

# Toy-Gods

By

Percival Pickering

Author of "A Life Awry," "A Pliable Marriage,"  
"The Spirit is Willing," etc.

"When I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon,  
The Lord pardon Thy servant in this thing"



London  
John Long  
13 and 14<sup>th</sup> Norris Street, Haymarket

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## Book I

# The God of the House of Rimmon

*"Men think as much of appearance as women do of appearances."*—R. HORNIMAN



# The God of the House of Rimmon

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## CHAPTER I

### THE FINDING OF AMELIA

IT was John Lawson who discovered Amelia Bradshaw. The occurrence, vital in result, was trivial in detail.

That afternoon as he left the office, rain was beginning to fall. Through the thin film of fog which clung above the house-tops, it descended in desultory fashion, fine, intermittent. He surveyed the heavens with depressed inquiry, then threaded a way through the moving crowd. The thoroughfares were thick with mud ; the rain had spread this in a greasy layer over the pavement. Outside the Bank he pushed through a hustling group which edged the curb and effected his entrance into a Putney 'bus. He secured the corner furthest from the door, and placing upon his lap the parcel which he had carried, involuntarily hitched up his shoulders with satisfaction at the closeness of the atmosphere.

The 'bus filled rapidly. A flickering oil-lamp served to dilute the dimness and to define the line of faces with unsteady glare. As its light fell upon John Lawson, it showed his features to be sharply cut, the cheeks and jaw lean, and darkened with a day's growth of hair. The eyes which looked out from under his overhanging brows

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appeared shrewd and not unkindly, but all humour was absent from their depths and from the thin, drawn mouth. As he leant forward, the wavering gleam, falling upon his arched back, showed the cloth worn to brightness at the shoulder-blades. To a fastidious taste it might have appeared that neither his skin nor the linen at neck and wrists were sufficiently clean.

He gauged each new-comer drowsily, with the curiosity which was habitual to him. At this hour the warehouses and offices were, unanimously, disgorging their occupants, and the faces before him afforded little food for speculation. City men, of varied grade and occupation, presented an uninteresting similarity of type ; girls freed from sale-rooms and ledgers were unobtrusive in their working clothes. The last vacant seat was occupied as a stout woman took the place next to him, and, with apology, compressed him into an unreasonably small space. In the glance of irritation with which he responded, he decided that her appearance bespoke homely circumstances and average respectability ; motherhood was indicated alike by a certain matronly rotundity of figure, and by the presence of an anæmic child at her side ; widowhood was suggested by the bonnet of dull crape which surmounted a costume of otherwise indefinite hue.

Then, for a space, sleep blurred John Lawson's vision. Noise angered him ; the 'bus swung, stopped, lurched, jolted and rattled with insistence ; a passing to and fro of passengers stirred consciousness ; near at hand the anæmic child sniffed with precision ; he was aware that a head which was insecurely attached to his shoulders swayed with ungainly action. Then, voices waxed aggressive, and he roused himself abruptly.

The 'bus had come to a standstill and invectives were audible from the direction of the box-seat. The stout female next to John Lawson explained with uncalled-for loquacity. "A Sister ef Mercy," she said, "all but under the 'orses 'oofs. Parses my comprehension why they wear head-pieces like they do. They might as well put their head in a bag an' done with it."

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"And no great loss, neether," the conductor observed with sarcasm. The 'bus jerked forwards ; he resumed his occupation of jotting down fares on the board in the doorway. "They," he corroborated, indefinitely, "carn't see wot's coming longside of 'em no more than a horse ken with 'is blinkers on !"

"Roman Kethlics ?" suggested the stout woman with intelligent interest.

"They may be Kethlics, or they may be skeercrows, for all I ken say," he responded with the assurance of a wag. "They keep an establishment in these parts for the training of young wimmin in the way they should go. A mos' deserving objec' !"

"Most deservin' !" echoed the stout female with an appreciative laugh, and the 'bus drew up before the Redcliffe Arms.

John Lawson up-rose and made his exit. He found that, contrary to his expectations, the rain had not abated ; it descended now with persistence and the sky was dark with more than the ordinary gloom of a November afternoon. He traversed the crossing, and, pausing on the opposite pavement to unfurl his umbrella, he observed that his late neighbour in the 'bus was close behind him, similarly employed. She met his glance with a smile of affability. "'Umerous young fellar, thet," she observed, jerking her head in the direction of the departing conductor ; and John Lawson, with brief assent, turned towards the wide gates upon his right.

But, by mischance, at that moment the parcel which he had lodged under his arm slipped, and falling at his feet, disgorged its contents into the mud. Before he realised what had happened, he had planted a heavy tread on the wreath of immortelles which lay thus exposed. The woman started forward and picked it up with voluble commiseration.

"Well, that is a shaime !" she exclaimed. "And it'll be so mis'rable for you to carry. Wait while I give it a bit of a shake.—Here, Meriar, take the umberella.—But there, the mud's wet, and it won't do a happorth of good. You'll have to carry it from you—so. What a pity, and

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sech a tasty one ! There's nothin' like them everlastin's for keeping fresh. Pritty things, ain't they ? a'most as good as wax for the larst that's in them. Well, you carn't hev' far to go, that's one thing."

" I can take it—thank you," said John Lawson.

The woman up-gathered her skirts about her stalwart ankles and removed the umbrella from the grasp of the child.

" Ah, well," she added parenthetically, " I see you're come like meself to visit them as is gorn before. I buried my husban' jest a week come Sunday, and as I'd done the washin' early and no charin' this week, I thought it'd be a treat for Meriar to come and see where her pa lay. I never thought it'd come on the afternoon it has, and when one's paid one's 'bus fare one must take one's pennorth. And Meriar there's got a cold on her that's as likely as not to turn to a wastin' away. I've had a matter of ten and buried seven."

" Husbands ? " questioned John Lawson, betrayed into facetiousness.

" Now, if you ain't a 'umerous fellar yourself ! " pronounced the woman, and Lawson, rejecting this praise with a deprecating shrug, moved away.

It was not an afternoon calculated to render the heart expansive towards adjacent humanity. As he entered the gates of the cemetery the rain swept about him in a fine, grey mist. It blurred the depressing vista of tombstones which extended to right and left. The air wreaked with damp, the heavy clay of the roadway was sodden with moisture. He turned up the central path and walked quickly, protecting the wreath which he held from the driving rain. The mud-bespattered flowers in their prim regularity of outline seemed to convey a mute reproach. The cemetery was comparatively deserted ; there was a marked absence of the visitors who, from motives of grief or recreation, were wont to frequent it on fine Saturday afternoons. By-and-by, two girls in black passed him with hurried steps bent homewards. Further, some men were smoothing the trampled earth about a newly-made grave. The wreaths lay piled about the

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bare mound ; the rain was beating their delicate petals into the wet earth ; the odour of damp mould assailed his nostrils with repellent suggestion. Averting his glance, he remarked how the mingling of rain and mist veiled in indistinctness the limits of the cemetery, and gave to its outskirts an erroneous impression of space. The tombstones, showing more whitely in the grey light, stretched away indefinitely on either hand, to all appearance an interminable forest of uneven stones, up-rising with oppressive closeness.

John Lawson was wont to accept the conditions of life, whether good or evil, with the same phlegmatic tolerance. Yet the discomfort of his present surroundings communicated itself to his brain in a vague impression of ill-usage. The uselessness of his present errand forced itself upon his attention. His thoughts turned and dwelt upon the afternoon of solid comfort which he had renounced. After all, the petty sacrifice of the living could afford no satisfaction to the dead. . . . Hitherto, his annual pilgrimage to his wife's grave had been accomplished under favourable conditions, and he had neither approved nor disapproved the utility of a proceeding which was exacted with never-failing regularity by his sisters-in-law, her sole surviving relatives. His defection would have roused disagreeable comment ; the wreath with which they provided him formed an incentive to concurrence. Yet, to-day, he recognised an absurdity in this mechanical tribute. The damaged flowers seemed to point the absurdity.

He passed the chapel and hurried on down a narrow path beyond. Molly Lawson's grave lay in this further portion of the cemetery, away by the wall where the ground was less expensive and the headstones less elaborate in design. And it seemed to him that here the aspect of the cemetery waxed more dreary. The earth was more saturated with moisture, the damp mist clung more visibly about the tombs. There was no human life stirring as there had been near the entrance, and the newly-made graves, with their grassless mounds, met his eye with more depressing frequency. The

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rawness of the air penetrated to his bones and filled him with unhealthy reflection. An illogical pity stirred him for the tenants of that wet clay. What if death robbed the human frame merely of the power of motion and expression, not of sensation? The early Egyptians, surely, held some such notion, though the idea was singularly lacking in sense. Still, with obstinate sequence, his thoughts drew the contrast of his warm fireside, and of Molly, once sharer of his bed and board, consigned to conscious solitude here in this wet, cold earth. It was eight years since he had laid her there, and, meanwhile—and the reflection was vested with novelty—he had been going his same round of daily work in the city, of home-coming to his pipe and the paper, of one yearly upheaval in a fortnight's visit to the sea. And Molly had been lying here in the silence of this grim world of Death, encircled by Death, herself an item of its strange majesty. He remembered the evening when she had died. . . . Little incidents of her last illness stirred recollection; homely sayings of hers in the past returned with a curious insistence. . . . Yet again, if the truths of the religion which he professed were real to him, Molly, the actual Molly, was a glorified spirit away in some beautiful, incredible world. Perversely, memory conjured up a disconcerting vision of Molly Lawson in the flesh, stout, homely, an excellent housewife. That same personality finding congenial occupation and experiencing unalloyed bliss in a world of gold and glass to the accompaniment of harps, was an anomaly which was unconvincing.

Later, John Lawson recalled his thoughts upon that afternoon with a sense of their premonition. But, at the time, he held the weather in fault. On none of the previous occasions when he had visited the cemetery had such notions disturbed him—days when the sun had been shining and the aspect of life reversed. He reached the turning where the pathway which he followed was crossed by another. On the right, remarkable amongst the less pretentious graves with which it was encircled, there rose a tombstone of marble which bore the life-

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sized figure of a sculptured angel. He had remarked it on previous occasions, impressed by the expenditure which its erection must have incurred. But to-day, attracted, perhaps, by the white purity with which it gleamed out of the waning light, he saw in it an unexpected embodiment of his reflections. Molly, stout, comfortable Molly, must be transformed into just such a thing of beauty as this, a being in whose society he would feel distinctly abashed. The difficulty of the idea disturbed him, the heterodoxy of his disbelief angered him. He turned away impatiently, and, leaving the path, struck out across the wet grass, picking his footsteps gingerly among the graves.

Molly's grave was hemmed in by headstones of more pronounced height and breadth, so that it was not visible to the eye at a little distance. But immediately in front of it, and serving as a landmark to him, there stood a granite monument of peculiar ugliness, which he never failed to recognise. This he skirted, and, passing between two square tombs, emerged close to the grave which he sought.

There he paused sharply, startled out of his abstraction, for, seated upon the flat tombstone before him and dangling her legs with unbecoming levity, he saw a living figure, whether that of a child or a woman he could not immediately decide. Her elbows projected, her face was half-concealed by the torn orange at which she was gnawing with vigour. Now and again, she paused to eject from her mouth a pip, or a piece of pulp, which she aimed with care at the lettering of a tombstone opposite. He could hear how her feet passed through the grass with a faint, swishing sound. Returning, her boots clicked the stone with resonance.

John Lawson's mind was not calculated to cope with the unexpected, and, for one moment, the discomposure which he felt was out of all proportion with an incident so trivial. It struck him as part of the generally unsatisfactory nature of things that day, that, with the whole of a deserted cemetery to choose from, a stranger should have invaded this particular portion of it; and

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that, out of all the surrounding graves, she should have selected the tomb of his wife on which to partake of some light refreshment. But events had conspired to disturb his equanimity, and the growing irritation from which he suffered received a fresh impetus in view of such desecration of his property. He reminded himself that the tomb before him was his possession, for which he had paid a sum that many would have considered preposterous, and, in recognition of this fact, the sound of the girl's heels kicking it with assurance hurt like a sacrilege. His impulse to rid himself of her intrusion, however, was checked by an absurd reluctance. He dreaded the explanation entailed, the possibility of rendering himself ridiculous. He had a morbid horror of the lower orders, of their disrespect, their contempt for the obvious, their propensity for chaff of a disagreeable nature. He recalled the familiarity of his neighbour in the 'bus. . . . And, for one moment even, he revolved the advisability of beating a retreat without making his presence known, of leaving Molly's wreath surreptitiously upon one of the adjacent tombs. The Gibsons who had sent it would never know this base subterfuge, and Molly, poor Molly, if she knew, could never betray his lack of moral courage. . . . His indecision was ended abruptly ; he noted that the object of his perplexity was eyeing him with a sudden and keen attention.

"Wot are you gapin' at, ole cock?" she demanded briefly.

John Lawson paused, taken aback as much by the effrontery as by the unexpectedness of the inquiry.

"I was not 'gaping,'" he corrected with asperity, "only, you happen to be—only perhaps you are not aware that you are sitting on my wife's grave."

The intruder bent a glance of intelligence upon the stone as though seeking there some corroboration of his statement. "No offence," she observed decisively ; "and, to say the least of it, I carn't hev' inconvenienced the lady in question."

Her tone was argumentative rather than apologetic ; and before the unabashed scrutiny of the gaze with

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which she favoured him, Lawson felt at a disadvantage. He was conscious of the ridiculous wreath which he carried, of the deplorable state of his shoe-leather ; and, in connection with the latter, he held a belief that the test of social superiority centres in a man's boots. Clothes may be shabby and linen soiled, but, so long as the boots shine with impressive respectability, it is possible to command respect from equals and deference from inferiors.

"It is scarcely the sort of weather I should have thought you'd be wanting to sit about here," he hinted with attempted assurance.

In response, the girl slid to the ground. He decided that she was younger than his first impression had suggested ; she had not yet attained to womanhood. He remarked that her face, if freed from the combined effects of orange-juice and uncleanliness, tended to beauty. He saw how her wet hat drooped limply about her face, how her skirts clung to her ankles. Meanwhile she lifted her hand, and, with intention, sent the remains of the dissected orange flying through the air. With steady aim it struck the head of the plump cherub surmounting the opposite monument, whence, falling to the ground, it left a smear upon the wide, stone face.

"It's not," she said, surveying her handiwork with obvious satisfaction, "for *me* to say, but p'raps if *you* was tired, *you'd* sit down—like wiser folk."

"It's not for you to be cheeky," retorted Lawson sharply. "It's more for me to ask what you mean by your presence here where you've no business?"

"Meanin' no one but yesself's toff enough to have friends in sech an aristocratic locolity?" she said, with satire. She sucked her fingers briskly and polished them deftly on her hips. Then, twitching her damp collar about her ears, she began threading her way off amongst the graves.

Lawson could hear the drag of her wet skirt upon the grass as she passed behind the tombs. The sound continued, more faintly. Then he heard the crunch of her tread upon the gravel beyond. He turned to the

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grave before him, and lost no time in executing the errand on which he had come. Molly's last year's wreath he discovered lying amongst the grass beside her stone. He tossed it unceremoniously over the wall and placed the fresh one above her name. He glanced conscientiously at the slab and lettering which covered the grave and at the little border of tiles which surrounded it. Then, perhaps feeling that it was not the weather for indulging in unnecessary sentiment, he retraced his steps, and before many moments had passed, with a sensation of relief, he found himself once more outside the churchyard.

He crossed the road and joined the little group which stood waiting for the 'bus. The lamps were lighted and the wet pavement shone. He paced to and fro with chilled limbs, his ill-temper augmenting with delay. By-and-by, coming across the road from the direction of the gates he saw the stout woman and the anaemic child who had journeyed with him on his arrival. He turned back to avoid an encounter for which he felt ill-disposed, but the woman had recognised him.

"Well, if this ain't singilar!" she called with fresh affability, as soon as she came within earshot; "we come in one and the same 'bus and we seem goin' back be one and the same! Looks as if it had ben planned! It's odd how parties hit off a journey like that unbemeant, when they'd never hev' contrived it if they'd wanted ever so! Well,"—she held her umbrella in front of her and shook it till the drops rained to right and left—"you and me's been alike in that, we hav'n't took long over our pleasuring in this weather!"

Lawson stepped aside from the range of scattering drops.

"And it's singilar," she continued, "I'd jest been thinking when you and me parted comp'ny goin' in that I'd been foolish not to give you a card of mine. I always carry them about with me, for business is business, as you'll understand, and one never knows when one meets the likely party. You see, it's this way, I do a bit of charing at times or I take care of a

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gentleman's house, and very glad to hear of a job, too. And I said to meself, you being a gentleman that's lost a wife or a daughter or some of them that was given to looking after you, might be in need of assistance at times and thankful enough to know where to turn for it—”

She had loosened her hold upon her skirt and was feeling in the depths of her pocket. “Stop a minute!” she called to Lawson, as the 'bus hove in sight, “you keep that, and when you hear of an odd job you jest take reference to it.”

And Lawson, securing the one available place in the remote end of the vehicle, glanced at a soiled square of cardboard which he held. Partly printed and partly written with uncertain autograph it conveyed the information :—

JANE BURGESS

Care-taker and Char-woman

10 Princes' St., Kilburn.

*close ocl jobs*

## CHAPTER II

### THE TRACING OF AMELIA

LATER, that evening, John Lawson traversed the length of Albion Crescent. On his right was a row of semi-detached villas, two storeys in height, which ran in a half-circle. On his left was Brunswick Street, a line of even, grey-fronted houses, cheaper in rent and less pretentious in appearance. A narrow slip of grass, unprotected by railings, divided the Crescent from the street. On fine afternoons, ragged children congregated there. Their shouts annoyed the neighbourhood ; their presence brought a taint of the alleys from which they had strayed. To-day, the rain dripped upon its deserted space, upon the damp benches at either end, upon the four small plane-trees recently planted by the County Council.

At No. 5 in the Crescent, John Lawson fitted his key into the latch and received two distinct impressions, one, that he could hear the sound of a visitor in the kitchen, one, that his house was pervaded by a smell of burnt fat. The latter, like the former, he held to be intimately connected with some form of waste, and he objected to both on economic principles. The gas was not yet lighted in the narrow passage, and groping his way to the top of the kitchen stairs, he stood listening to the voices below. Soon he made his presence known.

"Sarah ! " he called. " Is that you ? "

" Ah, John, so you've got home ! " responded a rather harsh female voice. There was a sound of a woman mounting the wooden steps, heavily, and Lawson turned back to see to the gas.

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Its light fell upon his sister-in-law, Sarah Gibson, as she stepped into the passage. She was above the medium height, somewhat gaunt in appearance, and plain with the nondescript plainness of middle age. There was about her an aggressive air of common sense as interpreted by a limited understanding. Life, to Sarah Gibson, was evidently no jesting matter; to view it even remotely as such, would be accredited by her as an error in the worst possible taste.

"It's a bad evening for you to come out, Sarah," observed Lawson, turning into the drawing-room, and proceeding to trim the lamp. His voice strove to be cordial, and failed.

"Not so bad as it looks," replied Sarah, following. She sniffed the air of the room as she entered, and apparently deciding it was damp, she turned her attention to igniting the gas fire. "After all," she continued, "it is more of a Scotch mist than actual wetting rain. I had to go to the chemist to get Lucy some cough drops, so thought I might as well look in here on my way back. I suppose you got to Brompton all right, John, with our wreath?"

"I have just come back from there," replied Lawson.

"I thought there would be nothing really to prevent your going. A man has no clothes to spoil. Though, for my part, I always dress suitably to this uncertain climate. Suitability, as I tell Lucy, is, after all, the only good taste. Anyhow, I'm glad you went, and I hope you found poor Mary's tomb in a satisfactory state of repair?"

"A stone grave in a sheltered part of a London cemetery isn't likely to get seriously out of order in one year," explained Lawson, putting on the globe of the lamp.

His tone was irritable, and Sarah's expression betrayed surprise. As he turned away from the lamp a smell of paraffin mingled with the odour of burnt fat.

"Well, one never knows, accidents may occur or storms," she pronounced vaguely. "And certainly, it

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is more satisfactory to ascertain that Mary's grave is in a condition creditable to her family and yours." She paused, then added, "and I scarcely think once a twelvemonth is so often that a man need grudge paying a trifling tribute to the woman who was a good wife to him."

"I don't recollect hinting I did grudge it," said Lawson, as he removed his overcoat.

Sarah stroked her black muff thoughtfully with a large hand. "Well, anyhow," she reiterated in mollified tones, "I was near here, so I thought I'd just look in and hear your news; it cheers Lucy up if one has anything to tell her when one goes in, and I thought I'd ask you if you'd like to join us at supper on Saturday? Beatrice is coming up from her school at Brighton. She seems to like the place, John. She says the other teachers are pleasant, and although she has to instruct during the day, you see she can attend the evening classes with the rest, and so be improving herself meanwhile. An interesting life. But one can always trust Beatrice to make the most of her opportunities."

John Lawson was conscious of the observant glance which accompanied Miss Gibson's mention of Beatrice's name. It was an anomaly which never failed to strike him, that the reverence which the Misses Gibson evinced for Molly's memory should be coupled thus intimately with their choice of her successor.

"May I leave it open?" he suggested awkwardly. "My servant Lizzie is poorly, and I might be very glad to avail myself of your kind offer—"

"Which reminds me, John," said Miss Gibson, "that it's fortunate I looked in. While I was waiting for you, I thought I'd just give a look downstairs and"—her voice was lowered—"you ought to get rid of that girl, the state of the kitchen is shocking. Dirty isn't the word for it, and such disorder!"

"I know," said Lawson, "she isn't a satisfactory servant. But lately, she's been ill—"

"Illness is no excuse for uncleanliness. Take my advice, John, and give her a month's notice; you can't

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do better. Or, what would perhaps be more advisable, I will do it before I go home."

Sarah Gibson spoke with the decisiveness which was habitual to her. Lawson was chilled to the marrow, and his temper was none of the best. His patience evaporated.

"I beg you'll do nothing of the sort, Sarah!" he exclaimed. "I am quite capable of giving my own servant warning if I wish to do so."

Sarah's mouth straightened. After a pause, she rose and began buttoning her coat with deliberation.

"Lucy and myself," she said, "would be extremely sorry to intrude with our advice or assistance where neither seem appreciated." She extended a limp hand.  
"Good-night, John."

"Good-night," repeated Lawson passively, and, a moment later, he had closed the door behind her gaunt figure without having spoken the apology which she had so obviously anticipated.

He hastened back to the drawing-room and turned out the fire. An hour later, he was the sole occupant of the house. Lizzie had professed herself too ill to remain, a discovery which he traced to the interfering visit of Sarah Gibson. And the girl's departure at that juncture left him awkwardly circumstanced; for, hitherto, in all matters of domestic dilemma he had depended upon the prompt assistance of his sisters-in-law. Now, in view of his recent defiance, he could not apply to them; and the thought troubled him. As hunger asserted itself, he descended the creaking stairs to the kitchen. It was, as Sarah had described, in a state of disorder. The cold mutton was upon the dresser, and not feeling disposed to carry it upstairs, he fetched himself a knife and fork and proceeded to eat it standing. It was but partially cooked, unappetising in appearance and taste. He swallowed it with an accompaniment of bread, found some cheese to complete the meal, and washed it down with a glass of beer. Then he returned upstairs, and fell into an uneasy sleep over the paper.

It was late when he awoke, and he drew aside the

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blind to look out at the night. The rain had ceased, but a damp fog hung heavily about the road. Here and there he could see dim lights in the houses opposite. The Crescent was very quiet, for little traffic went down it after dark. Somewhere in the distance a child was crying. He looked away to the right where lay Charles Street, and the home of the Misses Gibson. He pictured how Sarah must have retailed her experiences at No. 5 to Lucy, how she and Lucy must have been sitting over the fire that evening discussing his behaviour. He was sorry that he had created a coolness. He wondered what Beatrice would say to it if she knew, Beatrice, whom they so pointedly destined to supply Molly's place. He reflected that he was not usually excitable in temper. "It is liver," said John Lawson, as he went to bed.

. . . . .  
The sun was shining upon the grass-plot when he looked out next morning. It illuminated alike the tiles upon the grey houses of the Street and the red-and-white villas of the Crescent ; but the lower windows of the houses gleamed gaily like gold, while the villas for a space were cast into shadow. It was their sole hour of disadvantage out of the twenty-four ; at all other times their superiority was triumphant. For the Crescent was obviously more aristocratic than the Street ; not only did it consist of private dwellings, while the Street was let out in rooms and floors to the impecunious of all classes, but the villas could each boast a bay window to the front and a strip of garden to the rear ; in some cases even a greenhouse emphasised their opulence.

Since John Lawson had first come to live at No. 5, few changes had taken place in his surroundings. Behind the dingy blinds of the houses in the Street and the cleaner blinds of the houses of the Crescent no doubt new lives had come into being and older lives had passed away. Some of the neighbours of those earlier days had acquired a gradual or a sudden accession of wealth and had moved to a richer locality ; others had

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sunk in the social scale and drifted away no one knew whither. But to Lawson, existence had flowed on with little to mark the flight of time. As in former years the brown-haired youth had changed by invisible stages to the grey-haired man, so now, it might be, that each year was adding imperceptibly to the stoop of his shoulders, to the deliberation of his tread, to the settled sobriety of his aspect. And while the enterprise and restlessness of those earlier days lay far behind him, his naturally phlegmatic temperament had asserted itself till his state was one of mechanical regularity. Even the death of his wife, the one event in his career, left no apparent mark upon his outward being. The neighbours adjudged that the muslin blinds at No. 5 were less clean after her death than before—there the result ended. Each day they saw him go to the city by nine o'clock, each evening he had returned at 6.30; Saturdays were the one exception, when he arrived home at 2.30, and spent the afternoon in his small greenhouse or at work on the narrow slip of garden which edged the pathway. Occasionally, when the weather had been fine, he had been tempted to an expedition to Richmond or to Kew Gardens. He went by train and reappeared at dusk. He did not bicycle. He considered that form of exercise a nuisance and an innovation ; the terms were synonymous. It was said he had written two letters to a local paper explaining his views on the subject.

Yet to-day, as he awoke in the pale morning light, he was confronted drowsily by the impression that something unusual had taken place. He missed the familiar sound of Lizzie moving about the house. She had always trod heavily, had clattered the fire-irons and slammed the doors with vigour. Now, an oppressive stillness reigned. For a while he contemplated the tiles opposite with depression, then rose, and, later, made his way downstairs through the quiet house. The room below, still in semi-darkness and untidy from the night before, presented an unfamiliar appearance. He drew back the thick curtains and let in the pale sunlight. The grate was black, some dirty glasses stood on the table,

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the cloth and chairs were awry. His love of orderliness was offended. He penetrated to the kitchen and made an unpalatable breakfast off the remains of the cold mutton ; dwelling, meanwhile, on the complications which prevented his applying to the Misses Gibson in his discomfort. He passed a Sunday, rendered unendurable by solitude and insufficient food, and the next evening, on his way back from the office, he looked into a Servants' Registry Office, but was met with curt disapprobation by the book-keeper, who informed him that she had no young girl on the books at present who would go as 'general' with a single gentleman. Lawson left, feeling vaguely at fault for his condition. It was then that he bethought himself of Jane Burgess and of the card which he still had in his possession. He sought for it in his pocket and studied it. The woman had been garrulous and familiar, but she had looked respectable, and she would serve as a stop-gap in an emergency. He reflected that it had been a curious coincidence his meeting with her on the very day of Lizzie's defection, and, even then recognising the finger of Fate, he determined to seek her forthwith.

It was late when he arrived at the address indicated on the card. 10 Princes' Street proved to be a fish-shop, and the private entrance, which he found after a brief search, presented such a bewildering array of bells that he felt at a loss in making a choice. He pulled one at random, and was quickly confronted by a female, who, in answer to his inquiries, informed him indignantly that the lady whom he sought lived on the top floor, and, without further aid, left him facing the open door.

Deciding to act upon the information thus received, Lawson made his way to the staircase. It was in semi-darkness, and, as he clambered cautiously upwards, the odours of fish from the basement pursued him to mingle with the staleness of the atmosphere. Behind the open or closed doors upon each landing, voices of varied intonation were audible, which corroborated his impression that the place was let in tenements. Here

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and there children were playing in the doorways ; children unkempt, unsightly, shrill of tongue. They stared at him curiously as he passed. At length, breathing heavily, he gained the topmost floor and knocked at the first door which presented itself.

There was a commotion with the fire-irons within ; a silence ; then heavy steps trod to the door, and it opened, to reveal the face of Jane Burgess.

"What was you wantin'?" she asked doubtfully, and, before he could answer, a look of hesitating recognition dawning upon her broad face. "It's never the party I give the card to at Brompton, Saturday?" she suggested, interrogatively, and, as he informed her that her surmise was correct, her manner underwent a swift transformation.

"Well, I ne—ver!" she exclaimed in excited surprise, flinging the door open. "I thought your face was familiar, but, for the life of me, I couldn't call to mind where I'd set eyes on it! Come in, do. We're all at sixes and sevens, but you'll take us as you find us, and I'm in a terrible muck meself," she added as she cast a cursory glance at her apron, then twisted it reverse side uppermost—"but it's just a chanst, we was havin' a clean up this evening."

Lawson followed her into the room. It was, as she had explained, in confusion. The faded strip of carpet was rolled from the wet boards, a pail and mat stood in the centre, from which she had presumably risen at the sound of his knock, the scanty furniture was piled into a corner ; near the fire-place a girl knelt, polishing the grate.

"Y'see it's like this," explained Mrs Burgess, dusting a chair for his use, "what with my por husban's illness, and him goin' orf so slow, and us having a corp' in the house three days, we don't seem to have had the chanst to git straight, and I said to 'Melia there, only this morning, 'Melia, I ses, I can't stand this muck any longer, and we must jest have a set-to when I come home this evening and git a bit tittivated up, for it's more than I can stomach eating food in the

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midst of dirt and refuge.—But it's odd that you should have happened on us as you hev'."

Lawson did not take the chair which she pushed towards him. "I came on a trifling matter of business," he explained. "My servant has left me, and I wondered if you could come in for a bit, till I got suited. Or if you could recommend me anyone?"

Mrs Burgess reflected, resting her hands upon her broad hips. Standing thus, a study in neutral tints, she might have suggested to a fanciful mind the embodiment of Dust, at once her foe and means of sustenance. Pinned about her capacious middle, and drooping in a loop behind her, was a skirt of drab. Bulging fulsomely about her ample bust and attached by a black tape about her waist was a cotton bodice, drab also with age and much washing. Even the reversed apron, which limply defined the undulations of a form more homely than classical, partook of the prevailing tint, rather than of its original whiteness. Her hair was drab; her face drab; slippers of drab-coloured list encased her feet.

"Now, if that ain't fortunit," she pronounced, after profound consideration. "I had the offer of a gentleman's house, care-taking, you'll understand, and I *was* going, an' it might 've been a matter of munse and munse, and he let, on a sudden, the very first week the bills was up! Seems like a bit of Providence, you may say. And didn't I tell you you never know when you meet the likely party? It was jest a chanst me giving you that card a-Saturday, and I tell you, you could have knocked me down with a fevver when I see you come in the doorway."

Lawson did not dispute the practicability of the suggestion. "When could you come in?" he asked; "I am in immediate need of some one."

"Well, it's like this," said Mrs Burgess, toying with a corner of the reversed apron; "'Melia, there," nodding towards the fire-place, "has got a place as assistant at Osgood's in the Edgware Road, but she don't begin till a week to-morrar, so she can look after Meriar.

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Meriar's in a por way, took fresh cold a-Sunday. I've always had my doubts as to the rearing of Meriar——"

"Then you could come in," suggested John Lawson, "say, to-morrow for certain? No. 5 Albion Crescent—I'll write it down."

"Could I come to-morrar?" Mrs Burgess took counsel with herself. A displaced strand of drab-coloured hair upon her temple responded stiffly to the meditative action of her head. "I'll come the day *after*, if that will soot? You couldn't finish by yourself, 'Melia?" turning towards the fire-place. "What a shindy you're kicking up with them fire-irons! Give over, do! One carn't hear oneself speak."

The girl thus addressed propped the fire-irons sullenly against the wall and up-rose from her knees. She stood with her face averted, pulling her sleeves leisurely over her bare arms.

"I s'pose I could finish," she said sulkily; "but I've got me clothes to see to for next week, and I carn't do more than I can."

She lifted a kettle off the hob and, treading past Lawson with averted glance, disappeared into the passage, closing the door sharply behind her.

He turned to Mrs Burgess. "Is that another daughter?" he asked with curiosity.

"Daughter? No," repeated Mrs Burgess as though surprised at his lack of discrimination. "That's a niece o' mine, 'Melia Bradshaw. Burgess is my name, you'll understand, and Bradshaw's hers. Strange they should be so similar! Was you perhaps thinking her like Meriar?" she added inquisitively, evidently seeking some explanation of Lawson's query.

"No, but I saw her at the cemetery on Saturday," he said rather unwillingly. "She was sitting—that is I came across her near my wife's grave and I recognised her again as she left the room."

"Well, that's odd, now." Mrs Burgess rubbed her nose thoughtfully with the back of her hand. "'Melia never mentioned going to Brompton, an' to think of her and me havin' ben the same afternoon and never

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havin' so much as set eyes on one another ! But her ma's buried some way from where Burgess was put and I suppose that's who she'd gorn after. It's a good few years since *she* was put by, but I suppose with hearing me and Meriar talk of goin' for an outin jest set 'Melia off that she'd go on her own account."

Lawson looked at his watch and moved towards the door. "Then I am to expect you to-morrow?" he said with emphasis.

Mrs Burgess nodded her head absently and the strand of hair upon her temple again waved gently in response. "That's odd about 'Melia," she pursued reflectively. "But one never knows what she'll be at next. You see it's like this"—she spoke hurriedly as she observed Lawson's departing footsteps—"Melia is me sister's child and her father was a gentleman, old Admiral Bradshaw, as good a fam'ly as you can find anywhere, you can take *my* word for it. It was all as it should be, you'll understand, marriage lines and all that correct, and 'Melia's got relations that can hold up their 'ed with the best, her own blood relations, mind you, nothing shirty about it anywhere. Things is very singilar in this world," said Mrs Burgess, as though making a new and startling discovery. "But we'd never one of our fam'ly go wrong except an aunt on me mother's side who was deceived by a provost sergeant and she more sinned against than sinning, I always *do* say, and the child born dead, so that don't seem to count for much. But 'Melia's ma wasn't that sort. It'd hev' taken more than a provost sergeant to git round her ! And yet she *was* fooled in a way, bein' lef' a gentleman's widow and no fun's. You see, it was like this ; she was cook to the Admiral and she in her prime and him seventy and a bit in his dotage, but a wonderful fine man to look at, and he offered marriage to her. He wanted her to go to a register orffice, but she had her suspicions, and, like a sensible woman, she said she'd go to church or nowhere. So he took her to church and she was the lady six years with twenty-guinea gownds to her back, and that's gorspel, though I'm bound to state he was

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a bit of a tarmigan to her at times. And his people, they did carry on, and his daughters, they wouldn't come nigh the place she was on."

"But," asked Lawson, lingering, his natural inquisitiveness roused into interest at this unexpected story, "didn't the old Admiral leave suitable provision for his wife and child?"

"He meant to," said Mrs Burgess regretfully, "an' always said so, but there was some confusion—I don't rightly understand legal matters meself, anyways neether 'Melia nor her ma come off with much more than the clothes on their backs. My sister was taken-to about it; she never was the same woman after. She jest come to live with me, for she couldn't stomach taking another place as servant when she'd ben mistress, so she jest did odd jobs, cooking for big dinners and taking care of chambers, anythink that come handy, as you may say, and left her independent in her ways, till she was took with a chill in the inwards and died. And there's that 'Melia of hers, that's blood relation to some of the highest in the land, growing up, command, mind you, for I don't hold with her goings on. But there you have facts—'Melia's pa was a gentleman born, and Meriar's pa was a sweep, and when I look at the pair of 'em, I'm blest if I can tell where the difference comes in."

There was a note of interrogation in the last assertion which solicited attention, and Lawson, reflecting that the woman before him was to make his bed and cook his food in the days to come, lied firmly.

"If there is an advantage," he said, "it's Maria that has it. But really I cannot understand how your niece's relations let her grow up, well, neglected, as you put it, for she seems a little uncertain in her manners."

"'Melia's a caution," agreed Mrs Burgess in a tone of appreciation. "But she's got the lady in her for all that, when she likes; and, though you wouldn't credit it, that gurl's ben to board school and had a fair edgication. She can be'ave as well as the best of 'em when she chooses, but there, when the fit takes her, she'll talk as common as any corster and make friends with any wiff and stray.

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But you'll see when she gits amonst the young ladies at Osgood's she'll fit herself to her circumstances double-sharp. She's no fool, isn't 'Melia."

Mrs Burgess becoming aware of the plume of hair which waved above her brow applied a little moisture to her forefinger and stroked the rebellious lock back into place.

"That was Burgess's words," she repeated; "'Melia's a cute 'un,' and Burgess was as good a judge as most, when he was hisself. He"—Mrs Burgess spoke darkly—"he'd his weakness, had Burgess, but I always do say it was the sut that did it; it's a thirsty thing is sut, 'specially when you swallar it furst thing in a morning. There was a deal to be said for Burgess, though I'd a life of it with him, at times, and I've seen a deal of trouble. What with burying six childern and now I doubt if I'll rear Meriar. Seems like werry for nothing when you've a fam'ly jest to bury 'em before they git to the earning of any wage—"

"Then," said Lawson decisively, "I can rely on your coming, Mrs Burgess?"

"To-morrar," corroborated Mrs Burgess with assurance, as he turned towards the stairs. He heard her voice above him on the landing as he descended, but the gist of her remarks was inaudible, and he thought it wise to feign a more complete deafness. He passed again through the darkness, the odours, the sound of many voices, and found himself once more out in the windy street. He had walked a few paces only, when he observed a group of girls gathered by the wall. Their aggressive speech and laughter were partially clipped, to eye him as he approached. One of them stared at him more sharply. With awakened interest he viewed the slatternly clothes and dishevelled head of Amelia Bradshaw.

## CHAPTER III

### THE VISIT OF AMELIA

LAWSON made extensive preparations the next day for the advent of Mrs Burgess. He tidied the place to the best of his ability, in order not to give a bad impression at the start. He put all articles of value carefully under lock and key. Some china plaques, which Beatrice had painted him, alone caused him indecision. They were undoubtedly of value, being hand-painted, but to remove them would leave a mark upon the wall which Mrs Burgess might detect. Finally he left them where they hung.

It was early when Mrs Burgess arrived. She was wearing the drab skirt which, owing to a protuberance in her figure, arched coquettishly above her ankles ; but she had discarded the drab blouse for one similar in make, and attached about her middle by a like piece of tape, but showing spaces of variegated hue which baffled definition. This, later, she explained, had once been blue and the colour had 'run' in the wash.

She lost no time in investigating her surroundings. The house she pronounced to be a comfortable place, "not large, but sootable" ; the prevailing disorder and neglect she defined as disheartening ; Lawson himself (and his recollection meanwhile turned with embarrassment to the articles which he had placed in security)—Lawson, she gave to understand in so many words, was not what she'd been used to, she having, hitherto, only been charring in the best families ; and having, so far, been particular not to demean herself. Her investigation of the furniture was minute, even Beatrice's plaques came in for a share of her attention.

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"They're pritty, those daisies on a pink dish," she observed critically.

"They are painted by a young cousin, a distant cousin of my late wife," Lawson explained. "She was brought up by my sisters-in-law, the Misses Gibson, who live near here, and is now starting as teacher in a school at Brighton. She is very clever."

"Ah, governesses has to do them sort of things, it's their trade," said Mrs Burgess with diminished interest.

She prepared breakfast for Lawson before he started, the best he had tasted for months ; and that evening when he returned from the city, he found the place transformed into a model of cleanliness and order. He was not left under the delusion that this desirable consummation had been lightly arrived at. Mrs Burgess was eloquent upon the incredible nature of the task which she had accomplished, a task which would have taken any average mortal double and treble the time. "Talk of dirt," she said, thereby, it appeared to Lawson, mentioning a compound to which she had an objection everywhere except upon her own person—"talk of dirt, I tell you that owdacious young good-for-nothing that's left you was jest about fit to wipe the floors up with, that was all she was good for. I'd wake her up if I come across her ! I'd teach her what gentry expcs, and"—her glance indicating Lawson—"commonality as well. Dirt ! There was dirt enough to breed a fever. Anyone'd think you was a pig thriving on it as you have done." Which, even admitting an element of self-glorification, left Lawson with a pleasant sense of the treasure he had gained, and they parted mutually satisfied.

So matters went on for a week, Mrs Burgess arriving each morning at nine and departing each evening at eight with a regularity which rivalled Lawson's own existence. At the end of the time she explained that she had had an exceptional opportunity of boarding Maria out, and, since Amelia had gone to her place, there was no longer any necessity for this journeying backwards and forwards daily ; she could bring her traps

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and take up her residence in the house. Lawson, who was more comfortable than he had been for many months, acquiesced, though Mrs Burgess further pointed out to him that the post was not one which she could accept as a permanency, she having been used to Quality and surroundings of a very different class ; yet was she ready to oblige, cost her what it might.

"Your's ain't an easy place to git sooted," she emphasised ; "young wimmin of character don't take service with a single gentleman, however old,—not but what it's the old 'uns and the sober-faced that you'd least expec' it of that's oftenest the worst." All which profound knowledge of the world Lawson did not attempt to refute.

He understood that he had grown to appreciate the society of Mrs Burgess. Even while fearful of compromising his dignity and of bridging over, ever so slightly, the social gulf which she was too apt to ignore, he recognised that it was not needful to maintain the distant bearing towards her which he had been forced to adopt towards younger servants. His meals were more cheerful with her garrulous attendance, his home-coming less solitary. If at times her loquacity fatigued, it never failed to interest. Her experience of life was varied ; she had an inexhaustible fund of anecdote ; she was a connoisseur in the intricacies of fashionable life ; she was a reader of dreams, an interpreter of omens, a philosopher in much. Once, when she had explained the purport of a dream (a vision doubtless entailed by the tough steak of which Lawson had partaken for supper, but none the less portentous), and when, upon the following day, her trivial prediction was verified, he was, admittedly, impressed. Her intimate acquaintance alike with the unseen world and with a social world of which he was ignorant, endowed her conversation with a subtle charm, while the romance of her sister's marriage and her consequent connection with the Bradshaw family, lent her a peculiar interest in his eyes. More than once he pressed for fuller details concerning that strange history which had excited his

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curiosity, terminating his inquiries usually with a question respecting the whereabouts and welfare of her niece, Amelia.

Mrs Burgess's answer seldom varied. 'Melia was getting on well. She *had* been coming over on Saturday, but had gone an outing with some lady friends by tram. She liked her new life and was much improved.

"Do you think that her people will ever do anything for her?" he asked on one occasion; but on this point Mrs Burgess was decided.

"They'd have done it before if they'd been goin' to," she said. "'Melia thinks they'll take her up yet, but not they. They was too put out over the wedding.

"Of whom do the family exist?" he asked."

"There was three daughters at the time the Admiral married again," Mrs Burgess explained. "Now the eldest, Elinor's dead, and another, I'm told's a widow in foreign parts. There's one left living in England, Mrs John Coleford."

And it was in connection with this latter that Mrs Burgess related a tragedy. It appears that Muriel, the youngest daughter of the Admiral, was a girl of seventeen at the time of her father's second marriage. She left home consequent upon this event, and lived for a time with her eldest sister, Elinor; but this sister dying later, the girl was left with apparently no choice but to return to her former home under conditions to which she objected. In this dilemma, she adopted the sensible solution of getting married to Mr John Coleford; a match, according to accounts, desirable from every point of view, for Mr Coleford, at that time, was young, good-looking, popular and rich. It was hinted that her preference had been given to a cousin with whom she had been much thrown, and who was also a friend of John Coleford's; but, since the former was without means—if indeed, there was any truth in this rumour of a boy and girl attachment—Muriel Bradshaw had no doubt recognised the romance to be unpractical. For some time after the wedding all went well. Mr Coleford

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had a place in Scotland and a house in town, and, according to all accounts, they led a gay life. Then, they were wintering abroad in some hot climate, Mrs Burgess could not recall where, but Mr Coleford got sun-stroke, and when he came back he was a hopeless invalid. That was many years ago, and he had been on his back ever since, paralysed, so report said, and dying by inches—yet still he lived. Agatha Coleford, his orphan sister, had made her home with them, and on her account Mrs Coleford went out into society, and entertained largely. She had brought Miss Agatha out and had treated her like a daughter, though herself only a few years the girl's senior.

"What sort of an aged woman, then, is Mrs Coleford?" asked John Lawson.

"Now you arsk me something!" said Mrs Burgess, perplexed. "Let me see, Miss Muriel was seventeen at the time her pa married again, and 'Melia is seventeen at Xmas. But I don't seem to recollect jest how long Miss Muriel was with her sister before she had to marry."

This history, likewise, impressed John Lawson, and, later, when he remarked the name of Mrs John Coleford in the papers, he followed her doings with attention, feeling that he had a personal acquaintance with her private life.

Meanwhile the days passed, and he held no communication with the Misses Gibson. Beatrice wrote occasionally from Brighton and betrayed no knowledge of the coolness which had arisen, but Sarah called no more at No. 5, and Lawson felt an awkwardness about making the first advances. The estrangement might have continued but for an unlooked-for event.

It happened one morning that Lawson was troubled by the remembrance of a dream of extreme vividness. He retailed it to Mrs Burgess during his breakfast with some anxiety. It appeared that he had been distressed all night by the belief that he had lost his boots and was walking barefoot over an interminable road. The stones hurt him and the hard cart-ruts cut his feet.

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For some inexplicable reason he had taken off his boots and had left them on the road, and he went on and on, always seeking them, always believing that he was coming to them but never finding them. Mrs Burgess was profoundly interested.

"That's bad," she said lugubriously; "I tell you that's an omium that signifies pain in the feet and sickness. It's to be 'oped it means nothink worse than a change in the weather and a shootin' corn, but I don't like the look of it. An' it's odd, now," she added in contradistinction, "but I dreamt I was flying sky 'igh, jest like a bird, and that signifies luck, you know. Oh, I was flying that pritty! Seems as if I could fly now when I think of it!" She outspread her arms and waved them slowly by way of illustration, and Lawson departed to the city haunted by a vision of shooting corns and of Mrs Burgess sailing airily over the housetops.

That evening as he was crossing near Tottenham Court Road he was knocked down by a motor car. He was taken to the hospital and it was discovered that his leg was broken. Later, he was removed home in an ambulance. During the ensuing time of inaction Mrs Burgess nursed him with assiduity, his firm sent twice to ask after him, and finally, the Misses Gibson, hearing of his disaster, buried their affront and came to see him.

The visit was somewhat formal, and they made a point of eyeing Mrs Burgess, whom they had not engaged, with marked disapproval, but no allusions were made to the recent unpleasantness and Lawson was grateful for the kindly intention of their visit. Beatrice Grey too came once from Brighton, bringing a fresh terra-cotta vase which she had painted purposely. A comradeship had always existed between her and her elderly cousin, despite the too obvious matrimonial intentions of the Misses Gibson; and when she left, it was with the request, half-shyly, half-jestingly proffered, that he would not inform them of her visit.

Altogether, Lawson's days of convalescence were far from disagreeable. At the end of six weeks he went to the sea for a change, and within a few days of Xmas he

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returned. He found that Mrs Burgess in honour of the event had decorated the lamp in the hall with a bunch of evergreens. The cost he grudged, but the effect was festive, and his disapprobation silenced before her complete satisfaction : "Only seven-pennorth," she explained ; "and don't it make a show? And a bit of mizzletoe into the bargain"—with a sly wink—"for the comers-in, and the goers-out. You never know when the likely party comes along!"

Again a premonition, surely, which Lawson failed to recognise. He treated the utterance with remembered flippancy.

"Perhaps the Misses Gibson might find a use for it!" he suggested ; which unlooked-for jest met with keen appreciation on the part of Mrs Burgess.

It was on Xmas Eve, that, coming suddenly out of the dining-room where he usually sat, he found himself face to face with a young lady who was making her way softly past his room towards the hall door. He stopped short, taken aback by this unexpected encounter, and the lady herself seemed embarrassed. She hesitated, and finally extended a friendly hand.

"You don't seem to rekerne me!" she remarked with facetious affront ; and the voice brought recollection which the face had failed to convey.

"Why—it's Miss Bradshaw!" exclaimed Lawson awkwardly, shaking her hand. He was amazed at the change which a few weeks had effected in Amelia. For her black costume had a pronounced air of fashion, her hair was elaborately arranged and befrizzed, while the hat which jauntily surmounted her large bun was a remarkable edifice of blue and black bows.

"You don't seem good at fices!" she observed reprovingly, with an affected little giggle. "I jest ben down to see m'aunt. I didn't know you was back yet, and she found it so lonely in the house be herself. She used to git the fidgits in the evenings. It sounds solit'ry in these parts. Meself, I'd never fancy living in the shrububs."

"It's a long way for you to come," said Lawson at a

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loss for a rejoinder. "You are in a shop in the Edgware Road, now, I believe?"

"Why, yes," she said. "I'm assistant at Osgood's, and I lodge with another young laidy in those parts." She drew a rose-coloured, lace-edged handkerchief from her muff, flicked it to open it, and stuck it in the breast of her coat. "I mus' be orf," she explained. "It'll take me the best part of an hour to git back."

"Let me open the door for you," said Lawson, civilly; he moved with the aid of two sticks, and as he clattered on to the tiles, the girl viewed him with commiseration.

"Oh, don't you trouble," she protested, "I'll let meself out. You do seem to have been havin' a time! Aunt told me about your accident."

"Yes, it was hard luck," he said, with resignation, "but I hope soon to be all right again." He was furtively studying Amelia with an astonishment which increased. She trod lingeringly to suit the slowness of his steps, and as she passed under the gas he could judge the exquisite clearness of her skin, the delicacy of her features. Her figure was willowy in its supple grace, and her complexion was suggestive of breezy lanes and morning dew, rather than the squalor of London slums. He told himself he had had no previous notion of her good looks, only to recall that he had never before seen her cleanly and tidily clad. Neither on their former meetings had she struck him as being so tall, and he wondered if her present appearance of increased height was due to the flowing skirts which she now wore. He pondered too whether the recollection of that first meeting was distasteful to her, as he passed both sticks into one hand to open the door, and, treading out on to the steps, breathed the warm, damp air. "It's a mild night for Xmas," he observed. "I suppose you are going to be very gay at this festal time?"

Miss Bradshaw puckered her brows in a manner which reminded him of her aunt. "We've been very busy down our way," she replied, discontentedly.

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"Xmas is an orful time, and Xmas Eve in the shops—well, we jest don't know which way to turn. I'm that tired, my feet is sore. And if it hadn't ben that I thought aunt would think me unkind staying away, I'd never have come out to-night. We didn't close till seven. I'm that thankful the 'olidays begin to-morrar; I couldn't hev' stood another day of it."

"Perhaps you would like to come here to-morrow, would you?" suggested Lawson, moving slowly down the path towards the gate. "Maria is coming to spend the day with your aunt."

"Thenk you," she answered; "but I promised to spend the day with some young laidies, friends of mine. Nothing amusing, you'll understand, but I said I'd go. That's why I come to see aunt to-day."

Her voice was affected, at times, and she had evidently been cultivating a faint drawl in her speech which contrasted strangely with the sharp cockney twang.

"Ah, I expect you'll have a good time," said Lawson in fatherly accents. The light from the opposite street lamp fell upon Amelia; it showed the pink-and-white beauty of her face, the dainty, dislodged tendrils of hair which the breeze was blowing about her delicate cheeks. She must be the age of Beatrice, he considered—no, younger, of course, Mrs Bradshaw had stated that she was seventeen. And not clever, like Beatrice, one could see that, but certainly better looking. Beatrice had brains, not beauty. He thought with interest of the strange union to which the girl before him owed her existence.

She laid her hand on the gate. "Thenk you all the saime," she added more cordially as though afraid she had been ungracious. "It ain't that the other's amusing, you'll understand. As far as that goes, I'd ony one thing I wanted to go to this Xmas, and I doubt I'll git to it. And that was a darnce three weeks on."

Her voice expressed poignant regret, and Lawson's

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inquisitiveness was stirred. "And why don't you think you'll go to that?" he asked.

She swung the gate gently to and fro. "Well, it's like this," she explained with a faint giggle; "it's a young man wants me to go, an' a good few of the young laides from our plaice is goin' with their young men, and I'd have a good enough time if I was once there and know a lot of fellars. But it feels foolish to go be oneself, an' I don't care to tack on as third to a couple, and if I go with Bob Butler—that's the young man I was talking of—he'd take it as keepin' comp'ny, he's that way inclined, y'see. And I suppose"—she looked at Lawson interrogatively—"it's me being a laidy-born, I don't seem to take to them command fellars; they're a mixed lot, the set at our plaice."

Lawson smiled, with reflection, then spoke without. "It seems a pity you shouldn't go," he said, the while surprised at the venturesome nature of the suggestion. "Look here, it's some time on, and by then my game leg will have let me get about a bit more. How would it be if I took you?—I'm old enough to be your father," he explained quickly, "and you say you've lots of friends there, all you want's just some one to go with?"

He heard Miss Bradshaw draw in her breath with faint surprise; she was silent, considering his proposition.

"Well," she explained at length, "I'll keep you to that! An' I take it very friendly of you, Mr Lawson. There ain't many of your sort'd be so obliging. But"—with sudden anxiety—"you won't expec' me to darse with you?—Well, you see, I jest *couldn't* darse with a lame man, could I?"

The last clause was an attempt to qualify any lack of civility which the first suggested. None the less Lawson felt unreasonably annoyed.

"Of course not," he said more coldly. "I told you I did not intend to dance. I don't look like dancing at my time of life, I fancy! You must understand that

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I am only going to oblige you, as you were in a difficulty, and as you say you know plenty of young fellows when you get there. And perhaps"—he recognised the moral cowardice which prompted the suggestion—"it might be as well not to mention the matter to your aunt, possibly she would not understand, and she might expect to be asked to come too."

A spasm of merriment distorted Miss Bradshaw's face. "Lord!" she exclaimed, "I don't think m'aunt would want to go to a ball! I'd just like to see her darning!—I'd as lief set a feather bed twirling. Still I won't tell her if you'd rather not," she added more seriously. "An' I'd better find out and write to you to tell you about the tickuts and time and all that."

"Yes, you can write to me about it, later," said Lawson with a curious sense of depression. Already he regretted the rashness of his mood.

"I do take it kindly of you, though," repeated the girl gratefully, "an' you don't look the sort that's likely to care about darnces, neether. Why, when first I set eyes on you," she added with heightening colour, "I took you for a preacher, indeed I did—not an out-an'-out parson, you know, but somethin' in that line, you seemed quite sober-faced and goody. I never thought I'd be goin' to a darse with you——"

Her gaze had wandered to the door of the house, and Lawson, anticipating the presence of Mrs Burgess, looked round with nervous expectancy. But the passage there was empty, only the gas-lamp hung like a small Jack-o'-the-Green flickering faintly through its overhanging mass of Xmas decoration.

Yet it seemed as though it was upon this that Miss Bradshaw's glance was dwelling.

"Oh my!" she murmured, opening the gate with an air of sudden affright; "if you ain't a caution, Mr Lawson! There was me standing under the mizzletoe and thought it was a bunch of ordinerry greens!"

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TREATING OF AMELIA

MANY times during the week which followed, Lawson found it in his heart to regret the act of good-nature into which he had been betrayed.

It seemed to him incredible that, upon the impulse of the moment, he should have let himself in for a suggestion so at variance with all his previous mode of life and sense of fitness. To go to a dance with a girl young enough to be his daughter, was, in itself, a proceeding which reflection condemned ; but to take the niece of his own servant to a place of public entertainment was an aspect of the case which not even the remembrance of Miss Bradshaw's aristocratic connection could render palatable. He wondered uneasily what Sarah and Lucy would think of it if it ever came to their ears. It seemed to him, upon consideration, that the girl could, surely, secure some suitable escort for the dance when she had admitted that so many of her friends were going. Neither, he decided, was it his affair whether she went or stayed away, and his interference in the matter was open to an absurd misconstruction which it was well, at all costs, to avoid.

Having decided to extricate himself from the dilemma in which he had placed himself by a moment's rashness, he was perplexed how best to accomplish this. The most plausible excuse which presented itself to his mind was to base his refusal on the state of his health, but the girl was in a position to question her aunt and to ascertain that he was now returning to his work as

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usual. Matters were further complicated by his receiving a letter from her, thanking him again for his kindness and telling him where he could procure the tickets, 2s. 6d. a head. He was surprised to find her writing so much less illiterate than he should have expected from her speech, but he reminded himself that this was not uncommon among both men and women in her position, who had received the advantages of a board-school education and the disadvantages of illiterate associates.

He conned the letter with attention, trying to frame a suitable answer to it ; an answer which would be final and yet would represent his conduct in a favourable light. Lawson's imagination, however, was not quick, and no available excuse presented itself to his mind which carried sufficient weight when he had struggled to transfer it to paper. At length he decided that these sort of matters were more simple when accomplished by word of mouth. It would be best to see Miss Bradshaw and make verbal excuses to her. She could scarcely insist when she found him unwilling to oblige, and it required only a little tact to convey this impression.

Accordingly, he did not answer her letter, but, two days later, upon leaving his office he entered a 'bus which conveyed him to the Marble Arch. He continued his way thence on foot, being uncertain at which end of the street Osgood's was situated. He walked slowly, looking out anxiously for the name of the shop. The windows were gay with Xmas and New Year's gifts. Enticing, tawdry articles outspread behind the wide panes were labelled as useful presents or seasonable gifts. The gas flared cheerfully upon them ; it cast a brilliance beyond, over the wide pavement and the dark crowds moving there. Business places were closing ; clerks on their way home hurried past, irritable at each impediment to their progress ; smartly dressed girls sauntered along in twos and threes, chatting together, or pausing in front of the haberdashery shops in anxious conclave. Older women, absorbed, indifferent, threaded a way in and out of the idlers. Street-vendors shrieked their

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wares from the curb. A barrel-organ was playing the last popular air with marvellous variations to a juvenile audience. Outside a gaily-lighted public-house some girls of the coster class jested and sang, or indulged in horse-play with some loitering youths.

After Lawson's enforced inactivity and his absence in the country, the stir and noise of the streets was grateful to him. He disliked the stillness and lack of interest in bucolic life. Even Albion Crescent was too rural for his taste, though the cheaper rent and alleged purity of the air had originally induced him to settle there. He found himself viewing his present surroundings with the interest of a stranger to them. Often as he had passed through similar scenes and similar crowds they had never attracted him thus profoundly. To-day, the mere hum of the human voices cheered him, the ceaseless flow of the passers-by, the movement of the traffic. From time to time he paused before a window which presented a more attractive aspect than its neighbours, partly to rest his leg which ached after much walking, partly from an unacknowledged desire to delay the coming interview and to refashion the excuses to be employed throughout it. It was during one of these involuntary pauses that, with a start, he discovered Osgood to be written on the yellow glass above the window at which he was staring. He turned with an illogical dismay, and hurrying past it, strolled on, irresolute, till he paused amongst a crowd gathered about a gaudily-decorated butcher's shop a few yards further on. There, artificial holly was hanging in loops from the ceiling, the clean pink limbs of the dead animals were adorned with brilliant paper roses. On the white slab lay a whole ox, its huge head extended over a wooden prop and crowned with a large paper garland which contrasted, in horrid mockery, with the death agony still visible in its tortured eyes. Lawson, preoccupied, yet felt a sensation of disgust at the spectacle, but the man next to him eyed the huge carcase with a grin. "'E never thought 'e'd come to be sech a toff!" he observed facetiously, and, doubly

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annoyed at the distraction, Lawson retraced his steps determinedly to Osgood's.

He entered the shop with misgiving and a sudden realisation that it would be difficult to say all that he had intended when the interview must take place before so many witnesses. In planning it, he had not reckoned with those two long rows of assistants edging the counters ; and he was further disconcerted by a sleek shop-walker intercepting him to ask what article he required.

"I believe that Miss Bradshaw is employed here," said Lawson ; "I should like to speak to her for a moment, if it can be managed."

The man eyed him, then stepped back a few paces to scan the remote limits of the shop. He turned again : "The young lady is serving," he said ; "but she will be disengaged shortly. We shall be closing in another quarter of an hour, if you can wait ?" He proffered a chair, which Lawson accepted, and seated himself to face the door, with his back carefully turned towards the assistants at the neighbouring counter.

The half-hour which followed was, perhaps, the most disagreeable of his life. He sat with his eyes dependent on the glass door in front of him. It swung ceaselessly to and fro, customers passed in and out of the shop, the shop-walker hastened to meet them with a suave smile, or dogged their departing footsteps with effusive gratitude. But Lawson never varied his attitude nor the direction of his glance. He toyed with the handle of his umbrella, polishing it restlessly in a nervous grasp. His own personality had never oppressed him so keenly. It burdened him with an overwhelming self-consciousness. He grew hot and cold with the torment of it. The conviction strengthened that he was an object of mirth to the whole establishment. It seemed to him that each individual who entered the shop stared at him with curiosity, that the few assistants who crossed his line of vision were looking at him and whispering together ; that he had surprised an air of supercilious amusement upon the wooden face of the shop-walker. . . . He told himself that he had never realised before how his personal

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appearance was actually humorous. . . . The torment of that waiting waxed intolerable ; the moments spun themselves out tediously. At length he recognised that the assistants were packing up the goods for the night. Some of the lights were turned down, and the last straggling customers were hurrying over their purchases. Still Miss Bradshaw did not come, and his despair had augmented when he felt a light tap upon his shoulder and saw her beside him.

"I am sorry to have kep' you," she said, as he rose awkwardly to greet her. "But y'see I carn't git away till we close. Shell we come, now?"

She jerked her head suggestively towards the door, and he followed her, casting one anxious glance behind him, in which he gleaned that, during his moments of acute self-consciousness, the people surrounding him had been employed, severally, without a thought of his existence.

"That's my way—we can walk along a bit." Miss Bradshaw nodded again to the right as they turned into the street, while she tucked her muff under her arm in order to button her gloves. "I was surprised to see you come into our place jest now. I suppose you've come about those tickuts. Nothin' wrong, I hope?"

The anxiety in her voice depressed Lawson and robbed him of decision.

"Oh, no, nothing," he answered quickly.

"That's all right," said Miss Bradshaw, without noticing his subsequent embarrassment ; "I should jest be put out if I couldn't go, after all! I was a bit taken to when I see you come in for fear somethink was wrong, I thought y' leg might be worse, you see. Then I remembered aunt said you was all right again, so I settled it was jest a friendly call." She looked at him with a suspicion of amusement in her bright eyes, and her mouth curved to emit a brisk laugh. "An' the gurls—jest won't they chaff me about you, that's all! They'll be wantin' to know if you was me grandpa or me young man."

"And I suppose you'll explain that I am neither,"

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Lawson observed drily. The remark brought home to him the necessity of being firm in the real object of his visit.

"They'll git no chainge out o' me!" she said, with enigmatic rejoinder.

"I have not bought those tickets yet," he suggested, with decision.

"My—you're a dawdles," pronounced Miss Bradshaw, dismissing the statement with a momentary annoyance; "I'd better tell 'em to post them on to you, or they'll be all gorn. See here—there's the Salvation Army coming, let's go near the curb; I love to see them—idjots, that's what I call 'em!"

The sound of drums and tambourines approached, vieing with the traffic. A line of blue and red figures, grotesque in behaviour and costume, wound thinly, defiantly through its midst.

Miss Bradshaw, where the lamplight fell attractively upon her dainty face, watched the passing of the Army with a cynical smile.

"Ain't they a set of howling lunies?" she pronounced scornfully; "but there's this to be said, if it makes folks happy to tramp through the mud shoutin'—let 'em! That's all I say."

"All the same," said Lawson, anxious to sustain the conversation in a suitable strain, "General Booth seems to me a remarkable man, if it's only that he can get ladies to save their souls by wearing such hideous bonnets."

"You're right there, it's more than most men could do!" agreed Miss Bradshaw, with much amusement. As the natural arch of her mouth curved into a smile, he observed that her teeth showed, small, even, and of unblemished whiteness.

"I suppose," she said archly, "you don't know why they're howling so t'night?"

"They 'howl' most nights, I believe," said Lawson, newly oppressed with the necessity for reverting to his previous conversation.

"But t'night more than another night?" persisted Miss

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Bradshaw, with the air of one who asks a conundrum. "Well, you're a bright specimin ! It's not the last day of the ole year, and to-morrar's not the furst day of Janewerry. Nothing of the kind !"

"Of course !—Well, I had quite forgotten," he said. "But, when one has been ill, one's brain gets addled."

"Some of the people from our place are going to a darse t'night," said Miss Bradshaw, with suggestive depression. "Most folks 'll be having a good time t'night."

Lawson was silent. He realised that they were walking on indefinitely, and that the necessity for action became more urgent. He saw that she was observant of his silence. Every moment seemed to increase the difficulty of his task, and to heighten his regret at not having escaped from such a dilemma by writing. The thought of disappointing the girl grew more distasteful to him. He revolved whether it were indeed essential. It struck him that if he were to make a concession to the inevitable, and propose taking her to some place of amusement that evening, it might soften his subsequent refusal to take her to the dance. It was the publicity of the dance to which he objected.

"Miss Bradshaw," he said suddenly, acting on this reflection, "why shouldn't we go to a place of amusement to-night? I—I should be most happy to escort you."

Miss Bradshaw slackened her pace and looked at him. "What d'you mean by a plaice of amusement?" she questioned cautiously.

"Well, there are the theatres," he said with diffidence, "or—or Moore and Burgess, or Maskelyne and Cook, or Madame Tussaud's, or lots of other places if you will tell me what you like."

"Lots," she repeated, with perceptible sarcasm ; "that'd amuse a country podge. I prefer a theaytre, meself, if we go anywhere. But we'll be too late for the doors."

"We might get upper boxes"; he studied his watch. "Anyway it might be worth going to try.

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But we shall have to get food somewhere first." He cast his eyes in perplexity along the line of shops.

She turned briskly. "There's a restaurong near the Arch," she suggested in business-like accents; "we could git a snack of somethin' and not be too late"; and as they retraced their steps, soon she pointed out to him a window in which stood a large framed menu, artistically surrounded with a dusty tongue and glazed beef, a string of pale sausages, and some dingy rolls. Entering, they found themselves in a long, low room redolent of the odour of stale food and hot gas-pipes. The place was empty, save for a stout man of commercial appearance who was seated at one of the marble-topped tables reading a sporting paper, and, lower in the room, two men who were sharing a meal and disputing loudly in a foreign tongue. After a brief consultation with the waiter, Lawson ordered some slices of cold beef, beer, rolls, and two jam puffs, as being the repast which was at once economical and quickly served. He then joined Miss Bradshaw who had taken possession of a table near the window, and was engaged in drawing off her gloves. She looked about her with an air of satisfaction, and gave a complacent little sigh.

"This *is* warm and comfortable, ain't it?" she remarked. "I am glad you turned up this evenin', Mr Lawson. I was feelin' down in me luck with all the others goin' orf somewhere, and me with nothing."

The note of gratitude was pleasant to Lawson. It excused whatever was open to criticism in his action. He smiled a genial response to the girl's remark as he took the seat opposite to her. The shaded light upon the red wall behind her cast a softened glow over her face and figure. It enhanced her natural good looks, while it subdued the little exaggerations in her costume which were calculated to displease by daylight. Her beauty was remarkable in its perfection of feature and colouring. It seemed to him that now her eyes revealed a novel gentleness which their moments of greater brilliance, perhaps, lacked. When the waiter brought the beef, she turned up her veil and proceeded to

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manipulate her knife and fork with a certain daintiness which fascinated his attention. In the intervals of satisfying his own hunger, he watched her with furtive interest. The weeks of indoor life had already whitened hands which were naturally shapely. The little mannerisms in which she indulged were due, less to the attempted refinement which they implied, than to a natural grace which even vulgarity could not efface. To Lawson there seemed a marvellous prettiness in her little affectations of speech and gesture ; even the cockney twang when uttered by her lips acquired a quaintness which was no longer offensive. He recognised her lack of neatness, of good taste, of much, the absence of which was calculated to jar, but her shortcomings in this respect lent her an added pathos in his eyes. He had not lost sight of the fact that, socially, she had claim to a station superior to his own, and this fact vested her with a certain romance ; that, in spite of it, she should be what she was, common, untutored and condemned to associate with inferiors, filled him with a keen regret. He felt glad that he was being kind to her.

"Have you seen anything of Mr Bob Butler, lately?" he asked abruptly, as lifting the jug of beer which stood beside him, he poured some out into her glass.

"*Seen 'im?*" repeated Miss Bradshaw with emphasis. "Why, 'e's ben leading me the life of a toad under a harrar!"

Lawson winced. He cut his beef with precision. "I'm glad you are sensible on one point," he remarked cautiously, "that you don't encourage young fellows of that class. After all, with your parentage you have a right to look higher."

The colour deepened in the girl's cheek. She looked at him with kindling eyes.

"An' if you think I'm going to stay all me life what I am at present, Mr Lawson, you're precious mistaken," she announced with a note of confidence. "When I've put by enough money to dress as I should, I mean to

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look my people up and *make 'em* know me. Aunt says it ain't no manner of use, but we shell see."

Lawson looked at her approvingly. "Which reminds me," he said, "that I brought a paper along, with a passage marked in it that'll interest you. Don't delay to read it now," he added. "Just put it in your pocket, it'll keep till you get home. And about what you were saying, take my advice and don't go making friends more than you can help with your present associates. I don't, of course, mean affront them by holding aloof, and the girls, perhaps, don't matter so much, but I wouldn't get too thick with the men. It might be awkward if your people ever did take you up."

He was disconcerted by the expression of her eyes which met his own with a suspicion of merriment, and then were lowered with more than a suspicion of coquetry.

"That's jest it," she concurred, as she tucked the paper into the pocket of her coat. "I won't be keeping comp'ny with any of *that* set; it ain't what's proper for me. All young fellars, and cheeky, if you like! Of course, with, say, a man that's old enough to be me father, it's another pair of shoes!"

"Quite," answered Lawson drily. It might be that Miss Bradshaw shared her aunt's disability to distinguish between class and class. He called to the waiter for an evening paper, and began discussing what theatre it would be advisable to steer for.

Later, as they drove towards the Strand on the top of a 'bus, to which he had clambered with some difficulty, his momentary annoyance had passed from his mind. After the fetid air of the restaurant, the cold night breeze was exhilarating. They had secured the front seat and had nothing to obstruct their view. The gaily lighted streets were cheerful, and the scene attracted him with the curious sensation of novelty which he had experienced once before that day, and which surprised him. He felt as though the years had slipped from him, and he was viewing life again with the inquisitive

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interest of youth. At this hour he had usually been seated in solitude with his pipe and paper. No doubt he was too apt to waste life by getting into a groove. Yet he looked at the girl beside him, and the lost romance of youth stirred. He considered the past with regret; it represented a minimum of incident, of enjoyment.

