АРТУР КОНАН ДОЙЛ

A DUET, WITH AN OCCASIONAL CHORUS

Артур Конан Дойл

A Duet, with an Occasional Chorus

Дойл А.

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Содержание

Arthur Conan Doyle
A Duet, with an Occasional Chorus

TO

MRS. MAUDE CROSSE

Dear Maude, – All the little two-oared boats which put out into the great ocean have need of some chart which will show them how to lay their course. Each starts full of happiness and confidence, and yet we know how many founder, for it is no easy voyage, and there are rocks and sandbanks upon the way. So I give a few pages of your own private log, which tell of days of peace, and days of storm – such storms as seem very petty from the deck of a high ship, but are serious for the two-oared boats. If your peace should help another to peace, or your storm console another who is storm-tossed, then I know that you will feel repaid for this intrusion upon your privacy. May all your voyage be like the outset, and when at last the oars fall from your hands, and those of Frank, may other loving ones be ready to take their turn of toil – and so, *bon voyage*!

Ever your friend,

The Author.

Jan. 20, 1899.

THE OVERTURE

I

ABOUT THAT DATE

These are the beginnings of some of the letters which they wrote about that time.

Woking, May 20th.

My dearest Maude, – You know that your mother suggested, and we agreed, that we should be married about the beginning of September. Don't you think that we might say the 3rd of August? It is a Wednesday, and in every sense suitable. Do try to change the date, for it would in many ways be preferable to the other. I shall be eager to hear from you about it. And now, dearest Maude.. (The rest is irrelevant.)

St. Albans, May 22nd.

My Dearest Frank, – Mother sees no objection to the 3rd of August, and I am ready to do anything which will please you and her. Of course there are the guests to be considered, and the dressmakers and other arrangements, but I have no doubt that we shall be able to change the date all right. O Frank.. (What follows is beside the point.)

Woking, May 25th.

My dearest Maude, – I have been thinking over that change of date, and I see one objection which had not occurred to me when I suggested it. August the 1st is Bank holiday, and travelling is not very pleasant about that time. My idea now is that we should bring it off before that date. Fancy, for example, how unpleasant it would be for your Uncle Joseph if he had to travel all the way from Edinburgh with a Bank-holiday crowd. It would be selfish of us if we did not fit in our plans so as to save our relatives from inconvenience. I think therefore, taking everything into consideration, that the 20th of July, a Wednesday, would be the very best day that we could select. I do hope that you will strain every nerve, my darling, to get your mother to consent to this change. When I think.. (A digression follows.)

St. Albans, May 27th.

My dearest Frank, – I think that what you say about the date is very reasonable, and it is so sweet and unselfish of you to think about Uncle Joseph. Of course it would be very unpleasant for him to have to travel at such a time, and we must strain every nerve to prevent it. There is only one serious objection which my mother can see. Uncle Percival (that is my mother's second brother) comes back from Rangoon about the end of July, and will miss the wedding (O Frank, think of its being *our* wedding!) unless we delay it. He has always been very fond of me, and he might be hurt if we were married so immediately before his arrival. Don't you think it would be as well to wait? Mother leaves it all in your hands, and we shall do exactly as you advise. O Frank.. (The rest is confidential.)

Woking, May 29th.

My own Dearest, – I think that it would be unreasonable upon the part of your Uncle Percival to think that we ought to have changed the date of a matter so important to ourselves, simply in order that he should be present. I am sure that on second thoughts your mother and yourself will see the thing in this light. I must say, however, that in one point I think you both show great judgment. It

would certainly be invidious to be married *immediately* before his arrival. I really think that he would have some cause for complaint if we did that. To prevent any chance of hurting his feelings, I think that it would be far best, if your mother and you agree with me, that we should be married upon July 7th. I see that it is a Thursday, and in every way suitable. When I read your last letter.. (The remainder is unimportant.)

St. Albans, June 1st.

Dearest Frank, – I am sure that you are right in thinking that it would be as well not to have the ceremony too near the date of Uncle Percival's arrival in England. We should be so sorry to hurt his feelings in any way. Mother has been down to Madame Mortimer's about the dresses, and she thinks that everything could be hurried up so as to be ready by July 7th. She is so obliging, and her skirts *do* hang so beautifully. O Frank, it is only a few weeks' time, and then.

Woking, June 3rd.

My own darling Maude, – How good you are – and your mother also – in falling in with my suggestions! Please, please don't bother your dear self about dresses. You only want the one travelling-dress to be married in, and the rest we can pick up as we go. I am sure that white dress with the black stripe – the one you were playing tennis with at the Arlingtons' – would do splendidly. You looked simply splendid that day. I am inclined to think that it is my favourite of all your dresses, with the exception of the dark one with the light-green front. That shows off your figure so splendidly. I am very fond also of the grey Quaker-like alpaca dress. What a little dove you do look in it! I think those dresses, and of course your satin evening-dress, are my favourites. On second thoughts, they are the only dresses I have ever seen you in. But I like the grey best, because you wore it the first time I ever – you remember! You must *never* get rid of those dresses. They are too full of associations. I want to see you in them for years, and years, and years.

What I wanted to say was that you have so many charming dresses, that we may consider ourselves independent of Madame Mortimer. If her things should be late, they will come in very usefully afterwards. I don't want to be selfish or inconsiderate, my own dearest girlie, but it would be rather too much if we allowed my tailor or your dressmaker to be obstacles to our union. I just want you – your dainty little self – if you had only your 'wee coatie,' as Burns says. Now look here! I want you to bring your influence to bear upon your mother, and so make a small change in our plans. The earlier we can have our honeymoon, the more pleasant the hotels will be. I do want your first experiences with me to be without a shadow of discomfort. In July half the world starts for its holiday. If we could get away at the end of this mouth, we should just be ahead of them. This month, this very month! Oh, do try to manage this, my own dearest girl. The 30th of June is a Tuesday, and in every way suitable. They could spare me from the office most excellently. This would just give us time to have the banns three times, beginning with next Sunday. I leave it in your hands, dear. Do try to work it.

St. Albans, June 4th.

My dearest Frank, – We nearly called in the doctor after your dear old preposterous letter. My mother gasped upon the sofa while I read her some extracts. That I, the daughter of the house, should be married in my old black and white tennis-dress, which I wore at the Arlingtons' to save my nice one! Oh, you are simply splendid sometimes! And the learned way in which you alluded to my alpaca. As a matter of fact, it's a merino, but that doesn't matter. Fancy your remembering my wardrobe like that! And wanting me to wear them all for years! So I shall, dear, secretly, when we are quite quite alone. But they are all out of date already, and if in a year or so you saw your poor dowdy wife with tight sleeves among a roomful of puff-shouldered young ladies, you would not be consoled even by the memory that it was in that dress that you first.. you know!

As a matter of fact, I *must* have my dress to be married in. I don't think mother would regard it as a legal marriage if I hadn't, and if you knew how nice it will be, you would not have the heart to interfere with it. Try to picture it, silver-grey – I know how fond you are of greys – a little white chiffon at neck and wrists, and the prettiest pearl trimming. Then the hat *en suite*, pale-grey lisse, white feather and brilliant buckle. All these details are wasted upon you, sir, but you will like it when you see it. It fulfils your ideal of tasteful simplicity, which men always imagine to be an economical method of dressing, until they have wives and milliners' bills of their own.

And now I have kept the biggest news to the last. Mother has been to Madame, and she says that if she works all night, she will have everything ready for the 30th. O Frank, does it not seem incredible! Next Tuesday three weeks. And the banns! Oh my goodness, I am frightened when I think about it! Dear old boy, you won't tire of me, will you? Whatever should I do if I thought you had tired of me! And the worst of it is, that you don't know me a bit. I have a hundred thousand faults, and you are blinded by your love and cannot see them. But then some day the scales will fall from your eyes, and you will perceive the whole hundred thousand at once. Oh, what a reaction there will be! You will see me as I am, frivolous, wilful, idle, petulant, and altogether horrid. But I do love you, Frank, with all my heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and you'll count that on the other side, won't you? Now I am so glad I have said all this, because it is best that you should know what you should expect. It will be nice for you to look back and to say, 'She gave me fair warning, and she is no worse than she said.' O Frank, think of the 30th.

P.S.– I forgot to say that I had a grey silk cape, lined with cream, to go with the dress. It is just sweet!

So that is how they arranged about the date.

THE OVERTURE CONTINUED

II

IN A MINOR KEY

Woking, June 7th.

My own dearest Maude, – How I wish you were here, for I have been down, down, down, in the deepest state of despondency all day. I have longed to hear the sound of your voice, or to feel the touch of your hand! How can I be despondent, when in three weeks I shall be the husband of the dearest girl in England? That is what I ask myself, and then the answer comes that it is just exactly on that account that my wretched conscience is gnawing at me. I feel that I have not used you well; I owe you reparation, and I don't know what to do.

