

WALTER BESANT

THE
CHANGELING

Walter Besant

The Changeling

«Public Domain»

Besant W.

The Changeling / W. Besant — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	11
CHAPTER III.	14
CHAPTER IV.	23
CHAPTER V.	27
CHAPTER VI.	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	37

The Changeling

CHAPTER I.

WAS IT SUBSTITUTION?

"Pray be seated, madam." The doctor offered his visitor a chair. Then he closed the door, with perhaps a more marked manner than one generally displays in this simple operation. "I am happy to inform you," he began, "that the arrangements – the arrangements," he repeated with meaning, "are now completed."

The lady was quite young – not more than twenty-two or so – a handsome woman, a woman of distinction. Her face was full of sadness; her eyes were full of trouble; her lips trembled; her fingers nervously clutched the arms of the chair. When the doctor mentioned the arrangements, her cheek flushed and then paled. In a word, she betrayed every external sign of terror, sorrow, and anxiety.

"And when can I leave this place?"

"This day: as soon as you please."

"The woman made no objections?"

"None. You can have the child."

"I have told you my reasons for wishing to adopt this child" – he had never asked her reasons, yet at every interview she repeated them: "my own boy is dead. He is dead." There was a world of trouble in the repetition of the word.

The doctor bowed coldly. "Your reasons, madam," he said, "are sufficient for yourself. I have followed your instructions without asking for your reasons. That is to say, I have found the kind of child you want: light hair and blue eyes, apparently sound and healthy; at all events, the child of a sound and healthy mother. As for your reasons, I do not inquire."

"I thought you might like –"

"They are nothing to do with me. My business has been to find a child, and to arrange for your adoption of it. I have therefore, as I told you, arranged with a poor woman who is willing to part with her child."

"On my conditions?"

"Absolutely. That is – she will never see the child again; she will not ask who takes the child, or where it is taken, or in what position of life it will be brought up. She accepts your assurance that the child will be cared for, and treated kindly. She fully consents."

"Poor creature!"

"You will give her fifty pounds, and that single payment will terminate the whole business."

"Terminate the whole business? Oh, it will begin the whole business!"

"There are many reasons for adoption," the doctor continued, returning to the point with which he had no concern. "I have read in books of substituting a child – introducing a child – for the sake of keeping a title, or an estate, or a family."

The lady answered as if she had not heard this remark. "The mother consents to sell her child! Poor creature!"

"She accepts your conditions. I have told you so. Go your way – she goes hers."

The lady reflected for a moment. "Tell me," she said, – "you are a man of science, – in such an adoption –"

"Or, perhaps, such a substitution," interrupted the doctor.

"Is there not danger of inherited vice, or disease?"

"Certainly there is. It is a danger which you must watch in educating the child. He may inherit a tendency to drink: guard against it by keeping him from alcohol of any kind. He may show physical weakness; watch him carefully. But nine-tenths of so-called hereditary disease or vice are due to example and conditions of life."

"If we do not know the character of the parents – they may be criminals. What if the child should inherit these instincts?"

The doctor, who had been standing, took a chair, and prepared himself to argue the point. He was a young man, with a strong jaw and a square forehead. He had a face and features of rude but vigorous handling; such a face as a noble life would make beautiful in age, and an ignoble life would make hideous. Every man has as many faces as there are years of his life, and we heed them not; yet each follows each in a long procession, ending with the pale and waxen face in the coffin – that solemn face which tells so much.

"There is," he said, "a good deal of loose talk about heredity. Some things external are hereditary – face, eyes, figure, stature, hands, certainly descend from father to son; some diseases, especially those of the nervous kind; some forms of taste and aptitude, especially those which are artistic. Things which are not natural, but acquired, are never hereditary – never. If the boy's father is the greatest criminal in the country, it won't hurt him a bit, because he is taken away too early to have observed or imitated. The sons are said to take after the mothers; that is, perhaps, because they have always got the models before them. In your case, you will naturally become the child's most important model. Later on, will come in the male influence. If there is, for instance, a putative father – "

"There will be, of course, my husband."

The doctor bowed again. Then there was a husband living. "He will become the boy's second model," he said. "In other words, madam, the vices of the boy's parents – if they have vices – will not affect him in the least. Gout, rheumatism, asthma, consumption, – all these things, and many more, a child may inherit; but acquired criminality, never. Be quite easy on that point."

"My desire is that the child may become as perfect a gentleman at all points as his – as my husband."

"Why should he not? He has no past to drag him down. You will train him and mould him as you please – exactly as you please."

"You have not told me anything about the mother, except that she is in want."

"Why should you learn her name, or she yours?"

"I have no desire to learn her name. I was thinking whether she is the kind of woman to feel the loss of her child."

The doctor, as yet inexperienced in the feminine nature, marvelled at this sympathy with the mother whose child the lady was buying.

"Well," he said, "she is a young woman – of respectable character, I believe; good looking; in her speech something of a cockney, if I understand that dialect."

"The more respectable she is, the more she will feel the loss of her child."

"Yes; but there is another consideration. This poor creature has a husband who has deserted her."

"Then her child should console her."

"Her husband is a comedian – actor – singing fellow, – a chap who asks for nothing but enjoyment. As for wife and children, they may look out for themselves. When I saw him, I read desertion in his face; in his wife's face, it was easy to read neglect."

"Poor creature!"

"Now he's gone – deserted her. Nothing will do but she must go in search of him. Partly for money to help her along, partly because the workhouse is her only refuge, she sells her baby."

The lady was silent for a while, then she sighed. "Poor creature! There are, then, people in the world as unhappy as I myself?"

"If that is any consolation, there are. Well, madam, you now know the whole history; and, as it doesn't concern you, nor the child, best forget it at once."

"Poor mother!"

She kept harping on the bereavement, as though Providence, and not she herself, was the cause.

"I have told her that the boy will be brought up in ease – affluence even" – the lady inclined her head – "and she is resigned."

"Thank you. And when – ?"

"You would like to go up to London this afternoon? Well, I will myself bring the child to the railway station. Once more, as regards heredity. If the child should inherit his mother's qualities, he will be truthful and tenacious, or obstinate and perhaps rather stupid; if his father's, he will be artistic and musical, selfish, cold-hearted, conceited."

"He might inherit the better qualities of both."

"Ah, then he will be persevering, high-principled, a man of artistic feeling – perhaps of power, – ambitious, and desirous of distinction. I wish, madam, that he may become so perfect and admirable a young man." He rose. "I have only, I think, to receive the money which will start this poor woman on her wild-goose chase. Thank you. Ten five-pound notes. I will take care that the woman has it at once."

"For your own trouble, Dr. Steele?"

"My fee is three guineas. Thank you."

"I shall be on the platform or in the train at a quarter before three. Please look about for an Indian ayah, who will receive the child. You are sure that there will never be any attempt made to follow and discover my name?"

"As to discovery," he said, "you may rest quite easy. For my own part, my work lies in this slum of Birmingham; it is not likely that I shall ever get out of it. I am a sixpenny doctor; you are a woman of society: I shall never meet you. This little business will be forgotten to-morrow. If, in the future, by any accident I were to meet you, I should not know you. If I were to know you, I should not speak to you. Until you yourself give me leave, even if I should recognize you, I should not speak about this business."

"Thank you," she said coldly. "It is not, however, likely that you will be tempted."

He took up an open envelope lying on the table – it was the envelope in which the lady had brought the notes, – replaced them, and put them in his pocket. Then he opened the door for the lady, who bowed coldly, and went out.

A few days before this, the same lady, with an Indian ayah, was bending over a dying child. They sent for the nearest medical man. He came. He tried the usual things; they proved useless. The child must die.

The child was dead.

The child was buried.

The mother sat stupefied. In her hand she held a letter – her husband's latest letter. "In a day or two," he said, "my life's work will be finished. In a fortnight after you get this, I shall be at Southampton. Come to meet me, dear one, and bring the boy. I am longing to see the boy and the boy's mother. Kiss the boy for me;" and so on, and so on – always thinking of the boy, the boy, the boy! And the boy was dead! And the bereaved father was on his way home! She laid down the letter, and took up a telegram. Already he must be crossing the Alps, looking forward to meeting the boy, the boy, the boy!

And the boy was dead.

The ayah crouched down on a stool beside her mistress, and began whispering in her own language. But the lady understood.

As she listened her face grew harder, her mouth showed resolution.

"Enough," she said; "you have told me enough. You can be silent? – for my sake, for the sake of the sahib? Yes – yes – I can trust you. Let me think."

Presently she went out; she walked at random into street after street. She stopped, letting chance direct her, at a surgery with a red lamp, in a mean quarter. She read the name. She entered, and asked to see Dr. Steele, not knowing anything at all about the man.

She was received by a young man of five and twenty or so. She stated her object in calling.

"The child I want," she said, "should be something like the child I have lost. He must have light hair and blue eyes."

"And the age?"

"He must not be more than eighteen months or less than a year. My own child was thirteen months old. He was born on December 2, 1872."

"I have a large acquaintance in a poor neighbourhood," said the doctor. "The women of my quarter have many babies. If you will give me a day or two, I may find what you want." He made a note – "Light hair, blue eyes; birth somewhere near December 2, 1872, – age, therefore, about thirteen months."

At a quarter before three in the afternoon a woman, carrying a baby, stood inside the railway station at Birmingham. She was young, thinly clad, though the day was cold; her face was delicate and refined, though pinched with want and trouble. She looked at her child every minute, and her tears fell fast.

The doctor arrived, looked round, and walked up to her. "Now, Mrs. Anthony," he said, "I've come for the baby."

"Oh! If it were not for the workhouse I would never part with him."

"Come, my good woman, you know you promised."

"Take him," she said suddenly. She almost flung him in the doctor's arms, and rushed away.

Above the noise of the trains and the station, the doctor heard her sobbing as she ran out of the station.

"She'll soon get over it," he said. But, as has already been observed, the doctor was as yet inexperienced in the feminine heart.

About six o'clock that evening the lady who had received the baby had arrived at her house in Bryanston Square.

"Now," she said, when she had reached the nursery, "we will have a look at the creature – oh! the little gutter-born creature! – that is to be my own all the rest of my life."

The ayah threw back the wraps, and disclosed a lusty boy, about a year or fifteen months old.

The lady sat down by the table, and dropped her hands in her lap.

"Oh," she cried, "I *could* not tell him! It broke my heart to watch the boy on his deathbed: it would kill him – it would kill him – the child of his old age, his only child! To save my husband I would do worse things than this – far worse things – far worse things."

Among the child's clothes, which were clean and well kept, there was a paper. The lady snatched it up. There was writing on it. "His name" – the writing was plain and clear, not that of a wholly uneducated woman – "is Humphrey. His surname does not matter. It begins with 'W.'"

"Why," cried the lady, "Humphrey! Humphrey! My boy's own name! And his surname begins with 'W' – my boy's initial! If it should be my own boy! – oh! ayah, my own boy come back again!"

The ayah shook her head sadly. But she changed the child's clothes for those of the dead child; and she folded up his own things, and laid them in a drawer.

"The doctor has not deceived me," said the lady. "Fair hair, blue eyes; eyes and hair the colour of my boy." The tears came into her eyes.

"He's a beautiful boy," said the nurse; "not a spot nor a blemish, and his limbs round and straight and strong. See how he kicks. And look – look! why, if he hasn't got the chin – the sahib's chin!"

It was not much: a dimple, a hollow between the lower lip and the end of the chin.

