of Madame Aimée. Her hair, I observed, had been newly washed, and burnished with much brushing. I regretted to note that she smelt violently of "white rose," but that was a minor blemish and one easy to expunge in the future.

"Is there," she asked, when she had sat down, "is there lobster mayonnaise?"

"There is, *and* the turkey stuffed with chestnuts. Are you hungry?"

Was she hungry!

Our guests were all polite enough to eat with good appe-

tites, but after the first few minutes we all put down our forks and gave ourselves up to the fascinating survey of the guest of honour, in her magnificently sustained imitation of an anaconda laying in supplies for the winter.

Poor little Cohen seemed to pale and shrink at the sight, and Glenny teased her, but unruffled she went her way, hardly pausing to speak, and that meant a great deal for Mag.

"You have a fine appetite," old Treffry said courteously, as she held her plate for her third "go" of chestnut-stuffing. She looked at him, smiling happily:

"You see, I knew what we were going to have, so I ate no lunch——"

She had a little champagne in a tall, convolvulus-like glass, and at this her joy knew no bounds.

"I've only tasted it once before in my life," she said.

"Where was that?" asked Lossell.

"Well, that was at a friend's who used to live at Blantyre Buildings. You remember Pansy, Mr. Quest, don't you?"

I did, and politely asked for news of that lady.

Mag shook her head, and a look of real sadness came into her face. "I have never heard a word from her since she left," she said, "wasn't it unkind of her?"

I felt bound to defend poor Miss Roop, but could think of nothing to say, and Mag, being for the present surfeited with food, launched into one of her descriptive monologues, her taste and power for which had given rise to her nickname amongst us of "Coleridge."

She described Pansy Roop as circumstantially as an auctioneer might describe a small object that he could hold in his hand and turn over and regard from every possible point of view. I had thought that I remembered the unfortunate girl very well, but I saw now that I had not.

It was Mag who remembered her ; Mag on whose queer mind had impressed themselves with almost violent clearness all manner of little details that had utterly escaped me, and the child's gift of words, her amazing flow of language and her adjectival powers were such that four very diverse gentlemen, who had never seen, or even heard of, Miss Roop, sat for six or seven minutes and listened in a kind of thrall to the description of her.

When supper was over we went back into the sitting-room and I made the punch. The wind had risen, and battered at the windows, bringing with it intermittent onslaughts of rain. It was a cold night, and the snug fire-lit room was very agreeable. When I had finished the punch, I started ladling it out into the old rummers that had belonged to my mother's grandfather.

"What's that?" asked Lossell sharply.

"The rain," someone answered.

"No, it isn't. Hark!"

For a moment I thought I myself heard an odd noise, then the wind redoubled its violence and I went on filling the glasses.

"There is a queer noise somewhere," said the old Scot. We all listened, and this time we all heard it—a long-drawn, unpleasant sound it was, between a grumble and a groan.

I gave the glass in my hand to Mr. Treffry, and stood up.

"It must have been something overhead," Lossell said. And then the noise repeated itself, and it was a horrible sound.

We glanced round at each other, and when my eyes fell on Mag's face, I set down my glass hastily.

"What's the matter, Mag?" I asked sharply. "You're not frightened?"

The child's round face had grown perfectly white, and

was ghastly between the waves of her dark hair. She looked older, and her cheek-bones showed.

Treffry put a kind old hand on hers.

"Don't be frightened, my dear," he said. "Go and open the door, Quest, it's a lost dog or something." But Mag made a little gesture that forced me to stand still.

"No," she said harshly. "I'll go, it's—it's father."

We followed her to the door, Lossell carrying a light, and out on to the landing.

She was right; huddled there in a corner of the stairs, his hat beside him, his clothes rain-soaked and muddy, lay Pye, snoring hideously, his mouth open, his eyes only half closed.

It was a dreadful moment, and it is hard to describe the horror we all felt, so I will say only that the child turned and said very quietly:

"Oh, please go back into the room, all of you, except you, Mr. Quest—*please* go." They obeyed her without a word, Lossell setting the lamp on the chair at a safe distance from the sleeping man.

It was impossible for me to attempt to get the fellow home, so I was obliged, with the best grace I could muster, to lay him on my own bed.

"Poor, poor father," Mag said. "He must have followed me here; he must have wanted me. Perhaps it was because it was my birthday; he forgot it this morning, but he may have remembered to-night."

She sat down by the bed and took one of the inert, dirty hands in hers, and I left her sitting there by him.

My guests were preparing to leave, and I hadn't the heart to ask them to stay.

Glenny's eyes were full of tears. "Now you see," he said, almost as if he hated me. "how *unsensitive* she is! She doesn't care about her father; doesn't mind his

being—that ! Och, man alive, man alive, did ye see her face, her puir wee face ? ”

I hadn't a word to say, and they went away in a body, leaving me alone by the fire and the almost untouched bowl of punch.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE next afternoon I happened to be very busy, so I could not get to Blantyre Buildings until after dinner, which I had very early on purpose. I was deeply distressed about Mag.

She had sat all night by her father's side, absolutely refusing to lie down or take any rest, in spite of my representations that this was illogical, for she herself had told me that he always slept in this way on Saturdays.

She raised her eyes to mine, and for the first time I saw how she was going to look when she lost her childhood.

"He was never like this before; he's been getting worse, but he was never as bad as this——"

I thought at first that her distress was probably caused largely by the publicity of the affair; that it hurt her pride to have had Lossell and the others see her father in his disgusting condition, but I soon saw my mistake.

"I don't mind their seeing," she said dully, "but he's so much *worse*."

I made her take off her new finery and wrap herself in my dressing-gown; then I settled myself as comfortably as I could in the other room.

Mrs. Brankles had taken a message to the corporal to the effect that Pye and his daughter were spending the

night with me. I told her to say no more, not even to Madame Aimée.

"Oi won't, sir," she assured me, her vast face quivering with sympathy, her currant-like eyes wet. "I'm that sorry for the pore gentleman. It's all along o' that stuff in the little bottle; somethink 'e sticks into 'isself; 'e's a nice gentleman, though 'e never do 'ave much to say, and Magpie's as kind and friendly as if she wasn't no lidy at all. I'm real fond o' Magpie, I am."

She was a good soul as well as an excellent laundress, and I knew that she was sincere.

"Tell Madame Aimée—or no, perhaps you'd better not go near her——"

"Ow no, sir," she said, shaking her head. "I never goes upstairs to the pore lidy. It's Mrs. Butt as does 'er little bit o' work, and it ain't much Mag leaves over for 'er, only just the scrubbin', and polishin' the stove once in a while. She does all the rest 'erself, Mag does, and if I was to go upstairs o' purpose, she'd know somethink was wrong, sure——"

I nodded and agreed, and so, when at half-past seven I crept quietly up the stairs past Pye's closed door, I felt fairly sure that Madame Aimée could know nothing of the events of the past night. However, the minute I went into her room, I saw that she did know. She had been crying, and there was a look of hopeless misery, misery that seemed to me, even though I knew of her long devotion to Mag, a little disproportionate.

"You've seen her?" I said, sitting down.

"Yes, naturally."

"Of course, of course," I hastened to agree. "It's very sad, Madame Aimée."

She clasped her hands—I saw her for the first time with no work of any kind on her lap, and I noticed a green bottle of smelling salts on the table.

"Ah, Monsieur," she returned passionately, "what suffering! To see someone one loves ruined in such a dreadful way."

I tried to comfort her. "You mustn't exaggerate it," I said gently, "it was dreadful, of course, and no one was sorer for her than I, but after all, she's only a child, and her whole life is before her; this can't ruin her."

She stared at me from under her coif, her face almost stupid.

"Of course, of course," she stammered, "but oh, it's so dreadful." She looked as though she had been in acute mental agony for a week; there were deep lines in her poor face, and her white skin looked slightly marbled with a delicate, greyish mauve. Suddenly she put her hands to her face and burst into such a passion of tears as I have never seen since that night so many years ago, when Edith Lossell told me that her engagement was broken. It amazed me that the two crying fits could be so curiously like each other, although their sources were so different.

Edith, I knew, had been not only broken-hearted, but deeply, acutely angry, and also, for some reason, ashamed. There was in her outburst a passion stronger than merely grief; and here, I thought to myself, was this poor working woman, no kin to Mag, and who had never set eyes on her father, crying as if she, too, were both angry and ashamed, as well as wounded to the soul. Only one thing could account for it, and that was the greater articulateness and expressiveness of Latin feeling. Madame Aimée was French, and therefore her grief manifested itself in what to me, an Englishman, seemed an exaggerated way. As I helplessly watched her cry, I wondered what on earth she would be like in a case such as Edith's, and I shuddered.

The lamp was lighted on the table, the curtains were drawn, and the charming room was very pleasant. Presently, without asking her, I went into the kitchen and

boiled the kettle. When I had made my tea (and I flatter myself that that is a little job at which few can beat me), I went back into the sitting-room and set my tray down on a chair. She was still crying, but at the sight of the fruits of my labour she burst out laughing.

"Ah, *mon pauvre Monsieur*, how kind of you, how very kind! Drink your tea, it will refresh you, but you will forgive my not taking any; I don't feel myself ill, and in my country people of my class drink tea only when they are suffering. *Vous n'en êtes pas chagriné?*"

I assured her that I wasn't, but I was for a moment, and when I asked her what she would like, she told me that she would be grateful if I would ask Mag to come and make her a cup of coffee. I wondered, as I went down the stairs, what the poor soul did when she was quite alone and Mag not at hand, but I didn't pursue the subject in my mind, for I hated to think of her poor, broken body dragging about the room, or anywhere but on the comfortable sofa.

Mag was sitting by the lamp sewing when I went in—to be exact, she was mending a stocking. I didn't often kiss her, but I kissed her then, and asked her gravely how her father was. She pointed to the bedroom door.

"He's asleep," she said, "he—he's very sorry."

I nodded. "Of course, dear, he must be. Perhaps it will never happen again. Can you come and make Madame Aimée and me some coffee?"

She rose at once, and after looking into the bedroom came back.

"He's sound asleep," she said. "Come along."

She made the coffee, and very good it was. It did us all good, and in a little while we were talking more comfortably than I should have imagined possible that night.

I left at about ten, and just as I was going Madame Aimée said something that surprised me.

Mag had asked her if she wouldn't have a talk with her father and try to help him.

Madame Aimée said "No" so harshly, so decidedly, that I was aghast. It seemed so unlike her, so ungenerous, that I could hardly believe my ears.

"It is just possible," I expostulated, "that he might be glad to talk the thing over with a woman. It would surely be easier for him than discussing it with any man——"

"I am a stranger to him," she answered stiffly.

And I, with the same amount of warmth, observed that she could hardly call herself a stranger when she had been for so many years Mag's best friend.

"You have practically been a mother to her."

She drew away from me as I made to shake hands with her.

"Monsieur," she said, with a coldness that approached dignity, "no one can be a mother to a child, *except* the mother."

It struck me as a theatrical remark, and therefore it offended me. For the first time I left Madame Aimée with no feeling of sympathy for her.

I said good night to Mag, asked her to come and see me the next day, and went down the stairs.

Just as I was going out of the Buildings she overtook me, and I noticed that she had on her hat and a jacket over her arm.

"I'm going with you," she said, "as far as Victoria Street."

"Good gracious, why, at this time of night?"

"I've got to send a telegram."

We got on a bus as she spoke, and went rumbling along, up the Pimlico Road.

I had an odd feeling that I had no right to ask her questions, but that, of course, was absurd, so I did ask her.

"Whom are you going to send a telegram to?"

She looked at me grave'y.

"To Mr. Glenny."

"Why?"

"To tell him that I can't come."

"To-morrow, you mean?"

She shook her head. "I mean that I'm not going any more."

I didn't answer for a moment, and then I asked her why, although I already knew what she meant.

She hesitated oddly, and seemed for once in her voluble life to be searching for words.

"I—I must—don't you see I must stay with my father?"

The little possessive pronoun seemed to set us very far apart, and I was silent. Hitherto she had always spoken of Pye as "father"—now by saying "my father," she made me feel a stranger.

After a pause, I was going to expostulate, to explain, to remind her that she was being absurd and theatrical; that there was no use in her making such a fuss about something that she had known for years, but somehow I couldn't.

We had turned the corner and were swinging down towards the station. It was a starry night, but cold, and two sailors behind us were singing. I said no more, and presently, in Victoria Street, the girl rose.

"Good night, Mr. Quest," she said gently. "I know you are angry with me. Please don't be—I know I seem silly. I don't know why it is," she went on, holding the back of my seat, and swaying as the bus slowed up, "I never seemed to mind before, and I know you wanted to say just now that I'd always known it. I don't know why it is, but I've got to try to help him now. I don't *want* to stop going to my lessons, but I must, d'you see?"

I did see, and said so, for I suddenly knew that although theoretically I was right, and that she would probably only be wasting her time in trying to look after her wretched and worthless father, she was right to make the attempt, and that it was not for me or anyone else to try and dissuade her. But I was distressed and angry, so I stayed on the bus, to my shame be it said, and let her go her way alone. It was not until I had walked up and down in Fountain Court for quite half an hour that I quite and finally saw *why* it was right ; that no matter how great a failure it might be, so far as her father was concerned, her attempt to help him could not prove otherwise than a success to her ultimate character.

CHAPTER XX

LOSSSELL wanted me to have a talk with Pye about the matter of the morphine. This I flatly refused to do.

"He doesn't like me and I should be worse than useless," I declared stubbornly. "I don't think there's ever any use in trying to persuade these people to give up their drug, anyhow."

We were sitting in Cohen's library, just after Christmas, when the conversation took place, and Lossell was angry with me, and showed it.

"It is hardly fair," he said, "to let the chap go under without a remonstrance, and after all, Mag is your protégée more than any of ours."

I nodded. "I don't know—I'd do anything possible for Mag, but not for anyone on earth will I attempt what I know to be an absolute impossibility——"

Sir Max took his cigar from his mouth and looked at the ash contemplatively.

"I'll do it," he said.

I was surprised, for of the three he was the most fastidious, the most sensitive, and certainly the most reserved.

"You barely know him, do you?" I asked.

"I've seen him once, and I don't think he disliked me. Besides," the little man added, straightening his figure,

" I know something about it—morphine, I mean—I once took it myself."

Lossell and I were amazed. He was the last man on earth one could conceive of having had this revolting weakness. He struck one as being in every sense of the word, mentally as well as physically and morally, one of the cleanest men in the world, and added to the astounding fact that this foul vice had been his, it took my breath away that he could so coolly avow it. An extraordinary little man ! After a pause I said hurriedly :

" Oh well, then, of course in that case you are the one," Lossell agreed, in a halting phrase, and thus it was arranged.

Since then I have grown to know Cohen fairly well. I have grown at least to be exceedingly fond of him, and one of his leading characteristics is his reserve. It isn't like the reserve of a clever man of the world, or that of a worldly woman ; it is like the shy withdrawal from too close contact with other people, of a young girl. Even to-day I know very little about his life, and almost nothing about his past, and therefore his pluck in telling Lossell and me that he once had been a morphinist, had never ceased to fill me with astonishment and respect.

In these days one is so used to people stripped of the last remnant of mental modesty, men and, still more, women, who seem to have no reticences, no locked doors in their minds, that this old-fashioned quality of the little Jewish gentleman has a romance and charm all its own.

For some days after our conversation I heard nothing from him, or, as it happened, from any of the Blantyre Buildings folk. But one evening, just as I was going out to dinner, there came a knock at my door, and I opened it to find Cohen on the threshold. He had seen Pye and had a long talk with him, and had come to tell me about it.

" He said he'll do what he can," was the upshot of the

story, "but he's pretty hopeless about it. Poor devil! he's the most thorough-paced cynic I've ever met in my life, because his cynicism is absolutely unconscious. He's going away for a few weeks, and has told me to ask you to keep an eye on Mag in his absence."

I nodded. "All right, I shall be delighted. Did you see her?"

"Yes, she looks worn out, poor child. Upon my word, Quest, she's a wonderful little thing. She took the stuff away from him, clean away, ten days ago. He told me himself, and it appears to have had a pretty bad effect. It's my belief that he nearly killed her."

"Good God!"

"Yes, she's got her arm in a sling, and looks white and thin."

I burst out laughing. "It's an ill wind——" I suggested. "But the fellow can't be allowed to ill-treat her. I wonder she didn't stand up for herself."

Cohen looked at me, his delightful brown eyes really dancing in his head.

"She did," he returned, with a chuckle. "He has the blackest eye I ever saw."

The upshot of this was that Pye, faithful to his promise, retired to a nursing home a day or two later, and the same afternoon, according to an arrangement made by letter, Mag came to stay for a week with me.

I took her to a play that night and to supper afterwards, and bundled her off to bed without having said a word to her about her unpleasant parent. She looked as though she needed a change of thought, and I determined she should have it.

The next day we had a long talk—the first for some time, for my sister and her children had been in town, and taken up a great deal of my time, and of course I had spent Christmas week at Wandover.

"How about the drawing lessons?" I asked her at lunch.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Mr. Glenny has been so kind. He's come twice a week in the evenings and given me my lesson at home—you thought I was wrong to stop going to him, but he didn't. He thought I was right, and so did Sir Max. I should," she added, contemplatively, resting her elbow on the table, and her chin in her cupped hands, "just *love* to marry Sir Max."

"Go on!" I jeered, "he's old enough to be your father; besides, he wouldn't look at you, you're too plain."

She accepted this remark in good faith, and looked very depressed for a moment. Then she laughed: "If you come to that, he's not exactly beautiful himself."

"Oh, that's not my only reason; he's twenty years older than you; also, he's a Jew."

"I think he's a perfect darling, but of course he wouldn't marry me," she added resignedly, "he'll marry the lady in the gold frame."

"What do you mean?" I snapped, dropping my fork and glaring at her. "Who's the lady in the gold frame?"

"How should I know who she is? Is it likely I'd ask him? But one day when I was there to show him a sketch I'd done, he sent me to his room to get something, and there was a photograph on the table in a gold frame. Oh, Mr. Quest," the child added with fervour, "she was just lovely!"

"Fair, I suppose?" I asked, drawing a pattern on the table-cloth with the handle of a spoon.

"No, she wasn't. Dark hair she had, and such beautiful, queer eyes, going up to little points in her temples."

So my instinct had been right, and it was Edith.

"She had," the child continued, her own eyes intent and full of concentration, "a face—I don't know how to describe it—a sort of coronet face."

My miserable assurance was thus made doubly sure, but as we left the table I put my arm round my guest and gave her shoulders a squeeze.

Gold frame or not, she had hit upon a lovely phrase to describe my Edith: "a coronet face."

* * * * *

The next few days were lively ones. Mag's spirits, naturally volatile, had gone up with a bang once her father was safely in his retreat. She had never mentioned her bruised arm to me, nor was any word passed between us on the subject of the unfilial giving of black eyes, but I could see from the reaction what a hard time she must have been having, and I was glad to do all that I could to give her a happy time.

Amongst other festivities was a visit to the Tate, which she thoroughly enjoyed, as I did, although our subsequent plan for the day had few charms for me. After the first few minutes she left me to my own devices, feeling, no doubt, that my knowledge and appreciation of pictures was not in the same class with her own, and I wandered about by myself for a while, renewing acquaintance with certain old favourites, and making a few new friends.

At the end of about an hour I found that I had lost sight of the child, and went to look for her.

I found her before Bettany's "Cross Roads" apparently quite under the spell of that wonderful piece of work.

"Aren't they splendid?" she said, nodding towards it and the only slightly less wonderful "Windmill."

I nodded.

"Father used to know him," she declared proudly; "he was telling Sir Max about it."

"I know—he told me."

"Is he dead?" she asked dreamily. It was clear that

she was really away in that sun-flecked forest, where the three mossy, deep-rutted roads met and separated.

"I don't know," I replied. "He left England a good many years ago, and nobody has ever heard of him since."

She nodded. "I should like to do that some day. Not die, and have a horrible funeral, and be buried, but just—go away—disappear." She pointed to the picture—"just walk up that road under the trees into the shadow, and not have people know what had become of me."

It was an odd idea for a girl of fourteen, but I knew what she meant, for she is not the first person who has wished he or she could do that—just walk away up one of Bettany's three roads into the velvety shade. It is an amazing picture, and I knew that one very eminent French critic considered it the finest painting of its kind of the century.

Miss Pye and I had tea together that day in a little amateur restaurant, with red and white check curtains, rustic furniture, and tired, ineffectual waitresses.

Mag devoured much bread and butter and cake, but she was rather silent for her, and I think quite as much because of the pictures she had just been looking at, as because we were on our way to see her father.

"I'm going to work very hard," she said. "It was so good of dear Mr. Glenny to give up his evenings to me, and I shall go every morning now to him, after Thursday." Thursday was the day on which we had fixed that she was to return to Blantyre Buildings.

"Sometimes," she went on, as we sat on the bus going to Hampstead, "sometimes I think I shall paint well, and sometimes I think I never shall paint anything decent. Why do you suppose it's like that, Mr. Quest? It's like going along a path as hard as you can pound, and then suddenly finding yourself facing a stone wall miles high."

I nodded. "Yes, I suppose every artist feels that way. But you mustn't get discouraged, or give up working."

She laughed. "I shall never give up working; I like work, only what's the use if it isn't ever going to be good?"

"Sir Max was very much pleased with that sketch of Madame Aimée," I suggested encouragingly.

"Oh, I know; but you see, Mr. Quest, they look at what I do and say to themselves, '*This isn't so bad for a little girl,*' and I don't want to do stuff only 'not bad for a little girl' or 'not bad for a woman.' I have heard him talk about women painters,—I know."

So had I, but in those days we still hoped that she might turn out a genius, and it was an encouraging, blowy, sunny afternoon, so we were soon both of us in a mood of happy, though baseless, optimism, and when we reached the end of the bus route, and set out for our walk to the nursing home, we were telling each other silly jokes and giggling hopelessly.

I waited downstairs in a very clean but very depressing drawing-room while Mag was up with her father.

While I was there the Matron chanced to come in, and I had a little talk with her.

She was pleased with Pye, and believed in him.

"Of course it will be very difficult," she said, "and he may fail, but he does not strike me as a weak man, and there is a chance that he may succeed. He certainly is doing his very best."

"Have you ever," I asked, "known of a case as bad as his that has been cured?"

She looked at me thoughtfully.

"Yes, I have," she said, "twice. You would be very much surprised if you knew who one of them was."

"Perhaps I do know," I answered. "He told me himself that he had done it."

She saw that I knew and nodded quietly.

"That was fourteen years ago. He was very bad. It was just after his wife's death. It—it was dreadful."

" Was he a patient of yours ? "

" Ah, yes, and it is owing to him entirely that I am doing so well now. He took this house for me and paid the rent for the first five years. I have only just finished paying him back." Her face was quite beautiful with gratitude.

Someone else came in just then, and the Matron said good-bye to me and left the room.

I sat by the window until Mag came down, thinking about Max Cohen.

CHAPTER XXI

IT is almost unnecessary to say that I thought a great deal, during the next few weeks, of the gold photograph frame. Edith and her father were at Cap Martin, visiting the Malpases, who had owned a villa there for some years.

I did not see much of Mag after her little visit to me was over, for she was extremely busy, and after her father's six weeks' stay in the home he and she were whisked away by some benevolent fellow, whom I never dared accuse Cohen of being, to the Isle of Wight, where old Glenny had gone because of a tiresome attack of asthma which he couldn't shake off, and the particularly venomous weather to which we in London were being treated.

I missed Mag more than I could have thought possible. It gave me a real pang to pass her closed door on the two or three occasions when I went to see Madame Aimée.

Even after Pansy Roop's illuminating remark I find I have no power to write down on paper what Mag really was in those early days, so the reader must just take for granted the fact, whether or no it be a surprising one, that I loved the child and missed her dreadfully.

Thus time went on. March that year was a masterpiece ; it snowed, and froze, and melted, and was positively

warm, in turns. A church near the Temple was struck by lightning on St. Patrick's day, and a week later there was two inches of snow on the ground.

I had one of my few and far between briefs at this time, made rather an ass of myself over it, and early in April, compelled by the feeling that comes over me every now and then, made for France.

I wanted to see Edith. It sounds absurd to say it, but I was really almost sick for the sight of her, and what made matters worse was that I'd seen in the newspaper a few days before that Sir Max Cohen had left London for the south of France.

I liked, respected, and admired the little man with every decent drop of blood in my body ; he was as straight as a die, as truthful as a man would wish his own wife to be, and as kind and chivalrous a soul as ever lived ; but there were times when I nearly hated him. And he, as well as Edith, was pretty constantly in my mind just then.

In the train on the way to Dover, to the horror of everybody in the compartment, but to nobody more than to myself, I suddenly burst into a cackle of mad-sounding laughter.

I hadn't even the excuse of a paper or a book, and the other people in the compartment stared at me till I wished I could drop through the floor and be ground into a mince by the wheels. For the first time it had occurred to me that if Edith did marry this wonderful little man, she would henceforth be called Lady Cohen. Phœbus, what a name ! My beautiful Edith, Lady Cohen !

However, I didn't go to the Cap ; instead, I wandered down to Bordeaux and spent a month there and thereabouts, enjoying the sun and the general warm-bloodedness of the place, and regaining, as one always does regain through determination and self-respect, the mental balance I had temporarily lost.

I am glad that I had the strength not even to write to Edith all the time I was away, though I had two letters from Cohen about Mag, in both of which he said, in his formal little way, "Miss Lossell asks me to send you her very kindest regards."

The spring wore away very pleasantly, and late in May I turned my face homewards.

I reached London on a divine evening such as only an English spring can produce, and as if I was being rewarded for having tried to behave decently, I found on my table two letters that gave me the very keenest pleasure.

One was from Mag, announcing that her father was much better—cured, she called it—and hard at work painting, while she herself had just finished a picture that had pleased Cohen and Lossell very much, and that Lossell had bought it for the magnificent sum of ten guineas. Now Lossell would no more have bought a picture he didn't want than I would have bought an aeroplane.

Cohen might at a pinch conceivably have bought a picture as a cover to charity, although he was too conscientious, I knew, to give undeserved encouragement to any artistic aspirant; but Lossell's charities were almost invariably on a huge and impersonal scale; he would give away thousands of pounds to some cause or institution without turning a hair, and yet hesitate about lending five pounds. So, on the whole, I was pleased that it was he and not Sir Max who was Mag's patron.

My other letter was from Edith: three lines written hurriedly in an uneven scrawl, very unlike her usual exquisitely neat hand. She wanted to see me, she needed me, and would I come? The letter was dated two days before, and I at once telephoned to Grosvenor Place. Pruffles answered me and informed me, after a long wait, that Miss Lossell would be very glad to see me that evening.

" His lordship will be out," the man went on, " and Miss Lossell would be very pleased if you would come and dine with her, sir. Yes, sir, I will, sir, thank you, sir."

Somehow all thought of fear of Cohen had gone completely out of my mind, and I was very nearly perfectly happy as, a little late, I paid off my taxi and ran up the steps.

The chequer-board hall had a very homely air to me, and I was so glad to see Pruffles that I could almost have emulated Mag's behaviour on a certain historic occasion. However, I restrained myself and went into the drawing-room to wait, as Edith had been detained and was not down.

It is really a delightful room, this broad place under the picture gallery, and I am old-fashioned enough to like the thick carpet that covers every inch on its floor from wainscotting to wainscotting.

Beautiful rugs on highly polished boards are delightful to look at, but they are treacherous, unsafe things, and this thick velvet pile is delightful to my feet. I believe the furniture is good enough for a museum; it is part of a collection made by the present lord's grandfather. It is either Sheraton or Chippendale, I never can tell them apart; and there are comfortable, deep, enveloping chairs, and soft, buttony sofas as well, and there's a Venetian chandelier that looks like a rainbow and which I think perfectly beautiful.

I walked up and down for a few minutes, and finally went out on to the balcony at the back. It was here that Edith had told me that she was never going to see Bettany again.

I stood there leaning against the side of the window, looking at the sky, and while I was there she came in.

I turned and went back towards her. She came swiftly up to me, both hands held out. She had a very bright

colour and wore an ugly little dog-collar of diamonds. There was something odd about her.

I caught at her hands, which were very cold, and burst out in a voice that I hardly knew as my own :

" Edith, what is it ? It isn't that man ? " I couldn't bring myself to say Cohen's name.

She nodded, and drawing away her hands put one before her mouth. " Yes," she said.

At that moment Pruffles announced dinner, and we followed him without a word.

We dined in the breakfast-room, where there are little white panels, and one or two portraits of pretty ancestresses let into the walls. I love the room, and just outside it, in the small plot of grass that they called the garden, was a may tree just bursting into bloom. The wind had come up, and the boughs of the tree were tossing about in it. I sat opposite the window, and Edith was outlined against the shifting trusses of green and pink.

I ate my soup in silence, listening to her as she chatted for the benefit of the servants, and hardly daring to look up at her.

Finally, when I did, I nearly groaned aloud. She looked like a woman who was being tortured to death. Her eyes had sunk into her head, and her nose looked pinched, like the nose of a consumptive, and there were little dark furrows from her nostrils to her lips.

" Yes," she said, in a high, strained voice, " it was delightful, it always is. Your friend Lady Houndle was there part of the time, and Monica came for a week."

I nodded. " How is your uncle ? "

" Oh, he's better, thanks."

It was dreadful, and when at last we were left for a moment alone, I leant across the table.

" For God's sake tell me," I said. " Why are you going to do it if it makes you feel like this ? "

She stared at me. "Going to do what?" and I saw that she was sincere, that she did not understand what I meant.

How we got through the meal heaven alone knows, but after what seemed hours of unbearable suspense, we found ourselves alone in her grey and silver sitting-room, the coffee and cigarettes on the table, the servants gone for good.

I asked her, very roughly, to explain.

"I will," she said, "that's why I sent for you—but what did you mean when you asked why I was going to do something?"

"I mean, why are you going to marry him?"

"Oh, no, no," she murmured, moving her head restlessly from side to side, "you don't understand, Victor." Then she added, leaning towards me and speaking almost in a whisper, "I've seen *him*!"

CHAPTER XXII

IT was Bettany she had seen. A week before, as she came out of a theatre; he had not seen her, and the crowd had been so thick that when she had rushed after him she had lost him.

"Are you sure?" I asked. She didn't even take the trouble to answer me. [*Was she sure?*]

"He looked well," she said, adding that he had stared straight at her without seeing her.

"Have I changed so much?" she asked bitterly.

Then I told her what I had, during dinner, thought her meaning to be. She laughed.

"Dear little Sir Max——" she said absently, and I confess that sorry as I was for her and distressed by her pain, I couldn't help being glad that the trouble was simply the old one, the old one to which I was so used.

"Did you never think of marrying Cohen?" I asked her.

"Oh, heavens, Victor! does it matter what I thought about him? It's Bill, Bill. You don't know what seeing him meant to me. You have no idea. And, oh, my dear, you must find him for me."

I was silent for a while. "And if I do," I asked presently, "will you marry *him*?"

She looked down, and under what I had soon discovered to be the paint on her face, she grew very white.

"No, I shall never marry him, but I want to know—I want to know what happened; I want to know where he's been; I want to know what he's done with his life. Oh, Victor, can't you see? And above all I want to make up to him—I must find him—I must. Can't you see?"

I did see. Much as I perforce regretted her insane faithfulness to the memory of a man who I knew must in some way have outraged her, I could not pretend not to understand it. In a way, her case and mine were alike, but Bettany had certainly loved her, whereas I hadn't even the poor excuse that she had ever given me a thought even twenty years ago, yet I was perfectly ready to go to the ends of the earth for her.

I made her take off the ugly diamond collar, which, it appeared, she had put on under the very mistaken impression that it might make her look less ill, less tragic, and we sat for a long time thinking, and talking over the ways and means of discovering the lost man.

"He must have been out of England all this time," I said at last. "He couldn't possibly have been here without being seen by somebody. Even if he had been very hard up *somebody* would have been bound to come across him—even old Pye might have seen him in some of his haunts."

She shook her head irritably. "No, no, I tell you, he hasn't been in low haunts, and he's not poor. He looked older, of course, but he looked perfectly well, and—oh, Victor," she hesitated, "he looked almost happy."

"You've looked happy many a time when coming out of a theatre," I said, with measured brutality. "He might not have felt quite so gay if he'd seen you."

There was a frightened look in her eyes.

"For the moment I was glad he didn't," she said slowly,

as if ashamed of her words. "I was tired, and I know I was looking plain and—old."

"Nonsense. But it's getting late, dear. We must decide what I'm to do," I broke in hastily, for I was not prepared to discuss her looks with her. "We must advertise."

"All right. Whatever you think."

She rose. "Hark! There comes father; I can't see him to-night. You'll begin at once, won't you? You won't waste time?" She crossed the room to the door leading to her bedroom, and turned. "Good-bye. Telephone me in the morning—I'll stay on. If father asks where I am, say I've a headache and have gone to bed."

She closed the door.

To my relief Lord Lossell didn't appear, and a few minutes later I went quietly downstairs, tiptoed across the chess-board, and let myself out into the street.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE next fortnight I devoted exclusively, almost exclusively, to the search for Bettany. It was no easy task that I was undertaking, for I could form no conclusions as to whether, now that he had come back, he would have come openly or secretly, or even under another name.

I spent half a day telephoning different hotels, and I went to a place in Mary Street, St. James's, where Edith told me he had lived at the time of her engagement to him. They had not heard of him there, and no such name was registered on any of the hotel lists.

Then I advertised discreetly as I could, in several papers and for several days. I had two talks with Edith; she gave me the names of one or two people who had formerly been friends of the missing man, and looking them up I spent two or three of my mornings. I found not only that these people had had no recent news of Bettany, but that they had all, with one exception, for many years believed him to be dead.

I had heard a little about his antecedents, and I was somehow not surprised to find that these old friends of his were much humbler than the ones he had made after the exhibition of "Cross Roads."

They were for the most part members of the lower branches of professions. One, for instance, and this was the one who believed Bettany was not dead, was a man named Colwyn, who was chief clerk in a well-known firm of solicitors.

He was a nice old fellow, with three unmarried, middle-aged daughters, and I enjoyed my call at their shabby, comfortable old house in Ealing.

"Why do you think," I asked, after the preliminaries, "that he's still alive?"

Mr. Colwyn, his elbows on his chair-arms, laid the tips of his fingers together in a way I felt to be an unconscious imitation of the head of his firm.