"I believe an outing's good for one at times," he remarked, as the outcome of his reflection. "It takes one out of oneself. I don't believe I have been to a theatre for years. My only entertainment has been dining with my sisters-in-law."

"My!" responded the girl sympathetically, "you don't seem to have much of a time. But that's like aunt, she never seems to understand folks wanting a bit of change. It would jest drive me silly to live as she does, never a bit of outing from year's end to year's end."

The reference to Mrs Burgess checked Lawson's satisfaction, but again the annoyance was transient. He lit his pipe and smoked with complacency. Owing to the life of solitude which he had led, his conversational powers were limited. His ideas flowed slowly, their expression was difficult. But the contentment engendered by an ample meal had banished misgiving. His spirits were in the ascendant. The novelty of his position pleased him, the near presence of the girl, the encircling darkness. He rested his arm upon the railing behind her. The position was usual and he adopted it with intention. It was a happy mean between the coldness of indifference and the suspicion of any lover-like demonstration. Yet, possibly, she misread its significance, for, after a while, he felt her cast a glance at him through her dark lashes, and she spoke in a tone provocative and expectant. "Cheer up!" she suggested; "you've got the 'ump!"

He tapped his pipe against the railing in front of him.

"I'm afraid I'm stupid," he answered, rising to the occasion, "but you must make allowances. I'm not in the habit of escorting pretty girls about."

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She giggled, and, with assumed coyness, bent an exaggerated attention to buttoning her yellow kid gloves. The next moment, with a wholly involuntary action, she had caught Lawson's arm in a frightened grasp. For, in the stress of traffic, the 'bus on which they were seated had collided with another, and as the wheels of the two great vehicles locked, each swayed and lurched with disagreeable suggestion. Lawson, genuinely alarmed, strove to reassure the girl at his side. The warmth of her body, the strength of her clinging touch, affected him powerfully. . . . The moments passed, and the vehicles were sundered. A crowd had gathered, and the horses still plunged on the shining street. The drivers expressed their opinion of each other's incompetency with frankness.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you think you ken drive," shouted the occupant of the neighbouring box-seat. "You'd best let us know another tiome wen you're comin', then we'll hev' the Strand cleared for you. You're about sooted for a 'blind' label and a little dawg. That's about your figger."

The driver in front of Lawson lashed his horses with a silence which was impressive. He turned, at length, to survey his assailant with an air of compassion.

"B'lime," he remarked thoughtfully, "I s'pose yer wos created fer some good objec', but"—with an air of increased reflection—"so wos bugs."

Miss Bradshaw gave an uneasy laugh. "They're a common lot," she remarked. She and Lawson had settled down to their former position. But as the 'bus drove on, a certain pleasant embarrassment affected them mutually. The sudden tenderness of Lawson's manner had surprised himself as much as it had appeared to Amelia the natural outcome of the situation. And the moment had held for them, mutually, a psychological interest. For, all-unsuspectingly, in the strange electric quality which can spring out of physical contact, they had touched one of those curious confines of life when normal existence is sharply reversed; when the forces of nature assert their power, palpable, insidious,

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all-compelling. To the girl, with its accompaniments of mystical darkness, of flashing lights, of the cold exhilarating night-breeze, it meant the first stirrings of sex, a hint of potentialities, indefinite, uncomprehended. To the man it meant the revivifying of languid blood, the renewal of what had lain dormant, the echo of a forgotten ecstasy,—intoxicating, feared. Her glance betrayed anticipation, ignorantly accepted ; his, retrospection, consciously contested.

They reached the theatre with a latent regret for the untimely closing of an incident so palpably incomplete. An enquiry at the box-office procured seats in the upper circle. As they entered, the piece had begun ; lines of faces peering whitely out of the dimness were hushed, intent. In the space of light to which these turned, like a picture the scene lay revealed, arresting, sordid in its realism. A dying man, whose ghastly face proclaimed the extremity of his condition, lay extended on a bed in the corner, breathing audibly. At the other side of the room, two relations, evidently the villains of the play, were searching for his will by the light of a hand-candle, and explaining to each other the necessity for destroying this before they were discovered. It was obvious that they believed the dying man to be beyond all power of interference, although he lay watching them with deplorable anxiety in his eyes. Yet, in the moment when they had secured the precious document, and having conned it swiftly, were holding it towards the fire, he gathered together his remaining strength. He crawled from the bed with staggering, feeble footsteps, rushed noiselessly upon them, wrenched the paper from their grasp and tried vainly to reach the door. There was a moment's intolerable suspense while the astonished villains paused undecided ; then they pursued their victim, there was a short, sharp scuffle, a gurgling noise, unpleasant in suggestion and fact; and he lay strangled at their feet.

The act proceeded, the play developed, the curtain came down on a thunder of applause. Miss Bradshaw pinned her hat to the seat in front of her and dusted

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her face lightly with her handkerchief. "Hot!" she remarked in response to Lawson's glance. "My goodness, that was something *like* a play. Say what you like, you do git your pennorth at this theaytre. D'you think they git found out in the end, and that the girl that he meant to have all his money gits to know about it?"

Lawson could not tell. Watching her, he wondered if she traced a fanciful resemblance between the fate of the high-born, penniless heroine and her own.

"The worst is, things always do come right on the staige," she said; "one knows the end. The good git rich and the bad git beans; it's ony the different ways it's brought about."

She stood up and tried to peer over the intervening tiers down at the stalls. "I like the pit for one thing," she remarked, "one can see all the swells come in, and the dresses. I don't mind the wait when you see them arrivin'. It's wonderful to think ev'ry one of them's paying 10s., 6d. for the seat they sit in, and they never look as if they was enjoying themselves or cared to be there."

"Very likely they don't," he said absently. Again the recognition was present to him that, while he had been leading his uneventful existence, this life had been going on in unbroken continuity, night after night, this life of the active world, of theatres, of music, of enjoyment, of event. And he had only to reach out his hand and grasp it again in its fulness, its allurement.

"There's a man I know there," said Amelia, "sittin' next the girl with ginger hair, see, jest in front of those two ole dowds in the second row. He comes after one of the young ladies at our place and he's here with another gurl. Won't she be in a tearing rage when I tell her! You're looking in the wrong direction—over yonder, see, by the two elderly guys, second row from the front."

Lawson looked, and looked a second time.

"They're cures, if you like!" said Miss Bradshaw, accompanying his glance. "Look at their caps and

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shawls ; you bet they brought 'em in a paper-parcel and figged theirselves up in the passage to look like evening dress. They're what I call dressy, an' as sober-faced as if they was at a prayer-meeting ! "

Lawson did not respond. In the two elderly women he had recognised his sisters-in-law, Sarah and Lucy. They seldom visited a theatre, not oftener than twice a year, and, personally, he had not been since Molly's death ; it was a fateful coincidence that on this night of all others they should be present at a play which he had selected to attend at random, and still more, that they should be seated in places but a few yards distant from his own. The play progressed, but for Lawson enjoyment was at an end. The mood which his adventure had engendered was roughly disturbed. The excitement of the mimic life before him no longer held attraction ; even the enthusiasm of the girl beside him, her sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, no longer afforded him satisfaction. Between the acts he screened his face with his programme to avoid detection, and reassured himself with the knowledge that the Misses Gibson considered it in bad taste to stare round at the audience behind them. At the close of the play he hurried Miss Bradshaw from the theatre, and it was not till he found himself out in the streets that his satisfaction reasserted itself.

Amelia refused to let him see her home, but agreed to walk a little way along the Strand before getting into the 'bus which would put her down near her own street. Their progress was slow. The pavement was full of the people issuing from the different theatres. The stress of the crowd hindered, and Lawson took her arm to pilot her more effectually. They walked further than they had at first suggested. The exercise was agreeable after the heat and excitement of the theatre ; but by-and-by, as the bells began to toll for the old year, Miss Bradshaw professed herself tired, and decided to look out for the 'bus which went to Edgware Road. One was not in sight, and as the wind blew too coldly for prolonged inaction, they stood up to wait in the entrance

## The Treating of Amelia

of a shop. Next door was the church where the bells were tolling. The sound was mournful, insistent ; it ceased with abruptness ; the clock struck twelve, and the crash of the ensuing peal came with startling force. It seemed to tingle down the walls, to vibrate in the flags, to fill the little dark passage with a turmoil of sound. Lawson, still holding the girl's arm, stood peering out at the confusion of lights and faces in the street beyond. Speech had become impracticable. Clang after clang of the bells crashed and fell about them in the darkness, sharp, throbbing, resonant, tumbling each over each with frenzy till the place was alive with the noise, till it seemed to hammer in his veins and pulse through his nerves with an intolerable tension. For a space there came a lull in the sound, and he drew in his breath with relief. The sullen roar of the traffic droned in his ears again with a sense of quietude. He looked at the girl beside him. " You haven't wished me a happy New Year," he complained. Then he looked at her again, and his hand tightened on her arm. " What should you say," he demanded, " if I took a kiss, just for luck ? "

" You'd better—that's all ! " said Miss Bradshaw with indignation, and Lawson bent quickly and put his lips to hers.

## CHAPTER V

### THE EXPEDITION OF AMELIA

HALF an hour later Miss Bradshaw climbed the staircase of the lodging-house in Praed Street where she rented a small room in common with her friend, Miss Mabel Higgins. The door of this apartment cracked noisily as she opened it, and a voice out of the darkness assailed her in drowsy protest. Without troubling to respond, she proceeded to hunt about for matches. She swept chairs and tables with a heedless touch till she bruised her leg against the dressing-table, and recoiling too rapidly, upset a jug which stood on the floor. The water flowed about her feet and she uttered an exclamation of disgust.

A moment later the candle which she lit flickered through the small, scantily furnished apartment. It showed a wall-paper of obliterated pattern and nondescript hue, a carpet from which age had banished all vestige of design and colour. Half the room was occupied by the bed in which lay a girl whose sandy hair extended in a thick plait over the pillow. The tumbled blanket defined her figure : it tightened round her as she turned fretfully from the light.

"What a plague you are, coming in so late and waking one up!" she complained.

"You're late enough pretty often," remarked Amelia, drawing the pins out of her hat and sticking them into a pink plush pin-cushion slung on the wall.

"I come in quiet, then," maintained the other girl ; "do mop up that water you've spilt—it'll make the old carpet stink."

## The Expedition of Amelia

Amelia took a towel from off the wooden rail near her, and dropping it on to the pool of water, tapped it down with her foot and left it to soak up the superfluous moisture.

"That's the tow'l for the morning you've used, stupid," observed her friend, whom indignation was rousing to wakefulness. "What'll you do to-morrow, I'd like to know?"

"Do without, I suppose," said Amelia, as she hung her bodice on a peg, and seating herself, proceeded to unpin her hair.

"Well, you sha'n't have mine," the girl suggested, burrowing lower into the bed. "Where've you been, Milly?"

"Adelphi," responded Miss Bradshaw briefly.

"Good?"

"I'd say so."

The girl watched her with blinking eyes. "Did you go with that dry old stick that came to Osgood's after you?" she questioned.

Amelia bent her head backwards and shook it briskly till her hair fell in long, untidy coils to her waist.

"Yes," she said, with some reluctance.

"Is he sweet on you?"

"That way inclined."

Miss Higgins looked wider awake. "Well, you might tell us more," she remonstrated. "What sort of a fellow is he? and how did you come across him? You'd never think of an old chap like that, would you?"

"I dunno what I'd think of," said Amelia, with reticence; she plied the brush with vigour through her tangled locks. "He's a gentleman—of sorts," she observed after consideration.

"'Of sorts,'" echoed her friend with delicate emphasis. "So I should have supposed! His coat was precious shiny, but if he's 'of sorts,' that explains it.—I see Bob Butler when I was out this evening," she added with irrelevance; "we went for quite a pleasant bit of a walk together."

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"You're welcome," replied Amelia, and there was a silence.

"I don't think I'll tell you what I was going to have," remarked Miss Higgins.

"I wouldn't then," acquiesced Amelia.

Miss Higgins raised herself upon her elbow, patted her pillow discontentedly, and changed her position beneath the blankets.

"Your outing don't seem to have agreed with you," she remarked ; "but I wish you'd either be quick and get to bed, or you'd put the candle on the drawers where it ain't in my eyes. I want to get to sleep again."

"I mus' brush my hair for the mornin'," said Amelia ; but she lifted the candle on to the chest of drawers as requested, and propped a box on end beside it to cast half the room in shadow.

"Don't jerk the blankets when you get in," pleaded Miss Higgins, while Amelia continued to brush out her tangled locks, planting the brush on the crown of her head and tearing it through the splitting hair. Her cheeks flushed brightly with the exertion, her round arms up-lifted, acquired an additional whiteness. Soon, a steady and pronounced breathing from the direction of the bed indicated that her companion was asleep. Her hair plaited in a thick coil, Amelia undressed swiftly. One by one, her garments slid noiselessly to the floor, till she stood a quaint, slim figure in her chemise, with soft shoulders exposed, and firm, round legs. A little shiver contracted her limbs as she huddled her arms over her cold breast, and crossing the room, snatched her nightdress from the foot of the bed. She tossed it over her head and stood leisurely passing the buttons through the small holes. She eyed the sleeping girl before her with attention. Mab Higgins' mouth had opened as her eyes had closed ; the muscles of her face had stiffened ; all look of intelligence had gone from her features. Her tangled hair had lost the gloss which, by day, lent a certain prettiness to it. One hand lay on the blankets, a thick, coarse hand with pronounced wrist-bone.

## The Expedition of Amelia

Amelia smiled. Without undue vanity, the infatuation of John Lawson was more comprehensible than the defection of Bob Butler. She up-lifted the sleeve of the night-gown which she was fastening, and eyed her own hand and arm with criticism. Work had coarsened both, but already a different life was beginning to have effect ; she noted the improvement ; her skin was paler, its texture smoother. She drew the buttons of her nightdress asunder again, and studied the superior whiteness of her breast. She passed her touch over its surface ; it felt smooth to her hand, but her hand grazed the softer skin which her dress usually protected. She bent the tips of her fingers towards her and viewed their roughness with regret. Then, as the coldness of the air sent another shudder through her thinly-clad form, she fetched the candle, and drawing the paper which Lawson had given her from the pocket of her coat, she crept into bed.

Mab Higgins moaned faintly. Settling herself comfortably amongst the pillows, Amelia proceeded to cast her eye swiftly over the pages of Lawson's gift. In terse, entralling paragraphs she scanned accounts of varied incidents of existence ; thefts, murders, mysteries, horrible fatalities, a divorce case, a breach of promise. One murder, briefly, fascinated her attention. It had been accomplished by strangling, and recalled the scene at the theatre that evening. There was a picture of the murderer, a face with a moustache ; and a picture of the victim, the same face without a moustache. She experienced an agreeable sensation of horror. With realistic appreciation, she glanced at the door of the room, figuring it open, and a duplicate of the murderer's face observant of her from the yawning blackness of the passage beyond. Next, she wondered how it must feel to be a murderer and to know the police were after you and the rope threatening. She looked at the girl beside her ; Mab lay with her throat exposed, unconscious, limp, a look of imbecility upon her colourless face. She pictured clasping that naked, defenceless throat with strong, lithe fingers, tightening

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the grasp and watching death coming swiftly over those—now—placid, heavy features. She was strong, and Mab was half her size ; it would be simple to accomplish. . . . Amelia grew terrified at her thoughts ; the blood in her temples throbbed with a horrible wakefulness. She turned the pages of the paper over impatiently and a large dog's-ear caught her eye, indicating the passage to which John Lawson had wished to draw her attention. She read it with avidity.

It intimated to an interested world, that Agatha, sister of John Coleford, was about to enter the bonds of matrimony. The name of the bridegroom made no impression upon Amelia's consciousness ; it was the supplement to the announcement which commended itself to her attention.

This explained for the benefit of the uninitiated that Mrs Coleford, formerly Miss Muriel Bradshaw, youngest daughter of the late Admiral Bradshaw, was a well-known member of society. She was a most popular hostess both in London and at Mr Coleford's beautiful country seat in Inverness-shire. It enumerated certain entertainments at which Mrs Coleford had recently figured ; and stated that on the eve of the New Year, she was to be present at an entertainment at the Countess of Braithwaite's in Portman Square—a function, it asserted, destined to be on an unusually elaborate scale, since it was to begin with an amateur theatrical performance, and to terminate in a dance. On the 10th, Mrs Coleford was herself to come before the public once more in her capacity of hostess, when she intended to give a fancy-dress ball at her house in Albert Gate, previous to the marriage of Miss Agatha Coleford.

"The bride-elect," it concluded, "whose parents are both dead, made her *début* into society under the chaperonage of her sister-in-law, and for some time past has taken up her residence with Mr and Mrs Coleford ; the unfortunate occurrence which for so many years has rendered Mr Coleford a hopeless invalid, having, no doubt, been conducive to this arrangement ;

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and Mrs Coleford is to be condoled with upon the loss of so charming a companion.

"We understand that the bridegroom elect, who is in the Diplomatic service, will be resident in Berlin."

For a while Amelia lay very still. The paragraph which represented a subtle element of interest to John Lawson, held for her an attraction which was fourfold. Not without purpose, surely, had her brain remained so feverishly awake and her senses clear. Thought spun, veered, centered, and faced conclusion. Abruptly, with a quick, lithe movement, she slid from out the sheets ; she crossed the room and began hurrying into her clothes with noiseless haste. Her long skirt she tossed aside and chose one which was shorter. This she concealed beneath a mackintosh which touched her heels. Her hair she twisted into an untidy coil, her hat she perched insecurely upon the coil. From time to time her glance turned anxiously to the bed, but the yawning cavity of Mab's mouth had neither lessened nor widened. She opened the door cautiously and crept downstairs. The house was silent. In the passage, upon a peg in the wall, hung a key which was for the use of such lodgers as requested its loan. Of this she possessed herself, extinguished the candle, unbolted the door, and stepped out into the night.

The sudden coldness of the air checked her excitement. She paused, reminding herself that the lateness of the hour would probably render her project useless. Then, as she hesitated, like an animated shadow a black cat crossed the line of pavement before her, and Amelia, well versed under the tuition of Mrs Burgess in the correct interpretation of omens, accepted the prognostic of luck, and wrapping her mackintosh more closely about her, set off along the street. At the corner of the Edgware Road, a man who was lounging by the wall, coughed with emphasis. She feigned indifference, but, by-and-by, casting a cautious glance behind her, she perceived that he was following. She did not quicken her pace till she had turned up a side

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street and was out of his sight, then she took to her heels and ran.

The streets were badly lighted and comparatively lonely at this hour. Their solitude was oppressive. The murder which she had been reading returned to haunt her imagination with unpleasant suggestion. Her steps sounded to her like someone in pursuit. She ran faster, panting faintly, her hat flapped over the loose coil of hair on which it was insecurely perched. Suddenly, in rounding a corner too incautiously, she charged with considerable force against a policeman who was stationed near the wall. The shock dislodged her headgear ; she came to an abrupt standstill.

"And where are *you* orf to?" demanded the man with reasonable indignation.

Amelia, breathing shortly, readjusted her hat over the unsteady coil.

"Well," she remarked, "considering that you've jest knocked a laidy's hat orf her head and about broke every blessed bone in her tender body, it'd be more p'lite if you was to ask how I find meself." She rubbed her arm with assumed anguish. "You're about as soft to run against as a bag ef bricks."

"Now none 'o your sauce!" he remarked, not unkindly. Amelia, though dishevelled, showed attractive in the lamplight. "Wot are you doin' rampaging through the streets like this when respectable gurls is a-bed? I've a great mind to lock you up till the morning, so I tell you."

She up-cast an effective glance at him through her dark lashes. "Ketch the p'licee not knowing a face that's worth lookin' at when they see it!" she retorted coolly. The elaborate dignity of manner and diction to which she had attained of late was alike gone from her. The keen night air, a spirit of adventure, even the unwonted freedom of her shorter skirts, bred in her a pleasant daring. She felt young and irresponsible. "I'm sorry I carn't oblige you!" she exclaimed facetiously, "but I'm orf to a party where my presence is particulully requested. So long!" She waved to him

## The Expedition of Amelia

with pleasantry, then, when a few yards off, looked round, and framed her mouth with the hollow of her hand : " You tyke a friend's advice," she called back, " and don't go obstructioning the public pavement. The next party who tries to walk through you mayn't treat it as agree'bly as mesself."

She walked on, her fears dissipated, and turned into Portman Square. Here her pace slackened ; she bent her steps leisurely to the right, peering through the dimness at the numbers on the houses, and scanning the distance with expectation. Soon she espied a little dark knot of carriages drawn in rows along the curb near the Square. At the house opposite to where they were stationed was an awning. The windows of that house were like shining slits in the line of dark wall. Amelia drew near. A pathway of red baize crossed the white pavement. Despite the lateness of the hour, a few watchers still edged this thinly, showing in dingy relief against the stream of light from the open doorway. Elbowing her way to the front of the little crowd, Amelia subjected each to a quick glance of inspection. There was a policeman ; the usual complement of old-young children ; a woman, ragged and drink-sodden, who stood shivering in her tattered clothes ; two or three respectably dressed people, difficult to classify, and a group of footmen near the steps. These latter she eyed approvingly. They stood with their arms folded, an expression of dignified resignation upon their faces. Their dapper livery and silver buttons appealed to her, their white leggings or comfortable long coats, their air of spruceness and well-being. Involuntarily, her hand wandered to her hair and she strove to modify its dishevelled condition. Then she leant forward. A wave of warm air met her, heavy with the scent of flowers. It was like a breath of summer cutting the rawness of the winter's night. She sniffed it luxuriously, and craned her neck to lose no detail of the scene from whence it was wafted. She had often before watched, shivering, yet fascinated, at the door of a house where a party was taking place, but she had seldom secured a

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better view of any interior than on the present occasion. The door was wide, she could see the hall within, large and brilliantly lighted ; women in gay dresses crossed it, they passed up and down the broad staircase, they disappeared into the warm glow of the red walled supper-room, they issued cloaked from a side passage. Each aspect of the scene attracted her with a novel interest, the flowers, the dresses, the jewels, the laughter, the subdued, exhilarating sound of music from above. By stepping on to the carpet when the policeman's attention was momentarily distracted, she could see a little way into the dining-room. She caught a glimpse of a round table near the door, of people seated at it, feeding. The ragged woman, who had followed her example and stepped upon the cloth, shrank back as the policeman looked round.

"It do look lov'ly, don't it?" she said below her breath to Amelia, and Amelia nodded her head absently.

"There's alwis railyt expected when there's red cloth dahn," one of the girls opposite explained to a friend in an awestruck voice, and was promptly snubbed for her information.

"'T ain't cloth, it's baize, and they've red dahn ev'ry where. Anyone'd think you'd gorn abart with your eyes shet."

Amelia, with caution, edged nearer to the footman who stood beside the lowest step. Twice, with perseverance, she caught his eye, and was able to return the stolid coldness of his glance with an expression of extreme friendliness. Finally she spoke. "Can you tell me," she asked with civility, "if Mrs John Coleford is gorn yet?"

The man feigned an elaborate deafness ; Amelia repeated her question with a note of sharpness ; he eyed her over his shoulder with indecision, then turned to a taller footman beside him.

"This young person wants to know if your Mrs John Coleford is still here," he remarked with the intonation of one who states a grievance.

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The taller footman also paused before committing himself to speech ; he, too, viewed Amelia with uncertainty over a stiff collar. "What is your business with Mrs Coleford ?" he demanded, after consideration.

"I'd say," suggested Amelia with flippancy, "if it's my bissiness, it isn't yours."

He lapsed into silence with an air of disgust. But Amelia had gleaned the information which she desired ; if Mrs Coleford's footman had not left, neither had Mrs Coleford. She kept to the position she had secured near to the steps, and as each departing guest came into sight, she cast recurring glances at the tall servant by her side.

First a man in an overcoat came down the steps, the linkman summoned a hansom, shouted the address, and he drove away. Two other men followed. They paused on the steps to light cigars, then one of them moved the ragged children aside with his stick, and they walked off together down the street. Attention quickened as a lady appeared, wrapped in a long blue cloak. She stood in the doorway waiting for her carriage, while whispered comments passed along the line. But soon departures from the house became more frequent. A pleasurable excitement stirred the little line of on-lookers. Bright silks and satins trailed down the steps in swift succession, snatches of conversation, of laughter, and of farewell mingled with the shouts of the linkman and the sharp clatter of hoofs upon the dry roadway. For a while Amelia studied with interest the cut of the skirts upon the women who passed her, the fashion in which their hair was put up, the flash of the jewels which they wore. But the scene palled with repetition. The wind blew more coldly ; she became conscious of a sensation of emptiness, of an all-absorbing sleepiness. Later, the watchers diminished, the ragged woman had stolen away, muttering, to a neighbouring doorstep, the tall footman yawned noisily and rested his back with a lack of ceremony against the railings. The advisability of returning home recurred to Amelia with enticing suggestion. Her limbs ached and she felt

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benumbed. At length, with sudden decision, she turned towards the darkness behind her. But—and in this was not the lucky omen of the black cat verified?—it was at such a juncture that she saw the footman whom she had watched step forward, sharply alert, and that the linkman shouted the name which had been in her thoughts.

She turned again, and, looking up at the doorway, saw where in the space of light from the house a woman was standing. The woman's face was in shadow, but the brilliance behind her defined her figure, with its perfection of outline. She appeared to be above the average height, and the light falling palely over the long folds of her dress and cloak, cast a glint of gold upon their silken whiteness. As she turned to speak to a man who stood beside her, it fell more distinctly upon her face and upon the contour of her shapely dark head. She was, perhaps, past her first youth, but her features were delicate and exquisitely modelled; the fur and lace about her shoulders, loosely folded, left the white skin of her neck exposed; it showed the dainty curve of her neck, the gleam of the jewels which encircled it. As she moved, the light pricked out the pale stars in her hair, and sent flashes of prismatic colour from her throat and arms.

A brougham with two black horses drew up before the awning and the tall footman held open the door. The woman whom Amelia watched came down the steps with deliberate tread; her white skirt glistened as it swept from the light into the shadow. Amelia could hear her voice in passing; she was talking to the man who accompanied her, and as she disappeared into the warm recesses of the carriage, she leant forward and reached out her hand in farewell. "You will come to-morrow?" she said.

"To-day," he corrected. "Yes—to dine."

He ran back up the steps, turning to glance after the carriage as it drove away, and, as the light shone upon his face, Amelia had opportunity to observe it narrowly.

Subsequently she set off homewards; yet, in connec-

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tion with her departure, an occurrence may incidentally be worth mentioning. She was chilled through, and, the lowest button of her mackintosh coming unfastened, she paused to close it about her legs. A voice spoke from the adjacent doorstep, and she recognised the ragged woman who had stood near her under the awning.

"You ain't got the value of a copper abart you, hev' you?" the latter questioned. "I'm thet dizzy in the 'ed I feel I'll drop. I ain't 'ad a bite terday."

"I got nothink," said Amelia. The complaint was hackneyed, but the woman looked ill. "You've stood too long in the cold," said Amelia briefly. "I'm empty meself from standin' there, and I'd a good meal at seven."

"I'd a cup o' cawfy lars' night and thet's all I've 'ad for two days," said the woman. "Gawd knows it do giv' yer pines."

"It's a pity you carn't have some of the food they're chucking away yonder," suggested Amelia with a venom engendered by kindred sensations; "but there's nothing for por folks but to drown theirselves."

"An' they ain't allowed to drown," returned the woman. "Bless yer—por folks mayn't die wen they want ter—I ought ter know." She coughed harshly and spat into the area below. Amelia eyed her with morbid interest. A policeman approached; a long arm out-thrust from encircling rags clasped the railings, and the woman staggered to her feet. "You don't tell *me*," she said; "if there's a Gawd up there bossing this show, 'e must have a deal on his conscience, por fellah." But Amelia with benumbed fingers was fumbling with the back of her dress. Some dark drapery slipped and fell. She held it up.

"It's an old one," she explained, "but they'll give you the price of a meal on it. I've got me better one at 'ome."

And Amelia ran home without her skirt.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE INVESTIGATION BY AMELIA

IT was New Year's day, and John Lawson, coated and hatted for departure to work, eyed the outlook as he drew his woollen gloves over benumbed fingers. At present the chill morning, with indefinite sky and low-lying, lemon-tinted mist, was an unpropitious harbinger of the coming year. And to John Lawson the entire aspect of the world that morning was indefinite and unsatisfactory. For, reviewed by the prosaic light of daytime, the events of the evening before seemed unreasonably remote and incredible ; and his behaviour throughout that evening, up to the astonishing incident in which it had culminated, difficult of belief. And while in view of his usually unemotional temperament the fact was sufficiently surprising, attempted self-comprehension resulted in greater self-mystification.

From where he stood he could see Mrs Burgess upon the doorstep in the morning fog, plying her broom with energy. A little cloud of dust arose about her, veiling her figure with a dusky haze, and adding a more sombre note to the prevailing drab of her attire. And, since the hour was early and tradesmen's carts made a pleasant stir of life in the Crescent, her gaze was visibly alert. A butcher rattled past and waved his whip to her with friendly recognition ; a grocer going his rounds along the plebeian houses of the street jerked his head briskly in greeting. Since her first arrival in the neighbourhood Mrs Burgess had made a large and varied acquaintance.

John Lawson turned away. The connection of ideas

## The Investigation by Amelia

which linked the woman before him to his companion of the previous evening was distasteful. Would the girl retail to her aunt what had transpired? Would she—a faint warmth reddened his grey cheeks—expect him to follow up his unpremeditated courtship with more definite action? His glance strayed to the empty chair opposite his own at the breakfast-table, as though his mental vision had already furnished it with an occupant.—He moved out into the hall and sought his umbrella.—For the present, two courses seemed open to him, to write to the girl and apologise for his conduct, thus pointing its lack of intention (but imagination pictured Amelia making merry over the missive with her friends); or to pursue the interesting tenor of his acquaintance with her, and by his future circumspect behaviour prove the senselessness of the past (and, as the dance tickets were as good as purchased and could not be wasted, this latter course seemed almost advisable).

But his face still bore a very obvious perplexity as he passed down the steps. Mrs Burgess smiled at him, and cast a pessimistic glance at the sky :

“ Looks wettening ! ” she remarked.

As he disappeared down the street, she plied her broom more leisurely. Lower down the road before the villas, a party of scavengers were busily at work removing the refuse; and it seemed as if it was upon these that her glance was more particularly cast. They scraped in silence with slow methodical movements, their weather-stained clothes and bowed forms showing indistinctly through the encircling fog. By-and-by, it seemed as though she singled out one more than the rest for her consideration ; and there may have been a certain magnetic quality in her frequent glance, for, though the man never looked in her direction, by imperceptible stages he came nearer, until, an isolated figure, he was scraping the road immediately in front of Mr Lawson’s house. Then Mrs Burgess paused in her work, and leant upon her broom.

“ A happy New Year, Mr Giles,” she observed heartily.

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The object of her attention scraped with increased noise as he jerked his head in acknowledgment of her greeting.

Mrs Burgess removed lumps of flue from her broom reflectively, and cast them down the neighbouring area.

"It's on'y tea, Mr Giles," she observed after a portentous silence; "and I'm not for saying there's much substance in tea to a man of your parts, but if you'll be fancying it, there's the leavings of a cup in Mr Lawson's pot at this moment, and," she suggested, with diffidence, "such as it is, it's warming to the stomach on a cold morning."

The harsh scraping of the spade upon the roadway was discontinued, and Giles looked up with effort.

"Kindly," he replied, "obliged to you, mem."

"Kindly welcome," responded Mrs Burgess promptly. She rested her broom briskly inside the doorway; "Come along in, on this bench, while I heat it up for you," she said civilly. "You'll wipe your feet first on the mat, I *should* say," with a cursory glance at the condition of his boots.

Giles, cleaning his spade upon the curb, propped it against the area railings. He mounted the steps slowly, with stiff action, and in the passage met Mrs Burgess returning with a cup and plate.

"I," she said, "have brought you a bit of solid as a stay to the fluid, so to speak; which it's a belief of mine that too much of one or the other, taken solit'ry, is not a benefit to the digester."

Giles took the proffered dainties, but declined, with a deprecating shake of the head, the suggested seat. "I take m'viccles standin', mem," he explained, as he bit deeply into the bread and bacon.

"Well, and I don't say there mayn't be something in that," agreed Mrs Burgess encouragingly, as she stood opposite to him, her hands propped upon her hips. "It seems when you come to think of it as though the victuals did ought to go down more affable in the straight line than when the feeder's doubled up sitting. As you may

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put it, it seems like dealing more straightforward with 'em. Though I alwis *do* remark there's a deal in use. Burgess, now, (my late husban', you'll understand, and a sweep by trade, and in a good way of business, used to sweep titled chimblies, as many as four a week, and got paid 2d. above what others of his perfession could charge) —Burgess, he did use to say that the sut was like a meal to him. Very fillin' he found it. He'd git through double the victuals Sundays when not sweepin' than weekdays when he wer. Though weekdays, I'm bound to say"—Mrs Burgess spoke darkly as was her wont when dealing with this topic—"weekdays he took it out in ways that was less beneficial."

Giles jerked his head in silence. It appeared that he preferred to evade the intricacies of speech, and by this simple method to convey alike, it might be, the result of profound thought, or the expression of complex emotions.

And briefly, perhaps, Mrs Burgess looked discouraged. She may have felt that it was the joy of battle which appealed to her, that there was little satisfaction in securing a monopoly of the conversation when that monopoly was not even contested.

"Not but what we've all our failings," she pursued, rallying, after a pause of expectation, "and Burgess wer better than some ; though"—insinuatingly—"I don't go so far as to say I carn't never better 'im. And"—with a sudden brightening—"it seems odd, now, we're all in the sweepin' way of gittin' a livin' ! Burgess got 'is by the sweepin' of chimneys, I git mine by the sweepin' of floors, and you git yours by the sweeping of refuge ! Though," with more subtle flattery, "you've the pull of us all, being empiled by the county council, and, in that sort, a Government orficial yourself ! "

Giles' gaze accorded her a stolid attention over the huge hunk of bread which he was devouring.

"A Government orficial !" she repeated with satisfaction at her own perspicuity ; "it's a hearty life, I should say, out in the open ? but it'll make you feel the need of a good supper at night. An' you not a married

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man"—the pathetic aspect of the situation appeared to affect her profoundly—"an' you, no doubt, receiving a good pay, with a tidy bit of saving put by, and not gitting the advantage of it when you've no comfort about you in the 'ome. You've been married and lost, like meself, if I may presume? Ah," with much surprise, as he shook his head, "to think of it! It isn't every day one sees a man of your looks goin' begging! But there's no accountin' for tastes. There's some don't know a Man when they see 'im.—But tell me it's all luck about marriage, tell me *that*," insisted Mrs Burgess, waxing needlessly argumentative, "and I'll tell you you're wrong. The fault lies in the choosing. That's where married folks come to grief. They don't consider if the party they're going to settle with is young and flighty, with no more sense than a stock-pot, or if they're well on in years and likely to make a 'ome a 'ome. That's what one wants in marriage," said Mrs Burgess sententiously, "a 'ome to be a 'ome, and it can't be, if it ain't kept scrubbed and dusted. Though it's not for me to say it, there wasn't a day in the week that Burgess couldn't have eat his meals off the floor if he'd ben so minded."

And although the practicability of partaking meals in such a posture roused none of the expected enthusiasm in Giles, Mrs Burgess was not again to be discouraged.

"There's some, if you'll believe me," she explained with professional pride, "that dirt attracks just for the gitting rid of it. I used to tell Burgess I don't know as I'd ever have looked the way he was on, if it wasn't he wanted cleaning up. That was my bit of fun, you'll understand. Not that there's so much to chose between sut and mud, except it's the smell. You'll credit me, that I did use to know as soon as ever Burgess was a comin' upstairs by the smell he brought with him. It was for all the world like a chimbly a-fire gitting nearer and nearer; and I never," she added with a fine touch of sentiment, "smell a chimbly a-fire now without thinking it's Burgess comin' back as he ust."

## The Investigation by Amelia

Giles drank deeply and set his empty cup upon the bench.

"You'll take another, mister?" she pressed, hospitably.—"Lors, what's that?" she interrupted herself, as there was a sharp crash upon the curb in front of the house, accompanied by a ring of sounding metal. A bicycle lay prone upon the pavement, and a young woman, cautiously emerging from beneath it, up-rose, brushed her skirts disconsolately, and looked at the machine with indignation.

"Why—if it ain't 'Melia!" exclaimed Mrs Burgess. "Whatever brought you here at this time of day, and on sech a conveyance?"

Amelia lifted up the prostrate machine.

"I dunno what's got the thing, I'm sure," she complained angrily. "I borrared it from Mab Higgins, an' I've rode others an' got along all right, but with this, whenever you wants to go to the right it goes to the left, and when you wants to go to the left it goes to the right. I've ben under every blessed 'bus and keb that I've met on the way 'ere."

"You're thet venturesome," said Mrs Burgess admiringly. "Mr Giles, this is m'niece, 'Melia. 'Melia, this is Mr Giles, a friend o' mine, and in the way of being an orficial under Government"—she winked impressively at Giles, who, with embarrassment, tendered his plate and departed to resume his work.

Amelia propped her bicycle up in the passage, and turned into the dining-room. Seeing food on the table, she poured herself out a cup of milk, and took some bread and marmalade. "Well," she remarked, as her white teeth bit crisply through the crust, "you ain't been a widder long, aunt, before you've got yesself a follower!"

"Git along with you!" responded Mrs Burgess, looking pleased. She began clearing away the breakfast things with energy.

"Any'ow 'e don't appear a chatty party," said Amelia, with mild disparagement; "but there—you

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like all the talk yesself, so I suppose you chose 'em to your liking."

"A man's none the worse for not being too free with his tongue, I can tell you," pronounced Mrs Burgess with her superior knowledge of the world. "You mark my words, 'Melia, there's little pleasant to be got in the way of speech out of a man when his courtin's ended, and there's a deal one had liefer not hev' to listen to. And, since marriage takes longer to git done with than courtin', give me them that's not free of speech, that's all I say."

Amelia got up, and, still eating, began moving restlessly round the room.

"Lawson's out?" she observed, as though anxious to feel convinced of the obvious.

"Gorn to work," replied Mrs Burgess reassuringly, as she clattered the plates on to the tray.

"I thought so"; Amelia was gazing at Beatrice's plaque upon the wall; "What's this gimcrackery up here?"

"And-painted," said Mrs Burgess, "by his cousin Beatrice, governess at a school at Brighton and very clever."

"His sweetheart, I suppose!" said Amelia. She laughed suddenly over some abstruse joke; then, discovering that Mrs Burgess had gone down-stairs, she continued her tour of inspection round the room. Soon she made her way to the drawing-room, and devoted her consideration to the furniture in the room and its arrangement. She peered into the greenhouse and then made her way up-stairs. The three bedrooms she entered, and subjected each to a scrutiny which left no detail unobserved. In the third room, she paused longer, surveying with interest the life-size coloured photograph of a woman in a blue dress which hung above the mantelpiece. Upon the chest of drawers which Lawson used, lay two wooden-backed brushes, a pair of studs and a frayed collar. She examined each in turn. A book had been left under the looking-glass; she drew it out and opened it. It

# The Investigation by Amelia

proved to be a record of Lawson's private expenditure. She read the entry for the day before.

	s. d.
Train . . . . .	0 6
Purchased one pair socks .	1 0
One tooth-brush . . .	0 4
Washing-bill . . . .	0 8
Paid Mrs Burgess on weekly account . . . . .	1 7
Charity . . . . .	9 8

Amelia was racked with secret mirth. A pencil lay upon the drawers handy. She erased the word *Charity*, and in a fair facsimile of Mrs Burgess's somewhat remarkable autograph, substituted the word *Courtin*.

Sauntering down-stairs again, she perceived Mrs Burgess in the passage, broom in hand.

"I was wondering where you'd got to," the latter remarked. "I was thinking you'd be off back to work. You'll be precious late."

"I ain't goin' to work to-day. I'm come to wish you a 'appy New 'ear," said Amelia, seating herself with an air of luxurious languor upon the staircase, to watch Mrs Burgess passing the broom briskly over the oil-cloth below.

"You'll lose your place."

"Don't care if I do!"

"You're that fractious, an' alwis was," commented Mrs Burgess with anxiety. "What'll you do for your livelihood if you throw your chances away like this."

"Git others," quoth Amelia doggedly. She cocked out her feet, and studied with unqualified admiration a pair of brilliant yellow kid boots, and ankles clad in ginger-coloured, open-work stockings.

"That's as may be," said Mrs Burgess sceptically. "I can tell you one thing, 'Melia, if you're thinking of the fam'ly, it's a por look out; and if you're thinking of marriage, it's a porer."

"You don't seem to have had sech objections to it your-

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self," said Amelia, drily. "And if you've your chances, aunt, with your figger, I don't see why I carn't, with mine."

"You needn't be throwing skits at my figger, then," pronounced Mrs Burgess, deeply hurt. "It ain't showing respec' to your elders, 'Melia; and I can tell you there's those that admire a woman of substance and proportions more than a slip of a gurl, that, with a little trying, you could see through like a winder. But," she added, observing Amelia's pleased inspection of the ginger-clad ankles, "you're never thinking of the bally, 'Melia? I'd never consent to a niece o' mine going into the bally. It's downright low-class to show your legs to the public. I'd wash my hands of you, 'Melia, if you took to it, so I tell you."

"Who was talking of the bally?" asked Amelia, indifferently. "Aunt, can you tell me particklers about Miss Muriel Bradshaw—she was the youngest, wasn't she?"

Mrs Burgess cast a keen glance at her.

"An' I'd dearly like to know what maggot you've got into your head," she responded.

"What's the matter with Miss Muriel's husband?" persisted Amelia.

"I've told you a many times, but it's in at one ear and out at another!" complained Mrs Burgess. "Why, paralised from sunstroke. A sort of wasting away; begins in the legs and goes to the 'ed. Then you die. But it takes some time to git there."

"Dotty?" questioned Amelia, with interest. "There's a young laidy at Osgood's, whose father got sunstroke, and he thinks 'e's an injiarubber ball."

"I can't say about that," said Mrs Burgess. "But one thing I could say, and to them that shall be nameless, I'd not trouble my head about sech as don't trouble their head about me."

Amelia yawned with elaboration, and stretched her arms languidly above her head, till the brown jacket which she wore cracked ominously.

"Mrs Coleford," she mentioned, "is giving a fancy-

## The Investigation by Amelia

dress ball ten days on; I expec' it will be a sight worth seeing."

"And I s'pose you'll be at it!" said Mrs Burgess with sarcasm. "Fancy dress——, I've no patience with sech foolery; why can't people be contented with the clothes the Almighty's giv' 'em?"

Amelia did not attempt to fathom this mystery. "An' Mr Lawson," she questioned casually, "I s'pose you mean to go on charing for him? You've never told me exactly what sort of a man he is, an' how you find him to live with."

"Well, I might do worse, an' I might do better; an' I may stay, an' I mayn't," said Mrs Burgess sententiously. "To tell the trewth, 'Melia, I never settle my mind on anythin', because I've made observation that it sort of sets Providence determined on the cont'ry. An' as for Mr Lawson, I won't say he's what I've been used to, or that he's much by fambly, but he acks according to his lights, and none of us can do more."

"Is 'e rich?" asked Amelia, with curiosity.

"Well, I don't say 'e's rollin'," said Mrs Burgess, with reticence.

"I never thought 'e was the Prince a' Wales!" retorted Amelia; "if 'e was, I expec' you'd be setting your cap at him yesself!" She laughed again hilariously. Then, with a sudden access of energy, she sprang up and moved to the door. "Well, I'm orf, aunt," she announced, "so Good-bye!"

She wheeled her bicycle out on to the steps and paused for a moment, looking down the street. The early morning fog had dispersed, and the sun had penetrated in a sheen of gold through the silver mist. About the house-tops the white haze still clung, thinly; but, below in the street, each detail of the scene was distinct;—the line of dull houses, the red villas, the grass-plot with the straggling trees, the little knot of scavengers at work upon the mud beyond. She stood silent, curiously observant. The sunlight lit the steel of her bicycle, and fell with a pallid brightness upon her slender figure.

And Mrs Burgess looked at her with a stirring of

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admiration. "You've suttlenly got looks, 'Melia," she admitted. "Of-ten and of-ten I find meself wondering what'll be the end of you. There's times when I think you'll come to no good, you're that fractious and wrong-headed ; and there's times when I feel you'll light upon your legs, you're that cute. I'd dearly like to know what'll be the upshot of it."

Amelia lifted her bicycle over her strong young arm and ran down the steps. "And, for the matter of that," she said, "jest wouldn't I ! "

## CHAPTER VII

### THE VENTURE OF AMELIA

IT was ten days later that in the little bedroom in Praed Street three dim yellow candles were disposed variously, one upon the chest of drawers, one upon the mantelpiece and one upon a chair. A fourth, a tin hand-candle, was held in the air by Mab Higgins.

The centre of the illumination stood Amelia, critical, intent.

Dark maroon silk tights encased her legs. From her waist, in glittering folds, hung a scant tunic of maroon-and-silver tinsel. The same shining material swathed her neat form to the waist, fashioning a bodice of mock-armour. Her sleeves were steel. Steel, pointed with glittering antennæ capped her dark hair tightly. From her shoulders two long wings were pendent, dull in texture, with prominent ridges topped with gleaming prongs.

She bent and swayed with flexible contortions ; the small glass before her baffled her. It revealed only a limited portion of her person at a time, reproducing this with indistinctness, blurred, discoloured.

"That glass has all run in the damp," she remarked ; "it's all splotches and mildew spots, looks like it was me was queer all over. I *wish* I could see meself. Are you sure I look al'right ?"

"No one more so," pronounced Miss Higgins with decision. "I only wish you could git a good sight of your dress. But there's sure to be long mirrers there ; you must have a good look at yourself when you've the chance."

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"It don't look dull?" suggested Amelia with diffidence; "the red, I mean. It's a bit dark for my complexion. You see"—apologetically—"it's everythink I should give a good impression first start off. There's sech a lot depends on it—"

"What next?" Miss Higgins' astonishment withered. "First you're afraid you're too flashy, and then you're grumbling you're not flashy enough! Now you look here—as to the flashiness, what's the good of your going at all if you ain't noticed? And as to the dowdiness, I tell you, you can't, with any degree of correctness, be more flashy for a moth. If you'll consider, moths are mostly brown or sort of kitchen-paper colour. And that red's a lovely rich colour against your dark hair, and suits you down to the ground. And look how lovely that cap is against your dark curls."

Amelia ducked again. A face of faultless oval showed in the glass; its tints were pronounced carmine and white; grave eyes met her own with inquiry, the quaint cap glistened.

"My faice is al'right," she agreed with assurance; "and the dress is tasteful. But, if you'll understand, I feel a bit of a guy in meself."

Yet the costume was a sufficiently exact replica of the dress worn in the Ballet of Moths in the pantomime; it had been procured through the agency of a friend of Mab who was employed there; it was the outcome of time, thought, expense.

"There's this," she considered, "aunt's of opinion that it's low class to show your legs . . . and you must bear in mind that aunt's been in first class families. I think it's the legs that makes me feel peculiar."

"Why, you silly," Mab had angered, "it's a fancy costume. I don't say that it's suited for shopping, or church, or for your aunt to go charing in to her first class families. But, with all respec' to her, has she been in the habit of going to fancy balls with her first class families? No?—then what does she know about a kick-up of the sort you're going to any more than the man in the moon?"

## The Venture of Amelia

"Still"—Amelia sustained the argument with hesitation—"a pantymine's a pantymine—"

"And a fancy ball's a fancy ball. Really, what *d'you* want?—a black-cloth-jacket-and-sailor-'at?"

"Don't say that. Mab—what about m'fringe?"

"It goes from your eyes to the top of your head; isn't that enough for you?"

Amelia, silenced, gave a deep breath, then added, "I wish you was comin'!"

"You might have took me, I think. It couldn't have mattered in a crowd."

"You wasn't arskt."

"That's good! No more was you."

"Ah—but I'm a relation."

"Well, I only hope they'll welcome you as such."

Amelia hedged with unusual meekness: "I say, how shell I go?"

The practical side of Mab's nature came into activity.

"Well, I'll tell you what I'd do, if I was you. I'd take those wings off, and carry them under my arm. They unhook at the shoulders quite easy, see, and you can put them on when you get there. Your cloak will go on better then, and I'll walk a bit of the way with you, so as to make it a shilling fare. You can change your shoes when you get inside the cab, it won't take a minute, and I'll bring the old ones home." She hurried into her outdoor things, and as she trod downstairs in company with Amelia, she recognised occasion for advice, serious and facetious, which she administered in an undertone: "Don't look so down in the mouth. Nothing pays like shove. You'll have a first class time and come back made for life, see if you don't. They can't help but be pleased with you. And, look here, don't you go and dance all night with Teddy Wailes or any of that set; as Bob says, those sort of goings on never pay in the end—"

As they walked through the dimly lighted streets Amelia's mackintosh clung limply about her skirtless legs. Her scanty clothing chilled. The venture on which she was embarking assumed proportions fantastic,

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disconcerting. Till now it had attracted by its very boldness, by the element of adventure which it held, by its possibilities, infinite, bewildering. Now it assumed an aspect of unconsidered folly, brazen in attempt, doubtful in its issues. Later, rumbling across the park in the noisy solitude of a cab, she looked out at the darkness. The stiff, black trees stood like gaunt sentinels in the night. Lamplight flashed waveringly into the cab and passed. The ground was uneven, rattling glass and thunderous wheels distracted. . . . Imagination was roused. . . . The cab was transformed into a luxurious carriage with horses which pawed the ground; jewels in her hair flashed palely; satin, gleaming softly, swathed her limbs. Soon she would alight and pass up steps carpeted with red, fringed with admiring watchers. To-night she was no longer of that dingy, shivering crowd; she was of those who pass on into the laughter and the light. . . . Illusion failed. . . . Her limbs grew colder. Imagined comments of Mrs Burgess upon her folly urged its abandonment; Mab's anger if she returned egged her to fulfilment. . . . Suddenly she rose, let down the glass, and shouted to the man to go back. He did not hear; the cab was passing over the Serpentine Bridge. She saw the pale sheet of water gemmed by lamps. Trees and buildings beyond were a mass of indefinite blackness. The cold wind blew in her face, and she felt it displace the heavy mass of curls upon her forehead. Drops of rain fell, and she shrank back into shelter. Soon her cab was one of a line of others which approached a house in spasmodic jerks. It stopped, and a radiance beyond blinded her. She understood that the door was being held open, and she stepped to the pavement. The wings which she carried became wedged in the doorway, and she had to pause to extricate them. Her cloak blew open and she heard a street-boy laugh. Then, as she stumbled up the steps, the linkman pursued her with a reminder that her cab-fare was unpaid. . . . In the cloak-room, one maid removed the mackintosh, while another took possession of the large wings, regarding them with indecision. Amelia explained with anxious haste: "Don't take those away,

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miss, please. Will you hook them on the shoulders for me? I can't do it by meself."

Standing in front of a long mirror, she could see each detail of the room behind her reflected. A tall lady with two very tall daughters entered. She raised her lorgnette and regarded Amelia with attention. The girls, who were plain and ungainly, wore patriotic costumes representative of the Union Jack. Amelia considered their appearance, gauging her own by contrast. Little items of their costumes interested her. She remarked their white gloves ; her own had formed a subject of altercation between herself and Mab. For Mab had asserted that white silk mousquetaire were out of place with chain-armour sleeves and a Moth costume, while Amelia held that no lady went to a ball without whitely-clad hands. Now, the correctness of her own judgment reassured her. And, in comparison with the girls before her, her own appearance elated her. As the maid lingered, attaching her wings with difficulty, she studied her own reflection. She saw how the brighter light heightened the red of her costume, how the steel flashed with brilliancy. She noted the firm round grace of her limbs, the largeness of her eyes, the white and red of her complexion, regulated at Mab's discretion. The long wings drooped behind with quaint effect ; the antennæ gleamed. She drew on her gloves, and, casting a white woollen shawl over her arm, retraced her steps triumphantly down the passage.

A counter-stream of guests appeared to be veering to the left, and, following in their wake, she turned into a room where a large buffet extended from door to window. As she peered undecidedly about her, a man bearing a silver tray came up to her and offered her some yellow wine. Before she had determined whether to refuse or to accept it, he poured it out for her ; and, fearful of offending him, she took it with profuse thanks, and swallowed it down. It caught her breath and made her choke, but it sent a pleasant glow through her chilled limbs, and it was with renewed assurance that she turned to mount the staircase.

Infinite expectation filled her mind as she threaded her

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way upwards. The moment grew big with import. Higher, this crowd would slacken ; the hostess would be in a position of prominence at the end of a long ball-room ; a footman in plush would precede each fresh arrival ; one or more would announce her name in tones audible to the assembled guests ; its significance would electrify ; two courses, subsequently, would be open to Mrs Coleford, to acknowledge her promptly as a relation, or to quarrel with her publicly. And, from the latter, she recognised that her good looks, and the exceptional beauty of her costume would ensure immunity.

Meanwhile, she dreaded dishevelment in the stress of this crowd which thronged and grew. Her wings were crushed against her side. She forced a progress upwards with an energy which failed to remark the anger it aroused. By-and-by, an elderly man, bald-headed, inquired her name ; she confided it with uncertainty, and heard it repeated in sonorous accents above. As the landing was gained, a lady leaned through the crush to greet her ; a lady in flowered brocade, dainty in old-world grace, whose bright eyes and tinted cheeks belied the whiteness of her hair. The crowd thronged onwards, and Amelia was compelled with it. In the opposite doorway she resisted, to view her surroundings. Everywhere, faces met her gaze, unresponsive, unfamiliar. The face for which she searched was absent. She tiptoed to see above the heads of the dancers if a hostess were visible within the ball-room, but the surging crowd within seemed an indistinguishable medley. Misgiving stirred. She looked back at the white-haired woman on the landing, and conviction gathered. That dainty semblance of age concealed the woman whom she sought, a woman otherwise pale, dark-haired. She saw how the eyes were the same, the figure, the poise of the head. . . . Disbelief became certainty ; and with certainty came the knowledge that that moment of moments upon the result of which the success of her venture had hung—the crisis of her destiny—was already past, unrecognised, unmarked. Her venture had failed in the outset.

## The Venture of Amelia

Amelia's eyelids fluttered ; tears stung and were repressed. The in-coming crowd prevailed ; she found herself thrust back into a corner behind the doorway. Despite the coldness of the night, the atmosphere was stifling. Non-dancers blocked her view ; she peered between them. In the space beyond, couples were revolving, though the crush hindered. The music was inspiring ; yet, upon the faces which she scanned, she sought and missed the semblance of jollity which the occasion suggested. It seemed to her that repression reigned, an aggressive decorum. The music crashed into silence as a stream of people passed outwards. Summoning her courage, she crossed to the window and trod out on to the balcony. There it was cooler. Red cloth, she saw, covered the stonework ; and, along narrow benches, were seated men and girls. Overhead, flowers drooped ; small, coloured lights were suspended in mid-air. She stepped to the edge of the balustrade and looked over. Below, in the street, she saw the awning and the dark little crowd fringing it. Some of them looked up and she pictured their envy. Soon she passed on to the next window and watched while the ball-room filled again. The quaint admixture of dresses interested her. The first couples moved quickly, lightly, with exquisite motion ; then, again, the crowd thickened. The music enticed. She beat time with her feet. The wine which she had drunk began to make her feel a little giddy. Her versatile spirits rose ; she experienced an increasing restlessness. Given so many conditions of enjoyment, amusement must be practicable.

Two men in front conversed.

"A Scraper party to-night, Bridgman," observed one ; "the late arrivals never get further than the door scraper !"

"Good illustration of the Survival of the Fittest !"

"Of the Fattest—it's size that clears !"

Mr Bridgman moved off, but the man who had first spoken remained leaning against the framework of the window, still watching the dance. Amelia

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observed him critically. The colour of his hair, the set of his shoulders, a trick of movement, stirred recollection. She adjusted her fringe and tapped him gently on the arm.

"Can you tell me," she asked, "if there's anyone seein' to the introducin' here to-night?"

Surprise marked his voice and manner. "Mrs Coleford is in the doorway," he suggested, and paused. His glance comprised Amelia's costume.

"Mrs Coleford — yes," she said doubtfully. She decided it was best to be explicit. "At all the darnces I've been to before, there was gentlemen or some swells to see that the ladies was introduced and enjoyed themselves."

"Yes?" He considered. "There is no one in that capacity here, but, if you will give me the honour of a dance, I think I can promise to introduce you to friends."

Amelia disguised satisfaction in condescension. "Well, I don't mind if I darnce with you!" She flashed a glance at him quickly through lowered lashes. "Mind, I didn't *ask* you to darnce!"

"Of course not." He led her towards the centre of the room, again eyed her dress, and paused. Amelia, noting the glance, decided it had reference to the presence of some women folk whose jealousy he feared.

"It's rather crowded," he suggested; "don't you think we might go down to supper?"

Amelia, convinced that she had penetrated his design, was amused at this manœuvre, and circumvented it.

"I," she explained, "want to darnce. I don't go to a ball to sit and guzzle."

He did not attempt further evasion. They took a few steps, but the hooked prong of Amelia's wing caught in a lady's dress, and some moments were occupied in endeavouring to disentangle it. Her partner made the incident an excuse to lead her back to the window. Amelia felt still more giddy, and the ball-room looked confused to her gaze. She was glad to stand still, but

## The Venture of Amelia

she glanced at him vindictively as she fanned herself with her handkerchief.

"It's as well you give up dancing," she said, after a moment of piqued silence. "You don't seem a dab at it."

"I'm sorry."

"Anyone who hops like you do"—she laughed shortly—"I'd as lief dancé with a flea."

"That's unfortunate," he acknowledged. "But, since you've given me the pleasure of a dance, I wonder if I may venture to ask your name?"

"You may *ask*. But you've never told me yours?"

"That's easily remedied: Hope, Sir Geoffry Hope. I am a cousin of the Colefords."

Amelia gauged him with approval. A fresh romance enshrouded him; the adventure grew. She risked a suggestion.

"I've seen you before."

He looked perplexed.

"At the Countess of Braithwaite's."

His surprise augmented. "I must plead forgetfulness. Did we dance there?"

"No, we didn't dancé." Amelia emitted a faint giggle.

"I thought not; I should scarcely have forgotten you—"

The intonation of his voice was suggestive. Amelia laughed again. "Oh, git along!" she said, with disbelief.

"Certainly I should have remembered you," he said, with increasing conviction. "Are you"—after a moment's reflection—"here with friends to-night?"

"I'd hope so, being in your comp'ny!" asserted Amelia.

A man passed at that moment. Sir Geoffry caught him by the arm. He explained in an undertone and introduced Amelia. Dances were requested and arranged. The interlude over, Sir Geoffry resumed:

"You see I couldn't introduce you properly as I didn't know your name."

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"You managed very nicely. Where are you off to, now?"

"I thought we might find a seat in the conservatory. As you do not care to dance with me, perhaps you will condescend to talk to me?"

He made way for her amongst the crowd, and they passed through a room beyond. Its luxury pleased Amelia, the flowers, the dim light of the ruddy lamps. Couples were occupying each seat, and she remarked with satisfaction the attention which her appearance seemed to attract. A narrow corridor led out of the room into the conservatory, where, under a circular dome of glass, comfortable lounges were placed beneath overshadowing palms. She took the seat indicated to her, moving her wings cautiously to one side.

"You must find that charming dress rather inconvenient for dancing?" suggested Sir Geoffry.

"I'm glad you like it," said Amelia, gratified. "I made the top part of it meself. Mind you, I won't say I did it without help! Two other young ladies giv' me a lot of assistance, and one who wears a dress like this in the bally told me where to git the stuffs, and what to git, or I shouldn't have known. These sleeves were a lot of work."

Consideration revealed her mistake; ladies at balls of this sort did not make their own dresses, nor were they friends with ballet girls. Sir Geoffry's rejoinder marked her error:

"And you're not in the ballet yourself?" he asked.

"You can't let it alone wanting to find out who I am!" she said curtly.

"Who could?" He threw emphasis into his speech, disconcerting though facetious. Yet the glance with which he viewed her was serious in its critical examination of her face.

"What are you starin' at?" she questioned with curiosity.

"It is curious," he explained; "but you have an unaccountable likeness to a cousin of mine."

"Bewty, or otherways?"

## The Venture of Amelia

"Certainly not otherwise."

Amelia's glance shunned his with a sudden shyness. She heard the music strike up in the distant ball-room. The few remaining couples rose and left. She understood that he and she were alone together ; that her beauty charmed. Her heart-beats quickened. Her vision had grown curiously unsteady. She saw the room through a shifting haze, and her senses seemed befogged ; it was difficult to think connectedly. But she was conscious of an agreeable excitement which annulled all other considerations. She moved just perceptibly closer to the man beside her.

"I'm glad," she said, looking at him with an archness which was obvious, "that your friend ain't a guy ; but that's what *you* say. There's men'd think a broomstick a bewty if it was stuck in petticut !"

"You seem to have had an extensive experience," he suggested.

"You bet !" said Amelia, vaguely. From where she sat she could see a clock in the corridor beyond. She felt a conviction that before it struck the approaching hour, something momentous would have happened. "You bet !" she repeated. A recollection of John Lawson's easy subjugation stimulated her imagination. She felt glad that Sir Geoffry did not know that her only other admirer was so on in years.

"It don't take much to set a man off kissing !" she said, tentatively.

"Doesn't it ?" said Sir Geoffry.

When she passed back to the ball-room on the arm of the man to whom Sir Geoffry had previously introduced her, her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed with a brilliant colour. Mr Archibald, her present partner, proved nothing loth to dance. He was a cheerful fair-haired youth, energetic, amenable ; who responded to her conversation with inappropriate laughter, which perplexed, but cheered her. She danced

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through a polka with him, and he begged for others. She gave two only, convinced that Sir Geoffry would return ; but she based her refusal on more practical reasons.

"If I darse much with you," she explained, "I'd be a proper rag-bag. I arsk you, now, look what you've made of me, as it is?"

"Your wings have got a bit damaged," he admitted regretfully ; "but they're such difficult things in a crowd. Wouldn't you be as well without them—for dancing, I mean?"

"Why, no one would know what I was meant for," she remonstrated. "They're not much of a show as you've made 'em, but without them I'd be no better than a dog without a tail!"

"You could not look anything but charming under any circumstances," he asserted, and they danced again.

The crowd had thinned ; as the central space cleared, the dancers were more visible to the onlookers. Amelia noted the fresh attention which her appearance drew, the glances bent in her direction, the whispered comments whose import remained conjecture. She danced more swiftly ; her tunic swung. The venture which, in the onset, had failed, now courted success ; Mrs Coleford was of those who observed her progress ; Sir Geoffry watched. But, abruptly, Mr Archibald professed himself tired, and drew aside to the window. "You're such a one to go, don't you know?" he said, with the inevitable laugh. "A fellow can't keep it up for ever. You're in such magnificent form—beats me hollow."

Amelia rucked her brow. She felt the moment to be singularly unfortunate for this enforced withdrawal from public view. Meanwhile she was minded to probe her partner.

"They seemed to be taking pretty good stock of me just now," she observed, interrogatively.

"Well"—his glance bespoke comprehension—"your dress is a bit remarkable, don't you know?"

## The Venture of Amelia

"What d'you mean?" Amelia detected a note which was not all approval in the remark.

"Well, of course," he hesitated, "it's a little unlike other costumes, don't you see? I mean that the other ladies are all in skirts—not that I don't admire yours immensely—immensely. In fact, you couldn't have chosen anything to suit you better; it suits you down to the ground"—his enthusiasm grew as he read resentment in Amelia's face.

"How can it suit me down to the ground when it don't go there?" she demanded, with irritable and feeble retort. Her face had flamed. The true nature of the attention which she roused pricked suggestion. The advice of Mrs Burgess fretted her remembrance. She turned with determination to the youth at her side.

"There's no accounting for tastes," she said drily. "Why's it less stylish to come dressed like a live bally-gurl than to git up like the block in a barber's winder? If I was arsk, I'd say there's more sense in wearin' longer stockings than usual, like I'm doing, than to pop your head in the flour-bag like my sister, Mrs Coleford."

She remarked with satisfaction the expression of his face as he repeated the gist of her observation—"Your sister?"

"My sister. Didn't you know Mrs Coleford is m' sister?"

He explained: "I didn't catch your name when we were introduced."

"You didn't catch it because it wasn't told you. Shell we darse again if you've got your breath back?"

Defiance prompted, while misgiving checked. Her feet flew, while fancy racked. The women were watching; every eye in the room was upon her legs; shame cried for covering, but anger stirred. These women who condemned, women with shoulders bare and flesh exposed, what better were they, that they should talk and spy? . . . She was clothed; let them look to themselves. . . . Again Mr Archibald paused by the window. Sir Geoffry approached. Her glance sought his with

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an appeal which questioned. But he drew Mr Archibald aside ; a murmured colloquy passed between the two men ; then Sir Geoffry went ; but, later, he returned, and Mr Archibald, with quick apology, moved away.

"Miss Bradshaw"—Amelia noted with surprise that Sir Geoffry called her by her name—"I am sorry to have to tell you that Mrs Coleford, attracted, perhaps, by the peculiarity of your fancy dress, and not being able to recognise your face, made inquiries about you, and has found out who you are. She is consequently rather annoyed at your presence here, uninvited, and she asked me if I would see you into a cab. Will you allow me to do so?"

The warmth rushed from Amelia's heart and spun through her veins in a hot torrent.

"I'm her own blood relation!" she exclaimed, sharply.

"Of course." The even, modulated tones of Sir Geoffry's voice contrasted with the shrill excitement of her own. "But I am afraid it is not customary even for our blood relations to come to parties uninvited. So she is a little annoyed, and I think it would be wiser to do as she suggests."

He offered his arm. Amelia took it, and he led her out through the boudoir, avoiding the doorway where Mrs Coleford was standing. At the foot of the staircase he waited while she went to the cloak-room, and when she reappeared with her mackintosh on her arm, he begged her, with some solicitude, to put it on ; the night was cold, he emphasised. Amelia, reluctant that he should see its shabbiness, made an excuse that her wings rendered the wearing of a cloak inconvenient. But he insisted, and drew her aside from the cold draught which swept the hall. The shrill whistle of the linkman hailing her cab punctuated his conversation.

"I cannot offer to see you home, Miss Bradshaw," he said. "I am in requisition here, you see, and it would not do for me to leave yet. But where can I find you, if I may be permitted to come and call?"

Amelia shook her head. The longing not to lose

## The Venture of Amelia

sight of this man and of the world which he represented was strong. But Osgood's lay apart from that world—to mention it involved humiliation ; and she thought of the impossible little apartment tenanted by herself and Mab.

"I must see you again," he repeated, throwing more earnestness into his voice. "Why not to-morrow? See, I'll give you my card, and if you won't tell me now where I may call upon you, perhaps you will write to me and arrange something?"

Amelia trod out on to the steps ; the air lapped her about with icy insistence. It seemed to clear her vision. She understood how the future hinged upon the decision of the moment.

"I won't write," she said abruptly. "Come, if you like. You'll find me at Osgood's in the Edgware Road. It's a draiper's, you'll understand, and I'm serving there. Drive to the Marble Arch, will you?" she called to the cabman. From the recesses of the cab she spoke with finality : "Please yourself. So long!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE COURTSHIP OF AMELIA

THE fog was thick when Amelia awoke the next morning. The pungent odour assailed her nostrils with returning consciousness. She lay drowsily observant how the familiar outlines of the room were hidden in yellow gloom, and how, in the space of dingy window visible above the muslin blind, the usual view of chimney stacks was replaced by an orange blank.

Mab Higgins stood by the dressing-table applying the curling-tongs to her pale hair. But Amelia remained motionless, unwilling to make her wakefulness known. She experienced an unusual lassitude in her limbs, her head throbbed. Before long, Mab turned and discovered that her companion was no longer asleep.

"Why, I hope I didn't wake you!" she exclaimed. "I've been just as quiet as ever I could, but I couldn't get my fringe done without a light, and a match makes such a noise. Well—do tell us how it went off, I'm just dying to hear all about it. Did you have a good time?"

"I'd say so," said Amelia, staring at the ceiling.

Mab approached the bed, attaching refractory locks with gilt hair-pins. She wore a yellow and black striped petticoat and a vest of Jaeger wool, from the sleeves of which her arms protruded, mottled with cold.

"And how did your sister take it—your being there, I mean? Did she make you out? And how did your dress do? I do want to hear everything!"

Amelia turned over. "Carn't you let one be till one's awake, before you begin worrying?"

"You're always cross when you've had an outing. I

## The Courtship of Amelia

wouldn't have helped you all I did if I'd thought you'd cut up nasty as usual."

She turned back to the dressing-table in resentful silence. After a while, Amelia, up-rising amongst the sheets, yawned, stretched, and propped her arms upon her knees. Her dress upon the floor jogged remembrance disagreeably.

"If you're wantin' to know," she spoke again after consideration, "I'd a good enough time with the gentlemen. One of them, titled and exceptionally handsome, was awfully gorn, and coming to see me to-day. But it was the ladies"—she met Mab's glance—"it was all your fault."

"I like that!" Mab rounded on her with energy. "Well, there's nothing like gratitude!"

"I told you how it would be, but you would have it the dress was al'right, and now you've jest spoilt my prospects."

"Put it on me, *of course!* You forget it was you first said how a Moth-dress would suit you. But I'll tell you one thing, it'll be a long time before I go out of my way to do you a good turn again."

"An' I'll tell you another—you won't be arsk."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you this time: gentlemen marry ladies or actresses, not your betwixt and between sort."

Amelia's voice sharpened. "What am I but a laidy?—tell me that!"

Mab laughed, with irony. "It's as well to mention it. You might be took for a mongrel else."

"No one'd waste their time even *mentioning* it where you come in."

"That's as it may be. By your own showing others don't seem to have taken you for as much last night."

"Thanks to what, I'd like to know? Jest to your vulgar taste! Got me to go out showing yards ef leg, and thought it dressy, you did!"

The conversation ceased. Amelia lay still. Soon the door closed after Mab, and, left in solitude, Amelia stared out at the dreary day. The world to which wake-

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fulness had restored her looked singularly unprepossessing. Again, her tunic upon the floor renewed experience. . . . Those women of the night before, placid, proud women in their whiteness and their silks, they thought themselves so pure they had been offended because of her dress, that was why they had looked at her so. . . . None the less she would be even with them yet—with those women who despised her, with Mab who could insult her. Her venture had failed, but in its very failure lay a more complete success. Her relations turned from her, but the man who admired her saw differently. The conviction of his enthraldom fought the fret of humiliation, the despondency of failure. With sudden energy she flung the sheets from her and emerged boldly into the raw chill of the fireless room. She put up her hair with numb fingers, but frizzed it leisurely and with elaborate care. The difficulty of seeing angered her. She was also annoyed to discover how ill she looked. All her colour was gone, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Soon she went downstairs and out into the grimy atmosphere. Making her way to an A.B.C., she got a cup of coffee and a bun, and hurried on to Osgood's. As she hung up her cape and hat on a peg in the small cloak-room, she saw that all the pegs were full. She smoothed her hair again before a glass slung by a string on the wall ; then, entering the shop, passed behind the counter to her usual place in the ribbon department. There were only two customers arrived as yet, and the shopwalker stood in the centre paring his nails. When he saw her, he came towards the counter.

