

GALSWORTHY JOHN

PLAYS :
FOURTH
SERIES

John Galsworthy
Plays : Fourth Series

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A BIT O' LOVE

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

**MICHAEL STRANGWAY BEATRICE STRANGWAY
MRS. BRADMERE JIM BERE JACK CREMER
MRS. BURLACOMBE BURLACOMBE TRUSTAFORD
JARLAND CLYST FREMAN GODLEIGH SOL POTTER
MORSE, AND OTHERS IVY BURLACOMBE CONNIE
TRUSTAFORD GLADYS FREMAN MERCY JARLAND
TIBBY JARLAND BOBBIE JARLAND**

SCENE: A VILLAGE OF THE WEST

The Action passes on Ascension Day.

ACT I. STRANGWAY'S rooms at BURLACOMBE'S.

Morning.

ACT II. Evening

SCENE I. The Village Inn. SCENE II. The same. SCENE

III. Outside the church.

ACT III. Evening

SCENE I. STRANGWAY'S rooms. SCENE II.

BURLACOMBE'S barn.

A BIT O' LOVE

ACT I

It is Ascension Day in a village of the West. In the low panelled hall-sittingroom of the BURLACOMBE'S farmhouse on the village green, MICHAEL STRANGWAY, a clerical collar round his throat and a dark Norfolk jacket on his back, is playing the flute before a very large framed photograph of a woman, which is the only picture on the walls. His age is about thirty-five his figure thin and very upright and his clean-shorn face thin, upright, narrow, with long and rather pointed ears; his dark hair is brushed in a coxcomb off his forehead. A faint smile hovers about his lips that Nature has made rather full and he has made thin, as though keeping a hard secret; but his bright grey eyes, dark round the rim, look out and upwards almost as if he were being crucified. There is something about the whole of him that makes him seem not quite present. A gentle creature, burnt within.

A low broad window above a window-seat forms the background to his figure; and through its lattice panes are seen the outer gate and yew-trees of a churchyard and the porch of a church, bathed in May sunlight. The front door at right angles to the window-seat, leads to the village green, and a door on the left into the house.

It is the third movement of Veracini's violin sonata that STRANGWAY plays. His back is turned to the door into

the house, and he does not hear when it is opened, and IVY BURLACOMBE, the farmer's daughter, a girl of fourteen, small and quiet as a mouse, comes in, a prayer-book in one hand, and in the other a glass of water, with wild orchis and a bit of deep pink hawthorn. She sits down on the window-seat, and having opened her book, sniffs at the flowers. Coming to the end of the movement STRANGWAY stops, and looking up at the face on the wall, heaves a long sigh.

IVY. [From the seat] I picked these for you, Mr. Strangway.

STRANGWAY. [Turning with a start] Ah! Ivy. Thank you.

[He puts his flute down on a chair against the far wall] Where are the others?

As he speaks, GLADYS FREMAN, a dark gipsyish girl, and CONNIE TRUSTAFORD, a fair, stolid, blue-eyed Saxon, both about sixteen, come in through the front door, behind which they have evidently been listening. They too have prayer-books in their hands. They sidle past Ivy, and also sit down under the window.

GLADYS. Mercy's comin', Mr. Strangway.

STRANGWAY. Good morning, Gladys; good morning, Connie.

He turns to a book-case on a table against the far wall, and taking out a book, finds his place in it. While he stands thus with his back to the girls, MERCY JARLAND comes in from the green. She also is about sixteen, with fair hair and china-blue eyes. She glides in quickly, hiding something behind her, and sits down on the seat next the door. And at

once there is a whispering.

STRANGWAY. [Turning to them] Good morning, Mercy.

MERCY. Good morning, Mr. Strangway.

STRANGWAY. Now, yesterday I was telling you what our Lord's coming meant to the world. I want you to understand that before He came there wasn't really love, as we know it. I don't mean to say that there weren't many good people; but there wasn't love for the sake of loving. D'you think you understand what I mean?

MERCY fidgets. GLADYS'S eyes are following a fly.

IVY. Yes, Mr. Strangway.

STRANGWAY. It isn't enough to love people because they're good to you, or because in some way or other you're going to get something by it. We have to love because we love loving. That's the great thing —without that we're nothing but Pagans.

GLADYS. Please, what is Pagans?

STRANGWAY. That's what the first Christians called the people who lived in the villages and were not yet Christians, Gladys.

MERCY. We live in a village, but we're Christians.

STRANGWAY. [With a smile] Yes, Mercy; and what is a Christian?

MERCY kicks afoot, sideways against her neighbour, frowns over her china-blare eyes, is silent; then, as his question passes on, makes a quick little face, wriggles, and looks behind her.

STRANGWAY. Ivy?

IVY. 'Tis a man—whu—whu—

STRANGWAY. Yes?—Connie?

CONNIE. [Who speaks rather thickly, as if she had a permanent slight cold] Please, Mr. Strangway, 'tis a man what goes to church.

GLADYS. He 'as to be baptised—and confirmed; and—and—buried.

IVY. 'Tis a man whu—whu's gude and—

GLADYS. He don't drink, an' he don't beat his horses, an' he don't hit back.

MERCY. [Whispering] 'Tisn't your turn. [To STRANGWAY] 'Tis a man like us.

IVY. I know what Mrs. Strangway said it was, 'cause I asked her once, before she went away.

STRANGWAY. [Startled] Yes?

IVY. She said it was a man whu forgave everything.

STRANGWAY. Ah!

The note of a cuckoo comes travelling. The girls are gazing at STRANGWAY, who seems to have gone of into a dream. They begin to fidget and whisper.

CONNIE. Please, Mr. Strangway, father says if yu hit a man and he don't hit yu back, he's no gude at all.

MERCY. When Tommy Morse wouldn't fight, us pinched him—he did squeal! [She giggles] Made me laugh!

STRANGWAY. Did I ever tell you about St. Francis of

Assisi?

IVY. [Clasping her hands] No.

STRANGWAY. Well, he was the best Christian, I think, that ever lived—simply full of love and joy.

IVY. I expect he's dead.

STRANGWAY. About seven hundred years, Ivy.

IVY. [Softly] Oh!

STRANGWAY. Everything to him was brother or sister—the sun and the moon, and all that was poor and weak and sad, and animals and birds, so that they even used to follow him about.

MERCY. I know! He had crumbs in his pocket.

STRANGWAY. No; he had love in his eyes.

IVY. 'Tis like about Orpheus, that yu told us.

STRANGWAY. Ah! But St. Francis was a Christian, and Orpheus was a Pagan.

IVY. Oh!

STRANGWAY. Orpheus drew everything after him with music; St. Francis by love.

IVY. Perhaps it was the same, really.

STRANGWAY. [looking at his flute] Perhaps it was, Ivy.

GLADYS. Did 'e 'ave a flute like yu?

IVY. The flowers smell sweeter when they 'ear music; they du.
[She holds up the glass of flowers.]

STRANGWAY. [Touching one of the orchis] What's the name of this one?

[The girls cluster; save MERCY, who is taking a stealthy

interest in what she has behind her.]

CONNIE. We call it a cuckoo, Mr. Strangway.

GLADYS. 'Tis awful common down by the streams. We've got one medder where 'tis so thick almost as the goldie cups.

STRANGWAY. Odd! I've never noticed it.

IVY. Please, Mr. Strangway, yu don't notice when yu're walkin'; yu go along like this.

[She holds up her face as one looking at the sky.]

STRANGWAY. Bad as that, Ivy?

IVY. Mrs. Strangway often used to pick it last spring.

STRANGWAY. Did she? Did she?

[He has gone off again into a kind of dream.]

MERCY. I like being confirmed.

STRANGWAY. Ah! Yes. Now—What's that behind you, Mercy?

MERCY. [Engagingly producing a cage a little bigger than a mouse-trap, containing a skylark] My skylark.

STRANGWAY. What!

MERCY. It can fly; but we're goin' to clip its wings. Bobbie caught it.

STRANGWAY. How long ago?

MERCY. [Conscious of impending disaster] Yesterday.

STRANGWAY. [White hot] Give me the cage!

MERCY. [Puckering] I want my skylark. [As he steps up to her and takes the cage—thoroughly alarmed] I gave Bobbie thrippence for it!

STRANGWAY. [Producing a sixpence] There!

MERCY. [Throwing it down-passionately] I want my skylark!

STRANGWAY. God made this poor bird for the sky and the grass. And you put it in that! Never cage any wild thing! Never!

MERCY. [Faint and sullen] I want my skylark.

STRANGWAY. [Taking the cage to the door] No! [He holds up the cage and opens it] Off you go, poor thing!

[The bird flies out and away. The girls watch with round eyes the fling up of his arm, and the freed bird flying away.]

IVY. I'm glad!

[MERCY kicks her viciously and sobs. STRANGWAY comes from the door, looks at MERCY sobbing, and suddenly clasps his head. The girls watch him with a queer mixture of wonder, alarm, and disapproval.]

GLADYS. [Whispering] Don't cry, Mercy. Bobbie'll soon catch yu another.

[STRANGWAY has dropped his hands, and is looking again at MERCY. IVY sits with hands clasped, gazing at STRANGWAY. MERCY continues her artificial sobbing.]

STRANGWAY. [Quietly] The class is over for to-day.

[He goes up to MERCY, and holds out his hand. She does not take it, and runs out knuckling her eyes. STRANGWAY turns on his heel and goes into the house.]

CONNIE. 'Twasn't his bird.

IVY. Skylarks belong to the sky. Mr. Strangway said so.

GLADYS. Not when they'm caught, they don't.

IVY. They du.

CONNIE. 'Twas her bird.

IVY. He gave her sixpence for it.

GLADYS. She didn't take it.

CONNIE. There it is on the ground.

IVY. She might have.

GLADYS. He'll p'raps take my squirrel, tu.

IVY. The bird sang—I 'eard it! Right up in the sky. It wouldn't have sanged if it weren't glad.

GLADYS. Well, Mercy cried.

IVY. I don't care.

GLADYS. 'Tis a shame! And I know something. Mrs. Strangway's at Durford.

CONNIE. She's—never!

GLADYS. I saw her yesterday. An' if she's there she ought to be here. I told mother, an' she said: "Yu mind yer business." An' when she goes in to market to-morrow she'm goin' to see. An' if she's really there, mother says, 'tis a fine tu-du an' a praaper scandal. So I know a lot more'n yu du.

[Ivy stares at her.]

CONNIE. Mrs. Strangway told mother she was goin' to France for the winter because her mother was ill.

GLADYS. 'Tisn't, winter now—Ascension Day. I saw her cumin' out o' Dr. Desert's house. I know 'twas her because she had on a blue dress an' a proud luke. Mother says the doctor

come over here tu often before Mrs. Strangway went away, just afore Christmas. They was old sweethearts before she married Mr. Strangway. [To Ivy] 'Twas yure mother told mother that.