"Willy was a good boy," he said thoughtfully. "I was very fond of him. His mother came from Gloucestershire, the same village where my mother lived as a girl, so I knew him from the time he was about fifteen. I lost sight of him for a while, naturally, while he was abroad, and to a certain extent during the first great success of that picture—what's its name? He was taken up, as you probably know, by all kinds of people far above him in station, but he never altogether gave us up, did he, Clara?"

Miss Clara, the second daughter, a sweet-faced woman, who had blushed so vividly on my unfolding the reason of my visit that I suspected her of a former weakness for Bettany, shook her head.

"Oh, no, papa dear. He always came here occasionally, and don't you remember his taking Aunt Bertha and me to see the picture? 'Cross Roads' was its name," she added, with a little air of pride.

I remember wondering as I sat there what there had been about the fellow to make him liked, as he undoubtedly had been. I recalled him as a slight, eager-looking young man, with hair that grew in a point on his forehead, and an odd way of walking with his chin in the air. There

had been something vital and romantic in his bearing, but he was not handsome, and I had never heard him say anything arresting, and yet his individuality had been strong enough to make a permanent mark on the memories of many very different people.

"Did you like the picture?" I asked the second sister, gently.

She folded her pretty, faded hands. "Oh, yes, but then I should have liked anything Willy did," she answered simply. "I was very fond of him."

The clock struck, and my time was short. "But you've not yet told me, Mr. Colwyn," I began again, "what your reason is for thinking that he's still alive?"

The old man looked at his daughter, and began hesitatingly: "Well, I don't know."

Miss Clara rose. "I'll tell you—Mr. Quest. It's because of a letter he—Willy—wrote to me in the October after he went away."

Dear me! this was important, and looked like a clue.

"I shall be very grateful to you if you will tell me about the letter," I returned. "As I have said, I am making the inquiries on behalf of two people who used to be great friends of his. It is through them that I learned of your friendship for him."

They were a very pleasant, devoted family, these Colwyns. After a moment, Miss Colwyn and the youngest sister shook hands with me and left the room; evidently they realized that Miss Clara would like to be alone with me and her father.

She then went into the front drawing-room, and I heard the opening and shutting of a drawer. After a moment she came back.

"Father, do you mind," she said, "if I take Mr. Quest for a moment into the garden? I'm going to show him the letter."

The old gentleman bowed—also the family solicitor's bow—and I followed the little old maid,—(she must have been quite fifty)—out on to the sunlit, flower-bordered lawn.

We came to a standstill by an umbrella rose-tree, covered with pink flowers, and without speaking she handed me the letter.

Somehow I hardly liked to read it, and I took the letter out of the envelope slowly. She, however, saw my reluctance, for she said with a little smile: "Read it, read it, Mr. Quest, I'm sure I'm glad to have you do so. I don't like to show it to my father, I never have done, but if there's a chance of our finding him, poor Willy, I somehow feel that it would be through you."

The letter was short; I don't remember the exact wording, but it was something like this:

"DEAR CLARA,

"I can't come to dinner on Thursday. I'm going out of England, and I'm never coming back. I have managed to smash my whole life, and the quicker I get away the better.

"You've been very good to me, and I'm very fond of you. I'm going to send you a little picture to remember me by. Please explain to Uncle George.

"God bless you all.

"WILLY."

Then there was a P.S. of which I do distinctly remember the wording:

"My engagement is broken to the lady you saw that day."

We were both silent for a moment, and the voices of

some tennis-playing girls and boys in the next garden reached, at least, my ears, as though they were much further off than they were.

At last I said awkwardly, "Did he send you the picture?"

"Yes. It was a tiny replica of the 'Windmill.' I always liked it better than the other one."

"And this is the last you heard from him?"

She nodded. "Yes—I knew it would be when I got that letter. Father and the girls always thought he'd come back after a while, but I knew he wouldn't. He was an odd man, but he always did what he said."

"It never struck you, I suppose," I asked her, "that it was a sign of weakness, his going away like that, whatever the reason might have been?"

She shook her head very decidedly. "Oh, no. It might have been wrong, it might have been unnecessary, but it certainly wasn't weak; Willy wasn't weak."

After a pause she resumed: "I wrote to him several times, to his rooms in Bury Street, and to the Savage Club, but"—she picked a little cluster of roses, and laid them against her cheek—"that's all," she said.

And then I told her what I'd not mentioned before, for it struck me that if Bettany was in London and wished to see any of his old friends, it might easily be this gentle, unpretentious little lady.

"It is the lady to whom he was engaged," I said, "who's so anxious to find him."

"Ah, Miss Lossell."

"You know her name, then?"

"Of course. They were to be married very shortly, you remember. Why does she now, after all this time, want to find him?"

I looked away from her. "She thinks that she saw him the other night."

Miss Clara Colwyn didn't answer for a moment. Then she said gently: "Perhaps she cared for him, after all. I've always thought she didn't, or she wouldn't have let him go away like that."

She said no more, and shortly after I took my leave, and went home by Underground.

All I had learned was that Bettany, when he disappeared, had gone to France, but it was worth telling Edith, because his letter was certainly not that of a man who intended to put an end to his days, which was what Lossell and many other people had, I know, always suspected him of having done.

This was the only news of any kind that I was able to get for weeks, and gradually Edith settled down into a quiet mood of hopelessness, and then, one day, quite suddenly, it occurred to me that I was many kinds of an idiot never to have thought of asking Pye if he knew anything about his old acquaintance.

So the next day I went in search of him.

CHAPTER XXIV

I FOUND Pye, after making inquiries at several doors, established in a room he had taken at the very top of the Buildings, across the courtyard. I always wish I had counted the steps, as one does in St. Peter's; however, I didn't. I was thoroughly out of breath when I finally reached the door.

He was at work on a large canvas, and I can't say that he was particularly glad to see me. I was very much struck with his appearance—for he had shaved off his beard, and the change was a great improvement—I have always disliked men who part their hair in the middle, but Pye wore his lank dark locks in this fashion, and I noticed that he was wearing glasses—the thick glasses of a short-sighted man.

I sat down on the one chair the room boasted, and took the cigarette that he offered me. I didn't like to tell him I was glad to see him looking better, equally little did I feel inclined to congratulate him on his return to work; and I was feeling a little awkward when he simplified matters by saying, in a way that I liked, "I don't think I have ever thanked you, Mr. Quest, for your great kindness to my daughter."

We discussed Mag for a few minutes, and then I explained why I had come.

"You used to know William Bettany," I began. He looked at me sharply, and planted his glasses more firmly on his nose, which appeared to be the slippery kind.

"Yes," he said, "I knew him slightly."

"Well, I'm told that he's been seen in London recently, and it occurred to me that possibly you might know something of him."

He shook his head. "I've not seen Bill Bettany," he murmured reflectively, "for—oh, many years!"

"Do you remember when he disappeared?" I asked. "Were you in England then?"

"I saw him in Paris just afterwards——"

"Would you mind telling me about it? All you can remember. I don't know whether you know the circumstances just preceding his disappearance, do you?"

He took up his palette. "If you'll excuse me I'll go on with my work," he answered; "this is a commission. You were saying——? Ah, yes, did I know about the circumstances? I did. I was here when 'Cross Roads' and the other picture were in the Academy, and I remember when the Chantrey people bought them; from some peer, I believe it was."

"Yes—Lord Lossell."

He nodded. "I remember. He is the man who built this place, by the way, did you know?"

Somehow I felt that he was trying to put me off; that he knew more than he was willing to admit.

"Did he ever tell you anything about whatever it was that drove him out of England?" I urged, watching him sharply.

"I am not asking out of idle curiosity, Mr. Pye; I am not asking you *what* he told you, in case you were his confidant, but a very great friend of his—in fact, two very great friends—are most anxious to find him, and I've promised to do all I can to help."

Pye put down his palette, and the little I could see of his white forehead was corrugated nervously. Although he looked so much better, and had so improved in every way, it was plain that the poor fellow's nerves were even yet by no means good.

"Surely there must be people who... you could ask besides me?" he protested, biting at his thumb-nail in a way that I remembered to have noticed before. I explained apologetically that that was just the trouble—there *was* no one.

"I went yesterday," I added, "to see some old friends of his in Ealing. Their name is Colwyn——"

"Colwyn? Ah, yes. I remember," he said quickly, adding that he had heard Bettany speak of the family.

"It appears he wrote once to Miss Colwyn, from France. He was obviously in great trouble."

Pye stood in front of me—a small, stooping figure; his palette on his thumb, his cravat awry. I knew he wished to heaven I would go and leave him to his work, but I had no such intention.

"Have you heard from him since those days?" I insisted gently, trying to make my voice as inoffensive as possible.

"I'm not saying the fellow told me anything," he returned, not at all softened by my good intentions. "I don't see why I should tell."

I rose.

"Ah, in that case I'll be off," I answered. "I'm sorry to have troubled you—I wouldn't have done so on my own account; but I myself knew Bettany only very slightly——"

His face changed in a curious way, and he stared at me. "Then you did know him?" he blurted out, suddenly.

"Oh, yes, I had that pleasure. The Lossells, about whom you know, are among my very dearest friends, and were

even in his day." I held out my hand, but he didn't take it. He was still peering at me, his thumb between his teeth, and I heard a little nibbling noise while I waited.

"I have often heard him—Bettany—speak about the Lossells," he said at last. "It is odd that they—Lord Lossell, I mean—should have been so kind to my daughter. Is—Miss Lossell married?"

"No——"

He went on hurriedly, "Of course I know about the engagement, and I've wondered—— How are they both?" he wound up, with a jerk.

"Oh, very well," I answered. "Then you never meet them?"

"No," he said slowly.

"Poor Bettany, I see, confided in you."

He nodded. "Yes; poor Bettany!"

So I baited my hook afresh and said, as I went towards the door:

"I'll tell Miss Lossell that you were unable to help us," and I felt a beast as he swallowed the bait, hook and all.

"Then it was she who wanted to know?"

"Yes. She saw him the other night at a theatre, and she's most anxious to find him."

"That she'll *never* do," he burst out, so tensely that I was amazed.

"Look here, Mr. Pye," I said, closing the door and going back to him. "I know I'm being intrusive, and that you wish me at the ends of the earth, but if you know what it means to Miss Lossell (I tell you this in confidence) to find that poor fellow, you would tell me what you know about him, if you do know anything."

There was a long pause, and then he raised his eyes and looked heavily at me. I can see him now, standing there in the dusty room, his gaily set out palette in one hand, a brush in the other.

In biting his nail he had managed to decorate his cheek with a big smear of yellow ochre, and he was an odd little figure enough.

"All I know of Miss Lossell," he said at last, with an obvious effort, "is good, and I'm sorry if she is distressed, but—the man was never worth worrying about, and I rather think she knows that."

I felt that he knew a great deal more than he was willing to tell, and that, if I questioned him at that moment, he must tell me. I was dying of curiosity. Thank goodness, however, I didn't do it! After all, Edith had kept the secret from me, and I had no right to learn it from anyone else. At last Pye spoke :

"I can't tell you much, Mr. Quest," he said ; "at one time I knew Bettany fairly well, and then—he went under completely, I believe. I've heard several times that he died somewhere in South America, though of course it may not be true. I do know, however, that he was at one time in Buenos Ayres——"

"But Miss Lossell thinks she saw him, she's convinced she saw him, here in London, the other night."

He shook his head. "And I am just as convinced that she's mistaken," he said gravely. "Bettany never came back to England."

He spoke with more than mental persuasion, he spoke with knowledge, and I felt that he had said more than he had meant to, out of a wish to keep Edith from going on dreaming an unprofitable dream. He said no more, and I didn't insist, and then I took my leave, thanking him.

He had for the moment pretty well convinced me that Edith had been mistaken, although I was just as convinced that he knew far more about the matter than he was willing, or felt at liberty, to tell.

This last conviction, however, I kept to myself when I saw Edith, and after this she gradually, as I have said,

settled down more and more into the condition in which she had been before that night at the play.

"After all," she admitted once, with a sigh, "it's a long time ago, and people change. I *might* have been mistaken——"

I nodded. "Of course you might, and what's more you say he was only a few yards away from you, and looked straight at you. Is it likely, my dear, that he would not have recognized you if it had been he?"

But somehow, in spite of what the man had made me feel at the time, I began a little later to entertain an unhappy and unwilling conviction that Bettany *had* been in England, and that Edith had seen him.

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CHAPTER XXV

IN October Mr. Treffry had a serious illness, and early in November he sent for me to come to see him.

I found him sitting up in bed, his fine old face worn and thinned by his illness. It reminded me somehow of a knife that has been ground almost to nothing by some sharpening process.

"I am very glad to see you, sir," I began. "You've given us all an awful fright."

He laughed. "You've all been very kind, with your inquiries, and your grapes, and so on. It's amazing how much comfort a man can get out of sympathy. My beautiful Edith actually shed tears over me when she came to see me yesterday!"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm afraid I can't manage to do that! Although I assure you I should feel sincerely happier if you were just a little fatter."

By chance I had never been in the old gentleman's bedroom before; and it was a charming room. I felt that it was now exactly what it must have been fifty years before, when, as I knew, he had inherited the house from an uncle.

The four-poster bed was hung, not with chintz, but with some aged grey silk brocade, carefully mended in many places, and over the old man's delicate frame was

stretched, wrinkleless, a counterpane of the same beautiful material. It was a foggy afternoon and the window curtains were drawn, and a large lamp on the table at his right hand illuminated the place. Over the mantelpiece was a fine portrait of Treffry's grandmother in her youth. She had, I knew, brought him up, his mother having died in his boyhood.

Under the lamp on the table stood a big cut-glass scent-spray, full, my nose told me, of lavender-water, and there was a vase of white roses on the very elaborately set forth dressing-table, whose accoutrements were all of engraved brass, a priceless relic, I knew, of old Italian workmanship. A peat fire burned in the hearth and the windows behind the heavy curtains were open, letting in the roar and hum of the great town.

"It's a poisonous evening," I observed. "I wish I were in bed, being made a fuss of by a handsome young woman in blue and white uniform, and visited by enchanting and distinguished friends."

He laughed softly. "Yes, bed is by no means a bad place, but I don't like this fog, Quest; I don't like the fog. Neither does Cooper-Lewis; he says," the old gentleman added, looking at me in a way that caught my attention, "that I must be up and off before it gets worse."

"That means you are going out of England for the winter?"

He nodded. "Yes, I've got my marching orders. These are wonderful days we live in. Think of an old fellow of eighty being shipped off to Ceylon for his health!"

I had never been to Ceylon, and sat a moment thinking about it as I imagined it to be.

After a pause Treffry reached under his pillow and produced a large key, which he handed to me.

"Go into the miniature room," he said, "and open that ebony and ivory cabinet between the windows."

There was a suppressed excitement in his manner that intrigued me. I shouldn't have been surprised if I had found a wife or two hanging by their hair, or a bushel of pearls behind the doors of the cabinet, but when I had opened it nothing more exciting met my eyes than two rows of books, bound in russia leather.

"Do you know what they are?" the old man called out.

"Books," I answered, with brilliance.

"They are my diary. Now you may come back."

There was colour in his thin cheeks now, and when I had sat down he spoke about his famous diary more fully than he had ever before done to me.

"I've edited it, and prepared it up to four years ago," he said, "and I was just beginning on a new volume when I was taken ill."

"You must hurry and get well, so that you can get on with the work," I remarked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "That's just the point. I must get on with the work—or someone must. Quest, I want you to come to Ceylon with me and help me to finish this business."

In an hour's time he had persuaded me that nothing was simpler nor easier than for us to sail from Sydney that day three weeks, for Colombo. I was to go as his secretary, all expenses being paid, and we should be gone about six months. It was a delightful thought, and I was enchanted at the prospect, and I was making a list of books to be bought for the voyage, when his servant ushered in a young lady in dark blue, who carried in her hand a little bunch of violets.

It was Mag. She had got to the age when girls seem to change, to develop and grow up, almost from one week to the next, but whereas most girls of practically fifteen show their approach to womanhood by various subtle increases of curve, Mag signalled her progress

by as subtle a shrinkage. She no longer bulged in her old way. Her face was lengthening, and I missed some of the freckles on her dear little nose.

The old man had been very fond of her ever since that inauspicious meeting on the night of the birthday party a year before, and I knew that she had often been to his house, so I was not surprised to see her.

I told her the plan about Ceylon, and she was intensely interested, as she always was in anything concerning her friends, and begged me to write her a circumstantial account of the Devil-dances in the jungle, of which someone had told her.

Her news was good. Her father was in steady work, illustrating books of travel for some publisher.

"He has only," she announced with pride, "had two relapses since August."

"Where does he get the stuff?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. We can't find out, but I think he has a friend somewhere in the East End who gives it to him, for both times that he has had it he has told me the day before that he was going to see this man."

My mind jumped to the thought of Bettany, for I had never given up the idea that Pye knew more of him than he would admit.

"Have you ever seen this friend?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes; I was on a bus one day, ages ago,—two years it must be,—and I saw father and a man talking together in the street, and afterwards he told me that he had met a very old friend, whom he hadn't seen for many years—that was the man. His name," she added, "is Davis."

Treffry and I exchanged a glance, and I could see that the idea had occurred to him as well as to me.

"What did the man look like, Mag?" he asked, in the

pleasant voice that had grown as diaphanous and thin as himself.

She looked vague. "I don't know—I didn't notice."

"Oh, come, you always notice. Try and remember, I've a particular reason for wanting to know."

She frowned a little, and then, with an effort, for the man had obviously not interested her, she answered:

"He was a little man and he wore a soft hat. Oh, yes, he had a beard, not unlike father's before father shaved."

Treffry and I glanced at each other, for I'd told the old man about my search, thinking that perhaps he, who seemed to know everybody under the heavens, might have some clue as to Bettany's whereabouts. We said no more.

Mag was studying hard these days, she went on to tell us; her lessons, which she still hated, lessons in the "Three R's," geography, and so on, on which Max Cohen had insisted, she accomplished in a conscientious jog-trot way, while she applied herself to her drawing, and to reading—this last under my guidance—with intensity and even passion. It augured well, I thought, for her future.

I was dining that night with Cohen, and presently I said good-bye, leaving the old gentleman and the young girl chatting pleasantly together in the fragrant firelight.

Cohen, dear little man, was delighted about the Ceylon affair, and lent me several books about the island, telling me many interesting tales about it. I was not at all surprised to hear that he owned a tea plantation near Galle; I shouldn't have been surprised to hear that he owned a shrubbery of laurels in the Elysian Fields, for his possessions seemed as diversified as his knowledge. He was very much pleased with Mag, and, it appeared, so was old Glenny.

"The old fellow's devoted to her," he added, "and gets

on splendidly with the father, too." This reminded me of Mag's story of Pye's friend in the East End, and I told it to Cohen.

"I was wondering," I suggested, "if it could be Bettany, by any chance."

"Why on earth should it be Bettany? Whatever would he be doing in the East End?"

Cohen had never been told of Edith's thinking she had seen Bettany at the play, but I had mentioned to him, without naming her, that a doubt had arisen amongst us about the man's death. (Bettany's day had been before Cohen's, for when "Cross Roads" was painted Cohen had not come to England.)

However, I put little credence in Edith's story, for his theory was that a man of Bettany's genius would never be in such low water as living in the East End would seem to imply.

"Mightn't he have lost his power of painting?" I asked.

Cohen laughed. "A power like that is never lost, any more than, so to speak, it is found. It is born as much a part of a man as are his eyes or his brain."

We were sitting by the fire looking at a collection of silver-point drawings that the little man had just bought, when, looking up suddenly, I saw through the open door of the bedroom a gleam of gold on the table. It was, I knew, the gold frame of which Mag had told me. I had not thought about it for a long time, but somehow, as I sat there by him, I felt a sudden overpowering necessity for finding out what Cohen really felt about Edith.

My annual proposal had begun to work in me, and I had been staving it off, as I always did, knowing that I was bound, sooner or later, to fall, for some days.

Now the sight of the gold photograph-frame accelerated matters, and I knew that my poor dear lady would have to go through with it to-morrow.

"I'm lunching with the Lossells to-morrow," I announced, with a suddenness and inappositeness that evidently struck my courteous little host. "I shall telephone them in the morning."

Max Cohen looked at me. "Ah, yes," he murmured, "Miss Lossell is looking much better. I saw her two or three nights ago, at the Bainbridges'." Then he added softly, "What a beautiful woman she is!"

"Yes, and as she gets older," I returned, and my voice, to my own surprise, had an odd, dogged sound, "she gets more beautiful."

He looked at me reflectively. "No doubt you are right, in a higher sense, Quest, but I should like to have seen her in her youth——"

This made me very angry, which was quite illogical, but probably quite natural. He saw that I was ruffled, and in his kindness tried to soothe me by expatiating in carefully chosen, almost academic language, on the respect and admiration Miss Lossell had always aroused in him.

"She's wonderful," he concluded.

I was ashamed of myself, and said so.

"The truth is," I blurted out, "I can't bear to have her grow old. I've always admired her."

He looked at me, his pellucid, leaf-brown eyes full of understanding and sympathy.

"I've always known," he said quietly, "my dear Quest."

I was not at all annoyed or embarrassed by his speech.

We were both silent for a moment, and then he said, "I should like to show you something. It is nowadays my most cherished possession. It is the picture of the woman I love."

"Is it in a gold frame?" I asked him.

He stared at me in surprise. "How did you know?" And then, turning, he crossed towards the open door. "I

love her," he said, in a peculiarly noble and dignified way, "more than my own life."

After a pause he added, "Go and look at it, Quest."

I went slowly into the next room to look at the "coronet face," and for a full minute I stood motionless before it.

It was the face of a perfect stranger.

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CHAPTER XXVI

EDITH and I got through the next day's scene much in the usual manner. I was very unhappy for an hour or two after her definite refusal of me, but at least I hadn't the misery one experiences under an unexpected blow, this blow having recurred regularly every autumn for many years.

Bettany's name didn't come up, and she said nothing to me, except just in the sweetest, kindest way in the world, that she "really simply couldn't." In the middle of the interview it came over me suddenly that the circumstances were not without their funny side, and, when I laughed, she cheered up amazingly and insisted on knowing why. I told her the story of the gold frame. She was perfectly delighted.

"You silly old thing," she declared, "so you thought that charming little gentleman was cherishing my photograph?" At that moment it no longer struck me as funny.

"You know perfectly well you did consider marrying him at one time," I muttered, in a surly voice. "He was certainly devoted to you, why shouldn't he have had your photograph?"

We were in her car, driving home from a matinée, I having

chosen these conditions as having at least the merit of originality, for I had never proposed to her in a car before—and, leaning forward, she looked out of the window for a moment. Suddenly I saw that she was shaking with laughter. Then she turned, and her delightful, olive-green eyes wrinkled at the corners with mischief and amusement.

"Listen, Victor," she said, "I'll tell you a secret. I did consider marrying Sir Max; I contemplated according to him the high honour of my hand. Well—he never asked me!"

"He didn't!"

"No. I think for a time he meant to, and then, for some reason, the dear little man cooled down, and imperceptibly he drew away."

There was something so droll in her way of telling it, although it doesn't sound very funny as I write it, that I shouted with laughter. Then we were grave, and I told her what Pye's nurse had told me about Cohen's wife. The photograph, she decided, was of course hers.

Afterwards, as I have said, I had to go through my usual, annual period of misery, but even that period was, in that year, diversified and softened by the excitement of my preparations for Ceylon.

Like everybody else going for the first time to a strange country, I squandered a great deal of money on perfectly useless specialities fobbed off on me by the clever and unscrupulous tradesman. The solar topee that I bought proved to weigh a ton, so that I threw it away the third day in Colombo, and bought an excellent and most comfortable one for about a fifth the price I had spent on its predecessor.

I also bought many garments that, unknown to me, were destined to feed the voracious and omnipresent red ant, because nobody told me that I ought to have a tin trunk.

However, I enjoyed making my purchases, and I enjoyed, though it doesn't seem very gracious to say so, saying good-bye to all my friends. Everyone was most kind, even Lossell, who gave me a case of excellent cigars.

Mag and old Glenny went down with us to Tilbury, and I showed them over the *Margravia* with the ridiculous feeling of proprietorship common to all inexperienced travellers. Mag asked me what the binnacle was, and not for worlds would I reveal what she went on shore believing that maritime instrument to be! She was very much excited by the atmosphere and smell of the ship, and her ecstasies over the Lascars were both inappropriate and over-audible.

She had done another lap in her great game of growing up since I had seen her a fortnight before, and I observed with joy that no one now stared at her ankles, which, of course, showed that they were assuming normal proportions. At the same time, I feared that they would never be stared at for better reasons, and I declare that I do love a nice, bony back view to a woman's feet.

Old Glenny wandered about, looking exactly like Neptune, as if he had just climbed up over the side, and at the last minute they were very nearly carried off with us, Mag being found in the engine-room, learning all about the machinery. However, at last we got off, and finally the two kind faces faded from view, and I took my long nose up to the extreme peak of the bow, to experience in full the delicious sensations of the Oriental traveller.

The first few hours of the journey were delightful; over the next three days it would be as well to draw a veil. I would rather have any known disease than that from which I so grievously suffered as we beat across the Bay of Biscay.

Treffry, a magnificent sailor, looked a new man when I finally crawled out of my bunk and crept up on deck. The

fine old fellow had grown ten years younger and pounds heavier.

The rest of the voyage was sheer delight ; the Captain was a good fellow, with a charming red face, a Scottish accent, and what he himself would have qualified as " an eye for the ladies ; " and there were one or two interesting and well-worth-while passengers.

At Port Said I rode a donkey, for the first time since my childhood, with four or five other " children." We had our fortunes told in trays of sand, and I bought, for those at home, rich gifts which Treffry afterwards informed me were as British born as myself.

I had looked forward for a long time to the Red Sea, and was, like the ship, prepared for intense heat as we passed through it. Instead of heat, however, we got the most tremendous cold. Dear old Treffry stayed in bed two days with hot bottles and extra rugs, trying to keep warm, and altogether the cold was abominable and bitter. This disgusting phenomenon was a great disappointment to me, but it didn't last very long, and presently we found ourselves at the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo.

Nearly everybody has been at Colombo, so I'll not attempt to describe it. Indeed, we did not stay very long, but were soon installed in a delightful bungalow on a rubber plantation out past Mount Lavinia.

We stayed here for four months, after which we moved up to Kandy, where the Colonial Secretary, a very good fellow named Oxenden, was a great nephew of my fine old Governor, and when the hot weather came we went to Newara Elia, which certainly is one of the most beautiful and delightful places in the whole wide world.

All this time I was working pretty hard, for it is no easy matter to edit as detailed and compendious a diary as Middleton Treffry's.

I used to think that he must have been at every dinner party that ever took place in London during three reigns. There certainly was, during those three reigns, no distinguished person of any class or type whom he hadn't met.

The diary, as everybody knows now, is a marvel not only of accuracy, but of discretion, and I am very proud of having had an insignificant and belated finger in it.

While we were Oxenden's guests at Kandy, Dubourg, the French painter, turned up with a lady, who, I fear, was universally known as "one of his wives." I didn't like the man; he was that disagreeable thing, an old lady-killer, and I objected to his way of flaunting the different units of his collection.

However, he and I had two conversations that interested me greatly. The first one took place early in the morning in the beautiful garden of the Colonial Secretary's bungalow. I was walking up and down, thinking out a problem connected with my work (for Treffry did me the honour not only of using me as a scribe, but of discussing knotty editorial points with me), when Dubourg came out on the veranda. He wore a velvet coat, and his long beard glistened with some disgusting preparation that smelt of violets.

I looked at him with something very like loathing, for somehow I couldn't bear the fellow, and with a mutually stiff "*Bonjour, Monsieur,*" we parted, and I walked away.

Half an hour later I came back to find him sitting at his easel hard at work. He glanced up at me.

"Ah, Monsieur," he said gaily, "tell me, you, with your cold English eye, have I got it?" and he flicked his fingers, with a gesture that stamped him as a southerner, towards his little canvas.

I stood still in amazement; it was perfectly beautiful, the little picture—just a stretch of lawn, one pillar of the veranda, and above and on both sides the wild, riotous

colours of the flowers. I think my unmistakable pleasure pleased the jaded and much flattered man, and I think it pleased him the more because he knew that I felt it almost against my will. Thus it was that presently we were walking up and down waiting for the breakfast gong, and really talking together for the first time. I don't remember how it came up, but I know that when the gong did sound I knew a great deal more about William Bettany than I had known before.

It appears Dubourg and he had been really friends in the old days in Paris—in the days when Bettany had yet to prove himself, for he had been a man of slow development.

They had lived in the same street, and bought their colours at the same shop, and eaten their cheap dinners at the same little restaurant.

"He was a great man," I said thoughtfully.

Dubourg rolled his big, loose-set eyes at me.

"In those days he hadn't found himself," he returned. "His pictures were charming, his sense of colour already excellent, but he painted no better than half a dozen other young men of our group."

After a pause he added, "Where are those two pictures of his now? The Luxembourg wanted them, you know."

I explained that they were at the Tate, and then, as Oxenden, his sister, and my old man came out on the veranda, I put one more question hastily:

"Did you ever see him after those pictures were painted?" I asked.

"Yes," the successful man returned slowly. "I wonder where my wife is," and, taking up a little stone, he threw it at a neighbouring window, and the charming, cropped, red head of Madame Dubourg appeared, and assured him that she would be down in a moment.

" I saw him in Paris—I saw him several times, after he came back from England, and just before he disappeared."

" Will you tell me about it ? " I asked eagerly, and as we went in to breakfast he answered me.

" With pleasure, some time," he said.



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CHAPTER XXVII

HE told me that afternoon, as we sat in the green gloom of the small room on the north side of the bungalow, which was supposed to be fairly cool.

He was loafing in one deck-chair, I was loafing in another ; and we had both of us taken off our collars, and iced drinks clinked in glasses in the holes in the arms of our chairs.

One of the reasons I didn't like Dubourg was that he was so obviously open to flattery ; another was that he quite plainly believed me to be a solid, thick-skulled islander. Now, for reasons of my own, I am afraid on that afternoon I deliberately pandered to his weakness ; at least, I made myself as pleasant as I possibly could do, and led him up to the subject on which I wished him to discourse, with a certain sly skill.

Finally I got him started on one of those monologues that most men of his type love to indulge in.

" Let me see," he began, pulling his long beard that always reminded me of Aaron's, slowly through his over-well-kept hand. " It must have been '95 or '96. I know it was the autumn, because my picture 'Aphrodite' was at the Salon. Did you ever see 'Aphrodite,' Monsieur ? "

I assured him that that painting was one of my great

admiraions. This assurance was, to say the least of it, jesuitical, but never mind that. After a moment he went on :

“ It was at Constant’s, I think, that we met. You know Constant’s, Monsieur ? It is a small restaurant in the Place Pigalle, or was, alas ! The good Constant is long since dead, and his grandson, at that time almost a child, owns an hotel in the Champs-Élysées, a detestable place of stucco and brocade, a place without atmosphere—*hélas !* ”

I was boiling with impatience, but I saw that there was no use in trying to guide the conversation, so I sat still and tried to look interested.

“ I was dining in the dear little smoky back room with Lanier and poor Jean Pigoux—that poor Pigoux, it was only a few months before his death—Constant was waiting on us, naturally. We were dining well, not as you dine in England, Monsieur, but with art.”

This scathing remark left me untouched, for I had long since found it to be stock property of the French conversationalist : English women don’t know how to dress, and English men don’t know how to eat. It pleases them to think so—why protest ?

“ I had,” resumed my *raconteur*, still working with his beard, “ seen Bettany but once in the last year, and then not to speak to. It was at the Café Anglais, where I was dining with the Russian Ambassador and Prince Mitikoff—perhaps you have known Mitikoff ?

“ On this occasion he—Bettany, I mean—was dining with an Englishman and a very handsome English girl. It was just after he had painted ‘ Cross Roads,’ and I understood that he was engaged to this lady.”

To my disgust, as he spoke the man kissed his fat fingertips, and waved his hand in tribute to my beautiful Edith.

“ And now, when he came to Constant’s that night, I

hardly knew him. He was ill, and bore on his face the look of a man who was dying standing up. It will convey to you, Monsieur," the egregious one went on, draining his glass, "something of his condition when I tell you that this poor Bettany looked straight at me—*me!*—without recognition."

I nodded. Surely with his unguenty beard, and his dreadful, pulpy red lips, and his loose-set, rolling eyes, this great French artist was a sufficiently unforgettable individuality, although possibly not quite in the way he meant.

"He was alone, and I noticed that he ate little. Being sorry for him, and wondering why, after his great success, he made such a bad figure, I finally went to him and spoke, and asked him his news. He was vague and queer. He seemed unable to collect his thoughts. I assure you, Monsieur, I was seriously alarmed, for he had not even known about my 'Aphrodite.' I asked him about his pictures, of whose success in England I had heard, and he laughed. It was not the laugh of a sane man. Then he took from his pocket an envelope in which were certain newspaper cuttings, and showed them to me. From this I gathered that the success of his last two pictures was something almost unbelievable for England. They were bought by, I have forgotten what, but something similar to our Luxembourg, after being exhibited at the Academy. Your Academy, Monsieur," my informant added, lighting a fresh cigarette, "is to make weep the angels, but it is the best you have. Bettany should have been gratified, but instead he had the air of a man about to die. *Parbleu, je connais vous autres Anglais moi, mais—*"

He shrugged his shoulders, his pink palms uppermost as if to say that even with his great knowledge of our entirely inferior race, he could not explain to himself Bettany's ridiculous attitude.

"After that I saw him no more for some years."

I started. Then Bettany *had* been in Paris some years after his disappearance from London; but I was wrong, as it appeared. Dubourg had met him in Buenos Ayres, whither he himself had gone to paint the wives of some of those incredibly rich Argentines.

"How was he getting on then?" I asked.

"That I can't tell you. I saw him at the theatre—the opera, to be exact—he was with a lady, and when I spoke to him he pretended not to know me, or rather, he pretended that I had made a mistake. He assured me that his name was not Bettany, and the lady confirmed this. She was sincere, I could see—she was also very pretty. He was lying, but what will you? A man has a right to deny himself if he likes."

"What year was that in?" I asked.

