

Benson Edward Frederic

The House of Defence.

Volume 2



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The House of Defence v. 2:

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E. F. Benson

The House of Defence v. 2

CHAPTER I

MAUD was lying in a long chair on the lawn after lunch the following afternoon, defending Christian Science from the gibes (which were keen) of the mockers, who were many. She had an ally, it is true, in the person of Alice Yardly, who, in her big hat and white dress, with a blue sash, looked like a doubtful Romney, and was smiling, literally with all her might. The more the mockers mocked, the kinder grew her smile, and the more voluble her explanations. Maud, for her part, would sooner have done battle alone, for all that Alice as an ally did was, with great precision and copious directions, to reveal to the enemy all the weak points in the fortifications (of which, it seemed to Maud, there were hundreds) and all the angles where an assault would probably meet with success. Wherever, so it seemed, there was any possible difficulty in “the scheme of things entire,” as understood by Christian scientists, there was poor dear Alice, waving a large and cheerful flag to call attention to it.

“No, I am not a Christian Scientist, Thurso,” Maud was saying, “because I think a lot of it is too silly – oh, well, never mind. But what I told you at lunch I actually saw with my own

eyes. I will say it again. Nurse Miles, who is optimistic, told me that Sandie was dying, and though it was really no use, she wanted Dr. Symes to be sent for. Well, I didn't send for him, but I went upstairs with Mr. Cochrane, and I saw Mr. Cochrane – by means of Christian Science, I must suppose – pull Sandie out of the jaws of death.”

“Be fair, Maud,” said Thurso. “Tell them what Dr. Symes said when he came next morning.”

“I was going to. He said he had known cases where the temperature went suddenly down from high fever to below normal, and it had not meant perforation. It meant simply what it was – the sudden cessation of fever. Of course, such a thing is very rare, and it would be an odd coincidence if – ”

Alice Yardly leaned forward, smiled, and interrupted violently and volubly.

“Mortal mind had caused the fever originally,” she said, “and it was this that Mr. Cochrane demonstrated over, thus enabling Sandie to throw off the false claim of fever and temperature, for he couldn't really have fever, since fever is evil.”

“Is temperature evil, too?” asked Thurso. “And why is a temperature of 104 degrees more evil than a normal temperature?”

Alice did not even shut her mouth, but held it open during Thurso's explanation, so as to go on again the moment he stopped.

“Neither heat nor cold really exist,” she said, “any more than

fever, since, as I was saying, fever is evil, and Infinite Love cannot send evil to anybody, because it is All-Good. It was the demonstration of this that made his temperature go down and let him get well. It was only with his mortal mind, too, that he could think he had fever, since there is no real sensation in matter, just as it was through mortal mind, and not through All-Love, that he thought he had caught it. But Immortal Mind knows that there is no sensation in matter, and so no disease. As David said, ‘Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day;’ and when Sandie, by Mr. Cochrane’s demonstration over mortal mind, perceived that – though he need not have been conscious that he perceived it – the false claim of fever left him, so, of course, his temperature went down.”

Maud gave a sigh, not of impatience, but of very conscious patience, which is very near akin to it.

“Darling Alice,” she said, “you haven’t understood a single word from the beginning. Mr. Cochrane didn’t make Sandie’s temperature go down.”

Alice’s mouth was still open. She interrupted like lightning.

“No, of course not,” she said. “It was not Mr. Cochrane: it was the belief and trust in Immortal Mind that had reached Sandie. It is not the healer who does it: it is Divine Love shining through the healer that disperses false claims. God is good and is All, and matter is nothing, because Life, God, Immortal Mind – ”

Maud sat up in her long chair and clapped her hands close to Alice’s face, so that she absolutely could not go on, in spite of

the omnipotence of Immortal Mind.

“I will finish one sentence – just one,” she said, “whatever you say. You don’t understand a single thing. It was the subsidence of high temperature that was the dangerous symptom. Mr. Cochrane came in after Sandie’s temperature had suddenly gone down. He had nothing to do with bringing it down. I took him up to Sandie, because Sandie’s temperature had gone down. I am sure it is very difficult to understand, especially if you don’t believe in temperature; but do draw a long breath and try to grasp that. It wasn’t Immortal Good, God, Mind, that brought Sandie’s temperature below normal: it was all, as you would say, a frightfully false claim. It was a symptom of dangerous illness, not a symptom of health. I wish you would attend more. You make me feel feverish in explaining like this, darling.”

Alice’s smile suffered no diminution. She was still quite ready to explain anything.

“As I said, fever cannot be sent by Divine Love,” she remarked, “and therefore, since there is nothing really existent in the world except Divine Love, it follows that fever cannot be real, and that the belief in it is a function of mortal mind. No evil or pain or disease can happen to anybody who has uprooted the false claim of mortal mind, and no drug can have any effect, either harmful or beneficial, on anyone who knows the truth. The drug only acts on mortal mind, which is – ”

Thurso entered the arena.

“I want to understand, Alice,” he said. “Supposing I choose

to drink large quantities of prussic acid for breakfast, under the conviction that no poison exists for Immortal Mind, shall I live to take pints more of it at lunch? Doesn't poison exist for mortal body?"

"If you drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt you," quoted Alice.

"Soufflé of nightshade for Alice this evening," said Maud cheerfully.

Theodosia had been keeping up a general chattering noise, to which no one listened. Now she had her chance.

"My!" she said. "You'd better become a Christian Scientist at once, Silas. Silas adores – he just adores – English beer, but he has a false claim that it disagrees with him. Now Mrs. Yardly tells us that there's no such thing as poison. So, Silas, just take tight hold of that, and get a barrel. I may be left a widow, but try – just swill it."

"Theodosia," began Silas; but he was not permitted to get further.

