Benson Edward Frederic

The Relentless City

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

The big pink and white dining-room at the Carlton was full to suffocation of people, mixed odours of dinner, the blare of the band just outside, and a babel of voices. In the hall theatre-goers were having their coffee and cigarettes after dinner, while others were still waiting, their patience fortified by bitters, for their parties to assemble. The day had been very hot, and, as is the manner of days in London when June is coming to an end, the hours for most people here assembled had been pretty fully occupied, but with a courage worthy of the cause they seemed to behave as if nothing of a fatiguing nature had occurred since breakfast. The band played loud because it would otherwise have been inaudible above the din of conversation, and people talked loud because otherwise nobody could have heard what anybody else said. To-night everybody had a good deal to say, for a case of the kind that always attracts a good deal of attention had just been given that lengthy and head-lined publicity which is always considered in England to be inseparable from the true and indifferent administration of justice, and the vultures of London life found the banquet extremely to their taste. So they ate their dinner with a sense of special gaiety, pecked ravenously at the aforesaid affair, and all talked loudly together. But nobody talked so loud as Mrs. Lewis S. Palmer.

It was said of her, indeed, that, staying for a week-end not long ago with some friend in the country, rain had been expected because one day after lunch a peacock was heard screaming so loud, but investigation showed that it was only Mrs. Palmer, at a considerable distance away on the terrace, laughing. Like the peacock, it is true, she had been making *la pluie et le beau temps* in London this year, so the mistake was accountable. At present, she was entertaining two young men at an ante-opera dinner. A casual observer might have had the impression that she was clothed lightly but exclusively in diamonds. She talked, not fast, but without pause. She was in fact what may be called a long-distance talker: in an hour she would get through much more than most people.

'Yes, London is just too lovely,' she was saying; 'and how I shall tear myself away on Monday is more than I can imagine. I shall cry my eyes out all the way to Liverpool. Mr. Brancepeth, you naughty man, you were thinking to yourself that you would pick them up and carry them home with you to remind you of me. I should advise you not to say so, or I shall get Lord Keynes to call you out. I always tell everyone that he takes as much care of me as if he were my father. Yes, Lord Keynes, you are what I call faithful. I say to everyone, Lord Keynes is *the* most faithful friend I ever had. Don't you think you are faithful, now? Well, as I was saying when Mr. Brancepeth interrupted me with his wicked inquiries, I shall cry my eyes out. Indeed, if it wasn't that Lord Keynes had faithfully promised to come over in the fall, I think I should get a divorce from Lewis S. and remain here right along.'

'On what grounds?' asked Bertie Keynes.

'Why, on the grounds of his incompatibility of residence. Just now I feel as if the sight of Fifth Avenue would make me feel so homesick for London that I guess I should rupture something. When I am homesick I feel just like that, and Lewis S. he notices it at once, and sends to Tiffany's for the most expensive diamond they've got. That helps some, because a new diamond is one of the solemnest things I know. It just sits there and winks at me, and I just sit there and wink at it. We know a thing or two, a big diamond and I. But I conjecture it will have to be a big one to make me feel better this time, for just now London seems to me the only compatible residence. I guess I'll make Lewis buy it.'

Mrs. Palmer's tact had been one of the standing dishes of the season, and it appeared that there was plenty of it still in stock. It was distributed by her with strict impartiality to anyone present, and had a firm flavour.

Bertie Keynes laughed, and drew from his pocket a small printed card.

'I don't know if you have seen this,' he said. '"Admit bearer to see the world. Signed, Lewis S. Palmer."' And he handed it to her.

Mrs. Palmer opened her mouth very wide, and screamed so loud that for a radius of three tables round all conversation ceased for a moment. The scream began on about the note selected by express trains when they dash at full speed through a station, rose an octave or two with an upward swoop like a steam siren, came slowly down in a chromatic scale, broken off for a moment as she made a hissing intake of her breath, and repeated itself. This year it had been one of the recognised cries of London.'

'Why, if that isn't the cutest thing in the world,' she screamed. 'I never saw anything so cunning. Why, I never! Admit bearer to see the world! How can I get one for Lewis? It would just tickle him to death.'

'Pray take this,' said Bertie. 'I brought it on purpose for you.'

'Well, if that isn't too nice of you! I shall just hand that to Lewis without a word the moment I set eyes on him. I guess that'll make him want to buy the world in earnest. Why, he'll go crazy about buying it now that it has been suggested. Well, I'm sure, Lord Keynes, it's just too nice of you to give me that. I shall laugh myself sick over it. I always tell everyone that you are the kindest man I ever saw. Gracious, it's half after nine! We must go at once. I'll be down with you in a moment, but I must give this to my maid to be packed in my jewel-case.'

Mrs. Palmer looked at it again as she rose, gave another shrill scream, and vanished, leaving her two guests alone.

Charlie Brancepeth moved his chair a little sideways to the table as he sat down again, crossed his legs, and took a cigarette from his case.

'If you had asked her a hundred pounds for it, she would have given it you, Bertie,' he remarked.

Bertie Keynes raised his eyebrows a shade.

'A hundred pounds is always welcome, Charlie,' he said, without a shadow or hint of comment in his voice. In fact, the neutrality of his tone was too marked to be in the least degree natural.

Charlie did not reply for a moment, but blew thoughtfully on the lighted end of his cigarette.

'Why this sudden – this sudden suppression of the mercantile spirit?' he asked.

Bertie laughed.

'Don't trouble to be more offensive than is necessary to your reasonable comfort,' he remarked with some finish.

'I am not; I should have been in considerable pain if I hadn't said that. But why this suppression?'

Bertie delayed answering long enough to upset the salt with his elbow, and look reproachfully at the waiter for having done so.

'There isn't any suppression,' he said at length. 'The mercantile spirit is going strong. Stronger than ever. Damn!'

'Is it the salt you asked a blessing on?' said Charlie.

'No; the non-suppression.'

'Then you really are going to America in the autumn?' asked he. 'I beg its pardon, the fall.'

'Yes. Fall is just as good a word as autumn, by the way.'

'Oh, quite. Over there they think it better, and they have quite as good a right to judge as we. If they called it the pump-handle it wouldn't make any difference.'

'Not the slightest. Yes, I am going.'

Charlie smiled.

'Oh, I suddenly understand about the mercantile spirit,' he said. 'It was stupid of me not to have guessed at once.'

'It was rather. Charlie, I should like to talk to you about it. The governor has been making some uncommonly sensible remarks to me on the subject.'

'He would. Your father has an immense quantity of dry common-sense. Yes, come round after the opera, and we'll talk it out lengthways. Here's Mrs. Palmer. I hope Pagani will sing extremely loud to-night, otherwise we shan't hear a note.'

Two electric broughams were waiting at the Pall Mall entrance as Mrs. Palmer rustled out between rows of liveried men, whose sole office appeared to be to look reverential as she passed, as if to have just seen her was the Mecca of their aspirations. Then, after a momentary hesitation between the two young men, Bertie followed her dazzling opera-cloak into the first brougham, and, amid loud and voluble regrets on her part that there was not room for three, and the exaction of a solemn promise that Charlie would not quarrel with his friend for having monopolized her, they started. Charlie gave a little sigh, whether of disappointment or not is debatable, and followed them alone in the second brougham.

The motor went swiftly and noiselessly up Haymarket, and into the roaring whirlpool of the Circus. It was a fine warm evening, and over pavement and roadway the season of the streets, which lasts not for a few months only, after the manner of the enfeebled upper class, but all the year round, was in full swing. Hansom cabs, newsboys shouting the latest details of all the dirty linen which had been washed that week, omnibuses nodding ten feet high above the road, and life-guardsmen nodding six, women plain and coloured, men in dress-clothes hurrying late to the theatres, shabby skulkers in shadow, obscure persons of prey, glittering glass signs about the music-halls, flower-sellers round the fountain, swinging-doors of restaurants swallowing in and vomiting out all sorts and conditions of men, winking sky – signs, policemen controlling the traffic – all contributed their essential but infinitesimal quota to the huge hodge-podge of life, bent as the great majority of life always is on the seizure of the present vivid moment, the only thing which is certainly existent. For the past is already to everyone but of the texture of a dream; the future is a dream also, but lying in impenetrable shadow. But the moment is real.

To Charlie it appeared to-night that the festival of the pavements was certainly gayer than the festival of the Carlton. His own world schemed more, it might be, and substituted innuendo for a bolder and more direct manner of talk, but it really had less capacity for enjoyment. Ten weeks of London broke its wind somewhat, and it retired into the country to graze, to digest, to recoup. But here on the pavements a lustier spirit reigned, the spirit of the people, pressing upwards and upwards like buried bulbs striving towards the light through the good, moist earth, whereas, to continue the metaphor that was in his mind, the folk among whom he moved, whose doings he continually observed with an absorbed but kindly cynicism, were like plants tended in a greenhouse, and potted out when the weather became assured.

And what if the whole of England was becoming every year more like a tended greenhouse plant, compared to the blind thrust of forces from the earth in other countries? For all the old landmarks, as the great wheel of human life whirled down the road of the centuries, seemed to be passing out of sight; the world was racing westwards, where America sat high on the seas, grown like some portentous mushroom in a single night. There, at the present moment, the inexorable, relentless logic of nature was working out its everlasting proposition that the one force in the material world was wealth. England had had her turn, even as Rome had had her turn, and even as the hordes of barbarians had swept over the countries that had been hers till they reached and took the capital itself, even so – well, had he not himself dined with Mrs. Palmer that evening? It was not in his nature to hate anything, so it cannot be said that he hated her screaming, her insensate conversation, her lack of all that is summed up in the words breeding and culture, but he saw these loud defects, and knew of their existence. On the other hand, he saw and knew also of her intense good-nature, her true kindliness of heart, and believed in the integrity of her life; so, if it was fair to consider her presence in London typically as of the nature of a barbarian invasion, it must be confessed that England had fallen into the hands of very kindly foes. They did not even actively resent culture, they were simply not aware of it, and cut it when they met. In any case they were irresistible, for the power that moved

them was wealth more gigantic than any which heretofore had furthered the arts of war and peace, and that wealth was grasped by men who only yesterday had toiled with their hands in factories and workshops. Like stars reeling upwards from below the horizon, they swarmed into the sky, and looked down, not cruelly, but merely calmly, into the world which they owned.

Of such was Mrs. Palmer's husband; he had been a railway porter, now he was railways and steamships and anything else of which he chose to say 'This is mine.' Occasionally men like these watered the English greenhouse plants, and an heiress propped up the unstable fortunes of some five-hundred-years-old English name. But such gift of refreshment was but a spoonful out of the great wells; also, in a manner of speaking, having thus watered the plants, they picked them.

His motor got caught in a block at the entrance to Leicester Square, and he arrived at the Opera House some few minutes after the others had got there. A commanding white label with Mrs. Lewis S. Palmer's name printed on it was on the door of the omnibus box on the grand tier, and he found her, with her resplendent back firmly turned towards the stage, discoursing in shrill whispers to Bertie Keynes, and sighing more than audibly for the end of the act. It was the last representation for the year of 'Tristan und Isolde,' and the house was crowded. Royalty was there: a galaxy of tiaras sparkled in the boxes, and a galaxy of stars sang together on the stage. For London had suddenly conceived the almost incredible delusion that it was musical, and flocked to the opera with all the fervour of a newly-born passion. It was not, it never had been, and it never would be musical, but this particular form of the game 'Let's pretend' was in fashion, and the syndicate rejoiced. Soon London would get tired of the game, and the syndicate would be sad again.

But the longest act comes to an end at last, and even as the curtain fell, Mrs. Palmer began screaming again. She screamed when she was amused because she was amused, and she screamed when she was bored in order that it might appear that she was not. Just now she was amusing herself very tolerably, for as soon as the lights were up, the world in general flocked into her box, supplementing the very desirable company already assembled there.