In your last dear letter you talk about being frivolous. *You* have never been frivolous. But I have been frivolous – for ever since I have learned to love you, I have been so wrapped up in my love, with my happiness gilding everything about me, that I have never really faced the prosaic facts of life or discussed with you what our marriage will really necessitate. And now, at this eleventh hour, I realise that I have led you on in ignorance to an act which will perhaps take a great deal of the sunshine out of your life. What have I to offer you in exchange for the sacrifice which you will make for me? Myself, my love, and all that I have – but how little it all amounts to! You are a girl in a thousand, in ten thousand – bright, beautiful, sweet, the dearest lady in all the land. And I an average man – or perhaps hardly that – with little to boast of in the past, and vague ambitions for the future. It is a poor bargain for you, a most miserable bargain. You have still time. Count the cost, and if it be too great, then draw back even now without fear of one word or inmost thought of reproach from me. Your whole life is at stake. How can I hold you to a decision which was taken before you realised what it meant? Now I shall place the facts before you, and then, come what may, my conscience will be at rest, and I shall be sure that you are acting with your eyes open.

You have to compare your life as it is, and as it will be. Your father is rich, or at least comfortably off, and you have been accustomed all your life to have whatever you desired. From what I know of your mother's kindness, I should imagine that no wish of yours has ever remained ungratified. You have lived well, dressed well, a sweet home, a lovely garden, your collie, your canary, your maid. Above all, you have never had anxiety, never had to worry about the morrow. I can see all your past life so well. In the mornings, your music, your singing, your gardening, your reading. In the afternoons, your social duties, the visit and the visitor. In the evening, tennis, a walk, music again, your father's return from the City, the happy family-circle, with occasionally the dinner, the dance, and the theatre. And so smoothly on, month after month, and year after year, your own sweet, kindly, joyous nature, and your bright face, making every one round you happy, and so reacting upon your own happiness. Why should you bother about money? That was your father's business. Why should you trouble about housekeeping? That was your mother's duty. You lived like the birds and the flowers, and had no need to take heed for the future. Everything which life could offer was yours.

And now you must turn to what is in store for you, if you are still content to face the future with me. Position I have none to offer. What is the exact position of the wife of the assistant-accountant of the Co-operative Insurance Office? It is indefinable. What are my prospects? I may become head-accountant. If Dinton died – and I hope he won't, for he is an excellent fellow – I should probably

get his berth. Beyond that I have no career. I have some aspirations after literature – a few critical articles in the monthlies – but I don't suppose they will ever lead to anything of consequence.

And my income, £400 a year with a commission on business I introduce. But that amounts to hardly anything. You have £50. Our total, then, is certainly under £500. Have you considered what it will mean to leave that charming house at St. Albans – the breakfast-room, the billiard-room, the lawn – and to live in the little £50 a year house at Woking, with its two sitting-rooms and pokey garden? Have I a right to ask you to do such a thing? And then the housekeeping, the planning, the arranging, the curtailing, the keeping up appearances upon a limited income. I have made myself miserable, because I feel that you are marrying me without a suspicion of the long weary uphill struggle which lies before you. O Maude, my darling Maude, I feel that you sacrifice too much for me! If I were a man I should say to you, 'Forget me – forget it all! Let our relations be a closed chapter in your life. You can do better. I and my cares come like a great cloud-bank to keep the sunshine from your young life. You who are so tender and dainty! How can I bear to see you exposed to the drudgery and sordid everlasting cares of such a household! I think of your graces, your pretty little ways, the elegancies of your life, and how charmingly you carry them off. You are born and bred for just such an atmosphere as the one which you breathe. And I take advantage of my good-fortune in winning your love to drag you down, to take the beauty and charm from your life, to fill it with small and vulgar cares, never-ending and soul-killing. Selfish beast that I am, why should I allow you to come down into the stress and worry of life, when I found you so high above it? And what can I offer you in exchange?' These are the thoughts which come back and back all day, and leave me in the blackest fit of despondency. I confessed to you that I had dark humours, but never one so hopeless as this. I do not wish my worst enemy to be as unhappy as I have been to-day.

Write to me, my own darling Maude, and tell me all you think, your very inmost soul, in this matter. Am I right? Have I asked too much of you? Does the change frighten you? You will have this in the morning, and I should have my answer by the evening post. I shall meet the postman. How hard I shall try not to snatch the letter from him, or to give myself away. Wilson has been in worrying me with foolish talk, while my thoughts were all of our affairs. He worked me up into a perfectly homicidal frame of mind, but I hope that I kept on smiling and was not discourteous to him. I wonder which is right, to be polite but hypocritical, or to be inhospitable but honest.

Good-bye, my own dearest sweetheart – all the dearer when I feel that I may lose you. – Ever your devoted

Frank.
St. Albans, June 8th.

Frank, tell me for Heaven's sake what your letter means! You use words of love, and yet you talk of parting. You speak as if our love were a thing which we might change or suppress. O Frank, you cannot take my love away from me. You don't know what you are to me, my heart, my life, my all. I would give my life for you willingly, gladly – every beat of my heart is for you. You don't know what you have become to me. My every thought is yours, and has been ever since that night at the Arlingtons'. My love is so deep and strong, it rules my whole life, my every action from morning to night. It is the very breath and heart of my life – unchangeable. I could not alter my love any more than I could stop my heart from beating. How could you, could you suggest such a thing! I know that you really love me just as much as I love you, or I should not open my heart like this. I should be too proud to give myself away. But I feel that pride is out of place when any mistake or misunderstanding may mean lifelong misery to both of us. I would only say good-bye if I thought your love had changed or grown less. But I know that it has not. O my darling, if you only knew what terrible agony the very thought of parting is, you would never have let such an idea even for an instant, on any pretext, enter your mind. The very possibility is too awful to think of. When I read your letter just now up in my room, I nearly fainted. I can't write. O Frank, don't take my love away from me. I can't bear it. Oh

no, it is my everything. If I could only see you now, I know that you would kiss these heart-burning tears away. I feel so lonely and tired. I cannot follow all your letter. I only know that you talked of parting, and that I am weary and miserable.

Maude.

(Copy of Telegram)

***From Frank Crosse*, to *Miss Maude Selby*,**

The Laurels, St. Albans

Coming up eight-fifteen, arrive midnight

June 10th.

How good of you, dear old boy, to come racing across two counties at a minute's notice, simply in order to console me and clear away my misunderstandings. Of course it was most ridiculous of me to take your letter so much to heart, but when I read any suggestion about our parting, it upset me so dreadfully, that I was really incapable of reasoning about anything else. Just that one word PART seemed to be written in letters of fire right across the page, to the exclusion of everything else. So then I wrote an absurd letter to my boy, and the dear came scampering right across the South of England, and arrived at midnight in the most demoralised state. It was just sweet of you to come, dear, and I shall never forget it.

I am so sorry that I have been so foolish, but you must confess, sir, that you have been just a little bit foolish also. The idea of supposing that when I love a man my love can be affected by the size of his house or the amount of his income. It makes me smile to think of it. Do you suppose a woman's happiness is affected by whether she has a breakfast-room, or a billiard-board, or a collie dog, or any of the other luxuries which you enumerated? But these things are all the merest trimmings of life. They are not the essentials. *You* and your love are the essentials. Some one who will love me with all his heart. Some one whom I can love with all my heart. Oh the difference it makes in life! How it changes everything! It glorifies and beautifies everything. I always felt that I was capable of a great love – and now I have it.

Fancy your imagining that you had come into my life in order to darken it. Why, you *are* my life. If you went out of it, what would be left? You talk about my happiness before I met you – but oh, how empty it all was! I read, and played, and sang as you say, but what a void there was! I did it to please mother, but there really seemed no very clear reason why I should continue to do it. Then you came, and everything was changed. I read because you are fond of reading and because I wanted to talk about books with you. I played because you are fond of music. I sang in the hope that it might please you. Whatever I did, you were always in my mind. I tried and tried to become a better and nobler woman, because I wanted to be worthy of the love you bore me. I have changed, and developed, and improved more in the last three months than in all my life before. And then you come and tell me that you have darkened my life. You know better now. My life has become full and rich, for Love fills my life. It is the keynote of my nature, the foundation, the motive power. It inspires me to make the most of any gift or talent that I have. How could I tell you all this if I did not know that your own feeling was as deep. I could not have given the one, great, and only love of my

life in exchange for a half-hearted affection from you. But you will never again make the mistake of supposing that any material consideration can affect our love.

And now we won't be serious any longer. Dear mother was very much astounded by your tumultuous midnight arrival, and equally precipitate departure next morning. Dear old boy, it was so nice of you! But you won't ever have horrid black humours and think miserable things any more, will you? But if you must have dark days, now is your time, for I can't possibly permit any after the 30th. – Ever your own

maude.
Woking, June 11th.