There was a long pause, and then the Frenchman answered slowly:

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that with any exactitude. I went out three or four times in about ten years. I've had a certain popularity in South America, but I should think it must have been about 1900, possibly '99 or even 1901—no, it must have been later—yes, it must decidedly have been later, possibly 1904."

He rose.

"Well, Monsieur, I've told you all I know about our poor friend."

I thanked him. He was a detestable person, but he'd been kind in telling me what I wanted to know, and I was grateful to him. I made up my mind to write to Edith to-morrow.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE English mail came in the next day, and brought me several letters. Mag's, the first long letter I had ever had from her, came, oddly enough, on the heels of Dubourg's revelations, and filled me with that curious feeling of uncanny coincidence that everybody knows. Perhaps I had better reproduce the whole document :

" DEAREST MR. QUEST,

" I am so excited I can hardly hold the pen. The most wonderful thing has happened, and I really don't believe I can live till this letter gets out to you, it seems such a long time. Oh, if only you were here, if only you had been here yesterday! I've seen my mother. My mother! It happened this way. Father took me to the Tate yesterday afternoon, and then we were to go and have tea with Sir Max. Father has been splendidly well ever since you left, and he's doing some work for Sir Max, mending and pasting together old prints that Sir Max is afraid to trust to a shop. Father loves paste, and is as happy as a king sticking away, and trimming, and so on, up in his studio. Well, he had been working hard for two or three days and was very tired, and Mr. Glenny couldn't have me, as his sister-in-law had come to town, and he had

to take her to buy a mackintosh ; so father and I decided to have a holiday. I feel just as if I were writing a chapter in a book. I *do* wish you were here !

" Well, you know how oddly things go sometimes, when they all seem to happen in a kind of chain—well, this is the way it happened yesterday.

" The pictures seemed even better than usual, and we were very happy. Father was wonderful about ' Cross Roads ' and the ' Windmill.' Some American ladies were looking at them, and somehow we got talking with them, and I wish you could have heard father explain about the pictures. He adores them both, and he was so interesting about Bettany. It must have been wonderful to know him, though I don't think he can have been a very nice man, from what father said.

" The ladies were very kind—one of them was a girl about my age, with the prettiest feet you ever saw. I do wish my feet weren't so enormous.

" Well, father was so charming and so cheery that on our way home, walking down the Embankment, I thought I'd ask him about my mother, so I did—just like that.

" ' Father,' I said, ' I wish you'd tell me about my mother.' He stared at me in that funny, dazed way of his when somebody suddenly changes the subject, and so I said that I thought as I was going to be sixteen in six months, I was old enough to be told about the mystery.

" He looked at me for a long time and then he looked at the river. At last he said, ' Why do you think there is a mystery ? ' and I said I had always thought so since I gave up believing that she was dead. He didn't deny it, but just talked for a few minutes about mystery as a kind of subject, as if he was lecturing, and we walked on. I was awfully excited, as you can imagine. Then, after a while we sat down on one of the stone benches, and he began to talk. He told me all sorts of things I had never known

about him. Did you know that his father was postmaster in a lovely little village in the country, and that he got a prize at the school and was sent to a really good one, and that he got some prizes there, and his men came up to London and went to St. Paul's? He was awfully interesting. I think he forgot all about me after the first few minutes, and he sat there, leaning on his stick, his hat pulled down over his eyes, and talked and talked. I don't think I ever heard him talk so much in all my life. He told me about leaving school and going to Scarborough as tutor to two boys there. He was sent away for some reason. It must have been funny, because he laughed as he told it, and then he came to London, and worked in a colour shop—a French place in St. James's Street. He was only nineteen then, and that is when he learnt French. The shop is still there, he said. Some day I'm going to see it; and of course then he began to paint, and he had a room in a garret over the shop, just like in a book, and he was engaged to the daughter of the shopkeeper, her name was Julienne, and then, when he was twenty-three (it was really dreadful, but he doesn't seem a bit ashamed of it), he ran away because he didn't want to marry her. He said her hands were always cold, and of course that is unpleasant.

"Then he went to Paris. I wish I had been alive then, and in Paris, it must have been such fun. He sold a lot of the pictures though they weren't very good, and that was when he knew Bettany; I asked him.

"Well, he was restoring some pictures that some old English lady had bought, and she brought him back to London for the winter. When he got this far he stopped, and I thought he was never going to speak again—you know his way—and so I said, 'And was that when you met—Her?'

"Do you know, it never struck me before—that father

must have been good-looking when he was young ; one never does think that about an old gentleman."

(Oh rage, oh despair ! at the date of that letter Pye cannot have been a day over forty-six or forty-seven !)

" And I asked him questions and he didn't hear me, so then I thought of something to wake him up, and I shouted in his ear, ' And that was when you fell in love.' It was awfully successful ; he nearly fell off the bench ; and it *was*, Mr Quest. I asked him what she was like, and he began telling me, racing along so fast I could hardly understand him. She was perfectly beautiful, and she was an angel. I've always known that, of course. But she was very rich and lived in a very grand house, which somehow I had never suspected. It was wonderful hearing him—an old man like father describing ladies like that—also he said splendid things about love. Oh, dear, I wish I was grown up ! Anyhow, I don't want to marry Sir Max any more.

" It was a perfectly lovely evening, with what you call a ' glammer ' over everything. The sky was all pink, and I knew it was just half past six because the Chelsea Church clock struck just a moment ago. That is to say, father got up—I didn't—I wanted him to tell me more ; but he told me to come along, so I had to, and I said ' Go on, father, please tell me all about it. I'm quite old enough to understand now ! ' He was walking nearest the wall, which was lucky, when just at that moment IT HAPPENED. A big motor-car was coming along up the road towards us, with a lady in it. I was looking at her, thinking how dear old Mr. Glenny would like to paint her, and what a lovely hat she had on—it was black and small, with a beautiful curve to the brim, and little silk wispy feathers—not those hateful ostrich feathers, but soft things that waved in the air.

" She didn't look at us, and I had turned and was staring

after the car when I heard a little noise and looked back, and there was father, leaning against the wall gasping for breath and as white as a sheet. He looked perfectly beautiful, and I thought he was going to die. I put my arm round him and we stood still for a minute or two, and I don't suppose I would ever have known that it was the lady who had made him look like that, only he told me. He said, 'You saw that lady, Margaret? Well, that was She.' Wasn't it wonderful of him not to say *her*? Then he said to himself, as if I wasn't there at all (it was so romantic)—'Oh, my love, my love!' We walked home very slowly, and I didn't try to make him talk. Somehow, I didn't seem to want him to. It's exactly like something in a book. Just before we got home he stopped and said to me very gravely, 'Magpie dear, I don't wish you ever to mention that lady to me again.' I nodded. I knew he couldn't bear it, so I said 'All right, father, I won't. But wasn't it wonderful that she should have come by just when you were telling me about her?' He laughed, such a queer little laugh, Mr. Quest, and he said, 'No, it wasn't really wonderful, at least, it's just a part of herself to be wonderful in that way. It was as if my talking about her had conjured her up.' I'm sorry to say that he's got some of that stuff to-day, and he's in bed now, asleep. He went down to Mile End Road after supper last night, to see that friend I told you about. He's been pretty bad. I don't blame him a bit, though, do you? Oh, I do wish you were here.

"I told Madame Aimée about it, and she cried. She's such a dear, and so sympathetic. I do wish I could find out who my mother is, but I can never ask father again, because I promised, and besides, he wouldn't tell me if I did. Perhaps I'll see her with you some time, and you'll know her.

"Oh, I do wish I could go and see her and talk to her,

but I suppose she'd be ashamed of me now. I don't suppose her father and mother even know she ever had me. I've read stories like that. Anyhow, I'd rather be her child and never see her again, than be just some ordinary mother's daughter ; most mothers are so unattractive.

" Thank you very much for the lace and the pictures. I love them.

" Do come back soon. Please give my love to Mr. Treffry and keep some for yourself.

" Yours sincerely,

" MAG."

I also had a letter from Madame Aimée, written in French, and in some turmoil of spirit, as I could see. She was distressed and upset by Mag's beautiful adventure. She feared it would spoil the child by putting ideas into her head, and she resented, in a bourgeois fashion, that somehow or other surprised me, coming from her, the child's assumption that she was the result of a secret *liaison* between the popular young genius of twenty years before and some great lady.

" I'm doing my best for the child," the good woman went on, " and she's improving every day. She reads from morning till night, and I think you will be pleased with the list of books she has gone through. Lord Lossell has been very kind. He sent her several of the books on your list that she couldn't get at the library, and asked her to lunch, but for some reason Mr. Pye wouldn't let her go. I think it is wise of him. This romantic idea of her mother needs no encouraging by association with people so much above her in station.

" I told her this, and she complained about her father's decision, and I am sorry to say that she showed signs of considering herself, as her mother's child, of very good birth. However, when she's a little older this will doubt-

less straighten out all right. She brought Mr. Glenny to see me the other day, and he tells me he is very much pleased with her work. She has a great sense of colour, it seems, and is improving rapidly.

"I've bought the clothes for which you left me the money, and she looks very nice in her new coat and skirt. She is much slimmer, and most anxious to put her hair up. I have assured her that you will wish to find it down when you get back, so she's waiting."

There was nothing else of interest in the letter, and I didn't hear any more about the mysterious mother until I got back.

This event didn't take place until October. For various reasons we lengthened our stay in the delectable island until our work was completed up to date. I loved my year out there. I shall never forget it, although my memory of Colombo is not flattering. I like a Turkish bath as well as anybody, but I like it in a Turkish Bath Establishment, when I've only one garment on. A continual state of dripping wetness doesn't appeal to me, and I was thoroughly glad that my dear old chief liked the hills.

Treffry was, of course, a great social success, and before we had been six weeks in the island there was a widespread feeling that no gathering of any kind was complete without him, so we went to balls, and dinners, and race-meetings, and gymkhanas, and picnics, with an assiduity that probably had more to do with the lengthening of our stay than the dear old boy would ever admit.

The book had to be done, and as we frivelled quite half of our time, it followed that we were obliged to add another half to it.

I was sorry to leave, but I was very glad to go home, and when we reached London about six o'clock on a peculiarly virulent and wet evening early in November, I could have

danced for joy to see the old mud, and the blessed fog, and the faithful, endless rain.

"The same old damp," Treffry observed, as we bounded along in an ancient and springless taxi. "Damnable climate!"

But I felt that for my part no amount of dampness from without could compare with the horror of the self-generated moisture that exudes from every pore of one's body in the lowlands of Ceylon.

I was perfectly delighted to be back in London.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE first person I saw chanced to be Cohen. Him I met next morning in King's Bench Walk on his way to his solicitors. I had seen so many new faces, and made so many new acquaintances that I was conscious of a vague surprise at finding Cohen not all changed during my absence.

He was the same—wistful and exquisite as ever—and he was carrying the stick he had shown Edith and me two years before in St. James' Park. He was still pleased with his stick, I saw, and as I looked at it I felt an uneasy stirring in my mind. Poor Edith! if I possibly could I would spare her this year—at least I would try.

"You look very well, Quest. I was much interested to hear about you from Mag on one or two occasions. You seem to have had a very good time."

I expatiated on the raptures of island life, and asked for news of my various friends.

The little man laughed. "Things are pretty much the same. Lossell has had lumbago and has been to Aix-les-Bains; his temper had not improved by pain. Miss Lossell was in Devonshire the greater part of the summer with some relations, I believe."

"How's Pye?"

"Pye is doing very well. He had a pretty bad setback in June, and I gathered from some insinuations of Mag's, who was extremely mysterious in the matter, that there was a lacuna in the case. Mag has developed, you will be amused to hear," he went on, skipping with some nimbleness over a puddle, as I accompanied him on his way, "a great taste for Society news. Twice she has insisted on my taking her to church parade, and she reads the *Morning Post* with fervour."

"That's very odd," I burst out; "you never can tell with these growing girls. That looks snobbish, and our Magpie was never a snob."

Cohen turned his soft eyes full on me, and there was in them an ironical little gleam. "You're wrong," he said, "that's exactly what she is."

"Mag—a snob!"

He nodded. "Undoubtedly. Possibly it is a phase, and will pass, but for the moment her one idea seems to be to get within at least her eyeshot of the very fashionable."

I ought to have known at once what it meant, but I didn't, and in answer to a further question, he went on to tell me that he had formed the habit of taking the child to the theatre or opera once a fortnight or so, and that he had observed on these occasions that the play didn't interest her nearly so much as the people in the boxes and the stalls. "At first I thought it was only her childish curiosity about human nature intensifying as she grew up. But it isn't," he added with a little laugh, in which I detected a certain ruefulness, "for human nature in the pit or the gallery has no charm for her whatever." He laughed and twisted his eyeglass string round his finger.

"You needn't worry about one thing, though, my poor friend," he resumed, with gentle amusement at my horror. "It's no nonsense about men, as I at first thought it might be. It's only the women she looks at."

Then I remembered, and in my relief burst into a loud laugh.

"Oh, is that all?" I exclaimed. "Then it's pretty harmless, isn't it?"

"My dear friend, that's what I've been telling you. It's perfectly harmless, exteriorly. On the other hand, it is to be doubted whether even a technically innocent snobbism of the kind can fail to prove deteriorating in the long run."

I couldn't bear him to think ill of poor Mag, even in his gentle way, so I explained that the reason for her peculiarity was that she had no idea who her mother was, and was probably trying to find some fairy princess about whom to dream in that relationship.

The little man's relief was evident. "I'm glad," he said frankly; "I enjoy taking the child out—I am fond of her. She's very intelligent, too, and she's developing early. Has she told you, by the way, about her picture?"

She hadn't, and I said so.

"Then perhaps," he said, as we shook hands, "I'd better not tell you. She probably means it for a surprise."

I went my way reflectively, and then for some reason I didn't attempt to analyse, I decided that before I saw Mag I would pay a secret visit to Madame Aimée. This I did that very afternoon, for Edith was not yet back in town. I was rather glad she wasn't, for I did so want to spare her, if I could, my annual infliction.

I had, of course, come back the richer for my long sojourn as my chief's guest, so I took a taxi, and stopping at a fruit shop, bought several baskets of good things for the poor lady I was going to see. I also found, to my intense joy, two or three sprays of forced delphiniums (they were at that season of the year rather more expensive than orchids), but being that most reckless of all things, a temporary plutocrat, I bought them and went gaily splashing

down the Mall, through a pleasant, chilly, windless afternoon.

I found Madame Aimée busy, as usual, but in a pleasanter manner than I had often seen her occupied. She was embroidering a linen collar, punching little holes through it with a delightful ivory stick, and then sewing them up again in a charming way.

She was very glad to see me, and proved an admirable listener as I told my manifold and exciting adventures in the East. It was delightful anyway to be with someone who really liked to listen to my descriptions, for naturally, in Ceylon itself, nobody wanted to hear my opinions about Ceylon. It was a blighting experience I had on the boat coming back to find that nearly everybody had been, not once, but many times, to that island, and that most of them regarded it with a mild ennui, such as I might feel about Brighton.

So I talked my fill for about an hour. She was delighted with the monkeys that I had actually seen with my own eyes swinging in the trees, and a cobra that had been found in Mr. Treffry's bath at Anaradjapura (I haven't the slightest idea how this is spelt) thrilled her with further horror; in fact if I'd been the cobra myself her reception of my story could not have been more satisfactory.

At teatime I made coffee and toast. I also heated the toast plates and the milk, and spread several slices of bread and butter with Bar-le-Duc, which I had brought her from Fortnam and Mason's. We had an excellent party, and during it she told me all about Mag and her father.

"Mag has grown," she began, "and in every way. She's taller and she looks older."

"She ought to," I observed. "She'll be sixteen next month, poor old lady. Is she thinner?"

"Yes, she's most anxious to put her hair up." For a moment we were deliberating gravely on this important

point, and then came to the conclusion that the hair might be allowed to be tied on its owner's neck with a neat bow.

"I won't tell you about the picture," she said, "because it's to be a surprise."

"And what about that story of her mother?"

Madame Aimée, who, unlike Max Cohen, had grown perceptibly older during my absence, smiled sadly.

"Ah, Monsieur, that was a misfortune, that talk with her father and—the rest."

I told her what Cohen had said. To my relief she by no means shared his fears. Her own fears were quite different.

"She's not a snob," she answered quietly, "she's too clever to be that. The trouble is that she now has a fixed idea of finding, and—and of knowing, her mother."

"How can she?" I objected practically. "Her mother doesn't want her; that much is quite evident."

Madame Aimée's emotional eyes filled with tears. She said, "How do you know?" She said it with a little odd fierceness. "How can you tell?"

"It seems pretty obvious to me that the mother of a sixteen-year-old child's never having made the slightest effort to see her offspring might be safely considered to prove her to have no wish to acknowledge that young person."

My poor friend still looked deprecatingly at me. "It's never safe to judge, Monsieur; she may have suffered, *cette pauvre mère*."

I nodded. "Anything is possible," I returned readily, "but I don't think it at all probable. We must try to get this nonsense out of the child's head."

"Ah, yes, that of course we must do, if we can. She talks very little of it, but I can see that it's never absent from her mind."

"I shall tell her," I said suddenly, "that's its perfect nonsense her wasting a thought on her mother. She must

be—to be very charitable—an utterly selfish, inhuman woman.”

This Madame Aimée could not have, and continued her plea for the unknown lady.

“ There are so many reasons she might have of which you and I know nothing, Monsieur. Believe me, no woman would willingly give up her child.”

A wild vision of the Foundling Hospital flashed across my mind, but I didn't voice it. After all, this little, high-up room had a cloistral quality, and Madame Aimée a nun-like one, that heaven knows I'd no wish to violate. I could see that she was not happy about Mag, and I loved the loyalty that forbade her admitting it. However, I determined, as I said good-bye to her, to see Miss Magpie at once, and put the fear of God into her ; she was in a way, mine, and I would have no maundering sentimentality about beautiful, unknown mothers spoiling my plans for her.

CHAPTER XXX

I SEE a milestone before me—a milestone, that is to say in Mag's life—but we have not yet quite come to it, and, before we do, there is a little stretch of upward, rather heavy road to be traversed. The first step on that *étape* was my interview with Mag the next day. She met me and Mr. Treffry (according to a plan evolved by me one evening in the Suez Canal on our homeward way), for dinner at a restaurant he loved in Soho.

I was the first to arrive ; I don't remember why (I hate arriving in a restaurant before my host), and sat at the little table in the upstairs room, reading the *Globe* and sipping a French vermouth.

"The Golden Peacock" is an odd little place, and, true to the instinct of the real restaurant lover, I have not the slightest intention of telling where it is. Added to its charms of cleanliness, cheapness and excellent cuisine, it possesses that very alluring one of remoteness. Not cheek-by-jowl with the pavement does it stand, to lure the bank clerk and the country cousin with imitation lace curtains and a burly commissioner. To reach it one must go up a narrow lane and across a queer old court, whose cobblestones are as round and bullet-headed as any, even in

Paris. One goes up a narrow stair, across a passage into the small, very clean room, of which the whole restaurant, barring the kitchen, consists.

Madame Picrate is the proprietress, and, faithful to type, Madame Picrate has built for herself, near the door, a white and shiny altar with glass windows, at which, while she manages the waiters, clients, and cooks, she is not averse from a little discreet incense. When she saw me she bowed, and I went over and exchanged compliments with her. She was delightfully interested in Ceylon, and I was glad to hear that there was every prospect of an excellent meal that evening.

Strictly table d'hôte "le Paon d'Or;" no juggling here with a confusing and inaccurate list of viands; when you came to the "Golden Peacock" you took what there was, or you went away empty.

Madame Picrate, a large, high-bosomed lady in black satin, was rejoiced to hear that Monsieur Treffry had recovered himself and returned to his old London.

She was sorry to hear that the *mer* had been *mauvaise*, but resigned to the fact that it often was. The gentlemen in the corner, she told me, without lowering her voice, and yet becoming perfectly inaudible to anyone but me, was a Cabinet Minister—no, she knew nothing about the lady—and old Monsieur Filon, he who always sat in the corner, and was so lavish with toothpicks, had gone. *Non, non*, he hadn't left the country; it was simply that he was dead.

Thus I gathered scraps of news, and thus Mag and my dear old man found me when, having met in the courtyard, they came upstairs together. They told me, as we ate our *hors d'œuvre*, that they had been horrified to find me flirting with the *patronne*, that I had disturbed Treffry's ideal of me, and that Mag was grieved at my lack of taste,

Madame Picrate being as old as the devil's grandmother, and resembling the Crystal Palace in contours.

I let them talk, for I was hungry, and, moreover, I was busy observing Mag.

The Magpie was in great feather that night. It wore a frock of some soft hunter's green material—*not* flannel—and round its neck and wrists were delightful ornaments of white linen. After a careful examination of her, I pounced.

"Magpie," I said to her severely, "you're tight-laced."

She protested with indignation, swore she wasn't, and then she said she didn't know what I meant, and when I made her stand up, her young form outlined against the pale wallpaper, I thought that perhaps she was right. The fact remained that, for the first time since I had known her, she indisputably possessed a waist.

"That belt," I observed, "must hurt."

"It doesn't," she said. Then she drew in her breath and tucked one of her hands between her person and the strap of shiny leather. I begged her pardon on the spot, but Treffry laughed.

"There never lived a woman," he informed me, "no matter in what condition of atrophy her internals might be through pressure, who could not get her hand inside her belt."

Mag chuckled. "It *is* pretty tight," she said. "I might as well let it out now, as after dinner." She slackened the thing, and it slid forward two holes. She drew a breath of relief. "Enid Arthur," she explained, "is only nineteen—inches, I mean—so I just thought I'd see what I could do." Then she sat down and we went on with dinner. She was certainly much slimmer, and she had changed in the subtle, unexplainable way of girls of her age. Her very hair looked different, somehow, softer and more

flexible, and there was a remarkable air of coquetry about the black silk bow that tied it in a lump on the nape of her neck.

"You look very nice," I said. "I like your hair that way."

She tossed her head. "Do you? I don't. Enid wears hers in a lovely bun, fastened with big pins; it's much nicer."

It transpired that Enid was a fellow-student of hers at Glenly's, and that the two were great friends. I was longing to put the child to some test as to her mental attitude about her mother, but I felt that it was hardly fair before Treffry, to whom I had never mentioned the matter. However, towards the end of the meal the situation I longed for presented itself unsought.

I had asked her how her father was, and she told me he was quite well and very busy. Then she added: "I told you, didn't I, that he had been pretty bad in July?"

"No, I never heard that. Was it—I mean——"

She nodded, her face clouded. "Yes, I wrote you all about it, Mr. Quest, some time in August, after he was better."

Then I explained that her letter must have been lost while we were travelling about making our good-bye visits.

"He has never been quite the same," she went on, regarding her just-arrived ice with an absent stare that struck me as very indicative. "He's never been the same since the day we saw—since the day on the Embankment."

"What day on the Embankment?" put in Mr. Treffry, in perfect innocence, for he never asked questions.

To my surprise Mag was indignant that I had not told him, and she put my reticence down to indifference, rather than to loyalty.

" I'll tell you, Mr. Treffry," she said, regarding me almost with scorn. Then she told him.

The story was, in its structure, the same as that she had written to me, but I observed with amused pain that she had developed and adorned it, no doubt unconsciously, until it was almost unrecognizable.

The old man looked at me, raising his eyebrows. " This is very extraordinary, Victor," he said. Mag leaned over the table and laid her brown hand on his blue-veined old white one.

" Isn't it ? " she breathed. " Isn't it ? Oh, Mr. Treffry, if only I could find out who she is ! "

He shook his head slowly. " It sounds to me as if you must have made a mistake, my dear——"

" I've not make a mistake," she declared obstinately. " I told you what he said."

There was a little pause, and then the man, taking her hand in his, patted it gently. " If you are right about it," he declared, " I am very sorry. A mother who gives up her child and never tries to find it hardly deserves the name, does she ? "

Mag took a long breath and her mouth sank in deeply at the corners.

" That's just what Madame Aimée says. She, of course, couldn't know better—a working woman like her ; but I *did* think, Mr. Treffry, that *you'd* understand."

She was angry, and there was a grown-upness in her anger that I'd never seen before. It silenced me, but had no effect on the old man.

" I hope," he said, " that you aren't building any Spanish castles about this, Margaret, my dear."

She drew her hand quietly out of his.

" Not castles," she returned slowly. " But every girl has a right to a mother. I'm sure that some day I shall

find her, and when I do——” Suddenly her face quivered, the tears welled into her eyes without falling. “It’s not a castle I’m building,” she added, in a broken, pathetic, grown-up little voice, “it’s just a little cottage, Mr. Treffry.”

CHAPTER XXXI

AND now here's our milestone ; a tall, thin, flexible-looking youth, with dark reddish hair, humorous thick eyebrows, and the most beautiful teeth I have ever seen—Mr. Angus Forbes, of Scotland ; aged nineteen and two months, as he was at great pains to inform me ; a nephew of our wind-blown old painter, Mr. Glenny—Mag's first beau. I use this old-fashioned noun purposely, because it would be as false to call him Mag's first admirer, as it would be to call him Mag's first lover. It is a fault of the English language that we have no exact equivalents for *amoureux* and *amant* and *prétendant*.

Young Angus, as he was called in contradistinction to his great-uncle, happened along in the following January. There was something extremely attractive about him ; perhaps it was the way in which all his extremities ended in points—his hands were pointed, his feet were pointed, his delightful nose, even his ears, under their thatch of deep auburn hair, were fawn-like.

Mag brought him to my chambers one morning just before lunch.

" This," she said, as she pranced up to kiss me, " is Angus Forbes." Her information left me perfectly cold, for I

hadn't the slightest idea who Angus Forbes might be. But I liked the youth, so I took them out to lunch, and a very pleasant time we had. Half-way through the meal, my mental darkness was illumined by a remark of Miss Pye.

"I call him," she said, as she devoured watercress generously sprinkled with salt, "Yangus—young Angus, you see? Or young—Angus."

He beamed at her, and I was almost certain I caught a glimpse of his wisdom teeth as he did so.

"He's a great deal older than you, Mag," I suggested.

He gave a sudden hooting laugh, that I'm sure would, but a few months before, have ended in a squeak.

"Of course he's older than I am," she answered, with dignity, "but he's not older than his uncle, is he?"

"Why should a young man be older than his uncle?" I inquired, seriously at a loss for her meaning.

She burst out laughing. "Didn't I tell you he was Mr. Glenny's nephew?"

"Great-nephew," supplemented the youth. "My old grannie is his sister."

So then I understood, and Yangus he remained to the lot of us.

As winter wore on, I grew to love the boy—as much, that is to say, as it's human to love a young man who insists on playing the flute. He was a cheerful, honest, clean-minded youth, whose ignorance of, and adoration for, London were a constant delight to me.

It was during this winter that I finally got over even hoping for briefs, and realized that I should never have more to do with the law than is implied by living there in its sanctuary, and that henceforth all my time so long as I lived might be given to my friends, and of all my friends, London is, I think, the dearest.

So every Thursday Yangus would lunch with me, and

we would spend the whole day in wandering about in the dear old town. He was reading like mad, at the time, everything he could lay his hand on. He adored Dr. Johnson ; he worshipped Charles Lamb ; Garrick was to him an angel ; Jane Austen a perfect dear ; " Shakespeare, sir, too mighty for words ; " while as to Fielding, no words could contain his appreciation of that master. He had for Kipling a real distaste which, though I by no means share it, yet seemed to me, simply because it was a sincere and violent departure from the usual, a rather hopeful sign. Few young men, I thought, would dare admit such a distaste.

He was a real find to me, this merry, charming young fellow, and I was sorry to learn quite casually, for he never talked of his own affairs, that he was going out to a tea-planter in India in the autumn.

It appeared that he hated the country in the whole-hearted way of many village-born folk, and he would have been perfectly happy to spend the rest of his life in chambers, pottering about—as he innocently expressed it—as I did. However, that was not to be.

I have forgotten to say that Mag's picture, about which I was told on my return, was a very great success indeed. It was a portrait of Glenny himself, and an extraordinarily clever thing. She had caught his blown about, fleeting air in an amazing way, and Cohen was sure, and events proved him to be right, that it would find a place on or near the Line at the Academy. It was very wonderful, for the child was not sixteen when it was finished.

Old Glenny was beside himself with joy ; even Lossell, back from his cure on the continent, was thoroughly sympathetic about it.

One day Yangus and I went to Thurloe Square to have a look at this picture's successor. It was in February, and a very mild, melting, enervating day. To our surprise

nobody answered our ring at the studio door, and then we pounded ; still no one answered, except an irritated lady in a tea-gown, from the door opposite, who came to ask if we were trying to batter the place down. Yangus grinned at her and she fled. Then he said brilliantly, " I suppose they're out."

However, he had a key of his own, and a few minutes later we sat in the untidy room, discussing the eventuality that had taken master and pupil away at such an odd hour.

There were some dozens of canvases tilted with their faces to the walls ; there were tables covered with colours, and messy-looking bottles, and sheaves of brushes lay about everywhere ; so did dust. The old painter, his nephew informed me, never allowed anyone to set foot in the room except himself and his pupils.

" He becomes perfectly hysterical at the mention of a charwoman," he explained. " Mag tidies up for him once in a while ; but, my word, just look at it ! "

For my part, I couldn't have lived a day in the place the desolating confusion of it would have driven me mad. Presently the boy began poking round, looking at the canvases.

" That big one on the frame is Mag's," he explained.

" It can't be," I said, " that's drawn by a man."

" It's drawn by Mag, sir. She was working at it yesterday while I was here."

I looked at it in amazement. It was merely the sketch of a far more ambitious picture than anything the child had done as yet.

" What's that horrid-looking thing in the foreground ? " I asked.

Yangus laughed cheerfully.

" Oh, yes, that's *it*—the idiot, you know."

" The idiot ? "

"Yes, that's what the picture is—the 'Village Idiot.' Horrid subject, isn't it? She loves it—she would, you know."

I related to him the history of the "Crime Series" of two years before, and he was delighted.

"She's an odd girl," he ruminated, "seems to like ghastly things. By the way, she's awfully fond of you, sir."

He spoke in all innocence, and my ironical thanks distressed him so that I feared the remorseful blood would burst through his very skin. We were still laughing when there came a knock at the door, and Yangus, much relieved by the interruption, crossed the room in his nice, springy, early-morning kind of way.

"Oh, it's you, sir," I heard him say, and then I turned. There stood Pye, with another man. When he saw me, he hesitated.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Quest?" he said. "I—I just stopped to see if my daughter was here. She isn't, is she?"

I explained that we thought Mag and Glenny could not be very long now, and asked them to come in. Again he hesitated in a curious way, and turned and spoke to his companion, whom, as he stood in the comparative darkness of the unlighted passage, I could hardly see.

"Do you mind waiting a few minutes?"

The other man shook his head. "I'd rather not," he said in a very low voice, drawing still further from the door. "I told you, Pye, that I wouldn't go in."

Yangus, however, insisted, delighted to play the host, as young men of his age usually are.

"Oh, do come and wait," he urged, "my uncle won't be long, I'm sure," and I, impelled by some vague feeling that I hardly know how to describe, added my persuasion to his. The two men entered, Yangus closed the door

and we all sat down. It was dusk by this time, almost dark in the shadow-filled room. Pye and his friend sat with their backs to the window, which was now only an oblong patch of lead colour; and Yangus had straddled a chair on the little platform, where the models sat. Pye and I made a few remarks to each other, and then I said to the stranger:

"Are you a painter, too, or are you an outsider, like me?"

The man answered in a very low, hesitating voice, that he had once painted a little, years ago, but had long since given it up. From what I could see of him he was a small, slightly over middle-aged man, with a rather round face and a close pepper-and-salt beard. He was much Pye's build, but Pye seemed to have gained in height and in youth since he had improved in health.

"You've not," Mag's father burst out suddenly, "anything to drink here, Forbes? My friend has come all the way from the Mile End Road on a bus, and it's been raining, and he's cold."

The stranger stirred furtively in his seat, but said nothing, and when the whisky and soda was produced accepted his glass simply, with a bow.

The Mile End Road—so he had come from there! I felt again the strange, elusive sensation of being close to the heels of the ghost that had fled from me so long—the ghost of William Bettany, and suddenly I determined to find out.

"Did you ever," I asked the stranger, leaning forward in my chair so that he couldn't doubt that my question was to him, "meet the painter Bettany?"

What happened was so sudden that it is hard to describe. There was a crash of glass, and his whisky and soda was pouring over the unswept floor. Yangus sprang to the

light, but before he could turn it on the door opened and closed, and the stranger was the other side of it.

"Good gracious!" I ejaculated, "what on earth's the matter? Why did he do that?"

Pye looked at me inimically. "Why did you ask him if he knew Bettany?" he returned, in an angry voice.

"Because I wanted to know. It struck me that he, being an old friend of yours, might have some news."

Pye sneered.

"Oh, did it? Perhaps you thought he was Bettany himself?"

I was nettled by his tone, and not unwilling to show it. "The idea did occur to me," I said. "I've always felt that there's some mystery about you and Bettany, and I still think so."

He passed his hand over his forehead as if he was suddenly tired, even exhausted.

"You must forgive me, Quest," he said quietly, "my nerves are none of the best, and I'm sorry to have offended you." He meant it, too, so I accepted his apology with the frankness with which it was offered, and for a moment we were all silent. Then Pye rose and held out his hand.

"I'll not wait any longer now," he said. "I shall have to find Davis, he'll be waiting for me." He paused, and then, after a moment, went on, Yangus watching us, and thoroughly enjoying the odd little scene.

"You've been so kind to my poor Mag, and your friends, as well as you, have been so good even to me, that, believe me, if I could tell you anything about Bettany I would do so, but I can't, Quest, I can't. It's quite true that I know something about him that you don't know, but please take my word for it, it would only give pain to . . . to everybody concerned, if I told you."

"I see," I returned, "and I won't urge you any more,

but will you tell me just one thing? Is the poor fellow alive?"

Pye looked up at me, and shook his head with a rueful little smile.

"Yes," he said, "I'll tell you that much—he's still alive, poor fellow."

CHAPTER XXXII

I HAD never told Edith about my talk with Pye, for I felt that such news as he had given me would only distress her. It was quite plain to me that poor Bettany had pretty well gone under, to be pitied, as he obviously was, by Mag's father.

I find, on looking at my diary and notes, that very little of any interest, so far as the Blantyre Buildings folk are concerned, happened during that spring.

