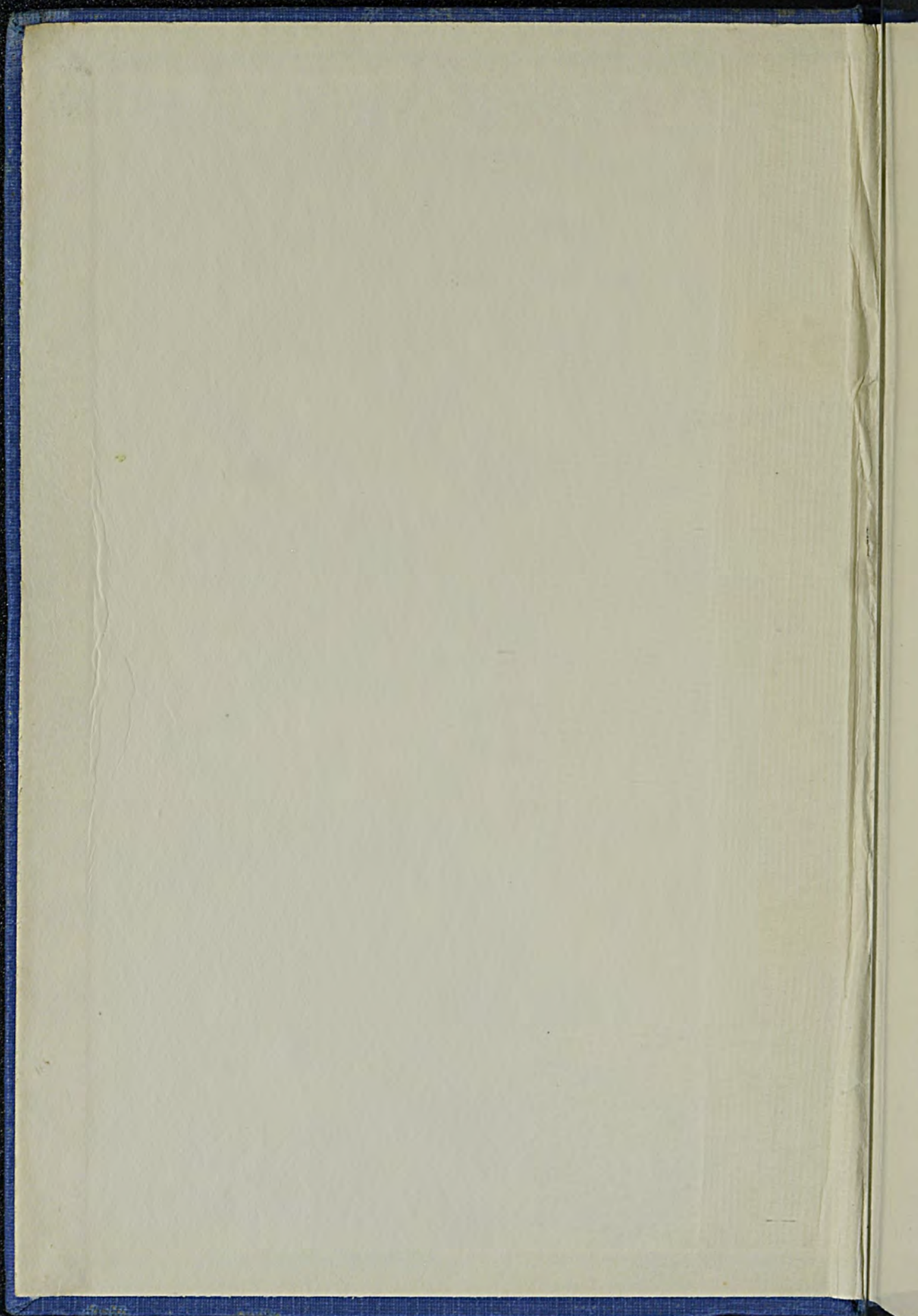


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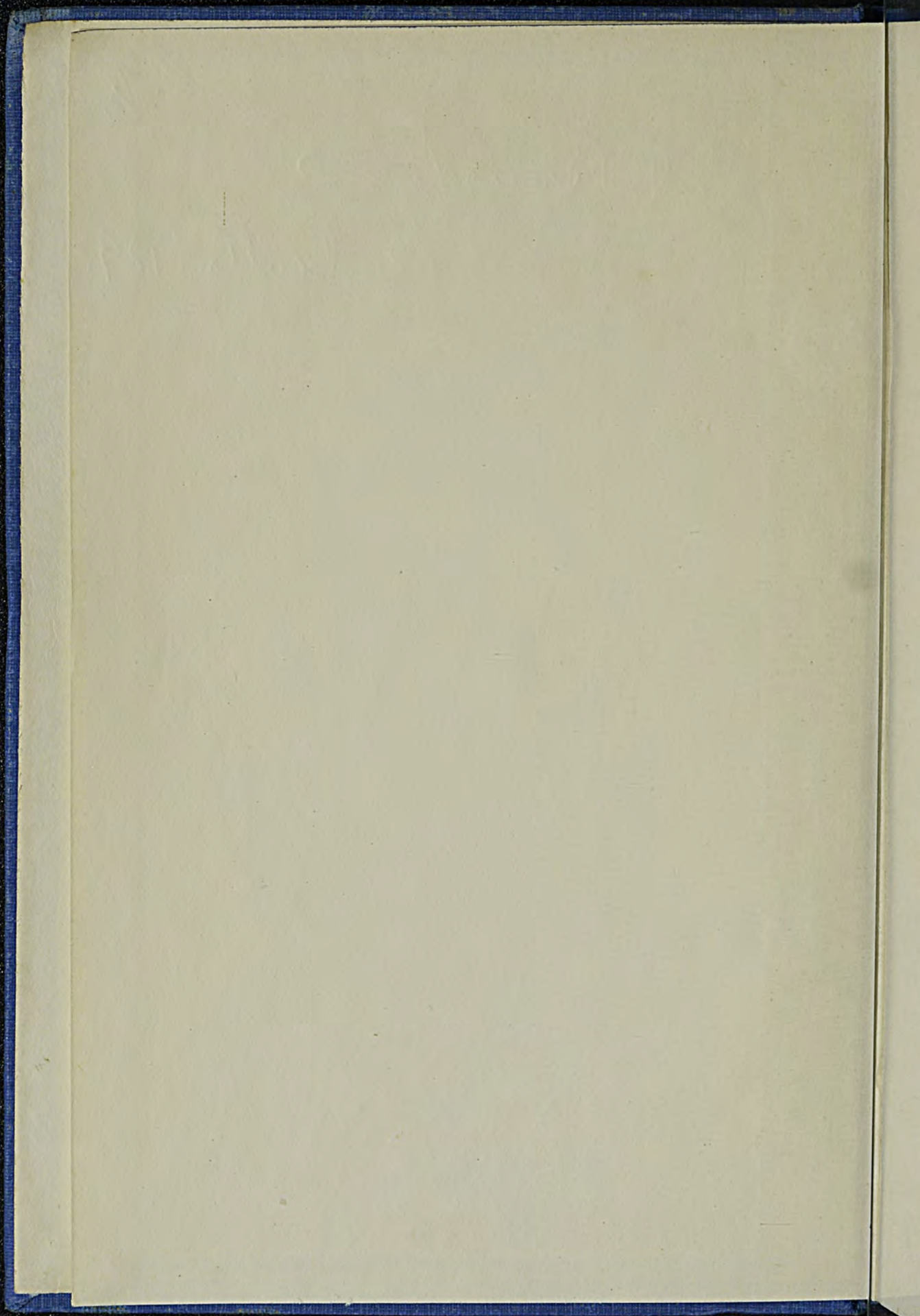
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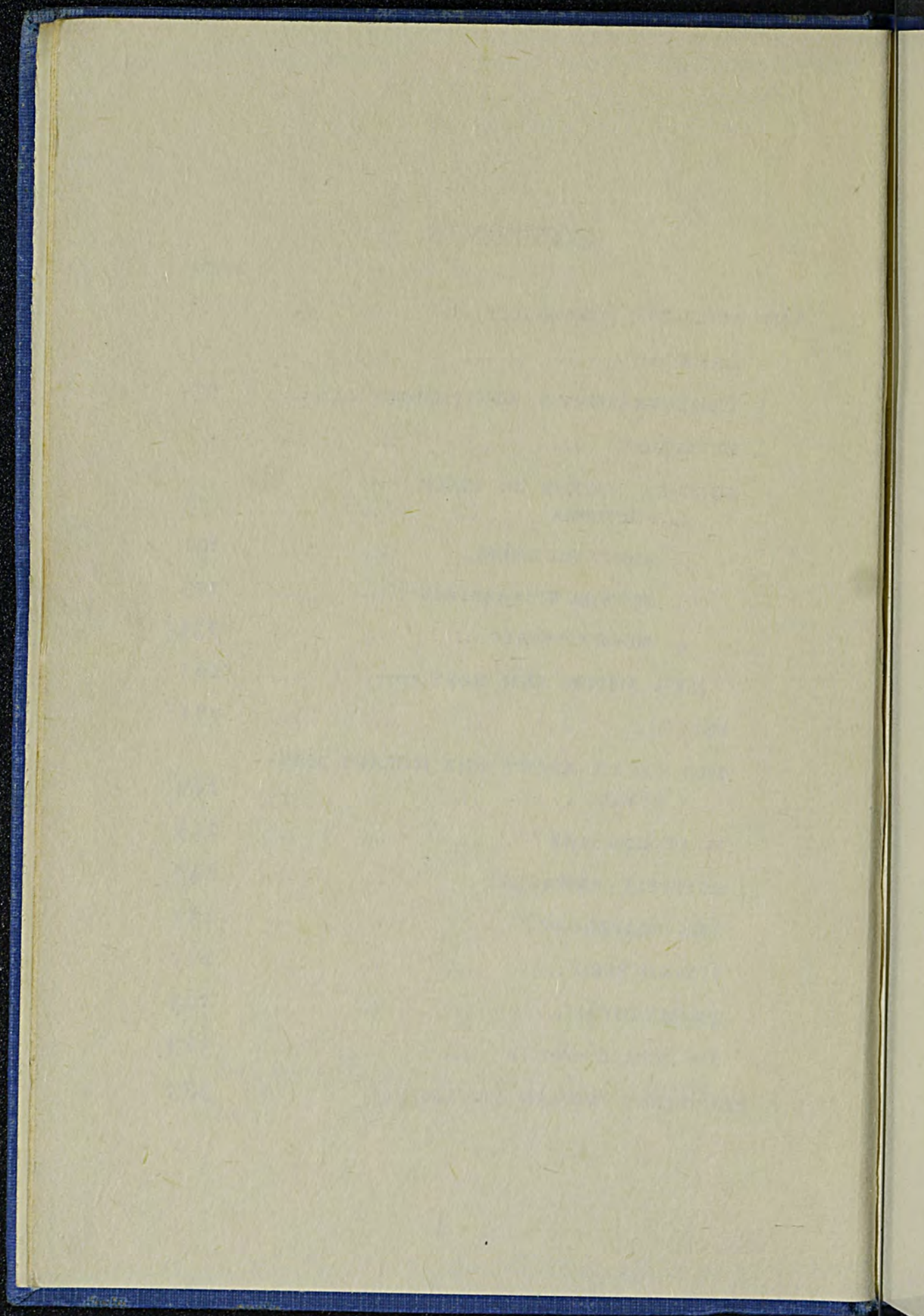
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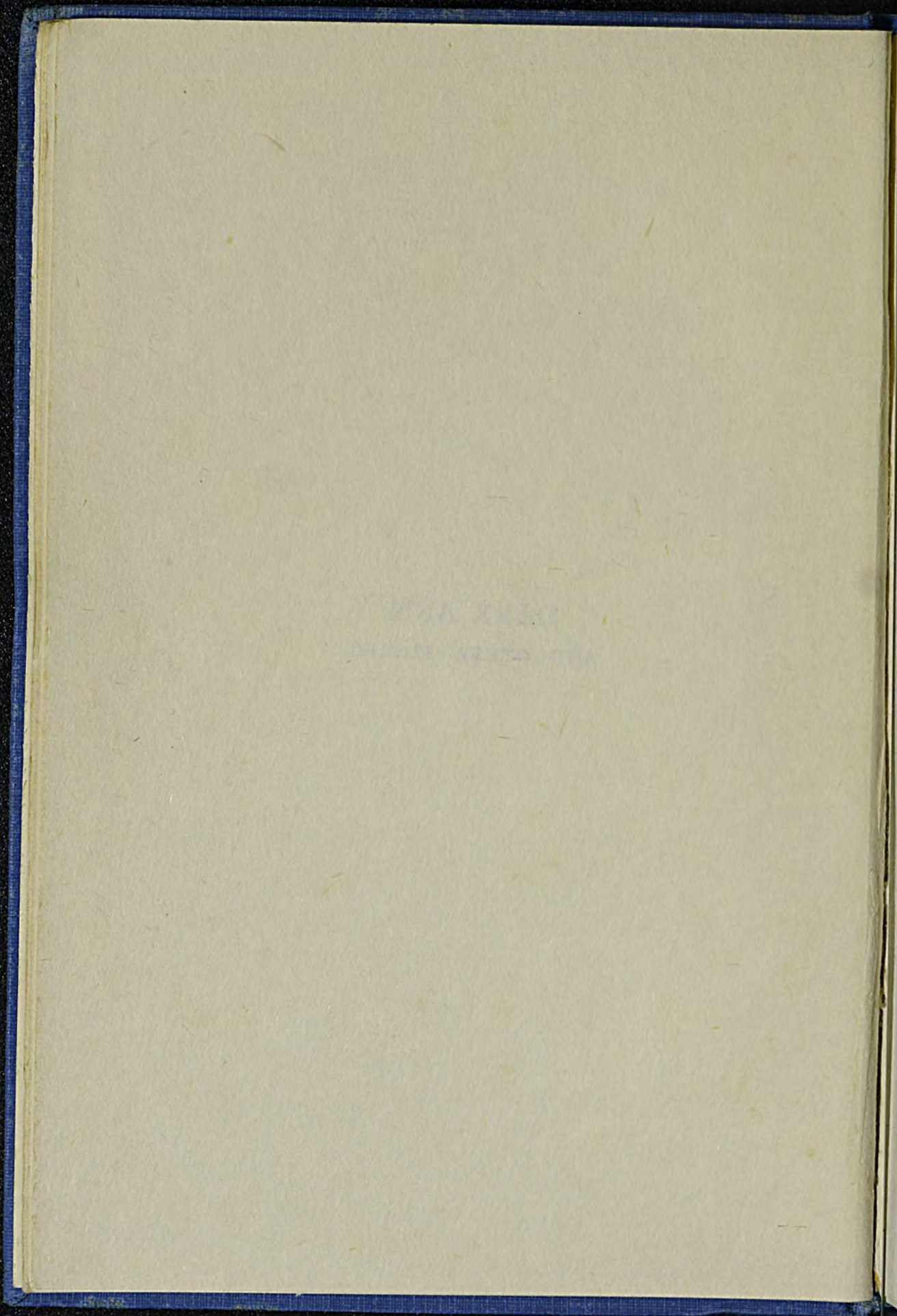
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DARK ANN
AND OTHER STORIES



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THE ACCIDENT

MURCHISON was amazed at the speed with which he escaped from the flaming car, across the common, for he could now see the red blaze on the lonely road in the distance : they were fools to row, he and Bargrave, and send the cursed vehicle over like that ; he had not ceased running since he had felt the first shock of the released fire from the wreckage.

He wondered why they had quarrelled : the fright had seared his memory ; but he certainly knew he loathed Bargrave ; the landscape was oddly dim, like the dimness of an eclipse.

Murchison, still fleeing, suddenly saw Bargrave in front of him, also hurrying—an attenuated, grey wisp of a Bargrave, blown thin by the forlorn breeze.

Murchison yelled in triumph :

“ So you were killed, you silly fool ! ”

“ Do you think that you’re alive ? ” jeered the ghost of Bargrave, then Murchison knew that he also had no body and that the red flames were not the blaze of the burning car but the light of their future destination.

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DARK ANN

NOTHING could have been more neutral, more dull ; the scene was the lecture hall of one of our most learned societies, as austere and grim a place as the cold mind and lifeless taste of Science could conceive, or anyhow did conceive and execute in the days when this hall, and many others, was built.

A lecture was in progress.

A man as austere, as grim as the hall, but in the same way rather grand and imposing, was in the rostrum, talking about hygiene and sanitation.

Like the hall, like the society, he seemed, in his disdain of any concession to the lighter graces, dreary and forbidding, ageless, featureless, drab.

I wondered why I had come ; Minnie Levine had brought me ; she was one of those women who try, and quite successfully, to make good works fashionable.

This had brought her into the chill and lofty circle where Sir William Torrance moved, and, somehow, to this lecture.

Not altogether purposelessly, for afterwards we were to take the great man back to Minnie's reception and introduce him to a number of other earnest and charming workers in the cause of health and happiness for others.

Minnie had said a great deal about the personality

of the lecturer, but to me he seemed to have no personality ; he was part of the remote classic decorations of that depressing room, something almost dehumanized.

Yet, as I studied the man (for there was nothing else to do since I could not concentrate on the matter of his speech), I discovered that he was not by any means unattractive, though subdued to the drab dignity of his surroundings, eclipsed by the sombre correctness of his orthodox clothes, those dull blacks, greys and icy white linen.

He was not so old though his hair was ash coloured, his face haggard, not so old, I was sure, perhaps forty-eight, fifty. Handsome features, aquiline, dark, with a narrow high nose and full lips, bluish eyes, cold and clever, a figure that would have been graceful enough if he had not so carefully refrained from any movement, any gesture, if he had not held himself with such monotonous stateliness.

The lecture was over ; I thought I caught Minnie's sigh of relief.

I, too, was glad to leave, though it was a cruel winter's day without, colourless, biting, grim.

We waited for the lecturer ; he carefully and gravely answered the earnest questioners who came timidly up to the platform, then waited for us, methodically rolling up his charts of " Drainage Systems for Country Houses " that he had been showing us.

He was presented to me and I felt further

depressed by his lifeless courtesy ; perhaps he had heard of me as a foolish trifler in dreams and visions, a writer of stories fantastical and strange ; I felt uncomfortable thinking how he must despise me ; of course I didn't believe he had any right to despise me, yet, unreasonably it made me wince to realize that he probably did, he had so much weight about him, an air of being unassailable.

He hadn't much to say as we went home in Minnie's car ; I believe he was wondering why he had consented to come. I've often seen that surprised resentment lurking in the eyes of Minnie's celebrated guests.

What he did say was heavy and wise, fragments of his lecture.

"Instructive but not amusing," whispered Minnie, "but rather a dear, don't you think?"

"No, I really don't. He knows too much—he's quite dried up."

"But so good-looking," insisted Minnie. "And not married——"

"A lucky escape for some woman"—the obvious gibe came sincerely to my lips. "Think of being married to a treatise on Sanitation——"

"Oh, he's much more than that," said Minnie earnestly, "a really *great* doctor, you know."

I did know, but I was quite vague as to his actual achievements ; one generally is vague as to the achievements of those outside one's own world.

I noticed him once or twice, impassive, bored, grave, among the guests ; I was surprised not to see the familiar gesture of the hand to the watch,

the murmur of "an appointment" which is such a man's usual escape from a crowd of women.

But he stayed.

When tea was over and dancing had begun, he, alone for a moment, looked round as if searching for someone.

He caught my eye and came so directly over to me that my companion rose at once and wandered off.

Sir William took the vacant chair ; I was more overwhelmed than flattered.

"You must have been very bored this afternoon," he said seriously.

I replied that I rather made a point of never being bored, but that I'd been depressed—and understood very little ; I paid him the compliment of not trying to "play up" to him.

"Of course you were. You write, don't you ?"

"Only a little. As an amateur."

"I've read them. *Phantasmagoria*."

This was amazing.

"Yes, they're phantasmagoria—don't you love the word ? But strange you should bother with them, Sir William."

"Do you think so ?"

"Well—I shouldn't have thought you'd have much time for that kind of thing."

He looked at me, wistfully, I thought.

"Yet I could tell you something."

And then he was silent, as if I had discouraged him ; he seemed so remote from the scene, the

warm, shaded room, the dancers, the hot-house flowers, that he made me too feel detached.

We were sitting a little apart in one of Minnie's famous alcoves lit by a painted alabaster lamp ; we were left alone, because all the others were enjoying themselves.

Minnie glanced at me and nodded cheerfully ; I think that she was rather glad to have the great man taken off her hands.

As for him, I really think he was as unconscious of his surroundings now as he had been during his lecture, he never asked if I danced, he never seemed to notice that anyone was dancing.

He spoke again, almost in a challenging tone.

"Do I seem to you very alien to all that?" he asked.

I was at a loss as to what thought he was finishing with this sentence, and so I said :

"All—what?"

He hesitated.

"Romance is perhaps the word."

Even to me that word was rather profaned.

"Oh, Romance——"

"I use it," said Sir William stiffly, "in the purest sense. It has of course been cheapened by our lesser writers. Like several other beautiful words—love, lovely, and others. They become *clichés*, slick, disgusting. Think, however, what Romance would mean to a lonely man who never saw a newspaper or heard a gossip and never read a book that was less than two hundred years old."

I agreed that everything was overdone.

"Nothing fresh is left," I lamented, "every story has been told and staled."

Sir William corrected me.

"You should know better. Told, but not staled. What of a kiss, the rose's scent? You've been kissed before, if you're lucky; you've smelt a rose before, if you've any sense—yet you are just as eager for the present kiss, the present rose.

"And with Romance. It is always the same Romance, of course, but only a fool seeks for novelty."

He spoke abstractedly, dryly, and his words, so at variance with his manner, surprised me a great deal.

"It is quite true," I said, "but I hardly thought you would know as much, Sir William."

"Why?"

I did not know how to explain to him how remote, how stern, how impressive and cold he seemed.

"You're too wise," I said, "you know too much to know that."

"Exactly. 'With all thy wisdom get understanding,' eh? Yes, I know too much, and none of it much use. But I know that too. A materialist may have his glimpses into spiritual matters."

"Not if he's really a materialist, Sir William."

He ignored that.

"I came here to speak to you," he said in a coldly impersonal tone, "because of some things of yours I've read. I thought I'd like to tell you something that happened to me, perhaps get you to write it down as a sort of record. One ages,

memory weakens. I always fear that what is so vivid to-day to-morrow may be dim. That is," he added with perfunctory politeness, "if it interests you."

I said with truth that it did interest me. Of course.

"That's good of you. And then, on my death—I am considerably your senior—you might publish the story, as—a lesson to other people."

He looked at his watch (the familiar gesture at last!) and excused himself in conventional tones.

Another time perhaps he might tell me the story? Or, no, there wasn't a story. I hoped he wouldn't forget, but thought he would.

Three days later he rang up to ask for an appointment; I begged him to come that afternoon; I should be alone.

He came; immaculate, stately, unsmiling, very impressive.

And, after an apology for tea, he began speaking, looking into the fire the while just as if I wasn't there; I saw at once that he was intensely lonely and that it was an immense joy and relief for him to speak, which he did carefully and without a trace of emotion, in a concise, stately language.

"It's twenty years ago, 1905, exactly twenty years, in the winter. I was very hard-working, very absorbed and very successful for a youngster. I had no ties and a little money of my own, I'd taken all the degrees and honours I could take, and I'd just finished a rather stiff German course in

Munich—physical chemistry—and I was rather worn out.

“ I had not begun to practise and I decided to rest before I did so.

“ I recognized in myself those dangerous symptoms of fatigue, lack of interest in everything and a nervous distrust of my powers. And by nature I was fairly confident, even, I daresay, arrogant.

“ While I was still in Munich a cousin I had almost forgotten, died and left me a house and furniture.

“ Not of much value and in a very out-of-the-way place.

“ I thought the bequest queer and paid no attention to it ; of course I was rather pleased, but I decided to sell.

“ I meant to live in London and I had not the least intention of an early marriage, nor indeed of any marriage at all.

“ I was nearly thirty and sufficiently resolute and self-contained.

“ When I returned to London and consulted my lawyers about the sale of the house, which was called ‘ Stranger’s End,’ they advised that I should see it first and check the inventories of the contents.

“ They said that there were some curious old pieces there I might care to keep ; I did not think this likely, as I had no interest in such things, but I thought I would go to see the house.

“ I was too tired for pleasure or amusement ; one can be, you know.

“ The thought of this lonely, quiet house attracted

me ; it was near Christmas and I dreaded the so-called festivities, the invitations of friends, the upset to routine.

“ I went to ‘ Stranger’s End ’ and my first impression justified my lawyers’ warning ; it was not a very saleable property.

“ The house stood one end of a lonely Derbyshire valley, on the site of one much older that had been burnt down.

“ The style was classic—Palladian, purplish brick, white pilasters, hard, square, ugly, more like Kent than Wren.

“ The garden had been very formal, with *broderie* beds, but was neglected, the stucco summer-houses, statues and fountains being in a dilapidated condition, and the parterres a tangle of wild growth.

“ The situation was lonely in the extreme, really isolated ; the railway had missed the valley and there was no passable motor road near ; the approaches to ‘ Stranger’s End ’ were mean tracks across moor and mountain.”

Sir William Torrance was silent here ; he seemed to sink into deep abstraction, as he stared into the fire.

And I, too, could see what he was seeing, that solitary, pretentious, ugly and neglected mansion in the Derbyshire dales.

“ It sounds haunted,” I suggested.

He roused himself.

“ No, it wasn’t. I never heard the least suggestion of that. There was no story about the place

at all. It had come to my cousin through his father's people ; our connection was through the female side, and they had been quiet, prosperous folk who hadn't for a hundred years lived much at ' Stranger's End.' But my cousin, an eccentric sort of man, had taken a liking to the place."

" Why did he leave it to you ? "

" I don't know. We had been slightly friendly as boys, but he was queer. We went such different ways. He was a little older than I. And died rather tragically, through an accident. Well, there was the place. I liked it.

" Really relished the isolation ; I was terrified of a breakdown, of losing my capacity, my zest for work ; I thought—whatever I do, I'll get fit.

" That was a very severe winter, at least in Derbyshire ; the fells and dales were covered with snow, and all that cracked stucco frippery in the garden, those sham deities of the eighteenth century, were outlined in white and masked in ice.

" I had no personal servant in those days ; the caretaker, an old man, and his widowed daughter looked after me ; they were rather a dour couple but efficient enough and seemed attached to ' Stranger's End,' for they asked if I would ' speak for them ' to my purchaser who did not yet exist.

" The house was furnished exactly as you would expect it to be, panelled walls, heavy walnut furniture, indigo blue green tapestry, gilt wood mirrors, and pictures of the schools of Van Dyck and Kneller.

" It was a large house, much larger than you

would think from that stern façade, and I was there a while before I knew all the rooms.

“ I enjoyed, with a sense of irony, the grandeur of the state bedroom which probably had chiefly been used for the ‘lying in state’ of defunct owners.

“ The four-poster was adorned by dusky plumes and curtains stiff with needlework, rotting at the cracks and faded a peculiar dove-like colour.”

Sir William spoke with a lingering relish curious to hear.

“ Strange,” I thought, “ that he should remember all these details, strange, too, that this is the man who gave that drab lecture in that drab hall.”

He seemed to want no encouragement nor comment from me, and continued in his level, pleasant tones that were so virile and powerful even when muted as they were now.

“ I found, during those first few days, several odd pieces in the house. Of course I had nothing to do but look for them.

“ It was ferociously cold and snowed steadily ; all prospect from the windows even was blotted out.

“ Among other things I found a little box of blue velvet sewn with a very intricate design in seed pearl and embroidered in gold thread—‘ Made by mee, Darke Ann.’ Impossible to describe how that fascinated me !

“ An empty, trifling sort of box, rather worn, odorous of some aromatic—musk or tonquin.

“ Made by ‘ Darke Ann ’ !

"Why should she so describe herself, in that formal age to which she belonged?"

"There was no date, but I thought the thing went back to the time of my grandmother.

"It was because, perhaps, my brain was so exhausted, because I was so studiously keeping it free from all serious matter, that this absurd detail so obsessed me; I had never had any imagination nor cared for fanciful things, I'd worked too hard.

"But now, when my mind was empty this seized on it—'Darke Ann.'

"I had no difficulty in visualizing her; I could see her moving about the house, bending over that box, looking out of the windows on to the snow."

"The house, then, was haunted after all," I suggested.

Sir William denied this earnestly.

"No. I have been trying to convey to you that it was not.

"Nothing of the kind. It was merely that I, shut up alone in this queer (to me) house in this great solitude, was able to picture, very clearly, this creature of my fancy.

"Purely of my fancy:

"You know how the snow will give one that enclosed feeling, shut in alone, remote, softly imprisoned.

"So few people came to the house, and those few I never saw.

"Then one night—it could not have been long before Christmas, of which festival I took no

account—I went up to my room holding a lamp—there was no other means of lighting in the old house—and glancing at the bed I saw there——”

He paused, and when he continued I had the strangest sensation, for this man, so dry, so austere, so conventionally clothed, whom I had heard lecturing on “Sanitation,” whose reputation was so lofty, whose life and career were well known to have been so dry, cold and laborious, spoke like a poet making an embroidery of beautiful words.

“A woman,” he went on with infinite tenderness. “She lay lightly to one side with her arms crossed, so that the delicate fingers rested on her rounded elbows, but so lightly! She wore a plain robe and a cap with a crimped edge, tied under her chin; tucked into her breast was a posy of flowers, winter flowers, aconite, I think. She was so fine, so airy that she did not press the bed at all, but rested there, as a little bird might rest on a water flower without rippling the pool.

“She smiled; her face was soft and dimpled, her eyes closed, yet not so completely that a streak of azure did not show beneath the fragile lids; her lips were full, but pale—the whole colour of her pearl and mist, merged into the faded tarnish of the bed.”

Sir William, who had been gazing into the fire, suddenly looked at me.

“Not a ghost,” he said. “I knew she was not there. I knew the bed was empty. Hallucination is perhaps the word. I had been over-working. Mind and nerves were strained.

"I told myself that she was not there, and I seated myself with my needless lamp beside the bed and looked at her ; I say, needless lamp, for when I had extinguished it, I saw her in the dark as easily, as precisely.

"Then the window must rattle at the pane and make me look round with a start, and when I looked back again she was gone.

"The next day I examined my casket of blue velvet with even greater tenderness, and chancing to pull at a little odd thread, ripped the stuff, so old and perished it was, so that there was an ugly slit across the lid.

"I was looking at this in much chagrin when my caretaker entered.

"'Who would this be?' I asked, as lightly as I could. 'Darke Ann?'

"'That would be Lady Ann Marly, sir,' he answered sullenly. 'There's her portrait upstairs.'

"'Where?' I was startled.

"'In the attics. I don't think you've been up to the attics, sir.'

"I went ; that bitter, windy day I went up to the attics of 'Stranger's End.' The snow had ceased and I could see the valley white from end to end, and the hills, sombre against a sky like a grey goose's breast.

"There was the portrait, standing with others amid dusty lumber, cobwebs and decay.

"It was she, of course, Dark Ann, but as I turned the picture round I was shocked.

"She was so much further away than I had thought.

"A hundred years, I had guessed, but the costume was that of the first Charles, a tight gown of grey satin, monstrous pearls at throat and ears, a confusion of jet black ringlets and the face that I had seen in my—hallucination.

"It was a fine painting by that sterling artist, Janssens van Ceulen, and I wondered why it had been banished to that sad obscurity.

"On the black background was painted '*The Lady Ann Marly, ætat. 25, "Darke Ann."*'

"Dark she was, as a gipsy, as a Spaniard, in eyes and hair, yet pure and clear in her complexion as a lily, as a rose.

"I had the picture taken downstairs and hung in the room where I usually sat. The man, old Doveton, knew nothing of the portrait, or of the Lady Ann Marly, only what I could see for myself, the names on canvas and casket, but he told me that the Marlys were buried in Baswell Church and probably this 'black Madam' amongst them, and also that there was an antique shop in the same town where I could get my casket repaired.

"I will not bother you," said Sir William at this part of his extraordinary narrative, "with any of my feelings, moods, or states of mind. I will merely tell you the facts.

"The first day it was fit to leave the house (for the snow had fallen again in great abundance), I went down across the valley to Baswell, a town so

small, so old, so grim and silent, that it seemed to me like a thing imagined, not seen.

“The church, heavy, mutilated, dark, squatted on a little slope and was flanked by tombs so gaunt, monstrous, ponderous and grim as to seem a very army of death ; the snow touched them here and there with a ghastly white, and the ivy on the tower was a green darker than black against that pallid winter sky.

“Inside, the place was musty, dull, crowded with tombs, knights, priests, ladies, children in busts and effigies—so much dust on everything !

“As if it had risen from the vaults below to choke the holy air !

“The pale dimness of the faint December light struggled through panes of old, dingy glass in withered reds and blues, only to be blocked by melancholy pillars and frowning arches.

“I found her tomb ; a gigantic rococo urn draped with a fringed cloth with boastful letters setting forth her prides and virtues, and a Latin epigram, florid and luscious, punning on her name of ‘Dark Ann’ and the eternal Darkness that had swallowed her loveliness.

“She had died, unmarried, ‘of a sudden fever’ in her 25th year, 1648.

“The year the portrait was painted.

“I had the casket in my pocket and I set out to find the antique shop.

“There was only one, in a side street, in a house as old, as sad, as grim as the church, with a tiny window, crowded by melancholy

lumber, the broken toys and faded vanities of the dead.

“Clocks that had stopped for ever, rusty vessels from which no one would drink again, queer necklaces no woman would ever again clasp round her throat, snapped swords and chipped tea cups—oh, a very medley of pathetic rubbish !

“I pulled the bell, for the door was locked, and was opened immediately by a woman who stood smiling and asking me in out of the uncharitable afternoon.

“It was Dark Ann—or, as my common sense assured me, a creature exactly like her.

“‘What is your name?’ I asked stupidly.

“‘Ann Marly,’ she replied in the sweetest accents.

“‘Why, I’ve just been looking at your tomb.’

“She smiled, not, though, surprised.

“‘I believe there is such a name in the church—many of them, indeed. The Marlys were great people round about here. And yet we have been long away and only just returned.’

“As she spoke she held the door for me and I entered the low, dusky shop, which was piled with lumber and lit by only a twilight greyness.

“‘Long away?’ I echoed.

“‘Yes, a long time,’ she smiled. ‘And, please what did you want?’

“In a delicious amaze I handed her the casket ; she looked at it and sighed.

“‘You want that mended?’

“ ‘Yes, please—she was called Dark Ann and that should be your name too, you know.’

“She did not answer this, but said gravely that the box could be mended—she herself would do the exquisite stitching.

“I could look at nothing but the lady—I must use this word ; neither woman nor girl will express this creature.

“She wore a dark dress that might have been of any period, low in the neck, and the clouds of her dark ringlets were lightly confined by a comb I could not see.

“She asked me into an old room at the back of the shop, and there she gave me tea in shallow yellow cups.

“The whole place was old, she said—the high-backed cane chairs in which we sat, the boards beneath our feet, the beams above our heads, the dark pictures of carnations and gillyflowers in gilt bronze frames, the sea green glass mirror in red tortoiseshell, all these things were old.

“She and her grandfather had opened the little shop only lately, and only, it seemed, because they wanted to come back to Baswell ; she told me nothing more of herself, nor did I speak of myself.

“I could not think of her as another than the Dark Ann of the portrait, the casket, the tomb ; I did not wish to think of her as another ; hallucination and reality blended in one.

“I went over every day to see her ; it was understood we were lovers, that we should marry and live in ‘Stranger’s End’ all our lives.

“Understood but not spoken of ——

“Once I brought her up to the ugly, queer house that now I no longer had any intention of selling.

“I had found an old pair of tiny gauntlets in a chest, much worn, fringed with gold ; she slipped them on, and they fitted to the very creases.

“Enough of this.

“As you know, one can't describe a rapture—sometimes, when I stood near her, there was a sense of radiance, well——

“With every year it becomes more difficult to recall, sometimes I forget it altogether, and yet I know it was there, it actually happened—that time of ecstasy.”

He was silent for a little, and in my quiet room I could see the glittering evanescent gleams of a vision that would not wholly vanish through all the prosaic years.

“And I suppose,” I said, “that you forgot your work and your ambitions.”

He looked at me sharply.

“That was exactly what happened. I remembered nothing, I lived in the moment, I hardly thought even of the future, though that was to be spent with her. I lived in that queer, ugly house in that lonely valley, and I went to and fro that grim, silent little town, accompanied by snow, wind and clouds, to sit in the little dim parlour behind the huddled shop and drink tea with Ann Marly out of those flat yellow cups, beneath the old beams, the old pictures, lit by a clear fire that glittered on the smooth surface of bluish tiles with puce-coloured

landscapes, and the mellow radiance of wax candles in heavy plated sticks that showed the red copper through where they were worn."

"You remember it all very distinctly, Sir William."

"Even the threads in her dress—where the sleeve was sewn to the bodice—a little lighter than the silk.

"I said I would keep to the facts," he sighed.

"So let all that go. One day I received a telegram.

"I read it as if it had been in an unknown language at first.

"When I came to understand it, I remembered who I was, where I was, what I had been and hoped to be, what was expected of me.

"It was from a friend, a man I greatly admired and respected, a really eminent, brilliant doctor——

"It was a long telegram.

"At that time Medicine was beginning to be very interested in Encephalitis Lethargica and a Swiss doctor claimed to have found a—what you would call a cure. Would I go, with three other men and investigate, report, and if need be, learn the treatment?

"I was excited, alert; I wired back an acceptance; in twenty-four hours I was in London.

"I had been tremendously interested in this disease, so rare, deadly and horrible, with its terrible sequelæ of dementia præcox, change of character and loss of memory, and I was again the careful, keen man of science, trained to test, to doubt, to explore——

'We were in the train for Geneva before I thought of Dark Ann.

"I wired her from the first stop ; I didn't really know her address, I had never noticed the name of the shop or the street, but I put ' Miss Ann Marly, Baswell, Derby ' ; the place was so small I had no doubt it would find her ; I wrote from Geneva, I said I was coming back.

"I wrote and wired often enough during three weeks.

"But she never sent me any message.

"I blamed myself ; my flight had been atrocious, I could not explain it to myself, it was extraordinary, incredible. I had started off like a man wakened from a dream !

"She was offended, angry. I thought it reasonable that she should be, I thought of her always as waiting for me.

"It was a month before I got back—the Swiss doctor's work was interesting, but there was nothing in it, really.

"I returned to Derbyshire.

"It was still cold, grey, iron-like in earth and sky.

"'Why on earth is this house called "Stranger's End"?' I asked old Doveton.

"'I don't know, sir. But it was a fancy in those old days, I think.'

"I went to Baswell.

"And this is pretty well the end of my story," said Sir William ironically.

"She was dead?"

"I could not find the shop. In the street where

I could have sworn it was, stood an old empty house ; the neighbours said it had been empty a long time, they remembered no antique shop, no Ann Marly—they were vague, stupid, unfriendly.

“ I ransacked the town ; she, her grandfather, the shop with that delicious parlour had utterly disappeared.

“ I went to the post office and they showed me the last of my little heap of letters ; the others had travelled back to Switzerland through the dead letter office and must now be waiting for me at my London address.

“ ‘ There’s a name like this in the church,’ said the postmaster sullenly, looking at me queerly, ‘ on a tomb. I’ve never heard of another here.’

“ I brought Doveton in to Baswell and made him point out the shop he had recommended for the repair of the velvet box.

“ He showed me a dingy furniture shop in the High Street where they did upholstering.

“ I asked him if he remembered the lady who had come to ‘ Stranger’s End.’

“ And the sulky fellow said that he did not, which may have been true, for I brought her and took her away myself and I do not think she met either of the servants.”

I knew that he had never found her ; the room seemed full of a miasma of regret, of remorse, of yearning.

“ So you went back to your work,” I said tentatively, for I was not sure of his control.

“ Yes, I did. I sold the house and all the

contents." He looked at me wildly. "I burnt the portrait, I could not endure it. I sold the house to the neighbouring lord who wanted the ground for his shooting—it was just in his way, that old garden, that old ugly house. He destroyed both. I wouldn't have sold to anyone who had not promised to destroy."

He looked withered, shrunk.

"I have the little blue box, so neatly mended, full of dead aconites, like she held against her breast——"

"You're confusing the vision and the reality," I said; "that—hallucination must have been the first Ann—after death, I rather think."

"After death," repeated Sir William.

"You've done good work," I reminded him, "devoted yourself to real, fine, man's work—she would have spoilt you for that, perhaps."

He said drearily :

"Yes, I've had my work. And nothing else."

"Well, fame, applause, gratitude, money, honours."

"Oh, those," he looked at me vaguely, "but I never had another dream. Not one. Now if that telegram hadn't come——"

He paused and I finished for him :

"It broke the spell, you mean. It restored you to your normal self—it made you return to your normal life."

"Exactly." He was now composed, austere, even ironic again. "I would give all I've ever gained since to have that moment again, to have that

choice—the dream or the bread and water. And at the moment I didn't know it was a choice."

"You wish you hadn't gone?"

He rose.

"Do I wish I hadn't gone! Haven't I told you the story as a warning? That was the only real thing that ever happened to me."

He turned to the door.

"But Ann, Ann Marly?" I asked. "What of her? Why did she disappear?"

"Why did she come, you mean," he answered dryly. "I lost her, because I forgot how to dream."

"You mean—she didn't really exist?" I felt a pang of fear.

Sir William Torrance smiled.

"I'm due the other end of London at six—I've talked you to death. Good-bye."

His manner was correct, lifeless again; I knew from the papers that he was lecturing on "Bacteriology in Food" at some institute.

I let him go, there was nothing to be said.

Nothing.

THE LOVE STORY OF A FASTIDIOUS MAN

HE always declared that if ever he fell in love it would be in the summer—and so it was in the very dawn of May that I introduced him to Sylvia.

I was, of course, merely and obviously a match-making old woman and got much pleasure and profit out of the fact.

Jerome Barry had always been a bother to me, and I believe to himself; he was so desirable, so experienced, so fortunate and comely, and with all this, so rich.

He was something rather high up in diplomacy and would one day, people said, be really—well, important.

The Gallic strain which bears the blame for so much, must be blamed for the faults of Jerome; his mother had been French, of a family thrice refined, and he, half dreamer, half man of the world, was too fastidious, too difficult.

And he wanted, so keenly wanted to fall in love; he was sincerely terrified of growing old without this great experience, horrified at the thought that he might, after all, have to make a commonplace marriage or leave the whole thing alone.

I had brought so many girls and women unsuccessfully to his notice, and this not without a flicker

of remorse, for he was very charming and apt to leave broken hearts behind him, and I was beginning to feel rather desperate.

So, too, was he.

He was thirty-eight.

"Why don't you look elsewhere?" I asked.

"A shame to thrust all the responsibility on *me*."

He assured me that only in my rooms could he find the women he cared to even consider.

"Everyone uncommon comes here," he smiled.

"And then the background is so delicious."

"I don't encourage fools or good dull people," I replied. "And I try to keep my old house pretty—but you are really becoming tiresome."

Then I thought of Sylvia.

I did not know very much about her, but I had been greatly of the acquaintance of her people in the old days and remembered her as a petulant lovely child.

She had just returned from Tuscany, where she had been staying for years with one of her mother's cousins; she was an orphan, well bred, well off and rather peculiar.

Talented, I mean, and original, witty and attractive, but all in a kind of dim way, difficult to express, as if there were veils about her personality.

She did not come very often to my house, but she had been frank enough with me; she was not bored, she was too intelligent for that, but rather at a loss.

She wanted to get married, or at least (or at most!) to have a wholly absorbing love affair.

Like Jerome she wanted high romance.

I introduced them.

Sylvia's taste in clothes was masterly ; she disregarded the fashions, yet was not eccentric ; that day she wore an exquisite dress of faded raspberry colour and a large faint gauzy black hat with delicate plumes that was like a dimness about her head.

She was dark and her features were indifferent, but her grace, her complexion and her voice were excellent.

And what more, I asked myself in irritation, could any man want ?

She was posed charmingly on a settee of old rubbed gilt wood, and behind her was my bronze and dead rose tapestry—and she sat very still with a translucent white cup and saucer in her hand and looked at Jerome.

She may have suspected my design, but, I was thankful to observe, she made no attempt to shine in charm or wit ; she was most quiet and left early.

“ Where does she live ? ” asked Jerome.

I told him.

“ An old house in Richmond, near the deer park—a house where the trees outside make a greenish light in the low rooms—the furniture has chintz covers with bunches of lilac and bunches of grapes and the walls are fluted panels.”

“ Alone ? ” he asked.

“ With a companion, or a friend—it is a delightful sort of house ; don't you think you would like to see it ? ”

He agreed.

They began to see much of each other, not always in my house.

At the end of two weeks she confessed to be completely in love—at the end of three he confessed that he was nearly in love.

“What is the difficulty?” I asked crossly. “She is delicious, gorgeous, exceptional——”

“I know, I know. I have no fault to find——”

“You are a philanderer, Jerome! You’ve hesitated so long you’ve lost the flavour of everything—you are a trifle——”

He denied this and insisted on his capacity for intense passion, for a storm of love, devotion and fidelity.

He could not explain his hesitancy about Sylvia, though he tried to do so.

“Somehow she is dim,” he remarked, “veiled, subdued—all her qualities, I mean.”

“You’re quick,” I agreed, “and quite right, but haven’t you always detested the obvious, the blatant, the crude? Don’t you revel in half lights, half tones?”

“Yes, but there is something exasperating about a flavour you can’t quite get—something appeals to me tremendously—but there isn’t enough of it for me to know what it is——”

This was as near as he could get and altogether too fine drawn for me, as I told him.

But when next Sylvia came to me with her account of things I noticed her more carefully than perhaps anyone has the right to notice anyone else.

I felt that the keenness of my scrutiny was almost indecent.

There certainly *was* something exasperatingly illusive about the personality of Sylvia.

What was it?

Did her manner not fit her real self?—was she too self-conscious?—was she not quite sincere?

Yet even as I asked myself these questions I knew that they were all too simple for the case.

And meanwhile Sylvia, leaning back in the deep chair as if languid from distress, was asking gravely:

“Do you think he is going to love me, Lady Mary? I don’t know what I shall do if he doesn’t love me.”

“You have only known him a few weeks,” I parried.

“As if time counted!” came the plaintive voice. “He likes me, he follows me—he asks me in everything but words——”

“I don’t know why he doesn’t speak.”

“But you’re his confessor, aren’t you?”

“Oh, not to that extent.”

“How long is he going to be making up his mind? It’s killing me, Lady Mary—a man like that——”

I was silent; I felt vexed with Jerome, he wasn’t so young, there weren’t so many women like Sylvia.

I did not, old and wise as I was, know what advice to give her; I would like to have told her to be more natural, that is, less subtle—but how did I know what her “natural” was?

And I did know that Jerome loved the fine, the

elusive, the mysterious, and detested the jovial, slangy, robust type.

So I had to let her go, with what vague comfort I could give her—and that was nothing much.

Almost immediately afterwards their fate came to a crisis.

This was how I put the scene together from what I heard afterwards from both of them.

It was an extremely hot afternoon ; her fluted panelled room was shuttered and full of bronze shadow.

She sat on a faded needlework chair, waiting for him ; she wore, I think she said, white, or some very pale colour that was drowned and drenched in the shadows ; by her side was a bowl of flowers, roses, iris, tulips, forget-me-nots, peonies, white lilac, all spread vividly and distinctly in their clear shapes and colours against the dusky background.

He came straight in, went up to her, slowly bent over her and kissed her.

She sat most still and turned away her head ; she waited, patiently, for him to kiss her again ; she was conscious that, through the obscurity of the shuttered room, across the bowl of varied flowers, he was scrutinizing her ; she used that word—“scrutinizing.”

After several seconds he said, almost harshly :

“Have you got a friend—an intimate friend ?”

She turned swiftly now.

“Yes, the woman I stayed with in Tuscany. Linda Vanni.”

He said nothing more ; there was a bleakness

between them ; their kiss had withered before it had bloomed.

As they put it to me afterwards, she was "found out."

As he kissed her he had suddenly guessed the riddle of her personality.

She was imitating someone else, she was not genuine, but a carefully coached sham.

He was at once sure of this and sure that Linda Vanni was the woman he would love, and she, poor wretch, read him quite clearly.

She said :

"Would you like to meet her ? I will take you to see her if you like."

This was (she told me) absolutely the only possible thing to say ; it saved her from the last humiliation, it was like a confession just before discovery.

She found herself continuing :

"I always thought you would like Linda, I meant to tell you about her before."

She said this with cold weariness ; both ignored the kiss, both ignored his question : "Have you a friend ?"

He, so he told me afterwards, had really almost forgotten Sylvia, so entranced and excited was he at the prospect of meeting Linda ; he felt as delighted as a man might who has loved a portrait and suddenly been promised a sight of the original.

Already he was considering Sylvia as but the faint imitation of Linda ; he pressed for a date when he might see this friend ; his was the complete cruelty of self-absorption ; when I pointed

this out to him he said that there was no need to consider Sylvia, for her passion was counterfeit, like the rest of her—she was incapable of real feeling, he declared.

Of course, wrongly.

Sylvia loved him.

Her offer to take him to Linda had not been a confession of defeat.

“I’ll fight,” she said. “After all—even Linda——”

I asked if it was true that she had copied Linda.

She confessed that it was true.

As a girl she had been very awkward and self-conscious, rather stupid (she said) and rather plain, and Linda had taught her everything.

Who was Linda?

