

VIOLET HUNT

THE

CELEBRITY AT

HOME

Violet Hunt

The Celebrity at Home

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The Celebrity at Home

Tempe, a valley in Thessaly, between Mount Olympus at the north, and Ossa at the south, through which the river Peneus flows into the Ægean.
—Lemprière.

CHAPTER I

THEY say that a child's childhood is the happiest time of its life!
Mine isn't.

For it is nice to do as you like even if it isn't good for you. It is nice to overeat yourself even though it does make you ill afterwards. It is a positive pleasure to go out and do something that catches you a cold, if you want to, and to leave off your winter clothes a month too soon. Children hate feeling "stuffy"—no grown-up person understands that feeling that makes you wriggle and twist till you get sent to bed. It is nice to go to bed when you are sleepy, and no sooner, not to be despatched any time that grown-up people are tired of you and take the quickest way to get rid of a nuisance. Taken all round, the very nicest thing in the world is your own way and plenty of it, and you never get that properly, it seems to me, until you are too old to enjoy it, or too cross to admit that you do!

I suspect that the word "rice-pudding" will be written on my heart, as Calais was on Bloody Mary's, when I am dead.

I have got that blue shade about the eyes that they say early-dying children have, and I may die young. So I am going to write down everything, just as it happens, in my life, because when I grow up, I mean to be an author, like my father before me, and teach in song, or in prose, what I have learned in suffering. Doing this will get me insensibly into the habit of composition. George—my father—we always call him by his Christian name by request—offered to look it over for me, but I do not think that I shall avail myself of his kindness. I want to be quite honest, and set down everything, in malice, as grown-up people do, and then your book is sure to be amusing. I shall say the worst—I mean the truth—about everybody, including myself. That is what makes a book saleable. People don't like to be put off with short commons in scandal, and chuck the book into the fire at once as I have seen George do, when the writer is too discreet. My book will not be discreet, but crisp, and gossippy. Even Ariadne must not read it, however much of my hair and its leaves she pulls out, for she will claw me in her rage, of course. Grammar and spelling will not be made a specialty of, because what you gain in propriety you lose in originality and *verve*. I do adore *verve*!

George's own style is said to be the perfection of nervousness and *vervouness*. He is a genius, he admits it. I am proud, but not glad, for it cuts both ways, and it is hardly likely that there will be two following after each other so soon in the same family. Though one never knows? Mozart's father was a musical man. George says that to be daughter to such a person is a liberal education; it seems about all the education I am likely to get! George teaches me Greek and Latin, when he has time. He won't touch Ariadne, for she isn't worth it. He says I am apt. Dear me, one may as well make lessons a pleasure, instead of a scene! Ariadne cried the first time at Perspective, when George, after a long explanation that puzzled her, asked her in that particular, sniffy, dried-up tone teachers put on,—“Did she see?” And when he asked me, I didn't see either, but I said I did, to prevent unpleasantness.

I do not know why I am called Tempe. Short for temper, the new cook says, but when I asked George, he laughed, and bid me and the cook beware of obvious derivations. It appears that there is a pretty place somewhere in Greece called the Vale of Tempe, and that I am named after that, surely a mistake. My father calls me a devil—plain devil when he is cross, little devil when he is pleased. I take it as a compliment, for look at my sister Ariadne, she is as good as gold, and what does she get by it? She does not contradict or ask questions or bother anybody, but reads poetry and does her hair different ways all day long. She never says a sharp word—can't! George says she is bound to get left, like the first Ariadne was. She is long and pale and thin, and white like a snowdrop, except for her reddish hair. The pert hepatica is my favourite flower. It comes straight out of the ground, like me, without any fuss or preparation in the way of leaves and trimmings.

I know that I am not ugly. I know it by the art of deduction. We none of us are, or we should not have been allowed to survive. George would never have condescended to own ugly children. We

should have been exposed when we were babies on Primrose Hill, which is, I suppose, the tantamount of Mount Taygetus, as the ancient Greeks did their ugly babies. We aren't allowed to read Lemprière. I do. What brutes those Greeks were, and did not even know one colour from the other, so George says!

I am right in saying we are all tolerable. The annoying thing is that the new cook, who knows what she is talking about, says that children "go in and out so," and even Aunt Gerty says that "fancy children never last," and after all this, I feel that the pretty ones can never count on keeping up to their own standard.

I cannot tell you if our looks come from our father, or our mother? George is small, with a very brown skin. He says he descends "from the little dark, persistent races" that come down from the mountains and take the other savages' sheep and cows. He has good eyes. They dance and flash. His hair is black, brushed back from his forehead like a Frenchman, and very nice white teeth. He has a mouth like a Jesuit, I have heard Aunt Gerty say. He never sits very still. He is about thirty-seven, but he does not like us chattering about his age.

Mother looks awfully young for hers—thirty-six; and she would look prettier if she didn't burn her eyes out over the fire making dishes for George, and prick her fingers darning his socks till he doesn't find out they are darned, or else he wouldn't wear them again, and spoil her figure stooping, sewing and ironing. George won't have a sewing machine in the house. Her head is a very good shape, and she does her hair plain over the top to show it. George made her. Sometimes when he isn't there, she does it as she used before she was married, all waved and floating, more like Aunt Gerty, who is an actress, and dresses her head sunning over with curls like Maud. George has never caught Mother like that, or he would be very angry. He considers that she has the bump of domesticity highly developed (though even when her hair is done plain I never can see it?), and that is why she enjoys being wife, mother, and upper housemaid all in one.

We only keep two out here at Isleworth, though my brother Ben is very useful as handy boy about the place, blacking our boots and browning George's, and cleaning the windows and stopping them from rattling at nights—a thing that George can't stand when he is here. When he isn't we just let them rave, and it is a perfect concert, for this is a very old Georgian house. Mother makes everything, sheets, window-curtains, and our frocks and her own. She makes them all by the same pattern, quite straight like sacks. George likes to see us dressed simply, and of course it saves dressmakers' bills, or board of women working in the house, who simply eat you out of it in no time. We did have one once to try, and when she wasn't lapping up cocoa to keep the cold out, she was sucking her thimble to fill up the vacuum. We are dressed strictly utilitarian, and wear our hair short like Ben, and when it gets long mother puts a pudding basin on our heads and snips away all that shows. At last Ariadne cried herself into leave to let hers grow.

The new cook says that if we weren't dressed so queer, Ariadne and me, we should make some nice friends, but that is just what George doesn't want. He likes us to be self-contained, and says that there is no one about here that he would care to have us associate with. Our doorstep will never wear down with people coming in, for except Aunt Gerty, and Mr. Aix, the oldest friend of the family, not a soul ever crosses the threshold!

I am forgetting the house-agent's little girl, round the corner into Corinth Road. She comes here to tea with us sometimes. She is exactly between Ariadne and me in age, so we share her as a friend equally. We got to know her through our cat Robert the Devil choosing to go and stay in Corinth Road once. At the end of a week her people had the bright thought of looking at the name and address on his collar, and sent him back by Jessie, who then made friends with us. George said, when he was told of it, that the Hitchings are so much lower in the social scale than we are, that it perhaps does not matter our seeing a little of each other. She is better dressed than us, in spite of her low social scale. She has got a real osprey in her hat, and a mink stole to wear to church, that is so long it keeps getting its ends in the mud. She doesn't like our George, though we like hers. George came out of his study once and passed through the dining-room, where Jessie was having tea with us.

“Isn’t he a *cure*?” said she, with her mouth full of his bread-and-butter.

We told her that our George was no more of a cure than hers, which shut her up; and was quite safe, as neither Ariadne nor I know what a “cure” is. She isn’t really a bad sort of girl. We teach her poetry, and mythology, and she teaches us dancing and religion. She has a governess all to herself every morning, and goes to church regularly. She once said that her mamma called us poor, neglected children, and pitied us. We hit her for her mother, and there was an end of that. We love each other dearly now, and have promised to be bridesmaids to each other, and godmothers to each other’s children. I am going to have ten.

Ariadne went to her birthday party at Christmas, and did a very silly thing, that Mother advised her not to tell George about. Every one at home agreed that poor Ariadne had been dreadfully rude, but I can’t see it? I adore sincerity. When Mr. Hitchings asked her what she would like out of the branpie when it was opened, same as they asked all the other children, Ariadne only said quite modestly, “A new papa, please!”

Their faces frightened her so, that she tried to improve it away, and explain she meant that she should like an every-day papa, like Mr. Hitchings, not only a Sunday one, like George. I know of course what she meant, a papa that one sees only from Saturdays to Mondays, and not always then, is only half a papa.

Ariadne’s real name is Ariadne Florentina, after one of George’s friends’ books. She has nice hair. It is reddish and yet soft, but it won’t curl by itself, which is a great grief and sorrow to her. But at any rate, her eyelashes are awfully long and dark, and she likes to put the bed-clothes right over her head and listen to her eyelashes scrabbling about on the sheet quite loud. She has big eyes like nursery saucers. The new cook calls them loving eyes. On the whole, Ariadne is pretty, she would think she was even if she wasn’t, so it is a good thing she is. She considers herself wasted, for she is over eighteen now, and she has never been to a party or worn a low neck in her life. We have neither of us ever seen a low neck, but we know what it is from books, and from them also we learn that eighteen is the age when it takes less stuff to cover you. The new cook says that all her young ladies at her last place came out when they were only seventeen. What is outness? I asked George once, and he said it was a device of the Philistines. I then told him that the new cook said that Ariadne would never be married and off his hands unless he gave her her chance like other young ladies, and he said something about a girl called Beatrice who was out and married and dead before she was nine. Her surname was Porter, if I recollect. The new cook said “Hout!” and that Beatrice Porter was all her eye and just an excuse for selfishness!

Anyhow it is Ariadne’s affair, and she doesn’t seem to care much, except when the new cook fills her head with ideas of revolt. She walks about the green garden reading novels, and waiting for the Prince, for she has a nice nature. I myself should just turn down the collar of my dress, put on a wreath and go out and find a Prince, or know the reason why!

We keep no gardener, only Ben. Ben is short for Benvenuto Cellini, another of George’s friends. He is thirteen, old enough to go to school, only George hasn’t yet been able to make up his mind where to send him. It is a good thing Ben has plenty of work to do, for he is very cross, and talks sometimes of running away to sea, only that he has the North border to dig, or Cat Corner to clear.

