GEORGE WALTER LIONEL

A BED OF ROSES

Walter George

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George W.

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Содержание

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PART I

CHAPTER I

'We go.' The lascar meditatively pressed his face, brown and begrimed with coal dust, streaked here and there with sweat, against the rope which formed the rough bulwark. His dark eyes were fixed on the shore near by, between which and the ship's side the water quivered quicker and quicker in little ripples, each ripple carrying an iridescent film of grey ooze. Without joy or sadness he was bidding goodbye to Bombay, his city. Those goodbyes are often farewells for lascars who must face the Bay and the Channel. But the stoker did not care.

His companion lay by his side, lazily propped up on his elbow, not deigning even to take a last look at the market place, seething still with its crowded reds and blues and golds. 'Dekko!' cried the first stoker pointing to the wharf where a white man in a dirty smock had just cast off the last rope, which came away swishing through the air.

His companion did not raise his eyes. Slowly he tilted up his pannikin and let the water flow in a thin stream into his mouth, keeping the metal away from his lips. Then, careless of the land of Akbar, he let himself sink on the deck and composed himself to sleep. India was no concern of his.

A few yards away a woman watched them absently from the upper deck. She was conscious of them, conscious too of the slow insistent buzzing of a gadfly. Her eyes slowly shifted to the shore, passed over the market place, stopped at the Fort. There, in the open space, a troop was drilling, white and speckless, alertly wheeling at the word of command. Her eyes were still fixed on the group as the ship imperceptibly receded from the shore, throbbing steadily as the boilers got up steam. A half-naked brown boy was racing along the wharf to gain a start and beat the vessel before she reached the military crane.

The woman turned away. She was neither tall nor short: she did not attract attention overmuch but she was one of those who retain such attention as they draw. She was clad entirely in black; her face seemed to start forward intensified. Her features were regular; her mouth small. Her skin, darkened by the shadow of a broad brimmed hat, blushed still darker at the cheeks. The attraction was all in the eyes, large and grey, suggestive of energy without emotion. Her chin was square, perhaps too thick in the jaw.

She turned once more and leant against the bulwark. A yard away another woman was also standing, her eyes fixed on the shore, on a figure who waited motionless on the fast receding wharf. As the steamer kept on her course the woman craned forward, saw once more and then lost sight of the lonely figure. She was small, fair, a little insignificant, and dressed all in white drill.

The steamer had by now attained half speed. The shore was streaming by. The second woman turned her back on the bulwark, looked about aimlessly, then, perceiving her neighbour, impulsively went up to her and stood close beside her.

The two women did not speak, but remained watching the shoals fly past. Far away a train in Kolaba puffed up sharp bursts of smoke into the blue air. There was nothing to draw the attention of the beholder in that interminable shore, low-lying and muddy, splashed here and there with ragged trees. It was a desert almost, save for a village built between two swamps. Here and then smoke arose, brown and peaty from a bonfire. In the evening light the sun's declining rays lit up with radiance the red speck of a heavy shawl on the tiny figure of a brown girl.

Little by little, as the ship entered the fairway, the shore receded almost into nothingness. The two women still watched, while India merged into shadow. It was the second hour and, as the ship slowly turned towards the west, the women watched the great cocoanut trees turn into black specks upon Marla point. Then, slowly, the shore sank into the dark sea until it was gone and nothing was left of India save the vaguely paler night that tells of land and the even fainter white spears of the distant light.

For a moment they stood still, side by side. Then the fair woman suddenly put her hand on her companion's arm. 'I'm cold,' she said, 'let's go below.'

The dark girl looked at her sympathetically. 'Yes,' she said, 'let's, who'd have thought we wanted to see more of the beastly country than we could help… I say, what's the matter, Molly?'

Molly was still looking towards the light; one of her feet tapped the deck nervously; she fumbled for her handkerchief. 'Nothing, nothing,' she said indistinctly, 'come and unpack.' She turned away from her companion and quickly walked towards the gangway.

The dark girl looked once more into the distance where even the searchlight had waned. 'Vic!' cried the fair girl querulously, half way up the deck. 'All right, I'm coming,' replied the woman in black. She looked again at the pale horizon into which India had faded, at the deck before her where a little black cluster of people had formed to look their last upon the light. Then she turned and followed her companion.

The cabin was on the lower deck, small, stuffy in the extreme. Its two grave-like bunks, its drop table, even its exiguous armchair promised no comfort. On the worn carpet the pattern had almost vanished; alone the official numerals on the edge stared forth. For half an hour the two women unpacked in silence; Molly knelt by the side of her trunk delving into it, dragging out garments which she tried to find room for on the scanty pegs. Her companion merely raised the lid of her trunk to ease the pressure on her clothes, and placed a small dressing-case on the drop table. Once she would have spoken but, at that moment, a faint sob came from Molly's kneeling form. She went up to her, put her arm about her neck and kissed her cheek. She undressed wearily, climbed into the upper berth. Soon Molly did likewise, after turning down the light. For a while she sighed and turned uneasily; then she became quieter, her breathing more measured, and she slept.

Victoria Fulton lay in her berth, her eyes wide open, glued to the roof a foot or so above her face. It was very like a coffin, she thought, perhaps a suitable enough habitation for her, but at present, not in the least tempting. A salutary capacity for optimism was enabling her to review the past three years and to speculate about the future. Not that either was very rosy, especially the future.

The steady throb of the screw pulsated through the stuffy cabin, and blended with the silence broken only by Molly's regular breathing in the lower berth. Victoria could not help remembering other nights passed also in a stuffy little cabin, where the screw was throbbing as steadily, and when the silence was broken by breathing as regular, but a little heavier. Three years only, and she was going home. But now she was leaving behind her the high hopes she had brought with her.

She was no exception to the common rule, and memories, whether bitter or sweet, had always bridged for her the gulf between wakefulness and sleep. And what could be more natural than to recall those nights, three years ago, when every beat of that steady screw was bringing her nearer to the country where her young husband was, according to his mood, going to win the V.C., trace the treasure stolen from a Begum, or become military member on the Viceroy's Council? Poor old Dicky, she thought, perhaps it was as well he did not live to see himself a major, old and embittered, with all those hopes behind him.

There were no tears in her eyes when she thought of Fulton. The good old days, the officers' ball at Lympton when she danced with him half the night, the rutty lane where they met to sit on a bank of damp moss smelling of earth and crushed leaves, and the crumbling little church where she became Fulton's wife, all that was far away. How dulled it all was too by those three years during which, in the hot moist air of the plains, she had seen him degenerate, his skin lose it's freshness,

his eyelids pucker and gather pouches, his tongue grow ever more bitter as he attempted to still with whisky the drunkard's chronic thirst. She could not even shudder at the thought of all it had meant for her, at the horror of seeing him become every day more stupefied, at the savage outbursts of the later days, at the last scenes, crude and physically foul. Three years had taught her brain dullness to such scenes as those.

The tragedy of Fulton was a common enough thing. Heat, idleness, temporary affluence, all those things that do not let a man see that life is blessed only by the works that enable him to forget it, had played havoc with him. He had followed up his initial error of coming into the world at all by marrying a woman who neither cajoled or coerced him. With the best of intentions she had bored him to extinction. His interest in things became slender; he drank himself to death, and not even the ghost of his self lived to grieve by his bedside.

In spite of everything it had not been a bad life in its way. Victoria had been the belle, in spite of Mrs Major Dartle and her peroxidised tresses. And there had been polo (Dicky always would have three ponies and refused three hundred guineas for Tagrag), and regimental dances and gymkhanas and what not. Under the sleepy sun these three years had passed, not like a flash of lightning, but slowly, dreamily, in the unending routine of marches, inspections, migrations to and from the hills. The end had come quickly. One day they carried Dick Fulton all the way from the mess and laid him under his own verandah. The fourth day he died of cirrhosis of the liver. Even Mrs Major Dartle who formally called and lit up the darkened room with the meretricious glow of her curls hinted that it was a happy release. The station in general had no doubt as to the person for whom release had come.

As Victoria lay in the coffin-like berth she vainly tried to analyse her feeling for Fulton. The three years had drawn over her past something like a veil behind which she could see the dim shapes of her impressions dancing like ghostly marionettes. She knew that she had loved him with the discreet passion of an Englishwoman. He had burst in upon her ravished soul like the materialised dream of a schoolgirl; he had been adorably careless, adorably rakish. For a whole year all his foibles had been charms in so far as they made the god more human, nearer to her. Then, one night, he had returned home so drunk as to fall prostrate on the tiles of the verandah and sleep there until next morning. She had not dared to call the ayah or the butler and, as she could not rouse or lift him, she had left him lying there under some rugs and mosquito netting.

During the rest of that revolutionary night she had not slept, nor had she found the relief of tears that is given most women. Hot waves of indignation flowed over her. She wanted to get up, to stamp with rage, to kick the disgraceful thing on the tiles. She held herself down, however, or perhaps the tradition of the English counties whispered to her that anything was preferable to scandal, that crises must be noiseless. When dawn came and she at last managed to arouse Fulton by flooding his head with the contents of the water jug, the hot fit was gone. She felt cold, too aloof, too far away from him to hate him, too petrified to reproach him.

Fulton took no notice of the incident. He was still young and vigorous enough to shake off within a few hours the effects of the drink. Besides he seldom mentioned things that affected their relations; in the keep of his heart he hid the resentment of a culprit against the one who has caught him in the act. He confined his conversation to daily happenings; in moments of expansion he talked of the future. They did not, however, draw nearer one another; thus the evolution of their marriage tended inevitably to draw them apart. Victoria was no longer angry, but she was frightened because she had been frightened and she hated the source of her fear. Fulton, thick skinned as he was, felt their estrangement keenly. He grew to hate his wife; it almost made him wish to hurt her again. So he absented himself more often, drank more, then died. His wife was free. So this was freedom. Freedom, a word to conjure with, thought Victoria, when one is enslaved and meaning very little when one is free. She was able to do what she liked and wished to do nothing. Of course things would smooth themselves out: they always did, even though the smoothing process might be lengthy. They must do so, but how? There were friends of course, and Ted, and thirty pounds of Consols

unless they'd gone down again, as safe investments are wont to do. She would have to do some work. Rather funny, but how jolly to draw your first month's or week's salary; everybody said it was a proud moment. Of course it would have to be earned, but that did not matter: everybody had to earn what they got, she supposed, and they ought to enjoy doing it. Old Flynn, the D.C., used to say that work was a remunerative occupation you didn't like, but then he had been twenty years in India.

Molly turned uneasily in her bunk and settled down again. Victoria's train of thought was broken and she could not detach her attention from the very gentle snore that came from the lower berth, a snore gentle but so insidious that it seemed to dominate the steady beat of the screw. Through the porthole, over which now there raced some flecks of spray, she could see nothing but the blackness of the sky, a blackness which at times turned to grey whenever the still inkier sea appeared. The cabin seemed black and empty, lit up faintly by a white skirt flung on a chair. Slowly Victoria sank into sleep, conscious of a half dream of England where so many unknowable things must happen.

CHAPTER II

'No, Molly, I don't think it's very nice of you,' said Victoria, 'we've been out four days and I've done nothing but mope and mope; it's all very well my being a widow and all that: I'm not suggesting you and I should play hop scotch on deck with the master gunner, but for four days I've been reading a three months old *Harper's* and the memoirs of Mademoiselle de I don't know what, and.'

'But what have I done?' cried Molly.

'I'm bored,' replied Victoria, with admirable detachment, 'and what's more, I don't intend to go on being bored for another fortnight; I'm going on deck to find somebody to amuse me.'

'You can't do that,' said Molly, 'they're washing it.'

'Very well, then, I'll go and watch and sing songs to the men.' Victoria glared at her unoffending companion, her lips tightening and her jaw growing ominously squarer.

'But my dear girl,' said Molly, 'I'm awfully sorry. I didn't know you cared; come and have a game of quoits with me and old Cairns. There's a place behind the companion which I should say nobody ever does wash.'

Victoria was on the point of answering that she hated quoits as she never scored and they were generally dirty, but the prospect of returning to the ancient *Harper's* was not alluring, so she followed Molly to the hatchway and climbed up to the upper deck still shining moist and white. Apparently they would not have to play behind the companion. Four men were leaning against the bulwarks, looking out at nothing as people do on board ship. Victoria just had time to notice a very broad flannel-clad back surmounted by a thick neck, while Molly went up to the last man and unceremoniously prodded him in the ribs.

'Wake up, Bobby,' she said, 'I'm waiting.'

The men all wheeled round suddenly. The broad man stepped forward quickly and shook hands with Molly. Then he took a critical look at Victoria. The three young men struggled for an absurd little bag which Molly always dropped at the right moment.

'How do you do, Mrs Fulton,' said the broad man stretching out his hand. Victoria took it hesitatingly.

'Don't you remember me?' he said. 'My name's Cairns. Major Cairns. You know. Travancores. Met you at His Excellency's hop.'

Of course she remembered him. He was so typical. Anybody could have told his profession and his rank at sight. He had a broad humorous face, tanned over freckled pink. Since he left Wellington he had grown a little in every direction and had become a large middle aged boy. Victoria took him in at one look. A square face such as that of Cairns, distinctly chubby, framing grey blue eyes, was as easily recalled as forgotten. She took in his forehead, high and likely to become higher as his hair receded; his straight aggressive nose; his little rough moustache looking like nothing so much as a ragged strip off an Irish terrier's back.

While Victoria was wondering what to say, Molly, determined to show her that she was not going to leave her out, had thrust her three henchmen forward.

'This is Bobby,' she remarked. Bobby was a tall young man with a round head, bright brown eyes full of cheerfulness and hot temper. 'And Captain Alastair.. and Mr Parker.' Alastair smiled. Smiles were his method of expression. Mr Parker bowed rather low and said nothing. He had at once conceived for Victoria the mixture of admiration and dislike that a man feels towards a woman who would not marry him if she knew where he had been to school.

'I hope,' said Mr Parker slowly, 'that your..' But he broke off suddenly, realising the mourning and feeling the ground to be unsafe.

'Mr Parker, I've been looking for you all the morning,' interjected Molly, with intuition. 'You've promised to teach me to judge my distance,' and she cleverly pushed Bobby between Mr Parker and Victoria. 'Come along, and you Bobby, you can pick the rings up.'

'Right O,' said Bobby readily. She turned towards the stern followed by the obedient Bobby and Mr Parker.

Captain Alastair smiled vacuously, made as if to follow the trio, realising that it was a false start, swerved back and finally covering his confusion by sliding a few yards onwards to tell Mrs Colonel Lanning that it was blowing up for a squall.

Victoria had watched the little incident with amused detachment.

'Who is Mr Parker?' she enquired.

'Met him yesterday for the first time,' said Cairns, 'and really I can't say I want to know. Might be awkward. Must be in the stores or something. Looks to me like a cross between a mute and a parson. Bit of a worm, anyhow.'

'Oh, he didn't hurt my feelings,' remarked Victoria; 'but some men never know what women have got on.' Cairns looked her over approvingly. Shoddy-looking mourning. Durzee made of course. But, Lord, what hands and eyes.

'I daresay not,' he said drily. 'I wish he'd keep away though. Let's walk up.'

He took a stride or two away from Alastair. Victoria followed him. She was rather taken with his rough simplicity, the comfort of his apparent obtuseness. So like an uncle, she thought.

'Well, Mrs Fulton,' said Cairns, 'I suppose you're glad to be here, as usual.'

'As usual?'

'Yes, as usual; people are always glad to be on board. If they're going home, they're going home and if they're going out they're thinking that it's going to be full pay instead of half.'

'It hadn't struck me like that,' said Victoria with a smile, 'though I suppose I am glad to go home.'

'Funny,' said the Major, 'I never found a country like India to make people want to come to it and to make them want to get out of it when they were there. We had a sub once. You should have heard him on the dead cities. Somewhere south east of Hyderabad, he said. And native jewellery, and fakirism, and all that. He's got a liver now and the last I heard of him was that he put his shoulder out at polo.'

