JOHN DAVYS BERESFORD

THE JERVAISE COMEDY

John Davys Beresford
The Jervaise Comedy

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36365110
The Jervaise Comedy:

Содержание

J. D. Beresford
The Jervaise Comedy

I
The First Hour

When I was actually experiencing the thrill, it came delightfully, however, blended with a threat that proclaimed the imminent consequence of dismay. I appreciated the coming of the thrill, as a rare and unexpected "dramatic moment." I savoured and enjoyed it as a real adventure suddenly presented in the midst of the common business of life. I imaginatively transplanted the scene from the Hall of Thorp-Jervaise to a West-End theatre; and in my instant part of unoccupied spectator I admired the art with which the affair had been staged. It is so seldom that we are given an opportunity to witness one of these "high moments," and naturally enough I began instinctively to turn the scene into literature; admitting without hesitation, as I am often forced to admit, that the detail of reality is so much better and more typical than any I can invent.

But, having said that, I wonder how far one does invent in such an experience? The same night I hinted something of my appreciation of the dramatic quality of the stir at the Hall door

to Frank Jervaise, Brenda's brother, and he, quite obviously, had altogether missed that aspect of the affair. He scowled with that forensic, bullying air he is so successfully practising at the Junior Bar, as he said, "I suppose you realise just what this may *mean*, to all of us?"

Jervaise evidently had failed to appreciate the detail that I had relished with such delight. He had certainly not savoured the quality of it. And in one sense I may claim to have invented the business of the scene. I may have added to it by my imaginative participation. In any case my understanding as interpreter was the prime essential—a fact that shows how absurd it is to speak of "photographic detail" in literature, or indeed to attempt a proper differentiation between realism and romance.

We were all of us in the Hall, an inattentive, chattering audience of between twenty and thirty people. The last dance had been stopped at ten minutes to twelve, in order that the local parson and his wife—their name was Sturton—might be out of the house of entertainment before the first stroke of Sunday morning. Every one was wound up to a pitch of satisfied excitement. The Cinderella had been a success. The floor and the music and the supper had been good, Mrs. Jervaise had thrown off her air of pre-occupation with some distasteful suspicion, and we had all been entertained and happy. And yet these causes for satisfaction had been nothing more than a setting for Brenda Jervaise. It was she who had stimulated us, given us a lead and kept us dancing to the tune of her exciting personality. She had

made all the difference between an ordinarily successful dance and what Mrs. Sturton at the open door continually described as "a really delightful evening."

She had to repeat the phrase, because with the first stroke of midnight ringing out from the big clock over the stables, came also the first intimation of the new movement. Mrs. Sturton's fly was mysteriously delayed; and I had a premonition even then, that the delay promised some diversion. The tone of the stable clock had its influence, perhaps. It was so precisely the tone of a stage clock—high and pretentious, and with a disturbing suggestion of being unmelodiously flawed.

Miss Tattersall, Olive Jervaise's friend, a rather abundant fair young woman, warmed by excitement to the realisation that she must flirt with some one, also noticed the theatrical sound of that announcement of midnight. She giggled a little nervously as stroke succeeded stroke in an apparently unending succession.

"It seems as if it were going on all night," she said to me, in a self-conscious voice, as if the sound of the bell had some emotional effect upon her.

"It's because it's out of place," I said for the sake of saying something; "theatrical and artificial, you know. It ought to be…" I did not know quite what it ought to be and stopped in the middle of the sentence. I was aware of the wide open door, of the darkness beyond, and of the timid visiting of the brilliant, chattering crowd by the fragrance of scented night-stock—a delicate, wayward incursion that drifted past me like

the spirit of some sweet, shabby fairy. What possible bell could be appropriate to that air? I began, stupidly, to recall the names of such flowers as bluebell, hare-bell, Canterbury-bell. In imagination I heard their chime as the distant tinkling of a fairy musical-box.

Miss Tattersall, however, took no notice of my failure to find the ideal. "Yes, isn't it?" she said, and then the horrible striking ceased, and we heard little Nora Bailey across the Hall excitedly claiming that the clock had struck thirteen.

"I counted most carefully," she was insisting.

"I can't think why that man doesn't come," Mrs. Sturton repeated in a raised voice, as if she wanted to still the superstitious qualms that Miss Bailey had started. "I told him to come round at a quarter to twelve, so that there shouldn't be any mistake. It's very tiresome." She paused on that and Jervaise was inspired to the statement that the fly came from the Royal Oak, didn't it, a fact that Mrs. Sturton had already affirmed more than once.

"What makes it rather embarrassing for the dear Jervaises," Miss Tattersall confided to me, "is that the other things aren't ordered till one—the Atkinsons' 'bus, you know, and the rest of 'em. Brenda persuaded Mrs. Jervaise that we might go on for a bit after the vicar had gone."

I wished that I could get away from Miss Tattersall; she intruded on my thoughts. I was trying to listen to a little piece that was unfolding in my mind, a piece that began with the coming

of the spirit of the night-stock into this material atmosphere of heated, excited men and women. I realised that invasion as the first effort of the wild romantic night to enter the house; after that…. After that I only knew that the consequences were intensely interesting and that if I could but let my thoughts guide me, they would finish the story and make it exquisite.

"Oh! did she?" I commented automatically, and cursed myself for having conveyed a warmth of interest I certainly did not feel.

"She's so enthusiastic, isn't she? Brenda, I mean," Miss Tattersall went on, and as I listened I compared her to the stable-clock. She, too, was a persistent outrage, a hindrance to whatever it was that I was waiting for.

Mrs. Sturton and her husband were coming back, with an appearance of unwillingness, into the warmth and light of the Hall. The dear lady was still at her congratulations on the delightfulness of the evening, but they were tempered, now, by a hint of apology for "spoiling it—to a certain extent—I hope I haven't—by this unfortunate contretemps."

The Jervaises were uncomfortably warm in their reassurances. They felt, no doubt, the growing impatience of all their other visitors pressing forward with the reminder that if the Sturtons' cab did not come at once, there would be no more dancing.

Half-way up the stairs little Nora Bailey's high laughing voice was embroidering her statement with regard to the extra stroke of the stable-clock.

"I had a kind of premonition that it was going to, as soon as

it began," she was saying.

Gordon Hughes was telling the old story of the sentry who had saved his life by a similar counting of the strokes of midnight.

And at the back of my mind my dæmon was still thrusting out little spurts of enthralling allegory. The Sturtons and Jervaises had been driven in from the open. They were taking refuge in their house. Presently…

"Given it up?" I remarked with stupid politeness to Miss Tattersall.

"They've sent John round to the stables to inquire," she told me.

I do not know how she knew. "John" was the only man-servant that the Jervaises employed in the house; butler, footman, valet and goodness knows what else.

"Mrs. Sturton seems to be afraid of the night-air," Miss Tattersall remarked with a complacent giggle of self-congratulation on being too modern for such prejudices. "I simply love the night-air, don't you?" she continued. "I often go out for a stroll in the garden the last thing."

I guessed her intention, but I was not going to compromise myself by strolling about the Jervaise domain at midnight with Grace Tattersall.

"Do you? Yes," I agreed, as if I were bound to admire her originality.

They are afraid of the night-air, my allegory went on, and having begun their retreat, they are now sending out their servant

for help. I began to wonder if I were composing the plot of a grand opera?

John's return convinced me that I was not to be disappointed in my expectation of drama.

He came out from under the staircase through the red baize door which discreetly warned the stranger that beyond this danger signal lay the sacred mysteries of the Hall's service. And he came down to the central cluster of faintly irritated Sturtons and Jervaises, with an evident hesitation that marked the gravity of his message. Every one was watching that group under the electric-lighted chandelier—it was posed to hold the stage—but I fancy that most of the audience were solely interested in getting rid of the unhappy Sturtons.

We could not hear what John said, but we inferred the general nature of the disaster from the response accorded to his news. The vicar merely clicked his tongue with a frown of grave disapproval, but his wife advertised the disaster for us by saying, —

"It's that man Carter, from the Oak, you know; not our own man. I've never liked Carter."

"Quite hopelessly, eh?" Jervaise asked John, and John's perturbed shake of the head answered that question beyond any doubt.

"In any case," Mrs. Sturton began, and I hazarded a guess that she was going to refuse to drive behind Carter in any stage of intoxication; but she decided to abandon that line and

went on with a splendid imitation of cheerfulness, "However, there's nothing to be done, now, but walk. It's quite a fine night, fortunately." She looked at her husband for approval.

"Oh! quite, quite," he said. "A beautiful night. Let us walk by all means."

A general rustle of relief spread up the gallery of the staircase, and was followed at once by a fresh outburst of chatter. The waiting audience of would-be dancers had responded like one individual. It was as if their single over-soul had sighed its thankfulness and had then tried to cover the solecism. Their relief was short-lived. Mrs. Jervaise "couldn't think" of the Sturtons walking. They must have the motor. She insisted. Really nothing at all. Their chauffeur was sure to be up, still.

"Of course, certainly, by all means," Jervaise agreed warmly, and then, to John, "He hasn't gone to bed yet, I suppose?"

"I saw him not half an hour ago, sir," was John's response.