[Ivy gazes at them more and more wide-eyed.]

CONNIE. Father says if Mrs. Bradmere an' the old Rector knew about the doctor, they wouldn't 'ave Mr. Strangway 'ere for curate any longer; because mother says it takes more'n a year for a gude wife to leave her 'usband, an' 'e so fond of her. But 'tisn't no business of ours, father says.

GLADYS. Mother says so tu. She's praaper set against gossip. She'll know all about it to-morrow after market.

IVY. [Stamping her foot] I don't want to 'ear nothin' at all; I don't, an' I won't.

[A rather shame faced silence falls on the girls.]

GLADYS. [In a quick whisper] 'Ere's Mrs. Burlacombe.

[There enters fawn the house a stout motherly woman with a round grey eye and very red cheeks.]

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Ivy, take Mr. Strangway his ink, or we'll never 'eve no sermon to-night. He'm in his thinkin' box, but 'tis not a bit o' yuse 'im thinkin' without 'is ink. [She hands her daughter an inkpot and blotting-pad. Ivy Takes them and goes out] What ever's this? [She picks up the little bird-cage.]

GLADYS. 'Tis Mercy Jarland's. Mr. Strangway let her skylark go.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Aw! Did 'e now? Serve 'er right, bringin' an 'eathen bird to confirmation class.

CONNIE. I'll take it to her.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. No. Yu leave it there, an' let Mr. Strangway du what 'e likes with it. Bringin' a bird like that! Well 'I never!

[The girls, perceiving that they have lighted on stony soil, look at each other and slide towards the door.]

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Yes, yu just be off, an' think on what yu've been told in class, an' be'ave like Christians, that's gude maids. An' don't yu come no more in the 'avenin's dancin' them 'eathen dances in my barn, naighther, till after yu'm confirmed—'t isn't right. I've told Ivy I won't 'ave it.

CONNIE. Mr. Strangway don't mind—he likes us to; 'twas Mrs. Strangway began teachin' us. He's goin' to give a prize.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Yu just du what I tell yu an' never mind Mr. Strangway—he'm tu kind to everyone. D'yu think I don't know how gells oughter be'ave before confirmation? Yu be'ave like I did! Now, goo ahn! Shoo!

[She hustles them out, rather as she might hustle her chickens, and begins tidying the room. There comes a wandering figure to the open window. It is that of a man of about thirty-five, of feeble gait, leaning the weight of all one side of him on a stick. His dark face, with black hair, one lock of which has gone white, was evidently once that of an ardent man. Now it is slack, weakly smiling, and the brown eyes are lost, and seem always to be asking something to which there is no answer.]

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [With that forced cheerfulness always assumed in the face of too great misfortune] Well, Jim! better? [At the faint brightening of the smile] That's right! Yu'm gettin' on bravely. Want Parson?

JIM. [Nodding and smiling, and speaking slowly] I want to tell 'un about my cat.

[His face loses its smile.]

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Why! what's she been duin' then? Mr. Strangway's busy. Won't I du?

JIM. [Shaking his head] No. I want to tell him.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Whatever she been duin'? Havin' kittens?

JIM. No. She'm lost.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Dearie me! Aw! she'm not lost. Cats be like maids; they must get out a bit.

JIM. She'm lost. Maybe he'll know where she'll be.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Well, well. I'll go an' find 'im.

JIM. He's a gude man. He's very gude.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. That's certain zure.

STRANGWAY. [Entering from the house] Mrs. Burlacombe, I can't think where I've put my book on St. Francis—the large, squarish pale-blue one?

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Aw! there now! I knu there was somethin' on me mind. Miss Willis she came in yesterday afternune when yu was out, to borrow it. Oh! yes—I said—I'm zure Mr. Strangway'll lend it 'ee. Now think o' that!

STRANGWAY. Of course, Mrs. Burlacombe; very glad she's got it.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Aw! but that's not all. When I tuk it up there come out a whole flutter o' little bits o' paper wi' little rhymes on 'em, same as I see yu writin'. Aw! my gudeness! I says to meself, Mr. Strangway widn' want no one seein' them.

STRANGWAY. Dear me! No; certainly not!

MRS. BURLACOMBE. An' so I putt 'em in your secretary.

STRANGWAY. My-ah! Yes. Thank yu; yes.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. But I'll goo over an' get the buke for yu. 'T won't take me 'alf a minit.

[She goes out on to the green. JIM BERE has come in.]

STRANGWAY. [Gently] Well, Jim?

JIM. My cat's lost.

STRANGWAY. Lost?

JIM. Day before yesterday. She'm not come back. They've shot 'er, I think; or she'm caught in one o' they rabbit-traps.

STRANGWAY. Oh! no; my dear fellow, she'll come back. I'll speak to Sir Herbert's keepers.

JIM. Yes, zurr. I feel lonesome without 'er.

STRANGWAY. [With a faint smile—more to himself than to Jim] Lonesome! Yes! That's bad, Jim! That's bad!

JIM. I miss 'er when I sits than in the avenin'.

STRANGWAY. The evenings—They're the worst—and when the blackbirds sing in the morning.

JIM. She used to lie on my bed, ye know, zurr.

[STRANGWAY turns his face away, contracted with pain]
She'm like a Christian.

STRANGWAY. The beasts are.

JIM. There's plenty folk ain't 'alf as Christian as 'er be.

STRANGWAY. Well, dear Jim, I'll do my very best. And any time you're lonely, come up, and I'll play the flute to you.

JIM. [Wriggling slightly] No, zurr. Thank 'ee, zurr.

STRANGWAY. What—don't you like music?

JIM. Ye-es, zurr. [A figure passes the window. Seeing it he says with his slow smile] "'Ere's Mrs. Bradmere, comin' from the Rectory." [With queer malice] She don't like cats. But she'm a cat 'erself, I think.

STRANGWAY. [With his smile] Jim!

JIM. She'm always tellin' me I'm lukin' better. I'm not better, zurr.

STRANGWAY. That's her kindness.

JIM. I don't think it is. 'Tis laziness, an' 'avin' 'er own way. She'm very fond of 'er own way.

[A knock on the door cuts off his speech. Following closely on the knock, as though no doors were licensed to be closed against her, a grey-haired lady enters; a capable, broad-faced woman of seventy, whose every tone and movement exhales authority. With a nod and a "good morning" to STRANGWAY she turns at face to JIM BERE.]

MRS. BRADMERE Ah! Jim; you're looking better.

[JIM BERE shakes his head. MRS. BRADMERE. Oh! yes, you are. Getting on splendidly. And now, I just want to speak to Mr. Strangway.]

[JIM BERE touches his forelock, and slowly, leaning on his stick, goes out.]

MRS. BRADMERE. [Waiting for the door to close] You know how that came on him? Caught the girl he was engaged to, one night, with another man, the rage broke something here. [She touches her forehead] Four years ago.

STRANGWAY. Poor fellow!

MRS. BRADMERE. [Looking at him sharply] Is your wife back?

STRANGWAY. [Starting] No.

MRS. BRADMERE. By the way, poor Mrs. Cremer—is she any better?

STRANGWAY. No; going fast: Wonderful—so patient.

MRS. BRADMERE. [With gruff sympathy] Um! Yes. They know how to die! [Wide another sharp look at him] D'you expect your wife soon?

STRANGWAY. I I—hope so.

MRS. BRADMERE: So do I. The sooner the better.

STRANGWAY. [Shrinking] I trust the Rector's not suffering so much this morning?

MRS. BRADMERE. Thank you! His foot's very bad.

[As she speaks Mrs. BURLACOMBE returns with a large pale-blue book in her bared.]

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Good day, M'm! [Taking the book across to STRANGWAY] Miss Willie, she says she'm very sorry, zurr.

STRANGWAY. She was very welcome, Mrs. Burlacombe. [To MRS. BURLACOMBE] Forgive me—my sermon.

[He goes into the house. The two women graze after him. Then, at once, as it were, draw into themselves, as if preparing for an encounter, and yet seem to expand as if losing the need for restraint.]

MRS. BRADMERE. [Abruptly] He misses his wife very much, I'm afraid.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Ah! Don't he? Poor dear man; he keeps a terrible tight 'and over 'imself, but 'tis suthin' cruel the way he walks about at night. He'm just like a cow when its calf's weaned. 'T'as gone to me 'eart truly to see 'im these months past. T'other day when I went up to du his rume, I yeard a noise like this [she sniffs]; an' ther' 'e was at the wardrobe, snuffin' at 'er things. I did never think a man cud care for a woman so much as that.

MRS. BRADMERE. H'm!

MRS. BURLACOMBE. 'Tis funny rest an' 'e comin' 'ere for quiet after that tearin' great London parish! 'E'm terrible absent-minded tu —don't take no interest in 'is fude. Yesterday, goin' on for one o'clock, 'e says to me, "I expect 'tis nearly breakfast-time, Mrs. Burlacombe!" 'E'd 'ad it twice already!

MRS. BRADMERE. Twice! Nonsense!

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Zurely! I give 'im a nummit afore 'e gets up; an' 'e 'as 'is brekjus reg'lar at nine. Must feed un up. He'm on 'is feet all day, gain' to zee folk that widden want to zee an angel, they're that busy; an' when 'e comes in 'e'll play 'is flute there. Hem wastin' away for want of 'is wife. That's what 'tis. An' 'im so sweet-spoken, tu, 'tes a pleasure to year 'im—Never says a word!

MRS. BRADMERE. Yes, that's the kind of man who gets treated badly. I'm afraid she's not worthy of him, Mrs. Burlacombe.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [Plaiting her apron] 'Tesn't for me to zay that. She'm a very pleasant lady.

MRS. BRADMERE Too pleasant. What's this story about her being seen in Durford?

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Aw! I du never year no gossip, m'm.

MRS. BRADMERE. [Drily] Of course not! But you see the Rector wishes to know.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [Flustered] Well—folk will talk! But, as I says to Burlacombe—"Tes paltry," I says; and they only married eighteen months, and Mr. Strangway so devoted-like. 'Tes nothing but love, with 'im.

MRS. BRADMERE. Come!

MRS. BURLACOMBE. There's puzzivantin' folk as'll set an' gossip the feathers off an angel. But I du never listen.

MRS. BRADMERE Now then, Mrs. Burlacombe?

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Well, they du say as how Dr. Desart

over to Durford and Mrs. Strangway was sweethearts afore she wer' married.

MRS. BRADMERE. I knew that. Who was it saw her coming out of Dr. Desart's house yesterday?

MRS. BURLACOMBE. In a manner of spakin' 'tes Mrs. Freman that says 'er Gladys seen her.