'Why, of course I am coming back next year,' she was explaining. 'And if Lewis doesn't come with me, and take Seaton House for me, so as to be able to have more than one person to dinner at a time, I guess I'll have a word or two to say to him which he won't forget; and if you, Mrs. Massington, don't come over to us in the fall with Lord Keynes, I shall cry my eyes out; and if that monster, Mr. Brancepeth, is as impudent again as he was at dinner, saying that he would pick them up and take them home to remind him of me, I'll ask him to leave my box, and call him back the moment afterwards, because I can't help forgiving him.'

There was a laugh at this brilliant effort of imagination, and Mrs. Massington leaned back in her chair towards Charlie, while Mrs. Palmer continued her voluble remarks.

'You are getting quite polished, Charlie,' she said. 'I should not have suspected you of so much gallantry.'

'I hope you never suspect me of anything,' he said.

'Oh, I do – of lots of things. Chiefly of a disapproving attitude. You are always disapproving. Now, you probably disapprove of my going to America.'

'You have not gone yet,' he said.

'No, but I shall. Mrs. Palmer has asked me to stay with them, and I am going. And Bertie is really going too.'

'So he told me to-night.'

'Who suggested it? His father?'

'Yes. As usual, he has shown his immensely good sense.'

Mrs. Massington laughed.

'You are extremely old-fashioned,' she said. 'I wonder at your dining with Mrs. Palmer at all, and coming to her box.'

'I often wonder at it myself,' said he. 'Never mind that. I haven't seen you for an age. What have you been doing with yourself?'

'I haven't been doing anything with myself. It is other people who have been doing all sorts of things with me. I have been taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged – literally dragged – from place to place. All this week there's been the Serington case, you see. I was in the court for three mornings, getting up at unheard-of hours to be there. Really it was very amusing. Topsie in the witness-box was the funniest thing you can possibly imagine. He jumped every time anybody asked him a question. They seem to have had the most extraordinary manage, and the servants appear to have spent their entire time in looking through keyholes. I wonder how the house-work got done at all. Charlie, you don't appear in the least amused.'

He looked at her a moment gravely.

'Am I really so awfully old-fashioned?' he asked.

'Yes, you old darling, I think you are. Are you shocked at my calling you an old darling? It's quite true, you know.'

'Delighted to hear it. But am I old-fashioned, then?'

'Certainly. Antique, out of date, obsolete. Of course, that sort of thing, all the Serington affair, is extremely shocking, and they are done for, quite done for; nobody will ever speak to them again – at least, except abroad. But because it is shocking, I don't see why I should pretend not to be amused at the really ridiculous figure Topsie cut in the witness-box. It would argue a very imperfect sense of humour if I was not amused, and great hypocrisy if I pretended not to be. I was amused, I roared; I was afraid they would turn me out.'

He laughed.

'Somehow, whatever you do, I can't disapprove,' he said; 'though the notion of all Topsie's friends sitting there and looking at him, and talking it over afterwards, makes me feel ill. But you – '

'Dear Charlie, it is too nice of you. But break those rose-coloured spectacles through which you so kindly observe me. It is no use. I have told you before it was no use, and I don't like telling you again.'

'Why?' he asked.

'Oh, that is so like a man, and especially an Englishman. You know why. Because it hurts you.'

'You dislike hurting me? That is something,' said he.

'But that is all,' she said.

The orchestra had taken their places, and a silence began to spread over the theatre as the lights were lowered. Then suddenly he leaned towards her so that he could smell the faint, warm fragrance of her presence.

'You mean that?' he asked.

She nodded her head in reply, and the curtain rose.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Palmer, when the opera was over, had many voluble good-byes to say to her friends, for she was leaving London next day, and sailing for her native shores in the middle of the week. Consequently, it was some time before the two young men could get off from Covent Garden, but eventually they strolled away together to pick up a hansom rather than wait for one. Charlie Brancepeth's rooms were in Half Moon Street, and it was thus nearer one than twelve when they got home. He threw himself into a long easy-chair with an air of fatigue, while the other strolled about somewhat aimlessly and nervously, smoking a cigarette, sipping whisky-and-soda, with the indolent carriage of a man who is at home with himself and his surroundings. In person he was of the fair, blue-eyed type of his family, small-featured, and thin, and looking taller, in consequence, than he really was. His eyebrows, darker than his hair, had the line of determination and self-reliance; but one felt somehow that his appearance had less to do with the essential man beneath than with the ancestors from whom he had inherited it. But his aimless, undetermined strolling one felt was more truly his own.

At last he went to the window and threw it open, letting in the great *bourdon* hum of London, coming somewhat muffled through the heavy air. Only the gentlest draught drew into the room from outside, barely stirring the flowers in the window-boxes, but spreading slowly over the room the warm, drowsy scent of them. Then, taking himself by the shoulders, as it were, he sat down.

'Charlie, I am going to America,' he said, 'in order, if possible, to find an extremely wealthy girl who is willing to marry me.'

'So I understood when you said the mercantile spirit was not suppressed. Well, you are frank, anyhow. Will you tell her that? Will you ask how much she expects to have as a dowry?'

'No, it will be unnecessary to tell her anything; she will know. You don't suppose the Americans really think that lots of us go there to find wives because we prefer them to English girls? They know the true state of the case perfectly well. They only don't choose to recognise it, just as one doesn't choose to recognise a man one doesn't want to meet. They look it in the face, and cut it – cut it dead.'

'I dare say you are perfectly right,' said Charlie with marked neutrality.

'I suppose you disapprove; you have a habit of disapproving, as I heard Sybil Massington say to you to-night. By the way, she is going to America, too, she told me.'

Charlie's face remained perfectly expressionless.

'Yes,' he said slowly. 'You might arrange to travel together. Never mind that now, though. You told me your father had some very sensible things to say about mercenary marriages. Do tell me what they were; he is always worth listening to.'

Bertie Keynes hailed this with obvious relief. It was easier to him to put up his father's ideas for his friend, if he chose, to box with, than receive the attack on his own person. He did not care in the least how much Charlie attacked his father's opinions on matrimony; nor, on the other hand, would the Marquis of Bolton care either, because the fact of his never caring for anything was so widely known as to have been abbreviated like a sort of hall-mark into his nick-name of Gallio.

'Yes, the governor talked to me about it yesterday,' he said to the other. 'He was very convincing, I thought. He put it like this: It is impossible for royalty to marry commoners; therefore, when royalty goes a-wooing, it goes a-wooing in its own class. It is equally impossible for me to marry a poor woman, because I can't afford it. Everything is mortgaged up to the hilt, as you probably know, and, indeed, if I don't marry a rich woman, we go smash. Therefore, I must go a-wooing, like royalty, among the class into which alone it is possible for me to marry. I see the force of that reasoning, so I am going to America. See?'

'Gallio might have gone on to say that it appeared that the English aristocracy is the only possible class for extremely rich American girls to marry into,' remarked Charlie.

'Yes, I'll tell him that,' said the other; 'he would be pleased with that. Then he went on to say that every country necessarily sends abroad for barter or exchange what it doesn't want or has too great a supply of. America has more money than it knows what to do with, so it is willing to let some of it come here, while we have just found out that titles are no longer of the slightest value to us. Nobody cares about them now, so we send them for distribution abroad too.'

'Labelled,' said Charlie. 'Ducal coronet so much, countess's coronet much cheaper, baroness's coronet for an annuity merely. You will be a marquis, won't you? Marquises come rather high. Brush up the coronet, Bertie, and put a fancy price on it.'

Charlie rose with some impatience as he spoke, and squirted some soda-water into a glass.

'Doesn't the governor's view seem to you very sensible?' asked the other.

'Yes, very sensible; that is why I find it so damnable. Sense is overrunning us like some horrid weed. Nobody thinks of anything except what will pay. That is what sense means. A sensible, well-balanced view – a sensible, bank-balanced view! That is what it comes to.'

Bertie Keynes whistled gently to himself a minute.

'I don't think I'll tell Gallio that,' he said; 'I don't think he would like that so much.'

Charlie laughed.

'Oh yes, he would; but you needn't tell him, since he knows it already. Well, in soda-water, I drink success to your wooing. Don't make yourself cheap.'

Bertie lit another cigarette from the stump of the one he had been smoking previously.

'If anybody else had said that, I should have been rather annoyed,' he remarked.

'You are annoyed as it is; at least, I meant you to be. It's no use arguing about it, because we really differ, and you cannot argue unless you fundamentally agree, which we do not. I'm in the minority, I know; almost everybody agrees with you. But I am old-fashioned; I have been told so this evening.'

'By – '

'Yes, by Sybil Massington. She, too, agrees with you.'

There was silence for a minute or two.

'It's two years since her husband died, is it not?' asked Bertie.

'Yes, two years and one month. I know what you are thinking about. I asked her – at least, she saw what I meant – again this evening, but I have asked her for the last time. I suppose it is that – my feeling for her – that to-night makes me think what a horrible cold-blooded proceeding you are going to embark on. I can't help it; I do feel like that. So there's an end of it.'

Bertie did not reply, and a clock on the chimney-piece chimed two.

'There's one more thing,' he said at length. 'You advised me to brush up the coronet. Did you mean anything?'

Charlie took out his watch, and began winding it up. Mechanically, Bertie took his coat on his arm.

'Yes, I meant exactly what you think I meant.'

'It's rather awkward,' said Bertie. 'She's going out to America in the autumn to act. I am certain to meet her in New York; at any rate, she is certain to know I am there.'

'Will that really be awkward?' asked Charlie. 'Is she – is she?'

'I haven't seen her for nearly two years,' said the other.

'I don't know whether she hates me or the other thing. In either case, I am rather afraid.'

Mrs. Massington also had spent the hour after she had got home in midnight conference. Since her husband's death, two years ago, she had lived with an unmarried sister of her own, a woman some ten years older than herself, yet still on the intelligent side of forty, and if she herself had rightly earned the title of the prettiest widow in London, to Judy, even more unquestionably, belonged the reputation of the wisest spinster in the same village. She was charmingly ugly, and relished the great distinction that real ugliness, as opposed to plainness, confers on its possessor. She was, moreover, far too wise ever to care about saying clever things, and thus there were numbers of people who could

never imagine why she was so widely considered a gifted woman. To Sybil Massington she was a sort of reference in all questions that troubled her – a referee always to be listened to with respect, generally to be agreed with, but in all cases to be treated with entire frankness, for the very simple reason that Judy invariably found you out, if you concealed any part of the truth, or had been in any degree, when consulting her, what Mrs. Massington preferred to call diplomatic.

Sybil Massington herself, though now a two-years-old widow, with weeds which, as we have seen, others considered quite outworn, was still barely twenty-five. She was one of those fortunate beings who invariably through life see more smiles than frowns, more laughter than tears, for the two excellent reasons that she was always, even when herself tired or bored past the general freezing-point of politeness, alert to amuse and to be interested in other people; the second because she studiously avoided all people and places where frowns and tears were likely to be of the party. K She deliberately took the view that life is a very charming 'business at the best, but full in its very woof – inseparably from existence – of many sombre-tinted threads. It was therefore futile to darken the web of existence by serious or solemn thoughts on the sadness of life and the responsibilities which she did not really think were binding on her. She preferred dancing in the sun to reading tracts in the shade; she wished primarily to be happy herself, and, in a scarcely secondary degree, she wished all her friends to be happy too. In this way her essential selfishness yet had the great merit of giving much pleasure as it went on its pleasant course; and though she had not, to state the fact quite baldly, the slightest desire that anybody should be good, it gave her the greatest pleasure to see that they were happy, and she really spent an enormous amount of trouble and force in advancing this object. Such a nature, whatever may be its final reward or punishment, certainly reaps a rich harvest here; for strenuous and continued efforts to be agreeable, especially when made by a young and pretty woman, yield their sixtyfold and a hundredfold in immediate returns.

It must be confessed that she had immense natural advantages for the rôle she so studiously played. She was rather above the ordinary height of women, and had that smooth, lithe gracefulness which one associates with boyhood rather than womanhood. Her head, small for her height, was set on to her neck with that exquisite pose one sees in the Greek *figurines* from Tanagra; and her face, with its long, almond-shaped eyes, straight features, and small mouth, expressed admirably the Pagan attitude towards life that was hers. It was a face to be loved for its fresh dewy loveliness, a face as of a spring morning, to be enjoyed with a sense of unreasoning delight that such beauty exists. It gave the beholder the same quality of pleasure that is given by the sight of some young animal, simply because it is so graceful, so vital, so made for and capable of enjoyment. And behind her beauty lay a brain of the same order, subtle because she was a woman, but in other respects even as her face, a minister and pastor of the religion of innocent mirth and pleasure. In pursuance of this creed, however, she was capable of subtle and intricate thought, and just now, in her talk with her sister, it was getting abundant exercise.