Victoria looked out over the immense oily greenness of the water. Far away on the skyline a twirling wreath of smoke showed that some tramp steamer was passing them unseen. The world was between them; they were crawling on one side of the ball and the tramp on the other, like flies on an orange. Was that tramp, Bombay bound, carrying more than a cargo of rolling stock? Perhaps the mate had forgotten his B.S.A. fittings and was brooding, he too, over the dead cities, somewhere south-east of Hyderabad.

'No,' repeated Victoria slowly, 'it hadn't struck me like that.'

Cairns looked at her curiously. He had heard of Fulton and knew of the manner of his death. He could not help thinking that she did not seem to show many signs of a recent bereavement, but then she was well rid of Fulton. Of course there were other things too. Going back as the widow of an Indian officer was all very well if you could afford the luxury, but if you couldn't, well it couldn't be much catch. So, being thirty eight or so, he prudently directed the conversation towards the customary subjects discussed on board a trooper: the abominable accommodation and the appalling incompetency of the government with regard to the catering.

Victoria listened to him placidly. His ancient tittle-tattle had been made familiar to her by three years' association with his fellows, and she had learned that she need not say much, as his one wish was naturally to revile the authorities and all their work. But one item interested her.

'After all,' he said, 'I don't see why I should talk. I've had enough of it. I'm sending in my papers as soon as I've settled a small job at Perim. I'll get back to Aden and shake all that beastly Asiatic dust off my shoes.'

'Surely,' said Victoria, 'you're not going to leave the Service?' Her intonation implied that she was urging him not to commit suicide. Some women must pass twice under the yoke.

'Fed up. Simply fed up with it. Suppose I do waste another twenty years in India or Singapore or Hong Kong, how much forrarder am I? They'll retire me as a colonel or courtesy general and dump me into an England which doesn't care a hang about me with the remains of malaria, no digestion and no temper. I'll then while away my time watching the busses pass by from one of the windows of the Rag and give my daily opinion of the doings of Simla and the National Congress to men who will only listen to me so long as I stand them a whisky and soda.'

'It isn't alluring,' said Victoria, 'but it may not be as bad as that. You can do marvels in India. My husband used to say that a man could hope for anything there.'

Cairns suppressed the obvious retort that Fulton's ideals did not seem to have materialised.

'No,' he said, 'I'm not ambitious. India's steam rollered all that. When I've done with my job at Perim, which won't be much more than a couple of months, I'm going home. Don't know that I'll do anything in particular. Farm a bit, perhaps, or have some chambers somewhere near St James' and dabble in balloons or motors. Some shooting too. All that sort of thing.'

'Perhaps you are right,' said Victoria after a pause. 'I suppose it's as well to do what one likes. Shall we join the others?'

CHAPTER III

Life on a trooper is not eventful. Victoria was not so deeply absorbed in her mourning or in the pallid literature borrowed from Molly as not to notice it. Though she was not what is termed serious, the perpetual quoits on the upper deck in company with Alastair and his conversation limited by smiles, and with Mr Parker and his conversation limited by uneasiness palled about the second game. Bobby too was a cypher. It was his fate to be known as 'Bobby,' a quantity of no importance. He belonged to the modern school of squires of dames, ever ready to fetch a handkerchief, to fish when he inwardly wanted to sleep in a deck chair or to talk when he had a headache. Such men have their value as tame cats and Victoria did not avoid his cheery neighbourhood. But he was summed up in the small fact which she recalled with gentle amusement a long time after: she had never known his name. For her, as for the ship's company, he was 'Bobby,' merely Bobby.

The female section too could detain none but cats and hens, as Victoria put it. She had moved too long like a tiny satellite in the orbit of Mrs Colonel So-and-So to return to the little group which slumbered all day by the funnel dreaming aloud the petty happenings of Bombay. The heavy rains at Chandraga, the simply awful things that had been said about an A.D.C. and Mrs Bryan, and the scandalous way in which a Babu had been made a judge, all this filled her with an extraordinary weariness. She felt, in the presence of these remains of her daily life, as she would when confronted for the third time with the cold leg of mutton.

True there was Cairns, a man right enough and jovial in spite of his cynical assumption that nothing was worth anything. He could produce passing fair aphorisms, throw doubts on the value of success and happiness. There was nothing, however, to hold on to. Victoria had not found in him a teacher or a helper. He was merely destructive of thought and epicurean in taste. Convinced that wine, woman and song were quite valueless things, he nevertheless knew the best Rüdesheimer and had an eye for the droop of Victoria's shoulders.

Cairns obviously liked Victoria. He did not shun his fellow passengers, for he considered that the dullest people are the most interesting, yet she could not help noticing from time to time that his eyes followed her round. He was a good big man and she knew that his thick hand, a little swollen and sunburnt, would be a good thing to touch. But there was in him none of that subtle magnetism that grasps and holds. He was coarse, perhaps a little vulgar at heart.

Thus Victoria had roamed aimlessly over the ship, visiting even the bows where, everlastingly, a lascar seemed to brood in fixed attitudes as a Budh dreaming of Nirvana. She often wandered in the troop-deck filled with the womankind and children of the non-coms. Without disliking children she could find no attraction in these poor little faded things born to be scorched by the Indian sun. The women too, mostly yellow and faded, always recalled to her, so languid and tired were they, commonplace flowers, marigolds, drooping on their stems. Besides, the society of the upper deck found a replica on the troop deck, where it was occasionally a little shriller. There too, she could catch snatches which told of the heavy rains of Chandraga, the goings on of Lance Corporal Maccaskie's wife and the disgrace of giving Babu clerks more than fifty rupees a month.

Perpetually the Indian ocean shimmered by, calm as the opaque eye of a shark, breaking at times into immense rollers that swelled hardly more than a woman's breast. And the days passed on.

They were nearing Aden, though nothing on the mauve horizon told of the outpost where the filth of the East begins to overwhelm the ugliness of the West. Victoria and Cairns were leaning on the starboard bulwark. She was looking vacuously into the greying sky, conscious that Cairns was watching her. She felt with extraordinary clearness that he was gazing as if spell-bound at the soft and regular rise and fall of her skin towards the coarse black openwork of her bodice. Far away in the twilight was something long and black, hardly more than a line vanishing towards the north.

'Araby,' said Cairns.

Victoria looked more intently. Far away, half veiled by the mists of night, unlit by the evening star, lay the coast. Araby, the land of manna and milk – of black-eyed women – of horses that champ strange bits. Here and there a blackened rock sprang up from the waste of sand and scrub. Its utter desolation awakened a sympathetic chord. It was lonely, as she was lonely. As the night swiftly rushed into the heavens, she let her arm rest against that of Cairns. Then his hand closed over hers. It was warm and hard; something like a pale light of companionship struggled through the solitude of her soul.

They stood cold and silent while the night swallowed up the coast and all save here and there the foam tip of a wave. The man had put his arm round her and pressed her to him. She did not resist. The soft wind playing in her hair carried a straying lock into his eyes, half blinding him and making him catch his breath, so redolent was it, not with the scent of flowers, but of life, vigorous and rich in its thousand saps. He drew her closer to him and pressed his lips on her neck. Victoria did not resist.

From the forepeak swathed in darkness, came the faint unearthly echoes of the stokers' song. There were no fourths; the dominant and the subdominant were absent. Strangely attuned to the western ear, the sounds sometimes boomed, sometimes fell to a whisper. The chant rose like incense into the heavens, celebrating Durga, protector of the Motherland, Lakshmi, bowered in the flower that in the water grows. Cairns had drawn Victoria close against him. He was stirred and shaken as never before. All conspired against him, the night, the fancied scents of Araby, the unresisting woman in his arms who yielded him her lips with the passivity of weariness. They did not think as they kissed, whether laying the foundation of regret or snatching from the fleeting hour a moment of thoughtless joy. Again a brass drum boomed out beyond them, softly as if touched by velvet hands. It carried the buzzing of bees, the calls of corncrakes, in every tone the rich scents of the jungle, where undergrowth rots in black water – of perfumes that burn before the gods. Then the night wind arose and swept away the crooning voices.

CHAPTER IV

Victoria stepped out on to the platform with a heart that bounded and yet shrank. Not even the first faint coming of the coastline had given her the almost physical shock that she experienced on this bare platform. Waterloo station lay around her in a pall of faint yellow mist that gripped and wrenched at her throat. Through the fog a thousand ungainly shapes of stairs and signals thrust themselves, some crude in their near blackness, others fainter in the distance. It might have been a dream scene but for the uproar that rose around her from the rumble of London, the voices of a great crowd. Yet all this violence of life, the darkness, the surge of men and women, all this told her that she was once more in the midst of things.

She found her belongings mechanically, fumblingly. She did not realise until then the bitterness that drove its iron into her soul. Already, when the troopship had entered the Channel she had felt a cruel pang when she realised that she must expect nothing and that nobody would greet her. She had fled from the circle near the funnel when the talk began to turn round London and waiting sisters and fathers, round the Lord Mayor's show, the play, the old fashioned Christmas. Now, as she struggled through the crowd that cried out and laughed excitedly and kissed, she knew her isolation was complete. There was nobody to meet her. The fog made her eyes smart, so they filled readily with tears.

As she sat in the cab, however, and there flashed by her like beacons the lights of the stalls in the Waterloo Road, the black and greasy pavement sown with orange peel, she felt her heart beating furiously with the excitement of home coming. She passed the Thames flowing silently, swathed in its shroud of mist. Then the blackness of St James's Park through which her cab crawled timidly as if it feared things that might lurk unknown in the fogbound thickets.

It was still in a state of feverish dreaming that Victoria entered her room at Curran's Private Hotel, otherwise known by a humble number in Seymour Street. 'Curran's' is much in favour among Anglo-Indians, as it is both central and cheap. It has everything that distinguishes the English hotel which has grown from a boarding-house into a superior establishment where you may stay at so much a day. The successful owner had bought up one after the other three contiguous houses and had connected them by means of a conservatory where there lived, among much pampas grass, small ferns in pots shrouded in pea-green paper and sickly plants to which no name could be attached as they mostly suggested stewed lettuce. It was impossible to walk in a straight line from one end of the coalition of buildings to the other without climbing and descending steps every one of which proclaimed the fact that the leases of the houses would soon fall in. From the three kitchens ascended three smells of mutton. The three halls were strewn with bicycles, gun cases in their last phase, sticks decrepit or dandified. The three hat racks, all early Victorian in their lines, bore a motley cargo. Dusty bowlers hustled it with heather coloured caps and top hats; one even bore a pith helmet and a clerical atrocity.

Queer as Curran's is, it is comfortable enough. Victoria looked round her room, tiny in length and breadth, high however with all the dignity that befits an odd corner left over by the Victorian builder. It was distinguished by its simplicity, for the walls bore nothing whatever beyond a restrained papering of brownish roses. A small black and gold bed, a wardrobe with a white handle, a washing stand with a marble top took up all the space left by the large tin trunk which contained most of Victoria's worldly goods. So this, thought Victoria, is the beginning. She pulled aside the curtain. Before her lay Seymour Street, where alone an eye of light shone faintly from the nearest lamp post. Through the fog came the warning noise of a lorry picking its way. It was cold, cold, all this, and lonely like an island.

Her meditations were disturbed by the maid who brought her hot water.

'My name is Carlotta,' said the girl complacently depositing the can upon the marble topped washstand.

'Yes?' said Victoria. 'You are a foreigner?'

'Yes. I am Italian. It is foggy,' replied the girl.

Victoria sighed. It was kind of the girl to make her feel at home, to smile at her with those flashing teeth so well set in her ugly little brown face. She went to the washstand and cried out in horror at her dirt and fog begrimed face, rimmed at the eyes, furrowed on the left by the course of that tear shed at Waterloo.

'Tell them downstairs I shan't be ready for half an hour,' she said; 'it'll take me about a week to get quite clean, I should say.'

Carlotta bared her white teeth again and withdrew gently as a cat, while Victoria courageously drenched her face and neck. The scents of England, already conjured up by the fog and the mutton, rose at her still more vividly from the warm water which inevitably exhales the traditional perfume of hot painted can.

Her dinner was a small affair but delightful. It was good to eat and drink once more things to which she had been accustomed for the first twenty years of her life. Her depression had vanished; she was merely hungry, and, like the healthy young animal she was, longing for a rare cut of roast beef, accompanied by the good old English potatoes boiled down to the consistency of flour and the flavour of nothing. Her companions were so normal that she could not help wondering, when her first hunger was sated and she was confronted with the apple tart of her fathers, whether she was not in the unchanging old board residence in Fulham where her mother had stayed with her whenever she came up to town, excited and conscious of being on the spree.

Two spinsters of no age discussed the fog. Both were immaculate and sat rigidly in correct attitudes facing their plates. Both talked quickly and continuously in soft but high tones. They passed one another the salt with the courtesy of abbés taking pinches of snuff. A young man from the Midlands explained to the owner of the clerical hat that under certain circumstances his food would cost him more. Near by a heavy man solemnly and steadily ate, wiping at times from his beard drops of gravy and of sauce, whilst his faded wife nibbled disconsolately tiny scraps of crust. These she daintily buttered, while her four lanky girls nudged and whispered.

Victoria did not stay in the conservatory after the important meal. As she passed through it, a mist of weariness gathering before her eyes, she had a vision of half a dozen men sleeping in cane chairs, or studying pink or white evening papers. The young man from the Midlands had captured another victim and was once more explaining that under certain circumstances his food would cost him more.

Victoria seemed to have reached the limits of physical endurance. She fumbled as she divested herself of her clothes; she could not even collect enough energy to wash. All the room seemed filled with haze. Her tongue clove to her palate. Little tingles in her eyelids crushed them together over her pupils. She stumbled into her bed, mechanically switching off the light by her bedside. In the very act her arm lost its energy and she sank into a dreamless sleep.

Next morning she breakfasted with good appetite. The fog had almost entirely lifted and sunshine soft as silver was filtering through the windows into the little dining-room. Its mahoganous ugliness was almost warmed into charm. The sideboard shone dully through its covering of coarse net. Even the stacked cruets remembered the days when they cunningly blazed in a shop window. A pleasurable feeling of excitement ran through Victoria's body, for she was going to discover London, to have adventures. As she closed the door behind her with a definite little slam she felt like a buccaneer.

Buccaneering in the Edgware Road, even when it is bathed in the morning sun, soon falls flat in November. It came upon Victoria rather as a shock that her Indian clothing was rather thin. As her flying visits to town had only left in her mind a very hazy picture of Regent Street it was quite

unconsciously that she entered the emporium opposite. A frigid young lady sacrificed for her benefit an abominable vicuna coat which, she said, fitted Victoria like a glove. Victoria paid the twenty seven and six with an admirable feeling of recklessness and left the shop reflecting that she looked the complete charwoman.

She turned into Hyde Park, where the gentle wind was sorrowfully driving the brown and broken leaves along the rough gravel. The thin tracery of the trees imaged itself on the road like a giant cobweb. Victoria looked for a moment towards the south where the massive buildings rise, towards the east where a cathedral thrusts into the sky a tower that suspiciously recalls waterworks. She drank in the cold air with a gusto that can be understood by none save those who have learned to live in the floating moisture of the plains. She felt young and, in the sunshine, with her cheeks gaining colour as the wind whipped them, she looked in her long black coat and broad brimmed straw hat, like a quakeress in love.

As she walked down towards the Achilles statue the early morning panorama of London unfolded itself before her un-understanding eyes. Girls hurried by with their satchels towards the typewriting rooms of the west; they stole a look at Victoria's face but quickly turned away from her clothes. Now and then spruce young clerks walking to the Tube slackened their pace to look twice into her grey eyes; one or two looked back, not so much in the hope of an adventure, for time could not be snatched for Venus herself on the way to the office, as to see whether they could carry away with them the flattery of having been noticed.

