

Thorne Guy

The Drunkard



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PROLOGUE

PART I

A BOOK OF POEMS ARRIVES FOR DR. MORTON SIMS

"How many bards gild the lapses of time
A few of them have ever been the food
Of my delighted fancy."

— *Keats.*

The rain came down through the London fog like ribands of lead as the butler entered the library with tea, and pulling the heavy curtains shut out the picture of the sombre winter's afternoon.

The man poked the fire into a blaze, switched on the electric lights, and putting a late edition of the *Westminster Gazette* upon the table, left the room.

For five minutes the library remained empty. The fire

crackled and threw a glancing light upon the green and gold of the book shelves or sent changing expressions over the faces of the portraits. The ghostly blue flame which burnt under a brass kettle on the tea table sang like a mosquito, and from the square outside came the patter of rain, the drone of passing taxi-cabs, and the occasional beat of horses' hoofs which made an odd flute-like noise upon the wet wood pavement.

Then the door opened and Dr. Morton Sims, the leading authority in England upon Inebriety, entered his study.

The doctor was a slim man of medium height. His moustache and pointed beard were grey and the hair was thinning upon his high forehead. His movements were quick and alert without suggesting nervousness or hurry, and a steady flame burned in brown eyes which were the most remarkable feature of his face.

The doctor drew up a chair to the fire and made himself a cup of weak tea, pouring a little lime-juice into it instead of milk. As he sipped he gazed into the pink and amethyst heart of the fire. His eyes were abstracted – turned inwards upon himself so to speak – and the constriction of thought drew grey threads across his brow.

After about ten minutes, and when he had finished his single cup of tea, Dr. Morton Sims opened the evening paper and glanced rapidly up and down the broad, well-printed columns.

His eye fell upon a small paragraph at the bottom of the second news-sheet which ran thus: —

"Hancock, the Hackney murderer, is to be executed

to-morrow morning in The North London Prison at eight o'clock. It is understood that he has refused the ministrations of the Prison Chaplain and seems indifferent to his fate."

The paper dropped from the doctor's hands and he sighed. The paragraph might or might not be accurate – that remained to be seen – but it suggested a curious train of thought to his mind. The man who was to be hanged in a few hours had committed a murder marked by every circumstance of callousness and cunning. The facts were so sinister and cold that the horrible case had excited no sympathy whatever. Even the silly faddists who generally make fools of themselves on such an occasion in England had organised no petition for reprieve.

Morton Sims was one of those rare souls whose charity of mind, as well as of action, was great. He always tried to take the other side, to combat and resist the verdict passed by the world upon the unhappy and discredited.

But in the case of this murderer even he could have had no sympathy, if he had not known and understood something about the man which no one in the country understood, and only a few people would have been capable of realising if they had been enlightened.

It was his life-work to understand why deeds like this were done.

A clock upon the high mantel of polished oak struck five.

The doctor rose from his chair and stretched himself, and as

he did this the wrinkles faded from his forehead, while his eyes ceased to be clouded by abstraction.

Morton Sims, in common with many successful men, had entire control over his own mind. He perfectly understood the structure and the working of the machine that secretes thought. In his mental context correct muscular co-ordination, with due action of the reflexes, enabled him to put aside a subject with the precision of a man closing a cupboard door.

His mind was divided into thought-tight compartments.

It was so now. He wished to think of the murderer in North London Prison no more at the moment, and immediately the subject passed away from him.

At that moment the butler re-entered with some letters and a small parcel upon a tray.

"The five o'clock post, sir," he said, putting the letters down upon the table.

"Oh, very well, Proctor," the doctor answered. "Is everything arranged for Miss Sims and Mrs. Daly?"

"Yes, sir. Fires are lit in both the bedrooms, and dinner is for half-past six. The boat train from Liverpool gets in to Euston at a quarter to. The brougham will be at the station in good time. They will have a cold journey I expect, sir."

"No, I don't think so, Proctor. The Liverpool boat-trains are most comfortable and they will have had tea. Very well, then."

The butler went away. Morton Sims looked at the clock. It was ten minutes past five. His sister and her friend, who had arrived

at Liverpool from New York a few hours ago would not arrive in London before six.

He looked at the four or five letters on the tray but did not open any of them. The label upon the parcel bore handwriting that he knew. He cut the string and opened that, taking from it a book bound in light green and a letter.

Both were from his great friend Bishop Moultrie, late of Simla and now rector of Great Petherwick in Norfolk, Canon of Norwich, and a sort of unofficial second suffragan in that enormous diocese.

"My dear John," ran the letter, "Here is the book that I was telling you of at the Athenæum last week. You may keep this copy, and I have put your name in it. The author, Gilbert Lothian, lives near me in Norfolk. I know him a little and he has presented me with another copy himself.

You won't agree with some of the thoughts, one or two of the poems you may even dislike. But on the whole you will be as pleased and interested as I am and you will recognise a genuine new inspiration – such a phenomenon now-a-days. Such verse must leave every reader with a quickened sense of the beauty and compass of human feeling, to say nothing of its special appeal to Xn thinkers. Some of it is like George Herbert made musical. Lothian is Crashaw born again, but born greater – sometimes a Crashaw who has been listening to some one playing Chopin!

But read for yourself.

Give my regards to your sister when she returns. I hear from many sources of the great mark her speeches have

made at the American Congress and I am anxiously hoping to meet Mrs. Daly during her stay over here. She must be a splendid woman!

Helena sends all kind remembrances and hopes to see you here soon.

Yours affectionately,

W. D. Moultrie."

Three quarters of an hour were at his disposal. Morton Sims took up the book, which bore the title "SURGIT AMARI" upon the cover, and began to read.

Like many other members of his profession he was something of a man of letters. For him the life-long pursuit of science had been humanised and sweetened by art. Ever since his days at Harrow with his friend, the Bishop, he had loved books.

He read very slowly the longish opening poem only, applying delicate critical tests to every word; analytic and scientific still in the temper of his mind, and distrusting the mere sensuous impression of a first glance.

This new man, this Gilbert Lothian, would be great. He would make his way by charm, the charm of voice, of jewel-like language, above all by the intellectual charm of new, moving, luminous ideas.

At three minutes to six the doctor closed the book and waited. Almost as the clock struck the hour, he heard his motor-brougham stop outside the house, and hurrying out into the hall had opened the door before the butler could reach it.

Two tall women in furs came into the hall.

The brother and sister kissed each other quietly, but their embrace was a long one and there was something that vibrated deep down in the voices of their greeting. Then Miss Morton Sims turned to the other lady. "Forgive me, Julia," she said, in her clear bell-like voice – in America they had said that her voice "toll'd upon the ear" – "But I haven't seen him for five months. John, here is Julia Daly at last!"

The doctor took his guest's hand. His face was bright and eager as he looked at the American woman. She was tall, dressed with a kind of sumptuous good taste, and the face under its masses of grey hair shone with a Minerva-like wisdom and serenity.

"Welcome," the doctor said simply. "We have been friends so long, we have corresponded so often, it is a great joy to me to meet you at last!"

The three people entered the library for a moment, exchanging the happy commonplaces of greeting, and then the two women went up to their rooms.

"Dinner at half past six," the doctor called after them. "I knew you'd want it. We can have a long talk then. At eight I have to go out upon an important errand."

He stood in front of the library fire, thinking about the new arrivals and smoking a cigarette.

His sister Edith had always lived with him, had shared his hopes, his theories and his work. He was the great scientist slowly getting deep down, discovering the laws which govern the vital

question of Alcoholism. She was the popular voice, one of the famous women leaders of the Temperance movement, the most lucid, the least emotional of them all. Her name was familiar to every one in England. Her brother gave her the weapons with which she fought. His theories upon Temperance Reform were quite opposed to the majority of those held by earnest workers in the same field, but he and his sister were beginning to form a strong party of influential people who thought with them. Mrs. Daly was, in America, very much what Edith Morton Sims was in Great Britain – perhaps even more widely known. Apart from her propaganda she was one of the few great women orators living, and in her case also, inspiration came from the English doctor, while she was making his beliefs and schemes widely known in the United States.

As he waited in the library, the doctor thought that probably no man had ever had such noble helpers as these two women to whom such great gifts had been given. His heart was very full of love for his sister that night, of gratitude and admiration for the stately lady who had come to be his guest and whom he now met in the flesh for the first time.

For the first part of dinner the ladies were very full of their recent campaign in America.

There was an infinity of news to tell, experiences and impressions must be recorded, progress reported. The eager sparkling talk of the two women was delightful to the doctor, and he was especially pleased with the conversation of Mrs. Daly.

Every word she spoke fell with the right ring and chimed, he seemed to have known her for years – as indeed he had done, through the medium of her letters.

Conversation, which with people like these is a sort of music, resembles the progress of harmonics in this also – that a lull arrives with mathematical incidence when a certain stage is reached in the progress of a theme.

It happened so now, at a certain stage of dinner. There was much more to be said, but all three people had reached a momentary pause.

The butler came into the room just then, with a letter. "This has just come by messenger from North London Prison, sir," he said, unable to repress a faint gleam of curiosity in his eyes.

With a gesture of apology, the doctor opened the envelope. "Very well," he said, in a moment or two. "I need not write an answer. But go to the library, Proctor, and ring up the North London Prison. Say Doctor Morton Sims' thanks and he will be there punctually at half past eight."

The servant withdrew and both the ladies looked inquiringly at the doctor.

"It is a dreadful thing," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "but I may as well tell you. It must go no further though. A wretched man is to be executed to-morrow and I have to go and see him."

Edith shuddered.

"How frightful," she said, growing rather pale; "but why,

John? How does it concern you? Are you forced to go?"

He nodded. "I must go," he said, "though it is the most painful thing I have ever had to do. It is Hancock, the Hackney murderer."

Two startled faces were turned to him now, and a new atmosphere suddenly seemed to have come into the warm luxurious room, something that was cold, something that had entered from outside.

"You don't know," he went on. "Of course you have been out of England for some months. Well, it is this. Hancock is a youngish man of five and twenty. He was a chemist at Hackney, and of quite exceptional intelligence. He was at one time an assistant at Williamsons' in Oxford Street, where some of my prescriptions are made up and where I buy drugs for experimental purposes. I took rather an interest in him several years ago. He passed all his examinations with credit and became engaged to a really charming young woman, who was employed in a big ladies' shop in Regent Street. He wanted to set up in business for himself, very naturally, and I helped him with a money loan. He married the girl, bought a business at Hackney, and became prosperous enough in a moderate sort of way. He paid me back the hundred pounds I lent him and from time to time I heard that things were going on very well. He was respected in the district, and his wife especially was liked. She was a good and religious woman and did a lot of work for a local church. They appeared to be a most devoted couple."

The doctor stopped in his story and glanced at the set faces turned towards him. He poured some water into a tumbler and drank it.

"Oh, it's a hideous story," he said, with some emotion and marked distaste in his voice. "I won't go into the details. Hancock poisoned his wife with the most calculating and wicked cunning. He had become enamoured of a girl in the neighbourhood and he wanted to get rid of his wife in order to marry her. His wife adored him. She had been a perfect wife to him, but it made no difference. The thing was discovered, as such things nearly always are, he was condemned to death and will be hanged to-morrow morning at breakfast time."

"And you are going to see him *to-night*, John?"

"Yes. It is my duty. I owe it to my work, and to the wretched man too. I was present at the trial. From the first I realised that there must have been some definite toxic influence at work on the man's mind to change him from an intelligent and well-meaning member of society into a ghastly monster of crime. I was quite right. It was alcohol. He had been secretly drinking for years, though, as strong-minded and cunning inebriates do, he had managed to preserve appearances. As you know, Edith, the Home Secretary is a friend of mine and interested in our work. Hancock has expressed a wish to see me, to give me some definite information about himself which will be of great use in my researches into the psychology of alcoholism. With me, the Home Secretary realises the value of such an opportunity, and as

it is the convict's earnest wish, I am given the fullest facilities for to-night. Of course the matter is one of absolute privacy. There would be an outcry among the sentimental section of the public if it were known. But it is my clear duty to go."

There was a dead silence in the room. Mrs. Daly played uneasily with her napkin ring. Suddenly it escaped her nervous fingers and rolled up against a tumbler with a loud ringing sound. She started and seemed to awake from a bitter dream.

"Again!" she said in a low voice that throbbed with pain. "At all hours, in all places, we meet it! The scourge of humanity, the Fiend Alcohol! The curse of the world! – how long, how long?"

PART II

THE MURDERER

"Ma femme est morte, je suis libre!
Je puis donc boire tout mon soûl.
Lorsque je rentrais sans un sou,
Ses cris me déchiraient la fibre."

— *Baudelaire.*

The rain had ceased but the night was bitter cold, as Dr. Morton Sims' motor went from his house in Russell Square towards the North London Prison.

A pall of fog hung a few hundred feet above London. The brilliant artificial lights of the streets glowed with a hard and rather ghastly radiance. As the car rolled down this and that roaring thoroughfare, the people in it seemed to Morton Sims to be walking like marionettes. The driver in front moved mechanically like a clockwork puppet, the town seemed fantastic and unreal to-night.

A heavy depression weighed upon the doctor's senses. His heart beat slowly. Some other artery within him was throbbing like a funeral drum.

It had come upon him suddenly as he left the house. He had never, in all his life, known anything like it before. Perhaps the

mournful words of the American woman had been the cause. Her deep contralto voice tolled in his ears still. Some white cell in the brain was affected, the nerves of his body were in revolt. The depression grew deeper and deeper. A nameless malady of the soul was upon him, he had a sick horror of his task. The hands in his fur gloves grew wet and there was a salt taste in his mouth.

The car left ways that were familiar. Presently it turned into a street of long houses. The street rose steeply before, and was outlined by a long, double row of gas-lamps, stretching away to a point. It was quite silent, and the note of the car's engine sank a full tone as the ascent began.

Through the window in front, and to the left of the chauffeur, the doctor could see the lamps running past him, and suddenly he became aware of a vast blackness, darker than the houses, deeper than the sky, coming to meet him. Incredibly huge and sinister, a precipice, a mountain of stone, a nightmare castle whose grim towers were lost in night, closed the long road and barred all progress onward.

It was the North London Prison, hideous by day, frightful by night, the frontier citadel of a land of Death and gloom and shadows.

The doctor left his car and told the man to return in an hour and wait for him.

He stood before a high arched gateway. In this gateway was a door studded with sexagonal bosses of iron. Above the door was a gas-lamp. Hanging to the side of this door was an iron rod

terminating in a handle of brass. This was the bell.

A sombre silence hung over everything. The roar of London seemed like a sound heard in a vision. A thin night wind sighed like a ghost in the doctor's ear as he stood before the ultimate reality of life, a reality surpassing the reality of dreams.

He stretched out his arm and pulled the bell.

The smooth and sudden noise of oiled steel bars sliding in their grooves was heard, and then a gentle "thud" as they came to rest. A small wicket door in the great ones opened. A huge sombre figure filled it and there was a little musical jingle of keys.

The visitor's voice was muffled as he spoke. In his own ears it sounded strange.

"I am Dr. Morton Sims," he said. "I have a special permit from the Home Secretary for an interview with the convict Hancock."

The figure moved aside. The doctor stepped in through the narrow doorway. There was a sharp click, a jingle of keys, the thud of the steel bars as they went home and a final snap, three times repeated – snap – snap – snap.

A huge, bull-necked man in a dark uniform and a peaked cap, stood close to the doctor – strangely close, he thought with a vague feeling of discomfort. From an open doorway set in a stone wall, orange-coloured light was pouring from a lit interior. Framed in the light were two other dark figures in uniform.

Morton Sims stood immediately under the gate tower of the prison. A lamp hung from the high groined roof. Beyond was another iron-studded door, and on either side of this entrance

hall were lit windows.

"You are expected, sir," said the giant with the keys. "Step this way if you please."

Sims followed the janitor into a bare room, brilliantly illuminated by gas. At the end near the door a fire of coke and coal was glowing. A couple of warders, youngish military-looking men, with bristling moustaches, were sitting on wooden chairs by the fire and reading papers. They rose and saluted as the doctor came in.

At the other end of the room, an elderly man, clean shaved save for short side whiskers which were turning grey, was sitting at a table on which were writing materials and some books which looked like ledgers.

"Good-evening, sir," he said, deferentially, as Doctor Sims was taken up to him. "You have your letter I suppose?"

Sims handed it to him, and pulling on a pair of spectacles the man read it carefully. "I shall have to keep this, sir," he said, putting it under a paper-weight. "My orders are to send you to the Medical Officer at once. He will take you to the condemned cell and do all that is necessary. The Governor sends his compliments and if you should wish to see him after your interview he will be at your service."