Oh, she was a kind of relation, the daughter of Sylvia’s mother’s cousin, if you could follow that, half Italian, like Jerome was half French, a widow (oh, but a widow!); Sylvia had lived with her for nearly five years absorbing, adoring, imitating this other personality so vivid, so powerful—so entrancing.

When she had come to London, to take up her own life in the sweet old house at Richmond, she had been, she knew, a very fair copy of Linda—what Linda herself called “*una donna elegantissima*,” which isn’t, somehow, the same as “a very elegant woman.”

Then Linda had herself come to London and Sylvia had purposely refrained from presenting any of her friends or acquaintances to her, but she had

gone to her secretly, as it were, taking fresh "lessons in deportment," as they used to say at the *Academies for Young Ladies*.

Linda had been told all about Jerome Barry, had been enthusiastic, intensely interested—had advised every step of the way, had even taught the gesture of averted face after the first kiss, the gesture that Jerome had detected, that had really "given the game away."

"And now you've got to take him to Linda," I mused.

"Yes."

"A pity you ever imitated anyone, Sylvia, you're very charming——"

"I didn't use to be, I was horrid, spoilt, plain—I didn't know how to dress or how to behave—I owe *everything* to Linda——"

"Yes, but now?"

"Linda of course won't take any notice of him, and when he sees it's no use with her he'll come back to 'second best,'" was Sylvia's hope.

I said :

"Why do you think that Linda will take no notice of him? Jerome is extremely attractive."

"But Linda is my *friend*," flushed Sylvia. "And absolutely loyal—she has so many men in love with her too."

"Well, yes, of course——" I didn't know what to say.

"Can't you advise me?" sighed Sylvia, pale with anguish. "You've had so much experience, Lady Mary."

"Experience?" I snapped. "And what has it taught me?—that I know nothing about anything. Do you think that I know more of men through having had two husbands?"

"I hoped you might," sighed Sylvia. "What am I to do?"

"Be more yourself and less of Linda Vanni, I should think," was all I could suggest.

"But there isn't any 'self,'" wailed poor Sylvia. "I was nothing at all, and I've been copying Linda so long—I couldn't stop."

"I should like to see Linda."

"Come next Thursday when I am taking Jerome."

So I went with these two to the Contessa Vanni's delicious apartments overlooking the Embankment, on that momentous Thursday.

I saw at once that she was Sylvia's "original"; dress, gesture, even thought and speech were the same.

But Linda was vivid where Sylvia was faint, decisive where Sylvia was hesitant, bright where Sylvia was dim—in brief, the original, not the copy.

She had, too, the advantage of being a lovely woman; only Sylvia scored on the point of youth, I didn't think Linda was any less than forty.

Still there she was, in her low, cool room perfumed faintly, adorned with lilies in pearl-coloured glasses, filled with music from a queer little gilt organ, herself in the most mystical of puce gowns, with her perfect arms encircled by bands of ivory—a lovely

woman indeed, such hair, such eyes, and the small classic features never seen on a Northern face !

Jerome had come prepared to be enslaved ; he made no disguise of his instant infatuation, nor did Linda, I thought, repel him, but perhaps she had for everyone that insinuating manner of melting sweetness.

After-events, however, proved my suspicion true ; Linda Vanni drew Jerome as with a magnet, and, as with a magnet, kept him.

Sylvia came to me aghast.

“She’s flirting with him——”

“Perhaps she loves him,” I suggested weakly.
“Have you spoken to her ?”

“Yes—she only laughed.”

“Perhaps there is nothing in it.”

“They are always together, I never see him now.”

“She’s a treacherous beast, then ?” I suggested crossly.

“I’m afraid she is,” whispered Sylvia.

I found out from Jerome that she *was* ; they were going, step by step, over the road he had travelled with poor Sylvia.

He was going to marry her (oh, but soon !).

Had he arranged that yet ?

No, the supreme moment was being delayed ; he was enjoying, to their full, all the graces and charms that Sylvia had indicated to him ; where she had given a hint Linda gave the thing itself ; Sylvia had given a faint sketch of his ideal woman—Linda gave the complete picture.

He was really in the seventh heaven of rapture, and only my ingenuity (for I was so angry with him that I wanted to pick his happiness to pieces) would have discovered the flaw in his perfect satisfaction.

And this was—

If Sylvia had been too faint—Linda was too vivid; if Sylvia was too veiled—Linda was too exposed; he almost admitted that his perfect woman would be between the two—there was a certain crudeness about Linda, which sometimes made her copy more desirable.

This is what it came to, and, well, I had noticed it myself.

Crude seemed the wrong word to apply to anything as exquisite as Linda, but there it was, a flamboyancy, an exotic quality that Sylvia had interpreted into a more delicate grace, a more tender charm.

I told this to Sylvia, for I thought that therein lay her own hope.

“Go and have it out with Linda,” I said. “Tell her everything.”

“Why?”

“Tell her that Jerome found you too faint, tell her to lay it on thick,” I replied, like the vulgar old woman I am; “goad her to overdo it.”

Sylvia’s eyes gleamed in a way that gave me some hopes of her.

“Do you think I *could*?” she asked.

“Try. It’s a chance.”

She went to see Linda—the two hardly met

since Jerome had been led, an eager victim, to Linda's altars, and this interview ensued.

"I suppose you are going to marry Jerome," said Sylvia bluntly.

"I suppose so," said Linda also rather bluntly.

You see, after all, they were just a couple of women, and I have always rather doubted if they had been quite as devoted to each other as they thought they had been—I wonder, in a way, if women ever are!

Anyhow Linda tried to keep up her reputation for kindness and sweetness and added:

"You know I'm awfully fond of you, Sylvia, and I hope to get you nicely married yet—but I felt I couldn't sacrifice myself any longer——"

"Any longer!" said Sylvia softly. "I didn't know that you had been sacrificing yourself for me."

"Oh, didn't you? You've always been such a simple little thing. Do you really think I *liked* teaching you everything? All the tricks and dodges? Making you such a copy of myself that some people can't tell the difference?"

"Why did you do it then?" asked Sylvia.

"Well, I was so sorry for you—you were such a raw creature—and you *asked* me, didn't you?"

Sylvia began to detest Linda.

"Leaving that out of it," she said, "you knew I wanted to marry Jerome, you knew he was in love with me——"

"With me, dear," corrected Linda, "with my reflection in you—you can't say I've robbed him

from you," she added gently, "for he was in love with me from the very first——"

This was so true that Sylvia paled with rage.

"I suppose," she said faintly, "you would have claimed any man who admired me on the same grounds?"

"Well, shouldn't I have had a right to?" suggested Linda delicately. "You see—what any man would admire in you would be just what you've got from me."

This again was so devastatingly true that Sylvia lost her temper.

She retorted (cheaply and vulgarly, as I thought):

"Perhaps when I'm your age I shall have thought out a few tricks for myself."

"Quite likely, dear," said Linda serenely. "Anyhow you can have the next man that comes along, for I'm quite content with Jerome."

(Sylvia said to me when recounting this, "Of course the beast knows that there aren't half a dozen matches like Jerome in the country—also that I happen to be in love with him.")

However, with admirable control she regained her temper and began to guilefully lay her little trap for the triumphant Linda.

"After all," she remarked, "I don't know that I've much to thank you for, you don't seem to have taught me enough to carry a man away—why didn't you tell me to let myself go, to be more vivid, more brilliant?"

Linda pricked up her ears.

You see, she had (I guessed) been *rather* piqued

that Jerome hadn't proposed to her before now and felt that there was, somewhere, a slight hitch.

"It wouldn't suit your style, dear," she said soothingly. "Why should you think it would have been successful?"

"Well, it would have been with Jerome," lied Sylvia. "I just lost him because I was too faint, too vague, too dim—he adores the florid, the exotic, the flamboyant, the passionate——"

"How do you know?" asked Linda quietly and suspiciously.

"He told Lady Mary Carfax so."

This was precious news to Linda, who had been rather keeping herself in hand, rather subduing, as it were, her effects for fear of frightening Jerome, whom she had correctly judged to be extremely fastidious.

But Sylvia had completely deceived her; she decided that she had misunderstood Jerome and was losing him by "undoing" things. She was being, in fact, too much like her own imitation.

"Well, don't let us quarrel," she said vaguely, for she was busy with her own thoughts. "I expect I shall be able to do something for you yet, Sylvia."

Sylvia thanked her and came away.

"She's sickening," she confided to me. "I don't want to be like her any more."

As Jerome had seen through her copy of Linda, so she had seen through the woman herself—seen her artificiality, her affectations, her ugly selfishness and greed.

The shock of this revelation altered Sylvia a good deal ; she had said that she had no "self," but she soon found one when she dropped all her carefully acquired mannerisms and graces—she sold her wardrobe (bought by Linda), gave up her perfumes, styles of hair and hat, tone of voice and choice of subject (taught by Linda) and tried to think and act for herself.

Not easy, of course ; a great deal of what she had learnt would remain with her for a long time, but she was, as I said, wonderfully changed with her plain clothes (when it came to it, she *liked* tailor makes, not scarves and veils) and her rather plain face, that somehow looked vastly more attractive and intelligent without the cosmetics and curls, however charming these had been.

She looked what she was, a pleasant, fragrant English girl, not an Italian "mannequin," or rather, a copy of an Italian "mannequin," for I told myself viciously that Linda was no better than that.

I wondered why Linda had bothered to cast her nets so firmly round Jerome ; surely there were other fish in the sea ?

Perhaps she really fell in love with him, perhaps, for all her charm, he was quite the best match she could hope for ; you see, Linda was *over* forty, I'm convinced, and when I say over, I don't mean *just* over.

I hadn't much hope that our little stratagem would defeat her designs on Jerome ; I believe that she was altogether too clever for both Sylvia and myself.

At this point it may be asked why Linda, with her charm and opportunities, bothered so very much about Jerome, and *made* this sudden onslaught on his affections.

I never myself quite knew the reason—perhaps Linda found herself really, for the first time, submerged by passion, perhaps she saw the real advantage of a marriage with a man like Jerome—perhaps she was just a rather ordinary adventuress sort of person and had been for a long time looking for a victim like Jerome.

I never knew Linda well, so I don't know which of these suppositions is correct. I can only repeat that Linda wasn't very young and that Jerome *was* very attractive.

They were inseparable and neither of course came near me or Sylvia, but I observed with malice that their marriage was not announced.

Jerome was taking his time, even with the potent Linda.

The fastidious man in love !

I thought of it ironically, but I could not think ironically of a defeated, changed Sylvia.

Then, in the very limit of the season, when I, almost the last of everyone, was about to leave town, Jerome Barry suddenly appeared at my house.

"You're a truant," I said severely, "and, I'm afraid, a traitor. Have you come to tell me that you are going to marry Linda Vanni?"

"No, I haven't," he said crossly. "The Contessa Vanni left for Italy yesterday."

“And I suppose you’ve come to say good-bye before you follow her?”

“No, I haven’t,” he replied, quite childishly, as I thought (he seemed to have lost a good deal of his—well, I suppose what you might call airs and graces), “she’s gone off alone and I don’t think it likely that I shall ever see her again.”

“Dear me,” I remarked, not being able to think of anything else to say; then I gathered courage from his silence and added like the gossipy old woman that I am:

“What happened?”

He laughed, which must have been the last thing he wanted to do; still, Jerome did always have that saving grace of being able to laugh at himself, to see himself, if only occasionally, in a humorous light; the lack of this ability has spoilt several otherwise great men.

“Of course I can’t tell,” he said.

“Of course not,” I agreed. “There are so many nice things one can’t do, many of them the nicest of all. Still, you might give me a hint.”

He groaned.

“You can guess if you like.”

“Well, then, I guess that it was all tremendously overdone—that you liked the hint better than the whole thing—the imitation better than the genuine——”

“Don’t put it like that,” he begged.

“I won’t, then, but I think that it has done you good.”

He agreed, rather to my surprise.

"It has done me good."

"Well, we won't say any more about it."

I gave him this classic comfort, but all the same, before he left the house I managed to get the whole thing out of him, without, of course, his knowing that I had.

The climax had been the kiss—perhaps it often is.

Jerome had set his scene for the first kiss with Linda, just as he had set it with Sylvia.

The shuttered room—the soft golden shadows, a bowl of Japanese lilies this time, Linda in a black gown on a black couch—ah, but a charming set!

And then, when he had kissed Linda she had not turned away with that gesture of reserve that she had taught Sylvia and which he had at once detected as artificial; no, she remembered what Sylvia had said, about his liking strong effects, and she turned and kissed him *and* kissed him—let herself go with a rush.

I don't know why he didn't like it, but he didn't; as I say, experience only teaches us that we know nothing at all.

By all the rules of the game Jerome should have been overwhelmed with delight and ecstasy, but he wasn't.

He got away from her as quickly as he had got away from Sylvia.

Imagine the scene!

And Linda after he had gone!

I don't suppose there was much left of the tiger lilies—I like to think of her tearing them up and

stamping them into the carpet and being really *human* for once—I mean doing something without calculating the effect of it on herself (lines, wrinkles, etc.) or on others (charms, capture, admiration, etc.).

Of course I didn't mention Sylvia, but I took her to the last of the big garden parties where I knew he would be.

They met.

Sylvia in a modest little hat and a lawn frock, just the rather ordinary little creature that she was, not a bit like the portrait of a wealthy sitter by a fashionable R.A., nor yet like a magazine cover (she had been a cross between the two).

Jerome was interested by the change in her ; I suppose, too, he was a bit tired of shams and effects.

I saw them together under a tree eating ice cream.

She told me afterwards what they had said.

He : "What did you mean by turning away when I kissed you ?"

She : "I was so awfully in love with you I didn't know what I was doing—of course I was a fool to think that you meant it seriously—a man like you——"

After that—well, she made him an excellent wife and Linda Vanni isn't married yet.

EXPIATION

I HAVE always liked Essex, partly, perhaps, because no celebrities live there (at least not the advertised or "branded" variety) and no one has "written up" or written down the natives; despite Southend, the place seems abandoned, enclosed on itself in a melancholy solitude that the most hideous districts in the world sombrely invade, then stop short before complete conquest.

I like the red brick churches with fretted turrets, the wooden fronted houses, the dark ochreish plastering with the zigzag pattern, I like the graveyards with monstrous rococo tombs and flamboyant monuments, massive, cracked and senseless, of the eighteenth and nineteenth century; I should not care to live in this quiet acreage either side of the beautiful Roman road to Colchester, but I like to go there, when I can, and get the flavour of this queer isolation.

Recently I discovered another hamlet, which I will call Dryning, for this is a meticulously true story, and though there is no such name as Dryning in Essex, you would soon find there everything else exactly as I describe it—not twenty-five miles from Piccadilly Circus.

I had an introduction to the doctor at Dryning; a man had told me something about "a queer chap, a queer story," but we were both busy, both in a

hurry, and I only noted the name of the village and the name of the doctor.

When next I motored, solitary, into Essex, I found the little place, and, by luck, the doctor, but he was setting off on a visit and had no leisure for another half-hour.

An affable, capable man, sixty-five or so.

"You want to see Dryning?" he said in amiable amazement. "But there's nothing here, nothing, and never has been. Why, it's the smallest, quietest place——"

"I'm a busy woman," I said, "in the horrid modern sense of busy, always darting from one spot to another, earning my living and because I like it—but sometimes I feel I want nothing—as you say, the smallest, quietest place."

"You're a journalist, aren't you?" he smiled. "Well, there's no 'copy' here——"

"Of course not," I replied, and I thought of what Dick Merriless had said of the doctor's story. Judging from his resolute face I was not likely to hear that to-day, nor did I want to; the blank serenity of the country was sufficient.

"There's nothing I can show you," insisted the doctor, "nothing. Merriless is an old friend of mine and when he comes here we talk of old times—but for a stranger, there's nothing——"

"Don't bother about me. I'll just go and look at the church——"

"Unfortunately there's nothing in the church."

"I'll go and look at nothing."

He glanced at his watch.

“ I’ll join you there in half an hour. I can offer a bachelor’s lunch——”

“ I bring mine with me—I’m horribly selfish in looking after myself, but I’d love a cup of coffee presently and a seat under your delicious trees.”

He was delighted and hurried away on his errand ; his house was Caroline, with a little white pilaster porch, and huge bouquets of peonies crimson against the old narrow purplish brick.

I left the car by his modest gate and walked to the church ; I could see the spire rising to the right in the midst of fields.

I crossed these meadows, overwhelmingly full of buttercups, in which the black and white cattle stood knee deep, passed over a level crossing—a single line which looked somehow as if no train ever passed along—and came to another yellow field, with a footpath leading to the church.

But first to a small house, the vicarage, I supposed ; it lay to the left, flat, ochreish blonde plaster, two windows upstairs, two windows downstairs, a plain door, and in front two grandiloquent chestnut trees that threw the frontage into greenish shadow.

A humble wall squared off the house and the trees from the field ; in this enclosure what space the trees left was filled by flowers and shrubs that looked as if they had been there a very long time and had survived much neglect ; syringa bushes, lilac, roses, not yet blooming, valerian, that queer brickish pink, lavender and southern wood.

The footpath ran straight through this garden,

the house on the left, the open fields on the right, just in front the church ; the modest wall was the dividing line between sacred and secular ground ; you entered by a low oak gate, the church porch only a few feet in front of you ; yet in those few feet were three graves.

No others, for the churchyard lay at the back, just the brick path, and to the right, the three graves.

I looked at them, idly enough.

Two were together, one headstone, one narrow border of marble, one enclosure of even turf, and the other lay outside with nothing but a low stone to mark the place, yet close as might be to the other two.

I read the names : " Sacred to the memory of James Trant and Kezia, his wife, 1915."

Nothing else ; only ten years ago—it seemed, this double grave, so much older than that.

And on the other the inscription was equally brief (there is something sinister in brevity on a tombstone, which is usually so expansive) : " Edward Ferrers, 1900."

Some of the waxy bells of the syringa from the vicarage garden had fallen on the plain turf that for the rest was so utterly unadorned ; the plant had topped the wall and blew in airy confusion across the rubbed bricks.

I turned to the church ; the tower was of wood, old, old grey oak crosswise beams, and a conical top of ash-coloured slats, and the body brick and rubble with thin Roman tiles here and there.

I entered.

A tiny place ; the East window was complete, dated 1600, and a pale blaze of crystal clear colour, the tree of Jesse, delicate and grotesque ; there were funeral hatchments of great families, six with different coats, and under the tower you could see those great beams, heavy wedges almost the girth of the living tree, and the dark bell, hanging high up between them.

The church was so small ; I thought that the bell must deafen the ringers, and the preacher whisper so as not to deafen the congregation ; it smelt of must and decay—so small, so old.

I went out into the wooden porch again ; the doctor had just arrived.

“Do you know,” he said, “that wood is six hundred years old ? You’d hardly believe it.”

“It seems to me six thousand years old,” I confessed. “And after all, what do dates matter ? You can’t be *older* than old—nor *deader* than dead.”

As I left the porch I was on the three graves again.

“Who were these people ?” I asked.

“Ah, those !” The doctor gave an incurious downward glance. “That was our old vicar, and his wife.”

“You remember him ?”

“Of course—why it’s only——”

He hesitated and I added :

“—ten years ago——”

“So long as that ? Has he been dead so long ? How time goes !”

He looked at the date on the grave for himself.

"Dear me, ten years ago! That's thirty since she died——"

I glanced across the humble wall to the little house behind the chestnut trees.

"I suppose that is the vicarage?"

"Yes, where they lived."

"They lie almost on their own doorstep."

"Yes, they do."

"Tell me about them," I asked.

Dr. Conyers seemed surprised.

"There's nothing to tell. Nothing."

"Like Dryning," I said. "Nothing at all."

"Absolutely nothing."

"Still, tell me——"

He frowned.

"About James Trant?"

"And Kezia, his wife," I quoted. "And who was this Edward Ferrers who lies so close, yet just outside their enclosure?"

He looked at me shrewdly.

"You noticed that?"

"I'm trained to notice," I replied, "it's my job. Tell me the story."

"There isn't one." He seemed amused at my persistency. "Good Lord! A story!"

"Just tell me what you know about them."

"But it is most ordinary——"

"Look here, Dr. Conyers," I interrupted, "what do you think 'stories' are? Something woven out of air? Stories are only just people's lives. Now, here are three people——something

must have happened to them, good or bad or indifferent, they must have been stupid or clever or kind or mean—they weren't blanks, you know—now you tell me what you know of them, and I expect it would make a full size novel.”

He caught me up there.

“Ah, a modern novel! You can fill that by describing how someone swallowed a fish bone and didn't choke, can't you?”

I assured him some could but I couldn't.

“Now tell me about the Rev. James Trant——”

“Why on earth are you so persistent? Supposing I didn't know?”

“But you do?”

“Well, I do, all there is to know. I was his doctor. I found him here when I came forty years ago—I had thirty years of him, you see—he came here in '65.”

“Fifty years he had then of Dryning?”

“Fifty years. Just sixty now, since he came, a young man then of twenty-five—seventy-five when he died, after, as you say, fifty years of Dryning.”

“Just the vicarage and the church—and those few cottages?”

“Just that,” said the doctor with a smile.

I had an impression that the sun was falling bleakly on those graves, that the scrolled flowers of the syringa dropped forlornly on the shaven grass.

“You see,” added my guide, “there's nothing in it—just fifty years of Dryning.”

We slowly passed through the little gate into the vicarage garden; how dense a shadow those

chestnuts threw ! The front of the little house was darkened as if under water.

"Curious to plant such trees just before a house," I remarked. "People seem to go out of their way to sadden themselves in these days."

"They've been there for hundreds of years and no one seemed to mind," said the doctor, amused.

I peered past the masses of sombre foliage at the four windows of the house.

"Who lives there now ?"

"Oh, a worm," said the doctor with frank uncharitableness, "one of those awful High Church men ; he won't stay."

We traversed the fields with the high yellow flowers, and the doctor began to tell me what he knew of the Rev. James Trant who had lived fifty years in Dryning.

But the story doesn't begin in Dryning but in Oxford, somewhere in the early sixties of last century. Story ? Dr. Conyers insisted there wasn't one.

James Trant was the son of wealthy aristocrats and heir presumptive to an earldom ; he was handsome, amiable, witty, popular and extremely brilliant ; his father had mapped out an effective career for him—diplomacy or possibly the army ; when James was twenty or so he wasn't (the father, I mean) quite sure.

James was doing wonderfully well at Oxford ; he adored and adorned life ; the most trivial pleasure gave him unlimited delight ; he had a

great deal of money to spend, but he was no rake, generous and open handed, but so far from foolish as to be rather stately ; he was never involved in vulgarities or stupidities and no one ever took any liberties with him ; he stood six feet two in his stockings, his hair was curly and black, his eyes blue, and the whole make of him, face and figure, was elegant, fine and extremely pleasing.

Above all he was lovable ; everyone, even those who might have been supposed likely to envy him, liked him ; indeed he achieved the difficult feat of being perfectly successful and perfectly amiable.

The early sixties, you will remember, when things were a little different from what they are now, a little more rigid, austere and defined.

At an inn outside Oxford (Dr. Conyers did not know the name of the village) was a chambermaid by name Kezia, nobody's child, come from obscure origins, and with no name but that of Kezia.

"There you are," I said triumphantly. "Your wonderful young man fell in love with her—and you said there wasn't a story."

"He did not," said the doctor, "he never fell in love with her."

"Well, go on."

The students used to walk out to this village, whatever it was called, and Kezia would serve them with beer, or coffee or lemonade ; she was young, fresh and blonde, nothing else ; seventeen and in the first, the only dazzle, of her feminine charm.

Trant never noticed her, save for a smile and a tip when he paid his reckoning ; but she noticed

him, as a girl would notice the handsomest of all the likely young fellows who came her way.

“What happened?”

For the doctor had paused, and we had left the thick starry fields for the road; looking back you could just see the wooden spire with the ash-coloured slats above the massive chestnut trees.

“I daresay you can guess—I daresay it’s sacred. I had to piece it together from what they told me afterwards. The most ordinary affair, as I said, nothing in it.”

Re-casting a little what the good man told me as we walked back to the village, this was how I see what happened at Oxford over sixty years ago.

Summer, of course, and delicious intoxicating weather, gold, blue, silver, green, exultation of all nature and of the human heart.

Trant was uncommonly happy, even for him; his mother had just come to see him, bringing a beautiful girl who was destined, he knew, to be his wife.

He had, in a romantic way, fallen in love at first sight, and the fair aristocrat had been gracious in her shy, proud fashion; his mother had praised him, there was a warm letter from his father, his friends, his honours, his gifts clustered about him like stars; he was really drunk with happiness, with the most entrancing anticipations of life.

That evening he went boating by himself down the river; there was a full moon; incredibly beautiful!

He drew up to a bank, moored his boat to a

willow and took out his Horace, pretending to read, loving the little vellum-covered book with the long sepia lettering that *she* had picked up and admired in his rooms a few hours before.

Through the shivering thin, dim green leaves of the willow looked Kezia ; her evening of freedom, her weekly holiday.

She wore something white and a straw hat ; the twilight tinged with moonlight turned her figure to an opalescent hue behind the vague boughs.

Trant said :

“ Good evening, Kezia.”

She pulled the willow boughs further apart and looked at him with astonishing wistfulness.

“ It’s my time off,” she said, “ Tuesday evening.”

He looked at her with his brilliant good humour.

“ Is this how you enjoy yourself, Kezia ? ”

“ Always. I sit on the bank watching the water, sir. There’s nought else to do.”

She wasn’t any longer a chambermaid, but a girl, fragrant, ethereal, dove-coloured, dove-like in the dusk, so timid, so gentle, so soft.

“ No one to take you out, Kezia ? ”

“ No one, sir.”

Of course he had heard ; he now recalled she was nobody’s child, some poor orphan, despised among her own class even, a “ charity brat ” someone had said. He thought of his own wonderful fortunes and a pang of pure pity smote him.

“ Would you like to come for a row, Kezia ? ”

“ Oh, sir, if you’d take me ! ”

“Of course.” He put the Horace into his pocket. “Get in.”

She stepped into the boat, he slipped the moorings and they went down stream ; the moon was pallid gold above a lavender twilight and a low breeze sent all the willows and sedge sighing downwards to the dark water.

Trant fell into dreams of the promised lady ; the sensuous ecstasy of his musings became unbearable ; the magic of the hour touching the magic of his mood became unbearable.

“Mr. Trant, sir, I do feel shivery. I wish I’d brought a shawl.”

He was startled to remember that he had a companion.

“We’ll get out and walk about a little——”

“Oh, no, sir, not here—that’s the haunted house.”

She pointed to a ruined cottage, doorless, with hollow windows that stood by the bank ; the moon hung just above ; and two crimson may trees massed with bloom blocked the front.

“Nonsense, Kezia.” He was restless, impatient with his thoughts of love. “Walk about a little till you are warm, then I’ll take you back.”

He was so absorbed with his inner poignant raptures that he did not notice the girl, but when he had to help her out of the swaying boat and felt her warm light weight, he knew the devastating wish :

“If this had been Harriet, my Harriet !”

“Sir, the cottage is haunted, and I daren’t go further.”

“Don't be a silly girl, Kezia.”

He drew her on, taking her arm ; she was, as she had said, “shivery” ; too lightly clad in a cheap book muslin that strained across her firm bosom ; she seemed part of the sweetness of the evening, so young, so fragrant, so wistful ; it was utterly silent and the pale light of the afterglow rapidly fading.

“It is getting dark, Kezia, I must take you back.”

“It doesn't matter for me, sir ; if I'm in by ten it'll do. There's no one to care——”

“Poor Kezia.”

She pressed closer to him as they passed the ruined cottage.

“Oh, but I'm frightened—there's something lurking inside——”

“You silly, come in and see——”

He drew her across that broken threshold ; half the roof was gone so that the moon still looked on them from the pale, pale sky ; all the cottage floor was covered with sweet grass and daisies and ferns grew out of the wall.

“Where's the ghost here, you foolish girl ?”

They stood silent, side by side in the shadow of the four broken walls, and he, thinking of Harriet, felt his senses begin to swim ; Kezia was holding close to him, and the darkness, which was not only physical, but of the soul, the luscious, exquisite darkness descended on them.

“I'm frightened, sir.”

“Don't be frightened.”

An owl hooted ; she turned with panic into his embrace ; her hat was off and her loose fine hair all over his arm ; she was soft and warm and delicious in his grasp ; he might think this was Harriet, his Harriet.

“ Oh, Mr. Trant, sir, if you'd kiss me, it'd be something to remember for always.”

He kissed her.

For half an hour the boat rocked lonely by the willows, then two figures crept down through the moonlight, got in and rowed away up stream.

He saw no more of her for a year ; he had sent her a letter with a hundred pounds in notes and she hadn't answered ; he didn't go near where she lived and he forgot her completely ; he went from honour to honour, from success to success, and it was just when he was about to leave college for his brilliant career and his brilliant marriage, that this happened.

A little girl stopped him in the street ; if he was Mr. Trant, Mr. James Trant, someone wanted to see him. Would he come ?

He followed the child to an alley in the outskirts of the town ; she took him to a clean, decent but very poor house.

Kezia was in the parlour, plumb, coarsened, neat—an obvious servant girl.

She clutched a baby in a white shawl pulled up to a point over its head.

“ Yours, sir. I thought you'd like to see him before you went away,” she gulped. “ I heard you weren't coming back no more after this summer.”

The tall handsome young man stared at her ; he could hardly believe that this was the girl of that moonlit night ; hardly recall that rapture.

“ I spent the money on him—and keeping respectable,” said Kezia. “ There’s a deal left yet, sir.”

She looked at him patiently.

“ Why didn’t you tell me ? ” he murmured, desperately. “ I never thought——”

“ I didn’t think you would,” she said, simply, “ you being a gentleman.”

He felt horribly stung, bewildered and guilty—mean for the first time in his life, *mean*.

“ What are you going to do, Kezia ? ”

“ I don’t know, sir—as long as the money lasts I look after him—then I can get work, somewhere.”

She was meek, matter of fact ; he questioned her, standing there grand and anguished.

Oh yes, there had been something to go through at the inn, they’d given her bad names, but his money had made it easy ; she’d been in these lodgings for months now, keeping a watch on him from an obscure distance.

“ Kezia, I’ve been a ruffian.” His distress was terrible.

“ Oh no, sir. Won’t you look at the baby, sir ? ”

“ Don’t call me that, Kezia——”

He looked at the baby in her arm, a bold beautiful baby ; his son.

The young man groaned ; his own beauty withered on him.

“Your son, sir.”

He was most profoundly moved ; she was so patient, she asked nothing at all ; yet who else was there in the world with any claim on him compared to her claim ?

“I’ll always look after you, Kezia.”

“If you’ll do what you can for him, sir. I’d like him to be brought up a gentleman.”

She paused and a lively colour spread over her face, which seemed so homely now.

“I wouldn’t care for him to know me for what I am, sir—not ever that, sir——”

“Don’t, Kezia.”

But she pressed her point, brutally.

“I don’t want him to know, not ever, that I wasn’t an honest woman, sir” ; he saw her timid glance flutter to her bare left hand ; “not ever that I wasn’t married, sir.”

He tried to throw off the nightmare incubus that was leaping on him.

“But you’ll get married, Kezia.”

She shook her head.

“Not likely to have a chance. And then I couldn’t. Begging your pardon, sir, I’ve always loved you and always shall.”

She bent her shamed head over the fair baby ; Trant put a trembling hand on her shoulder.

“But of course,” he said hoarsely, “I meant that you’d marry me.”

At this point in the story we were under the doctor’s beeches, drinking coffee ; you could just

see that wooden steeple of Dryning Church in the distance.

Sixty years ago and more, all of this.

“He married her,” said Dr. Conyers, “and the family just made Hell for him. Cut him off, with curses, from *everything*, property, affection, countenance, all his friends fell off——”

“Impossible,” I interrupted. “Oh, surely impossible.”

“True. People used to be very hard—why, that big stone house we passed, coming here—one of the sons there, fifty years ago, forged his brother’s name to a cheque and they hounded him out of the country to drink himself to death—a beautiful youth, too, the tenth son and the flower of the flock as they used to say.”

“It seems so grotesque.”

“Well, in the case of Trant, he’d bitterly disappointed them, remember, and the breaking off of his marriage made a frightful scandal—of course everything was so *defined*—you were born a gentleman or a lady just as you were born a crab or a duck—something immutable, obvious, definite—and Kezia was hopeless from their point of view. Well, he had one cousin who stood by him a little and advised him to enter the Church and get a quiet living somewhere——”

“How strange——”

“His own world was utterly closed to him and he had no means of earning a living ; he entered the Church ; he sold his personal possessions to live on meanwhile, and this same cousin, helped by

the family, procured him the living of Dryning. They came here in 'sixty-five,' the Rev. James Trant, Kezia his wife, and a little boy who, she said, was her orphan nephew, Edward Ferrers."

I thought of the third grave, outside the enclosure of the Trants' burial place.

"That's all," said the doctor. "I told you there wasn't a story."

"No one relented?"

"No one. The old Earl, his uncle, married again out of spite and begot himself an heir. They all regarded him as dead, not one of them ever came near Dryning."

"And he?"

"Stayed here fifty years, that's all. Even here he was snubbed, the story had leaked out, and Mrs. Trant was obviously 'common'; they were *just* tolerated because of his birth and magnificence and the splendour he gave to the tiny place."

"He never went away?"

"Never. The living is only ninety pounds a year and the house; they had no other means and the boy to bring up."

I was silent.

"There were no other children," added the doctor; "a penance, a judgment, I don't know!"

I felt myself revolt against the horror of the dreadful tale I had discovered.

"But I can't believe it—a man like that, fifty years of Dryning! What did he *do*?"

"His duty, for one thing, very thoroughly—there was, from the first, no hope of preferment or change,

his influential friends and his influential family had agreed on that—he was tacitly buried in Dryning—fifty years before he went under ground—yes, with all his learning and ambitions and culture and looks and presence——”

“What did he *do*?”

“Pottered in the bit of garden—learnt the few languages he didn’t know—translated something from the Norwegian, the Spanish, he never went to London, at first for fear of meeting the people he used to know, afterwards from habit—and poverty, he never went anywhere, he couldn’t afford many books or even papers.”

“And she?”

“A very ordinary little woman, plumb, common, tawdry in her dress—she couldn’t resist bits of finery from Chelmsford.”

“Surely *she* was happy?”

“I don’t know. She felt the grandeur of her position, but the bitterness too, I think. You see no one would really be *friends* with her, she must have known she was marked, branded. The boy, a handsome child, grew so like her too, common, dull; when he called her ‘aunt’ you could see the laugh in people’s eyes.”

“And the other woman? Harriet?”

“Oh, she married someone else,” smiled the doctor. “What else could she do?”

“I know. But she might have written and told him that she understood.”

“Perhaps she did. Trant wouldn’t tell me that. He’d been here twenty years when I came—a man

of forty-five, really a splendid fellow, so amiable, so courteous, cultured, a great gentleman, in his darned, patched clothes, with that handsome head and noble voice."

"A saint," I murmured.

"I don't know. What is a saint?" mused the doctor. "I only know that man was in the pillory all the time, smiling in the pillory. You never caught him without his mask—at least I did, just once.

"The boy was no good, they couldn't afford a decent education, he went to a kind of dame school here and then the father tried to teach him, but he was slack, dull, cold, blighted—and what could they do with him, cut off as they were from all opportunity? The boy grew up to hang about the house, to whine round his mother, to idle in the village.

"Then she died, the influenza, that bad year—let me see—why, '95, thirty years ago—I came here in—'85, I'd known them for ten years then."

I shivered in the sunshine, there was something dreadful in these old dates.

"Those last days," continued the doctor, "she told me a lot of what I've told you—the Oxford business—they'd been married thirty years then. She died in that front room behind the chestnut tree; he'd sit for hours holding her hand, still a splendid fellow—so noble and courteous."

"He loved her by then," I hoped.

The doctor continued :

“ He had gone into the garden for air, when I had to tell him she was dying. He smiled :

“ ‘ Oh, Kezia, this was the only thing you could do for me—and you’ve done it too late. I’m an old man now.’

“ He went up and took farewell of her with infinite tenderness. I heard her say : ‘ James, I’ve noticed you use a word, sometimes in your sleep, sometimes muttering in the daytime, and I’ve often wanted to know what it meant, but never liked to ask ; perhaps you’ll tell me now ? ’

“ ‘ Of course, my darling.’

“ ‘ Expiation,’ she whispered. ‘ A queer, foreign word, I think.’

“ He looked stricken.

“ ‘ Did I say that ? Did I ever say that ? ’

“ ‘ Often, indeed, my dear.’

“ ‘ It’s a foreign word,’ he said, softly. ‘ It means—thankfulness—for a happy, quiet life, Kezia.’

“ She died soon after that, and he had her buried where you saw, just over the wall.”

“ He didn’t break down ? ”

“ No—exactly the same. He asked me to help him to tidy away her poor things, there was no one else, all the women had their hand against her. There were piles of copy-books full of pot-hooks and hangers—he had tried to teach her to read and write, secretly, in vain—there were primers, too—we burnt them all without a word. I remember a train went by as the flames went up. ‘ I wish the railway wasn’t so near, Doctor,’ he said. ‘ I can’t

forget that people go about when I hear that. I'd like to forget.' Nothing more."

"There must," I insisted desperately, "be something out of that monstrous self-sacrifice——"

The doctor shook his head.

"I told you that there wasn't a story. The two men lived alone in that vicarage for another five years, then Edward Ferrers died, thirty-five years old, bronchitis—he'd been drinking since his mother died. He, too, was put near the wall. Trant read the service over him and tolled the bell himself—he couldn't afford the ringer."

"He was free at last," I said with a sigh.

"And sixty years old. Soon after he came to me with the signs on him of the malady that I knew would kill him—creeping palsy.

"He was very serene—people were kinder now the wife and son were gone—and the temper of the times was more generous ; he did his duty admirably—I happened to know he was pinching himself to pay some paltry debts left by the ignoble son. He began to teach himself Sanscrit in the long evenings."

The doctor paused.

"And that was the end," I sighed.

"Not quite. A few years after the son died a blousy woman from London came to see him. She spoke to him as I suppose he had never been spoken to before ; I was there and she didn't stop for that. Never mind what she said. There was a little girl in the garden, his grandchild. 'Ned often told me of the fine thing you'd done by his

mother ; perhaps you'll look after his belongings—*I've* done enough,' she sneered.

"Ned's child in the garden—the whole story over again—without the romance.

"'You're responsible,' nagged the woman. 'Ned often said he'd never had a chance, being what he was——'

"There was more of it—never mind ; the old man looked at her blankly ; when I tried to stop her he told me to let her go on.

"Think what must have been in his mind—how he must have gone back to that moonlit hour—over forty years ago—then these years of expiation, and now this as the end of it !

"The woman railed on ; she mocked at his habit, his age—his 'hypocrisy' ; she asked for money.

"He stopped her at last.

"'Madam,' he said, 'I am indeed responsible. Leave your child here and I will bring her up as my grandchild. And I will gladly give you all the money I have in the world at the present moment.'

"He went to his shabby desk and took out his poor purse and gave her the solitary five-pound note hoarded there. I've never seen anything quite so regal as Trant at that moment. Yet utterly simple."

"I hope the wretch was abashed," I whispered.

"Yes, I think so ; she took the money and went away, leaving the child in the hall—a leggy, half-starved, frightened thing. Trant went out to her,

he spoke as he must have spoken to Kezia when he found her with the baby all those years ago—grand and tender—‘Come in, my dear child, I am your grandfather and I hope we’ll be happy together.’”

That was all the doctor had to say ; the tale enraged me ; I wanted to have known James Trant, I wanted to have been the woman he loved ; my own life seemed pale and flat.

“The child stayed ?” I murmured.

“And looked after him—they were much attached. I remember the year he died she brought him out to see our soldiers go off (ten from this place !)—he blessed them with such dignity—then, a regiment went through and he heard the music. ‘Soldiers, Ann, soldiers,’ he said, and I seemed to see the splendours he *might* have known flash across his face.”

“Who put up the grave stones ?”

“I, that was my privilege.”

“And the girl ?”

“A woman now. She’s the wife of a young farmer near here, quite content.”

“I’m glad of that, at least.”

We sat silent in the cool shade ; I was much oppressed ; anything as magnificent as James Trant to be so wasted ! Do we always stone our Galahads, our Bayards ?

I tried to turn my thoughts.

“What about yourself, Dr. Conyers ?”

His kind eyes twinkled.

“No story there, either—I suppose Merriless hinted there was ?”

“ Yes——”

He laughed.

“ Why, forty years ago when I took my final honours, I looked round for a practice, saw this advertised, came down, looked at it, took it—and been here ever since—in this house.”

“ Ever since ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Forty years of Dryning ? ”

“ Yes—never been away a night,” he said triumphantly. “ Nothing in that, eh ? ”

Nothing ? Forty years of service in this quiet spot, nothing in that ?

“ And happy as a sand boy,” added the doctor. “ You see, there really is nothing in Dryning.”

Nothing in the story behind those three graves ? I suppose from the point of view of the passer-by—nothing.

But I wish I hadn't seen the little house behind the chestnut trees, I wish I hadn't heard of those books of pot-hooks and hangers, I wish I couldn't picture so vividly the superb man in the threadbare clothes passing from house to church, from church to village, glancing daily at his own grave space, undergoing isolation, poverty, contempt, complete frustration as an expiation for—what ?

Can you give it a name ? I can't.

Fifty years of Dryning for one who meant to overtop the world.

I hate the place, it's like a trap, I shan't go there again.

The doctor too, plodding on his rounds, soon he'll have been there fifty years ; perhaps they'll put him near those other three, near the garden wall and the syringa.

I wish I had had the honour to be the woman James Trant loved.

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SUMMER NIGHTS IN ITALY

I. Nocturne

MISS AMY DACRE detested the villa opposite. She would with relish have seen it consumed by fire from heaven ; she would dream at night of seeing thin flames turn gardens, orchards and house into smoke through which she could put her triumphant, contemptuous hand.

She thought that it had been a mistake to come to Italy ; it certainly had been a mistake to take this lodging opposite the villa ; but then she had not known anything at all of the things she knew now, the things that the villa had taught her ; the lodging in the old palazzo had been cheap and the views pretty ; Miss Dacre still called them "pretty," but the use of the word worried her now ; twenty years of teaching drawing in a provincial English town had given her a careful sense of the words "pretty" and "nice" ; Italy offended this sense and so did the villa opposite.

At forty-five the death of a bed-ridden mother had given her freedom ; there were also "savings," savings of more than money, savings of youth, of pleasure, of joy, representing self-denial and a succession of days that dragged one after the other like a procession of slaves occupied in dull toil.

She had always wanted to go to Italy ; she had seen neat pictures of the Bay of Naples, very blue and clean, and little sketches of well-behaved peasant

girls in charming costumes holding baskets of grapes, and this desirable country was rather vaguely associated in her mind with Art ; she, as an Art Mistress, had some fellow feeling towards the land of Michelangelo Buonarroti.

And with that admirable British courage that has achieved such marvels Miss Amy Dacre went to Italy, alert, suspicious and determined, with her paints and her canvases and her good English money sewn inside the bosom of her gown.

From Florence and the shelter of a boarding house kept by a countrywoman she had ventured further afield ; she wanted to sketch, she had the local exhibition in her native town in her mind—"Spring in Tuscany" would be the pretty title of a nice picture.

Grim and defensive, she actually secured a floor in this ancient farm house where the owner never came, and the services of the wife of the caretaker ; she knew a few words of utilitarian Italian and she was no more dismayed by the chestnut woods and mountains than she had been troubled by the statues and pictures of Florence ; she was passively content in her busy solitude until she sensed the villa opposite ; she had been surprised to find that "villa" meant an estate, not a house, and this first roused her curiosity when Arcangela, her servant, spoke of the villa opposite, for she could see no house because of the trees.

The old farm *podere* where she lived was part of the same estate ; the villa had been sold some time ago, the steward and the peasants who looked after

the farm lived at the bottom of the slope in the "*Case Capuane*," and on the slope, in the chestnut wood, was only Miss Dacre in the deserted farm house and one man who lived in the villa. He was, she painfully elicited from the foreign speech of Arcangela, some sort of a learned, famous man ; he had bought the villa for repose, for solitude ; he was a friend of the patrician families who had summer residences in the neighbourhood, but he seldom visited even there ; he was, you might take it, a great man, very wealthy, very wonderful, moving in a world that Amy Dacre had only distantly glimpsed at through the medium of an illustrated paper.

The villa was extremely beautiful ; the fine iron gates enclosed a confusion of roses and oleanders, flowering laurels and lilies ; Miss Dacre's self-possession, the heritage of a lifetime of repression, began to be first shaken by these flowers ; she had never believed in anything like this ; why did people talk so much of English roses ?

Surely those Northern blooms did not have the lustre and brilliancy, the glow and perfume of these that rioted in the cool shade of the ilex and cypress beneath that sky that was really blue, blue like a bit of silk you could hold in your hand, definite, purple blue.

At the end of this avenue of blossom showed the house ; not large, of pale yellow stucco and crowned by statues ; in front was a terrace with lemon trees in terracotta pots ; Miss Dacre's fancy was touched by the fact that the lemons were green ; in the middle

of the terrace was a fountain, a nude sea beast tossed the water up out of bulging cheeks and the crystal ray fell back again in shining drops into the basin round which were tubs of gardenias. These gave Miss Dacre a shock, like the green lemons, for these flowers had always seemed to her to exist only in a florist's shop on a black velvet cushion ; they were associated with luxury and a visit to London, but here they grew in profusion, thick as daisies, as geraniums in the window pots at home.

Miss Dacre, impressed, slightly troubled by the villa, became to observe it covertly as she went to and fro on her sketching expeditions, to linger at the gate and spy through the trees as she passed up and down on her solitary walks.

One day she saw the owner.

He was crossing the terrace ; a tall man in a light silk suit, with his neck bare and a yellow sash holding his delicate shirt ; Miss Dacre considered this theatrical, a violation of the unwritten law that to be decent a man's clothes must be as hideous as possible ; the sight of this slight elegant figure was Miss Dacre's first realization that men possessed a human body under starched cotton, cloth and serge.

Miss Dacre resented this and was further troubled. The man was very dark ; she was disturbed by this fact, she thought of it a great deal. His extreme swarthiness that was not like the swarthiness of the peasants, but fine and noble, at least seemingly fine and noble, yet savouring of danger, of the forbidden, of the unknown, not as Miss Dacre told herself

“ nice,” but the villa and the man who lived there had the real atmosphere of the fairy tale to Miss Dacre, those fairy tales that even as a dull child she had never “ believed in ” ; she had inherited from dour ancestors a vast incredulity in anything but the concrete ; hard facts had fortified her against any possible illusion or delusion. She did not, of course, know that hard facts are themselves illusion ; her world was circumscribed by common sense ; her purblind vision could not glimpse any horizon.

She had never known any emotion except a long time ago, a flicker of dull resentment against the drab emptiness of the days, and a certain pang, half relief, half forlornness, when her mother had died, and all her instincts had been overlaid by the superstition of duty and good behaviour.

Now she was troubled.

She ceased to work so earnestly at her neat canvases, her painstaking sketches ; she looked at her ugly clothes, covered with useless patterns, of random colours, cheap and serviceable ; she looked at herself in the dim mirror in the farm-house bedroom.

A woman of forty-six who had never taken any interest in herself and whose health was no longer very good, she was not a pleasing sight ; her complexion was sallow and grim little lines were marked round the pale thin lips, glasses magnified the faded eyes and her hair was colourless and thin ; it was the plainness of a woman who had never bloomed, but withered quietly from early youth ; in the

austere virginity of her solitary life comeliness had not counted at all.

The beautiful summer unfolded like a great rose petal on a petal of loveliness ; Amy Dacre found her habits of petty industry overthrown ; by eleven o'clock it was too hot to work, she was glad to lie still behind the mosquito nets or wander far into the woods and rest under the chestnut shade ; but she began to be frightened of solitude, and daily she spent more time by the villa, peering, spying, troubled, hostile.

Several times she saw an elderly manservant and once she saw the owner again ; this time he had two women with him ; two astonishing women in white muslin with rosy parasols ; their liquid voices just rippled the languid air ; one at least was beautiful and very young.

The three passed across the terrace and into the cool darkness of the house.

That day the sun gave Miss Dacre a headache ; she crouched, sullen, in her room, watching from her window the two shuttered upper windows of the villa house that she could see through the boughs of the trees.

At night she could not sleep ; the world seemed full of slumbrous noises and the moon was shining on the white house opposite.

Miss Dacre went out.

She could not remember when she had been out at night before, or when she had seen the moon or stars save when she pulled down a blind to shut them out.

She shuddered as she stepped into the moonlight ; it was terrible.

She went towards the villa ; the lilies looked luminous in the shaded walks as she gazed through the iron gates ; the sea beast and his jet of water glittered like molten silver ; the moon high overhead seemed to pulsate in air vibrant with light.

Miss Dacre kept in the shadows that lay clear cut and black about the villa wall ; she was afraid of this pure light that she could not quite believe in ; she peered through the gate.

In an upper window a light glowed yellow for a second behind the latticed shutters, then went out.

Miss Dacre watched.

Two figures came onto the terrace, a man and a woman ; they looked white like the lilies, but her hair hung black between her shoulders.

By the bubbling fountain they paused in their languid walk and embraced ; tightly interlaced, pressed close together, they kissed.

Miss Dacre felt her blood curdle ; she turned and walked away quickly.

Arcangela had told her that he was not married.

That woman was the woman of the afternoon visit.

These two facts bit into her mind ; she detested the villa ; she loathed the woman ; she would like to have struck her, insulted her, shamed her, to have told her what an outrage she was.

