

Nesbit Edith

The Literary Sense



ЭДИТ НЕСБИТ

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E. Nesbit

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THE UNFAITHFUL LOVER

SHE was going to meet her lover. And the fact that she was to meet him at Cannon Street Station would almost, she feared, make the meeting itself banal, sordid. She would have liked to meet him in some green, cool orchard, where daffodils swung in the long grass, and primroses stood on frail stiff little pink stalks in the wet, scented moss of the hedgerow. The time should have been May. She herself should have been a poem – a lyric in a white gown and green scarf, coming to him through the long grass under the blossomed boughs. Her hands should have been full of bluebells, and she should have held them up to his face in maidenly defence as he sprang forward to take her in his arms. You see that she knew exactly how a tryst is conducted in the pages of the standard poets and of the cheaper weekly journals. She had, to the full limit allowed of her reading and her environment, the literary sense. When she was a child she never could cry long, because she always wanted to see herself cry, in the glass, and then of course the tears always stopped. Now that she was a young woman she could never be happy long, because she wanted to watch her heart's happiness, and it used to stop then, just as the tears had.

He had asked her to meet him at Cannon Street; he had something to say to her, and at home it was difficult to get a quiet half-hour because of her little sisters. And, curiously enough, she was hardly curious at all about what he might have to say. She only wished for May and the orchard, instead of January and the dingy, dusty waiting-room, the plain-faced, preoccupied travellers, the dim, desolate weather. The setting of the scene seemed to her all-important. Her dress was brown, her jacket black, and her hat was home-trimmed. Yet she looked entrancingly pretty to him as he came through the heavy swing-doors. He would hardly have known her in green and white muslin and an orchard, for their love had been born and bred in town – Highbury New Park, to be exact. He came towards her; he was five minutes late. She had grown anxious, as the one who waits always does, and she was extremely glad to see him, but she knew that a late lover should be treated with a provoking coldness (one can relent prettily later on), so she gave him a limp hand and no greeting.

"Let's go out," he said. "Shall we walk along the Embankment, or go somewhere on the Underground?"

It was bitterly cold, but the Embankment was more romantic than a railway carriage. He ought to insist on the railway carriage: he probably would. So she said —

"Oh, the Embankment, please!" and felt a sting of annoyance and disappointment when he acquiesced.

They did not speak again till they had gone through the little back streets, past the police station and the mustard factory, and were on the broad pavement of Queen Victoria Street.

He had been late: he had offered no excuse, no explanation. She had done the proper thing; she had awaited these with dignified reserve, and now she was involved in the meshes of a silence that she could not break. How easy it would have been in the orchard! She could have snapped off a blossoming branch and – and made play with it somehow. Then he would have had to say something. But here – the only thing that occurred to her was to stop and look in one of the shops till he should ask her what she was looking at. And how common and mean that would be compared with the blossoming bough; and besides, the shops they were passing had nothing in the windows except cheap pastry and models of steam-engines.

Why on earth didn't he speak? He had never been like this before. She stole a glance at him, and for the first time it occurred to her that his "something to say" was not a mere excuse for being

alone with her. He had something to say – something that was trying to get itself said. The keen wind thrust itself even inside the high collar of her jacket. Her hands and feet were aching with cold. How warm it would have been in the orchard!

"I'm freezing," she said suddenly; "let's go and have some tea."

"Of course, if you like," he said uncomfortably; yet she could see he was glad that she had broken that desolate silence.

Seated at a marble table – the place was nearly empty – she furtively watched his face in the glass, and what she saw there thrilled her. Some great sorrow had come to him. And she had been sulking! The girl in the orchard would have known at a glance. *She* would gently, tenderly, with infinite delicacy and the fine tact of a noble woman, have drawn his secret from him. She would have shared his sorrow, and shown herself "half wife, half angel from heaven" in this dark hour. Well, it was not too late. She could begin now. But how? He had ordered the tea, and her question was still unanswered. Yet she must speak. When she did her words did not fit the mouth of the girl in the orchard – but then it would have been May there, and this was January. She said —

"How frightfully cold it is!"

"Yes, isn't it?" he said.

The fine tact of a noble woman seemed to have deserted her. She resisted a little impulse to put her hand in his under the marble table, and to say, "What is it, dearest? Tell me all about it. I can't bear to see you looking so miserable," and there was another silence.

The waitress brought the two thick cups of tea, and looked at him with a tepid curiosity. As soon as the two were alone again he leaned his elbows on the marble and spoke.

"Look here, darling, I've got something to tell you, and I hope to God you'll forgive me and stand by me, and try to understand that I love you just the same, and whatever happens I shall always love you."

This preamble sent a shiver of dread down her spine. What had he done – a murder – a bank robbery – married someone else?

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she would stand by him whatever he had done; but if he had married someone else this would be improper, so she only said, "Well?" and she said it coldly.

"Well – I went to the Simpsons' dance on Tuesday – oh, why weren't you there, Ethel? – and there was a girl in pink, and I danced three or four times with her – she was rather like you, side-face – and then, after supper, in the conservatory, I – I talked nonsense – but only a very little, dear – and she kept looking at me so – as if she expected me to – to – and so I kissed her. And yesterday I had a letter from her, and she seems to expect – to think – and I thought I ought to tell you, darling. Oh, Ethel, do try to forgive me! I haven't answered her letter."

"Well?" she said.

"That's all," said he, miserably stirring his tea.

She drew a deep breath. A shock of unbelievable relief tingled through her. So that was all! What was it, compared with her fears? She almost said, "Never mind, dear. It was hateful of you, and I wish you hadn't, but I know you're sorry, and I'm sorry; but I forgive you, and we'll forget it, and you'll never do it again." But just in time she remembered that nice girls must not take these things too lightly. What opinion would he form of the purity of her mind, the innocence of her soul, if an incident like this failed to shock her deeply? He himself was evidently a prey to the most rending remorse. He had told her of the thing as one tells of a crime. As the confession of a crime she must receive it. How should she know that he had only told her because he feared that she would anyhow hear it through the indiscretion of the girl in pink, or of that other girl in blue who had seen and smiled? How could she guess that he had tuned his confession to the key of what he believed would be an innocent girl's estimate of his misconduct?

Following the tingle of relief came a sharp, sickening pinch of jealousy and mortification. These inspired her.

"I don't wonder you were afraid to tell me," she began. "You don't love me – you've never loved me – I was an idiot to believe you did."

"You know I do," he said; "it was hateful of me – but I couldn't help it."

Those four true words wounded her more than all the rest.

"Couldn't help it? Then how can I ever trust you? Even if we were married I could never be sure you weren't kissing some horrid girl or other. No – it's no use – I can never, never forgive you – and it's all over. And I *believed* in you so, and trusted you – I thought you were the soul of honour."

He could not say, "And so I am, on the whole," which was what he thought. Her tears were falling hot and fast between face and veil, for she had talked till she was very sorry indeed for herself.

"Forgive me, dear," he said.

Then she rose to the occasion. "Never," she said, her eyes flashing through her tears. "You've deceived me once – you'd do it again! No, it's all over – you've broken my heart and destroyed my faith in human nature. I hope I shall never see you again. Some day you'll understand what you've done, and be sorry!"

"Do you think I'm not sorry now?"

She wished that they were at home, and not in this horrible tea-shop, under the curious eyes of the waitresses. At home she could at least have buried her face in the sofa cushions and resisted all his pleading, – at last, perhaps, letting him take one cold passive hand and shower frantic kisses upon it.

He would come to-morrow, however, and then – At present the thing to compass was a dignified parting.

"Good-bye," she said; "I'm going home. And it's good-bye for ever. No – it's only painful for both of us. There's no more to be said; you've betrayed me. I didn't think a decent man could do such things." She was pulling on her gloves. "Go home and gloat over it all! And that poor girl – you've broken *her* heart too." This really was a master stroke of nobility.