"Strange! So he has. Do you think, nurse, the sahib, his father, will think that the child looks his age? He is to be a year and a quarter, you know."

The ayah laughed. "Men know nothing," she said.

In a day or two the supposed parent returned home. He was a man advanced in years, between sixty and seventy. He was tall and spare of figure. His features were strongly marked, the features of a man who administers and commands. His face was full of authority; his eyes were as keen as a hawk's. He stepped up the stairs with the spring of five and twenty, and welcomed his wife with the sprightliness of a bridegroom of that elastic age. The man was, in fact, a retired Indian. He had spent forty years or so in administering provinces: he was a king retired from business, a sovereign abdicated, on whose face a long reign had left the stamp of kingcraft. It was natural that in the evening of his life this man should marry a young and beautiful girl; it was also quite natural that this girl should entertain, for a husband old enough to be her grandfather, an affection and respect which dominated her.

He held out both arms; he embraced his wife with the ardour of a young lover; he turned her face to the light.

"Lilias!" he murmured, "let me look at you. Why, my dear, you look pale – and worried! Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing – nothing – now you are home again."

"And the boy? Where is the boy?"

"He shall be brought in." The ayah appeared carrying the child. "Here he is; quite well – and strong – and happy. Your son is quite happy – quite happy – " Her voice broke. She sank into a chair, and fell into hysterical sobbing and weeping. "He is quite – quite – quite happy."

They brought cold water, and presently she became calmer. Then the father turned again to consider the boy.

"He looks strong and hearty; but he doesn't seem much bigger than when you carried him off six months ago."

"A little backward with his growth." The mother had now recovered. "But that's nothing. He's made a new start already. Feel his fingers. There's a grip! Your own living picture, Humphrey!"

"Ay, ay. Perhaps I would rather, for good looks, that he took after his mother. Blue eyes, fair hair, and the family dimple in the chin."

When the doctor was left alone, he took the envelope containing the bank-notes from his pocket, and threw it on his desk. Then he sat down, and began to think over the situation.

"What does she do it for?" he asked. "Her own child is dead. There is no doubt about that; her face is so full of trouble. She wants to deceive her husband: at least, I suppose so. She will keep that secret to herself. The ayah is faithful – that's pretty certain. There will be no blackmailing in that quarter. A fine face she has" – meaning the lady, not the ayah. "Hard and determined, though. I should like to see it soften. I wish she had trusted me. But there, one couldn't expect it of a woman of that temperament – cold, reserved, haughty; a countess, perhaps. It's like the old story-books. Somebody will be disinherited. This boy is going to do it. Nobody will ever find it out. And that's the way they build up their fine pedigrees!"

The doctor was quite wrong. Nobody was to be disinherited; nor was there an estate. This you must understand, to begin with. The rest I am going to tell you.

"No clue," the doctor continued. "She is quite safe, unless she were to meet me. No other clue. Nobody else knows." He took up the envelope, and observed that it had part of an address upon it. All he could read, however, was one word – "Lady." "Oho!" he said; "there *is* a title, after all. It looks as if the latter half were a 'W.' There's a conspiracy, and I'm a conspirator! Humph! She's a beautiful creature!"

He fell into meditation on that subject which is always interesting to mere man – the face of a woman. Then his thoughts naturally wandered off to the conversation he had held with that memorable face.

"I *should* like, if I could, to learn how this job will turn out from the hereditary point of view! Will that interesting babe take after his father? Will he astonish his friends by becoming a low comedian? Or will he take after his mother, and become a simple, honourable Englishman? Or will he combine the inferior qualities of both, and become a beautiful and harmonious blend, which may make him either a villain of the deeper dye, or a common cold-blooded man of the world, with a touch of the artist?"

CHAPTER II. THE ONLY WITNESS GONE

One afternoon, about eighteen years later, certain mourning-coaches, returning home from a funeral, drew up before a house in Bryanston Square. There were three coaches. From the first descended a young man of twenty or thereabouts, still slight and boyish in figure. He had been sitting alone in the carriage.

From the second came a middle-aged man of the greatest respectability, to look at. He was so respectable, so eminently respectable, that he could not possibly be anything but a butler. With him was a completely respectable person of the other sex, who could be no other than a housekeeper.

In the third carriage there were two young maid-servants in black, and a boy in buttons. At the halting of the carriage they clapped their handkerchiefs to their eyes, because they knew what was expected on such an occasion; and they kept up this external show of grief until they had mounted the steps and the door was shut. The page, who was with them, had been weeping freely ever since they started; not so much from unavailing grief, as from the blackness of the ceremony, and the dreadful coffin, and the horror and terror and mystery of the thing. He went up the stairs snuffling, and so continued for the rest of the day.

The young gentleman mounted to the drawing-room, where his mother, sitting in a straight, high chair, more like an office-chair than one designed for a drawing-room, was dictating to a shorthand girl secretary. The table was covered with papers. In the back drawing-room two other girls were writing. For Lady Woodroffe was president of one society, chairman of committee of another, honorary secretary of a third; her letters and articles were on subjects and works of philanthropy, purity, rescue, white lilies, temperance, and education. Her platform advocacy of such works had placed her in the forefront of civilizing women; she was a great captain in Israel, a very Deborah, a Jael.

She was also, which certainly assisted her efforts, a very handsome woman still, perhaps austere: but then her eloquence was of the severe order. She appealed to the conscience, to duty, to responsibility, to honour. If sinners quailed at contemplating the gulf between themselves and the prophetess, who, like Jeremiah, had so little sympathy with those who slide backwards and enjoy the exercise, it was a perpetual joy to ladies of principle to consider an example so powerful.

She was dressed in black silk, but wore no widow's weeds; her husband, the first Sir Humphrey, had been dead four years.

The young gentleman threw himself into a chair. Lady Woodroffe nodded to her secretary, who gathered up her papers and retreated to the back drawing-room, closing the door.

"Well, mother," said the boy, carelessly, "we've buried the old woman."

"Yes. I hope you were not too much distressed, Humphrey. I am pleased that you went to the funeral, if only to gratify the servants."

"How could I refuse to attend her funeral? – an old servant like that. It's a beastly thing – a funeral, – and a beastly nuisance."

"We must not forget her services," the lady replied. "It was in return for those services that I kept her here, and nursed her through her old age. One does not encumber one's self with sick old women except in such cases as this."

"No, thank goodness." The young man was in no gracious mood. "Give me a servant who takes her wages and goes off, without asking for our gratitude."

"Still, she was your nurse – and a good nurse."

"Too ostentatious of her affection, especially towards the end."

"She was also" – Lady Woodroffe pursued her own thoughts, which was her way – "a silent woman; a woman who could be trusted, if necessary, with secrets – family secrets."

"Thank goodness, we've got none. From family secrets, family skeletons, family ghosts, good Lord, deliver us!"

"There are secrets, or skeletons, in every family, I suppose. Fortunately, we forget some, and we never hear of others. You are fortunate, Humphrey, that you are free from the vexation – or the shame – or the shock – of family secrets, which mean family scandals. Now, at all events, you are perfectly safe, because there is no one living who can create a family ghost for you, or provide you with a skeleton."

Humphrey laughed lightly. "Let the dead bury their dead," he replied. "So long as I know nothing about the skeleton, it can go on grinning in the cupboard, for aught I care."

"Did I tell you," the young man continued, after a pause, "of her last words?"

"What last words?"

"I thought I had told you. Curious words they were. I suppose her mind was wandering."

"Humphrey," said his mother, sharply, "what did she say? What words?"

"Well, they sent for me. It was just before the end. She was lying apparently asleep, her eyes shut. I thought she was going. The nurse was at the other end of the room, fussing with the tea-cups. Then she opened her eyes and saw me. She whispered, 'Low down, low down, Master Humphrey.' So I stooped down, and she said, 'Don't blame her, Master Humphrey. I persuaded her, and we kept it up, for your sake. Nobody suspects. All for your sake I kept it up,' Then she closed her eyes, and opened them no more."

"What do you understand by those words, Humphrey?"

"Nothing. I cannot understand them. She was accusing herself, I suppose, of something – I know not what. What did she keep up? Whom did she persuade? But why should we want to know?"

"Wandering words. Nurses will tell you that no importance can be attached to the last words when the brain wanders. Well, Humphrey, while you were at the funeral I unlocked her drawers and examined the contents. I found that she had quite a large sum of money invested. One is not in good service for all these years without saving something. There is a little pile of photographs of yourself at various ages. I have put them aside for you, if you like to have them."

"I don't want them," he replied carelessly.

"I shall keep them, then. There is her wardrobe also. I believe she had nephews and nieces and cousins in her native village in India. All her possessions shall be sent out to them. Meanwhile, there is a little packet of things which she tied up a great many years ago, and has kept ever since. The sight of them caused me a strange shock. I thought they had been long destroyed. They revived my memories of a day – an event – certain days – when you were an infant."

"What things are these, then?"

"They were your own things – some of the things which you wore when you were a child in arms, not more than a few months old."

"Oh, they are not very interesting, are they?"

"Perhaps not." Lady Woodroffe had in her lap a small packet tied up in a towel or a serviette. She placed it on the table. "Humphrey, I always think, when I look at old things, of the stories they might tell, if they could, of the histories and the changes which might have happened."

"Well, I don't know, mother. I am very well contented with things as they are, though they might have given my father a peerage. As for thinking of what they might have been, why, I might, perhaps, have been born in a gutter."

"You might, Humphrey" – the widow laughed, which was an unwonted thing in her – "you certainly might. And you cannot imagine what you would be now, had you been born in a gutter."

"What's the good of asking, then?"

"Look at this bundle of your things."

"I don't want to look at them."

"No, I dare say not. But I do. They tell a story to me which they cannot tell to you. I am glad the old woman kept them."

Lady Woodroffe untied the parcel, and laid open the things.

"The story is so curious that I cannot help looking at the things. I have opened the bundle a dozen times to-day, since I found it. I believe I shall have to tell you that story some day, Humphrey, whether I like it or not."

"What story can there be connected with a parcel of socks and shoes?"

"To you, at present, none. To me, a most eventful story. The old nurse knew the story very well, but she never talked about it. See, Humphrey, the things are of quite coarse materials – one would think they were made for that gutter child we talked about."

Her son stooped and picked up a paper that had fallen on the floor.

"His name is Humphrey," he read. "A servant's handwriting, one would think. What was the use of writing what everybody knew?"

"Perhaps some servant was practising the art of penmanship. Well" – she tied up the parcel again – "I shall keep these things myself."

She put the parcel on the table, and presently carried it to her room. Her son immediately forgot all about the old nurse's strange last words, and the parcel of clothes, and everything. This was not unnatural, because he presently went back to Cambridge, where there is very little sympathy with the sentiment of baby linen.

When the door closed upon her son, his mother sprang to her feet.

"Oh!" she clasped her hands. Can we put her thoughts into words – the thoughts that are so swift, into words that are so slow – the thoughts that can so feebly express the mind with words that are so imperfect? "I have never felt myself free until to-day. She is dead; she is buried. On her death-bed she kept the secret. She never wrote it down; she never told any one: had she written it I should have found it; had she told any one I should have heard of it before now. And all, as she said, for the sake of the boy. She meant her long silence. I feared that at the last, when she lay a-dying, she might have confessed. I sat in terror when I knew that the boy was at her death-bed. I thought that when Sir Humphrey died, and the boy succeeded, she might have confessed. But she did not. Good woman, and true! Never by a word, or by a look, or by a sigh, did she let me know that she remembered."

