FREDERIC BIRD

A PESSIMIST IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Bird F.

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Содержание

Robert Timsol
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I.
WISDOM IN THE WOODS

I had seen and heard little of Hartman since our college days. There he was counted a youth of eminent promise: after that I knew that he had traveled, written something or other, and practised law – or professed it, and not too eagerly: then he had disappeared. Last May I stumbled on him in a secluded region where I had gone to fish and rest, after a year of too close attention to business. We came face to face in the woods, stared at each other, and then our hands met in the old grip. He took me home with him, to a comfortable enough bachelor establishment, and we made a night – or more than an evening – of it. He did not seem curious, but I was.

"What have you been doing with yourself!" I began; "withdrawing from the world?"

"To some extent," he said. "You can't do that entirely, you know. The world is in you as well as around you, unluckily. It is too much with us, as the poet observed. Do you remember the time you had in class over that sonnet?"

"Pass that," I said. "I've given up poetry." ("I should have thought that impossible," he put in, in his nasty nagging fashion; but I took no notice.) "Where have you been all the time?"

"Here, mostly. It's not much of a place, but that is its merit."

He was getting too deep now, as he often did of old; so I said, "But it's so far away."

"That's its other merit. You always had a direct and ingenuous mind, Bob. Here you've hit both bull's-eyes in two shots."

"None of your chaff," said I. "Who do you practice your wits on, up here?"

"My dogs. And there are some hens in the neighborhood, and a few small farmers. Or if my bosom cries too loudly to be eased of its perilous stuff, I can chaff myself, which is more profitable."

"You were always too clever for me. What else do you do?"

"As the Baroness used to say in *The Danicheffs*, in our days of vanity, 'Do you think that is much of a compliment?' I read, and fish, and climb, and ride several hobbies, and meditate on Man, on Nature, and on Human Fate."

"What's the good of that?" I was growing impatient of all this nonsense.

"Well, not much, perhaps," said he. "For you, very little indeed. But intrinsically it is about as profitable as more popular avocations."

"Now look here, Hartman," I said. "You're a better man any day than I – or you were. But here you are, hidden in the backwoods with owls (one of them was making a horrid noise outside), and nothing to show. Now I've got a wife – "

"And seven children," he interposed.

"No, only three. But I have a good business, and a house on the avenue, and a decent social position, and I'm making money. And I don't like to see you throw yourself away like this."

"Old man," said Hartman, "we are just of an age, and you would pass for five years the elder. Your hair is getting gray, and thin on top. You look fagged. And you owned to me that you came here to pick up."

He had me there a little. "Yes, I've been working hard. But I'm in the swim. I do as others do. I help to make the wheels go round." I thought I had him there; but you never can count on Hartman, except for an answer of some kind.

"Wouldn't they go round without your help? And why should they go around, anyway? It might be a variety to have them stop. What's the good of it?"

I stared at him; but his eye looked more rational than his talk sounded. "The good of it is that I am in things generally, while you are out."

"Exactly so. I am out, while you are in. As to things generally, I prefer to be with the outs. It is a matter of taste, no doubt."

"Well, you are beyond me. But I brought myself in merely as an example – not that I set up to be much of that – or an illustration, say. I want to know about you." It may have been foolish, but somehow I felt the old affection coming back as we talked. "What does it all mean, Harty?"

He looked at me. "Do you really want to know, Bob?"

"Of course I do. Do you suppose I've forgotten the larks we used to have, and the scrapes you got me out of, and how you coached me through that exam, in Calculus? It's long ago, Jim; but I took it rather hard, the way you dropped me."

He began to look as he used to: he wasn't a selfish fellow in those days. "I never meant to be hard on you, Bob, nor supposed you'd take it so: and I doubt if you did, though you think so at this moment. It was part of a system; and systems are poor things, though we can't do without them. I'll tell you how it was."

"Wait till I fill up. – Now go ahead."

"You don't smoke as you used to, Bob. Does the Madam object?"

"She doesn't like tobacco about the house, of course. And I'm not sure it's good for me."

"Ah. Sorry to be leading you astray. There is no one to interfere with my little vices. Well, Bob, I got tired of it. Not that that alone would matter: one could stand being bored in a good cause. But I couldn't see that it was a good cause."

"Would you mind explaining?" said I. "What cause?"

"Helping to make the wheels go round. Being in the swim. Doing as others do. Trying to make a little money and a little name, and following the fashions of a carnal-minded generation. I could see no point to it, Bob; the game never seemed worth the candle."

"And so you came out in the woods, like what's his name – that Concord fellow. Do you find this any better?"

"Negatively. I am not so much a part of the things I despise. The pomps and vanities are conspicuous chiefly by their absence. It is a simpler life, comparatively laudable for there being less of it."

"And don't you get bored, out here? A week or so of it is well enough in a way; but take it the year round, I should think you'd find it worse than civilization."

"I get bored, of course: that is incidental to life, and chronic with one who has looked beneath the surface and sifted values. But it's not so oppressive as in town. There are no shams here, to speak of. Having no business and no society, we don't pretend to be very different from what we are."

"O, if you come to that, the women still improve on nature, and the street has its little tricks and methods; but you could keep out of them. You were in the law."

"It's all the same, Bob. The law now is worked much more as a business than as a science. Look at Jones, and Brown, and Jenkins: they are getting on, I hear. I don't want to get on in that way."

"But you might have taken the scientific side of it. With your head piece, and your high and mighty notions, there was a field for you."

"So is theology a field, or physic, or Greek roots, or chiropody – for him, who believes in them. I was not able to see that one line of thought has a right to crowd out all the rest, or to sink my whole soul in a profession. That's what they want of you now – to make a little clearing, and put up palings all round it, and see things outside only through the chinks of your blessed fence. Be a narrow specialist: know one thing, and care for nothing else. I suppose you can do that with oil."

I thought there was some uncalled-for bitterness in this; but the poor fellow can't be contented, with his lonesome and aimless life. "We're not talking about me, Jim. You're the topic. Stick to your text, and preach away: my soul is not so immersed in oil that I can't listen. But I don't blame you for going back on the law; a beast of a business, I always thought it. Why didn't you go for a Professorship?"

"My poor friend, you were at college four years, and graduated – without honors, it is true. Don't you remember how little we cared for the Profs. and their eminent attainments? We took it for granted that it was all right, and they understood what they were at; but it was a grind, to them and to us. If a man was an enthusiast for his branch, we rather laughed at him; or if his name was well up, we were willing to be proud of him – at a distance – as an honor to Alma Mater; but we kicked all the same, if he tried to put extra work on us. It was all fashion, routine, tradition. The student mind doesn't begin to look into things for itself till about the senior year, and then it's full of what lies ahead, in the great world outside – poor innocents! With those of us who had anything in us, it took most of the time to knock the nonsense out. – And then if a man wants a chair, he must take it in a western concern, where he'll be expected to lead in prayer-meeting, and to have no views of geology that conflict with the Catechism."

"Well then, why not go on with literature? That was in your line: you might have made a good thing of it."

"Yes, by 'unremitting application,' much the same as at law, and taking it seriously as a profession, I might in time possibly have made five hundred a year off the magazines, and won an humble place among our seven hundred rising authors. What's the good of that, when one is not a transcendent genius, destined for posterity? The crowd seems to be thickest just there: too many books, too many writers, and by far too many anxious aspirants. Why should I swell the number? The community was not especially pining to hear what I might have to say; and I did not pine so much as some to be heard."

"I fear you lacked ambition, Harty. You would have made a pretty good preacher; but I suppose you weren't sanctified enough."

"Thanks: scarcely. I prefer to retain some vestiges of self-respect. That will do for the youths on the beneficiary list, who are taken in and done for from infancy, to whom it is an object to get a free education and into a gentlemanly profession. That's the kind they mostly make parsons of now, I hear. My boy, to do anything really in that line, a man ought to have notions different from mine – rather. Why don't you advise me to set up a kindergarten? That would suit as well as chronicling ecclesiastical small beer. Cudgel your brains, and start something more plausible."

This did not surprise me at all; but my suggestion-box was getting low. Then I made a rally. "How about the philanthropic dodge? Robinson is on the Associated Charities in town. I saw in the paper that he made a speech the other night."