"Tell him to bring the motor round," Jervaise ordered, and added something in a lower voice, which, near as I was to them, I could not catch. I imagined that it might be an instruction to have the chauffeur out again if he had by any chance slunk off to bed within the last half-hour.

I think Miss Tattersall said "Damn!" Certainly the over-soul of the staircase group thought it.

"They'll be here all night, at this rate," was my companion's translation of the general feeling.

"If they have to wake up the chauffeur," I admitted.

"He's a new man they've got," Miss Tattersall replied. "They've only had him three months…" It seemed as if she were about to add some further comment, but nothing came.

"Oh!" was all that I found appropriate.

I felt that the action of my opera was hanging fire. Indeed, every one was beginning to feel it. The Hall door had been shut against the bane of the night-air. The stimulus of the fragrant night-stock had been excluded. Miss Tattersall pretended not to yawn. We all pretended that we did not feel a craving to yawn. The chatter rose and fell spasmodically in short devitalised bursts of polite effort.

I looked round for Brenda, but could not see her anywhere.

"Won't you come back into the drawing-room?" Mrs. Jervaise was saying to the Sturtons.

"Oh! thank you, it's *hardly* worth while, is it?" Mrs. Sturton answered effusively, but she loosened the shawl that muffled her throat as if she were preparing for a longer wait. "I'm *so* sorry," she apologised for the seventh time. "So very unfortunate after such a really delightful evening."

They kept up that kind of conversation for quite a long time, while we listened eagerly for the sound of the motor-horn.

And no motor-horn came; instead, after endlessly tedious minutes, John returned bearing himself like a portent of disaster.

The confounded fellow whispered again.

"What, not anywhere?" Jervaise asked irritably. "Sure he hasn't gone to bed?"

John said something in that too discreet voice of his, and then Jervaise scowled and looked round at the ascending humanity of the staircase. His son Frank detached himself from the swarm, politely picked his way down into the Hall, and began to put John under a severe cross-examination.

"What's up now, do you suppose?" Miss Tattersall asked, with the least tremor of excitement sounding in her voice.

"Perhaps the chauffeur has followed the example of Carter, and afterwards hidden his shame," I suggested.

I was surprised by the warmth of her contradiction. "Oh, no" she said. "He isn't the least that sort of man." She said it as if I had aspersed the character of one of her friends.

"He seems to have gone, disappeared, any-way," I replied.

"It's getting frightfully mysterious," Miss Tattersall agreed, and added inconsequently, "He's got a strong face, you know; keen—looks as if he'd get his own way about things, though, of course, he isn't a gentleman."

I had a suspicion that she had been flirting with the romantic chauffeur. She was the sort of young woman who would flirt with any one.

I wished they would open that Hall door again. The action of my play had become dispersed and confused. Frank Jervaise had gone off through the baize door with John, and the Sturtons and their host and hostess were moving reluctantly towards the drawing-room.

"We might almost as well go and sit down somewhere," I

suggested to Miss Tattersall, and noted three or four accessible blanks on the staircase.

"Almost," she agreed after a glance at the closed door that shut out the night.

In the re-arrangement I managed to leave her on a lower step, and climbed to the throne of the gods, at present occupied only by Gordon Hughes, one of Frank Jervaise's barrister friends from the Temple. Hughes was reputed "brilliantly clever." He was a tallish fellow with ginger red hair and a long nose—the foxy type.

"Rum start!" I cried, by way of testing his intellectual quality, but before I could get on terms with him, the stage was taken by a dark, curly-haired, handsome boy of twenty-four or so, generally addressed as "Ronnie." I had thought him very like a well-intentioned retriever pup. I could imagine him worrying an intellectual slipper to pieces with great gusto.

"I say, it's all U.P. now," he said, in a dominating voice. "What's the time?" He was obviously too well turned out to wear a watch with evening dress.

Some one said it was "twenty-five to one."

"Fifty to one against another dance, then," Ronnie barked joyously.

"Unless you'll offer yourself up as a martyr in a good cause," suggested Nora Bailey.

"Offer myself up? How?" Ronnie asked.

"Take 'em home in your car," Nora said in a penetrating whisper.

"Dead the other way," was Ronnie's too patent excuse.

"It's only a couple of miles through the Park, you know," Olive Jervaise put in. "You might easily run them over to the vicarage and be back again in twenty minutes."

"By Jove; yes. So I might," Ronnie acknowledged. "That is, if I may really come back, Miss Jervaise. Awfully good of you to suggest it. I didn't bring my man with me, though. I'll have to go and wind up the old buzz-wagon myself, if your fellow can't be found. Do you think … could any one…"

He was looking round, searching for some one who was not there.

"Want any help?" Hughes asked.

"No, thanks. That's all right. I know where the car is, I mean," Ronnie said, and still hesitated as if he were going to finish the question he had begun in his previous speech.

Olive Jervaise anticipated, I think wrongly, his remark. "They're in the drawing-room," she said. "Will you tell them?"

"Better get the car round first, hadn't I?" Ronnie asked.

The sandy Atkinson youth found an answer for that. He cleared his long, thin throat huskily and said, "Might save time to tell 'em first. They'd be ready, then, when you came round." His two equally sandy sisters clucked their approval.

"All serene," Ronnie agreed.

He was on the bottom step of the stairs when the Hall door was thrown wide open and Frank Jervaise returned.

He stood there a moment, posed for us, searching the ladder

of our gallery; and the spirit of the night-stock drifted past him and lightly touched us all as it fled up the stairs. Then he came across the Hall, and addressing his sister, asked, in a voice that overstressed the effect of being casual, "I say, Olive, you don't happen to know where Brenda is, do you?"

I suppose our over-soul knew everything in that minute. A tremor of dismay ran up our ranks like the sudden passing of a cold wind. Every one was looking at Ronnie.

Olive Jervaise's reply furnished an almost superfluous corroboration. She could not control her voice. She tried to be as casual as her brother, and failed lamentably. "Brenda was here just now," she said. "She—she must be somewhere about."

Ronnie, still the cynosure of the swarm, turned himself about and stared at Frank Jervaise. But it was Gordon Hughes who demonstrated his power of quick inference and response, although in doing it he overstepped the bounds of decency by giving a voice to our suspicions.

"Is the car in the garage? Your own car?" he asked.

"Yes. Rather. Of course," Jervaise replied uneasily.

"You've just looked?" Hughes insisted.

"I know the car's there," was Jervaise's huffy evasion, and he took Ronnie by the arm and led him off into the drawing-room.

The Hall door stood wide open, and the tragedy of the night flowed unimpeded through the house.

Although the horror had not been named we all recognised its finality. We began to break up our formation immediately,

gabbling tactful irrelevancies about the delightful evening, the delinquent Carter, and the foolishness of Sabbatarianism. Mrs. Atkinson appeared in the Hall, cloaked and muffled, and beckoned to her three replicas. She announced that their omnibus was "just coming round."

In the general downward drift of dispersion I saw Grace Tattersall looking up at me with an expression that suggested a desire for the confidential discussion of scandal, and I hastily whispered to Hughes that we might go to the extemporised buffet in the supper-room and get a whisky and seltzer or something. He agreed with an alacrity that I welcomed at the time, but regret, now, because our retirement into duologue took us out of the important movement, and I missed one or two essentials of the development.

The truth is that we were all overcome at the moment by an irresistible desire to appear tactful. We wanted to show the Jervaises that we had not suspected anything, or that if we had, we didn't mind in the least, and it certainly wasn't their fault. Nevertheless, I saw no reason why in the privacy of the supper-room—we had the place to ourselves—I should not talk to Hughes. I had never before that afternoon met any of the Jervaise family except Frank, and on one or two occasions his younger brother who was in the army and, now, in India; and I thought that this was an appropriate occasion to improve my knowledge. I understood that Hughes was an old friend of the family.

He may have been, although the fact did not appear in his

conversation; for I discovered almost immediately that he was, either by nature or by reason of his legal training, cursed with a procrastinating gift of diplomacy.

"Awkward affair!" I began as soon as we had got our whiskies and lighted cigarettes.

Hughes drank with a careful slowness, put his glass down with superfluous accuracy, and then after another instant of tremendous deliberation, said, "What is?"

"Well, this," I returned gravely.

"Meaning?" he asked judicially.

"Of course it may be too soon to draw an inference," I said.

"Especially with no facts to draw them from," he added.

"All the same," I went on boldly, "it looks horribly suspicious."

"What does?"

I began to lose patience with him. "I'm not suggesting that the Sturtons' man from the Royal Oak has been murdered," I said.

He weighed that remark as if it might cover a snare, before he scored a triumph of allusiveness by replying, "Fellow called Carter. He's got a blue nose."

Despite my exasperation I tried once more on a note of forced geniality, "What sort of man is this chauffeur of the Jervaises? Do you know him at all?"

"Wears brown leather gaiters," Hughes answered after another solemn deliberation.

I could have kicked him with all the pleasure in life. His awful guardedness made me feel as if I were an inquisitive little

journalist trying to ferret out some unsavoury scandal. And he had been the first person to point the general suspicion a few minutes earlier, by his inquiry about the motor. I decided to turn the tables on him, if I could manage it.

