The Carissima

A MODERN GROTESQUE

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NOTE

THIS story was originally named "The Power of the Dog." Last year my attention was called to the fact that this title had been appropriated. I altered the name of my story to that which it now bears. I have, however, retained the phrase in Leversedge's letter in the last chapter; which, I may add, was written and submitted to Messrs. Methuen & Co. long before I had heard of book now bearing the title I had originally chosen.

LUCAS MALET. *KENSINGTON, W., August 1896.*

"We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go
    Round with the Sun-illumined Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show;

But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days;
    Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays."*OMAR KHAYYAM.*

PROLOGUE

ANTONY HAMMOND told me this story one wet afternoon sitting in the smoking-room of a certain country-house. Everyone else had gone out, regardless of weather, to tramp across the sodden park, walk down to the home farm, or up to the rectory. I observe, when it rains hard some members of a house-party are invariably taken up to tea at the rectory. But neither the plashy grass, nor the manorial pig-styes, nor the clerical teapot seemed to exercise any wild fascination over us; so, with an agreeable conviction of having chosen the better, and dryer, part, we remained a home.

Hammond recounts very well when he is in the vein. He also possesses the gift of pronouncing a larger number of words in a limited space of time than any other person of my acquaintance. We had talked of many things. Discussed that chief wonder of the age, the modern young woman; who differs as much from all bygone types of womanhood as our modern modes of locomotion do from those obtaining in the days of Abraham.

"For," said Hammond, "broadly speaking, is she not to her mother, as is the Orient Express to a string of camels?"

He added that, compared with even a superficial comprehension of the intricacies of her thought and conduct, the mastery of the Chinese language would supply an airy pastime, the study of the higher mathematics a gentle sedative.

"You may take her," he declared, "as a single or, in conjunction with man as a double, acrostic. In either case she is past finding out."

Then the conversation wandered on to the heroines of modern fiction; and brought up, by chance, against the lady to whom is given the *title-rôle* in that penetrating little tale of Daudet's, *La menteuse*.

Here Hammond became didactic.

PHASE FIRST

CHAPTER I

FEW persons (Hammond said) are truthful; yet the complete and experienced liar is rare. A really great lie, whether acted or spoken, is the supreme expression of a nature. It is an inspiration of genius. I make my bow to it with my hand on my heart. And all this reminds me of a man whom I once knew called Leversedge—Constantine Leversedge. For although he told, consciously at all events, no lies, he was intimately involved in the telling of one of a really superior order. And a young lady, eminently distinguished for the ripeness of her modernity, was involved in it also.

I met Leversedge in London once in a way. Then he would disappear for an indefinite period, to return—very long and lean and brown—furnished with a vocabulary floridly rich in abusive epithets applicable to South African society. He had business, as I understood, in those savage regions. And it must have proved remunerative, for he gave an increasing impression of prosperity each time I saw him. But whether it consisted in exploiting the aborigines, digging for diamonds, pulling the tail feathers out of live ostriches, or undertaking dental operations on dead elephants, I never exactly knew. He grew rich, *voilà tout*; and he really was a charming fellow, though his appearance always seemed to imply the near neighbourhood of a horse—a thing which I, personally, find slightly irritating. For I have no drop of the blood of the Centaurs in me. I gravitate naturally, as you may say, to my own feet or to wheels. So that a being half equine, as are so many of the members of our great race, produces in me an annoying sense of the limitations of my opportunities.

This, however, is a digression.—It remains that this man Leversedge had just that hint of a stoop about the shoulders, indolent fashion of moving, and slightly distracted look across the eyes and

brow which riding-men so frequently have. He had more legs, too, than are absolutely requisite in civilised society. I may mention, in passing, that he was delightfully clean; that his almost black beard was neatly trimmed, while his moustache, which was a quite bright brown, stood rather gallantly away from it. Had you arrayed him in white ruff and trunk-hose he would have made an admirable Elizabethan adventurer. Pardon these details, since it is necessary to the appreciation of what follows that you should see the creature "in his habit as he lived."

The last time I met Leversedge was at a large summer hotel on the Lake of Geneva. It is a very commendable dwelling-place,—according to the style of such things,—situated in several acres of garden that stretch down to and along the lake shore. I abstain from localising it more particularly, for Leversedge's is not a name to conjure with there. Quite unintentionally he spoilt the manager's season for him. Even the British and American tourist, matter-of-fact animal though it is, has its superstitions. My friend's eccentric action aroused them, aroused them to the extent of making the owners of them run away. For he caused life suddenly to dip to the tragic level—a thoughtless thing to do at any time, an almost criminal one at a summer hotel.

But I am getting the cart before the horse. All that came later. Immediately, Leversedge appeared to be in the very heyday of success. He had attained. He had made his pile. The elephants and ostriches and South Africans, white or black, had receded into the Great Inane. The diamonds had receded also, saving and excepting the considerable store of those delightful stones that he had brought along with him, and destined for the delectation and adornment of his bride. For Leversedge's tastes were innocent, innocent to the point of matrimony. He was engaged to a young lady, by name Miss Charlotte Perry,—playfully addressed by her father in moments of expansion as " *carissima Carlotta mia*,"—had been so engaged for quite a number of years. Now he was about to marry her, a proceeding which, subject

to the fact of a protracted engagement, really touches the high-water mark of innocence, doesn't it?

The Perry parents, I regret to say, struck me as leaving something to be desired. Leversedge had offered to take the best suite of rooms in the house for them; and they had, perhaps consequently, shown considerable alacrity in coming this far to meet him on his homeward journey.

They were a rather dusty-looking couple. He a voracious, adhesive little rat of a man, with a lop-sided way of walking, a coat-collar insufficiently brushed at all times, and a waistcoat to match after meals. He smiled upon one ravenously; and told many stock stories of witty bishops and Conservative politicians, giving his audience to understand he had himself invariably acted Horatio to the Hamlet of these good and great men. Mrs. Perry was in another style. Dusty too, but round-about and kindly; of an expansive, middle-class figure, and a countenance resembling a moon on a clock-face. A suburban moon, be it added, of the very honestest sort, wholly unsymbolic of the worship of Artemis or Astarte, without phases, standing ever at a guileless full. But if in outward aspect this worthy pair was divided, in sentiment they were one—in as far, at least, as sentiment related to their fair daughter; for they reverenced her as the supreme expression of their highest selves. And there was something genuinely touching in the whole-heartedness of that reverence, in their whispered confidences regarding the effect of her beauty, the widespread recognition of her talents, the brilliancy of her social successes. If one might accept the witness of these good parents, the life of London, intellectual and artistic, pulsed with profounder colour and thrilled into more vigorous effort when Charlotte Perry passed along. According to them, Walter Creighton extolled her pastels, and even that harshest of critics, James Colthurst, praised her draughtsmanship; while Zeltingen had been heard, more than once, to protest that if she played in public his reputation as a pianist would be completely gone. At Adolphus Carr's Wednesday afternoons she was a more than

welcome guest; and Mrs. Septimus Mertyns, the wife of the distinguished Q.C., whose drawing-rooms in Portland Place so perpetually reverberate to the roarings of lions young and old, could not be happy without her. Given dearest Lotta to help, she is reported to have declared herself equal to entertaining the Immortals of all ages—without distinction of race, creed, or sex—and, what is more, of making a success of the affair.

From all of which it may assuredly be gathered that this accomplished young lady had been designed by nature to fill some notable niche in contemporary history. And that provoked a little inward questioning as to whether she was equally designed by nature to be the contented wife of Constantine Leversedge, with his distracted brow, and long legs, and probably very ordinary, primitive view of the marital relation.

The thermometer, I remember, stood rather persistently at 90° in the shade that summer,—a condition of the atmosphere which disposes one to the exclusive observation of objects in the immediate foreground, easily within the range of vision, that can be contemplated without the breaking of a decent repose, without the unlovely heatings of physical exertion. And therefore, I suppose, I began to observe the Perry-Leversedge drama rather closely. It was under my hand. Daily it was round about me. At first the action was languid. Suddenly unexpected elements introduced themselves into the piece.

CHAPTER II

IT happened thus. Leversedge was off duty. He and I were alone, drinking our coffee after luncheon in the central hall of the hotel. It is a very good hall, lighted from above by a glass roof. Galleries—over the white balustrades of which waiters and chambermaids, valets, couriers, and ladies'-maids lean half the day, watching the antics of their social superiors down below—open upon it right up to the fourth floor.

The Perrys had gone out to luncheon. Mrs. Septimus Mertyns had just announced her advent at a popular hostelry in the neighbouring little town—half a mile away down a scorching boulevard, very inadequately shaded by rows of small, round-headed mountain-ash trees. You may reach the place—the Perrys had done so—by means of an electric tram of phenomenal joltiness, the whirrings and hootings of which distract the sensitive ear from 7 A.M. to 9.30 at night.

Mrs. Mertyns, like the highland chieftain of legend or heroic story, had brought her tail along with her. A truly resplendent tail, socially and intellectually considered; dazzling to the eyes of Perry *père et mère*, and even, in a degree, to the more experienced orbs of the Carissima also. For it counted a clever peeress who does not get on well with her stupid peer; pretty Mrs. Neville St. John, some time Miss Hattie White, an American. (She gets on equally well with St. John or without him, so there is no indiscretion in naming names. Upon the present occasion, I may remark, she was getting on quite capitally without him.) Walter Creighton, A.R.A., was also of the party; and Percy Gerrard, the well-known editor of the *Present Day* . Lastly, Septimus Mertyns himself, looking bleak and slightly harried. When his wife clearly is enjoying herself, it is reprehensibly weak of a husband to look harried. Bleak he must look, I suppose, poor dear, if nature has fashioned him that way,—but let that pass. The Perrys

were bidden to meet the resplendent tail, and the Perrys went.

Leversedge did not go. Being a very true gentleman, he assumed that he had not cared to go. "It was too hot,"—too hot, forsooth, for this sun-grilled being just home from the tropics! Whether he had not been included in the invitation, or whether Miss Perry had desired him to refuse it, offered food for speculation. I could not determine. But I observed that he was a trifle low in his mind as he sat in that cool hall, among the palms and indiarubber plants, smoking the cigarette of peace and drinking black coffee. His talk ran on serious subjects.

The irruption of some lively children from out of the lift, accompanied by French *bonnes* and English governesses galore, caused a pause in our conversation. Leversedge was very fond of children, a wholesome trait in any man's character. He watched them, and as their cries and chatter died away out of doors in the garden he asked me—

"Do you believe in devils?"

Now, this, if you like, was serious. It almost amounted to being fundamental; and I own to an inherent distaste for formulating opinions upon fundamentals.

"A devil, Leversedge," I therefore playfully protested. "Don't let us approach the question in the plural number. It becomes too complicated, too crowded. One devil,—one surely is enough for all practical purposes? In the singular he is precious, though archaic; and, if only for dramatic and literary reasons, I don't think we can afford to abolish him. He supplies the dash of absolute black, you see, which brings out all the delicate lights and shades of the moral picture. Without him the *nuances* would lose their values. No, we must keep one. He may be of any size you like,—quite a small one if you wish it, a veritable little ewe-lamb of a devil. But for the sake of his colour,—I am getting slightly mixed as to sex, I fancy, but my knowledge of the sheepfold is scarcely professional,—well, of **its** colour, which is black, you understand, uncompromising black, I implore that one, just one, may be spared to us."

Leversedge smiled upon me, but in a spirit of gentle endurance. His pensiveness remained, unabated.

"I was not talking of property devils," he answered; "and they would hardly serve your purpose anyhow; for they seem to make them red nowadays, mostly, not black. I saw *Faust* last time I was home, at the Lyceum; but I didn't think the scarlet variety patronised there amounted to very much. They were altogether too solid. You know, at a push you could do for them,—shoot, or stick, or strangle them. You must be an uncommonly poor lot if you find things frightening that you could strangle."

He smoked reflectively for a little.

"No," he went on; "I—I mean you—I mean nobody's afraid of what they can strangle. Even when I was home last, I could have supplied the management with the ground-plan of a much nastier species of fiend than those hairy, pudding-bodied creatures. And now—"

Leversedge's voice caught with a click in his throat. He sprang to his feet, making a violent movement of both hands, as though forcing something heavy and clinging off his lap.

"Get down," he cried, "you brute,—you hideous brute."

This was startling. But there are incidents which, while provoking curiosity almost to bursting-point, have about them a gravity—a gravity born of their very absurdity sometimes—which would effectually prevent any but a double-soled idiot making comments or asking questions. I did neither. Leversedge had just spoken of people being frightened; and that more sympathetically than I should have expected, for he was himself certainly no poltroon. He was a quiet, steady, sensible fellow, the kind of man to whom women turn instinctively, as to a life-belt or lightning-conductor, in an emergency. Yet at this moment his face expressed fear, and more than fear. It expressed downright terror and uncontrollable disgust.

Really he presented a very distressing spectacle. His mouth was slightly open, while his lips curled back queerly from his teeth. It may sound ridiculous, but I could almost swear that his hair bristled. His

action had been too rapid for premeditation. I never doubted it was wholly spontaneous and honest. Still, I knew—knew as positively as I have ever known anything in my life—that nothing, animate or inanimate, had been reposing upon his excellently white, flannel trousers. Knew, equally well, that nothing had slipped from off them on to the inlaid marble floor as, beating his knees, he lunged up out of the chair beside me.