"I don't think I shall want to trouble Colonel Wilde, thank you," said the doctor.

"Very good, sir. Of course you can change your mind if you wish, afterwards. But the Governor's time is certainly very much

taken up. It always is on the night before an execution. Jones, take this gentleman to the Medical Officer."

Again the cold air, as Morton Sims left the room with one of the warders. Again the sound of sliding bars and jingling keys, the soft closing of heavy doors. Then a bare, whitewashed hall, with a long counter like that of a cloak-room at a railway station, a weighing machine, gaunt anthropometrical instruments standing against the walls, and iron doors on every side – all seen under the dim light of gas-jets half turned down.

"The reception room, sir," said the warder, in a quiet voice, unlocking one of the doors, and showing a long corridor, much better lighted, stretching away for a considerable distance. The man stepped through with the noiseless footfall of a cat. The doctor followed him, and as he did so his boots echoed upon the stone floor. The noise was startling in this place of silence, and for the first time Sims realised that his guide was wearing shoes soled with felt.

They went down the corridor, the warder's feet making a soft padding sound, the steel chain that hung in a loop from his belt of black leather shining in the gas light. Almost at the end of the passage they came to a door – an ordinary varnished door with a brass handle – at which the man rapped.

"Come in," cried a voice.

The warder held the door open. "The gentleman to see Hancock, sir," he said.

The chief prison doctor, a youngish-looking, clean-shaved

man, rose from his chair. "Wait in the passage till I call you," he said. "How-do-you-do, Dr. Morton Sims. We had your telephone message some time ago. You are very punctual! Do sit down for a minute."

Sims sank into an armchair, with a little involuntary sigh of relief. The room in which he found himself was comfortable and ordinary. A carpet was on the floor, a bright fire burned upon the hearth, there was a leather-covered writing table with books and a stethoscope upon it. The place was normal.

"My name is Marriott, of 'Barts'," said the medical officer. "Do take off your coat, sir, that fur must be frightfully hot in here and you won't need it until you leave the prison again."

"Thank you, I will," Sims answered, and already his voice had regained its usual calmness, his eyes their steady glow. Anticipation was over, the deep depression was passing away. There was work to be done and his nerves responded to the call upon them. "There is no hitch, I suppose?"

"None whatever. Hancock is waiting for you, and anxious to see you."

"It will be very painful," Sims answered in a thoughtful voice, looking at the fire. "I knew the man in his younger days, poor, wretched creature. Is he resigned?"

"I think so. We've done all we could for him; we always do. As far as I can judge, and I have been present at nine executions, he will die quite calmly. 'I shall be glad when it's over,' he said to me this morning."

"And his physical condition?"

"Just beginning to improve. If I had him here for six months under the second class regulations – I should not certify him for hard labour – I could turn him out in fair average health. He's a confirmed alcoholic subject, of course. It's been a case of ammonium bromide and milk diet ever since his condemnation. For the first two days I feared delirium tremens from the shock. But we tided over that. He'll be able to talk to you all right, sir. He's extremely intelligent, and I should say that the interview should prove of great value."

"He has absolutely refused to see the Chaplain? I read so in to-night's paper."

"Yes. Some of them do you know. The religious sense isn't developed at all in him. It will be all the easier for him tomorrow."

"How so?"

"So many of them become religious on the edge of the drop simply out of funk – nervous collapse and a sort of clutching at a chance in the next world. They often struggle and call out when they're being pinioned. It's impossible to give them any sort of anæsthetic."

"Is that done then? I didn't know."

"It's not talked about, of course, sir. It's quite unofficial and it's not generally known. But we nearly always give them something if it's possible, and then they know nothing of what's happening."

Sims nodded. "The best way," he said sadly, "the lethal

chamber would be better still."

There was a momentary silence between the two men. The prison doctor felt instinctively that his distinguished visitor shrank from the ordeal before him and was bracing himself to go through with it. He was unwilling to interrupt such a famous member of his profession. It was an event to meet him, a thing which he would always remember.

Suddenly Sims rose from his chair. "Now, then," he said with a rather wan smile, "take me to the poor fellow."

Dr. Marriott opened the door and made a sign to the waiting warder.

Together the three men went to the end of the passage.

Another door was unlocked and they found themselves in a low stone hall, with a roof of heavily barred ground glass.

There was a door on each side of the place.

"That's the execution room," said Dr. Marriott in a whisper, pointing to one of the doors. "The other's the condemned cell. It's only about ten steps from one to the other. The convict, of course, never knows that. But from the time he leaves his cell to the moment of death is rarely more than forty-five seconds."

The voice of the prison doctor, though very low in key, was not subdued by any note of awe. The machinery of Death had no terrors for him. He spoke in a matter-of-fact way, with an unconscious note of the showman. The curator of a museum might have shown his treasures thus to an intelligent observer. For a second of time – so strange are the operations of the

memory cells – another and far distant scene grew vivid in the mind of Morton Sims.

Once more he was paying his first visit to Rome, and had been driven from his hotel upon the Pincio to the nine o'clock Mass at St. Peter's. A suave guide had accompanied him, and among the curious crowd that thronged the rails, had told in a complacent whisper of this or that Monsignore who said or served the Mass.

Dr. Marriott went to the door opposite to the one he had pointed out as the death-chamber.

He moved aside a hanging disc of metal on a level with his eyes, and peered through a glass-covered spy-hole into the condemned cell.

After a scrutiny of some seconds, he slid the disc into its place and rapped softly upon the door. Almost immediately it was opened a foot or so, silently, as the door of a sick-room is opened by one who watches within. There was a whispered confabulation, and a warder came out.

"This gentleman," said the Medical Officer, "as you have already been informed by the Governor, is to have an interview with the convict absolutely alone. You, and the man with you, are to sit just outside the cell and to keep it under continual observation through the glass. If you think it necessary you are to enter the cell at once. And at the least gesture of this gentleman you will do so too. But otherwise, Dr. Morton Sims is to be left alone with the prisoner for an hour. You quite understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"You anticipate no trouble? – how is he?"

"Quiet as a lamb, sir. There's no fear of any trouble with him. He's cheerful and he's been talking a lot about himself – about his violin playing mostly, and a week he had in Paris. His hands are twitching a bit, but less than usual with them."

"Very well. Jones will remain here and will fetch me at once if I am wanted. Now take Dr. Morton Sims in."

The door was opened. A gust of hot air came from within as Morton Sims hesitated for a moment upon the threshold.

The warm air, indeed, was upon his face, but once again the chill was at his heart. Lean and icy fingers seemed to grope about it.

At the edge of what abysmal precipice, and the end of what sombre perspective of Fate was he standing?

From youth upwards he had travelled the goodly highways of life. He had walked in the clear light, the four winds of heaven had blown upon him. Sunshine and Tempest, Dawn and Dusk, fair and foul weather had been his portion in common with the rest of the wayfaring world.

But now he had strayed from out the bright and strenuous paths of men. The brave high-road was far, far away. He had entered a strange and unfamiliar lane. The darkness had deepened. He had come into a marsh of miasmic mist lit up by pale fires that were not of heaven and where dreadful presences thronged the purple gloom.

This was the end of all things. A life of shame closed here

– through that door where a living corpse was waiting for him "pent up in murderers' hole."

He felt a kindly and deprecating hand upon his arm.

"You will find it quite ordinary, really, sir. You needn't hesitate in the very least" – thus the consoling voice of Marriott.

Morton Sims walked into the cell.

Another warder who had been sitting there glided out. The door was closed. The doctor found himself heartily shaking hands with someone whom he did not seem to know.

And here again, as he was to remember exactly two years afterwards, under circumstances of supreme mental anguish and with a sick recognition of past experience, his sensation was without precedent.

Some one, was it not rather *something*? was shaking him warmly by the hand. A strained voice was greeting him. Yet he felt as if he were sawing at the arm of a great doll, not a live thing in which blood still circulated and systole and diastole still kept the soul co-ordinate and co-incident.

Then that also went. The precipitate of long control was dropped into the clouded vessel of thought and it cleared again. The fantastic imaginings, the natural horror of a kind and sensitive man at being where he was, passed away.

The keen scientist stood in the cell now, alert to perform the duty for which he was there.

The room was of a fair size. In one corner was a low bed, with a blanket, sheet and pillow.

In the centre, a deal table stood. A wooden chair, from which the convict had just risen, stood by the table, and upon it were a Bible, some writing materials, and a novel – bound in the dark-green of the prison library – by "Enid and Herbert Toftrees."

Hancock wore a drab prison suit, which was grotesquely ill-fitting. He was of medium height, and about twenty-five years of age. He was fat, with a broad-shouldered corpulence which would have been less noticeable in a man who was some inches taller. His face was ordinarily clean-shaven, but there was now a disfiguring stubble upon it, a three weeks' growth which even the scissors of the prison-barber had not been allowed to correct and which gave him a sordid and disgusting aspect. The face was fattish, but even the bristling hairs, which squirted out all over the lower part, could not quite disguise a curious suggestion of contour about it. It should have been a pure oval, one would have thought, and in the gas-light, as the head moved, it almost seemed to have that for fugitive instants. It was a contour veiled by a dreadful something that was, but ought not to have been there.

The eyes were grey and had a certain capability of expression. It was now enigmatic and veiled.

The mouth was by far the most real and significant feature of the face. In all faces, mouths generally are. The murderer's mouth was small. It was clearly and definitely cut, with an undefinable hint of breeding in it which nothing else about the man seemed to warrant. But despite the approach to beauty which, in another face, it might have had, slyness and egotism lurked in every curve.

.. "So that's how it first began, Doctor. First one with one, then one with another. You know!"

The conversation was in full swing now.

The doll had come to life – or it was not quite a doll yet and some of the life that was ebbing from it still remained.

The voice was low, confidential, horribly "just between you and me." But it was a pleased voice also, full of an eager and voluble satisfaction, – the last chance of toxic insanity to explain itself!

The lurid swan-song of a conceited and poisoned man.

.. "Business was going well. There seemed no prospect of a child just then, so Mary got in with Church work at St. Philip's. That brought a lot more customers to the shop too. Fancy soaps, scents and toilette articles and all that. Dr. Mitchell of Hackney, was a church-warden at St. Philip's and in time all his prescriptions came to me. No one had a better chance than I did. And Mary was that good to me." ..

Two facile, miserable tears rolled from the man's glazing eyes. He wiped them away with the back of his hand.

"You can't think, sir, being a bachelor. Anything I'd a mind to fancy! Sweet-breads she could cook a treat, and Burgundy we used to 'ave – California wine, 'Big Bush' brand in flagons at two and eight. And never before half-past seven. Late dinner you might have called it, while my assistant was in the shop. And after that I'd play to her on the violin. Nothing common, good music – 'Orer pro Nobis' and 'Rousoh's Dream.' You never heard

me play did you? I was in the orchestra of the Hackney Choral Society. I remember one day .."

"And then?" the Doctor said, gently.

He had already gathered something, but not all that he had come to gather. The minutes were hurrying by.

The man looked up at the doctor with a sudden glance, almost of hatred. For a single instant the abnormal egoism of the criminal, swelled out upon the face and turned it into the mask of a devil.

Dr. Morton Sims spoke in a sharp, urgent voice.

"Why did you ask me to come here, Hancock?" he said. "You know that I am glad to be here, if I can be of any use to you. But you don't seem to want the sort of sympathetic help that the chaplain here could give you far better than I can. What do you want to say to me? Have you really anything to say? If you have, be a man and say it!"

There was a brief but horrible interlude.

"Well, you are cruel, doctor, not 'arf! – and me with only an hour or two to live," – the man said with a cringing and sinister grin.

The doctor frowned and looked at the man steadily. Then he asked a sudden question.

"Who were your father and mother?" he said.

The convict looked at the doctor with startled eyes.

"Who told you?" he asked. "I thought nobody knew!"

"Answer my question, Hancock. Only a few minutes remain."

"Will it be of use, sir?"

"Of use?"

"In your work – It was so that I could leave a warning to others, that I wanted to see you."

"Of great use, if you will tell me."

"Well, Doctor, I never thought to tell any one. It's always been a sore point with me, but I wasn't born legitimate! I tried hard to make up for it, and I did so too! No one was more respectable than I was in Hackney, until the drink came along and took me."

"Yes? Yes?" – The hunter was on the trail now, Heredity? Reversion? At last the game was flushed! – "Yes, tell me!"

"My father was a gentleman, Doctor. That's where I got my refined tastes. And that's where I got my love of drink – damn him! God Almighty curse him for the blood he gave me!"

"Yes? Yes?"

"My father was old Mr. Lothian, the solicitor of Grey's Inn Square. He was a well-known gentleman. My mother was his housekeeper, Eliza Hancock. My father was a widower when my mother went into his service. He had another son, at one of the big schools for gentlemen. That was his son by his real wife – Gilbert he was called, and what money was left went to him. My father was a drunkard. He never was sober – what you might rightly call sober – for years, I've heard .. Mother died soon after Mr. Lothian did. She left a hundred pounds with my Aunt, to bring me up and educate me. Aunt Ellen – but I'm a gentleman's son, Doctor! – drunken old swine he was too! What about my

blood now? Wasn't my veins swollen with drink from the first? Christ! *you* ought to know – you with your job to know —*Now* are you happy? I'm not a *love* child, I'm a *drink* child, that's what I am! Son of old Mr. Lothian, the gentleman-drunkard, brother of his son who's a gentleman somewhere, I don't doubt! P'r'aps 'e mops it up 'imself! – shouldn't wonder, this – brother of mine!"

The man's voice had risen into a hoarse scream. "Have you got what you came to get?" he yelled. His eyes blazed, his mouth writhed.

There was a crash as the deal table was overturned, and he leapt at the doctor.

In a second the room was full of people. Dark figures held down something that yelled and struggled on the truckle bed.

It was done with wonderful deftness, quickness and experience... Morton Sims stood outside the closed door of the condemned cell. A muffled noise reached him from within, the prison doctor was standing by him and looking anxiously into his face.

– "I can't tell you how sorry I am, Dr. Morton Sims. I really can't say enough. I had no idea that the latent toxic influence was so strong.."

On the other side of the little glass-roofed hall the door was open. Another cell was shown, brilliantly lit. Two men, in their shirt-sleeves, were bending over a square, black aperture in the wooden floor. Some carpenters' tools were lying about.

An insignificant looking little man, with a fair moustache, was

standing in the doorway.

"That'll be quite satisfactory, thank you," he was saying, "with just a drop of oil on the lever. And whatever you do, don't forget my chalk to mark where he's to stand."

From behind the closed door of the condemned cell a strangled, muffled noise could still be heard.

"Not now!" said Dr. Marriott, as the executioner came up to him – "In half an hour. Now Dr. Morton Sims, please come away to my room. This must have been most distressing. I feel so much that it is my fault."

The two men stood at the Prison gate, Sims was shaking hands with the younger doctor. "Thank you very much indeed," he was saying. "How could you possibly have helped it? – You'll take steps – ?"

"I'm going back to the cell now. It's incipient delirium tremens of course – after all this time too! I shall inject hyoscine and he will know nothing more at all. He will be practically carried to the shed – Good-night! *Good-night*, sir. I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting you again."

The luxurious car rolled away from the Citadel of Death and Shadows – down the hill into London and into Life.

The man within it was thinking deeply, sorting out and tabulating his impressions, sifting the irrelevant from what was of value, and making a *précis* of what he had gained.

There were a dozen minor notes to be made in his book when he reached home. The changing quality of the man's voice, the

ebb and flow of uncontrolled emotion, the latent fear – "I must be present at the post mortem to-morrow," he said to himself as a new idea struck him. "There should be much to be learnt from an examination of the Peripheral Nerves. And the brain too – there will be interesting indications in the cerebellum, and the association fibres." ..

The carriage swung again into the familiar parts of town. As he looked out of the windows at the lights and movement, Morton Sims forgot the purely scientific side of thought. The kindly human side of him reasserted itself.

How infinitely sad it was! How deep the underlying horror of this sordid life-tragedy at the close of which he had been assisting!

Who should say, who could define, the true responsibility of the man they were killing up there on the North London Hill?

Predisposition to Alcohol, Reversion, Heredity! – was not the drunken old solicitor, long since dust, the true murderer of the gentle-mannered girl in Hackney?

Lothian, the father of Gilbert Lothian the poet! the poet who certainly knew nothing of what was being done to the young man in the prison, who had probably never heard of his existence even.

The "Fiend Alcohol" at work once more, planting ghastly growths behind the scutcheons of every family!

A cunning murderer with a poisoned mind and body on one side, the brilliant young poet in the sunlight of success and high

approbation upon the other!