"I asked because you seemed to suggest just now that he had gone off with the Jervaises' motor," I remarked.

Hughes stroked his long thin nose with his thumb and forefinger. It seemed to take him about a minute from bridge to nostril. Then he inhaled a long draught of smoke from his cigarette, closed one eye as if it hurt him, and threw back his head to blow out the smoke again with a slow gasp of relief.

"One never knows," was all the explanation he vouchsafed after this tedious performance.

"Whether a chauffeur will steal his master's motor?" I asked.

"Incidentally," he said.

"But, good heavens, if he's that sort of man…" I suggested.

"I'm not saying that he is," Hughes replied.

I realised then that his idea of our conversation was nothing more nor less than that of a game to be played as expertly as possible. He had all the makings of a cabinet minister, but as a companion he was, on this occasion, merely annoying. I felt that I could stand no more of him, and I was trying to frame a sentence that would convey my opinion of him without actual insult, when Frank Jervaise looked in at the door.

He stared at us suspiciously, but his expression commonly conveyed some aspect of threat or suspicion. "Been looking all

over the place for you," he said.

"For me?" Hughes asked.

Jervaise shook his head. "No, I want Melhuish," he said, and stood scowling.

"Well, here I am," I prompted him.

"If I'm in the way…" Hughes put in, but did not attempt to get himself out of it.

Jervaise ignored him. "Look here, Melhuish," he said. "I wonder if you'd mind coming up with me to the Home Farm?"

"Oh! no; rather not," I agreed gladly.

I felt that Hughes had been scored off; but I instantly forgot such small triumphs in the delight of being able to get out into the night. Out there was romance and the smell of night-stock, all kinds of wonderment and adventure. I was so eager to be in the midst of it that I never paused to consider the queerness of the expedition.

As we left the Hall, the theatrical stable-clock was just striking one.

II
Anne

The moon must have been nearly at the full, but I could not guess its position behind the even murk of cloud that muffled the whole face of the sky. Yet, it was not very dark. The broad masses of the garden through which Jervaise led me, were visible as a greater blackness superimposed on a fainter background. I believed that we were passing through some kind of formal pleasance. I could smell the pseudo-aromatic, slightly dirty odour of box, and made out here and there the clipped artificialities of a yew hedge. There were standard roses, too. One rose started up suddenly before my face, touching me as I passed with a limp, cool caress, like the careless, indifferent encouragement of a preoccupied courtesan.

At the end of the pleasance we came to a high wall, and as Jervaise fumbled with the fastening of a, to me, invisible door, I was expecting that now we should come out into the open, into a paddock, perhaps, or a grass road through the Park. But beyond the wall was a kitchen garden. It was lighter there, and I could see dimly that we were passing down an aisle of old espaliers that stretched sturdy, rigid arms, locked finger to finger with each other in their solemn grotesque guardianship of the enciente they enclosed. No doubt in front of them was some kind

of herbaceous border. I caught sight of the occasional spire of a hollyhock, and smelt the acid insurgence of marigolds.

None of this was at all the mischievous, taunting fairyland that I had anticipated, but rather the gaunt, intimidating home of ogres, rank and more than a trifle forbidding. It had an air of age that was not immortal, but stiffly declining into a stubborn resistance against the slow rigidity of death. These espaliers made me think of rheumatic veterans, obstinately faithful to ancient duties—veterans with knobbly arthritic joints.

At the end of the aisle we came to a high-arched opening in the ten-foot wall, barred by a pair of heavy iron gates.

"Hold on a minute, I've got the key," Jervaise said. This was the first time he had spoken since we left the house. His tone seemed to suggest that he was afraid I should attempt to scale the wall or force my way through the bars of the gates.

He had the key but he could not in that darkness fit it into the padlock; and he asked me if I had any matches. I had a little silver box of wax vestas in my pocket, and struck one to help him in his search for the keyhole which he found to have been covered by the escutcheon. Before I threw the match away I held it up and glanced back across the garden. The shadows leaped and stiffened to attention, and I flung the match away, but it did not go out. It lay there on the path throwing out its tiny challenge to the darkness. It was still burning when I looked back after passing through the iron gates.

As we came out of the park, Jervaise took my arm.

"I'm afraid this is a pretty rotten business," he said with what was for him an unusual cordiality.

Although I had never before that afternoon seen Jervaise's home nor any of his people with the exception of the brother now in India, I had known Frank Jervaise for fifteen years. We had been at Oakstone together, and had gone up the school form by form in each other's company. After we left Oakstone we were on the same landing at Jesus, and he rowed "two" and I rowed "bow" in the college boat. And since we had come down I had met him constantly in London, often as it seemed by accident. Yet we had never been friends. I had never really liked him.

Even at school he had had the beginning of the artificially bullying manner which now seemed natural to him. He had been unconvincingly blunt and insolent. His dominant chin, Roman nose, and black eyebrows were chiefly responsible, I think, for his assumption of arrogance. He must have been newly invigorated to carry on the part every time he scowled at himself in the glass. He could not conceivably have been anything but a barrister.

But, to-night, in the darkness, he seemed to have forgotten for once the perpetual mandate of his facial angle. He was suddenly intimate, almost humble.

"Of course, you don't realise how cursedly awkward it all is," he said with the evident desire of opening a confidence.

"Tell me as little or as much as you like," I responded. "You know that I…"

"Yes, rather," he agreed warmly, and added, "I'd sooner Hughes didn't know."

"He guesses a lot, though," I put in. "I suppose they all do."

"Oh! well, they're bound to guess something," he said, "but I'm hoping we'll be able to put that right, now."

"Who are we going to see?" I asked.

He did not reply at once, and then snapped out, "Anne Banks; friend er Brenda's."

My foolishly whimsical imagination translated that queer medley of sounds into the thought of a stable-pump. I heard the clank of the handle and then the musical rush of water into the pail.

"Sounds just like a pump," I said thoughtlessly.

He half withdrew his arm from mine with an abrupt twitch that indicated temper.

"Oh! don't for God's sake play the fool," he said brutally.

A spasm of resentment shook me for a moment. I felt annoyed, remembering how at school he would await his opportunity and then score off me with some insulting criticism. He had never had any kind of sympathy for the whimsical, and it is a manner that is apt to look inane and ridiculous under certain kinds of censure. I swallowed my annoyance, on this occasion. I remembered that Jervaise had a reasonable excuse, for once.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to play the fool. But you must admit that it had a queer sound." I repeated the adjectival sentence under my breath. It really was a rather remarkable piece

of onomatopœia. And then I reflected on the absurdity of our conversation. How could we achieve all this ordinary trivial talk of everyday in the gloom of this romantic adventure?

"Oh! all serene," Jervaise returned, still with the sound of irritation in his voice, and continued as if the need for confidence had suddenly overborne his anger. "As a matter of fact she's his sister."

"Whose sister?" I asked, quite at a loss.

"Oh! Banks's, of course," he said.

"But who in the name of goodness is Banks?" I inquired irritably. The petulant tone was merely an artifice. I realised that if I were meek, he would lose more time in abusing my apparent imbecility. I know that the one way to beat a bully is by bullying, but I hate even the pretence of that method.

Jervaise grunted as if the endeavour to lift the weight of my ignorance required an almost intolerable physical effort.

"Why, this fellow—our chauffeur," he said in a voice so threateningly restrained that he seemed on the point of bursting.

There was no help for it; I had to take the upper hand.

"Well, my good idiot," I said, "you can't expect me to know these things by intuition. I've never heard of the confounded fellow before. Haven't even seen him, now. Nor his sister—Anne Banks, Frienderbrenda's."

Jervaise was calmed by this outburst. This was the sort of attitude he could understand and appreciate.

"All right, keep your shirt on," he replied quite amicably.

"If you'd condescend to explain," I returned as huffily as I could.

"You see, this chap, Banks," he began, "isn't quite the ordinary chauffeur Johnnie. He's the son of one of our farmers. Decent enough old fellow, too, in his way—the father, I mean. Family's been tenants of the Home Farm for centuries. And this chap, Banks, the son, has knocked about the world, no end. Been in Canada and the States and all kinds of weird places. He's hard as nails; and keen. His mother was a Frenchwoman; been a governess."

"Is she dead?" I asked.

"Lord, no. Why should she be?" Jervaise replied peevishly.

I thought of explaining that he had made the implication by his use of the past tense, but gave up the idea as involving a waste of energy. "How old is this chap, Banks; the son?" I asked.

"I don't know," Jervaise said. "About twenty-five."

"And his sister?" I prodded him.

"Rather younger than that," he said, after an evident hesitation, and added: "She's frightfully pretty."

I checked my natural desire to comment on the paradox; and tried the stimulation of an interested "*Is* she?"

"Rather." He tacked that on in the tone of one who deplores the inevitable; and went on quickly, "You needn't infer that I've made an ass of myself or that I'm going to. In our position…" He abandoned that as being, perhaps, too obvious. "What I mean to say is," he continued, "that I can't understand about Brenda.