We had only just finished our coffee. The tray and a *flacon* of cognac still stood on the table before me. After about a minute Leversedge laid hold of the *flacon*, and emptied half its contents into one of the dirty coffee-cups. He gulped down the brandy, and wiped his moustache and beard—as well as he could, for his teeth were chattering and his hands shaking, like those of a person in the cold fit of a fever. Then he walked up and down the length of the hall once or twice, fished a cane stool out from under one of the seats, came back and sat down beside me again.

He had entered into possession of himself. But he was still shaking. Very carefully he placed the stool on his knees, wrong way about, so that the four legs of it stuck up into the air, took out his cigarette case, and lighted another cigarette.

"I beg your pardon, Hammond," he said, as he did so. "This has not happened to me for some time, and it took me by surprise. I don't make such a fool of myself when I am in training—when I'm habitually hag-ridden. But I've been pretty free of all that lately."

He looked round, doing his best to smile, though his lips twitched oddly.

"Now, do you believe in devils?" he asked. "Real ones, I mean,—not property devils."

"I believe in liver, my dear friend," I asserted. "And still more sincerely do I believe in nerves, which are superior in the production of torments to all the Satans generated by the unhealthy imaginations of all ascetics, Oriental and mediæval, put together."

"And still more readily do you believe in drink, I suppose," he said

quietly. "Only let me remind you, the monsters that haunt drunkards do it openly in broad day. You can see them, so they tell me, as plain as your hand. Now, I only see this beast at night, when the lights are out and there's no moon. And even then only—only part of it. By day I only feel it."

Leversedge shook again all over, while he slowly slid the cane stool up and down his lap.

"When I begin to see it in the light, I shall have sense enough left to look for the nearest lunatic asylum, I hope. Or put an end to the business in an even more effectual manner."

What did I do? Naturally I did what everyone does, except a very few women—on whom may heaven rain all blessings, they richly deserve such, faithful souls!—what everyone, I say, does when a fellow-creature is in anly vital need of help, or advice, or encouragement. I expended myself in ineptitudes, in palpable platitudes, in sieve-like commonplaces of consolation, through which the comfort ran with the silliest little tinkle imaginable.

Poor Leversedge listened in commendable patience.

"You're extremely kind," he said; "but this is nothing new. It's been going on for ever so long. I've tried drugs, and dieting, and doctors—they make no difference. I hoped perhaps coming back to Europe and the old life—"

He paused, still sliding the stool backwards and forwards in that unpleasantly suggestive manner.

"Smoke, please," he said. "Do you mind my telling you? I've never told anybody before. The best and the worst things that happen to you, you keep to yourself as a rule, you know. But—but—I'm rather knocked about by what's just occurred. I should be glad to have you know."

Again the stool travelled backwards and forwards. Then Leversedge said slowly—

"It began like this—I had been riding for a couple of days expecting to strike a mining camp where I had business. But I'd fever on me,

and got out of my course. Do you know the Veldt, Hammond? Of course you don't—the endless roll of the treeless land, under the dome of the thick, tropic sky, both alike grey with the heavy, deadly heat. It gets you with a sort of despair. You look at it as you might look at a sentence of penal servitude for life. The monotony takes the heart out of you—that, and the heat, the killing heat. At last the hazy warming-pan of a sun went down, and the dark came quick, and I muddled on pretty well done. And, from the top of one of those everlasting bare ridges, I saw the white tilts of a couple of waggons showing up about half a mile away. It wasn't my camp, but it meant something in the way of rest and help. At least, I thought so at first, though there was no smoke, and the whole place seemed unaccountably quiet, save for the yapping of a dog."

Leversedge looked round at me, and spoke as though forcing himself.

"I needn't go into details, Hammond," he said. "That camp was dead. Even in the night, which decently hides a good deal, it was a ghastly place. I suppose they'd all died of thirst, they and the oxen. And I had fever on me. I shall never know quite all I did see. But in one of the waggons I made out a dead woman. Underneath it a dog was tied, a small, yellowish cur, the only thing left alive, and it yapped. And—and—there had been a child in the waggon, a little baby-child—and I suppose it had lived longer than the rest. And it must have crawled out over the tail of the waggon, and fallen close to the dog. It lay there, a white bundle of a thing in the gloom. And the dog squatted with its forepaws out across the child's chest, its eyes showing green, straining at the rope which tied it. And bending down from the saddle—I was too weak with fever to get off—my horse, too, would have scared, it was half mad at—well—at the death all round it, and the stench—I saw that the brute had torn the child's throat—for—for the blood."

He paused a moment. And when he continued, it struck me through all the absorbing terror of his story that Leversedge was one

of those persons who, even under severest stress of adverse circumstance, try to be just.

"I know it was starving," he said, "and—which is worse—it was parched. Men have done as bad things before now at sea,—only, I tell you, Hammond, I had to kill that dog. I could not afford to squander cartridges, but I could spare a couple. Twice I tried it, but my revolver was heavy, and I was altogether played out, so that my hand shook. The bullets only cut the rope. And then—then—I was taken with a sort of panic, Hammond. I cleared out of that awful place; and the dog came too."

His voice sank; and while one hand still held the upturned legs of the stool, he leant sideways, and with the other made a slow level motion as of something passing across the floor.

"It kept pace with my horse. Those dreadful eyes looking up at me—two yellowish-green discs galloping beside me, dropping behind for a minute or two, coming up with me again, mile after mile, all through the night. And the night seemed years and years long—"

I am afraid it is true, even with the most civilised of us, that the appetite for horror grows with what it feeds on. I am naturally a soft man, a dweller in tents, of the Jacob rather than the Esau order of mind. I detest adventures, save of the drawing-room and five-o'clock-tea sort. Yet, as Leversedge ceased speaking, I was sensible of an unholy craving for more of these horrors. And, when his silence grew somewhat prolonged, I found myself—to my shame—saying greedily—

"Well, my dear fellow, well? That's not the end?"

Leversedge turned to me with that pathetically patient smile of his. Did I perceive, though, the faintest flavour of contempt behind it? The contempt of Esau, the fighter and hunter, the dealer in primitive passions, for the smooth-handed Jacob of the club, and the pavement, and the silver teapot?

"No, that's not the end," he answered at last; "that's only the beginning.—I need not bother you with the whole set out. I was pretty

bad for some time; though I stumbled across my own people next day, and we struck a vein of luck at our mining place, and the money was rolling in hand over hand. It seemed as if the curse and the gold had come together.—As soon as I could move I went down to the coast and got away to sea. And I thought it was all right. We were a couple of degrees south of the equator, and there had been a bad electric storm which had made us all feel pretty jumpy; but the rain had come down and the weather was mending. Everyone else had gone under cover—some music and singing was going on in the saloon—and I was standing forward against the bulwarks with the doctor. He was a nice little chap—tremendously keen on travel and on natural history. He died of fever a year and a half afterwards, I heard, exploring somewhere up the Congo. I've always been sorry he dropped out. There was good stuff in him.—But about this affair of mine. It must have been about half-past eight, and it was very close notwithstanding the rain; and very dark, but for the glimmer through the slats of the saloon shutters. And right along the length of the promenade deck, straight at us, came a dog, just as hard as it could lick. I only saw its eyes,—two glowing green discs a trifle bigger than a sixpence,—but there was no mistaking what they were. They travelled along about nine inches above the level of the deck, sometimes higher, sometimes lower, as the thing galloped. It turned, just short of us, round the end of the saloon, and went, as I supposed, down the other side of the deck. I spoke to the doctor about it—I hoped there might be a dog on board I did not know of—but he hadn't observed anything. Then the eyes came racing up our side of the deck again. I pointed them out to him, still he didn't see. Still I had a sort of hope about me, so I knelt down and whistled the brute to come to me."

Leversedge grasped the up-turned legs of the stool, and leaned forward, looking across to where the great glass doors of the hall opened on to the buff of the carriage-drive, and the dancing green of the garden in blaze of sunshine beyond.

"It came," he said. "The eyes were close to me,—quite close.

People are sentimental on board ship, you know. A girl was singing 'Annie Laurie' in the saloon. She'd an uncommonly pretty voice. I heard the words of the song quite distinctly; that and the swish of the water against the side, and the steady pounding of the engines, as I put out my hand to pat the beast's head. And my hand went down, clean down, within a couple of inches of those eyes, where its neck should have been—where its neck was—I swear it was—clean down on to the wet planks of the deck.—Then I knew something very evil was upon me. In that dead camp I had seen the Thing-too-Much.—For there is a Thing-too-Much, you know, in nature, in men and women, in what happens. And you may tell by the look in a person's face whether they've seen it. They mayn't be cowards; most fairly healthy people have really plenty of pluck. Only, I tell you what takes it out of the bravest. They have seen Fear,—Fear itself, that there's no getting over or arguing about. They've been 'to the end of the world and looked over the wall,'—they got to the place from which there's no way out.—Oh! I say," he cried suddenly, "here comes Charlotte—Miss Perry—and the others."

Then Leversedge, "the man who had gone to the end of the world and looked over the wall," glanced at the *flacon* of cognac; thought better of it, got up and went across the hall to meet the returning revellers.

I am fond of contrasts. At that moment I had reason to congratulate myself. Here promised to be contrasts of a high order of interest.

CHAPTER III

TO most of us foggy islanders 90° in the shade takes the gilt off the ginger-bread even in so delectable a matter as a luncheon to meet a resplendent tail. Perry *père et mère* were distinctly demoralised in aspect, and even the Carissima was not quite up to her usual level.

Miss Perry looked warm, which was a pity, for it was not her *rôle* to look warm. It was her *rôle* to remind you of sunrise rather than sunset, to be virginal, flower-like, I might say dewy. She was tall; and our grandmothers, I think, would have described her appearance as elegant, the more so that her shoulders sloped and that her features were somewhat indefinite. For truly, in her the paternal rat and the maternal clock-moon had mixed themselves to the point of uncertainty, the roundness of the one putting a perpetual check upon the sharpness of the other, and *vice versâ*—two affirmatives going to make a negative, if one may reverse the rule laid down in our English grammar. Her colouring, on the other hand, was quite definite. It was red and brown. I have heard it called Italian, or gipsy-like. A budding poet once asserted, in dedicatory verse, that her complexion reminded him of split pomegranates. But then, poets pay odd compliments—specially young ones. Miss Perry's hair was brown, and abundant. Her eyes were also brown, and the whites of them very white. They were extremely pretty eyes; not large and placed flatly in her head, but dewy, almost always dewy, and full of appeal.

In short, she was unquestionably an uncommonly attractive young lady, particularly at a little distance. She needed to be focussed—but nearly every pretty woman, like every good picture, needs that! And she dressed well, though her clothes needed focussing too. At close quarters they had an unhappy knack of looking new without looking

quite fresh. On the day in case, I remember, she wore a brown linen suit with a wealth of primrose silk vest to it. Both were smart, but slightly tired—perhaps from long sojourn in her boxes. The yellow roses in her large, black-lace hat were tired also. But I own to a sense of shame in having noticed these defects. I felt it was unhandsome of me, since she advanced upon her lover with a really captivating air of appeal and anxiety.

A pathetic note had intruded itself into my friendship for Constantine Leversedge during the last half-hour. If any pleasure was going, he had a prescriptive right to it. He was owed compensation. Solitude *à deux* is, of course, the very seat of bliss in matters of the affections; I therefore did my possible to procure him a *tête-à-tête* with the fair Charlotte by concentrating the attention of her parents upon myself. I succeeded. Mrs. Perry, dear good woman, had subsided on to the settee in the centre of the hall, too extenuated by the heat to be otherwise than perfectly docile. Mr. Perry was active, I might almost say rampageous; he was thirsting to communicate impressions, triumphs. In the capacity of an audience I was therefore acceptable to him.

"Well, well, good afternoon to you, Mr. Hammond," he cried. "You see, we have returned. Not all the darts of the sun-god—torrid sunshine to-day, I'm sure, really torrid—could detain us any longer. Even in the gayest scenes, the most intellectually stimulating society, the heart of the true woman"—Mr. Perry nodded playfully over his shoulder in the direction of Miss Charlotte and Leversedge—"draws her back to 'the kindred points of heaven and home.' Hotel and heaven and home, as I may say in this case; which is accurate in fact, and pleasing to the ear as alliteration, eh, Mr. Hammond? Yes, thank you, we have had a charming party, really a delightful party,—haven't we, Mamma?"

This to Mrs. Perry, flushed as a moon in the early stages of an eclipse, vainly courting coolness by untying her bonnet strings and spreading out her fingers upon her knees, as she sat upon the settee.

"Delightful," he continued, without waiting for an answer; "and most gratifying to us as—as the authors of her days, as I may say—wasn't it, Mamma?—to witness the high estimation in which our dear Charlotte is held by really superior persons. Nothing new, of course,"—Mr. Perry said this with a smile which came as near being haughty as the fashion of a rat permitted;—"but testimony to an old truth, if that truth be pleasing, is always welcome. And she sustained her part in the conversation victoriously. I do not exaggerate when I employ the word victorious. Really there are moments when my daughter's knowledge of all subjects that come under discussion almost staggers me. It is encyclopædic, I'm sure,—positively encyclopædic. I listen and admire and— Still the wonder grows How one small head can carry all she knows."

(For under excitement it was Mr. Perry's habit thus to gather in the British poets by some more or less hybrid quotation. I have heard with trembling, that he has been known to recite whole poems of a patriotic character—"The Charge of the Light Brigade," for instance, or "God bless the Prince of Wales"—during the lapses of active interest—these are not infrequent, I understand—at local meetings of the Primrose League.)

"Mamma, I am sure, will endorse my statement," he added. "My daughter in congenial society, among her intellectual equals, is surprising, really surprising."