He stood up suddenly. "Do you mean it?" he said, and his tone should have warned her. "Are you really going to throw me over for a thing like this?"

The anger in his eyes frightened her, and the misery of his face wrung her heart; but how could she say —

"No, of course I'm not! I'm only talking as I know good girls ought to talk?"

So she said —

"Yes. Good-bye!"

He stood up suddenly. "Then good-bye," he said, "and may God forgive you as I do!" And he strode down between the marble tables and out by the swing-door. It was a very good exit. At the corner he remembered that he had gone away without paying for the tea, and his natural impulse was to go back and remedy that error. And if he had they would certainly have made it up. But how could he go back to say, "We are parting for ever; but still, I must insist on the sad pleasure of paying for our tea – for the last time"? He checked the silly impulse. What was tea, and the price of tea, in this cataclysmic overthrowing of the Universe? So she waited for him in vain, and at last paid for the tea herself, and went home to wait there – and there, too, in vain, for he never came back to her. He loved her with all his heart, and he, also, had what she had never suspected in him – the literary sense. Therefore he, never dreaming that the literary sense had inspired her too, perceived that to the jilted lover two courses only are possible – suicide or "the front." So he enlisted, and went to South Africa, and he never came home covered with medals and glory, which was rather his idea, to the few simple words of explanation that would have made all straight, and repaid her and him for all the past. Because Destiny is almost without the literary sense, and Destiny carelessly decreed that he should die of enteric in a wretched hut, without so much as hearing a gun fired. Literary to the soul, she has taken no other lover, but mourns him faithfully to this hour. Yet perhaps, after all, that is not because of the literary sense. It may be because she loved him. I think I have not mentioned before that she did love him.

ROUNDING OFF A SCENE

A SOFT rain was falling. Umbrellas swayed and gleamed in the light of the street lamps. The brightness of the shop windows reflected itself in the muddy mirror of the wet pavements. A miserable night, a dreary night, a night to tempt the wretched to the glimmering Embankment, and thence to the river, hardly wetter or cleaner than the gutters of the London streets. Yet the sight of these same streets was like wine in the veins to a man who drove through them in a hansom piled with Gladstone bags and P. and O. trunks. He leaned over the apron of the hansom and looked eagerly, longingly, lovingly, at every sordid detail: the crowd on the pavement, its haste as intelligible to him as the rush of ants when their hill is disturbed by the spade; the glory and glow of corner public-houses; the shifting dance of the gleaming wet umbrellas. It was England, it was London, it was home – and his heart swelled till he felt it in his throat. After ten years – the dream realised, the longing appeased. London – and all was said.

His cab, delayed by a red newspaper cart, jammed in altercation with a dray full of brown barrels, paused in Cannon Street. The eyes that drank in the scene perceived a familiar face watching on the edge of the pavement for a chance to cross the road under the horses' heads – the face of one who ten years ago had been the slightest of acquaintances. Now time and home-longing juggled with memory till the face seemed that of a friend. To meet a friend – this did, indeed, round off the scene of the home-coming. The man in the cab threw back the doors and leapt out. He crossed under the very nose-bag of a stationed dray horse. He wrung the friend – last seen as an acquaintance – by the hand. The friend caught fire at the contact. Any passer-by, who should have been spared a moment for observation by the cares of umbrella and top-hat, had surely said, "Damon and Pythias!" and gone onward smiling in sympathy with friends long severed and at last reunited.

The little scene ended in a cordial invitation from the impromptu Damon, on the pavement, to Pythias, of the cab, to a little dance that evening at Damon's house, out Sydenham way. Pythias accepted with enthusiasm, though at his normal temperature, he was no longer a dancing man. The address was noted, hands clasped again with strenuous cordiality, and Pythias regained his hansom. It set him down at the hotel from which ten years before he had taken cab to Fenchurch Street Station. The menu of his dinner had been running in his head, like a poem, all through the wet shining streets. He ordered, therefore, without hesitation —

Ox-tail Soup.
Boiled Cod and Oyster Sauce.
Roast Beef and Horse-radish.
Boiled Potatoes. Brussels Sprouts.
Cabinet Pudding.
Stilton. Celery.

The cabinet pudding was the waiter's suggestion. Anything that called itself "pudding" would have pleased as well. He dressed hurriedly, and when the soup and the wine card appeared together before him he ordered draught bitter – a pint.

"And bring it in a tankard," said he.

The drive to Sydenham was, if possible, a happier dream than had been the drive from Fenchurch Street to Charing Cross. There were many definite reasons why he should have been glad to be in England, glad to leave behind him the hard work of his Indian life, and to settle down as a landed proprietor. But he did not think definite thoughts. The whole soul and body of the man were filled and suffused by the glow that transfuses the blood of the schoolboy at the end of the term.

The lights, the striped awning, the red carpet of the Sydenham house thrilled and charmed him. Park Lane could have lent them no further grace – Belgrave Square no more subtle witchery. This was England, England, England!

He went in. The house was pretty with lights and flowers. There was music. The soft-carpeted stair seemed air as he trod it. He met his host – was led up to girls in blue and girls in pink, girls in satin and girls in silk-muslin – wrote brief *précis* of their toilets on his programme. Then he was brought face to face with a tall dark-haired woman in white. His host's voice buzzed in his ears, and he caught only the last words – "old friends." Then he was left staring straight into the eyes of the woman who ten years ago had been the light of his: the woman who had jilted him, his vain longing for whom had been the spur to drive him out of England.

"May I have another?" was all he found to say after the bow, the conventional request, and the scrawling of two programmes.

"Yes," she said, and he took two more.

The girls in pink, and blue, and silk, and satin found him a good but silent dancer. On the opening bars of the eighth waltz he stood before her. Their steps went together like song and tune, just as they had always done. And the touch of her hand on his arm thrilled through him in just the old way. He had, indeed, come home.

There were definite reasons why he should have pleaded a headache or influenza, or any lie, and have gone away before his second dance with her. But the charm of the situation was too great. The whole thing was so complete. On his very first evening in England – to meet her! He did not go, and half-way through their second dance he led her into the little room, soft-curtained, soft-cushioned, soft-lighted, at the bend of the staircase.

Here they sat silent, and he fanned her, and he assured himself once more that she was more beautiful than ever. Her hair, which he had known in short, fluffy curls, lay in soberly waved masses, but it was still bright and dark, like a chestnut fresh from the husk. Her eyes were the same as of old, and her hands. Her mouth only had changed. It was a sad mouth now, in repose – and he had known it so merry. Yet he could not but see that its sadness added to its beauty. The lower lip had been, perhaps, too full, too flexible. It was set now, not in sternness, but in a dignified self-control. He had left a Greuze girl – he found a Madonna of Bellini. Yet those were the lips he had kissed – the eyes that —

The silence had grown to the point of embarrassment. She broke it, with his eyes on her.

"Well," she said, "tell me all about yourself."

"There's nothing much to tell. My cousin's dead, and I'm a full-fledged squire with estates and things. I've done with the gorgeous East, thank God! But you – tell me about yourself."

"What shall I tell you?" She had taken the fan from him, and was furling and unfurling it.

"Tell me" – he repeated the words slowly – "tell me the truth! It's all over – nothing matters now. But I've always been – well – curious. Tell me why you threw me over!"

He yielded, without even the form of a struggle, to the impulse which he only half understood. What he said was true: he *had* been – well – curious. But it was long since anything alive, save vanity, which is immortal, had felt the sting of that curiosity. But now, sitting beside this beautiful woman who had been so much to him, the desire to bridge over the years, to be once more in relations with her outside the conventionalities of a ball-room, to take part with her in some scene, discreet, yet flavoured by the past with a delicate poignancy, came upon him like a strong man armed. It held him, but through a veil, and he did not see its face. If he had seen it, it would have shocked him very much.

"Tell me," he said softly, "tell me now – at last –"

Still she was silent.