'Ah, that is no use, dear Judy,' she was saying. 'I do not say to you, "Make me different, then tell me what to do," but "Take me as I am, and tell me what to do."' Judy's shrewd face broadened into a smile, and a pleasant soul looked out of her intelligent eyes – eyes that were bright and quick like a bird's.

'I don't in the least want to make you different,' she said, 'because I think you are a unique survival.'

Sybil's eyes expressed surprise.

'Survival!' she said.

'Yes, dear; you came straight out of Pagan mythology; you were a nymph in the woods by the Ilyssus, and Apollo saw you and ran after you.'

'Did he catch me?' asked Sybil, with an air of dewy innocence.

'Don't be risky; it doesn't suit you. Really, Sybil, considering what – what great natural advantages you have, you should study yourself more closely. Just as a fault of manner committed by

a woman who wears a beautiful dress is worse than a fault of manner committed by a char-woman, so you, with your appearance, should be doubly careful not to say anything out of character.'

'Dear Judy, you are charming, but do keep to the point.'

'I thought you were the point; I am sure I have talked about nothing else.'

'I know: it is charming of you; and you have yawned so frightfully doing it that it is cruel to bring you back to it. But I really want your advice now at once.'

Judy poured out some hot water from a blanketed jug, and sipped it. Having an admirable digestion, she was determined to keep it. 'Take care of your health, if it is good,' was a maxim of hers. 'If it is inferior, try to think about something better.'

'State your case, then, in a very few words,' she said, looking at the clock.

'It is fast,' said Sybil, laughing, 'though not so fast as I should wish. Well, it is this: I am twenty-five years old, and I don't believe I have the faculty of what is known as falling in love. It always seems to me I haven't time, to begin with. I was married, as you know, at eighteen, but I can't imagine I was ever in love with John. Otherwise that horror couldn't have happened.'

Judy looked up, forgetting the time and the hot water.

'What horror?' she asked.

The light died out of Sybil's face; she looked like a troubled child.

'I have never told anyone,' she said, 'because I was ashamed, but I will tell you to make you understand me. He was ill, as you know, for months before he died; every day I used to grow sick at the thought of having to sit by him, to talk to him. He got more and more emaciated and awful to look at. One night I did not kiss him as usual. He asked me to, and I refused; I could not – simply I could not. I loathed the thought of the days that were coming; I longed for the end, and when the end came I was glad. I tried to persuade myself that I was glad his sufferings were over. It was not so; I was glad that mine were over. So I think I never loved him, though I liked him very much. Then he got ill and awful, and I was very sorry for him. But that was all. Ah – '

She got up, and walked up and down the room once or twice, as if to waken herself from the clutch of some horrid dream. Then she stopped behind Judy's chair, and leaned over her sister, stroking her hair.

'Yes, that was the horror, Judy,' she said; 'and I am that horror. Now, to-night again Charlie would have asked me to marry him, if I had not; "smiling put the question by." I like him very much; I think I should like to have him always in the house. I like everything about him.'

'Don't marry him,' said Judy quickly.

'Judy, when you speak like that, you are saying to yourself, "If only she was different." Well, I am not; I am as I am. I couldn't make my eyes blue by wanting, or make myself an inch taller. Well, it must surely be far more difficult to change one's nature in so radical a way.'

'I think you did not run very fast when Apollo began Judy.

'That does not suit you, either, dear,' remarked Sybil. 'Well, then, I am not to marry Charlie. Am I to marry anybody? That is the point. Or am I to consider that marriage is not for me?'

'How can I tell you, Sybil?' asked Judy, rather perplexed. 'I dare say there are men who regard marriage like you. You can calmly contemplate marrying a man whom you just like. I don't see why, if you can find a man like you, you shouldn't be far happier together than you would be single. I don't see what law, human or Divine, prevents your marrying. You promise to love, honour, and obey – well, fifty people mean exactly fifty different things by love. Because A doesn't attach the same meaning to it as B, B has no right to say that A doesn't love. And perhaps your "liking very much" will do. But don't marry a man who loves you very much. John did.'

'Yes, John did,' said Sybil, and paused a moment. 'Then I think I shall go to America,' she said.

'America?' said Judy.

'Yes; Mrs. Palmer has asked me to go, and I think I shall accept.'

'Do you mean the steam-siren?' asked Judy.

'Yes, the steam-siren. You see, I like steam, go, energy, so much that I don't really mind about the siren.'

'She has the manners,' said Judy, 'of a barmaid, and the mind of a – a barmaid.'

'I know. But I don't mind. In fact – don't howl – I like her; she is extremely good-natured.'

Judy yawned.

'Dear Sybil, she is extremely rich.'

'Certainly. If she lived in a back fourth-floor flat in New York, I shouldn't go to stay with her. You see, I like rich people; I like the quality of riches just as you like the quality of generosity. By the way, you must be rather rich to be generous to any extent, so the two are really synonymous; I'm glad I thought of that. Anyhow, I am going to stay with her.'

Judy got up.

'You are going to stay with her in order to meet other people who are rich,' she said.

'Why not?' asked Sybil. 'Other things being equal, I should prefer to marry a rich man than a poor one. Or shall I cultivate acquaintances in Seven Dials?'

Judy laughed.

'I think they would appreciate you in Seven Dials,' said she, 'and I am sure they will in America. You can make yourself very pleasant, Sybil.'

'Yes, dear, and you can make yourself most unpleasant, and I adore you for it. Judy dear, it's after two. How you keep one up talking!'

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Massington was lying on an extremely comfortable and elaborately padded wicker couch under a conveniently shady tree. The time was after lunch, the day an excessively hot Sunday in July, and the place the lawn of Lord Bolton's present residence on the hills above Winchester. His big country place at Molesworth was let, and had been for some years, since he could not afford to live in it; but in the interval he made himself fairly at home in the houses of other people in equally impecunious circumstances. As he truly said, one must live somewhere, and he very much preferred not to live at Molesworth. The plan partook of the nature of that of those ingenious islanders who lived entirely by taking in each other's washing, but, though theoretically unsound, it seemed to succeed well enough in practice.

For himself he really preferred Haworth, the place he had taken for the last four years; for Molesworth was unmanageably immense, remote from London, and really lonely, except when there was a regiment of guests in the house. Haworth, on the other hand, was small, exquisite in its way, and within an hour or so of London.

From the lawn the ground sloped sharply down to the water-meadows of the Itchen, where in the driest summer the grass was green, and streams of a translucent excellence wove their ropes of living crystal from bank to bank of their courses. A few admirable trees grew on the lawn, and all down the south front of the Tudor house a deep riband of flower-bed, all colour, gleamed and glowed in the summer sun. Sweet-peas were there in huge fragrant groups, stately hollyhocks, with flowers looking as if they had been cut out of thin paper by a master hand, played chaperon from the back; carnations were in a swoon of languid fragrance, love-lies-bleeding drooped its velvety spires, and a border of pansies wagged their silly faces as the wind passed over them. Behind, round the windows of the lower story, great clusters of clematis, like large purple sponges, blossomed, miraculously fed through their thin, dry stalks. At some distance off, in Winmester probably, which pricked the blue haze of heat with dim spires, a church bell came muffled and languid, and at the sound Mrs. Massington smiled.

'That is what I like,' she said. 'I like hearing a railway-whistle when I am not going in the train; I like hearing a church bell when I am not going to church; I like seeing somebody looking very hot when I am quite cool; I like hearing somebody sneeze when I haven't got a cold; I like – oh, I like almost everything,' she concluded broadly.

'I wonder if you, I, we shall like America,' said a voice, which apparently came from two shins and a knee in a basket-chair.

'America?' said Sybil. 'Of course you, I, we will. It is absurd to go there unless one means to like it, and it is simply weak not to like it, if one means to. Bertie, sit up!'

'I don't see why,' said Bertie.

'Because I want to talk to you, and I can't talk to a tennis-shoe.'

The tennis-shoe descended, and the chair creaked.

'Well,' said he.

'You and I are going on business,' she said. 'That makes one feel so like a commercial traveller. The worst of it is neither you nor I have got any wares to offer except ourselves. Dear me! I'm glad Judy can't hear me. Oh, there's Ginger! Ginger, come here!'

Ginger came (probably because he had red hair). He wore a Panama hat, and looked tired. He might have been eighteen or thirty, and was twenty-four, and Bertie's younger brother, his less-used name being Lord Henry Scarton. He sat down suddenly on the grass, took off the Panama hat, and prepared himself to be agreeable.

'There is a Sabbath peace about,' said he; 'that always makes me feel energetic. The feeling of energy passes completely away on Monday morning, and it and I are strangers till the ensuing

Sunday. Then we meet. But now it is here, I think I shall go to church. There is a church, isn't there? Come to church, Bertie.'

'No,' said Bertie.

'That is always the way,' remarked Ginger; 'and it is the same with me. I never want to do what anybody else proposes; so don't propose to me, Sybil.'

'Ginger, why don't you do something?' asked Sybil.

'I will go to church,' said Ginger.

'No, you won't. I want you to tell Bertie and me about America. You haven't been there, have you?'

'No. The capital is New York,' said Ginger; 'and you are sick before you get there. When you get there, you are sick again. Then you come back. That is why I haven't been. Next question, please.'

'Why is Bertie going, then?' she asked.

'Because – because he is Bertie instead of me.'

'And why am I going, then?'

'Because you are not Judy. And you are both going there because you are both progressive English people.'

Ginger got up, and stood in front of them.

'All people who on earth do dwell,' said he, 'go to America if they want to dwell – really dwell – on earth. If you want to have all material things at your command, you will, if you are going to get them at all, get them quicker there than anywhere else. But if you attain your ambition, you will come back like cast iron. Everything that was a pleasure to you will be a business; you will play bridge with a cast-iron face, and ask for your winnings; you will study the nature of your soil before you plant a daisy in it; you will always get your money's worth out of everybody. You will be cast iron.'

'No, I won't,' said Sybil. 'You are quite wrong. I will come back in nature as I went.'

'You can't. If you were strong enough for that, you wouldn't go; your going is a sign of weakness.'

Sybil laughed, and stretched herself more at ease on her couch.

'I am not weak,' she said.

Ginger sat down again.

'I am not sure that to do anything is not a sign of weakness,' he said. 'It isn't so easy to loaf as you imagine. Lots of people try to loaf, and take to sheer hard work as a rest from it. I don't suppose anybody in America loafs, and that I expect you will find is the vital and essential difference between them and us. It implies a lot.'

'Go on, Ginger,' said Sybil, as he paused.

'Yes, I think I will. Now, take Mrs. Palmer. She works at pleasure in a way few people in this island work at business. It is her life's work to be gay. She doesn't like gaiety really; it isn't natural to her. But she, by the laws of her nature, which prevent her loafing, works at gaiety just as her husband works at amassing millions. They can neither of them stop. They don't enjoy it any more than a person with St. Vitus's dance enjoys twitching; simply they have lost control of their power to sit still. Now, in England we have lost a good deal; we are falling behind, I am told, in most things, but we still have that power – the power of tranquillity. I am inclined to think it is worth something. But you will go to America, and come back and tell me.'

Ginger lay back on the grass and tilted his straw hat over his eyes after this address.

'Ginger, I've never heard you say so much on end,' remarked Sybil; 'have you been getting it up?'

'I never get things up, but I scent danger,' replied Ginger. 'I am afraid you and Bertie will come back quite different. You will always be wanting to do something; that is a weakness.'

'I don't agree with you,' said Sybil.

'That's all right. If people say they agree with me, I always think I must have said something stupid. What don't you agree with me about?'

