The Cords of Vanity

James Branch Cabell et al

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THE CORDS OF VANITY

A Comedy of Shirking

Revised and Expanded Edition

by JAMES BRANCH CABELL

with INTRODUCTION by WILSON FOLLETT

To

GABRIELLE BROOKE MONCURE

Plus sapit vulgus, quia tantum, quantum opus est, sapit.

AN INTRODUCTION

by Wilson Follett

Mr. Cabell, in making ready this second or intended edition of THE CORDS OF VANITY, performs an act of reclamation which is at the same time an act of fresh creation.

For the purely reclamatory aspect of what he has done, his reward (so far as that can consist in anything save the doing) must come from insignificantly few directions; so few indeed that he, with a wrily humorous exaggeration, affects to believe them singular. The author of this novel has been pleased to describe the author of this introduction as "the only known purchaser of the book" and, further, as "the other person to own a CORDS OF VANITY". I could readily enough acquit myself, with good sound legal proofs, of any such singularity as stands charged in this soft impeachment--and that without appeal to _The Cleveland Plain Dealer_ of eleven years ago ("slushy and disgusting"), or to _The New York Post_ ("sterile and malodorous ... worse than immoral--dull"), or to _Ainslee's Magazine_ ("inconsequent and rambling ... rather nauseating at times"). These devotees of the adjective that hunts in pairs are hardly to be discussed, I suppose, in connection with any rewards except such as accrue to the possessors of a certain obtuseness, who always and infallibly reap at least the reward of not being hurt by what they do not know--or, for that matter, by what they do know. He who writes such a book as THE CORDS OF VANITY is committing himself to the supremely irrational faith that this dullness is somehow not the ultimate arbiter; and for him the pronouncements of this dullness simply do not figure among either his rewards or his penalties. So, it is not exactly to these tributes of the press that one reverts in noting that THE CORDS OF VANITY, on its publication eleven years ago, promptly became a book which there were--almost--none to praise and very few to love. After all, its author's computation of that former audience of his--his actual individual voluntary readers of a decade ago--appears to be but

slightly and pardonably exaggerated on the more modest side of the fact. If there were a Cabell Club of membership determined solely by the number of those who, already possessing THE CORDS OF VANITY in its first edition, recognize it as the work of a serious artist of high achievement and higher capacity, I suspect that the smallness of that club would be in inordinate disproportion to everything but its selectness and its members' pride in "belonging".

Be that as it may, the economist-author, on the eve of his book's emergence from the limbo of "out of print", prefers that it come into its redemption carrying a foreword by someone who knew it without dislike in its former incarnation. No contingent liability, it seems, can dissuade Mr. Cabell from this preference. An author who once elected to precede a group of his best tales with an introduction eloquently setting forth reasons why the collection ought not to be published at all, is hardly to be deterred now by the mere inexpediency of hitching his star to a farm-wagon. His own graciously unreasonable insistence must be the excuse, such as it is, for the present introduction, such as it is. If there may be said to exist a sort of charter membership in Mr. Cabell's audience, this document is to be construed as representing its very enthusiastic welcome to the later and vastly larger elective membership.

And if, weighed as such a welcome, it proves hopelessly inadequate, at least it provides a number of possible compensations by the way. For instance, that _New York World_ critic who damned the book but praised its frontispiece of 1909, has now a uniquely pat opportunity to balance his ledger by praising the book and damning this foreword, which, more or less, replaces the frontispiece. Similarly, the more renowned critic and anthologist who so well knows the "originals" of the verses in _From the Hidden Way_, can now render poetically perfect justice to all who will care by perceiving that both the earlier edition of this book and the author of this foreword are but figments of Mr. Cabell's slightly puckish invention.

But these pages must not be, like those which follow, a comedy of shirking. They will have flouted a plain duty unless they speak of the sense and the degree in which this novel, during the process of reclaiming it, has been actually recreated. Perhaps the matter can be packed most succinctly into the statement that Mr. Cabell's hero has been subjected to such a process of growth as has made him commensurate in stature with the other two modern writers of Mr. Cabell's invention. As _The Cream of the Jest_ is essentially the book of Felix Kennaston and _Beyond Life_ that of John Charteris, so THE CORDS OF VANITY is essentially the book of Robert Etheridge Townsend. Now, this Townsend has accomplished a deal of growing since 1909. By this I do not mean that he is taken at a later period of his own imagined life, or that he fails to act consonantly with the extreme youth imputed to him: I mean that he is the creation of a more mature mind, a deeper philosophy, a more probing insight into the implications of things. A given youth of twenty-five will be very differently interpreted by an observer of thirty and by the same observer at forty, very much as a given era of the past will be understood differently by a single historian before and after certain cycles of his own social and political experience. The past never remains to us the same past; it grows up along with us; the physical facts may remain admittedly the same, but our understanding accents them differently, finds more in them at some points and less at others. So Robert Etheridge Townsend remains an example of that

special temperament which, being unable to endure the contact of unhappiness, consistently shirks every responsibility that entails or threatens discomfort; and the truth about him, taking him as an example of just that temperament, is still inexorably told. But his weakness as a man becomes much more tolerable in this second version, because it is much more intimately and poignantly correlated with his strength as an artist. One is made to feel that he, like Charteris, may the better consummate in his art the auctorial virtues of distinction and clarity, beauty and symmetry, tenderness and truth and urbanity, precisely because his personal life is bereft of those virtues. Less than before, the accent is on the wastrel in Townsend; more than before, it is on the potential creator of beauty in him. The earlier readers will hardly count it as a fault that Mr. Cabell has contrived to make his novel, without detriment to any truth whatsoever, a far less unpleasant book. Sardonic it still is, by a necessary implication, but not wantonly, and with a mellowness. The irony, which at its harshest was capable of rasping the nerves, has become capable of wringing the heart.

Other reasons there are, too, for holding that THE CORDS OF VANITY is certain to make its second appeal to a many times multiplied audience. Since divers momentous transactions of the years just gone, the whole world stands in a moral position extraordinarily well adapted to the comprehension of just such a comedy of shirking; and especially the world of thought has received a powerful impulsion toward the area long occupied by Mr. Cabell's romantic pessimism. There is perhaps somewhat more demand for satire, or at least a growing toleration of it. Moreover, by sheer patience and reiteration Mr. Cabell has procured no little currency for some of his most characteristic ideas. Chivalry and gallantry, as he analyzes them, are concepts which play their part in the inevitable present re-editing of social and literary history. _The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck_, _The Cream of the Jest_, and _The Certain Hour_ have somewhat to say to the discriminating, even on other than purely aesthetic grounds; _Beyond Life_ is on the threshold of its day as the _Sartor Resartus_ of one side, the aesthetic side, of modernism;

"_Of_ Jurgen _eke they maken mencion";_

and THE CORDS OF VANITY is but the first of the earlier books to be reissued in the format of the uniform and accessible Intended Edition.

While THE CORDS OF VANITY was out of print, a fresh copy is known to have been acquired for twenty-five cents. Copies of a more recent work by the same hand--a tale which has been rendered equally unavailable to the public, though by slightly different considerations--have fetched as much as one hundred times that sum. This arithmetic may be, in part, the gauge of an unsought and distasteful notoriety; but that very notoriety, by the most natural of transitions, will lead the curious on from what cannot be obtained to what can, and some who have begun by seeking one particular work of a great artist will end by discovering the artist. In short, it is rational to expect that the fortunes hereafter of this rewritten novel will very excellently illustrate the uses of adversity.

Not, I repeat, that any great part of the reward for such writing can come from without. According to Robert Etheridge Townsend, "a man writes admirable prose not at all for the sake of having it read, but for the more sensible reason that he enjoys playing solitaire"--a not

un-Cabellian saying. And, even of the reward from without, it may be questioned whether the really indispensable part ever comes from the multitude. A lady with whose more candid opinions the writer of this is more frequently favored nowadays than of old has said: "Every time I hear of somebody who has wanted one of these books without being able to get it, or who, having got it, has conceded it nothing better than the disdain of an ignoramus, I feel as if I must forthwith get out the copy and read it through again and again, until I have read it once for every person who has rejected it or been denied it." One may feel reasonably sure that it is this kind of solicitude, rather than any possible sanction from the crowd, which would be thought of by the author of this book as "the exact high prize through desire of which we write".

WILSON FOLLETT.

CHESHIRE, CONNECTICUT

May, 1920

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THE PROLOGUE

"In the house and garden of his dream he saw a child moving, and could divide the main streams at least of the winds that had played on him, and study so the first stage in that mental journey."

The Prologue: Which Deals with the Essentials

1--Writing

It appeared to me that my circumstances clamored for betterment, because never in my life have I been able to endure the contact of unhappiness. And my mother was always crying now, over (though I did not know it) the luckiest chance which had ever befallen her; and that made me cry too, without understanding exactly why.

So the child, that then was I, procured a pencil and a bit of wrapping-paper, and began to write laboriously:

"DEAR LORD

"You know that Papa died and please comfort Mama
and give Father a crown of Glory Ammen

"Your lamb and very sincerely yours

"ROBERT ETHERIDGE TOWNSEND."

This appeared to the point as I re-read it, and of course God would understand that children were not expected to write quite as straight across the paper as grown people. The one problem was how to deliver this, my first letter, most expeditiously, because when your mother cried you always cried too, and couldn't stop, not even when you wanted to, not even when she promised you five cents, and it all made you horribly uncomfortable.

I knew that the big Bible on the parlor table was God's book. Probably God read it very often, since anybody would be proud of having written a book as big as that and would want to look at it every day. So I tiptoed into the darkened parlor. I use the word advisedly, for there was not at this period any drawing-room in Lichfield, and besides, a drawing-room is an entirely different matter.

Everywhere the room was cool, and, since the shades were down, the outlines of the room's contents were uncomfortably dubious; for just where the table stood had been, five days ago, a big and oddly-shaped black box with beautiful silver handles; and Uncle George had lifted me so that I could see through the pane of glass, which was a part of this funny box, while an infinity of decorous people rustled and whispered....

I remember knowing they were "company" and thinking they coughed and sniffed because they were sorry that my father was dead. In the light of knowledge latterly acquired, I attribute these actions to the then prevalent weather, for even now I recall how stiflingly the room smelt of flowers--particularly of magnolia blossoms--and of rubber and of wet umbrellas. For my own part, I was not at all sorry, though of course I pretended to be, since I had always known that as a rule my father whipped me because he had just quarreled with my mother, and that he then enjoyed whipping me.

I desired, in fine, that he should stay dead and possess his crown of glory in Heaven, which was reassuringly remote, and that my mother should stop crying. So I slipped my note into the Apocrypha....

I felt that somewhere in the room was God and that God was watching me, but I was not afraid. Yet I entertained, in common with most children, a nebulous distrust of this mysterious Person, a distrust of which I was particularly conscious on winter nights when the gas had been turned down to a blue fleck, and the shadow of the mantelpiece flickered and plunged on the ceiling, and the clock ticked louder and louder, in prediction (I suspected) of some terrible event very close at hand.

Then you remembered such unpleasant matters as Elisha and his bears, and those poor Egyptian children who had never even spoken to Moses, and that uncomfortably abstemious lady, in the fat blue-covered _Arabian Nights_, who ate nothing but rice, grain by grain--in the daytime.... And you called Mammy, and said you were very thirsty and wanted a glass of water, please.

To-day, though, while acutely conscious of that awful inspection, and painstakingly careful not to look behind me, I was not, after all, precisely afraid. If God were a bit like other people I knew He would say, "What an odd child!" and I liked to have people say that. Still, there was sunlight in the hall, and lots of sunlight, not just long and dusty shreds of sunlight, and I felt more comfortable when I was back in the hall.

2--_Reading_

I lay flat upon my stomach, having found that posture most conformable to the practice of reading, and I considered the cover of this slim, green book; the name of John Charteris, stamped thereon in fat-bellied letters of gold, meant less to me than it was destined to signify thereafter.

A deal of puzzling matter I found in this book, but in my memory, always, one fantastic passage clung as a burr to sheep's wool. That fable, too, meant less to me than it was destined to signify thereafter, when the author of it was used to declare that he had, unwittingly, written it about me. Then I read again this

Fable of the Foolish Prince

"As to all earlier happenings I choose in this place to be silent. Anterior adventures he had known of the right princely sort. But concerning his traffic with Schamir, the chief talisman, and how through its aid he won to the Sun's Sister for a little while; and concerning his dealings with the handsome Troll-wife (in which affair the cat he bribed with butter and the elm-tree he had decked with ribbons helped him); and with that beautiful and dire Thuringian woman whose soul was a red mouse: we have in this place naught to do. Besides, the Foolish Prince had put aside such commerce when the Fairy came to guide him; so he, at least, could not in equity have grudged the same privilege to his historian.

"Thus, the Fairy leading, the Foolish Prince went skipping along his father's highway. But the road was bordered by so many wonders--as here a bright pebble and there an anemone, say, and, just beyond, a brook which babbled an entreaty to be tasted,--that many folk had presently overtaken and had passed the loitering Foolish Prince. First came a grandee, supine in his gilded coach, with half-shut eyes, uneagerly meditant upon yesterday's statecraft or to-morrow's gallantry; and now three yokels, with ruddy cheeks and much dust upon their shoulders; now a haggard man in black, who constantly glanced backward; and now a corporal with an empty sleeve, who whistled as he went.

"A butterfly guided every man of them along the highway. 'For the Lord of the Fields is a whimsical person,' said the Fairy,' and such is his very old enactment concerning the passage even of his cowpath; but princes each in his day and in his way may trample this domain as prompt their will and skill.'

"'That now is excellent hearing,' said the Foolish Prince; and he strutted.

"'Look you,' said the Fairy, 'a man does not often stumble and break his shins in the highway, but rather in the byway.'....

"Thus, the Fairy leading, the Foolish Prince went skipping on his allotted journey, though he paused once in a while to shake his bauble at the staring sun.

"'The stars,' he considered, 'are more sympathetic....

"And thus, the Fairy leading, they came at last to a tall hedge wherein were a hundred wickets, all being closed; and those who had passed the Foolish Prince disputed before the hedge and measured the hundred wickets with thirty-nine articles and with a variety of instruments, and each man entered at his chosen wicket, and a butterfly went before him; but no man returned into the open country.

"'Now beyond each wicket,' said the Fairy, 'lies a great crucible, and by ninety and nine of these crucibles is a man consumed, or else transmuted into this animal or that animal. For such is the law in these parts and in human hearts.'

"The Prince demanded how if one found by chance the hundredth wicket? But she shook her head and said that none of the Tylwydd Teg was permitted to enter the Disenchanted Garden. Rumor had it that within the Garden, beyond the crucibles, was a Tree, but whether the fruit of this Tree were sweet or bitter no person in the Fields could tell, nor did the Fairy pretend to know what happened in the Garden.

"'Then why, in heaven's name, need a man test any of these wickets?' cried the Foolish Prince; 'with so much to lose and, it may be, nothing to gain? For one, I shall enter none of them.'

"But once more she shook her glittering head. 'In your House and in your Sign it was decreed. Time will be, my Prince; to-day the kid gambols and the ox chews his cud. Presently the butcher cries, _Time is!_ Comes the hour and the power, and the cook bestirs herself and says, _Time was!_ The master has his dinner, either way, all say, and every day.'

"And the Fairy vanished as she talked with him, her radiances thinning into the neutral colors of smoke, and thence dwindling a little by a little into the vaulting spiral of a windless and a burnt-out fire, until nothing remained of her save her voice; and that was like the moving of dead leaves before they fall.

"'Truly,' said the Foolish Prince, 'I am compelled to consider this a vexatious business. For, look you, the butterfly I just now admire flits over this wicket, and then her twin flutters over that wicket, and between them there is absolutely no disparity in attraction. Hoo! here is a more sensible insect.'

"And he leaped and cracked his heels together and ran after a golden butterfly that drifted to the rearward Fields. There was such a host of butterflies about that presently he had lost track of his first choice, and was in boisterous pursuit of a second, and then of a third, and then of yet others; but none of them did he ever capture, the while that one by one he followed divers butterflies of varying colors, and never a golden butterfly did he find any more.

"When it was evening, the sky drew up the twilight from the east as a blotter draws up ink, and stars were kindling everywhere like tiny signal-fires, and a light wind came out of the murky east and rustled very plaintively in places where the more ambiguous shadows were; and the Foolish Prince shivered, for the air was growing chill, and the tips of his fingers were aware of it.

"'A crucible,' he reflected, 'possesses the minor virtue of continuous warmth.'

"And before the hedge he found a Rational Person, led hither by a Clothes' Moth, working out the problem of the hundred wickets in consonance with the most approved methods. 'I have very nearly solved it,' the Rational Person said, in genteel triumph, 'but this evening grows too dark for any further ciphering, and again I must wait until to-morrow. I regret, sir, that you have elected to waste the day, in pursuit of various meretricious Lepidoptera.'

"'A happy day, my brother, is never wasted."

"'That appears to me to be nonsense,' said the Rational Person; and he put up his portfolio, preparatory to spending another night under his umbrella in the Fields.

"'Indeed, my brother?' laughed the Foolish Prince. 'Then, farewell, for I am assured that yonder, as here, our father makes the laws, and that to dispute his appreciation of the enticing qualities of butterflies were an impertinence.'

"Thereafter, pushing open the wicket nearest to his hand, the Foolish Prince tucked his bauble under his left arm and skipped into the Disenchanted Garden; and as he went he sang, not noting that, from somewhere in the thickening shadows, had arisen a golden butterfly which went before him through the wicket.

"Sang the Foolish Prince:

"'Farewell to Fields and Butterflies
And levities of Yester-year!
For we espy, and hold more dear,
The Wicket of our Destinies.

"'Whereby we enter, once for all,
A Garden which such fruit doth yield
As, tasted once, no more Afield
We fare where Youth holds carnival.

"'Farewell, fair Fields, none found amiss
When laughter was a frequent noise
And golden-hearted girls and boys
Appraised the mouth they meant to kiss.

"'Farewell, farewell! but for a space
We, being young, Afield might stray,
That in our Garden nod and say,
Afield is no unpleasant place.'"

3--_Arithmetic_

In such disconnected fashion, as hereafter, I record the moments of my life which I most vividly remember. For it is possible only in the last paragraphs of a book, and for a book's people only, to look back upon an ordered and proportionate progression to what one has become; in life the thing arrives with scantier dignity; and one appears, in retrospection, less to have marched toward any goal than always to have jumped and scrambled from one stepping-stone to another because, however momentarily, "just this or that poor impulse seemed the sole work of a lifetime."

Well! at least I have known these moments and the rapture of their dominance; and I am not lightly to be stripped of recollection of them, nor of the attendant thrill either, by any cheerless hour wherein, as sometimes happens, my personal achievements confront me like a pile of flimsy jack-straws.

What does it all amount to?--I do not know. There may be some sort of supernal bookkeeping, somewhere, but very certainly it is not conformable to any human mathematics.

_THE CORDS OF VANITY

"His has been the summer air, and the sunshine, and the flowers; and gentle ears have listened to him, and gentle eyes have been upon him. Let others eat his honey that please, so that he has had his morsel and his song."_

1.

He Sits Out a Dance

When I first knew Stella she was within a month of being fifteen, which is for womankind an unattractive age. There were a startling number of corners to her then, and she had but vague notions as to the management of her hands and feet. In consequence they were perpetually turning up in unexpected places and surprising her by their size and number. Yes, she was very hopelessly fifteen; and she was used to laugh, unnecessarily, in a nervous fashion, approximating to a whinny, and when engaged in conversation she patted down her skirts six times to the minute.

It seems oddly unbelievable when I reflect that Rosalind--"daughter to the banished Duke"--and Stella and Helen of Troy, and all the other famous fair ones of history, were each like that at one period or another.

As for myself, I was nine days younger than Stella, and so I was at

this time very old--much older than it is ever permitted anyone to be afterward. I cherished the most optimistic ideas as to my impendent moustache, and was wont in privacy to encourage it with the manicure-scissors. I still entertained the belief that girls were upon the whole superfluous nuisances, but was beginning to perceive the expediency of concealing this opinion, even in private converse with my dearest chum, where, in our joyous interchange of various heresies, we touched upon this especial sub-division of fauna very lightly, and, I now suspect, with some self-consciousness.

2

All this was at a summer resort, which was called the Green Chalybeate. Stella and I and others of our age attended the hotel hops in the evening with religious punctuality, for well-meaning elders insisted these dances amused us, and it was easier to go than to argue the point. At least, that was the feeling of the boys.

Stella has since sworn the girls liked it. I suspect in this statement a certain parsimony as to the truth. They giggled too much and were never entirely free from that haunting anxiety concerning their skirts.

We danced together, Stella and I, to the strains of the last Sousa two-step (it was the _Washington Post_), and we conversed, meanwhile, with careful disregard of the amenities of life, since each feared lest the other might suspect in some common courtesy an attempt at--there is really no other word--spooning. And spooning was absurd.

Well, as I once read in the pages of a rare and little known author, one lives and learns.

I asked Stella to sit out a dance. I did this because I had heard Mr. Lethbury--a handsome man with waxed mustachios and an absolutely piratical amount of whiskers,--make the same request of Miss Van Orden, my just relinquished partner, and it was evident that such whiskers could do no wrong.

Stella was not uninfluenced, it may be, by Miss Van Orden's example, for even in girlhood the latter was a person of extraordinary beauty, whereas, as has been said, Stella's corners were then multitudinous; and it is probable that those two queer little knobs at the base of Stella's throat would be apt to render their owner uncomfortable and a bit abject before--let us say--more ample charms. In any event, Stella giggled and said she thought it would be just fine, and I presently conducted her to the third piazza of the hotel.

There we found a world that was new.

3

It was a world of sweet odors and strange lights, flooded with a kindly silence which was, somehow, composed of many lispings and trepidations and thin echoes. The night was warm, the sky all transparency. If the comparison was not manifestly absurd, I would liken that remembered sky's pale color to the look of blue plush rubbed the wrong way. And in its radiance the stars bathed, large and

bright and intimate, yet blurred somewhat, like shop-lights seen through frosted panes; and the moon floated on it, crisp and clear as a new-minted coin. This was the full midsummer moon, grave and glorious, that compelled the eye; and its shield was obscurely marked, as though a Titan had breathed on its chill surface. Its light suffused the heavens and lay upon the earth beneath us in broad splashes; and the foliage about us was dappled with its splendor, save in the open east, where the undulant, low hills wore radiancy as a mantle.

For the trees, mostly maples of slight stature, clustered thickly about the hotel, and their branches mingled in a restless pattern of blacks and silvers and dim greens that mimicked the laughter of the sea under an April wind. Looking down from the piazza, over the expanse of tree-tops, all this was strangely like the sea; and it gave one, somehow, much the same sense of remote, unbounded spaces and of a beauty that was a little sinister. At times whippoorwills called to one another, eerie and shrill; and the distant dance-music was a vibration in the air, which was heavy with the scent of bruised growing things and was filled with the cool, healing magic of the moonlight.

Taking it all in all, we had blundered upon a very beautiful place. And there we sat for a while and talked in an aimless fashion. We did not know quite how one ought to "sit out" a dance, you conceive....

4

Then, moved by some queer impulse, I stared over the railing for a little at this great, wonderful, ambiguous world, and said solemnly:

"It is good."

"Yes," Stella agreed, in a curious, quiet and tiny voice, "it--it's very large, isn't it?" She looked out for a moment over the tree-tops. "It makes me feel like a little old nothing," she said, at last. "The stars are so big, and--so uninterested." Stella paused for an interval, and then spoke again, with an uncertain laugh. "I think I am rather afraid."

"Afraid?" I echoed.

"Yes," she said, vaguely; "of--of everything."

I understood. Even then I knew something of the occasional insufficiency of words.

"It is a big world," I assented, "and lots of people are having a right hard time in it right now. I reckon there is somebody dying this very minute not far off."

"It's all--waiting for us!" Stella had forgotten my existence. "It's bringing us so many things--and we don't know what any of them are. But we've got to take them, whether we want to or not. It isn't fair. We've got to--well, got to grow up, and--marry, and--die, whether we want to or not. We've no choice. And it may not matter, after all. Everything will keep right on like it did before; and the stars won't care; and what we've done and had done to us won't really matter!"

"Well, but, Stella, you can have a right good time first, anyway, if you keep away from ugly things and fussy people. And I reckon you really go to Heaven afterwards if you haven't been really bad,--don't you?"