MRS. BRADMERE. That child's got an eye like a hawk.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. 'Tes wonderful how things du spread. 'Tesn't as if us gossiped. Du seem to grow-like in the naight.

MRS. BRADMERE [To herself] I never lied her. That Riviera excuse, Mrs. Burlacombe—Very convenient things, sick mothers. Mr. Strangway doesn't know?

MRS. BURLACOMBE. The Lord forbid! 'Twid send un crazy, I think. For all he'm so moony an' gentlelike, I think he'm a terrible passionate man inside. He've a-got a saint in 'im, for zure; but 'tes only 'alf-baked, in a manner of spakin'.

MRS. BRADMERE. I shall go and see Mrs. Freman. There's been too much of this gossip all the winter.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. 'Tes unfortunate-like 'tes the Fremans. Freman he'm a gipsy sort of a feller; and he've never forgiven Mr. Strangway for spakin' to 'im about the way he trates 'is 'orses.

MRS. BRADMERE. Ah! I'm afraid Mr. Strangway's not too discreet when his feelings are touched.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. 'E've a-got an 'eart so big as the full

mun. But 'tes no yuse espectin' tu much o' this world. 'Tes a funny place, after that.

MRS. BRADMERE. Yes, Mrs. Burlacombe; and I shall give some of these good people a rare rap over the knuckles for their want of charity. For all they look as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, they're an un-Christian lot. [Looking very directly at Mrs. BURLACOMBE] It's lucky we've some hold over the village. I'm not going to have scandal. I shall speak to Sir Herbert, and he and the Rector will take steps.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [With covert malice] Aw! I du hope 'twon't upset the Rector, an' 'is fute so poptions!

MRS. BRADMERE. [Grimly] His foot'll be sound enough to come down sharp. By the way, will you send me a duck up to the Rectory?

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [Glad to get away] Zurely, m'm; at once. I've some luv'ly fat birds.

[She goes into the house.]

MRS. BRADMERE. Old puss-cat!

[She turns to go, and in the doorway encounters a very little, red-cheeked girl in a peacock-blue cap, and pink frock, who curtsies stolidly.]

MRS. BRADMERE. Well, Tibby Jarland, what do you want here? Always sucking something, aren't you?

[Getting no reply from Tibby JARLAND, she passes out. Tibby comes in, looks round, takes a large sweet out of her mouth, contemplates it, and puts it back again. Then, in

a perfunctory and very stolid fashion, she looks about the floor, as if she had been told to find something. While she is finding nothing and sucking her sweet, her sister MERCY comes in furtively, still frowning and vindictive.]

MERCY. What! Haven't you found it, Tibby? Get along with 'ee, then!

[She accelerates the stolid Tissy's departure with a smack, searches under the seat, finds and picks up the deserted sixpence. Then very quickly she goes to the door: But it is opened before she reaches it, and, finding herself caught, she slips behind the chintz window-curtain. A woman has entered, who is clearly the original of the large photograph. She is not strictly pretty, but there is charm in her pale, resolute face, with its mocking lips, flexible brows, and greenish eyes, whose lids, square above them, have short, dark lashes. She is dressed in blue, and her fair hair is coiled up under a cap and motor-veil. She comes in swiftly, and closes the door behind her; becomes irresolute; then, suddenly deciding, moves towards the door into the house. MERCY slips from behind her curtain to make off, but at that moment the door into the house is opened, and she has at once to slip back again into covert. It is Ivy who has appeared.]

IVY. [Amazed] Oh! Mrs. Strangway!

[Evidently disconcerted by this appearance, BEATRICE STRANGWAY pulls herself together and confronts the child with a smile.]

BEATRICE. Well, Ivy—you've grown! You didn't expect me, did you?

IVY. No, Mrs. Strangway; but I hoped yu'd be comin' soon.

BEATRICE. Ah! Yes. Is Mr. Strangway in?

IVY. [Hypnotized by those faintly smiling lips] Yes—oh, yes! He's writin' his sermon in the little room. He will be glad!

BEATRICE. [Going a little closer, and never taking her eyes off the child] Yes. Now, Ivy; will you do something for me?

IVY. [Fluttering] Oh, yes, Mrs. Strangway.

BEATRICE. Quite sure?

IVY. Oh, yes!

BEATRICE. Are you old enough to keep a secret?

IVY. [Nodding] I'm fourteen now.

BEATRICE. Well, then—, I don't want anybody but Mr. Strangway to know I've been here; nobody, not even your mother. D'you understand?

IVY. [Troubled] No. Only, I can keep a secret.

BEATRICE. Mind, if anybody hears, it will hurt Mr. Strangway.

IVY. Oh! I wouldn't—hurt—him. Must yu go away again? [Trembling towards her] I wish yu wer goin' to stay. And perhaps some one has seen yu—They—

BEATRICE. [Hastily] No, no one. I came motoring; like this. [She moves her veil to show how it can conceal her face] And I came straight down the little lane, and through the barn, across the yard.

IVY. [Timidly] People du see a lot.

BEATRICE. [Still with that hovering smile] I know, but—Now go and tell him quickly and quietly.

IVY. [Stopping at the door] Mother's pluckin' a duck. Only, please, Mrs. Strangway, if she comes in even after yu've gone, she'll know, because—because yu always have that particular nice scent.

BEATRICE. Thank you, my child. I'll see to that.

[Ivy looks at her as if she would speak again, then turns suddenly, and goes out. BEATRICE'S face darkens; she shivers. Taking out a little cigarette case, she lights a cigarette, and watches the puff's of smoke wreath about her and die away. The frightened MERCY peers out, spying for a chance, to escape. Then from the house STRANGWAY comes in. All his dreaminess is gone.]

STRANGWAY. Thank God! [He stops at the look on her face] I don't understand, though. I thought you were still out there.

BEATRICE. [Letting her cigarette fall, and putting her foot on it] No.

STRANGWAY: You're staying? Oh! Beatrice; come! We'll get away from here at once—as far, as far—anywhere you like. Oh! my darling —only come! If you knew—

BEATRICE. It's no good, Michael; I've tried and tried.

STRANGWAY. Not! Then, why—? Beatrice! You said, when you were right away—I've waited—

BEATRICE. I know. It's cruel—it's horrible. But I told you not to hope, Michael. I've done my best. All these months at Mentone, I've been wondering why I ever let you marry me—when that feeling wasn't dead!

STRANGWAY. You can't have come back just to leave me again?

BEATRICE. When you let me go out there with mother I thought—I did think I would be able; and I had begun—and then—spring came!

STRANGWAY. Spring came here too! Never so—aching! Beatrice, can't you?

BEATRICE. I've something to say.

STRANGWAY. No! No! No!

BEATRICE. You see—I've—fallen.

STRANGWAY. Ah! [In a twice sharpened by pain] Why, in the name of mercy, come here to tell me that? Was he out there, then?

BEATRICE. I came straight back to him.

STRANGWAY. To Durford?

BEATRICE. To the Crossway Hotel, miles out—in my own name. They don't know me there. I told you not to hope, Michael. I've done my best; I swear it.

STRANGWAY. My God!

BEATRICE. It was your God that brought us to live near him!

STRANGWAY. Why have you come to me like this?

BEATRICE. To know what you're going to do. Are you

going to divorce me? We're in your power. Don't divorce me—Doctor and patient—you must know—it ruins him. He'll lose everything. He'd be disqualified, and he hasn't a penny without his work.

STRANGWAY. Why should I spare him?

BEATRICE. Michael; I came to beg. It's hard.

STRANGWAY. No; don't beg! I can't stand it.

[She shakes her head.]

BEATRICE. [Recovering her pride] What are you going to do, then? Keep us apart by the threat of a divorce? Starve us and prison us? Cage me up here with you? I'm not brute enough to ruin him.

STRANGWAY. Heaven!

BEATRICE. I never really stopped loving him. I never—loved you, Michael.

STRANGWAY. [Stunned] Is that true? [BEATRICE bends her head] Never loved me? Not—that night—on the river—not—?

BEATRICE. [Under her breath] No.

STRANGWAY. Were you lying to me, then? Kissing me, and—hating me?

BEATRICE. One doesn't hate men like you; but it wasn't love.

STRANGWAY. Why did you tell me it was?

BEATRICE. Yes. That was the worst thing I've ever done.

STRANGWAY. Do you think I would have married you? I would have burned first! I never dreamed you didn't. I swear it!

BEATRICE. [Very low] Forget it!

STRANGWAY. Did he try to get you away from me?

[BEATRICE gives him a swift look] Tell me the truth!

BEATRICE. No. It was—I—alone. But—he loves me.

STRANGWAY. One does not easily know love, it seems.

[But her smile, faint, mysterious, pitying, is enough, and he turns away from her.]

BEATRICE. It was cruel to come, I know. For me, too. But I couldn't write. I had to know.

STRANGWAY. Never loved me? Never loved me? That night at Tregaron? [At the look on her face] You might have told me before you went away! Why keep me all these—

BEATRICE. I meant to forget him again. I did mean to. I thought I could get back to what I was, when I married you; but, you see, what a girl can do, a woman that's been married—can't.

STRANGWAY. Then it was I—my kisses that—! [He laughs] How did you stand them? [His eyes dart at her face] Imagination helped you, perhaps!

BEATRICE. Michael, don't, don't! And—oh! don't make a public thing of it! You needn't be afraid I shall have too good a time!

[He stays quite still and silent, and that which is writhing in him makes his face so strange that BEATRICE stands aghast. At last she goes stumbling on in speech]

If ever you want to marry some one else—then, of course—

that's only fair, ruin or not. But till then—till then—He's leaving Durford, going to Brighton. No one need know. And you—this isn't the only parish in the world.

STRANGWAY. [Quietly] You ask me to help you live in secret with another man?

BEATRICE. I ask for mercy.

STRANGWAY. [As to himself] What am I to do?

BEATRICE. What you feel in the bottom of your heart.

STRANGWAY. You ask me to help you live in sin?

BEATRICE. To let me go out of your life. You've only to do—nothing. [He goes, slowly, close to her.]

STRANGWAY. I want you. Come back to me! Beatrice, come back!

BEATRICE. It would be torture, now.

STRANGWAY. [Writhing] Oh!

BEATRICE. Whatever's in your heart—do!

STRANGWAY. You'd come back to me sooner than ruin him? Would you?

BEATRICE. I can't bring him harm.

STRANGWAY. [Turning away] God!—if there be one help me! [He stands leaning his forehead against the window. Suddenly his glance falls on the little bird cage, still lying on the window-seat] Never cage any wild thing! [He gives a laugh that is half a sob; then, turning to the door, says in a low voice] Go! Go please, quickly! Do what you will. I won't hurt you—can't—But—go! [He opens the door.]

BEATRICE. [Greatly moved] Thank you!