"But intoxicant drinks are in themselves evil things," said Alice, "just as tobacco, which is only fed upon by a loathsome worm, is evil, as you will find in Mrs. Eddy's miscellaneous writings. She has pronounced against them."

"But I thought there was no evil except in the false belief of mortal mind?" said Maud.

"That is just what I have been saying," said Alice profusely. "The only real existence is God, who is cause, source, origin,

overlies and underlies and encompasses.”

Rudolf Villars joined in.

“And if Mrs. Eddy said that cream-cheese was evil, would that make it so?” he asked politely. “Cannot she have attacks of error and mortal mind? Is it not just possible, as Oliver Cromwell said, that she is occasionally? I should have thought that instances might be found where intoxicants had even saved life in cases of exhaustion or exposure.”

Maud broke in again.

“You are all very flippant,” she said. “It really does not matter what Mrs. Eddy thinks about tobacco, or whether darling Alice will not answer our questions. But I did see – and I stick to it – a man who was past human power pulled back into life by Mr. Cochrane. How it was done I don’t know, but his own explanation was a perfectly simple one. He said it was the direct healing power of God. After all, if we and doctors say that there are healing powers in certain herbs which God made, why shouldn’t He heal direct?”

The throb of a motor and the sound of its wheels crunching the gravel was heard, and Thurso got up.

“Well, we must settle something else just now,” he said. “Who wants to drive over to Windsor, and who wants to go on the river, and who wants to do nothing?”

This broke up the conference, as it was designed to do, for Thurso felt literally unable to stand much more: he was nervous, irritable, scarcely in his own control. He had slept

badly – indeed, he had hardly slept at all – and this stream of balderdash that spouted from Alice was quite intolerable. She, however, with undiminished cheerfulness, expressed a preference for the river, and made it impossible for Villars not to offer his companionship. Ruby and Jim had not been seen since lunch. Theodosia and her husband went with Thurso to Windsor, and Mr. Yardly murmured something about letters, which, rightly interpreted, meant slumber, and hastily betook himself to the house. In consequence, Maud and her sister-in-law, both of whom announced their intention of doing nothing of any description, were before long left in possession of the garden. There had been a certain design about this, though successfully veiled, on Catherine's part. She wanted to have a talk with Maud, and the gentlest promptings had been sufficient to make other people choose other things.

The rest of the party dispersed in their various directions, and it was not till the motor had hooted at the entrance to the main road and the steam launch puffed its way past the opening in the yew-hedge that Catherine spoke again.

“Tell me more about this Mr. Cochrane,” she said.

Maud was already half immersed in her book, and had been quite unconscious of Catherine's diplomacy. She started a little when the question was put to her, and closed her book.

“There is really no more to tell,” she said. “I think I have told you all. Ah! no; there was one more thing, but they would all have howled so if I had said it. It was this: he told me that he

was demonstrating over the whole outbreak of typhoid. Well, it stopped quite suddenly. The cases had been coming in hour after hour till it ceased like a tap being turned off. And after that there were no more deaths. Of course, it sounds incredible, and if you ask me whether I really believe that it was through him that it came to an end like that, I shouldn't say 'Yes.' I don't know."

"I should like to see Mr. Cochrane," remarked Catherine.

"You can if you like. He is coming to town, he told me, some day this month. Oh, Catherine, it is interesting, anyhow! He did cure Sandie; also, he cured Duncan Fraser's wife. I am convinced of that. And then the other fact of the typhoid ceasing like that! Of course, you may say it was a pure coincidence; you may say that those other cures were coincidences too. But when you get a set of coincidences all together like that, you wonder if there is not – well, some law which lies behind them, and accounts for them all."

She paused a moment.

"A lot of apples and other things fell to the ground," she said, "and Newton deduced the law of gravity. It accounted for them all."

Catherine lit a cigarette, and threw the match away with great vigour.

"*What* a fool darling Alice is!" she observed. "I love Alice just as you do – you can't help loving her – but, oh, what a fool! Somehow, if a person talks such abject nonsense as that about anything, one concludes that the subject is nonsense too. But it

doesn't really follow. And Mr. Cochrane doesn't talk nonsense?" she asked.

"No; he isn't the least nonsensical. As I have told you, he goes and cures people when they are ill, instead of gassing about it. He's a very good fisherman, too."

Catherine could not help laughing. Maud mentioned this in a voice of such high approval.

"But isn't that inconsistent?" she said. "I don't think a man whose whole belief was in health and life should go and kill things."

"Oh yes; I think it's inconsistent," said Maud, "and so does he. But did you ever see anybody who wasn't inconsistent? I never did, and I never want to. He would be so extremely dull: you would know all about him at once."

"And you don't know all about Mr. Cochrane?" she asked.

"No; I should like to know more. I think I never met anyone so arresting. You are forced to attend, whether you like it or not."

"And I gather you like it?" asked Catherine.

"Yes, certainly. I like vigour and certainty, and – oh, well, that sort of cleanness. He is like a nice boy at Cambridge, with all this extraordinary strength behind."

Catherine could not help making mental comments on this.

"Ah, that attracts you?" she said. "It attracts me also. I like people to be strong and efficient; but, oh, Maud, how one's heart goes out to them when they are helpless and enmeshed in what is stronger than they!"

This was a clear change of subject. Mr. Cochrane was put aside for a little, and Catherine could not help noticing that Maud seemed relieved.

“Ah, you mean Thurso?” she said quickly, letting her book slide to the ground.

“Yes; and I want to talk to you about him, for I believe you are wise, and I feel helpless. I don’t know what to do. Last night, I must tell you, I went straight to his room after leaving you dressing. He had just taken laudanum, not because he had any headache, but because he longed for it.”

Maud clasped her hands together and gave a little pitiful sound, half sigh, half moan.

“Ah, the poor fellow!” she said. “Yes?”