"Rob,--are you ever afraid of dying?" Stella asked, "very much afraid--Oh, you know what I mean."

I did. I was about ten once more. It was dark, and I was passing a drug-store, with huge red and green and purple bottles glistening in the gas-lit windows; and it had just occurred to me that I, too, must die, and be locked up in a box, and let down with trunk-straps into a hole, like Father was.... So I said, "Yes."

"And yet we've got to! Oh, I don't see how people can go on living like everything was all right when that's always getting nearer,--when they know they've got to die before very long. Because they dance and go on picnics and buy hats as if they were going to live forever. I--oh, I can't understand."

"They get used to the idea, I reckon. We're sort of like the rats in the trap at home, in our stable," I suggested, poetically. "We can bite the wires and go crazy, like lots of them do, if we want to, or we can eat the cheese and kind of try not to think about it. Either way, there's no getting out till they come to kill us in the morning."

"Yes," sighed Stella; "I suppose we must make the best of it."

"It's the only sensible thing to do, far as I can see."

"But it is all so big--and so careless about us!" she said, after a little. "And we don't know--we can't know!--what is going to happen to you and me. And we can't stop its happening!"

"We'll just have to make the best of that, too," I protested, dolefully.

Stella sighed again, "I hope so," she assented; "still, I'm scared of it."

"I think I am, too--sort of," I conceded, after reflection. "Anyhow, I am going to have as good a time as I can."

There was now an even longer pause. Pitiable, ridiculous infants were pondering, somewhat vaguely but very solemnly, over certain mysteries of existence, which most of us have learned to accept with stolidity. We were young, and to us the miraculous insecurity and inconsequence of human life was still a little impressive, and we had not yet come to regard the universe as a more or less comfortable place, well-meaningly constructed anyhow--by Somebody--for us to reside in.

Therefore we moved a trifle closer together, Stella and I, and were commonly miserable over the _Weltschmerz_. After a little a distant whippoorwill woke me from a chaos of reverie, and I turned to Stella, with a vague sense that we two were the only people left in the whole world, and that I was very, very fond of her.

Stella's head was leaned backward. Her lips were parted, and the

moonlight glinted in her eyes. Her eyes were blue.

"Don't!" said Stella, faintly.

I did....

It was a matter out of my volition, out of my planning. And, oh, the wonder, and sweetness, and sacredness of it! I thought, even in the instant; and, oh, the pity that, after all, it is slightly disappointing....

Stella was not angry, as I had half expected. "That was dear of you," she said, impulsively, "but don't try to do it again." There was the wisdom of centuries in this mandate of Stella's as she rose from the bench. The spell was broken, utterly. "I think," said Stella, in the voice of a girl of fifteen, "I think we'd better go and dance some more."

5

In the crude morning I approached Stella, with a fatuous smile. She apparently both perceived and resented my bearing, although she never once looked at me. There was something of great interest to her in the distance, apparently down by the springhouse; she was flushed and indignant; and her eyes wouldn't, couldn't, and didn't turn for an instant in my direction.

I fidgeted.

"If," said she, impersonally, "if you believe it was because of _you_, you are very much mistaken. It would have been the same with anybody. You don't understand, and I don't either. Anyhow, I think you are a mess, and I hate you. Go away from me!"

And she stamped her foot in a fine rage.

For the moment I entertained an un-Christian desire that Stella had been born a boy. In that case, I felt, I would, just then, have really enjoyed sitting upon the back of her head, and grinding her nose into the lawn, and otherwise persuading her to cry "'Nough." These virile pleasures being denied me, I sought for comfort in discourteous speech.

"Umph-huh!" said I, "and you think you're mighty smart, don't you? Well, I don't want you pawing around me any more, either. I won't have it, do you understand! That was what I was going to tell you anyhow, you kissing-bug, even if you hadn't acted so smart. And you can just stick that right in your pipe and smoke it, you old Miss Smart Alec."

Thereupon I--wisely--departed without delay. A rock struck me rather forcibly between the shoulder blades, but I did not deign to notice this phenomenon.

"You can't fight girls with fists," I reflected. "You've just got to talk to them in the right way."

2.

He Loves Extensively

I saw no more of Stella for a lengthy while, since within two days of the events recorded it pleased my mother to seek out another summer resort.

"For in September," she said, "I really must have perfect quiet and unimpeachable butter, and falling leaves, and only a very few congenial people to be melancholy with,--and that sort of thing, you know. I find it freshens one up so against the winter."

It was a signal feature of my mother's conversation that you never understood, precisely, what she was talking about.

Thus in her train the silly, pretty woman drew otherwhither her hobbledehoy son, as indeed Claire Bulmer Townsend had aforetime drawn an armament of more mature and stolid members of my sex. I was always proud of my handsome mother, but without any aspirations, however theoretical, toward intimacy; and her periods of conscientious if vague affection, when she recollected its propriety, I endured with consolatory foreknowledge of an impendent, more agreeable era of neglect.

I fancy that at bottom I was without suspecting it lonely. I was an only child; my father had died, as has been hinted, when I was in kilts.... No, I must have graduated from kilts into "knee-pants" when the Democracy of Lichfield celebrated Grover Cleveland's first election as President, for I was seven years old then, and was allowed to stay up ever so late after supper to watch the torchlight parade. I recollect being rather pleasantly scared by the yells of all those marching people and by the glistening of their faces as the irregular flaring torches heaved by; and I recollect how delightfully the cold night air was flavored with kerosene. In any event, it was on this generally festive November night that my father again took too much to drink, and, coming home toward morning, lay down and went to sleep in the vestibule between our front-door and the storm-doors; and five days later died of pneumonia...In that era I was accounted an odd boy; given to reading and secretive ways, and, they record, to long silences throughout which my lips would move noiselessly. "Just talking to one of my friends," they tell me I was used to explain; though it was not until my career at King's College that I may be said to have pretended to intimacy with anybody.

2

For in old Fairhaven I spent, of course, a period of ostensible study, as four generations of my fathers had done aforetime. But in that leisured, slatternly and ancient city I garnered a far larger harvest of (comparatively) innocuous cakes and ale than of authentic learning, and at my graduation carried little of moment from the place save many memories of Bettie Hamlyn.... Her father taught me Latin at King's College, while Bettie taught me human intimacy--almost. Looking back, I have not ever been intimate with anybody....

Not but that I had my friends. In particular I remember those four of us who always called ourselves--in flat defiance, just as Dumas did, of mere arithmetic--"The Three Musketeers." I think that we loved one another very greatly during the four years we spent together in our youth. I like to believe we did, and to remember the boys who were once unreasonably happy, even now. It does not seem to count, somehow, that Aramis has taken to drink and every other inexpedient course, I hear, and that I would not recognize him today, were we two to encounter casually--or Athos, either, I suppose, now that he has been so long in the Philippines.

And as for D'Artagnan--or Billy Woods, if you prefer the appellation which his sponsors gave him,--why we are still good friends and always will be, I suppose. But we are not particularly intimate; and very certainly we will never again read _Chastelard_ together and declaim the more impassioned parts of it,--and in fine, I cannot help seeing, nowadays, that, especially since his marriage, Billy has developed into a rather obvious and stupid person, and that he considers me to be a bit of a bad egg. And in a phrase, when we are together, just we two, we smoke a great deal and do not talk any more than is necessary.

And once I would have quite sincerely enjoyed any death, however excruciating, which promoted the well-being of Billy Woods; and he viewed me not dissimilarly, I believe.... However, after all, this was a long, long while ago, and in a period almost antediluvian.

And during this period they of Fairhaven assumed I was in love with Bettie Hamlyn; and for a very little while, at the beginning, had I assumed as much. More lately was my error flagrantly apparent when I fell in love with someone else, and sincerely in love, and found to my amazement that, upon the whole, I preferred Bettie's companionship to that of the woman I adored. By and by, though, I learned to accept this odd, continuing phenomenon much as I had learned to accept the sunrise.

3

Once Bettie demanded of me, "I often wonder what you really think of me? Honest injun, I mean."

I meditated, and presently began, with leisure:

"Miss Hamlyn is a young woman of considerable personal attractions, and with one exception is unhandicapped by accomplishments. She plays the piano, it is true, but she does it divinely and she neither crochets nor embroiders presents for people, nor sketches, nor recites, nor sings, or in fine annoys the public in any way whatsoever. Her enemies deny that she is good-looking, but even her friends concede her curious picturesqueness and her knowledge of it. Her penetration, indeed, is not to be despised; she has even grasped the fact that all men are not necessarily fools in spite of the fashion in which they talk to women. It must be admitted, however, that her emotions are prone to take precedence of her reasoning powers: thus she is not easily misled from getting what she desires, save by those whom she loves, because in argument, while always illogical, she is invariably convincing--"

Miss Hamlyn sniffed. "This is, perhaps, the inevitable effect of

twenty cigarettes a day," was her cryptic comment. "Nevertheless, it does affect me with ennui."

"--For, the mere facts of the case she plainly demonstrates, with the abettance of her dimples, to be an affair of unimportance; the real point is what she wishes done about it. Yet the proffering of any particular piece of advice does not necessarily signify that she either expects or wishes it to be followed, since had she been present at the Creation she would have cheerfully pointed out to the Deity His various mistakes, and have offered her co-operation toward bettering matters, and have thought a deal less of Him had He accepted it; but this is merely a habit--" "Yes?" said Bettie, yawning; and she added: "Do you know, Robin, the saddest and most desolate thing in the world is to practise an _etude_ of Schumann's in nine flats, and the next is to realize that a man who has been in love with you has recovered for keeps?"

"--It must not be imagined, however, that Miss Hamlyn is untruthful, for when driven by impertinences into a corner she conceals her real opinion by voicing it quite honestly as if she were joking. Thereupon you credit her with the employment of irony and the possession of every imaginable and super-angelical characteristic--"

"Unless we come to a better understanding," Miss Hamlyn crisply began, "we had better stop right here before we come to a worse--"

"--Miss Hamlyn, in a word, is possessed of no insufferable virtues and of many endearing faults; and in common with the rest of humanity, she regards her disapproval of any proceeding as clear proof of its impropriety." This was largely apropos of a fire-new debate concerning the deleterious effects of cigarette-smoking; and when I had made an end, and doggedly lighted another one of them, Bettie said nothing.... She minded chiefly that one of us should have thought of the other without bias. She said it was not fair. And I know now that she was right.

But of Bettie Hamlyn, for reasons you may learn hereafter if you so elect, I honestly prefer to write not at all. Four years, in fine, we spent to every purpose together, and they were very happy years. To record them would be desecration.

4

Meantime, during these years, I had fallen in and out of love assiduously. Since the Anabasis of lad's love traverses a monotonous country, where one hill is largely like another, and one meadow a duplicate of the next to the last daffodil, I may with profit dwell upon the green-sickness lightly. It suffices that in the course of these four years I challenged superstition by adoring thirteen girls, and, worse than that, wrote verses of them.

I give you their names herewith--though not their workaday names, lest the wives of divers people be offended (and in many cases, surprised), but the appellatives which figured in my rhymes. They were Heart's Desire, Florimel, Dolores, Yolande, Adelais, Sylvia, Heart o' My Heart, Chloris, Felise, Ettarre, Phyllis, Phyllida, and Dorothy. Here was a rosary of exquisite names, I even now concede; and the owner of each _nom de plume_ I, for however brief a period, adored for this or

that peculiar excellence; and by ordinary without presuming to mention the fact to any of these divinities save Heart o' My Heart, who was, after all, only a Penate.

Outside the elevated orbits of rhyme she was called Elizabeth Hamlyn; and it afterward became apparent to me that I, in reality, wrote all the verses of this period solely for the pleasure of reading them aloud to Bettie, for certainly I disclosed their existence to no one else--except just one or two to Phyllida, who was "literary."

And the upshot of all this heart-burning is most succinctly given in my own far from impeccable verse, as Bettie Hamlyn heard the summing-up one evening in May. It was the year I graduated from King's College, and the exact relation of the date to the Annos Domini is trivial. But the battle of Manila had just been fought, and off Santiago Captain Sampson and Commander Schley were still hunting for Cervera's "phantom fleet." And in Fairhaven, as I remember it, although there was a highly-colored picture of Commodore Dewey in the barber-shop window, nobody was bothering in the least about the war except when Colonel Snawley and Dr. Jeal foregathered at Clarriker's Emporium to denounce the colossal errors of "imperialism"....

"Thus, then, I end my calendar
Of ancient loves more light than air;--
And now Lad's Love, that led afar
In April fields that were so fair,
Is fled, and I no longer share
Sedate unutterable days
With Heart's Desire, nor ever praise
Felise, or mirror forth the lures
Of Stella's eyes nor Sylvia's,
Yet love for each loved lass endures.

"Chloris is wedded, and Ettarre
Forgets; Yolande loves otherwhere,
And worms long since made bold to mar
The lips of Dorothy and fare
Mid Florimel's bright ruined hair;
And Time obscures that roseate haze
Which glorified hushed woodland ways
When Phyllis came, as Time obscures
That faith which once was Phyllida's,--
Yet love for each loved lass endures.

"That boy is dead as Schariar,
Tiglath-pileser, or Clotaire,
Who once of love got many a scar.
And his loved lasses past compare?--
None is alive now anywhere.
Each is transmuted nowadays
Into a stranger, and displays
No whit of love's investitures.
I let these women go their ways,
Yet love for each loved lass endures.

"Heart o' My Heart, thine be the praise
If aught of good in me betrays
Thy tutelage--whose love matures
Unmarred in these more wistful days,--

Yet love for each loved lass endures."

For this was the year that I graduated, and Chloris--I violate no confidence in stating that her actual name was Aurelia Minns, and that she had been, for a greater number of years than it would be courteous to remember, the undisputed belle of Fairhaven,--had that very afternoon married a promising young doctor; and I was draining the cup of my misery to the last delicious drop, and was of course inspired thereby to the perpetration of such melancholy bathos as only a care-free youth of twenty is capable of evolving.

5

"Dear boy," said Bettie, when I had made an end of reading, "and are you very miserable?"

Her fingers were interlocked behind her small black head; and the sympathy with which she regarded me was tenderly flavored with amusement.

This much I noticed as I glanced upward from my manuscript, and mustered a Spartan smile. "If misery loves company, then am I the least unhappy soul alive. For I don't want anybody but just you, and I believe I never will."

"Oh--? But I don't count." The girl continued, with composure: "Or rather, I have always counted your affairs, so that I know precisely what it all amounts to."

"Sum total?"

"A lot of imitation emotions." She added hastily: "Oh, quite a good imitation, dear; you are smooth enough to see to that. Why, I remember once--when you read me that first sonnet, sitting all hunched up on the little stool, and pretending you didn't know I knew who you meant me to know it was for, and ending with a really very effective, breathless sob--and caught my hand and pressed it to your forehead for a moment--Why, that time I was thoroughly rattled and almost believed--even I--that--" She shrugged. "And if I had been younger--!" she said, half regretfully, for at this time Bettie was very nearly twenty-two.

"Yes." The effective breathless sob responded to what had virtually been an encore. "I have not forgotten."

"Only for a moment, though." Miss Hamlyn reflected, and then added, brightly: "Now, most girls would have liked it, for it sounded all wool. And they would have gone into it, as you wanted, and have been very, very happy for a while. Then, after a time--after you had got a sonnet or two out of it, and had made a sufficiency of pretty speeches,--you would have gone for an admiring walk about yourself, and would have inspected your sensations and have applauded them, quite enthusiastically, and would have said, in effect: 'Madam, I thank you for your attention. Pray regard the incident as closed.'"

"You are doing me," I observed, "an injustice. And however tiny they may be, I hate 'em."

"But, Robin, can't you see," she said, with an odd earnestness, "that to be fond of you is quite disgracefully easy, even though--" Bettie Hamlyn said, presently: "Why, your one object in life appears to be to find a girl who will allow you to moon around her and make verses about her. Oh, very well! I met to-day just the sort of pretty idiot who will let you do it. She is visiting Kathleen Eppes for the Finals. She has a great deal of money, too, I hear." And Bettie mentioned a name.

"That's rather queer," said I. "I used to know that girl. She will be at the K. A. dance to-morrow night, I suppose,"--and I put up my manuscript with a large air of tolerance. "I dare say that I have been exaggerating matters a bit, after all. Any woman who treated me in the way that Miss Aurelia did is not, really, worthy of regret. And in any event, I got a ballade out of her and six--no, seven--other poems."

For the name which Bettie had mentioned was that of Stella Musgrave, and I was, somehow, curiously desirous to come again to Stella, and nervous about it, too, even then....

3.

He Earns a Stick-pin

"Dear me!" said Stella, wonderingly; "I would never have known you in the world! You've grown so fa--I mean, you are so well built. I've grown? Nonsense!--and besides, what did you expect me to do in six years?--and moreover, it is abominably rude of you to presume to speak of me in that abstracted and figurative manner--quite as if I were a debt or a taste for drink. It is really only French heels and a pompadour, and, of course, you can't have this dance. It's promised, and I hop, you know, frightfully.... Why, naturally, I haven't forgotten--How could I, when you were the most disagreeable boy I ever knew?"

I ventured a suggestion that caused Stella to turn an attractive pink, and laugh. "No," said she, demurely, "I shall never never sit out another dance with you."

So she did remember!

Subsequently: "Our steps suit perfectly--Heavens! you are the fifth man who has said that to-night, and I am sure it would be very silly and very tiresome to dance through life with anybody. Men are so absurd, don't you think? Oh, yes, I tell them all--every one of them--that our steps suit, even when they have just ripped off a yard or so of flounce in an attempt to walk up the front of my dress. It makes them happy, poor things, and injures nobody. You liked it, you know; you grinned like a pleased cat. I like cats, don't you?"

Later: "That is absolute nonsense, you know," said Stella, critically. "Do you always get red in the face when you make love? I wouldn't if I were you. You really have no idea how queer it makes you look."

Still later: "No, I don't think I am going anywhere to-morrow afternoon," said Stella.

2

So that during the fleet moments of these Finals, while our army was effecting a landing in Cuba, I saw as much of Stella as was possible; and veracity compels the admission that she made no marked effort to prevent my doing so. Indeed, she was quite cross, and scornful, about the crowning glory being denied her, of going with me to the Baccalaureate Address the morning I received my degree. To that of course I took Bettie.

3

I said good-bye to Bettie Hamlyn rather late one evening. It was in her garden. The Finals were over, and Stella had left Fairhaven that afternoon. I was to follow in the morning, by an early train.

It was a hot, still night in June, with never a breath of air stirring. In the sky was a low-hung moon, full and very red. It was an evil moon, and it lighted a night that was unreasonably ominous. And Bettie and I had talked of trifles resolutely for two hours.

"Well--good-bye Bettie," I said at last. "I'm glad it isn't for long." For of course we meant never to let a month elapse without our seeing each other.

"Good-bye," she said, and casually shook hands.

Then Bettie Hamlyn said, in a different voice: "Robin, you come of such a bad lot, and already you are by way of being a rather frightful liar. And I'm letting you go. I'm turning you over to Stellas and mothers and things like that just because I have to. It isn't fair. They will make another Townsend of my boy, and after all I've tried to do. Oh, Robin, don't let anybody or anything do that to you! Do try to do the unpleasant thing sometimes, my dear!--But what's the good of promising?"

"And have I ever failed you, Bettie?"

"No,--not me," she answered, almost as though she grudged the fact. Then Bettie laughed a little. "Indeed, I'm trying to believe you never will. Oh, indeed, I am. But just be honest with me, Robin, and nothing else will ever matter very much. I don't care what you do, if only you are always honest with me. You can murder people, if you like, and burn down as many houses as you choose. You probably will. But you'll be honest with me--won't you?--and particularly when you don't want to be?"

So I promised her that. And sometimes I believe it is the only promise which I ever tried to keep quite faithfully....

4

And all the ensuing summer I followed Stella Musgrave from one

watering place to another, with an engaging and entire candor as to my desires. I was upon the verge of my majority, when, under the terms of my father's will, I would come into possession of such fragments of his patrimony as he had omitted to squander. And afterward I intended to become excessively distinguished in this or that profession, not as yet irrevocably fixed upon, but for choice as a writer of immortal verse; and I was used to dwell at this time very feelingly, and very frequently, upon the wholesome restraint which matrimony imposes upon the possessor of an artistic temperament.

Stella promised to place my name upon her waiting list, and to take up the matter in due season; and she lamented, with a tiny and pre-meditated yawn, that as a servitor of system she was compelled to list her "little lovers and suitors in alphabetical order, Mr. Townsend. Besides, you would probably strangle me before the year was out."

"I would thoroughly enjoy doing it," I said, grimly, "right now." She regarded me for a while. "You would, too," she said at last, with an alien gravity; "and that is why--Oh, Rob dear, you are out of my dimension. I am rather afraid of you. I am a poor bewildered triangle who is being wooed by a cube!" the girl wailed, and but half humorously.

And I began to plead. It does not matter what I said. It never mattered.

And persons more sensible than I found then far more important things to talk about, such as General Alger's inefficiency, and General Shafter's hammock, and "embalmed beef," and the folly of taking over the Philippines, and Admiral von Diedrich's behavior, and the yellow fever in our camps and the comparative claims of Messrs. Sampson and Schley to be made rear-admiral; and everybody more or less was demanding "an investigation," as the natural aftermath of a war.

5

Stella's mother had closed Bellemeade for the year, however, and they were to spend the winter in Lichfield; and Stella, to reduplicate her phrase, promised to "think it over very seriously."

But I suppose I had never any real chance against Peter Blagden. To begin with,--though Stella herself, of course, would inherit plenty of money when her mother died,--Peter was the only nephew of a childless uncle who was popularly reported to "roll in wealth"; and in addition, Peter was seven years older than I and notoriously dissipated. No other girl of twenty would have hesitated between us half so long as Stella did. She hesitated through a whole winter; and even now there is odd, if scanty, comfort in the fact that Stella hesitated....

Besides Peter was eminently likeable. At times I almost liked him myself, for all my fervent envy of his recognized depravity and of the hateful ease with which he thought of something to say in those uncomfortable moments when he and I and Stella were together. At most other times I could talk glibly enough, but before this seasoned scapegrace I was dumb, and felt my reputation to be hopelessly immaculate ... If only Stella would believe me to be just the tiniest

bit depraved! I blush to think of the dark hints I dropped as to entirely fictitious women who "had been too kind to me. But then"--as I would feelingly lament,--"we could never let women alone, we Townsends, you know--"

6

One woman at least I was beginning to "let alone", in that I was writing Bettie Hamlyn letters which grew shorter and shorter.... Her mother had fallen ill, not long after I left college; and she and Bettie were now a great way off, in Colorado, where the old lady was dying, with the most selfish sort of laziness about it, and so was involving me in endless correspondence.... At least, I wrote to Bettie punctually, if briefly, though I had not seen her since that night when the moon was red, and big, and very evil. I had to do it, because she had insisted that I write.

"But letters don't mean anything, Bettie. And besides, I hate writing letters."

"That is just why you must write to me regularly. You never do the things you don't want to do. I know it. But for me you always will, and that makes all the difference."

"Shylock!" I retorted.

"If you like. In any event, I mean to have my pound of flesh, and regularly."

So I wrote to Bettie Hamlyn on the seventh of every month--because that was her birthday,--and again on the twenty-third, because that was mine. The rest of my time I gave whole-heartedly to Stella....

7

They named her Stella, I fancy, because her eyes were so like stars. It is manifestly an irrelevant detail that there do not happen to be any azure stars. Indeed, I am inclined to think that Nature belatedly observed this omission, and created Stella's eyes to make up for it; at any rate, if you can imagine Aldebaran or Benetnasch polished up a bit and set in a speedwell-cup, you will have a very fair idea of one of them. You cannot, however, picture to yourself the effect of the pair of them, because the human mind is limited.

Really, though, their effect was curious. You noticed them casually, let us say; then, without warning, you ceased to notice anything. You simply grew foolish and gasped like a newly-hooked trout, and went mad and babbled as meaninglessly as a silly little rustic brook trotting under a bridge.