[She passes him with her head down, and goes out quickly. STRANGWAY stands unconsciously tearing at the little bird-cage. And while he tears at it he utters a moaning sound. The terrified MERCY, peering from behind the curtain, and watching her chance, slips to the still open door; but in her haste and fright she knocks against it, and STRANGWAY sees her. Before he can stop her she has fled out on to the green and away.]

[While he stands there, paralysed, the door from the house is opened, and MRS. BURLACOMBE approaches him in a queer, hushed way.]

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [Her eyes mechanically fixed on the twisted bird-cage in his hands] 'Tis poor Sue Cremer, zurr, I didn't 'ardly think she'd last thru the mornin'. An' zure enough she'm passed away! [Seeing that he has not taken in her words] Mr. Strangway— yu'm feelin' giddy?

STRANGWAY. No, no! What was it? You said—

MRS. BURLACOMBE. 'Tes Jack Cremer. His wife's gone. 'E'm in a terrible way. 'Tes only yu, 'e ses, can du 'im any gude. He'm in the kitchen.

STRANGWAY. Cremer? Yes! Of course. Let him—

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [Still staring at the twisted cage] Yu ain't wantin' that—'tes all twizzled. [She takes it from him] Sure yu'm not feelin' yer 'ead?

STRANGWAY. [With a resolute effort] No!

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [Doubtfully] I'll send 'im in, then.

[She goes. When she is gone, Strangway passes his handkerchief across his forehead, and his lips move fast. He is standing motionless when CREMER, a big man in labourer's clothes, with a thick, broad face, and tragic, faithful eyes, comes in, and stands a little in from the closed door, quite dumb.]

STRANGWAY. [After a moment's silence—going up to him and laying a hand on his shoulder] Jack! Don't give way. If we give way—we're done.

CREMER. Yes, zurr. [A quiver passes over his face.]

STRANGWAY. She didn't. Your wife was a brave woman. A dear woman.

CREMER. I never thought to luse 'er. She never told me 'ow bad she was, afore she tuk to 'er bed. 'Tis a dreadful thing to luse a wife, zurr.

STRANGWAY. [Tightening his lips, that tremble] Yes. But don't give way! Bear up, Jack!

CREMER. Seems funny 'er goin' blue-bell time, an' the sun shinin' so warm. I picked up an 'orse-shu yesterday. I can't never 'ave 'er back, zurr.

[His face quivers again.]

STRANGWAY. Some day you'll join her. Think! Some lose their wives for ever.

CREMER. I don't believe as there's a future life, zurr. I think we goo to sleep like the beasts.

STRANGWAY. We're told otherwise. But come here! [Drawing him to the window] Look! Listen! To sleep in that!

Even if we do, it won't be so bad, Jack, will it?

CREMER. She wer' a gude wife to me—no man didn't 'ave no better wife.

STRANGWAY. [Putting his hand out] Take hold—hard—harder! I want yours as much as you want mine. Pray for me, Jack, and I'll pray for you. And we won't give way, will we?

CREMER. [To whom the strangeness of these words has given some relief] No, zurr; thank 'ee, zurr. 'Tis no gude, I expect. Only, I'll miss 'er. Thank 'ee, zurr; kindly.

[He lifts his hand to his head, turns, and uncertainly goes out to the kitchen. And STRANGWAY stays where he is, not knowing what to do. They blindly he takes up his flute, and hatless, hurries out into the air.]

ACT II

SCENE I

About seven o'clock in the taproom of the village inn. The bar, with the appurtenances thereof, stretches across one end, and opposite is the porch door on to the green. The wall between is nearly all window, with leaded panes, one wide-open casement whereof lets in the last of the sunlight. A narrow bench runs under this broad window. And this is all the furniture, save three spittoons:

GODLEIGH, the innkeeper, a smallish man with thick ruffled hair, a loquacious nose, and apple-red cheeks above a reddish-brown moustache; is reading the paper. To him enters TIBBY JARLAND with a shilling in her mouth.

GODLEIGH. Well, TIBBY JARLAND, what've yu come for, then? Glass o' beer?

[TIBBY takes the shilling from her mouth and smiles stolidly.]

GODLEIGH. [Twinkling] I shid zay glass o' 'arf an' 'arf's about yure form. [TIBBY smiles more broadly] Yu'm a praaper masterpiece. Well! 'Ave sister Mercy borrowed yure tongue? [TIBBY shakes her head] Aw, she 'aven't. Well, maid?

TIBBY. Father wants six clay pipes, please.

GODLEIGH. 'E du, du 'ee? Yu tell yure father 'e can't 'ave

more'n one, not this avenin'. And 'ere 'tis. Hand up yure shillin'.

[TIBBY reaches up her hand, parts with the shilling, and receives a long clay pipe and eleven pennies. In order to secure the coins in her pinafore she places the clay pipe in her mouth. While she is still thus engaged, MRS. BRADMERE enters the porch and comes in. TIBBY curtsies stolidly.]

MRS. BRADMERE. Gracious, child! What are you doing here? And what have you got in your mouth? Who is it? Tibby Jarland? [TIBBY curtsies again] Take that thing out. And tell your father from me that if I ever see you at the inn again I shall tread on his toes hard. Godleigh, you know the law about children?

GODLEIGH. [Cocking his eye, and not at all abashed] Surely, m'm. But she will come. Go away, my dear.

[TIBBY, never taking her eyes off MRS. BRADMERE, or the pipe from her mouth, has backed stolidly to the door, and vanished.]

MRS. BRADMERE. [Eyeing GODLEIGH] Now, Godleigh, I've come to talk to you. Half the scandal that goes about the village begins here. [She holds up her finger to check expostulation] No, no—its no good. You know the value of scandal to your business far too well.

GODLEIGH. Wi' all respect, m'm, I knows the vally of it to youn, tu.

MRS. BRADMERE. What do you mean by that?

GODLEIGH. If there weren't no Rector's lady there widden' be no notice taken o' scandal; an' if there weren't no notice taken, twidden be scandal, to my thinkin'.

MRS. BRADMERE. [Winking out a grim little smile] Very well! You've given me your views. Now for mine. There's a piece of scandal going about that's got to be stopped, Godleigh. You turn the tap of it off here, or we'll turn your tap off. You know me. See?

GODLEIGH. I shouldn' never presume, m'm, to know a lady.

MRS. BRADMERE. The Rector's quite determined, so is Sir Herbert. Ordinary scandal's bad enough, but this touches the Church. While Mr. Strangway remains curate here, there must be no talk about him and his affairs.

GODLEIGH. [Cocking his eye] I was just thinkin' how to du it, m'm. 'Twid be a brave notion to putt the men in chokey, and slit the women's tongues-like, same as they du in outlandish places, as I'm told.

MRS. BRADMERE. Don't talk nonsense, Godleigh; and mind what I say, because I mean it.

GODLEIGH. Make yure mind aisy, m'm there'll be no scandal-monkeyin' here wi' my permission.

[MRS. BRADMERE gives him a keen stare, but seeing him perfectly grave, nods her head with approval.]

MRS. BRADMERE. Good! You know what's being said, of course?

GODLEIGH. [With respectful gravity] Yu'll pardon me,

m'm, but ef an' in case yu was goin' to tell me, there's a rule in this 'ouse: "No scandal 'ere!"

MRS. BRADMERE. [Twinkling grimly] You're too smart by half, my man.

GODLEIGH. Aw fegs, no, m'm—child in yure 'ands.

MRS. BRADMERE. I wouldn't trust you a yard. Once more, Godleigh! This is a Christian village, and we mean it to remain so. You look out for yourself.

[The door opens to admit the farmers TRUSTAFORD and BURLACOMBE. They doff their hats to MRS. BRADMERE, who, after one more sharp look at GODLEIGH, moves towards the door.]

MRS. BRADMERE. Evening, Mr. Trustaford. [To BURLACOMBE] Burlacombe, tell your wife that duck she sent up was in hard training.

[With one of her grim winks, and a nod, she goes.]

TRUSTAFORD. [Replacing a hat which is black, hard, and not very new, on his long head, above a long face, clean-shaved but for little whiskers] What's the old grey mare want, then? [With a horse-laugh] 'Er's lukin' awful wise!

GODLEIGH. [Enigmatically] Ah!

TRUSTAFORD. [Sitting on the bench dose to the bar] Drop o' whisky, an' potash.

BURLACOMBE. [A taciturn, alien, yellowish man, in a worn soft hat] What's wise, Godleigh? Drop o' cider.

GODLEIGH. Nuse? There's never no nuse in this 'ouse. Aw,

no! Not wi' my permission. [In imitation] This is a Christian village.

TRUSTAFORD. Thought the old grey mare seemed mighty busy. [To BURLACOMBE] 'T'es rather quare about the curate's wife a-cumin' motorin' this mornin'. Passed me wi' her face all smothered up in a veil, goggles an' all. Haw, haw!

BURLACOMBE. Aye!

TRUSTAFORD. Off again she was in 'alf an hour. 'Er didn't give poor old curate much of a chance, after six months.

GODLEIGH. Havin' an engagement elsewhere—No scandal, please, gentlemen.

BURLACOMBE. [Acidly] Never asked to see my missis. Passed me in the yard like a stone.

TRUSTAFORD. 'T'es a little bit rumoursome lately about 'er doctor.

GODLEIGH. Ah! he's the favourite. But 't'es a dead secret; Mr. Trustaford. Don't yu never repate it—there's not a cat don't know it already!

BURLACOMBE frowns, and TRUSTAFORD utters his laugh. The door is opened and FREMAN, a dark gipsyish man in the dress of a farmer, comes in.

GODLEIGH. Don't yu never tell Will Freman what 'e told me!

FREMAN. Avenin'!

TRUSTAFORD. Avenin', Will; what's yure glass o' trouble?

FREMAN. Drop o' eider, clove, an' dash o' gin. There's blood

in the sky to-night.

BURLACOMBE. Ah! We'll 'ave fine weather now, with the full o' the mune.

FREMAN. Dust o' wind an' a drop or tu, virst, I reckon. 'Earl t' nuse about curate an' 'is wife?

GODLEIGH. No, indeed; an' don't yu tell us. We'm Christians 'ere in this village.

FREMAN. 'Tain't no very Christian nuse, neither. He's sent 'er off to th' doctor. "Go an' live with un," 'e says; "my blessin' on ye." If 'er'd a-been mine, I'd 'a tuk the whip to 'er. Tam Jarland's maid, she yeard it all. Christian, indeed! That's brave Christianity! "Goo an' live with un!" 'e told 'er.

BURLACOMBE. No, no; that's not sense—a man to say that. I'll not 'ear that against a man that bides in my 'ouse.