"Tell me," he said again; "why did you do it? How was it you found out so very suddenly and surely that we weren't suited to each other – that was the phrase, wasn't it?"

"Do you really want to know? It's not very amusing, is it – raking out dead fires?"

"Yes, I do want to know. I've wanted it every day since," he said earnestly.

"As you say – it's all ancient history. But you used not to be stupid. Are you sure the real reason never occurred to you?"

"Never! What was it? Yes, I know: the next waltz is beginning. Don't go. Cut him, whoever he is, and stay here and tell me. I think I have a right to ask that of you."

"Oh – rights!" she said. "But it's quite simple. I threw you over, as you call it, because I found out you didn't care for me."

"I– not care for *you*?"

"Exactly."

"But even so – if you believed it – but how could you? Even so – why not have told me – why not have given me a chance?" His voice trembled.

Hers was firm.

"I *was* giving you a chance, and I wanted to make sure that you would take it. If I'd just said, 'You don't care for me,' you'd have said, 'Oh, yes I do!' And we should have been just where we were before."

"Then it wasn't that you were tired of me?"

"Oh, no," she said sedately, "it wasn't that!"

"Then you – did you really care for me still, even when you sent back the ring and wouldn't see me, and went to Germany, and wouldn't open my letters, and all the rest of it?"

"Oh, yes!" – she laughed lightly – "I loved you frightfully all that time. It does seem odd now to look back on it, doesn't it? but I nearly broke my heart over you."

"Then why the devil – "

"You mustn't swear," she interrupted; "I never heard you do that before. Is it the Indian climate?"

"Why did you send me away?" he repeated.

"Don't I keep telling you?" Her tone was impatient. "I found out you didn't care, and – and I'd always despised people who kept other people when they wanted to go. And I knew you were too honourable, generous, soft-hearted – what shall I say? – to go for your own sake, so I thought, for your sake, I would make you believe you were to go for mine."

"So you lied to me?"

"Not exactly. We *weren't* suited – since you didn't love me."

"I didn't love you?" he echoed again.

"And somehow I'd always wanted to do something really noble, and I never had the chance. So I thought if I set you free from a girl you didn't love, and bore the blame myself, it *would* be rather noble. And so I did it."

"And did the consciousness of your own nobility sustain you comfortably?" The sneer was well sneered.

"Well – not for long," she admitted. "You see, I began to doubt after a while whether it was really *my* nobleness after all. It began to seem like some part in a play that I'd learned and played – don't you know that sort of dreams where you seem to be reading a book and acting the story in the book at the same time? It was a little like that now and then, and I got rather tired of myself and my nobleness, and I wished I'd just told you, and had it all out with you, and both of us spoken the truth and parted friends. That was what I thought of doing at first. But then it wouldn't have been noble! And I really did want to be noble – just as some people want to paint pictures, or write poems, or climb Alps. Come, take me back to the ball-room. It's cold here in the Past."

But how could he let the curtain be rung down on a scene half finished, and so good a scene?

"Ah, no! tell me," he said, laying his hand on hers; "why did you think I didn't love you?"

"I knew it. Do you remember the last time you came to see me? We quarrelled – we were always quarrelling – but we always made it up. That day we made it up as usual, but you were still

a little bit angry when you went away. And then I cried like a fool. And then you came back, and – you remember – "

"Go on," he said. He had bridged the ten years, and the scene was going splendidly. "Go on; you must go on."

"You came and knelt down by me," she said cheerfully. "It was as good as a play – you took me in your arms and told me you couldn't bear to leave me with the slightest cloud between us. You called me your heart's dearest, I remember – a phrase you'd never used before – and you said such heaps of pretty things to me! And at last, when you had to go, you swore we should never quarrel again – and that came true, didn't it?"

"Ah, but *why*?"

"Well, as you went out I saw you pick up your gloves off the table, and I *knew*– "

"Knew what?"

"Why, that it was the gloves you had come back for and not me – only when you saw me crying you were sorry for me, and determined to do your duty whatever it cost you. Don't! What's the matter?"

He had caught her wrists in his hands and was scowling angrily at her.

"Good God! was *that* all? I *did* come back for you. I never thought of the damned gloves. I don't remember them. If I did pick them up, it must have been mechanically and without noticing. And you ruined my life for *that*?"

He was genuinely angry; he was back in the past, where he had a right to be angry with her. Her eyes grew soft.

"Do you mean to say that I was *wrong*– that it was all my fault – that you *did* love me?"

"Love you?" he said roughly, throwing her hands from him; "of course I loved you – I shall always love you. I've never left off loving you. It was you who didn't love me. It was all your fault."

He leaned his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands. He was breathing quickly. The scene had swept him along in its quickening flow. He shut his eyes, and tried to catch at something to steady himself – some rope by which he could pull himself to land again. Suddenly an arm was laid on his neck, a face laid against his face. Lips touched his hand, and her voice, incredibly softened and tuned to the key of their love's overture, spoke —

"Oh, forgive me, dear, forgive me! If you love me still – it's too good to be true – but if you do – ah, you do! – forgive me, and we can forget it all! Dear, forgive me! I love you so!"

He was quite still, quite silent.

"Can't you forgive me?" she began again. He suddenly stood up.

"I'm married," he said. He drew a long breath and went on hurriedly, standing before her, but not looking at her. "I can't ask you to forgive me – I shall never forgive myself."

"It doesn't matter," she said, and she laughed; "I – I wasn't serious. I saw you were trying to play the old comedy, and I thought I had better play up to you. If I'd known you were married – but it was only your glove, and we're such old acquaintances! There's another dance beginning. Please go – I've no doubt my partner will find me."

He bowed, gave her one glance, and went. Halfway down the stairs he turned and came back. She was still sitting as he had left her. The angry eyes she raised to him were full of tears. She looked as she had looked ten years before, when he had come back to her, and the cursed gloves had spoiled everything. He hated himself. Why had he played with fire and raised this ghost to vex her? It had been such pretty fire, and such a beautiful ghost. But she had been hurt – he had hurt her. She would blame herself now for that old past; as for the new past, so lately the present, it would not bear thinking of.

The scene must be rounded off somehow. He had let her wound her pride, her self-respect. He must heal them. The light touch would be best.

"Look here," he said, "I just wanted to tell you that I knew you weren't serious just now. As you say, it was nothing between two such old friends. And – and – " He sought about for some further consolation. Ill-inspired, with the touch of her lips still on his hand, he said, "And about the gloves. Don't blame yourself about that. It was not your fault. You were perfectly right. It *was* the gloves I came back for."

He left her then, and next day journeyed to Scotland to rejoin his wife, of whom he was, by habit, moderately fond. He still keeps the white glove she kissed, and at first reproached himself whenever he looked at it. But now he only sentimentalises over it now and then, if he happens to be a little under the weather. He feels that his foolish behaviour at that Sydenham dance was almost atoned for by the nobility with which he lied to spare her, the light, delicate touch with which he rounded off the scene.

He certainly did round it off. By a few short, easy words he accomplished three things. He destroyed an ideal of himself which she had cherished for years; he killed a pale bud of hope which she had loved to nurse – the hope that perhaps in that old past it had been she who was to blame, and not he, whom she loved; he trampled in the mud the living rose which would have bloomed her life long, the belief that he had loved, did love her – the living rose that would have had magic to quench the fire of shame kindled by that unasked kiss, a fire that frets for ever like hell-fire, burning, but not consuming, her self-respect.

He did, without doubt, round off the scene.

THE OBVIOUS

HE had the literary sense, but he had it as an inverted instinct. He had a keen perception of the dramatically fitting in art, but no counteracting vision of the fitting in life. Life and art, indeed, he found from his earliest years difficult to disentwine, and later, impossible to disentangle. And to disentangle and disentwine them became at last the point of honour to him.

