

Jenkins Herbert George

Patricia Brent, Spinster



Herbert Jenkins

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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Patricia Brent is a "paying guest" at the Galvin House Residential Hotel. One day she overhears two of her fellow "guests" pitying her because she "never has a nice young man to take her out."

In a thoughtless moment of anger she announced that on the following night she is dining at the Quadrant with her fiancé. When in due course she enters the grill-room, she finds some of Galvin Houseites there to watch her. Rendered reckless by the thought of the humiliation of being found out, she goes up to a young staff-officer, and asks him to help her by "playing up."

This is how she meets Lt. – Col. Lord Peter Bowen, D.S.O. The story is a comedy concerned with the complications that ensue from Patricia's thoughtless act.

CHAPTER I

PATRICIA'S INDISCRETION

"She never has anyone to take her out, and goes nowhere, and yet she can't be more than twenty-seven, and really she's not bad-looking."

"It's not looks that attract men," there was a note of finality in the voice; "it's something else." The speaker snapped off her words in a tone that marked extreme disapproval.

"What else?" enquired the other voice.

"Oh, it's – well, it's something not quite nice," replied the other voice darkly, "the French call it being *très femme*. However, she hasn't got it."

"Well, I feel very sorry for her and her loneliness. I am sure she would be much happier if she had a nice young man of her own class to take her about."

Patricia Brent listened with flaming cheeks. She felt as if someone had struck her. She recognised herself as the object of the speakers' comments. She could not laugh at the words, because they were true. She *was* lonely, she had no men friends to take her about, and yet, and yet —

"Twenty-seven," she muttered indignantly, "and I was only twenty-four last November."

She identified the two speakers as Miss Elizabeth Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe.

Miss Wangle was the great-niece of a bishop, and to have a bishop in heaven is a great social asset on earth. This ecclesiastical distinction seemed to give her the right of leadership at the Galvin House Residential Hotel. Whenever a new boarder arrived, the unfortunate bishop was disinterred and brandished before his eyes.

One facetious young man in the "commercial line" had dubbed her "the body-snatcher," and, being inordinately proud of his *jeu d'esprit*, he had worn it threadbare, and Miss Wangle had got to know of it. The result was the sudden departure of the wit. Miss Wangle had intimated to Mrs. Craske-Morton, the proprietress, that if he remained she would go. Mrs. Craske-Morton considered that Miss Wangle gave tone to Galvin House.

Miss Wangle was acid of speech and barren of pity. Scandal and "the dear bishop" were her chief preoccupations. She regularly read *The Morning Post*, which she bought, and *The Times*, which she borrowed. In her attitude towards royalty she was a Jacobite, and of the aristocracy she knew no wrong.

Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe was Miss Wangle's toady; but she wrapped her venom in Christian charity, thus making herself the more dangerous of the two.

At Galvin House none dare gainsay these two in their pronouncements. They were disliked; but more feared than hated. During the Zeppelin scare Mr. Bolton, who was the humorist of Galvin House, had fixed a notice to the drawing-room door, which read: "Zeppelin commanders are requested to confine their attentions to rooms 8 and 18." Rooms 8 and 18 were those occupied by Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. There had been a great fuss about this harmless and rather feeble joke; but fortunately for Mr. Bolton, he had taken care to pin his jest on the door when no one was looking, and he took the additional precaution of being foremost in his denunciation of the bad taste shown by the person responsible for the jest.

Patricia Brent was coming downstairs in response to the dinner-gong, when, through the partly open door of the lounge, she overheard the amiable remarks concerning herself. She passed quietly into the dining-room and took her seat at the table in silence, mechanically acknowledging the greetings of her fellow-guests.

At Galvin House the word "guest" was insisted upon. Mrs. Craske-Morton, in announcing the advent of a new arrival, reached the pinnacle of refinement. "We have another guest coming," she would say, "a most interesting man," or "a very cultured woman," as the case might be. When the

man arrived without his interest, or the woman without her culture, no one was disappointed; for no one had expected anything. The conventions had been observed and that was all that mattered.

Dinner at Galvin House was rather a dismal affair. The separate tables heresy, advocated by a progressive-minded guest, had been once and for all discouraged by Miss Wangle, who announced that if separate tables were introduced she, for one, would not stay.

"I remember the dear bishop once saying to me," she remarked, "'My dear, if people can't say what they have to say at a large table and in the hearing of others, then let it for ever remain unsaid.'"

"But if someone's dress is awry, or their hair is not on straight, would you announce the fact to the whole table?" Patricia had questioned with an innocence that was a little overdone.

Miss Wangle had glared; for she wore the most obvious auburn wig, which failed to convince anyone, and served only to enhance the pallor of her sharp features.

In consequence of the table arrangements, conversation during meal-times was general – and dull. Mr. Bolton joked, Miss Wangle poured vinegar on oily waters, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe "dripped with the oil of forbearance." Mr. Cordal ate noisily, Miss Sikkum simpered and Mrs. Craske-Morton strove to appear a real hostess entertaining real guests without the damning prefix "paying."

The remaining guests, there were usually round about twenty-five, looked as they felt they ought to look, and never failed to show a befitting reverence for Miss Wangle's ecclesiastical relic; for it was Miss Wangle who issued the social birth certificates at Galvin House.

That evening Patricia was silent. Mr. Bolton endeavoured to draw her out, but failed. As a rule she was the first to laugh at his jokes in order "to encourage the poor little man," as she expressed it; "for a man who is fat and bald and a bachelor and thinks he's a humorist wants all the pity that the world can lavish upon him."

Patricia glanced round the table, from Miss Wangle, lean as a winter wolf, to Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, fair, chubby and faded, and on to Mr. Cordal, lantern-jawed and ravenous. "Were they not all lonely – the left of God?" Patricia asked herself; and yet two of these solitary souls had dared to pity her, Patricia Brent. At least she had something they did not possess – youth.

The more she thought of the words that had drifted to her through the half-closed door of the lounge, the more humiliating they appeared. Her day had been particularly trying and she was tired. She was in a mood to see a cyclone in a zephyr, and in a ripple a gigantic wave. She looked about her once more. What a fate to be cast among such people!

The table appointments seemed more than usually irritating that evening. The base metal that peeped slyly through the silver of the forks and spoons, the tapering knives, victims of much cleaning, with their yellow handles, the salt-cellars, the mustard, browning with three days' age (mustard was replenished on Sundays only), the anæmic ferns in "artistic" pots, every defect seemed emphasized.

How she hated it; but most of all the many-shaped and multi-coloured napkin-rings, at Galvin House known as "serviette-rings." Variety was necessary to ensure each guest's personal interest in one particular napkin. Did they ever get mixed? Patricia shuddered at the thought. At the end of the week, a "serviette" had become a sort of gastronomic diary. By Saturday evening (new "serviettes" were served out on Sunday at luncheon) the square of grey-white fabric had many things recorded upon it; but above all, like a monarch dominating his subjects, was the ineradicable aroma of Monday's kipper.

On this particular evening Galvin House seemed more than ever grey and depressing. Patricia found herself wondering if God had really made all these people in His own image. They seemed so petty, so ungodlike. The way they regarded their food, as it was handed to them, suggested that they were for ever engaged in a comparison of what they paid with what they received. Did God make people in His own image and then leave the rest to them? Was that where free will came in?

" – lonely!"

The word seemed to crash in upon her thoughts with explosive force. Someone had used it – whom she did not know, or in what relation. It brought her back to earth and Galvin House. "Lonely,"

that was at the root of her depression. She was an object of pity among her fellow-boarders. It was intolerable! She understood why girls "did things" to escape from such surroundings and such fox-pity.

Had she been a domestic servant she could have hired a soldier, that is before the war. Had she been a typist or a shop-girl – well, there were the park and tubes and things where gallant youth approached fair maiden. No, she was just a girl who could not do these things, and in consequence became the pitied of the Miss Wangles and the Mrs. Mossdrop-Smythes of Bayswater.

She was quite content to be manless, she did not like men, at least not the sort she had encountered. There were Boltons and Cordals in plenty. There were the "Haven't-we-met-before?" kind too, the hunters who seemed cheerfully to get out at the wrong station, or pay twopence on a bus for a penny fare in order to pursue some face that had attracted their roving eye.

She sighed involuntarily at the ugliness of it all, this cheapening of the things worthy of reverence and respect. She looked across at Miss Sikkum, whose short skirts and floppy hats had involved her in many unconventional adventures that one glance at her face had corrected as if by magic. A back view of Miss Sikkum was deceptive.

Suddenly Patricia made a resolve. Had she paused to think she would have seen the danger; but she was by nature impulsive, and the conversation she had overheard had angered and humiliated her.

Her resolve synchronised with the arrival of the sweet stage. Turning to Mrs. Craske-Morton she remarked casually, "I shall not be in to dinner to-morrow night, Mrs. Morton."

Mrs. Craske-Morton always liked her guests to tell her when they were not likely to be in to dinner. "It saves the servants laying an extra cover," she would explain. As a matter of fact it saved Mrs. Craske-Morton preparing for an extra mouth.

If Patricia had hurled a bomb into the middle of the dining-table, she could not have attracted to herself more attention than by her simple remark that she was not dining at Galvin House on the morrow.

Everybody stopped eating to stare at her. Miss Sikkum missed her aim with a trifle of apple charlotte, and spent the rest of the evening in endeavouring to remove the stain from a pale blue satin blouse, which in Brixton is known as "a Paris model." It was Miss Wangle who broke the silence.

"How interesting," she said. "We shall quite miss you, Miss Brent. I suppose you are working late."

The whole table waited for Patricia's response with breathless expectancy.

"No!" she replied nonchalantly.

"I know," said Mrs. Mossdrop-Smythe, in her even tones, and wagging an admonitory finger at her. "You're going to a revue, or a music-hall."

"Or to sow her wild oats," added Mr. Bolton.

Then some devil took possession of Patricia. She would give them something to talk about for the next month. They should have a shock.