I have seen the thing happen any number of times. And, strangely enough, you liked it. Numbers of young men would venture into the same room with those disconcerting eyes the very next evening, even appearing to seek them out and to court peril, as it were,--young men who must have known perfectly well, either by report or experience, the unavoidable result of such fool-hardy conduct. For eventually it always culminated in Stella's being deeply surprised and grieved,--at

a dance, for choice, with music and color and the unthinking laughter of others to heighten the sadness and the romance of it all,--she never having dreamed of such a thing, of course, and having always regarded you only as a dear, dear friend. Yes, and she used certainly to hope that nothing she had said or done could have led you to believe she had even for a moment considered such a thing. Oh, she did it well, did Stella, and endured these frequent griefs and surprises with, I must protest, quite exemplary patience. In a phrase, she was the most adorable combination of the prevaricator, the jilt and the coquette I have ever encountered.

8

So, for the seventh time, I asked Stella to marry me. Nearly every fellow I knew had done as much, particularly Peter Blagden; and it is always a mistake to appear unnecessarily reserved or exclusive. And this time in declining--with a fluency that bespoke considerable practice,--she informed me that, as the story books have it, she was shortly to be wedded to another.

And Peter Blagden clapped the pinnacle upon my anguish by asking me to be the best man. I knew even then whose vanity and whose sense of the appropriate had put him up to it....

"For I haven't a living male relative of the suitable age except two second cousins that I don't see much of--praise God!" said Peter, fervently; "and Hugh Van Orden looks about half-past ten, whereas I class John Charteris among the lower orders of vermin."

I consented to accept the proffered office and the incidental stick-pin; and was thus enabled to observe from the inside this episode of Stella's life, and to find it quite like other weddings.

Something like this:

"Look here," a perspiring and fidgety Peter protested, at the last moment, as we lurked in the gloomy vestry with not a drop left in either flask; "look here, Henderson hasn't blacked the soles of these blessed shoes. I'll look like an ass when it comes to the kneeling part--like an ass, I tell you! Good heavens, they'll look like tombstones!"

"If you funk now," said I, severely, "I'll never help you get married again. Oh, sainted Ebenezer in bliss, and whatever have I done with that ring? No, it's here all right, but you are on the wrong side of me again. And there goes the organ--Good God, Peter, look at her! simply look at her, man! Oh, you lucky devil! you lucky jackass!"

I spoke enviously, you understand, simply to encourage him.

Followed a glaring of lights, a swishing of fans, a sense that Peter was not keeping step with me, and the hum of densely packed, expectant humanity; a blare of music; then Stella, an incredible vision with glad, frightened eyes. My shoulders straightened, and I was not out of temper any longer. The organist was playing softly, _Oh, Promise Me_, and I was thinking of the time, last January, that Stella and I heard The Bostonians, and how funny Henry Clay Barnabee was.... "--so long as ye both may live?" ended the bishop.

"I will," poor Peter quavered, with obvious uncertainty about it.

And still one saw in Stella's eyes unutterable happiness and fear, but her voice was tranquil. I found time to wonder at its steadiness, even though, just about this time, I resonantly burst a button off one of my new gloves. I fancy they must have been rather tight.

"And thereto," said Stella, calmly, "I give thee my troth."

And subsequently they were Mendelssohned out of church to the satisfaction of a large and critical audience. I came down the aisle with Stella's only sister--who afterward married the Marquis d'Arlanges,--and found Lizzie very entertaining later in the evening....

9

Yes, it was quite like other weddings. I only wonder for what conceivable reason I remember its least detail, and so vividly. For it all happened a great while ago, when--of such flimsy stuff is glory woven,--Emilio Aguinaldo and Captain Coghlan were the persons most talked of in America; and when the Mazet committee was "investigating" I forget what, but with column after column about it in the papers every day; and when _Me und Gott_ was a famous poem, and "to hobsonize" was the most popular verb; and when I was twenty-one. _Sic transit gloria mundi_, as it says in the back of the dictionary.

4.

He Talks with Charteris

It was upon the evening of this day, after Mr. and Mrs. Blagden had been duly rice-pelted and entrained, that I first talked against John Charteris. The novelist was, as has been said, a cousin of Peter Blagden, and as such, was one of the wedding guests at Bellemeade; and that evening, well toward midnight, the little man, midway in the consumption of one of his interminable cigarettes, happened to come upon me seated upon the terrace and gazing, rather vacantly, in the direction of the moon.

I was not thinking of anything in particular; only there was a by-end of verse which sang itself over and over again, somewhere in the back of my brain--"Her eyes were the eyes of a bride whom delight makes afraid, her eyes were the eyes of a bride"--and so on, all over again, as at night a traveller may hear his train jogging through a monotonous and stiff-jointed song; and in my heart there was just hunger.

2

Charteris had heard, one may presume, of my disastrous love-business; and with all an author's relish of emotion, in others, chose his

gambit swiftly. "Mr. Townsend, is it not? Then may a murrain light upon thee, Mr. Townsend,--whatever a murrain may happen to be,--since you have disturbed me in the concoction of an ever-living and entrancing fable."

"I may safely go as far," said I, "as to offer the proverbial penny."

"Done!" cried Mr. Charteris. He meditated for a moment, and then began, in a low and curiously melodious voice, to narrate

The Apologue of the First Conjugation

"When the gods of Hellas were discrowned, there was a famous scurrying from Olympos to the world of mortals, where each deity must henceforward make shift to do without godhead:--Aphrodite in her hollow hill, where the good knight Tannhauser revels yet, it may be; Hephaestos, in some smithy; whilst Athene, for aught I know, established a girls' boarding school, and Helios, as is notorious, died under priestly torture, and Dionysos cannily took holy orders, and Hermes set up as a merchant in Friesland. But Eros went to the Grammarians. He would be a schoolmaster.

"The Grammarians, grim, snuffy and wrinkled though they might be, were no more impervious to his allures than are the rest of us, and in consequence appointed him to an office. This office was, I glean of mediaeval legend, that of teaching dunderheaded mortals the First Conjugation. So Eros donned cap and gown, took lodgings with a quiet musical family, and set _amo_ as the first model verb; and ever since this period has the verb 'to love' been the first to be mastered in all well-constituted grammars, as it is in life.

"Heigho! it is not an easy verb to conjugate. One gets into trouble enough, in floundering through its manifold nuances, which range inevitably through the bold-faced 'I love', the confident 'I will love', the hopeful 'I may be loved', and so on to the wistful, pitiful Pluperfect Subjunctive Passive, 'I might have been loved if'--Then each of us may supply the Protasis as best befits his personal opinion and particular scars, and may tear his hair, or scribble verses, or adopt the cynical, or, in fine, assume any pose which strikes his fancy. For he has graduated into the Second Conjugation, which is _moneo_; and may now admonish to his heart's content, whilst looking back complacently into the First Classroom, where others--and so many others!--are still struggling with that mischancy verb, and are involved in the very conditions--verbal or otherwise--which aforetime saddened him, or showed him a possible byway toward recreation, or played the deuce with his liver, according to the nature of the man.

"Eros is a hard, implacable pedagogue, and for the fact his scholars suffer. He wields a rod rather than a filigree bow, as old romancers fabled,--no plaything, but a most business-like article, well-poised in the handle, and thence tapering into graceful, stinging nothingness; and not a scholar escapes at least a flick of it.

"I can fancy the class called up as Eros administers, with zest, his penalties. Master Paris! for loving his neighbor a little less than himself, and his neighbor's wife a little more. Master Lancelot! ditto. Masters Petrarch, Tristram, Antony, Juan Tenorio, Dante Alighieri, and others! ditto. There are a great many called up for

this particular form of peccancy, you observe; even Master David has to lay aside his Psalm Book, and go forward with the others for chastisement. Master Romeo! for trespassing in other people's gardens and mausoleums. Master Leander! for swimming in the Hellespont after dark; and Master Tarquin! for mistaking his bedroom at the Collatini's house-party.

"Thus, one by one, each scholar goes into the darkened private office. The master handles his rod--eia! 'tis borrowed from the Erinnyes,--lovingly, caressingly, like a very conscientious person about the performance of his duty. Then comes the dreadful order, 'Take down your breeches, sir!'.... But the scene is too horrible to contemplate. He punishes all, this schoolmaster, for he is unbelievably old, and with the years' advance has grown querulous.

"Well, now I approach my moral, Mr. Townsend. One must have one's birching with the others, and of necessity there remains but to make the best of it. Birching is not a dignified process, and the endurer comes therefrom both sore and shamefaced. Yet always in such contretemps it is expedient to brazen out the matter, and to present as stately an appearance, we will say, as one's welts permit.

"First, to the world--"

3

But at this point I raised my hand. "That is easily done, Mr. Charteris, inasmuch as the world cares nothing whatever about it. The world is composed of men and women who have their own affairs to mind. How in heaven's name does it concern them that a boy has dreamed dreams and has gone mad like a star-struck moth? It was foolish of him. Such is the verdict, given in a voice that is neither kindly nor severe; and the world, mildly wondering, passes on to deal with more weighty matters. For vegetables are higher than ever this year, and, upon my word, Mrs. Grundy, ma'am, a housekeeper simply doesn't know where to turn, with the outrageous prices they are asking for everything these days. No, believe me, the world does not take love-affairs very seriously--not even the great ones," I added, in noble toleration.

And with an appreciative chuckle, Charteris sank beside me upon the bench.

"My adorable boy! so you have a tongue in your head."

"But can't you imagine the knights talking over Lancelot's affair with Guenevere, at whatever was the Arthurian substitute for a club? and sniggering over it? and Lamoracke sagaciously observing that there was always a crooked streak in the Leodograunce family? Or one Roman matron punching a chicken in the ribs, and remarking to her neighbor at the poultry man's stall: 'Well, Mrs. Gracchus, they do say Antony is absolutely daft over that notorious Queen of Egypt. A brazen-faced thing, with a very muddy complexion, I'm told, and practically no reputation, of course, after the way she carried on with Caesar. And that reminds me, I hear your little Caius suffers from the croup. Now _my_ remedy'--and so they waddle on, to price asparagus."

Charteris said: "Well! we need not go out of our way to meddle with

the affairs of others; the entanglement is most disastrously apt to come about of itself quite soon enough. Yet a little while and Lancelot will be running Lamoracke through the body, while the King storms Joyeuse Garde; a few months and your Roman matron will weep quietly on her unshared pillow--not aloud, though, for fear of disturbing the children,--while Gracchus is dreadfully seasick at Actium."

"But that doesn't prove anything," I stammered. "Why, it doesn't follow logically--"

"Nor does anything else. This fact is the chief charm of life. You will presently find, I think, that living means a daily squandering of interest upon the first half of a number of two-part stories which have not ever any sequel. Oh, my adorable boy, I envy you to-night's misery so profoundly I am half unwilling to assure you that in the ultimate one finds a broken heart rather fattening than otherwise; and that a blighted life has never yet been known to prevent queer happenings in conservatories and such-like secluded places or to rob a solitude _a deux_ of possibilities. I grant you that love is a wonderful thing; but there are a many emotions which stand toward love much as the makers of certain marmalades assert their wares to stand toward butter--'serving as an excellent occasional substitute.' At least, so you will find it. And unheroic as it is, within the month you will forget."

"No,--I shall not quite forget," said I.

"Then were you the more unwise. To forget, both speedily and frequently, is the sole method of rendering life livable. One is here; the importance of the fact in the eternal scheme of things is perhaps a shade more trivial than one is disposed to concede, but in any event, one is here; and here, for a very little while in youth, one is capable of happiness. For it is a colorful world, Mr. Townsend, containing much, upon the whole, to captivate both eye and taste; a world manured and fertilized by the no longer lovely bodies of persons who died in youth. Oh, their coffins lie everywhere beneath our feet, thick as raisins in a pudding, whithersoever we tread. Yet every one of these poor relics was once a boy or a girl, and wore a body that was capable of so much pleasure! To-day, unused to gain the fullness of that pleasure, and now not ever to be used, they lie beneath us, in their coffins, these white, straight bodies, like swords untried that rust in the scabbard. Meanwhile, on every side is apparent the not yet out-wasted instrument, and one is naturally inquisitive,--so that one's fingers and one's nostrils twitch at times, even in the hour when one is most miserable, very much as yours do now."

For a long while I meditated. Then I said: "I am not really miserable, because, all in all, one is content to pay the price of happiness. I have been very happy sometimes during the past year; and whatever the blind Fate that mismanages the world may elect to demand in payment, I shall not haggle. No, by heavens! I would have nothing changed, and least of all would I forget; having drunk nectar neat, one would not qualify it with the water of Lethe."

I rose, not unhandsome, I trusted, in the moonlight. I was hoping Mr. Charteris would notice my new dress-suit, procured in honor of Stella's wedding. And I said: "The play is over, the little comedy is played out. She must go; at least she has tarried for a little. She

does not love you; ah! but she did. God speed her, then, the woman we have all loved and lost, and still dream of on sleepy Sundays; and all possible happiness to her! One must be grateful that through her one has known the glory of loving. Even though she never cared--'and never could understand',--one may not but be glad that one has known and loved in youth the Only Woman."

"The Only Woman has a way of leaving many heirs, Mr. Townsend, that play the deuce with the estate."

"--So to-morrow, like the person in _Lycidas_, I am for fresh fields, Mr. Charteris. And indeed it is high time that I were journeying, since she and I have rested, and have laughed and eaten and drunk our fill at this particular tavern; and now it is closing time. A plague on these foolish and impertinent laws, say I quite heartily; for it is cold and cheerless outside, whereas here within I was perfectly comfortable. None the less I must go, or else be evicted by the constable; so good-night, my sweet; and as for you, Madam Clotho, pray what unconscionable score have you chalked up against me?"

I grimaced. "Heavens! what an infinity of sighs, sonnets, lamentations, and heart-burnings is this that I owe to Fate and Decency!"

Charteris applauded as though it were a comedy. "In effect, Marian's married and you stand here, alive and merry at--pray what precise period of life, Mr. Townsend?"

"I confess to twenty-one at present, sir, though I trust to live it down in time."

"I would hardly have thought you that venerable. Well, I predict for you a life without achievements but of gusto. Yes, you will bring a seasoned palate to your grave,--and I envy you. We open Willoughby Hall next week, and of course you will make one of the party. For you write, I know; and you will want to talk to me about editors and read me all your damnable verses. Nothing could please me more. Good-night, you glorious boy."

And the little man wheeled and departed, leaving me to reflect, with appropriate emotions, that I had been formally invited to visit the founder of the Economist school of writers.

4

"He said it," I more lately observed--"yes, he undoubtedly said it. And he wrote _Ashtaroth's Lackey_ and _In Old Lichfield_ and _The Foolish Prince_, and he knows all the magazine editors personally, and they are probably only too glad to oblige him about anything, and--Oh, may be, it is only a dream, after all." My heart was pounding, but not with sorrow or despair or any other maudlin passion; and Stella was now as remote from my thoughts as was Joan of Arc or Pharaoh's daughter.

5.

He Revisits Fairhaven and the Play

So I went to Willoughby Hall, which stands, as you may be aware, upon the eastern outskirt of Fairhaven. My reappearance created some stir among the older students and the town-folk, though, one and all, they presently declared me to be "too stuck-up for any use," inasmuch as I ignored them in favour of the Charteris house-party,--after, of course, one visit to Chapel, which I paid a little obviously _en prince_, and affably shook hands with all the Faculty, and was completely conscious of how such happenings impressed us when I, too, was a student.

So much had happened since then, and I felt so much older,--with my existence so delightfully blighted, too,--that it seemed droll to find Colonel Snawley and Dr. Jeal still sitting in arm chairs before Clarriker's Emporium, very much as I had left them there ten months ago.

2

By a disastrous chance did Bettie Hamlyn spend that spring, as well as the preceding year, in Colorado with her mother, who died there that summer; and to me Fairhaven proper without Bettie Hamlyn seemed a tawdry and desolate place; and I know that but for Mrs. Hamlyn's illness--a querulous woman for whom I never cared a jot,--my future life had been quite otherwise. For, as I told Bettie once, and it was true, I have found in the world but three sorts of humanity--"Myself, and Bettie Hamlyn, and the other people."

So I still wrote to Bettie Hamlyn on the seventh of every month--because that was her birthday,--and again on the twenty-third, because that was mine.

And I thought of many things as I walked by the deserted garden, where there was nothing which concerned me now, not even a ghost. I did not go in to leave a card upon Professor Hamlyn. The empty house confronted me too blankly, with its tight-shuttered windows, like blind eyes, and I hurried by.

3

Meanwhile, this was the first time for many years that Willoughby Hall had been occupied by any other than caretakers; and Fairhaven, to confess the truth, was a trifle ill-at-ease before the modish persons who now tenanted the old mansion; and consoled itself after an immemorial usage by backbiting.

And meanwhile I enjoyed myself tremendously. It was the first time I was ever thrown with people who were unanimously agreed that, after all, nothing is very serious. Mrs. Charteris, of course, was different; but she, like the others, found me divertingly naive and, in consequence, petted and cosseted me. I like petting; and since everyone seemed agreed to regard me as "the Child in the House"--that was Alicia Wade's nickname, and it clung,--and to like having a child in the house, I began a little to heighten my very real boyishness.

There was no harm in it; and if people were fonder of me because I sat upon the floor by preference, and drolly exaggerated what I really thought, it became a sort of public duty to do these things. So I did, and found it astonishingly pleasant.

4

And meanwhile too, John Charteris could never see enough of me, whom, as I to-day suspect, Charteris was studying conscientiously, to the end that I should be converted into "copy." For me, I was waiting cannily until he should actually ask to see those manuscripts I had brought to Willoughby Hall, and should help me to get them published. So there were two of us.... In any event, it was just three weeks after Stella's marriage that Charteris coaxed me into Fairhaven's Opera House to witness a performance of _Romeo and Juliet_, by the Imperial Dramatic Company.

I went under protest; I had witnessed the butchery of so many dramas within these walls during my college days, that I knew what I must anticipate, I said. I had, as a matter of fact, always enjoyed the Opera House "shows," but I did not wish to acknowledge the harboring of such crude tastes to Charteris. In any event, at the conclusion of the second act,--

"By Jove!" said I, in a voice that shook a little. "She's a stunner!" I jolted out, as I proceeded to applaud, vigorously, with both hands and feet. "And who would have thought it! Good Lord, who would have thought it!"

Charteris smiled, in that infernally patronizing way he had sometimes. "A beautiful woman, my dear boy,--an inordinately beautiful woman, in fact, but entirely lacking in temperament."

"Temperament!" I scoffed; "what's temperament to two eyes like those? Why, they're as big as golf-balls! And her voice--why, a violin--a very superior violin--if it could talk, would have just such a voice as that woman has! Temperament! Oh, you make me ill! Why, man, just look at her!" I said, conclusively.

Charteris looked, I presume. In any event, the Juliet of the evening stood before the curtain, smiling, bowing to right and left. The citizens of Fairhaven were applauding her with a certain conscientious industry, for they really found Romeo and Juliet a rather dull couple. The general opinion, however, was that Miss Montmorenci seemed an elegant actress, and in some interesting play, like _The Two Orphans_ or _Lady Audley's Secret_, would be well worth seeing. Upon those who had witnessed her initial performance, she had made a most favorable impression in _The Lady of Lyons_; while at the Tuesday matinee, as Lady Isabel in _East Lynne_, she had wrung the souls of her hearers, and had brought forth every handkerchief in the house. Moreover, she was very good-looking,--quite the lady, some said; and, after all, one cannot expect everything for twenty-five cents; considering which circumstances, Fairhaven applauded with temperate ardor, and made due allowance for Shakespeare as being a classic, and, therefore, of course, commendable, but not necessarily interesting.

5

"Well?" I queried, when she had vanished. I was speaking under cover of the orchestra,--a courtesy title accorded a very ancient and very feeble piano. "Well, and what do you think of her--of her looks, I means? Who cares for temperament in a woman!"

Charteris assumed a virtuous expression. "I don't dare tell you," said he; "you forget I am a married man."

Then I frowned a little. I often resented Charteris's flippant allusion to a wife whom I considered, with some reason, to be vastly too good for her husband. And I considered how near I had come to remaining with the others at Willoughby Hall--for that new game they called bridge-whist! And I decided I would never care for bridge. How on earth could presumably sensible people be content to coop themselves in a drawing-room on a warm May evening, when hardly a mile away was a woman with perfectly unfathomable eyes and a voice which was a love-song? Of course, she couldn't act, but, then, who wanted her to act? I indignantly demanded of my soul.

One simply wanted to look at her, and hear her speak. Charteris, with his prattle about temperament, was an ass; when a woman is born with such eyes and with a voice like that, she has done her full duty by the world, and has prodigally accomplished all one has the tiniest right to expect of her.

It was impossible she was in reality as beautiful as she seemed, because no woman was quite so beautiful as that; most of it was undoubtedly due to rouge and rice-powder and the footlights; but one could not be mistaken about the voice. And if her speech was that, what must her singing be! I thought; and in the outcome I remembered this reflection best of all.

I consulted my programme. It informed me, in large type at the end, that Juliet was "old Capulet's daughter," and that the part was played by Miss Annabelle Alys Montmorenci.

And I sighed. I admitted to myself that from a woman who wilfully assumed such a name little could be hoped. Still, I would like to see her off the stage...without all those gaudy fripperies and gewgaws...merely from curiosity.... Then too, they said those actresses were pretty gay....

6

"A most enjoyable performance," said Mr. Charteris, as we came out of the Opera House. "I have always had a sneaking liking for burlesque."

Thereupon he paused to shake hands with Mrs. Adrian Rabbet, wife to the rector of Fairhaven.

"Such a sad play," she chirped, "and, do you know, I am afraid it is rather demoralizing in its effects on young people. No, of course, I didn't think of bringing the children, Mr. Charteris--Shakespeare's language is not always sufficiently obscure, you know, to make that safe. And besides, as I so often say to Mr. Rabbet, it is sad to think of our greatest dramatist having been a drinking man. It quite depressed me all through the play to think of him hobnobbing with Dr.

Johnson at the Tabard Inn, and making such irregular marriages, and stealing sheep--or was it sheep, now?"

I said that, as I remembered, it was a fox, which he hid under his cloak until the beast bit him.

"Well, at any rate, it was something extremely deplorable and characteristic of genius, and I quite feel for his wife." Mrs. Rabbet sighed, and endeavored, I think, to recollect whether it was _Ingomar_ or _Spartacus_ that Shakespeare wrote. "However," she concluded, "they play _Ten Nights in a Barroom_ on Thursday, and I shall certainly bring the children then, for I am always glad for them to see a really moral and instructive drama. That reminds me! I absolutely must tell you what Tom said about actors the other day--"

And she did. This led naturally to Matilda's recent and blasphemous comments on George Washington, and her observations as to the rector's dog, and little Adey's personal opinion of Elisha. And so on, in a manner not unfamiliar to fond parents. Mrs. Rabbet said toward the end that it was a most enjoyable chat, although to me it appeared to partake rather of the nature of a monologue. It consumed perhaps a half-hour; and when we two at last relinquished Mrs. Rabbet to her husband's charge, it was with a feeling not altogether unakin to relief.

7

We walked slowly down Fairhaven's one real street, which extends due east from the College for as much as a mile, to end inconsequently in those carefully preserved foundations, which are now the only remnant of a building wherein a number of important matters were settled in Colonial days. There Cambridge Street divides like a Y, one branch of which leads to Willoughby Hall.

Our route from the Opera House thus led through the major part of Fairhaven, which, after an evening of unwonted dissipation, was now largely employed in discussing the play, and turning the cat out for the night. The houses were mostly dark, and the moon, nearing its full, silvered row after row of blank windows. There was an odour of growing things about, for in Fairhaven the gardens are many.

Then it befell that I made a sudden exclamation.

"Eh?" said Charteris.

"Why, nothing," I explained, lucidly.

It may be mentioned, however, that we were, at this moment, passing a tall hedge of box, set about a large garden. The hedge was perhaps five feet six in height; Charteris was also five feet six, whereas I was an unusually tall young man, and topped my host by a good half-foot.

"I say," I observed, after a little, "I'm all out of cigarettes. I'll go back to the drug-store," I suggested, as seized with a happy thought, "and get some. I noticed it was still open. Don't think of waiting for me," I urged, considerately.

"Why, great heavens!" Charteris ejaculated; "take one of mine. I can recommend them, I assure you--and, in any event, there are all sorts, I fancy, at the house. They keep only the rankest kind of domestic tobacco yonder."