He first knew that he loved her on the occasion of her "coming of age party." His people and hers lived in the same sombre London square: their Haslemere gardens were divided only by a sunk fence. He had known her all his life. Her coming of age succeeded but by a couple of days his return from three years of lazy philosophy – study in Germany – and the sight of her took his breath away. In the time-honoured *cliché* of the hurried novelist – too hurried to turn a new phrase for an idea as old as the new life of spring – he had left a child: he found a woman. She wore a soft satiny-white gown, that showed gleams of rose colour through its folds. There were pink hollyhock blossoms in the bright brown of her hair. Her eyes were shining with the excitement of this festival of which she was the goddess. He lost his head, danced with her five times, and carried away a crumpled hollyhock bloom that had fallen from her hair during the last Lancers, through which he had watched her. All his dances with her had been waltzes. It was not till, alone again at his hotel, he pulled out the hollyhock flower with his ball programme that he awoke to a complete sense of the insipid flatness of the new situation.

He had fallen in love – was madly *épris*, at any rate – and the girl was the girl whose charms, whose fortune, whose general suitability as a match for him had been dinned into his ears ever since he was a callow boy at Oxford, and she a long-black-silk-legged, short-frocked tom-boy of fourteen. Everyone had always said that it was the obvious thing. And now he had, for once, done exactly what was expected of him, and his fine literary sense revolted. The worst of all was that she seemed not quite to hate him. Better, a thousand times better, that he should have loved and longed, and never won a smile from her – that he should have sacrificed something, anything, and gone his lonely way. But she had smiled on him, undoubtedly she had smiled, and he did not want to play the part so long ago assigned to him by his people. He wanted to be Sidney Carton. Darnay's had always seemed to him the inferior rôle.

Yet he could not keep his thoughts from her, and for what was left of the year his days and nights were a restless see-saw of longing and repulsion, advance and retreat. His moods were reflected in hers, but always an interview later; that is to say, if he were cold on Tuesday she on Thursday would be colder. If on Thursday he grew earnest, Sunday would find her kind. But he, by that time, was frigid. So that they never, after the first wildly beautiful evening when their hearts went out to each other in a splendour of primitive frankness, met in moods that chimed.

This safe-guarded him. It irritated her. And it most successfully bewitched them both.

His people and her people looked on, and were absolutely and sadly convinced that – as her brother put it to his uncle – it was "no go." Thereupon, a certain young-old cotton broker appearing on the scene and bringing gifts with him, her people began to put pressure on her. She loathed the cotton-broker, and said so. One afternoon everyone was by careful accident got out of the way, and the cotton-broker caught her alone. That night there was a scene. Her father talked a little too much of obedience and of duty, her mother played the hysterical symphony with the loud pedal hard down, and next morning the girl had vanished, leaving the conventional note of farewell on the pincushion.

Now the two families, being on all accounts close allies, had bought jointly a piece of land near the Littlestone golf links, and on it had built a bungalow, occupied by members of either house in turn, according to any friendly arrangement that happened to commend itself. But at this time of the year folk were keeping Christmas season dismally in their town houses.

It was on the day when the cotton-broker made his failure that the whole world seemed suddenly worthless to the man with the hollyhock bloom in his pocket-book, because he had met her at a dance,

and he had been tender, but she, reflecting his mood of their last meeting, had been glacial. So he lied roundly to his people, and told them that he was going to spend a week or two with an old chum who was staying up for the vacation at Cambridge, and instead, he chose the opposite point of the compass, and took train to New Romney, and walked over to the squat, one-storied bungalow near the sea. Here he let himself in with the family latch-key, and set to work, with the help of a box from the stores, borne behind him with his portmanteau on a hand-cart, to keep Christmas by himself. This, at least, was not literary. It was not in the least what a person in a book would do. He lit a fire in the dining-room, and the chimney was damp and smoked abominably, so that when he had fed full on tinned meats he was fain to let the fire go out and to sit in his fur-lined overcoat by the be-cindered grate, now fast growing cold, and smoke pipe after pipe of gloomy reflection. He thought of it all. The cursed countenance which his people were ready to give to the match that he couldn't make – her maddening indecisions – his own idiotic variableness. He had lighted the lamp, but it smelt vilely, and he blew it out, and did not light candles because it was too much trouble. So the early winter dusk deepened into night, and the bitter north wind had brought the snow, and it drifted now in feather-soft touches against the windows.

He thought of the good warm dining-room in Russell Square – of the gathering of aunts and uncles and cousins, uncongenial, perhaps, but still human, and he shivered in his fur-lined coat and his icy solitude, damning himself for the fool he knew he was.

And even as he damned, his breath was stopped, and his heart leaped at the sound, faint but unmistakable, of a key in the front door. If a man exist not too remote from his hairy ancestors to have lost the habit of the pricking ear, he was that man. He pricked his ears, so far as the modern man may, and listened.

The key grated in the lock – grated and turned; the door was opened, and banged again. Something was set down in the little passage, set down thumpingly and wholly without precaution. He heard a hand move along the partition of match-boarding. He heard the latch of the kitchen door rise and fall – and he heard the scrape and spurt of a struck match.

He sat still. He would catch this burglar red-handed.

Through the ill-fitting partitions of the jerry-built bungalow he could hear the intruder moving recklessly in the kitchen. The legs of chairs and tables grated on the brick floor. He took off his shoes, rose, and crept out through the passage towards the kitchen door. It stood ajar. A clear-cut slice of light came from it. Treading softly in his stockinged feet, he came to it and looked in. One candle, stuck in a tea-saucer, burned on the table. A weak blue-and-yellow glimmer came from some sticks in the bottom of the fireplace.

Kneeling in front of this, breathless with the endeavour to blow the damp sticks to flame, crouched the burglar. A woman. A girl. She had laid aside hat and cloak. The first sight of her was like a whirlwind sweeping over heart and brain. For the bright brown hair that the candle-light lingered in was like Her dear brown hair – and when she rose suddenly, and turned towards the door, his heart stood still, for it was She – her very self.

She had not seen him. He retreated, in all the stillness his tortured nerves allowed, and sat down again in the fur coat and the dining-room. She had not heard him. He was, for some moments, absolutely stunned, then he crept to the window. In the poignant stillness of the place he could hear the heavy flakes of snow dabbing softly at the glass.

She was here. She, like him, had fled to this refuge, confident in its desertion at this season by both the families who shared a right to it. She was there – he was there. Why had she fled? The question did not wait to be answered; it sank before the other question. What was he to do? The whole literary soul of the man cried out against either of the obvious courses of action.

"I can go in," he said, "and surprise her, and tell her I love her, and then walk out with dignified propriety, and leave her alone here. That's conventional and dramatic. Or I can sneak off without her knowing I've been here at all, and leave her to spend the night unprotected in this infernal frozen dog-

hutch. That's conventional enough, heaven knows! But what's the use of being a reasonable human being with free-will if you can't do anything but the literarily and romantically obvious?"

Here a sudden noise thrilled him. Next moment he drew a long breath of relief. She had but dropped a gridiron. As it crashed and settled down with a rhythmic rattle on the kitchen flags, the thought flowed through him like a river of Paradise. "If she did love me – if I loved her – what an hour and what a moment this would be!"

Meantime she, her hands helpless with cold, was dropping clattering gridirons not five yards from him.

Suppose he went out to the kitchen and suddenly announced himself!

How flat – how obvious!

Suppose he crept quietly away and went to the inn at New Romney!

How desperately flat! How more than obvious!

Suppose he – but the third course refused itself to the desperate clutch of his drowning imagination, and left him clinging to the bare straw of a question. What should he do?

Suddenly the really knightly and unconventional idea occurred to him, an idea that would save him from the pit of the obvious, yawning on each side.