At the remembrance of that caress Amy Dacre's thin blood flamed ; her chill ignorance was horrified, everything in life that she had ignored seemed

symbolized in that embrace ; her flesh quivered in revolt, she hurried, she almost ran, deep into the grove of sweet chestnuts.

In her flight she had hastened into a colony of nightingales ; as she fled in and out of the trees, avoiding the moonlight, the nightingales broke into song.

The swelling melody was all about her ; she thought it wicked, an enchantment, it mocked and lured, it mingled with the magic of the moon ; she put her fingers in her ears, but the poignant notes penetrated her defences.

She sank down, exhausted ; she took off her hat and her glasses and leant against one of the thick tree trunks ; it was a horrible place and she must get away ; back to Florence, no, back to England.

The nightingales sang passionately above her head ; she could not shut her ears to them, or her eyes to the moonlight, nor her mind to that picture in the villa.

She trembled ; she felt that, here in the dreadful wood, she would be ill ; she put her hand to her hurrying heart and, as she felt her perished bosom, the remembrance of that embrace came upon her with unbearable poignancy.

“ Bother those birds,” she said weakly ; she got up, picked up the hat and glasses and fumbled her way home ; the night was a misery, the next day darkened by her shameful secret.

But she did not leave her lodgings ; she was not, she told herself, well enough, she was afraid she was going to be ill, to have malaria, perhaps ; she

sat in her room staring at the windows of the villa house.

In one of those windows she had seen the light last night.

At first she meant to make a scandal, to protest violently to Arcangela ; but shame and spite held her silent ; she would wait till her secret could be used with more devastating effect.

On the second day after her adventure she saw the women again ; they were leaving the villa and passing the farm ; behind came the man and another woman, an elderly woman of another type, blonde and plainly dressed.

Miss Dacre now saw the object of her detestation at close range.

It was a girl, not more than seventeen ; her black hair still hung between her shoulders over the delicate embroidery of her pale frock, her dark eyes flashed beneath the shade of a muslin hat, from head to foot she was delicate and beautiful.

Arcangela was in the room and Amy Dacre asked her about these people ; she could not wholly understand the answer ; but she gathered that the two women were mother and daughter and that the third was a German governess ; they came very often to visit Signor Camillo, who had been giving the girl lessons.

A girl with a governess !

The hussey, the brazen hussey, thought Miss Dacre ; her whole body tingled, she looked greedily at the man as he passed, courteously conversing with the governess.

Yes, he was graceful and handsome in an indescribable way, wicked, evil, of course, but as nothing compared to that depraved girl, that detestable creature walking so proudly, talking so gaily.

Miss Dacre watched them out of sight among the chestnuts ; she heard the sound of the motor on the road below that took them away and she saw the man come back alone. His white-clad figure moved slowly through the translucent shadow of the jade-green foliage; he seemed thoughtful, depressed.

Arcangela, taking away, with many exclamations of disappointment, the coarse, untouched meal, paused to look out of the window.

"He is thinking of his great book," she said with admiration.

Amy Dacre's shaky laugh rang out ; she checked herself and sat biting her finger.

Her lips were dry as if her horrible secret lay there and burnt them ; when she moved her limbs trembled and her head throbbed.

But she no longer thought of going away, and night after night she crept out, defying the moonlight and the nightingales, and spied round the villa.

It was all incredible to the Northern woman, the heat, the glow, the flowers, the perfume, the luxuriance of beauty, the singing birds, the splendour of the moon and this forbidden love.

She lost interest in her painting ; she ceased to send home to her acquaintances examples from her store of picture postcards ; she looked often at herself in the mirror, with rage, with despair that

was the more bitter for being wholly unacknowledged and secret.

Once more she surprised the lovers in their sanctuary ; for an instant they flashed on her vision in the warm midnight heavy with dark perfumes ; prying through the gate she saw them, in the waning moonlight, clasped together beneath the ilex shade, wandering between the lilies, then gone into the dark house and the shutters closed behind them.

The woman at the gate panted in the exotic loveliness of the sumptuous night ; she tried to imagine what was happening in that house, the caresses, the kisses in that enclosed darkness.

Gradually Miss Dacre was losing hold on reality, which is to say reality as she knew it ; it began to be plain even to her understanding that there was no such thing as reality, nothing hard and unchanging that you could cling to ; it was all a changing phantasmagoria—but Miss Dacre would not admit this ; she clung sullenly to her whole beliefs that had seemed so solid in that surface life at home, black for vice, white for virtue and drab for every day.

She repudiated the sunshine, the moonlight, the nightingales, the flowers, as her ancestors the puritans had repudiated satin and lace, jewels and wine ; it was a gesture not only of renunciation, but of hatred.

And her detestation of the lovers was a passion that shook her ; but she could not resist the enchantment of the weather ; in this heat, in this perfume,

in this luxurious silence, she could not look at things quite sanely ; the true English view point requires the true English climate, and this hatred of Amy Dacre for two strangers was not wholly on the score of outraged virtue.

Morality being only a matter of custom and the instincts of the human heart being stronger even than custom, change of environment will do much to mitigate the shock caused by the violation of even the most ancient laws ; Amy Dacre did not loathe this new world because it was wicked, but because she was shut out of it ; bitter jealousy slipped on her usual mask of sour virtue.

And Amy Dacre had full right to her one pride, her solitary consolation. "I'm a good woman, I've led a good life. After all I've a right to make a stand."

Good, yes ; no one had tried to assail her goodness, no one had wanted this long-hoarded purity.

Goodness and purity !—high-sounding words ; Miss Dacre began to be a little shaken as to what they really meant. Why was it something to be so proud of that she had never, in any shape or form, known love ?

For days she saw no one at the villa save the grey manservant, and Arcangela told her that Signor Camillo was away ; but, though the shutters were up in the front of the hated house, Miss Dacre did not believe this.

She lay in the great heat, peering through the mosquito nets round her bed at the light in that

upper window opposite, glimmering through the trees, and then the light went out and she still watched the vibrant darkness.

And presently there was a knock, low and timorous, on the downstairs door.

Courage was one of Amy Dacre's positive qualities; she had lived alone in the farm now for several weeks, and though she regarded these foreigners as little better than savages she had never been afraid.

And now she was not only unafraid, but disinterested; she thought that it was Arcangela who had returned for some domestic matter and she rose, leisurely, and went to the window and looked out.

There was no moon now, but sufficient starlight for Miss Dacre to see that it was a woman who stood beneath, but not Arcangela.

This woman looked up and in desperate accents addressed Miss Dacre.

"Please, will you come down? Please, it is very important—may I please speak to you?"

The voice was harsh and extremely agitated.

"Who are you?" asked Miss Dacre sternly.

"You would not know me. I come from the villa opposite."

Amy Dacre flushed.

This was not the girl, not the mother—no, the German governess!

"I'll come down," said the Englishwoman grimly.

She lit a candle; she dressed; she put on her print

frock with the blue and yellow stripes and a white knitted coat from a stubborn superstition that the night air was cool, and she went downstairs and unbolted the door that she shut every night after Arcangela and opened so often to allow herself to issue into the wicked, sumptuous nights.

The waiting woman was crying; she sobbed noisily into a large handkerchief.

"Come in," said Miss Dacre; as the stranger entered setting the candle on the deal table and then closing the door; her swift contempt was roused by the abandon of the German's distress, her voluble exclamations and despairing gestures.

"Please tell me what I can do," said Miss Dacre, speaking from a rigid sense of duty.

"Ach, it is this! But how to tell I know not! I am governess in the family of the Marchese Bernacchi, to the daughter, the Marchesina Flavia—her parents, they go away and leave her with me in their villa here, in a few days to follow to the Lido, and she and I, we come, a joke you understand, to see this professor who lives here——"

Miss Dacre looked at the cheap Swiss timepiece in the corner.

"Half-past one," she remarked.

"Ah, *Gott im Himmel!* That is all the trouble if it is found we come here so late, secretly—the professor is not thought to be here, for several days he supposed to be away——"

"You," said Miss Dacre, "are a wicked woman."

The German wept noisily.

"But it is good-bye they say! She must marry

a man she does not like ! Have you a heart of stone that you do not pity them ? ”

“ Why do you want me to pity them ? ”

“ Because she is ill, my pupil, she does not have a strong heart, the emotion bring on an attack, she is very ill and we must for help send.”

“ Well ? ”

“ How can we ? To bring anyone there is ruin—to his house ? It was a joke——”

“ Not a joke,” said Miss Dacre sternly.

“ Well, then,” replied the German, not without dignity, “ a tragedy. If she die she must not be found dead there, you understand ? And so we to you come—to ask if she may be brought here.”

“ You want to bring her here ? ” Amy Dacre’s blood seemed to curdle in her veins. “ Why ? ”

“ Don’t you see ? You can say you make friends with her, sketching in the woods, that she come here, with me, for a little supper. It is a schoolgirl naughtiness, no more, and he, the professor, he creep away, his house seem shut up, no one ever know——”

Miss Dacre rose ; her features twitched.

“ And why should I tell all these dreadful lies ? ”

“ Vy, vy ? ” cried the German, becoming vehemently incoherent. “ Because you are a woman, I tink.”

“ Not that kind of woman.”

“ Vell, you was young once, ees it possible you have forgotten already ? ”

Miss Dacre stared at the frumpish creature with

the tear-blotched face who was enunciating these grotesque sentences in comic language.

Was it possible that she had forgotten ?

Was it possible that she had nothing to forget ?

The German sprang up dramatically.

“ While I wait, she may die ! ”

“ Bring her here, ” said Miss Dacre.

“ You will arrange as if a supper was ? The dishes ? Hein ? ” The German sprang up and was clumsily hurrying away.

“ Who thought of all this ? ” asked Amy Dacre sarcastically.

“ The professor think of it—— ”

“ You’re very devoted, ” sneered the English-woman. “ Why ? ”

“ Why ? Because it is love, it is beautiful ! ”

And this queer messenger was gone into the starlight.

Miss Dacre did as she had been asked ; she mechanically arranged supper for three on the table of the inner room, soiled some plates, peeled some fruit, cut some bread and lit the spirit lamp and placed the coffee pot above it ; then she looked at the stiff, narrow horsehair sofa with one hard pillow ; if this abominable girl was really ill, she would have to violate the sanctity of her, Amy Dacre’s, bedroom.

To keep herself from thinking of anything else she thought of this scheme she was required to help ; it was ingenious, she thought, but not sound.

Arcangela and all the *contadine* would know that she was not acquainted with the girl ; if she had really wished to help she would have found this a

difficulty; but for desperate subterfuge the plot was not so bad . . . what devilish irony that she should have been drawn into it! What a choice weapon of vengeance put unsheathed into her hand!

She stood rigid in the inner room while the unlatched outer door was opened, and watched the little group enter, between starlight and candlelight, the man and the woman supporting the girl.

The presence of this lovely creature was like a spray of flowers in the plain, rather dingy room; she had the richness of the oleander, the grace of the lily, the luxuriant charm of the tuberose and gardenia to Miss Dacre's bitter fancy; even now, when, pale and languid, she leant across her lover's shoulder, her face clouded with pain, her hair dishevelled, her eyes half closed, she was beauty, positive, gleaming beauty.

Amy Dacre had never seen such fine muslins, so heavy with embroidery, such exquisite white kid sandals, such a sparkling stone as the green gem that hung by an almost invisible chain round the drooping neck.

Amy Dacre, rigid, drew her upper lip back like a snarling beast; and she thought, "Dead or alive, I've got you now, my lady!"

But she remained in the shadow of the doorway; although she knew nothing of flourishing and robust health she also knew nothing of illness and she was, despite herself, awed by the appearance of the despised, detested woman, so pallid, so wan, so blighted by pain and weakness.

The governess, Miss Dacre noted with fury, was

actually putting hats, cloaks, parasols and sketching materials about the room ; an adept this, in wickedness, as you could see, was the Englishwoman's mental comment.

The man was speaking, and she had to come forward now and listen, as she did, stiffly with her hands hanging awkwardly.

"It is very kind of you to help us in our difficulty," he said in graceful English and holding himself with a haughtiness that Miss Dacre deeply resented. "In your more liberal country the visit of these ladies to my house would cause no comment—here one must be careful of '*les convenances*' and it is better that they be found here—we are very grateful——"

He bowed.

Miss Dacre did not answer ; he had added the last insult of not taking her into his confidence, of trying to pass the whole incident off as nothing, pretending that in England these things were taken no notice of ; and then he seemed to have forgotten her and was bending over the girl who sat rigidly on one of the wood chairs and held her breast.

"Have you no bed, no comfort ?" asked the governess wildly. "She suffers very much, she is perhaps dying——"

"There is my bedroom," said Miss Dacre grimly. "I suppose, as it is a question of illness, you can have that. But I should like to know what you are going to do."

The man looked up ; still he did not seem to

realize Miss Dacre, her personality did not seem to penetrate his anguish.

"There is a telephone at my house," he said, "but no night service, so I have sent my servant to Cimarosa for the doctor. That is reasonable—that you should send to my house for help, and that my servant, who is caretaker there, should go for the doctor——"

"But remember," cried the governess, "that you must be away! You are in Florence, you were not here, it is better that you go now!"

"It is not possible while she is like this," he answered.

"How did you get here?" asked Miss Dacre.

"Ach, we have the two-seater, but the Marchesina drives. I cannot!" wailed the German.

Miss Dacre smiled.

"You're in a nice fix, aren't you? Well, you'd better bring that girl upstairs, she looks very ill to me—but I won't have the man, tell him to get out."

She addressed the governess and did not face the object of her insult, but she was conscious of the quiver that ran through the two aristocrats and of the girl's effort to rise; they exchanged sentences swiftly in their own language; Miss Dacre cut in:

"I only speak plain English. I'll take in anyone sick, but I don't want anything to do with this business; seems to me that you have asked me to tell a lot of lies to help a pack of strangers—you say you could do this kind of thing in England; you're wrong, we'd call it wickedness."

She snapped out the words acidly, quickly, secretly wondering at her own temerity, for the man awed her, but she was on her own ground and they had asked her help.

The girl had succeeded in rising.

"Madame, I will go away," she whispered, but even as she spoke she fainted.

Now Miss Dacre had to allow her last citadel to be stormed; to permit the man and the woman to carry the girl upstairs between them and lay her on the bed that she, Amy Dacre, had so lately left; there were no other furnished rooms in the house.

With hostile eyes she saw this man in her room, leaning over her bed, brusquely moving her things, absorbed in the pale girl she hated; the governess sensed her silent rage and whispered hoarsely in Italian to the intruder; he listened and at last left the room, with bitter reluctance.

Miss Dacre followed him down to the kitchen.

"It is permitted that I wait here?" he asked. "I shall leave before the doctor comes."

"What is that to me?" demanded Miss Dacre. "Why am I to tell all these lies?"

They faced each other across the candle, now getting to the edge of the stick.

"It is a question of a lady's reputation," he said gravely, "an indiscretion that must be effaced—we did not notice the lateness of the hour, and I admit that the parents of the Marchesina do not approve of my friendship——"

Miss Dacre cut in.

"Did the governess come with her on her other visits to you?"

"The governess or her mother—naturally."

"No," said Miss Dacre reflectively. "I suppose she could never have done it without the connivance of the governess, they must have been pretty clever, the two of them——"

"It has all been foolish and wrong," he remarked sadly as if he had not heard her. "I—well, there is nothing to say."

A light tap on the door, followed by a little whistle.

Signor Camillo opened it; his servant and a bicycle were outside.

Miss Dacre could not follow the rapid conversation.

"What is it?" she asked, coming forward.

"The doctor at Cimarosa is away on his '*vacances*,' there is no other nearer than—Santa Agata, many miles away. I could drive the car, but I must not be seen on this errand——"

"Let your man go on his bicycle."

"It would take hours."

Her harsh laugh broke against the stillness of his despair.

"Well, I doubt if a doctor could do much good."

He raised his hand as if to silence her and turned again to the man in the doorway; their low earnest conversation barely stirred the silence.

Miss Dacre went upstairs to her victim.

The girl lay on the poor bed like a jewel in a paltry setting.

Even in her eclipse she was splendid; her grace

and beauty were like a perfume in the room; her dark hair spread on the coarse pillow had the rich bloom of the violet and Miss Dacre must still think of gardenias and lilies when looking at her face.

She was conscious now, but lay still, breathing heavily; two candles had been lit, but shaded from her eyes, and the shutters of the windows carefully closed; as Miss Dacre entered the German crept up to her and began a subdued but voluble plea for mercy; she had sensed the other's burning vindictiveness and in panic terror sought to allay the hostility of the enemy; ardently now did the wretched woman wish that she had thought of some other way out of the hideous dilemma, but Miss Dacre's type was unknown to her easy sentimentality.

As she talked, very incoherently, Miss Dacre, in whose existence ways and means had always been paramount, understood that she was fighting for her own livelihood as well as for the reputation of the girl on the bed.

If the truth came out she would be reduced to disgraceful penury.

As to the intrigue itself, that was altogether beyond Miss Dacre; she could not understand how it had been, from any point of view, possible, and she did not try to understand; she only saw the blazing fact of this secret, unlawful love.

"What shall I say to her parents in any case?" lamented the governess. "She is left behind because she is not so well and she goes out like this!"

"You need not worry about that," said Miss

Dacre, "because I am not going to do more than give you shelter——"

"Shelter!" answered the governess. "We did not want shelter! Why did you take us in if you mean to betray us? It is you who are a wicked woman——"

Then the distracted creature sprang up and whispering, "I must see the professor and see what we must do—*what we must do*," hurried out of the room which had become such a sinister place to Amy Dacre.

She went and sat down by the bed, pulling further back the coarse mosquito net; her faded eyes gazed aridly at the still figure lying there.

A girl; young enough to be her daughter . . . supposing it *had* been her daughter lying here?

Strange thoughts stirred in Amy Dacre's heart; the emptiness of her life stood before her, a definite thing, like a dry cup that has never been filled.

How she hated this girl, this cheat, this hypocrite, this pilferer of stolen fruit, this creature who seemed made of those wanton exotic blossoms that luxuriated so shamelessly under this godless sun.

The governess shuffled back to the door; Miss Dacre rose and met her there.

"The servant has gone for the doctor, but some hours must pass—the professor, he may wait downstairs?"

"Yes." Miss Dacre grimly granted this humiliating favour. "And you go down too, and make some coffee—I want some coffee. I'm not used to losing my night's rest."

"But," cringed the German, "may I not stay by my mistress?"

"She's better without you, I think. Will you get that coffee?"

The German rocked in anguished hesitation, then, muttering in her native speech, descended the mean stairs, and Amy Dacre returned to her post.

She did not think that she would long be alone with the girl; instinct told her that those two people downstairs would not long be separated from the object of their love, so she took the half-unconscious girl by the shoulder and lightly shook her; the purple eyes opened heavily, slowly, and the two women stared at each other.

Amy Dacre's soul was in tumult; her whole being swayed to the turmoil of a fell tempest; she leant down and slapped the fair face lying on her own humble pillow.

The girl sighed and shuddered without moving and the wild emotion of Amy Dacre's spirit found feeble vent in the only language she knew, the limited commonplace of middle-class provincial English.

"You are a wicked girl, I wonder you had the impudence to come here. I know all about your goings on—you with your hair not up! I'm going to tell your parents all I know, it is only fair that I should—cheek, I must say, to think I'd tell a lot of lies for anyone like you."

The girl stirred faintly.

"Will you not ask him to come up?" she whispered.

“No,” replied Miss Dacre. “I should think not indeed.”

And she stared curiously at the red marks of her own fingers or that unearthly pale face. She began to be frightened, terribly frightened, at herself, at her own capacity for doing such a thing, for doing worse things.

In difficult English, the girl said:

“I am dying. Will you not send for him?”

“No, no,” replied Miss Dacre through stiff lips. “And it is nonsense about your dying. They’ve gone for a doctor.”

“I shall not live till then,” murmured the girl. “I have been warned that the next attack—might—please, will you not let him come up?”

“If you believe that you are dying you ought to think of other things.”

“There is nothing else to think of.”

Amy Dacre trembled violently.

“I won’t. I won’t——”

Even the shaded candle light revealed that the girl’s face was changing, a bluish tinge stained her pure pallor and the light in her eyes seemed to recede, as the light on the outgoing tide draws slowly back; she made no lamentation; with wandering hands she detached the fine chain that held the green stone round her neck.

“Please take this—for you.”

She held it out, with a blind gesture; Miss Dacre bent over her.

“Don’t you know I won’t let him up? that I slapped you? that I’m going to tell about you?”

"Yes, I understood," came faintly from the pillow. "I am so sorry for you. I want you to have something beautiful—I do not believe you have ever had anything beautiful."

"Beautiful?" quivered the woman. "You're wandering—beautiful?"

She took the green stone and let the chain hang across her ugly fingers; little radiances darted from the depths of the clear gem; she flung it on the bed.

"Beautiful? You mean wicked," she added.

There was a flurried tapping at the door; Miss Dacre went and opened it cautiously; it was the governess, humble, anxious, supplicating, with the coffee; Miss Dacre looked past her down the stairs into the kitchen; there the man kept his ghastly vigil; he was sitting by the table, with his head in his hands.

Miss Dacre took the coffee.

"You can't come in—she is asleep. I'll let you know if she is worse. You can't come in."

The German tried to peer past her, but Miss Dacre closed the door in her face, and listened till the shuffling footsteps had retreated again. Then she tiptoed to the bed, set the coffee on the side table.

The girl was dead; between the half-closed lids was blankness and the fair mouth hung open; on the cheek were dull finger prints.

In that second Amy Dacre realised Hell; she took a corner of the sheet and tried to rub away those marks on the dead face, but they seemed to glow more brightly, a brand that would outlive the flesh;

to be transferred to her own heart, there to sear for ever. No longer Amy Dacre, but tortured femininity; the woman cast up her arms in a gesture of revolt against some unknown Deity; she was inarticulate, but the meaning of her gesture was obvious; she cursed the God who had made her what she was.

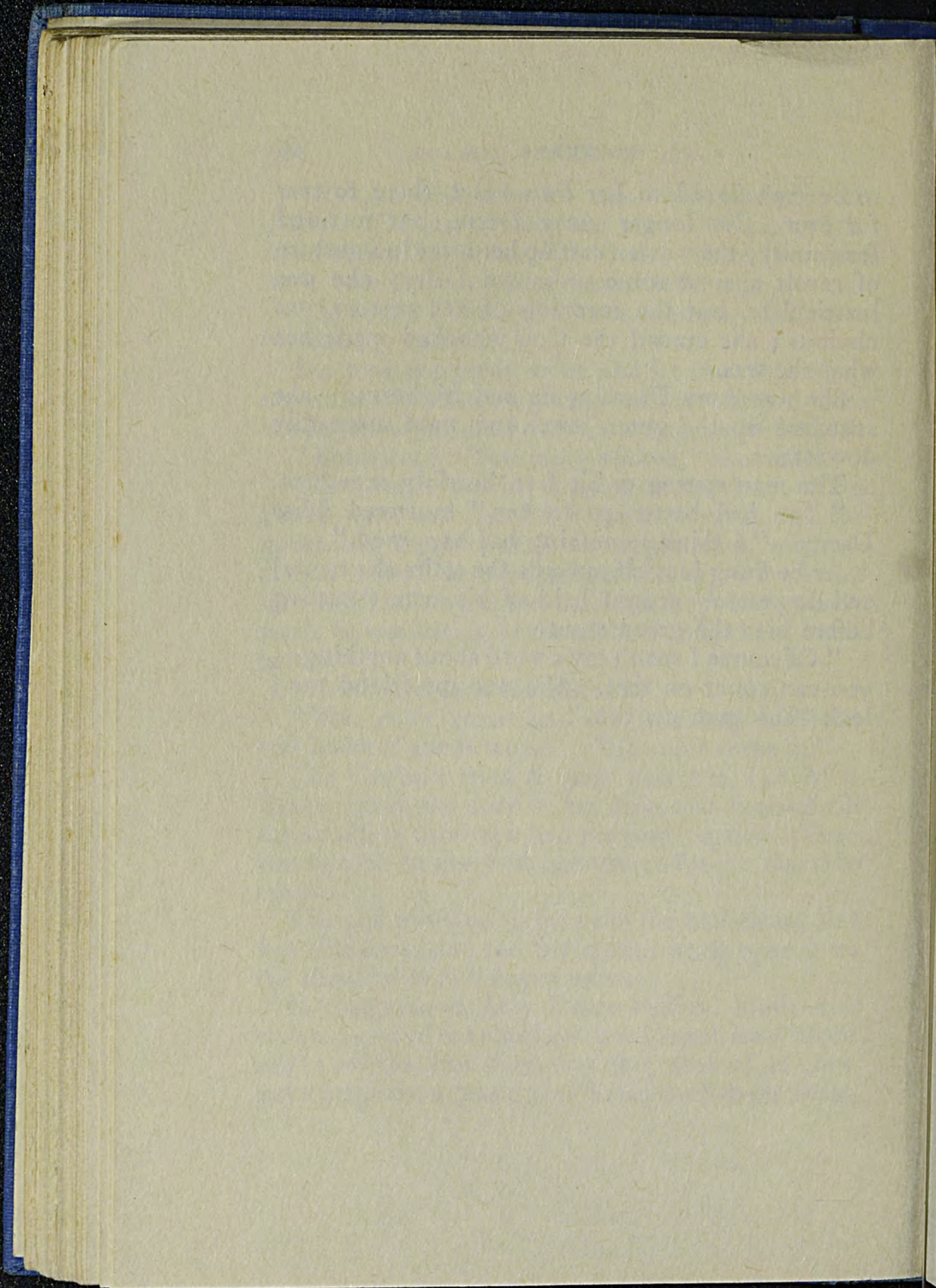
She was Amy Dacre again and frightened; she snatched up the green jewel and went unsteadily downstairs.

The man sprang to his feet, horribly expectant.

"You had better go to her," muttered Miss Dacre. "I think something has happened."

As he flung himself towards the stairs she turned and desperately caught hold of his arm, thrusting before him the green stone.

"Of course I shan't say a word about anything—you can count on that. She was my friend too; look—she gave me this."



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2. Night Blooming

WHEN Adrian Fleetwood was introduced to Lucia Dolabella he resolved, quite deliberately, to fall in love with her; he used in his mind the crude old-fashioned phrase, but he did not mean the crude old-fashioned thing, but, indeed, something far-reaching, subtle, curious and exotic.

To love Lucia Dolabella would of a surety be a stimulating and curious adventure, rare enough in quality to satisfy the most fastidious of men.

Adrian Fleetwood could afford to be fastidious; he was not very young, so had no wayward passions to trip him up in his leisured quests. He was sufficiently wealthy not to be obliged to do anything hurried, ordinary, or disagreeable, and he had sufficient intelligence and culture (for a great deal is required) to be able to fill his boundless leisure with amusing and creditable occupations.

He was a connoisseur in most things, even in cities, and he should have found Rome banal, but he had a flat "off" the Corso in quite a dingy but ancient and romantic house, where he spent part of the spring of each year.

He had heard several stories of the Marchesa Dolabella before he met her; she was of a great family, the last of her line, not young for an unmarried Italian lady, poor (no one could understand how she lived), eccentric and sickly.

This last item disgusted Fleetwood, who was

himself elegantly robust and regarded permanent ill-health as a kind of indecency.

But that was before he had met Lucia Dolabella.

He had often bought her some indifferent jewel for the sake of its intricate, lovely, or queer and strange setting, and he could really have loved the Marchesa for her own surroundings. She lived in an old *rococo* palace hidden away in the twistings of busy modern streets and shining tram lines.

Contrary to general usage, she refused to let even a portion of her vast dwelling, which was filled with the aroma of this one personality.

She "received" in the huge *salone* on the *piano nobile*, a room with painted walls of dim green hunting scenes, veiled with the bloom of damp, and lit by an enormous cut-glass candelabra in royal blue and puce colour, that had never been fitted for electric light, but on festive occasions held squat yellow church candles.

The chill floor was of shining tiles, the great windows were hung with heavy faded red brocade curtains, two negroes in black marble supported a yellow marble table that bore a lofty Empire clock and two Sèvres vases in China pink.

The furniture was crimson velvet and gilt, and not a bit of it less than a hundred years old; even in April the place was chilly and shadowed; there was no heating save the tiny brazier by the couch, with its stiff, red bolsters, where the Marchesa shivered with her hands held out over the thin glow, or fanning it with a cluster of eagle's feathers.

"I happen to prefer things as my grandfather

preferred them, that is all," she said to Fleetwood in her excellent English.

She was like a portrait by David, thin and dark, always enveloped in cashmere or lace shawls, that smelt of musk and bergamot, her smooth black hair looped with queer old combs, some unusual jewels sparkling in her tiny ears.

Her features were regular, but her lips too thin—her complexion sallow; it was in her grace, her charm, her distinction, her extraordinary elegance that the attraction lay.

On her ormolu table where she served her tea was a group of porcelain blossoms in a gilt *jardinière*—an exquisite piece of Dresden ware, and she reminded Fleetwood of this posy of china flowers, stiff, precise, exactly coloured like life, yet wholly artificial and more enchanting than the nature they imitated.

That the Marchesa Dolabella should possess any of the grosser qualities of humanity seemed to Fleetwood impossible; she was as remote from anything passionate, violent or crude, as the chill Dresden blooms were remote from the lusty flowers of the ditch.

She was also what Fleetwood would have called in the jargon of his moment "brilliant" and "clever," which is to say that she had those gifts which give any effect of shining, something resplendent and bright. She also possessed social wisdom and knew when to gleam and when to withdraw into enigmatical darkness.

Fleetwood came to adore everything she did and was, her useless netting with gold threads, her

turning of a tinkling musical-box that played Puccini, Gluck, and *La Belle Hélène*, gavottes and quadrilles to the same beat, and valse written when Byron found them indecent. Fleetwood admired her laziness, her serene idleness, the poverty she ignored, her cool reserve.

He heard of estates mortgaged, sold, ruined by a father and brothers, of vineyards permitted to be swept out by the pyloxerella, of country villas fallen to decay, of treasures sold—all before she was born; yet she lived in austere luxury and never spoke of “business.”

It was not easy for Fleetwood to imagine Lucia Dolabella in any setting but this setting. Yet she was not really often in her ancient palazzo; she travelled all over Europe with a withered maid (duenna rather) and a serving man in a worn livery who, when she was in Rome, drove her, in the evening press of carriages, through the Borghese gardens. Delicious then to see the Dolabella!

How graciously she reclined against her cushions, how charmingly her plumes and veils, always smoke-coloured, black, or ivory, floated behind her, how delicate her hand among her laces—the turn of her fringed and tasselled parasol, hinged to tilt against the sun.

Fleetwood had the vanity to believe that he could win this exquisite creature.

He was, he thought, as exactly made for her as the long silk gloves into which she slipped her thin fingers, and she suited him as perfectly as the spray of gardenias she sometimes gave him with his

plate of iced biscuits. But though she was perfect in her distinct individuality, a gem cut into one facet and throwing one point of light, Fleetwood was not himself of so unchanging and serene a character.

He admitted depths in himself that the Marchesa could not plumb, heights she could not climb—side-paths he would not have her explore.

When they sat together in her chill *salone* he was conscious that she was in the only setting possible to her, but that there were many others possible to him—who, after all, remained the restless, roving male, and under all his refinements held quietly to many prerogatives impossible, oh, impossible for the Marchesa to even guess!

She dismissed her guests early; she did not disdain the conventions; being so great a lady she could afford to do ordinary things, and even the favoured Fleetwood was not ever asked to supper or expected to stay long after the “five o’clock.”

And she never went out in the evening, not even to the opera; the doctor had forbidden her to do so—her strength was just sufficient to last till dusk.

As Fleetwood left the now rigidly closed doors of the palazzo, over which hung the dusty canvas shield with the lavish foreign quarterings, he reflected how extraordinarily little this woman could know of life . . . her confessor, her *bijouterie*, her champagne-like wit, her sofa lounging, her long hours of seclusion—why, she saw the world through the pages of English quarterlies, French novels, and Italian poems—artificial! ignorant! delicious!

Fleetwood sauntered through the May evening;

the days began to be too hot, but these hours were ravishing; he had time to spare (he made a point of always having time to spare, no arbitrary engagements or imperative duties ever fettered his days), and as he walked the warm pavements under the dusty trees he was conscious of wishing to go somewhere quite different from the dim *salone* of the Palazzo Dolabella.

He wanted some vivid and stinging contrast to that exquisite atmosphere so that, when he went there again, he should relish it the more keenly.

And then he saw on one of the kiosks that sold all the bright papers Fleetwood never read, a badly printed poster of a music-hall, across the top of which ran in smudged black lettering :

“LA CIVETTA”

Fleetwood's fancy travelled round the name; this tawdry gipsy, probably from the slums of Salonika or the ports of the Levantine, would be the antithesis of the Marchesa—for the sake of the violent contrast he would see “La Civetta.”

The foul air of the music-hall, thickened by cigars and the odour of *siroppi* and oranges, filled with the clash of a huge orchestra, and the gabble, hisses and encores of the audience, speedily gave Fleetwood a headache.

Yet it was a different kind of headache from those he sometimes got in the Palazzo Dolabella; he drank several kummel, the only civilized drink he found at the shoddy *bar Americana*, and he waited for the star turn of the evening.

Somewhere about ten o'clock she appeared, more

than half-naked, against a black curtain strapped with pearls, and wearing a hideous gold Tibetan mask.

From her brows sprang two scarlet antennæ, and she wore shoes shaped like scarlet claws . . . she began to dance.

Fleetwood stared.

She was grotesque, she was horrible, she suggested unnameable things . . . Fleetwood stared.

She ran off and came on in another mask like Greek comedy, but apple-green. Through the thick lips she shrilled a song in Roman argot that sent the audience wild with delight; Fleetwood could understand enough to catch the abominable vulgarity of it. . . . She came on as a nautch girl in a tinsel skirt like a bell, and whirled and twisted, swung and swooped in voluptuous fury; when she had darted off the house echoed with frantic delight, Fleetwood with the rest.

For the last time she came on, and he saw her without disguise; her face was dead white, her lips the colour of a geranium, her eyes circled with blue, a twist of scarlet hair bound her head, her legs and arms were bare, her body covered in black, she danced and sang like a street gamin; Fleetwood had never seen anything so fantastic, so ugly.

Yet when it was over he shouted lustily he wanted it all over again . . . what life, what humour, what nerve, *panache*, zest! The creature was a genius. . . .

Fleetwood went every night to the music-hall.

And he did not propose marriage to the Marchesa.

For the part of him that was not in love with her had fallen in love with "La Civetta."

He heard many different accounts of her; she was a Jewess from Amsterdam, a Neapolitan, a French Eastern, a half-caste, a negress—oh, what did it matter, *via*, she was a *cantatrice*!

She appeared in most of the capitals, but came to Rome every season; her reputation was what anyone might expect.

Fleetwood balanced her with the Marchesa, a profanity in which he took exquisite delight.

He was really in love with two women at once—with two women so different that one supplied what the other lacked, and both supplied a great deal of what he lacked himself.

He found a secret and subtle pleasure in balancing one against the other; it was an exquisite sensation to sit toying with the Marchesa over some question of modern philosophy, a piece of ancient lace, or a curious print, to feel one with the atmosphere of the old *salone*, with the antique servant in livery, the circle of precise narrow aristocrats, to adore, really adore the pale woman on the sofa and to know, deep down in your heart, that in a few hours you would be free of all of it, in the rank air of the music-hall, relishing crudity, glare and blast, and enjoying the antics of "La Civetta" in her masks and flashing glass jewels, her half-nude limbs plastered with paint, her voice, coarsened by all the evil drinks of every European café, singing songs in a polyglot that was the dictionary of vice.

And equally enticing was the reverse of the medal; to sit amid this din and clash, his eyes seared with vulgar colours, and think of the dim *salone*, cool

and green as a seagrot too, and the thin woman with her low voice, who knew nothing at all about anything save elegant trifles, and the vase of china flowers.

But though he indulged in this mental philandering, Fleetwood had his loyalties; he would not declare his passion for the Marchesa until he was quite sure that he was cured of his passion for the *cantatrice*.

He looked for an occasion to cure himself of his indecision, and found it, as one generally does find that for which one searches with leisure.

It was necessary that his love affairs should come to a crisis, for summer was closing over Rome; the music-hall would soon shut and the Marchesa would go to the hills.

Hitherto he had scrupulously avoided seeking the acquaintance of "La Civetta," but now he resolved to do so and put to the test the various legends he had heard of this notorious lady.

He wrote to her, and received a reply making an appointment in her dressing-room at the theatre on the last night of the season.

For a moment Fleetwood visualized himself on Lago di Garda—oh, anywhere!—dreaming away the exotic summer with this bizarre companion—costly, of course, but then he need not buy the Tintoretto sketch that had tempted him; it was dubious, anyhow, perhaps as dubious as "La Civetta," if you cared to look at things in that light.

And Lucia Dolabella?

Fleetwood hesitated . . . wonderful, of course, to be the husband of that wonderful creature, it

would give you distinction, *cachet*, anywhere—but—well, marriage was a more serious matter than an episode on Lago di Garda.

Then Fate (as Fleetwood thought) played him this neat trick.

“Do you know the cereus?” asked the Marchesa. “It only blooms at night. It is very curious to see it open.”

She pointed to a large shapeless plant on the heavy marble table; among the thick leaves was a massive bud.

“Giovanni, who never mistakes, thinks that it will open on Saturday. On these great occasions I waive my usual custom and have a few intimates to watch the cereus bloom. Will you come?”

The date was that of his appointment with “La Civetta”—the hour Madame Dolabella named was the hour when he should be with her rival.

Saturday evening saw him with his blonde, serene face, slightly flushed by the heat and press, at the last performance of “La Civetta.”

The dancer wore a marvellous costume of pale pink thick satin; her face was covered by a long pointed gilt horn, like an old powder mask, about two feet long, from the tip of which a crystal blob depended; her hair was concealed by a stiff green net, another green net was her only covering to the waist, where the pink satin flounced into huge trousers.

She was hideous . . . Fleetwood stared in a growing discomfort . . . how the people pressed and applauded, he was deafened, stifled by the perpetual “*bis . . . bis . . . bis.*”

She only gave that one dance; at the appointed time Fleetwood made his way to the stage door; but at the very threshold of the dingy, dirty entrance, where some gaudy youths were lounging, he turned back . . . what would the woman look like without the drench of the footlights and limelights—how many rents and patches might he not discern in her bright dress, how many seams and wrinkles behind the masks and cosmetics? A close, foul reek came down the narrow soiled passage . . . Fleetwood peered in and retraced his steps.

The Marchesa was waiting for him; it seemed like Providence.

Giovanni admitted him with smiling discretion; in the familiar *salone* he breathed more freely; he looked at himself in one of the damp, dimmed mirrors as at a creature saved from the edge of an abyss . . . exciting, of course, to dance on the edge, but when you found yourself losing foothold—ugh!

He was alone; although he was exact to the hour the other guests had not arrived; the puce and blue candelabra was lit with the squat wax candles . . . how cool and fragrant, filled with what delicious peace was the dim *salone*!

On the marble table straggled the big ugly plant with the huge bud; as Fleetwood gazed at the thing it seemed to quiver.

He wondered why he was so long alone; Giovanni had said that the Marchesa was "resting" and would be down in a moment . . . but the other guests?

He heard the grind of a car outside, and the bleaching white light of the headlamps was cast in

at the open window . . . a pity she had asked other people . . . how delightful to have told her to-night in front of the cereus.

He looked again at the flower; with a movement so sudden that it made him step back, the thing opened; the fleshy petals uncurled with a gesture of a woman stretching out her arms; a second and the huge pale pink bloom was complete.

Pale, gleaming pink, like satin, like flesh, dark green leaves and a crystal blob of water at the tip of one petal . . . how horribly like "La Civetta" . . . Fleetwood wiped his forehead.

The door opened; with a little pattering sound she joined him, dropped the white cloak and showed the pink satin trousers, the green net; she removed the white horn-like mask and revealed the pale, tired face of Lucia Dolabella.

"I thought you were coming to see me in my dressing-room?" she said.

But Fleetwood had withered; he was bent and holding on to the marble table.

"Night blooming," the Marchesa nodded at the flower, "very fine, is it not? But you do not really like it?"

The shrunken Fleetwood moved towards escape; the Marchesa looked at him languidly, with a remote interest in her eyes.

"It is a little like Lucia Dolabella, who would have made such a distinguished wife," she remarked, "and 'La Civetta,' who would have been such a 'bizarre' mistress; ah, yes, very nice—but not for little boys."

3. Flower of Carnival

MODERN life, so deprived of violent action, and restrained in emotional display, tends to take refuge from dullness in phantasy, fires of passion damped and concealed escape in fumes of dreams; like the smoke of burnt essence.

Felicity, without any means of expressing herself and moulded into decorum and schooled into repression, was in Venice at Carnival time. She had long fled from outer chagrins into inner visions and had now arrived at a state of mind where the solidity of material things no longer hampered her spiritual flights; she had discovered that the exact geometric basis of everything was only part of the great illusion and that to call all objects square that had four corners and leave it at that was to be stupidly deceived.

There were times when Felicity believed that she had discovered the Fourth Dimension, or at least knew rather too much about Height, Depth and Length for complete clarity of thought, for though there were times when she saw light and air as geometrical cubes and heavy stone buildings as wisps of grey smoke, she had not yet completely adjusted her experiences and her convictions.

One sensation she had long persistently been aware of—that of standing on the segment of a circle with the Past coming round one half of it,

and the Future coming round the other half of it, to meet her, and both being alike unescapable.

In these beliefs she bore more patiently her immediate destiny, which was that of being a plain, dependent woman, with few friends and no worldly prospects.

She was, in brief, companion to a peevish invalid, and her duties were of a rasping monotony; she had learnt that spiritless patience that is death to the gaiety and lustre of life.

Now she was in Venice and she found her invisible world had slipped into new shapes like the shaking of a kaleidoscope, that most enchanting of toys.

She sat on the balcony of the narrow hotel and looked on to the narrow Piazza.

One could put on a disguise, a mask, and wander about these odd strange streets, hearing gusts of music, like gold ribbons in the air, seeing radiant lamps reflected in blackish green water flowing between palaces, seeing flags with exotic devices fluttering in the pure purple of the twilight.

This of course quite altered life; 'bus fares, mud, icy winds, rubber slip-ons and twopenny screws of wilting violets faded from Felicity's mind; her intense and bitter hunger for beauty so long dormant began to revive and rouse her into excitement.

Colour first.

Colour that here seemed to obscure, even dissolve shape; the ornate palaces were unsubstantial things of nacre and hyacinth blue and dying amber

and rich bistre in the shadows; the people who began to leave the warm darknesses of the doorways were oblongs and circles of orange, scarlet, acid green, crude blue and heavy crimson.

Voices sounded thin and queer, music coming across unseen water had a sweet uncertainty; Felicity could scarcely distinguish which was music and which colour; the notes of the melody were mingled with the notes of colour passing in and out of the thickening twilight.

Presently Mrs. Powell, who had been so well lately, would put on her dress, her disguise and mask and go out with the new friends she had made in the hotel.

Felicity would remain on the balcony a while, then she would go and help the maid arrange the large austere rooms as Mrs. Powell liked them.

A man came out of the door below and stood hesitant in the street; Felicity viewed him with hostile eyes; she had seen him before; to look at him was like looking in a mirror, for he, too, appeared mean, ordinary and inefficient; she was sure that he was only here by chance as she was herself here by chance, and that he also was at a loss what to do with the gorgeous licence of the evening.

Felicity despised him; she wished that he was not there, she wished that he would return to his miserable occupation of addressing picture postcards in the lounge, nursing a broken fountain pen and complaining of Italian ink.

The man remained below, wistfully snuffing up the rich and languid air.

Felicity degraded him malignantly in her thoughts; he was baldish, he had holes in his socks, he caught cold every winter, and went to sleep, flushed hideously, after dinner, his mind was cramped and dusty; she loathed him; she was sure that he loathed her; when they had passed in the hall full of wicker work and cracking palms below he had glanced at her with distaste.

A woman who should not wear pink roses in her hat because of her complexion, but would do so; a woman whose wavering chin made lace at her neck grotesque, yet always had a cheap copy of lace there; a woman hardly important enough even to be absurd.

Felicity had conceded that point long ago. She was not important enough to be absurd; so few women were.

For the completely plain woman, further distorted by lack of taste and a stupid mind, a new word is required; Felicity was not one of these, she had her sense of humour and her intelligence, but she did not disdain the haunts of these unfortunates.

She had mingled with the votaries of good causes, she had attended Sunday performances of uplifting plays, she had been on Committees for the Relief of the Unworthy and Ungrateful, therefore it is quite clear that she knew feminine unattractiveness to the very nadir; and she knew this despicable man had consigned her paltry presence to this nadir.

Mrs. Powell called to her—"Felicity!" sharply.

The tiresome woman had been taken really ill; she was yellow and sharp featured; her dyed hair

had a merciless brightness; with peevish hands she pushed about pots and boxes of cosmetics.

"I can't go out to-night," she complained. "Put me to bed."

The maid was filling hot-water bottles, the big bed had a gaping look.

How horrible illness was ! What was the matter with Mrs. Powell ?

Felicity had heard doctors and nurses talk so frequently about this malady that she was quite confused. Mrs. Powell had so much money that no one ever said anything definite to her; Felicity got out the night things, white silk, white wool.

Why had Mrs. Powell come to Venice ?

There was no reason in such a visit. As if there was ever any reason in anything, as if reason itself wasn't ridiculous !

The maid tied pink silk over the electric light; Mrs. Powell was "put to bed" as she had demanded; someone telephoned to the doctor; down the stairs was the constant sound of people going out to the Carnival. All flowing away, as time itself was flowing away, into the void of night.

The English doctor came; he had seen Mrs. Powell that afternoon; he was kind and vague; Felicity knew that he had no interest in the case beyond his fee, but he humoured Mrs. Powell's belief that her illness, in its origin largely her own fault, gave her a vast, almost sacred importance.

Mechanically Felicity went out on the landing with him; the well of the stairs was filled with perfume of coffee, of dried mimosa and gunpowder,

for crackers were being pulled and fireworks let off outside. You could hear the sharp rippling noise.

The doctor looked at Felicity.

"Why don't you go out and enjoy yourself, eh?"

"Go out and enjoy myself?"

"Yes. I suppose you've never done such a thing?"

Felicity said shrewdly :

"I've enjoyed myself. In dreams. That's nonsense to you."

"Of course not. There's lots of dreams abroad to-night—why don't you go?"

"Isn't Mrs. Powell ill?"

"No worse to-day than yesterday or to-morrow."

"It was the mirror," said Felicity. "Carnival time—and you look in the mirror. I know. She's never been pretty and she's getting old."

"It's the most pitiful thing in the world," said the doctor, "but you're still young. Go out and have a look round. The Stanfields will take you instead of Mrs. Powell."

Felicity went back to the bedroom; a sleeping draught had put Mrs. Powell beyond the reach of the sound of fireworks, of music, of footsteps; the maid was reading a book with a yellow cover.

"Do you think that I might go out?" asked Felicity.

"Why not? I've got to stay in anyhow, it doesn't make any difference."

"I'll put on Mrs. Powell's mask and cloak."

"Yes, do." Mary was always good-natured, content with an easy chair and an easy book.

"I'll be back early."

The mask was white and pointed with a fall of black lace over the lips; from the three-cornered hat hung a curtain that reached the shoulders of the huge cloak, also black with a monstrous gold border and galloons of crimson braid; the most coquettish disguise yet evolved by frivolity.

Covered thus from head to foot Felicity stared through the eyeholes at herself in the prim hotel glass.

"There, now I'm pleasing, perhaps beautiful—if we all wore masks now—how much more easy to be self-respecting——"

She went downstairs, walking with a confidence she had never used before; of course she wasn't going to join the Stanfields.

She was going alone.

Her disguise had taken from her all petty nervousness, she never thought about the things that usually worried her; little questions of time and money, of knowing the way, of being addressed rudely, of being back early, of not catching cold, of taking an umbrella, and avoiding the rush hour on 'bus or tube.

She did not know the time, she had no money, she was ignorant of the city, of the people, of the modes of transit, and despite her conventional remark to Mary, she had given no thought to her return.

Cloud on cloud, phantasy overwhelmed her, cloud on cloud forming, dissolving, re-forming.

She found the night air of a piercing sweetness; it seemed adorned with gold dust, powdered amber and perfumed by ripe grapes.

The stars, of an astonishing lustre, appeared to hang between, as well as above the palaces, to be suspended in the streets where they danced gently over the heads of the masks.

Long and round bladders floated in light confusion from slight strings; these gleaming skins were luminous lemon, dull prune and jade-green colour; you had a sense of their fragility, their foolishness, of the delight of bursting their thin, shining skins.

Felicity mingled lusciously in the press; she wanted to be jostled.

People were squealing, blowing whistles, giving thin shrieks; light and colour broke and re-formed in every patch of shade, in every blot of radiance.

Why wasn't life always like this?

How silly for it to ever be different—was this what was at the back of one's mind when one was doing drab things, vague, worrying thoughts of happiness?

A great deal that was going on about her Felicity did not see, and she saw a great deal that no one else would have been aware of; her emotions, sublimated into the realms of so-called phantasy, and her senses, quickened by a long inward gazing, were played on by the lovely scene until between them they worked what used to be known as a spell.

It would, then, appear that Felicity was spell-bound.

Inasmuch as she did not any longer know she was plain, ill-considered, poor, on the verge of the absurd.

She did not know any longer that she was wearing borrowed finery, that Mrs. Powell was lying sick and drugged in the hotel bedroom and that Mary was beside her reading a book with a yellow cover.

She passed on with the crowd, turning this way and that as she was pushed or led.