"If he does nothing better than speech-making, he might as well drop it. There might be something in benevolent efforts, if one had just the temperament and talents for them. But as it is, I fear most of it is humbug; mutual admiration, seeing your name in the paper, and all that. And how they get imposed on! How they pauperize and debauch those they try to raise! It's a law of nature, Bob, that every tub must stand on its own bottom: you can't reform a man from without. Natural selection will have its way: the shiftless and the lazy must go to the wall. If you could kill them off, now, that might do some good. The class that needs help is not like us – not that we are anything to brag of: they've not had our chance. It's very well to say, give 'em a chance; but that's no use unless they take it, which they won't. 'Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow.' If they wouldn't, you are bound to respect their right of choice. Your drunken ruffian will keep on breaking the furniture, till another like him breaks his skull. His wife, the washerwoman with six small children, will continue getting more and making things worse. This part of it at least ought to be regulated by law: but that

would be a restriction of personal liberty, which is the idol of this age, and not without reason. We're between two millstones, and I see no way out."

"How would you like politics? The gentleman is supposed to have an opening there now."

"A doubtful and difficult one. If it had come in my time I might have tried it. But it would be uphill work, a sort of Sisyphus affair: you may get the stone to the top, but the chances are against it. And which party is one to join, when he sees nothing in either but selfish greed and stale traditions? Viewed as a missionary field, Bob, it's just like the ministry: you are weighed down with a lot of dead conventions which you must pretend to believe have life and juice in them yet. Before you can do anything you must be a partisan, and that requires a mediæval state of mind. Mine, unluckily if you like, is modern. It wouldn't go, Bob. Try again, if you have more on your list."

"Well, there's pure Science: you wouldn't care for the applied, I know. But you used to like beetles and things. Truth for Truth's sake is a fine motto, now?"

"Yes, if they lived by it. There was Bumpus, old Chlorum's favorite student – in the laboratory, you remember. The old man died, and Bumpus stole all his discoveries, and published them as his own; made quite a pretty reputation, and is one of our leading chemists. You know how the books on Astronomy are made? A man finds out a thing or two for himself, cribs the rest from other books, changes the wording, and brings it all out with a blare of trumpets as original research. Those methods are approved, or at least tolerated, in the best scientific circles, and other folks don't know the difference. O, I belong to a few societies yet, and once in an age go to their meetings, when I get tired up here."

"So the outside world still has charms, eh? Have to go back to it now and then, to keep alive, do you?"

"Yes, when I need to be reconciled to solitude; much as you go to hear Ingersoll when your orthodoxy wants confirming, or Dr. Deadcreed if your liberalism is to be stirred up. Let us spice the insipid dish with some small variety. The lesser evil needs the greater for its foil."

"Look here, Harty; this sounds like pure perverseness; opposition for its own sake, you know. I believe your money has been the ruin of you. It's not an original remark, but if you'd had nothing you'd have done something; gone into business like the rest of us, and made your way."

"Of course, if I had been obliged to; but I should have loved it none the better. Poor Bayard Taylor said a man could serve God and mammon both, but only by hating the mammon which he served from sheer necessity. Say I got my living by a certain craft, would that make the craft noble? 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians,' because we sell her images! Why should I desire to supply the confiding public with shoes, or sugar, or sealing-wax? Plenty of others can do that better, and find it more amusing, than I should."

"If it's amusement you're after, most men find it in Society. You're not too old for that yet."

"Blind guide, I have been there. So long ago, you say, that I've forgotten what it's like? Not quite. Last winter I had to attend an execution: couldn't get out of it, you know. My cousin married a Washington belle, and I had to be there a week, and take it all in. Ah well, this is a threadbare theme; but I could understand how men fifteen hundred years ago fled from Alexandrian ball-rooms to Nitrian deserts. The emptiness of it – the eternal simper, the godless and harrowing routine! If a man has brains or a soul about him, what can he do with them in such a crowd? Better leave them at home with his pocket-book, or he might lose them – less suddenly, but more certainly, I fancy. No, the clubs are not much better; I don't care for horse-talk or the price of shares. See human nature? not in its best clothes – and you may read that remark either way you like. Why man, you can get all this in *Punch* and the novels, with far less fatigue, and lay them down when you have had enough. An hour on Broadway sickens me for the wild-flowers, the brooks, the free breeze or the mountain side."

He was getting violent now, and I thought I had better calm him down. "Oho! the rhyme and reason of a rural life, is it? Soothing effect of Nature on a world-worn bosom, and all that? So you do believe in something, after all?"

"I told you it was but a choice of evils, and this is the less. Nature has neither heart nor conscience, and she sets us a bad example. She has no continuity, no reliableness, no self-control. I can see none of the fabled sublimity in a storm; only the pettishness of a spoiled child, or of an angry man bent on breaking things. The sunset is better to look at, but it has no more moral meaning than a peep-show. Yet this is a return to primitive conditions, in a way. I can throw off here the peddler's pack of artificialities that Vanity Fair imposes, and carry only the inevitable burden of manhood. The air is less poisonous to body and mind than in the cities. The groves were God's first temples, and may be the last."

"See here, Hartman. Suppose people in general were to take up with these cheerful notions of yours, and go away from each other and out in the backwoods – what then?"

"It might be the best thing they could do. But don't be alarmed, Bob: I am not a Nihilist agent. Preserve your faith in the Oil Exchange and the general order. I speak only for myself, and I'm not proselyting to any great extent. We'll have a week's fishing, and then I'll send you back to your wife in good shape. Or if you find yourself getting demoralized, you can skip earlier, either home or to a place further up that I'll tell you of, where the few inhabitants are as harmless as your youngest baby."

But I was not to be bluffed off in this way. "Jim," I said, "there is something behind all this. Was it that girl you met at Newport and afterwards in Naples? You told me once – "

"Never mind the girl," he said. "You are a married man, and I an old bachelor. Leave girls to those who have use for them. If we are to get any trout to-morrow, it's time we turned in. And if you won't stay, I'll go with you to the tavern and knock up old Hodge: he's been asleep these four hours." I thought he had talked enough for one night, so I said no more, but got back to bed.

II.
WORSE YET

Hartman had asked me to stay with him, but there is no use of overloading friendship, and I like to be my own master as well as he does. I might get tired of him, or he of me; and it's not well to be chained to your best friend for a solid week. Not that I am afraid of Hartman; he is not a lunatic, only a monomaniac; but I can cheer him up better when I have a good line of retreat open. He took me next morning to some superior pools, where the trout were fat and fierce; but I had not my usual skill. The truth is, Jim was on my mind; and after missing several big fish and taking a good deal of his chaff, I begged off – said I had letters to write – and so got to the tavern in time for dinner, which they have at the pagan hour of half-past eleven. Then I set to work thinking. I am not quite so dull as I may seem, but Hartman always had the ascendancy at college, and last night I fell into the old way of playing chorus to his high tragedy. This will not do, and I must assert myself. He was much the better student of course, but I have knocked about and seen more of the world than he has, shut up in these woods like a toad in a tree. He is too good a sort to go to seed with his confounded whimseys; so I determined to take a different tone with him. And I wrote to my wife about it: Mabel is a competent woman, and sometimes has very good ideas where mine fail – though of course I seldom let her see that. That evening I took him in hand.

"Jim," I said, "I've been thinking – about you."

"Ah," said he. "Large results may be expected from such unusual exertion. Impart them by all means."

"James Hartman, you are lazy, and selfish, and unprincipled."

"Yes?" said he, in an inquiring tone. "That is your thesis. Prove it."

I went on. "A man should be doing something: you are doing nothing. A man should have a stake in the community. What have you got? Three dogs and an old cow. A man should be in connection and sympathy with the great tides of life. Here you are with nobody but yokels to talk to, and the pulse of the region about two to the minute."

"Twin brother of my soul, companion of the palmy days of youth, methinks – as they say in the wild and wondrous West – you hit me where I live. But none of these things move me. I am lost in admiration of your oratory: really, Bob, I didn't think it was in you. But you said all this, in simpler language, last night."

I saw I had overshot the mark: when he takes that tone, you are nowhere. "Jim," I said, "let's be serious. Begin where we left off, then. Granted that you don't care for making money, and the ends most of us are after. By character and fortune you are above the usual selfish motives. Still you are a man, a member of the community: you have duties to your fellows. Let the nobler motives come in. Do something to make the world happier, wiser, better. You have the power, if you had the will. Are not private talents a public trust? You used to berate the hogs of Epicurus' sty. It seems to me you've fallen back on mere self-indulgence. Your life here is a huge egoism. Cut loose from these withering notions: there is a better side to things than the one you see. Come back to the world, and be a man again."

His eye was very bright now – not that it was ever dull – but I could not quite make out what it meant; perhaps mere curiosity. "Robert," he said, "I should believe that somebody had been coaching you, but there's no one in range who could do it except myself. It's not like you to have brought books along; and you've not had time to hear from home. What put you up to this?"