"Oh yes," Mrs. Perry said, thus appealed to—"of course everybody was very clever. Mrs. Mertyns' friends always are. And it seemed to me Charlotte talked as cleverly as any of them; at least I understood quite as little of what she meant. And it always shows people are saying what is clever when you can't make out what they mean; don't you think so, Mr. Hammond?"

"Unquestionably, my dear lady," I replied. "An infallible test!"

Mr. Perry glanced at me sharply, and then again addressed that unconscious satirist his wife.

"You would like to have the lift, my love, and go up to our apartment

and rest.—Here, *ascenseur, ascenseur*!"

"I think I will sit still a little first," Mrs. Perry replied, throwing back her bonnet strings. "Heat is very confusing. Don't you find it so, Mr. Hammond? It quite upsets me. Once or twice at luncheon I turned so faint and giddy I wondered if I could remain at table, which was very awkward for me."—Mrs. Perry sighed.—"It seems to me clever people, like Charlotte's friends, are so strong," she said. "They often look delicate, and yet somehow they always seem ready to go anywhere, and do anything, and talk. They never seem overcome with the heat, or the cold either, for that matter. I'm sure it must be very nice to feel like—"

"Habit," broke in Mr. Perry,—"habit—there is a vast amount in that. I declare I hesitate to limit the power of habit. But I wish you had been with us, Mr. Hammond. You would have appreciated the conversation, and no doubt increased its charms—no doubt increased them. One brief passage of arms between my daughter and Mr. Percy Gerrard, upon the place of the imagination in modern realistic fiction, was brilliant, positively brilliant.

And so the wordy battle grew, swelling almost to dissonance;
Then broke in laughter, and, with courteous phrase,
Sunk back to sweet agreement—this the end. And Mertyns told some very good stories towards the conclusion of lunch. One of the late Earl of Beaconsfield, which was new to me. A first-rate story—not more so than some of my own, but still first-rate. Just remind me, after dinner, my dear, and I'll tell it to Mr. Hammond. It will amuse him."

"Yes, but it seems a pity you couldn't have heard Mr. Mertyns tell it himself; for it seemed to me everybody would have been so glad to see you, Mr. Hammond," Mrs. Perry said. "They all seemed so surprised to hear you were at this hotel with us. Mrs. St. John said she wondered what on earth you could be doing here, and that she wished so much you would come and tell her."

"Mrs. St. John is a delightful woman, and if she is very good perhaps I will tell her," I replied.

Perplexity obscured Mrs. Perry's countenance as a passing cloud, then she beamed out harvest-moon-wise at me.

"Oh," she said, "I see. Now you're being clever."

"Heaven forbid!" I cried. "I am guilty of much, but, believe me, of that never."

"My dear, I really think we may as well be moving."—This from Mr. Perry, not without a hint of asperity.—"*Ascenseur!* Where is that lazy lad? Asleep, I suppose, as usual.—Yes, most kind inquiries after you, I'm sure, Mr. Hammond. The ladies begged you would call upon them. In fact, I suspected,"—he here became very arch,—"I may have been wrong, but I suspected it was thought you were a little remiss in not having done so already. Come, *ascenseur, ascenseur* , I tell you; don't you hear?"

And, receiving no response, he chased away in and out of all probable and improbable doors voraciously seeking the lift-boy.

"Mr. Hammond, a legend obtains that you are a lawyer. I hope that it is true, for I stand in great need of an advocate. Constantine is obdurate, he is grasping. Plead my cause with him, pray."

Miss Perry was at my elbow, Leversedge's long, lean, white and grey figure a couple of paces from her to the left. He was watching her, adoring her; and the terror had not yet quite passed out of his face. This was dramatic.

Meanwhile Miss Perry's bright and dewy eyes were, I will not say raised to mine, for truth compels me to own our eyes were pretty nearly on a level. I trust I shall not be considered indiscreet if I mention that her lips had a trick of tremulously collecting themselves into what may be described as the sketch of a conceivable kiss before and after speaking. Her voice was of a gentle, toneless quality; while her speech, glib in fact yet apparently full of modest hesitation, caressed one's ear with a delicate hint of deference. For Charlotte Perry had the excellent gift of a deprecatory manner, such as flatters the natural vanity of the masculine heart. You felt she reckoned it a matter of gratitude so fine a creature as your manly self allowed her to look on

you and live. Ah! if women knew! Perhaps some of them do, though—worse luck!

Anyhow, at that moment, Leversedge's matrimonial intentions appeared to me as little misplaced as such foolish intentions often can be. For even at close quarters Miss Perry was very distinctly engaging. It must be remembered I had just suffered a heavy dose of her parents, and from them she came a sensible relief. Poor young lady! I asked myself of what crimes she could possibly have been guilty in a former state of existence to deserve such parents?

"You see this bunch of roses," she continued; "it is very lovely, isn't it? The scheme of colour is perfect—you feel colour, don't you, Mr. Hammond? These gradations are delicious, from white through those faint flesh tones, rose-saffron, and rose to this heart of passionate crimson. Do not let Constantine coerce me into marring its perfection. Plead for it. You are a poet. Save it, for is it not a poem?"

"Is it?" Leversedge said. "Well, then, give me a verse to stick in my buttonhole."

"Ah!" Miss Perry murmured, drawing back.

She shut her eyes for an instant and shook her head, putting up one hand with a very pretty gesture of repudiation.

"A verse! but the context, Constantine; don't you perceive you would annihilate the context?"

"Annihilate the what?" Leversedge asked, in bewilderment. "I only want one of your roses."

Charlotte Perry looked piteously at me.

"I cannot comprehend a willingness to mar what is perfect in order to gratify personal desire," she said. "It is distressing. Is it not almost immoral?"

"According to many high authorities all desire, alas! is immoral, my dear young lady," I replied. "Therefore your wish to preserve your charming nosegay intact may be—I do not assert that it is, I only suggest that it may be—every bit as culpable as Leversedge's very natural wish to convert a portion of it into a favour for his unregenerate

buttonhole."

"Do you really mean that? I should have thought harmony was always dearer than discord, preservation than destruction. To me that scheme of colour represents the birth and growth"—Miss Perry's voice sank away, became almost inaudible in refinements of hesitation—"and the eventual, the splendid consummation of some great romance. I told Mr.Gerrard so when he gave me the flowers—"

"Oh! Percy Gerrard gave you the flowers?" I cried.

The girl did not speak, she only gazed at me, while her lips tremulously formed themselves into that peculiar sketch of a kiss. I don't know how she did it, but undoubtedly she made me feel I had behaved grossly, that I had been amazingly crude and coarse. Then she turned languidly to Leversedge.

"Do you still want them, Constantine? You may have them all now," she said.

"Oh, my dear, you're never going to give away your sweet bookay!" Mrs. Perry protested from her post on the settee.

And Leversedge stood holding the flowers, bewildered, looking as nearly awkward, indeed, as I had ever seen him look. I am not usually either impulsive or irritable, but I could not quite contain myself.

"Ah, you were right, pre-eminently right," I remarked to Mrs. Perry. "Your daughter is among the very clever persons. She says things of which it is wholly difficult to arrive at the meaning."

"*Ascenseur*—I have him at last. Run him to earth," cried Mr. Perry, emerging from a side door, in what may be described as a jovial, sporting, fine old English mood. "Ah ha! run him to earth at last. Now, my ladies, to horse, to horse, boot and saddle, up and away!—eh, Mamma?—up and away!"

Leversedge followed the family party, and leaned his long arms on the gilded gates of the lift.

"Mayn't I come up with you, Charlotte?" he asked. "I've hardly seen you all day."

Miss Perry's expression was still that of one who has been pained,

mistaken, really very much pained.

"I am so tired," she answered gently. "And yet I must practise. I—I am distressed, Constantine, but I think perhaps—I must practise, you see—I had better be alone."

The sleepy boy was working the steel rope, and with a click the painted cage began to move up on its greased steel pillar.

"I won't be in the way. I'll sit quite still. I swear I won't try to make you talk," Leversedge pleaded.

But Charlotte Perry sank upon the narrow red velvet seat beside her mother, shaking her head.

"Not just now, dear Constantine—please not just now," she plaintively said.

Leversedge sauntered back across the hall thoughtfully, dropped the discarded roses on a little round table, rubbing his hands together as though he wished to get the feeling of their stems out of his fingers.

"I think I want exercise, perhaps," he said to me.—Leversedge had a very well-bred instinct of always trying to carry things off.—"One leads an abominably lazy life here, you know. I think I'll go out for a good stretch. By the way, Hammond, I suppose I ought to know, but I've been so little at home lately, you see—who's this fellow Percy Gerrard, who you're all talking about?"

"A scavenger of genius," I replied.

"A what?"

"The editor of an extremely successful weekly paper of the social variety. In his youth he produced a witty and improper novel, which everybody said it was impossible to read, and everybody promptly read. It affected to be autobiographical. Now he has ceased to be immoral—at all events in print—having laid to heart the golden maxim that public confession of the sins of others is, on the whole, an even more paying speculation than public confession of sins of your own. I am afraid he has also ceased to be witty. That is a matter for regret."

Leversedge looked hard at me.

"Sounds a bit of a skunk, I think," he said. "But very likely I'm

wrong. I see I don't catch on to a whole heap of subjects you are all talking about. I have stayed out of England too long, and your ideas at home have run clean away from me. You are all speaking a language I don't know half the time."

He stared absently at the stool, still lying wrong way up on the marble floor, and then kicked it aside with a sudden savageness.

"Why the dickens didn't I come home six years ago for good?" he said. "I was worth a tidy lot even then. I was younger, everyone was younger—one was more in touch. And then, perhaps, too, I should never have seen that ungodly brute of a—Oh, well, I beg your pardon, Hammond. I must have bored you enough and to spare with my own affairs already. Meet you at dinner? All right—I'm going for my walk."

CHAPTER IV

I WAS called away to Evian for a couple of days to meet a friend —who does not enter into this history, so we will, if you please, leave her out of it. I returned, rather depressed, by an afternoon boat that was packed with an amazingly plain-headed selection of tourists of all nations. They named the mountains by the help of red Baedekers, patronised the beauties of nature, smoked atrocious tobacco, expectorated freely, and were othervise objectionable to almost every sense.

Yet if you could detach your mind from the vileness of surrounding humanity, the aspect of nature was very enjoyable. Rain had fallen in the early morning, and the fresh-washed landscape wore a delightfully clean and youthful look. The hotels and villas on the north shore of the lake shone out among their rich orchards and gardens; while the lake itself, a "heavenly floor," showing all shades from indigo to azure, was turned up with the most delectable bottle-green at the edges. The Savoy Alps were azure likewise, shot with pinkish lights upon their topmost crags, and with a bloom of sunlit woods about their feet. The Swiss are nothing but a nation of "*marchands de soupe*." Granted; but it must be conceded they have the merit of selling the contents of their stock-pots in an admirably pretty country.

On disembarking, the first person I saw—barring the heavy porter in peg-top trousers, who managed the gang-plank—was Mr. Perry. H e appeared worried. He scuttled up and down over the black timbers of the pier and clung to the rusty side-rails, scanning the lovely levels of the lake with irritable eyes. At intervals he hailed some—to me—imperceptible object in the far distance, and signalled with a bulky white umbrella. Catching sight of me, he saluted me with wavings of this instrument.

"Ah! you are back again, Mr. Hammond," he cried. "And all our

little society will be most happy to welcome you back—I'm sure, most happy. Even in so purely fortuitous an association of our fellow-creatures, even in the passing relations of an hotel, we miss the accustomed face, the vacant place at table raises a regret."

I expressed my sense of indebtedness for these polite observations. But Mr. Perry bad returned to his agitated survey of the lake.

"Excuse me," he exclaimed. "I think I perceive them."

He climbed upon the cross-bar ironwork of rails with surprising agility, and gave forth a really portentous howl.

"Coming in that direction you must have seen them in passing, Mr. Hammond, in the steamer," he said, turning suddenly and almost angrily upon me, after waiting vainly for some response to this terrible noise. "Did you not recognise them?"

"Who and what are they?" I ventured to inquire.

"Constantine Leversedge has taken my daughter out boating."—Mr. Perry descended dejectedly from his perch.—"No, I was in error. I did not perceive them, nor evidently did you."

He removed his hat and wiped his forehead. I may mention that Mr. Perry invariably wore a tall hat at this period, and black clothes. After which ceremony he somewhat recovered his equanimity.

"No, no," he cried, "we must school ourselves, we must school ourselves—

To wait and hope, and still to hope and wait,

Last lesson learned by man of heaven directed fate. But I am not among the pessimists, Mr. Hammond. I can look forward, I am thankful to say, and look up."

All of which unquestionably was very praiseworthy on the part of Mr. Perry; but a little too large, so it struck me, for the immediate situation. I pointed out that the young people were in no danger, that disaster was wholly improbable, the sky being absolutely clear, the water as smooth as a millpond.

"Ah, you misconceive me," Mr. Perry rejoined.—He carried his

head on one side, and nodded sagely, looking up from under his eyebrows.—"You misconceive me. I fear other dangers than material ones just now,—a father's anxieties, natural and not I think condemnable where the future of so dear an object as an only daughter is concerned. Frankly, then,—for in speaking to you I speak to a man of the world, Mr. Hammond,—our charming friends, Mrs. Septimus Mertyns and Mr. Gerrard, have called. They are actually here, they are indoors with Mamma. And it annoys me," he said, "I cannot disguise from myself that it annoys me profoundly, my daughter should not be at home to receive them. Constantine shows himself inconsiderate in detaining her so long. I thought it probable our friends would visit us this afternoon, and I gave him a pretty broad hint on the subject. I regret to say so—but you must have observed it yourself, Mr. Hammond—Constantine Leversedge is obtuse, unhappily obtuse; he is insufficiently sensible of his social privileges. Having been deprived of intellectual advantages, and the enjoyment of intercourse with persons of superior gifts and position for so long, I should have expected him to prize these things highly. But unfortunately it is not so. He displays, is displaying at this moment, in my opinion, a lamentable indifference to an opportunity of cultivating a most valuable acquaintance. I hoped he had taken my hint. He assured me he would return soon after five. Unless I am very much mistaken, six will be striking almost immediately."