My own dearest Girlie, – How perfectly sweet you are! I read and re-read your letter, and I understand more and more how infinitely your nature is above mine. And your conception of love – how lofty and unselfish it is! How could I lower it by thinking that any worldly thing could be weighed for an instant against it! And yet it was just my jealous love for you, and my keenness that you should never be the worse through me, which led me to write in that way, so I will not blame myself too much. I am really glad that the cloud came, for the sunshine is so much brighter afterwards. And I seem to know you so much better, and to see so much more deeply into your nature. I knew that my own passion for you was the very essence of my soul – oh, how hard it is to put the extreme of emotion into the terms of human speech! – but I did not dare to hope that your feelings were as deep. I hardly ventured to tell even you how I really felt. Somehow, in these days of lawn-tennis and afternoon tea, a strong strong passion, such a passion as one reads of in books and poems, seems out of place. I thought that it would surprise, even frighten you, perhaps, if I were to tell you all that I felt. And now you have written me two letters, which contain all that I should have said if I had spoken from my heart. It is all my own inmost thought, and there is not a feeling that I do not share. O Maude, I may write lightly and speak lightly, perhaps, sometimes, but there never was a woman, never, never in all the story of the world, who was loved more passionately than you are loved by me. Come what may, while the world lasts and the breath of life is between my lips, you are the one woman to me. If we are together, I care nothing for what the future may bring. If we are not together, all the world cannot fill the void.

You say that I have given an impulse to your life: that you read more, study more, take a keener interest in everything. You could not possibly have said a thing which could have given me more pleasure than that. It is splendid! It justifies me in aspiring to you. It satisfies my conscience over everything which I have done. It must be right if that is the effect. I have felt so happy and light-hearted ever since you said it. It is rather absurd to think that *I* should improve you, but if you in your sweet frankness say that it is so, why, I can only marvel and rejoice.

But you must not study and work too hard. You say that you do it to please me, but that would not please me. I'll tell you an anecdote as a dreadful example. I had a friend who was a great lover of Eastern literature, Sanskrit, and so on. He loved a lady. The lady to please him worked hard at these subjects also. In a month she had shattered her nervous system, and will perhaps never be the same again. It was impossible. She was not meant for it, and yet she made herself a martyr over it. I don't mean by this parable that it will be a strain upon your intellect to keep up with mine. But I do mean that a woman's mind is *different* from a man's. A dainty rapier is a finer thing than a hatchet, but it is not adapted for cutting down trees all the same.

Rupton Hale, the architect, one of the few friends I have down here, has some most deplorable views about women. I played a round of the Byfleet Golf Links with him upon Wednesday afternoon, and we discussed the question of women's intellects. He would have it that they have never a light of their own, but are always the reflectors of some other light which you cannot see. He would allow that they were extraordinarily quick in assimilating another person's views, but that was all. I quoted some very shrewd remarks which a lady had made to me at dinner. 'Those are the traces of the last man,'

said he. According to his preposterous theory, you could in conversation with a woman reconstruct the last man who had made an impression to her. ‘She will reflect you upon the next person she talks to,’ said he. It was ungallant, but it was ingenious.

Dearest sweetheart, before I stop, let me tell you that if I have brought any happiness into your life, you have brought far, far more into mine. My soul seemed to come into full being upon the day when I loved you. It was so small, and cramped, and selfish, before – and life was so hard, and stupid, and purposeless. To live, to sleep, to eat, for some years, and then to die – it was so trivial and so material. But now the narrow walls seem in an instant to have fallen, and a boundless horizon stretches around me. And everything appears beautiful. London Bridge, King William Street, Abchurch Lane, the narrow stair, the office with the almanacs and the shining desks, it has all become glorified, tinged with a golden haze. I am stronger: I step out briskly and breathe more deeply. And I am a better man too. God knows there was room for it. But I do try to make an ideal, and to live up to it. I feel such a fraud when I think of being put upon a pedestal by you, when some little hole where I am out of sight is my true place. I am like the man in Browning who mourned over the spots upon his ‘speckled hide,’ but rejoiced in the swansdown of his lady. And so, my own dear sweet little swansdown lady, good-night to you, with my heart’s love now and for ever from your true lover,

Frank.

Saturday! Saturday! Saturday! oh, how I am longing for Saturday, when I shall see you again! We will go on Sunday and hear the banns together.

THE OVERTURE CONCLUDED

St. Albans, June 14th.

My dearest Frank, – What a dreadful thing it is to have your name shouted out in public! And what a voice the man had! He simply bellowed 'Maude Selby of this parish' as if he meant all this parish to know about it. And then he let you off so easily. I suppose he thought that there was no local interest in Frank Crosse of Woking. But when he looked round expectantly, after asking whether there was any known cause or just impediment why we should not be joined together, it gave me quite a thrill. I felt as if some one would jump up like a Jack-in-the-box and make a scene in the church. How relieved I was when he changed the subject! I sank my face in my hands, but I know that I was blushing all down my neck. Then I looked at you between my fingers, and there you were sitting quite cool and cheerful, as if you rather liked it. I think that we shall go to evening-service next week. Papa has given up going altogether since the new organist came. He says he cannot face the music.

What a sweet time we had together. I shall never, never forget it! O Frank, how good you are to me! And how I hope you won't regret what you are doing. It is all very well just now, when I am young and you think that I am pretty. I love that you should think so, but I am compelled to tell you that it is not really so. I can't imagine how you came to think it! I suppose it was from seeing me so often beside papa. If you saw me near Nelly Sheridan, or any other *really* pretty girl, you would at once see the difference. It just happens that you like grey eyes and brown hair, and the other things, but that does not mean that I am really pretty. I should be so sorry if there were any misunderstanding about this, and you only found out when too late. You ought to keep this letter for reference, as papa always says, and then it will be interesting to you afterwards.

I should like you to see me now – or rather I wouldn't have you see me for the world. I am so flushed and untidy, for I have been cooking. Is it not absurd, if you come to think of it, that we girls should be taught the irregular French verbs, and the geography of China, and never to cook the simplest thing? It really does seem ridiculous.

But it is never too late to mend, so I went into the kitchen this morning and made a tart. You can't imagine what a lot of things one needs even for such a simple thing as that. I thought cook was joking when she put them all down in front of me. It was like a conjurer giving his performance. There was an empty bowl, and a bowl full of sliced apples, and a big board, and a rolling-pin, and eggs, and butter, and sugar, and cloves, and of course flour. We broke eggs and put them into a bowl – you can't think what a mess an egg makes when it misses the bowl. Then we stirred them up with flour and butter and things. I stirred until I was perfectly exhausted. No wonder a cook has usually a great thick arm. Then when it had formed a paste, we rolled it out, and put the apples in the dish, and roofed it in, and trimmed the edges, and stuck flat leaves made of paste all over it, and the dearest little crown in the middle. Then we put it into the oven until it was brown. It looked a very nice tart, and mamma said that I had made it very solidly. It certainly did feel very heavy for its size. Mamma would not taste it, because she said that she thought Dr. Tristram would not approve of her doing so, but I had a piece, and really it was not so bad. Mamma said the servants might have it at dinner, but the servants said that the poor window-cleaner had a large family, and so we gave it to him. It is so sweet to feel that one is of any use to any one.

What do you think happened this morning? Two wedding-presents arrived. The first was a very nice fish slice and fork in a case. It was from dear old Mrs. Jones Beyrick, on whom we really had no claim whatever. We all think it so kind of her, and such a nice fish-slice. The other was a beautiful travelling-bag from Uncle Arthur. Stamped in gold upon it were the letters M.C., I said, 'Oh, what a pity! They have put the wrong initials.' That made mamma laugh. I suppose one soon gets used to it. Fancy how you would feel if it were the other way about, and you changed your name to mine.

They might call you Selby, but you would continue to feel Crosse. I didn't mean that for a joke, but women make jokes without intending it. The other day the curate drove up in his donkey-cart, and mother said, 'Oh, what a nice tandem!' I think that she meant to say 'turn-out'; but papa said it was the neatest thing he had heard for a long time, so mamma is very pleased, but I am sure that she does not know even now why it should be so funny.

What stupid letters I write! Doesn't it frighten you when you read them and think that is the person with whom I have to spend my life. Yet you never seem alarmed about it. I think it is so *brave* of you. That reminds me that I never finished what I wanted to say at the beginning of this letter. Even supposing that I am pretty (and my complexion sometimes is simply awful), you must bear in mind how quickly the years slip by, and how soon a woman alters. Why, we shall hardly be married before you will find me full of wrinkles, and without a tooth in my head. Poor boy, how dreadful for you! Men seem to change so little and so slowly. Besides, it does not matter for them, for nobody marries a man because he is pretty. But you must marry me, Frank, not for what I look but for what I am – for my inmost, inmost self, so that if I had no body at all, you would love me just the same. That is how I love you, but I do prefer you with your body on all the same. I don't know how I love you, dear. I only know that I am in a dream when you are near me – just a beautiful dream. I live for those moments. – Ever your own little

Maude.

P.S.– Papa gave us such a fright, for he came in just now and said that the window-cleaner and all his family were very ill. This was a joke, because the coachman had told him about my tart. Wasn't it horrid of him?