And it was such an infernally silly way of going about things. Admitted that there was no earthly chance of the pater giving his consent or anything like it; she needn't in any case have made a damned spectacle of the affair. But that's just like her. Probably did it all because she wanted to be dramatic or some rot."

It was then that I expressed my appreciation of the dramatic quality of the incident, and was snubbed by his saying,—

"I suppose you realise just what this may mean, to all of us."

I had a vivid impression, in the darkness, of that sudden scowl which made him look so absurdly like a youthful version of Sir Edward Carson.

I was wondering why it should mean so much to all of them? Frank Jervaise had admitted, for all intents and purposes, that he was in love with the chauffeur's sister, so he, surely, need not have so great an objection. And, after all, why was the family of Jervaise so much better than the family of Banks?

"I suppose it would be very terrible for you all if she married this chap?" I said.

"Unthinkable," Jervaise replied curtly.

"It would be worse in a way than your marrying the sister?"

"I should never be such an infernal fool as to do a thing like that," he returned.

"Has she … have there been any tender passages between you and Miss Banks?" I asked.

"No," he snapped viciously.

"You've been too careful?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't think she likes me," he said.

"Oh!" was all my comment.

I needed no more explanations; and I liked Jervaise even less than I had before. I began to wish that he had not seen fit to confide in me. I had, thoughtlessly, been dramatising the incident in my mind, but, now, I was aware of the unpleasant reality of it all. Particularly Jervaise's part in it.

"Can't be absolutely certain, of course," he continued.

"But if she did like you?" I suggested.

"I've got to be very careful who I marry," he explained. "We aren't particularly well off. All our property is in land, and you know what sort of an investment that is, these days."

I tried another line. "And if you find your sister up at the Home Farm; and Banks; what are you going to do?"

"Kick him and bring her home," he said decidedly.

"Nothing else for it, I suppose?" I replied.

"Obviously," he snarled.

We had come into a wood and it was very dark under the trees. I wondered why I should restrain the impulse to strangle him and leave him there? He was no good, and, to me, quite peculiarly objectionable. It seemed, in what was then my rather fantastic state of mind, that it would be a triumph of whimsicality. I should certainly have resisted the impulse in any case, but my attention was diverted from it at that moment by a sudden pattering of feet along the leaves of the great trees under which we were walking —light, clean, sharp, little dancing feet, springing from leaf to

leaf—dozens of them chasing each other, rattling ecstatically up and down the endless terraces of wide foliage.

"Damn it all, it's beginning to rain like blazes," remarked the foolish Jervaise.

"How much farther is it?" I asked.

He said we were "just there."

I saw the Home Farm first as a little square haze of yellow light far up in the sky. I didn't realise the sharp rise in the ground immediately in front of us, and that rectangular beacon, high in the air, seemed a fantastically impossible thing. I pointed it out to Jervaise who was holding his head down as if he were afraid the summer rain might do some serious injury to his face.

"Some one up, anyway," was his comment.

"Very far up," I murmured. I could not quite believe, even then, that it could be a window. I was disappointed when we had climbed the hill and stood only a few feet below the beacon, to discover that this too, was another instance of the all too credible commonplace. I suppose men like Frank Jervaise never long to believe in the impossible. I was, however, agreeably surprised to find that he could be nervous.

He hesitated, looking up at the prism of light that splayed out through the first floor window, and set a silver fire to the falling rain. "Suppose we'd better knock," he grumbled.

"D'you know whose window it is?" I asked.

Apparently he didn't. He made a dive into a deeper obscurity and I lost him until I heard his knock. I was glad that he should

have knocked with such decent restraint, but all the effect of it was instantly shattered by the response. For at his first subdued rap, a dog with a penetratingly strident bark set up a perfectly detestable clamour within the house. It was just as if Jervaise's touch on the door had liberated the spring of some awful rattle. Every lovely impulse of the night must have fled dismayed, back into the peace and beauty of the wood; and I was more than half inclined to follow.

Until that appalling racket was set loose I had been regarding this midnight visit to the farm as a natural and enticing adventure, altogether in keeping with the dramatic movement preluded by the chime of the stable-clock. That confounded terrier, whose voice so clearly proclaimed his breed, had dragged us down to the baldest realism. We were intruders upon the decencies of civilisation. That dog was not to be misled by any foolish whimsies of the imagination. He was a thorough-going realist, living in a tangible, smellable world of reality, and he knew us for what we were—marauders, disturbers of the proper respectable peace of twentieth century farms. He lashed himself into ecstasies of fury against our unconventionality; he rose to magnificent paroxysms of protest that passionately besought High Heaven and Farmer Banks to open the door and let him get at us.

But no one came. There may have been other sounds coming from the house besides that infuriated demand for vengeance, but all inferior noises—and surely all other noises must have

been inferior to that clamour—were absorbed and flattened out of existence. We were in a world occupied by the bark of a single dog, and any addition to that occupation would have been superfluous.

The owner of the voice was doing his level best now to get the door down on his own account. I hoped he might succeed. I should have excuse then to fly to the woods and claim sanctuary. As it was, I retreated a couple of steps, holding my breath to ease the pain of my nerves, and some old instinct of prayer made me lift my face to the sky. I welcomed the cold, inquisitive touch of the silent rain.

Then I became aware through the torture of prolonged exasperation that my upturned face was lit from above; that a steady candle was now perched on the very sill of the one illuminated window; and that behind the candle the figure of a woman stood looking down at me.

She appeared to be speaking.

I held my hands to my ears and shook my head violently to intimate my temporary deafness; and the figure disappeared, leaving the placid candle to watch me as it seemed with a kind of indolent nonchalance.

I decided to pass on the news to Jervaise, and discovered that besotted fool in a little trellised porch, stimulating the execrations of the Irish terrier by a subdued inaudible knocking. I was beginning to scream my news into his ear when silence descended upon us with the suddenness of a catastrophe. It was

as if the heavens had been rent and all the earth had fallen into a muffled chaos of mute despair.

I had actually began my shriek of announcement when all the world of sound about us so inexplicably ceased to be, and I shut off instantly on the word "*Someone*…," a word that as I had uttered it sounded like a despairing yelp of mortal agony.

Out of the unearthly stillness, Jervaise's voice replied in a frightened murmur, "Someone coming," he said, as if he, alone, had knowledge of and responsibility for that supreme event.

And still no one came. The door remained steadfastly closed. Outside the porch, the earth had recovered from the recent disaster, and we could hear the exquisitely gentle murmur of the rain.

"Damned odd," commented Jervaise. "That cursed dog made enough noise to wake the dead."

I was inspired to go out and search the window where burned the indigent, just perceptibly, rakish candle.

She was there. She had returned to her eyrie after quelling the racket in the hall, and now she leaned a little forward so that I could see her face.

"Who's there?" she asked quietly.

Her voice was low and clear as the reed of a flute, but all sounds had the quality of music at that instant of release.

I was nonplussed for the moment. I ought to have taken up the key of high romance. She deserved it. Instead of that I dropped to the awful commonplaces of a man in evening dress and a light

overcoat standing in the rain talking to a stranger.

"I came up with Mr. Jervaise, Mr. Frank Jervaise," I explained. "He—he wants to see you. Shall I tell him you're there?"

"All serene, I'm here," whispered the voice of Jervaise at my elbow, and then he cleared his throat and spoke up at the window.

"Rather an upset down at the Hall, Miss Banks; about Brenda," he said. "Might we come in a minute?"

"It's rather late, isn't it?" the vision returned—it wasn't only the ease of the silence, she had a delicious voice—and added rather mischievously, "It's raining, isn't it?"

"Like anything," Jervaise said, and ducked his head and hunched his shoulders, as if he had suddenly remembered the possible susceptibility of his exposed face.

"Is it so very important?" the soft, clear voice asked, still, I thought, with a faint undercurrent of raillery.

"Really, Miss Banks, it is," Jervaise implored, risking his delicate face again.

She hesitated a moment and then said, "Very well," and disappeared, taking this time the dissipated candle with her. I heard her address a minatory remark within the room to "Racket"—most excellently described, I thought; though I discovered later that I had, in imagination, misspelt him, since he owed his name to the fact that his mother had sought her delivery on the bed of a stored tennis-net.

Jervaise and I hurried back to the front door as if we were

afraid that Miss Banks might get there first; but she kept us waiting for something like ten minutes before she came downstairs. The silence of that interval was only broken by such nervous staccato comments as "Long time!" "Dressing, presumably," and occasional throaty sounds of impatience from Jervaise that are beyond the representative scope of typography. I have heard much the same noises proceed from the throat of an unhopeful pig engaged in some minor investigation.

The rain was falling less heavily, and towards the west a pale blur of light was slowly melting its way through the darkness. I noted that spot as marking the probable position of the setting moon. I decided that as soon as this infernal inquisition was over, I would get rid of Jervaise and find some God-given place in which I might wait for the dawn. I knew that there must be any number of such places between the Farm and the Hall. I was peering westward towards the rolling obscurity of hills and woods that were just beginning to bulk out of the gloom, when I heard the click of the door latch.

