

**JEROME
KLAPKA
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SKETCHES IN LAVENDER,
BLUE AND GREEN

Джером Джером

Sketches in Lavender, Blue and Green

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Jerome K. Jerome

Sketches in Lavender, Blue and Green

La-ven-der's blue, did-dle, did-dle!
La-ven-der's green;
When I am king, did-dle, did-dle!
You shall be queen.

Call up your men, did-dle, did-dle!
Set them to work;
Some to the plough, did-dle, did-dle!
Some to the cart.

Some to make hay, did-dle, did-dle!
Some to cut corn;
While you and I, did-dle, did-dle!
Keep ourselves warm.

REGINALD BLAKE, FINANCIER AND CAD

The advantage of literature over life is that its characters are clearly defined, and act consistently. Nature, always inartistic, takes pleasure in creating the impossible. Reginald Blake was as typical a specimen of the well-bred cad as one could hope to find between Piccadilly Circus and Hyde Park Corner. Vicious without passion, and possessing brain without mind, existence presented to him no difficulties, while his pleasures brought him no pains. His morality was bounded by the doctor on the one side, and the magistrate on the other. Careful never to outrage the decrees of either, he was at forty-five still healthy, though stout; and had achieved the not too easy task of amassing a fortune while avoiding all risk of Holloway. He and his wife, Edith (*née* Eppington), were as ill-matched a couple as could be conceived by any dramatist seeking material for a problem play. As they stood before the altar on their wedding morn, they might have been taken as symbolising satyr and saint. More than twenty years his junior, beautiful with the beauty of a Raphael's Madonna, his every touch of her seemed a sacrilege. Yet once in his life Mr. Blake played the part of a great gentleman; Mrs. Blake, on the same occasion, contenting herself with a singularly mean *rôle*—mean even for a woman in love.

The affair, of course, had been a marriage of convenience. Blake, to do him justice, had made no pretence to anything beyond admiration and regard. Few things grow monotonous sooner than irregularity. He would tickle his jaded palate with respectability, and try for a change the companionship of a good woman. The girl's face drew him, as the moonlight holds a man who, bored by the noise, turns from a heated room to press his forehead to the window-pane. Accustomed to bid for what he wanted, he offered his price. The Eppington family was poor and numerous. The girl, bred up to the false notions of duty inculcated by a narrow conventionality, and, feminine like, half in love with martyrdom for its own sake, let her father bargain for a higher price, and then sold herself.

To a drama of this description, a lover is necessary, if the complications are to be of interest to the outside world. Harry Sennett, a pleasant-looking enough young fellow, in spite of his receding chin, was possessed, perhaps, of more good intention than sense. Under the influence of Edith's stronger character he was soon persuaded to acquiesce meekly in the proposed arrangement. Both succeeded in convincing themselves that they were acting nobly. The tone of the farewell interview, arranged for the eve of the wedding, would have been fit and proper to the occasion had Edith been a modern Joan of Arc about to sacrifice her own happiness on the altar of a great cause; as the girl was merely selling herself into ease and luxury, for no higher motive than the desire to enable a certain number of more or less worthy relatives to continue living beyond their legitimate means, the sentiment was perhaps exaggerated. Many tears were shed, and many everlasting good-byes spoken, though, seeing that Edith's new home would be only a few streets off, and that of necessity their social set would continue to be the same, more experienced persons might have counselled hope. Three months after the marriage they found themselves side by side at the same dinner-table; and after a little melodramatic fencing with what they were pleased to regard as fate, they accommodated themselves to the customary positions.

Blake was quite aware that Sennett had been Edith's lover. So had half a dozen other men, some younger, some older than himself. He felt no more embarrassment at meeting them than, standing on the pavement outside the Stock Exchange, he would have experienced greeting his brother jobbers after a settling day that had transferred a fortune from their hands into his. Sennett, in particular, he liked and encouraged. Our whole social system, always a mystery to the philosopher, owes its existence to the fact that few men and women possess sufficient intelligence to be interesting to themselves. Blake liked company, but not much company liked Blake. Young Sennett, however, could always be relied upon to break the tediousness of the domestic dialogue. A common love of sport

drew the two men together. Most of us improve upon closer knowledge, and so they came to find good in one another.

“That is the man you ought to have married,” said Blake one night to his wife, half laughingly, half seriously, as they sat alone, listening to Sennett’s departing footsteps echoing upon the deserted pavement. “He’s a good fellow – not a mere money-grubbing machine like me.”

And a week later Sennett, sitting alone with Edith, suddenly broke out with:

“He’s a better man than I am, with all my high-falutin’ talk, and, upon my soul, he loves you. Shall I go abroad?”

“If you like,” was the answer.

“What would you do?”

“Kill myself,” replied the other, with a laugh, “or run away with the first man that asked me.”

So Sennett stayed on.

Blake himself had made the path easy to them. There was little need for either fear or caution. Indeed, their safest course lay in recklessness, and they took it. To Sennett the house was always open. It was Blake himself who, when unable to accompany his wife, would suggest Sennett as a substitute. Club friends shrugged their shoulders. Was the man completely under his wife’s thumb; or, tired of her, was he playing some devil’s game of his own? To most of his acquaintances the latter explanation seemed the more plausible.

The gossip, in due course, reached the parental home. Mrs. Eppington shook the vials of her wrath over the head of her son-in-law. The father, always a cautious man, felt inclined to blame his child for her want of prudence.

“She’ll ruin everything,” he said. “Why the devil can’t she be careful?”

“I believe the man is deliberately plotting to get rid of her,” said Mrs. Eppington. “I shall tell him plainly what I think.”

“You’re a fool, Hannah,” replied her husband, allowing himself the licence of the domestic hearth. “If you are right, you will only precipitate matters; if you are wrong, you will tell him what there is no need for him to know. Leave the matter to me. I can sound him without giving anything away, and meanwhile you talk to Edith.”

So matters were arranged, but the interview between mother and daughter hardly improved the position. Mrs. Eppington was conventionally moral; Edith had been thinking for herself, and thinking in a bad atmosphere. Mrs. Eppington, grew angry at the girl’s callousness.

“Have you no sense of shame?” she cried.

“I had once,” was Edith’s reply, “before I came to live here. Do you know what this house is for me, with its gilded mirrors, its couches, its soft carpets? Do you know what I am, and have been for two years?”

The elder woman rose, with a frightened pleading look upon her face, and the other stopped and turned away towards the window.

“We all thought it for the best,” continued Mrs. Eppington meekly.

The girl spoke wearily without looking round.

“Oh! every silly thing that was ever done, was done for the best. *I* thought it would be for the best, myself. Everything would be so simple if only we were not alive. Don’t let’s talk any more. All you can say is quite right.”

The silence continued for a while, the Dresden-china clock on the mantelpiece ticking louder and louder as if to say, “I, Time, am here. Do not make your plans forgetting me, little mortals; I change your thoughts and wills. You are but my puppets.”

“Then what do you intend to do?” demanded Mrs. Eppington at length.

“Intend! Oh, the right thing of course. We all intend that. I shall send Harry away with a few well-chosen words of farewell, learn to love my husband and settle down to a life of quiet domestic bliss. Oh, it’s easy enough to intend!”

The girl's face wrinkled with a laugh that aged her. In that moment it was a hard, evil face, and with a pang the elder woman thought of that other face, so like, yet so unlike – the sweet pure face of a girl that had given to a sordid home its one touch of nobility. As under the lightning's flash we see the whole arc of the horizon, so Mrs. Eppington looked and saw her child's life. The gilded, over-furnished room vanished. She and a big-eyed, fair-haired child, the only one of her children she had ever understood, were playing wonderful games in the twilight among the shadows of a tiny attic. Now she was the wolf, devouring Edith, who was Red Riding Hood, with kisses. Now Cinderella's prince, now both her wicked sisters. But in the favourite game of all, Mrs. Eppington was a beautiful princess, bewitched by a wicked dragon, so that she seemed to be an old, worn woman. But curly-headed Edith fought the dragon, represented by the three-legged rocking-horse, and slew him with much shouting and the toasting-fork. Then Mrs. Eppington became again a beautiful princess, and went away with Edith back to her own people.