She breathed deeply, as if relieved from a great anxiety.

"I have thought it all over, day after day. There is nothing that can be found out now. The doctor would not recognize me. I suppose he is still slaving at Birmingham; he did not know my name. The mother never saw me. At last, I am free from danger! After all these years, I have no longer any fear."

Over the mantel hung a portrait of her late husband.

"Humphrey," she said, talking to it familiarly, "I did it for your sake. I could not bear that you should lose your boy. All for your sake – all for your sake I screened the child from you. At least you never knew that there is not – there has never been – the least touch of your nobility in the gutter child. He is mean; he is selfish. He has never done a kind action, or said a generous word. He has no friends, only companions. He has already all the vices, but is never carried away; he will become a sensualist, a cold and heartless sensualist. I am sorry, Humphrey, truly sorry, my most noble and honourable husband, that I have given you so unworthy a successor. Yet he is careful; he will cause no scandal. So far, my husband, your name is safe."

CHAPTER III. THE THREE COUSINS

"Is it possible?" they repeated, gazing each upon each in the triangular fashion.

Every incident in life is a coincident. That is to say, nothing happens as one expects. The reason is that no one considers the outside forces, which are unseen; very few, indeed, take into consideration the inside forces, which are obvious. The trade of prophet has fallen into decay, because we no longer believe in him; we know that he cannot really prophesy the coincidence: to him, as to us, the future is the unexpected. Wise folk, therefore, go about prepared for anything: they carry an umbrella in July; they build more ships when peace is most profound. The unexpected, the coincidence, gives to life its chief charm: it relieves the monotony; it breaks the week, so to speak. Formerly it might take the form of invasion, a descent upon the coast: dwellers by the seaside enjoyed, therefore, the most exciting lives possible. To-day it comes by telegraph, by post, by postal express. The philosopher of tears says that the unexpected is always disagreeable; he of smiles says that, on the whole, he has received more good gifts unexpectedly than thwacks. Mostly however, the opinion of the multitude, which is always right, is summed up in the words of the itinerant merchant – the man with the barrow and the oranges. "We expex a shilling," he says, "and we gits tuppence."

"Is it possible?"

These three people had arisen and gone forth that morning expecting nothing, and lo! a miracle! For they were enriched, suddenly, and without the least expectation, by the discovery that they were all three of common kin. Imagine the boundless possibilities of newly recovered cousinship! No one knows what may come out of it – an augmentation of family pride, an increase of family griefs, the addition of sympathy with the lowly, the shame and honour of ancient scandals, more money perhaps, more influence perhaps. It may be a most fortunate event. On the other hand – But for the moment, these three had not begun to consider the other side.

"Is it possible?" Well, it is sometimes best to answer a question by repeating it. The place was a country churchyard; the time, a forenoon in July. In the churchyard was a group of four. They were all young, and two of them were of one sex, and two were of the other.

The girls were the first to arrive. They entered by a gate opening into the churchyard from a small coppice on the north side.

One of the girls, evidently the leader, had in her face, her form, her carriage, something of Pallas Athênê. She was grave – the goddess, I believe, seldom laughed; she was one of those girls who can smile readily and pleasantly, but are not anxious to hear good stories, like the frivolous man at his club, and really saw very little to laugh at even in the unexpectedness of men – nothing, of course, in the ways of women. Her seriousness was sweet in the eyes of those who loved her – that is to say, of all who had the privilege of knowing her. Her head was large and shapely – a shapely head is a very lovely thing in woman. Her figure matched her head in being large and full. Her features were regular, her cheek was ample, like that of a certain bronze Venus in the Museum. Her hair was light in colour, and abundant, not of the feathery kind, but heavy, and easily coiled in classical fashion. Her eyes were of that dark blue which is wickedly said to accompany a deceitful nature. If this is ever true, it certainly was not true of Hilarie Woodroffe. She was dressed in white, as becomes a girl on a summer morning, with a rose at her throat for a touch of colour. As a child of her generation, she was naturally tall; and being, as she was, a girl of the highest refinement and culture after such an education as girls can now command, and being, moreover, much occupied with the difficulties and problems of the age, she bore upon her brow an undoubted stamp of intellectual endeavour. Twenty years ago, such a girl would have been impossible. If you are still, happily, so young that you can doubt this assertion, read the novels – the best and the worst – of that time.

Her companion showed in her face and her appearance more of Aphrodite than the sister goddess. She looked as sprightly as L'Allegra herself; of slighter figure than the other, she was one of those fortunate girls who attract by their manner more than by their beauty. Indeed, no one could call her beautiful; but many called her charming. Her grey eyes danced and sparkled; her lips were always smiling; her head was never still; her face was made for laughing and her eyes for joy; her hair was of the very commonest brown colour – every other kind of girl has that kind of hair, yet upon her it looked distinguished. The dress she wore – she had designed and made it herself – seemed craftily intended to set off her figure and her face and her eyes. In a word, she was one of those girls – a large class – who seem born especially for the delight and happiness of the male world. They are acting girls, singing girls, dancing girls, even stay-at-home girls; but always they delight their people or the public with their vivacity, and their cheerfulness, and their sympathy. By the side of the other girl she looked like an attendant nymph. I have always thought that it would be a pleasing thing to detach from Diana's train one of those attendant nymphs, whose undeveloped mind knew nothing but the narrow round of duty; to run breathlessly after the huntress, or to bathe with her in a cold mountain stream. I would take her away, and teach her other things, and make her separate and individual. But the fear of Dian has hitherto prevented me. Ladies-in-waiting, in other words, must have a dull time of it.

Both girls, of course, were strong, healthy, and vigorous: they thought nothing of twenty miles on a bicycle; they could row; they could ride; they could play lawn tennis; they would have climbed the Matterhorn if it had been within reach. They were such girls as we have, somehow, without knowing how, without expecting it, presented to modern youth, athletic and vigorous, of the last decade of the nineteenth century.

"This is my churchyard, Molly," said Hilarie. "You have seen the house – this place belongs to the house – and the whole of it belongs to the family history."

"It must be very nice to have a pedigree," said Molly – "ancestors who wore laced coats and swords, like the characters on the stage. My people, I suppose, wore smock-frocks. I gather the fact because my father never mentioned his father. Smocks go with silence."

"One would rather, I suppose, have a pedigree than not."

"Small shops, also, go with silence. I wonder why one would rather have a grandfather in a smock than in a small shop."

"I will tell you something of the family history. Let us sit down on this tombstone. I always sit here because you can see the church, and the alms-houses, and the school, if you like to take them together. So. Once there was a man named Woodroffe, who lived in this village, seised of a manor, as they say. He was a small country gentleman, an Armiger; I will show you his tomb presently, with his coat of arms. This man – it was five hundred years ago – had four sons. One of them stayed at home, and carried on the family descent; the second son was educated by the Bishop, and rose to the most splendid distinction. He actually became Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England. Now, the father of these lads had friends or cousins – they came from the next village, where their descendants are living still – in the City of London. So the two younger sons were sent up to town and apprenticed, one to a mercer, and the other to a draper; and one of these became Lord Mayor – think of that! – and the other, Sheriff. There was a wonderful success for you! The effort seems to have exhausted the family, for no one else has ever distinguished himself. Stay; there was an Indian civilian of that name, who died some time ago, but I don't know if he belonged to the family. My own branch has always remained hopelessly undistinguished – squires, and plain gentlemen, and Justices of the Peace. They hunted, flogged vagabonds, and drank port. And, of course, after all these years, one does not know what has become of the citizens' descendants."

"Still, Archbishop, Lord Mayor, and Sheriff – that ought to last a long time."

"It has lasted a long time. Well, when they became old, these men resolved to show their grateful sense of the wonderful success which had been accorded to them. So they came back to their native village, and they replaced the little church by a beautiful and spacious church – there it is!"

Truly it was a great and noble church, of proportions quite beyond the needs of a small village; its tower and spire standing high above all the country round, its recessed porch a marvel of precious work. The windows and the clerestory and the roof may be seen figured in all the books on ecclesiastical architecture as the finest specimens of their style.

"Yes, this church was built by these brothers. They walled the churchyard – this is their old grey wall, with the wallflowers; they built the lych-gate – there it is – in the churchyard; they founded a school for the young – there it is" – she pointed to a small stone hall standing in the north-west corner of the churchyard. It was of the same period and of the same architecture as the church; the windows had the same tracery; the buttresses were covered with yellow lichen: a beautiful and venerable structure. From the building there came a confused murmur of voices. "And on the other side of the church they built an almshouse for the old – there it is" – she pointed to a long low building, also of the same architecture. "So, you see, they provided, in the same enclosure, a place of worship for the living, a place of burial for the dead, a school for the young, and a haven of rest for the old."

The sentiment of the history touched her companion, who looked about her, and murmured —

"It seems a peaceful place."

"Everything in the place seems to belong to those four brothers: the old house behind those trees, the broken cross at the gate, the ruined college in the village, the very cottages, all seem to me to be monuments of those four brothers."

"It is a beautiful thing owning such a house and such a place," said the other. "But I prefer your gardens to your churchyard, Hilarie, I confess."

Just then a young man, in a hired victoria, drove up to the gate and descended, and looked about him with an indolent kind of curiosity. He wore a brown velvet coat, had a crimson scarf with a white waistcoat, carried a pince-nez on his nose, had sharp and somewhat delicate features, carried his head high, and was tall enough to convey by that attitude, which was clearly habitual, the assumption of superiority, if not of disdain. And there was in him something of the artist. His face was pale and clean shaven; his lips were thin; his hair was light, with a touch of yellow in it; his eyes, when you could make them out, were of a light blue, and cold. His figure was thin, and not ungraceful. In a word, a young man of some distinction in appearance; of an individuality certainly marked, perhaps self-contained, perhaps selfish.

He walked slowly up the path. When he drew near the girls he raised his hat.

"Am I right," he asked, "in thinking this to be Woodroffe Church?"

"Yes. It is Woodroffe Church."

"The church built by the Archbishop and his brothers?"

"This is their church. That is their school. That is their almshouse. Would you like to go into the church? I have the key with me, and am going in at once."

At this moment they were joined by another young man, whose entrance to the churchyard was not noticed. He had been walking with light elastic step along the middle of the road. A small bag was slung from his shoulder by a strap; he carried a violin-case. His broad felt hat, his brown tweed suit, his brown shoes, were all white with the dust of the road. He passed the church without observing it; then he remembered something, stopped, came back, and turned into the churchyard.

He was quite a young man. His face was clean shaven – a mobile face, with thin lips and quick blue eyes. His hair, as he lifted his hat, was a light brown with a trace of yellow in it, growing in an arch over his forehead. His step was springy, his carriage free. His hair – longer than most men wear it, – the blue scarf at his throat, his long fingers, made one think of art in some shape or other. Probably a musician.

In the churchyard he looked about him curiously.

Then he turned to the group of three, and put exactly the same question as that proposed by the first young man.

"May I ask," he said, "if this is Woodroffe Church?"

The attendant nymph jumped up. "Oh!" she cried. "It's Dick!"

"You here, Molly?" he asked. "I never expected –"

"Hilarie," said the girl, "this is my old friend Dick. We were children together."

Hilarie bowed graciously. "I am pleased to know your friend," she said. "I was just telling this other gentleman that this is Woodroffe Church. We are going into the church: would you like to come too?"