That is the corner George calls The Pleasaunce—it is we who call it Cat Corner. Not only dead cats come there, but brickbats and tin kettles with just one little hole in them, and brown-paper parcels that we open with a poker. I hope there will be a dead baby in one some day, to reward us. The trees are so dirty that we don’t like to touch them, and the birds that scurry about in the bushes would be yellow, like canaries, Sarah says, only for the dirt of London. I hardly believe it, I should like to catch one and wash it. In the opposite corner George has built a grotto, and we have to keep it dusted, and he sits there and writes and smokes. The next garden is the garden of a mad-house. The doctor keeps a donkey and a pony. Once a table-knife came flying over the wall to us. George’s nerves were so thoroughly upset that he could not bear anything but Ouida and Miss Braddon read

aloud to him all the rest of the day. Mother happens to like those authors and another Italian lady's books that we are forbidden to mention in this house. She never reads George's own works; she says she has promised to be a good wife to him, but that that wasn't in the bond. She knows them too well, having heard them all in the rough. Behind the scenes in a novel is as dull as behind the scenes in a theatre, you never know what the play is about. Aunt Gerty says that all George's things are rank, and quite undramatic, and George says he is glad to hear it, for he doesn't like Aunt Gerty.

The other persons in the house are George's cats. There are three. The grey cat, the only one who has kittens, I call Lady Castlewood, out of *Esmond* by Thackeray. George sometimes says "that little cat of a Lady Castlewood"—it occurred to me that "that little Lady Castlewood of a cat" just suits ours, for she is a jealous beast, a cantankerous beast, and goes Nap with her claws all over your face in no time! She hates her children once they are grown up, and is merely on bowing terms with them, or you might call it licking terms—for she doesn't mind giving them a wash and a brush-up whenever they come her way. Robert the Devil was the one that stayed away a week. He is very big and mild; he can lie down and wrap himself in his fur till he looks all over alike, and you couldn't find any particular part of him, no more than if he were a kind of soft hedgehog. George talks to them and tells them things about himself.

"I am sure they are welcome to his confidence!" that is what the new cook said. She likes them better than she likes him. She is quite kind to cats, though she gives them a hoist with her foot sometimes, when they get in her way. They are valuable, you see. I wish I was, for then people care what you eat and give you medicines, which I love. It isn't often you are disappointed in a new bottle of medicine, except when there's gentian in it.

CHAPTER II

YOU don't get a very good class of servant down this way, my mother says, but then she is so particular. She is the kind of mistress who knows how to do everything better herself, and that kind never gets good servants; it seems to paralyze the poor girls, and make them limp and without an idea in their heads, or what they choose to call their heads, which I strongly suspect is their stomachs. You can punish or reward a servant best through its stomach, and don't give them beer, or beer-money either! Beer makes them cross or cheeky, depending, I suppose, on the make of the beer. Mother never gives it. They buy it, I know, but I never tell. It would be as much as my place (in the kitchen) is worth, and I value my right of free entry.

Mother is terribly down on dust too. She has a book about germ culture, and sees germs in everything. It doesn't make her any happier. But as for dusting, so far as I can see, what they call dusting is only a plan for raising the dirt and taking it to some other place. It gets into our mouths in the end. I do pity Matter that is always getting into the wrong place, chivied here and there, with no resting-place for the sole of the foot. For whenever Mother sees dust anywhere, or suspects it, she makes a cross with her finger in it, and the servants are supposed to see the cross and feel ashamed. Though I don't believe any servant was ever ashamed in her life. 'Tisn't in their natures. They just grin and bear with it—with the dust, and the scolding too.

"It's 'er little way," I heard Sarah say once, not a bit unkindly or disagreeably, though, after Mother had come down on her about something. But once I caught the very same girl shaking her fist at George's back and calling him "an old beast!"

"Sarah," I said, "whom are you addressing?"

"The doctor's donkey, miss," she said, as quick as lightning, pointing to it grazing in the doctor's garden next door. People were always overloading that donkey, and shaking their fists at it.

I must get to the new cook. The last one gave Mother notice, and I never could find out why, because she was fond of Mother and could stand the cats.

"Oh, I like *you*, ma'am," I heard her say, just as if she disliked some one else. Mother took no notice, but left the kitchen, and Cook took a currant off her elbow and pulled down her sleeves, and mumbled to Sarah, "It isn't right, and I for one ain't going to help countenance it. A-visiting his family now and then between jobs, just like a burglar—or some-think worse!"

What is worse than a burglar? I was passing the scullery window, and Sarah had just thrown a lot of boiling water into a basin in front of them both, so that it made a mist and she didn't see me. I knew, though, she was saying something rude, for when Sarah told her she "shouldn't reely," she muttered something more about a "neglected angel!" I did think at first she meant me, or perhaps the doctor's donkey as usual, but then the words didn't fit either of us? I asked her straight if she did mean the donkey, just for fun, and she said the poor beast was minding his own business and I had better do the same.

She left us next month, crying worse than I ever did in my life for really serious things. Mother patted her on the back as she went out at the back door, and she kept saying, "A poor girl's only got her character, mum, and she is bound to think of it—" and Mother said, "Yes, yes, you did quite right!" and seemed just to want her out of the house and a little peace and quiet and will of her own. The very moment Sarah's back was turned, she set to work and turned everything into the middle of the room and left it there while she and Cook swept round into every corner. Ariadne and I rather enjoyed clearing our bed of the towel-horse before we could lie down in it, and having dinner off the corner of the kitchen-table because the dining-room one was lying on its back like a horse kicking.

Of course George wasn't allowed home all this time. Mother wrote to him where he was staying at the Duke of Frocester's for the shooting (George shooting! My eye!—and the keeper's legs!) and said he had better not come home till we were straight again. I was in no hurry to be straight again.

It was like Heaven. When I was a child I always built my brick houses crooked, and Ariadne called me Queen Unstraight, and that made me cry. But she liked this too. We made all the beds, and didn't bother to tuck them in. It isn't necessary to do so when we turn head over heels in the bed-clothes onto the floor every night three times to make us dizzy and sleepy. We washed up everything with a nice lather of three things mixed that occurred to me, Hudson's, Monkey Soap, and Bath Eucryl. In the end there wasn't a speck of dirt, or pattern either, left on the plates. It looked much cleaner. Why should one eat one's meat off a fat Chinese dragon or have bees all round the edge of one's soup plate ready to fall in? It is a dirty idea. We basted the joints turn and turn about, and our own pinafores. They couldn't scold us for not keeping clean, any more than they can pigs when they put them in a sty. We asked no questions or bothered Mother at all, but we black-leaded the steps and bath-bricked the grates, and washed down the walls with soda-water. The wallpaper peeled off here and there, but that shows it was shabby and ready for death.

Mother said afterwards that she couldn't see any improvement anywhere, but anyhow we enjoyed ourselves and that is everything. We spent money on it, for we bought *décalcomanie* pictures, and did bouquets all over the mantelpieces, but Mother insisted we should peel all these off again before George came back. He couldn't come back till we got that cook, for George is most absurdly particular about our servants. Sarah has got used to him, and there seems to be no idea of her going. She has to valet him, for he is always beautifully dressed. She has to take the greatest care of her own appearance, and get her nails manicured and her hair waved when he is at home. That is about all for her. But the cook he calls the keeper of his conscience, that is to say, his digestion. His digestion is as jumpy as he is. Sometimes it wants everything quite plain, and he will eat nothing but our rice-puddings and cold shapes of tapioca, etc.; at another time he calls it "apparition," and says the very name of it makes him shiver. I am used to cold shapes, alas! He sometimes brings things down from town himself—caviare and "patty de foy." Children are not supposed to like that sort of thing, but we do, and George gives them us; he is not mean in trifles. Sometimes it is pheasants and partridges, that he has shot himself on ducal acres. They are shot very badly, not tidily, with the shot all in one place as it ought to be: Mr. Aix explained this to me. They are not to be cooked till they are ready, and when they are they are a little too ready for Mother and us, so Papa and Mr. Aix have to eat it all. George belongs to the sect of the Epicureans; I heard him tell the cook so, also that he is the reincarnation of a gentleman called Villon.

For a month Mother "sat in" for cooks, and all sorts of fat and lean women came and went. Our establishment didn't seem attractive. George bespoke a fat one, by letter, but Mother inclined to lean. These women sat on the best chairs and prodded the pattern of the carpets with their dusty umbrellas, and asked tons of questions,—far more than she asked them, it seemed to me, and this one that we have at last got was the coolest of all, but in rather a nice way. She was tall and thin, with a long nose with a dip in it just before the tip, which was particularly broad. Ariadne said afterwards that a nose like that seemed to need a bustle. She said she was a north-country woman, and that is about all she did tell us about herself, except her name, Elizabeth Cawthorne.

She sat and asked questions. When she came to the usual "And if you please, ma'am, how many is there in family?" Mother answered, "Myself and my son and my two daughters,—and my sister—she is professional—and is here for long visits—that is all."

"Then I take it you are a widow, ma'am?"

Mother, getting very red, explained that George is very little at home, so that in one way he didn't count, but in another way he did, for he is very particular and has to be cooked for specially. Being an author, he has got a very delicate appetite.

"A proud stomach, I understand ye. Well, I shall hope to give him satisfaction." She said that as if she would have liked to add, "or I'll know the reason why."

She seemed quite to have settled in her own mind that she was going to take our place. She "blessed Mother's bonny face" before that interview was over, and passed me over entirely.

She came in in a week, and the first time she saw George she was “doing her hall.” Ariadne and I were there as George’s hansom drove up and he got out and began a shindy with the cabman.

“Honeys, this will be your father, I’m thinking!” she said.

Perhaps she expected us to rush into his arms, but we didn’t; we knew better. We just said “Hallo!” and waited till he was disengaged with the cabman, who wanted too much, as we are beyond the radius. George didn’t give it to him, but a good talking to instead. The new cook stopped sweeping—servants always stop their work when there is something going on that doesn’t concern them, and looked quite pleased with George.

“He can explain himself, and no mistake!” she said to Sarah afterwards, and she cooked a splendid dinner that night, for, says she to Sarah, “seemed to her he was the kind of master who’d let a woman know if she didn’t suit him.”

She doesn’t “make much account of childer,” in fact I think she hates them, for when Ariadne showed her the young shoots in a pot of snowdrops she was bringing up, and said, “See, cook, they have had babies in the night!” Elizabeth, meaning to be civil, said, “*Disgusting* things, miss!”