I should not like to be put in the witness-box and cross-examined by Jervaise as to my reason for entering the house with him that night. All that part of me with which I have any sort of real friendship, wanted quite definitely to stay outside. That would have been the tactful thing to do. There was no reason why I should intrude further on the mystery of Brenda's disappearance; and as a matter of fact I was no longer very keenly interested in that brilliant and fascinating young woman's affairs.

The plan that I had in mind when the door opened was to say politely to Jervaise, "I'll wait for you here"—I had a premonition that he would raise no objection to that suggestion—and then when he and Miss Banks were safely inside, I meant to go and find rapture in solitude. The moon was certainly coming out; the dawn was due in three hours or so, and before me were unknown hills and woods. I had no sort of doubt that I should find my rapture. I may add that my plan did not include any further sight of Jervaise, his family, or their visitors, before breakfast next morning.

I had it all clear and settled. I was already thrilling with the first ecstasies of anticipation. But when the door was opened I turned my back on all that magical beauty of the night, and accompanied Jervaise into the house like a scurvy little mongrel with no will of its own.

I can't account for that queer change of purpose. It was purely spontaneous, due to something quite outside the realm of reason. I was certainly not in love with Anne, then. My only sight of her had left an impression as of an amateur copy of a Rembrandt done in Indian ink with a wet brush. It is true that I had heard her voice like the low thrilling of a nightingale—following a full Handel chorus of corncrakes.

She had evidently spent an active ten minutes while we waited for her. She had done her hair, and she was, so far as I could judge from superficialities, completely dressed. Also she had lighted the lamp in what I took to be the chief sitting-room of the farm.

As a room it deserved attention, but it was not until I had been there for ten minutes or more, that I realised all that the furniture of that room was not. My first observations were solely directed to Miss Banks.

Jervaise had grossly maligned her by saying that she was "frightfully pretty." No one but a fool would have called her "pretty." Either she was beautiful or plain. I saw, even then, that if the light of her soul had been quenched, she might appear plain. Her features were good, her complexion, her colouring—she was something between dark and fair—but she did not rely on those things for her beauty. It was the glow of her individuality that was her surpassing charm. She had that supremely feminine vitality which sends a man crazy with worship. You had to adore or dislike her. There was no middle course.

And Jervaise quite obviously adored her. All that tactful confession of his in the park had been a piece of artifice. It had not, however, been framed to deceive *me*. I do not believe that he considered me worth bothering about. No, those admissions and denials of his had been addressed, without doubt, to a far more important person than myself. They had been in the nature of a remonstrance and assurance spoken to Frank Jervaise by the heir to the estate; which heir was determined with all the force of his ferocious nose and dominant chin to help him, that he would not make a fool of himself for the sake of the daughter of a tenant farmer. I had been nothing more than the register upon which he had tentatively engraved that resolve. But he should have chosen

a more stable testament than this avowal made to a whimsically-minded playwright with an absurd weakness for the beauties of a midnight wood.

And if I had been a witness to his oath, I was, now, a witness to his foreswearing.

He began well enough on the note proper to the heir of Jervaise. He had the aplomb to carry that off. He stood on the hearthrug, austere and self-controlled, consciously aristocrat, heir and barrister.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Banks. Almost inexcusable to disturb you at this time of night." He stopped after that beginning and searched his witness with a stare that ought to have set her trembling.

Anne had sat down and was resting her forearms on the table. She looked up at him with the most charming insouciance when he paused so portentously at the very opening of his address. Her encouraging "yes" was rather in the manner of a child waiting for the promised story.

Jervaise frowned and attempted the dramatic. "My sister, Brenda, has run away," he said.

"When?"

"This evening at the end of the Cinderella. You knew we were giving a dance?"

"But where to?"

"Oh! Precisely!" Jervaise said.

"But how extraordinary!" replied Miss Banks.

"Is she here?" asked Jervaise. He ought to have snapped that out viciously, and I believe that was his intention. But Anne's exquisitely innocent, absorbed gaze undid him; and his question had rather the sound of an apology.

"No, certainly not! Why ever should she come here?" Anne said with precisely the right nuance of surprise.

"Is your brother here?"

"No!"

It looks such an absurd little inexpressive word on paper, but Anne made a song of it on two notes, combining astonishment with a sincerity that was absolutely final. If, after that, Jervaise had dared to say, "Are you sure?" I believe I should have kicked him.

How confounded he was, was shown by the change of attitude evident in his next speech.

"It's horribly awkward," he said.

"Oh! horribly," Anne agreed, with a charming sympathy. "What are you going to do?"

"You see, we can't find your brother, either," Jervaise tried tactfully.

"I don't quite see what that's got to do with Brenda," Anne remarked with a sweet perplexity.

Apparently Jervaise did not wish to point the connection too abruptly. "We wanted the car," he said; "and we couldn't find him anywhere."

"Oh! he's almost sure to have gone to sleep up in the woods,"

Anne replied. “Arthur’s like that, you know. He sort of got the habit in Canada or somewhere. He often says that sometimes he simply can’t bear to sleep under a roof.”

I had already begun to feel a liking for Anne’s brother, and that speech of hers settled me. I knew that “Arthur” was the right sort—or, at least, my sort. I would have been willing, even then, to swap the whole Jervaise family with the possible exception of Brenda, for this as yet unknown Arthur Banks.

Jervaise’s diplomacy was beginning to run very thin.

“You don’t think it conceivable that Brenda…” he began gloomily.

“That Brenda what?”

“I was going to say…”

“Yes?” She leaned a little forward with an air of expectancy that disguised her definite refusal to end his sentences for him.

“It’s a most difficult situation, Miss Banks,” he said, starting a new line; “and we don’t in the least know what to make of it. What on earth could induce Brenda to run off like this, with no apparent object?”

“But how do you know she really has?” asked Anne. “You haven’t told me anything, yet, have you? I mean, she may have gone out into the Park to get cool after the dance, or into the woods or anything. Why should you imagine that she has—run away?”

I joined in the conversation, then, for the first time. I had not even been introduced to Anne.

"That's very reasonable, surely, Jervaise," I said. "And wouldn't it—I hardly know her, I'll admit—but wouldn't it be rather like your sister?"

So far as I was concerned, Anne's suggestion carried conviction. I was suddenly sure that our suspicions were all a mistake.

Jervaise snubbed me with a brief glance of profoundest contempt. He probably intended that commentary on my interruption to go no further; but his confounded pose of superiority annoyed me to the pitch of exasperation.

"You see, my dear chap," I continued quickly, "your unfortunate training as a lawyer invariably leads you to suspect a crime; and you overlook the obvious in your perfectly unreasonable and prejudiced search for the incriminating."

Jervaise's expression admirably conveyed his complete boredom with me and my speeches.

"You don't know anything about it," he said, with a short gesture of final dismissal.

"But, Mr. Jervaise," Anne put in, "what can you possibly suspect, in this case?"

"He'd suspect anything of anybody for the sake of making a case of it," I said, addressing Anne. I wanted to make her look at me, but she kept her gaze fixed steadily on Jervaise, as if he were the controller of all destinies.

I accepted my dismissal, then, so far as to keep silence, but I was annoyed, now, with Anne, as well as with Jervaise. "What on

earth could she see in the fellow?" I asked myself irritably. I was the more irritated because he had so obviously already forgotten my presence.

"Have you no reason to suspect anything yourself, Miss Banks?" he asked gravely.

"If you're suggesting that Brenda and Arthur have run away together," she said, "I'm perfectly, perfectly certain that you're wrong, Mr. Jervaise."

"Do you mean that you know for certain that they haven't?" he returned.

She nodded confidently, and I thought she had perjured herself, until Jervaise with evident relief said, "I'm very glad of that; very. Do you mind telling me how you know?"

"By intuition," she said, without a trace of raillery in her face or her tone.

I forgave her for ignoring me when she said that. I felt that I could almost forgive Jervaise; he was so deliciously sold.

"But you've surely some other grounds for certainty besides —intuition?" he insisted anxiously.

"What other grounds could I possibly have?" Anne asked.

"They haven't, either of them, confided in you?"

"Confided? What sort of things?"

"That there was, or might be, any—any sort of understanding between them?"

"I know that they have met—occasionally."

"Lately! Where?"

"Brenda has been having lessons in driving the motor."

"Oh! yes, I know that. You didn't mean that they had been meeting here?"

"No, I didn't mean that," Anne said definitely. All through that quick alternation of question and answer she had, as it were, surrendered her gaze to him; watching him with a kind of meek submission as if she were ready to do anything she could to help him in his inquiry. And it was very plain to me that Jervaise was flattered and pleased by her attitude. If I had attempted Anne's method, he would have scowled and brow-beaten me unmercifully, but now he really looked almost pleasant.

"It's very good of you to help me like this, Miss Banks," he said, "and I'm very grateful to you. I do apologise, most sincerely for dragging you out of bed at such an unholy hour, but I'm sure you appreciate my—our anxiety."

"Oh! of course," she agreed, with a look that I thought horribly sympathetic.

I began to wonder if my first estimate of her—based to a certain extent, perhaps, on Jervaise's admission that she did not like him—had not been considerably too high. She might, after all, be just an ordinary charming woman, enlivened by a streak of minx, and eager enough to catch the heir of Jervaise if he were available. How low my thought of her must have sunk at that moment! But they were, now, exchanging courtesies with an air that gave to their commonplaces the effect of a flirtation.