Evidently this was serious. So I tried to appease Mr. Perry by remarking that, considering how exquisite a companion he possessed, Leversedge's conduct was more than comprehensible, excusable, almost justifiable. For is not unpunctuality, as I pointed out, the natural prerogative of happy lovers? For them time has ceased. Eternity enfolds them. How, then, can they be expected to remember that wholly mechanical contrivance, the clock? And, to pass from the general to the particular, was it altogether inconceivable that even Mrs. Mertyns might, at a push, recall faint memories of a period when to linger with the great Septimus beyond the appointed time had been

bliss? Was Perry himself, indeed, entirely guiltless under this head? For had he never, in the dear dead past, toyed with Mrs. Perry,—pretty, pretty picture!—oblivious of the fleet-footed hours, which, as the poets so insistently remind us, "will not stay"?

"Ah yes, the young will be young, will be young, Mr. Hammond," he admitted. "It therefore is incumbent upon those who, like Mamma and myself, have reached what I may term the watershed of our terrestrial existence, to watch attentively and prevent the commission of thoughtless indiscretion on the part of our youthful relatives. Keep a sharp look-out on our green apples, our green apples, ah ha!—eh? And society is not to be trifled with. Not—but, excuse me, this time I do perceive them."

A rowing-boat, containing two persons, rounded the nose of the stone breakwater which protects the bathing-place and little harbour on the right of the garden. And my companion, uttering ejaculations of uncontrollable satisfaction, chased off the steamboat pier and trotted along the path at the bottom of the hotel grounds to meet it.

The breakwater, I may mention, runs back in a low, broad-topped stone wall, enclosing two sides of a triangular piece of ground planted with close rows of plane trees. The hotel boatman's house stands at one corner. The men dry their nets here, and the boats are hauled up for repairs. It is a nice, moist, shady place, commanding an entrancing view, where the gnat trumpets by day and by night, and the midge actively investigates all pasturage afforded by the human loiterer.

As for me, I never run; should not, I imagine, were it even to clasp to my heart a potentially eloping daughter—which thing, heaven, in its mercy, eternally forbid! So I followed Mr. Perry, in all the calm dignity of the non-parental mind, along the lake path under quivering balsam-poplars and charmingly pendent willows, arriving at the place of gnats only in time to see his lop-sided, little, black figure and the tall, cream-coloured one of the fair Charlotte speeding away, through sunshine and shadow, in the direction of the hotel and social distinction.

Verily, the ways of Providence are not equal! I had returned from Evian in a depressed frame of mind, as I have already recorded. I had started for that agreeably mundane little watering-place in a somewhat Byronic humour, determined to do a trifle of living on my own account. But the humour had not lasted. With me it rarely does. Once on the spot, a spirit of pallid Platonism invaded me, chilling to death all possibility of drama. It really was rather provoking, for I love drama; and the position had been worthy of one of those French comedies from which the heart must be extracted, during the process of adaptation for the English stage, if young maidens are to be spared anxiety when taking members of the elder generation to the theatre. I had planned it all so nicely, yet nothing had come of it. And now, directly I returned to this innocent locality, to these commonplace, not to say rather common, people, I found that, in full play which I had vainly sought across the water.

Mr. Perry's conversation had given me food for thought. While one glance at Leversedge assured me that for him the wheels had been going round during my absence, going round to some purpose.

CHAPTER V

HE had just beached the boat, a gaudy emerald-green and buff affair with scarlet cushions to it, and stood in the shifting angular shadow of the plane trees, watching the receding figure of the lady of his affections and that of his prospective father-in-law. As they passed out of sight, behind a belt of flowering shrubs in the garden, Leversedge half shut his eyes and threw back his head. Then his chin dropped on his chest, and he stared vacantly at a pair of swans sailing about the clear water of the little harbour, just back of the row of gaily painted boats—which creaked and bumped together as the slight wash from the beat of the birds' black paddles took them.

A good many of us, I suppose, as we get on in life, have a face our friends do not know, though our looking-glasses do, when doors are shut and the room is empty. That is the face of our naked self, and therefore it is somewhat indecent for any but ourselves to behold it. Leversedge believed himself to be alone, he had let slip appearances, and I beheld the face of his naked self. It was very interesting; but, as things naked often will, it gave me a shock.

Not that there was anything evil in it. It held no revelation of cleverly veiled iniquities, no trace either of fox or satyr. The man's self bare was, like the man's self clothed, cleanly, sober, and—on its own lines—not undignified. If sin was about, one judged him more likely to be sinned against than sinning; which, so the authorities assure us, "is far better." But, in his case, even the farthest better was still but a poor best. For Leversedge looked hunted, looked tormented; looked as people will look after a disaster at sea, or a heavy shock of earthquake; looked as those are reported to look who have seen a ghost.

Of course we all join in denying the existence of the supernatural and relegating it to the, at present somewhat over-populated, country

of Exploded Ideas; or only in permitting its existence in the form of some derangement of nerve ganglia or of the intestines. The pill, to put it concisely, has superseded the prayer—to the great advantage of the vender of patent medicines, whose advertisement-boards have so gracefully usurped the station of the wayside cross in modern English landscape.

I mention this in self-defence. For Leversedge certainly did look as though, in pre-scientific phrase, he had seen a ghost; and no one knows better than I do, I need hardly say, that ghosts, like miracles, "do not happen." Therefore Leversedge's body must clearly have been playing some fool's trick on Leversedge's brain; and Leversedge, in being taken in and so harassed by such trickery was clearly guilty of a grave scientific misdemeanour. Demonstrably it was my place to be angry with him, to convince him of foolishness. But I did none of these things. I own to it with contrition, I was horribly sorry for him—that was all. And only the more sorry, when, suddenly awakening to the fact of my presence, he gripped himself, left off contemplating the swans, accosted me with as much nonchalance as he could muster (not being a very accomplished actor); while an almost defiant inquiry as to how much of the face of his naked self I had beheld haunted his eyes.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Hammond; I didn't see you," he said. "We've been having a very jolly time out on the water. It really is a glorious afternoon. But the sunshine's rather dazzling. It strikes right up in your face off the surface of the lake in a blinding sort of way. Well, what have you been doing? Been amusing yourself over there?"

"With the wisest moderation," I replied. "My joys during the last two days have had nothing bacchanalian about them. I have lost a little money, I have gained a little experience, since we parted. And so have you, I fancy, my dear fellow."

"Why? I've lost no money," Leversedge said rather quickly.

"No, but you have lost flesh, which always implies a deepening of experience."

Leversedge seemed startled. Then, after a moment's pause, he exclaimed inconsequently—

"Why, you don't mean to say it shows as much as that!"

"I only mean to say that you are looking a good deal out of sorts."

"You see too much, Hammond." He spoke shortly, but recovered himself almost at once. "I'm hardly the person to accuse others of seeing too much, though."

"So I feared," I said.

"I have had a hell of a time with—with that blasted dog"—Leversedge flung away from me savagely. "Oh, it's humiliating!" he cried. "I tell you I'm ashamed, downright ashamed of myself. I can't hold my tongue—I want to talk about it. I want to tell somebody. I am as full of my own symptoms and sensations as some hysterical girl. I can't keep them to myself. Oh! it's humiliating; I tell you it's degrading to one's manhood."

He turned and stood quietly by me again, and again I beheld the face of his naked self.

"I don't know what to do for the best," he said. "I want advice—advice; I, who have never asked advice of any living soul, but just shoved along by myself and kept my own counsel, ever since—when I was a little chap of eleven, after my mother died—my father chucked me into the rough and tumble of Harrow to sink or swim as I could. And I have swum after a fashion—that's just why it's so rough on one. If you're going to smash up, upon my word I believe it's best to do it early, before you have grown to believe in yourself. You haven't so far to fall, so it hurts less. But I beg your pardon, Hammond," he added civilly, changing his tone. "I have no earthly claim on your patience and kindness, and I must be boring you frightfully."

"Boring me?" I cried. "Ye gods! is one bored watching in the operating theatre? Is one bored when seeing a man hanged?"

Leversedge smiled grimly. Perhaps my words evoked some recollection.

"No," he replied. "There are nicer occupations; but I grant you you

are not much bored, as a rule, when a man's being hung."

We moved away and sat down on the top of the wall together, and I confessed Leversedge—smoking all the while, which I fear was far from the orthodox attitude of a confessor. But it was agitating work, and I needed support of some kind.

"You see, the thing's growing worse," he said,— "not merely more frequent in coming, but different; it is developing—that's what knocks me about so. It doesn't stop where it did. The brute is materialising itself—that's the word, isn't it?—more and more."—He drew his heels up on to the coping, and bowed himself together, clasping his bands round his knees.—"When I was sitting with the Perrys the other evening, it curled itself up on my lap. And I could not play the fool before them, you know, by blaspheming at it and making a scene. I had to sit still."—He leant forward, resting his chin upon his knees, and spoke very steadily.—"And I tell you I felt all the shape of it—its shoulder, the crinkled turn of its ribs—it must be horribly thin—and its left fore and hind leg pressing down on me as it lay on them, as plain as I feel my fingers holding each other just now. It was all cold and damp, and—and it smelt, Hammond, and that was unspeakably filthy. You know how a mangy cur can smell."

"This is bad," I said.

Leversedge raised his head slowly and looked at me.

"I believe you. It is bad—just as bad as bad can be." He rested his chin on his knees again.—"And the beast has taken a fancy to my bedroom, unfortunately. Last night, as soon as I put the candles out, I saw the eyes down by the side of the bed and they made a rush. I heaved a book at them which I had been reading. It was *Vanity Fair* . I'm awfully fond of *Vanity Fair*. Poor little Becky, I always want to give her her five thousand a year to 'be good on.' Oh dear me!—Well, they wriggled down again; the beast was knocked backwards on to the floor, you understand. But in a minute it made another rush, and came up across the counterpane, and settled itself against the pillow, those eyes staring bang into mine."

Leversedge put his feet to the ground and, turning away, leaned his elbows on the low wall. His hat was off, and he held his head back. I saw, against the wide heavenly blue expanse of the lake, his face in profile, his pointed beard, and the rather long line of his bare throat—in which the apple moved sharply as he swallowed once or twice. He was fine-looking, but too colourless and worn for health—the Elizabethan adventurer still, but the adventurer who has touched the limit of success, who is beginning to make acquaintance with the side of adventure which deals in sickness, in prison, in the failure of hope, in foreknowledge of death.

"I swore at it, but it did not move. I could not bring myself to touch it, so we stayed like that some time."—He paused and swallowed again.—"At last I turned over on the other side, and it came and scratched at my back, between the shoulders, as if it was digging out a rabbit. And then—why, then I began to pray, Hammond. If there's a devil, there must be a God somewhere too, I suppose, if it's only to balance things; and I thought perhaps He might happen to hear. It did leave off scratching, but it turned round and round, and snuggled into the small of my back and lay there against me like a lump of ice. It chilled me clean through. I couldn't stand it, so I lighted the candles again, and walked up and down till that blessed sun arose and it was day."

For a minute or two I smoked in silence, and Leversedge stared across the lake. The grisly night of which he told me and this radiant evening were in curious contrast. At last he said—"Hammond, what on earth am I to do?"

"About about?" I asked, for I knew he had not finished his confession yet.

"About my engagement—about Charlotte Perry," he answered rather hoarsely.

"Ah! That comes into it."

He looked up at me.—"Of course that comes into it. Why, that's the heart of it. Do you suppose I should care a twopenny-damn about it

but for that?"

"I am afraid I should care a very immense amount, my dear fellow," I said, "quite entirely apart from that."

Leversedge straightened himself up.

"No, you wouldn't, though, not if you were in my place. You see, this engagement of mine is an old story. It's worked right into the very stuff of my life. And,it may sound queer,"—he smiled rather sadly,-"but perhaps you are never really more dependent upon a woman than when you are a few thousand miles away from her. You see, when you are knocking about in countries where there is not much public opinion to reckon with you are liable to be tempted to live a bit loosely; and then her face comes before you at all sorts of odd times, and her letters come. And you spend hours planning what you and she will do together when the parting is over and you get back. The thought of her is the sweetness of your life, and the salt of it too—it's what makes the work worth while. You see other women, nice women some of them,—dear women, for a lot of women are nice and dear,—and they're good to you sometimes; but they aren't in it, they don't count one bit. You want her, just her and no one else; and you're ambitious for her, you slave and pile up money for her, you want to give her just all there is to have. And—and, in fact," Leversedge said, looking full at me, "I love her, Hammond. I love her. I suppose I'm a selfish coward, but it's worse than death—oh! my God, it's unutterable misery to think of giving her up."

His voice had grown thick. He did not wait for my answer, but walked away beside the break- water—his figure long and white under the coo green shade of the plane trees.