In a sense that first day in London was for Victoria a day of revelations. Having despatched a telegram to her brother to announce her arrival she felt that the day was hers. Ted had not troubled to meet her either at Southampton or Waterloo: it was not likely that he had followed the sightings of her ship. The next day being a Saturday, however, he would probably come up from the Bedfordshire school where he proffered Latin to an ungrateful generation.

Victoria's excursions to London had been so few that she had but the faintest idea of where she was to go. Knowing, however, that one cannot lose oneself in London, she walked aimlessly towards the east. It was a voyage of discovery. Piccadilly, bathed in the pale sun, revealed itself as a land where luxury flows like rivers of milk. Victoria, being a true woman, could not pass a shop. Thus her progress was slow, so slow that when she found herself between the lions of Trafalgar Square she began to realise that she wanted her lunch.

The problem of food is cruel for all women who desire more than a bun. They risk either inattention or over attention, and if they follow other women, they almost invariably discover the cheap and bad. Victoria hesitated for a moment on the steps of an oyster shop, as nervous in the presence of her first plunge into freedom as a novice at the side door of a pawnbroker. A man passed by her into the oyster shop, smoking a pipe. She felt she would never dare to sit in a room where strange men smoked pipes. Thus she stood for a moment forlorn on the pavement, until a memory of the only decent grill in town, according to Bobby, passed through her mind.

A policeman sent her by bus to the New Gaiety, patronised by Bobby and his cronies. As Victoria went down the interminable underground staircase, and especially as she entered the enormous room where paper, carpets, and plate always seem new, her courage almost failed her. Indeed she looked round anxiously, half hoping that the anonymous Bobby might be revisiting his old haunts. But she was quite alone, and it was only by reminding herself that she must always be alone at meals now that she coerced herself into sitting down. She got through her meal with expedition. She felt frightfully small; the waiters were painfully courteous; a man laid aside his orange coloured newspaper, and embarrassed her with frequent side glances. She braced herself up however. 'I am training,' was her uppermost thought. She then wondered whether she ought to have come to the New Gaiety at all. Fortunately it was only at the very end of her lunch that Victoria realised she was the only woman sitting alone. After this discovery her nerve failed her. She got up hurriedly, and, in her confusion, omitted to tip the waiter. At the desk the last stone was heaped on the cairn of

her discomfiture when the cashier politely returned to her a quarter rupee which she had given her thinking it was a sixpence.

With a sigh of satisfaction Victoria resumed her walk through London. She was a little tired already but she could think of nothing to do, nowhere to go to. She did not want to return to Curran's to sit in her box-like room, or to look at the two spinsters availing themselves of their holiday in town to play patience in the conservatory.

All the afternoon, therefore, Victoria saw the sights. Covent Garden repelled her by the massiveness of its food suggestion, and especially by the choking dirt of its lanes. After Covent Garden, Savoy court yard and its announcements of intellectual plays by unknown women. Then once more, drawn by its spaciousness guessed at through Spring Gardens, Victoria walked into Saint James's Park. She rested awhile upon a seat, watching the waterfowl strut and plume themselves, the pelicans flounder heavily in the mud. She was tired. The sun was setting early. The magic slowly faded from London; Buckingham Palace lost the fictitious grace that it has when set in a blue sky. Victoria shivered a little. She felt tired. She did not know where to go. She was alone. On the seat nearest to hers two lovers sat together, hand in hand. The man's face was almost hidden by his cap and by the blue puffs of his pipe; the girl's was averted towards the ground where, with the ferule of her umbrella, she lazily drew signs. There was no bitterness in this sight for Victoria. Her romance had come and gone so long ago that she looked quite casually at these wanderers in Arcadia. She only knew that she was alone and cold.

Victoria got up and walked out of the park. It was darkening, and little by little the lights of London were springing into life. By dint of many questionings she managed to regain Oxford Street, that spinal column of London without which the stranger would be lost. Then her course was easy, and it was with a peculiar feeling of luxuriousness that she resigned herself to the motor bus that jolted and shook her tired body until she reached the Arch. More slowly, and with diminished optimism, she found her way up Edgware Road, where night was now falling. The emporium was dazzling with lights. Alone the public house rivalled it and thrust its glare through the settling mist. Victoria closed the door of Curran's. At once she re-entered its atmosphere; into the warm air rose the three smells of three legs of mutton.

CHAPTER V

'Mr Wren, ma'am.'

Victoria turned quickly to Carlotta. The girl's face was obtrusively demure. Some years at Curran's had not dulled in her the interest that any woman subtly feels in the meeting of the sexes.

'Ask him to come in here, Carlotta,' said Victoria. 'We shan't be disturbed, shall we?'

'Oh no! ma'am,' said Carlotta, with increasing demureness. 'There is nobody, nobody. I will show the young gentleman in.'

Victoria walked to the looking-glass which shyly peeped out from the back of the monumental sideboard. She re-arranged her hair and hurriedly flicked some dust from the corners of her eyes. All this for Edward, but she had not seen him for three years. As she turned round she was confronted by her brother who had gently stolen into the dining-room. Edward's every movement was unobtrusive. He put one arm round her and kissed her cheek.

'How are you, Victoria?' he said, looking her in the eyes.

'Oh, I'm alright, Ted. I'm so glad to see you.' She was genuinely glad; it was so good to have belongings once again.

'Did you have a good passage?' asked Edward.

'Pretty good until we got to Ushant and then it did blow. I was glad to get home.'

'I'm very glad to see you,' said Edward, 'very glad.' His eyes fixed on the sideboard as if he were mesmerised by the cruets. Victoria looked at him critically. Three years had not made on him the smallest impression. He was at twenty-eight what he had been at twenty-five or for the matter of that at eighteen. He was a tall slim figure with narrow pointed shoulders and a slightly bowed back. His face was pale without being unhealthy. There was nothing in his countenance to arouse any particular interest, for he had those average features that commit no man either to coarseness or to intellectuality. He showed no trace of the massiveness of his sister's chin; his mouth too was looser and hung a little open. Alone his eyes, richly grey, recalled his relationship. Straggly fair hair fell across the left side of his forehead. He peered through silver rimmed spectacles as he nervously worried his watch chain with both hands. Every movement exposed the sharpness of his knees through his worn trousers.

'Ted,' said Victoria, breaking in upon the silence, 'it was kind of you to come up at once.'

'Of course I'd come up at once. I couldn't leave you here alone. It must be a big change after the sunshine.'

'Yes,' said Victoria slowly, 'it is a big change. Not only the sunshine. Other things, you know.'

Edward's hands played still more nervously with his watch chain. He had not heard much of the manner of Fulton's death. Victoria's serious face encouraged him to believe that she might harrow him with details, weep even. He feared any expression of feeling, not because he was hard but because it was so difficult to know what to say. He was neither hard nor soft; he was a schoolmaster and could deal readily enough with the pangs of Andromeda but what should he say to a live woman, his sister too?

'I understand – I – you see, it's quite awful about Dick – ' he stopped, lost, groping for the proper sentiment.

'Ted,' said Victoria, 'don't condole with me. I don't want to be unkind – if you knew everything – But there, I'd rather not tell you; poor Dicky 's dead and I suppose it's wrong, but I can't be sorry.'

Edward looked at her with some disapproval. The marriage had not been a success, he knew that much, but she ought not to speak like that. He felt he ought to reprove her, but the difficulty of finding words stopped him.

'Have you made any plans?' he asked in his embarrassment, thus blundering into the subject he had intended to lead up to with infinite tact.

'Plans?' said Victoria. 'Well, not exactly. Of course I shall have to work; I thought you might help me perhaps.'

Edward looked at her again uneasily. She had sat down in an armchair by the side of the fire with her back to the light. In the penumbra her eyes came out like dark pools. A curl rippled over one of her ears. She looked so self-possessed that his embarrassment increased.

'Will you have to work?' he asked. The idea of his sister working filled him with vague annoyance.

'I don't quite see how I can help it,' said Victoria smiling. 'You see, I've got nothing, absolutely nothing. When I've spent the thirty pounds or so I've got, I must either earn my own living or go into the workhouse.' She spoke lightly, but she was conscious of a peculiar sinking.

'I thought you might come back with me,' said Edward, '.. and stay with me a little.. and look round.'

'Ted, it's awfully kind of you, but I'm not going to let you saddle yourself with me. I can't be your housekeeper; oh! it would never do. And don't you think I am more likely to get something to do here than down in Bedfordshire?'

'I do want you to come back with me,' said Edward hesitatingly. 'I don't think you ought to be alone here. And perhaps I could find you something in a family at Cray or thereabouts. I could ask the vicar.'

Victoria shuddered. It had never struck her that employment might be difficult to find or uncongenial when one found it. The words 'vicar' and 'Cray' suggested something like domestic service without its rights, gentility without its privileges.

'Ted,' she said gravely, 'you're awfully good to me, but I'd rather stay here. I'm sure I could find something to do.' Edward's thoughts naturally came back to his own profession.

'I'll ask the Head,' he said with the first flash of animation he had shown since he entered the room. To ask the Head was to go to the source of all knowledge. 'Perhaps he knows a school. Of course your French is pretty good, isn't it?'

'Ted, Ted, you do forget things,' said Victoria, laughing. 'Don't you remember the mater insisting on my taking German because so few girls did? Why, it was the only original thing she ever did in her life, poor dear!'

'But nobody wants German, for girls that is,' replied Edward miserably.

'Very well then,' said Victoria, 'I won't teach; that's all. I must do something else.'

Edward walked up and down nervously, pushing back his thin fair hair with one hand, and with the other nervously tugging at his watch chain.

'Don't worry yourself, Ted,' said Victoria. 'Something will turn up. Besides there's no hurry. Why, I can live two or three months on my money, can't I?'

'I suppose you can,' said Edward gloomily, 'but what will you do afterwards?'

'Earn some more,' said Victoria. 'Now Ted, you haven't seen me for three years. Don't let us worry. Think things over when you get back to Cray and write to me. You won't go back until to-morrow, will you?'

'I'm sorry,' said Edward, 'but I didn't think you'd be back this week. I shall be in charge to-morrow. Why don't you come down?'

'Ted, Ted, how can you suggest that I should spend my poor little fortune in railway fares! Well, if you can't stay, you can't. But I'll tell you what you can do. I can't go on paying two and a half guineas a week here; I must get some rooms. You lived here when you taught at that school in the city, didn't you? Well then, you must know all about it: we'll go house-hunting.'

Edward looked at her dubiously. He disliked the idea of Victoria in rooms almost as much as Victoria at Curran's. It offended some vague notions of propriety. However her suggestion would give him time to think. Perhaps she was right.

'Of course, I'll be glad to help,' he said, 'I don't know much about it; I used to live in Gower Street.' A faint flush of reminiscent excitement rose to his cheeks. Gower Street, by the side of Cray and Lympton, had been almost adventurous.

'Very well then,' said Victoria, 'we shall go to Gower Street first. Just wait till I put on my hat.'

She ran upstairs, not exactly light of heart, but pleased with the idea of house-hunting. There's romance in all seeking, even if the treasure is to be found in a Bloomsbury lodging-house.

The ride on the top of the motor bus was exhilarating. The pale sun of November was lighting up the streets with the almost mystic whiteness of the footlights. Edward said nothing, for his memories of London were stale and he did not feel secure enough to point out the Church of the Deaf and Dumb, nor had he ever known his London well enough to be able to pronounce judgment on the shops. Besides, Victoria was too much absorbed in gazing at London rolling and swirling beneath her, belching out its crowds of workers and pleasure seekers from every tube and main street. At every shop the omnibus seemed surrounded by a swarm of angry bees. Victoria watched them struggle with spirit still unspoiled, wondering at the determination on the faces of the men, at the bitterness painted on the sharp features of the women as they savagely thrust one another aside and, dishevelled and dusty, successively conquered their seats. All this, the constant surge of horse and mechanical conveyances, the shrill cries of the newsboys flashing pink papers like *chulos* at an angry bull, the roar of the town, made Victoria understand the city. Something like fear of this strong restless people crept into her as she began to have a dim perception that she too would have to fight. She was young, however, and the feeling was not unpleasant. Her nerves tingled a little as she thought of the struggle to come and the inevitable victory at the end.

Victoria's spirits had not subsided even when she entered Gower Street. Its immensity, its interminable length frightened her a little. The contrast between it, so quiet, dignified and dull, and the inferno she had just left behind her impressed her with a sense of security. Its houses, however, seemed so high and dirty that she wondered, looking at its thousand windows, whether human beings could be cooped up thus and yet retain their humanity.

Here Edward was a little more in his element. With a degree of animation he pointed to the staid beauty of Bedford Square. He demanded admiration like a native guiding a stranger in his own town. Victoria watched him curiously. He was a good fellow but it was odd to hear him raise his voice and to see him point with his stick. He had always been quiet, so she had not expected him to show as much interest as he did in his old surroundings.

'I suppose you had a good time when you were here?' she said.

'Nothing special. I was too busy at the school,' he replied. 'But, of course, you know, one does things in London. It's not very lively at Cray.'

'Wouldn't you like to leave Cray,' she said, 'and come back?'

Edward paused nervously. London frightened him a little and the idea of leaving Cray suddenly thrust upon him froze him to the bone. It was not Cray he loved, but Cray meant a life passing gently away by the side of a few beloved books. Though he had never realised that hedgerows flower in the spring and that trees redden to gold and copper in the autumn, the country had taken upon him so great a hold that even the thought of leaving it was pain.

'Oh! no,' he said hurriedly. 'I couldn't leave Cray. I couldn't live here, it's too noisy. There are my old rooms, there, the house with the torch extinguishers.'

Victoria looked at him again. What curious tricks does nature play and how strangely she pleases to distort her own work! Then she looked at the house with the extinguishers. Clearly it would be impossible, but for those aristocratic remains, to distinguish it from among half a dozen of its fellows. It was a house, that was all. It was faced in dirty brick, parted at every floor by stone work. A

portico, rising over six stone steps, protected a door painted brown and bearing a brass knocker. It had windows, an area, bells. It was impossible to find in it an individual detail to remember.

But Edward was talking almost excitedly for him. 'See there,' he said, 'those are my old rooms,' pointing indefinitely at the frontage. 'They were quite decent, you know. Wonder whether they're let. You could have them.' He looked almost sentimentally at the home of the Wrens.

'Why not ring and ask?' said Victoria, whose resourcefulness equalled that of Mr Dick.

Edward took another loving look at the familiar window, strode up the steps, followed by Victoria.

There were several bells. 'Curious,' he said, 'she must have let it out in floors; Wakefield and Grindlay, don't know them. Seymour? It's Mrs Brumfit's house: Oh! here it is.' He pressed a bell marked 'House.' Victoria heard with a curious sensation of unexpectedness the sudden shrill sound of the electric bell.

After an interminable interval, during which Edward's hands nervously played, the door opened. A young girl stood on the threshold. She wore a red cloth blouse, a black skirt, and an unspeakably dirty apron half loose round her waist. Her hair was tightly done up in curlers in expectation of Sunday.

'Mrs Brumfit,' said Edward, 'is she in?'

''oo?' said the girl.

'Mrs Brumfit, the landlady,' said Edward.

'Don't know 'er, try next 'ouse.' The girl tried to shut the door.

'You don't understand,' cried Edward, stopping the door with his hand. 'I used to live here.'

'Well, wot do yer want?' replied the girl. 'Can't 'elp that, can I? There ain't no Mrs Brumfit 'ere. Only them there.' She pointed at the bells. 'Nobody but them and mother. She's the 'ousekeeper. If yer mean the old woman as was 'ere when they turned the 'ouse into flats, she's dead.'

Edward stepped back. The girl shut the door with a slam. He stood as if petrified. Victoria looked at him with amusement in her eyes, listening to the echoes of the girl's voice singing more and more faintly some catchy tune as she descended into the basement.

'Dead,' said Edward, 'can it be possible – ?' He looked like a plant torn up by the roots. He had jumped on the old ground and it had given way.