Still, she isn’t really unkind to children, and admits that they have a right to exist. She will boil me my glue-pot and make me paste, and lets Ariadne heat her curling-tongs between the bars of the kitchen fire. She doesn’t “matter” cats, but she gives them their meals regular and doesn’t hold with them loafing in the kitchen, and getting tit-bits stolen or bestowed. And they know she is just, though not generous, and never forgets their supper. They were all hid, as it happened, when she came about the place, but she said she knew she had got into a cat house as soon as she found herself eating fluff with her tea, and she thinks she ought to have been told. George laughs at her and calls her “stern daughter of the north,” but he wasn’t a bit cross when she told him that Ben ought to be sent to school. He even agreed, but Ben isn’t sent. Ben is still eating his heart out, and he keeps telling Elizabeth Cawthorne so. He is much in the kitchen. She is very sensible. She just stuffs a jam tart into his mouth, and says, “Tak’ that atween whiles then, my bonny bairn, to distract ye.” Ben takes it like a lamb, and it does distract him, or at any rate it distends him; he has got fat since she came.

She orders Mother about as if she were a child. Mother *does* look very young, as I have said. She ought, and so ought Aunt Gerty, considering the trouble they both take to keep the cloven hoof of age off their faces. They go to bed with poultices of oatmeal on them, and Aunt Gerty once tried the raw-beef plaster. But what she does in the night she undoes in the day, with the grease paint and sticky messes that are part of her profession.

She lives with us except when she is on tour, and is only here when she is “resting” in the *Era*, and all that time she is dreadfully cross, because she would rather be doing than resting, for “resting” is only a polite way of saying no one has wanted to engage her, and that she is “out of a shop,” which all actresses hate.

CHAPTER III

I HAVE forced George's hand, so I am told, and neither he nor mother take any notice of me. But Aunt Gerty hugged me all over when she heard what I had done, and scolded Mother for not being nice to me.

"I don't see why you need put that poor child in Coventry?" she said. "You had more need to be grateful to her than not. How much longer was it going to go on, I want to know? Hiding away his lawful wife like an old Bluebeard, and me Sister Anne boiling over and wanting to call it all from the house-tops!"

"Well, Gerty, you seem to have got it a bit mixed!" said Mother. "But, talking of Bluebeard, I always envied the first Mrs. B. the lots of cupboard room she must have had! I wonder if she was a hoarder, like me, who never have the heart to throw anything away? If I do happen to see the plans for the new house, I will speak up for lots of cupboards, and that is all I care about."

"See the plans! Why, of course you will! Isn't it your right? You must make a point of seeing them and putting your word in. Look after your own comfort in this world or you will jolly well find yourself out in the cold, and 'specially with a husband like you've got!"

"Bother moving!" said Mother, in her dreary way that comes when she has been overdoing it, as she has lately. "It is an odious wrench; just like having all one's teeth out at once."

"Hadn't need! Yours are just beautiful. One of your points, Lucy, and don't you forget it."

"The life here suited me well enough; I had got used to it, I suppose."

"You can get used to something bad, can't you, but that's no reason you are not to welcome a change? Oh, you'll like the new life that's to be spent up-stairs in the daylight, above-board like, instead of this kind of 'behind the scenes' you have been doing for eighteen years. And a pretty woman still, for so you are. Cheer up! You are going to get new scenery, new dresses, new backcloth—"

"You see everything through the stage, Gerty. I must say it irritates one sometimes, especially now, when—"

"I know what you mean. No offence, my dear old sis. And you can depend on me not to be bringing the smell of the footlights, as they call it—it's the only truly pleasant smell there is, to my idea!—into your fine new house. Pity but *He* can't get a little whiff of it into his comedies, and some manager would see his way to putting them on, perhaps? No, beloved, me and George don't cotton to each other, nor never shall. He isn't my sort. I like a man that is a man, not a society baa-lamb! Baa! I've no patience with such—"

"Sh', Gerty. You seem to forget his child sitting messing away with her paints in a corner so quietly there!"

That was me. Aunt Gerty stopped a minute, and then they went on just the same.

"We have never minded the child yet" (which was true), "and I don't see why we should begin now. Tempe is getting quite a woman and able to hold her tongue when needful. And she knows her way about her precious father well enough. What you've to think of now, Lucy, is getting your hands white, and the marks of sewing and cooking off. Lemons and pumice! Cream's good, too. You have been George Taylor's upper servant too long—Gracious, who's that at the front-door?"

Aunt Gerty nearly knocked me over in her rush to the window. We were all three sitting in the front bedroom, which is George's, when he is at home, and Mother had been washing my hair. It was a dreadfully hot day—a dog-day, only we haven't any dogs, but the kittens were tastefully arranged in the spare wash-basin all round the jug for coolness. They had put themselves there. We humans had got very little clothes on, partly for heat and also having got out of the habit of dressing in the afternoons, for no callers ever came to The Magnolias. But there were some now. There was a big, two-horsed thing at the door such as I have often seen driving out to Hampton Court, but never,

never had I seen one stop at our gate before. It was most exciting. I hoped Jessie Hitchings and her mother saw.

There were two ladies inside, one of them old and frumpy, the other was Lady Scilly, whom I knew, though Mother didn't. I haven't got to her yet in my story. A footman was taking their orders, and Sarah was standing at the door holding on to her cap that she'd forgotten to put a pin in. Lucky she had a cap on at all! Mother doesn't like her to leave her caps off to go to the door, even when George isn't here, out of principle, and for once it told.

"For goodness sake get your head in, Gerty, you have got the shade a bit too strong to-day," cried Mother, pulling my aunt in by her petticoats, and nearly upsetting the mirror on the dressing-table. Aunt Gerty came in with a cross grunt, and we all sat well inside till we heard the carriage drive away and Sarah mounting the stairs all of a hop, skip and a jump.

"Please m'm!" she cried almost before she got into the room, "there's a carriage-and-pair just called—"

"Anything in it?" Mother said.

"Two ladies, m'm, and here's their cards."

I took one and Aunt Gerty the other.

"Dowager Countess of Fylingdales!" Aunt Gerty read, as if she was Lady Macbeth saying, "Out, damned spot!"

The card I held was for Lady Scilly, and there was one for Lord Scilly, but it had got under the drawers.

"I said you wasn't dressed, ma'am," Sarah said, looking at Mother's apron all over egg, and her rolled-up sleeves.

"No more I am," said Mother, laughing. "Don't look so disappointed, Gerty. I couldn't have seen them."

"But you shouldn't have said your mistress wasn't dressed, Sarah," said Aunt Gerty. "It isn't done like that in good houses. You should have said, 'My mistress is gone out in *the* carriage.'"

"But that would have been a lie!" argued Sarah, "and I'm sure I don't want to go to hell even for a carriage-and-pair."

"Oh, where have you been before, Sarah," Aunt Gerty sighed, "not to know that a society lie can't let any one in for hell fire? Well, it is too late now; they have gone. And it was rather a shabby turnout for aristocratic swells like that, after all."

"They didn't really want to see me," said Mother. "They only called on me to please George. He sent them probably. I have heard him speak of Lady Fylingdales. He stays there. She is one of his oldest friends. She is lame and nearly blind. Lady Scilly I shall never like from what I have heard of her. Tempe, run in the garden in the sun and dry your hair. Off you go!"

"And get a sunstroke," thought I. "Just because she wants to talk to Aunt Gerty about the grand callers!"

So I stayed, and they have got so in the habit of not minding me that they went on as if I really had been out broiling in the sun.

Mother began to talk very fast about the new house, and getting visiting-cards printed, and taking her place in Society. These ladies coming had given her thoughts a fresh jog. She nearly cried over the bother of it all, and what George would now go expecting of her, and she with no education and no ambition to be a smart woman, as Aunt Gerty was continually egging her on to be, saying it was quite easy if you only had a nice slight figure, like she has.

"Bead chains and pince-nezs won't do it as you seem to think," Mother said. "And even if I get to be smart, I shall never get to be happy!"

"Happy!" screamed my Aunt Gertrude. "Who talked of being happy? You don't go expecting to be happy, unless it makes you happy, as it ought, to put your foot down on those stuck-up cats who have been leading your husband astray all these years, and giving them a good what-for. It would me,

that's all I can say. Happiness indeed! It is something higher than mere happiness. What you have got to do, my dear Lucy, is just to take your call and go on—not before you've had a trip to Paris for your clothes, though—and show them all what a pretty woman George Taylor's despised wife is. There's an object to live for! That's your ticket, and you've got it. He married you for your looks, now, didn't he?"

"Nothing else," said Mother sadly.

"Nonsense! Weren't you—aren't you as good as he? You are the daughter of a respectable Irish clergyman. Whose daughter—I mean son—is he? A French tailor's, I expect. You married him eighteen years ago in Putney Parish Church by special licence, when he was nothing and nobody cared whom or what he married. Little flighty, undersized foreign-looking creature! You have been a good wife to him, borne his children, nursed him when he was ill, and kept a house going for him to come back to when he was tired of the others, and if it's been done on the sly, it hasn't been through any will of yours! And now that the matter has been taken out of his hands, and a good thing too, and he's obliged to leave off his dirty little tricks and own you, and send his grand friends to call on you, and build a nice house to put you in, you want to back out and hide yourself—lose your chance once for all and for ever! You are good-looking, your children are sweet—you'll soon catch them all up, and then you can be as haughty and stuck-up as the rest of them. If it is *me* you are thinking of, I shan't trouble you—I have my work and I mean to stick to it!"

"I shall never disown you, Gerty."

"No, I dare say not, but I shan't put myself in the way of a snub. I've got one thing that's been very useful to me in this life—that's tact. I shan't make a nasty row or a talk, but you'll not see more of me than you want to. I'm a lady—I'll never let anybody deny that—but I've knocked about the world a bit, and it's a rough place, and that soft dainty manner people admire so, rubs off pretty soon fighting one's own battles. The aristocracy can afford to keep it on. Clothes does it, largely. Where you're wearing chiffon, I'll be wearing linen, that's the diff. Now I'm off—'on' first act and share a dresser with three other cats, where there isn't room to swing one. Ta-ta! I'm not as vulgar as you think!"