Hilarie led the way, and opened the door of the south porch. Within, restorers had been at work. The seats which replaced the old oaken pews were machine-made, and new; they wanted the mellowing touch of two hundred years, and even then they would be machine-made still. The rood screen, as old as the Archbishop, was so polished and scraped, that it looked almost as much machine-made as the seats. Even the roof, after its scraping and painting, looked brand new. Yet they had not destroyed all the antiquity of the church: there were still the grey arches, the grey pillars, the grey walls and the monuments. There were many monuments in the church; two or three tablets in memory of former vicars; all the rest, shields, busts, and sculptured tombs, in memory of bygone Woodroffes. A low recessed arch in the north wall contained the figure of a Crusader. "He is one of the Woodroffes," said the guide. A recent tablet commemorated one who fell at the Alma. "He was another of them," said the guide. "You are walking over the graves of a whole family; they have been buried here from time immemorial. Every slab in the aisle, and every stone in the chancel, covers one of them."

In the north transept there stood a long low altar-tomb, with carvings on the sides, and a slab of grey granite on the top. Formerly it had been surrounded and covered by a white marble tabernacle richly carved; this was now broken away and destroyed, except a few fragments in the wall. The tomb itself was dilapidated; the granite slab was broken in two, yet the inscription remained perfectly legible. It was as follows: —

"Hic jacent

Robertus Woodroffe, Armiger, et

Hilaris, Uxor Ejus,

Qui Robertus obiit Sep. 2, A.D. MCCCCXXXIX."

In the right-hand corner of the slab were the arms of the deceased.

"This tomb," said the guide, "was erected by the Archbishop, to the memory of his father."

On the opposite side of the south transept one of the common Elizabethan monuments was affixed to the wall. It represented figures in relief, and painted. The husband and wife, both in high ruffs, knelt before a desk, face to face. Below them was a procession of boys and girls, six in number. Over their heads was a shield with a coat-of-arms – the same arms as on the other tomb. The monument was sacred to the memory of Robert Woodroffe, Knight, and Johanna his wife. Beneath the figures was a scroll on which the local poet had been allowed to do his worst.

"After thy Dethe, thy Words and Works survive
To shew thy Virtues: as if still alive.
When thou didst fall, fair Mercy shrieked and swoon'd,
And Charity bemoaned her deadly Wounde.

The Orphan'd Babe, the hapless Widow cry'd,
Ah! who will help us now that thou hast dyed?"

"They made him a knight," said the guide, "against his will. James the First insisted on his assuming the dignity. It was the only honour ever attained by any of this branch. They all stayed at home, contented to make no noise in the world at all. Well, I think I have shown you all the monuments."

"This is my ancestor," said the man with the violin-case, pointing to the first tomb. "Not this one at all."

"Why, the elder Robert is my ancestor also!" said the first young man, wondering.

"Good gracious! He is my ancestor as well!" cried Hilarie, in amazement. "All these Woodroffes belong to me, and I to them."

"Your ancestor? Is it possible?" she added, turning from one to the other.

"Is it possible?" the two men repeated.

"The Archbishop's elder brother is my direct ancestor," said Hilarie. "He is buried here beneath this stone."

"Mine was Lord Mayor Woodroffe," said the first young man. "He was buried in the Church of All Hallows the Less, where his tomb was destroyed in the Fire."

"And mine was the Sheriff," said the second young man. "He was buried in St. Helen's, where you may see his tomb to this day."

"Oh, it is wonderful!" Hilarie looked at her new cousins with some anxiety. The first young man seemed altogether "quite: " well-dressed, well-spoken, well-mannered, well-looking, of goodly stature, a proper youth. In fact, proper in the modern sense. His turn-out was faultless, and of the very day's – not yesterday's – mode. She turned to the other. Circumstances, perhaps, were against him: the dust with which he was covered; the shabby old bag hanging round his neck; his violin-case. A gentleman does not travel on foot, carrying a violin. Besides, his face was not the kind of face which comes out of Eton and Trinity. It was a humorous face; there was a twinkle, or the fag end of a smile, upon it. Such a girl as Hilarie would not at first take readily to such a face. However, he looked quiet, and he looked good-natured; his eyes, realizing the oddness of the situation, were luminous with suppressed laughter.

"Molly," he said, "please tell this lady – your friend – who I am."

"Hilarie, this is Dick Woodroffe. I suppose you have never heard of him. I never thought of his name being the same as yours. Dick is an actor. He sings and plays, and writes comediettas; he is *awfully* clever."

"Thank you, Molly. Add that I am now on tramp."

He looked with some contempt on the other young man.

"Since you are my cousin, Mr. Woodroffe, I hope we shall be friends."

Hilarie shook hands with him. "My name is Hilarie Woodroffe, and I am descended from the eldest brother. The old house, which I will show you presently, has remained with us. And you – are you really another cousin?"

She turned to the first comer.

"I hope so. My name is Humphrey Woodroffe."

"Oh, this is delightful! May I ask what your branch has been doing all these years?"

"I have a genealogy at home. We have had no more Lord Mayors or Archbishops. A buccaneer or two; a captain under Charles the First; a judge under William the Third; and an Anglo-Indian, my father, now dead, of some distinction."

"Your branch has done more creditably than mine. And yours, Cousin Dick?"

He laughed. "We went down in the world, and stayed there. Some of us assisted in colonizing Virginia, in the last century, by going out in the transports. There is a tradition of highwaymen;

some of us had quarters permanently in the King's Bench. I am a musician, and a mime, and a small dramatist. Yet we have always kept up the memory of the Sheriff."

"Never mind, Dick," said Molly; "you shall raise your branch again."

He shook his head. "There is not so much staying power," he said, "in a Sheriff as in a Lord Mayor."

Hilarie observed him curiously. "Why," she said, "you two are strangely alike. Do you observe the resemblance, Molly?"

"Yes. Oh yes!" – after a little consideration. "Mr. Humphrey is taller and bigger. But they certainly *are* alike."

"Good Heavens! It is wonderful. The same coloured hair, growing in the same manner; the same eyes. It is the most extraordinary instance of the survival of a type."

The young men looked at each other with a kind of jealousy. They resented this charge of resemblance.

"Like that boulder?" said the look of the young man of clubs. "Like this Piccadilly masher?" was the expression on the speaking countenance of the man on tramp.

"After five hundred years." Hilarie pondered over this strange coincidence. "Let us go back to the churchyard."

At the porch she paused, and bade them look round. "Tell me," she said, "if you have ever seen a place more beautiful or more peaceful?"

The amplitude of the churchyard was in harmony with the stateliness of the church. An ancient yew stood in one corner; the place was surrounded by trees; the steps of the old Cross were hollowed by the feet of many generations; beyond the quiet mounds the dark trees with their heavy foliage made a fitting background; two or three of the bedesmen stood at their door, blinking in the sunshine.

"The almshouse is a reading-room now," said Hilarie. "The old people have quarters more commodious for sleeping, but they come here all day long to read and rest."

They stood in silence for a while.

The swifts flew about the tower and the spire; the lark was singing in the sky, the blackbird in the coppice. The air was full of soft calls, whispers-twitters of birds, the humming of insects, and the rustle of leaves. From the schoolroom came the continuous murmur of children's voices. Another old man passed slowly along the path among the graves towards the almshouse: it seemed as if he were choosing his own bed for a long sleep. Everything spoke of life, happy, serene, and peaceful.

"I am glad you came here," said Hilarie. "It is your own. When you know it you will love everything in it – the church and the churchyard, the trees and the birds, the old men and the children, the living and the dead."

Her eyes filled with tears. Those of the man with the violin-case softened, and he listened and looked round. Those of the other showed no response – they were resting with admiration upon the other girl.

"Come" – Hilarie returned to the duty of hostess, – "let me show you the house – the old, old house – where your ancestors lived."

She led the way to the gate by which she had entered. She conducted them along a path under the trees into a small park. In the middle of the park were buildings evidently of great age. They were surrounded by a moat, now dry, with a bridge over it, and beyond the bridge a little timbered cottage which had taken the place of gate tower and drawbridge. Within was a garden, with flowers, fruit, and vegetables, all together. And beyond the garden was the house. And surely there is no other house like unto it in the whole country. In the middle was a high-roofed hall; at either end were later buildings; beyond these buildings, at one end, was a low broad tower, embattled. The windows of the hall were the same as those of the church, the school, and the almshouse.

"You cannot wonder," said the girl, "that I love to call this house my own – my very own. There is nothing in the world that I would take in exchange for this house. Come in, Cousin Humphrey,"

she said hospitably. "And – and – my other cousin, Cousin Dick. Besides, you are a friend of Molly's. Come in. You are both welcome."

She opened the door. Within, the great hall had a stone bench running all round; the high-pitched roof was composed of thick beams, black with age; the floor was boarded; the daïs stood raised three or four inches for the high table; the circular space was still preserved beneath the lantern, where the fire was formerly made.

"Here lived Robert," said the chatelaine, "with his four sons. There was no floor to the hall then. The servants took their meals with the master, but below him. The men slept on the floor. This was the common living-room." She led the way to the north end. "Here was the kitchen, built out beyond the hall" – there were signs of women-servants – "and above it" – she led the way up a rude stair – "the solar of three or four rooms, where the lord and lady slept, and the daughters, and the women-servants. At the other end" – she led them to the south end of the hall – "was the lady's bower, where the lady with her maids sat at their work all day. And beyond is the tower, where the men-at-arms, our garrison, lay."

These rooms were furnished. "They are our sitting-rooms." Three or four girls now rose as Hilarie entered the room. She presented her cousins to them. "My friends," she said, simply. "Here we live; we take our meals in the hall. Our servants sleep in the gate-house; we in the solar. Confess, now, my newly-found cousins, is it not a noble house?"

She showed them the tower and the dungeon and the guard-room, all belonging to the Wars of the Roses. And then she led them back to the hall, where a dainty luncheon was spread on a sideboard. The high table was laid for about a dozen. The girls, to whom the cousins had been presented, trooped in after them. At the lower table stood the servants, the coachman and grooms, the gardener and his staff, the women-servants, the wives and children of the men. All sat down together at their table, which ran along the middle of the hall. Before Hilarie's chair, in the middle of the high table, stood an ancient ship in silver; ready for her use was a silver-gilt cup, also ancient; silver cups stood for each of her guests.

"We all dine together," she said – "my friends and I at our table, my servants below; we are one family. My ancestors" – her cousins sat on each side of her – "dined in this fashion. There is something in humanity which makes those friends who break bread together."

"It is like a picnic five hundred years back," said Humphrey. "I have heard talk, all my life, about this place. My father always intended to visit it, but at last grew too old."

Hilarie watched her two guests. The taller, Humphrey, had the manners of society; he seemed to be what the world, justly jealous, allows to be a gentleman. Yet he had a certain coldness of manner, and he accepted the beauty of this ancient place without surprise or enthusiasm.

"What are you by profession, Cousin Humphrey?" she asked.

"Nothing, as yet; I have been travelling since I left Cambridge." He laid his card before her – "Sir Humphrey Woodroffe."

"You have the title from your father. I hope you will create new distinctions for yourself."

"I suppose," he said coldly, "that I shall go into the House. My people seem to want it. There are too many cads in the House, but it seems that we cannot get through the world without encountering cads." He looked through his hostess, so to speak, and upon the third cousin, perhaps accidentally.

"You certainly cannot," observed the third. "For instance, I am sitting with you at luncheon."

"You will play something presently, Dick, won't you?"

Molly, sitting on the other side of the table, saw a quick flush upon her friend's cheek, and hastened to avert further danger. One may be a cad, but some cads are sensitive to an openly avowed contempt for cads.