Mystery of mysteries that God should allow so foul a thing to dominate and tangle the fair threads and delicate tissues of life!

"Well, that's that!" said the doctor, in a phrase he was fond of using when he dosed an episode in his mind. "I'll make my notes on Hancock's case and forget it until I find it necessary to use them in my work. And I'll lock up the poems Moultrie has sent me and I won't look at the book again for a month. Then I shall be able to read the verses for themselves and without any *arrière-pensée*."

"But, I wonder .. ?"

The brougham stopped at the doctor's house in Russell Square.

BOOK ONE

LOTHIAN IN LONDON

"Myself, arch traitor to myself,
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go."

CHAPTER I

UNDER THE WAGGON-ROOF. A DINNER IN BRYANSTONE SQUARE

"Le véritable Amphitryon est l'Amphitryon où l'on dine."

— *Molière.*

It was a warm night in July when Mr. Amberley, the publisher, entertained a few friends at dinner to meet Gilbert Lothian, the poet.

Although the evening was extremely sultry and the houses of the West End were radiating the heat which they had stored up from the sun-rays during the day, Mr. Amberley's dining room was deliciously cool.

The house was one of those roomy old-fashioned places still to be found unspoiled in Bryanstone Square, and the dining room, especially, was notable. It was on the first floor, over-looking the square, a long and lofty room with a magnificent waggon-roof which was the envy of every one who saw it, and gave the place extraordinary distinction.

The walls were panelled with oak, which had been stained a curious green, that was not olive nor ash-green but partook of both — the veritable colour, indeed, of the grey-green olive trees that one sees on some terrace of the Italian Alps at dawn.

The pictures were very few, considering the size of the room, and they were all quite modern – "In the movement" – as shrewd Mr. Amberley was himself.

A portrait of Mrs. Amberley by William Nicholson, which was quite famous in its way, displayed all the severe pregnancy and almost solemn reserve of this painter. There was a pastel of Prydes' which showed – rather suggested – a squalid room in which a gentleman of 1800, with a flavour of Robert Macaire about him, stood in the full rays of the wine and honey-coloured light of an afternoon sun.

Upon yet another panel was a painting upon silk by Charles Conder, inspired of course, by Watteau, informed by that sad and haunting catching after a fairyland never quite reached, which is the distinctive note of Conder's style, and which might well have served for an illustration to a grotesque fantasy of Heine.

Mrs. Amberley loved this painting. She had a Pater-like faculty of reading into – or from – a picture, something which the artist never thought about at all, and she used to call this little masterpiece "An Ode of Horace in Patch, Powder and Peruque!" She adored these perfectly painted little snuff-box deities who wandered through shadowy mists of amethyst and rouge-de-fer in a fantastic wood.

It is extremely interesting to discover, know of, or to sit at ease in a room which, in its way, is historic, and this is what the Amberleys' guests always felt, and were meant to feel.

In its present form, and with its actual decorations, this

celebrated room only dated from some fifteen years back. The Waggon-roof alone remained unaltered from its earlier periods.

The Publishing house of Ince and Amberley had been a bulwark of the Victorian era, and not without some growing celebrity in the earlier Georgian Period.

Lord Byron had spoken well of the young firm once, Rogers was believed to have advanced them money, and when that eminent Cornish pugilist "The Lamorna Cove" wrote his reminiscences they were published by Ince and Amberley, while old Lord Alvanley himself contributed a preface.

From small beginnings came great things. The firm grew and acquired a status, and about this time, or possibly a little later, the dining-room at Bryanstone Square had come into being.

Its walls were not panelled then in delicate green. They were covered with rich plum-coloured paper festooned by roses of high-gilt. In the pictures, with their heavy frames of gold, the dogs and stags of Landseer were let loose, or the sly sleek gipsies of Mr. Frith told rustic fortunes beneath the spreading chestnut trees.

But Browning had dined there – in the later times – an inextinguishable fire just covered with a sprinkling of grey ash. With solemn ritual, Charles Dickens had brewed milk punch in an old bowl of Lowestoft china, still preserved in the drawing-room. The young Robert Cecil, in his early *Saturday Review* days, had cracked his walnuts and sipped his "pint of port" with little thought of the high destiny to which he should come, and Alfred

Tennyson, then Bohemian and unknown, had been allowed to vent that grim philosophy which is the reaction of all imaginative and sensitive natures against the seeming impossibility of success and being understood.

The traditions of Ince and Amberley – its dignified and quiet home was in Hanover Square – had always been preserved.

Its policy, at the same time, had continually altered with the passage of years and the change of the public taste. Yet, so carefully, and indeed so genuinely, had this been accomplished that none of the historic prestige of the business had been lost. It still stood as a bulwark of the old dignified age. A young modern author, whatever his new celebrity, felt that to be published by Ince and Amberley hall-marked him as it were.

Younger firms, greedy of his momentary notoriety, might offer him better terms – and generally did – but Ince and Amberley conferred the Accolade!

He was admitted to the Dining Room.

John Amberley (the Inces had long since disappeared), at fifty was a great publisher, and a charming man of the world. He was one of the personalities of London, carrying out what heredity and natural aptitude had fitted him to do, and was this evening entertaining some literary personages of the day in the famous Dining Room.

The Waggon-roof, which had looked down upon just such gatherings as these for generations, would, if it could have spoken, have discovered no very essential difference between

this dinner party and others in the past. True, the walls were differently coloured and pictures which appealed to a different set of artistic conventions were hanging upon them.

The people who were accustomed to meet round the table in 19 – were not dressed as other gatherings had been. There was no huge silver epergne in the centre of that table now. Nor did the Amberley at one end of it display his mastery of ritual carving.

But the talk was the same. Words only were different. The guests' vocabularies were wider and less restrained. It was the music of piano and the pizzicato plucking of strings – there was no pompous organ note, no ore rotundo any more. They all talked of what they had done, were doing, and hoped to do. There was a hurry of the mind, inherent in people of their craft and like a man running, in all of them. The eyes of some of them burned like restless ghosts as they tried to explain themselves, display their own genius, become prophets and acquire honour in the heart of their own country.

Yes! it had always been so!

The brightest and most lucent brains had flashed into winged words and illuminated that long handsome room.

And ever, at the head of the long table, there had been a bland, listening Amberley, catching, tasting and sifting the idea, analysing the constituents of the flash, balancing the brilliant theory against the momentary public taste. A kind, uncreative, managing Amberley! A fair and honest enough Amberley in the main. Serene, enthroned and necessary.

The publisher was a large man, broad in the shoulder and slightly corpulent. There was something Georgian about him – he cultivated it rather, and was delighted when pleated shirts became again fashionable for evening wear. He had a veritable face of the Regency, more especially in profile, sensual, fine, a thought gluttonous and markedly intelligent.

His voice was authoritative but bland, and frequently capable of a sympathetic interest which was almost musical. His love of letters was deep and genuine, his taste catholic and excellent, while many an author found real inspiration and intense pleasure in his personal praise.

This was the cultured and human side of him, and he had another – the shrewd business man of Hanover Square.

He was not, to use the slang of the literary agent, a "knifer." He paid the market price without being generous and he was perfectly honest in all his dealings.

But his business in life was to sell books, and he permitted himself no experiments in failure. A writer – whether he produced good work or popular trash – must generally have his definite market and his more or less assured position, before Ince and Amberley would take him up.

It was distinctly something for a member of the upper rank and files to say in the course of conversation, "Ince and Amberley are doing my new book, you know."

To-night Amberley, as he sat at the head of his table towards the close of dinner, was in high good humour, and very pleasant

with himself and his guests.

The ladies had not yet gone away, coffee was being served at the table, and almost every one was smoking a cigarette. The party was quite a small one. There were only five guests, who, with Mr. and Mrs. Amberley and their only daughter Muriel, made up eight people in all. There was nothing ceremonious about it, and, though three of the guests were well known in the literary world, none of these were great, while the remaining couple were merely promising beginners.

There was, therefore, considerable animation and gaiety round this hospitable table, with its squat candlesticks, of dark-green Serpentine and silver, the topaz-coloured shades, its gleaming surface of dark mahogany (Mrs. Amberley had eagerly adopted the new habit of having no white table-cloth), its really interesting old silver, and the square mats of pure white Egyptian linen in front of each person.

In age, with the exception of Mr. Amberley and his wife, every one was young, while both host and hostess showed in perfection that modern grace of perfect correspondence with environment which seems to have quite banished the evidences of time's progress among the folk of to-day who know every one, appreciate everything and are extremely well-to-do.

On Amberley's right hand sat Mrs. Herbert Toftrees, while her husband was at the other end of the table at the right hand of his hostess – Gilbert Lothian, the guest of the evening, being on Mrs. Amberley's left.

Mr. and Mrs. Toftrees were novelists whose combined names were household words all over England. Their books were signed by both of them – "Enid and Herbert Toftrees" and they were quite at the head of their own peculiar line of business. They knew exactly what they were doing – "selling bacon" they called it to their intimate friends – and were two of the most successful trades-people in London. Unlike other eminent purveyors of literary trash they were far too clever not to know that neither of them had a trace of the real fire, and if their constant and cynical disclaimer of any real talent sometimes seemed to betray a hidden sore, it was at least admirably truthful.

They were shallow, clever, amusing people whom it was always pleasant to meet. They entertained a good deal and the majority of their guests were literary men and women of talent who fluttered like moths round the candle of their success. The talented writers who ate their dinners found a bitter joy in cursing a public taste which provided the Toftrees with several thousands a year, but they returned again and again, in the effort to find out how it was done.

They also had visions of just such another delightful house in Lancaster Gate, an automobile identical in its horse-power and appointments, and were certain that if they could only learn the recipe and trick, wrest the magic formula from these wizards of the typewriter, all these things might be theirs also!

The Herbert Toftrees themselves always appeared – in the frankest and kindest way – to be in thorough sympathy with such

aspirations. Their candour was almost effusive. "Any one can do what we do" was their attitude. Herbert Toftrees himself, a young man with a rather carefully-cultivated, elderly manner, was particularly impressive. He had a deep voice and slow enunciation, which, when he was upon his own hearthrug almost convinced himself.

"There is absolutely no reason," he would say, in tones which carried absolute conviction to his hearer at the moment, "why you shouldn't be making fifteen hundred a year in six months."

But that was as far as it went. That was the voice of the genial host dispensing wines, entrées and advice, easy upon his own hearth, the centre of the one picture where he was certain of supremacy.

But let eager and hungry genius call next day for definite particulars, instructions as to the preparations of a "popular" plot, hints as to the shop-girl's taste in heroines, – with hopes of introductory letters to the great firms who buy serials – and the greyest of grey dawns succeeded the rosy-coloured night.

It was all vague and cloudy now. General principles were alone vouchsafed – indeed who shall blame the tradesman for an adroit refusal to give away the secrets of the shop?

Genius retired – it happened over and over again – cursing successful mediocrity for its evasive cleverness, and with a deep hidden shame that it should have stooped so low, and so ineffectually! .. "That's very true. What Toftrees says is absolutely true," Mr. Amberley said genially, turning to young

Dickson Ingworth, who was sitting by his daughter Muriel.

He nodded to the eager youth with a little private encouragement and hint of understanding which was very flattering. It was as who should say, "Here you are at my house. For the first time you have been admitted to the Dining Room. I have taken you up, I am going to publish a book of yours and see what you are made of. Gather honey while you may, young Dickson Ingworth!"

Ingworth blushed slightly as the great man's encouraging admonitions fell upon him. He was not down from Oxford more than a year. He had written very little, Gilbert Lothian was backing him and introducing him to literary circles in town, he was abnormally conscious of his own good fortune, all nervous anxiety to be adequate – all ears.

"Yes, sir," he said, with the pleasant boyish deference of an undergraduate to the Provost of his college – it sat gracefully upon his youth and was gracefully said.

Then he looked reverentially at Toftrees and waited to hear more.

Herbert Toftrees' face was large and clean shaven. His sleek hair was smoothly brushed over a somewhat protruding forehead. There was the coarse determined vigour about his brow that the bull-dog jaw is supposed to indicate in another type of face, and the eyes below were grey and steadfast. Toftrees stared at people with tremendous gravity. Only those who realised the shrewd emptiness behind them were able to discern what some one had

once called their flickering "R.S.V.P. expression" – that latent hope that his vis-à-vis might not be finding him out after all!

"I mean it," Toftrees said in his resonant, and yet quiet voice. "There really is no reason, Mr. Ingworth, why you should not be making an income of at least eight or nine hundred a year in twelve months' time."

"Herbert has helped such a lot of boys," said Mrs. Toftrees, confidentially, to her host, although there was a slight weariness in her voice, the suggestion of a set phrase. "But who is Mr. Dickson Ingworth? What has he done? – he is quite good-looking, don't you think?"

"Oh, a boy, a mere boy!" the big red-faced publisher purred in an undertone. "Lothian brought him to me first in Hanover Square. In fact, Lothian asked if he might bring him here to-night. We are doing a little book of his – the first novel he will have had published."

Mrs. Toftrees pricked up her ears, so to say. She was really the business head of the Toftrees combination. Her husband did the ornamental part and provided the red-hot plots, but it was she who had invented and carried out the "note," and it was she who supervised the contracts. As Mr. Amberley was well aware, what this keen, pretty and well-dressed little woman didn't know about publishing was worth nothing whatever.

"Oh, really," she said, in genuine surprise. "Rather unusual for you, isn't it? Is the boy a genius then?"

Amberley shook his head. He hated everything the worthy

Toftrees wrote – he had never been able to read more than ten lines of any of the half-dozen books he had published for them. But the Hanover Square side of him had a vast respect for the large sums the couple charmed from the pockets of the public no less than the handsome percentage they put into his own. And a confidential word on business matters with a pretty and pleasant little woman was not without allurements even under the Waggon-roof itself.

"Not at all. Not at all," he murmured into a pretty ear. "We are not paying the lad any advance upon royalties!" He laughed a well-fed laugh. "Ince and Amberley's list," he continued, "is accepted for itself!"

Mrs. Toftrees smiled back at him. "*Of course*," she murmured. "But I wasn't thinking of the financial side of it. Why? .. why are you departing from your usual traditions and throwing the shadow of your cloak over this fortunate boy? – if I may ask, of course!"

"Well," Amberley answered, and her keen ear detected – or thought that she detected – a slight reluctance in his voice... "Well, Lothian brought him to me, you know."

Mrs. Toftrees' face changed and Amberley saw it.

She was looking down the table to where Lothian was sitting. Her face was a little flushed, and the expression upon it – though not allowed to be explicit – was by no means agreeable. "Lothian's work is very wonderful," she said – and there was a question in her voice " – you think so, Mr. Amberley?"

Bryanstone Square, the Dining Room, asserted itself. Truth to tell, Amberley felt a little uncomfortable and displeased with himself. The fun of the dinner table – the cigarette moment – had rather escaped him. He had got young people round him to-night. He wanted them to be jolly. He had meant to be a good host, to forget his dignities, to unbend and be jolly with them – this fiction-mongering woman was becoming annoying.

"I certainly do, Mrs. Toftrees," he replied, with dignity, and a distinct tone of reproof in his voice.

Mrs. Toftrees, the cool tradeswoman, gave the great man a soothing smile of complete understanding and agreement.

Mr. Amberley turned to a girl upon his left who had been taken in by Dickson Ingworth and who had been carrying on a laughing conversation with him during dinner.

She was a pretty girl, a friend of his daughter Muriel. He liked pretty girls, and he smiled half paternally, half gallantly at her.

"Won't you have another cigarette, Miss Wallace?" he said, pushing a silver box towards her. "They are supposed to be rather wonderful. My cousin Eustace Amberley is in the Egyptian Army and an aide-de-camp to the Khedive. The Khedive receives the officers every month and every one takes away a box of five hundred when they leave the palace – His Highness' own peculiar brand. These are some of them, which Eustace sent me."

"May I?" she answered, a rounded, white arm stretched out to the box. "They certainly are wonderful. I have to be content with Virginian at home. I buy fifty at a time, and a tin costs one

and threepence."

She lit it delicately from the little methyl lamp he passed her, and the big man's kind eyes rested on her with appreciation.

She was, he thought, very like a Madonna of Donatello, which he had seen and liked in Florence. The abundant hair was a dark nut-brown, almost chocolate in certain lights. The eyes were brown also, the complexion the true Italian morbidezza, pale, but not pallid, like a furled magnolia bud. And the girl's mouth was charming – "delicious" was the word in the mind of this connoisseur. It was as clear-cut as that of a girl's face in a Grecian frieze of honey-coloured travertine, there was a serene sweetness about it. But when she smiled the whole face was changed. The young brown eyes lit up and visited others with their own, as a bee visits flowers. The smile was radiant and had a conscious provocation in it. The paleness of the cheeks showed such tints of pearl and rose that they seemed carved from the under surface of a sea-shell.