I like lovers. Their antics rarely irritate me. Even at their worst they are idiots to whom I offer myself quite willingly as an asylum, and invite, with open arms, to drivel on my breast; while, at their best, they ravish my soul with satisfaction. In spirit I build temples to them, and worship prostrate, my frivolous head in the dust. I had erected a quite imposing temple to Leversedge by the time he returned; for it

appeared to me that, in him, Providence granted me acquaintance with a lover of a rather heroic type. If the Beloved was as fine as the Lover, I had hope. In that case I snapped my fingers at the diabolic dog. For if Charlotte Perry was what her lover imagined her, if she was worthy of his love, I did not fear but that she could stay the plague under which he suffered. But was she worthy? Was it probable the paternal rat and maternal clock-moon could between them produce offspring of an heroic stamp? To believe they could was, I own, a tax on my faith. But, as in law the accused is held innocent till proved guilty, so I would assume Miss Perry to be a heroine till she was clearly proved to be otherwise, and therefore I said to Leversedge—

"Has it occurred to you, my good friend, that you are treating this matter rather high-handedly, and that the young lady in question might be any- thing but grateful to you for—as you put it—giving her up?"

"I only want to spare her."

"Quite so. But as we may, I suppose, take for granted a degree of affection on her side, it remains an open question whether you will spare her by retiring from the situation."

"Ah! if I thought she cared like that," Leversedge said softly.

"Of course," I cried, "she cares like that."

Nothing is sweeter than assurance on the part of others, when one's own confidence grows somewhat weak. Leversedge threw back his bead and smiled. Without doubt he was very much in love.

"And yet, I don't know," he said after a moment. "For the more she cares the more likely I should be to bring my curse on her. It is too hideous to contemplate. Think, Hammond, if later, if afterwards, as the reward of her faithfulness, as the payment of her great goodness in giving herself to me—she—she came to see and feel that loathsome beast herself?"

But here cries from the direction of the hotel broke in upon the solemnity of our interview, and Mr. Perry bore down upon us at a double.

"Make a clean breast of it," I said hurriedly. "Trust her—tell her.

That is my advice, since you have done me the kindness to ask it. Tell her everything. Let her decide."

CHAPTER VI

"**CONSTANTINE**," he called. "*Où est il? savez-vous où il est—Monsieur Leversedge*?"

Now, I am, I trust, the last person in the world to be guilty of an impertinence towards my elders; but, as Mr. Perry pursued his active way towards us, the word **pecky** rose unbidden to my lips. His expression denoted desire for some object on which to wreak a measure of vengeance. A cherry, perhaps, would do; perhaps a worm or fly; possibly—for have not even doves, under stress of emotion, been known to use their tender beaks upon their fellow-doves?—possibly he coveted a human victim. At sight of me, however, I observed him make an effort to summon a more genial aspect, and overlay his evident irascibility with a varnish of playfulness. He shook his finger waggishly at me; and my heart fell. Could this, indeed, be a father of heroic children?

"Ah ha! I see, I see!" he exclaimed. "The mystery touches on explanation. 'This is the cause, the cause, my soul.' Hence Constantine plays truant. When you two young gentlemen get together there is no hope of you."

He turned to Leversedge, and as he did so the spirit of peckiness resumed full sway.

"We have been expecting you," he cried. "Charlotte has been visibly disturbed by your absence."

"Oh, has she? I'm sure I am very sorry," Leversedge said. "I understood some friends of yours were there, and—"

"Precisely," returned Mr. Perry quite excitedly. "That is the point. Friends of ours are here. Mr. Percy Gerrard and Mrs. Septimus Mertyns are kindly calling upon us. Most talented person, I am sure, Mrs. Mertyns,—an advantage, Constantine, as I was saying recently to Mr. Hammond, a positive advantage for one whom, like yourself, I

may call a *débutant* in the London world, to have the *entrée* of her charming house."

During the progress of this somewhat confused exordium, Leversedge's vaguely-distracted brow had gathered into a quite definite frown. He was bothered, annoyed, and, for once, did not try to conceal the fact.

"I have not the honour of knowing Mrs. Mertyns," he said.

"Precisely," cried Mr. Perry again. "That, as I remark, is the point. Charlotte perceived this was a most favourable opportunity for effecting the introduction. She is very thoughtful, very—dear girl,"—here he smiled in a really kingly manner,—"very wise; she notes, and never undervalues, a social opportunity. For which I commend her. Indifference in social matters is, rightly understood, but the mask of ignorance— Ignorance, that churlish sin,
Which, seeking to cloak others, shows itself
Still basest born of all."

"Dear me!" murmured Leversedge, lifting his shoulders, as he drew a long breath.

"Charlotte took for granted you would follow us up from the boat immediately. When she found you did not do so, she was disappointed, I had almost said pained; for she recognised your mistake. Mamma, remarking her disappointment—affection lends wings to perception, Mr. Hammond—interrupting me in the midst of a most interesting conversation with Mr. Gerrard upon the deepening of the conservative sentiment among the educated artisans of our great commercial centres, whispered to me to come and tell you. And here I am;—*me voilà*, as I may say, Mr. Hammond, here I am."

"Yes, you are very sensibly here, Mr. Perry: and it is, as always, a happiness to be in your company," I replied, with effusion.

I had an idea Leversedge intended revolt. I wanted to give him time to mature that excellent intention.

Mr. Perry glanced at me sharply; then he again addressed our companion.

"Well, Constantine, I have delivered myself of my mission. Why this delay?"

"Because"—Leversedge spoke very slowly—"I will explain why to Charlotte later, and she will understand,"—he paused,—"yes, she'll understand; because I don't, to tell the truth, feel very much inclined to go and see these people just now. I—I am not in the humour."

"But—but—this is unheard of," cried Mr. Perry. "Not inclined,—this is incredible. Not inclined,—this is insanity."

"Oh no, it isn't; it is disinclination," Leversedge replied, pushing his hands down into the pockets of his boating coat and smiling wearily. "Nothing worse than disinclination. Not insanity, not just yet,—at least, I believe not."

"I fail to grasp your meaning." Mr. Perry looked vicious.

"Oh, it's very simple. As I say, I will explain to Charlotte; she'll understand."—Leversedge repeated the phrase more as one who needs, than as one who has, a conviction of the truth of that which he asserts.—"We will leave it all in her hands. It may be better in the longrun for me not to know these people at all."

At this rejoinder Perry *père* lost himself utterly for the moment, and, in the excess of his irritation, literally danced round his future son-in-law.

"Not to know them? But don't you recognise that it is absolutely incumbent upon you to know my daughter's very cultivated and interesting circle of friends? It is your duty, and I may add your privilege, to pay them all possible attention. What are you thinking of? Pray, who have you to look to but them? Who have you to push you socially? Why, yours and my daughter's future happiness is wholly dependent upon their attitude towards you—upon their receiving you, taking you up, and putting you through, in short."

I ought to have gone away and left the combatants. I admit that I ought. But the natural man is strong in me, and curiosity is strong in the natural man. I was tempted, and I fell; that is, I stayed—stayed to see Leversedge clasp his hands behind him, and bow slightly from

the waist.

"So our happiness is dependent upon Charlotte's friends taking us up and putting us through, is it?" he answered calmly. "Well, I own the matter had not occurred to me in that light. I hoped our happiness drew a little more water than that. But I may be wrong, of course, Mr. Perry, and you may be right. I shall know more about it when I have explained things to Charlotte; and if I find a strict observance of social duties will secure our happiness, you may be very certain I shall do my best to observe them.—Ah!" he added, "here she is."

His face went very pale, but his eyes were clear and steady and his jaw set. Morally, the small battle had braced him.

Miss Perry's cheeks appeared charmingly flushed, her abundant hair slightly disordered. The drawing together of her lips suggested a sense of injury, an inclination to tears. She was extremely pretty, as she halted at the edge of the shadow thrown by the plane trees, a radiant perspective of wooded shore bathed in golden sunshine and the fair expanse of the azure lake behind her, the white swans floating motionless, the gaily-painted boats.

"Ah, Constantine," she exclaimed in tones of plaintive reproach, "what cause you have given me for vexation!"

Leversedge stepped out into the sunshine towards her.

"No," she said, raising her hands, "repentance comes too late. They have gone. It is useless now, and I wanted you so greatly to see them."

"Look here, my dearest child, I am glad they are gone, for I want greatly to see you."

There was a certain air of mastery about Leversedge just then, which was not to be gainsaid. Without the smallest apology, he put his arm round the young lady's shoulders and drew her aside. Miss Perry looked startled. She was I imagine, unaccustomed to such practical declarations of affection in public.

"Never mind your friends; they won't break their hearts at not seeing me. They'll keep. Let's sit down on the wall over there. I've a

whole lot to tell you. I ought to have told you before, but I shirked it."

"Constantine!" the girl murmured. Her expression was strange. The dewy eyes were frightened, the rest of her face sharpened into resemblance of the paternal rat.

Leversedge must have seen the fright, for I heard him speak soothingly. I trusted he did not see the rat.

"Come, come, my dear sir," I cried, "in this delightful idyll you and I clearly have no part. Let us remove ourselves with all possible despatch."

I ventured to let my hand rest upon the sleeve of Mr. Perry's ill-brushed coat.

"I am amazed at the events of the last quarter of an hour," he said severely as he walked away. "I may go further,—I may employ the term dumfoundered. The anxieties of a parent are cruel, Mr. Hammond. The pelican strips from her breast feathers wherewith to line the nest for her young; and then the young, in the most unexpected manner—I am sure sometimes most unexpected—get out of the nest and fly away. That is how Mamma and myself feel just now, Mr. Hammond, I assure you we do."

Mr. Perry drew up suddenly, took out his handkerchief, and wiped his head well round.

"I am at sea," he cried. "I give you my word, Mr. Hammond, I am completely at sea."

"Never fear," I returned cheerfully; "if I have the honour of knowing you truly, you are one of those elect souls who are very safe to come into port at last."

Mr. Perry eyed me shrewdly, and then decided to take the speech in good part; so told me it reminded him of a capital story of the late Earl of Beaconsfield and a deputation of shipowners from Cardiff, which story he proceeded to tell me, as we strolled towards the hotel, at the fullest of full length.

PHASE SECOND

CHAPTER I

THE next day, as far as I remember, passed without incident until evening.

I hold there is but one irremediable evil in life, that of growing tired of oneself. I therefore avoid it with great care, and, to that end, entirely refuse to grow accustomed to my own idiosyncrasies. I let my characteristics take me by surprise. I am *journalier* to myself, scorning stereotyped habits as I would scorn to wear a livery. I dread to be consistent as I would dread paralysis. Quite the last person of my acquaintance with whom I would ever risk being familiar is myself; and so I study earnestly to cultivate a various mind, and give my good qualities the slip equally with my bad ones.

To take a minor example. I am naturally gregarious. The manners and customs of my fellow-mortals afford me permanent entertainment. Consequently I woo solitude, and often seek a hermit hour. I sought one, unsuccessfully, on the evening in question.

It was damp out of doors, and the more lively members of the community had gathered in the hall, the more serious in the *salle de conversation*, after dinner. A mixed multitude in both cases, splitting itself up, as such multitudes invariably do, into cliques and coteries, that jealously guard their own frontiers, while casting glances of mingled desire and distrust upon those of their neighbours. At one end of the hall, a would-be *prima-donna*, of transatlantic extraction, reigned over the American section of the community, supported by an elegant and obedient mother who had kept her figure, a good-tempered and obedient French composer who had lost his, and a disobedient French poodle who had followed suit. At the other end, a venerable Russian poet, blessed with fine head and silvery beard, a man of really apostolic aspect—he, for cause unknown, by the way,

invariably wore brown kid, cut-fingered gloves—presided over a court of three beautiful daughters; a fierce, spare young woman in a scarlet silk blouse—her wardrobe appeared limited—whose black hair hung in a thick pigtail, tied with scarlet ribbons, down her back to below her knees; and two young men, also Russian, of debilitated physique and excited bearing. The interspaces were filled in by English—English, prickly or patronising, nervously dumb or nervously boisterous; few, if any of them, quite at their ease. For it must be conceded that the number of our dear country-men and women who possess the gentle art of living gracefully in public is lamentably small. Persons who, in the security of their moist island homes, are well-bred and really quite delightful, become as awkward as chased hens in an hotel. Most English are born with their feet glued to little round green stands, like the ladies and gentlemen of Noah's Ark. To see them unglued—as in foreign travel—is to see them at a disadvantage. For the stand is as necessary to their self-respect as their decent petticoats and irreproachable trousers.

In the hall everyone talked. The debilitated Russian young men did more. They waved their arms and shouted; while the spare young woman alternately hissed and purred at them, and waved, not her arms only, but her whole lithe body. This displeased the poodle—it was very disquieting—and caused him to bark, which caused his mistress to slap him. During the process she explained exactly why she slapped him to her mother and all her friends; who on their part continued chattering volubly to her and her mother, and the poodle, and each other, and the French composer. The latter laughed good-temperedly, with raised eyebrows, puffed at his cigar, furtively consoled the poodle, and tapped out airs from his coming opera upon the floor with the heel of his boot.

In the *salon* the style was different. A retired Deputy Surgeon-General of the Madras Army, seated upon a gilded lounge upholstered in crimson and yellow (the furniture of the *salon* was slightly loud), held forth to an elderly and respectable audience upon

the clear connection between Mr. Gladstone and the "little horn" in the Book of the Prophet Daniel, the iniquities of the Opium Traffic, and the unfulfilled predictions in Revelations.

