

GALLON TOM

THE CRUISE OF THE
MAKE-BELIEVES

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CHAPTER I

THE PRINCESS NEXT DOOR

THE thin young man with the glossy hat got out of the cab at the end of the street, and looked somewhat distrustfully down that street; glanced with equal distrust at the cabman. A man lounging against the corner public-house, as though to keep that British institution from falling, and leaving him without refreshment, got away from it, and inserted himself between the driver and the fare, ready to give information or advice to both, on the strength of being a local resident.

"Are you quite sure that this is Arcadia Street?" asked the young man in the glossy hat. He had a thin, meagre, precise sort of voice – delicate and mincing.

"Carn't yer see it wrote up?" demanded the driver, pointing with his whip to the blank wall that formed one side of the street. "Wotjer think I should want to drop yer in the wrong place for?" He was a cross driver, for he had already been driving about in the wilds of Islington in search of Arcadia Street for a long time, and he was doubtful whether or not that fact would be remembered in the fare.

"Yus – this is Arcadia Street, guv'nor," said the man from the public-house. "You take it from me; I've bin 'ere, man an' boy, since before I could remember. Wot part of it was you wantin', sir?"

But the young man had already given the cabman a substantial fare, and had turned away. The man from the public-house jogged along a little behind him, eager to be of service for a consideration to a man to whom a shilling or two seemed to mean nothing at all; a few bedraggled staring children had sprung up, as if by magic, and were also lending assistance, by the simple expedient of walking backwards in front of the stranger, and stumbling over each other, and allowing him to stumble over them. And still the young man said nothing, but only glanced anxiously at the houses.

He did not fit Arcadia Street at all. For he was particularly well dressed, with a neatness that made one fear almost to brush against him; while Arcadia Street, Islington, is not a place given to careful dressing, or even to neatness. Moreover, silk hats are not generally seen there, save on a Monday morning, when a gentleman of sad countenance goes round with a small book and a pencil, in the somewhat cheerless endeavour to collect rents; and his silk hat is one that has seen better days. So that it is small wonder that the young man was regarded with awe and surprise, not only by the straggling children, but also by several women who peered at him from behind doubtful-looking blinds and curtains.

Still appearing utterly oblivious of the questions showered upon him by the now frantic man who had constituted himself as guide, the young man had got midway up the street, and was still searching with his eyes the windows of the houses. If you know Arcadia Street at all, you will understand that in order to search the windows he had but to keep his head turned in one direction; for the habitable part of the street lies only on the left-hand side, the other being formed by a high blank wall, shutting in what is locally known as "The Works." From behind this wall a noise of hammering and of the clang of metal floats sometimes to the ears of Arcadia Street, and teaches them that there is business going on, although they cannot see it.

Now, just as the young man had reached the middle of the street, and the loafer who had accompanied him was almost giving up in despair, the eyes of the young man looked into the eyes of a young girl on the other side of a sheet of glass. The sheet of glass represented one part of one window of a house, and at the moment the young man turned his gaze in that direction, she was setting up against the glass a card which bore the modest inscription – "Board and Residence." And she was

so unlike Arcadia Street generally that the young man stopped, and made a faltering movement with one arm, as though he would have raised his hat, and looked at her helplessly. Instantly, something to his relief, she raised the window, careless of what became of the card, and looked out at him.

"Perhaps, sir, you might be looking for – " So she began; and then faltered and stopped.

"You're very good," he responded, in his precise voice. "Name of Byfield – Mr. Gilbert Byfield. Does he live here?"

"Next door, sir," she said, as she slowly lowered the window. And it seemed to the young man that for a moment, although she was evidently interested in him, a shadow of disappointment crossed her face.

He raised his hat, disclosing for a moment a very neatly arranged head of fair hair, parted accurately in the middle; and then rang the bell at the adjoining house. By this time his guide, seeing that he was about to escape, began rapidly to urge his claims, the while the young man took not the faintest notice of him, but kept his eyes fixed on the door he expected to see open every moment.

"Didn't I tell yer w'ere it was, guv'nor?" demanded the man. "Where'd you 'ave bin, if it 'adn't bin for me; you might 'ave lorst yerself a dozen times. I says to meself, w'en I sees yer gettin' out of the cab – I says to meself – 'E's a gent – that's wot 'e is – 'e's one of the tip-tops. You look arter 'im,' I says, 'an' see if 'e don't do the 'andsome by yer.'.. Well – of all the ugly smug-faced dressed-up – "

For the door had opened, and the young man of the glossy hat had been swallowed up inside. Mr. Byfield was at home. The loafer looked the house up and down aggressively, and seemed on the point of expressing his opinion concerning it and its inhabitants publicly; deemed that a waste of breath apparently; and drifted away, to take up his old position at the corner of the street. The children, coming reluctantly to the understanding that there was not likely to be a fight, or even an altercation, drifted away also.

Above the curtain of the window of the next house the plaintive pretty face of the girl appeared again for a moment, and then was withdrawn. So far as the street was concerned, the incident was closed, and the mystery of the young man's appearance had been transferred to the house itself. For his inquiry for Mr. Byfield had led to his being directed up certain shabby stairs, until he came to a door; he had just raised his knuckles delicately to knock upon it, when it was flung open, and the man he had come to see stood before him.

It would be difficult indeed to imagine a greater contrast between any two men than that which existed between the visitor and the visited. For Gilbert Byfield was big and hearty – not in any sense of mere fleshiness, but rather because there was a largeness about his actions and his gestures – a certain impulsive eagerness in all he did, as though each day was all too short for what he wanted to crowd into it. He was in his shirt-sleeves (for it seems always to be hot and stuffy in Arcadia Street, Islington) and a pipe was in his mouth. He grinned amiably, but a little sheepishly, at his visitor; suddenly leaned forward, and caught the immaculate one by the hand and drew him into the room.

"Of all wonders," he ejaculated – "how did you get here?"

The thin young man, who had removed his hat, was glancing round the dingy walls of the room, and at the table in the centre that was strewn with books and papers. "My dear Byfield," he said, in his thin voice, "I might almost repeat that question to you. I am amazed, Byfield; I am pained and outraged. Why are you hiding in this place?"

Gilbert Byfield threw himself into his chair, and laughed. "No question of hiding," he said. "I came here for a change of air – change of scene – change of surroundings. I'm studying."

"What for?" demanded the visitor.

Byfield leant forward over the table, and looked at his friend half contemptuously, half whimsically. "The world I've left behind me," he said, "was peopled by quite a lot of men of the type of a certain Jordan Tant – "

"Thank you," said the other, with a nod.

"All very worthy and delightful people, but unfortunately all saying the same thing – day after day – year in and year out. They were always dressed in the same fashion, and they always had a certain considerable amount of respectable money in the pockets of their respectable clothes; and they always got up at exactly the same hour every morning, and they lived their dear little Tant-like lives, until the time came for them to be turned, in due course, into little Tant-like corpses, and presumably after that into nice little Tant-like angels. And I got tired of them, and finally gave them up. Now," he added, throwing himself back in his chair, and laughing good-humouredly, "you know all about it."

Mr. Jordan Tant had seated himself on a chair opposite his friend, and had been listening attentively. He now hitched his trousers up carefully over his knees, displaying rather neat ankles, and began to speak in an argumentative fashion, with his neat head a little on one side. "You're not complimentary, Byfield," he said; "but then you never were. I should not have found you, but for the fact that some one mentioned to me that you were living in a place called Arcadia Street, Islington; and as I wondered a little what reason you could possibly have for leaving your own natural surroundings, I decided to look you up. As for the Tant-like people of whom you speak so scornfully, I would remind you that they belong properly to that sphere to which you also belong, when you are not in your present revolutionary spirit. You are forgetting what I have endeavoured often to remind you about; you are forgetting the dividing line which must be kept between the classes and the masses. The world knows you as Mr. Gilbert Byfield – with any amount of money, and any amount of property; you are masquerading as a very ordinary person, in a very ordinary and commonplace neighbourhood. Now what, for instance, do you pay for these rooms?" He glanced round as he spoke.

"Ten shillings a week – which of course includes the use of the furniture," said Gilbert, smiling. "Meals extra."

"Horrible!" exclaimed his friend. "Where is the comfortable set of chambers in the West End; where is your place in the country – your yacht – everything of that kind? And what in the name of fortune are you doing it for?"

"I've already told you," responded the other, good-humouredly. "I wanted to see what life really was, when you didn't have someone near at hand to feed you, and clothe you, and make much of you; I wanted to look at a world where banking accounts and dividends were unknown, and stocks and shares something not to be considered. I wanted to see what people were like who had to scramble for a living – to scramble, in fact, for the crumbs that fall from tables such as mine. I had read in books of people who had a difficulty in making both ends meet – and quite nice people at that; I had dreamed of a world outside my own very ordinary one, where romance was to be found – and beauty – and love and tenderness. I was sick to death of the high voices and the gracious airs and the raised eyebrows of most of the women I knew – the time-killers, with nothing in the world to occupy them; I wanted to take off my coat, and get back to what I know my grandfather, at least, was in his time: a real hard-working citizen. A better man than ever I shall be, Jordan; a clear-headed, clear-hearted fellow, with no nonsense about him. He made a fortune – and my father trebled it; it has been my sacred mission to spend it. There" – he got to his feet, and stretched his arms above his head, and laughed – "I've done preaching; and you shall tell me all the news from the great world out of which I have dropped."

"What news can I have to give you?" demanded Mr. Tant, with an almost aggressive glance at his friend. "Oh, I know what you're going to say," he added rapidly as he raised his hand – "that that is the best comment on what you have said. But, at all events, we live respectably – not in hovels."

"Respectable is the word," said Gilbert, with something of a sigh. "And yet I'm sure that you really have news – of a sort. Come – a bargain with you: you shall give me your news, bit by bit, and item by item; and I'll see if I can match it from my experience here."

"Well, in the first place," said Mr. Jordan Tant, shifting uneasily on his chair, and finally drawing up his legs until his heels rested on the front wooden rail of it – "in the first place, Miss Enid wonders what has become of you, and is naturally somewhat troubled about you." He said it sulkily, with the air of one to whom the delivery of the message was a disagreeable task.

"Exactly. And the fair Enid is in that drawing-room which is like a hot-house, and is yawning the hours away, and glancing occasionally at the clock, to determine how long it is since she had lunch, and how best she shall get through the time before tea is announced. To match that, my item of news is of a certain little lady who has a habit of tucking up her sleeves, the better to get through hours that are all too short for the work that must fill them, who is afraid to glance at a clock, for fear it should tell her how time is flying; and who never by any chance had a best frock yet that wasn't almost too shabby to wear before it was called best at all. Go on."

"Oh – so that's the secret, is it?" exclaimed Mr. Tant, nodding his head like a smooth-plumaged young bird. "There's a woman in Arcadia Street – eh?"

"Beware how you speak of her lightly," said Gilbert. "In Arcadia Street are many women; they hang out of the windows, and they scream at their children, and they tell their husbands exactly what their opinion is concerning the characters of those husbands whenever the unfortunate men are not at work. But – mark the difference, my Tant! – there is but one woman worthy of the name, and I have found her. She lives next door."

"Then I've seen her," replied Jordan Tant. "Rather pretty, perhaps – but pale and shabby."

"Ah – she hadn't got her best frock on," said Gilbert. "You have to wait for Sundays to see the best frock; and then you have to pretend that it isn't really an old frock pretending to be best. Where did you see her?"

