

GALSWORTHY JOHN

THE ISLAND
PHARISEES

John Galsworthy
The Island Pharisees

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The Island Pharisees:

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John Galsworthy

The Island Pharisees

"But this is a worshipful society"

KING JOHN

PREFACE

Each man born into the world is born like Shelton in this book – to go a journey, and for the most part he is born on the high road. At first he sits there in the dust, with his little chubby hands reaching at nothing, and his little solemn eyes staring into space. As soon as he can toddle, he moves, by the queer instinct we call the love of life, straight along this road, looking neither to the right nor left, so pleased is he to walk. And he is charmed with everything – with the nice flat road, all broad and white, with his own feet, and with the prospect he can see on either hand. The sun shines, and he finds the road a little hot and dusty; the rain falls, and he splashes through the muddy puddles. It makes no matter – all is pleasant; his fathers went this way before him; they made this road for him to tread, and, when they bred him, passed into his fibre the love of doing things as they themselves had done them. So he walks on and on, resting comfortably at nights under the roofs that have been raised to shelter him, by those who went before.

Suddenly one day, without intending to, he notices a path or opening in the hedge, leading to right or left, and he stands, looking at the undiscovered. After that he stops at all the openings in the hedge; one day, with a beating heart, he tries one.

And this is where the fun begins.

Out of ten of him that try the narrow path, nine of him come

back to the broad road, and, when they pass the next gap in the hedge, they say: “No, no, my friend, I found you pleasant for a while, but after that-ah! after that! The way my fathers went is good enough for me, and it is obviously the proper one; for nine of me came back, and that poor silly tenth – I really pity him!”

And when he comes to the next inn, and snuggles in his well-warmed, bed, he thinks of the wild waste of heather where he might have had to spend the night alone beneath the stars; nor does it, I think, occur to him that the broad road he treads all day was once a trackless heath itself.

But the poor silly tenth is faring on. It is a windy night that he is travelling through a windy night, with all things new around, and nothing to help him but his courage. Nine times out of ten that courage fails, and he goes down into the bog. He has seen the undiscovered, and – like Ferrand in this book – the undiscovered has engulfed him; his spirit, tougher than the spirit of the nine that burned back to sleep in inns, was yet not tough enough. The tenth time he wins across, and on the traces he has left others follow slowly, cautiously – a new road is opened to mankind! A true saying goes: Whatever is, is right! And if all men from the world’s beginning had said that, the world would never have begun – at all. Not even the protoplasmic jelly could have commenced its journey; there would have been no motive force to make it start.

And so, that other saying had to be devised before the world could set up business: Whatever is, is wrong! But since the

Cosmic Spirit found that matters moved too fast if those that felt “All things that are, are wrong” equalled in number those that felt “All things that are, are right,” It solemnly devised polygamy (all, be it said, in a spiritual way of speaking); and to each male spirit crowing “All things that are, are wrong” It decreed nine female spirits clucking “All things that are, are right.” The Cosmic Spirit, who was very much an artist, knew its work, and had previously devised a quality called courage, and divided it in three, naming the parts spiritual, moral, physical. To all the male-bird spirits, but to no female (spiritually, not corporeally speaking), It gave courage that was spiritual; to nearly all, both male and female, It gave courage that was physical; to very many hen-bird spirits It gave moral courage too. But, because It knew that if all the male-bird spirits were complete, the proportion of male to female – one to ten – would be too great, and cause upheavals, It so arranged that only one in ten male-bird spirits should have all three kinds of courage; so that the other nine, having spiritual courage, but lacking either in moral or in physical, should fail in their extensions of the poultry-run. And having started them upon these lines, it left them to get along as best they might.

Thus, in the subdivision of the poultry-run that we call England, the proportion of the others to the complete male-bird spirit, who, of course, is not infrequently a woman, is ninety-nine to one; and with every Island Pharisee, when he or she starts out in life, the interesting question ought to be, “Am I that one?”

Ninety very soon find out that they are not, and, having found it out, lest others should discover, they say they are. Nine of the other ten, blinded by their spiritual courage, are harder to convince; but one by one they sink, still proclaiming their virility. The hundredth Pharisee alone sits out the play.

Now, the journey of this young man Shelton, who is surely not the hundredth Pharisee, is but a ragged effort to present the working of the truth "All things that are, are wrong," upon the truth "All things that are, are right."

The Institutions of this country, like the Institutions of all other countries, are but half-truths; they are the working daily clothing of the nation; no more the body's permanent dress than is a baby's frock. Slowly but surely they wear out, or are outgrown; and in their fashion they are always thirty years at least behind the fashions of those spirits who are concerned with what shall take their place. The conditions that dictate our education, the distribution of our property, our marriage laws, amusements, worship, prisons, and all other things, change imperceptibly from hour to hour; the moulds containing them, being inelastic, do not change, but hold on to the point of bursting, and then are hastily, often clumsily, enlarged. The ninety desiring peace and comfort for their spirit, the ninety of the well-warmed beds, will have it that the fashions need not change, that morality is fixed, that all is ordered and immutable, that every one will always marry, play, and worship in the way that they themselves are marrying, playing, worshipping. They have no speculation, and they hate

with a deep hatred those who speculate with thought. This is the function they were made for. They are the dough, and they dislike that yeasty stuff of life which comes and works about in them. The Yeasty Stuff – the other ten – chafed by all things that are, desirous ever of new forms and moulds, hate in their turn the comfortable ninety. Each party has invented for the other the hardest names that it can think of: Philistines, Bourgeois, Mrs. Grundy, Rebels, Anarchists, and Ne'er-do-weels. So we go on! And so, as each of us is born to go his journey, he finds himself in time ranged on one side or on the other, and joins the choruses of name-slingers.

But now and then – ah! very seldom – we find ourselves so near that thing which has no breadth, the middle line, that we can watch them both, and positively smile to see the fun.

When this book was published first, many of its critics found that Shelton was the only Pharisee, and a most unsatisfactory young man – and so, no doubt, he is. Belonging to the comfortable ninety, they felt, in fact, the need of slinging names at one who obviously was of the ten. Others of its critics, belonging to the ten, wielded their epithets upon Antonia, and the serried ranks behind her, and called them Pharisees; as dull as ditch-water – and so, I fear, they are.

One of the greatest charms of authorship is the privilege it gives the author of studying the secret springs of many unseen persons, of analysing human nature through the criticism that his work evokes – criticism welling out of the instinctive likings or

aversions, out of the very fibre of the human being who delivers it; criticism that often seems to leap out against the critic's will, startled like a fawn from some deep bed, of sympathy or of antipathy. And so, all authors love to be abused – as any man can see.

In the little matter of the title of this book, we are all Pharisees, whether of the ninety or the ten, and we certainly do live upon an Island. JOHN GALSWORTHY.

January 1, 1908

PART I

THE TOWN

CHAPTER I

SOCIETY

A quiet, well-dressed man named Shelton, with a brown face and a short, fair beard, stood by the bookstall at Dover Station. He was about to journey up to London, and had placed his bag in the corner of a third-class carriage.

After his long travel, the flat-vowelled voice of the bookstall clerk offering the latest novel sounded pleasant – pleasant the independent answers of a bearded guard, and the stodgy farewell sayings of a man and wife. The limber porters trundling their barrows, the greyness of the station and the good stolid humour clinging to the people, air, and voices, all brought to him the sense of home. Meanwhile he wavered between purchasing a book called Market Hayborough, which he had read and would certainly enjoy a second time, and Carlyle's French Revolution, which he had not read and was doubtful of enjoying; he felt that he ought to buy the latter, but he did not relish giving up the former. While he hesitated thus, his carriage was beginning to fill up; so, quickly buying both, he took up a position from which

he could defend his rights. "Nothing," he thought, "shows people up like travelling."

The carriage was almost full, and, putting his bag, up in the rack, he took his seat. At the moment of starting yet another passenger, a girl with a pale face, scrambled in.

"I was a fool to go third," thought Shelton, taking in his neighbours from behind his journal.

They were seven. A grizzled rustic sat in the far corner; his empty pipe, bowl downwards, jutted like a handle from his face, all bleared with the smear of nothingness that grows on those who pass their lives in the current of hard facts. Next to him, a ruddy, heavy-shouldered man was discussing with a grey-haired, hatchet-visaged person the condition of their gardens; and Shelton watched their eyes till it occurred to him how curious a look was in them – a watchful friendliness, an allied distrust – and that their voices, cheerful, even jovial, seemed to be cautious all the time. His glance strayed off, and almost rebounded from the semi-Roman, slightly cross, and wholly self-complacent face of a stout lady in a black-and-white costume, who was reading the Strand Magazine, while her other, sleek, plump hand, freed from its black glove, and ornamented with a thick watch-bracelet, rested on her lap. A younger, bright-cheeked, and self-conscious female was sitting next her, looking at the pale girl who had just got in.

"There's something about that girl," thought Shelton, "they don't like." Her brown eyes certainly looked frightened, her

clothes were of a foreign cut. Suddenly he met the glance of another pair of eyes; these eyes, prominent and blue, stared with a sort of subtle roguery from above a thin, lopsided nose, and were at once averted. They gave Shelton the impression that he was being judged, and mocked, enticed, initiated. His own gaze did not fall; this sanguine face, with its two-day growth of reddish beard, long nose, full lips, and irony, puzzled him. "A cynical face!" he thought, and then, "but sensitive!" and then, "too cynical," again.

The young man who owned it sat with his legs parted at the knees, his dusty trouser-ends and boots slanting back beneath the seat, his yellow finger-tips crisped as if rolling cigarettes. A strange air of detachment was about that youthful, shabby figure, and not a scrap of luggage filled the rack above his head.

The frightened girl was sitting next this pagan personality; it was possibly the lack of fashion in his looks that caused, her to select him for her confidence.

"Monsieur," she asked, "do you speak French?"

"Perfectly."

"Then can you tell me where they take the tickets?"

"The young man shook his head.

"No," said he, "I am a foreigner."

The girl sighed.

"But what is the matter, ma'moiselle?"

The girl did not reply, twisting her hands on an old bag in her lap. Silence had stolen on the carriage – a silence such as steals

on animals at the first approach of danger; all eyes were turned towards the figures of the foreigners.

“Yes,” broke out the red-faced man, “he was a bit squiffy that evening – old Tom.”