Good Mrs. Perry was a member of his congregation. She sat under the full glare of the gas chandelier. She was rubicund. She was beaming. Yet she appeared to me worried. Presumably Mr. Gladstone and the "little horn" were too much for her. In that she surely did not stand alone. Mr. Gladstone and the "little horn," whether taken singly or in connection, have been too much for many persons before now. Realising this, I ventured to disregard the signs the kind creature made to me—her pointings to and pattings of a vacant golden seat in the immediate vicinity of the exegetical Deputy Surgeon-General. I hurriedly crossed the room, and let myself out by one of the glass doors on to the long wide verandah.

The change from the heat and noise and glare within was rather startling.

A wet wind lashed through the balsam poplars bordering the lake, swept over the garden, and tormented the banks of shrubbery on either side the large lawn. The leaves of the pyramidal magnolias upon the terrace slapped together, and the great odorous blossoms swayed ghostly in the half light. Flights of ragged cloud, fringed with watery yellow where they crossed the moon, fled across the sky. Gleams of white foam and a hoarseness of breaking waves came from the shore. In a spirit of economy the lamps upon the terrace and the verandah had been left unlighted. Only a tawny brightness from the doors and windows of the *salon* lay in broad stripes along the marble pavement, and touched the edges of the descending steps.

We writers of little verses are addicted to exaggerating the moral and emotional significance of Nature's moods, no doubt. The night struck me as full of inarticulate complaint, turbulent and distressed—a night to make one think of lost youth, and dead loves; and of that most inconveniently haunting of beings, the still living woman whom—almost certainly—one ought to have married.—I often think of her, for I

have a tender heart, and she was really very charming.—I thought of her now as I stood on the wind-swept verandah. A long trail of scarlet, trumpet-flowered honeysuckle had torn away from its fastenings, and beat against the ironwork just above my head. And here observe the advantages of cultivating a various mind! In a few seconds I was enjoying all the pensive satisfactions of self-reproach. For I ought to have married her. Unquestionably I ought. It is true when I proposed she refused me. But that is a detail. I had delayed; I had shilly-shallied. I had been seen in equivocal company, and a considerate friend had not been wanting to report that damaging incident. And then I had been too ready to take "No" for an answer. Decline to take "No," oh my brothers, wholly decline to take it, and in the end the woman will invariably say "Yes."—Here modesty intervened, inquiring, "What, invariably?" And I replied, "Yes, always, invariably," refusing to permit officious modesty thus to put out the purifying fires of self-reproach.

CHAPTER II

BUT just then a deprecating voice, worthy to be that of modesty incarnate, gently addressed me.—"Mr. Hammond, I hesitate to interrupt you, for I have watched you and I see you are thinking. I fancy you are regretting. And so I hesitate."

Charlotte Perry had approached from somewhere in the surrounding dimness. She stood on my right, between me and the steps, and her appearance was arresting. She had swathed herself in an Indian shawl, which framed her face, was drawn closely about her shoulders and folded arms, draping her whole figure and almost concealing even the skirt of her dress. This shawl was an exquisite thing—one of Leversedge's many costly gifts. In colour violet, it was stiffened at the border with delicate gold and silver threads and arabesques worked in many-coloured silks. The warm light from the windows behind us touched these rich colours in places, touched the girl's profile and the soft brown hair about her forehead. The result was eminently picturesque. Charlotte Perry looked quite delightfully pretty; and had Leversedge not possessed prior claims, I really could have found it in my heart—but then fortunately Leversedge did possess them. I remembered this; yet I hold a man a fool who, be his sentiments ever so honourable, omits to let a woman know when he finds her pleasant to look upon.

"Hesitate no longer, my dear young lady," I therefore answered. "Interruptions, when they appear in so charming a form, believe me, are never unwelcome."

Miss Perry gazed at me for a moment, and her dewy eyes were very bright.—"I wonder," she said softly, "are you ever in earnest? Are you ever serious?"

"I am profoundly serious in my welcome of this particular interruption."

The girl drew her breath with a little sob. "Can—can one trust you, I wonder?" she said.

"Try me," I cried,—"try me. Such as I am you shall not, I warrant you, find me wanting."

Still Miss Perry drew her breath somewhat sobbingly. She leaned her shrouded head against the iron pillar of the verandah. The leaves and scarlet flowers of the honeysuckle clustered around it. I regretted the half dark, for I merely received an impression, and the picture must have been worthy to be seen clearly. Just then I heard a distinct grunt. Various animals grunt; my knowledge of natural history, though by no means profound, carries me as far as that. But only one human being of my acquaintance produces—whether voluntarily or involuntarily I know not—that unengaging sound. A rather squat black person passed slowly down the farther side of the marble steps.

"Percy Gerrard!" I exclaimed. "Where has the great man been hiding the light of his countenance? I did not know he was here."

"I am in trouble," Miss Perry murmured, disregarding my remark. —"I am in great trouble." She clasped her hands, and the shawl fell in loose folds about her.—"You know my parents, Mr. Hammond. You know their devotion to me? Of course you know it, and have probably smiled at it."

"Heaven forbid!" I murmured.

"Ah, but you have. For is it not obviously exaggerated—an affection blinding to the critical faculty? They have no measure. No one realises more keenly than I do that their misplaced admiration makes both me and themselves absurd."—Miss Perry's tone expressed the tenderest apology, the most appeasing humility. —"They cannot help it, I suppose," she said gently. "But their attitude does not fail to distress and embarrass me greatly, all the same. Do not imagine that I undervalue their goodness to me. It is beautiful, but, alas! it is impeding. I cannot be quite frank with them. I cannot dare to risk causing them pain."

She swung aside with a really fine movement. As she did so the

light from the *salon* window fell full on her face; I saw that her eyes overflowed with tears.

"And I am in pain," she cried softly. "I suffer, ah! I suffer. I am cruelly perplexed. For I fail to see where duty—the high duty which compels acquiescence, and dignifies self-surrender—truly lies."

I am very alive to sentiment. This was touching and I was touched. Yet in the girl's speech and action was there not just a hint, a remote hint, of Perry *père* in his noblest manner? I therefore hardened my heart slightly, determining to test the fair sufferer and bring her to book.

"Leversedge has spoken to you," I said.

"Yes, that is part of the pain; but not in the way you no doubt imagine, Mr. Hammond. If my parents knew all that he has told me, they would certainly require us to part. They would think only of me. Therefore they must not know."

And I, hearing this, repented of my late suspicion in mental sackcloth and ashes. "That is well," I said,—"very well."

"Is it?"—Miss Perry smiled upon me. I divined more than saw the working of her singularly captivating mouth.—"How little men know of women, after all! How easily they mistake that which will attract and that which will repulse us! I should have expected Constantine to mistake; but you, Mr. Hammond, are different. From you I should have hoped for a more subtle judgment. Understand, this strange story of Constantine's has no terror for me."

"The gods be praised for that," I murmured. "Leversedge is not born under so very unlucky a star, after all."

The girl leaned her head against the iron pillar, clustered with honeysuckle, again. The wind took her hair, blowing it back over the embroidered edge of the shawl. Her eyes were astonishingly bright.

"No, it has no terror for me," she repeated. "If this curse is laid upon him, it is clearly my office to share it, to shield him, to sustain him in these dark seasons and places of his existence. And so, far from repulsing, it attracts me. It supplies the touch of mystery which

was lacking. It dignifies what was otherwise commonplace. It wraps us—him and me—about with a peculiar atmosphere."

As she spoke, she pressed her head in among the leaves and flowers and drew the folds of her shawl tighter about her with an odd action as of physical enjoyment. Charlotte Perry had never appeared to me so perfectly natural as at this moment. Her deprecatory manner had vanished. She glowed, so to speak. She was positively seductive, but she was also a little displeasing.

"If Constantine knew how to use it," she continued, "it might be tremendous and splendid. He might make an immense success, an immense reputation. He would be received anywhere on the strength of it. Ah! what a superb opportunity some men would find in this! To have your legend thus ready to hand, and, if properly treated, such a legend! You might dominate society."

The girl let her hands fall at her sides dejectedly.

"But he has no idea how to use it—no more idea than a child. The opportunity will be wasted. He does not rise to it in the very least. I have tried to inspire him, tried to show him how unique and therefore precious a fate has befallen him; but I cannot develop any enthusiasm in him. I cannot, cannot make him see."

"No," I agreed; "that, I am afraid, is a point of view which will never commend itself to Leversedge. I fear you will never make him see."

Miss Perry looked at me sharply—as her father might have looked. Then she bent her head, put her hands over her eyes, moved a couple of paces to the right hurriedly, while the wind—lending itself sympathetically to the situation—caught her shawl and blew it up and outward into a great arc of dusky colour, against which her light dress, her slightly bowed figure, her arms bare to the elbow, were revealed.

"Ah!" she cried, "I am very unfortunate. I have given you a wrong impression—you, Antony Hammond, the last person I would have misjudge my motives."

The hypercritical might have called all this artificial and theatrical perhaps. I can never find it in my heart to be hypercritical where a

thing is really well done; and, without question, this was beautifully done. The personal note, too, in the young lady's outcry I found comforting to my little sprig of private vanity. So, naturally I protested vehemently against all possibility of misjudging her motives. But Miss Perry refused to listen. She stood before me clutching one corner of her shawl, letting the rest of it lie heaped about her feet on the wet marble pavement, while she addressed me with lips trembling from emotion.

"I know it," she said, "and of course you know it—who better, seeing who you are and what you are? But I cannot help it. I am not well-bred—my poor, dear parents are altogether mistaken about me; how should they, alas! of all people, perceive just that? I am not well-bred, and the knowledge I am not haunts me and poisons my happiness; for I am conscious that to you, and such as you, Mr. Hammond, I must seem lacking in delicacy at times, lacking in innate refinement. I am conscious that in what I said just now I have seemed thus lacking. I misled you by my inherent inability to express myself, to put things as a high-bred woman would put them."

Distress impeded the girl's utterance.

"I seemed guilty of proposing to trade upon Constantine's strange hallucination. I seemed oh! it is too dreadful—like the unnatural mother who makes capital out of the deformity of her child. And I am incapable of entertaining such an idea. Surely you must feel I am incapable of it? Indeed, you cruelly misread me. It was not of myself I was thinking, not of any advantage I could gain, but of him, of Constantine—exclusively, solely of him."

This was abundantly moving. I would have spoken, but Miss Perry paused only an instant for breath, and then continued in the most charmingly pleading tones.

"You know—as a poet, who should know better?—that we none of us can live without our romance, without an ideal, without some secret, hidden place in which the soul finds and maintains the completeness of its individuality. We must have not only this passive

support; we must have an active one too—we must have some realm to conquer. A strange fate has overtaken Constantine. He must either sink under it or find his romance in it. I thought it conceivable he might do that last. I dreamed he might be saved, that I might save him that way—but—but you say it cannot be."

I tried to point out to Miss Perry that a far less recondite way of salvation was open to Leversedge through her instrumentality. She had only to stand by him, to be good to him, to—if I might put it crudely—love him. Why are homely, honest things such as these always the most difficult to say? I feared I was playing a somewhat bearish part, and most unromantically drowning fine fancifulness in the cold waters of common-sense. I protest the position was hard on me, for I should greatly have preferred meeting my fair companion's utterances in a more sympathetic spirit. I found her abundantly captivating. But friendship demanded I should not yield too freely to such finding. I therefore strove to quench our little possible flames—both hers and mine—in this douche of cold water.

But I am only a man after all. Miss Perry was far more than man, namely, woman—which means that she was a past-master in the art of strategy. I had advanced upon her lumberingly along the plain. She suddenly opened fire upon me from heights I had never even reconnoitred.

"Forgive me if I have spoken too plainly," I said, "and preached you a desolatingly dull sermon. You will be within your rights if you are offended; still, my dear young lady, if you can possibly avoid it, don't be offended. Clemency is a great virtue, specially when extended to that vilest of bores—the giver of sound practical advice. Remember, our object is the same; the straightening out, the reconstructing, of Constantine Leversedge.

Miss Perry's face was in the light again. Her charming lips were quivering.—"I am not offended," she said gently; "I am a little hurt—that is inevitable."—She put up her hands and held both sides of her head with a sort of distraction.—"If I was only sure, only sure," she

repeated, "that I could only trust you—that you would not misunderstand again, would not think me indelicate—unmaidenly."

She gazed first questioningly at me, then out into the wild night.

"I will trust you," she said finally. "Come down into the garden. The neighbourhood of all these people in the *salon* paralyses me. Here I cannot speak, and I must speak, I must."

Now clearly it was indiscreet to accede to Miss Perry's proposition. Moreover, the gravel was wet and the soles of my evening shoes thin. Still, I went down with her into the garden.

CHAPTER III

WHY is there always a third person to whom one owes a duty? And why do the claims of that third person become paramount at precisely the most inconvenient moments? "'Twas even thus from childhood's hour" in my experience. Ah! what is it to have retained a little odd and end of a conscience! I protest I wish I had been born a blackguard; a gentleman-like, but otherwise unmitigated, villain, then life might indeed have been worth living!

Charlotte Perry moved down the dusky alley beside me in silence. We reached the path running along the shore before she spoke.

The moon had sailed out from behind the floats of cloud, and her light made a wide pale stain right across the lake, in which the broken crests of the waves leapt up like tongues of silver flame. The wind swept tumultuously through the thick foliage of the trees above us. Away on the Savoy side, under the shadowy mass of the mountains, clusters of twinkling lights marked the site of the villages of St. Gingolph and Meillerie. The scene was a wholly appropriate setting to a romantic *tête-à-tête*. It might have really been enchanting but for the intruding claims of the inevitable third person.

Miss Perry paced along slowly, swathed closely in her shawl, her head bent. She addressed me in broken sentences. Her voice was so low that, what with the swishing wind and breaking waves, at times I could barely catch her words.