And, as Amberley looked, wishing that he had talked more to her during dinner, startled suddenly to discover such loveliness, he saw her lips suddenly glow out into colour in an extraordinary way. It wasn't scarlet – unpainted lips are never really that – but of the veiled blood-colour that is warm and throbs with life; a colour that hardly any of the names we give to pigment can properly describe or fix.

What did he know about her? he asked himself as she was lighting her second cigarette. Hardly anything! She was a girl

friend of his daughter's – they had been to the same school together at Bath – an orphan he thought, without any people. She earned her own living – assistant Librarian, he remembered, at old Podley's library. Yes, Podley the millionaire nonconformist who was always endowing and inventing fads! And Muriel had told him that she wrote a little, short stories in some of the women's papers..

"At any rate," he said, while these thoughts were flashing through his mind "you smoke as if you liked it! All the girls smoke now, Muriel is inveterate, but I often have a suspicion that many of them do it because it's the fashion."

Rita Wallace gave a wise little shake of her head.

"Oh, no," she answered. "Men know so little about girls! You think we're so different from you in lots of things, but we aren't really. Muriel and I always used to smoke at school – it doesn't matter about telling now, does it?"

Mr. Amberley made a mock expression of horror.

"Good heavens!" he said, "what appalling revelations for a father to endure! I wish I had had an inkling of it at the time!"

"You couldn't have, Mr. Amberley," she answered, and her smile was more provocative than ever, and delightfully naughty. "We used to do it in the bathroom. The hot vapour from the bath took all the smell of tobacco away. I discovered that!"

"Tell me some more, my dear. What other iniquities did you all perpetrate – and I thought Muriel such a pattern girl."

"Oh, we did lots of things, Mr. Amberley, but it wouldn't be

fair to give them away. We were little devils, nearly all of us!"

She gave him a little Parisian salute from the ends of her eyelids, instinct with a kind of impish innocence, the sort of thing that has an irresistible appeal to a middle-aged man of the world.

"Muriel!" Mr. Amberley said to his daughter, "Miss Wallace has been telling me dreadful things about your schooldays. I am grieved and pained!"

Muriel Amberley was a slim girl with dark smouldering eyes and a faint enigmatic smile. Her voice was very clear and fresh and there was a vibrant note in it like the clash of silver bells. She had been talking to Mrs. Toftrees, but she looked up as her father spoke.

"Don't be a wretch, Cupid!" she said, to Rita Wallace over the table.

"Cupid? Why Cupid?" Herbert Toftrees asked, in his deep voice.

"Oh, it's a name we gave her at school," Muriel answered, looking at her friend, and both girls began to laugh.

Mr. Amberley re-engaged the girl in talk.

"You have done some literary work, have you not?" he asked kindly, and in a lower voice.

Again her face changed. Its first virginal demureness, the sudden flashing splendour of her smile, had gone alike. It became eager and wistful too.

"You can't call it *that*, Mr. Amberley," she replied in a voice pitched to his own key. "I've written a few stories which have

been published and I've had three articles in the Saturday edition of the *Westminster*— that's nearly everything. But I can't say how I love it all! It is delightful to have my work among books – at the Podley Library you know. I learned typewriting and shorthand and was afraid that I should have to go into a city office – and then this turned up."

She hesitated for a moment, and then stopped shyly. He could see that the girl was afraid of boring him. A moment before, she had been perfectly collected and aware – a girl in his own rank of life responsive to his chaff. Now she realised that she was speaking of things very near and dear to her – and speaking of them to a high-priest of those Mysteries she loved – one holding keys to unlock all doors.

He took her in a moment, understood the change of mood and expression, and it was subtle flattery. Like all intelligent and successful men, recognition was not the least of his rewards. That this engaging child, even, knew him for what he was gave him an added interest in her. All Muriel's girl friends adored him. He was the nicest and most generous of unofficial Papas! – but this was different.

"Don't say that, my dear. Never depreciate yourself or belittle what you have done. I suppose you are about Muriel's age, twenty-one or two – yes? – then let me tell you that you have done excellently well."

"That is kind of you."

"No, it is sincere. No man knows how hard – or how easy –

it is to succeed by writing to-day."

She understood him in a moment. "Only the other day, Mr. Amberley," she said, "I read Stevenson's 'Letter to a young gentleman who proposes to embrace the career of Art.' And if I *could* write feeble things to tickle feeble minds I wouldn't even try. It seems so, so low!"

Quite unconsciously her eye had fallen upon Mrs. Toftrees opposite, who was again chattering away to Muriel Amberley.

He saw it, but gave no sign that he had done so.

"Keep such an ideal, my dear. Whether you do small or great things, it will bring you peace of mind and dignity of conscience. But don't despise or condemn merely popular writers. In the Kingdom of Art there are many mansions you know."

The girl made a slight movement of the head. He saw that she was touched and grateful at his interest in her small affairs, but that she wanted to dismiss them from his mind no less than from her own.

"But I *am* mad, crazy," she said, "about *other* peoples' work, the big peoples' work, the work one simply can't help reverencing!"

She had turned from him again and was looking down the table to where Gilbert Lothian was sitting.

"Yes," he answered, following the direction of her glance, "you are quite right *there*!"

She flushed with enthusiasm. "I did so want to see him," she said. "I've hardly ever met any literary people at all before,

certainly never any one who mattered. Muriel told me that Mr. Lothian was coming; she loves his poems as much as I do. And when she wrote and asked me I was terribly excited. It's so good of you to have me, Mr. Amberley."

Her voice was touching in its gratitude, and he was touched at this damsel, so pretty, courageous and forlorn.

"I hope, my dear," he said, "that you will give us all the pleasure of seeing you here very often."

At that moment Mrs. Amberley looked up and her fine, shrewd eyes swept round the table. She was a handsome, hook-nosed dame, with a lavish coronet of grey hair, stately and kindly in expression, obviously capable of many tolerances, but with moments when "*ne louche pas à La Reine*" could be very plainly written on her face.

As she gathered up the three women and rose, Mr. Amberley knew in a moment that all was not quite well. No one else could have even guessed at it, but he knew. The years that had dealt so prosperously with him; Fate which had linked arms and was ever *debonnair*, had greatly blessed him in this also. He worshipped this stately madam, as she him, and always watched her face as some poor fisherman strives to read the Western sky.

The door of the Dining Room was towards Mrs. Amberley's end of the table, and, as the ladies rose and moved towards it, Gilbert Lothian had gone to it and held it open.

His table-napkin was in his right hand, his left was on the handle of the door, and as the women swept out, he bowed.

Herbert Toftrees thought that there was something rather theatrical, a little over-emphasised, in the bow – as he regarded the poet, whom he had met for the first time that night, from beneath watchful eye-lids.

And *did* one bow? Wasn't it rather like a scene upon the stage? Toftrees, a quite well-bred man, was a little puzzled by Gilbert Lothian. Then he concluded – and his whole thoughts upon the matter passed idly through his mind within the duration of a single second – that the poet was an intimate friend of the house.

Lothian was closing the door, and Toftrees was sinking back into his chair, when the latter happened to glance at his host.

Amberley, still standing, was *watching* Lothian – there was no other word which would correctly describe the big man's attitude – and Toftrees felt strangely uneasy. Something seemed tapping nervously at the door of his mind. He heard the furtive knocking, half realised the name of the thought that timidly essayed an entrance, and then resolutely crushed it.

Such a thing was quite impossible, of course.

The four men sat down, more closely grouped together than before.

The coffee, which had been served by a footman, before the ladies had disappeared, was a pretence in cups no bigger than plovers' eggs. Amberley liked the modern affectation of his women guests remaining at the table and sharing the joys of the after-dinner-hour. But now, the butler entered with larger cups and a tray of liqueurs, while the host himself poured out a glass

of port and handed the old-fashioned cradle in which the bottle lay to young Dickson Ingworth on his right.

That curly-headed youth, who was a Pembroke man and knew the ritual of the Johnsonian Common Room at Oxford, gravely filled his own glass and pushed the bottle to Herbert Toftrees, who was in the vacated seat of his hostess, and pouring a little Perrier water into a tumbler.

The butler lifted the wicker-work cradle with care, passed behind Toftrees, and set it before Gilbert Lothian.

Lothian looked at it for a moment and then made a decisive movement of his head.

"Thank you, no," he said, after a second's consideration, and in a voice that was slightly high-pitched but instinct with personality – it could never have been mistaken for any one else's voice, for instance – "I think I will have a whiskey and soda."

Toftrees, at the end of the table, within two feet of Lothian, gave a mental start. The popular novelist was rather confused.

A year ago no one had heard of Gilbert Lothian – that was not a name that counted in any way. He had been a sort of semi-obscure journalist who signed what he wrote in such papers as would print him. There were a couple of novels to his name which had obtained a sort of cult among minor people, and, certainly, some really eminent weeklies had published very occasional but signed reviews.

As far as Herbert Toftrees could remember – and his jealous memory was good – Lothian had always been rather small beer

until a year or so back.

And then "Surgit Amari" – the first book of poems had been published.

In a single month Lothian had become famous.

For the ringing splendour of his words echoed in every heart. In this book, and in a subsequent volume, he had touched the very springs of tears. Not with sentiment – with the very highest and most electric literary art – he had tried and succeeded in irradiating the happenings of domestic life in the light that streamed from the Cross.

".. Thank you, no. I think I will have a whiskey and soda."

CHAPTER II

GRAVELY UNFORTUNATE OCCURRENCE IN MRS. AMBERLEY'S DRAWING ROOM

"Μισω μνημονα συμποτην, Procille."

– *Martial.*

– "One should not always take after-dinner amenities au pied de la lettre."

– *Free Translation.*

Toftrees, at the head of the table, shifted his chair a little so that he was almost facing Gilbert Lothian.

Lothian's arresting voice was quite clear as he spoke to the butler. "That's not the voice of a man who's done himself too well," the novelist thought. But he was puzzled, nevertheless. People like Lothian behaved pretty much as they liked, of course. Convention didn't restrain them. But the sudden request was odd.

And there was that flourishing bow as the women left the room, and certainly Amberley had seemed to look rather strangely at his guest. Toftrees disposed himself to watch events. He had wanted to meet the poet for some time. There was a certain reason. No one knew much about him in London. He lived in the country and was not seen in the usual places despite

his celebrity. There had been a good deal of surmise about this new star.

Lothian was like the photographs which had appeared of him in the newspapers, but with a great deal more "personality" than these were able to suggest. Certainly no one looked less like a poet, though this did not surprise the popular novelist, in an age when literary men looked exactly like every one else. But there was not the slightest trace of idealism, of the "thoughts high and hard" that were ever the clear watchwords of his song. "A man who wears a mask," thought Herbert Toftrees with interest and a certain half-conscious fellow-feeling.

The poet was of medium height and about thirty-five years of age. He was fat, with a broad-shouldered corpulence which would have been far less noticeable in a man who was a few inches taller. The clean-shaven face was fattish also, but there was, nevertheless, a curious suggestion of contour about it. It should have been a pure oval, and in certain lights it almost seemed that, while the fatness appeared to dissolve and fall away from it. It was a contour veiled by something that was, but ought not to have been, there.

The eyes were grey and capable of infinite expression – a fact which always became apparent to any one who had been half an hour in his company. But this feature also was enigmatic. For the most part the eyes seemed to be working at half-power, not quite doing or being what one would have expected of them.

The upper lip was short, and the mouth by far the most real

and significant part of the face. It was small, but not too small, clearly and delicately cut though without a trace of effeminacy. In its mobility, its sensitive life, its approach to beauty, it said everything in the face. Thick-growing hair of dark brown was allowed to come rather low over a high and finely modelled brow, hair which – despite a natural luxuriance – was cut close to the sides and back of the head.

Such was Toftrees' view of Gilbert Lothian, and it both had insight and was fair. No one can be a Toftrees and the literary idol of thousands and thousands of people without being infinitely the intellectual superior of those people. The novelist had a fine brain and if he could have put a tenth of his observation and knowledge upon paper, he might have been an artistic as well as a commercial success.

But he was hopelessly inarticulate, and æsthetic achievement was denied him. There was considerable consolation in the large income which provided so many pleasures and comforts, but it was bitter to know – when he met any one like Lothian – that if he could appreciate Lothian thoroughly he could never emulate him. And it was still more bitter to be aware that men like Lothian often regarded his own work as a mischief and dishonour.

Toftrees, therefore, watched the man at his side with a kind of critical envy, mingled with a perfectly sincere admiration at the bottom of it all.

He very soon became certain that something was wrong.

His first half-thought was a certainty now. Something that

some one had said to him a week ago at a Savage Club dinner – one of those irresponsible but dangerous and damaging remarks which begin, "D'you know, I'm told that so and so – " flashed through his mind.

"Are you in town for long, Mr. Lothian?" he asked. "You don't come to town often, do you?"

"No, I don't," Lothian answered. "I hate London. A damnable place I always think."

The other, so thorough a Londoner, always getting so much – in every way – out of his life in London, looked at the speaker curiously, not quite knowing how to take him.

Lothian seemed to see it. He had made the remark with emphasis, with a superior note in his voice, but he corrected himself quickly.

It was almost as though Toftrees' glance had made him uneasy. His face became rather ingratiating, and there was a propitiatory note in his voice when he spoke again. He drew his chair a little nearer to the other's.

"I knew too much of London when I was a young man," he went on with an unnecessarily confidential and intimate manner. "When I came down from Oxford first, I was caught up into the 'new' movement. It all seemed very wonderful to me then. It did to all of us. We divorced art from morals, we lived extraordinary lives, we sipped honey from every flower. Most of the men of that period are dead. One or two are insane, others have gone quite under and are living dreadful larva-like lives in obscene

hells of the body and soul, of which you can have no conception. But, thank God, I got out of it in time – just in time! If it hadn't been for my dear wife .."

He paused. The sensitive lips smiled, with an almost painful tenderness, a quivering, momentary effect which seemed grotesquely out of place in a face which had become flushed and suddenly seemed much fatter.

There was a horrible insincerity about that self-conscious smile – the more horrible because, at the moment, Toftrees saw that Lothian believed absolutely in his own emotion, was pleased with himself sub-consciously, too, and was perfectly certain that he was making a fine impression – pulling aside the curtain that hung before a beautiful and holy place!

The smile lingered for a moment. The light in the curious eyes seemed turned inward complacently surveying a sanctuary.

Then there was an abrupt change of manner.

Lothian laughed. There was a snap in his laughter, which, Toftrees was sure, was meant to convey the shutting down of a lid.

"I like you," Lothian was trying to say to him – the acquaintance of ten minutes! – "I can open my heart to you. You've had a peep at the Poet's Holy of Holies. But we're men of the world – you and I! – enough of this. We're in society. We're dining at the Amberleys'. Our confidences are over!"

"So you see," the *actual* voice said, "I don't like London. It's no place for a gentleman!"

Lothian's laugh as he said this was quite vague and silly. His hand strayed out towards the decanter of whiskey. His face was half anxious, half pleased, wholly pitiable and weak. His laugh ended in a sort of bleat, which he realised in a moment and coughed to obscure.

There was a splash and gurgle as he pressed the trigger of the syphon.

Intense disgust and contempt succeeded Toftrees' first amazement. So this, after all the fuss, was Gilbert Lothian!

The man had talked like a provincial yokel, and then fawned upon him with his sickly, uninvited confidences.

He was drunk. There was no doubt about that.

He must have come there drunk, or nearly so. The last half hour had depressed the balance, brought out what was hidden, revealed the fellow's state.

"If it hadn't been for my dear wife!" – the tout! How utterly disgusting it was!

Toftrees had never been drunk in his life except at a bump-supper at B.N.C. – his college – nearly fifteen years ago. – The shocking form of coming to the Amberleys' like this! – He was horribly upset and a little frightened, too. He remembered where he was – such a thing was an incredible profanation *here!*

.. He heard a quiet vibrant voice speaking.

He looked up. Gilbert Lothian was leaning back in his chair, holding a newly-lighted cigarette in a steady hand. His face was absolutely composed. There was not the slightest hint that it

had been bloated and unsteady the minute before. Intellect and strength – STRENGTH! that was the incredible thing – lay calmly over it. The skin, surely it *had* been oddly blotched? was of an even, healthy-seeming tint.