"I prefer it," I insisted, "oh, yes, I really prefer it. So much milder and more wholesome, you know. I never smoke any other sort. My doctor insists on my smoking the very rankest tobacco I can get. It is much better for the heart, he says, because you don't smoke so much of it, you know. Besides," I concluded, virtuously, "it is infinitely cheaper; you can get twenty cigarettes all for five cents at some places. I really must economize, I think."

Charteris turned, and with great care stared in every direction. He discovered nothing unusual. "Very well!" assented Mr. Charteris; "I, too, have an eye for bargains. I will go with you."

"If you do alive," quoth I, quite honestly, "I devoutly desire that all sorts of unpleasant things may happen to me for not having wrung your neck first."

Charteris grinned. "Immoral young rip!" said he; "I warn you, before entering the ministry, Mr. Rabbet was accounted an excellent shot."

"Get out!" said I.

And the fervour of my utterance was such that Charteris proceeded to obey. "Don't be late for breakfast, if you can help it," he urged, kindly. "Of course, though, you are up to some new form of insanity, and I shall probably be sent for in the morning, to bail you out of the lock-up."

Thereupon he turned on his heel, and went down the deserted street, singing sweetly.

Sang Mr. Charteris:

"Curly gold locks cover foolish brains,
Billing and cooing is all your cheer,
Sighing and singing of midnight strains
Under bonnybells" window-panes.
Wait till you've come to forty year!

"Forty times over let Michaelmas pass,
Grizzling hair the brain doth clear;
Then you know a boy is an ass,
Then you know the worth of a lass,
Once you have come to forty-year."

6.

He Chats Over a Hedge

Left to myself, I began to retrace my steps. Solitude had mitigated my craving for tobacco in a surprising manner; indeed, a casual observer

might have thought it completely forgotten, for I walked with curious leisure. When I had come again to the box-hedge my pace had degenerated, a little by a little, into an aimless lounge. Mr. Robert Etheridge Townsend was rapt with admiration of the perfect beauty of the night.

Followed a strange chance. There was only the mildest breeze about; it was barely audible among the leaves above; and yet--so unreliable are the breezes of still summer nights,--with a sudden, tiny and almost imperceptible outburst, did this treacherous breeze lift Mr. Townsend's brand-new straw hat from his head, and waft it over the hedge of trim box-bushes. This was unfortunate, for, as has been said, the hedge was a tall and sturdy hedge. So I peeped over it, with disconsolate countenance.

2

"Beastly awkward," said I, as meditatively; "I'd give a great deal to know how I'm going to get my hat back without breaking through the blessed hedge, and rousing the house, and being taken for a burglar, may be--"

"It is terrible," assented a quite tranquil voice; "but if gentlemen _will_ venture abroad on such terrible nights--"

"Eh?" said I. I looked up quickly at the moon; then back toward the possessor of the voice. It was peculiar I had not noticed her before, for she sat on a rustic bench not more than forty feet away, and in full view of the street. It was, perhaps, the strangeness of the affair that was accountable for the great wonder in my soul; and the little tremor which woke in my speech.

"--so windy," she complained.

"Er--ah--yes, quite so!" I agreed, hastily.

"I am really afraid that it must be a tornado. Ah," she continued, emotion catching at her voice, "heaven help all poor souls at sea! How the wind must whistle through the cordage! how the marlin-spikes must quiver, and the good ship reel on such a night!" She looked up at a cloudless sky, and sighed.

"Er h'm!" I observed.

For she had come forward and had held out my hat toward me, and I could see her very plainly now; and my mouth was making foolish sounds, and my heart was performing certain curious and varied gymnastics which could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be included among its proper duties, and which interfered with my breathing.

3

"Didn't I know it--didn't I know it?" I demanded of my soul, and my pulses sang a paean; "I knew, with that voice, she couldn't be a common actress--a vulgar, raddled creature out of a barn! You not a gentlewoman! Nonsense! Why--why, you're positively incredible! Oh, you

great, wonderful, lazy woman, you are probably very stupid, and you certainly can't act, but your eyes are black velvet, and your voice is evidently stolen from a Cremona, and as for your hair, there must be pounds of it, and, altogether, you ought to be set up on a pedestal for men to worship! There is just one other woman in the whole wide world as beautiful as you are; and she is two thousand years old, and is securely locked up in the Louvre, and belongs to the French Government, and, besides, she hasn't any arms, so that even there you have the advantage!"

Indeed, Miss Annabelle Alys Montmorenci was of much the same large, placid type as the Venus of Milo, nor were the upper portions of the two faces dissimilar. Miss Montmorenci's lips, however, were far more curved, more buxom, and were, at the present moment, bordered by an absolutely bewildering assemblage of dimples which the statue may not boast.

4

"I really think," said Miss Montmorenci, judicially, "that it would be best for you to seek some shelter from this devastating wind. It really is not safe, you know, in the open. You might be swept away, just as your hat was."

"The shelter of a tree--" I began, looking doubtfully into the garden, which had any number of trees.

"The very thing," she assented. "There is a splendid oak yonder, just half a block up the street." And she graciously pointed it out.

I regarded it with disapproval. "Such a rickety old tree," I objected, sulkily.

Followed a silence. She bent her head to one side, and looked up at me. She was now grave with a difference. "A strolling actress isn't supposed to be very particular, is she?" asked Miss Montmorenci. "She wouldn't object to a man's coming by night and trying to scrape acquaintance with her,--a man who wouldn't think of being seen with her by day? She would like it, probably. She--she'd probably be accustomed to it, wouldn't she?" And Miss Montmorenci smiled.

And I, on a sudden, was abjectly ashamed of myself. "Why, you can't think that of me!" I babbled. "I--oh, don't think me that sort, I beg of you! I'm not--really, I'm not, Miss Montmorenci! But I admired you so much to-night--I--oh, of course, I was very silly and very presumptuous, but, really, you know--"

I paused for a little. This was miles apart from the glib talk I had designed.

"My name is Robert Townsend," I then continued; "I am staying at Mr. Charteris's place, just outside of Fairhaven. And I am delighted to meet you, Miss Montmorenci. So now, you see, we have been quite properly introduced, haven't we? And, by the way," I suggested, after a moment's meditation, "there is a very interesting old college here--old pictures, records, historical association and such like. I would like to inspect it, vastly. Can't I call for you in the morning. We can do it together, if you don't mind, and if you haven't already seen

it. Won't you, Miss Montmorenci? You really ought to see King's College, you know; it is quite famous, because I was educated there, and no end of other interesting things have happened within its venerable confines."

She had drawn close to the hedge. "You really mean it?" she asked. "You would walk through the streets of this Fairhaven with me--with a barn-stormer, with a strolling actress? You'd be afraid!" she cried, suddenly; "oh, yes, you talk bravely enough, but you'd be afraid, of course, when the time came! You'd be afraid!"

I had taken the hat, but my head was still uncovered. "I don't think," said I, reflectively, "that I am afraid of many things, somehow. But of one thing I am certainly not afraid, and that is of mistaking a good woman for--for anything else. Their eyes are different somehow," I haltingly explained, as to myself; then I smiled. "Shall we say eleven o'clock?"

Miss Montmorenci laid one hand upon the hedgetop and slowly twisted off four box-leaves what while I waited. "I--I believe you," she said, in' meditation; "oh, yes, I believe you, somehow, Mr. Townsend. But we rehearse in the morning, and there is a matinee every day, you know, and--and there are other reasons--" She paused, irresolutely. "No," said Miss Montmorenci, "I thank you, but--good night."

"Oh, I say! am I never to see any more of you?"

A century or so of silence now. Her deliberation seemed endless.

At last: "Matinees and rehearsal keep us busy by day. But I am boarding here for the week, and--and I rest here in the garden after the evening performance. It is cool, it--it is like a glass of water after taking rather bitter medicine. And you aren't a bad sort, are you? No; you look too big and strong and clean, Mr. Townsend. And, besides, you're just a boy--"

"In that case," cried Mr. Townsend, "I shall say goodnight with a light heart." And I turned to go.

"A moment--" said she.

"An eternity," I proffered.

"Promise me," she said, "that you will not come again this week to the Opera House."

My brows were raised a trifle. "I adore the drama," I pleaded.

"And I loathe it. And I act very badly--hopelessly so," said Miss Montmorenci, with an indolent shrug; "and, somehow, I don't want you to see me do it. Why did you mind my calling you a boy? You _are_, you know."

So I protested I had not minded it at all; and I promised. "But at least," I said, triumphantly, "you can't prevent my remembering Juliet!"

She said of course not, only I was not to be silly.

"And therefore," quoth I, "Juliet shall be remembered always." I smiled and waved my hand. "_Au revoir_, Signorina Capulet," said I.

And I took my departure. My blood rejoiced, with a strange fervor, in the summer moonlight. It was good to be alive.

7.

He Goes Mad in a Garden

"And, oh, but it is good to be with you again, Signorina!" cried I, as I came with quick strides into the moonlit garden. I caught both her hands in mine, and laughed like an ineffably contented person. There was nothing very subtle about the boy that then was I; at worst, he overacted what he really felt; and just at present he was pleased with the universe, and he saw no possible reason for concealing the fact.

It was characteristic, also, that she made no pretence at being surprised by my coming. She was expecting me and she smiled very frankly at seeing me. Also, in place of the street dress of Tuesday, she wore something that was white and soft and clinging, and left her throat but half concealed. This, for two reasons, was sensible and praiseworthy; one being that the night was warm, and the other that it really broadened my ideas as to the state of perfection which it is possible for the human throat to attain.

2

"So you don't like my stage-name?" she asked, as I sat down beside her. "Well, for that matter, no more do I." "It doesn't suit you," I protested--"not in the least. Whereas, you might be a Signorina Somebody-or-other, you know. You are dark and stately and--well, I can't tell you all the things you are," I complained, "because the English language is so abominably limited. But, upon the whole, I am willing to take the word of the playbill,--yes, I am quite willing to accept you as Signorina Capulet. She had a habit of sitting in gardens at night, I remember. Yes," I decided, after reflection, "I really think it highly probable that you are old Capulet's daughter. I shall make a point of it to pick a quarrel as soon as possible, with that impertinent, trespassing young Montague. He really doesn't deserve you, you know."

Unaccountably, her face saddened. Then, "Signorina? Signorina?" she appraised the title. "It _is_ rather a pretty name. And the other is horrible. Yes, you may call me Signorina, if you like."

3

She would not tell me her real name. She was unmarried,--this much she told me, but of her past life, her profession, or of her future she never spoke. "I don't want to talk about it," she said, candidly. "We play for a week in Fairhaven, and here, once off the stage, I intend to forget I am an actress. When I am on the stage," she added, in

meditative wise, "of course everyone knows I am not."

I laughed. I found her very satisfying; she was not particularly intelligent, perhaps, but then I was beginning to consider clever women rather objectionable creatures. There was a sufficiency of them among the Charteris house-party--Alicia Wade, for instance, and Pauline Ashmeade and Cynthia Chaytor,--and I thought of them almost resentfully. The world had accorded them not exactly what they most wanted, perhaps, but, at least, they had its luxuries; and they said sharp, cynical things about the world in return. In a woman's mouth epigrams were as much out-of-place as a meerschaum pipe.

Here, on the contrary, was a woman whom the world had accorded nothing save hard knocks, and she regarded it, upon the whole, as an eminently pleasant place to live in. She accepted its rebuffs with a certain large calm, as being all in the day's work. There was, no doubt, some good and sufficient reason for these inconveniences; not for a moment, however, did she puzzle her handsome head in speculating over this reason. She was probably too lazy. And the few favours the world accorded her she took thankfully.

"You see," she explained to me--this was on Thursday night, when I found her contentedly eating cheap candy out of a paper bag,--"the world is really very like a large chocolate drop; it's rather bitter on the outside, but when you have bitten through, you find the heart of it sweet. Oh, how greedy!--you've taken the last candied cherry, and I am specially fond of candied cherries!" And indeed, she looked frankly regretful as I munched it.

I thought her adorable; and in exchange for that last candied cherry I promised her some of the new books,--_David Harum_ certainly, and, _When Knighthood Was in Flower_, because everybody was reading it, and Mr. Dooley, because they said this young fellow Dunne was nearly as funny as Bill Nye....

4

In fact, the moon seemed to shine down each night upon that particular garden in a more and more delightful and dangerous manner. And I being a fairly normal and healthy young man, the said moonshine affected me in a fashion which has been peculiar to moonshine since Noah was a likely stripling; my blood appeared to me, at times, to leap and bubble in my veins as if it had been some notably invigorating and heady tipple; and my heart was unreasonably contented, and I gave due thanks for this woman who had come to me unsullied through the world's gutter. For she came unsullied; there was no questioning that.

I pictured her in certain execrable rhymes as the Lady in _Comus_, moving serene and unafraid among a rabble of threatening, bestial shapes. And I rejoiced that there were women like this in the world,--brave, wholesome, unutterably honest women, whose very lack of cleverness--oh, subtle appeal to my vanity!--demanded a gentleman's protection.

As has been said, I was a well-grown lad, but when I thought in this fashion I seemed to myself, at a moderate computation, ten feet in height,--and just the person, in short, who would be an ideal protector.

Thus far my callow meditations. My course of reasoning was perhaps faulty, but then there are, at twenty-one, many processes more interesting and desirable than the perfecting of a mathematical demonstration. And so, for a little, my blood rejoiced with a strange fervour in the summer moonlight, and it was good to be alive.

5

Thursday was the twenty-third of the month, so upon that afternoon I wrote to Bettie Hamlyn, in far-off Colorado.

It was a lengthy letter. It told her of how desolate her garden was and of how odd Fairhaven seemed without her. It told how I had half changed my mind, and would probably not go to Europe with Mr. Charteris, after all. Bettie had been at pains, in the letter I was answering, to expatiate upon her hatred of Charteris, whom she had never seen. My letter told her, in fine, of a variety of matters. And it ended:

"I went to the Opera House on Monday. But that, like everything else, isn't the same without you, dear. The woman who played Juliet was, I believe, rather good-looking, but I scarcely noticed her in worrying over the pitiful circumstance that the Apothecary and the Populace of Verona had only one pair of shoes between them. Besides, Mercutio kept putting on a bathrobe and insisting he was Friar Laurence.... I would write more about it, if I had not almost used up all my paper. There is just room to say--"

6

This was, as I have stated, on Thursday afternoon. Upon the following evening--

"And why not?" I demanded, for the ninth time.

But she was resolute. "Oh, it is dear of you!" she cried; "and I--I do care for you,--how could I help it? But it can't be,--it can't ever be," she repeated wearily; and then she looked at me, and smiled a little. "Oh, boy, boy! dear, dear boy!" she murmured, half in wonder, "how foolish of you and--how dear of you!"

"And why not?" said I--for the tenth time.

She gave a sobbing laugh. "Oh, the great, brave, stupid boy!" she said, and, for a moment, her hand rested on my hair; "he doesn't know what he is doing,--ah, no, he doesn't know! Why, I might hold you to your word! I might sue you for breach of promise! I might marry you out of hand! Think of that! Why I am only a strolling actress, and fair game for any man,--any man who isn't particular," she added, with the first trace of bitterness I had ever observed in her odd, throaty voice. "And you would marry me,--you! you would give me your name, you would make me your wife! You have actually begged me to be your wife, haven't you? Ah, my brave, strong, stupid Bobbie, how many women must love you,--women who have a right to love you! And you would give them all up for me,--for me, you foolish Bobbie, whom you haven't known a week! Ah, how dear of you!" And she caught her breath swiftly, and her

voice broke.

"Yes," I brazenly confessed; "I really believe I would give them all up--every blessed one of them--for you." I inspected her, critically, and then smiled. "And I don't think that I would be deserving any very great credit for self sacrifice, either, Signorina."

"My dear," she answered, "it pleases you to call me old Capulet's daughter,--but if I were only a Capulet, and you a Montague, don't you see how much easier it would be? But we don't belong to rival families, we belong to rival worlds, to two worlds that have nothing in common, and never can have anything in common. They are too strong for us, Bobbie,--my big, dark, squalid world, that you could never sink to, and your gay little world which I can never climb to,--your world that would have none of me, even if--even _if_--" But the condition was not forthcoming.

"The world," said I, in an equable tone--"My dear, I may as well warn you I am shockingly given to short and expressive terms, and as we are likely to see a deal of each other for the future, you will have to be lenient with them,--accordingly, I repeat, the world may be damned."

And I laughed, in unutterable content. "Have none of you!" I cried. "My faith, I would like to see a world which would have none of you! Ah, Signorina, it is very plain to me that you don't realize what a beauty, what a--a--good Lord, what an unimaginative person it was that invented the English language! Why, you have only to be seen, heart's dearest,--only to be seen, and the world is at your feet,--my world, to which you belong of rights; my world, that you are going to honour by living in; my world, that in a little will go mad for sheer envy of blundering, stupid, lucky me!" And I laughed her to scorn.

There was a long silence. Then, "I belonged to your world once, you know."

"Why, of course, I knew as much as that."

"And yet--you never asked--" "Ah, Signorina, Signorina!" I cried; "what matter? Don't I know you for the bravest, tenderest, purest, most beautiful woman God ever made? I doubt you--I! My word!" said I, and stoutly, "that _would_ be a pretty go! You are to tell me just what you please," I went on, almost belligerently, "and when and where you please, my lady. And I would thank you," I added, with appropriate sternness, "to discontinue your pitiful and transparent efforts to arouse unworthy suspicions as to my future wife. They are wasted, madam,--utterly wasted, I assure you."

"Oh, Bobbie, Bobbie!" she sighed; "you are such a beautiful baby! Give me time," she pleaded weakly.

And, when I scowled my disapproval, "Only till tomorrow--only a little, little twenty-four hours. And promise me, you won't speak of this--this crazy nonsense again tonight. I must think."

"Never!" said I, promptly; "because I couldn't be expected to keep such an absurd promise," I complained, in indignation.

"And you look so strong," she murmured, with evident disappointment,-- "so strong and firm and--and--admirable!"

So I promised at once. And I kept the promise--that is, I did subsequently refer to the preferable and proper course to pursue in divers given circumstances "when we are married;" but it was on six occasions only, and then quite casually,--and six times, as I myself observed, was, all things considered, an extremely moderate allowance and one that did great credit to my self-control.

7

"And besides, why _not_?" I said,--for the eleventh time.

"There are a thousand reasons. I am not your equal, I am just an ostensible actress--Why, it would be your ruin!"

"My dear Mrs. Grundy, I confess that, for the moment, your disguise had deceived me. But now: I recognize your voice."

She laughed a little. "And after all," the grave voice said, which was, to me at least, the masterwork of God, "after all, hasn't one always to answer Mrs. Grundy--in the end?"

"Why, then, you disgusting old harridan," said I, "I grant you it is utterly impossible to defend my behaviour in this matter, and, believe me, I don't for an instant undertake the task. To the contrary, I agree with you perfectly,--my conduct is most thoughtless and reprehensible, and merits your very severest condemnation. For look you, here is a young man, well born, well-bred, sufficiently well endowed with this world's goods, in short, an eminently eligible match, preparing to marry an 'ostensible actress' a year or two his senior,--why, of course, you are,--and of whose past he knows nothing,--absolutely nothing. Don't you shudder at the effrontery of the minx? Is it not heart-breaking to contemplate the folly, the utter infatuation of the misguided youth who now stands ready to foist such a creature upon the circles of which your ladyship is a distinguished ornament? I protest it is really incredible. I don't believe a word of it."

"I cannot quite believe it, either, Bobbie--"

"But you see, he loves her. You, my dear madam, blessed with a wiser estimation of our duties to society, of the responsibilities of our position, of the cost of even the most modest establishment, and, above all, of the sacredness of matrimony and the main chance, may well shrug your shoulders at such a plea. For, as you justly observe, what, after all, is this love? only a passing madness, an exploded superstition, an irresponsible _ignis fatuus_ flickering over the quagmires and shallows of the divorce court. People's lives are no longer swayed by such absurdities; it is quite out of date."

"Yes; you are joking, Bobbie, I know; yet it is really out of date--"

"But I protest, loudly, my hand upon my heart, that it is true; people no longer do mad things for love, or ever did, in spite of lying poets; any more than the birds mate in the spring, or the sun rises in the morning; popular fallacies, my dear madam, every one of them. You and I know better, and are not to be deceived by appearances, however specious they may be. Ah, but come now! Having attained this highly

satisfactory condition, we can well afford to laugh at all our past mistakes,--yes, even at our own! For let us be quite candid. Wasn't there a time, dear lady, before Mr. Grundy came a-wooing, when, somehow, one was constantly meeting unexpected people in the garden, and, somehow, one sat out a formidable number of dances during the evening, and, somehow, the poets seemed a bit more plausible than they do today? It was very foolish, of course,--but, ah, madam, there _was_ a time,--a time when even our staid blood rejoiced with a strange fervour in the summer moonlight, and it was good to be alive! Come now, have you the face to deny it,--Mrs. Methuselah?"

"It has not been quite bad to be alive, these last few hours--"

"And, oh, my dear, how each of us will look back some day to this very moment! And we are wasting it! And I have not any words to tell you how I love you! I am just a poor, dumb brute!" I groaned.

Then very tenderly she began to talk with me in a voice I cannot tell you of, and concerning matters not to be recorded.

And still she would not promise anything; and I would give an arm, I think, could it replevin all the idiotic and exquisite misery I knew that night.

8.

He Duels with a Stupid Woman

Yet I approached the garden on Saturday night with an elated heart. This was the last evening of the engagement of the Imperial Dramatic Company. To-morrow the troupe was to leave Fairhaven; but I was very confident that the leading lady would not accompany them, and by reason of this confidence, I smiled as I strode through the city of Fairhaven, and hummed under my breath an inane ditty of an extremely sentimental nature.

As I bent over the little wooden gate, and searched for its elusive latch, a man came out of the garden, wheeling sharply about the hedge that, until this, had hidden him; and simultaneously, I was aware of the mingled odour of bad tobacco and of worse whiskey. Well, she would have done with such people soon! I threw open the gate, and stood aside to let him pass; then, as the moon fell full upon the face of the man, I gave an inarticulate, startled sound.

"Fine evening, sir," suggested the stranger.

"Eh?" said I; "eh? Oh, yes, yes! quite so!" Afterward I shrugged my shoulders, and went into the garden, a trifle puzzled.

2

I found her beneath a great maple in the heart of the enclosure. It was a place of peace; the night was warm and windless, and the moon, now come to its full glory, rode lazily in the west through a froth of

clouds. Everywhere the heavens were faintly powdered with stardust, but even the planets seemed pale and ineffectual beside the splendour of the moon.

The garden was drenched in moonshine--moonshine that silvered the unmown grass-plots, and converted the white rose-bushes into squat-figured wraiths, and tinged the red ones with dim purple hues. On every side the foliage blurred into ambiguous vistas, where fireflies loitered; and the long shadows of the nearer trees, straining across the grass, were wried patterns scissored out of blue velvet. It was a place of peace and light and languid odours, and I came into it, laughing, the possessor of an over-industrious heart and of a perfectly unreasoning joy over the fact that I was alive.

"I say," I observed, as I stretched luxuriously upon the grass beside her, "you put up at a shockingly disreputable place, Signorina."
"Yes?" said she.

"That fellow who just went out," I explained--"do you know the police want his address, I think? No," I continued, after consideration, "I am sure I'm not mistaken,--that is either Ned Lethbury, the embezzler, or his twin-brother. It's been five years since I saw him, but that is he. And that", said I, with proper severity, "is a sample of the sort of associate you prefer to your humble servant! Ah, Signorina, Signorina, I am a tolerably worthless chap, I admit, but at least I never forged and embezzled and then skipped my bail! So you had much better marry me, my dear, and say good-bye to your peculating friends. But, deuce take it! I forgot--I ought to notify the police or something, I suppose."

She caught my arm. Her mouth opened and shut again before she spoke. "He--he is my husband," she said, in a toneless voice. Then, on a sudden, she wailed: "Oh, forgive me! Oh, my great, strong, beautiful boy, forgive me, for I am very unhappy, and I cannot meet your eyes--your honest eyes! Ah, my dear, my dear, do not look at me like that,--you don't know how it hurts!"

The garden noises lisped about us in the long silence that fell. Then the far-off whistling of some home going citizen of Fairhaven tinkled shrilly through the night, and I shuddered a bit.