Woking, June 17th.

My own sweetest Maude, – I do want you to come up to town on Saturday morning. Then I will see you home to St. Albans in the evening, and we shall have another dear delightful week end. I think of nothing else, and I count the hours. Now please to manage it, and don't let anything stop you. You know that you can always get your way. Oh yes, you can, miss! *I* know.

We shall meet at the bookstall at Charing Cross railway station at one o'clock, but if anything should go wrong, send me a wire to the Club. Then we can do some shopping together, and have some fun also. Tell your mother that we shall be back in plenty of time for dinner. Make another tart, and I shall eat it. Things are slack at the office just now, and I could be spared for a few days.

So you have had a fish-slice. It is so strange, because on that very day I had my first present, and it was a fish-slice also. We shall have fish at each end when we give a dinner. If we get another fish-slice, then we shall give a fish-dinner – or keep one of the slices to give to your friend Nelly Sheridan when *she* gets married. They will always come in useful. And I have had two more presents. One is a Tantalus spirit-stand from my friends in the office. The other is a pair of bronzes from the cricket club. They got it up without my knowing anything about it, and I was amazed when a deputation came up to my rooms with them last night. 'May your innings be long and your partnership unbroken until you each make a hundred not out.' That was the inscription upon a card.

I have something very grave to tell you. I've been going over my bills and things, and I owe ever so much more than I thought. I have always been so careless, and never known exactly how I stood. It did not matter when one was a bachelor, for one always felt that one could live quite simply for a few months, and so set matters straight. But now it is more serious. The bills come to more than a hundred pounds; the biggest one is forty-two pounds to Snell and Walker, the Conduit Street tailors. However, I am ordering my marriage-suit from them, and that will keep them quiet. I have enough on hand to pay most of the others. But we must not run short upon our honeymoon – what an awful idea! Perhaps there may be some cheques among our presents. We will hope for the best.

But there is a more serious thing upon which I want to consult you. You asked me never to have any secrets from you, or else I should not bother you about such things. I should have kept it

for Saturday when we meet, but I want you to have time to think about it, so that we may come to some decision then.

I am surety to a man for an indefinite sum of money. It sounds rather dreadful, does it not? But it is not so bad as it sounds, for there is no harm done yet. But the question is what we should do in the future about it, and the answer is not a very easy one. He is a very pleasant fellow, an insurance agent, and he got into some trouble about his accounts last year. The office would have dismissed him, but as I knew his wife and his family, I became surety that he should not go wrong again, and so I saved him from losing his situation. His name is Farintosh. He is one of those amiable, weak, good fellows whom you cannot help loving, although you never can trust them. Of course we could give notice that we should not be responsible any longer, but it would be a thunderbolt to this poor family, and the man would certainly be ruined. We don't want to begin our own happiness by making any one else unhappy, do we? But we shall talk it over, and I shall do what you advise. You understand that we are only liable in case he defaults, and surely it is very unlikely that he will do so after the lesson that he has already had.

I think the house will do splendidly. The Lindens is the name, and it is on the Maybury Road, not more than a quarter of a mile from the station. If your mother and you could come down on Tuesday or Wednesday, I should get a half-day off, and you would be able to inspect it. Such a nice little lawn in front, and garden behind. A conservatory, if you please, dining-room and drawing-room. You can never assemble more than four or five guests. On your at-home days, we shall put up little placards as they do outside the theatres, 'Drawing-room full,' 'Dining-room full,' 'Room in the Conservatory.' There are two good bedrooms, one large maid's room, and a lumber-room. One cook and one housemaid could run it beautifully. Rent £50 on a three years' lease – with taxes, about £62. I think it was just built for us. Rupton Hale says that we must be careful not to brush against the walls, and that it would be safer to go outside to sneeze – but that is only his fun.

What a dull, stupid letter! I do hope that I shall be in good form on Saturday. I am a man of moods – worse luck! and they come quite regardless of how I wish to be, or even of how I have cause to be. I do hope that I shall make your day bright for you – the last day that we shall have together before *the* day. There have been times when I have been such bad company to you, just when I wished to be at my best. But you are always so sweet and patient and soothing. Until Saturday, then, my own darling. – Ever your lover,

Frank.

P.S.– I open this to tell you that such a gorgeous fish-knife, with our monograms upon it, has just arrived from Mrs. Preston, my father's old friend. I went to the Goldsmith's Company in Regent Street yesterday afternoon, and I bought – what do you think? It looks so beautiful upon its snow-white cotton wadding. I like them very broad and rather flat. I do hope you will think it all right. It fills me with the strangest feelings when I look at it. Come what may, foul weather or fair, sorrow or joy, that little strip of gold will still be with us – we shall see it until we can see no more.

P.P.S.– Saturday! Saturday!! Saturday!!!

THE TWO SOLOS

Their tryst was at the Charing Cross bookstall at one o'clock, and so Mr. Frank Crosse was there at quarter-past twelve, striding impatiently up and down, and stopping dead whenever a woman emerged from the entrance, like a pointer dog before a partridge. Before he came he had been haunted by the idea that possibly Maude might have an impulse to come early – and what if she were to arrive and not find him there! Every second of her company was so dear to him, that when driving to meet her he had sometimes changed from one cab to another upon the way, because the second seemed to have the faster horse. But now that he was on the ground he realised that she was very exact to her word, and that she would neither be early nor late. And yet, in the illogical fashion of a lover, he soon forgot that it was he who was too soon, and he chafed and chafed as the minutes passed, until at about quarter to one he was striding gloomily about with despondent features and melancholy forebodings, imagining a thousand miserable reasons for her inexplicable delay. A good many people stared at him as they passed, and we may do so among the number.

In person Frank Crosse was neither tall nor short, five feet eight and a half to be exact, with the well-knit frame and springy step of a young man who had been an athlete from his boyhood. He was slim, but wiry, and carried his head with a half-defiant backward slant which told of pluck and breed. His face was tanned brown, in spite of his City hours, but his hair and slight moustache were flaxen, and his eyes, which were his best features, were of a delicate blue, and could vary in expression from something very tender to something particularly hard. He was an orphan, and had inherited nothing from his parents save a dash of the artist from his mother. It was not enough to help him to earn a living, but it transformed itself into a keen appreciation and some ambitions in literature, and it gave a light and shade to his character which made him rather complex, and therefore interesting. His best friends could not deny the shade, and yet it was but the shadow thrown by the light. Strength, virility, emotional force, power of deep feeling – these are traits which have to be paid for. There was sometimes just a touch of the savage, or at least there were indications of the possibility of a touch of the savage, in Frank Crosse. His intense love of the open air and of physical exercise was a sign of it. He left upon women the impression, not altogether unwelcome, that there were unexplored recesses of his nature to which the most intimate of them had never penetrated. In those dark corners of the spirit either a saint or a sinner might be lurking, and there was a pleasurable excitement in peering into them, and wondering which it was. No woman ever found him dull. Perhaps it would have been better for him if they had, for his impulsive nature had never been long content with a chilly friendship. He was, as we may see, a man with a past, but it *was* a past, now that Maude Selby had come like an angel of light across the shadowed path of his life. In age he was nearly twenty-seven.

There are one or two things which might be said for him which he would not have said for himself. He was an only child and an orphan, but he had adopted his grandparents, who had been left penniless through his father's death, and through all his struggles he had managed to keep them happy and comfortable in a little cottage in Worcestershire. Nor did he ever tell them that he had a struggle – fearing lest it should make their position painful; and so when their quarterly cheque arrived, they took it as a kindly but not remarkable act of duty upon the part of their wealthy grandson in the City, with no suspicion as to the difference which their allowance was making to him. Nor did he himself look upon his action as a virtuous one, but simply as a thing which must obviously be done. In the meantime, he had stuck closely to his work, had won rapid promotion in the Insurance Office in which he had started as junior clerk, had gained the goodwill of his superiors through his frank, unaffected ways, and had been asked to play for the second Surrey eleven at cricket. So without going the length of saying that he was worthy of Maude Selby, one might perhaps claim – if it could be done without endangering that natural modesty which was one of his charms – that he was as worthy as any other young man who was available.

That unfortunate artistic soul of his, which had been in the tropics of expectation, and was now in the arctic of reaction, had just finally settled down to black despair, with a grim recognition of the fact that Maude had certainly and absolutely given him up, when one boomed from the station clock, and on the very stroke she hurried on to the platform. How could he have strained his eyes after other women, as if a second glance were ever needed when it was really she! The perfectly graceful figure, the trimness and neatness of it, the beautiful womanly poise of the head, the quick elastic step, he could have sworn to her among ten thousand. His heart gave a bound at the sight of her, but he had the English aversion to giving himself away, and so he walked quickly forward to meet her with an impassive face, but with a look in his eyes which was all that she wanted.

'How are you?'

'How do you do?'