There was a bicycle shed, where, also, wood was stored and coal, and lumber of all sorts. He would pass the night there, warm in his fur coat, and his determination not to let his conduct be shaped by what people in books would have done. And in the morning – strong with the great renunciation of all the possibilities that this evening's meeting held – he would come and knock at the front door – just like anybody else – and —*qui vivra verra*. At least, he would be watching over her rest – and would be able to protect the house from tramps.

Very gently and cautiously, all in the dark, he pushed his bag behind the sofa, covered the stores box with a liberty cloth from a side table, crept out softly, and softly opened the front door; it opened softly, that is, but it shut with an unmistakable click that stung in his ears as he stood on one foot on the snowy doorstep struggling with the knots of his shoe laces.

The bicycle shed was uncompromisingly dark, and smelt of coal sacks and paraffin. He found a corner – between the coals and the wood – and sat down on the floor.

"Bother the fur coat," was his answer to the doubt whether coal dust and broken twigs were a good down-setting for that triumph of the Bond Street art. There he sat, full of a chastened joy at the thought that he watched over her – that he, sleepless, untiring, was on guard, ready, at an instant's warning, to spring to her aid, should she need protection. The thought was mightily soothing. The shed was cold. The fur coat was warm. In five minutes he was sleeping peacefully as any babe.

When he awoke it was with the light of a big horn lantern in his eyes, and in his ears the snapping of wood.

She was there – stooping beside the heaped faggots, breaking off twigs to fill the lap of her up-gathered blue gown; the shimmery silk of her petticoat gleamed greenly. He was partly hidden by a derelict bicycle and a watering-can.

He hardly dared to draw breath.

Composedly she broke the twigs. Then like a flash she turned towards him.

"Who's there?" she said.

An inspiration came to him – and this, at least, was not flat or obvious. He writhed into the darkness behind a paraffin cask, slipped out of his fur coat, and plunged his hands in the dust of the coal.

"Don't be 'ard on a pore cove, mum," he mumbled, desperately rubbing the coal dust on to his face; "you wouldn't go for to turn a dawg out on a night like this, let alone a pore chap outer work!"

Even as he spoke he admired the courage of the girl. Alone, miles from any other house, she met a tramp in an outhouse as calmly as though he had been a fly in the butter.

"You've no business here, you know," she said briskly. "What did you come for?"

"Shelter, mum – I won't take nothing as don't belong to me – not so much as a lump of coal, mum, not if it was ever so!"

She turned her head. He almost thought she smiled.

"But I can't have tramps sleeping here," she said.

"It's not as if I was a reg'lar tramp," he said, warming to his part as he had often done on the stage in his A.D.C. days. "I'm a respectable working-man, mum, as 'as seen better days."

"Are you hungry?" she said. "I'll give you something to eat before you go if you'll come to the door in five minutes."

He could not refuse – but when she was gone into the house he could bolt. So he said —

"Now may be the blessing! It's starving I am, mum, and on Christmas Eve!"

This time she did smile: it was beyond a doubt. He had always thought her smile charming. She turned at the door, and her glance followed the lantern's rays as they pierced the darkness where he crouched.

The moment he heard the house door shut, he sprang up, and lifted the fur coat gingerly to the wood-block. Flight, instant flight! Yet how could he present himself at New Romney with a fur coat and a face like a collier's? He had drawn a bucket of water from the well earlier in the day; some would be left; it was close by the back door. He tiptoed over the snow and washed, and washed, and washed. He was drying face and hands with a pocket-handkerchief that seemed strangely small and cold when the door opened suddenly, and there, close by him, was she, silhouetted against the warm glow of fire and candles.

"Come in," she said; "you can't possibly see to wash out there."

Before he knew it her hand was on his arm, and she had drawn him to the warmth and light.

He looked at her – but her eyes were on the fire.

"I'll give you some warm water, and you can wash at the sink," she said, closing the door and taking the kettle from the fire.

He caught sight of his face in the square of looking-glass over the sink tap.

Was it worth while to go on pretending? Yet his face was still very black. And she evidently had not recognised him. Perhaps – surely she would have the good taste to retire while the tramp washed, so that he could take his coat off? Then he could take flight, and the situation would be saved from absolute farce.

But when she had poured the hot water into a bowl she sat down in the Windsor chair by the fire and gazed into the hot coals.

He washed.

He washed till he was quite clean.

He dried face and hands on the rough towel.

He dried them till they were scarlet and shone. But he dared not turn around.

There seemed no way out of this save by the valley of humiliation. Still she sat looking into the fire.

As he washed he saw with half a retroverted eye the round table spread with china and glass and silver.

"As I live – it's set for two!" he told himself. And, in an instant, jealousy answered, once and for all, the questions he had been asking himself since August.

"Aren't you clean yet?" she said at last.

How could he speak?

"Aren't you clean *yet*?" she repeated, and called him by his name. He turned then quickly enough. She was leaning back in the chair laughing at him.

"How did you know me?" he asked angrily.

"Your tramp-voice might have deceived me," she said, "you did do it most awfully well! But, you see, I'd been looking at you for ages before you woke."

"Then good night," said he.

"Good night!" said she; "but it's not seven yet!"

"You're expecting someone," he said, pointing dramatically to the table.

"Oh, *that!*" she said; "yes – that was for – for the poor man as had seen better days! There's nothing but eggs – but I couldn't turn a dog from my door on such a night – till I'd fed it!"

"Do you really mean – ?"

"Why not?"

"It's glorious!"

"It's a picnic."

"But?" said he.

"Oh – well! Go if you like!" said she.

It was not only eggs: it was all sorts of things from that stores box. They ate, and they talked. He told her that he had been bored in town and had sought relief in solitude. That, she told him, was her case also. He told her how he had heard her come in, and how he had hated to take either the obvious course of following her to the kitchen, saying "How do you do?" and retiring to New Romney; or the still more obvious course of sneaking away without asking her how she did. And he told her how he had decided to keep watch over her from the bicycle shed. And how the coal-black inspiration had come to him. And she laughed.

"That was much more literary than anything else you could have thought of," said she; "it was exactly like a book. And oh – you've no idea how funny you looked."

They both laughed, and there was a silence.

"Do you know," he said, "I can hardly believe that this is the first meal we've ever had alone together? It seems as though –"

"It *is* funny," she said, smiling hurriedly at him.

He did not smile. He said: "I want you to tell me why you were so angel-good – why did you let me stay? Why did you lay the pretty table for two?"

"Because we've never been in the same mood at the same time," she said desperately; "and somehow I thought we should be this evening."

"What mood?" he asked inexorably.

"Why – jolly – cheerful," she said, with the slightest possible hesitation.

"I see."

There was another silence. Then she said in a voice that fluttered a little —

"My old governess, Miss Pettingill – you remember old Pet? Well, she's coming by the train that gets in at three. I wired to her from town. She ought to be here by now –"

"Ought she?" he cried, pushing back his chair and coming towards her – "ought she? Then, by heaven! before she comes I'm going to tell you something –"

"No, don't!" she cried. "You'll spoil everything. Go and sit down again. You shall! I insist! Let *me* tell *you*! I always swore I would some day!"

"Why?" said he, and sat down.

"Because I knew *you'd* never make up your mind to tell *me* –"

"To tell you what?"

"*Anything*– for fear you should have to say it in the same way someone else had said it before!"

"Said what?"

"Anything! Sit still! Now *I'm* going to tell *you*."

She came slowly round the table and knelt on one knee beside him, her elbows on the arm of his chair.

"You've never had the courage to make up your mind to anything," she began.

"Is that what you were going to tell me?" he asked, and looked in her eyes till she dropped their lids.

"No – yes – no! I haven't anything to tell you really. Good night."

"Aren't you going to tell me?"

"There isn't anything to tell," she said.

"Then I'll tell you," said he.

She started up, and the little brass knocker's urgent summons resounded through the bungalow.

"Here she is!" she cried.

He also sprang to his feet.

"And we haven't told each other anything!" he said.

"Haven't we? Ah, no – don't! Let me go! There – she's knocking again. You must let me go!"