"I don't understand," I commenced, strangely quiet. "You told me--"

"Ah, I lied to you! I lied to you!" she cried. "I didn't, mean to--hurt you. I did not know--I couldn't know--I was so lonely, Bobbie," she pleaded, with wide eyes; "oh, you don't know how lonely I am. And when you came to me that first night, you--why, you spoke to me as the men I once knew used to speak. There was respect in your voice, and I wanted that so; I hadn't had a man speak to me like that for years, you know, Bobbie. And, boy dear, I was so lonely in my squalid world,--and it seemed as if the world I used to know was calling me--your world, Bobbie--the world I am shut out from."

"Yes," I said; "I think I understand."

"And I thought for a week--just to peep into it, to be a lady again for an hour or two--why, it didn't seem wicked, then, and I wanted it so much! I--I knew I could trust you, because you were only a boy. And I was hungry--_so_ hungry for a little respect, a little courtesy,

such as men don't accord strolling actresses. So I didn't tell you till the very last I was married. I lied to you. Oh, but you don't understand, this stupid, honest boy doesn't understand anything except that I have lied to him!"

"Signorina," I said, again, and I smiled, resolutely, "I think I understand." I took both her hands in mine, and laughed a little. "But, oh, my dear, my dear," I said, "you should have told me that you loved another man; for you have let me love you for a week, and now I think that I must love you till I die."

"Love him!" she echoed. "Oh, boy dear, boy dear, what a Galahad it is! I don't think Ned ever cared for anything but Father's money; and I--why, you have seen him. How _could_ I love him?" she asked, as simply as a child.

I bowed my head. "And yet--" said I. Then I laughed again, somewhat bitterly. "Don't let's tell stories, Mrs. Lethbury," I said; "it is kindly meant, I know, but I remember you now. I even danced with you once, some seven years ago,--yes, at the Green Chalybeate. I remember the night, for a variety of reasons. You are Alfred Van Orden's daughter; your father is a wealthy man, a very wealthy man; and yet, when your--your husband disappeared you followed him--to become a strolling actress. Ah, no, a woman doesn't sacrifice everything for a man in the way you have done, unless she loves him."

I caught my breath. Some unknown force kept tugging down the corners of my mouth, in a manner that hampered speech; moreover, nothing seemed worth talking about. I had lost her. That was the one thing which mattered.

"Why, of course, I went with him," she assented, a shade surprised; "he was my husband, you know. But as for loving,--no, I don't think Ned ever really loved me," she reflected, with puckering brows. "He took that money for--for another woman, if you remember. But he is fond of me, and--and he _needs_ me."

I did not say anything; and after a little she went on, with a quick lift of speech.

"Oh, what a queer life we have led since then! You can't imagine it, my dear. He has been a tavern-keeper, a drummer,--everything! Why, last summer we sold rugs and Turkish things in Atlantic City! But he is always afraid of meeting someone who knows him, and--and he drinks too much. So we have not got on in the world, Ned and I; and now, after three years, I'm the leading lady of the Imperial Dramatic Company, and he is the manager. I forgot, though,--he is advance-agent this week, for he didn't dare stay in Fairhaven, lest some of the men at Mr. Charteris's should recognize him, you know. He came back only this evening--"

She paused for a moment; a wistful quaver crept into her speech. "Oh, it's queer, it's queer, Bobbie! Sometimes--sometimes when I have time to think, say on long Sunday afternoons, I remember my old life, every bit of it,--oh, I do remember such strange little details! I remember the designs on the bread and butter plates, and all the silver things on my desk, and the plank by my door that always creaked and somehow never got fixed, and the big, shiny buttons on the coachman's coat,--just trifles like that. And--and they hurt, they hurt, Bobbie, those

little, unimportant things! They--grip my throat."

She laughed, not very mirthfully. "Then I am like the old lady in the nursery rhyme, and say, Surely, this can't be I. But it is I, boy dear,--a strolling actress, a barn-stormer! Isn't it queer, Bobbie? But, oh, you don't know half--"

I was remembering many things. I remembered Lethbury, a gross man, superfluously genial, whom I had never liked, although I recalled my admiration of his whiskers. I recollected young Amelia Van Orden, not come to her full beauty then, the bud of girlhood scarce slipped; and I remembered very vividly the final crash, the nine days' talk over Lethbury's flight in the face of certain conviction,--by his father-in-law's advice (as some said) who had furnished and forfeited heavy bail for the absconder. Oh, the brave woman who had followed! Oh, the brave, foolish woman! And, for the action's recompense, he was content to exhibit her to yokels, to make of her beauty an article of traffic. Heine was right; there is an Aristophanes in heaven. And then hope blazed.

"Your husband," I said, quickly, "he does not love you? He--he is not faithful to you?"

"No," she answered; "there is a Miss Fortescue--she plays second parts--"

"Ah, my dear, my dear!" I cried, with a shaking voice; "come away, Signorina,--come away with me! He _doesn't_ need you,--and, oh, my dear, I need you so! You can get your divorce and marry me. Ah, Signorina, come away,--come away from this squalid life that is killing you, to the world you are meant for, to the life you hunger for! Come back to the clean, lighthearted world you love, the world that is waiting to pet and caress you just as it used to do,--our world, Signorina! You don't belong here with--with the Fortescues. You belong to us."

I sprang to my feet. "Come now!" said I. "There's Anne Charteris; she is a good woman, if ever lived one. She used to know you, too, didn't she? Well, then, come with me to her, dearest--and tonight! You shall see your father tomorrow. Your father--why, think how that old man loves you, how he has longed for you, his only daughter, all these years. And I?" I spread out my hands, in the tiniest, impotent gesture. "I love you," I said, simply. "I cannot do without you, heart's dearest."

Impulsively, she rested both hands upon my breast; then bowed her head a little. The nearness of her seemed to shake in my blood, to catch at my throat, and my hands, lifted for a moment, trembled with desire of her.

"You don't understand," she said. "I am a Catholic--my mother was one, you know. There is no divorce for us. And--and besides, I'm not modern. I am very old-fashioned, I suppose, in my ideas. Do you know," she asked, with a smile upon the face which lifted confidingly toward me, "I--I _really_ believe the world was made in six days; and that the whale swallowed Jonah, and that there is a real purgatory and a hell of fire and brimstone. You don't, do you, Bobbie? But I do,--and I promised to stay with him till death parted us, you know, and I must do it. I am all he has. He would get even worse without me. I--oh, boy

dear, boy dear, I love you so!" And her voice broke, in a great, choking sob.

"A promise--a promise made by an ungrown girl to a brute--a thief--!"

"No, dear," she answered, quietly; "a promise made to God."

And looking into her face, I saw love there, and anguish, and determination. It seemed monstrous, but of a sudden I knew with a dull surety; she loved me, but she thought she had no right to love me; she would not go with me. She would go with that drunken, brutish thief.

And I suddenly recalled certain clever women--Alicia Wade, Pauline Ashmeade, Cynthia Chaytor--the women of that world wherein I was novitiate; beyond question, they would raise delicately penciled eyebrows to proclaim this woman a fool--and to wonder.

They would be right, I thought. She was only a splendid, tender-hearted, bright-eyed fool, the woman that I loved. My heart sickened as her folly rose between us, an impassable barrier. I hated it; and I revered it.

Thus we two stood silent for a time. The wind murmured above in the maples, lazily, ominously. Then the gate clicked, with a vicious snap that pierced the silence like the report of a distant rifle. "That is probably Ned," she said wearily. "I had forgotten they close the barrooms earlier on Saturday nights. So good-bye, Bobbie. You--you may kiss me, if you like."

So for a moment our lips met. Afterward I caught her hands in mine, and gripped them close to my breast, looking down into her eyes. They glinted in the moonlight, deep pools of sorrow, and tender--oh, unutterably tender and compassionate.

But I found no hope there. I lifted her hand to my lips, and left her alone in the garden.

3

Lethbury was fumbling at the gate.

"Such nuishance," he complained, "havin' gate won't unlock. Latch mus' got los'--po' li'l latch," murmured Mr. Lethbury, plaintively--"all 'lone in cruel worl'!"

I opened the gate for him, and stood aside to let him pass toward his wife.

9.

He Puts His Tongue in His Cheek

It was not long before John Charteris knew of the entire affair, for in those days I had few concealments from him: and the little wizened

man brooded awhile over my misery, with an odd wistfulness.

"I remember Amelia Van Orden perfectly," he said--"now. I ought to have recognized her. Only, she was never, in her best days, the paragon you depict. She sang, I recollect; people made quite a to-do over her voice. But she was very, very stupid, and used to make loud shrieking noises when she was amused, and was generally reputed to be 'fast.' I never investigated. Even so, there was not any real doubt as to her affair, in any event, with Anton von Anspach, after that night the sleigh broke down--"

"Oh, spare me all those ancient Lichfield scandals! She is an angel, John, if there was ever one."

"In your eyes, doubtless! So your heart is broken. Yet do you not realize that not a month ago you were heartbroken over Stella Musgrave? Child, I repeat, I envy you this perpetual unhappiness, for I have lost, as you will presently lose, the capacity of being quite miserable."

"But, John, it seems as if there were nothing left to live for, now--"

"At twenty-one! Well, certainly, at that age one loves to think of life as being implacable. But you will soon discover that she is merely inconsequential, and that none of her antics are of lasting importance; and you will learn to smile a deal more often than you weep or laugh."

Then we talked of other matters. It was presently settled that Charteris was to take me abroad with him that summer; and with the thorough approval of my mother.

"Mr. Charteris will be of incalculable benefit to you," she told me, "in introducing you to the very best people, all of whom he knows, of course, and besides you are getting to look older than I, and it is unpleasant to have to be always explaining you are only my stepson, particularly as your father never married anybody but me, though, heaven knows, I wish he had. Of course you will be just as wild as your father and your Uncle George. I suppose that is to be expected, and I daresay it will break my heart, but all I ask of you is please to keep out of the newspapers, except of course the social items. And if you _must_ associate with abandoned women, please for my sake, Robert, don't have anything to do with those who can prove that they are only misunderstood, because they are the most dangerous kind."

I kissed her. "Dear little mother, I honestly believe that when you get to heaven you will refuse to speak to Mary Magdalen."

"Robert, let us remember the Bible says, 'in my Father's house are many mansions,' and of course nobody would think of putting me in the same mansion with her."

It was well-nigh the last conversation I was to hold with my mother; and I was to remember it with an odd tenderness....

2

Upon the doings of myself in Europe during the ensuing two years I

prefer to dwell as lightly as possible. I had long anticipated a sojourn in divers old-world cities; but the London I had looked to find was the London of Dickens, say, and my Paris the Paris of Dumas, or at the very least of Balzac. It is needless to mention that in the circles to which the, quite real, friendship of John Charteris afforded an entry I found little that smacked of such antiquity. I had entered a world inhabited by people who amused themselves and apparently did nothing else; and I was at first troubled by their levity, and afterward envious of it, and in the end embarked upon sedulous attempt to imitate it. I continued to be very boyish; indeed, I found myself by this in much the position of an actor who has made such a success in one particular role that the public declines to patronize him in any other.

3

It was during this first year abroad that I wrote _The Apostates_, largely through the urging of John Charteris.

"You have the ability, though, that dances most gracefully in fetters. You will never write convincingly about the life you know, because life is, to you, my adorable boy, a series of continuous miracles, to which the eyes of other men are case-hardened. Write me, then, a book about the past."

"I have thought of it," said I, "for being over here makes the past seem pretty real, somehow. Last month when I was at Ingilby I was on fire with the notion of writing something about old Ormskirk--my mother's ancestor, you know. And since I've seen what's left of Bellegarde I have wanted to write about his wife's people too,--the dukes and vicomtes of Puysange, or even about the great Jurgen. You see, I am just beginning to comprehend that these are not merely characters in Lowe's and La Vrilliere's books, but my flesh and blood kin, like Uncle George Bulmer--"

"And for that reason you want to write about them! You would, though; it is eminently characteristic. Well, then, why should you not immortalize the persons who had the honor of begetting you--oh, most handsome and most naive of children!--by writing your very best about them?" "Because to succeed--not only among the general but with the 'cultured few,' God save the mark!--it is now necessary to write not badly but abominably."

"What would you demand, then, of a book?"

I meditated. "What one most desiderates in the writings of to-day is clarity, and beauty, and tenderness and urbanity, and truth."

"Not a bad recipe, upon the whole, though I would stipulate for symmetry and distinction also--Write the book!"

"Ah," said I, "but this is the kind of book I wish to read when, of course, the mood seizes me. It is not at all the sort of book, though, I would elect to write. The main purpose of writing any book, I take it, is to be read; and people simply will not read a book when they suspect it of being carefully written. That sort of thing gets on a reader's nerves; it's too much like watching a man walk a tight-rope and wondering if he won't slip presently."

"Oh, 'people!'" Charteris flung out, in an extremity of scorn. "Since time was young, a generally incompetent humanity has been willing to pardon anything rather than the maddening spectacle of labour competently done. And they are perfectly right; it is abominable how such weak-minded persons occasionally thrust themselves into a world quite obviously designed for persons who have not any minds at all. But I was not asking you to write a 'best-seller.'"

"No, you were asking me to become an Economist, and be one of 'the few rare spirits which every age providentially affords,' and so on. That is absolute and immoral nonsense. When you publish a novel you are at least pretending to supply a certain demand; and if you don't endeavour honestly to supply it, you are a swindler, no more and no less. No, it is all very well to write for posterity, if it amuses you, John; personally, I cannot imagine what possible benefit you will derive from it, even though posterity _does_ read your books. And for myself, I want to be read and to be a power while I can appreciate the fact that I _am_ a sort of power, however insignificant. Besides, I want to make some money out of the blamed thing. Mother is a dear, of course, but, like all the Bulmers, with age she is becoming tight-fisted."

"And Esau--" Charteris began.

"Yes,--but that's Biblical, and publishing a book is business. People say to authors, just as they do to tailors: 'I want such and such an article. Make it and I'll pay you for it.' Now, your tailor may consider the Imperial Roman costume more artistic than that of today, and so may you in the abstract, but if he sent home a toga in place of a pair of trousers, you would discontinue dealing with him. So if it amuses you to make togas, well and good; I don't quarrel with it; but, personally, I mean to go into the gents' furnishing line and to do my work efficiently."

"Yes,--but with your tongue in your cheek."

"It is the one and only attitude," I sweetly answered, "in which to write if you indeed desire to be read with enjoyment." And presently I rose and launched upon

A Defence of That Attitude

"The main trouble with you, John Charteris, is that you will never recover from being _fin de siecle_. Yes, you belong to that queer dying nineteenth century. And even so, you have quite overlooked what is, perhaps, the signal achievement of the nineteenth century,--the relegation of its literature to the pharmacopoeia. The comparison of the tailor, I willingly admit, is a bad one. Those who write successfully nowadays must appeal to men and women who seek in fiction not only a means of relaxation, but spiritual comfort as well, and an uplifting rather than a mere diversion of the mind; so that they are really druggists who trade exclusively in intoxicants and hypnotics.

"Half of the customers patronize the reading-matter shops because they want to induce delusions about a world they know, and do not find particularly roseate and the other half skim through a book because they haven't anything else to do and aren't sleepy, as yet.

"Oh, in filling either prescription the trick is much the same; you

have simply to avoid bothering the reader's intellect in any way whatever. You have merely to drug it, you have merely to caress it with interminable platitudes, or else with the most uplifting avoidances of anything which happens to be unprintably rational. And you must remember always that the crass emotions of half-educated persons are, in reality, your chosen keyboard; so play upon it with an axe if you haven't any handier implement, but hit it somehow, and for months your name will be almost as famous as that of my mother's father remains the year round because he invented a celebrated baking-powder.

"It is all very well for you to sneer, and talk about art. But there are already in this world a deal more Standard Works than any man can hope to digest in the average lifetime. I don't quarrel with them, for, personally, I find even Ruskin, like the python in the circus, entirely endurable so long as there is a pane of glass between us. But why, in heaven's name, should you endeavour to harass humanity with one more battalion of morocco-bound reproaches for sins of omission, whenever humanity goes into the library to take a nap? For what other purpose do you suppose a gentleman goes into his library, pray? When he is driven to reading he does it decently in bed.

"Besides, if I like a book, why, then, in so far as I am concerned, it _is_ a good book. No, please don't talk to me about 'the dignity of literature'; modern fiction has precisely as much to do with dignity as has vaudeville or billiards or that ridiculous Prohibitionist Party, since the object of all four, I take it, is to afford diversion to people who haven't anything better to do. Thus, a novel which has diverted a thousand semi-illiterate persons is exactly ten times as good as a novel that has pleased a hundred superior persons. It is simply a matter of arithmetic.

"You prefer to look upon writing as an art, rather than a business? Oh, you silly little man, the touchstone of any artist is the skill with which he adapts his craftsmanship to his art's limitations. He will not attempt to paint a sound or to sculpture a colour, because he knows that painting and sculpture have their limitations, and he, quite consciously, recognizes this fact whenever he sets to work.

"Well, the most important limitation of writing fiction nowadays is that you have to appeal to people who would never think of reading you or anybody else, if they could possibly imagine any other employment for that particular vacant half-hour. And you cannot hope for an audience of even moderately intelligent persons, because intelligent persons do not attempt to keep abreast with modern fiction. It is probably ascribable to the fact that they enjoy being intelligent, and wish to remain so.

"You sneer at the 'best-sellers.' I tell you, in sober earnest, that the writing of a frankly trashy novel which will 'sell,' is the highest imaginable form of art. For true art, in its last terms, is the adroit circumvention of an unsurmountable obstacle. I suppose that form and harmony and colour are very difficult to tame; and the sculptor, the musician and the painter quite probably earn their hire. But people don't go to concerts unless they want to hear music; whereas the people who buy the 'best-sellers' are the people who would prefer to do _anything_ rather than be reduced to reading. I protest that the man who makes these people read on until they see how 'it all came out' is a deal more than an artist; he is a sorcerer."

And I paused, a little out of breath.

"What a boy it is!" said Charteris. "Do you know, you are uncommonly handsome when you are talking nonsense? Write the trashy book, then. I never argue with children; and besides, I do not have to read it."

4

It thus fell about that in the second European year, not very long after my mother's death, _The Apostates_ was given to the world, with what result the world has had a plenty of time wherein to forget.... It was first published in _The Quaker Post_, with pictures by Roderick King Hill, and in the autumn was brought out as a book by Stuyvesant and Brothers. I made rather a good thing cut of it financially; but the numerous letters I received from the people who had liked it I found extremely objectionable. They were not the right sort of people, I felt forlornly.... So I endured my plaudits without undue elation, for I always held _The Apostates_ to be, at best, a medley of conventional tricks and extravagant rhetoric, inanimate by any least particle of myself,--and its success, say, as though the splendiferous trappings of an emperor were hung upon a clothier's dummy, and the result accepted as an adequate presentation of Charlemagne.

In other words, the book was the most unbridled kind of balderdash, founded on my callow recollections of the Green Chalybeate,--not the least bit accurate, as I was afterward to discover,--with all the good people exceedingly oratorical and the bad ones singularly epigrammatic and abandoned and obtuse. I introduced a depraved nobleman, of course, to give the requisite touch of high society, seasoned the mixture with French and botany and with a trifle of Dolly Dialoguishness, and inserted, at judicious intervals, the most poetical of descriptions, so that the skipping of them might afford an agreeable rest to the reader's eye. There was also a sufficiency of piddling with unsavoury matters to insure the suffrage of schoolgirls.

And a number of persons, in fine, were so misguided as to enthuse over the result. The verb is carefully selected, for they one and all were just the sort of people who "enthuse."

5

I was vexed, however, at the time to find I could not achieve an appropriate emotion over my mother's death. The news came, to be sure, at a season when I was preoccupied with getting rid of Agnes Faroy.... I have not ever heard of any rational excuse for the quite common assumption that children ought to be particularly fond of their parents. Still, my mother was the prettiest woman I had ever known, though without any claim to beauty, and I had always gloried in our kinship; for I believed her nature to be generous and amiable when she thought of it; and the cablegram which announced the event aroused in me sincere regret that a comely ornament to my progress had been smashed irrevocably.

For a little I reflected as to whither she had vanished, and decided she had been too futile and well-meaning ever to be punished by any reasonable Being. Yet how she would have enjoyed the publication of my

book!--without any attempt to read it, however, since she had never, to my knowledge, read anything, with the exception of the daily papers.... And besides, I disliked being unable to have the appropriate emotion.

But I simply could not manage it. For here, in the midst of the Faroy mess,--with Agnes weeping all over the place, and her brothers flourishing pistols and declaiming idiocies,--came the news from Uncle George that my mother had left me virtually nothing. She must have used up, of course, a good share of her Bulmer Baking Powder money in supporting my father comfortably; but she had always lived in such estate as to make me assume she had retained, anyhow, enough of the Bulmer money to last my time. So it was naturally a shock to discover that this monetary attitude was inherited from my mother, who had been cheerfully "living on her principle" all these years, without considering my future. I had no choice but to regard it as abominably selfish.

"I think Claire was afraid to tell you," wrote Uncle George, "how little there was left. In any event, she always shirked doing it, so as to stave off unpleasantness. And when we cabled you how ill she was, it now seems most unfortunate you could not see your way clear to giving up your trip through the chateau country, as your not coming appeared to be on her mind a great deal at the last. I do not wish to seem to criticize you in any way, Robert, but I must say...."

Well, but you know what sort of nonsense that smug gambit heralds in letters from your kindred. Even so, I now owned the Townsend house and an income sufficient for daily bread; and it looked just then as though the magazine editors were willing to furnish the butter, and occasional cakes. So the future promised to be pleasant enough.

6

Charteris had returned to Algiers in the autumn my book was published, but I elected to pass the winter in England. "Of course," was Mr. Charteris's annotation--"because it is precisely the most dangerous spot in the world for you. And you are to spend October at Negley? I warn you that Jasper Hardress is in love with his wife, and that the woman has an incurable habit of making experiments and an utter inability to acquire experience. Take my advice, and follow Mrs. Monteagle to the Riviera, instead. Cissie will strip you of every penny you have, of course, but in the end you will find her a deal less expensive than Gillian Hardress."

"You possess a low and evil mind," I observed, "since I am fond, in all sincerity, of Hardress, whereas his wife is not even civil to me. Why, she goes out of her way to be rude to me."

"Yes," said Mr. Charteris; "but that is because she is getting worried about her interest in you. And what is the meaning of this, by the way? I found it on your table this morning." He read the doggerel aloud with an unkindly and uncalled-for exaggeration of the rhyming words.

"We did not share the same inheritance,--
I and this woman, five years older than I,
Yet daughter of a later century,--

Who is therefore only wearied by that dance
Which has set my blood a-leaping.

"It is queer
To note how kind her face grows, listening
To my wild talk, and plainly pitying
My callow youth, and seeing in me a dear
Amusing boy,--yet somewhat old to be
Still reading _Alice Through the Looking-Glass_
And _Water-Babies_.... With light talk we pass,

"And I that have lived long in Arcady--
I that have kept so many a foolish tryst,
And written drivelling rhymes--feel stirring in me
Droll pity for this woman who pities me,
And whose weak mouth so many men have kissed."

"That," I airily said, "is, in the first place, something you had no business to read; and, in the second, simply the blocking out of an entrancingly beautiful poem. It represents a mood."

"It is the sort of mood that is not good for people, particularly for children. It very often gets them shot too full of large and untidy holes."

"Nonsense!" said I, but not in displeasure, because it made me feel like such a devil of a fellow. So I finished my letter to Bettie Hamlyn,--for this was on the seventh,--and I went to Negley precisely as I had planned.

7

"We were just speaking of you," Mrs. Hardress told me, the afternoon of my arrival,--"Blanche and I were talking of you, Mr. Townsend, the very moment we heard your wheels."

I shook hands. "I trust you had not entirely stripped me of my reputation?"

"Surely, that is the very last of your possessions any reasonable person would covet?"

"A palpable hit," said I. "Nevertheless, you know that all I possess in the world is yours for the asking."

"Yes, you mentioned as much, I think, at Nice. Or was it Colonel Tatkin who offered me a heart's devotion and an elopement? No, I believe it was you. But, dear me, Jasper is so disgustingly healthy that I shall probably never have any chance of recreation."

I glanced toward Jasper Hardress. "I have heard," said I, hopefully, "that there is consumption in the family?"

"Heavens, no! he told me that before marriage to encourage me, but I find there is not a word of truth in it."