'About our power of sitting still. Look at the season in London. All the time we are doing exactly what you say Americans, as opposed to us, do. We make a business of pleasure; we rush about after gaiety, when we are not naturally gay; we – '

'Sybil, you are talking about three or four thousand people among whom you live. I hope you don't think that a few hundred people like that mean England.'

'They include almost all well-known English people.'

'Well known to whom? To themselves. No, that sleepy little misty town down there is just as important a part of England as the parish of St. James's. The parish of St. James's is the office of the company. The people there do the talking, and see after the affairs of the shareholders, and play a very foolish game called politics. They are mere clerks and officials.'

'Well, but as regards the pursuit of gaiety,' said Sybil, 'nobody can be more senseless than you or I, Ginger.'

'Oh, I know we are absurd; you are more absurd than I, though, because you are going to America.'

'You seem to resent it.'

'Not in the least. It is ridiculous to resent what anybody else chooses to do, so long as it is not a personal attack on one's self. That is the first maxim in my philosophy of life.'

'Published? I shall get it.'

'No; it will be some day. It begins with a short history of the world from the days of Adam, and then the bulk of the book draws lessons from the survey. But that is the first lesson. Let everybody go to the devil in his own way. Your way is by the White Star Line.'

'I don't think you know what you are talking about, Ginger,' said his brother.

'I'm sure I don't,' said Ginger cheerfully.

'Why desecrate the Sabbath stillness, then?'

Ginger was silent a moment.

'That is a personal assault,' he said at length, 'and I resent it. It is unjust, too, because meaningless conversation is utterly in harmony with Sabbath stillness. It completes the sense of repose. It is no tax on the brain. Besides, I do really know what I was talking about; I said I didn't because I don't like arguing.'

'You have been doing nothing else.'

'No. I have been reeling out strings of assertions, which Sybil has languidly contradicted from time to time. You can't call that argument. Look! there's Charlie. Why didn't you marry him, Sybil, and stop in England? Who is that with him? Oh, Judy, isn't it? Are they coming here? What a bore!'

Charlie and Judy strolled across the lawn towards them with extreme slowness. To walk across a lawn for tea and walk back again afterwards was the utmost exercise that Judy ever took.

'I am taking my walk,' she observed as she got near them. 'I am now exactly half way, so I shall rest. Sybil, you look as if you were resting too.'

'We are all resting, and we are making the most of it, because Ginger tells us we shall never rest again.'

'Do you want a chair, Judy?' asked Ginger.

Bertie got up.

'Sit there,' he said.

'I am rather tired,' said Judy; 'but pray don't let me turn you out.' And she sat down.

'I'm so glad your father's party broke down,' she went on to Bertie. 'It is so very much nicer to have nobody here, except just ourselves, who needn't make any efforts.'

Ginger gently applauded, his face still hidden by his straw hat.

'The voice of my country,' he remarked.

'Ah, somebody agrees with you,' said Sybil; 'so you are wrong. I am glad; I was beginning to be afraid you were right.'

'Has Ginger been sparkling?' asked Judy.

'Yes, sparkling Ginger-beer. Very tasty,' remarked Ginger fatuously. 'They swallowed it all. If you only talk enough, some of it is sure to be swallowed – not to stick. But it's finished now.'

Charlie had sat down on the bank beside Sybil's couch.

'This is the last Sunday, then,' he said; 'you go to Scotland next week, don't you?'

'Yes,' said she – ' just for a fortnight. Then Aix with Judy, and I sail on September 1st.'

'That is earlier than you planned originally.'

'I know; but we get a big boat instead of a small one. I thought it worth while.'

'Do you feel inclined to stroll a bit till tea?'

'By all means.'

'They are going to desecrate the Sabbath stillness by strolling,' remarked Ginger. 'It ought not to be allowed, like public-houses.'

'Ah, we are genuine travellers,' said Sybil. 'Come, too, Ginger.'

'Do I look like it?'

'No; but one never knows with you. Judy dear, would not a good brisk walk do you good?'

'I shouldn't wonder,' said Judy; 'but I shall never know.'

Sybil put up her parasol.

'Come, Charlie,' she said.

They walked off together in the shadow of the big elm avenue that led down to the village. The huge boskage of the trees allowed no inter-penetrating ray of sun to reach them, and in the silence and sleep of the hot summer afternoon they seemed to Charlie to be very specially alone. This feeling was emphasized, no doubt, to his mind by the refusal of the others to accompany them.

'Really, Gallio always succeeds in making himself comfortable,' said she. 'What more can anyone want than a charming house like this? It is so absurd to desire more than you can use. It is a mistake the whole world makes, except, perhaps, Judy.'

'I don't think Ginger does,' said Charlie.

'Oh yes; he desires, at least, to say more than he means. Consequently people attach no importance to what he says.'

Charlie laughed.

'Which, being interpreted, means that Ginger has been saying something which you are afraid is correct.'

Sybil Massington stopped.

'Charlie, for a man you have a good deal of intuition. That is partly what makes me never think of you as a man. You are so like a woman in many ways.'

'I am wanting to have a last word.'

'Last word! What last word?'

'A last word with you, Sybil,' he said; 'I shall never bother you again.'

'Dear Charlie, it is no use. Please don't!' she said.

'I am sorry to disobey you,' said he; 'but I mean to. It is quite short – just this: if ever you change your mind, you will find me waiting for you. That is all.'

Sybil frowned.

'I can't accept that,' she said. 'You have no business to put the responsibility on me like that.'

'There is no responsibility.'

'Yes, there is; you practically threaten me. It is like writing a letter to say you will commit suicide unless I do something. You threaten, anyhow, to commit celibacy unless I marry you.'

'No, I don't threaten,' said he; 'so far from threatening, I only leave the door open in case of Hope wanting to come in. That is badly expressed; a woman would have said it better.'

Sybil was suddenly touched by his gentleness.

'No one could have said it better,' she said. 'Charlie, believe me, I am sorry, but – here is the truth of it: I don't believe I can love anybody. This also: if I did not like you so much, I think I would marry you.'

'Ah, spare me that,' he said.

'I do spare it you. I will not willingly make you very unhappy. Do you believe that?'

He stopped, and came close to her.

'Sybil, if you pointed to the sky and said it was night, I should believe you,' he said.

She made no reply to that, and they walked on in silence. Everywhere over the broad expanse of swelling downs, looking huge behind the heat-haze, and over the green restfulness of the water-meadows beneath them, even over the blue immensity of the sky, there was spread a sense of quiet and leisure. To Sybil, thinking of the after-lunch conversation, it seemed of value; to her at the moment this contented security was a big factor in life. Economically, no doubt, she was wrong; a score of dynamos utilizing the waste power of the streams below that so hurryingly sought the sea would have contributed much to the utility of the scene, and the noble timber which surrounded them could certainly have been far better employed in some factory than to have merely formed a most wasteful handle, as it were, for the great parasol of leaves which screened them and the idle, cud-chewing cattle. Here, as always, there was that silent deadly war going on between utility and beauty; soon, without a doubt, in a score of years, or a score of days, or a score of centuries, principles of economy would prevail, and the world of men would live in cast-iron mood in extremely sanitary cast-iron dwellings. Already, it seemed to her, the death-knell of beauty was vibrating in the air. The rural heart of the country was bleeding into the towns; instead of beating the swords into sickles, the way of the world now was to beat the elm-trees into faggots and the rivers into electric light. For the faggots would give warmth and the electricity would give light; these things were useful. And in the distance, like a cuttle-fish with tentacles waving and growing every moment nearer, New York, and all that New York stood for, was sucking in whatever came within its reach. She was already sucked in.

All this passed very quickly through her mind, for it seemed to her that there had been no appreciable pause when Charlie spoke again.

'Yes, the world is going westwards,' he said. 'I heard a few days ago that Mrs. Emsworth was going to act in New York this autumn. Is it true?'

'I believe so. Why?'

'Mere curiosity. Is she going on her own?'

Sybil laughed.

'Her own! There isn't any. I don't suppose she could pay for a steerage passage for her company. Bilton is taking her,' She paused a moment. 'Do you know Bilton?' she asked.

'The impresario? No,'

'He is a splendid type,' she said, 'of what we are coming to.'

'Cad, I should think,' said Charlie.

'Cad – oh yes. Why not? But a cad with a head. So many cads haven't one. I met him the other night.'

'Where?' asked Charlie, with the vague jealousy of everybody characteristic of a man in love.

'I forget. At the house of some other cad. It is rather odd, Charlie; he is the image of you to look at. When I first saw him, I thought it was you. He is just about the same height, he has the same – don't blush – the same extremely handsome face. Also he moves like you, rather slowly; but he gets there.'

'You mean I don't,' said Charlie.

'I didn't mean it that moment. Your remark again was exactly like an Englishman. But I liked him; he has force. I respect that enormously.'

On the top of Charlie's tongue was 'You mean I have none,' but he was not English enough for that.

'Is he going with her?' he asked.

'No; he has gone. He has three theatres in New York, and he is going to instal Dorothy Emsworth in one of them. Is it true, by the way – '

She stopped in the middle of her sentence.

'Probably not,' said Charlie, rather too quickly.

'You mean it is,' she said – 'about Bertie.'

Charlie made the noise usually written 'Pshaw!'

'Oh, my dear Sybil,' he said, 'Queen Anne is dead, the prophets are dead. There are heaps of old histories.'

Sybil Massington stopped.

'Now, I am going to ask you a question,' she said. 'You inquired a few minutes ago whether Dorothy Emsworth was going to act in New York. Why did you ask? You said it was from mere curiosity; is that true? You can say yes again, if you wish.'

'I don't wish,' said he. 'It wasn't true then, and I don't suppose it will be by now. You mean that Bertie saw a good deal of her at one time, but how much neither you nor I know.'

Sybil turned, and began walking home again rather quickly.

'How disgusting!' she said.

'Your fault,' he said – ' entirely your fault.'

'But won't it be rather awkward for him?' she asked, walking rather more slowly.

'I asked him that the other night,' said Charlie; 'he said he didn't know.'

Again for a time they walked in silence. But the alertness of Mrs. Massington's face went bail for the fact that she was not silent because she had nothing to say. Then it is to be supposed that she followed out the train of her thought to her own satisfaction.

'How lovely the shadows are!' she remarked; 'shadows are so much more attractive than lights.'

'Searchlights?' asked he.

'No; shadows and searchlights belong to the same plane. I hope it is tea-time; I am so hungry.'

This was irrelevant enough; irrelevance, therefore, was no longer a social crime.

'And I should like to see my double,' said Charlie.

The only drawback to the charming situation of the house was that a curve of a branch railway-line to Winchester passed not far from the garden. Trains were infrequent on it on weekdays, even more infrequent on Sundays. But at this moment the thump of an approaching train was heard, climbing up the incline of the line.

'Brut-al-it-é, brut-al-it-é, brut-al-it-é,' said the labouring engine.

She turned to him.

'Even here,' she said – 'even here is an elbow, a sharp elbow. "Utility, utility!" Did you not hear the engine say that?'

'Something of this sort,' said he.

CHAPTER IV

A day of appalling heat and airlessness was drawing to its close, and the unloveliest city in the world was beginning to find it just possible to breathe again. For fourteen hours New York had been grilling beneath a September sun in an anticyclone; and though anticyclone is a word that does not seem to matter much when it occurs in an obscure corner of the *Herald*, under the heading of 'Weather Report,' yet, when it is translated from this fairy-land of print into actual life, it matters a good deal if the place is New York and the month is September. Other papers talked airily of a 'heat wave,' and up in Newport everyone reflected with some gusto how unbearable it must be in town, and went to their balls and dinner-parties and picnics and bridge with the added zest that the sauce of these reflections gave. Even in Newport the heat was almost oppressive, but to think of New York made it seem cooler.