He let her slip through his arms.

At the door she paused to flash a soft, queer smile at him.

"It *was* I who told you, after all!" she said. "Aren't you glad? Because that wasn't a bit literary."

"You didn't. I told you," he retorted.

"Not you!" she said scornfully. "That would have been too obvious."

THE LIE ABSOLUTE

THE tradesmen's books, orderly spread, lay on the rose-wood writing-table, each adorned by its own just pile of gold and silver coin. The books at the White House were paid weekly, and paid in cash. It had always been so. The brown holland blinds were lowered half-way. The lace curtains almost met across the windows. Thus, while, without, July blazed on lawns and paths and borders, in this room a cool twilight reigned. A leisured quiet, an ordered ease, reigned there too, as they had done for every day of Dorothea's thirty-five years. The White House was one of those to which no change comes. None but Death, and Death, however he may have wrung the heart or stunted the soul of the living, had been powerless to change outward seemings. Dorothea had worn a black dress for a while, and she best knew what tears she had wept and for what long months the light of life had gone out of all things. But the tears had not blinded her eyes to the need of a mirror-polish on the old mahogany furniture, and all through those months there had been, at least, the light of duty. The house must be kept as her dead mother had kept it. The three prim maids and the gardener had been "in the family" since Dorothea was a girl of twenty – a girl with hopes and dreams and fond imaginings that, spreading bright wings, wandered over a world far other than this dainty, delicate, self-improving, coldly charitable, unchanging existence. Well, the dreams and the hopes and the fond imaginings had come home to roost. He who had set them flying had gone away: he had gone to see the world. He had not come back. He was seeing it still; and all that was left of a girl's first romance was in certain neat packets of foreign letters in the drawer of the rose-wood table, and in the disciplined soul of the woman who sat before it "doing the books." Monday was the day for this. Every day had its special duties: every duty its special hour. While the mother had stayed there had been love to give life to this life that was hardly life at all. Now the mother was gone it sometimes seemed to Dorothea that she had not lived for these fifteen years – and that even the life before had been less life than a dream of it. She sighed.

"I'm old," she said, "and I'm growing silly."

She put her pen neatly in the inkstand tray: it was an old silver pen, and an old inkstand of Sèvres porcelain. Then she went out into the garden by the French window, muffled in jasmine, and found herself face to face with a stranger, a straight well-set-up man of forty or thereabouts, with iron-grey hair and a white moustache. Before his hand had time to reach the Panama hat she knew him, and her heart leaped up and sank sick and trembling. But she said: —

"To whom have I the pleasure – ?"

The man caught her hands.

"Why, Dolly," he said, "don't you know me? I should have known you anywhere."

A rose-flush deepened on her face.

"It can't be Robert?"

"Can't it? And how are you, Dolly? Everything's just the same – By Jove! the very same heliotropes and pansies in the very same border – and the jasmine and the sundial and everything."

"They tell me the trees have grown," she said. "I like to think it's all the same. Why didn't you tell me you were coming home? Come in."

She led him through the hall with the barometer and the silver-faced clock and the cases of stuffed birds.

"I don't know. I wanted to surprise you – and, by George! I've surprised myself. It's beautiful. It's all just as it used to be, Dolly."

The tears came into her eyes. No one had called her Dolly since the mother went, whose going had made everything, for ever, other than it used to be.

"I'll tell them you're staying for lunch."

She got away on that, and stood a moment in the hall, before the stuffed fox with the duck in its mouth, to catch strongly at her lost composure.

If anyone had had the right to ask the reason of her agitation, and had asked it, Dorothea would have said that the sudden happening of anything was enough to upset one in whose life nothing ever happened. But no one had the right.

She went into the kitchen to give the necessary orders.

"Not the mince," she said; "or, stay. Yes, that would do, too. You must cook the fowl that was for to-night's dinner – and Jane can go down to the village for something else for to-night. And salad and raspberries. And I will put out some wine. My cousin, Mr. Courtenay, has come home from India. He will lunch with me."

"Master Bob," said the cook, as the kitchen door closed, "well, if I ever did! He's a married man by this time, with young folkses growing up around him, I shouldn't wonder. He never did look twice the same side of the road where she was. Poor Miss Dolly!"

Most of us are mercifully ignorant of the sympathy that surrounds us.

"It's wonderful," he said, when she rejoined him in the drawing-room. "I feel like the Prodigal Son. When I think of the drawing-rooms I've seen. The gim-crack trumpery, the curtains and the pictures and the furniture constantly shifted, the silly chatter, the obvious curios, the commonplace rarities, the inartistic art, and the brainless empty chatter, spiteful as often as not, and all the time *this* has been going on beautifully, quietly, perfectly. Dolly, you're a lucky girl!"

To her face the word brought a flush that almost justified it.

They talked: and he told her how all these long years he had wearied for the sight of English fields, and gardens, of an English home like this – till he almost believed that he was speaking the truth.

He looked at Dorothea with long, restful hands quietly folded, as she talked in the darkened drawing-room, at Dorothea with busy, skilful hands among the old silver and the old glass and the old painted china at lunch. He listened through the drowsy afternoon to Dorothea's gentle, high-bred, low-toned voice, to the music of her soft, rare laugh, as they sat in the wicker-chairs under the weeping ash on the lawn.

And he thought of other women – a crowd of them, with high, shrill tones and constant foolish cackle of meaningless laughter; of the atmosphere of paint, powder, furbelows, flirtation, empty gaiety, feverish flippancy. He thought, too, of women, two and three, whose faces stood out from the crowd and yet were of it. And he looked at Dorothea's delicate worn face and her honest eyes with the faint lines round them.

As he went through the hush of the evening to his rooms at the "Spotted Dog" the thought of Dorothea, of her house, her garden, her peaceful ordered life stirred him to a passion of appreciation. Out of the waste and desert of his own life, with its memories of the far country and the husks and the swine, he seemed to be looking through a window at the peaceful life – as a hungry, lonely tramp may limp to a lamp-lit window, and peering in, see father and mother and round-faced children, and the table spread whitely, and the good sure food that to these people is a calm certainty, like breathing or sleeping, not a joyous accident, or one of the great things that man was taught to pray for. The tramp turns away with a curse or a groan, according to his nature, and goes on his way cursing or groaning, or, if the pinch be fierce, he tries the back door or the unguarded window. With Robert the pang of longing was keen, and he was minded to try any door – not to beg for the broken meats of cousinly kindness, but to enter as master into that "better place" wherein Dorothea had found so little of Paradise.

It was no matter of worldly gain. The Prodigal had not wasted his material substance on the cheap husks that cost so dear. He had money enough and to spare: it was in peace and the dignity of life that he now found himself to be bankrupt.

As for Dorothea, when she brushed her long pale hair that night she found that her hands were not so steady as usual, and in the morning she was quite shocked to note that she had laid her hair-pins on the left-hand side of the pin-cushion instead of on the right, a thing she had not done for years.

It was at the end of a week, a week of long sunny days and dewy dark evenings spent in the atmosphere that had enslaved him. Dinner was over. Robert had smoked his cigar among the garden's lengthening shadows. Now he and Dorothea were at the window watching the light of life die beautifully on the changing face of the sky.

They had talked as this week had taught them to talk – with the intimacy of old friends and the mutual interest of new unexplored acquaintances. This is the talk that does not weary – the talk that can only be kept alive by the daring of revelation, and the stronger courage of unconquerable reserve.

Now there came a silence – with it seemed to come the moment. Robert spoke —

"Dorothea," he said, and her mind pricked its ears suspiciously because he had not called her Dolly.

"Well?"

"I wonder if you understand what these days have been to me? I was so tired of the world and its follies – this is like some calm haven after a stormy sea."

The words seemed strangely familiar. He had a grating sense of talking like a book, and something within him sneered at the scruple, and said that Dolly would not notice it.