A conversation between the Poet and his host had obviously been in progress for several minutes. Toftrees realised that he had been lost in his own thoughts for some time – if indeed this scene was real at all and he himself were sober!

".. I don't think," Lothian was saying with precision, and a certain high air which sat well upon him – "I don't think that you quite see it in all its bearings. There must be a rough and ready standard for ordinary work-a-day life – that I grant. But when you penetrate to the springs of action – "

"When you do that," Amberley interrupted, "naturally, rough and ready standards fall to pieces. Still we have to live by them. Few of us are competent to manipulate the more delicate machinery! But your conclusion is – ?"

" – That hypocrisy is the most misunderstood and distorted word in our mother tongue. The man whom fools call hypocrite may yet be entirely sincere. Lofty assertions, the proclamation of high ideals and noble thoughts may at the same time be allied with startling moral failure!"

Amberley shook his head.

"It's specious," he replied, "and it's doubtless highly comforting for the startling moral failure. But I find a difficulty in adjusting my obstinate mind to the point of view."

"It is difficult," Lothian said, "but that's because so few people are psychologists, and so few people – the Priests often seem to me less than any one – understand the meaning of Christianity. But because David was a murderer and an adulterer will you tell me that the psalms are insincere? Surely, if all that is good in a man or woman is to be invalidated by the presence of contradictory evil, then Beelzebub must sit enthroned and be potent over the affairs of men!"

Mr. Amberley rose from his chair. His face had quite lost its watchful expression. It was genial and pleased as before.

"King David has a great deal to answer for," he said. "I don't know what the unorthodox and the 'live-your-own-life' school would do without him. But let us go into the drawing room."

With his rich, hearty laugh echoing under the Waggon roof, the big man thrust his arm through Lothian's.

"There are two girls dying to talk to the poet!" he said. "That I happen to know! My daughter Muriel reads your books in bed, I believe! and her friend Miss Wallace was saying all sorts of nice things about you at dinner. Come along, come along, my dear boy."

The two men left the dining room, and their voices could be heard in the hall beyond.

Toftrees lingered behind for a moment with young Dickson Ingworth.

The boy's face was flushed. His eyes sparkled with excitement and the three glasses of champagne he had drunk at dinner were

having their influence with him.

He was quite young, ingenuous, and filled with conceit at being where he was – dining with the Amberleys, brought there under the ægis of Gilbert Lothian, chatting confidentially to the great Herbert Toftrees himself!

His immature heart was bursting with pride, Pol Roger, and satisfaction. He hadn't the least idea of what he was saying – that he was saying something frightfully dangerous and treacherous at least.

"I say, Mr. Toftrees, isn't Gilbert splendid? I could listen to him all night. He talks like that to me sometimes, when he's in the mood. It's like Walter Pater and Dr. Johnson rolled into one. And then he sort of punctuates it with something dry and brown and freakish – like Heine in the 'Florentine Nights'!"

With all his eagerness to hear more – the quiet malice in him welling up to understand and pin down this Gilbert Lothian – Toftrees was forced to pause for a moment. He knew that he could never have expressed himself as this enthusiastic and excited boy was able to do. Ingworth was a pupil then! Lothian could inspire, and was already founding a school.

"You know Mr. Lothian very well, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. I go and stay with Gilbert in the country a lot. I'm nearly always there! I am like a brother to him – he was an only child, you know. But isn't he wonderful?"

"Marvellous!" Toftrees chuckled as he said the word. He couldn't help it.

Misunderstood as his chuckle was, it did the trick and brought confidence in full flood from the careless and excited boy.

"Yes, and I know him so well! Hardly any one knows him so well as I do. Every one in town is crying out to find out all about him, and I'm really the only one who knows .."

He looked towards the door. Thoughts of the two pretty girls beyond flushed the wayward, wine-heated mind.

"I'm going to have a liqueur brandy," Toftrees said hastily – he had taken nothing the whole evening – "won't you, too?"

"Now you'd never think," Ingworth said, sipping from his tiny glass, "that at seven o'clock this evening Prince and I – Prince is the valet at Gilbert's club – could hardly wake him up and get him to dress?"

"No!"

"It's a fact though, Mr. Toftrees. We had the devil of a time. He'd been out all day – it was bovril with lots of salt in it that put him right. As a matter of fact – of course, this is quite between you and me – I was in a bit of a funk that it was coming over him again at dinner. Stale drunk. You know! I saw he was paying a lot of compliments to Mrs. Amberley. At first she didn't seem to understand, and then she didn't quite seem to like it. But I was glad when I heard him ask the man for a whiskey and soda just now. I know his programme so well. I was sure that it would pull him together all right – or at least that number two would. I suppose you saw he was rather off when the ladies had gone and you were talking to him?"

"Well, I wasn't sure of course."

"I was, I know him so well. Gilbert's father was my father's solicitor – one of the old three bottle men. But when Gilbert collared number two just now I realised that it would be quite all right. You heard him with Mr. Amberley just now? Splendid!"

"Yes. And now suppose we go and see how he's getting on in the drawing room," said Herbert Toftrees with a curious note in his voice.

The boy mistook it for anxiety. "Oh, he'll be as right as rain, you'll find. It comes off and on in waves, you know," he said.

Toftrees looked at the youth with frank wonder. He spoke in the way of use and wont, as if he were saying nothing extraordinary – merely stating a fact.

The novelist was really shocked. Personally, he was the most temperate of men. He was *homme du monde*, of course. He touched upon life at other points than the decorous and above-board. He had known men, friends of his own, go down, down, down, through drink. But here, with these people, it was not the same. In Bohemia, in raffish literary clubs and the reprobate purlieus of Fleet Street, one expected this sort of thing and accepted it as part of the *milieu*.

Under the Waggon roof, at Amberley's house, where there were charming women, it was shocking; it was an outrage! And the frankness of this well-dressed and well-spoken youth was disgusting in its very simplicity and non-moral attitude. Toftrees had gathered something of the young man's past during dinner.

Was this, then, what one learnt at Eton? The novelist was himself the son of a clergyman, a man of some family but bitter poor. He had been educated at a country grammar school. His wife was the youngest daughter of a Gloucestershire baronet, impoverished also.

Neither of them had enjoyed all that should have been theirs by virtue of their birth, and the fact had left a blank, a slight residuum of bitterness and envy which success and wealth could never quite smooth away.

"Well, it doesn't seem to trouble you much," he said.

Ingworth laughed. He was unconscious of his great indiscretion, frothy and young, entirely unaware that he was giving his friend and patron into possibly hostile hands and providing an opportunity for a dissection of which half London might hear.

"Gilbert's quite different from any one else," he said lightly. "He is a genius. Keats taking pepper before claret, don't you know! One must not measure him by ordinary standards."

"I suppose not," Toftrees answered drily, reflecting that among the disciples of a great man it was generally the Judas who wrote the biography – "Let's go to the drawing room."

As they went out, the mind of the novelist was working with excitement and heat. He himself was conscious of it and was surprised. His was an intellect rather like dry ice. Very little perturbed it as a rule, yet to-night he was stirred.

Wonder was predominant.

Physically, to begin with, it was extraordinary that more drink should sober a man who a moment before had been making exaggerated and half-maudlin confidences to a stranger – in common with most decent living people, Toftrees knew nothing of the pathology of poisoned men. And, then, that sobriety had been so profound! Clearly reasoned thought, an arresting but perfectly sane point of view, had been enunciated with lucidity and force of phrase.

Disgust, the keener since it was more than tinged by envy, mingled with the wonder.

So the high harmonies of "Surgit Amari" came out of the bottle after all! Toftrees himself had been deeply moved by the poems, and yet, he now imagined, the author was probably drunk when he wrote them! If only the world knew! – it *ought* to know. Blackguards who, for some reason or other, had been given angel voices should be put in the pillory for every one to see. Hypocrite! ..

Ingworth opened the door of the drawing room very quietly. Music had begun, and as he and Toftrees entered, Muriel Amberley was already half way through one of the preludes of Chopin.

Mrs. Amberley and Mrs. Toftrees were sitting close together and carrying on a vigorous, whispered conversation, despite the music. Mr. Amberley was by himself in a big arm-chair near the piano, and Lothian sat upon a settee of blue linen with Rita Wallace.

As he sank into a chair Toftrees glanced at Lothian.

The poet's face was unpleasant. When he had been talking to Amberley it had lighted up and had more than a hint of fineness. Now it was heavy again, veiled and coarsened. Lothian's head was nodding in time to the music. One well-shaped but rather red hand moved restlessly upon his knee. The man was struggling – Toftrees was certain of it – to appear as if the music was giving him intense pleasure. He was thinking about himself and how he looked to the other people in the room.

Drip, drip, drip! – it was the sad, graceful prelude in which the fall of rain is supposed to be suggested, the hot steady rain of the Mediterranean which had fallen at Majorca ever so many years ago and was falling now in sound, though he that caught its beauty was long since dust. Drip, drip! – and then the soft repetition which announced that the delicate and lovely vision had reached its close, that the august grey harmonies were over.

For a moment, there was silence in the drawing room.

Muriel's white fingers rested on the keys of the piano, the candles threw their light upwards upon the enigmatic maiden face. Her father sighed quietly – happily also as he looked at her – and the low buzz of Mrs. Amberley's and Mrs. Toftrees' talk became much more distinct.

Suddenly Gilbert Lothian jumped up from the settee. He hurried to the piano, his face flushed, his eyes liquid and bright.

It was consciously and theatrically done, an exaggeration of his bow in the dining room – not the right thing in the very least!

"Oh, thank you! *Thank you!*" he said in a high, fervent voice. "How wonderful that is! And you played it as Crouchmann plays it – the *only* interpretation! I know him quite well. We had supper together the other night after his concert, and he told me – no, that won't interest you. I'll tell you another time, remind me! Now, *do* play something else!"

He fumbled with the music upon the piano with tremulous and unsteady hands.

"Ah! here we are!" he cried, and there was an insistent note of familiarity in his voice. "The book of Valses! You know the twelfth of course? Tempo giusto! It goes like this .."

He began to hum, quite musically, and to wave his hands.

Muriel Amberley glanced quickly at her father and there was distress in her eyes.

Amberley was standing by the piano in a moment. He seemed very much master of himself, serene and dominant, by the side of Gilbert Lothian. His face was coldly civil and there was disgust in his eyes.

"I don't think my daughter will play any more, Mr. Lothian," he said.

An ugly look flashed out upon the poet's face, suspicion and realisation showed there for a second and passed.

He became nervous, embarrassed, almost pitifully apologetic. The savoir-faire which would have helped some men to take the rebuke entirely deserted him. There was something assiduous, almost vulgar, a frightened acceptance of the lash indeed, which

immensely accentuated the sudden *défaillance* and break-down.

In the big drawing room no one spoke at all.

Then there was a sudden movement and stir. Gilbert Lothian was saying good-night.

He had remembered that he really had some work to do before going to bed, some letters to write, as a matter of fact. He was shaking hands with every one.

"I do hope that I shall have the pleasure of hearing you play some more Chopin before long, Miss Amberley! Thank you so much Mrs. Amberley – I'm going to write a poem about your beautiful Dining Room. I suppose we shall meet at the Authors' Club dinner on Saturday, Mr. Toftrees? – so interested to have met you at last."

.. The people in the drawing room heard him chattering vivaciously to Mr. Amberley, who had accompanied his departing guest into the hall.

No one said a single word. They heard the front door close, and the steps of the master of the house as he returned to them. They were all waiting.

When Amberley came in he made a courtly attempt at ignoring what had just occurred. The calm surface of the evening had been rudely disturbed – yes! For once even an Amberley party had gone wrong – there was to be no fun from this meeting of young folk to-night.

But it was Mrs. Amberley who spoke. She really could not help it. Mrs. Toftrees had been telling her of various rumours

concerning Gilbert Lothian some time before the episode at the piano, and with all her tolerance Mrs. Amberley was thoroughly angry.

That such a thing should have happened in her house, before Muriel and her girl friend – oh! it was unthinkable!

"So Mr. Gilbert Lothian has gone," she said with considerable emphasis.

"Yes, dear," Mr. Amberley answered as he sat down again, willing enough that nothing more should be said.

But it was not to be so.

"We can never have him here again," said the angry lady.

Amberley shook his head. "Very unfortunate, extremely unfortunate," he murmured.

"I cannot understand it. Such a thing has never happened here before. Now I understand why Mr. Lothian hides himself in the country and never goes about. *Il y avait raison!*"

"I don't say that genius is any *excuse* for this sort of thing," Amberley replied uneasily, "and Lothian has genius – but one must take more than one thing into consideration .."

He paused, not quite knowing how to continue the sentence, and genuinely sorry and upset. His glance fell upon Herbert Toftrees, and he had a sort of feeling that the novelist might help him out.

"Don't you think so, Toftrees?" he asked.

The novelist surveyed the room with his steady grey eyes, marshalling his hearers as it were.

"But let us put his talent aside," he said. "Think of him as an ordinary person in our own rank of life – Mrs. Amberley's guest. Certainly he could not have taken anything here to have made him in the strange state he is in. Surely he must have known that he was not fit to come to a decent house."

"I shall give his poems away," Muriel Amberley said with a little shudder. "I can never read them again. And I did love them so! I wish you hadn't asked Mr. Lothian to come here, Father."

"There is one consolation," said Mrs. Toftrees in a hard voice; "the man must be realising what he has done. He was not too far gone for that!"

A new voice broke into the talk. It came from young Dickson Ingworth who had slid into the seat by Rita Wallace when Lothian went to the piano.

He blushed and stammered as he spoke, but there was a fine loyalty in his voice.

"It seems rather dreadful, Mrs. Amberley," he said, quite thinking that he was committing literary suicide as he did so. "It is dreadful of course. But Gilbert *is* such a fine chap when he's – when he's, all right! You can't think! And then, 'Surgit Amari'! Don't let's forget he wrote 'The Loom' – 'Delicate Threads! O fairest in life's tissue,'" he quoted from the celebrated verse.

Then Rita Wallace spoke. "He is great," she said. "He is manifesting himself in his own way. That is all. To me, at any rate, the meeting with Mr. Lothian has been wonderful."

Mrs. Toftrees stared with undisguised dislike of such

assertions on the part of a young girl.

But Mrs. Amberley, always kind and generous-hearted, had been pleased and touched by Dickson Ingworth's defence of his friend and master. She quite realised what the lad stood to lose by doing it, and what courage on his part it showed. And when Rita Wallace chimed in, Mrs. Amberley dismissed the whole occurrence from her mind as she beamed benevolently at the two young people on the sofa.

"Let's forget all about it," she said. "Mrs. Toftrees, help me to make my husband sing. He can only sing one song but he sings it excellently – 'In cellar cool' – just the thing for a hot night. Joseph! do as I tell you!"

The little group of people rearranged themselves, as Muriel sat down at the piano to accompany her father.

"Le metier de poëte laisse a désirer," Toftrees murmured to his wife with a sneer which almost disguised the atrocious accent of his French.

CHAPTER III

SHAME IN "THE ROARING GALLANT TOWN"

– "Is it for this I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?"

""Très volontiers' repartit le démon. 'Vous aimez
les tableaux changeants; je veux vous contenter.'"

– *Le Sage.*

When the door of the house had closed after him, and with Mr. Amberley's courteous but grave good-night ringing in his ears, Gilbert Lothian walked briskly away across the Square.

It was very hot. The July sun, that tempest of fire which had passed over the town during the day, had sucked up all the sweetness from the air and it was sickly, like air under a blanket which has been breathed many times. As it often is in July, London had been delightfully fresh at dawn, when the country waggons were bringing the sweet-peas and the roses to market, and although his mind had not been fresh as the sun rose over St. James' where he was staying, Lothian had enjoyed the early morning from the window of his bedroom. It had been clear and scentless, like a field with the dew upon it, in the country from

which he had come five days ago.

Now his mind was like a field in the full sun of noon, parched and full of hot odours.

He was perfectly aware that he had made a *faux pas*. How far it went, whether he was not exaggerating it, he did not know. The semi-intoxicated person – more especially when speech and gait are more or less normal, as in his case – is quite incapable of gauging the impression he makes on others. In lax and tolerant circles where no outward indication is given him of his state, he goes on his way pleased and confident that he has made an excellent impression, sure that no one has found him out.

But his cunning and self-congratulation quite desert him when he is openly snubbed or reproved. "Was I very far gone?" he afterwards asks some confidential friend who may have been present at his discomfiture. And whatever form the answer may take, the drunkard is abnormally interested in all the details of the event. Born of the toxic influences in his blood, there is a gaunt and greedy vanity which insists upon the whole scene being re-enacted and commented upon.