“Ah!” replied his neighbour, “he would be.”

Something seemed to have destroyed their look of mutual distrust. The plump, sleek hand of the lady with the Roman nose curved convulsively; and this movement corresponded to the feeling agitating Shelton’s heart. It was almost as if hand and heart feared to be asked for something.

“Monsieur,” said the girl, with a tremble in her voice, “I am very unhappy; can you tell me what to do? I had no money for a ticket.”

The foreign youth’s face flickered.

“Yes?” he said; “that might happen to anyone, of course.”

“What will they do to me?” sighed the girl.

“Don’t lose courage, ma’moiselle.” The young man slid his eyes from left to right, and rested them on Shelton. “Although I don’t as yet see your way out.”

“Oh, monsieur!” sighed the girl, and, though it was clear that none but Shelton understood what they were saying, there was a chilly feeling in the carriage.

“I wish I could assist you,” said the foreign youth; “unfortunately – ” he shrugged his shoulders, and again his eyes returned to Shelton.

The latter thrust his hand into his pocket.

“Can I be of any use?” he asked in English.

“Certainly, sir; you could render this young lady the greatest possible service by lending her the money for a ticket.”

Shelton produced a sovereign, which the young man took. Passing it to the girl, he said:

“A thousand thanks – *’voila une belle action’*.”

The misgivings which attend on casual charity crowded up in Shelton’s mind; he was ashamed of having them and of not having them, and he stole covert looks at this young foreigner, who was now talking to the girl in a language that he did not understand. Though vagabond in essence, the fellow’s face showed subtle spirit, a fortitude and irony not found upon the face of normal man, and in turning from it to the other passengers Shelton was conscious of revolt, contempt, and questioning, that he could not define. Leaning back with half-closed eyes, he tried to diagnose this new sensation. He found it disconcerting that the faces and behaviour of his neighbours lacked anything he could grasp and secretly abuse. They continued to converse with admirable and slightly conscious phlegm, yet he knew, as well as if each one had whispered to him privately, that this shady incident had shaken them. Something unsettling to their notions of propriety-something dangerous and destructive of complacency – had occurred, and this was unforgivable. Each had a different way, humorous or philosophic, contemptuous, sour, or sly, of showing this resentment. But by a flash of insight Shelton saw that at the bottom of their minds and of his own the

feeling was the same. Because he shared in their resentment he was enraged with them and with himself. He looked at the plump, sleek hand of the woman with the Roman nose. The insulation and complacency of its pale skin, the passive righteousness about its curve, the prim separation from the others of the fat little finger, had acquired a wholly unaccountable importance. It embodied the verdict of his fellow-passengers, the verdict of Society; for he knew that, whether or no repugnant to the well-bred mind, each assemblage of eight persons, even in a third-class carriage, contains the kernel of Society.

But being in love, and recently engaged, Shelton had a right to be immune from discontent of any kind, and he reverted to his mental image of the cool, fair face, quick movements, and the brilliant smile that now in his probationary exile haunted his imagination; he took out his fiancée's last letter, but the voice of the young foreigner addressing him in rapid French caused him to put it back abruptly.

"From what she tells me, sir," he said, bending forward to be out of hearing of the girl, "hers is an unhappy case. I should have been only too glad to help her, but, as you see" – and he made a gesture by which Shelton observed that he had parted from his waistcoat – "I am not Rothschild. She has been abandoned by the man who brought her over to Dover under promise of marriage. Look" – and by a subtle flicker of his eyes he marked how the two ladies had edged away from the French girl "they take good care not to let their garments touch her. They are virtuous women.

How fine a thing is virtue, sir! and finer to know you have it, especially when you are never likely to be tempted.”

Shelton was unable to repress a smile; and when he smiled his face grew soft.

“Haven’t you observed,” went on the youthful foreigner, “that those who by temperament and circumstance are worst fitted to pronounce judgment are usually the first to judge? The judgments of Society are always childish, seeing that it’s composed for the most part of individuals who have never smelt the fire. And look at this: they who have money run too great a risk of parting with it if they don’t accuse the penniless of being rogues and imbeciles.”

Shelton was startled, and not only by an outburst of philosophy from an utter stranger in poor clothes, but at this singular wording of his own private thoughts. Stifling his sense of the unusual for the queer attraction this young man inspired, he said:

“I suppose you’re a stranger over here?”

“I’ve been in England seven months, but not yet in London,” replied the other. “I count on doing some good there – it is time!” A bitter and pathetic smile showed for a second on his lips. “It won’t be my fault if I fail. You are English, Sir?”

Shelton nodded.

“Forgive my asking; your voice lacks something I’ve nearly always noticed in the English a kind of – ‘comment cela s’appelle’ – cocksureness, coming from your nation’s greatest quality.”

“And what is that?” asked Shelton with a smile.

“Complacency,” replied the youthful foreigner.

“Complacency!” repeated Shelton; “do you call that a great quality?”

“I should rather say, monsieur, a great defect in what is always a great people. You are certainly the most highly-civilised nation on the earth; you suffer a little from the fact. If I were an English preacher my desire would be to prick the heart of your complacency.”

Shelton, leaning back, considered this impertinent suggestion.

“Hum!” he said at last, “you’d be unpopular; I don’t know that we’re any cockier than other nations.”

The young foreigner made a sign as though confirming this opinion.

“In effect,” said he, “it is a sufficiently widespread disease. Look at these people here” – and with a rapid glance he pointed to the inmates of the cage, – “very average persons! What have they done to warrant their making a virtuous nose at those who do not walk as they do? That old rustic, perhaps, is different – he never thinks at all – but look at those two occupied with their stupidities about the price of hops, the prospects of potatoes, what George is doing, a thousand things all of that sort – look at their faces; I come of the bourgeoisie myself – have they ever shown proof of any quality that gives them the right to pat themselves upon the back? No fear! Outside potatoes they know nothing, and what they do not understand they dread and they despise – there are millions of that breed. ‘Voila la Societe’. The

sole quality these people have shown they have is cowardice. I was educated by the Jesuits," he concluded; "it has given me a way of thinking."

Under ordinary circumstances Shelton would have murmured in a well-bred voice, "Ah! quite so," and taken refuge in the columns of the Daily Telegraph. In place of this, for some reason that he did not understand, he looked at the young foreigner, and asked,

"Why do you say all this to me?"

The tramp – for by his boots he could hardly have been better – hesitated.

"When you've travelled like me," he said, as if resolved to speak the truth, "you acquire an instinct in choosing to whom and how you speak. It is necessity that makes the law; if you want to live you must learn all that sort of thing to make face against life."

Shelton, who himself possessed a certain subtlety, could not but observe the complimentary nature of these words. It was like saying "I'm not afraid of you misunderstanding me, and thinking me a rascal just because I study human nature."

"But is there nothing to be done for that poor girl?"

His new acquaintance shrugged his shoulders.

"A broken jug," said he; "– you'll never mend her. She's going to a cousin in London to see if she can get help; you've given her the means of getting there – it's all that you can do. One knows too well what'll become of her."

Shelton said gravely,

“Oh! that’s horrible! Could n’t she be induced to go back home? I should be glad – ”

The foreign vagrant shook his head.

“Mon cher monsieur,” he said, “you evidently have not yet had occasion to know what the ‘family’ is like. ‘The family’ does not like damaged goods; it will have nothing to say to sons whose hands have dipped into the till or daughters no longer to be married. What the devil would they do with her? Better put a stone about her neck and let her drown at once. All the world is Christian, but Christian and good Samaritan are not quite the same.”

Shelton looked at the girl, who was sitting motionless, with her hands crossed on her bag, and a revolt against the unfair ways of life arose within him.

“Yes,” said the young foreigner, as if reading all his thoughts, “what’s called virtue is nearly always only luck.” He rolled his eyes as though to say: “Ah! La, Conventions? Have them by all means – but don’t look like peacocks because you are preserving them; it is but cowardice and luck, my friends – but cowardice and luck!”

“Look here,” said Shelton, “I’ll give her my address, and if she wants to go back to her family she can write to me.”

“She’ll never go back; she won’t have the courage.”

Shelton caught the cringing glance of the girl’s eyes; in the droop of her lip there was something sensuous, and the conviction that the young man’s words were true came over him.

"I had better not give them my private address," he thought, glancing at the faces opposite; and he wrote down the following: "Richard Paramor Shelton, c/o Paramor and Herring, Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"You're very good, sir. My name is Louis Ferrand; no address at present. I'll make her understand; she's half stupefied just now."

Shelton returned to the perusal of his paper, too disturbed to read; the young vagrant's words kept sounding in his ears. He raised his eyes. The plump hand of the lady with the Roman nose still rested on her lap; it had been recased in its black glove with large white stitching. Her frowning gaze was fixed on him suspiciously, as if he had outraged her sense of decency.

"He did n't get anything from me," said the voice of the red-faced man, ending a talk on tax-gatherers. The train whistled loudly, and Shelton reverted to his paper. This time he crossed his legs, determined to enjoy the latest murder; once more he found himself looking at the vagrant's long-nosed, mocking face. "That fellow," he thought, "has seen and felt ten times as much as I, although he must be ten years younger."

He turned for distraction to the landscape, with its April clouds, trim hedgerows, homely coverts. But strange ideas would come, and he was discontented with himself; the conversation he had had, the personality of this young foreigner, disturbed him. It was all as though he had made a start in some fresh journey through the fields of thought.

CHAPTER II

ANTONIA

Five years before the journey just described Shelton had stood one afternoon on the barge of his old college at the end of the summer races. He had been "down" from Oxford for some years, but these Olympian contests still attracted him.

The boats were passing, and in the usual rush to the barge side his arm came in contact with a soft young shoulder. He saw close to him a young girl with fair hair knotted in a ribbon, whose face was eager with excitement. The pointed chin, long neck, the fluffy hair, quick gestures, and the calm strenuousness of her grey-blue eyes, impressed him vividly.

"Oh, we must bump them!" he heard her sigh.

"Do you know my people, Shelton?" said a voice behind his back; and he was granted a touch from the girl's shy, impatient hand, the warmer fingers of a lady with kindly eyes resembling a hare's, the dry hand-clasp of a gentleman with a thin, arched nose, and a quizzical brown face.