“And – and he lied to me,” said Catherine, “and said he had not been taking it, and there was the glass smelling of it by his side. Then he was very angry with me for a little, and said I had spoiled everything, but eventually he gave me the bottle and let me pour it away. I did, and I threw the bottle into the shrubbery.”

Maud’s eye brightened.

“Ah! that’s better,” she said. “He can still fight it.”

Catherine shook her head.

“That’s not all,” she said, “and the rest is so dreadful, and so pathetic. I couldn’t sleep last night, and it must have been about two in the morning when I got out of bed and went to the window and sat there a little. And I saw Thurso come along the path, and he lit a match and found the bottle. Then he took it – it was bright

moonlight; I could see quite clearly – and literally sucked it, to see if there was not a drop or two left.”

Maud had no reply to this. If it was despicable, it was, as Catherine had said, dreadfully pathetic.

“Advise me, dear Maud,” she said at length. “I am horribly troubled about it. The sight of him turning that damned little bottle – no, I’m not sorry: I meant it – upside down in his mouth showed me how awfully he wanted it. I feel one shouldn’t lose a day or a minute. The desire grows like an aloe-flower. But if he won’t see a doctor, what is to be done? I shall send for Sir James as soon as I get back to town, and tell him all about it; but I can’t force Thurso to see him. Besides – ” and she stopped.

“Yes?”

“There is nothing in the world so hard to cure,” she said. “It is deadlier than a cancer.”

“But he still wants to free himself,” said Maud.

“Yes; so does a prisoner.”

There was a pause.

“Or do you think I am taking too pessimistic a view?” asked Catherine.

Maud could not help seeing the bright side of things. Sunshine appealed to her more strongly than shadow. It was more real to her.

“Yes; I think you are,” she said. “He let you pour the – well, the damned stuff away. You influenced him more strongly than his desire.”

“Yes, than his satisfied desire,” said Catherine with terrible commonsense. “He had just taken it. Do you suppose he would have let me pour it away if he was just going to take it?”

“I don’t know. You are stronger than he, I think.”

Maud gave a great sigh, picking up her book.

“I remember Mr. Cochrane practically offered to cure his neuralgia,” she said, “but I knew it was perfectly useless to suggest it to Thurso; nor at the time did I believe in Mr. Cochrane. But since then – ”

Catherine looked up, and saw in Maud’s face what she had suspected.

“Oh, Maud!” she said. “Are you in love with him?”

Maud leaned forward, and her book again dropped face downwards on the gravel. She did not notice it.

“Oh, I haven’t the slightest idea,” she said. “Catherine, I do like him awfully – I like him most awfully. No one has ever attracted me like that. Good gracious! how indelicate I am! But I don’t care one straw. I should like to put all my affairs and all poor Thurso’s into his hands. I should do it with the utmost confidence, and I should then just curl round as one does in bed, and feel everything is all right. Is that being in love? I don’t know or care. He is so strong, and so windy and so sunny. He is surrounded by sun, and – and it is as if he had just had a cold bath and stepped into the sun. I love that strength and wind. Don’t you like it? I want somebody who would go on playing undoubted spades at bridge in the middle of an earthquake. He would – for a shilling a

hundred. Am I in love with him? I tell you I don't know. Certainly this sort of thing has never happened to me before, and, again, I certainly have never been in love. So perhaps 'these are the ones.' Oh, do tell me! When Thurso proposed to you, was it like that? Did you feel there wasn't anybody else who *really* mattered? Oh dear! poor Mr. Cochrane, to have all this put upon him! He hasn't shown the slightest sign of doing more than admire my fishing. Lots of people have done that. But about you and Thurso, did you feel that? Is that the one?"

There was a fine irony about this, and Catherine, in spite of the previous discussion on Christian Science, which laid down that all that had any real existence was good, felt disposed to believe in the malice that lurked in chance questions. She evaded the direct answer.

"Oh, there are as many ways of love as there are people in the world," she said. "But, dear, I regard you with suspicion. There are certain symptoms –"

"Oh, don't," said Maud.

"Very well. But I feel with you about strength. It is an adorable quality to women. And it is that which so troubles me about Thurso. I know – the throwing away of the bottle proves it – that he is fighting; but is he strong enough? He was weak when he allowed himself to form a habit that he knew was harmful."

She threw her hands wide.

"Oh, it is so awful!" she said. "One begins by saying, 'I shall do this when I choose,' and so soon. This says, 'You shall do it when

I choose.' Personally, I always make it a rule to give anything up before I begin to want it very badly."

There was an irony in this, too. The remembrance of what chiefly kept her awake last night made her know that her rule was not always quite easy to follow. But this was secret from Maud.

"You, who get all you want!" she said, speaking from outside.

Catherine got up, and began walking up and down the small angle of lawn where they sat, bordering the deep flower-bed. All June was in flower there, just as in herself, to the outside view, all June seemed to be flowering. It was no wonder that Maud thought that. But all the emotional baggage which she had consistently thrown away all her life seemed to her to be coming back now in bales, returned to her by some dreadful dead-letter office – at least, she had hoped it was dead – and a sudden bitterness, born of perplexity, invaded her.

"Oh yes; everybody always thinks one is happy," she said, "if one has good digestion and a passable appearance, and heaps of things to do, and the enjoyment in doing them which I have, and as much money as one wants. But all these things only give one pleasure. Do you think I am happy? Do you really think so?"

Maud dropped her eyes. When talk deepens it is well to talk in the dark, or to talk without the distraction of sight.

"No, I don't think you are," she said, "if I look deep down."

"Then you are two people," said Catherine rather fiercely – "the superficial Maud who just now said I had all I wanted, implying happiness, and another Maud, who has to be fished

for.”

That was less personal, less intricate, and Maud looked up again, smiling.