From the corner where Sixth Avenue slices across Broadway and Thirty-fourth Street crosses both, one can see the huge mass of the Waldorf Hotel rising gigantic against the evening sky, and wonder, if one is that way inclined, how many million dollars it has taken to blot out the evening sun. But during the afternoon to-day most people were probably grateful for the shadow which those millions had undesignedly procured them; it was something as one went from Fifth Avenue to Broadway to be shielded a little by that hideous immensity, for the dazzle and glare of the sun had been beyond all telling. And though now the sun was close to its setting, the airlessness and acrid heat of the evening was scarcely more tolerable than the furnace heat of the day, for boiling was not appreciably more pleasant than baking. Yet in the relentless city, where no one may pause for a moment unless he wishes to be left behind in the great universal race for gold, which begins as soon as a child can walk, and ceases not until he is long past walking, the climbings of the thermometer into the nineties is an acrobatic feat which concerns the thermometer only, and at the junction of Sixth Avenue and Broadway there was no slackening in the tides of the affairs of men. The electric street cars which ran up and down both these streets, and the cars that crossed them, running east and west up Thirty-fourth Street, were all full to overflowing, and passengers hung on to straps and steps as swarming bees cluster around their queen. Those in the centre of the car were unable to get out where they wanted, while those at the ends who could get out did not want to. A mass of damp human heat, patient, tired, nasal-voiced, and busy, made ingress and egress impossible, and that on which serene philosophers would gaze, saying, 'How beautiful is democracy!' appeared to those who took part in it to be merely mis-management. Incessant ringings of the conductor's bell, the sudden jerks of stoppages and startings, joltings over points where the lights were suddenly extinguished, punctuated the passage of the cars up and down the street, and still the swarming crowds clustered and hung on to straps and backs of seats wherever they could find foot-hold and standing room. But all alike, in payment for this demoniacal means of locomotion, put their five cents into the hot and grimy hands of the conductor, from which, by occult and subtle processes, they were gradually transformed into the decorations of the yachts and palaces of the owners of the line.

Democracy and discomfort, too, held equal sway in the crowded trams of the elevated railway which roared by overhead down Sixth Avenue, in the carriages of which tired millionaires and tired milliners sat stewing side by side, with screeching whistles, grinding brakes, and the vomiting forth of the foul smoke from soft coal; for a strike of some kind was in progress in Pennsylvania, and the men who had stored coal and also engineered the strike were reaping a million dollars a day in increased prices and slight inconvenience to a hundred million people, for the thick pungent smoke poured in wreaths into the first-floor windows of the dingy, dirty habitations of the street. But the train passed by on the trembling and jarring trestles, and the inconvenience passed also, till the next train came.

Thunder of the passing trains above; rumbling of the electric cars; roar of heavy, iron-shod wheels of drays on the uneven, ill-paved cobbles of the street; jostling of the foot passengers on the

side-walks, as they streamed in and out from the rickety wooden staircases of the elevated railway, from the crammed, perspiring cars, from dingy, sour-smelling restaurants; shouts of the newsboys with sheaves of ill-printed newspapers under their arms, giving horrible details of the latest murder, and abominable prints of the victim's false teeth, shoes, and the dress she had last been seen in; the thump-thump of the engines in the *Herald* office; the sickening stew of the streets; the sickening heat of the skies – Democracy, or 'Everyone for himself.'

As an antidote or warning – though it did not seem to have the least effect on the dogged, unending bustle – the note of 'Impermanence' was everywhere sounded loudly. A block or two further up, for instance, the street was torn up for some new underground enterprise (Lewis S. Palmer, as a matter of fact, had floated a company to run a new subterranean line across New York, and had been paid a million and a half dollars for the loan of his credit); and while the cars, which will certainly not cease running till the last trump has been sounded several times, passed over spindle-shanked iron girders and supports, shaken every now and again by the blasting of the rock below, thousands of workmen were toiling day and night deep down in the earth, loading the baskets of the cranes with the splinters of the riven rocks, or giving the larger pieces into the embrace of huge iron pincers that tackled them as a spider tackles a fat fly, and, rising aloft with them above street level, took them along the ropes of their iron web, over the heads of passengers and vehicles, for the carts which waited for them. Elsewhere, half a block of building had vanished almost as the night to make way for something taller, and where yesterday a five-storied building had stood, the site to-day was vacant but for a dozen pistons half buried in the ground, which puffed and shook in a sort of hellish ecstasy of glee at the work, while a gang of men with axe and pick dug out the foundations for the steel house-frames. Yet though to-morrow almost would see the newly completed building again filling up the gap in the street, the exposed walls of the adjacent houses were just for to-day only covered with advertisements, and a notice informed the bewildered shopper that business was going on as usual. That in New York might be taken for granted, but the notice omitted to say where it was going on. But for the crowd in general it was sufficient that work was to be done, and money to be made. That was the whole business and duty of each unit there, and as far as each unit was concerned, the devil might take the rest. Everyone looked tired, worn out, but indefatigable, and extraordinarily patient. One man pushed roughly by another, and where in England the one would look aggrieved, and the other probably, however insincerely, mutter an apology, here neither grievance nor apology was felt, desired, or expressed, for it is a waste of time to feel aggrieved and a waste of energy to express or feel regret. To-morrow the crowd would, on the average, be a little richer than to-day; that was all they wanted. To-morrow the world in general would be a day richer.

Sybil Massington and Bertie Keynes had arrived that morning by the *Celtic*, after a voyage of complete uneventfulness. The sea had been rough, but the *Celtic* had not been aware of it. Bertie had seen a whale blow, or so he said, and Sybil had seen three fisher boats off the banks. There had been six hours' fog, and they had got in that morning in this day of frightful heat. They had been on deck like honest tourists to see the immense green, mean statue of Liberty, or whatever that female represents, and had found the huge sky-scrapers by the docks, the bustling paddle-steamers of the ferries, the hooting sirens, the general hideousness, exactly what they had expected. They were, in fact, neither disappointed nor pleased, and when a small, tired young man with a note-book had met them on the moment of their landing, and asked Bertie his first impressions of America, they had felt that they were indeed in the authentic place. Nor had the impression been in any way dimmed all day, and now, as they sat together in the darkened sitting-room at the Waldorf, just before going to dress for dinner, they felt like old inhabitants. Bertie had bought a paper containing the account of his interview, headed, 'Marquis Bolton's eldest son lands: Lord Keynes' first impressions,' and had just finished reading to Sybil, half a column of verbose illiteracy of which, to do him justice, he had not been in any way guilty.

'You're getting on, Bertie,' said she; 'that interview shows you have struck the right note. And where have you been this afternoon?'

'Like Satan, walking up and down the earth,' said he. 'I went by an overhead railway and an underground railway. There are swing gates into the stations of the overhead railway. As I passed in, I naturally held the gate for the next man, so as not to let it bang in his face. He did not take it from me, but passed through, leaving me still holding it. I might have stood there all day, and they would have all passed through. Then I learned better, and let it slam in other people's faces. It saves time. Somehow I thought the incident was characteristic of the country.'

Sybil lit a cigarette.

'I like it,' she said. 'The air, or the people, or something, makes me feel alert. Now, when I feel alert in England it is mere waste of energy. There is nothing to expend one's alertness on; besides, one is out of tone. But here, somehow, it is suitable. I like the utter hideousness of it, too. Look from that window at the line of houses. They are like a row of jagged, broken teeth. Well, it is no worse than Park Lane, and, somehow, there is an efficiency about them here. One is ninety-five stories high for a definite reason – because land is valuable; the next is three stories high because it belongs to a millionaire who doesn't want to walk upstairs. By the way, Mrs. Palmer came in while you were out. We are going to dine with her this evening, and go to Mrs. Emsworth's first night.'

She looked at him rather closely as she said this.

'That will be charming,' he said quite naturally. 'And to-morrow we go down to Mrs. Palmer's on Long Island, don't we?'

'Yes. Really, Bertie, their idea of hospitality is very amazing. She came up here to-day to this blazing gridiron of a place simply in order not to let us be dull on our first evening here. It seemed to her quite natural. And she has put a motor-car at my disposal. I like that sort of thing.'

Bertie thought a moment.

'I know,' he said. 'But though it sounds horrid to say it, a motor-car doesn't mean anything to Mrs. Palmer.'

'It means the kindliness of thinking of it,' said Sybil.

'It was the same kindliness which brought her up from Long Island. Would you and I, if we were in the country, come up to town to entertain someone who was going to stay with us next day? You know we shouldn't.'

'That is true,' said he. 'Is Mrs. Palmer alone here?'

'Yes. Her husband and daughter are both down in Long Island. She is making a sort of rival Newport, you know. You and I plunge into it all to-morrow. I think I am rather frightened, but I am not sure. No, I don't think I am frightened. I am merely trembling with determination to enjoy it all immensely.'

'Trembling?' he asked.

'Yes; just as when you hold something as tight as you can your hand trembles. You must go and dress – at least, I must. Bertie, I am going to be very English. I think they will like it best.'

'Oh, don't pose! You are never so nice when you pose.'

'I'm not going to pose. I am going to be absolutely natural.'

'That is the most difficult pose of all,' said he.

About half-way up Fifth Avenue the two rival restaurants, Sherry's and Delmonico's, glare at each other from opposite sides of the street, each with its row of attendant hansoms and motor-cars. Though New York was technically empty – that is to say, of its millions a few hundred were still at Newport – both restaurants were full, for Mrs. Emsworth's opening night was an occasion not to be missed, and many of those who would naturally have been out of town were there in order to lend their distinguished support to the actress. Furthermore, Mr. Lewis S. Palmer, from his retreat in Long Island, had been operating yesterday on the Stock Exchange in a manner which compelled the attendance of many of the lesser magnates who at this season usually left the money-market to

attend to itself. This was very inconsiderate of him, so it was generally thought, but he was not a man who consulted the convenience of others when he saw his own opportunity. But it was extremely characteristic of him that, while nervous brokers, bankers, and financiers rushed back to the furnace of the streets, he remained himself in the coolness of Long Island, and spoke laconically through the telephone.

Mrs. Palmer was waiting in the anteroom at Sherry's when her two English guests arrived, and greeted them with shrill enthusiasm. A rather stout young American, good-looking in a coarse, uncultivated kind of manner, and dressed in a subtly ill-dressed, expensive mode, was with her.

'And here you are!' she cried. 'How are you, Lord Keynes? I'm delighted to see you again. Mrs. Massington, you must let me present to you Mr. Armstrong, who has been so long dying to make your acquaintance that I thought he would be dead before you got here. Mrs. Massington, Mr. Reginald Armstrong. Lord Keynes, Mr. Armstrong.'

The American murmured his national formula about being very pleased, and Mrs. Palmer continued without intermission.

'And I've got no party to meet you,' she said, 'because I thought you would be tired with your journey, and want to have a quiet evening, and we'll go in to dinner at once. Lord Keynes, you look as if America agreed with you, and I see they have been interviewing you already. Well, that's our way here. Why, when Reginald Armstrong gave his equestrian party down at Port Washington last week, I assure you there was a string of our newspaper men a quarter of a mile long waiting to see him.'

The curious shrillness of talk peculiar to America sounded loud in the restaurant as they made their sidling way by crowded tables toward one of the windows looking on the street.

'Equestrian party?' asked Mrs. Massington. 'What is that?'

'Tell them, Reginald,' said Mrs. Palmer. 'Why, it tickled me to death, your equestrian party. Mrs. Massington, those are blue points. You must eat them. Tell them, Reginald.'

'Well, my stable was burned down last fall,' said he, 'and I've been building a new one. So I determined to open it in some kind of characteristic way.'

'His own idea,' said Mrs. Palmer in a loud aside to Bertie. 'He's one of our brightest young men; you'll see a lot of him.'

'So I thought,' continued Mr. Armstrong, 'that I'd give a stable party – make everyone dress as grooms. But then the ladies objected to dressing as grooms. I'm sure I don't know why. I should have thought they'd have liked to show their figures. But some objected. Mrs. Palmer objected. I don't know why she objected – looking at her – but she did object.'

Mrs. Palmer smiled.

'Isn't he lovely?' she said loudly across the table to Mrs. Massington.

'Well, she objected,' again continued Mr. Armstrong; 'and when Mrs. Palmer objects, she objects. She said she wouldn't come. So I had to think of something else. And it occurred to me that the best thing we could do was to have dinner on horseback in the stables.'

He paused a moment.