"Hartman," I said, "look me in the eye and see whether I mean what I say. Go back with me next week. Make your home at my house till you can look round. I'll introduce you to some men who are not shams – and women, if you like. I know a few who have souls and consciences, though

they do go to parties. I'll help you all I'm worth. You can make a new start. Something went wrong before. Better luck this time."

"Bob," said he, "I'll take your word for it. Deeply touched by such unexpected and undeserved consideration – no, I won't chaff. You're not half a bad lot. But, my dear boy, you see the thing from your standpoint; mine is different. I'll try to explain. But what would you have me do?"

"Whatever is best for you. Anything, so you get an object in life."

"Do you remember what De Senancour says, in *Obermann*?"

"Not I. Put it in your own English, please: no French morals in mine."

"What is there to be done that is worth doing? It seems to me that everything is overdone. I go into a town, big or little: ten stores where one is needed. How do all these poor creatures live? Do you see anything noble in this petty struggle for existence? I can't. I serve my kind best by getting out of their way: that makes one less in the scramble."

"I shouldn't expect you to sell tape or taffy, Jim. You could deal in a higher line of goods, and do it in your own way."

"They don't want my goods, Bob, and I can't do it in my own way. I have tried – not much, but enough to see. There is no market for my wares: and I'm not sure they are worth marketing – or that any man's are. Truth as I see it is the last article to be in demand."

"As you think you see it just now, very likely. Your eye is jaundiced, and sees all things yellow. Get well, and you can find a market. Fit your mind to the facts, and receive a true impression."

"Exactly what I have done – so far as any impression is true. That's the point I've been waiting for you to come to. 'The Universe is change, and Life is opinion.' As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he; and as he thinks of things outside himself, so are they to him. One can do no more than use his eyes and brains, and then rule himself by what he sees. I have looked at matters more carefully and dispassionately than some do, and seen a little deeper into them: the prospect is not edifying, Bob. I am prejudiced, you say? No, I have cast aside prejudice. Most of you are misled by the love of life: you want to give a favorable account of your own belongings, and the wish is father to the thought: so you blink what is before you, and won't own the truth. Perhaps you are wise in your way: you gain such bliss as is in ignorance. Keep it if you can: I have no desire to disturb it."

"Jim, mayn't there be a little conceit of superior wisdom here?"

"Very possibly: as the lamented Bedott observed, we are all poor creatures. 'I do not speak as one that is exempt:' doubtless I have my full share of infirmity."

"Then why not take the benefit of it, with the rest of us? There's a better as well as a worse side. Take things as they are, and make the best of them."

"I do. The best is the least, and I get away from things as much as possible. To minimize life is to make the best of it."

"Now you're at it again; begging the question, and dodging the argument – you'd say, summing it up, I suppose. I tell you, it's all mental, and your mind's diseased. You think you're injured by the scheme of things. Well, change your opinion, and the injury is gone. Didn't one of your old philosophers say something like that?"

"He didn't give it quite the application you do, Bob. How can I change an opinion that is based accurately on facts? I don't make the facts: if I did, my opinion of myself would be yet worse than it is. I have a brain – such as it is – and a conscience: I can keep them clean and awake, even on Crusoe's island. Nothing better than that, my boy. 'What is the good of man? Rectitude of will, and to understand the appearances of things.'"

"Well, Hartman, if you had two or three kids, as I have, you'd see things differently. They would give you an interest in life."

"A tragically solemn one, no doubt. That responsibility at least can't be forced on a man. He can let his part of the curse die out with him."

"Jim, you *are* selfish. You were made to gladden some woman's eye and fill her heart. You were the strongest man of the nine, and the best oar in the crew. We all envied your looks, and there's more of them now. You could outshine all the gilded youth I know, and hold your own with the best. I remember a girl that thought so, a dozen years ago. Somewhere a woman is waiting for you to come and claim her. Why will you rob her and the world? This wilful waste is selfish wickedness, that's what it is."

"Think so if you must: it's a free country. But you sugar the pill too much. Who misses me – or what if some few did for a while? They've forgotten me long ago. I tell you, I served society by deserting it."

"It's all very well now, Jim, while your youth and strength last. But after you turn forty, or fifty say, these woods and whims will lose their charm; you'll get bored as you've never been yet. The emptiness and dreariness that you theorize about will become stern realities: you'll pine, when it's too late, for human affection and some hold on life. My lad, you are storing up for yourself a sad old age."

I thought I had him at last. His surface lightness was all gone: he looked intent and solemn. "No doubt of it, Bob; not the least in life. I am human, and the worst is yet to come. But do you think me such a cad as to go back on my principles in search of so poor a shadow as happiness? Shall I, in base hope of easing my own burden, throw it on somebody else who but for me might go through existence lightly? Should I call sentient beings out of the blessed gulf of nothingness, that they may pay a duty to my weakness by and by, and curse me in their hearts? That would be somewhat too high a price to pay for broth when I am toothless, and the coddling comforts of one who has lived too long."

I am not thin-skinned, but his tone shocked me. "Dear boy," I said, "they wouldn't look at it in that light. They would be your wife and your children."

"Yes," he said, still savagely, "they would be my wife and children – supposing your unsupposable case. Grant that my notions are as false and monstrous as you think them: a pleasant lot for my wife, wouldn't it, to be in constant contact with them? And my children would have my blood in them – the taint of eccentricity, perhaps of madness: O, I've seen it in your eye. Others would think so too – most, no doubt. No, Bob; better let it die out with me."

"Jim, you make me tired. I'll go back to the tavern." I was disappointed, and he saw it.

"Don't make yourself wretched about me, old man. Let this thing go – you can't mend it. Follow your own doctrine, and take what you find. We have the May weather, good legs, and our tackle, and the brooks are full of trout. I kill nothing bigger than fish, but if you want a change I'll show you where you can have a chance for deer. And for the evenings, there are other topics besides ourselves – or rather myself. You can tell me about your children; they are likely to be healthier than mine would be. Good night, my boy: sound sleep, and no dreams of me."

III.
COMPLICATIONS

After that I found it best to do as Hartman had said. The sport was good, but I failed to enjoy it. I suppose I was a fool, for each of us makes or mars his own life, and it is no use moping over your neighbor's blunders; but I could not get that poor devil out of my mind. He talks as well on one subject as on another: it was I, not he, had brought him under discussion; but the evenings dragged. Then came a letter from home: the distance is considerable, and the mails slow. "Dear Robert," my wife wrote, "I am glad to know you are so comfortable. Keep your flannels on, and change your clothing when you have been in the wet. The children are well: Herbert fell over the banisters yesterday, but fortunately without injury. Bring your friend Mr. H. back with you; he seems to be presentable, and evidently all he needs is a little cheering feminine society." [Hum: feminine society puts a higher estimate on its own powers than I do, then.] "Clarice has returned. You know how enterprising she is, not to say wilful, and how fond she is of you. She has taken a fancy to try your retreat, and learn to catch trout." [She has, eh? Well, let's get on with this.] "Jane will go with her, of course: they start on Thursday. Secure rooms for them, and have a vehicle to meet them."

Here was a nice situation. To make Mabel easy about me, I had enlarged too much on the accommodations here; they are a long way from what she supposes. I called the landlord. "Hodge, here are two ladies coming from the city. Where can you put them?"

"Wall, I d'no, Square. Ain't much used to city gals. Hope they don't bring no sarrytogys. There ain't nothin but your room, an mine, an old Poll's, and the gerrit. Me and you might go out in the hayloft like, or sleep on the pyazzer if the nights is warm."

While he was maundering on, the whole truth flashed upon me. Why can't I see things at once, like Hartman? If I had his sharpness, and he my slow common sense, there would be two men fit for this world's uses – which neither of us appears to be, as the case stands. I had rashly said too much about Jim and his attractions. Mabel is a born manager and matchmaker – can't endure to see an eligible man uncaught. She has put the girls up to this game: 'cheering feminine society,' indeed! My sister Jane is a sensible woman enough, and not much younger than I; but Clarice is a beauty with six years' experience, and irresistible, some think. 'Enterprising' – well, I should say so: cheeky, you might call it. Women do take such stunning liberties nowadays. My wife would reprove me for slang; but weaker words fail to express the fact, and my feelings about it. I might stand these girls coming up here after me – Clarice is a sort of eighth cousin of Mabel's and looks on me as a brother. But Jim – no. She must be pining for more worlds to conquer, and it would just suit her book to bring a romantic hermit to her feet. I should like well enough to see her try it, when I was not responsible, but not under present circumstances. Great Cæsar! Jim will think I have put up this job on him, and never forgive me: nor would I, in his place. This field is getting too thick with missionaries. – "Hodge, it won't do. Harness your old nag, and drive me to the station. I must telegraph. And while I'm there, I may as well put for home. We can catch the night train if you hurry."