"No," she replied indifferently, attracting to herself the attention of the whole table by her deliberation. "No, I'm not going to a revue, a music-hall, or to sow my wild oats. As a matter of fact," she paused. They literally hung upon her words. "As a matter of fact I am dining with my fiancé."

The effect was electrical. Miss Sikkum stopped dabbing the front of her Brixton "Paris model." Miss Wangle dropped her pince-nez on the edge of her plate and broke the right-hand glass. Mr. Cordal, a heavy man who seldom spoke, but enjoyed his food with noisy gusto, actually exclaimed, "What?" Almost without exception the others repeated his exclamation.

"Your fiancé?" stuttered Miss Wangle.

"But, dear Miss Brent," said Mrs. Mossdrop-Smythe, "you never told us that you were engaged."

"Didn't I?" enquired Patricia indifferently.

"And you don't wear a ring," interposed Miss Sikkum eagerly.

"I hate badges of servitude," remarked Patricia with a laugh.

"But an engagement ring," insinuated Miss Sikkum with a self-conscious giggle.

"One is freer without a ring," replied Patricia.

Miss Wangle's jaw dropped.

"Marriages are – " she began.

"Made in heaven. I know," broke in Patricia, "but you try wearing Turkish slippers in London, Miss Wangle, and you'll soon want to go back to the English boots. It's silly to make things in one place to be worn in another; they never fit."

Mrs. Craske-Morton coughed portentously.

"Really, Miss Brent," she exclaimed.

Whenever conversation seemed likely to take an undesirable turn, or she foresaw a storm threatening, Mrs. Craske-Morton's "Really, Mr. So-and-so" invariably guided it back into a safe channel.

"But do they?" persisted Patricia. "Can you, Mrs. Morton, seriously regard marriage in this country as a success? It's all because marriages are made in heaven without taking into consideration our climatic conditions."

Miss Wangle had lost the power of speech. Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe was staring at Patricia as if she had been something strange and unclean upon which her eyes had never hitherto lighted. In the eyes of little Mrs. Hamilton, a delightfully French type of old lady, there was a gleam of amusement. Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe was the first to recover the power of speech.

"Is your fiancé in the army?"

"Yes," replied Patricia desperately. She had long since thrown over all caution.

"Oh, tell us his name," giggled Miss Sikkum.

"Brown," said Patricia.

"Is his knapsack number 99?" enquired Mr. Bolton.

"He doesn't wear one," said Patricia, now thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Oh, he's an officer, then," this from Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe.

"Is he a first or a second lieutenant?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Major," responded Patricia laconically.

"What's he in?" was the next question.

"West Loamshires."

"What battalion?" enquired Miss Wangle, who had now regained the power of speech. "I have a cousin in the Fifth."

"I am sure I can't remember," said Patricia, "I never could remember numbers."

"Not remember the number of the battalion in which your fiancé is?" There was incredulous disapproval in Miss Wangle's voice.

"No! I'm awfully sorry," replied Patricia, "I suppose it's very horrid of me; but I'll go upstairs and look it up if you like."

"Oh please don't trouble," said Miss Wangle icily. "I remember the dear bishop once saying – "

"And I suppose after dinner you'll go to a theatre," interrupted Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, for the first time in the memory of the oldest guest indifferent to the bishop and what he had said, thought, or done.

"Oh, no, it's war time," said Patricia, "we shall just dine quietly at the Quadrant Grill-room."

A meaning glance passed between Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe and Miss Wangle. Why she had fixed upon the Quadrant Grill-room Patricia could not have said.

"And now," said Patricia, "I must run upstairs and see that my best bib and tucker are in proper condition to be worn before my fiancé. I'll tell him what you say about the ring. Good night, everybody, if we don't meet again."

"Patricia Brent," admonished Patricia to her reflection in the looking-glass, as she brushed her hair that night, "you're a most unmitigated little liar. You've told those people the wickedest of wicked

lies. You've engaged yourself to an unknown major in the British Army. You're going to dine with him to-morrow night, and heaven knows what will be the result of it all. A single lie leads to so many. Oh, Patricia, Patricia!" she nodded her head admonishingly at the reflection in the glass. "You're really a very wicked young woman." Then she burst out laughing. "At least, I have given them something to talk about, any old how. By now they've probably come to the conclusion that I'm a most awful rip."

Patricia never confessed it to herself, but she was extremely lonely. Instinctively shy of strangers, she endeavoured to cover up her self-consciousness by assuming an attitude of nonchalance, and the result was that people saw only the artificiality. She had been brought up in the school of "men are beasts," and she took no trouble to disguise her indifference to them. With women she was more popular. If anyone were ill at Galvin House, it was always Patricia Brent who ministered to them, sat and read to them, and cheered them through convalescence back to health.

Her acquaintance with men had been almost entirely limited to those she had found in the various boarding-houses, glorified in the name of residential hotels, at which she had stayed. Five years previously, on the death of her father, a lawyer in a small country town, she had come to London and obtained a post as secretary to a blossoming politician. There she had made herself invaluable, and there she had stayed, performing the same tasks day after day, seldom going out, since the war never at all, and living a life calculated to make an acid spinster of a Venus or a Juno.

"Oh, bother to-morrow!" said Patricia as she got into bed that night; "it's a long way off and perhaps something will happen before then," and with that she switched off the light.

CHAPTER II

THE BONSOR-TRIGGS' MENAGE

The next morning Patricia awakened with a feeling that something had occurred in her life. For a time she lay pondering as to what it could be. Suddenly memory came with a flash, and she smiled. That night she was dining out! As suddenly as it had come the smile faded from her lips and eyes, and she mentally apostrophised herself as a little idiot for what she had done. Then, remembering Miss Wangle's remark and the expression on Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe's face, the lines of her mouth hardened, and there was a determined air about the tilt of her chin. She smiled again.

"Patricia Brent! No, that won't do," she broke off. Then springing out of bed she went over to the mirror, adjusted the dainty boudoir cap upon her head and, bowing elaborately to her reflection, said, "Patricia Brent, I invite you to dine with me this evening at the Quadrant Grill-room. I hope you'll be able to come. How delightful. We shall have a most charming time." Then she sat on the edge of the bed and pondered.

Of course she would have to come back radiantly happy, girls who have been out with their fiancé's always return radiantly happy. "That will mean two *crèmes de menthes* instead of one, that's another shilling, perhaps two," she murmured. Then she must have a good dinner or else the *crème de menthe* would get into her head, that would mean about seven shillings more. "Oh! Patricia, Patricia," she wailed, "you have let yourself in for an expense of at least ten shillings, the point being is a major in the British Army worth an expenditure of ten shillings? We shall – "

She was interrupted by the maid knocking at the door to inform her that it was her turn for the bath-room.

As Patricia walked across the Park that morning on her way to Eaton Square, where the politician lived who employed her as private secretary whilst he was in the process of rising, she pondered over her last night's announcement. She was convinced that she had acted foolishly, and in a way that would probably involve her in not only expense, but some trouble and inconvenience.

At the breakfast-table the conversation had been entirely devoted to herself, her fiancé, and the coming dinner together. Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, and Miss Sikkum, supported by Mrs. Craske-Morton, had returned to the charge time after time. Patricia had taken refuge in her habitual breakfast silence and, finding that they could draw nothing from her her fellow-guests had proceeded to discuss the matter among themselves. It was with a feeling of relief that Patricia rose from the table.

There was an east wind blowing, and Patricia had always felt that an east wind made her a materialist. This morning she was depressed; there was in her heart a feeling that fate had not been altogether kind to her. Her childhood had been spent in a small town on the East Coast under the care of her father's sister who, when Mrs. Brent died, had come to keep house for Mr. John Brent and take care of his five-year-old daughter. In her aunt Patricia found a woman soured by life. What it was that had soured her Patricia could never gather; but Aunt Adelaide was for ever emphasizing the fact that men were beasts.

Later Patricia saw in her aunt a disappointed woman. She could remember as a child examining with great care her aunt's hard features and angular body, and wondering if she had ever been pretty, and if anyone had kissed her because they wanted to and not because it was expected of them.

The lack of sympathy between aunt and niece had driven Patricia more and more to seek her father's companionship. He was a silent man, little given to emotion or demonstration of affection. He loved Patricia, but lacked the faculty of conveying to her the knowledge of his love.

As she walked across the Park Patricia came to the conclusion that, for some reason or other, love, or the outward visible signs of love, had been denied her. Warm-hearted, impetuous, spontaneous, she had been chilled by the self-repression of her father, and the lack of affection of

her aunt. She had been schooled to regard God as the God of punishment rather than the God of love. One of her most terrifying recollections was that of the Sundays spent under the paternal roof. To her father, religion counted for nothing; but to her aunt it counted for everything in the world; the hereafter was to be the compensation for renunciation in this world. Miss Brent's attitude towards prayer was that of one who regards it as a means by which she is able to convey to the Almighty what she expects of Him in the next world as a reward for what she has done, or rather not done, in this.

Patricia had once asked, in a childish moment of speculation, "But, Aunt Adelaide, suppose God doesn't make us happy in the next world, what shall we do then?"

"Oh! yes He will," was her aunt's reply, uttered with such grimness that Patricia, though only six years of age, had been satisfied that not even God would dare to disappoint Aunt Adelaide.

Patricia had been a lonely child. She had come to distrust spontaneity and, in consequence, became shy and self-conscious, with the inevitable result that other children, the few who were in Aunt Adelaide's opinion fit for her to associate with, made it obvious that she was one by herself. Patricia had fallen back on her father's library, where she had read many books that would have caused her aunt agonies of stormy anguish, had she known.

Patricia early learnt the necessity for dissimulation. She always carefully selected two books, one that she could ostensibly be reading if her aunt happened to come into the library, and the other that she herself wanted to read, and of which she knew her aunt would strongly disapprove.

Miss Brent regarded boarding-schools as "hotbeds of vice," and in consequence Patricia was educated at home, educated in a way that she would never have been at any school; for Miss Brent was thorough in everything she undertook. The one thing for which Patricia had to be grateful to her aunt was her general knowledge, and the sane methods adopted with her education. But for this she would not have been in the position to accept a secretaryship to a politician.