"Sticking a card in the window – something about apartments or – lodgings," said Mr. Tant. "I think she thought there was some chance that I might be insane enough to want to live in Arcadia Street."

"Poor little girl!" said Gilbert softly, as he seated himself on the edge of the table, and thrust some of his papers out of the way. "She dreams about lodgers – and hopes for the sort that pay. I believe she gets up in the morning, dreadfully afraid that those who owe her money have run away in the night; I believe she goes to bed at night, wondering if by any possibility she can squeeze another bedstead in somewhere to accommodate a fresh one. She would like to go out into the highways and byways, and gather in all possible lodgers, and drive them before her to the house; and keep 'em there for ever. You've only got to say 'Lodgers!' to that girl, and her eyes brighten at once."

"What an extraordinary person!" exclaimed Mr. Jordan Tant, opening his eyes very wide, and staring up at the other man. "What's she do it for?"

"For a living, Tant – for a sordid horrible grinding sweating living." Gilbert got up in his excitement, and began to bang one fist into the palm of his other hand close to the face of Mr. Jordan Tant. "You talk of life – and respectability – and what not; I tell you I've seen more life in a week in Arcadia Street than ever I saw in years before. Look out into the streets; you'll see a dozen sights that shock you – you'll see a dozen things that are unlovely. And yet I tell you that I have stepped in this place straight into the heart of Fairyland – and that I dream dreams, and see visions. And all on account of a pale-faced shabby girl, who lives next door, and lies in wait behind the parlour window to catch the lodgers who never pay her when they come!"

"Why don't you live there yourself?" demanded Mr. Tant. "You'd pay her well enough."

Gilbert shook his head a little sadly. "That wouldn't do at all," he said, "because I should take all the romance out of the thing. Besides, in Arcadia Street you mustn't pay more than a certain amount, or you bring down suspicion upon yourself. No – my method is a more subtle one: I am the mysterious man who lives next door – (which is quite a great way off in Arcadia Street, I can assure you) – and I appear to her only with a sort of halo of romance about me."

"You're in love with her, I suppose?" suggested Mr. Tant.

"That's crude – and untrue," said Gilbert. "That's the only thing you sort of people seem to think about: you look at a girl, and instantly you're in love with her. Doesn't it occur to you that it may be possible that I, from the distance of my thirty-five years, may look at this child of seventeen

– or perhaps even less – and feel sorry for her, and desirous of helping her. Bah! – what do you know of romance?"

"I know this about it," said Mr. Tant, a little sullenly, "that if I go back to Miss Enid, and tell her that you take a deep interest in a very pretty girl of seventeen, who lives next door to you in a slum, and with whom you occasionally visit Fairyland, it is more than possible that the lady to whom you are supposed to be engaged – "

"I am not engaged to her," exclaimed Gilbert, almost savagely.

"May have something to say regarding romance on her own account. I state facts." Thus Mr. Jordan Tant, very virtuously, and with his head nodding in a sideways fashion at his friend.

"You pervert them, you mean," exclaimed Gilbert. "Besides, if you're so deeply interested in Miss Enid Ewart-Crane, this will be a splendid opportunity for you to set yourself right with her, to my everlasting damage."

"You know perfectly well that she'd never look at me," said Mr. Tant. "She's a glorious creature – a wonderful woman, and in your own sphere of life; I can't see why you neglect her as you do."

"I have been told ever since I was a mere boy that at some future date I should marry Enid – if I were good. It's just like a small boy being offered anything – if he is good; he begins to loathe the idea of it at once. Enid is all that you say – and I like her very much; but if I've got to marry her I'll choose my own time for it. At present I'm in Fairyland – and I mean to stop there."

"What do you mean by Fairyland?" asked Mr. Tant testily.

"You wouldn't understand if I told you," replied Gilbert. Then he added quickly, and with contrition – "There – there – my dear fellow, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings; you're not really a bad sort, if you'd come out of your shell sometimes, and let the real wind of the real earth ruffle your hair a bit. I must talk to someone – and I'm not sorry to find you here to-day; only you mustn't tell anyone outside."

"Of course not," almost snapped Mr. Tant.

"I came here in the first place, Tant," began Gilbert, seating himself again on the table, "with the expectation of finding that I had got among commonplace people – and not nice commonplace people at that. Then I saw this girl – this mere child, that even a hard world and a hard and sordid life had not changed, struggling on day by day to make a living – not for herself, or for any selfish reason – but to keep those who should by rights have kept her. And I saw her, above all things, doing something else, and doing it rather splendidly."

"I don't understand you. What else was she doing?" asked Jordan Tant.

It was growing dark in Arcadia Street, and the lamps were being lighted. With the dying of the day a sort of hush had fallen upon the place; the sounds outside were subdued, as though even Arcadia Street might be inclined for rest. Gilbert had walked across to the window, and stood there, looking out; his face was turned from his friend.

"This child to whom life was a mean and sordid struggle had taught herself a lesson – had shown herself how best to live another life. You'll think it mean and commonplace, perhaps; but this little drudge – child alike in years and in thoughts – had learnt how to make-believe to perfection; knew how to gild the commonplace bricks and mortar of Arcadia Street so that the mean houses became palaces – the mean back gardens places of beauty, wherein one might stroll beneath the light of the moon, and listen even unto nightingales. Think of it, Tant; this child who had never known anything but the mean streets of a great city had yet learnt how to dream, and almost how to make her dreams come true. I tell you, man, you've only got to look into her eyes to understand that there is in her that brave spirit that defies poverty and disaster – that brave spirit that aims straight for the skies."

Mr. Jordan Tant sat still for a moment or two without speaking. He was used by this time to this impulsive friend, who was for ever doing unconventional things; and now, with this new unconventional thing to face, he had no words either of reproof or admonition. Very slowly he lifted

first one foot and then the other from the wooden rail of the chair, and stood up; picked up his hat, and brushed it carefully on his sleeve.

"I've nothing to say to you," he said at last. "I expect, if the truth were known, you'd find that the lady who dwells in Fairyland in her spare moments has a scheming mind, and a money-grubbing soul; you'd find she thought more of the price of chops than she does of all the romances that ever were invented for fools to read. What am I to tell Miss Enid?"

Gilbert Byfield laughed good-humouredly. "Tell her," he said, "that I shall come and see her very soon. But you need not, of course, say anything about –"

"About the Princess next door? I suppose not." Mr. Jordan Tant walked to the door of the room, and laid his hand upon the handle. "It'll be all right for you – and you'll give up this madness, just as you have given up many, many others. But what about the – the Princess?"

"You don't understand in the least," said Gilbert, a little hastily. "She thinks no more of me than she might think of anybody who was good to her – kind to her."

"But so very few people have been good or kind to her, you see," Mr. Tant reminded him, as he opened the door.

"I'll come with you, and find a cab for you; you might get lost," said Gilbert. "And pray get all those silly notions out of your head; if you knew this child as well as I do, you'd look at the matter in a different light. At the same time, as people are so apt to misunderstand even our best motives, perhaps you'd better not say anything to Enid – or to her mother. If there's any explaining to be done, I can do it when I come to see them."

He found the cab for his friend, and saw him drive away. Walking back slowly into Arcadia Street, he determined that he would if possible see that little Princess next door that very evening – if only to assure himself that she was the child he knew her to be, and he her big friend – years and years older and wiser.

CHAPTER II

THE KING OF A LEAN KINGDOM

ARCADIA STREET is noted – locally, at least – for its "gardens." By this term I would not have you understand that hidden away in that corner of Islington are bowers of beauty, or that you may stroll at eventide under the drooping branches of trees, what time the soft scents of flowers are wafted to your nostrils. Rather let it be said that attached to each dingy house is a dingy plot of ground that is only a "garden" by courtesy – a place where the primeval instincts of man have from time to time urged him to dig in the earth, for the sole reason that it is earth, and in the mad hope to raise from it something that no other London garden has yet accomplished. The moon that looks down on each slip of ground at night knows differently; she has seen the thing being done for generation after generation, and finally given up in despair. Also the cats look on tolerantly, because they too know how it will end, and that the victory will be with them easily in the long run.

You may look into many such gardens, and may see for yourselves how bravely they began – with what high hopes. Here, for example, is what was once intended to be a summer-house; and it has long since fallen into decay, and become a place where the shabby things that are not wanted even in a shabby house have been tossed from time to time, and left to ruin. You will see creepers that started well, and intended great things, and clung quite bravely to walls; until the London atmosphere and neglect and one thing and another put an end to them. And you may see rows and rows of pots, wherein nothing grows nor ever will grow, and wherein the very earth that fills them is of a consistency known nowhere else. Here and there, too, a bit of trellis-work had been put up and painted; in Arcadia gardens it is generally found to be an easy hanging place for cloths and doubtful-looking garments.

In the gardens of Arcadia Street was one exception. That exception was the house, behind the front window of which, the wistful face of a girl had looked out at Mr. Jordan Tant – that girl about whom he had heard so much from his friend Gilbert Byfield. The house itself, poor and shabby though it was, was neat and scrupulously clean; but the real triumph of it lay in the garden. Not, perhaps, in the artistic sense, but rather that it was a garden of surprises – a place where it was impossible to say what you might meet next, if you wandered carefully through its circumscribed length, and took it seriously.

Yet to anyone to whom the mere name of garden means so much, what a pitiful place! For there was nothing really garden-like about it; it was a place of rags and patches and pretences. The few pitiful plants that struggled out of the black-looking earth here and there seemed to do so not because they liked it, but because they had a desperate desire to show what they could do, even against adverse fate, when they were put to it. Half a dozen things that could not have been named even by the most careful student in botany stood in pots under the kitchen window; and in front of these, spread out on the earth itself, was an old and very ragged carpet – a trap to the unwary, because of the many holes it contained and the uneven surface it presented on the uneven ground.

With the idea of hiding the carpet as much as possible, and at the same time of giving an air of luxury to the place, an ancient staggering table on three legs had been placed in the centre of it; and on either side of this table a chair, long since set aside as being too deplorable even for use in that house. It was a very mockery of a table, and the chairs were in a dreadful conspiracy with it to let down any unwary mortal who should attempt to sit upon them in their old age, unless he treated them with due caution and respect.

Nor was this all; the garden held other treasures. Another ancient strip of carpet, as ragged as its fellow, had been hung against a wall to form a species of background to a crazy box that stood against that wall. Not that you would ever have called it a box; it had a dingy rug upon it, and that dingy rug made it, of course, a species of settle or ottoman – an easy lounging place on summer nights. You

had to sit down carefully upon it, because it had a defective board, which gave way unexpectedly and might let you through; but with care that was a fault that might not be noticed. For the rest, the place contained a bulky old plaster flower-pot, with some seedy-looking moss growing in it, and with great cracks at the further side from the house.

The kindly darkness was hiding the tawdriness of the place when a little door at the end of the garden opened, and a little man came in. A man shabby like all the place; with an old frock-coat much too large for him hanging in scarecrow fashion from his thin shoulders, with trousers much too long for him lapping over carpet slippers frayed and worn, and with an old velvet smoking-cap, with three strands of frayed silk to represent a tassel, stuck on one side of his head. A melancholy-looking little man, with a certain fierce sullenness upon him, as though he quarrelled perpetually with the world at large. He slammed the gate, and advanced into that sorry garden; made as if to kick the unwieldy cracked flower-pot, but thought better of it; and went shambling towards the table set upon the ragged carpet.