" You're very late, Miss Bradshaw," he said ; " and one day last week I understand that you were ill. Of course we are willing to make every allowance possible for indisposition, but you must bear in mind we cannot retain hands who fail, except under unavoidable circumstances."

Amelia repressed the retort which rose to her lips, but looked after him vindictively as he walked away. His coat creased about his narrow chest, his trousers were too large, and bagged at the knees. But it would not

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suit her to be dismissed at present ; it was no good cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. She saw the girls from the opposite counter watching her with amusement.

The hours lagged. Customers were slack ; few people cared to make purchases in the bad light, and the time seemed longer when there was little to do.

On each occasion when the glass door at the entrance swung forward, Amelia eyed the incomer with quick attention. Her manner was *distract*. She served with an absence of her usual alacrity, and with scant civility. As the morning wore away her head and back ached. She longed to sit down if it were only for a moment ; four hours standing at a stretch was no joke. . . . She was thankful when the dinner-bell rang and she went down with the first relay at 12.30. The room in the basement where the female assistants had their meals was next the kitchen. The windows were occasionally opened on hot days in summer when the heat on the glass skylight became overpowering, but to-day there was no outlet for the combined smell of stale fog and mutton, which were nauseating. Amelia looked at the meat before her, unable to taste it. The girl next to her noticed her compassionately.

" You do look chippy, dear," she said. " Can't you seem to fancy a bit ? I know it isn't properly done, and it's greasy too ; it's just shameful the stuff they put before us, but you'll get empty if you eat nothing till tea."

" I don't feel I can choke it down," said Amelia. She essayed a few mouthfuls. The girl passed her some bread : " Try that," she said ; " sometimes when one can't fancy meat one can get down a bit of bread. There's rice pudding to-day, you'll like that. I know how bad it is when one's feeling seedy, and the serving's such a trial then. And customers always are more aggravating the days one don't know how to get through with it."

At the door, as Amelia came out, Mab caught her up and linked an arm in hers. " You're not well, Milly," she said. " I saw how white you looked at dinner,

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from where I was sitting. Look here, I'm sorry I spoke as I did this morning ; I might have known you were tired and done up. Let's think no more about it."

Amelia pressed her hand with sudden affection.  
"Dear old gurl !" she said.

In the afternoon the weather improved and customers were more plentiful. Amelia watched the door with greater assiduity and served with greater abstraction. Her face bore a curious pinched expression. As the hours passed, a sickening despondency gained upon her. The future showed, darkly transformed, changed since the morning. To a nature like her own—decisive, impatient—the conviction that love should brook no delay was very patent. From the conclusiveness of that test there was no appeal ; if Sir Geoffry did not come that day, it meant that her belief had been at fault, it meant the failure for all time of her enterprise. She eyed the hands of a clock upon the wall with anxious foreboding. The hours passed quickly till tea-time ; from tea to closing was never long. It was with a heavy sense of hopelessness that she resumed her hat.

As she left the shop Mab joined her and they went for a walk along the Bayswater Road. Although the fog had lifted, its foulness still scented the atmosphere. Flakes of soot drifted in the thick air. Mab reverted to the subject uppermost in her thoughts.

"I do call it a shame about last night. They might have troubled to make themselves pleasant when you were there, and, say what you like, looking so pretty too. I expect it was just jealousy ; women with everything they want are spiteful toads ! As for Mrs Coleford, I'd like to tell her what I think of her. But I wouldn't answer for it this will be the end of it."

"Oh, it'll be the end of it, fast enough !" said Amelia, irritably. "But I'll be even with them yet, and give them the go-by before I've done."

"What do you mean to do ?" asked Mab, interested.

"If one can't do things one way, there's always

## The Courtship of Amelia

another"—she spoke vaguely. "They think such a lot of themselves!"

"And it's all money makes the difference," Mab moralised.

"You bet!" Amelia spoke more sharply. "There's a tex', if you'll remember, 'Keep thyself unspattered from the world.' That's what they think they're about with their airs and graces! So good that they couldn't be in the room with my legs! An' there's other women with nothing left but to drown, and not let do that. An' it's jest money, as you say. Some women find it suits their game better to be straight, and other women git better chances if they ain't."

"Still I don't like to hear you put it that way. It don't sound respectable."

Amelia sniffed with cynicism. The thought recurred of a story which she had read; these women in their smiling sleekness were like a vampire which had figured in that tale, they grew plump and beautiful upon the blood of their fellow-women. She reiterated:

"It's jest a question of gitting a good time, see? Some see they git it best one way, and some another. But they're all on the same tack—it's whatever pays. Your shoulders may go bare, but stockings are next door to shocking!" She laughed shortly. "Give me sense, I say. Aunt's worth a peck of their sort."

Yet before, when she had seen these women driving about in their silks and their idleness, she had known all the while that she was as good as they, that one day she would be one of them . . . that had made all the difference. And she had as much right to be happy as they; she was young, she had good looks, better than most of them, and good blood too, and they were aware of this, but they wouldn't have her as one of themselves. . . . And the man who had made love to her—that man suave of speech and wholly persuasive of manner—he was no better than the rest; since he knew that she served in a shop she wasn't good enough for him. Into the midst of the chill, foul twilight, imagination, with unnerving contrast,

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reproduced the glowing sensuous warmth of a rose-lit scene, renewed the speech, the glance—the kiss which had been to her possible of but one interpretation, which had seemed part of that same hazy, all-prevailing, yet withal agreeable confusion of brain and sense.

Mab offered consolation inappropriately : “ You’ll see things differently when your gentleman friend turns up. Didn’t you say, though, you expected him to-day ? ”

Amelia’s voice bespoke a careful indifference. “ He *was* coming, if he could fit it in, but you see, to-day’s been weather not fit for a cat to turn out. And, as far as I’m concerned, he can stay away as long as he likes—I hate the lot of ‘em ! Stuck-up, that’s what they are.”

The next day the fog had disappeared, but rain fell. Two fine days followed with pallid sky and grimy streets. Amelia still watched the door while she served, and noted with unusual interest the frequent arrival of the postman. Her speech sharpened and her manner was uncertain. On the evening of the Subscription Dance, Mab, entering their room abruptly, surprised her with traces of tears upon her face.

With commendable tact she proceeded to exhibit in triumph to Amelia a bodice which she had that day purchased at Osgood’s. The material was purple velvet ; it was lavishly adorned with steel buttons and yellow lace.

“ It won’t show up by gas-light,” Amelia commented enviously.

“ *Won’t* it ? ” Mab, who had outspread it in mid-air, eyed it with undiminished satisfaction. “ I’m going to turn it in at the neck, and tack some yellow ribbon round there and the elbows, then it’ll be bright enough for evening with all this lace.”

“ Everyone will know what you give for it, it’s been in the window so long,” suggested Amelia.

“ Fifteen-and-six. It don’t matter if they do. It’s not like a rubbishy article.”

She produced some yellow ribbon and twisted it into folds with careful touch. A brief silence ensued while she stitched ; then curiosity erased tact.

## The Courtship of Amelia

"By the way," she questioned, "what's got your gentleman friend who was coming so quick? He don't seem to have hurried himself!"

Amelia, before the glass, smiled elaborately where Mab could see her reflection. "Didn't I tell you the weather's been too bad for sech a piece of soft soap?" she said indifferently, as she pinned a large pink bow into her dark hair. "I think I like meself better in pink than torkoise, don't you?" An opportune voice at the door announced that Lawson was waiting below. She hurried into her hat and cape, and ran downstairs.

Lawson, waiting at the foot of the flight, greeted her gravely. He asked whether she preferred to go in a 'bus or on foot, and, since she had divined that economy was one of his hobbies, she took the arm which he offered and professed herself ready to walk. His manner was pointedly paternal. Whatever conclusion he had arrived at with regard to the question debated with so much perplexity on New Year's morning, he had seen fit to call upon Amelia and to arrange meetings with her on several occasions subsequently. And, since his company came in handy at that juncture, Amelia had accepted with indifference his attitude—sometimes paternal as now, at others responsive and curiously eager.

Arrived at the hall, they found that dancing had commenced; and, on issuing from the cloak-room, Amelia found Lawson studying a large board which was placed in the lobby. It was an advertisement of the ball, and he pointed to it anxiously: "DANCING 9 P.M. till 4 A.M. SANDWICHES AND LEMONADE," he read. "It's a little past nine now, do you anticipate remaining till four?"

She hastened to reassure him. "Not me!" she said. "I can't go to work at har-past eight if I'm on all night."

In the dancing-room the scene contrasted with that of a few nights previously. Some of the arrangements filled Amelia with a novel contempt—the absence of flowers, the lack of brilliancy in the lighting, the unappetising show of refreshments for which payment was demanded. She felt an unaccountable irritation with her surroundings.

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Yet many of the girls present were pretty, and their dresses, if less expensive than the fancy costumes at the other ball, struck her as being really more tasteful. The colours were brighter and more showy. There was one of blue silk with yellow lace which she pointed out to Lawson as being particularly stylish. But the men—she could not decide wherein lay the difference, but they did not look the gentleman like Sir Geoffry. There was something wrong about them, something in their trousers, or their coats, or the way they held themselves. Lawson, in contradistinction, she eyed with a new element of approval. Rid of his shabby overcoat, and seen for the first time in evening-dress, she found him more calculated to please. His evening suit was not shabby like his day clothes, evidently it had been seldom worn ; it was becoming to him, and the cloth was good. Of course he was no longer young, but he was tall, and the iron-grey hair upon his head was not ugly now that his face was shaved.

"Do you like standing or sitting, Miss Bradshaw ?" he asked. "I'm afraid I can't dance, you know."

"I'll stand a bit," decided Amelia. "Then I'll see the gentlemen I know as they come in."

They remained without attempting further conversation, and she watched the dancers with impatience. It being supposed that Lawson was her partner, no one was brought up to be introduced to her ; but after a while, seeing that she was not dancing, a youth who was in the Bazaar department at Osgood's made his way to her and requested a dance. She gave him one and placed her woollen shawl in Lawson's care, with a promise to return shortly. "Pretty good cheek of the boy," she explained in an undertone ; "he was jest a whipper-snapper serving outside the door last year !" Once she was seen dancing, other partners presented themselves, and she went through the ensuing valses with energy, though at intervals she returned to Lawson and remained with him for a rest.

She had seen Mab enter in company with Bob Butler, and soon she noticed that the latter was assiduous in his attendance upon her friend. She did not desire his

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company, but his defection at a moment when she was feeling down in her luck hurt illogically. Lawson's undivided attention might have compensated, had she not felt that the other girls looked upon him as impossibly old. She noticed with satisfaction that Mab's dress was singularly unbecoming. The yellow ribbon and the large pearls at her throat were the colour of her hair, and made her face look sallow. A paste ornament lost effect amongst her sandy locks. Her skirt dipped at one side.

"By the way, dear," she observed, as she found herself near Amelia, "I hope you don't mind about Bob —his trotting after me, I mean? I know he was a bit gone on you a time back, and now it's me. Men are like that, but you won't think it's me getting him away from you?"

Amelia smiled. "I'm sure you're welcome, dear," she said. "Everyone to their taste, and a turnip nose and bandy legs ain't my style."

Yet she grew tired early; she was not enjoying herself, and by-and-by she was surprised to find when the clock pointed only to twelve. Lawson, judging by his face, would also gladly have left, but she was afraid lest an early departure on her part would be attributed to pique at Bob's desertion. So she stayed on, dancing and laughing with an exaggerated hilarity, till Mab came up to her again.

"I'm off," the latter announced. "You see I was late last night, and I don't want to knock myself up. I've had a ripping time. How've you got along?"

"First rate," said Amelia. "But I suppose I mustn't be late either, or I'll oversleep myself in the morning to a dead certainty."

"Your young man don't dance?" remarked Mab, with cynicism, as she glanced towards Lawson.

"He," explained Amelia, drily, "has got no call to put 'imself out. He's a man of means."

They left the hall in a small party, but Mab and her friends walked quickly, while Lawson and Amelia fell into the rear. The air was keen and the atmosphere was clear; only a thin film of smoke clung about the

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chimneys, through which the stars showed palely. Amelia, her glance cast heavenwards, observed that the latter were pretty ; and Lawson, with gaze glued to the pavement, agreed. He was preoccupied, and at intervals she eyed him with impatience. They reached the end of the street in silence. Ahead, Mab and her friends were laughing ; they were having a good time and the knowledge was riling.

"Well," she said at last, "you're a civil fellah ! I do believe if you was let you'd walk the length of home without ever so much as asking me if I'd enjoyed myself !"

"I'm very sorry, I'm sure," exclaimed Lawson, startled. "The fact is, I—the fact is, I was thinking—"

Amelia saw signs of a speedy relapse. "An' what might you be thinking of?" she questioned quickly. "You might as well tell us."

Lawson turned his face towards her, and she read in it a torment of indecision.

"I was thinking—the fact is, Miss Bradshaw—well, you see, it's like this : I'm no doubt an old man to you, but I've a comfortable home to offer you and I don't think I'd be difficult to please. Will you be my wife?"

Amelia heard with sudden distinctness her footsteps and Lawson's falling together on the pavement. Her heels gave a sharp little click, and there were two clicks to one of Lawson's flat, even tread. She felt tired, and her limbs dragged.

"Well," she said, "it's jest this : you're not a young man, Mr Lawson, as you say, you must be fifty if you're a day, but I don't know that I mind that. I'd as lief marry you as most. You're more the gentleman than some—"

She stared absently down the street. The twinkling lamps blurred to her gaze. She tried to count them, ineffectually.

"May I kiss you?" asked Lawson.

"You've done it before," said Amelia.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE ADVISING OF AMELIA

SHE did not tell Mab of what had occurred ; she felt vaguely that it was not wholly a cause for congratulation. The fact of Lawson's age detracted from the gratification of announcing that she was about to make a well-to-do marriage. Even if the other girls envied her, the door was open to chaff, and she did not feel game to cheek them back. The future which she was accepting contrasted with that other future which had dazzled imagination, and which, a few nights back, she had confidently believed to be assured.

For some days after the Subscription Dance the weather was continuously bad. Upon the first fine evening she met Lawson after dusk at the Marble Arch and they went for a walk along the lamp-lit path to Knightsbridge. She had not yet seen Mrs Burgess to tell her news, and learnt from him that, so far, he too had been reticent on the subject of their engagement.

"There need be no haste in acquainting your aunt of our circumstances," he explained in answer to her inquiry. "Of course, it is due to my sisters-in-law that I should tell them before anyone else."

Amelia detected something of evasion in his rejoinder, and it struck her that he betrayed annoyance at the allusion to Mrs Burgess. "And when are you going to tell your precious sisters-at-law?" she asked curtly.

"I propose calling on them on Wednesday," he said reluctantly ; "I shall send them a line to-night to inform them of my intention."

Amelia made a mental note that upon that same

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evening she would call on Mrs Burgess. It seemed to her that Lawson's manner was constrained, and she decided that he was out of sorts. As they took possession of one of the seats by the pathway, he did not put his arm round her waist, and she noticed the omission. The crowd passed them in a ceaseless stream ; all the world seemed paired. The lamplight fell on the faces of the lovers who went by. She studied them with curiosity. There was a difference hitherto undreamed of betwixt the kiss of man and man.

"When you were after your first wife," she questioned, after a somewhat lengthy silence on his part, "did you carry on like this?"

"Carry on? Like what?" Lawson looked surprised. "I do not grasp your meaning."

"Oh, it don't matter," said Amelia sarcastically, "I wouldn't put myself out about it, if I were you!"

Jolting over the rough roads in a 'bus on Wednesday evening, she stared out at the gas-lit streets. She felt a curious desire for the company of Mrs Burgess ; the latter invariably seemed to do away with all unsettled feeling, and to put the world back in its right place. Absently she pondered the cause. Thoughts passed with irrelevance through her brain. She recalled how Lawson's brow had clouded at her mention of Mrs Burgess ; it was borne in upon her that he did not appreciate the relationship of his future wife to the woman who was his servant; and the belief chilled her. It always seemed the case, wherever you turned in this world, that one half the people were not fine enough or else not good enough for the other half. Everybody ran down everybody else, and kept themselves up by so doing. . . . Arrived in Albion Crescent, Mrs Burgess accorded her a greeting whose warmth was cheering, though later she discovered it to have left a black impress on her cheek. She followed into the kitchen. The ruddy glow of the fire enticed her; she approached and warmed her chill fingers.

"Well, and how's yourself, aunt? and what news have you of Maria?" she said.

## The Advising of Amelia

"Meriar ain't anything peticular," explained Mrs Burgess, poking the fire. "If she was eight years younger, I'd say it was teeth. As it is, it's jest stomach, and the being strange where she's put. Meriar don't like work, and it's a case of Meat for Manners."

"Of how much?" queried Amelia.

"Meat for Manners," repeated Mrs Burgess wonderingly. "Don't you know what that is, 'Melia? Why, it's like a Meal a Do; you give your work and you git your keep. That's all Meriar's fit for at present. An' she don't like it."

"And small fool, she," commented Amelia sympathetically. "However," she added, "I thought it was about time I heard something of you; it's like gitting blood out of a post, is gitting news of you out of *John*"—she pronounced the name with noticeable emphasis.

Mrs Burgess clattered the poker against the range. For a moment she looked at Amelia mutely. Then a smile like the coming of a sunbeam flickered and passed over her countenance; she raised her hands, palm outwards, with an expressive gesture.

"You've putrified me *this* time!" she announced.

All the wonderment, elation, and commendation which Amelia could possibly have desired were conveyed in the remark. Her depression lightened. "I thought you'd be taken to," she observed with a faint complacency, as she drew a chair towards her.

"Taken to?" agreed Mrs Burgess. "An' to think"—her spacious bosom heaved with noiseless mirth—"a time back there was you asking me what 'e was worth, so sensible, an' me never giving a thought to the meanings of it!"

"It ain't no good buying a pig in a poke," said Amelia, gratified with the compliment to her forethought. Yet recollection stabbed with a hint of the news which it might have been her lot to convey.

"Well, there's no fool like an old 'un!" pronounced Mrs Burgess, in criticism of the absent Lawson. "Not but what," she added, anxious to qualify her first enthusiasm, "you'd a right to look 'igh—'igher than

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him, for the matter of that. Lawson ain't what I call quality, but then I've been used to them that was, and it's another pair of shoes!"

Amelia scraped her boots over the flags with a sudden movement of irritation. For a space she was silent, while Mrs Burgess,—still with that subtle amusement upon her face,—moved about making preparations for a nondescript meal. "That's the worst of it," she said at length, as though anxious to give another bend to the conversation. "It's like me turning you out of a comfortable place, aunt. You can't stay on here, working, with me mistress."

Mrs Burgess spread the knives and forks briskly upon the table. "I suppose," she said darkly, "you think no other folks has chances, besides yourself?"

"What d'you mean?" exclaimed Amelia. "You're never thinking of marriage, yourself?"

Mrs Burgess looked mysterious.

"And whoever to?—It's never old Giles that I see here the other day I come?"

Mrs Burgess exhibited an inscrutable smile.

"I thought that was what you was after!" exclaimed Amelia excitedly. "Well, you're a cure, aunt, an' no mistake! There's never a man worth a ha'porth, according to your way of talk, an' you carn't rest a widow half a year!"

Mrs Burgess, proceeding to cut slices off a cold joint, paused to devote consideration to this phenomenon.

"It seems more homely to have a man about the plaice," she explained. Again she reflected. "It's this way with the men, 'Melia; it seems as though they've *got* to be, an' it's no good shirking 'em!"

Amelia giggled. "You're a cure, aunt!" she said again.

The shadow of a very definite annoyance was visible on Mrs Burgess' face. "If I *was* arsk, which I'm *not*," she said, with some severity, "I might giv' it as my opinion that's not a respec'ful way of talking, 'Melia. That's the pity of you, you're wantin' in becoming difference to your elders. I don't see that I'm more

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of a cure than most. But you'll git another way of looking at things when you've got a husban' over you."

"He won't have much to say to it, I can tell 'im!" retorted Amelia.

"Won't 'e?" said Mrs Burgess, with a little vindictive intonation. "You wait. All the same," she added in somewhat mollified accents later, "there's a deal in the management of a man. They're all alike in that; don't cross 'em, and they're as meek as any lamb; let 'em think they're having their way, and you git yours. As you may put it, blindfold 'em, and you'll lead 'em, and they'll think they're leading you; drive 'em, and they'll turn fractious. There was never a man born into the world that differed on that particular. I've had ony one husban', that's true, but one husban's a deal of experience. It was that way with Burgess, and it'll be that way with Giles. Burgess now," she added reminiscently, "was that figger of abstinacity, I felt took-aback he'd go into his coffin without having been told he wasn't ter!"

She poured out a glass of beer, lost in thoughts of the past, and then continued—

"And, as regard Lawson hisself, if you want to know the ins and outs of things, I can give you fac's, seeing I've been like a mother to him for weeks. For one point, he's peticular fond of a tasty stew, stewed in the gravy, you'll understand, and with a good pinch of pepper. He's an exceptionable man for pepper. An' kippers—I never see sech a one for kippers. But between you an' me, I expec' that's because 'e thinks they're cheap. He's close, is Lawson, you'll hev' to mind that; an' if you spend sixpence, mak' 'im think you've got seven-pennorth for it."

"I 'ate close-fisted folks!" said Amelia, pettishly.

"It'll be all the better for you when you're a widder," said Mrs Burgess, practically. "But there it is; as I was saying, I can give you information on most points, an', while on the subjec' of Lawson, here's another wrinkle for you, 'Melia—alwis have his slippers to the fire in the evening at six-thirty. That tells more on

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his temper in winter-time than anything—not the droring-room fire, mind you, that's gas, and mustn't be lighted till 'e comes home. You see, 'Melia, with men it's jest these little bits of figgity fac's that go to make up the happiness of a 'ome, and make a man a werry or a lamb as the case may be."

"If you want to know what *I* think, men are more worry than they're worth!" said Amelia, discontentedly.

"Not wen thay're earning a good wage," said Mrs Burgess, sagely. "That's where Giles comes in; he'll pay the rent, if he don't drink it, an' I'll be able to put by a bit for Meriar."

"An' if he does drink it?" said Amelia, pessimistically.

"It's jest a chanst," agreed Mrs Burgess. "There's the chanst he does, and there's the chanst he doesn't. But in the choosing of a husban' it's the colour of the nose I'd look to. I declare it's the nose that tells if the man's worth the taking!" She winked slyly as she replenished Amelia's plate.

"Well, I needn't look to Mr Lawson's nose," said Amelia. "He's a cut above that, and I 'spose he wouldn't waste the money on spirits if he wanted to."

"You're in what I call a contrary mood, 'Melia," complained Mrs Burgess. "An' it's odd, you, being sensible to know which side your bread's buttered, shouldn't be better satisfied with your prospec's at the present time. But I suppose you must have your ups and downds like the rest of us. It's jest the digester."

"I don't know about yourself, aunt," said Amelia, with, perhaps, a hint of flattery; "you seem all ups whenever I come across you. Perhaps it's you being comfortable in figure makes you like you are. Stout folks don't seem to cotten to worry like the scrappy ones." A sigh pointed her speech.

"Well, I don't see the sense of moping, meself," said Mrs Burgess. "Giles," she added, reverting to the

## The Advising of Amelia

subject which was uppermost in her thoughts—"his christened name is Eph'rim, a Scriptural name that—is thinking of giving up his present trade and going in for a dustman. Dustbin and husbin'!" she concluded, humorously; "strange they should be so similar! Seems as if it'd make a pritty rhyme, that!"

"It strikes me, aunt," said Amelia, curtly, "you're right in that, you're more taken with your ketch than I am with mine!"

"That's becos you're young in years," explained Mrs Burgess, cheerfully. "Young thinks is all built that way; they expec' and expec' and they're never satisfied. Now, I say it's no good expec'ing in this world—you don't *git*. So I takes what comes, and jest sees that I'm not more put upon than most, and I find that works. . . . Why"—she interrupted herself—"you're never crying, 'Melia!"

"Who said I was crying?" said Amelia, indignantly. She sniffed briskly.

A silence ensued. "It's the way of women to marry when they've the chanst," said Mrs Burgess, perplexedly.

Amelia sniffed again. "Wimmin is por things," she observed inarticulately.

"Now, if there's one thing more than another that turns me up, it's that!" said Mrs Burgess. "I carn't stomach women that cry down their own kind. There's a sayin'—'It's an ill bird befools its own nest'; or, as I put it—'If like don't like like, I'm not like to like them'!"

She glanced at Amelia for some appreciation of this witticism, but received none. "It's jest this, when I hear a woman cottening to the men by humble-pieing about her own kind, I ses to meself,—that woman is precious frightened of being an ole maid!"

"You carn't think that of me at the present time," protested Amelia, dabbing her eyes furtively. "An' I didn't mean what I said the way you took it. . . . But I mus' be orf, or Lawson'll be back, and I'm not nuts on seeing him to-night."

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Mrs Burgess looked thoughtfully up at the area railings.  
"No hurry, 'Melia," she asserted. "An' he carn't come unawares. I jest popped the latch-key in my pocket this mornin' so as he couldn't find it. It's sometimes more convenient."

## CHAPTER X

### THE INTRODUCTION OF AMELIA

IT was the next day that, as she was serving, she saw Sir Geoffry following the shopwalker past the counter where she stood ; he was looking about him, and she knew that he was seeking her. Suddenly his glance encountered hers, and he turned back.

"How d'you do, Miss Bradshaw?" he said, in an undertone which seemed to involve her in a subtle confidence. "I wondered if I should find you."

"I'm serving," said Amelia, shortly. She was disconcerted to feel that her cheeks had flamed.

"I'll wait," he said. "But, meanwhile, what do you sell? I didn't know what to ask for, so I said gloves."

"Veilin', ribb'n, and artificial flowers." She pulled out a drawer, and turned back to her customer.

The shopwalker, who had been traversing the shop jauntily under the impression that he was piloting a gentleman to the glove department, now returned with an air of surprised inquiry.

"I see some things I want at this counter," announced Sir Geoffry quickly. "No—you need not call anybody. I'll wait till this assistant is disengaged. She knows what I want."

"I thought you said gloves, sir? They are in another—"

"I know!" Sir Geoffry spoke impatiently. "I'll see about them presently." He seated himself on the nearest chair, and Amelia continued serving, conscious that his gaze was fixed upon her.

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His presence filled her with a confused sensation of anger. She did not know what to think. He had come and she was glad ; it was a gladness which made her limbs tremble. Yet, he might have come sooner ; he had not hurried himself, and she would make him feel it. . . . It was fortunate that her hair was nicely done and that she had a fresh lace bow at her neck. It had been by the merest chance that she had not put on her old one that morning. . . . The fat customer before her desired advice respecting what flowers were best calculated to suit a rubicund complexion ; would yellow roses or pink carnations tone in best with magenta ribbon ? Amelia opined that it was a matter of opinion. The stout woman held the pale blossoms to her forehead and looked in the glass. Of course, flowers were not in season, but feathers got so out of curl in the damp. Amelia agreed that feathers were not so serviceable. Her tone was curt. She rapped the counter sharply with her pencil as she called "Sign !" The stout woman still speculated whether it had been a wise decision on her part purchasing yellow roses instead of a tuft of green feathers which she had preferred. She received the paper bag containing her purchase with reluctance. Amelia clicked the drawer into a cavity in the wall, tucked her pencil in her hair and stepped before Sir Geoffry.

"What is your pleasure ?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know,—show me anything you like, there—yellow roses or magenta ribbon ! It doesn't matter ! Only, I want a word with you."

His facetious glance was met by Amelia with one of impenetrable gravity. She turned again to the drawers behind her.

"Which is it you require, the roses or the ribb'n ?" she questioned.

"I ?—Oh, anything you like—ribbon, if it's nearest." Meeting her glance, he laughed. "Show me anything for appearance's sake. It doesn't matter."

She placed the ribbon drawer before him. "What width ?" she asked, lifting out several vivid shades and unpinning the brightest for his inspection.

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"What width?—Oh, any width; I really don't know. What width is this? That'll do."

"A shilling a yard. And what length do you require?"

"Oh, a yard—two yards—anything you like."

She measured off two yards, and clipped it with shining scissors.

"And your next pleasure?" she asked.

"You see"—his tone was more insistent—"I did not know how to communicate with you except by coming here."

She twisted the ribbons back upon their neat rolls with deft, slim fingers. She pinned each with precision.

"Has the penny post been stopped?" she asked.

"Of course, I could have written, but a verbal interview is more satisfactory." His glance questioned, while the assurance in his voice was provocative. She laid his yard of ribbon, folded in a loop, upon the counter: "And the next article?" she asked, again.

Sir Geoffry hesitated. The moment was one of swift consideration. His errand in seeking the girl was singularly definite, incomplex; the message of which he was the bearer held no compromise with chance, no trifling with adventure. And he felt disposed to dally with its simplicity, to introduce into it the element of analysis. This, he decided, would scarcely be inappropriate. For Amelia's present attitude piqued curiosity. It hinted at subtleties in her character which he had overlooked. He was aware that the fashion of his first meeting with her had left him with a concise impression of her personality. To him, she had seemed of a very recognisable type, redeemed only from commonplaceness by the brass which had launched her on her unaccountable venture. His attitude towards her on that occasion had been the outcome of this classification; and, although the subsequent discovery of her identity had proved disconcerting, yet the manner of her behaviour, and the incident which resulted, had endorsed that previous impression. Already, the details of that incident, in their supreme unimportance, had grown hazy to his recollection; and only the fact of her parentage remained to attract, had

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not the curtness of her present manner mystified and aroused him. It did not appear to him that Amelia, guileless in intention, if not unsophisticated in fact, with her head full of illusion and of the dazzling possibilities of that same incident, had read a seriousness into his flippancy which had been wholly foreign to his intention.

"It was strange our meeting that evening," he suggested ; "considering we are cousins, or nearly so, and I have been looking forward to renewing a pleasant experience."

The malice of her voice was explanatory : "And the 'looking forward' seems to have about satisfied you."

Then, since the cause of her curtness lay revealed, Sir Geoffry saw his advantage and pursued it.

"I must have seemed remiss," he admitted ; "but the fault was not mine. My cousin, Miss Agatha Coleford, has been getting married, a tremendous business, I assure you, and I had everything to see to. It was impossible for me to get away."

Amelia did not answer.

"There is something I have to say to you, something of importance," he said, studying the perfect oval of her face. "But we cannot talk here under these conditions. Will you forgive me, and tell me where else I can see you ?"

The hot blood pulsed and paled beneath Amelia's skin. Her eyes, in their helpless avoidance of his, refused obedience to her will. The intention of his speech held for her but one interpretation. Again, life hung upon decision.

"I," she said, as though stating a wholly irrelevant fact, "am going to Brompton, Saturday." It was a curious sequence of ideas, which, in the unconsidered haste of her conclusion, had suggested the locality of her first meeting with Lawson.

"Brompton?" Sir Geoffry's voice bespoke perplexity.

"The cemetery, I should say. I'm going to see mother's bit of a grave." Amelia spoke with a sudden note of defiance.

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"Ah." The reference to the deceased Mrs Bradshaw appeared to strike Sir Geoffry. "And the time?"

"There's a chance I'll be there by three-thirty." Her sustained indifference bespoke the knowledge that, where man is concerned, a rebuff brings a rebound. Yet she met his glance with ill-concealed anxiety. "Rain or shine," she emphasised.

He accepted the spirit of the invitation. "I will be there at the entrance by three-thirty," he said as he took up his parcel—"in case you come."

As he left the shop, Mab came hurrying from the millinery department. "Which drawer is the navy-blue ribbon in, dear?" she asked. "About an inch wide. My customer is in a hurry, so I said I'd fetch it and oblige."

"It's second drawer from the top," said Amelia, indicating the row.

Mab, reaching to clasp the handle, craned backwards to Amelia. "Was that your gentleman friend just gone?" she questioned in an eager undertone. "The one you've been expecting for so long?"

"I don't know I've been expecting anyone for so long," said Amelia shortly.

"You know—the one you thought was coming long ago. He does look a rare old swell. What's he come after?"

"What I knew he'd come after," Amelia hinted, but her face betrayed its satisfaction. "I thought your customer was in a hurry?" she added significantly; and Mab, with annoyance in her glance, hurried away.

After closing, Amelia sauntered down the Edgware Road to meet Lawson by appointment at the Marble Arch. She found him unusually excited. He, so he informed her, had, after much deliberation, at length broken the news of his engagement to his sisters-in-law, Sarah and Lucy Gibson. They had naturally, he said, felt the slight put upon the remembrance of his first wife, their sister, but, none the less, they had been kindness itself, and they had most thoughtfully included Amelia in a party they were giving the following evening to

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a few friends, and had asked him to bring her to dine.

"Will it be amusing?" she asked.

"Well, I should not describe it as likely to be amusing," he said with hesitation; "but I am particularly anxious that you should create a good impression there. It is important to me as they are the only great friends or relations I have; and as they live near, we are likely to meet them often."

His voice betrayed an anxiety which seemed to Amelia out of all proportion to the cause, but she professed herself ready to charm. It was, she concluded, too early days yet to be plain with Lawson on the matter of throwing him over. Two days later, circumstances would be different, but Sir Geoffry had not spoken yet—although his meaning had been clear—and it was as well to wait. After all, Lawson was old and not suitable; he would surely see the sense of that.

"They don't like very bright colours or hair done in a very pronounced manner," he pursued uneasily. "If you could meet their views in these particulars for the occasion, it would be very advisable."

"I can't make a guy of meself to please their fads," complained Amelia firmly.

Yet the next evening, by dint of studied amiability and dark hints of imminent confidences of an interesting nature, she procured from Mab the loan of the purple bodice which she had secretly admired. The yellow lace at the neck she pinned low with a glittering brooch. She frizzed her hair with care, and set off for Albion Crescent in good time. "Aunt would have smelt a rat," she reflected, "now me and Mr Lawson's going out together," otherwise it was to be regretted that she had told of her engagement, since, two days later, she would have other news to tell. But, after all, Mrs Burgess' gratification at the first announcement would only be eclipsed by the greater which was to follow.

Pleased anticipation filled Amelia's thoughts as she knocked at the door of No. 5. She looked with changed vision at the little villa of which she had fancied the

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possession so short a time before. In contrast with the actualities which filled her brain, it was a pitiful place, and the outlook mean.

It was Lawson himself who answered her knock, and disappointment waited her in the discovery that Mrs Burgess was out. Maria, he said, was still poorly ; some trifling ailment, no doubt, but Mrs Burgess had thought it wiser to ascertain what was the matter. He lapsed into silence, studying Amelia as he drew on his overcoat. He was trying to gauge her from the standpoint of the Misses Gibson. Given the conditions, they would be hypercritical. Her tall figure pleased the eye, the freshness of her colouring, the sombre wealth of her dark hair ; but he recognised that her beauty was of a somewhat vivid type, startling, assertive ; it filled him with misgiving. Its existence, thus pronounced and aggressive, constituted a subtle lack of refinement which her shortcomings of manner and diction would accentuate. And the taste of the Misses Gibson was fastidious, prejudiced. Their ears would be keen to detect error in enunciation, their minds on the alert to judge failure in taste. They would forget that she was the daughter of a Bradshaw to remember that she was the niece of a Burgess.

And so, in his own case, he had pictured introducing his future wife to his sisters-in-law, proudly conscious of her beauty, of her pretensions to superior birth ; he found himself, instead, alive to her shortcomings, her relationship to the woman who was his servant. It seemed as though in this invitation of the Misses Gibson lay some subtle power to enable him to see his position from a standpoint other than his own. Yet he was aware that this was but a shaping of what had already been existent, though indefinitely defined. His attitude throughout the past week had been one of uncertainty. The lost romance of youth had stirred, and a spirit of unrest had entered the previous monotony of his life. There were times when the magnetism of sex predominated, when the girl's presence, her charm, her enticing femininity absorbed him, throwing all else into abeyance ; there were times when he awoke from his infatuation, when he became, as now, morbidly

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alive to her deficiencies, to her vulgarity, her lack of education. At such times he scarcely knew whether to attribute the position in which he found himself to arrant folly, or his failure to abide by it unflinchingly, to moral cowardice.

He was preoccupied as he walked by her side to Charles Street.<sup>\*</sup> His slowness of speech and tread filled Amelia with smouldering irritation. In contradistinction, she framed the thought of Sir Geoffry, of his perfectly-groomed appearance and attractive face, his brisk alertness of speech and manner. It was with difficulty that she could restrain all indication of her mood, all hint of her secret knowledge of the future. None the less, the situation in its dual aspect afforded amusement, and she was minded to get any entertainment available out of the evening which lay before her.

A trim maid opened the door in Charles Street, and Amelia, following upstairs to Miss Sarah's room, was shown into a neat apartment, where she changed her shoes with an interested glance on her surroundings. The room was square and almost filled by the bedstead of pale walnut ; the furniture was a suite of similar pattern, the white watered wall-paper was adorned with texts and Scriptural prints ; in a window stood a chest of drawers covered by a white cloth, on which rested a Bible and some books, evidently of a religious nature ; in a corner were two chintz curtains veiling the pegs from which, doubtless, was suspended Miss Sarah's wardrobe ; but the presence of the maid in the doorway prevented Amelia from more closely inspecting the contents of the latter and from examining the two cloaks, presumably belonging to guests, which lay upon the bed.

She soon rejoined Lawson on the landing below, and they were ushered into the drawing-room. This, at first sight, struck her as a glorified version of the bedroom above ; more elaborately white wall-paper covered the walls and more highly polished furniture of a slightly darker hue was arranged with yet more stiff regularity. Two elderly ladies came forward to greet her, and Amelia,

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to whom they seemed duplicates of each other, saw that they were dressed alike in dark puce silk gowns, that they wore similar white cashmere shawls and similar caps with green ribbons. Something in their appearance struck her as familiar, and with infinite amusement she remembered having seen them at the theatre the night she went with Lawson. She pictured his secret dismay on the occasion, she recalled his reticence. While these considerations were occupying her attention, introductions were effected to a Mr and Mrs Dangles, the curate and his wife, and to Miss Grey, a girl in black who stood by the fire.

"You will be surprised to see me here, John," the latter said—and Amelia remarked the sudden flush which overspread the pallor of her face—"but I have been unwell," and Lawson expressed his commiseration. Miss Lucy Gibson resumed her chair next the curate's wife, Miss Sarah seated herself next to Amelia, and Lawson found himself placed between the latter and Miss Sarah.

He saw Miss Sarah's eye comprise Amelia from head to foot in a coldly critical glance. He was keenly aware of the effect which Amelia presented, even of the infinity of detail which went to produce that effect ; her ginger shoes and frilled skirt, the purple bodice which contrasted unfavourably with her complexion, the obnoxious yellow lace with which it was adorned, even of the cheap, rose-coloured handkerchief always so painfully in evidence upon her lap. Throughout his attempted conversation he was conscious of her remarks, of her self-assertion, of the growing patronage of her manner. For Amelia, cognisant of her air of fashion, of her well-dressed hair and general superiority to the women among whom she found herself, set herself to please, with a self-confidence all the more aggressive that it covered a secret awe of her surroundings. Her voice, her laugh, her gestures were sharply at variance with the standard of repression held in approbation by the Misses Gibson. Here, as Lawson had anticipated, even her beauty was at fault ; it smacked too boldly of a

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world with which they were not in sympathy, with which, it might be, he, too, failed to assimilate ; a world of youth and strength, strong-toned, full-blooded, potent to experience, to adventure, rife with unrest, with a thirst for the untried. And still each note of the conversation smote upon his consciousness with a pain which was almost physical.

"It has been a singularly cold day," Miss Sarah opened the interview.

"Oh, crool," observed Amelia with amiability. She was toying with the rose cotton handkerchief on her lap, and it seemed to Lawson that never had it looked so absurdly crude in colour as at that moment.

"These winds are very trying to my sister," continued Miss Sarah. "She suffers from a severe bronchial affection of the throat."

"Por thing. Old people do have a time of it in the winter," responded Amelia, with a compassionate disregard of the fact that those who are elderly do not care to be confounded with those who are aged.

Miss Gibson glanced nervously at her sister and covered the remark with haste. "My cousin, Beatrice Grey, too, has been really ill from it, a bad chill. The winds at Brighton are so very sharp. The doctor advised her leaving for a few days change.

"'Beatrice'?" Amelia turned with a quick glance of curiosity towards the girl who was seated beside Lawson. "Is she the one who painted your nephew, Mr Lawson, those daisies on a pink dish that hang up at No. 5?"

"My nephew?" echoed Miss Sarah, with emphasis. "I do not know what Beatrice may have painted for Mr Lawson, but I must explain that John is not my nephew, Miss Bradshaw, he used to be my brother-in-law."

And to Lawson, the sound was audible of merriment, ill-suppressed, in the rose-coloured handkerchief. Again, the conversation was resumed ; Miss Gibson's remarks were punctuated with inquiry.

"Where did you meet Mr Lawson?" she asked, with

## The Introduction of Amelia

an intonation which conveyed much to Lawson's imagination. "Have you been long acquainted?"

And, awaiting Amelia's answer, Lawson pondered—and the recognition was not without irony—how his second wife had appeared, Phoenix-like, from the grave of the first.

"We met on an outin'," said Amelia, with a reticence which, however admirable, failed to comprehend Miss Gibson's view of the proprieties. "It's odd what a chance there is about things like that. But I've an aunt, now, who's wonderful at omiums. She can mostly tell what's going to happen by the things that turn up beforehand. And the very day I met your nephew—Mr Lawson, I should say, there was a black cat come across my path and come back and rubbed hisself against me and made such a fuss as never was—jest like half-an-hour, as you may say, before me and Mr Lawson met. And when I was telling aunt about it she said it meant a piece of luck coming. And she didn't know I'd met your nephew then, and of course I didn't know all that was coming of it."

"I am afraid," suggested Miss Gibson, "that neither Lucy nor myself are superstitious, and I am not versed in the portent of seeing a black cat."

"It means luck coming," said Amelia. "Luck, you see, if he jest crosses your path, but if he comes and rubs hisself against you, well," she laughed, "I suppose it means ever so much more luck."

"It is curious," interpolated Mr Dangles, whose attention had been arrested by Amelia's explanation, "to trace the origin of all these, apparently, meaningless superstitions. The cat, in early Egypt, was a sacred animal, and, no doubt, the association of its appearance with luck, dates prior to the time of Moses. Then again, in infinitely later times, though we have no Biblical authority for the belief, cats, and particularly black cats, were intimately associated with the idea of witchcraft. It was believed that not only were witches invariably accompanied by one or more of these animals, but that, personally, they often assumed this disguise. It would

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be interesting to follow the belief in all its developments and vicissitudes. There is little doubt that it has come down to us from remote ages."

"Most interesting!" said Miss Sarah. "I never realised before to what ancient ancestry ideas of this sort could owe their origin. But to an intellect like yours, everything assumes a new aspect."

Amelia laughed a little uneasily. The self-complacency of the little curate, and the reverence in which he was so obviously held by the other women present, had an irritating effect upon her. "As far as I'm concerned," she asserted, "I like to know what's coming, not what's gorn past. The one, no fussing 'll alter it, or make it matter; and the other's everything to one."

"It depends," hinted Mr Dangles, "if we live in our own paltry life, or in the larger life of Time and the Universe."

Amelia, at a loss for a trenchant rejoinder, sniffed superciliously. "What say?" she remarked vaguely; but the voice of the servant announcing that dinner was laid, created a diversion; and Lawson rose with alacrity as the company prepared to descend to the dining-room.

The entertainments of the Misses Gibson were of a complex character. They usually commenced with a small dinner, unceremonious, and almost "*en fagmile*," as Miss Sarah never failed to explain to those bidden. After dinner, a suitable margin having been allowed for digestion, the guests of the evening began to arrive. About a dozen could be accommodated comfortably in the small drawing-room; and the time was passed by little musical efforts on the part of those present, and by various games, the chief of which was a rubber of whist at the little table between the windows. At nine-thirty supper was served, a cold collation, as Miss Sarah called it; and, by eleven, Sarah and Lucy, sleepy, but triumphant, were invariably left in solitude discussing the success of the evening.

Yet, on this occasion, a certain embarrassment seemed

## The Introduction of Amelia

to mar the perfect harmony of things. Conversation did not flow as usual ; all present seemed aware of the presence of an uncongenial element, save Amelia herself, who watched with considerable interest the opening ceremony of the evening. Miss Sarah and Miss Lucy respectively took possession of the top and bottom of the table ; the curate said grace, and the four courses followed each other with a slowness which was singularly impressive. During the ensuing conversation started by Mr Dangles upon recent explorations in Palestine, she found herself at a discount. Beatrice Grey sat immediately opposite to her, and Amelia studied her with curiosity. The girl was a guy, she decided ; her dress was absolutely devoid of style, her pallid complexion, and hair strained back tightly from her ears, were unprepossessing ; but there was an attraction in the frank intelligence of her kindly brown eyes of which Amelia was sensible, and it may have been that Beatrice, highly-educated, nervous, effaced, her identity outwardly repressed by a life of routine, represented a type which appealed to Amelia by force of contrast.

Later, in the drawing-room, Miss Grey drew her chair beside Amelia. "It seems to me we are a mannerless set," she said ; "I don't believe one of us has congratulated you on your engagement to our cousin. But it is difficult with strangers present—you must forgive it !"

"Mr Lawson's your cousin ?" asked Amelia.

"Well, not exactly, though I always call him so. You see I am really a cousin of the Gibsons. My mother was their first cousin and just like their sister."

"Then you knew Mr Lawson's first wife ?" asked Amelia, interested. "Was she at all like me ?"

The shadow of a smile passed over Beatrice's face. "Oh, no," she said. "Molly Lawson was elderly when I remember her, and not pretty like you. But she was a dear, good soul and quite devoted to John. As"—she added more shyly, and it seemed that the assertion

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veiled an appeal—"I am sure you will be, too. He is such a good fellow."

"We shell git along as well as other folks, I suppose," said Amelia with secret amusement. Then she added with irrelevance, "You are teacher at a school at Brighton, aren't you?"

"Yes"; Beatrice spoke with some enthusiasm; "and I love teaching. It is such an interesting profession."

Amelia pondered. "Well, everyone to his liking," she said; "but meself I believe I'd as soon be monkey to a organ any day, as teacher to a school; both's got to dance to someone else's tune."

She started as she heard Lawson's voice at her elbow.

"I'm going to play a rubber of whist," he said. "I expect you will be wanting to leave early, won't you? as you have a good way to go home."

"I'm game to be off as soon as you like," she replied frankly; "so you'd better tip me the wink when you're ready." She leant towards him. "You never told me," she whispered with malice, "that night that we were at the theaytre, that the two old cures I showed you were your sisters-at-law!"

Lawson glanced uneasily at Beatrice. "No?" he returned in a more cautious undertone. "I—it did not seem necessary to mention it."

Amelia looked at him with keen, bright eyes. "Which," she hinted, "was you ashamed of—them or me?"

"The circumstances were equivocal," he said quickly, "I mean we were not engaged at the time. It would have been difficult to explain your presence."

"If I was a man," she returned, "I wouldn't do a thing if I couldn't own up to it."

A chord crashing from the piano enforced silence. Mrs Dangles was playing and Mr Dangles sang in a full sonorous voice: "Life is real, Life is earnest." Miss Sarah, pausing in the bay window, emphasised her appreciation by stating in an audible aside that it was an impressive song, impressively rendered. Before it

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ceased, other guests had begun to arrive ; the card-table was set out, and the various games prepared—all alike, when seen under the roof of the Misses Gibson, innocent of the vice of gambling. Amelia, who was uneducated in what Mr Dangles playfully called parlour pastimes, sat apart, a silent spectator, to the obvious relief of the Misses Gibson. She recognised that there was little further to be got out of the evening in the way of entertainment ; it had come short of her expectations ; and she longed impatiently for its conclusion, and for the arrival of sleep which would hasten the advent of the eventful morrow. Through a space in the Venetian shutter, she looked out at the night. No stars were visible, but the sky was clear. She watched the moon above the chimneys with a novel appreciation of its beauty and its desirability as an adjunct to romance and courtship. Then, lowering her gaze, she saw where a stealthy shadow crossed her line of vision upon the balcony. As a sequel to her thoughts, it was portentous. Throwing the upshot of her fate upon the test of the omen, she rose impulsively, and peered through the pane. The cat's eyes met her own, glassy, translucent. Its back was erect, its tail curved, its attention centered upon her presence with a direct persistence which left no doubt of its connection with her fate. But Amelia's heart sank. In the pale light she could see that its fur was sandy and mottled, not the uniformity or the hue which boded luck. *The omen was unpropitious.*

Her silence was maintained as Lawson saw her to the tram. Once only, as they neared their destination, she spoke. "Tell aunt," she said, "that I may be lookin' in to-morrar to hear how Maria is, and to give her some news. But it'll be late. Don't you forget !—Oh, and Miss Grey, as we was coming away, asked me and you down to Brighton to spend the day sometime."

Lawson roused, as though waking out of a stupor ; "I cannot imagine," he said, "that the inspection of a girl's school would be very entertaining to you."

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Amelia eyed him with reflection. "To *me?*" she repeated. "A fat lot 'me's' got to do with it! I tell you," she suggested, "she's sweet on you!"

He looked at her with a vague anxiety. He did not respond.

## CHAPTER XI

### AMELIA ASPIRANT

AMELIA, waiting for the 'bus, tested Fate again. At the corner of the street was an Italian woman with a little cage of green parrots. Approaching, Amelia placed a penny on the stand ; one of the birds hopped down and presented her with a scroll of fortune. She scanned it quickly :

" You will marry the Man of your Choice," she read ; " You will be very happy and will have a large Family, Chiefly Boys."

The omen was surely wrapped in mystery, since, at the present moment had she not chosen two men ? and, in its latter clause, at least, it left much to be desired. She pocketed the little paper with dissatisfaction, her mind reverting significantly to that other disconcerting omen of the night before.

It was 3.30 as she approached the gates. In her hand she carried a cross of evergreens to give credence to the stated reason of her errand. She saw where Sir Geoffry was awaiting her inside the entrance ; he came quickly forward.

" So you're here !" she said with brisk though embarrassed greeting. She had prearranged the coldness of her speech upon this occasion, but circumstances overrule intention.

" Did you not expect me ? " he asked while the amusement in his glance found answer in her own ; she laughed. " There's no accountin' for men ! " she stated. " One never knows what fit'll take 'em. "

He took the wreath from her with a quick politeness

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which she remarked and appreciated. John Lawson's movements were slow, his courtesy usually a matter of afterthought and apology. "This way," she said. She turned up the principal pathway. She had a fine intuition for the conditions essential to the true motive of the visit : in the distance was the chapel with seats adjacent in sufficient seclusion, sheltered from the east wind ; soon the dusk would fall ; already a pink sunset was tinting the tombstones. She observed, meanwhile, how the aspect of the cemetery differed from its appearance on her last visit. She recalled that day with a passing recognition of the strangeness of the fate that she should have met here one man who might have become her husband, that she should be bringing here another filled with the desire to become so. The gloom on that previous visit contrasted with the clear brightness of the weather upon this. Her forlorn dishevelment—the remembrance of which was calculated to displease—with her present smartness of dress and tone.

Sir Geoffry trod by her side, faultlessly clothed according to the accepted standard, upright, well-built, pleasant to behold, altogether admirable in bearing and being. The stamp of a happy self-sufficiency of a conscious claim to superiority which his appearance conveyed, did not mar its suggestion of strength and purpose. He was an excellent specimen of an Englishman, comely, cleanly, strong of limb, reticent of speech, with a hint of reserve and latent force from which an obviously minute attention to the dictates of fashion did not detract.

His presence, with its unmistakable stamp of a world to which she had not yet attained, satisfied Amelia's sense of romance, of ambition. They walked on with a mutual exchange of platitudes. Sir Geoffry, in the desire to make conversation, drew attention in passing to any tombs the construction of which was original or elaborate ; Amelia lingered, examining them with interest, adding her comments to his. Their progress was, necessarily, slow. They passed the chapel and the dim arcades—for not yet, while daylight lingered,

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did Amelia consider the portentous hour to be arrived—and turned down a pathway beyond. At the branching of the ways stood the tomb surmounted by the marble angel which had attracted Lawson's attention, and before it Sir Geoffry paused, his consideration arrested. For the figure is one of exceptional beauty ; it has none of the conventional attributes of the ordinary weeping angel from whose insipid features holiness has banished identity ; it is a human form spiritualised, rather than a spirit clumsily humanised. There is an exquisite suggestion in the delicate eagerness of the pose. The palms of the hands are pressed lightly downwards as though in readiness to rise. The beautiful mouth is stern, but the face full of a wonderful expectancy, looks away over the dreary vista of tombs. Its gaze seems to meet, and to accept, the horror of death, but to pierce unconquerably through the gloom to some glorious vision of the Beyond.

And Sir Geoffry studied it critically, his face expressive of complex considerations—appreciation, perhaps, of the artistic value of the work before him and recognition of the transcendental truths which it so triumphantly conveyed ; of the faith, mental and moral, which went to its construction; of the purity embodied in its all-compelling spirituality.

Amelia, watching, glanced at the angel, then back to the man, and read the impress of the former upon the latter.

"It—it makes one feel like being in church," she said, crudely interpreting his mood.

He glanced at her, wondering briefly whether beneath her vulgarity and commonplaceness of speech the girl could be imaginative.

"The face is something like yours," he said thoughtfully. The remark was impersonal in its abstract criticism, but to Amelia it banished fancy and restored fact. The blood thumped in her veins. As they moved on down a side-path, viewing tombs of less importance, she trod closer to the man beside her in order to realise more keenly the proximity which stirred

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a pleasurable excitement. The moments were rife with quickened anticipation. In his speech, his glance, she read intention. Her spirits felt singularly light. Out of their exuberance, little inspirations of chaff and pleasantry rose to her lips with a glibness which gratified. Already she framed the recital of all that was now imminent to Mab, to Mrs Burgess ; later, the breaking with Lawson. Her cheeks burnt beneath the touch of rouge with which, in recognition of all that hinged upon that meeting, she had heightened their colouring.

And, meanwhile, the moments of expectancy which to her appeared so agreeable, so rife with the exchange of pleasantries and mutual comprehension, to Sir Geoffry lagged. He had discovered the girl to be lacking in the attraction anticipated. Her nature was devoid of those imagined subtleties which urged analysis ; even the suggestion, veiled yet definite, which he thought to have detected in her manner on their first meeting (that hint of laxity in an accepted rule of conduct which has its own peculiar magnetism), appeared now to have existed only in his imagination. He recognised her attitude to be that of a girl, sophisticated and not averse to flirtation—and flirtation, presumably, of questionable refinement—but who was essentially harmless in intention. He read no ulterior motive in her exaggerated coquetry of speech and glance, in her aggressive chaff, her elaborate self-sufficiency. And although desire for analysis had been prompted by no distinct purpose, he felt its conclusion to rob the situation of motive. Perhaps too, though unacknowledged, the fact carried weight, that while the virtue of a girl belonging to a lower class may be an inconvenient adjunct not to be too scrupulously fostered, the virtue of a girl closely connected—and about to become more so—with the class to which he himself belonged, was not to be lightly tampered with. Thus it came to pass that the adventure lacked in interest, the conversation in piquancy. Even the girl's beauty failed to attract. The likeness which he had traced upon their previous meeting, to-day was not apparent. He recognised the remarkable

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lustre of her eyes, he admitted the regularity of her features—as instanced by his involuntary comparison with the perfection of the sculptured face—but her complexion had a harshness which he had not remarked by gas-light, which curiously hardened her expression and tended to vulgarise an appearance already of doubtful refinement.

“Where is your mother’s grave situated?” he asked, as the path brought them to the confines of the cemetery, outlined by a low-lying wall.

Amelia reverted in thought to her pre-arranged purpose of action. The nameless mound which concealed the remains of Mrs Bradshaw she had been unable to trace upon her last visit; fresh graves which had arisen, had made its locality numerically difficult to discover. She had decided that any grave would serve to rid herself of the cross, provided it was a tomb sufficiently imposing in appearance to impress Sir Geoffry, and provided that he did not come near enough to it to discover the lettering which revealed it to be that of a stranger. She turned: “We’ve come beyond it,” she explained. At the bend of the pathway she took the wreath from his grasp. “You wait!” she said; “I won’t be a moment—it’s over yonder.” She cut swiftly across the grass to where a granite monument stood which struck her as being of sufficient importance. Rounding this, with a start of amusement, she perceived herself to be opposite to Molly Lawson’s grave. The latter, she decided, would answer her purpose, and, with a sense of the humour of things, she placed the cross upon it; then, picturing Lawson’s bewilderment upon his next visit to the cemetery, she rejoined Sir Geoffry.

The moment for definite action had arrived; she looked at him. “Shell we git a seat by the chapel?” she said, “I’m tired.” She never doubted that, with a tact for which the man beside her must be secretly grateful, she was aiding him to conditions for which he craved. They retraced their steps, quitting the pathway at her suggestion, and sauntering along the dim recesses of the arcades. In the silence their steps rang sharply upon the flags, and

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echoed in the wide, over-arching stone-work. Even here, was a place where, with impunity, a man might encircle the waist of the girl he was courting, and advance his suit without experiencing or occasioning undue embarrassment. But Sir Geoffry did not avail himself of the opportunity. They descended the steps, and the great closed doors of the chapel were before them ; in a niche amongst the laurels on the left was a seat of which Amelia took possession.

Sir Geoffry glanced at his watch. "We will sit for a few minutes," he suggested ; "till you are rested. Then, I'm afraid, I must be going home."

His surroundings were distasteful to him. The thought of the incalculable train of dead who had crossed the threshold beside which he was sitting, depressed him. They were represented in the flags beneath his feet, in the monuments behind him, in the forest of white tombstones peering on all sides indefinitely out of the waning light. The uncertainty, the insignificance of individual life—that time-honoured reflection—hurt his complacency, and reduced to ridiculous proportion the sum of his comfortable self-importance.

The tread of some visitors passing clanked upon the stones, and the girl at his side stirred.

"What was it you said you'd got to tell me about?" she asked.

Sir Geoffry thrust aside the unwelcome train of thought which had intruded. "Of course!" he said, "and I had quite forgotten—that was the reason of our meeting to-day"; he laid stress upon the fact with unconscious satisfaction at its recognition. "Mrs Coleford sent a message to you"; he paused. "She was annoyed, naturally, at your appearance at her ball unasked, but, none the less, she is anxious to do something for you. As a preliminary, she wants you to come to see her; to appoint a time."

"Is *that* what you'd got to tell me?" asked Amelia.

He acquiesced.

"Why didn't you out with it the other day at the shop?" she persisted quickly.

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"I can't say,—perverseness, perhaps," Sir Geoffry smiled. "I believe the truth was, that delay entailed our meeting again."

In the silence Amelia heard a faint breeze encircle the chapel ; it swept the dust from the roadway up upon the flags, an eddying whirl of grit ; it passed on, sighing, amongst the tombs.

"Look here," she said at length, "Mrs Coleford's nothing to me, I had about enough of it the other night, an' I want no more to do with her. You can tell her that, and that I don't mean to come."

Sir Geoffry paused for an almost imperceptible moment before he answered. "If so, you are very foolish," he suggested with surprise and perhaps irritation in his voice ; "Of course, if you choose to throw away your chances it's your own affair, but it is none the less folly on your part."

And Amelia, staring out at the dusk, did not immediately reply. As yet, the sharpness of her disillusion had to be comprehended, the loss of the dazzling actuality which she had reached out to grasp. In the acuteness of the discovery, perception was dulled. She was conscious only of a leaden sense of failure, of a dull unhappiness, through which arose more definitely a novel hatred to the man beside her. That he was cognisant of her humiliation, that he had brought it about by malice aforethought, and deliberation, she did not doubt. The whole situation had been a plant. His kiss, previously given, his present admiration, his implied affection, had been part of a concerted scheme to render her ridiculous. And now he sat, with unheeding satisfaction, tapping—stick in hand—the woodwork of the seat with a callousness, intolerable in its convincing proof of his supreme indifference.

She rose. "I mus' be gitting back," she said. She stumbled a little blindly as she trod away down the path, and she was aware that the man beside her uttered some commonplace in consequence—she did not rightly grasp what. Then again, through the noisy crackling of the gravel beneath their feet, she understood that he was speaking to her with an assumption of argument, and

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the substance of his speech penetrated her preoccupation.

"If I were you, in my own interests," he reasoned, "I should consider twice before I rejected Mrs Coleford's proposal. At any rate, why not go to see her and hear what she has to suggest? That can do you no harm. If Mrs Coleford were to offer you a chance of improving yourself, of fitting yourself, say, for a better position in life, wouldn't you be foolish to throw it away without consideration?"

"Oh, you think so, do you?" she said briefly. Slowly, and with considered effort, she turned a coward's gaze to take afresh the measure of his personality. And the whole bearing of the man, his unruffled complacency, his self-concentration, his limitless, triumphant unconcern, stabbed her with a sense of irreparable injury. She looked away again with tightened lips.

And yet, in this very recognition of the immensity of her hurt, the purport of his reasoning hammered upon her consciousness. To fit herself for a better position would mean to fashion herself on an equality with those who now despised her; to meet them in the future on a level, qualified to hold her own, ready to pay contempt with contempt; enabled, perhaps,—was it too much to prefigure?—in the strange tide of events which the years might bring, to wreak upon them some tittle of the affront with which they had bespattered her. As yet indefinite, as it was pre-eminently far-fetched, the belief took shape that, in this offer which she was rejecting, there was a means to an end; that she could grasp the very methods which themselves provided, to convey—first, to the woman who had slighted her, the full sum of her disaffection; then to be even—in that remote future—with this man who had worked her present humiliation.

They reached the gates, and he stood aside for her to precede him. Through the unwonted transparency of the atmosphere, the sharp little lights in the street beyond, twinkled keenly in a rose-hued twilight. And the hum of the surrounding life—that sense of the great multitude, omnipresent, all-encircling—seemed to enfold

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her with a perceptible exhilaration, to stimulate her to a new-born courage.

"Look here," she said ; "I'll change my mind about that ; I'll come and see Mrs Coleford. But it must be a Sunday, so I'll go to-morrow, say eleven o'clock, if that'll do. I don't say I won't tell her what I think of her, but that's my affair."

Sir Geoffry expressed qualified approval of her decision. "In your own interests," he reiterated, "you are certainly wise to go. And now, shall I see you home in a hansom?"

But Amelia declined firmly.

"I'm sorry," she said, with studied politeness. "But I think I'll go my own way ; you see, I have an appointment with the gentleman I'm engaged to."

With a satisfaction which misread his surprise, she observed the effect of her statement upon Sir Geoffry.

"You are engaged to be married?" he repeated, with a noticeable disapprobation. Possibly, he was thinking that the message of which he had been the bearer might have remained undelivered. "I hope," he added with an afterthought, "that it is to someone worthy of you."

And Amelia laughed, as she waved to a passing 'bus. "I'm not the sort to take up with a soft!" she assured him pointedly.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE GOING OF AMELIA

AMELIA remarked that the hands of the clock were on the stroke of eleven the next morning as she crossed the hall into Mrs Coleford's house. The room into which she was shown was a little boudoir over-looking the leads. She had no inclination to notice or remark her surroundings. She could hear the church bells ringing as she sat there, and the sound seemed to confuse her ideas. She selected the most comfortable arm-chair and placed it with its back to the light, hoping that the attitude might inspire confidence.

Owing to an unavoidable reticence on her part with regard to her doings upon the previous day, an unlucky coolness had risen between her and Mab, which had prevented her again securing the loan of the purple bodice. Moreover, she had not slept well, so that her head felt tired, and she had observed before starting that the rims of her eye-lids exhibited a tell-tale redness. She felt conscious that her appearance left much to be desired, and the conviction robbed her of the self-assurance of which she recognised herself to be so greatly in need. She tried to recall, and recollection evaded, the little speeches which she had pre-arranged, so telling in their independence, in the subtle contempt which they were calculated to convey. Meanwhile the minutes passed, the door opened, and Muriel Coleford entered. Amelia rose. For a moment the two women faced each other in a pause of unconscious inspection.

There was between them a definite likeness, though Amelia in her heavy dress—black, with maroon facings—

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compared ill with the peculiar grace of Mrs Coleford's figure in a diaphanous and wholly elaborate swathing of lace and silk. Muriel was the taller by half a head, yet in the hair, eyes, and mouth lay a curious similarity. Colour and expression, line and curve betrayed the fact of a joint ancestry, yet there the likeness ceased, and ceased with a suggestion of pathos ; for, in Amelia's face, was the roundness of youth, the hint of a beauty which time would perfect ; in Muriel's was the presence of a beauty, perhaps more exquisite, more delicate in detail, but which time had matured, and maturing, marred.

Mrs Coleford extended her hand with a prettily-worded apology for delay.

"So you have come !" she added. "I did not feel sure you would."

An appropriate answer did not occur to Amelia. She laughed, but was conscious that it was not a hearty laugh, full of assurance, such as she wished to emit ; it was a sound wanting in volume and tone. But she found the fact disturbing that the woman before her should prove so far the reverse of what she had anticipated. Remembrance renewed the figure which she had seen when watching at the party. Looking up out of the night towards the lighted doorway, she had despaired a presence dimly visible, white-robed, incalculably apart ; framed—and the setting had borne a dual interpretation—in an atmosphere of luxury and light; incredible in youth and charm, in circumstance and effect. Another remembrance in its diversity dislodged the first ; that dainty semblance of age which she had seen later, that disguise which had transformed, yet left the personality it concealed more brilliant, vivacious, unapproachable—the centre of a dazzling scene. But the woman before her seemed to have no connection with those other two. She looked tired and old—Amelia was surprised to see how old ; there were hollows under her eyes and her face looked thin. She drew the lace of her morning gown about her with a slight shiver as she took the chair from which Amelia had just risen and stretched out her hands to the fire.

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"Well," she said, not unkindly, "this is not our first meeting. Tell me, what made you come to my ball uninvited?"

Again Amelia laughed. "Because I couldn't come invited, I s'pose." Her wit reassured her.

"Under those circumstances it is not usual to come at all. What put the idea into your head?"

Amelia considered, reflectively stroking the bow of her muff.

"Be honest with me. I should like to hear your motive. It is scarcely likely that you came out of mere impertinence—"

"I wanted to know you—"

"A good reason, but not wholly satisfying, not from my point of view. *Why* did you want me to know you?"

"We are sisters." She announced the fact with decision, yet, studying the figure before her in those same exquisite folds of lace and silk, there seemed a certain incredibility in the statement.

"A fact, but not an argument," pursued Mrs Coleford. "Because we are sisters, it does not follow that I should wish, or choose, to make your acquaintance."

The questioning with its accompanying line of argument was disquieting to Amelia. She smiled uneasily, remarking, meanwhile, the thinness of Mrs Coleford's hands, outspread to the blaze. They were curiously slender and—the fact surprised her—devoid of rings.

"If you will not tell me," persisted Mrs Coleford, "shall I tell you? I am rich and you are not; I am in a good social position and you are not. You thought that I was thus able to do something for you. I should suggest that your motives are mercenary, and their execution, to say the least, clumsy."

Amelia lifted up her head sharply. In that moment trivialities conspired against her; a shaft of sunlight of disagreeable brightness fell in her eyes; the firelight was scorching her face. "I don't see," she said, "that you've any call to be ashamed of me; I'm not sech a guy as that comes to, and on one side, anyhow, I'm as good as yesself."

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Mrs Coleford smiled. "No, you're not a guy," she admitted. "But that minds me of another question : Why did you try, so successfully, to make yourself into one when you came to my ball ? What made you wear such a dress ? "

"It was a Pantymine dress," said Amelia. Her temper was rising. She had the true woman's instinct which makes it easier to bear a depreciation of her natural charms than an aspersion upon her taste in dress. And, after all, there is sense in the recognition, for the Deity may be supposed to be directly responsible for the former and herself for the latter.

"I know," repeated Mrs Coleford ; "but, can't you grasp that what is fitting and correct for a Pantomime dress, is not fitting, or decent, for a ball-room ? "

"I'd have thought that what was decent for a woman before one crowd was decent before another," Amelia pointed, with prompt sarcasm.

Somewhat to her surprise, Mrs Coleford appeared to appreciate the contention. "You seem," she responded, "to have been thinking over some of the little problems of life."

"But that's the way of the gentry," pursued Amelia, taking courage to quote Mrs Burgess. "They've one notion for themselves and another for the por."

"Still"—Mrs Coleford questioned with hesitation—"you've led a respectable life, hitherto ? "

The colour flushed hotly over Amelia's face. "What'll you take me for next ? " she exclaimed, impulse overcoming embarrassment.

Mrs Coleford attempted no qualification of her speech. She toyed with the frail lace of her gown, outspreading it absently over her slender fingers. "Which," she said, with evasion, "reminds me of another question.—How I shall weary you soon !—But you have been brought up by your aunt, I understand. What does she do for a living ? "

"Aunt goes charing, and that sort of thing."

"And I gather that you are engaged to be married ? "

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Amelia nodded with reluctance. She had a disinclination to mention her engagement.

"And you must forgive my asking such a personal question—Are you very fond of this man to whom you are engaged?"

"He's an ole chap," Amelia said, after a pause.

"Yes?" There was a latent satisfaction in Mrs Coleford's voice. "But you are ridiculously young to get engaged, barely seventeen?—What I did myself!" she added with a smile.

And Amelia, studying the face of the woman before her, recalled the history of Mrs Coleford's marriage and, with compassion, felt mollified.

"Yet no one, to look at you'd think you'd had sech a por time of it," she said, with implied compliment.

Mrs Coleford betrayed no interest in the remark. "Let us return to business," she suggested. "Now what do you expect me to do for you?"

"I expec' nothing, and I arsk nothing," asserted Amelia drily.

The answer, intended to insult, appeared to please.

"Well, I should like to do something for you," Mrs Coleford pursued; "so far your venture has succeeded. I should never have troubled about you if you had not crossed my path, but, since you have done so, I am willing to help you. Only it must be in my own time and in my own way, and that you may not consent to." She dropped her hands into her lap, and the bright blaze fell upon her face as she leant forward to watch the girl more narrowly. "First of all, about this marriage of yours, you are too young to tie yourself up for your whole life. Now, I want you to do nothing in a hurry, but if you don't love this man you are engaged to, I advise you to end it. I am sorry for him, but you must not let that influence your decision; after all, he has lived his life, yours is still before you, the two cannot be weighed in the same balance. Even if you love him, bear in mind that by thirty you will require an entirely different type of husband to the man who would appeal to your fancy now. All I say is, consider the matter

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well, and if you decide as I expect, I will do all for you I can. But, first, I am going to be terribly frank with you. Listen ; I consider you exceptionally pretty, criticising you, you must understand, not as you are, but as you might be. That fringe down to your eyes, that towzled hair and that hat are in execrable taste, and would vulgarise a far prettier face than yours,—no, you must not be offended at my plain speaking ; if you have any grit in you, and I fancy you have, you will take it in good part and have the sense to profit by it. Further, you strike me as exceptionally ill-educated, below the average of the class among whom you have been brought up. How far this is from choice or from necessity, I cannot say ; how far it is inherent—part of your nature—or is solely the result of association, caught like an infection and, as such, possible to stamp out, I cannot tell. But I want to stamp it out, and you must aid me for all you are worth. Only first you must realise the necessity for effort, and there lies the difficulty, because I can see that, at present, you do not ; and until you do this, until you are willing to strain your utmost to help yourself, it is useless my attempting to help you. Here, however, are the conditions on which I offer you my assistance : You must be educated where and how I choose. I shall spare no expense. You shall go to a first-rate school ; you shall have private masters ; you shall travel ; but it will be for some time. And meanwhile, I promise nothing. According to what is in you, according to the use which you make of that time of opportunity, so your after-life will depend. Tell me, what do you think of this ? ”

Amelia sat upright in her chair. Her face was expressive in the intensity of its combined disbelief, humiliation, denial. She straightened her gaze with a quick defiance.