When Patricia was twenty-one her father had died, and she inherited from her mother an annuity of a hundred pounds a year. Her aunt had suggested that they should live together; but Patricia had announced her intention of working, and with the money that she realised from the sale of her father's effects, particularly his library, she came to London and underwent a course of training in shorthand, typewriting, and general secretarial work. This was in March, 1914. Before she was ready to undertake a post, the war broke out upon Europe like a cataclysm, and a few months later Patricia had obtained a post as private secretary to Mr. Arthur Bonsor, M.P.

Mr. Bonsor was the victim of marriage. Destiny had ordained that he should spend his life in golf and gardening, or in breeding earless rabbits and stingless bees. He was bucolic and passive. Mrs. Bonsor, however, after a slight altercation with Destiny, had decided that Mr. Bonsor was to become a rising politician. Thus it came about that, pushed on from behind by Mrs. Bonsor and led by Patricia, whose general knowledge was of the greatest possible assistance to him, Mr. Bonsor was in the elaborate process of rising at the time when Patricia determined to have a fiancé.

Mr. Bonsor was a small, fair-haired man, prematurely bald, an indifferent speaker; but excellent in committee. Instinctively he was gentle and kind. Mrs. Bonsor disliked Patricia and Patricia was indifferent to Mrs. Bonsor. Mrs. Bonsor, however, recognised that in Patricia her husband had a remarkably good secretary, one whom it would be difficult to replace.

Mrs. Bonsor's attitude to everyone who was not in a superior position to herself was one of patronage. Patricia she looked upon as an upper servant, although she never dare show it. Patricia, on the other hand, showed very clearly that she had no intention of being treated other than as an equal by Mrs. Bonsor, and the result was a sort of armed neutrality. They seldom met; when by chance they encountered each other in the house Mrs. Bonsor would say, "Good morning, Miss Brent; I hope you walked across the Park." Patricia would reply, "Yes, most enjoyable; I invariably walk across the Park when I have time"; and with a forced smile Mrs. Bonsor would say, "That is very wise of you."

Never did Mrs. Bonsor speak to Patricia without enquiring if she had walked across the Park. One day Patricia anticipated Mrs. Bonsor's inevitable question by announcing, "I walked across

the Park this morning, Mrs. Bonsor, it was most delightful," and Mrs. Bonsor had glared at her, but, remembering Patricia's value to her husband, had made a non-committal reply and passed on. Henceforth, Mrs. Bonsor dropped all reference to the Park.

On the first day of Patricia's entry into the Bonsor household, Mrs. Bonsor had remarked, "Of course you will stay to lunch," and Patricia had thanked her and said she would. But when she found that her luncheon was served on a tray in the library, where Mr. Bonsor did his work, she had decided that henceforth exercise in the middle of the day was necessary for her, and she lunched out.

Mr. Bonsor had married beneath him. His father, a land-poor squire in the north of England, had impressed upon all his sons that money was essential as a matrimonial asset, and Mr. Bonsor, not having sufficient individuality to starve for love, had determined to follow the parental decree. How he met Miss Triggs, the daughter of the prosperous Streatham builder and contractor, Samuel Triggs, nobody knew, but his father had congratulated him very cordially about having contrived to marry her. Miss Triggs's friends to a woman were of the firm conviction that it was Miss Triggs who had married Mr. Bonsor. "'Ettie's so ambitious." remarked her father soon after the wedding, "that it's almost a relief to get 'er married."

Mr. Bonsor was scarcely back from his honeymoon before he was in full possession of the fact that Mrs. Bonsor had determined that he should become famous. She had read how helpful many great men's wives had been in their career, and she determined to be the power behind the indeterminate Arthur Bonsor. Poor Mr. Bonsor, who desired nothing better than a peaceable life and had looked forward to a future of ease and prosperity when he married Miss Triggs, discovered when too late that he had married not so much Miss Triggs, as an abstract sense of ambition. Domestic peace was to be purchased only by an attitude of entire submission to Mrs. Bonsor's schemes. He was not without brains, but he lacked that impetus necessary to "getting on." Mrs. Bonsor, who was not lacking in shrewdness, observed this and determined that she herself would be the impetus.

Mr. Bonsor came to dread meal-times, that is meal-times *tête-à-tête*. During these symposiums he was subjected to an elaborate cross-examination as to what he was doing to achieve greatness. Mrs. Bonsor insisted upon his being present at every important function to which he could gain admittance, particularly the funerals of the illustrious great. Egged on by her he became an inveterate writer of letters to the newspapers, particularly *The Times*. Sometimes his letters appeared, which caused Mrs. Bonsor intense gratification: but editors soon became shy of a man who bombarded them with letters upon every conceivable subject, from the submarine menace to the question of "should women wear last year's frocks?"

Mr. Triggs had once described his daughter very happily: "'Ettie's one of them that ain't content with pressing a bell, but she must keep 'er thumb on the bell-push." That was Mrs. Bonsor all over; she lacked restraint, both physical and artistic, and she conceived that if you only make noise enough people will, sooner or later, begin to take notice.

Within three years of his marriage, Mr. Bonsor entered the House of Commons. He had first of all fought in a Radical constituency and been badly beaten; but the second time he had, by some curious juggling of chance, been successful in an almost equally strong Radical division, much to the delight of Mrs. Bonsor. The success had been largely due to her idea of flooding the constituency with pretty girl-canvassers; but she had been very careful to keep a watchful eye on Mr. Bonsor.

One of her reasons for engaging Patricia, for really Mrs. Bonsor was responsible for the engagement, had been that she had decided that Patricia was indifferent to men, and she decided that Mr. Bonsor might safely be trusted with Patricia Brent for long periods of secretarial communion.

Mr. Bonsor, although not lacking in susceptibility, was entirely devoid of that courage which subjugates the feminine heart. Once he had permitted his hand to rest upon Patricia's; but he never forgot the look she gave him and, for weeks after, he felt a most awful dog, and wondered if Patricia would tell Mrs. Bonsor.

When she married, Mrs. Bonsor saw that it would be necessary to drop her family, that is as far as practicable. It could not be done entirely, because her father was responsible for the allowance which made it possible for the Bonsors to live in Eaton Square. The old man was not lacking in shrewdness, and he had no intention of being thrown overboard by his ambitious daughter. It occasionally happened that Mr. Triggs would descend upon the Bonsor household and, although Mrs. Bonsor did her best to suppress him, that is without in any way showing she was ashamed of her parent, he managed to make Patricia's acquaintance and, from that time, made a practice of enquiring for and having a chat with her.

Mrs. Bonsor was grateful to providence for having removed her mother previous to her marriage. Mrs. Triggs had been a homely soul, with a marked inclination to be "friendly." She overflowed with good-humour, and was a woman who would always talk in an omnibus, or join a wedding crowd and compare notes with those about her. She addressed Mr. Triggs as "Pa," which caused her daughter a mental anguish of which Mrs. Triggs was entirely unaware. It was not until Miss Triggs was almost out of her teens that her mother was persuaded to cease calling her "Girlie."

In Mrs. Bonsor the reforming spirit was deeply ingrained; but she had long since despaired of being able to influence her father's taste in dress. She groaned in spirit each time she saw him, for his sartorial ideas were not those of Mayfair. He leaned towards checks, rather loud checks, trousers that were tight about the calf, and a coat that was a sporting conception of the morning coat, with a large flapped pocket on either side. He invariably wore a red tie and an enormous watch-chain across his prosperous-looking figure. His hat was a high felt, an affair that seemed to have set out in life with the ambition of being a top hat, but losing heart had compromised.

If Mrs. Bonsor dreaded her father's visits, Patricia welcomed them. She was genuinely fond of the old man. Mr. Triggs radiated happiness from the top of his shiny bald head, with its fringe of sandy-grey hair, to his square-toed boots that invariably emitted little squeaks of joy. He wore a fringe of whiskers round his chubby face, otherwise he was clean-shaven, holding that beards were "messy" things. He had what Patricia called "crinkly" eyes, that is to say each time he smiled there seemed to radiate from them hundreds of little lines.

He always addressed Patricia as "me dear," and not infrequently brought her a box of chocolates, to the scandal of Mrs. Bonsor, who had once expostulated with him that that was not the way to treat her husband's secretary.

"Tut, tut, 'Ettie," had been Mr. Triggs's response. "She's a fine gal. If I was a bit younger I shouldn't be surprised if there was a second Mrs. Triggs."

"Father!" Mrs. Bonsor had expostulated in horror. "Remember that she is Arthur's secretary."

Mr. Triggs had almost choked with laughter; mirth invariably seemed to interfere with his respiration and ended in violent and wheezy coughings and gaspings. Had Mrs. Bonsor known that he repeated the conversation to Patricia, she would have been mortified almost to the point of discharging her husband's secretary.

"You see, me dear," Mr. Triggs had once said to Patricia, "'Ettie's so busy bothering about aitches that she's got time for nothing else. She ain't exactly proud of her old father," he had added shrewdly, "but she finds 'is brass a bit useful." Mr. Triggs was under no delusion as to his daughter's attitude towards him.

One day he had asked Patricia rather suddenly, "Why don't you get married, me dear?"

Patricia had started and looked up at him quickly. "Married, me, Mr. Triggs? Oh! I suppose for one thing nobody wants me, and for another I'm not in love."

Mr. Triggs had pondered a little over this.

"That's right, me dear!" he said at length. "Never you marry except you feel you can't 'elp it, then you'll know it's the right one. Don't you marry a chap because he's got a lot of brass. You marry for the same reason that me and my missis married, because we felt we couldn't do without each

other," and the old man's voice grew husky. "You wouldn't believe it, me dear, 'ow I miss 'er, though she's been dead eight years next May."

Patricia had been deeply touched and, not knowing what to say, had stretched out her hand to the old man, who took and held it for a moment in his. As she drew her hand away she felt a tear splash upon it, and it was not her own.