The fact that he caught his foot in a hole in the carpet, and almost precipitated himself over the table, did not improve his temper. He glared savagely about him, and gave his head a fierce rub with his cap before seating himself gingerly on one of the chairs. Having done so, he pulled his frock-coat closer about him, and shivered in the warm and stifling air.

"It's a conspiracy – that's what it is!" exclaimed the little man. "It's an infernal conspiracy against me from first to last!"

The shadows were lengthening in the garden, and the little man was rather a pathetic figure as he sat there, solemnly shaking his head and muttering to himself. Someone who had come to the back door of the house, and looked out upon him, hesitated for a moment, and then stepped quickly out towards him. A young girl with a bright, eager, thin face; the girl who had looked through the window at Mr. Jordan Tant. She came quickly towards the man, and dropped her arm round his shoulders, and whispered to him.

"Father – you're home quite early," she said. "Will you have your coffee out here?"

He shook himself peevisly away from her embrace. "Coffee?" he exclaimed. "Who the devil wants coffee, Bessie? A man wants something stronger than coffee. Besides – what's the good of making a fuss about my being home as early as this? You don't suppose I should have come home but for a very good reason – do you?"

The girl winced a little, and drew away from him. "I thought perhaps for once you were glad to come home, father," she said timidly. "And you know I always like to think of us sitting out in the garden – under the stars – and drinking our coffee. The best people do that every night of their lives – after dinner."

"After dinner!" he reminded her, raising a finger, and shaking it at her. "That makes all the difference in the world; I dare say anyone might drink the stuff after a good dinner – just to oblige a friend. But what is anyone to do – in what condition of mind do you imagine a man to be – when his dinner has been a thing not of the stalled ox order – but of herbs? Besides – I'm upset – annoyed."

"I'm sorry, father," said the girl softly. She tiptoed into the house, and softly called to someone within; came out again, and sat down at the further side of the table, folding her hands upon it, and looking at the shabby figure of the man on the other side of it.

"What has gone wrong, dear?" she whispered; and at the question he suddenly turned upon her, and opened the very floodgates of his wrath and misery.

"Turned out – ejected – thrust to the door with gibes and laughter!" he exclaimed. "For how many years have I not, in a sense, been the very prop and stay of that place – its chief ornament – the one being who in an impoverished and sordid neighbourhood has shed upon it the light of what I may term real intellect. I ask you, Bessie – for how many years?"

"For more years than I can remember, father," whispered the girl, turning away her head.

"Exactly," he responded triumphantly. "It has been to me not a mere house of refreshment – but a club – a place in which, by virtue of long usage, I had a species of proprietary right. They'll find their mistake out, of course; they're bound to do that in time. The Arcadia Arms without me degenerates into a mere low public-house – a pot-house; I had succeeded in raising the place. I was a feature – almost an institution. And now a vulgar creature – without a coat, mark you, Bessie! – points to the door, and says that I'm not to be served again. Some talk of a score – of a paltry sum that should have been paid long since."

There was silence between them for a minute; it seemed as if, in the gathering darkness, the petty record of the years was being told over between them – so much to this account, and so much to that. The man in the shabby frock-coat seemed to shrink and dwindle – to fall away from what he would have appeared in her eyes, and to be the mean thing he really was. When presently he went on with his tale, it was as though he sought for excuses for himself, and blamed her in so doing.

"That place was in a sense my last refuge; I held a position there I hold nowhere else now. When the cares of the world pressed upon me more than usual, I was able to turn there; I had my seat in a special corner – and I was respected. It was known always and everywhere as 'Mr. Meggison's place'; and only once in all the years has it been usurped – and then the man was drunk. He was very properly turned out at once, of course, and made to understand the enormity of his offence. And now – now, Bessie" – he turned to the girl, and feebly smote the crazy table with his fist – "now they tell me I am not to go there again – they turn me out; I heard them laugh when the door banged behind me. Oh – a bitter world – a very bitter world, Bessie!"

In all that he said she knew that there was an implied reproach for herself. For if Bessie Meggison had but passed into his hands certain shillings, this might never have happened; he might still have held up his head at the Arcadia Arms – still have filled his old seat in a corner – still have called like a man for his glass to be filled. In that Bessie had failed; and she knew it now.

"We have had a hard time, father," she said, dropping a light hand on the fist with which he was beating the table. "People don't come and take the lodgings as they used to do; the things are getting so poor and shabby that perhaps the more fashionable young men don't like it. I try hard, father – but every shilling seems to be so important."

"My dear Bessie, I am not aware that I have blamed you," he said a little coldly, as he withdrew his hand and turned away his head. "Time was when Fortune smiled upon me, and I was able to do work that brought in money; that time is long since past. In a fashion, I may be said to have retired; I am no longer actively engaged in commercial pursuits."

"No, father – of course not," responded the girl cheerfully.

"And you have often assured me that you are glad – and proud – glad and proud to be able to assist my declining years. It is not much that I want: I saunter out in the sun in the morning, and go down to my – my club –"

"The Arcadia Arms, father," she said gently.

"I prefer to call it my club," he said, a little testily. "There I nod to an acquaintance or two – and I have my modest glass, and perhaps smoke a pipe, or even a mild cigar. In the afternoon, a stroll and perhaps another modest glass; in the evening a few more people gather there, and we are almost convivial. That's my programme; that's my day. For the rest, as you're aware, I occupy the cheapest bed in the house – and I don't eat much. Therefore I do urge," he concluded fretfully, "that it is a shame that a man should be deprived of the little thing that gives him so much pleasure. I have been wounded to-night – sorely hurt and wounded, Bessie."

"The coffee will be here directly, father," said the girl.

"Coffee – served in cracked cups by a dingy maid – in a back-yard," he cried viciously. "There's nothing soothing or helpful or restful about coffee – and I'm too old to pretend that this place is anything but the back-yard it really is."

"It's better than any other garden in Arcadia Street," she said. "And at a time like this, when – when you don't see things so distinctly – it looks quite good. If you shut your eyes the least little bit, so that you can only just see out of them, you seem to be looking down long spaces – ever so far; and you can sit there under the wall, and think you're anywhere – anywhere in the world except in Arcadia Street."

"I have shut my eyes to a great many things far too long, Bessie," he exclaimed fiercely. "I have been inclined to forget at times who I really am, and the position I should have occupied. I let my children do as they like with me. Where, for instance, is your brother to-night?"

"Aubrey always goes out in the evening," said the girl quickly. "He likes his freedom, you know, father dear."

"I know his freedom," said the man; "the freedom of every low billiard saloon in the neighbourhood. No intellect about him, mind you; no discussing of matters of moment concerning the neighbourhood, and even the nation, with Aubrey. Oh dear, no; the knocking about of billiard balls is more in his line. Aubrey will never cut a figure in any resort of gentlemen. How much, for instance, did your precious brother receive out of the funds of the house – my house, mark you! How much did he receive this day?"

"Aubrey had half a crown," said the girl, in a mere whisper.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet. "He flaunts it with half a crown all over London, and his poor old father is shown the door in a pot-house, because he can't pay his score. Bessie, I could not have believed that you would sink so low!"

"Aubrey says that he must live," said the girl wistfully. "And he likes always to feel that he is a gentleman."

"Why doesn't he work?" exclaimed Mr. Meggison savagely. "He is young and strong – why should he borrow half-crowns; why doesn't he earn 'em instead? Things have come to a pretty pass when I – Daniel Meggison – am refused necessary refreshment in order that my son should flaunt it on half-crowns. Bah!"

"Somebody seems to be talkin' about me," said a voice from the doorway of the house. "What's the row?"

The youth who sauntered out, and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking from one to the other, was not of an inviting type. Shiftless son of a shiftless father, he lacked even that father's poor dignity, and failed to carry himself so well as the older man. He stooped at the shoulders, and his mean and narrow face was thrust forward, and bore an expression of knowingness, as though he asserted that there was precious little in this world you could teach him. A small billycock hat was thrust on the back of his head, and from between his lips drooped a cigarette; it was his proud boast that he was never to be seen without the latter.

"The row is this," exclaimed the old man, "that I want to know when you are going to take your proper position in the world – and do your proper work?"

"Don't you worry about me, dad," replied the son; "I shall be there all right when the work comes along. Always provided, mind you," he added as an afterthought, "always provided that the work suits me, and is of a sort that a gentleman can take up. No hole-and-corner jobs for me; I know what I want, and I mean to get it."

"You have already obtained from your sister here to-day a sum of money far in advance of your needs or your deserts," said old Meggison, wagging his head at him. "Pray what do you want with half-crowns?"

"Father – you shall have all the money you want as soon as I get any myself," pleaded the girl in a low voice. "Surely there is no need for quarrelling."

"I am not quarrelling; my dignity does not permit me to quarrel," said Daniel Meggison, shaking his arm free of her touch. "But I trust that I know what is due to me as that boy's father; I hope I know my duty."

"Hope so, dad, I'm sure," said the youth, as he turned away. "Can't see for the life of me what you're upset about. You've had your bit at times; you've been kept going, same as I have – haven't you?"

"My 'bit,' as you term it, is what is justly due to me as the head of this house," exclaimed the elder man.

"I wasn't aware that you were the head of the house," said the youth. "If it comes to that, Bess is the only one that does anything for what I'm pleased to call a rotten family. I'm not saying, mind you, that she does what she might, or that she looks up the lodgers for what's due with that business instinct she should; I'm only sayin' that she does what a mere girl can do tolerably well. More than that, she knows that her brother, bein' a gentleman, can't go about London with empty pockets."

"What about my pockets?" demanded Daniel Meggison, plunging his hands into them. "Who thinks of my wants – my simple ordinary little wants? Who deems it necessary even to know that I have that refreshment that is not denied to the lowest of the beasts?"

"The lowest of the beasts drink water," said Aubrey, with a chuckle. "And I never heard of you doin' that."

While Bessie stood looking helplessly from one to the other, and while a savage retort rose to the lips of old Meggison, the door leading from the house was opened, and a little servant-maid appeared. A precise and prim little maid, who, having come from some institution but a little time before, had felt ever since that she was seeing life as she had never hoped to see it; to her, indeed, the sorry garden was a place of delight. She came out now almost with eagerness, bringing that despised coffee on a battered tray, and set it on the rickety table. And at the same time announced some startling news.

"Oh, if you please, miss, a gent an' a lidy – name o' Stocker – was waitin' in the passage – "

"Hall!" thundered Mr. Daniel Meggison, so savagely that the child almost knocked over the coffee-pot. "How many times, Bessie, have I told you that the domestics are to be instructed to give proper names to the apartments in the house."

"You will be more careful in future, Amelia, won't you?" suggested Bessie mildly. She turned to her father, and spoke wistfully. "Perhaps Aunt Julia and Uncle Ted had better come out here – in the garden," she suggested.

"I will not see them," said Mr. Meggison. "I am in no mood to see anyone; I should probably insult my sister, to begin with. I dislike her as much as I dislike her absurd prosperity."

"Don't ask me to meet 'em," said Aubrey, making for the little gate in the wall. "Aunt Julia always asks a chap what he's doin' – as though earnin' your livin' was about the only blessed thing you'd got to do in this world."

"I'd be glad if you'd stop and see them, Aubrey," pleaded Bessie; then to her father she added slyly – "It will be so much more dignified if you stop and meet them, father."

"Perhaps it will; I will put up with them on your account, my child," said Mr. Meggison. "Aubrey – I command you to stay."