"Wall, Square, I don't cotton to suddint changes: like to move when I git a good ready. Ye put a man off his base, Darn – ."

I checked his incipient profanity. "My friend, whether you like it or not is in this case immaterial. I'll pay you for the time I meant to stay, and all you like for the fifteen miles. But be quick, now."

While he was hunting strings for his broken buckboard, I threw my traps together, and scratched a line to Jim: called home by sudden press of business, I said – and so it was, in a way. It is a long ride, but I had enough to think of. At the depot I wired, "Hold the girls. I am coming back." As I straightened up from this exercise, there was the old sinner grinning malignantly over my shoulder.

"Hodge," I said, "not a word about the ladies to Mr. Hartman, mind," and I gave him an extra dollar. This was another mistake, I suppose.

"Never you mind, Square: tain't me as goes back on my friends." What could the old fool be thinking of? I would have given him some more cautions, but the train came, and I was off.

You may imagine the reception at home. I tried to take a high hand, but what can a man do against three women? "I really think, Robert," said Mabel, "that since the girls had set their hearts on this excursion, you might have indulged them." "The conceit of men!" cried Clarice; "what had our coming to do with Mr. Hartman? Is he lord of the manor, that no one may trespass on his demesne?" Jane too turned on me. "It was not very kind of you, brother, to prefer a mere acquaintance above your own sister, and suspect her motives in order to save his peace, forsooth!" I knew it was humbug; but I had to eat no end of humble pie, all the same. You may believe me or not – if you are a family man you will, without difficulty – but I had to get those women apart, and explain things to them one at a time, before I could have peace in the house. My own flesh and blood were soon mollified; but Clarice has not forgiven me yet. I have been on my knees to her, so to speak – most men do it, and she expects it – but it is of no use. "My dear Clarice," said I, "you know I would do anything in the world for you." "Yes," said she contemptuously, "I've just had experience of it." "But you don't know Hartman." "Then why couldn't you let me know him?" "But it wouldn't have done, under these circumstances. He – I – ." "Unhappy man," she said, with her tragedy queen air, "is it possible you imagined that you were a better judge of the proprieties than I?" And that's the way it goes. I am coming to believe Hartman was right about the fate of philanthropic efforts, at least.

In the midst of all this came a note from Jim himself. "Dear Bob, I enclose something which Hodge says you left behind." [O thrice-accursed idiot, did I leave Mabel's letter lying around loose?] "Of course I have not looked into it, but I fear he has." [You may bet on that: the only chance was that he could not read her fine Italian hand.] "He says one of your children fell down stairs: I trust the results were not serious. Sorry you left in such haste, and hindered the ladies from coming. Hodge's quarters are not palatial, but you could bunk with me, as I at first proposed; and since they were willing to rough it, we would have managed somehow. You could surely rely on my humble aid toward making their sojourn in the wilderness endurable. And *per contra*, a little cheering feminine society might have assisted your benevolent efforts toward my reclamation. Was it not selfish to leave me thus unconsoled and unconverted?"

Well, the business is done now, with neatness and dispatch. That beast Hodge has told Jim all he knew or suspected, even to that fatal phrase of my wife's: so there's an end of his faith in me, and of any chance I might have had to set him straight. That was a fortnight ago, and I have not the face to answer him. When I have any more doctrinaire anchorites to convert, I shall not call a family council. But alas, poor Hartman!

IV.
A WILFUL PRINCESS

I was wrong about Hartman after all. He has written me again, and this is what he says:

"Do you want to confirm the heretical opinions you argued against so manfully? You had revived my faith in friendship, Bob: I believed, and would like still to believe, that one man can be true and kind to another. And perhaps in general you had stirred and shaken me up more than you knew. Socrates outranks Pyrrho, and I am open to conviction. Possibly I have been too sweeping; I don't wish to dogmatize. It may be that I have lived alone too long, shut up in a narrow space, where light could enter only through my perversely colored glasses. At any rate, your coming was like opening a door and letting in a wholesome breeze. Have I offended you? I thought I was past asking favors from my kind: but do let me hear from you."

Of course I had to answer that, and worse, to show it to the girls. Some men, now, would keep it to themselves, and preserve their dignity; but such is not my style. Let them crow over me if they must.

They did. "Well, Robert," said Mabel, "you see now how absurdly mistaken you were. Perhaps hereafter you will allow us to manage our own affairs, and not complicate them with your bungling masculine attempts at superior wisdom." "I am glad to know, brother," said Jane, "that your friend is a gentleman, incapable of the base suspicions you would have attributed to him. You did your best to prevent our knowing him and carrying out your ideas for his improvement: now we shall be able to meet him cordially, and try to cheer him a little. But probably he is not at all as dark as you have painted him."

Clarice would say nothing: she was in one of her high and mighty moods. Her soul is like a star, and sits up aloft; sometimes it twinkles, but more generally it does not. I often want to tell her that she is a creature too bright and good to come to breakfast like other folks; but somehow she has a way of keeping people at a distance, and even of repressing my pleasantries. We call her the Princess: She has to be approached with bated breath, and you must whisper your compliments if you want to fire them off at her; rear them as gently as a sucking child, in fact – and then they are very seldom appreciated.

"Clarice," I said, "I want to get Hartman down here. Do treat him kindly, please; won't you, now?"

She looked at me with her Juno air. "Why should I treat him kindly?"

"O well, I won't say for my sake, because you wouldn't care for that. But the poor devil has lived in the woods so long."

"He might have been well enough in his woods; but why should you bring your poor devils into civilized society, and expect me to bear with their gaucheries, in addition to your own?"

There it is: she'll not forgive me in a year for upsetting her fine plan of going up there to beard the hermit in his den. She rarely takes these fancies, I must own; and when she does, she is not accustomed to be balked of them. As it has turned out, I might as well have let her have her way that time; there was no harm in it. "Princess, haven't you trampled on me enough? I was wrong, and I'm very sorry: what more can a man say? But Hartman had no hand in that."

"Yes, that is clear now, no thanks to you. Small merit in confessing after you are proved guilty."

"Well, you are pretty hard on a fellow. But you needn't punish Hartman for my fault. Thrash me all you like, but give him a chance. I give you my word of honor, Clarice, he is a finished gentleman, and very different from me. You needn't fear awkwardness in him. I knew you would like him."

"How do *you* know what I would like? If this Mr. Hartman wants to see a little of the world, I have no desire to prevent his being reclaimed from barbarism. Mabel and Jane can do that, without

my aid. To tell you the truth, Robert, I don't care to meet the man, after the disgusting complications which you have introduced."

I groaned – I couldn't help it. "Princess, please God, I will never interfere with you again. You shall be safe from any meddling of mine. If you will kindly say what you want, and say it slow, so that my limited faculties can take it in, I will try to act accordingly. But, if I may make so bold as to inquire, what are you up to now?"

"I shall go away. O, you need not feel so badly about it, Bob: I am not tied to you and Mabel. I was in the South all winter, you know, and only returned while you were at your fishing. I have a dozen invitations for the summer: I think I will join Constance."

"Not if I can help it, you won't. This is your natural home, Clarice, and you shall not be driven from it. Nobody shall enter here who is not acceptable to you: if anything about the house don't suit you, name it and it shall be corrected. You know Jane and Mabel worship you; so do the children, if you count them. I'll not have Hartman; or I can entertain him at the club while you are all at Newport."

"That will be hospitality indeed. Would you desert your friend for me?"

"I would not desert you for all the friends under the canopy. You have always ruled the house when you deigned to be in it, and you always will. I may be low in your books, but it does not follow that you are not high in mine. We can't do without you, Princess; you must stay. Name your price, and I'll pay it if it breaks me."

"Very well then; I will remain, and meet your Mr. Hartman. But one thing must be distinctly understood: there must be no more crossing of my will. I must be absolutely free and unhampered, to plan and carry out what I see fit. I may possibly be wrong at times; but you will not know when, and it is not for you to judge. No more interference or opposition, remember. Do the terms suit you?"

"O Lord, yes. I'll have a throne set up in the drawing-room, and everybody shall approach you Siamese fashion. And perhaps I had better come to you to see if my tie is right before dinner, and to practice what I shall say when we have company."

"It might improve you. But Mabel should be competent to attend to those trifles. On one point I must instruct you, though. I shall doubtless do things that appear to you strange, perverse, incomprehensible. In such cases it will be best for you to walk by faith. No meddling nor espionage, mind."