"Ever hear that song 'My Old Dutch'?" he asked after a lengthy silence.

Patricia nodded.

"I used to sing it to 'er – God bless my soul! what an old fool I'm gettin', talkin' to you in this way. Now I must be gettin' off. Lor! what would 'Ettie say if she knew?"

But Mrs. Bonsor did not know.

CHAPTER III

THE ADVENTURE AT THE QUADRANT GRILL-ROOM

That evening as Patricia looked in at the lounge on the way to her room, she found it unusually crowded. On a normal day her appearance would scarcely have been noticed; but this evening it was the signal for a sudden cessation in the buzz of conversation, and all eyes were upon her. For a moment she stood in the doorway and then, with a nod and a smile, she turned and proceeded upstairs, conscious of the whispering that broke out as soon as her back was turned.

As she stood before the mirror, wondering what she should wear for the night's adventure, she recalled a remark of Miss Wangle's that no really nice-minded woman ever dressed in black and white unless she had some ulterior motive. Upon the subject of sex-attraction Miss Wangle posed as an authority, and hinted darkly at things that thrilled Miss Sikkum to ecstatic giggles, and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe to pianissimo moans of anguish that such things could be.

With great deliberation Patricia selected a black charmeuse costume that Miss Wangle had already confided to the whole of Galvin House was at least two and a half inches too short; but as Patricia had explained to Mrs. Hamilton, if you possess exquisitely fitting patent boots that come high up the leg, it's a sin for the skirt to be too long. She selected a black velvet hat with a large white water-lily on the upper brim.

"You look bad enough for a vicar's daughter," she said, surveying herself in the glass as she fastened a bunch of red carnations in her belt. "White at the wrists and on the hat, yes, it looks most improper. I wonder what the major-man will think?"

Swift movements, deft touches, earnest scrutiny followed one another. Patricia was an artist in dress. Finally, when her gold wristlet watch had been fastened over a white glove she subjected herself to a final and exhaustive examination.

"Now, Patricia!" – it had become with her a habit to address her reflection in the mirror – "shall we carry an umbrella, or shall we not?" For a few moments she regarded herself quizzically, then finally announced, "No: we will not. An umbrella suggests a bus, or the tube, and when a girl goes out with a major in the British Army, she goes in a taxi. No, we will not carry an umbrella."

She still lingered in front of the mirror, looking at herself with obvious approval.

"Yes, Patricia! you are looking quite nice. Your eyes are violeter, your hair more sunsetty and your lips redder than usual, and, yes, your face generally looks happier."

When she entered the lounge it was twenty minutes to eight and, although dinner was at seven-thirty, the room was full. Everybody stared at her as with flushed cheeks she walked to the centre of the room. Then suddenly turning to Miss Wangle, she said, "Do you think I shall do, Miss Wangle, or do I look too wicked for a major?"

Miss Wangle merely stared. Mrs. Hamilton smiled and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe looked sympathetically at Miss Wangle. Mr. Bolton laughed.

"I wish I was a major, Miss Brent," he remarked, at which Patricia turned to him and made an elaborate curtsy.

"That girl will come to a bad end," remarked Miss Wangle with conviction to Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, as with a smile over her shoulder Patricia made a dramatic exit. She had noticed, however, that Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe were in hats and jackets. They, too, were apparently going out, although she had not heard them tell Mrs. Craske-Morton so. Mr. Bolton also had his hat in his hand. During the day Patricia had thought out very carefully the part she had set herself to play. If she were going to meet her fiancé back from the Front, she must appear radiantly happy, vide conventional opinion. But she had admonished her reflection in the mirror, "You mustn't overdo it. Women, especially tabbies, are very acute."

It had been Patricia's intention to go by bus but at the entrance of the lounge she saw Gustave who ingratiatingly enquired, "Taxi, mees?"

With a smile she nodded her head, and Gustave disappeared. "There goes another two shillings. Oh, bother Major Brown! Soldiers are costly luxuries," she muttered under her breath.

A moment after Gustave reappeared with the intimation that the taxi was at the door. A group of her fellow-guests gathered in the hall to see her off. Patricia thought their attitude more appropriate to a wedding than the fact that one of their fellow-boarders was going out to dinner. "It is clear," she thought, "that Patricia Brent, man-catcher, is a much more important person than is Patricia Brent, inveterate spinster."

She noticed that there was a second taxi at the door, and while her own driver was "winding-up" his machine, which took some little time, the other taxi got off in front. She had seen get into it Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, and Mr. Bolton.

As the taxi sped eastward, Patricia began to speculate as to what she really intended doing. She had no appointment, she was in a taxi which would cost her two shillings at least, and she had given the address of the Quadrant Grill-room.

She was still considering what she should do when the taxi drew up. Fate and the taxi driver had decided the matter between them, and Patricia determined to go through with it and disappoint neither. Having paid the man and tipped him handsomely, she descended the stairs to the Grill-room. She had no idea of what it cost to dine at the Quadrant; but remembered with a comfortable feeling that she had some two pounds upon her. With moderation, she decided, it might be possible to get a meal for that sum without attracting the adverse criticism of the staff. It had not struck her that it might appear strange for a girl to dine alone at such a restaurant as the Quadrant, and that she was laying herself open to criticism. She was too excited at this new adventure into which she had been precipitated for careful reasoning.

As she descended the stairs she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. She started. Surely that could not be Patricia Brent, secretary to a rising politician, that stylish-looking girl in black, with a large bunch of carnations. That red-haired creature with sparkling eyes and a colour that seemed to have caught the reflection of the carnations in her belt!

She entered the lounge at the foot of the stairs with increased confidence, and she was conscious that several men turned to look at her with interest. Then suddenly the bottom fell out of her world. There, standing in the vestibule, were Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, and Mr. Bolton. In a flash she saw it all. They had come to spy upon her. They would find her out, and the whole humiliating story would probably have to be told. Thoughts seemed to spurt through her mind. What was she to do? It was too late to retreat. Miss Wangle had already fixed her with a stony stare through her lorgnettes, which she carried only on special occasions.

Patricia was conscious of bowing and smiling sweetly. Some sub-conscious power seemed to take possession of her. Still wondering what she should do, she found herself walking head in the air and perfectly composed, in the direction of the Grill-room. She was conscious of being followed by Miss Wangle and her party. As Patricia rounded the glass screen a superintendent came up and enquired if she had a table. She heard a voice that seemed like and yet unlike her own answer, "Yes, thank you," and she passed on looking from right to left as if in search of someone, unconscious of the many glances cast in her direction.

When about half-way up the long room, just past the bandstand, the terrible thought came to her of a possible humiliating retreat. What was she to do? Why was she there? What were her plans? She looked about her, hoping that she did not appear so frightened as she felt. She was conscious of the gaze of a man seated at a table a few yards off. He was fair and in khaki. That was all she knew. Yes, he was looking at her intently.

"No, that table won't do! It is too near to the band." It was Miss Wangle's voice behind her. Without a moment's hesitation her sub-conscious self once more took possession of Patricia, and she

marched straight up to the fair-haired man in khaki and in a voice loud enough for Miss Wangle and her party to hear cried:

"Hullo! so here you are, I thought I should never find you." Then as he rose she murmured under her breath, "Please play up to me, I'm in an awful hole. I'll explain presently."

Without a moment's hesitation the man replied, "You're very late. I waited for you a long time outside, then I gave you up."

With a look of gratitude and a sigh of content, Patricia sank down into the chair a waiter had placed for her. If there had been no chair, she would have fallen to the floor, her legs refusing further to support her body. She was trembling all over. Miss Wangle had selected the next table. Patricia was conscious of hoping that somewhere in the next world Miss Wangle's sufferings would transcend those of Dives as a hundred to one.

As she was pulling off her gloves her companion held a low-toned colloquy with the waiter. She stole a glance at him. What must he be thinking? How had he classified her? Her heart was pounding against her ribs as if determined to burst through.

Suddenly she remembered that the others were watching and, leaning upon the table, she said:

"Please pretend to be very pleased to see me. We must talk a lot. You know – you know – " then she turned aside in confusion; but with an effort she said, "You – you are supposed to be my fiancé, and you've just come back from France, and – and – Oh! what are you thinking of me? Please – please – " she broke off.

Very gravely and with smiling eyes he replied, "I quite understand. Please don't worry. Something has happened, and if I can do anything to help, you have only to tell me. My name is Bowen, and I'm just back from France."

"Are you a major?" enquired Patricia, to whom stars and crowns meant nothing.

"I'm afraid I'm a lieutenant-colonel," he replied, "on the Staff."

"Oh! what a pity," said Patricia, "I said you were a major."

"Couldn't you say I've been promoted?"

Patricia clapped her hands. "Oh! how splendid! Of course! You see I said that you were Major Brown, I can easily tell them that they misunderstood and that it was Major Bowen. They are such awful cats, and if they found out I should have to leave. You see that's some of them at the next table there. That's Miss Wangle with the lorgnettes and the other woman is Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, who is her echo, and the man is Mr. Bolton. He's nothing in particular."

"I see," said Bowen.

"And – and – of course you've got to pretend to be most awfully glad to see me. You see we haven't met for a long time and – and – we're engaged."

"I quite understand," was the reply.

Then suddenly Patricia caught his eye and saw the smile in it.

"Oh, how dreadful!" she cried. "Of course you don't know anything about it. I'm talking like a schoolgirl. You see my name's Patricia, Patricia Brent," and then she plunged into the whole story, telling him frankly of her escapade. He was strangely easy to talk to.

"And – and – " she concluded, "what do you think of me?"

"I think I'd sooner not tell you just now," he smiled.

"Is it as bad as that," she enquired.

Then suddenly the smile faded from his face and he leaned across to her, saying:

"Miss Brent – "

"I'm afraid you must call me Patricia," she interrupted with a comical look, "in case they overhear. It seems rather sudden, doesn't it, and I shall have to call you – "

"Peter," he said. He had nice eyes Patricia decided.

"Er – er – Peter," she made a dash at the name.