“Quite true,” she said. “But so are you two Catherines; so is everybody who is worth anything. I used to think you an ideally happy person, because, as far as one could see, you got all you wanted. I imagine it was what you call the superficial Maud who thought that; I don’t think the deep-down ‘you’ is happy.”

Maud paused a moment, feeling that her sister-in-law was hanging on her words. It did not seem to her that in this claim for unhappiness, so to speak, that Catherine had made she had in her mind the drug-taking: it was something different to that. Only lately, too, had she herself been conscious of this “deeper Maud,” which yet did not in the least affect the workings of the more superficial self. The joy of morning and evening, the depression and irritation of east wind, the rapture of catching sea-trout, went on, on the surface, just as keenly as ever, but an interior life had awoke.

“I used to envy you so, Cathy,” she said – “at least, I used to envy lots of things about you, when I thought that the ‘you’ which all the world knew and admired so was all there was. But now I believe that there is a greater ‘you’ than that, and that a realer ‘me’ than the ordinary thing perceives it. And since you ask me, I don’t think that essential part of you is happy, any more than Thurso is happy.”

Catherine sat down again, and thought over this before she

answered.

“I would give, or give up, a great deal to make Thurso happy,” she said with absolute sincerity. “But I get on his nerves.”

Maud looked up, waiting for more – waiting for the completion of the sentence which she had heard not so long ago on Thurso’s lips. It came.

“And he bores me,” said Catherine.

There was a long silence. Bees buzzed in the flowers, making them bend and sway and nod to their weight; a grasshopper clicked and whirred on the lawn; swifts swooped and chided together in sliding companies; while the splash of oars or churn of a steamer sounded from the river. Then – such is the habit of the world – it struck them both how unlike themselves, unlike the ordinary presentment of themselves, that is to say, they were being, and simultaneously they swam out of the depths that were in reality the much more essential abode of them both. But the return to normal levels was short; they soon went down again; since those who have met or seen each other below always go back there. It is only those who have talked insincerely on deep matters who prefer to splash about on the surface. But a few surface remarks followed.

“Yet it is almost certainly one’s own fault if one is bored,” said Catherine. “To be bored only shows that a bore is present – probably oneself. Yet, Maud ... if I tell him about the bazaars, and sales, and speeches, and so on, *he* is bored; and they do make up a big part of my life.”

“On the surface,” said she, “since we are being frank.”

“No, not on the surface, since we are contradicting each other. The deepest and most real part of me that I know is sorry for poor devils, and it expresses itself in these ways. And it is exactly that which gets on his nerves. If I get up from lunch because I have got to go somewhere, he is irritated. He thinks I am restless. Well, so I am. I want to be doing things, not eating stupid cutlets. What do you want me to do? What does he want me to do? Eat opium instead?”

Maud gave a long sigh.

“Oh, Cathy, that was a pity!” she said.

Catherine gave a little hopeless gesture.

“Oh yes; it was a pity. Lots of things are. Our attitude towards each other is a pity. But I’m sorry I said that. Oh, do help me! Let’s be practical. Remember, I am at home when I am doing things. And I want to know what to do about a hundred things.”

Catherine got up again. She was, as she said, always practical, and she was always restless. This afternoon in particular, after the inconclusive wakefulness of the night before, she longed to map out plans, rules of conduct, a line to take about all these complications. Yet, since all her life she had been chary of emotion, apt to regard it as useless, if not dangerous, stuff to have on board; now, when it was certainly there, either through her will or in opposition to it, she found herself – she, the ready speaker – destitute of words to deal with it to Maud. And in her silent search for expression again she paced up and down the

busy bee-travelled flower-beds. Then there came a crisper note – the sound of crunched gravel – and a dog-cart drew up at the front-door, some fifty yards only from where they sat. There was only one person in it, a young man, who dismounted and rang the bell, and stood at the pony's head waiting for it to be answered. But apparently the servants were drowsy too, as befitted Sunday afternoon, and after a pause he rang again.

No definite process of reasoning went on through Catherine's mind, but somehow her heart sank. This was no caller, no one who would need entertainment; but there was something dimly familiar in that cart, and in the tradesman-like young man, that reminded her of medicines, of the time when the children had the measles. Yes; it was a man from the chemist's ... and next moment she knew why her heart sank.

"I will see who it is," she said to Maud. "The servants seem to be asleep;" and she went across the grass to the front-door.

She had a word with the man, who gave her a small package, neatly sealed. Then he touched his hat, mounted, and turned his horse. Catherine came back to where Maud was sitting.

"It is directed to Thurso," she said, "and it is from the chemist in Windsor. Maud – "

Maud understood; but she shook her head.

"Oh, you can't open other people's things," she said – "you can't. Oh, Catherine, what are we to do?"

Catherine sat down again, with the bottle – the shape of it was plain – in her hand. Then Maud spoke again.

“But we must,” she said. “Open it carefully, so that if it isn’t what we think we can do it up again. Oh, I hate it all; it seems mean, but I don’t care. I’ll open it if you would rather not.”

Catherine seemed to think this unnecessary, and carefully broke the seals. There was a bottle of dark blue glass inside, with a red label of “Poison” on it. It was closed with a glass stopper, which she withdrew, and she smelled it. Then, paper and all, she passed it to Maud.

Maud put the stopper back into the bottle, squeezed up the paper and string in which it had been wrapped into a tight ball, and threw it deep into the flower-bed. Then she went to the opening in the yew-hedge and flung the bottle itself into mid-stream.

“So we’ve both had a hand in it,” she said when she returned. “Oh, Cathy, last night only he let you throw the wretched stuff out of the window, and the very next day has to go and order some more. Poor dear old boy! He must have ordered it when he went in with Theodosia after lunch. He must have told them he wanted it quickly. It’s death and hell, you know. I didn’t stop to think. I had to throw it into the river. What next? Are we to know anything about it or not?”

“Yes; he would find out in any case. The chemist’s man would say he gave it to me. But there is no reason why you should come into it.”