Lothian had no one to tell him how far he had gone, precisely what impression he had made upon his hosts and their guests. He felt with a sense of injury that Dickson Ingworth ought to have come away with him. The young man owed so much to him in the literary life! It was a treachery not to have come away with him.

As he got into a cab and told the man to drive him as far as Piccadilly Circus, he was still pursuing this train of thought.

He had taken Ingworth to the Amberleys', and now the cub was sitting in the drawing room there, with those charming girls! quite happy and at ease. He, Gilbert Lothian himself! was out of it all, shut out from that gracious house and those cultured people whom he had been so glad to meet.

.. Again he heard the soft closing of the big front door behind him, and his skin grew hot at the thought. The remembrance of Amberley's quiet courtesy, but entire change of manner in the hall, was horrible. He felt as if he had been whipped. The dread of a slight, the fear of a quarrel, which is a marked symptom of the alcoholic – is indeed his torment and curse through life – was heavy upon Lothian now.

The sense of impotence was sickening. What a weak fool he had been to break down and fly like that. To run away! What faltering and trembling incapacity for self-assertion he had shown. He had felt uneasy with the very servant who gave him his opera hat!

And what had he done after all? Very little, surely.

That prelude of Chopin always appealed to him strongly. He had written about it; Crouchmann had played it privately for him and pointed out new beauties. Certainly he had only met Miss Amberley for the first time that night and he may have been a little over-excited and effusive. His thoughts – a poet's thoughts after all – had come too quickly for ordered expression. He was too Celtic in manner, too artistic for these staid cold folk.

He tried to depreciate the Amberleys in his thoughts.

Amberley was only a glorified trades-man after all! Lothian tried to call up within him that bitter joy which comes from despising that which we really respect or desire. "Yes! damn the fellow! He *lived* on poets and men of letters – privileged people, the salt of the earth, the real forces of life!"

And yet he ought to have stayed on and corrected his mistake. He had made himself ridiculous in front of four women – he didn't care about the men so much – and that was horribly galling.

As the cab swung down Regent Street, Lothian was sure that if his nerves had not weakened for a moment he would never have given himself away. It was, he felt, very unfortunate. He knew, as he could not help knowing, that not only had he a mind and power of a rare, high quality, but that he possessed great personal charm. What he did not realise was how utterly all these things fled from him when he was not quite sober. Certainly at this moment he was unable to comprehend it in the slightest. Realisation would come later, at the inevitable punishment hour.

He over-paid his cabman absurdly. The man's quick and eager deference pleased him. He was incapable of any sense of proportion, and he felt somehow or other reinstated in his own opinion by this trivial and bought servility.

He looked at his watch. It was not very much after ten, and he became conscious of how ridiculously early he had fled from the Amberleys'. But as he stood on the pavement – in the very centre of the pleasure-web of London with its roar and glare – he pushed such thoughts resolutely from him and turned into a

luxurious "lounge," celebrated among fast youths and pleasure-seekers, known by an affectionate nick-name at the Universities, in every regimental mess or naval ward-room in Great Britain.

As he went down a carpeted passage he saw himself in the long mirror that lined it. He looked quite himself, well-dressed, prosperous, his face under full control and just like any other smart man about town.

At this hour, there were not many people in the place. It would become crowded and noisy later on.

The white and green tiles of the walls gleamed softly in the shaded lights, electric fans and a huge block of ice upon a pedestal kept the air cool. There were palms which refreshed the eye and upon the porphyry counter at which he was served there was a mass of mauve hydrangea in a copper bowl.

He drank a whiskey and soda very quickly – that was to remove the marked physical exhaustion which had begun to creep over him – ordered another and lit a cigarette.

His nerves responded with magical quickness to the spirit. All day long he had been feeding them with the accustomed poison. The strain of the last half hour had used up more vitality than he had been aware.

For the second time that night – a night so infinitely more eventful than he knew – he became master of himself, calm, happy, even, in the sense of power returned, and complete correspondence with his environment.

The barmaid who served him was – like most of these Slaves

of the Still in this part of London – an extremely handsome girl. Her face was painted – all these girls paint their faces – but it was done merely to conceal the pallor and ravages wrought upon it by a hard and feverish life. Lothian felt an immense pity for her, symbolic as she was of all the others, and the few remarks he made were uttered with an instinctive deference and courtesy.

He had been married seven years before this time, and had at once retired into the country with his wife where, by slow degrees, he had felt his way to the work which had at last made him celebrated. But in the past he had known the under side of London well and had chosen it deliberately as his *milieu*.

It had in no way been forced upon him. Struggling journalist and author as he was, good houses had been open to him, for he was a member of a well-known family and had made many friends at Oxford.

But the other life was so much easier! If its pleasures were coarse, they were hot and strong! For years, as many a poet has done before him, he lived a bad life, tolerant of vice in himself and others, kind, generous often, but tossed and worn by his passions – rivetting the chains link by link upon his soul – until he had met and married Mary.

And no one knew better than he the horrors of life behind the counters of a bar.

He turned away, as two fresh-faced lads came noisily up to the counter, turned away with a sigh of pity. He was quite unconscious – though he would have been interested at the

psychological fact – that the girl had wondered at his manner and thought him affected and dull.

She would much rather have been complimented and chaffed. She understood that. Life is full of anodynes. Mercifully enough the rank and file of the oppressed are not too frequently conscious of their miseries. There is a half-truth in the philosophy of Dr. Pangloss, and if fettered limbs go lame, the chains are not always clanking.

The poor barmaid went to bed that night in an excellent humour, for the two lads Lothian had seen brought her some pairs of gloves. And if she had known of Lothian's pity she would have resented it bitterly.

"Like the fellow's cheek," she would have said.

Lothian, as he believed, had absolutely recovered his own normal personality. He admitted now, as he left the "lounge," that he had not been his true self at the Amberleys'.

"At this moment, as I stand here," he said to himself, "'I am the Captain of my Soul,'" not in the least understanding that when he spoke of his own "soul" he meant nothing more than his five senses.

The man thought he was normal. He was not. On the morrow, when partially recovering from the excesses of to-day, there was a possibility that he might become normal – for a brief period, and until he began to drink again.

For him to become really himself, perfectly clean from the stigmata of the inebriate mind, would have taken him at least six

months of total abstinence from alcohol.

Lothian's health, though impaired, had by no means broken down.

A strong constitution, immense vitality, had preserved it, up to this point. At this period, though a poisoned man, an alcoholised body, there were frequent times of absolute normality – when he was, for certain definite spaces of time by the clock, exactly as he would have been had he never become a slave to alcohol at all.

As he stood upon the pavement of Piccadilly Circus, he felt and believed that such a time had come now.

He was mistaken. All that was happening was that there was a temporary lull in the ebb and flow of alcohol in his veins. The brain cells were charged up to a certain point with poison. At this point they gave a false impression of security.

It must be remembered, and it cannot be too strongly insisted on, that the mental processes of the inebriate are *definite*, and are *induced*.

The ordinary person says of an inebriate simply that "he is a drunkard" or "he drinks." Whether he or she says it with sympathetic sorrow, or abhorrence, the bald statement rarely leads to any further train of thought.

It is very difficult for the ordinary person to realise that the mental processes are *sui generis* a Kingdom – though with a debased coinage – which requires considerable experience before it can always be recognised from the ring of true metal.

Alcoholism so changes the mental life of any one that it results

in an ego which has *special* external and internal characteristics.

And so, in order to appreciate fully this history of Gilbert Lothian – to note the difference between the man as he was known and as he really was – it must always be kept in mind under what influence he moves through life, and that his steps have strayed into a dreadful kingdom unknown and unrealised by happier men.

He had passed out of one great Palace of Drink.

Had he been as he supposed himself to be, he would have sought rest at once. He would have hurried joyously from temptation in this freedom from his chains.

Instead of that, the question he asked himself was, "What shall I do now?"

The glutton crams himself at certain stated periods. But when repletion comes he stops eating. The habit is rhythmic and periodically certain.

But the Drunkard – his far more sorrowful and lamentable brother – has not even this half-saving grace. In common with the inordinate smoker – whose harm is physical and not mental – the inebriate drinks as long as he is able to, until he is incapacitated. "Where shall I go now?"

If God does indeed give human souls to His good angels, as gardens to weed and tend, that thought must have brought tears of pity to the eyes of the august beings who were battling for Gilbert Lothian.

Their hour was not yet.

They were to see the temple of the Paraclete fall into greater ruin and disaster than ever before. The splendid spires and pinnacles, the whole serene beauty of soul and body which had made this Temple a high landmark when God first built it, were crumbling to decay.

Deep down among the strong foundations the enemy was at work. The spire – the "Central-one" – which sprang up towards Heaven was deeply undermined. Still – save to the eyes of experts – its glory rose unimpaired. But it was but a lovely shell with no longer any grip upon its base of weakened Will. And the bells in the wind-swept height of the Tower no longer rang truly. On red dawns or on pearl-grey evenings the message they sent over the country-side was beginning to be false. There was no peace when they tolled the Angelus.

In oriel or great rose-window the colour of the painted glass was growing dim. The clear colour was fading, though here and there it was shot with baleful fire which the Artist had never painted there, – like the blood-shot eyes of the man who drinks.

A miasmatic mist had crept into the noble spaces of the aisles. The vast supporting pillars grew insubstantial and seemed to tremble as the vapour eddied round them. A black veil was quickly falling before the Figure above the Altar, and the seven dim lamps of the Sanctuary burned with green and flickering light.

The bells of a Great Mind's Message, which had been cast with so much silver in them, rang an increasing dissonance.

The trumpets of the organ echoed with a harsh note in the far clerestory; the flutes were false, the *dolce* stop no longer sweet. The great pipes of the pedal organ muttered and stammered in their massive voices, as if dark advisers whispered in the ear of the musician who controlled them.

Lothian had passed from one great Palace of Drink. "Where shall I go?" he asked himself again, and immediately his eye fell upon another, the brilliant illumination upon the façade of a well-known "Theatre of Varieties."

His hot eye-balls drank in the flaring signs, and telegraphed both an impulse and a memory to his brain.

"Yes!" he said. "I will revisit the 'Kingdom.' There is still two thirds of an hour before the performance will be over. How well I used to know it! What a nightly haunt it used to be. Surely, even now, there will be some people I know there? .. I'll go in and see!"

As Lothian turned in at the principal doors of the most celebrated Music Hall in the world, his pulses began to quicken.

– The huge foyer, the purple carpets, with their wreaths of laurel in a purple which was darker yet, the gleaming marble stairway, with its wide and noble sweep, how familiar all this dignified splendour was, he thought as he entered the second Palace of Drink which flung wide its doors to him this night.

A palace of drink and lust, vast and beautiful! for those who brought poisoned blood and vicious desires within its portals! Here, banished from the pagan groves and the sunlit temples of their ancient glory – banished also from the German pine-woods

where Heine saw them in pallid life under the full moon – Venus, Bacchus and Silenus held their unholy court.

For all the world – save only for a few wise men to whom they were but symbols – Venus and Bacchus were deities once.

When the Acropolis cut into the blue sky of Hellas with its white splendour these were the chiefest to whom men prayed, and they ruled the lives of all.

And, day by day, new temples rise in their honour. Once they were worshipped with blythe body and blinded soul. Now the tired body and the besotted brain alone pay them reverence. But great are their temples still.

Such were the thoughts of Lothian – Lothian the Christian poet – and he was pleased that they should come to him.

It showed how detached he was, what real command he had of himself. In the old wild days, before his marriage and celebrity, he had come to this place, and other places like it, to seize greedily upon pleasure, as a monkey seizes upon a nut. He came to survey it all now, to revisit the feverish theatre of his young follies with a bland Olympian attitude.

The poison was flattering him now, placing him upon a swaying pedestal for a moment. He was sucking in the best honey that worthless withering flowers could exude, and it was hot and sweet upon his tongue.

– Were any of the old set there after all? He hoped so. Not conscious of himself as a rule, without a trace of "side" and detesting ostentation or any display of his fame, he wanted to

show off now. He wanted to console himself for his rebuff at the house in Bryanstone Square. Vulgar and envious adulation, interested praise from those who were still in the pit of obscurity from which his finer brain had helped him to escape, would be perfectly adequate to-night.

After the episode at the Amberleys', coarse flattery heaped on with a spade would be as ice in the desert.

And he found what he desired.

He passed slowly through the promenade, towards the door which led to the stalls, and the great lounge where, if anywhere, he would find people who knew him and whom he knew.

In a slowly-moving tide, like a weed-clogged wave, the women of the town ebbed and flowed from horn to horn of the moon-shaped crescent where they walk. Against the background of sea-purple and white, their dresses and the nodding plumes in their great hats moved languorously. Sickly perfumes, as from the fan of an odalisque, swept over them.

Many beautiful painted masks floated through the scented aisle of the theatre, as they had floated up and down the bronze corridors of the Temple of Diana at Ephesus in the far off days of St. Paul. A mourning thrill shivered up from the violins of the orchestra below; the 'cellos made their plaint, the cymbals rattled, the kettledrums spoke with deep vibrating voices.

.. So had the sistra clanked and droned in the old temple of bronze and silver before the altars of Artemis, – the old music, the eternal faces, ever the same!

A chill came to Lothian as he passed among these "estranged sad spectres of the night." He thought suddenly of his pure and gracious wife, alone in their little house in the country, he thought of the Canaanitish harlot whose soul was the first that Christ redeemed. For a moment or two his mind was like a darkened room in which a magic lantern is being operated and fantastic, unexpected pictures flit across the screen. And then he was in the big lounge.

Yes, some of them were there! – a little older, perhaps, to his now much more critical eye, somewhat more bloated and coarsened, but the same still.

"Good heavens!" said a huge man with a blood red face, startling in its menace, like a bully looking into an empty room, "Why, here's old Lothian! Where in the world have *you* sprung from, my dear boy?"

Lothian's face lit up with pleasure and recognition. The big evil-faced man was Paradil, the painter of pastels, a wayward drunken creature who never had money in his pocket, but that he gave it away to every one. He was a man spoken of as a genius by those who knew. His rare pictures fetched large prices, but he hardly ever worked. He was soaked, dissolved and pickled in brandy.

A little elderly man like a diseased doll, came up and began to twitter. He was the husband of a famous dancer who performed at the theatre, a wit in his way, an adroit manager of his wife's affairs with other men, a man with a mind as hollow and bitter

as a dried lemon.

He was a well-known figure in upper Bohemia. His name was constantly mentioned in the newspapers as an entrepreneur of all sorts of things, a popular, evil little man.

"Ah, Lothian," he said, as one or two other people came up and some one gave a copious order for drinks, "still alternating between the prayer book and the decanter? I must congratulate you on 'Surgit Amari.' I read it, and it made me green with envy to think how many thousand copies you had sold of it."

"You've kept the colour, Edgar," he said, looking into the little creature's face, but the words stabbed through him, nevertheless. How true they were – superficially – how they expressed – and must express – the view of his old disreputable companions. They envied him his cunning – as they thought it – they would have given their ears to have possessed the same power of profitable hypocrisy – as they thought it. Meanwhile they spoke virtuously to each other about him. "Gilbert Lothian the author of 'Surgit Amari'! – it would make a cat laugh!"

One can't throw off one's past like a dirty shirt – Gilbert began to wish he had not come here.

"I ought never to be seen in these places," he thought, forgetting that it was only the sting of the little man's malice that provoked the truth.

But Paradil, kindly Paradil with the bully's face and a heart bursting with dropsical good nature, speedily intervened.

Other men joined the circle; "rounds of drinks" were paid for

by each person according to the ritual of such an occasion as this.

In half an hour, when the theatre began to empty, Lothian was really, definitely drunk.

Hot circles expanded and contracted within his head. His face became pale and very grave in expression, as he walked out into Leicester Square upon Paradil's supporting arm. There was a portentous dignity in his voice as he gave the address of his club to the cabman. As he shook hands with Paradil out of the window, tears came into his eyes, as he thought of the other's drunken, wasted life. "If I can only help you in any way, old chap – " he tried to say, and then sank back in oblivion upon the cushions.

He was quite unconscious of anything during the short drive to St. James's Street, and when the experienced cabman pulled down the flag of the taximeter and opened the door, he sat there like a log.

The X Club was not fashionable, but it was reputable and of old establishment. It was fairly easy to get into – for the people whom the election committee wanted there – exceedingly difficult for the wrong set of people. Very many country gentlemen – county people, but of moderate means – belonged to it; the Major-General and the Admiral were not infrequent visitors; several Judges were on the members' list and looked in now and again.