Bowen sat back in his chair and laughed. Miss Wangle fixed upon him a stare through her lorgnettes, not an unfavourable stare, she was greatly impressed by his rank and red tabs.

After that the ice seemed broken and Patricia and her "fiancé" chatted merrily together, greatly impressing Patricia's fellow-boarders.

Bowen was a good talker and a sympathetic listener and, above all, his attitude had in it that deference which put Patricia entirely at her ease. She told him all there was to tell about herself and he, in return, explained that he came of an army family, and had been sent out to France soon after Mons. He was then a captain in the Yeomanry. He was wounded, promoted, and later received the D.S.O. and M.C. He had now been brought back to England and attached to the General Staff.

"Now I think you know all that is necessary to know about your fiancé," he had concluded.

Patricia laughed. "Oh, by the way," she said, "you have never given me an engagement ring. Please don't forget that. They asked me where my ring was, and I told them I didn't care about rings, as they were badges of servitude. You see it is quite possible that Miss Wangle will come over to us presently. She's just that sort, and she might ask awkward questions, that is why I am telling you all about myself."

"I'll remember," said Bowen.

"I'm glad you're a D.S.O., though," she went on, half to herself, "that's sure to interest them, and it's nice to think you're more than a major. Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mossdrop-Smythe are most worldly-minded. Of course it would have been nicer had you been a field-marshal; but I suppose you couldn't be promoted from a major to a field-marshal in the course of a few days, could you?"

"Well, it's not usual," he confessed.

When the meal was over Bowen looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid it's too late for a show, it's a quarter to ten."

"A quarter to ten!" cried Patricia. "How the time has flown. I shall have to be going home."

He noticed preparations for a move at the Wangle table.

"Oh, please, don't hurry! Let's go upstairs and sit and smoke for a little time."

"Do you think I ought," enquired Patricia critically, her head on one side.

"Well," replied Bowen, "I think that you might safely do so as we are engaged," and that settled it.

They went upstairs, and it was a quarter to eleven before Patricia finally decided that she must make a move.

"Do you know," she said as she rose, "I am afraid I have enjoyed this most awfully; but oh! to-morrow morning."

"Shall you be tired?" he enquired.

"Tired!" she queried, "I shall be hot with shame. I shall not dare to look at myself in the glass. I – I shall give myself a most awful time. For days I shall live in torture. You see I'm excited now and – and – you seem so nice, and you've been so awfully kind; but when I get alone, then I shall start wondering what was in your mind, what you have been thinking of me, and – and – oh! it will be awful. No; I'll come with you while you get your hat. I daren't be left alone. It might come on then and – and I should probably bolt. Of course I shall have to ask you to see me home, if you will, because – because –"

"I'm your fiancé," he smiled.

"Ummm," she nodded.

Both were silent as they sped along westward in the taxi, neither seeming to wish to break the spell.

"Thinking?" enquired Bowen at length, as they passed the Marble Arch.

"I was thinking how perfectly sweet you've been," replied Patricia gravely. "You have understood everything and – and – you see I was so much at your mercy. Shall I tell you what I was thinking?"

"Please do."

"It sounds horribly sentimental."

"Never mind," he replied.

"Well, I was thinking that your mother would like to know that you had done what you have done to-night. And now, please, tell me how much my dinner was."

"Your dinner!"

"Yes, *ple-e-e-e-ase*," she emphasised the "please."

"You insist?"

And then Patricia did a strange thing. She placed her hand upon Bowen's and pressed it.

"Please go on understanding," she said, and he told her how much the dinner was and took the money from her.

"May I pay for the taxi?" he enquired comically.

For a moment she paused and then replied, "Yes, I think you may do that, and now here we are," as the taxi drew up, "and thank you very much indeed, and good-bye." They were standing on the pavement outside Galvin House.

"Good-bye," he enquired. "Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, *ple-e-e-ase*," again she emphasised the "please."

"Patricia," he said in a serious tone, as the door flew open and Gustave appeared silhouetted against the light, "don't you think that sometimes we ought to think of the other fellow?"

"I shall always think of the other fellow," and with a pressure of the hand, Patricia ran up the steps and disappeared into the hall, the door closing behind her. Bowen turned slowly and re-entered the taxi.

"Where to, sir?" enquired the man.

"Oh, to hell!" burst out Bowen savagely.

"Yes, sir; but wot about my petrol?"

"Your petrol? Oh! I see," Bowen laughed. "Well! the Quadrant then."

In the hall Patricia hesitated. Should she go into the lounge, where she was sure Galvin House would be gathered in full force, or should she go straight to bed? Miss Wangle decided the matter by appearing at the door of the lounge.

"Oh! here you are, Miss Brent; we thought you had eloped."

"Wasn't it strange we should see you to-night?" lisped Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, who had followed Miss Wangle.

Patricia surveyed Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe with calculating calmness.

"If two people go to the same Grill-room at the same time on the same evening, it would be strange if they did not see each other. Don't you think so, Miss Wangle?"

"Did you say you were going there?" lisped Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, coming to Miss Wangle's assistance. "We forgot."

"Oh, do come in, Miss Brent!" It was Mrs. Craske-Morton who spoke.

Patricia entered the lounge and found, as she had anticipated, the whole establishment collected. Not one was missing. Even Gustave fluttered about from place to place, showing an unwonted desire to tidy up. Patricia was conscious that her advent had interrupted a conversation of absorbing interest, furthermore that she herself had been the subject of that conversation.

"Miss Wangle has been telling us all about your fiancé." It was Miss Sikkum who spoke. "Fancy your saying he was a major when he's a Staff lieutenant-colonel."

"Oh!" replied Patricia nonchalantly, as she pulled off her gloves, "they've been altering him. They always do that in the Army. You get engaged to a captain and you find you have to marry a general. It's so stupid. It's like buying a kitten and getting a kangaroo-pup sent home."

"But aren't you pleased?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton, at a loss to understand Patricia's mood.

"No!" snapped Patricia, who was already feeling the reaction. "It's like being engaged to a chameleon, or a quick-change artist. They've made him a 'R.S.O.' as well." Under her lashes Patricia saw, with keen appreciation, the quick glances that were exchanged.

"You mean a D.S.O., Distinguished Service Order," explained Mr. Bolton. "An R.S.O. is er – er – something you put on letters."

"Is it?" enquired Patricia innocently, "I'm so stupid at remembering such things."

"He was wearing the ribbon of the Military Cross, too," bubbled Mrs. Mossdrop-Smythe.

"Was he?" Patricia was afraid of overdoing the pose of innocence she had adopted. "What a nuisance."

"A nuisance!" There was surprised impatience in Miss Wangle's voice.

Patricia turned to her sweetly. "Yes, Miss Wangle. It gives me such a lot to remember. Now let me see." She proceeded to tick off each word upon her fingers. "He's a Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Bowen, D.S.O., M.C. Is that right?"

"Bowen," almost shrieked Miss Wangle. "You said Brown."

"Did I? I'm awfully sorry. My memory's getting worse than ever." Then a wave of mischief took possession of her. "Do you know when I went up to him to-night I hadn't the remotest idea of what his Christian name was."

"Then what on earth do you call him then?" cried Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Call him?" queried Patricia, as she rose and gathered up her gloves. "Oh!" indifferently, "I generally call him 'Old Thing,'" and with that she left the lounge, conscious that she had scored a tactical victory.

CHAPTER IV

THE MADNESS OF LORD PETER BOWEN

When Patricia awakened the next morning, it was with the feeling that she had suffered some terrible disappointment. As a child she remembered experiencing the same sensation on the morning after some tragedy that had resulted in her crying herself to sleep. She opened her eyes and was conscious that her lashes were wet with tears. Suddenly the memory of the previous night's adventure came back to her with a rush and, with an angry dab of the bedclothes, she wiped her eyes, just as the maid entered with the cup of early-morning tea she had specially ordered.

With inspiration she decided to breakfast in bed. She could not face a whole table of wide-eyed interrogation. "Oh, the cats!" she muttered under her breath. "I hate women!" Later she slipped out of the house unobserved, with what she described to herself as a "morning after the party" feeling. She was puzzled to account for the tears. What had she been dreaming of to make her cry?

Every time the thought of her adventure presented itself, she put it resolutely aside. She was angry with herself, angry with the world, angry with one Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Bowen. Why, she could not have explained.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed, as she made a fourth correction in the same letter. "Going out is evidently not good for you, Patricia."

She spent the day alternately in wondering what Bowen was thinking of her, and deciding that he was not thinking of her at all. Finally, with a feeling of hot shame, she remembered to what thoughts she had laid herself open. Her one consolation was that she would never see him again. Then, woman-like, she wondered whether he would make an effort to see her. Would he be content with his dismissal?

For the first time during their association, the rising politician was conscious that his secretary was anxious to get off sharp to time. At five minutes to five she resolutely put aside her notebook, and banged the cover on to her typewriter. Mr. Bonsor looked up at this unwonted energy and punctuality on Patricia's part, and with a tactful interest in the affairs of others that he was endeavouring to cultivate for political purposes, he enquired:

"Going out?"

"No," snapped Patricia, "I'm going home."

Mr. Bonsor raised his eyebrows in astonishment. He was a mild-mannered man who had learned the value of silence when faced by certain phases of feminine psychological phenomena. He therefore made no comment; but he watched his secretary curiously as she swiftly left the room.

Jabbing the pins into her hat and throwing herself into her coat, Patricia was walking down the steps of the rising politician's house in Eaton Square as the clock struck five. She walked quickly in the direction of Sloane Square Railway Station. Suddenly she slackened her speed. Why was she hurrying home? She felt herself blushing hotly, and became furiously angry as if discovered in some humiliating act. Then with one of those odd emotional changes characteristic of her, she smiled.

"Patricia Brent," she murmured, "I think a little walk won't do you any harm," and she strolled slowly up Sloane Street and across the Park to Bayswater.