He stood for a few moments looking at her in silence. She had on the dress which he loved so much, a silver-grey merino skirt and jacket, with a blouse of white pongee silk showing in front. Some lighter coloured trimming fringed the cloth. She wore a grey toque, with a dash of white at the side, and a white veil which softened without concealing the dark brown curls and fresh girlish face beneath it. Her gloves were of grey suède, and the two little pointed tan shoes peeping from the edge of her skirt were the only touches of a darker tint in her attire. Crosse had the hereditary artist's eye, and he could only stand and stare and enjoy it. He was filled with admiration, with reverence, and with wonder that this perfect thing should really proclaim itself to be all his own. Whatever had he done, or could he do, to deserve it?

She looked up at him in a roguish sidelong way, with the bright mischievous smile which was one of her charms.

'Well, sir, do you approve?'

'By Jove, it is splendid – beautiful!'

'So glad! I hoped you would, since you are so fond of greys. Besides, it is cooler in this weather. I hope you have not been waiting.'

'Oh no, that's all right.'

'You looked so solemn when first I saw you.'

'Did I?'

'And then you just jumped.'

'Did I? I'm sorry.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I like our feelings to be our very very own, and never to show them to any one else at all. I dare say it is absurd, but that is my instinct.'

'Never mind, dear, it wasn't such a big jump as all that. Where are we going?'

'Come here, Maude, into the waiting-room.'

She followed him into the gloomy, smoky, dingy room. Bare yellow benches framed an empty square of brown linoleum. A labouring man with his wife and a child sat waiting with the stolid patience of the poor in one corner. They were starting on some Saturday afternoon excursion, and had mistimed their train. Maude Selby and Frank Crosse took the other corner. He drew a jeweller's box from his pocket and removed the lid. Something sparkled among the wadding.

'O Frank! Is that really it?'

'Do you like it?'

'What a broad one it is! Mother's is quite thin.'

'They wear thin in time.'

'It is beautiful. Shall I try it on?'

'No, don't. There is some superstition about it.'

'But suppose it won't fit?'

'That is quite safe. I measured it with your sapphire ring.'

'I haven't half scolded you enough about that sapphire ring. How could you go and give twenty-two guineas for a ring? – oh yes, sir, that was the price, for I saw a duplicate yesterday in the Goldsmith's Company. You dear extravagant old boy!'

'I had saved the money.'

'But not for that!'

'For nothing half or quarter as important. But I had the other to the same size, so it is sure to fit.'

Maude had pushed up her veil, and sat with the little golden circlet in her hand, looking down at it, while the dim watery London sunlight poured through the window, and tagged all her wandering curls with a coppery gleam. It was a face beautiful in itself, but more beautiful for its expression – sensitive, refined, womanly, full of innocent archness and girlish mischief, but with a depth of expression in the eyes, and a tender delicacy about the mouth, which spoke of a great spirit with all its capacities for suffering and devotion within. The gross admirer of merely physical charms might have passed her over unnoticed. So might the man who is attracted only by outward and obvious signs of character. But to the man who could see, to the man whose own soul had enough of spirituality to respond to hers, and whose eye could appreciate the subtlety of a beauty which is of the mind as well as of the body, there was not in all wide London upon that midsummer day a sweeter girl than Maude Selby, as she sat in her grey merino dress with the London sun tagging her brown curls with that coppery glimmer.

She handed back the ring, and a graver expression passed over her mobile face.

'I feel as you said in your letter, Frank. There *is* something tragic in it. It will be with me for ever. All the future will arrange itself round that little ring.'

'Are you afraid of it?'

'Afraid!' her grey glove rested for an instant upon the back of his hand. 'I *couldn't* be afraid of anything if you were with me. It is really extraordinary, for by nature I am so easily frightened. But if I were with you in a railway accident or anywhere, it would be just the same. You see I become for the time part of you, as it were, and you are brave enough for two.'

'I don't profess to be so brave as all that,' said Frank. 'I expect I have as many nerves as my neighbours.'

Maude's grey toque nodded up and down. 'I know all about that,' said she.

'You have such a false idea of me. It makes me happy at the time and miserable afterwards, for I feel such a rank impostor. You imagine me to be a hero, and a genius, and all sorts of things, while I *know* that I am about as ordinary a young fellow as walks the streets of London, and no more worthy of you than – well, than any one else is.'

She laughed with shining eyes.

'I like to hear you talk like that,' said she. 'That is just what is so beautiful about you.'

It is hopeless to prove that you are not a hero when your disclaimers are themselves taken as a proof of heroism. Frank shrugged his shoulders.

'I only hope you'll find me out gradually and not suddenly,' said he. 'Now, Maude, we have all day and all London before us. What shall we do? I want you to choose.'

'I am quite happy whatever we do. I am content to sit here with you until evening.'

Her idea of a happy holiday set them both laughing.

'Come along,' said he, 'we shall discuss it as we go.'

The workman's family was still waiting, and Maude handed the child a shilling as she went out. She was so happy herself that she wanted every one else to be happy also. The people turned to look at her as she passed. With the slight flush upon her cheeks and the light in her eyes, she seemed the personification of youth, and life, and love. One tall old gentleman started as he looked, and watched her with a rapt face until she disappeared. Some cheek had flushed and some eye had brightened at his words once, and sweet old days had for an instant lived again.

'Shall we have a cab?'

‘O Frank, we must learn to be economical. Let us walk.’

‘I can’t and won’t be economical to-day.’

‘There now! See what a bad influence I have upon you.’

‘Most demoralising! But we have not settled yet where we are to go to.’

‘What *does* it matter, if we are together?’

‘There is a good match at the Oval, the Australians against Surrey. Would you care to see that?’

‘Yes, dear, if you would.’

‘And there are matinées at all the theatres.’

‘You would rather be in the open air.’

‘All I want is that you should enjoy yourself.’

‘Never fear. I shall do that.’

‘Well, then, first of all I vote that we go and have some lunch.’

They started across the station yard, and passed the beautiful old stone cross. Among the hansoms and the four-wheelers, the hurrying travellers, and the lounging cabmen, there rose that lovely reconstruction of mediævalism, the pious memorial of a great Plantagenet king to his beloved wife.

‘Six hundred years ago,’ said Frank, as they paused and looked up, ‘that old stone cross was completed, with heralds and armoured knights around it to honour her whose memory was honoured by the king. Now the corduroyed porters stand where the knights stood, and the engines whistle where the heralds trumpeted, but the old cross is the same as ever in the same old place. It is a little thing of that sort which makes one realise the unbroken history of our country.’

Maude insisted upon hearing about Queen Eleanor, and Frank imparted the little that he knew as they walked out into the crowded Strand.

‘She was Edward the First’s wife, and a splendid woman. It was she, you remember, who sucked the wound when he was stabbed with a poisoned dagger. She died somewhere in the north, and he had the body carried south to bury it in Westminster Abbey. Wherever it rested for a night he built a cross, and so you have a line of crosses all down England to show where that sad journey was broken.’

They had turned down Whitehall, and passed the big cuirassiers upon their black chargers at the gate of the Horse Guards. Frank pointed to one of the windows of the old banqueting-hall.

‘You’ve seen a memorial of a queen of England,’ said he. ‘That window is the memorial of a king.’

‘Why so, Frank?’

‘I believe that it was through that window that Charles the First passed out to the scaffold when his head was cut off. It was the first time that the people had ever shown that they claimed authority over their king.’

‘Poor fellow!’ said Maude. ‘He was so handsome, and such a good husband and father.’

‘It is the good kings who may be the dangerous ones.’

‘O Frank!’

‘If a king thinks only of pleasure, then he does not interfere with matters of state. But if he is conscientious, he tries to do what he imagines to be his duty, and so he causes trouble. Look at Charles, for example. He was a very good man, and yet he caused a civil war. George the Third was a most exemplary character, but his stupidity lost us America, and nearly lost us Ireland. They were each succeeded by thoroughly bad men, who did far less harm.’

They had reached the end of Whitehall, and the splendid panorama of Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament lay before them. The most stately of ancient English buildings was contrasted with the most beautiful of modern ones. How anything so graceful came to be built by this tasteless and utilitarian nation must remain a marvel to the traveller. The sun was shining upon the gold-work of the roof, and the grand towers sprang up amid the light London haze, like some

gorgeous palace in a dream. It was a fit centre for the rule to whose mild sway one-fifth of the human race acquiesces – a rule upheld by so small a force that only the consent of the governed can sustain it.

Frank and Maude stood together looking up at it.

'How beautiful it is!' she cried. 'How the gilding lights up the whole building!'

'And how absurd it is not to employ it more in our gloomy London architecture!' said Frank. 'Imagine how grand a gilded dome of St. Paul's would look, hanging like a rising sun over the City. But here is our restaurant, Maude, and Big Ben says that it is a quarter to two.