“ I can’t say ” ; she spoke after a silence. “ It’s me to be grateful to you, of course—but no one else thinks me command as you do.”

“ You are grateful, but you are offended—that was inevitable.” Mrs Coleford hesitated, then rose with a

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certain abruptness. Amelia, eyeing her with reluctant admiration, noted how the fire-light, with rosy glow, played upon her tall figure and upon her face bowed to watch the flames, while the sunlight lay upon her hair. "I want you to say no more to-day," Mrs Coleford said. "I want no answer, no comment which might influence your after-decision. I want you to go away and think it all over quietly. Let me know what you have decided, say, in a week's time. But remember, there is no concession possible on what I have said. And now, good-bye." She rang the bell promptly as though to avoid any chance of discussion, and held out her hand.

It is an accepted truism that great issues in life constantly hinge on trivialities with which they had no apparent connection. It happened that Amelia, extending her hand in responsive farewell, heard the door behind her open, and became aware that Sir Geoffry had entered the room. She understood the disadvantage of contrast which the situation afforded, the inimitable perfection of the woman with whom she was placed in contrast, perfection of dress and bearing, of gesture and speech. And Sir Geoffry's arrival at that moment, with its attendant reminiscences, pointed her past humiliation and her present disadvantage; and, intensifying the dual smart, clenched afresh that foregone—though as yet—unconscious decision.

She clasped Muriel's hand in brief farewell; and, ignoring Sir Geoffry's attempted greeting, passed swiftly through the door which he held open for her. Alone in the cool, wide hall, she paused. She was breathing a little quickly from contending emotions. The servant whom Mrs Coleford had intended to summon by ringing the bell had not appeared. And Amelia was glad of the fact, since it gave her an opportunity for reconsideration of her position. She was not sure that she had been wise to accept her dismissal and the termination of the interview so readily. A little more resistance, some definite self-assertion on her part might have impressed Mrs Coleford, might even, in due course, have afforded opportunity for humiliating Sir Geoffry.

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. . . One gained nothing in this world by being meek. . . . And, still indeterminate, she glanced absently at her surroundings, noting before her the white staircase which rose the height of the house ; further, a window of stained glass which cast jewelled tints upon the light paint and curiously twisted balustrades, upon the mosaic tiles at her feet. Through an open door she could see a room, enticing in wealth of velvet hangings and luxurious furnishing. . . . Everywhere the house was silent, forsaken, save in that room behind her where were closeted the two people round whom her emotions centred. She recognised that they were discussing her at that moment ; enumerating her deficiencies ; possibly, deciding her fate. The murmur of voices penetrated to where she stood. She trod back and bent her attention to distinguish their utterance. She could hear, first, Mrs Coleford's clear, evenly-modulated tones ; then, more audible, Sir Geoffry's reply.

"It was curious," Mrs Coleford was saying, "to sit opposite to her and to feel that, there she was, papa's daughter ; and that, but for the accident of money, she would now be thinking of her first drawing-room, and looking forward, with some reason, to being the beauty of the season ! It all seems such an absurd chance."

"The mere accident of money"—Sir Geoffry was speaking, "the problem of that absurd chance can equally apply to every tramp and vagabond in the kingdom!"

"Your description was, on the whole, very accurate" ; again Mrs Coleford spoke. "But I cannot think how she comes to be exactly what she is in these days of Board schools. Most of the shop-girls now are such a very superior type, so very superior to oneself."

"At the good shops, certainly, not, perhaps, at the kind of shop she is at. But she is pretty, though of a vulgar type."

"There I disagree" ; Mrs Coleford spoke decisively. "The vulgarity is far more the result of her particular taste in dress ; a taste which she herself, I fancy, would define as 'stylish.' But a man cannot distinguish between cause and effect where a woman is concerned.

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He can judge a result, but how that result is arrived at, is impossible to him."

"I must wait till you have experimentalised on the raw material"—Amelia could picture the smile which punctured his speech—"Meanwhile, I admit that her features are exceptionally regular."

"As an experiment, you say it will be a failure," Mrs Coleford's voice was reflective. "I don't know. One likes to think that there is latent refinement in her nature by inheritance, and that the vulgarity is hers by association. You see, I consider myself an adept at reading faces, and I should say she is no fool ; she strikes me as observant, gifted with a certain independence of outlook. I could fancy her true, with an inconvenient, dogmatic acceptance of truth; and I can imagine her affectionate and loyal. I won't say how far this latter thought appeals to me, for I hate the idea of a love which gives out measure for measure."—She seemed to have turned away for her voice was less clearly audible. ". . . Good material to work upon, the difficulty lies with that surface veneer which is so essential in our eyes. How am I to get her to realise that she is only vulgar when she is fancying herself ladylike? I drove it home just now with a certain brutality and, of course, offended without convincing. Yet I have great faith in a woman's power of adaptability. One sees such marvellous instances of it. Women are quick to absorb and appropriate fresh surroundings. You see I remember this girl's mother, and how quickly and cleverly she adapted herself to a difficult rôle. And yet——"

The tread of approaching footsteps upon the staircase smote upon Amelia's attention. She stepped towards the hall door, and, opening it softly, ran down into the street. Some of the church bells had not yet ceased ringing, and the crowd of intending worshippers which thronged the pavement had not yet perceptibly thinned. It had all occupied such an incredibly small space of time—that interview with its humiliation of contrast and of incident, that conversation which had emphasised the interview. She bent her steps towards the Park and

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struck out along the path which leads to the Marble Arch. She carried her head erect, her skirts trailed in the mud. Now and again people paused to look after her, attracted by her brilliant colouring, her showy hat, her sweeping dress. But she did not heed and appreciate the fact as usual. She kicked the little pebbles in the pathway angrily ; they spun before her tread. Her mind held a curious mixture of triumph and abasement. The criticism which she had absorbed stung recollection ; the woman's criticism, offensive but charitably tempered, the man's criticism, incredible in its gross denial of all that had preceded it. She repeated it to herself, alternately accepting it without qualification, then rejecting it with a disbelief as convincing.

But the enchanting fabric of her self-appreciation had been undermined. Her unshaken faith in her beauty and charm was gone. She could never again prune herself upon it with unhesitating conviction. A vision of herself as she had been defined tortured imagination. . . . Vulgar, common, devoid of style, of attraction. She turned from the adjectives with sharp but unsatisfying denial. . . . Again, through the smarting sense of disillusion, ran the realisation that some good thing had befallen her and she pursued the thought with a faint elation. For the fortune which she had craved was tangibly within her grasp, although presented under conditions which robbed it of its charm, which almost prohibited acceptance.—Her gaze swept the grey outline of the Park with unrest; she strove to steady the turmoil of her thoughts.—Hitherto in her life events had followed each other in harmonious sequence. There had been no necessity for exerting her individuality to direct them. Even in the matter of her engagement with John Lawson, one course only had been possible to a girl of any sense and respectability. Now, for the first time, the shaping of her future lay indeterminate, awaiting her decision. And that decision must lead to results so diametrically opposite, that it was difficult for brain to grasp. On the one hand she saw the even, monotonous life with Lawson, a life of good solid comfort, of un-

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exciting domesticity, of petty economies ; on the other, a vista of dazzling possibilities, bewildering, varied beyond conception, enticing in the very lack of knowledge which rendered them indefinite. . . . Only the intervening years stretched between, sharply prohibitive. School-work, a state of routine, of restraint, a return to the ignominious conditions of childhood, presented itself to her mind with strong distaste. Yet, it was perhaps characteristic of Amelia that the thought of seeking advice in her perplexity did not occur to her. She might have summed up her conviction in the statement that a personal matter was a matter to determine personally, that no exterior opinion could influence individual feeling. And still, through her perplexity, that foregone decision ruled, that knowledge of the admiration which had been veiled contempt, that determination, unrecognised but stubborn, to qualify herself to eclipse where she had been despised, to return measure for measure, to repay contempt with contempt.

It was not in her nature to weigh and question long. Before she had crossed the Park her resolution was taken. Her action in the matter was yet more prompt. Aware that John Lawson was likely to be at home early in the afternoon, she procured a slice of cold meat from the landlady, and, having partaken of a hurried meal, she set off for the Crescent. It was about three o'clock when she arrived there. Rain had been falling heavily in the night, and a damp haze clung about the little circle of houses. They looked unprepossessing, no fresh wash of air stirred the fog which seemed to stagnate there ; the gloom of the closing day and the oppressive sense of Sunday stillness increased the aspect of dreariness. Amelia looked nervously at the dining-room window as she reached No. 5, but the interior of the room was not visible through the dingy blinds ; and stepping quickly to the area gate, she ran down the steps and drummed noisily upon the door. Within, heavy footsteps approached in response, and Mrs Burgess stood before her in the bravery of Sunday attire.

" Back agen ! " she exclaimed, in playful reference to

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the frequency of Amelia's visits. "This time I conclude it's after your young man, and you're sort of taking the kitching on your way to the high lickholities."

"Non of your sauce, aunt!" said Amelia, bestowing a kiss on the plump circumference of Mrs Burgess' cheek, and assuming a flippancy which was foreign to her feeling. "There—it's a pleasure on Sundays to kiss you without feelin' one's face blackened in the prociss!"

"Well, I carn't clean the furniture and meself at one and the same time," said Mrs Burgess, preceding her down the dark passage; "when I see these servant-gurls with their muslin aprons an' their curls an' their board-school grammar, I know what they're worth in the way of cleaning. I tell you, they'll brush their hair but not your carpet, and they'll scrub their cheeks but not your floors, and that's all the good you'll git out of them. The servant I like 'ull spend six days out of the seven cleaning the house, and the seventh, she may clean herself and welcome if she's minded to." Mrs Burgess paused with her hand upon the kitchen door. "Are you coming in, or goin' straight up, 'Melia?"

Something in the manner of the question suggested possibilities to Amelia. "Mr Giles ain't here?" she questioned.

"It's not for me to say he ain't," said Mrs Burgess coquettishly.

"Then I'll go straight up," said Amelia, glad of the excuse. "I don't want to make third party to a pair of love-birds."

"You'll find Lawson in the front room," responded Mrs Burgess; "and then, unless I'm singularly mistook, there'll be two pair of love-birds, one in the high lickholities, and one humble in the basemint."

"You're right!" Amelia began the ascent; the exuberance of Mrs Burgess' mood jarred upon her preoccupation.

"And I say!" Mrs Burgess called insinuatingly after her, "you needn't go mentioning up there the por little pair of love-birds a-cooing down below."

"Straight!" Amelia called down briefly.

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But the remark met with disapprobation. "I wish you wouldn't use those common expressions," remonstrated Mrs Burgess, more loudly. "'Straight!' it's like any corster. Why can't you say, 'Ef course,' 'All right,' 'I'm with you there,' or some civil speech of that sort. But you'll never make the lady, and it's no good wasting words."

The speech followed Amelia's transit upwards with ominous significance. Arrived at the top of the staircase, she groped her way to the dining-room door and tapped at it gently. There was no response, and she went in. Lawson was sitting in the arm-chair before the fire, inert, asleep. His head had fallen back and his mouth was open. He had not yet shaved, and his face, expressionless from slumber, looked singularly drawn and lean. His arms, in their shirt sleeves of common twill, were folded limply across his shabby waistcoat. Amelia advancing, stared at him with a sensation of self-congratulation at the fate which she was escaping, and with a singular stirring of regret at that which she had come to do. For John Lawson was an object unsightly, yet pitiful. Sitting there, he looked an old man.

The slight creaking of a board disturbed him, and he sat up and looked at her with a vacant expression, till, slowly, returning consciousness relaxed the tension of his features.

"Why, it's you!" he remarked. He felt about for his coat and drew it on with an air of perplexity.

"It's me!" corroborated Amelia briskly. She took the chair opposite to him, pulled it to the fire, and propped her feet on the fender.

"I did not expect you this afternoon," remarked Lawson. His hand involuntarily strayed to his unshaven cheek. "We had not arranged anything in connection with it, had we?"

"Why, no," said Amelia. "You was to call for me an' go a walk this evening." She paused. "That's it—I'm come to say I can't go."

"Ah," said Lawson, with annoying apathy. But, after a moment, realising that she offered no explanation

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of this change of plans, he added : "What are you doing instead?"

Amelia reflected. "It's jest this," she said, her colour rising, "I don't want to keep comp'ny with you, Mr Lawson. There, I've said it straight. I'd better to out and have done with it."

Lawson's apathy vanished. "I don't understand," he said, turning to her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean jest that I carn't keep comp'ny any more," replied Amelia stolidly. "That's straight, if you'll take it, an' if you won't, you'll hev' to. I carn't go on keeping comp'ny with you because I don't want to marry, an' I carn't. That's jest it."

"This is very unexpected, Amelia, I don't understand," said Lawson anxiously; and she heard the change in his voice without looking at his face. "We've had no quarrel or anything to account for it, that I can recall. Have I offended you in any way?"

"No." Amelia studied the buttons on the sides of her high boots, and observed that there were three missing on the left leg. "No, you've been all right. But I don't *want* to marry. It's no good carrying on," she added desperately, "I don't, an' I won't, and it's better you should swallar it at onst."

"And may I inquire since when you have changed your mind?" asked Lawson at length. His voice had a peculiar hard ring in it, like a man whose temper is rising.

"Since twelve o'clock," replied Amelia with strict accuracy. "You see it's jest this, my people have giv' me the chance of bettering meself, and I'd be a fool if I was to overlook it. They've come forward, you see, and they'll spare no expense to make me the lady and put me in the place I ought to be, an' I've took the orffer. So I come along to tell you straight away."

"I see. You have acted very straightforwardly to me," said Lawson drily. "Of course, Miss Bradshaw, it shall be as you wish."

There ensued a silence. Amelia rose and looked

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across at the door, but lingered. Lawson stared blankly out at the street.

There the lamps were beginning to prick the greyness of the evening one by one. A muffin bell clanged down the deserted Crescent. Its shrill, monotonous note wound confusedly with his train of thought. Why was there that curious propensity in human nature to value only the unattainable? It began in childhood with the infant who rejected the toy which it held for the bauble which was beyond its reach. It lasted till the old man staggered reluctantly into the grave which was yet but the portal to the Heaven of his prayers. Always the ache of the unattainable, the disillusion of the attained.

. . . Only two days previously, he, John Lawson, had been prepared to resent the folly of his present romance, to desire himself rid of it, to curse the rashness which had urged him to mate with a girl so palpably his inferior. Now all his heart rose up in pitiful, morbid yearning after the joy which was going from him. As he stared across at the grey row of houses opposite, they seemed to him suddenly typical of the life to which he must look forward; a dull uniform of monotony, they were like the drab tenor of his days. For love had come, and had crudely revealed to him the joylessness of his previous existence. And he had dreamed a dream of romance, of renewed youth, of a girl's fresh presence rejuvenating all the grey way which he must traverse. . . . Now the muffin bell sounded like a ridiculous knell to his lost youth. . . . His gaze wandered to the hand which lay upon his lap. It was the hand of an old man.

Involuntarily he reached out his clasp to the girl at his side. "Amelia," he said sharply, "don't talk like that. It's foolish. Don't say you'll leave me. Oh, go away and be educated if you wish, there's no harm in that—no, no, I approve of that; but don't break with me; wait and see. I tell you, you won't feel happy where you're going; you'll only feel out of place. Oh, I know you think I'm old. Perhaps I've been too sober for you. But I like a little recreation

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as well as anyone, and I know I should alter, I know I should. And I tell you I'd be good to you, I—" he bent his face in his hands, ashamed of his outburst, and was silent.

Amelia waited a moment, watching him with an air of anxious perplexity ; then she tapped him gently on the shoulder ; but he did not answer. "Mr Lawson," she said, "I haven't been straight with you. I never wanted to marry you. There—it was true—you was too old for me. It was jest that I wanted the home. I'm sorry—" a catch came in Amelia's voice and the tears pinked her lids ; "I'm sorry. There—por ole chap"—her arm stole about his neck and her soft lips pressed his cheek. Then a door slammed, and Amelia was gone.



## Book II

# The God with the Feet of Clay

*“And never say ‘no’ when the world says ‘aye’;  
For that is fatal . . .”*—E. B. BROWNING



# The God with the Feet of Clay

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## CHAPTER I

### THE AMELIA OF TO-DAY

AMELIA had been a week at Albert Gate, when one day Muriel took her to see Jack Coleford. Amelia was awed with the long dim room, the still figure upon the couch, the stealthy valet, the white-capped nurse. At Muriel's request, she came close to the couch and the blind was raised that Jack Coleford might see her. As the afternoon sunshine fell upon him, she was reminded of a corpse ; the rigid outline of his limbs, the white face, the sunken eyes, even the nerveless hand in which she was forced to place her own, filled her with repulsion. She saw that his mouth was distorted, and, when he spoke to her, his remark was unintelligible. She tried to understand that he was a man still young, who, in health, might have been at that moment handsome, talented, proud of wealth and a beautiful wife. She noticed the caressing movement with which Muriel bent over him, the gentleness with which she touched his hand. In the hall she hazarded a remark :

“ Is he all there ? ” she asked.

Muriel shook her head. “ His mind is going now, but he always understands me. He used to be very clever.”

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Amelia risked another question. "If he isn't sensible, why do you read to him for hours? It seems like all your trouble for nothing."

"He likes the continuous sound of my voice and to know that I am there, even if he cannot always follow the sense of what I may read."

They were passing an unused room which adjoined the dining-room; the door stood open, and Muriel paused.

"They ought to air this room," she observed. She entered and flung the shutters back and the window up. Amelia looked about her. It was a comfortable study with book-lined walls. A man's pipe lay upon the writing-table, and a coat hung over the arm of one chair. A stale smell of tobacco clung to the air.

"This is Geoffry's room when he is in town," said Muriel, answering her look of inquiry.

"Does he live here?" asked Amelia interested.

"No; he has his own rooms in St James' Street, but this is always kept as a room for him to transact business in. At one time he used to go through everything with Jack, but now he only attempts it as a matter of form when Jack is at his best." She was moving round the room, testing with her fingers the dust on tables and chairs. "He may come next week."

And, as Amelia went upstairs, she scented romance imminent in her life, and romance of an unusual order. But Mrs Coleford, following to that upper landing where their ways diverged, turned aside into her room and wrote:—

"The event of the week was the return of Amelia. As you know, I had seen her twice during the time she was at Brighton so her appearance was no surprise to me. She certainly is exceptionally handsome; even you will accredit her with an acquired refinement. Otherwise, I am curious to know what you will think of her. So far, I have avoided bringing her into contact with strangers, and have even substituted supper for late dinner to dispense with the presence of the servants till I could feel my way. . . . But the precaution was unnecessary.

"This is the Amelia of to-day:—She is transformed by

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her improvement in dress ; her behaviour, if gauche, is inoffensive ; her speech, if not faultless, is passable ; she is no longer glaringly ignorant nor obtrusively vulgar ; her refinement, if mere veneer, is sufficient to satisfy a world which will treat the story of her up-bringing as an attractive romance. Her principal drawback, perhaps, lies in a certain awkwardness of speech and manner. Her actions are not spontaneous, her speech is too considered. She talks carefully, enunciating with precision. Yet, although a trace of cockney accent or an occasional lapse of grammar may occur, this is only obvious when a moment of haste or aberration throws her off her habitual guard.

“ And yet, in the face of a result which might be said to have exceeded my most sanguine expectations, my disappointment is all the more keen that it is unreasonable. My opinion need not influence yours, so I give it.

“ That Amelia of old days, rough, common, uneducated, was yet a creature of individuality, of possibilities, of capacity for enjoyment, of quick emotions. I had pictured finding the same nature shorn of its vulgarity, but with its identity unassailed. I had thought of all that such a companionship would mean ; the unsophisticated outlook upon life, the boundless capacity for enjoyment, the appreciation of a thousand little commonplaces of an unaccustomed social existence. And I had pictured, perhaps, the delight of making such a nature happy ; I had hugged myself with that ridiculous, praiseworthy reflection of the amiably rich, how I was in a position to give all that the nature which I had thus developed, was so peculiarly fitted to enjoy !—*Cui bono ?* In the Amelia of to-day I find none of these things. I am simply bored.

“ For the girl is colourless. Education, instead of developing her identity, has effaced it. I can trace no connection between the result of my experiment and the raw material which first took my fancy. Socially, the Amelia whom I have manufactured is a success ; she will pass ; she is quite admirably like other ordinary,

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brainless, under-educated girls. And that is where I read failure. She is no longer common, she is commonplace."

She looked across to where, through a door which stood ajar she could see into the room opposite. Amelia's dress was the colour of a pale cloud. The gaudy hues which had once gladdened her heart were now eliminated from her wardrobe. Ribbon knots of palest blue alone relieved the straight folds, the trim simplicity of her present gown. And, with the gipsy brilliance of the past days, had, perhaps, vanished something of the daring beauty of which they had seemed the fitting expression. Now, she represented a type more delicate, harmonious, subdued. Her face was thinner, her features finer, her large hat shadowed a brow from which the disfiguring fringe was gone, the transparency of her skin was no longer marred by a suspicion of rouge or of uncleanliness. If she did not court criticism, she disarmed it. The Amelia of to-day presented an appearance arresting, satisfying to the eye.

Later, as they drove from the house, Mrs Coleford looked at her again. Amelia leant back in the carriage while the soft air heightened the delicacy of her colouring. Her face was expressionless, save for the faint complacency of eyes and mouth, but a little self-conscious air of gratification crept through her reserve. It betrayed itself in the exaggerated languor of her attitude, in the affectation of the glances which she cast around, whenever she thought herself unobserved. Whatever of vulgarity there was unextinguished in her nature found satisfaction in the novelty of her present position, and its *naïveté* was refreshing in contrast with the apathy at which she aimed.

"Milly," said Mrs Coleford, "I want to hear more of your experiences abroad. You have told me so little of your school-life, and your letters told me less. Which did you like best, Brighton or Brussels?"

"Brighton. I hated Brussels!" Amelia explained without hesitation.

"Of course—I quite understand that it must have

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been dreary there, living alone with a governess and attending classes amongst strangers. You had no companions. At the Brighton school there were, at least, other girls."

"I didn't like the gurls—" Amelia paused.

"Oh?" The interrogation in Muriel's voice elicited no response. "What made you like being there then?"

"Well, as for the pupils, as I say they were just beastly disagreeable," explained Amelia. "But there were the shops, and the parade, and the niggers, and lots of life going on, you see. And it was such a mercy to hear people talking English again. I couldn't stand the foreigners."

"Ah."

"And then"—she hesitated, "it was an odd chance there was that Miss Grey at that school. She was a sort of cousin to the gentleman I was going to marry."

"I remember. I saw her once when I came down. A pleasant little person, I should think; nice but plain."

"Ugly," corroborated Amelia, "but very ladylike."

She opened her lace parasol and placed it daintily behind her head.

"Miss Grey was friendly to me, and took me about with her, and gave me a good time of it when she'd the chance. But the gurls—they were just a silly lot, full of stupid chaff, you know, with no sense in it. I hate that sort of thing."

"School-girls are very ill-natured sometimes to—  
to strangers," agreed Mrs Coleford with comprehension. "But I wish you would tell me, how did you like being at the other places abroad which you visited? You have told me absolutely nothing of your experience except the school-life at Brussels."

"It was all very nice," said Amelia politely.

"But tell me something about it. I want to hear what you thought of it all, what you enjoyed most. Which of all the places were you most sorry to leave?"

Amelia reflected. "Well, as I say," she remarked after consideration, "the worst of foreign parts is one

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does feel so out of it, the not being able to talk, I mean. The foreigners jabber so—oh, just don't they jabber! as if they liked to spite one by showing they'd got it all to themselves. It's aggravating that, and the not being able to make oneself understood if one wants to ever so. You feel for all the world as if everybody was stone deaf, and as if you could only shout loud enough they would understand what you were saying."

A recollection of her own impressions, as a girl, in Switzerland and Italy, may have passed through Muriel's mind. "You liked Brighton best of all, then?" she said.

"Not so much as London; I like this." Amelia spoke with unwonted animation. She cast a comprehensive glance around her in which enthusiasm leapt through her careful indifference.

"Next week," observed Mrs Coleford after a pause, "I hope to take you to a ball. Probably Geoffry will be here then and can look after you a bit."

The carriage stopped at the different houses upon her list; she handed cards to the footman and told him the next address. The streets were full of the droning whirr of traffic; the warm air was softly soporific. After a while she spoke again.

"Is there anywhere you would like to drive to before we go home? Have you any shopping or anything you want to do?"

Amelia considered.

"There's a flower shop at the corner of the Edgware Road and Upper George Street I'd like to go to, if it's all the same to you. I'd like to git some violets."

"Very well. But we shall probably pass some florist's nearer. Unless"—she saw the dissent on Amelia's face—"you prefer the one in Upper George Street?"

"They've very good violets," Amelia insisted.

The order was given and the carriage turned. The supposition which occurred to Mrs Coleford that Amelia might have a former lover in the shop which she wished to visit, jarred and was dismissed; yet, as they approached their destination, she watched the girl narrowly.

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Amelia eyed her distorted reflection in the shining polish of the carriage and tilted her hat to the approved angle. She sat more stiffly upright and her little affectations of attitude and glance grew. Arrived, she suggested entering the shop to choose the flowers personally, and Muriel, watching still through the wide flower-framed doorway, noted the exaggerated condescension of her manner, her disparaging inspection of the flowers submitted for her approval, her complacency of smile and movement. After all, it was readily conceivable that, in thus visiting her former haunts under changed conditions, Amelia found a subtle satisfaction ; and, for the first time in Mrs Coleford's thoughts, a dawning amusement replaced criticism.

"They're very good violets," explained Amelia again as she proffered them upon entering the carriage, and Muriel pinned the little fragrant bunch into her dress.

That day it was early when they returned home, and Amelia made her way to the leads in the rear of the drawing-room. An awning overhead, rugs underfoot, and comfortable wicker chairs fashioned this into a pleasant retreat.

The Coleford's house was situated so that its outlook afforded infinite solace to a mind which required diversion. One set of windows commanded a panorama of Knightsbridge, a knot of diverging streets, of thunderous traffic. The other windows overlooked a broad streak of park, of mimic country, and studied rurality, suggestive of a repose which it failed to sustain.

The roar of the streets appealed to Amelia, the cheerful noise, the sense of turbulent, teeming life. By day it was a scene of unrest, uniform only in its changeability ; at night it was transformed, when the lamps were twinkling in their globes of glass. Then its sordid ugliness of outline was veiled in a glamour of mystery. The flashing lights, the gay wares of the shops, the dingy, undefined crowd held a subtle allurement.

But the balcony which overlooked Knightsbridge was small and exposed to public view, while the leads which

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extended in the rear of the house were spacious and comparatively secluded.

Hour after hour she had sat out there in the sunshine. The mellowed dim of the traffic had drummed in her ears and the great blind had flapped overhead. She had seen the Park in all its phases : early morning, when pale sunshine lay upon the trees, and the buildings beyond, dome and steeple, glittering tiles and tapering chimneys were dim shadows against a pallid sky ; mid-day, when the rhododendrons burnt like jewels in the shrubs, when paths of saffron were intersecting sunny lawns, and the silver water contrasted with the brown earth of the Ride ; evening, when the wide roadway was a throng of glancing harness and restless life, while upon the distant hill the houses were a block of whiteness in a haze of gold.

There had been days when the mere roll of the carriages could provoke ; when she had sat a mute, solitary figure who watched the world go on its joyous round without her.

It had seemed that her past energies had been bent to one endeavour, only to find that, in the moment of fancied achievement, she was met by uncertainty, by prolonged waiting.

So far Muriel's intentions with regard to her remained unfathomed. Neither by hint nor token had she conveyed the decision for which Amelia craved.

And the qualification of that former promise, which, at the time Amelia had dismissed with incredulity—that warning, how upon the use of her time of opportunity the trend of her after-life would depend—now revived with unpleasant insinuation to whisper of failure, of renewed probation.

Little white invitation-cards, each incredible in its magic properties of passport to the world which she desired, were tucked into the moulding of the mirror in the drawing-room. Daily the sum-total was increased by additions of—so it seemed—more perfect whiteness, more absorbing significance, more enticing suggestion ; and daily Amelia had studied each with an interest

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which heightened with delay. Each night as she trod upstairs to her trim apartment on that upper landing, she had known the nature and locality of the entertainment to which she might then have been wending, and fancy, with vivid illusion, had portrayed the scene in which, had Muriel been so minded, she might have been taking part.

But to-day this was changed. Expectancy prevailed. Her initiation into that social vortex of which she had dreamed was an appointed fact ; it held possibilities infinite, arresting. The near advent of Sir Geoffry offered food for speculation.

The Amelia of to-day leant upon the balustrade and looked life in the face. Its aspect was attractive, but singularly perplexing.

She had arrived in Albert Gate possessed with a concise estimate of her own personality ; she had weighed with exactitude her pretensions to consideration, her qualifications for the world upon which she was entering. And she had been well content. Further, she had been imbued with a distinct and absorbing plan of action with regard to that new existence. Present to her consciousness was the fact that she was returning qualified to be an object of envy where she had been an object of ridicule ; to eclipse where she had been despised ; to repay contempt with a justifiable and most comprehensive contempt.

And the upshot had been disconcerting in its entire variance with all her preconceived conclusions.

Throughout the long mornings when she had sat in a solitude which induced superfluous reflection, throughout the afternoons when she had driven with such entire gratification through an entrancing world, and throughout the evenings in the cool dimness or shaded brilliance of the quiet rooms,—when a sense of her inadequacy oppressed her or when speech became a matter of effort and humiliation—one abiding impression had filled her consciousness.

The fascination of the elder woman had impressed her like a revelation. The sweetness of Muriel's voice, the stateliness of Muriel's tread, her gracious and all-enviable

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composure of speech and manner, her dignity, frightening, compelling in its charm.

To the eye of the casual observer, Mrs Coleford, at this period of her career, was in transition between age and youth, possibly not altogether pleasing. Her noticeable height, the perfect undulations of her figure, her ineradicable air of breeding and of a certain intellectual superiority were unalterably apparent. But she had lived hard, alternating between the strain of society and a somewhat wearing attendance in a sick-room, and the traces of it were visible upon her face. With some women, age comes in pleasant guise, substituting, by imperceptible stages, for the beauty of youth the beauty of maturer years ; but with Muriel, as has before been stated, there was a hint of pathos in her defection from her former state. Her beauty had not transformed ; it had faded, waned. It was present still in a constant trickery of restored completeness which more accurate inspection refuted ; and such haunting evidence of its former perfection served to emphasise its present lack. But to Amelia, ripe for illusions and of impressionable temperament, its magnetism was absolute. Beneath its spell all the purpose of her former resentment dispersed. The strong irritation with which Muriel, in the past, had inspired her, gave place to a present hero-worship as extravagant in its essence, unguessed, unrequited, to which service was a joy, whose witchery rendered her mute. For love, which is not the protective instinct, craves awe to whet its worship. In Muriel's indifference lay her spell. Romance enshrouded her inapproachability. To Amelia there was magic in her touch, her glance ; magic in her perfection of grace and motion. Beside the mysterious quality of her charm attempted imitation was pitifully ineffectual.

All this in one week, and now Amelia, looking life in the face from the leads in Albert Gate, cast a more material glance downwards, and saw where in the narrow space of garden below stood life's epitome—Muriel.

Along the yellow gravel path Mrs Coleford had stepped out into the sunlight. One slender hand, from which the lace fell softly, shielded her glance from the glare. The

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brightness fell aslant upon her tall figure and pale dress, upon her regally-poised head. Amelia's violets were upon her breast.

And from herself to that conscious figure beneath, Amelia's thought flashed and clung. Abruptly, with jealous resentment, she saw in the advent of Sir Geoffry an intrusion which she feared. She was aware that she had ardently desired his coming ; that she had chafed at delay ; that, throughout the long probation of the past, the thought of this meeting now, at last, imminent had been the incentive which had urged endeavour. It had dogged her reluctance with vindictive persistence. His personality had detached itself from her former life, and had stood out in her recollection endowed with all the glamour of a sphere still apart from her own. That determination to excel in his eyes, to eclipse where she had been despised, to return qualified to retaliate for the past, had haunted her with all the flavour of romance.

And now beneath the spell of the fresh attraction which possessed her, she resented the intrusion of the old. She was vaguely aware that this present magnetism which enthralled her was an essence delicate, intangible, which an alien influence might dissipate. And, in the advent of the man who had haunted her recollection, she recognised a disturbing element which might thwart her newly-found worship, and distract the blameless tenor of its unexplained delight. In strange affright she hugged the realisation of that new emotion, endowing it with strength, with mastery, with all-satisfying sweetness, till, in the knowledge of its grand absorption, she hurled a strong defiance at the old.

But Muriel turned her back into the house and concluded her letter :

" Since writing, Geoffry, I have had a conversation that gave me an insight into her character which all the previous week had failed to accomplish. Well, I had looked for a nature of possibilities, which would unfold like a flower beneath the magic touch of education ; a soul which, freed from vulgarity, might attain to unexpected heights ! And I find instead a nature in which

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vulgarity is engrained—a harmless, petty nature, with boarding-school views of life and art, and a well-drilled, unexpansive soul, to whom all that earth holds of beautiful and of ideal would be powerless to weigh beside the satisfaction of driving in a fashionable carriage in a fashionable dress.

“The companionship of such a nature proves fatiguing ! Perhaps a more aggressive vulgarity would have been supportable. But I fancy that the vulgarity of common-placeness offers no compensation for its existence.”

## CHAPTER II

### ROMANCE AND THE MAN

SIR GEOFFRY, seated opposite to the drawing-room door, watched Amelia approach. The after-glow of sunset was bathing the staircase in a fiery glory as she crept downstairs. Her white skirts trailed over the rosy steps. The ruddy stain dyed them as though they dipped into a stream of blood.

He rose as she entered, and introduced himself. "I only arrived from Scotland last night, and you were out this afternoon when I called," he explained.

"Yes," she answered, eyeing him with curiosity. Like a flash his personality was reproduced before her; her hazy remembrance of him grew distinct. Each item of his appearance leapt back to her memory, refashioned.

"Muriel is not down yet," he observed, offering her his chair. "She always reads to Jack till the last moment, and then she is never ready."

Amelia took the proffered chair with considered carelessness. She leant back and arranged the silk cushion behind her shoulders. She still eyed him narrowly as she swung her fan on its slender cord.

"There's nobody who's anything much coming tonight?" she asked, hesitatingly, after a moment's pause, more as though she realised the necessity to make conversation than from any desire for information.

"N—no," he replied, a little surprised by the nature of the inquiry. He laid his book down on the table. "Let's see,—there's a Mrs Breton, a rich little widow; a Colonel, and Mrs Banks, and a Mr Bridgman, I think, I am not quite sure. Nobody at all alarming. The old

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Colonel is rather amusing. He and Muriel always quarrel."

"Ah!" Amelia spoke with a faint satisfaction. "I thought there wasn't anybody much expected, but I wasn't sure, because when I asked Mrs Coleford if I could put on a tea-gown for dinner and dress properly afterwards when we go on to this party, she said better not. And, of course, tea-gowns aren't right for a big occasion." She emitted a scarcely perceptible sigh as she planted one hand against her bodice and passed it over the shining, creaseless silk.

"Well, no, I suppose not," said Sir Geoffry.

"The worst of an evening body," she explained, with a note of cynicism, "is, if you put it on before dinner you can't eat any dinner, and if you put it on after, you can't git into it!"

"I see!"

"It seems a lot of fuss to eat a bit of food."

Standing in the shadow Sir Geoffry was studying her with quickening interest and awakening amusement. In the rigid simplicity of her dress he recognised Muriel's taste, but her appearance was altogether more refined, the transformation from his remembrance more complete than he had anticipated. Her features, too, seemed finer, her colouring more delicate than he recollects. It did not occur to him that the former hard brilliancy of her complexion had been due to rouge.

"It's a long time since I saw you last," he remarked, seating himself leisurely. "I scarcely thought you would remember me."

Amelia looked at him keenly.

"You flatter yourself!" she observed more briskly. "I don't seem to remember saying I'd a recollection of you."

He hastened to modify his remark. "I did not wish to imply anything so conceited; you seemed to recognise me directly, so I fancied I could not have faded wholly from your memory."

And to Amelia, with her mind full of the crucial importance of that last meeting, there was an incredible

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effrontery in the casual nature of his reference to it. " You thought perhaps I'd had nothing to think about meantime," she said drily. " That's the way with the men ! "

" You don't give us credit for much humility, apparently."

" There's methods of putting it into you ! " she said with a laugh.

She protruded her foot in its white satin shoe, and regarded it attentively, then raised her glance more decidedly to his face. Still refashioning her remembrance of him, she recalled the neat head, the straight figure, the faultless clothes, the firm hand. She liked the suggestion of strength which he conveyed, the air of conscious superiority. Her present criticism compared with her former judgment and approved it.

" Do you live in London most of the year ? " she asked after a pause.

He shook his head. " I am here very little. I come from time to time to see poor Jack Coleford, or to go through things with Muriel. But now that his mental state is more hopeless, I come less often, it is so useless referring business matters to him."

" His wife don't do any of the work for him ? " suggested Amelia.

" She has had so little time between looking after Agatha and nursing her husband ; besides, there has to be someone resident in Scotland for part of the year to look after the estate there.—I am glad you have come," he added, with unexpected seriousness, " for I think you may be a comfort to Muriel and help her in lots of ways. Women understand each other, and there are times when she is in great need of another woman's help and sympathy."

Amelia cast a glance at him which he failed to fathom.

" She's got plenty," she suggested, casually, " money and looks and a good time all round. I don't see that she is to be pitied if her husband is on his back."

" A woman may have money and looks, as you put it," said Sir Geoffry, somewhat sententiously, " she may even

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be brilliant and attractive as Muriel, with apparently everything in the world at her feet, and yet be very much to be pitied. Does it never occur to you, that other side of the picture which is pretty apparent, the tragedy of Muriel's youth and health sacrificed in a sick-room to a man who cannot even know her devotion? The knowledge that her beautiful home will never go to a child of her own? I fancy that she needs sympathy in her life more than any of us."

Amelia smiled a little superciliously as she watched her swaying fan. "No doubt you are right," she said; "but I can't ever be the use to her you think. She don't like me enough."

The remark and the tentative manner of its utterance, stirred Sir Geoffry's curiosity, but, before he could pursue inquiry, the door opened, and Mrs Breton was announced. She came into the room with a rustle of silk and a rattle of jet, a plump blonde of forty, with a pink childish face and vivacious manner. Sir Geoffry introduced Amelia and apologised for Mrs Coleford's absence.

Mrs Breton cut short his remarks.

"Dear Mrs Coleford!" she observed, and meanwhile, her glance, in its errant inspection of her surroundings, conveyed a lack of whole-heartedness in her speech—"you need never apologise for her being late, for it is always due to the same cause. Mrs Banks was saying the other day that, wherever Mrs Coleford is, or whatever she is doing, she always insists on being home at a particular hour to look after her poor husband, and whatever the engagement, she never will leave him as long as he requires her. I do think"—her glance with quick civility comprised Amelia—"that her devotion is something wonderful!"

"I suppose so," said Amelia indifferently. As Mrs Breton took possession of a chair, she edged away to the window, and, a moment later, stepped out on to the balcony. The panes in the houses opposite glowed with a sullen red. The fantastic gleam touched her face, her neck, her arms, then passed, leaving her wraith-like in the shadow. In the darkening street below a barrel-organ

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was playing a popular air with trills and variations ; she drummed the tune gently with her fan upon the window-sash.

In the room behind her, Mrs Breton was pursuing a glib conversation with Sir Geoffry. He listened with divided attention, his thoughts turning to the girl whose figure he could see outlined against the waning light. It did not appear to him that Muriel's description of her tallied with his present brief impression. Amelia's speech was less precise and considered than he had been given to expect ; her manner hinted at individuality. Mrs Breton followed the direction of his glance.

"That's Mrs Coleford's half-sister, I gather ?" she observed lowering her voice. "There's some romantic story about her birth, isn't there? Didn't the old Admiral marry a gipsy or something ?"

"No, only his cook," explained Sir Geoffry with a faint reluctance.

Mrs Breton shrugged her plump shoulders. "Cleaner," was her comment, "but less poetical."

Muriel came down, a stately figure in floating gauze and shimmering steel ; there were two fresh arrivals and the hum of conversation increased in volume. Amelia stepped back into the room and sat a silent spectator. The depressed platitudes, the strained trivialities to which hunger gives rise, waxed and waned with mellow monotony. There came a hush and a stir, a faint excitement relaxed the tension, and she found that they were moving down to dinner.

She accepted, without comment, the arm which Sir Geoffry offered, and was silent as they passed down the wide staircase. In the hall the overhanging lamp shed a wavering gleam through the lingering daylight, but in the dining-room the curtains were drawn and the outer world excluded. Sir Geoffry saw how her gaze turned to the oval table with evident appreciation of its many lights, of the snowy cloth upon which lay the stain of the crimson shades, of the glittering silver, the profusion of flowers. As she seated herself she looked at him with a momentary expression of anxiety.

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"Where's the food?" she questioned, in an abrupt undertone.

"It's coming," he replied cautiously. "They hand it round."

"Oh," she said obviously reassured; "I thought for a moment, you know, they'd forgotten to bring it."

She accepted her soup placidly at the hands of the footman and proceeded to sip it, still surveying her surroundings with an air of criticism. It was some moments before she spoke again.

"Why's the bill-of-fare written in French?" she demanded suddenly.

"I don't know," he answered, "unless it is that we mayn't know what we are eating."

"The dinner's a precious long one," she remarked, studying it with the eye of a connoisseur.

"That's the custom; one course to appease hunger and seven others for ostentation."

Amelia did not smile. He wondered if she were revolving the meaning of the word 'ostentation.'

Soon she leant towards him. "I'd like to hear about the people," she said in a voice which invited confidence. "Tell me about the little widow."

"I'm afraid I should be overheard," he suggested. "People are so quick to hear their own names. And if I whisper, it looks as if we were saying things we did not want the others to hear."

"So we are," she said with a visible annoyance.

"Yes, but they would think it bad manners," he hinted in the explanatory tone which he might have adopted to a child. The colour rushed to her face. "I will tell you everything you want to know afterwards," he added quickly.

"That wasn't how you meant me to take it," she said. "When you've spoken the truth once in a way, you may as well leave it."

She lapsed into silence, averting her head with a resolution which was obvious. Sir Geoffry considered her profile with attention. Its outline was singularly

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perfect. The regularity of her features, which he had remarked in the past, was emphasised with the clear pallor of a cameo against the background of the shadowy room ; and that hint of something elusive in her nature, which he recalled having first detected and then denied, was again apparent, to stir curiosity and to tempt analysis. For in her attitude towards himself he read an element of contradiction. Her manner was seductive yet defiant ; her laboured coquetry held something antagonistic, a note of challenge for which he could not account.

Meanwhile Amelia, perhaps conscious of his scrutiny, held her thoughts obstinately to the conversation going on around her. Colonel Banks, the iron-grey man opposite, was declaiming on the subject of a play which he had seen the evening before. She liked his eyes, slits of humour beneath shaggy brows. She noticed with interest how his moustache drooped at the corners and what difficulty he had in separating it from his food.

"It's a thoroughly morbid play," he was saying ; "if I have all the trouble of turning out in the evening and having a hurried uncomfortable dinner I want to be amused, not to have my brain addled by all sorts of impossible problems which never bothered me before. But of course I am old-fashioned and ought to have belonged to the days when a man's creed was to fear God and honour the King, and he didn't bother his head whether God had any existence or the King any authority except what he bestowed upon them."

Mrs Breton smiled as she hitched her shoulder-straps over her sloping shoulders. "Morbid," she said, "is such a very favourite word with the British public. Whatever is not ridiculously optimistic is—morbid. The optimism of the average Englishman gets on my nerves !"

"It always seems to me that pessimism is only a sign of youth, and optimism of old age," murmured Mr Bridgeman, the thin man on Amelia's left, with a placid appreciation of his own opinion.

Mrs Coleford leaning back in her chair swayed her

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large ostrich fan with mechanical regularity. Her face was in shadow, but the rosy lights caught the steel upon her bodice and changed them to twinkling threads of fire. "The world," she observed, "is very like a child—it insists on being lulled to sleep with fairy-tales."

"Or like a fool," pursued Mr Bridgman, "it hates to be reminded of its failures."

"After all," she smiled, "we must not be too hard on it, poor old world. Appearances are all it has to go by. It likes to keep an ideal even if that must be a god with feet of clay."

"The fact is," announced Mrs Breton with the little air of decisiveness which characterised her speech, "the world adores realism which is wholly impersonal, as much as it resents realism which, even remotely, conveys the suggestion of reproach. That is why society approves the realistic slum-story which makes the comfortable fire-side all the more enjoyable by contrast; why it dotes on the pretty little moral tale which appeals to its vanity by showing it itself as it might be, and why it abominates the crude, indecent, morbid realism which shows it itself as it is and wounds its *amour propre*."

"In short," said Mrs Coleford, fanning herself, "we might sum up our conclusions: Amuse the world and it laughs with you; show it to your heart and it laughs at you; show it itself, and it won't stand you at any price. And one can't blame it!"

"I should really reproduce that as my own," said Mrs Breton, "if it wasn't one of my principles that it takes a wit to make an epigram and a fool to repeat one.—But, *à propos* of our conclusions, how pathetically people, men in particular, do resent being made to think. Intellect is voted neurotic. The Press has really grown quite militant about it! And yet, it seems simple; there are only two problems, the Religious and the Social; the one is bad form, and the other"—she flashed a glance at Mrs Banks, "is—any form."

The silken gown of Mrs Banks stirring abruptly, voiced a protest like the murmur of autumn leaves.

"Well, I don't care," pursued the Colonel, with,

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perhaps, dual interpretation ; "my motto is—Let sleeping dogs lie. A fellow only wants to be left in peace. He knows that there's garlic in the world and he knows that garlic smells nasty, therefore he very naturally resents when some officious fool thrusts it under his nose. But the modern system is to rake up everything disagreeable, to force it upon you, and to consider you a weak-minded idiot if you don't wallow in it."

Mrs Coleford laid down her fan as she helped herself from the silver dish beside her. "But, supposing, that the object of raking up the garlic is to rid the world of some of it—"

"There never was a greater fallacy than that," he pronounced decidedly. "They never have rid the world of garlic, and they never will. There's bound to be a surplus, and there always will be."

"And yet," she said with smiling reproof, "Mrs Breton called you an optimist !"

Amelia, in what appeared a fit of abstraction, leant towards Sir Geoffry. "What's ~~ree~~—realism ?" she asked.

"Well, truth," he answered, feeling unable to cope more adequately with the inquiry.

She knitted her forehead, looking absently across at the Colonel. He caught her glance.

"And what do you think, young lady ?" he said. "But I suppose you are of the modern school who run before they walk, and go in for agnosticism, pessimism, bicycling, smoking, bloomers and all the rest of it ?"

"My de—ar Peter !" remonstrated Mrs Banks in a mild, faded voice.

"My sister has just returned from school," said Muriel hurriedly, "and has not had time to form any opinions yet."

"Well, there will be only one opinion possible to form about her," said the Colonel bowing towards her with blunt gallantry.

Amelia perceived that a compliment was intended. She flushed becomingly ; she opened her lips and shut them again. Then she looked at the Colonel ; "Thank you," she said simply.

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Mrs Coleford's expression betrayed relief.

"A woman," pursued the Colonel with an appreciative eye still on Amelia, "who in these days fulfils woman's first duty of looking charming is a pleasure to meet. The days are past when woman was contented to accept beauty as her profession."

"And a mere profession," murmured Mrs Breton.

"Poor woman!" protested Mrs Coleford with a sigh of exhaustion; "when I hear eternally that her first duty is to be charming, I find myself calculating the amount of brains, education, time, worry, and real hard work which are involved in the effort. And, after all, *why* is it my first duty?"

"I should have said it was your privilege," said the Colonel.

She leant forward, resting her white arms on the table. "The question," she said, "has happily become obsolete, but in the days when bicycling first came in, you were shocked—disgusted—rabid against a woman bicycling.—Why?"

"The obvious reason, a woman does not look her best upon a bicycle."

"A man looks appalling; yet, no doubt, you bicycle yourself?"

"Certainly. It doesn't matter how I look."

"But why doesn't it? The brazen egoism of it astounds me. I am perforce to please you, while you tell me frankly you don't care to please me. We women are to renounce a harmless, healthy exercise, because it offends the masculine eye, while you tell us that you are indifferent to the fact that we, equally, desire something pleasant to look at."

"Exactly," agreed Mrs Breton. "It's the same with any question of dress; a man's horror at a woman aping masculine attire because it is frightful, is only equalled by the obstinacy with which he clings to it himself because it is comfortable. But that a woman might prefer his beauty to his comfort, appears to him as preposterous as that she might prefer her own comfort to her beauty. Tell me candidly, would you renounce your bicycling,

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your hideous modern dress, the smoking which contaminates your clothing, any of your thousand-and-one unprepossessing little foibles, because we thought it your first duty to be charming?"

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders, and Mr Bridgman laughed.

"You've got the worst of it," he said.

"I always do," said the Colonel, good-humouredly. "I always get educated when I come here!"

"After all," urged Mr Bridgman, "Mrs Coleford is on the side of nature, you know. Throughout creation it is always the male who has to render himself attractive to the female. It's only we who transpose the universal order of things."

"There, at least, I claim that we show our superior intelligence," said the Colonel; "we can't compete and we know it! What do you say, Hope?"

"Oh, my ideas are not worth stating," said Sir Geoffry, for the first time joining in a conversation to which, latterly, he had been listening with a faint amusement. "Personally, I hate all cut and dried notions about the duties or capabilites of one sex or the other. Let every man and woman find out what rôle suits him or her best, and stick to it. The devil will always take the hindermost."

"Precisely," murmured Mrs Breton; "for that reason I always think that men make unmitigated fools of themselves when they decry woman's capacity for certain professions, because all such opposition is a frank admission that the competition is one they have cause to dread."

"Oh, you," said the Colonel with lively resentment, "would advocate a mixed Parliament!"

"On the contrary," she explained, "no one wants a Cock-and-Hen House. Do away with the House of Lords and make it a House of Ladies. It is so narrow-minded to have two Houses of one sex and not one of the other."

"Well, at least," said Colonel Banks, "if I concede that men have no brains and are mere animated marion-

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ettes, I suppose you will admit our superiority in brute force? We excel as farm labourers."

"Not even that," she retorted. "In some countries where women work in the fields, they can lift loads which the men cannot raise."

"Oh, of course," said the Colonel, grimly, "in uncivilised countries, woman is still a beast of burden."

"And in civilised," she hinted, "she is still burdened with a beast!"

Muriel may have noted the expression upon Mrs Banks' face, for she spoke with quick irrelevance: "After all, it's no use disputing about intelligence, because it is the one quality which is superlative rather than comparative. We all know that the person whom we each define as clever, is the person whose opinion coincides with our own."

The conversation drifted and waned, split into duologues, and again waxed general. Amelia, listening, remarked how Mrs Coleford toyed with it lightly, directing its course, sustaining when it flagged, enlivening when it bored, neglecting when it progressed. The fascination of her personality was more than usually apparent; the charm of her low, clear voice; her quiet self-assurance which provoked while it disheartened emulation; the sombre dress which threw her beauty into subtle relief. And Amelia, noting with a care which designed reproduction, Muriel's little tricks of speech and gesture, her unconsidered grace of movement, her somewhat languid ease of pose, yet remained supremely conscious of that counter-influence which made itself felt, of the presence of the man beside her, of his recurrent scrutiny, of the marvellous recognition that that meeting on which destiny hinged had at last taken place.—He turned to her at length:

"You are very silent!" he remarked.

"They do talk so!" she said, with perhaps a faint discontent.

"I wish you would tell me," he suggested, lowering his voice with considered caution, "what was the reason of your remark to me upstairs, before dinner, about

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Muriel. Why should you conclude that she dislikes you?"

She looked at him sharply. "There's likes and dislikes," she said. "There's some, like myself, sensible to see where they're disliked, and there's others"—her speech seemed enigmatic—"are precious slow."

"But how," he insisted, alive to the importance of erasing an impression which might alienate her and Muriel, "in view of all that Muriel has done for you, can you imagine that she does not like you?"

Her annoyance at his persistence was obvious. She cast a significant glance round the table. "People are so quick to catch their names," she quoted drily, "and, if I whisper, it looks as if I were saying things we did not want the others to hear!"

In view of which rebuff Sir Geoffry was silent, revolving the fact that Amelia's personality promised to interest him. For it presented certain complexities to his imagination. He was conscious of the mingling of vulgarity, of coquetry, and of simplicity which it held. Her physical beauty he recognised as potent to obliterate much which would otherwise have been offensive in speech and manner, while the very *naïveté* of ignorance endowed her with an originality which she might otherwise not possess.

At the signal to rise, he held her chair aside for her to pass. She brushed by him, then paused. "Aren't you coming up?" she questioned.

"Yes, soon," he explained. "You see, we remain behind to say all the delightful things about you that we dare not say to your face."

## CHAPTER III

### IDEALS AND THE MAN

IN the drawing-room upstairs the wide windows were open to the breeze ; the leaves of a great palm swayed gently. Subdued lights cast a softened glow over familiar surroundings. Amelia seated herself in a rose-coloured shadow and sipped her coffee in unbroken silence. Before long, however, she quitted the chair which she had taken on first entering, and placed herself boldly in the full glare of the lamp. She seemed aware that her beauty could stand the test of a light which was not filtered through tinted silk. Mrs Breton's glance dwelt upon her.

"Your sister is very handsome," she said to Muriel in an undertone ; "I expect she will make quite a sensation. I thought Sir Geoffry seemed to admire her at dinner. He always admires dark women."

Muriel smiled, leaning back against an effective foil of amber cushions. "He is very good-natured," she said.

Mrs Breton nodded. "But scarcely so good-natured as you are to undertake her like this. It will feel so terribly like having a grown-up daughter."

And Muriel, raising her glance, encountered the persistence of Amelia's gaze. The coincidence bespoke connection, in its suggestion that Amelia had overheard. "You forget," she said quickly, "I have been chaperoning Agatha for years, ever since I ceased to be chaperoned myself. And it is really good for me to be forced to go out, otherwise I should never go ! "

Mrs Breton set down her cup slowly. A lingering

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stain of coffee dyed her lips ; she pursed them together in a crimson curve, and removed it. "Besides, a sheep-dog is always an acquisition, under your circumstances as well as mine," she said. "I mean, our lives are equally lonely. I was only thinking that Agatha, though charming, had not the disadvantage of being good-looking—and dark."

The carriage was announced and they returned downstairs. In the hall Sir Geoffry came forward with Muriel's cloak ; she thrust her arms into the wide sleeves, and, drawing the pale silk loosely across her breast, moved out on to the doorstep, which the moon-light was bathing in mystic whiteness.

"How did you get on at dinner to-night?" she asked him in an undertone.

"Oh, very well," he smiled. "She does not talk much."

"How does she strike you, so far?"

"It is early days to judge, but much what I expected."

"That is curious." She fastened the silver hooks of her cloak quickly. "But if she does not bore you, I shall be very grateful if you will look after her to-night. I am anxious that she should enjoy herself, but I cannot introduce her to people till I know a little more about her." The silk fell with a faint rustle to her feet ; she tossed a lace scarf of filmy lightness about her hair, and passed down the steps to the brougham.

The night was warm, but as they drove along the air circulated softly through the open windows of the carriage. The roads were dry and the steady click of the horses' hoofs rang with a grotesque suggestion of frost. In the darkness of her corner Amelia's eyes closed, her head drooped and swayed. The fantastic flash of the lamp-light spun, at intervals, through the night. It swept the faces of the two women, and passed to shoot with a wavering gleam over the still figure of the man opposite. Later, Mrs Breton's landau overtook and out-stripped their steady pace. Colonel Banks' head at the window represented in facetious pantomime

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its superior speed ; and as Muriel leant forward, the moonlight showed a smile upon her lips.

"The poor old Colonel !" she said, speaking softly not to disturb Amelia. "How we teased him at dinner ! But how strange it is that the very men who deny the existence of brains in women, are always the men who are so palpably lacking in that commodity themselves ! "

"Well, naturally," said Sir Geoffry, "the less one has of a commodity the more jealously one must guard it against encroachment. That is why, as Mrs Breton pointed out, in these days one can really profess to gauge a man's intellect by the breadth of his views with regard to woman ! "

"As accurately," she urged, "as one can test his moral worth by the depth of his reverence for her."

They swung into the Park and there was a sigh of wind among the trees.

"I," she said, a moment later, "get just a little weary of the Colonel Banks type. Oh, the poor old Colonel, individually, is charmingly inoffensive. His old-world outlook is so in keeping with the man ! But the same type modernised lacks excuse ; out of its own mouth it is condemned"—she drew in her breath with a pretty impatience. "It seems as if one can test the very foundations of a man's soul by the limit of his capacity to view life innocently. And men of that type are so suspicious of every innovation : their minds have become constituted to see the snake in every Eden ! A new idea shocks them—there must be more in it than meets the eye. A harmless pastime fills them with alarm for the race—veiled naughtiness alone could make it so popular ! In an innocent remark they spy an intentional *double entente* ; in a book which treats of some grand scientific problem, they see only brazen pruriency.—They find the trail of the serpent over every flower ! "

For a moment the lamplight, revealing her out of the darkness, showed the whiteness of her neck and arms, and the sharp twinkle of diamonds at her throat.

"I have grown too intolerant," she complained, "of the type of conventionality which seems to me just

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prudent prudery. As it is the fools who think the world composed of fools, so the foul see foulness. But all this has been said before ; for, still down the ages the Divine fiat rings, changed to some, perhaps, in diction, but unchanged to all in essence : ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see *Good.*’ ”

“ And, with that hunting our understanding,” said Sir Geoffry, “ is it not a little curious to reflect, as you remarked at dinner, that the whole system which knits our modern society together is a necessary fraud, and that we all subscribe to it—all, except those who are as yet too ignorant to know the fraud which they are called upon to maintain ! ”

Even in the darkness he was aware that she recoiled.

“ Oh, you are too severe on my little platitudes ! ” she said. “ I did not mean to imply that we are all deliberate frauds.”

“ Not deliberate, no,” he said. With the revealing lamp-light he glanced at the corner where Amelia slumbered. “ But we are conscious that those wholesome ideals of ours are upheld by wilful self-deception. ‘ Life is run on the cheerful denial of facts.’ ”

She stirred a little, and he heard her draw the crisp silk of her cloak more closely about her throat.

“ When one is very young,” she breathed, “ how one frets and chafes at any discrepancy between the seeming and the root of things ! Afterwards, one learns so convincingly that it is better to preserve one’s ideals at the cost of one’s honesty.”

“ I am afraid,” he admitted, “ that it is only the novelty of an idea which disturbs one. Afterwards, we see that the determination to prove this the best of all possible worlds is a healthy one, and so pre-eminently praiseworthy ! ”

The carriage rounding a corner grazed the curb. Amelia woke, and speech was silenced. And into that silence which was maintained, Amelia, with the shrewdness of an onlooker, read her own rendering. For it seemed to her that such unnatural lack of conversation revealed a subtle alienation in the two people before her. The

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friendliness which it was reasonable to expect between them would undoubtedly have found expression in genial talk and ready comradeship. Instead, there was an obvious want of spontaneity in their enforced intimacy. Throughout the evening, she recalled, Muriel had never directly addressed Sir Geoffry or shown him other than a strained civility. The discovery absorbed Amelia and she determined to devote her attention to its better elucidation.

And still with alternate flashings of lamplight and moonlit darkness, of grotesque shadows from tall outstanding trees, of earth like snow in the moonbeams, and sky faintly luminous against uprising houses, the carriage passed onwards to its destination.

The tall house in Lancaster Gate which they entered, was crowded to excess. Sir Geoffry, having made his way to the coat-room, was proceeding up-stairs when he caught sight of Colonel Banks and Mr Bridgman in the supper-room ensconced in a window behind the buffet, comfortably apart from the crowd. He turned back.

"Refreshing the inner man!" explained the Colonel as he joined them. "Not that we require it after that very excellent dinner, but the inner man invariably comes up to the scratch!"

Mrs Breton swept in, uncloaked, and demanded some coffee from the other side of the table. "I must keep awake," she explained. "I'm going on to a dance after this. I suppose everyone else is going on—in the season everyone always *is* going on! There's very little difference, isn't there, Mr Bridgman, between us and the lower classes; they're moved on, we go on!"

"And carry on!" said Mr Bridgman, heavily humorous.

Mrs Breton peered into the Colonel's glass across the table. "What stuff are you drinking? And why does Mrs Banks let you drink it?—Champagne-cup, it looks singularly poisonous—quite brown, like beer! C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas Lager!" she nodded and smiled as she swept upstairs.

The Colonel chuckled appreciatively. "Natty little

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woman, Mrs Breton ! " he stated. " And clever, too. Always hits the right nail on the head. But a trifle too daring. She don't always go down with my wife."

" She has the courage of her opinions at times," agreed Mr Bridgman.

" And a bit of a mistake in a pretty woman to have opinions, don't you see ? " he concluded. " Now, your cousin," turning to Sir Geoffry, " is a woman who thinks,—a very superior woman, Mrs Coleford,—but she don't spring her theories on one like a bomb-shell whatever the company one happens to be in. Mrs Breton, if there's anyone at all shockable there, like my wife, goes out of her way to call a spade a spade."

" Instead of an implement for delving," suggested Mr Bridgman.

And, for a moment, the Colonel's face bore the expression, half-apologetic but withal venturesome, of the man who is about to enunciate what his wife would disapprove.

" The truth is," he said with temerity, " woman is kept so long with blinkers on, that, once she gets them off, she can't help shying at what she sees."

Sir Geoffry smiled encouragingly as he poured himself out some of the brown champagne-cup.

" Ah, well," he suggested, " in that little matter of propriety, we men are a bit apt to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel."

The Colonel's eyes twinkled as he shook his head reprovingly. " Appearances must be maintained, however," he asserted.

" Toll must be paid to our god with the feet of clay," said Sir Geoffry, perhaps reminiscent of the conversation in the carriage. " Toll of vice and toll of virtue ! It is a bit strange to think that, after all these centuries of civilisation, we have advanced no further with that eternal paradox—that problem of the development of the lower at the cost of the higher ; of the higher at the cost of the essential ; of Nature which can debase ; of an ideal which can lie—"

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"Oh, come, come!" said the Colonel, protesting, though both sensibly perplexed and agreeably alert.

"Of course, our code of ideals is inimitable," pursued Sir Geoffry, more from perverseness than from conviction, as he watched the Colonel's face. "Take our present ideal of virtue, one can't help thinking, how is it preserved at all in the world?—Not by the men—no, I have no false modesty—not even by a majority of the women; but by a small minority, who preserve it—consciously or unconsciously—for convenience; some by good luck, more by good management, and many by a celibacy for which the statistics of our prisons and lunatic asylums would have us believe that they pay too dearly. And yet the female population, for the protection of whom it is ostensibly designed, and for whom it does not always seem quite a success, represents the greater surviving proportion of our race!"

"New illustration of the Survival of the Fittest!" commented Mr Bridgman.

"Still I don't think you ought to call our code of morality a fraud," said the Colonel, vague, but actively resistant.

"Take the men," insisted Sir Geoffry, still provocative, as he tasted his champagne-cup, and eyed the incoming crowd,—"virtue in their eyes is an exclusive ideal; it refers solely to the women of their own class—to actual or prospective property. Take the women, who hug individual virtue that vice may abound—you will find that the very women who are proudest of their own unblemished purity, who are most rigid in preserving it from the suspicion of a taint, are the first to accept most unhesitatingly the dogma which dooms the rest of their sex to all which they profess to abhor. Men cannot be immaculate, these blameless women agree cheerfully, yet they ignore the sequence of their creed, that, if just so full must the cup of womanhood's humiliation ever be, for every woman rescued or guarded from shipwreck some other women is bound to be sacrificed.—And take Nature"—he helped himself thoughtfully to mayonnaise,—"she has no fine dis-

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crimination of our latter-day morality. She recognises one crime only, the crime of excess, and she punishes excess of what we term 'virtue' as she punishes excess of what we term 'vice'. Some of our women suffer from the former ; some from the latter."

The Colonel jogged his arm abruptly. "There's a pretty woman coming in now," he said critically, "d'you see—in pink in the doorway? Worth looking at, eh?—Ah, what were you saying?" as his mind reverted to the matter under discussion—"I'm really beginning to suspect that you are one of those officious humanitarians who rake up garlic and thrust it willy-nilly under one's nose!"

"The Powers forbid!" said Sir Geoffry fervently, as he set down his empty glass. "I lay claim to no utilitarian motives! On the contrary, I accept most cheerfully the sham of act and sham of theory which seems the best we can make of a tangle of contradictions. All the same, I suppose, it strikes one sometimes, that Tolstoi, crank and dotard as the civilised world is fond of classifying him, represents the one consistent adherent to the religion and morality which all profess!"

His gaze turned to the staircase and he saw how Mrs Banks' upward progress was stayed in valiant resistance of the ascending crowd, while with one glance she observed the transit of Mrs Breton higher upon the flight, and with the next devoted an anxious inspection to the coat-room door. "I fancy," he suggested, "that Mrs Banks must be waiting for you."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Colonel ; "if I hadn't quite forgotten!" He gulped down his champagne-cup and hurried off.

"Man proposes and woman imposes!" commented Mr Bridgman regretfully.

Sir Geoffry followed more leisurely. Ignoring the invitation conveyed in Mrs Breton's smile as he entered the room upstairs, he began moving as opportunity permitted towards the corner where Amelia was standing. She stood a little apart from Muriel, distinctive

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in her plain white dress. He remarked that she looked handsome, but very perceptibly bored. She was fanning herself irritably, and her gaze strayed about the room in an apparently aimless endeavour to find something which would repay inspection. As he approached, her face lit up with a smile, but the noise of the music precluded conversation. At the first pause she edged towards him and spoke.

"Is it all like this?" she asked in a subdued voice.

"All the evening?—Yes," he answered.

"No dancing, or nothing?"

"No, just music."

"Not amusing," she observed decidedly.

"One doesn't go out to be amused," he suggested.

"Then what do you go for?" She looked at him suspiciously.

"I think," he propounded, "that one goes to a place usually to see who else has done the same thing."

"There doesn't seem much sense in that," she reflected. "To-morrow we are going to a ball, and that will be different; but don't you consider that, if there'd been dancing, or games, or some sort of a show to-night, it would be much more worth coming to?"

"I'm afraid we don't play Puss-in-the-corner, or Blind-man's-Buff—at least not in their primitive simplicity," he replied sadly. "But there's always food, a consolation in which I have been indulging already. Let's go downstairs."

She took his arm readily, and he elbowed his way again past the stout hostess who stood energetically shaking hands in the midst of the crowded landing. Arrived in the supper-room, he procured a chair for Amelia in the window which he had so recently vacated, and left her temporarily, in order to secure something appetising from the larger accumulation of refreshments at the other end of the table.

And meanwhile Amelia indulged in rapid reflection. She was keenly aware that the moment for taking the initiative had arrived, the moment when she should

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proceed with her long, projected plan of retaliation ; but—still more in view of Sir Geoffry's unhesitating friendliness—it perplexed her unduly in what manner to open the attack ; and, further, the novelty of her surroundings distracted her, and rendered it difficult to centre her attention upon any concerted line of action. She decided swiftly that there need be no hurry in her attempt ; for the present her friendliness might equal Sir Geoffry's own, and doubtless opportunity would devise the rest. As he returned she moved to make space for him beside her, and accepted graciously at his hands the pink ice with which he had judged fit to provide her. After a few moments, she turned to him :

" You git through a lot of eating," she observed brightly, eyeing the plateful of mayonnaise to which he was doing ample justice, possibly in view of that previous supply which he had deserted.

" I am sorry you think me greedy," he responded.

" It ain't—isn't that. But we'd a good dinner just an hour since, and now we're at it again. And I suppose all the other people had good dinners and they're at it. Half the world's just stodged up with food while the other half's starving."

" The idea has occurred to me before," he admitted.

" It's a pity," pursued Amelia amiably, and the thought seemed to appeal to her with all the force of novelty, " that we can't have the poor persons in that are standing outside in the street and give them a good feed. It seems a shame to be stuffing like this what we don't want, while they're hungering."

" It would be charitable," he agreed, " but, unfortunately, it is a Divine law that to him that hath, shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath—though that latter clause always strikes me as rather difficult of fulfilment."

He watched her slowly manipulating the pink ice, while her brow contracted visibly. In the brilliant light from the candelabra, the creamy whiteness of her dress enhanced the exquisite delicacy of her complexion. He

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found it curious to reflect that her rounded arms and shapely hands had ever been red and coarsened by work. Again, he observed how her gaze wandered down the buffet with the air of perplexity which seemed her normal condition.

"I always think of one day, some time back," she continued, after a reflective pause; "I was—well, I was passing, you see, and had a look at a party, just as we might be now, and outside there was a poor woman starving. She had tried to drown herself, but they wouldn't let her; and there she was, obliged to live on and watch other folks having a good time."

"The old story of Dives and Lazarus"—a second Scriptural reference aided Sir Geoffry, to whom there seemed a lack of point in the present anecdote.

Amelia nodded.

"I've thought about it many a time since," she said. "I can't see, myself, where the good comes in of making anybody live who don't want to. If you come to think, there's too many people in the world for all to have a good time, and it stands to reason if those who don't want to live were allowed to clear out, there'd be more room for those who do."

Sir Geoffry considered. "It sounds simple," he said; "but you must remember that nothing exists except by comparison. Their misery is necessary to our content. We should not be having a good time unless they were having a bad one."

"You're not talking sense," she said, with the note of affront which had characterised her speech at dinner.

"But it is obvious," he insisted, amused at her annoyance. "If there were no misery in the world there would be no happiness; if there were no disease there would be no health; if there were no evil there would be no good."

"And, by the same showing, I suppose, if there was no food there'd be no hunger," said Amelia drily. A sudden awkward movement sent her spoon on to the floor. "You could talk sense enough at dinner—to the others!" she hinted, as he restored it to her.

Momentarily Sir Geoffry was disconcerted. The girl

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in her ignorance was likely to misjudge proportion and exaggerate triviality ; but there was a latent element of truth in her insinuation which, with a certain compunction, he admitted. Her naïve simplicity, her crude affectation had alike appealed to a not very commendable sense of humour. And meanwhile, it was possible she had been shrewd enough to recognise the fact, and sensitive enough to suffer from it.

"You must not take me too seriously," he begged.  
"My intentions are excellent, only they don't always come off as well as I could wish!"