'My dear Ted,' said Victoria gently, 'things change, you see.' Slowly they went down the steps of the house. Victoria did not speak, for a strange mixture of pity and disdain was in her. She quite understood that a tie had been severed and that the death of his old landlady meant for Edward that the past which he had vaguely loved had died with her. He was one of those amorphous creatures whose life is so interwoven with that of their fellows that any death throws it into disarray. She let him brood over his lost memories until they reached Bedford Square.

'But Ted,' she broke in, 'where am I to go?'

Edward looked at her as if dazed. Clearly he had not foreseen that Mrs Brumfit was not an institution.

'Go?' he said, 'I don't know.'

'Don't you know any other lodgings?' asked Victoria. 'Gower Street seems full of them.'

'Oh! no,' said Edward quickly, 'we don't know what sort of places they are. You couldn't go there.'

'But where am I to go then?' Victoria persisted. Edward was silent. 'It seems to me,' his sister went on, 'that I shall have to risk it. After all, they won't murder me and they can't rob me of much.'

'Please don't talk like that,' said Edward stiffly. He did not like this association of ideas.

'Well I must find some lodgings,' said Victoria, a little irritably. 'In that case I may as well look round near Curran's. I don't like this street much.'

In default of an alternative, Edward looked sulky. Victoria felt remorseful; she knew that Gower Street must have become for her brother the traveller's Mecca and that he was vaguely afraid of the West End.

'Never mind, dear,' she went on more gently, 'don't worry about lodgings any more. Do you know what you're going to do? you're going to take me to tea in some nice place and then I'll go with you to St Pancras; that's the station you said you were going back by, isn't it? and you'll put me in a bus and I'll go home. Now, come along, it's past five and I'm dying for some tea.'

As Victoria stood, an hour later, just outside the station in which expires the spirit of Constantine the Great, she could not help feeling relieved. As she stood there, so self-possessed, seeing so clearly the busy world, she wondered why she had been given a broken reed to lean upon. Where had her brother left his virility? Had it been sapped by years of self-restraint? Had the formidable code of pretence, the daily affectation of dignity, the perpetual giving of good examples, reduced him to this shred of humanity, so timid, so resourceless? As she sped home in the tube into which she had been directed by a policeman, she vainly turned over the problem.

Fortunately Victoria was young. As she laid her head on the pillow, conscious of the coming of Sunday, when nothing could be done, visions of things she could do obsessed her. There were lodgings to find, nice, clean, cheap lodgings, with a dear old landlady and trees outside the window, in a pretty old-fashioned house, very very quiet and quite near all the tubes. She nursed the ideal for a time. Then she thought of careers. She would read all the advertisements and pick out the nicest work. Perhaps she could be a housekeeper. Or a secretary. On reflection, a secretary would be better. It might be so interesting. Fancy being secretary to a member of Parliament. Or to a famous author.

She too might write.

Her dreams were pleasant.

CHAPTER VI

A week had elapsed and Victoria was beginning to feel the strain. She looked out from the window into the little street where fine rain fell gently as if it had decided to do so for ever. It was deserted, save by a cat who shivered and crouched under the archway of the mews. Sometimes a horse stirred. Through the open window the hot alcaline smell of the animals filtered slowly.

Victoria had found her lodgings. They were not quite the ideal, but she had not seen the ideal and this little den in Portsea Place was not without its charms. Her room, for the 'rooms' had turned from the plural into the singular, was comfortable enough. It occupied the front of the second floor in a small house. It had two windows, from which, by craning out a little, the trees of Connaught Square could be seen standing out like black skeletons against a white house. Opposite was the archway of the mews out of which came most of the traffic of the street. Under it too was the mart where the landladies who have invaded the little street exchange notes on their lodgers and boast of their ailments.

Victoria inspected her domain. She had a very big bed, a little inclined to creak; she had a table on a pedestal split so cunningly at the base that she was always table-conscious when she sat by it; she had a mahogany wash-stand, also on the triangular pedestal loved by the pre-Morrisites, enriched by a white marble top and splasher. A large armchair, smooth and rather treacherous, a small mahogany chest of drawers, every drawer of which took a minute to pull out, some chairs of no importance, completed her furniture. The carpet had been of all colours and was now of none. The tablecloth was blue serge and would have been serviceable if it had not contracted the habit of sliding off the mahogany table whenever it was touched. Ugly as it was in every detail, Victoria could not help thinking the room comfortable; its light paper saved it and it was not over-loaded with pictures. It had escaped with one text and the 'Sailor's Homecoming.' Besides it was restrained in colour and solid: it was comfortable like roast beef and boiled potatoes.

Victoria looked at all these things, at her few scattered books, the picture of Dick and of a group of school friends, at some of her boots piled in a corner. Then she listened and heard nothing. Once more she was struck by the emptiness, the darkness around her. She was alone. She had been alone a whole week, hardly knowing what to do. The excitement of choosing lodgings over, she had found time hang heavy on her hands. She had interminably walked in London, gazed at shop windows, read hundreds of imbecile picture postcards on bookstalls, gone continually to many places in omnibuses. She had stumbled upon South Kensington and wandered in its catacombs of stone and brick. She had discovered Hampstead, lost herself horribly near Albany Street; she had even unexpectedly landed in the City where rushing mobs had hustled and battered her.

Faithful to her resolve she had sedulously read the morning papers and applied for several posts as housekeeper without receiving any answers. She had realised that answering advertisements must be an art and had become quite conscious that employment was not so easy to find as she thought. Nobody seemed to want secretaries, except the limited companies, about which she was not quite clear. As these mostly required the investment of a hundred pounds or more she had not followed them up.

She paced up and down in her room. The afternoon was wearing. Soon the man downstairs would come back and slam the door. A little later the young lady in the City would gently enter the room behind hers and, after washing in an unobtrusive manner, would discreetly leave for an hour. Meanwhile nothing broke the silence, except the postman's knock coming nearer and nearer along Portsea Place. It fell unheeded even on her own front door, for Victoria's ears were already attuned to the sound. It meant nothing.

She walked up and down nervously. She looked at herself in the glass. She was pretty she thought, with her creamy skin and thick hair; her eyes too were good; what a pity her chin was so thick. That's why Dicky used to call her 'Towzer.' Poor old Dicky!

Shuffling footsteps rose up the stairs. Then a knock. At Victoria's invitation, a woman entered. It was Mrs Bell, the landlady.

'Why, ma'am, you're sitting in the dark! Let me light the lamp,' cried Mrs Bell, producing a large wooden box from a capacious front pocket. She lit the lamp and a yellow glow filled the room, except the corners which remained in darkness.

'Here's a letter for you, ma'am,' said Mrs Bell holding it out. As Victoria took it, Mrs Bell beamed on her approvingly. She liked her new lodger. She had already informed the gathering under the archway that she was a real lady. She had a leaning for real ladies, having been a parlourmaid previous to marrying a butler and eking out his income by letting rooms.

'Thank you, Mrs Bell,' said Victoria, 'it was kind of you to come up.'

'Oh! ma'am, no trouble I can assure you,' said Mrs Bell, with a mixture of respect and patronage. She wanted to be kind to her lodger, but she found a difficulty in being kind to so real a lady.

Victoria saw the letter was from Edward and opened it hurriedly. Mrs Bell hesitated, looking with her black dress, clean face and grey hair, the picture of the respectable maid. Then she turned and struggled out on her worn shoes, the one blot on her neatness. Victoria read the letter, bending perilously over the lamp which smoked like a funnel. The letter was quite short; it ran:

> 'My dear Victoria, – I am sorry I could not write before now, but I wanted to have some news to give you. I am glad to say that I have been able to interest the vicar on your behalf. He informs me that if you will call at once on Lady Rockham, 7a Queen's Gate, South Kensington, S.W., she may be in a position to find you a post in a family of standing. He tells me she is most capable and kind. He is writing to her. I shall come to London and see you soon. – Yours affectionately,
> *Edward.'*

Victoria fingered the letter lovingly. Perhaps she was going to have a chance after all. It was good to have something to do. Indeed it seemed almost too good to be true; she had vaguely resigned herself to unemployment. Of course something would ultimately turn up, but the what and when and how thereof were dangerously dim. She hardly cared to face these ideas; indeed she dismissed them when they occurred to her with a mixture of depression and optimism. Now, however, she was buoyant again. The family of standing would probably pay well and demand little. It would mean the theatres, the shops, flowers, the latest novels, no end of nice things. A little work too, of course, driving in the Park with a dear dowager with the most lovely white hair.

She ate an excellent and comparatively expensive dinner in an Oxford Street restaurant and went to bed early for the express purpose of making plans until she fell asleep. She was still buoyant in the morning. Connaught Square looked its best and even South Kensington's stony face melted into smiles when it caught sight of her. Lady Rockham's was a mighty house, the very house for a family of standing.

Victoria walked up the four steep steps of the house where something of her fate was to be decided. She hesitated for an instant and then, being healthily inclined to take plunges, pulled the bell with a little more vigour than was in her heart. It echoed tremendously. The quietude of Queen's Gate stretching apparently for miles towards the south, increased the terrifying noise. Victoria's anticipations were half pleasureable, half fearsome; she felt on the brink of an adventure and recalled the tremor with which she had entered the New Gaiety for the first time. Measured steps came nearer and nearer from the inside of the house; a shape silhouetted itself vaguely on the stained glass of the door.

She mustered sufficient coolness to tell the butler that she wished to see Lady Rockham, who was probably expecting her. As the large and solid man preceded her along an interminable hall, she felt rather than saw the thick Persian rug stretching along the crude mosaic of the floor, the red paper on the walls almost entirely hidden by exceedingly large and new pictures. Over her head a ponderous iron chandelier carrying many electric lamps blotted out most of the staircase.

For some minutes she waited in the dining-room into which she had been shown; for the butler was not at all certain, from a look at the visitor's mourning, that she was quite entitled to the boudoir. Victoria's square chin and steady eyes saved her, however, from having to accommodate her spine to the exceeding perpendicularity of the high-backed chairs in the hall. The dining-room, ridiculous thought, reminded her of Curran's. In every particular it seemed the same. There was the large table with the thick cloth of indefinite design and colour. The sideboard too was there, larger and richer perhaps, of Spanish mahogany not an inch of which was left bare of garlands of flowers or archangelic faces. It carried Curran's looking-glass; Curran's cruets were replaced by a number of cups which proclaimed that Charles Rockham had once won the Junior Sculls, and more recently, the spring handicap of the Kidderwick Golf Club. The walls were red as in the hall and profusely decorated with large pictures representing various generations having tea in old English gardens, decorously garbed Roman ladies basking by the side of marble basins, and such like subjects. Twelve chairs, all high backed and heavily groined, were ranged round the walls, with the exception of a large carving chair, standing at the head of the table, awaiting one who was clearly the head of a household. Victoria was looking pensively at the large black marble clock representing the temple in which the Lares and Penates of South Kensington usually dwell, when the door opened and a vigorous rustle entered the room.

'I am very glad to see you, Mrs Fulton,' remarked the owner of the rustle. 'I have just received a letter from Mr Meaker, the vicar of Cray. A most excellent man. I am sure we can do something for you. Something quite nice.'

Victoria looked at Lady Rockham with shyness and surprise. Never had she seen anything so majestic. Lady Rockham had but lately attained her ladyhood by marrying a knight bachelor whose name was a household word in the wood-paving world. She felt at peace with the universe. Her large silk clad person was redolent with content. She did not vulgarly beam. She merely was. On her capacious bosom large brooches rose and fell rhythmically. Her face was round and smooth as her voice. Her eyes were almost severely healthy.

'I am sure it is very kind of you,' said Victoria. 'I don't know anybody in London, you see.'

'That will not matter; that will not matter at all,' said Lady Rockham. 'Some people prefer those whose connections live in the country, yes, absolutely prefer them. Why, friends come to me every day, and they are clamouring for country girls, absolutely clamouring. I do hope you are not too particular. For things are difficult in London. So very difficult.'

'Yes, I know,' murmured Victoria, thinking of her unanswered applications. 'But I'm not particular at all. If you can find me anything to do, Lady Rockham, I should be so grateful.'

'Of course, of course. Now let me see. A young friend of mine has just started a poultry farm in Dorset. She is doing very well. Oh! very well. Of course you want a little capital. But such a very nice occupation for a young woman. The capital is often the difficulty. Perhaps you would not be prepared to invest much?'

'No, I'm afraid I couldn't,' faltered Victoria, wondering at what figure capital began.

'No, no, quite right,' purred Lady Rockham, 'I can see you are quite sensible. It is a little risky too. Yet my young friend is doing well, very well, indeed. Her sister is in Johannesburg. She went out as a governess and now she is married to a mine manager. There are so few girls in the country. Oh! he is quite a nice man, a little rough, I should say, but quite suitable.'

Victoria wondered for a moment whether her Ladyship was going to suggest sending her out to Johannesburg to marry a mine manager, but the Presence resumed.

'No doubt you would rather stay in London. Things are a little difficult here, but very pleasant, very pleasant indeed.'

'I don't mind things being difficult,' Victoria broke in, mustering a little courage. 'I must earn my own living and I don't mind what I do; I'd be a nursery governess, or a housekeeper, or companion. I haven't got any degrees, I couldn't quite be a governess, but I'd try anything.'

'Certainly, certainly, I'm sure we will find something very nice for you. I can't think of anybody just now but leave me your address. I'll let you know as soon as I hear of anything.' Lady Rockham gently crossed her hands over her waistband and benevolently smiled at her protégée.

Victoria wrote down her address and listened patiently to Lady Rockham who discoursed at length on the imperfections of the weather, the noisiness of London streets and the prowess of Charles Rockham on the Kidderwick links. She felt conscious of having to return thanks for what she was about to receive.

Lady Rockham's kindness persisted up to the door to which she showed Victoria. She dismissed her with the Parthian shot that 'they would find something for her, something quite nice.'

Victoria walked away; cold gusts of wind struck her, chilling her to the bone, catching and furling her skirts about her. She felt at the same time cheered and depressed. The interview had been inconclusive. However, as she walked over the Serpentine bridge, under which the wind was angrily ruffling the black water, a great wave of optimism came over her; for it was late, and she remembered that in the Edgware Road, there was a small Italian restaurant where she was about to lunch.

It was well for Victoria that she was an optimist and a good sleeper, for November had waned into December before anything happened to disturb the tenor of her life. For a whole fortnight she had heard nothing from Lady Rockham or from Edward. She had written to Molly but had received no answer. All day long the knocker fell with brutal emphasis upon the doors of Portsea Place and brought her nothing. She did not think much or hope much. She did nothing and spent little. Her only companion was Mrs Bell, who still hovered round her mysterious lodger, so ladylike and so quiet.

She passed hours sometimes at the window watching the stream of life in Portsea Place. The stream did not flow very swiftly; its principal eddies vanished by midday with the milkman and the butcher. The postman recurred more often but he did not count. Now and then the policeman passed and spied suspiciously into the archway where the landladies no longer met. Cabs trotted into it now and then to change horses.

Victoria watched alone. Beyond Mrs Bell, she seemed to know nobody. The young man downstairs continued to be invisible, and contented himself with slamming the door. The young lady in the back room continued to wash discreetly and to snore gently at night. Sometimes Victoria ventured abroad to be bitten by the blast. Sometimes she strayed over the town in the intervals of food. She had to exercise caution in this, for an aspect of the lodging house fire had only lately dawned upon her. If she did not order it at all she was met on the threshold by darkness and cold; if she ordered it for a given time she was so often late that she returned to find it dead or kept up wastefully at the rate of sixpence a scuttle. This trouble was chronic; on bitter days it seemed to dog her footsteps.

She had almost grown accustomed to loneliness. Alone she watched at her window or paced the streets. She had established a quasi-right to a certain seat at the Italian restaurant where the waiters had ceased to speculate as to who she was. The demoralisation of unemployment was upon her. She did not cast up her accounts; she rose late, made no plans. She slept and ate, careless of the morrow.