Mag's picture, as I have said, was very well hung, and she, of course, was much written about in the papers, to her immense joy and delight. Her photograph appeared in an illustrated breakfast-table mentor, but as it was so bad as to be utterly unrecognizable, I didn't mind at all. In fact, I rather hailed her momentary celebrity, as a possible means of deflecting her thoughts from her absurd obsession about her mother. This obsession worried Madame Aimée and me very much. It was disconcerting to find the child spending all her pennies on illustrated weeklies and papers, in which appeared so-called likenesses of the great, the beautiful, and the conspicuous and I had no patience, either, with the new line of talk . . . which she occasionally treated me. She had, it appeared, a great idea of being acknowledged by her mother, because of her success at painting.

"Suppose," she suggested to me, "suppose she went to the Academy, and saw my picture, and looked it up in the catalogue, and then turned round and saw me standing there—I do look like father, you know, since he shaved off his beard, and she'd recognize me, of course, and then —"

"Mag, don't be a goose," I jeered; "if your mother had wanted you she'd have found you before now, believe me."

She set her pretty mouth (for it *was* pretty, though large) in the way to which I was becoming familiar, and said no more; but a few days later, when I found her having tea in Park Place, I observed that she had a kind of blue garter round her hair.

"What's that thing on your head?" I asked.

"Everybody wears them," she returned calmly, "don't they, Mr. Treffry?" and then I perceived after a moment's study that her abundant locks were arranged in the carefully simulated disorder and indifference germane to the heads of certain very-much-in-the-public eye young damsels of title.

"Oho! you're trying to look like Lady Mildred Blood!" I sneered. "What do they think of it in the Blantyre Buildings?"

"Quest, Quest," protested dear old Treffry gently. "My good fellow, drink your tea and don't be so fierce."

Mag regarded me with a stony eye of much hauteur.

"And why shouldn't I wear my hair like Lady Mildred?" she returned.

Treffry winked at me and changed the subject, but I groaned in spirit to think that my Magpie, my own little Pimlico Magpie, was being spoilt in this particularly disgusting way.

In the middle of the night an illuminating idea came to me. I'd take her to see Edith, and make her give the child

a good talking to. Edith having been so much away the first two years of my acquaintance with Mag, and I having been in Ceylon the whole of the third year, it was hardly strange that the two had never met, but it struck me now with great force that it was a misfortune. Edith would do her no end of good, and I determined, turning over my pillow with a thump, that she should. I telephoned to Grosvenor Place the next morning, and Pruffles, after the usual interval, assured me that Miss Lossell would be delighted.

"Will you bring the young lady to tea, sir," he said, "as there'll be people here for lunch."

"All right, Pruffles," I said, "we'll be there about five. She's quite grown up by now, you know, so she won't——"

I heard Pruffles give a little embarrassed grunt at his end of the line.

"Wonderful clever—ahem, young lady—she's grown up to be, sir," he said. "I heard his lordship and Sir Max Cohen talking about it the other day——"

The Magpie was much pleased at being told that she was to meet Miss Lossell, although she wished to know why Lord Lossell's daughter was only "Miss." "It would be nicer," she said, "to be Lady Edith."

"Oh, shut up, Mag; I don't believe your mother was a lady. I believe your father only imagined it that day on the Embankment. You're growing up to be the most egregious little snob, and that looks rather more as if your mother had been a barmaid, or somethirg of that kind."

It was a horrible thing to say, but I said it deliberately. I tried to hurt her, but I failed. Proudly superior to my middle-class jeer, she disregarded the remark. I knew that she was thinking that I was not nearly so nice as I used to be. I lunched with Cohen at one of his clubs that day.

It is a nice club, exclusive, and not too exclusive, silent enough, and not too silent, mixed enough without being too mixed. They also have the best port in London. The little man was going out of town early in the afternoon, so we what he called "breakfasted" at a quarter to one. We had an excellent meal, and towards its close I confided to him my motherly qualms about Miss Pye.

"She's perfectly detestable," I moaned. "Little brute, what am I to do?"

"Has she any ground for thinking that her mother was a lady?" he returned. "I mean beyond the fact that the father, poor fellow, is certainly a gentleman."

And then, because I was really puzzled and distressed, and felt myself sincerely in need of counsel, I told him about the meeting on the Embankment. He sipped his port thoughtfully, a dreamy smile on his kind little face.

"You English are a wonderful people," he murmured, "so romantic—so romantic——"

It had never occurred to me before that we deserved this characterization, but he explained it to me gently and lucidly, and presently I began to feel that he was right.

"A young child," he began, "brings home your washing, because your laundress is a friend of hers. You like the child, and set to work to educate her. The father, a broken-down painter, turns out to be, or to have been, a gentleman. There is no mother anywhere about, but there are no signs of her being dead, and presently she appears on the Embankment in a beautiful motor-car and an expensive black hat. But it's beautiful, my dear Quest, beautiful!"

"It's not beautiful, the way it's affecting Mag," I growled; "it's spoiling her, Cohen. She's detestable, she's losing all sense of proportion."

For a moment he was silent, and then he said with that

smile of his which, modest, almost deprecating as it is, is so full of a higher kind of wisdom :

" Listen, Quest, it's not all ignoble snobbishness—remember where she was born ; how she was brought up ; remember that her friends were your washerwoman and Lossell's butler, and a French seamstress. This story is a fairy story to her, and in dreaming over it she is doing no more than Cinderella did. I don't believe," he added, " from what I know of the child, that it is the money or the possible title that so enthralis her."

" What is it, then ? "

" I think," the Frankfurt banker answered thoughtfully, " that it is largely the beauty of the lady in the car, and the wonder to a motherless child of having a beautiful mother."

" Delightful mother, indeed," I returned, " to have deserted her for all these years."

" Ah, yes, that's true, but you must remember that Mag has never missed her mother. She has never seen other girls with mothers ; she knows nothing of mothers as they ought to be and sometimes are. I'm sorry it happened, because, of course, the woman, whoever she is, can't be the right kind, but there's no use in trying to persuade the child of that. She will, I think, no matter how much you fume about it, go on dreaming about this fairy mother until"—he paused—" until the fairy prince comes along."

We separated shortly after this, Cohen going to his train, and I making my way gradually to Pimlico. I had been too ungracious to admit it, but I felt very much the better, even if not wholly convinced, by my talk with Cohen, and I determined to impart his wisdom to Madame Aimée.

This I did, sitting with her for over an hour before I was due at the flat below, and I think something of the

little Jewish gentleman's optician had extended to Madame Aimée before I left her.

"Of course it's true," I impressed on her, "that Mag doesn't know any mothers except Mrs. Brankles." Madame Aimée looked swiftly up at me, and there was pain in her face. "She ought to know," I hastened to add, "what a real mother is like, for that is what you, dear Madame Aimée, have been to her."

She dropped her sewing and clasped her hands over it.

"You're kind to say that, Monsieur, I—I've tried——"

She could get no further, and I was very sorry for her. Her exaggerated sensibility, her almost morbid love for Mag, had increased of late, I saw, as if, poor soul, lying there helpless on her couch, she visualized the great need that Mag must have for her care—a greater need, of course, than the child had in reality had.

"It is bitter," she said, "to have to lie here; never to go anywhere with her; never to see the things she sees, or hear the things she hears. Sometimes I feel that I can bear it no longer."

As usual when she became too emotional, I fled to the tiny kitchen and made coffee for her. When I came back, she was, as I had known she would be, sewing quietly.

"You're very good to me," she said, the odd, sweet break in her voice.

"I wish I could make you understand," I returned, moving a little table close to her side, "that the very fact of your not being able to go about and to see and hear things that the rest of us see and hear, gives you and your room a kind of—I don't know how to say it—a kind of feeling, or atmosphere—something quite apart from the rest of the world, and something, at least for me, unspeakably soothing and comforting."

It was an awkward thing to have to say, and I was desperately afraid of rousing the poor woman's too highly-

strung susceptibilities, but it was true, and I struggled on through it. She was glad, I know, from the way she smiled at me, and when she had drunk the coffee she became quite gay, and insisted on making a little buttonhole for me out of a rosebud and a scrap of fern and a bit of silver paper.

Shortly afterwards I sallied forth, with an equally resplendent Mag, to Grosvenor Place.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

WE walked from Pimlico to Grosvenor Place, Mag talking vociferously the whole way. She was much excited at meeting Edith, and she was even more delighted at the prospect of again seeing the pictures. I don't know whether I have said that on two previous occasions she was to have gone for an afternoon with Lossell, and that her father had for some reason—once when he was suffering what we euphemistically called "from illness"—prevented her doing so.

Thus it happened that it was now over two years since her first and only visit to Grosvenor Place.

"I hope," I said as we approached the door, "that you won't kiss poor Pruffles this time."

She laughed. "No, poor old dear, I shall never forget his face. After all, I'd often kissed him before; he's a perfect dear when he's being Mr. Williams. What a pity," she went on, "that Miss Lossell is an old maid."

I stopped short. "Now, Magpie," I admonished, "I won't have you call her that."

She stared with the odd directness that, for all her sixteen and a half years, and her bunned hair, was still a part of her.

"Well, isn't she?"

"I'm sure you never heard Sir Max Cohen, or Mr. Treffry, call her that," I returned evasively. Because, after all, what would be the use of denying that an unmarried woman of forty-five merits the unpleasing description?

"'Course I haven't. I never said I had. It's Mr. Will—Pruffles, who told me. He told me all about her, one Sunday while you were in the East."

I hated this, but once again protestation would have been useless, so I made none.

I was very much diverted by the manner in which Pruffles and Miss Pye met. It was masterly in its aloof dignity. Miss Pye marched upstairs beside me, looking neither to the right nor the left, rather as if, in fact, having been used to Buckingham Palace and Windsor, she found Lord Lossell's mansion something of a shanty, like the girl in the story.

On the landing there's a black marble pedestal, bearing a beautiful fragment of sculpture. It is a thing the late lord brought back from Greece, where, I believe, he had seen it dug up. It is a boy's head and shoulders; a smiling, kind face with a beautiful brow, and a dimple in one cheek. The head is thrown slightly back, and the eyes look upwards, so Lord Lossell has dared to put it on a rather low pedestal—I should think about five feet high—so that one looks down at it; this has somehow given it a very charming and human aspect, and it was an old favourite of mine.

Mag stood for a moment in the late afternoon sun that poured in from the staircase window, gazing into the marble eyes. Then she gave a little laugh, and stooping over, took the youth's face in her hands and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth. It was thus that Edith Lossell first saw her.

Hearing a little sound above us, I turned and saw my beautiful dear smiling over the balustrade. I was about to speak, but for some reason she laid her finger to her

lips and withdrew without Mag having seen her, and a few minutes later we were in the drawing-room where she sat at the tea-table.

She was looking particularly beautiful that afternoon, I thought, in a delicious corn-coloured frock of some thin stuff like muslin or chiffon, and there was a happy smile on her dear face.

"I'm very glad to see you," she said as I kissed her hand, "*amigo*."

"And I, how glad I am to see you!" I had forgotten all about Mag for the moment, and then I remembered and introduced her.

"It is odd," Edith said kindly, "that we have never met before. I have heard a great deal about you. May I call you Margaret?"

To my surprise Mag burst into a harsh, loud laugh, and with a little toss of her head jerked out:

"Nobody calls me Margaret, I'm Magpie, that's all," and with that, my horrified eyes beheld her turn her back on us both and march to the farther end of the long room, where she stood with her nose about one inch from a picture.

Edith and I stared at each other. Then she leant forward and whispered to me, "Don't be angry with her, dear Victor. She's jealous of me."

I was glad to know what it was, for it must have been either that or sudden insanity, and I sat down at her bidding and rang for tea.

"There's a good picture just beyond that one, Magpie," Edith said, raising her voice, for the room is a very long one, "near the window—it's a Harpignies."

Without answering, Mag crossed to the place indicated, and Edith and I talked quietly, while Pruffles, as expressionless as an Aunt Sally, brought in tea.

As he closed the door, Mag came back to us.

"I'm sorry," she said abruptly, "and I'm ashamed to have behaved like that. Please forgive me."

"I'll forgive you if you will drink two cups of tea, and eat a lot of cake. You see my father has told me that you love chocolate cake, and this one has been made specially for you."

After this things went smoothly, the only sign of the storm being the odd pallor still in Mag's face.

For the first time I realized, as she sat there drinking her tea, that she was really very nearly grown up. Of course, I had known that she was sixteen and a half, but for some reason she had always remained to me a child, and it was odd to think that her childhood was a thing of the past as irrevocably as was my own.

After a while Lossell came in, and took Mag up to the picture gallery. When Edith and I were alone, I waited in silence for her judgment. It was some time in coming, but when it did come its kindness exceeded what I had ventured to hope since Mag's extraordinary display.

"I like her, Victor; there is something about her—I don't know what—but she's charming."

"Perfectly delightful she was, when we first came in! How like a child to behave like that just when I wanted her to be at her very best."

"You dear old thing," she answered. "I like her for it. It was rather explosively demonstrated, still, I liked it. It shows how deeply she cares for you, oh, godfather!"

I supposed it did, and said so. "But I should have preferred her affection to show itself in some other form."

"How old is she?"

"She'll be seventeen in December."

Edith was thoughtful for a moment. Then a rush of colour swept over her face and her dimple appeared in a delighted laugh.

"We'll have a party," she said, "a real party, Victor—here, and you must let me dress her for it. She's going to be very pretty, you know."

"She deserves to be put in the coal-hole," I returned, for I was very vexed still. "But have it your own way, dear."

"Yes, it shall be a party. Can she dance?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, then, she must have some lessons, and I'll get Agatha Rumney's boys and girls, and the Clansons, and Jimmy and Olive Radford. It will be a little *bal blanc, mi amigo* dear."

"You're an angel," I answered, thoroughly meaning it, "but I deserve everything you can give me, after all, don't I?"

"I suppose so, oh, modest one; but why?"

I rose abruptly. "I won't tell you. I'm going upstairs now to see the pictures." In answer to her raised eyebrows I went on hurriedly. "If I don't go, Edith, I shall spoil everything. You know—what I *didn't* do last autumn."

She rose too. "Oh, poor Victor, is it coming on again?"

Her mockery was very gentle, but, although I fully appreciated how ridiculous I was being, it annoyed me, and answering shortly that it *was* coming on, I went upstairs to Mag and Lossell.

Mag had entirely recovered her equanimity and was very happy amongst the pictures. Lossell, whose temper had been outrageous the last two or three months, so much so that I had carefully kept out of his way, was in a bland mood, and he and Miss Pye were deep in technical talk and didn't at all desire my presence. So I wandered about by myself for a while, looking at one or two of my old favourites, and then went down to the dining-room for a whisky and soda. Here I found Pruffles with his own hands

perfecting the arrangement of the dinner-table. He explained to me that the new footman was incapable "and 'ad no heye for symmetry. 'E's incapable of seein', if you'll believe me, sir, when the knives and forks isn't straight, and the middle of the table might be in Africa, for all 'e knows about it."

I drank my whisky and inquired for the Brankles family.

"I rarely see Mrs. Brankles nowadays," I explained, "since Willy is big enough to bring the washing home, and I miss her."

He regarded me gravely.

"She's doin' well, sir, thank you. You will have heard, sir, of 'is death. 'Is death certainly was a blessed release."

I had, of course, heard of the demise of Brankles, and said as much, qualifying it by the remark that I hadn't known that he had been a sufferer.

Mr. Arthur Williams held out his little tray for my glass.

"'E wasn't, sir. It was a fit 'e died of, in five minutes. When I referred to a release, sir, I meant Ethel's, my sister's."

When I went up to say good-bye to Edith, she was not in the drawing-room, nor was she in her own particular sitting-room, and presently her maid came to tell me that she was dressing for dinner. She was, it appeared, dining out.

"What are you wearing?" I called through the door.

She laughed. "Oh, I am very grand to-night. I've a new white brocade and I'm wearing the emeralds, all of them, lock, stock, and barrel."

I had an idea. I was still ridiculously uneasy about the possibility of Edith and Mag not being the friends I wanted them to be, and here seemed a chance to draw them closely together.

"I say, Edith," I urged, while Pamphlett, the maid,

regarded me benignly, "let Mag come and see you in your war-paint."

She agreed at once.

"Very well, I'll be ready in a quarter of an hour. We are going to the Russian Opera, and of course dine early."

Then she opened the door and came to me, wrapped in a dressing-gown. It was a pale rose-coloured thing, and fell about her in folds like the drapery of a statue.

"You wretch!" I said, "I must fly, or I'll do it even yet. When shall we come up?"

She laid her hand on my shoulder. "Don't you come at all," she said, "Mag and I will get on better alone."

So that is what we arranged, and I waited in his study with Lossell, and listened to a long, uninteresting wail about the faithlessness of some Parisian print-seller, who had failed to keep his promise about a valuable old engraving, until just after half-past seven, when Mag came in.

There was a bright flame of colour in both her cheeks, and her eyes were wonderful; Lossell and I both stared at her—she was almost beautiful.

She burst out into one of her old-time tirades, vivid, eloquent, almost feverish, in explanation, and appreciation of, Edith's beauty. She described that gown in a way that would have made her fortune in a ladies' paper. Even I could see it, and feel its charm, and as to the emeralds, the child's words were quite amazing.

When she paused, exhausted, Lossell suddenly, without having had until that minute the slightest idea of doing such a thing, invited her to lunch with him the next day.

"We'll go to the Savoy or the Ritz," he said, "and then you shall take me to Thurloe Square to have a look at the new picture."

Even the prospect of a magnificent meal could not detach Miss Pye's imagination from its immediate subject, and

she accepted the invitation with the most amusing, perfectly sincere, absent-mindedness and indifference.

I looked at Lossell as we parted with the cold eye of sudden suspicion. He was an old man, but—was he going to fall in love with this child, this baby, this creature who was nearly my daughter? Not if I could help it—so I determined to go to the lunch-party too.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

THE luncheon party at the Savoy took place, I remember, on the 11th of July. It was not a great success, as luncheon parties go, but I enjoyed it, because Lossell was so thoroughly annoyed at my presence, and dared not say so. I am proud to say that I had the wit to make neither an apology nor an explanation about my presence; I just came, leaving my irritated host to assume that I had stupidly imagined myself to be included in the invitation. Whether he assumed this or not, I have never really known, but it was patent to the meanest mind that I was, for the moment, unloved and unwanted by him.

Mag had a headache when she arrived, but the excellent food and the cider-cup soon cured her, and her interest in her surroundings was intense. It was one of the Savoy Grill's good days, that is to say, several interesting people were assuaging their one o'clock pangs within its walls.

There were three actors, six dreams of beauty from the realms of musical comedy, one of whom, as Mag at once pointed out to me, ate with her mouth open. There was a famous airman, and a great statesman, who, I am sorry to add, Lord Lossell's incorrigible lady guest instantly qualified as "mouldy." There was a French dancer with a short

crop of hair that looked as if it had been chopped off with an axe, and who wore a huge uncut sapphire on her left thumb, and there was a very fashionable preacher, looking like an abbot from behind the scenes. Altogether a fine collection of celebrities for the young Margaret to browse upon.

Personally, I didn't think that lobster salad and cider-cup and strawberries and cream promised well for a lady with a headache, but her young juices managed them with the greatest skill, and when finally she asked, and received, a cigarette from her attentive host, I felt I had better say nothing.

Thus far I had won the day, but Lossell scored as we went out into the courtyard, for there stood his little car, the one in which he went about town ; it was a two-seater.

" Good-bye, Quest," he said, with sudden cordiality. " I'll take Margaret to Thurloe Square, and then give her a run in Richmond Park—you'll like that, my dear ? "

Mag would, and I, defeated, ground my teeth as I went along the Strand. Of course I didn't for a moment seriously suspect Lossell of any designs on Mag's young affections, but at the same time I didn't wish him to begin paying her grown-up attentions, because I didn't feel either that the time had come for her to be grown up, or that his was the hand to open the door of young ladyhood to her.

I decided to have a talk with him on the matter, and as I pondered these things, I found suddenly that I was in Fleet Street on a fine summer afternoon, with the rest of the day on my hands, and not a ghost of a plan as to how I should spend it.

A passing bus, alluringly empty on top, decided the matter for me, and a few minutes later I was bowling along, thoroughly enjoying myself.

It was a lovely day, the wind still as it ever can be in this sea-engirdled isle, and I took off my hat and gloves,

and leaned back as comfortably as if I had been a Maharaja on his favourite elephant. There was an element of excitement about the journey, too, for was I not going to the east? Besides, it was one of those days when anything might happen at any moment. We had lingered long over our coffee, and Miss Pye's one cigarette, and presently I heard a clock strike four. It made no difference, the day was young, the evening would be long, and time that day was emphatically made only for slaves.

At length we reached in our course a great hospital, and I got down, suddenly deciding to call on the matron, an old and valued acquaintance of mine. It would be pleasant to have tea with this lady in her quiet little room, with pretty and busy nurses coming in and out.

I have never been ill enough to have a trained nurse—this is one of the pleasures that I am reserving for my declining years—and I decided, as I went up the steps and sent in my card, that I would have a young and beautiful one, a kind and clever one—I would have one from here. I had not yet decided what illness I should cultivate for the benefit of this super-She, when word was brought back to me that Miss Matthews was away for her holiday, and turning back I drifted aimlessly up the street.

Whitechapel is not a place one would choose to be stranded in on a summer afternoon, but there I was, so I wandered on, thinking a thousand things, but on the whole still in my pleasant, after-lunch mood, when I ran bang into, and nearly knocked off his pins, a little, trembling man, who, when I apologized, picked up his hat and turned on me the face of Pye's friend, Mr. Davis.

For a moment I felt extremely clever, as if it was my own doing, my own achievement, to meet this man whom I had really wished to see. Then I shook him warmly by the hand and asked him where he was going. He looked a little surprised, but at once told me. He was

going, it appeared, to a chemist's, and then back home to his rooms. I walked along beside him, although I knew he was casting about in his mind for some way to shake me off. It appeared that nobody wanted me that day, but the thought amused me, and I stuck to the poor little chap, waiting outside while he was at the chemist's.

"I have been wanting, ever since we met that day in Mr. Glenny's studio, to have a talk with you, Mr. Davis," I began.

He nodded. "I was afraid so."

I looked at him carefully in the strong sunlight. Was it possible that this poor, jumpy, shabby man could once, no matter how long ago, have painted "Cross Roads" and "The Windmill?" It annoyed me very much that I couldn't recall Bettany's face, but after all I had only seen him twice, and he had, as in those days was the fashion with painters, a beard. His eyes, I remembered, were blue, and this man's eyes were blue, though faded, and sunken, and surrounded by wrinkles.

We walked slowly through the crowd, along Mile End Road, and for about ten minutes neither of us spoke. Then we crossed Stepney Green and turned into a short thoroughfare called Telletson Street. It was a shabby street, desolate and hopeless, but not so dreadful as many I have seen, and No. 11, the house into which he led me, was one of the best it could boast. We went up two flights of stairs, and then my unwilling host opened the door and asked me to go in. It was a fairly large room, of the type known as bed-sitting-room. The bed was crumpled and untidy, and indeed it struck me that Davis looked the kind of man who would loaf on his bed in the daytime.

There were one or two photographs on the mantelpiece, and I noticed that the dressing-table set of ebony had once been good. There were two bookshelves bursting

with books of all kinds. I suddenly remembered Max Cohen's diatribe against the adjective "decayed" as applied to human beings, and it struck me that far more even than Pye this poor little man deserved the label "decayed gentleman."

"I am afraid I am a nuisance to you, Mr. Davis," I said, "but Pye practically made me promise never again to ask him for news of poor William Bettany, and as I have reasons for being particularly anxious to find out what I can of him, since he left England so long ago, I can't resist asking you."

He looked away from me and shuffled his feet softly. "It is hardly fair," he said, "hardly fair."

"It wouldn't be if I wanted him for any reason that would bring trouble or even worry to him," I returned. "But I don't. I want to know where he is, and how he is—and possibly to see him—on behalf of a friend of whom he was very fond in his youth."

"Do you mean Clara Colwyn?" he asked, like a shot.

I shook my head. "No."

"She was fond of him," he murmured again, speaking in the odd, half-audible way that seemed habitual to him.

"The person I mean was even fonder of him, Mr. Davis."

He looked at me in a way that seemed to be imploring me not to notice it, if I'd be so kind; then he said very slowly, "You mean Edith Lossell."

It was very odd, hearing, in this shabby, sordid room, that name, uttered in that way, by this shabby, sordid man.

"It is Miss Lossell," I answered quietly. "She is most anxious to have news of poor Bettany. You spoke as if you knew her—if you did know her, surely you must realize that she would never intrude on Bettany against his wishes, and as you know so much," I added very, very gently, as one speaks to an almost hysterically nervous child, "I

may tell you that her life has not been very happy, and that by giving her news of the only man she has, throughout it, ever loved, you will be doing her a great kindness."

There was a long pause, and a pitiful change came over his not wholly ignoble face.

"Heaven knows," he said, "I should like to make her happy." Then, to my horror, his lips began to shake, and he buried his face in his hands as if he were about to cry. But he didn't; he did something infinitely worse. Going to the table, he took from a drawer and from his pocket two objects, and then poured some water from a broken-lipped old carafe into a saucer. A moment later he had plunged the needle of his morphine syringe into his arm.

I had often thought that the silence and furtiveness of people who do this dreadful thing is one of their worst characteristics, but it was somehow very horrible to see the matter-of-fact, indifferent way in which he disregarded me. I rose and went to the window, opening it wider, for I felt suddenly almost sick. After a minute he burst into a little soft, almost musical laugh.

"I'm sorry," he said, "to have shocked you, but this talk is a difficult one for me." He drew out a chair and sat down, crossing his legs.

"Now, Mr. Quest," he said, in a stronger, brighter voice, "I am at your service."

As he talked I remembered my talk in the green, shadowy room at Kandy, and compared this man with my informant of that day. I felt oddly as if my whole life were to be but a repetition of such scenes; that I should never again have any real life of my own, and must always be seeking, seeking news of William Bettany. It even came into my mind while he talked that perhaps this was why my name was "Quest."

"I have always known Bettany," he began, "ever since we were boys. His father was postmaster in a country

village, and my father, it may surprise you to hear, was the vicar. We were friends as children—played cricket together, robbed birds'-nests—if I am not mistaken we even smoked our first cigars together. Then I was sent away to school and saw nothing of him until half-way through my first year at Cambridge, where I was—at one of the smaller colleges. I was to be a parson, like my father ; he, Bettany, had been to some school in London—a scholarship, or something—and then one day I met him in the street in town, and he told me that he was working in a shop somewhere in the West End. We dined together, and that was when I first knew that he wanted to be a painter. He took me home to his rooms and showed me some of his work ; it was pretty bad—I knew something about painting myself—but he was very hopeful, and then for the next year or so I saw him at intervals, and his work improved. Yes," he added dreamily, " there's no doubt about it, it *did* improve, and as to his ambition, it was wonderful. Perhaps you know that after this he went to Paris ? "

I nodded. " Yes. He studied there, and supported himself by restoring old prints."

It was cooler in the stuffy room now, and as the sun sank a soft breeze stirred the curtains.

" Were you here," I went on, " when he came back with the old lady to look after her collection ? "

Davis smiled peculiarly. " Oh, yes, I was here," he returned. " She was a Mrs. Grayfield, and she lived in Chelsea."

" You must have been," I suggested, " fairly intimate with him."

He looked at me without flinching. " I was," he said quietly. " It was while he was there that he met—Miss Lossell, as I see you prefer me to call her. I met her, too, and she was kind to me."

" May I ask," I said, disregarding his insinuation

about her name, "whether you were his confidant in that matter?"

"I knew that they were engaged almost as soon as he did."

There was a certain dignity in his manner that both pleased and displeased me. I was completely at sea.

"I suppose he was very happy then, for a time?"

"He was as happy as any man who ever drew the breath of life, until Lord Lossell refused his permission to the marriage."

"I know about that," I put in. "Lord Lossell himself has told me. He very naturally objected to his daughter marrying a penniless painter, who didn't even paint well, for you must remember, Mr. Davis, that at that time no one, except possibly you, believed that his talent was anything above the average."

He nodded. "I'm not blaming Lord Lossell, I never did," he said, in his vague way.

"Did you ever meet Lord Lossell?" I asked.

"I did, on several occasions. You are trying to catch me, Mr. Quest." He laughed, not unpleasantly. "Yes, I met him several times, and I take it that you know as much as I do about what happened then."

"Well, I had never met him at that time," I answered. "I wasn't in England, as it happened. When I came back he was already in France."

"He was there for a year, he worked like a black; he worked all day, and the greater part of every night, and he never heard once from Miss Lossell—they had promised her father not to write to each other."

I had known this, and nodded. "Then he went to Concarneau," I suggested, looking at my watch, "and painted there. She told me at the time."

"Yes, he wandered along from village to village in Finistère, and he had a great affection for Quimper."

"Were you with him, by any chance?" I asked.

He looked at me with a little twinkle in his eye.

"He was quite alone out there," he answered.

"Do you know where it was that he painted *the* pictures?"

"That," my mentally eel-like informant replied, "he, so far as I know, never told anyone. But I was in Paris when he brought back the pictures; in fact, I was with Lord Lossell when he first saw them. Did you ever meet Tambourel? Étienne, not Louis. Well, it was at Étienne Tambourel's studio that he first showed the pictures. Bouguéreau was there, and several others—I need not tell you about that, because of course you know, but I will say that Lord Lossell was wonderfully generous in his recognition of the genius in the pictures, and, hard man though he was, nothing else now mattered, neither Bettany's obscure birth nor his poverty, or even the peculiarities of his character. He had proved that he could paint, and Lord Lossell at once ratified his promise, and brought him back to London with him the next day."

"I was at the dinner at Lord Lossell's," I said, "when the engagement was announced."

"Yes, I know," he answered quickly, adding in a deliberate, absent-minded way, "he told me—Bettany, I mean."

It is a very hard thing to get up in a man's own house and tell him he is somebody else. I was pretty well convinced as I sat there that Bettany and this poor derelict were one and the same, but I simply hadn't the courage to say it.

"Of course," I said instead, "I know about the next month or six weeks, whatever it was—I remember them distinctly—although I did not see Bettany again. Then came the break—and he went away." I paused, and then

added, slowly and impressively, "Do you know what caused the break?"

He had slid forward in his chair so that his head was pretty well invisible in the gathering dusk. I noticed that his boots were sound and of fairly good quality, but that they were badly polished, and that the laces were broken, and tied in knots in several places.

After a pause he answered me. "I do know," he said, "but I can't tell you."

He spoke very quietly, very conclusively, in a way that compelled me to accept his words, at least in part.

"Miss Lossell knows," I observed.

"It is because of Miss Lossell," he returned, and his reply was amazing to me, "that I cannot tell you or anyone else. She asked him for his word of honour that he would never tell why they parted."

"I see. I will not insist, but there can be no harm in my asking you what you know of the poor fellow's subsequent life. Did he ever marry?"

I disliked the look he gave me at this question.

"Did Miss Lossell ask you to find that out?" he asked.

"No, she didn't. She has some definite object in wishing to find him; that much I know, but what her object may be, I don't know."

He nodded. "I see, and I don't mind telling you that he did marry."

"Thanks. And will you tell me, not her name, but what his wife was?"

There was a pause, during which he rose and went to the table.

"I don't want to shock you," he said, "but I'm going to take some more of this stuff, so perhaps——"

"One minute, I beg of you. It would be useless for me to try and persuade you not to do that——?"

"Useless as well as—impertinent," he put in, with perfect courtesy, adding, as he began his dreadful little preparations, "I will tell you in two words what became of Bettany—*He went under.*"

"Did it happen suddenly? Had he gone under when he was in Buenos Ayres early in the century?"

He stared at me, his little bottle of pellets in his hand. "How on earth did you know that?" he burst out.

"I too can be mysterious, Mr. Davis. However, I am your debtor for telling me what you have, and I will ask you only one more question. Is he in England now? Was Miss Lossell right in thinking she saw him a few months ago?"

He took up his horrid little instrument, drew out the piston, and slowly filled it at the saucer—then, holding it upside down, and shooting his lean, left wrist out of its sleeve, he felt with the third finger of his right hand for a good place to administer the dose.

"Why have you not asked Pye that question?" he said very slowly.

I made a mistake, and answered him honestly. "Pye assured me that he was not in England."

He jabbed the needle into the flabby flesh of his arm, and very slowly drew the piston home. Then he said, with an odd little smile. "He is not in England."

I watched him as he pulled the thing out of his flesh and rubbed the place with his not altogether clean finger.

"And his wife?" I persisted, taking up my hat and gloves.

He stood very quietly rubbing his arm; his eyes half shut and the horrible look of dreamy comfort I had noticed before coming over his face.

"I think," he said, "we have had enough about Bettany, but I will tell you one thing. Your young friend, Pye's daughter, is making rather an idiot of herself."

"In what way? What do you mean? What has Pye been telling you?"

"Pye hasn't told me anything. The child came down here the other day—it's amusing how people think I must know things—and asked me all sorts of questions about her father's young days. She's got some bee in her bonnet about her mother," he said, with an unpleasant smile.

"She's not yet seventeen, Mr. Davis," I suggested, "and perhaps it is natural for a young girl to dream about the mother she has never seen."

Still he rubbed his arm in that horrid way, and as I reached the door, having thanked him for his courtesy, he said slowly:

"The child's mother was a tumbler in a circus."

CHAPTER XXXV

AFTER a wakeful night I went early the next morning to see Mr. Treffry. He was not only very fond of Mag, and sympathetic with my own ideas about her, but my year with him had taught me that he was an old man of very beautiful wisdom; the wisdom of much kindness that the widest kind of experience has failed to embitter. I found him at breakfast, and while I drank several cups of his delicious coffee, I told him the story. I didn't say much about Bettany, and I said nothing at all about Edith, but going straight to the point, I reminded him of Mag's story of the meeting on the Embankment, and the girl's foolish dreams about the lady in the car.

The old gentleman listened patiently, putting an occasional keen question, but giving me my head, as is the way of wise people when they want information.

"The father said distinctly that the lady in the car was Margaret's mother, you know," he said at one point.

"Oh, yes, she was quite definite about that."

"Do you think he's a liar?"