I distracted my attention. I couldn't help hearing what they

said, but I could refrain from looking at Anne. She was becoming vivacious, and I found myself strangely disliking her vivacity. It was then that I began to take note of the furnishing of the room which, when I considered it, was so peculiarly not in the manner of the familiar English farm-house. Instead of the plush suite, the glass bell shades, the round centre table, and all the other stuffy misconceptions so firmly established by the civilisation of the nineteenth century, I discovered the authentic marks of the old English æsthetic—whitewashed walls and black oak. And the dresser, the settles, the oblong table, the rush-bottomed chairs, the big chest by the side wall, all looked sturdily genuine; venerably conscious of the boast that they had defied the greedy collector and would continue to elude his most insidious approaches. Here, they were in their proper surroundings. They gave the effect of having carelessly lounged in and settled themselves; they were like the steady group of "regulars" in the parlour of their familiar inn.

I came out of my reflection on the furniture to find that Jervaise was going, at last. He was smiling and effusive, talking quickly about nothing, apologising again for the unseemliness of our visit. Anne was pathetically complacent, accepting and discounting his excuses, and professing her willingness to help in any way she possibly could. "But I really and truly expect you'll find Brenda safe at home when you get back," she said, and I felt that she honestly believed that.

"I hope so; I hope so," Jervaise responded, and then they most

unnecessarily shook hands.

I thought that it was time to assert myself above the clatter of their farewells.

"We might add, Miss Banks," I put in, "that we've been making a perfectly absurd fuss about nothing at all. But, no doubt, you're used to that."

She looked at me, then, for the first time since I had come into the house; and I saw the impulse to some tart response flicker in her face and die away unexpressed. We stood and stared at one another for a long half-second or so; and when she looked away I fancied that there was something like fear in her evasion. It seemed to me that I saw the true spirit of her in the way her glance refused me as some one with whom she did not care to sport. Her voice, too, dropped, so that I could not catch the murmur of her reply.

We had, indeed, recognised each other in that brief meeting of our eyes. Some kind of challenge had passed between us. I had dared her to drop that disguise of trickery and show herself as she was; and her response had been an admission that she acknowledged not me, but my recognition of her.

How far the fact that I had truly appraised her real worth might influence her, in time, to think gently of me, I could not guess; but I hoped, even a little vaingloriously, that she would respond to our mutual appreciation of truth. I had shown her, I believed, how greatly I admired the spirit she had been at such pains to conceal during that talk in the honest sitting-room of the Home Farm.

And I felt that her failure to resent the impertinence of my "No doubt, you're used to that," had been due to an understanding of something she and I had in common against the whole solid, stolid, aristocratic family of Jervaise.

Moreover, she gave me what I counted as two more causes for hopefulness before we left the house. The first was her repetition, given, now, with a more vibrating sincerity, of the belief that we should find Brenda safely at home when we got back to the Hall.

"I feel sure you will, Mr. Jervaise," she said, and the slight pucker of anxiety between her eyebrows was an earnest that even if her belief was a little tremulous, her hope, at least, was unquestionably genuine.

The second sign was the acceptance of a hackneyed commonplace; the proffer of a friendly message through the medium of a cliché which, however false in its general application, offered a short cut to the interpretation of feeling. Racquet who had maintained a well-bred silence from the first moment of his mistress's reproof, had honoured me with his approval while we sat in the farm-house sitting-room, and sealed the agreement by a friendly thrust of his nose as we said "Goodnight."

Anne did not look at me as she spoke, but her soft comment, "You are fond of dogs," seemed to me a full acknowledgment of our recognition of each other's quality.

I must admit, however, that at two o'clock in the morning one's sense of values is not altogether normal.

III
Frank Jervaise

I should have preferred to maintain a thoughtful, experiencing silence throughout our walk home. I had plenty of material for reflection. I wanted, now, to look at all this disappearing Brenda business from a new angle. I had a sense of the weaving of plots, and of the texture of them; such a sense as I imagine a blind man may get through sensitive finger-tips. Two new characters had come into my play, and I knew them both for principals. That opening act without Brenda, Arthur Banks, or his sister was nothing more than a prologue. The whole affair had begun again to fascinate my interest. Moreover, I was becoming aware of a stern, half-tragic background that had not yet come into proper focus.

And the circumstances of our walk home were of a kind that I find peculiarly stimulating to the imagination. The sky was clearing. Above us, widening pools of deep sky, glinting here and there, with the weak radiance of half-drowned stars, opened and closed again behind dispersing wreaths of mist. While in the west, a heaped indigo gloom that might in that light have been mistaken for the silhouette of a vast impending forest, revealed at one edge a thin haze of yellow silver that stretched weak exploring arms of light towards the mysterious obscurity of the

upper clouds. I knew precisely how that sky would look at sunset, but at moonset it had a completely different quality that was at once more ethereal and more primitive. It seemed to me that this night-sky had the original, eternal effect of all planetary space; that it might be found under the leaping rings of Saturn or in the perpetual gloom of banished Neptune. Compared to the comprehensible, reproducible effects of sunlight, it was as the wonder of the ineffable to the beauty of a magnificent picture.

But I was not left for many minutes to the rapture of contemplation. Even the primitive had to give place to the movement of our tiny, civilised drama. Jervaise and I were of the race that has been steadily creating a fiction of the earth since the first appearance of inductive science in the days of prehistoric man; and we could not live for long outside the artificial realism of the thing we were making. We were not the creatures of a process, but little gods in a world-pantheon.

I made no attempt to check him when he began to talk. I knew by the raised tone of his voice—he was speaking quite a third above his ordinary pitch—that he was pleasantly excited by our interview with Anne: an excitement that he now wished either to conceal, or, if that were impossible, to attribute to another cause.

"It occurs to me that there are one or two very puzzling points about that visit of ours, Melhuish," he began.

"At least two," I agreed.

"Which are?" he asked.

"I'd prefer to hear yours first," I said, having no intention of

displaying my own.

He was so eager to exhibit his cleverness that he did not press me for my probably worthless deductions.

"Well, in the first place," he said, "did it strike you as a curious fact that Miss Banks, and she alone, was apparently disturbed by that dog's infernal barking?"

"It hadn't struck me," I admitted; and just because I had not remarked that anomaly for myself, I was instantly prepared to treat it as unworthy of notice. "I suppose her father and mother and the servants, and so on, heard her let us in," I said.

Jervaise jeered at that. "Oh! my good man," he said.

"Well, why not?" I returned peevishly.

"I put it to you," he said, "whether in those circumstances the family's refusal to make an appearance admits of any ordinary explanation?"

I could see, now, that it did not; but having committed myself to a point of view, I determined to uphold it. "Why *should* they come down?" I asked.

"Common curiosity would be a sufficient inducement, I should imagine," Jervaise replied with a snort of contempt, "to say nothing of a reasonable anxiety to know why any one should call at two o'clock in the morning. It isn't usual, you know—outside the theatrical world, perhaps."

I chose to ignore the sneer conveyed by his last sentence.

"They may be very heavy sleepers," I tried, fully aware of the inanity of my suggestion.

Jervaise laughed unpleasantly, a nasty hoot of derision. “Don’t be a damned fool,” he said. “The human being isn’t born who could sleep through that hullabaloo.”

I relinquished that argument as hopeless, and having no other at the moment, essayed a weak reprisal. “Well, what’s your explanation?” I asked in the tone of one ready to discount any possible explanation he might have to make.

“It’s obvious,” he returned. “There can be only one. They were expecting us.”

“Do you mean that Miss Banks was deliberately lying to us all the time?” I challenged him with some heat.

“Why that?” he asked.

“Well, if she were expecting us…”

“Which she never denied.”

“And had warned all her people…”

“As she had a perfect right to do.”

“It makes her out a liar, in effect,” I protested. “I mean, she implied, if she didn’t actually state, that she knew nothing whatever of your sister’s movements.”

“Which may have been true,” he remarked in the complacent tone of one who waits to formulate an unimpeachable theory.

“Good Lord! How?” I asked.

“Brenda may have been expected and not have arrived,” he explained, condescending, at last, to point out all the obvious inferences I had missed. “In which case, my friend, Miss Banks’s *suppressio veri* was, in my judgment, quite venial. Indeed, she

was, if the facts are, as I suppose, perfectly honest in her surprise. Let us assume that she had arranged to let Brenda in, at say twelve-thirty, and having her father and mother under her thumb, had warned them to take no notice if Racquet started his cursed shindy in the middle of the night. The servant may have been told that Mr. Arthur might be coming. You will notice, also, that Miss Banks had not, at one-thirty, gone to bed, although we may infer that she had undressed. Furthermore, it is a fair assumption that she saw us coming, and having, by then given up, it may be, any hope of seeing Brenda, she was, no doubt, considerably at a loss to account for our presence. Now, does that or does it not cover the facts, and does it acquit Miss Banks of the charge of perjury?"