As far as the Arts went, they were but poorly represented. There was no sparkle, no night-life about the place. The painters,

actors and writers preferred a club that began to brighten up about eleven o'clock at night – just when the X became dreary. Not more than a dozen suppers were served at the staid building in St. James' on any night of the week.

Nevertheless, it was not an "old fogies'" club. There was a younger leaven working there. A good many younger men who also belonged to much more lively establishments found refreshment, quiet, and just the proper kind of atmosphere at the X.

For young men of good families who were starting life in London, there was a certain sense of being at home there. The building had, in the past, been the house of a celebrated duke and something of comely and decent order clung to every room now. And, more than anything, the servants suggested a country or London house of name.

Mullion, the grey-haired head-porter who sat in his glass box in the hall was a kind and assiduous friend to every one. He was reported to be worth ten thousand pounds and his manners were perfection. He was one of the most celebrated servants in London. His deference was never tinged by servility. His interest in your affairs and wants was delicately intimate and quite genuine. Great people had tried to lure this good and shrewd person from the X Club, but without success. For seventeen years he had sat there in the hall, and, if fate was kind, he meant to sit there for seventeen years more.

All the servants of the X were like that. The youngest waiter

in the smoking-rooms, library or dining room wore the face of a considerate friend, and Prince, the head bed-room valet was beloved by every one. Members of other clubs talked about him and Mullion, the head-porter, with sighs of regret.

When Gilbert Lothian's taxi-cab stopped at the doors of the X Club, he was expected. Dickson Ingworth, who was a member also, had been there for a few moments, expectant of his friend.

Old Mullion had gone for the night, and an under-porter sat in the quiet hall, but Prince, the valet, stood talking to Ingworth at the bottom of the stair-case.

"It will be perfectly all right," said Prince. "I haven't done for Mr. Lothian for all these years without understanding his ways. Drunk or sober, sir, Mr. Gilbert is always a gentleman. He's the most pleasant country member in the club, sir! I understand his habits thoroughly, and he would bear me out in that at any time. I'm sure of that! His bowl of soup is being kept hot in the kitchens now. The small flask of cognac and the bottle of Worcester sauce are waiting on his dressing table. And there's a half bottle of champagne, which he takes to put him right when I call him in the morning, already on the ice!"

"I know he appreciates it, Prince. He can't say enough about how you look after him when he's in London."

"I thoroughly believe it, sir," said the valet, "but it gives me great pleasure to hear it from you, who are such a friend of Mr. Gilbert's. I may say, sir – if I may tell you without offence – that I'm not really on duty to-night. But when I see how Mr. Gilbert

was when he was dressing for dinner, I made up my mind to stay. James begged me to go, but I would not. James is a good lad, but he's no memory for detail. He'd have forgot the bi-carbonate of soda for Mr. Gilbert's heart-burn, or something like that – I think that's him, sir!"

Ingworth and the valet hurried over the hall as the inner doors swung open and Lothian entered. His shirt-front was crumpled. His face was white and set, his eyes fixed and sombre.

It was as though the master of the house had returned, when the poet entered. The under-porter hurried out of his box, Prince had the coat and opera hat whisked away in a moment. In a moment more, like some trick of the theatre and surrounded by satellites, Lothian was mounting the stairs towards his bedroom.

They put him in an arm-chair – these eager servitors! The electric lights in the comfortable bed-room were all switched on. The servant who loved him, not for his generosity, but for himself, vied with the young gentleman who loved him for somewhat different reasons.

Both of them had been dominated by this personality for so long, that there was no sorrow nor pity in their minds. The faithful man of the people who had served gentlemen so long that any other life would have been impossible to him, the boy of position, united in their efforts of resuscitation.

The Master's mind must be called back! The Master's body must be succoured and provided for.

The two were there to do it, and it seemed quite an ordinary

and natural thing.

"You take off his boots, Prince, and I'll manage his collar."

"Yes, sir."

"Managed it?"

"A little difficulty with the left boot, sir. The instep is a trifle swelled."

"Good heavens! I do hope he's not going to have another attack of gout!"

"I hope not, sir. But you can't ever tell. It comes very sudden. Like a thief in the night, as you may say."

"There! I've broken the stud, but that doesn't matter. His neck's free."

"And his boots are off. There's some one knocking. It's his soup. Would you mind putting his bed-room slippers on, sir? I don't like the cold for his feet."

Prince hurried to the door, whispered a word or two to whoever stood outside, and returned with a tray.

"Another few minutes," said Prince, as he poured the brandy and measured the Worcester sauce into the silver-plated tureen; "another few minutes and he'll be beautiful! Mr. Gilbert responds to anything wonderful quick. I've had him worse than this at half past twelve, and at quarter to one he's been talking like an archdeacon. You persuade him, sir."

"Here's your soup, Gilbert!"

"*It's all nothing, there's nobody, all nothing – dark —,*" the voice was clogged and drowsy – if a blanket could speak, the

voice might have been so.

The boy looked hopelessly at the valet.

Prince, an alert little man with a yellow vivacious countenance and heavy, black eye-brows, smiled superior. "When Mr. Gilbert really have copped the brewer – excuse the expression, sir – he generally says a few words without much meaning. Leave him to me if you please."

He wheeled a little table up to the arm-chair, and caught hold of Lothian's shoulder, shaking him.

"What? What? My soup?"

"Yessir, your soup."

The man's recuperative power was marvellous. His eyes were bleared, his face white, the wavy hair fell in disorder over his forehead. But he was awake and conscious.

"Thank you, Prince," he said, in his clear and sweet voice, "just what I wanted. Hullo, Dicker! You here? – I'll just have my soup.."

He grasped the large ladle-spoon with curious eagerness. It was as though he found salvation in the hot liquid – pungent as it was with cognac and burning spices.

He lapped it eagerly, coughing now and again, "gluck-gluck" and then a groan of satisfaction.

The other two watched him with quiet eagerness. There was nothing horrible to them in this. Neither the valet nor the boy understood that they were "lacqueys in the house of shame." As they saw their muddy magic beginning to succeed, satisfaction

swelled within them.

Gilbert Lothian's mind was coming back. They were blind to the hideous necessity of their summons, untouched by disgust at the physical processes involved.

"Will you require me any more, sir?"

"No, thank you, Prince."

"Very good, sir. I have made the morning arrangements."

"Good-night, Prince."

The bedroom door closed.

Lothian heaved himself out of his chair. He seemed fifteen years older. His head was sunk forward upon his shoulders, his stomach seemed to protrude, his face was pale, blotchy, debauched, and appeared to be much larger than it ordinarily did.

With a slow movement, as if every joint in his body creaked and gave him pain, he began to pace slowly up and down the room. Dickson Ingworth sat on the bed and watched him.

Yet as the man moved slowly up and down the room, collecting the threads of his poisoned consciousness, slowly recapturing his mind, there was something big about him.

Each heavy, semi-drunken movement had force and personality. The lowering, considering face spelt power, even now.

He stopped in front of the bed.

"Well, Dicker?" he said – and suddenly his whole face was transformed. Ten years fell away. The smile was sweet and simple, there was a freakish humour in the eyes, – "Well,

Dicker?"

The boy gave a great gasp of pleasure and relief. The "gude-man" had come home, the powerful mind-machine had started once more, the house was itself again!

"How are you, Gilbert?"

"Very tired. Horrible indigestion and heartburn, legs like lumps of brass and a nasty feeling as if an imprisoned black-bird were fluttering at the base of my spine! But quite sober, Dicker, now!"

"Nor were you ever anything else, in Bryanstone Square," the young man said hotly. "It *was* such a mistake for you to go away, Gilbert. So unnecessary!"

"I had my reasons. Was there much comment? Now tell me honestly, was it very noticeable? – what did they say?"

"No one said anything at all," Ingworth answered, lying bravely. "The evening didn't last long after you went. Every one left together – I say you ought to have seen the Toftrees' motor! – and I drove Miss Wallace home, and then came on here."

"A beautiful girl," Lothian said sleepily. "I only talked to her for a minute or two and she seemed clever and sympathetic. Certainly she is lovely."

Ingworth rose from the bed. He pointed to the table in the centre of the room. "Well, I'm off, old chap," he said. "As far as Miss Wallace goes, she's absolutely gone on you! She was quoting your verses all the way in the cab. She lives in a tiny flat with another girl, and I had to wait outside while she did up that

parcel there! It's 'Surgit Amari,' she wants you to sign it for her, and there's a note as well, I believe. Good-night."

"Good-night, Dicker. I can't talk now. I'm beautifully drunk to-night.. Look me up in the morning. Then we'll talk."

The door had hardly closed upon the departing youth, when Lothian sank into a heap upon his chair. His body felt like a quivering jelly, a leaden depression, as if Hell itself weighed him down.

Mechanically, and with cold, trembling hands, he opened the brown paper parcel. His book, in its cover of sage-green and gold, fell out upon the table. He began to read the note – the handwriting was firm, clear and full of youth – so he thought. The heading of the note paper was embossed —

"The Podley Pure Literature Institute.

Dear Mr. Lothian:

I am so proud and happy to have met you to-night. I am so sorry that I had not the chance of telling you what your poems have been to me – though of course you must always be hearing that sort of thing. So I will say nothing more, but ask you, only, to put your name in my copy of "Surgit Amari" and thus make it more precious – if that is possible – than before.

Mr. Ingworth has kindly promised to give you this note and the book.

Yours sincerely,

RITA WALLACE."

The letter dropped unheeded upon the carpet. Thick tears

began to roll down Lothian's swollen face.

"Mary! Mary!" he said aloud, "I want you, I want you!" ..

"Darling! there is no one else in the world but you."

He was calling for his wife, always so good and kind to him, his dear and loving wife. At the end of his long foul day, lived without a thought of her, he was calling for her help and comfort like a sick child.

Poisoned, abject, he whined for her in the empty room.

– She was sleeping now, in the quiet house by the sea. The horn of a motor-car tooted in St. James' Street below – She was sleeping now in her quiet chamber. Tired lids covered the frank, blue eyes, the thick masses of yellow hair were straying over the linen pillow. She was dreaming of him as the night wind moaned about the house.

He threw himself upon his knees by the bedside, in dreadful drunken surrender and appeal.

– "Father help me! Jesus help me! – forgive me!" – he dare not invoke the Holy Ghost. He shrank from that. The Father had made everything and had made him. He was a beneficent, all-pervading Force – He would understand. The Lord Jesus was a familiar Figure. He was human; Man as well as God. One could visualise Him. He had cared for harlots and drunkards! ..

Far down in his sub-conscious brain Lothian was aware of what he was doing. He was whining not to be hurt. His prayers were no more than superstitious garrulity and fear. Something – a small despairing part of himself, had climbed upon the roof of

the dishonoured Temple and was stretching trembling hands out into the overwhelming darkness of the Night.

"Father, help me! Help me *now*. Let me go to bed without phantoms and torturing ghosts round me! Do not look into the Temple to-night. I will cleanse it to-morrow. I swear it! Father! Help me!"

He began to gabble the Lord's Prayer – that would adjust things in a sort of way – wouldn't it? There was a promise – yes – one said it, and it charmed away disaster.

Half-way through the prayer he stopped. The words would not come to him. He had forgotten.

But that no longer distressed him. The black curtain of stupor was descending once more.

"'Thy will be done' – what *did* come after? Well! never mind!" God was good. He'd understand. After all, intention was everything!

He scrambled into bed and instantly fell asleep, while the lovely face of Rita Wallace was the first thing that swam into his disordered brain.

In a remote village of Norfolk, not a quarter of a mile from Gilbert Lothian's own house, a keen-faced man with a pointed beard, a slim, alert figure like an osier wand and steely brown eyes was reading a thin green-covered book of poems.

Now and then he made a pencil note in the margin. His face was alive with interest, almost with excitement. It was as though he were tracing something, hunting for some secret hidden in the

pages.

More than once he gave a subdued exclamation of excitement.

"It's there!" he said at last to himself. "Yes, it is there! I'm sure of it, quite apart from what I've heard in the village since I came."

He rose, put the book carefully away in a drawer, locked it, blew out the lamp and went to bed.

Three hundred miles away in Cornwall, a crippled spinster was lying on her bed of pain in a cottage by the sea.

The windows of her room were open and the moon-rays touched a white Crucifix upon the wall to glory.

The Atlantic groundswell upon the distant beaches made a sound as of fairy drums.

The light of a shaded candle fell upon the white coverlet of her bed, and upon a book bound in sage-green and gold which lay there.

The woman's face shone. She had just read for the fifth time, the poem in "Surgit Amari" which closes the first book.

The lovely lines had fused with the holy rapture of the night, and her patient soul was caught up into commune with Jesus.

"Soon! Oh, soon! Dear Lord," she gasped, "I shall be with Thee for ever. If it seemeth good to Thee, let me be taken up on some such tranquil night as this. And I thank Thee, Dear Saviour, that Thou hast poured Thy Grace into the soul of Gilbert Lothian, the Poet. Through the white soul of this poet, which Thou hast chosen to be a conduit of comfort to me, my night pain has gone. I am drawn nearer to Thee, Jesus who hast died for me!

"Lord, bless the poet. Pour down Thy Grace upon him. Guard him, shield him and his for ever more. And, Sweet Lord, if it be Thy will, let me meet him in Heaven and tell him of this night – this fair night of summer when I lay dying and happy and thinking kindly and with gratitude of him.

"Jesus!"

CHAPTER IV

LOTHIAN GOES TO THE LIBRARY OF PURE LITERATURE

"I only knew one poet in my life:
And this, or something like it, was his way."

— *Browning.*

The Podley Library in West Kensington was a fad of its creator. Mr. John Podley was a millionaire, or nearly so, and the head of a great pin-making firm. He was a public man of name and often preached or lectured at the species of semi-religious conversations known as "Pleasant Sunday Afternoons."

Sunday afternoon in England – though Mr. Podley called it "The Sabbath" – represented the pin-maker's mental attitude with some fidelity. All avenues to pleasure of any kind were barred, though possibly amusement is the better word. A heavy meal clogged the intellect, an imperfectly-understood piece of Jewish religious politics was made into an idol, erected and bowed down to.

Mr. Podley had always lived with the fear of God, and the love of money constantly before his eyes. "Sabbath observance" and total abstinence were his watchwords, and he also took a great interest in "Literature" and had pronounced views upon

the subject. These views, like everything else about him, were confined and narrow, but were the sincere convictions of an ignorant, pompous and highly successful man.

He had, accordingly, established the Podley Free Library in Kensington in order to enunciate and carry out his ideas in a practical way. What he considered – and not without some truth – the immoral tendency of modern writers, was to be sternly prohibited in his model house of books.

Nothing should repose upon those shelves which might bring a blush to the cheeks of the youngest girl or unsettle the minds of any one at all. "Very unsettling" was a great phrase of this good, wealthy and stupid old man. He really was good, vulgar and limited as were all his tastes, and he had founded the Library to the glory of God.

He found it impossible – when he became confronted by the task – to choose the books himself, as he had hoped to do.

He had sat down one day in his elegant private sanctum at Tulse Hill with sheets of foolscap before him, to make a first list. The "Pilgrim's Progress" was written down immediately in his flowing clerkly hand. Then came the novels of Mrs. Henry Wood. "Get all of this line" was the pencilled note in the margin. Memories of his youth reasserted themselves, so "Jessica's First Prayer," "Ministering Children" and "A Peep Behind the Scenes" were quickly added, and then there had been a pause.

"Milton, Shakespeare and the Bible?" said Mrs. Podley, when consulted. "They're pure enough, I'm sure!" and the pin-maker

who had never been to a theatre, nor read a line of the great poets, wrote them down at once. As for the Bible, it was God's word, and so "would never bring a blush" etc. It was Mr. Podley's favourite reading – the Old Testament more than the New – and if any one had scoffed at the idea that the Almighty had written it Himself, in English and with a pen, Podley would have thought him infidel.

The millionaire was quite out of date. The modern expansions of thought among the Non-conformists puzzled him when he was (rarely) brought into any contact with them. His grim, uncultured beliefs were such as exist only in the remote granite meeting houses of the Cornish moors to-day.

"I see that Bunyan wrote another book, the 'Holy War,'" said Mr. Podley to his wife. "I never heard of it and I'm a bit doubtful. I don't like the name, shall I enter it up or not?"

The good lady shook her head. "Not knowing, can't say," she remarked. "But if it is the same man who wrote 'Pilgrim's Progress' then it's sure to be pure."

"It's the 'Holy' that puzzles me," he answered, "that's a papist word – 'Holy Church' 'Holy Mary' and that."

"Then I should leave it out. But I tell you what, my dear, choosing these books'll take up a lot of your valuable time, especially if each one's got to be chose separate. You might have to read a lot of them yourself, there's no knowing! And why should you?"