It was in the midst of this slow settling into despond that a short note from Lady Rockham arrived like a bombshell. It asked her to call on a Mrs Holt who lived in Finchley Road. It appeared that Mrs Holt was in need of a companion as her husband was often away. Victoria was shaken out of her torpor. In a trice her optimism crushed out of sight the flat thoughts of aimless days. She feverishly dressed for the occasion. She debated whether she would have time to insert a new white frill into the neck of a black blouse. Heedless of expenditure she spent two and eleven pence on new black gloves, and twopence on the services of a shoeblack who whistled cheerful tunes, and smiled

on the coppers. Victoria sallied out to certain victory. The wind was blowing balmier. A fitful gleam of sunshine lit up and reddened the pile of tangerines in a shop window.

CHAPTER VII

'I'm very sorry you can't come,' said Mrs Holt.

'Last Sunday, Mr Baker was so nice. I never heard anything so interesting as his sermon on the personal devil. I was quite frightened. At least I would have been if he had said all that at Bethlehem. You know, when we were at Rawsley we had such nice lantern lectures. I do miss them.'

Victoria looked up with a smile at the kindly red face. 'I'm so sorry,' she said, 'I've got such a headache. Perhaps it'll pass over if I go for a little walk while you are at Church.' She was not unconscious, as she said this, of the subtle flattery that the use of the word 'church' implies when used to people who dare not leave their chapel.

'Do, Victoria, I'm sure it will do you good,' said Mrs Holt, kindly. 'If the sun keeps on, we'll go to the Zoo this afternoon. I do like to see the children in the monkey house.'

'I'm sure I shall be glad to go,' said Victoria quietly. 'It's very kind of you to take me.'

'Nonsense, my dear,' replied Mrs Holt, gently beaming. 'You are like the sunshine, you know. Dear me! I don't know what I should have done if I hadn't found you. You can't imagine the woman who was here before you. She was the daughter of a clergyman, and I did get so tired of hearing how they lost their money. But, there, I'm worrying you when you've got a headache. I do wish you'd try Dr Eberman's pills. All the papers are simply full of advertisements about them. And these German doctors are so clever. Oh, I shall be so late.'

Victoria assured her that she was sure her head would be better by dinner time. Mrs Holt fussed about the room for a moment, anxiously tested the possible dustiness of a bracket, pulled the curtains and picked up the Sunday papers from the floor. She then collected a small canvas bag decorated with a rainbow parrot, a hymn and service book, her spectacle case, several unnecessary articles which happened to be about and left the room with the characteristic rustle which pervades the black silk dresses of well-to-do Rawsley dames.

Victoria sat back in the large leather armchair. Her head was not very bad but she felt just enough in her temples a tiny passing twinge to shirk chapel without qualms. She toyed with a broken backed copy of *Charlton on Book-Keeping* which lay in her lap. It was a curious fate that had landed her into Charlton's epoch making work. Mrs Holt, that prince of good fellows, had a genius for saving pennies and had been trained in the school of a Midland household, but the fortunes of her husband had left her feebly struggling in a backwash of pounds. So much had this been the case that Mr Holt had discovered joyfully that he had at last in his house a woman who could bring herself to passing an account for twenty pounds for stabling. Little by little Victoria had established her position. She was Mrs Holt's necessary companion and factotum. She could apparently do anything and do it well; she could even tackle such intricate tasks as checking washing or understanding Bradshaw. She was always ready and always bright. She had an unerring eye for a good quality of velvet; she could time the carriage to a nicety for the Albert Hall concert. Mrs Holt felt that without this pleasant and competent young woman she would be quite lost.

Mr Holt, too, after inspecting Victoria grimly every day for an entire month, had decided that she would do and had lent her the work on book-keeping, hoping that she would be able to keep the house accounts. In three months he had not addressed her twenty times beyond wishing her good morning and good night. He had but reluctantly left Rawsley and his beloved cement works to superintend his ever growing London business. He was a little suspicious of Victoria's easy manners; suspicious of her intentions, too, as the northerner is wont to be. Yet he grudgingly admitted that she was level headed, which was 'more than Maria or his fool of a son would ever be.'

Victoria thought for a moment of Holt, the book-keeping, the falling due of insurance premiums; then of Mrs Holt who had just stepped into her carriage which was slowly proceeding

down the drive, crunching into the hard gravel. A gleam of sunshine fitfully lit up the polished panels of the clumsy barouche as it vanished through the gate.

This then was her life. It might well have been worse. Mr Holt sometimes let a rough kindness appear through an exterior as hard as his own cement. Mrs Holt, stout, comfortable and good-tempered, quite incompetent when it came to controlling a house in the Finchley Road, was not of the termagant type that Victoria had expected when she became a companion. Her nature, peaceful as that of a mollusc, was kind and had but one outstanding feature; her passionate devotion to her son Jack.

Victoria thought that she might well be content to pass the remainder of her days among these good folk. From the bottom of her heart mild discontent rose every now and then. It was a little dull. Tuesday was like Monday and probably like the Tuesday after next. The glories of the town, which she had caught sight of during her wanderings, before she floated into the still waters of the Finchley Road, haunted her at times. The motor buses too, which perpetually carried couples to the theatre, the crowds in Regent Street making for the tea-shops, while the barouche trotted sedately up the hill, all this life and adventure were closed off.

Victoria was not unhappy. She drifted in that singular psychological region where the greatest possible pain is not suffering and where the acme of possible pleasure is not joy. She did not realise that this negative condition was almost happiness, and yet did not precisely repine. The romance of her life, born at Lympton, now slept under the tamarinds. The stupefaction of the search for work, the hopes and fears of December, all that lay far away in those dark chambers of the brain into which memory cannot force a way but swoons on the threshold.

Yes, she was happy enough. Her eyes, casting through the bay window over the evergreens, trimly stationed and dusty, strayed over the low wall. On the other side of the road stood another house, low and solid as this one, beautiful though ugly in its strength and worth. It is not the house you live in that matters, thought Victoria, unconsciously committing plagiarism, but the house opposite. The house she lived in was well enough. Its inhabitants were kind, the servants respectful, even the mongrel Manchester terrier with the melancholy eyes of some collie ancestor did not gnaw her boots.

She let her hands fall into her lap and, for a minute, sat staring into space, seeing with extraordinary lucidity those things to come which a movement dispels and swathes with the dense fog of forgetfulness. With terrible clarity she saw the life of the last three months and the life to come, as it was in the beginning ever to be.

The door opened softly. Before she had time to turn round two hands were clapped over her eyes. She struggled to free herself, but the hands grew more insistent and two thumbs softly touched her cheeks.

'Dimple, dimple,' said a voice, while one of the thumbs gently dwelled near the corner of her mouth.

Victoria struggled to her feet, a little flushed, a strand of hair flying over her left ear.

'Mr Jack,' she said rather curtly, 'I don't like that. You know you mustn't do that. It's not fair. I really don't like it.' She was angry; her nostrils opened and shut quickly; she glared at the good looking boy before her.

'Naughty temper,' he remarked, quite unruffled. 'You'll take a fit one of these days, Vicky, if you don't look out.'

'Very likely if you give me starts like that. Not that I mind that so much, but really it's not nice of you. You know you wouldn't do that if your mother was looking.'

'Course I wouldn't,' said Jack, 'the old mater's such a back number, you know.'

'Then,' replied Victoria with much dignity, 'you ought not to do things when we're alone which you wouldn't do before her.'

'Oh Lord! morals again,' groaned the youth. 'You are rough on me, Vicky.'

'And you mustn't call me Vicky,' said Victoria. 'I don't say I mind, but it isn't the thing. If anybody heard you I don't know what they'd think.'

'Who cares!' said Jack in his most dare devil style, putting his hand on the back of hers and stroking it softly. Victoria snatched her hand away and went to the window, where she seemed absorbed in the contemplation of the evergreens. Jack looked a little nonplussed. He was an attractive youth and looked about twenty. He had the fresh complexion and blue eyes of his father but differed from him by a measure of delicacy. His tall body was a little bent; his face was all pinks and whites set off by the blackness of his straight hair. He well deserved his school nickname of Kathleen Mavourneen. His long thin hands, which would have been aristocratic but for the slight thickness of the joints, branded him a poet. He was not happy in the cement business.

Jack stepped up to the window. 'Sorry,' he said, as humbly as possible. Victoria did not move.

'Won't never do it again,' he said, pouting like a scolded child.

'It's no good,' answered Victoria, 'I'm not going to make it up.'

'I shall go and drown myself in the Regent Canal,' said Jack dolefully.

'I'd rather you went for a walk along the banks,' said Victoria.

'I will if you'll come too,' answered Jack.

'No, I'm not going out. I've got a headache. Look here, I'll forgive you on condition that you go out now and if you'll do that perhaps you can come with your mother and me to the Zoo this afternoon.'

'All right then,' grumbled the culprit, 'you're rather hard on me. Always knew you didn't like me. Sorry.'

Victoria looked out again. A minute later Jack came out of the house and, pausing before the window, signed to her to lift up the sash.

'What do you want now?' asked Victoria, thrusting her head out.

'It's a bargain about the Zoo, isn't it?'

'Yes, of course it is, silly boy. I've got several children's tickets.'

Jack made a wry face, but walked away with a queer little feeling of exultation. 'Silly boy.' She had called him 'silly boy.' Victoria watched him go with some perplexity. The young man was rather a problem. Not only did his pretty face and gentle ways appeal to her in themselves, but he had told her something of his thoughts and they did not run on cement. His father had thrust him into his business as men of his type naturally force their sons into their own avocation whatever it be. Victoria knew that he was not happy and was sorry for him; how could she help feeling sorry for this lonely youth who had once printed a rondeau in the *Westminster Gazette*.

Jack had taken to her at once. All that was delicate and feminine in him called out to her square chin and steady eyes. Often she had seen him look hungrily at her strong hands where bone and muscle plainly showed. But, in his wistful way, Jack had begun to embarrass her. He was making love to her in a sense, sometimes sportively, sometimes plaintively, and he was difficult to resist.

Victoria saw quite well that trouble must ensue. She would not allow the boy to fall in love with her when all she could offer was an almost motherly affection. Besides, they could not marry; it would be absurd. She was puzzled as to what to do. Everything tended to complicate the situation for her. She had once been to the theatre with Jack and remembered with anxiety how his arm had rested against hers in the cab and how, when he leaned over towards her to speak, she had felt him slowly inhaling the scents of her hair.

She had promised herself that Jack should be snubbed. And now he played pranks on her. It must end in their being caught in an ambiguous attitude and then she would be blamed. She might tell Mrs Holt, but then what would be her position in the household? Jack would sulk and Mrs Holt would watch them suspiciously until the situation became intolerable and she had to leave. Leave! no, no, she couldn't do that. With sudden vividness Victoria pictured the search for work, the silence of Portsea Place, the Rialto-like archway, Mrs Bell, and the cold, the loneliness. Events must take their course.

Like the rasp of a corncrake she heard the wheels of the barouche on the gravel. Mrs Holt had returned from the discourse on the personal devil.

CHAPTER VIII

'Thomas,' said Mrs Holt with some hesitation.

'Yes,' said Mr Holt. 'What is it?'

'Oh! nothing,' said Mrs Holt. 'Just a queer idea. Nothing worth talking about.'

'Well, come again when it is worth talking about,' growled Mr Holt, relapsing into his newspaper.

'Of course there's nothing in it,' remarked Mrs Holt pertinaciously.

'Nothing in what?' her husband burst forth. 'What do you mean, Maria? Have you got anything to say or not? If you have, let's have it out.'

'I was only going to say that Jack.. of course I don't think that Victoria sees it, but you understand he's a very young man, but I don't blame her, he's such a funny boy,' said Mrs Holt lucidly.

'Good heavens, Maria,' cried her husband, 'do you want me to smash something?'

'How you do go on,' remarked Maria placidly. 'What I meant to say is that don't you think Jack's rather too attentive to Victoria?'

Mr Holt dropped his paper suddenly. 'Attentive?' he growled, 'haven't noticed it.'

'Oh! you men never notice things,' replied Mrs Holt with conscious superiority. 'Don't say I didn't warn you, that's all.'

'Now look here, Maria,' said Mr Holt, his blue eyes darkening visibly, 'I don't want any more of this tittle tattle. You can keep it for the next P.S.A. I can tell you that if the young cub is "attentive" to Mrs Fulton, well, so much the better: it'll teach him something worth knowing if he finds out that there's somebody else in the world who's worth doing something for beyond *his* precious self.'

'Very well, very well,' purred Mrs Holt. 'If you take it like that, I don't mind, Thomas. Don't say I didn't warn you if anything happens. That's all.'

Mr Holt got up from the leather chair and left the room. There were moments when his wife roused in him the fury that filled him when once, in his young days, he had dropped steel bolts into the cement grinders to gratify a grudge against an employer. The temper that had made him rejoice over the sharp cracks speaking of smashed axles was in him still. He had got above the social stratum where husbands beat their wives, but innuendoes and semi-secrets goaded him almost to paroxysm.

Mrs Holt heard the door slam and coolly took up her work. She was engaged in the congenial task of disfiguring a piece of Morris chintz. She had decided that the little bag given her by an æsthetic friend was too flat and she was busily employed in embroidering the 'eyebright' pattern, with coloured wool in the most approved early Victorian manner. 'At any rate,' she thought, 'Thomas has got the idea in his head.'

Mrs Holt had not arrived at her determination to awaken her husband's suspicions without much thought. She had begun to realise that 'something was wrong' one Sunday afternoon at the Zoo. She had taken Jack and Victoria in the barouche, putting down to a fit of filial affection the readiness of Jack to join them. She had availed herself of the opportunity to drive round the Circle; so as to show off her adored son to the Bramleys, who were there in their electric, to the Wilsons, who were worth quite fifty thousand a year, to the Wellensteins too, who seemed to do so wonderfully well on the Stock Exchange. Jack had taken it very nicely indeed.

All the afternoon Jack had remained with them; he had bought animal food, found a fellow to take them into the pavilion, and even driven home with them. It was when he helped his charges into the carriage that Mrs Holt had noticed something. He first handed his mother in and then Victoria. Mrs Holt had seen him put his hand under Victoria's forearm, which was quite ordinary, but she had also seen him hold her in so doing by the joint of her short sleeve and long glove where a strip of white skin showed and slip two fingers under the glove. This was not so ordinary and Mrs Holt began to think.

When a Rawsley dame begins to think of things such as these, her conscience invariably demands of her that she should know more. Mrs Holt therefore said nothing, but kept a watchful eye on the couple. She could urge nothing against Victoria. Her companion remained the cheerful and competent friend of the early days; she was no more amiable to Jack than to his father: she talked no more to him than to the rest of the household; she did not even look at him much. But Jack was always about her; his eyes followed her round the room, playing with every one of her movements. Whenever she smiled his lips fluttered in response.

Mrs Holt passed slowly through the tragic stages that a mother goes through when her son loves. She was not very anxious as to the results of the affair, for she knew Jack, though she loved him. She knew that his purpose was never strong. Also she trusted Victoria. But, every day and inevitably, the terrible jealousy that invades a mother's soul crept further into hers. He was her son and he was wavering from an allegiance the pangs of childbirth had entitled her to.

Mrs Holt loved her son, and, like most of those who love, would torture the being that was all in all for her. She would have crushed his thoughts if she had felt able to do so, so as to make him more malleable; she rejoiced to see him safely anchored to the cement business, where nothing could distract him; she even rejoiced over his weakness, for she enjoyed the privilege of giving him strength. She would have ground to powder his ambitions, so that he might be more fully her son, hers, hers only.

The stepping in of the other woman, remote and subtle as it was, was a terrible thing. She felt it from afar as the Arabian steed hears the coming simoon moaning beyond the desert. With terrible lucidity she had seen everything that passed for a month after that fatal day at the Zoo, when Jack touched Victoria's arm. She saw his looks, stolen from his mother's face, heard the softness of his voice which was often sharp for her. Like gall, his little attentions, the quick turn of his face, a flush sometimes, entered into and poisoned her soul. He was her son; and, with all the ruthless, entirely animal cruelty of the mother, she had begun to swear to herself that he should be hers and hers only, and that she would hug him in her arms, aye, hug him to death if need be, if only in her arms he died.