For often other maskers took her hand and hurried her along.

She had the sensation of passing through the houses, of entering vast doors, of passing down long corridors adorned by grandiose coats of arms and cracked mirrors, out on to a sombre canal where black water flowed with a delicious gloom round striped poles crowned by great, crazy gilt crowns.

She thought, too, that she went in boats, gondolas, of course; and she kept saying over the word "gondola" so long familiar yet never real.

A foreign word, though you'd hardly realized that, a pretty word, though it didn't sound like a boat!

She was in a vast piazza—really vast—had she ever thought of anything so large in a city?—so dark—so full of people?

St. Mark's Square—one had seen pictures of it, the tower, the pigeons, the arcades, not like this; how full of people!

And at one end a stage where grotesques were leaping to the sound of drum and pipe.

Leaping and turning head over heels, high in the air.

What was the word that creaked stiffly in her memory?

Saltimbique? Fantocchi?

How the spangles and sequins on their tights glittered as they sprang and gyrated; the crowd applauded without looking.

Someone seized Felicity by the elbow and gave her a green drink in a twisted glass.

"Isn't it all delicious?" said this mask. "But why are you alone?"

"I'm not alone, I'm part of the crowd, for the first time I'm part of a crowd."

"But where is your lover? Have you lost him? Are you waiting for him? You have been standing by this pillar quite a long time."

There was a din of trumpets, of drums, of squeaking voices, of thin shrieks and harsh whistles.

"Everyone ought to have a lover to-night, you know," added the mask. "You had better find one before it is too late."

He was lost in the crowd again. Felicity set her glass on one of the little round tables under the arcade; she was no longer afraid of the sound of the word "lover"; of course she never had been really, but only pretended to be as she had pretended so many things.

Now, masked and disguised she might dare to

think of a lover—why not? She was no longer unattractive or plain or unwanted.

Merged in the Carnival she had become part of the Carnival, that consisted, after all, largely of lovers, perhaps entirely of lovers.

Felicity considered love, enwrapped in a cloud of meditation Felicity considered love—she had always felt that it was a passion dangerous, silly or sad save for the very few fortunate people that you heard of, or read about, but never met.

And now, of course, one might meet them; this would be the kind of place.

It has been said that Felicity was spellbound; she moved round the Piazza as one might move round a gilt roundabout on a vermilion horse, despising, as long as the crazy music of the fair lasted, the insignificance of every day.

Another domino accosted her; he had antennæ like a beetle, of iridescent purple, hovering above his gilded mask.

“Where are you going?” he asked, putting himself in Felicity’s way.

She was by now completely self-assured, and answered this stranger with the gay humour of an admired woman.

“Is that a question for Carnival time?” she asked. “And do any of us know where we are going?”

A clock struck and Felicity had a shuddering sense of the intrusion of a hateful past.

“What time is it?” she whispered in a voice from which all confidence had gone.

"Time is an illusion," replied the mask. "Surely you know that? Our consciousness of time is as incomplete as our consciousness of the bat's cry——"

He pulled on his gloves, which were studded with sapphires, and asked Felicity if she had noticed the bronze horses above the church.

No, she had not, nor even seen the church itself.

"You would not know it for a church," said the mask, "for I am sure that in this connection you always think of steeples and ivy and Gothic architecture——"

"It seems odd to think of horses above a church door," Felicity agreed, "but I suppose they are sacred beasts."

And the mask said, no, not at all, not in the way Felicity meant, were they in the least sacred, only very ancient and wise too, if they had taken the least notice of their experiences.

Felicity asked him why he had said that time was an illusion, and he asked her if she really knew where she was.

"In Venice, at Carnival time," said Felicity vaguely.

"Ah, but what Venice, and what Carnival?" asked the mask. "It is not so easy to tell that, is it? One isn't anchored, you know; you may have gone forwards or backwards from where you started——"

Felicity said that this sounded like nonsense, but after all what was nonsense?

And she herself had often had the sensation

described by the mask which she had explained to herself as that of standing on the segment of a circle.

They now passed into a sweetmeat shop which was lit by crimson candles.

Felicity had always thought of sweets as cheap things in bags or so expensive you didn't consider them, but these sweets were different, both lovely and enticingly arranged and the most delicious colours of buff, opal, rose, raspberry pink, violet and clear green, powdered with the finest sugar as delicately as a lady's face.

They were placed in patterns in boxes of figured silk, in dishes of thick cut glass, in milky hued jars, in oval plates of silver filigree and in tiny pyramids on squares of embroidered satin.

The top of the shop, which was very lofty and dim, was filled by balloons of various colours and white birds suspended from scarlet threads who gave a mechanical cry at intervals.

A Turk in a robe embossed with bullion was selling the sweets and he offered Felicity some dark glittering sugar plums in a horn of silver paper.

"But I have no money," she said, but both the beetle mask and the Turk said together :

"You can pay to-morrow."

"But if there is no time there is no to-morrow," argued Felicity.

"No," replied the Turk, "there is always a to-morrow and a yesterday—it is to-day which is the deception—it is that present moment which men feel so sure of that is the real illusion."

Another reveller lingered by the door of the shop; he wore black and yellow, which made him appear part of the night and the lights.

"Perhaps," suggested Felicity's companion, "it is your lover, looking for you."

The Turk advanced courteously and offered sherbet to the newcomer, which he declined.

"He is certainly looking for you," persisted the beetle mask. "Why don't you take his arm and run off with him?"

Felicity laughed, for certainly the stranger lingered in the doorway as if waiting for someone.

"Sir," said the Turk, "probably you are wondering if this lady is ready—I assure you that she is, she has eaten all her sugar plums and has nothing more to say. Neither have we."

And he gently pushed Felicity towards the newcomer, whose blank white mask gave him a look of pallor.

"They seem determined to get rid of us," said Felicity, pleasantly addressing him, "so if you have nothing to do, suppose we go together?"

"I do not know the way anywhere," answered the black and yellow domino.

"Neither do I," said Felicity, "but as we have nowhere to go to that doesn't matter."

They had now left the shop, which seemed to be quickly lost to view, and found themselves hurried along in the crowd. The air was warm, yet chill with the delightful sharpness of spring.

"Will you stay with me all the evening?" asked

Felicity's cavalier, "for I know no one else in all this throng."

"Neither do I," she answered, "and I will gladly stay."

They watched the fireworks, all those gaudy stars and wheels in the pure purple of the night, falling above the crude reflections in the blackness of the canals.

Felicity's companion held her tightly by the arm as if he feared to lose her; despite his full domino and cape she knew that he was strong, tall and slim; as she leant into the pressure of his arm she felt a very excellence of happiness.

They passed down a side street where there were few lights, only an odd lamp here and there in some high, lonely window; and the faint song of caged nightingales moaning to the moon was the only sound save that distant melody of the Carnival.

"Dear," whispered Felicity's cavalier, "I am glad that we have got away from the others so that I can tell you how much I love you. I have loved you ever since I first saw you, and that seems a long time ago."

These words brought to Felicity an overwhelming joy; never before had she experienced such a sensation of pure delight.

Not till this moment indeed had she been a woman. Quite speechless she listened, gazing at the moon high above the dim palaces that never before had seemed remotely so gorgeous and glittering—oh, never remotely!

"I've been looking for you so long," continued

the man with tender passion, "and now I've found you at last on a night like this—a night full of gold and silver."

"Do you know me then?" asked Felicity weakly.

"Of course! And your name, Felicity! Is not that a good omen for us, a name like that?"

The rest of his speech Felicity could never have reduced into words; it was a confusion of all joy and wonder, not a single fear, doubt or regret marred the radiance of her delight.

It seemed to her that everything, not only the masked man, but everything was speaking at once, the moon, the dark heavens, those lonely lamps, the nightingales, the black waters, all speaking of Love.

Never before had she heard these voices, seen this radiance which never seemed to hover above and beyond the dimmest, most shadowed objects.

Not until he asked her to kiss him did she remember that she was masked, and she began to shudder, then, in a clouded Paradise.

Her spirit begged the moon to hide, the lamps to go out and even that fading glow of distant Carnival to disappear.

Who was she to unmask while there was the least vestige of any light to betray her?

But she now observed that their wanderings had indeed led them away from the light—both of moon and lamp, and that they were in the dense shadow of a huge statue that rose in the middle of a small enclosed piazza.

This statue appeared monstrous and completely blotted out not only the moon but the pallid lightness of the midnight heavens; it seemed to be the shape of a gigantic man, reining in a powerful and fierce horse, but Felicity could not be sure of this.

By the base of this statue in the warm intense shadow Felicity and her lover stood enwrapped in magic darkness.

And there she lifted her lucky mask and let him kiss her, and kissed him, joyously, fervently, in a way that she had not believed credible.

He spoke to her, and she to him, but they did not know what each other said—only their unheard words vibrated the universe to rapturous harmony.

Everything now lost shape and colour to Felicity and became one dazzle; she was walking with his arm round her, she was in a boat with his arm round her; the air was full of showers of brilliant stars rose coloured, diamond bright; the water rippled swiftly to the rose dripping shores of the fortunate isles and all Felicity's being bloomed into one rapturous glittering flower of Carnival.

She was at the hotel again; Mrs. Powell was still asleep under the glow of the pink silk shaded light of the electric lamp, Mary was still reading the book with the yellow cover.

She, this dazed Felicity, could not have been away very long, not as you counted time on the clock.

“What a noise there has been,” said Mary, looking up. “I thought that Mrs. Powell would wake up, drug or no drug, but she didn't, though she's been restless in her sleep.”

Felicity felt that this was what she had been, restless in her sleep.

"Why, your domino is all draggled," added Mary, "wet and muddy and all the confetti sticking to it—you had better clean it up before Mrs. Powell sees it——"

"Yes, I'll dry and brush it," said Felicity, who had taken off her mask. "And now, is there anything I can do for Mrs. Powell?"

Mary said no, surely the invalid would sleep till morning; she was herself going to bed.

"Very well," answered Felicity, "I will go to bed too."

She went to her bare hotel room; there was an iron frame over the narrow bed where the mosquito net hung in summer; she wondered what this could be; the sheets were cold and coarse, but all manner of raptures invaded the shabbiness of the hired chamber; she did not know when her dreams began.

She woke on rain.

A wet day.

Peering from the splashed window she saw the draggled litter of last night disfiguring the dirty square.

Confetti drifting into the gutter, paper roses drowned in rain, broken flags, burst balloons and the stumps of fireworks.

All washed pallid, while stains of blue, red and green dye ran over the pavement.

The sky was covered by unbroken clouds, the houses looked drab, the glimpse of canal murky; no one was about save a lame beggar who groped through the rubbish of Carnival.

A wet day.

The domino was dry, Felicity brushed it and carried it back to Mrs. Powell's room; she knocked gently on the door and Mary opened it; oh yes, she said, Mrs. Powell was better, but she had decided to leave Venice; she was like that, wasn't she—so sudden and whimsical; well, if she had the money——

"I don't think I shall leave Venice," said Felicity, but not aloud.

"Better go down and get your breakfast," Mary advised.

Felicity went downstairs.

"I wonder how soon he'll come for me," she thought; then she saw herself in the harsh mirror in the hall and all her lovely expectancy withered.

She became furtive, crouching, timid.

Plain, not very young, dependent, awkward, of course he must never see her without her mask.

Masks—that was it—one must not be without one's mask.

Last night had been a matter of masks. She must not forget that.

A matter of masks and darkness.

There was no one in the long dining-room—a vista of white cloths, little groups of white china, honey, butter, rolls.

Outside the rain.

On the long window it swept steadily, drops and deluges, rivulets and streams, rain blotting out the further world.

Felicity sat before her table.

Breakfast, a respite.

Coffee, with a delusive perfume of something exclusive, good, which it wasn't after all.

Still, pleasant—something to sip and flavour; the rolls too, pleasant to eat, the butter fresh, the honey sweet.

Outside the rain, steadily obscuring the outer world.

A man came in to have his breakfast, the man of last night, the man she had despised, the man she had watched, standing reluctant, hesitant, viewing the Carnival.

A man as ordinary, as plain, as inefficient as she was herself.

She glanced at him with annoyance; he nervously glanced away.

Coffee was brought too, to him; the perfumes of their pots mingled.

In the light of her marvellous experience of last night she despised this drab man even more heartily than before. He spoilt the peace of the long white dining-room, the homely comfort of this breakfast respite.

She endeavoured, in the manner so well known to her countrywomen, to make him so uncomfortable that he would gulp down his breakfast and leave the room.

But, instead, her hostile stares produced a queer result, for he looked at her with defiant shyness and said across the two white cloths and two pots of coffee :

“ Did you get home very late last night ? ”

Felicity could not at once evolve a reply of a sufficiently withering nature, so answered with inadequate scorn :

“ I really don't know.”

“ I don't either,” he replied, “ it was all too wonderful.”

The ringing sincerity of this moved Felicity to some softening.

“ Were you out last night also ? ” she asked.

His eyes seemed suddenly luminous, wise and kind in his ordinary face.

“ But you haven't forgotten ? ”

“ Forgotten ? ”

“ Last night.”

Her immediate surroundings began to ebb away at the sound of this voice; out of a mist she asked :

“ Why you weren't—it wasn't you—why how absurd——”

“ I suppose it does seem absurd now—with the masks, darkness, and the Carnival.”

She gazed at different images that receded, blended and faded.

“ It was you ! ”

“ It was you ! ”

They stared at each other across the two squares of white tablecloth, the two coffee pots.

“ You ! ” cried Felicity again.

The little word whistled round the room; it was the key to everything.

“ Last night wasn't true, then,” said Felicity stupidly.

“ Of course it was true.”

"But if it was you——"

"Why shouldn't it be me?"

The earnestness of his eyes compelled attention; she had to admit him into her dreams.

"It is all a matter of masks," he suggested humbly.

"But you knew me—you must have known me—without a mask?"

"Of course. I saw you on the balcony—I saw you go out—I followed you. You went so fast that I had a job to overtake you——"

"Don't," said Felicity, "don't."

Her tears ran into the coffee which she bravely drank.

The man leant closer.

"Why are you disappointed? You couldn't get more than that, could you?"

She did not answer.

"It was like a dream, I know. But we ought to be able to get away into dreams like that—you and I."

"You like me without a mask?"

"You don't need one."

She did. He did. They both needed masks.

They were both such ordinary people; but if last night could be recaptured, even once or twice, it might be worth while.

After all—only a matter of masks—but once you had seen behind them, you couldn't go on pretending that you hadn't. She knew that she would never be able to endure him.

She preferred her dreams.

4. Bright Petals

UNA FULLERTON knew that she could not too easily justify her marriage engagement; that her attitude would have to be a defensive one, and she resented with a hot inner resentment that might not be expressed (as so many have resented before her) that sacred vital emotions must be tested in the crucible of common sense and worldly knowledge and experience.

Of course she could "do as she liked"; she had independent means, and her family respected her intelligence and strength of character; her parents were extremely modern in their views and had made no attempt to control her choice, but her mother had sighed, her father had seemed vaguely dissatisfied, and her young brother had been openly disgusted. And she knew that not one of her friends had been really pleased.

Not that there was "anything against" Lambert Fortress; he was, in his way, a celebrity as a traveller and explorer of some note, but, for all that, he was not quite definitely "placed"; for one thing his mother had been a foreigner and a singer, and though she had died young he had been brought up abroad, and when his father had died he had been left to the guardianship of an Italian physician, of partially Arab descent, and it was in this old man's Roman villa that he made his home; it was there that Una had met him.

Naturally to the girl who fell in love with him, this romantic history and exotic background was an added glamour, but in the minds of her parents and friends an obvious prejudice was roused.

Fortress came of a good family on his father's side and possessed considerable means, but the mother's birth and precedents seemed dubious and he seemed to possess no English relatives and had certainly not had an English training.

Una, of course, did not care in the least; apart from her passion for Fortress, the kind of life he led interested her enormously and she was prepared to instantly forgo her tennis clubs and autumn visits, her Bond Street shops and her childhood acquaintances and to share the remote, peculiar and adventurous life that Lambert Fortress led.

It was indeed clear that she must do so, for he was nearly forty years of age and set and stern in his habits both of thought and action, tinged with Oriental austerity and utterly indifferent to many matters, great and small, that appeared of vivid importance to his countrymen.

The marriage was to be in the spring and in London and their life was to begin with a flat in Paris; but Una knew that this would be a mere stepping-off board.

Fortress was so obviously restless and ill at ease in England and the cordiality of her people that urged him to stay so forced, that Una permitted his return to Rome and accepted the invitation of the Marchesa Spinoli (who had been Alice Carey, a school friend) to stay with her during the autumn,

and Una went, not without a faint feeling of defiance evoked by a faint feeling of disapproval on the part of her family.

She was rather sorry that they could not be married immediately, but the delay was in deference to a strongly expressed wish on the part of Dr. Lorenzi, who believed himself in the last few months of his life and clung to the companionship of his adopted son; Una felt a generous admiration for the remarkable old man and on her own account had a womanly desire to prolong these golden days of courtship, yet the urge to marry Fortress and so defeat any latent attempt to separate them, was potent too.

She arrived in Rome when the intense heat was mellowing in the yellow tawny sunshine of autumn, when the air seems thick with golden dust and fruit and harvest, sky and sea are slowly tinged with rich and burning colours.

Una sat on the terrace of the Villa Spinoli at Frascati; a red and white striped awning cast a blue shadow over her white frock and wide hat and the crumbling ochreish stone.

Out in the unshielded sunlight stood dull red pots with the sharp scarlet of dahlias and geraniums; the open green shutters revealed the cool shaded frescoed drawing-room.

Una put down the French novel she had been reading and gazed across the smudged dusky colour of the burning *campagna* to where Rome gleamed faintly out of the azure violet mist.

Wonderful to think that Lambert Fortress was there; wonderful to think he would soon be

speeding across the plain to her . . . soon . . . soon.

She could have wished that he, too, would come to stay in Frascati until the last of the heat had gone, but Dr. Lorenzi did not care to leave the city.

The Marchesa came out of the cool room, the pale muslins of her gown were fluttered by the slight sunset breeze.

"It begins to be melancholy in the evenings," she said. "Frascati is getting very empty; we, too, will go back to the city soon."

"Melancholy?" smiled Una. "Nothing seems melancholy to me."

The Marchesa lit a rose-scented cigarette.

"I suppose not," she answered thoughtfully; she, too, had an indefinable air of not seeming to whole-heartedly approve of the Fortress affair. "You are, of course, very happy."

"Naturally," replied Una, and the note of defiance was very pronounced.

"You must ask Dr. Lorenzi up here," said her hostess irrelevantly. "He is such a marvellous old man and I am very fond of him."

"But he never goes about now, does he? That is why Lambert has to stay so much in the city—he is really very old."

"Nearly ninety—but his mind is very sharp and clear—of course he is really more an Asiatic than a European and has many of their peculiar gifts."

"I do not know him well," said Una rather stiffly; she thought this last remark was meant to apply also to Lambert Fortress.

"But I have known him very well, ever since I married Nikko," replied the Marchesa, her fair face serene as she exhaled the frail cigarette smoke. "I think he really has the gift of healing—and of second sight—there are very queer stories told about him you know."

"How very uncomfortable," smiled Una self-consciously.

"Oh, why? He is a noble character and has been absolutely devoted to work for humanity. You heard, of course, of some of the things that he has done, but there are a great many that no one has ever heard of—and then his devotion to Mr. Fortress is really touching."

Una moved uneasily; if Dr. Lorenzi had not been so "marvellous," nor Fortress so devoted to him, she would not have had so much prejudice against her marriage to combat.

"Who is Dr. Lorenzi?" she asked.

She leant forward and narrowed her gaze onto the distant haze, now turning bronze colour where the dome of St. Peter sparkled with faint clearness.

The only sound was the slipping of water from the gaping mouth of a Triton into a pool of clay struck with shells and hung with ferns that was in the villa gardens just below the terrace.

"Well, you see, no one really knows," answered the Marchesa. "I believe his father lived in Tripoli and his mother or his grandmother was an Arab—he never speaks of it and seems to have no people."

"Like Lambert," said Una with assumed lightness.

"Oh, Mr. Fortress is very different!"

But she was too eager in her disclaimer and Una winced.

"I must ask Lambert to bring him up here," she said, "and perhaps he will talk 'black magic' to us, or we might go down to the city one evening and have coffee with them."

"That would be very pleasant," said the Marchesa, "but I am sure that Dr. Lorenzi's magic is 'white magic.'"

Una rose.

The evening was really cool now; the fiery sun had sunk behind the flat horizon and the Clardian Aqueduct began to show dark against the pale bleakness of the plain.

The girl went into the dim long shuttered room and idly turned over the English newspapers.

She did not really want to see much of or know much about Dr. Lorenzi, because she felt that he had a great influence over Lambert Fortress and had almost shaped his career and character, and this she wilfully and jealously resented; she wanted Fortress to belong entirely to her, and, in a selfish fashion of which she felt ashamed, she was glad that the doctor was a very old man.

And perhaps, under her admiration of Dr. Lorenzi, was a vague and secret resentment of the fact that he had brought up Lambert Fortress in this exotic fashion, for she was conventional enough to think that it really would have been much

pleasanter now if Fortress had been brought up as an Englishman by an Englishman—of what quite had his father been thinking in choosing such an—well—unusual type of guardian ?

When Lambert Fortress arrived in the purple cool of the evening Una was conscious, even as he stepped from the glittering little aluminium car, that “something was wrong.”

He greeted her almost casually and showed signs of obvious ill-humour even before his host and hostess, and, when Una was alone with him in the empty garden walks where the great violet leaves grew thickly under the cypress trees, he said abruptly :

“When you come to the city you might let me know of it, Una.”

She was quite at a loss.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Weren’t you at Bertelli’s show the other day ?”

“Oh yes, Alice took me——”

“Not alone——”

“No—Ercole, the Marchesa’s brother, came with us—he is fond of sculpture, you know.”

Out of the sweet dusk his voice sounded in bitter triumph.

“You see—you were there—with another man—and I was not even asked.”

Una was so amazed that she felt like one groping in sudden darkness.

“But—but Alice arranged it all,” she stammered.

“I’m her guest, you see, Lambert—I can’t very well

tell her who she is to ask about—she's been so extraordinarily good—and—and you know what a bore engaged people are to others——”

And while she spoke she thought, “If he had been a real Englishman I should not have had to say that.”

Unappeased, Fortress continued :

“It looked very peculiar to my friends (and several of them were at Bertelli's studio) that you should be there with young Spinoli——”

“But I was with Alice,” interrupted Una desperately.

“Spinoli gave you tea—and showed you the statues—you were both very gay—my friends told me so——”

“Your friends are Italians, I suppose, Lambert?”

“Yes—why do you ask?”

“Because—well, English people *wouldn't* have told you those things—it's, well, ridiculous—to English people.”

“I'm not altogether English,” he sternly reminded her; and Una, in her amazed vexation, answered :

“But I am—oh, Lambert, please don't be—*foolish*——”

It was nearly a quarrel, and Una tingled with resentment at this sudden blight on her joyous happiness; she remembered the gay, worldly party at the studio of the fashionable sculptor, the courteous pleasantness of young Spinoli, a boy on leave from the Cavalry School at Modena, and she felt ashamed of this crude jealousy that amounted to a social “gaffe.”

"I do not call it foolish," answered Lambert stubbornly. "It is you who are foolish in thinking you can trifle with my feelings."

Una drew herself up sharp—they were actually on the verge of a sharp disagreement; she controlled herself swiftly.

"I am very sorry if I annoyed you, Lambert, but I do owe some compliance to Alice and you have *nearly* all my time—and *all* my thoughts."

He was mollified but still ungracious.

"Let us look at the water organ," he said abruptly.

They had reached the verge of the hillside garden which ended in a fantastic temple and fountain, visible by the light of the rising moon, and Una, her nerves smarting, her heart full of dismay, followed Lambert Fortress into the interior, which was occupied by a huge water organ on which perched a multitude of clay birds.

The white walls were frescoed with delicate arabesques of the Renaissance period and the organ pipes were heavily gilt; the moonlight pouring through long unglazed windows showed this and also a grotto of bright coloured pebbles at one end where a baroque nymph spouted water from an urn matted with maidenhair fern.

The walls were blotted with damp, green with mould, and here and there hung with ferns and lichen; the floor was wet and bats and owls flapped in the dark corners of the ceiling; Una always found the place dismal.

"It is falling to pieces," remarked Fortress briefly. "A pity."

"Alice hates it," replied the girl, trying to speak lightly, "and her husband would rather have a good gramophone."

Fortress went to the organ and moved about it, touching it here and there, the rising moonlight full over him.

As Una watched him she realized with a secret pang that she really knew very little of him—of his life, his character, his hopes or fears, and she was for an instant terrified at the blind trust love gives. . . .

He was a tall, powerful man, dark and taciturn, of a strong intellect, a wide experience and an unusual charm of personality; now, in the bluish rays of the moon, his slightly strange face looked absolutely unreal—like a mask or covering. His features were good, but the eyes were too wide apart and slightly slanted, the lips full and firmly curved, the nostrils widely curved too, and the dark hair closely waving round the compact head.

Without looking at Una he began to play; she watched his hands, bleached in the moonlight, moving fastidiously over the keyboard.

The melody was wild and sounded as unreal as Fortress looked; all the little clay birds suddenly started warbling in shrill fantastic notes; a figure, half unseen in the shadows, began to clash cymbals and whirl slowly round and round, and in the back-ground of all this was the steady flop, flop of the water.

Una shivered in the damp.

"Do let us go," she asked gently. "It is so chilly, and that organ—I don't like decaying toys."

Fortress closed the keyboard.

"I feel as if I was looking for something to-night and could only find it in music," he answered queerly.

He went back with Una to the house, but soon complained of a headache and early returned to Rome, leaving Una miserable and chilled in spirit.

The following day Una wrote several letters to Fortress, but tore them all up; passionately as she desired again the understanding with her lover, she could not put the matter on paper—it was too trivial, too degrading for both of them; how thankful she was that her hosts knew nothing of the incident and that the gay Ercole continued absolutely unconscious.

That evening a closed "coupé" drove up the long gravel sweep at the back of the Villa Spinoli, and instead of Fortress, Dr. Lorenzi slowly ascended the shallow steps of the winged stairway that led to the terrace.

The Marchesa was out and Una came forward with an odd sense of relief and yet a shiver of premonition; she had not really *wanted* to see Fortress to-night; yet she dreaded what the coming of the old man might mean.

She drew more closely over her shoulders her thin orange silk shawl and hastened forward. Ah—it was good of the doctor to come—they had hardly ventured to ask him, the evenings were still so close—would he wait on the terrace for the Marchesa?

Yes, he would sit on the terrace, but he had not come to see the Marchesa but the gracious Signorina herself; no, neither coffee nor a *limonata* yet—perhaps afterwards—the Signorina was very kind to an old man—like a gentle grand-daughter, or great-grand-daughter he should say—Ah, the *bella vista* Rome in that last haze!

Side by side they sat, the old, old man and the young woman, over their heads the lightly fluttering striped awning, and either side of them the big pots with the unfolding scarlet flowers.

Una was glad of the dusk that veiled from her the figure of her companion, shrunken into the deep boating cushions, his sharp authoritative profile outlined against the yet glittering sky, his thin, pale hair softly stirring on his polished brown forehead, his eyes enveloped with a thousand wrinkles and filmed like those of a sleeping bird of prey.

“Lambert is not coming to-night?” asked Una faintly.

“No, Signorina,” Dr. Lorenzi answered in his cool slow English, “but I have come to talk of him.”

Una had been from the first on the defensive; now she palpably stiffened.

“He is jealous, our poor Lambert, very jealous.”

“He told you that?”

“Ah, there is no need. I know him very well, Signorina.”

In her vexation Una spoke in a kind of ruthless and devastating honesty that hurt herself.

“I am very ashamed, Dr. Lorenzi. I used to

think it would be wonderful to have someone care for you so much they could be jealous—but now I find it is just humiliating—it is all too trivial for words,” she added in her anxiety to clear herself of any possibility of having wilfully provoked Fortress. “I was amazed—shocked.”

“Signorina,” smiled the old man, “love is the only primitive passion we recognize, but the others continue to exist—just the same.”

Una was silent and after a pause the old man added :

“Lambert inherits a great capability for jealousy.”

“It is rather—terrible,” frowned Una.

“If I was a man like most men—if I did not believe in Fate, Miss Fullerton, I should have said to you from the very first—‘you must not marry Lambert Fortress.’”

Una winced; but she ceased to be on the defensive; there was something so noble, so gentle, so lofty and so friendly about Dr. Lorenzi that she was even disposed to open to him the secret misgivings of her heart.

“I know,” she said quickly, “there are a lot of objections—he wants to absorb me, quite—and of course I don’t mind. But it *does* mean giving up everything—and my people and friends——”

“—do not like him,” finished Dr. Lorenzi quietly.

“He is *different*, Doctor, and you know what we are . . . our dreadful little gods . . . the right clubs, the right tailor—the right speech—the right school—the right games—horrible to speak of

—but you can't dethrone those dreadful little gods——”

“But you can turn your back on them and they will never miss you because they have so many worshippers.”

“And then you are an ‘outsider.’ . . . Lambert wasn't happy in England, though everyone *tried* to be nice—he—he doesn't know the passwords——”

“I know.”

“Oh, Dr. Lorenzi, he *is* English, why didn't you bring him out as an Englishman?”

“My child, I have come to tell you that—very briefly. It is not because Lambert Fortress does not know your shibboleths that I say he should not marry you—no, nor any other woman.”

Una sat still; it was quite dark now, but she did not ask for lights.

“I deliberately brought up Lambert to live in remote strange places, to keep away from his kind, to have peculiar and extraordinary interests and not to think of love—or marriage.”

He paused, but Una did not speak or move.

“I resolved that, *if possible*, he must not marry, but I knew, from the first, that it might not be possible, and when I saw you with him I realized that Fate was too strong for me—and I was glad that he is a grown man now, strong and healthy, and that much of the danger may have passed.”

“Danger?” whispered the girl.

“I can use no other word.”

“Does—Lambert know of this danger?”

"No—he has never been told, he must not be told . . . *but his blood knows.*"

Una did not ask for an explanation of this strange phrase.

"I am glad that you are English," continued Dr. Lorenzi, "for the English women are cool and not emotional, and though they seem hard they have very high ideals."

Through all her misery of apprehension Una was touched.

"Is that how we seem?" she asked faintly.

"That, despite your slang and your lawn tennis, is how you English women seem to me—and I can, with confidence, expect some heroism from you."

Heroism! How seldom one used the word, how one disliked using it! Yet Una secretly thrilled to the old man's speech.

"I do not, must not, make a long story; there is a great deal I need not tell, the details you may, if you wish, know afterwards——"

A queer horror gripped the listening girl.

"Must I know?" she asked quickly.

"If you still wish to marry Lambert Fortress, Miss Fullerton."

"Tell me," said Una.

"It was thirty-eight years ago exactly, Signorina, in Switzerland. I, always a cosmopolitan, was staying in a fashionable hotel before beginning my beloved mountaineering. And in this hotel which was full of well-bred people was a Captain Fortress and his wife."

He paused; it was obvious that he was carefully, even painfully choosing his words.

Una, shivering, watched the moon rise over the bleak Roman plain and listened to the flop, flop of the water in the Triton's fountain beneath the window.

"Mrs. Fortress was an Italian, her mother was a Spanish dancer from Cordova and she had been a singer—a *cantatrice*; the Fortress family had so little sympathy with her that her husband had resigned his commission and travelled—lived abroad—moving from place to place."

"They were happy?"

"No—Mrs. Fortress was of a most extraordinary temperament, almost incredibly beautiful, wild, ignorant, passionate, hysterical and literally consumed with jealousy—I say literally, for the first glance told me of her most precarious delicacy. I became very friendly with Captain Fortress, who was a man after my own heart."

"This jealousy was groundless?" asked Una.

"Absolutely. But Raquel Fortress's husband acted according to his code—he was pleasant to other women—he liked to speak English, to play tennis, to skate, to row—he was, you understand, practically banished from England because of his wife."

"Didn't he love her?" asked Una half defiantly.

"He *had* loved her," replied Dr. Lorenzi quietly. "It was passion against custom. When I met them custom was winning. She used to make

scenes—I take it that, to an Englishman, is the unforgivable thing.”

“I’m willing to risk it,” whispered Una. “Lambert isn’t like his mother.”

“Hear me out, Miss Fullerton. There was a fair, placid English girl, Nora Johnston, staying at the hotel, of whom Raquel Fortress became furiously jealous because her husband became friendly with the Johnstons, and Nora was often his partner in games and dances—you see Mrs. Fortress was not well enough to do anything.”

“Had she no friends, no relatives of her own?” asked Una.

“None—she was almost a gipsy vagrant,” replied the old man calmly. “Fortress never told me how he met her, but I could guess! Well, one evening, this scene—hot, autumn like to-night, the moon rising, the room dimly lit, great pots of red dahlias and geraniums outside the window—like this, several of us gathered in the pleasant room smoking, idling—Nora Johnston singing one of your Scottish airs—near the window Raquel Fortress huddled in her chair, wrapped in fine white lace shawls, a big sleepy red rose at her breast—her husband near, uneasy, a little sullen.”

The old man sighed.

“Well, Captain Fortress applauded the song and asked for another, and the lady got out the music, naturally—but Raquel Fortress rose and went to the piano and took the music out of her hand: ‘I will sing now,’ she said in Italian, ‘one of the old songs.’ Very few understood what she said, but

they saw the look, the gesture, the blazing febrile beauty ; I restrained the husband—' Let her sing'—she sang. Ah me, a piteous business! "

" What did she sing ? " whispered Una.

" A little thing in English she had learnt, poor soul, to please her husband—I have it at home—so—and so—

Bright petals you left
To fall and fade
The flower bereft
Whose sun you made—

And so—and so—she had a wild, lovely voice, untrained, that rang and sobbed. When she had finished she tore the rose from her breast and cast it down, and the red petals fluttered all over the floor—' There are the petals, bright as blood,' she said, ' and you may tread on them! ' They shrank back from her exquisite fury, only her husband leapt to her side. ' Ah, Dio! ' she cried, ' do you praise my singing? Am I not fallen like these for you and this English girl to tread on? ' Captain Fortress flared then—you understand that he had borne a great deal. He got her by the wrists and swore she should ask Nora Johnston's pardon—there was a hubbub. I, as a doctor, got her away somehow, up to bed and gave her a sedative; when she woke she was raving of ' bright petals ' ; she escaped downstairs and scattered the geraniums and dahlias—we had to move them—Captain Fortress insisted that she should apologize to Nora Johnston."

"That was not very reasonable," murmured Una.

"Reasonable? The man was overwrought, almost out of his senses—the Johnstons were 'nice' about it, as you would say, they left the hotel—but nothing could appease Raquel Fortress; she was in a perpetual fever now and hardly ate or slept. I was in charge of the case and I had sent for a nurse, but she had not arrived—things were not so easy then."

He paused, moved in his chair and added in a low tone :

"The end of it was that Raquel Fortress tried to murder her husband—not in a passion, but quite cold-bloodedly. I went into her room—well . . . she had pretended to sleep—he was watching and dozed—she crept out of bed with a table-knife she had concealed——"

"But you were in time?" Una's voice quivered in the darkness.

"I was in time to save his life, but not her reason—I found myself struggling with a maniac."

"Jealousy," whispered Una. "She had been driven mad by jealousy?"

Dr. Lorenzi answered carefully.

"No—it was a dreadful family history—hereditary homicidal lunacy—her father—her mother—no matter—she herself had had an attack before and nearly killed a man in Cordova . . . that night her child was born—Lambert Fortress."

Una moved now, started up and went to the edge of the terrace.

"I wish that fountain would stop," she said hoarsely. "It has been going so incessantly."

She was conscious of a bitter woe and vexation; why need she have been told—could not the long-kept secret have *remained* a secret? How much rather would she have gone on in the dark and *risked* it——

"Raquel Fortress lived two years after that in the care of a keeper. I took charge of the child—when my beloved friend Captain Fortress died I took over his guardianship. Since then, I have done what I could. The boy was brought up—strangely thrust out in lonely places, taught to absorb himself in unusual things, hardened, mind and body—watched and guarded most zealously."

Ashamed of her inner resentment Una returned to her seat.

"Nothing," she commanded herself to say, "nothing has ever happened to Lambert?"

"Nothing." The old man spoke with energy. "I have consulted my colleagues, the most famous alienists in the world—and we are agreed on this, that if trouble comes it will come through the emotions and associations—through love, jealousy, that song, the bright petals—in other words, *the child may have inherited the thwarted impulse of the mother*, which, lying dormant in him, would be released by circumstances similar to those which provoked his mother."

"How horrible!" whispered Una. "How horrible!"

"On the other hand this may not be so—it has

never been put to the test, Lambert has never given any sign of lunacy, he has passed his first youth in safety, he is strong with a well-trained mind—there is just the chance, just the risk.”

“What am I to do?” murmured Una.

“You want to risk it?”

“Yes.”

“Have you thought of what it might mean—and of possible children?”

Una was silent, twisting her hands to and fro in her lap.

Out of the warm dusk came the tired, gentle old voice:

“Have you the courage to put it to the test—to discover if the man you love is sane or a potential murderer and maniac?”

“How?” asked Una desperately.

“Reconstruct the scene—try him and *see what happens.*”

Una Fullerton stood in her bedroom turning over an old yellow book of music that for nearly forty years had been locked away in Dr. Lorenzi's secret drawer.

It was a cheap little song, by a forgotten writer, set to an old-fashioned valse tune; on the frayed paper cover was a lithograph of a red rose scattering petals on the upturned face of a sleeping or dying girl in a white satin ball dress.

Una went downstairs and put the book on top of the Marchesa's elegant grand piano; everywhere about the room were big red roses beginning to

droop and fade and through the open window showed the red pots with the now unfolded dahlias and geraniums.

Una wore a white lace dress and another red rose at the knot of the fichu.

By the window was Doctor Lorenzi sunk in a cushioned chair; Una went quickly up to him, stooped and kissed his hand.

"My dear child," he said, much moved. "My dear child, remember that love *can* conquer. I do believe that——"

"Do you, doctor?" she asked wistfully.

"I do—if some evil is raised this afternoon I think that your love can meet and slay it."

"It sounds like a fairy tale," said Una piteously.

"And do you not know that fairy tales are true?"

It was a day of glorious colour, the rich afternoon light filtering through awnings and *persiane* into the large cool room. On a dark side table were majolica plates piled with peaches, apricots, figs and grapes lying on the dark leaves . . . Una sat by Ercole Spinoli and laughed while he showed her his last snapshots—the guests idled, smoked, sipped iced coffee and lemonade; the melting ice, stirred by straws, tinkled in the tall Venetian glasses.

Lambert Fortress was out of humour; he even said that he did not care for music, though he was known to be a musician of some accomplishment . . . and he complained of the profusion of crimson flowers; they made, he said, a kind of glare in the gloom.

"You must blame Una," smiled the Marchesa. "She insisted upon them and went to a lot of trouble to find them—I grow nothing so 'outré'—you see she wears one, too, Mr. Fortress."

"Ercole found them for me," said Una in a clear voice. "He went all over the city, I believe—I think them splendid."

Fortress moved uneasily; he rose and sat down, and rose again.

The Marchesa sang a Scotch song, by request of Una.

"Bad style, that man Fortress," she thought, for while she sang he stared at her in a hostile fashion, and when she had finished he said nothing, but put his hand to his forehead as if bored or weary.

"Have I heard that song before?" he asked Doctor Lorenzi.

Una was crossing the room.

"There is a funny old thing I am going to sing—it has quite a flavour of its own—so sentimental it will make you laugh—Lambert—do come and play the accompaniment."

She stood by the piano; the rose she wore scattered a few petals on the keys; she brushed them to the ground.

Fortress took the music from her and seated himself at the piano; he stared at the picture on the cover, the title, then down at the shed petals.

"Bright Petals," he said slowly. "I seem to have heard that title before—Bright Petals."

Una looked across at Dr. Lorenzi and the old man rose and came to the piano.

"Play it, Lambert," he said gently.

Fortress played over the jiggling melody; his face was intense and dark, at once uneasy and excited; Una noted that he was playing almost without glancing at the score, and that, as he played, he became more and more agitated.

His legacy, his awful legacy . . . had she not already proved all that she wanted to know? . . . Dr. Lorenzi caught her glance of agony.

"Do not sing it now," he said quietly. "I will play you something."

He took Lambert's place and played a sabrerattling "Czardas"; the guests moved away, some to the garden, some to the terrace; Dr. Lorenzi ceased playing.

Fortress picked up the piece of old English music.

"Sing this now——" he demanded, and he glanced frowningly at the laughing figure of Ercole Spinoli on the terrace.

Fortress played, with feverish haste and energy, and she sang :

"Bright petals you left
To fall and fade
The flower bereft
Whose sun you made——"

When she had finished Fortress rose to his full height and she had never realized that he was so tall.

"I have remembered something," he said, "something that I had forgotten for years—of course all this has happened before and never been finished——"

Una saw in his distorted face, in his desperate eyes, a hideous devil called to life.

She rose and stood quite close to him and put her cold hands on his shoulders.

"Lambert," she asked, "don't you love me?"

He paused, seemed to shiver and blench; Una looked steadfastly up at him and slowly his expression changed to one of loving content.

"What was that you were singing?" he asked tenderly.

"The Carnival of Venice, that queer old thing," whispered Una.

"Of course—the Carnival of Venice—I've had such a bad headache and suddenly it is gone," he said with a queer simplicity.

But Una never married him; she had seen in his face, for that brief moment, something that had made her love turn brittle and break in her hands.

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“ MRS. SMITH AND ROSE — ”

ROSE SMITH had never made any attempt to live up to her Christian name; she had never been anything like a rose; to hear her name and to see her was to suffer a dislocation of ideas; after that “ rose ” would mean something else to you besides a flower.

The boundaries of her features were in as fluid a state as the frontiers of Central Europe; emotion, the weather, or even a cup of hot tea, changed the whole map of her face, which appeared to shrink in one part, swell in another, and be one moment a whitish grey, and the next a bluish pink; indigestion, perhaps, or a sensitive soul, but poignantly unbecoming.

But Rose in the backwash of a remote town and the backwash of a remote faith was not troubled by her plainness; there were a great many texts hanging about her simple home, and they all inculcated a severe adherence to morals in preference to any outward adornments; it was tacitly understood that the clear complexions of the angels in the border of “ Blessed are the pure in heart ” were due solely to the fair air of heaven and that the purity referred wholly to the heart and not to any other organ whatever; also that “ Cleanse your hearts and not your garments ” meant just what it said, and with garments you might include a lot of things, from wallpapers and carpets to windowpanes and saucepans; of course, you had the

laundry-van calling, not that you were afraid your neighbours might think your cleanliness in question, but that you were afraid they might think you did your own "washing"—washing it was, not laundry, when you did it yourself.

For the same reason the steps received a daily mask of hearthstone, furtively, in the early morning; that was Biblical too. Rose often thought of "whitened sepulchres"; she rather wondered people didn't still hearthstone tombstones nowadays, and even broached the subject to Mrs. Smith.

What about Father?

Mrs. Smith was decided; a heathen custom; wasteful. Father had already a white, waxy wreath in a bulge of glass. Mrs. Smith wasn't sure that she even "held" with wreaths. Not permanents. It was like, she said, parsley round a mutton-bone, all right to look at, but no consolation to the sheep.

Mrs. Smith saw the Nottingham lace window-curtains were clean, and sometimes wiped down the aspidistras in the drawing-room; for the rest, she and Rose dwelt in queer underground regions, cooking and "waiting" on the lodgers.

They lived with, by, for, on, the lodgers, and as they were not above two miles from the sea, close to the shops, chapels, and the cinema, they received, in the summer months, which was not always the summer weather, numbers of "guests," who came from similar houses, steps, texts, aspidistras, streets, shops and cinemas for a complete "change."

They had one lodger who, like the wreath on Father's sepulchre, was permanent.

And not only permanent, but opulent; he was

in a "Stores" of a more than local celebrity that had lately opened a branch near Malvernia Terrace.

In the pall of fishy, greasy odour that rose from those secret regions below, and gently settled on the whatnots, photos, bamboo, and imitation leather furniture, Mr. Minxton found an atmosphere of home, and often said so, gratefully; his refined features, which looked as if they had once been melted and only rescued before they "ran" out of all semblance to humanity, his neat clothes, and his unfaltering courtesy, which branded him as firmly as the name of the maker on the biscuits he handled so deftly branded them as eatable, at least made Mrs. Smith and Rose decide he was "quite the gentleman."

He did not disdain to sometimes descend to the inner mysteries and contemplate with a calm eye the aftermath of his last meal or the chaotic preparation for his next; custom had blunted his natural instincts; unflinchingly he praised the curious messes over which Mrs. Smith laboured with a rather bitter pride, and earnestly he talked to Rose on a subject that he, at least, found completely engrossing, that of himself.

He, too, went to the chapel, and the elegance of his appearance and the brightness of his smile radiated for Rose the sodden melancholy of the provincial Sunday.

One day Rose, walking back beside Mr. Minxton through the liverish-looking streets from the stuffiness of the chapel to the stuffiness of her home, confided to her cavalier her life tragedy.

She had once been "engaged;" she could hardly

believe it herself, she added frankly, but it had been during the war.

"That accounts," said Mr. Minxton soothingly.

Rose blushed beneath her faded pimples.

"He was billeted on us—seventeen and sixpence a week and expecting three meat meals a day, wanting the best of everything, and getting it too, whether we was out of pocket or not."

"Ah! I know the sort, too good to him, you were, of course," said Mr. Minxton vaguely.

"Well, I don't know. I wouldn't say he hadn't got a way with him, didn't half make himself comfortable though. Mother couldn't do enough for him, doing his bit, as they used to say, you know the fuss there was."

Rose sighed.

"He was a milkman in real life, somewhere in London. Well, he made up to me, took us both to the movies one night and a fish supper afterwards. I don't know half he said, me teeth were that bad and I'd got cotton-wool in me left ear, the side he sat, and what with that and his cracking of nuts and Mother nudging me to take notice how badly them bits of girls was behaving with the other soldiers in front, I didn't catch it all proper, but Mother said, coming home, 'Take it from me, you're engaged, Rose,' and we bought a bottle of whisky and sat in the firelight, and he said he liked them plain and good with a bit at the bank, and I was never a looker and I had the bit all right, then."

"Where has it gone? The bit?" asked Mr. Minxton with a sudden keen interest. "Did he borrow it?"

"I don't know about borrowed," replied Rose drearily. "He had it."

"But you've had time since to get some more together."

"Time, but not the heart," said Rose. "You see he went away next day and broke it off, the engagement, on a postcard written in the train. No stamp and twopence to pay."

Mr. Minxton looked at her as if he was considering something, and Rose thought she saw a gleam of tenderness in those boot-button eyes.

"Of course, it was a lucky escape," she said. "I don't know where I'd be now if I'd married him—I don't know where I am now," she added despondently. "It's a poor sort of life, come to look at it."

Mr. Minxton pressed her arm.

"Now, don't you get downhearted; what you've got is that Sunday feeling, nothing to do but employ your mind, worrying what's no use worrying for. Now suppose we were to take a walk on the front, just to stretch our shoes a bit? What you put on once a week is hard on the corns, I always say, sitting in chapel won't ease foot-leather."

A faint goldenness clothed Rose's mental outline; she pressed coquettishly against Mr. Minxton, so that they stumbled at the crossing.

"I don't say I haven't something put by, and the house is ours. Father built that row, and the one next is ours too, a tidy bit of rent, but what's the good? I don't get much fun out of it."

"You don't want fun," said Mr. Minxton sternly. "Worst thing in the world—fun."

Glib self-defence animated Rose.

"Of course, I know that, Mr. Minxton; isn't likely I'd be forgetting, with the bringing up I've had, and as for young Ed.—"

"I don't think," Mr. Minxton interrupted firmly, "you acted right there—letting him have the money."

"I was took off me feet," apologized Rose. "You know—the war——"

"I *know*, right enough, but I don't approve—a sensible woman like your mother."

"Mother wasn't herself—bothered, as you might say, and Ed. had such a way of putting things, talked of them Germans—or the Huns—one of them lot landing and taking it all—the money, I mean."

"Well"—Mr. Minxton contrived some show of tenderness for feminine folly—"I don't say there aren't excuses."

"And he didn't have so much," said Rose eagerly, "not all, Mr. Minxton. Mother stood out there, 'for who knows, Rose,' she used to say, 'that there won't be Mr. Right popping along some day.'"

And Rose, whose features seemed to have spread and become vague under the action of the east wind nipping up from the sea, giggled and snuggled coyly.

"Well, who knows?" conceded Mr. Minxton. "I'm, mind you, not saying that he *won't*."

A delicious sensation of warmth crept round Rose's rather chilled members; she felt a faint reflection of those emotions that had intoxicated

her as she had sat before the fire with the soldier and the whisky, and the cocaine in her tooth and ear—a kind of painful delirium.

Mr. Minxton remained calm; he surveyed, with a professional glance, the belt of new shops on the front; shops so carelessly refined that there were no shutters or blinds to hide the “novelties” within.

“Well, we are getting chic,” he remarked, and stopped before the plate-glass that enshrined *Poppè—modes et robes*.

There was nothing in this window but one shawl.

Pale, pink silk, with a huge rose in deeper shades of pink embroidered in one corner and a fringe a foot deep.

This shawl broke on Rose as a sort of apotheosis of her daring thoughts—marriage, new clothes—a bottom drawer—Mr. Minxton, sitting hand-in-hand—in the pink shawl.