"Your commands don't affect me the least little bit," said Aubrey coolly, shifting his cigarette to the other corner of his mouth. "But on Bessie's account I don't mind lettin' myself be seen. Amelia – trot 'em out!"

Bessie Meggison having some idea of how these things should be done, from certain accounts she had read, or from certain things she had heard, immediately got behind the crazy table, the better to preside over that pouring out of coffee. She bravely shut her eyes to the fact that the cups did not match, and that the saucers were either too large or too small, or that the coffee-pot was a mere tin affair, blackened all up one side from contact with the fire. She waited in that proud position the coming of the unexpected guests.

Mrs. Stocker came first, looking about her with the high dignity of one who moves in a very different sphere, and who has condescended for once, in a spirit of Christian virtue, to step down among beings less fortunate. She was a large lady, holding herself very erect; the sort of person with

whom you could not under any circumstances have cracked a jest. Life was a simple and a respectable thing with her; a serious matter, that could but lead in due course to a very proper and becomingly elaborate funeral. Women had been known to do remarkable things, and to get their names into books and newspapers; not so Julia Stocker. "From the moment Edward Stocker claimed my hand, I knew exactly what was going to happen to me, and I acted accordingly," was her invariable summary of the course of her life. Incidentally it may be mentioned that Mr. Edward Stocker had "a little property" and that Mrs. Stocker looked after it. Which is to say that Mr. Stocker was a mild good-tempered little man, with a partiality for convivial good company into which he rarely got.

The lady came out of the house now, looking about her somewhat disdainfully. She took Bessie's outstretched hand, and, still with her eyes searching the bare and shabby yard, touched the girl's cheek for a moment with lips that had no softness about them; performed the same ceremony with her brother Daniel; and stared at Aubrey Meggison. "I have come, brother," she said, in a voice that was in itself almost dirge-like, "to see how you are getting on."

"Very kind of you – but I'm not getting on at all," said Meggison, furtively rubbing the place on his cheek where her lips had been with his knuckles. "More than that, I don't expect to."

"Perhaps I should have said that *we* have come – Edward and myself – to inquire about you; for of course without Edward I never attempt to do anything. In my opinion the woman should always be dependent upon the man, and guided by him. Consequently, if Edward tells me that he desires that I should call and inquire about my relatives, I do so, however distasteful it may be to me personally. Edward – where are you?"

Mr. Stocker came from the house at that moment, holding his hat in his hand, and looking about him as though he felt he was in some place of historic interest. He saw Bessie's hand, and after looking at it for a moment or two, as though not quite certain what it was, or how it concerned him, decided to grasp it; and having done so looked up at the girl, and smiled in rather a pleased way. But he dropped the hand guiltily on hearing his wife's voice.

"Edward! – why are you loitering? Where are you?"

"Here, my dear," said Mr. Stocker, coming round the table, and still looking about him as though marvelling at the place in which he found himself. "Charming spot, this!"

"Charming fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Mrs. Stocker, sitting carefully on a chair. "A mere back-yard – with nothing in it but rags and rubbish and draughts. Surely you people don't live out here?" she asked, glaring round upon them.

"We like to come here in the evening, aunt; it's very pleasant then," said Bessie. "Will you have some coffee, Aunt Julia?"

"No, I will not have some coffee – especially in the open air," said Mrs. Stocker. "Nor will your uncle Edward have coffee," she added, noting a tendency on the part of that gentleman to reach for one of the cups; "it always disagrees with him. Not, of course, that I would wish for a moment to interfere with your enjoyment, Edward – but I think I know what is best for you."

Mr. Stocker sighed and turned away; found his way up to that improvised seat against the wall; and, with that luck that usually attends such men, discovered the loose board and almost went through; he was frantically readjusting his balance when Daniel Meggison, as though by the merest chance, strolled up to him and dropped a hand on his shoulder, and smiled in a friendly way.

"Glad to see you, Ted – always glad to see you," he said, keeping a wary eye upon Mrs. Stocker the while, and lowering his voice suddenly and dramatically. "You don't happen to have change for half a sovereign, I suppose?"

Mr. Stocker slipped his hand into his pocket, and brought out a small gold coin. "I don't think I have," he began in a whisper; and then discovered, something to his amazement, that by a species of conjuring trick the coin had disappeared from his hand and was entering the pocket of Mr. Daniel Meggison, who was beaming upon him.

"It doesn't matter – one coin's easier to remember," said Meggison. "You shall have it back – certainly within a week. You're a man to know, sir."

Mrs. Stocker was speaking in her loud and strident tones. "I should not be doing that duty that is imposed upon me by the mere fact of being a woman and a Stocker, did I not speak my mind. I come here, and I find you all drifting on in exactly the same way that you have always done – in a shabby and shiftless manner, that seems to belong to you and Arcadia Street. Don't interrupt me; there is only one being on this earth that has a right to interrupt me – and he dare not do it." She glared round upon Mr. Stocker as she spoke.

"We are very happy, Aunt Julia," said Bessie, who was delicately sipping some of the half-cold stuff known to Amelia as coffee. "Father has been a little unfortunate over the matter of finding employment."

"A misfortune that has dogged him nearly all his life," snapped Mrs. Stocker. "In what direction are you looking, brother?"

"In all directions, my dear Julia," said Meggison, in a jubilant tone that sprang from the fact that he had unexpected money in his pocket. "I may be said to say to the world – 'Give me work; help me to discover work; give me some hard task, with appropriate pay attached to it – and then see what I'll do!' I appeal to Bessie: am I not for ever condemning the state of the labour market?"

"I have heard you speak of it often, father," said the girl.

"And what, for example, is Aubrey doing?" demanded Mrs. Stocker, turning suddenly on that youth. "What are his prospects?"

"What he's doing at the present time is this," said the youth, opening the door at the end of the garden – "he's goin' out. And the prospects, as far as you're concerned, are that you won't see him again this evenin'. I'm goin' to have a hundred up at the Arcadia Arms. Good night!"

As he was swinging out of the door Mr. Daniel Meggison seized his arm, and held him for a moment. "How dare you address a relative in such a fashion, sir!" he cried. "Above all, how dare you suggest that you will waste money upon such a pursuit. Your aunt is right; you should by this time have decided what work you will seize upon in the world. There are many maxims I might employ in such a case as yours – but I – "

"I wouldn't trouble, if I was you," said Aubrey, shaking himself free. "As I've said before, I'm ready for anything in the way of work, if I can only see it before me, and know what I've got to look forward to. If it isn't there, don't blame me."

He went out of the door, slamming it behind him; his father, in a sudden access of virtue, pulled open the door, and called after him down the narrow alley which ran at the back of the houses – "Understand, I will not permit you to frequent any such place as the Arcadia Arms – a mere ordinary pot-house – "

His voice died away, and he contented himself by shaking a fist in the direction of the retreating youth. He slammed the door, and turned again to his sister.

"I think that I shall be compelled to go out myself, Julia," he said, while his fingers lovingly caressed that small gold coin in his pocket. "I must really look in at my club."

"Club? I didn't know you had one," said the lady, rising. "However, we won't detain you; so soon as I know that Edward commands me to return home I shall be quite willing to leave Arcadia Street."

Mr. Daniel Meggison took the hint at once, and hurried into the house; a minute or two later he might have been observed shuffling down the street in the direction of the Arcadia Arms, having exchanged his smoking-cap for a grimy grey felt that was stuck jauntily on the side of his head. Mrs. Stocker, having brought Mr. Stocker to his feet by the simple expedient of turning to look at him, shook hands with Bessie, and gave that young lady at parting a few words of much-needed advice.

"Call things by their right names, my child," she said sternly. "A garden's a garden – and a yard's a yard; this is a yard, and an untidy one at that. Don't pretend; when you haven't got enough to eat, don't eke it out with coffee badly served that nobody wants. Come out of your dreams, and wake

up to the realities of life. Don't forget, whenever you feel inclined to think that you are any better off than you really are, or have anything to be grateful for, that you're a mere ordinary commonplace girl – or woman, if you like it better – and that your mission in life is to slave from morning to night for people that don't care a button about you. My advice to you is: clear away this rubbish, and keep chickens or something of that sort. Good night."

It is probable that Mr. Stocker would have said something more cheering, but for the fact that at the very moment he had grasped Bessie's hand Mrs. Stocker looked back from the doorway, and called to him; he departed hurriedly and obediently. The girl looked at the sorry array of cups and saucers, and then at the poor wilderness about her; all in a moment it seemed poor and mean and childish. She sank down on to that box that was covered by the dingy old rug, and covered her face with her hands.

The shadows were falling all about her, and the Princess next door, as Gilbert Byfield had called her, was crying softly to herself.

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCE JUMPS OVER THE WALL

JUST how long Bessie might have sat there in the dusk of the garden it is impossible to say; an interruption was to be provided. Almost the last of her sobs had died away, and she was beginning to realize that this kind of thing would not do at all, if her small world was to be kept going, when the door leading into the little alley was opened cautiously, and a young man came in. A very presentable young man, with an honest face inclined to laughter, over which a look of relief was stealing as he saw the girl sitting there. He closed the gate quietly, and took a few steps towards her; paused and coughed. Instantly she sprang to her feet, and faced him.

"Good evening!" he said. "Did I startle you?"

"Very much; I did not know there was anyone there. How long have you been here?" she asked suspiciously.

"I came in this very moment," he assured her. "You see, I'm obliged to come in that way, because there might be somebody – somebody looking out for me at the front. Very handy house in that respect." He grinned cheerfully, and she laughed for very sympathy.

"Haven't you any good news, Mr. Dorricott?" she asked, forgetting her own troubles for a moment.

He shook his head. "I went down to the theatre, just to let them know I was about, you know, and almost with the hope that someone might fall ill – or be run over – "

"Don't!" she whispered with a shiver.

"I'm sorry, Miss Meggison – but a fellow gets absolutely murderous at times, when he thinks of the people who stand in his way. Here am I, without a shilling to bless myself with – "

"Everyone that I have ever known, and everyone that I ever shall know, has been and will be in that state," exclaimed Bessie with conviction. "I don't believe in all the stories about people having more money than they know what to do with; I simply can't believe them. All the world is poor and struggling – and everybody fights for money that they never by any chance get. I know it!" she said with deep dejection.

"Well, it isn't quite like that," he replied. "There are fellows in the profession, for instance, who are known to touch three figures a week, and who simply live in motor-cars; it's a known fact. Other poor devils like myself walk on with the crowd, or get an understudy – or something of that kind."

"It must be nice to be an actor," said Bessie, looking at him with awe.

"It is – when you *are* an actor," he replied solemnly. He moved away a step or two restlessly, and then came back to her. "I say, Miss Meggison – there's something I'd like to say to you."

"Not about the bill!" she pleaded.

"About the bill – yes; and about something else," he replied earnestly. "The bill worries me horribly – and it worries me more in your case than it would in the case of anyone else. I haven't any money, and I've got a large appetite – which I endeavour to suppress as much as is consistent with keeping a figure fit to be seen behind the footlights. Many and many a tasty dish, Miss Meggison, which you may think I scorn, I pass by because I simply feel that I have no right to touch it; it would not be fair. I never come into your little dining-room without seeing the figures of my bill in huge white characters on the wall; I'm ashamed of myself."

"I wish you wouldn't speak of it," she urged.

"But I must speak of it; it haunts me," he exclaimed. "I know that in time it will be all right; I know that in time I shall be able to pay you in full – and pay other people as well. More than that, the time will come when you will be proud of me – really proud of me."