"Clarice, you don't think me capable of playing the spy on you?"

"Not that exactly, but you sometimes indulge in little tricks and stratagems: you like to think that you hoodwink your wife – not that it ever succeeds – in small unimportant matters. Mabel and Jane may endure your attempts, if they like; but don't try them on me. They would never deceive me for a moment, of course; but I can't waste time in explaining that to you in detail. Besides, your fancied success would unsettle your mind, and so tend to disturb the domestic equilibrium."

"Good heavens, Clarice! would I lie to you?"

"No: you dare not. But let me have no subterfuges, no concealments, and no criticisms. What I may do you cannot expect to understand, nor is it necessary that you should."

"Well, thought has been hitherto supposed to be free. When I see you at those little games of which you are to enjoy a monopoly, can't I have an opinion of them?"

"O yes. The opinion will be of small value, but your poor mind must be amused and occupied somehow, I suppose. But you will be carrying your opinions about the house, and introducing an element of confusion. If you could keep your own counsel, now – but that is hopeless."

"When you are operating on Hartman, for instance, it might confuse the programme if I were to say anything to him, eh?"

"When I take Mr. Hartman up, it will be very much better for his welfare and yours for you to leave him in my hands."

"O, he would rather be left there, no doubt, though they grind him to powder. But what the deuce am I to do? If I mayn't talk to anybody else, can't I come to you with my opinions – in odd moments, when your serene highness has nothing better on hand?"

"You may bring your valuable ideas to me, and I will hear them, when I have leisure and inclination. Yes, that will be best. But no concealments, mind. When you think you know anything that affects me, come to me with it at once: otherwise you will be blurting it out to somebody else. You promise?"

"I swear, by all my hopes of your royal favor. Anything else? I mean, has your majesty any further commands? You'll have to give me audience about three times a day, you know, to keep me in mind of all these rules, or I'll be safe to forget some of them."

"You had better try to remember. I'll keep an eye on you. And now do you want any more, or have you learnt your lesson?"

"I'll trust so. Henceforth I shall not call my soul my own. The humblest of your slaves craves permission to kiss the royal hand. I say, Clarice, you won't be rough on poor Hartman, will you? He's had hard lines: you could easily break him to pieces, what is left of him."

"If there is so little left of him, there would be small credit in breaking him to pieces, as you elegantly express it. I shall probably let him alone."

"Scarcely. There is a good deal left of him yet: he is as handsome a fellow, and as fine a fellow, as you'd be apt to find. You're tired of the regulation article, dancing man and such, that you meet every night: I don't wonder. This is something out of the common. He needs a little looking after, too. I wish now I had let you get at him in May, as you proposed."

"Robert, if you fling that odious and vulgar figment of your debased imagination at me again, I will go away and never come back. You make me sick of the man's name. If you ever breathe a hint of this disgusting slander to him I will never forgive either of you, nor speak to you."

"God forbid, Princess dear. Don't you know that your good name is as sacred to me as Mabel's? Wasn't I to come to you with notions that I couldn't put in words to anybody else?"

"Let them have some shadow of reason and decency about them, then. Cannot a girl plan a rural excursion, in company with your sister and under your escort, without being accused of designs on a strange man who chances to be in the neighborhood? You try my patience sorely, Robert. I wonder how Mabel can endure you."

"Well, he that is down can't fall any lower, as it says in Pilgrim's Progress. Walk over me some more, and then maybe you'll feel better. What the d – There, I'm at it again. Clarice, it might improve me if you would mix a little kindness with your corrections; handle me as if you loved me, like the old fisherman with his worms, you know. It discourages a fellow to get all kicks and no kisses."

"Robert, look me in the eye and swear to purge your mind of that vile thought, and never to admit another that dishonors me."

"O, I swear it. Bring me the Thirty-nine Articles and the Westminster Catechism and the Ten Tables, and I'll subscribe to all of 'em. I'll think anything you tell me to: I signed my soul away an hour ago." Here I saw that I had gone too far, and she was really angry. She's right; I must learn to check my confounded tongue, if I am to keep on any terms with the Princess. So I changed my tune, just in time. "Don't go, Clarice. Honestly, I beg your pardon; upon my soul, I do. Your word is all the evidence I want of any fact under heaven, of course. Princess dear, I've been fond of you since you were a baby, and it has grown with your growth – it has, really. I'll prove it some day: you wait and see. Forgive me this once, won't you? Don't speak, if you are tired, but just give me your hand, as they did in the Old Testament, in token of forgiveness."

She gave it. I am not good at descriptions, but a man might go barefoot and fasting for a week, and be paid by touching such a hand as that. The queer thing is that I've known Clarice for over twenty years – I told you she had been in society for six – and practically lived with her most of that time, and yet she grows more surprising every day. It seems to be generally supposed that familiarity

breeds contempt in such cases; that sisters, and wives, and the like, get to be an old story to the men who belong to them. Clarice is not that kind: possibly I am not. To be sure, she is neither my wife nor any blood relation; but I don't see that that makes any difference. They took out a patent for her up above, and reserved all rights, with no power of duplication. She might care for me a little more; but then I don't suppose I've ever given her any reason to. I am well enough in my way, but I'm not such an original and striking specimen of my 'sect' as she is of hers – not by a long shot. She was exhausted now, and that is how I got a chance to put in all this wisdom just here. I might talk to Mabel for a week, and it would produce no effect: but a little thing upsets the Princess, her organization is so delicate and sensitive. She is all alive and on fire, or else languid and disdainful: she can't take life easily, as people of coarser grain do, like me. Her brain weighs too much and works too hard; that uses her up. I don't doubt she has a heart to match; but it has never yet waked up to any great extent, so far as I have seen or heard. No matter; people will care for you all the same, Beauty, whether you care for them or not. Don't fancy that I am the only one – far from it: but I have the luck to be her adopted brother from infancy, and to have access to her when others have not. She is not always kind – very seldom, in fact, up to date: but it is a privilege to look at her, and any treatment from her is good enough for me. She used to tyrannize over me in this way when she was ten and I twenty, and so it will be, no doubt, to the end of the chapter. Outside, I sometimes take on a man-of-the-world air, and fancy that I can think of you lightly, my Princess – that is the correct society tone, and it does not pay to display the finer feelings of our nature to the general world: but when I come under the spell of your presence, I know that that is all humbug, and that you are Fair Inez of the ballad, God bless you. You and Hartman ought to get on together: it might be a good thing for you both – him especially. Mabel and Jane are women too, but they are as devoted to you as I am, according to their lights, and more jealous for you: jealousy seems to be no part of me, luckily. Well, between us we ought to be able to keep all harm from you, if you will let us.

Of course I didn't say all this out loud, but only thought it. Then she opened her eyes and yawned a little.

"Have I been asleep, Bob? I must have been: you tired me so. O yes, I know you think a good deal of me: that is an old story. Well, anything more?"

"Only about poor Hartman, dear: you didn't promise yet."

"Well, when he comes I will look him over and see what is to be done with him. I must go upstairs and dress now." And with this I had to be content.

This conversation occurred of a Sunday afternoon, when Mabel and Jane had gone to Church, and taken Herbert with them: the infants were out for an airing with their nurse. Fortunately there was a long missionary sermon, and a big collection, to which I must send five dollars extra: the occasion was worth that much to me. As the Princess left the room, they came in. They looked at her, then at me. "What have you been doing to Clarice, Robert?"

"Only preparing her to receive Hartman."

"Preparing her! you great goose, what does she want with your preparation? You'll only prejudice her against him, and spoil any chances he might have. Let her alone, do. Haven't you made mischief enough between them already?"

That is all they know about it. Churchgoing sometimes fails to bring the female mind into a proper frame. But you see they are ready to scratch out even my eyes at the thought that I have been rubbing her down the wrong way. No matter: I know what I know, and they need not try to make me believe that these things will go right without proper management.

V.
CONSULTATION

We usually go to Newport for the summer. As Mrs. Fishhawk says, the bathing is so fine, and the cliffs are such a safe place for children to play. Not that we care so much for the society: the Princess has seen the vanity of that and been bored with it, and the rest of us are very domestic people. After much persuasion through the mail, Hartman agreed to join us there: I was to pick him up in New York and take him down. A night or two before this, Clarice took me out on the aforesaid cliffs, which afford a fine walk in the moonlight with the right kind of company, but somewhat dangerous if you get spoony and forget to look where you are going. The Princess, it is needless to say, never commits this folly: she always has her wits about her, and wits of a high order they are, as not a few men have found to their cost, myself included, – many and many a time. She opened the ball.