Dick laughed. "All right, Molly. What shall I play? Something serious, befitting the place? Luncheon is over – I will play now, if you like." He looked down the hall. "That, I suppose, is the musicians' loft?"

"That is the musicians' gallery. It is a late addition – Elizabethan, I believe."

"The musicians' gallery? Well, Miss Woodroffe, I am the music. Let me play you something in return for the fine ancestors you have given me, and for your gracious hospitality."

He took up his violin-case, to which he had clung with fidelity, marched down the hall, climbed up into the gallery, and began to tune his fiddle.

"Hilarie," Molly said, "Dick plays in the most lovely way possible. He carries you quite out of yourself. That is why everybody loves him so."

However, the artist, standing up alone in the gallery, struck a chord, and began to play.

I suppose that the magic belonged to the fiddle itself. It is astonishing what magical powers a fiddle may possess. This was the most sympathetic instrument possible. It was a thought leader or inspirer. The moment it began, all the listeners, including the servants below the salt, sat upright, their eyes fixed upon the gallery, rapt out of themselves.

Hilarie, for her part, saw in a vision, but with a clearness and distinctness most marvellous, her ancestor Robert with Hilarie his wife. They were both well-stricken in years; they were standing in the porch with their eldest son, his wife and children, to receive their visitors. And first, across the drawbridge, rode the great Lord Archbishop and Lord Chancellor, followed by his retinue. When the Archbishop dismounted, the old man and his wife, and the son, and his wife, and his children went on their knees; but the Archbishop bade them rise, and kissed his parents lovingly. Meantime, the pages and the varlets were unloading pack-horses and pack-mules, because the Archbishop would not lay upon his father so great a charge as the entertainment of his following. And she saw next how the Lord Mayor and the Sheriff, his brother, rode up side by side, the Sheriff a little behind the Mayor, and how they dismounted and knelt for their father's blessing; and so all into the hall together, to take counsel for the great things they were minded to do for their native village.

Hilarie turned to her cousin on the right. "Cousin," she said, still in her dream, "we must think of our forefathers, and of what they did. We must ask what the Archbishop would have done in our place."

But her cousin made no reply. He was looking with a kind of wonder at Molly. Had the man never seen an attractive girl before? He had; but out of a thousand attractive girls a man may be attracted by one only.

And the music went on. What was it that the musician played? Indeed, I know not; things that awakened the imagination and touched the heart.

"No one knows," said Molly, "what he plays; only he makes one lost to everything."

As for herself, she had a delicious dream of going on the tramp with Dick, he and she alone – he to play, and she – But when she was about to tell this dream, she would not confess her part in the tramp.

The music was over; the fiddle was replaced in its case; the musician was going away.

In the porch stood Hilarie. "Cousin," she said, "do you go on tramp for pleasure or for necessity?"

"For both. I must needs go on tramp from time to time. There is a restlessness in me. I suppose it is in the blood. Perhaps there was a gipsy once among my ancestors."

"But do you really – live – by playing to people?"

"He needn't," said Molly; "but he must. He leaves his money at home, and carries his fiddle. Oh, heavenly!"

"Why not? I fiddle on village greens and in rustic inns. I camp among the gipsies; I walk with the tramps and casuals. There is no more pleasant life, believe me!"

He began to sing in a light, musical tenor —

"When daffodils began to peer,
With heigh! the doxy over the dale,

Why then comes in the sweet o' the year;
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.
The lark that tirra-lirra chants
With heigh! with heigh! the thrush and the jay,
Are summer songs for me and my aunts,
While we lie tumbling in the hay."

"You are a strange man," said Hilarie. "Come and see me again."

"I am a vagabond," he replied, "and my name is Autolycus."

Dick took off his hat and bowed low, not in Piccadilly style at all; he waved his hand to Molly; he glared defiance at Humphrey, who loftily bent his head; and then, catching up his violin-case, he started off with a step light and elastic.

Humphrey, the other cousin, half an hour later, stood beside his carriage.

"I must congratulate myself," he said, "on the good fortune which has presented me to the head of my family."

"To two cousins, say."

"Oh! I fancy we shall not see much of Autolycus. Meanwhile, since you kindly grant me permission, I hope to call upon you again."

"I shall be very pleased."

As he drove away, his last look was not on Hilarie, but on the girl beside her – the girl called Molly – the nymph attendant. Some, the goddess charms; but more, the nymph attendant.

"What was she doing with all those girls?" he asked. "Making a home for them, or some such beastly nonsense, I suppose."

CHAPTER IV. THE CONSULTING-ROOM

The doctor's servant opened the door noiselessly, almost stealthily, and looked round the room.

There were half a dozen people waiting. One was an ex-colonial governor, who had been maintaining the empire with efficiency in many parts of the world for thirty years, and was now anxious to keep himself alive for a few years in the seclusion of a seaside town, if certain symptoms could be kept down. There was a middle-aged victim to gout; there was an elderly sufferer from rheumatism; there was an anæmic girl; there was a young fellow who looked the picture of health; and, sitting at one of the windows, there was a lady, richly dressed, her pale face, with delicate features of the kind which do not grow old, looking anxious and expectant.

They were all anxious and expectant: they feared the worst, and hoped the best. One looked out of window, seeing nothing; one gazed into the fireplace, not knowing whether there was a fire in it; one turned over the pages of a society journal, reading nothing; all were thinking of their symptoms. For those who wait for the physician, there is nothing in the whole world to consider except symptoms. They have got to set forth their symptoms to the physician. They have to tell the truth, that is quite clear. Still, the plain truth can be dressed up a little; it can be presented with palliatives. A long course of strong drinks may figure as a short course of weak whisky-and-soda. Perhaps the danger, after all, is not so grave. Patients waiting for the doctor are like persons waiting to be tried for life. Can a man take any interest in anything who awaits his trial for life – who hopes for an acquittal, but fears a capital sentence?

The doctor's manservant looked round the room, and then glided like a black ghost across the thick carpet. He stopped before the lady in the window.

"Sir Robert, madam, will see you."

There are some who maintain that the success of this eminent physician, Sir Robert Steele, M.D., F.R.S., is largely due to the virtues of his manservant. Certainly this usher of the chamber, this guardian of the portal, this receiver of those who bring tribute, has no equal in the profession. In his manner is the respect due to those who know where the only great physician is to be found. There is also an inflexible and incorruptible obedience to the laws of precedence, or order of succession. Thirdly, there is a soft, a velvety, note of sympathy in his voice, as one who would say, "Be of good cheer, sufferer; I bring thee to one who can relieve. Thou shalt not suffer long."

The rest of the patients looked at each other and sighed. He who would follow next sighed with increasing anxiety: his fate would soon be known. He who had yet to wait several turns sighed with impatience. It is hard to be tormented with anxiety as well as with pain. Those symptoms again! They may be the final call. Did Christiana, when the call came, repair first, in the greatest anxiety, to a physician! Or they may be only passing clouds, so to speak, calling attention to the advance of years.

The doctor, in his consulting-room, held a card in his hand – "Mrs. John Haveril." The name was somehow familiar to him. He could not remember, at the moment, the associations of the name. A physician, you see, may remember, if he pleases, so many names. To every man's memory belongs a long procession of figures and faces, with eyes and voices. But most men work alone. Think of the procession in the memory of a physician, who all day long sees new faces and hears new voices! "Haveril." He knew the name. Was she the wife of a certain American millionaire, lately spoken of in the papers?

"The doctor, madam, will see you."

The lady rose and followed him. All the patients watched her with the same kind of curiosity as is shown by those waiting to be tried towards the man who is called to the honours of the dock.

They observed that she was strangely agitated; that she walked with some difficulty; that she tottered as she went; that her lips trembled, and her hands shook.

"Locomotor ataxis," whispered one. "I myself – "

"Or perhaps a break-up of the nervous system. It is my own – "

But the door was shut, and the patients in waiting relapsed into silence.

The lady followed the manservant, who placed a chair for her and withdrew.

Instead of sitting down, the patient stepped forward, and gazed into the doctor's face. Then she clasped her hands.

"Thank God," she cried; "he is the man!"

"I do not understand, madam. I see so many faces. The name – is it an American name?"

"You think of my husband. But I am English-born, and so is he."

"Well, Mrs. Haveril, even the richest of us get our little disorders. What is yours?"

"I have been very ill, doctor; but it was not for that that I came here."

"Then, madam, I do not understand why you do come here."

"You don't remember me? But I see that you don't." Her trembling ceased when she began to speak. "Yet I remember you very well. You have changed very little in four and twenty years."

"Indeed?"

"I heard some people at the hotel talking about you. They said you were the first man in the world for some complaints. And I remembered your name, and – and – I wondered if you were the man. And you are the man."

"This is a very busy morning, madam. If you would kindly come to the point at once. What do you want with me?"

"Doctor, I once had a child – a boy – the finest boy you ever saw."

"It is not unusual," the doctor began, but stopped, because the woman's face was filled with a great trouble. "But pray go on, madam."

"I had a boy," she repeated, and burst into a flood of tears.

The doctor inclined his head. There is no other answer possible when a complete stranger bursts into tears from some unknown cause.

"I lost the boy," she proceeded. "I – I – I lost the boy."

"He died?"

She shook her head. "No. But I lost my boy," she repeated. "My husband deserted me. I was alone in a strange town. My relations had cast me off because I married an actor. I was penniless, and I could find no work. I sold the boy to save him from the workhouse, and to get the money to follow my husband."

"Good Heavens! I remember! It was at Birmingham. Your husband's name was – was – ?"

"His professional name was Anthony."

"True – true. I remember it all. Yes – yes. The child was taken by a lady. I remember it perfectly. And you are the deserted wife, and the rich American is your husband?"

"No. I followed my husband from place to place; but I had to cross the Atlantic. I came up with him in a town in a Western State. When I found him, he got a divorce for incompatibility of temper. I lost both my husband and my child, and neither of them died."

"Oh! And then – then you came back to look for the boy?"

"No; I married John Haveril. It was before he made his money."

"And now you come to me for information about the child, who must be a man by this time?"

"I've never forgotten him, doctor. I never can forget him. Every day since then I have thought of him. I said, 'Now he's six; now he's ten; now he's twenty.' And I've tried to think of him as he grew up. Always – always I have had the boy in my mind."

"Yes; but surely – Perhaps you had no more children?"

"No; never any more. And last spring I fell ill – very ill. I was – "

"What was the matter?"

She told him the symptoms.

"Yes; nerves, of course. Fretting after the child."

"You know. The American doctor did not. Well, and while I was lying in my dark room, I had a dream. It came again. It kept on coming. A dream which told me that I should see my child again if I came to London. So my husband brought me over."

"And you think that you will find your child?"

"I am sure that I shall. It is the only thing that I have prayed for. Oh, you need not warn me about excitement; I know the danger. I don't care so very much about living; but I want that dream to come true. I must find the boy."

"You might as well look for him at the bottom of the sea. Why, my dear lady, your boy was intended to take the place of a dead child; I am sure he was. I know nothing at all about him. There is no clue – no chance of finding the child."

"Do you know nothing?"

"Upon my honour, madam, I cannot even guess. The lady did not give me her name, and I made no inquiries."

"Oh!" Her face fell. "I had such hopes. At the theatre, yesterday, I saw a young man who might have been my son – tall, fair, blue-eyed. Oh, do you know nothing?"

"Nothing at all," he replied decidedly. "And you came here," he went on, "remembering my name, and wondering whether it was the same man? Well, Mrs. Haveril, it *is* the same man, and I remember the whole business perfectly. Now go on."