But she said: "I'm sure I've read something like that in a school reading book, but it's very touching, of course."

"Oh – if you're going to mock my holiest sentiments," he said lightly – and withdrew from the attack.

The moment seemed to flutter near again when she said good night to him in the porch where the violet clematis swung against his head as he stood. This time his opening was better inspired.

"Dolly, dear," he said, "how am I ever to go away?"

Her heart leaped against her side, for his tone was tender. But so may a cousin's tone be – even a second cousin's, and when one is thirty-five she has little to fear from the pitying tenderness of her relations.

"I am so glad you have liked being here," she said sedately. "You must come again some time."

"I don't want to go away at all," he said. "Dolly, won't you let me stay – won't you marry me?"

Almost as he took her hand she snatched it from him.

"You must be mad!" she said. "Why on earth should you want to marry me?" Also she said: "I am old and plain, and you don't love me." But she said it to herself.

"I do want it," he said, "and I want it more than I want anything."

His tone was convincing.

"But why? but why?"

An impulse of truth-telling came to Robert.

"Because it's all so beautiful," he said with straightforward enthusiasm. "All your lovely quiet life – and the house, and these old gardens, and the dainty, delicate, firm way you have of managing everything – the whole thing's my ideal. It's perfect – I can't bear any other life."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," she said with bitter decision. "I am not going to marry a man just because he admires my house and garden, and is good enough to appreciate my methods of household management. Good night."

She had shaken his hand coolly and shut the front door from within before he could find a word. He found one as the latch clicked.

"Fool!" he said to himself, and stamped his foot.

Dorothea ran up the stairs two at a time to say the same word to herself in the stillness of her bedroom.

"Fool – fool – fool!" she said. "Why couldn't I have said 'No' quietly? Why did I let him see I was angry? Why should I be angry? It's better to be wanted because you're a good manager than not to be wanted at all. At least, I suppose it is. No – it *isn't!* it isn't! it isn't! And nothing's any use now. It's all gone. If he'd wanted to marry me when I was young and pretty I could have made him love me. And I *was* pretty – I know I was – I can remember it perfectly well!"

Her quiet years had taken from her no least little touch of girlish sentiment. The longing to be loved was as keen in her as it had been at twenty. She cried herself to sleep, and had a headache the next day. Also her eyes looked smaller than usual and her nose was pink. She went and sat in the black shade of a yew, and trusted that in that deep shadow her eyes and nose would not make Robert feel glad that she had said "No." She wished him to be sorry. She had put on the prettiest gown she had, in the hope that he *would* be sorry; then she was ashamed of the impulse; also its pale clear greenness seemed to intensify the pinkness of her nose. So she went back to the trailing grey gown. Her wearing of her best Honiton lace collar seemed pardonable. He would never notice it – or know that real lace is more becoming than anything else. She waited for him in the deep shadow, and it was all the morning that she waited. For he knew the value of suspense, and he had not the generosity that disdains the use of the obvious weapon. He was right so far, that before he came she had had time to wonder whether it was her life's one chance of happiness that she had thrown away. But he drove the knife home too far, for when at last she heard the click of the gate and saw the gleam of flannels through the shrubbery, the anxious questioning, "Will he come?" "Have I offended him beyond recall?" changed at one heart-beat to an almost perfect understanding of his reasons for delay. She greeted him coldly. That he expected. But he saw – or believed he saw – the relief under the coldness – and he brought up his forces for the attack.

"Dear," he said – almost at once – "forgive me for last night. It was true, and if I had expressed it better you'd have understood. It isn't just the house and garden, and the perfect life. It's *you!* Don't you understand what it is to come back from the world to all this, and you – you – you – the very centre of the star?"

"It's all very well," she said, "but that wasn't what you said last night."

"It's what I meant," said he. "Dear, don't you see how much I want you?"

"But – I'm old – and plain, and –"

She looked at him with eyes still heavy from last night's tears, and he experienced an unexpected impulse of genuine tenderness.

"My dear," he said, "when I first remember your mother she was about your age. I used to think she was the most beautiful person in the world. She seemed to shed happiness and peace around her – like – like a lamp sheds light. And you are just like her. Ah – don't send me away."

"Thank you," she said, struggling wildly with the cross currents of emotion set up by his words. "Thank you. I have not lived single all these years to be married at last because I happen to be like my mother."

The words seemed a treason to the dead, and the tears filled Dorothea's eyes.

He saw them; he perceived that they ran in worn channels, and the impulse of tenderness grew.

Till this moment he had spoken only the truth. His eyes took in the sunny lawn beyond the yew shadow, the still house: the whirl of the lawn-mower was music at once pastoral and patriotic. He heard the break in her voice; he saw the girlish grace of her thin shape, the pathetic charm of her wistful mouth. And he lied with a good heart.

"My dear," he said, with a tremble in his voice that sounded like passion, "my dear – it's not for that – I love you, Dolly – I think I must have loved you all my life!"

And at the light that leaped into her eyes he suddenly felt that this lie was nearer truth than he had known.

"I love you, dear – I love you," he repeated, and the words were oddly pleasant to say. "Won't you love me a little, too?"

She covered her face with her hands. She could no more have doubted him than she could have doubted the God to whom she had prayed night and morning for all these lonely years.

"Love you a little?" she said softly. "Ah! Robert, don't you know that I've loved you all my life?"

So a lie won what truth could not gain. And the odd thing is that the lie has now grown quite true, and he really believes that he has always loved her, just as he certainly loves her now. For some lies come true in the telling. But most of them do not, and it is not wise to try experiments.

THE GIRL WITH THE GUITAR

THE last strains of the ill-treated, ill-fated "Intermezzo" had died away, and after them had died away also the rumbling of the wheels of the murderous barrel-organ that had so gaily executed that, along with the nine other tunes of its repertory, to the admiration of the housemaid at the window of the house opposite, and the crowing delight of the two babies next door.

The young man drew a deep breath of relief, and lighted the wax candles in the solid silver candlesticks on his writing-table, for now the late summer dusk was falling, and that organ, please Heaven, made full the measure of the day's appointed torture. There had been five organs since dinner – and seven in the afternoon – one and all urgently thumping their heavy melodies into his brain, to the confusion of the thoughts that waited there, eager to marshal themselves, orderly and firm, into the phalanx of an article on "The Decadence of Criticism."

He filled his pipe, drew paper towards him, dipped his pen, and wrote his title on the blank page. The silence came round him, soothing as a beloved presence, the scent of the may bushes in the suburban gardens stole in pleasantly through the open windows. After all, it was a "quiet neighbourhood" as the advertisement had said – at any rate, in the evening; and in the evening a man's best efforts —

Thrum, tum, tum — *Thrum*, tum, tum came the defiant strumming of a guitar close to the window. He sprang to his feet – this was, indeed, too much! But before he could draw back the curtains and express himself to the intruder, the humming of the guitar was dominated by the first words of a song —

"Oh piccerella del vieni al'mare
Nella barchetta veletto di fiore
La bianca prora somiglia al'altare
Tutte le stelle favellan d'amor,"

and so forth. The performer was evidently singing "under her voice," but the effect was charming. He stood with his hand on the curtain, listening – and with a pleasure that astonished him. The song came to an end with a chord in which all the strings twanged their best. Then there was silence – then a sigh, and the sound of light moving feet on the gravel. He threw back the curtain and leaned out of the window.

"Here!" he called to the figure that moved slowly towards the gate. She turned quickly, and came back two steps. She wore the dress of a Contadina, a very smart dress indeed, and her hands looked small and white.

"Won't you sing again?" he asked.

She hesitated, then struck a chord or two and began another of those little tuneful Italian songs, all stars and flowers and hearts of gold. And again he listened with a quiet pleasure.

"I should like to hear her voice at its full strength," he thought – and now it was time to give the vagrant a few coppers, and, shutting the window, to leave her to go on to the next front garden.