I was forced, something reluctantly, to concede an element of probability in his inferences, although his argument following the legal tradition was based on a kind of average law of human motive and took no account of personal peculiarities. He did not try to consider what Anne would do in certain circumstances, but what would be done by that vaguely-conceived hermaphrodite who figures in the Law Courts and elsewhere as "Anyone." I could hear Jervaise saying, "I ask you, gentlemen, what would you have done, what would Anyone have done in such a case as this?"

"Hm!" I commented, and added, "It still makes Miss Banks appear rather—double-faced."

"Can't see it," Jervaise replied. "Put yourself in her place and

see how it works!"

"Oh! Lord!" I murmured, struck by the grotesque idea of Jervaise attempting to see life through the eyes of Anne. Imagine a rhinoceros thinking itself into the experiences of a skylark!

Jervaise bored ahead, taking no notice of my interruption. "Assuming for the moment the general probability of my theory," he said, "mayn't we hazard the further assumption that Brenda was going to the farm in the first instance to meet Banks? His sister, we will suppose, being willing to sanction such a more or less chaperoned assignation. Then, when the pair didn't turn up, she guesses that the meeting is off for some reason or another, but obviously her friendship for Brenda—to say nothing of loyalty to her brother—would make her conceal the fact of the proposed assignation from us. Would you call that being 'double-faced'? I shouldn't."

"Oh! yes; it's all very reasonable," I agreed petulantly. "But how does it affect the immediate situation? Do you, for instance, expect to find your sister at home when we get back?"

"I do," assented Jervaise definitely. "I believe that Miss Banks had some good reason for being so sure that we should find her there."

I am not really pig-headed. I may not give way gracefully to such an opponent as Jervaise, but I do not stupidly persist in a personal opinion through sheer obstinacy. And up to Jervaise's last statement, his general deductions were, I admitted to myself, not only within the bounds of probability but,

also, within distance of affording a tolerable explanation of Anne's diplomacy during our interview. But—and I secretly congratulated myself on having exercised a subtler intuition in this one particular, at least—I did not believe that Anne expected us to find Brenda at the Hall on our return. I remembered that anxious pucker of the brow and the pathetic insistence on the belief—or might it not better be described as a hope?—that Brenda had done nothing final.

"You haven't made a bad case," I conceded; "but I differ as to your last inference."

"You don't think we shall find Brenda at home?"

"I do not," I replied aggressively.

I expected him to bear me down under a new weight of argument founded on the psychology of Anyone, and I was startled when he suddenly dropped the lawyer and let out a whole-hearted "Damnation," that had a ring of fine sincerity.

I changed my tone instantly in response to that agreeably human note.

"I may be quite mistaken, of course," I said. "I hope to goodness I am. By the way, do you know if she has taken any luggage with her?"

"Can't be sure," Jervaise said. "Olive's been looking and there doesn't seem to be anything missing, but we've no idea what things she brought down from town with her. If she'd been making plans beforehand…"

We came out of the wood at that point in our discussion,

and almost at the same moment the last barrier of cloud slipped away from before the moon. She was in her second quarter, and seemed to be indolently rolling down towards the horizon, the whole pose of the scene giving her the effect of being half-recumbent.

I turned and looked at Jervaise and found him facing me with the full light of the moon on his face. He was frowning, not with the domineering scowl of the cross-examining counsel, but with a perplexed, inquiring frown that revealed all the boy in him.

Once at Oakstone he had got into a serious scrape that had begun in bravado and ended by a public thrashing. He had poached a trout from the waters of a neighbouring landowner, who had welcomed the opportunity to make himself more than usually objectionable. And on the morning before his thrashing, Jervaise had come into my study and confessed to me that he was dreading the coming ordeal. He was not afraid of the physical pain, he told me, but of the shame of the thing. We were near to becoming friends that morning. He confessed to no one but me. But when the affair was over—he bore himself very well—he resumed his usual airs of superiority, and snubbed me when I attempted to sympathise with him.

And I saw, now, just the same boyish dread and perplexity that I had seen when he made his confession to me at Oakstone. He looked to me, indeed, absurdly unchanged by the sixteen years that had separated the two experiences.

"You know, Melhuish," he said; "I'm not altogether blaming

Brenda in one way."

"Do you think she's really in love with Banks?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "How can any one know? But it has been going on a long time—weeks, anyhow. They were all getting nervous about it at home. The mater told me when I came down this afternoon. She wanted me to talk to B. about it. I was going to. She doesn't take any notice of Olive. Never has." He stopped and looked at me with an appeal in his face that begged contradiction.

We were standing still in the moonlight at the edge of the wood and the accident of our position made me wonder if Jervaise's soul also hesitated between some gloomy prison of conventional success and the freedom of beautiful desires. I could find no words, however, to press that speculation and instead I attempted, rather nervously, to point the way towards what I regarded as the natural solution of the immediate problem. "Come," I said, "the idea of a marriage between Banks and your sister doesn't appear so unreasonable. The Bankses are evidently good old yeoman stock on the father's side. It is a mere accident of luck that you should be the owners of the land and not they."

"Theoretically, yes!" he said with a hint of impatience. "But we've got to consider the opinions—prejudices, if you like—of all my people—to say nothing of the neighbours."

"Oh! put the neighbours first," I exclaimed. "It's what we think other people will think that counts with most of us."

"It isn't," Jervaise returned gloomily. "You don't understand

what the idea of family means to people like my father and mother. They've been brought up in it. It has more influence with them than religion. They'd prefer any scandal to a mésalliance."

"In your sister's case?" I put in, a trifle shocked by the idea of the scandal, and then discovered that he had not been thinking of Brenda.

"Perhaps not in that case," he said, "but…" he paused noticeably before adding, "The principle remains the same."

"Isn't it chiefly a matter of courage?" I asked. "It isn't as if … the mésalliance were in any way disgraceful."

I can't absolve myself from the charge of hypocrisy in the making of that speech. I was thinking of Jervaise and Anne, and I did not for one moment believe that Anne would ever marry him. My purpose was, I think, well-intentioned. I honestly believed that it would be good for him to fall in love with Anne and challenge the world of his people's opinion for her sake. But I blame myself, now, for a quite detestable lack of sincerity in pushing him on. I should not have done it if I had thought he had a real chance with her. Life is very difficult; especially for the well-intentioned.

Jervaise shrugged his shoulders. "It's all so infernally complicated by this affair of Brenda's," he said.

Yet it has seemed simple enough to him, I reflected, an hour before. "Kick *him* and bring *her* home," had been his ready solution of the difficulties he thought were before us. Evidently Anne's behaviour during our talk at the farm had had

a considerable effect upon his opinions. That, and the moon. I feel strongly inclined to include the moon—lazily declining now towards the ambush of a tumulus-shaped hill, crowned, as is the manner of that country, with a pert little top-knot of trees.

"Complicated or simplified?" I suggested.

"Complicated; damnably complicated," he replied irritably. "Brenda's a little fool. It isn't as if she were in earnest."

"Then you don't honestly believe that she's in love with Banks?" I asked, remembering his "I don't know. How can any one know," of a few minutes earlier.

"She's so utterly unreliable—in every way," he equivocated. "She always has been. She isn't the least like the rest of us."

"Don't you count yourself as another exception?" I asked.

"Not in that way, Brenda's way," he said. "She's scatter-brained; you can't get round that. Going off after the dance in that idiotic way. It's maddening."

"Well, there are two questions that must be resolved before we can get any further," I commented. "The first is whether your sister has gone back—she may have been safe in bed for the last hour and a half for all we know. And the second is whether she is honestly in love with Banks. From what I've heard of him, I should think it's very likely," I added thoughtfully.

Jervaise had his hands in his pockets and was staring up at the moon. "He's not a bad chap in some ways," he remarked, "but there's no getting over the fact that he's our chauffeur."

I saw that. No badge could be quite so disgraceful in the eyes

of the Jervaises as the badge of servitude. Our talk there, by the wood, had begun to create around us all the limitations of man's world. I was forgetting that we were moving in the free spaces of a planetary republic. And then I looked up and saw the leaning moon, whimsically balanced on the very crown of the topknot that gave a touch of impudence to the pudding-basin hill.

"What's the name of that hill?" I asked.

He looked at it absently for a moment before he said, "The people about here call it 'Jervaise Clump.' It's a landmark for miles."

There was no getting away from it. The Jervaises had conquered all this land and labelled it. I watched the sharp edge of the tree-clump slowly indenting the rounded back of the moon; and it seemed to me that Jervaise-Clump was the solid permanent thing; the moon a mere incident of the night.

"Oh! Lord! Lord! What bosh it all is!" I exclaimed.

"All what?" Jervaise asked sharply.

"This business of distinctions; of masters and servants; of families in possession and families in dependence," I enunciated.

"It isn't such dangerous bosh as socialism," Jervaise replied.

"I wasn't thinking of socialism," I said; "I was thinking of interplanetary space."

Jervaise blew contemptuously. "Don't talk rot," he said, and I realised that we were back again on the old footing of our normal relations. Nevertheless I made one more effort.

"It isn't rot," I said. "If it is, then every impulse towards beauty

and freedom is rot, too." (I could not have said that to Jervaise in a house, but I drew confidence from the last tip of the moon beckoning farewell above the curve of the hill.) "Your, whatever it is you feel for Miss Banks—things like that … all our little efforts to get away from these awful, clogging human rules."