"Why, indeed?" said Mr. Podley. "But I don't see how – "

"Well, I do then, John. It's as simple as A. B. C. You want to establish a library in which there shan't be any wicked books."

"That is so?"

"Yes, my dear. Pure, absolutely pure!"

"Well, then, have them bought for you by an expert – like you do the metal for the pins. You don't buy metal yourself any more. You pay high wages to your buyers to do it. Treat the books the same!"

"There's a good deal in that, dear. But I want to take a *personal* interest in the thing."

"Now don't you worry, John. 'Tis right that we should all be conscientious in what we do, but them as has risen to the head of great businesses haven't any further call to trouble about minor details. I've heard you say it many a time. And so with this library. You're putting down the money for it. You've bought the land and the building is being erected. You've got to pay, and if that isn't taking a personal interest then I'm sure I don't know what is!"

"You advise me? – "

"To go to the best book shop in London – there's that place opposite the Royal Academy that is the King's booksellers. See one of the partners. Explain that you want the library furnished with pure books, state the number you want, and get an estimate of the cost. It's their business to know what books are pure and what aren't – and, besides, at a shop like that, they wouldn't sell any wicked books. It would be beneath them."

Podley had taken his wife's advice. He had "placed an order"

for an initial ten thousand pure volumes with the firm in question, and the thing was done.

The shop in Piccadilly was a very famous shop indeed. It had all the *cachet* of a library of distinction. Its director was a man of letters and an anthologist of repute. The men who actually sold the books were gentlemen of knowledge and taste, invaluable to many celebrated authors, mines of information, and all of them trained bibliophiles.

"Now look here, Lewis," the director said, to one of his assistants, an Oxford man who translated Flaubert and wrote introductions to English editions of Gautier in his spare time, "you've got to fill a library with books."

Mr. Lewis smiled. "Funny thing they should come to us," he said; "I should have thought they would have bought them by the yard, in the Strand. What is it, American millionaire? question of bindings and wall-space?"

"No, not quite," said the director. "It's Mr. Podley, the pin millionaire and philanthropist. He's founding a public library of 'pure literature' in Kensington. The only books he has ever read, apparently, are the books of the Old Testament. He was with me for an hour this morning. Take a week and make a list. He wants ten thousand volumes for a start."

The eyes of Mr. Lewis gleamed. "Certainly!" he said. "It will be quite delightful. It seems almost too good to be true. But will the list be scrutinised before the books are actually bought? Won't this Podley man take another opinion?"

The director shook his head. "He doesn't know any one who could give him one," he answered. "It would only mean engaging another expert, and he's quite satisfied with our credentials. 'Pure books'! Good Lord! I wonder what he thinks he means. I should like to get inside that man's head and poke about for an hour. It would be interesting."

Mr. Lewis provided for the Kensington Institute exactly the library he would have acquired for himself, if he could have afforded it. The result, for all real lovers of books, would have been delightful if any of them had known of it. But the name frightened them away, and they never went there. Members of the general public were also deterred by the name of the Institute – though for quite different reasons – and folk of Mr. Podley's own mental attitude were too illiterate (like him), to want books – "pure" or otherwise – at all.

Podley, again after consultation with his wife, appointed a clerk from the Birmingham pin works as chief librarian. "It won't matter," that shrewd woman had pointed out, "if he knows anything about literature or not! His duties will be to supervise the lending of the books, and a soft job he'll have too!"

A Mr. Hands had been elected, a limpet-like adherent to Podley's particular shibboleth, and a person as anæmic in mind and body as could have been met with in a month of search.

An old naval pensioner and his wife were appointed caretakers, and a lady-typist and sub-librarian was advertised for, at thirty-five shillings a week.

Rita Wallace had obtained the post.

Hardly any one ever came to the library. In the surge and swell of London life it became as remote as an island in the Hebrides. Podley had endowed it – it was the public excuse for the knighthood he purchased in a year from the Liberal Party – and there it was!

Rita Wallace had early taken entire charge and command of her nominal superior – the whiskered and despondent Mr. Hands. The girl frightened and dazzled him. As he might have done at the foot of Etna or Stromboli, he admired, kept at a distance, and accepted the fact that she was there.

The girl was absolute mistress of the solitary building full of beautiful books. Sometimes Hands, whose wife was dying of cancer, and who had no stated times of attendance, stayed away for several days. Snell and his wife – the care-takers – adored her, and she lunched every day with them in the basement.

Mrs. Snell often spoke to her husband about "Miss Rita." "If that there Hands could be got rid of," she would say, "then it would be ever so much better. Poor silly thing that he is, with his face like the underside of a Dover sole! And two hundred a year for doing nothing more than what Miss Rita tells him! He calls her 'Miss' – as I'm sure he should, her being a Commander's daughter and him just a dirty Birmingham clerk! Miss Rita ought to have his two hundred a year, and him her thirty-five shillings a week. Thirty-five shillings! what is it for an officer's daughter, that was born at Malta too! I'd like to give that old Podley a piece

of my mind, I would!"

"In the first place he never comes here. In the second place he's not a gentleman himself, so that don't mean nothing to him," Snell would say on such occasion of talk.

He had been at the Bombardment of Alexandria and could not quite forget it... "Now if it was Lord Charles what had started this – ' – Magneta – ' library, then 'e could 'a' been spoke to – Podley!"

It was four o'clock on the afternoon of the day after the Amberleys' dinner-party. Hands was away, staying beside his sick wife, and Rita Wallace proposed to close the library.

She had just got rid of the curate from a neighbouring church, who had discovered the deserted place – and her. Snubbed with skill the boy had departed, and as no one else would come – or if they did what would it matter? – Rita was about to press the button of the electric bell upon her table and summon Snell.

The afternoon sunlight poured in upon the books from the window in the dome.

The place was cool and absolutely silent, save for the note a straying drone-bee made as his diapason swept this way and that.

Even here, as the sunlight fell upon the dusty gold and crimson of the books, summer was calling. The bee came close to Rita and settled for a moment upon the sulphur-coloured rose that stood in a specimen-glass upon her writing-table.

He was a big fellow, and like an Alderman in a robe of black fur, bearing a gold chain.

"Oh, you darling!" Rita said, thinking of summer and the outside world. She would go to Kensington Palace Gardens where there were trees, green grass and flowers. "Oh, you darling! You're a little jewel with a voice, a bit of the real country! I believe you've actually been droning over the hop-fields of Kent!"

She looked up suddenly, her eyes startled, the perfect mouth parted in vexation. Some one was coming, she might be kept any length of time – for the rare visitors to the Podley Library were generally bores.

.. That silly curate might have returned!

The outer swing doors thudded in the hall, there was the click of a latch as the inner door was pushed open and Gilbert Lothian entered.

The girl recognised him at once, as he made his way under the dome towards her, and her eyes grew wide with wonder. Lothian was wearing a suit of grey flannel, his hair as he took off his straw hat was a little tumbled, his face fresh and clear.

"How do you do," he said, with the half-shy deference that came into his voice when he spoke to women. "It was such a lovely afternoon that I thought I might venture to bring back your copy of 'Surgit Amari' myself."

Rita Wallace flashed her quick, humorous smile at him – the connection between the weather and his wish was not too obvious. But her smile had pleasure of another kind in it also – he had wanted to see her again.

Lothian laughed boyishly. "I wanted to see you again," he said, in the very words of her thought.

The girl was flattered and delighted. There was not the slightest hint of self-consciousness in her manner, and the flush that came into her cheeks was one of pure friendliness.

"It is very kind of you to take so much trouble," she said in a voice as sweet as singing. "I was so disappointed when you had to go away so early from the Amberleys' last night."

She did not say the conventional thing about how much his poems had meant to her. Girls that he met – and they were not many – nearly always did, and he always disliked it. Such things meant nothing when they came as part of ordinary greetings. They jarred upon the poet's sensitive taste and he was pleased and interested to find that this girl said nothing of the sort.

"Well, here's the book," he said, putting it down upon Rita's table. "And I've written in it as you asked. Do you collect autographs then?"

She shook her head. "Oh, dear me no," she answered. "I think it's silly to collect anything that isn't beautiful. But, in a book one values, and with which one has been happy, the author's autograph seems to add to the book's personality. But I hate crazes. There are lots of girls that wait outside stage doors to make popular actors write in their books. Did you know that, Mr. Lothian?"

"No, I didn't! Little donkeys! Hard lines on the actors. Even I get a few albums now and then, and it's a fearful nuisance. I

put off writing in them and they lie about my study until they get quite a battered and dissipated look."

"And then?"

"Oh, I write in them. It would be impolite not to, you know. I have an invaluable formula. I write, 'Dear Madam, I am very sorry to say that I cannot accede to your kind request for an autograph. The practice is one with which I am not in sympathy. Yours very truly, Gilbert Lothian!'"

"That's splendid, Mr. Lothian, better than sending a telegram, as some one did the other day to an importunate girl. They were talking about it last night at the Amberleys' after you left. I suppose that's really what gave me courage to send 'Surgit Amari' by Mr. Dickson Ingworth. Mr. and Mrs. Toftrees said that they always write passages from their novels when they are asked."

"Perhaps that's a good plan," Lothian answered, listening to the "viols in her voice" and not much interested in the minor advertising arts of the Toftrees. What rare maiden was this with whom he was chatting? What had made him come to see her after all? – a mere whim doubtless – but was he not about to reap a very delightful harvest?

For he was conscious of immense pleasure as he stood there talking to her, and there was excitement mingled with the pleasure. It was as though he was advancing upon a landscape, and at every step something fresh and interesting came into view.

"I *did* so dislike Mr. Toftrees and his wife," Rita said with a mischievous little gleam in her eyes.

"Did you?" he asked in surprise. "They seemed very pleasant people I thought."

"I expect that was because you thought nothing whatever about them, Mr. Lothian," she replied.

He realised the absolute truth of the remark in a flash. The novelists had in no way interested him. He had not thought about these people at all – this maiden was a psychologist then! There was something subtly flattering in what she had said. His point of view had interested the girl, she had discovered it, small and unimportant though it was.

"But why did you dislike poor Mr. Toftrees?" he said, with an eminently friendly smile – already an unconscious note of intimacy had been sounded, he was interested to hear why she disliked the man, not the woman.

"He is pompous and insincere," she replied. "He tries to draw attention to his great success, or rather his notoriety, by pretending to despise it. Surely, it would be far more manly to accept the fact frankly, and not to hint that he could be a great artist if he could bring himself to do without a lot of money!"

Lothian wondered what had provoked this little outburst. It was quiveringly sincere, that he saw. His eyes questioned hers.

"It's such dreadful appalling treacle they write! I saw a little flapper in the Tube two days ago, with the Toftrees' latest book – 'Milly Mine.' Her expression was ecstatic!"

"For my part I think that's something to have done, do you know, to have taken that flapper out of the daily tube of her life

into Romance. Heaven with electric lights and plush fittings is better than none at all. I couldn't grudge the flapper her ecstasy, nor Mr. Toftrees his big cheques. I should very much like to see the people in Tubes reading my books – it would be good for them – and to pouch enormous cheques myself – would be good for me! But there must be Toftrees sort of persons now that every one knows how to read!"

"Well, I'll let his work alone," she answered, "but I certainly do dislike him. He was trying to run your work down last night – though we wouldn't let him."

So the secret was out now! Lothian smiled and the quick, enthusiastic girl understood. A little ripple of laughter came from her.

"Yes, that's it," she cried. "He did all he could."

"Did he? Confound him! I wonder why?"

Lothian asked the question with entire simplicity. Subtle-minded and complex as he was, he was incapable of mean thoughts and muddy envy when he was not under the influence of drink.

Poisoned, alas, he was entirely different. All the evil in him rose to the surface. As yet it by no means obscured or overpowered the good, but it became manifest and active.

In the case of this fine intellect and splendid artist, no less than in the worker in the slum or the labourer in the field, drink seemed an actual key to unlock the dark and secret doors of wickedness which are in every heart. Some coiled and sleeping

serpent within him, no less than in them, raised its head into baleful life and sudden enmity of good.

A few nights ago, half intoxicated in a club – intoxicated in mind that is, for he was holding forth with a caustic bitterness and sharp brilliancy that had drawn a crowd around him – he had abused the work of Herbert Toftrees and his wife with contemptuous and venomous words.

He was quite unconscious that he had ever done so. He knew nothing about the couple and had never read a line of their works. The subject had just cropped up somehow, like a bird from a stubble, and he had let fly. It was pure coincidence that he had met the novelists at the Amberleys' and Lothian had entirely forgotten that he had ever mentioned their work at the club.

But the husband and wife had heard of it the next day, as people concerned always do hear these things, and neither of them were likely to forget that their books had been called "as flat as champagne in decanters," their heroines "stuffy" and that compared to even " – " and " – " they had been stigmatised as being as pawn-brokers are to bankers.

Lothian had made two bitter enemies and he had not the slightest suspicion of it.

"I wonder why?" he said again. "I don't know the man. I've never done him any harm that I know of. But of course he has a right to his own opinions, and no doubt he really thinks – "

"He knows nothing whatever about it," Rita answered. "If a man like that reads poetry at all he has to do it in a prose

translation! But I can tell you why – Addison puts it far better than I can. I found the passage the other day. I'll show you."

She was all innocent eagerness and fire, astonishingly sweet and enthusiastic as she hurried to a bookshelf and came back with a volume.

Following her slim finger, he read: —

"There are many passions and tempers of mankind, which naturally dispose us to depress and vilify the merit of one rising in the esteem of mankind.

All those who made their entrance into the world with the same advantages, and were once looked on as his equals, are apt to think the fame of his merits a reflection on their own deserts. Those, who were once his equals, envy and defame him, because they now see him their superior; and those who were once his superiors, because they look upon him as their equal."

The girl was gazing at him in breathless attention, wondering whether she had done the right thing, hoping, indeed, that Lothian would be pleased.

He was both pleased and touched by this lovely eager little champion, so unexpectedly raised up to defend him.

"Thank you very much," he said. "How kind of you! My bruised vanity is now at rest. I am healed of my grievous wound! But this seems quite a good library. Are you here all alone, does nobody ever come here? I always heard that the Podley Library was where the bad books went when they died. Tell me all about

it."

His hand had mechanically slipped into his waistcoat and half withdrawn his cigarette case. He could never be long without smoking and he wanted a cigarette now more than ever. During a whole hour he had not had a drink. A slight suspicion of headache floated at the back of his head, he was conscious of something heavy at his right side.

"Do smoke," she said. "No one minds – there never is any one to mind, and I smoke here myself. Mr. Hands, the head librarian, didn't like it at first but he does what I tell him now. I'm the assistant librarian."

She announced her status with genuine pride and pleasure, being obviously certain that she occupied a far from unimportant position in public affairs.

Lothian was touched at her simplicity. What a child she was really, with all her cleverness and quickness.

He smoked and made her smoke also – "Delicious!" she exclaimed with pretty greediness. "How perfectly sweet to be a man and able to afford Ben Ezra's Number 5."

"How perfectly sweet!" – it was a favourite expression of Rita's. He soon got to know it very well.

He soon got to know all about the library and about her also, as she showed him round.

She was twenty-one, only twenty-one. Her father, a captain in the Navy, had left her just sufficient money for her education, which had been at a first-class school. Then she had had to be

dependent entirely upon her own exertions. She seemed to have no relations and not many friends of importance, and she lived in a tiny three-roomed flat with another girl who was a typist in the city.

She chattered away to him just as if he were a girl friend as they moved among the books, and it was nearly an hour before they left the Library together.

"And now what are you going to do?"

"I must go home, Mr. Lothian," she said with a little sigh. "It has been so kind of you to come and see me. I was going to sit in Kensington Palace Gardens for a little while, but I think I shall go back to the flat now. How hot it is! Oh, for the sea, now, just think of it!"

There was a flat sound in her voice. It lost its animation and timbre. He knew she was sorry to say good-bye to him, rather forlorn now that the stimulus and excitement of their talk was over.

She was lonely, of course. Her pleasures could be but few and far between, and at twenty-one, when the currents of the blood run fast and free, even books cannot provide everything. Thirty-five shillings a week! He had been poor himself in his early journalistic days. It was harder for a girl. He thought of her sitting in Kensington Gardens – the pathetic and solitary pleasure the child had mapped out for herself! He could see the little three-roomed flat in imagination, with its girlish decorations and lack of any real comfort, and some appalling meal presently to be

eaten, bread and jam, a lettuce!

The idea came into his mind in a flash, but he hesitated before speaking. Wouldn't she be angry if he asked her? He'd only met her twice, she was a lady. Then he decided to risk it.

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