“Oh, give me my share,” said Maud quickly. “I want to help.”

“Of course you can help; but I am quite willing to take the

whole responsibility for what we have done," said Catherine.

"No; I want it to come from both of us," said Maud, "if that is of any use."

Catherine considered this.

"It is," she said. "You have more weight with him than I have, you know."

There was no trace of any bitterness in her tone. It was plain unemotional speech, but it struck Maud as one of the saddest things she had ever heard said. She had long known, of course, that the married life of her brother and Catherine was not very happy, but this afternoon the tragedy of it was becoming, by these little trivial words, infinitely more real. And the materials for tragedy were being dreadfully augmented. This little bottle she had just thrown into the Thames was like one of those little incidents in the first act of a play, from which disaster will certainly be evolved later. What hideous scene in the last act did the great Playwright of life mean to make out of this?

Then suddenly some memory of things Mr. Cochrane had said to her up in Scotland, some sentences from a book concerning Christian Science which he had lent her, came back to her mind. He had warned her that she would find in it certain things which would seem to her ridiculous, and he had asked her to pass over those. But he had told her that she would also find there certain things which were indisputably true, and, remembering one of them, she told herself now that she was thinking wrongly in anticipating evil like this. If she was to be of any use in the

world, or produce any happiness in herself or others, she must turn away from evil, must deny it, and look at and affirm this great reality of Love and Good. To dwell on sin and error and on their consequences was to invite them, to make them her guests. It was another Guest – a very willing One – that was to be made welcome, but He was autocratic: you had to do His bidding all the time, even in details.

“Yes, let me help,” she said. “And we must tell him at once what we have done. Don’t let us deceive him, even if we could.”

“He will be furious,” said Catherine.

“We can’t help that. We have certainly got to tell him. Besides, we don’t want to conceal what we have done; we don’t want to think of some plan for preventing it coming to his knowledge. We are not ashamed of it. Wouldn’t you do it again? I would. I would throw all the laudanum bottles in the world into the Thames if I could prevent the stuff reaching him.”

People began to gather again after this. Rudolf Villars and his companion came back from the river, he looking fatigued, while Alice was fresher than paint. Her husband came out from the house with considerable alertness, as if letter-writing had been an unconscious recuperative process. A few people from neighbouring houses came, by road or river, to look in at tea-time; and when Thurso, with the two Americans, returned from Windsor, there was a rather numerous company on the lawn. He went into the house before joining the others, and was there some minutes, during which time they heard a bell ring furiously

within. Catherine's eyes and Maud's met over this; and when he came out, another piece of silent telegraphy went on between them, and Maud got up and went straight to him before he joined the tea-table group.

Catherine could not go with her, being busy with her entertaining, but between sentences she watched them. They were not far distant when they met, and Thurso's face was towards her. She saw it get suddenly white, and he gave one furious gesticulation, then turned and went back towards the house again, without joining them. He did not go in, but walked down the shrub-set road that led to the stables.

Maud came back to the tea-table, spoke to friends, and gradually got close to Catherine.

"He is going back to Windsor to get more," she said quietly. "Yes, no sugar, thanks. He would not listen to me. I have never seen him so angry."

Catherine just nodded, and then, since, whatever private tragedy was being played, the public comedy had to go on, she was, with the surface-Catherine, no more than an admirable hostess, charmed to see her guests, eager to interest them. But below, courageous though she was, and little as she regretted what Maud and she had done, though it turned out to be futile, she feared what was coming, for she hated anger, and she hated, also, to think that just now, when, for reasons of which Maud knew nothing, she wanted Thurso's friendship and companionship so much, there should open this fresh breach between them. But it

was no good thinking of that: here was Villars at her elbow, and here was Thurso already on his way back to Windsor, for she had heard the motor start by the back way from the stables. And only last night he had let her pour the foul stuff away, and had thanked her for doing it!

Meantime the tinkle of drawing-room philosophy went on round her, and it was a relief, in its way, to join in it. It was so perfectly easy.

“Yes, it is necessary for all of us to have some fad which for the time being is quite the most serious thing in the world,” she said to Lady Swindon, who had come down the river from Cookham. “We do the serious things lightly, but we take our fads in deadly earnest. Two years ago, do you remember, we never wore hats in the country. I didn’t get as far as wearing none in town, though I remember you did; but in the country I felt that golden hours were wasted if I had a hat on. Then last year there was the simple life. I retain pieces of that still.”

Lady Swindon laughed.

“I know you do, darling Catherine, but you are so busy that you find time for everything. I gave it up because it was so very complicated. One had to provide two sorts of lunches and two sorts of dinners every day – one for the simple-life people who ate curried lentils and all the most expensive fruits, and one for the people who ate beef. Swindon always ate both, to show he wasn’t bigoted, and so, of course, he had two months at Carlsbad instead of one. The simple life, anyhow, is finished with: it was

too difficult. Do tell me what the next fad is going to be. You always are a full fad ahead of the rest of us.”

“I wish I knew. I thought it would be spiritualism at one time, but I don’t believe now that it will come off. Such confusing things happen. I went to a *séance* the other day, and the most wonderful materialisation occurred, and I recognised the figure at once, and for certain, as being my grandmother. But in the same breath Major Twickenham over there recognised it as being his great-aunt, who was Austrian, and is no more a relation of mine than I am of the Shah’s. The medium subsequently explained it as being a spiritual coalition, but personally I felt rather inclined to explain it as being the medium.”

Lady Swindon looked thoroughly disappointed.