"I don't know him well enough to have any very decided opinion about that, but I shouldn't think he or any other man would have taken the trouble to make up such a story. However, the fact remains that this fellow Davis

assured me that Mag's mother was a tumbler in a circus."

Treffry helped himself to hot-house grapes, and leaned back in his chair.

"A tumbler? Do you suppose she jumped through hoops?"

"I shouldn't think so. She probably ran up those red velvet things, like little staircases, and turned somersaults in the air. Whatever possessed the man to marry such a woman?"

Treffry laughed. "After all, Quest, you know," he said pleasantly, "you're very young."

I was not feeling young at all, and I was already fifty-one, but he went on to explain that it was my assumption that the tumbling lady might not have been perfectly desirable as a wife for a great painter, that stamped me as a youth, at any rate, in wisdom.

"I believe they are temperate, decent-living women for the most part," he went on. "They have to be, to keep their nerves right. George Sanger told me that. He always swore that ladies in his line were much more moral and temperate in every way than the ladies, say, of the lower branches of the theatrical profession. However, we needn't go into that now, Quest."

"What do you think about it?" I insisted. "I confess it has upset me."

His bullfinch was singing like mad in the window, and he paused until the outburst had ceased. "I should think," he answered, smiling at me, his delightful eyes full of kindness and sympathy, "that it is the best thing that could possibly have happened."

"Good heavens, why? For a man of Pye's refinement to marry a woman who, however impeccable her morals might have been, must certainly have been without any great education or delicacy!"

The old man said, "Education be blowed, my boy! and I don't mean that. I mean that considering the effect that Miss Magpie's vain imaginings are having upon her, nothing could be better than for her to know at once what her mother really was."

And then it seemed that I had known all along what he was going to say, and moreover, as if I almost, if not quite, agreed with him.

"Perhaps you'll tell her?" I suggested, lighting a cigarette.

"Not I," he said, with a chortle. "That's your job. She's your girl, your discovery, very nearly your young woman, by now. Ah, yes, you'll have to tell her, and the sooner the better, for I agree with you that she's spoiling herself. She's been full of little airs and graces lately. I don't think anybody could kick them out of her better than a tumbling mother in tights."

I was fully convinced that he was right, and that afternoon I did it. I myself, with my bow and arrow, I shot poor Mag's dream cock-robin. A mean and cruel sparrow I felt as I did it, too.

I told her as we were sitting on penny chairs in Hyde Park, watching the great and glorious of the earth get up their Sunday appetites. She looked, poor little thing, very sweet, and, so far as I could see, quite as smart as the other girls of her age who walked by us. She had on a delightful hat. I have forgotten what was on top of it, but the brim, which was broad, was lined with a sort of dark orange-coloured velvet, and her dear, almost pretty, young face glowed in a beautiful warm way as the sun poured down on us.

She had been talking about her imaginary parent, and I could see how sharp was the glance she gave to every passing carriage.

"If you see the lady you saw that day with your father," I suggested, with guile, "will you show her to me?"

She shook her head. "No. You yourself told me that it might hurt her if anyone knew who I am."

"Then why are you watching out for her?" She turned away, so that I could not see her face, and answered me in that position.

"I like to see her, and some day she'll know who I am. Only she and I will know—and father. I'll never tell a soul," she added vehemently, turning round, her face white with strong feeling. "I'd rather *die* than hurt her. I'd rather be eaten by caterpillars than hurt her, and I'll never, never tell, not even you, Mr. Quest."

It was a very warm day, but it was not only the heat of the sun that caused me to wipe my forehead stealthily with my handkerchief, and I am afraid that for the moment my feelings about Mr. Treffry were not all that they should have been. However, I had made up my mind to the task, and was not going to let my own cowardice put me off it.

"Why do you think," I asked her, "that the lady in the carriage was your mother? I don't think she was, you know."

Her eyes clouded over. "It's horrid of you to say so, horrid." Then suddenly she shrugged her shoulders in a curious little way that was hers. "But it doesn't matter—you don't know anything about it—and I'm sorry I was cross."

Presently Edith drove by with old Lady Houndle. They both saw us and bowed, and Mag and I, of course, did the same.

"I wish," I said, "you had told Miss Lossell about this idea you have got into your head."

She answered very coldly. "I will not tell Miss Lossell. I'm not going to tell anybody. I wish I'd never written it to you. But I know—I know——" her voice trailed

off into silence, and I knew that I was considered unworthy, because of my disbelief, to be told of her dream.

At last we got up and walked towards Stanhope Gate (we were to lunch with Cohen), and suddenly I blurted it out. I suppose it was rather cowardly to choose such a time and place, but I couldn't bear a scene on the subject, and I knew the child was proud enough to rally and behave as usual when other people were present. Also, I meant to sneak out shortly after lunch.

"Mag," I said, "listen to me." We were standing under the gate, waiting for carriages to pass. She looked up at me, struck, I suppose, by something in my voice.

"I have been finding out about your mother," I said, "and I know——" She turned crimson, and her poor little face quivered into a delighted smile, that died away as suddenly at something she saw in mine.

"You may tell your father that I have told you, if you like," I continued, "and you'll find that I have not made a mistake. Your mother was not a great lady, Mag. Remember, dear, we have no reason for thinking that she was less good, or less charming, than any great lady that ever lived; your father is a gentleman, and he married her."

We crossed Park Lane, and went on towards Green Street. I wished I had never been born, but there was only one thing to be done—to get on with it as fast as possible.

"She was poor," I said, "she worked for her living. I hope you are not snob enough to be ashamed of that?"

"Of course I shouldn't be, but——"

"Good. She was," I added, after a long pause, "a tumbler—in a circus."

And then, to my amazement, quite suddenly all the horror died out of her face, and she looked up quietly.

" I see, Mr. Quest," she said ; " did my father marry her when he was very young ? "

" He must have been about thirty, I should think. What has that got to do with it ? "

" Darling Mr. Quest," she returned, putting her hand on my arm and giving it a little squeeze, " I do love you—you are so good to me."

We had reached Cohen's door, and two ladies were standing on the steps, so I could say no more, but I realized that the reason for Mag's quiet and unforced gaiety throughout lunch was simply that although she was too polite to pain me by saying so—she didn't believe me.

CHAPTER XXXVI

I HAVE said very little about Mag's early success as a painter, but it was a very real one of its kind, although it was, of course, one more of promise than of execution. But for a child not yet seventeen to have a picture in the Academy was undeniably a remarkable thing. But I might as well say now, to explain my apparent indifference on the subject, that the promise was one that was never carried out. As she grew older, Mag, of course, in a way, painted better, but she never subsequently produced anything that was as good in proportion to her age as had been this Academy picture, and it seems pretty certain that she never will.

I don't know whether I have said that the head of old Glenny was actually on the line, but it was. After that, alas, the poor Magpie was never even granted a small space near the ceiling within those classic, though oft-derided walls.

Cohen, and especially Lossell, were bitterly disappointed in the girl's failure to make good. Lossell in particular was much more upset about it than either the Magpie or I, but of course a large part of his disappointment was due to his having hoped and predicted such great things

of her—his own vanity was hurt, and that, of course, is one of the most painful mishaps that anyone can sustain. The next time I saw him after he had seen the new picture—the group that Yangus and I had inspected that day at the studio, and to see which he had, in his malicious triumph, driven Mag away from me on the day of my visit to Davis—he was inclined to reproach me for her failure to achieve what had been expected of her.

“It’s not nearly so good,” he grumbled, “as the portrait of Glenny—and you told me it was clever.” His little face was all scored and soured by lines of vexation. It was one of the days when I did not like him; when he reminded me most strongly of what he must have been as a husband.

“Don’t be peevish,” I said. “It is clever.”

This he acknowledged, but went on fretfully describing to me the faults and ineffectiveness of poor Mag’s cherished work.

“It’s got, or it hasn’t got, something very important,” he grumbled. “Almost anybody might have painted it, though most girls of her age wouldn’t have chosen such a damned unpleasant subject.” The little man was thoroughly disgruntled. He and Edith were going to Scotland the next day, and I had stopped in the library, at his own request, on my way upstairs to say good-bye to her.

“I wonder why you ever thought she was so gifted?” he asked me finally as I rose. Then I lashed out and told him what I thought of him. I hadn’t even known she had an idea of painting until he, the great Lord Lossell, had asked her in that very room, and it wasn’t I, but Cohen, who had set her to work with Glenny. These things I put very clearly before my angry host, and then I went upstairs.

“Your father,” I told Edith, “is in a filthy temper.”

She nodded. "I know. He's been pretty hard to bear lately, and the day before yesterday he went to Magpie's studio and hated her picture. He seems to think," she added gently, "that it's my fault that the child can't paint. That seems a little far fetched, don't you think so?"

I did, and said so, and then we had a long and, on the whole, happy talk, and when the tea things had been taken away, I told her of my interview with Davis.

It was then nearly three weeks since that our meeting, and during that time I had, by chance, seen her alone.

"He's a dreadful little man," I said. "and it was a dreadful room. I shall never forget it, but he told me one or two interesting things—very pleasant things, my dear Edith, but—you will wish me to tell you?"

"Yes."

When I had carefully described Davis and she had, not unnaturally after all these years, been unable to recall him, I went on. I explained that the man had assured me of Bettany's complete submersion. "I am afraid there is no doubt that the poor fellow went altogether to the—pieces. I don't know whether it was before or after the time in South America. But this is the third person, you must remember, who has assured us that he went under—Py—who certainly would have no reason to say it was not true, that loathsome Frenchman, and now Davis."

She folded her beautiful hands and looked at me steadily. "Dear Victor," she said gently, her wonderful face flushed, "I have always known that. I knew that he would do that when he went away—go to the dogs, I mean."

"Then why?" I asked, with much sense, "do you want to find him?"

She rose—we were in the grey and silver room, and since I have started calling it that I have noticed that there is not anything silver in it ; it is merely the effect of the grey, I suppose, that gave me the impression that there was—and walked restlessly up and down, her hands still clasped, sometimes hanging in front of her, and sometimes pressed to her bosom.

“ I must find him,” she said. “ I must, I must ! ”

It seemed as unreasonable as the obstinacy about an undesirable lover of some very young girl, and for a moment I saw her as she must have been when only a little older than Mag.

“ Surely, surely you wouldn't marry him ? ” I asked.

To my relief she gave a little, bitter laugh. “ No, of course not. That would be perfectly impossible ; besides, you just told me he was married.”

“ He was, years ago. But his wife might be dead, mightn't she ? Wives have been known to die.” I looked at her irritably, and then added, with a sudden rush of gentleness to my heart :

“ My dear, can't you tell me what it's all about ? It all seems so mysterious, so preposterous, that you—you, of all women—should have wasted your youth for the sake of a man like that.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “ I know it must seem dreadful—and ridiculous, Victor. I don't wonder you feel that way ; but you see, *amigo*, you don't understand, you don't know.”

“ Couldn't you tell me ? ” I jerked out.

We stood facing each other in the bright, late summer sunlight, and there was a long pause—a pause that I felt to be vital—full of strong emotion. It seemed a long time before she answered, and when she did I was disappointed, for, in a very quiet voice, she said :

“ No, I can't tell you. You must just go on thinking

me a fool—and you must—for I know you will—go on trying to find him.” Then she added, very slowly :

“ I can tell you only one thing. You see, it’s my fault that his life was ruined in that dreadful way.”

As I walked home to the Temple I told myself that my poor girl was indeed being a fool, and I also informed myself that nearly every woman who has loved and lost a man who subsequently goes wrong positively revels in the thought that the man went to pieces because of having lost her.

No doubt Bettany had been badly hurt through Edith, for the fellow certainly had loved her, and from what she had said that day I was fairly sure that she must have broken the engagement and sent him away in an unnecessarily harsh manner ; but after all, there are many women in the world, and Bettany’s having married did not argue any exceptional tenacity of memory on his part, and I saw no reason to assume that he was as faithful to a hopeless ideal as I, sometimes very much against my will, had proved to be.

I felt that if the truth were known, Edith’s dismissal may have driven the man into certain evil ways for a time, but that he would have speedily found feminine consolation of a more or less vital kind, and with all my heart I wished that I might find him settled in some foreign land, with a wife and three or four nearly grown children, so that I might tell her so, and rid her poor mind of what was undoubtedly a very painful, though foolish, obsession.

I walked for several hours that evening, for I was upset and unhappy. I couldn’t bear to have Edith miserable, and still less could I bear to have Edith illogical and silly, and I felt she was being both.

When I got back to the Temple I found Yangus walking up and down in the Court. He had come to say good-

bye to me, for he too was going to Scotland very shortly. His grandmother was a widow who lived somewhere in Perthshire, and old Glenny and he were going to spend August there.

"Anybody else going to Scotland?" I asked, rather crossly, for the Land of Cakes seemed to loom too largely for my comfort for the moment.

To my surprise the young fellow laughed nervously and walked over to the window. (I had asked him to come up for supper.) "Odd that you should say that, sir," he blurted out. "I've come to ask you if you'd let the Magpie go with us."

I was very tired, and I had felt two lumbagoish twinges in my back on my way home.

"Oh, bother the Magpie!" I said crossly, "what's it got to do with me? Can't you ask her father?" And then I was dreadfully ashamed, for young Angus turned on me a look of the most childlike, pellucid bewilderment that ever I had seen in my life in the eyes of a grown-up creature.

"I'm most awfully sorry, sir," he said, "but I thought I ought to ask you. It—it never occurred to me to ask Mr. Pye; you see, you seem a great deal more like her father than he does."

There are moments at which this remark would have irritated me still further; but on that occasion, for some reason, I felt soothed and gratified by it, and we sat down to our rather unusually luxurious meal—for I had treated myself to one of those net-work melons, and some mushrooms, which I stewed in my new saucepan over the spirit-lamp—and discussed the pros and cons of Mag's visit (for I at once decided that she might go) in the friendliest manner possible.

Yangus was delighted, and delightfully grateful.

"I haven't said a word to her about it, sir," he assured

me. "I thought I'd better not till I'd asked you, but Uncle Angus and I were talking about it a couple of days ago; in fact, he suggested it, and he's sure she'd love it. You see, she's only been out of London once, and that," he added, with the deep scorn of the Northerner, "was only to the Isle of Wight."

Little by little I learned that it was to a rugged, very simple life that the urban Miss Pye was to go. The young man's grandfather, as he quite sweetly put it, "had been a meenister," and as the new incumbent had built himself a grand new house, the late man's widow still lived in the little old manse. The delightful atmosphere of George MacDonald's books, and some of Mrs. Oliphant's, came over me as I stirred my mushrooms; indeed, it came over me with such potency that I nearly burnt these delectable fungi. I could feel the cool air on my forehead, and smell the peaty, smoky, early-morning atmosphere—

"It's just the thing for Mag," I said, a little later, my whole nature softened by the emollient effect of the excellent food and drink. "I had to give her rather a hard blow the other day, Yangus. Perhaps I had better tell you about it, in case she does."

So I told him, and he listened, his charming, bony face glowing with interest.

"You mustn't tell her I've told you," I added, when I'd finished my story.

"I won't, but I'm glad you did, because I've been awfully at a loss sometimes lately to know what on earth she was driving at. She's been very mysterious, and just a little——" He broke off, his loyalty seeking for a kind word. I cut him short.

"She has been a pretentious and foolish young monkey," I put in, "but we mustn't blame her very much, because, after all, every girl has a right to a nice mother, and Mag

apparently never even saw hers, so she's had to make one up, hasn't she?"

He nodded. "I know. I asked Mr. Pye the other night how long ago Mrs. Pye had died, and he said it was when Mag was only a year old. Hard luck for the poor fellow, wasn't it? So she was in a circus!" He gave a sudden, uncouth chuckle. "I'm glad my old grannie doesn't know that," he said.

I was very glad the boy had turned up. There was something very wholesome and pleasant about him, and I liked his rough, always woolly clothes, and even the way a stiff little plume of hair stuck straight up out of the middle of his scalp in a thing he called a "cow lick." Also, I was heartily glad that Mag was to be removed from the scene of her romantic maunderings. Little by little, I knew, she must inevitably come to believe what I had told her about her mother, and it was certain to give her pain. In the Highlands there would be new sights to occupy her, and Angus would be very useful in distracting her mind and amusing her.

So I wrote her a note, enclosing a few pounds for travelling expenses, and so on, and told her that I thought she couldn't do better than to go with the two Anghi, and added that I would try to keep an eye on her father, and that she must arrange for Mrs. Brankles to look after Madame Aimée during her absence.

I sent her my love, and was always her very affectionate "Victor Quest."

Mothers, real and imaginary, and other suchlike troublous questions, I left untouched.

Three days later I had a postcard from Inverness, the ardour of whose wording might almost have burned the paper.

Nothing on earth could compare with travel; the Scotch express was the finest train in the world; porridge beat

MAGPIE

253

anything in the food line that she had ever tasted, and the Anghi were nothing more or less than darling angel-lambs. She was going to paint, and paint, and paint, because there was no doubt at all in her experienced mind that the Highland scenery was the finest in the world ; and she was my loving and very grateful " Magpie."

CHAPTER XXXVII

IT was not until a fortnight had passed that I was able to keep my word to Mag and go and cast a fatherly eye on Madame Aimée and Pye.

My poor sister, during this interval, lost one of her children, and I was obliged to stay down in the country with her. It was a sad time, and poor little Gisella had been my favourite niece, for she was in an odd way very like my father, and I had been fond of him. Poor Eleanor was broken-hearted, and there had been something very dreadful in the suddenness of the snatching away of the little life. The child had been in the garden on the Thursday morning, and Friday night she was dead. For some time poor Christian had been almost unable to make Eleanor believe that it was true, and then when she did realize it, her grief was a dreadful and desolating thing. I had always been fond of my sister, but I had never understood her, or tried to understand her, in any intimate way—she is twelve years younger than I—and now I saw that underneath her placid, rather uninteresting exterior lay a nature of great strength and fidelity, like her poor father's.

So I stayed down there in the pleasant little Hampshire house until poor Bob had persuaded her to go abroad with him for a few weeks. Anna Christian, his sister, the ugliest human being I had ever seen, but a charming,

devout, whimsical woman, who drew the most exquisite caricatures of herself as gifts for her friends, settled down at Pellamy House, to look after the two remaining children during the mother's absence. The evening after her arrival I returned to town, and the following afternoon I went to Blantyre Buildings.

I had had two letters from Mag, crammed full of incident and excitement. She seemed absolutely bursting with vitality and joy, and there was no hint in anything she said of the worm in the bud. Evidently nothing but the Scottish winds were gnawing at her damask cheek, and heartily relieved was I to find it was so. I had no doubt that gradually, almost unknown to herself, the child was learning to accept the fact of the Circus and not the Aristocracy having provided her with a parent, and when she came back I meant to persuade Edith to talk to her on the matter. Edith had liked her very much, and I had not forgotten the promise of the birthday party.

Madame Aimée was very sympathetic and kind about poor little Gisella, whose photograph I showed her. I had an uneasy feeling that it was wrong to carry that particular snapshot round in my pocket, for it showed the poor child in the act of standing on her head on the lawn before the house. It was a charming picture, for she was grinning with delight as she recovered a horizontal position, and her long legs were in the air, and her cropped hair violently disordered. It was the only picture I had that looked in the least like the child, and I was fond of it.

Madame Aimée's gentleness and understanding were so great that I suddenly asked her something I had often wondered about before.

"Did you ever have any children?"

She lay down the pillowslip she was darning, and looked up at me.

"Yes, one, but—only for a few months, Monsieur."

We were silent for a moment, and then she added :

"Some day I will tell you, Monsieur, but not now. Instead, tell me what you have heard from Mag ?"

It appears she had had only one letter from the lady in Scotland, so as I had my last one in my pocket, I read it aloud to her. When I had done the quiet woman smiled.

"It seems to me, Monsieur," she observed, in a little, whimsical way, "that there is in this letter much of Angus."

"He's a very nice boy," I declared. "You've seen him, haven't you ?"

"Oh, yes. I like him, and," she added, with the bland, matter-of-factness in such matters of her race and class, "I hope that one day he'll marry Mag."

"Good gracious, Madame Aimée," I burst out, for such an idea had never occurred to me, "she's not seventeen yet."

Obviously amused at my obtuseness she laughed, and laid down her work the better to use, as she talked, her beautiful, capable little hands.

"Soon she'll be seventeen, Monsieur, and then soon she'll be twenty-seven, and soon she'll be thirty, forty-seven—it all happens very quickly—and marry of course she must."

I was a little piqued by her attitude, for I did not quite like being considered slow-witted, and it was plain that this little mender of communal linen in industrial dwellings in Pimlico was quite kindly jeering at me for not having seen it all long ago.

"Of course she'll marry. I'm a great advocate of matrimony—for women," I returned. "But why you must pick out this gawky boy of no position, and no money, is more than I can see."

Still with her air of irritating wisdom she answered, with that expressive flourishing of her hands :

"Ah, but what will you ? Where is the young man of

great position and wealth who will come to Blantyre Buildings for his bride ? ”

Of course it was perfectly good sense, what she said, and probably that is one reason why it was so extremely irritating to me.

“ Miss Lossell,” I announced, with pride and a little defiance, “ is giving a party for her on her birthday ; she’ll meet young men there.”

“ *Tiens !* and the following day they will come here by the dozens to ask her hand of her father,” she returned, taking up her work.

After a moment she looked up again and smiled at me in her old way—a serene, charming, cloistral kind of smile. “ And now, Monsieur, will you be so good and make the coffee ? ” she asked. “ It is so delicious, the coffee, when you make it.”

I bustled about the kitchen in which I was so thoroughly at home, and set out the tray with the greatest care, covering it with a linen and lace contraption that I had brought with me from a shop in Regent Street as a little gift to my hostess. She was delighted with this attention, and we had a thoroughly enjoyable coffee-party.

It was a lovely day, and both windows were wide open, and while I knew to my cost that London down below was damp, sweltering, and not very sweet-smelling that afternoon, up here at least there was a fresh breeze that was almost a little wind, and which blew the curtains about, and stirred the flowers in the vases, and gave us a delightful feeling of being at sea on land.

I had not yet told the little Frenchwoman of my visit to Davis, and I sat debating as to whether or not I had better let her know about Mag’s mother.

Finally she herself opened the way to me by asking me what I thought about the condition of the child’s mind in this respect.

"Do you think," she asked, "she's still imagining her mother to be a great lady?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. The last time I saw her she was."

"When was that, Monsieur?"

"The day we lunched with Sir Max. On the way there I told her something that I think will have persuaded her she was wrong about the lady in the motor-car."

"Did you? Sir Max was here a fortnight ago. He brought me some beautiful flowers and a picture, and he said that she had been particularly happy and gay that day."

I nodded. "She was. I am afraid that was because she didn't believe me, but after all, it was pretty conclusive what I told her."

As my mind went back to the occasion of our walk up Park Lane and along Green Street, I for the moment forgot that Madame Aimée didn't know what I was talking about, and I went on quite as if she had known.

"No child can have two mothers, and it is a far cry from the lady in the motor-car to the circus woman, don't you think so?"

"What!" Her voice was so strange that I looked sharply up. She had dropped her work and clasped her hands on it, and was looking at me, her chin thrust forward.

"Oh, I forgot I didn't tell you. I saw a friend of Pye's," I answered hurriedly, "who had known Pye in his youth, and he told me. It is evidently quite true. I suppose it was in Pye's bad days. At all events, there seems to be no doubt that Mag's mother was a tumbler, *une jongleuse*, in a circus."

"Mag must never know that—never!" the French-woman burst out in her own language. "You must never tell her, it—it would be dreadful."

I was amazed. It was, too, odd to think that she should have this snobbish feeling, she who had been so pre-eminently sane about the business of the lady in the car.

For a moment we argued sharply, I maintaining, as Treffry had done, that it was the best thing in the world for Mag to realize her humble origin; Madame Aimée insisting with a positive passion of conviction that it would be dreadful and most hurtful for the child to know.

In the end I burst out: "But, hang it all, she *does* know. I've told her. That's what I've been telling you. I told her that day on the way to Sir Max Cohen's."

As if exhausted by her excitement, the Frenchwoman leaned back against her cushion and closed her poor eyes.

"*Ah, mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*" she murmured. Then, reaching out one hand, she took from the drawer of a little table near her an old and much worn rosary of brown wood, and held it in her hands. She was very, very pale, and about her mouth was the bluish shadow I had learned to dread. Her drops were on the shelf in the kitchen, and I brought her a dose, which she drank with her usual docility. Then I waited until she felt better—and this was very soon, for she was full of pluck, poor soul—and in a few moments she begged my pardon for her vehemence.

"I know," she said, "and you must remember, Monsieur, I have known her for nearly ten years, that it would be bad for her to be told this of her mother. However, you see, as it happens, it doesn't matter, for she plainly doesn't believe you—I mean, she thinks you are mistaken. She was perfectly happy after the luncheon party at Sir Max's, and has talked several times since to me about her mother."

"But you yourself thought that illusion to be very bad for her," I burst out. "You told me so."

"Yes, I did, and I meant it, but I have been trying of late to make use of it—her idea, I mean—and I think perhaps I am on the right track."

"How do you mean?"

She hesitated, as if mentally feeling for the right words. At length she spoke, very slowly, in English.

"I have told her that if her mother is a great lady, she can't be a snob—the mother, I mean—that the great are never snobs—and I have told her that if she ever should know her mother, how it would hurt that lady to see that Mag was foolish and—and vulgar about it."

"Did you use that word?" I inquired, mildly.

"Yes, Monsieur, for pretence and unsimplicity *are* vulgar. And I have told her that if her mother is a great lady, she, Mag, should try to be worthy of that position, even though she is never to occupy it. *Enfin, monsieur,*" she added in French, "I thought as it was impossible to get rid of the idea, it would be well to make use of it."

I rose and walked up and down the room. She was quite right, of course, and while Treffry, that wise old man, and Cohen and Edith and I had all blundered, it was this quiet working woman who had solved the problem.

"You have tried to turn the delusion," I said slowly, "into an ideal. Is that it?"

She smiled, and her smile was very sweet as she nodded with her usual, "*Oui, monsieur.*"

"I should like," she added, after a moment, "you to see the picture that Sire Max brought me. It is there, behind the curtain."

In all my many visits to No. 133 I had never yet penetrated beyond this veil, and it was with an oddly-keen feeling of interest that I now did so. There was a window in here as well, for the flat was at the corner of the building. There was a little iron bedstead, with an old-fashioned French *duvet* folded at its foot; there was a small dressing-table, without a glass, and a neat array of plain, wooden brushes, and a cut-glass bottle, filled, I suppose, with eau-de-Cologne. There was a table and one chair, and a

tiny iron washstand, and facing the foot of the bed, near the window, hung the picture.

It was one of Raphael's less well-known Madonnas, and a very beautiful, comforting conception of the Mother and Child, and the young St. John and his Lamb. It was a brown photograph simply framed in brown wood. I looked at it for a moment, and then went back to the couch.

"It is beautiful," I said.

She nodded gently, holding out her hand to me.

"Yes, it is good to wake up in the morning and see Them there," she returned simply; "and was it not wonderful of Sire Max?"

As I went my way greatly relieved about Magpie, I thought very warmly of the little Jewish gentleman. What a good fellow he was!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN the middle of September, Mag and the two Anghi returned from the Manse, Mag looking very tall and very brown, and with more than a touch of a burr in her speech. She brought back some sketches that I thought delightful, and they were, although we didn't know it then, indicative of the kind of work she was going to do in the future.

They were, amongst other things, eminently saleable, and she and I took them one fine morning to a shop in Dover Street, where, after a short inspection by a very dandified gentleman in the very latest shriek in frock-coats, two of these masterpieces were transferred to his hands in return for the enormous sum of fifteen guineas.

Mag, of course, trod on air; and she was much more like a balloon than anything else as we walked home.

"I did them in four days," she said. "If I can make fifteen pounds every four days, that'll make how much a year, Mr. Quest?"

"Oh, shut up," I said, laughing. "I'm going to open an account in *my* bank in *my* name, and make you deposit your earnings there."

To this preposterous proposal she agreed with the utmost composure; her knowledge of banking matters being then even more limited than is that of most young female creatures who are not yet seventeen.

However, I was very much pleased with this sign in the sky, that she would probably be able to make a very decent little income for herself, and Cohen was as glad as I.

A few days after this we celebrated the sale by a theatre party, and Cohen promised to take steps to ensure Magpie a pretty constant sale of her sketches, if she could keep them up to the level of the last two. It is only fair to Mag to say that she had been much less distressed than the rest of us by her failure as a genius. She had been disappointed about the "Village Idiot," but she was too young, and too interested at the world at large to be deeply cast down by her relegation to the unsuccessful, would-be exhibitors at the Academy; fame meant to her much less than gold.

She was charming that evening; she had improved, grown up, lost some of her mental angles and gained a few physical ones, in a way that delighted the kind Cohen and the good Quest. Her little throat, bared just a little for the first time, was extremely pretty, and her hair, a trifle sunburnt, although knowing what I do of Scotland, that looks like rather an extravagant statement, was piled up in a very shapely way at exactly the right angle on her head.

"Upon my word," I said, "you're not nearly so ugly as you used to be, Mag."

She looked at me gravely, and I knew that she wished me to understand that only politeness prevented her from answering that she couldn't say as much for me. She burst out laughing, so that even Cohen knew what she was about, and altogether a dinner begun so auspiciously could hardly fail to be a success.

The Anghi, she told me, were very well. Yangus rather depressed because it had been definitely settled that he was to sail on the first week in January for his tea-plantation.

"I should think he'd be glad," she exclaimed.

"Heavens! I wish it was me going to India, but he isn't glad. Every time he thinks of it he goes round with a face like a wet boot. Too silly, I call it."

"Perhaps he doesn't like leaving his friends," I suggested, with a mental jump in Madarne Aimée's direction.

"That's what he says," she admitted indifferently. "He makes me quite ill sometimes, Yangus does—although, of course, he's a very nice boy."

"He's three years older than you are," I remarked dryly.

"That doesn't make any difference. He's a perfect kid in some ways. Why, he still blushes!" she added, with the deepest scorn.

Cohen and I exchanged a glance, but we said no more on the subject.

I have forgotten what the play was that we saw that night, but it was marked by one incident.

We sat in the stalls, and just above us, on our left, sat two ladies and two men, and one of the ladies was Edith Lossell. I had only seen her once since her return from Lossell's shooting box, so after the first act I told Cohen I would go and speak to her. I did so, and the amiable Malpas, who, with his wife and one of her brothers, made up the party, gave me his seat and went out for a smoke.

It was one of Edith's "good" nights. She was looking very handsome in some dull goldish brocade stuff. We had a pleasant chat, and she told me how pretty she thought Mag looking.

"Mag," I said, "is growing up. She has a beau."

Edith laughed. "Who is he?"

"A very nice Scottish youth, a nephew of old Glenny," I explained. "Angus Forbes is his name."

"We must invite him to the party," she said.

Lady Malpas inquired about the party, and announced her intention of looking in at it.

"So that," she added, "is the child Max Cohen is always talking about. Perhaps he'll marry her. It would be just like him, odd little fellow that he is!"

Edith and I looked at each other.

"He hasn't shown her any marked attentions as yet," I declared.

"One never can tell."

I was just leaving the box, when Edith suddenly leaned forward and stared down at the back of the stalls in a way that I could tell, although I couldn't see her face, was passionately intent. Lady Malpas was surveying the opposite box with her glasses, and Edith turned to me.

"Do you remember the man I was speaking about not long ago to you?" she said quietly, pressing my arm in a way that hurt. "A friend of father's, I mean, a man who used to paint?"

I looked at her, and she nodded.

"It's odd," she said, "I just saw him down there at the back of the stalls. Go and speak to him, will you?"

I knew how difficult it must have been for her to tell me this in that particular way, and I knew that she couldn't possibly have told me in any other manner, for the reason that Hermione Malpas is, although a good-natured woman, the most hopeless tongue-wagger in English society.

Answering Edith in the voice she had indicated to me—that of good-natured indifference—I rose and shook hands with the two.

"I will," I said. "I can't see that far from here, but I'll find him, of course—Briggs, you mean?"

"Yes, tell him I'd be very glad to see him some time," she answered, taking up her fan.

I lounged out of the box, and then dashed full tilt downstairs and into the stalls. At that moment the lights went down, and my miserable, short-sighted eyes became as

useless as if they had both been made of glass. I paused a moment, hesitating as to what I should do next, and in that pause lay my defeat.

A man rose from the row next to the pit and went quietly out, I just being able to see that a man had gone out ; but when I had retraced my steps to the passage, and made my way as quickly as I could to the door through which he had gone, he had disappeared.

There was nothing for it but for me to go to my seat, where I found Mag enthralled at the play, and with a mouth too full for strict beauty with chocolates that the soft-hearted Cohen had been coaxed into buying her.

Personally I hate women who eat at the play, and am deaf to the beguilings of the girls who wander about with trays.

"Miss Lossell sent her love to you, Mag," I told her, "and told you not to forget the party."

"No fear! Oh, Mr. Quest, isn't she too beautiful to-night?"

"She is," I said. "You're right there, old girl."

"I think," the child went on, before she settled down to the new act, "that she's the most beautiful woman in the whole world."

"You having seen them all," I returned, retrieving my shoe, which had fallen off as I crossed my legs, "your opinion is of the greatest value. Now shut up, my child, I wish to watch these burglars."

After the play we met Edith and her party in the foyer. I at once said to her in an off-hand way, for Lady Malpas was close at her elbow:

"Sorry, Edith, Briggs had gone by the time I got down."

She nodded. "Oh, it doesn't matter."

My dear woman was very sweet to the enraptured Magpie, and that daring young bird actually ventured to slip her hand through Edith's arm as they stood there waiting for

the car, and to give it a little squeeze. Edith smiled down at her.

"I'm glad you're back, my dear," she said kindly. "Mr. Quest has missed you dreadfully, haven't you, Victor?"

"No," I replied, with truth and rudeness, "not particularly, but I'm glad she's back."

Then, as we shook hands, Edith said to me, aside, "Dear me, Victor, to think that I might have had a girl of that age of my own!"

As Mag and I made our way to our problematic but finally victoriously captured taxi, the child caught my arm with both her strong little hands, and gave it a fearful squeeze.

"Oh, Mr. Quest," she exclaimed, "did you hear—did you hear what *She* said?"

I nodded. "I did, and it does seem a pity, Mag."