I had given him his opportunity and he took it. He was absolutely ruthless. "No one but a fool tries to be superhuman," he said. "Come on!"

He had turned and was walking back in the direction of the Hall, and I followed him, humiliated and angry.

It was so impossible for me at that moment to avoid the suspicion that he had led me on by his appealing confidences solely in order to score off me when I responded. It is not, indeed, surprising that that should be my reaction while the hurt of his sneer still smarted. For he had pricked me on a tender spot. I realised the weakness of what I had said; and it was a characteristic weakness. I had been absurdly unpractical, as usual, aiming like a fool, as Jervaise had said, at some "superhuman" ideal of freedom that perhaps existed solely in my own imagination; and would certainly be regarded by Mr. and Mrs. Jervaise and their circle of county friends as the vapourings of a weak mind. In short, Jervaise had made me aware of my own ineptitude, and it took me a full ten minutes before I could feel anything but resentment.

We had passed back through the kitchen garden with its gouty espaliers, and come into the pleasance before I forgave him.

According to his habit, he made no apology for his rudeness, but his explicit renewal of confidence in me more nearly approached an overt expression of desire for my friendship than anything I had ever known him to show hitherto.

"Look here, Melhuish," he said, stopping suddenly in the darkness of the garden. I could not "look" with much effect, but I replied, a trifle sulkily, "Well? What?"

"If she hasn't come back…" he said.

"I don't see that we can do anything more till to-morrow," I replied.

"No use trying to find her, of course," he agreed, irritably, "but we'd better talk things over with the governor."

"If I can be of any help…" I remarked elliptically.

"You won't be if you start that transcendental rot," he returned, as if he already regretted his condescension.

"What sort of rot do you want me to talk?" I asked.

"Common sense," he said.

I resisted the desire to say that I was glad he acknowledged the Jervaise version of common sense to be one kind of rot.

"All serene," I agreed.

He did not thank me.

And when I looked back on the happenings of the two hours that had elapsed since Jervaise had fetched me out of the improvised buffet, I was still greatly puzzled to account for his marked choice of me as a confidant. It was a choice that seemed to signify some weakness in him. I wondered if he had been

afraid to trust himself alone with Anne at the Farm; if he were now suffering some kind of trepidation at the thought of the coming interview with his father? I found it so impossible to associate any idea of weakness with that bullying mask which was the outward expression of Frank Jervaise.

IV
In the Hall

We found the family awaiting us in the Hall—Mr. and Mrs. Jervaise, Olive, and "Ronnie" Turnbull, whose desire to become one of the family by marrying its younger daughter was recognised and approved by every one except the young lady herself. Ronnie had evidently been received into the fullest confidence.

We had come in by the back door and made our way through the rather arid cleanliness of the houses' administrative departments, flavoured with a smell that combined more notably the odours of cooking and plate-polish. The transition as we emerged through the red baize door under the majestic panoply of the staircase, was quite startling. It was like passing from the desolate sanitation of a well-kept workhouse straight into the lighted auditorium of a theatre. That contrast dramatised, for me, the Jervaises' tremendous ideal of the barrier between owner and servant; but it had, also, another effect which may have been due to the fact that it was, now, three o'clock in the morning.

For just at the moment of our transition I had the queerest sense not only of having passed at some previous time through a precisely similar experience, but, also, of taking part in a ridiculous dream. At that instant Jervaise Hall, its owners,

dependants and friends, had the air of being not realities but symbols pushed up into my thought by some prank of the fantastic psyche who dwells in the subconscious. I should not have been surprised at any incongruity in the brief passing of that illusion.

The sensation flashed up and vanished; but it left me with the excited feeling of one who has had a vision of something transcendental, something more vivid and real than the common experiences of life—just such a feeling as I have had about some perfectly absurd dream of the night.

Mr. Jervaise was a man of nearly sixty, I suppose, with a clean-shaven face, a longish nose, and rather loose cheeks which fell, nevertheless, into firm folds and gave him a look of weak determination. I should have liked to model his face in clay; his lines were of the kind that give the amateur a splendid chance in modelling.

Mrs. Jervaise was taller and thinner than her husband, but lost something by always carrying her head with a slight droop as if she were for ever passing through a low doorway. Her features were sharper than his—she had a high hawk nose and a thin line of a mouth—but either they were carelessly arranged or their relative proportions were bad, for I never felt the least desire to model her. Jervaise's face came out as a presentable whole, my memory of his wife delivers the hawk nose as the one salient object of what is otherwise a mere jumble.

Old Jervaise certainly looked the more aristocratic of the pair,

but Mrs. Jervaise was a woman of good family. She had been a Miss Norman before her marriage—one of the Shropshire Normans.

The four people in the Hall looked as if they had reached the stage of being dreadfully bored with each other when we arrived. They did not hear us immediately, and as my momentary dream dissolved I had an impression of them all as being on the verge of a heartrending yawn. They perked up instantly, however, when they saw us, turning towards us with a movement that looked concerted and was in itself a question.

Frank Jervaise, striding on ahead of me, answered at once, with a gloomy shake of his head.

"Isn't she there?" his mother asked. And "Hasn't she been there at all?" she persisted when Frank returned a morose negative.

"Who did you see?" put in young Turnbull.

"Miss Banks," Frank said.

"You are quite sure that Brenda hadn't been there?" Olive Jervaise added by way of rounding up and completing the inquiry.

It was then Frank's turn to begin an unnecessary interrogation by saying "She isn't here, then?" He must have known that she was not, by their solicitude; but if he had not put that superfluous question, I believe I should; though I might not have added as he did, "You're absolutely certain?"

Young Turnbull then exploded that phase of the situation by

remarking, “I suppose you know that the car’s gone?”

Frank was manifestly shocked by that news.

“Good Lord! no, I didn’t. How do you know?” he said.

“I left my own car in the ditch, just outside the Park,” Ronnie explained. “Don’t know in the least how it happened. Suppose I was thinking of something else. Anyway, I’ve fairly piled her up, I’m afraid. I was coming back from the vicarage, you know. And then, of course, I walked up here, and Mr. Jervaise was good enough to offer me your car to get home in; and when we went out to the garage, it had gone.”

“But was it there when you went to get your own car?” Frank asked.

“I’m bothered if I know,” Ronnie confessed. “I’ve been trying hard to remember.”

Mr. Jervaise sighed heavily and took a little stroll across to the other side of the Hall. He seemed to me to be more perturbed and unhappy than any of the others.

Frank stood in a good central position and scowled enormously, while his mother, his sister, and Ronnie waited anxiously for the important decision that he was apparently about to deliver. And they still looked to him to find some expedient when his impending judgment had taken form in the obvious pronouncement, “Looks as if they’d gone off together, somewhere.”

“It’s very dreadful,” Mrs. Jervaise said; and then Olive slightly lifted the awful flatness of the dialogue by saying,—

"We ought to have guessed. It's absurd that we let the thing go on."

"One couldn't be sure," her mother protested.

"If you're going to wait till you're sure, of course…" Frank remarked brutally, with a shrug of his eyebrows that effectively completed his sentence.

"It was so impossible to believe that she would do a thing like that," his mother complained.

"Point is, what's to be done now," Ronnie said. "By gad, if I catch that chap, I'll wring his neck."

Mr. Jervaise, who was taking a lonely promenade up and down the far side of the Hall, looked up more hopefully at this threat.

"Oh! we can *catch* him," Frank commented. "He has stolen the car, for one thing…" his inflection implied that catching Banks might be only the beginning of the trouble.

"Well, once we've got him," returned Ronnie hopefully.

"Don't be an ass," Frank snubbed him. "We can't advertise it all over the county that he has gone off with Brenda."

"I don't see…" Ronnie began, but Mrs. Jervaise interrupted him.

"It was so unfortunate that the Atkinsons should have been here," she remarked.

"Every one will know, in any case," Olive added.

Those avowals of their real and altogether desperate cause for distress raised the emotional tone of the two Jervaise women, and for the first time since I had come into the Hall, they looked

at me with a hint of suspicion. They made me feel that I was an outsider, who might very well take this opportunity to withdraw.

I was on the point of accepting the hint when Frank Jervaise dragged me into the conclave.

"What do you think, Melhuish?" he asked, and then they all turned to me as if I might be able in some miraculous way to save the situation. Even old Jervaise paused in his melancholy pacing and waited for my answer.

"There is so little real evidence, at present," I said, feeling their need for some loophole and searching my mind to discover one for them.

"It really does seem almost impossible that Brenda should have—run away with that man," Mrs. Jervaise pleaded with the beginning of a gesture that produced the effect of wanting to wring her hands.

"She's under age, too," Frank put in.

"Does that mean they can't get married?" asked Ronnie.

"Not legally," Frank said.

"It's such madness, such utter madness," his mother broke out in a tone between lament and denunciation. But she pulled herself up immediately and came back to my recent contribution as presenting the one possible straw that still floated in this drowning world. "But, as Mr. Melhuish says," she went on with a little gasp of annoyance, "we really have very little evidence, as yet."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.