“Oh, I did hope it was going to be spiritualism,” she said. “I do automatic writing every evening, unless I am really tired – because it’s no use then, is it? – and sometimes it says *the* most extraordinary things. Haven’t you ever tried it? It is quite fascinating, especially if you use a stylograph pen, which seems to go easier. And Swindon and I have heard the most awful raps – like the postman. But if it is not going to be the craze I shall give it up. One has no time for a private hobby: one has to ride the public hobby all the time. Are you sure you are right? Think of the Zigzags. I never can remember their name. And what about Christian Science? I hear it is spreading tremendously. Or deep breathing?”

The smile on Alice Yardly’s face widened and deepened as she

heard the sacred word. But at this moment she was being talked to, and could not join in with her long and lucid explanations, though the scientific statement of Being – cause, source, origin – was trembling on her lips.

“I have tried deep breathing,” said Catherine, “but there really isn’t time. You can’t do anything else while you are doing it; you can’t talk even, because your mouth is closed, and you breathe in through one nostril and breathe out through the other. Perhaps it will be Christian Science, though, do you know, I think some of it is too serious and sensible to be a fad, whereas the other half is too silly. On that side talk to Alice, or read what Mark Twain says. But on the serious side – the side that is sensible – get Maud to tell you about the typhoid up at Achnaleesh and her Mr. Cochrane.”

“Her Mr. Cochrane?” asked Lady Swindon, with the alertness of the world.

But the unconsciousness of the world, no less important an equipment, answered her.

“Oh, only ‘hers’ because she told me about him; no other reason. Thurso and she were up there together.”

“And Thurso – isn’t he here?”

“Oh yes,” said Catherine, “but tea-time isn’t his hour. Tea-time is women’s hour; it corresponds to men’s after-dinner talk when we have gone upstairs.”

“But we have women’s hour then, too,” said Lady Swindon. “I suppose we have got more to say?”

Lady Thurso laughed.

“Oh, I don’t think that,” she said. “I think we only take longer to say it. Tea, Theodosia?”

Theodosia had truly American ideas about being introduced. It was her custom – and a genial one – to make all her guests formally known to each other by name, and she expected the same formality.

“Kindly introduce me, Catherine,” she said.

“Lady Swindon – my cousin, Mrs. Morton.”

“Very happy to make your acquaintance, Lady Swindon,” said Theodosia; “and don’t you think that Catherine’s place down here is just the cunningest spot you ever saw? Why, look at that yew-hedge! I guess – expect, I mean – that Noah planted it before the Flood, or, anyhow, soon after, to have made it that height. But, then, all Catherine has is perfect, is it not? I adore her things and her. My! I never saw such a wonderful black pearl as that you’ve got around your neck. It looks as if it came straight from the Marquis of Anglesea’s tie-pin.”

“I think not; I inherited it,” said Lady Swindon rather icily.

“Well, there you are,” said the prompt Theodosia. “That’s what comes of being an Englishwoman of the upper classes. You inherit things, and we’ve got to buy them. Why, this afternoon Lord Thurso and my husband and I drove over to Windsor, and I never saw a spot that looked so inherited as that. You can’t buy that look: it’s just inheritance. Do you know my husband? Ah! he’s talking to Count Villars over there; and what a lovely man

he is! And we had the loveliest time to-day! I never saw Windsor before; and fancy inheriting that! But I'm afraid Lord Thurso is sick. He called at a chemist's, and told them to send some medicine out here right away. I guess he pined for that medicine. And he's not here, is he? I shouldn't wonder if he went straight in to take it. I guess he's taking it now. Catherine, I think your husband is the loveliest man! I hope he's not real sick. But he just pined for that medicine."

Tea was no longer in demand, and Catherine got up. The whole situation was beginning to get on her nerves. Theodosia, with her awful American manner, was on her nerves; this dreadful information about the call at the chemist's was there also, and she felt sure that Lady Swindon, for all her "darling Catherines," was that sort of friend who likes knowing the weak points of others, not necessarily with the object of their malicious use, but as useful things to have in your pocket. Theodosia, as she was aware, when she got up now to get out of immediate range of that rasping voice, was one of her weak points: the mention of Thurso's medicine and his anxiety to get it were others. Theodosia touched them with the unerring instinct of the true and tactless bungler. So Catherine, with the higher courage that wants not to know the worst, if Theodosia was going to throw more sidelights on the subject of this medicine, moved out of earshot.

Lady Swindon justified her position of a true friend to Catherine, and became markedly more cordial to Theodosia. She

wanted to know more about this, and proceeded in the spirit of earnest inquiry.

“What a charming afternoon you must have had!” she said. “To see Windsor for the first time is delightful, is it not? and to have Lord Thurso as a companion is delightful at any time. But he is not ill, is he?”

“He seemed just crazy to get to that chemist’s,” said Theodosia, “and he seemed just crazy to get back home again. They tell me you have a speed-limit for motors over here, but if we didn’t exceed it, I don’t see that it can be of much service.”

Now, Lady Swindon was not really more malicious than most people, in spite of her weakness for her friends’ weaknesses, and it was in the main her truly London desire to be always well up in current scandals, and know the details of all that may perhaps soon be beginning to be whispered, that led her to “pump” (if a word that implies effort may be used about so easy a process) Theodosia on this subject. Thurso’s long absence in Scotland, to begin with, had seemed to her queer, and to require explanation. It did not seem likely, somehow, that he had gone there after a woman, but, on the other hand, she personally thought it improbable that he had really gone to look after fever-stricken tenants. As a matter of fact, of course he had done so, but the truth usually escapes these earnest inquirers, especially if it is quite simple and straightforward. But here was a fresh fact: he had been crazy to get to the chemist’s and had raced home. She felt she had guessed.

“He used to have dreadful headaches,” she observed. “Perhaps he had one this afternoon.”

“He didn’t seem that way,” said Theodosia, “and I know about headaches, because Silas used to have them, arising from faulty digestion, to which he is a martyr. He took opium for them.”

“Yes?” said Lady Swindon.