"Where is that child, doctor?"

"I say that I don't know. I never did know. The lady gave me the money, received the child at the railway station. You brought it to the waiting-room. She had an Indian ayah with her, and the train carried her off, baby and all. That is all I can tell you."

Mrs. Haveril sighed. "Is that all?"

"Madam, since such precautions were taken, it is very certain that no one knew of the matter except the lady herself, and she will certainly not tell, because, as I have already told you, the case looked like substitution, and not adoption."

"What can I do, then?"

"You can do nothing. I would advise you to put the whole business out of your head and forget it. You can do nothing."

"I cannot forget it: I wish I could. The wickedness of it! Oh, to give away my own child only to run after that villain!"

"My dear lady, is it well to allow one single episode to ruin your life? Consider your duty to your second husband. You should bring him happiness, not anxiety. Consider your splendid fortune. If the papers are true, you are worth many millions."

"The papers are quite true."

"You yourself are still comparatively young – not more than five and forty, I should say. Time has dealt tenderly with you. When I knew you, in Birmingham, you were a girl still, with a delicate, beautiful face. How could your husband desert you? Your face is still delicate and still beautiful. You become the silks and satins as you then became your cottons. Resign yourself to twenty years more of happiness and luxury. As for that weakness of yours, it will vanish if you avoid excitement and agitation. If not – what did your American adviser warn you?"

She rose reluctantly. "I cannot forget," she said. "I must go on remembering. But the dream was true. It was *sent*, doctor; it was sent. And the first step, I am sure and certain, was to lead me here."

After a solitary dinner, Sir Robert sat by the fire in his dining-room. A novel lay on a chair beside him. Like many scientific men, he was a great reader of novels. For the moment, he was simply looking into the fire while his thoughts wandered this way and that. He had seen about twenty patients

in the course of the day, and made, in consequence, forty guineas. He was perfectly satisfied with the condition of his practice; he was under no anxiety about his reputation: his mind was quite at ease concerning himself from every point of view. He was thinking of this and of that – things indifferent – when suddenly he saw before him, by the light of the four candles on the table, the ghost of a date. The figures, in fact, stood out, luminous, against the dark mahogany of his massive sideboard. "December 2, 1872." He rubbed his eyes; the figures disappeared; he lay back; the figures came again.

"It's a trick of memory," he said. "What have I done to-day that could suggest this date?" The only important event of the day was the visit of his old patient, and the reminder about a certain adoption in which he had taken a part. Was the date connected with that event?

He got up and went into his consulting-room. There, on a shelf among many companions, he found his note-book of 1874. He remembered. The time was winter; it was early in the year. He turned over the pages; he came to his notes. He read these words: "Child must have light hair, blue eyes; age – must be born as nearly as possible to December 2, 1872, date of dead child's birth."

"That's the date, sure enough," he said. "And the brain's just been working round to it, without my knowledge – of its own accord – started by that poor woman. Humph!"

He put back the note-book, and returned to the dining-room.

He sat down by the fire again, crossed his feet, lay back, took up the novel, and prepared for a comfortable hour.

In vain. That business of the adoption came back to him. The letters on the page melted into dissolving views: he saw the poor woman crying over the child, and clutching at the money which would save the boy from the workhouse and carry her to her husband; he saw the Indian ayah taking the child from him, and the lady bowing coldly from the railway carriage. "A lady through and through," said the doctor.

The torn envelope was addressed to "Lady – " She was a woman of title, then. He got up; on the bookshelves of the dining-room was a Red Book.

"Now," he said, "if I go right through this book from beginning to end, and if I should find the heir to something or Lord Somebody, born on December 2, 1872, I shall probably come upon the victim of this conspiracy – if there has been a conspiracy."

Luckily he began at the end, at the letter Z. Before long, under the fourth letter from the end, he read as follows: —

"Woodroffe, Sir Humphrey Arundale, second baronet; born at Poonah, December 2, 1872; son of Sir Humphrey Armitage Woodroffe, first baronet, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., formerly Lieut-Governor of Bengal, by Liliās, daughter of the fifteenth Lord Dunedin. Succeeded his father in 1888. Educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. Is a captain in the Worcestershire Militia. Residence, Crowleigh, Worcestershire, and Bryanston Square, London. Clubs, 'Junior United,' 'Travellers,' and 'Oriental.'"

"That's my man!" cried the doctor, with some natural excitement. "I believe I've found him. Then there *has* been substitution, after all, and not adoption! But, good Lord! it's Lady Woodroffe! Lady Woodroffe! It's the writer and orator and leader! Oh, purity! Oh, temperance! Oh, charity! What would the world say, if the world only knew?"

He threw the book aside and sat down. "I told that woman," he reflected, "that I knew nothing about the lady who carried off her child. Well, I did not know then. But I do know now. Must I tell her? Why disturb things? She can never find out. Let her go back to her adopted land. And as for this – this substitution – I promised solemnly that I would not speak about the business, even if I were to chance upon that lady, without her leave. My dear Mrs. Haveril, go home to America and forget the boy who is now the second baronet. Go home; it will be best for your health. 'The first step,' she said. Strange! The first step. But not for you, dear lady, not for you."

CHAPTER V. GUEST NIGHT

"I am glad to see you again, Cousin Humphrey."

It was two months after the meeting in the churchyard. Hilarie's house was full; her guests overflowed into the village. It was, in fact, the first guest night of the season.

"This is the beginning of Term," she said. "You shall make acquaintance with the college."

"I have heard something about your college." He looked round the room, which was the lady's bower, as if in search of some one.

"You can take me in, and I will tell you more about it during dinner."

There were more than the house-party. The place is within an hour of Victoria, and a good many friends of the students had come out by train to see what the college was like; what it meant; and if it had come to stay.

A new social experiment always draws. First, it attracts the social wobblers who continually run after the last new gospel. Then it attracts those who watch social experiments from the outside. Thirdly, it attracts the New Woman herself; those who are curious about the New Woman; and those who hate the New Woman. Lastly, it attracts those who are always in search of material for "copy." For all these reasons, the guests present wore that expression of countenance called, by their friends, "thoughtful;" it should rather be called "uncertain." They looked about curiously, as if to find traces of the experiment in the furniture, on the walls, in the students' dresses; they listened in order to catch the note of the experiment in the air; they cast suspicious looks to right and to left, as expecting something to be sprung upon them. To be invited at all was to make them realize that they were in the very van and forefront of contemporary intellect; it also imposed upon them the difficult task of pronouncing a judgment without a "lead." Now, without a lead these philosophers are uncertain. Hence the aspect and appearance of the guests this evening. They did not know what to think or what to say of the college – no one had yet given them a lead; they were uncertain, and they would be expected to pronounce a judgment.

The oracle who waits for a "lead" is common among us; he takes himself seriously; he is said by his friends to have "made the most" of himself: not that he has distinguished himself in any way, but he has made the best out of poor materials, and he would have made himself a good deal bigger and better had the materials been richer. As it is, he reads all the thoughtful papers in all the magazines; he writes thoughtful papers of his own, which he finds a difficulty in placing; he sometimes gets letters into the papers giving reasons why he, being a very little man, cannot agree with some great man. This makes his chin to stick out. He even contrives to get people to read his letters, as if it matters a brass farthing whether he agrees or does not agree. Over a new social experiment, once he has got a "lead," this oracle is perfectly happy.

"We will talk presently," said Hilarie, turning to welcome new guests.

Humphrey stepped aside, and looked on while the room filled up. The students, he remarked, who were all dressed in white, with ribbons of their own individual choice, appeared to be a cheerful company of damsels. To be sure, cheerfulness belongs to their time of life, and to the profession of student, about which there should cling a certain lawless joyousness – a buoyancy not found in the domestic circle, a touch of the barrack, something of the camp, because they are recruits in the armies that fight against ignorance and prejudice. These white-robed students were full of cheerfulness, which bubbled over in laughter and happy faces. One is told that in some colleges there are students entirely given over to their studies, who wear dowdy dresses, who push back their hair anyhow behind their spectacles, who present faces of more than possible thoughtfulness. Here there were none such; none were oppressed with study.

Rightly considered, every college for young persons should be interesting. We have forgotten that there used formerly to be colleges for old persons; for priests, as Jesus Commons and the Papey on London Wall; for physicians; for surgeons; for serjeants-at-law; for debtors, as the Fleet; for the decayed, as an almshouse; for criminals, as Newgate; for paupers, as the workhouse. A college for girls is naturally more interesting than one for young men: first, because they are girls; next, because the male college contains so much that is disquieting, – ambition and impatience, with effort; strenuous endeavour to conciliate Fame, a goddess who presents to all comers at first a deaf ear, eyes that see nothing, and a trumpet silently dangling at her wrist; the resolution to compel Fortune, even against her will, to turn round that wheel which is to bear them up aloft. The strength of these ambitions stimulates the air – you may note this effect in any of the courts at Cambridge. One remembers, also, that in most cases Fame, however persistently wooed, continues to dangle the silent trumpet; while Fortune, however passionately invoked, refuses to turn the wheel; and that the resolution and determination of the petitioner go for nothing. One observes, also, that the courts of the colleges are paved with shattered resolutions, which make a much better pavement than the finest granite. One remembers, also, that there are found in the young man's college the Prig and the Smug, the Wallower, the Sloth, the Creeping Thing, and the Contented Creature. But pass across the road to the Woman's College. Heavens! what possibilities are there! What ambitions are hers! For her field is not man's field, though some pretend. Not hers to direct the throbbing engine, and make that thing of steel a thing of intelligence; not hers to command a fleet; not hers to make the laws. She does not construct lighthouses; she does not create new sciences; she does not advance the old; she never invents, nor creates, nor advances; she receives, she adapts, she distributes. How great are her possibilities! Though she neither creates nor invents, she may become a queen of song, a queen of the stage, a great painter, a great novelist, a great poet – great at artistic work of every kind. Or, again, while her brother is slowly and painfully working his way up, so that he will become a Q.C. at forty, a Judge at sixty, the girl steps at once by marriage into a position that dazzles her friends, and becomes a queen of society, a patron of Art, a power in politics. Far be it from me to suppose that the maidens of any college dream of possibilities such as these. Perhaps, however, the possibilities of maidenhood are never quite forgotten. There is another possibility also. Every great man has a mother. Do maidens ever dream of the supreme happiness of having a great man for a son? Which would a woman prefer, the greatest honour and glory and distinction ever won by woman for herself, or to be the mother of a Tennyson, a Gordon, a Huxley?

"Now, my cousin," said Hilarie. "The dinner is served."

So two by two they went into the old hall. It had been decorated since the summer. The lower part was covered with tapestry; the upper part was hung with armour and old weapons. There were also portraits, imaginary and otherwise, of women wise and women famous. Queen Elizabeth was there, Joan of Arc was there, George Sand, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Jane Austen, Grace Darling, Rosa Bonheur, and many others. The male observer remarked, with a sense of omission, the absence of those queens of beauty whose lamentable lives make history so profoundly interesting. Where were Rosamond, Agnes Sorel, La Vallière, Nell Gwynne? Alas! they were not admitted.

"The house," said the president, taking her seat, "is much larger than it looks. With the solar and the lady's bower and the tower, we have arranged dormitories for forty and half a dozen sitting-rooms, besides this hall, which is used all day long."

The musicians' gallery had been rebuilt and painted. It contained an organ now and a piano, besides room for an orchestra. Six of the students were sitting there with violins and a harp, ready to discourse soft music during the banquet. There were three tables running down the hall, with the high table, and all were filled with an animated, joyous crowd of guests and residents.