Her hand trembled as she put the key in the door and opened it. She looked swiftly in the direction of the letter-rack; but her eyes were arrested by two boxes, one very large and obviously from a florist. A strange excitement seized her. "Were they – ?"

At that moment Miss Sikkum came out of the lounge simpering.

"Oh, Miss Brent! have you seen your beautiful presents?"

Then Patricia knew, and she became angry with herself on finding how extremely happy she was. Glancing almost indifferently at the labels she proceeded to walk upstairs. Miss Sikkum looked at her in amazement.

"But aren't you going to open them?" she blurted out.

"Oh! presently," said Patricia in an off-hand way, "I had no idea it was so late," and she ran upstairs, leaving Miss Sikkum gazing after her in petrified astonishment.

That evening Patricia took more than usual pains with her toilette. Had she paused to ask herself why, she would have been angry.

When she came downstairs, the other boarders were seated at the table, all expectantly awaiting her entrance. On the table, in the front of her chair, were the two boxes.

"I had your presents brought in here, Miss Brent," explained Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Oh! I had forgotten all about them," said Patricia indifferently, "I suppose I had better open them," which she proceeded to do.

The smaller box contained chocolates, as Mr. Bolton put it, "evidently bought by the hundred-weight." The larger of the boxes was filled with an enormous spray-bunch of white and red carnations, tied with green silk ribbon, and on the top of each box was a card, "With love from Peter."

Patricia's cheeks burned. She was angry, she told herself, yet there was a singing in her heart and a light in her eyes that oddly belied her. He had not forgotten! He had dared to disobey her injunction; for, she told herself, "good-bye" clearly forbade the sending of flowers and chocolates. She was unconscious that every eye was upon her, and the smile with which she regarded now the flowers, now the chocolates, was self-revelatory.

Mrs. Mossdrop-Smythe glanced significantly at Miss Wangle, who, however, was too occupied in watching Patricia with hawk-like intentness to be conscious of anything but the quarry.

Suddenly Patricia remembered, and her face changed. The flowers faded, the chocolates lost their sweetness and the smile vanished. The parted lips set in a firm but mobile line. What had before been a tribute now became in her eyes an insult. Men sent chocolates and flowers to – to "those women"! If he respected her he would have done as she commanded him, instead of which he had sent her presents. Oh! it was intolerable.

"If I sent flowers and chocolates to a lady friend," said Mr. Bolton, "I should expect her to look happier than you do, Miss Brent."

With an effort Patricia gathered herself together and with a forced smile replied, "Ah! Mr. Bolton, but you are different," which seemed to please Mr. Bolton mightily.

She was conscious that everyone was looking at her in surprise not unmixed with disapproval. She was aware that her attitude was not the conventional pose of the happily-engaged girl. The situation was strange. Even Mr. Cordal was bestowing upon her a portion of his attention. It is true that he was eating curry with a spoon, which required less accuracy than something necessitating a knife and fork; still at meal times it was unusual of him to be conscious even of the existence of his fellow-boarders.

It was Gustave who relieved the situation by handing to Patricia a telegram on the little tray where the silver had long since given up the unequal struggle with the base metal beneath. Patricia with assumed indifference laid it beside her plate.

"The boy ees waiting, mees," insinuated Gustave.

Patricia tore open the envelope and read: "May I come and see you this evening dont say no peter."

Patricia was conscious of her flushed face and she felt irritated at her own weakness. With a murmured apology to Mrs. Morton she rose from the table and went into the lounge where she wrote the reply: "Regret impossible remember your promise," then she paused. She did not want to sign her full name, she could not sign her Christian name she decided, so she compromised by using initials

only, "P.B." She took the telegram to the door herself, knowing that otherwise poor Gustave's life would be a misery at the hands of Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe and the others.

"Why had she given the boy sixpence?" she asked herself as she slowly returned to the dining-room. Telegraph boys were paid. It was ridiculous to tip them, especially when they brought undesirable messages. "Was the message undesirable?" someone within seemed to question. Of course it was, and she was very angry with Bowen for not doing as she had commanded him.

When Patricia returned to the table and proceeded with the meal, she was conscious of the atmosphere of expectancy around her. Everybody wanted to know what was in the telegram.

At last Miss Wangle enquired, "No bad news I hope, Miss Brent."

Patricia looked up and fixed Miss Wangle with a deliberate stare, which she meant to be rude.

"None, Miss Wangle, thank you," she replied coldly.

The dinner proceeded until the sweet was being served, when Gustave approached her once more.

"You are wanted, mees, on the telephone, please," he said.

Patricia was conscious once more of crimsoning as she turned to Gustave. "Please say that I'm engaged," she said.

Gustave left the dining-room. Everybody watched the door in a fever of expectancy.

Two minutes later Gustave reappeared and, walking softly up to Patricia's chair, whispered in a voice that could be clearly heard by everyone, "It ees Colonel Baun, mees. He wish to speak to you."

"Tell him I'm at dinner," replied Patricia calmly. She could literally hear the gasp that went round the table.

"But, Miss Brent," began Mrs. Craske-Morton.

Patricia turned and looked straight into Mrs. Craske-Morton's eyes interrogatingly. Gustave hesitated. Mrs. Craske-Morton collapsed. Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe exchanged meaning glances. Little Mrs. Hamilton looked concerned, almost a little sad. Patricia turned to Gustave.

"You heard, Gustave?"

"Yes, mees," replied Gustave and, turning reluctantly towards the door, he disappeared.

There was something in Patricia's demeanour that made it clear she would resent any comment on her action, and the meal continued in silence. Mr. Bolton made some feeble endeavours to lighten the atmosphere; but he was not successful.

In the lounge a quarter of an hour later, Gustave once more approached Patricia, this time with a note.

"The boy ees waiting, mees," he announced.

Patricia tore open the envelope and read:

"DEAR PATRICIA,

"Won't you let me see you? Please remember that even the under-dog has his rights.

"Yours ever, "PETER."

"There is no answer, Gustave," said Patricia, and Gustave left the room disconsolately.

Half an hour later Gustave returned once more.

On his tray were three telegrams. Patricia looked about her wildly. "Had the man suddenly gone mad?" she asked herself. "Tell the boy not to wait, Gustave," she said.

"There ees three boys, mees."

The atmosphere was electrical. Mr. Bolton laughed, then stopped suddenly. Miss Sikkum simpered.

Patricia turned to Gustave with a calmness that was not reflected in her cheeks.

"Tell the three boys not to wait, Gustave."

"Yes, mees!" Gustave slowly walked to the door. It was clear that he could not reconcile with his standard of ethics the allowing of three telegrams to remain unopened, and to dismiss three boys

without knowing whether or no there really were replies. The same feeling was reflected in the faces of Patricia's fellow-boarders.

"Miss Brent must be losing a lot of relatives, or coming into a lot of fortunes," remarked Mr. Bolton to Mrs. Hamilton.

Patricia preserved an outward calm she was far from feeling. She rose and went up to her room to discover from the three orange envelopes what was the latest phase of Colonel Bowen's madness. Seated on her bed she opened the telegrams.

The first read:

"Will you go motoring with me on Sunday peter."

No, she would do nothing of the kind.

The second said:

"If I have done anything to offend you please tell me and forgive me peter."

Of course he had done nothing, and it was all very absurd. Why was he behaving like a schoolboy?

The third was longer. It ran:

"I so enjoyed last night it was the most delightful evening I have spent for many a day please do not be too hard upon me peter."

This was a tactical error. It brought back to Patricia the whole incident. It was utter folly to have placed herself in such an impossible position. Obviously Bowen knew nothing of women, or he would not have made such a blunder as to remind her of what took place on the previous night, unless – unless – She hardly dare breathe the thought to herself. What if he thought her different from what she actually was? Could he confuse her with those – It was impossible!

She was angry; angry with him, angry with herself, angry with the Quadrant Grill-room; but angriest of all with Galvin House, which had precipitated her into this adventure.

Why did silly women expect every girl to marry? Why was it assumed because a woman did not marry that no one wanted to marry her? Patricia regarded herself in the looking-glass. Was she really the sort of girl who might be taken for an inveterate old maid? Her hands and feet were small. Her ankles well-shaped. Her figure had been praised, even by women. Her hair was a natural red-auburn. Her features regular, her mouth mobile, well-shaped with very red lips. Her eyes a violet-blue with long dark lashes and eyebrows.

"You're not so bad, Patricia Brent," she remarked as she turned from the glass. "But you will probably be a secretary to the end of your days, drink cold weak tea, keep a cat and get hard and angular, skinny most likely. You're just the sort that runs to skin and bone."

She was interrupted in her meditations by a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called.

The door was softly opened and Mrs. Hamilton entered.

"May I come in, dear?" she enquired in an apologetic voice, as she stood on the threshold.

"Come in!" cried Patricia, "why of course you may, you dear. You can do anything you like with me."

Mrs. Hamilton was small and white and fragile, with a ray of sunlight in her soul. She invariably dressed in grey, or blue-grey. Everything she wore seemed to be as soft as her own expression.

"I – I came up – I – I – hope it is not bad news. I don't want to meddle in your affairs, my dear; but I am concerned. If there is anything I can do, you will tell me, won't you? You won't think me inquisitive, will you?"

"Why you dear, silly little thing, of course I don't. Still it's just like your sweet self to come up and enquire. It is only that ridiculous Colonel Bowen who is showering telegrams on me in this way, in order, I suppose, to benefit the revenue. I think he has gone mad. Perhaps it's shell-shock, poor thing. There will most likely be another shower before we go to bed. Now we will go downstairs and stop those old pussies talking."

"My dear!" expostulated Mrs. Hamilton.

Patricia laughed. "Yes, aren't I getting acid and spinsterish?"

As they walked downstairs Mrs. Hamilton said:

"I'm so anxious to see him, my dear. Miss Wangle says he is so distinguished-looking."

"Who?" enquired Patricia, with mock innocence.

"Colonel Bowen, dear."

"Oh! Yes, he's quite a decent-looking old thing, and he's given Galvin House something to talk about, hasn't he?"