IN BRITAIN'S VALHALLA

They had discussed the rooms in their new house, and the bridesmaids' dresses, and Maude's cooking, and marriage-presents, and the merits of Brighton, and the nature of love, and volleying at tennis (Maude was the lady-champion of a tennis club), and season tickets, and the destiny of the universe – to say nothing of a small bottle of Perrier Jouet. It was reprehensibly extravagant, but this would be their last unmarried excursion, and so they drank to the dear days of the past, and the dearer ones of the future. Good comrades as well as lovers, they talked freely, and with pleasure. Frank never made the common mistake of talking down, and Maude justified his confidence by eagerly keeping up. To both of them silence was preferable to conventional small talk.

'We'll just get down there after lunch,' said Frank, as he paid his bill. 'You have not seen the Australians, have you?'

'Yes, dear, I saw them at Clifton four years ago.'

'But this is a new lot. There are nine of the present team who have never played in England before.'

'They are very good, are they not?'

'Very good indeed. And the dry summer has helped them. It is the sticky English wickets which put them off. The wickets are very fast over there. Giffen is their best all-round man, but Darling and Iredale and young Hill are good enough for anything. Well, then – O Lord, what a pity!'

He had turned towards the window as he rose, and saw one of those little surprises by which Nature relieves the monotony of life in these islands. The sun had gone, a ragged slate-coloured cloud was drifting up from over the river, and the rain was falling with a soft persistency which is more fatal than the most boisterous shower. There would be no more cricket that day.

'Two coffees and two benedictines,' cried Frank, and they relapsed into their chairs. But a half-hour passed and the grey cloud was thicker and the rain more heavy. The cheerless leaden river flowed slowly under drifting skies. Beyond an expanse of shining pavement the great black Abbey towered amidst the storm.

'Have you ever done the Abbey, Maude?'

'No, Frank; I should love to.'

'I have only been once – more shame to me to say so! Is it not a sin that we young Englishmen should be familiar with every music-hall in London and should know so little of this which is the centre of the British race, the most august and tremendous monument that ever a nation owned. Six hundred years ago the English looked upon it as their holiest and most national shrine, and since then our kings and our warriors and our thinkers and our poets have all been laid there, until there is such an accumulation that the huge Abbey has hardly space for another monument. Let us spend an hour inside it.'

They made for Solomon's porch, since it was the nearest and they had but the one umbrella. Under its shelter they brushed themselves dry before they entered.

'Whom does the Abbey belong to, Frank?'

'To you and me!'

'Now you are joking!'

'Not at all. It belongs in the long-run to the British taxpayer. You have heard the story of the Scotch visitor who came on board one of our battleships and asked to see the captain. "Who shall I say?" said the sentry. "One of the proprietors," said the Scotchman. That's *our* position towards the Abbey. Let us inspect our property.'

They were smiling as they entered, but the smile faded from their lips as the door closed behind them. In this holy of holies, this inner sanctuary of the race, there was a sense of serene and dignified solemnity which would have imposed itself upon the most thoughtless. Frank and Maude stood in

mute reverence. The high arches shot up in long rows upon either side of them, straight and slim as beautiful trees, until they curved off far up near the clerestory and joined their sister curves to form the lightest, most delicate tracery of stone. In front of them a great rose-window of stained glass, splendid with rich purples and crimsons, shone through a subdued and reverent gloom. Here and there in the aisles a few spectators moved among the shadows, but all round along the walls two and three deep were ranged the illustrious dead, the perishable body within, the lasting marble without, and the more lasting name beneath. It was very silent in the home of the great dead – only a distant footfall or a subdued murmur here and there. Maude knelt down and sank her face in her hands. Frank prayed also with that prayer which is a feeling rather than an utterance.

Then they began to move round the short transept in which they found themselves – a part of the Abbey reserved for the great statesmen. Frank tried to quote the passage in which Macaulay talks about the men worn out by the stress and struggle of the neighbouring parliament-hall, and coming hither for peace and rest. Here were the men who had been strong enough to grasp the helm, and who, sometimes wisely, sometimes foolishly, but always honestly, had tried to keep the old ship before the wind. Canning and Peel were there, with Pitt, Fox, Grattan and Beaconsfield. Governments and oppositions moulder behind the walls. Beaconsfield alone among all the statues showed the hard-lined face of the self-made man. These others look so plump and smooth one can hardly realise how strong they were, but they sprang from those ruling castes to whom strength came by easy inheritance. Frank told Maude the little which he knew of each of them – of Grattan, the noblest Irishman of them all, of Castlereagh, whose coffin was pursued to the gates of the Abbey by a raging mob who wished to tear out his corpse, of Fox the libertine philosopher, of Palmerston the gallant sportsman, who rode long after he could walk. They marvelled together at the realism of the sculptor who had pitted Admiral Warren with the smallpox, and at the absurdity of that other one who had clad Robert Peel in a Roman toga.

Then turning to the right at the end of the Statesmen's Transept, they wandered aimlessly down the huge nave. It was overwhelming, the grandeur of the roof above and of the contents below. Any one of hundreds of these tombs was worth a devout pilgrimage, but how could one raise his soul to the appreciation of them all. Here was Darwin who revolutionised zoology, and here was Isaac Newton who gave a new direction to astronomy. Here were old Ben Jonson, and Stephenson the father of railways, and Livingstone of Africa, and Wordsworth, and Kingsley, and Arnold. Here were the soldiers of the mutiny – Clyde and Outram and Lawrence, – and painters, and authors, and surgeons, and all the good sons who in their several degrees had done loyal service to the old mother. And when their service was done the old mother had stretched out that long arm of hers and had brought them home, and always for every good son brought home she had sent another forth, and her loins were ever fruitful, and her children loving and true. Go into the Abbey and think, and as the nation's past is borne in upon you, you will have no fear for its future.

Frank was delighted with some of the monuments and horrified by others, and he communicated both his joy and his anger to Maude. They noticed together how the moderns and the Elizabethans had much in common in their types of face, their way of wearing the hair, and their taste in monuments, while between them lie the intolerable affectations – which culminated towards the end of last century.

'It all rings false – statue, inscription, everything,' said Frank. 'These insufferable allegorical groups sprawling round a dead hero are of the same class as the pompous and turgid prose of Doctor Johnson. The greatest effects are the simplest effects, and so it always was and so it always will be. But that little bit of Latin is effective, I confess.'

It was a very much defaced inscription underneath a battered Elizabethan effigy, whose feet had been knocked off, and whose features were blurred into nothing. Two words of the inscription had caught Frank's eye.

'*Moestissima uxor*! It was his "most sad wife" who erected it! Look at it now! The poor battered monument of a woman's love. Now, Maude, come with me, and we shall visit the famous Poets' Corner.'

What an assembly it would be if at some supreme day each man might stand forth from the portals of his tomb. Tennyson, the last and almost the greatest of that illustrious line, lay under the white slab upon the floor. Maude and Frank stood reverently beside it.

'"Sunset and evening Star

And one clear call for me."'

Frank quoted. 'What lines for a very old man to write! I should put him second only to Shakespeare had I the marshalling of them.'

'I have read so little,' said Maude.

'We will read it all together after next week. But it makes your reading so much more real and intimate when you have stood at the grave of the man who wrote. That's Chaucer, the big tomb there. He is the father of British poetry. Here is Browning beside Tennyson – united in life and in death. He was the more profound thinker, but music and form are essential also.'

'What a splendid face!' cried Maude.

'It is a bust to Longfellow, the American.' They read the inscription. 'This bust was placed among the memorials of the poets of England by English admirers of an American poet.'

'I am so glad to have seen that. I know his poems so well,' said Maude.

'I believe he is more read than any poet in England.'

'Who is that standing figure?'

'It is Dryden. What a clever face, and what a modern type. Here is Walter Scott beside the door. How kindly and humorous his expression was! And see how high his head was from the ear to the crown. It was a great brain. There is Burns, the other famous Scot. Don't you think there is a resemblance between the faces? And here are Dickens, and Thackeray, and Macaulay. I wonder whether, when Macaulay was writing his essays, he had a premonition that he would be buried in Westminster Abbey. He is continually alluding to the Abbey and its graves. I always think that we have a vague intuition as to what will occur to us in life.'

'We can guess what is probable.'

'It amounts to more than that. I had an intuition that I should marry you from the first day that I saw you, and yet it did not seem probable. But deep down in my soul I knew that I should marry you.'

'I knew that I should marry you, Frank, or else that I should never marry at all.'

'There now! We both had it. Well, that *is* really wonderful!'

They stood among the memorials of all those great people, marvelling at the mysteries of their own small lives. A voice at their elbows brought them back to the present.

'This way, if you please, for the kings,' said the voice. 'They are now starting for the kings.'

'They' proved to be a curiously mixed little group of people who were waiting at the entrance through the enclosure for the arrival of the official guide. There were a tall red-bearded man with a very Scotch accent and a small gentle wife, also an American father with his two bright and enthusiastic daughters, a petty-officer of the navy in his uniform, two young men whose attention was cruelly distracted from the monuments by the American girls, and a dozen other travellers of various sexes and ages. Just as Maude and Frank joined them the guide, a young fresh-faced fellow, came striding up, and they passed through the opening into the royal burying-ground.