Savagely selfish as a good mother, however, Mrs Holt remembered that she must go slowly, collect her evidence, allow the fruit to ripen before she plucked it. Thus she retained her outward kindnesses for Victoria, spoke her fair, threw her even into frequent contact with her son. And every day she tortured herself with all the tiny signs that radiate from a lover's face like aerolites from the blazing tail of a comet. Now her case was complete. She had seen Jack lean over Victoria while she was on her knees dusting some books, and let his hand dwell on hers. She had seen his face all alight, his mouth a little open, breathing in the fragrance of this woman, the intruder. And the iron had entered into the mother's heart so sharply that she had to hurry away unseen for fear she should cry out.

Mrs Holt dropped her little work bag. She wondered whether her husband would see. Would she have to worry him placidly for months as she usually had to when she wanted her own way? Or would he understand and side with her? She did not know that women are intuitive, for she knew nothing either of women or men, but she felt perfectly certain that she was cleverer than Thomas Holt. If he would not see, then she would have to show him, even if she had to plot for her son's sake.

The door opened suddenly. Thomas Holt entered. His face was perturbed, his jaw setting grimly between the two deep folds in his cheeks. That was the face of his bad days.

'Well, Thomas?' ventured his wife hesitatingly.

'You were right, Maria,' answered Holt after a pause. 'Jack's a bigger fool than I thought him.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Holt with meaning, her heart beating a sharp tatoo.

'I was standing on the first landing,' Holt went on. 'I saw them at the door of the smoke-room. He asked her for a flower from her dress; she wouldn't give it him; he reached over and pulled one away.'

'Yes?' said Mrs Holt, everything in her quivering.

'Put his arm round her, though she pushed him off, and kissed her.'

Mrs Holt clasped her hands together. A sharp pang had shot through her. 'What are you going to do?' she asked.

'Do?' said Holt. 'Sack her of course. Send him up to Rawsley. Damn the young fool.'

CHAPTER IX

Breakfast is so proverbially dismal, that dismalness becomes good form; humanity feels silent and liverish, so it grudges Providence its due, for it cannot return thanks for the precocious blessings of the day. Such was breakfast at Finchley Road, and Victoria would not have noticed it on that particular morning had the silence not somehow been eloquent. She could feel, if not see storm clouds on the horizon.

Mr Holt sat over his eggs and bacon, eating quickly with both hands, every now and then soiling the napkin tightly tucked into the front of his low collar. There was nothing abnormal in this, except perhaps that he kept his eyes more closely glued than usual to the table cloth; moreover, he had not unfolded the paper. Therefore he had not looked up the prices of Industrials. This was singular. Mrs Holt never said much at breakfast, in deference to her husband, but this morning her silence was somewhat ostentatious. She handed Victoria her tea. Victoria passed her the toast and hardly heard her 'thank you.'

Jack sat more abstracted than ever. He was feeling very uncomfortable. He wavered between the severe talking to he had received from Victoria the previous afternoon and the sulkiness of his parents. Of course he was feeling depressed, but he could not tell why. Victoria's mere nod of acceptance when he offered her the salt, and his mother's curt refusal of the pepper did not contribute to make him easier in his mind. Mrs Holt cleared her throat: 'Blowing up for rain, Thomas,' she said. Mr Holt did not move a muscle. He helped himself to marmalade. Stolid silence once more reigned over the breakfast table. Jack stole a sidelong glance at Victoria. Her eyes were fixed upon her hands crossed before her. Jack's eyes dwelled for a moment on their shapely strength, then upon the firm white nape of her bent neck. An insane desire possessed him to jump up, seize her in his arms, crush his lips into that spot where the dark tendrils of her hair began. He repressed it, and considered the grandfather's clock which had once ticked in a peasant Holt's kitchen. To-day it ticked with almost horrible deliberation.

Jack found that he had no appetite. Forebodings were at work with him. Perhaps Vic had told. Of course not, she couldn't be such a fool. What a beastly room it was! Sideboard must weigh a ton. And those red curtains! awful, simply awful. Good God, why couldn't he get out of the damned place and take Vic with him. Couldn't do that yet of course, but couldn't stick it much longer. He'd be off to the City now. Simply awful here. Jack rose to his feet suddenly, so suddenly that his chair tilted and fell over.

Mrs Holt looked up. 'I wish you wouldn't be so noisy, Jack,' she said.

'Sorry, mater,' said Jack, going round to her and bending down to kiss her. 'I'm off.'

'You're in a fine hurry,' remarked Mr Holt grimly, looking up and speaking for the first time.

'Left some work over,' said Jack, in a curt manner, making for the door.

'Hem! you've got work on the brain,' retorted his father in his most sardonic tone.

Jack opened the door without a word.

'One minute, Jack,' said Mrs Holt placidly, 'you needn't go yet, your father and I have something to say to you.'

Jack stood rooted to the ground. His knees almost gave way beneath him. It, it, it was it. They knew. Victoria's face, the profile of which he could see outlined like a plaster cast against the red wall paper did not help him. Her face had set, rigid like a mask. Now she knew why the previous evening had gone by in silence. She rose to her feet, a strange numb feeling creeping all over her.

'Don't go, Mrs Fulton,' said Mr Holt sharply, 'this concerns you.'

For some seconds the party remained silent. Mr and Mrs Holt had not moved from the table. Jack and Victoria stood right and left, like prisoners at the bar.

'Victoria,' said Mrs Holt, 'I'm very sorry to have to say it, but I'm afraid you know what I'm going to tell you. Of course I don't say I blame you. It's quite natural at your age and all that.' She stopped, for a flush was rising in Victoria's face, the cheekbones showing two little red patches. Mr Holt had clasped his hands together and kept his eyes fixed on Victoria's with unnatural intensity.

'You see, Victoria,' resumed Mrs Holt, 'it's always difficult when there's a young man in the house; of course I make allowances, but, really, you see it's so complicated and things get so annoying. You know what people are.'

'That'll do, Maria,' snarled Mr Holt, jumping to his feet. 'If you don't know what you have to say, I do. Look here, Mrs Fulton. Last night I saw Jack kissing you. I know perfectly well you didn't encourage him. You'd know better. However, there it is. I don't pretend I like what I've got to do, but this must be stopped. I can't have philandering going on here. You, Jack, you're going back to the works at Rawsley and don't let me see anything of you this side of the next three months. As for you, Mrs Fulton, I'm sorry, but Mrs Holt will have to find another companion. I know it's hard on you to ask you to leave without notice, but I propose to give you an indemnity of twenty pounds. I should like to keep you here, but you see that after what has happened it's impossible. I suppose you agree to that?'

Victoria stood silent for a moment, her hands tightly clenched. She knew Holt's short ways, but the manner of the dismissal was brutal. Everything seemed to revolve round her, she recovered herself with difficulty.

'Yes,' she said at length, 'you're quite right.'

Jack had not moved. His hands were nervously playing with his watch chain. Victoria, in the midst of her trouble, remembered Edward's familiar gesture. They were alike in a way, these two tall weedy men, both irresolute and undeveloped.

'Very well then,' continued Holt; 'perhaps you'll make your arrangements at once. Here is the cheque.' He held out a slip of blue paper.

Victoria looked at him for a moment dully. Then revolt surged inside her. 'I don't want your indemnity,' she said coldly, 'you merely owe me a month's wages in lieu of notice.'

The shadow of a smile crept into Holt's face. The semi-legal, semi-commercial phrase pleased him.

Mrs Holt rose from the table and went to Victoria. 'I'm so sorry,' she said, speaking more gently than she had ever done. 'You must take it. Things are so hard.'

'Oh, but I say, dad.' broke in Jack.

'That will do, do you hear me, sir?' thundered the father violently, bringing down his fist on the table. 'I'm not asking you for your opinion! You can stay and look at your work but you just keep a silent tongue in your head. D'you hear?'

Jack stood cowed and dumb.

'There's nothing more to say, is there?' growled Mr Holt, placing the cheque on the table before Victoria.

'Not much,' said Victoria. 'I've done no wrong. Oh! I'm not complaining. But I begin to understand things. Your son has persecuted me. I didn't want his attentions. You turn me out. Of course it's my fault, I know.'

'My dear Victoria,' interposed Mrs Holt, 'nobody says it's your fault. We all think.'

'Indeed? it's not my fault, but you turn me out.'

Mrs Holt dropped her hands helplessly.

'I see it all now,' continued Victoria. 'You don't blame me, but you're afraid to have me here. So long as I was a servant all was well. Now I'm a woman and you're afraid of me.' She walked up and down nervously. 'Now understand, I've never encouraged your son. If he had asked me to marry him I wouldn't have done it.' A look of pain passed over Jack's face but aroused no pity in Victoria. She felt frozen.

'Oh! but there was no question of that,' cried Mrs Holt, plaintively.

'No doubt,' said Victoria ruthlessly. 'You couldn't think of it. Nobody could think of an officer's widow marrying into the Rawsley Works. From more than one point of view it would be impossible. Very good. I'll leave in the course of the morning. As for the cheque, I'll take it. As you say, Mrs Holt, things are hard. I've learned that and I'm still learning.'

Victoria took up the blue slip. The flush on her face subsided somewhat. She picked up her handkerchief, a letter from Molly and a small anthology lying on the dumb waiter. She made for the door, avoiding Jack's eyes. She felt through her downcast lids the misery of his looks. A softer feeling went through her, and she regretted her outburst. As she placed her hand on the handle she turned round and faced Mrs Holt, a gentler look in her eyes.

'I'm sorry I was hasty,' she stammered. 'I was taken by surprise. It was.. vulgar.'

The door closed softly behind her.

CHAPTER X

Victoria went up to her room and locked the door behind her. She sat down on her small basket trunk and stared out of the dormer window. She was still all of a tingle; her hands, grasping the rough edges of the trunk, trembled a little. Yet she felt, amid all her perturbation, the strange gladness that overcomes one who has had a shock; the contest was still upon her.

'Yes,' she said aloud, 'I'm free. I'm out of it.' She hated the dullness and ugliness which the Holts had brought with them from the Midlands. The feeling came over her almost like a spasm. Through the dormer window she could see the white frontage of the house opposite. It was repellent like Mrs Holt's personal devil.

The feeling of exultation suddenly subsided in Victoria's breast. She realised all of a sudden that she was once more adrift, that she must find something to do. It might not be easy. She would have to find lodgings. The archway in Portsea Place materialised crudely. She could hear the landlady from 84 detailing the last phase of rheumatics to the slatternly maid who did for the grocer. Awful, awful. Perhaps she'd never find another berth. What should she do?

Victoria pulled herself together with a start. 'This will never do,' she said, 'there's lots of time to worry in. Now I must pack.' She got up, drew the trunk into the middle of the room, opened it and took out the tray. Then, methodically, as she had been taught to do by her mother, she piled her belongings on the bed. In a few minutes it was filled with the nondescript possessions of the nomad. Skirts, books, boots, underclothing, an inkpot even, jostled one another in dangerous proximity. Victoria surveyed the heap with some dismay; all her troubles had vanished in the horror that comes over every packer: she would never get it all in. She struggled for half an hour, putting the heavy things at the bottom, piling blouses on the tray, cunningly secreting scent bottles in shoes, stuffing handkerchiefs into odd corners. Then she dropped the tray in, closed the lid and sat down upon it. The box creaked a little and gave way. Victoria locked it and got up with a little sigh of satisfaction. But she suddenly saw that the cupboard door was ajar and that in it hung her best dress and a feather boa; on the floor stood the packer's plague, shoes. It was quite hopeless to try and get them in.

Victoria surveyed the difficulty for a moment; then she regretfully decided that she must ask Mrs Holt for a cardboard box, for her hat-box was already mortgaged. A nuisance. But rather no, she would ask the parlourmaid. She went to the door and was surprised to find it locked. She turned the key slowly, looking round at the cheerful little room, every article of which was stupid without being offensive. It was hard, after all, to leave all this, without knowing where to go.

Victoria opened the door and jumped back with a little cry. Before her stood Jack. He had stolen up silently and waited. His face had flushed as he saw her; in his eyes was the misery of a sorrowful dog. His mouth, always a little open, trembled with excitement.

'Jack,' cried Victoria, 'oh! what do you want?'

'I've come to say.. oh! Victoria.' Jack broke down in the middle of his carefully prepared sentence.

'Oh! go away,' said Victoria faintly, putting her hand on her breast. 'Do go away. Can't you see I've had trouble enough this morning?'

'I'm sorry,' muttered Jack miserably. 'I've been a fool. Vic, I've come to ask you if you'll forgive me. It's all my fault. I can't bear it.'

'Don't talk about it,' said Victoria becoming rigid. 'That's all over. Besides you'll have forgotten all about it to-morrow,' she added cruelly.

Jack did not answer directly, though he was stung. 'Vic,' he said with hesitation, 'I can't bear to see you go, all through me. Listen, there's something you said this morning. Did you mean it?'

'Mean what?' asked Victoria uneasily.

'You said, if I'd asked you to marry me you.. I know I didn't, but you know, Vic, I wanted you the first time I saw you. Oh! Vic, won't you marry me now?'

Victoria looked at him incredulously. His hands were still trembling with excitement. His light eyes stared a little. His long thin frame was swaying. 'I'd do anything for you. You don't know what I could do. I'd work for you. I'd love you more than you've ever been loved.' Jack stopped short; there was a hardness that frightened him in the set of Victoria's jaw.

'You didn't say that yesterday,' she answered.

'No, I was mad. But I wanted to all along, Vic. You're the only woman I ever loved. I don't ask more of you than to let me love you.'

Victoria looked at him more gently. His likeness to her brother grew plainer than ever. Kind but hopelessly inefficient. Poor boy, he meant no harm.

'I'm sorry, Jack,' she said after a pause, 'I can't do it. You know you couldn't make a living.'

'Oh, I could, I could!' cried Jack clinging at the straw, 'if I had you to work for. You can't tell what it means for me.'

'Perhaps you could work,' said Victoria with a wan little smile, 'but I can't marry you, Jack, you see. I like you very much, but I'm not in love with you. It wouldn't be fair.'

Jack looked at her dully. He had not dared to expect anything but defeat, yet defeat crushed him.

'There, you must go away now,' said Victoria, 'I must go downstairs. Let me pass please.' She squeezed between him and the wall and made for the stairs.

'No, I can't let you go,' said Jack hoarsely. He seized her by the waist and bent over her. Victoria looked the space of a second into his eyes where the tiny veins were becoming bloodshot. She pushed him back sharply and, wrenching herself away, ran down the stairs. He did not follow her.

Victoria looked up from the landing. Jack was standing with bent head, one hand on the banister. 'The only thing you can do for me is to go away,' she said coldly. 'I shall come up again in five minutes with Effie. I suppose you will not want us to find you outside my bedroom door.'

She went downstairs. When she came up again with the maid, who carried a large brown cardboard box, Jack was nowhere to be seen.

A quarter of an hour later she followed the butcher's boy who was dragging her box down the stairs, dropping it with successive thuds from step to step. As she reached the hall, while she was hesitating as to whether she should go into the dining-room to say good-bye to Mrs Holt, the door opened and Mrs Holt came out. The two women looked at one another for the space of a second, like duellists about to cross swords. Then Mrs Holt held out her hand.

'Good-bye, Victoria,' she said, 'I'm sorry you're going. I know you're not to blame.'

'Thank you,' said Victoria icily. 'I'm sorry also, but it couldn't be helped.'

Mrs Holt heaved a large sigh. 'I suppose not,' she said.

Victoria withdrew her hand and went towards the door. The butcher's boy had already taken her box down, marking the whitened steps with two black lines.

'Shall I call a cab, mum?' he asked.

'Yes please,' said Victoria dreamily.