"We're all proud of you now; I laugh still when I think of that time when you gave me tickets for the pantomime, and I saw you as the front part of the donkey."

"Don't!" he said in a low tone. "I know I was funny. Everyone said so – but I could get no real expression into it; you can't when the only way in which you can move your jaws is by a string. But I shall do finer things than that. In the years to come I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Arcadia Street was the scene of a rather imposing little ceremony – on my account."

"Ceremony?" She looked at him in a bewildered fashion.

"Yes. They may in all probability affix a tablet to the house, recording the fact that Harry Dorricott once lived here; it's frequently done – there's a society for it. They will probably refer to me then as 'poor Harry Dorricott' – and will say how much greater things I might have done had I lived."

"Mr. Dorricott! You're not ill?"

"Oh dear, no; but I have a sort of feeling that I shall die young – or at least comparatively young. So very many of our best people have done that. I beg you won't alarm yourself, Miss Meggison," he added hastily – "because I'm quite all right at the present moment; never felt better in my life. The only thing that worries me is about you."

"About me?"

"Yes – because you see I'm actually living on you – and that's a shameful thing. Perhaps you may wonder that I don't go away, and live on somebody else – some fat and uninteresting old landlady, for instance, who wouldn't matter so much."

"I shouldn't like you to do that, because she mightn't be kind to you," said Bessie.

"Oh – that isn't the reason," he replied, coming near to her, and looking into her eyes. "You have been kind to me; there's never been anyone in all the world that has done so much for me as you have – helped me, and urged me on, and cheered me up. That's why, although I owe you this money, I can't go away; I'd rather be a slave to you than to anyone else. You didn't understand that – did you, dear?" he whispered, not daring even to take her hands. "From the very first moment, when I saw you looking out of the window into Arcadia Street, my heart gave a sort of jump, and I knew exactly what had happened to me. Bessie – it's because I love you that I can't go away."

"No – it isn't that; it's only because you're sorry for me, just as quite a lot of other people are sorry for me," she said softly. "You mustn't think that I don't understand, or that I'm ungrateful; I shouldn't be telling the truth if I didn't say that it's quite the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me in all my life. But I don't love anyone – except my father – and Aubrey; I don't think I've got time to love anyone. So you mustn't speak about it again, please; you must forget it. And you can stay as long as you like – and the bill won't matter."

"But you'll give me some better comfort than that, Bessie," urged the boy. "I shan't always be poor; I shall make a great name for myself some day, and then I shall be able to lift you out of all this, and make you happy."

"I'm not sure that I want to be lifted out of it," she told him, smiling. "Good night – and forget all about it. You're my friend always, I know – and I want friends."

There in the dark garden, with perhaps an idea in his mind not wholly theatrical, he lifted her hand to his lips before he turned away; and she stood there, looking after him, with that warm touch still upon her fingers, and with her heart beating a little more rapidly than usual.

After all, it must be nice to be loved, she thought; to be made much of, and shielded from the cold, and from hunger and poverty; never to listen to anything but gentle kindly words; never to have to meet frowning tradesmen, or duns of any sort; never to trudge through the streets on Saturday nights, with the certain knowledge that your skirts were bedraggled, and your feet cold and wet, and that the money in the thin worn purse had come perilously near to nothingness. Oh – that must be good indeed!

She went back into the house – with a strange feeling that to-night something had happened that had changed her; she would never be able to make-believe any more as she had done. The touch

of the boy's lips upon her hand had wakened something in her that had merely lain dormant; she cried out dumbly for her natural and proper birthright. The world held something better for her, and it was denied her; she found herself wondering, without being able to put the question into words, whether she would ever get that which belonged to her, by right of the fact that she was a woman, and young.

Mr. Aubrey Meggison came in presently, and insisted on telling her of a few shots he had taken that night on the billiard-table – illustrating his words by means of a walking-stick on the shabby cover of the dining-room table – and how he had completely "wiped the floor" with his opponent, to the unbounded astonishment of a choice circle which seemed to consist of a billiard-marker, a bookmaker, and a long-dethroned music-hall star. The triumphs of the evening, however, had not smoothed his temper; he complained bitterly about the monotony of bread and cheese, and pushed his food from him with a few elegant expressions of disgust.

"Tact and forethought – that's what you're lackin', Bess," he suggested. "You don't think to yourself what's the best thing to suit your brother, and your brother's appetite. Not you; the first thing that comes along'll do for him."

She bore his reproaches meekly, until presently he restlessly wandered out of the house again. He encountered his father on the doorstep; and Bessie heard a little wordy warfare between the two – Daniel Meggison protesting virtuously that his son should be in bed at ten o'clock to the minute – and that son suggesting airily that he knew what was best for himself. Then Daniel came into the room, not too steadily, but perhaps with the greater dignity on that account.

"What I've done this night will not soon be forgotten," he said, with a roll of the head. "On their knees, they were, in a manner of speaking – on their knees, my child. Nothing good enough for me; apologies flying about everywhere. Haughty with them, mind you; no sudden giving way on my part. At the same time – condescending; that's the right word – condescending." He sat down, and waved his hand to show exactly what manner he had adopted for the subjugation of the Arcadia Arms, and fell asleep.

The shabby little room seemed intolerable, with the old man gurgling and choking, and muttering in his sleep in his chair; once again the girl slipped out into her garden. And now, as if to welcome her, the kindly moon had come over the housetops, and was shedding a radiance even there. She sat down at the table, and leant her elbows upon it; she did not understand what this new and desperate longing was that had come upon her. She had been content for so many years; had been glad to accept things as they were, and to make the best of them. But now to-night there was a new and passionate longing for a world and a life that could never be hers at all. As she sat there, staring at the shabby wall before her, the walls seemed to vanish; and there grew up in their place a dim vision of a wide countryside, lying silent and peaceful under the moon; of a life that was gentle and secure and easy. And beyond that wide countryside, with a path of light made across it by the moon, lay the shining sea. The vision was gone, just as rapidly as it had come; the grey wall was there; out in the street coarse hoarse voices sounded, and a shout of discordant laughter. She let her hands fall on the table, and bowed her head upon her arms. What had she to do with dreams?

It was at that precise moment that Mr. Gilbert Byfield determined to walk out of the house next door into that plot of ground attached to it which matched that in which Bessie Meggison was seated. That particular plot of ground did not boast any of the adornments of the Meggison garden; it was simply a stretch of bare earth, with scrubby grass growing here and there in patches. Gilbert thought nothing of that, because the place did not interest him, save for the fact that it adjoined the garden next door; and he had already learned that in that garden only was the Princess of Arcadia Street to be approached, if one did it delicately. Accordingly he stole up to the dividing wall now, and peered over it; and so, of course, saw that hopeless figure in the moonlight, leaning over the old table.

As he had never seen her save with that demure brightness upon her that seemed to belong to her, he was naturally shocked at this sudden abandonment; besides, she looked pathetic indeed in her utter loneliness in that place. He called softly to her over the wall.

"Hullo! I say – what's the matter?"

He called so softly that she did not hear him, nor did she change her position. After a moment of hesitation, he glanced first at the back of the house he had left, and then at the back of the other one; swung himself up to the top of the wall; and jumped over. He alighted, as luck would have it, on that defective board in the old box set under the wall; swore softly to himself, and stepped down to the ground. The noise he made had startled the girl; she got quickly to her feet, and moved away from him.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he began, smiling at her.

But she waved him back hurriedly. "Mr. Byfield!" she said in a whisper, with a glance at the house. "Oh, please – you must go back! – you must really go back!"

"If anyone comes, I can jump over in a moment," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of – and this is ever so much better than talking over the wall, you know. By the way," he added ruefully, "I'm afraid I've broken your – your ottoman."

"It doesn't matter," she said in a dull voice – "and it isn't an ottoman. It's an old box."

"I don't believe it," he exclaimed. "It's an ottoman – and a very nice one at that."

"You're laughing at me," she said, with the shyness of a child. "You know it's all only pretending; you know what a shabby place this is – really and truly. You've been good and kind about it; you've never laughed at me, like other people."

"God forbid, child!"

"That's it!" she exclaimed quickly. "Child! That's what you think me; that's what you believe me to be. If a child brought you a broken doll, you'd be sorry, and make much of it, although in your heart you'd laugh, because it was such a little thing to make a fuss about. And you've been sorry for me – and have pretended with me that this place was what it has never been. And in your heart you have never ceased to laugh at me."

"In my heart I have never laughed at you at all," he said solemnly.

They had unconsciously drawn nearer to each other in the solitude of the garden under the moon; their hands were touching. For now it seemed that she wanted desperately to touch hands with some friendly being – someone, for choice, who came out of the big world mysteriously, as this man had done. She was so much of a child that she needed comforting; so much of a woman that she needed loving.

"I was wrong to say that you had laughed at me," she said penitently – "you have been the only one that has understood. I wonder if you remember when you first looked over the wall?"

"Shall I ever forget it!" he exclaimed, in all honesty. "You see, I had never imagined any place like this" – he glanced round about him, and whimsically shook his head as he spoke – "and of course I was surprised. And then I saw you – and I understood at once that you were so different from anyone I had seen in Arcadia Street, or indeed anywhere. And so we – we talked."

"I shall never forget it," she said. "I had always tried to make-believe a little, because when one does that one gets away from all the tiresome things – all the things that *must* happen, and yet that ought not to happen at all. You see, so many people seem always to have held out hands to me for money; and I've had so little money to give them."

"And so – just to enable you to forget them a little – you started this great game of make-believe; this pretending that you were something better (although that could never be, you know) – something bigger and greater than you really were. The fine lady walked in her garden every night, and saw the flowers grow, and heard the summer wind rustling the trees and dreamed – what great dreams they were!"

She nodded, with shining eyes. "And then you one day looked over the wall – and you seemed to understand in a moment. Any one else but you, coming out of the big world, would simply have laughed, and would have seen that this was an old carpet, too shabby even for the house – and this a table we couldn't use for anything else – and that a box that no one wanted. And yet in a moment – do you remember? – you knew perfectly what each thing was. It was wonderful!"

"I remember." He nodded gravely. "I knew that was the ottoman – and behind it the tapestry; I understood also how nice it was to have coffee in the garden every evening. Arcadia Street doesn't run to coffee – except in the morning."

"I had read somewhere – it was in a paper that came to the house – that ladies and gentlemen take their coffee generally on the terrace. Well, of course, we couldn't manage a terrace, and I couldn't quite understand whether it was anything like the terrace you get to round the corner, with the houses in a sort of half-circle, and the little bit of green in front; only somehow I knew it couldn't be quite like that; all I understood was that it was out of doors. So then I understood the best thing I could do was to make the most of the garden; and it really isn't half bad – is it?"

"It's a pity it isn't better appreciated," he said.

"Father said he didn't understand what I was driving at; and then he always seemed to find the hole in the carpet and to trip over it. And Amelia doesn't really make very good coffee; it's the sort you dare not stir too much."

"Poor little Miss Make-Believe!" he said, a little sorrowfully. "I wonder what you would do if the time came when some of your dreams came true, when you didn't have to make-believe any more; when you walked out of this place, and left behind all the shabby pretences of it. I wonder what you would say then?"

"That's never likely to happen," she said, with a shake of the head. "Father doesn't seem to belong to the rich side of the family. His sister, who was here to-night – Aunt Julia, you know – has lots of money; she owns houses, you know, and lives in Clapham."

"Wonderful Aunt Julia!" he said.