“That always cured him. Why, here’s Count Villars. Count Villars, I haven’t set eyes on you since lunch, and I feel bad because you are neglecting me. Let me present you to Lady Swindon.”

Villars bowed.

“I think we were introduced about twelve years ago,” he observed. “How are you, Lady Swindon? You have come down the river from your charming Cookham?”

Lady Swindon got up, turning her back on Theodosia, for whom she had no further use.

“Yes, and I am just going back there. How clever of you to remember where we live! Will you take me to my boat? Let us walk round the garden first. It is charming to see you again.”

They strolled a few yards down the path between the two tall herbaceous borders, while she rapidly ran over in her mind what information she wanted from him. It was very quickly done.

“And you are staying here?” she asked. “How do you find Catherine? I am sure you walked together last night after dinner, and joined old memories onto the present.”

Lady Swindon was colossal in her impertinence. It struck

Villars afresh after his long absence from England how very ill-bred a well-bred Englishwoman can be. But he was more than a match for her.

“Ah, my dear lady,” he said, “we found that the two needed no link. We neither of us have that faculty, which, no doubt, is often convenient, of forgetting old friends. As always, I adore her; as always, she receives my adoration from her infinite height. The Madonna still smiles on her worshipper. He asks no more.”

It was admirably done, for it told her nothing. She tried again.

“Indeed? I thought you had once asked more,” she said. “We all supposed so.”

“There is no limit to what people of brilliant and vivid imagination may not suppose,” said he.

She could not help smiling at her own defeat. His refusals to give direct answers were so very silken.

“And the truth always exceeds one’s imagination, does it not?” she said.

“It is usually different from it,” observed he.

This would not do. She tried something else.

“And Thurso?” she said. “How do you think he is?”

Villars looked at her in bland surprise.

“Very well, surely, is he not?” he said. “Why should you think otherwise?”

“Only something I heard about his calling at a chemist’s and racing home afterwards.”

“Indeed!” said Villars.

Lady Swindon was afraid there was no more to be got there, and he handed her into her launch.

"But I am so glad, so very glad you think he is well," she said. "Do come and spend a Sunday with us some week. I will try to get Catherine to come and meet you."

He murmured gratitude of the non-committal sort, and stood a little while looking after her launch, which sped like an arrow up-stream, raising a two-foot wave in its wake, and nearly upset half a dozen boats in its passage. Then he strolled back to the lawn again. He had not the faintest intention of staying with Lady Swindon, but, on the other hand, he did not at all desire to be on bad terms with her, for, little as he respected her, he had a profound respect for her supreme mischief-making capabilities. She had got hold of something about Thurso, too, and perhaps it was as well she had not seen him. In that case, his own bland assertion that he considered him very well would not have been of much use.

Lady Swindon's departure had acted as a signal for a general move, and when Villars got back, Lady Thurso was just saying good-bye to the last of her guests. On the moment, the butler came out of the house and spoke to her.

"His lordship begs that you and Lady Maud will go to his room for a moment as soon as you are disengaged, my lady," he said.

"Tell his lordship we will come immediately. Ah, Count Villars, we were going on the river, were we not? Could you wait a few minutes? Thurso wants to see me about something."

Maud joined her, and they went together to Thurso's sitting-room at the end of the house. He was sitting at his table in the window, and, with his usual courtesy, got up as they entered. On the table in front of him stood a bottle of dark blue glass. He had just finished unpacking this as they entered, and threw the corrugated paper in which it had been wrapped into the waste-paper basket.

"A cigarette, Catherine?" he said, offering her one. "I want a few minutes' talk with you both."

She took one, and he waited till she had lit it, and sat down.

"Maud tells me," he said, "that you and she undid a package that arrived here this afternoon addressed to me, and threw it away. That is so, I believe?"

She did not answer – it seemed unnecessary – and he raised his voice a little.

"Will you kindly say whether that is so?" he said.

"Yes; quite right," she said.

Again he raised his voice, that shook with suppressed rage.

"And do you make a habit of doing such things, both of you? Do you open my letters, other people's letters?"

"Oh, Thurso, don't be a fool!" said Maud quietly.

His face went very white.

"Maud, I am trying to be courteous," he said, "under a good deal of provocation. You might make an effort to follow my example."

"Is it courteous to ask Catherine and me whether we are in the

habit of opening other people's letters?" she asked.

"Your behaviour this afternoon seems to me to warrant my question," he said.

"No, Thurso, it does not," said his wife. "I think you know it, too."

He looked first at the one, then at the other, and his hand moved as if instinctively towards the bottle on the table.

"I don't want to make a scene with either of you," he said, "and I don't want to detain you. I wish to say, however, that I think you behaved quite outrageously. And I require you both to promise never again to act in such a way. You are absolutely unjustified in touching or interfering with my things in this way from whatever motive."

He took up the bottle.

"You see how little good your interference has done in this instance," he said, "and it will do as little in any other. You will merely oblige me to adopt methods as underhand as your own."

"There was nothing underhand," said Catherine. "We were going to tell you what we had done. Indeed, Maud did tell you."

"I should have said that stealing was underhand," said he very evilly, "though perhaps you think differently. As to your telling me, you knew it was inevitable that I should find out."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Maud quickly. "Even if you could never have found out otherwise, we should have told you."

"Ah!" said he.

Maud looked at him in amazement. She had been told by Catherine this afternoon that there were two Mauds, and here indeed was a Thurso whom she would scarcely have known for her brother. His manner was quite quiet and courteous again now, but it seemed as if he was possessed. There was a world of sneering incredulity in that one word.

“You don’t believe what I say?” she asked.

He was silent; he smiled a little, and raised his eyebrows. There was no need for him to speak; he could not have shouted his meaning nearly so clearly.

“Then where is the use of our giving you any promise for the future, if you don’t believe what we say?” she asked.

“I ask for your promise, however,” he said.

“And if we don’t give it you?” said Catherine.