In the lounge Patricia soon became the centre of a group anxious for information; but no one was daring enough to put direct questions to her. Mrs. Craske-Morton ventured a suggestion that Colonel Bowen might be coming to dine with Patricia, and that she hoped Miss Brent would let her know in good time, so that she might make special preparations.

Patricia replied without enthusiasm. None was better aware than she that had her fiancé turned out to be a private, Mrs. Craske-Morton would have been the last even to suggest that he should dine at Galvin House. There would have been no question of special preparations.

About ten o'clock Gustave entered and approached Patricia. She groaned in spirit.

"You are wanted on the telephone, mees."

Patricia thought she detected a note of reproach in his voice, as if he were conscious that a fellow-male was being badly treated.

"Will you say that I'm engaged?" replied Patricia.

"It's Colonel Baun, mees."

For a moment Patricia hesitated. She was conscious that Galvin House was against her to a woman. After all there were limits beyond which it would be unwise to go. Galvin House had its standards, which had already been sorely tried. Patricia felt rather than heard the whispered criticism passing between Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. Rising slowly with an air of reconciled martyrdom, Patricia went to the telephone at the end of the hall, followed by the smiling Gustave, who, like the rest of Galvin House, had found his sense of decorum sorely outraged by Patricia's conduct.

"Hullo!" cried Patricia into the mouthpiece of the telephone, her heart thumping ridiculously. Gustave walked tactfully away.

"That you, Patricia?" came the reply.

Patricia was conscious that all her anger had vanished.

"Yes, who is speaking?"

"Peter."

"Yes."

"How are you?"

"Did you ring me up to ask after my health?"

There was a laugh at the other end.

"Well!" enquired Patricia, who knew she was behaving like a schoolgirl.

"Did you get my message?"

"I'm very angry."

"Why?"

"Because you've made me ridiculous with your telegrams, messenger-boys, and telephoning."

"May I call?"

"No."

"I'm coming to-morrow night."

"I shall be out."

"Then I'll wait until you return."

"Are you playing the game, do you think?"

"I must see you. Expect me about nine."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Please don't be angry, Patricia."

"Well! you mustn't come, then. Thank you for the chocolates and flowers."

"That's all right. Don't forget to-morrow at nine."

"I tell you I shall be out."

"Right-oh!"

"Good-bye!"

Without waiting for a reply, Patricia hung up the receiver.

When she returned to the lounge her cheeks were flushed, and she was feeling absurdly happy. Then a moment after she asked herself what it was to her whether he remembered or forgot her. He was an entire stranger – or at least he ought to be.

Just as she was going up to her room for the night, another telegram arrived. It contained three words: "Good night peter."

"Of all the ridiculous creatures!" she murmured, laughing in spite of herself.

CHAPTER V

PATRICIA'S REVENGE

Galvin House dined at seven-thirty. Miss Wangle had used all her arts in an endeavour to have the hour altered to eight-fifteen, or eight-thirty. "It would add tone to the establishment," she had explained to Mrs. Craske-Morton. "It is dreadfully suburban to dine at half-past seven." Conscious of the views of the other guests, Mrs. Craske-Morton had held out, necessitating the bringing up of Miss Wangle's heavy artillery, the bishop, whose actual views Miss Wangle shrouded in a mist of words. As far as could be gathered, the illustrious prelate held out very little hope of salvation for anyone who dined earlier than eight-thirty.

Just as Mrs. Craske-Morton was wavering, Mr. Bolton had floored Miss Wangle and her ecclesiastical relic with the simple question, "And who'll pay for the biscuits I shall have to eat to keep going until half-past eight?"

That had clinched the matter. Galvin House continued to dine at the unfashionable hour of seven-thirty. Miss Wangle had resigned herself to the inevitable, conscious that she had done her utmost for the social salvation of her fellow-guests, and mentally reproaching Providence for casting her lot with the Cordals and the Boltons, rather than with the De Veres and the Montmorencies.

Mr. Bolton confided to his fellow-boarders what he conceived to be the real cause of Mrs. Craske-Morton's decision.

"She's afraid of what Miss Wangle would eat if left unfed for an extra hour," he had said.

Miss Wangle's appetite was like Dominie Sampson's favourite adjective, "prodigious."

So it came about that on the Friday evening on which Colonel Peter Bowen had announced his intention of calling on Patricia, Galvin House, all unconscious of the event, sat down to its evening meal at its usual time, in its usual coats and blouses, with its usual vacuous smiles and small talk, and above all with its usual appetite – an appetite that had caused Mrs. Craske-Morton to bless the inauguration of food-control, and to pray devoutly to Providence for food-tickets.

Had anyone suggested to Patricia that she had dressed with more than usual care that evening, she would have denied it, she might even have been annoyed. Her simple evening frock of black voile, unrelieved by any colour save a ribbon of St. Patrick's green that bound her hair, showed up the paleness of her skin and the redness of her lips. At the last moment, as if under protest, she had pinned some of Bowen's carnations in her belt.

As she entered the dining-room, Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe exchanged significant glances. Woman-like they sensed something unusual. Galvin House did not usually dress for dinner.

"Going out?" enquired Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe sweetly.

"Probably," was Patricia's laconic reply.

Soup had not been disposed of (it was soup on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; fish on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, and neither on Sundays at Galvin House) before Gustave entered with an enormous bouquet of crimson carnations. It might almost be said that the carnations entered propelled by Gustave, as there was very little but Gustave's smiling face above and the ends of his legs below the screen of flowers. Instinctively everybody looked at Patricia.

"For you, mees, with Colonel Baun's compliments."

Gustave stood irresolute, the crimson blooms cascading before him.

"You've forgotten the conservatory, Gustave," laughed Mr. Bolton. It was always easy to identify the facetious from the serious Mr. Bolton; his jokes were always heralded by a laugh.

"Sir?" interrogated the literal-minded Gustave.

"Never mind, Gustave. Mr. Bolton was joking," said Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Yes, madame." Gustave smiled a mechanical smile: he overflowed with tact.

"Where will you have the flowers, Miss Brent?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton. "They are exquisite."

"Try the bath," suggested Mr. Bolton.

"Sir?" from Gustave.

It was Alice, Gustave's assistant in the dining-room during meals, who created the diversion for which Patricia had been devoutly praying. An affected little laugh from Miss Sikkum called attention to Alice, standing just inside the door, with an enormous white and gold box tied with bright green ribbon.

Patricia regarded the girl in dismay.

"Put them in the lounge, please," she said.

"You are lucky, Miss Brent," giggled Miss Sikkum enviously. "I wonder what's in the box."

"A chest protector," Mr. Bolton's laugh rang out.

"Really, Mr. Bolton!" from Mrs. Craske-Morton.

Patricia wondered was she lucky? Why should she be made ridiculous in this fashion?

"I should say chocolates." The suggestion came from Mr. Cordal through a mouthful of roast beef and Brussels sprouts. Everyone turned to the speaker, whose gastronomic silence was one of the most cherished traditions of Galvin House.

"He must have plenty of money," remarked Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe to Miss Wangle in a whisper, audible to all. "Those flowers and chocolates must have cost a lot."

"Ten pounds." The remark met a large Brussels sprout that Mr. Cordal was conveying to his mouth and summarily ejected it.

As Mr. Cordal was something on the Stock Exchange (Mr. Bolton had once said he must be a "bear") he was, at Galvin House, the recognised authority upon all matters of finance.

"Really, Mr. Cordal!" expostulated Mrs. Craske-Morton, rather outraged at this open discussion of Patricia's affairs.

"Sure of it," was all Mr. Cordal vouchsafed as he shovelled in another mouthful.

"You've been a goer in your time, Mr. Cordal," said Mr. Bolton.

Mr. Cordal grunted, which may have meant anything, but in all probability meant nothing.

For a quarter of an hour the inane conversation so characteristic of meal-times at Galvin House continued without interruption. How Patricia hated it. Was this all that life held for her? Was she always to be a drudge to the Bonsors, a victim of the Wangles and a target for the Boltons of life? It was to escape such drab existences that girls went on the stage, or worse; and why not? She had only one life, so far as she knew, and here she was sacrificing it to the jungle people, as she called them. Was there no escape? What St. George would rescue her from this dragon of – ?

"Colonel Baun, mees."

Patricia looked up with a start from the apple tart with which she was trifling. Gustave stood beside her, his face glowing in a way that hinted at a handsome tip. He was all-unconscious that he had answered a very difficult question in a manner entirely unsatisfactory to Patricia.

"I haf show him in the looaunge, mees. He will wait."

Patricia believed him. Was ever man so persistent? She saw through the move. He had come an hour earlier to be sure of catching her before she went out. Patricia was once more conscious of the ridiculous behaviour of her heart. It thumped and pounded against her ribs as if determined to compromise her with the rest of the boarders.

"Very well, Gustave, say we are at dinner."

"Yes, mees," and Gustave proceeded with his duties.

"He's clever," was Patricia's inward comment. "He's bought Gustave, and in an hour he'll have the whole blessed place against me."

If the effect upon Patricia of Gustave's announcement had been startling, that upon the rest of the company was galvanic. Each felt aggrieved that proper notice had not been given of so auspicious an event. There was a general feeling of resentment against Patricia for not having told them that she expected Bowen to call.

There were covert glances at their garments by the ladies, and among the men a consciousness that the clothes they were wearing were not those they had upstairs.

Miss Sikkum's playful fancy was with the Brixton "Paris model," which only that day she had taken to the cleaners; Miss Wangle was conscious that she had not hung herself with her full equipment of chains and accoutrements; Mrs. Mossdrop-Smythe thought regretfully of the pale blue evening-gown upstairs, a garment that had followed the course of fashion for nearly a quarter of a century. Mr. Bolton had doubts about his collar and his boots, whilst Mr. Cordal, with the aid of his napkin and some water from a drinking glass, strove to remove from his waistcoat reminiscences of bygone repasts.