'Well, that dinner was a success,' he said. 'I say it was a success, and I'm modest too. I had fifty tables made, fitting on to the horses' shoulders, and we all sat on horseback, and ate our dinners in the new stables. Fifty of us in a big circle with the horses' heads pointing inwards, and simultaneously the horses ate their dinner out of a big circular manger. And that dinner has been talked about for a week, and it 'll be talked about till next week. Next week Mrs. Palmer gives a party, and my dinner will be as forgotten as what Adam and Eve had for tea when they were turned out of Paradise.'

'No, don't tell them,' screamed Mrs. Palmer. 'Reginald, if you tell them, I shall never forgive you.'

'Please don't, then, Mr. Armstrong,' said Sybil. 'I should hate it if you were never forgiven. Besides, I like surprises. I should have loved your dinner; I think it was too unkind of you to have given it before I came. Or else it is unkind of you to have told me about it now that it is over.'

She laughed with genuine amusement.

'Bertie, is it not heavenly?' she said. 'We think of that sort of thing sometimes in England. Do you remember the paper ball? But we so seldom do it. And did it all go beautifully? Did not half fall off their horses?'

'Well, Mrs. Palmer's husband, Lewis S., he wouldn't get on a real horse,' he said. 'He said that he was endangering too many shareholders. So I got a wooden horse for him, and had it covered with gold-leaf.'

'Lewis on a rocking-horse!' screamed his wife. 'I died – I just died!'

'Luckily, she had a resurrection,' said Mr. Armstrong; 'otherwise I should never have forgiven myself. But you did laugh, you did laugh,' he said.

Mrs. Palmer probably did. Certainly she did now.

The dinner went on its way. Everything was admirable: what was designed to be cold was iced; what was designed to be hot was molten. Round them the shrill-toned diners grew a little shriller; outside the crisp noise of horses' hoofs on asphalt grew more frequent. Mrs. Emsworth's first night was the feature of the evening; and even the harassed financiers, to whom to-morrow, as dictated by the voice of the telephone from Long Island, might mean ruin or redoubled fortunes, had with closing hours laid all ideas of dollars aside, and, like sensible men, proposed to distract themselves till the opening of business next morning distracted them. For Mrs. Emsworth was something of a personality; her friends, who were many, said she could act; her enemies, who were legion, allowed she was beautiful, and New York, which sets the time in so many things, takes its time very obediently in matters of artistic import from unbusiness-like England and France. In this conviction, it was flocking there to-night. Besides the great impresario, Bilton, had let her the Dominion Theatre, and was known to have given her *carte blanche* in the matter of mounting and dresses. This meant, since he was a shrewd man, a belief in her success, for into the value of business he never allowed any other consideration to enter. Furthermore, there had been from time to time a good deal of interest in England over Mrs. Emsworth's career, the sort of interest which does more for a time in filling a theatre than would acting of a finer quality than hers have done. The piece she was to appear in was a *petit saleté* of no importance whatever. That always suited her best; she liked her audience to be quite undistracted by any interest in the plot, so that they might devote themselves to the contemplation of her dresses and herself. Of her dresses the quality was admirable, the quantity small; of herself there was abundance, both of quality and quantity, for she was a tall woman, and, as we have said, even her enemies conceded her good looks.

The piece had already begun when the little *partie carrée* from Sherry's entered, and rustled to the large stage-box which Bilton had reserved for them. Mrs. Emsworth, in fact, was at the moment making her first entrance, and, as they took their places, was acknowledging the applause with which she was greeted. Naturally enough, her eye, as she bowed to the house, travelled over its occupants, and she saw the party arriving. This was made easy for her by Mrs. Palmer's voluble enthusiasm, which really for the moment divided the attention of the house between the stage and her box.

'I adore her, I just adore her!' she cried; 'and she promised to come down from Saturday till Monday to Long Island. You know her, of course, Lord Keynes? There's something magnetic to me about her. I told her so this afternoon. I think it's her neck. Look at her bending her head, Mrs. Massington. I really think that Mrs. Emsworth's neck is the most magnetic thing I ever saw. Reginald, isn't it magnetic?'

The magnetic lady proceeded. She acted with immense and frolicsome enjoyment, like some great good-humoured child bursting with animal spirits. To the rather tired and heated occupants of the stalls she came like a sudden breeze on a hot day, so infectious was her enjoyment, so natural and unaffected her pleasure in exhibiting her beauty and buoyant vitality. The critical element in the audience – in any case there was not much – she simply took by the scruff of the neck and turned out of the theatre. 'We are here to enjoy ourselves,' she seemed to say. 'Laugh, then; look at me,

and you will.' And they looked and laughed. Whether she was an actress or not was really beside the point; there was in her, anyhow, something of the irrepressible *gamin* of the streets, and the *gamin* that there is in everybody hailed its glorious cousin. Long before the act was over her success was assured, and when Mr. Bilton came in to see them in the interval, it was no wonder that his mercantile delight was apparent in his face. Once more, for the fiftieth or the hundredth time, he had staked heavily and won heavily.

'I knew she would take,' he said. 'We Americans, Mrs. Massington, are the most serious people on the face of the earth, and there is nothing we adore so much as the entire absence of seriousness. Mrs. Emsworth is like Puck in the "Midsummer Night's Dream." They'll be calling her Mrs. Puck before the week's out. And she's playing up well. There is a crowd of a hundred reporters behind the scenes now, and she's interviewing them ten at a time, and making her dog give audience to those she hasn't time for. Do you know her dog? I thought it would knock the scenery down when it wagged its tail.'

Armstrong in the meantime was regaling Bertie with more details of the equestrian party, and the justice of Bilton's remarks about seriousness was evident from his conversation.

'It was all most carefully thought out,' he was saying, 'for one mustn't have any weak point in an idea of that sort. I don't think you go in for that sort of social entertainments in London, do you?'

'No; we are much more haphazard, I think,' said Bertie.

'Well, it's not so here – anyhow, in our set. If you want to keep in the swim you must entertain people now and then in some novel and highly original manner. Mrs. Lewis S. Palmer there is the centre, the very centre, of our American social life. You'll see things at her home done just properly. Last year she gave a farm-party that we talked about, I assure you, for a month. You probably heard of it.'

'I don't remember it, I'm afraid.'

'Well, you surprise me. All the men wore real smock-frocks and carried shepherd's crooks or cart-whips or flails, and all the women were dressed as milkmaids. It was the drollest thing you ever saw. And not a detail was wrong. All the grounds down at Mon Repos – that's her house, you know – were covered with cattle-sheds and poultry-houses and pig-sties, and the cows and sheep were driven around and milked and shorn just as they do on real farms. And inside the walls of her ballroom were even boarded up, and it was turned into a dairy. She's one of our very brightest women.'

'And next week there is to be a new surprise, is there not?' asked Bertie.

'Yes, indeed, and I think it will top everything she has done yet. What she has spent on it I couldn't tell you. Why, even Lewis S. Palmer got a bit restive about it, and when Lewis S. gets restive about what Mrs. Palmer is spending, you may bet that anyone else would have been broke over it. Why, she spent nearly thirty thousand dollars the other day over the funeral of her dog.'

'Did Mr. Palmer get restive over that?' asked Bertie.

'Well, I guess it would have been pretty mean of him if he had, and Lewis, he isn't mean. He's a strenuous man, you know, and he likes to see his wife strenuous as a leader of society. He'd be terribly mortified if she didn't give the time to American society. And he knows perfectly well that she has to keep firing away if she's to keep her place, just as he's got to in his. Why, what would happen to American finance if Lewis realized all his fortune, and put it in a box and sat on the top twiddling his thumbs? Why, it would just crumble – go to pieces. Same with American society, if Mrs. Palmer didn't keep on. She's just got to.'

'Then what happened to you all when she came to London?' asked Bertie, rather pertinently.

'Why, that was in the nature of extending her business. That was all right,' said Armstrong. 'And here's some of the returns coming in right along,' he added felicitously – ' Mrs. Massington and you have come to America.' At this point Bilton interrupted.

'Mrs. Emsworth saw you to-night, Lord Keynes,' he said, 6 and hopes you will go to see her to-morrow morning. No. 127, West Twenty-sixth Street. Easier than your Park Squares and Park Places and Park Streets? isn't it?'

'Much easier,' said Bertie. 'Pray give my compliments to Mrs. Emsworth, and say I regret so much I am leaving New York to-morrow with Mrs. Palmer.'

'Ah, you couldn't have a better excuse,' said Bilton; 'but no excuse does for Mrs. Emsworth. You'd better find half an hour, Lord Keynes.'

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Emsworth's little flat in Twenty-sixth Street certainly reflected great credit on its furnisher, who was her impresario. She had explained her requirements to him briefly but completely before she signed her contract.

'I want a room to eat my chop in,' she said; 'I want a room to digest my chop in; I want a room to sleep in; and I want somebody to cook my chop, and somebody to make my bed. All that I leave to you; you know my taste. If the room doesn't suit me, I shall fly into a violent rage, and probably refuse to act at all. You will take all the trouble of furnishing and engaging servants off my hands, won't you? How dear of you! Now, please go away; I'm busy. *Au revoir*, till New York.'

Now, Bilton, as has been mentioned, was an excellent man of business, and, knowing perfectly well that Mrs. Emsworth was not only capable of carrying her threat into action, but was extremely likely to do so – a course which would have seriously embarrassed his plans – he really had taken considerable pains with her flat. Consequently, on her arrival, after she had thrown a sham Empire clock out of the window, which in its fall narrowly missed braining a passing millionaire, she expressed herself much pleased with what he had done, and gave a standing order to a very expensive florist to supply her with large quantities of fresh flowers every day, and send the account to Bilton.

The room in which she digested her chop especially pleased her. Carpet, curtains, and upholstery were rose-coloured, the walls were green satin, with half a dozen excellent prints on them, and by the window was an immense Louis XV. couch covered in brocade, with a mass of pillows on it. Here, the morning after her opening night in New York, she was lying and basking like a cat in the heat, smoking tiny rose-scented Russian cigarettes, and expecting with some anticipation of amusement the arrival of Bertie Keynes. Round her lay piles of press notices, which stripped the American variety of the English language bare of epithets. She was deeply absorbed in these, and immense smiles of amusement from time to time crossed her face. On the floor lay her huge mastiff, which, with the true time-serving spirit, rightly calculated to be thoroughly popular, she had rechristened Teddy Roosevelt. Her great coils of auburn hair were loosely done up, and her face, a full, sensuous oval, was of that brilliant warm-blooded colouring which testified to the authenticity of the smouldering gold of her hair. Lying there in the hot room, brilliant with colour and fragrant with the scent of innumerable flowers (the account for which was sent in to Mr. Bilton), she seemed the embodiment of vitality and serene Paganism. Not even her friends – and they were many – ever accused her of morality, but, on the other hand, all children adored her. That is an item not to be disregarded when the moralist adds up the balance-sheet.

In spite of his excuse of the night before, Bertie Keynes had taken Bilton's advice, and before long he was announced.

'Bertie, Bertie!' she cried as he came in, 'I wake up to find myself famous. I am magnetic, it appears, beyond all powers of comprehension. I am vimmy – am I really vimmy, do you think, and what does it mean? I am a soulful incarnation of adorable – Oh no; it's Teddy Roosevelt who is the adorable incarnation. Yes, that dear angel lying there is Teddy Roosevelt and an adorable incarnation, which would never have happened if we hadn't come to America, would it, darling? Not you, Bertie. I christened him on the way over, and you shall be godfather, because he wants a new collar. Let me see, where was I? Bertie, I was a success last night. Enormous. I knew I should be. Now sit down, and try to get a word in edge-ways, if you can.'

'I congratulate you, Dorothy,' he said – 'I congratulate you most heartily.'

'Thanks. I say, Teddy Roosevelt, the kind young gentleman congratulates us. Now, what are you doing on these opulent shores? Looking out for opulence, I guess. Going to be married, are we? Well, Teddy is too, if we can find a suitable young lady; and so am I. Oh, such fun! and we'll tear up all our past histories, and put them in the fire.'

She sat half up on her couch, and looked at him.

'It's two years since we met last, Bertie,' she said; 'and you – why, you've become a man. You always were a pretty boy, and you don't make a bad-looking man. And I'm vimmy. I used not to be vimmy, did I? But we are all changing as time goes on. Really, I'm very glad to see you again.'