'This way, ladies and gentlemen,' cried the hurrying guide, and they all clattered over the stone pavement. He stopped beside a tomb upon which a lady with a sad worn face was lying. 'Mary, Queen of Scots,' said he, 'the greatest beauty of her day. This monument was erected by her son, James the First.'

'Isn't she just perfectly sweet?' said one of the American girls.

'Well, I don't know. I expected more of her than that,' the other answered.

'I reckon,' remarked the father, 'that if any one went through as much as that lady did, it would not tend to improve her beauty. Now what age might the lady be, sir?'

'Forty-four years of age at the time of her execution,' said the guide.

'Ah weel, she's young for her years,' muttered the Scotchman, and the party moved on. Frank and Maude lingered to have a further look at the unfortunate princess, the bright French butterfly, who wandered from the light and warmth into that grim country, a land of blood and of psalms.

'She was as hard as nails under all her gentle grace,' said Frank. 'She rode eighty miles and hardly drew rein after the battle of Langside.'

'She looks as if she were tired, poor dear!' said Maude; 'I don't think that she was sorry to be at rest.'

The guide was narrating the names of the owners of the tombs at the further end of the chapel. 'Queen Anne is here, and Mary the wife of William the Third is beside her. And here is William himself. The king was very short and the queen very tall, so in the sculptures the king is depicted standing upon a stool so as to bring their heads level. In the vaults beyond there are thirty-eight Stuarts.'

Thirty-eight Stuarts! Princes, bishops, generals, once the salt of the earth, the mightiest of men, and now lumped carelessly together as thirty-eight Stuarts. So Death the Republican and Time the Radical can drag down the highest from his throne.

They had followed the guide into another small chapel, which bore the name of Henry VII. upon the door. Surely they were great builders and great designers in those days! Had stone been as pliable as wax it could not have been twisted and curved into more exquisite spirals and curls, so light, so delicate, so beautiful, twining and turning along the walls, and drooping from the ceiling. Never did the hand of man construct anything more elaborately ornate, nor the brain of man think out a design more absolutely harmonious and lovely. In the centre, with all the pomp of mediæval heraldry, starred and spangled with the Tudor badges, the two bronze figures of Henry and his wife lay side by side upon their tomb. The guide read out the quaint directions in the king's will, by which they were to be buried 'with some respect to their Royal dignity, but avoiding damnable pomp and outrageous superfluities!' There was, as Frank remarked, a fine touch of the hot Tudor blood in the adjectives. One could guess where Henry the Eighth got his masterful temper. Yet it was an ascetic and priest-like face which looked upwards from the tomb.

They passed the rifled tombs of Cromwell, Blake, and Ireton – the despicable revenge of the men who did not dare to face them in the field, – and they marked the grave of James the First, who erected no monument to himself, and so justified in death the reputation for philosophy which he had aimed at in his life. Then they inspected the great tomb of Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, as surprising and as magnificent as his history, cast a glance at the covering of plucky little George the Second, the last English king to lead his own army into battle, and so onwards to see the corner of the Innocents, where rest the slender bones of the poor children murdered in the Tower.

But now the guide had collected his little flock around him again, with the air of one who has something which is not to be missed. 'You will stand upon the step to see the profile,' said he, as he indicated a female figure upon a tomb. 'It is the great Queen Elizabeth.'

It was a profile and a face worth seeing – the face of a queen who was worthy of her Shakespeares upon the land and her Drakes upon the sea. Had the Spanish king seen her, he would have understood that she was not safe to attack – this grim old lady with the eagle nose and the iron lips. You could understand her grip upon her cash-box, you could explain her harshness to her lovers, you could realise the confidence of her people, you could read it all in that wonderful face.

'She's splendid,' said Frank.

'She's terrible,' said Maude.

'Did I understand you to say, sir,' asked the American, 'that it was this lady who beheaded the other lady, Queen of Scotland, whom we saw 'way back in the other compartment?'

'Yes, sir, she did.'

‘Well, I guess if there was any beheading to be done, this was the lady to see that it was put through with promptness and despatch. Not a married lady, I gather?’

‘No, sir.’

‘And a fortunate thing for somebody. That woman’s husband would have a mean time of it, sir, in my opinion.’

‘Hush, poppa,’ said the two daughters, and the procession moved on. They were entering the inner chapel of all, the oldest and the holiest, in which, amid the ancient Plantagenet kings, there lies that one old Saxon monarch, confessor and saint, the holy Edward, round whose honoured body the whole of this great shrine has gradually risen. A singular erection once covered with mosaic work, but now bare and gaunt, stood in the centre.

‘The body of Edward the Confessor is in a case up at the top,’ said the guide. ‘This hollow place below was filled with precious relics, and the pilgrims used to kneel in these niches, which are just large enough to hold a man upon his knees. The mosaic work has been picked out by the pilgrims.’

‘What is the date of the shrine?’ asked Frank.

‘About 1250, sir. The early kings were all buried as near to it as they could get, for it was their belief in those days that the devil might carry off the body, and so the nearer they got to the shrine the safer they felt. Henry the Fifth, who won the battle of Agincourt, is there. Those are the actual helmet, shield, and saddle which he used in the battle upon the crossbeam yonder. That king with the grave face and the beard is Edward the Third, the father of the Black Prince. The Black Prince never lived to ascend the throne, but he was the father of the unfortunate Richard the Second, who lies here – this clean-shaven king with the sharp features. Now, ladies and gentlemen, if you will turn this way, I will show you one of the most remarkable objects in the Abbey.’

The object in question proved to be nothing more singular than a square block of stone placed under an old chair. And yet as the guide continued to speak, they felt that he had justified his words.

‘This is the sacred stone of Scone upon which the kings of Scotland have been crowned from time immemorial. When Edward the First overran Scotland 600 years ago, he had it brought here, and since then every monarch of England has also sat upon it when crowned.’

‘The present Queen?’ asked some one.

‘Yes, she also. The legend was that it was the stone upon which Jacob rested his head when he dreamed, but the geologists have proved that it is red sandstone of Scotland.’

‘Then I understand, sir, that this other throne is the Scottish throne,’ said the American gentleman.

‘No, sir, the Scottish throne and the English throne are the same throne. But at the time of William and Mary it was necessary to crown her as well as him, and so a second throne was needed. But that of course was modern.’

‘Only a couple of hundred years ago. I wonder they let it in. But I guess they might have taken better care of it. Some one has carved his name upon it.’

‘A Westminster boy bet his schoolfellows that he would sleep among the tombs, and to prove that he had done it, he carved his name upon the throne.’

‘You don’t say!’ cried the American. ‘Well, I guess that boy ended pretty high up.’

‘As high as the gallows, perhaps,’ said Frank, and every one tittered, but the guide hurried on with a grave face, for the dignity of the Abbey was in his keeping.

‘This tomb is that of Queen Eleanor,’ said he.

Frank twitched Maude by the sleeve. ‘Eleanor of Charing Cross,’ said he. ‘See how one little bit of knowledge links on with another.’

‘And here is the tomb of her husband, Edward the First. It was he who brought the stone from Scone. At the time of his death the conquest of Scotland was nearly done, and he gave orders that his burial should be merely temporary until Scotland was thoroughly subdued. He is still, as you perceive, in his temporary tomb.’

The big Scotchman laughed loudly and derisively. All the others looked sadly at him with the pitying gaze which the English use towards the more excitable races when their emotion gets the better of them. A stream from a garden hose could not have damped him more.

'They opened the grave last century,' said the guide. 'Inside was an inscription, which said, "Here lies the hammer of the Scots." He was a fine man, six feet two inches from crown to sole.'

They wandered out of the old shrine where the great Plantagenet kings lie like a bodyguard round the Saxon saint. Abbots lay on one side of them as they passed, and dead crusaders with their legs crossed, upon the other. And then, in an instant, they were back in comparatively modern times again.

'This is the tomb of Wolfe, who died upon the Heights of Abraham,' said the guide. 'It was due to him and to his soldiers that all America belongs to the English-speaking races. There is a picture of his Highlanders going up to the battle along the winding path which leads from Wolfe's Cove. He died in the moment of victory.'

It was bewildering, the way in which they skipped from age to age. The history of England appeared to be not merely continuous, but simultaneous, as they turned in an instant from the Georgian to the Elizabethan, the one monument as well preserved as the other. They passed the stately de Vere, his armour all laid out in fragments upon a marble slab, as a proof that he died at peace with all men; and they saw the terrible statue of the onslaught of Death, which, viewed in the moonlight, made a midnight robber drop his booty and fly panic-stricken out of the Abbey. So awful and yet so fascinating is it, that the shuffling feet of the party of sightseers had passed out of hearing before Maude and Frank could force themselves away from it.