But Amelia did not appear mollified ; perhaps, in the present incident, she recognised the finger of fate whose promptings she had been awaiting.

"You wrap up nonsense in sham civilness," she complained, with exaggerated indignation, "and think I haven't sense to look inside the parcel ; I don't call it being the gentleman." She rose with a novel and slightly dramatic assumption of dignity, and set down her plate. "I'll trouble you to take me upstairs," she said.

## CHAPTER IV

### AMELIA REMINISCENT

THE afternoon of the next day Amelia stood before the glass in her room, lifting up her dress and lowering it. She wished to ascertain at what precise angle it was advisable to hold up a dove-coloured skirt in order to show the five flounces of a blue silk petticoat beneath.

After a while, she took her gloves and parasol, and went softly downstairs. As she passed the door of Jack Coleford's room, she could hear Mrs Coleford reading steadily. Jack had not slept, and Muriel would not leave him. Amelia shut the house door quietly, and walked off down the sunny street.

Before long, she waved her parasol to hail a passing hansom, stepped into it, and ordered the man to drive to the Marble Arch. As it sped briskly along she craned her neck forward, as much from the desire to be seen as to see. She was careful to lose no item of her surroundings. London whirled past her in a dancing flash of sunlight and noise. Her feathers gently dusted the glass above her. She drew a pair of spotless dove-coloured gloves upon her hands, and set her teeth firmly while she nipped the buttons into the holes. There was about her a suppressed air of excitement.

At the Marble Arch she dismissed the man, paying him, with a conscious magnanimity, in excess of his fare. Next, she crossed the street, and proceeded to wend her way slowly down the Edgware Road. The sun shone hotly on the pavement; fine dust circulated in the air. The atmosphere still held a faint crispness of spring, though the stale odour of a London summer already

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weighted its freshness. But the mingled smell of the warm pavement, of the provision shops, of the stress of humanity, was wafted with a pleasant sense of familiarity to Amelia. She walked leisurely through the shabby crowd, a dainty unexpected figure, in her pale Spring dress. Her gaze was bent sideways that she might lose no detail of the effect which she produced upon the passers-by. She was aware of the glances which were turned towards her as she passed, of the whispered comments which her approach elicited, of the girls, here and there, who stood still to stare after her. A satisfying vision elated her of herself as these people must see her, tall, slight, faultlessly dressed, from her bright patent shoes to her expensive hat. She raised her skirt to the height previously decided upon, and heard the rustle of the silken flounces. It may have been that in that moment she touched the zenith of human happiness, for, although to drive through this neighbourhood in a carriage had been eminently satisfactory, yet it palled before the prolonged gratification of this slow triumphal progress.

By-and-by she had passed the flower shop, and her surroundings grew more familiar to her. A remembrance prevailed, agreeable in contrast, of the cold, foggy mornings when she had so often hurried along this same pavement in her old mackintosh. . . . Now, she could see the wide, gold board on which the name OSGOOD appeared in gigantic lettering—for the more insignificant the shop, the more impressively is the name usually writ to the world. Soon she was standing in front of the window. She remarked that it was arranged much as it used to be ; the hats in the left pane, the dress materials in the right ; gloves, handkerchiefs and flowers above, the jackets by themselves in the further window. The only innovation appeared to be that now the cheap tailor dresses on stands were put in amongst the dress materials. She decided that the arrangement was a foolish one. Next, her eye, still roving critically over the window, discovered a bodice which adorned a short stand, placed among the complete costumes like a dwarf among giants. Save for the necessary concessions to time and fashion, it was a fac-

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simile of the one which Mab had once purchased. It was composed of the identical shade of purple velvet with steel buttons and yellow lace. It was marked fifteen-and-six. Amelia turned and entered the shop ; the shop-walker, a successor of the man in the baggy trousers, hurried forward to inquire her pleasure.

"I want the ribbon department," said Amelia, and in a few moments she was seated at the counter where she had so often served.

"I want a corded sash-ribbon, nice and wide, and pale blue," she explained to the touzle-haired shop girl who stood waiting her orders and eyeing her clothes.

"About what price?" asked the girl, turning to the drawers behind her.

"The best you have in stock," said Amelia. "The price is unimportant."

The girl produced the neat rolls and unpinned the widest. "How do you like that?" she questioned.

"The colour does very well," said Amelia, fingering it, "but not the quality."

"I'm afraid it's the best I can do," said the girl turning the others over regretfully.

Amelia repressed a smile. She had expected the reply.

"It's very common," she said after a long and disparaging inspection ; "and I don't think it's likely to be much use to me. But there—as you've had the trouble of gitting it out, I'll make it do. It might come in, just for a morning—in the country, you know. I'll take three yards."

The girl thanked her and measured off the required amount. "And your next pleasure?" she asked.

"There's a purple bodice in the window ; I might just look at it," said Amelia with apathy.

"That's in another department, but I'll see if I can get it for you." The girl departed quickly and in a few minutes the gaudy body on its stand was placed upon the counter before Amelia.

"It's very stylish," the girl remarked as she un-

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fastened a few hooks that Amelia might judge better of the quality of the velvet.

Again Amelia smiled. There was a certain vindictive quality in her smile. She fingered the velvet dubiously, then she turned back a fold and gave a well-feigned exclamation of surprise. "Why—it's only on a cotton lining," she remarked contemptuously.

"Well, you see, madam"—the girl was apologetic—"you could not expect silk for the money; it's only fifteen-and-six."

"Oh, of course," said Amelia decisively; "I had not considered the price. No, it would not do at all." She twisted the stand round; "and it's such a bad cut, too!"

"Well," repeated the girl, "of course it's wonderful value for what it is, we couldn't make it at the price. But it *is* scarcely the thing for madam."

"No, I should not care to be seen out in it," said Amelia. "Thank you." She took up her parcel and walked gracefully from the shop, keenly alive to the attention which her appearance excited and followed to the door by the obsequious shop-walker.

On through the sunshine she walked, and it seemed to have grown brighter. She felt a ridiculous longing to sing, her head felt giddy with the intoxicating light and hurry of the world. She turned down a small side-street on the left and walked more slowly, looking up at the houses. Soon she paused at a door and rang. A slim, white-faced girl opened it and stared at her.

"I want Mrs Burgess," said Amelia.

The girl stared harder. "Mother's upstairs," she said at length.

"It's never Maria?" exclaimed Amelia astonished. "Why, I'd not have known you!"

"No?" said Maria vaguely, leading the way towards the wooden, carpetless stairs.

Amelia had scarcely begun the ascent, her heart palpitating with a sudden excitement, when, from the dark spaces above, a familiar voice made itself heard. "Is that 'Melia come?" it demanded.

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"It's me, aunt!" said Amelia, stumbling more hurriedly upwards. A bulky form barred the way at the first landing and she found herself clasped in a suffocating embrace.

"Well, this *is* a meetin', an' no mistake!" exclaimed Mrs Burgess breathlessly. "Come into the room, 'Melia, where I can have a look at you!" She flung open an adjacent door, talking volubly in her excitement; "I'm quite the proper duchess for you to call upon, havin' got apartments on the droring-room floor, the lady that had them having been took sudden in a fit and the landlady not happening to have a lodger of rank waitin' to step inter the let!" She drew Amelia into the little, dark room, held her at arm's length and surveyed her critically.

"Well, you do look a proper dysie, an' no mistake!" she exclaimed facetiously. "Quite the lady, ain't she, Meriar? I never thought you'd turn out like it. I'd not hev' known you! Here, give us another kiss!"

She wiped her mouth invitingly, and Amelia tendered her cheek with a recognition—at once dismissed as hypercritical—that Mrs Burgess did not look over-clean. . . . Yet formerly she had only objected to the fervour of such an embrace when its outward sign was left too visibly upon her face. . . . Released, she glanced round the room thoughtfully. The atmosphere was close; the window could not have been open for some time.

"That's a pritty dress," said Mrs Burgess, taking the soft, dove-coloured material of Amelia's gown between her finger and thumb. "An' expensive wear; it'll take the smuts pretty quick. Yes—my fingers *is* clean, 'Melia."

"Look at my petticoat!" said Amelia.

"Well, I never!" said Mrs Burgess, but more in the tone of one who would humour a folly. "If that isn't the quality all over, puttin' a silk like that where it don't make a ha'porth of show! And you alwis was fond of a bit of colour. Not but what you was too loud in your dress to my way of thinking. It was that

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made me think you'd come to no good. Now, Meriar there, she never had your love of finery."

Amelia looked at the long-legged, anaemic Maria in her brown serge.

"You don't look like cousins now," said Mrs Burgess, following her glance with a faint jealousy; "but we haven't all gorn up in the world, hev' we, Meriar? Meriar's general at a butcher's now, and thankful to be earning her six pun' a year."

"She's so grown," said Amelia, with delicate tact, "and so slim!"

"Ain't she skinny?" said Mrs Burgess, gratified. "The doctor says she's an enema, but she ain't sickly like she was. And I tell Meriar she's got all the figger in the fam'ly, and though I say it as shouldn't, she'll make a fine woman yet for all I never thought to rear her to the earning of any wage.—But take a chair and make yourself at home, 'Melia. I don't know who should be at 'ome, if you shouldn't! As to the rest of the comp'ny, they ken sit on the bed if there ain't accommodation for them."

Amelia seated herself, and despite the closeness of the atmosphere, a distinct feeling of well-being stole over her. The knowledge was reassuring that here she could count on being looked up to, that whatever she said or did in her present company would provoke admiration, not criticism.

"And now, tell us about yourself, aunt," she said. "You're expecting company, I see," as she glanced at the tea-cups.

"Well, yes, I thought seein' as the occasion was spechul I'd give a little at 'ome," said Mrs Burgess, turning her attention to the kettle. "Mr and Mrs Butler's comin'. You remember Mab Higgins that was? She married Mr Robert Butler that was at Osgood's wen you was. I expect you knew 'im?"

"You don't mean to say so! Fancy Mab married!" said Amelia. "But you never tell one the news in your letters, aunt."

"An'," said Mrs Burgess slyly, sinking her voice

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to a mysterious whisper, "I tipped the wink to Lawson to come to-day."

"You've never asked Mr Lawson in!" said Amelia with a faint blush. "Aunt, how could you?"

"'E don't know you're 'ere, bless 'im!" said Mrs Burgess. "He's coming to hear about a servant gurl. He's never got sooted to his liking after I left 'im, and it's not to be wondered at that when a man's known what comfort means, 'e don't take kindly to slip-shod ways agen. But I seemed that I couldn't stay on there after you'd given 'im the chuck. It didn't seem as it should be, me to be servanting a man that should hev' ben my nephew-at-law."

"And what about Mr Giles?" asked Amelia, turning the tables. "How was it that never came off?"

Mrs Burgess drew the loaf of bread towards her and wiped a knife on her apron preparatory to cutting bread-and-butter.

"Giles was a man," she said shortly. "An' that's saying everythink, 'Melia. They're all tarred with the same brush. I was deceived in Giles."

"Then did he give you the go-by, aunt?" asked Amelia, unconsciously slipping back into her former manner of speech. It seemed superfluous to strain after perfection in grammar, when grammar was lost on Mrs Burgess.

"Giles was a man," repeated Mrs Burgess firmly; "an' when you've said that you've said truth and no liable. There's no accountin' for a man. They're 'ere to-day and gorn to-morrar. But," she added with a spice of satisfaction, "we've Scripture for it that it ain't well to be a man that tampers with widows and orphands; 'e's an uncommon por time of it in the long-run, though he may seem to flourish like a green baize tree."

"Well, I don't take much count of the men myself, aunt," said Amelia. "They're all very well as a pastime, but there it ends. The only sort of man I'd have any opinion of is the man that thinks women better than himself."

"And where do you come acrost 'im?" said Mrs

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Burgess with infinite sarcasm. "And, bless you, 'Melia, a man don't think ! He ain't got the necessary appyratus. I'll tell you what a man is : 'e works 'cos 'e wants to eat, an' 'e drinks 'cos 'e's dry, and that's the 'ole of 'im. But tell us how you've ben gittin' on yourself, 'Melia ? "

"Oh, all right," said Amelia carelessly. "They make a precious fuss of me there."

"They was long enough beginning it, then," said Mrs Burgess. "If it hadn't been for me I'd like to know where you'd hev' been meanwhile ? "

"That's true, aunt," said Amelia amiably ; "but late's better than never, I say."

"An' Mrs Coleford, what sort of a lady's she? She was a pritty scrap of a gurl in green velvet with a lace collar wen I see her the first time. But that's a time back ; she can't be as young as she was."

Amelia flushed. "She's pritty enough now," she said stoutly. "Very tall, and dresses beautifully—you should just see her dresses, aunt. And very stately ; you could tell only to look at her that she is quite one of the Court Circle. You'd never doubt it from her way of doing things and talking."

Mrs Burgess nodded. "I know what the quality is as well as you can tell me," she said drily ; "seein' I've ben mixed up with them all my life."

"To-night," said Amelia, ignoring the snub, "I'm going to a big ball. I expect it will be a precious grand affair. I just wish you and Maria could see my dress, aunt. It's a beauty."

"It's a pity you carn't run in on your way and give us a look at your toggery !" agreed Mrs Burgess. "I've seen your por ma got up so that her own mother'd not have known her. It's wonderful what dress and a bit of false hair'll do.—But I wish these people'd come, 'Melia. I've had tea on the make this long while, and it always gives me an emptiness at the pit of the stomach when I see good food waitin' to be attended to."

As if in response to her desire a knock at the door

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was audible, and Amelia turned in fresh excitement as Mr and Mrs Butler entered the room.

Mab had altered little since old days. Her plain face had, perhaps, coarsened. She was a trifle stouter and less pale. Her showy gown of peacock blue and her large velvet hat seemed strangely familiar. As in old days, she had clothed herself in a colour which emphasised the yellowness of her complexion and her sandy hair. Bob Butler, too, had filled out. His frock coat creased about a less lanky figure. His cheap top-hat fitted jauntily over a more bullet-shaped head. The diamond in his scarlet tie, and the geranium in his button-hole, alike seemed to indicate a certain air of worldly prosperity, and alike—so Amelia soon discovered—rested upon a bosom filled with innocent jocularity and a comfortable sense of self-complacency.

The two women greeted each other with much effusion and a certain shyness. They seated themselves together on the bed, Amelia, conscious that Mab was taking the measure of her appearance and that Bob's glance from the opposite side of the room rested admiringly upon her. There was a subtle satisfaction in thus appearing to advantage in the eyes of a faithless lover.

"It does seem strange, us meeting again, Milly!" Mab exclaimed. "And you look such a toff in these days, I'd not have known you! It seems odd to think of all that's passed since we last met, me married and all. You know Bob's set up on his own account, taken a tobacconist's shop out Hornsey way. I do wish you'd come and see the baby—it would be lovely if you would! But perhaps you're too grand in these days?"

"Don't talk rubbish!" said Amelia amiably. "But, Mab—you've never got a baby?"

"Yes, rather! A little beauty, and the image of his father, so everyone tells me. But do tell me about yourself, Milly. I suppose you're having no end of a time?"

"No end!" said Amelia with assumed enthusiasm.

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"Balls and parties, I suppose, and lots of clothes!" Mab's voice was envious. "That's a lovely dress you've got on, and all on silk, I see; it must have cost a pretty penny. You *do* look a dear! Tell us, do you go to Court?"

"Well, I've not been yet; you see I've only been back in town a week or so. I've been part of the time on the Continent."

"Melia's ben in foreign parts," chimed in Mrs Burgess, overhearing the last remark, as she dispensed tea. "And, what's more, she don't think much to them, and there I'm with her, I've no opinion of foreinners meself."

"Nor me," agreed Mr Butler with an air of shrewdness. "As to them Frenchies, they're as seedy a lot of fellows as ever I set eyes on—not a man amongst them."

"There's a French restorong opposite to us," explained Mab; "and Bob sees them all day long when he's serving in the shop. He says he gits sick of the sight of them. And they've such funny sayings. A friend of ours explained some of them to us; when they're pleased, they say everything's the 'Colour of a rose,' and, when you're the third party that's not wanted, they say you're 'De trough'. It seems like telling anyone to go to the pig-sty and done with it!—But, as for me, I'd just love to see a bit of the world. Paris—that's where I'd like to go! Do tell us what you thought of it, Milly."

"It's just like everywhere else," said Amelia, unwilling to admit that she had not stayed there more than a night.

"Well, anyhow, the dresses must be a lovely sight, as all the fashions come from there," said Mab unconvinced. "That's what I'd like to see! Bob takes me to Hyde Park sometimes on Sundays to see the people, and that has to be enough for me. But, talking of dress," lowering her voice, "do you remember your going got up as a moth to that ball, Milly? I often laugh now when I think of it! Me dressing you, and

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you with your big wings and your horns bobbing up and down in front of that bit of glass, trying to see yourself!"

Amelia tittered. "Well, there's one mercy, I've a cheval glass in my room now."

"I expec' you've everything—it's well to be you! But, I say, do you ever see that gentleman you met that night, the one you was quite spoons on, you remember?"

"I wasn't spoony!" said Amelia sharply. "How you invent!"

"Oh, but you was, at the time," said Mab decidedly. "You've perhaps forgotten now—there's been so many since! But you're sure to have plenty gone on you! You'll marry some big swell soon, see if you don't, and cut no end of a dash. But, all the same, there it is—I wouldn't be you! I wouldn't change anythink for Bob."

Amelia, following the direction of her admiring glance, thought with curiosity of the days when she, too, might have married Bob Butler. And not the vanished attraction of the purple bodice, not her recognition of the unsatisfactory condition of Mrs Burgess' complexion, not her dislike to the unsanitary state of an atmosphere to which she had once been impervious, revealed itself to her with such a mysterious suggestion of personal change.

"What's that about me?" exclaimed Bob, looking knowing. "Mrs Burgess, I must call upon you to interfere. The ladies are talking secrets about me over yonder. It's your place to protect me, seeing I'm the only gentleman present."

"Which you won't be long!" said Mrs Burgess darkly, winking at Amelia. "But here, Mr Butler, you take some tea round to the ladies and stop their tongues. An' don't you forget the sugar—the gentleman who forgits the sugar is like to be 'imself forgot!"

Bob, acting promptly upon this suggestion, possessed himself of a large breakfast cup and brought it round to

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Amelia. "Milk and sugar?" he inquired gallantly. "No sugar?—then let me relieve you of your spoon. Not the first spoon you've wanted to be relieved of, I guess!" he added with humour. "It don't seem in the natural order of things that I should still be addressing you as 'Miss.' "

"That's what I tell her," said Mab. "She's sure to marry some swell soon and then she'll have no more to say to us."

Amelia protested.

"That's what I call good tea," said Mrs Burgess, staring appreciatively into her cup. "If there's one think I carn't do with, it's the dish-water some folks gives you. Many's the time I've heard my por ole grandmother say that to make a good cup of tea you should never wash the teapot out. She used to tell us she could make as good a cup without leaves as with—just stewing the water in the pot."

A knock came at the door; there was the sound of a handle turning, and Amelia without moving her head knew that Lawson had come into the room.

"I did not know that you had visitors, Mrs Burgess," she heard him say. "I only came to ask about that girl."

"And I can tell you all about her, Mr Lawson," said Mrs Burgess, bustling forward with a chair. "You'll not mind Mr and Mrs Butler who've just dropped in in a friendly way. Oh, and"—with studied carelessness—"there's m'niece, 'Melia Bradshaw. 'Melia, you'll remember Mr Lawson?"

Amelia half rose from the bed on which she was seated and placed a nervous hand in Mr Lawson's. She did not look at him. As she resumed her seat she heard the suppressed titter with which Mab greeted the episode.

Lawson took a chair far removed from her, and engaged himself in conversation with Mrs Burgess. In a little while she ventured to look at him. She was curious to see how he struck her after the lapse of time. Memory retraced the bend of his shoulders, his iron-grey

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locks, his face, lean and darkened with a day's growth of hair. She decided that he stooped more than he used to do, and that his coat was very shabby. It was strange to think that by now she might have been married to him for quite a length of time. She found herself wondering what the life would have been like. She felt a wish to tell him that she had not planned this meeting, that she was annoyed to find how he had been tricked into coming. She looked away quickly as he turned his head.

Conversation did not seem to flow so briskly as before. Mrs Burgess talked volubly, but the rest of the company seemed to find something remarkable in the existing conditions. Mab showed her appreciation of the situation by laughing immoderately at abstruse jokes and poking Amelia slyly with her foot at intervals. Before long, Lawson rose, and thanking Mrs Burgess for his tea, announced that he must be taking his departure. As he said good-bye to Amelia, he paused.

"I suppose you are staying with your sister now?" he remarked. "And very gay? I must congratulate you on looking in splendid health, Miss Bradshaw."

Amelia tried to think of some piquant rejoinder which would impress the listeners. But her self-possession deserted her. She stammered, flushed, and dropped his hand awkwardly. She knew that the others were watching, ready to make a laughing stock of him. Something in his forlorn, uncared-for appearance awoke in her the protective instinct.

The door had scarcely closed behind him when Mab gave vent to the merriment which consumed her. She disclaimed on the sheepishness of Lawson's behaviour, on the fact that he was still spoons on Amelia, on many little humorous aspects of the situation. The joviality of the little tea-party was considerably increased. Amelia alternately joined in the laughter, flattered at the implied tribute to her powers of fascination, then felt irritated at the foolishness of the conversation. The

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incident continued to furnish food for wit and lively comment until Mab insisted that she must return home to the baby. Amelia rising too announced that they might all walk together to the Marble Arch where she would get into a cab.

## CHAPTER V

### GHOSTS

As her hansom drove up to Albert Gate, she saw with some dismay that Sir Geoffry was upon the doorstep. His back was towards the street and he did not see her. She stepped leisurely to the pavement, and, with all available delay, remained seeking in her purse for her fare. Finally, having paid and dismissed the cabman, she came slowly up the strip of garden to find that Sir Geoffry had only just succeeded in fitting a troublesome key into the latch.

The episode of the night before was fresh in Amelia's memory ; it had assumed a different aspect by the light of day. Her glance fell as he extended his hand.

" Been out on a shopping expedition ? " he asked in friendly tones.

" I've been to see some friends of mine, " she said, stepping past him into the house. Yet, in the wide, cool hall, she lingered to look with unwonted interest at the cards on the table.

" Jack—Mr Coleford—has not been so well to-day, " he remarked, while he removed his hat and placed his stick in the stand. " I'm afraid Muriel is rather done up. Do you know if she will be able to take you to the dance this evening ? "

" Oh ! " exclaimed Amelia, embarrassment merged in tones of heart-felt annoyance. " Do you think there's a chance she mayn't ? "

" I can't say—it would be hard luck, " he said sympathetically. He had been curious to ascertain whether her manner would be friendly or the reverse. With a

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view to experimentalising further, he glanced at his watch. "Over an hour to dinner," he remarked; "I think I shall go out on to the leads. Why don't you come too? It's too early to dress, and it's pleasant sitting out there looking over the Park."

"Well, I don't mind if I do," said Amelia with a faint note of uncertainty; and Sir Geoffry, ignoring the indecision in her voice, led the way upstairs, and drawing up the Venetian blind, flung open the windows in the back drawing-room.

She passed down the steps. "I come out here sometimes in the mornings," she observed. "It's amusing watching the people below."

"Yes, that's the advantage of these houses," he answered, pulling a chair forward for her. "One doesn't often get such a bath of fresh air in London.—Do you object to smoke?"

"Not me!" said Amelia amiably. The desire crossed her mind that Mab could see her at that moment. As in the past, there was romance in the situation; again, as in the past, the appearance of the man beside her gratified her eye. . . . Her gaze strayed complacently to the scene below where the Park lay bathed in a glory of evening sunshine. The changing crowd swept ceaselessly along the wide, white road. Away, beyond the brown soil of the Row, the water glanced through the shimmering foliage.

"It's pritty here," she said below her breath. Her eyes glowed with a soft enthusiasm as she removed her gloves and outspread them upon her lap. "Very pritty. I like the noise and the rush of it, the feelin' of life all round you. That's what I like about London—you feel just giddy with it."

"Evidently you are a true Londoner," remarked Sir Geoffry, absorbed in lighting a cigar. "Country people find something terrifying in a crowd, and Londoners find something terrifying in getting away from it."

"That's just it," said Amelia quickly. "I don't like the country. It's pritty, too, of course, but, if you'll understand, it's a prittiness that makes one miserable.

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It seems to git into one and hurt one. One seems so alone ; as if one was wanting something one could never git at. I don't know why," she added vaguely, "but it just frightens me—it always makes me think of dying alone. Once when we were at some place abroad—I don't remember the name of it—it was bad weather, and the rain was sweeping across the mountains, and it seemed to quite scare one. I didn't feel a bit myself. I felt—a silly feel—that I wanted to scream and git right away and never stop till I got back amongst people again. Somehow, in the middle of a crowd, one feels that one just couldn't die, that there's too much life all round one."

"I know what you mean," said Sir Geoffry seriously. He was above everything anxious to erase the impression of flippancy to which his manner had given rise the night before. It seemed to him that the girl's mind was struggling to comprehend itself. It was like the undeveloped mind of a child,—perplexed at its inconsistencies, at its own crude complexity.

"Don't you think," he suggested, feeling that he was talking platitudes as he might have done to a child, "that there is another reason why the solitude of the country is terrifying sometimes—why it hurts one, as you may say? As long as we remain on a par with mere animals we escape all the more complex forms of suffering ; once something comes which stirs the soul in us, it gives that terrible feeling of loneliness, of yearning, of wanting something which we cannot get at. There is nothing, you see," he added with a smile, "in the mundane cheeriness of a scene like this to disturb our higher nature, so it leaves us in placid commonplace content. But when once we get to a glorious sunset, to music, to the desolate grandeur of the mountains, to any solitude where the soul is alone with itself, it wakes, and waking—well—it hurts."

Amelia knit her brows. She looked down at the moving scene below with dreamy, intent eye.

"I know what you mean," she said earnestly. "Not that I agree about the animals. Take a dog, say.

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Someone strikes up a tune, and he sits up and howls. He doesn't know why he howls, but all his comfort's gone and he's just miserable. It's a bit of the soul in him's been disturbed just as it's disturbed in us, and though he doesn't understand it, it is hurting him."

Sir Geoffry leant his head back against the bar of the chair. Overhead, from a neighbouring chimney, a tapering film of smoke trailed across the sky. It wound into fantastic curves, writhed upwards and dispersed.

"Yes, I have thought about that, too," he agreed. "In animals one sees how anything which stirs the latent germ of a soul, which gives rise to subtle, uncomprehended emotions, causes them the same sort of misery and unrest."

"That's it," said Amelia, eagerly nodding her head as though relieved to find how readily he comprehended her meaning. A smile played upon her lips. She twisted the gloves on her lap with restless fingers. "And, I say, isn't it queer why things make one change so? Why a tune can make one jolly or doleful all in a moment? Why music makes one want to romp about a room, dancing?"

"You seem to think a good deal about the little incomprehensibilities of our nature," said Sir Geoffry, lowering his gaze to her face.

"Things come to me," said Amelia modestly; "but it ain't—isn't often I talk them over."

It struck her how in bygone days it was usually Mrs Burgess who was given to probing the peculiarities of life. But of late her own mind had run more on the little angularities and contradictions of existence as she now saw it. She recognised a curious power of sympathy with the man beside her in his new and kindly mood. Her behaviour of the night before recurred to her with a surprising compunction. To-day he seemed to take her unspoken—her barely understood thoughts—and unravel the tangled skein for her. She felt her nature expand beneath this novel comprehension. She glowed with a quick excitement.

"There's a difference in people, too," she explained,

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turning away her head with a vague embarrassment. "Some people draw out what's in you, and others lock it up."

"Yes," said Sir Geoffry. He studied the girl as she leant back in her chair, her face animated, her eyes lit with that attractive enthusiasm, and with startled recognition he traced again the resemblance which had formerly caught his fancy. It was a fleeting suggestion, fascinating, elusive; not more definite, perhaps, than the likeness which a stranger may detect, and which those of a closer relationship may fail to trace; yet it stirred him powerfully.

There was a pause before he spoke. "Do you know," he said, "you give me an impression that—very likely you will think it impertinent of me to put into words—but as if you had never been with people who understood you and helped you. Part of your nature seems dormant—I mean," he said hurriedly, detecting a faint look of resentment in Amelia's face, "at school they seem to have frozen your thoughts, all that was cleverest in you. They have given you the usual girl's education—all learning and no knowledge."

The latter part of the sentence arrested Amelia's attention.

"I'll tell you what I think of schooling," she said confidently; "it's just a pack of humbug. Oh, it is! What's all learning, say, but just the knowing how to pretend the right thing at the right moment? What's all study but picking other people's brains to find your own way about?—Gitting to know how to fool and not to be fooled? Again, what's all good manners, all stylishness in dress, but just having sense to know your bad points in ways and looks, and humbug about them?"

"That's true——"

"Haven't I just had it dinned into my ears the last few years!" she said more excitedly: "What people will think and what people will say, and how to stop their thinking and saying? That's edgecation!" The satire in her voice was impressive. "I've wondered

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sometimes that people may blow their own noses and not be called upon to pretend they've got no noses to blow!"

Sir Geoffry leant his head back once again and idly scanned the vista of chimneys. "I wish," he said, "that you would tell me something about your school-life?"

"That's just what Mrs Coleford said!" exclaimed Amelia, struck by the similarity of the requests. "And there ain't—isn't anything that's worth the telling. It was just a hateful set-out from start to finish—oh, it was!" she added with a nervous laugh at her own vehemence. "I'll just tell you."

The afternoon's contentment may have left its influence upon Amelia, giving her an unwonted accession of self-confidence; for the flood-gates of her reserve vanished. The history of the past years poured with crude eloquence from her lips. Her eyes brightened, the colour came and went softly in her cheeks. She leant forwards, her hands clasped across her knees. With quick, eager speech and graphic vividness she conveyed the outline of her life in Brussels alone with a woman of limited understanding, petty, punctilious, conscientious; of the subsequent months of travel in the same uncongenial companionship; of the classes she attended where the English girls looked at her askance, and the foreign girls made comments upon her in a language which she could not understand; of the loneliness of a world where even the little commonplace speeches of her fellow-creatures were unintelligible to her; of the final life at Brighton, where again the girls shunned her and her sole companion was the little quiet governess whose life-romance she had unwittingly wrecked. All the wearying restraint, the ceaseless routine, the solitude of heart and brain which that time represented was conveyed with unconscious pathos; the fret and humiliation to which her ignorance exposed her, the irritating supervision of speech and manner, the enforced artificiality, the inevitable self-consciousness and self-distrust thereby entailed.

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The narration held a novel interest for the man who listened, it seemed to him that he recognised again the mixture of simplicity and shrewdness in the girl's character, the strange anomaly that it was to her very vulgarity of mind that she owed any present diminution of vulgarity in speech and manner ; it had been through a sordid ambition to rise in the social scale that she had acquired this surface veneer of refinement. And yet, in the hatred of artificiality, in the battling against restraint and convention, in the still more dogged determination which had enabled her to over-rule tendency and to conform to all that was at variance with her disposition, he recognised possibilities which lent her an added interest in his eyes.

"Many a time I said I'd chuck it," she concluded ; "but I just stuck to it and"—with a hint of triumph—"here I am !"

"It was very plucky of you," he answered ; "I wonder what made you do it ?"

Amelia looked down at the Park where the sunlight lay dying.

"When you're poor it isn't living, it's drudging. I—I felt I'd go through with it for the sake of what come after."

Yet she was conscious in her own mind of a reservation in this explanation. For, however powerful had been the inducement of the prospect held out to her, the underlaying motive had been one more difficult of comprehension. She recalled that incentive which had lain at the root of her endeavour ; how the thought of the man beside her had incited attainment, and urged retaliation ; and the latent absurdity of the knowledge warred with the active consciousness of its survival ; for as yet the score was unerased ; it was awaiting only the stirring of chance to renew recognition and achieve fulfilment.

"Well," said Sir Geoffry again, breaking a brief silence, "I hope you'll find it has all been worth the struggle."

Amelia nodded. "It's a pity about the ball to-

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night," she observed, as though following the sequence of ideas, and recognising that she might be defrauded of some portion of her just reward ; "I mean if Mrs Coleford—Muriel shouldn't go, after all. I've a lovely dress, too, white, with spangly sort of things."

"I am very sorry," he replied sympathetically ; "but, in any case, there will be plenty more opportunities of wearing it ; and though it sounds an ill-natured wish, honestly I hope Muriel will decide not to attempt it. She isn't fit for it."

Preceptibly Amelia saddened. It may have been that she recognised the claim of her secret worship to that spirit of sacrifice which is the essence of all devotion. "But, I say," she said, at length, giving vent to the lingering hope which occurred to her, "*you're* going, any way, aren't you ?"

"Oh, probably," he answered. "But you see it wouldn't be correct that I should take you !"

It was unfortunate that at this juncture he allowed a smile to appear upon his face. It conveyed an impression to Amelia's mind, and her brain followed a swift sequence of ideas. . . . To go out to a public entertainment with a man was what in the past she had been trained to understand as keeping company with him, a species of tacit engagement ; the probable preliminary to marriage. And she had been offering this suggestion to the man who had first made love to her and then made light of her. . . . A sharp humiliation urged that transference of sentiment which had been awaiting the stirring of chance. Her former aversion returned upon her, possessing her with intensity. She caught the sides of her chair with a grip which, leaving her fingers bloodless, lessened the physical strain of repression. . . . And meanwhile Sir Geoffry, unaware of the mood which rent her, enlarged upon the little inconsistencies of conventionality—a topic which amused him—those varying restrictions with which each successive generation hedges itself around and dignifies into inexorable laws. He descanted upon the trivialities thus established :—How it was correct for a man to

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take a girl for a long walk in the lonely country and bad form to take the same girl for a walk in crowded London ; how a married flirt in her teens may be required to chaperon a staid spinster in the thirties ; how a girl may not be seen alone with a man at some entertainments, and may not be seen walking without one at others. . . . And all the while he felt no alteration in the glory of the summer's evening, saw no difference in the pale sunshine, heard no diminution in the twittering of the sparrows as they prepared to roost among the chimneys. But to Amelia the world had transformed ; the echo of its pulsing, jubilant life which came to her mellowed from the street beyond, was a distorted, discordant dim of incongruities.

"That's what I say—it's all a sham !" she announced with a decision which surprised him. "Oh, it don't matter what you are, it's all whether you can humbug properly. A lady or a gentleman's only another word for a good liar and having the money to back it up. I know ! "

The unexpected comment upon his remarks, ludicrously attune to his own somewhat cynical outlook, still more the suppressed excitement of Amelia's tone surprised him. He saw that her lips were tremulous, while into her eyes had crept an expression difficult to interpret, whether of malice or dislike he could not tell. And while he decided that it was impossible for him to fathom the workings of her mind, the varying phases of feeling which were probably incomprehensible even to herself, he recognised—and it prompted solution—that her speech was dictated by the same element of class, or personal hatred, which it seemed to him had characterised it upon the previous evening.

"And the men," she pursued with insinuation, "are better at it than the women. I tell you, in old days when I was common in ways and dress—I admit it, I hadn't the edgication then I've had since—any man that came along then would have been glad to git his little bit of fun out of me. Now I'm better dressed and can talk grammar, I suppose the same man'd prate

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about his respect for me ! And yet, I tell you, I wouldn't give tuppence for his respect ! He respects the money that's made me better than I was——"

The challenge of her eyes pointed the personal application of her speech. But that her remarks had reference to a past into which she had read other rendering than his own, was not apparent to Sir Geoffry. The details of that episode, sufficiently insignificant at the time, had since, of very necessity, further dimmed to his recollection. And, as in that past he had failed to fathom the hurt of Amelia's illusion, so now he failed to understand that, to a woman, a flirtation,—inconceivably trivial in fact and outcome,—may yet be the crucial experience on which her development hinges.

Still the situation prompted that analysis which appealed to his imagination. But a rustle of trailing silk interrupted intention, and Mrs Coleford in evening dress stepped out on to the balcony. A smile lit her glance as it turned from Amelia to Sir Geoffry, but waned with an abruptness which Amelia remarked; and in the quality of the gaze which Muriel bent upon the man beside her, Amelia detected—though inconceivably transient, repressed—a direct element of disapprobation. Coinciding with her impression of the evening before, it clenched her belief in the existence of a veiled dislike on Muriel's part for Sir Geoffry ; and, in that fancied discovery of a mood in harmony with her own, Amelia recognised a fresh and satisfactory link between herself and the woman who so powerfully attracted her.

" Do you know that it is long past dressing-time," said Muriel, " and that you are neither of you ready for dinner ? "

Amelia rose with an exclamation of surprise. She picked up the gloves which fell from her lap, and straightened her hat, then, moving briskly forwards, she stumbled over the steps into the room and disappeared quickly upstairs.

" I am going to dine at the club," explained Sir Geoffry.

Mrs Coleford stepped forward, and, leaning against the

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balustrade, looked down at the Park aglow with the blaze of a yellow sunset.

The sky was now an indefinite space of sullen gold ; the roadway, deserted by the crowd which had thronged it an hour earlier, was a desolate, undulating line which wound palely away into the distant haze.

"Well?" she suggested after a silence.

He smiled at the conciseness of her question. "She certainly is unusual!" he answered without hesitation.

"I wonder in what capacity she interests you—as a problem or as a diversion?"

"I think—both."

"I wish I could feel it." She lifted a cloak from the wicker table near her and flung it about her shoulders as though chilled by the breeze. The dull glory of the sky enshrouded her softly. She lifted her gaze towards it.

"There are girls," she added, after a pause, "whose future one seems to know so well. A little education, a little dancing, a little flirting, a little sentiment, and they marry a man who is a little infatuated with them, and who, by and by, is a little bored with them. And they are a little unhappy. But they have little consolations. They are excellent housewives. They revel in the knowledge. Their butchers' books and their servants' delinquencies fill their days with a mild flavour of virtuous excitement. By and by they end their little lives, and, according to popular theory, appear before their Maker to represent that they have done a little good, and a little evil, and—save for a little addition to the population—have left the world precisely as they found it!—I feel that the result of my little experiment has been to fashion Amelia into one of these."

"There might have been a worse result." Sir Geoffry blew a thin ring of smoke into the air and watched it slowly disperse. "Of course, she is undeveloped," he added ; "and the crucial question is, how much there is to develop. But, at present, one must remember, she is on her guard. She finds herself in a strange world in which she is terribly afraid of making a false step ; she is feeling her way, trying to recollect all the conflicting,

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worrying little rules which have been given to her for her guidance. All that will pass. And I fancy that, socially, she is not nearly such a success as you imagine. I should not like to guarantee either her grammar or her *savoir faire* under unusual circumstances." He smiled reminiscently. "On the other hand, I credit her with a fair amount of originality, identity, and powers of observation. The curious thing is, I notice too, she is more at her ease with me than she is with you; possibly, I fancy, because in talking to me she is not burdened with the sense of comparison which is inevitable with one of her own sex."

A recollection may have crossed Mrs Coleford's mind of the week which she had passed with Amelia; of the companionship which palled, of the stilted conversation—those little platitudes uttered with considered enunciation in carefully selected grammar. Yet it was comprehensible that Amelia should be more at her ease with a man than with a woman. The latent coquetry in female nature is potent to banish shyness. The same girl who could be ill-at-ease, gauche, and subdued in the presence of another woman, may be full of self-assurance and of vanity in the presence of a man. For between woman and woman comparison is inevitable; and the one who, in that ordeal, recognises her own shortcomings, is crushed by the recognition. But man is a creature of another genus with whom comparison is impossible, the natural antithesis of her type, a creature to be amused, cajoled, flattered, fooled, but never feared.

"The idea may seem fantastic," Sir Geoffry smiled, "but she reminds me more than others of her sex of the story of Sleeping-Beauty—the typical story of woman's nature."

"Yes?"

"The world is asleep for her till the kiss of the Fairy Prince comes and wakes her to life."

"And pain?"—His glance met hers with comprehension.

"Admittedly," she said, after a pause. "Love accentuates a character most remarkably!—as it also develops

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possibilities which would otherwise have remained unsuspected.—But this same question of Amelia's marriage—since, in her case, love and marriage are likely to be synonymous—troubles me in advance not a little. Oh, very much in advance, you will say ! but, with her face and general appearance, one knows that it must inevitably come. And to me it was, and is, horrible the way that girls have to marry. Of course, in these days every girl knows that marriage is not merely a platonic residence under the roof of the man with whom she goes through the marriage service : but, having a vague knowledge of a fact, and realising its crude actuality, are conditions wide apart as the poles. And a girl's idea of love and a man's, if the same in origin, are surprisingly diverse in theory ! ” She laughed briefly, and her face darkened. “ The fact remains that no virtuous and modest woman has any correct realisation of all that marriage entails till she has sworn a life-long adherence to conditions of which she was supremely ignorant at the time of her vow ! Is it not preposterous—preposterous that she should be allowed no subsequent decision in retaining or discontinuing what she undertook ignorantly ? By what possible freak of justice can an oath, the nature of which is not rightly understood, be legally binding ? . . . And people are so fond of arguing, that because a condition is according to nature, it must needs be palatable. Death is according to nature, but we don't find its conditions peculiarly attractive ! —As far as a woman is concerned, the marriage service seems to me a specious fraud, a piece of illegal trickery ! ”

The stateliness, the reticence of her normal self seemed to have been replaced by a girlish vehemence and animation which he found infinitely attractive. Her voice, in its livelier accents, was an echo of Amelia's. He smiled as he watched her. “ My remarks are lamentably commonplace,” he said ; “ but, do away with the present conditions, and what results ? —chaos. Also, that beautiful institution the Home——”

“ The Home ! ” she echoed ; “ my dear Geoffry, you have become charmingly circumspect ! You know as well

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as I can tell you, that for one home which you can show me which is a success, I could show you a hundred which will not bear quoting. There is no subject on which such an immense amount of nonsense and false sentiment is talked as this same institution of the Home and its necessity. My experience is, that even children are usually happier with the supervision of one parent than with two, and often would be infinitely better with none at all to stunt their mental growth. Of course a man should contribute pecuniarily to the maintenance of the child whom he has brought into the world—that is obvious ; but, as matters stand”—she laughed—“I declare I should make the marriage service binding to the man who knew what he was undertaking, and not ultimately binding to the woman who was ignorant !”

He laughed in response, frankly and heartily. “And all this is *à propos* of Amelia !” he said. “Oh, you are delightfully like your old self when you are enthusiastic and irrelevant ! Your outer self which you have achieved is so charmingly at variance with that real self ! At heart you are so defiant of every recognised law and custom. Because a thing was accepted used to be your very reason for finding a flaw in it. You had an incurable tendency to run your head against a brick wall !”

She turned to look in his face with shining eyes.

“Oh, it is good to have you to talk to again !” she exclaimed. “Good to have someone with whom one can be irresponsible ! The years drop from me when you come. When you are away I get hungry for someone with whom my thoughts can run riot. . . . And those long months since I have seen you. . . . The other people are all on a pattern—and such a pattern ! Their brains are milk and water with considerably more water than milk ! And now Amelia ! There is the head and front of my grievance. I have spared no pains to manufacture a congenial soul and I have manufactured a chastening influence. If only she were human flesh and blood—not a second-rate etiquette-book stuffed with grammatical truisms !”

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He shook his head at the pathos of her tone. "I fancy," he said, "some day you will realise another side to her character. After all, the only fault of your system is that the education stopped short too soon. She has learnt just enough to be vaguely aware that she is not quite as great a success as she imagined—the beginning of wisdom, but a singularly uncomfortable stage!"

She leant her elbow against the balustrade, and propped her chin with her slender hand. "Just think," she said, "youth is so short, so horribly short, and the years in which it is possible—theoretically—to rejoice in the sun, so fleeting, that it seems cruel to allow a handsome girl of Amelia's disposition to waste them. What I feel is that she is so essentially not cut out for flights of genius, and if she is to play her social rôle with any success it was necessary to bring her out within plausible time of the usual age. Besides," she spoke with a quick assumption of flippancy, "I believe all these little plausible truisms are equivocal! My true motive was silly in its simplicity—I wanted to give someone a good time. I was feeling that I had never had a good time myself."

Again in the silence his eye rested upon her slight figure, then rose slowly to her face. Her profile showed in clear outline against the stormy gold of the sky.

"It is curious," he said, "how she reminds me of you. Something in her eyes, her voice—I cannot define it, but the likeness startles me sometimes, and yet I cannot trace it in any particular feature or trait. And it is not you as you are now, it is a ghostly you, come back from the past."

"Am I so changed?" she asked, still with that enforced lightness of speech; yet he was conscious that it repressed a very sensible annoyance. "I am not sure that it is a pleasant experience meeting the ghost of one's former self!"

"All ghosts are better avoided," he agreed; "and, for ourselves, we have eschewed even the track of their haunting." He rose and extinguished the glowing remnant of his cigar upon the stonework. For a moment he looked down upon the scene below from which the

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glory of the sunset was departing. And in the hot stillness of the dying day there came to him an inexpressible hunger of escape from the fetid atmosphere, the restrictions of London existence. With vivid contrast he scented the keenness of an autumn air, pictured moving figures against a dun landscape, the sharp report of a gun in the grey silence, a scatter of living things through a pallid sky, the bark of dogs, and—with the toy whence man, god-like, dispenses death—another little life sped into the Unknown.

“None the less”—he contradicted his first statement—“ghosts, of their very nature, have a tendency to penetrate any barrier we raise against them. Even in this moment I am forcibly reminded of those old Brookfield days when we were boy and girl together. I have visited near the old place once or twice since for shooting, and to-night this atmosphere sets me hungering for that gorgeous sea-drenched air of the downs.”

She was tapping the iron balustrade absently with the flattened palm of her hand.

“Brookfield?” she said. “The house that Elinor took that summer by the sea?—of course I remember! And those happy days there—ridiculous days, before we learnt that romance, golden romance, could be secondary to an inability to buy board and lodging. . . . What happy, childish fools we were then—so certain that fate would treat us like spoilt children and give us all we craved!”

She was silent for a moment.

“I think,” she said, “there are three pictures which stand out in my life with a very crucial distinctness. I wonder if you remember one evening that summer when you and I had been for a long walk of many miles over the downs; and as we came back there was a marvellous stormy sky and a rocking sea, the moors were like purple and the air like wine. . . . Oh, there is nothing special to mark that evening, but it stands out in my memory just like a patch of sunlight will linger on the hills when the shadow has fallen all around. I was so happy then; it was so perfect, one of those rare, glad bits of life when

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one is thankful to exist. . . . When I think of it I can taste the salt upon my lips and feel the air—that cold, wild air—whipping my cheeks, and the wonderful feeling of youth and strength in my limbs as I walked with the knowledge that I could never grow tired. And later, do you remember, Jack came to meet us, all ruddy and cold from a late bathe? I can see his sunburnt face and wet curls, and his strong, young figure coming towards us over the sands."

There was a faint tremor in her voice, while her eyes were preternaturally bright. And, as if to accentuate the mood of the moment, in the distant street a band was playing. Its crude, jaunty tune came to their ears fitfully, mingling with her speech, mellowed by distance, endowed with a fictitious melancholy.

"I wonder," she said, "do you realise that it is an old woman who is speaking to you? That is the strangest, the most incredible reflection of all. Do you remember how, when we were young then, we believed that we were a species apart from the old; that never had they been as us; that never could we be as they. Then, by and by, we learn that the one is merged into the other as the living are merged into the dead."

"And the two other pictures?" he questioned, after a silence.

"The second," she said, "is another evening at the end of that same summer, and the third—intimately connected with the second—is what I fancy forms a crucial picture in most women's lives—my wedding-day." But she did not elaborate her information. She rose, and casting the cloak from her shoulders on to the chair, she moved towards the window. "I must see Jack before dinner," she said. The brief animation which had transformed her was gone. As they passed down-stairs he remarked her weariness of voice and movement.

"You," he hinted, "are not thinking of going to that ball at the Ellison's to-night?"

"I must go; Amelia would be so disappointed, and at present I cannot very well risk her going with anyone

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else. Besides it would not make any difference, I am so tired now I should not sleep."

"Why do you overdo everything so unreasonably?" he asked, with an assumed impatience in his voice. "When Jack has every care and attention that money can provide, what need is there for you to wear yourself out and wreck your health in this manner? Especially when it means so little to him now."

She looked at him with a curious smile. "In view," she said, "of that very successful lie into which you tell me I have manufactured myself, need you ask? And, after all," she added with a change of tone, "how can I be sure that it means nothing to him? Have you seen him to-day, Geoffry? I thought his mind clearer."

He followed her into the long, dim room. As they entered the nurse came forwards.

"He seems asleep now," she said. "At least, he has lain as though he were torpid since you left him. You need not be afraid of waking him."

She went, and together they stood before the couch. The quiet figure before them was outlined by the dimness. There was no sign of life in the senseless face or in the rigid limbs.

"So often," Muriel explained, speaking in a low voice, "after a lucid interval he has a relapse. Sometimes he is like this for hours and no sound from the outer world seems to penetrate to his brain."

A shaded lamp stood on the table near by, its pale light fell over her face and dress. Sir Geoffry's glance strayed from her to the couch.

"I never see Jack," he spoke with hushed accents, "without recalling what he said to me once in the old days when he was well and strong; how it always haunted him that, even if civilisation could erase all human cruelty from the world, the Divine cruelty would remain—the cruelty of Design, which, to our finite intelligence, places the Creator on a lower level than the thing created. What civilised man—not a fiend—would have planned for a fellow-man—even a criminal—conditions like these?"

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"To our finite intelligence," she repeated, speaking as softly. "Isn't it curious to think that, in those words—the confession of our limitation—lies the hope of the ages? A slender thread on which to hang such a substantial fabrication! And yet, how pathetically people cling to a religion which teaches omnipotence of design and beneficence of purpose, and the two are so incompatible! To think of all the horrible ailments to which we are subject and to imagine a responsible, beneficent Being ingeniously inventing each!" She turned to adjust the shade of the lamp while its light glittered softly in her eyes. "One wastes half a life-time fretting over mysteries to which there is no solution, or over a scheme of dogma which no thinking person can accept, before we understand at last that religion represents a spiritual not a mental attitude; that an atheist is one who has blunted his perceptions, who has lost touch with the diviner side of life—a stunted soul. And that the grossest expression of atheism is often—a creed!"

Sir Geoffry's eyes still rested on the couch. "I suppose you would subscribe to Browning's verdict, 'The soul doubtless is immortal, where a soul can be discerned,'" he said. "But—what of *this*?"

Turning, she lifted one stiff, inert hand from the coverlet with an unconsciously protective movement.

"I have tried to persuade myself that it is only a soul asleep," she said quickly. "Sometimes as I have sat here I have wondered if his brain is really a blank when he is like this, or if it is wandering through some beautiful dream-world to which we are blind. . . . It used to be such a clever, brilliant brain before his mind went. . . . When he used to lie here helpless and think, I used to want to save something of it from the wreckage of his life. I used to beg him to dictate aloud to me, but he never would consent."

And perhaps remembrance hinted of the persistence with which he refused and how she had known that refusal to be lest the work should weary her; how thus he and she had everlastingly contrived to circumvent

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each other ; he in fear lest the gloom of his tragedy should shadow her life, and she in dread lest she should fail to take his burden upon her.

A gong droned through the house ; they walked together to the door. " You will be very late," she said. " And Amelia—it has just struck me she is getting into *grande tenue* for the ball already. I must go up and fetch her."

## CHAPTER VI

### THE RENUNCIATION AND AN AFTERTHOUGHT

SHE passed slowly up the stairs, and, tapping at the door of Amelia's room, was greeted by a muffled permission to enter.

The interior presented a curious chaos. Clothes lay piled upon the chairs, the bed ; shoes, stockings, and under-garments were strewn about the floor in varied confusion. In the centre of the room stood Amelia rapidly twisting up one coil of hair, while another, caught between her teeth, accounted for the recent thickness of her intonation. She was wearing her evening skirt, but a dressing-gown was cast untidily about her shoulders. It struck Mrs Coleford that there was something unusual in her appearance. She looked excited and her face was heavily daubed with powder.

"I came to tell you," Muriel explained, "you need not put on your dress for the ball now ; just slip on a tea-gown. We don't go to the dance till eleven."

The coil of hair released from between Amelia's teeth swung heavily to her waist. "I was going to arsk," she observed, and the cockney accent was apparent, "I was going to arsk—need I dine down to-night?"

"To dine down? Aren't you well?"

"I'm feeling sick," said Amelia blandly.

"But surely you were quite well at luncheon?"

The suggested scepticism of the remark seemed to have an irritating effect upon Amelia.

"One may be well one hour and sick enough the next," she said shortly. "Anyhow, I must git to bed

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—everything looks green with me. And—you understand—I can't go to that ball."

"Oh, I expect if you lie down now and keep quiet, you will be all right later," said Mrs Coleford reassuringly. She met an element of inquiry in Amelia's glance.

"*You* look tired out," Amelia hinted; "I expect you'll be glad enough to be off the job—to be off going?" she corrected herself hastily.

"I shall go if you are equal to it," said Mrs Coleford with evasion. "Tell me, is there anything you can fancy—a little soup?"

"If I was to try," said Amelia, conscious of the claims of a voracious appetite, "I might eat a little something. Nothing sweet, you know, or greasy"; this last was a realistic touch which she felt to be telling.

"I will go and see about it," said Mrs Coleford.

Amelia, left alone, divested herself of her skirt, thrust her arms into the sleeves of her dressing-gown and extended herself upon her bed. The ecstasy of sacrifice fascinated her, the very immensity of her renunciation bewitched her. Her imagination dwelt upon each detail of her loss, elaborated it, and hugged the sum-total with satisfaction. Even her belief—the result of hypersensitive observation—that Muriel had little liking for her, added perceptibly to the value of that sacrifice. The knowledge of all which, by her own act, she was forfeiting, restored her equanimity which had suffered disturbance.

Soon a maid arrived bearing her dinner, when, with laudable exercise of self-control, she ate but sparingly of the meat and sent the sweets away untasted. Left in solitude once more, she rose and stood looking out of the window. The thoroughfares were shrouded in opalescent twilight; lamps were beginning to prick the dusk. The glow of sunset lingered upon the tiles, but night was gathering in the streets. The world seemed to bear a holiday air. In the warm summer gloom it was pleasantly astir. Work was ended and the workers

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were abroad. Girls loitered, their dresses showing whitely in the half-light ; youths lounged aimlessly, unpicturesque figures in indistinct relief ; lovers courted ; poverty jostled wealth ; misery and contentment contrasted ; vice and virtue amalgamated with outward proximity and spiritual divergence. Infinite in suggestion as in variety, the scene outspread before her like a mock world with shifting scenes portrayed for diversion. Small items of the crowd stayed her restless glance : a neat little messenger boy with a closely-cropped head ; a woman in a blue dress walking with a soldier ; a watering-cart which sent a scatter of pale drops upon the grey roadway ; a brake returned from a day's outing which had stopped opposite the house —she watched the people descend, ugly in billycocks and aggressive in joviality ;—the 'buses which came past, blue, green, red, which swung ponderously round the corner, drew up near the curb, and lurched on again ; the groups which thronged and thinned, which hustled and shifted at their coming and their going. . . . And, as she gazed, a frantic restlessness possessed her. She desired to be out, to be one of that happy, moving world ; she was cooped up in ridiculous imprisonment which it lay in her power to end. She got up on a chair, wound the curtains about her to conceal herself, and craned her body out of the window. The breeze fluttered against her cheek ; the twilight seemed to wrap her about in a soothing genial warmth ; she breathed it in with long, hungry breaths.

Next, her eye paused at the pavement. Near the strip of garden before the house, a man was standing. He pushed the gate open, looked up at the window and then withdrew. From behind the curtain, Amelia peered attentively ; but he had walked on and had disappeared beyond the hoarding of a neighbouring building. Yet, a moment later, he returned, and lingered in front of the gate as before. The peculiarity of the action, as well as something vaguely familiar in his appearance, interested her. A lamp-lighter near at hand lifted his taper and the gas flared upon the

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upturned face of the man at the gate. It seemed to Amelia that it was the face of John Lawson.

When, after protracted watching, she was satisfied that he would not reappear, she left the window and seated herself upon her bed. For a time the incident filled her with speculation. But soon the fret of her solitude returned to occupy her thoughts. The evening stretched before her with intolerable lengthiness. The temptation to go back from her resolution urged and was repressed. She clung to her decision with a stubborn determination which refused to admit the possibility of vacillation. By and by there came a tap at the door, and Mrs Coleford entered. Amelia lay back listlessly among the pillows, and answered all inquiries with apathy. Dimly visible in the twilight, a gracious presence, soft of speech and noiseless of movement, Muriel came to the bed-side; her voice expressed commiseration; she arranged the coverlet and smoothed the sheets with the deft, gentle touch of one accustomed to illness. She suggested that a complete absence of daylight might induce sleep, and meeting with no contradiction, she closed the shutters and drew the curtains.

"I am really very sorry this has happened," she repeated kindly; "I know how you had set your heart on going to this dance, and how hard it must be for you. As you are not going, I shall not go either, for I am feeling rather knocked-up myself."

Amelia made a more definite sound of assent. In the darkness her head rose from the pillow.

"I suppose," she said abruptly, "Sir Geoffry will be going, anyhow?"

"I imagine so. He will probably look in for a short time."

"I say"—something of the languor was gone from Amelia's voice—"is that little Mrs Breton going—the widow?"

"I really don't know—probably. Why?" Mrs Coleford's voice was cold.

"She's gone on him—on Sir Geoffry," said Amelia

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with a conviction that her information would prove of interest. "Do you know, I saw it the very first night at dinner? Every time he spoke to me she glared at him. She was wild I was by him and not her!"

"Women occasionally do care for men," said Mrs Coleford, with unusual triteness; "but it is not always good taste to notice it."

Amelia shrank back amongst the bedclothes.

"By the way," pursued Mrs Coleford with a prompt irrelevance which bespoke compunction, "there's one thing I've always been meaning to ask you—don't you want to go and see your aunt? There might, perhaps, be difficulties in the way of asking her here, but I think you ought to see her soon."

"I've been," explained Amelia, uncertain how her announcement would be received. "I went to-day."

"Oh, you've been?" Muriel's voice expressed surprise. "I'm very glad you have been," she added in tones of approval; and Amelia, though admittedly perplexed, gleaned that she had risen in Mrs Coleford's estimation.

"I'm very fond of aunt," she ventured to explain. "I won't say she's perhaps what you would call ladylike, aunt; but she was very good to me after mother died."

"She must have been," responded Muriel with cordiality. "In point of fact it seems to me you owe everything to her. She treated you just like her own daughter."

"Just," agreed Amelia. "She never made any difference between me and her own girl, Maria. It was share and share alike. She's a funny girl, is Maria." In the darkness, a smile crossed her lips.

"Well, you must go and see them from time to time," said Mrs Coleford. "But I must not stay talking to you now, for I hope you'll get off to sleep and be all right again in the morning."

And Amelia, left alone once more, strove to rehabilitate the ecstasy of martyrdom, but the experience was illusive. Her mood had transformed. She turned

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restlessly upon her bed, and the sheets seemed to scorch her limbs. Momentarily her mind became more active. When darkness shrouds the physical sight the mental vision acquires a wonderful clearness. And, gradually, with an ever-increasing conviction, she saw herself confronted by a situation which it was imperative to readjust. She understood that the strange excitement of Sir Geoffry's presence during the last few hours had achieved the result against which she had believed herself to be steeled. Mrs Coleford's personality had faded into the background of her consciousness, the magnetism of that presence was less distinct. And it was not Amelia's way to fence and coquet with her own emotions. In one sharp moment of humiliation she accepted unflinchingly the facts which faced her ; the inferred disloyalty to her ideal, the shame of subservience to an influence against which all the circumstances of the past had demanded that she should be on the defensive. And her present act of renunciation gained meaning as a sop to her love, a vent to her hate ; a propitiatory act of sacrifice to her defamed hero-worship, a prompt check to her reprehensible infatuation.

Yet she understood that the circumstances demanded a solution more concise, more conclusive. It was imperative that her future intercourse with Sir Geoffry should be placed upon lines both definite and defensive. And, thinking thus, it was apparent to her that he had his uses, that—since a man never knows what a woman is driving at—treated with judgment he might be made an unconscious tool to her own ends. She understood how, despite Mrs Coleford's presumed aversion, long years of acquaintance with her must have made her personality known to him like the pages of an open book. He alone could explain how to see with Muriel's eyes, to speak with Muriel's speech, to think with Muriel's thoughts, to fashion that which, personally, she desired to be, an—admittedly imperfect—replica of Muriel's perfection. And, while in order to enlist the sympathies of this man who could aid her, it would be

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needful to assume a friendliness—foreign to her sentiment but in keeping with her purpose—she recognised that, in pursuing this course, she would never lose sight of the real motive of her attitude, so that his influence would be counteracted and thus rendered powerless. She would treat him as the other women she had noticed treated the other men—with a mixture of condescending playfulness which galled and enchain'd them. No undue humility should characterise her behaviour towards him; she would be betrayed into no avoidable confidences. She would flatter him in so far as was necessary to her object, but, all the while, it would represent but a means to an end; and if he suffered in the encounter it was but part of that original plan of revenge which her pride had demanded. . . .

And, all the amazing complexity of her self-deception being satisfactory to Amelia, an agreeable vision of Sir Geoffry subservient to her machinations gradually soothed her excited brain; stillness had fallen upon the house, and the drone of the traffic waxed louder; she sank into a pleasant slumber.

It was some hours later when she awoke with a start. She had fallen asleep in her clothes and the night was stifling. She rose and opened the window; she let down the coils of her heavy hair. Sleep had deserted her; she felt feverishly awake. The blood in her veins was dancing. She felt cramped, frantic with the craving for motion. The realisation of all that she had renounced came upon her with overwhelming conviction. Again she strove to conjure back the first ecstatic delight of sacrifice, but again it evaded her. She trod to the cardboard box where her ball-dress lay coffined, and drew it from the folds of tissue-paper. She out-spread it upon the bed. The spangles glittered in the candle-light. She studied with a species of reverence the glistening satin, the spotless tulle. The artificial flowers on the bodice emitted a faint perfume; white shoes placed below the skirt gave a semblance of reality to its limp suggestion of a human presence. It was

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possible to image the effect which she would have presented clad thus. She nipped her teeth together and her brow contracted. In the limp semblance of humanity on the bed before her, she saw the crucial sacrifice to that devotion which was thus proven triumphant to any minor and more disquieting emotions. . . .

At that moment, in the prevailing silence of the house, a hint of movement held her attention. It was a suggestion of voices, of action, scarcely perceptible, yet admittedly actual. The thought caught her fancy that Mrs Coleford, reinvigorated by rest, might be going to the ball. It might not yet be too late to reverse a renunciation which would thus be made of none avail. Excitement quickened ; she trod to the door and drew it ajar. Through the gloom, the unexpected light of a candle stabbed her sight with sharp effulgence. She shrank back into the concealing darkness of the doorway and peered out cautiously. On the threshold of Muriel's room Sir Geoffry was standing. The candle which he held twinkled and danced in a vagrant draught. Shielded by his hand, it left his face in shadow, but shed a flickering brightness over the dim landing and panelled wall, endowing with fantastic activity a portrait of the Admiral which hung there, and, lower, illumining the dark wainscoting where Muriel, in pale relief, leant against it.

And it may have been the unsteady glimmer of the dancing flame which, with wavering shadow, distorted Mrs Coleford's expression, but a change of which Amelia was sensible had temporarily transformed her. For, as to the pictured face above, the flame gave a false animation, a mock semblance of life, so to the living face it gave a contrary illusion, showing it strained, blanched with a pallor which incongruously resembled death. And, in the recognition of some unexplained disaster, Amelia, with swift conjecture, decided that Jack Coleford was worse ; that in the threat of a great danger Sir Geoffry had come with unwelcome summons ; but, simultaneously the supposition was disproven, for Muriel extended her hand

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in farewell and Sir Geoffry with quiet tread passed towards the staircase. For a while, the candle which he held marked his descent with wayward gleam, flickering, dancing, paling, till it was swallowed up in the prevailing night ; and, as blackness once more engulfed the silent passage, the door of Muriel's room closed softly.

And Amelia understood that the danger, if danger there had been, was past. Meanwhile her renunciation remained.

## CHAPTER VII

### TWIN GODS

A SHAFT of brilliant light piercing through a chink in the shutter the next morning awoke Amelia.

The pang of renunciation pursued her. She stared drowsily at the ceiling with the haunting sense of abiding loss. Gradually, as remembrance cleared, the determination renewed to make the most of what life still presented. The nightmare of that lost chance lay behind her in the past. She recollected her new plan of action. The housemaid called her and sunshine flooded her room ; she got up and began to dress quickly. The weather was cloudless, the gladness of a gala day was in the air. She arranged her hair with unusual care, and selected from her wardrobe a new print dress which she had not yet worn. She saw with satisfaction how the cool, bright pink became her. Some flowers stood upon her dressing-table which she had intended to have pinned into her hair the evening before. She stuck them in her white belt, knotted her silk tie neatly, and at the first sound of the gong, ran downstairs.

Mrs Coleford had not yet appeared, but, to her surprise, she found Sir Geoffrey in the dining-room. He greeted her with inquiries about her health.

"I'm as well as I could be," she answered. "Quite another thing to yesterday."

"Your illness was rather sudden, wasn't it?" he looked at her intently.

"I don't seem to remember your asking me how I

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"What have you been reading?" he asked with a note of curiosity.

"Verses, mostly," she said. "If you know what I mean," she added, "the thing about verses is, they are like life set to a tune, as you may say. There's a swing about them sets one's thoughts dancing just as music sets one's feet. Mrs Coleford's fond of poetry, I should say?"

"Yes, I think so," he answered. The latter clause of her speech escaped consideration in the peculiarity of the first. It seemed to him that her train of thought and turn of phrase were alike unusual. But, meanwhile, Amelia who had introduced Mrs Coleford's name into the conversation with a dexterity on which she congratulated herself, was disconcerted to find that the topic promptly lapsed. She continued her breakfast more apathetically, dipping the little silver spoon into the yellow yolk of the egg with an air of reflection. Once she glanced across at the man opposite to her and emphasised the fact that he was powerless to break the spell of the devotion which enthralled her. He had value in her eyes only that he might serve as a channel for discussing the object of that devotion. Muriel was the link which alone, unobserved by his fatuity, prevented open enmity between herself and him.

After a while she pushed her plate away and sat drawing a pattern on the table-cloth with her fork.

"Do you remember what you said to me that first day in the drawing-room about Mrs Coleford's wanting a friend?" she demanded.

"I think I do—yes?" he answered, looking up with surprise.

"To be friends with people you must git like them in a way, you must git into their real selves, and be able to think with their thoughts and see with their eyes," she announced, speaking quickly. "Now, I want your opinion on a matter you'd be a judge of. Do you think I could ever git a bit like *her*?"

Sir Geoffry, too, pushed his plate away, and glanced at the girl as she sat with her face averted. Her

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question involved an unsuspected irony. For, in that moment, the elusive likeness of which he had been conscious was singularly apparent. That ghostly rejuvenation of a dead personality ; of Muriel, buoyant, clear-eyed, bright of glance and light of heart, supple of limb, young in hope, in faith, in the ineffable gladness of being. And, admittedly, the recognition was disturbing. It was like the hint of a dual identity, and he answered abruptly :

“Like her—no ; to like her—yes !”

Amelia looked at him sharply. “To like her—I didn’t ask you that !”

“No you didn’t,” he admitted. “But—well, you must not think personalities an impertinence if I am to answer you. In the eyes of the world, no doubt, you may have distinct advantages over Mrs Coleford, if only that you are younger than she is ; you see, the perfection of life, for her, is past, and for you lies in the future—”

“I didn’t ask you that neether !” said Amelia flushing. Her voice was a mixture of indignation and appeal. “I know my age as well as you can tell me, and, as to looks, a blind man might find little to choose between us. That wasn’t the sort of ‘like’ I meant.”

“Tell me what it is you specially want ?” he asked with obvious perplexity.

“I want to set about improving all round,” suggested Amelia. “I want to git more like herself. *You* know. There’s ways about Mrs Coleford that’s taking and all that. And she’s clever.”

“Cleverness is a gift of the gods and not to be learnt.”

“Edgecation goes a long way towards it.”

“But you’ve been educated.”

“I’ve told you the sort of stuff it was !” she said impatiently. “I say—will you, or won’t you help me ?”

“Help you?—Nothing would give me greater pleasure—but with what?”

“With books and things.”

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her weight was resting slightly upon her forward foot. Her beauty was assertive, not subtle ; but the poise of her figure in its perfection of line and curve defied criticism. Her dress was effective. Only her expression courted interpretation and was indefinable ; it was impossible to judge if her mental attitude were rude or ingenuous.

"Ah, well," Mrs Breton insisted, "you must come with me some day." Her glance roved with hinted impatience to the little watch-bangle on her wrist, thence to the floor. "What a lot of books !" she observed abruptly. "Were you"—with a note of facetiousness—"reading them all ?"

"I'd be clever to be gitting through ten at once," said Amelia, pointing the obvious. "I was making a choice, that's all."

Mrs Breton stooped and picked up one or two volumes. "All Mrs Coleford's !" she observed, looking at the flyleaf. "She is so frightfully clever !"

And Amelia was smitten with an inspiration, possibly clumsy in conception, but distinct in purpose.

"So I gather," she agreed. "Not that *I'm* a judge, you'll understand, but it's Sir Geoffry says there's no end to what she knows !"

Mrs Breton nodded. "And Sir Geoffry is an infallible authority?" There was a delicate inflection of irony in her voice. "Do you know, Miss Bradshaw, you are just what I was at your age ! We start life with a romantic admiration for the wisdom of Man, and, later, we learn as keen an appreciation for his lack of it." She turned as the door opened and Sir Geoffry entered. "Ah, *parlez du diable !*" she said playfully. "Miss Bradshaw and I were just discussing whether men have brains or not. Can you help us to a decision ?"

"It is a subject on which I am too modest to say all I feel," he asserted. Amelia saw that he was carrying his hat and stick. "But perhaps I may be permitted to suggest that the wit belongs to your sex, and the solid worth to ours."

"But wit is equivalent to both !" she retorted, drawing

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on her glove, "since it involves that, though we cannot all be good, we can all pretend to be so?"

"You imply that pretence is equivalent to reality?"

"Better!" her smiling protest appealed to Amelia. "Goodness may be mere stupidity, while pretence shows intelligent appreciation of the worth of an ideal!"

She smoothed the creases of the grey kid about her wrist and extended her hand to Amelia; "I must really not interrupt you longer! In fact I only ran up to ask after your brother-in-law. Sir Geoffry is going to take me in the Park to join some friends, and then we are going to have a little luncheon at Prince's. You are too busy to-day, I see, or I could have promised you a charming man to talk to!"

The lightness of her tread made no perceptible sound; the trail of her dress was inaudible as she passed down-stairs. Out on the door-step in the sunlight she handed her parasol to Sir Geoffry, and paused to fasten a bangle which had come unclasped when she removed her glove. "Your cousin and I have been having quite a quaint little chat," she said. "What a handsome girl she is!"

He acquiesced.

"Everyone"—she caught up her dress—"will be saying how charming Miss Bradshaw is—till she opens her lips."

"And then," he suggested, "she is original."