Never had any act seemed so impossible. He had watched her through the singing of this last song, and he had grown aware of the beauty of her face's oval – of the fine poise of her head – and of the grace of hands and arms.

"Aren't you tired?" he said. "Wouldn't you like to sit down and rest? There is a seat in the garden at the side of the house."

Again she hesitated. Then she turned towards the quarter indicated and disappeared round the laurel bushes.

He was alone in the house – his people and the servants were in the country; the woman who came to "do for him" had left for the night. He went into the dining-room, dark with mahogany and damask, found wine and cake in the sideboard cupboard, put them on a tray, and took them out through the garden door and round to the corner where, almost sheltered by laburnums and hawthorns from the view of the people next door, the singer and her guitar rested on the iron seat.

"I have brought you some wine – will you have it?"

Again that strange hesitation – then quite suddenly the girl put her hands up to her face and began to cry.

"Here – I say, you know – don't – " he said. "Oh, Lord! This is awful. I hardly know a word of Italian, and apparently she has no English. Here, signorina, ecco, prendi – vino – gatto – No, gatto's a cat. I was thinking of French. Oh, Lord!"

The Contadina had pulled out a very small handkerchief, and was drying her eyes with it. She rose.

"No – don't go," he said eagerly. "I can see you are tired out. Sai fatigueé non è vero? Io non parlate Italiano, sed vino habet, et cake ante vous partez."

She looked at him and spoke for the first time.

"It serves me right," she said in excellent, yet unfamiliar, English. "I don't understand a single word you say! I might have known I couldn't do it, though it's just what girls in books would do. It would have turned out all right with them. Let me go – thank you very much. I am sure you meant to be kind." And then she began to cry again.

"Look here," he said, "this is all nonsense, you know. You are tired out – and there's something wrong. What is it? Do drink this, and then tell me. Perhaps I can help you."

She drank obediently. Then she said: "I have not had anything to eat since last night – "

He hurriedly cut cake and pressed it upon her. He had no time to think, but he was aware that this was the most exciting adventure that had ever happened to him.

"It's no use – and it all sounds so silly."

"Ah – but do tell me!" His voice was kinder than he meant it to be. Her eyes filled again with tears.

"You don't know how horrid everyone has been. Oh – I never knew before what devils people are to you when you're poor – "

"Is it only that you're poor? Why, that's nothing. I'm poor, too."

She laughed. "I'm *not* poor – not really."

"What is it, then? You've quarrelled with your friends, and – Ah, tell me – and let me try to help you."

"You *are* kind – but – Well, then – it's like this. My father brought me to England from the States a month ago: he's 'made his pile': it was in pork, and I always wish he'd made it of something else, even canned fruit would be better, but that doesn't matter – We didn't know anyone here, of course, and directly we got here, he was wired for – business – and he had to go home again."

"But surely he didn't leave you without money."

Her little foot tapped the gravel impatiently.

"I'm coming to that," she said. "Of course he didn't. He told me to stay on at the hotel, and I did – and then one night when I was at the theatre my maid – a horrid French thing we got in Paris – packed up all my trunks and took all my money, and paid the bill, and went. The hotel folks let her go – I can't think how people can be so silly. But they wouldn't let me stay, and I wired to papa – and there was no answer, and I don't know whatever's the matter with him. I know it all sounds as if I was making it up as I go along – "

She stopped short, and looked at him through the dusk. He did not speak, but whatever she saw in his face it satisfied her. She said again: "You *are* kind."

"Go on," he said, "tell me all about it."

"Well, then, I went into lodgings; that wicked woman had left me one street suit – and to-day they turned me out because my money was all gone. I had a little money in my purse – and this dress had been ordered for a fancy ball – it *is* smart, isn't it? – and it came after that wretch had gone – and the guitar, too – and I thought I could make a little money. I really *can* sing, though you mightn't think it. And I've been at it since five o'clock – and I've only got one shilling and seven pence. And no one but you has ever even thought of thinking whether I was tired or hungry or anything – and papa always took such care of me. I feel as if I had been beaten."

"Let me think," he said. "Oh – how glad I am that you happened to come this way."

He reflected a moment. Then he said —

"I shall lock up all the doors and windows in the house – and then I shall give you my latch-key, and you can let yourself in and stay the night here – there is no one in the house. I will catch the night train, and bring my mother up to-morrow. Then we will see what can be done."

The only excuse for this rash young man is to be found in the fact that while he was feeding his strange guest with cake and wine she was feeding, with her beauty, the first fire of his first love. Love at first sight is all nonsense, we know – we who have come to forty year – but at twenty-one one does not somehow recognise it for the nonsense it is.

"But don't you know anyone in London?" he asked in a sensible postscript.

It was not yet so dark but that he could see the crimson flush on her face.

"Not *know*," she said. "Papa wouldn't like me to spoil my chances of knowing the right people with any foolishness like this. There's no one I could *let* know. You see, papa's so very rich, and at home they expect me to – to get acquainted with dukes and things – and –"

She stopped.

"American heiresses are expected to marry English dukes," he said, with a distinct physical pain at his heart.

"It wasn't I who said that," said the girl, smiling; "but that's so, anyhow." And then she sighed.

"So it's your destiny to marry a duke, is it?" the young man spoke slowly. "All the same," he added irrelevantly, "you shall have the latch-key."

"You *are* kind," she said for the third time, and reached her hand out to him. He did not kiss it then, only took it in his, and felt how small and cold it was. Then it was taken away.

He says that he only talked to her for half an hour – but the neighbours, from whose eyes suburban hawthorns and laburnums are powerless to conceal the least of our actions, declare that he sat with the guitar player on the iron seat till well after midnight; further, that when they parted he kissed her hand, and that she then put her hands on his shoulders – "quite shamelessly, you know" – and kissed him lightly on both cheeks. It is known that he passed the night prowling in our suburban lanes, and caught the 6.25 train in the morning to the place where his people were staying.

The lady and the guitar certainly passed the night at Hill View Villa, but when his mother, very angry and very frightened, came up with him at about noon, the house looked just as usual, and no one was there but the charwoman.

"An adventuress! I told you so!" said his mother at once – and the young man sat down at his study table and looked at the title of his article on "The Decadence of Criticism." It was surely a very long time ago that he had written that. And he sat there thinking, till his mother's voice roused him.

"The silver is all right, thank goodness," she said, "but your banjo girl has taken a pair of your sister's silk stockings, and those new shoes of hers with the silver buckles – and she's left *these*."

She held out a pair of little patent leather shoes, very worn and dusty – the slender silken web of a black stocking, brown with dust, hung from her hand. He answered nothing. She spent the rest of that day in searching the house for further losses, but all things were in their place, except the silver-handled button-hook – and that, as even his sister owned, had been missing for months.

Yet his family would never leave him to keep house alone again: they said he is not to be trusted. And perhaps they are right. The half dozen pairs of embroidered silk stockings and the dainty

French silver-buckled shoes, which arrived a month later addressed to Miss – , Hill View Villa, only confirmed their distrust. *He* must have had them sent – that tambourine girl could never have afforded these – why, they were pure silk – and the quality! It was plain that his castanet girl – his mother and sister took a pleasure in crediting her daily with some fresh and unpleasing instrument – could have had neither taste, money, nor honesty to such a point as this.

As for the young man, he bore it all very meekly, only he was glad when his essays on the decadence of things in general led to a berth on the staff of a big daily, and made it possible for him to take rooms in town – because he had grown weary of living with his family, and of hearing so constantly that *She* played the bones and the big drum and the concertina, and that *She* was a twopenny adventuress who stole his sister's shoes and stockings. He prefers to sit in his quiet room in the Temple, and to remember that she played the guitar and sang sweetly – that she had a mouth like a tired child's mouth, that her eyes were like stars, and that she kissed him – on both cheeks – and that he kissed – her hand only – as the scandalised suburb knows.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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