"Are you the Mr. Shelton who used to play the 'bones' at Eton?" said the lady. "Oh; we so often heard of you from Bernard! He was your fag, was n't he? How distressin' it is to see these poor boys in the boats!"

"Mother, they like it!" cried the girl.

"Antonia ought to be rowing, herself," said her father, whose

name was Dennant.

Shelton went back with them to their hotel, walking beside Antonia through the Christchurch meadows, telling her details of his college life. He dined with them that evening, and, when he left, had a feeling like that produced by a first glass of champagne.

The Dennants lived at Holm Oaks, within six miles of Oxford, and two days later he drove over and paid a call. Amidst the avocations of reading for the Bar, of cricket, racing, shooting, it but required a whiff of some fresh scent – hay, honeysuckle, clover – to bring Antonia's face before him, with its uncertain colour and its frank, distant eyes. But two years passed before he again saw her. Then, at an invitation from Bernard Dennant, he played cricket for the Manor of Holm Oaks against a neighbouring house; in the evening there was dancing on the lawn. The fair hair was now turned up, but the eyes were quite unchanged. Their steps went together, and they outlasted every other couple on the slippery grass. Thence, perhaps, sprang her respect for him; he was wiry, a little taller than herself, and seemed to talk of things that interested her. He found out she was seventeen, and she found out that he was twenty-nine. The following two years Shelton went to Holm Oaks whenever he was asked; to him this was a period of enchanted games, of cub-hunting, theatricals, and distant sounds of practised music, and during it Antonia's eyes grew more friendly and more curious, and his own more shy, and schooled, more furtive and more

ardent. Then came his father's death, a voyage round the world, and that peculiar hour of mixed sensations when, one March morning, abandoning his steamer at Marseilles, he took train for Hyeres.

He found her at one of those exclusive hostelries amongst the pines where the best English go, in common with Americans, Russian princesses, and Jewish families; he would not have been shocked to find her elsewhere, but he would have been surprised. His sunburnt face and the new beard, on which he set some undefined value, apologetically displayed, were scanned by those blue eyes with rapid glances, at once more friendly and less friendly. "Ah!" they seemed to say, "here you are; how glad I am! But – what now?"

He was admitted to their sacred table at the table d'hôte, a snowy oblong in an airy alcove, where the Honourable Mrs. Dennant, Miss Dennant, and the Honourable Charlotte Penguin, a maiden aunt with insufficient lungs, sat twice a day in their own atmosphere. A momentary weakness came on Shelton the first time he saw them sitting there at lunch. What was it gave them their look of strange detachment? Mrs. Dennant was bending above a camera.

"I'm afraid, d' you know, it's under-exposed," she said.

"What a pity! The kitten was rather nice!" The maiden aunt, placing the knitting of a red silk tie beside her plate, turned her aspiring, well-bred gaze on Shelton.

"Look, Auntie," said Antonia in her clear, quick voice,

“there’s the funny little man again!”

“Oh,” said the maiden aunt – a smile revealed her upper teeth; she looked for the funny little man (who was not English) – “he’s rather nice!”

Shelton did not look for the funny little man; he stole a glance that barely reached Antonia’s brow, where her eyebrows took their tiny upward slant at the outer corners, and her hair was still ruffled by a windy walk. From that moment he became her slave.

“Mr. Shelton, do you know anything about these periscopic binoculars?” said Mrs. Dennant’s voice; “they’re splendid for buildin’s, but buildin’s are so disappointin’. The thing is to get human interest, isn’t it?” and her glance wandered absently past Shelton in search of human interest.

“You haven’t put down what you’ve taken, mother.”

From a little leather bag Mrs. Dennant took a little leather book.

“It’s so easy to forget what they’re about,” she said, “that’s so annoyin’.”

Shelton was not again visited by his uneasiness at their detachment; he accepted them and all their works, for there was something quite sublime about the way that they would leave the dining-room, unconscious that they themselves were funny to all the people they had found so funny while they had been sitting there, and he would follow them out unnecessarily upright and feeling like a fool.

In the ensuing fortnight, chaperoned by the maiden aunt, for

Mrs. Dennant disliked driving, he sat opposite to Antonia during many drives; he played sets of tennis with her; but it was in the evenings after dinner – those long evenings on a parquet floor in wicker chairs dragged as far as might be from the heating apparatus – that he seemed so very near her. The community of isolation drew them closer. In place of a companion he had assumed the part of friend, to whom she could confide all her home-sick aspirations. So that, even when she was sitting silent, a slim, long foot stretched out in front, bending with an air of cool absorption over some pencil sketches which she would not show him – even then, by her very attitude, by the sweet freshness that clung about her, by her quick, offended glances at the strange persons round, she seemed to acknowledge in some secret way that he was necessary. He was far from realising this; his intellectual and observant parts were hypnotised and fascinated even by her failings. The faint freckling across her nose, the slim and virginal severeness of her figure, with its narrow hips and arms, the curve of her long neck—all were added charms. She had the wind and rain look, a taste of home; and over the glaring roads, where the palm-tree shadows lay so black, she seemed to pass like the very image of an English day.

One afternoon he had taken her to play tennis with some friends, and afterwards they strolled on to her favourite view. Down the Toulon road gardens and hills were bathed in the colour of ripe apricot; an evening crispness had stolen on the air; the blood, released from the sun's numbing, ran gladly in the veins.

On the right hand of the road was a Frenchman playing bowls. Enormous, busy, pleased, and upright as a soldier, pathetically trotting his vast carcass from end to end, he delighted Shelton. But Antonia threw a single look at the huge creature, and her face expressed disgust. She began running up towards the ruined tower.

Shelton let her keep in front, watching her leap from stone to stone and throw back defiant glances when he pressed behind. She stood at the top, and he looked up at her. Over the world, gloriously spread below, she, like a statue, seemed to rule. The colour was brilliant in her cheeks, her young bosom heaved, her eyes shone, and the flowing droop of her long, full sleeves gave to her poised figure the look of one who flies. He pulled himself up and stood beside her; his heart choked him, all the colour had left his cheeks.

“Antonia,” he said, “I love you.”

She started, as if his whisper had intruded on her thoughts; but his face must have expressed his hunger, for the resentment in her eyes vanished.

They stood for several minutes without speaking, and then went home. Shelton painfully revolved the riddle of the colour in her face. Had he a chance then? Was it possible? That evening the instinct vouchsafed at times to lovers in place of reason caused him to pack his bag and go to Cannes. On returning, two days later, and approaching the group in the centre of the Winter Garden, the voice of the maiden aunt reading aloud an extract

from the Morning Post reached him across the room.

“Don’t you think that’s rather nice?” he heard her ask, and then: “Oh, here you aye! It’s very nice to see you back!”

Shelton slipped into a wicker chair. Antonia looked up quickly from her sketch-book, put out a hand, but did not speak.

He watched her bending head, and his eagerness was changed to gloom. With desperate vivacity he sustained the five intolerable minutes of inquiry, where had he been, what had he been doing? Then once again the maiden aunt commenced her extracts from the Morning Post.

A touch on his sleeve startled him. Antonia was leaning forward; her cheeks were crimson above the pallor of her neck.

“Would you like to see my sketches?”

To Shelton, bending above those sketches, that drawl of the well-bred maiden aunt intoning the well-bred paper was the most pleasant sound that he had ever listened to.

“My dear Dick,” Mrs. Dennant said to him a fortnight later, “we would rather, after you leave here, that you don’t see each other again until July. Of course I know you count it an engagement and all that, and everybody’s been writin’ to congratulate you. But Algie thinks you ought to give yourselves a chance. Young people don’t always know what they’re about, you know; it’s not long to wait.”

“Three months!” gasped Shelton.

He had to swallow down this pill with what grace he could command. There was no alternative. Antonia had acquiesced in

the condition with a queer, grave pleasure, as if she expected it to do her good.

“It’ll be something to look forward to, Dick,” she said.

He postponed departure as long as possible, and it was not until the end of April that he left for England. She came alone to see him off. It was drizzling, but her tall, slight figure in the golf cape looked impervious to cold and rain amongst the shivering natives. Desperately he clutched her hand, warm through the wet glove; her smile seemed heartless in its brilliancy. He whispered “You will write?”

“Of course; don’t be so stupid, you old Dick!”

She ran forward as the train began to move; her clear “Good-bye!” sounded shrill and hard above the rumble of the wheels. He saw her raise her hand, an umbrella waving, and last of all, vivid still amongst receding shapes, the red spot of her scarlet tam-o’-shanter.

CHAPTER III

A ZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

After his journey up from Dover, Shelton was still fathering his luggage at Charing Cross, when the foreign girl passed him, and, in spite of his desire to say something cheering, he could get nothing out but a shame-faced smile. Her figure vanished, wavering into the hurly-burly; one of his bags had gone astray, and so all thought of her soon faded from his mind. His cab, however, overtook the foreign vagrant marching along towards Pall Mall with a curious, lengthy stride – an observant, disillusioned figure.

The first bustle of installation over, time hung heavy on his hands. July loomed distant, as in some future century; Antonia's eyes beckoned him faintly, hopelessly. She would not even be coming back to England for another month.

.. I met a young foreigner in the train from Dover [he wrote to her] – a curious sort of person altogether, who seems to have infected me. Everything here has gone flat and unprofitable; the only good things in life are your letters... John Noble dined with me yesterday; the poor fellow tried to persuade me to stand for Parliament. Why should I think myself fit to legislate for the unhappy wretches one sees about in the streets? If people's faces are a fair test of their happiness, I'd rather not feel in any way responsible...

The streets, in fact, after his long absence in the East, afforded him much food for thought: the curious smugness of the passers-by; the utterly unending bustle; the fearful medley of miserable, over-driven women, and full-fed men, with leering, bull-beef eyes, whom he saw everywhere – in club windows, on their beats, on box seats, on the steps of hotels, discharging dilatory duties; the appalling chaos of hard-eyed, capable dames with defiant clothes, and white-cheeked hunted-looking men; of splendid creatures in their cabs, and cadging creatures in their broken hats – the callousness and the monotony!