She put on her picture-hat carefully with sixteen pins in it, and went away. Mother asked me why I hadn't been drying my hair in the garden all this time? Because I wanted to hear what Aunt Gerty had to say, I answered, and Mother accepted the explanation. But now I went and found a cool place and meditated on my sins.

I am not what is called a strictly naughty child. I am too busy. Satan never need bother about me or find mischief for me to do, for my hands are never idle, and I can generally find it for myself.

On the eventful morning that decided our fate three weeks before this incident, I was in the drawing-room, where we hardly ever sit, making devils with George's name with the ink out of the best inkstand. I spilt it. Why do these things happen? It is the fault of fatality.

There is nothing I hate more than the sickening smell of spilt ink, or rather, the soapy rags they chose to rub it up with, so I went up to my room quietly intending to get my hat and go out till it had blown over, or rather soaked in. Sarah was there, tidying or something, and she said immediately, "Now whatever have you been up to?" I told her that the word "ever" was quite surplus in that sentence, and that George objected to it strongly. Thus I got away from her, wishing I had a less expressive face.

I found myself in the street without an object. I have got beyond the age of runaway rings, thank goodness, but they did use to amuse me, till one day an old gentleman got hold of me and went on about the length of kitchen stairs generally, and the shortness of cooks' legs, and the cruel risk of things boiling over. He changed my heart. So this day I just walked along to a motor-car, that I saw at the end of the next street but one, standing in front of the "Milliner's Arms," with nobody in it. I expected the man was having a drink, for it was piping hot. I got into the car and sat down, and just put my hand on the twirly-twirly thing in front, considering if I should set the car going. It was the very first time I had ever been in a motor in my life, and I simply hadn't the heart to miss the chance.

A lady came out of the Public. I never saw anything so pretty, and her dress was all billowy, like the little fluffy clouds we call Peter's sheep in a blue sky, and the hem of it was covered with sawdust off the public-house floor. Yet I can't say she looked at all tipsy.

"I wanted a pick-me-up so badly, I just had to go in and get it." She said this in an apologizing sort of way, while I was just wondering how I should explain my presence in her car. She settled that for me, by saying with a little sweet smile, "Well, you pretty child, how do you like my motor-car?"

"It is the first time I—"

"Oh, of course! Would you like to be in one while it is on the move?"

I confessed I should, and she jumped in beside me, saying, "Sit still, then, child!" and moved the crissy-cross starfish thing in front, and we were off.

Mercy, what a rate! Policemen seemed to hold up their hands in amazement at us, and she looked pleased and flattered. We drove on and on, past the Hounslow turning, through miles of nursery gardens and then miles of slums, till at last the houses got smarter and bigger, and I guessed this was the part of London where George lives, only I did not ask questions. I hardly ever do. I did see a clock once, and I saw it was nearly our lunch time. I realized that I had missed rice-pudding for once, and was glad. She talked all the way along, and I listened. I find that is what people like, for she kept telling me that I was a nice child, and that she thought she should run away with me.

"You *are* running away with me," I said.

"And you don't care a bit, you very imperturbable atom! I think I shall take you home with me to luncheon. You amuse me."

She amused *me*. She was a darling—so gay, so light, as if she didn't care about anything, and had never had a stomach-ache in her whole life. If George's high-up friends are like this, I don't wonder he prefers them to Aunt Gerty. Mother can be as amusing as anybody,—I am not going to try to take Mother down—but even she can't pretend she is happy as this woman seemed to be. She was like champagne,—the very dry kind George opens a bottle of when he is down, and gives Mother and me a whole glassful between us.

We were quite in a town now, and on a soft pavement made of wood, like my bedroom floor. The streets, oddly enough, grew grander and narrower. She told me about the houses as we went along.

"That is where my uncle, the Duke of Frocester, lives," she said, and pointed to a kind of grey tomb, with a paved courtyard in a very tiny street. I knew that name—the name of the man George stays and shoots with—but of course I didn't say anything. Then we passed a funny little house in a smaller street called after a chapel, and there was a fanlight over the door, and a great extinguisher thing on the railings.

"You have no idea what a lovely place that is inside," she told me. "A great friend of mine lives there, and pulled it about. He took out all the inside of the house, and made false walls to the rooms. One of them has just the naked bricks and mortar showing, but then the mortar is all gilt. He always has quantities of flowers, great arum lilies shining in the gloom, and oleanders in pots, and stunted Japanese trees. He gives heavenly tea-parties and little suppers after the play. He writes plays, but somehow they have never been acted that I know of? Bachelors always do you so well. I declare, if I wasn't going to see him this very afternoon at my club, I would go in and surprise him, now that I have got you with me, you little elf! You have certainly got the widest open eyes I ever saw. He is probably in there now, working at his little table in the window, getting up the notes for his lecture, so we should put him out abominably. I will take you to the lecture instead. And remind me to lend you one of his books,—that is, if your mother allows you to read novels."

I explained to her that I was a little off novels, as my father kept us on them.

"Oh, does he? How interesting! I love authors! You must introduce him to me some day. Bring him to one of my literary teas. I always make a point of raising an author or so for the afternoon. It pleases my crowd so, far better than music and recitations, and played-out amusements of that kind; and then one doesn't have to pay them. They are only too glad to come and get paid in kind looks

that cost nothing. The queerer they are, the more people believe in them. I used to have Socialists, but really they were *too* dirty! Some authors now are quite smart, and wear their hair no longer than Lord Scilly, or so very little longer. Now, there is Morrell Aix, the man who wrote *The Laundress*. I took him up, but he had been obliged, he said, to live in the slums for two years to get up his facts, and you could have grown mustard and cress on the creases of his collar. And I do think, considering the advertisement he gave them, the laundresses might have taken more trouble with the poor man's shirts!"

I knew Mr. Aix, of course, and I have often seen Mother take the clothes-brush to him, but I said nothing, for I like to show I can hold my tongue. Knowledge is power, if it's ever so unimportant. We didn't go far from the house with walls like stopped teeth, before she pulled up at another rather smart little door in a street called Curzon.

"Here we are at my place, and there's Simmy Hermyre on the doorstep waiting to be asked to lunch."

It was a nice clean house with green shutters and lovely lace curtains at the windows, that Ariadne would have been glad of for a dress, all gathered and tucked and made to fit the sash as if it had been a person. The young man standing at the front door had a coat with a waist, and a nice clean face, and a collar that wouldn't let him turn his head quickly. He helped us out, and she laughed at him as if he was hers.

"Are you under the impression that I have asked you to lunch? Why, I don't suppose there is any!"

Imagine her saying that when she had brought me all the way from Isleworth to have it! I didn't, of course, say anything, and she made me go in, and the young man followed us, quite calm, although she had said there wasn't anything for him to eat.

"I would introduce you to this person" (I thought it so nice of her not to stick on the offensive words little or young!) "only it strikes me I don't know her name." She didn't ask it, but went on, "It's a most original little creature, and amused me more in an hour than you have in a year, my dear boy!"

Now, had I said anything particularly amusing? I hadn't tried, and I do think you should leave off calling children "it" after the first six months. Mothers hate it. Still, though I didn't think her quite polite, I told her my name—Tempe Vero-Taylor—in a low voice so that she could introduce me to her great friend, as we were going to lunch at the same table. I thought there wouldn't be a children's table, as she didn't speak of children, and I was glad, for children eat like pigs and have no conversation.

Her eyebrows went up and her mouth went down, but she soon buttoned up her lips again, though they stayed open at the corners, and didn't introduce me to Mr. Hermyre at all. I didn't suppose I should ever meet him again, so it didn't matter.

We went in and had lunch, and it was quite a grand lunch, hot, and as much again cold on a side-table. But I was actually offered rice-pudding! I wouldn't have believed it, in a house like this. I refused rather curtly, but she ate it, and very little else. I generally take water at home, but I did not see why I shouldn't taste champagne when I had the chance, and I took a great deal, quite a full glass full, and when I had taken it, I felt as if I could fight a lion. George often says when he comes back from London that he has been fighting with wild beasts at Ephesus. I wondered if I might not meet some this afternoon at the lecture at the Go-ahead Club? Lady Scilly (that's her name) said she must take me, and I knew I should be bored, but I couldn't very well say no.

"You may come too, Simmy," she said to the young man; "it will be exciting, I can promise you!"

"Not if I know it," he said. Then he tried to be kind and said, "What is the lecture about?"

"The Uses of Fiction."

"None, that I can see, except to provide some poor devil with an income."

"That's a man's view."

"It is," he said, "a man, and not a monkey's. You don't call your literary crowd men, do you?"

I was just wondering what he did call them, when Lady Scilly shut him up, and I thought she looked at me. Presently he went on—

“You’re quite spoiling your set, you know, Paquette. I used to enjoy your receptions.”

“I don’t see why you should permit yourself to abuse my set because you’re a fifth cousin. That’s the worst of being well connected, so many people think they have the right to lecture one!”

“All the better for you, my dear! Do you suppose now, that if you were not niece to a duke and cousin to a marquis, that Society would allow you to fill your house with people like Morrell Aix and Mrs. Ptomaine and Ve—”

Lady Scilly jumped up and said she must go and dress, and if he wouldn’t come to the lecture he must go, and pushed me out of the room in front of her and on up-stairs.

“Good-bye!” she called to him over the bannisters. “Let yourself out, and don’t steal the spoons.”

That was a funny thing to say to a friend, not to say a relation! We went up into her bedroom, and her old nurse—I suppose it was her nurse, for she wore no cap and bullied her like anything—came forward.

“Put me into another gown, Miller!” she said, flopping into a chair. Miller did, putting the skirt over her head as if she had been a child, and even pulling her stockings up for her. Then she had a try at tidying me.

“Don’t bother. The child’s all right. She’s so pretty she can wear anything.”

I think personal remarks rude even if she does think me pretty, but I said nothing. She looked at herself very hard in the glass, and we went down-stairs and got into the motor again. Lady Scilly sat with her hand in mine, and a funny little spot of red on the top of the bone of her cheek that I hadn’t noticed there before. It was real.

CHAPTER IV

WE went into a house and into a large empty room with whole streets of coggley chairs and a kind of pulpit thing in the middle. A jug of water and a tumbler stood on it. There was a governessy-looking person present, presiding over this emptiness, whom Lady Scilly immediately began to order about. She was the secretary of the club, and Lady Scilly is a member of the committee.

“Where will you sit, Lady Scilly?” said this person, and she asked a good many other questions, using Lady Scilly’s name very often.