FREMAN. 'Tes sure, I tell 'ee. The maid was hid-up, scared-like, behind the curtain. At it they went, and parson 'e says: "Go," 'e says, "I won't kape 'ee from 'im," 'e says, "an' I won't divorce 'ee, as yu don't wish it!" They was 'is words, same as Jarland's maid told my maid, an' my maid told my missis. If that's parson's talk, 'tes funny work goin' to church.

TRUSTAFORD. [Brooding] 'Tes wonderful quare, zurely.

FREMAN. Tam Jarland's fair mad wi' curate for makin' free wi' his maid's skylark. Parson or no parson, 'e've no call to meddle wi' other people's praperty. He cam' pokin' 'is nose into my affairs. I told un I knew a sight more 'bout 'orses than 'e ever would!

TRUSTAFORD. He'm a bit crazy 'bout bastes an' birds.

[They have been so absorbed that they have not noticed the entrance of CLYST, a youth with tousled hair, and a bright, quick, Celtic eye, who stands listening, with a bit of paper in his hand.]

CLYST. Ah! he'm that zurely, Mr. Trustaford.

[He chuckles.]

GODLEIGH. Now, Tim Clyst, if an' in case yu've a-got some scandal on yer tongue, don't yu never unship it here. Yu go up to Rectory where 'twill be more relished-like.

CLYST. [Waving the paper] Will y' give me a drink for this, Mr. Godleigh? 'Tes rale funny. Aw! 'tes somethin' swats. Butiful readin'. Poetry. Rale spice. Yu've a luv'ly voice for readin', Mr. Godleigh.

GODLEIGH. [All ears and twinkle] Aw, what is it then?

CLYST. Ah! Yu want t'know tu much.

[Putting the paper in his pocket.]

[While he is speaking, JIM BERE has entered quietly, with his feeble step and smile, and sits down.]

CLYST. [Kindly] Hello, Jim! Cat come 'ome?

JIM BERE. No.

[All nod, and speak to him kindly. And JIM BERE smiles at them, and his eyes ask of them the question, to which there is no answer. And after that he sits motionless and silent, and they talk as if he were not there.]

GODLEIGH. What's all this, now—no scandal in my 'ouse!

CLYST. 'T'es awful peculiar—like a drame. Mr. Burlacombe 'e don't like to hear tell about drames. A guess a won't tell 'ee, arter that.

FREMAN. Out wi' it, Tim.

CLYST. 'T'es powerful thirsty to-day, Mr. Godleigh.

GODLEIGH. [Drawing him some cider] Yu're all wild cat's talk, Tim; yu've a-got no tale at all.

CLYST. [Moving for the cider] Aw, indade!

GODLEIGH. No tale, no cider!

CLYST. Did ye ever year tell of Orphus?

TRUSTAFORD. What? The old vet. up to Drayleigh?

CLYST. Fegs, no; Orphus that lived in th' old time, an' drewed the bastes after un wi' his music, same as curate was tellin' the maids.

FREMAN. I've 'eard as a gipsy over to Vellacott could du that wi' 'is viddle.

CLYST. 'Twas no gipsy I see'd this arternune; 'twee Orphus, down to Mr. Burlacombe's long medder; settin' there all dark on a stone among the dimsy-white flowers an' the cowflops, wi' a bird upon 'is 'ead, playin' his whistle to the ponies.

FREMAN. [Excitedly] Yu did never zee a man wi' a bird on 'is 'ead.

CLYST. Didn' I?

FREMAN. What sort o' bird, then? Yu tell me that.

TRUSTAFORD. Praaper old barndoor cock. Haw, haw!

GODLEIGH. [Soothingly] 'T'es a vairy-tale; us mustn't be tu partic'lar.

BURLACOMBE: In my long medder? Where were yu, then, Tim Clyst?

CLYST. Passin' down the lane on my bike. Wonderful sorrowful-fine music 'e played. The ponies they did come round 'e—yu cud zee the tears rennin' down their chakes; 'twas powerful sad. 'E 'adn't no 'at on.

FREMAN. [Jeering] No; 'e 'ad a bird on 'is 'ead.

CLYST. [With a silencing grin] He went on playin' an' playin'. The ponies they never mued. An' all the dimsy-white flowers they waved and waved, an' the wind it went over 'em. Gav' me a funny feelin'.

GODLEIGH. Clyst, yu take the cherry bun!

CLYST. Where's that cider, Mr. Godleigh?

GODLEIGH. [Bending over the cider] Yu've a— 'ad tu much already, Tim.

[The door is opened, and TAM JARLAND appears. He walks rather unsteadily; a man with a hearty jowl, and sullen, strange; epileptic-looking eyes.]

CLYST. [Pointing to JARLAND] 'Tis Tam Jarland there 'as the cargo aboard.

JARLAND. Avenin', all! [To GODLEIGH] Pinto' beer. [To JIM BERE] Avenin', Jim.

[JIM BERE looks at him and smiles.]

GODLEIGH. [Serving him after a moment's hesitation] 'Ere

y'are, Tam. [To CLYST, who has taken out his paper again] Where'd yu get thickey paper?

CLYST. [Putting down his cider-mug empty] Yure tongue du watter, don't it, Mr. Godleigh? [Holding out his mug] No zider, no poetry. 'Tis amazin' sorrowful; Shakespeare over again. "The boy stude on the burnin' deck."

FREMAN. Yu and yer yap!

CLYST. Ah! Yu wait a bit. When I come back down t'lane again, Orphus 'e was vanished away; there was naught in the field but the ponies, an' a praaper old magpie, a-top o' the hedge. I zee somethin' white in the beak o' the fowl, so I giv' a "Whisht," an' 'e drops it smart, an' off 'e go. I gets over bank an' picks un up, and here't be.

[He holds out his mug.]

BURLACOMBE. [Tartly] Here, give 'im 'is cider. Rade it yureself, ye young teasewings.

[CLYST, having secured his cider, drinks it o\$. Holding up the paper to the light, he makes as if to begin, then slides his eye round, tantalizing.]

CLYST. 'Tes a pity I bain't dressed in a white gown, an' flowers in me 'air.

FREMAN. Read it, or we'll 'aye yu out o' this.

CLYST. Aw, don't 'ee shake my nerve, now!

[He begins reading with mock heroism, in his soft, high, burring voice. Thus, in his rustic accent, go the lines]

God lighted the zun in 'eaven far.
Lighted the virefly an' the star.
My 'eart 'E lighted not!

God lighted the vields fur lambs to play,
Lighted the bright strames, 'an the may.
My 'eart 'E lighted not!

God lighted the mune, the Arab's way,
He lights to-morrer, an' to-day.
My 'eart 'E 'ath vorgot!

[When he has finished, there is silence. Then
TRUSTAFORD, scratching his head, speaks:]

TAUSTAFORD. 'T'es amazin' funny stuff.

FREMAN. [Looking over CLYST'S shoulder] Be danged!
'T'es the curate's 'andwritin'. 'Twas curate wi' the ponies, after
that.

CLYST. Fancy, now! Aw, Will Freman, an't yu bright!

FREMAN. But 'e 'adn't no bird on 'is 'ead.

CLYST. Ya-as, 'e 'ad.

JARLAND. [In a dull, threatening voice] 'E 'ad my maid's
bird, this arternune. 'Ead or no, and parson or no, I'll gie 'im one
for that.

FREMAN. Ah! And 'e meddled wi' my 'orses.

TRUSTAFORD. I'm thinkin' 'twas an old cuckoo bird 'e 'ad

on 'is 'ead. Haw, haw!

GODLEIGH. "His 'eart She 'ath Vorgot!"

FREMAN. 'E's a fine one to be tachin' our maids convirmation.

GODLEIGH. Would ye 'ave it the old Rector then? Wi' 'is gouty shoe? Rackon the maids wid rather 'twas curate; eh, Mr. Burlacombe?

BURLACOMBE. [Abruptly] Curate's a gude man.

JARLAND. [With the comatose ferocity of drink] I'll be even wi' un.

FREMAN. [Excitedly] Tell 'ee one thing—'tes not a proper man o' God to 'ave about, wi' 'is luse goin's on. Out vrom 'ere he oughter go.

BURLACOMBE. You med go further an' fare worse.

FREMAN. What's 'e duin', then, lettin' 'is wife runoff?

TRUSTAFORD. [Scratching his head] If an' in case 'e can't kape 'er, 'tes a funny way o' duin' things not to divorce 'er, after that. If a parson's not to du the Christian thing, whu is, then?

BURLACOMBE. 'Tes a bit immoral-like to pass over a thing like that. Tes funny if women's gain's on's to be encouraged.

FREMAN. Act of a coward, I zay.

BURLACOMBE. The curate ain't no coward.

FREMAN. He bides in yure house; 'tes natural for yu to stand up for un; I'll wager Mrs. Burlacombe don't, though. My missis was fair shocked. "Will," she says, "if yu ever make vur to let me go like that, I widden never stay wi' yu," she says.

TRUSTAFORD. 'T'es settin' a bad example, for zure.

BURLACOMBE. 'T'es all very airy talkin'; what shude 'e du, then?

FREMAN. [Excitedly] Go over to Durford and say to that doctor: "Yu come about my missis, an' zee what I'll du to 'ee." An' take 'er 'ome an' zee she don't misbe'ave again.

CLYST. 'E can't take 'er ef 'er don' want t' come—I've 'eard lawyer, that lodged wi' us, say that.

FREMAN. All right then, 'e ought to 'ave the law of 'er and 'er doctor; an' zee 'er goin's on don't prosper; 'e'd get damages, tu. But this way 'tes a nice example he'm settin' folks. Parson indade! My missis an' the maids they won't goo near the church to-night, an' I wager no one else won't, neither.

JARLAND. [Lurching with his pewter up to GODLEIGH] The beggar! I'll be even wi' un.

GODLEIGH. [Looking at him in doubt] 'T'es the last, then, Tam.

[Having received his beer, JARLAND stands, leaning against the bar, drinking.]

BURLACOMBE. [Suddenly] I don' goo with what curate's duin—'tes tiff soft 'earted; he'm a muneey kind o' man altogether, wi' 'is flute an' 'is poetry; but he've a-lodged in my 'ouse this year an' mare, and always 'ad an 'elpin' 'and for every one. I've got a likin' for him an' there's an end of it.

JARLAND. The coward!

TRUSTAFORD. I don' trouble nothin' about that, Tam

Jarland. [Turning to BURLACOMBE] What gits me is 'e don't seem to 'ave no zense o' what's his own praperty.

JARLAND. Take other folk's property fast enough!

[He saws the air with his empty. The others have all turned to him, drawn by the fascination that a man in liquor has for his fellow-men. The bell for church has begun to rang, the sun is down, and it is getting dusk.]

He wants one on his crop, an' one in 'is belly; 'e wants a man to take an' gie un a gude hidin zame as he oughter give 'is fly-be-night of a wife.