The youth went down the drive, his heels crunching into the gravel. Victoria stood at the top of the steps, looking out at the shrubs, one or two of which showed pale buds, standing sharp like jewels on the black stems. Mrs Holt came up behind her softly.

'I hope we don't part in anger, Victoria,' she said guiltily.

Victoria looked at her with faint amusement. True, anger is a cardinal sin.

'Oh! no, not at all,' she answered. 'I quite understand.'

'Don't be afraid to give me as a reference,' said Mrs Holt.

'Thank you,' said Victoria. 'I shan't forget.'

'And if ever you're in trouble, come to me.'

'You're very kind,' said Victoria. Mrs Holt was kind, she felt. She understood her better now. Much of her sternness oozed out of her. A mother defending her son knows no pity, thought Victoria; perhaps it's wrong to resent it. It's nature's way of keeping the young alive.

The cab came trotting up the drive and stopped. The butcher's boy was loading the trunk upon the roof. Victoria turned to Mrs Holt and took her hand.

'Good-bye,' she said, 'you've been very good to me. Don't think I'm so bad as you thought me this morning. Your son has just asked me to marry him.'

Mrs Holt dropped Victoria's hand; her face was distorted by a spasm.

'I refused him,' said Victoria.

She stepped into the cab and directed the cabman to Portsea Place. As they turned into the road she looked back. At the head of the steps Mrs Holt stood frozen and amazed. Victoria almost smiled but, her eyes wandering upwards, she saw, at her dormer window, Jack's head and shoulders. His blue eyes were fixed upon her with unutterable longing. A few strands of hair had blown down upon his forehead. For the space of a second they gazed into each other's eyes. Then the wall blotted him out suddenly. Victoria sighed softly and sank back upon the seat of the cab.

At the moment she had no thought. She was at such a point as one may be who has turned the last page of the first volume of a lengthy book: the next page is blank. Nothing remained even of that last look in which Jack's blue eyes had pitifully retold his sorry tale. She was like a rope which has parted with many groans and wrenchings; broken and its strands scattering, its ends float lazily at the mercy of the waves, preparing to sink. She was going more certainly into the unknown than if she had walked blindfold into the darkest night.

The horse trotted gently, the brakes gritting on the wheels as it picked its way down the steep. The fresh air of April drove into the cab, stinging a little and yet balmy with the freshness of latent spring. Victoria sat up, clasped her hands on the doors and craned out to see. There was a little fever in her blood again; the spirit of adventure was raising its head. As fitful gleams of sunshine lit up and irradiated the puddles a passionate interest in the life around seemed to overpower her. She looked almost greedily at the spire, far down the Wellington Road, shining white like molten metal with almost Italian brilliancy against a sky pale as shallow water. The light, the young wind, the scents of earth and buds, the men and women who walked with springy step intent on no business, all this, and even the horse who seemed to toss his head and swish his tail in sheer glee, told her that the world was singing its alleluia, for, behold, spring was born unto it in gladness, with all its trappings and its sumptuous promise.

Everything was beautiful; not even the dreary waste of wall which conceals Lords from the vulgar, nor the thousand tombs of the churchyard where the dead jostle and grab land from one another were without their peculiar charm. It was not until the cab crossed the Edgware Road that Victoria realised with a start that, though the world was born again, she did not share its good fortune. Edgware Road had dragged her down to the old level; a horrible familiarity, half pleasurable, half fearful, overwhelmed her. This street, which she had so often paced carrying a heart that grew heavier with every step, had never led her to anything but loneliness, to the cold emptiness of her room. Her mood had changed. She saw nothing now but tawdry stationer's shops, meretricious jewellery and, worse still, the sickening plenty of its monster stores of clothing and food. The road had seized her and was carrying her away towards its summit, where the hill melts into the skies between the houses that grow lower as far as the eye can see.

Victoria closed her eyes. She was in the grip once more; the wheels of the machine were not moving yet but she could feel the vibration as it got up steam. In a little the flywheel would slowly revolve and then she would be caught and ground up. Yes, ground up, cried the Edgware Road, like thousands of others as good as you, ground into little bits to make roadmetal of, yes, ground, ground fine.

The cab stopped suddenly. Victoria opened her eyes. Yes, this was Portsea Place. She got out. It had not changed. The curtains of the house opposite were as dirty as ever. The landlady from the corner was standing just under the archway, dressed as usual in an expansive pink blouse in which her flowing contours rose and fell. She interrupted the voluble comments on the weather which she was addressing to the little faded colleague, dressed in equally faded black, to stare at the newcomer.

'There ain't no more room at Bell's,' she remarked.

'She is very fortunate,' said the faded little woman. 'Dear me, dear me. It's a cruel world.'

'Them lidies' maids allus ketches on,' said the large woman savagely. 'Tell yer wot, though, p'raps they wouldn't if they was to see Bell's kitching. Oh, Lor'! There ain't no black-beetles. I don't think.'

The little faded woman looked longingly at Victoria standing on the steps. A loafer sprung from thin air as is the way of his kind and leant against the area railings, touching his cap whenever he caught Victoria's eye, indicating at times the box on the roof of the cab. From the silent house came a noise that grew louder and louder as the footsteps drew nearer the door. Victoria recognised the familiar shuffle. Mrs Bell opened the door.

'Lor, mum,' she cried, 'I'm glad to see you again.' She caught sight of the trunk. 'Oh, are you moving, mum?'

'Yes, Mrs Bell,' said Victoria. 'I'm moving and I want some rooms. Of course I thought of you.'

Mrs Bell's face fell. 'Oh, I'm so sorry, mum. The house is full. If you'd come last week I had the first floor back.' She seemed genuinely distressed. She liked her quiet lodger and to turn away business of any kind was always depressing.

Victoria felt dashed. She remembered Edward's consternation on discovering the change in Gower Street and, for the first time, sympathised.

'Oh, I'm so sorry too, Mrs Bell. I should like to have come back to you.'

'Couldn't you wait until next month, mum!' said Mrs Bell, reluctant to turn her away. 'The gentleman in the second floor front, he's going away to Rhodesia. It's your old room, mum.'

'I'm afraid not,' said Victoria with a smile. 'In fact I must find lodgings at once. Never mind, if I don't like them I'll come back here. But can't you recommend somebody?'

Mrs Bell looked right and left, then into the archway. The little faded woman had disappeared. The landlady in the billowy blouse was still surveying the scene. Mrs Bell froze her with a single look.

'No, mum, can't say I know of anybody, leastways not here,' she said slowly. 'It's a nice neighbourhood of course, but the houses here, they look all right, but oh, mum, you should see their kitchens! Dirty ain't the word, mum. But wait a bit, mum, if you wouldn't mind that, I've got a sister who's got a very nice room. She lives in Castle Street, mum, near Oxford Circus. It's a nice neighbourhood, of course not so near the Park,' added Mrs Bell with conscious superiority.

'I don't mind, Mrs Bell,' said Victoria. 'I'm not fashionable.'

'Oh, mum,' cried Mrs Bell, endeavouring to imply together the superiority of Portsea Place and the respectability of any street patronised by her family, 'I'm sure you'll like it. I'll give you the address.'

In a few minutes Victoria was speeding eastwards. Now she was rooted up for good. She was leaving behind her Curran's and Mrs Bell, slender links between her and home life, links still, however. The pageant of London rolled by her, heaving, bursting with rich life. The sunshine around her bade her be of good cheer. Then the cab turned a corner and, with the suddenness of a stage effect, it carried its burden into the haunts of darkness and malodour.

CHAPTER XI

'*Telegraph*, mum,' said a voice.

Victoria started up from the big armchair with a suddenness that almost shot her out of it. It was the brother of the one in Portsea Place and shared its constitutional objection to being sat upon. It was part of the 'sweet' which Miss Briggs had divided with Mrs Bell when their grandmother died.

'Thanks, Miss Briggs,' said Victoria. 'By the way, I don't think that egg is quite fresh. And why does Hetty put the armchair in front of the cupboard every day so that I can't open it?'

'The slut, I don't see there's anything the matter with it,' remarked Miss Briggs, simultaneously endorsing the complaint against Hetty and defending her own marketing.

'Oh, yes there is, Miss Briggs,' snapped Victoria with a sharpness which would have been foreign to her some months before. 'Don't let it happen again or I'll do my own catering.'

Miss Briggs collapsed on the spot. The profits on the three and sixpence a week for 'tea, bread and butter and anything that's going,' formed quite a substantial portion of her budget.

'Oh, I'm sorry, mum,' she said, 'it's Hetty bought 'em this week. The slut, I'll talk to her.'

Victoria took no notice of the penitent landlady and opened the *Telegraph*. She absorbed the fact that Consols had gone up an eighth and that contangoes were in process of arrangement, without interest or understanding. She was thinking of something else. Miss Briggs coughed apologetically. Victoria looked up. Miss Briggs reflectively tied knots in her apron string. She was a tall, lantern-jawed woman of no particular age; old looking for thirty-five perhaps or young looking for fifty. Her brown hair, plentifully sprinkled with grey, broke out in wisps over each ear and at the back of the neck. Her perfectly flat chest allowed big bags of coarse black serge to hang over her dirty white apron. Her hands played mechanically with the strings, while her water-coloured eye fixed upon the *Telegraph*.

'You shouldn't read that paper, mum,' she remarked.

'Why not?' asked Victoria, with a smile, 'isn't it a good one?'

'Oh, yes, mum, I don't say that,' said Miss Briggs with the respect that she felt for the buyers of penny papers. 'There's none better. Mine's the *Daily Mail* of course and just a peep into *Reynolds* before the young gent on the first floor front. But you shouldn't have it. *Tizer's* your paper.'

'*Tizer*?' said Victoria interrogatively.

'*Morning Advertiser*, mum; that's the one for advertisements.'

'But how do you know I read the advertisements, Miss Briggs?' asked Victoria still smiling.

'Oh, mum, excuse the liberty,' said Miss Briggs in great trepidation. 'It's the only sheet I don't find when I comes up to do the bed. *Tizer's* the one for you, mum; I had a young lady 'ere, once. Got a job at the Inverness Lounge, she did. Married a clergyman, they say. He's divorced her now.'

'That's an encouraging story, Miss Briggs,' said Victoria with a twinkle in her eye. 'How do you know I want to be a barmaid, though?'

'Oh, one has to be what one can, mum,' said Miss Briggs sorrowfully. 'Sure enough, it ain't all honey and it ain't all jam keeping this house. The bells, they rings all day and it's the breakfast that's bad and their ain't blankets enough, and I never 'ad a scuttle big enough to please 'em for sixpence. But you ain't doing that, mum,' she added after a pause devoted to the consideration of her wrongs. 'A young lady like you, she ought to be behind the bar.'

Victoria laughed aloud. 'Thanks for the hint, Miss Briggs,' she said, 'I'll think it over. To-day however, I'm going to try my luck on the stage. What do you think of that?'

'Going on tour?' cried Miss Briggs in a tone of tense anxiety.

'Well, not yet,' said Victoria soothingly. 'I'm going to see an agent.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Miss Briggs with ghoulish relief. 'Hope yer'll get a job,' she added as confidently as a man offering a drink to a teetotaller. At that moment a fearful clattering on the

stairs announced that Hetty and the pail had suddenly descended to the lower landing. Liquid noises followed. Miss Briggs rushed out. Victoria jumped up and slammed her door on the chaotic scene. She returned to the *Telegraph*. The last six weeks in the Castle Street lodging house had taught her that these were happenings quite devoid of importance.

Victoria spread out the *Telegraph*, ignored the foreign news, the leaders and the shocking revelations as to the Government's Saharan policy; she dallied for a moment over 'gowns for débutantes,' for she was a true woman, and passed on to the advertisements. She was getting quite experienced as a reader and could sift the wheat from the chaff with some accuracy. She knew that she could safely ignore applications for lady helps in 'small families,' at least unless she was willing to clean boots and blacklead grates for five shillings a week and meals when an opportunity occurred; her last revelation as to the nature of a post of housekeeper to an elderly gentleman who had retired from business into the quietude of Surbiton had not been edifying. The 'Financial and Businesses' column left her colder than she had been when she left Mrs Holt with nearly thirty-seven pounds. Then she was a capitalist and pondered longingly over the proposals of tobacconists, fancy goods firms, and stationers, who were prepared to guarantee a fortune to any person who could muster thirty pounds. Fortunately Miss Briggs had undeceived her. In her variegated experience, she herself had surrendered some sixty golden sovereigns to the persuasive owner of a flourishing newsagent's business. After a few weeks of vain attempts to induce the neighbourhood to indulge in the news of the day, she had been glad to sell her stock of sweets for eighteen shillings, and to take half a crown for a hundred penny novelettes.

Victoria turned to the 'Situations Vacant.' Their numbers were deceptive. She had never realised before how many people live by fitting other people for work they cannot get. Two thirds of the advertisements offered wonderful opportunities for sons of gentlemen in the offices of architects and engineers on payment of a premium; she also found she could become a lady gardener if she would only follow the courses in some dukery and meanwhile live on air; others would teach her shorthand, typewriting or the art of the secretary. All these she now calmly skipped. She was obviously unfitted to be the matron of an asylum for the feeble-minded. Such experience had not been hers, nor had she the redoubtable record which would open the gates of an emporium. An illegible hand would exclude her from the City.

'No,' thought Victoria, 'I'm an unskilled labourer; that's what I am.' She wearily skimmed the agencies; as a matter of habit noted the demand for two companions and one nursery governess and put the paper aside. There was not much hope in any of these, for one was for Tiverton, the other for Cardiff, which would make a personal interview a costly business; the third, discreetly cloaked by an initial, suggested by its terseness a companionship probably undue in its intimacy. The last six weeks had opened Victoria's eyes to the unpleasant aspects of life, so much so that she wondered whether there were any other. She felt now that London was waiting for her outside, waiting for her to have spent her last copper, when she would come out to be eaten so that she might eat.

Whatever her conceit might have been six months before, Victoria had lost it all. She could do nothing that was wanted and desired everything she could not get. She had tried all sources and found them dry. Commercialism, philanthropy, and five per cent. philanthropy had failed her. What can you do? was their cry. And, the answer being 'nothing,' their retort had been 'No more can we.'

Victoria turned over in her mind her interview with the Honorary Secretary of the British Women's Imperial Self Help Association. 'Of course,' said the Secretary, 'we will be glad to register you. We need some references and, as our principle is to foster the independence and self-respect of those whom we endeavour to place in positions such as may befit their social status, we are compelled to demand a fee of five shillings.'

'Oh, self help, I see,' said Victoria sardonically, for she was beginning to understand the world.

'Yes,' replied the Honorary Secretary, oblivious of the sneer, for his mind was cast in the parliamentary mould, 'by adhering to our principle and by this means only can we hope to stem the

tide of pauperism to which modern socialistic tendencies are – are – spurring the masses.' Victoria had paid five shillings for this immortal metaphor and within a week had received an invitation to attend a meeting presided over by several countesses.

The B. W. I. S. H. A., (as it was called by its intimates) had induced in Victoria suspicions of societies in general. She had, however, applied also to the Ladies' Provider. Its name left one in doubt whether it provided ladies with persons or whether it provided ladies to persons who might not be ladies. The Secretary in this case, was not Honorary. The inwardness of this did not appear to Victoria; for she did not then know that plain secretaries are generally paid, and try to earn their salary. Their interview had, however, not been such as to convert her to the value of corporate effort.

The Secretary in this case was a woman of forty, with a pink face, trim grey hair, spectacles, amorphous clothing, capable hands. She exhaled an atmosphere of respectability, and the faint odour of almonds which emanates from those women who eschew scent in favour of soap. She had quietly listened to Victoria's history, making every now and then a shorthand note. Then she had coughed gently once or twice. Victoria felt as in the presence of an examiner. Was she going to get a pass?

'I do not say that we cannot do anything for you, Mrs Fulton,' she said, 'but we have so many cases similar to yours.'

Victoria had bridled a little at this. 'Cases' was a nasty word.