"She's an angel, a perfect angel! Oh, Mr. Quest, *isn't* she?"

We drove to Pimlico, very happily talking about and praising our beautiful lady.

CHAPTER XXXIX

NOW I am glad to say that we have arrived at a particularly large and white milestone on Mag's road—the birthday party at the Lossells'.

Ever since her return from Scotland, the child had been undergoing a period of initiation in the art of dancing. A friend of Madame Aimée, who also chanced, to my delight, for I do love incidental connections of the kind, to be a brother-in-law of the amiable Madame Picrate, of the "Golden Peacock," had been selected for the honour of thus initiating the young lady.

Monsieur Pigeonnet, or, as Madame Picrate called him, "*le cousin Annibale*," was a little old gentleman in whom Charles Dickens must have delighted. He had taught dancing in Paris when the old lady of Chislehurst was in her hectic heyday, and, so far as I could gather, had, since that rather remote period, instructed the youth of most European capitals in his art.

One of Mag's best sketches is a thing she did in half an hour on the back of a cardboard hat-box, of Monsieur Pigeonnet as he struggled with a stupid pupil on his polished floor at No. 1, St. Aubin Street, Canning Town.

It is almost too good to be true, but the little old Frenchman played the fiddle himself as he danced, like dear Prince Tarveydrop.

On several occasions I went to Mag's lesson with her ; once we took Edith, and once we took Sir Max, and several times the Anghi were of the party. Old Angus electrified and delighted us all one evening (for these lessons took place by lamp-light) by bursting into a kind of Highland Fling, and leaping and shouting in the most blood-curdling and entrancing manner, his beard blowing wildly about, his eyes ablaze.

Mag took to dancing as a duck takes to water, and in this aptness I perceived the unfailing hand of heredity.

Monsieur Annibale, greatly delighted with his pupil, insisted on speaking French with her, and I shall always remember with a pleasant glow, the long, low room, with its well-waxed floor, and three dim-burning and rather smelly lamps ; the dusty platform at one end, on which stood an almost entirely superfluous piano, and a long, yellow, horizontal line painted about five feet from the floor on the wall, at which those ladies of the various classes who intended to become footlight ornaments were wont to demonstrate the flexibility of what one may elegantly term their lower limbs. Sometimes Madame Picrate adorned the party, and on more than one occasion Eudoxie, the old dancing-master's housekeeper (whom my evil mind shrewdly suspected of having begun their common life as something rather different), sidled in at the door, bringing with her a smell of fried onions, and stood looking on, with her large, blunt-fingered, bony hands classically arranged over her hips.

" Picrate, *ma belle*," the little man would exclaim sometimes, " regard me that. Mademoiselle Pie, *petit oiseau noir et blanc, sautez ! sautez encore*." And Mag, all fire and enthusiasm, would " sauter " higher and higher, Madame Picrate and the broad Eudoxie applauding. Madame Picrate had a romantic way of murmuring, " *Bis, Bis !* " that carried me on the wings of phantasy to Parisian

theatres, and evenings of glamour. For Monsieur Pigeonnet despised the modern school of dancing; his theory was that without muscle in the feet and legs, not even the modern debased and altogether unworthy dances could possibly be accomplished with success. He held to the ancient method of building on a firm foundation, so his dancing lessons might almost be termed gymnastic lessons.

Sometimes the young Angus would be inspired to enter the ring, and then there were great larks.

However, the little old man with the fiddle and the amazingly palpable brown wig was all for hard work, and Mag worked like a slave the three nights in the week dedicated to Terpsichore, with the result that the afternoon of her birthday I went home to dress for the party without a qualm as to her qualifications as a young lady at a ball.

I had a new pair of shoes, and a particularly neat waistcoat for the occasion. Moreover, in a glass on my dressing-table stood an unblemished and very expensive gardenia, with which I meant to embellish myself.

I had invited Mag to dine with me, but she was far too excited to accede to any such proposition, added to which she told me with her usual frankness that she intended her supper appetite to remain inviolate. So I was dining with young Angus, or rather he was dining with me, at Simpson's, and we were then to go on to Pimlico in a swift and luxurious taxi, to convey our lady to the scene of revelry.

We had an excellent dinner, and Angus was so envious of my buttonhole that I was obliged, much against my will, to give it to him.

"After all," he remarked, as he pinned it carefully in his new coat, "it isn't as if you were young, sir."

At nine o'clock we were to be at Mag's; at half-past eight I was going through a harrowing experience; I was

being asked in marriage for the hand of another man's daughter.

"Get along, Yangus," I said, "you're only a child yourself."

His bony young face, rather flushed with emotion, bent gravely towards me.

"I know I am, sir," he admitted bravely, "but I shan't always be, and you see, after all, she's seventeen to-night. My mother was married when she was seventeen."

"Your mother was married a good many years ago, and these matters have changed since then."

"Yes, but say, when she's eighteen, will you let me ask her?"

"My dear fellow," I broke in impatiently, "as I said when you came to me about her going to Scotland, why don't you ask her father?"

"Well, I shall, of course, when the time comes, but I wanted to ask you to-night. You see, Mr. Quest," the lad went on, with the beautiful seriousness of youth, "if it hadn't been for you, there wouldn't have been any Mag—this Mag, I mean. She wouldn't have had any education, and—well, everything would have been different."

"As far as that goes," I returned, "you had better ask Mrs. Brankles' permission, too; it was Mrs. Brankles who sent her to my rooms first."

Then I saw that I was not being fair, and talked to him quite plainly for a few moments. I told him that Mag was far too young for any nonsense of the kind, but that when he came back in a year and a half's time (for his preliminary trial on the tea-plantation was to be a short one), I shouldn't have the slightest objection in the world to his trying his luck with Miss Pye. And with that he was fain to be satisfied.

I paid the bill, and we, as he put it, bought a taxi, and sped to fairyland!

I waited outside the Buildings while he went up and fetched the lady, and after what seemed a long time, I heard their gay young voices coming nearer and nearer down the stairs.

I looked out of the window, and saw four feet approaching me. Two large, shiny, masculine ones, and two comparatively small white satin ones, that sped upwards into what seemed to me an astonishing amount of silken leg. Then I saw that it was not all leg, but that at an early period of its upward flight it changed into a skirt—in a word, it was Miss Pye, in a fashionable "hobble" evening dress. Round her was wrapped a fleecy white shawl, which surprised me, for I knew that Edith, in her quality of fairy godmother, had not forgotten an evening cloak.

The Magpie's face, instead of being rosy, as I had somehow expected, was as white as her frock, and her eyes looked inhumanly big; and when she got into the taxi, I found that her hands were like ice.

"Frightened?" I asked.

"Yes, awfully. Oh, no, I'm not, either. Why should I be?"

I had given her a funny little pendant for her birthday. It was made of a piece of baroc pearl that happened to be shaped rather like a swan, which likeness the skilful worker had greatly perfected, and the little head and feet were made of tiny diamonds, and the thing hung on a delicate gold chain. Platinum is, of course, more fashionable, but I love gold myself, as an ornament, and I am sure I was right in thinking that the warmer colour better suited my Magpie's delightful ivory skin.

"I thought Miss Lossell had given you a cloak?" I said. She nodded.

"She did—oh, Mr. Quest, such a beauty, with white fur round it! But you see, poor Madame Aimée wanted

me to wear something of hers, so of course I did. Isn't this a lovely shawl? She's had it for years."

I was glad she had been unselfish enough to gratify our poor friend, and gave her a little kiss and told her so.

She had a bunch of roses of a very pale pink, and I felt quite certain that it was the enamoured Yangus who had sent them to her. And when we got out, and went into the brightly-lighted hall in Grosvenor Place, I perceived that she was not wearing her gloves, and that this was obviously for the purpose of blazoning to the world the fact that she had two rings on her fingers.

These she at once showed to me.

"Aren't they lovely? Aren't they perfect ducks? Dear Sir Max gave me this one."

"This one" was a tiny, pearl-encircled emerald, in very faint-coloured, much-chased gold. A modest and suitable ornament for a young girl's hand, but I knew as I looked at it, probably a thing of considerable age and value.

On the little finger of her other hand was a fairly good-sized matrix turquoise, with a wee diamond on either side of it.

"And that is charming," I said, "who gave you that?"

"Miss Lossell. Wasn't it—*lovely* of her?"

I hated the hobble skirt, but I knew that the simple white frock was very suitable in every way, and as I knew also that Edith had given it to her, it had been almost unnecessarily kind of my dear lady to bestow the little ring as well. But kind it certainly was.

We went up the broad staircase and into the drawing-room, where Edith stood talking to Lady Malpas, my old enemy, Lady Houndle, a certain good-natured duchess, and one or two other people.

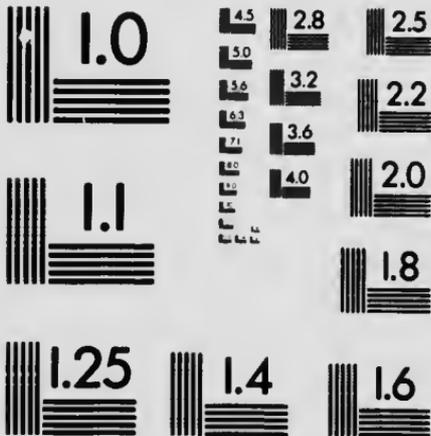
Edith kissed the child and told her how nice she looked, and then introduced her to the other ladies.

"The dancing is to be in the picture-gallery," she said,



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" wouldn't you like to go up and see it ? Let me introduce Mr. Gerald Malpas to you. You take Miss Pye up, Gerry."

Gerry Malpas, a rather rabbit-faced youth, with an exceedingly good-natured smile, signified his willingness to act as guide, and the two young things disappeared.

A few minutes later I was amazed and amused to see Yangus chatting on the most comfortable terms with Lady Houndle. There was something about the boy that was very winning, and I soon found occasion to tell Edith of my conversation with him about Magpie. She thought it an excellent plan, and promised to write to an uncle of hers who happened to be Chief Commissioner near where the boy was going.

" I haven't seen Oswald Luck for years," she said, " but I'm sure he'll do anything he can for Mr. Forbes."

The ball was a great success ; up to about eleven none of the dancers there were, I should think, to put the estimate high, over four-and-twenty. But later two or three young women of forty came in from the play, and loudly expressing their ingenuous delight in the scene, partook of the festivities. Some of the young girls, daughters of Edith's friends, and all about Mag's age, were loud-spoken and bitter in their condemnation of this behaviour.

Nevertheless, all went merry as a marriage-bell. Mag's dancing was a great success, and I could have wished the good cousin Annibale might have been there to enjoy the fruits of his instructions.

Just at midnight—supper was to be at that dramatic hour—I saw, shouldering his way through the crowd in a way that somehow reminded me of a water-buffalo in Ceylon, a strange young man. He was an ancient person for this party, for he must have been quite twenty-six. An enormously broad-shouldered, thick-necked man, with a lump of muscle across his back, just below his collar, (that added to his resemblance to the native of Ceylon

before referred to), and a large, forward-bent head, covered with sculptural, glossy black curls.

This being made his way slowly along the now crowded room to where I was sitting with Edith.

"Good heavens! Who's that?"

She looked vexed. "It's young Cardwell, Lord Max stoke's son; you know, the iron foundry people."

"He looks like an iron foundry himself," I remarked.

"What an enormous youth!"

"Isn't he? How do you do, Mr. Cardwell?"

The young man explained in a perfectly proper manner that he had been dining with the Woolcotes, who, as Miss Lossell, of course, remembered, were to have come on here, and that Mrs. Woolcote had been taken ill at the play, and Woolcote and he had just got her home and settled with a nurse, and so on. And she had asked him, Cardwell, to come on to explain Mr. and Mrs. Woolcote's absence.

"Charmion couldn't come, either," he explained.

"Couldn't leave her mother, of course."

Edith thanked him, and expressed the necessary hopes that Mrs. Woolcote's illness would prove to be of no importance. Then she said:

"I hope you dance, Mr. Cardwell?" The immense one bowed.

"If you will do me the honour," he murmured.

But she laughed. "This is a young people's party," she returned, "surely you know most of them here?"

He looked round. "Rather! There's Cissy Pollock, I know her," his heavy face brightened, "and the Derbyshire girls. Then, if I may, I will see about getting a partner."

Since the days of which I write we have all heard of that awesome and elephantively frolicking creature, the Tank. Retrospectively, now, as I look back to my first acquaintance with Anthony Cardwell, my mind is irresistibly drawn

to comparing him with this Brobdingnagian and unterrifying trample specialist. Like a Tank, Lord Maxstoke's heir barged across the room and leaned up against a wall. Then, always true to type, he scattered several innocent young couples, and bore down on his prospective partner. The girl happened to be a tiny, fair-haired thing, clad in the palest of pale blue gauze or chiffon. She looked like a hapless butterfly as the huge young man folded her to him and began to gyrate, and then, to my amusement, I perceived that for all his vast bulk and weight he danced like an angel.

Lossell was quite willing to tell me all about him.

"Isn't he amazing?" our host exclaimed. "Quite the biggest man, I think, though not the tallest, that I ever saw in my life. He's Maxstoke's son and heir, you know. Only boy, I believe. Odd thing, Maxstoke married one of the Carlyon girls—you know, the Brading people—she had four daughters before this boy—I can remember old Maxstoke's rage at each birth—and they are all, if you will believe it, my dear Quest, miserable, squinny little women, no bigger than white mice;—and look at that!"

"He looks awfully strong," I commented.

"He is. He's done a good deal of amateur boxing; fought three rounds with Carpentier a short time ago—most interesting fight it was, I'm told."

"Who won?"

"Oh, the Frenchman, of course, but this fellow put up a magnificent fight."

"He ought to have tried sitting down on the Frenchman," I suggested; "what does he ride?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Never heard of him in connection with a horse."

A few minutes later I was sitting at a little table eating my supper with Hermione Malpas and one or two other

people, when I heard a little laugh behind me. It was unmistakably the coquettish and triumphant laugh of a woman in the midst of a particularly enchanting flirtation. I turned round discreetly, and facing me, towering like a huge building over the little table, which he could have cracked like a walnut shell with one hand, was the young Anthony. A minute later I took another look, and I saw that the lady, the back of whose chair nearly touched mine, and whose laugh had so struck my ear, was none other than that fledgling Magpie !

CHAPTER XL

AFTER the ball nothing particular happened for several months. I spent Christmas, as usual, at Wandover, and to her infinite delight Mag was included in the party. Her adoration for Edith was a very pleasant thing to see, and, in a curious way, her youth, instead of making Edith look older, seemed, at least to me, to make Edith look younger. Perhaps it was because the child's vehement and outspoken affection was as delightful to my dear woman as it was to me. She certainly, for some reason, seemed happier than for a long time, and I liked to think that these two people, of whom I was so fond, were extending their generous affection for me to each other.

Lady Houndle was not at Wandover that year, and we all accepted the poor old lady's absence in a rather unflatteringly Spartan spirit.

But Treffry was there, vigorous and well, full of his adventures in Germany, to which then supposedly *very* friendly country he had gone on a visit to a married great-niece.

I am sorry to say the old man had liked the Huns, and believed in their protestations, but he must not be reproached for this, as other Englishmen, even official

Englishmen, who ought to have known much better than he, were at least as completely bamboozled by that blood-thirsty, distressingly intelligent race as my kind old friend.

Max Cohen was not here; in fact, he was actually spending Christmas in Frankfurt, his old home, and I had from him, a few days after Christmas, a letter that made me very uneasy.

He had been in Berlin, and talked with many people in many positions, and he seemed oddly anxious to hear from me that all was well in England.

"This country, of course," he wrote, "is in reality my home; but, to reverse what Lord Haldane said, he an Englishman, finding his spiritual home in Germany, I a German Jew, feel that now and henceforth, so long as I may live, I must stand or fall with England."

It disconcerted and upset me to hear him suggest, even in this loyal way, the possible fall of my country, and I told Treffry about the letter. The old gentleman shook his head.

"All bosh, my dear Victor, just bosh. There may have been some upset in banking circles, and our charming little friend is exaggerating it, but I have reason to know, and, mind you, I was six weeks in Germany, that the Kaiser and the party in power are most anxious not only to continue, but to consolidate, their peace with us. I understand that the Crown Prince is Anglophile to a most flattering extent."

The opinions of these two men are worth writing down, because they so clearly show the impressions created in Germany on a German and an Englishman. It is easy to see now that Cohen, in spite of his long residence in these islands, had been treated by the Germans as one of themselves, whereas dear old Mr. Treffry, distinguished man of the world, *raconteur*, what I am told they called an "*echter*,

englischer gentleman " was deliberately and very cleverly misled.

But to go back to the house party. Mag—now that he no longer expected her to be a genius, and had forgiven her her failure in that way—was a great favourite with Lord Lossell. In fact, she was so great a favourite that I was glad to reflect that he was nearly seventy years old. Naturally many old men do marry young girls, but the Magpie did not seem the kind who would barter all the really good things of life for, so to speak, "a ribbon to stick in her coat." Frankly, she treated him as a kind old gentleman, showing in every word she said to him and to Treffry her unquestioning appreciation of the fact that in all essentials the dear old man of nearly eighty-two was much younger than our host. She was always respectful to Lossell, whereas she treated Treffry much as she treated me, and the great old boy saw this and understood it, and with me rejoiced thereat.

We hurried back to town the last day of the year but one, to celebrate a good-bye party (oh, these parties!) that Glenny was giving for his young great-nephew. Yangus was sailing on the second of January, and we were to see the Old Year out and the New Year in, in grand style in Thurloe Square.

I had a very bad headache that night, and as I think of it, can recall but little of the festivities. I know there was punch, and dancing, and a good many flowers in the room, and that Yangus was nervous, and white-faced, and bitterly jealous, poor boy, of young Cardwell, who, in some way, had managed to join the party, although nobody seemed to know who had invited him.

Monsieur Pigeonnet was there, and the feature of the evening was a Sarabande, that he and Mag danced to an air played on a borrowed spinet, by Glenny, who was a very odd sight, leaning over the diminutive instrument,

peering out of his ambush of beard and hair. It seemed impossible that such delicate, tinkling tones as reached us from his corner could have come from that large and untidy personality, but he played very well. It was a charming sight, and in spite of my headache I enjoyed it. Those of us who were not dancing, about ten souls we must have been, possibly twelve (for there were one or two people I don't remember), were huddled together on the model platform, and in the carefully shaded electric light the figures of the two dancers had something very romantic and almost unreal about them. They were in costume, which old Glenny had designed, and Mag and Madame Aimée had made, and somehow the little, bent figure of the old man, with his odd, crooked legs and his long arms, and very large, very grotesque wig, brought into fine relief young Magpie's positive youth and comparative grace, for she was still not the lissome, willowy thing that young girls ought to be, although she had greatly improved.

Her dress was yellow, and of some heavy material, with a burlesque overdress; and, as most people know, the Sarabande being a thing of grave, almost bombastic measure, and full of splendid bows and curtsies, the performance had a ghostly quality that nothing quicker could have held.

Glenny had been very clever in his shading of the lights, and there was one place in the middle of the room which was almost in complete darkness, so that every now and then the dignified dancers seemed to disappear for a moment, particularly as their exaggerated esteem for each other demonstrated itself in low, swooning curtsies and sweeping bows.

Tinkle, tinkle went the old spinet, on and on went the slow dance, and suddenly, looking up, I caught sight of young Forbes's face. It was white with a pitiful and

perfectly grown-up misery. I didn't know why, for a moment, and then, as Miss Mag swam into the light again, I perceived that the minx, while she danced, was flirting with the Tank-like young man.

In the confusion and applause at the end of the dance I drew Yangus into the little room where his old relative passed his nights, and where the coats and cloaks, and so on, had been left, and went for him.

"Don't you dare let Mag see you looking like that," I said harshly. "You know what you promised me?" He glowered at me dumbly.

"I have not forgotten, Mr. Quest, and I always keep my word, but I can't help looking like that when she makes me feel like it."

"Like what?" I snapped. "Be lucid."

"I believe she likes that—that big chap better than me now, and she's only seen him three times."

"What big chap? You don't mean Cardwell?" I answered, with fine and insincere scorn. "Why, he's like a water-cart, or a garden-roller; he's like a prizefighter, what's it they call them?—a bruiser, that's what he is, a bruiser."

This epithet somewhat consoled the suffering Yangus, and the name stuck to the heir of all the Maxstokes (his father was the first peer), and for all I know sticks to him to this day.

At midnight we opened the windows and waited for the striking of the clock, and then we drank, all unwitting of what it was to bring, to the health of the New Year, 1914.

The Bruiser behaved well on the whole, after I had found occasion to tell him of young Forbes' departure. He even suggested Yangus looking up a cousin of his in Bombay, and wrote the name and address down on his card, but no one, not even the most prejudiced in Miss Pye's favour, could deny that on this occasion she flirted

in a barefaced and abominable way with the Honourable Anthony.

So the party ended not very gaily, and I took Yangus home to my rooms, where he was to spend the night, a doleful and depressing companion.

Mag we had safely packed off to Pimlico by herself, in the only taxi we could find, and the Bruiser walked with us as far as the next cab-rank, where we parted, he for gilded baronial halls somewhere in the West-End.

I have forgotten why Mag and Yangus were not to meet again before he sailed, but that was the arrangement, and on New Year's Day I took him and his uncle to dine at some restaurant. There was nothing sentimental about the old painter, but he was sorry to lose the boy, and begged him with quite pathetic insistence to write often.

Yangus also promised to write to me, because, sly youth, he knew that if I answered his letters he would get news of Miss Pye.

The long evening wore away, as the long day had done, and the next morning sailed the good ship that was to carry the budding tea-planter to the field of his labours.

I greatly liked the boy, and secretly shared Madame Aimée's hopes for the future, although I had seen in Mag no signs of anything warmer for him than a casual, rather sisterly affection.

I remember watching his train go out of the station, rather wishing I was going with it, and feeling vaguely that this New Year was bound to bring great changes to all of us. And God knows it did.

CHAPTER XLI

IN May Pye had a very serious breakdown, or backsliding. He came to my rooms one of those Arctic, hurricane-like nights that make the English spring and summer so fatal to tropical trees and plants, wrapped in a hooded cloak of thick felt, that gave him a strangely picturesque look.

"I have come," he said, dashing the hood to the back of his ruffled head, "to tell you that you must take Mag away for a while."

"Good heavens, why?"

He gave a rough little laugh. "Don't be frightened, nothing's the matter with her; it's only me."

I gave him a whisky and soda, and he drained the glass before he spoke, then he said shortly:

"It's simply that I can't do without the stuff any longer—I'm going to have it."

"Morphine, you mean?"

He nodded. "Yes. I've done my best, and now that she's grown up and I can be of some use to her I shall keep on—understand that, Mr. Quest. I shall never stop trying, but it has gone too far with me for me to be able to give it up entirely."

"I see, and you don't want her to know?"

The poor fellow shook his head, which, by the way, looked rather fine in the shadow of the monk-like hood.

"No, I thought perhaps you could take her away; or Mr. Glenny; she'd be uneasy if I went. Now that she's older she hates it more and more——"

It was very decent of the man to come to me, and I thought in silence for a moment, not as to whether, but in what way I could carry out his wish.

"It would do no good," I said, after a while, during which I had filled and lighted a pipe, "for me to take Mag away if she were to come back at the end of a fortnight, say, and find you a wreck, Mr. Pye. We couldn't fool her, you know, even if we try. She's too clever."

"I don't want that. A fortnight of the stuff would undo me. What I shall have to have is four or five days' hard go at it, and then," he concluded quietly, not without dignity, "I shall go to that Nursing Home in Hampstead."

I had had so little experience with people with this poor fellow's terrible weakness, or vice, that I don't know even now whether there was anything peculiar in the way it affected him.

However, this is what he told me, and time showed that he was perfectly truthful in the matter.

At his own suggestion, he sat down at my writing-table and wrote a letter to Nurse Johnson, who, he told me, had now taken the house next her own, and was running them together very successfully, and told her that he would be coming to her very shortly.

He left the letter on my table, and I knew that he wanted me to post it, so that I should be quite sure of his good faith.

"I shall not leave Blantyre Buildings," he said, "and as soon as I can I will go to Hampstead. Nurse Johnson will write to you."

Then we parted, I having undertaken to remove Mag

from the scene the next day but one. Before midnight that night I walked to the post-office and sent Miss Pye a wire. This wire was the result of a long talk on the telephone with Mr. Treffry, and I am sure that rarely has one of the orange-coloured envelopes contained more of pure delight for its recipient than did that one.

On the Wednesday morning Treffry, Magpie and I were sitting in the boat-train, making our way to Paris. In a second-class compartment near by was Treffry's trusty butler-valet, old Usher, who had been to Ceylon with us, as well as to Germany with his master.

Mag and I, it must be said at once, were from the moment we left London until the moment when we reached it at the end of a much longer absence than we had first contemplated, Mr. Treffry's guests. The dear old fellow had insisted on doing this, because he maintained that my plan of going somewhere to the sea in England could have held but little delight so early in the year, and in this, of course, he was right. Also, it had long been his wish to be with the child the first time she saw Paris, and for many years he had had the habit of taking a look at that delectable city in what he called "lilac and hot asphalt time."

So everything had fitted in together smoothly and without apparent effort, and we dined that night after a hasty toilet in the almost empty dining-room of an old hotel in the Rue de Rivoli that had been a haunt of fashion in the sixties.

I was glad we had gone there, because there was, to my mind, something far more typically Parisian in the tall, bare rooms, with their gilded sofas and cornices, and faded crimson damask curtains, than in the newer hotels, with their chintz and white paint, and general air of cosiness. It is not French to be cosy, and I wanted Mag to catch as much as she could of the French spirit. She was delighted with everything, and her face, on our arrival a little wan and

pale with the fatigue of the unwonted journey, glowed like a lamp while she devoured food in a way that, if applied to lamp oil, would have made her a hideously expensive lighting system. She was awfully hungry, and it was an excellent dinner, for the proprietor, Monsieur Jules, himself superintended it in the good old-fashioned way, afterwards standing by the table and conversing with his kind old patron.

"Ah, Monsieur Treffree," he exclaimed, at one point, "I was telling my son only the other day that it is over fifty years since first you came to the 'Saint Omer'—*cinquante ans!*"

I caught Mag busily counting on her fingers and toes to find to what remote period of the world's history these fifty years would bring her.

"Sixty-four," I murmured. She nodded.

"Oh, Mr. Quest, isn't it wonderful! I'd like some more of that salad, please. I like salads made of these things that you don't know what they are," she added lucidly.

"Do you remember the day we stood on the balcony, Monsieur, and saw the Empress drive by in her open carriage?"

Treffry nodded. "I do, Jules. I also remember the day when we saw 'Those Others' march by."

"Who were 'Those Others'?" asked Mag.

The two old men looked at each other and sighed.

"The Germans, my dear," said Mr. Treffry, adding to the Frenchman, "Thank God you've lived all that down here."

The rotund little man in the beautifully-fitting frock-coat shrugged his shoulders sadly.

"In a way, Monsieur, in a way; but I wish I could have seen another war, and partaken in the march to Berlin."

"Very ominous signs in Germany now," I observed.

"They are getting restive, the brutes, and a friend of mine

wrote me only a few weeks ago from Frankfurt that they are making no bones about their readiness and willingness, if no more, for a war."

"*Sapristi*, Monsieur, with whom should they make war?"

"Possibly with Russia."

The old Frenchman smiled.

"They would never dare attack France, because"—and he made a polite bow—"attacking France would mean attacking England as well."

Treffry laughed at us, secure in the evidence of what he had seen and heard in the autumn, and shortly afterwards we all went to bed.

I was half undressed when Mag came pounding at my door to rhapsodize over the enthralling fact that her bed had a canopy to it.

"What Madame Aimée calls a '*ciel*,'" she added. "Too perfect for words! And curtains tied up with silk cords and tassels to them!"

I bade her go away and leave me in peace. But I lay awake for some time in my own bed, which appeared to be a twin brother to the one that so delighted her, wondering which of my friends, Treffry or Max Cohen, had been right about Germany.

CHAPTER XLII

FOR four blissful days our Magpie explored Paris. She really knew French remarkably well, and thanks to some of the books I had had her read, she had a pretty good idea, as such ideas go in girls of seventeen, of the history of that wonderful old town.

So it was a real pleasure to old Middleton Treffry and me to take her about and watch her thrill at the wonderful things we showed her.

She fell in love with Notre-Dame at first sight, but I must say that I think it was more connected in her mind with Quasimodo and Esmeralda, to say nothing of the goat, than with more serious and authentic vicissitudes.

She climbed up to see the view, while Treffry and I wandered about below, and when she came down there was no stopping her, she talked for a solid half hour about the things she had seen. Oh, how she did talk!

The day after that we drove to Versailles, and of course she loved best of all the pathetic, romantic little Trianon, with its little rococo ghosts of artificial shepherds and shepherdesses.

Marie Antoinette was one of Miss Pye's most deeply loved heroines, and perhaps it is that poor little queen's greatest reward for the terrible troubles, which, however

surely she brought them on herself, she certainly bore with dignity and courage, that she is amongst queens the best beloved of young girls.

We did not see the waters playing ; I have been to Versailles hundreds of times, and I've never yet caught them at it ; but we had a lovely, sunny, unhurried day at the old place, and not the least of our joys was the wonderful lunch at the Hôtel des Réservoirs. That evening we heard *Faust*, and we saw a very dull, classical production at the " Français," and three blissful days Mag spent, chiefly, I must confess, without me, at the Louvre. I went with her to the Luxembourg, and bought for her there a delightful little statue—a reproduction of something by somebody. I have forgotten the name ; a naked woman, sitting very straight in a chair with her feet crossed, her little head erect, and in her delicate hands a large mirror, into which she is supposed to be gazing ; a charming little thing, and the replica I bought was well worth the five pounds I gave for it. The young man who made it, who had heard her admiration of the original and persuaded us to go with him to his studio and look at his reproduction, was a charming person, carefully got up to resemble Rudolphe in " La Vie de Bohême." He even wore, in his passion for detail, the pegtop trousers of the period, and his long, greasy hair was of a raven-wing's blackness.

He it was who invited us to the students' ball, to which, when I had had a few minutes' private conversation with him, I agreed to take my young charge for half an hour that evening. It was very good fun, I must admit, for it was a real ball, and we were, I think, the only onlookers, and even we weren't entirely onlookers, because Mag insisted on dancing, and did so with our young friend and one or two of his friends. The ladies present were possibly not all of a virtue sufficiently exiguous to please, let us say, dear old Lady Houndel, but they were all obviously what

used to be called Grisettes, and most of them seemed honestly in love with their young men; in fact, I think most of the couples composed what the French so charmingly call *faux ménages*, and to Mag they were simply a lot of working girls and young students enjoying themselves.

I was perfectly disgusted when, towards the end of our allotted time, for Treffry was to fetch us for a moonlight drive in the Bois, who should come in but the Bruiser. He was accompanied by two ladies, more elaborately dressed than those already present, and obviously of an entirely different class, and altogether I didn't like the look of him. This was, perhaps, unfortunate in view of the very decided way in which he liked the look of us.

How he got rid of his twittering companions I don't know, but it is a fact that a few minutes later, he, as well as Mag and I, were in the big, open car, in the back seat of which, well wrapped up, sat Treffry.

Treffry and the Bruiser had never met before, but the objectionable young man possessed, it seemed, an aunt who was a friend of our host, and on the strength of this absent lady, the old gentleman was obliged to make the young man one of our party.

I sat in front with the driver, and Mag and Treffry shared between them the little room not occupied by the vast frame of Mr. Cardwell.

We drove up the Champs-Élysées and through the Bois towards Fontainebleau, and in the beautiful moonlight we were all a little silent. The trees, of course, for it was only the middle of May, were still half transparent in their young verdure, and the air was mild and sweet.

I should have been very happy but for the presence of the unwanted guest just behind me. I did dislike him so intensely, though, I must admit, for no particular reason. Once I couldn't help voicing my prejudice by asking Mag

with great anxiety if she had enough room. It was the Bruiser's voice that answered me.

"Thank you very much, sir," he returned, beginning at that moment his horrid trick of treating me with a respect due to nobody but a nonogenarian, "we are most comfortable." I suppose they were.

The young man was staying at Meurice's, and it gratified him to know that he was, so to speak, almost next door to us. Plans for our united jollification poured from his lips. Had we been to the Conciergerie? Good gracious! We must go to the Conciergerie. He knew someone who could get some special kind of pass. I was intensely exasperated, but there was no good my saying anything, and my exasperation waxed as the days went by, for whenever the young man gave us what *I* considered a brief rest from his society, Mag became noticeably absent-minded, and almost depressed. In fact, she as nearly moped as I have ever seen her do.

"What you can see in that great rhinoceros of a young man," I burst out one evening on our way up in the lift, "beats me."

Treffry laughed gently. "No," he said, before she had time to reply, "you wouldn't be able to see, Quest."

"Well, do you?" I snapped.

"I think he's a pleasant boy," the old man returned. "And he's beautiful manners. Naturally Mag likes him."

Half an hour later, as we sat in his room over a fire, for it was rainy and chilly, and Usher had decided that his master's old bones needed comforting, I asked my friend why he had spoken as he did.

He smiled. "I take it," he said, "you don't want the child to fall in love with the young brute?"

"Oh, you horrible old hypocrite!" I burst out. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, pretending to like him?"

He laughed gently.

"My dear Victor, I don't mind him myself. He's an interesting type. I believe he could crush an ox, and I have never known a man before about whom I had that pleasant conviction. I'm sure he could pull down some of the flimsier church porches, say, in the London suburbs. He's a magnificent specimen."

"Ho, he's bow-legged!"

"Many very strong men are; but you are an idiot, my dear fellow, if you don't mind my saying so, to show Magpie so plainly that you disapprove and are jealous of this young man."

Naturally I protested against the word "jealous," but he was in a manner right, and I deserved it, for my feeling about Mag and her Bruiser must have been very much like the feeling a mother might have for an undesirable man who hovers about a dearly-loved daughter.

There was no shaking off the Honourable Anthony, and for the next three or four days he was a positive blight on my life.

I plotted to escape him one night when I was taking our young lady to a carefully-selected music hall, but he beat me, and bobbed up serenely a few minutes after we had taken our places in the little pen called a box, over the sides of which he nearly squeezed us all by displacement, as he sat down.