“I shall sit quite at the back this time,” Lady Scilly answered. “Too many friends immediately near him might put the lecturer out!” As she said this she looked at me wickedly, but I could not think why.

We then went away and read the comic papers for a little until the place had filled. In the reading-room we met a gentleman, who seemed to be a great friend of Lady Scilly’s. He spoke to me while she was discussing some arrangement or other with the secretary, who had followed her.

“How do you like going about with a fairy?” he asked me.

“I’m not,” I said. “She’s a grown-up woman, old enough to know—”

“Worse!” he interrupted me. “She is what I call a fairy!”

“What is a fairy?” I asked, though he seemed to me very silly, and only trying to make conversation.

“A fairy is a person who always does exactly as she likes—and as other people sometimes don’t like.”

“I see,” I said, as usual, although I did not see, as usual, “just as grown-up people do.”

“But she isn’t pretty when she is old! I wonder if you will grow up a fairy? No, I think not, you don’t look as if you *could* tell a lie.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said. He then remarked that Lady Scilly had sent him to take me into the room where the lecture was to be given, and we went. Of course I politely tried to let age go first, but he didn’t like that, and said “*Jeunesse oblige*,” and “*Place aux dames*,” and “*Juniores ad priores*”—every language under the sun, winding up with that silly old story about the polite Lord Stair, who was too polite to hang back and keep the king waiting.

“Oh yes, I know that story,” I said, just to prevent him going on bothering. “It’s in Ollendorff.”

The lecture-room was quite full, and we—Lady Scilly and I—squeezed ourselves in at the back in a kind of cosy corner there was, and we were almost in the dark.

“Sit tight, child, whatever happens!” she kept saying, and held my hand as if I should run away. When among a rain of claps the lecturer came in I saw why, for it was George!

Lady Scilly grabbed my arm, and said, “Don’t call out, child!”

As if I was going to! But now I saw why she had kept calling him the lecturer instead of saying his name whenever she had spoken of him before. Now I saw why she was so full of nods and winks and grins, and had brought me to the lecture so particularly. Now I saw why the old gentleman had called her a fairy—that meant a tease, and I wasn’t going to gratify her by seeming upset or anything. Not I! So I sat quite still as she told me, and George began.

I borrowed a pencil of the Ollendorff man, and put down some notes to remind me of what George said, for Ariadne. It took me some time to get used to the funny little voice George put on to lecture with, quite different to his Isleworth voice. Presently when I began to catch on a little I found that the lecture was all about novels and the good of them, as Lady Scilly had said. This is the sort of thing—

“A novel,” said my father, “*is apt to hold a group of quite ordinary, uninteresting characters, wallowing in their clammy, stale environment, like fishes in an aquarium, held together by a thin thread of narrative, and bounded by the four walls of the author’s experience. His duty is to enlarge that*

experience, for to novels we go, not so much for amusement as for a criticism of Life. That portion of life which comes under the reader's own observation is naturally so restricted, so vastly disproportionate, to the whole great arcana.” (I do hope I got this down right!) *“The novelist should be omniscient and omnipotent.”* (Once I got these two great words, all the rest seemed child's play.) *“A great responsibility lies with the purveyors of this necessary panorama of existence, the men who monopolize the furnishing and regulating of the supply.”* (Loud applause.) *“The right man, or peradventure, the right woman”* (he bowed at Lady Scilly), *“knows, or ought to know, so many sides, while the reader, alas, knows but one, and is so tired of that one!”*

Everybody sighed and groaned a little to show how tired they were, and George went on—

“I see my audience is in touch with me. It works both ways.” (What works both ways? I must have left something out.) *“A Duchess of my acquaintance said some poignant, pregnant words—as indeed all her words are pregnant and poignant”* (he bowed to an old corpulent lady in another part of the room)—*“to me the other day. She said that her novel of predilection was not a society novel. ‘I know it all, don't I, like the palm of my hand?’ she objected. ‘I know how to behave in a drawing-room and how not to behave in a boudoir!’ So she complained. The substance of her complaint, as I understand it, is this;—what she wants is worlds not realized! She wants to see the actress in her drawing-room, the flower-girl in her garret, the laundress at her tub, the burglar at his work——”*

Here George made a little bob at Mr. Aix in the audience, for there he was, and there was another fit of clapping. Then he went on—

“I mean to say that what we mostly seek in fiction is to be taken out of our own lives, and put into somebody else's—to temporarily change our moral environment. High life is deeply interested in what is going on below stairs. Bill Sykes and Liza of Lambeth, if they have any time for reading, want to know all about countesses and their attendant sprites.” (Fancy calling Simon Hermyre that!) *“The Highest or the Lowest, but no middle course, is the novelist's counsel of perfection. There is no second class in the literary railway.*

“Yet there is a serious issue involved in this proposition. If, for instance—only for instance, for I am very sure that most of us here will have to rely on imagination, not fact, to support my illustration—if our home is a suburban one, and our wildest actual dissipation a tea-party in Clapham or Tooting—even Clapham Rise or Upper Tooting—we must transport ourselves in seven-league boots to the better quarters of London, to visualize the giddy cultured throng in the halls of Belgravia, and set down accurately the facile inaccuracies of the small talk of Mayfair. It is the tale of the mad, bad great world that sets the heart of the matron of Kennington Common aflame, and makes her waking dreams ‘all a wonder and a wild desire.’ Que voulez vous? She is our staple standing reader. She does not want to bend her chaste thoughts towards Hornsey Rise and Cricklewood, to envisage, stimulated by the novelist's art, its bursten boilers, its infant woes, its humdrum marrying and giving in marriage. No, she prefers, in her grey unlovely Jerry-built parlour, to gloat over the morbid, rose-coloured sins that are enacted in the halls of fashion; the voluptuous sorrows of the Bridge-end of the week; the mystery of Royal visits postponed are her chosen pabulum. To all these novelists whose ways are cast in safe and humdrum middle-class places I would say that they had best ignore their entourage as a help to local colour. In this case, character drawing, like charity, should not begin at Home. Go out, go out, young man, from thy homely nest in the suburbs, where the females of thy family hang over their flaccid meat teas in faded blouses—”

I think it was about here that I half got up, quite determined, and Lady Scilly pinched me in several places at once.

“Don't nip me, please,” I said. “I think somebody ought to get up and tell George he's drivelling, and if nobody else does, I will.”

“Bless the child!” she said. “You may answer him when he's done, if you like, and can. It will be quite amusing.”

I think that she really was a fairy, but never mind! I did think somebody ought to stop George, and take Mother's side. So I waited, though I stopped my ears and would not listen to any more till George sat down and the secretary lady asked if some one would care to answer Mr. Vero-Taylor's speech? Lady Scilly poked me up, and I got up so that George and all of them could see me, and I didn't feel a bit shy—no, for I had something to say, and off I went, to speak up for Mother who wasn't there to speak up for herself.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” I said—I noticed that George began like that—“I don't agree at all with what the gentleman—who is my father—has been saying about Tooting—Upper Tooting, I mean. He ought to be more patriotic, as he lives at Isleworth, which is pretty nearly the same thing, part of his time anyhow, and I suppose he needn't do it unless he likes. And as for what he says about Mother, why, I can tell everybody that Mother doesn't read novels about Duchesses or anybody. She hasn't time, she's much too busy in the house, bringing us up, and cooking specially for George, and so on. That's all!”

I sat down with a bump. George seemed to subside, and I lost him, but I hardly expected him to come and hug me. Lady Scilly went and comforted him, perhaps! I don't know what happened, except tea and coffee, but I didn't feel inclined, and I asked Mr. Aix to take me home.

He did, in a hansom. He held my hand all the way. We didn't talk, but I am sure he wasn't cross with me, and held my hand to show it. He seemed to know I was going to have a bad time.

I did. Even Mother scolded me.

Papa didn't come near us for a week, and when he was due I asked if I might have a cold and be in bed. God sent me a real cold to make me truthful. Aunt Gerty nursed me. It wasn't so bad. She read to me about Thumbelina and Boadicea, my two favourite heroines, one big and the other little, and poetry about my painted boy, which I love and that always makes me go to sleep. I believe it is spelt with a u, and doesn't mean a child at all. But, I like it best my way—

“We left behind the painted buoy
That tosses at the harbour-mouth,
And madly danced our hearts with joy

While I was ill, though, I missed all the discussions about moving, and the results of the lecture and all that. Ariadne reported what she could. She said that Mother and George never mentioned me, but talked as if the drains had gone wrong, or a pipe had burst, or as if George had lost a lot of money somehow. Everything is to be altered and the world will be topsy-turvy when I get downstairs again. Though I don't suppose that even if I did get a chance of putting my word in, I could alter anything as I wished it? These grown-ups, once they get the bit between their teeth—!

CHAPTER V

IT is no fun for George now, when everybody knows he is a married man. Lady Scilly took care of that, and told everybody as a good joke, and all her friends at the Go-ahead Club told their friends how George Vero-Taylor's little girl had burst into the middle of his lecture there and given him away—such fun, don't you know! It wasn't fun for me, for I had nothing but the consciousness of a bad action to support me in Coventry, where they all put me for a month. It wouldn't have mattered so much if George hadn't been at home a good deal about that time. I think I prefer George as a visitor, and so does Elizabeth Cawthorne, though she says it is more natural perhaps for a gentleman to stop with his family, though wearing to the servants.

George is a philosopher. He has been forced to own up to a family, and thus has lost a certain amount of prestige, but he is now trying a new line. At any rate, he has been a good deal talked about, and got into the newspapers, and that will sell an edition, I should think. He has a volume on the stocks. Misfortunes never come single-handed, luckily. He settled to build a house—a house that should express him and shelter his family as well. Mother didn't want to build. If we *had* to move, she wanted a dear little house on the river at Datchet, or even at Surbiton, and she and I used to go down for the day third-class to see if there were any to let. We used to take a packet of sandwiches and a soda-water bottle full of milk for us both. Mother never hardly touches spirits. In this way we looked over heaps of little earwiggeries trimmed with clematises and pots of geraniums hanging from the balconies, with their poor roots higher than their heads, and manicured lawns right down to the water's edge. George didn't stop our doing this and taking so much trouble; I believe he thought it amused us and did him no harm. But all the time, he was hansoming it backwards and forwards to St. John's Wood, where he meant to settle. He quietly chose a site, and bought it, and was his own architect, though a little Mr. Jortin he discovered, made the plans from his dictation. He got no credit, except for the blunders. George, being a man of the widest culture, wanted to show the world that he can do other things than write books. In *Who's Who*, he doesn't mention writing as one of his occupations, not even as one of his amusements. These are Riding, Driving, Shooting, Fishing, Fencing, Polo, Rotting and Log-rolling, or at least, that's what his friend Mr. Aix read out to us one afternoon he came to see us, out of the very newest edition, and George was in the room too, and laughed.