"Oh, very!" she answered.

They strolled on down the street, and the slate-coloured muslin blew daintily from side to side; it revealed and hid, with coquettish suggestion, a skirt of cherry-colour which trailed beneath; it distributed a fine cloud of dust in its rear; it wound skittishly around Sir Geoffry's legs; finally, it drifted into the Park.

And Amelia, from behind the flower-boxes on the balcony, alternately watched its progress, and eyed, where, at her feet, a small beetle crawled aimlessly along the stone-work. His horny wings shone with a dull metallic glitter. He moved with an awkward contortion of his legs. And imagination was surely errant which traced a connection, infinitely far-fetched, between that

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airy transit of drifting drapery and the cumbersome journeying of the insect at her feet. But the link between cause and effect is often mysterious to the casual eye ; and, as the slate-coloured muslin vanished from sight, Amelia, hitherto kindly in disposition, up-lifted her foot angrily over the glittering insect, lowered it slowly with vindictive satisfaction, and drew his small body grating along the flags. "Damn you !" she said with energy.

By luncheon-time the beauty of the weather had vanished. The sky clouded over and large rain-drops fell. Mrs Coleford decided not to go out, and late in the afternoon Amelia wandered discontentedly down Sloane Street and regaled herself with a solitary tea at Searcy's. A curious restlessness oppressed her, a leaden sense of dissatisfaction. The day which had promised so well had turned out a failure. Even her gay dress looked unsuited to the prevailing gloom. She entered the Park and bent her way to the Serpentine. She stood for some time on the bridge drinking in the breeze. The grey sky and chill air were like an evening in late autumn. Miniature waves ruffled the surface of the water, and toy boats, with spread sails, came rocking to the land. By and by the sun came out and the scene transformed. The tiny ships were snow-flecks on a sea of gold. The ripples glistened, the trees were a lighter green. Summer had returned and her spirits rose. Her gaze strayed in the direction of Stanhope Gate and she thought with envy of the crowds gathered there, and whom she could not join without the protection of a companion. At length, wearied with her solitude, she turned home-wards. At that moment her attention was attracted by a man who was walking up from Knightsbridge. Their eyes met and he stopped.

"How d'you do, Mr Lawson ?" said Amelia, extending her hand.

"Oh, it's you !" said Lawson slowly.

"It's me !" corroborated Amelia. "It's surprising to see you in these parts. Well, and have you been after your servant yet that aunt told you about ?"

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"Yes, I went after her."

"And she's likely to be a success? That's a good job. And how are you? And how's the Miss Gibsons?"

"Very well, thank you."

He turned and walked by her side.

"If you was sociable, now, I think you'd ask me to tea one day to meet them—but there," mischief appeared in Amelia's eye, "they didn't approve of me!"

"You were very different in those days;" he pointed out with unwonted sarcasm, surveying her.

"We're not all stick-in-the-muds, you know!"

"No"; he accepted the retort with a depression which disarmed Amelia.

"But there—the less said about that, the better, Mr Lawson," she observed demurely; "for I always think I treated you badly."

"You're right—the less said about bygones the better," agreed Lawson.

The passers-by looked after them. Lawson's appearance was shabby, he bore a general air of dejection. Amelia moved with conscious self-satisfaction; her head was erect, her skirts swept the gravelled path, her parasol, twirled lightly between her finger and thumb, spun, a revolving whirl of silk, behind her flowered hat. She read in the manner of the man beside her that her presence occasioned him a vague disquietude—that he resented this disquietude and considered the regret which stirred within him to be an insult to his common-sense. She thought of the evening before and wondered what strange impulse had then brought him to view her present dwelling. She was aware that he looked at her furtively; that he was thinking how the raw material had been within his grasp, how inadequately he had appreciated it, still more how he had let it slip through his fingers—yet that it had held possibilities which were now apparent. . . . And, reading his mood, Amelia was filled with extreme friendliness towards him.

"I suppose you're going on just the same," she said.

"Just the same," he answered dully.

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"And it seems such a lot's happened to me," she said wonderingly.

The slowness of his voice struck her ; his linen, she saw, was dirty. She remembered the dance they had gone to together, and recalled with a faint incredulity her impression of him that evening.

At Knightsbridge he stopped abruptly and shook hands with her. "Would you come if I asked you, one day?" he questioned awkwardly.

Amelia nodded. "Yes—that's to say if I can git away, you know."

It was nearly dressing-time when she reached home. Glancing into the dining-room she saw that three places were laid for dinner. The inference which she drew from this fact proved correct, and Sir Geoffry dined with them. Afterwards, contrary to his custom, he returned with them to the drawing-room. He did not follow Amelia out on to the leads, where, purposely, she retired to sip her coffee, but remained in the room seated upon the sofa beside Muriel. They conversed together in subdued tones, the unwontedly confidential nature of their speech seeming to refute Amelia's previous impression of their strained relations. Yet, as she moved her chair nearer to the window in order to learn the topic of their talk, she remarked something not altogether friendly in Muriel's voice, a certain coldness which confirmed that previous conviction.

"After," Muriel said—and there seemed a definite note of complaint in her remark—"having repudiated ghosts so comprehensively, you would have strayed once more into the track of their haunting. Can you not see that a wrong renounced may not be a wrong condoned, but a wrong renewed would be a wrong doubled."

"Only that the whole question of 'wrong' is simply relative," he stated. Remember, children and savages erect a fetish of their own creation and fear it ; we are apt to evolve some moral bug-bear of our imagination and wreck our lives for it. After all, we know that wrong is that eternal question of convenience to the

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community ; and, as far as the individual is concerned, the whole of life is simply a question of counting costs. For every happiness which we wrest from Fate we know that we have to pay, and the knaves of this world are those who have failed to count the costs ; the virtuous, those who have successfully weighed them."

"Those," she hinted, "who have paid their costs, may be quits with Fate. Sin may be a relative term, but, I wonder, can the same be said for hypocrisy? For the lie of convenience, for instance, which sin may entail ?"

"I think," he said, "just now you are a little bit overstrained and ready to view things out of their just proportion. The lie of convenience to which it may be advisable to defer, is nothing worse than a public appreciation of the excellence of an idea. If there are circumstances under which that idea requires modification—that is your private affair, you publicly acknowledge its ethical value. The truth is," he added, "if circumstances dictate at a time when the emotions, spiritual and sexual, are paramount, in later life, with the apathy of a control which the years have engendered, we are too ready to depreciate the part they once played in our complex economy."

And Amelia saw how Muriel bent forward and briefly bowed her face upon her slender hand. "All *that* lies away in the past," she said ; "but—how intolerably one could suffer then ! Physically and spiritually, life was out of proportion. The conclusion is not original, but age brings its compensation as well as its tragedy !"

"One arrives at the Doldrums !" he admitted, then breathed devoutly—"and, thank God when one gets there !"

"And I wonder," she said drily, meeting his glance again, "at what age you consider our moral responsibility to begin, since even the Doldrums do not involve it !"

She rose and moved away to the piano. Sir Geoffrey followed and remained by her side, turning over the pages of her music while she sang. Amelia, still out on

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the leads abstractedly drinking her coffee, eyed the room behind her framed like a picture in the ruddy glow of the lamp. The two figures at the piano were bathed in the rosy sheen ; it seemed to her fantastic imagining that they were enshrouded in an atmosphere of light and warmth, infinitely distant from the desolate outer world where she sat apart. In the softened light Muriel's face looked younger and more tender ; her gown, filmy in texture and pricked with vagrant threads of scintillating gold, defined the supple roundness of her figure, and fell away with discreet limitation from the throbbing whiteness of her breast, the languorous grace of her swaying arms. Sir Geoffry leant over her ; he listened to the music assiduously. By and by their voices rose in a duet. Amelia moved uneasily. A sense of isolation oppressed her ; the darkness was indescribably dreary, and the music was melancholy ; she was reminded of the lonely Swiss mountains. The feeling waxed to exasperation. Suddenly she emitted a faint scream. Muriel's fingers lagged upon the keys, and Sir Geoffry stepped hurriedly to the window.

"What is the matter ?" he questioned.

"I spilt the coffee !" she explained, "and I think that some's gone over on my dress." She moved where the light from within fell upon her and stood with her cup poised in one hand, looking earnestly at her skirt.

Sir Geoffry stooped and examined the white silk in the dim light. "I see no mark," he said.

"Then it must have gone on the ground," she answered, apparently reassured. She reseated herself and watched him as he lingered, lifting up his face to meet the breeze which blew freshly from the water.

"Sittin's as cheap as standing !" she suggested, after a pause.

He took the hint. Within the room Muriel played more softly.

"How did the studying get on, to-day?" he asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Oh, well enough," said Amelia carelessly. "Not that I can say—thanks to you !"

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"No—I am very sorry, but every moment of my day was full up."

"Especially after twelve," she said. -

His face was in shadow and she could not read the effect of her remark.

"She's not so bad looking, that Mrs Breton, when you take her age," she pursued thoughtfully. "But I don't seem to take a liking to her. There I'm with Mrs Coleford."

"Muriel has never discussed her with you, I believe?" He spoke coldly.

"No, but when she don't like anyone it's as plain as the nose on your face—not as plain as the face on your nose!" said Amelia with flippancy.

He did not answer. She felt that her little pleasantry had been a failure.

"But there," she said with nervous desire to mollify him, "a man shouldn't see the faults of the woman who's a liking for him!"

Sir Geoffry did not pretend to ignore her meaning. The explanation may have seemed futile that a man is inevitably flattered by the preference of a woman, even when that preference is not reciprocated. He presented for her consideration a more psychological aspect of the case.

"My dear Miss Bradshaw," he said, "don't you know that your sex is divided into two types?—the woman who loves Man, and the woman who loves a man? Mrs Breton belongs essentially to the former. In her eyes I am the unimportant unit in a crowd."

Amelia revolved the significance of the word 'unit'.

"I can't tell you much about women," she said, recognising that some comment was expected of her, "but I'll tell you one thing about men. When a woman loves a man and he don't want her to, he thinks her an ass; when he wants her to love him and she don't, he thinks her a brute."

"You seem to have a poor opinion of our sex!" his voice bespoke restored good-humour.

"That's what aunt used to say," replied Amelia

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quickly ; but she did not follow up her remark. It may have struck her that Mrs Burgess and her philosophy were not suited to her present world. " Still," she said tentatively, " I believe I haven't such a poor opinion of a man till he's in love with me, and then, when I can't think much of his taste, I can't think much of him."

" Perhaps you are too humble."

" No ; but a woman hates a soft. I believe we're the same all the world over. I remember a woman saying it was just this, that if a man fetched her a whack, she took a liking to him ; but the fellow who went down on his knees to her, she just wanted to kick."

Amelia felt herself waxing eloquent. The air had grown soft, the darkness was delicious ; a curious excitement swayed her.

" Yet all women like admiration," said Sir Geoffry.

" Ra—ther ! But it must be the right sort. Nothing namby-pamby."

Unwittingly there came to her a recollection of how the man beside her had once made love to her. The episode seemed removed by decades from her present knowledge of him. Still she could revive with disconcerting realism the masterful clasp of his arms about her, the touch of his lips. . . . A sense of suffocation oppressed her. She rose impatiently, and leant against the balustrade. From the room within, the cheap sentiment of Muriel's song came with ironical emphasis—

Alas, how easily things go wrong ;  
A sigh too much, or a kiss too long,  
There comes a mist and a weeping rain ;  
And life is never the same again.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A PROMISE AND AN INFERENCE

MINDFUL of his promise, the next morning Sir Geoffry appeared with a book for Amelia. He showed her where he had written her name on the fly-leaf. She received it with civility, but her face bore an expression of discouragement as she turned its pages.

"It's sort of history," she observed, "and I've done history."

"So have I—at school," he replied. "But I found, afterwards, there were a few things I had not read. Suppose you try, say, an hour at that, this morning—it's amusing—and later in the day we'll talk it over."

She acquiesced doubtfully, but about noon when he looked in to ascertain the success of his experiment, he found her still reading.

"It's queer to think they were all real people once, just the same as you and me," she observed.

"Ah! that's the point of it," he said.

"You see," she added, apologetically, "it all reads like things in a story, and not as if it had ever been."

He turned over the pages of the book, questioning her cautiously about what she had read. Here and there he paused to dwell upon some anecdote or paragraph which he felt might interest her, or to suggest what further books he advised her to study. The *naïveté* of her comments, the uncertainty of her taste, diverted him. He felt again that to her very ignorance she owed her originality. Her mind was quick to absorb the ideas which were presented to her, while the

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attitude which she adopted towards them was invariably unexpected.

As a result of this conclusion he did what, in his perfunctory promise, he had not at first contemplated, and set apart a certain time each morning to read with her or to assist her in understanding what she had already read. His hours of leisure in London occasionally hung heavy on his hands, and he accepted this novel method of lessening their incipient tediousness. The situation held all the flavour of piquancy ; the girl's exceptional beauty, her incredible relationship to himself, her engrafted connection with his world, and her amusing mental alienation from it ; even the recognition of the laudable nature of this his effort to render her assistance, lent to his attitude towards her an added attraction, and sensibly enhanced the affinity of sex for sex. And, meanwhile, Amelia's manner towards him was a mixture of embarrassment and friendliness. Although shrewdly aware that his assistance depended on the fact that she should possess and maintain attraction in his eyes, she yet never failed to remind herself of the true motive of her friendliness. Sir Geoffry was the tool by means of which she was fashioning herself into a semblance of Muriel, and her loyalty to her purpose never missed an opportunity of furthering it. Whenever an opening occurred for introducing Muriel's name into the conversation she never failed to do so. Each book which he mentioned she strove faithfully to ascertain whether Muriel had read and approved it. Each incident or paragraph which arrested her attention she endeavoured as carefully to glean what would probably be Muriel's opinion with regard to it. Sir Geoffry noticed this idiosyncrasy and finally remarked upon it.

"Why are you always so anxious to know what Muriel will think about everything?" he asked with curiosity. "Why don't you talk things over with her yourself? Or do you still fancy she dislikes you?"

His question threw Amelia into a very obvious confusion. Love, however unflinching in its loyalty,

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shrinks from the possible breath of ridicule or lack of comprehension with a sensitiveness which is torture. Perhaps it is because we are unwillingly aware of the limitations of the beloved that we dread having that recognition thrust upon us too obtrusively. But, seeing Amelia's discomfiture, Sir Geoffry forbore to pursue inquiry, while he recalled how, in Muriel's presence, she invariably became tongue-tied, and how the quaintness of speech, which was her charm, deserted her.

But he tried to explain something of his conclusions to Muriel.

"Perhaps you are right," she answered. "She may be all you say—intelligent and exceptionally original ; and I appreciate her most fully on one point where she does not appreciate herself—her surprising absence of any vulgar pride towards those who were kind to her under her former conditions ; but the fact remains that she bores me. I think she gets on my nerves ! I am for ever afraid of what she is going to say or do, and in the end it always proves so inexpressibly ordinary, that I find myself wishing her more of a fiasco ! "

"If your experiment has become a nuisance to you," he suggested, "why carry it further? You are under no obligation to do so."

"Oh, but I am !" she denied quickly. "There we come to an illustration of your beautiful institution The Home. I have established Amelia as my child—(few mothers have my poor privilege of selection !)—and here she must remain, she boring me and I boring her, till marriage transplants her to another home. After all," she added more pensively, "I suppose we desire children principally because we cling to the delusion that we can make them all that we ourselves have failed to be. Amelia is not very plastic material, but she represents in my life that desirable adjunct—a duty ready-born—and she may be that which I have failed to be—happy."

A few days afterwards she entered the room where Sir Geoffry and Amelia were reading. The gong had sounded for luncheon but they were still occupied with

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a book which was ostentatiously outspread between them. "We are finishing lessons," Sir Geoffry pointed out.

She accepted the fact gravely. "Saturday is a half-holiday," she said; "I shall take you down to Hurlingham this afternoon. The rest will do us all good."

The shadows were lengthening when they started, but the intensity of the heat seemed undiminished. They drove through the hot, bright streets—along the noisy Brompton Road with its dust and turmoil; down the King's Road where the air was full of the odours of Saturday marketing; on past Parson's Green with its dingy crowd of loafers, and into the shade of the Hurlingham Lane. Amelia had given herself up to the luxury of the hour. The swift, smooth motion of the carriage was agreeable, a sense of well-being impressed her. The sight of the tired throng in the dusty streets pleased her by force of contrast. Once she pictured the atmosphere of Osgood's on such an afternoon, the smell of food from the basement, the long hours of standing. . . . She shook out her skirts with an air of complacency as she stepped from the carriage. The cool green gardens appealed to her eye. The sight of the gaily-dressed crowd gratified her imagination with the reflection that she was about to form part of it. As they sauntered past the conservatory she saw her flowing skirts reflected in the glass. Satisfaction made her communicative.

"It's queer," she said, "how a pritty dress and just the thinking everything's all right with you makes you feel good. I could be downright wicked with an ugly thing on!"

Sir Geoffry glanced at Mrs Coleford. "I feel a much better Christian in a well-cut coat," he agreed.

"Which shows," Muriel replied lightly, "how a belief in oneself is essential to godliness; and—that the belief should extend to other people."

They secured a table in the shade. Amelia, sipping her tea, looked about her. To the left was the lawn

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with striped umbrellas and marble tables. Crowds trailed past on their way to feed. She studied the variety and perfection of the dresses with infinite appreciation. The dreamy tones of the Hungarian band came on the breeze.

Her glance straying furtively, feasted on Mrs Coleford's perfection. She remarked the manner in which Muriel held her cup, and adopted it. She contrasted her jealously with the other women who passed in review. And while faith in her own pretensions waned, she saw with satisfaction that Mrs Coleford suffered no eclipse from such universal rivalry. Her exquisite dress, the distinctive grace of her figure, were without comparison. Admiration fed Amelia's hero-worship agreeably ; she felt in harmony with the world and its conditions.

"How much less women must have dreaded advancing years in the days of powder and patches," Sir Geoffry observed, lazily watching the crowds which were passing. "In days when art gave all alike the rose of youth and the snows of age, a fading complexion and grey hair must have been a farce. It seems to have been more successful to play prettily at age as they did then, than to ape youth ridiculously as they do now !"

Amelia, the onlooker, remarked the sensitive colour which flushed and paled in Mrs Coleford's face.

"And yet," he added, "however atrocious the way in which a woman clings to her youth, I suppose there is a pathos about it. To the average woman there are only ten years of living. The years before are a longing ; the years after—a remembrance."

"Certainly all her life-story lies in these years," she agreed indifferently.

"And yet, life has no story," he contradicted with a smile ; "it is a series of disjointed incidents."

She shook her head. "I should define each woman's life as a love-story—with a superfluous epilogue."

Amelia nudged his elbow abruptly. "I say," she said in a hurried undertone, "if there isn't Mrs Breton again ! There's no gittin' away from that woman !"

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The little widow was already coming towards them, her black-and-white silk rustling crisply over the grass. Colonel Banks was following in her wake.

"Will you take pity on two hungry souls?" she said—"and let us share your table. Ah, how nice of you!" as Mrs Coleford moved her chair back to make room for them.

"Dear me, this is very pleasant," said the Colonel with satisfaction, lowering himself slowly into his seat. "I don't often come here on Saturday, but to-day my wife is in bed with a chill, and Mrs Breton took compassion on me and forced me out to this gathering of the Unemployed."

"I told him as an inducement that he would be at a premium here," said Mrs Breton, waving frantically to a waiter for some tea. "Hurlingham is a peaceful hen-coop where men only come when they are bored or in love."

"Then it is satisfactory to see how few of us are in either condition," said Sir Geoffry.

Mrs Breton flashed a glance at him, but it was Mrs Coleford who spoke.

"At least, this place should do away with the fallacy that we women are not content with our own society."

"Or," added Mrs Breton, "that we don't trouble to put on our best frocks for it." She looked round restlessly. "All things come to those who wait," she suggested, "except the waiter."

An inspector came in answer to her gesticulations, and soon she was pouring tea briskly into the white and gilt cups. "I was almost afraid of interrupting you when we caught sight of you," she observed parenthetically, "you looked as if you were having such a serious discussion."

"We were discussing the merits of rouge and powder," Muriel smiled.

"Pigments?" Mrs Breton shrugged her plump shoulders. "Ask any woman if she has powder on her nose and she will tell you 'yes,' she uses it for the good of her skin; suggest that she has rouge on her cheeks

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and she will cut you for life. Powder is an indiscretion, but rouge is an immorality."

"We were defining their rejuvenating qualities," Muriel suggested.

"Well, I fancy we have one absolutely disinterested umpire present,"—Mrs Breton's glance instanced Amelia; and Amelia, responding, furrowed her brows while embarrassment clipped her speech.

"As far as I'm concerned," she said shortly, "I don't see where the objection comes in between putting pink powder on one part of your face or white powder on another. It's just foolishness!"

Mrs Breton eyed her with a faint curiosity; then leant towards Muriel. "The objection to rouge"—her voice had dropped to a penetrating whisper—"is that it stands for the outward and visible sign of an inward and physical disgrace."

The Colonel tilted his hat to shade his eyes, and swayed his chair gently backwards. "Anyway, as I say, however the result is arrived at, it's very satisfactory," he remarked. "I don't often come here or in the Park when it is crowded, but whenever I do, the same thing strikes me—in no country in the world does one see such beautiful women, exquisitely dressed," he bowed towards the tea-table, "or such a splendid race of men, as in England."

"One word for us and two for yourself," said Mrs Breton flippantly; "but you know you are the type of optimistic Englishman. There are two types—the Englishman who runs down everything English because it is English, and the Englishman who, with every moment of his breath, thanks God that he is not as other men are—miserable foreigners. The former are enraging, the latter amusing."

"I'm glad I amuse you," said the Colonel. "If one has no other mission in life, that is at least an excuse for existence."

"Oh *you*," she persisted, "are the type of Englishman who would write a leading article for the 'Times' on the enormity of a lion and bull fight in France and

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assure one that in England the fox enjoys being hunted!"

"Well, that is only another way of pointing out that the one has the elements of a fine sport, while the other is a loathesome spectacle."

"A fine sport! what a delightfully masculine definition! I wonder if your pigeon-shooting here is a 'fine sport' for the nation to be proud of? Or coursing—which I know you patronise—to see a whole crowd of horses, dogs, and well-educated Englishmen and women turn out, without the remotest danger to themselves, to torment one little timid, harmless, terrified animal! Is there nothing loathesome in that spectacle?—But apparently a sport is only disgusting when the animals concerned are able to defend themselves."

"On the same system," suggested Sir Geoffry, "as the sublime egoism of our laws, which makes it legal to torture any animal not useful to us domestically."

Momentarily, Mrs Coleford's gaze sought Sir Geoffry, and it seemed to Amelia that her eyes took a deeper shadow. "To me," she said with seriousness, "sport where there is personal danger—where the odds are even—is at worst excusable. But so much that is called sport—taking advantage of the helplessness of a weaker creature—is simply a cowardly remnant of barbarism."

"My dear Mrs Coleford," said the Colonel, stirring his tea complacently, "if it is cowardly ever to take advantage of the weakness of any living thing, how about the animals which are slaughtered for food for you? By your own showing, a cannibal is a finer fellow since he kills and eats only where the odds are even."

"Certainly," interpolated Mrs Breton. "I should find it convincing logic that, if I did not eat my friend, my friend would eat me!"

"Anyhow, you must admit," pursued the Colonel, "that we English are far ahead of the other nations in our laws for the defenceless. As to sport, a little cruelty is necessary to prevent the world getting too effeminate. Too much sentiment in these matters becomes mawkish."

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Muriel dismissed the statement with a smile. "Of course, it is hopeless running counter to the pet prejudices of the age in which one happens to live, but we all know that the sport of one age is invariably the barbarism of the next, just as the fashion of one age is the vulgarism of the next, and the religion of one age the superstition of the next."

Mrs Breton nodded her head approvingly. "Ah, well," she said, "in old days, if one had ventured to suggest that there was anything at all unpleasant in seeing one's fellow-creatures chewed up by lions in the arena, one would have been considered hopelessly mawkish. But I wonder, is there any crime a man is so afraid of as being accused of being tender-hearted? When they have sufficient imagination to develop it, they haven't the moral courage to live up to it."

"Oh, no doubt we men are moral cowards among the rest of our crimes!" said the Colonel, grimly.

"We'll divide the honours," suggested Muriel. "I think men have the most physical courage and women moral courage."

"As you will," said the Colonel deprecatingly; "but I must say, I wish your sex would expend a little of your vaunted pity on the lords of creation. Why reserve it all for the lower animals?"

"They are less pretentious and so superior!" said Mrs Breton, as she held a plateful of cake towards him. "Here, Colonel, if you argue so much you'll get no tea. Hurlingham, with all its riches, you know, is famous for two kinds of cakes—the brown, which tastes of shoe-leather and bad tobacco, and the yellow, which is a compound of stale eggs and sand."

A faint discontent pouted Amelia's lips. She leant back in her chair, while her pale mauve draperies fell about her in diaphanous folds. Her gaze dwelt on the cool green vistas of turf which outspread before her. The lack of a congenial companion oppressed her. She reflected how Mab Butler would have appreciated these surroundings. If Mab had been present they would have discussed the passers-by and their dresses, and quizzed

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them together. But to her present company, novelty was unknown ; the sight of each other's perfection stirred little comment, familiarity had destroyed appreciation.

By and by the whole party rose and wandered single-file in and out of the little marble tables. Amelia was not slow to observe that people looked after her as she passed. She surveyed her critics through the lace flounce of her parasol, and bent her attention to catch their criticisms. Once and yet again she overheard a flattering verdict upon her dress and her appearance. It was borne in upon her that this crowd, whom she had regarded with awe, regarded her with admiration. Her mood, easily affected by trivialities, transformed. And while the novelty of her position and its sense of unreality held the keynote of its fascination, a more subtle gratification lay in the discovery that her own personal value had not diminished in this new world where she found herself. The experience reassured ; it intoxicated. In the brief walk up the lawn her former life seemed to recede, to lie behind her like an unsubstantial shadow. She found herself looking back with a species of contempt at the days before she had been initiated into this grand fulness of living.

They stood for a while looking at the quaint dresses of the Hungarian band, then turned down by the water where there was an Obstacle Race. The crush increased, and Amelia found herself alone with Sir Geoffry, whether by chance or by design on his part, she could not decide. He discovered an open space where she could stand and whence she could watch the proceedings with comfort. The race amused her ; the little round tubs in which the men rowed themselves across the water, the great ungainly dolls which they carried, the quick exciting gallop to the winning-post. She stuck her parasol in the soft earth near the water, and left her hands free to clap if she found that other people did so. "They're for all the world like a pack of babies," she pronounced ; "if it was children, now, amusing themselves with such silliness, we'd be making fun of them !" The laughter, the sunshine, the gaiety of her surroundings further infected

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Amelia's spirits. Her discontent had vanished. A regret occurred to her for her temporary separation from Muriel, and she strove to persuade herself that this was acute, but a fund of unquenchable happiness welled within her. Each time, when the glance of the man beside her rested upon her, the consciousness of her own good looks came pleasantly to her.

And to Sir Geoffry her spontaneous enjoyment was refreshing, while her abrupt lapses into a state of repression were equally unexpected. And meanwhile, her laughter rang with a haunting familiarity, while notes in her voice stirred recollection perversely. The breeze twined her skirts about her supple figure, it tinted her cheeks with a radiant colour. Once, he had a curious sensation that the hand of Time was reversed, that two people who had been dead were resuming the thread of life again—a fateful thread with its inextricable tangles and complications already woven for their confusion.

"You're looking solemn enough," she said, suddenly turning to him; "but I suppose it's no treat to you coming to a place like this?"

"That depends," he suggested pointedly.

Amelia smiled. Out in the bright sunshine she felt a sense of security; his presence did not influence her in that pre-eminently unsatisfactory manner which she had experienced on the balcony in the dusk.

"Men never enjoy a thing for the thing's sake," she said with a note of contempt; "they must always hunt about for an excuse for finding it pleasant. Now, when I'm happy, I'm happy and done with it. I want no reasons!"

"Sometimes one cannot help knowing the reason!" He could not rid himself of the recognition that Amelia was not wholly of his class; that, in the blameless flippancy of his intercourse with her, a certain crudeness of method was admissible, even necessary, to frame it acceptable to her comprehension.

And Amelia smiled again. There was no attempted seriousness in his voice to deceive or provoke, but the inference of the little speech was agreeable. In these

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days she was not unversed in the ways of men ; and men, whatever their class, talked to pretty girls with much of a muchness. Sir Geoffry's present line of conversation was understandable, where his previous attitude of banter had angered her.

The race over, they sauntered along by the Thames. Upon the opposite bank with hideous distinctness, rose a vista of ugly red buildings. The water lay palely between ; pleasure boats, gaudy in the sunlight, lent to it an element of picturesqueness. And along the sandy path Amelia trod with a crisp, swinging tread. She had removed her gloves and her bare hands swayed in time to each supple movement of her body. The pointless little remarks in which she indulged, were delivered with a careless provocation which added to her charm. The coquetry of her manner had deepened unconsciously. There was a subtle difference between her attitude towards Sir Geoffry during the morning readings and her attitude now. She had grasped that the appreciation of her looks which society accorded must have enhanced her value in his eyes. During the morning he was her instructor, her superior ; the wayward friendliness which existed between them left her nervous, gauche, subordinate. Now the situation seemed mysteriously reversed. She dominated. His manner was deferential. She toyed with her uncertain sense of power, probing it with misgiving, testing it with a growing triumph.

And meanwhile, Sir Geoffry recognised that the girl's beauty was a more potent factor in his intercourse with her than he had been willing to admit. He had regarded her in the light of a problem, a diversion, and it seemed impossible that she should possess a charm which could dominate. He accepted the fact with incredulity. Yet the suggestion was pleasurable, even while he denied its existence.

The shadows had grown more purple and the sunshine more golden as they turned back towards the polo-ground. Amelia paused to look with kindling eyes upon the game, while Sir Geoffry endeavoured to explain it to her. The nimble ponies with their sleek, brown hides, the gay

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jackets of the riders pleased her. The goals at the end reminded her of gallows, and she failed to grasp their significance.

"I shall be playing this myself, soon," he observed.

"Do you come here?" she asked.

"No; I mean in Scotland. I am going on the sixth." Amelia studied the clock opposite.

"So you're off again," she said after a silence. "Are you staying long?"

"Till August," he said. He saw with amusement and with a sudden quickening of his pulse that something of the gladness was gone from her face.

"Till August?" she echoed. She glanced at him quickly. "A lot of good our beginning lessons if you're to be off at once!"

"We must make the most of the time that we have."

"One can't do more than a certain amount a day," she objected.

"Of course I am sorry to go if I am of use to you"; he was looking at her intently. "But I don't suppose you will really mind. I believe you would prove a lazy pupil."

Amelia prodded the ground with her parasol. "You make out you're sorry," she returned; "it's just what a man *would* say; but you could please yourself fast enough if you wanted to."

"Could I?" he answered. Opportunely a bit of thistle-down came floating past, a fleeting star against the paling sky. "Perhaps there are considerations which determine my actions and over which I have as little control as that bit of silver fluff has to direct the wind which steers it."

He observed that Amelia was gazing at the right-hand goal; but the ponies were galloping towards the left.

And out of a recklessness born of—who shall say?—a spirit of adventure, the spell of the June brightness, a trick of remembrance?—Sir Geoffry clenched a passing whim.

"We made one bargain; shall we make another? If you will tell me that my help is of vital use to you—that

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you really wish me to stay—I will promise to delay my departure to the end of the month."

The laughter flashed back to Amelia's face. She cast a glance at him through her dark lashes. "That's three weeks clear," she suggested. "But men's promises are like pie-crust!"

"Mine are not made for the proverbial reason. *Am I to go or stay?*"

There was a pause. It grew fatefully big with an importance which seemed to Sir Geoffry to have become inadvertently attached to it. Amelia prodded the soft turf with tireless energy. "I'd be sorry you should go," she conceded at length in a low voice.

"Then you have my promise," he answered. Already, a marked regret had chilled his speech, but Amelia read only effort in its coldness.

There came a clatter of hoofs as the ponies scampered near the barrier; the turf flew to right and left, a white ball spun in the air, and a voice broke on their ears.

"If there is a place one's likely to be killed—" Mrs Breton's remark died away in a suppressed scream. "Well, I must say I am always thankful when I get home from Hurlingham with what little brains I possess safely inside my head!—My dear Miss Bradshaw," turning to Amelia with the little matronly manner which she affected towards the unmarried, "I have been looking for you. Mrs Coleford has met some friends who are anxious to have a lift back, so I insisted that I should drive you home. She wouldn't hear of it at first, but I explained that the Colonel wasn't a bit afraid of going on the small seat. The only nuisance is, I am afraid we must be going, as he has to dine out. I am so sorry to take you away so early! But perhaps we might have time to sit in the Park for a little. I am so sorry I can't offer you a lift, Sir Geoffry, I have only got the Victoria."

"Oh, I shall go back in a hansom," he said.

They strolled away over the smooth lawn; through the scattered crowd, clusters of colour on the sunny grass; past the coaches, horseless blocks of yellow or black, studded with the same variegated human freight;

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on to the pale yellow road where the carriages were drawn in line. Amelia knew that Sir Geoffry helped her into the Victoria, but she avoided his glance. Soon the scenes of the previous drive were reproduced :—The dusty lane with the over-arching trees, Parson's Green with its dingy loafers, the streets with the dim haze of sunshine, the ponderous omnibuses, the hot, tired horses. The Colonel and Mrs Breton were talking briskly, while the latter strove to keep his balance on the small seat opposite. Once Amelia listened.

"Ah, well," Mrs Breton was saying, with a neatly effective sigh, "love is very like the measles. One is bound to have it once. And it is a good thing to get it over young. One never takes it so badly the second time."

"The worst of love," the Colonel responded comprehensively, "is that it makes a fellow make such a confounded ass of himself!"

At Knightsbridge he left them, and the carriage turned into the Park ; opposite Stanhope Gate it drew up, and Mrs Breton and Amelia got out to sit for a while under the trees. The Park was unusually crowded for Saturday. Before many moments had passed, Mrs Breton had been joined by several acquaintances, and Amelia, left out of their conversation, sat idly watching the passers-by. Soon her gaze, traversing a line of unfamiliar faces, paused. To the left, where the pathway widened, a little group had gathered to eye the drifting crowd. Their dress and general appearance was suburban and incongruous with their surroundings ; while, foremost amongst them, and conspicuous by the brightness of its colour, Amelia espied a remembered gown. She glanced thoughtfully at Mrs Breton ; decision knit her lips—a smile parted them ; she rose and trod away across the grass.

"Why, Mab !" she said, extending her hand as she gained the path.

"Why, it's Milly !" exclaimed Mab Butler awkwardly.

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"What a lucky chance my meeting you ; And how are you—but I needn't ask !"

"Me? Oh, I'm as fit as a fiddle and so's Bob. But talk of looking well, I'm sure *you* are, and such a swell, Milly ! What a lovely dress ! I was looking at it before ever I saw who was in it."—Amelia glanced complacently at her lavender muslin and floating sash.—"But, I say, d'you know you went on Thursday and never settled a day to come and see us—you know you said you'd come some day. You'll find the air lovely out our way."

"Oh, I'll come right enough, only I'm in such a rush just now, I don't know when I've got free—that's a fact. But, Mab, I must have a bit of a talk with you now I've found you. Come along and sit with us a bit."

"But you're with friends and I don't know them," she objected. "They mightn't like it. Besides there's Bob—"

"He's gone across to see Jenny into her 'bus, dear," vouchsafed a girl in red who stood beside Mab. "But if you like to go along with your friend, I'll wait here and tell him you'll be back soon."

"That's right—do come along for a bit, it's the only way to see you in these days," said Amelia, placing a constraining hand on Mab's arm. They moved a few steps together over the grass, but, as they approached the circle under the trees, Mab again demurred.

"I don't think I'll come, dear," she said.

"You silly, they won't eat you !" responded Amelia. She drew Mab unwillingly towards Mrs Breton, introduced her with a faint malice, and compelled her into a neighbouring chair. Meanwhile, her glance criticised without compunction. Mab in her heavy peacock cashmere, with feathered hat and yellow kid gloves, contrasted disadvantageously with the company in which she was placed. But the fact held a psychological interest for Amelia. It had supplied her with the motive for her present conduct.

And Mab, who read disapprobation in Mrs Breton's

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glance, sat on the edge of her chair, and talked volubly to cover her embarrassment.

"I saw your aunt, yesterday," she said, after various attempts at disjointed conversation.

"And how's aunt?" asked Amelia absently.

"She's just got a job out Hornsey way, not far from us, and I fancy it's a good one. She actually let on to us that she'd come up to the Park the other day with Maria for an outing. Fancy Mrs Burgess doing the grand like that! It did make Bob and me laugh when she told us. I think she and Maria thought they'd see you swelling it in a carriage, but they couldn't find you, so they went on to listen to the band."

"No?" said Amelia vaguely. Looking at Mab's gloves she recalled that she, too, had once affected that particular shade of gamboge.

"I left the baby with my sister when I came out to-day. He's too much of a tug to bring him up here. I do want you to see him, Milly."

"Oh, I'll come right enough," said Amelia. "But just lately I haven't had time to turn round. But I expect I'll see you here again."

"Oh, Bob and me used to come pretty frequent, but Sundays now we often go biking, it's nice getting further out of London when you can. And you're by way of having no end of a time still, I suppose?"

Amelia nodded. "Take it all round," she answered casually.

"And how's the Special?" Mab spoke in an arch but audible whisper.

Amelia coloured and moved impatiently. "I told you there isn't one!" she said.

"Oh, but I expect that is only there's such lots to choose from you don't know which is which at times! I'm sure to see you walking with him some day."

Suddenly Mab got up—"I must be off, there's Bob yonder waving his stick at me over the railing. I expect he's been wondering whatever had got me."

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Amelia hesitated. The need for comprehension and comradeship was strong upon her ; she rose. "I say," she said in an undertone, "can't you send Bob on with the others and I'll come a bit up the Avenue with you? Just beckon to him he's to go on, and that you'll join him higher up."

Mab nodded intelligently ; a few graphic gesticulations on her part conveyed the required information to Bob Butler, and Amelia, vouchsafing a brief explanation to Mrs Breton, linked her arm in Mab's and cut quickly across the grass.

"Look here," she began as soon as they were out of earshot, you shouldn't go talking like that about my 'special' before that Mrs Breton. It's a sore point, and you put your foot in it, I can tell you."

"Did I?" said Mab, with quick comprehension. "You mean you're both gone on the same party? But she's an old thing!"

"She wouldn't be best pleased to hear you say so," said Amelia with extreme satisfaction. "But it's not me that's gone on anyone—it's him on me."

"I shouldn't wonder if it's a bit of both," said Mab sagely. "But you always was a flirt, Milly!"

"I *would* tell you something, Mab," said Amelia insinuatingly ; "but that's the worst of talking to married people, whatever you tell one half is always talked over with the other half. One knows that for a certainty."

"Only when they're first married. But with Bob and me, well, baby's going on for a year old."

"Anyway, I've a good mind to tell you and chance it. Look here, you remember my mentioning about the man I met at the ball I went to? the man you asked the other day if I'd ever met since?"

"Ra—ther. But that's never the one now?"

Amelia nodded.

Mab laughed loudly.

"And now you're sweet on each other! Well, how oddly things turn out!"

## A Promise and an Inference

"Him on me," corrected Amelia sharply.

"Anyhow you swore you'd be even with him, and you've done it. You are a cure, Milly! But what did you say when he put the question?"

"He hasn't exactly put it—he's not one that says much, you'll understand, that isn't his way. Besides I gave him such a setting-to-rights a time back, he's likely to be cautious."

"Then how do you know he's gone on you if he's never told you so?" said Mab with irritating scepticism.

"Oh, there's ways of knowing," said Amelia. "Not that I was sure of it till to-day, but to-day—" she paused.

"Well, tell us what he said. You needn't mind me."

The conversation at Hurlingham presented itself to Amelia for reconsideration. Brought under the search-light of Mab's practical questioning, the faint glamour of romance which had vested it seemed to fade. So little had been said. . . . And yet, there returned upon her the conviction which made her blood dance and her brain whirl.

"Oh, you'll not understand," she said quickly; "it's not what a man says, it's the little way with him that tells. And gentlemen don't make love quite like—" she hesitated for a sufficiently tactful expression—"quite like men in trade."

But the delicacy with which she had expressed herself was lost on Mab.

"I'd have thought a man was a man all the world over," she responded shortly. "And if he was too big a swell to make love to me in the usual way, he might take himself off—and the quicker the better, as far as I was concerned. But, of course, you know your own affairs best."

Amelia felt a return of the dislike with which Mab occasionally inspired her. She regretted her confidence. Under the pretence of picking up her dress, she withdrew her arm from the clasp of her friend.

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"Well, I must be gitting back," she said. "And remember, I only just mentioned these facts seeing that you knew what had gone before and that you'd probably be interested."

"And of course I am! Oh, come a bit further, Milly, I haven't heard half I want to, yet. Do you mean to have him when he pops?"

A brilliant colour dyed Amelia's face. "Oh, I haven't got as far as that yet," she said hurriedly. "It depends how things go. Of course, you'll understand, he'd be nothing of a match for me as things are; and it's just that—" she hesitated how to convey to Mab's comprehension the complex emotions which were perplexing to herself—"there's something in keeping company that puts you in spirits, that, as you used to express it, seems to make life more of a catch! And when it's a man that's scorned you—well, you just feel game to lie low till he's ever so far gone, and then lead him a dance!"

Amelia's eyes were sparkling, the colour was glowing more warmly in her cheeks. Mab studied her with frank attention.

"Don't you tell *me*!" she said. "It's six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. You're every bit as gone on him as you say he is on you. We'll be being asked to the wedding before you can say Jack Robinson! Bob will laugh fit to split himself over it."

"But you promised not to tell him," said Amelia, vexed. "How sillily you do talk—I'm downright sorry I ever mentioned it. Anyhow, I must git back, or Mrs Breton'll be in a tearing rage."

She extended her hand in farewell. A ruddy sunset was piercing the stems of the trees; it's tawny gleam fell upon her fluttering skirts and on her radiant face.

"Never you mind, dear," said Mab, looking at her with admiration, "you're beauty enough to get what you want. Here, give us a kiss for the sake of old times."

## A Promise and an Inference

Amelia complied, and waved her parasol amicably as she turned back.

"Give my love to aunt when you see her, and tell her I'll come and see her when I can, but it's a long way out Hornsey way."

## CHAPTER IX

### AMELIA PROGRESSES

ON rejoining the group under the trees, the dissatisfaction visible upon Mrs Breton's face gratified Amelia. The success of her venture was apparent. It was not, however, till they were driving home that Mrs Breton pursued inquiry.

"Your friend," she observed thoughtfully—"that healthy-looking young woman in a peacock-blue dress, who is she?"

"What—Mab Butler?" said Amelia; "she's a very old pal of mine."

"She dresses rather peculiarly."

"Perhaps she doesn't go to a West-End firm."

"Was that her husband, that fat little man the other side of the railing who waved his stick to her? What is he?"

"Oh, Bob Butler? You'd like him! He's a very pleasant sort of fellow. He keeps a tobacconist's shop out Hornsey way."

Mrs Breton's interest seemed to augment. "Perhaps," she suggested cautiously, "you were at school together? In our days, even at the best schools, one never can feel certain—"

"We weren't at school together," said Amelia shortly. "We'd diggings together a time back. And her people are well-to-do enough for all she's a bad dresser."

On re-entering the house, Amelia went straight to the dining-room. Two places only were laid at the table; the third chair, so often occupied, was drawn up significantly before a blank space of cloth. The inference was

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disappointing, but she accepted it with philosophy, recognising that Sir Geoffry's absence that evening meant only the postponement of what was, after all, assured. His presence at that particular juncture would certainly have been rife with an unusual interest ; but the meeting, if postponed to-night, would but occur on the morrow ; and, in the same manner, if all that was imminent did not come to pass on any one occasion, it would inevitably do so on another. . . . Meanwhile, such postponement meant only the continuance of a pleasurable dalliance. . . . Among the lower classes, courtship and marriage are matters of comparatively careless selection and quick arrangement. And to Amelia, recalling how John Lawson had followed up his first overtures with prompt conclusion, it did not appear comprehensible that a man of Sir Geoffry's superior education and courtesy should fall short of that standard, even to the extent of dallying unduly in proceeding to the conclusion at which his manner so plainly hinted.

True, the recollection of his first defection in this respect might have been calculated to promote misgiving ; but Amelia had developed an insight which—however it failed to comprise the present—could realise how far she had fallen short of Sir Geoffry's ideas of fitness in the past. In dress and ways she had then belonged to a class beneath his own. And, in the light of present knowledge, she could view his behaviour at that time, not only with excuse, but with a satisfactory belief that her attraction in his eyes had been permanent as well as actual, since the present was surely but a continuance,—as it was an evidence of the genuineness of what had gone before.

Yet, as she entered the drawing-room, a counter-influence to her present mood made itself felt. Muriel was seated in the agreeable dimness of the shaded room ; and, as Amelia's gaze fell upon the object of her recent hero-worship, the magnetism of that sentiment reasserted itself in opposition to the attraction of sex. The fascination of Mrs Coleford's presence seemed to breathe from her surroundings, with mesmeric effect. The soft light

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of the room, inexpressibly soothing after the glare of the vivid world without, its sense of quietude, of remoteness from that outer din, the perfection of its arrangement, the dainty knick-knacks, each befitting the place assigned to it with such entire harmony, the pale chintzes and gay cushions, the all-pervading scent of flowers, the great clusters of blossoms—delicate white and lemon, bright pink and flaming crimson—in the clear bowls of glass,—all seemed the expression of a personality which charmed. A sense of disloyalty assailed Amelia ; a knowledge that, in the self-deception of her intercourse with Sir Geoffry, she had failed in allegiance to her original purpose. She thrust the recognition from her, and tried to ignore her present perplexity of conflicting feelings.

Mrs Coleford looked up : “Have you enjoyed yourself ?” she asked.

Amelia nodded. “Very much,” she answered, with the terseness which characterised her communications to Mrs Coleford.

She came nearer, and stood flicking the edge of the table with the gloves which she held in her hands. There was about her an air of expectancy, of suppressed exultation which did not escape Muriel’s notice.

“Mrs Breton brought me back,” she vouchsafed. “We’ve been in the Park a bit. But there were not so many well-dressed people there to-day.”

Mrs Coleford still took note of the definite air of satisfaction which pervaded her. “Was anyone with you ?” she asked.

Amelia replied in the negative. “The Colonel went home,” she explained.

Muriel’s glance reverted to her book, then resumed its inspection of the girl’s face. “Perhaps,” she suggested, “as you may be often meeting Mrs Breton, I ought to warn you to be a little guarded in your conversation with her. She is very inquisitive, and is not always good-natured in her remarks. And she is a little apt to be jealous of women whom she fancies are more successful socially than herself.”

Amelia was pleased. The little note of intimacy which

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the communication involved was grateful to her ; but, mindful of her former rebuff, she proceeded with caution. "I wish you'd tell me," she said—"should you, for your part, say that Mrs Breton is anything much?"

Muriel devoted consideration to her reply.

"I am not quite sure that I know from what point of view you ask," she said. "Personally, I do not consider Mrs Breton very good form."

"You mean she's not all she ought to be?"

"Not at all." The directnesss of the question enforced a directness of reply. "Socially, Mrs Breton is all right, or I should not let you be seen with her. But she goes everywhere, and later, you will consider that to be the one criterion of an irreproachable woman and a desirable acquaintance!"

Amelia's uncertainty sheathed itself in silence.

"You see," pursued Mrs Coleford in a tone, of the seriousness of which Amelia did not feel assured, "society decides our actions entirely on the simple sheep-like principle of following the majority. It saves an infinity of trouble and waste of brain-tissue ; and the majority are essentially practical. Mrs Breton, for instance, is very rich."

"But you're not one of the sort to whom money's everything," ventured Amelia.

"Certainly I should not know a woman if there was anything definite against her, however rich," agreed Muriel ; "but, you see, that is not the case with Mrs Breton. As far as I am concerned, she is an old school acquaintance of mine, and therefore it is a friendship of chance not choice. I may not admire her ; and I certainly consider that the man who eventually marries her will have to be more practical than romantic."

And Amelia pondering this enigmatic speech as she went upstairs, traced a link between it and her own information vouchsafed to Muriel a time back. So far as Mrs Coleford knew, Sir Geoffry might reciprocate Mrs Breton's infatuation for him (an infatuation to which Amelia had first drawn Muriel's attention), and her present comment, therefore, in its indirect condemna-

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tion of his imagined folly, was surely further evidence of the dislike with which Mrs Coleford regarded him.

It was the next day that Muriel spoke to Sir Geoffry : "Amelia is changing," she said. "She has acquired a knowledge of the little catchwords and foibles of society which my previous education failed to convey."

"I think," he replied, "the fact is patent to her that she excites admiration. It has rid her of diffidence, and, with it, of that little spasmodic self-assertion which was its result. And, fortunately for her, when not sure of her ground she has always understood that silence was her best resource. There were times when a little overconfidence might have been deplorable."

"Consequently she is voted handsome, but dull."

"Preferable to being voted amusing, but objectionable."

"I fancy," she studied him with a smile, "that, in your case, she entertains—but jars."

"Yes," he agreed, "she jars."

"Already," she suggested, "people couple your name with hers."

"The world," he reflected her smile, "is as precipitate as it is romantic."

"I suppose it was inevitable," she spoke with apology in her voice. "But, you see, I felt that in your company her little idiosyncrasies did not matter. And you are in town so short a time that really a little gossip seemed unimportant."

"Quite. And, after all, you consider it better for a girl to be pronounced attractive than ridiculous?"

"To provoke jealousy instead of derision?" She spoke with hesitation—"So long as there is no question of her happiness being involved."

"Amelia is not unsophisticated," he answered.

Yet, with curious contradiction, he was aware that what was unsophisticated in her nature held interest for him. Her novel outlook upon life could present a familiar world afresh for his inspection. Surroundings with regard to which custom had long since blunted criticism, assumed for him a new aspect beneath her

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comments ; little social contradictions of which he had been unobservant were brought perpetually before his notice as a source of inquiry or ridicule. Her mind, he had discovered, was adapted to see one aspect only of a situation ; her natural penetration would lead her to the root of a matter with a directness which was disconcerting ; but, an impression once given, it was impossible to eliminate or modify ; sophistry had little influence upon her ; with all her reverence for fashion and her exaggerated anxiety to conform to the world into which she had been transplanted, she adopted its customs as a concession, and as though in so doing she felt herself to be acting a part, at the folly of which she was pre-eminently amused.

Thus if, at times, her personality jarred, it held for him an attraction which other women failed to provide. And while the fascination of her beauty strengthened, lending a keener enjoyment to the hours which he passed in her society, he toyed with the knowledge, and, cheating himself with a fancied security, analysed its existence with continued diversion. He encouraged her to express her opinions without reserve, and was careful never by word or sign to betray the amusement which he felt. He was even confronted by the anomaly that the little tricks of manner and pronunciation in which she erred, had power to offend only through an irrational prejudice on his part which was equally a trick of habit. His preconceived notion of fitness was, in itself, an absurdity which had no inherent value. Yet the recognition of her failure to coincide with it, was a safeguard which reassured him. For, while a remembered rashness dictated caution—that irresponsible promise given at the promptings of impulse—he could contrast the moments of infatuation with the moments of reaction, and feel satisfied that the latter could always counteract the former.

And still he was occupied with the more subtle nature of the magnetism which she possessed for him. Its dual aspect was very apparent to him. He believed that the mere physical witchery which she exercised, though palpable, had, of itself, no existence. It was in its

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complexity alone that it could stir his blood and fill him with a pleasurable attraction. Each little trick of speech or of gesture which startled remembrance served to enchain his fancy. He saw in it the curious echo of what lay apart in his life—the rejuvenation of a far-other ideal. Amelia's fascination, however apparent, was a fleeting resemblance which, whatever its brief power to enthral, must for ever remain distinct to his consciousness from the actuality to which it owed its origin.

Meanwhile, the days passed quickly and the date approached for which his departure had originally been fixed. Amelia remembered it.

"There's a ball next week," she observed pointedly.  
"You'll be at it, of course?"

"I expect so," he answered.

"It's funny," she explained, "I've been to a good few things by now, but I haven't managed a ball yet. And I'm awfully keen on it. The other shows are a bit of a failure, but at a ball you know what you're at; there's something settled to do."

"The worst is, all a woman's enjoyment depends on the chance if she happens to know plenty of people there."

For a moment misgiving shadowed her face. "The worst is, the start-off's everything; and if one gets there long before one's friends arrive, one'll feel such a ninny stuck against the wall waiting to be called for!"

"When you go to your first ball," he promised, "I shall be waiting for your arrival in the doorway."

Her glance, in its satisfaction, shunned his. Present to their consciousness was the essence of that other speech, uncancelled, incomplete. It lay between them, a hint of danger, of romance; a suggestion mysterious, alluring—perhaps, to Sir Geoffry, impossible.

Yet that same evening at a party where Sir Geoffry was late in arriving, Mrs Breton spoke to Amelia. "My dear Miss Bradshaw," she said, "they say that when a woman begins watching the door, all enjoyment is over for her."

And Amelia smiled with unextinguished complacency.

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"I," she observed significantly, "always watch it to see what fresh sort of fools can be added to those already come!"

Since the evening when Amelia had purposely encouraged Mrs Butler's presence in the Park, Mrs Breton had not evinced any desire for her society. One day, however, being apparently unable to procure another companion, she invited Amelia to accompany her to a concert. To Amelia the entertainment was peculiarly boring, and, with malicious intention, she watched for the passages which Mrs Breton appeared most to appreciate, and throughout their delivery made a point of whispering audible comments upon the people adjacent, and the eccentricities of life in general. Mrs Breton strove unsuccessfully to check this propensity for conversation, and Amelia, having watched her growing irritation with satisfaction, finally left the hall with a happy conviction that her own presence would not again be required on a similar occasion. They drove on to tea in Bond Street, and thence to the Park. As they took possession of two little green chairs under the trees Mrs Breton looked thoughtfully about her.

"By the way," she observed casually, "have you seen your friend again lately—that healthy-looking young woman in a peacock-blue dress?"

"Not since I was here last," said Amelia, "but she's often in the Park. I shouldn't be surprised if we were to run across them to-night."

Mrs Breton did not pursue the conversation. "Really, how quick the season passes!" she observed after a silence, during which they watched the stream of passers-by. "Already we are past the second division.—I suppose you have studied your social A B C sufficiently to know that the season, conversationally, is divided into three stages?—The first is: Have you been to the Academy? The second: Are you going to Ascot? The third: When do you leave town?" She paused. "This year I don't mean to go to Homburg in August; I shall go to some little rural place for a complete rest; some place where one can wear old clothes and be quietly plain."

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"You'll be off that, when the time comes, I expect," suggested Amelia shrewdly.

Mrs Breton shook her head. "You're too young yet to suffer from the need for rest. Do you know," she added, "I was thinking only the other day that really you are the most fortunate girl I know. Perhaps you will think me very cool!—but, you know, you seem to have everything—good looks, your fill of society, a charming home with your delightful sister; and no cares for the future, for, of course Mrs Coleford has no children."

Amelia, who had crossed her legs, swung her foot gently backwards and forwards, and watched the flash of the silver buckle upon her shoe. It seemed to her that there was in Mrs Breton's remark an attempt to probe her, with a motive which, at present, she failed to fathom.

"Still, of course, one is so apt to forget that the present sad state of affairs cannot last for ever, and that, some day, Mrs Coleford is pretty sure to marry again."

"All widows don't," propounded Amelia.

"One does feel, though, that in the future Mrs Coleford ought to have some happiness. She has spent all the best years of her youth in a sick-room. It is a serious slice out of life."

"Anyhow, she don't grudge it," said Amelia cautiously.

"Certainly not," there was a peculiar quality in Mrs Breton's smile; "your sister is well known for two characteristics: her devotion to her own husband, and the care with which she weeds from her acquaintance all women who do not follow her good example. Why, really," she smiled a reflective smile, "poor Jack Coleford is practically dead already—dead in mind and body—and many women in Muriel's peculiar circumstances would consider him so. And—when a man is dead, there is no law against re-marriage!" She eyed Amelia beneath drooped lids. "But it would be ridiculous your worrying about the future, you are so certain to make a good marriage yourself!"

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"There's one thing, I'll please myself and no one else about it," suggested Amelia.

Mrs Breton acquiesced. "I am glad you propose to act advisedly. Marriage is so singularly pre-historic that it is well not to treat it altogether as a leap in the dark. There," she observed a moment later, "goes Sir Geoffry Hope."

Amelia's parasol shifted irritably.

"He has not seen us," said Mrs Breton. "Ah—and there is Colonel Banks."

The Colonel took the vacant seat near her. "Sir Geoffry has just gone past!" she explained. "He did not see us. But—he will return."

"Sir Geoffry," said the Colonel, gazing reminiscently up the pathway, "Sir Geoffry is a fellow who, it always seems to me, has aged considerably during the past few years. I remember him looking little more than a lad at poor Jack Coleford's wedding. You'll remember him as best-man."

Mrs Breton nodded. "An official capacity which has been more permanent than was expected—"

"Eh?"

"Some"—her voice was a monotone—"consider he has been best-man ever since."

The Colonel's appreciative laugh was checked to cast a significant glance at Amelia.

"*Innocentia est surda*," said Mrs Breton, imperturbably. She knew a little Latin, and delighted in an opportunity of employing it.

And Amelia's face was impassive while she sifted and fathomed the insinuation which, with difficulty, she had overheard. Its senseless spite provoked her while she pondered it with vengeful purpose. Muriel's name in Mrs Breton's lips was a discord, a sacrilege!

"After all," said Mrs Breton, "the marriage service exists only as an anomaly. We only swear to love eternally because we recognise its extreme impracticability!"

But Amelia watched where a carriage had drawn up by the roadway. Then, slowly over the grass, the embodi-

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ment of her fleeting ideal, Mrs Coleford, approached with Sir Geoffry. Mrs Breton and the Colonel turned to view her as she drew near. Her tall figure was distinctive amongst the crowd ; the exquisite poise of her head, her slow grace of movement. Again, Amelia remarked her perfection with a gratification which was personal.

But she greeted Sir Geoffry with an unhesitating assumption of fellowship as he took the seat next to her. "It's a mercy there's someone come who can talk sense !" she whispered.

"Indeed ?" he said significantly ; "that is not a quality for which you always give me credit !"

Her glance fell. "One never knows what one may come to !" she retorted with embarrassment. "One's badly off till one has to put up with worse !—But fancy you doing this gravel-grinding here ! I thought you hated it ?"

He answered evasively.

"To-morrow," she reminded him, "is the day of that precious ball."

"To - morrow ?" he repeated, obviously taken aback.

"There's some business in the shires I had to see to—I doubt if I shall manage it. I may have to be away two nights."

Amelia's face fell, noticeably. "I'd have bet anything," she said drily, "that you'd rake up some excuse when the time come. That's a man all over !"

"I never realised the date," he said, to all appearance genuinely annoyed. "It was unpardonably stupid of me !—I must see what can be done. . . . Of course, he added reassuringly, "I *must* be there for your first ball ! And, after all, a meeting I had to attend is, fortunately, postponed, so the other matters might keep a day or so. I will see what I can arrange."

"You'll be there for the start-off ?" she insisted. "It's the start-off that matters."

"I'll be there for your start-off !" he conceded, "waiting in the doorway as I promised."

His glance was more explicit than his speech ; and

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Amelia, to cover an irrational confusion, talked with assurance in an undertone.

"Do you remember telling me," she said hurriedly, "that people went to a party just to see who else was there?"

"I think I do—yes!"

"Well, I've thought of that often since. It seems to me, now, this world's all either staring or being stared at."

"Yes!"

"Take ladies; they're either a show or showing. Half their life's the gitting clothes, and the other half the airing them."

"Only in the season," he suggested, with an obvious amusement; "and, don't you think it's a very good thing for one to be thoroughly frivolous for a time? The way to get the most out of life is to be absolutely thorough in whatever mood you have elected to live up to at the moment."

"Well, I hold with it in this way," she agreed seriously. "I do believe in doing things well while you're about them. My motto'd be—when you're silly, be out-and-out silly; and when you've done with it—just be done with it. But, as I've told you before, there's silliness, of course I don't hold with. I look about me and I see things."

"As, for instance—"

"Oh, you know," she said vaguely. "There's manners, and ways, and humbug—there's lots of humbug in things."

"No doubt."

"Take manners, you know," she spoke more earnestly; "you'd say ladies with money and edgecation would be all right that way; but, I don't care, they haven't the good manners of the poor. You go in the pit of a theatre, say, and you'll find everyone civil and agreeable, and all take off their hats because they wouldn't for worlds inconvenience each other. But, you look at the rich, they won't demean themselves to show consideration for others, not they! and, if you

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was to arsk them, it's ten chances to one they'd be rude. I suppose they're afraid of being too like the poor if they show civility!"

"Oh, that custom of the Matinée hat is a hackneyed grievance I can't uphold," said Sir Geoffry.

"Custom?"—Not a bit of it! It's manners. What's all bad manners," she asked triumphantly and evidently repeating an adage which had been instilled into her, "but the doing something which is a nuisance to other people? There, again, you go first class, and everybody's chilly and stiff, and if you speak to them they look as if you was a pickpocket; you go third or in a 'bus where there's not such swells, and everyone's ready to be affable and help everybody else. *They* don't draw themselves up at a stranger as if you was a wild beast out on a holiday.—Which is the best manners, I ask you?"

All that was banal in her speech found extenuation in her appearance. With excitement the delicate colouring of her cheeks became more vivid, her dark eyes shone curiously. Sir Geoffry watched her.

"There's aunt, now," she concluded, with the slight air of hesitation with which she referred to Mrs Burgess, "she's just a common woman, and don't pretend to be otherways; but she wouldn't be rude to a neighbour in the way that lots of ladies are, or say the—the not quite respectable things that lots of ladies do. But it's just the foolishness of things gits over me, the humbugs people make of themselves——"

"You mean they're inconsistent?"

"Have it your own way! But there's lots of points"—a brisk smile crossed her face, she leant closer towards Sir Geoffry. "You arsk any woman," glancing significantly at Mrs Breton, "if she's white powder on her nose, and she'll say 'yes,' without more ado; but just you tell her she's got pink powder on her cheek, and you'll see if she'll cut up rough!"

Sir Geoffry, about to respond, became conscious of Muriel's glance. It rested upon him with speculation,

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grave, insistent. And, even as he tried to interpret it, Mrs Breton's speech distracted his thoughts.

"Have you been told," she said to Muriel, "that there is a likeness between Miss Bradshaw and yourself? Of course it is not very remarkable that it should be so, since you are sisters!—but I wondered if you had noticed it at all?"

Amelia looked visibly embarrassed, but Muriel, leaning back in her chair, glanced round with a languorous indifference.

"I cannot say that I have noticed it, myself," she answered. "No doubt you are right; but likenesses, however flattering, are a trifle irritating, don't you think? And one prefers to fancy that one's identity is entirely one's own."

"It shows most in the profile, I think," said Mrs Breton, critically. "And in the eyes; and, of course, the colouring is the same. But it is nothing to worry about!" she laughed vivaciously. "Not like an unfortunate girl I know, who had a double just like herself, and her young man went and proposed to the double at a ball,—presumably after supper—and then got in such a state, he rushed off and proposed to her too, and so got engaged to two girls, exactly like each other, in one evening!"

"What would you do under such circumstances, Banks?" propounded Sir Geoffry. "Rather a difficult point of honour, because, you see, he was already engaged to one woman when he suggested marrying the second."

"It's usually the last woman who scores," said the Colonel gruffly. "Personally, I'd tell 'em to toss up!"

"A man has such a complicated code of honour," complained Mrs Breton. "Where a woman would just explain matters and so put things right, a man will break his heart—*save the mark!*—and the heart of the woman he cares for, by some distorted idea of honour to a third woman, who doesn't matter!—I've known several instances of it!"

Muriel suppressed a yawn, compressing her lips daintily with a slim hand. "You see we live in such a ridiculous world," she said. "The man who cheats at

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a game goes away branded for life ; the man who cheats a woman and wrecks a life may pass on without a soil upon his name. Why, even in a farce, the stereotyped jest is when a husband successfully deceives a faithful wife ! With such a sense of humour it is scarcely to be wondered at that a man's code of honour is magnificent —except where a woman is concerned ! " She rose. " We must be walking back," she explained ; " I sent the carriage home."

" I didn't ! " said Mrs Breton. " I sent it to wait at Hyde Park Corner. It always seems to me that my friends keep their carriages, not for use, but as a permanent means of self-denial."

They sauntered back under the trees. The sun was intersecting the foliage more obliquely, and the burnt grass beneath their feet was a tawny gold. Amelia, in a spirit of perverseness, walked ahead with Colonel Banks and Mrs Breton ; while conscious of Sir Geoffry's near presence, she swung her parasol and talked volubly. The sunlight fluttered upon her dress with dappled change of light and shadow.

" By the way," Muriel turned to Sir Geoffry, " you have not forgotten that you are coming to dine and do a theatre with us to-night ? "

" No," he looked at his watch, " and I see I have not too much time."

" I thought," she said, " we might do something together, as I believe it is your last free evening before you leave for Scotland."

Perplexity faintly shadowed his face. " Did I not tell you," he asked, " that my plans are changed, and that I am not leaving for Scotland at present ? "

Muriel did not immediately answer. Her gaze had strayed to where Amelia, laughing noisily, placed her hand in the Colonel's and leapt the little railing on to the path. In the girl's whole bearing was revealed a strange unrest, an excitement,—repressed, exultant.

" No," Muriel said, " you had not told me."

At Knightsbridge he turned back to see Mrs Breton to her carriage. She trod slowly, and he looked with a

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mute anxiety at the clock. "Miss Bradshaw progresses," she hinted, observantly. "She is becoming a woman of the world, yet you still seem to find her conversation amusing?"

He acquiesced. "She is still original."

"Originality is delightful in other people's relations!" she rejoined. "But your cousinship, of course is distant," she added thoughtfully; "I mean it was Mrs Coleford's mother who was your mother's sister—not Miss Bradshaw's mother."

He acknowledged the truth of this statement.

"I wonder if her originality would have revealed itself in culinary matters had she followed her mother's vocation," she reflected with a laugh. "All the same, I fear Muriel scarcely shows her usual circumspection in adopting a younger edition of herself. As we are friends, you won't give me away! but she has appeared ten years older since that girl came."

"The likeness surely is not so marked?" he affirmed.

"Not so marked, as remarked," she agreed.

## CHAPTER X

### PASSION THE TYRANT

HE entered a hansom and drove rapidly back to his chambers. Later, when he arrived in Albert Gate, he found Muriel alone in the drawing-room. Near the window a long mirror was let into the wall, and before it she was adjusting a refractory ribbon upon her dress. She turned as he entered. The light defined the supple outline of her figure ; it seemed to him singularly round and girlish. With a novel sense of criticism he noted afresh the rare quality of her beauty ; the stateliness which Amelia lacked, the more exquisite poise of her head, the delicately modelled neck and arms, the whole etherealised charm which for a moment contrasted in his imagination with the insipid rose-and-white of the younger girl. The elaborate simplicity of her gown pleased him. He remarked the solitary knot of colour upon the dull steel ; the pale brilliance of diamonds in her dark hair.

" You are wonderfully punctual ! " she greeted him, with a smile.

As he answered, the trail of a skirt met his ear, and Amelia entered the room. With an impulse of curiosity, his gaze sought the glass. In a neat oval, trimly framed, was reproduced a reflection of the two women. It struck him strangely in that moment that the resemblance which linked them in his thoughts when apart was thus no longer apparent. In close proximity with Amelia, Muriel looked indefinitely changed. Beside the girl's triumphant beauty, she appeared aged ; her charm was curiously effaced.

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And it seemed to him that, in the limpid surface of the glass, her glance met his with comprehension.

"Milly!" she called abruptly, "come and stand beside me! I want to see how much taller I am than you."

Amelia, with a laugh, crossed to the glass.

"A good two inches," she announced, with depression. She leant her dark head back against Muriel's. Her dress shimmered faintly; silver edged its whiteness. Against its uncompromising pallor, the clear olive of her skin defied the crude light of day.

"Your two heads are exactly the same colour," said Sir Geoffry. "I can't tell which is which when you put them together."

"Except," suggested Muriel, "that all the grey hairs are mine!"

She bent closer to the glass and touched the dark strands of hair which uprose from her forehead. Fine white lines intersected them like straggling threads of silver. Still she smiled.

"In French novels," she said, "the moment when a woman discovers her first grey hair is a crisis, a tragedy; in England—we are undramatic—it suggests a bottle of hair-dye!"

At dinner Sir Geoffry was unusually preoccupied. Amelia remarked it with a faint resentment. To her the occasion was a momentous one. She had rehearsed it in imagination throughout the previous day. To sit in a seat for which everyone knew that 10/6 had been paid; to know that when she slipped off her cloak, the pit behind her and the tiers above must be gazing in admiration at her dress; to be seen publicly chaffing a man of Sir Geoffry's distinguished appearance. . . . As she entered the theatre, she thought of the evening when she had gone with John Lawson. It was as though her former self were looking at her present self with awe and envy. She glanced round at the darkened seats in the shadow of the pit with a vague hope that Mab Butler might be seated there.

The play differed from the Adelphi one of former days. She adjudged it to be foolish. It was a tale of modern

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life. The tempted wife, the trusting husband, the erring lover, all talked in crisp dialogue difficult of comprehension. Under the most agitating circumstances they were concisely epigrammatic ; they spoke for posterity. No one lost his or her temper, no one became pugnacious, no one tried to strangle anyone else. It seemed to Amelia that on the stage there was too little incident and too much talk, while, off the stage, life was rife with incident, and conversation was unfortunately circumscribed.

As the curtain went down upon the first act, Muriel looked at Sir Geoffry. "What do you think of it?" she asked.

"Very clever," he replied ; "but it won't pay."

"Yet the social problem is generally acceptable?"

"So long as it is run in the accepted groove," he agreed. "Tell people what *they* think—or what they have decided to think—and they're immensely pleased with you ; tell them what *you* think, and you are universally condemned. And it's a law of morality that, if you're *risqué*, you must be flippant ; take yourself seriously, and at once you jar the susceptibilities of a sensitive public. After all, one cannot get away from the fact that the plays which pay are the plays which insult women to amuse men."

Again the curtain went up, and the audience vanished in gloom. In the distant space of brightness, the mimic life progressed, with its mimic joys and sorrows, its problem, its dismay ; a long-drawn human existence compressed into the vision of an hour. To Amelia, the whole presented a pleasing confusion of lights and of music, of exquisite dresses and stage effects which attracted, of speech which silenced, and silence which spoke ; of an unexplained satisfaction and a subtle sense of well-being ; of mysterious, enshrouding dimness ; of a tension which stirred and grew. She could see Sir Geoffry's face turned palely towards her in the subdued light. Each unpremeditated movement of touch or glance thrilled her with a magnetism infinitely bewildering, penetrating ; it seemed to compel and enfold her, to

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beat back from that dimly-seen audience, to pulse fiercely from the uncomprehended passion and tragedy of that sham world in the brightness beyond.