In this twilight hour the misbehaviour of the "General," the importunity of the family butcher, and the airs assumed by cousin Jane, who kept two servants, were forgotten.

The games ended. The little curly head would be laid against her breast "for five minutes' love," while the restless little brain framed the endless question that children are for ever asking in all its thousand forms, "What is life, mother? I am very little, and I think, and think, until I grow frightened. Oh, mother, tell me, what is life?"

Had she dealt with these questions wisely? Might it not have been better to have treated them more seriously? Could life after all be ruled by maxims learned from copy-books? She had answered as she had been answered in her own far-back days of questioning. Might it not have been better had she thought for herself?

Suddenly Edith was kneeling on the floor beside her.

"I will try to be good, mother."

It was the old baby cry, the cry of us all, children that we are, till mother Nature kisses us and bids us go to sleep.

Their arms were round each other now, and so they sat, mother and child once more. And the twilight of the old attic, creeping westward from the east, found them again.

The masculine duet had more result, but was not conducted with the *finesse* that Mr. Eppington, who prided himself on his diplomacy, had intended. Indeed, so evidently ill at ease was that gentleman, when the moment came for talk, and so palpably were his pointless remarks mere efforts to delay an unpleasant subject, that Blake, always direct bluntly though not ill-naturedly asked him, "How much?"

Mr. Eppington was disconcerted.

"It's not that – at least that's not what I have come about," he answered confusedly.

"What have you come about?"

Inwardly Mr. Eppington cursed himself for a fool, for the which he was perhaps not altogether without excuse. He had meant to act the part of a clever counsel, acquiring information while giving none; by a blunder, he found himself in the witness-box.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," was the feeble response, "merely looked in to see how Edith was."

"Much the same as at dinner last night, when you were here," answered Blake. "Come, out with it."

It seemed the best course now, and Mr. Eppington took the plunge.

"Don't you think," he said, unconsciously glancing round the room to be sure they were alone, "that young Sennett is a little too much about the house?"

Blake stared at him.

"Of course, we know it is all right – as nice a young fellow as ever lived – and Edith – and all that. Of course, it's absurd, but –"

"But what?"

“Well, people will talk.”

“What do they say?”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

Blake rose. He had an ugly look when angry, and his language was apt to be coarse.

“Tell them to mind their own business, and leave me and my wife alone.” That was the sense of what he said; he expressed himself at greater length, and in stronger language.

“But, my dear Blake,” urged Mr. Eppington, “for your own sake, is it wise? There was a sort of boy and girl attachment between them – nothing of any moment, but all that gives colour to gossip. Forgive me, but I am her father; I do not like to hear my child talked about.”

“Then don’t open your ears to the chatter of a pack of fools,” replied his son-in-law roughly. But the next instant a softer expression passed over his face, and he laid his hand on the older man’s arm.

“Perhaps there are many more, but there’s one good woman in the world,” he said, “and that’s your daughter. Come and tell me that the Bank of England is getting shaky on its legs, and I’ll listen to you.”

But the stronger the faith, the deeper strike the roots of suspicion. Blake said no further word on the subject, and Sennett was as welcome as before. But Edith, looking up suddenly, would sometimes find her husband’s eyes fixed on her with a troubled look as of some dumb creature trying to understand; and often he would slip out of the house of an evening by himself, returning home hours afterwards, tired and mud-stained.

He made attempts to show his affection. This was the most fatal thing he could have done. Ill-temper, ill-treatment even, she might have borne. His clumsy caresses, his foolish, halting words of tenderness became a horror to her. She wondered whether to laugh or to strike at his upturned face. His tactless devotion filled her life as with some sickly perfume, stifling her. If only she could be by herself for a little while to think! But he was with her night and day. There were times when, as he would cross the room towards her, he grew monstrous until he towered above her, a formless thing such as children dream of. And she would sit with her lips tight pressed, clutching the chair lest she should start up screaming.

Her only thought was to escape from him. One day she hastily packed a few necessaries in a small hand-bag and crept unperceived from the house. She drove to Charing Cross, but the Continental Express did not leave for an hour, and she had time to think.

Of what use was it? Her slender stock of money would soon be gone; how could she live? He would find her and follow her. It was all so hopeless!

Suddenly a fierce desire of life seized hold of her, the angry answer of her young blood to despair. Why should she die, never having known what it was to live? Why should she prostrate herself before this juggernaut of other people’s respectability? Joy called to her; only her own cowardice stayed her from stretching forth her hand and gathering it. She returned home a different woman, for hope had come to her.

A week later the butler entered the dining room, and handed Blake a letter addressed to him in his wife’s handwriting. He took it without a word, as though he had been expecting it. It simply told him that she had left him for ever.

* * * * *

The world is small, and money commands many services. Sennett had gone out for a stroll; Edith was left in the tiny *salon* of their *appartement* at Fécamp. It was the third day of their arrival in the town. The door was opened and closed, and Blake stood before her.

She rose frightened, but by a motion he reassured her. There was a quiet dignity about the man that was strange to her.

“Why have you followed me?” she asked.

“I want you to return home.”

“Home!” she cried. “You must be mad. Do you not know – ”

He interrupted her vehemently. “I know nothing. I wish to know nothing. Go back to London at once. I have made everything right; no one suspects. I shall not be there; you will never see me again, and you will have an opportunity of undoing your mistake – our mistake.”

She listened. Hers was not a great nature, and the desire to obtain happiness without paying the price was strong upon her. As for his good name, what could that matter? he urged. People would only say that he had gone back to the evil from which he had emerged, and few would be surprised. His life would go on much as it had done, and she would only be pitied.

She quite understood his plan; it seemed mean of her to accept his proposal, and she argued feebly against it. But he overcame all her objections. For his own sake, he told her, he would prefer the scandal to be connected with his name rather than with that of his wife. As he unfolded his scheme, she began to feel that in acquiescing she was conferring a favour. It was not the first deception he had arranged for the public, and he appeared to be half in love with his own cleverness. She even found herself laughing at his mimicry of what this acquaintance and that would say. Her spirits rose; the play that might have been a painful drama seemed turning out an amusing farce.

The thing settled, he rose to go, and held out his hand. As she looked up into his face, something about the line of his lips smote upon her.

“You will be well rid of me,” she said. “I have brought you nothing but trouble.”

“Oh, trouble,” he answered. “If that were all! A man can bear trouble.”

“What else?” she asked.

His eyes travelled aimlessly about the room. “They taught me a lot of things when I was a boy,” he said, “my mother and others – they meant well – which as I grew older I discovered to be lies; and so I came to think that nothing good was true, and that everything and everybody was evil. And then – ”

His wandering eyes came round to her and he broke off abruptly. “Good-bye,” he said, and the next moment he was gone.

She sat wondering for a while what he had meant. Then Sennett returned, and the words went out of her head.

* * * * *

A good deal of sympathy was felt for Mrs. Blake. The man had a charming wife; he might have kept straight; but as his friends added, “Blake always was a cad.”

AN ITEM OF FASHIONABLE INTELLIGENCE

Speaking personally, I do not like the Countess of –. She is not the type of woman I could love. I hesitate the less giving expression to this sentiment by reason of the conviction that the Countess of – would not be unduly depressed even were the fact to reach her ears. I cannot conceive the Countess of –'s being troubled by the opinion concerning her of any being, human or divine, other than the Countess of –.

But to be honest, I must admit that for the Earl of – she makes an ideal wife. She rules him as she rules all others, relations and retainers, from the curate to the dowager, but the rod, though firmly held, is wielded with justice and kindly intent. Nor is it possible to imagine the Earl of –'s living as contentedly as he does with any partner of a less dominating turn of mind. He is one of those weak-headed, strong-limbed, good-natured, childish men, born to be guided in all matters, from the tying of a neck-cloth to the choice of a political party, by their women folk. Such men are in clover when their proprietor happens to be a good and sensible woman, but are to be pitied when they get into the hands of the selfish or the foolish. As very young men, they too often fall victims to bad-tempered chorus girls or to middle-aged matrons of the class from which Pope judged all womankind. They make capital husbands when well managed; treated badly, they say little, but set to work, after the manner of a dissatisfied cat, to find a kinder mistress, generally succeeding. The Earl of – adored his wife, deeming himself the most fortunate of husbands, and better testimonial than such no wife should hope for. Till the day she snatched him away from all other competitors, and claimed him for her own, he had obeyed his mother with a dutifulness bordering on folly. Were the countess to die to-morrow, he would be unable to tell you his mind on any single subject until his eldest daughter and his still unmarried sister, ladies both of strong character, attracted towards one another by a mutual antagonism, had settled between themselves which was to be mistress of him and of his house.