"Robert, do you remember our compact?"

"I'm not likely to forget it. Your words are my law, more sacred and peremptory than the Ten Commandments, or those of the old codger who wrote 'em in blood because his ink had given out. As a servant looks to the hand of his mistress, so am I to watch your dark blue eye for direction and approval. Deign to cast a sweet smile, however faint, in this direction occasionally: it won't cost you much, and will encourage me. If the devotion of a lifetime – "

"Yes, I know all that: at least you've said it often enough. Now you will have an opportunity to put it in practice. Drop generalities, and come to business."

"My heart's queen, I am all attention. Speak, and thy slave obeys. Bid me leap from yon beetling crag into the billows' angry roar – "

"Will you stop that, or shall I go into the house? We are not rehearsing private theatricals now."

"Ah, indeed? I thought we might be. I expect to see some next week."

"You will see my place at table vacant if you don't keep quiet, and listen to what I have to say. I can join Constance yet. You talk about your affection for me and anxiety to serve me, and when I want something definite of you, you go off into the Byronic, or the Platonic, or what you would perhaps call the humorous: it is not easy to discriminate them. Once for all, will you do as I bid you, or not?"

When the Princess wants to bring a man to book, he has to come there, and stay there till he sees a favorable opening for a break: there was none such just now. So I called in the white-winged coursers of my too exuberant fancy, locked them up in the barn, begged the lady's pardon as usual, and composed myself into an attitude of respectful and devout attention, as if I were in church. It was not long after dinner: I wanted to have some more fun, but that did not seem to be just the time and place for it. My preceptress eyed me sternly, and waxed anew the thread of her discourse.

"I told you that my actions might appear strange to your ignorance. I will tell you now what my plan is, so far as is necessary for your guidance: then perhaps you will have sense enough not to go gaping about, but to fall into line and do what is required of you. I have determined to see very little of this Mr. Hartman – "

"O now, Clarice! After you promised! I relied on you – "

"Be still, stupid, and hear me out. I shall see but little of him at first. You have made such an ado about the man, I am disposed to be interested in him, for your sake. There, that will do; let my hand be." – I was merely pressing it a little, I assure you, to testify my gratitude for this unusual consideration: I don't know when she ever owned to doing a thing for my sake before. "For your sake first, you great baby, and then, if he is worth it, for his own. But at the start, as I told you, I must look him over; and that I can do best at a little distance."

"And then you mean to take him in and do for him? You can, of course; but, Princess dear, be merciful – for my sake first, and then, if he is worth it, for his own. Don't grind him up too fine: leave pieces of him big enough to be recognized and collected by his weeping friends."

"Robert, you really ought to try to restrain your native coarseness. What can a man like you know of the motives and intentions of a woman like me? Poor child, if I were to put them before you in the plainest terms the facts and the dictionary allow, you could not understand them."

As a quartz-crusher the Princess could have won fame and fortune. I hope she may not pulverize Hartman as effectually as she does me: he might not take it so kindly. To eliminate the metaphor, she is a master at the wholesome process of taking a man down: not that I don't often deserve it, or that it is not good for me. In fact, I've given her occasion, from her youth up, to get her hand in; and admiration of her skill binds up the wounds, so to speak, with which my whole moral nature is scarred at least sixteen deep. In case you should not follow my imaginative style, let me say in simpler language that I am used to it; but another man might not understand it. I consumed some more humble pie – these desserts occur frequently in the symposia of our conversations – and she resumed.

"So I will leave him to Jane at first. She will be very sisterly and gracious, and will make the first stages of his return to the world easy and pleasant. This may last two days, or two weeks."

"O, don't overdo it. He talked of staying but a week or ten days."

"Dear Robert, you are so innocent. He will stay as long as I want him to."

"What, whether you notice him or not?"

"Of course. Are you six years old? Have you never seen me in action before?"

"Body of Venus and soul of Sappho, I give it up. Of course you can do anything you like, but I never realized that you could do it without seeming to take a hand in the game. I strew ashes on my head like what's-his-name, and sit down in the dust at your feet. Forgive a penitent devotee for forming such lame and inadequate conceptions of your power. But what part do you want me to dress for in this improving moral drama?"

"Your part is very simple. Of course I must be occupied. I should hardly shine as a wall-flower."

"You would shine anywhere. If you were a violet by an old stone, you couldn't be half or a quarter hidden from the eye. But the supposition is impossible. If you were free, no other girl in the room would have a chance."

"That is very passable, though not wholly new. You are improving, Bob. If you would give your mind to it, I could mould you into tolerable manners yet. – Well, I might get plenty of men from the houses around. But they are tiresome – staler than you, my Robert, though I see less of them – and I can't take the same liberties with them I do with you. You are to belong to me as long as I may want you."

"That is not new at all, Princess. It has been so for years. Everybody about the house knows that, even the servants – and all our friends."

"Yes, of course. But I am to make special use of my property for the next few days. You will have to be in constant attendance. You ought to enjoy the prospect, and the reality when it comes."

"I do; I shall: bet your boots on that. O confound it, I've got my lines mixed already."

"Rather. If you startle the audience with such a speech as that, what will Mr. Hartman think? You must put on your prettiest behavior, Bob. Make a desperate effort, and try to keep it up – for my sake, now."

"For your sake I can be Bayard and Crichton and Brummell and all those dudes rolled into one. I'll order some new clothes when I go down. And you will have to be very gracious to me, you know."

"Am I not gracious enough now, pet? How is this for a rehearsal?"

"Beyond my wildest dreams, Empress. When you treat me thus for an hour, I can bear your ill usage for a year."

"There will be no ill usage at present, if you behave. Now don't forget, and spoil the play. Understand, you are to pair off with me, as Mr. Hartman with Jane. Mabel is mostly occupied with

the children; we will all look after her, of course. And there will be mixing and change of partners, but not much. You must watch, and obey my slightest hint – the turn of an eyelid, the flutter of a fan. I'll teach you all that."

"I know a lot of it already: when it comes to watching you, I am a dabster. I'll behave as if I was at school to Plato and Confucius, and in training to succeed them both. Do you know, Princess, if you were to treat a stranger for half a day as you are treating me now, he would want to die for you?"

"He might die for want of me before the day was over, if he grew lackadaisical over his wants. All men are not so chivalrous as you, my poor Robert. You may have to do that sort of dying before long. You must be ready to be dropped when the time comes to change the figures. No growling or moping, mind: you must submit sweetly, and take your place in the background with Jane, while the rest of the play goes on."

"I know: I've been there before. I can find consolation in seeing you carry the leading part. One set of men passes away, and another set comes on; but the Princess goes on conquering, regardless of the moans of her victims as they writhe on the bloody battlefield. O, I'm used to being shoved aside, and feeding on my woes in silent patience. The flowret fades when day is done, and so does every mother's son Who thinks his course is just begun, And knows not that his race is run – How does it go on, Clarice? I forget the rest of it."

"It is a pity you didn't forget the whole of it. I would if I were you, and quickly, lest you horrify some one else with it. You are too big to pose as a flowret, Bob."

"Polestar of my faith, see here. I'll have to be around with Hartman, smoking and so on, nights, after you and the rest have turned in, and often in the daylight. You and Jane can't attend to his case in person all the time, you know, and I'm his host. What shall I say about you?"

"Anything you like. Praise me to the skies, of course. That will be in keeping with your part as my cavalier; and he will see how things are between us – on your side, I mean. Tell him about my few faults, if you can bring yourself to mention them. Yes, you must; they will set off my many virtues. Be perfectly natural about it: you have known and cherished me from infancy, and so forth. Not a word, of course, about our compact, and these rehearsals, and my coaching you – O you great booby, were you capable of blurting that out? If you do, you'll spoil all, and I'll never forgive you. Remember now: you profess to dread my anger, and you have reason; you've felt it before. If you want me ever to trust you again, keep to yourself what is between us; regard it as sacred. O, I know you profess to look at all that belongs to me in that light; but show your faith by your works. Swear it to me now."

I swore. That is a ceremony which has to be gone through rather frequently with the Princess, and somehow I don't mind it. But how the deuce is one to remember all these rules and regulations? I'll have to get Clarice to write them out for me, by chapter and verse, with big headings; then I'll get the thing printed, and carry it about with me, and study it nights and mornings. But Mabel might find it in my clothes: she is welcome to my secrets, but this is not mine. I might have it printed in cipher; but then I should be sure to lose the key. O, confound it all, I'll have to chance it: I'll be sure to slip up somewhere, and then there'll be a row. Well, why borrow trouble? Let's gather the flowers while we may: only there are none just here, and it is too dark to find them. Then a thought suddenly struck me: why not head off the difficulty by improving my position beforehand? "Princess dearest, do you like me better than you used to, or is this only part of the play, the excitement of practicing for a newcomer? Tell me, please – there's a dear."