One afternoon in May he received this letter couched in French:

3, BLANK ROW WESTMINSTER. MY DEAR SIR,

Excuse me for recalling to your memory the offer of assistance you so kindly made me during the journey from Dover to London, in which I was so fortunate as to travel with a man like you. Having beaten the whole town, ignorant of what wood to make arrows, nearly at the end of my resources, my spirit profoundly discouraged, I venture to avail myself of your permission, knowing your good heart. Since I saw you I have run through all the misfortunes of the calendar, and cannot tell what door is left at which I have not knocked. I presented myself at the business firm with whose name you supplied me, but being unfortunately in rags, they refused to give me your address. Is this not very much in the English character? They told me to write, and said they would forward the letter. I put all my hopes in you.

Believe me, my dear sir,
(whatever you may decide)
Your devoted
LOUIS FERRAND.

Shelton looked at the envelope, and saw, that it, bore date a week ago. The face of the young vagrant rose before him, vital, mocking, sensitive; the sound of his quick French buzzed in his ears, and, oddly, the whole whiff of him had a power of raising more vividly than ever his memories of Antonia. It had been at the end of the journey from Hyeres to London that he had met him; that seemed to give the youth a claim.

He took his hat and hurried, to Blank Row. Dismissing his cab at the corner of Victoria Street he with difficulty found the house in question. It was a doorless place, with stone-flagged corridor – in other words, a “doss-house.” By tapping on a sort of ticket-office with a sliding window, he attracted the attention of a blowsy woman with soap-suds on her arms, who informed him that the person he was looking for had gone without leaving his address.

“But isn’t there anybody,” asked Shelton, “of whom I can make inquiry?”

“Yes; there’s a Frenchman.” And opening an inner door she bellowed: “Frenchy! Wanted!” and disappeared.

A dried-up, yellow little man, cynical and weary in the face, as if a moral steam-roller had passed over it, answered this call, and stood, sniffing, as it were, at Shelton, on whom he made the

singular impression of some little creature in a cage.

“He left here ten days ago, in the company of a mulatto. What do you want with him, if I may ask?” The little man’s yellow cheeks were wrinkled with suspicion.

Shelton produced the letter.

“Ah! now I know you” – a pale smile broke through the Frenchman’s crow’s-feet – “he spoke of you. ‘If I can only find him,’ he used to say, ‘I ‘m saved.’ I liked that young man; he had ideas.”

“Is there no way of getting at him through his consul?”

The Frenchman shook his head.

“Might as well look for diamonds at the bottom of the sea.”

“Do you think he will come back here? But by that time I suppose, you’ll hardly be here yourself?”

A gleam of amusement played about the Frenchman’s teeth:

“I? Oh, yes, sir! Once upon a time I cherished the hope of emerging; I no longer have illusions. I shave these specimens for a living, and shall shave them till the day of judgment. But leave a letter with me by all means; he will come back. There’s an overcoat of his here on which he borrowed money – it’s worth more. Oh, yes; he will come back – a youth of principle. Leave a letter with me; I’m always here.”

Shelton hesitated, but those last three words, “I’m always here,” touched him in their simplicity. Nothing more dreadful could be said.

“Can you find me a sheet of paper, then?” he asked; “please

keep the change for the trouble I am giving you.”

“Thank you,” said the Frenchman simply; “he told me that your heart was good. If you don’t mind the kitchen, you could write there at your ease.”

Shelton wrote his letter at the table of this stone-flagged kitchen in company with an aged, dried-up gentleman; who was muttering to himself; and Shelton tried to avoid attracting his attention, suspecting that he was not sober. Just as he was about to take his leave, however, the old fellow thus accosted him:

“Did you ever go to the dentist, mister?” he said, working at a loose tooth with his shrivelled fingers. “I went to a dentist once, who professed to stop teeth without giving pain, and the beggar did stop my teeth without pain; but did they stay in, those stoppings? No, my bhoy; they came out before you could say Jack Robinson. Now, I shimplly ask you, d’you call that dentistry?” Fixing his eyes on Shelton’s collar, which had the misfortune to be high and clean, he resumed with drunken scorn: “Ut’s the same all over this pharisaical counthry. Talk of high morality and Anglo-Shaxon civilisation! The world was never at such low ebb! Phwhat’s all this morality? Ut stinks of the shop. Look at the condition of Art in this counthry! look at the fools you see upon th’ stage! look at the pictures and books that sell! I know what I’m talking about, though I am a sandwich man. Phwhat’s the secret of ut all? Shop, my bhoy! Ut don’t pay to go below a certain depth! Scratch the skin, but pierce ut – Oh! dear, no! We hate to see the blood fly, eh?”

Shelton stood disconcerted, not knowing if he were expected to reply; but the old gentleman, pursing up his lips, went on:

“Sir, there are no extremes in this fog-smitten land. Do ye think blanks loike me ought to exist? Whoy don’t they kill us off? Palliatives – palliatives – and whoy? Because they object to th extreme course. Look at women: the streets here are a scandal to the world. They won’t recognise that they exist – their noses are so dam high! They blink the truth in this middle-class counthry. My bhoi” – and he whispered confidentially – “ut pays ‘em. Eh? you say, why shouldn’t they, then?” (But Shelton had not spoken.) “Well, let ‘em! let ‘em! But don’t tell me that’s morality, don’t tell me that’s civilisation! What can you expect in a counthry where the crimson, emotions are never allowed to smell the air? And what’s the result? My bhoi, the result is sentiment, a yellow thing with blue spots, like a fungus or a Stilton cheese. Go to the theatre, and see one of these things they call plays. Tell me, are they food for men and women? Why, they’re pap for babes and shop-boys! I was a blanky actor moyself!”

Shelton listened with mingled feelings of amusement and dismay, till the old actor, having finished, resumed his crouching posture at the table.

“You don’t get dhrunk, I suppose?” he said suddenly – “too much of ‘n Englishman, no doubt.”

“Very seldom,” said Shelton.

“Pity! Think of the pleasures of oblivion! Oi ‘m dhrunk every night.”

“How long will you last at that rate?”

“There speaks the Englishman! Why should Oi give up me only pleasure to keep me wretched life in? If you’ve anything left worth the keeping shober for, keep shober by all means; if not, the sooner you are dhrunk the better – that stands to reason.”

In the corridor Shelton asked the Frenchman where the old man came from.

“Oh, and Englishman! Yes, yes, from Belfast very drunken old man. You are a drunken nation” – he made a motion with his hands “he no longer eats – no inside left. It is unfortunate-a man of spirit. If you have never seen one of these palaces, monsieur, I shall be happy to show you over it.”

Shelton took out his cigarette case.

“Yes, yes,” said the Frenchman, making a wry nose and taking a cigarette; “I’m accustomed to it. But you’re wise to fumigate the air; one is n’t in a harem.”

And Shelton felt ashamed of his fastidiousness.

“This,” said the guide, leading him up-stairs and opening a door, “is a specimen of the apartments reserved for these princes of the blood.” There were four empty beds on iron legs, and, with the air of a showman, the Frenchman twitched away a dingy quilt. “They go out in the mornings, earn enough to make them drunk, sleep it off, and then begin again. That’s their life. There are people who think they ought to be reformed. ‘Mon cher monsieur’, one must face reality a little, even in this country. It would be a hundred times better for these people to spend their

time reforming high Society. Your high Society makes all these creatures; there's no harvest without cutting stalks. 'Selon moi'," he continued, putting back the quilt, and dribbling cigarette smoke through his nose, "there's no grand difference between your high Society and these individuals here; both want pleasure, both think only of themselves, which is very natural. One lot have had the luck, the other – well, you see." He shrugged. "A common set! I've been robbed here half a dozen times. If you have new shoes, a good waistcoat, an overcoat, you want eyes in the back of your head. And they are populated! Change your bed, and you'll run all the dangers of not sleeping alone. 'V'la ma clientele'. The half of them don't pay me!" He, snapped his yellow sticks of fingers. "A penny for a shave, twopence a cut! 'Quelle vie'. Here," he continued, standing by a bed, "is a gentleman who owes me fivepence. Here's one who was a soldier; he's done for! All brutalised; not one with any courage left! But, believe me, monsieur," he went on, opening another door, "when you come down to houses of this sort you must have a vice; it's as necessary as breath is to the lungs. No matter what, you must have a vice to give you a little solace – 'un peu de soulagement'. Ah, yes! before you judge these swine, reflect on life! I've been through it. Monsieur, it is not nice never to know where to get your next meal. Gentlemen who have food in their stomachs, money in their pockets, and know where to get more, they never think. Why should they – 'pas de danger'. All these cages are the same. Come down, and you shall see the pantry." He took

Shelton through the kitchen, which seemed the only sitting-room of the establishment, to an inner room furnished with dirty cups and saucers, plates, and knives. Another fire was burning there. "We always have hot water," said the Frenchman, "and three times a week they make a fire down there" – he pointed to a cellar – "for our clients to boil their vermin. Oh, yes, we have all the luxuries."

Shelton returned to the kitchen, and directly after took leave of the little Frenchman, who said, with a kind of moral button-holing, as if trying to adopt him as a patron:

"Trust me, monsieur; if he comes back – that young man – he shall have your letter without fail. My name is Carolan Jules Carolan; and I am always at your service."

CHAPTER IV

THE PLAY

Shelton walked away; he had been indulging in a nightmare. "That old actor was drunk," thought he, "and no doubt he was an Irishman; still, there may be truth in what he said. I am a Pharisee, like all the rest who are n't in the pit. My respectability is only luck. What should I have become if I'd been born into his kind of life?" and he stared at a stream of people coming from the Stares, trying to pierce the mask of their serious, complacent faces. If these ladies and gentlemen were put into that pit into which he had been looking, would a single one of them emerge again? But the effort of picturing them there was too much for him; it was too far – too ridiculously far.

One particular couple, a large; fine man and wife, who, in the midst of all the dirt and rumbling hurry, the gloomy, ludicrous, and desperately jovial streets, walked side by side in well-bred silence, had evidently bought some article which pleased them. There was nothing offensive in their manner; they seemed quite unconcerned at the passing of the other people. The man had that fine solidity of shoulder and of waist, the glossy self-possession that belongs to those with horses, guns, and dressing-bags. The wife, her chin comfortably settled in her fur, kept her grey eyes on the ground, and, when she spoke, her even and unruffled voice reached Shelton's ears above all the whirring of the traffic.