Bertie felt unaccountably relieved at her manner. His relief was of short duration. Dorothy Emsworth arranged her pillows more comfortably, and lit another cigarette.

'I wanted to see you before you left New York,' she said, 'because I am coming down to stay with Mrs. Palmer next Saturday, and we had better know how we stand. So, what are you over here for? Did you come here to get married? And if so, why not?'

She lay back as she spoke, stretching her arms out with a gesture that somehow reminded him of a cat stretching its forelegs and unsheathing the claws of its silent, padded feet. His feeling of relief was ebbing a little.

'Why not, indeed?' he said.

'Dear Bertie, echo-conversation is so tedious,' she said.

'You always used to be rather given to it. So you have come out to get married. That is settled, then. Do ask me to the wedding. The "Voice that Breathed"; wedding march from "Lohengrin"; ring dropping and running down the aisle like a hoop; orange-flowers; tears; sudden unexplained hysterics of the notorious Mrs. Emsworth; deportment of the bride; wedding-cake; puff-puff. And the curtain drops with extreme rapidity. O lor', Teddy R.! what devils we all are, to be sure!'

Bertie's feeling of relief had quite gone, but his nervousness had gone also. He felt he knew the facts now.

'I see,' he said: 'you propose to make trouble. I'm glad you told me.'

'I told you?' she asked, laughing lazily. 'Little vimmy me? I say, I'm brainy too.'

'What do you propose to do?' he asked.

'Well, wait first of all till you are engaged. I say, Bertie, I like teasing you. When you wrinkle your forehead as you are doing now, you look adorable. I don't mean a word I say, you know, any more than you meant a word of that very, very funny letter you once wrote me, which is now,' she said with histrionic utterance, 'one of my most cherished possessions.'

'You told me you had burned it,' said he.

'I know; I meant to burn it, but I couldn't. When I told you I had burnt it, I really meant to have burnt it, and so I didn't tell you a lie, because for all practical purposes it was burned. But then I found I couldn't; it was too funny for words. Really, there are so few humorous things in the world that it would be murder to destroy it. Of course, you didn't mean it. But I can't burn it. It is here somewhere.'

Bertie did not smile. He sat up straight in his chair, and put the tips of his fingers together.

'And don't look like Gallio,' remarked Mrs. Emsworth.

'Look here, Dorothy,' he said, 'you can make things rather unpleasant for me, if you choose. Now, why do you choose? You know perfectly well that at one time the world said things about you and me; you also know perfectly well that – well, that there was no truth in them. You encouraged me to fall madly in love with you because – I don't know why. I thought you liked me, anyhow. Then there appeared somebody else. I wrote you a letter expressing my illimitable adoration. That was all – all. You have got that letter. Is not what I have said true?'

'Yes – slightly edited. You see, I am a *very* improper person.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if you choose to write a very fervent letter to a very improper person, people will say – it is no use denying it – they will say What a fine day it is, but hot.'

Bertie got up.

'That is all I have to say,' he said.

'People are so ill-natured,' said Mrs. Emsworth.

The catlike laziness had left her, though her attitude was the same; instead of looking sensuously lazy, she looked very alert.

'Good-bye, then,' said Bertie; 'we meet next week at Long Island.'

'Yes; it will be very pleasant,' said she.

He left the room without more words, and for five minutes she remained where she was. But slowly, as she lay there, the enjoyment and the purring content faded completely out of her face. Then it grew hard and sad; eventually, with a long-drawn sigh, half sob, she got up and called to her dog. He rose limb by massive limb, and laid his head on her lap.

'Teddy R.,' she said, 'we are devils. But there are two worse devils than you and I. One has just gone away; one is just coming. Worse-devil one is worse because he thinks – he thinks that of me. Worse-devil two is worse because he – he did that to me. So – so you and I will think nothing more about it at all, but keep our spirits up.'

She fondled the great dog's head a moment, then got up suddenly, and drew the blind down to shut out the glare of the sun, which was beginning to lay a hot yellow patch on the floor.

'He thought that,' she said to herself – 'he really thought that.'

She walked up and down the room for a moment or two, then went to a table on which stood her despatch-box, opened it, and looked through a pile of letters that lay inside. One of these she took out and read through. At moments it seemed to amuse her, at moments her smile was struck from her face. When she had finished reading it, she paused a few seconds with it in her hands, as if weighing it. Then, with a sudden gesture of impatience, she tore it in half, and threw the pieces into the grate. Then, with the quick relief of a decision made and acted upon, she whistled to her dog, and went into her bedroom to make her toilet. Resplendency was part of her programme, and with the consciousness of a busy hour before her, she told her butler – Bilton's liberal interpretation of her requirements had included a manservant – that if Mr. Harold Bilton called, he was to be asked to wait.

The 'room to sleep in' was, if anything, more satisfactory than the 'room to digest her chop in.' Like all proper bedrooms, there was a bed in it, a large table, winking with silver, in the window, and very little else. By the bedside there was a bearskin; in front of the dressing-table in the window there was a rug; otherwise the room was carpetless and parquetted, and devoid of furniture and dust. Dark-green curtains hung by the window, dark-green blinds could be drawn across the window. The bathroom beyond held the hopeless but necessary accessories of dressing. Her maid was waiting for her – Parkinson by name – and it was not Dorothy who came to be dressed, but Puck.

'Parkinson,' she said, 'once upon a time there was a very fascinating woman called X.'

'Lor'm!' said Parkinson.

'Quite so. And there was a very fascinating young man called Y. He wanted to marry her, and wrote to say so. But meantime another man called Z also wanted to – to marry her. So she said "Yes," because he gave her a great deal of money. But she kept Y's proposal – I don't know why, except because it was so funny. And so now I suppose she is Mrs. Z. That's all.'

'Lor'm!' said Parkinson. 'Will you wear your shiffong and lace dress?'

'Yes, shiffong. Parkinson, supposing I suddenly burst into tears, what would you think?'

'I should think you wasn't quite well'm.'

'Quite right; also there isn't time.'

Mrs. Emsworth had not been gone more than ten minutes or so before Bilton was shown up. He appeared to be in a particularly well-satisfied humour this morning, and as he moved about the room, noting with his quick eye the stamp of femininity which Mrs. Emsworth had already impressed into the garnishing of the place, he whistled softly to himself. In his hand he carried a small jewel-case with her initials in gold upon the top. As always, in the relaxed mood the true man came to the surface; for a man is most truly himself, not at great moments of emergency or when a sudden call is made on him, but when his ambitions for the time being are gratified, when he is pleased with himself and his circumstances – above all, when he is alone. Thus, though just now the hard

eagerness of his face was a little softened, yet its alertness hardly dozed; and though he had made, he felt sure, a great success in bringing Dorothy Emsworth to America, he hardly allowed himself even this momentary pause of achievement, but had called this morning to talk over with her the details of a protracted tour through the principal cities of the States. True son of his country, he realized that to pause spelled to be left behind.

As his manner was, Bilton did not sit down, but kept walking about, as if not to be caught idle either in mind or body. As in many of his countrymen, the habit of perpetually being ready and eager to snap up an opportunity had become a second nature to him, so that it was far more an effort to him to rest than to work. Working was as natural to him as breathing; to cease to work required the same sort of effort as to hold the breath. To him in his profession as impresario any movement, any glimpse at a room or a picture, could perhaps suggest what in the fertile alchemy of his mind might be transformed into a 'tip,' and he looked with special attention at two Watteau prints which hung on the walls; for in the second piece which Mrs. Emsworth was to produce under his direction a certain scene was laid in the gardens at Versailles, and the note of artificial naturalness had to be struck in the scenery as Watteau and no one else had struck it. Big trees cut formally and square in their lower branches, but with the topmost boughs left unpollarded; fountain in the centre, quite so, and a glimpse, just a glimpse, of the terrace of the palace with the two bronze fountains beneath the trees.

He stood a moment before the fireplace with eyes half closed, conjuring up the scene, and in particular seeing it with his mind's eye as a setting to that incomparable woman in whom, professionally, at this juncture, he was so deeply interested, to whom he was so managerially devoted, but of whom in other respects he was so profoundly weary. For a year he had been wildly in love with her, for another year he had slowly cooled towards her, and now it required all his steadiness of head and incessantly watchful will not to betray his tedium. Also in years he was now, though still only half way through the thirties, old enough in mind to wish to settle down. His capabilities for passionate attachments were a little cooling, and, with a cynical amusement at himself, he was beginning to realize that married domesticity, even as morals taught, was, though for other reasons, the placid river-bed into which the babbling mountain-streams of youth must eventually empty themselves. Rather bathos, perhaps, but he realized fully that everyone gets in life what they themselves bring to it. The only limitations imposed on a man are those which his own nature makes.

But these unedifying moralities did not occupy him long. They were the background to his thoughts, just as the terrace of Versailles was the background for the picture he was forming. In the foreground of the picture stood Mrs. Emsworth; on the terrace stood another figure, Sybil Massington.

He had let his cigar go out as he revolved these things in front of the two Watteau pictures, and then rose to drop it in the fireplace. A letter in an envelope torn once in half lay there, and he stooped and picked it up, laid the two pieces side by side on the table, and read it through. Then he put the pieces in his pocket, and, with that praiseworthy attention to detail which throughout his life had contributed so largely to his success, he took from the table a sheet of paper, folded it inside an envelope, tore it in half, and replaced the pieces in the grate where he had found the others. The whole thing was quickly and naturally done; it was merely one among a thousand million other cases in which his mind was ready to take advantage of any possible opportunity that Fate might cast in his way. The torn letter might conceivably at some future date be useful to him. Therefore he kept it. It is no use to guard against certainties – such was his gospel – for certainties in this life are so few as to be practically negligible. But he who guarded against contingencies and provided for possibilities was the winner in the long-run.

This done, he dismissed the matter from his mind, and, in order not to let the moments pass without seed, sketched out in some detail the plan of the stage as suggested by the two Watteau prints. He was deep in this when Mrs. Emsworth entered. The 'shiffong' suited her admirably.

'You have been waiting,' she said; 'I am sorry for keeping you. Oh, Harold, they love me over here; they just love me!'

His part was at his finger-tips.

'That doesn't seem to me in the least remarkable,' he said. 'You are a success; no one can be more. I want to be allowed to commemorate it.' And he handed her the jewel-case.

He was no niggard when business was involved; his business now was to keep her in a good temper, and the opal and diamond brooch he had chosen at Tiffany's was really admirable. Even Mrs. Palmer might have found it brought consolation to a wounded spirit.

'That is dear of you, Harold,' she said; 'I adore opals. Is it really for me? Thank you ever so much. It goes on now. Is it rather big for the morning? I think it is. A reason the more for wearing it.'

She pinned it into her dress, and sat down.

'Well?' she said.

'I came really to congratulate you,' said he; 'but as I am here, I suppose we may as well talk over some business that must be talked over. About your tour: are you willing to stop over here till April at least?'

'Yes; I don't see why not. I want to appear in London early in May.'

'Very well. I will draft an agreement, and send it you. Now, you may consider that with your extraordinary success of last night the theatre will be full for some weeks ahead. I propose your giving an evening performance on Saturdays as well as the matinee.'

'Terms?'

'Royalty. Twenty per cent, on total takings. It is worth your while.'

'Is it not more worth my while to be seen from Saturday till Monday at Mrs. Palmer's?'

'It would be if the theatre was not full. But you could fill it – for the present, anyhow – if you had a matinee every day. Besides, you can get down to Long Island with the utmost ease on Sunday morning.'

'I go to Mass on Sunday morning; you forget that!'

He smiled.

'I suggest, then, that you should omit that ceremony, if you want to go to Mrs. Palmer's. However, there is no hurry. Weigh the three things in your mind – eighty or ninety pounds by acting on Saturday evening, or Mass on Sunday morning, or Mrs. Palmer's on Sunday morning. There is another thing: I want to talk over the scenes in "Paris" with you. I am going to Mrs. Palmer's the Sunday after next. I will bring the models down with me, if you will promise to give me an hour. 'They will not be ready till then.'