We were near the house now, and she darted away from me. "If you tells me no questions, I asks you no lies," she sang gaily as she ran in. O shades of Juliet and Cleopatra, what a woman that is – or what an idiot I am: I can't be sure which till I get an outside opinion. I'd give odds that within a fortnight Hartman will be far gone. It will be life or death for him, poor old man. But he's nigh dead now, inwardly speaking, and so has not much to lose. Anyway, he'll see that a world with Clarice in it is not as blank and chilly as he thinks it now – not by several thousand degrees. I fancy

his thermometer will begin to go up pretty soon. He needs shaking up and turning inside out and upside down – a general ventilating, in fact, and I rather think Miss Elliston will administer it to him.

VI.
PREPARATION

I was mighty glad that Clarice felt this way about Hartman's coming; she has not waked up so, or come down from her Olympian clouds of indifference, in a long time. But still I thought it best to go around and make some more preparations. When I have a secret to carry, it oppresses my frank and open nature more than you would think; and I find that I can conceal it best by inquiring concerning the matter of it of persons who know nothing about it. Naturally I began with the head of the house. That is myself, I suppose, nominally; but every decent man allows his wife to fill the position, and get what comfort she can out of it.

"Mabel," I said, "I hope that Hartman will enjoy himself here."

"You told us he was not given to enjoying himself; on the contrary, quite the reverse. No doubt he will take us as he finds us. He will hardly want to go out to dinner every day, and meet the Vanderdeck's and the foreign princess."

"But, Mabel, I trust you are all prepared to meet him in the right spirit."

"What absurd questions you ask, Robert. You talk as if he were a bishop, come to convert us: I thought we were to convert him. I hope I do not need to be instructed how to receive my husband's friends. And Jane is ready to take an interest in him: she can be very nice, you know."

"And Clarice: will she do her part?"

"Nobody knows what Clarice will do on any occasion. She would be more apt to do what you wish if you would not trouble her about Mr. Hartman. We are not three little maids from school, to be taught our manners. Why can you not learn that matters would move just as well, yes, and better, without your continual interference, dear? Your blunders only complicate them, and disturb the harmony."

Now that is a nice way for the wife of one's bosom to talk, isn't it? How often, O how often, would I remove the clouds of care from her placid brow, and smooth her path through life by graceful persiflage and appropriate witticisms: but she does not seem to appreciate them. I fear she must have had some Scottish ancestors. Sometimes I think she does not appreciate *me*. It is a cold world; a cold, heartless, unfeeling, unresponsive world, in which the sensitive spirit may fly around promiscuously like Noah's dove, and have to stay out in a low temperature. Wisely and beneficently is it arranged that Virtue should be her own reward, since she gets no other. I will try Jane next.

"My dear sister, you know I go to town to-night, and expect to bring Hartman back. You will receive him kindly, for my sake, will you not?"

Jane is a little prim at times, and I have to arrange my sentences carefully, when I am with her.

"I will do that, of course: why so many words about it? Have you not been preparing me, and all of us, for this visit, for the last month? We know what is right, Robert: *your* behavior is the only doubtful part."

"But Clarice, sister? She is always so doubtful, as Mabel says; so capricious, so haughty, so unapproachable. You have great influence with her. Dear Jane, can you not persuade her to treat my poor friend kindly?"

"Now, brother, why will you be such an unconscionable humbug? We all know that you are in her confidence, when any one is. What were you two talking about all last evening? Hatching some plot, no doubt. But it was not intended to be practiced on me – not on her part; that is your unauthorized addition to her text." And the maiden assumed the part of Pallas, and gazed at me with severity, as if she would read my inmost soul. But she can't beat Clarice at that. See here, young lady, you are too sharp; you are getting dangerously near the truth. I came near saying this out, but did not. Instead I took an injured tone.

"You are a pretty sister, Jane, to go about suspecting me this way, and accusing me of intrigue and hypocrisy, and all kinds of black-hearted wickedness. What would I want to deceive you for? You know we all have to consider Clarice, and humor her: she is an orphan, and we are her nearest friends. She amuses herself with me sometimes, for want of another man at hand, and then throws me aside when the fit is over."

"O yes, we all know that, of course. Well, brother, you can go to town with an easy mind. Leave Mr. Hartman to Clarice and me; when she is not in the humor to attend to him, I will."

Now how does Jane come to know so much? Has the Princess been taking her into the plan too, as well as me? That I don't believe. Clarice would expect Jane to take her cue by intuition, and not bother to coach her as she has me: perhaps she can trust Jane farther. That must be it: one woman can see into another's mind where a man couldn't. I must put a mark on that for future reference. They do beat us at some minor points. Well, I didn't exactly get the best of that encounter: it seems to me I owe Jane one, which I must try and remember to pay.

VII.
INITIATION

Hartman arrived on schedule time, and was duly taken home with me. "Old man," I said, "welcome back to the amenities of life; to the tender charities of man and woman; to the ties, too long neglected, which bind your being to the world's glad heart. You are the prodigal returning from sowing his wild oats in the backwoods: the fatted calf shall be killed for you, in moderation, as per contract, and the home brewed ale drawn mild. We are quiet people, and live mostly by ourselves: that will suit your book. The giddy crowd, in its frivolous pursuit of amusement and fashion, surges by in the immediate vicinity, and old Ocean, in his storm-tost fury, dashes his restless waves upon our good back door, or adjacent thereto. But we give small heed to either one of them. The sea views and feminine costumes are supposed to be of the highest order, and there is polo at stated intervals, if you care for such; but these vanities have little to do with the calm current of our daily life. You will shortly have in front of you a christian family, united in bonds of long-tried affection and confidence. The earthly paradise, James, must be sought in the peaceful bosom of one's Home. After tossing on the angry billows of Water Street, how sweet to return to this haven of rest! And you too, world-worn and weary man of woes, shall receive attention. The furrows of care shall be smoothed out of your manly brow: gentle hands will bind up your wounds – even the one you got from that girl a dozen years ago, if it isn't healed yet. The shadows of gloomy and soul-debasing Theory will flit away from your bewildered brain, and in this healthful atmosphere your spirit will regain its long-lost tone, and embrace once more the ethereal images of Hope and Joy and Faith. Probably you will yet find some one to love in this wide world of sorrow; anyway, we hope to send you forth clothed and in your right mind."

"I hope I'm properly clothed now, or will be with what I've got in my trunk; and I need to be in my right mind to take in all this eloquence. I was mistaken about you, Bob; you should have been a preacher. The only drawback is, you don't stick to one key long enough: these sudden changes in your woodnotes wild might confuse a congregation."

"The church lacks vivacity and sense of humor, Jim: she's all for a dull monotone. Old Fuller is dead: his mantle descended on me, but they don't appreciate that style nowadays. To return to our topic, and deal with the duty that lies nearest. In an humble and pottering way, we are a happy family, James. We envy not the rich and great: seek elsewhere their gilded saloons, and tinsel trappings of pride; but you will find things pretty comfortable. I regret to say we'll have to do our smoking out of doors; but it is generally warm enough for that. If we are noted for anything, it is for modest contentment, unassuming virtue, and cheerful candor – just as you see them in me. Each face reflects the genuine emotions and guileless innocence of the heart connected therewith; more than that, they reflect one another, as in a glass. You can look at Mabel, and see all that is passing in my capacious bosom. We share each other's woes, each other's burdens bear, and if we don't drop the sympathizing tear frequently, it is because there is very seldom any call for it. We have no secrets from one another: limpid and pure flows the confidential stream – but it flows no further than the fence. You can say what you like to any of us, and it will not go out of the house – unless the servants overhear it; you'll have to look out for that, of course."

"See here, Bob; judging by you, I had no idea I was coming among such apostolic manners, or I'd have taken a course of À Kempis. Are there any prayer-meetings near by, where I can go to freshen up?"