"I want to interest you in my college," Hilarie began, when they were seated.

Humphrey examined the menu. He observed that it was an artistic attempt – an intelligent effort at a harmony. If only the execution should prove equal to the conception!

"At present, of course, we are only beginning. What are you yourself doing, however?"

"I follow – humbly – Art. There is nothing else. I paint, I write verse, I compose."

"Do you exhibit?"

"Exhibit? Court the empty praises or the empty sneers of an ignorant press? Never! I show my pictures to my friends. We confide our work to each other."

Hilarie smiled, and murmured something inaudible.

"And we keep the outer world outside. You, I fear" – he looked down the room – "admit the outer world. You lose a great deal. For instance, if this mob was out of your lovely house, I might bring my friends. It would be an ideal place for our pictures and our music, and for the acting of our plays."

"I fear the mob must remain." Hilarie began to doubt whether her college would appeal, after all, to this young man.

"What we should aim at in life," the artist continued, "is Art without Humanity."

"I should have said that Humanity is the basis of all Art."

Her cousin shook his head. "Not true Art – that is bodiless. I fear you do not yet belong to us."

"No; I belong to these girls, who are anything but bodiless."

"Your college, I take it, has something to do with helping people?"

"Certainly."

"My own view is that you cannot help people. You may give them things, but you only make them want more. People have got to help themselves."

"Did you help yourself?"

"Oh, I am born to what my forefathers acquired. As for these girls, to whom you are giving things, you will only make them discontented."

The president of the college looked round the hall. There were forty white frocks encasing as many girls, students at her college, and as many guests. There was a cheerful ripple of talk; one thought of a dancing sea in the sunlight. There were outbursts of laughter – light, musical; one thought of the white crests of the waves. In the music-gallery the girls played softly and continuously; one thought of the singing of birds in the coppice. The dinner was already half finished. There is a solid simplicity about these guest nights. A short dinner, with jellies, ices, and puddings, most commends itself to the feminine heart.

"Let me tell you my design, at least. I saw that in this revolution of society, going on so rapidly around us, all classes of women are rushing into work."

"A woman who works ceases to be a woman," Humphrey spoke and shuddered.

"I think of my great-grandmother Hilarie, wife of Robert, who lies buried in our church. She sat with her maids in the lady's bower and embroidered. She administered everything – the food and the drink and the raiment. She made them all behave with decency. She brought up the children, and taught them right and wrong. Above all, she civilized. To-day, as yesterday and to-morrow and always, it is the duty of woman to civilize. She is the everlasting priestess. This is therefore a theological college."

Her cheek flushed, her eye brightened. She turned her head, as if suspecting that she had said too much. Her cousin seemed not to have heard; he was, in fact, absorbed in partridge.

"Now that all women want to work, will they continue to civilize? I know not yet how things may go. They all want to work. They try to work, whether they are fit for it or not. They take men's work at a quarter the pay. I know not how it will end. They turn the men adrift; they drive them out of the country, and then congratulate themselves – poor fools! And for themselves, I chiefly dread their hardening. The woman who tries to turn herself into a man is a creature terrible – unnatural. I know the ideal woman of the past. I cannot find the ideal woman of the present."

"There isn't any."

"If we surrender the sacerdotal functions, what have we in exchange?"

"I don't know." The manner meant, "I don't care;" but Hilarie hardly observed the manner.

"I cannot alter the conditions, cousin. That is quite true. But there are some things which can be done."

Hilarie went on, at this point, to tell a story, for one who could read between the lines – which her cousin certainly could not – of a girl dominated partly by a sense of responsibility and duty; one who, being rich, must do something with her wealth, partly by that passion for power which is developed in some hearts – not all – by the possession of wealth; and partly by a deep sympathy with the sufferings and sorrows of her impecunious sisters.

There are always, as we know, at every moment of life, two courses open to us – the right and the wrong; or, if the choice is not so elementary, the better and the worse. But there comes to those of the better sort one supreme moment when we seem to choose the line which will lead to honour, or the line which will lead to obscurity. To the common sort the choice is only apparent, not real; men and women are pushed, pulled, dragged, shoved, either in the way of fortune or in the way of failure, by circumstances and conditions beyond our control. To them there is no free will. When the time of repentance arrives, we think that we choose freely. The majority cannot choose; their lives are ordered for them, with their sins and their follies. They might choose, but they are not able; they cannot see before them or around them. A fog lies about their steps; they stumble along with the multitude, getting now and then a pleasant bit, now and then a thorny bit. Some walk delicately along a narrow way, which is grassy and flowery, where the babbling brooks run with champagne, and the spicy breezes are laden with the fragrance of melons, peaches, and roast lamb. Some march and stagger along the broad way, thirsty and weary, where there is no refreshment of brooks or of breezes. It is an unequal world.

Such a supreme moment came to Hilarie after long consideration.

"I thought," she explained, "that if the Archbishop and his brethren were living to-day, they would do something for the women who work."

Her cousin slowly drank a glass of champagne. "Yes?" he asked, without much affectation of interest.

"I thought that if the Archbishop were living, he would like to found a college – not for priests, nor for old villagers, but for girls; not to teach anything, but to give them a place where they can go and stay. In this college we do not teach anything. There are no lectures. We need not do any work unless we please. Every girl does exactly what she pleases: some study, some paint – not after your school, I fear; some practise music; in fact, they do just what they please. I believe that at least a dozen are writing novels, two or three are writing verse, one or two are working for examinations. In the evening we amuse ourselves."

"You give them all this?"

"Certainly. They come here whenever they please, and they can stay here for three months, or more if there is necessity. In three words, my cousin, I maintain an establishment of forty guests, and I fear I shall have to increase the number."

"And what's the good of it?"

"When the Archbishop built his school, he argued, first, that education is good even for the swineherd; next, that with education follow manners; and, thirdly, that it was good for himself to give. So, you see, it is good for the girls to get the rest and quiet; living thus all together in a college raises their standard of thought and manners; and, thirdly, it is good for me, as it was the Archbishop, to give."

"I do not feel myself any call to give anybody anything."

"Meantime, I keep before myself the great function of woman. She is, I say, the eternal priestess. She compels men into ways of gentleness and courtesy; she inspires great thoughts. By way of love she leads to the upper heights. But you do not feel these things."

"I do not, I confess."

"If the girls must work, I want them ever to keep before themselves the task laid upon them. They have hitherto civilized man from the home; they must now civilize him from the workshop. That, my cousin, is the meaning of this college."

"You've got some rather pretty girls in the place," said Humphrey.

"Oh, pretty! What has that to do with it?"

The music ceased. There was a general lull. The guests all leaned back in their chairs. The president knocked with her ivory hammer, and they all returned to the lady's bower.

In the drawing-room Humphrey left the president to the people who pressed in upon her, and wandered round the room, looking, apparently, for some one. Presently he discovered, surrounded by a company of men, the girl who was called Molly. She, too, was dressed in white, and wore a cherry-coloured ribbon round her neck; a dainty damsel she looked, conspicuous for this lovely quality of daintiness among them all. At sight of her the young man coloured, and his eye brightened; then his face clouded. However, he made his way to her. She stepped out of the circle and gave him her hand.

"It is a week and more," he whispered, "since I have seen you. Why not say at once that you don't care about it any longer?"

"You are welcome to the college, Sir Humphrey," she replied aloud. "Confess that it is a pretty sight. The president was talking to you about it all dinner-time. I hope that you are interested."

"I think it is all tomfoolery," he replied ungraciously; "and a waste of good money too."

"Hilarie wants money to make happiness. You do not look in the best of tempers, Humphrey."

"I am not. I couldn't get enough to drink, and I have had to listen to a lot of stuff about women and priestesses."

"Good stuff should not be thrown away, should it? Like good pearls."

"I want to talk to you – away from this rabble. Where can we go?"

"I will take you over the college." She led the way into the library, a retired place, where she sat down. "Do you ask how I am getting on?"

"No, I don't." He remained standing. "You'll never go on the stage with my consent."

"We shall see." By her quick dancing eye, by her mobile lips, by the brightness of her quaint, attractive face, which looked as if it could be drawn into shapes like an india-rubber face, she belied his prophecy. "Besides, Hilarie wants me to become a tragic actress. Please remember, once more, Humphrey, that what Hilarie wishes I must do. I owe everything to Hilarie – everything."

"You drive me mad with your perverseness, Molly."

"I am going to please myself. Please understand that, even if I were engaged to you, I would keep my independence. If you don't like that, take back your offer. Take it back at once." She held out both her hands, as if she was carrying it about.

"You know I can't. Molly, I love you too much, though you are a little devil."

"Then let me alone. If one is born in a theatre, one belongs to a theatre. I would rather be born in a theatre than in a West End square. Humphrey, you make me sorry that I ever listened to you."

"Well, go and listen to that fiddler fellow who calls you Molly. Curse his impudence!"

"Oh, if you had been only born differently! You belong to the people who are all alike. You sit in the stalls in a row, as if you were made after the same pattern; you expect the same jokes; you take the same too much champagne; you are like the pebbles of the seashore, all rounded alike."

"Well, what would you have?"

"The actors and show folk – my folk – are all different. As for kind hearts, how can you know, with your tables spread every day, and your champagne running like water? There's no charity where there's no poverty."

"I don't pretend to any charity."

"It is a dreadful thing to be born rich. You might have been so different if you had had nothing."

"Then you wouldn't have listened to me."

"Thank you. Listening doesn't mean consenting."

"You cannot withdraw. You are promised to me."

"Only on conditions. You want me to be engaged secretly. Well, I won't. You want me to marry you secretly. Well, I won't."

"You are engaged to me."

"I am not. And I don't think now that I ever shall be. It flattered me at first, having a man in your position following around. I should like to be 'my lady.' But I can't see any happiness in it. You belong to a different world, not to my world."

"I will lift you into my world."

"It looks more like tumbling down than getting lifted up. There is still time, however, to back out. If you dare to maintain that I ever said 'Yes,' I'll say 'No' on the spot. There!"

This sweet and loving conversation explains itself. Every one will understand it. The girl lived in a boarding-house, where she took lessons from an old actress in preparation for the stage. From time to time she went to stay with her friend – her benefactress – who had found her, after her father's death, penniless. At her country house she met, as we have seen, her old friend Dick, and the other cousin. The second meeting, outside the boarding-house, which the latter called, and she believed to be, accidental, led to other meetings. They were attended by the customary results; that is, by an ardent declaration of love. The girl was flattered by the attentions of a young man of position and apparent wealth. She listened to the tale. She found, presently, that her lover was not in every respect what a girl expects in a lover. His ideas of love were not hers. He turned out to be jealous, but that might prove the depth and sincerity of his love; suspicious, which argued a want of trust in her; ashamed to introduce her to his own people; anxious to be engaged first and married next, in secrecy; avowedly selfish, worshipping false gods in the matter of art and science; and, worst of all, ill-tempered, and boorish in his ill temper. Lastly, she was, at this stage, rapidly making the discovery that not even for a title and a carriage and a West End square ought she to marry a man she was unable to respect.

"We will now go back to the lady's bower," she said. "This talk, Humphrey, will have to last a long while."

CHAPTER VI. THE OLD LOVER

"My dear Dick!" Molly ran into the dining-room of her dingy boarding-house, which was also the reception-room for visitors. "At last! I thought you were never coming to see me again."

"It has been a long summer. I only came home last night."