"Father has said over and over again that if he had what he deserves he would be a rich man. I don't quite know what he means; he's never very explicit about it. But sometimes at night, when he comes home from – from his club, he cries a little, poor dear, and tells me what he would give me if only he had what he ought to have. And I know he would, too; he is really very generous by nature."

Gilbert Byfield knew enough of the girl's story by that time not to need to ask questions. Ever since that first meeting with her, when he had carefully gained her confidence over the wall, he had been able, by the simple process of piecing together her innocent answers to his questions, to understand what she did, and what sort of struggle she was constantly engaged in. He summed up the shiftless father and the shiftless son easily enough; understood, from the type of lodgers that came to the house, how difficult it must be for this girl to make both ends meet. Most he admired her unflinching courage, and above all that curious fanciful child-like nature that nothing had been able to crush or stamp out of her. With the most innocent feeling in the world, he had fostered that, and encouraged it.

It had been hard at times to remember that she was not a child, and that he had no right to treat her as such; it had, above all things, been difficult for him to tell himself, over and over again, that the life he lived in Arcadia Street was a sham, and that he was not the poor man he seemed to be to her. She had been frankness itself with him, and he should have been with her in return. Only of course he knew that, once she understood that he was playing a part, her confidence in him, as someone as poor as herself and as struggling, would be gone. For a period not yet defined in any way he intended to keep that fiction alive, and remain near her. And in that again there was no real motive, save one of pity for the girl.

He asked a question now that had been on his lips many and many a time, and yet that he had not uttered before. They were standing together near the table, and she had one hand resting upon it; he noticed how short the sleeve was, and guessed that she must long since have outgrown this dress, and many others she possessed. He remembered suddenly that her dresses had always seemed short. "How old are you, little Make-Believe?" he asked.

"More than eighteen," she said; and laughed and blushed.

A shadow darkened the doorway of the house, and a man stood there. Gilbert Byfield stood quite still, watching; for his presence there would need explanation. The girl had drawn away from him, and was peering at the man in the doorway; she spoke his name hesitatingly at last – almost apologetically.

"Mr. Quarle?" she asked. "Do you want me?"

The man who stepped out from the doorway was a thickly-set man of between fifty and sixty years of age, with thin grey hair and with a somewhat sour-looking face. His shoulders were very broad, and he had the appearance almost of a man whose head has been set too far forward; the sharp clean-shaven face was thrust well out, as though the man spent his time in peering into everything about him. He carried his hands locked behind him; his voice was rather harsh. Certainly there was nothing amiable-looking about him.

"I don't want you – but your father's asking for you," said the man.

"I'll go in at once," said Bessie. "Oh – Mr. Quarle," she added nervously, slipping her hand through the arm of the man, and drawing him forward a little – "this is Mr. Byfield – a friend of mine."

"Pleased to know you, sir," said Quarle, with a face that belied his words. "New lodger?"

"I live – next door," said Gilbert, a little lamely. For the girl had run into the house, and the situation was an absurd one. The only fashion in which he could leave this man, whose appearance he did not like, was by an undignified exit over the wall; and he had no wish for that. He could have gone out into the little alley behind, but he knew that the door at the end of his own particular garden was always kept bolted. So he stood somewhat awkwardly looking at the newcomer, and wondering whether he had better say something about the moon, or the warmth of the night. The man relieved him of the difficulty by speaking first.

"My name is Simon Quarle," he said, coming a step or two nearer to the younger man, and lowering his voice. "You're not likely to have heard of me; very few people have, because I keep myself to myself. It's a habit of mine."

"And a very excellent habit too, I should imagine," said Gilbert with meaning.

"I could wish it was a more general habit," retorted Quarle, with a quick glance at the house. "Now, sir – I'm old enough to be your father – old enough, under happier circumstances, to be the father of that girl who has just left us. And the Lord knows she needs a father badly."

"I believe she has one already," said Gilbert coldly.

"She supports a drunken reprobate who has that title," retorted the man, with a snarl. "Perhaps, if he were worthy of the name, he might have something to say to a man who sneaks over a back wall at night to talk to his daughter."

Gilbert made a quick movement towards the man; Quarle did not flinch, nor did he take his eyes from the face of the younger man. Again the absurdity of his position was borne in upon Byfield; more than that, he seemed to see in this strange creature someone who had a greater right to say that he was the friend of Bessie – a friend of an older standing.

"You simply don't understand," said Gilbert. "From a younger man I shouldn't stand it – but –"

"Never mind my years," said the other. "I'll do you the justice to believe that yours has simply been the thoughtlessness of youth – the carelessness of a man to whom women are all alike –"

"I see that you don't understand," broke in Gilbert hotly. "I have been genuinely sorry to see this child slaving for those who should really be supporting her; I have seen in her something purer and sweeter than in any woman I have met yet."

"You're right there," said Simon Quarle, with a nod. "But you'd best leave her alone to her garden, as she calls it, and to her dreams, and to the hard workaday world she knows. You belong to another world; go back to it."

"How do you know I belong to another world?" demanded Gilbert.

"Because I haven't lived in this one for nearly sixty years without watching men, and growing to understand them. You don't belong to Arcadia Street; you haven't the true stamp of it."

Gilbert took an impatient turn or two about the garden, and then came back to this strange man, who had not moved. "But if I tell you that I'm interested in her – that I want to help her – "

"Then I tell you that no help you can give her is of the sort she wants or deserves," said Quarle steadily. "At the present time, you stand to her doubtless as someone wonderful, who can talk to her as no man has talked to her yet – understand her with the understanding of youth. And presently, when the mood seizes you, you will turn your back on Arcadia Street, and go off to the world you know and understand. But you will leave her behind."

Again there was a pause between the two men, and again the younger one strode about impatiently, and again the elder one stood still, watching him. At last Gilbert came back to where Simon Quarle was standing.

"I beg your pardon if I spoke hastily just now," he said. "I had no right to do that, because no man would speak as you have done unless he was her friend."

"Thank you," said the other simply. "Anything else?"

"I want to help her – I want to lift her out of this slum in which she lives – make some of her dreams come true. I am rich; I can do many things secretly without her knowledge."

"You are young; would you marry her?"

"My dear sir – she's a child. Besides – I – "

"Besides – you belong to another world," broke in Quarle mockingly. "Get back over your wall, my friend, and leave her alone. Much better leave her to her dreams and her fancies, even if they are never to be realized, than shatter them as you would shatter them. Get back over your wall."

"You don't understand, and I don't suppose you ever will," exclaimed Gilbert quickly. "But I shall find a way to help her yet."

"Perhaps – perhaps," said Simon Quarle, nodding his head slowly. "But for the present get back over your wall!"

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCESS GOES TO DINNER

THAT absurd business of climbing the wall again had to be got over, and was safely accomplished; to do him justice, Mr. Simon Quarle refrained from watching Gilbert's departure, and so took away one pang at least. The last vision Gilbert had of him was as he dropped over into the other garden, and, looking back, saw the old man standing with his hands clasped behind his back, and his bent shoulders turned towards where Gilbert had disappeared, and his eyes fixed upon the opposite wall.

But whatever resolution Gilbert Byfield may have formed to help the girl, and to lift her out from the sordid life in which he had found her, for the present he did nothing. Indeed, for the moment he decided after a restless night to abandon Arcadia Street altogether, and to touch again that life to which he most properly belonged. He would go back into that artificial existence, and, looking on this picture and on that, would decide clearly which was the most worthy. Which is to say in other words that the old life still drew him, and that this quixotic thing about which he had concerned himself could be easily laid aside, for a time at least.

Thus it happened that Mr. Jordan Tant, in his extremely neat and trim chambers, was informed by his extremely neat and trim man-servant one morning that Mr. Byfield had arrived. At the same moment the man-servant was thrust aside, and Gilbert strode in.

"Now, I don't want a lot of fuss, or a lot of talk," said Gilbert, a little impatiently; "you've just got to accept me as I am, and not talk about what I have been, or what I have done. You should know by this time that I cut up my life into slices; and when one slice is done with I go on to the next with a new appetite. Arcadia Street is gone – lost somewhere in the wilds of Islington. I am back again in civilization. What's the news?"

"There's no news that I'm aware of," said Mr. Tant, a little sulkily. "What news should there be?"

"Something's upset you, Tant," said Gilbert, with a laugh. "Come, now – I'm sure to hear about it sooner or later; why not tell me now?"

Jordan Tant stood with his arms folded, and his head a little on one side, and with an aggressive shoulder turned towards the other man. When he began to speak he shook himself almost in the fashion of a spoilt child that resents an injury.

"It isn't fair," he said, in his thin voice; "it really isn't fair. You go away for an unlimited time, and in a sense you leave the field to me. I cultivate that field; I'm careful about it; I am attentive and anxious – in fact, I work very hard. Then suddenly you step in, and if I may use such a term in so delicate a matter – you gather the crop."

"My dear Tant, you are really more Tant-like than ever," said Gilbert. "Why won't you tell me what you really mean in half a dozen words?"

"One word will suffice," said Jordan, turning upon him, and speaking with a sort of mild fierceness. "And that one word is – 'Enid.' While you've been living in your blessed Arcadia Street, on bread and cheese and moonshine, I've been seeing much of Miss Ewart-Crane; and there has been a gradually increasing respect for me in the family. You have shamefully neglected the lady; I have given her companionship. Now you turn up again, and will doubtless be welcomed with open arms, as having returned to the fold. For you will the fatted calf be prepared; I shall be lucky if I'm invited to the feast at all."

"My dear Tant," said Gilbert, laughing, "you are jumping at conclusions. Because I walk out of Arcadia Street, and come back here, is it to be said that I am about to take up the old life again in the old way? Am I going to call on the fair Enid, and stay to lunch – or perhaps drop in, in immaculate garments, for afternoon tea; or dine with her and her esteemed mother in a state of hopeless boredom;

and take them afterwards to a theatre where the play's something I don't want to see? Perish the thought! I'm going to leave all that sort of thing to you."

Mr. Jordan Tant shook his head sadly. "It's quite impossible," he said. "I'm a useful man when there's no one else about; there you have me in a nutshell. If you had persisted in your folly, and had remained in Arcadia Street, it might have happened that some fine morning, or some fine evening, when Enid was more bored than usual, she would have said that she would put up with me for the rest of her life; and we should have got on very well. But about you always," he went on petulantly, "is a species of storm-cloud – a very whirlwind of romantic excitement. Now there's no whirlwind about me – and it's really the whirlwind fellows that attract the girls. One never knows what you're going to do; while, on the other hand, everyone knows what I'm going to do every hour of the day. I'm a sort of damp squib, that just fizzles about on its bit of ground, and does no harm to anybody; you're a gorgeous sort of rocket, that might even set fire to a town if you felt that way inclined. At all events, while I'm fizzing about down below, you'll be illuminating your bit of sky."

"You're really most complimentary," said Gilbert Byfield. "But suppose I tell you that I've no intention of stepping into the place you have so laboriously made for yourself – what then?"

"It wouldn't make the least difference," said Tant, shaking his head. "Mrs. Ewart-Crane is all for you; she never ceases to speak of you. I think she knows that one of these days you'll go back and settle down comfortably with Enid. You see, the thing is really arranged."

"Oh – nonsense!" exclaimed Gilbert impatiently. "That was a boy and girl affair – a sort of arrangement made between our people, years and years ago. Besides, suppose I don't want to settle down – what then?"