“Just about your size,” remarked Mr. Minxton. “Rose for rose—sweets to the sweet,” as they sat at the refreshment stall.

Rose could have fainted with joy; was he going to buy her the shawl?

“It’s my colour to a turn,” she confessed.

Mr. Minxton scattered a superior smile over her yielding mood, then remarked that there was pork for dinner, and if they didn’t want the crackling spoiled there was urgent need to hurry home.

From that delicious moment the pink shawl consolidated the misty, chaotic dreams of Rose; it became to her what America was to Columbus, unexpected, unlikely, but full of dazzling hope.

She told Mrs. Smith about it, in the same breath

as she spoke of Mr. Minxton's probable "intentions." For a moment the close dinginess, the mean comfort, the sly uncleanliness of Number 4, Malvernia Terrace, became illuminated by the faint glimmer of something lovely.

The two women snivelled together a little, and as Rose sniffed : " Oh, Mother, I'm so happy! " the something lovely came very near.

Mr. Minxton continued his attentions, but he did not buy the shawl. Rose, with an impulse of exhilarated recklessness, went in and priced it. A creature who seemed to belong to another sex from Rose—she was so polished, neat and suave—said " Only five guineas " with a wonderful indifference that both awed and stimulated Rose.

" Why shouldn't I buy it for myself, Mother? We've got a bit put by, and I must begin to get my things together, you know, what them papers call the bottom drawer."

" Well, if you were sure of Mr. Minxton," said Mrs. Smith, tenderly, inspired by feminine frivolity, but remembering Ed.; but Rose thought she was sure; Mr. Minxton's " attentions " were unmistakable.

The struggling watering-place (they would call it that, which made it sound like a cattle pool), moribund in the winter, and hysterically alive in the summer, possessed a struggling newspaper that Rose read carefully every Wednesday. Most carefully the weddings; the editor was lavish about the weddings; the most wonderful weddings; almost every week there was one, an orgy of compliments, beauty, *crêpe de Chine*, lucky horseshoes,

white heather, wedding marches—and presents. Columns of presents, like this :—

Father of Bride. Cheque.

Father of Bridegroom. Another cheque.

Mother of Bride. Cruet.

Mother of Bridegroom. Silver handled umbrella.

Annie, Willie, Katie, Sally, Muriel, Gladys and Baby Bob. A pen-wiper.

Staff of Messrs. Robem. Rose bowl (electro).

Sunday School Class at Muddleton. Works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox (limp lamb).

Grannie Mitchem and Grannie Dale. A wool winder.

And so on. Rose could read for hours, up one column and down another, and then back again.

She had it all planned out; the hymns, the march, the going-away dress, the bridesmaids (carrying bouquets of sweet peas and wearing horseshoe brooches, the gift of the bridegroom), Mother's grey satin and white kids. . . .

And then she bought the shawl.

Drew five pounds five shillings from the savings bank and bought the shawl, which was still there wilting in a slightly wilted shop which had proved slightly too modern for the neighbourhood.

Rose's emotion, till then in crescendo, had a climax. It was when she brought the shawl home and draped it round herself, standing in the piled-up, darkish kitchen; the pink silk slipped gracefully from the tissue paper, and hung in luxurious folds round her stumpy figure.

Mrs. Smith was awed; everything in the room

looked dirty, old and sad: Rose's face looked "funny," a "funny" colour; it was a merciless pink, clear and hard, like nothing in nature, but putting nature to shame.

It was then Mr. Minxton entered. They, in their excitement, had forgotten his dinner. He came in, jovially, to remind them; but at the sight of the pink shawl his humour changed.

"It don't suit you," he remarked, coldly.

Rose took it off.

"I liked it," she quavered, then, with a fatal attempt to imitate the "insouciance" of the shop damsel, she added, "it was only five pounds five shillings!"

Mr. Minxton's glance was withering.

"Only! Well, I never, no wonder they talk of the nation going to pieces when talk like that is going on! Wicked, I call it."

"It's her own money, what she's worked hard for," stammered Mrs. Smith, paling, however, before the dreaded masculine judgment.

Rose was wrapping the shawl up in the tissue paper; her glance was supplicant, but Mr. Minxton was too outraged to respond.

"First that soldier, and now this," he said. "You're pretty flighty, aren't you? Well, I hope you'll find a husband who can keep you in luxury, that's what I hope."

The next day he left for other rooms; the next month he married the only daughter of a "warm" man with a tidy little business.

In the list of wedding presents figured :

"Mrs. Smith and Rose—A pink shawl."

PETUNIA

DO you think it wise, or even safe, for a woman to marry a man much younger than herself?

Do you think if a woman is really in love she can let go, give way, for any object or emotion on earth?

Of course there are matters that must always be argued about and the end of the argument is always the same—each must do as their own temperaments and circumstances suggest.

Personally I think that there are rules stronger than any circumstances or temperaments and that it goes very ill with those who break them.

When I last heard a discussion on this subject I told the story of Madame Vandal.

And no one was agreed about the conclusion of this story.

To some she was a fool, to others a sentimentalist, one young girl found her very right, one elderly woman very wrong.

The courageous ones agreed that a woman *couldn't* let go, not if she was really in love; the others were silent.

“Ah, *if*,” I said in my capacity of sage old philosopher, “but I take it that real love is rather rare——”

They agreed that it was so.

“And therefore,” I concluded, “you mustn't judge by the cases you meet where people just talk about love and falling in love——”

They agreed again.

"You must judge by the genuine thing, real love, real passion."

And some of them asked if this was not very uncommon and rather disastrous; didn't it end, very often, nowadays, "in the newspapers"?

Suicide, divorce, even murder, all those matters that looked rather sordid in modern life.

I refused to be drawn into this issue; I thought it so obvious that neither our emotions nor our power of controlling them had kept pace with our surface civilization, that I would not argue the matter.

Instead, I told my audience what I thought of the story of Madame Vandal.

And, as I said before, there was passionate dissent. I wonder what you would say about it?

Madame Vandal was a woman I had always very much liked; she was one of those brilliant worldly women who remain kind, impulsive and soft-hearted.

She was English, and I don't think so very well born; but she had what the French call an "allure" of grace and elegance and keen fineness such as is considered the best gift of patrician blood.

A crude judgment would have called her "plain," and I admit that her face was ordinary in feature and colouring; but you only had to wait a little and you saw a turn, a gesture, a movement that made her beautiful.

She was gay, too; everyone who met her felt

grateful to her for her gaiety, which was so radiant, so fine, so kind.

I must tell you how this story, the story of Madame Vandal, came to be called *Petunia*, which flower perhaps seems to you neither very lovely nor very romantic.

But Madame Vandal loved petunias; she found in them what perhaps no one else had ever found in them before; she said they were never used for funerals or bridal bouquets or to pin in women's hair or on women's breasts, and that this gave them a sort of purity, an untouched aloofness; they came, too, when the most admired flowers had ceased to bloom and adorned the passing of autumn.

Madame Vandal said, too, that these meek blooms did not disdain to flourish in houses, and that they were lovely to the last, the delicious colours changing into hues of deepening purple, violet and blue as the chalice scolded away. They had, she declared, a perfume, a sweet perfume, like dust and sugar.

Monsieur Vandal was a perfume manufacturer and she asked him to make a perfume from petunias.

Naturally he laughed, for the thing was clearly impossible; even among the heavily scented flowers there are several you cannot extract the perfume from, they are so volatile.

But Monsieur Vandal was a very wealthy man and extremely fond of his wife.

"It will be amusing," he declared, "to make a scent from a flower that has no scent."

And in his opulent factories at Grasse he

concocted some perfume that he called "Petunia." I don't know what he put in it, but it certainly reminded you of a petunia, dusty, sweet, remote.

Madame Vandal used no other scent; in every room she had a tall bottle of lilac red, with a blown glass flower for a spray, full of this faint perfume.

When I first met her, Monsieur Vandal was dead; he had been much older than she and there were no children.

I suppose she was about forty and extremely charming; her type is delicious at forty, it needs maturity to express its perfections.

She lived a life that seemed to touch the outer world very little, or the inner world either, for she was not in what the newspapers call Society, but in a set of people who don't bother much about the conventional rounds of standardized occupations and pleasures.

Madame Vandal spent much of her time abroad; it was in Paris that I met her and we at once became friends.

We were both cosmopolitan, both well off, and both too sure of ourselves to be afraid of friendship; she was ten years younger than I and exquisite, but I was never in the least danger of falling in love with her; she made of me, rather, a kind of father confessor.

The first thing she confessed to me was her passion for André Latour, the sculptor.

You see, he had asked her to marry him, and she was undecided about it and had to talk to someone.

"I don't see your difficulty," I said to make her talk—"you love each other—*voilà tout!*"

Of course I knew it wasn't, but I wanted her to explain herself.

I saw that she had scruples, and a person with scruples—and emotions, is the most interesting study in the world.

And Madame Vandal's scruples would be so fine drawn, so subtle.

"I am older than he," she began, "he is very much in love now—but——"

"How old is he?"

"André? Thirty-four."

"Well, that isn't a big difference."

"You don't know how old I am? It is a difference of nearly ten years."

"But you," I declared sincerely, "are perfect. And nowadays——"

"Please don't talk like that," she smiled. "Nowadays are just any days. We may have made some advance in face creams and hair dyes—but we haven't changed human nature. We grow old, my friend, we grow old."

"André will grow old——"

"But not till I'm quite decrepit, in a few years' time the difference will show——"

I said the usual things.

"Your wit, your personality, your gaiety—they won't be affected——"

"I wonder," she replied wistfully.

Of course I wondered too.

If she loved André and André ceased to love her

because of the difference in age between them, her wit and gaiety would both be eclipsed, her personality withered.

An unhappy marriage would make an old woman of Madame Vandal.

Would it be unhappy?

André Latour was rather impossibly handsome, rather impossibly popular, and perilously young. When I looked at Madame Vandal all doubts, however, became impertinent.

She lay back in a deep chair of lilac-red velvet, her gown was grey, something flowing in the skirt and tight in the sleeves and bodice showing the long lines of her graceful limbs; her little head, crowned with plaits and ringlets, her provoking profile, were so enchanting that to discuss André's possible infidelity seemed fantastic.

Besides I knew she meant to marry him.

"I'm an old fool," I declared, "to offer you any advice. You don't want it—of all women!"

"No, I suppose I only want to talk things over. You see, I'm terribly afraid of unhappiness, I'm a coward before the thought."

I knew what she meant—an unhappy marriage.

I couldn't help her; I really didn't know enough about André Latour.

I admired her petunias (it was late autumn), great chalices of mauve and crimson blue and spotted white, with that queer musky smell.

A few days later the engagement was announced; but the marriage wasn't to be till the early summer.

I sensed in that Madame Vandal's lack of self-confidence; she was waiting, testing.

I thought prudence, in her case, dangerous.

There are moments when the only safety consists of a leap in the dark; this seemed to me one. I believed that she would have been wiser to have married him out of hand, in the very height of his infatuation.

As it happened Madame Vandal soon had another problem to propound to me—not, she admitted, for my wisdom to solve, but for my patience to listen to.

She disclosed to me an unhappy family history in the last generation.

Her father had quarrelled deeply with his only brother, who appeared, despite all Madame Vandal's kind glasses, to have been a miserable wastrel. This man had drifted over, somehow, to Port Elizabeth and picked up a living, till, latish in life, he had married a woman with a little money and soon after died, leaving one daughter.

The widow had come to England with this child and given her a fair education, then some disaster had overtaken her small means and she had died leaving the girl almost penniless; she had written to Madame Vandal from the boarding house where her mother had died and where she was now earning her living by acting as assistant housekeeper or manageress.

Evidently she had been early imbued with the knowledge of this wealthy cousin and the old grievance of the family quarrel whereby her father had lost all hold on his prosperous brother.

Madame Vandal showed me her letter.

It was quite well written, sober but rather piteous in tone; you could see that only the desperation of her present position would have made her write at all.

“And I never knew of her existence!” cried Madame Vandal remorsefully. “I understood my uncle had died long ago, and unmarried——”

In my capacity of worldly counsellor I hinted at a possible impostor; but Madame Vandal said there were certain things in that letter that no impostor could have known about.

“Well, I don’t see what there is to talk about,” I said. “I’m sure you’ll do the most generous thing possible——”

“I’m going to bring her here to live with me—there will be a great deal to make up to her. I shall enjoy that——”

I asked questions:

“How old is she? Pretty? Kind? Lazy? Ill-bred? And aren’t you going to be married soon?”

Madame Vandal laughed me off.

“How can I know anything about her till I have seen her? As for my marriage, that is months away; by then we’ll have found a husband for her——”

Well, she went to London. I don’t know what investigations she made, but she brought the girl back with her, triumphantly.

Ursula Fenner possessed youth, a perilous and shining youth; she was beautiful, not in the fashion

of a pretty face, but in all her ways; she was Madame Vandal emphasized, the full portrait for which her cousin was the sketch.

Where there was something vague and hesitating about Madame Vandal, there was something clear and shining about Ursula Fenner; she was definite, too, and obvious; a great many people would always think Madame Vandal a plain woman; Miss Fenner could never by any excuse pass for, in anyone's eyes, less than lovely.

There was a similarity between them; I think there must have been a strong likeness between the two brothers, thus transmitted to the cousins, and this was rather to Madame Vandal's disadvantage, for, through the difference in age, she looked like Miss Fenner's mother; which I suppose by the years she might well have been.

Looking at them together I often thought of a full white rose with superb perfume next a—petunia.

It was a piquant contrast, but one rather cruel to Madame Vandal; how few women would have thus taken about with them a blooming copy of their own youth!

She was curiously generous—more magnificent than Miss Fenner even wished her to be; the girl, I learnt, had only asked for help in a course of training—for the stage; she had a certain talent, and, of course, a princely presence, but her cousin ridiculed this exploitation.

"She'll be married before a year," her cousin declared.

I thought that it would be better for the girl to work; it was obvious that she would marry, but I should have liked to detach her at once from Madame Vandal.

They went everywhere that winter, both equally well dressed, with André Latour in attendance—sometimes others as well, but always André. Some people laughed, in a horrid quiet cynical way.

André made a statuette of Miss Fenner; a glorious full-length in a brocade gown that just showed the outline of her limbs as she moved—the thing, in a blonde terra-cotta, like a Clodion, really did make her look a goddess; more than that, it made you see that she was a goddess, disguised in modern clothes; only, of course, a goddess cannot be disguised.

This portrait, freely exhibited in André's sumptuous studio (André was always rich. I had been glad of that—there could never be any question of Madame Vandal's money being a lure), brought him a great deal of increased fame.

His skill and Miss Fenner's beauty were spoken of together.

Madame Vandal did not seem to resent this or, rather, she did not seem to notice it; she lavished generousities on the girl.

I came to see her once when the three of them were alone together; André was playing a Beethoven sonata and Miss Fenner was on a low stool by the piano.

It was snowing and there were hot-house lilies in the big chamber; this whiteness within and

without gave me an impression of coldness, though the room was of a hot-house warmth.

Madame Vandal sat apart from the other two.

She seemed to me to be in every way detached from them.

She was smiling, but without, I thought, her usual gaiety.

And presently, with scarcely an excuse, she got up and left me alone with the two young people.

André stopped playing.

I could see the dark noble shape of the piano against the window, and his thin aquiline profile, with his look of formidable pride, outlined against the hurry of the snowflakes that criss-crossed out the dull houses opposite.

The girl was in the clothed shadow of the piano; even there she seemed to shine; looking at her I could understand her frantic desire to escape from an unprotected poverty—with beauty like that, life must have yawned like a trap to the lonely girl.

She wore something pale that gleamed out of the shadow, and I saw that she had a line of silver round her throat.

“Go on playing, André,” I said; I wanted to cover up Madame Vandal’s absence.

But matters had gone too far for any hushing up, I suppose.

No doubt they were at the end of things, exhausted after a long tension, and of course they looked upon me as an old man.

The kind you make confessions to, perhaps.

I think too (and I respected them for that) they

chose me to speak to because I was a friend, a sincere friend, as they knew, of Madame Vandal.

It was the girl who spoke first, without moving from the shadow of the piano.

She addressed me directly.

“Can you help me to get away? Do you know some place I could go to—some work I could do, without asking any help of my cousin?”

“Has it come to this?” I asked sadly.

And André said, pitifully:

“We have tried our hardest. Mary Vandal is the most wonderful woman in the world, but we love each other.”

The girl hid her face for a second with one of the most piteous gestures I have ever seen, then rose and stood by André, as she might have gone and stood by him if he had been in the dock—it was as if she wished to share his guilt and his shame.

“I owe literally everything to my cousin,” she said. “I don’t want to be, I can’t be, an ungrateful beast. So I’ve got to get away.”

“My poor children,” I said.

But I was really thinking of Madame Vandal. I felt secretly indignant at André’s infidelity to anyone so rare and lovely; even this shining girl was ordinary to me beside the elder woman.

But I tried to be fair—it was the rose beside the—petunia, the rich bloom of full summer beside the frail, scentless flower of autumn.

“Please help,” said Miss Fenner desperately.

“If you go away she’ll guess,” I replied.

“If I stay she’ll find out,” was her answer.

"And you see, all the time, she's feeding me, clothing me—being more than good and generous and kind. I can't endure it."

André sat silent; a man cuts a sorry figure at such a moment—two wonderful women in love with him and he pledged to the wrong one!

I saw that it was impossible for him to find even the poor words the girl fumbled with.

"We both love her," continued Miss Fenner, "and so do you, don't you? Between us we ought to be able to find a way out."

I saw the tragic difficulty.

The first of the two problems I had put to my listeners at the beginning of this story was, in this case at least, solved.

Madame Vandal in consenting to marry a man younger than herself had made a mistake, a failure, stumbled perhaps on a disastrous tragedy.

There remained the other problem.

Could a woman in love really "let go" for any object or emotion on earth?

I had always thought not.

Not even a woman of the type of Madame Vandal, if she found out, and surely she was bound to find out, she would not, I thought, set him free.

So it seemed to me, as Miss Fenner said, best that she should go away.

"But can you," I asked André, "put it through? I mean, if Miss Fenner goes away, can you avoid Madame Vandal seeing anything?"

He hadn't spoken since he said "we love each other," and I was anxious for him to commit himself,

to pull him into this painful talk; I thought of the whole thing as his fault, and I spoke clumsily, even unkindly no doubt, for he looked at me rather wildly.

"I shall do what I can," he said grimly.

This, to me, was not enough for a woman like Mary Vandal.

"You don't seem to have done much so far," I said sternly. "If you hadn't spoken to Ursula——"

I am not likely to forget the look with which she turned on me.

"You think he *spoke*? We just knew. We couldn't help knowing."

This condemned me as an old, dry, withered man, unable to comprehend.

"I was thinking of Madame Vandal," was my defence.

And then these two poor creatures turned to each other in a kind of passion that recked not at all of me.

She put her hands on his shoulders and looked up at him and I saw his fingers pressing into her arm.

"We did think of her," he said, "but we have sometimes a little to think of ourselves. This has been going on for weeks——"

Then he released her suddenly and sank on the piano stool, taking her splendid head in his hands.

While she remained upright, yet drooping, not daring to touch him, but bending on him looks of unutterable love, woe and comfort.

"I don't think it is any use for you to go away," I said. "You must tell Madame Vandal."

But the girl said :

“ No, no, I'm too ashamed.”

I think there was more than that in her mind; she was considering, as I had considered, that a woman in love couldn't “ let go,” couldn't be expected to let go.

I was as bewildered as they were.

“ Surely she already guesses ? ” I suggested.

“ Why did she go away just now ? ”

They neither of them had an answer to this.

I could see that the fear that Madame Vandal “ already guessed ” had prompted them to this appeal, this confession to me.

I suppose they saw their fate (as I saw it) in this silence on the part of the other woman. If she had guessed and said nothing, then clearly she did not mean to leave go, to give way.

In which case the retreat of Miss Fenner was the only possible course.

“ I'll think what I can do,” I said far more calmly than I felt.

And then I advised the young man to go home and get to work.

Obviously work was *his* only hope of salvation.

He kissed the girl's hands with a passionate intensity that augured ill, I thought, for any renunciation on his part; he would do his utmost, poor fellow, but it was on Miss Fenner I should have to rely, both for playing her own part and keeping him up to his.

When he had impetuously gone she turned to me, not without a certain dignity and courage.

"Please don't think too badly of me. I know that I ought to have gone away before, but it was too hard for me."

I could believe that, having seen them together; it said a great deal for her that she had made any fight at all.

There had been nothing much, either in her birth or bringing up, I thought, to help her to this resistance.

But this story, you will say, is about Madame Vandal, not Miss Fenner.

It was her problem, not the girl's, that we were considering.

I told Ursula Fenner that I would think of a means of retreat for her; I had a sister who might be useful for the purposes of an immediate flight.

The next day I called to see Madame Vandal; neither of the others were there and I was glad enough of that.

It was still snowing; the streets were piled, muffled with it; as fast as it was swept away it re-descended; it added to my sense of nervous tension, that steady fall of snow from the grey sky above the grey houses.

One felt oppressed, hemmed in, overwhelmed; even in the houses one was pursued, till dark, by this falling whiteness.

Madame Vandal received me in a room without flowers; it was too late even for hot-house petunias.

But the sweet dusty smell of this autumn bloom she loved so was faintly in the air; the bottle of lilac-red glass with the perfume her husband had

laughingly composed for her stood close to where she sat, in her black lacquer chair in her grey gown.

As she first turned towards me I had an impression of what she would look like when she was old.

I have often had that experience with people of her age; one moment the impression is that of youth, or lovely maturity, then suddenly a turn, a gesture, an expression, and an old woman looks at you.

It is always an ugly, sometimes a terrifying thing, this blending of youth and age in a single person, a single moment.

She spoke to me about indifferent things and I wondered if Miss Fenner had taken any steps towards flight.

I wasn't in the least doubt that Madame Vandal knew, nor how she was going to take it; she wouldn't let go.

She would marry André, in the teeth, as it were, of this gale of emotion, closing her eyes to the storm about her; I did not dare think whether she was right or wrong, only I did believe it to be what any woman would do.

And then she told me:

"Do you know, I am not going to be married after all? I have quite decided, and you are the first person to know."

I said, absurdly:

"Why?"

I was too amazed to consider what I said.

"It was a mistake from the first," she answered steadily. "I think you said so, didn't you?"

So she was making this sacrifice for the lovers; then, a woman who cared, *could* give way!

I wanted to tell her how tremendous I thought she was, but before I could speak she added:

"I never really cared for André—my husband had all my love and I couldn't put anyone in his place."

I don't know now if this was a heroic lie or the truth; not knowing, I am unable to solve my problem.

Some of my audience thought it a lie, others the truth.

"If she *had* loved André," said these last, "she *couldn't* have given him up."

But the others thought she was like that—faint, elusive—like the perfume of petunia, and capable of supreme abnegation.

I don't know!

To see her with André and Ursula when they were married was to believe it impossible that she had ever loved him save in the placid way of friendship.

And yet——

To watch her fine and rapid fading is like watching one of her petunia blooms when it has been unnaturally plucked and cast away—too swift a withering.

Still, I don't know!

She is accounted a happy woman; very likely she is of your acquaintance, under another name, of course, and you must judge for yourself.

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE HOBART MARRIAGE

WOMEN have often confided in me; that is why I know how foolish this present dread of melodrama is; people seem to have a terror of all that is vital, to think that modern life consists only of flippancies and hard commonplaces.

I suppose you must thank the realistic school for that, all the novelists and poets who taught that if anything was ugly it was true and if it was beautiful it wasn't, and that little mean trivialities make the whole of life.

I don't know that this doctrine helped or encouraged anyone very much, and of course it couldn't hold long; everyone knows better.

We may be, as the novelists say, very hard, very wide awake, very contemptuous of passions and flourishes and hot impulses and fierce speaking, but we get "caught out" now and then, *some of us*.

There is more licence, of course—that is more licence than there was yesterday, but not so much as there was the day before—and we don't have to pretend so much about those little refinements and niceties that used to be considered so necessary, but when it comes to it——

Take the Hobart marriage.

On the surface a most ordinary affair, no drama at all, just some sort of a little hitch that no one

quite understood but that didn't seem to matter—no emotion, no feeling even—a most modern affair.

But, as I said, women confide in me.

Not that I am so very sympathetic, but when they begin about their love affairs I don't retaliate with mine; and they know I won't talk, not that I'm so scrupulous, but because I am not so very interested.

You see if a woman has got anything really interesting to say she usually *doesn't* say it; the ordinary people with the ordinary experiences want the solace of the confessional.

But there was always melodrama—often with the limelight turned on both sides at once; melodrama is more up to date than realism, in fact, it is realism; but we're so afraid of it.

Amy Hobart was an exception; she was interesting enough; you wouldn't have thought that she would ever come to grief through any fault of her own, she was so hard, so careful, so clever, so extremely attractive.

I don't think that any man ever quite saw through this type of woman; it is, honestly, a terrible combination, that frail feminine beauty and that keen, unscrupulous, rapacious mind, that shrivelled heart, that greedy, cold avaricious nature.

They are never quite unmasked; the fair exterior excuses to the last, there always seems to be "something to be said" for a pretty woman however much she cheats and lies and steals.

I've been amazed at many women, never quite so amazed as I was at Amy Hobart. Outwardly

très femme, she had really nothing of what is still called "womanly" about her; she was as alert to her own interests, as devoid of sentiment, honour or shame as a clever swindler at the height of his career—there was just the allure of the face and figure, the voice and movement, nothing else.

With me she didn't try to pose; her cynicism was as crude as it was sincere.

"I've got to shift for myself, haven't I?" she would say. "And only a few years to do it in. I shan't be pretty after thirty—and look at the swarms of girls——"

"Marriage isn't the only way."

"Isn't it? It is still the pleasantest. Show me a better."

I couldn't; she had no talent and was both lazy and untrained in every detail of life (the ignorance, the real worthlessness of these Amys is a queer reflection); and she wanted that mysterious thing called, concretely, "a good time."

She spoke of this "good time" as if it was something definite you could see and touch.

Perhaps, to her, it was.

Avid for "chances" she came to London with some sort of a mother and sister, and the background of a tiny flat. I never knew much about the Hobarts. I don't think they were what we should have called gentlefolk a generation ago; they had just a little money and Amy's beauty.

It was this beauty made me tolerate her; it was certainly a genuine pleasure to watch that lovely face, so pure in line, so radiant in tint, the "real"

gold hair, the most uncommon pale grey eyes, so candid, so lustrous.

Although I knew her quite well for what she was, I sometimes was absurd enough to feel humble before her; I could quite understand that no man——

Amy Hobart did immediately, however, become engaged in a matrimonial venture, and that, even in these days of diminished chances of that kind, was surprising.

Her flirtations were, obviously, innumerable, and more than once it seemed as if she would secure what she was out to secure.

But whether her ambition was not quite satisfied with any of these victories, or whether the men discovered in time her essential coldness, I never knew; only there were, for two seasons, several marriages in our set, and none of them the marriage of Amy Hobart.

"Men are afraid of me," she confided once. "I'm too intelligent."

"Too intelligent for this game," I said, but she answered straightly :

"It takes all one's wits."

This was the beginning of the drama—or melodrama—that no one ever guessed about.

At that moment there was absolutely no one worth Amy's while but Jeremy Brownlow. I mean no one she knew or was likely to know.

Jeremy had great advantages; he was a gentleman rather noble, very candid and simple in the way so many charming Englishmen are; he had a country

place, not encumbered, no near relatives, and a workable income.

He had done well in the war and now he was taking up politics after four years or so of intelligent travel.

But every one knew that he was in love with Drusilla Armstrong; we expected the announcement of their engagement any day, and rather wondered why we were kept waiting.

Drusilla never confided in me, but I guessed that this was her doing; she kept Jeremy uncertain; perhaps she was uncertain herself; she was a fastidious, subtle type, full of moods and whims and ideals.

And there was a maimed brother who absorbed a considerable part of her time; his lungs had never recovered gassing, and they took him here and there and tried this and that, only to see him go from one complication to another; he was very young, with outraged nerves that were broken to bits, and selfish, poor chap, and passionately attached to his sister; I think he spoke definitely between her and Jeremy.

Anyhow there it was; we knew Jeremy was in love with Drusilla and we guessed Drusilla to be in love with Jeremy, but these two shy, sensitive people lingered and dallied and kept us all in suspense.

From the first I warned Amy; she had given herself away so to me that I could be brutal.

"It is a sheer waste of time being pleasant to Jeremy," I said.

"I know. That Armstrong girl. She isn't pretty."

This was true; Drusilla was only graceful and knew how to wear clothes and had an air of gentle kindness; Jeremy, on the other hand, possessed quite unnecessary good looks.

"It's an absurd match," said Amy, but she kept her hands off.

I was, at that time, rather sorry for Amy; I knew how she hated her failure, how detestable to her, her position was; she was so frightfully hard up; no one would have guessed the gallant fight she made to appear adequately dressed; I've seen her eyeing other women's clothes in a way that was terrifying; I think, at that time, she loathed all of us.

True to type, though, she had one faithful follower, an utterly useless and hopeless young man, Bob Hardinge, who was an engineer who had never been much good at anything, and who was now doing nothing in particular, but worrying his father who was fairly well off; all his spare time (and there was a lot of it), cash and wits, he spent hanging about Amy, and she, scarcely disguising her disdain, used him with infinite skill for all he was worth.

No one pitied Bob; it was so obvious that he must be aware of his fate. Amy, of course, had explained that to him long ago; he was just the tamest of tame cats; when Amy had anyone else to go about with he vanished, when she hadn't, he was there; he was extremely presentable and had that humorous way that covers up and glosses over all kinds of silly or awkward situations.

Last spring Drusilla went with her brother to

Funchal, that is the whole family went, Colonel Armstrong, his wife, Drusilla, and his sister Anne, and the poor sick boy, and, what was most astonishing, Amy went too; she had never been very friendly with the Armstrongs, but she had managed to attach herself to their party, paying, of course, her own expenses and making herself extremely pleasant,

But why?

Her mother said she was "run down," but I had never seen her look more radiant, and Madeira had always seemed to me further than the Hobart purse would stretch.

I could only suppose that Amy was counting on a new hunting ground—but why go with a quiet family party like the Armstrongs?

Jeremy retired, in dudgeon, I supposed, to his place that he was taking rather seriously, and Agnes Gisborne, a neighbour, who mothered him a little, asked some of us down to help console him—cheer him up, she said.

I at least was glad to go; it was delicious in Devonshire that sunny May and the little crowd of us got on so well together; husbands came and went from town, but we women didn't want to leave the lovely countryside.

Almost every day we went to see Jeremy or Jeremy came to see us; you see we used to get letters from the Armstrongs and give him news; we gathered Drusilla wasn't writing much, and Jeremy was clearly a bit unhappy.

Of Amy we heard nothing until there came a letter from London.

"I couldn't afford Madeira, after all. It is so hot and stuffy here—please ask me down to Plainlands."

This to Agnes Gisborne, the most good natured of women; at this time we were all sorry for Amy.

"Poor little beast," said Agnes, who rather thought of everything in farming terms, "she's missing her market."

And asked her down.

Amy came and surprised us all again by her loveliness; we hadn't seen her for three months and we were all married and "fortyish," so I suppose she showed up by comparison.

I could see that Jeremy noticed it; he looked startled that first night he came to dinner when she was there.

And Amy in her white gown, with her look of Helen on the walls of Troy, a most adorable innocent mischief, grand in sheer loveliness, threw her devastating news into the midst of us.

"Have you heard of Drusilla's engagement? I was to tell you, if the letters hadn't got here."

Agnes was the first to rally.

"No—not a word. How very strange."

And I said, foolishly :

"Is it a joke, Amy?"

She took her chance.

"How very uncomplimentary to poor Drusilla! Why shouldn't she be engaged? It is a Major Barstow who was there for lungs or something, dull, you know, but then Drusilla is so patient."

No one dare look at Jeremy; we, fighting for

him, tried to fight off the truth; in our hearts we all distrusted Amy.

"Is it official? How queer we haven't heard a word?"

"Oh, there was a lot of talk and fuss," replied Amy easily, "but it is quite official—look——"

She took from her silk bag a half sheet of a little local newspaper and pointed out a paragraph which quite clearly announced the engagement of two visitors to Funchal, Miss Armstrong and Major Barstow.

We got through the meal somehow; Jeremy behaved very well; when he'd escaped we turned on Amy.

"You're a beast."

"Oh, I thought he had got over that long ago," she said.

She threw a white scarf round her exquisite head (she knew, of course, just what a white scarf thrown like that made her look like) and went out into the garden.

"She's gone after Jeremy," we agreed.

Agnes Gisborne thought this wasn't a bad thing for Jeremy just then; Amy was always a distraction, at least.

"And she won't make much headway with him," we consoled each other. "Poor old Jeremy is one of the faithful sort."

Still, you must understand we didn't trust Amy, not even with the newspaper to back her up.

The next morning we sent a compound telegram to Funchal, addressed to Mrs. Armstrong :

"Delighted news engagement. Do write."
And we all signed it.

The answer came back immediately :

"Most happy about engagement. Writing,
but Leslie terribly ill."

Leslie was the poor boy; we could intrude no more; we had found out what we wanted to know.

We began to try and find excuses for Drusilla; after all she wasn't pledged and you couldn't call her a flirt.

It was just a terrible mistake and we must do our best to console Jeremy.

Amy took this task in hand from the first; we stood aside; we had no right and no power to interfere, and Jeremy seemed to like it; there came no letters from the Armstrongs; one could understand that with Leslie so ill.

Well, I knew Amy, but I was taken by surprise when at the end of a week she walked into my room and told me that she was going to marry Jeremy.

"How did you do it?" I asked dryly.

"Well, I suppose, Mrs. Frobisher, he fell in love with me."

If Amy was going to take that tone I wasn't going to tolerate her a moment.

"You know perfectly well," I said, "that Jeremy is in love with Drusilla and probably always will be, he's that sort."

Amy slipped into my favourite chair; she always made herself intensely comfortable.

"Well, that doesn't matter to me," she said coolly. "He's going to marry me."

I felt that we ought not to have stood by and allowed it to happen; but who was prepared for quite such swiftness of tactics on Amy's part?

She sat looking at me now, in the lustre of her beauty and the pathos of her cheap clothes, and I could only repeat feebly:

"How did you do it?"

Astonishingly, she told me; even the Amys have need of confession.

"I got him out there in the long meadow by the pond and the willow. I told him how tremendously I'd always cared for him, only that I couldn't show it while Drusilla was there, and I asked him if I couldn't be some consolation now."

Were these the tactics of the sirens? Sheer bold impudence?

"Well," added Amy, "what is the matter? I meant every word I said. Jerry isn't a fool, he could have turned me down if he had wanted to—"

"Haven't you heard of chivalry?" I asked grimly.

She eyed me unflinchingly.

"No." She stretched herself; it was the movement of a cat suddenly secure of milk and cushions. "Of course you don't think I'm good enough for Jerry—but that is his business, isn't it?"

His business indeed! She hadn't heard of chivalry but she found it pretty useful just the same; I detested her, of course, but I admired her hard skill, her level courage. I even envied her absolute lack of passion, feeling and sentiment; she seemed superhuman, but that only shows how little I knew.

Of course we could none of us do anything, Jerry naturally didn't give any of us any confidences, didn't seem unhappy—and Amy's fair beauty was really like a cloak over everything; I think he must have been a little dazed, a little bewildered by that—suddenly flung at his feet when he was feeling most sore from his sharp downfall.

I lost sight of them all for a while, for we went abroad. I only heard that the wedding was to be very soon—in the country. Agnes Gisborne had been persuaded to let it be from her house, out of kindness to Jeremy, of course, and trying to get a hold on Amy through pleasing her, poor Agnes had always been so fond of melodrama.

Just then Leslie Armstrong died; I saw that in the papers; the family came straight home, on the eve of Amy's wedding; I was going down to that, for Jerry's sake, and at the station I met Drusilla in her mourning.

She was going to—going to Amy's wedding, a few weeks after her brother's death; I saw she was shaken by fearful emotion, and in the train she told me:

“Of course it was not I who was engaged but Anne—how could you believe it was I? How could you?”

I couldn't answer her. I was too ashamed; Amy's monstrous lie had fooled us all completely; I tried to remember how it was possible, the bit in the paper, Leslie's illness—if only we had put Drusilla's name in that telegram!

The whole aspect of her as she sat in the corner

of the carriage was so dreadful that I did not dare to speak; I knew that she would break down presently and I thought of the end of the journey.

Presently she handed me a letter from Amy written before Leslie's death, asking her to be a bridesmaid.

"Of course I didn't know then what she had told him—I thought that he——"

"When did you find out?" I tried to be very matter of fact.

"Only the other day."

"But why are you coming now?"

"Agnes Gisborne will put me up, won't she?"

"Of course. But what are you meaning to do?"

"I want to see them both before the wedding."

I understood; but of course she would have no effect on Amy and it was terribly hard on Jerry.

I have said that Drusilla had never confided in me though I had had the confidences of so many women, but now, I think, she did not care who was there. She would have spoken to anyone—that is, any one of us, her friends.

You see, it was only a day or so before that she had heard, from Alice Fenner, I think, of Amy's atrocious lie.

I wanted to persuade her to go back; to get out at any station and go back to her people; that was my cowardice; I was absolutely afraid of what was going to happen at that journey's end.

I tried, with horrible inadequacy, of course, to put some of my fear into words.

"Amy won't let go—and the wedding's tomorrow——"

"He doesn't know."

"But when you've told him?"

I remembered the word Amy had said she didn't know the meaning of—chivalry.

"He can't break with Amy now," I finished.

"He shall know what he is marrying, at least," she answered.

"But you—you won't be able to bear it——"

She wasn't able to answer this, and she really looked ghastly; plain and haggard, too, even her grace struck out of her—and the sombre, ugly mourning for poor Leslie!

I leant forward and took her poor chilled hands.

"Oh, my dear, why didn't you make sure of him!"

"I thought," she whispered piteously, "I was sure of him—how is one to reckon on—people like Amy?"

As we neared our station, at the close of that hideous journey, Drusilla, who had been long silent, tried to reassure me.

"Of course I shan't make a scene, no need to mention—a word to anyone."

As I said, we are all so afraid of drama, melodrama, nowadays that we pretend that it doesn't exist; Drusilla and I both snatched eagerly at commonplaces to cover up this tragedy; but I was thinking, as we drove through the lavender coloured twilight sprayed with eglantine and honeysuckle,

that no situation could be more monstrous and poignant than this.

The first that had to be told was Agnes Gisborne; she tried, poor wretch, to blink the whole thing by pretending Amy had been honestly mistaken—perhaps! Oh, perhaps!

Drusilla was not even angry, she took no notice.

“Where is Amy?”

Upstairs—trying on, of all things, her wedding dress.

Everything was very quiet and decorous and ordinary on the surface; Agnes had gathered a pleasant little party together who were all serenely enjoying themselves; it was thought very kind of Drusilla to come in her mourning, a little strange, but kind, she was so much one of us, and poor Leslie had been ill so long.

She went up to the Bird room, which was Amy's, and I went with her; I did not dare to let her go alone.

It was called the Bird room because of two cabinets of china birds, queer shapes and colours, and a wall paper with flying parrots, very old and greatly prized by Agnes.

There stood Amy on a big sheet spread on the floor, her white crepe dress lying all about her, and old Jane on her knees pinning up some of the lace flounces.

She even had her veil on, falling from the back of her head in modern fashion and fastened with a little braid of pearls; she looked so lovely that I

felt weak and sick, as if everything was hopeless before that beauty.

Drusilla, pallid and tired in her black coat and skirt and grey veil, stood inside the doorway; Amy must have been far from thinking of her and when she saw us she did look scared and discomfited.

I remember being glad of that, even at such a moment. I had never seen Amy look put out before.

"Please go away, Janet," said Drusilla pleasantly. "I've got something to say to Miss Hobart."

As the old servant left, I noticed Amy look in the long cheval glass; she was as aware of the power of that loveliness as I was; she wanted reassuring; by now she had got her maddening impudence back.

"Hullo, Drusilla, hullo, Mrs. Frobisher—I'm, glad you've got here, after all—going to be bridesmaid, Drusilla?"

"Why did you tell that lie about me?" asked Drusilla plainly.

Amy was amazing, of course, in sheer effrontery.

"A lie? Oh, you mean that mistake about your engagement?"

"I mean a lie."

"Don't be boring—the man was hanging round both of you—how was I to know which it was going to be? Everyone thought it was to be you when I left Funchal."

Wonderful bluff, but Drusilla brushed it aside.

"And you had the newspaper ready in your bag? Alice Fenner told me, she saw you bring it out."

Amy became more insolent, but I think she was

frightened; she sat down by the mirror and reached for her cigarettes.

"I don't know what this is all about or why you've come here to make a scene." She gave the time honoured phrase a new sting of her own. "Why should it matter if I made a mistake?"

I had to speak.

"Amy, don't pretend with us. We know quite well why you lied—Jerry'll have to know too."

She *was* frightened; not of us, but of him; she had to strike two matches before she could light her cigarette.

"You're very spectacular," she sneered. "What's poor Jerry got to do with it?"

"Don't pretend," I insisted, keeping Drusilla back.

"I can't help it if he fell in love with me," smiled Amy. "He wasn't promised to anyone else, either, was he?"

Drusilla was quieter than I had hoped she could be; she was standing on the white sheet spread for Amy's wedding dress; I thought hysterically how grotesque we must all look.

"He doesn't love you and never will," said Drusilla, "and quite soon he'll hate you. I wonder you care to risk it—Jerry's a good hater."

Amy smoked feverishly—that looked so fantastic in connection with her bridal gown and veil.

"Did Jerry engage himself to you?" she demanded sternly.

"No"—Drusilla stepped into the trap before I could warn her—"or he would have kept his word, of course."

"Well, he'll keep it—to me, he's that sort, isn't he?"

Drusilla caught my hand.

"You won't hold him to it—now I'm back?"

At this sign of weakness Amy became steel-like.

"My dear girl, this is all very silly—you ought not to have come so soon after your brother's death, you're upset. Mrs. Frobisher, I wish you'd get her to lie down."

The cruel mention of poor Leslie was the final blow for Drusilla; she looked terribly ill and I had to hurry her away; it was a small satisfaction to see that, under all her flaunting, Amy looked sick too.

You see, she wasn't *quite* sure of herself; there remained Jeremy to reckon with; I know how she must be wishing that Drusilla had been only twenty-four hours later.

I got Drusilla to her room, and deputed Agnes to tell Jerry; he was coming to dinner, of course, and some sort of face had to be put on it; this was after six and by 7.30 we were all sitting down to dinner, as by some miracle, it seemed to me.

Agnes had whispered to me that Jerry hadn't said a word at the revelation of the "mistake," but then she had just gabbled it out and fled.

Well, there we all were, well behaved, decorous, even gay; you could expect Drusilla to be quiet and tired and Amy to be slightly nervous, and perhaps no one noticed how much Jerry was drinking.

He never looked at Drusilla, but somehow I didn't give much for Amy's chance.

Somehow the meal and the talk and the laughter

came to an end and we scattered. I saw Jerry go up to Drusilla and say something and her wild look of appeal to me.

I crossed over to her.

“Jerry wants to talk to me—won’t you come too?”

We went out on to the dark balcony; I noticed the queer colour of the leaves that pressed into the halo of light from the room, and the night moths flitting about; Drusilla clung to me, really clung, with sharp fingers.

And after all Jerry had nothing to say; I had half hoped, for his sake, that he didn’t love her so much as she believed, but I could see now that I was wrong in that half hope.

It was just love, love, love, between these two unhappy beings, so haggard and shaken, who gazed at each other on the little balcony; I stayed by Drusilla. I knew she wanted me there to prevent her going straight to his arms; she held to what I thought a great nobility, the leaving of the decision to him.

I couldn’t bear it; I tried to dip the scales against Amy.

“Jerry,” I whispered, “it was a monstrous lie and it isn’t quite too late—I’ll tell her, if you like, that you can’t go through with it.”

“Thanks,” said the poor fellow, “but you see, it’s only a few hours before the wedding——”

I don’t think he knew what he said; he was simply absorbed by the hideous struggle in his mind—his face was really expressionless.

Drusilla begged me to hold her—tight.

“ I shall go on my knees, I shall implore him if you don't prevent me—don't you see I'm trying to be good ? ” She used the last childish word with an accent of the most dreadful agony.

I did draw her away; I knew it wasn't fair for her to touch him—not fair to Amy?—No, I wasn't thinking of Amy—not fair to Jerry's own honour that he was fighting so hard to maintain.

And then she found us. Agnes had detained her, desperately, but she had got away and found us.

I saw at once she was in a panic, but her nerve was admirable.

“ This looks like a conspiracy! What are you people talking about ? ”

Drusilla and I waited for Jerry.

He said:

“ I've got a frightful headache. I think I'll go for a walk.”

I thought that she would offer to go with him, but she was far too clever for that.

She answered :

“ Do—good night, and ”—in a tone of the most appealing confidence—“ don't be the least bit late to-morrow, Jerry darling. I feel most frightfully nervous——”

Drusilla dare not touch him, but Amy did; she tripped up with her softest manner of seductive sweetness and kissed him, folding her bare arms closely round his neck; I did not see what he did. I had to look after Drusilla, get her upstairs and on to her bed; it was a sleeping draught before she

was quiet; when I left her at last Agnes told me that Jerry and Amy had been a long time on the balcony and that she had gone singing gaily to her room.

“Bluff,” I hoped. “Where is he?”

“Gone off—without taking leave of anyone. Home, I suppose.”

We both agreed that he ought not to be left alone, but what were we to do?

We were the only two who knew about this drama; the house was full of people, but not one of the men was friend enough to Jerry to be confided in, even if we could have done so without betraying Drusilla; I would have risked telling my husband and sending him after Jerry, but he was away, coming down for the wedding by the first train.

We discussed things like a couple of conspirators; it was clear that not only ought we to send some one to look after Jerry, but that we ought to know exactly what he was going to do.

“If there is going to be a wedding or not,” summed up Agnes.

“Exactly.”

We had got every one to bed; Janet was sleeping in Drusilla's room, poor Leslie was the natural excuse for the breakdown, and Amy was safe from mischief for the night—but what about Jerry alone in that big house of his?

“I'm going after him,” said Agnes.

“I'll come too—we must know just how we stand, if he isn't going to turn up——”

I didn't want any woman, even Amy Hobart,

waiting in vain for her bridegroom, Agnes didn't want a house full of guests treated to an open scandal.

"And if he *is* going through with it," we agreed, "we've got to keep Drusilla out of the way, she's about at the end of things."

Like two sensible "fortyish" women of 1927, we slyly put on coats and caps, slyly got out our bicycles, and crept away from the house where every one was so comfortably asleep.

It was just about midnight; delicious June weather with an amorous moon above the big elms.

When we reached Jerry's great house we found it shut up for the night; either he was in bed or the servants thought he was; obviously we couldn't rouse anyone.

Agnes decided there was nothing more to be done, save cycle round the Park and look for him; we did, but saw no one.

"We've just got to wait till to-morrow and see if he turns up," said Agnes who was getting tired.

As we went back to Plainlands I saw a light in the Bird room; I was viciously glad that Amy Hobart wasn't having such a good night, after all.

For the matter of that I couldn't sleep, either.

I looked in on Drusilla and satisfied myself as to her state of oblivion, and then I tried to rest.

Impossible.

In the stillness everything seemed more tremendous; we were all behaving so well, that I think, tore at my nerves more than anything; no one would have guessed that there was any trouble

at all, any hitch about the wedding; the very food for to-morrow was prepared, the room arranged for the breakfast, the cars in the garage decorated with white favours, the church aisles banked with lilies—oh, everything ready!

And there was Amy, and I, and Agnes, and perhaps Drusilla if she had awakened, wondering in our separate distresses if the bridegroom would be there to-morrow——

One could not help feeling sorry for Amy, detestable as she was. I rather thought there was a detestable punishment in store for her; it would take all of even her effrontery to face the situation if he didn't come.

But it was of Jeremy I thought most; it was worse for him than even for Drusilla, for with him lay the anguish of decision.

I didn't think that he had gone home; I thought he was wandering about somewhere; about dawn I went to look for him; my room was on the terrace and I could get out very easily without disturbing anyone.

The Bird room was on the terrace too; the curtains were a little drawn apart and there was still a glimmer of a light; I rather shuddered to think of Amy's vigil there, and then I rather shuddered to think how she would make him pay for this torture if he married her.

Either way the situation was ugly.

I looked for Jerry in the Park and down in the long meadow by the pond; coming home I found him by the churchyard, seated inside the lych gate;

of course he had been up all night; his evening clothes were damp and stained with green from trees and walls—and his face—I couldn't see how he could possibly be got to church by eleven.

"Oh, Jerry," I said, forgetting how strange it must have seemed to see me there, in the lovely dawn, in my old ulster, disfigured with fatigue, "you must go home now—people will be about soon, and it's all up if you're seen."

He stared at me stupidly and then jerked himself off the seat.

I came into the shelter of the lych gate also, fearful of some early labourer seeing us.

"Jerry," I said (I *was* old enough to be his mother, really) "have you decided? It is an awful mess—but we've got to do something, one way or another——"

"Did you follow me?" he asked dully.

"Yes. I knew you were wandering about somewhere—and we've only got a few hours——"

"You're awfully good to bother," said the poor fellow, looking like a child bewildered with pain.

"Nonsense. You must decide, Jerry. Dallas" (that was the best man) "will be up early looking for you—remember no one suspects anything. If you feel you can't give up Drusilla——"

He said, with piteous simplicity:

"It isn't only giving up Drusilla, it's marrying a type like Amy——"

I agreed.

"You've decided against going on, then?"