It was leisurely precise, as if it had never hurried, had never been exhausted, or passionate, or afraid. Their talk, like that of many dozens of fine couples invading London from their country places, was of where to dine, what theatre they should go to, whom they had seen, what they should buy. And Shelton knew that from day's end to end, and even in their bed, these would be the subjects of their conversation. They were the best-bred people of the sort he met in country houses and accepted as of course, with a vague discomfort at the bottom of his soul. Antonia's home, for instance, had been full of them. They were the best-bred people of the sort who supported charities, knew everybody, had clear, calm judgment, and intolerance of all such conduct as seemed to them "impossible," all breaches of morality, such as mistakes of etiquette, such as dishonesty, passion, sympathy (except with a canonised class of objects – the legitimate sufferings, for instance, of their own families and class). How healthy they were! The memory of the doss-house worked in Shelton's mind like poison. He was conscious that in his own groomed figure, in the undemonstrative assurance of his walk, he bore resemblance to the couple he apostrophised. "Ah!" he thought, "how vulgar our refinement is!" But he hardly believed in his own outburst. These people were so well mannered, so well conducted, and so healthy, he could not really understand what irritated him. What was the matter with them? They fulfilled their duties, had good appetites, clear consciences, all the furniture of perfect citizens; they merely lacked-feelers, a

loss that, he had read, was suffered by plants and animals which no longer had a need for using them. Some rare natural faculty of seeing only the obvious and materially useful had destroyed their power of catching gleams or scents to right or left.

The lady looked up at her husband. The light of quiet, proprietary affection shone in her calm grey eyes, decorously illumining her features slightly reddened by the wind. And the husband looked back at her, calm, practical, protecting. They were very much alike. So doubtless he looked when he presented himself in snowy shirt-sleeves for her to straighten the bow of his white tie; so nightly she would look, standing before the full-length mirror, fixing his gifts upon her bosom. Calm, proprietary, kind! He passed them and walked behind a second less distinguished couple, who manifested a mutual dislike as matter-of-fact and free from nonsense as the unruffled satisfaction of the first; this dislike was just as healthy, and produced in Shelton about the same sensation. It was like knocking at a never-opened door, looking at a circle – couple after couple all the same. No heads, toes, angles of their souls stuck out anywhere. In the sea of their environments they were drowned; no leg braved the air, no arm emerged wet and naked waving at the skies; shop-persons, aristocrats, workmen, officials, they were all respectable. And he himself as respectable as any.

He returned, thus moody, to his rooms and, with the impetuosity which distinguished him when about to do an unwise

thing, he seized a pen and poured out before Antonia some of his impressions:

... Mean is the word, darling; we are mean, that's what 's the matter with us, dukes and dustmen, the whole human species – as mean as caterpillars. To secure our own property and our own comfort, to dole out our sympathy according to rule just so that it won't really hurt us, is what we're all after. There's something about human nature that is awfully repulsive, and the healthier people are, the more repulsive they seem to me to be...

He paused, biting his pen. Had he one acquaintance who would not counsel him to see a doctor for writing in that style? How would the world go round, how could Society exist, without common-sense, practical ability, and the lack of sympathy?

He looked out of the open window. Down in the street a footman was settling the rug over the knees of a lady in a carriage, and the decorous immovability of both their faces, which were clearly visible to him, was like a portion of some well-oiled engine.

He got up and walked up and down. His rooms, in a narrow square skirting Belgravia, were unchanged since the death of his father had made him a man of means. Selected for their centrality, they were furnished in a very miscellaneous way. They were not bare, but close inspection revealed that everything was damaged, more or less, and there was absolutely nothing that seemed to have an interest taken in it. His goods were accidents, presents, or the haphazard acquisitions of a pressing need.

Nothing, of course, was frowsy, but everything was somewhat dusty, as if belonging to a man who never rebuked a servant. Above all, there was nothing that indicated hobbies.

Three days later he had her answer to his letter:

.. I don't think I understand what you mean by "the healthier people are, the more repulsive they seem to be"; one must be healthy to be perfect, must n't one? I don't like unhealthy people. I had to play on that wretched piano after reading your letter; it made me feel unhappy. I've been having a splendid lot of tennis lately, got the back-handed lifting stroke at last – hurrah!.

By the same post, too, came the following note in an autocratic writing:

DEAR BIRD [for this was Shelton's college nickname],

My wife has gone down to her people, so I'm 'en garçon' for a few days. If you've nothing better to do, come and dine to-night at seven, and go to the theatre. It's ages since I saw you.

Yours as ever,

B. M. HALIDOME.

Shelton had nothing better to do, for pleasant were his friend Halidome's well-appointed dinners. At seven, therefore, he went to Chester Square. His friend was in his study, reading Matthew Arnold by the light of an electric lamp. The walls of the room were hung with costly etchings, arranged with solid and unfailing taste; from the carving of the mantel-piece to the binding of the books, from the miraculously-coloured meerschaums to the chased fire-irons, everything displayed an unpretentious luxury,

an order and a finish significant of life completely under rule of thumb. Everything had been collected. The collector rose as Shelton entered, a fine figure of a man, clean shaven, – with dark hair, a Roman nose, good eyes, and the rather weighty dignity of attitude which comes from the assurance that one is in the right.

Taking Shelton by the lapel, he drew him into the radius of the lamp, where he examined him, smiling a slow smile. “Glad to see you, old chap. I rather like your beard,” he said with genial brusqueness; and nothing, perhaps, could better have summed up his faculty for forming independent judgments which Shelton found so admirable. He made no apology for the smallness of the dinner, which, consisting of eight courses and three wines, served by a butler and one footman, smacked of the same perfection as the furniture; in fact, he never apologised for anything, except with a jovial brusqueness that was worse than the offence. The suave and reasonable weight of his dislikes and his approvals stirred Shelton up to feel ironical and insignificant; but whether from a sense of the solid, humane, and healthy quality of his friend’s egoism, or merely from the fact that this friendship had been long in bottle, he did not resent his mixed sensations.

“By the way, I congratulate you, old chap,” said Halidome, while driving to the theatre; there was no vulgar hurry about his congratulations, no more than about himself. “They’re awfully nice people, the Dennants.”

A sense of having had a seal put on his choice came over Shelton.

“Where are you going to live? You ought to come down and live near us; there are some ripping houses to be had down there; it’s really a ripping neighbourhood. Have you chucked the Bar? You ought to do something, you know; it’ll be fatal for you to have nothing to do. I tell you what, Bird: you ought to stand for the County Council.”

But before Shelton had replied they reached the theatre, and their energies were spent in sidling to their stalls. He had time to pass his neighbours in review before the play began. Seated next to him was a lady with large healthy shoulders, displayed with splendid liberality; beyond her a husband, red-cheeked, with drooping, yellow-grey moustache and a bald head; beyond him again two men whom he had known at Eton. One of them had a clean-shaved face, dark hair, and a weather-tanned complexion; his small mouth with its upper lip pushed out above the lower, his eyelids a little drooped over his watchful eyes, gave him a satirical and resolute expression. “I’ve got hold of your tail, old fellow,” he seemed to say, as though he were always busy with the catching of some kind of fox. The other’s goggling eyes rested on Shelton with a chaffing smile; his thick, sleek hair, brushed with water and parted in the middle, his neat moustache and admirable waistcoat, suggested the sort of dandyism that despises women. From his recognition of these old schoolfellows Shelton turned to look at Halidome, who, having cleared his throat, was staring straight before him at the curtain. Antonia’s words kept running in her lover’s head, “I don’t like unhealthy people.” Well,

all these people, anyway, were healthy; they looked as if they had defied the elements to endow them with a spark of anything but health. Just then the curtain rose.

Slowly, unwillingly, for he was of a trustful disposition, Shelton recognised that this play was one of those masterpieces of the modern drama whose characters were drawn on the principle that men were made for morals rather than morals made by men, and he watched the play unfold with all its careful sandwiching of grave and gay.

A married woman anxious to be ridded of her husband was the pivot of the story, and a number of scenes, ingeniously contrived, with a hundred reasons why this desire was wrong and inexpedient, were revealed to Shelton's eyes. These reasons issued mainly from the mouth of a well-preserved old gentleman who seemed to play the part of a sort of Moral Salesman. He turned to Halidome and whispered:

"Can you stand that old woman?"

His friend fixed his fine eyes on him wonderingly.

"What old woman?"

"Why, the old ass with the platitudes!"

Halidome's countenance grew cold, a little shocked, as though he had been assailed in person.

"Do you mean Pirbright?" he said. "I think he's ripping."

Shelton turned to the play rebuffed; he felt guilty of a breach of manners, sitting as he was in one of his friend's stalls, and he naturally set to work to watch the play more critically than ever.

Antonia's words again recurred to him, "I don't like unhealthy people," and they seemed to throw a sudden light upon this play. It was healthy!

The scene was a drawing-room, softly lighted by electric lamps, with a cat (Shelton could not decide whether she was real or not) asleep upon the mat.

The husband, a thick-set, healthy man in evening dress, was drinking off neat whisky. He put down his tumbler, and deliberately struck a match; then with even greater deliberation he lit a gold-tipped cigarette...

Shelton was no inexperienced play-goer. He shifted his elbows, for he felt that something was about to happen; and when the match was pitched into the fire, he leaned forward in his seat. The husband poured more whisky out, drank it at a draught, and walked towards the door; then, turning to the audience as if to admit them to the secret of some tremendous resolution, he puffed at them a puff of smoke. He left the room, returned, and once more filled his glass. A lady now entered, pale of face and dark of eye – his wife. The husband crossed the stage, and stood before the fire, his legs astride, in the attitude which somehow Shelton had felt sure he would assume. He spoke:

"Come in, and shut the door."

Shelton suddenly perceived that he was face to face with one of those dumb moments in which two people declare their inextinguishable hatred – the hatred underlying the sexual intimacy of two ill-assorted creatures – and he was suddenly

reminded of a scene he had once witnessed in a restaurant. He remembered with extreme minuteness how the woman and the man had sat facing each other across the narrow patch of white, emblazoned by a candle with cheap shades and a thin green vase with yellow flowers. He remembered the curious scornful anger of their voices, subdued so that only a few words reached him. He remembered the cold loathing in their eyes. And, above all, he remembered his impression that this sort of scene happened between them every other day, and would continue so to happen; and as he put on his overcoat and paid his bill he had asked himself, "Why in the name of decency do they go on living together?" And now he thought, as he listened to the two players wrangling on the stage: "What 's the good of all this talk? There's something here past words."