"Sit down, and let me look at you." She put him in a chair, and turned his face to the light, familiarly holding it by the chin. "You look very well, Dick. You are browned by the summer's sun, that's all."

She released his chin, and lightly boxed his ears. They had always been on very friendly terms, these two.

"Well, Dick, tell me about your summer. Has it been prosperous? Have you had adventures?" She laughed, because she knew very well the kind of adventures that this young man desired.

"Adventures come to the adventurous, Molly."

"Oh, how I envied you that day when you turned up among the tombs, covered all over with dust, looking so fit and going so free! If I were only a man, to go off with you on the tramp!"

"I wish you were, Molly. We would go off together. I've often thought of it. You should carry a mandoline; I would stick to the fiddle. We would take a room at the inn, and have a little show. You should dance and sing and twang the mandoline. I should play the fiddle and do the patter. We should have a rare time, Molly."

"We should, oh, we should! Do you remember that time when daddy let me go with him, and you came too?"

"I do. I remember how charming you looked, even then! You were about fourteen; you wore a red flannel cap. You used to take off your shoes and stockings whenever we came to a brook, and wade in it with your pretty bare feet."

"And we rested on the trunks of trees in the woods, and had dinner in the open. And you talked to all the gipsies in their own language. And one night we sat round their fire, and had some of their stew for supper. Oh! And we listened to the birds, and made nosegays of honeysuckle. And the people came to the inn at night while you played the fiddle, and daddy sang comic songs and did conjuring tricks. Oh, what a time it was!"

"And you danced. Don't forget your dance, Molly. I taught you that dance."

The girl laughed merrily. Then she threw herself into the attitude common to all dancing-girls in all ages and all countries – the arms held out and the foot pointed.

"I haven't forgotten it, Dicky. I only wish I could forget it." She sighed. "It would be better for me if I could."

"If we *could* go away together, Molly!" He took her hand and held it.

"Don't, Dick, don't! You make me feel a longing for the road and the country."

"There's nothing like it, Molly darlin', nothing! When the summer comes, I'm off. All the winter I live in a lonely flat, and am respectable."

"As respectable as you can be, Dick."

"Well, I put on dress clothes and get engagements. I don't mind, so that in summer I can be a tramp and a rogue and a vagabond."

"Not a rogue, Dick."

"I was born behind the scenes in a circus at St. Louis before my worthy parent ran away from his wife. It's in the blood, I suppose. I don't care, Molly, what they say." He sprang to his feet, and began to walk about. "There is no life like it. We don't want money; we don't try to be gentlefolk. We're not cooped up in cages. All we've got to do is to amuse the people. We're not stupid; we're

not dull. We're not selfish; we are contented with a little. We're never tired of it. We're always trying some new business. My poor Molly, you're out of it. Pity, pity!" He sat down again, shaking his head. "And you born to it – actually born to it!"

"Well, I'm to have the next best thing to it. I'm to be an actress, at any rate."

"An actress! Well, that's something. Tell me about it, Molly."

"A serious actress – a tragic actress. It's all settled. I'm to show the world the real inwardness of Shakespeare. I'm to be the light and lamp of all other actresses. I'm to be another Siddons."

"You another Siddons? Oh, Molly!" He laughed, but not convincingly. The part of the scoffer was new to him. "You, with that face, with those lips, with those eyes? My child, you might be another Nelly Farren, but never another Siddons."

The girl laughed too; but only for a moment. Then she became serious.

"It's got to be, Dick. Don't tempt me. Don't make me unhappy. It would grieve Hilarie awfully if I failed or changed my mind – which is her mind."

"My cousin Hilarie hasn't the complete disposal of your life, has she?"

"She ought to have, because she saved my life. What should I have done, Dick, when daddy died and left me without a penny? There are relations about, I dare say; but I don't know where. My only chance was to get in somewhere. You were away. What could I do? Eighteenpence a night to go on – "

"No, no; not with that crew, Molly."

"There Hilarie found me. And she thinks she is doing the best thing in the world for me when she gets me taught to be a tragedy queen."

"You shall be a great actress, Molly. You shall rake in fifty pounds a week, and you shall wear long chains of diamonds, if you like."

"I've got ambition enough, if that counts for anything. I like that part of it where the great actress sweeps across the stage, with all the people shouting and clapping. Why, when daddy took me to the pit, and I used to watch the leading lady marching majestically – like this – with her long train, sweeping it back – so – I resolved to be an actress. And when she spoke the lines, I didn't care twopence about the sense, if they had any; I was thinking all the time how grand she looked, and how splendid it must be to have all the world in love with you."

"You shall have it, Molly – if you like, that is. You were always ready to think about fellows being in love with you, were you not?"

"Why not? The stories and the plays and the songs are all about love. A girl can't help wanting all the world to be in love with her. At the theatre I used to see love and admiration on every man's face. The women's faces were not so full of love, I noticed."

"Oh, you noticed that, did you? At so early an age? Wonderful!"

"And now, Dick, now, you see, I've found out that it means work; and after all the work it may mean failure. Sometimes I think – Dick, I don't mind saying everything to you – girls who are beautiful – like me, in my way – were never intended to work; they were to be rewarded for their good looks by – you know – the prince, Dick."

"Sometimes it comes off," Dick replied thoughtfully. "There was Claribel Winthrop – Jane Perks her real name was – in one of my country companies; she married a young lord. But she worked desperately hard for it. All of us looked on and backed her up. It might come off that way; but I should be sorry, Molly. You're born for better things; you ought to have an empty purse."

"What should you say, Dick, if it was to come off that way?"

"Is there a young lord, then? Already?" He changed colour.

"He isn't a lord, but he is not far off, Dick; and I can have him if I like."

"What sort of a fellow, Molly? Oh, be very careful. It is the devil and all if he isn't the right sort. Do you like him?" His face twisted as if he could not find it in his heart to like him.

"He's a baronet. He's young. He wants to conceal things. His mother doesn't like show folk. He thinks most people are cads. He's rich."

"You don't mean to say it's that cousin of mine – not Sir Humphrey?"

She nodded her head. "You don't like him, I know. I'm afraid he's got a temper, and I don't know if I shall be able to put up with him."

"You haven't promised, have you?"

"He says I have. But I haven't, really. I am always reminding him that there is still time to draw back. But, Dick, think! To have plenty of money! To be independent!"

Dick groaned. "It's the greatest temptation in the world. Eve's apple was made of gold, and after she'd got it she couldn't eat it. You think of that, Molly. You can't eat a golden apple. Now, I could give you a real delicious Ribstone pippin." He sat down beside her, and took her hand again. "It's very serious, my dear." It is the manner of the stage to address the ladies so. It means nothing. Whether it is also the manner to take their hands, I know not. "You must be very careful, Molly. Will my other cousin, Hilarie, advise?"

"It's a secret, so far. But don't think about it, Dick. I've got to please Hilarie first. The young man will have to be considered next."

"Well, if there's nothing fixed – Molly, I don't like the fellow, I own. I don't like any of the lot who talk about outsiders and cads, as if they were a different order. Still, if it makes you happy – Molly, I swear there's nothing I wouldn't consent to if it would make you happy." The tears stood in his eyes.

"My dear Dick," she said. "There's nobody cares for me so much as you." And the tears stood in her eyes as well.

The young man let go her hand, and stood up. "That's enough, Molly – so long as we understand. Now tell me about the studies. Are you really working?"

"Really working. But, oh, Dick, my trouble is that the harder I work the more I feel as if it isn't there. I do exactly what I am told to do, and it doesn't come off."

"But when you used to sing and dance –"

"Oh, anybody could make people laugh."

The actor groaned. "She says – anybody! And she can do it! And they put her into tragedy!"

"Whenever I try to feel the emotion myself, it vanishes, and I can only feel myself in white satin, with a long train sweeping to the back of the stage, and all the house in love with me."

"This is bad; this is very bad, Molly."

"See, here, Dick, I'm telling you all my troubles. I am studying the part of Desdemona – you know, Desdemona who married a black man. How could she? – and of course he was jealous. I've got to show all kinds of emotion before that beast of a husband kills me."

"It's a fine part – none finer. Once I saw it played magnificently. She was in a travelling company, and she died of typhoid, poor thing! Yes, I can see her now." He acted as he spoke. "She was full of forebodings; her husband was cold; her distress of mind was shown in the way she took up trifles, and put them down again; she spoke she knew not what, and sang snatches of song; in her eyes stood tears; her voice trembled; she moved about uneasily; she clutched at her dress in agitation."

"The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow."

"Why," cried the girl, "you make me feel it – you – only with talking about it! And I – alas! Have I any feeling in me at all, Dick?"

"Oh yes, it's there – it's there all right. There's tragedy in the most unpromising materials, if you know how to get at it. I think a woman's got to be in love first. It's a very fine thing for an actress to fall in love – the real thing, I mean. Then comes jealousy, of course. And after that, all the real tragedy emotions."

"Oh, love!" the girl repeated with scorn.

"Try again now; you know the words."

Molly began to repeat the lines —

"My mother had a maid called Barbara;
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad,
And forsook her; she had a song of 'Willow.'"

She declaimed these lines with certain gestures which had been taught her. She broke off, leaving the rest unfinished.

The effect was wooden. There was no pity, no sorrow, no foreboding in the lines at all. Dick shook his head.

"What am I to say to Hilarie?" she asked.

Dick passed his fingers through his hair. Then he sat down again, and began to laugh – laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"You a tragedy queen!" he said. "Not even if you were over head and ears in love. Now, on the other hand, if I had my fiddle in my hand, and were to play – so – that air which you remember" – he put out his legs straight and sat upright, and pretended the conduct of a fiddle and bow – "could you dance, do you think, as you used to dance two years ago?"

She stood before him, seeming to listen. Then she gently moved her head as if touched by the music. Then she raised her arms and began to dance, with such ease and grace and lightness as can only belong to the dancer born.

"Thank you, Molly." He stood up as if the music was over. "We shall confer further upon this point – and other points. When may I come again to visit Miss Molly Pennefather?"

He caught her head in his hands and kissed her gaily on her forehead – after all, he had no more manners than can be expected of a tramp – and vanished.

"If Dick could only play 'Desdemona'!" she murmured, looking after him at the closed door. "Why, he actually *looked* the part. I suppose he has been in love. If I could only do it so!" She imitated his gestures, and broke out into singing —

"The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow."

"No," she said; "it won't do. I don't feel a bit like Desdemona. I am only myself, and I am filled with the most unholy longing for money – for riches, for filthy lucre, which we are told to despise."

Her eyes fell upon a newspaper, folded and lying on the floor. It had probably dropped out of Dick's pocket. She took it up mechanically, and opened it, expecting nothing. The sheet was one of the gossip papers of the day, full of personal paragraphs. She glanced at it, thinking of the paragraphs about herself and her grand success, which would probably never appear, unless she could transform herself.

Presently her eye caught the word "millionaire," and she read —

"Among the *nouveaux riches*— the millionaires of the West – we must not, as Englishmen, forget to enumerate Mr. John Haveril, who has made his money partly by transactions in silver-mines, and partly by the sudden creation of a town on his own lands. He is said to be worth no more than two or three millions sterling, so that he is not in the very front rank of American rich men. Still, there is a good deal of spending, even in so moderate a fortune. Mr. Haveril is by birth an Englishman and a Yorkshireman. He was born about sixty years ago, and emigrated about the year '55. His wife is also of English origin, having been born at Hackney. Her maiden name was Alice Pennefather."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.