However, there is little fear (bar accidents) but that my friend the countess will continue to direct the hereditary vote of the Earl of – towards the goal of common sense and public good, guide his social policy with judgment and kindness, and manage his estates with prudence and economy for many years to come. She is a hearty, vigorous lady, of generous proportions, with the blood of sturdy forebears in her veins, and one who takes the same excellent good care of herself that she bestows on all others dependent upon her guidance.

“I remember,” said the doctor – we were dining with the doctor in homely fashion, and our wives had adjourned to the drawing-room to discuss servants and husbands and other domestic matters with greater freedom, leaving us to the claret and the twilight – “I remember when we had the cholera in the village – it must be twenty years ago now – that woman gave up the London season to stay down here and take the whole burden of the trouble upon her own shoulders. I do not feel any call to praise her; she liked the work, and she was in her element, but it was good work for all that. She had no fear. She would carry the children in her arms if time pressed and the little ambulance was not at hand. I have known her sit all night in a room not twelve feet square, between a dying man and his dying wife. But the thing never touched her. Six years ago we had the small-pox, and she went all through that in just the same way. I don't believe she has ever had a day's illness in her life. She will be physicking this parish when my bones are rattling in my coffin, and she will be laying down the laws of literature long after your statue has become a familiar ornament of Westminster Abbey. She's a wonderful woman, but a trifle masterful.”

He laughed, but I detected a touch of irritation in his voice. My host looked a man wishful to be masterful himself. I do not think he quite relished the calm way in which this grand dame took possession of all things around her, himself and his work included.

“Did you ever hear the story of the marriage?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, “whose marriage? The earl's?”

“I should call it the countess’s,” he answered. “It was the gossip of the county when I first came here, but other curious things have happened among us to push it gradually out of memory. Most people, I really believe, have quite forgotten that the Countess of – once served behind a baker’s counter.”

“You don’t say so,” I exclaimed. The remark, I admit, sounds weak when written down; the most natural remarks always do.

“It’s a fact,” said the doctor, “though she does not suggest the shop-girl, does she? But then I have known countesses, descended in a direct line from William the Conqueror, who did, so things balance one another. Mary, Countess of –, was, thirty years ago, Mary Sewell, daughter of a Taunton linen-draper. The business, profitable enough as country businesses go, was inadequate for the needs of the Sewell family, consisting, as I believe it did, of seven boys and eight girls. Mary, the youngest, as soon as her brief schooling was over, had to shift for herself. She seems to have tried her hand at one or two things, finally taking service with a cousin, a baker and confectioner, who was doing well in Oxford Street. She must have been a remarkably attractive girl; she’s a handsome woman now. I can picture that soft creamy skin when it was fresh and smooth, and the West of England girls run naturally to dimples and eyes that glisten as though they had been just washed in morning dew. The shop did a good trade in ladies’ lunches – it was the glass of sherry and sweet biscuit period. I expect they dressed her in some neat-fitting grey or black dress, with short sleeves, showing her plump arms, and that she flitted around the marble-topped tables, smiling, and looking cool and sweet. There the present Earl of –, then young Lord C-, fresh from Oxford, and new to the dangers of London bachelordom, first saw her. He had accompanied some female relatives to the photographer’s, and, hotels and restaurants being deemed impossible in those days for ladies, had taken them to Sewell’s to lunch. Mary Sewell waited upon the party; and now as many of that party as are above ground wait upon Mary Sewell.”

“He showed good sense in marrying her,” I said, “I admire him for it.” The doctor’s sixty-four Lafitte was excellent. I felt charitably inclined towards all men and women, even towards earls and countesses.

“I don’t think he had much to do with it,” laughed the doctor, “beyond being, like Barkis, ‘willing.’ It’s a queer story; some people profess not to believe it, but those who know her ladyship best think it is just the story that must be true, because it is so characteristic of her. And besides, I happen to know that it is true.”

“I should like to hear it,” I said.

“I am going to tell it you,” said the doctor, lighting a fresh cigar, and pushing the box towards me.

* * * * *

I will leave you to imagine the lad’s suddenly developed appetite for decanted sherry at sixpence a glass, and the familiar currant bun of our youth. He lunched at Sewell’s shop, he tea’d at Sewell’s, occasionally he dined at Sewell’s, off cutlets, followed by assorted pastry. Possibly, merely from fear lest the affair should reach his mother’s ears, for he was neither worldly-wise nor vicious, he made love to Mary under an assumed name; and to do the girl justice, it must be remembered that she fell in love with and agreed to marry plain Mr. John Robinson, son of a colonial merchant, a gentleman, as she must have seen, and a young man of easy means, but of a position not so very much superior to her own. The first intimation she received that her lover was none other than Lord C-, the future Earl of –, was vouchsafed her during a painful interview with his lordship’s mother.

“I never knew it, madam,” asserted Mary, standing by the window of the drawing-room above the shop, “upon my word of honour, I never knew it”

“Perhaps not,” answered her ladyship coldly. “Would you have refused him if you had?”

“I cannot tell,” was the girl’s answer; “it would have been different from the beginning. He courted me and asked me to be his wife.”

“We won’t go into all that,” interrupted the other; “I am not here to defend him. I do not say he acted well. The question is, how much will compensate you for your natural disappointment?”

Her ladyship prided herself upon her bluntness and practicability. As she spoke she took her cheque-book out of her reticule, and, opening it, dipped her pen into the ink. I am inclined to think that the flutter of that cheque-book was her ladyship’s mistake. The girl had common sense, and must have seen the difficulties in the way of a marriage between the heir to an earldom and a linen-draper’s daughter; and had the old lady been a person of discernment, the interview might have ended more to her satisfaction. She made the error of judging the world by one standard, forgetting there are individualities. Mary Sewell came from a West of England stock that, in the days of Drake and Frobisher, had given more than one able-bodied pirate to the service of the country, and that insult of the cheque-book put the fight into her. Her lips closed with a little snap, and the fear fell from her.

“I am sorry I don’t see my way to obliging your ladyship,” she said.

“What do you mean, girl?” asked the elder woman.

“I don’t mean to be disappointed,” answered the girl, but she spoke quietly and respectfully. “We have pledged our word to one another. If he is a gentleman, as I know he is, he will keep his, and I shall keep mine.”

Then her ladyship began to talk reason, as people do when it is too late. She pointed out to the girl the difference of social position, and explained to her the miseries that come from marrying out of one’s station. But the girl by this time had got over her surprise, and perhaps had begun to reflect that, in any case, a countess-ship was worth fighting for. The best of women are influenced by such considerations.

* * * * *

“I am not a lady, I know,” she replied quietly, “but my people have always been honest folk, well known, and I shall try to learn. I am not wishing to speak disrespectfully of my betters, but I was in service before I came here, ma’am, as lady’s maid, in a place where I saw much of what is called Society. I think I can be as good a lady as some I know, if not better.”

The countess began to grow angry again. “And who do you think will receive you?” she cried, “a girl who has served in a pastry-cook’s shop!”

“Lady L- came from behind the bar,” Mary answered, “and that’s not much better. And the Duchess of C-, I have heard, was a ballet girl, but nobody seems to remember it. I don’t think the people whose opinion is worth having will object to me for very long.” The girl was beginning rather to enjoy the contest.

“You profess to love my son,” cried the countess fiercely, “and you are going to ruin his life. You will drag him down to your own level.”

The girl must have looked rather fine at that moment, I should dearly love to have been present.