Then Jasper Hardress came to welcome his guest, and save from a distance I saw no more that evening of Gillian Hardress.

10.

He Samples New Emotions

It was the following day, about noon, as I sat intent upon my Paris _Herald_ that a tiny finger thrust a hole in it. I gave an inaudible observation, and observed a very plump young person in white with disfavour.

"And who may you happen to be?" I demanded.

"I'm Gladys," the young lady responded; "and I've runned away."

"But not without an escort, I trust, Miss Gladys? Really--upon my word, you know, you surprise me, Gladys! An elopement without even a tincture of masculinity is positively not respectable." I took the little girl into my lap, for I loved children, and all helpless things. "Gladys," I said, "why don't you elope with me? And we will spend our honeymoon in the Hesperides."

"All right," said Gladys, cheerfully. She leaned upon my chest, and the plump, tiny hand clasped mine, in entire confidence; and the contact moved me to an irrational transport and to a yearning whose aim I could not comprehend. "Now tell me a story," said Gladys.

So that I presently narrated to Gladys the ensuing

Story of the Flowery Kingdom

"Fair Sou-Chong-Tee, by a shimmering brook
Where ghost-like lilies loomed tall and straight,
Met young Too-Hi, in a moonlit nook,
Where they cooed and kissed till the hour was late:
Then, with lanterns, a mandarin passed in state,
Named Hoo-Hung-Hoo of the Golden Band,
Who had wooed the maiden to be his mate--
For these things occur in the Flowery Land.

"Now, Hoo-Hung-Hoo had written a book,
In seven volumes, to celebrate
The death of the Emperor's thirteenth cook:
So, being a person whose power was great,
He ordered a herald to indicate
He would blind Too-Hi with a red-hot brand
And marry Sou-Chong at a quarter-past-eight,--
For these things occur in the Flowery Land.

"And the brand was hot, and the lovers shook
In their several shoes, when by lucky fate
A Dragon came, with his tail in a crook,--
A Dragon out of a Nankeen Plate,--
And gobbled the hard-hearted potentate
And all of his servants, and snorted, _and_
Passed on at a super-cyclonic rate,--

For these things occur in the Flowery Land.

"The lovers were wed at an early date,
And lived for the future, I understand,
In one continuous tete-a-tete,--
For these things occur...in the Flowery Land."

Gladys wanted to know: "But what sort of house is a tete-a-tete? Is it like a palace?"

"It is very often much nicer than a palace," I declared,--"provided of course you are only stopping over for a week-end."

"And wasn't it odd the Dragon should have come just when he did?"

"Oh, Gladys, Gladys! don't tell me you are a realist."

"No, I'm a precious angel," she composedly responded, with a flavour of quotation.

"Well! it is precisely the intervention of the Dragon, Gladys, which proves the story is literature," I announced. "Don't you pity the poor Dragon, Gladys, who never gets a chance in life and has to live always between two book-covers?"

She said that couldn't be so, because it would squash him.

"And yet, dear, it is perfectly true," said Mrs. Hardress. The lean and handsome woman was regarding the pair of us curiously. "I didn't know you cared for children, Mr. Townsend. Yes, she is my daughter." She carried Gladys away, without much further speech.

Yet one Parthian comment in leaving me was flung over her shoulder, snappishly. "I wish you wouldn't imitate John Charteris so. You are getting to be just a silly copy of him. You are just Jack where he is John. I think I shall call you Jack."

"I wish you would," I said, "if only because your sponsors happened to christen you Gillian. So it's a bargain. And now when are we going for that pail of water?"

Mrs. Hardress wheeled, the child in her arms, so that she was looking at me, rather queerly, over the little round, yellow head. "And it was only Jill, as I remember, who got the spanking," she said. "Oh, well! it always is just Jill who gets the spanking--Jack."

"But it was Jack who broke his crown," said I; "Wasn't it--Jill?" It seemed a jest at the time. But before long we had made these nicknames a habit, when just we two were together. And the outcome of it all was not precisely a jest....

2

She told me not long after this, "When I saw Gladys loved you, of course I loved you too." And I hereby soberly record the statement that to have a woman fall thoroughly in love with him is the most uncomfortable experience which can ever befall any man.

I am tolerably sure I never made any amorous declaration. Rather, it simply bewildered me to observe the shameless and irrational infatuation this woman presently bore for me, and before it I was powerless. When I told her frankly I did not love her, had never loved her, had no intention of ever loving her, she merely bleated, "You are cruel!" and wept. When I attempted to restrain her paroxysms of anguish, she took it as a retraction of what I had told her.

I would then have given anything in the world to be rid of Gillian Hardress. This led to scenes, and many scenes, and played the very devil with the progress of my second novel. You cannot write when anyone insists on sitting in the same room with you, on the irrelevant plea that she is being perfectly quiet, and therefore is not disturbing you. Besides, she had no business in my room, and was apt to get caught there.

I remember one of these contentions. She is abominably rouged, and before me she is grovelling, as she must have seen some actress do upon the stage.

"Oh, I lied to you," she wailed; "but you are so cruel! Ah, don't be cruel, Jack!"

Then I lifted the scented woman to her feet, and she stayed motionless, regarding me. She had really wonderful eyes.

"You are evil," I said, "through and through you are evil, I think, and I can't help thinking you are a little crazy. But I wish you would teach me to be as you are, for tonight the hands of my dead father strain from his grave and clutch about my ankles. He has the right because it is his flesh I occupy. And I must occupy the body of a Townsend always. It is not quite the residence I would have chosen-- Eh, well, for all that, I am I! And at bottom I loathe you!"

"You love me!" she breathed.

I thrust her aside and paced the floor. "This is an affair of moment. I may not condescend to sell, as Faustus did, but of my own volition must I will to squander or preserve that which is really Robert Townsend."

I wheeled upon Gillian Hardress, and spoke henceforward with deliberation. You must remember I was very young as yet.

"I have often regretted that the colour element of vice is so oddly lacking in our life of to-day. We appear, one and all, to have been born at an advanced age and with ladylike manners, and we reach our years of indiscretion very slowly; and meanwhile we learn, too late, that prolonged adherence to morality trivialises the mind as hopelessly as a prolonged vice trivialises the countenance. I fear this has been said by someone else, my too impetuous Jill, and I hope not, for in that event I might possibly be speaking sensibly, and to be sensible is a terrible thing and almost as bad as being intelligible."

"You are not being very intelligible now, sweetheart. But I love to hear you talk."

"Meanwhile, I am young, and in youth--_il faut des emotions_, as Blanche Amory is reported to have said, by a novelist named Thackeray, whose productions are now read in public libraries. Still, for a respectable and brougham-supporting person, Thackeray came then as near to speaking the truth as is possible for people of that class. In youth emotions are necessary. Find me, therefore, a new emotion!"

"So many of them, dear!" she promised.

"I do not love you, understand,--and your husband is my friend, and I admire him. But I am I! I have endowments, certain faculties which many men are flattering enough to envy--and I will to make of them a carpet for your quite unworthy feet. I will to degrade all that in me is most estimable, and in return I demand a new emotion."

4

Well, but women are queer. There is positively no way of affronting them, sometimes. She had not even the grace to note that I had taken a little too much to drink that night.... But over all this part of my life I prefer to pass as quickly as may be expedient.

5

I remembered, anyway, after Gillian had gone from my room, to write Bettie Hamlyn a post-card. It was no longer, strictly speaking, the twenty-third, but considerably after midnight, of course. Still, it was the writing regularly when I loathed writing letters that counted with Bettie, I reflected; and virtually I was writing on the twenty-third, and besides, Bettie would never know.

6

And thereafter Gillian Hardress made almost no concealment of her feeling toward me, or employed at best the flimsiest of disguises. All that winter she wrote to me daily, and, when the same roof sheltered us, would slip the scribblings into my hand at odd moments, but preferably before her husband's eyes. She demanded an account of every minute I spent apart from her, and never believed a syllable of my explanations; and in a sentence, she pestered me to the verge of distraction.

And always the circumstance which chiefly puzzled me was the host of men that were infatuated by Gillian Hardress. There was no doubt about it; she made fools of the staidest, if for no better end than that the spectacle might amuse me.

"Now you watch me, Jack!" she would say. And I obediently would watch her wriggling beguilements, and the man's smirking idiocy, with bewilderment.

For in me her allurements aroused, now, absolutely no sensation save that of boredom. Often I used to wonder for what reason it seemed

impossible for me, alone, to adore this woman insanely. It would have been so much more pleasant, all around.

But, I repeat, I wish to have done with this portion of my life as quickly as may be expedient. I am not particularly proud of it. I would elide it altogether, were it possible, but as you will presently see, that is not possible if I am to make myself intelligible. And I find that the more I write of myself the more I am affected by the same poor itch for self-exposure which has made Pepys and Casanova and Rousseau famous, and later feminine diarists notorious.

Were I writing fiction, now, I would make the entire affair more plausible. As it stands, I am free to concede that this chapter in my life history rings false throughout, just as any candid record of an actual occurrence does invariably. It is not at all probable that a woman so much older than I should have taken possession of me in this fashion, almost against my will. It is even less probable that her husband, who was by ordinary absurdly jealous of her, should have suspected nothing and have been sincerely fond of me.

But then I was only twenty-two, as age went physically, and he looked upon me as an infant. I was, I think, quite conscientiously childish with Jasper Hardress. I prattled with him, and he liked it. And so often, especially when we three were together--say, at luncheon,--I was teased by an insane impulse to tell him everything, just casually, and see what he would do.

I think it was the same feeling which so often prompted her to tell him, in her flighty way, of how profoundly she adored me. I would wriggle and blush; and Jasper Hardress would laugh and protest that he adored me too. Or she would expatiate upon this or that personal feature of mine, or the becomingness of a new cravat, say; and would demand of her husband if Jack--for so she always called me,--wasn't the most beautiful boy in the world? And he would laugh and answer that he thought it very likely.

7

They were Americans, I should have said earlier, but to all intents they lived abroad, and had done so for years. Hardress's father had been thoughtful enough to leave him a sufficient fortune to countenance the indulgence of this or any other whim, so that the Hardresses divided the year pretty equally between their real home at Negley and a tiny chateau which they owned near Aix-les-Bains. I visited them at both places.

It was a pleasant fiction that I came to see Gladys. Regularly, I was told off to play with her, as being the only other child in the house. It was rather hideous, for the little girl adored me, and I was beginning to entertain an odd aversion toward her, as being in a way responsible for everything. Had Gillian Hardress never found me cuddling the child, whose sex was visibly a daily aggrievement to Jasper Hardress, however conscientiously he strove to conceal the fact,--so that in consequence "I have to love my precious lamb for two, Jack,"--Gillian would never, I think, have distinguished me from the many other men who, so lightly, tendered a host of gallant speeches.... But I never fathomed Gillian Hardress, beyond learning very early in our acquaintance that she rarely told me the truth about

anything.

Also I should have said that Hardress cordially detested Charteris, just as Bettie Hamlyn did, because for some reason he suspected the little novelist of being in love with Hardress's wife. I do not know; but I imagine Charteris had made advances to her, in his own ambiguous fashion, as he was apt to do, barring strenuous discouragement, to every passably handsome woman he was left alone with. I do know he made love to her a little later.

Hardress distrusted a number of other men, for precisely the same reason. Heaven only is familiar with what grounds he had. I merely know that Gillian Hardress loathed John Charteris; she was jealous of his influence over me. But me her husband never distrusted. I was only an amusing and ingenuous child of twenty-two, and not for a moment did it occur to him that I might be in love with his wife.

Indeed, I believe upon reflection that he was in the right. I think I never was.

8

"Yes," I said, "I am to meet the Charterises in Genoa. Yes, it is rather sudden. I am off to-morrow. I shall not see you dear good people for some time, I fancy...."

When Hardress had gone the woman said in a stifled voice: "No, I will not dance. Take me somewhere--there is a winter-garden, I know--"

"No, Jill," said I, with decision. "It's no use. I am really going. We will not argue it."

Gillian Hardress watched the dancers for a moment, as with languid interest. "You fear that I am going to make a scene. Well! I can't. You have selected your torture chamber too carefully. Oh, after all that's been between us, to tell me here, to my husband's face, in the presence of some three hundred people, without a moment's warning, that you are 'off to-morrow!' It--it is for good, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "It had to be--some time, you know."

"No, don't look at me. Watch the dancing, I will fan myself and seem bored. No, I shall not do anything rash."

I was uncomfortable. Yet at bottom it was the theatric value of this scene which impressed me,--the gaiety and the brilliance on every side of her misery. And I did not look at her. I did just as she ordered me.

"I was proud once. I haven't any pride now. You say you must leave me. Oh, dearest boy, if you only knew how unhappy I will be without you, you could not leave me. Sweetheart, you must know how I love you. I long every minute to be with you, and to see you even at a distance is a pleasure. I know it is not right for me to ask or expect you to love me always, but it seems so hard."

"It's no use, Jill--"

"Is it another woman? I won't mind. I won't be jealous. I won't make scenes, for I know you hate scenes, and I have made so many. It was because I cared so much. I never cared before, Jack. You have tired of me, I know. I have seen it coming. Well, you shall have your way in everything. But don't leave me, dear! oh, my dear, my dear, don't leave me! Oh, I have given you everything, and I ask so little in return--just to see you sometimes, just to touch your hand sometimes, as the merest stranger might do...."

So her voice went on and on while I did not look at her. There was no passion in this voice of any kind. It was just the long monotonous wail of some hurt animal.... They were playing the _Valse Bleu_, I remember. It lasted a great many centuries, and always that low voice was pleading with me. Yes, it was uncommonly unpleasant; but always at the back of my mind some being that was not I was taking notes as to precisely how I felt, because some day they might be useful, for the book I had already outlined. "It is no use, Jill," I kept repeating, doggedly.

Then Armitage came smirking for his dance. Gillian Hardress rose, and her fan shut like a pistol-shot. She was all in black, and throughout that moment she was more beautiful than any other woman I have ever seen.

"Yes, this is our dance," she said, brightly. "I thought you had forgotten me, Mr. Armitage. Well! good-bye, Mr. Townsend. Our little talk has been very interesting--hasn't it? Oh, this dress _always_ gets in my way--"

She was gone. I felt that I had managed affairs rather crudely, but it was the least unpleasant way out, and I simply had not dared to trust myself alone with her. So I made the best of an ill bargain, and remodeled the episode more artistically when I used it later, in _Afield_.

11.

He Postures Among Chimney-Pots

I met the Charterises in Genoa, just as I had planned. Anne's first exclamation was, "Heavens, child, how dissipated you look! I would scarcely have known you."

Charteris said nothing. But he and I lunched at the Isotta the following day, and at the conclusion of the meal the little man leaned back and lighted a cigarette.

"You must overlook my wife's unfortunate tendency toward the most unamiable of virtues. But, after all, you are clamantly not quite the boy I left at Liverpool last October. Where are your Hardresses now?"

"In London for the season. And why is your wife rushing on to Paris, John?"

"Shopping, as usual. Yes, I believe I did suggest it was as well to

have it over and done with. Anne is very partial to truisms. Besides, she has an aunt there, you know. Take my advice, and always marry a woman who is abundantly furnished with attractive and visitable relations, for this precaution is the true secret of every happy marriage. We may, then, regard the Hardress incident as closed?"

"Oh, Lord, yes!" said I, emphatically.

"Well, after all, you have been sponging off them for a full year. The adjective is not ill-chosen, from what I hear. I fancy Mrs. Hardress has found you better company after she had mixed a few drinks for you, and so--But a truce to moral reflections! for I am desirous once more to hear the chimes at midnight. I hear Francine is in Milan?"

"There is at any rate in Milan," said I, "a magnificent Gothic Cathedral of international reputation; and upon the upper gallery of its tower, as my guidebook informs me, there is a watchman with an efficient telescope. Should I fail to meet that watchman, John, I would feel that I had lived futilely. For I want both to view with him the Lombard plain, and to ask him his opinion of Cino da Pistoia, and as to what was in reality the middle name of Cain's wife."

2

Francine proved cordial; but John Charteris was ever fickle, and not long afterward an Italian countess, classic in feature, but in coloring smacking of an artistic renaissance, had drawn us both to Switzerland, and thence to Liege. It was great fun, knocking about the Continent with John, for he knew exactly how to order a dinner, and spoke I don't know how many languages, and seemed familiar with every side-street and back-alley in Europe. For myself, my French as acquired in Fairhaven appeared to be understood by everybody, but in replying very few of the natives could speak their own foolish language comprehensibly. I could rarely make head or tail out of what they were jabbering about.

I was alone that evening, because Annette's husband had turned up unexpectedly; and Charteris had gone again to hear Nadine Neroni, the new prima donna, concerning whom he and his enameled Italian friend raved tediously. But I never greatly cared for music; besides, the opera that night was _Faust_; the last act of which in particular, when three persons align before the footlights and scream at the top of their voices, for a good half hour, about how important it is not to disturb anybody, I have never been able to regard quite seriously.

So I was spending this evening sedately in my own apartments at the Continental; and meanwhile I lisped in numbers that (or I flattered myself) had a Homeric tang; and at times chewed the end of my pencil meditatively. "From present indications," I was considering, "that Russian woman is cooking something on her chafing-dish again. It usually affects them that way about dawn."

I began on the next verse viciously, and came a cropper over the clash of two sibilants, as the distant clamour increased. "Brutes!" said I, disapprovingly. "Sere, clear, dear--Now they have finished, '_Jamais, monsieur_', and begun crying, 'Fire!' Oh, this would draw more than three souls out of a weaver, you know! Mere, near, hemisphere--no, but the Greeks thought it was flat. By Jove! I do smell smoke!"

Wrapping my dressing-gown about me--I had afterward reason to thank the kindly fates that it was the green one with the white fleurs-de-lis, and not my customary, unspeakably disreputable bath-robe, scorched by the cigarette ashes of years,--I approached the door and peeped out into the empty hotel corridor. The incandescent lights glimmered mildly through a gray haze which was acrid and choking to breathe; little puffs of smoke crept lazily out of the lift-shaft just opposite; and down-stairs all Liege was shouting incoherently, and dragging about the heavier pieces of hotel furniture.

"By Jove!" said I, and whistled a little disconsolately as I looked downward through the bars about the lift-shaft.

"Do you reckon," spoke a voice--a most agreeable voice,--"we are in any danger?"

The owner of the voice was tall; not even the agitation of the moment prevented my observing that, big as I am, her eyes were almost on a level with my shoulder. They were not unpleasant eyes, and a stray dream or two yet lingered under their heavy lids. The owner of the voice wore a strange garment that was fluffy and pink,--pale pink like the lining of a sea-shell--and billows of white and the ends of various blue ribbons peeped out about her neck. I made mental note of the fact that disordered hair is not necessarily unbecoming; it sometimes has the effect of an unusually heavy halo set about the face of a half-awakened angel.

"It would appear," said I, meditatively, "that, in consideration of our being on the fifth floor, with the lift-shaft drawing splendidly, and the stairs winding about it,--except the two lower flights, which have just fallen in,--and in consideration of the fire department's probable incompetence to extinguish anything more formidable than a tar-barrel, --yes, it would appear, I think, that we might go further than 'dangerous' and find a less appropriate adjective to describe the situation."

"You mean we cannot get down?" The beautiful voice was tremulous.

And my silence made reply.

"Well, then," she suggested, cheerfully, after due reflection, "since we can't go down, why not go up?"

As a matter of fact, nothing could be more simple. We were on the top floor of the hotel, and beside us, in the niche corresponding to the stairs below, was an iron ladder that led to a neatly-whitewashed trapdoor in the roof. Adopting her suggestion, I pushed against this trap-door and found that it yielded readily; then, standing at the top of the ladder, I looked about me on a dim expanse of tiles and chimneys; yet farther off were the huddled roofs and gables of Liege, and just a stray glimpse of the Meuse; and above me brooded a clear sky and the naked glory of the moon.

3

I lowered my head with a distinct sigh of relief.

"I say," I called, "it is infinitely nicer up here--superb view of the

city, and within a minute's drop of the square! Better come up."

"Go first," said she; and subsequently I held for a moment a very slender hand--a ridiculously small hand for a woman whose eyes were almost on a level with my shoulder,--and we two stood together on the roof of the Hotel Continental. We enjoyed, as I had predicted, an unobstructed view of Liege and of the square, wherein two toy-like engines puffed viciously and threw impotent threads of water against the burning hotel beneath us, and, at times, on the heads of an excited throng erratically clad.

But I looked down moodily, "That," said I, as a series of small explosions popped like pistol shots, "is the cafe; and, oh, Lord! there goes the only decent Scotch in all Liege!"

"There is Mamma!" she cried, excitedly; "there!" She pointed to a stout woman, who, with a purple? shawl wrapped about her head, was wringing her hands as heartily as a bird-cage, held in one of them, would permit. "And she has saved Bill Bryan!"

"In that case," said I, "I suppose it is clearly my duty to rescue the remaining member of the family. You see," I continued, in bending over the trap-door and tugging at the ladder, "this thing is only about twenty feet long; but the kitchen wing of the hotel is a little less than that distance from the rear of the house behind it; and with this as a bridge I think we might make it. In any event, the roof will be done for in a half-hour, and it is eminently worth trying." I drew the ladder upward.

Then I dragged this ladder down the gentle slant of the roof, through a maze of ghostly chimneys and dim skylights, to the kitchen wing, which was a few feet lower than the main body of the building. I skirted the chimney and stepped lightly over the eaves, calling, "Now then!" when a muffled cry, followed by a crash in the courtyard beneath, shook my heart into my mouth. I turned, gasping; and found the girl lying safe, but terrified, on the verge of the roof.

"It was a bucket," she laughed, "and I stumbled over it,--and it fell--and--and I nearly did,--and I am frightened!"

And somehow I was holding her hand in mine, and my mouth was making irrelevant noises, and I was trembling. "It was close, but--look here, you must pull yourself together!" I pleaded; "because we haven't, as it were, the time for airy badinage and repartee--just now."

"I can't," she cried, hysterically. "Oh, I am so frightened! I can't!"

"You see," I said, with careful patience, "we must go on. I hate to seem too urgent, but we _must_, do you understand?" I waved my hand toward the east. "Why, look!" said I, as a thin tongue of flame leaped through the open trap-door and flickered wickedly for a moment against the paling gray of the sky.

She saw and shuddered. "I'll come," she murmured, listlessly, and rose to her feet.

I heaved another sigh of relief, and waving her aside from the ladder, dragged it after me to the eaves of the rear wing. As I had foreseen, this ladder reached easily to the eaves of the house behind the rear wing, and formed a passable though unsubstantial-looking bridge. I regarded it disapprovingly.

"It will only bear one," said I; "and we will have to crawl over separately after all. Are you up to it?"

"Please go first," said she, very quiet. And, after gazing into her face for a moment, I crept over gingerly, not caring to look down into the abyss beneath.

Then I spent a century in impotence, watching a fluffy, pink figure that swayed over a bottomless space and moved forward a hair's breadth each year. I made no sound during this interval. In fact, I do not remember drawing a really satisfactory breath from the time I left the hotel-roof, until I lifted a soft, faint-scented, panting bundle to the roof of the Councillor von Hollwig.

5

"You are," I cried, with conviction, "the bravest, the most--er--the bravest woman I ever knew!" I heaved a little sigh, but this time of content. "For I wonder," said I, in my soul, "if you have any idea what a beauty you are! what a wonderful, unspeakable beauty you are! Oh, you are everything that men ever imagined in dreams that left them weeping for sheer happiness--and more! You are--you, and I have held you in my arms for a moment; and, before high heaven, to repurchase that privilege I would consent to the burning of three or four more hotels and an odd city or so to boot!" But, aloud, I only said, "We are quite safe now, you know."

She laughed, bewilderingly. "I suppose," said she, "the next thing is to find a trap-door."

But there were, so far as we could discover, no trapdoors in the roof of the Councillor von Hollwig, or in the neighbouring roofs; and, after searching three of them carefully, I suggested the propriety of waiting till dawn to be melodramatically rescued.

"You see," I pointed out, "everybody is at the fire over yonder. But we are quite safe here, I would say, with an entire block of houses to promenade on; moreover, we have cheerful company, eligible central location in the very heart of the city, and the superb spectacle of a big fire at exactly the proper distance. Therefore," I continued, and with severity, "you will please have the kindness to explain your motives for wandering about the corridors of a burning hotel at four o'clock in the morning."