The curtain came down upon the act, and he looked at the lady next him. She was shrugging her shoulders at her husband, whose face was healthy and offended.

"I do dislike these unhealthy women," he was saying, but catching Shelton's eye he turned square in his seat and sniffed ironically.

The face of Shelton's friend beyond, composed, satirical as ever, was clothed with a mask of scornful curiosity, as if he had been listening to something that had displeased him not a little. The goggle-eyed man was yawning. Shelton turned to Halidome: "Can you stand this sort of thing?" said he.

"No; I call that scene a bit too hot," replied his friend.

Shelton wriggled; he had meant to say it was not hot enough.

“I’ll bet you anything,” he said, “I know what’s going to happen now. You’ll have that old ass – what’s his name? – lunching off cutlets and champagne to fortify himself – for a lecture to the wife. He’ll show her how unhealthy her feelings are – I know him – and he’ll take her hand and say, ‘Dear lady, is there anything in this poor world but the good opinion of Society?’ and he’ll pretend to laugh at himself for saying it; but you’ll see perfectly well that the old woman means it. And then he’ll put her into a set of circumstances that are n’t her own but his version of them, and show her the only way of salvation is to kiss her husband”; and Shelton grinned. “Anyway, I’ll bet you anything he takes her hand and says, ‘Dear lady.’”

Halidome turned on him the disapproval of his eyes, and again he said,

“I think Pirbright ‘s ripping!”

But as Shelton had predicted, so it turned out, amidst great applause.

CHAPTER V

THE GOOD CITIZEN

Leaving the theatre, they paused a moment in the hall to don their coats; a stream of people with spotless bosoms eddied round the doors, as if in momentary dread of leaving this hothouse of false morals and emotions for the wet, gusty streets, where human plants thrive and die, human weeds flourish and fade under the fresh, impartial skies. The lights revealed innumerable solemn faces, gleamed innumerable on jewels, on the silk of hats, then passed to whiten a pavement wet with newly-fallen rain, to flare on horses, on the visages of cabmen, and stray, queer objects that do not bear the light.

“Shall we walk?” asked Halidome.

“Has it ever struck you,” answered Shelton, “that in a play nowadays there’s always a ‘Chorus of Scandalmongers’ which seems to have acquired the attitude of God?”

Halidome cleared his throat, and there was something portentous in the sound.

“You’re so d – d fastidious,” was his answer.

“I’ve a prejudice for keeping the two things separate,” went on Shelton. “That ending makes me sick.”

“Why?” replied Halidome. “What other end is possible? You don’t want a play to leave you with a bad taste in your mouth.”

“But this does.”

Halidome increased his stride, already much too long; for in his walk, as in all other phases of his life, he found it necessary to be in front.

“How do you mean?” he asked urbanely; “it’s better than the woman making a fool of herself.”

“I’m thinking of the man.”

“What man?”

“The husband.”

“What ‘s the matter with him? He was a bit of a bounder, certainly.”

“I can’t understand any man wanting to live with a woman who doesn’t want him.”

Some note of battle in Shelton’s voice, rather than the sentiment itself, caused his friend to reply with dignity:

“There’s a lot of nonsense talked about that sort of thing. Women don’t really care; it’s only what’s put into their heads.”

“That’s much the same as saying to a starving man: ‘You don’t really want anything; it’s only what’s put into your head!’ You are begging the question, my friend.”

But nothing was more calculated to annoy Halidome than to tell him he was “begging the question,” for he prided himself on being strong in logic.

“That be d – d,” he said.

“Not at all, old chap. Here is a case where a woman wants her freedom, and you merely answer that she dogs n’t want it.”

“Women like that are impossible; better leave them out of

court.”

Shelton pondered this and smiled; he had recollected an acquaintance of his own, who, when his wife had left him, invented the theory that she was mad, and this struck him now as funny. But then he thought: “Poor devil! he was bound to call her mad! If he didn’t, it would be confessing himself distasteful; however true, you can’t expect a man to consider himself that.” But a glance at his friend’s eye warned him that he, too, might think his wife mad in such a case.

“Surely,” he said, “even if she’s his wife, a man’s bound to behave like a gentleman.”

“Depends on whether she behaves like a lady.”

“Does it? I don’t see the connection.”

Halidome paused in the act of turning the latch-key in his door; there was a rather angry smile in his fine eyes.

“My dear chap,” he said, “you’re too sentimental altogether.”

The word “sentimental” nettled Shelton. “A gentleman either is a gentleman or he is n’t; what has it to do with the way other people behave?”

Halidome turned the key in the lock and opened the door into his hall, where the firelight fell on the decanters and huge chairs drawn towards the blaze.

“No, Bird,” he said, resuming his urbanity, and gathering his coat-tails in his hands; “it’s all very well to talk, but wait until you’re married. A man must be master, and show it, too.”

An idea occurred to Shelton.

“Look here, Hal,” he said: “what should you do if your wife got tired of you?”

The expression on Halidome’s face was a mixture of amusement and contempt.

“I don’t mean anything personal, of course, but apply the situation to yourself.”

Halidome took out a toothpick, used it brusquely, and responded:

“I shouldn’t stand any humbug – take her travelling; shake her mind up. She’d soon come round.”

“But suppose she really loathed you?”

Halidome cleared his throat; the idea was so obviously indecent. How could anybody loathe him? With great composure, however, regarding Shelton as if he were a forward but amusing child, he answered:

“There are a great many things to be taken into consideration.”

“It appears to me,” said Shelton, “to be a question of common pride. How can you, ask anything of a woman who doesn’t want to give it.”

His friend’s voice became judicial.

“A man ought not to suffer,” he said, poring over his whisky, “because a woman gets hysteria. You have to think of Society, your children, house, money arrangements, a thousand things. It’s all very well to talk. How do you like this whisky?”

“The part of the good citizen, in fact,” said Shelton, “self-preservation!”

“Common-sense,” returned his friend; “I believe in justice before sentiment.” He drank, and callously blew smoke at Shelton. “Besides, there are many people with religious views about it.”

“It’s always seemed to me,” said Shelton, “to be quaint that people should assert that marriage gives them the right to ‘an eye for an eye,’ and call themselves Christians. Did you ever know anybody stand on their rights except out of wounded pride or for the sake of their own comfort? Let them call their reasons what they like, you know as well as I do that it’s cant.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Halidome, more and more superior as Shelton grew more warm; “when you stand on your rights, you do it for the sake of Society as well as for your own. If you want to do away with marriage, why don’t you say so?”

“But I don’t,” said Shelton, “is it likely? Why, I’m going – ” He stopped without adding the words “to be married myself,” for it suddenly occurred to him that the reason was not the most lofty and philosophic in the world. “All I can say is,” he went on soberly, “that you can’t make a horse drink by driving him. Generosity is the surest way of tightening the knot with people who’ve any sense of decency; as to the rest, the chief thing is to prevent their breeding.”

Halidome smiled.

“You’re a rum chap,” he said.

Shelton jerked his cigarette into the fire.

“I tell you what” – for late at night a certain power of vision

came to him – “it’s humbug to talk of doing things for the sake of Society; it’s nothing but the instinct to keep our own heads above the water.”

But Halidome remained unruffled.

“All right,” he said, “call it that. I don’t see why I should go to the wall; it wouldn’t do any good.”

“You admit, then,” said Shelton, “that our morality is the sum total of everybody’s private instinct of self-preservation?”

Halidome stretched his splendid frame and yawned.

“I don’t know,” he began, “that I should quite call it that – ”

But the compelling complacency of his fine eyes, the dignified posture of his healthy body, the lofty slope of his narrow forehead, the perfectly humane look of his cultivated brutality, struck Shelton as ridiculous.

“Hang it, Hall” he cried, jumping from his chair, “what an old fraud you are! I’ll be off.”

“No, look here!” said Halidome; the faintest shade of doubt had appeared upon his face; he took Shelton by a lapel: “You’re quite wrong – ”

“Very likely; good-night, old chap!”

Shelton walked home, letting the spring wind into him. It was Saturday, and he passed many silent couples. In every little patch of shadow he could see two forms standing or sitting close together, and in their presence Words the Impostors seemed to hold their tongues. The wind rustled the buds; the stars, one moment bright as diamonds, vanished the next. In the lower

streets a large part of the world was under the influence of drink, but by this Shelton was far from being troubled. It seemed better than Drama, than dressing-bagged men, unruffled women, and padded points of view, better than the immaculate solidity of his friend's possessions.

“So,” he reflected, “it’s right for every reason, social, religious, and convenient, to inflict one’s society where it’s not desired. There are obviously advantages about the married state; charming to feel respectable while you’re acting in a way that in any other walk of life would bring on you contempt. If old Halidome showed that he was tired of me, and I continued to visit him, he’d think me a bit of a cad; but if his wife were to tell him she couldn’t stand him, he’d still consider himself a perfect gentleman if he persisted in giving her the burden of his society; and he has the cheek to bring religion into it – a religion that says, ‘Do unto others!’.”

But in this he was unjust to Halidome, forgetting how impossible it was for him to believe that a woman could not stand him. He reached his rooms, and, the more freely to enjoy the clear lamplight, the soft, gusty breeze, and waning turmoil of the streets, waited a moment before entering.

“I wonder,” thought he, “if I shall turn out a cad when I marry, like that chap in the play. It’s natural. We all want our money’s worth, our pound of flesh! Pity we use such fine words – ‘Society, Religion, Morality.’ Humbug!”

He went in, and, throwing his window open, remained there

a long time, his figure outlined against the lighted room for the benefit of the dark square below, his hands in his pockets, his head down, a reflective frown about his eyes. A half-intoxicated old ruffian, a policeman, and a man in a straw hat had stopped below, and were holding a palaver.

“Yus,” the old ruffian said, “I’m a rackety old blank; but what I say is, if we wus all alike, this would n’t be a world!”

They went their way, and before the listener’s eyes there rose Antonia’s face, with its unruffled brow; Halidome’s, all health and dignity; the forehead of the goggle-eyed man, with its line of hair parted in the centre, and brushed across. A light seemed to illumine the plane of their existence, as the electric lamp with the green shade had illumined the pages of the Matthew Arnold; serene before Shelton’s vision lay that Elysium, untouched by passion or extremes of any kind, autocratic; complacent, possessive, and well-kept as any Midland landscape. Healthy, wealthy, wise! No room but for perfection, self-preservation, the survival of the fittest! “The part of the good citizen,” he thought: “no, if we were all alike, this would n’t be a world!”