"The root of my suffering is this," she murmured, "I am sensible of a change in myself, which makes me doubt whether the voice of supreme duty counsels self-emancipation or self-abnegation. Now that we have met again, I cannot disguise from myself that I have developed, and that Constantine—you care for him, you are his friend, therefore I can say it,—that Constantine has not developed. There was a time when what he had to offer me seemed enough—

wealth and all the advantages it brings with it, a very respectable social position and—"

"And very sincere affection," I put in.

The girl stopped abruptly and faced me, wringing, literally wringing, her hands.

"Ah! what will you think of me?" she cried.

"That you are entirely charming," I answered.

"Be serious, pray, pray be serious," Miss Perry implored.

She stood gazing up at the moon, trying apparently to control some overmastering emotion, pressing her hands upon her bosom; while her shawl, once more yielding to the wind blew hither and thither, forming all manner of fantastic evolutions. Sometimes it sailed out in a streaming pennon, sometimes it clung closely, shrouding her figure as that of a nun.

"Constantine has much, very much to give. But, but in the last year—is it faithless, is it wrong of me?—I have come to dream of a love very different from his. And I cannot decide whether that is a temptation or a revelation. A love occult, profound, mysterious—a love which should be a religion, an illumination, which should realise all the richest, deepest aspirations of one's soul. I think, from what I read, they knew this love in Italy during the Renaissance—some, a few, a very few, have known it since—"

Her voice sank away into an awestricken whisper.

"Only a few, a very few," she repeated, "have known it since. Constantine could never know it; he could not grasp the idea. And therefore I tremble lest I should do violence to the light that is in me by contracting a marriage in which this element must of necessity be absent—this hidden mutual adoration of elect hearts."

There was a momentary silence. The sound of the lake was hoarse along the shore, the trees bent, reeled under the force of the warm wind. The girl's shawl suddenly sprung up in flapping bat-like wings from her shoulders, giving her lightly clad figure the strangest appearance. It affected me. I became resolutely practical.

"You wish to break off your engagement," I said.

"No, no—not unless, unless—"

And Charlotte Perry's lips gathered into that fascinating sketch of a kiss, while she looked full at me in the most astonishing manner.

I grew hot. I grew cold. I rallied my friendship for Leversedge. I wished I was not a man of honour. I wished a cloud would pass over the moon. I thanked God I was a man of honour. I blew up the embers of my affection for the woman I ought to have married. I wished I knew what on earth to say. I craved for the presence of Perry *père*; I should have hailed him as my deliverer from one of the worst moments of my life. I wondered if I was making a contemptible mistake. I wished sweet Lydia Castern had never refused me. I wondered if I was a fatuous ass. I wished Leversedge would rush out of the nearest bush and seize me by the throat. I wished anything and everything, in short, but that this marvellously pretty girl, with the dewy eyes and bewitching mouth, should continue to stand looking thus at me.

"My dear, young lady—" I began, with a courage born of desperation.

But Miss Perry moved back a step or two, extending one hand in a movement of entreaty and protest, covering her eyes with the other.

"Oh! spare me the crowning humiliation of an explanation," she cried. "It is uncalled for. It is almost unchivalrous. Can you doubt that I see my error—that, with a scathing clearness, I comprehend."

"I will go—I will leave here to-night. I will leave by the first train in the morning," I exclaimed distractedly.

The girl made no immediate response. Her attitude stiffened, like that of a person who listens and thinks acutely. Was it conceivable that behind the screen of her uplifted hand Charlotte Perry was thinking acutely? I detested myself for entertaining so cold-blooded a supposition; yet as the seconds passed I could not avoid entertaining it.

"I will go," I repeated.

Miss Perry lowered her hand, and gathered her shawl languidly

about her. Never had she looked more flower-like, more adorably virginal.

"No!" she said, and there was not any trace of resentment in her gentle tones; "indeed, you must not go. For after all you owe me something—a little, just a very little, Mr. Hammond—" her charming eyes dwelt momentarily upon my most unworthy face.

"It is almost intolerable to think how much I owe you," I replied. "Dispose of me as you please."

The girl's mouth quivered, her eyelids drooped. "Then I lay it upon you to remain here," she said. "You will still be my friend. Have I not bought your friendship at a rather bitter price—the price of my woman's pride? You will remain. You will teach me where my highest duty lies. I think perhaps you have begun to teach me that already. You will help me to save Constantine," she sighed.—"You will help me to conceal this double pain from my poor, dear, doting parents. For they must absolutely know nothing of Constantine's strange hallucination,—they must know nothing of—"

The girl's voice died down into a sobbing whisper. She held out her hand to me. I kissed it in silence, and Miss Perry turned away. —"Do not come with me, please," she murmured. "It is far kinder to let me find my way back through this troubled wind-vexed night alone."

I permitted a decent time to elapse before I returned to the hotel. I a m human. Consequently, I was moved; I was flattered; I was *attendri*—specially at first. Then the blighting habit of analysis, the one habit with which, alas! I utterly fail to play fast and loose, laid its chill influence upon my feelings. I began to ask my- self whether the Carissima was—just possibly—among the greatest actresses of the world? I recalled that odious grunt. I began to ask myself, where the devil Mr. Percy Gerrard could possibly come in?

CHAPTER IV

I HAVE mentioned Percy Gerrard. I disliked him then, I may add that I dislike him still. A certain pleasure is derivable from describing those whom one dislikes. I will not deny myself that pleasure.

At this particular period of his development; Gerrard had lately passed from the expansive and aggressive to the reserved style. He moved as one anointed by profound experiences, as one hallowed by a n esoteric wisdom of the heart.—Had Miss Perry, by chance, acquired some of her curious little theories on the subject of the affections from this source? I could not say.—In bearing, Gerrard was withdrawn, augustly apart. He had religious scruples too, or, to be quite accurate, religious persons had, according to his own report, scruples concerning him. He hinted at diplomacies on the part of Eminences sent forth from the Eternal City. Both in speech and in print he gave one to understand that, not only many a member of the Sacred College, but even the Holy Father himself, was engaged in efforts to gather this wandering sheep—in whom mystic and worldling were so subtlely mixed—into the great central Catholic fold. The honest man commits himself hastily. The truly wise man commits himself very, very slowly. For is not the possible convert precious, alike to those whose communion he is on the edge of joining, and those whose communion he is on the edge of leaving? Gerrard knew this. He remained on the edge, wooed by both parties. I believe, for I don't see him often in these days, he remains there still.

In person he was not beautiful. I have heard that plain but vivacious lady, Madame Jacobini, describe him as "a cross between a second-rate Parisian *petit crevé* and a Methodist parson gone wrong." There is an element of excess in this statement, yet truly he was not beautiful. For he was short, sallow, and inclined to stoutness; in moments of asperity I could have found it in my heart to call him

greasy-looking. His hair was black, rather long, and of an uncomfortable thinness and smoothness. What of moustache he owned was black also. He dressed soberly, as in mourning for lost illusions. He had political aspirations of the *grand seigneur* type,—he dwelt on pictures of the stately, conscientious noble, of the lowly and contented serf. As far as I know, he never owned a rod, pole, or perch —let alone acre—of his native or any other soil. But that is a base detail. As rank would not marry him—I speak from hearsay—he had decided to marry money. Meanwhile a lady possessed of neither, according to contemporary scandal, solaced the leisures of this truly remarkable mind.

In the days immediately succeeding my surprising interview with Miss Perry, I observed that Gerrard treated us to an increasing amount of his society. He came in to luncheon; he came in to dinner. He, if I may employ so common an expression in speaking of so uncommon a person, was perpetually hanging about.

I was hanging about too. For I soon discovered Miss Perry's demand that I should help her in the present crisis of her affairs was no empty one. I had begged her to dispose of me. She took me at my word. She did dispose of me. I am far from complaining, for our fair Charlotte did everything (almost everything) well, and she disposed of me admirably. She held me with a silken chain; held me so gently, so deferentially, yet with so delicate a flavour of chastened sadness, of just conceivable reproach, that I came near hugging that same chain. It became natural I should be constantly at hand. Gerrard, as I have said, was also constantly at hand. So, of course, was Leversedge. It was not her object, I entirely acquit the young lady of any so paltry a scheme, but in point of fact she did thus establish a rival court to those of the American *prima donna* and the Russian poet—a court which not only rivalled, but came near eclipsing theirs. For while they merely herded indiscriminately with their kind, Miss Perry throned it alone in her maidenly sweetness, always attended by one, sometimes by two, more frequently by three still youngish and entirely

eligible English gentlemen. Such things give me pleasure!—Let it be added, that her worthy parents were constantly, though unobtrusively, within hail; their office, like that of the chorus in a Greek play, to direct the eyes of the spectators upon the chief actors in the piece by praising these last, lauding their talents, virtues, and beauty, reciting their titles, and the innumerable noble deeds they had performed, or might, in the hopeful opinion of the chorus, almost certainly be expected to perform very shortly.

But we were not always in public. The suite of apartments retained by Leversedge for the Perry family included a smart little sitting-room. And it was here, as far as my memory serves me, that the next serious scene of the Perry-Leversedge drama enacted itself.

The devotion of Miss Perry's parents to their offspring reached the point of self-effacement. And further than that no devotion, surely, can go? As my intimacy with this interesting family increased, I could not fail to remark the young lady, on more than one occasion, tenderly but firmly suggest that her mother might stand in need of repose. Sometimes the dear good woman took the hint gratefully. Sometimes she appeared slightly perplexed, and did not display entire docility; or, and that was embarrassing, bungled in speech and required explanation. She was guilty of this last, I grieve to report, on the evening in question.

We were gathered in the sitting-room, and Charlotte had been playing to us. Mrs. Perry, supported by a wealth of puce silk cushions, was seated on a sofa, at right angles to the large French-window opening on to the balcony. A disposition to slumber after the last and heaviest meal of the day, in which hereditary middle-class habit triumphed for a brief space over a somewhat late developed social sense, held Mrs. Perry in its ponderous grasp. Her knitting fell on to her lap. She recovered it. Soon it fell again, and this time with a distinct tinkle of the steel needles. Our active Perry, seated beside her (the sound of whose own breathing had, more than once, quite audibly filled up the pauses in his daughter's really magnificent

rendering of the ill-omened Kreutzer Sonata), recalled her to a fitting sense of her dignified surroundings by gently fanning her with the half-completed woollen sock, while murmuring in tones of playful severity —

"Mrs. Perry, my love, do not give way! Awake, my life—rouse yourself, pray rouse yourself, Mamma!"

In consequence, I suppose, of overhearing these admonitions, Miss Perry, her progress accompanied by the soft rustlings of what I believe is technically known as a "silk foundation," crossed the room and laid her hand caressingly upon her mother's shoulder.

"Dearest"—she began in her charmingly hesitating voice.

Mrs. Perry sat bolt upright.

"Gracious, Lottie, how you did make me jump!" she cried.

Leversedge had been standing at the open window; he stepped rather quickly out on to the balcony. Gerrard had been turning over some music lying on the top of the piano. He emitted the peculiar sound I have characterised as a grunt. I had been standing by Leversedge; I remained where I was, and Charlotte Perry, still bending very prettily above her mother, raised her eyes to mine in pleading, in pathetic apology for the shortcomings of one so near and dear to her. Then, visibly making an effort over herself, she went on gently:—"Dearest, I see that you are weary. The day has been so hot. We must not let you over-tire yourself. You need rest. You must not let me keep you up."

"Well, it has been very hot, my dear," Mrs. Perry assented. "And the heat often does turn me a little giddy, as I think I told you, Mr. Hammond. And the music's very nice and pretty, but you see I never can keep awake long under it."

"A lullaby," broke in Mr. Perry gaily,—"a lullaby! Delightful compliment, I'm sure, really delightful compliment to the soothing qualities of my daughter's playing—

And tired eyes in sweet repose, *et cetera*.—Line from a hymn that, I fancy. But, as I maintain whenever the subject comes up for

discussion, our hymnology is not to be despised, numbering, as it does, Cowper, Addison, and the late venerable, though mistaken, Cardinal Newman among its producers. Sweet verses, I give you my word for it, most exceedingly sweet verses, I have often been constrained to recall to my wife's memory—haven't I, Mamma?—on our return from our church services."

Again Charlotte Perry raised her dewy eyes to mine. Poor young lady, I really felt for her. Her parents were somewhat unspeakable.

"Listen, dearest mother, you acknowledge that you are tired," she repeated. "I know our guests will excuse you. So do not attempt to sit up any longer"—here she glanced at Mr. Perry, and once again it struck me that at moments there was a singular similarity between the expression of the father and daughter.—"Persuade her to go,—they have kindly asked for a little more music,—but persuade her to go. It will be much better."

An air of bewilderment pervaded Mrs. Perry's kindly countenance. She looked questioningly from one to the other.

"But, my dear," she said,—"of course you know best, and I wouldn't interfere with your arrangements on any account, you know; but isn't it rather odd—it is so awkward to say like this—but you know, my dear, how nervous I am at night, and if Papa goes to bed too you'll be left alone with these three gen—"

A quantity of loose music fell with a slither and thump from the piano on to the floor, and Gerrard stooped, murmuring excuses for his stupidity, to pick it up. Leversedge, who was standing near the window again, called to me—

"Come out here, Hammond. The lake is looking awfully pretty to-night."

CHAPTER V

I OBEYED his summons, and leaned beside Leversedge upon the stone balustrade of the balcony.