All this time Ariadne and I were kept hard at it copying things. George talked of nothing but atriiums and tricliniums and environments. I only interrupted once, when I said that they had never mentioned a main staircase, and was it going to be outside, like those wooden ones you see in the country, with the fowls stepping up to bed on them? They thanked me, and added an inside stairs to the plan at once.

As soon as we get into the new house, George intends to raise his prices. He expects to get ten pounds per "thou." He told Middleman, his literary agent, so. Up to now his price was four pound ten per "thou." for articles, and the royalties on his last book are going to pay for the new house. Middleman says George will be quite right to charge establishment charges. Middleman is supposed to have a faint, very faint sense of humour, and that's the only way people get at him. Mr. Aix says Middleman can run up an author's sales twenty per cent. in no time, if he fancies you personally, or thinks there's money in you.

George's new book is going to be not mediæval this time; people have imitated him and *The Adventures of Sir Bore and Sir Weariful* was brought out just to plague him, so he is going to quit that for a time. He thinks that the Isles of Greece would be a good place to dump a few English aristocrats and tell their adventures on. He will go abroad soon, but is waiting for some of the aristocrats to make up a party and pay his expenses.

Meanwhile Cinque Cento House, as it is to be called, rose like a thief in the night, and as it grew higher and higher Mother's face grew longer and longer. She refused to go near it, and it was Lady Scilly who helped George to arrange the furniture.

Aunt Gerty, however, is practical, and tried to get Mother to take some interest in her own mansion.

"I do," Mother said, "but at a distance. I couldn't be of any use advising, and whatever I advised, George would still take his own way. That odious woman, whom I thank God I have never set eyes on, is always about, and would put my back up if I met her there, and I should say things I should be sorry for after. No, Gerty, let them arrange it as they like, and buy furniture and set it up. It is George's own money. He earned it."

"Not by the sweat of his brow, at all events!" sneered my aunt.

"I came to him without a penny, and I haven't the right to dictate so much as the position of a wardrobe."

"You're the man's lawful wife," said Aunt Gerty, as she always did. One got tired of the expression.

"Yes, unfortunately," said Mother. "Or I'd have a better chance! But I am *not* going to fight over George with that minx!"

How Mother did hate Lady Scilly, to be sure, a person she had never seen! I once told her she needn't be cross with Lady Scilly, and how harmless she was, and how very little she really thought of Papa—snubbed him even, and treated him like dirt; and then she was cross with *me*, and said George was a man of whom any woman might be proud.

Ariadne and I went over to the new house often, to get measurements for blinds and curtains and things at home. Mother made them, and then we took them round. Lady Scilly was always there, from twelve to two, and George generally met her and they shut themselves into first one room and then another, discussing it. Vanloads of furniture kept coming in, and all George's furniture from his old rooms in Mayfair. She kept saying—

"Oh, that dear old marquetry cabinet! How I remember it in Chapel Street, and how the firelight caught it in the evenings!" or else—"That sweet little pair of Flemish bellows? Do you remember when you and I"—something or other?

She marched about and settled everything. George took it quite mildly, and made jokes, at least I suppose they were jokes, for he made her laugh consumedly, so she said. It's extraordinary how he can make people laugh—people out of his own family!

She is very friendly to me and Ariadne, and has promised to present Ariadne at the next Court. It's to please George, if she does remember to do it. But if I were Ariadne I should refuse till my own mother had been presented first, so that she could introduce me herself. George ought to insist on it, but he always says "Let them rave!" and that means, Do as you like, but don't bother me. What he won't like will be forking out forty pounds for Ariadne's dress, and it will end by her staying at home. Ariadne wants to be presented badly; she is practising curtseys already, and longing for the season to begin. I would not condescend to owe even a pleasure to Lady Scilly, but Ariadne is so poor-spirited, and Aunt Gerty continually advises her to take what she can get, and make what she can out of George's "mash," when well disposed.

About Easter, George got his chance. Lady Scilly proposed a month's yachting trip in the Mediterranean in somebody's yacht that they were willing to lend her, on condition she invited her own party and included them. If I had a yacht, I would ask my own party, that is all I can say. She asked George to go with them—"We shan't see more of Mr. Pawky (i.e. the owner) than we can help, and you can have a study on board and write a yachting novel, like William Black's, and put old Pawky in. He is quite a character, you know, with a gilded liver, as they say—dyspeptic and all that. I can't stand him, but you might bear with him a little in the interests of Art!" George had no objection to visiting the scene of his new book at Mr. Pawky's expense, in the company of his own

pals, and accepted at once. I wonder if they will batten down the hatches on Mr. Pawky as soon as they get out to sea, and keep him there for the rest of the voyage? It would be just like them.

George proposed to Mother that she should move in while he was away. He said somebody must go in to get the painters out. Then he would come home fresh and full of material, and find his study organized and everything ready for him to begin. He said there would be ructions, inseparable from a first installation, and that would put him off work abominably, and spoil the whole brewing!

“Dear,” said Mother, “I fear we shall do badly without you—you are a man, at least—but I’ll be good, and spare you cheerfully!”

So he went. Then Mother set to work, and was perfectly happy. There was to be a sale in this house, because the furniture in it would not go with what George and Lady Scilly had chosen for Cinque Cento House, but there were some old pieces Mother could not do without. Her nice brass bedstead, and the old nursery fender that Ariadne nearly hanged herself on once in a fit of naughtiness, and of course all the bedding and linen and kitchen utensils from “The Magnolias”—one could hardly suppose Lady Scilly had troubled herself about that sort of thing? The greengrocer “moved” us for two pounds. Mother and Aunt Gerty and the cook saw the things off at Isleworth, and Ariadne and I and Kate—Sarah had gone, and I never got any better reason than that she “had to”—received them at Cinque Cento House. Mother had stuck to it, that she would not go near the place till she went in for good, so it was to be all quite new to her and Aunt Gerty. Ariadne and I, who had been in and out for months, wondered how they would like it, and expected some sport when their eyes first fell on it.

We had a long delightful day of anticipation, and putting things where they had to go, and in the evening Mother and Aunt Gerty came. They had got out of the train at Swiss Cottage, and asked their way to their own house. Aunt Gerty had her mouth wide open; Mother had hers tight shut. She was not intending to carp or pass opinions, but the front-door knocker was a regular slap in the face, and took her breath away.

She tried to talk of something else, and whispered to Aunt Gerty, “Rather an inconvenient place for a coal-shoot, isn’t it! Right alongside the front-door!”

I hastened to explain that that was the larder-window she saw, to prevent unpleasantness.

Mother shivered when she got into the hall, which is vast and flagged with marble like a church. “It strikes very cold to the feet!” she said to Aunt Gerty. “Mine are like so much ice.”

“Oh, come along, and we’ll brew you a glass of hot toddy!” Aunt Gerty said cheerfully. “It’s a bit chilly, I think, myself, but ’ansom, like the big ’all where ’Amlet ’as the players!”

Aunt Gerty is generally most careful, but she is apt to drop a little h or so when she is excited. She could hardly contain herself, as Ariadne and I had hoped, when she saw the gilt stairs leading up into the study.

“What price broken legs? Why, I shall have to get roller-skates or take off my shoes and stockings to go up them!”

“So you will, Aunt Gerty,” said Ariadne. “It is one of George’s rules. He made Lady Scilly even leave off her high heels before she used them.”

“Took ’em off for her himself with his lily hands, I suppose?” snorted my aunt. “Well, I don’t expect you will find me treading those golden stairs very often. I ain’t one of George’s elect.”

“Such wretched things to keep clean,” Mother complained. “The servants are sure to object to the extra work, and give up their places, and I am sure one can’t blame them, and such good ones as we’ve got, too, in these awful times, when looking for a cook is like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay. Heavens, is the girl there all the time listening to me?”

Kate was, luckily, down-stairs, showing Elizabeth Cawthorne the way about her kitchen, or else it would have been very imprudent to tell a servant how valuable she is. Mother was cowed by the danger she had escaped, but Aunt Gerty went on flouncing about, pricing everything and tinkling her nails against pots and jugs, till she stopped suddenly and put her muff before her face—

“Well, of all the improper objects to meet a lady’s eye coming into a gentleman’s house! Who’s that mouldy old statue of?”

I told her that was Autolycus.

“Cover yourself, Tollie, I would,” Aunt Gerty said, going past him affectedly. “Oh, look, Lucy, at all those dragons and cockroaches doing splits on the fire-place! Brass, too, trimmed copper. My God!”

“I shall just have to clean that brass fire-place myself,” said Mother. “I shall never have the face to ask Kate to do it.”

“And no proper grate, only the bare bricks left showing!” Aunt Gerty wailed. “How could one get up any proper fireside feeling over a contraption like that! The Lyceum scenery is nothing to it. It makes me think of Shakespeare all the time—so *painfully* meretricious—”

Lady Castlewood in a basket under Mother’s arm, suddenly began to mew very sadly. Aunt Gerty had put Robert the Devil down on the floor, in his hamper, and I suppose a draught got to him, for he spat loudly. Ariadne and I let out the poor things and they bounced straight out on to the parquet floor, and their feet slid from under them. I never saw two cats look so silly!

“Well, if a cat can’t keep his feet on those wooden tiles,” said Mother, “I don’t suppose I can,” and she jumped, just to try, right into the middle of a little square of blue carpet, which, true enough, slid along with her.

“You can give a nice hop here, at any rate,” cried Aunt Gerty, catching her round the waist, and waltzing all over the room, till both their picture hats fell off, and hung down their backs by the pins. “Ask me and all the boys, and give a nice sit-down supper, and do us as well as the old villain will allow you.”