"They'll make you; they'll persuade you," said Mr. Tant gloomily. "Mrs. Ewart-Crane is a mother, and has one thought in her mind, and one only – Enid's future. You'll simply be told that you've got to get married. After that, perhaps, they'll let you run about as much as you like – that is, within limits."

"We shall see about that," said his friend. "By the way, what are you doing to-night? We might dine together."

"I am taking Enid and her mother to dinner and to the theatre," said Mr. Tant with dignity. "Perhaps you'd like to suggest that you will go too?"

"Certainly," said Gilbert, with alacrity. "Most kind of you; I'll join you with pleasure."

"I knew it!" Mr. Jordan Tant threw up his hands in a sort of comical despair. "I can see myself escorting Mrs. Ewart-Crane all the evening, and compelled to be polite while inwardly boiling. It's a very unfair world."

Just as Gilbert was going Mr. Tant called him back, to deliver a word of warning. "Understand me clearly, Byfield," he said, "I will not have you springing in suddenly in any dramatic fashion. You shall be announced in a commonplace way – your return referred to as something quite of an ordinary kind. I will fetch the ladies this evening, but I shall tell them that you await us at the restaurant. There shall be no surprises."

"I don't want any surprises," said Gilbert, laughing.

Despite all his precautions, Mr. Tant found himself as usual very much in the background when it came to that moment of meeting between the gentleman from Arcadia Street and Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter. Mr. Tant had made all arrangements for a very excellent dinner; and he endeavoured, with what dignity he might, to take the head of affairs. But Enid was anxious to know everything concerning a certain Arcadia Street that had been spoken of, and she leaned eagerly towards Gilbert, demanding to know what he had been doing, and if it was really true that he had lived among people who were a sort of savages – and what he had had to eat, and how he had managed to live at all.

"There's nothing remarkable about it at all," said Mr. Tant savagely. "Anyone would think that he had been exploring some wild region where the foot of man had never trod; instead of which, he's

simply been living in a very thickly populated part of London, within a cab fare of his own home – and all for a whim! Besides, slumming's out of date."

"It wasn't exactly slumming – and besides, he really went to study the people – didn't you, Gilbert?" asked Enid, in her high voice. She was a tall, handsome girl, with a good carriage, and an abundance of good health and spirits; this evening she was particularly glad to see her old friend back again in his place among men.

"What I never can understand," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane, adjusting a bracelet on a very well-formed arm, "is why we need study men at all – or women, for the matter of that. I grant you that in your own sphere you are naturally interested in the people about you; but beyond that I decline to go."

"Exactly, my dear Mrs. Ewart-Crane," broke in Tant. "Just what I always say: let us remember always the dividing line, and stick to it. We should get jumbled up in the most horrible way if we didn't remember the dividing line always, and above all, if we didn't remember that the people who live in the Arcadia Streets of the world are very right and proper in their own places, and very wrong and improper elsewhere. The people of position in this world are those who have come by right to the top; it's fellows like Byfield that put wrong notions into their heads, by mixing with 'em, and coming down, in a sense, to their level. I assure you that when I discovered him he was living in a perfectly shocking place."

Mrs. Ewart-Crane closed her eyes, and shivered. "Then I'm very glad to think that he's left it," she said. "For my part, I wish to hear no more about it; let us regard it as something happily done with and forgotten."

"But I want to hear about it, mamma," persisted Enid, laughing good-humouredly. "I'm quite sure there was an attraction down there – wasn't there?" She turned to Gilbert with a smile.

"Many attractions," he replied evasively. "All sorts of poor people, toiling cheerfully, and having rather a good time in their own way, in spite of poverty."

"Don't let him put you off, Miss Enid," said Tant, a little maliciously. "There was an attraction – I saw her, and I heard about her. And I don't mind saying that she was very pretty."

"Gilbert!" The girl was looking at him quizzically. "I want to hear all about this. What was she like? Big and rather brazen – quite a child of nature, with what they call a heart of gold – eh? I know the sort."

"I beg again, Enid, that the subject may be dropped," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane icily. But no one took the least notice of her.

"I'm afraid you don't know the sort," said Gilbert. He was annoyed at the turn the conversation had taken – annoyed, too, at Jordan Tant for his breach of faith. He hated the thought of discussing the girl with these people; he knew that the more he tried to explain his feeling about the matter, the less they would be able to understand. But the rather haughty eyes of Enid were upon him, and he had to go on, against his will. "The girl Tant is talking about is a little hard-working thing, who lived in the next house to that in which I stayed; and she keeps a drunken father and a reprobate brother by the simple process of letting lodgings. Now you know all about it."

"How touching – and how romantic!" exclaimed the girl. "And the great man from the great world took a deep interest in her, and stayed perhaps a little longer in his slum on her account – eh?"

"For my part," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane stiffly, "since the subject must be discussed, I have never been able to understand what people let lodgings for. If they've got a house, why not live in it, and not give over bits of it to other people?"

Gilbert Byfield glanced at his watch. "We shall be late for the first act," he said.

"Which of course puts an end to the discussion," Enid said, as she rose from the table. "Of course, if you'd like me to send her anything that would be useful, I should be only too pleased. Mother likes me to be charitable."

The play proved to be dull (at least to Gilbert Byfield), and the evening seemed to stretch on interminably. For the man was haunted by the miserable feeling that this child, in her common

back-yard – this girl he had understood, as he thought, so perfectly – could never by any chance be understood by those who had not intimately touched her life. He was puzzled to think what he could do to carry out that brave determination of his to help her – to lift her out of her surroundings. If he remained where he was, among his own people, and in his own sphere, he deserted the child; if he went back to her, he deserted them, and took up his life in surroundings uncongenial, except so far as she was concerned. And he saw that it was utterly impossible to go half-way about one matter or the other; Arcadia Street was not to be brought into the West End and dumped down there.

It happened that between the acts he went out to smoke a cigarette, and found himself, with a dozen other men, near the open doors of the theatre. A few people were strolling listlessly outside in the street – pausing now and then to stare in at the well-dressed men, and to whisper. And once a girl went past – a thin shabby girl in black; and he was reminded so forcibly of Bessie Meggison that, without knowing what he did, he hurried out of the place, and went after her. Fifty yards down the street she stopped to look in at a shop window; and it was not Bessie at all, but someone quite different. Yet the thought assailed him, as he went back to the theatre, that just in that fashion the girl might be wandering alone in this horrible London – poorly clad, and not too well fed. He hated the thought of his own prosperity; quite unnecessarily called himself a brute, because he had had a good dinner, and was supposed to be out in search of enjoyment.

Never for a moment, of course, did it occur to him that his point of view was wrong; never for a moment did he understand that properly his life could not touch the girl's, and could have nothing in common with it. He accused himself unnecessarily, when the only mistake that had been made in the whole matter was in going to Arcadia Street at all, and above all going there under false colours. That point of view he did not regard in the least.

But he walked home that night, after leaving his friends, feeling miserably that it would have been better if he had buried himself for ever in Arcadia Street; if in some impossible way, he could have forgotten this selfish purposeless life he had always lived, and could have flung himself into some real work that would have brought him nearer in thought and feeling to the girl. Not for the first time he cried out against artificiality; metaphorically speaking, he wanted to put on rough clothing and thick boots, and plunge into the real fierce work of the world.

Some sense of the injustice of the world in meting out such different lots to such different women urged him, after a lapse of days during which he had been at the beck and call of Enid, to go back to Arcadia Street. He told himself that it would be merely an experimental visit; he meant to see if something could not be done to shake old Meggison into an understanding of his responsibilities, and perhaps even to urge the derelict brother into an attempt to earn a living. That was what he told himself; in the end, of course, it amounted to his going with the prospect of seeing the girl, and of doing something, in a wholly indefinite way, for her personally.

He was a little shy about meeting her; so many ridiculous suggestions had been thrown to him by Jordan Tant, and by Enid and her mother, concerning this girl, that the old freedom between them, so far at least as he was concerned, seemed a thing of the past. Even when that summer evening arrived when, leaning over the wall, he saw her seated in her garden, and called to her, it was with a new constraint.

"I've come back, you see," he said.

She was genuinely very glad to see him; he found himself wondering if the eyes of Enid could by any chance ever light up at his coming as did the eyes of this child. Things were different in Arcadia Street, he knew; almost he wished that they were not – almost he wished that this happy familiarity might obtain in other places with which he was more naturally in touch.

"I thought – thought you were not coming back," said the girl. "And yet I hoped – "

"Hoped that I was – eh?" he supplemented. "Even now, I don't know how long I may be able to stop here; I may go away again at a moment's notice – and never come back at all. Don't look so grave about it; you can go on making-believe, you know, just as well as ever."

"It won't be quite the same," she said. "You see, in that you've helped me – because, as I told you, you understood."

"And how have you been getting on?" he asked. "I mean, of course – the house?"

She stood against the wall over which he leaned; she did not look up at him when she replied. "Oh, pretty well, thank you," she said in a low voice. "Nothing ever happens, you know, in Arcadia Street – except the thing you don't want to happen."

"Your father?"

"Father is quite established again at his club; they think a lot of him at his club," she said. "And Aubrey is positive he will hear of something to do very shortly."

"That's good news," said Gilbert. "By the way – that Mr. Quarle I met when I was here last – the night I came over into your garden – do you know him very well?"

"Oh, yes; he's been a great friend of mine for nearly two years. But for him I think we couldn't keep the house going; he is the only lodger I have ever had who pays money without being asked for it. He's simply wonderful. Not that he's well off; he's only retired from something, and I don't think the something was very much before he retired from it. But his payments – oh – they're beautifully regular!"

"He's a valuable man," said Gilbert, not without a curious little feeling of jealousy that anyone else should be good to the girl except himself. Then the thought of what he had meant to do – the remembrance of the girl, shabby and forlorn, who had walked past the theatre that night, and had been something like Bessie Meggison – urged him to say something else.

"Bessie – (you don't mind my calling you Bessie – do you?) – have you ever had a holiday? I mean, have you ever got away from this dull house for one long evening – and seen bright lights, and happy faces – and heard music? Have you ever done that?"

Still leaning against the wall, she shook her head slowly, without looking up. "There hasn't been time – or money," she said simply.

"If you found the time – and I found the money?" he suggested. "What then?"

She looked up at him wonderingly; did not seem for a moment to understand what he meant. At last she said slowly – "I'm afraid it wouldn't do, you know; it really wouldn't do at all. Someone would be wanting me – someone would be calling for me."

"I should let them call for once," said Gilbert. "Just suppose for once, little Make-Believe, that we went out of Arcadia Street – and far beyond Islington – just our two selves. There are certain places called theatres, you know."

She nodded, with a sigh. "I know," she said. "That is, of course, I don't know much about what they're like inside; the outsides are wonderful. But I expect they're very expensive."

"We might manage it – just for once," he urged. "I could save up, you know – go without something."

It needed a lot of persuasion before she would consent at all; but at last she named a night when it was probable that father would be more in requisition at his club even than usual, and when Aubrey would be engrossed in the mysteries of a billiard handicap. She would go then; and, the better to preserve the proprieties (for Arcadia Street was given to gossip), would meet him at a certain spot not a hundred yards from the Arcadia Arms.

He began to understand, almost at the last moment, that the expedition must be conducted in her own fashion; he had the delicacy to understand that he must be shabby to match her poor shabbiness. So that it is probable very few of his friends would have recognized Mr. Gilbert Byfield, had they seen him waiting about at the corner of a certain street in Islington, in a well-worn tweed suit and a billycock hat. At that time he did not like the idea at all; he would have liked to whirl her away in a hansom, and do the thing properly at a first-class restaurant, with stalls at a theatre to follow. He wondered a little how the evening was going to pass.