“There will be no dragging down, my lady,” she replied, “on either side. I do love your son very dearly. He is one of the kindest and best of gentlemen. But I am not blind, and whatever amount of cleverness there may be between us belongs chiefly to me. I shall make it my duty to fit myself for the position of his wife, and to help him in his work. You need not fear, my lady, I shall be a good wife to him, and he shall never regret it. You might find him a richer wife, a better educated wife, but you will never find him a wife who will be more devoted to him and to his interests.”

That practically brought the scene to a close. The countess had sense enough to see that she was only losing ground by argument. She rose and replaced her cheque-book in her bag.

“I think, my good girl, you must be mad,” she said; “if you will not allow me to do anything for you, there’s an end to the matter. I did not come here to quarrel with you. My son knows his duty to me and to his family. You must take your own course, and I must take mine.”

“Very well, my lady,” said Mary Sewell, holding the door open for her ladyship to pass out, “we shall see who wins.”

But however brave a front Mary Sewell may have maintained before the enemy, I expect she felt pretty limp when thinking matters calmly over after her ladyship’s departure. She knew her lover well enough to guess that he would be as wax in the firm hands of his mother, while she herself would not have a chance of opposing her influence against those seeking to draw him away from her. Once again she read through the few schoolboy letters he had written her, and then looked up at the framed photograph that hung above the mantelpiece of her little bedroom. The face was that of a frank, pleasant-looking young fellow, lightened by eyes somewhat large for a man, but spoiled by a painfully weak mouth. The more Mary Sewell thought, the more sure she felt in her own mind that he loved her, and had meant honestly by her. Did the matter rest with him, she might reckon on being the future Countess of – , but, unfortunately for her, the person to be considered was not Lord C-, but the present Countess of – . From childhood, through boyhood, into manhood it had never once occurred to Lord C- to dispute a single command of his mother’s, and his was not the type of brain to readily receive new ideas. If she was to win in the unequal contest it would have to be by art, not by strength. She sat down and wrote a letter which under all the circumstances was a model of diplomacy. She knew that it would be read by the countess, and, writing it, she kept both mother and son in mind. She made no reproaches, and indulged in but little sentiment. It was the letter of a woman who could claim rights, but who asked only for courtesy. It stated her wish to see him alone and obtain from his own lips the assurance that he wished their engagement to cease. “Do not fear,” Mary Sewell wrote, “that I shall be any annoyance to you. My own pride would not let me urge you to marry me against your desire, and I care for you too much to cause you any pain. Assure me with your own lips that you wish our engagement to be at an end, and I shall release you without another word.”

The family were in town, and Mary sent her letter by a trusty hand. The countess read it with huge satisfaction, and, re-sealing it, gave it herself into her son’s hands. It promised a happy solution of the problem. In imagination, she had all the night been listening to a vulgar breach of promise case. She herself had been submitted to a most annoying cross-examination by a pert barrister. Her son’s assumption of the name of Robinson had been misunderstood and severely commented upon by the judge. A sympathetic jury had awarded thumping damages, and for the next six months the family title would be a peg on which music-hall singers and comic journalists would hang their ribald jokes. Lord C- read the letter, flushed, and dutifully handed it back to his mother. She made pretence to read it as for the first time, and counselled him to accord the interview.

“I am so glad,” she said, “that the girl is taking the matter sensibly. We must really do something for her in the future, when everything is settled. Let her ask for me, and then the servants will fancy she’s a lady’s maid or something of that sort, come after a place, and won’t talk.”

So that evening Mary Sewell, addressed by the butler as “young woman,” was ushered into the small drawing-room that connects the library of No. – Grosvenor Square with the other reception rooms. The countess, now all amiability, rose to meet her.

“My son will be here in a moment,” she explained, “he has informed me of the purport of your letter. Believe me, my dear Miss Sewell, no one can regret his thoughtless conduct more than I do. But young men will be young men, and they do not stop to reflect that what may be a joke to them may be taken quite seriously by others.”

“I don’t regard the matter as a joke, my lady,” replied Mary somewhat curtly.

“Of course not, my dear,” added the countess, “that’s what I’m saying. It was very wrong of him altogether. But with your pretty face, you will not, I am sure, have long to wait for a husband; we must see what we can do for you.”

The countess certainly lacked tact; it must have handicapped her exceedingly.

“Thank you,” answered the girl, “but I prefer to choose my own.”

Fortunately – or the interview might have ended in another quarrel – the cause of all the trouble at this moment entered the room, and the countess, whispering a few final words of instruction to him as she passed out, left them together.

Mary took a chair in the centre of the room, at equal distance from both doors. Lord C-, finding any sort of a seat uncomfortable under the circumstances, preferred to stand with his back to the mantelpiece. Dead silence was maintained for a few seconds, and then Mary, drawing the daintiest of handkerchiefs from her pocket, began to cry. The countess must have been a poor diplomatist, or she might have thought of this; or she may have remembered her own appearance on the rare occasions when she herself, a big, raw-boned girl, had attempted the softening influence of tears, and have attached little importance to the possibility. But when these soft, dimpled women cry, and cry quietly, it is another matter. Their eyes grow brighter, and the tears, few and far between, lie like dewdrops on a rose leaf.

Lord C- was as tender-hearted a lout as ever lived. In a moment he was on his knees with his arm round the girl's waist, pouring out such halting words of love and devotion as came to his unready brain, cursing his fate, his earldom, and his mother, and assuring Mary that his only chance of happiness lay in his making her his countess. Had Mary liked to say the word at that moment, he would have caught her to his arms, and defied the whole world – for the time being. But Mary was a very practical young woman, and there are difficulties in the way of handling a lover, who, however ready he may be to do your bidding so long as your eyes are upon him, is liable to be turned from his purpose so soon as another influence is substituted for your own. His lordship suggested an immediate secret marriage. But you cannot run out into the street, knock up a clergyman, and get married on the spot, and Mary knew that the moment she was gone his lordship's will would revert to his mother's keeping. Then his lordship suggested flight, but flight requires money, and the countess knew enough to keep his lordship's purse in her own hands. Despair seized upon his lordship.

“It's no use,” he cried, “it will end in my marrying her.”

“Who's she?” exclaimed Mary somewhat quickly.

His lordship explained the position. The family estates were heavily encumbered. It was deemed advisable that his lordship should marry Money, and Money, in the person of the only daughter of rich and ambitious parvenus, had offered itself – or, to speak more correctly, had been offered.

“What's she like?” asked Mary.

“Oh, she's nice enough,” was the reply, “only I don't care for her and she doesn't care for me. It won't be much fun for either of us,” and his lordship laughed dismally.

“How do you know she doesn't care for you?” asked Mary. A woman may be critical of her lover's shortcomings, but at the very least he is good enough for every other woman.

“Well, she happens to care for somebody else,” answered his lordship, “she told me so herself.”

That would account for it.

“And is she willing to marry you?” inquired Mary.

His lordship shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, well, you know, her people want it,” he replied.

In spite of her trouble, the girl could not help a laugh. These young swells seemed to have but small wills of their own. Her ladyship, on the other side of the door, grew nervous. It was the only sound she had been able to hear.

“It's deuced awkward,” explained his lordship, “when you're – well, when you are anybody, you know. You can't do as you like. Things are expected of you, and there's such a lot to be considered.”

Mary rose and clasped her pretty dimpled hands, from which she had drawn her gloves, behind his neck.

“You do love me, Jack?” she said, looking up into his face.

For answer the lad hugged her to him very tightly, and there were tears in his eyes.

“Look here, Mary,” he cried, “if I could only get rid of my position, and settle down with you as a country gentleman, I’d do it to-morrow. Damn the title, it’s going to be the curse of my life.”

Perhaps in that moment Mary also wished that the title were at the bottom of the sea, and that her lover were only the plain Mr. John Robinson she had thought him. These big, stupid men are often very loveable in spite of, or because of their weakness. They appeal to the mother side of a woman’s heart, and that is the biggest side in all good women.

Suddenly however, the door opened. The countess appeared, and sentiment flew out. Lord C-, releasing Mary, sprang back, looking like a guilty school-boy.

“I thought I heard Miss Sewell go out,” said her ladyship in the icy tones that had never lost their power of making her son’s heart freeze within him. “I want to see you when you are free.”

“I shan’t be long,” stammered his lordship. “Mary – Miss Sewell is just going.”