[STRANGWAY in his dark clothes has entered, and stands by the door, his lips compressed to a colourless line, his thin, darkish face grey-white]

Zame as a man wid ha' gi'en the doctor, for takin' what isn't his'n.

All but JARLAND have seen STRANGWAY. He steps forward, JARLAND sees him now; his jaw drops a little, and he is silent.

STRANGWAY. I came for a little brandy, Mr. Godleigh—feeling rather faint. Afraid I mightn't get through the service.

GODLEIGH. [With professional composure] Marteil's Three Star, zurr, or 'Ennessy's?

STRANGWAY. [Looking at JARLAND] Thank you; I believe I can do without, now. [He turns to go.]

[In the deadly silence, GODLEIGH touches the arm of

JARLAND, who, leaning against the bar with the pewter in his hand, is staring with his strange lowering eyes straight at STRANGWAY.]

JARLAND. [Galvanized by the touch into drunken rage] Lave me be—I'll talk to un-parson or no. I'll tache un to meddle wi' my maid's bird. I'll tache un to kape 'is thievin' 'ands to 'imself.

[STRANGWAY turns again.]

CLYST. Be quiet, Tam.

JARLAND. [Never losing STRANGWAY with his eyes—like a bull-dog who sees red] That's for one chake; zee un turn t'other, the white-livered buty! Whu lets another man 'ave 'is wife, an' never the sperit to go vor un!

BURLACOMBE. Shame, Jarland; quiet, man!

[They are all looking at STRANGWAY, who, under JARLAND'S drunken insults is standing rigid, with his eyes closed, and his hands hard clenched. The church bell has stopped slow ringing, and begun its five minutes' hurrying note.]

TRUSTAFORD. [Rising, and trying to hook his arm into JARLAND'S] Come away, Tam; yu've a-'ad to much, man.

JARLAND. [Shaking him off] Zee, 'e darsen't touch me; I might 'it un in the vase an' 'e darsen't; 'e's afraid—like 'e was o' the doctor.

[He raises the pewter as though to fling it, but it is seized by GODLEIGH from behind, and falls clattering to the

floor. STRANGWAY has not moved.]

JARLAND. [Shaking his fist almost in his face] Luke at un, Luke at un! A man wi' a slut for a wife—

[As he utters the word "wife" STRANGWAY seizes the outstretched fist, and with a jujitsu movement, draws him into his clutch, helpless. And as they sway and struggle in the open window, with the false strength of fury he forces JARLAND through. There is a crash of broken glass from outside. At the sound STRANGWAY comes to himself. A look of agony passes over his face. His eyes light on JIM BERE, who has suddenly risen, and stands feebly clapping his hands. STRANGWAY rushes out.]

[Excitedly gathering at the window, they all speak at once.]

CLYST. Tam's hatchin' of yure cucumbers, Mr. Godleigh.

TRUSTAFORD. 'E did crash; haw, haw!

FREMAN. 'Twas a brave throw, zurely. Whu wid a' thought it?

CLYST. Tam's crawlin' out. [Leaning through window] Hello, Tam— 'ow's t' base, old man?

FREMAN. [Excitedly] They'm all comin' up from churchyard to zee.

TRUSTAFORD. Tam du luke wonderful aztonished; haw, haw! Poor old Tam!

CLYST. Can yu zee curate? Reckon 'e'm gone into church. Aw, yes; gettin' a bit dimsy-service time. [A moment's hush.]

TRUSTAFORD. Well, I'm jiggered. In 'alf an hour he'm got

to prache.

GODLEIGH. 'T'es a Christian village, boys.

[Feebly, quietly, JIM BERE laughs. There is silence; but the bell is heard still ranging.]

CURTAIN

SCENE II

The same-in daylight dying fast. A lamp is burning on the bar. A chair has been placed in the centre of the room, facing the bench under the window, on which are seated from right to left, GODLEIGH, SOL POTTER the village shopman, TRUSTAFORD, BURLACOMBE, FREMAN, JIM BERE, and MORSE the blacksmith. CLYST is squatting on a stool by the bar, and at the other end JARLAND, sobered and lowering, leans against the lintel of the porch leading to the door, round which are gathered five or six sturdy fellows, dumb as fishes. No one sits in the chair. In the unnatural silence that reigns, the distant sound of the wheezy church organ and voices singing can be heard.

TAUSTAFORD. [After a prolonged clearing of his throat] What I mean to zay is that 'tes no yuse, not a bit o' yuse in the world, not duin' of things properly. If an' in case we'm to carry

a resolution disapprovin' o' curate, it must all be done so as no one can't, zay nothin'.

SOL POTTER. That's what I zay, Mr. Trustaford; ef so be as 'tis to be a village meetin', then it must be all done proper.

FREMAN. That's right, Sot Potter. I purpose Mr. Sot Potter into the chair. Whu seconds that?

[A silence. Voices from among the dumb-as-fishes: "I du."]

CLYST. [Excitedly] Yu can't putt that to the meetin'. Only a chairman can putt it to the meetin'. I purpose that Mr. Burlacombe— bein as how he's chairman o' the Parish Council—take the chair.

FREMAN. Ef so be as I can't putt it, yu can't putt that neither.

TRUSTAFORD. 'Tes not a bit o' yuse; us can't 'ave no meetin' without a chairman.

GODLEIGH. Us can't 'ave no chairman without a meetin' to elect un, that's zure. [A silence.]

MORSE. [Heavily] To my way o' thinkin', Mr. Godleigh speaks zense; us must 'ave a meetin' before us can 'ave a chairman.

CLYST. Then what we got to du's to elect a meetin'.

BURLACOMBE. [Sourly] Yu'll not find no procedure far that.

[Voices from among the dumb-as fishes: "Mr. Burlacombe 'e oughter know."]

SOL POTTER. [Scratching his head—with heavy solemnity] 'Tes my belief there's no other way to du, but to elect a chairman

to call a meetin'; an' then for that meetin' to elect a chairman.

CLYST. I purpose Mr. Burlacombe as chairman to call a meetin'.

FREMAN. I purpose Sol Potter.

GODLEIGH. Can't 'ave tu propositions together before a meetin'; that's apple-pie zure vur zurtain.

[Voice from among the dumb-as fishes: "There ain't no meetin' yet, Sol Potter zays."]

TRUSTAFORD. Us must get the rights of it zettled some'ow. 'T'es like the darned old chicken an' the egg—meetin' or chairman—which come virst?

SOL POTTER. [Conciliating] To my thinkin' there shid be another way o' duin' it, to get round it like with a circumbendibus. 'T'all comes from takin' different vuse, in a manner o' spakin'.

FREMAN. Vu goo an' zet in that chair.

SOL POTTER. [With a glance at BURLACOMBE modestly] I shid'n never like fur to du that, with Mr. Burlacombe zettin' there.

BURLACOMBE. [Rising] 'T'es all darned fulishness.

[Amidst an uneasy shufflement of feet he moves to the door, and goes out into the darkness.]

CLYST. [Seeing his candidate thus depart] Rackon curate's pretty well thru by now, I'm goin' to zee. [As he passes JARLAND] 'Ow's to base, old man?

[He goes out. One of the dumb-as-fishes moves from

the door and fills the apace left on the bench by
BURLACOMBE'S departure.]

JARLAND. Darn all this puzzivantin'! [To SOL POTTER]
Got an' zet in that chair.

SOL POTTER. [Rising and going to the chair; there he stands,
changing from one to the other of his short broad feet and
sweating from modesty and worth] 'T'es my duty now, gentlemen,
to call a meetin' of the parishioners of this parish. I beg therefore
to declare that this is a meetin' in accordance with my duty as
chairman of this meetin' which elected me chairman to call this
meetin'. And I purceed to vacate the chair so that this meetin'
may now purceed to elect a chairman.

[He gets up from the chair, and wiping the sweat from
his brow, goes back to his seat.]

FREMAN. Mr. Chairman, I rise on a point of order.

GODLEIGH. There ain't no chairman.

FREMAN. I don't give a darn for that. I rise on a point of
order.

GODLEIGH. 'T'es a chairman that decides points of order.
'T'es certain yu can't rise on no points whatever till there's a
chairman.

TRUSTAFORD. 'T'es no yuse yure risin', not the least bit in
the world, till there's some one to set yu down again. Haw, haw!
[Voice from the dumb-as-Etches: "Mr. Trustaford 'e's right."]

FREMAN. What I zay is the chairman ought never to 'ave
vacated the chair till I'd risen on my point of order. I purpose

that he goo and zet down again.

GODLEIGH. Yu can't purpose that to this meetin'; yu can only purpose that to the old meetin' that's not zettin' any longer.

FREMAN. [Excitedly] I didn' care what old meetin' 'tis that's zettin'. I purpose that Sol Potter goo an' zet in that chair again, while I rise on my point of order.

TRUSTAFORD. [Scratching his head] 'Tesn't regular but I guess yu've got to goo, Sol, or us shan't 'ave no peace.

[SOL POTTER, still wiping his brow, goes back to the chair.]

MORSE. [Stolidly-to FREMAN] Zet down, Will Freman. [He pulls at him with a blacksmith's arm.]

FREMAN. [Remaining erect with an effort] I'm not a-goin' to zet down till I've arisen.

JARLAND. Now then, there 'e is in the chair. What's yore point of order?

FREMAN. [Darting his eyes here and there, and flinging his hand up to his gipsy-like head] 'Twas—'twas—Darned ef y' 'aven't putt it clean out o' my 'ead.

JARLAND. We can't wait for yore points of order. Come out o' that chair. Sol Potter.

[SOL POTTER rises and is about to vacate the chair.]

FREMAN. I know! There ought to 'a been minutes taken. Yu can't 'ave no meetin' without minutes. When us comes to electin' a chairman o' the next meetin', 'e won't 'ave no minutes to read.

SOL POTTER. 'Twas only to putt down that I was elected chairman to elect a meetin' to elect a chairman to preside over a

meetin' to pass a resolution dalin' wi' the curate. That's aisy set down, that is.

FREMAN. [Mollified] We'll 'ave that zet down, then, while we're electin' the chairman o' the next meetin'.

[A silence.]

TRUSTAFORD. Well then, seein' this is the praaper old meetin' for carryin' the resolution about the curate, I purpose Mr. Sol Potter take the chair.

FREMAN. I purpose Mr. Trustaford. I 'aven't a-got nothin' against Sol Potter, but seein' that he elected the meetin' that's to elect 'im, it might be said that 'e was electin' of himzelf in a manner of spakin'. Us don't want that said.

MORSE. [Amid meditative grunts from the dumb-as-fishes] There's some-at in that. One o' they tu purposals must be putt to the meetin'.

FREMAN. Second must be putt virst, fur zure.