From the theatre they went on to the Savoy, and it was late when they returned home. Sir Geoffry drove with them to Albert Gate, and in the hall bid them good-night. Muriel, candle in hand, passed quickly upstairs, but, to Amelia, there was a moment when the clasp of Sir Geoffry's hand paralysed. Still, the curious intoxication of the theatre seemed to pursue and enthrall her ; her gaze, impelled blindly, met his. . . . As she hurried on upstairs her limbs trembled and a sensation of faintness possessed her. From the landing above she looked down into the hall, but already it was in darkness.

Sir Geoffry turned into the study. The light which he had extinguished outside had left the room in darkness ; but, photographed upon the night was a luminous circle in which he saw the bright hall, the girl's white figure upon the staircase. In another moment this had faded, but the transition from brilliancy to gloom left a smarting sting of fire upon his eyes. An indefinite space of tawny radiance still seemed to dance before him with blinding effulgence, as he groped his way to the window and flung it open.

He found the matches upon his writing-table, and lit the shaded candle which he used at night. Seating himself in a chair he felt in the drawer for his pipe. Soon he was smoking, drawing deep, slow whiffs with almost methodical regularity. From without, the patterning of horses' hoofs on the wood pavement sounded noisily, but the heavy traffic was abating. He could hear footsteps pass along the pavement,—brisk, irritable footsteps which trod with feverish energy ; idle footsteps which lagged ; accompaniments of disjointed conversation and unmusical laughter. Once he heard a policeman unlatch the gate at the end of the pathway, and come towards the window. The flash of a lantern shot through the dim room, then vanished, and the gate closed again noiselessly. . . . Some nervous energy within him was

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strained unnaturally, he was plunged unwittingly into a turmoil of sound and sense ; each noise, each evidence of life without came to him exaggerated with a horrible claim upon his attention.

Then the confusion of his thoughts shaped themselves more definitely. He was facing an old-world problem —that problem of Sentiment the Toy and Passion the Tyrant ; of the mystical boundary-line where one is merged into the other ; of the still more mystical compound Love—and this last he considered more attentively ;—an emotion in itself animal, yet gilded by Romance, dignified by sacrifice, inspired by the breath of all that is divine in human nature, the impetus of poetry and art, of all which idealises human intellect—of all which is the antithesis of its own origin.

Sentiment, Passion, Love—each stood labelled in his consciousness in orthodox rendering, concise and definite. Sentiment, the mere stirring of sex for sex, pleasurable or provoking as chance decreed ; Passion, magnificent in its immeasurable abandonment, in its immortal savour of god and devil ; Love, the exquisite union of the human and the divine, to which the eyes of humanity ever turn for a renewal of faith in poor human nature ; a pitiful, radiant figure, ridiculously defying through each successive generation the eternities of change, decay, and death.

And Love,—this love which needs the blood of youth to give it life,—Love, with its mingling of glorified Passion and deified Sentiment, with its eternal cry of sacrifice opposed to the baser claim of possession—this love is for the few. He saw that few natures can respond in entirety to its complex rendering, they cheat themselves with a counterfeit. And yet, once in a while, this same Love will enter a commonplace soul and transform it, will quicken the dull clay to the sublimity of a diviner life ; will rend it with the stormy blare of Passion, and set it—flouting pain, denying death, drunk with the music of the spheres—to leave it again—clay.

In the silence, Sir Geoffry breathed heavily.

Undoubtedly, it was orthodox to classify the phases of attraction between the sexes, yet, here again that old

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tantalising question—how test the boundary-line which decided each? How know the moment when Sentiment the Toy merged into Passion the Tyrant? Or how ensure that Love, of which each man believed himself capable, exquisite, stainless Love did not stoop from her empyrean heights to be confounded in the mire of sensuality? How again know when Sentiment—the mere pin-prick of emotion—would not change to an overwhelming force, which would swamp intelligence, annul will-power, and bear the soul tossed like a straw on the torrent of its phantasy? How again know when this frightening, all-compelling emotion would not evaporate as swiftly, as completely as it had arisen? Above all, how remain sane among the tricks and chances with which this mysterious physical nature teased the human soul? How watch, control, outwit it?

His thoughts veered from the abstract to the personal.

Once, in the past, this love, this insane compound of the ridiculous and the sublime, had entered into his life. It had come, as it came to many, in the guise of a god with the sneer of a satyr. Its beauty had intoxicated, while its irony had enraged—its irony in wealth of promise, in pitiless negation of fulfilment. Yet it had stayed. Fate chanced that it had found expression in an act which the hypocrisy of the world would condemn ; *that* had been as an episode in its development. It had been true and faithful, it had been the pivot of all that was noblest in his nature. Minor emotions had visited him, and he had toyed with them as a child toys with a preposterous semblance of humanity ; he could not fear them ; they were vapid and soulless ; they could not reach that Thing apart, that ideal enshrined in secrecy, eternally secure against the blight of Time and mood. . . . Until, at last, he had entered upon a new phase, perverse in that it had seemed like the rest (save in that it was yet more paltry, more powerless in its inconsistency)—still that mere pin-prick of emotion—worse than all, it had been absurd, it had jarred upon his finest sensibilities ; he had made light of its power

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to stir him, and had toyed with it in sheer wilfulness. And now—

He turned from the conclusion to which his thoughts tended. Disloyalty to an ideal is damaging to self-respect. Love may be evanescent, but the fact is at variance with our best theories. He rose from his chair and laid his pipe upon the mantelpiece ; he stood staring into the blackness of the empty grate.

He could no longer fence with his own emotions ; his fancied security had been a myth ; throughout, this Thing despised had been waxing and growing till it threatened to become a force fateful in its persistence, potent to swamp all that had hitherto been his existence. The inference to be deducted from such an admission was that human nature is pitiful in its impotence and the human soul a puppet of the senses. Yet still, with perverseness, he struggled to bring his thoughts within focus ; to consider the erratic, elusive impulse which tormented him. He desired to analyse it more faithfully ; to stint its power. . . . And he could see that it was an infatuation which held nothing mental. The link of companionship—one of the surest of love's bonds—was lacking. Considered by the light of common-sense, no doubt it was devoid of all that was fine and was enduring. Still more, the mere fret of its folly provoked. It was irrational, preposterous. Yet by some extraordinary freak of chance it remained ; a palpable, tormenting presence ; some subtle physical witchery which would not be denied, all-compelling in its insidious sweetness—frightening, persistent. And here again it was necessary not only to face a strange anomaly that this mood despised, this love of yesterday, this passion of a mushroom growth could so spring up to efface the ideal of years, the comradeship which had been one of the strongest as it had been the changeless factor in a life-time—but that still that paramount trickery of its existence confounded him, the fact that it had power, had being only of and through the love which it had superseded !

A fictitious resemblance, a shallow counterfeit, and that love had been presented to him anew, in all the

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freshness of its first allurement. With the passion of youth spent, with its very essence devolved into a sentiment at once rational and assured—a sentiment of the quiescent nature of which he had become slowly and placidly aware—the past had revived thus, disconcerting, strong, warm, palpitating with renewed youth, renewed torment ; a very travesty of what it aped, an ideal rejuvenated with a subtle difference which was a mockery of itself. Which was real, and which was phantasy—that ideal of the past, or that ideal revived ? Or were they not rather one and the same essence ; a continuance, not a change ; a whole, of which the past was the true, the abiding expression ?

But the theory of an ideal rejuvenated it difficult of elucidation ; while passion bereft of dignity and man of will-power is a conclusion to be resented. There came to him an overwhelming desire to reassert his individuality, to prove to his satisfaction that the familiar self of which he had felt assured was not gone from him. With erratic contradiction he told himself again that this latter phase which appeared absorbing was only trivial. He had toyed with it too long in its dangerous magnetism. Not only common-sense demanded its extinction, but the respect which was due to that self at which he aimed, and faith in which it was degrading to shatter.

He moved abruptly to the window, and paused. With the soft breath of the summer's night there came to him a haunting regret for the sweetness of this thing which must be renounced. He saw the warm outer darkness cut by fleeting lights. It held some spell which stirred his blood. The emotional side of his nature was in the ascendant ; again, fancy ran riot. He drew down the window slowly, with decision. The action seemed to him typical of the episode which he was closing decisively.

And upstairs, Amelia felt as sleepless as upon the night when she had been to the theatre with John Lawson. The music, the lights, the champagne, still made their influence felt, and formed a disturbing element in her brain. She sat in front of her dressing-table,

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prodding her pin-cushion meditatively with a hat-pin. A continuous smile played upon her lips. Once a sudden flush overspread her face and mounted to the roots of her hair. She rose impatiently, slipped off her dress, and flung a dressing-gown about her shoulders. Fetching a book from her writing-table, she seated herself in an arm-chair and tried to read. But she could not keep her attention to the story. She thought regretfully of the volumes of verse in the drawing-room downstairs. Poetry, she understood, would form an accompaniment, not a distraction to her present thoughts. She stepped on to the landing, but the darkness of the house alarmed her, and she did not want to take a candle with her lest the light should penetrate beneath Mrs Coleford's door. After some hesitation, she felt her way to the top of the staircase, and descended cautiously, step by step. Outside the drawing-room door she felt nervously for the little knob which switched on the electric light; the sudden, cheerful gleam reassured her. She proceeded to search for the book which she had in her mind, a volume of verse by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, that she had once seen, and the rhythm of which had attraction. Soon, standing beneath one of the coloured globes, she turned over the pages of the book till she came to a poem which she remembered. It describes how the woman who has been deserted sees her rival at the theatre as the wife of the man whom they had both loved. The sense was somewhat obscure to Amelia, but its connection with a visit to the theatre gave it a pleasing appropriateness. She read it attentively, familiarising herself with the swing of the verses.

By and by she turned to the leads, and, unlatching the window noiselessly, stepped outside. The night was very still and oppressive. The houses to right and left were a line of blackness. Only, at long intervals, windows slit the darkness with a square of light. The Park was a void of silence and murmuring trees. Lamps defined the pathways with a thin trail of fire. The darkness at that late hour was infinitely mysterious. It fascinated and yet oppressed her. The sense of loneliness, of

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an unknown danger to which it gave rise, held a curious attraction. She thought gratefully of the lighted room at hand, yet lingered, staring at the blackness. A faint breeze blew, and she shivered a little. Her long blue dressing-gown fell loosely to her slippered feet. Her hair was uncoiled.

Suddenly the sound of a closing door in the room behind smote upon her attention unpleasantly. In a moment her heart-throbs seemed to shake her from head to foot. Her breathing sounded preposterously loud. She listened attentively, rooted to the spot with unexplained terror. The noise was succeeded by an interval of intense stillness. She tried to persuade herself that her ears had tricked her. Summoning her resolution at last she trod to the Venetian blind and drew it back—to find herself confronting Sir Geoffry.

"Oh, it's you!" she exclaimed with an hysterical laugh. "You scared me!"

The situation struck her as singularly familiar, she knew that she had read the scene before in a book. None the less, its equivocal nature was borne in upon her. Her costume was disconcerting, although, with swift consideration, she decided that a man might take it for a tea-gown. Yet she put up her hand with sudden shyness to her head; the grotesque clipped sentiment; in books which she had read all well-conditioned heroines possessed hair which, at a romantic crisis such as this, came unbound, and rained in luxuriant tresses to their feet. Yet perversely, with her flowing locks thus opportunely abetting romance, Amelia recognised that her self-assurance would have been greatly increased had they occupied a more conventional position.

"I went to the study for a smoke before going home," said Sir Geoffry, "and I came up here to look for a book."

"Just my case!" said Amelia.

"It's late for you to be wandering about the house." The girl's loveliness in her flowing gown was disturbing. The irony of the encounter following immediately upon his previous train of thought, unstrung his imagination.

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'What have you here?' he asked, steadying his voice with an effort. He drew the book gently from beneath her arm. It was still open at the poem which she had been reading. A curious expression passed over his face as he glanced at it, reading his own rendering into the familiar sense :—

"We were both of us—aye, we were both of us there,  
In the self-same house at the play together ;  
To her it was summer with bees in the air,  
To me it was winter weather.

..... . . . . .  
Had played, in a desperate woman fashion,  
A game of life with a prize in view,  
And oh ! I played with passion.

"Twas a game which meant heaven and sweet home life  
For the one who went forth with a crown upon her,  
For the one who lost—it meant lone strife,  
Sorrow, despair, and dishonour."

His eye flashed down the page :

"When the love we have won at any cost  
Has grown familiar as some old story,  
Naught seems so dear as the love we lost,  
All bright with the past's weird glory.

And tho' he is fond of that woman, I know,  
I saw in his eyes the brief confession  
That the love seemed sweeter which he let go  
Than that in his possession——"

He speculated, was it coincidence which had selected that poem for Amelia's perusal ?

"Which woman would you rather have been?" he asked, with curiosity.

Amelia, clasping her dressing-gown tightly about her, reflected, as she stood opposite to him in the soft light.

"Of course," she said, with a nervous laugh, "the one woman had the pull, the husband and the money

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and all that, but, I suppose, if I'd been properly gone on the man, I'd have given everything to feel that the other wasn't in it with him."

"You wouldn't have cared what the other woman suffered?"

Amelia shook her head dubiously. "If I'd been properly gone on the man," she reiterated, "I suppose it'd have made me just hate her." Some element of fancied disapprobation in his face made her shift her gaze unsteadily. "I'd be sorry she was having a poor time of it, of course," she explained; "but she'd be having more than her share of everything else."

"Of everything," he suggested, "except the one thing which may mean everything to a woman."

Something in his voice quickened the sense of expectancy which unnerved Amelia. The atmosphere was charged with a palpable tension. Her glance rose defiantly, then fell with an accession of embarrassment. She turned away blindly and caught the cord beside the window as though smitten with an unreasonable anxiety to alter the existing position of the Venetian blind. She drew the shutters together with a snap, then, as briskly and aimlessly, pulled them asunder again. The commonplace, meaningless action served to restore her mental balance.—Then she felt Sir Geoffry's hand upon her shoulder and his face close to hers.

"Milly!" he whispered. "Milly!"

A sudden wonderful happiness swept Amelia from head to foot. She felt physically giddy.

"Milly, do you love me?" he asked.

The face which she turned to him was bright with laughter.

"Men are greenhorns!" she whispered with tremulous defiance.

The bathos of the utterance was effaced by the emotion which permeated it. He put his arms more firmly about her and drawing her towards him kissed her unhesitatingly upon the lips. The action was as unpremeditated as the situation which gave rise to it. But circumstances had ironically conspired against Sir

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Geoffry. That insidious romance, to the subtle fabrication of which he had but recently accorded recognition, could assert itself with preposterous significance. The mastery of impulse was complete, even while its stability remained doubtful. It is possible that the absence of certain outward and usual tokens of conventionality—trivial, yet admittedly deterrent—aided this to an undue prominence. But the sensible lack of decorum in the conditions of the present meeting—the lateness of the hour, its alluring sense of solitude, the girl's dishevelled loveliness, even the obvious facility offered to experience that unresisting pressure of her lightly-clad body in his embrace—all combined to obliterate the fine distinctions of courtesy, the discrimination of cooler reason. And, meanwhile, his vehemence had startled her. She drew a swift comparison between the quality of his first kiss, and this. She could feel his body trembling as he held her, and he breathed heavily like a man in pain.

"You're a cool hand!" she said, at last, as, flushing and half-frightened, she wrenched herself out of his grasp and pushed him sharply from her.

"I know—I know—" and the tone of his voice had grown so harsh that Amelia scarcely recognised it. He caught her arm again.

"Only tell me that you care for me," he begged.

A sudden seriousness came into Amelia's face. Geoffry Hope, drunk with the mastery of his own emotions, saw it. A new soul seemed to shine from the girl's eyes. Her face was transfigured. There was a chair close at hand. "Sit down!" she commanded, and he obeyed. His head was on a level with her breast. She put out her arms and drew it closer. The passion of her kisses was a silent answer. She passed her hand to and fro over his hair with a lingering, caressing movement.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE DAY AFTER

EARLY the next morning Amelia was seated at the writing-table in the drawing-room.

"My Dear Mab"—her pen squeaked over the paper, her head was bowed low—"I have a feeling that I would like to write to you as being my oldest friend. You will never guess my news, but you were right after all. I am going to marry the man I told you of. We have just found out that we are sweet on each other, at least he is so fond of me that I am bound to return it. It was all settled last night in the most romantique manner, so I have lost no time in letting you know. No one can say but that he is very, very handsome. As you know, though he is a baronette, I might have done better for myself, but you will understand I couldn't seem to fancy anyone else, and you will agree it's no good going against one's likes. I will try my best to come to see you soon when I will have a lot to tell you.—I remain,  
Your affectionate friend,

AMELIA."

Amelia swung round abruptly upon the music stool upon which she was sitting and looked across to where Muriel sat beside the open window.

"I say," she questioned, "should you fancy a man would know a dressing-gown wasn't a tea-gown?"

Muriel looked up from the paper she was reading.

"You can't wear your dressing-gown at dinner," she said decidedly.

"No, but—supposing, say, you put the wrong thing on by mistake, and you was to meet a man, would the man know where the difference came in?"

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"I should say it would depend on the dressing-gown, and the tea-gown, and the man."

"Yes, of course." Amelia looked foolish; she turned back to the writing-table and added a postscript; "Don't you tell aunt, as I want to surprise her by word of mouth." Then, folding up her letter, she rose and stood with it in her hand, looking out of the window with an air of uncertainty. A white mist hung over the Park, promising a day of unusual heat.

"Are you by way of doing anything special this afternoon?" she asked, after a pause.

"I don't think so."

"I was thinking perhaps I'd go and see a friend of mine."

"Certainly; only don't do anything to tire yourself for to-night. Remember we are going to that ball—your first ball"—Muriel laid the paper upon her lap and looked across at the girl before her. "I hope you will enjoy it," she said, "but I am so afraid you may be disappointed. Often a girl at her first dance in London has no chance of enjoying herself, because she knows so few people."

"I know a good few," suggested Amelia.

"But London is a big place, and the few you know may not be at this particular dance!"

"Oh, I expect I'll git along all right." Amelia looked away to hide her smile. The impulse arose to unburden herself of her secret. It fascinated yet alarmed her. For since she could no longer trick fancy with the belief of her faithfulness to her first infatuation, since Muriel no longer reigned supreme in her consciousness, her disloyalty to that former hero-worship shamed recollection. And a more impossible deterrent existed in that remembered antipathy between the man who was now her sweetheart and the woman whom she had elected to admire. Then even while she hesitated, an incident occurred, big with result, to which at that time she attached only the importance of a moment's discomfiture.

"It is unfortunate," Muriel added—was it with inten-

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tion?—"that Geoffry will not be there to-night; as, of course, he would have looked after you; but, unluckily, there was some important business connected with a little property of Jack's in the Midlands, and there was a meeting to-day at which he told me it was essential he should be present; in fact, he doubted if he would complete all there was to see to, even in a day."

For a moment the blood rushed back from Amelia's heart with an unreasoning dismay; then, recollection reassured her.

"He told me about that," she said. "But he give—gave it up on purpose, just because he said if he went about it he couldn't git back again, as you say; and he'd promised me for certain to go to my first ball to-night."

There was a note of triumph, of assurance in Amelia's voice. And Amelia's face had flamed from chin to brow. Yet, apparently, it struck her that she might, unwarily, be making things awkward for Sir Geoffry.

"He said it would make no real difference," she explained, "he could find someone to take his place, and write—I think he said write, not wire—to them first thing. In fact, he said he would be busy about it all day, he expected, and not able to git round here."

"I see," said Muriel.

Amelia turned away, and picking up her letter, ran down to post it. That afternoon, directly after luncheon, she left the house. The weather had turned out glorious. The sun had long since dispersed the white mist of the morning, and the heat was intense. It seemed to her that she had never remarked a day when everything looked so bright and everyone so happy. At the corner of the street a woman held a basket of flowers towards her; the smell of the carnations and narcissus followed her pleasantly. It seemed a fitting compliment to the general success of creation. Having made her way to the underground, she took the train to Hornsey; a quick walk along a broad road leading from the station brought

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her to a side street with little red houses tapering unevenly against the pallid sky. Glancing to the right and left, before long she espied the name "Robert Butler," over a modest little shop. She opened the door, and, as a bell rang noisily, she noticed with relief that Bob Butler was not to be seen. There was a movement in the little room behind the shop, and Mab came forward tying a clean apron over her soiled cotton dress.

Recognition dawned slowly upon her face.

"It's never Milly!" she said, turning down her sleeves.

"But it is!" Amelia advanced and kissed her.

"Oh, why ever didn't you let us know you was coming?" Mab's voice expressed poignant distress. "There's Bob gone out on business, and me in a state not fit to be seen, and the place not tidied up or anything, and I did want you to have seen it looking pretty. Why, even baby's not washed. He's never woke up since dinner, you see."

"Leave him asleep, a bit," said Amelia, secretly rejoiced; "and never mind about Bob. It's you I want, Mab, and I've got you. Tell me, did you git my letter?"

"I got it at two, to-day, dear," Mab led the way into the back parlour. "It did take my breath away, but I wish you'd given a hint in it that you might be coming to-day."

"I didn't know for certain I could git, when I wrote," explained Amelia. She glanced round the room into which she was shown. The surroundings were in disorder; two dirty plates, a half-eaten pie, and a glass of beer stood upon the table; some freshly-washed clothes were lying on a chair evidently awaiting ironing. In a corner stood the baby's cot, covered by a blue knitted shawl.

But a vision of the room as it might have been, disturbed Mab's serenity—she saw snowy curtains in the window, a blue satin coverlet on the baby's cot, a red cloth on the middle table, and upon it, a geranium placed

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prominently in a blue pot, and the big album which had been a wedding-present.

"There's such a lot I want to talk to you about," she said discontentedly, "but I don't feel I can say a word till I have tidied myself up a bit. I'm not fit to be seen, and there's you so smart! I'm Cinderella over again."

"Well, you tidy yourself up if you must," said Amelia with impatience, "and I'll come up while you dress."

Mab fell in readily with the suggestion. "Yes, come up with me, dear, our room's only on the next floor, we let the room at the top to a young gentleman who goes to town every day."

"You've kept your counsel where aunt's concerned?" asked Amelia, as she followed her up.

"I only just got your letter," reiterated Mab, "so I haven't had much chance of telling anybody, and, what's more, Mrs Burgess has left these parts. Her job came to an end unexpectedly, and, only you fancy where's she's gone!—back to Mr Lawson's! He wrote to her that his servant had left him and he didn't know where to turn, and she made no bones about it, but just packed up her traps and went. I *was* amused!—but you sit yourself there in the window-sill and stick a cushion behind you—so." Mab slipped off her soiled cotton dress, and pouring some water into the basin, proceeded to spread a thick layer of soap over her face and plump arms. "Now, tell us all about it—I haven't half wished you luck! It was last night, you say?—And the circumstances?"

Amelia collected herself.

"Yes—I'd like to tell you all about it. To begin with, it was between twelve and one at night, you see we had been to the theatre. I was wearing a tea-gown" (the word was a concession to Mab's sense of the proprieties) "made of pale blue cashmere, with remarkably fine lace trimming. My hair—you'll grasp I'd been going to bed previous to this—my hair fell all loose below my waist. It wasn't quite the costume one would wish to be surprised in by a gentleman friend, as you'll agree, but I

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didn't arrange the circumstances! I was standing on the balcony in the moonlight reading a poem——”

“But the moon's in the first quarter,” objected Mab, wiping off the soap with screwed-up eyes.

“Oh, well, the moon's nothing, it's the man that matters,” said Amelia shortly. “Well, as I was saying, there was I reading a poem, and never thinking of anything, and I looked up, and He was there. Then we had a conversation.”

“What about?”

“Oh, the poem—and love—and broken hearts. That sort of thing. You'll understand it seemed to lead up to it quite natural, and then I found his arms about me and him kissing me.”

“And what did he say?”

“He didn't say much then—he seemed too out of breath; as aunt would put it, he shook like an Hashpan!”

“An aspan, I suppose you mean. Much good your schooling's done you, Milly!”

“I was quoting aunt,” said Amelia drily. “Any way, he shook, that's the main point of the narrative.”

“Did he go down on his knees?” asked Mab, her face buried in a coarse towel. “Bob did.”

“*He* would, only he knows I've a special objection to it. I hate seeing a man make a silly of himself. It puts one off.”

“Well, Bob did,” asserted Mab. “He says the man who hesitates to go down on his knees to a woman on an occasion like that isn't worth taking into account. And that a woman shouldn't give herself away easy. But didn't your friend say anything all this time?”

“Not at first. He was too much upset. Afterwards he asked me if I loved him and said how he loved me.”

“Oh, he got it out at last, did he?” Mab's face was shining like a mirror. “But what I'm wanting to arrive at is, when is *it* to be?”

“Oh, you're so previous!” said Amelia, with a faint

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laugh. "He had to be away all to-day—couldn't help himself—but no doubt we'll settle matters of business to-night at a ball we're going to. He's to be waiting for me in the doorway, and you bet he'll be there ever so long before I turn up. Then we'll spend the rest of the time in a conservatory, with pink shades and rare plants."

Mab's face was appreciative as she proceeded to brush her locks before the glass.

"The best of it is—the other one's going—the old one!" said Amelia with a spicce of exultation.

"The one I saw in the Park with you?"—Mab grasped the situation quickly. "My, won't she be in a tearing rage when she sees him dancing all the night with you!" she pursued with an unwonted gift of imagination: "She'll tackle him about it, and he'll say—'Mayn't I even dance with my future wife!'" I'd like to see her face! She looked a little cat.—But what are you going to wear, Milly?"

"White, or else rose-colour."

"I'd wear the rose. White's clean-looking, but it's neither here nor there. In your own mind"—her voice had acquired a new seriousness—"what are you thinking of for the bridesmaids? I suppose you'll have a swell wedding and cut a dash with a dozen of them?"

"Twelve bridesmaids and two pages is what I'd like," said Amelia, anxious not to fall short of expectations. "And to have them in blue and white."

"White again! I wouldn't have white, it dashes the bride's get-up. But blue's lovely. Only, I suppose you'll have to consult your sister, as she pays the piper."

"Yes, of course, and won't it be awful work being the sinnercure of all eyes"—quoting a phrase from the life of Margaret of Anjou which she had been reading that week. "But it's early days to settle anything as yet, and I'm not the one to rush at a man as if I was afraid he'd be off for the waiting."

Mab struggled into a gown of maroon cashmere; she shot the skirt deftly over her head and remained hidden

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while she detached a hook which had fastened itself into her hair. Emerging, she strained the band round her waist, and then, from a neighbouring drawer, she drew a bodice of maroon velvet lavishly adorned with large steel buttons.

"I say," said Amelia, who had maintained a brief silence, "do you know I understand now what you meant about Bob—the not wanting to change him for anything else in the whole world ; it comes to one like that."

Mab nodded. Speech was impracticable to her at that moment ; it was necessary to compress her waist by drawing a deep breath, while she forced the steel buttons into distended holes.

"Don't you think," pursued Amelia, more shyly, "that there's something in caring for anybody that makes one feel quite religious ?"

The power of speech had returned to Mab, and the moment struck her as opportune for a little matronly advice. "I know," she said with solemnity ; "and I hope you'll feel it that way and will settle down all right, Milly. You see you're used to your larks, and the men come after you, and a husband won't stand *that*."

"And I'll talk to them fast enough if they come," said Amelia defiantly, "but they won't count. It seems to me when you're fond of one man, the only way you can put up civilly with another is just by pretending to yourself that he isn't a man at all."

"I know," repeated Mab with an air of experience. "But it don't last like that, Milly. That's just at first, you know. And it's a lovely feeling. One feels one could suffer or die for the One and enjoy it. But afterwards, even when it's gone, marriage is a great thing. There's someone always to look after you and to be looked after ; he's humorous when you're depressed, and when he's a bad turn, you cheer him up. It's give and take, and you're both the better for it. That's my experience—and baby's a year old."

A voice from the basement testified appropriately to

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the existence of the heir of the house. Mab's face underwent a swift transformation.

"He's awake now," she said, with suppressed excitement. "That's just like him to sleep till the moment I'm dressed. He's such a good baby. Come along now, Milly, and see him. And then I'll make you a cup of tea before you have to go."

## CHAPTER XII

### REQUIESCAT IN PACE

IN a small study next to the invalid's quiet room Muriel sat with a book outspread upon her lap. The door communicating between the rooms was open and from where her chair was placed she could see the couch and its still occupant in the dimness beyond. Behind her, over the wide window, the blind was lowered, lest the light should penetrate too brightly into the shadowy recesses of that other room ; but, from time to time, with the breath of incoming air from the window, it swung languidly ; the sunshine shot and receded over the floor, and all the uncertain outlines of her surroundings grew instinct with an immediate brightness—its solid furniture and ample chairs, the book-lined shelves, the sullen red of the walls, and, in cool contrast, the pale cream of cornices and mouldings, vanishing higher into the line of arched, gold-starred ceiling.

Muriel sat very still. The flowing folds of her saffron gown, crushed about her in varying gradations of tint, showed palely against the ponderous woodwork and dull velvet of the chair in which she was seated. A bright-hued cushion, which she had thrust behind her, revealed with happy effect the dainty outline of her features against its scarlet silk, and fashioned a flaming aureole for her shapely head. But for a while it seemed that the book so plausibly outspread upon her lap occupied her attention but sparingly ; her eyes were partially closed and she viewed her surroundings from beneath drowsy lids ; yet, since with the occasional swinging of

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the blind and the incoming sunshine her gaze quickened and grew alert, it appeared also that such inattention might be the result of undue activity of mind rather than of its quiescence.

Once a hint of movement in the quiet occupant of the adjacent room roused her and drew her with hasty steps to his couch-side. But to her soft utterance of his name there was no audible or visible response. She waited, looking down at him, listening, observant. He bore the same appearance as on the evening when she had visited him with Sir Geoffry ; his face was set in a changeless rigidity, the mouth agape ; the skin had the effect of fine parchment drawn tightly over the thin, protuberant features, while his limbs, save for a slight indenture in the coverlet indicating where paralysis had contracted the right leg, lay stretched in the same motionless, uncompromising outline. And, as she bent above him, a singular expression—it was as though repulsion warred with compassion—passed over her delicate, sensitive face. It may have been apparent to her that just so, save for the elimination of that indenture, he would lie when prepared for his last resting-place ; just so would his soulless face look when the coffin-lid shut it down into final corruption. She drew the coverlet over his thin hands, and, returning to the next room, resumed the chair which she had vacated, and now with roused activity, resumed the inspection of the neglected book which she had laid aside upon the table.

It was a small volume with frayed edges, over whose shabby cover a long-dried stream of ink had once trickled, smearing the sometime gilt lettering which proclaimed it a diary, also the ornate date of a year long past. She turned over the pages slowly, each with its compressed faded writing and the thin pink sheets of blotting-paper which intervened. And so doing, she traced the record of a daily life now far in the past, details round whose triviality time had cast a tender charm ; which re-created it with the actual vision of the moment, the little so big, the big so infinitely little. Yet it was perhaps over three entries that her gaze more particularly lingered :

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*"Brookfield.*

*"Such a glorious day. It has been uneventful, but I think I have enjoyed it thoroughly. Geoffry and I went for a long tramp of many miles over the downs this evening. Coming back, we met Jack, who had had a late bathe."*

A crude, somewhat colourless picture, truly, but memory supplied the glowing pigments which fashioned it afresh, unnerving in its light and gladness.

The next, an entry of duller tone, was more explicit :

*"Our glorious weather has broken at last, and summer is gone! Such a cold, stormy day. The sand is blowing over the shore in clouds and the curlews are shrieking dismally. Elinor drove off for the town directly after luncheon to do some shopping, before the rain came on, but Geoffry and I did not go out this afternoon. We made up a roaring fire in the library instead—our first this summer—and simply roasted ourselves before the flames. Yet we felt a little depressed, I think. Geoffry has failed to get the post he tried for, and is inclined to be pessimistic about the future. (Of course he is very poor, but then we are so young, and I can live on at home and wait!) However, to conclude, after tea Jack came over, drenched to the skin—only he is so strong that nothing matters—and he soon cheered us up. In fact, we have been laughing so much that we couldn't hear the gale or the rain any more, and I feel quite exhausted. Jack's laugh is so infectious, even his happy, handsome face seems to put the world all right again. Just now they have both gone up to the gun-room and I am scribbling this by the fire-light till they return, for if I once get behind with my diary it is so difficult to write it up again."*

Lower, under the same date, came the completion of the entry :

*"I thought I had finished all there would be to say to-night, but such a dreadful thing has happened; and, as one trouble always brings another, it brought about so much more. For, suddenly, into the middle of all our fun and nonsense there came a letter which Elinor brought back with her, telling this terrible news of my*

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father's re-marriage, and how my home is gone from me. And then, as if that was not enough, Jack, poor Jack, in his chivalrous desire to comfort me and to point out that I had still a home to go to, said what made everything so much worse. I know Geoffry felt as I did, a horrible dread of its inevitability, for, after all, Geoffry and I are so poor! I must talk to Elinor and see if I can live with her. Anyhow, nothing can ever be the same again between us three. I shall always remember this day, summer and my girlhood seem ended together! I am very, very miserable."

Then, some way further on in the book, the third entry :

"Yesterday," she read, "was my wedding day. I suppose it would be very interesting when I am an old, old woman to be able to read an exact account of it written at the time; and I should like to write this. But there seems so little I can say. It was a very quiet affair on account of poor Elinor's death; and I wore my travelling dress. And I have really a very confused recollection of the actual ceremony. I think I remember most clearly the effect of the tall palms and stiff white arums up the aisle, which Jack, with such needless lavishness, had insisted on sending. And I remember how it struck me as so ridiculous to see Jack himself standing there in his London clothes with that earnest, far-away look on his face, so unlike his old irresponsible self. And then, too, it was very like a dual wedding, for I stood between him and Geoffry. There was a very ugly window opposite us; it cast square splashes of colour upon the pavement where I knelt, red and green, and I counted them to keep from thinking. But afterwards, as we moved up the chancel, Geoffry was no longer beside me, and the smell of the arums became sickly, haunting and horrible like the flowers which deck a funeral, or"—(surely the writer was waxing unduly fanciful?—"which fall with our tears into the grave of someone we have loved. . . . And in one sense it was indeed a funeral, the funeral of my dead girlhood and of all that that girlhood had held dear. . . . But Jack understood. He

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*was very tender and grave as he took me away, and I knew that between my old life, in the sight of God and man, an eternal, incredible barrier had been raised."*

And again, through the reticence of the little entry, sententious in hinted sentiment, in childish triviality of diction, memory filled in what prudence had left unwritten ; filled it in with an unnerving accuracy which dimmed the sight and checked the breath of the woman who read, which brought other memories in its wake, a crowd of gibbering, importunate ghosts from the past, surging upon her consciousness, hustling for prominence. Until, with a salutary yet disconcerting abruptness, the present intruded ; the blind swung far out into the room, and, returning, struck the sash with an imperative knocking ; a more extensive slant of sunshine cut the dimness, and her glance, following in its wake, saw where the door into the passage beyond had opened, and Sir Geoffry had entered the room.

In that moment he must have been supremely aware of the effective picture in daring blend of scarlet and gold, presented by that same saffron-clothed figure with that incisive background of flaming cushion and the dull bronze-red of the wall beyond. Involuntarily, he paused, peering in the wake of the receding sunshine ; then he closed the door behind him gently, and came forwards.

"I got your letter," he said, "an hour since. I came round at the first opportunity, but had certain matters it was advisable to complete first. And you did not hint at being in any hurry."

Unconsciously, perhaps, Muriel's attitude stiffened. She sat more upright, and the cushion, released from pressure, slid to her waist ; she rested her arms flatly, lengthwise along the wide arms of the chair. So sitting, her pose was suggestively regal, if not judicial : the chair—it was one originally brought from the palace of a Doge in Venice—afforded the appearance of a throne, its wide arms terminating in massive carved dogs, and her white hands drooping downwards over these, gripped them with considered firmness. She leant slightly forwards.

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"I am glad you have come," she said. "No, there was no hurry. Only there are certain matters which I decided to-day I would speak to you about."

She paused, looking at him with a curious intentness.

"For one thing, Amelia told me that you had not left town to-day; the reason she gave was that you had promised her to go to that ball to-night. Perhaps I am entitled to ask why Amelia's wishes, where a frivolous object is concerned, should come before mine, where a serious one is at stake? I understood from you that it was important that you should attend that meeting to-day."

Her tone, to Sir Geoffry's hearing, savoured unpleasantly of the attitude of the employer towards the employed—notably that outwardly judicial aspect which he had remarked was not without its meaning. Yet, even while he resented it, he admitted her right to adopt it. Meanwhile, he paused in the act of drawing a chair forward, and viewed her with a very definite inquiry in his glance.

"As far as the meeting was concerned, it was postponed," he explained. "And with regard to the less immediate business, I have made arrangements—I have been busy in connection with the matter till now—arrangements, believe me, wholly adequate to your interests, as I can prove if you will go into the little technicalities of the matter with me——"

She answered decisively, if inconsistently, in the negative. "Of course, your assurance is sufficient," she informed him more graciously—there was even a note of apology in her voice. "In point of fact, it is another matter which I am wishing to speak to you about."

She paused in that crucial moment uncertain how to proceed, uncertain whether to proceed at all, since it appeared that to do so might not only be unavailing, but mistaken, a useless error of taste. And all unconsciously at this juncture Sir Geoffry forced her conclusion by a question which it seemed to him so infinitely more prudent to speak than to omit.

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"The nurse is out, of course," he observed, glancing casually into the darkened room behind him; "and Amelia"—the question in its ostensible triviality left his lips without sign of stress or hesitation—"is Amelia out too?"

Muriel gripped the grotesque, iron-like heads of the wooden dogs beneath her grasp with a fresh quality of decision. "Amelia is out," she said; "and, in connection with that fact, I may mention that it is fortunate, since it is about Amelia that I wish to speak to you."

Sir Geoffry had remained standing. At this juncture he leant his elbow against the slab of the mantelpiece beside him and looked down at her thoughtfully. If he experienced a moment of disquietude, it was hidden beneath a successful apathy of manner. But the recollection of an episode of the night before, an episode ludicrous in its entire inadequacy, its lack of any decisive element of either honour or dishonour—honour of motive, or—and of this he was, presumably grateful—dishonour of completion, doubtless revived; and for one intolerable moment he believed that, in all its barrenness of purpose, it was known to the woman before him.

"You will remember," Muriel was speaking with deliberation, "that I hinted to you before, how I should be sorry if, through any miscomprehension on Amelia's part, or, still more, mistaken judgment on mine, her happiness should be involved. I have reason to believe that such is likely to be the case, and I want you to help me to prevent it."

Still her voice, in its careful, evenly modulated tones, baffled the elucidation of what he desired to ascertain. And he understood that such elucidation was essential to the better understanding of the part which he must presently adopt.

"Before we go further in this matter," he suggested, "surely it is fair to me that you should tell me what are your reasons to justify such an assumption?"

"My reasons?" she looked up at him with a quick glance which, in its steady assurance almost hinted defiance. "What are the hundred-and-one reasons

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which usually point to such a conclusion? Shall I tell you that I have observed in Amelia a preoccupied manner, a little habit of smiling at vacancy, a tendency to abrupt changes of complexion, a self-conscious appreciation of your manifold attentions? Is it necessary to enumerate all the usual danger-signals of a state of irresponsibility? I will only say that I have been observing them for some time, though, not until to-day, when she told me how you had promised her to be present at the ball, did her manner carry conviction."

She paused.

"And to-day," she said, "Amelia showed me that your presence was a matter of vital importance to her, that she could not pronounce your name with indifference, and that she herself was supremely conscious of her own attitude. This marks a definite stage in its development."

Then, as though with an unconquerable inclination to avoid his gaze, her own drooped abruptly; and thus, perhaps, she was unaware of the impression of an immense relief which his face bore.

"Please understand," she said, "that I admit no right to question your actions—anyway"—as he was about to protest—"I accept no such right. Only when I constituted myself, foolishly, perhaps, the guardian of Amelia's welfare, and promoter, in so far as is practicable, of her peace of mind, her interest becomes a matter in which I am directly responsible."

"Certainly," he answered readily. There was apparent to him the curious complexity of which feminine nature affords illustration. That she resented his attention towards Amelia, he did not doubt; that she was fighting that resentment in an effort to behave with an honourable impartiality in the girl's interests was also obvious; but that her scheme of honour included what was due to himself was not so apparent. "I am glad that you have pointed this out," he said, "even though I consider that, as usual, you are taking too serious a view. All your tendency is to take life too seriously! If I have, in my attempt to make her new

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conditions palatable to Amelia, fallen, unconsciously, into the appearance of a flirtation, surely it is a matter easily remedied?"

She tapped the head of one of the wooden dogs with an action half-caressing, half-impatient. "Do you remember," she said, "what you said to me about the kiss of the Fairy Prince? And my rejoinder? It is borne in upon me that Amelia, for all her precise, boarding-school outlook upon life, may at heart be a woman with a woman's stormy nature and terrible capacity for constancy. Oh, I admit that that same quality of constancy is one about which—when it is undesired—men profess to be sceptical. None the less there is a theory that a girl's soul is a sheet of blank paper on which the man who first teaches her the meaning of love writes what can never after be erased. And it always seems to me that this is, perhaps, the most pitiful part of a game of cross-purposes, that he will go his way with no knowledge of what he has done. He will think, good, easy man, that the emotion which sways him will sway her, will wax or wane in exactly the same proportion to how it happens to affect himself. Is it that men are lacking in imagination that they eternally measure the feelings of others by their own? I only know that a man contentedly leaves a woman to a torture whose worst pang is that it is ridiculous——"

Again she paused.

"Is it altogether inconceivable that the kiss of the Fairy Prince may produce far-reaching effects, even on Amelia? Or, to resume my other metaphor, that he may write on that somewhat uninterestingly blank sheet, much which afterwards, could he know of its existence, he would wish unwritten?"

A faint amusement was visible upon Sir Geoffry's face.

"And, even so," he said, "is not all satisfactory? The impression which I have, unwittingly, been writing is at present so faint, its erasure must be a matter of easy accomplishment."

"And, even so," she answered quietly, "all is not

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said between us. I have told you what I read in Amelia ; I have not told you what I read in yourself."

And, with the renewal of that disquieting doubt which he had so confidently discarded, Sir Geoffry may have leant somewhat heavily on the comfortable support of the cold marble slab beside him. But, whether from disinclination or uncertainty, he did not speak.

"Geoffry," she said, and he recognised there was a new note of appeal in her voice, "we have always been honest with each other, let us be so still. Perhaps the phase through which you have been passing has been more comprehensible to me than to yourself. But it seems in the eternal order of things that we women should always be at variance with men in the ideal nearest to our hearts. It may be because we start life with such adverse codes upon such vital subjects—upon truth, honour and purity—that a woman usually trusts a man too much, and a man trusts a woman too little. But I recognise one thing clearly, that most of the complications in life arise from our not having sense to face a situation frankly in time, and also, from another reason, that a man lacks the moral courage to appear a knave in order not to be one."

Her hands relaxed from their grip of the wooden dogs and interlaced themselves restlessly in her lap.

"What is it that I have often told you, Geoffry?—that a man never will understand that, to the woman who loves him, his truth comes first. Even whether he loves her, is less than that supreme question whether his truth is worth her love. But—it is a common error—men do not understand this ; they deceive us to spare us, and so kill our belief in God with our belief in man."

"Is it necessary," he asked, "to speak in riddles?"

"I have no wish to do so," she answered ; "I had even believed my meaning to be clear. Let me state matters more boldly, then. This impression which you recognise that you have been writing, which you maintain is so easy to erase—*do you altogether wish it erased?*"

For the first time he spoke with impatience. "I have told you," he said, "what I think of Amelia. I admit—

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I believe I have always admitted even when you have denied it—that she has attraction. She attracts—but she also jars."

"She jars, but she also attracts," she corrected quickly. "How well I understand you! Listen; a crude statement smacks of the unpalatable, but you have done me the honour in times past to point out that I was brain of your brain and soul of your soul. There is yet another item which men require and which Amelia may be adapted to fulfil: flesh of your flesh. And to some men, or to all men at some period of their lives, this comprises the rest.—Oh I know"—as she read protest in his glance, "that 'Life is run on the cheerful denial of facts,' and that, as you pointed out yesterday, if ever we depart from that polite acquiescence in the ordained we lay ourselves open to misapprehension. But, after all, what I understand in this matter is beside the mark. What is essential is that you should understand simply this: that, except in so far as my responsibility to Amelia entails interference, you are free to act in this matter as you choose; that, to me, what is dead is dead; that there is no fear of my failing to recognise this, or of wishing it otherwise; that"—she met his observance with unhesitating self-possession—"after all, in life each To-day smiles upon the grave of some Yesterday, and that the sooner we recognise this fact the better for ourselves and others."

And still only the nervous unlacing and interlacing of her hands seemed to him an involuntary confession of weakness; her voice retained its steady and unvarying composure. And that same composure, even her ability to moralise coolly upon a situation so intimate, so entirely personal, stung him not a little. His speech revealed a more definite impatience—anger even, as he answered:

"But this is preposterous! Because an impressionable girl, with a very limited knowledge of the world, chooses to misconstrue my feelings toward her, or because through a foolish and mistaken good-nature I may have slipped into the similitude of a flirtation, you jump to finalities, demand that I should act honestly to you,

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and honourably to her, and decide—Good God!"—he laughed more angrily—"is it reasonable on such grounds to talk as if all that lies between us can be set aside as lightly, conveniently, as though it had never been? All I can say is, if you do not hold that past sacred, if you recognise no tie of honour involved in it, at least believe that I have never ceased to do so." He found the emphatic sincerity of his speech all-convincing. "And, for all that past holds," he added, the decision of his voice still firmly belying the indecision of his mind, "though I, too, may have stooped to quibble with the world, to accept the lie of convenience to which we both defer, yet can you say that I have ever stooped on my own behalf to plead the usual excuses with which men square their consciences—the ignorance of youth, the strength of passion, the extenuation of circumstances? That I have ever belittled that past, or been otherwise than frankly, royally glad of the years and their memories?"

Her face was in shadow. She kept it averted with care from that swaying blind and the vagrant sunshine; but he fancied that a faint colour had stolen into her cheeks, and, for one moment, he believed that that all-convincing sincerity of speech had impressed her, even as it had impressed himself. And, so thinking, he lashed himself into a more complete conviction.

"The whole matter is absurd," he said conclusively. "It is fine of you—you are always fine, Muriel, admirable, even when most unreasonable, and, in this case, admirable towards the girl, but scarcely so admirable towards myself—it is I, surely, who have something to condone—And scarcely practical, since you overlook the fact, that even if matters were for one moment as you suppose, I, apart from my post here—and the position would lack a desirable element of decency—have no income, neither has she."

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Thus it appeared that that same all-convincing sincerity of speech of which he had been conscious had failed in its mark. Yet when she spoke again, it was with a swift apologetic resumption of her old gentleness.

"None the less, do believe that, in spite of all that I may have said to the contrary, I credit you with stating what, at the moment, you emphatically believe to be true. Oh, so far you are honest, I must believe that ! But —Geoffry"—unwittingly, doubtless, her voice was a caress—"while out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh, it is very apparent to me that the heart is apt to be so much more romantic than the head. Feelings dictate what facts disprove. . . . Listen, I believe that you desire most ardently to be faithful to that Image which you have set up, but I also know (better than you know yourself) that you have been aware how its pristine perfection is a thing of the past. Your worship has not changed—God forbid ! the change lies in the thing worshipped. Perhaps I can arrogate to myself that I am stronger than you in that I can accept this fact without flinching or subterfuge. And so, you see, I also face that crucial problem, what if"—she spoke deliberately—"when time has placed certain lines and erasures upon that once fair Image of past worship, what if a curious chance should present to you its semblance rejuvenated, fresh, young, altogether pleasing, altogether adapted to appeal to those same human instincts which we have acknowledged to be paramount at some periods of a man's life? Is it so wonderful that, being a man, you should prefer the unmarred to the marred? Think for one moment of last night, and of the contrast afforded by that dual picture in the glass!"

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which had influenced him was too complex, that most comprehensible theory of an Ideal rejuvenated yet indivisible from its progenitor, somewhat difficult of explanation.)

And, meanwhile, Muriel stirred restlessly. The blind swayed by a stronger breeze swung outwards, the encroaching sunshine shrouded her inopportune from head to foot, revealing incisively her unstudied grace of pose, her compelling charm ; but, showing, too, with undesired distinctness, the all-explicit tension of her face.

"Do you not understand," she said quickly, "that the point which you hold all-important is to me a minor question? What if a few weeks can cut the link of years? —Can any tie which you may, or may not form now, alter that knowledge to me? Can these dry bones live? I would suggest that we bury our dead with decency as others have done before us, and face the future with the usual *Requiescat in Pace* upon our lips."

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Yet, in defiant rejection of facts, so it seemed to him, thought outstripped itself ; and, with a pertinacity which dumfounded, grasped the unerring justice of her standpoint. Her woman's insight, undeterred by his specious reasoning, could clarify his own outlook till he could see that this episode, so ostensibly trivial in itself, was to her of mighty moment.

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For, as she herself had stated, it weighed little in her conclusion whether the incident was, in itself, transient or permanent ; the fact that it could be existent, that the gold of her fancy was proven alloy, the recognition of the causes which thus proved it, marked an awakening from which there was no appeal.

And, in reviewing his past relations with the woman before him, he knew the strength of her present recoil. There are sins whose very essence constitutes at once their glory and their blame. Lucifer was magnificent in his defiance, and love is omnipotent in the very abandonment which is its crime. He knew how the one great passion of Muriel's life had been pure in faithfulness. Fate might have wrecked God's handiwork, as circumstance had distorted the pattern of love's own weaving, but, in her truth to that love, despite all chances, all man-made laws, he had seen only the voice of nature triumphing in splendid defiance over the voice of man. Yet, for all the independence of her outlook, for her keen, untrammelled estimate of the laws which ruled petty souls, he understood further how, for a woman of her cleanliness of temperament to have defied the traditions of her upbringing, to have—even in conventional acceptance—sullied the purity of her white soul, had meant much. For the taint of that lie of convenience was upon her, the deceit to which she had deferred soiled her, thus making of her a lesser thing than she had aimed. And now herein lay the force of the present tragedy : that she should have risked all, believed all, and sinned greatly for a great love, to find only that it was no life-long passion to which she had surrendered, but a phase, contemptible in this, its power of transition.

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And, seeing this, another aspect of the case moved him profoundly. For the moment when we realise the death of a great passion is ineffably sad, the mortality of what we deemed immortal brings with it a strong yearning, an infinite regret. It is as though the terror of death were transposed, and the living body could survive the dead soul. . . . And to Sir Geoffry the realisation held an unexplained horror, while beneath the search-light of Muriel's analysis the sophistry of his delusion dropped from him. For he knew now that he had not cheated his imagination. His former passion had not merged into a semblance of itself. It was extinct ; and the strange travesty of it which had arisen to lure him into an act of folly, had thereby but shown him the fallacy of his most cherished belief. For there had been one portion of his soul where he had believed his identity unassailable, where he had deemed himself as the gods in eternity of purpose ; and he found now that he, too, was a thing lower than he had dreamed ; his identity was a myth ; his godhood clay. That was all. The experience was not novel ; and therein lay its hurt.

And still as he stood before her in his silence—silence which, in its tacit acceptance of all that he desired to refute, he felt shamed this woman he had loved—he was aware that he cut a sorry figure. And though passion may be dead, it can be replaced by an infinite tenderness. He longed in that moment to prove to her that he had not been so altogether faithless, that the new love had been but part and parcel of the old ; to plead, even in despite, that strange trickery of likeness. But still he was confounded by the knowledge that her woman's shrewdness would penetrate the sophistry which had

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Then, since her height almost equalled his own, for a moment their glances met on a fair level, his intent and anxious, hers unflinchingly defensive.

" And so," she said, " I think we are both agreed that it would be needless to wreck a warm, living Present to a shallow ghost like the Past. I only suggest that, whatever course you elect to adopt, at least let it be decisive, since, for Amelia, indecision must entail complications." She moved away, her glance upheld, her step deliberate, and drew the door into the next room once more ajar.

And there, indefinitely in the dimness, she could trace again the outline of that still figure with the inert limbs, the sunken cheeks, the lips parted in a senseless smile. And fancy may have reproduced a shore golden in the sunlight, where, coming towards her was a strong young figure with the sunlight on his hair.

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the Jack I knew—Jack of the brilliant brain, the warm heart, the tender loving-kindness—died to me ; and in his place was that poor stricken thing, a living corpse with a dead soul and brain. Circumstances overrule our best intentions with a simplicity which is ironical ! For the rest, God and the world will condemn ; but I used to think that Jack would understand.”

She turned away with a little gesture of repudiation. “ As you have pointed out,” she said, “ the situation lacks a desirable element of decency. Only in connection with the girl, you see, I felt—there is a hackneyed theory that, as we sow, so shall we reap ; but the horror of it all is that the one who reaps is so seldom the one who sowed.”

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conditions palatable to Amelia, fallen, unconsciously, into the appearance of a flirtation, surely it is a matter easily remedied ? ”

She tapped the head of one of the wooden dogs with an action half-caressing, half-impatient. “ Do you remember,” she said, “ what you said to me about the kiss of the Fairy Prince ? And my rejoinder ? It is borne in upon me that Amelia, for all her precise, boarding-school outlook upon life, may at heart be a woman with a woman’s stormy nature and terrible capacity for constancy. Oh, I admit that that same quality of constancy is one about which—when it is undesired—men profess to be sceptical. None the less there is a theory that a girl’s soul is a sheet of blank paper on which the man who first teaches her the meaning of love writes what can never after be erased. And it always seems to me that this is, perhaps, the most pitiful part of a game of cross-purposes, that he will go his way with no knowledge of what he has done. He will think, good, easy man, that the emotion which sways him will sway her, will wax or wane in exactly the same proportion to how it happens to affect himself. Is it that men are lacking in imagination that they eternally measure the feelings of others by their own ? I only know that a man contentedly leaves a woman to a torture whose worst pang is that it is ridiculous——”

Again she paused.

“ Is it altogether inconceivable that the kiss of the Fairy Prince may produce far-reaching effects, even on Amelia ? Or, to resume my other metaphor, that he may write on that somewhat uninterestingly blank sheet, much which afterwards, could he know of its existence, he would wish unwritten ? ”

A faint amusement was visible upon Sir Geoffry’s face.

“ And, even so,” he said, “ is not all satisfactory ? The impression which I have, unwittingly, been writing is at present so faint, its erasure must be a matter of easy accomplishment.”

“ And, even so,” she answered quietly, “ all is not

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said between us. I have told you what I read in Amelia ; I have not told you what I read in yourself."

And, with the renewal of that disquieting doubt which he had so confidently discarded, Sir Geoffry may have leaned somewhat heavily on the comfortable support of the cold marble slab beside him. But, whether from disinclination or uncertainty, he did not speak.

"Geoffry," she said, and he recognised there was a new note of appeal in her voice, "we have always been honest with each other, let us be so still. Perhaps the phase through which you have been passing has been more comprehensible to me than to yourself. But it seems in the eternal order of things that we women should always be at variance with men in the ideal nearest to our hearts. It may be because we start life with such adverse codes upon such vital subjects—upon truth, honour and purity—that a woman usually trusts a man too much, and a man trusts a woman too little. But I recognise one thing clearly, that most of the complications in life arise from our not having sense to face a situation frankly in time, and also, from another reason, that a man lacks the moral courage to appear a knave in order not to be one."

Her hands relaxed from their grip of the wooden dogs and interlaced themselves restlessly in her lap.

"What is it that I have often told you, Geoffry?—that a man never will understand that, to the woman who loves him, his truth comes first. Even whether he loves her, is less than that supreme question whether his truth is worth her love. But—it is a common error—men do not understand this ; they deceive us to spare us, and so kill our belief in God with our belief in man."

"Is it necessary," he asked, "to speak in riddles?"

"I have no wish to do so," she answered ; "I had even believed my meaning to be clear. Let me state matters more boldly, then. This impression which you recognise that you have been writing, which you maintain is so easy to erase—*do you altogether wish it erased?*"

For the first time he spoke with impatience. "I have told you," he said, "what I think of Amelia. I admit—

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I believe I have always admitted even when you have denied it—that she has attraction. She attracts—but she also jars."

"She jars, but she also attracts," she corrected quickly. "How well I understand you! Listen; a crude statement smacks of the unpalatable, but you have done me the honour in times past to point out that I was brain of your brain and soul of your soul. There is yet another item which men require and which Amelia may be adapted to fulfil: flesh of your flesh. And to some men, or to all men at some period of their lives, this comprises the rest.—Oh I know"—as she read protest in his glance, "that 'Life is run on the cheerful denial of facts,' and that, as you pointed out yesterday, if ever we depart from that polite acquiescence in the ordained we lay ourselves open to misapprehension. But, after all, what I understand in this matter is beside the mark. What is essential is that you should understand simply this: that, except in so far as my responsibility to Amelia entails interference, you are free to act in this matter as you choose; that, to me, what is dead is dead; that there is no fear of my failing to recognise this, or of wishing it otherwise; that"—she met his observance with unhesitating self-possession—"after all, in life each To-day smiles upon the grave of some Yesterday, and that the sooner we recognise this fact the better for ourselves and others."

And still only the nervous unlacing and interlacing of her hands seemed to him an involuntary confession of weakness; her voice retained its steady and unvarying composure. And that same composure, even her ability to moralise coolly upon a situation so intimate, so entirely personal, stung him not a little. His speech revealed a more definite impatience—anger even, as he answered:

"But this is preposterous! Because an impressionable girl, with a very limited knowledge of the world, chooses to misconstrue my feelings toward her, or because through a foolish and mistaken good-nature I may have slipped into the similitude of a flirtation, you jump to finalities, demand that I should act honestly to you,

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and honourably to her, and decide—Good God!"—he laughed more angrily—"is it reasonable on such grounds to talk as if all that lies between us can be set aside as lightly, conveniently, as though it had never been? All I can say is, if you do not hold that past sacred, if you recognise no tie of honour involved in it, at least believe that I have never ceased to do so." He found the emphatic sincerity of his speech all-convincing. "And, for all that past holds," he added, the decision of his voice still firmly belying the indecision of his mind, "though I, too, may have stooped to quibble with the world, to accept the lie of convenience to which we both defer, yet can you say that I have ever stooped on my own behalf to plead the usual excuses with which men square their consciences—the ignorance of youth, the strength of passion, the extenuation of circumstances? That I have ever belittled that past, or been otherwise than frankly, royally glad of the years and their memories?"

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## CHAPTER XIII

### THE AWAKENING OF AMELIA

THAT same evening Amelia surveyed the effect upon her appearance of a ball-dress of rose-hued tulle. It was one which, with a survival of her old passion for brilliant colour, she had begged Muriel to purchase. The whiteness of her neck and arms against the vivid gown pleased her ; so did her dark hair and brilliant eyes. The thought of Mab's persistent admiration returned to her agreeably ; it conveyed a subtle compliment. She grasped that the value of a man's approbation is a reflection of the interest which his personality may inspire, while that of a woman carries scientific weight. As Muriel had stated in that remembered conversation of former years, a man can judge a result only, to the woman alone it is given to know how the result is arrived at ; she is a critic of detail, a connoisseur of means ; in apprising achievement she measures the material which was available and does homage to the genius of which the result is a visible expression. Amelia knew that in old days when she had been badly dressed Mab had never been betrayed into a statement of admiration for her. The unqualified approbation therefore of that present criticism elated her, in preference to any crude tribute to mere natural charm.

She descended the stairs haunted pleasantly by the vision of her personality. It occurred to her agreeably throughout the quiet meal in the cool, dim dining-room. There had been times during those meals when the burden of her inferiority had been borne in upon her ; when the perfection of Muriel's dress, her unbroken self-

## The Awakening of Amelia

possession, her ready gift of speech, had alike oppressed her with the force of a disconcerting contrast which provoked while it disheartened emulation. In comparison, her own efforts after wit or elegance had been clumsy and ineffectual. But to-day this was reversed. She pictured herself in the ordeal of a ballroom and gauged her entry viewed with Sir Geoffry's eyes while complacency remained, the conviction that her superiority would still be apparent amidst such surroundings. The thought of the evening before her filled her with expectancy. The momentous nature of the coming interview was absorbing, incredible.

Muriel, glancing across at her, surprised a smile upon her face. "You're looking remarkably well to-night," she observed kindly. "That colour is very bright, but it suits you."

Amelia appeared gratified. "We seem to have changed about, you and me," she replied genially. "Generally it's you in dark clothes and me in light, to-night we're the other way round."

Muriel cast a cursory glance at her own dress. "I mean to give up wearing white," she observed; "I am getting too old for it."

Amelia shook her head.

"I don't think it!" she protested. "Why, in the distance, you don't look a day more than twenty. And that's the honest truth."

And, as with a previous suggestion of flattery in years gone by, Mrs Coleford did not respond.

"Where's the dance we're bound for to-night?" Amelia ventured after a pause.

"In Portman Square, at Lady Braithwaite's." Muriel's voice sounded tired.

Amelia reflected, possessed by a fresh excitement. Soon this found expression in speech.

"I'll tell you," she said; "that's where I first saw you three years gone back. I'd read in the papers you were going to a dance there, so I went to watch and see what you were like. How funny things do turn out that I should be going to a ball there with you!"

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Muriel appeared interested. "Very curious," she agreed. "So you went on purpose to find out what I was like?" She paused. "Was that where you settled that I did not look more than twenty—in the distance?"

"Why, no!" Amelia, conscious of a faint satire in Muriel's voice, spoke with embarrassment. She understood that this was an exceptional opportunity for conveying to Mrs Coleford some of the admiration which she inspired; but shyness clogged her speech even while enthusiasm shook its utterance.

"I didn't give your age a thought," she said earnestly, "of course I knew it within a year or so, because aunt had told me as much, but I'd never have said you looked it, and your dress—it was a white one like to-night and was lovely."

In the silence which ensued she crumbled her bread with nervous fingers and popped the fragments between her lips.

Later, as they started for the ball, she looked out at the crowded streets and saw where a clock over a shop pointed to twelve. She was glad that the hour was late, for she had learnt that when Sir Geoffry dined out he did not arrive at a party much before midnight. She desired to question Muriel respecting his whereabouts but was deterred by the fear of not being able to pronounce his name with a sufficient air of indifference. Her expectancy grew. It seemed to her that all her life had been culminating towards this important evening. It was the crisis of a story of which she was the heroine. The whirl of lights and the rumble of traffic formed part of the strange excitement which possessed her. Her heart-beats drummed in ridiculous unison with the click of the horses' hoofs. By and by as the carriage slackened pace at the approach of its destination she leant towards the window and looked with anticipation, first at the house, and then at the crowd which fringed the awning. Imagination conjured up an incredible vision of herself in the past, clothed in a shabby mackintosh, filled with admiration at the footmen who

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would not condescend to speak to her. As she passed up the steps impulse checked her. Where the light from the hall fell brightly upon her she paused to look back. A deft movement of studied carelessness threw open her cloak, leaving her beautiful neck and arms exposed to view. The pale silk hung from her shoulders in glistening folds, heightening the whiteness of her skin, the brilliant hue of her dress. She saw the double line of watchers lean forwards eagerly and a smile of gratification was upon her face as she passed on into the house.

Hurrying after Muriel through the hall, she eyed her surroundings with unwonted curiosity. She recalled how, in the past, she had caught a glimpse of the dining-room and of the cloak-room beyond. Other girls were straining to see her now as she had striven to see those guests of that day gone by. The wide staircase was crowded. The air was heavy with the perfume of flowers. Roses garlanded the balustrades, roses drooped over the doorway, huge balls of roses were suspended from the ceilings. Music swung upon the air. It thrilled her with increasing exultation as she made slow progress up the staircase. Present to her remembrance now was that other ball at Muriel's house and the moment when, expectant, confident, she had mounted the staircase to the disillusion which awaited her. . . . And here it seemed as if in a moment of disappointment history was repeating itself, for as she gained the landing she saw the doorway of the ballroom, a sea of moving faces, unfamiliar, unresponsive, and though she scanned them sharply, the face which she sought was absent. A sudden dismay chilled and angered her. Muriel had been waylaid by acquaintances. Passing on unceremoniously, Amelia edged a passage through the crowd which lined the wall and gained a point of vantage by the window.

Partially hemmed in by dancers who were resting, she reviewed the entrance. And still misgiving, with increasing dismay, chilled her imagination. She repulsed it angrily. She fanned herself with a sharp,

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quick movement. Sir Geoffry had been delayed ; he would come later. And when he arrived eventually, it was necessary that she should be dancing with someone ; a man thought more of you if you were well sought after. She scanned the people surrounding her more narrowly. And, as if in response to her desire, a voice arrested her, and she found that a man to whom she had been introduced two days previously was asking her to valse. She accepted with alacrity. They took a few turns, but the crush increased and they paused by the wall.

"We must have a better turn later when it is less crowded," he suggested ; "this is one of the best floors in London."

"It's precious slippery," Amelia responded. "I'd have been on my nose just now if you hadn't held me up as you did. But I never get tired of just watching the people ; some of them look such frights !"

He acquiesced.

"Though, take it all round, it's an elegant sight," she modified the rigour of her first opinion ; "and some look much better than others."

Again he agreed.

Then, as in the days gone by, Amelia's natural shrewdness suggested a method of ascertaining what she wished to know. "One of the best dancers about," she remarked with careful carelessness, "is a sort of cousin of mine, Sir Geoffry Hope. But I don't seem to see him this evening."

"Hope?" repeated the man. "I know him well. You're right ; an A1 dancer, I should say, but he's generally a pretty lazy beggar at it, too. I saw him downstairs waiting for supper as I came in."

"Downstairs?" said Amelia.

"Sitting near the supper-room with a Mrs Breton—I don't know if you know her? He'd got a cool place and looked as if he were going to keep it. I don't believe he's ever looked into the ballroom yet."

Amelia considered.

"Was the place where he was sitting anywhere near

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the doorway downstairs, say the hall, as you come in?"

The man looked at her curiously. "Perhaps I ought not to give him away," he suggested with a smile. "No, he was beyond the conservatory at the back of the supper-room. Nowhere near the entrance."

Amelia laughed. "You bet I'll chaff him about it later on!" she asserted, meeting the criticism of his glance unflinchingly. "But, talk about lazy, I'd say it was the pot calling the kettle black!"

He took the hint. They danced again. She was haunted by a curious sensation that it was the room which was turning and not herself. It was a revolving board which spun round and round while the figures hopped upon it with ridiculous contortions. They paused, and she found herself next to Muriel who took the opportunity to effect some quick introductions. Partners seemed provided with unexpected promptitude. At the close of the dance another claimed her and yet another. It was not till later that she spied Colonel Banks standing in the doorway, and crossing the room, confided to him that she was suffering from hunger and would like to go to supper. He fell in readily with the suggestion and they passed downstairs.

In the lower rooms were tables with bright glass and brighter metal. Flowers. Lines of unfamiliar faces. White faces which paled and hot faces which reddened. Young and old; quiet and hilarious. Dresses which charmed and jewels which twinkled. The clatter of knives; the babel of tongues; food, food, everywhere food; an atmosphere which stifled, a smell which nauseated; herds of superfluous humanity; and, for Amelia, waves of heat, waves of sound; music overhead which throbbed, pulses in her head which beat its measure, a delay which was interminable; then, once again, a slow progress up the hot, flower-scented staircase; a descending crowd which checked and passed; further, a vision of the ballroom and beyond, in the shifting maze, drifting, turning, appearing and disappearing,

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a fleeting sight of Sir Geoffry and Mrs Breton dancing together.

The Colonel went off in search of a partner to whom he was engaged, and Amelia stood in the doorway. The couple whom her gaze pursued drifted through the dancers with a gliding, swinging motion which seemed to her inexpressibly attractive. The delicate grey of Mrs Breton's gown spun smoothly through the whirling maze of colour with which it was surrounded. It darted into sight with persistence. It was like a pale thread which wound with haunting effect throughout some gorgeous pattern of varied hue.

To Amelia's straining senses the mellow tones of Sir Geoffry's voice were distinctly audible. Again, and yet again, the pair swept by. Little trivialities of their conversation clipped the universal murmur, rose and fell. Once, the pale dress brushed Amelia's feet in passing. Music crashed and spun, wailed and waned, hushed; and the two had passed from the room by the opposite door.

The night wore away. Amelia danced briskly when she could secure a partner and concealed herself among the crowd when one was not forthcoming. Her head ached and her limbs were tired. Yet, while her feet sped or stayed, while her speech flowed or halted, one thought, ever present, pursued and tormented her. She faced it, absorbed and accepted it with characteristic decision. For the persistence with which Sir Geoffry shunned her was the result of design, not chance. His absence from the doorway upon her arrival in violation of his promise, his continued avoidance of her throughout the evening, even his studied attention to Mrs Breton were all part of a concerted line of conduct, inexplicable yet obvious.

The crowd had begun to thin in the ballroom, and already, with ghostly effect the faint pallor of dawn was stealing about the windows, when with a start, she heard Sir Geoffry's voice at her elbow.

"May I have a dance?" he asked; and there was an

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embarrassment in his voice which Amelia did not fail to note.

She did not look at him as she shook her head. "I am too tired," she said curtly.

"If you are too tired to dance, will you sit out the remainder of this interval with me?"

No available excuse presented itself to her rapid reflection. He led her towards the balcony. The grey twilight already lay upon the red cloth. It looked tawdry. The flowers overhead were drooping. She stepped to the balustrade and looked down into the street. The harsh voice of the linkman came from below with monotonous reiteration. Dark figures like blue phantoms were moving upon the white pavement. A thin line of watchers still fringed the awning. Opposite, she saw that the houses were showing in shadowy outline against the pale sky. The daylight felt cold. She shivered.

Then, as she turned her gaze upon Sir Geoffry, she saw that he was noting with steady intentness, the shifting crowd in the ballroom beyond. Already the dancers were returning. Trim feet were stepping languidly across the shining boards. Bright dresses, like a gaudy knot of exotics gathered in the doorway; the murmur of voices grew. She recognised that he roused himself from the abstraction which was gaining upon him and seemed to brace his determination afresh.

"Miss Bradshaw," he said, "do you know that I want you to release me from a promise I made a short time back? I find it would be impossible for me to remain in London longer now. I believe I shall have to leave directly."

The announcement, in its apparent triviality, smote Amelia's ears with the full force of significance. With fingers which were unsteady, she plucked a rose from one of the wreaths which drooped over her head and smelt it meditatively before she answered.

"Didn't I tell you that men's promises were like pie-crust—made to be broken?" she inquired after a pause.

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"You certainly have the best of the argument," he said slowly; "but you must remember that I also told you that I am not always master of my actions."

She did not answer.

"I am sorry," he said, and she heard a change in his voice; "will you believe that this was—unavoidable?"

Amelia drew herself up with a little gesture of repudiation, ghost-like in its similarity to a gesture of Muriel's. "You seem fussing yourself about a very small matter," she said. "It seems to me if you go, you go, and if you stay, you stay. There's the music again—I must be off."