Mary waited without moving until the countess had left and closed the door behind her. Then she turned to her lover and spoke in quick, low tones.

“Give me her address – the girl they want you to marry!”

“What are you going to do?” asked his lordship.

“I don’t know,” answered the girl, “but I’m going to see her.”

She scribbled the name down, and then said, looking the boy squarely in the face:

“Tell me frankly, Jack, do you want to marry me, or do you not?”

“You know I do, Mary,” he answered, and his eyes spoke stronger than his words. “If I weren’t a silly ass, there would be none of this trouble. But I don’t know how it is; I say to myself I’ll do, a thing, but the mater talks and talks and – ”

“I know,” interrupted Mary with a smile. “Don’t argue with her, fall in with all her views, and pretend to agree with her.”

“If you could only think of some plan,” said his lordship, catching at the hope of her words, “you are so clever.”

“I am going to try,” answered Mary, “and if I fail, you must run off with me, even if you have to do it right before your mother’s eyes.”

What she meant was, “I shall have to run off with you,” but she thought it better to put it the other way about.

Mary found her involuntary rival a meek, gentle little lady, as much under the influence of her blustering father as was Lord C- under that of his mother. What took place at the interview one can only surmise; but certain it is that the two girls, each for her own ends, undertook to aid and abet one another.

Much to the surprised delight of their respective parents, there came about a change in the attitude hitherto assumed towards one another by Miss Clementina Hodskiss and Lord C-. All objections to his lordship’s unwilling attentions were suddenly withdrawn by the lady. Indeed, so swift to come and go are the whims of women, his calls were actually encouraged, especially when, as generally happened, they coincided with the absence from home of Mr. and Mrs. Hodskiss. Quite as remarkable was the new-born desire of Lord C- towards Miss Clementina Hodskiss. Mary’s name was never mentioned, and the suggestion of immediate marriage was listened to without remonstrance. Wiser folk would have puzzled their brains, but both her ladyship and ex-Contractor Hodskiss were accustomed to find all things yield to their wishes. The countess saw visions of a rehabilitated estate, and Clementina’s father dreamed of a peerage, secured by the influence of aristocratic connections. All that the young folks stipulated for (and on that point their firmness was supernatural) was that the marriage should be quiet, almost to the verge of secrecy.

“No beastly fuss,” his lordship demanded. “Let it be somewhere in the country, and no mob!” and his mother, thinking she understood his reason, patted his cheek affectionately.

“I should like to go down to Aunt Jane’s and be married quietly from there,” explained Miss Hodskiss to her father.

Aunt Jane resided on the outskirts of a small Hampshire village, and “sat under” a clergyman famous throughout the neighbourhood for having lost the roof to his mouth.

“You can’t be married by that old fool,” thundered her father – Mr. Hodskiss always thundered; he thundered even his prayers.

“He christened me,” urged Miss Clementina.

“And Lord knows what he called you. Nobody can understand a word he says.”

“I’d like him to marry me,” reiterated Miss Clementina.

Neither her ladyship nor the contractor liked the idea. The latter in particular had looked forward to a big function, chronicled at length in all the newspapers. But after all, the marriage was the essential thing, and perhaps, having regard to some foolish love passages that had happened between Clementina and a certain penniless naval lieutenant, ostentation might be out of place.

So in due course Clementina departed for Aunt Jane’s, accompanied only by her maid.

Quite a treasure was Miss Hodskiss’s new maid.

“A clean, wholesome girl,” said of her Contractor Hodskiss, who cultivated affability towards the lower orders; “knows her place, and talks sense. You keep that girl, Clemmy.”

“Do you think she knows enough?” hazarded the maternal Hodskiss.

“Quite sufficient for any decent woman,” retorted the contractor. “When Clemmy wants painting and stuffing, it will be time enough for her to think about getting one of your ‘*Ach Himmels*’ or ‘*Mon Dieu*’.”

“I like the girl myself immensely,” agreed Clementina’s mother. “You can trust her, and she doesn’t give herself airs.”

Her praises reached even the countess, suffering severely at the moment from the tyranny of an elderly Fraulein.

“I must see this treasure,” thought the countess to herself. “I am tired of these foreign minxes.”

But no matter at what cunning hour her ladyship might call, the “treasure” always happened for some reason or other to be abroad.

“Your girl is always out when I come,” laughed the countess. “One would fancy there was some reason for it.”

“It does seem odd,” agreed Clementina, with a slight flush.

Miss Hodskiss herself showed rather than spoke her appreciation of the girl. She seemed unable to move or think without her. Not even from the interviews with Lord C- was the maid always absent.

The marriage, it was settled, should be by licence. Mrs. Hodskiss made up her mind at first to run down and see to the preliminaries, but really when the time arrived it hardly seemed necessary to take that trouble. The ordering of the whole affair was so very simple, and the “treasure” appeared to understand the business most thoroughly, and to be willing to take the whole burden upon her own shoulders. It was not, therefore, until the evening before the wedding that the Hodskiss family arrived in force, filling Aunt Jane’s small dwelling to its utmost capacity. The swelling figure of the contractor, standing beside the tiny porch, compelled the passer-by to think of the doll’s house in which the dwarf resides during fair-time, ringing his own bell out of his own first-floor window. The countess and Lord C- were staying with her ladyship’s sister, the Hon. Mrs. J-, at G- Hall, some ten miles distant, and were to drive over in the morning. The then Earl of – was in Norway, salmon fishing. Domestic events did not interest him.

Clementina complained of a headache after dinner, and went to bed early. The “treasure” also was indisposed. She seemed worried and excited.

“That girl is as eager about the thing,” remarked Mrs. Hodskiss, “as though it was her own marriage.”

In the morning Clementina was still suffering from her headache, but asserted her ability to go through the ceremony, provided everybody would keep away, and not worry her. The “treasure” was the only person she felt she could bear to have about her. Half an hour before it was time to start for church her mother looked her up again. She had grown still paler, if possible, during the interval, and also more nervous and irritable. She threatened to go to bed and stop there if she was not left quite alone. She almost turned her mother out of the room, locking the door behind her. Mrs. Hodskiss had never known her daughter to be like this before.

The others went on, leaving her to follow in the last carriage with her father. The contractor, forewarned, spoke little to her. Only once he had occasion to ask her a question, and then she answered in a strained, unnatural voice. She appeared, so far as could be seen under her heavy veil, to be crying.

“Well, this is going to be a damned cheerful wedding,” said Mr. Hodskiss, and lapsed into sulkiness.

The wedding was not so quiet as had been anticipated. The village had got scent of it, and had spread itself upon the event, while half the house party from G- Hall had insisted on driving over to take part in the proceedings. The little church was better filled than it had been for many a long year past.

The presence of the stylish crowd unnerved the ancient clergyman, long unaccustomed to the sight of a strange face, and the first sound of the ancient clergyman’s voice unnerved the stylish crowd. What little articulation he possessed entirely disappeared, no one could understand a word he said. He appeared to be uttering sounds of distress. The ancient gentleman’s infliction had to be explained in low asides, and it also had to be explained why such an one had been chosen to perform the ceremony.

“It was a whim of Clementina’s,” whispered her mother. “Her father and myself were married from here, and he christened her. The dear child’s full of sentiment. I think it so nice of her.”

Everybody agreed it was charming, but wished it were over. The general effect was weird in the extreme.

Lord C- spoke up fairly well, but the bride’s responses were singularly indistinct, the usual order of things being thus reversed. The story of the naval lieutenant was remembered, and added to, and some of the more sentimental of the women began to cry in sympathy.

In the vestry things assumed a brighter tone. There was no lack of witnesses to sign the register. The verger pointed out to them the place, and they wrote their names, as people in such cases do, without stopping to read. Then it occurred to some one that the bride had not yet signed. She stood apart, with her veil still down, and appeared to have been forgotten. Encouraged, she came forward meekly, and took the pen from the hand of the verger. The countess came and stood behind her.

“Mary,” wrote the bride, in a hand that looked as though it ought to have been firm, but which was not.

“Dear me,” said the countess, “I never knew there was a Mary in your name. How differently you write when you write slowly.”