TRUSTAFORD. I dunno as I wants to zet in that chair. To hiss the curate, 'tis a ticklish sort of a job after that. Vurst comes afore second, Will Freeman.

FREMAN. Second is amendment to virst. 'Tes the amendments is putt virst.

TRUSTAFORD. 'Ow's that, Mr. Godleigh? I'm not particular eggzac'ly to a dilly zort of a point like that.

SOL POTTER. [Scratching his, head] 'Tes a very nice point, for zure.

GODLEIGH. 'Tes undoubtedly for the chairman to decide.

[Voice from the dumb-as fishes: "But there ain't no chairman yet."]

JARLAND. Sol Potter's chairman.

FREMAN. No, 'e ain't.

MORSE. Yes, 'e is—'e's chairman till this second old meetin' gets on the go.

FREMAN. I deny that. What du yu say, Mr. Trustaford?

TRUSTAFORD. I can't 'ardly tell. It du zeem a darned long-sufferin' sort of a business altogether.

[A silence.]

MORSE. [Slowly] Tell 'ee what 'tis, us shan't du no gude like this.

GODLEIGH. 'Tes for Mr. Freman or Mr. Trustaford, one or t'other to withdraw their motions.

TRUSTAFORD. [After a pause, with cautious generosity] I've no objections to withdrawin' mine, if Will Freman'll withdraw his'n.

FREMAN. I won't never be be'indhand. If Mr. Trustaford withdraws, I withdraws mine.

MORSE. [With relief] That's zensible. Putt the motion to the meetin'.

SOL POTTER. There ain't no motion left to putt.

[Silence of consternation.]

[In the confusion Jim BERE is seen to stand up.]

GODLEIGH. Jim Bere to spike. Silence for Jim!

VOICES. Aye! Silence for Jim!

SOL POTTER. Well, Jim?

JIM. [Smiling and slow] Nothin' duin'.

TRUSTAFORD. Bravo, Jim! Yu'm right. Best zense yet!

[Applause from the dumb-as-fishes.]

[With his smile brightening, JIM resumes his seat.]

SOL POTTER. [Wiping his brow] Du seem to me, gentlemen, seem' as we'm got into a bit of a tangle in a manner of spakin', 'twid be the most zimplest and vairest way to begin all over vrom the beginnin', so's t'ave it all vair an' square for every one.

[In the uproar Of "Aye" and "No," it is noticed that TIBBY JARLAND is standing in front of her father with her finger, for want of something better, in her mouth.]

TIBBY. [In her stolid voice] Please, sister Mercy says, curate 'ave got to "Lastly." [JARLAND picks her up, and there is silence.] An' please to come quick.

JARLAND. Come on, mates; quietly now!

[He goes out, and all begin to follow him.]

MORSE. [Slowest, save for SOL POTTER] 'Tes rare lucky us was all agreed to hiss the curate afore us began the botherin' old meetin', or us widn' 'ardly 'ave 'ad time to settle what to du.

SOL POTTER. [Scratching his head] Aye, 'tes rare lucky; but I dunno if 'tes altogether reg'lar.

CURTAIN

SCENE III

The village green before the churchyard and the yew-trees at the gate. Into the pitch dark under the yews, light comes out through the half-open church door. Figures are lurking, or moving stealthily—people waiting and listening to the sound of a voice speaking in the church words that are inaudible. Excited whispering and faint giggles come from the deepest yew-tree shade, made ghostly by the white faces and the frocks of young girls continually flitting up and back in the blackness. A girl's figure comes flying out from the porch, down the path of light, and joins the stealthy group.

WHISPERING VOICE of MERCY. Where's 'e got to now, Gladys?

WHISPERING VOICE OF GLADYS. 'E've just finished.

VOICE OF CONNIE. Whu pushed t'door open?

VOICE OF GLADYS. Tim Clyst I giv' it a little push, meself.

VOICE OF CONNIE. Oh!

VOICE of GLADYS. Tim Clyst's gone in!

ANOTHER VOICE. O-o-o-h!

VOICE of MERCY. Whu else is there, tu?

VOICE OF GLADYS. Ivy's there, an' Old Mrs. Potter, an' tu

o' the maids from th'Hall; that's all as ever.

VOICE of CONNIE. Not the old grey mare?

VOICE of GLADYS. No. She ain't ther'. 'Twill just be th'ymn now, an' the Blessin'. Tibby gone for 'em?

VOICE OF MERCY. Yes.

VOICE of CONNIE. Mr. Burlacombe's gone in home, I saw 'im pass by just now—'e don' like it. Father don't like it neither.

VOICE of MERCY. Mr. Strangway shoudn' 'ave taken my skylark, an' thrown father out o' winder. 'Tis goin' to be awful fun! Oh!

[She jumps up and dawn in the darkness. And a voice from far in the shadow says: "Hsssh! Quiet, yu maids!" The voice has ceased speaking in the church. There is a moment's dead silence. The voice speaks again; then from the wheezy little organ come the first faint chords of a hymn.]

GLADYS. "Nearer, my God, to Thee!"

VOICE of MERCY. 'Twill be funny, with no one 'ardly singin'.

[The sound of the old hymn sung by just six voices comes out to them rather sweet and clear.]

GLADYS. [Softly] 'Tis pretty, tu. Why! They're only singin' one verse!

[A moment's silence, and the voice speaks, uplifted, pronouncing the Blessing: "The peace of God—" As the last words die away, dark figures from the inn approach over

the grass, till quite a crowd seems standing there without a word spoken. Then from out of the church porch come the congregation. TIM CLYST first, hastily lost among the waiting figures in the dark; old Mrs. Potter, a half blind old lady groping her way and perceiving nothing out of the ordinary; the two maids from the Hall, self-conscious and scared, scuttling along. Last, IVY BURLACOMBE quickly, and starting back at the dim, half-hidden crowd.]

VOICE of GLADYS. [Whispering] Ivy! Here, quick!

[Ivy sways, darts off towards the voice, and is lost in the shadow.]

VOICE OF FREMAN. [Low] Wait, boys, till I give signal.

[Two or three squirks and giggles; Tim CLYST'S voice: "Ya-as! Don't 'ee tread on my toe!" A soft, frightened "O-o-h!" from a girl. Some quick, excited whisperings: "Luke!" "Zee there!" "He's comin'!" And then a perfectly dead silence. The figure of STRANGWAY is seen in his dark clothes, passing from the vestry to the church porch. He stands plainly visible in the lighted porch, locking the door, then steps forward. Just as he reaches the edge of the porch, a low hiss breaks the silence. It swells very gradually into a long, hissing groan. STRANGWAY stands motionless, his hand over his eyes, staring into the darkness. A girl's figure can be seen to break out of the darkness and rush away. When at last the groaning has died into sheer expectancy, STRANGWAY drops his hand.]

STRANGWAY. [In a loco voice] Yes! I'm glad. Is Jarland

there?

FREMAN. He's 'ere-no thanks to yu! Hsss!

[The hiss breaks out again, then dies away.]

JARLAND'S VOICE. [Threatening] Try if yu can du it again.

STRANGWAY. No, Jarland, no! I ask you to forgive me.

Humbly!

[A hesitating silence, broken by muttering.]

CLYST'S VOICE. Bravo!

A VOICE. That's vair.

A VOICE. 'E's afraid o' the sack—that's what 'tis.

A VOICE. [Groaning] 'E's a praaper coward.

A VOICE. Whu funk'd the doctor?

CLYST'S VOICE. Shame on 'ee, therr!

STRANGWAY. You're right—all of you! I'm not fit! An uneasy and excited mustering and whispering dies away into renewed silence.

STRANGWAY. What I did to Tam Jarland is not the real cause of what you're doing, is it? I understand. But don't be troubled. It's all over. I'm going—you'll get some one better. Forgive me, Jarland. I can't see your face—it's very dark.

FREMAN'S Voice. [Mocking] Wait for the full mune.

GODLEIGH. [Very low] "My 'eart 'E lighted not!"

STRANGWAY. [starting at the sound of his own words thus mysteriously given him out of the darkness] Whoever found that, please tear it up! [After a moment's silence] Many of you have been very kind to me. You won't see me again—Good-bye, all!

[He stands for a second motionless, then moves resolutely down into the darkness so peopled with shadows.]

UNCERTAIN VOICES AS HE PASSES. Good-bye, zurr!
Good luck, zurr! [He has gone.]

CLYST'S VOICE. Three cheers for Mr. Strangway!

[And a queer, strangled cheer, with groans still threading it, arises.]

CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE I

In the BURLACOMBES' hall-sitting-room the curtains are drawn, a lamp burns, and the door stands open. BURLACOMBE and his wife are hovering there, listening to the sound of mingled cheers and groaning.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Aw! my gudeness—what a thing t'appen! I'd saner 'a lost all me ducks. [She makes towards the inner door] I can't never face 'im.

BURLACOMBE. 'E can't expect nothin' else, if 'e act like that.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. 'Tes only duin' as 'e'd be done by.

BURLACOMBE. Aw! Yu can't go on forgivin' 'ere, an' forgivin' there. 'Tesn't nat'ral.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. 'Tes the mischief 'e'm a parson. 'Tes 'im bein' a lamb o' God—or 'twidden be so quare for 'im to be forgivin'.

BURLACOMBE. Yu goo an' make un a gude 'ot drink.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Poor soul! What'll 'e du now, I wonder? [Under her breath] 'E's cumin'!

[She goes hurriedly. BURLACOMBE, with a startled look back, wavers and makes to follow her, but stops

undecided in the inner doorway. STRANGWAY comes in from the darkness. He turns to the window and drops overcoat and hat and the church key on the windowseat, looking about him as men do when too hard driven, and never fixing his eyes long enough on anything to see it. BURLACOMBE, closing the door into the house, advances a step. At the sound STRANGWAY faces round.]

BURLACOMBE. I wanted for yu to know, zurr, that me an' mine 'adn't nothin' to du wi' that darned fulishness, just now.

STRANGWAY. [With a ghost of a smile] Thank you, Burlacombe. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter a bit.

BURLACOMBE. I 'ope yu won't take no notice of it. Like a lot o' silly bees they get. [After an uneasy pause] Yu'll excuse me spakin' of this mornin', an' what 'appened. 'Tes a brave pity it cam' on yu so sudden-like before yu 'ad time to think. 'Tes a sort o' thing a man shude zet an' chew upon. Certainly 'tes not a bit o' yuse goin' against human nature. Ef yu don't stand up for yureself there's no one else not goin' to. 'Tes yure not 'avin' done that 'as made 'em so rampageous. [Stealing another look at STRANGWAY] Yu'll excuse me, zurr, spakin' of it, but 'tes amazin' sad to zee a man let go his own, without a word o' darin'. 'Tea as ef 'e 'ad no passions like.

STRANGWAY. Look at me, Burlacombe.