"Within a mile or two, no doubt. Jane can tell you about them; she can lend you a prayer-book, anyway. But I was not meaning to discourage you: they will make allowances. My wife is an exemplary woman; if you want to get on with her, you'll have to take an interest in Herbert's bruises

when he falls over the banisters. He is the only one of the children who will trouble you much; the others are small yet, happily. My sister is a pattern of propriety, but of rather an inquiring mind, and sympathetic if you take her the right way: she can talk with you about philosophy and science and your dried-up old doxies. Not that she knows anything about Schopenhauer, and Darwin, and Diogenes, of course; but she's heard their names, and she'll pretend to be posted – you know how women are. And when you need a mental tonic – the companionship of a robust intellect, the stimulus of wide acquaintance with the great world of men and things, a manly comprehension of any difficulties that you may meet, or sound and wise advice how to steer your way through the pitfalls and intricacies of the female character – in such cases, which will no doubt often arise, you have only to come to me. I know all about these matters, of which you have had no experience. I'll be at home as much as possible while you are there, and I'll stand by you, Jim."

"Thanks, awfully – as I believe they say where we are going. Yes, you will be an invaluable mentor, Bob. Well, I'll try not to disgrace you. It is late: let us turn in."

This important conversation took place on the boat. You see, when I was with Hartman in May, he took the lead; but in my own house, or on the way to it, I like to be cock of the walk. Besides, as I had prepared the women for his coming, so now it was necessary to prepare his mind to meet them. In my picture of our domestic felicity, I may have laid on some tints too heavily, as about our mutual confidence. But he will soon see how that is. You may notice that I said nothing about the Princess. There was a deep design in that omission. When the orb of day in all his glory bursts from his liquid bed upon the astonished gaze of some lonely wanderer on the Andes, or the Alps, – or our own Rockies, say, – the spectacle is all the more effective if the wanderer was not expecting anything of the kind; didn't suppose it was time yet, or, still better, didn't know there was any sun. That is the way Jim will feel when he sees Clarice. If he has forgotten about her wanting to go up there in the woods in May, O. K.; that will meet her views, and he'll be reminded of her existence soon enough.

This is one of those delicate ideas which might not occur to the male mind unassisted: in fact, left to my native nothingness, I should probably have enlarged on her charms most of the evening. But she laid special stress on this point, that I was to say as little as possible about her beforehand, and fortunately I remembered it. Hartman thinks he is going to have a safe and easy time with me and two highly respectable ladies of sedate minds and settled habits. Sleep on, deluded James, while I finish my cigar here on deck: dream of the forest and the trout brooks, and your neighbor Hodge and your old tomcat. By to-morrow night your mental horizon will be enlarged, and when you return to your castle in the wilderness there will be some new sensations tugging at your vitals. It will be a change for you, old man, and you needed one. Well, I've given you enough to think of for now, and you'll get more before you are a week older. I hope he will come through it right: it is like taking one's friend to the surgeon to undergo an operation, when he doesn't know that anything ails him or is going to be done. Poor old Jim, I wouldn't have put up such a job on you if I didn't believe it was for your good. I am not a pessimist like you: I believe in God and the Princess.

VIII.
INTRODUCTION

The drive from the wharf is too long: I often think that the older part of the town ought to be submerged, or removed to one of the adjacent islands. We met the family at breakfast, and I said, "Ladies, you see before you a wild man of the woods, brought hither to be subdued and civilized by your gentle ministrations. By the way, Mabel, there was a corner in oil yesterday. I made fourteen thousand, and Simpkins went under; so you can have that new gown now." They paid no attention whatever to these pleasantries. Clarice was not there, or the sparkling fount of humor would have flowed less freely.

Hartman has very good manners when he chooses, and in my house he would naturally choose; so he got on well enough. The children took to him at once, and he seemed to take to them. After breakfast I led him out for a walk, to show him the points of interest. Several very creditable cottages have been put up since he was here last: in fact, this is quite a growing place, for the country. As we went back he suddenly said, "Bob, who is this Clarice that your sister mentioned at the table? Fancy name, isn't it?"

"O no," I said as indifferently as I could. He ought not to go springing her on me in that way: it makes a man nervous. "She's an orphan; a sort of cousin of Mrs. T. Got no brothers or sisters, and all that sort of thing; so we look after her a good deal. Sometimes she's with us, sometimes she's not. Was south all winter: got back while I was up there with you."

Now what the deuce did I say that for? It'll brush up his rusty mental machinery, and help him to recall what she wants forgotten. Just so; of course.

"Yes, I remember. She thought of joining you with Miss Jane. I wish you had let them come."

"Well, you see, you don't know what these girls are used to; I do. There were no fit quarters for them at Hodge's. I had gone and written my wife a lot of rot, pretending his place was much better than it is."

"With your usual unassuming virtue and cheerful candor; yes. We have no secrets from one another: the limpid stream of confidence flows unchecked and unpolluted. Just so. But see here, you old hypocrite, if there is another young woman in the family, you ought to have told me about her last night, when you were preparing my mind, you know, and pretending to explain the whole domestic situation. – Great heavens, who's that?"

We had turned a corner, and come plump on the house; and there on the piazza, two rods away, sat a rare and radiant maiden, playing cat's cradle with my eldest son and heir. I can't tell you how she was dressed; but she was a phantom of delight when thus she broke upon our sight; a lovely apparition, sent to be Jim Hartman's blandishment. At least so it seemed, for he stood there and stared like a noble savage. As when the lightning descends on the giant oak in its primeval solitude – but I must stop this; she is too near, though she pretends not to see us yet. So I whispered in low and warning tones:

"Brace up, Jim. She's not the one you met here twelve years ago, who jilted you at Naples: this one wasn't out of her Fourth Reader then. Don't get them mixed, or be deceived by a chance resemblance." I thought it was better to lay his embarrassment on that old affair, you see. But that was all nonsense: he never saw anybody like Clarice before – how should he?

"Confound you, Bob," he muttered between his teeth, "so you've been practising your openhearted innocence on me. Get on with it now, and finish it up."

He pulled himself together, and I went through the introduction with due decorum; then I got away as soon as I could. You see, I was unmanned by the spectacle of so much young emotion, and somewhat exhausted by my own recent exertions. I found a cool corner in the library; and presently Jane had to come in. "What is the matter with you, Robert? Why do you sit there grinning like an

idiot?" Perhaps a smile of benevolence had overspread my striking countenance; and that's the way she distorts it. I could not tell her what pleased me, so I said I had been reading a comic paper. "You write your own comic papers, I suspect; and bad enough they are. If you go on at this rate, you will end by editing the *Texas Siftings*. Do try to be decent, brother, while you have a guest in the house." I suppose she thinks that is a crushing rebuke, now. I said I would try, and told her she had better join Clarice and Hartman, who would probably be tired of each other by this time. Here again I have played into the Princess' hands. She doesn't want Jim to see too much of her at first, but to get used to the blinding glare by degrees, and take his physic in small doses, until he can bear it in larger. At least I hope so: if I've made a mistake and spoiled the procession, I'll learn it soon enough. But Jane wouldn't go unless it was right: that's the good of being a woman. You don't catch me interrupting them, or going near the Princess when she has any of her procedures on foot, unless I am called.

IX.
AT NEWPORT

I could not tell you all that occurred that week; but it went exactly as Clarice intended and had foretold. She was gracious and equable and gentle, a model young lady of the social-domestic type; but Hartman did not see much of her. I on my part was kept steadily occupied, what with boats, and horses, and parasols, and fans, and wools, and wide hats, and more things than you could think of. It was, "Robert, come out on the cliffs," or "Robert, get my garden gloves, please; they are in the sitting-room, or somewhere else;" or "Robert, take me to town; I must telegraph to Constance;" or "Bob dear, would you mind running over to Miss Bliffson's, and telling her that I can't go to the Society this afternoon; and on your way back, stop at the milliner's and see if my hat is done." I usually attended to these commissions promptly; when you have women about, your generous heart will rejoice to protect and indulge their helplessness. They are the clinging vine, you are the sturdy oak; and then, as I said, Clarice is an orphan. Hartman at first showed an inclination to relieve me of the lighter part of these useful avocations, such as taking her about over the rocks and in the bay; but she very quietly, and without the least discourtesy, made him understand that no foreigners need apply for that situation. Other men were coming after her every day, but she avoided them or sent them to the right about: she can do that in a way to make you feel that you have received a favor. She kept reminding me that it was my business to wait on her: if these things were paid for in cash, I should want high wages, for the duties are far from light. But I can stand it: within the bosom of Robert T. glows a spark of warm and pure philanthropy. When I see my fellow-creatures in need, and this good right arm refuses to extend its friendly aid, may my hand cleave to the roof of my mouth – O well, you know what I mean. I used to retire to my meagre and philosophic cot-bedstead with aching limbs and an approving conscience: I never was worked so hard before. Some of these errands were perfectly needless, I knew. She can't want to get me out of the way for an hour or two, for I am never *in*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.