No, he hadn't; I knew it was tremendously

important that he shouldn't be interfered with, it wasn't either of the two women I was thinking of, but Jerry's own idea of honour; he'd *got* to decide so as to satisfy that; it was his whole future character at stake, and I think the character of people like Jerry is important to the world in general.

"Look here," I tried to be "sensible," "we can't sit here—I'll smuggle you into Plainlands and make you a cup of coffee and lend you one of Jim's overcoats, and then if you're seen getting home it won't look so queer——"

"I'd like a cup of coffee," he said, and I went on talking to cover things up.

"We'll slip into the sitting-room between mine and Agnes's—there's everything there for coffee, it isn't really light yet and there's the big yews making a shade—if they miss you at your place it won't sound so impossible to say you went out for a stroll."

We turned through the dim bluish dawn light towards Plainlands.

And I still didn't know what he had decided.

When we got into the shadow of the huge yews that cover up the entrance to the terrace with deep shadow he told me.

"I'll go through with it. I couldn't let a woman down like that."

Perhaps it was very old-fashioned and silly of me, but I was relieved; I thought he was right; you couldn't let a woman down like that.

A problem, of course—for there was Drusilla

to think of, but I had been puzzling at it all night too, and I had thought as Jerry had thought.

What would you have decided ?

“ I’ll come in and get the coffee and pull myself together,” added the poor fellow, “ and then slip off home—everything will be all right ” ; then he tried to thank me. “ You’ve been so decent.”

“ Jerry, don’t, or I shall break down.”

He pushed on doggedly.

“ You’ll look after Drusilla? Keep her away till we’ve cleared out.”

“ Yes, yes, the mourning will be an excuse.”

But I felt sick when I thought of Drusilla; you could hardly expect her to appreciate Jerry’s chivalry.

We had got out of the shade of the yew trees now and I was frightened at his looks; I couldn’t see how he could possibly escape notice; one would have to clutch at the excuse of nervousness.

We were close to my useful French window which I had left ajar; the light was changing from that colourless coldness to a sparkling radiance; you could see the whole façade of Plainlands very clearly in a kind of still, blank way.

Jeremy stopped short, and I, not wanting him to be seen, was impatient.

“ Jerry, do come on.”

But he said:

“ Hasn’t Amy got the Bird room ? ”

“ Yes.”

And then he leant against the window frame and got out, somehow, these words:

"Well, a man's just come out of there."

I shook his arm.

"Jerry, don't—it can't be——"

"Come along and see," he answered.

I saw her light was still burning, it was only a few paces to her window; we were there before I quite knew what was happening; and just creeping round the corner of the house was a man in a big overcoat.

"Hullo!" called Jeremy. "You'd better come back!"

Amy must have been just inside the window; I don't know if it was panic, or courage, or sheer devilry, but she pulled back the curtains and looked at us; was suddenly there, standing only a foot or so away; I noticed her white wool wrap and the queer colour it looked in the dawn.

"What do you want?" she asked. "You're up rather early, aren't you?"

She might have saved herself even then if it had all rested with her; but it didn't; when Jerry had called to the other man he came back; it was Bob Hardinge.

Relying on Jerry's chivalry she had won, relying on Bob's passion she had lost; he must have known she would want him to slink off, but a man's emotion is too much for the cleverest of women. Bob, futile wretch as he was, really cared about her, I suppose; anyhow, he came back.

You see what I meant about melodrama; here were the four of us, caught, speared, as it were, by this atrocious situation.

I had forgotten Bob's existence; I had just noticed that he had been of the party, fooling about as usual, flippant, amusing, and now he suddenly loomed of terrific importance.

Her secret lover, I supposed; passion had evidently tripped the hard, clever Amy. She loved, or had loved, this man she disdained to marry, this poor *flaneur*, and through that flaw in her perfect, brilliant hardness she'd been defeated.

You could see she was quite exhausted; first there had been the shock of Drusilla's return and the horrible uncertainty about Jerry; then, I suppose, there had been Bob to soothe and quiet; he had been difficult, of course, jealous, perhaps vindictive, but at last she had got rid of him and had just drawn a gasp of relief when—she was caught.

But she didn't show the white feather.

"Won't you all come inside and say what you've got to say?" she asked; and she stood back, allowing us to see into her bedroom.

I don't think anything she could have said or done could have disgusted Jerry so much; he seemed to turn physically ill; Amy's type never quite reckon enough on the sensitiveness of good men; for the same reason that he had been going to marry her he couldn't have touched her now.

It was Bob who spoke.

"I don't think there's anything to be said, except I'm glad you've found out, and I'll take all the consequences——"

"You bitter fool," said Amy.

Jerry put out his hand with a gesture as if he could not bear to hear her speak, and turned away, straight across the Park.

Amy looked at me.

"Perhaps you'll come in, Mrs. Frobisher?"

"No, I don't think I'll come into your room."

She came, then, to the point that had been in her mind from the first, of course.

"What are you going to tell people? You and Mrs. Gisborne?"

"Oh, let all that rip," cried Bob passionately. "Now Jerry knows clear out with me—the next train anywhere——"

I think her fury against him was more terrible than her fury against any of us.

"Leave my window," she whispered, "people are beginning to get up," then, to me, "Say I'm ill, the wedding's postponed because I'm ill——"

She turned her back on both of us, shut the window and drew her curtains.

"You might go away," I told Bob. "After all you've ruined her."

He sneered furiously:

"As if anyone could ruin Amy."

But he slunk away.

And I went off to tell Agnes.

It was all managed wonderfully; no one for a moment guessed the truth.

For one thing, Amy really *was* ill; she had to go to a nursing home, and then there was a long convalescence in Switzerland, and no one thought very

much about it when her engagement was broken off, about a year later.

Naturally she didn't marry Bob; she secured a wealthy merchant, just widowed, before Jerry married Drusilla; he either didn't know about Bob or he didn't care; Amy kept away from all of us, and Bob took to hanging round another woman not in our set.

Luck just saved Jerry; supposing it hadn't; would he, marrying Amy, have been right or wrong?

I don't know.

I can see the melodrama of the thing, as I said, but the morality remains confused.

IS IT GENUINE ?

SARAH FULLAGAR was thirty-five; she had kept this fact before her during the last three years; it was, she decided, delightful to be thirty-five; she had never felt so happy in her life.

She had left behind so much that was distressing, agitating, perplexing, she had lost that sense of uneasiness about her own appearance, personality and character that had made her, as a girl, timid, and as a younger woman, self-conscious; she had been inclined towards apology and even shame of her differences from the majority. Now she asserted them; she knew, quite definitely, that she was a wonderful woman.

She was now able to appreciate the fact that she lived in an age which was very kind towards women, particularly kind to women who had for some time been thirty-five; the years behind her had been filled by sacrifice, self-denial; a certain austerity, a keen sense of duty (that last and most deadly of our lingering superstitions) had bound her to the service of husband and children, a mother and a sister; she had deliberately deprived herself of much for which her nature longed and which she could have indulged in without harm to anyone and with much benefit to her health and humours; her wifeness and her maternity had sapped her womanhood; there had been periods when for years at a time she had never realized her own personality, when she

had positively winced from the verdict "queer" delivered by complacent mediocrity.

Now she delighted in her femininity and cultivated her "queerness."

Now everything was different; her mother was dead, her sister had married, the boys were at school beyond her sphere altogether, the girl had her own friends, her husband was making money at last, there was no longer any need to struggle to contrive to "go without," anxiety, responsibility could be alike thrown off; wonderful to think that there was not any longer any need to "worry" over anything.

And all this meant that she was in better health than she had ever been and more charming and lovable because she was more happy.

Best of all, all passions were behind her; she had been married twice; she had been loved by a man who could not marry her. She had lost a child; all these things were memories now; her husband was kind and good; she no longer fretted at him because he was dull and slow; she rather sympathized with him in his secret knowledge of her being a wonderful woman, and the hidden chafe of it, all these years; he had, as it were, grudged her to his own service; looking back and realizing herself as she was, she saw her own abnegation to this commonplace man as almost grotesque.

She had been a singer; her career, flung aside like an old glove at the dictates of her heart, had been of an astonishing success; she knew many other arts and accomplishments that had been allowed to rust; she was very popular among people whose

opinion was worth gaining; what she might have been was the subject of many of her calm, half-cynical day-dreams.

Well, it was over; no one would ever ask any more sacrifices of her; the rest of life would be easy; she could relax in every way; she was no longer afraid of discipline, no longer afraid of her own impulses, passionate, pitiful or wayward.

She had a beautiful home in the country, a comfortable house in town; she was not very rich, on some things she had to economize, but she no longer economized on anything for herself.

She indulged herself with the same strength of purpose with which she had hitherto denied herself; she sought for all that was amusing and pleasant with the trouble with which she had hitherto sought for opportunities of self-denial and effacement; she made many friends, she hoped that she might find a lover.

Ten years ago she would have trembled at such an idea, now she felt that the experience would be merely delightful, an added perfume to the days; she was so sure that no man could move her again; never, never again would she do anything desperate or foolish or wonderful for a man's sake.

But she desired the charm and elegance of a finished love affair with exactly the right kind of man.

She remained serene, for she knew that she would meet him; when she heard the name of Quentin Furmage she guessed that this might be he; she was very sensitive to names, she had always been fond of her own; with a perpetual sense of pleasure

she wrote "Sarah Fullagar"; it was like the title of a fine engraving; Quentin Furmage delighted her also; it was "queer" without affectation.

Mrs. Fullagar also liked the man who bore the name; he was vivid and yet completely subdued by his own good breeding; he had never been harassed or discomposed by any unpleasant circumstance; his personality had been his passport to all the pleasures and good fortune he had ever wished for; he had inherited some money and made more; he was an electrical engineer and a rather fine occasional poet, thus rousing Mrs. Fullagar's respect for the purely masculine achievement, and pleasing her judgment by the rare gift, the choice accomplishment.

His person and his manners pleased her taste, which, always peculiar, had now become singularly fastidious; as she had never been attracted by a very fair man before Furmage's blondness pleased her as something unusual; she liked his thick, almost white lashes, his light gray eyes very clearly outlined by a dark circle round the iris, she liked his blunt man's face that was at once so bust and finely worn, his neat squared figure and his hands as surprisingly beautiful as those in a Vandyck portrait; it was amusing to Mrs. Fullagar to wonder if he knew about those hands.

Furmage collected, in a shy and furtive way, coloured glass and white glazed Chinese porcelain.

That he should do this pleased Mrs. Fullagar immensely.

He was writing monographs on his hobbies in his

spare time; that, too, was delightful; she loved alertness, industry; without rancour she thought of her husband's leisure—yawning over the newspaper, asleep by the fire, gossiping with some good stupid fellow like himself. . . .

Mrs. Fullagar saved her private money; she denied herself several pleasures . . . but she really did not need pleasures, she was serenely happy.

One chill, sweet day in February she bought a white Chinese Pagoda (she knew where to go for such rarities and what to pay); it cost half the money she had saved; she had no debts, her indulgences were always the fruits of her self-denials.

With the Pagoda in her large muff she called at the office where Furmage worked. It pleased her to stand in the depressing outer room among the desks and typewriters where the untidy girls with waterproof cuffs were working and to feel how alien she was to this atmosphere; it pleased her to pass into his inner room, also bare and ugly, and sit in the round swing chair and know how lovely she must look in such a place with her plumed hat and veil, her big furs and flowing cloak, her delicate shoes, the perfume breathing from her laces and the curling waves of her red golden hair.

Mrs. Fullagar set the Pagoda on his desk and laughed.

The thing was of a thick white porcelain with a surface like a mirror and a gleam of all the colours of the opal; it reflected the light of the windows in clear bluish facets.

“Is it genuine?” asked Mrs. Fullagar.

"Wouldn't it be just as pretty if it wasn't?" he asked.

"No"; her smile concealed some amaze; she *knew* the Pagoda was not an imitation. "Of course I loathe a sham. I bought it because I thought it was the real thing—and I brought it here to show it to you because you know so much more than I do about it."

He examined the porcelain; again she had her secret thrill over his hands; looking down she enjoyed her own exquisite foot, long, delicate, high arched, on the dusty linoleum.

"It's genuine," said Furmage, "and must have cost a lot of money."

"It did. I saved."

"It's no fun if you don't, is it? What a lovely bit it is!"

"Yes," she smiled; quite happy. "Think of that with a dish of lemons on your puce glass dish—that's the kind of thing you can't hackney——"

"People do their best," he said ruefully.

"To spoil *everything*, I know. Either they won't understand and are so ignorant you don't want them to, or they just know enough to copy, copy, copy—for money—or because it is the fashion."

She was thinking of her husband and he knew that she was; she meant him to; their mutual smile crossed the Pagoda; each of them liked to think how many fools there were.

Mrs. Fullagar found it impossible not to gloat over the fact of her own finish, culture and composure, and the crudeness of other people; once

this difference had irritated her, it was delightful to think that it could do so no longer.

"Your husband will say that you have been wasting money," smiled Furmage, and the remark gave them both the full savour of Timothy Fullagar's limitations.

"Come and see where I shall place it," said Mrs. Fullagar as she left; she had not stayed more than five minutes and she was exquisitely conscious as she passed through the heavy glass doors that she had left a frail perfume behind her on the dusty air.

She enjoyed showing the Pagoda to her husband, he so plainly thought the thing rather silly and the price simply grotesque.

"The dealers inflate the prices," he remarked, "because the stuff is the fashion. You could have had a good time with that money."

"I am having a perfectly good time," smiled Mrs. Fullagar. "You cannot imagine how much pleasure that Pagoda gives me."

"It doesn't seem natural," remarked Timothy, "but you always were a wonderful woman."

Her contempt was gilded by a kindly smile; he had had fifteen years of her life; her sacrifice had been preposterous and in its way a work of art, for he had never guessed that she was not, inwardly as outwardly, the model wife.

Fullagar left the room; he did not feel comfortable in her apartments now, nor with her friends; she did not mean that he should feel comfortable, she rather wished to drive his inferiority from her presence; he had had enough from her; coldly

she marked him as he went; he was getting stout, he was nearly bald, everything about him was ordinary, even his nice kind eyes—you could see that look any day, in any passing dog.

In the room with ivory walls and black lacquer woodwork, putty-coloured curtains, opal-tinted lights and flame velvet cushions, he looked comical.

He *was* comical, and the thing that was even more comical was her devotion to him, the way she had put up with his ignorance, his stupidity, his dullness.

Mrs. Fullagar moved her long fair arms impatiently and clasped them behind her bright head.

“My God, how have I kept from him that he has *bored me—bored me—*”

Eliza was sitting between two of the flame-coloured cushions when Furmage called to see the Pagoda; she wore a navy serge dress with dreadful red stitching, there was ink on her fingers and she knitted a green “jumper”; Mrs. Fullagar regarded as something of an alien this child of her first brief, passionate marriage, yet she was full of pity for the crude, awkward, noisy, self-conscious girl. Some such creature had she been twenty years ago; Eliza might be as radiant as she was now, twenty years hence.

Eliza went away at once; her mother no longer troubled about her movements and she knew she must not long intrude on the elder woman's time.

She had grinned at the Pagoda, she grinned at Mr. Furmage; she was a plain backward girl.

Mrs. Fullagar sat beneath the Pagoda, which was on a jet-black shelf; she wore a gown of a faded lilac colour with borders, stiff on the chiffon, of dull greenish gold, like shining plates of armour. In this fashion had she spent the other half of her savings, so her luxury was marred by no consciousness of extravagance.

Furmage told her that he had instantly fallen in love with the Pagoda; she smiled, understanding him; they progressed delicately in intimacy; he told her of a candelabra in purple glass she must have—purple—no, all shades from violet to lilac.

He had brought her two volumes of his poems, so well written you knew the author had another means of livelihood, and so well got up you knew that the publisher must be bankrupt—long since.

The inscription was adoring—tactful; Mrs. Fullagar felt very happy as she went upstairs that night.

She peeped in at her husband, who sat remote in the room where his suppressed tastes overflowed and submerged him; crude electric lights illuminated triumphs of machine-made upholstery, framed photographs, ugly desks, bright carpets, and the man himself asleep beside a fallen newspaper, with hanging head and outstretched legs.

Mrs. Fullagar surveyed him coolly.

Funny he looked . . . *funny*.

He had cut his cheek in shaving; *funny* that men did shave . . . funny he was her husband, that they had two children and none of that mattered at all.

She stood still, pitying herself; it seemed grotesque that he would never know what she had sacrificed for him; but that of course was her great triumph, that he must never know.

Any more than Eliza, or the boys would ever know how she had subdued herself to their needs . . . the model wife, the model mother.

Mr. Fullagar inelegantly woke.

She obviously glanced over the manifold causes of offence in his room, her person, his slumber.

"How do you like my new gown?" she asked.

"All right—nothing the matter with it, is there?"

She received graciously this inevitable reply.

"I am going to be photographed in it—I like it so much——"

He looked at her critically.

"Yes," he said. "I'd like to have something of you for the boys."

Mrs. Fullagar smiled wanly; it was as if he had said, "Yes, have your photograph taken while you are still nice to look at—I'll keep it for the days you are old—not so long now."

It was not the first time that his devastating honesty had ruined some secret legend of hers; had she breathed her "I'm thirty-five," he would have countered—"Thirty-nine—forty—past——"

And she felt so securely beautiful—and *young*.

But she could afford to bear with him, she had the back door open very wide now—on the white Pagoda—and Furmage.

Through the long, chill, colourless spring she

allowed this man to draw nearer and nearer to her heart; she had discovered no imperfection in him; he was kindly and tactful with Mr. Fullagar, pleasant to Eliza and to herself, the best of undeclared lovers.

As the essence of worldly wisdom is a sense of the transitory nature of all passions, emotions and phases of human juxtaposition, Mrs. Fullagar knew that this exquisite hovering on the edge of decision could not last long.

She played with the word "decision"; she was emotionally rather further involved than she had meant to be; she did not mean to go away with him and ruin things for poor Timothy, Eliza and the boys, but she liked to think that he would ask her; she was almost sure that she could retain her serenity, but she liked to think that she could shake his; she tried him in every possible way, she made him take Eliza out in the afternoons, sit with her husband in the evenings—by every means she postponed the climax.

And this despite signs of rising emotion, of agitation, of distress on his part, that she noted and treasured greedily.

Mr. Fullagar gave her a piece of white porcelain for her birthday; the thing wasn't genuine. Furmage seemed embarrassed by the fact.

"I expect he gave a great deal for it," he said.

"Of course. Poor Tim! He simply doesn't know what is genuine and what isn't!"

"But Chinese porcelain isn't the only thing in the world," replied Furmage—"there's——"

"What?"

"Women."

She closed her eyes.

"Ah, yes. Well, Tim doesn't know any more of them than he does of—Buddhas and Pagodas; never mind."

"No," said Furmage slowly. Then he turned round. "Look here; I'm going to Italy—for a while—firm's business—there is something I want to tell you first——"

He was being much more awkward than she had expected; she looked down at her exquisite hands.

"I know."

"Do you? I feel such a clumsy fool."

Mrs. Fullagar did not like his embarrassment, it revealed to her how dead she was herself to all stirrings of passion; she leant forward and looked at him curiously; she had seen this mood in men before—twenty—fifteen years ago, and thrilled with delight; then she too had stammered and blushed, felt hot, her hands moist—*funny, funny*.

"Don't tell me now—ask me to dinner somewhere, I like to be banal sometimes." She was all cool graciousness, he all gratitude. He arranged the appointment awkwardly.

When he had gone she sat and gazed at the Chinese Pagoda and endeavoured to extract what pleasure she could from the prospect of his declaration.

He was going to Italy, he intended to ask her to go with him; she could almost hear his arguments. . . .

Mrs. Fullagar hesitated, played with her thoughts. Furmage called twice before the meeting; she sent Eliza down to him; she guessed that the girl bored him and she wanted to be cruel.

Tim Fullagar had his comment to make.

"Time Furmage found something to do, time he left off hunting curios and writing verses—hope his job abroad will be a bit stiff, for his own sake."

He spoke good-humouredly, but his wife was jarred; she almost wished he would not be quite so obtuse; such utter freedom from jealousy amounted to an affront to her beauty.

The night of her dinner with Furmage Mrs. Fullagar sat before her dressing-table in a pearl-coloured gown covered with black lace.

She looked lovingly at the dove-coloured glass jars of pastes and powders, the big scarlet-backed puff, the heaped violets tumbling out of silver paper, the bowls of orange and vermilion holding lotions, the large crystal bottle of white lilac perfume, the thick gleaming white gloves and the black cluster of feathers for her hair, all lying ready on the thick lace cover.

These were Mrs. Fullagar's weapons and she delighted in them all; perhaps it was because she had gone all her life without them that they seemed to her of such tremendous importance now.

As she looked at herself in the mirror and saw a luminous woman with soft hair and a filmy gown, exquisitely lit by the steady burning candles, she knew that she would keep him waiting.

She would be very late.

And then she knew that she would not go at all.

She was in no humour for the banal, after all . . . and her self-sacrifice had been a work of art, she hated to spoil it now. And yet again . . . she was tired; she did not want to see Furmage; if only there was the least of chances that he would thrill her with his love!

But she knew there was not the least of chances and she did not want it *proved* that she was—well, too old to be thrilled; better leave a trembling uncertainty, she meditated, than be sure it's all dead.

She changed her gown; she felt the need for something dramatic and sudden; she would go into the country, her house was always ready.

Mrs. Fullagar found pleasure in adjusting her plummy hat and veil, her full velvet coat, her soft wrinkling gloves, pleasure too in the thought of the letter she would write to Furmage.

She left a message for her husband and was going slowly downstairs when she was stopped by Eliza, who was flushed and excited and wearing an untidy coat and skirt.

“Mother, I want to speak to you.”

This jarred horribly on Mrs. Fullagar's mood.

“Is it important?” she asked kindly.

“Not to you, perhaps,” said the girl in an odd tone.

“Then can't it wait?” Mrs. Fullagar remembered her rule; had she not decided to henceforth put herself first; they had had enough of her, these importunate others.

"Aren't you going out to dinner?" asked Eliza curiously.

"No, I'm going into Beckwith—there's just time to catch the 7.50——"

The telephone rang; it was Furmage; she was late already and he spoke from the restaurant in some agitation.

"I'm so sorry," said Mrs. Fullagar gently, aware of her daughter's watchful presence. "I'm not coming. A change of mood, that's all——"

"But I'm leaving England in a few days."

"When?"

"Friday, to be precise."

"I'll write to you before then."

"But I must *see* you."

"Must?"

"Yes, I say—it's, it's jolly important, you know."

"Is it, really? Tell me now, then——"

"I couldn't—I'm rather jibbing telling you anyhow——"

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know, you're such a wonderful woman—I say, *do* come——"

Mrs. Fullagar rang off; this was a delicious note to leave it on; almost had she achieved her thrill.

"And now I haven't time to hear you, Eliza, dear," she said, lowering her veil over a face softly flushed.

"It doesn't really matter," returned the girl slightly sullen.

Mrs. Fullagar took no notice of that; she could recall that when she had been a girl she had often felt, and shown, sullenness.

She passed two days quietly in the country. Furmage sent wires begging for a meeting; she enjoyed that.

But she had decided not to see him; better that he should go to Italy with everything undecided.

And then, if she wished, she could renew all the pleasant play; be still the model wife and get . . .

Timothy rang her up, talked of "running down for the week-end," his phrases were all like that.

"It is good of you not to be angry with me for running away," she said frankly.

"As long as you are happy!" he answered.

"You're so kind to my moods," she replied and tried to keep her voice free from irony.

"Oh, you're such a wonderful woman, you know!"

"Is that a quotation?" asked Mrs. Fullagar, "or did you think of it yourself, Timothy?"

"Both." (She knew he was grinning sheepishly.) "Well, I'll run down for the week-end; so long."

That was Timothy; you would never get any farther than that with Timothy; she thought of the fake Buddha; Timothy simply didn't know . . . *anything*.

She was happy in the quiet house; there was always an efficient woman in charge and a man in the garden; she liked this humble, silent company.

She liked the garden.

Above the wet dark earth the snowdrops gathered in stiff clusters and the frail crocus blooms, golden, white and lilac, like liquid colour blown into shape, bordered the damp shaven grass.

A faint haze of green veiled the hedges, the honeysuckle was covered with long gray-green leaves that trailed across the dry foxy red of last year's brambles.

Thick buds were swelling the trees and the distant woods were bloomed with living purple; a wash of pale light blended the landscape into faint harmonies above the vivid green of the spring wheat, rising between the clothed lumps of earth. Slow lavender-tinted clouds covered the still sky.

This quiet, austere aspect of Nature, the peace and the expectancy, as if a sleeper indrew a deep and final breath before awaking, pleased Mrs. Fullagar.

It accorded well with her mood, which was also one of waiting, of expectancy, of dalliance. It was pleasant to sit in the comfortable house, to wander in the chill fresh garden, and to wonder what Quentin Furmage would do, what he was thinking; to remain quietly here, leaving him in suspense, was like standing idly on a ship in harbour, watching the glorious colours and angry tumbling waves of the storm in the open sea.

And there was Tim.

She knew Tim loved her in his inarticulate way; she had allowed him to love her and believe in her; she had been so very careful never to allow him to glimpse the kindly contempt she had for him; how he would be devastated if she went to Italy with Furmage!

She would not go, of course, but she liked to think of that—how Tim would be devastated!

And the boys . . . and Eliza.

But she felt hard towards them; they had had so much from her—she had made an idol of her domesticity, it was an idol that must be destroyed.

She relished, during those cool quiet days, her own beauty, her perfumed hair, her silk garments; she packed and repacked boxes of beautiful clothes, she arranged the chill snowdrops in a black glass vase; in a gold gown she sat and dreamt by the great wood fire.

The night before Furmage left England Mrs. Fullagar decided to see him again.

Just to say "good-bye."

She came to this decision when the last London train had gone; if he was leaving by the usual boat train she would have to travel at seven o'clock next morning; this did not displease her, there was a sense of adventure about it that almost achieved a faint echo of dead excitements. She was about early, chilled and sleepy with the spreading of the colourless light across the cloudy east.

It was raining; the garden looked dark and sodden, the bloom and glow was eclipsed on the leafless trees, the crocus bells broken and shattered, the catkins of the sallow willow ruined and heavy with water, the shrinking buds of the enfolded daffodils, all expressed desolation and disappointment.

The still hour seemed remote from anything possibly eventful; when Mrs. Fullagar opened the door and looked out on to the dark drenched landscape lying under the ghostly light of the dawn,

she felt it strange that anyone anywhere toiled or laughed or loved or hated.

Yet twenty years ago, ten years ago, and she would have seen in this sombre serenity but a background to her own hot love of life; through what veils of gold and rose and purple would she not have moved to her lover's side. . . .

Shivering, she drank coffee in a candle-lit room; the fire would not burn, the house looked large and unfamiliar. There was something grotesque about her husband's coats and umbrellas in the hall . . . something grotesque in the fact that she was sitting there, feeling dull and drinking coffee, early roused to catch the early train to see Quentin Furmage who was waiting to tell her that he loved her; her mind stumbled over the vulgarized word—love—what did it mean?

Twenty, ten years ago she would not have asked.

Strange the motor drive through the narrow muddy lanes between cropped hedges showing fields bright with pools of water that caught the strengthening white light of the sky, strange the sight of featureless-looking men tramping to work, of dark farms with blots of yellow lights in the windows, of patient gray ewes huddled together against the discomfort of the unresented rain.

In the train she was yawning and dispirited; the woman who was her sole companion annoyed her intensely.

This stranger was altogether wrong, out of harmony with herself, like a clergyman's wife who has bought her clothes in Shaftesbury Avenue;

her perfume was different from her powder, her rouge from either, as if she patronized various flamboyant restaurants and lavishly availed herself of their dressing-room accessories.

She was like a caricature of Mrs. Fullagar, that lady thought, and wondered, with a sense of disgust, "What do men see in women to bother about, *ever?*"

The black ugliness of the London station further depressed her; in the glacial hideousness of the waiting-room she adjusted her furs and veil.

Even in that grim mirror she looked desirable—even to her own critical glance.

Tall and pale and fair, with plumes and gauze like smoke about her . . . people looked at her; even these surroundings could not altogether obscure her personality.

In the taxi that took her through the congested streets she strove to put some gloss of reason onto her conduct.

What had she to say to Quentin Furmage? Oh, God, what?

And what had he to say to her?

If only some glow and sparkle could be given to the incident . . . perhaps he would give this by his presence . . . some touch of enchantment . . . she tried to remember his hands . . . his fine hands . . . his peculiar eyes . . . to impress on herself the fact that he *loved* her, *loved*, *loved*.

He lived in rooms in an old house in a secluded square in Westminster; Mrs. Fullagar was not embarrassed by the strangeness of her visit; her lifelong discretion was a large asset.

A pleasant-faced woman opened the door.

"Is Mr. Furmage in? I know that he is going away, but I want to see him for a few moments."

"He left yesterday, ma'am."

"But to-day is Friday," said Mrs. Fullagar, "he was to have left to-day."

"Perhaps he changed his mind, ma'am. He went yesterday—the early morning train to the Continent."

"To Italy?"

"I think so, ma'am. There is an address."

"He is returning soon?" asked Mrs. Fullagar, and there was a slight faintness in her voice.

"No, ma'am. The flat is to be let and the furniture sold."

"Good day. And thank you. I will write to Mr. Furmage."

The door gave a horrid sound as it closed; it seemed to grate on her raw nerves. How blank the drab square looked, how chill the air seemed . . . but what did it matter?

She had allowed him to go.

If she had met him surely she would have been disappointed.

Disappointed; her heart dwelt on the word. She was of an age to be disappointed; whatever happened it would spell that, disappointment.

Had she been younger she would have followed him to Italy; delicious was the thought of the sun, of blue lakes where the cypress trees rose from the silvery mists of the olives on the banks; the cyclamen would be in bloom now and the white violets

profuse along the old paved Roman roads. But she could not do it; not because of any lingering attachment to her old fetish of duty, but because she could not take the trouble.

The journey overwhelmed her—the explanations there must be wearied her; she yawned behind her veil; she would go home and make the best of Mr. Fullagar.

Or rather amuse herself by making the worst of him; that was what she really meant.

She went home slowly, hating the foul streets; she was pleased that she would be too late to meet her husband before he went to the office; by dinner time she would be quite composed and cheerful, not that it would matter if she was neither, for lately he never questioned her comings and goings, but she liked to play her part well.

The house was warm and comfortable. Mrs. Fullagar ordered a late breakfast and changed her gown.

Then she noticed a note on her desk; from Eliza; something wrong with the housekeeping.

“DEAR MOTHER,

“I am going away with Quentin Furmage, we were married some days ago. We both tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen—Father is always absorbed now, too. So I just cleared. You see, we feel rather scared of you, you're such a wonderful woman.

“With love,
“ELIZA.”

Mrs. Fullagar crossed the room quickly and looked at herself in the glass.

"Is it possible? I was *Eliza's mother* to him?"

No other aspect of the case occurred to her for quite a while; this shattering blow at her charm amazed more than angered her; then when her mind roved round the question she saw that any action was useless.

They were married.

They had gone away.

Eliza was in Italy by now . . . *young*, with her lover.

Mrs. Fullagar did not touch her breakfast; she folded and unfolded her daughter's letter.

She stared at, but did not see, the sham Buddha on her desk.

Then she heard her husband's voice, her husband's step outside, and roused into startled irritation.

Why was he back at this hour?—how was it he did not know of Eliza's flight?

These questions were in her eyes as she rose when he opened the door.

He appeared amazed to see her; he had that stupid way of being surprised at ordinary things.

"Timothy—Eliza has gone—don't you know about it?"

"Yes—gone to stay with friends, the Penney girls——"

"Eloped," said Mrs. Fullagar. "Did you not see her letter?"

"Eloped? I've been away," he answered dully.

"I've just looked in for a few things—eloped, you say?"

"Away? You left her here alone? Where have you been?"

"At Eastbourne. A little holiday. Who has the girl gone with?"

Exasperated, she thrust Eliza's letter out to him; Eliza was not his daughter; it seemed as if he remembered that; a holiday? Tim was taking a holiday?

Her impatient movement as she turned from the desk shook over the Buddha and sent it toppling to the ground.

Mrs. Fullagar's nerves broke their control.

"It doesn't matter," she snapped, "the thing's a sham!"

And she struck the gleaming fragments with the toe of her shoe; presently she would smash the Pagoda also.

"Gone off with Furmage!" cried Mr. Fullagar, dashing down the letter. "And I was keeping out of the way . . . of course he had more sense. . . ."

He seemed considerably moved and absorbed in some trouble of his own.

"What *do* you mean?" asked Mrs. Fullagar.

He turned on her, in quite an unmannerly fashion.

"I wanted the divorce—I thought you'd cleared with Furmage—I promised Amy——" He pulled himself up, but she had pounced on the name; she looked haggard and honestly middle-aged now and like someone fighting fiercely.

“Amy—another woman? Timothy, not another woman—after all these years?”

He lost his temper in the bitterness of his disappointment.

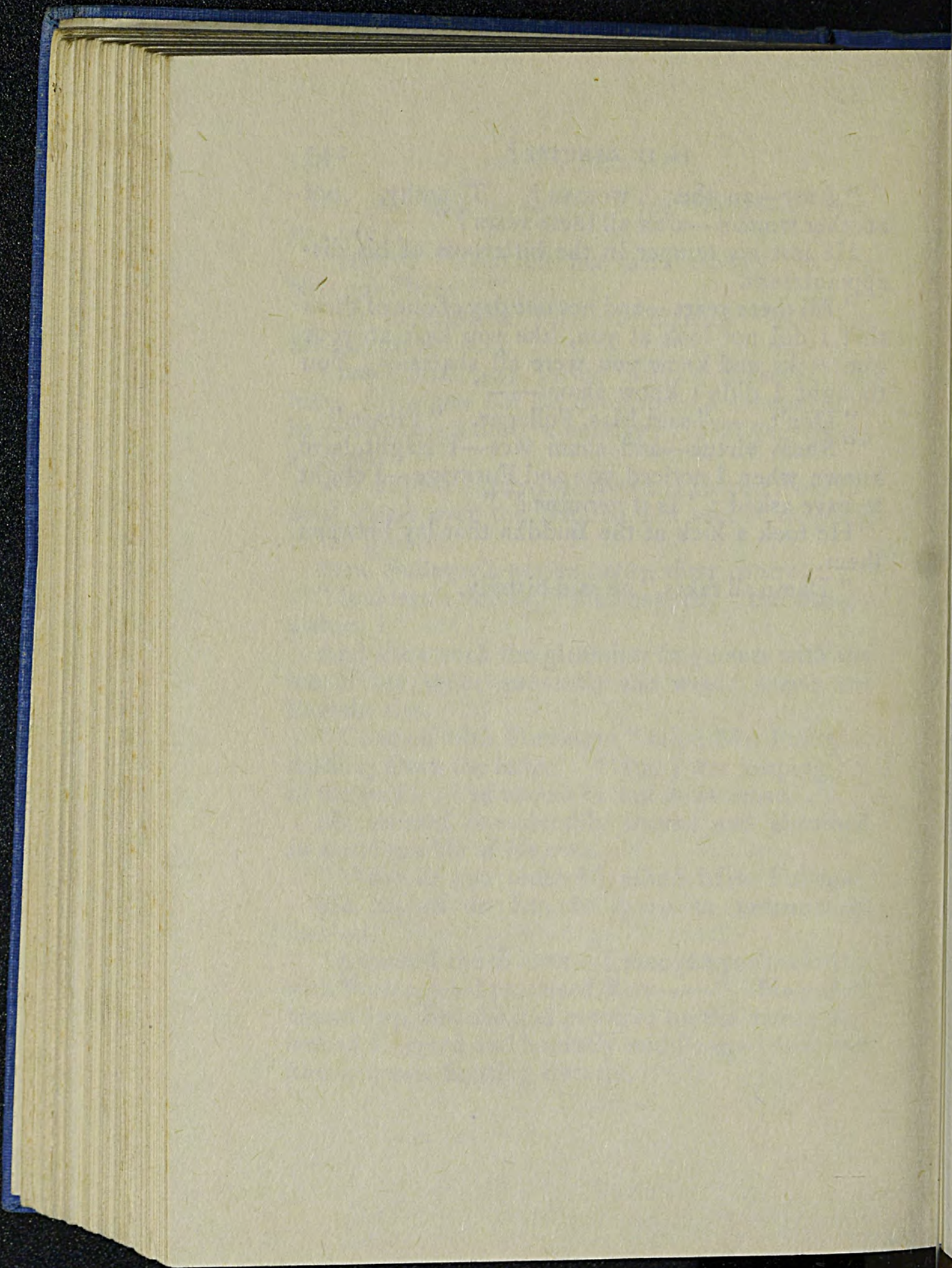
“All these years—and not one day of one of them that I did not look at you, like you look at your gimcracks and know you were all shams— You thought I didn’t know sham——”

“Don’t——” said Mrs. Fullagar. “Please.”

“Sham virtue—and sham vice—I might have known when I noticed you and Furmage—I ought to have asked: ‘Is it genuine?’”

He took a kick at the Buddha that lay between them.

“Damn all fakes,” he said bitterly.



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SUITABLY REWARDED

“IT’S a study in going without, that’s what it is.”

And Mrs. Mellish added, with the good-humoured philosophy of her race :

“ It’s a good thing I’m over fifty and never was one for looks.”

With a dogged courage that was wholly unconscious she slipped into the worn black serge, Cousin Sarah’s cast-off, that was to be “ turned about ” for her winter dress; Cousin Sarah had been steadily generous in handing over these cast-offs. She was a sombre stout woman of dull taste and a dull sense of duty; Mrs. Mellish had always detested her garments, but knew that without them it would have been impossible to be clothed at all, since it was clearly hopeless to dress herself on the five pounds given her by Mr. Mellish on her birthday and the odd scarce pence she might wrest from the meagre housekeeping allowance.

The Mellishes were what the neighbours called “ well to do ” and even “ warm ” people; he had been a clerk in a tea warehouse all his life at a steadily rising salary, and she had always been a good manager; the children were well placed, there were savings, the mean and inconvenient house was as near a paltry ideal of safe comfort as labour could make it; but no one had ever thought of Mrs. Mellish’s clothes or pocket money.

Perhaps because she was plain, and always working Cousin Sarah's worn-out garments and five pounds on her birthday from Mr. Mellish seemed a most sensible arrangement; Mr. Mellish had never departed from it, nor mentioned it; for twenty-five years it had been unquestioned; the two sons and the two daughters never thought of giving Mother presents, unless it was "something for the house," a cinder sifter, for instance, or a fern for the parlour; they were all sensible, thrifty people, the kind that "gets on"; money was wanted for so many things, such clothes or amusements as could be spared they needed themselves.

Mrs. Mellish never said anything; there was a silence on the subject that you could not break; not after twenty-five years.

It was only to herself that Mrs. Mellish spoke. She cut down the large sloppy Sarah's clothes, dragged out of shape they were, and always of some harsh stuff that flew viciously apart under the scissors and jarred your fingers.

Mrs. Mellish had still a comely figure; no one seemed to have ever noticed it, but slim and erect she defied a lifetime's toil; of course her feet were deplorable, as she said herself—"what with standing and boots——"

You might have thought that by now she would have been utterly resigned, completely indifferent, but there are some passions that only die with the body they inhabit, and such was the dumb passion of Mrs. Mellish for clothes, for what she herself called frankly "finery."

Her father had been a stingy man, her whole girlhood had been bleak of any frivolity, any prettiness; she had been married in her "Sunday best," a stern blue cashmere, bought for service, and a white rice straw hat with muslin cornflowers that something in her, secretly loathed.

Perhaps it was this wedding apparel that had placed her once and for all in the estimation of Mr. Mellish; had she achieved a white gown and a wreath perhaps he would never have dared ignore her clothes for a generation.

At first it had not been so bad, for everyone seemed to be, more or less, in the same plight, everyone, that is, whom Mrs. Mellish met, and then there was the War, when you were supposed to "do without."

But lately there had been a very *bacchanalia* of fine feathers; everyone had got some, everyone but Mrs. Mellish.

She could not get away from them.

There were the papers.

And the shops.

The things you read about now!

Plumes dipped in gold dust, royal blue heels, capes of ermine, coats of leopard skin, flowers made of plaited chiffon . . . and the "make up" orange, ochre and mauve powder, blue paint for putting under the eyes, hair cropped close and beeswaxed . . . all in the Sunday papers for you to read when you had a bit of leisure.

Not only for girls or young women; everyone was very clear and firm about that; well-known people, like widows of murderers, deposed royalties,

and winners of beauty competitions wrote earnestly in these same papers to prove that you ought to be beautiful, that you must be beautiful . . . *up to any age*; no one was old; people who would have been considered senile a generation ago wore flesh-coloured stockings, choker pearls, frocks like a roll of linoleum, and declared that modern science had so prolonged life that one wasn't interesting till one was "fortyish" and that if you kept your tissues from wasting you *were* young, even at sixty.

All this awoke the hydra-headed desires of Mrs. Mellish; the desires, the passions for beauty, admiration, adornment, splendour.

The shops overflowed with concrete dreams, even the local shops, and if she could scrape up the fare to town, to Oxford Street, or Regent Street, her head went fairly round.

Now her last girl was married there was a fair amount of time for these expeditions, but no more money; the housekeeping allowance had been proportionately reduced; the profit of the smaller family remained with Mr. Mellish.

In those same marvellous papers there were grand bold words very often about the equality of women, a wife's wages, equal share of the income, etc.; you were reminded you'd got the vote.

Mrs. Mellish was never impressed.

"They don't know Mr. Mellish," she would reflect and turn again to the fashion page; this, like secret drug-taking, was her own peculiar and delicious consolation.

And the shops.

The cascades of twinkling silks, the arrays of delicate shoes, high arched, high heeled, fine, impudent, the crystal and amber jars of delicious essences, the noble furs the colour of wet, dead leaves or snow, or an autumn haze, the gauzy flimsy, exquisite "undies" (the papers Mrs. Mellish read always called them "undies"; she secretly cherished the word).

Such colours too, with such names!

Peach, mignonette, flesh, orchid, tangerine, champagne, rose, tinsel, silver!

All the delights of life symbolized by these delicious extravagances; you could say them over as you went home, stifling in the Tube, and think you saw them again.

Mrs. Mellish had a legacy; thirty-five pounds.

"It's a tidy sum," said Mr. Mellish.

"You could spend it," she reflected, "*all*, on a bit o' fur."

He thought that she was light-headed with her good fortune.

"Well," he said playfully, "you won't want any more birthday presents from *me*."

Her drab-coloured face flushed.

"Not if I can keep this——"

"Of course you can keep it." He trusted her prudence, having never known her other than a pattern of thrift; it was near her birthday, too, there would be a clear immediate save of five pounds and Emily would have capital to draw on—for the rest of her life.

But Mrs. Mellish meant to spend it all on clothes,

a "peach," a "champagne" nightgown, silk, *thin* silk stockings, a pale misty bottle of perfume with a French name—clothes she'd be ashamed of, clothes she couldn't show, clothes that would be as hidden as her lifetime's passion, as secret as sin.

She began with a nightdress, a peach-coloured nightdress with ecru lace; it cost thirty-five shillings; as she bore it home she felt giddy as a lifetime abstainer who had suddenly drank a whole glass of wine.

On this reckless wave of intoxication she decided to buy rouge, powder, and some of that grease stuff they used; her features weren't so bad; it was her complexion.

And never having a chance.

She looked boldly round the Tube carriage. Why, some of these other women now, take away the hats and the impudence and put 'em behind a wash tub and they would be no better than she was.

The nightgown, shaken out of tissue paper, affronted the detestable room . . . no sleeves, just bands of ribbon . . . how were they ever warm enough . . . it was like Cleopatra, or whatever was the name of that hussey you kept seeing outside the movies . . . *but it was lovely.*

She smuggled it away in the despicable chest of drawers when Mr. Mellish returned home.

He had bad news.

"Mary's husband has lost his job; no fault of his; reducing staff."

"And the winter coming on and Mary expecting in January!" exclaimed Mrs. Mellish.

"Seemed a bit upset," her husband admitted. "Came over to see me dinner time. I told him not to worry—I said, 'Mother's a rich woman now—she's got capital,' meaning your legacy."

"Meaning my legacy?" mumbled Mrs. Mellish.

"Well, I knew you'd be only too glad to help 'em out—told George so, said nothing would please you more, first grandchild and all."

Mrs. Mellish pushed her supper aside that evening, remarking that she'd "no stomach for a bloater."

"Why do you buy 'em then?" remarked Mr. Mellish tersely. "*I've* got to eat 'em, stomach or no stomach—that's the difference, I'm hard working and you've nothing to do but gad about."

Mrs. Mellish no longer felt irritation at such speeches; she regarded them as part of married life as a handle is part of a cup.

She looked at the little whity brown man devouring his supper with mingled contempt and relish, and she never got so far as thinking: "I've toiled for that for five and twenty years and there's never been a kiss or a present or a smiling word."

But she did say, with timidity masking panic:

"Haven't you got capital, father? After all these years, and we being so careful?"

"And if I have," he retorted fiercely, "what's it for? To look after you when I'm not there to work for you. And how much do you think it is? I suppose you don't think I'm a gold mine, after bringing up a family and keeping a home going all these years?"

"I wasn't thinking of a gold mine," said Mrs.

Mellish patiently, "but in the matter of helping George and Mary——"

"That's where your legacy comes in handy. What do you want the money for, with everything provided?"

"I suppose," answered Mrs. Mellish dully, "it is a question of borrowing——"

"Well, mother, I'm surprised at you, bargaining with your own flesh and blood—here you are with a little unexpected bit o' luck just what'll tide George and Mary over the winter, and there you go making conditions."

"I was only wondering."

"George'll pay you back when he gets another job."

Mrs. Mellish sent the money, minus two pounds.

"I'm keeping that instead of my birthday present," she explained.

Mr. Mellish was satisfied; he suggested that she bought a present "from both of them" for Mary's baby.

Mrs. Mellish had only ten shillings; she had meant to buy a bottle of scent to put in the nightdress in the bottom drawer, but now she purchased a white woollie coat for seven and eleven and kept the change for the Tube.

One flash of hope animated her; she suggested that she shopped for Baby.

A change to get into those shops again, to handle money, to handle pretty things!

But Mary was surprised.

"Of course I want to get *everything* myself, and

you wouldn't know, mother, it's all so different since your time."

Only fair, of course, only reasonable.

Somehow no one seemed to have ever been fair and reasonable with Mrs. Mellish.

Not even God.

Before the baby was born, Mrs. Mellish caught influenza; her boots let in the wet, she'd been waiting till her birthday to get them repaired; she was chilled, low spirited at the time; well, somehow she caught influenza.

Mr. Mellish said it was a nuisance—if she hadn't been gadding now . . .

Mrs. Brown, from next door, came in to help nurse her; Mrs. Brown was kindly enough, but after the first three days she did begin to gloat on the prospect of the approaching funeral and her own importance therein.

On the third day Mrs. Mellish also appeared entirely aware as to the termination of her illness.

She confided in Mrs. Brown.

"I think Mr. Mellish is the sort to do anything respectable—flowers, I mean, and two coaches following——"

"I'm sure," soothed Mrs. Brown. "You can rest your mind easy there."

"But what I was going to say," whispered the dying woman, "was—if I could have some of those flowers *now*, waxy, expensive ones, lilies and roses, now they're out of season, and maybe a bottle of scent, and a lace cap, what you call 'budwar' caps——"

Mrs. Brown knew, of course, that her patient was becoming light-headed; she sent for the doctor while Mrs. Mellish laboured hopelessly to explain:

“ You see, I was always fond of pretty things.”

The day she died the balked woman made another attempt to gratify her unslaked desires; she told Mrs. Brown about the nightgown.

“ I meant it as a present for Mary’s wedding,” she lied, “ but it didn’t seem suitable, but I thought if I could wear it, afterwards——”

Mrs. Brown surveyed the garment without enthusiasm.

“ It’s like they wear now,” she conceded. “ My Jane’s got some in lemon—but I don’t know if they’re any more suitable for a laying-out than for a wedding.”

“ I’d like to wear it,” persisted Mrs. Mellish desperately. “ It doesn’t matter if it’s suitable. I suppose you can have your own way—in your coffin.”

What she said after that was so incoherent that it escaped notice as her last delirium.

She had not been dead very long before they went through her drawers looking for a pair of white stockings, and Mrs. Brown found the nightgown and told Mary what Mrs. Mellish had told her; Mary pocketed the prize.

“ Why did she keep it so long, seeing she knew I was so fond of pretty things,” the girl remarked; she was labouring under the grievance of mother dying “ just now ” when she would have been so useful.

It was a beautiful funeral; a cross of white lilies, an anchor of white roses, a broken pillar of white carnations, several wreaths, all glossy, gleaming and smart; no one could see inside the coffin where Mrs. Mellish lay in a mended sheet that she turned "sides to middle" herself some time ago.