She was quite happy. That is just like an actress! Ariadne and I danced too, and the cats mewed loudly for strangeness. Cats hate newness of any kind, and they weren’t easy till I got some newspaper, crackled it, and let them sit on it, and then they were all right. Then Mother and Aunt Gerty rang the queer-shaped bell, as if it would sting them, and got up some coals which Mother had had the forethought to order in, and lit a modest little fire in a great cave with brass images in front of it under the kind of copper hood. It wouldn’t draw at first, being used to logs, and when it smoked we threw water on it, lest we dirtied the beautiful silk hangings. At last we fetched Elizabeth Cawthorne.

“Hout!” she said. “I’d like to see the fire that’s going to get the better of me!”

She made it burn, sulkily, and Ariadne and I went to a shop we knew of round the corner, and bought tea and sugar and condensed milk, to make ourselves tea with the spirit-lamp Aunt Gerty had brought. We had no butter or bread, only biscuits luckily, so we couldn’t stain the Cinque Cento chairs, whose gold trimmings were simply peeling off them. Sit on them we dared not, they would have let us down on the floor for a certainty. Mother and Aunt Gerty had a high old time blaming Lady Scilly for all her foolish arrangements, and then we all went down to the so-called kitchen to see how Elizabeth Cawthorne was getting on there. She was in a rage, but trying to pass it off, like a good soul as she is.

“Well, I never! Here’s a gold handle to my coal-cellar door! I shall have to wipe my lily hands before I dare use it. And a fine lady of a dresser that I shall be shy to set a plain dish on. Beetles here, do you ask, woman?” (To Kate.) “They’d be ashamed to show their faces in such a smart place as this, I’m thinking. And what’s this couple of drucken little candlesticks for the kitchen? Our Kate’ll soon rive the fond bit handles from off them, or she’s not the girl I take her for!”

She banged it hard against the dresser as servants do, to make it break, but it didn’t, and she looked disappointed. Mother then suggested she should unpack a favourite frying-pan she never goes anywhere without, and sent Kate out for a pound and a half of loin-chops, and cook was to fry them for our dinners.

The kitchen fire, after all, was the only one that would burn, so we ate our chops there, and sat there till bed-time. Ariadne looked like a picture, sitting at a trestle-table, and a thing like a

torch burning at the back of her head. She was thoroughly disgusted, and got quite cross, and so did Elizabeth, as the evening went on. She hated trestles, and flambeaus, and dark Rembrandtish corners, and couldn't lay her hand on her things nohow, so that when we all went up to bed, Mother said to her—

“Good-night, Elizabeth. You have been a bit upset, haven't you? I wonder we have managed to get through the day without a row!”

“So do I, ma'am,” said the cook. “Heaps of times I'd have given you warning for twopence, but you never gave me ought to lay hold on.”

A horrid wind sprang up and moaned us off to sleep. I thought once or twice of George out on the Mediterranean on a tippity yacht, and didn't quite want him to get drowned, though he had made us live in such an uncomfortable house. I had tried to colonize a little, and put up a photograph of Mother done at Ramsgate in a blue frame, to make me feel more at home. Ariadne had hung up all her necklaces on a row of nails. She has forty. There is one made of dried marrowfat peas, that she nibbles when she is nervous, and another of horse's jesses, or whatever you call them, sewn on red velvet. We have a bed each, costing fourteen-and-six. They are apt to shut up with you in them. There is no carpet in our room, and there are not to be any. We are to be hardy. Nothing rouses one like a touch of cold floor in the mornings, and cools one on hot nights better than the same. Our water-jug too is an odd shape. I tilted all the water out of it on to the floor the first time I tried to use it. It must be French, it is so small. I shall not wash my hands very often in the days to come, I fancy.

Ariadne began to get reconciled to our room when she had made up her mind it was like the bower of a mediæval chatelaine, or like Princess Ursula's bedroom in *Carpaccio*, but I prefer Early Victorian, and cried myself to sleep.

Next morning Ben come along; he had stayed all night at the Hitchings', in Corinth Road. Jessie Hitchings likes Ben best of the family. She may marry him, when he is grown up, if she likes. He has birth, but no education, so that will make them even. The only glimmering of hope I see for Ben is that in this house there seems to be no bedroom for him, unless it is a room at the top with all the water tanks in it, which makes me think perhaps George is going to send him to school? For the present we have arranged him a bed in the butler's pantry. Ben says perhaps George means him to be butler, as he has laid it down as a rule that only women servants are to be used in *Cinque Cento House*. They look so much nicer than men, George says; he likes a houseful of waving cap-ribbons. Mother thinks she can work a house best on one servant, and better still on none. George doesn't mind her having any amount of boys from the Home near here, but that doesn't suit Mother. She says one boy isn't much good, that two boys is only one and a half, and that three boys is no boy at all. I suppose they get playing together? Ariadne and I would, in their place, I know, and human nature is the same, even in a Home, though I can't call ours quite that.

CHAPTER VI

GEORGE makes a point of refusing to be interviewed. He hates it, unless it is for one of the best papers. Then he says that it is a sheer kindness, and that a successful man has no right to refuse some poor devil or other the chance of making an honest pound or two. So he suffers him gladly. He even is good enough to work on the thing a little in the proof: just to give the poor fellow a lift, and prevent him making a fool of himself and getting his facts all wrong. In the end George writes the whole thing entirely from beginning to end, and makes the man a present of a complete magazine article, and a very fine one too!

“I have been generous,” he tells us. “I have offered myself up as a burnt sacrifice. I have given myself all, without reservation. I have nothing extenuated, everything set down in malice. I have owned to strange sins that I never committed, to idiosyncrasies that took me all my time to invent, and all to bump out an article by some one else. I have been butchered to make a journalistic holiday!”

This is all very nice and self-sacrificing of George, but this particular interview read very well when it came out, and made George seem a very interesting sort of man with some quaint habits, not half so funny as his real ones, though, and I think the interviewer might just as well have given those.

So, when I got a chance of telling the truth, I did, meaning to act for the best, and give Papa a good show and save him the trouble of telling it all himself, but nobody gave me credit for my good intentions, and kind heart.

In the first place, how dared I put myself forward and offer to see George’s visitors! But the young man asked for me—at least, when he was told that George was out, he said might he see one of the young ladies? Of course I don’t suppose that would have occurred to him, only I was leaning over the new aluminium bannisters, and caught his eye. Then an idea seemed to come into his head. The look of disappointment that had come over him when he was told that George was out changed to a little happy perky look, as if he had just thought of something amusing. He crooked his little finger at me as I slid down the bannister, and said would I do? and would he come in? Kate is a cheeky girl, but even the cook admits that Kate is not a patch upon me. Kate evidently didn’t think it quite right, but she slunk away into the back premises, and left me to deal with the young man.

He handed me a card. I thought that very polite of him, and “*Mr. Frederick Cook,*” and Representative of *The Bittern* down in the corner, explained it all to me. We take in about a hundred rags, and that’s the name of one of them. It’s called *The Bittern* because it booms people, so George says.

“I suppose you have come to interview my Father,” I said. “I’m sorry, but he is out. Did you have an appointment?”

“No, I didn’t,” said the young man right out.

I liked his nice bold way of speaking; he was the least shy young man I ever met.

“I don’t believe in appointments. The subject is conscious, primed, braced up, ready with a series of cards, so to speak, which he wishes to force on the patient public—a collection of least characteristic facts which he would like dragged into prominence. It is as if a man should go to the dentist with his mind made up as to the number of teeth that he is to have pulled out, a decision which should always rest with any dentist who respects himself.”

He went running on like that, not a bit shy, or anything, and amused me very much.

“But then the worst of that is, you’ve got no appointment with George, and he is not here to have his teeth pulled out.”

I really so far wasn’t quite sure if he was an interviewer or a dentist, but I kept calm.

“All the better, my dear young lady, that is if you are willing to aid and abet me a little. Then we shall have a thundering good interview, I can promise you. You see, in my theory of interviewing, the actual collaboration of the patient—shall we call him?—is unnecessary. Indeed, it is more in the

nature of an impediment. My method, which of course I have very few opportunities of practising, is to seek out his nearest and dearest, those who have the privilege—or annoyance—of seeing him at all hours, at all seasons, unawares. If a painter, 'tis the wife of his brush that I would question; if an author, the partner of his pen—do you take me?”

Yes, I “took” him, and as George had called me a cockatrice—a very favourite term of abuse with him—only that morning, and remembering how she swaggers about being George’s Egeria, I said, “You’ll have to go to Lady Scilly for that!”

“Quite so!” he said very naturally. “Your distinguished parent dedicated his last book to her, did he not? Did you approve, may I ask?”

“No,” I said. “People should always dedicate all their works to their wife, whether they love her or not, that’s what I think!”

“Quite so,” he said again. “I see we agree famously, and between us we shall concoct a splendid interview. But now, if you would be so very good, and happen to have a small portion of leisure at your disposal—”

“I’ll do what I can for you,” I said, delighted at his nice polite way of putting things. “I’ll take you round the house, shall I? Have you a Kodak with you? Would you like to take a snapshot at George’s typewriter?”

“Certainly, if she is pretty,” said the silly man, and I explained that Miss Mander was out, and that it was the machine I meant. He said one machine was very like another, but that if he might see the study, where so many beautiful thoughts had taken shape? He said it quite gravely, but I felt he was laughing in his jacket all the time.

“We’ll take it all *seriam!*” I said, not wishing him to have all the fine words. “And we will begin at the beginning—I mean the atrium.”

He had a little pocket-book in his hand, and he said, as I led the way through the hall, “You won’t mind my writing things down as they occur to me?”

“Not at all!” I said. “If you will let me look at what you have written. I see you have put a lot already.”

He laughed and handed me his book, and I read—

“Through dusky suites, lit by stained glass windows, whose dim cloistral light, falling on lurid hangings and gorgeous masses of Titianesque drapery, and antique ebon panelling, irresistibly suggest the languorous mysteries of a mediæval palace.... Do you think your father will like this style?”

“You have made it rather stuffy—piled it on a good deal, the drapery and hangings, I mean!” I said. “Now that I know the sort of thing you write, I shan’t want to read any more.”

“I thought you wouldn’t,” he said, taking it back. “I’ll read it to you. *‘Behind this arras might lurk Benvenuto and his dagger—’*”

“Not Ben’s dagger, but Papa’s bicycle.”

“We’ll leave it there and keep it out of the interview,” he said. “It would spoil the unity of the effect. *‘On, on, through softly-carpeted ante-rooms where the footstep softer falls, than petals of blown roses on the grass....’*”

“I hate poetry!” I said. “And we mayn’t walk on that part of the carpet for fear of blurring the Magellanic clouds in the pattern. Do you know anything about Magellanic clouds in carpets?”