CHAPTER VI

MARRIAGE SETTLEMENT

“My dear Richard” (wrote Shelton’s uncle the next day), “I shall be glad to see you at three o’clock to-morrow afternoon upon the question of your marriage settlement...” At that hour accordingly Shelton made his way to Lincoln’s Inn Fields, where in fat black letters the names “Paramor and Herring (Commissioners for Oaths)” were written on the wall of a stone entrance. He ascended the solid steps with nervousness, and by a small red-haired boy was introduced to a back room on the first floor. Here, seated at a table in the very centre, as if he thereby better controlled his universe, a pug-featured gentleman, without a beard, was writing. He paused. “Ow, Mr. Richard!” he said; “glad to see you, sir. Take a chair. Your uncle will be disengaged in ‘arf a minute”; and in the tone of his allusion to his employer was the satirical approval that comes with long and faithful service. “He will do everything himself,” he went on, screwing up his sly, greenish, honest eyes, “and he ‘s not a young man.”

Shelton never saw his uncle’s clerk without marvelling at the prosperity deepening upon his face. In place of the look of harassment which on most faces begins to grow after the age of fifty, his old friend’s countenance, as though in sympathy with the nation, had expanded – a little greasily, a little genially, a

little coarsely – every time he met it. A contemptuous tolerance for people who were not getting on was spreading beneath its surface; it left each time a deeper feeling that its owner could never be in the wrong.

“I hope you’re well, sir,” he resumed: “most important for you to have your health now you’re going-to” – and, feeling for the delicate way to put it, he involuntarily winked – “to become a family man. We saw it in the paper. My wife said to me the other morning at breakfast: ‘Bob, here’s a Mr. Richard Paramor Shelton goin’ to be married. Is that any relative of your Mr. Shelton?’ ‘My dear,’ I said to her, ‘it’s the very man!’.”

It disquieted Shelton to perceive that his old friend did not pass the whole of his life at that table writing in the centre of the room, but that somewhere (vistas of little grey houses rose before his eyes) he actually lived another life where someone called him “Bob.” Bob! And this, too, was a revelation. Bob! Why, of course, it was the only name for him! A bell rang.

“That’s your uncle”; and again the head clerk’s voice sounded ironical. “Good-bye, sir.”

He seemed to clip off intercourse as one clips off electric light. Shelton left him writing, and preceded the red-haired boy to an enormous room in the front where his uncle waited.

Edmund Paramor was a medium-sized and upright man of seventy, whose brown face was perfectly clean-shaven. His grey, silky hair was brushed in a cock’s comb from his fine forehead, bald on the left side. He stood before the hearth facing the room,

and his figure had the springy abruptness of men who cannot fatten. There was a certain youthfulness, too, in his eyes, yet they had a look as though he had been through fire; and his mouth curled at the corners in surprising smiles. The room was like the man – morally large, void of red-tape and almost void of furniture; no tin boxes were ranged against the walls, no papers littered up the table; a single bookcase contained a complete edition of the law reports, and resting on the Law Directory was a single red rose in a glass of water. It looked the room of one with a sober magnanimity, who went to the heart of things, despised haggling, and before whose smiles the more immediate kinds of humbug faded.

“Well, Dick,” said he, “how’s your mother?”

Shelton replied that his mother was all right.

“Tell her that I’m going to sell her Easterns after all, and put into this Brass thing. You can say it’s safe, from me.”

Shelton made a face.

“Mother,” said he, “always believes things are safe.”

His uncle looked through him with his keen, half-suffering glance, and up went the corners of his mouth.

“She’s splendid,” he said.

“Yes,” said Shelton, “splendid.”

The transaction, however, did not interest him; his uncle’s judgment in such matters had a breezy soundness he would never dream of questioning.

“Well, about your settlement”; and, touching a bell three

times, Mr. Paramor walked up and down the room. “Bring me the draft of Mr. Richard’s marriage settlement.”

The stalwart commissionaire reappearing with a document – “Now then, Dick,” said Mr. Paramor. “She ‘s not bringing anything into settlement, I understand; how ‘s that?”

“I did n’t want it,” replied Shelton, unaccountably ashamed.

Mr. Paramor’s lips quivered; he drew the draft closer, took up a blue pencil, and, squeezing Shelton’s arm, began to read. The latter, following his uncle’s rapid exposition of the clauses, was relieved when he paused suddenly.

“If you die and she marries again,” said Mr. Paramor, “she forfeits her life interest – see?”

“Oh!” said Shelton; “wait a minute, Uncle Ted.”

Mr. Paramor waited, biting his pencil; a smile flickered on his mouth, and was decorously subdued. It was Shelton’s turn to walk about.

“If she marries again,” he repeated to himself.

Mr. Paramor was a keen fisherman; he watched his nephew as he might have watched a fish he had just landed.

“It’s very usual,” he remarked.

Shelton took another turn.

“She forfeits,” thought he; “exactly.”

When he was dead, he would have no other way of seeing that she continued to belong to him. Exactly!

Mr. Paramor’s haunting eyes were fastened on his nephew’s face.

"Well, my dear," they seemed to say, "what 's the matter?"

Exactly! Why should she have his money if she married again? She would forfeit it. There was comfort in the thought. Shelton came back and carefully reread the clause, to put the thing on a purely business basis, and disguise the real significance of what was passing in his mind.

"If I die and she marries again," he repeated aloud, "she forfeits."

What wiser provision for a man passionately in love could possibly have been devised? His uncle's eye travelled beyond him, humanely turning from the last despairing wriggles of his fish.

"I don't want to tie her," said Shelton suddenly.

The corners of Mr. Paramour's mouth flew up.

"You want the forfeiture out?" he asked.

The blood rushed into Shelton's face; he felt he had been detected in a piece of sentiment.

"Ye-es," he stammered.

"Sure?"

"Quite!" The answer was a little sulky.

Her uncle's pencil descended on the clause, and he resumed the reading of the draft, but Shelton could not follow it; he was too much occupied in considering exactly why Mr. Paramor had been amused, and to do this he was obliged to keep his eyes upon him. Those features, just pleasantly rugged; the springy poise of the figure; the hair neither straight nor curly, neither short nor

long; the haunting look of his eyes and the humorous look of his mouth; his clothes neither shabby nor dandified; his serviceable, fine hands; above all, the equability of the hovering blue pencil, conveyed the impression of a perfect balance between heart and head, sensibility and reason, theory and its opposite.

“‘During coverture,’” quoted Mr. Paramor, pausing again, “you understand, of course, if you don’t get on, and separate, she goes on taking?”

If they didn’t get on! Shelton smiled. Mr. Paramor did not smile, and again Shelton had the sense of having knocked up against something poised but firm. He remarked irritably:

“If we ‘re not living together, all the more reason for her having it.”

This time his uncle smiled. It was difficult for Shelton to feel angry at that ironic merriment, with its sudden ending; it was too impersonal to irritate: it was too concerned with human nature.

“If – hum – it came to the other thing,” said Mr. Paramor, “the settlement’s at an end as far as she ‘s concerned. We ‘re bound to look at every case, you know, old boy.”

The memory of the play and his conversation with Halidome was still strong in Shelton. He was not one of those who could not face the notion of transferred affections – at a safe distance.

“All right, Uncle Ted,” said he. For one mad moment he was attacked by the desire to “throw in” the case of divorce. Would it not be common chivalry to make her independent, able to change her affections if she wished, unhampered by monetary troubles?

You only needed to take out the words “during coverture.”

Almost anxiously he looked into his uncle's face. There was no meanness there, but neither was there encouragement in that comprehensive brow with its wide sweep of hair. “Quixotism,” it seemed to say, “has merits, but – ” The room, too, with its wide horizon and tall windows, looking as if it dealt habitually in common-sense, discouraged him. Innumerable men of breeding and the soundest principles must have bought their wives in here. It was perfumed with the atmosphere of wisdom and law-calf. The aroma of Precedent was strong; Shelton swerved his lance, and once more settled down to complete the purchase of his wife.

“I can't conceive what you're – in such a hurry for; you 're not going to be married till the autumn,” said Mr. Paramor, finishing at last.

Replacing the blue pencil in the rack, he took the red rose from the glass, and sniffed at it. “Will you come with me as far as Pall Mall? I 'm going to take an afternoon off; too cold for Lord's, I suppose?”

They walked into the Strand.

“Have you seen this new play of Borogrove's?” asked Shelton, as they passed the theatre to which he had been with Halidome.

“I never go to modern plays,” replied Mr. Paramor; “too d – d gloomy.”

Shelton glanced at him; he wore his hat rather far back on his head, his eyes haunted the street in front; he had shouldered his umbrella.

"Psychology 's not in your line, Uncle Ted?"

"Is that what they call putting into words things that can't be put in words?"

"The French succeed in doing it," replied Shelton, "and the Russians; why should n't we?"

Mr. Paramor stopped to look in at a fishmonger's.

"What's right for the French and Russians, Dick," he said "is wrong for us. When we begin to be real, we only really begin to be false. I should like to have had the catching of that fellow; let's send him to your mother." He went in and bought a salmon:

"Now, my dear," he continued, as they went on, "do you tell me that it's decent for men and women on the stage to writhe about like eels? Is n't life bad enough already?"

It suddenly struck Shelton that, for all his smile, his uncle's face had a look of crucifixion. It was, perhaps, only the stronger sunlight in the open spaces of Trafalgar Square.

"I don't know," he said; "I think I prefer the truth."

"Bad endings and the rest," said Mr. Paramor, pausing under one of Nelson's lions and taking Shelton by a button. "Truth 's the very devil!"

He stood there, very straight, his eyes haunting his nephew's face; there seemed to Shelton a touching muddle in his optimism – a muddle of tenderness and of intolerance, of truth and second-handedness. Like the lion above him, he seemed to be defying Life to make him look at her.

"No, my dear," he said, handing sixpence to a sweeper;

“feelings are snakes! only fit to be kept in bottles with tight corks. You won’t come to my club? Well, good-bye, old boy; my love to your mother when you see her”; and turning up the Square, he left Shelton to go on to his own club, feeling that he had parted, not from his uncle, but from the nation of which they were both members by birth and blood and education.