In the base of the statue is an iron door, which has been thrown open, and the sculptor's art has succeeded wonderfully in convincing you that it has been thrown open violently. The two leaves of it seem still to quiver with the shock, and one could imagine that one heard the harsh clang of the metal. Out of the black opening had sprung a dreadful thing, something muffled in a winding-sheet, one bony hand clutching the edge of the pedestal, the other upraised to hurl a dart at the woman above him. She, a young bride of twenty-seven, has fallen fainting, while her husband, with horror in his face, is springing forward, his hand outstretched, to get between his wife and her loathsome assailant.

'I shall dream of this,' said Maude. She had turned pale, as many a woman has before this monument.

'It is awful!' Frank walked backwards, unable to take his eyes from it. 'What pluck that sculptor had! It is an effect which must be either ludicrous or great, and he has made it great.'

'Roubillac is his name,' said Maude, reading it from the pedestal.

'A Frenchman, or a man of French descent. Isn't that characteristic! In the whole great Abbey the one monument which has impressed us with its genius and imagination is by a foreigner. We haven't got it in us. We are too much afraid of letting ourselves go and of giving ourselves away. We are heavy-handed and heavy-minded.'

'If we can't produce the monuments, we can produce the men who deserve them,' said Maude, and Frank wrote the aphorism down upon his shirt-cuff.

'We are too severe both in sculpture and architecture,' said he. 'More fancy and vigour in our sculptors, more use of gold and more ornament in our architects – that is what we want. But I think it is past praying for. It would be better to subdivide the work of the world, according to the capacity of the different nations. Let Italy and France embellish us. We might do something in exchange – organise the French colonies, perhaps, or the Italian exchequer. That is our legitimate work, but we will never do anything at the other.'

The guide had already reached the end of his round, an iron gate corresponding to that by which they had entered, and they found him waiting impatiently and swinging his keys. But Maude's smile and word of thanks as she passed him brought content into his face once more. A ray of living sunshine is welcome to the man who spends his days among the tombs.

They walked down the North Transept and out through Solomon's Porch. The rain-cloud had swept over, and the summer sun was shining upon the wet streets, turning them all to gold. This might have been that fabled London of which young Whittington dreamed. In front of them lay the lawns of vivid green, with the sunlit raindrops gleaming upon the grass. The air was full of the chirping of the sparrows. Across their vision, from the end of Whitehall to Victoria Street, the black ribbon of traffic whirled and circled, one of the great driving-belts of the huge city. Over it all, to their right, towered those glorious Houses of Parliament, the very sight of which made Frank repent his bitter words about English architecture. They stood in the old porch gazing at the scene. It was so wonderful to come back at one stride from the great country of the past to the greater country of the present. Here was the very thing which these dead men lived and died to build.

'It's not much past three,' said Frank. 'What a gloomy place to take you to! Good heavens, we have one day together, and I take you to a cemetery! Shall we go to a matinée to counteract it?'

But Maude laid her hand upon his arm.

'I don't think, Frank, that I was ever more impressed, or learned more in so short a time, in my life. It was a grand hour – an hour never to be forgotten. And you must not think that I am ever with you to be amused. I am with you to accompany you in whatever seems to you to be highest and best. Now before we leave the dear old Abbey, promise me that you will always live your own highest and never come down to me.'

'I can very safely promise that I will never come down to you,' said Frank. 'I may climb all my life, and yet there are parts of your soul which will be like snow-peaks in the clouds to me. But you will be now and always my own dear comrade as well as my sweetest wife. And now, Maude, what shall it be, the theatre or the Australians?'

'Do you wish to go to either very much?'

'Not unless you do.'

'Well, then, I feel as if either would be a profanation. Let us walk together down to the Embankment, and sit on one of the benches there, and watch the river flowing in the sunshine, and talk and think of all that we have seen.'

TWO SOLOS AND A DUET

The night before the wedding, Frank Crosse and his best man, Rupton Hale, dined at the Raleigh Club with Maude's brother, Jack Selby, who was a young lieutenant in a Hussar regiment. Jack was a horsy, slangy young sportsman who cared nothing about Frank's worldly prospects, but had given the match his absolute approval from the moment that he realised that his future brother had played for the Surrey Second. 'What more can you want?' said he. 'You won't exactly be a Mrs. W. G., but you will be on the edge of first-class cricket.' And Maude, who rejoiced in his approval, without quite understanding the grounds for it, kissed him, and called him the best of brothers.

The marriage was to be at eleven o'clock at St. Monica's Church, and the Selbys were putting up at the Langham. Frank stayed at the Metropole, and so did Rupton Hale. They were up early, their heads and nerves none the better for Jack Selby's hospitality of the night before.

Frank could eat no breakfast, and he shunned publicity in his wedding-garments, so they remained in the upstairs sitting-room. He stood by the window, drumming his fingers upon the pane, and looking down into Northumberland Avenue. He had often pictured this day, and associated it with sunshine and flowers and every emblem of joy. But Nature had not risen to the occasion. A thick vapour, half smoke half cloud, drifted along the street, and a thin persistent rain was falling steadily. It pit-patted upon the windows, splashed upon the sills, and gurgled in the water-pipes. Far down beneath him on the drab-coloured slimy road stood the lines of wet cabs, looking like beetles with glistening backs. Round black umbrellas hurried along the shining pavements. A horse had fallen at the door of the Constitutional Club, and an oil-skinned policeman was helping the cabman to raise it. Frank watched it until the harness had been refastened, and it had vanished into Trafalgar Square. Then he turned and examined himself in the mirror. His trim black frock-coat and pearl grey trousers set off his alert athletic figure to advantage. His glossy hat, too, his lavender gloves, and dark-blue tie, were all absolutely irreproachable. And yet he was not satisfied with himself. Maude ought to have something better than that. What a fool he had been to take so much wine last night! On this day of all days in their lives she surely had a right to find him at his best. He was restless, and his nerves were all quivering. He would have given anything for a cigarette, but he did not wish to scent himself with tobacco. He had cut himself in shaving, and his nose was peeling from a hot day on the cricket-field. What a silly thing to expose his nose to the sun before his wedding! Perhaps when Maude saw it she would – well, she could hardly break it off, but at least she might be ashamed of him. He worked himself into a fever over that unfortunate nose.

'You are off colour, Crosse,' said his best man.

'I was just thinking that my nose was. It's very kind of you to come and stand by me.'

'That's all right. We shall see it through together.'

Hale was a despondent man, though the most loyal of friends, and he spoke in a despondent way. His gloomy manner, the London drizzle, and the nervousness proper to the occasion, were all combining to make Frank more and more wretched. Fortunately Jack Selby burst like a gleam of sunshine into the room. The sight of his fresh-coloured smiling face – or it may have been some reminder of Maude which he found in it – brought consolation to the bridegroom.

'How are you, Crosse? How do, Hale? Excuse my country manners! The old Christmas-tree in the hall wanted to send for you, but I knew your number. You're looking rather green about the gills, old chap.'

'I feel a little chippy to-day.'

'That's the worst of these cheap champagnes. Late hours are bad for the young. Have a whisky and soda with me. No? Hale, you must buck him up, for they'll all be down on you if you don't bring your man up to time in the pink of condition. We certainly did ourselves up to the top hole last night. Couldn't face your breakfast, eh? Neither could I. A strawberry and a bucket of soda-water.'

'How are they all at the Langham?' asked Frank eagerly.

'Oh, splendid! At least I haven't seen Maude. She's been getting into parade order. But mother is full of beans. We had to take her up one link in the curb, or there would have been no holding her.'

Frank's eyes kept turning to the slow-moving minute-hand. It was not ten o'clock yet.

'Don't you think that I might go round to the Langham and see them?'

'Good Lord, no! Clean against regulations. Stand by his head, Hale! Wo, boy, steady!'

'It won't do, Crosse, it really won't!' said Hale solemnly.

'What rot it is! Here am I doing nothing, and I might be of some use or encouragement to her. Let's get a cab!'

'Wo, laddie, wo then, boy! Keep him in hand, Hale! Get to his head.'

Frank flung himself down into an armchair, and muttered about absurd conventions.

'It can't be helped, my boy. It is correct.'

'Buck up, Crosse, buck up! We'll make the thing go with a buzz when we do begin. Two of our Johnnies are coming, regular fizzers, and full of blood both of them. We'll paint the Langham a fine bright solferino, when the church parade is over.'

Frank sat rather sulkily watching the slow minute-hand, and listening to the light-hearted chatter of the boy-lieutenant, and the more deliberate answers of his best man. At last he jumped up and seized his hat and gloves.

'Half-past,' said he. 'Come on. I can't wait any longer. I must do *something*. It is time we went to the church.'

'Fall in for the church!' cried Jack. 'Wait a bit! I know this game, for I was best man myself last month. Inspect his kit, Hale. See that he's according to regulations. Ring? All right. Parson's money? Right oh! Small change? Good! By the right, quick march!'

Frank soon recovered his spirits now that he had something to do. Even that drive through the streaming streets, with the rain pattering upon the top of their four-wheeler, could not depress him any longer. He rose to the level of Jack Selby, and they chattered gaily together.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.