The other members of the company all had something to regret. Mr. Archibald Sefton, whose occupation was a secret between himself and Providence, was dubious about the creases in his trousers; Mrs. Barnes wondered if the gallant colonel would discover the ink she had that day applied to the seams of her dress. Everyone was constrained and anxious to get to his or to her room for repairs.

"Did you know Colonel Bowen was coming?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton, quite at her ease in the knowledge that "something had told her" to put on her best black silk and the large cameo pendant that made her look like a wine-steward at a fashionable restaurant.

"He said he might drop in; but he's so casual that I didn't think it worth mentioning," said Patricia, conscious that the reply was unanimously regarded as unconvincing.

Having finished her coffee Patricia rose in a leisurely manner. She was no sooner out of the door than a veritable stampede ensued. Every one intended "just to slip upstairs for a moment," and each glared at the other on discovering that all seemed inspired by the same idea.

Mrs. Craske-Morton went to her "boudoir" out of tactful consideration for the young lovers; Mrs. Hamilton went up to the drawing-room for the same reason.

Patricia paused for a moment outside the door of the lounge. She put her cool hands to her hot cheeks, wondering why her heart should show so little regard for her feelings. She felt an impulse to run away and lock herself in her own room and cry "Go away!" to anyone who might knock. She strove to work herself into a state of anger with Bowen for daring to come an hour before the time appointed.

As she entered the lounge, Bowen sprang up and came towards her. There was a spirit of boyish mischief lurking in his eyes.

"I suppose," said Patricia as they shook hands, "you think this is very clever."

"Please, Patricia, don't bully me."

Patricia laughed in spite of herself at the humility and appeal in his voice. She was conscious that she was not behaving as she ought, or had intended to behave.

"It seems an age since I saw you," he continued.

"Forty-eight hours, to be exact," commented Patricia, forgetful of all the reproachful things she had intended to say.

"You got the flowers?" as his eye fell on the carnations which Gustave had placed in a large bowl.

"Yes, thank you very much indeed, they're exquisite. They made Miss Sikkum quite envious."

"Who's Miss Sikkum?"

"Time, in all probability, will show," replied Patricia, seating herself on a settee. Bowen drew up a chair and sat opposite to her. She liked him for that. Had he sat beside her, she told herself, she would have hated him.

"You're not angry with me, Patricia, are you?" There was an anxious note in his voice.

"Do you appreciate that you've made me extremely ridiculous with your telegrams, messenger-boys, conservatories, and confectioner's-shops? Why did you do it?"

"I don't know," he confessed with unconscious gaucherie, "I simply couldn't get you out of my thoughts."

"Which shows that you tried," commented Patricia, the lightness of her words contradicted by the blush that accompanied them.

"The King's Regulations do not provide for Patricias," he replied, "and I had to try. That is how I knew."

"Do you think I'm a cormorant, as well as an abandoned person?" she demanded.

"A cormorant?" queried Bowen, ignoring the second question. "I don't understand."

"Within twenty-four hours you have sent me enough chocolates to last for a couple of months."

"Poor Patricia!" he laughed.

"You mustn't call me Patricia, Colonel Bowen," she said primly. "What will people think?"

"What would they think if they heard the man you're engaged to call you Miss Brent?"

"We are not engaged," said Patricia hotly.

"We are," his eyes smiled into hers. "I can bring all these people here to prove it on your own statement."

She bit her lip. "Are you going to be mean? Are you going to play the game?" She awaited his reply with an anxiety she strove to disguise.

Bowen looked straight into her eyes until they fell beneath his gaze.

"I'm afraid I've got to be mean, Patricia," he said quietly. "May we smoke?"

As she took a cigarette from his case and he lighted it for her, Patricia found herself experiencing a new sensation. Without apparent effort he had assumed control of the situation, and then with a masterfulness that she felt rather than acknowledged, had put the subject aside as if requiring no further comment. This was a side of Bowen's character that she had not yet seen. As she was debating with herself whether or no she liked it, the door opened, giving access to a stream of Galvin Houseites.

"Oh!" gasped Patricia hysterically, "they're all dressed up, and it's in your honour."

"What's that?" enquired Bowen, less mentally agile than Patricia, as he turned round to gaze at the string of paying guests that oozed into the room.

"They've put on their best bibs and tuckers for you," she cried. "Oh! please don't even smile, *ple-e-e-ase!*"

The first to enter was Miss Wangle. Although she had not changed her dress, it was obvious that she had taken considerable pains with her personal appearance. On her fingers were more than the usual weight of rings; round her neck were flung a few additional chains; on her arms hung an extra bracelet or two and, as a final touch, she had added a fan to her equipment. To Patricia's keen eyes it was clear that she had re-done her hair, and she carried her lorgnettes, things that in themselves betokened a ceremonial occasion.

Following Miss Wangle like an echo came Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. She had evidently taken her courage in both hands and donned the blue evening frock, to which she had added a pair of white gloves which reached barely to the elbow, although the frock ended just below her shoulders.

Miss Wangle bowed graciously to Patricia, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe followed suit. They moved over to the extreme end of the room. Mr. Cordal was the next arrival, closely followed by Mr. Bolton. At the sight of Mr. Cordal Patricia started and bit her lower lip. He had assumed a vivid blue tie, and had obviously changed his collar. From the darker spots on his waistcoat and coat it was evident that he had subjected his clothes to a vigorous process of cleaning.

Mr. Bolton, on the other hand, had followed Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe's lead, and made a clean sweep. He had assumed a black frock-coat; but had apparently not thought it worth while to change

his brown tweed trousers, which hung about his boots in shapeless folds, as if conscious that they had no right there. He, too, had donned a clean collar and, by way of adding to his splendour, had assumed a white satin necktie threaded through a "diamond" ring. His thin dark hair was generously oiled and, as he passed over to the side of the room occupied by Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, he left behind him a strong odour of verbenä.

Mrs. Barnes came next and, one by one, the other guests drifted in. All had assumed something in the nature of a wedding garment in honour of Patricia's fiancé. Miss Sikkum had selected a pea-green satin blouse, which caused Bowen to screw his eyeglass vigorously into his eye and gaze at her in wonder.

"Do you like them?" It was Patricia who broke the silence.

With a start Bowen turned to her. "Er – er – they seem an er – awfully decent crowd."

Patricia laughed. "Yes, aren't they? Dreadfully decent. How would you like to live among them all? Why they haven't the pluck to break a commandment among them."

Bowen looked at Patricia in surprise. "Really!" was the only remark he could think of.

"And now I've shocked you!" cried Patricia. "You must not think that I like people who break commandments. I don't know exactly what I do mean. Oh, here you are!" and she ran across as Mrs. Hamilton entered and drew her towards Bowen. "Now I know what I meant. This dear little creature has never broken a commandment, I wouldn't mind betting everything I have, and she has never been uncharitable to anyone who has. Isn't that so?" She turned to Mrs. Hamilton, who was regarding her in astonishment. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm quite mad to-night, you mustn't mind. You see Colonel Bowen's mad and he makes me mad."

Turning to Bowen she introduced him to Mrs. Hamilton. "This is my friend, Mrs. Hamilton." Then to Mrs. Hamilton. "You know all about Colonel Bowen, don't you, dear? He's the man who sends me conservatories and telegrams and boy-messengers and things."

Mrs. Hamilton smiled up sweetly at Bowen, and held out her hand.

Patricia glanced across at the group at the other end of the lounge. The scene reminded her of Napoleon on the *Bellerophon*.

Suddenly she had an idea. It synchronised with the entry of Gustave, who stood just inside the door smiling inanely.

"Call a taxi for Colonel Bowen, please, Gustave," she said coolly.

Gustave looked surprised, the group looked disappointed, Bowen looked at Patricia with a puzzled expression.

"I'm sorry you're in a hurry," said Patricia, holding out her hand to Bowen. "I'm busy also."

"But – " began Bowen.

"Oh! don't trouble." Patricia advanced, and he had perforce to retreat towards the door. "See you again sometime. Good-bye," and Bowen found himself in the hall.

"Damn!" he muttered.

"Sir?" interrogated Gustave anxiously.

As Bowen was replying to Gustave in coin, Mrs. Craske-Morton appeared at the head of the stairs on her way down to the lounge after her tactful absence. For a moment she hesitated in obvious surprise, then, with the air of a would-be traveller who hears the guard's whistle, she threw dignity aside and made for Bowen.

"Colonel Bowen?" she interrogated anxiously.

Bowen turned and bowed.

"I am Mrs. Craske-Morton. Miss Brent did not tell me that you were making so short a call, or I would – " Mrs. Craske-Morton's pause implied that nothing would have prevented her from hurrying down.

"You are very kind," murmured Bowen absently, not yet recovered from his unceremonious dismissal. He was brought back to realities by Mrs. Craske-Morton expressing a hope that he would

give her the pleasure of dining at Galvin House one evening. "Shall we say Friday?" she continued without allowing Bowen time to reply, "and we will keep it as a delightful surprise for Miss Brent." Mrs. Craske-Morton exposed her teeth and felt romantic.

When Bowen left Galvin House that evening he was pledged to give Patricia "a delightful surprise" on the following Friday.

"That will teach them to pity me!" murmured Patricia that night as she brushed her hair with what seemed entirely unnecessary vigour. She was conscious that she was the best-hated girl in Bayswater, as she recalled the angry and reproachful looks directed towards her by her fellow-guests after Bowen's departure.

In an adjoining room Miss Wangle, a black cap upon her head, was also engaged in brushing her hair with a gentleness foreign to most of her actions.

"The cat!" she murmured as she lay it in its drawer, and then as she locked the drawer she repeated, "The cat!"

CHAPTER VI

THE INTERVENTION OF AUNT ADELAIDE

Sunday at Galvin House was a day of bodily rest but acute mental activity. The day of God seemed to draw out the worst in everybody; all were in their best clothes and on their worst behaviour. Mr. Cordal descended to breakfast in carpet slippers with fur tops. Miss Wangle regarded this as a mark of disrespect towards the grand-niece of a bishop. She would glare at Mr. Cordal's slippers as if convinced that the cloven hoof were inside.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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