And yet, after all, it proved to be rather pleasant – viewed as a new experience. Pleasant, to begin with, to see that little thin figure coming towards him; to hold for a moment the little hand in the worn glove, and to notice with satisfaction how neat she was, and how tastefully dressed, despite the poor things she had on. He had the grace to forget that a swift hansom might be hailed with the raising of a hand; found an omnibus almost comfortable – quite delightful, in fact, with the girl seated beside him, wearing upon her face that extraordinary look of complete happiness. He forgot even to think what his friends would have said had they seen him riding in such a vehicle, dressed in such fashion, and with such a companion.

The choosing of a restaurant was a difficulty, because he scarcely knew the cheaper or more dingy ones. She drew back in alarm at the prospect of entering a place gay with electric light; became reconciled at last to a little place of few tables and fewer waiters; sat open-eyed and breathless at the glory of a fifth-rate place, with a decided smell of the kitchen about it every time a creaking door was opened near her. She did not talk much; only occasionally she glanced at him, and when she did she smiled that slow grave smile of gratitude and friendliness.

Afterwards he found himself, for the first time in his life, in the upper circle at a theatre; congratulated himself on the fact that a friend he saw in a box below would not be likely to raise his eyes to the third row of that particular part of the building. He contented himself, not with looking at a play he had already seen, but with watching the thin face of the girl beside him – the bright eyes and the half-parted lips. Once, at a moment that was thrilling, she gripped his arm; and for quite a long time kept her hand there, holding to him while she watched the stage.

Coming out of the theatre, in the whirl and rush of people homeward bound, he got her into the hansom almost before she knew what had happened; it was only after the horse had started for Arcadia Street that she looked up at him reproachfully – shocked and awed by this friend who could spend so much money in a single evening. She voiced that thought as they drove along.

"You'll have to go without quite a lot for this, Mr. Byfield – won't you?" she asked wistfully. "I mean – it has been a frightfully expensive evening."

"I don't mind – for once," said Gilbert. "The only question in my mind is – have you really had a good time?"

She heaved a big sigh. "I should like to do it all over again," she said softly – "but to do it much more slowly. It has been wonderful!"

This was the one man in all the world that had ever thought about her, or had ever done her a kindness. Small wonder then that her eyes spoke more than gratitude when she put that little hand into his again in Arcadia Street, before the shabby house swallowed her up, and the door closed upon her. No one saw her, because Arcadia Street, save on Saturday nights, goes early to bed.

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT GAME OF MAKE-BELIEVE

IN the course of many scrambling, shambling years Mr. Daniel Meggison had learnt much, in the sordid sense, concerning the value of men. Had it been necessary for him, at any time in his later life, to pass a strict examination in the Gentle Art of Tapping People, he would in all probability have come out of the ordeal with flying colours, as one having vast experience.

For he could have told you to a nicety how, in the case of this man, you must not try for more than half a crown, and must be jocular with him; how, in another case, you might fly higher, and whine for a sovereign, with a pitiful tale pitched to charm the coin out of his pockets; and how, in other cases, you would have to drop your demands so low as a shilling or even possibly a sixpence. It is not too much to say that every man, in a very special sense, had for Mr. Daniel Meggison his price; and that on all and sundry occasions he was only too ready to exact that price from his fellows.

Exactly how far back in the years he had really made any attempt to earn an honest living it is impossible to say, and he had probably long since forgotten. It had at the beginning been a mere accidental business; a temporary loss of work had thrown him into the willing arms, as it were, of a wife who had always done something to help him. It merely became necessary for her to increase her efforts; Mr. Meggison was in no hurry to look for work, and gradually the truth was forced upon him that he need never do so again. True, he made a pretence, for something like twelve months, to gain a livelihood, but with no ardour in the pursuit; and so gradually drifted into that great and marvellous army which always in a big city manages to exist pretty comfortably without working at all.

He learnt their tricks and their ways – even their little catch-phrases slipped naturally from his tongue. He might have been heard talking loudly concerning the affairs of the nation, and how they should be conducted; he knew his newspaper by heart. More than that, he might have been heard often demanding to know why this man and that did not obtain the employment that was obviously waiting for him in a busy world. And so in time he grew to the belief that he was in all respects something of a poor gentleman, for whom others must provide money, and who, by reason of a certain superiority of birth and education and resources, stood outside the mere common grubbing workaday world.

There were, of course, mean shifts and petty frauds to be encountered; but in time the man grew hardened even to those. There was a bed in which he might sleep, and there was food for him, and tobacco always; he became a familiar figure in his poor neighbourhood, and accepted with each day that which was provided for him, not without grumbling. In time the patient wife folded her hands, and sighed, and fell asleep; and the patient daughter took up the burden quite naturally, as it had been bequeathed to her. The legacy of the shiftless father, who was always to be protected and looked after, descended to her, and was taken up as a sacred trust.

But with that shiftless life that had been his portion so long the man had not lost his natural cunning – the cunning of the creature that preys upon his fellows. Money was necessary, for the occasional replenishing of his scanty wardrobe, and for tobacco and drinks; he would have been a poor thing without money in his pockets. Hence the borrowing – hence the tapping of any and every one with whom he came in contact. Therefore, too, it is small wonder that he turned his eyes at last towards Gilbert Byfield, with something of a smacking of lips. For here was higher game; here was a man who might, if handled carefully, be a man of sovereigns instead of paltry shillings.

The man was not above playing the spy, and he had of course a jealous interest in the fate of that chief breadwinner – his daughter. More than once he had shivered, with a very genuine horror, at the prospect of love or marriage being even suggested to her; had been short with Harry Dorricott, when he had seen that boy's eyes turn with an unmistakable look of affection in them in Bessie's

direction. For what, in the name of all that was tragic, was to become of Mr. Daniel Meggison if his daughter left him?

From behind the curtain of a window he had seen the stranger who lived next door talking to the girl over the wall; had been inclined to resent that at once. At the same time, he had a craven feeling that it would not do to upset Bessie; he had better watch, and be silent. So he had seen other meetings, until at last that night had arrived when Bessie was not in the house, and when she came in very late, and crept up to her room like the guilty truant she was. And had there not been a sound of wheels outside the house? Daniel Meggison shivered in his bed, and wondered what he had done in all his blameless life to deserve this.

Questioned cautiously on the following morning, Bessie would say but little. Yes – she had been out – all the evening – with a friend. No – she had not spent money over it; she would not have thought of doing such a thing; the friend had paid for everything. She hoped that her father was not annoyed, and that he had not wanted for anything.

"No, my child, I am not suggesting that I wanted for anything; I spent the greater part of the evening at my club," he replied stiffly. "Only, of course, as a father I am naturally anxious for you – and I –"

"It was a very nice friend – a very nice one indeed," she broke in; and he decided that it would not be wise to pursue the matter then.

For the sake of his very livelihood, however, he saw that he must be alert; it might even happen that this precious child would be snatched away from him. He went to that club of his less frequently; came into the house at unexpected moments, and was to be found loitering about on the staircase, and in rooms in which he had no business. Also he haunted that garden, and had a watchful eye upon the house next door. He hungered for another sight of this man who could afford to pay for an evening's entertainment, and could travel in cabs.

He knew, of course, that Gilbert Byfield was not as other men in Arcadia Street. Apart from his own observation, he knew instinctively that Bessie had hitherto held aloof from everyone; had gone about her duties soberly – a grown woman long before her time; he did her the justice to know that no ordinary man would have attracted her attention, or have drawn her away from the life her father had mapped out for her even for an hour. More than that, those who dwell in Arcadia Street have not money for evening pleasures or for cabs; and there had been from the beginning a sort of mystery about this young man who lived next door. Mr. Meggison determined to lie in wait for that young man, and to confront him.

He began artfully. On one particular evening he did not, as usual, shuffle off down the street, with his pipe between his teeth; he waited about in the house instead. Bessie hinted that she supposed he would be going out soon; he declared that he would wait a little while; he might not, in fact, be going out at all. He seated himself in his shabby easy chair, and declared that he was very comfortable where he was. He had been too much at the club of late; home was the proper place for the man and the head of a family, after all.

Bessie was moving towards the garden, when he sat up and called to her. "I dislike the idea of your sitting out in that garden so much in the evening, my child," he said, with a new tenderness that was startling to the girl. "Here you've been cooped up in the house all day long – no fresh air – no exercise; and now you expect to go and sit out there. We must take care of you, Bessie. Much better go for a walk."

"But I like the garden, father," the girl urged faintly.

"For to-night, my dear – to please me," said Daniel Meggison, with an unaccustomed smile – "go for a walk. There may be little matters of shopping which you ordinarily leave to Amelia; go yourself on this occasion; you will probably buy more economically than she will. You must think of these matters in dealing with a household. Come, Bessie, I know what is best for you; put your hat on, and go out."

She kissed him obediently, and thanked him for his care of her; and went out into the hot streets. She was disappointed, because the garden would have been welcome, and it might just have happened that a face would look over the wall and a voice call to her; and then the ending of the day would be good and complete.

But Daniel Meggison, like greater men before him, had a motive. He desired to draw that shy being who dwelt on the other side of the wall; to come face to face with him, if possible, and discover something about him. He argued that it was a rare thing for Bessie not to be in the garden late in the evening if the weather happened to be fine, and that the man on the other side of the wall would be naturally surprised, and perhaps alarmed. Mr. Daniel Meggison chuckled to himself at the thought of his own cunning, and sat down in such a position that he could watch the garden. He had not long to wait.

Mr. Gilbert Byfield was confident that on this particular evening the girl would be in the garden; and he wanted to talk to her. She had rather avoided him during these past few days, and he had already come to understand that Arcadia Street was a remarkably dull place, unless it was actually represented by her. Consequently, on this evening he had determined that he would see her, if possible, and that he would have a little tender whimsical explanation with her, in which, appropriately enough, he would play the part of a species of elderly friend or brother, and would in fact be very good to her. He recognized that that feeling of protective tenderness for the girl was growing; but he told himself sternly that it was, of course, merely the protective tenderness of a friend. On that point he was very strong. He had come back to Arcadia Street because he was interested in her; and when the time came for him to leave Arcadia Street he would, of course, leave it with regret on her account. He would not think about it to-night; he simply recognized that the time was coming when he must know Arcadia Street no more.

An inspection of the garden over the wall showed it to be empty, but the lighted house was beyond. It occurred to him that in all probability she had stepped inside for a moment; he would get over the wall, and would surprise her when she came out again. He did so, and, carefully avoiding the broken boards in the ottoman that was not an ottoman, made his way cautiously towards the house. He sat down on one of the rickety chairs near the crazy table, and waited.

This was Mr. Daniel Meggison's opportunity. He rose with an air of importance, and laid down his pipe; pulled down his waistcoat, and set his smoking-cap a little rakishly on one side of his head; and sauntered out. He went with the air of a gentleman about to gaze upon the beauty of the evening; his face was indeed turned towards the sky at the moment that he emerged from the door and stepped on to the ragged old carpet.

Gilbert Byfield had risen, in the surprise of the encounter; he stood watching old Meggison. Meggison, for his part, allowed his eyes to come down from their contemplation of the stars, and so gradually to rest upon the intruder who stood before him. He gave a very fine start, in the most approved fashion, and then stood in a dignified attitude, with a hand thrust into his waistcoat, looking at Gilbert up and down.

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