'Yes. I am going there next Sunday and the Sunday after. They have a theatre there; she wants me to do something in the evening.'

Bilton thought a moment.

'What do I get?' he asked.

'The pleasure of seeing me act, silly.'

He shook his head.

'I'm afraid I must forget that pleasure,' he said. 'Your contract binds you to give no theatrical representations of any sort except under my direction.'

The *gamin* element rose to the surface in her.

'What a beast you are!' she said. 'It is for a charity!'

'And a cheque,' he observed.

'The cheque is purely informal. Besides, we shall be there together.'

He took a cigar out of his case, bit the end off with his long teeth, that gleamed extremely white between the very remarkable red of his lips.

'Look here, Dolly,' he said; 'there are two sides to the relations in which we are placed. One is purely businesslike; the other is purely sentimental. It is a pity to let them overlap. It spoils my

devotion to you to feel that it is in a way mixed up with business, and it offends my instincts as a business man to let sentiment have a word to say in our bargains. Briefly, then, I forbid your acting for Mrs. Palmer unless you make it worth my while. After all, I didn't bring you out here for sentimental reasons; I brought you out because, from a financial point of view, I thought it would be good for both of us.'

'What do you want?' she asked.

'Half your cheque.'

'For something you haven't arranged, and which won't cost you a penny?'

'Yes. I am talking business. You can close with that offer any time to-day; to-morrow it will be two-thirds. I'm quite square with you.'

'Americans are Jews,' observed Mrs. Emsworth.

'Possibly; it would be an advantage if everyone was; it would simplify bargaining immensely. The Gentile mind is often highly unreasonable, and, instead of allowing both sides to make profits, it simply refuses to part with its goods. And a fine opportunity goes to – well, to damnation. You won't score if you don't act for her, nor will I. If you do, we both shall. Don't be a Gentile, Dolly.'

She did not answer for a moment. Her eyes saw the torn fragments of the letter in the grate, and she remembered that she had definitely and for ever torn up what Bertie had written to her. Then she got up, crossed the room to where he was standing by the fireplace, and put her hands on his shoulders.

'Are you tired of me?' she asked.

His brown eyes grew black at the fragrance and seductiveness of her close presence; for the blood is stirred long after the imagination has ceased to be fired.

'You witch! you witch!' he said.

But in the background on the terrace there still stood the other figure.

CHAPTER VI

Long Island is separated from New York by a narrow sound, across which ferry-boats ply in both directions with extreme punctuality. From any part of New York city a couple of electric cars or an electric railway will take you to the threshold of the ferry-boat, and trains await you at the back-door, so to speak, of the ferry-boats, to convey you down the length of Long Island. On board the ferry-boat you can buy a variety of badly-printed and sensational daily papers for the sum of one cent; you can get your boots blacked for very little more; and no doubt, if there was sufficient demand, the directors would enable you to have your teeth brushed or your hair combed. No part of the equipment, however, is at all lovely. It answers the purpose of conveying you cheaply and expeditiously from one point to another, and enables you to finish your toilet in transit, which is an invaluable boon to those who want to save time. As a matter of fact, everyone wants to save time, but it has been reserved for Americans to invent such methods of doing it. The rest of the world, therefore, is in their debt. The debt is acknowledged, but the rest of the world, quite inscrutably, does not choose to follow their example. All may raise the flower now all have got the seed, but they do not raise the flower.

There is no 'class' on these boats; there is no 'class' on the elevated railway; there is no 'class' on the electric cars. Millionaires in Long Island, in consequence, have the privilege of enjoying the same discomforts as other people, and even Lewis S., who could have bought up the whole system of electric cars, overhead railway, and ferry-boats (after a little judicious distribution of emoluments to the officials of New York City), habitually went by these unlovely conveyances, because there were no other. During his transit he once sent a cablegram buying, at any price, the whole dinner-service which had been used on the last occasion on which Marie Antoinette dined at Petit Trianon. It was extremely expensive, and, as he wrote, the drippings from the rain fell on to his cablegram form, for the boat was full. Subsequently he argued with the boot-boy who had blacked his boots, but gave in when the boy produced his tariff-card. And Democracy, the spirit of his fellow-passengers, sympathized in the main with him.

Once arrived on Long Island, a walk of a hundred yards or so leads to the ticket-office. Those hundred yards are uncovered, however; but since people who live on Long Island *must* pass them in order to get into the Delectable City, there is no reason why the railroad or the ferry-boat company should offer conveniences in the way of shelter to their passengers. Given competition, any line would vie with the others in mirrors and gilded furniture; but if there is none, why on earth spend a penny? Not a passenger the less will travel because the mode of transit is bestial. Thus, common-sense, as usual, emerges triumphant.

For the purpose of this narrative, the low-lying swamp and companies of jerry-built houses that cluster round the various stations on the line may be disregarded, and after half an hour's travelling the train emerges into a very pleasant land. There are no high uplands to dwarf the immediate landscape, but there are trees of tolerable growth and slim presence to add distinction to it. Underneath these trees, as the train nears Port Washington, grow high clumps of purple Michaelmas daisies, now, in September, full of bursting bud, and the temperate sea-winds give a vividness of colour to the prevailing green, which reminds foreigners of the Devon sea-coast.

Mrs. Palmer's new-built house stood on a charming hill-top some mile or so beyond the station. The site had been occupied till a few years before by a delightful bungalow structure, built of wood, with shingled walls, and surrounded on all sides by deep, shady verandas. The wood in those days came right up to the house on two sides, and was just lopped of its topmost branches on a third, so that where the ground fell away rapidly from the house a charming glimpse of the dim blue sound could be seen framed in sky and tree-tops, while the fourth side was open, the house-front giving on to a broad lawn of velvety turf which changed into rougher meadow-land in the middle distance, while over distant tree-tops and a wash of green country the gray smoke of New York sat on the horizon.

The house, in fact, had been like a hundred other houses on Long Island, not perhaps very pretty, still less beautiful, but not without a certain haphazard picturesqueness about it, restful and unpretending, and most eminently adapted for the purpose of affording to the brain-heated business man a draught of coolness and greenness. Moreover, it had expressed somehow the genius of the place; its woods, not huge nor of magnificent trees, but of pleasant growth, always sounded in whispers through the rooms; and even as the greatest heats of summer came tempered by the passage of the winds through the filter of the woodlands, so, one would have thought, the fever of New York was abated here, even as the smoke of the city was but a gray *tache* on the horizon. It had, as all houses should, been in tune with the pleasant, mediocre charm of the island, even as the chateaux on the Loire express the broad grandeur and classical formality of the landscape, as the big houses of England are in the scale of their huge timbered parks, and, for that matter, as the county gaol expresses the security which His Majesty kindly affords to the criminal classes.

But within the last few years the whole place had been completely changed, and it was no longer the genius of Long Island, but the genius of mushroom wealth, that crowned the hill-top. For a quarter of a mile on every side round the house the trees had been felled and their roots dynamited, and huge lawns spread their green carpets in the most ample expanses. Four-square in the centre stood the immense house of gray stone, copied largely from one of the Valois chateaux in the South of France, but with various protuberances, in the shape of a theatre, a swimming-bath, and a tennis-court, grafted on to it. A carriage-drive lay in long curves like a flicked whip-lash, surmounting terrace after terrace set with nugatory nudities, till it reached the lead-roofed portico at the front, where two great Græco-Roman candelabra of Parian marble stood one on each side of the door, pierced for gas, and crowned by large glass globes. To the north lay the Italian garden, all laurels and tessellated pavement, cypresses and statuary, fountains and flower-beds. To the west were the tennis and croquet lawns, and to the south, where the ground in old days had fallen tumbling towards the sea, it had been built up with thousands of tons of earth and faced with masonry, so that from the edge of the terrace one looked down on to the topmost fans of the waving trees. Heavy gilded vanes crowned the lead roofs, and high over the central dome of the building a flag-staff displayed Mrs. Palmer's very original device – Love caught in a rose-bush – to the airs of heaven. Round the extreme edge of the terrace ran the bicycle track, on which Lewis S. Palmer did his ten miles a day, with black hatred in his heart of this extraordinary waste of time.

The estate, which was of great extent, and produced nothing whatever, since, to Mrs. Palmer's way of thinking, to live on an estate which produced anything was of the nature of keeping a shop, was all pressed into the amiable service of providing entertainment for the guests, and of showing the wondering world a specimen of the delectable life. For several miles the road through the woods had been run in artfully contrived gradients, carried on struts over too precipitous ravines, and quarried through cuttings to avoid undesirable steepnesses. The sides of the cuttings were admirably planted, and creepers and ivy covered the balustrades of the bridges. A golf-course, smooth as a billiard-table, and not too heavily bunkered, lay near the house, and Mrs. Palmer had tried a most original experiment last year of stocking the woods with all sorts of game, to provide mixed shooting for a couple of parties in the autumn. This had not been wholly a success, for the deer she had turned out were so tame that they gazed in timid welcome at the shooters, probably expecting to be fed, till they fell riddled with bullets, while the pheasants were so wild that nobody could touch a tail-feather. But the costume of the *chasseurs*– green velvet, very Robin-Hoody – had been most tasteful, and she herself, armed with a tiny pea-rifle and dressed in decent imitation of Atalanta, had shot a roebuck and a beater, the latter happily not fatally.

From the centre of the terrace on the east, which had been brought over entire from a needy Italian palace, a broad flight of steps of rose-coloured marble led down to the sea. A small breakwater was sufficient to provide station and anchorage for the two steam-yachts and smaller pleasure-boats, but otherwise the shore had not been meddled with. There was a charming beach of sand, and a

little further on a fringe of seaweed-covered rock-pools. Behind this was a small natural lagoon in a depression in the sandy foreshore, some half-acre in extent, fed by a stream that came down through the woods, but brackish through the infiltration of the salt water. This that highly original woman had chosen to be the scene of the fête which was to astonish society next week; but the secret had been well kept, and no one except Reggie Armstrong knew the precise details of the new surprise. For a fortnight or so, however, it was common knowledge that a great many large pans wrapped in tarpaulin had been arriving, and the shore had been populous with men who plied some sort of bare-legged avocation, which implied wading in the lagoon. But the foreman of the company who was executing Mrs. Palmer's orders had received notice that if any word of what was being done leaked out or reached the papers, at that moment all work would be suspended, and the firm would never have another order from her. She herself, sometimes alone, sometimes with Reggie, inspected the work; otherwise no one was allowed near the place. The yachts of her dearest friends, it is true, constantly passed and repassed up the sound, and many were the opera-glasses levelled at the shore; but what the bare-legged men were doing baffled conjecture and the best glasses.

The house inside was, with the exception of one small suite, of the most sumptuous description. A huge hall, paved with marble, and covered as to its walls with superb wood-work of Grinling Gibbons, occupied the centre of the ground-floor, and *en suite* round it were the rooms for entertaining. Ping-pong being at this moment fashionable, it was to be expected that almost every room had its table, and it was curious to see the hideous little black board on its cheap trestle legs occupying the centre of the great French drawing-room. Old rose-coloured satin was stretched on the walls, an immense Aubusson carpet covered the floor. All the furniture was gems of the early Empire style; the big ormolu clock was by Vernier; great Dresden parrots in gilt mounts held the shaded electric lights, and a statuette by Clodion stood on the Queen's escritoire from the Tuileries. One side of the square block of house was entirely occupied by the picture-gallery, which contained some extremely fine specimens of the great English portrait-school, a few dubious old masters, some good Lancrets, and several very valuable pictures by that very bright young American artist, Sam Wallace. These, as all the world knows, represent scenes from the ballet and such subjects, and he is supposed to have a prodigious eye for colour. Here, too, of course, was an unrivalled place for ping-pong, and Mrs. Palmer had caused to be made a very large court, so that four people could play together. Great grave English footmen, when the game was in progress, were stationed at each end to pick up the balls, and hand them on silver salvers to the server; and they had rather a busy time of it, for the majority of Mrs. Palmer's guests found a difficulty in inducing the ball to go anywhere near the table. But they found it very amusing, and it produced shrieks of senseless laughter.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.