The bride did not answer, but followed with “Susannah.”

“Why, what a lot of names you must have, my dear!” exclaimed the countess. “When are you going to get to the ones we all know?”

“Ruth,” continued the bride without answering.

Breeding is not always proof against strong emotion. The countess snatched the bride’s veil from her face, and Mary Susannah Ruth Sewell stood before her, flushed and trembling, but looking none the less pretty because of that. At this point the crowd came in useful.

“I am sure your ladyship does not wish a scene,” said Mary, speaking low. “The thing is done.”

“The thing can be undone, and will be,” retorted the countess in the same tone. “You, you –”

“My wife, don’t forget that, mother,” said Lord C- coming between them, and slipping Mary’s hand on to his arm. “We are both sorry to have had to go about the thing in this roundabout way,

but we wanted to avoid a fuss. I think we had better be getting away. I'm afraid Mr. Hodskiss is going to be noisy."

* * * * *

The doctor poured himself out a glass of claret, and drank it off. His throat must have been dry.

"And what became of Clementina?" I asked. "Did the naval lieutenant, while the others were at church, dash up in a post-chaise and carry her off?"

"That's what ought to have happened, for the whole thing to be in keeping," agreed the doctor. "I believe as a matter of fact she did marry him eventually, but not till some years later, after the contractor had died."

"And did Mr. Hodskiss make a noise in the vestry?" I persisted. The doctor never will finish a story.

"I can't say for certain," answered my host, "I only saw the gentleman once. That was at a shareholders' meeting. I should incline to the opinion that he did."

"I suppose the bride and bridegroom slipped out as quietly as possible and drove straight off," I suggested.

"That would have been the sensible thing for them to do," agreed the doctor.

"But how did she manage about her travelling frock?" I continued. "She could hardly have gone back to her Aunt Jane's and changed her things." The doctor has no mind for minutiae.

"I cannot tell you about all that," he replied. "I think I mentioned that Mary was a practical girl. Possibly she had thought of these details."

"And did the countess take the matter quietly?" I asked.

I like a tidy story, where everybody is put into his or her proper place at the end. Your modern romance leaves half his characters lying about just anyhow.

"That also I cannot tell you for certain," answered the doctor, "but I give her credit for so much sense. Lord C- was of age, and with Mary at his elbow, quite knew his own mind. I believe they travelled for two or three years. The first time I myself set eyes on the countess (*née* Mary Sewell) was just after the late earl's death. I thought she looked a countess, every inch of her, but then I had not heard the story. I mistook the dowager for the housekeeper."

BLASÉ BILLY

It was towards the end of August. He and I appeared to be the only two men left to the Club. He was sitting by an open window, the *Times* lying on the floor beside him. I drew my chair a little closer and remarked: – “Good morning.”

He suppressed a yawn, and replied “Mornin” – dropping the “g.” The custom was just coming into fashion; he was always correct.

“Going to be a very hot day, I am afraid,” I continued.

“Fraid so,” was the response, after which he turned his head away and gently closed his eyes.

I opined that conversation was not to his wish, but this only made me more determined to talk, and to talk to him above all others in London. The desire took hold of me to irritate him – to break down the imperturbable calm within which he moved and had his being; and I gathered myself together, and settled down to the task.

“Interesting paper the *Times*,” I observed.

“Very,” he replied, taking it from the floor and handing it to me. “Won’t you read it?”

I had been careful to throw into my voice an aggressive cheeriness which I had calculated would vex him, but his manner remained that of a man who is simply bored. I argued with him politely concerning the paper; but he insisted, still with the same weary air, that he had done with it. I thanked him effusively. I judged that he hated effusiveness.

“They say that to read a *Times* leader,” I persisted, “is a lesson in English composition.”

“So I’ve been told,” he answered tranquilly. “Personally I don’t take them.”

The *Times*, I could see, was not going to be of much assistance to me. I lit a cigarette, and remarked that he was not shooting. He admitted the fact. Under the circumstances, it would have taxed him to deny it, but the necessity for confession aroused him.

“To myself,” he said, “a tramp through miles of mud, in company with four gloomy men in black velveteen, a couple of depressed-looking dogs, and a heavy gun, the entire cavalcade being organised for the purpose of killing some twelve-and-sixpence worth of poultry, suggests the disproportionate.”

I laughed boisterously, and cried, “Good, good – very good!”

He was the type of man that shudders inwardly at the sound of laughter. I had the will to slap him on the back, but I thought maybe that would send him away altogether.

I asked him if he hunted. He replied that fourteen hours’ talk a day about horses, and only about horses tired him, and that in consequence he had abandoned hunting.

“You fish?” I said.

“I was never sufficiently imaginative,” he answered.

“You travel a good deal,” I suggested.

He had apparently made up his mind to abandon himself to his fate, for he turned towards me with a resigned air. An ancient nurse of mine had always described me as the most “wearing” child she had ever come across. I prefer to speak of myself as persevering.

“I should go about more,” he said, “were I able to see any difference between one place and another.”

“Tried Central Africa?” I inquired.

“Once or twice,” he answered. “It always reminds me of Kew Gardens.”

“China?” I hazarded.

“Cross between a willow-pattern plate and a New York slum,” was his comment.

“The North Pole?” I tried, thinking the third time might be lucky.

“Never got quite up to it,” he returned. “Reached Cape Hakluyt once.”

“How did that impress you?” I asked.

“It didn’t impress me,” he replied.

The talk drifted to women and bogus companies, dogs, literature, and such-like matters. I found him well informed upon and bored by all.

“They used to be amusing,” he said, speaking of the first named, “until they began to take themselves seriously. Now they are merely silly.”

I was forced into closer companionship with “Blasé Billy” that autumn, for by chance a month later he and I found ourselves the guests of the same delightful hostess, and I came to liking him better. He was a useful man to have about one. In matters of fashion one could always feel safe following his lead. One knew that his necktie, his collar, his socks, if not the very newest departure, were always correct; and upon social paths, as guide, philosopher, and friend, he was invaluable. He knew every one, together with his or her previous convictions. He was acquainted with every woman’s past, and shrewdly surmised every man’s future. He could point you out the coal-shed where the Countess of Glenleman had gambolled in her days of innocence, and would take you to breakfast at the coffee-shop off the Mile End Road where “Sam. Smith, Estd. 1820,” own brother to the world-famed society novelist, Smith-Stratford, lived an uncriticised, unparagraphed, unphotographed existence upon the profits of “rashers” at three-ha’pence and “door-steps” at two a penny. He knew at what houses it was inadvisable to introduce soap, and at what tables it would be bad form to denounce political jobbery. He could tell you offhand what trade-mark went with what crest, and remembered the price paid for every baronetcy created during the last twenty-five years.

Regarding himself, he might have made claim with King Charles never to have said a foolish thing, and never to have done a wise one. He despised, or affected to despise, most of his fellow-men, and those of his fellow-men whose opinion was most worth having unaffectedly despised him.

Shortly described, one might have likened him to a Gaiety Johnny with brains. He was capital company after dinner, but in the early morning one avoided him.

So I thought of him until one day he fell in love; or to put it in the words of Teddy Tidmarsh, who brought the news to us, “got mashed on Gerty Lovell.”

“The red-haired one,” Teddy explained, to distinguish her from her sister, who had lately adopted the newer golden shade.

“Gerty Lovell!” exclaimed the captain, “why, I’ve always been told the Lovell girls hadn’t a penny among them.”

“The old man’s stone broke, I know for a certainty,” volunteered Teddy, who picked up a mysterious but, in other respects, satisfactory income in an office near Hatton Garden, and who was candour itself concerning the private affairs of everybody but himself.

“Oh, some rich pork-packing or diamond-sweating uncle has cropped up in Australia, or America, or one of those places,” suggested the captain, “and Billy’s got wind of it in good time. Billy knows his way about.”

We agreed that some such explanation was needed, though in all other respects Gerty Lovell was just the girl that Reason (not always consulted on these occasions) might herself have chosen for “Blasé Billy’s” mate.