Mag was delighted to see him, and I couldn't help being sure that it was she who had told him where we were going to be.

The next evening there was no way of evading his invitation to supper at the Café de Paris, and a grand festival it was.

Mag wore her birthday frock, that had somehow changed and blossomed a little, and something about her, probably her vitality and warm colouring, drew a great deal of attention to our table.

It was quite plain by this time that the young man was seriously in love ; I couldn't even reproach him for a wish to philander with my charge—matrimony was written all over him, and I felt in my bones that at the most I could hope to stave off a formal declaration only for a day or two, and my soul sank within me as I thought of poor Yangus, working, presumably, in the sweat of his brow on his tea-plantation, and thinking about the young limb who had so utterly forgotten him.

Filled with a strong wish to be unpleasant to the Bruiser, I suddenly leant across the table and spoke :

" Mag," I said, " this is the thirty-first ; five months ago to-day dear old Yangus left us. Have you heard from him lately ? "

She stared at me for a moment, and then looked rather guilty.

" No—that is, I—well, yes, I had a letter from him yesterday, I think it was, or the day before—but I haven't read it yet."

" Haven't read it ? " I asked severely. " Why not ? "

" Well, I'm afraid I just forgot. I've always been in such a hurry, and there have been so many things to do."

The Bruiser eyed me with triumph.

" How shocking of you, Miss Pye," he commented, his odd, square face grave. " But I thought him such a nice little fellow."

I was very much annoyed, and I don't know what I should have said, but just as he, the Bruiser, had walked into my life ten days ago, and trampled my springing hopes, as his prototype, the elephant, might trample a field of tender green corn, at that moment the door of the restaurant opened, and in walked, unexpected, balm-bringing and beautiful, Edith Lossell with her father and two people I had never seen, a man and a woman.

It was for them that the empty table next us had been

reserved, and in a few minutes the two parties had been amalgamated and the Bruiser's star began to wane.

It was interesting and curious to watch. Lossell was cordial in his dry way to the young man, and Mrs. Logan-Bull seemed really to take to him, as, considering the latter half of their name, and the young man's burly build, seemed rather a touching fidelity to type. Edith was perfectly civil, yet she routed him. I don't quite know how she did it, or even what it was she did, but in a pricked-balloonish way he dwindled and became silent; he ceased to shine; his magnetism failed him; even Mag, in her rapture over Edith, forgot him, and this the young man couldn't endure. He sulked, and therein lay his undoing.

Before we parted company—the Lossells and their friends to go to their usual hotel in the Place Vendôme—the two following days were arranged for. The Logan-Bulls, it appeared, were on their way to Belgium to visit some friends, and Lossell would, of course, be busy during his stay, so Edith was to join with us, and "us" had ceased to include young Mr. Cardwell.

"I'm afraid I shan't see you to-morrow," the fallen star murmured at the door of the hotel, "or the next day either. Miss Lossell seems to have arranged for your day."

Mag nodded.

"Yes, it's too heavenly that she should have turned up. You've no idea," she added, in all innocence, "what a perfect darling she is."

"Indeed," he murmured. "She must have been very handsome once."

To my delighted amusement Mag went for him and railed at him. There was much coldness in their parting, and I marched up to my room to an inaudible march of victory that rang through every drop of my blood.

Edith had routed him. The Bruiser had met his match.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE next morning I received two letters, both of which interested me very much.

The first I have kept, and it runs as follows :

“ MY DEAR QUEST,

“ The last time I saw Mr. Treffry he told me that he was going to Germany—to Wiesbaden, I think—this summer. Don't let him go. There's going to be war, and it will come very suddenly. I am very sad these days, for it is dreadful to see the fatal carelessness and slackness of those who ought to be setting about protecting this country. Lord Roberts appears to be the only one who sees things as I know them to be true, and they are disregarding him, as other than prophets of pleasant things are always disregarded in England.

“ I won't go into details, for I find that nothing bores Englishmen more than being told that Germany is going to war ; but my dear fellow, don't let that most delightful of old gentlemen go to Germany, even if you have to proceed to the length of preventing him by main force. I know what I'm talking about.

“ I had a card from Magpie informing me that of all cities in the world Paris is undoubtedly the most delightful.

I have always been rather of this opinion myself ; but it is a comfort to have it confirmed by such an experienced traveller ! Tell her this, with my love.

" Who is the youth you so greatly dislike ? She says that you are very funny about him, and I am wondering if he is an undesirable suitor !

" With kindest regards to you, and don't forget what I have told you about Mr. Treffry.

" Yours sincerely,

" MAX COHEN."

The other letter was from Nurse Johnson, in Hampstead, and told me in a few words that Pye, who had been in her house for about ten days and was very bad at first, was on the road to recovery and behaving very well.

" I am very sorry for him," the kind woman added, " for his is an odd case, without the hateful element of lying and pretence that usually stamps such as his. He's sincerely desirous of giving up this stuff, and has altogether improved immensely since that first time when Sir Max Cohen sent him to me.

" Thank you very much for your kind letter and for congratulations about my little success. It is wonderful to be quite independent, and earning a really good living.

" With kind regards,

" Yours very truly,

" CATHERINE JOHNSON."

I told Mr. Treffry what Sir Max had said ; indeed, I showed him the little man's letter, but he laughed at it, the gay old boy, and declared that nothing should keep him from a course of the waters at Wiesbaden. In fact, he unfolded a plan he had been cherishing about taking Mag on there with him, but this at least I was able to veto. (I hope that the reader will be glad to hear that a sharp

touch of gout, just when he intended to go, prevented our losing this enchanting old citizen of the world.)

That day, the day, as I have said, after the supper at the *Café de Paris*, was a grand day for me.

Edith, Mag, Mr. Treffry and I lunched at the " *Pré au Catalan* " and there was no Bruiser ; yet, in spite of this fatal fact, Mag was brilliantly happy. After lunch Edith took her to one of the good shops, and bought her two frocks as a gift, and never was bird of paradise or peacock more consciously splendid than was our homely Magpie at dinner that night. There is really something different about Parisian clothes.

No one mentioned Mr. Cardwell, and I had every hope that the coming of Edith had routed him once and for all. In this, however, I was doomed to be disappointed, and my chagrin was augmented by a fear that the young man's knowledge the next morning of Edith having gone off somewhere by herself for the whole of the day, must have some connection with Miss Pye.

At all events, at half-past ten he was in our sitting-room, bearing a large bunch of flowers and a box of sweets, and Mag was as pleased as ever to be with him.

Anything like the imperviousness of the Bruiser to cold-shouldering, and outrageously downright snubs, I have never beheld. Even Mr. Treffry showed that he was intruding, and as for me, I was abominable to him, yet never for one minute of the day did we lose sight of him, and I was very troubled to watch Mag sparkle and soften, and glow, in an unmistakable way, under his attentions.

The next day I myself had an engagement with Edith. She had written to ask me if I could spend three or four hours with her in the afternoon, and I arranged for Mr. Treffry to take Mag to lunch at *St. Cloud*. At about twelve, just as I was going out to find a suitable taxi, up came the huge young man, whom I by this time detested

with a thoroughness and venom that was really rather exhausting. He had a new covert coat, with a flower in it, and he looked more like the prosperous, victorious prize-fighter than ever. What on earth his charm could be for a clever and artistically sensitive girl like the Magpie, I couldn't imagine.

"Good morning," I said stiffly. "Miss Pye is not in. She's gone to the country for the day with Mr. Treffry."

He looked down at me and smiled, a perfectly good-tempered smile of triumph. "Gone to the country, has she?" he repeated, his conspicuously white teeth flashing; "in that case, how odd it is that she should be standing on the balcony just over your head!"

I should have liked to go upstairs and spank Mag, but all I could do was to explain that I knew she was busy and could see nobody before she and Treffry set out.

"I have just telephoned her," he answered. "They are going to allow me to take them to St. Cloud for the day in a very good 'Renault' I have been lucky enough to find."

Thoroughly disgruntled, I left him and wandered about brooding until it was time for me to fetch Edith.

I found her, looking very smart in new clothes, waiting for me.

"I'm so glad you could come, Victor," she said. "I'm in a sentimental, retrospective mood to-day, and I want you to take me on a little ghost-hunt."

I knew what she meant. We lunched at Montmartre at the Hôtel de la Poste, where, incidentally, before the war was to be got as good food as anywhere in Paris, and then we wandered about, looking at places connected in her mind with Bettany.

The pilgrimage was not much to my taste. I hope I should not have minded quite so much if he had been a decent fellow, but I fear I should not have enjoyed it, even

in that case. However, I did my best to be sympathetic, and made very careful inquiries at two restaurants, the hotel, and two houses that he had at different times either frequented or lived in. No one knew anything about him. He had not, apparently, on his return to Paris, gone back to his old haunts, and we learnt nothing, until suddenly I remembered Dubourg and his tale of Constant's.

We found the place with no trouble, and, what was more remarkable, we found there an old waiter who distinctly remembered Monsieur Dubourg and Monsieur Bettany. This old man told us that he had seen Bettany within the last ten years.

"He came in once to lunch, Monsieur, and I waited on him myself—I who tell you."

"How did he look?" put in Edith.

The waiter shrugged his shoulders. "No man grows younger, Madame," he said, "as time goes on."

"Yes, but did he look—how do you say 'prosperous,' Victor?"

"*Non*, Monsieur," the waiter was sorry to say that Monsieur Bettany had not looked prosperous. Moreover, he had looked sad.

That was all we could gain, but we left a stamped and addressed envelope with the waiter, and gave him five francs with the promise of a like sum by return of post if he could ever send us any further news of our old friend.

Edith was very silent as we made our way to the Luxembourg Gardens. She looked tired and worn. It was a beautiful day, and there was in the air that oft-described and quite indescribable gaiety that in the spring is as much a part of Paris as Notre-Dame itself.

She led the way to a seat not far from the statue of a very pot-bellied Cupid, shooting an arrow apparently straight at the bald head of an old gentleman reading the *Figaro* on a bench opposite us.

"Let's sit down here for a little while."

It was very pleasant there in the sun, and I liked watching the shrill, leggy-looking French children at play. At last Edith said:

"Victor, you are so good to me. You have been so patient to-day at what I know you think is only a silly whim, that I want to tell you something."

"Don't tell me, dear, if it would be painful to you. You know how I love being with you——"

She laid her hand on mine for a moment.

"I don't want you to think that I am looking for—for Mr. Bettany in a silly, sentimental way. You know that I loved him, and you also know that I have never loved anybody else, but one doesn't go on being *in love* for twenty years with a man one has never seen during that time. I am not in love now with poor—Bill."

I could think of nothing to say, so I was silent.

"I am looking for him, Victor—I shall look for him, now that I am sure he is alive, till the last day of my life. I once did him a cruel wrong; one of the worst wrongs a woman could possibly do to a man, and I want to set it right."

Of course I hadn't the remotest notion what she meant, and of course I couldn't ask her, so I assured her that I understood, and thanked her for telling me so much.

"It was on this very bench we were sitting," she resumed, after a moment, "that he first asked me to marry him. It seems," she added slowly, "a *thousand* years ago."

The old gentleman folded his *Figaro*, put it into his pocket, and trotted briskly away, quite unconscious of the Cupid's arrow that had been pointed at him so long. Perhaps he, too, had been hit by it a thousand years ago.

We took a taxi and drove back to her hotel, and found Lossell in a very good temper, having just discovered and bought very cheap three delightful satinwood chairs,

on which had been painted, well over a hundred years ago, by a master hand, wreaths and garlands of deep pink and yellow flowers.

They were really charming things, and he informed me he should give them to Mag as a wedding present.

I groaned. "If the young minx carries out what appears to be her present intentions," I returned, "you'll have to have cast-iron chairs made for her. If that fellow sat on one of those, it would be matchwood in a moment."

Edith was as exercised as I about the Bruiser, and to my great delight the chairs led up to a plan, carried out the next day, which gave me, for a short period, the whip hand over Mr. Cardwell—and didn't I enjoy it!

Sir Ralph and Lady Belchamber, Edith's uncle and his young wife, were at Spa, and Edith had planned to spend a week there with them before returning to London. When she offered to take Mag with her, unbeknownst to the Bruiser, I could have shouted with joy.

Mag *did* shout with joy, when, cannily waiting till just before bedtime, I informed her that she was to go away the very next morning with Miss Lossell for a whole week.

"Oh, Mr. Quest," she cried, grinning with the unreserve with which a large, affectionate dog sometimes grins at one, "how perfectly heavenly! Where are we going?"

"Ah, that," I returned sagely, "is on the knees of the gods."

To my relief this mystery only increased her delight, and before nine the next morning I had her at Edith's hotel, for their train was to go at ten something. But I decided to forego the pleasure of accompanying them to the station, in order to save for myself the joy of beholding Mr. Cardwell's discomfiture in finding himself thwarted.

Our interview was really rather amusing, and since that hour I have always known what must have been the feeling of Jack the Giant-Killer after he had slain his Giant.

This Giant came lumbering into the room about half-past eleven, beaming with joy and anticipation.

"Good morning, sir," he exclaimed, making great play with that reverence for my age that he had been sharp enough to see intensely annoyed me. "I hope you are feeling all right this fine morning?"

"Much the same as usual, thank you."

"I have just come to tell Miss Pye that I have got a box for *Carmen* to-night, and to remind her that she and Mr. Treffry—what a delightful old gentleman he is! so sympathetic and kind—that they are lunching with me at 'Henri's.'"

"Indeed?" I murmured, quite politely. "Won't you sit down?" He did.

"I suppose they told you what a jolly day we had yesterday," he went on. "I'm sorry to hear that Miss Pye's father has been ill. I'm greatly looking forward to the pleasure of meeting him when we get back to London."

(Bullock-hided but doomed youth!)

"Would you mind letting her know I am here?"

"I am sorry," I said. "I'm afraid that is impossible."

"What do you mean—impossible?"

It was very undignified of me to play with him in this way, and I knew it, but somehow I couldn't resist it.

"You said she was to lunch with you at Henri's?" I asked him.

His deep-set little eyes darted a glance of suspicion at me, but I met it innocently; as innocently as he had yesterday morning met my story about Mag being out.

"Yes, Mr. Treffry and she both promised."

Then came my turn, and with my puny sword I slew the monster.

"In that case," I said, "it is odd that she should be at this moment a good hour and a half away from Paris by train."

Oh, frabjous day! He could have crushed me like a blown egg-shell with his thumb and finger; he could have pressed the breath out of my gullet, and I had a fearful joy in thinking of these things as he crept in silence out of the room.

I believe he left Paris the next day. At all events, during the fortnight I was still there—for, because of Mag's run into Belgium our visit had lengthened a little—he no longer loomed up offending my eye in theatres, or blocking the view at street corners, or occupying on velvet seats in restaurants room that would have done for three average-sized men. For the time being I triumphed.

Treffry and I spent most of the time motoring and enjoying the out-of-door life of Paris. The old man was such a delightful companion that I didn't miss Mag at all, and even Edith only a little occasionally, but when at the end of five days the two ladies came back, we had a very happy reunion, and planned to return to London the next day but one.

CHAPTER XLIV

I SHALL never forget our picnic in the forest of Fontainebleau. It was my party, to celebrate our last day of our beautiful stay in beautiful Paris.

Early in the morning I spent quite two hours scouring the streets of Paris to buy beautiful and strange food for this *fiesta*; and indeed, for a man with his pockets full of money, as I that one day was, there can be on this wide earth nowhere like what some bold translator has termed "the light city." It was about eleven when the four of us set forth in the car I had hired for the occasion, on the back of which were strapped two large ambrosial hampers. Mag was bursting with excitement because I refused to tell her what she was going to have to eat, and spent quite ten minutes of our life-and-limb imperilling dash up the Champs-Elysées in suggesting all her favourite viands, to all of which, needless to say, I returned an unqualified "no."

I remember that it was the fourteenth of June that day, and everything looked happy to me.

Mag had been told simply that her father had had a touch of "flu," and it had never occurred to her to doubt the truth of this information. I knew that by the time we got back the poor man, who had greatly risen in my estimation by the news contained in Catherine Johnson's letter,

would be settled in Blantyre Buildings, ready to welcome his great traveller. It was also balm to my spirit that the Bruiser had been so definitely routed, and surely I need not say how perfectly happy I was in being that beautiful morning in that beautiful place, with my two dearest women in the world, and Mr. Treffry, whom I had learned in the past two years really to love.

They all seemed happy, too, and even beside Mag's glowing youthfulness, my dear Edith lost, to my eyes, none of her beauty.

It is hard to express the deep happiness it gave me to see that Edith and Mag were growing fonder and fonder of each other. Altogether a propitious morning.

We stopped the car somewhere in the middle of the forest, and, telling the chauffeur to come back for us in two hours' time, made our way, I lugging with Mag's help the mysterious hampers, to a lovely little clearing, which was neither sunny nor shady, but flecked and dappled with a moving web of lovely light and pleasant shade, and there we spread out our rugs and there we camped.

Mag looked round.

"This reminds me," she said, "of that lovely picture in Lord Lossell's gallery—'La Clairière.' Do you remember, Mr. Quest?"

I did. There is something very beautiful in the word "*clairière*." It is much prettier than "clearing," and like so many French words seems in an unfair way to mean so much more romantic things than their English equivalent, but romantic things were soon forgotten in our zest for collecting sticks to make the fire for our coffee.

It is, of course, strictly against the law to make a fire in the forest there, but little did we reck of such tiresome things as laws, and very soon we had a fine blaze, the water boiling under a patent arrangement I had bought that morning—the water we had brought in bottles.

I don't suppose that there is a single soul who does not think that he or she can make beautiful coffee. I have no wish to dispute these pretensions, but long experience has taught me that *I* really can. The coffee was fresh ground, and we had cream and milk. The bread was twisty, crusty crescents, and the butter had been churned in Brittany.

I shan't attempt to describe what we had to eat, except to say that as a meal for a June day under French trees and a French sky, it could not possibly have been beaten. We were all very hungry, even Edith, and when Mag and I had packed up the things and buried the *débris*, we moved a little further away and again sat down, and told stories.

Presently the car came back, and with that lordly disregard for time and money that characterizes me when I really set about doing things on a grand scale, I bade the fellow wait.

Dear old Mr. Treffry (we had brought a pillow for him) leant up against a fallen tree and very quietly and unostentatiously dropped off to sleep.

I told Mag a blood-curdling tale about a charcoal-burner who went mad in the forest and roamed about there after dark ; and Edith, who had taken off her hat, leant against a tree-trunk and listened to our nonsense with a happy smile on her dear face.

Mag and I finally took to writing rhymes—limericks—and became so idiotic that we could hardly read them out. And all this time the delicate, early summer leaves stirred above us, and the mild sun warmed us, and tiny insects creaked and whirred, and the birds—lazy little devils—enjoying themselves in the mid-day sun, gave out occasional hoarse, sleepy chirps.

Mag was sitting by Edith, holding one of her pretty white hands between her own brown paws, and examining the

rings on my dear lady's fingers. They were very happy, these two, and I suddenly remembered that, after all, we were now in summer and that autumn would soon be on us, and I told myself the old lie about long lanes having no turnings—so many lanes seem to go straight from horizon to horizon—and I decided that when the time again came when I was constrained to ask Miss Lossell to marry me, her affection for Mag, and Mag's devotion to her, might be very potent assets on my side.

Now there was behind me a very comfortable rise in the ground, and a little ledge from which the earth slid away, and underneath which, against the bright yellow soil, small roots and stalks could be seen.

Against this I had placed my rain coat, brought because, as an Englishman, I had mistrusted the beautiful French day; and I was leaning very comfortably with my hat tilted over my eyes. The last thing I remember was watching Edith's and Magpie's faces through my overhanging eyebrows, which, for the moment, I was too lazy to push up. It was like looking at them through a curious frill, or scrap of lace. The next thing I knew, I had just heard a sharp little cry, and jerking my eyes open, I saw Mag and Edith drawn apart from the ground, staring at each other. Mag's face was scarlet; Edith's very white.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Neither of them answered me, and a moment later Mag had dashed off amongst the trees and was lost to view.

"What is it?"

Edith looked at me helplessly. "I haven't the slightest idea," she said. "We—we were talking, and she was stroking my hand, and I was nearly asleep." She frowned gently. "It's very odd, Victor."

It was odd, but, as Mr. Treffry woke up at that minute, we said no more about it, and when, ten minutes later, Mag came back, so to speak, into camp, she went straight to

Edith from behind, and, kneeling down, put her arms round the older woman's neck.

"Dear Miss Lossell," she said, "I'm sorry to have been so silly. Will you please forgive me?"

I saw Treffry—dear old man—admiring the pretty picture they made, and when Edith turned and took the young girl in her arms, the old gentleman rose to his feet.

"This is Fairyland we're in," he said, "and perfectly delightful, but perhaps, my dear Quest, it is also just a trifle damp for my antick bones. Suppose we start back?"

Edith agreed at once, and a few minutes later we were again in the car, bowling along through the intricate, romantic forest.

Mag sat with Edith's hand folded close in hers, and said very little, occasionally touching with a caressing forefinger the little chain bracelet with an ivy leaf medallion that Edith had worn ever since I could remember.

The next afternoon on the boat I took occasion to ask the child what it was that had so startled her in the forest.

She laughed at me. "You dreamt it, dear Mr. Quest," she said. "You were sound asleep."

"I wasn't," I returned immediately. "Somebody screamed or cried out. Was it you, Mag?"

Her mouth tightened and she turned away from me.

"Perhaps we were all pretty near asleep," she said. "I for one had eaten so much that it wouldn't have been at all surprising if I had had a bad dream and made a row."

We had a dreadful crossing, and I will say no more about it; and the next day I had to go to Hampshire, as my poor sister, who had never recovered from the loss of little Gisella, needed me.

CHAPTER XLV

AND now we have come to War-time. I have no intention of trying to depict the effect, even on my unimportant self, of the world cataclysm. Much has been written about the war ; most of it, I venture to think, nearly worthless through lack of perspective, for to my mind great events can best be described in the subsequent quiet and peace. Moreover, if anyone can describe its effects at such a close range as this, Mr. H. G. Wells has very completely and conclusively done so as " Mr. Britling."

My humble little story I will tell as a thing too insignificant to have been much affected by the dramatic events under whose shadow they passed, so I will only say that, like everybody else, I have been both saddened and encouraged by the effects of the Kaiser's decision to attack the bellicose, and provocative, and contemptible little army of these isles. I know many people who have fallen in the great conflict, and as yet we have not come to its end, but, ignorant though I am of psychic and metaphysical things, and though I have no knowledge whatsoever of strategy and tactics, and could, if asked, offer no suggestions as to how our country could better be governed, or by whom, in the future, yet I still can see light breaking

ahead, and it seems to me that it is, unlike the flash of shot and shell, or the glory of conflagrations, a clear, white illumination, like the promise of dawn. Surely better days must be in store for the whole world after this dreadful time of purification.

And now to get on with my story. I stayed in Hampshire for eight or nine weeks, although I had, I am glad to say, been in town on that never-to-be-forgotten night when we declared war against Germany. I had been one of the waiting crowd before Buckingham Palace. No one who was there will ever forget it, and I don't believe anyone who was there could describe it, try he never so hard.

The psychology of crowds is always wonderful, but the psychology of a crowd breathlessly waiting for the vindication of the honour of its country is a thing not to be put into words.

When I came back from Hampshire, I found Blantyre Buildings, so far as I was concerned, deserted, save for that pathetic permanency, Madame Aimée.

Mag and her father, she told me, when I found my way to 133 one pouring wet evening, had gone to the East End to see someone who was ill there. "An old friend, I suppose," the Frenchwoman added, with an odd kind of acrimony, "the man who told you about Mag's mother."

"No doubt. Why on earth did Pye take the child?"

"It is probably," she answered, smiling, "that the child took him. Mag has changed very much, Monsieur; she is growing very fond of her father."

"Good. How is she behaving about—well, her mother?"

Madame Aimée stitched placidly on. Being a rainy evening the windows were almost closed, and the smell of

hot irons, that I somehow always connected with her, was very strong. There was also a strong smell of lavender, and I noticed a big enamel bowl half full of the stripped-off blossoms of that delightful flower.

"Miss Lossell sent Mag a lot of lavender," Madame Aimée explained, "and we are going to put it into bags. You are to have one," she added, smiling, "to put among your shirts."

At this noble prospect I expressed gratification, and then went back to the subject of Mag's behaviour regarding her mother.

"Is she beginning to believe what I told you?" I asked.

"No, but oh, Monsieur," the poor woman clasped her delicate hands with that fervour that seemed so exhausting to her, "she's much more sensible. She's trying, poor child, oh, so hard, to be worthy of the great lady who gave her birth."

So she had succeeded, the poor mending-woman. I congratulated her, meaning every word that I said.

"You must be," I said, "very proud of having brought her into this useful frame of mind."

She smiled. "I am very thankful. That is one reason why she is now so different about her father. She is of a protectiveness and motherliness to him now; no doubt because whatever he has been of late years, he was once the man that her mother loved. It will make you want to weep, Monsieur; it will make you very happy."

Then she added something that did make me want to weep, and did not make me happy at all.

"A young man of gigantic proportions has been coming to see her."

"Oh, damn!" I murmured.

Madame Aimée looked up in the shadow of her blue veil.

"You do not like him—this bear-like gentleman?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't. I thought I had got

rid of him. By the way, has she told you young Forbes, Yangus, is coming home ? ”

“ Yes, I know. He cabled you, did he not ? ”

“ He did. I don't think he's found tea a very lucrative leaf, and I'd like to bet something valuable that he's coming back to fight.”

For a long time I sat there, for, as was always the case, the odd kind of peace had settled on me as soon as I had established myself in my usual chair in the quiet room. At last, however, I rose to go, and was indeed making my adieu, when our dear Magpie came in. It was over two months since I had seen her, and I was struck by something new in her face. It wasn't exactly that she looked older, but she seemed more complete, more settled—less a growing thing than something that had reached its full growth. She kissed me affectionately and told me that she and her father had been down to Mile End Road to see poor Mr. Davis.

“ He's dying,” she added simply. “ *It*, you know, has killed him.” Then she added, with a strong note of pride in her young voice, “ Only people who are really good, and really try, can ever get over *that*, you know.” And I knew that she was praising her father.

She came downstairs with me, and on the way I ran in and shook hands with Pye. He looked exhausted and ill, and much older, but he seemed glad to see me in his non-committal way, and I sat with him for a few minutes, and heard the latest news about Mag's pictures. She had sold two, it appeared, and was busy on a third.

“ I wonder,” I began, struck by a new idea, “ whether her lessons began too late, Mr. Pye ? Whether, if she had had earlier instruction, things might have gone better with her.”

The air of authority with which the broken, inarticulate man met this surmise astonished me.

"No, Mr. Quest," he said, lighting a cigarette, "it is not that. I think that, even now, before she is eighteen, my daughter has developed to the fullest extent that which was born in her."

"Then you don't believe," I mused, "that artistic powers can be increased?"

He made an odd, un-English gesture with his left hand. "No,—developed, improved, yes; but increased, no. According to Mag's materials she has done wonders."

It was raining, so I walked to Sloane Square and went home by Underground, and when I got out at the Temple station, behold, the rain had ceased and in a wind-blown wrack of cloud perched a half-ripe moon. It was a beautiful evening, and I wandered for an hour up and down the Embankment, wondering how far right poor Pye had been.

Finally I came to the conclusion that at all events he had not been far wrong, and that every mind might be compared, so to speak, to an egg, and out of a hen's egg is bound to come a chicken, no matter how warm the incubator in which it is placed, and nothing that can prevent a peacock's egg from ultimately producing a peacock.

Then I went home to bed.

CHAPTER XLVI

LOOKING back on the next few months, the fact that presents itself most broadly to my mind is that Mag behaved like an idiot about young Cardwell, and gave us all a great deal of trouble.

Yangus turned up early in October, and after he had joined up, asked my permission to propose to the Magpie.

"Unless," I growled, "you can turn yourself into a water-butt or a Japanese wrestler, it is not much use proposing to her. She's crazy about that fat boy."

Yangus, who had had a sharp go of fever, and looked much older in his subsequent thinness, turned very pale.

"Cardwell still?" he asked.

"Yes, and I blush for her."

"But does she want to marry him?"

"I don't know that things have gone that far, but they are a great deal together, and she won't hear a word against him."

"Good God!" said young Angus. "What does her father say?"

"He seems quite content. Madame Aimée, I am glad to say, loathes the fellow—I mean Cardwell."

Yangus was very depressed; but no more than I was, particularly after I had screwed myself up to the pitch of mentioning Miss Pye's suitor to her father.

"I have nothing against the boy," he said, "and I believe in early marriages."

"But Mag is too young, she can't possibly know her own mind."

A smile flickered over his sad face. "Do you really think Mag doesn't know her own mind?" he retorted.

Of course I didn't think this, and my next move was to inquire into that mind itself.

"Are you going to marry the Bruiser, Mag?" I asked her.

She was painting in her father's studio during his absence and I was sitting by her.

"Marry the Bruiser?" she repeated reflectively, looking very tall and pretty in her blue and white pinafore. "Who told you I was?"

"Nobody. I was just asking you. I suppose he has asked you to do so?"

"Five times," she answered, "and a half."

"What happened to the other half?"

"Well, I think I—choked it."

"Do you like him, Mag?"

She blushed a little. "Well, I don't know whether I like him," she answered, with her transcendent frankness, "but I'm awfully in love with him."

I laughed. "Do you ever think of the good old days when you sighed for Sir Max?"

"Oh, that was different," with a toss of her head.

"Well, suppose you try to make me understand, will you?"

Always willing to oblige, she put down her palette and brushes, and drew a chair close to mine.

"I'll try if you'll promise not to laugh at me."

"I never laugh at you, Magpie dear—not inside."

She nodded gravely. "All right, then, I'll try. You see it's rather fun," she said, "to be able to scare the life

out of anybody who is so big that he could literally swallow you whole."

"Oh, I see. And this whale-like fascination is enough for the sprightly minnow to risk all her future on?"

"The sprightly minnow," she answered, "is not a minnow at all, it is an electric eel, or a poisonous jelly-fish—that's the fun."

"I see. And suppose you married him, where would you be when the joy of being swallowed alive and stinging back had lost its freshness and charm? Remember you may have got over your love of stinging, but you will still remain," I concluded impressively and rather pleased with my choice of a word, "like Jonah in the whale's belly."

"I think it is very indelicate of you to talk of Mr. Cardwell's—I mean— Oh, Mr. Quest, what idiots we are!"

She laughed till I could see her tonsils. But a little later when we were again serious, we went back to the subject of her feeling for the young man.

"After all, dear," I said, "none of us, your friends who love you, like Cardwell, not one of us, and as we are all fairly well-meaning and not unintelligent people, don't you think that our opinion ought to count just a little with you?"

She was silent for a moment and very serious, her charming eyelids hiding her eyes. At last she said slowly, "I have another reason, Mr. Quest."

"Is it one you can tell me?"

Her answer amazed me. "Yes, it's about my mother."

"About your mother, Magpie?"

She rose and walked up and down the long, dusty room, her hands clasped behind, her head bent.

"I know what you think about my mother, dear Mr. Quest," she began slowly again; "I have never forgotten, but"—very gently—"you were wrong, you know."

"My poor child, I was right."

She shook her head. "No, I knew then, and I know thousand times more surely now."

"But why do you think so? I was told—it was Davis who told me, and he has known your father for years."

"He has known my father for a long time, but not at the time. No doubt he thought he was speaking the truth about the poor little man—by the way, he died yesterday—but he was mistaken."

There was no doubting her absolute belief in what she was saying, and her conviction was so convincing that I began to wonder if, after all, Davis had been mistaken.

"Have you ever seen the lady in the motor since that day?" I asked.

"I could tell you," she returned, "her name, and a great deal about her,—the whole story—but I mustn't, it wouldn't be fair, so you mustn't ask me."

"Nonsense," I said testily, "you've been reading the *Family Herald*. These things don't happen in real life. I tell you your father's wife was, before he married her, a tumbler in a circus."

She sat still in the middle of the room, and she was very pale.

"I never said," she declared slowly, "that my father's wife was my mother. I always knew she wasn't."

This was awful, and I jumped up and burst out into unmodified and most ill-considered words.

"You are insulting your father, and you are insulting your mother," I shouted. "What right have you to say such things about a dead woman? You are a silly young idiot, Mag, and I'm ashamed of you."

In a moment she had torn off her pinafore and had marched out of the door and down the stairs.

When I could compose myself decently I followed her and knocked at the flat. No one answered, and though I knocked quite three minutes, I was obliged to go away without seeing her, although I knew she was within.

This was my first quarrel with Mag, and I knew that however exasperated and foolish she had been, I had behaved very badly to her. After all, the child had trusted me with a secret which, however idiotic I might think it to be, was evidently to her something sacred, and I had jeered at it. This made me very unhappy, and I wrote and told her so, and brought my letter hidden in a box of lilies of the valley that very evening. The Corporal, when I asked him to take them up, regarded me with frank suspicion, and I believe he thought that I had begun a belated flirtation with Miss Pye. When he had consented to undertake the delivery of the box, I walked home by the Embankment, a little comforted by my apology, but still shaken and ashamed of myself.

Nothing is more unjustifiable than the rough handling by the old of the little, fantastic, delicate secrets of the young.

The next day I received a short note from Mag, forgiving me, and thanking me for the lilies, but expressing no wish to see me, and although I called once and sent an invitation, not only to a play, but to dinner at the "Savoy," in the next three weeks, she wouldn't see me, and I knew that her forgiveness had been only one of duty and gratitude for the past, and by no means meant that she had forgotten her anger.

I had never told Edith what poor Davis had told me about Mrs. Pye, but now in my misery I did tell her one day, as we walked in the Park, and in order to make my situation clear I was obliged to tell her about the lady in the motor-car. To my surprise she already knew about this.

"Mag told me in Paris," she explained. "She's very odd about it. I never saw anyone so tense and dramatic about something so distant, and impersonal one might almost call it, as a mother one has never seen except in a motor-car."

"She's very romantic, is Mag, in spite of her up-to-date casualness of manner; I wonder what on earth it can all mean? Pye must have been an attractive fellow, and wonderful things happen, saving your presence, even in the British aristocracy, my dear. But still—her father must have told her something, because she's perfectly truthful, and she is too quick-witted to imagine that one thing means another. Besides, she says he nearly fainted when he saw the lady."