'I'm not particular,' she had answered, 'I'd be a companion any day.'

'I'm sure you'd make a pleasant one,' said the Secretary graciously, 'but before we go any further, tell me how it was you left your last place. You were in the.. in the Finchley Road, was it not?' The Secretary's eyes travelled to a map of London where Marylebone, South Paddington, Kensington, Belgravia, and Mayfair, were blocked out in blue.

Victoria had hesitated, then fenced. 'Mrs Holt will give me a good character,' she faltered.

'No doubt, no doubt,' replied the Secretary, her eyes growing just a little darker behind the glasses. 'Yet, you see, we are compelled by the nature of our business to make enquiries. A good reference is a very good thing, yet people are a little careless sometimes; the hearts of employers are often rather soft.'

This was a little too much for Victoria. 'If you want to know the truth,' she said bluntly, 'the son of the house persecuted me with his attentions, and I couldn't bear it.'

The Secretary made a shorthand note. Then she looked at Victoria's flashing eyes, heightened colour, thick piled hair.

'I am very sorry,' she began lamely..

What dreadful things women are, thought Victoria, folding up the *Telegraph*. If Christ had said: Let *her* who hath never sinned.. the woman would have been stoned. Victoria got up, went to the looking-glass and inspected herself. Yes, she was very pretty. She was prettier than she had ever been before. Her skin was paler, her eyes larger; her thick eyebrows almost met in an exquisite gradation of short dark hairs over the bridge of the nose. She watched her breast rise and fall gently, flashing white through the black lacework of her blouse, then falling away from it, tantalising the faint sunshine that would kiss it. As she turned, another looking-glass set in the lower panels of a small cupboard told her that her feet were small and high arched. Her openwork stockings were drawn so tight that the skin there also gleamed white.

Victoria took from the table a dirty visiting card. It bore the words 'Louis Carrel, Musical and Theatrical Agent, 5 Soho Place.' She had come by it in singular manner. Two days before, as she left the offices of the 'Compleat Governess Agency' after having realised that she could not qualify in either French, German, Music, Poker work or Swedish drill, she had paused for a moment on the doorstep, surveying the dingy court where they were concealed, the dirty panes of an unlet shop opposite, the strange literature flaunting in the showcase of some publisher of esoterics. A woman had come up to her, rising like the loafers from the flagstones. She had realised her as between ages and

between colours. Then the woman had disappeared as suddenly as she came without having spoken, leaving in Victoria's hand the little square of pasteboard.

Victoria looked at it meditatively. She would have shrunk from the idea of the stage a year before, when the tradition of Lympton was still upon her. But times had changed; a simple philosophy was growing in her; what did anything matter? would it not be all the same in a hundred years? The discovery of this philosophy did not strike her as commonplace. There are but few who know that this is the philosophy of the world.

Victoria put down the card and began to dress. She removed the old black skirt and ragged lace blouse and, as she stood before the glass in her short petticoat, patting her hair and setting a comb, she reflected with satisfaction that her arms were shapely and white. She looked almost lovingly at the long thin dark hairs, fine as silk, that streaked her forearms; she kissed them gently, moved to self-adoration by the sweet scent of femininity that rose from her.

She tore herself away from her self-worship and quickly began to dress. She put on a light skirt in serge, striped black and white, threading her head through it with great care for fear she should damage her fringe net. She drew on a white blouse, simple enough though cheap. As it fastened along the side she did not have to call in Miss Briggs; which was fortunate, as this was the time when Miss Briggs carried coals. Victoria wriggled for a moment to settle the uncomfortable boning of the neck and, having buckled and belted the skirt over the blouse, completed her toilet with her little black and white jacket to match the skirt. A tiny black silk cravat from her neck was discarded, as she found that the fashionable ruffle, emerging from the closed coat, produced an *effet mousquetaire*. Lastly she put on her hat; a lapse from the fashions perhaps, but a lovable, flat, almost crownless, dead black, save a vertical group of feathers.

Victoria drew her veil down, regretting the thickness of the spots, pushed it up to repair with a dab of powder the ravage of a pod on the tip of her nose. She took up her parasol and white gloves, a glow of excitement already creeping over her as she realised how cleverly she must have caught the spirit of the profession to look the actress to the life and yet remain in the note of the demure widow.

Soho Place is neither one of the 'good' streets nor one of the 'bad.' The police do not pace it in twos and threes in broad daylight, yet they hardly like to venture into it singly by night. On one side it ends in a square; on the other it turns off into an unobtrusive side street, the reputation of which varies yard by yard according to the distance from the main roads. It is dirty, dingy; yet not without dignity, for its good Georgian and Victorian houses preserve some solidity and are not yet of the tenement class. They are still in the grade of office and shop which is immediately below their one-time status of dwellings for well-to-do merchants.

Victoria entered Soho Place from the square, so that she was not too ill impressed. She walked in the middle of the pavement, unconsciously influenced the foreign flavour of Soho. There men and women stand all day in the street, talking, bargaining, quarrelling and making love; when a cab rattles by they move aside lazily, as a Neapolitan stevedore rolls away on the wharf from the wheels of a passing cart.

Victoria paused for a second on the steps. № 5 Soho Place was a good house enough. The ground floor was occupied by a firm of auctioneers; a gentleman describing himself as A.R.I.B.A. exercised his profession on the third floor; below his plate was nailed a visiting-card similar to the one Victoria took from her reticule. She went up the staircase feeling a little braced by the respectability of the house, though she had caught sight through the area railings of an unspeakably dirty kitchen where unwashed pots flaunted greasy remains on a liquor stained deal table. The staircase itself, with its neutral and stained green distemper, was not over encouraging. Victoria stopped at the first landing. She had no need to enquire as to the whereabouts of the impresario for, on a door which stood ajar, was nailed another dirty card. Just as she was about to push it, it opened further to allow a girl to come out. She was very fair; her cheeks were a little flushed; a golden lock or two fell like keepsake ringlets on her low lace collar. Victoria just had time to see that the blue eyes sparkled

and to receive a cheerful smile. The girl muttered an apology and, smiling still, brushed past her and lightly ran down the stairs. 'A successful candidate,' thought Victoria, her heart rising once more.

She entered the room and found it empty. It was almost entirely bare of furniture, for little save an island of chairs in the middle and faded red cloth curtains relieved the uniform dirtiness of the wall paper which once was flowered. One wall was entirely covered by a large poster where half a dozen impossibly charming girls of the biscuit box type were executing a cancan so symmetrically as to recall an Egyptian frieze. The mantlepiece was bare save for the signed photograph of some magnificent foreign-looking athlete, nude to the waist. Victoria waited for a moment, watching a door which led into an inner room, then went towards it. At once the sound of a chair being pushed back and the fall of some small article on the floor told her that the occupant had heard her footsteps. The door opened suddenly.

Victoria looked at the apparition with some surprise. In a single glance she took in the details of his face and clothes, all of which were pleasing. The man was obviously a foreigner. His face was pale, clean shaven save for a small black moustache closely cropped at the ends; his eyes were brown; his eyebrows, as beautifully pencilled as those of a girl, emphasized the whiteness of his high forehead from which the hair receded in thick waves. His lips, red and full, were parted over his white teeth in a pleasant smile. Victoria saw too that he was dressed in perfect taste, in soft grey tweed, fitting well over the collar and loose everywhere else; his linen was immaculate; in fact nothing about him would have disgraced the Chandraga mess, except perhaps a gold ring with a large diamond which he wore on the little finger of his right hand.

'Mr Carrel?' said Victoria in some trepidation.

'Yes, Mademoiselle,' said the man pleasantly. 'Will you have the kindness to enter?' He held the door open and Victoria, hesitating a little, preceded him.

The inner room was almost a replica of the outer. It too was scantily furnished. On a large table heaps of dusty papers were stacked. An ash-tray overflowed over one end. In a corner stood a rickety-looking piano. The walls were profusely decorated with posters and photographs, presumably of actors and actresses, some highly renowned. Victoria felt respect creeping into her soul.

Carrel placed a chair for her before the table and resumed his own. For the space of a second or two he looked Victoria over. She was a little too conscious of his scrutiny to be quite at ease, but she was not afraid of the verdict.

'So, Mademoiselle,' said the man gently, 'you wish for an engagement on the stage?'

Victoria had not expected such directness. 'Yes, I do,' she said. 'That is, I was thinking of it since I got your card.'

'My card?' said Carrel, raising his eyebrows a little. 'How did you get my card?'

Victoria told him briefly how the card had been thrust into her hand, how curious it was and how surprised she had been as she did not know the woman and had never seen her again. Then she frankly confessed that she had no experience of the stage but wanted to earn her living and that.. She stopped aghast at the tactical error. But Carrel was looking at her fixedly, a smile playing on his lips as he pulled his tiny moustache with his jewelled hand.

'Yes, certainly, I understand,' he said. 'Experience is very useful, naturally. But you must begin and you know: *il n'y a que le premier pas qui coûte*. Now perhaps you can sing? It would be very useful.'

'Yes, I can sing,' said Victoria doubtfully, suppressing 'a little,' remembering her first mistake.

'Ah, that is good,' said Carrel smiling. 'Will you sit down to the piano? I have no music; ladies always bring it but do you not know something by heart?'

Victoria got up, her heart beating a little and went to the piano. 'I don't know anything French,' she said.

'It does not matter,' said Carrel, 'you will learn easily.' He lowered the piano stool for her. As she sat down the side of his head brushed her shoulder lightly. A faint scent of heliotrope rose from his hair.

Victoria dragged off her gloves nervously, felt for the pedals and with a voice that trembled a little sang two ballads which had always pleased Lympton. The piano was frightfully out of tune. Everything conspired to make her nervous. It was only when she struck the last note that she looked at the impresario.

'Very good, very good,' cried Carrel. '*Magnifique.* Mademoiselle, you have a beautiful voice. You will be a great success at Vichy.'

'Vichy?' echoed Victoria, a little overwhelmed by his approval of a voice which she knew to be quite ordinary.

'Yes, I have a troupe to sing and dance at Vichy and in the towns, Clermont Ferrand, Lyon, everywhere. I will engage you to sing and dance,' said Carrel, his dark eyes sparkling.

'Oh, I can't dance,' cried Victoria despairingly.

'But I assure you, it is not difficult,' said Carrel. 'We will teach you. There, I will show you the contract. As you have not had much experience my syndicate can only pay you one hundred and fifty francs a month. But we will pay the expenses and the costumes.'

Victoria looked doubtful for a moment. To sing, to dance, to go to France where she had never been, all this was sudden and momentous.

'*Voyons*,' said Carrel, 'it will be quite easy. I am taking four English ladies with you and two do not understand the theatre. You will make more money if the audience like you. Here is the contract.' He drew a printed sheet out of the drawer and handed it to her.

It was an impressive document with a heavy headline; *Troupe de Théâtre Anglaise*. It bore a French revenue stamp and contained half-a-dozen clauses in French which she struggled through painfully; she could only guess at their meaning. So far as she could see she was bound to sing and dance according to the programme which was to be fixed by the *Directeur*, twice every day including Sundays. The *syndicat* undertook to pay the railway fares and to provide costumes. She hesitated, then crossed the Rubicon.

'Fill in the blanks, please,' she said unsteadily. 'I accept.'

Carrel took up a pen and wrote in the date and *cent cinquante francs*. 'What name will you adopt?' he asked, 'and what is your own name?'

Victoria hesitated. 'My name is Victoria Fulton,' she said. 'You may call me.. Aminta Ormond.'

Carrel smiled once more. 'Aminta Ormond? I do not think you will like that. It is not English. It is like Amanda. No! I have it, Gladys Oxford, it is excellent.'

Before she could protest he had begun writing. After all, what did it matter? She signed the document without a word.

'*Voilà*,' said Carrel smoothly, locking the drawer on the contract. 'We leave from Charing Cross on Wednesday evening. So you have two days to prepare yourself. *Monsieur le Directeur* will meet you under the clock at a quarter past eight. The train leaves at nine. We will take your ticket when you arrive. Please come here at four on Wednesday and I will introduce you to the *Directeur*.'

Victoria got up and mechanically shook hands. Carrel opened the door for her and ceremoniously bowed her out. She walked into Soho place as in a dream, every pulse in her body thrilling with unwonted adventure. She stared at a dirty window pane and wondered at the brilliance it threw back from her eyes.

CHAPTER XII

Victoria had forgotten her latchkey. Miss Briggs opened the door for her. Her sallow face brightened up.

'There's a gentleman waiting, mum,' she said, 'and 'ere's a telegram.' Came jest five minutes after you left. I've put him in the front room what's empty, mum. Thought you'd rather see him there. Been 'ere 'arf an 'our, mum.'

Victoria did not attempt to disentangle the hours of arrival of the gentleman and the telegram; she tore open the brown envelope excitedly. It only heralded the coming of Edward who was doubtless the gentleman.

'Thanks, Miss Briggs,' she said, 'it's my brother.'

'Yes, mum, nice young gentleman. He's all right; been reading the *New Age*, mum, this 'arf hour, what belongs to the lady on the third.'

Victoria smiled and went into the dining-room, where none dine in lodging houses save ghosts. Edward was standing near the mantlepiece immersed in the paper.

'Why, Ted, this is nice of you,' cried Victoria going up to him and taking his hand.

'I had to come up to town suddenly,' said Edward, 'to get books for the Head. I'm going back this afternoon but I thought I'd look you up. Did you get the telegram.'

'Just got it now,' said Victoria, showing it, 'so you might have saved the sixpence.'

'I'm sorry,' said Edward. 'I didn't know until this morning.'

'It doesn't matter. I'm so glad to see you.'

There was an awkward pause. Edward brushed away the hair from his forehead. His hands flew back to his watch-chain. Victoria had briefly written to him to tell him why she left the Holts. Fearful of all that touches women, he was acutely conscious that he blamed her and yet knew her to be blameless.

'It's a beautiful day,' he said suddenly.

'Isn't it?' agreed Victoria, looking at him with surprise. There was another pause.

'What are you doing just now, Vic?' Edward breathed more freely, having taken the plunge.

'I've just got some work,' said Victoria. 'I begin on Wednesday.'

'Oh, indeed?' said Edward with increasing interest. 'Have you got a post as companion?'

'Well, not exactly,' said Victoria. She realised that her story was not very easy to tell a man like Edward. He looked at her sharply. His face flushed. His brow puckered. With both hands he grasped his watch-chain.

'I hope, Victoria,' he said severely, 'that you are not adopting an occupation unworthy of a lady. I mean I know you couldn't,' he added, his severity melting into nervousness.

'I suppose nothing's unworthy,' said Victoria; 'the fact is, Ted, I'm afraid you won't like it much, but I'm going on the stage.'

Edward started and flushed like an angry boy. 'On the.. the stage?' he gasped.

'Yes,' said Victoria quietly. 'I've got an engagement for six months to play at Vichy and other places in France. I only get six pounds a month but they pay all the expenses. I'll have quite thirty pounds clear when I come back. What do you think of that?'

'It's.. it's awful,' cried Edward, losing all self-consciousness. 'How can you do such a thing, Vic? If it were in London, it would be different. You simply can't do it.'

'Can't?' asked Victoria, raising her eyebrows. 'Why?'

'It's not done. No really Vic, you can't do it.' Edward was evidently disturbed. Fancy a sister of his.. It was preposterous.

'I'm sorry, Ted,' said Victoria, 'but I'm going on Wednesday. I've signed the agreement.'

Edward looked at her almost horror-struck. His spectacles had slid down to the sharp tip of his nose.

'You are doing very wrong, Victoria,' he said, resuming his pedagogic gravity. 'You could have done nothing that I should have disapproved of as much. You should have looked out for something else.'

'Looked out for something else?' said Victoria with the suspicion of a sneer. 'Look here, Ted. I know you mean well, but I know what I'm doing; I haven't been in London for six months without finding out that life is hard on women like me. I'm no good because I'm too good for a poor job and not suitable for a superior one. So I've just got to do what I can.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.