She sat down against a chimney and wrapped her gown about her. "I sleep very soundly," said she, "and we did both museums and six churches and the Palais de Justice and a deaf and dumb place and the cannon-foundry today,--and the cries awakened me,--and I reckon Mamma lost her head."

"And left you," thought I, "left you--to save a canary-bird! Good Lord! And so, you are an American and a Southerner as well."

"And you?" she asked.

"Ah--oh, yes, me!" I awoke sharply from admiration of her trailing lashes. The burning hotel was developing a splendid light wherein to see them. "I was writing--and I thought that Russian woman had a few friends to supper,--and I was looking for a rhyme when I found you," I concluded, with a fine coherence.

She looked up. It was incredible, but those heavy lashes disentangled quite easily. I was seized with a desire to see them again perform this interesting feat. "Verses?" said she, considering my slippers in a new light.

"Yes," I admitted, guiltily--"of Helen."

She echoed the name. It is an unusually beautiful name when properly spoken. "Why, that is my name, only we call it Elena."

"Late of Troy Town," said I, in explanation.

"Oh!" The lashes fell into their former state. It was hopeless this time; and manual aid would be required, inevitably. "I should think," said my compatriot, "that live women would be more--inspiring"

"Surely," I assented. I drew my gown about me and sat down. "But, you see, she is alive--to me." And I dwelt a trifle upon the last word.

"One would gather," said she, meditatively, "that you have an unrequited attachment for Helen of Troy."

I sighed a melancholy assent. The great eyes opened to their utmost. The effect was as disconcerting as that of a ship firing a broadside at you, but pleasanter. "Tell me all about it," said she, coaxingly.

"I have always loved her," I said, with gravity. "Long ago, when I was a little chap, I had a book--_Stories of the Trojan War_, or something of the sort. And there I first read of Helen--and remembered. There were pictures--outline pictures,--of quite abnormally straight-nosed warriors, with flat draperies which amply demonstrated that the laws of gravity were not yet discovered; and the pictures of slender goddesses, who had done their hair up carefully and gone no further in their dressing. Oh, the book was full of pictures,--and Helen's was the most manifestly impossible of them all. But I knew--I knew, even then, of her beauty, of that flawless beauty which made men's hearts as water and drew the bearded kings to Ilium to die for the woman at sight of whom they had put away all memories of distant homes and wives; that flawless beauty which buoyed the Trojans through the ten years of fighting and starvation, just with delight in gazing upon Queen Helen day by day, and with the joy of seeing her going about their streets. For I remembered!" And as I ended, I sighed effectively.

"I know," said she.

"'Or ever the knightly years had gone
With the old world to the grave,
I was a king in Babylon
And you were a Christian slave.'"

"Yes, only I was the slave, I think, and you--er--I mean, there goes

the roof, and it is an uncommonly good thing for posterity you thought of the trap-door. Good thing the wind is veering, too. By Jove! look at those flames!" I cried, as the main body of the Continental toppled inward like a house of cards; "they are splashing, actually splashing, like waves over a breakwater!"

I drew a deep breath and turned from the conflagration, only to encounter its reflection in her widened eyes. "Yes, I was a Trojan warrior," I resumed; "one of the many unknown men who sought and found death beside Scamander, trodden down by Achilles or Diomedes. So they died knowing they fought in a bad cause, but rapt with that joy they had in remembering the desire of the world and her perfect loveliness. She scarcely knew that I existed; but I had loved her; I had overheard some laughing words of hers in passing, and I treasured them as men treasure gold. Or she had spoken, perhaps--oh, day of days!--to me, in a low, courteous voice that came straight from the back of the throat and blundered very deliciously over the perplexities of our alien speech. I remembered--even as a boy, I remembered."

She cast back her head and laughed merrily. "I reckon," said she, "you are still a boy, or else you are the most amusing lunatic I ever met."

"No," I murmured, and I was not altogether playacting now, "that tale about Polyxo was a pure invention. Helen--and the gods be praised for it!--can never die. For it is hers to perpetuate that sense of unattainable beauty which never dies, which sways us just as potently as it did Homer, and Dr. Faustus, and the Merovingians too, I suppose, with memories of that unknown woman who, when we were boys, was very certainly some day, to be our mate. And so, whatever happens, she

"Abides the symbol of all loveliness,
Of beauty ever stainless in the stress
Of warring lusts and fears.

"For she is to each man the one woman that he might have loved perfectly. She is as old as youth, she is more old than April even, and she is as ageless. And, again like youth and April, this Helen goes about the world in varied garments, and to no two men is her face the same. Oh, very often she transmutes her fleshly covering. But through countless ages I, like every man alive, have followed her, and fought for her, and won her, and have lost her in the end,--but always loving her as every man must do. And I prefer to think that some day--" But my voice here died into a whisper, which was in part due to emotion and partly to an inability to finish the sentence satisfactorily. The logic of my verses when thus paraphrased from memory, seemed rather vague.

"Yes--like Pythagoras" she said, a bit at random. "Oh, I know. There really must be something in it, I have often thought, because you actually do remember having done things before sometimes."

"And why not? as the March Hare very sensibly demanded." But now my voice was earnest. "Yes, I believe that Helen always comes. Is it simply a proof that I, too, am qualified to sit next to the Hatter?" I spread out my hands in a helpless little gesture. "I do not know. But I believe that she will come,--and by and by pass on, of course, as Helen always does."

"You will know her?" she queried, softly.

Now I at last had reached firm ground. "She will be very tall," I said, "very tall and exquisite,--like a young birch-tree, you know, when its new leaves are whispering over to one another the secrets of spring. Yes, that is a ridiculous sounding simile, but it expresses the general effect of her--the _coup d'oeil_, so to speak,--quite perfectly. Moreover, her hair will be a miser's dream of gold; and it will hang heavily about a face that will be--quite indescribable, just as the dawn yonder is past the utmost preciosity of speech. But her face will flush and will be like the first of all anemones to peep through black, good-smelling, and as yet unattainable earth; and her eyes will be deep, shaded wells where, just as in the proverb, truth lurks."

But now I could not see her eyes.

"No," I conceded, "I was wrong. For when men talk to her as--as they cannot but talk to her, her face will flush dull red, almost like smouldering wood; and she will smile a little, and look out over a great fire, such as that she saw on the night when Ilium was sacked and the slain bodies were soft under her stumbling feet, as she fled through flaming Troy Town. And then I shall know her."

My companion sighed; and the woes of centuries weighed down her eyelids obstinately. "It is bad enough," she lamented, "to have lost all one's clothes--that new organdie was a dream, and I had never worn it; but to find yourself in a dressing-gown--at daybreak, on a strange roof--and with an unintroduced lunatic--is positively terrible!"

The unintroduced lunatic rose to his feet and waved his hand toward the east. The dawn was breaking in angry scarlet and gold that spread like fire over half the visible horizon; the burning hotel shut out the remaining half with tall flames, which shouldered one another monotonously, and seemed lustreless against the pure radiance of the sky. Chill daylight showed in melting patches through the clouds of black smoke overhead.

It was a world of fire, transfigured by the austere magnificence of dawn and the grim splendour of the shifting, roaring conflagration; and at our feet lay the orchard of the Councillor von Hollwig, and there the awakened birds piped querulously, and sparks fell crackling among apple-blossoms.

"Ilium is ablaze," I quoted; "and the homes of Pergamos and its towering walls are now one sheet of flame."

She inspected the scene, critically. "It does look like Ilium," she admitted. "And that," peering over the eaves into the deserted by-street, "looks like a milkman."

I was unable to deny this, though an angry concept crossed my mind that any milkman, with commendable tastes and feelings, would at this moment be gaping at the fire at the other end of the block, rather than prosaically measuring quarts at the Councillor's side-entrance. But there was no help for it, when chance thus unblushingly favoured the proprieties; in consequence I clung to a water-pipe, and explained the situation to the milkman, with a fretted mind and King's College French.

I turned to my companion. She was regarding the burning hotel with an impersonal expression.

"Now I would give a deal," I thought, "to know just how long you would prefer that milkman to take in coming back."

12.

He Faces Himself and Remembers

Into the lobby of the Hotel d'Angleterre strolled, an hour later, a tall young man, in a green dressing-gown, and inquired for Charteris. The latter, in evening dress, was mournfully breakfasting in his new quarters.

Charteris sprang to his feet. I saw, with real emotion, that he had been weeping; but now he was all flippancy. "My dear boy! I have just torn my hair and the rough drafts of several cablegrams on your account! Sit down at once, and try the bacon, since, for a wonder, it is not burnt--and, in passing, I had thought of course that you were."

Instead, I took a drink, and went to sleep upon the nearest sofa.

2

I was very tired, but I awakened about noon and managed to procure enough clothes to make myself not altogether unpresentable to the public eye. Charteris had gone already about his own affairs, and I did not regret it, for I meant, without delay, to follow up my adventure of the night before.

But when I had come out of the Rue de la Casquette, and was approaching the statue of Gretry, I came upon a very ornately-dressed woman, who was about to enter en open carriage. I stared; and preposterous as it was, I knew that I was not mistaken. And I said aloud, "Signorina!"

It was a long while before she said, "Don't--don't ever call me that again!" And since the world in general appeared just then to be largely flavoured with the irresponsibility of dreams, it did not surprise me that we were presently alone in somebody's sitting-room.

"I have seen you twice in Liege," she said. "I suppose this had to come about. I would have preferred to avoid it, though. Well! _che sara!_ You don't care for music, do you? No,--otherwise you would have known earlier that I am Nadine Neroni now."

"Ah!" I said, very quietly. I had heard, as everybody had, a deal concerning the Neroni. "I think, if you will pardon me, I will not intrude upon Baron von Anspach's hospitality any longer," I said.

"That is unworthy of you,--no, I mean it would have been unworthy of a boy we knew of." There was a long pier-glass in these luxurious rooms. She led me to it now. "Look, Bobbie. We have altered a little, haven't we? I at least, am unmistakable. 'Their eyes are different, somehow', you remember. You haven't changed as much,--not outwardly. I think you are like Dorian Gray. Yes, as soon--as soon as I could afford it, I

read every book you ever talked about, I think. It was damnably foolish of me. For I've heard things. And there was a girl I tried to help in London--an Agnes Faroy--"

"Ah!" I said.

"She had your picture even then, poor creature. She kissed it just before she died. She didn't know that I had ever heard of you. She never knew. Oh, how _could_ you!" the Neroni said, with something very like a sob, "Or were you always--just that, at bottom?"

"And have you ever noticed, Mademoiselle Neroni, that every one of us is several people? In consequence I must confess to have been wondering--?"

"Well! I wasn't. You won't believe it now, perhaps. And it doesn't matter, anyhow." Her grave voice lifted and upon a sudden was changed. "Bobbie, when you had gone I couldn't stand it! I couldn't let you ruin your life for me, but I could not go on as I had done before--Oh, well, you'll never understand," she added, wearily. "But Von Anspach had always wanted me to go with him. So I wrote to him, at the Embassy. And after all, what is the good of talking--now!"

We two were curiously quiet. "No, I suppose there is no good in talking now." We stood there, as yet, hand in hand. The mirror was candid. "Oh, Signorina, I want to laugh as God laughs, and I cannot!"

3

But I lack the heart to set down all that brief and dreary talk of ours. How does it matter what we said? We two at least knew, even as we talked, that all we said meant in the outcome, nothing. Yet we talked awhile and spoke, I think, quite honestly.

She was not unhappy; and there were inbred Lichfeldian traditions which prompted me to virtuous indignation over her defects in remorse and misery. There were my memories, too.

"I don't sing very well, of course, but then I'm not dependent on my singing, you know. Oh, why not be truthful? And Von Anspach always sees to it I get the tendered of criticism--in print. And, moreover, I've a deal put by. I'm a miser, _he_ says, and I suppose I am, because I know what it is to be poor. So when the rainy day comes--as of course it will,--I'll have quite enough to purchase a serviceable umbrella. Meanwhile, I have pretty much everything I want. People talk of course, but it is only on the stage they ever drive you out into a snow-storm. Besides, they don't talk to _me_."

In fine, I found that the Neroni was a very different being from Miss Montmorenci....

4

Then I left her. I had not any inclination just now to pursue my fair Elena. Rather I sat alone in my new bedroom, thinking, confusedly, first of Amelia Van Orden, and how I danced with her a good eight years ago; of that woman who had come to me in remote Fairhaven, coming

through the world's gutter, unsullied,--because that much I yet believe, although I do not know.... She may have been always the same, even in the old days when Lichfield thought her "fast," and she was more or less "compromised,"--and years before I met her, a blind, inexperienced boy. Only she may then have been a better actress than I suspected.... I thought, in any event, of those execrable rhymes that likened her to the Lady in _Comus_, moving serene and unafraid among a rabble of threatening bestial shapes; and I thought of the woman who would, by this time, be with Von Anspach.

For here again were inbred Lichfieldian traditions of the sort I rarely dare confess to, even to myself, because they are so patently hidebound and ridiculous. These traditions told me that this woman, whom I had loved, was Von Anspach's harlot. I might--and I did--endeavor to be ironical and to be broadminded and to be up-to-date about the whole affair, and generally to view the matter through the sophisticated eyes of the author of The Apostates, that Robert Etheridge Townsend who was a connoisseur of ironies and human foibles; but these futilities did no good at all. Lichfield had got at and into me when I was too young to defend myself; and I could no more alter the inbred traditions of Lichfield, that were a part of me, than a carpet could change its texture. My traditions merely told me that the dear woman whom I remembered had come--in fleeing from discomforts which were unbearable, if that mattered--to be Von Anspach's harlot: and finding her this, my traditions declined to be the least bit broadminded. In Lichfield such women were simply not respectable; nor could you get around that fact by going to Liege.

There was in the room a _Matin,_ which contained a brief account of the burning of the Continental, and a very lengthy one of the Neroni's appearance the night before. Drearily, to keep from thinking, I read a deal concerning _la gracieuse cantatrice americaine._ Whether or not she had made a fool of me with histrionics in Fairhaven, there was no doubt that she had chosen wisely in forsaking Lethbury, and the round of village "Opera Houses." She had chosen, after all, and precisely as I had done, to make the most of youth while it lasted; and she appeared, just now, to harvest prodigally.

"On jouait Faust," I read, "et jamais le celebre personnage de Goethe n'adore plus exquise Gretchen. Miss Nadine Neroni est, en effet, une ideale Marguerite a la taille bien prise, au visage joli eclaire des deux yeux grands et doux. Et lorsqu'elle commenca a chanter, ce fut un veritable ravissement: sa voix se fit l'interprete revee de la divine musique de Gounod, tandis que sa personne et son coeur incarnaient physiquement et moralement l'heroine de Goethe"....

And so on, for Von Anspach had "seen to it," prodigally. And "Oh, well!" I thought; "if everybody else is so extravagantly pleased, what in heaven's name is the use of my being squeamish? Besides, she is only doing what I am doing, and getting all the pleasure out of life that is possible. She and I are very sensible people. At least, I suppose we are. I wonder, though? Meanwhile, I had better go and look for that preposterously beautiful Elena. And a fig for the provincial notions of Lichfield, that are poisoning me with their nonsense! and for the notions of Fairhaven, too, I suppose--"

Then Charteris came into the room. "John," said I, "this is a truly remarkable world, and only hypercriticism would venture to suggest that it is probably conducted by an inveterate humourist. So lend me that pocket-piece of yours, and we will permit chance to settle the entire matter. That is the one intelligent way of treating anything which is really serious. You probably believe I am Robert Etheridge Townsend, but as a matter of fact, I am Hercules in the allegory. So! the beautiful lady or America? Why, the eagle flutters uppermost, and from every mountain side let praises ring. Accordingly I am off."

"And you will cross half the world," said Charteris, "in the green dressing-gown, or in the coat which Byam borrowed for you this morning? I do not wish to seem inquisitive, you understand--"

"No, I believe I am through with borrowed coats--as with yours, for instance. But I am quite ready to go in my own dressing-gown if necessary--"

I wheeled at the door.

"By the way, I am done with you, John. I am fond of you, and all that, and I sincerely admire my chimney-pot coquette--of whom you haven't heard,--but, after all, there are real people yonder. And by God, even after two years of being pickled in alcohol and chasing after women that are quite used to being chased--well, even now I am one of those real people. So I am done with you and this perpetual making light of things--!"

"The Declaration of Independence," Charteris observed, "is undoubtedly the best thing in imaginative literature that we Americans have as yet accomplished; but I am sufficiently familiar with it, thank you, and I find, with age, that only the more untruthful platitudes are endurable. Oh, I predicted for you, at our first meeting, a life without achievements but of gusto! Now, it would appear, you plan to prance among an interminable saturnalia of the domestic virtues. So be it! but I warn you that the house of righteousness is but a wayside inn upon the road to being a representative citizen."

"You are talking nonsense," I rapped out--"and immoral nonsense."

"It is very strange," John Charteris complained, "how so many of us manage to reduce everything to a question of morality,--that is, to the alternative of being right or wrong. Now a man's personality, as somebody or other very properly observes, has many parts besides the moral area; and the intelligent, the artistic, even the religious part, need not necessarily have anything to do with ethics--"

"Ah, yes," said I, "so there is a train at noon--"

"And a virtuous man," continued Charteris, amicably, "is no more the perfect type of humanity than an intellectual man. In fact, the lowest and certainly the most disagreeable type of all troublesome people is that which combines an immaculate past with a limited understanding. The religious tenets of this class consist of an unshakable belief that the Bible was originally written in English, and contains nothing applicable to any of the week-days. And in consequence--"

I left him mid-course in speech. "Words, words!" said I; and it appeared to me for the moment that words were of astonishingly trivial

import, however carefully selected, which was in me a wholesome, although fleet, apostacy of yesterday's creed. And I sent a cablegram to Bettie Hamlyn.

6

It was on the trip homeward I first met with Celia Reindan. I then considered her a silly little nuisance....

For I crossed the Atlantic in a contained fury of repentance for the wasted months. I had achieved nothing that was worthy of me, and presently I would be dead. Why, I might die within the five minutes! I might never see the lagging minute-hand of my little traveling clock pass that next numeral, say! The thought obsessed me, especially at night. Once, in a panic, I rose from my berth, and pushed the minute-hand forward a half-hour. "Now, I have tricked You!" I said, aloud; for nervously I was footing a pretty large bill. At twenty-three one has the funds wherewith to balance these accounts....

I wanted to live normally--to live as these persons thick about me, who seemed to grow up, and mate, and beget, and die, in the incurious fashion of oxen. I wanted to think only from hand to mouth, to think if possible not at all, and to be guided always in the conduct of my life by gross and obvious truisms, so that I must be judged at last but as one of the herd. "And what is accustomed--what holds of familiar usage--had come to seem the whole essence of wisdom, on all subjects"; for I wanted just the sense of companionship, irrevocable and eternal and commonly shared with every one of my kind. And yonder was Bettie Hamlyn.... "Oh, make a man of me, Bettie! just a common man!"

And Bettie might have done it, one considers, even then, for I was astir with a new impetus. Now, with a grin, the Supernal Aristophanes slipped the tiniest temptation in my way; to reach Fairhaven I was compelled to spend some three hours of an April afternoon in Lichfield, where upon Regis Avenue was to be met, in the afternoon, everyone worth meeting in Lichfield; and Stella drove there on fine afternoons, under the protection of a trim and preternaturally grave tiger; and the afternoon was irreproachable.

7

By the way she looked back over her shoulder, I knew that Stella had not recognized me. I stood with a yet lifted hat, irresolute.

"By Jove!" said I, in my soul, "then the Blagdens are in Lichfield! Why, of course! they always come here after Lent. And Bettie would not mind; to call on them would be only courteous; and besides, Bettie need not ever know. And moreover, I was always very fond of Peter."

So the next afternoon but four, Stella was making tea for me....

13.

He Baits Upon the Journey

"You are quite by way of being a gentleman," had been Stella's greeting, that afternoon. Then, on a sudden, she rested both hands upon my breast. When she did that you tingled all over, in an agreeable fashion. "It was uncommonly decent of you to remember", said this impulsive young woman. "It was dear of you! And the flowers were lovely."

"They ought to have been immortelles, of course," I apologised, "but the florist was out of them. Yes, and of daffodils, too." I sat down, and sighed, pensively. "Dear, dear!" said I, "to think it was only two years ago I buried my dearest hopes and aspirations and--er--all that sort of thing."

"Nonsense!" said Stella, and selected a blue cup with dragons on it. "At any rate," she continued, "it is very disagreeable of you to come here and prate like a death's-head on my wedding anniversary."

"Gracious gravy!" said I, with a fine surprise, "so it is an anniversary with you, too?" She was absorbed in the sugar-bowl. "What a coincidence!" I suggested, pleasantly.

I paused. The fire crackled. I sighed.

"You are such poor company, nowadays, even after the advantages of foreign travel," Stella reflected. "You really ought to do something to enliven yourself." After a little, she brightened as to the eyes, and concentrated them upon the tea-making, and ventured a suggestion. "Why not fall in love?" said Stella.

"I am," I confided, "already in that deplorable condition."
And I ventured on sigh number two.

"I don't mean--anything silly," said she, untruthfully. "Why," she continued, with a certain lack of relevance, "why not fall in love with somebody else?" Thereupon, I regret to say, her glance strayed toward the mirror. Oh, she was vain,--I grant you that. But I must protest she had a perfect right to be.

"Yes," said I, quite gravely, "that is the reason."

"Nonsense!" said Stella, and tossed her head. She now assumed her most matronly air, and did mysterious things with a perforated silver ball.
I was given to understand I had offended, by a severe compression of her lips, which, however, was not as effective as it might have been. They twitched too mutinously.

2

Stella was all in pink, with golden fripperies sparkling in unanticipated localities. Presumably the gown was tucked and ruched and appliqued, and had been subjected to other processes past the comprehension of trousered humanity; it was certainly becoming.

I think there was an eighteenth-century flavour about it,--for it smacked, somehow, of a patched, mendacious, dainty womanhood, and its artfulness was of a gallant sort that scorned to deceive. It defied

you, it allured you, it conquered you at a glance. It might have been the last cry from the court of an innocent Louis Quinze. It was, in fine, inimitable; and if only I were a milliner, I would describe for you that gown in some not unbefitting fashion. As it is, you may draft the world's modistes to dredge the dictionary, and they will fail, as ignominiously as I would do, in the attempt.

For, after all, its greatest charm was that it contained Stella, and converted Stella into a marquise--not such an one as was her sister, the Marquise d'Arlanges, but a marquise out of Watteau or of Fragonard, say. Stella in this gown seemed out of place save upon a high-backed stone bench, set in an _allee_ of lime-trees, of course, and under a violet sky,--with a sleek abbe or two for company, and with beribboned gentlemen tinkling on their mandolins about her.

I had really no choice but to regard her as an agreeable anachronism the while she chatted with me, and mixed hot water and sugar and lemon into ostensible tea. She seemed so out of place,--and yet, somehow, I entertained no especial desire upon this sleety day to have her different, nor, certainly, otherwhere than in this pleasant, half-lit room, that consisted mostly of ambiguous vistas where a variety of brass bric-a-brac blinked in the firelight.

We had voted it cosier without lamps or candles, for this odorous twilight was far more companionable. Odorous, for there were a great number of pink roses about. I imagine that someone must have sent them--because there were not any daffodils obtainable, by reason of the late and nipping frost--in honour of Stella's second wedding anniversary.

3

"Peter says you talk to everybody that way," quoth she,--almost resentfully, and after a pause.

"Oh!" said I. For it was really no affair of Peter's. And so--

"Peter, everybody tells me, is getting fat," I announced, presently.

Stella witheringly glanced toward the region where my waist used to be. "He isn't!" said she, indignant.

"Quite like a pig, they assure me," I continued, with relish. She objected to people being well-built. "His obscene bloatedness appears to be an object of general comment."

Silence. I stirred my tea.

"Dear Peter!" said she. And then--but unless a woman of Stella's sort is able to exercise a proper control over her countenance, she has absolutely no right to discuss her husband with his bachelor friends. It is unkind; for it causes them to feel like social outcasts and lumbering brutes and Peeping Toms. If they know the husband well, it positively awes them; for, after all, it is a bit overwhelming, this sudden glimpse of the simplicity, and the credulity, and the merciful blindness of women in certain matters. Besides, a bachelor has no business to know such things; it merely makes him envious and uncomfortable.