"I once asked Mag," she returned meditatively, "if she wouldn't like me to take her driving in the Park sometimes on the chance of seeing this queen of mystery, but she wouldn't go."

"Now that's odd," I returned, "because she sat with me at Church Parade many a time, with her eyes glued on every woman who drove past. Of course," I added, looking at my watch, "she's at just the romantic age, and is doubtless making a very huge mountain out of a very insignificant molehill. And after all, at that time any well-dressed woman in a motor-car might have looked like a fairy queen to the poor little thing."

Edith laughed. "Not a bit of it. She's an uncommonly good judge, I can tell you, not only as to looks, but as to whether a woman's a lady or a man a gentleman. Her observations on people are extremely amusing."

"Do try," I said, "to make her tell you more, Edith dear, for she's laying up great sorrow for herself. No, I must go. I promised not to be late."

We shook hands, and she laughed gently at me.

"She may be laying up sorrow for herself, but she's also crushing my poor old Victor under the weight of her displeasure. She's a vindictive monkey, and I shall tell her so."

But Mag was not vindictive, and as I made my way to Bloomsbury I was very unhappy about her.

CHAPTER XLVII :

AS time went on I was glad to see that Yangus was not deeply depressed by the continued devotion of the Bruiser to the Magpie. He was, instead, angry and blood-thirsty, and showed it in a way that was balm to my soul.

"Do you suppose they are engaged?" he asked.

"I don't know. As I have told you, Miss Pye and I are hardly on speaking terms."

He looked on me with the greatest compassion.

"I *am* sorry, but it's perfect nonsense, of course. I shall tell her so."

In view of this decision he insisted on Mag's coming to tea with him, and his uncle, and me, within the next few days, and, rather to my surprise, she did so, treating me with perfect courtesy and a horrid little film of reserve that was sincere, and that I tried in vain to brush aside.

I sent her a book next day, pretending that I had promised it to her, but this failed to move her, and only a lucky (brute that I am to say it) fainting-fit of Madame Aimée's succeeded in winning me her real forgiveness, for, by a stroke of good fortune, I was with Madame Aimée at the time, and able to be of service to her. This she told Mag, thus winning for me a perfectly disproportionate burst of gratitude from the haughty young woman.

After that we all dined together—Treffry's party, this time. We wore our best clothes, and looked very handsome, and the dinner (it was at the "Berkeley," for Mag had expressed a wish to become acquainted with all the great restaurants of London) was a most merry one, until the horizon was suddenly darkened by the vast approach of the Bruiser. He came in to speak to some people at another table, but when he saw us (we were sitting over our coffee), he immediately joined us, shaking hands warmly with us all, and inviting Mr. Treffry to invite him to sit down for a bit.

I think I have said that Treffry never shared my violent antipathy for the self-confident, rhinoceros-hided young man, so the desired invitation was cordially given, and we drew our chairs closer to make room for the unfortunate one on which that gigantic youth sat down.

To my delight Mag seemed less impressed than usual by this visitant from higher spheres.

Yangus had gained, as young men do, in value, through having been absent and doing unknown things in unknown lands. He was no longer the abject slave he had been, and that, of course, raised him greatly in her feminine eyes. Moreover, the huge one had lost something of his pristine charm for her, for he was, so to speak, always on top, and that is disillusioning. Therefore the race was more or less a fair one, and as the Honourable Anthony waned in Miss Pye's estimation, he, perhaps inevitably, rose a little in mine, though I don't know that that comforted him very much.

Yangus, sly dog, had learned a thing or two in India, as indeed is nothing unusual, and as I have said, paid no such abject devotion to his charmer as of yore. So, human nature being what it is, Mag treated the returned traveller, if not exactly with deference, at least not so much in the way in which the boot treats the worm.

Treffry was delighted, and he and I thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. For although the old man rather liked young Gargantua, he had never wanted Mag to marry him, and it was with difficulty that I suppressed a cheer as, before old Glenny had smoked his second cigar, Lord Maxstoke's heir beat a dignified, if rather sulky retreat, murmuring that he was due at Lady Somebody's ball, in, I think, Grosvenor Square.

"I don't like that lad," Glenny declared, looking at his cigar and then stabbing it, in a way that looked very dangerous, at his long beard, in feeling for his mouth.

"Rather braw?" I suggested.

"No," said the old man, unmoved, "yon's not braw, yon's above life-size."

We then talked a wild jargon that Mag and I pretended was Scotch, and in which the two Scotsmen so ably seconded us, until the party broke up in general good temper.

* * * * *

Everybody remembers the turmoil of the first few months of the war, and I suppose I was at that time no more busy than anybody else, though I felt that nobody had ever lived in such a whirl as I.

I blundered about, trying all kinds of things till I finally settled down at some abnormally dull secretarial work at the Home Office. No words can tell how I loathed this occupation, but having undertaken it, I stuck to it until some change in the arrangements set me free. And so back to my story.

On looking back now, and gathering together its wandering threads, I seem to see nothing worth relating until a few weeks before Mag's eighteenth birthday. At this time Edith was at Wandover, which, to everybody's surprise, Lossell had, within a fortnight, turned into one of the most

perfect private hospitals surely ever seen. Yangus was living up to his neck, so he wrote, in mud, at Salisbury Plain; Mag was what she called "grinding bandages" somewhere for hours every day; Madame Aimée, in every moment that she could spare from her work, was knitting huge and hideous socks for the soldiers. Max Cohen came out strong; there was not a charity in which he did not figure, and he gave his time and brains as generously as he gave his money.

One evening in November, then, I was sitting in my room, rather glad to feel as the rain clattered on the window, and the wind howled in the old courtyard, that autumn had really come. I know that many people find sadness in what the Americans very beautifully call "The Fall of the Year," and that spring is supposed to be the season of hopefulness and happiness; but it seems to me that to people whose lives have passed the time when every day is naturally expected to bring some new delight, and when quite half one's pleasures must be either retrospective or vicarious, the early part of the year has a queer little sadness of its own. I know that I always feel older, more out-of-date, more useless in the spring than at any other time; whereas in the autumn there is in the sense of cosiness, there is in the delight of early lamps and the pleasant company of not yet quite necessary fires, something very comforting and very fulfilling, and I think I feel about these two seasons much as I feel about, say, Mag and dear old Middleton Treffry. To Mag, who stands for spring, because she is Youth, I am an old man; to Mr. Treffry, young though he always will be in spirit, I am almost a youth.

On this blowy, chilly, wet night, I drew my dear arm-chair close to the fire, which I had been taught by war economists would shortly become almost a criminal luxury, and I loaded my pipe with a secret mixture of my

own, and stretched out my feet, in a perfectly disreputable pair of old slippers, on the fender, bent forward the green silk shade of the electric lamp at my elbow, so that no glare could offend my eye and a mellow light was ready for my book, and opened that book.

I had been feeling all day that the time had come for me to go for perhaps the hundredth time to the Hebrides with Dr. Johnson and his faithful Bozzy. The wind howled ; we had a most tiresome passage to the Islands, but finally landed, the great man soaked to the skin, but very sententious, and Bozzy and I hanging on to his every word. And then somebody knocked at my door.

I called out " Come in " and, after a moment of fumbling, in came Mr. Pye. The minute I saw him I knew why he had come.

It was six months since his last nocturnal visit to me, and the poor fellow had, in the interim, done his best.

I noticed as I welcomed him and gave him a pair of slippers, for his boots were soaked, that he looked ill and haggard and indefinitely broken.

I had begun by thoroughly despising him, but his doughty struggle at his long, losing game had inspired me with a certain real respect, and to save him the embarrassment of an explanation, I said, as I poured out some whisky for him :

" You want me to take Mag away again ? "

He was gnawing his lips, which were dry and scaly-looking, and his hands, I saw, were never still a moment. He nodded, and I saw in his eyes a look of inarticulate torture such as I have, for my own peace, never seen before or since.

" Don't think worse of me than you must, Mr. Quest," he said, " and don't think that I don't know how little right I have to come and bother you with my miserable troubles."

" Drink your whisky, Pye, it'll warm you. Man alive, you're trembling! And as to my thinking badly of you, just listen to me. I have"—I said it very slowly and very quietly, as if I were dropping big, round stones into a pool I didn't want to disturb—" I have a very great admiration for you."

His face worked, deep wrinkles that I had never seen in it before appeared suddenly as if drawn by charcoal all over it, and he stammered out something I couldn't understand, but that I knew meant gratitude and relief.

" It is worse than ever this time," he went on, with a sudden rush of words; " I can't bear it any longer, I have endured it as long as I could. You see, it is difficult to get the stuff, since poor Davis died I have hardly known where to go for it; but I met a sailor the other day who sold me some. And I must have it, I must."

I nodded. " I see. I'll ask Miss Lossell to invite Mag down to her Hospital for a time. Mag's crazy to go."

He breathed a deep sigh and finished his drink. " I wonder if you know," he began, after a long pause, during which I put some coals on the fire as softly as I could, " that this kind of thing—mine, I mean—can't be got over? "

" Sometimes it can."

He shook his head. " No, not when it is a habit of many years. I shouldn't care a bit if it wasn't for the child."

" But there is the child, you poor fellow," I put in.

" She is nearly a grown woman now, Mr. Quest."

I wanted to tell him that a man's daughter can never really grow beyond child. I went to her parent, but I didn't. I felt that he wanted to talk, and that I had better let him choose his own words.

" You have been the best friend Mag has ever had," he resumed. " There is no use my thanking you. But for you God knows what would have happened to her."

"I think you forget, Mr. Pye," I interrupted him gently, "Mag's very best friend, Madame Aimée."

He shook his head and frowned. "I know. I know. You've told me that before, and I have heard it a thousand times from Mag herself, but I have never seen the woman—I couldn't bear to—disablement and disfigurement have always been frightful to me." He shuddered from head to foot. "I know you think I am a brute about it, and you are right. That is one reason why I have come to-night. I have brought"—he fumbled in his shabby coat and took out an envelope—"I have brought a letter that I have written for you to give to Madame Aimée, just in case"—he stammered and broke off—"just in case I—"

For a wild moment I thought he meant that he was going to kill himself, and, reading the thought in my face, he gave a little laugh and shook his head. "No, no; if I had been that kind I should have done it years and years ago. I was never," he added, "brave enough for that."

He handed me a letter, and I saw that it was addressed, in a small, neat hand, just to "Madame Aimée!"

"In case anything should happen to me, even if it is in ten years' time," he went on quietly, "you'll give her that, Mr. Quest. It is a poor attempt to thank her for what she has been to Mag."

I put the letter on the table. "Then you do understand what she has been to Mag?"

"Yes, I have told her that she has been the nearest thing to a mother the child has ever known."

Then it was that I dared ask him my great question.

"Look here, Pye," I said, "let's talk frankly for a few minutes—for Mag's good. Will you tell me—for her sake—and I'm not asking lightly—something about her mother?"

He looked mildly surprised, but not, as I had half expected, deeply moved.

" Her mother ? Yes, I'll tell you but why, why do you want to know ? "

I didn't answer, and without waiting for me to speak, he said simply, " I married a girl who was one of a family of tumblers in a circus. She was one of the best and purest women who ever lived." He sat staring into the fire, his dreadful nervousness for a moment in abeyance.

Then I said, " And Mag is her child ? "

His eyes were full of almost stupid bewilderment as he stared at me.

" Mag—Mag her child ? Why, of course she is ! Whose child could she have been ? "

I felt an awful fool. " Mag has got it into her head," I said, " that she is the daughter of some great lady." He looked more puzzled than ever, and I knew that he was not shamming.

" How on earth——" he murmured slowly.

And then I told him of the day on the Embankment.

" You were talking about her mother, and at that moment a motor-car passed, do you remember ? You nearly fainted."

He rose suddenly, his face first scarlet, and then growing slowly of an odd, greyish colour. " She thought that—that lady was—her mother ? Oh, my dear Christ ! " He buried his face in his hands for a moment, and then, walking to the window, knelt and thrust his head and shoulders out into the wet darkness. I neither spoke nor moved until he came back. Then I looked at him and broke the silence.

" Will you not, for her sake," I said, " tell her she was mistaken ? "

" Yes. I must go now," he murmured, kicking off my slippers and putting on his wet boots, " you—you will take her away to-morrow ? Thank you, Mr. Quest. I must go."

He caught up his old hat, and made for the door. Before he opened it I stopped him.

"Have I your promise, Pye, you will tell her?"

He turned. "On my honour——" he began, then he laughed. "No, on *your* honour, I promise you. Not for the child's sake, but for the sake of——"

After a moment of hesitation he went quietly out, and shut the door.

CHAPTER XLVIII

AFTER a moment, impelled by I have never been able to remember clearly what thought, I ran after him, snatching up my coat as I went, and running down the stairs as if the devil were after me. But I must have waited several minutes before leaving my chair, for when I reached the court it was empty save for the old plane-trees, and the rain pelted down on a vacant world as I came out from under the archway.

I tore up to Fleet Street, fairly empty at that time of night, and sped as quickly as I could towards the Strand. I knew instinctively that he had gone home, and I didn't tell myself why it was necessary that I should overtake him; it *was* necessary, and I ran along, threading my way amongst the infrequent but baffling umbrellas I met, as hard as I had run for many years. Near the church I caught him.

He had slowed up a bit, but his pace was still a good one, and I rather feared startling him, which I need not have done, for presently he turned and looked at me in a way quite new from him to me. He looked at me as an older man might look at a younger, caught in some silly but well-meant prank; or as a very clever man might look at a

rather stupid one of whom he was fond. And for the first time he spoke to me as if there were nothing strange or strained in our relations, just as one man naturally speaks to another.

"So it was you beating along like that," he said, with a more genial smile than I had ever seen on his face. "You'll catch your death of cold in those slippers."

I believe I blushed in the darkness, as we passed out of the radius of the street lamp; I know my ears burned.

"You don't mind my coming after you?" I stammered. "I'm sorry to be a nuisance, but somehow I couldn't help it. I had to come, Pye."

He laughed. "Did you think I was makin' for the river, or going to buy some rat-poison?"

We settled into a brisk walk, and for a while neither of us spoke. At last he said, as we approached Savoy Street, "Do you know the little church down here?"

"I've never been inside it——"

"Come along, I'll show it to you."

We plunged down the steep grade, and stood presently looking through the iron palings at the old churchyard. It was raining harder than ever, but a street lamp cast a long shaft of light across the grass and the old grave-stones.

"Looks a quiet place, doesn't it?" my strange companion observed. "Well, one fine summer morning fifteen years ago, I walked in through that gate, and into the church, and was married."

I had known him so long, and yet so remarkably little, that his sudden communicativeness disconcerted me.

"That must have been a happy day," I stammered feebly.

I could see his thin hands tighten their clasp on the two palings they were holding.

"It was the most wretched day but one of my whole

life," he returned slowly, and then, at a sign, I followed him down to the Embankment, and we went westward.

"Some day," he began, as we passed the Abbey, "I want Mag to know about my life, but she mustn't know till I am safely dead. So I'm going to tell you."

"Shall we not get a taxi?" I said. "You'll be drenched to the bone." He paid no attention to the interruption, and we walked on.

"I haven't any religion," I heard him say next, "but I believe in certain things; one of these is punishment. When I was very young I committed a crime. I am not sure that it was one that could have been punished by the law; it was an odd crime—but I did it. And I have been punished every minute of every hour of every day since then. I was not a bad young fellow, as young fellows go, but under the greatest temptation that has ever been put before anyone in this world, I broke down and gave way, and then, later, when my sin had won for me the prize for which I had committed it, I repented and wished to make good." He stood still, and, taking off his hat, pushed back his long hair and stood with his face held up to the rain, his head thrown back, his eyes closed. As I watched the heavy rain beat on his white face, it struck me that just so must look men who die out of doors, and lie until someone by chance finds them. Presently, half opening his eyes, he went on speaking. "I was not allowed to retract what I had done. I was not allowed to repeat, and that has been my punishment."

I wanted to say something about Christ; I wanted him to remember those wonderful words about seventy times seven, but I couldn't, and after a long time, as it seemed, we walked on. My head was full of a wild confusion of thoughts. I knew that I ought to use the man's sudden, unexpected hour of emotion in some way to prevent his carrying out his dreadful plan for the next day; I knew

that I ought to speak to him of his dead wife, of his daughter, of duty, but none of these things could I put into words; as it was his will that we should walk on through the deserted, wet streets, we walked on.

Presently he led me away from the Embankment, and after some moments I found that we were at the far end of Victoria Street. Outside the delightful old vicarage, with its garden full of trees, we again stopped.

"You're a good fellow, Quest," he said, "and upon my soul I'd like to tell you the whole miserable story, but I can't—I mustn't. Thief and scoundrel though I am, I must keep my promise."

"Of course you must."

"But I promise you I'll make Mag understand," he resumed, "what her dear mother was, and that she has been dead these many years, poor soul. And to-night, before I go to sleep—God help me, shall I sleep?—I'm going to write another letter to give you, for you to give some day to a third person, whose name I will tell you in the letter. You won't read it until I am dead."

Physically, as well as mentally, I gave myself a sharp pull together.

"I'll do anything you say," I answered, "but the rain is too much for both of us; we are becoming rather—well, rather morbid, aren't we?"

He laughed. "I dare say we are. However, I meant it about the letter. And the reparation that I am bound to make, that I am allowed to make after my death, shall be made through you. That will be, perhaps, some little recompense for your marvellous kindness to Mag and me."

He held out his hand and an odd kind of power seemed to radiate from him. It didn't seem possible to me that he could seriously intend making a brute of himself with drugs, and yet I dared not put this thought into words. I

shook hands with him in an obedient way that I observed myself. He smiled at me, and his blue eyes, for the first time that I had ever seen them so, were full of active kindness. Then we parted, he crossing the street to the Pimlico Road, and I standing under the lamp where he had left me.

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CHAPTER XLIX

AS I stood there in a kind of stupor, I heard, very far off, softened by the rain, a recurrent clangour. It came nearer and nearer from Pimlico way, and, incredible though it may seem, it was several seconds before I realized what it meant. Fire! Far down the road I saw the red thing leaping towards me, and the noise it made waked me from my curious, dreamy condition. I was ashamed of having been such a coward as not to dare try to use Pye's confidential and friendly mood to help him against his dragon, and, as if the sound of the fire-engine had given me new strength and vitality, I dashed along back in his direction. I would again overtake him, and try in the name of his dead wife and his child to persuade him to forego the dreadful indulgence he was contemplating.

Just beyond the little triangle of grass, at the near end of the Pimlico Road, there was a butcher's shop; just beyond the butcher's shop there was a bright light, and in this light, although it was nearly half-past ten at night, a child was standing with its mother, while she talked to another woman. It was a Saturday night, and some of the shops were only just closing. There were more people here than one would have seen in a better street—poor people who had lingered to snatch up tit-bits at closing

prices. As the fire engine leapt towards me, the child, who was dragging some kind of a woolly animal on wheels, let go the string, and the toy slid over the curb into the street.

I am taking an unconscionable time to tell it, but I saw the child dash after the toy, and I saw something dark dash across the pool of light from the lamp after the child. There was a shriek, the fire-engine thundered past, sprinkling the darkness with sparks of light, and in the road, just on the edge of the light, something lay.

I knew before I had got to it what it was—I knew before the crowd had collected and the child's frightened screams were quiet that I need not try to dissuade Mag's father from his plans for the next day.

* * * * *

It was only a step to the Buildings, and some kind ambulance men had him on a stretcher almost at once ; and the mother of the child sat on a grocer's steps in hysterics ; and the rain ceased, and a strongish wind, sprung from nowhere, blew a hole in the sky so that the little cortège of which I was the head walked along in a path of moonlight.

The ambulance men stopped at the Corporal's door, and I went upstairs to break the news. Mag was not at home, but the door wasn't locked, so I opened it and called up the men, and they carried their burden down the narrow passage and into the room with the too-large furniture. Then I flew up the stairs to Madame Aimée's and knocked. Mag opened the door, a huge grey sock in process of making in her hands.

" Will you just come down, dear," I said, " I have something to tell you."

She looked at me, and then, turning, called to Madame Aimée, " I'll come back in a little while. It's Mr. Quest."

And we went downstairs. I told her on the way and I let her go into the room alone. I shall never forget standing on the little gallery watching the moonlight, which was broken and intermittent, because of the wind-driven clouds, as it poured down into the courtyard. Most of the inmates of the Buildings had gone to bed, but in one or two windows lights still showed, and somewhere a cheap gramophone was playing. It seemed a long time that I stood there, and then one of the stretcher-bearers came out and told me he was going to the chemist's for one or two things that the doctor would be sure to need. It appeared that he had already sent Copley for a doctor.

"He's not dead, then?" I asked, knowing for the first time what novelists mean when they say that a man's own voice sounds strange to him.

"No, but he's done for, sir—at least, I think so. Spine."

As he went downstairs a tall, thin young man came up, and I found that he was, as I had supposed, the doctor. He went in, and again I watched. After a long time the door opened, and Mag came out. She had wrapped a shawl round her—the white shawl of Madame Aimée that she had, for the sake of sentiment, worn at the famous birthday party in Grosvenor Place almost exactly a year before. I went towards her, but with a queer little smile she shook her head, and with her left hand (the other was holding the folds of the shawl under her chin) motioned me back, and went almost silently downstairs.

Mine was a long and sad vigil. I loved Mag, and for the first time I had that night somehow got into sympathy with her poor father. He had trusted me—in a way, confided in me—and yet in their tragedy I was only an outsider. It came to me, as I stood there, my feet, in my old slippers, aching with cold and wet, that I was old and lonely and unneeded. After a while I began to walk up and down like an uninvited sentinel.

I walked as quietly as I could, because of the working people round me who needed unbroken rest, and thus it happened that I was at the far end of the side of the gallery when Mag came back. I heard her voice as she spoke to Copley, and as she came upstairs I heard it again, thus knowing that she had not returned alone. Largely, I hope, out of delicacy, but I also fear to a great extent out of hurt vanity and pique, I turned my back in the darkness, as two people arrived at the landing and went into the flat. But when Mag opened the door again a moment later, I was standing just outside it. She came to me. "Will you come in?" she said, and I followed her.

Pye was stretched on his bed, his old-fashioned night-shirt wide open over his thin chest, his hands lying inertly on the counterpane. As I went into the room the doctor came out, the ambulance men having gone; and kneeling, her arm under his head, her face on his chest, was Edith Lossell.

I knew so clearly at that first sight of her what it all meant; I felt so bitterly what a fool I had been not to understand long before, that it seems to me almost unnecessary to write another word; but poor Pye's eyes opened as Mag and I came in, and I knew by something in them that he would like to speak to me. So I laid my hand on his, and with the other just touched Edith's hair.

"He wants me to tell you, dear Victor," she said, "that it is he who is my dear love."

Why I hadn't known years before that he was Bettany, God alone can tell; it seemed incredible to me then that anyone could have been as stupid as I had been. I nodded.

"I see. And it was you Mag saw in the motor-car, and thought you were her mother?" She nodded, brave soul, she even smiled.

"Yes. But there is something else that you and Mag must both hear." Bending down she laid her face for a

second against that rapidly changing face on the pillow ; then she rose, still holding his hand.

"It's this—this is why I have broken my heart trying to find him." Bettany's eyes were fixed on her face. "Victor, he never painted those two pictures, 'Cross Roads' and 'Windmill.' You see, father said that we couldn't marry, and he, Bill, for my sake, and for his, because he knew that I was breaking my heart with him, pretended that these pictures were his." Then she added slowly, "He was robbing no one, really. He was staying at a farmhouse in Finistère after father had sent him away (for the excellent reason—oh, my dear love!—that he was not a great painter), and he found the two pictures in the thatch of the roof of his little garret room." She broke off, and knelt down, burying her face in the man's almost motionless breast. "The last person who had lived in that room had been a young painter who was killed in the Franco-Prussian War ; the people of the house didn't even know his name, and so Bill took the pictures and told my father they were his." I nodded.

"I see, dearest Edith, and then Lord Lossell allowed you to be engaged ? "

"Yes." Taking a glass from the table, she poured a few drops of some dark liquid between the dying man's parted lips.

"Don't blame him, Victor, don't dare blame him. It was dishonest—yes ; he was a thief—yes. But he was dishonest and a thief, willingly, *for less than four weeks*, and he has been paying *and the rest of his life.*"

I could hardly bear to let her undergo the pain of finishing the story. It was so unnecessary, for I knew so well what she was going to say. Mag had come quite close to me, and I put my arm round her, and thus we listened. But the man's eyes, fixed so avidly on Edith's face, compelled me to silence.

"You remember that night of the storm," she returned to me for one moment. "He had just le when you came, and he had just told me about pictures; he wanted to go to father and tell the truth wanted to own up to the whole world, and I would *him.*"

The silence in the room was dreadful; it seemed thickening; we all held our breath. Then Bettany a little rough sound without moving his lips, and she on. "Father had that very day sold the pictures to Chantrey people, and it is my doing that they are ha on the wall now as Bettany's work."

At this Mag spoke. "Why didn't you marry hi she asked coldly.

"I couldn't; I was angry, I was ashamed. I wa and hard and cruel to him, and I sent him away. I him promise never to tell, and I sent him away wit on his mind."

"You have been trying for years to find him, Edith said slowly. "Now I know why you wanted to give back his promise; you wanted to tell him that he r own that the pictures were not his."

"Yes. Now I have told you everything. Come, M she said, a minute later, "he wants you."

At that moment I, who was standing nearest the heard an odd sound in the passage—a trailing, bump kind of noise that I couldn't explain, and yet it made heart jump. Then the sitting-room door opened, and noise came nearer and they all heard it. Edith drew a from the bed; Mag, who had knelt down, and held father's right hand to her breast, turned round and st at the door. Bettany's eyes had closed, and he smiling. He looked up. The sitting-room door ope into the bedroom, and as the odd, shuffling n approached, I pulled it wide. There was a little gasp

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sonnd, and then, sideways, crab-like, ducking and bending, almost crawling, one hand sometimes to the floor, finally lurching against the lintel, came Madame Aimée.

Bettany opened his eyes. It was impossible for him to be paler than he had been ever since I entered the room, but something changed in his face and when I sprang to the poor, broken woman and helped her into the room, Edith drew back and Bettany spoke—the only word he had spoken since my entrance.

"Charlotte!"

I helped the poor creature to the bed and she knelt without a word. Then, after a moment's silence, she produced from under her loose robe a small brown rosary I had often seen, and I began to pray.

Presently she turned to Edith, and said very gently, "I am his wife, Madame Aimée, and Mag's mother." Then she again prayed.

I could bear no more, so I quietly left the room and stood in the gallery looking out into the rain, which was again coming down hard.

Some time after Edith joined me, and we stood there for, I think, quite an hour, hardly speaking—just waiting. It was Mag who told us that we need no longer wait. She came quit quietly and joined us, holding out a hand to each.

"Was de 1," she said.

Edith wouldn't go home till we had helped Madame Aimée to her chair and while I went for a taxi they had a little talk, about which neither of them ever told me a word.

I didn't see Mr. William Bettany again that night, but after I had put Edith into a taxi I left her. I knew she would rather be alone, and I knew that I should. I went quietly back up the stairs, and found Mag straightening

the counterpane over her dead father. She wasn't crying, she was very quiet, and after a while she let me make her some coffee ; and, drawing up the blinds, we sat down on the shabby sofa and drank our coffee, and talked, as the slow, autumn day came to Pimlico.

CHAPTER L

AND so I have finished my story. I need only say that when they first brought Bettany in after the accident he told Mag to fetch Miss Lossell, and that Mag had gone fully expecting to be recognized at last as her dear lady's daughter. Poor Edith, however, had, of course, not an idea until she reached the room whom she was going to see, and then I don't think she herself could ever decide whether the shock or the relief was greater. Before I went in she had promised to make everything all right with the Trustees of the Chantrey Bequest, and to make it clear that Bettany had acted on an impulse, however unforgivable that impulse might seem, and how fully the poor fellow had paid for his sin.

Bettany must have been happier the last few hours of his life than he had been for many years, and after his quiet funeral I took Mag and, despite her terrified protests, Mrs. Bettany, to Bournemouth for a few weeks.

It was beautiful to see how my dear child's fine nature met the queer situation in which she was placed. Madame Aimée had, indeed, as she told us, sitting among the pines, been a tumbler in a circus, and she gave us in simple language her whole story. I shall never forget the scene; the warm coloured pine trunks, the blue of the sea, and the

face of Mag's mother as she talked. Mag will never forget it either. She had met Bettany after the disaster, when he had assumed his mother's maiden name, and had never known who he really was. He had apparently married her because she was fond of him, and because he wished to forget Edith. Things had gone fairly well at first, for she had really loved him—and people who love and are happy are not suspicious—until, one day, in Paris, he had seen Edith with some man of whom, in a lover's foolish way, he had formerly been jealous. There had been a scene after this. It was when Mag was just over a year old, and the poor wife had run away on the impulse of the moment, bent on sacrificing herself for what she believed to be his good.

"He was drinking," she said, "and I hoped that if I wasn't there to worry him he would learn to love you, my dear, and keep strong for your sake; I thought you would be better without me, and I thought I could bear it; but in six months I found that I had undertaken more than I could carry out. We were at La Rochelle when I made up my mind to go back and ask him to forgive me, and begin over again. I meant to be very patient and very good, for I saw that after loving a lady like Miss Lossell (I didn't know her name then), he could never love a poor, uneducated girl like me. So I would go back and bear with whatever came. That night was the fire, and when I began to get better, months afterwards, my face was half gone; I couldn't walk, and I wanted to die. Never could I let him see me like that. So, knowing that he was then in Paris, I came to London to a friend who had been Columbine in a big pantomime here, and I lived with her for a long time, until you, *ma petite*, were six." Mag nodded.

"I remember. I remember your coming to the Buildings. I was playing in the courtyard with the other

children, and we all rushed to see you be carried upstairs."

"That is because," Madame Aimée (as she likes us to call her, even now) went on, "I had seen you and him together one day in the King's Road, where I lived, pass my windows, and he—he was not well, Monsieur," she added, turning to me, "and Mag was trying to help him."

The poor woman's mouth quivered and she pressed her finger-tips to it for a moment.

"I couldn't bear that. Though I had left them for their good, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't endure seeing her with a torn frock and a dirty pinafore——"



The bravery and simple goodness of her mother impressed Mag as much as it impressed me, particularly Madame Aimée's splendid self-sacrifice in enduring the child's nonsense about her lady mother.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Mag used to ask her. And Madame Aimée never answered, only, under the shadow of the blue veil, she would smile.

I came up to town once during our stay at Bourne-mouth to help Edith in her arrangements about the pictures, and with Madame Aimée's permission, I also showed her the letter poor Bettany had brought me the last night of his life. It was a good letter, expressing much gratitude for her kindness, and then, strangely as if someone or something had caused him to write, as he supposed, to a stranger, the only thing that could possibly have ever consoled the poor wife, he went on to say that Mag's mother, who had been dead many years, was one of the best and most generous creatures in the world; that he wished Madame Aimée, who, so far as one human being can ever take the place of another human being, had taken her

place, to know that although the child's father was a worthless and miserable wreck, yet there was in the child good and worth-while blood—her mother's. My dear Edith's beautiful eyes filled with tears over the last sentence in the letter. Perhaps that is why I remember it word for word :

" When you receive this letter, I shall be away, and if it can be so arranged, I should like my poor little Mag to stay with you, that you and she may take care of each other. I have been too great a coward to come and see you, but with all my heart I thank you, and I do know that there is nobody in the world with whom I would rather leave my poor Charlotte's child.

" W. PYE."

" I don't quite understand her having gone away and left the child," Edith said, when I had put the letter back in its envelope. " What possible good could that have done ? "

" None, of course, and so the poor creature saw, after she had done it. But can't you imagine her despair in finding that she had been wrong in hoping that he could ever love her ? Besides, she was young and she must have been pretty, and I suppose she was confoundedly jealous, don't you ? "

Edith nodded. " Yes. Oh, Victor, we are all jealous. Do you know, I had a very hard moment to go through the other night when the poor soul came into the room--and yet it was her place, not mine."

" There was," I returned gently, " room for you both there, but there was no room for her at the moment she ran away. I suppose it was her instinct to go back to the tents—back to the only work she knew, and perhaps she even thought she was making it possible for him to marry you."

We were silent for a moment, and then went back to the question of the pictures.

With Edith's permission I told Max Cohen the whole story, for he, we knew, could ensure the publication of the truth in the least unpleasant way to everyone concerned—and this he did, with a delicacy, and kindness, and pains-taking, not to be expressed. Edith's name or Mag's was not mentioned. Edith was happier than I had seen her for years, and when I came away to go back to my dear charges, she took from her arm the little gold bracelet with the green enamel medallion that she had worn ever since I could remember.

"Give this," she said, "to Mag. Do you remember our picnic in Fontainebleau, Victor?"

I did.

"Well, it came open that day, as she played with it on my arm, and she saw what was in it, and that is one of the things that confirmed our poor child's belief about her mother."

I opened the little locket, and the face of the young Bettany, so amazingly like the old Bettany as he lay dead, looked out at me.

"Poor Mag!" I said.

Edith laid her hand on my arm.

"Happy Mag, dear, to have a mother like hers."

I looked at her longingly and wondered whether I should be able to get through this autumn without causing her to go through her usual autumnal bad hour. She smiled.

"Now, don't," she said gently, "you mustn't, for I never, never could." And then she kissed me good-bye and sent me back to Pineland.



Since then only a few months have passed. Young Angus is at the front; the Bruiser has swum out of our ken; dear old Middleton Treffry is beginning to fail, but in a very gentle, happy way; Cohen is busy and kind as ever; and Mag and Madame Aimée are living in a little house in St. Leonard's Terrace. They are very happy—so am I, because it is a fine thing to see our wild Magpie gentling into a sweet and generous-minded woman.

Some day the war will end, by God's grace, and some day I hope to see Mag married, and a mother.

In the meantime she is making a fair amount of money by selling her charming pictures, and if Lord Lossell shakes his head over them we none of us mind.

Thus I think I have explained up to date the lives of all those friends about whom I have tried to tell.

So good-bye.

* * * * *

In the Tate Gallery hang together two very fine pictures; the one is called "Cross Roads," and the other "The Windmill," and on the little gold label with black lettering under the title to each, appear two words: "*Unknown Painter.*"

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