[BURLACOMBE looks up, trying hard to keep his eyes on STRANGWAY'S, that seem to burn in his thin face.]

STRANGWAY. Do I look like that? Please, please! [He

touches his breast] I've too much here. Please!

BURLACOMBE. [With a sort of startled respect] Well, zurr, 'tes not for me to zay nothin', certainly.

[He turns and after a slow look back at STRANGWAY goes out.]

STRANGWAY. [To himself] Passions! No passions! Ha!

[The outer door is opened and IVY BURLACOMBE appears, and, seeing him, stops. Then, coming softly towards him, she speaks timidly.]

IVY. Oh! Mr. Strangway, Mrs. Bradmere's cumin' from the Rectory. I ran an' told 'em. Oh! 'twas awful.

[STRANGWAY starts, stares at her, and turning on his heel, goes into the house. Ivy's face is all puckered, as if she were on the point of tears. There is a gentle scratching at the door, which has not been quite closed.]

VOICE OF GLADYS. [Whispering] Ivy! Come on Ivy. I won't.

VOICE OF MERCY. Yu must. Us can't du without Yu.

Ivy. [Going to the door] I don't want to.

VOICE of GLADYS. "Naughty maid, she won't come out," Ah! du 'ee!

VOICE OF CREMER. Tim Clyst an' Bobbie's cumin'; us'll only be six anyway. Us can't dance "figure of eight" without yu.

Ivy. [Stamping her foot] I don't want to dance at all! I don't.

MERCY. Aw! She's temper. Yu can bang on tambourine, then!

GLADYS. [Running in] Quick, Ivy! Here's the old grey mare cumin' down the green. Quick.

[With whispering and scuffling; gurgling and squeaking, the reluctant Ivy's hand is caught and she is jerked away. In their haste they have left the door open behind them.]

VOICE of MRS. BRADMERE. [Outside] Who's that?

[She knocks loudly, and rings a bell; then, without waiting, comes in through the open door.]

[Noting the overcoat and hat on the window-sill she moves across to ring the bell. But as she does so, MRS. BURLACOMBE, followed by BURLACOMBE, comes in from the house.]

MRS. BRADMERE This disgraceful business! Where's Mr. Strangway? I see he's in.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. Yes, m'm, he'm in—but—but Burlacombe du zay he'm terrible upset.

MRS. BRADMERE. I should think so. I must see him—at once.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. I doubt bed's the best place for 'un, an' gude 'ot drink. Burlacombe zays he'm like a man standin' on the edge of a cliff; and the lasts tipsy o' wind might throw un over.

MRS. BRADMERE. [To BURLACOMBE] You've seen him, then?

BURLACOMBE. Yeas; an' I don't like the luke of un—not a little bit, I don't.

MRS. BURLACOMBE. [Almost to herself] Poor soul; 'e've

a-'ad to much to try un this yer long time past. I've a-seen 'tis sperrit cumin' thru 'is body, as yu might zay. He's torn to bits, that's what 'tis.

BURLACOMBE. 'Twas a praaper cowardly thing to hiss a man when he's down. But 'twas natural tu, in a manner of spakin'. But 'tesn't that troublin' 'im. 'Tes in here [touching his forehead], along of his wife, to my thinkin'. They zay 'e've a-known about 'er a-fore she went away. Think of what 'e've 'ad to kape in all this time. 'Tes enough to drive a man silly after that. I've a-locked my gun up. I see a man like—like that once before—an' sure enough 'e was dead in the mornin'!

MRS. BRADMERE. Nonsense, Burlacombe! [To MRS. BURLACOMBE] Go and tell him I want to see him—must see him. [MRS. BURLACOMBE goes into the house] And look here, Burlacombe; if we catch any one, man or woman, talking of this outside the village, it'll be the end of their tenancy, whoever they may be. Let them all know that. I'm glad he threw that drunken fellow out of the window, though it was a little—

BURLACOMBE. Aye! The nuspapers would be praaper glad of that, for a tiddy bit o' nuse.

MRS. BRADMERE. My goodness! Yes! The men are all up at the inn. Go and tell them what I said—it's not to get about. Go at once, Burlacombe.

BURLACOMBE. Must be a turrable job for 'im, every one's knowin' about 'is wife like this. He'm a proud man tu, I think. 'Tes a funny business altogether!

MRS. BRADMERE. Horrible! Poor fellow! Now, come! Do your best, Burlacombe!

[BURLACOMBE touches his forelock and goes. MRS. BRADMERE stands quite still, thinking. Then going to the photograph, she stares up at it.]

MRS. BRADMERE. You baggage!

[STRANGWAY has come in noiselessly, and is standing just behind her. She turns, and sees him. There is something so still, so startlingly still in his figure and white face, that she cannot for the moment find her voice.]

MRS. BRADMERE. [At last] This is most distressing. I'm deeply sorry. [Then, as he does not answer, she goes a step closer] I'm an old woman; and old women must take liberties, you know, or they couldn't get on at all. Come now! Let's try and talk it over calmly and see if we can't put things right.

STRANGWAY. You were very good to come; but I would rather not.

MRS. BRADMERE. I know you're in as grievous trouble as a man can be.

STRANGWAY. Yes.

MRS. BRADMERE. [With a little sound of sympathy] What are you— thirty-five? I'm sixty-eight if I'm a day—old enough to be your mother. I can feel what you must have been through all these months, I can indeed. But you know you've gone the wrong way to work. We aren't angels down here below! And a son of the Church can't act as if for himself alone. The eyes of

every one are on him.

STRANGWAY. [Taking the church key from the window.] Take this, please.

MRS. BRADMERE. No, no, no! Jarland deserved all he got. You had great provocation.

STRANGWAY. It's not Jarland. [Holding out the key] Please take it to the Rector. I beg his forgiveness. [Touching his breast] There's too much I can't speak of—can't make plain. Take it to him, please.

MRS. BRADMERE. Mr. Strangway—I don't accept this. I am sure my husband—the Church—will never accept—

STRANGWAY. Take it!

MRS. BRADMERE. [Almost unconsciously taking it] Mind! We don't accept it. You must come and talk to the Rector tomorrow. You're overwrought. You'll see it all in another light, then.

STRANGWAY. [With a strange smile] Perhaps. [Lifting the blind] Beautiful night! Couldn't be more beautiful!

MRS. BRADMERE. [Startled-softly] Don't turn sway from these who want to help you! I'm a grumpy old woman, but I can feel for you. Don't try and keep it all back, like this! A woman would cry, and it would all seem clearer at once. Now won't you let me—?

STRANGWAY. No one can help, thank you.

MRS. BRADMERE. Come! Things haven't gone beyond mending, really, if you'll face them. [Pointing to the photograph]

You know what I mean. We dare not foster immorality.

STRANGWAY. [Quivering as at a jabbed nerve] Don't speak of that!

MRS. BRADMERE. But think what you've done, Mr. Strangway! If you can't take your wife back, surely you must divorce her. You can never help her to go on like this in secret sin.

STRANGWAY. Torture her—one way or the other?

MRS. BRADMERE. No, no; I want you to do as the Church—as all Christian society would wish. Come! You can't let this go on. My dear man, do your duty at all costs!

STRANGWAY. Break her heart?

MRS. BRADMERE. Then you love that woman—more than God!

STRANGWAY. [His face quivering] Love!

MRS. BRADMERE. They told me—Yes, and I can see you're in a bad way. Come, pull yourself together! You can't defend what you're doing.

STRANGWAY. I do not try.

MRS. BRADMERE. I must get you to see! My father was a clergyman; I'm married to one; I've two sons in the Church. I know what I'm talking about. It's a priest's business to guide the people's lives.

STRANGWAY. [Very low] But not mine! No more!

MRS. BRADMERE. [Looking at him shrewdly] There's something very queer about you to-night. You ought to see doctor.

STRANGWAY. [A smile awning and going on his lips] If I am not better soon—

MRS. BRADMERE. I know it must be terrible to feel that everybody—

[A convulsive shiver passes over STRANGWAY, and he shrinks against the door]

But come! Live it down!

[With anger growing at his silence]

Live it down, man! You can't desert your post—and let these villagers do what they like with us? Do you realize that you're letting a woman, who has treated you abominably;—yes, abominably —go scot-free, to live comfortably with another man? What an example!

STRANGWAY. Will you, please, not speak of that!

MRS. BRADMERE. I must! This great Church of ours is based on the rightful condemnation of wrongdoing. There are times when forgiveness is a sin, Michael Strangway. You must keep the whip hand. You must fight!

STRANGWAY. Fight! [Touching his heart] My fight is here. Have you ever been in hell? For months and months—burned and longed; hoped against hope; killed a man in thought day by day? Never rested, for love and hate? I—condemn! I—judge! No! It's rest I have to find—somewhere—somehow-rest! And how—how can I find rest?

MRS. BRADMERE. [Who has listened to his outburst in a soft of coma] You are a strange man! One of these days you'll

go off your head if you don't take care.

STRANGWAY. [Smiling] One of these days the flowers will grow out of me; and I shall sleep.

[MRS. BRADMERE stares at his smiling face a long moment in silence, then with a little sound, half sniff, half snort, she goes to the door. There she halts.]

MRS. BRADMERE. And you mean to let all this go on—Your wife—

STRANGWAY. Go! Please go!

MRS. BRADMERE. Men like you have been buried at cross-roads before now! Take care! God punishes!

STRANGWAY. Is there a God?

MRS. BRADMERE. Ah! [With finality] You must see a doctor.

[Seeing that the look on his face does not change, she opens the door, and hurries away into the moonlight.]

[STRANGWAY crosses the room to where his wife's picture hangs, and stands before it, his hands grasping the frame. Then he takes it from the wall, and lays it face upwards on the window seat.]

STRANGWAY. [To himself] Gone! What is there, now?

[The sound of an owl's hooting is floating in, and of voices from the green outside the inn.]

STRANGWAY. [To himself] Gone! Taken faith—hope—life!

[JIM BERE comes wandering into the open doorway.]

JIM BERE. Gude avenin', zurr.

[At his slow gait, with his feeble smile, he comes in, and standing by the window-seat beside the long dark coat that still lies there, he looks down at STRANGWAY with his lost eyes.]

JIM. Yu threw un out of winder. I cud 'ave, once, I cud.

[STRANGWAY neither moves nor speaks; and JIM BERE goes on with his unimaginably slow speech]

They'm laughin' at yu, zurr. An' so I come to tell 'ee how to du. 'Twas full mune—when I caught 'em, him an' my girl. I caught 'em. [With a strange and awful flash of fire] I did; an' I tuk un [He taken up STRANGWAY'S coat and grips it with his trembling hands, as a man grips another's neck] like that—I tuk un. As the coat falls, like a body out of which the breath has been squeezed, STRANGWAY, rising, catches it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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