Accordingly, "Stella," said I, with firmness, "if you flaunt your connubial felicity in my face like that, I shall go home."

She was deaf to my righteous rebuke. "Peter is in Washington this week," she went on, looking fondly into the fire. "I had planned a party to celebrate to-day, but he was compelled to go--business, you know. He is doing so well nowadays," she said, after a little, "that I am quite insufferably proud of him. And I intend for him to be a great lawyer--oh, much the greatest in America. And I won't ever be content till then."

"H'm!" said I. "H'm" seemed fairly non-committal.

"Sometimes," Stella declared, irrelevantly, "I almost wish I had been born a man."

"I wish you had been," quoth I, in gallant wise. "There are so few really attractive men!"

Stella looked up with a smile that was half sad.

"I'm just a little butterfly-woman, aren't I?" she asked.

"You are," I assented, with conviction, "a butterfly out of a queen's garden--a marvellous pink-and-gold butterfly, such as one sees only in dreams and--er--in a London pantomime. You are a decided ornament to the garden," I continued, handsomely, "and the roses bow down in admiration as you pass, and--ah--at least, the masculine ones do."

"Yes,--we butterflies don't love one another overmuch, do we? Ah, well, it scarcely matters! We were not meant to be taken seriously, you know,--only to play in the sunlight, and lend an air to the garden and--amuse the roses, of course. After all," Stella summed it up, "our duties are very simple; first, we are expected to pass through a certain number of cotillions and a certain number of various happenings in various tete-a-tetes; then to make a suitable match,--so as to enable the agreeable detrimentals to make love to us, with perfect safety--as you were doing just now, for instance. And after that, we develop into bulbous chaperones, and may aspire eventually to a kindly quarter of a column in the papers, and, quite possibly, the honour of having as many as two dinners put off on account of our death. Yes, it is very simple. But, in heaven's name," Stella demanded, with a sudden lift of speech, "how can any woman--for, after all, a woman is presumably a reasoning animal--be satisfied with such a life! Yet that is everything--everything!--this big world offers to us shallow-minded butterfly-women!"

Personally, I disapprove of such morbid and hysterical talk outside of a problem novel; there I heartily approve of it, on account of the considerable and harmless pleasure that is always to be derived from throwing the book into the fireplace. And, coming from Stella, this farrago doubly astounded me. She was talking grave nonsense now, whereas Nature had, beyond doubt, planned her to discuss only the lighter sort. So I decided it was quadruply absurd, little Stella talking in this fashion,--Stella, who, as all knew, was only meant to be petted and flattered and flirted with.

And therefore, "Stella," I admonished, "you have been reading something

indigestible." I set down my teacup, and I clasped my hands. "Don't tell me," I pleaded, "that you want to vote!"

She remained grave. "The trouble is," said she, "that I am not really a butterfly, for all my tinsel wings. I am an ant."

"Oh," said I, shamelessly, "I hadn't heard that Lizzie had an item for the census man. I don't care for brand-new babies, though; they always look so disgracefully sun-burned."

The pun was atrocious and, quite properly, failed to win a smile or even a reproof from the morbid young person opposite. "My grandfather," said she in meditation, "began as a clerk in a country store. Oh of course, we have discovered, since he made his money and since Mother married a Musgrave, that his ancestors came over with William the Conqueror, and that he was descended from any number of potentates. But he lived. He was a rip at first--ah, yes, I'm glad of that as well, --and he became a religious fanatic because his oldest son died very horribly of lockjaw. And he browbeat people and founded banks, and made a spectacle of himself at every Methodist conference, and everybody was afraid of him and honoured him. And I fancy I am prouder of Old Tim Ingersoll than I am of any of the emperors and things that make such a fine show in the Musgrave family tree. For I am like him. And I want to leave something in the world that wasn't there before I came. I want my life to count, I want--why, a hundred years from now I _do_ want to be something more than a name on a tombstone. I--oh, I daresay it _is_ only my ridiculous egotism," she ended, with a shrug and Stella's usual quick smile,--a smile not always free from insolence, but always satisfactory, somehow.

"It's late hours," I warned her, with uplifted forefinger, "late hours and too much bridge and too many sweetmeats and too much bothering over silly New Women ideas. What is the sense of a woman's being useful," I demanded, conclusively, "when it is so much easier and so much more agreeable all around for her to be adorable?"

She pouted. "Yes," she assented, "that is my career--to be adorable. It is my one accomplishment," she declared, unblushingly,--yet not without substantiating evidence.

After a little, though, her gravity returned. "When I was a girl--oh, I dreamed of accomplishing all sorts of beautiful and impossible things! But, you see, there was really nothing I could do. Music, painting, writing--I tried them all, and the results were hopeless. Besides, Rob, the women who succeed in anything like that are always so queer looking. I couldn't be expected to give up my complexion for a career, you know, or to wear my hair like a golf-caddy's. At any rate, I couldn't make a success by myself. But there was one thing I could do, --I could make a success of Peter. And so," said Stella, calmly, "I did it."

I said nothing. It seemed expedient.

"You know, he was a little--"

"Yes," I assented, hastily. Peter had gone the pace, of course, but there was no need of raking that up. That was done with, long ago.

"Well, he isn't the least bit dissipated now. You know he isn't. That

is the first big thing I have done." Stella checked it off with a small, spear-pointed, glinting finger-nail. "Then--oh, I have helped him in lots of ways. He is doing splendidly in consequence; and it is my part to see that the proper people are treated properly."

Stella reflected a moment. "There was the last appointment, for instance. I found that the awarding of it lay with that funny old Judge Willoughby, with the wart on his nose, and I asked him for it--not the wart, you understand,--and got it. We simply had him to dinner, and I was specially butterfly; I fluttered airily about, was as silly as I knew how to be, looked helpless and wore my best gown. He thought me a pretty little fool, and gave Peter the appointment. That is only an instance, but it shows how I help." Stella regarded me, uncertainly. "Why, but an authorman ought to understand!"

Of a sudden I understood a number of things--things that had puzzled. This was the meaning of Stella's queer dinner the night before, and the ensuing theatre-party, for instance; this was the explanation of those impossible men, vaguely heralded as "very influential in politics," and of the unaccountable women, painfully condensed in every lurid shade of satin, and so liberally adorned with gems as to make them almost valuable. Stella, incapable by nature of two consecutive ideas, was determined to manipulate the unseen wires, and to be, as she probably phrased it, the power behind the throne....

"Eh, it would be laughable," I thought, "were not her earnestness so pathetic! For here is Columbine mimicking Semiramis."

Yet it was true that Peter Blagden had made tremendous strides in his profession, of late. For a moment, I wondered--? Then I looked at this butterfly young person opposite, and I frowned. "I don't like it," I said, decisively. "It is a bit cold-blooded. It isn't worthy of you, Stella."

"It is my career," she flouted me, with shrugging shoulders. "It is the one career the world--our Lichfield world--has left me. And I am doing it for Peter."

The absurd look that I objected to--on principle, you understand--returned at this point in the conversation. I arose, resolutely, for I was really unable to put up with her nonsense.

"You are in love with your husband," I grumbled, "and I cannot countenance such eccentricities. These things are simply not done--"

She touched my hand. "Old crosspatch, and to think how near I came to marrying you."

"I do think of it--sometimes. So you had better stop pawing at me. It isn't safe."

I wish I could describe her smile. I wish I knew just what it was that Stella wanted me to say or do as we stood for a moment silent, in this pleasant, half-lit room where brass things blinked in the firelight.

"Old crosspatch!" she repeated....

"Stella," said I, with dignity, "I wish it distinctly understood that I am not a funny old judge with a wart on his nose."

Whereupon I went away.

14.

He Participates in a Brave Jest

Stella drove on fine afternoons, under the protection of a trim and preternaturally grave tiger. The next afternoon, by a Lichfieldian transition, was irreproachable. I was to remember, afterward, wondering in a vague fashion, as the equipage passed, if the boy's lot was not rather enviable. There might well be less attractive methods of earning the daily bread and butter than to whirl through life behind Stella. One would rarely see her face, of course, but there would be such compensations as an unfailing sense of her presence, and the faint odour of her hair at times and, always, blown scraps of her laughter or shreds of her talk, and, almost always, the piping of the sweet voice that was stilled so rarely.

Perhaps the conscienceless tiger listened when she was "seeing the proper people were treated properly"? Yes, one would. Perhaps he ground his teeth? Well, one would, I suspected. And perhaps--?

There was a nod of recognition from Stella; and I lifted my hat as they bowled by toward the Reservoir. I went down Regis Avenue, mildly resentful that she had not offered me a lift.

2

A vagrant puff of wind was abroad in the Boulevard that afternoon. It paused for a while to amuse itself with a stray bit of paper. Presently the wind grew tired of this plaything and tossed between the eyes of a sorrel horse. Prince lurched and bolted; and Rex, always a vicious brute, followed his mate. One fancies the vagabond wind must have laughed over that which ensued.

After a moment it returned and lifted a bit of paper from the roadway, with a new respect, perhaps, and the two of them frolicked away over close-shaven turf. It was a merry game they played there in the spring sunlight. The paper fluttered a little, whirled over and over, and scuttled off through the grass; with a gust of mirth, the wind was after it, now gained upon it, now lost ground in eddying about a tree, and now made up the disadvantage in the open, and at last chuckled over its playmate pinned to the earth and flapping in sharp, indignant remonstrances. Then _da capo_.

It was a merry game that lasted till the angry sunset had flashed its final palpitant lance through the treetrunks farther down the roadway. There were gaping people in this place, and broken wheels and shafts, and a policeman with a smoking pistol, and two dead horses, and a horrible looking dead boy in yellow-topped boots. Somebody had charitably covered his face with a handkerchief; and men were lifting a limp, white heap from among the splintered rubbish.

Then wind and paper played half-heartedly in the twilight until the night had grown too chilly for further sport. There was no more murder to be done; and so the vagabond wind was puffed out into nothingness, and the bit of paper was left alone, and at about this season the big stars--the incurious stars--peeped out of heaven, one by one.

3

It was Stella's sister, the Marquise d'Arlanges, who sent for me that night. Across the street a hand-organ ground out its jingling tune as Lizzie's note told me what the playful wind had brought about. It was a despairing, hopeless and insistent air that shrilled and piped across the way. It seemed very appropriate.

The doctors feared--Ah, well, telegrams had failed to reach Peter in Washington. Peter Blagden was not in Washington, he had not been in Washington. He could not be found. And did I think--?

No, I thought none of the things that Stella's sister suggested. Of a sudden I knew. I stood silent for a little and heard that damned, clutching tune cough and choke and end; I heard the renewed babblement of children; and I heard the organ clatter down the street, and set up its faint jingling in the distance. And I knew with an unreasoning surety. I pitied Stella now ineffably, not for the maiming and crippling of her body, for the spoiling of that tender miracle, that white flower of flesh, but for the falling of her air-castle, the brave air-castle which to her meant everything. I guessed what had happened.

Later I found Peter Blagden, no matter where. It is not particularly to my credit that I knew where to look for him. Yet the French have a saying of infinite wisdom in their _qui a bu boira_. The old vice had gripped the man, irresistibly, and he had stolen off to gratify it in secret; and he had not been sober for a week. He was on the verge of collapse even when I told him--oh, with a deliberate cruelty, I grant you,--what had happened that afternoon.

Then, swiftly, his demolishment came; and I could not--could not for very shame--bring this shivering, weeping imbecile to the bedside of Stella, who was perhaps to die that night. Such was the news I brought to Stella's sister; through desolate streets already blanching in the dawn.

Stella was calling for Peter. We manufactured explanations.

4

Nice customs curtsey to death. I am standing at Stella's bedside, and the white-capped nurse has gone. There are dim lights about the room, and heavy carts lumber by in the dawn without. A petulant sparrow is cheeping somewhere.

"Tell me the truth," says Stella, pleadingly. Her face, showing over billows of bedclothes, is as pale as they. But beautiful, and exceedingly beautiful, is Stella's face, now that she is come to die.

It heartened me to lie to her. Peter had been retained in the great Western Railway case. He had been called to Denver, San Francisco

and--I forget today just why or even whither. He had kept it as a surprise for her. He was hurrying back. He would arrive in two days. I showed her telegrams from Peter Blagden,--clumsy forgeries I had concocted in the last half-hour.

Oh, the story ran lamely, I grant you. But, vanity apart, I told it with conviction. Stella must and should die in content; that much at least I could purchase for her; and my thoughts were strangely nimble, there was a devilish fluency in my speech, and lie after lie was fitted somehow into an entity that surprised even me as it took plausible form. And I got my reward. Little by little, the doubt died from her eyes as I lied stubbornly in a drug-scented silence; a little by a little, her cheeks flushed brighter, and ever brighter, as I dilated on this wonderful success that had come to Peter Blagden, till at last her face was all aflame with happiness.

She had dreamed of this, half conscious of her folly; she had worked toward this consummation for months. But she had hardly dared to hope for absolute success; it almost worried her; and she could not be certain, even now, whether it was the soup or her blue silk that had influenced Allardyce most potently. Both had been planned to wheedle him, to gain this glorious chance for Peter Blagden....

"You--you are sure you are not lying?" said Stella, and smiled in speaking, for she believed me infinitely.

"Stella, before God, it is true!" I said, with fervour. "On my word of honour, it is as I tell you!" And my heart was sick within me as I thought of the stuttering brute, the painted female thing with tumbled hair, and the stench of liquor in the room--Ah, well, the God I called to witness strengthened me to smile back at Stella.

"I believe you," she said, simply. "I--I am glad. It is a big thing for Peter." Her eyes widened in wonder and pride, and she dreamed for just a moment of his future. But, upon a sudden, her face fell. "Dear, dear!" said Stella, petulantly; "I'd forgotten. I'll be dead by then."

"Stella! Stella!" I cried, and very hoarsely; "why--why, nonsense, child! The doctor thinks--he is quite sure, I mean--" I had a horrible desire to laugh. Heine was right; there is an Aristophanes in heaven.

"Ah, I know," she interrupted. "I am a little afraid to die," she went on, reflectively. "If one only knew--" Stella paused for a moment; then she smiled. "After all," she said, "it isn't as if I hadn't accomplished anything. I have made Peter. The ball is at his feet now; he has only to kick it. And I helped."

"Yes," said I. My voice was shaken, broken out of all control. "You have helped. Why, you have done everything, Stella! There is not a young man in America with his prospects. In five years, he will be one of our greatest lawyers,--everybody says so--everybody! And you have done it all, Stella--every bit of it! You have made a man of him, I tell you! Look at what he was!--and then look at what he is! And--and you talk of leaving him now! Why, it's preposterous! Peter needs you, I tell you--he needs you to cajole the proper people and keep him steady and--and--Why, you artful young woman, how could he possibly get on without you, do you think? Oh, how can any of us get on without you? You _must_ get well, I tell you. In a month, you will be right as a trivet. You die! Why, nonsense!" I laughed. I feared I would never have

done with laughter over the idea of Stella's dying.

"But I have done all I could. And so he doesn't need me now." Stella meditated for yet another moment. "I believe I shall always know when he does anything especially big. God would be sure to tell me, you see, because He understands how much it means to me. And I shall be proud--ah, yes, wherever I am, I shall be proud of Peter. You see, he didn't really care about being a success, for of course he knows that Uncle Larry will leave him a great deal of money one of these days. But I am such a vain little cat--so bent on making a noise in the world, --that, I think, he did it more to please my vanity than anything else. I nagged him, frightfully, you know," Stella confessed, "but he was always--oh, _so_ dear about it, Rob! And he has never failed me--not even once, although I know at times it has been very hard for him." Stella sighed; and then laughed. "Yes," said she, "I think I am satisfied with my life altogether. Somehow, I am sure I shall be told about it when he is a power in the world--a power for good, as he will be,--and then I shall be very perky--somewhere. I ought to sing _Nunc Dimittis_, oughtn't I?" I was not unmoved; nor did it ever lie within my power to be unmoved when I thought of Stella and how gaily she went to meet her death....

5

"Good-bye," said she, in a tired voice.

"Good-bye, Stella," said I; and I kissed her.

"And I don't think you are a mess. And I _don't_ hate you." She was smiling very strangely. "Yes, I remember that first time. And no matter what they said, I always cared heaps more about you, Rob, than I dared let you know. And if only you had been as dependable as Peter--But, you see, you weren't--"

"No, dear, you did the right thing--what was best for all of us--"

"Then don't mind so much. Oh, Bob, it hurts me to see you mind so much! You aren't--being dependable, like Peter, even now," she said, reproachfully....

Heine was right; there is an Aristophanes in heaven.

15.

He Decides to Amuse Himself

I came to Fairhaven half-bedrugged with memories of Stella's funeral, --say, of how lightly she had lain, all white and gold, in the grotesque and horrid box, and of Peter's vacant red-rimmed eyes that seemed to wonder why this decorous company should have assembled about the deep and white-lined cavity at his feet and find no answer. Nor, for that matter, could I.

"But it was flagrant, flagrant!" my heart screeched in a grill of impotent wrath. "Eh, You gave me power to reason, so they say! and will You slay me, too, if I presume to use that power? I say, then, it was flagrant and tyrannical and absurd! 'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first, Loving not, hating not, just choosing so!' O Setebos, it wasn't worthy of omnipotence. You know it wasn't!" In such a frame of mind I came again to Bettie Hamlyn.

2

It was very odd to see Bettie again. I had been sublimely confident, though, that we would pick up our intercourse precisely where we had left off; and this, as I now know, is something which can never happen to anybody. So I was vaguely irritated before we had finished shaking hands, and became so resolutely boyish and effusive in my delight at seeing her that anyone in the world but Bettie Hamlyn would have been quite touched. And my conversational gambit, I protest, was masterly, and would have made anybody else think, "Oh how candid is the egotism of this child!" and would have moved that person, metaphorically anyhow, to pat me upon the head.

But Bettie only smiled, a little sadly, and answered:

"Your book?--Why, dear me, did I forget to write you a nice little letter about how wonderful it was?"

"You wrote the letter all right. I think you copied it out of _The Complete Letter Writer_. There was not a bit of you in it."

"Well, that is why I dislike your book--because there was not a bit of _you_ in it. Of course I am glad it was the big noise of the month, and also a little jealous of it, if you can understand that phase of the feminine mind. I doubt it, because you write about women as though they were pterodactyls or some other extinct animal, which you had never seen, but had read a lot about."

"Which attests, in any event, my morals to be above reproach. You should be pleased."

"To roll it into a pill, your book seems pretty much like any other book; and it has made me hold my own particular boy's picture more than once against my cheek and say, 'You didn't write books, did you, dear? --You did nicer things than write books'--and he did .... I hear many things of you...."

"Oh, well!" I brilliantly retorted, "you mustn't believe all you hear." And I felt that matters were going very badly indeed.

"Robin, do you not know that your mess of pottage must be eaten with you by the people who care for you?--and one of them dislikes pottage. Indeed, I _would_ have liked the book, had anybody else written it. I almost like it as it is, in spots, and sometimes I even go to the great length of liking you,--because 'if only for old sake's sake, dear, you're the loveliest doll in the world.' There might be a better reason, if you could only make up your mind to dispense with pottage...."

The odd part of it, even to-day, is that Bettie was saying precisely

what I had been thinking, and that to hear her say it made me just twice as petulant as I was already.

"Now, please don't preach," I said. "I've heard so much preaching lately--dear," I added, though I am afraid the word was rather obviously an afterthought.

"Oh, I forgot you stayed over for Stella Blagden's funeral. You were quite right. Stella was a dear child, and I was really sorry to hear of her death."

"Really!" It was the lightest possible additional flick upon the raw, but it served.

"Yes,--I, too, was rather sorry, Bettie, because I have loved Stella all my life. She was the first, you see, and, somehow, the others have been different. And--she disliked dying. I tell you, it is unfair, Bettie,--it is hideously unfair!"

"Robin--" she began.

"And why should you be living," I said, in half-conscious absurdity, "when she is dead? Why, look, Bettie! even that fly yonder is alive. Setebos accords an insect what He grudges Stella! Her dying is not even particularly important. The big news of the day is that the President has started his Pacific tour, and that the Harvard graduates object to his being given an honorary degree, and are sending out seven thousand protests to be signed. And you're alive, and I'm alive, and Peter Blagden is alive, and only Stella is dead. I suppose she is an angel by this. But I don't care for angels. I want just the silly little Stella that I loved,--the Stella that was the first and will always be the first with me. For I want her--just Stella--! Oh, it is an excellent jest; and I will cap it with another now. For the true joke is, I came to Fairhaven, across half the world, with an insane notion of asking you to marry me,--you who are 'really' sorry that Stella is dead!" And I laughed as pleasantly as one may do in anger.

But the girl, too, was angry. "Marry you!" she said. "Why, Robin, you were wonderful once; and now you are simply not a bad sort of fellow, who imagines himself to be the hit of the entire piece. And whether she's dead or not, she never had two grains of sense, but just enough to make a spectacle of you, even now."

"I regret that I should have sailed so far into the north of your opinion," said I. "Though, as I dare assert, you are quite probably in the right. So I'll be off to my husks again, Bettie." And I kissed her hand. "And that too is only for old sake's sake, dear," I said.

Then I returned to the railway station in time for the afternoon train. And I spoke with no one else in Fairhaven, except to grunt "Good evening, gentlemen," as I passed Clarriker's Emporium, where Colonel Snawley and Dr. Jeal were sitting in arm chairs, very much as I had left them there two years ago.

3

It was a long while afterward I discovered that "some damned good-natured friend," as Sir Fretful has immortally phrased it, had

told Bettie Hamlyn of seeing me at the theatre in Lichfield, with Stella and her marvellous dinner-company. It was by an odd quirk the once Aurelia Minns, in Lichfield for the "summer's shopping," who had told Bettie. And the fact is that I had written Bettie upon the day of Stella's death and, without explicitly saying so, had certainly conveyed the impression I had reached Lichfield that very morning, and was simply stopping over for Stella's funeral. And, in addition, I cannot say that Bettie and Stella were particularly fond of each other.

As it was, I left Fairhaven the same day I reached it, and in some dissatisfaction with the universe. And I returned to Lichfield and presently reopened part of the old Townsend house .... "Robert and I," my mother had said, to Lichfield's delectation, "just live downstairs in the two lower stories, and ostracise the third floor...." And I was received by Lichfield society, if not with open arms at least with acquiescence. And Byam, an invaluable mulatto, the son of my cousin Dick Townsend and his housekeeper, made me quite comfortable.

Depend upon it, Lichfield knew a deal more concerning my escapades than I did. That I was "deplorably wild" was generally agreed, and a reasonable number of seductions, murders and arsons was, no doubt, accredited to me "on quite unimpeachable authority, my dear."

But I was a Townsend, and Lichfield had been case-hardened to Townsendian vagaries since Colonial days; and, besides, I had written a book which had been talked about; and, as an afterthought, I was reputed not to be an absolute pauper, if only because my father had taken the precaution, customary with the Townsends, to marry a woman with enough money to gild the bonds of matrimony. For Lichfield, luckily, was not aware how near my pleasure-loving parents had come, between them, to spending the last cent of this once ample fortune.

And, in fine, "Well, really now--?" said Lichfield. Then there was a tentative invitation or two, and I cut the knot by accepting all of them, and talking to every woman as though she were the solitary specimen of feminity extant. It was presently agreed that gossip often embroidered the actual occurrence and that wild oats were, after all, a not unheard-of phenomenon, and that though genius very often, in a phrase, forgot to comb its hair, these tonsorial deficiencies were by the broadminded not appraised too strictly.

I did not greatly care what Lichfield said one way or the other. I was too deeply engrossed: first, in correcting the final proofs of _Afield_, my second book, which appeared that spring and was built around--there is no harm in saying now,--my relations with Gillian Hardress; secondly, in the remunerative and uninteresting task of writing for _Woman's Weekly_ five "wholesome love-stories with a dash of humor," in which She either fell into His arms "with a contented sigh" or else "their lips met" somewhere toward the ending of the seventh page; and, thirdly, in diverting myself with Celia Reindan....

4

That, though, is a business I shall not detail, because it was one of the very vulgarest sort. It was the logical outgrowth of my admiration for her yellow hair,--she did have extraordinary hair, confound her! --and of a few moonlit nights. It was simply the resul

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