CHAPTER VII

THE CLUB

He went into the library of his club, and took up Burke's Peerage. The words his uncle had said to him on hearing his engagement had been these: "Dennant! Are those the Holm Oaks Dennants? She was a Penguin."

No one who knew Mr. Paramor connected him with snobbery, but there had been an "Ah! that 's right; this is due to us" tone about the saying.

Shelton hunted for the name of Baltimore: "Charles Penguin, fifth Baron Baltimore. Issue: Alice, b. 184-, m. 186-Algernon Dennant, Esq., of Holm Oaks, Cross Eaton, Oxfordshire." He put down the Peerage and took up the 'Landed Gentry'. "Dennant, Algernon Cuffe, eldest son of the late Algernon Cuffe Dennant, Esq., J. P., and Irene, 2nd daur. of the Honble. Philip and Lady Lillian March Mallow; ed. Eton and Ch. Ch., Oxford, J. P. for Oxfordshire. Residence, Holm Oaks," etc., etc. Dropping the 'Landed Gentry', he took up a volume of the 'Arabian Nights', which some member had left reposing on the book-rest of his chair, but instead of reading he kept looking round the room. In almost every seat, reading or snoozing, were gentlemen who, in their own estimation, might have married Penguins. For the first time it struck him with what majestic leisureliness they turned the pages of their books, trifled with their teacups, or lightly

snored. Yet no two were alike – a tall man-with dark moustache, thick hair, and red, smooth cheeks; another, bald, with stooping shoulders; a tremendous old buck, with a grey, pointed beard and large white waistcoat; a clean-shaven dapper man past middle age, whose face was like a bird's; a long, sallow, misanthrope, and a sanguine creature fast asleep. Asleep or awake, reading or snoring, fat or thin, hairy or bald, the insulation of their red or pale faces was complete. They were all the creatures of good form. Staring at them or reading the Arabian Nights Shelton spent the time before dinner. He had not been long seated in the dining-room when a distant connection strolled up and took the next table.

“Ah, Shelton! Back? Somebody told me you were goin’ round the world.” He scrutinised the menu through his eyeglass. “Clear soup!.. Read Jellaby’s speech? Amusing the way he squashes all those fellows. Best man in the House, he really is.”

Shelton paused in the assimilation of asparagus; he, too, had been in the habit of admiring Jellaby, but now he wondered why. The red and shaven face beside him above a broad, pure shirt-front was swollen by good humour; his small, very usual, and hard eyes were fixed introspectively on the successful process of his eating.

“Success!” thought Shelton, suddenly enlightened – “success is what we admire in Jellaby. We all want success.. Yes,” he admitted, “a successful beast.”

“Oh!” said his neighbour, “I forgot. You’re in the other camp?”

“Not particularly. Where did you get that idea?”

His neighbour looked round negligently.

“Oh,” said he, “I somehow thought so”; and Shelton almost heard him adding, “There’s something not quite sound about you.”

“Why do you admire Jellaby?” he asked.

“Knows his own mind,” replied his neighbour; “it ‘s more than the others do.. This whitebait is n’t fit for cats! Clever fellow, Jellaby! No nonsense about him! Have you ever heard him speak? Awful good sport to watch him sittin’ on the Opposition. A poor lot they are!” and he laughed, either from appreciation of Jellaby sitting on a small minority, or from appreciation of the champagne bubbles in his glass.

“Minorities are always depressing,” said Shelton dryly.

“Eh? what?”

“I mean,” said Shelton, “it’s irritating to look at people who have n’t a chance of success – fellows who make a mess of things, fanatics, and all that.”

His neighbour turned his eyes inquisitively.

“Er – yes, quite,” said he; “don’t you take mint sauce? It’s the best part of lamb, I always think.”

The great room with its countless little tables, arranged so that every man might have the support of the gold walls to his back, began to regain its influence on Shelton. How many times had he not sat there, carefully nodding to acquaintances, happy if he got the table he was used to, a paper with the latest racing,

and someone to gossip with who was not a bounder; while the sensation of having drunk enough stole over him. Happy! That is, happy as a horse is happy who never leaves his stall.

“Look at poor little Bing puffin’ about,” said his neighbour, pointing to a weazened, hunchy waiter. “His asthma’s awf’ly bad, you can hear him wheezin’ from the street.”

He seemed amused.

“There ‘s no such thing as moral asthma, I suppose?” said Shelton.

His neighbour dropped his eyeglass.

“Here, take this away; it’s overdone;” said he. “Bring me some lamb.”

Shelton pushed his table back.

“Good-night,” he said; “the Stilton’s excellent!”

His neighbour raised his brows, and dropped his eyes again upon his plate.

In the hall Shelton went from force of habit to the weighing-scales and took his weight. “Eleven stone!” he thought; “gone up!” and, clipping a cigar, he sat down in the smoking-room with a novel.

After half an hour he dropped the book. There seemed something rather fatuous about this story, for though it had a thrilling plot, and was full of well-connected people, it had apparently been contrived to throw no light on anything whatever. He looked at the author’s name; everyone was highly recommending it. He began thinking, and staring at the fire...

Looking up, he saw Antonia's second brother, a young man in the Rifles, bending over him with sunny cheeks and lazy smile, clearly just a little drunk.

"Congratulate you, old chap! I say, what made you grow that b-b-eastly beard?"

Shelton grinned.

"Pillbottle of the Duchess!" read young Dennant, taking up the book. "You been reading that? Rippin', is n't it?"

"Oh, ripping!" replied Shelton.

"Rippin' plot! When you get hold of a novel you don't want any rot about – what d'you call it? – psychology, you want to be amused."

"Rather!" murmured Shelton.

"That's an awfully good bit where the President steals her diamonds There's old Benjy! Hallo, Benjy!"

"Hallo, Bill, old man!"

This Benjy was a young, clean-shaven creature, whose face and voice and manner were a perfect blend of steel and geniality.

In addition to this young man who was so smooth and hard and cheery, a grey, short-bearded gentleman, with misanthropic eyes, called Stroud, came up; together with another man of Shelton's age, with a moustache and a bald patch the size of a crown-piece, who might be seen in the club any night of the year when there was no racing out of reach of London.

"You know," began young Dennant, "that this bounder" – he slapped the young man Benjy on the knee – "is going to be spliced

to-morrow. Miss Casserol – you know the Casserols – Muncaster Gate.”

“By Jove!” said Shelton, delighted to be able to say something they would understand.

“Young Champion’s the best man, and I ‘m the second best. I tell you what, old chap, you ‘d better come with me and get your eye in; you won’t get such another chance of practice. Benjy ‘ll give you a card.”

“Delighted!” murmured Benjy.

“Where is it?”

“St. Briabas; two-thirty. Come and see how they do the trick. I’ll call for you at one; we’ll have some lunch and go together”; again he patted Benjy’s knee.

Shelton nodded his assent; the piquant callousness of the affair had made him shiver, and furtively he eyed the steely Benjy, whose suavity had never wavered, and who appeared to take a greater interest in some approaching race than in his coming marriage. But Shelton knew from his own sensations that this could not really be the case; it was merely a question of “good form,” the conceit of a superior breeding, the duty not to give oneself away. And when in turn he marked the eyes of Stroud fixed on Benjy, under shaggy brows, and the curious greedy glances of the racing man, he felt somehow sorry for him.

“Who ‘s that fellow with the game leg – I’m always seeing him about?” asked the racing man.

And Shelton saw a sallow man, conspicuous for a want of

parting in his hair and a certain restlessness of attitude.

“His name is Bayes,” said Stroud; “spends half his time among the Chinese – must have a grudge against them! And now he ‘s got his leg he can’t go there any more.”

“Chinese? What does he do to them?”

“Bibles or guns. Don’t ask me! An adventurer.”

“Looks a bit of a bounder,” said the racing man.

Shelton gazed at the twitching eyebrows of old Stroud; he saw at once how it must annoy a man who had a billet in the “Woods and Forests,” and plenty of time for “bridge” and gossip at his club, to see these people with untidy lives. A minute later the man with the “game leg” passed close behind his chair, and Shelton perceived at once how intelligible the resentment of his fellow-members was. He had eyes which, not uncommon in this country, looked like fires behind steel bars; he seemed the very kind of man to do all sorts of things that were “bad form,” a man who might even go as far as chivalry. He looked straight at Shelton, and his uncompromising glance gave an impression of fierce loneliness; altogether, an improper person to belong to such a club. Shelton remembered the words of an old friend of his father’s: “Yes, Dick, all sorts of fellows belong here, and they come here for all sorts o’ reasons, and a lot of em come because they’ve nowhere else to go, poor beggars”; and, glancing from the man with the “game leg” to Stroud, it occurred to Shelton that even he, old Stroud, might be one of these poor beggars. One never knew! A look at Benjy, contained and cheery, restored

him. Ah, the lucky devil! He would not have to come here any more! and the thought of the last evening he himself would be spending before long flooded his mind with a sweetness that was almost pain.

“Benjy, I’ll play you a hundred up!” said young Bill Dennant.

Stroud and the racing man went to watch the game; Shelton was left once more to reverie.

“Good form!” thought he; “that fellow must be made of steel. They’ll go on somewhere; stick about half the night playing poker, or some such foolery.”

He crossed over to the window. Rain had begun to fall; the streets looked wild and draughty. The cabmen were putting on their coats. Two women scurried by, huddled under one umbrella, and a thin-clothed, dogged-looking scarecrow lounged past with a surly, desperate step. Shelton, returning to his chair, threaded his way amongst his fellow-members. A procession of old school and college friends came up before his eyes. After all, what had there been in his own education, or theirs, to give them any other standard than this “good form”? What had there been to teach them anything of life? Their imbecility was incredible when you came to think of it. They had all the air of knowing everything, and really they knew nothing – nothing of Nature, Art, or the Emotions; nothing of the bonds that bind all men together. Why, even such words were not “good form”; nothing outside their little circle was “good form.” They had a fixed point of view over life because they came of certain schools, and

colleges, and regiments! And they were those in charge of the state, of laws, and science, of the army, and religion. Well, it was their system – the system not to start too young, to form healthy fibre, and let the after-life develop it!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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