The sunlight was not too kind to her, but at evening parties, where the lighting has been well considered, I have seen her look quite girlish. At her best she was not beautiful, but at her worst there was about her an air of breeding and distinction that always saved her from being passed over, and she dressed to perfection. In character she was the typical society woman: always charming, generally insincere. She went to Kensington for her religion and to Mayfair for her morals; accepted her literature from Mudie’s and her art from the Grosvenor Gallery; and could and would gabble philanthropy, philosophy, and politics with equal fluency at every five-o’clock tea-table she visited. Her ideas could always be guaranteed as the very latest, and her opinion as that of the person to whom she was talking. Asked by a famous novelist one afternoon, at the Pioneer Club, to give him some

idea of her, little Mrs. Bund, the painter's wife, had remained for a few moments with her pretty lips pursed, and had then said:

“She is a woman to whom life could bring nothing more fully satisfying than a dinner invitation from a duchess, and whose nature would be incapable of sustaining deeper suffering than that caused by an ill-fitting costume.”

At the time I should have said the epigram was as true as it was cruel, but I suppose we none of us quite know each other.

I congratulated “Blasé Billy,” or to drop his Club nickname and give him the full benefit of his social label, “The Hon. William Cecil Wychwood Stanley Drayton,” on the occasion of our next meeting, which happened upon the steps of the Savoy Restaurant, and I thought – unless a quiver of the electric light deceived me – that he blushed.

“Charming girl,” I said. “You’re a lucky dog, Billy.”

It was the phrase that custom demands upon such occasions, and it came of its own accord to my tongue without costing me the trouble of composition, but he seized upon it as though it had been a gem of friendly sincerity.

“You will like her even more when you know her better,” he said. “She is so different from the usual woman that one meets. Come and see her to-morrow afternoon, she will be so pleased. Go about four, I will tell her to expect you.”

I rang the bell at ten minutes past five. Billy was there. She greeted me with a little tremor of embarrassment, which sat oddly upon her, but which was not altogether displeasing. She said it was kind of me to come so early. I stayed for about half an hour, but conversation flagged, and some of my cleverest remarks attracted no attention whatever.

When I rose to take my leave, Billy said that he must be off too, and that he would accompany me. Had they been ordinary lovers, I should have been careful to give them an opportunity of making their adieus in secret; but in the case of the Honourable William Drayton and the eldest Miss Lovell I concluded that such tactics were needless, so I waited till he had shaken hands, and went downstairs with him.

But in the hall Billy suddenly ejaculated, “By Jove! Half a minute,” and ran back up the stairs three at a time. Apparently he found what he had gone for on the landing, for I did not hear the opening of the drawing-room door. Then the Honourable Billy redescended with a sober, nonchalant air.

“Left my gloves behind me,” he explained, as he took my arm. “I am always leaving my gloves about.”

I did not mention that I had seen him take them from his hat and slip them into his coat-tail pocket.

We at the Club did not see very much of Billy during the next three months, but the captain, who prided himself upon his playing of the *rôle* of smoking-room cynic – though he would have been better in the part had he occasionally displayed a little originality – was of opinion that our loss would be more than made up to us after the marriage. Once in the twilight I caught sight of a figure that reminded me of Billy's, accompanied by a figure that might have been that of the eldest Miss Lovell; but as the spot was Battersea Park, which is not a fashionable evening promenade, and the two figures were holding each other's hands, the whole picture being suggestive of the closing chapter of a *London Journal* romance, I concluded I had made an error.

But I did see them in the Adelphi stalls one evening, rapt in a sentimental melodrama. I joined them between the acts, and poked fun at the play, as one does at the Adelphi, but Miss Lovell begged me quite earnestly not to spoil her interest, and Billy wanted to enter upon a serious argument as to whether a man was justified in behaving as Will Terriss had just behaved towards the woman he loved. I left them and returned to my own party, to the satisfaction, I am inclined to think, of all concerned.

They married in due course. We were mistaken on one point. She brought Billy nothing. But they both seemed quite content on his not too extravagant fortune. They took a tiny house not far from

Victoria Station, and hired a brougham for the season. They did not entertain very much, but they contrived to be seen everywhere it was right and fashionable they should be seen. The Honourable Mrs. Drayton was a much younger and brighter person than had been the eldest Miss Lovell, and as she continued to dress charmingly, her social position rose rapidly. Billy went everywhere with her, and evidently took a keen pride in her success. It was even said that he designed her dresses for her, and I have myself seen him earnestly studying the costumes in Russell and Allen's windows.

The captain's prophecy remained unfulfilled. "Blasé Billy" – if the name could still be applied to him – hardly ever visited the Club after his marriage. But I had grown to like him, and, as he had foretold, to like his wife. I found their calm indifference to the burning questions of the day a positive relief from the strenuous atmosphere of literary and artistic circles. In the drawing-room of their little house in Eaton Row, the comparative merits of George Meredith and George R. Sims were not considered worth discussion. Both were regarded as persons who afforded a certain amount of amusement in return for a certain amount of cash. And on any Wednesday afternoon, Henrick Ibsen and Arthur Roberts would have been equally welcome, as adding piquancy to the small gathering. Had I been compelled to pass my life in such a house, this Philistine attitude might have palled upon me; but, under the circumstances, it refreshed me, and I made use of my welcome, which I believe was genuine, to its full extent.

As months went by, they seemed to me to draw closer to one another, though I am given to understand that such is not the rule in fashionable circles. One evening I arrived a little before my time, and was shown up into the drawing-room by the soft-footed butler. They were sitting in the dusk with their arms round one another. It was impossible to withdraw, so I faced the situation and coughed. A pair of middle-class lovers could not have appeared more awkward or surprised.

But the incident established an understanding between us, and I came to be regarded as a friend before whom there was less necessity to act.

Studying them, I came to the conclusion that the ways and manners of love are very same-like throughout the world, as though the foolish boy, unheeded of human advance, kept but one school for minor poet and East End shop-boy, for Girton girl and little milliner; taught but the one lesson to the end-of-the-nineteenth-century Johnny that he taught to bearded Pict and Hun four thousand years ago.

Thus the summer and the winter passed pleasantly for the Honourable Billy, and then, as luck would have it, he fell ill just in the very middle of the London season, when invitations to balls and dinner parties, luncheons and "At Homes," were pouring in from every quarter; when the lawns at Hurlingham were at their smoothest, and the paddocks at their smartest.

It was unfortunate, too, that the fashions that season suited the Honourable Mrs. Billy as they had not suited her for years. In the early spring, she and Billy had been hard at work planning costumes calculated to cause a flutter through Mayfair, and the dresses and the bonnets – each one a work of art – were waiting on their stands to do their killing work. But the Honourable Mrs. Billy, for the first time in her life, had lost interest in such things.

Their friends were genuinely sorry, for society was Billy's element, and in it he was interesting and amusing. But, as Lady Gower said, there was no earthly need for his wife to constitute herself a prisoner. Her shutting herself off from the world could do him no good and it would look odd.

Accordingly the Honourable Mrs. Drayton, to whom oddness was a crime, and the voice of Lady Gower as the voice of duty, sacrificed her inclinations on the social shrine, laced the new costumes tight across her aching heart, and went down into society.

But the Honourable Mrs. Drayton achieved not the success of former seasons. Her small talk grew so very small, that even Park Lane found it unsatisfying. Her famous laugh rang mechanically. She smiled at the wisdom of dukes, and became sad at the funny stories of millionaires. Society voted her a good wife but bad company, and confined its attentions to cards of inquiry. And for this relief the Honourable Mrs. Drayton was grateful, for Billy waned weaker and weaker. In the world

of shadows in which she moved, he was the one real thing. She was of very little practical use, but it comforted her to think that she was helping to nurse him.

But Billy himself it troubled.

“I do wish you would go out more,” he would say. “It makes me feel that I’m such a selfish brute, keeping you tied up here in this dismal little house. Besides,” he would add, “people miss you; they will hate me for keeping you away.” For, where his wife was concerned, Billy’s knowledge of the world availed him little. He really thought society craved for the Honourable Mrs. Drayton, and would not be comforted where she was not.

“I would rather stop with you, dear,” would be the answer; “I don’t care to go about by myself. You must get well quickly and take me.”

And so the argument continued, until one evening, as she sat by herself, the nurse entered softly, closed the door behind her, and came over to her.