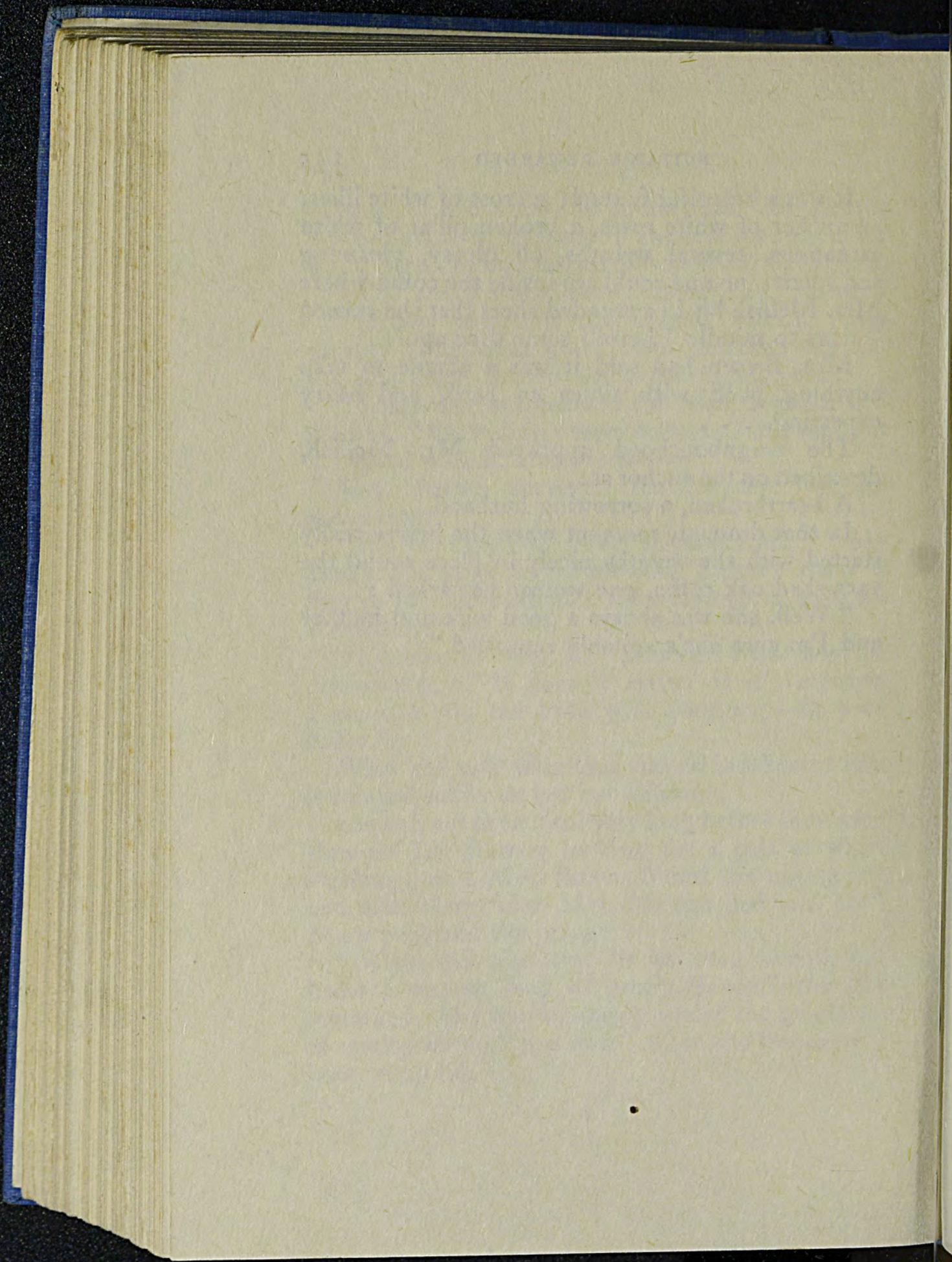
Mrs. Brown had said it was a shame to take anything good with times so hard, and Mary expecting. . . .

The neighbourhood approved Mr. Mellish, described on the anchor as:

A heartbroken, a sorrowing husband.

In that dramatic moment when the hearse really started with the wreaths nicely in place round the varnished oak coffin, one woman remarked :

"Well, she was always a good wife and mother and I'm sure she's suitably rewarded."



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THE SCAPEGOAT

EVERYONE called them—nice—several called them “dears,” a great many said that you couldn’t help liking them; they were so devoted to each other, for one thing; their lives ran so smoothly, in a clean line away from all that was mean or sordid, or, as Mr. Osborne would himself have said, “unworthy.”

Of course they had means; pretty ample means; no one knew how much—but enough for the simple, dignified life that they led.

Mr. Osborne had retired long ago, from some very important and solid position connected with finance. Mrs. Osborne had a weak heart that kept her in a charmingly negative attitude towards everything. Minnie Osborne was an amateur musician of much refinement.

Everything about them was of much refinement; the pretty house in a pretentious suburb, the rather sumptuous furnishings, the crowd of acquaintances, the several choice friends; it was a beatific existence that of the Osbornes.

They were always together, always had been; no one seemed able to remember Minnie as a child, or the Osbornes as young; in fact, such a thought would have been almost indecent, nothing so disorderly as a child, nothing so crude as youth seemed ever to have touched the Osbornes.

Their lives seemed to tiptoe through easy

places; to hear them coo at each other was to disbelieve in the frailty of human nature; they always spoke in bright light tones of delicate affection, spiced with the humour of the humourless.

"You're tiring yourself out, Mumsie, you must let me go." "You've got your work, Child." "Never mind the work." "Well, Dad will go." "No, you." "Can't we all go?—the whole family?" "We always do—that's the trouble." "What trouble?" "Oh, well, I mean all of us going together." "But, Child, you wouldn't go alone, would you?" "Of course not." Kisses "Dearest Mum. Dearest Dad." "Dear, dear Child. So cosy, so kind and happy."

Their voices were silvery and thin, even Mr. Osborne had caught the infection of a feminine pipe as a queer gloss on his pomposity.

Sometimes they called him the Master—playfully of course, but they never forgot that he had the money—all the money.

A faint frost lay over the perfect establishment, the chill of meanness.

They were all careful as the successful bourgeois is careful; Mr. Osborne had good taste and bought good things, the woman had handsome clothes, there were always at least three servants, but there were a great many 'bus rides, a deal of stale cake for tea, and more than a suspicion of camphor about some of those same handsome clothes.

Parsimony clutched them on the question of holidays; these were contrived with strategy and misgivings.

"You need a change, Child." "No, you go, dears, I'm ever so happy in London!" "Darling Child! But she looks fagged, doesn't she, Mumsie?" "Well, I don't know about *fagged*." "Tired, then." "Tired of what?" "Oh, well, *tired*." "Daddie needs to go most——" "We'll all go, of course." "Yes, that's the trouble." "The trouble, Child—now where is the trouble? What do you mean, Child—the trouble?" "Oh, nothing. We'll go to Cornwall, the same rooms as last year." "Yes—or Brittany." "No, Cornwall. Cheaper."

They all smiled at each other discussing the holiday. Dad planned to have the house partially redecorated while they were away and some of the beautiful furniture cleaned. Like last year.

The woman talked about clothes; the really good things could be put away. With moth balls. You didn't need any new things for Cornwall. Only "turned abouts." From last year.

It would be a charming holiday.

So childishly pleased were they that it seemed rather exaggerated; but then, as Mr. Osborne often said, they were fortunate enough to like sane, simple things.

Not like some people.

The people who went to those awful fast foreign watering places, the people who sat up late and liked cards and dancing and even worse—all those ugly things, that as Minnie so sweetly piped, "don't trouble us, do they, Mums? We just don't like them, do we?"

As they never gossiped, their conversation ran

on very artificial lines; it is difficult to be entirely charitable and entirely natural; priding themselves on seeing no evil they found very little to talk about; sometimes it really seemed a choice between "picking" friends to pieces—and yawns.

"One must not presume to judge" was Mrs. Osborne's favourite phrase of commendation; of course she did judge, but secretly; Mr. Osborne was equally careful—he would say just as something really vivid was being introduced: "Minnie will sing——"

And Minnie herself was more than careful. She was affectionate—every woman she knew had "darling" before her name; no one could really have provoked her purling ripples of welcome to the pretty rooms, the delicate teas, the ethereal suppers.

Such dear friends.

How they kissed each other, squeezed hands and gushed. Praised her music. "We *are* proud of her, aren't we? Dear Minnie."

It was wonderful how smooth and pleasant it all was. How easy. No trouble anywhere.

The Income Tax, of course.

That made dad's almost real.

Not quite. He kept himself from being really roused by reflecting that they hadn't *quite*.

And now this holiday, this dear holiday, all by themselves. "You'll enjoy it, Dads." "You want the change, Child."

Yes, she wanted it. A change. She had not been, as Mrs. Osborne said, quite her sweet self

lately. Tired. Wanting, well, a change. The doctor had said that. A change.

Minnie went upstairs saying it too. A change.

It was really a beautiful house, gracious, handsome, tasteful; she had her own suite of rooms. Bed. Leisure. Music.

She opened her Chippendale wardrobe that was worth such a lot of money, and began to look over her clothes.

It was latish in the year for London; the poplars in the garden were dry and dusty, the pompous road was arid and hot, there seemed to be too much sunlight in the precise house, it worried you, like something out of place.

Into this southern room this sunlight came insistent as a buzzing fly, pale, hazy sunlight tarnished by passing over so many houses.

Minnie took the dresses down from the hooks.

There was no hurry, she need not do this now. Plenty of time.

She sat down; the sun dazzled in her glasses; she couldn't see without them; her face was all soft and crumpled and her hair was colourless; Mrs. Osborne had taught her daughter the use of curling irons; the resultant fuzz had caused her no remorse. She had a fuzz herself.

Minnie had no taste in dress; didn't seem to care about dress, somehow; she looked at the clothes in the wardrobe with apathy.

She had pretty arms and shoulders. No one had ever seen them. That kind of dress was so vulgar.

A barrel organ played in the distance.

Perhaps they would meet some nice people in Cornwall. She had thought that last year.

Nothing had happened.

Nothing could. With dad. And mum.

They called her the Child. She was still the child to them.

She was forty—forty-one—forty-two—forty-three——

“Oh God,” she said suddenly, and put her face against the chair back.

A change. A change.

Downstairs Mr. Osborne had picked up the paper. He wanted to see the rate of exchange. Perhaps, after all, Brittany——

His eye caught a paragraph overlooked that morning; he read avidly, then, with a shaking hand, gave the sheet to his wife.

She, too, read, and they looked at each other.

How horrible. Disgusting. There was nothing to be said. *Disgusting.*

The item that had disturbed them was in the divorce news; the little paragraph that announced the cases to be heard during the next term; Sybil Castor Mallot was petitioning for a divorce from her husband, Charles Castor Mallot—“the well known painter.”

That was all.

But it shook the Osbornes.

“Of course,” he said, “it is what one might have expected. Exactly.”

“It shows how *right* we were,” said she.

“How right? Surely there was never any

question of that?" demanded Mr. Osborne with some asperity.

"No, of course not." Mum chose her words judiciously, as always; she hesitated and pondered with pursed lips, searching to be very just and clear and delicate. "It is very unpleasant. One could wish that one had not seen it."

"I cannot see how anything would have been helped by *not* seeing it, Mum, dear," replied Mr. Osborne in the full flow of his ripe sententiousness. "There it is—and there it will be, whether we see it or not! And it doesn't remotely, one is happy to say, affect us. It is twenty years ago——"

Mum gave a little jerk, and he altered the expression—"it is a long time ago."

But even that was too strong for Mrs. Osborne.

"It is a good while ago," she altered. "And of course it has for a long while ceased to affect Minnie in the very slightest."

"Was I suggesting that it affected her in the very slightest? I should be very grieved to think that a daughter of mine was likely to be affected, Mum, dear."

He was a little milk coloured man, tubular in shape, swelled and compact with a sense of his own choiceness and importance; he had always had a sufficiency of money to create a little world of his own in which there was no one to tell him that he was neither choice nor important.

His wife looked at him; they did not often look, really *look* at each other.

"I have," she remarked slowly, "sometimes

wondered if the Child has ever worried about it—ever been in any way distressed——”

“My dear Mum! Has she ever said one word?”

“Never.”

“Then—I ask you? We must be just. And reasonable. A girl like Minnie. Of course he went right out of her mind absolutely.”

Mrs. Osborne agreed; she always had to; there was a dreadful feeling that there would be a quarrel if she didn't; and a quarrel had been unthinkable ever since they married; they had never been on the level on which quarrels are possible.

Her voice became more mincing, more refined.

“Shall we show it to her? Perhaps that would be better than allowing her to see it herself—there might be some little shock.”

“Minnie doesn't read the divorce news,” dad reminded her gently; it was astonishing how often, oh so gently, he had to put mum right in these little things.

Mrs. Osborne looked rather huddled in the lovely yellow and grey damask chair; her lips twitched and she pulled at the long silver chain with lumps of turkis that hung over the velvet gown.

Minnie had once been engaged to Charles Castor Mallot; it had been broken off abruptly; they had not seen him or spoken of him except once, since. That was when he married about eight years ago; they had just mentioned that; Minnie had said, in the most silvery of remote voices:

“Well, Dad, I hope she will be happy!”

Obviously she had not been happy; the man was a ruffian, a scoundrel, as dad had always known, As his private judgment was now openly confirmed he could not dismiss the matter without a vague gesture of triumph.

“Think what we’ve been spared! Think what it might have been! If one’s eyes hadn’t been opened in time!”

Mum did think. Why, it might have been Minnie petitioning for that divorce, not that Minnie ever would have done such a thing, but it might have been Minnie wanting to.

“Well,” added dad, “one took very great care that it didn’t happen again——” He took his glasses off and polished them. “I flatter myself the Child has been protected and sheltered fairly well against the recurrence of these horrors.”

She had; all the men who came to the house had been so “weeded out” that there remained none but the old, the married, the idiotic; she had been so cherished and guarded from all that was ugly and harmful that she had been shut off from everything else as well.

“Minnie has lived in her work,” said Mum vaguely.

Yes. In her work. In her music. How happy, pleasant and lovely her life had been! What a lucky escape that was. A divorced man. Why, there was a kind of smirch in thinking that Minnie had ever been engaged to a man who was afterwards divorced. A dreadful mistake.

They folded away the paper and dad went out

to look at a mirror, a real Charles France pier glass, that he thought he could get cheap.

Mum sat still and thought of that lucky escape of twenty years ago and how safe and happy and cherished Minnie was.

Upstairs Minnie sat listless.

Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three. Oh God!

She began to pull the dresses about. You had to do something. She held them up and shook them and tried to think over alterations.

How many dresses. Too many dresses.

And something inside you saying—you old fool, what does it matter what you put on? No one will look at you and if they did they'd only see a dowdy middle aged woman with a sagging figure.

Mum came in, softly, tenderly. Darling Minnie, Darling Mum.

They began to discuss the dresses. Waists were still long, a new belt here and there. Sponge cloth always looked well. Got out of shape with washing though. Well, in Cornwall it didn't matter.

The barrel organ was playing under the garden wall. Now the dance melody that seemed to be beaten out with hammer strokes mingled with the dry flutter of the curling poplar leaves.

Mrs. Osborne sat down by the window with a pile of frocks over her knee and told Minnie of the Castor Mallot divorce case.

Why, she didn't know.

Minnie gave her ineffable smile.

"That's very sad, Mummie! I don't like to hear that—it's ugly."

She continued sorting out the dresses.

"It makes me shiver, Child," said Mrs. Osborne, "to think what we've escaped. What we have been spared. The unutterable degradation of a loveless marriage——"

Minnie gave a fastidious shudder.

"We won't talk about it, Mummie, darling. It is very, very sad. Think of that poor woman——"

"She deserved it," replied Mrs. Osborne with unexpected viciousness. "She married him without love—for no nice woman could possibly—a man like that—with his reputation——"

Minnie sighed.

"Of course. But may not one be a little sorry?"

She hardly knew what she was saying; inside her head was a buzz of questions, like a wheel going round.

What does mother mean? A loveless marriage? Degradation? What *is* love, anyway? There must be a lot of degraded people. Love? Love?? Love??? Do dad and mum *love* each other?

Mrs. Osborne rang the bell. When the maid came she told her to send away the barrel organ.

They continued to discuss the dresses.

When the music suddenly stopped they found that they were talking to each other in high voices; if they had been any other people you would have said that they were irritable. Snappish.

They went to Cornwall.

It was all exactly like last year.

At first it was quite exciting, the different air,

the sparkling sea, the jovial, yet select, little hotel, the novelty of it all, after London.

Then in a week dad began to complain of the cooking, and mum of the service, and both found the place ruined by motor brakes and motor boats full of trippers who came in daily; where *could* one go now to get away from these people?

They "rested" more and more, on chairs, sofas and beds, nodding off to sleep in the strong air. They are old, thought Minnie. Old.

She wandered about a little. Alone. There was no one in the hotel she cared to make friends with, no one who wanted to make friends with her; she didn't know how to dress, how to play—anything.

She tried to distract herself with the scenery; but scenery is only a background, after all; Minnie wasn't really interested in the scenery.

Everywhere she saw lovers; walking, rowing, bathing, picnicing, lying about on the sands, on the cliffs, guffawing, poking each other, slapping each other, dreadful, low, coarse people.

She tried to get away from them; but they seemed to be everywhere—you couldn't get away from them.

The place was spoilt.

They all agreed that; it was better to go home.

When they got home Minnie was ill. Overwork of course. She had been straining at her music. And then that horrid place in Cornwall. So changed. Noisy and overcrowded.

Minnie must have rest and quiet.

When she recovered it was well on into the autumn.

The first thing she read when she came downstairs was the report of the Castor Mallot divorce; there wasn't very much, for it was an undefended case.

Minnie secured the papers secretly, read them furtively, sat listless and thought about it all.

She had been very silly, very vain, very ignorant and artificial, but quite pretty, gentle and pleasing; of course she had been delighted to be "engaged" to a handsome young man of family, money, and some fame.

The fripperies had been an immense enjoyment to her; the wedding dress had been delicious—the trousseau, the presents. She had been very happy.

A week before the wedding she and her father had paid a surprise visit to Charles in his studio.

They gaily trotted in to find him kissing a model—good-bye, perhaps.

There was a short, sharp scene, and Mr. Osborne bore away for ever his outraged daughter.

After that life had shut down like a lid for Minnie. Everyone was so kind. No one talked about it. She took up music.

At first she kept thinking:

"There'll be someone else."

But there wasn't. Mum and dad were too careful. Other people were careful too; it wasn't everyone who could breathe in the rarified atmosphere created by the Osborne family.

Now it was twenty years ago and she was thinking:

Some people wouldn't have made such a fuss. Was it nonsense making such a fuss? If they hadn't paid that dreadful surprise visit. Of course it would have been *dreadful* to have married a man like that. Or wouldn't it? Was it all nonsense, everything one had believed?

She copied his address from the paper and hoarded it secretly.

And while she went her usual placid sweet way she toyed, terribly, with the monstrous thought that she would like to see him again.

She had read, but never dared to think of—some phrase of Thoreau's about most people living "lives of quiet desperation," and now the sentence recurred to her, and would not be dismissed.

Looking back on the sheltered blankness of those twenty years she could find nothing to justify further submission; she had done exactly as her parents had told her, always been moulded and framed by these people who had been past the generous years of youth when she was born.

The reintroduction of the name of Castor Mallot, coming when she was secretly at the breaking point, had fanned a timid flame of inner rebellion that she nursed in a jealous privacy; it seemed incredible that she had even this privacy of thought left—so completely had the old people absorbed everything else of hers, so entirely did they watch and guard.

To Minnie Osborne the thought of her brief betrothal came as a palliative to her deep restlessness; she *had* been loved, he *had* asked her to marry him; she was sorry that every scrap of everything

had been returned to him; there was not a letter or a trifling gift left.

The old people did not remotely guess what was working in her; they could see that something was wrong. They were even forced to admit——

Nerves. The doctor hinted——nerves.

Mum and dad were surprised, frankly surprised. Why should Minnie have——nerves?

There was nothing whatever to set her on edge——everything ran so smoothly. Dad was inclined to be vexed. It really seemed unreasonable of Minnie to have nerves.

Sometimes, very faintly, there was an uneasy look at the back of mum's arid eyes.

But Minnie never said a word to admit anything except "tiredness"; and there were a dozen facile explanations for that.

One day of cool clouds blowing across a lavender void of sky, of curled leaves rustling down onto the pavement flags and vivid scarlet and orange flowers in the street sellers' baskets, Minnie actually walked down past the studios where Charles Mallot lived, and looked up at his windows.

There was a little group of people round a car at the kerb; as the car moved away, one was left standing, Mallot himself.

Minnie knew him as if they had parted yesterday, but it appeared that he did not know her, for he looked, with a shade of surprise, at the woman who had paused and was staring at him so fixedly.

Minnie had forgotten the old people. Forgotten that she was the Child.

Her whole attitude besought him to remember her, and yet she shrank away.

"Why, it is Minnie Osborne!" he exclaimed pleasantly.

And he had held his hand out, and she had clasped it before she realized the awful thing she was doing.

"I was just passing," was her ambush against his amazement.

"Of course." He cast about for something to say. "Isn't it a jolly day? Are you still in town?"

She did not move.

"Won't you come up and see my place?" he added. "I've just finished a new thing. You might care about it."

He was being kind. She ought to have resented that. But she actually, though with trembling limbs, went upstairs with him to his studio.

Mallot was very friendly and pleasant and talked a good deal because she hardly talked at all.

There was still some tea on the table; he gave her some and Minnie sat on a low divan and looked about her and tried to appear and feel, woman of the worldish.

It wasn't the studio into which she had blundered twenty years ago, but something much larger and more imposing, and though she had known him at once and could never have mistaken him, it wasn't at all the same man.

Not handsome, as she remembered him, but comely and pleasant, with this atmosphere of tranquil geniality that was so strange to Minnie Osborne; there were several people in the room

and they too were genial and tranquil and talked quickly and gaily.

They were not at all the sort of people that dad and mum would have received, nor did they talk of the kind of things that the dad and mum circle discussed, and Minnie knew quite well that it was monstrous, almost a disgrace for her to be there.

But slowly her cramped soul, always swathed in the same thick, stifling atmosphere, began to re-act to this startlingly novel surrounding.

Mallot behaved with perfect tact; she might have been an old friend he had met again after a few months; he seemed to have forgotten rancour as he had forgotten sentiment.

As she watched him she longed to force him to refer to the past.

There was only one picture exposed though the backs of many canvases showed round the walls.

This picture was on an easel and Minnie thought it frightful; she didn't want to look at it; but Mallot, with the same impulse of pity and wonder that had made him ask her up to the studio, courteously explained this picture about which everyone was lightly talking.

It represented a dying animal.

A large white goat, stretched out on the sand of a vast desert; the glare of a blue and yellow void was the background; the horror of utter loneliness, the agony of slow starvation shone from the perishing creature's glazed eyes, the cracked lips were drawn back stiffly as if a last cry of misery had contorted them.

The beast's hollow flanks and starting bones were garlanded with wreaths of dead flowers, fastened by ribbons to horns and sides.

"The Scapegoat," said Mallot. "He's got the sins of the tribe to expiate—they drive him out and when he has perished they feel purified—extraordinary how that idea has always got hold of people, isn't it?"

"It is very barbarous," said Minnie.

"Oh, yes, to do it like that—but still it does happen, you know—here and there you'll find the transgressors perfectly comfortable and some innocent victim suffering——"

"Why the flowers?" asked Minnie.

"The adornment of the sacrifice," he smiled.

He was like his own old self when he smiled; how much there was she longed to ask him, how dearly she would have liked to go back with him along ancient ways.

His hair was grey now; hers ought to have been; didn't they look at things differently now?

She began to persuade herself that she had always loved him, that she had remained unmarried for his sake; there was balm and dignity in the first quiver of this delusion.

"Haven't you any other pictures?" she asked.

"Only portraits—nothing finished." With his fatal kindness he added: "But your music? I've heard great things about you—you've had some famous notices for your concerts."

And he was trying to remember what kind of stuff she sung.

Minnie flushed unbecomingly.

"You must come and hear me—I do think that I've got on a little lately——"

"Rather——"

She stumbled on, in a kind of dazed boldness.

"Do you remember you were going to paint my portrait once?"

He switched his memory back over what seemed incredible gulfs.

"Of course—I made the sketch—white muslin and a blue ribbon—that was your style, you were such a child!"

She caught at that crumb.

"Quite a child. A very silly child, I dare say."

He looked at her, straight, for just a second, with those ruthless, trained, clever grey eyes of his that were always observing.

As he glanced away he said lightly:

"It's fun being silly, if you're a woman—sensible femininity is like wet weather wear, useful, but we mostly keep it hung up in the dark—how are your people? I suppose it is no use for me to call, even now?"

He added this with such a casual smile that Minnie was left breathless.

"Oh no!" she answered, really frightened.

Didn't he understand, *yet*, the enormity of his offence, or had he forgotten?

"I suppose it seems a long time ago to you," she added vaguely and sadly.

"Well—rather, yes—you see it's a question of what happens, not of the years——"

“Of course.” She rose from the divan. “Of what happens. If nothing happens—it doesn’t seem so long. Good-bye—I’ll send you tickets for my next concert. You used to like ‘Primroses’ and ‘Tuesday Morning’ and ‘Toy Lambs,’ didn’t you?”

“What a memory! Yes, of course I did. Most awfully! I suppose you’ve got past that simple stuff now?”

She hesitated on the threshold as she had hesitated on the kerb when she first saw him; it wasn’t the indecision of one waiting for something, but of one lost.

“Well, good-bye——”

Again his warm-hearted kindness prompted him to the injudicious.

“I say, won’t you come again? I should be most awfully pleased if you would.”

“Oh, perhaps—some day—to see the pictures.”

He took her down to the door; as she stepped into the street he noticed a great gust of wind ruffle all her odd, untidy garments, her straggles of dead looking hair and the half dozen little odd packages and bags she carried.

When he returned upstairs the two last of his guests, a man and woman, asked together :

“Who ever is she?”

Mallot shook his head.

“Don’t ask me. Talk about ghosts——”

When Minnie gave her winter concert—an annual event that cost her father much good money and her friends much good effort and

time—she did not, of course, dare to send Mallot tickets.

For fear of dad. And mum.

But she put "Toy Lambs" and "Primroses" into her programme, and when she looked round the hall, foetid with the stale acclamations of that weary rally of "friends" so patiently gathered together, she looked desperately to see if he might have come—have bought a seat and come.

He was not there.

Minnie sent him a cutting from a suburban paper wherein an old journalist, a great friend of dad, praised in a dozen lines of "cliches"; "Toy Lambs" was mentioned.

By now she was certain that she had always cherished for him a lofty and secret fidelity, that she was the type of woman who "loves" once only, and that though her affection might be blighted it could never be supplanted.

This gave light colour and purpose to all those blank years.

She became gay, almost blooming, in spirit if not in person; rosy veils of illusion shut out the drab reality of the cooing, pecking round of daily irritation.

Dad and mum rejoiced that the child was "so much better. Quite herself. It had been over-work. What she had wanted was rest. Quiet." They drowsed a good deal themselves. Dad with his collection of old pieces. Mum with her little round of threadbare duties.

Neither of them remotely sensed Minnie's secret.

Mallot sent her an invitation to his studio; by wild good luck she got the letter without dad or mum seeing it; she went, inventing a shopping expedition, a pilgrimage after some new music.

There were a lot of people there—jolly, interesting, bright people; Mallot showed her a special consideration. Minnie began to draw closer an impossible dream. He had loved her once; she had always loved him—what if?

How wonderful, how marvellous it would be.

If it was so she would brave dad and mum—even that—she would defy them at last.

They hadn't any power really, only the money. And Mallot had money too.

Before the afternoon was over he had said:

“I should like to paint your portrait now. Could you possibly?”

Minnie felt her heart swoon within her; before he could grasp her confused incoherencies of a reply he had been distracted away from her; an elderly man tried to be very kind; he asked her about Mallot's pictures.

“Don't you think they are too clever? And not quite fair?”

There was nothing on view but that horrible “Scapegoat.”

“I haven't seen any,” answered Minnie stupidly.

She knew nothing about anyone's pictures—that sort of thing wasn't remotely in her world, her stifling, cramped, coffin-like world.

Her companion concealed his sense of snub.

"You must get Mallot to show you—they are rather a revelation."

He drifted away from her as soon as he decently could.

Minnie did not notice his defection, was unaware how her prosy, pragmatism bored people like these people.

She waited for Mallot to return, as he, seeing her desolate amid the crowd, did return and spoke to her charmingly.

He sat beside her on the wide sofa and talked of a hundred things with ease and vivacity. He said:

"We must arrange about that portrait—it's a promise remember——"

Oh yes, a promise. Minnie would not forget. But she had to leave before any definite date was settled.

That did not matter; the thing was there, hanging golden in the future, gilding all the days to come. She did not think, consider or plan, she did not dare do any of these things.

She existed on a plane of emotion where there was no logic or reason; she approached a state in which it was possible for her to believe that Mallot had been waiting for her as she had been waiting for him—as she was quite sure now, that she had been waiting for him; she was confused by the suppressed fantasies of a life time that had suddenly escaped her control.

Sometimes when she looked at mum and dad sitting either side of her at the elegant round table at which they had sat for meals as long as she could

remember, she would feel a swift dart of agony, of frantic accusation; hadn't they robbed her of twenty years?

Wasn't she approaching now, with timidity, like a supplicant, like a beggar what she might have had proudly, radiantly—twenty years? Twenty years. Wasted.

But she was simply terrified to pursue this thought. Frightened.

She shut it away, blindly, and groped towards her happiness. Secret, incredible happiness.

As a miser counts over his gold she counted over again and again the looks, the words of Mallot; how pleasant, how kind, how eager to please he had been. There could only be one meaning. There was only one meaning.

Of his wife, his divorce she thought not at all; of anything that might have happened in those twenty years she would not think. Think?

There was no thought possible to her; she lived in a state of pure emotion. Of crazy, secret, hysterical emotion.

Mallot did not write and ask about the portrait.

And the secret processes in Minnie Osborne's soul one day moved her to put on her fur coat and set out to call on Mallot at his studio.

It was possible that he dare not intrude on her, was afraid to write.

And it seemed easier to Minnie to call, to really see him, than to write a letter.

As she mounted the outside staircase to the row of terraced studios she had a sickly remembrance

of that awful surprise visit of twenty years ago. And nearly turned back.

But of course, such a fear was absurd.

A thing like that could not happen twice; he had been a boy then. She didn't believe that he employed models now.

Her short sighted eyes peered through the thick pebbles of her glasses as she looked for the button of the electric bell; Mallot himself opened the door.

After a long pause when the east wind swept along the open terrace and chilled Minnie through the fur coat.

He was amazed to see her, that was clear.

For a second he did not seem to recognize her, to be quite sure who she was.

Behind him, in the antechamber to the studio, was a woman in a gown of pale rose under a heavy black velvet coat and a big hat with feathers; she was leaving, saying good-bye; her shadowed face was full, Minnie thought, of that still insolence that was the hall mark of so much loveliness.

Without waiting for a possible introduction Minnie hastened past into the studio.

The "Scapegoat" was still on view and beyond on another easel was a portrait of the woman in the black velvet with pouting lips and eyes full of amused satiety, and listless hands lying on a brocaded lap full of close packed flowers.

The farewells lingered; perhaps a conversation that Minnie had interrupted was being carried on behind the thick green arras that shut off the entrance to the antechamber.

Minnie looked round and saw that the room was full of portraits of women.

The canvases had been turned round as if there was an exhibition. An exhibition of portraits of women.

They were terrible pictures. Pictures of souls.

Most of them were middle aged, or elderly, or old women; those few who were young had faces blank save for wantonness and vanity. The majority, starved or gluttoned, sensuous or mean, had a hard, greedy clutching look as if they were grabbing for something, or had grabbed something and were clutching it tight for fear of letting it go; one or two looked frightened as if they had been roughly knocked aside and malicious under the sneer as if they waited for an opportunity of revenge.

Mallot had only been generous to one woman; and that was the woman to whom he was now saying "good-bye" at the door.

Minnie picked up her bag, her umbrella, her little roll of music—her fussy little parcels.

She saw herself as Mallot would paint her and her heart withered suddenly as her face had withered slowly.

He came in, genial, kind, completely master of himself, genuinely pleased to see her; his virile personality radiated good will.

"How good of you to come—I'm so sorry I kept you waiting——"

Minnie interrupted.

"I've been looking at your portraits."

"Ah, yes, those things." He appeared, just slightly, discomposed. "I don't often have 'em out——"

"I'm glad I've seen them," said Minnie. "I came about mine. Please don't trouble about that any more. I can see how you would have painted it——"

He tried to laugh her meaning off.

"How frightfully cutting—you don't mean it, do you? I'm so awfully keen—I can see you so definitely——"

No doubt he could; she could see herself. Definitely.

She was braced to an icy bluntness.

"I'm forty-four. I know what you would make of that."

"Oh," he assured her eagerly, "that's a jolly age—I'm forty-seven——"

"You?" Passion briefly illuminated her soft crumpled face. "You've had life. Life," she searched for emphasis—"great lumps of it—Life. It's a long time since I found you with that girl. There was someone else to-day. A different type."

"A shame," he said penitently. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," she answered.

She thought of dad and mum. Of their vanity, temper, meanness, ignorance, of all the falsity with which they had enwrapped her—false sentiment, false morals, false virtue, false honour.

Like the glow of an invisible sunset the phantasmagoria of an impossible happiness had lately radiated the murk of her darkening days: now this was gone

and in the cold light that succeeded this rosy colour she saw very clearly.

Too late. Too late for everything.

“You needn't paint my portrait,” she added. “You've got it there.”

She nodded towards the picture of “*The Scapegoat*.”

Those two old people had decked her up and driven her into the wilderness to expiate their negative sins.

She slipped away before he could answer; out into the east wind and the gouts of rain falling from the tumbled iron coloured clouds.

She went home.

Mum was there, nodding beside the luxurious fire in the luxurious chair; she looked up at Minnie a little anxiously, with that dim question and uneasiness at the back of her eyes. Poor mum.

Minnie put her fussy little parcels down on the table, one by one.

“Had a good day, dear?” asked mum with a little quaver in her voice.

Minnie's gesture of heroism made all her life worth while; out of her depths she answered gently:

“A very good day, Mum dear.”

FLYING SEED

WAS it worth while to be a woman ?

A game that it took so long to learn and there was so short a time in which to play.

Of course, if you weren't a woman, merely a female, it was so easy.

You fetched and carried, grumbled and toiled, and sat out when anything exciting was on, and no one bothered about you at all, except perhaps to say when you were young—"she is a good sort," and when you were not any longer young—"poor old thing."

Eva Concern had always had an eager passion for her own femininity; she had played the queer, delightful, perilous game with avidity—and made so many mistakes.

Looking back now over her life she was ashamed of these mistakes, such foolish, petty, sometimes contemptible mistakes; ashamed of her mistakes, terrified of the perils she had escaped by so near a step.

She was forty-five now and safe.

Eva Concern rejoiced in this safety; after these mistakes and perils, mistakes committed, perils just missed, she rejoiced in this sense of safety.

Still lovely and graceful, she was free from the possible assault of any possible passion, neither love, nor hate, nor ambition, nor jealousy, nor fear. She

was neither sated nor satisfied with these things, but she was silenced; she had come through the storm to calm waters that would endure to the end.

She was surrounded, safeguarded by affection, money, position, her husband, her children, her friends—all bulwarked her against those old devastating storms.

And in herself emotion was on the ebb; she no longer asked for the heights but was content with the quiet of the valley.

She leant back in her chair and looked at the thistle they had brought home from a drive that afternoon; she had asked Harry to get out and pick this thistle which she had seen growing on a waste piece of land.

It was dry, brittle, dead, but magnificent in line, erect with stiff grace, gracious in faded colour.

It would never put out any more leaves, here was the end of it, but it would last a long time like this, a pleasing, rather noble shape.

“Like myself,” thought Eva Concern.

She had placed the thistle in a vase in the window place and watched it against the chill winter sky that showed above the house opposite.

Looking at it she reviewed her position.

There was Timothy, her husband.

She had married him in a medley of emotions of which love was not one; he was a good man, but there had been many terrible moments when she had thought: “I can’t go on with it—being married—that man—all my life——” Timothy had never known how near she had been to a break;

that was over now, toleration of Timothy had ended in a quiet respect, a real affection—no more peril there.

And then the children, Harry, Barbara and Christopher.

How many times (she was ashamed to think how many) had her spirit failed her there—their illnesses, their tempers, their demands, their insistence, her own weakness, her own nerves, her own inner revolt against this intense absorption in them; how often had she not said to herself with horror, "I'll never do it."

But it was done.

The nursery days were over; Harry was at college, training for an engineer like his father, healthy, happy, well trained, well educated—Barbara was at a finishing school, pretty, sweet, dutiful—Christopher was at school too, ordinary, normal, content—none of them the least trouble.

Then there was the money.

Eva Concern could recall moments of sheer panic when financial alarm had swallowed up everything else, when she and Timothy had looked at each other across the unconscious children's heads and whispered, "We'll never make it——"

But they had.

She had cooked and sewn, and watched and tended, and Timothy had toiled and strained, and both had gone without everything they liked.

And it was done.

Timothy had been successful, a relative had left her a little fortune; she could have everything she

liked now; there was no more need for stinting for any of them.

And then her own emotions.

First, the wild joy of work, of creation—she, actually she, Eva Concern, had wanted to be a sculptress; her poor lumps of clay had raised her to a god-like level; she had really known the furious rush of enthusiastic artistry through her soul. . . .

Of course she was no good as a sculptress; perhaps she might have been if her femininity had not claimed her; once she fell in love she utterly forgot the poor lumps of clay; now she thought of them with gratitude that that devastating emotion had been crushed, stifled, killed.

Then—love.

What an agony that, but a desperate upsetting of life, of all values, standards, hopes, fears, joys—ah, what an agony!

The man was married, living apart from his wife.

Nearly had Eva abandoned her own life to follow his; her resistance cost her a long illness.

When she read afterwards of his sordid divorce case she shuddered with thankfulness.

Then another man had loved her dearly, and though she could not bring herself to respond, still it had been dreadful pain again when he had died suddenly.

Afterwards had come her marriage with Timothy—not a very honest marriage on her part, for she had undertaken it selfishly, as an expedient for distraction, to keep herself safe, without thinking

of Timothy at all except to unconsciously think that she much favoured and honoured him, for compared to her other lovers, he was an ordinary man.

Absorbed in mundane and vital affairs, undemonstrative, he had never praised Eva's beauty, grace and wit, had seemed, indeed, not to notice it, and she, exasperated, had encouraged the coarse admiration of another man.

With shame she recalled the meanness of that episode, for if she had never really loved Timothy she had certainly never loved Hilary Blake; yet, out of spite, malice, boredom she had flirted, coquetted, been secretive, deceived Timothy, lied to him, nearly, ah, nearly betrayed him utterly—she, a woman with a good husband and three small children.

She knew it as a sign of something ignoble in her nature that she had been able to do such a thing, for Blake was a trashy, flashy type—and yet how strong the temptation had been.

Queer now to think how strong.

But nothing had really happened.

She had saved herself in time; she had kept the family intact; Timothy had never known anything about it, no one had ever known anything about it; on the surface she had always appeared as a quiet woman of an irreproachable and uneventful life.

And now she was safe.

Nothing would happen any more.

There would be ease and comfort, affection, respect to the end.

No more fierce joys perhaps, but no more fierce agonies, regrets, struggles, renunciations.

She looked again with a smile at the thistle, dry, dead, but safe from the tempest, from the wind and rain and destroying fingers and trampling feet—safe until it dropped into fragments that would powder into dust.

Eva Concern went shopping with Hilda Wake; they bought leisurely in handsome palaces crowded with well-dressed people, softly lit, softly perfumed, adorned and spread with luxurious articles.

In the great faintly illuminated hall where they drank tea from orange cups in opalescent recesses people danced.

Eva Concern watched the women.

How much trouble they all had to take!

Those who were with men had to take trouble to please and flatter them, and the men were mostly unresponsive, bored, dry; those without men had to take trouble to show they didn't care and at the same time to decorously attract any roving masculine attention that might possibly be turned in their direction.

And all of them had to take trouble to be young, slim and fashionable.

From her safe harbourage Eva Concern sighed with relief that she had done with all this effort, this anxiety.

For her the game was over.

Hilda Wake spoke of a woman they both knew who had "run away" (how childish that sounded,

but weren't they all rather childish ?) with a rather disreputable sort of man.

And again Eva shuddered inwardly with relief to think how safe, safe, safe she was.

She watched the women dancing to the harsh, tearing music, some in love, some trying to be in love, some clutching eagerly at Life coming towards them, some clutching desperately at Life going away from them; some just seeking a respite with brows wrinkled, with anxiety under the merciful shade of the high hats, some faded with ease, bored, dull, smiling mechanically.

"Oh, thank God it is all over for me!"

They went on to a picture exhibition.

An unknown artist had become suddenly fashionable; Hilda Wake wanted to see his "stuff" that she might be able to talk about it; everyone had been to see these grave, queer pictures.

The work was good.

Eva Concern felt a touch of nostalgia; the silence of the gallery, that flat, top light, the couple of critics making notes, the red stars in the corner of the picture frames, the whole atmosphere of work, ambition, competition—and here, success.

There was a statue in the centre of the room—lovely! lovely!

"Perhaps by now," thought Eva, "if I'd stuck at it I might——"

"Don't understand any of it, do you?" smiled Hilda.

"Not a thing."

Not one of her present friends knew that she had been at an art school.

Her thought went on:

"Thank God that too is over, that wild, impossible dream—and that no one knows."

They went home comfortably in her limousine, comfortably to her comfortable room.

Placid, quiet, comfortable.

The children were all home for their holidays, but only Harry was in the house.

He sat by the thistle, looking out into the winter dark.

"Is your father back yet?"

"No, he'll be a bit late to-night he said. I'm glad, I rather want to talk to you."

"Do you, dear? That's nice."

"It isn't—very."

Eva Concern switched up the light, which gave a pretty artificial amber glow to the luxury, the comfort, the ease.

"Why, Harry, what's the matter?"

She sensed that Harry, kind, ordinary, dutiful Harry, was in trouble.

Queer.

Trouble had never been associated with Harry as child, boy or youth.

Looking at him Eva thought, "He's a man now." She had scarcely realized that before.

He was standing beside the thistle, thick set, reliable, pleasant, like Timothy.

"I've come to an end," he jerked out. "I can't go on."

"Can't go on with what, Harry?" She was amazed, stunned.

"With the engineering. I can't go on."

"But Harry, you *liked* it, you've done so well——"

"No, I haven't. I always hated it, and I'm a fool at it, really. Only father always took it for granted—and it seemed so obvious. I was just shoved in. And a fellow doesn't like to kick up a row. Things weren't so easy then, I didn't want to make a fuss. Thought I'd settle down too. But I can't. It—makes me sick, to the pit of my soul. I've got to get out."

Thus the apologia of Harry, delivered with a thick voice and a red face, looking so like Timothy, not really in the least like Timothy, but quite another individuality.

Eva said:

"What do you want to do, Harry?"

"Paint. I've always wanted to. But I heard what father said about painters when I was a kid and I hid my things away——"

"You've been painting, Harry?"

"Yes. Little things. I saw a show yesterday, Crakenthrope's——"

"I know. I was there to-day."

"Well, they're *good*. They made me feel that I couldn't go on."

"Oh! Have you spoken to your father?"

"No. I daren't. I know what father thinks, I know what he'll say."

Eva knew too.

"Why did you tell me, Harry?"

"Thought you might speak to father. I'll have to clear even if it means a break. You don't know what it's like, but I tell you—when it gets you."

Eva heard her own futile voice rising with the fatuous words.

"I always thought you so contented, Harry."

The young man said:

"I expect you've taken us all a bit for granted, mother. There's Barbara, now——"

"Barbara is a child!"

"I don't know. Seems to me one grows up pretty quickly nowadays. I don't think that Barbara's quite happy."

"I'll speak to her." Eva's voice was touched with panic now.

"And then Christopher. Of course he's only a kid. But he's twelve——"

"Harry, what do you mean? What could possibly be the matter with Christopher?"

Harry flushed deeper, but stuck doggedly to his point.

"Father and you are absorbed in your own affairs, of course, you don't seem to notice things—but poor old Christopher isn't quite straight——"

Oh, grotesque! Oh, monstrous!

"Absurd, Harry, absurd."

He looked at her kindly, meekly, but with judgment.

"I daresay it does all seem absurd to you, mother. You're so serene." He said it as if it was a great compliment. "Nothing's ever

happened to you either. You can't quite understand."

"Can't I, Harry?"

"Well," still with admiration, "it must be difficult for you to get it—temptation, all that sort of thing——"

"Do you think that I'm perfect, Harry?"

"I expect you are, really. That's what makes it so difficult."

He looked at her candidly and all her secret life mocked bitterly at her; how carefully she must have played her part of sweet negation; how little Harry knew of her, or she of Harry.

In her bewilderment she played for time.

"Don't do anything at once, Harry—put up with it a little longer. I shall have to try and think about it. It's been a great surprise."

"All right. But you'll speak to father?"

"Oh, Harry—I'll try to—but give me a little time."

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't have spoken if I hadn't been—well, all out."

With elaborate carelessness Harry left the room.

Eva Concern's startled mind darted to Barbara, to Christopher.

Barbara was out to a dinner and a dance, she would not be in till late; Christopher was staying with school friends, he would not be back till to-morrow.

Eva felt suddenly isolated from both of them; not only momentarily but as if she had been all her

life cut off from them; she had thought of them always as just her children, happy, ordinary children who had been no trouble.

And how had they thought of her?—as a happy, ordinary mother, so “good” that you couldn’t “tell things” to her placid simplicity.

The return of Timothy scattered the nightmare that had settled on Eva.

Timothy was so cheerful, so stable, so completely sure that everything was normal, settled and comfortable.

Of course Harry had just spoken out of a mood; young people were like that; probably he would never mention the matter again.

He had been so easy and jolly with his father at dinner.

But Eva waited up for Barbara that evening—a thing she had never done before, a thing there was no need to do in a house with good maids and electric heating—and with a sensible girl like Barbara who always came home escorted by a gay family party. But to-night Eva pretended to go to bed to prevent any questions from Timothy, then got up again and waited for her daughter. She felt oddly shy, strangely foolish, utterly disturbed.

And yet——

She kept telling herself that there was absolutely nothing in it.

She heard the motor stop, the brisk, noisy good-nights, the young laughter——

Why of course it was all right, everything was all right.

From her own room she heard the girl run upstairs and then close her door.

"As I'm up," thought Eva, "I'll go in and say good-night——"

She crossed the corridor, tapped at Barbara's door, and went in.

The girl was standing with her rose-coloured cloak on, flushed and startled.

"Oh, it's you, mother! I couldn't think who—why, you didn't wait up for me?"

"No, not exactly. I expect there's some supper in the chafing dish——"

"I don't want any. Mother, nothing is the matter, is there?"

She had dropped her cloak now, a woman, not a girl; she was leaving school next term.

Eva sat down on the little couch by the glowing rods of light against the copper screen that formed the fire.

"I don't know if there is anything wrong, Barbara."

The girl sank into a chair; her frock was a whisk of spangles and fluff, her arms and shoulders looked of almost foolish delicacy, but the small, clear face was vivid and vital, her expression was neither frivolous nor futile.

She looked, Eva thought, tired despite her flush.

"Harry's been speaking to me. I must say it bothered me."

Barbara's eyes narrowed; she spoke in a tone which Eva had never heard her use before.

"Been speaking about me?"

She had betrayed herself; there was something wrong.

Something wrong.

"No, about himself. But he did say, about you, that you weren't quite happy."

"Poor old Harry! He's such a good sort. I wish you'd get him out of that rotten engineering——"

"Then you know all about it, Barbara?"

"Yes, Harry and I are good friends."

"But haven't I been a good friend to both of you?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, why don't you tell me these things?"

"It's different. I don't think you'd understand—you're so different—one doesn't feel you've ever had trouble or temptation."

Just what Harry had said—this was the result of her long suppression!

Eva said:

"How queer of you to say that, Barbara. One doesn't talk of the things that have happened to one—the secret things. It is awful to me to be shut out. I thought that you were both so happy."

"It isn't your fault that we're not."

"You're not, then?" It was a cry from Eva; the girl averted her face. "Barbara, what is wrong?"

"I don't want to speak of it—I wish that Harry hadn't said anything. It's a shame to worry you."

"It worries me more to think I'm shut out."

"I couldn't tell you."

"Have you told Harry?"

"Oh, Harry's different."

"He isn't." Eva was vehement as if she was defending herself. "I wanted to be an artist—just like Harry does——"

"You, mother?"

"Yes, but I was timid—and distracted. I've been ashamed to tell anyone, even your father."

"How queer, mother." Barbara gazed at her with curiosity. "Then you'll get Harry off the engineering?"

"I'll try—but you?"

The girl rose.

"It isn't wanting to be an artist that's the matter with me," she said bitterly.

Eva rose also.

"Don't frighten me, Barbara."

"That's it!" flashed the girl, "frighten you! I won't say anything. I'm all right."

"I didn't mean frighten," pleaded Eva. "I meant don't keep me in suspense. I must have been very stupid and inadequate, but don't think I couldn't understand—whatever it was——"

Before her desperate sincerity the girl relented; she, too, was near the breaking point of nerves and control.

"I'm in love, that's all."

A schoolgirl! Eighteen! But how old had she been the first time? Less.

"There's nothing so dreadful in that." Eva's lips quivered. "Of course you're young——"

"Young! I'm alive. I'm grown up."

"Well, darling—why didn't you tell me?"

"He's married. I thought that you wouldn't like that," jerked out the girl, agitated but without either defiance or shame.

Eva was rigid with shock, yet stronger even than the shock was her desire to conceal it, and under all a certain wonder at her own horror.

When this had happened to her it had not seemed dreadful or terrible—why had she always regarded Barbara as immaculate?

"No, I don't like it," she said quietly, "but perhaps I'll be able to help you."

The girl seemed relieved at this absence of emotion; her cold tension slightly relaxed.

"I'm afraid that you can't—no one could, we're in a fix."