“No, I confess I have never trod them before,” he said, becoming all at once respectful to me. I expect he lives in a garret, and has no carpet at all, and I thought I would be good to him, and help him to bump out his article, and not cram him, but tell him where things really came from. So I drew his attention particularly to the aluminium eagle, and the pinchbeck serpent George picked up in Wardour Street. I left out George’s famous yarn about the sack of our ancestral Palace in Turin in the fifteenth century, when the Veros were finally disseminated or dissipated, whichever it is. I don’t believe it myself, but George always accounts for his swarthy complexion by his Italian grandmother. Aunt Gerty says it is all his grandmother, or in other words, all liver!

We went down-stairs into the study, which is the largest room in the house.

“Your father has realized the wish of the Psalmist,” said *The Bittern* man. “*Set my feet in a large room!*”

“He likes to have room to spread himself,” I said, “and to swing cats—books in, I mean.”

“So your father uses missiles in the fury of composition?”

“Sometimes; but oftenest he swears, and that saves the books. He mostly swears. Look here!”

I had just found a piece of paper in Miss Mander’s handwriting, and on it was written, “Selections from the nervous vocabulary of Mr. Vero-Taylor during the last hour.”

The Bittern man looked at them, and, “By Jove! these are corkers!” he said. Then I thought perhaps I ought not to have let him see them. There was Drayton, the ironmonger’s bill lying about too, and I saw him raise his eyebrows at the last item, “*To one chased brass handle for coal-cellar door.*”

“That’s what I call being thorough!” said *The Bittern* man. “I’m thorough myself. See this interview when it is done!”

He was thorough. He looked at everything, and particularly asked to see the pen George uses. “Or perhaps he uses a stylograph?” he asked.

“Mercy, no!” I screamed out. “He would have an indigestion! This is his pen—at least, it is this week’s pen. George is wasteful of pens; he eats one a week.”

“Very interesting!” said he. “Most authors have a fetish, but I never heard of their eating their fetish before. This will make a nice fat paragraph. Come on!”

You see what friends we had become! We went into the dining-room, and I showed him the dresser, with all the blue china on, and the Turkey carpet spread on it, instead of a white one—that was how they had it in the Middle Ages. He sympathized with me about how uncomfortable Mediæval was, and if it wasn’t for the honour and glory of it, how much we preferred Early Victoria, when the drawers draw, and the mirrors reflect—there’s not one looking-glass in the house that poor Ariadne can see herself in when she’s dressing to go out to a party—or chairs that will bear sitting on. Why, there are four in one room that we are forbidden to sit upon on pain of sudden death!

“Very hard lines!” said *The Bittern* man. “I confess that this point of view had not occurred to me. I shall give prominence to it in my article. Art, like the car of some fanatical Juggernaut, crushing its votaries—”

“Yes,” I said. “Mother draped a flower-pot once, and sneaked Ariadne’s photograph into a plush frame. You should have heard George! ‘To think that any wife of his—’ ‘Cæsar’s wife must be above suspicion!’ And as for Ariadne, he had rather see her dead at his feet than folded in blue plush.”

“Capital!” said *The Bittern* man. “All good grist for the interview! And now, will you show me the famous metal stairs of which I have heard so much? There are no penalties attached to that, I trust?”

“Except that we are not allowed to go up them—Ariadne and me—without taking our boots off first, for fear of scratching the polish. We have to strip our feet in the housemaid’s pantry, and carry them up in our hands. That’s rather a bore, you will admit!”

“And your father? Does he bow to his own decrees?”

“Oh, no!” I said. “Papa is the exception that proves the rule.”

“Capital!” again remarked *The Bittern* man. “I am getting to know all about the great Mr. Vero-Taylor in the fierce light that beats upon the domestic hearth! But, by the way,” he said, with a little crooked look at me, “it is usual—shall I say something about Mrs. Vero-Taylor? People generally like an allusion—just a hint of feminine presence—say the mistress of the house flitting about, tending her ferns, or what not?”

“You must put her in the kitchen, then,” I said, “tending her servants. Would you like to see her?”

“I should not like to disturb her,” he said politely. “Will you describe her for me?”

“Oh, mother’s nice and thin—a good figure—I should hate to have one of those feather-beddy mothers, don’t you know? But I don’t really think you need describe her. I don’t think she cares about being in the interview, thank you, but you may say that my sister Ariadne is ravishingly beautiful, if you like?”

“And what about you, Miss—?” he asked, looking at me.

“Tempe Vero-Taylor,” I said. “But whatever you do, don’t put me in! George would have a fit! He won’t much like your mentioning Ariadne, but I don’t see why she shouldn’t have a show, if I can give her one.”

“Very well,” he said. “Your ladyship shall be obeyed. Now I really think I have got enough, unless—” I saw his eyes straying up-stairs.

“There’s nothing much to see up those stairs, except George’s bedroom, and I daren’t take you in there. It is quite commonplace, too; not like the rest of the house, but very, *very* comfortable.”

“Oho! Your father reminds me of the man who plays Othello, and doesn’t trouble to black more than his face and arms,” said *The Bittern* man. “And *your* rooms?”

“Oh, our rooms are cupboards. Bowers, George calls them, and says we have more room to keep our clothes in than the lady of a mediæval castle would have. Now that’s all, and—”

The truth was, I wanted him to go before George came home, for I thought it might be awkward for me if I were found entertaining a newspaper man. George might have preferred to do his own interview, who knows? This reflection only just occurred to me, as all reflections do, too late. *The Bittern* man was very quick, however, and understood me. He thanked me very much, far more than he need, for on reflection I did not see how he was going to make an interview out of all the scrappy things I had told him, and I said so. He assured me I need be under no uneasiness on that score, that this particular interview would be unique of its kind, and would gain him great credit with his editor, and increase the circulation of the paper. If it had nothing else, he said, it would at least have a *succès de scandale*, at least I think that is what he said, for I don’t understand French very well. While he was making all those pretty speeches we stood in the hall, and I heard the little grating noise in the lock that meant that George was fitting his key in, and oh, how I just longed to run away! But I didn’t. George opened the door, and came in and shook off his big fur coat. Then he saw *The Bittern* man and came forward, and *The Bittern* man came forward too, with his funny little smile on his face that somehow reminds me of the Pied Piper we used to read of when we were little.

“I came from *The Bittern*,” he said, and George nodded, to show he knew what for. “To ask you to grant me the favour of an interview—”

“I am sorry I happened to be out!” began George, and then I knew, by the sound of his voice, that *The Bittern* was a *good* paper. “But if it is not too late, I shall be happy—”

“No need, no need to trouble you now, my dear sir,” the interviewer said, waving his hand a little. “I came, and I go not empty away, but with the material of a dozen articles of sovereign interest in my pocket. You left an admirable *locum tenens* in the person of your daughter here, who kindly consented to be my cicerone and relieved me of the necessity of troubling *you*. You will doubtless be relieved also. I shall have the pleasure of sending you a proof to-morrow. Good-day!”

And before George could say what he wanted to say, Mr. Cook had opened the door for himself and had gone. I said he had plenty of cheek. George said so, too, and a great deal worse. I was black and blue for a week, and *The Bittern* man never sent a proof after all, so when the article came out—“*Interviewing, New Style. A Talk with Miss Tempe Vero-Taylor*,”—I got some more. That is the first and last time I was ever interviewed. George has peculiar theories about interviewing, I see, and I shall not interfere with them in future. I should think Mr. Frederick Cook would get on, making tools of honest children to serve his ambition like that. George didn’t punish him, of course, he is a power on a paper; while I am but a child in the nursery.

CHAPTER VII

I WONDER if other families have got tame countesses, who come bothering and interfering in their affairs? I don't mind our having a house-warming party at all, but I do hate that it should be to please Lady Scilly.

"A party! A party!" she said to George, clasping her hands in her silly way. "My party on the table!" like the woman in the play of *Ibsen*. "Ask all the dear, amusing literary people that I adore. And I'll bring a large contingent of smart people, if I may, to meet them. Please, *please!*"

I don't know what a contingent is, but I fancy it's something disagreeable. Lady Scilly is George's friend, not Mother's. She has only called on Mother once, and that was in the old house, and then Mother was not receiving as they call it, so she has never even seen the mistress of the house where she is going to give the party. Christina Mander, George's secretary, says that is quite the new way of doing things, and she has been about a great deal, and ought to know.

Miss Mander is a lady. She is very thin, one of those lath-and-plaster women, you know, that seem to live to support a small waist that is their greatest beauty, but when we first knew her, she was plump and jolly-looking. We practically got her for George. Years ago, when we were quite little and had had measles, we were sent down to a sort of boarding-house at Ramsgate to an old lady, an ex-dresser in some theatre Aunt Gerty knew, and who could neither see to mend or to keep us in order, though she got thirty shillings a week for doing it. They never got us up till nine; I suppose the slavey thought sufficient for the day was the evil thereof, and tried to make the evil's day as short as possible. One morning when it was quite nine, and the sun was shining in, Ariadne and I were feeling frightfully bored, so we got up in our night-gowns, moved a wardrobe, and found a door behind it into another house. It was quite a smart house, with soft plush carpets and nicely-varnished yellow doors. We went all over it. Only the cat was awake, licking herself in the window-seat. The bedroom doors were all shut except one, and we went in and found a nice girl in bed with her gold hair all spread over the pillow. She didn't seem shocked at us, but laughed, and when we had explained, she wished us to get into the bed beside her. It had sheets trimmed with lace, and her initials, C. M., on the pillow. We did this every morning till we went away. She kept us up, afterwards sending us Christmas cards and so on, and when George advertised for a secretary to help him to sub-edit *Wild Oats*, she answered it, among the thousand others, and we remembered her name and made George engage her.

She had been to Girton, and to a journalistic school, and Mr. D'Auban's dancing academy, and to Klondike—where all her hair got cut off, so that she hasn't enough to spread over the pillow now—and behind the scenes at a music-hall, and a month on the stage, and edited a paper once and wrote a novel. All before she was thirty! At every new arrangement for amusement she made her people opposed her, and prayed for her in church. But she always got her own way in the end. Her mother, Mrs. Stephen Cadwallis Mander, came here to sniff about when George first took Christina on. She is a woman of the world, tortoise-shell *pince-nez*.

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