“I wish you would go out to-night, ma’am,” said the nurse, “just for an hour or two. I think it would please the master; he is worrying himself because he thinks it is his fault that you do not; and just now” – the woman hesitated for a moment – “just now I want to keep him very quiet.”

“Is he weaker, nurse?”

“Well, he is not stronger, ma’am, and I think – I think we must humour him.”

The Honourable Mrs. Drayton rose, and, crossing to the window, stood for a while looking out.

“But where am I to go, nurse?” she said at length, turning with a smile. “I’ve no invitations anywhere.”

“Can’t you make believe to have one?” said the nurse. “It is only seven o’clock. Say you are going to a dinner-party; you can come home early then. Go and dress yourself, and come down and say good-bye to him, and then come in again about eleven, as though you had just returned.”

“You think I must, nurse?”

“I think it would be better, ma’am. I wish you would try it.”

The Honourable Mrs. Drayton went to the door, then paused.

“He has such sharp ears, nurse; he will listen for the opening of the door and the sound of the carriage.”

“I will see to that,” said the nurse. “I will tell them to have the carriage here at ten minutes to eight. Then you can drive to the end of the street, slip out, and walk back. I will let you in myself.”

“And about coming home?” asked the other woman.

“You must slip out for a few minutes before eleven, and the carriage must be waiting for you at the corner again. Leave all that to me.”

In half an hour the Honourable Mrs. Drayton entered the sick-room, radiant in evening dress and jewels. Fortunately the lights were low, or “Blasé-Billy” might have been doubtful as to the effect his wife was likely to produce. For her face was not the face that one takes to dinner-parties.

“Nurse tells me you are going to the Grevilles this evening. I am so glad. I’ve been worrying myself about you, moped up here right through the season.”

He took her hands in his and held her out at arm’s length from him.

“How handsome you look, dear!” he said. “How they must have all been cursing me for keeping you shut up here, like a princess in an ogre’s castle! I shall never dare to face them again.”

She laughed, well pleased at his words.

“I shall not be late,” she said. “I shall be so anxious to get back and see how my boy has behaved. If you have not been good I shan’t go again.”

They kissed and parted, and at eleven she returned to the room. She told him what a delightful evening it had been, and bragged a little of her own success.

The nurse told her that he had been more cheerful that evening than for many nights.

So every day the farce was played for him. One day it was to a luncheon that she went, in a costume by Redfern; the next night to a ball, in a frock direct from Paris; again to an “At Home,” or

concert, or dinner-party. Loafers and passers-by would stop to stare at a haggard, red-eyed woman, dressed as for a drawing-room, slipping thief-like in and out of her own door.

I heard them talking of her one afternoon, at a house where I called, and I joined the group to listen.

“I always thought her heartless, but I gave her credit for sense,” a woman was saying. “One doesn’t expect a woman to be fond of her husband, but she needn’t make a parade of ignoring him when he is dying.”

I pleaded absence from town to inquire what was meant, and from all lips I heard the same account. One had noticed her carriage at the door two or three evenings in succession. Another had seen her returning home. A third had seen her coming out, and so on.

I could not fit the fact in with my knowledge of her, so the next evening I called. The door was opened instantly by herself.

“I saw you from the window,” she said. “Come in here; don’t speak.”

I followed her, and she closed the door behind her. She was dressed in a magnificent costume, her hair sparkling with diamonds, and I looked my questions.

She laughed bitterly.

“I am supposed to be at the opera to-night,” she explained. “Sit down, if you have a few minutes to spare.”

I said it was for a talk that I had come; and there, in the dark room, lighted only by the street lamp without, she told me all. And at the end she dropped her head on her bare arms; and I turned away and looked out of the window for a while.

“I feel so ridiculous,” she said, rising and coming towards me. “I sit here all the evening dressed like this. I’m afraid I don’t act my part very well; but, fortunately, dear Billy never was much of a judge of art, and it is good enough for him. I tell him the most awful lies about what everybody has said to me, and what I’ve said to everybody, and how my gowns were admired. What do you think of this one?”

For answer I took the privilege of a friend.

“I’m glad you think well of me,” she said. “Billy has such a high opinion of you. You will hear some funny tales. I’m glad you know.”

I had to leave London again, and Billy died before I returned. I heard that she had to be fetched from a ball, and was only just in time to touch his lips before they were cold. But her friends excused her by saying that the end had come very suddenly.

I called on her a little later, and before I left I hinted to her what people were saying, and asked her if I had not better tell them the truth.

“I would rather you didn’t,” she answered. “It seems like making public the secret side of one’s life.”

“But,” I urged, “they will think – ”

She interrupted me.

“Does it matter very much what they think?”

Which struck me as a very remarkable sentiment, coming from the Hon. Mrs. Drayton, *née* the elder Miss Lovell.

THE CHOICE OF CYRIL HARJOHN

Between a junior resident master of twenty-one, and a backward lad of fifteen, there yawns an impassable gulf. Between a struggling journalist of one-and-thirty, and an M.D. of twenty-five, with a brilliant record behind him, and a career of exceptional promise before him, a close friendship is however permissible.

My introduction to Cyril Harjohn was through the Rev. Charles Fauerberg.

“Our young friend,” said the Rev. Mr. Fauerberg, standing in the most approved tutorial attitude, with his hand upon his pupil’s shoulder, “our young friend has been somewhat neglected, but I see in him possibilities warranting hope – warranting, I may say, very great hope. For the present he will be under my especial care, and you will not therefore concern yourself with his studies. He will sleep with Milling and the others in dormitory number two.”

The lad formed a liking for me, and I think, and hope, I rendered his sojourn at “Alpha House” less irksome than otherwise it might have been. The Reverend Charles’ method with the backward was on all fours with that adopted for the bringing on of geese; he cooped them up and crammed them. The process is profitable to the trainer, but painful to the goose.

Young Harjohn and myself left “Alpha House” at the end of the same term; he bound for Brasenose, I for Bloomsbury. He made a point of never coming up to London without calling on me, when we would dine together in one of Soho’s many dingy, garlic-scented restaurants, and afterwards, over our bottle of cheap Beaune, discuss the coming of our lives; and when he entered Guy’s I left John Street, and took chambers close to his in Staple Inn. Those were pleasant days. Childhood is an over-rated period, fuller of sorrow than of joy. I would not take my childhood back, were it a gift, but I would give the rest of my life to live the twenties over again.

To Cyril I was the man of the world, and he looked to me for wisdom, not seeing always, I fear, that he got it; while from him I gathered enthusiasm, and learnt the profit that comes to a man from the keeping of ideals.

Often as we have talked, I have felt as though a visible light came from him, framing his face as with the halo of some pictured saint. Nature had wasted him, putting him into this nineteenth century of ours. Her victories are accomplished. Her army of heroes, the few sung, the many forgotten, is disbanded. The long peace won by their blood and pain is settled on the land. She had fashioned Cyril Harjohn for one of her soldiers. He would have been a martyr, in the days when thought led to the stake, a fighter for the truth, when to speak one’s mind meant death. To lead some forlorn hope for Civilisation would have been his true work; Fate had condemned him to sentry duty in a well-ordered barrack.

But there is work to be done in the world, though the labour lies now in the vineyard, not on the battlefield. A small but sufficient fortune purchased for him freedom. To most men an assured income is the grave of ambition; to Cyril it was the foundation of desire. Relieved from the necessity of working to live, he could afford the luxury of living to work. His profession was to him a passion; he regarded it, not with the cold curiosity of the scholar, but with the imaginative devotion of the disciple. To help to push its frontiers forward, to carry its flag farther into the untravelled desert that ever lies beyond the moving boundary of human knowledge, was his dream.

One summer evening, I remember, we were sitting in his rooms, and during a silence there came to us through the open window the moaning of the city, as of a tired child. He rose and stretched his arms out towards the darkening streets, as if he would gather to him all the toiling men and women and comfort them.

“Oh, that I could help you!” he cried, “my brothers and my sisters. Take my life, oh God, and spend it for me among your people.”

The speech sounds theatrical, as I read it, written down, but to the young such words are not ridiculous, as to us older men.

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