"We?" Hardly could Eva keep the panic out of her voice. "He's spoken then?"

"Of course. You don't think that this is just a romance, do you, mother?" asked the girl bitterly. "It's real—and awful."

"Who is it?"

"I don't suppose I ought to tell you. It would make it awkward for you to let him come to the house."

Come to the house! Someone they knew! This clandestine intrigue going on under the eyes of all of them!

Eva had to shade her face with her hand as she answered:

"Has he written to you? Been to see you at school—taken you out?"

"Yes. It seems so silly that I should still be at school."

"You had better not go back—you had better go away," said Eva dully. "Why didn't you let me know before?"

"I thought that you'd hate it. You always seemed so—remote. You see, to me it isn't sordid nor ugly. But to you I thought it might be."

"Then where is the trouble? You said that it was awful."

Barbara answered unexpectedly:

"It is his wife. She's a good sort. I like her—it isn't her fault. She's been awfully decent to me. One wants to be straight."

Eva gasped—as one who has been stifling and suddenly feels the fresh air rush into the lungs.

Barbara wanted to be "straight."

She, too, in her time had been "straight," but not from any abstract love of straightness, but because she was afraid.

Barbara was better than she had been.

"So you're going to—cut it?"

"I'm trying." The little clear face looked distorted.

"I'll help. Won't you let me help?"

"Oh, mother—you're jolly good. I never meant to tell you—it seems a shame. But I expect I'm tired."

In her heart Eva was saying "My baby, my baby"; aloud she said:

"Go to bed now, dear, don't worry. We'll fight it through together."

"Father mustn't know."

"Of course not."

That sounded ugly; a deliberate deception of Timothy; but not for the first time; she had deliberately deceived him all her life, as to her emotional experiences.

And thinking of this she said:

"I've got to help you and Harry—and Christopher? It sounds so silly, but Harry said——"

"Harry's been talking of Christopher?"

"Yes—is—there anything in it? There can't be—a child."

Barbara said slowly, staring into the dazzling rods of the electric fire:

"I think Christopher wants help too—he's a jolly kid but—Harry's worried about him."

"What does he do? What do you mean?"

"He's sly, not truthful. Harry's hushed up one or two rows. It makes us mad to see how he takes you and father in. I think you ought to know, so that you could tell father. Neither of us like to tell father."

Eva was seeing Christopher in a woolly suit flying round a garden looking like an animated rose; only a few years ago. She asked quickly:

"What has he *done*?"

"Well, he takes things. He had my little necklace I pretended I'd lost. And some money out of Harry's pocket. I'm sorry, mother."

Eva rose.

"I'm tired too. I'll go to bed. It's fearfully late."

"Yes. It's fearfully late—for you. I know I generally sit up a bit. I don't sleep so well."

Eva did not dare kiss her; she felt that if she did they would both weep and weep and never let each other go.

"I'll talk to you in the morning. We'll talk about it all in the morning."

"Yes. I'm glad that you know. I hope I haven't bothered you—I'm glad you know."

"Good-night, Babs, don't worry."

"Good-night, mother. I'm all right."

Eva went back to her room; the pale lamp was alight by the bedside, all the comfort and luxury was revealed—blasted.

She opened an inner door and peeped into the darkness where Timothy slept, so comfortable, peaceful and righteous; these misfortunes had nothing to do with him, nor would they ever be told to him save they were revealed by open disaster; they came through her and she would have to deal with them.

Eva closed the door.

Always had been this gently closed door between herself and Timothy.

She sat down by the bed.

Just when she thought that it was all over, that she was safely in harbour—how crazy that thought had been.

There was no harbour save death.

All to do over again—Barbara's illicit passion, Harry's misplaced career, Christopher's crookedness—her own illicit passion, her own misplaced career,

her own crookedness, all coming out in her children.

All the things she had suppressed, denied, hidden in herself coming to light in them, all the old battles to fight over again.

No end. No end.

She thought of the dry, dead thistle to which she had compared herself—safe, graceful, finished.

How foolish was the simile.

That withered coronal had been full of flying seed that had been wafted away into the air, and all over the fields were young thistles, green, fresh, vigorous and exposed to all the disasters the open way holds for youth.

PRÆLUDIUM

SHE confessed to me that she had always been quite comfortable and happy, but added that she did not really see much object in living.

This not with any passion or melancholy, but as a quiet statement of fact—there simply, from her point of view, did not seem to be any reason in it at all.

The minor comforts and minor excitements that had come her way were hardly—well, worth while.

“I suppose,” she remarked cheerfully, “that I am the type the modern novelist would love to write about—to say nothing of the modern doctor! Thirty-seven, unmarried, dissatisfied—pages would go to my complexes, inhibitions and repressions—but I’m not conscious of feeling any of these things. I believe I’m stupid and life is very simple to the stupid.”

“Life is simple to everyone,” I ventured. “The complications of the clever people really only exist in their own brains.”

“Well, it’s all simple to me, anyhow,” she replied. “I just haven’t found what I want.”

She smiled at my glance of discreet sympathy and added:

“I know what you are thinking! A husband and children! I don’t think so, really. I had a reasonable offer of marriage once—quite a nice man,

good enough for me, anyhow, but still—I don't know—I refused him and never regretted it. And children——”

As she paused on this word I could not help a disconcerted, self-conscious glance; one cannot help feeling that children must be a tender topic with any spinster of thirty-seven who is not the least likely to be married.

But Rose Dalton looked at me with unmistakable candour.

“I never saw much romance about children—I looked after other people's kids for ten years—they're all right of course, but they are really a great deal of trouble.”

There was no denying this; I wondered if she knew that everything in life was “a great deal of trouble”—that is, everything worth while.

She seemed to notice my reserve.

“I wouldn't mind taking any amount of trouble,” she added, “for just the right thing—but honestly I haven't found yet what does seem worth—any amount of trouble.”

It seemed only fair to believe her; I was certainly sure that she might, by taking this same amount of trouble, have achieved the ordinary husband and children; she was pleasant looking, had perhaps been pretty in her twenties, was intelligent, sympathetic, neither sexless nor hysterical, well mannered, well educated—oh yes, I had seen many well-dowered women fortunately married.

I had known her for some years as the very efficient secretary of one of my nearest friends,

Adèle French, a busy and delightful woman (how often the two go together !), and only recently had she opened her heart to me—opened it to show this curious emptiness within.

It was impossible to feel sorry for one so self-possessed, but somehow her personality slightly disturbed me.

I asked Adèle French:

“Do you think she is really happy?—Rose Dalton, I mean.”

“Why not? She is very efficient, very well paid—very well treated——”

“I know. But the monotony—the kind of deputy life—the lack of individual interest——”

“My dear,” Adèle assured me, “some people really *like* to have eggs and bacon for breakfast every day of their lives, and some people really *like* the view from the back yard and never want it changed.”

“You think Rose Dalton is one of them?” I replied rather feebly, for I could not betray the confidence about that “emptiness” Miss Dalton had mentioned.

“I’m sure she is.” Adèle was cheerful. “That’s what I appreciate about her—no complexes, no depths—no fusses or bothers—don’t, for goodness sake, Muriel, go putting ‘ideas’ into her head.”

I did not intend to do so, but, perhaps because I was such a happy woman myself I did, secretly, worry a little over that admission of Rose Dalton—that quiet, almost cheerful, “I don’t really see the use of it all.”

I had had so much. I was so undeservedly successful in marriage, children and work, and I had been touched, as I had often been touched, by the other woman's frank admiration.

We women have such a reputation for spite and jealousy that I should like to put on record how often I have been touched and moved and made ashamed by the admiration of women who have had nothing—and never will have anything—the elderly spinster who lives a dull, cramped existence in the country, how sweetly and generously she will admire the woman who leads just the life she would have liked—how warmly she praises other people's children and applauds other people's successes—how often I have seen this—how often seen the eyes of the drab little failure gleam with delight in some other woman's achievement—how often felt small when considering these lives, so dull, so confined, that I should never have had the courage to support—and that these others could not only support but endure with a heroism that permitted them to applaud the triumphs of the favourites of the Gods!

There was much of this about Rose Dalton—so many beautiful, active, fortunate women came to Adèle's house and the secretary regarded them all with an admiration free from the least taint of envy.

Yet many of these others (ungracious contrast!) found Miss Dalton stupid, boring.

"You might as well talk to a typewriter," one said. "Hasn't the woman any hobbies, any interests?"

No, and no relatives and no friends; she might

almost, as they said, as well have been the machine at which she spent so many hours of her uneventful days.

After that little confession I became so sensitive on the subject of Rose Dalton that I disliked to hear Adèle speak of her with good-natured contempt as she so often did; once I was moved to protest.

“That freakish man of yours will have to take Miss Dalton down,” she said, referring to one of her numerous dinner parties. “I couldn’t expect anyone else——”

This “freakish man” was a friend of my husband, Lucas Barry; Adèle had lately collected him for her affairs, I never shall know why, nor why he accepted her invitation—it must have been one of those “mysterious strokes of fate” of which we hear so much.

“That isn’t fair,” I said. “He’ll hate her—he doesn’t like women anyhow——”

“Just why he’s got to put up with Rose Dalton—he’ll probably be rude——”

“Well, let him be rude to someone who can answer back——”

“I’m not going to have someone who matters insulted in my house,” smiled Adèle, who prided herself on her social tact.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter if he insults Miss Dalton?”

“Of course not,” said Adèle cheerfully. “She doesn’t mind a bit—it’s part of her job—she’s extremely sensible.”

I went off at a tangent.

“ If you think he is going to insult people why on earth do you ask him ? ”

“ Well, I *like* him, and he is one of those rather exotic, out-of-the-way celebrities that one is glad to get hold of nowadays when everything is so overdone.”

That was one way of describing Lucas Barry, perhaps not a bad one.

He had a great deal of money, an unattractive person, rugged, harsh and uncouth, a stinging contempt for most of the world, and a passion and a genius for old music.

He was now about forty-five and had achieved, as Adèle said, a choice kind of fame (to which he was unaffectedly indifferent) as a collector of ancient musical instruments and MSS., and a composer of delicious melodies in the antique manner.

When he deigned to give a concert there was a struggle for tickets; as a rule he performed only to his few (very few) friends.

I never knew anyone so absorbed in one subject and so contemptuous of all others; his expert knowledge, his exquisite taste, his loving enthusiasm for this one subject was equalled by his ferocious disdain for everything in the world.

He had collected, with infinite labour, a set of all those queer instruments you may see in the altar pieces of Van Eyck and the early Italians—viol, tabor, sackbut, organ, and so on—and he really did perform on all of them with a divine purity and sweetness.

His collection of MSS. music was the most

perfect in the world—and he had been all over the world to get his treasures.

For anything after the early eighteenth century he felt a kind of fury—the piano was an object of his keenest detestation.

And Rose Dalton knew nothing whatever about any kind of music.

“She plays the piano a little,” said Adèle maliciously.

Our house being one of those that Lucas Barry condescended to visit, I had an opportunity of seeing him before the date of the dinner party.

“Why in the world do you want to go to Lady French?” I asked. “You’ve always stood out against that kind of thing.”

“I know. No doubt she’ll get a lot of fools together——”

“And not your sort of fools. Don’t go.”

He was, for him, in a soft mood, and his reply astonished me.

“I’ve been getting so confoundedly bored with myself lately—I’m taking to going about to try and forget myself.”

“You of all people! You were always so desperately self-centred and self-satisfied, Lucas.”

“Well, I’m not now,” he said crossly. “I don’t see much sense in it all, really—it’s hardly good enough.”

“What is hardly good enough?”

“Life,” he sneered.

It was Rose Dalton’s confession put in other

words; he was savage, where she was resigned, but it came to the same thing—queer!

“Don’t go about to make yourself hateful—to bait people,” I said.

“People shouldn’t ask me,” he retorted sourly yet somehow wistfully.

I tried to find out what was the matter; he honestly didn’t know—just this emptiness, this lack of the sense of “worth-whileness.”

“I’m writing a thing now,” he confessed. “‘Prelude’ I call it—I can’t get it finished. ‘Prelude!’ That’s about all there is for all of us—a ‘*Prelude*’ and the damned performance never begins.”

I thought him pitiful as he said this; nothing so pathetic as the coarse, rude, unpleasant creature in trouble.

I didn’t find him pathetic the evening of Adèle’s dinner.

He had, obviously, come prepared to be odious; his evening clothes were atrocious, his face was red, lined, profoundly disagreeable, his voice gruff, his answers fierce; Adèle whispered that he was going to be “most amusing.”

I hoped so—but hardly “most amusing” for Miss Dalton, in her quality of butt.

She did not very often come to Adèle’s parties—not being ornamental enough, and her dress was of the kind that costs too little and is kept too long—and black—for safety.

What is worse than a safe, useful black dress? And hers didn’t fit very well and the sleeves

were an unbecoming length—just above the middle of the arm—which women who possess elbows should never wear.

She had been working till late and her hair had been done up in a hurry—there was nothing to soften her haphazard profile and her very ordinary complexion—she even displayed a shiny nose.

Never had I known before how plain she could look.

She accepted Lucas Barry with meek passivity, as she accepted every part of her day's routine. She didn't, I think, notice him very much.

He took her in with a glance that was like a growl, and they began their meal in a silence of masculine sullenness and feminine resignation.

His audible comments about the food delighted Adèle—and all the guests with the exception of the woman on Barry's left, and she discreetly kept her attention fixed on her other neighbour.

Rose Dalton became distressed; the rudeness of Barry embarrassed her orthodox training, she began to endeavour to stop his fliers by engaging him in conventional dinner-table talk.

She felt, no doubt (poor soul), that this was what she was there for, and she tried, gallantly enough, to perform her duty to her employer.

With a bright placidity that covered a complete indifference she began:

“You're very interested in music, aren't you, Mr. Barry?”

He led her on.

“Yes, I'm interested.”

I was opposite and pretended to be talking to my partner—but I was really listening to this little conversation, and so, I think, was everyone else.

The leer of the intellectual about to destroy the fool further disfigured Barry's unprepossessing countenance. I could swear that he was positively licking his lips over the prospect of the fate she was so guilelessly inviting.

"I'm afraid I'm very ignorant——" The conventional remark came out pat.

"I daresay you are." He wanted her to commit herself further.

"I took up music a little once——"

"Ah, you did?"

If only I could have saved her—given her a hint! I felt that I hated Adèle, who was enjoying it all covertly and unmistakably.

"But I always detested the piano." Miss Dalton's voice, pure, ordinary, came out roundly on the extraordinary remark. "I think there must be something much finer—one feels that, don't you think?"

Had she been primed? Adèle had sworn she knew nothing of the man and I had no chance of warning her.

"I suppose you know all about me?" he said ungraciously

Miss Dalton blushed and answered, not without dignity

"I'm afraid I don't, Mr. Barry—I go out very little—I only know you are a famous musician, not,

I hope, a performer on the piano—I should say,” she amended, “a pianist.”

Barry chuckled; her sincerity was obvious, so, I thought, tingling, was her stupidity, she was doing herself less than justice, and mentally I blamed Adèle for allowing her secretary to be so shut away that she became rusty and blundering.

In common fairness Rose Dalton should either be ignored altogether, or given a chance to learn the manners of Adèle’s set.

Through the fragile lilt of the lowered voices round the table I caught Barry’s tones (*not* lowered) again.

“No, I don’t play the piano—you won’t have ever heard of the instruments I do play or perform on, as you call it——”

“I should like to,” she answered, adding, startingly enough, “I think I’ve often wanted to hear that kind of music—I’ve got a copy of the angels from ‘The Holy Lamb’ and I’ve often thought that I should like to hear what they are singing. I read somewhere that you could tell the notes from the way their mouths are shaped.”

Lucas Barry stared at her.

“Oh, you did, did you?” he snapped, and then lapsed into a silence from which Miss Dalton, in placid resignation, made no effort to rouse him; I thought, not without spite, that Adèle was disappointed of her baiting of the great man.

After dinner he spoke to me.

“Who was the woman next me? Very plain, very plain-looking indeed,” he said crossly.

"Lady French's secretary—I like her—really a great deal."

"Just what she would be," he remarked rudely. "Anyone who would be secretary to Lady French——"

I drifted away not to be his accomplice in the discussion and managed to find myself by Rose Dalton.

"I'm afraid you found your neighbour rather dreadful," I sympathized.

"Yes, a horrid man," she agreed quietly, "and so ugly, too."

So that was that, so what was I to think when Lucas Barry, two days after, telephoned to me and asked me in his abrupt manner if I could bring Rose Dalton round to his place to tea?

"I suppose," came his grumbling voice, "she's the kind that has to have a chaperone, the ugly kind always do——"

I tried to take the preposterous thing casually.

"I'll bring her if she cares to come."

As I knew that no one save the very oldest and choicest friends were ever permitted across Lucas Barry's threshold—and *never* an odd woman—I was frankly amazed, but tried, of course, to be casual with Rose Dalton.

She accepted, with a rather pathetic flush of pleasure; she did not often receive even a dull invitation.

Lucas Barry had been heard to say of a young cherry tree in April that it was "*very pretty indeed*," and of the Resurrection—that "*it wasn't very*

likely," without any thought of the connection between the two or any consideration for the millions who had moralized, rhapsodized and preached about both the bursting of the blossom from the dry stick and the rising of the body from the grave—he just dismissed both with the same kind of comment.

That was the kind of man he was.

Yet on the matter of medieval music he seemed inspired.

His whole house was a setting, a shrine for this one delight of his days.

The sombre richness of the music-room was itself like a chord of music, pure early Gothic, with sharp blues and reds colouring the bosses of the beams, a delicious gilt organ, a winged Flemish altar piece, gleaming like enamel, several high "prie-Dieu" with MS. music on vellum with gorgeous covers, some fourteenth century glass in the window, and in the shadows of the dark walls other musical instruments, curious, lovely, unique.

It wasn't a fake or a sham or an affectation, it was a passionate, almost desperate effort to re-create something lost—nearly lost—something that Lucas Barry had missed—or nearly missed.

He sneered at reincarnation and race memory, but he had said once, with savage wistfulness: "This isn't my age."

Rose Dalton had not been able to come with me—her leisure was scanty, she said she would meet me there, and then was late, so that I was alone with Lucas Barry a little before she came.

He seemed depressed—he had heard of a “find” in Spain—some fourteenth century Masses richly illuminated, but somehow couldn’t bother to go and investigate them for himself; it was the first time I had heard a hint of weariness in his passion.

“Lucas—you’re not getting stale?”

“I don’t know. What’s the use of it all?” he answered snappishly.

The ghastly “*a quoi bon?*” echoed in the room, the demon of boredom must have uttered the horrible sentence.

Then Rose Dalton came in.

It was the end of the season and she was fagged; it was a hot day and she had been hurrying; she was both, therefore, tired and flushed, and her clothes had the “put on at the last minute” look. I saw, too, that she was nervous and ill at ease—this my instant impression—a badly dressed, plain, bloused, tired woman, embarrassed and awkward.

It vanished instantly.

She became self-assured, radiant.

“I’ve been here before, in a dream,” she said, and took no notice of either of us.

Above the door was an angel with crimped hair and a robe full of broken folds, carved out of a log of firewood hundreds of years ago; she looked up at this and her face was rapt.

“Dear me,” she said, “dear me——”

“Haven’t you seen that kind of thing before?” asked Barry harshly.

She looked round the room.

“Not all together—sometimes, long ago, in museums,” she answered simply, “something——”

No, I didn't suppose that either as a nursery governess to ordinary people, or as a secretary to ordinary people, there had been much time even for museums.

She had seen the organ now.

“Oh, dear,” she said again.

He made her sit down; she took off her gloves and kept looking round the room smiling; before tea was over I actually began to feel in the way.

These two had a common meeting ground; as I watched them I realized how rare that is—how we “descend to meet” and talk nonsense to cover up our lack of interest in each other.

But these two were interested; he told her the history of some of his treasures, brought them out one by one for her inspection; you would have thought, from her admiration, that she had been waiting all her life to see these things.

Perhaps she had.

She fingered the old ivory-coloured leaves of vellum with the pale gold plaques in the initials and the long sepia-coloured notes as if she reverently greeted old friends, and she looked at those queer, rare old instruments with eyes that glowed with joy.

At last he played to her, his clumsy figure huddled in front of the angelic little organ. He asked her to sing; she did, reading over his shoulder an old, old setting of Arcadelt's *Ave Maria*, spelling out the Latin diffidently.

She knew just enough music to teach children,

no more, but she sang now with a pure certainty, a delicious precision, as if at last she was speaking her own language.

I came away and left them.

But I could not resist ringing up Lucas Barry that evening, and asking fatuously enough, "how he liked Miss Dalton."

"She's coming with me to Spain to look up those MSS.," he answered, adding (I'm sure with a grin), "I suppose I'll have to marry her."

Adèle French refused to see anything out of the way in it. "They just fell in love with each other, the most unlikely people do," she declared.

Someone else commented:

"He wanted a disciple—she wanted a home, she's played up to him very cleverly."

Rose Dalton said very little; she seemed completely satisfied.

"It is what I've been looking for all my life," she told me, "that old music."

Lucas Barry finished his "Prelude"; he played it to me the last time I saw him before his marriage; it ended on a triumphal note.

"That's that," he commented. "Now the show's going to begin."

She said much the same.

"I feel as if life had begun to-day."

Yet I'll swear they weren't "in love" with each other—only somehow, the emptiness was gone, it was all suddenly worth while—everything up to then had been only a prelude.

They were crazily happy, so happy that other people found them bores.

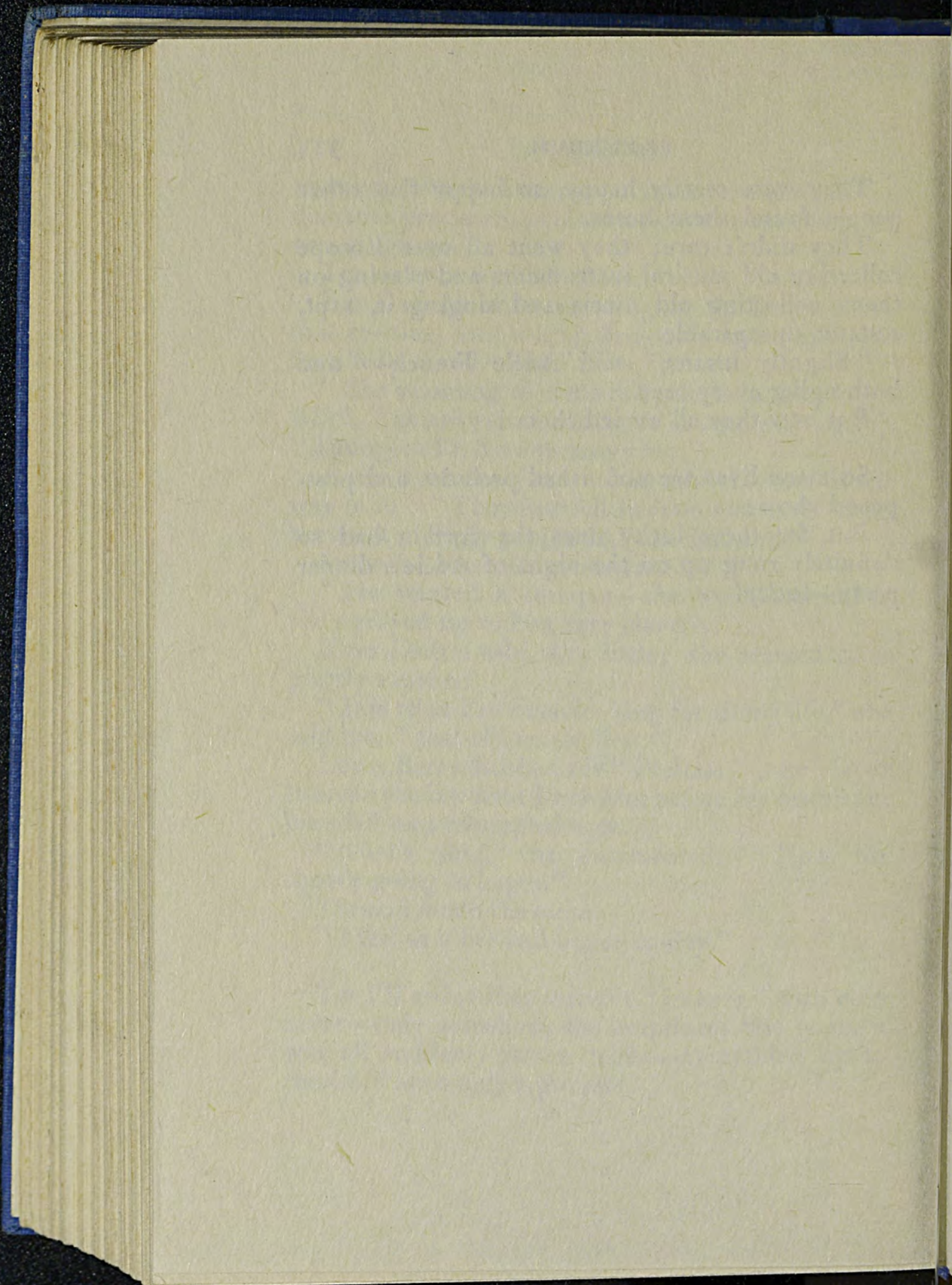
They didn't care; they went all over Europe collecting old musical instruments and playing on them, collecting old music and singing it, rapt, ecstatic, inseparable.

"Slightly insane," said Adèle French—"and both uglier every year."

But how they all envied them !

So many lives are unfinished preludes and postponed shows. . . .

But for these lucky ones the curtain had so definitely rung up on the night of Adèle's dinner party—lucky!



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UN PEU D'AMOUR

SHE had persuaded herself that she had not been happy in her marriage; an unfortunate matrimonial experience excused so much—especially in her own eyes.

It is a great thing to be able to do what you like and retain your self-respect; wonderful is the art of make-believe by which the sensitive (whom it would be harsh to call hypocrites) reconcile conscience and inclination.

She had plenty of money, which, if it would not buy happiness, in the words of the truism, at least gave her opportunity to consider the delicate problem of her lack of complete felicity.

She would have liked—as who would not?—a succession of romantic, exquisite love affairs; she would have liked to have hovered between earth and heaven in a delicious sensuous dream heightened by the thrill of an exotic spirituality, but the right partner for the dual adventure was hard to discover.

He who had leisure too often lacked refinement; he who was exquisite in his passions had too often to earn his living; and he who was neither gross nor occupied was too often in love with another woman, or, at least, not with her melancholy charm.

By forty-five she had discovered that a *grande passion* is as difficult (in the vulgar speech) to “land”

as a wealthy husband; the fishing as tiresome, the disappointment as bitter.

Her life became a flavourless languor; she began to blame the passing of the years for her failure: "Do men care for anything but youth?"

She was still lovely, with an impeccable taste in dress; she, ignoring fashion, clothed herself in veils of heavy lace, in faded colours, faint raspberry, tarnished silver, honey-yellow, dim blues and violets in muted tones with a peach-like bloom; she was singularly graceful and, despite her deep discontent, of a restful presence.

This year she met Rupert Lestrangle, and he speedily became the focus of her desperate ambitions—*un peu d'amour*—yes, the ancient verse lilted in her head:

La vie est brève
Un peu d'espoir
Un peu de rêve
Et puis—bon soir,

with melancholy cadence, false, of course, to most people, but true to her mood and condition.

Lestrangle was a poet—poor, eccentric, rather friendless; if only he would love her there would be nothing to interfere with their delight in each other.

Nothing.

If only . . .

She, Constance Finlay, sighed over the laggard spirit of men; he liked her, he found her fascinating—he never told her (in any fashion) that he loved her; and she felt as if this would be the last spring

that she, poor waiting wretch, would herself be capable of love.

One must stop—one must grow old, one must come, at last, to that spring which would be nothing but a renewal of green on the green, a scattering of flowers on the earth and a brave radiant light in the heavens.

He also was not so young (though younger than she). Could he not see the inestimable beauty of this neglected season?

She left London and lived in her austere purplish brick house, four square, reserved, plain, with the spacious walled garden and the sunk lily pond, and the date of a hundred and fifty years ago above the porticoed door.

The setting was delicious; a tardy spring gave a choiceness to the first timid blooms; a vague mildness was in the air; behind fine veils of lavender mist the sun sparkled with an indrawn splendour; beyond the garden, the copses on the dim downs were flushed with gold and purple; in the garden the clustering succulent bells of hyacinth showed above the damp earth—rosy pink, deep blue, creamy white, and groups of small leaves and buds in bouquets and single file, vivid, tender, in the long beds of freshly-turned mould.

Here, on the black crooked boughs of the damson trees was a sprinkle of clear white blossom, and on the brick wall appeared the fleshy flower of the peach.

The setting was delicious—so soft, so alluring, so transient.

She asked him to come—to stay, anywhere—near, it was so close to London; she would not have been there if it had not been; London had become too sombre and dingy a background for her frail romance; yet she would have endured it, if this most exquisite of retreats had not been so near.

He wrote—but seldom.

He came—but seldom.

He talked of his work ; she was not unintelligent, but she did not care for playing Egeria save as a prelude to a satisfying rôle; the spring so evanescent, so exquisite, was waning into the blatancy of summer. Constance Finlay began to droop in the languor of despair.

She saw ahead flat days, like a string of tired horses, one behind the other, dragging the dull burden of Time (her Time) to an unlamented end—the death of an old, unloved woman—the fireside, the bedside, the lawyer, the doctor, and no memories to dispel the tedium of the end of all things for Constance Finlay.

La vie est vaine
Un peu d'amour
Un peu de peine
Et puis—bon jour!

Well, if she could only have that, only that—
“un peu d'amour” . . .

Not too late, surely; ah, surely not too late! Her mirror framed a gracious reflection still; but she had not the courage to put it in a cruel light.

Then his letter—

“ May I come? I have something really important to say. I don't know how I shall find the courage, but you are such an understanding creature——”

She took the letter under the weeping willow, now elegantly strewn with golden buds down the streaming length of the slender boughs; she re-read it in sweet solitude.

She dallied with her delight; she mused long under the veils of the willow, silent amid the noisy music of spring birds.

His meagre lodgings had no telephone: her quickest message must go by wire:

“ Of course. Come,” it ran.

He did not come.

For two days she waited, with emotions too muted and suspended, like a high, yet hushed note of music.

La vie est telle
Que Dieu la fit
Et telle quelle—elle suffit!

In gowns always fresh, trailing and delicate, she waited in the walled garden where the sun was, every hour, melting the austerity of the chill spring.

She had scarcely disturbed her dream sufficiently to make the resolution that she must write to him, when he came.

She was standing by the bed of hyacinths, so choice, so rich with perfume, when he opened the gate.

She was acutely conscious of a deliberate change in all her surroundings; the sun became more vivid, the grass and trees more vivid, every object more radiant, in the same manner as a lamp, suddenly turned up, will dispel the shadow that has obscured the chamber.

He came in reluctantly; she saw that he had been wrought on by vast emotion and trembled to the edge of her own self-control.

"You got my letter?" His voice was hoarse as if he had not spoken for a long time.

Their hands touched.

"Your letter?"

"Yes. I thought that it would be so much easier to write—and then come for your answer."

"I got a letter two days ago. This is the third day. Just to ask if you could come. I wired at once—'Of course—come.'"

"I know. I got that. I wrote again. Yesterday."

They had walked (drifted, it seemed) across the sward, close packed with beheaded daisies, to the willow tree.

"I didn't get that."

"You didn't?" He was perturbed, incredulous.

"I thought—I was sure——"

"You missed the post." She was serene, confident in destiny. "It will come this afternoon; we are rather out of the way for the post."

"I see——" He seemed amazed at the cross-grainedness of fortune. "I should never have come if I hadn't been sure that you would have had that letter."

"It cost—something—an effort—to write?"

"A great effort."

Feminine dislike of timidity in a lover held her silent; why couldn't he be triumphant about what was wholly a triumphant matter?

He continued, struggling with an infinite reluctance.

"I don't think I could ever tell you what I put in that letter——"

Couldn't he? She gave a sigh for the inarticulateness of the Northern male. Still, she would have the letter.

Meanwhile she must encourage him.

"There is nothing you need mind telling me."

"Isn't there?" He spoke with that impetuous vigour, that so delighted her, with spontaneous grace. "I wish that I could be quite sure of that."

"I wish you could be."

They sat down on the cinder-coloured seat under the willow; a double ring of grape hyacinths were pushing up through the grass.

She looked at his hand, lying negligently beside her; she had always considered his hand beautiful.

She noticed his cuff; her glance travelled furtively over his attire.

The thought of his poverty stung at her nerves

with bitter poignancy; he had good reason for his hesitancy; he was so poor, probably even more desperately poor than she realized.

Lazy, thriftless, too, of course.

But what did these qualities matter in a lover?

If only he could forget these things and love her, while there was time, before the lights went out—
“un peu d'amour” . . .

Her voice thrilled with self-pity as she spoke.

“I wish that I could persuade you that all this is wasting time. Yes, really wasting time. Haven't we always understood each other?”

“Yes, I know, we have been the best of friends—but this—there are some things so difficult to put into words—the presumption—I don't know how I dared——”

His handsome eyes avoided her intent and reassuring gaze; he pulled at the long, thin boughs of the willow and nervously stripped off the green-gold buds.

She looked at these as they lay on the grass.

“Tell me—tell me——”

“I'd rather that you read the letter.”

She was going to insist on his speech when the postman came; Lestrangle remained with his face in his hands, his elbows on his knees, while she went to fetch the letters.

“How he loves me,” she thought, unsteadily.

She sorted his letter from the others and read it as she stood on the lawn.

It contained only three lines.

When she had read these she looked to where he

sat, hidden by the veil of the willow, his face still concealed by his shaking hands.

She went into the house, to her desk, and drew out her cheque book.

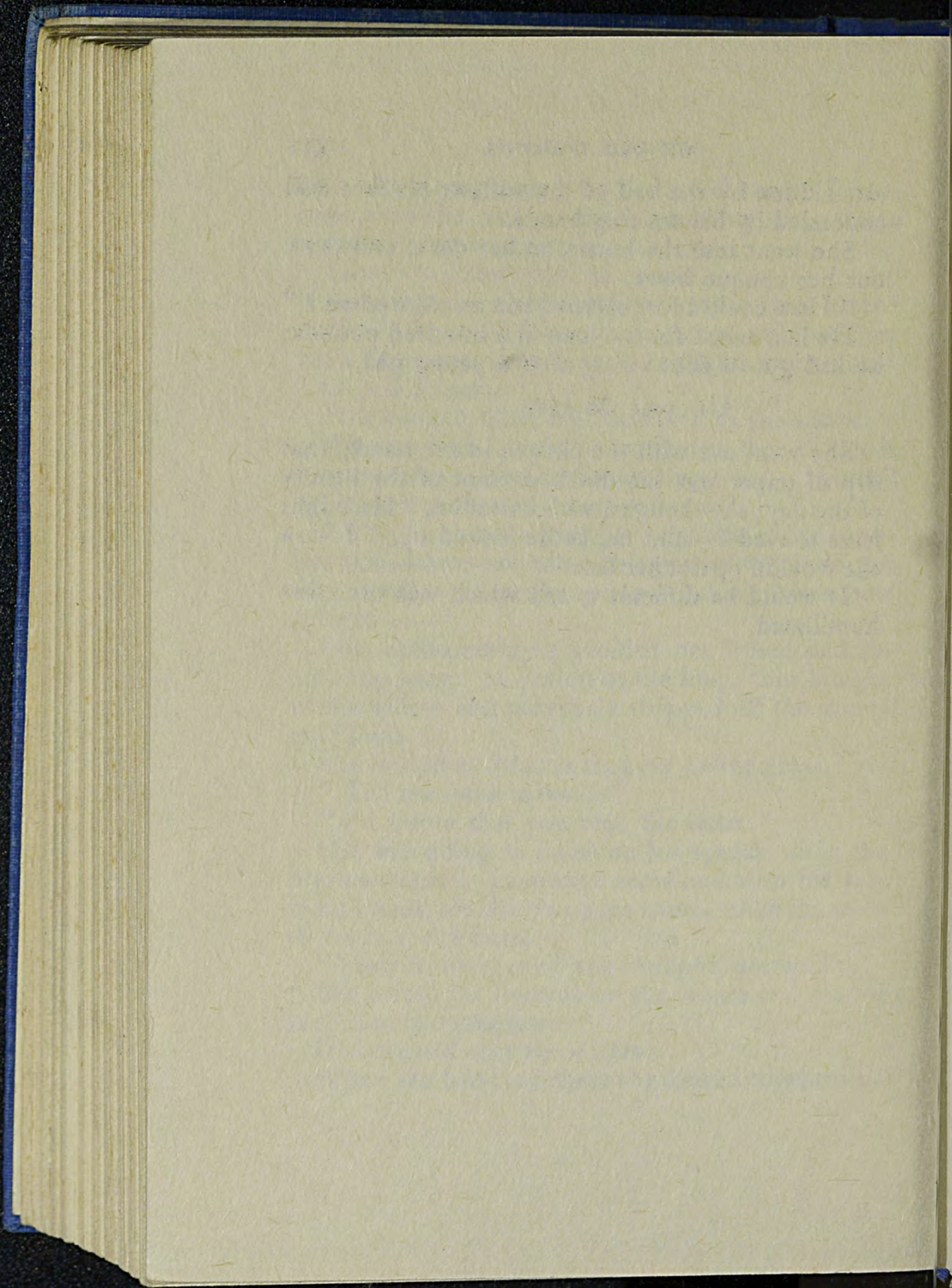
“How could I forget that I was an old woman?”

He had asked for the loan of a hundred pounds; he had got in debt idling after a young girl.

Un peu de rêve . . .

She went out with the cheque in her hand; that slip of paper was the death-warrant of the beauty of the day; she thought, with irritation, “He might have shaved”—and he, as he looked up, “I wish she wouldn't paint her face.”

It would be difficult to tell which was the more humiliated.



A PERSISTENT WOMAN

TEMPLE, exhausted, resolved to leave his wife; their atrocious quarrels were killing him; he was still shaken by the furies of this morning's disagreement when he returned home with bitter reluctance; difficult to get free of Sarah, but it must be done; Temple was resolved.

She met him in the sombre lane that led to their house, and clung to his arm in silence; she was repentant, no doubt, but Temple would not relent; he was mute and tried to shake her off, but she clung with great tenacity.

When they reached their home he found it full of commotion; out of a phantasmagoria someone told him that his wife had been discovered in the pond—"Suicide, poor thing!" and his brother whispered: "You're free."

But Temple grinned at the spiteful shape hugging his arm and knew he never could be free from Sarah.

A. F. ...

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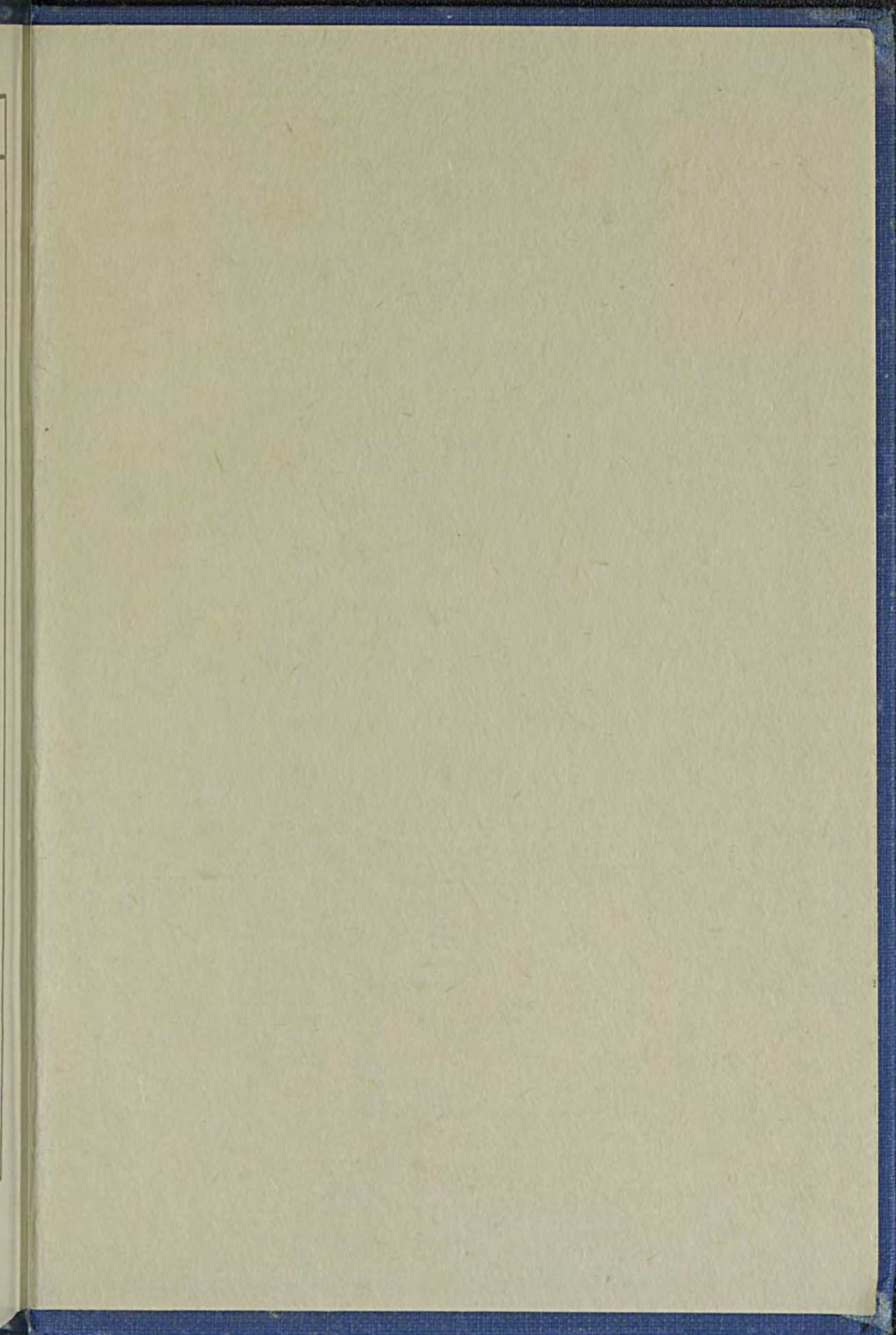
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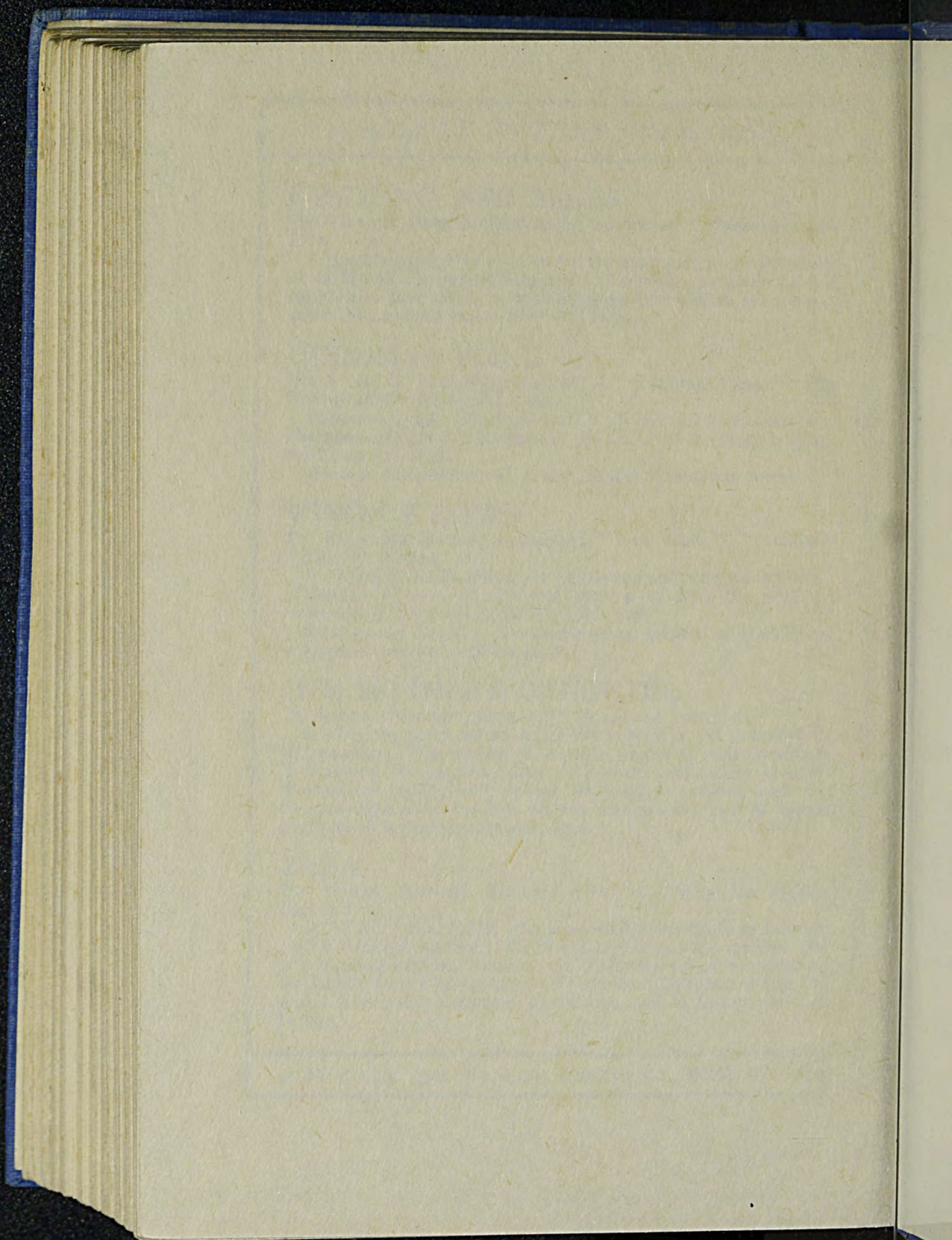
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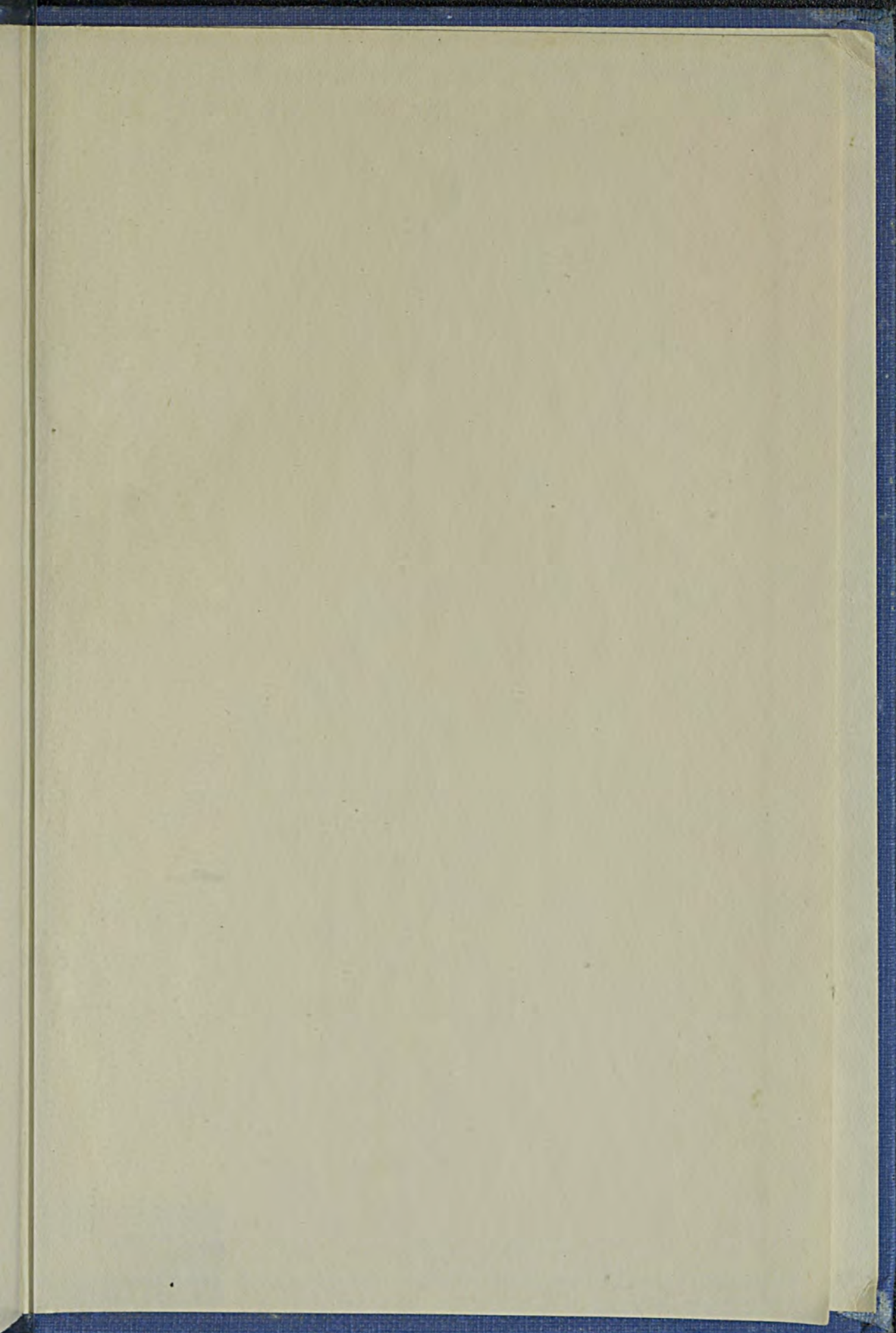
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