He looked at her closely, and she felt that he hated her at that moment.

“I shall merely have to find some other way of getting things delivered,” he said, “so that you shall not st – intercept them.”

There was silence.

“I ask for your promise,” he repeated.

Maud threw back her head.

“I promise,” she said. “It is no use refusing.”

“And I,” said Catherine, getting up. “Is that all, Thurso?”

Thurso put his hand to his head suddenly, with a wince of pain he could not control.

“Yes, on that point that is all,” he said. “Let us agree to say

nothing more about a most unpleasant subject. But I want to tell you this: I am suffering so hideously at the present moment that I hardly know what I am saying. Agitation and anger, for which you two are responsible, have brought on about the worst attack I ever had. Very likely I should not have taken laudanum from that bottle you threw away; in any case, I should have struggled hard not to. I struggled yesterday, with the result that I allowed Catherine to pour away all I had in the house. But I am not going to struggle now, thank you. The pain is intolerable, and I believe it to have been brought on by what you did. Your interference has not done the slightest good; it has only given me an hour of hell.”

Then, quite suddenly, his mood changed. “I have said abominable things to you both,” he said. “My only excuse is that I am in torments. I beg the forgiveness of both of you.”

Here was the real Thurso again, looking out like a soul in prison, trying to burst through the bars, and there was a dreadful, hopeless pathos about him. Catherine laid her hand on his shoulder.

“Ah, Thurso, of course we forgive you,” she said. “But for God’s sake don’t give up. I suppose you must take this now because of your pain, but say you will go on fighting it again. It’s – it’s damnation, you know.”

He looked at her with agonised eyes.

“I will do my best,” he said. “Now go, please. Make my excuses to the others if I don’t appear at dinner. But I expect I shall; I have two hours yet.”

The women went out together, but before the door was closed they heard the clink of glass.

CHAPTER II

IT was a chill November afternoon in the autumn of the same year, and Catherine was seated at the table in her sitting-room at Thurso House, surrounded by a plentiful litter of letters and telegrams, writing busily, fiercely almost, as if to absorb herself in what she was doing to the exclusion of other thoughts. Her secretary, to whom she had just finished dictating a pile of business correspondence and letters less private than those she was occupying herself with, had just left her, and Catherine had begun to tackle this great heap of letters which she felt she had better answer herself – inquiries, mainly, from personal friends. She knew she had given herself more to do than it was really needful that she should, but what to her mind was needful was that she should be occupied in writing, and leave herself no leisure to think. At present there was nothing to be gained by thinking; she could take no step.

Outside the day was utterly dispiriting; there had been a dense yellow fog all morning, and though it had cleared a little about midday, so that from her window she could see the lilac-bushes of the garden that bordered the Green Park, it hovered still overhead, and though the hour was still not yet three in the afternoon, and her table was in the window, she had to light the shaded electric candle that stood on it to enable her to write. A big fire burned in the open hearth, compounded of logs and

coal, that hissed and whistled cheerfully as they blazed, and the room was warm and fragrant. But so dense had been the fog this morning that it had penetrated a little through the joinings of the windows, and a haze, visible now that the electric lights were burning, hung in the atmosphere.

The room where she sat was one of her own private suite, which she had fitted up not long ago for occupation in those numerous flying visits she had to pay to town, when she intended to stop only a day or two and do some necessary business. On these occasions it was not worth while to open the whole house, and so she had established herself here on the third-floor, with just the one sitting-room, and a bedroom and bathroom adjoining. Until half-way through November she had been paying a series of visits at different country houses ever since she came down from Scotland, while Thurso, so she then believed, had been doing the same at other houses. This week they were to have had the first big shoot at their place in Norfolk, but all that had been put off. Ten days ago now she had arrived here for a couple of days' stay before going down to Norfolk, and had found her husband was in the house. He had been there ever since they came down from Scotland, alone with his valet and a couple of maidservants, one to cook and one to clean, having excused himself from the various houses where he had told her he should be staying, in order to live here in the hell-paradise of opium. Catherine had at once telegraphed for Maud, who was of more use than anybody with her brother, and the two had been here

now for ten days. It was just better that they should be with him than that he should be alone; he still occasionally felt ashamed of himself if they were there.

Since last June the habit had gained on him with appalling rapidity, though for a few months he had, as she knew, made frantic, agonising efforts to throw it off. He had seen doctors, he had done apparently all that lay in his power to do. But now it seemed that a sort of atrophy of his will had set in; he no longer actively desired to be a free man again, though sometimes a sort of shame and remorse seemed to visit him; and though his will had been so completely dominated and destroyed by the drug, it had left the calculating, scheming part of his brain untouched, and he had a thousand devices for obtaining it after the chemists with whom he habitually dealt had been warned not to give it him. Indeed, it was ten days now since he made what appeared to be the very last effort of will, when, on Catherine's appearance here, he had burned the prescription which enabled him to obtain it. But within twenty-four hours he had himself forged it again, and Lord Thurso, calling suddenly at some big pharmacy with a prescription bearing an eminent doctor's name, was naturally not refused the blue bottle with its red poison label.

Yet busily as Catherine occupied herself with her correspondence, striving, since at the moment she could do nothing for her husband, to engage her mind rather than let it dwell on the hideous realities that were going on, and so vitally concerning her, she was alert for the interruption she expected.

For yesterday afternoon Thurso, undermined and weakened as he was by this habit, had had an attack of syncope, and for an hour or two they thought he could not live. But the doctor had pulled him round out of immediate danger, and he had regained a little strength during the last twenty-four hours. Sir James Sanderson had, in fact, just come back for his afternoon visit, and was with him now. He had promised to make his report to Lady Thurso before he left the house. The news of Thurso's sudden illness had been in the evening papers last night, and had appeared again this morning. She was answering the inquiries of her huge circle of friends.

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