He led her back to the doorway. The incident, so obviously crucial, had occupied but the space of a few moments. She recalled with a feeling akin to terror that she had no partner for that dance. As he turned away she slipped downstairs and hurried to the cloak-room. Tears stung her eyes to torment. She twisted her chair away from the curious gaze of the attendant maid. Overhead, the feet of the dancers drummed upon the floor with monotonous insistence.

But in the ballroom Sir Geoffrey had returned to the balcony. The cold air of the morning drew him irresistibly. He stood watching the new day take shape out of the indefinite grey dawn. And the clear breath of the outer world which whipped intelligence into sharper activity brought with it a corresponding dismay. Behind him, the night still lay, in its hot brightness, and its mock festivity, with its surfeit of food, its breath of dying flowers. He turned from its recollection with singular distaste.

The rôle which he had adopted was odious to him. A decisive measure had been essential, but its execution suddenly appeared inexpressibly clumsy. He reviewed his conduct from Amelia's standpoint and the loss of self-esteem rankled. His present attitude was irretrievable in its conclusiveness, far-reaching in its issues, but the curious inconsistency of the situation stung him anew. For the spell of his infatuation was strong upon him. The all-compelling sweetness of the girl's recent presence

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compassed him ; its allurement strengthened, yet reason was paramount. Even while his blood leapt, and his pulses thrilled with the sense of its intoxication, he could disassociate this phase of emotion, this witchery of his senses from the more subtle union of brain and soul. It was as though some sub-conscious self could view with cynicism the little eccentricities of his mood and decide where it was ephemeral and where permanent. And whatever of a more practical barrier lay between himself and the fulfilment of his desire, the fact was distinct to his consciousness that to yield to his infatuation would be to destroy it, and, in destroying it, to efface whatever of happiness life held for himself and for Amelia.

And, meanwhile, dimly before him trees, houses, the wide, pale thoroughfare below, all the outlines of a familiar world took shape, growing momentarily more distinct. But, as yet, over all brooded the cold greyness of returning day, a phantom hue, an atmosphere of unreality. In a moment of fantastic imagining it seemed to him that he was watching life fashion itself anew out of the indefinite chances of the Unknown. Colourless, prosaic, yet ever more clearly defined, he saw it shaping itself in unattractive guise, a life devoid of romance, of promise, of enticement, permeated with a haunting echo from that other life which lay behind. Yet, for the moment, he had only to turn his head and the old world was upon him, that world of high pressure, of fevered unrest, of artificial festivity, of allurement, of dissatisfaction, of regret—

A voice cut the current of his thoughts, and he looked round to find Mrs Coleford standing beside him.

"Have you seen Amelia?" she asked.

He glanced back at the ballroom. "She is dancing somewhere," he said.

But Muriel lingered. In apparent response to an afterthought, she stepped out on to the balcony and stood where Amelia had so lately stood, while the dawn touched her face to an unwonted pallor. And again Sir Geoffry was conscious of that curious psychological aspect of his mood, for, in sharp contradistinction to the glowing youth of the girl whom he had so lately seen there, the

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woman before him was like some ghostly embodiment of his recent passion—exquisite, intangible, inexpressibly spiritualised.

Yet, in the white light Mrs Coleford's diamonds looked lustreless, her dress cold. Perhaps she recognised the unsatisfactory conditions to which she was exposed, for she turned from the daylight and moved back into the shadow.

There was a silence before Sir Geoffry spoke.

"I wanted to tell you," he said, "that I have taken your advice. I leave for Scotland to-morrow night."

She looked at him gravely. "I understand," she said. "And later—when we come in August?"

"I shall be fishing in Norway. I can provide a temporary substitute for my work."

"Then we shall not meet for some time?"

"Not for some time."

In the ballroom a polka struck up. Again, the brilliant lights, the crashing music there seemed curiously apart from the cold, grey balcony where they stood. A girl's laugh rang out as the dancers sped past.

"For her it has only been a few weeks"—Muriel's gaze seemed to seek Amelia in the whirling crowd. Then she reached out her hand: "I may not see you before you leave," she said.

And, as his hand closed over hers, he did not look upon her face.

The drive home seemed unusually long. Amelia stared out intently at the empty streets. A few early milk-carts were going their rounds; vegetable carts were on their way to Covent Garden. At a coffee stall, despondent figures were awaiting a scant repast.

Only once Amelia broke the silence. "I hate those sparrings!" she said, as they skirted the Park; "they go through one's head in a morning!"

Arrived at Albert Gate, she took the latch-key from Mrs Coleford, and got out first to open the door. In the hall a gleam of artificial light still strove feebly to assert itself against the encroaching day. She lit a hand-candle for Muriel and followed her upstairs.

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It was near the topmost flight that Amelia saw the white figure before her sway suddenly against the wall. The candle fell from Muriel's grasp and clattered, guttering, on to the stairs.

Amelia sprang forward. "Why," she exclaimed, "you're faint!" She pushed open the door of Muriel's room and drew her towards a chair. She switched on the electric light.

"It was a sudden giddiness," said Muriel. "The rooms were so hot. I shall be better soon."

"You look just ghastly," said Amelia with much concern. In that moment the weariness which made her head throb, all the tormenting mystery of her own heart-ache was swept from her recollection. "You wait while I git you some wine," she said. She hastened downstairs, and returned quickly with a decanter. Muriel was standing by the dressing-table; already the colour was coming back into her face. As she lifted the wine to her lips, she spoke gratefully—

"I am feeling better," she said; "but it was very good of you to fetch this, for I know you must be tired."

The solicitude of her voice was senselessly unnerving. Amelia looked away and her absent gaze scanned her surroundings. The clear electric light in the candles was mellowed to a peach tint. It shadowed walls and ceiling with a pale warmth of hue. All the dainty appurtenances of the room were touched to a delicious mystery beneath its gleam. In the distance stood the wide, white bed with its coverlet of peach-hued silk.

Her gaze lingered at the limpid surface of the glass which cut the wall.

"You're beginning to look yourself again," she agreed, as she saw the reflection of Muriel's face there. And next, still fighting the thoughts which threatened distraction, she pressed her outspread palms on either side of her firm, round waist.

"Aren't you just slim beside me!" she said, critically, but with shyness. "I always feel like a cart-horse in make where you're concerned."

The remark, in its harmless flattery of purpose, affected

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Muriel unexpectedly as it drew her reluctant gaze to the glass, perhaps recalling with distinctness an incident of the evening before.

For the contrast which had been apparent to Sir Geoffry was reproduced yet again before her, but immeasurably exaggerated. Amelia's face was still flushed with dancing, her eyes were marvellously brilliant. In the pale sheet of mirror, her strong, young figure with its vivid daring of dress showed triumphantly distinctive. Beside it, Muriel saw her own personality as he had seen it, vapid, effaced. She saw her beauty rendered yet more void by the traces of her recent faintness, by the haggard lines upon her face, by the overshadowing hue of grey upon her dark hair.

"Good-night," said Amelia. There was dissatisfaction in her tone. In a moment of illumination she had remarked the import of Muriel's glance. It clenched a belief which for some time past had been slowly crystallising in her brain. She moved to the door with an air of indecision. Outside, she paused, her clasp reluctant to quit the handle. Then, still with the same air of irresolution, she thrust the door once more noiselessly asunder, and looked back into the room.

Muriel had not moved from the spot where she had left her, but her face was bowed upon her hands ; her attitude revealed all that Amelia had dimly fathomed, the existence of some unuttered grief, the secret abandonment of self-control. And, as Amelia watched, all the torment of her own mood beat back upon her consciousness ; the pent-up misery of the past hours, the unnerving quality of the doubt from which she had suffered, the enforced repression. In the comprehension of her own unhappiness, she knew herself in the presence of another sorrow whose pain was none the less real to her because she misread it, ridiculously.

For a moment she watched ; then it was as though some other self took wing and thrust back the bars of convention in which she had bound it. She crossed the room quickly.

"Listen here," she said, as she rested her touch on

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Muriel's shoulder. "I know what it is—oh, don't you tell *me*"—as Muriel looked up in astonished protest—"don't you suppose I've eyes in my head like other people? That I haven't seen you look in the glass and turn from it, without my knowing what it meant? I tell you, you're fretting yourself because you think you're gitting on in years. You're out of sorts and in a low way, and you think you're gitting old and ugly and all the rest of it. I've seen it right enough!" her voice waxed tremulous in her anxiety to be explicit—"we've all the feeling at times. Do you suppose I never feel down in my luck about my looks? that there aren't days when I feel I'll never put my nose outside again, I'm so disheartened about meself in looks and ways. And it's all stuff—where you come in. You're every bit as good-looking as you were! There isn't another woman in London that's a patch upon you. That's just the way—it's always the beauties who think they're frights, and the frights who think they're beauties——"

She hesitated. Speech was inadequate to vent the thoughts which rushed upon her brain; while beneath the touch of unwonted feeling, the self-control to which she had attained was deserting her. And, meanwhile, the emotion which wrung her utterance, in all its apparent absurdity of disproportion to the cause which evoked it, was read aright by the woman who listened.

"There isn't another who's a patch upon you!" asserted Amelia with conviction. She stooped, awkward in her excitement. The rosy tulle outspread around her in crushed waves of colour. Her face was aglow with love triumphant over temerity as she outstretched her arms, and drawing Mrs Coleford towards her, imprinted upon her cheek a decisive, lingering kiss.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE MUD-BALL

THE day which brightened while Amelia lay sleepless upon her bed, brought to Sir Geoffry a corresponding unrest. Mrs Breton on her way home had driven him as far as Hyde Park Corner in her brougham. She had expressed her satisfaction at the manner of her entertainment during the past night. The supper and attendance had been exceptionally good, the floor perfect, the music all that could be desired. Her conversation, as it branched upon the morals and eccentricities of her fellow-guests, became more abstract, and had a certain bearing upon his own train of thought.

"I look upon you as a connoisseur in social problems," she said. "Tell me, do you consider it practicable to be in love with two people at once?"

"Practicable, not practical," said Sir Geoffry, dismissing the question lightly. "I suppose I might be permitted to say *in love* with any number, while love is reserved for one."

"How admirably you have retained the ideals of your youth!"

The characteristic inflection of irony passed unnoticed.

"My distinction," he added, with unexpected seriousness, "lies, of course, between sentiment and a great passion. As far as women are concerned, I believe most women experience one deep, overwhelming passion in their youth, and, in it, vent all the strong emotion which is possible to them. Any subsequent affection of which they are capable, may be loyal enough, but I

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should describe it as essentially a manufactured emotion, cold and unromantic."

"My dear Sir Geoffry," she remonstrated, "you take yourself so seriously! After all, you are bearing out my pet statement that love is as inevitable as measles."

Momentarily Sir Geoffry echoed the flippancy of her tone. "Why not compare it to distemper?—since one's owner never can feel sure of one, till one has been through with it!"

"Ah, well," she said, with unwonted pessimism, "the universal trait remains much the same, that, before marriage, we find out all in which we are akin; and, after marriage, all in which we differ!"

Looking at her, Sir Geoffry was deciding whether his theories applied to a personality which was so neatly effective. Against the pale dawn, her face showed faintly in profile. Its sole identity lay in the shrewd, bright eyes; a childish roundness of outline lent to it a fictitious air of youth; its tiny features in a setting of fine fair hair, were placidly expressionless. Her dress, paled to whiteness in the dusk of the carriage, and the full silver fur of her wrap, incongruous in its suggestion of warmth, carried out the impression of kitten-like softness which her appearance conveyed. She had the elusive attraction of a woman of the world, self-contained, well-groomed, elaborately ordinary; but, in connection with her, stormy feeling seemed elementary, primeval. She had neither the etherealised charm of Muriel, nor the disquieting beauty of Amelia. He could have described her as restfully mundane.

"When are you coming to see me?" she asked.

"I go north to-morrow night."

"Then lunch with me to-morrow." She returned his parting hand-shake with a faint pressure, which seemed to him like the indication of her own personality—suggestive, indefinite—and in solitude Sir Geoffry was left once more to face the fret of his perplexity.

Again he considered the irony of his dilemma; the

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issues, grotesque in disproportion which hinged on a trick of emotion, a momentary yielding to impulse ;—issues apt to determine the fate of lives present, and lives future, on and on, an impossible computation, before the sum of whose immensity his own paltry dismay rose absurd, imperative.

For, while he could recognise that, by that same disconcerting mood of a moment he had not only crossed a barrier from which there was no return, he had likewise placed himself in a position the entire aspect of which was at variance with his preconceived notion of fitness, of honour. To have wrung from a girl the confession which he had wrung from Amelia, a confession which had been based only on her complete faith in his sincerity, and then to cheat that faith by the excuse of all that he had left unsaid, to shelter himself by the pitiful plea that love and not marriage had been the theme of his conversation, was in itself a moral cowardice from which there was no appeal. And yet it was senseless to attribute to a passing flirtation an undue prominence. He believed himself to have read, with an insight which was infallible, the trivial hold which the episode would have upon Amelia. There are women to whom a kiss is holy, the expression of all that is deepest and truest in their nature, the seal only of a life-long surrender ; there are others, by whom, lightly given, it is as lightly forgotten. And, recalling the details of his first flirtation with Amelia, it seemed impossible that the present incident would affect her as it would have affected a nature of finer susceptibilities and more unsophisticated past. Further, whatever of deeper feeling had been stirred in her by his agency was, as yet, new-born ; Muriel herself had adjudged that the experience of a few weeks could not be indelible. In acting with decision in the present crisis he had felt that he was according a tardy recognition to whatever element of honour the situation held for him ; and, short of marriage, which every consideration barred, and at which even inclination—brought up abruptly to defined law and prescribed bond—had recoiled, no other course had been open to him.

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It was thus that, veering with inconsistency and withal fearful of dwelling unduly upon that dismissed emotion, his thought turned to the woman whom he no longer loved. And a regret, poignant and profound, moved him at his inability to be swayed longer by his former allegiance, that he should be powerless to be stirred, emotionally, by all to which, mentally, he still gave reverence. And, since what had once rent him to the very foundations of his being could leave him thus, cold, unresponsive, he saw more clearly how all that had been reprehensible in that past, had, to her, been but the express faithfulness of a love to which only circumstance, and perhaps—was it not conceivable?—her girlhood's ignorance of the true nature of the marriage tie had ever made her legally inconstant. And, so thinking, that unexplained horror of which he had before been conscious, revealed itself with distinctness. For it was in his recent attempted renewal of those past relations at a moment when she herself had read his defection, that he had greatly shamed the woman he had loved since boyhood. And here he was confronted by yet another aspect of that whole intricate problem of sexual emotion. Was it that the new emotion which had swayed him had thus unconsciously demanded satisfaction of the old? And so had she not gauged all too accurately the depth and measure of the insult he had unknowingly offered her?

Thought revolted from the conclusion, but, in its hinting which marked afresh the supreme finality of the crisis, his perplexity turned selfwards. His own immediate future held his attention. It was impossible to contemplate a renewal of the old existence under changed conditions: to be forced to meet Amelia again in the protracted intimacy of every-day life, to see Muriel cold, implacable, all the sweet tenderness and trust erased from her manner, and to know that his mere companionship was an insult, that ever-present to her and to himself was the silent consciousness of the grave which lay between. And although for a brief space this might be postponed until something of its smarting

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freshness had passed from it, yet, so long as he held his present position, eventually it must be met, it must form part of all the years which were yet to come. Self-effacement was the sole solution which presented itself to his consideration, and he believed that, could he but erase himself from the lives of the two women, even that unspoken worship of which he had been cognisant, that reverence on Amelia's part for the woman to whom she owed much, and against whom no knowledge had come to poison her imagination, might ultimately prove a link between them ; might yet—was it incredible?—hold some subtle consolation for the woman he had greatly wronged. But his presence in their lives rendered this impossible ; while that presence, in itself, was a disaster which thought resented. Yet, to throw up his position meant penury. He had qualified for no profession. The post which Jack Coleford's illness had opened to him had been providential in a time of irretrievable poverty. Again he realised how the man who is without money can be handicapped in the race of life. Blameless love can be denied to him, and, under certain circumstances, the power of following the dictates of common honesty and honour.

It was late that afternoon when he went to Albert Gate. He chose an hour when he knew that Muriel would be out driving. Yet, as he entered his study, a figure rose up to meet him.

"I've been waiting for you for some time," said Amelia.

The unexpectedness of the encounter took Sir Geoffry at a disadvantage ; yet he spoke without apparent hesitation. "I am very sorry, Miss Bradshaw," he explained, "but I am leaving for Scotland by the night-mail ; there are only a few hours, and I have a good deal of business to transact first——"

"Excuse me," said Amelia, "but this happens to be a bit of it." There was a new decision in her voice which he felt it would be useless to combat. In silence he awaited the drift of the interview.

And, meanwhile, Amelia experienced a moment of dis-

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comfiture which exceeded his own. She had rehearsed her portion of the conversation carefully beforehand, and to her, too, the unexpected had occurred. For the man before her was different from what in her anger she had pictured. She read in his face no triumph at her humiliation, at his own undoubted power of conquest. He looked depressed, broken. And there came to her a forlorn desire to put her arms about his neck, to draw his head again on to her breast. She remembered the feeling of his soft hair against her fingers. . . .

"What I want to know is this," she proceeded, steadying her voice; "we'd a little interview Tuesday night—you and me."

Sir Geoffry acquiesced gravely, still waiting where her voice had first arrested his footsteps.

"You told me then that you loved me, and you asked my feelings for you; and I told you them." There was a little break in Amelia's voice.

"My dear Miss Bradshaw—" he began.

She interrupted him: "Let me finish, please. Having exchanged sentiments, the next course was simple to a man that *is* a man. But—I don't seem to remember your taking it."

He was silent.

"The case is this," proceeded Amelia, her voice gaining in intensity as her assurance grew; "I'm no believer in half-measures myself. Perhaps if I was a lady"—she threw a little sharpness of emphasis upon the word—"I mightn't say straight out what I mean; but there's none of that shilly-shallying about me. And it's just this—I want a plain answer to a plain question—did you mean what you said, or didn't you?"

Her speech in its baldness of statement affected Sir Geoffry with the sensation of something repellent, altogether distasteful. In that moment, even the intonation of her voice jarred. And there was present to him the complete impossibility of coping with her attitude, of meeting her on any equal ground of mutual understanding.

"Then, if you can't speak up to it," said Amelia after

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a little pause, "we'll say you don't. And by the same process of arithmetic, you don't want to go further with—what we were speaking of. We've arrived at something!" He fancied that her brisk laugh disguised a sob. "And so we come to another question : things being as they are, why did you play the goat?"

The latent tragedy of the situation was again reduced to bathos. And as Sir Geoffry spoke, he felt the intolerable vulgarity of the incident taint his speech ; he recognised the meanness of his endeavour even while he dealt a decisive blow at the vanity of the girl who was wounding his self-respect.

"A man," he suggested with deliberation, "may not know his own mind."

"Then he's no business to want other people to know theirs!" returned Amelia sharply. "Any fool can play straight. If he's mistaken himself he can still act square. *I'd* say a fool was one thing, and a sneak another!"

She saw that the shaft had hit.

"Perhaps if you knew all the circumstances of the case, Miss Bradshaw," he said, "you would modify your opinion. Meanwhile I can offer no excuse for my behaviour, and I have felt that an apology would be only adding to it."

"Perhaps you're wise," said Amelia. "Where there's nothing to say, it's as well not to say it." The undramatic ending of the interview disappointed her ; she still tried to sift the omitted arguments which burdened her remembrance.

"I might have known what you were," she said more dispassionately ; "and that's where I blame myself. But there's one point I'd like you to know. I don't say I've never done a bit of fooling on your account myself. But it seemed to me you deserved all you got, and more, for the way you treated me when we first met ; I'd not forgotten that. But you'll remember *I* never said I loved you then, in humbug ; *I* don't mix up fooling and earnest. And I'd like you to understand that if I hadn't exchanged sentiments honestly with you now, I'd not have let you kiss me or touch me. I've that much of the 'lady' in me

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in these days ; and it may be your thinking otherwise that made you act as you did."

She turned towards the door with reluctance. Still she felt, vaguely, that all had not been said.

But to Sir Geoffry the unspoken was apparent. For he saw this redeeming quality in the love of Amelia, that no petty vanity had overruled her to its denial ; that, throughout her anger she had understood how in her truth lay his offence. Hitherto sentiment might have been a toy to Amelia, kisses and courtship a matter which had not deeply affected her sensibility ; but—and herein lay the torment of her wrong—on a sudden she had found something good, something holy, and he had used it as a mud-ball wherewith to soil her.

## CHAPTER XV

### FEET OF CLAY

THE days were uneventful after Sir Geoffry's departure. Outwardly he had passed completely from the lives of the two women. If Mrs Coleford ever received any communication from him, she did not refer to it ; and, although Amelia watched, she never discovered any letter arrive which bore his handwriting. Even as a memory he seemed effaced.

Yet to Amelia the sudden reticence with regard to his name held no significance ; the reserve upon Muriel's part bespoke only dislike to the man who was forgotten when absent. In the infinite but unobtrusive compassion of Muriel's attitude towards herself, she saw only the new link which had arisen between them since the night of the ball.

Ever since that evening she had read in Muriel's manner a fresh kindness, a wonderful gentleness. And life thereby had represented a confusing admixture of gain and loss. It seemed to her sometimes that the give and take in existence was balanced to a nicety. As one love had been wrested from her, the other love had been granted ; and the new love was a placid, tender affection which contrasted curiously with the stormy emotion which had entered her life to disquiet it.

Whatever Muriel's own heartache in those days, she thrust it from her relentlessly. The compunction which marked her effort to win Amelia to forgetfulness seemed to have erased the antagonism which, under other conditions, the girl who had worked her own unhappiness might have inspired. And, without reserve, Amelia's

## Feet of Clay

old devotion leapt into life, refined, intensified. As from the moment when she had first realised her own deficiencies, Muriel had appeared to her so far removed from her own standing, of such unspeakable perfection, so now the ideal restored served to deaden the smart of the stronger passion which possessed her.

For, although friendship may be a colourless substitute for love, the element of hero-worship which it involved for Amelia, and which was essential to her temperament, robbed it of much that was prosaic. There was fresh romance in the novelty of Muriel's present attitude towards her ; there was a gratification in each token of Muriel's consideration, of Muriel's intimacy. There were times, too, when she felt that to her unfaithfulness to that first fascination had been due the punishment which had overtaken her. She had turned from a pure, disinterested worship, to an emotion which had swept her off her balance ; which had tricked and duped her, to leave her a stricken thing, justly shamed.

And that same unhesitating loyalty which never questioned the elder woman's claim to superiority, wrought for her an unrecognised balm. Love perverted acts like a canker. Without the antidote of this softening affection, the sullen hatred which she had developed towards Sir Geoffry was a passion which, in its brief intensity, threatened to surpass the emotion from which it had sprung.

For, as in old days, there was in her resentment a vindictive quality ; as then, her desire was to be even with the man who had worked her a wrong ; by some act of retribution to reinstate herself in her own opinion. The remembrance of having brought him to book in that brief interview was her sole satisfaction ; but even that had disappointed her expectation ; and the humiliation rankled. More than once the longing came to her to unburden herself to Mrs Coleford, but her shame was too recent, the smart too keen for her to probe it needlessly. Again she dreaded rendering herself ridiculous by a confession of love for the man whom Muriel disliked.

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Meanwhile a change had come in the manner of their daily life. In the rumour of a General Election the season waned. Parties became few, and the Park was abandoned. Now Muriel arranged long drives throughout the sunny afternoons far into the country where the air was still fresh and the trees a wonderful green ; she passed hours singing to Amelia the pre-eminently unclassical songs for which the girl had a preference ; she sat throughout quiet evenings in the cool twilight upon the leads, indulging in desultory talk with the girl, or maintaining a silence which at times seemed more welcome to Amelia than words. But it did not appear to Amelia that the simple tenor of their days was planned by Muriel with consummate care, or that the studied kindliness of Muriel's manner was conscientious rather than spontaneous.

"It's odd," Amelia once said to her in a moment of expansion, "but at one time I was downright afraid of you ! You seemed so far away, you always made me feel I was at the bottom step of the ladder. And I got into my head that you didn't like me."

They had driven to the Star and Garter for tea ; from the terrace where they stood they looked down on the wide stretch of country below. Trees and hills were bathed in the sunlight, and the shining river was a line of silver whiteness.

In the still evening and quiet country the shallowness of ordinary life seemed removed and Muriel spoke with unconsidered frankness.

"I suppose," she answered, "you would be very much surprised if I were to tell you that you have made me suffer the same form of discomfort. You seemed so young and prosperous. You made me feel at a terrible disadvantage."

"It seems it was six of one and half-a-dozen of the other," said Amelia. The idea seemed to have a peculiar interest for her. "That's why you were so touchy about your age," she said after reflection. "I knew you'd got it on your mind, but it wasn't for some time that I ever thought I'd anything to do with it. It's

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queer and you'll not believe it, but when I first met you, I couldn't stand you ! It was just you were so superior, manner and dress and something about you, and I felt you looked down on me. You never said anything, but you always seemed spying out what was wrong about me."

And as she looked at the woman beside her, the faint sadness of the evening glory with which they were surrounded seemed shadowed in Muriel's eyes. That unexplained sorrow which was the mysterious keynote to this older life struck a responsive chord in her own. For Muriel, brilliant and successful, had once alienated her ; Muriel, shorn of her aggressive prosperity, indefinitely softened, seemed to approach more nearly to her own level, to come palpably within the radius of her understanding.

"It's just this," she said with fresh shyness, "I see as much as ever I did that you're a bigger success in every way than ever I can be, but, where I couldn't bear you for it before, I—I love you for it now. And it's not what you've done for me, and it's not what I see you are, so good to your poor husband that everybody talks about nothing else, so perfect in looks and all—I can't explain where it comes in, but if anyone were to ask me, I suppose I'd have to say it's just that you are you."

Muriel smiled one of her rare smiles as she looked at the girl. She remembered the days when she, too, had been the prey to an exaggerated admiration for some woman older than herself. It is a phase of youth pathetic in its capacity for illusion.

"My dear Milly," she said gently, "affection springs far more from what is beautiful in the person who loves than in the one who is loved. It sounds priggish, no doubt, but in love at least it is more blessed to give than to receive."

She checked her lack of reserve, conscious of the fear which had been haunting her during the past week, the knowledge that, by some unconsidered word, some rash note of sympathy, she might bring about an unveiling of

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that gaping horror which lay beneath. She felt Amelia look at her with a quick, observant look, and, for one moment, before the dread passed, she knew all that her mood had made imminent.

It was the next day that, as Amelia was walking down Sloane Street, she saw Mrs Breton looking into a shop window. She stopped, experiencing a sharp stab of pain from an unreasonable connection of ideas, but, before she could turn back, Mrs Breton had seen and joined her. She was wearing one of those dainty, nondescript hues which always seemed to Amelia so daring in their simplicity. The sole note of colour in her dress, a great knot of purple flowers at her breast, gave out a penetrating sweetness.

"I am going to stay in London for the first week of the sales," she explained, "then I shall go for a fortnight to some out-of-the way place for a rest, and then, after all, I shall go to Homburg. Why don't you come there? It is just the sort of life you would like."

"Muriel can't git away, you see."

"But I could chaperon you, and you would meet lots of friends. Sir Geoffry is coming, too. By-the-way, have you heard from him?"

Amelia replied in the negative.

"I had a long letter this morning. He is having an excellent time fishing. He *was* going to Norway, but now he has changed his plans."

At the top of the street she got into a hansom and Amelia turned homewards. All that she had striven to put from her had returned to fret her memory; but, with it, a new thought, a belief wonderful in its significance, boundless in the issues it involved, shaped and grew.

When she reached the house she found a letter addressed to her upon the hall table. It was from John Lawson asking her to tea to meet the Misses Gibson on the following Thursday. She thrust it into her pocket and forgot it.

Late that night she knocked at Muriel's door.

Mrs Coleford looked up as she entered, and, gathering

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together a little pile of papers which lay upon her lap, answered the unspoken inquiry in the girl's glance : " You are not interrupting me. I am only destroying old papers and letters"—a smile satirised her words—" things which I wrote when I was very young."

Amelia paused for a moment and looked absently about her. The room in its dainty luxury and mystery stamped itself afresh upon her consciousness. The delicate peach-hued light, the pale gleam of silver and glass, the faint sweetness which seemed to haunt the air. Her gaze returned to the languid figure before her, slender in clinging lace and silk.

" I wanted to speak to you," she said.

Muriel brushed away some fragments of paper which still clung to her dress. " Yes?" she said. She picked up a screen of peacock's feathers from the table beside her, a gorgeous tuft of azure and green ; she raised it between herself and the lamp as though the light hurt her.

" I wanted to tell you," said Amelia, " that Sir Geoffry and myself were in love."

She stood there like a school-girl come to repeat a lesson.

" I don't care for shabby dealings ; I owe you a lot, and I'm sorry I didn't speak out before, but—matters of that sort aren't easy to talk about."

" I quite understand." Muriel's tone was very gentle.

With fresh decision Amelia took possession of a low wicker chair on the other side of the rug, she clasped her hands about her knees.

" I say he was in love—but—he wasn't straight. He first made up to me and then backed out of it. Men'll do that sort of thing, of course. I was very angry at the time and I gave it him. It was a satisfaction to me, but I've been thinking matters over since, and I'm sorry I did."

Her gaze dwelt upon the tiny point of Muriel's shoe which protruded below the pale silk gown. She seemed to compare it absently with her own.

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"The matter's this. Think as I will, I'm certain he did care. There's no gitting away from it. Love's love, and he was off his head. Men can make pretty speeches by the dozen and mean nothing, I know that. But a man can't act being struck silly."

She was silent so long that, at last, Muriel spoke. "Yes, but"—there was a great reluctance in her voice—"there's a difference between emotion and love. A man can be whirled off his head by a passing fancy, but it mayn't be love. Love is made of different stuff."

"I—I grasp your meaning." Amelia's tone bespoke conscientious civility. "Love's to you the sort of husband-and-wife business, the caring that makes you ready to sit up at night and look after a man that can't even know what you're doing for him. I understand all that. Perhaps I'd do it myself for the right man—for Geoffry Hope"; she pronounced his christian name softly, but with an absence of glibness which told the other woman that habit had never made its utterance familiar. "But, it's just that, you can be very fond of a person and good to them, only, unless the silliness is there, it isn't love."

Muriel smiled, but Amelia who saw it, recognised that it was a smile in which amusement had no part.

"You're right," she answered, "the silliness, as you call it, must be there, but—I wonder if you can grasp my meaning?—love entails emotion, but emotion, with nothing finer to give it backbone, isn't love."

"And you think that is all his was for me," said Amelia slowly, but without the offence in her voice which Muriel had expected to hear. She shook her head; "He was in earnest, if it was only for half-an-hour."

Muriel did not speak.

"You'll laugh at me, most likely," pursued Amelia, speaking more quickly. "I'll bet anything you do, but, it was just that, it had all been growing in me without me knowing it, a sort of belief in him that

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was so good it seemed to change everything. I didn't know it altogether myself. I was just fooling and dressing and having a good time all the while, and, even after things came to a head, if you'll grasp my meaning, it felt more like an amusing story than anything else. And next I was angry and that hurt. . . . But it was there all the time, a sort of belief in him that meant a lot——” She paused and looked anxiously at Muriel. “And now I don't seem to think so much of his caring or not caring if I could only know he was *all right*. It's the thought that he was just having a lark with me that I can't do with.”

In the warm air, the long feathers of the peacock screen swayed to and fro, the yellow lamp-shade swung gently in unison.

And the flood-gates of Amelia's reserve once broken, her confidence increased in volume. “D'you know,” she said, and her voice was reminiscent, “there was a girl at Osgood's where I used to be, and, one day—she was talking about her affairs, you see—and in the way of conversation she remarked that the only man she'd be game to kill would be a man she loved, and I said there wasn't much love attached to it if she felt that way, and she put it that it's only a first class love can turn to a first class hate—one just wouldn't be bothered to hate else—and that the two are pretty well mixed up. I've thought of it often since, and I think it came to me like that. But now, if you'll understand, that's gone, and I just want to know that he's *all right*. I can't go on thinking he got me to say I cared, just for the lark of it. It would have been a poor game.” She paused. “It seems to me when you git fond of anybody it's like putting a whip in their hands for them to lash you with.”

Muriel stirred slightly in her chair. “You can be quite sure you are wrong in thinking what you did,” she said. “No gentleman would act like that.”

And, unwittingly, she had made use of a word to which Amelia took instant exception.

“That's where it comes in,” she said with sharpness

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"But there's time enough to think about that later on."

Her eloquence had deserted her ; she seemed wandering in a maze of her own reflections. She did not resent the long silence before Mrs Coleford spoke again.

"Milly," Muriel said, "would you be happier, I wonder, if you knew that he hadn't been quite to blame in the way you first thought? That at least he wasn't laughing at you?"

Amelia nodded ; her brisk attention revived. "But you'll put it to him he'd no business to have believed lies against me?"

"I can't write to him what you want," pursued Muriel slowly. "Perhaps I will write to him and say —something of what you have told me. . . . But there is a matter I want you to understand first." She lifted up her hand to her throat with a sudden impatience and unclasped the string of pearls there as though they hurt her. They slid from her grasp over the lace upon her breast, halting, gliding with serpentine motion till they coiled, gleaming palely upon the silken folds of her gown. "There were reasons, all-compelling reasons, why he saw it best to go, why he believed that, if he married you, there would be no happiness for you. He wasn't trying to cheat you, at the moment he meant all he said . . . only, afterwards, he wished it unsaid, and then it would have been more false to abide by it than to cancel it. The truth is very hard to face, but we get no happiness out of life by being cowards."

She turned from the look which darkened the girl's face.

"Men don't love and unlove like a merry-go-round," said Amelia with the old obstinacy in her voice. "He cared for me, and why should he go back on it at once if no one had meddled?"

Muriel played with the pearls which lay in her lap, lifting them up and letting them slide between her restless fingers. Her new-born comprehension of the girl beside her, the subtle bond of their joint womanhood,

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the haunting sense of a wrong unwittingly perpetrated—strengthened with appreciable force. All else had faded into nothingness before that strange link of their mutual suffering. And, with this dawning affection, there had come to her a desire to retain and repay the worship given to her of which she was newly aware, a hunger for its continuance in her empty life.

"Milly," she said after a pause, "perhaps you have yet to learn that the love which springs up lightly will die as lightly, and that the only love which will wear is a thing of slower growth because it is a thing of soul and brain. It is useless to tell you that what you feel to-day will, of its very nature, pass, for you do not think so now. Only on one point I think we are both agreed,—we should neither of us hold a man blamable if his love changes ; *that* may be beyond his control, an accident of chance. He would only be to blame if he could cheat with that love and stoop to be false, if, even for a moment, he could pretend its continuance when it was dead."

Her voice shook slightly.

"Milly," she said again, and the earnestness of her tone clenched Amelia's attention, "what I am saying to you I say because I believe you have touched what is best in woman's love. I think you have understood that, to a woman, her happiness is belief in the man she loves. Perhaps," she smiled a little sadly, "we women ask very little in our love. We can forgive any weakness, any sin in the man we love, we will defy the world for him ; face suffering, shame, even that more pitiful tragedy of unrequited affection, so long as that one thing is left to us—our faith in his truth." The lamplight fell upon her face as she leant forward and took Amelia's hand in her thin, nervous grasp. "You see I understand . . . you would be brave enough to face the knowledge that he doesn't love you, but you can't face the thought that he wasn't true . . . and you need not feel that about him. I believe that, at the time, he meant in all honesty what he said, only afterwards . . . it passed . . . and then he had to

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go. . . . And I think it is just because you understand what is best in woman's love that your love will ring aright in this too, that, if you see his happiness does not lie in your hands you will only want to do what is best for him."

She paused, as though confronted by the tragic impracticability of her attempt. How elucidate that subtle physical love, pitiful complement to being, which in its very essence is so potent, so ephemeral? How explain that she who knew each thought, each mood of this man, could see that Amelia's affection was never calculated to satisfy him? That Amelia's mind and nature were not attuned to his, that these past years of her upbringing could never be so wholly eradicated, that, to a man of fastidious taste, the taint would not remain, only awaiting the moment when passion was spent to spring into hideous actuality? How explain that he had understood this? That, even under the stress of a powerful physical attraction he had known it—that in the moment of supreme infatuation she had jarred upon him? And what of that other reason, that implacable fact upon which rested the actuality of his decision, and which, if all else were swept aside, could still dog his new love like a shadow and thwart happiness?

But Amelia forestalled her conclusion.

"You say he doesn't care, and I say he does," she said briefly. "It's a matter of opinion. And it's my belief that Mrs Breton was at the bottom of it, but I'll find out before I'm many hours older."

Muriel loosened her hold of the girl's hand with a faint gesture of distaste. "You must act as you think best," she said. "But, you see, I *know* that Mrs Breton had nothing to do with his going away. You will only place yourself in a very false position by speaking to her. You see—"

But again Amelia arrested the attempted elucidation. "You're pretty cock-sure," she said with a note of acute suspicion. "I believe you know the ins and outs of it, only you won't say so. Did he tell you anything himself? *How d'you know?*"

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Her attentive gaze did not leave Muriel. And it may have been certain tokens—the white lips, the nervous hands, the indefinable tension upon the face of the older woman, which, sharply erasing a previous conclusion, produced the dawning comprehension upon her own.

"I know," she said after a silence; "it wasn't Mrs Breton at all. It's *you* sent him away. . . . It's as Mrs Breton told us . . . *he was your best man.*"

The crude expression of a hideous suggestion came from her lips without hesitation. Perhaps, as Sir Geoffry had considered, she was not burdened with the susceptibilities of a more unsophisticated mind, and across her consciousness there may have passed something of the irony of this second affection which she had bestowed, this ideal which she had elected to worship, the pose of perfect wife, of perfect womanhood, the sham of the attitude which Muriel bore to the world.

Meanwhile, the stolid impenetrability of her face was baffling.

"It's the lie of it," she said.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE HOUSE OF RIMMON

AND without extenuation Muriel understood the gist of Amelia's speech. Her judgment with pitiless condemnation approved it. Imagination spared her no item of its import. She saw that the situation affected Amelia from no abstract code of right and wrong. It was the personal application which alone moved her, the instability of her ideal, the sudden distortion of a belief round which she had built a whole fabric of pitiful illusions.

In that brief interval the working of Amelia's mind was clear to her ; the phase through which the girl was passing hurt with a torturing compassion. Before it, her own craving for comprehension, for self-extenuation, strengthened, but the complete impracticability of the attempt silenced her.

How again present to the girl's limited intelligence any total of the many-sided problem which was apparent to her own ? For the palliation of temperament and circumstance, the innumerable little intricacies of a complex code of civilisation, the infinitesimally indefinite quality of all right and wrong would be lost upon Amelia.

To her, truth was the one understandable quality ; straightforwardness of speech and living the only actuality. To her wrong lay, not so much in action, as in the falsification of action, the cowardice which, for convenience, could ape adherence to a belief or a line of conduct which was not a reality. To her a person was true or was false, and before this broad fact, all the little deviations and inconsistencies, all the sophistries and

## The House of Rimmon

complexities of a tangled scheme of rectitude would be swept contemptuously aside.

The sound of a closing door revealed that the girl was gone. The sudden solitude came with an immeasurable relief. The assurance that each thought, each emotion, sacred in its pain, which the face involuntarily betrayed was not watched with curiosity or dislike. Now she stirred and drew the lace of her tea-gown more closely about her as though she were cold ; then she sat very still.

The threefold tangle which the situation represented was more sharply present to her imagination—this problem of her own life, of Amelia's, of the man whom they both had loved. Thought turned to her future with the girl—the dawning sympathy between them checked the ever-present sense of a wrong which sundered them ; thought dwelt with insistence upon this man thus loved, upon his torment, his regret, the whole woeful measure of his perplexity. Only from more intimate contemplation of her own life, thought turned aside.

But, from a stupor of weariness, her brain seemed to have become abnormally clear. Her glance strayed again to the little pile of papers on the table beside her which she had been looking over when Amelia entered. They lay there outspread in pitiful confusion, awaiting extinction ; letters of bygone years and letters of a more recent date—whose obliteration, it might be, prudence demanded—crude relics of her girlhood, school-day journals and girlish correspondence, half-written stories, and attempted poems. In the recklessness of a mood to which nothing was sacred she had been subjecting all to the same indiscriminate destruction. Yet now, she saw in these, the accumulated record of years, consecutive links of a life-story, definite steps of incident, of emotion, of development, on from the days of her white girlhood to this momentous conjunction of her life with Amelia's—to the renunciation thereby entailed. And thought, reverting from the impossible probing of the future, strove to read its riddle through the past. Like a flash the years unrolled before her :

She saw the trend of her upbringing, that training

## Toy-Gods

which had taught her to believe in virtue as in God ; which had shown her those two shades in the world, black and white ; the black as a minute division, the white—all but universal.

She saw her own stainlessness of belief in that past, how she had desired to be pure in thought as in fact, how she had turned with shrinking from the great Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

She saw the coming of first love, that innocent shame and exquisite illusion, that emotion which was holy, that faith which was a religion in the goodness of the man she loved.

And she saw, later, that stupendous revelation that the world in which she had lived had been a sham, that her eyes had been bandaged. That that darker division whose existence she had ignored was of incontestable supremacy ; that virtue could differentiate in rule between man and woman. That love, her beautiful, pure love, was not the poetry she dreamed, but an essence compounded of anomalies, the supreme paradox of existence.

And she saw how, in the culling of knowledge, she had been thrust from the Eden of her innocence. For the God of her childhood was proven a useful fable, the purity which was the creed of her girlhood a convenient myth. There was but one religion and one morality in this world where she found herself : Thou shalt not be found out. Bow thyself in the House of Rimmon. What you are is trivial ; what you seem is vital. Appearances are the fetish of a world which craves a god, even if it be a god with feet of clay. So she, too, had seemed, and sinned, and swum with the tide. And, since only fools are caught, and folly is the unpardonable sin, she too had humoured the world which respected the knave and discarded the fool ; she had drawn her skirts aside from the woman whose virtue admitted even of a doubt, and had received as her honoured guest the man whose virtue she knew to be non-existent. And, with the dew of that lost Eden still upon her, she had abetted the degradation of those other women whom gold did not protect, who were

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befouled that she might be stainless ; women more honest than she, that woman who worshipped the god with the feet of clay.

She stirred impatiently. The thunder of a passing van distracted her, and her gaze sought the lamp-lit street. Yet thought resumed : still the years outrolled before her. Still, over that world which she reviewed,—pitiful site of mire which clogs, of false gods and shallow effort, of stress, of failure, of futile attainment, of strong unrest —still she saw, brooding, that semblance of division ; black and white, light and shade, lower and higher, matter and spirit, animal and angel, God and Devil, a superstition, maybe, of convenience, the mirage of an aspiration, the materialisation of a dream, exquisite, unsubstantial, which yet held the root of all endeavour, the gist of a Beyond. Right and wrong, falsehood and truth, shadow and substance, vice and virtue—still they swept across her vision, and still she saw the problem of her womanhood, of womanhood upheld, downthrust ; paradoxical as the love of which she is the supreme manifestation,—idealised, degraded ; worshipped, shamed as convenience shall dictate ; raised by gold on a pinnacle out of the foulness, thrust by gold into the foulness without redress ; the loadstar of man's highest aspirations, the sport of his lowest desires ; maybe, natural negation of unnatural conditions, but withal, preserver of the ideal of which she is at once the supreme expression and denial, that mighty fable of prize and penalty, creed of contradictions, that toll of vice and toll of virtue which must be paid to the god with the feet of clay.

And with that illumining review down the vista of years, she saw how, what her life presented of failure, had been, primarily, the outcome of an upbringing at first all-concealing, then all-revealing ; which had first bred beliefs, and then, in one strenuous disillusion, had shattered the traditions of her girlhood. It was not her province of inquiry whether it was essential that truth should be thus floated on the wings of error, whether that creed of purity to which all deferred and only a minority adhered, was thus proven untenable, an ideal unworthy

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the mighty contradictions it involved. It was very credible to her that a stronger soul than her own might have unravelled the tangled skein of anomalies, and knit it nobly into an all-sustaining clue of guidance through the same intricacies of existence : and, so deeming, her thoughts turned with a strong craving to the girl who, even in that moment, must be meeting that crisis of being ; who, although her outlook had been circumscribed by no fictitious views of the world in which she existed, had yet not escaped that disability of her sex, the disillusion of her early dreams, of the fresh faith of her youth.

And thence, facing the future more boldly, she saw now how her own life must henceforth represent not merely a continuance of care for that poor mockery of humanity which she had hitherto tended with such pitiful mother-love, but an active, ever-present, all-renouncing restitution to this fresh young life whose awakening she had so fatefully brought to pass. And that cry of the girl in her first disillusion pursued her, that cry which had stamped the lie for the thing it was. And, with an ever-strengthening yearning she desired to aid Amelia in this her time of darkness. But she knew that neither human wisdom nor human fellowship can avail us in that dread hour when it seems that the God whom we revered has forsaken us. The soul in its loneliness must do battle with its own perplexity, and must, out of that perplexity, out of the shattered remnants of past beliefs and past ideals, work or wreck its own salvation.

And the white door upon the other side of the passage shut Amelia off into a solitary world. She lay upon her bed. The knob of her thick hair indented in the pillow hurt the back of her neck ; it was the only sensation of which she was actively conscious. For the present, all consecutive thought was suspended. She recognised only a vague, though poignant dissatisfaction with existence and its conditions. Life was a poor game. Everything you clung to, everyone that you pinned your faith upon, turned out a fraud, sooner

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or later. It was a game not worth the playing ; obviously not worth the fret and hurt which appeared to be its inseparable conditions. With abrupt sequence, fancy reconjured that other evening when she had lain in the darkness of a summer night and had pictured the ball which was taking place without her, had tormented her imagination with the thought of those other happy women who were dancing through hours which held for her only a battling with wearisome regret. . . . The ludicrousness of that past sacrifice was ironically apparent. . . . To point its irony she saw a dark passage and a bright light which stabbed her expectant gaze ; the low tones of the man's voice, the white face of the woman were reproduced with distinctness, while into the mystery of that past scene she read a new rendering—

As then, inaction became torment. She sat up sharply. The clock ticked ironically upon the mantelpiece, marking the flight of hours which lagged, of hours which, all told, made up the absurd span of human life, so long in the telling, so ridiculously brief in the sum total. Thought began to pursue a more definite course. She must go away, she must escape from the unsatisfactory conditions into which chance had tricked her. And anger fought with her perplexity while opinion veered with inconsistency. Fate had treated her scurvily in all that she had cherished ; and, in the pain of that fierce comprehension, she felt an eternal enmity against the man who had mocked her, an eternal alienation from the woman who had duped her. Next, she could not altogether judge if she were the aggrieved or the aggressor. With a strange transference of ideas she saw that she who had been greatly wronged had yet been the interloper in those other lives ; that the resentment which was justifiable in her case might be equally existent in theirs. The ache of all that she had, unwittingly, wrought was illogically added to the ache of her own hurt, her mind grappled helplessly with the confusion of her thoughts. That her resentment should be pruned by a wholly

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unreasonable compassion was, in itself, a source of dismay.

For since our gods must needs be higher than ourselves—else worship were a mockery—it was little to her that she, herself, fell short of the standard of perfection to which she had assigned Muriel. This myth which she had elected to revere, had been rudely dislodged from the particular altitude in which she had enshrined it ; and all the romance, the faith, the idealism of which she had been vaguely conscious and which had permeated her being like a prayer, had been given to a sham. The thought recurred of a girl with whom Mrs Burgess had once, in former days, forbidden her to associate ; a girl in their lodgings who had got herself into trouble under circumstances perhaps more than usually foolish, and who, in consequence, was shunned by the more respectable of the inhabitants. Save in the lie of pretence and, more particularly in the wealth which enabled her to maintain that lie, Muriel, all-gracious in refinement and breeding, royally aloof and proudly pure in seeming, differed nothing, unless in increased reprehensibility, from that poor degraded fool of mischance.

She rose and paced the room with slow, swinging steps. The silence was hideous with phantom voices which she could not still, the darkness was bright with scenes which mocked her. She stepped to the window that the wholesome reality of that outer world might banish the phantasy of imagination. She traced the familiar outlook ; the tall, dark houses, the irregular lights, the tinkle of harness, the click of horses' hoofs, the murmur of eternal talk. Yet in that world below nothing was real ; pretence was the only actuality ; falsehood was the keynote of success ; neither man nor woman was worth a moment's affection ; love was only given by fools who did not see aright.

Again her conclusion tended, even as Sir Geoffry's had tended, to that doctrine of self-effacement. And since that same habit of love is stubborn, unrecognised, and unerased, the spirit of her former infatuation still

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swayed her decision. Could she but go away and escape from her present perplexity all would be simple. In cutting herself adrift from this life of disillusion she would be cutting herself adrift from the pain which formed part of it. Still more, her presence meant disaster to those other lives. As Muriel had adjudged, apart from the stress of her personal hurt, the ethical aspect of the situation did not greatly trouble Amelia. To her John Coleford was something less than human, something repellent upon which death had already set its stamp and then left its handiwork incomplete. And all which that wreckage of a life could represent—the tie of honour, of faith, the bond of a limitless constancy—was a doctrine too abstruse for her acceptance. She saw only how that semblance of a life could not be of long duration, and how, at its extinction, the situation could be readjusted.

Still she paced to and fro, while, in the growing silence of the night, the clock ticked more obtrusively. She must have traversed miles in that ceaseless walk. An intolerable weariness gained upon her, but sleep seemed impossible to her. Her skirt impeded the restless action of her limbs, and at length, wearily, she paused to unloosen it, mechanically folding it in the darkness and slinging it over a chair, while, from force of habit, her hand sought the pocket, according to her nightly custom, to empty it of its contents. She drew forth her handkerchief and some papers, then switched on the light to sort what her grasp contained. A crumpled list of books in Sir Geoffry's handwriting fell sharply from her grasp; but it happened that as she tossed the other papers upon the table, a letter addressed in thin precise characters stayed her glance. She turned it over with a faint air of questioning, then drew it from the envelope and read it. It was the forgotten letter from John Lawson; she recalled that he had asked her to tea upon the following Thursday. To-day was Tuesday. She folded it up, then unfolded and reread it. A purpose shaped in her mind, definite, complete. She revolved it dispassionately. It appealed to her

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sense of fitness. It would represent a propitiation to her self-respect, a silent sacrifice to that dead worship of vanished illusion to which she felt dimly that something was yet due. She held the letter in her clasp, and stood for a long time, looking out at the night.

## CHAPTER XVII

### BYGONES

ON the following Thursday, upon the stroke of four, Mrs Burgess descended to the kitchen in afternoon attire. There was about her an air of subdued festivity. She wore her Sunday gown of dusty black. A large gilt brooch clasped that portion of her bodice where her bust seemed to mingle confusedly with her neck.

In response to an imperative knocking, she opened the area door and admitted Amelia. "Oh, it's you," she observed with complacency; "Lawson said you'd most likely be coming along."

Amelia nodded. "He wrote to me some days back, but I put the letter in my pocket and forgot it; so I thought I'd better come and see if he was expecting me."

The day was close and the atmosphere below stairs was oppressively warm. As Amelia entered the kitchen she shielded her face from the blaze of the fire which threatened to impair the delicacy of her skin. An odour of tobacco was noticeable in the air. She sniffed it reflectively.

"So you've patched it up with Giles, I hear, aunt," she said. "You've been pretty quick to take up with a man that's slighted you."

Mrs Burgess, pressing the kettle amongst the coals, scattered the droppings of a tallow candle to increase the blaze which was oppressing Amelia. "It don't do to expec' too much of a man," she explained. "They ack according to their lights."

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Amelia stared up thoughtfully at the area railings and at the feet of the passers-by.

"You'd better set down while Lawson comes," suggested Mrs Burgess. "He'll be in presently, for he's expectin' the Misses Gibson to tea. They've got Miss Beatrice Grey staying with them."

"Oh, she's there, is she?" said Amelia.

She drew a wooden chair to the other side of the kitchen as far away from the fire as was practicable, while Mrs Burgess, fetching a ham from the larder, proceeded to cut little pink slices from it and to place them between correspondingly thin layers of bread. She laid them upon the table and compressed them with the flattened palm of her hand.

"All one's time seems spent gittin' tea in this world," she complained. "It seems in my life, the kettle's always on the boil. As for the Miss Gibsons, they like a bit of something solid for their tea. They're big feeders when they come out." She cut two larger sandwiches of amazing substance and proportions and these she set aside on the kitchen dresser. "I put it to Lawson to git a 'am, then I thought it would do its turn for Eph'rim. There's few things he's more partial to than a sweet tastin' 'am.—'Ave one, 'Melia?"

Amelia shook her head.

"It's like old days, this," said Mrs Burgess reminiscently, as she set the sandwiches in a plate and sprinkled some ends of parsley over them; "me back here, and you visiting me, and Giles popping in later! It only wants you to be marrying Lawson to be just where we was!"

Amelia laughed uneasily.

"But you're gorn up in the world since those days and left us all be'ind," said Mrs Burgess with resignation. "Lawson'd be nothing of a catch for you nowadays.—By the way, 'Melia, did I tell you Meriar's got a rise? Thinks no small bones of hesself, I can tell you! Ten-pun a year, and her missus teaching her cooking, and she walking out with a young man on Sundays."

"Which—the mistress or Maria?"

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"Both ef 'em, most likely," said Mrs Burgess with an appreciative laugh; "but I was specifying Meriar."

"I'm glad she's gitting on so well," said Amelia absently.

"She's a hard worker, is Meriar, and, as I tell her, we can't *all* be quality," said Mrs Burgess with point in her asperity. "Some ef us has to drudge for our livin'. And Meriar's gittin' a pritty gurl; if she'd the dress she'd make the lady as well as others I could name."

"Oh, don't go 'ladying' me, aunt," said Amelia with impatience. "I'll tell you what a 'lady' is:—it's talking correct grammar, mincin' particular words in a particular way, never looking as if you were enjoying yourself, walking well, talking well, fooling well, and a lady can be as bad a lot as she likes if she's money and cheek to brass it out."

Mrs Burgess detected the note of temper in Amelia's voice and respected it.

"I was thinking I'd be hearin' some news of you, 'Melia," she said, diplomatically changing the subject. "Mrs Butler was here the other day and she was hintin' we'd be havin' something startling before so long, and I thought by the manner of her that it was you'd be gittin' settled in life. She told Lawson something, meeting him in the garden on her way out, but she wouldn't tell me becorse she said she'd promised not."

"Oh, she told Mr Lawson, did she?" said Amelia. She sat silent a moment, still staring up at the pavement above, then she rose. "I think I'll go up a bit, aunt," she said. "It's hot here. And I'd like to git a word with Lawson before the others come."

A faint affront shadowed Mrs Burgess' brow. "I was goin' to have got you a previous cup of tea," she observed. "I told you it was on the make. But you alwis was like a parched pea on a cinder, 'Melia—never two minutes in the same place."

Amelia held her pink muslin skirts from contact with the tiles as she looked in a small square of glass which

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hung upon the wall. She tilted her big picture hat to a becoming angle. Then she went slowly upstairs.

The room upon the ground floor which she entered appeared much as she remembered it upon that winter afternoon when she had come to break off her engagement with John Lawson. The only change which remembrance traced was that the fire-place now had its summer waterfall of gilt paper, and that over the mantelpiece were two fresh plaques of Beatrice's handiwork. At the side of the rug stood the chair in which Lawson had slumbered with his mouth open. She crossed to the window and looked out. The voices of children came shrilly from the plot of straggling grass. The long Crescent was unchanged ; the row of houses opposite looked unalterably dreary in their uniform air of attempted gentility. She pictured life circumscribed by that outlook. Then, with strong reaction, her thoughts sped to that other existence from which she had come.

In the experience of the past two days there had been a strange unreality ; the effort of that daily life renewed with an abiding sense of change.

Days of strained friendliness between herself and Muriel ; of distinction between the outward seeming of their relations and the knowledge which sundered them ; of growing contrast between the past and the present ; of futile comparison between belief and fact. Sometimes she had found herself looking at this woman whom she had loved with a terrible curiosity and a pain which racked. What she had loved was gone and was replaced by what she failed to understand.

Her gaze recurred to the scene before her. A sudden shower had swept the Crescent. The vista of houses blurred in a driving rain. Pavement and building took on a darker hue beneath the moisture. The voices of children shrilled no more from the Green. A silence fell, in which the patter of rain-drops and the steady drip of an overcharged gutter alone were audible.

And in the emphasised dreariness of the view from the window of the little villa, Amelia felt misgiving stir.

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The project which had satisfied in suggestion, assumed a different aspect as she faced fulfilment. The increased unattractiveness of the scene before her pointed what she had before felt vaguely but with recurrence, something alien to her temperament in the very essence of the life thus represented, a whole from which the crucial joys of being were effaced, with which she, as change had fashioned her, could never assimilate. And the hint of impracticability in her attempt fought with the recognition of its dire necessity, with the promptings of loyalty to that dead illusion which still dictated sacrifice.

Into the midst of her abstraction there came the sound of an opening door behind her and she looked round to find that Lawson had entered the room. Surprise was visible upon his face as he stepped forward to welcome her.

"Miss Bradshaw!" he said.

"Yes—I've been pretty rude to you, I got your note and popped it in my pocket and forgot to answer, so I thought I'd better come to apologise in person."

"So long as you've come," he said; but he looked vaguely disturbed.

"I hear you're giving a tea-party to-day, Mr Lawson, so aunt's been telling me. You are gitting giddy!"

Lawson smiled faintly as though the idea of giddiness connected with the Misses Gibson stirred in him some latent sense of humour.

"I've been down with aunt, and I came up; I thought we might be having a word before the others came," said Amelia with a meaningless laugh.

He was removing the thin overcoat which he wore summer and winter alike, and she stepped forward to assist it from his shoulders. "Where d'you put it?" she asked with a faint assumption of domesticity.

"The passage is so narrow," said John Lawson apologetically, as he took it from her. He folded it into neat compass and laid it upon a music what-not which stood in the corner of the room.

"Well, the fact is, Mr Lawson"—Amelia plunged

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with characteristic abruptness into the subject which was uppermost in her thoughts, "I've been thinking a great deal lately—and—look here—I'm sorry that I acted as I did by you in old days."

She noticed with annoyance that he was preoccupied, studying the effect of his coat upon the what-not, apparently undecided whether to remove it to a less obvious position or no.

"I thought that we'd settled that bygones was to be bygones between us," he said after a pause.

"There's this about bygones," said Amelia significantly, "they're not make-ups."

A muffin-man was coming down the Crescent; the clang of his shrill monotonous bell stirred recollection perversely.

"It's this way," she said, striving desperately to force the conversation into the channel which it was necessary it should take, "I hear Mrs Butler's been giving you news of me."

"She said you were going to get married," agreed Lawson.

"Some people are fond of interfering with what's no business of theirs, and—they're not particular about knowing whether it's truth or not."

"I don't see much good in keeping an engagement secret for a time without reason, myself," he rejoined.

"But ladies think differently. They like a bit of mystery."

A bell close at hand mingled its shrill discord with the clang of the muffin-bell. Lawson stepped back into the passage. Amelia, standing in the middle of the room where he had left her, heard the commotion of arrival and the exchange of greeting. Then the little room seemed suddenly filled with plain women in badly-made clothes.

Despite her preoccupation, Amelia saw at a glance that the Misses Gibson were wearing the maroon satin gowns, grown shiny, which she remembered at the dinner-party. Doubtless, having become too shabby for festivities, these now did duty as second best for

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day. The black dolmans which surmounted them were antiquated and the bonnets grotesque. She wondered how she had ever stood in awe of the shabby, elderly women before her. Behind them Beatrice Grey stood smiling. Her hair was strained back tightly as of yore under her sailor hat, her black jacket was out of fashion, but her brown eyes were as bright and as singularly attractive. Amelia kissed her cordially, and, as they sat down side by side, they began exchanging little reminiscences of the Brighton school.

Meanwhile, as in those former days, but with more reason, Amelia was keenly aware that the fashion and daintiness of her own appearance was not lost on the Misses Gibson. A perceptible affectation stole into her voice and manner, an unconscious mimicry of the world from which she came.

Soon Mrs Burgess brought in tea. As she set it on the table she looked at Amelia and closed one eye in a portentous wink. A visible embarrassment slackened the conversation of the Misses Gibson and showed that still they appreciated the social intricacies of the situation. This incredible transformation of the Amelia Bradshaw of former days, this girl who, with her irritating little mannerisms and her air of fashion, made them feel at a curious disadvantage, was yet allied by the close tie of blood to the servant who waited on them—"and not even a servant," Miss Sarah reminded herself as she raised her voice and talked with a more pronounced assertiveness.

"And you're enjoying life, dear?" asked Beatrice, much as Mab had asked; and Amelia with increasing satisfaction proceeded to sketch some of the reasons by which the presumption might be justified. The sidelights which she cast upon her new existence, if highly coloured, were proportionately graphic, and the knowledge that her listeners were profoundly, if unwillingly, impressed, afforded her extreme gratification. Only once or twice, as her eye met Lawson's, her little air of complacency fell from her abruptly.

The meal was drawing to a close when Miss Sarah

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tightened her cravat with an air of decision. "Lucy," she said, "and John," looking from one to the other, "what do you say to telling Miss Bradshaw the news?"

John Lawson's gaze shifted unsteadily and he murmured something inaudible. Beatrice's face turned a rosy-red.

And Amelia, looking from one to the other, suddenly understood.

"I don't approve of second marriages, as a rule," said Miss Sarah; "but, in this case, where a very dear cousin is to make a brother-in-law happy, I cannot withhold my entire approbation."

She spoke with a solemnity which was awe-inspiring.

"I'd think not!" exclaimed Amelia. Her enthusiasm was a little forced. The surprise was not wholly erased from her voice as she turned to Beatrice and plied her with a swift series of questions, keenly anxious to leave no doubt of her satisfaction in the minds of those present.

"Mr Dangles has kindly offered to return to perform the ceremony," vouchsafed Miss Sarah. "You will remember Mr and Mrs Dangles whom you met at a party at our house some time ago?"

"That funny little curate and his wife, who sang such comic songs?" said Amelia.

"I have never heard either Mr or Mrs Dangles sing anything so inappropriate to their position as comic songs," responded Miss Sarah. "Mr Dangles has recently been offered a living in the East End, a very arduous parish, I understand, for which his remarkable ability and energy render him peculiarly qualified."

"Yes, I should think him a conscientious little party," said Amelia. "But his wife won't have to dress herself the fright she used if she's to go down, even in the East End."

At the very earliest opportunity she rose to go. Lawson preceded her to the gate. The shower had ended, but the glance with which she looked to right and

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left down the silent Crescent was expressive of undiminished distaste. She understood how life spent gazing out upon that dreary vista of suburban houses would have been impracticable ; life, varied only by entertainments at the Misses Gibson, or by visits from some curate's wife. The reflection was grotesque in suggestion ; and, with a sequence of inquiry, she bent her attention to John Lawson as he unlatched the gate. Yet, in devoting criticism to the outward aspect of the man, she was struck by a consideration of more vital import. For she had gathered that he had only come to an understanding with Beatrice subsequent to hearing Mab's news ; and the recognition was agreeable in its proof that he had not cheated her belief in him ; that whatever the nature of his affection, romantic or regrettably matter-of-fact, he had remained honest to the promptings of that affection from start to finish. It seemed that he alone, of all those who had greatly swayed her life, had been true, unswervingly consistent with the manner of his seeming. She put out her hand to say good-bye.

"Mr Lawson," she said genially, "I'm awfully glad you're going to marry Beatrice. She's a real good sort if ever there was one, and you're a downright lucky fellow."

Lawson wrung her hand. The sun shone upon his lean, anxious face ; it showed the place in the crown of his head where the hair was getting thin.

"You're a good sort too," said Amelia, bent on being complimentary ; "and she'll make the very wife for you."

"She's a good girl," he agreed.

The muffin-bell was coming back along Brunswick Road. It rang jerkily, then was silent, with indefinite pauses.

"And about that matter we were speaking of," said Lawson ; "you're wrong if you think I bear you ill-will. I wasn't your fancy and you spoke your mind. That's all."

Amelia nodded. She saw Miss Sarah looking out of

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the bay window, and, on an impulse, she bent towards the area and framed her mouth with her hands. "I'm off, aunt," she called sharply ; "have you got a whistle for a hansom?"

But if she wished to impress Miss Gibson in the manner of her going, she was doomed to disappointment. "You won't git a hansom if you was to whistle till Doomsday," Mrs Burgess called back promptly through the grating ; "it's beyond the radiance here, and they're scarce as saints. Walk to the top of the street and you'll git a tram."

Amelia waved acquiescence and took her departure. As her shoes clicked briskly along the quiet pavement there came to her a hunger for the cheerful roar of Knightsbridge and the near presence of a world which lay apart from this stagnant suburban existence. Life here was like some little torpid pool compared with the wide stirring life of the great sea. . . . Her heart grew light with the reaction from a great danger as she clambered upon the 'bus and drove away through the cool evening air. . . . Yet, strange conclusion!—to herself, once, life as John Lawson's wife had presented no special distaste, and still to Beatrice it held all the romance which would come into her little grey life. With the soothing rush of the breeze upon her face Amelia found that thought assumed a placid outlook. She pictured the contentment which she had seen upon Beatrice's face, token of happiness ensured ; she pictured how Lawson would slip abstractedly into the satisfaction of domestic life ; she recalled Mrs Burgess and Giles. It was a queer world. Human lives were like the shifting bits of glass in a toy which she had once seen, some strange chance stirred their little circle, and they just sorted themselves without more ado ; in some lives, only, there was a hitch, but they were the unlucky ones ; most just attached themselves to what was handy and were unperplexed.

It was not till she neared home and was walking along the dusty pavement that the depression of her mood returned. Her mental attitude was reversed.

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She saw that a way of escape had been open to her, and that she had accepted it only to find the ground cut from under her feet. She knew that when brought face to face with all that her acceptance entailed, she had recoiled from it, and the fact that Fate had prearranged the issue for her had come with an overwhelming relief. But now with the return of her perplexity, the quiet suburban life which lay behind became more attractive as it receded. If she had married John Lawson all would have been plain sailing. It was a course which her behaviour of the past and the circumstances of the present alike demanded. In the abstract it had seemed easy of accomplishment. It had even pleased her sense of romance. Since her own experience of love, she had developed a novel compunction for her former treatment of John Lawson. Moreover the woman who has suffered from the indifference of one man turns with fresh gratitude to the constancy of another. The fact that her attraction should continue in John Lawson's eyes, that her present superiority should so visibly augment it, had soothed her vanity and been balm to her shattered self-respect.

And although in that first shock of disillusion she had felt only contempt and aversion for the woman who had so cheated her belief, she understood dimly now that her affection for Muriel could renew in opposition to all sense. It was, perhaps, a love infinitely humbled, robbed of the faith which had been its glory, of the romance which had been its magnetism, yet, immeasurably transformed, it could revive and could adjust itself from a different standpoint. For although Amelia could not trace the workings of temperament on the human soul and deduct thence the sum total of merit or demerit, she saw, as love alone will see, the spirit unmarred by the touch of circumstance. And this transference of ideas ceased to perplex her, as the right and wrong of the situation had failed to interest her; she was of those whose love runs to sacrifice, and more sharply present to her was the knowledge that the effacement of her presence was essential to the exigencies of that situation.

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She could not go on living in Albert Gate. Her life there lay in the way of everybody's advantage. It was rendered impossible by that man who had entered her existence to disturb it. She had grasped that he was poor, that his means of subsistence lay in his present work. He could not renounce it. Some day he must return there.—But what to do?—She lifted her gaze and looked at the bright full streets, the shops, the hurrying crowd of life. In old days she would have gone back to Mrs Burgess and have found some means of earning her living. Existence was simpler then. Now, every way seemed closed to her by a passionate distaste. For the first time she saw fully the gulf which seemed to lie between her present self and that self of the past. And, in the scene before her, certain items pricked her imagination afresh ;—the carriages, the idle women seated in them, the gay wares in the shops, the expensive dresses, the agreeable turmoil of a pleasure-seeking world —each suggestion of wealth, of luxury, of the pursuit of enjoyment, appealed to her with a strong and novel attraction, vaguely she realised how this world into which she had been grafted was essential to her ; she clung to its froth, its ease, its restless enticement.

As she turned into the house, the closing door effaced that vivid outer life. And in the cool, dim dining-room she sunk wearily into a chair. She was tired after her long walk. With the absence of the turmoil which had mesmerised her, thought became self-centred. That phase of emotion through which she had passed occupied her attention. Already it was detached from her life and she could study it with a sensation of curiosity. Her mind grappled confusedly with its mysterious properties . . . its allurement, its folly, its overwhelming force. She understood that something of its first keenness had faded, but, in its place, remained a dull, insistent hurt. She did not want to think of it. It was like looking into a grave where lay a thing which she had loved, a thing which had been beautiful, but now was unsightly beneath the touch of a horrible decay. . . . She wanted no more to do with men. She never wanted to feel again. . . .

## Bygones

In the future, all stormy, uncomfortable emotion was to be avoided with the caution born of experience. She hated to think that this man who had hurt her was in the same world as herself, breathing the same air, unattached, capable of coming back into her life, of paralysing brain and nerve by a recurrence of intolerable folly. It frightened her. She saw now that love is an illness, a madness. The people in Scripture who were mysteriously possessed with devils were surely as little responsible for their condition, their actions. . . . Her thoughts turned with curious sympathy to that other life which was still under the spell of its poison. The anger which she had felt against the woman who had wronged her was wholly replaced by regret that she had unwittingly wrought mischance in that woman's life. The judgment which she had hurled at her hurt like a profanity.

It was later that Amelia crossed the passage and stood before the door of Jack Coleford's room. She had never entered there before unasked, and, as she turned the handle softly, a sense of her temerity awed her. She paused upon the threshold while the familiar objects took shape out of the dimness—the couch, the partially-lowered blind, the lamp which was shaded while the invalid slept. She saw a figure rise up against the narrow space of daylight and come towards her. She sought for an excuse for her presence.

"Milly," said Muriel, "is that you?" And there seemed erased from her speech the strain of a coldness, half-defensive, half-embarrassed, which had characterised it during the last two days. She laid a hand upon Amelia's shoulder and drew her towards the window. The subdued daylight which filtered through the blind fell upon her face with a strange whiteness.

"I have a letter here which I think I had better show you," she said; and the tone of her voice precluded the question which rose involuntarily to Amelia's lips.

There followed a space of intense silence. Then Amelia looked up from the letter which told her that Sir Geoffry had married Mrs Breton.

Her own sensations puzzled her, but, in that moment,

## Toy-Gods

she seemed to experience a sharp severance from her former infatuation. She recognised that there was no longer any barrier between herself and the woman who stood before her. Haltingly, imagination sped ahead ; life lay before her afresh, with youth and its boundless capacity for happiness. Uncomprehended, a strange freedom elated her ; her brain, her senses were her own once more ; her identity was restored to her. Yet, though she handed the letter back to Muriel with fingers which did not tremble, an abiding hurt stung her remembrance.

"So he wasn't up to much, after all," she said drily.

But Muriel had turned away, and tearing the letter into minute fragments she threw it into the waste-paper basket.

"There are different ways of committing suicide," she said ; "and he has chosen the hardest."

Amelia watched her with a faint curiosity as she went back to her husband's couch.

THE END