To-night the garden was very sufficiently illuminated. Earlier in the evening the local orchestra had discoursed music of a questionable sweetness upon the verandah; and the whole of our company, reinforced by a contingent from the town, still lingered in the balmy night air, taking little drinks around the tables upon the terrace, or strolling about the paths and shadowy alleys. A gang of children, clothed in white garments, chased each other, with cries, across the broad lawns and in and out of the shrubberies. Far out on the lake, someone was singing to a thrumming banjo accompaniment.

This was the first time I had seen Leversedge, save in the presence of witnesses, for several days. I had fancied, probably quite erroneously, that I detected a slight unwillingness on the part of the fair Charlotte to leave us together. I was the more glad, therefore, to note a very distinct im- provement in my companion's looks and bearing. He seemed less harassed, steadier, more solid; he bore himself as a man contented and at ease. I even thought that just now I perceived a smile at the back of his eyes, so to speak, indicating that the late incident—though he so gallantly came to the rescue—had appealed to his sense of humour.

"It's a glorious night, isn't it?" he said.

Leversedge's shoulders shook slightly.

"I really am awfully fond of Mrs. Perry, though," he added. "And that fellow Gerrard actually came in at the right moment for once in his life."

"Are you revising your first opinion?" I asked; for I was rather curious as to the relation of the two men. "Are you growing to relish the society of our celebrated Percy?"

"Oh, I think him more or less of a skunk, which is exactly what I always have thought him," Leversedge answered in tones of cheerful contempt. "And we see a lot more of him than I personally in the least care to see; but when a man's clear that he has the game in his own hands, he is an ass if he worries about trifles. I can put up with Mr. Percy Gerrard well enough for the next week or two. And if he fools about too much after we are married, I'll just let him know his place by kicking him." Leversedge quietly chuckled.—"I walked downstairs behind him the other day, and I've an idea nature specially constructed him with a view to a kicking."

Clearly Leversedge was in excellent spirits.

"The course of true love runs smooth, then?" I remarked. "The marriage takes place?"

Leversedge stood up and stretched himself, opening his chest and bringing his clenched fists up to the level of his shoulders.

"Yes, the marriage takes place—takes place—takes place," he said, smiling.

Then he leaned his elbows on the top of the balustrade again, and for a minute or two we were silent. The man was evidently happy, and when a man is happy I hold he may very safely be left to his own thoughts. For, next to slapping an infant to make it cease crying, or beating a cripple with his own crutches to make him hurry, I know no more brutal stupidity than awakening the happy from their dream of bliss by talking to them. Happiness is not so common that one cares to risk interfering with it. Let them speak first. After a time Leversedge did speak.

"You were perfectly right, Hammond," he said, "and I was a miserably faithless idiot of a creature. Of course the right way was to trust her. I'm immensely grateful to you. You've been a wonderfully good friend to us both. She told me you had had a little talk with her the other day, and, I think, if possible, she's been sweeter to me than ever since then."

Leversedge turned his face to me. It was radiant.

"Dear God," he said very softly, "it's the loveliest thing on earth to be certain at last that the woman you love really loves you."

"And of that you are certain?" I asked.

"Yes, haven't I had proof? She has been tried in the fire and shown what she is made of—pure gold. I've left off cursing the dog, Hammond—for three whole days I've forgotten to curse him. Ah! there's Charlotte playing again. She does play divinely, doesn't she? Let's come to the window and listen."

And it really was worth while to listen; for if not exactly divine, Miss Perry's playing was remarkably good. Her technique was admirable—so admirable, that you could afford to forget all about it, and give yourself to the emotional element crying through and superseding the mechanical one.

Gerrard had subsided into an arm-chair close to the grand piano. He was not a large man, yet he had the iniquitous habit of slightly overflowing every chair in which he sat. To-night he overflowed more than usual, changing his position frequently, shading his eyes with a music score, glancing about him restlessly, grunting, then shading them again. As Miss Perry concluded the nocturne she had been playing, he rose with a sloth-like slowness to his small square feet; and, as the girl, turning her head, looked at him, said—

"No, my craving for music is not yet satisfied, far from it. But before I ask you to steep my jaded senses once more in this purifying ocean of sound, I must implore that the room may be darkened somewhat. You have done your best to mitigate the glaring abominations of colour and form in this terrible hotel *salon*, I am sure, Miss Perry; but yet much, much of necessity remains which causes anguish to a cultivated eye. And the garish light of these candles and lamps brings all unlovely details into fullest relief."

"Really I didn't think the room half bad," Leversedge said in an aside.

"May we not have some of them extinguished, Miss Perry?—thus letting the stars, there, through the open window, the fragrance of the

garden borne upon the night wind, and the perilous rapture of Chopin —think of the Majorcan episode, that exquisite exile *à deux* , the eternal sough of the breeze in the pine trees, and George Sand (the woman of the sphinx-like and unfathomable eyes) sitting by drinking in the insatiable passion of the master's music,—let these, I say, even here, amid the bare commonplaces of a modern hotel, for one beneficent hour have it all their own way."

"Ah! I love the half light too," the girl answered. "It is sympathetic. Partially to conceal is to suggest, isn't it? And to suggest is often really to reveal the deeper, the everlasting meaning, don't you think so?"

She got up.

"Yes—yes—let us extinguish them," she said, with a sort of fervour. Then checking herself suddenly, she added,—"Ah! I forgot."

Charlotte Perry paused; she appeared to hesitate. Then she came swiftly across the room, straight to Leversedge—her head thrown back, her hands slightly extended as though in entreaty, and that conceivable kiss deliciously sketched upon her lips.

"But if you in the least mind, Constantine?" she said, just audibly, and waited.

He had been a little disturbed by Gerrard's strictures upon the sitting-room, but Leversedge's moment of ecstasy was not wholly past yet. His face was still radiant.

"My dearest child, do whatever you like," he said, taking her extended hands for an instant. "Thanks to you, I am growing royally indifferent to the dark."

Charlotte Perry lingered, gazing in a really enchanting manner questioningly at her lover. Suddenly her chin quivered, and her bright eyes were suffused by tears. This was wonderfully pretty—too pretty for Leversedge.

"Go and play, go and play," he said huskily. "Go, or I shall make a fool of myself. Go—I'll put out your candles and things—put out the sun itself in heaven, I believe if you asked me to."

The girl turned, gave me one glance in passing—stabbing me as with a dewy dagger—and moved swiftly back to the piano; while Leversedge followed her, quenching light and sowing darkness in his path with an almost savage ardour; and Gerrard spread himself over the surface of his arm-chair again, with a grunt.

"Thanks, thanks, that is better. You are really very amiable, Mr. Leversedge," he murmured, in tones of lofty patronage. "Nothing now, I trust, will mar the sentiment—a sentiment at once so chaste and so voluptuous—of these god-given nocturnes."

CHAPTER VI

THE dark is all very well. The dark may even prove a friend; at times I have found it so myself. But this was not one of those times, and somehow I mistrusted the events of the last few minutes; neither Gerarrd's action or our fair Charlotte's had appeared to me quite spontaneous. I reproved myself for my eternal cavilling where these two persons were concerned; yet I remained impressed with the feeling that his request had been curiously insistent, her granting of it curiously elaborate.

And then, the darkened room unquestionably wore a somewhat sinister aspect, by no means calculated to dispel uncomfortable suspicions, however foolish and unfounded such suspicions might be. The electric lights on the terrace threw a vague, stark sort of brightness, crossed by equally vague bluish shadows, upon the ceiling, upon portions of the wall above the piano, and upon the edges of the furniture near the window. The shadow of the ironwork of the balcony lay along the floor, twisted and contorted by the opposing angles of the lamps below. Otherwise the room and its contents were colourless and indistinct.

As Miss Perry's fingers touched the keys again, I placed myself on the sofa left vacant by her mother's departure to the connubial chamber. The silk-covered pillows, that had supported that good lady's back and promoted her unaristocratic tendency towards slumber, had now slipped down on to the seat. The crumpled surface of the upper one and the frill of it caught the light. Leversedge stepped back on to the balcony. He stood there, his left shoulder resting against the woodwork of the window-frame. His face was turned towards the darkened room; but I had a sense it bore an expression of exaltation, the exaltation of something successfully dared and won. The man was generous to a fault. Generosity communicates a

pleasant glow to the whole person. I have been generous myself just often enough to know that one's first sensation is delicious, as is the first moment after jumping out of a cold bath. I have, also, observed you need subsequently to rub yourself very hard if you would retain either the moral or spiritual sensation of warmth. The tonic has been a trifle too strong, a reaction follows. These thoughts passed through my mind as I looked up at Leversedge, and in doing so became aware that his lean, well-made figure—showing black against the purple depth of the night sky—was surrounded, like the cushions and carved woodwork of the sofa immediately below him, by a pale luminous outline.

Charlotte Perry played that nocturne—I stupidly forget the number of it—with a tenderness beyond all praise. I murmured something of my very genuine admiration, the most rudimentary taste forbidding, to my thinking, at all pronounced applause. Gerrard, however, uplifted his voice without hesitation. He belongs to a set—the Mrs. Septimus Mertyns set—in which endless discussion is fashionable, and a hundred and one wise reasons are offered in justification of even the most trivial personal opinion. He spoke languidly, yet loud. He intended us to hear.

"Thanks," he said, "you have surpassed yourself. I fancy that unconsciously you have done more. We were speaking of self-revelation just now. Surely, in your rendering of that delicious thing, you permitted yourself to draw away a veil from your own soul, and, for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, in a measure revealed your deepest self!"

Leversedge moved slightly.

"The spiritual element in that nocturne is definite, it speaks directly to my religious instinct," he continued. "But the spiritual element is not the only one, for the sentiment as a whole is marvellously complex. That is what renders it so profoundly interesting. The religious emotion in its simple expression is always joyous, isn't it?"

"I think so," the girl answered softly.

"I am sure that it is," Gerrard asserted. "Recalling the hours when I have been most deeply conscious of the magnetism of the Divine Idea, I recognise that they were hours of unalloyed joyousness."

I hugged myself silently at the thought of Gerrard of all men on earth, Percy Gerrard, author of *Leda's Lover*, and editor of the *Present Day*, with his lethargic temperament and gift of heavy feeding, in a condition of unalloyed joyousness, thanks to the magnetism of the Divine Idea!

"But here, notwithstanding the presence of true spirituality, I find little gladness. I am aware, indeed, throughout of a tremor of intense and vital melancholy. You were aware of that also, Miss Perry; and you intended to convey it to your hearer?"

"Ah yes!" she answered, again softly.

Leversedge shifted his position.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Gerrard. "Your dramatic instinct, of course, is strong, since you possess in so remarkable a degree the artistic temperament. But, knowing you as well as I am learning to know you, I can rapidly detect where you draw upon the comparative shallows of the dramatic instinct, and where upon the deeps of living personal experience."

"The deuce you can!" said Leversedge, under his breath.

"May I try, will you grant me permission to try, to construe your thought?"

Gerrard still addressed himself with rather ostentatious exclusiveness to Miss Perry; but he still spoke quite loud, his voice cracking up now and again into the shrillest and most unengaging treble. It had the effect of a challenge as delivered by a cockerel, none too certain of his own prowess or of his footing, from the top of a wall. His manner and the subject of his discourse, in short, were quite ironically at variance.

"To me it seems you found in that nocturne, and gave in your rendering of it, the melancholy, not of a rejected soul—far from that—but rather of one who, after long struggle, has sacrificed the

consummation of terrestrial happiness in obedience to the compelling dominion of some moral idea; and who, looking back, momentarily gauges the immensity, I had almost said, the enormity of such a sacrifice."—He paused, trying, as I imagined, to gain more mastery over his wandering voice.—"Yes, your reading was richly subtle, richly pathetic. I too can figure that broken melody, those searching harmonies, which seem to vibrate through the secret places of one's most innermost being, as the utterance of some exquisite woman, artist by nature, saint through the constraining power of adverse circumstance, as she realises for some brief but hideous instants the eternal anguish, the glory of her own self-dedication."

"It's all very fine, I daresay," Leversedge said; "but, upon my honour, if this sort of thing goes on the kicking will have to take place sooner than I expected."

Gerrard turned towards us, his face projecting itself as a livid platelike object from the encompassing obscurity.

"I beg your pardon, I did not quite catch what you were saying, Mr. Leversedge; you were good enough to remark?"

"Oh! my remark will keep until a more convenient season," the other answered. "When that season arrives I shall have the greatest pleasure, I assure you, in repeating it with appropriate action."

But here Charlotte Perry's hands most opportunely descended with a crash upon the piano.

The young lady's melting mood seemed to have passed, giving place to a very different humour. What she played during the ensuing ten to fifteen minutes I do not know. I never heard it before; I am more than willing never to hear it again. I suppose it must have been a tarantella, but a tarantella conceived in a madhouse. It gave me a nightmarish impression of innumerable tormented, shrieking, human figures whirling in a desperate and formless dance—driven hither and thither in purposeless fashion, like desert sand by an evil wind. It was exciting, for it took one into the region of utter lawlessness; and that region is always exciting, however undesirable. This was decidedly

exciting, but it was not quite nice.

Miss Perry lent herself whole-heartedly to the spirit of the music. I trust I am far from being a prude, but there are limits, and she passed them. Her playing was not quite nice. Perhaps, therefore,—I have confessed to a dislike of the man,—it stirred Gerrard's somewhat sluggish blood. I watched him rise, and move slowly close to the side of the grand piano, facing the girl as she played—his squat person a blot of deeper darkness against the dark.

Leversedge made a movement also. I fancied he did not relish the performance, and was going out on to the balcony to escape somewhat from it; but he merely stepped into the middle of the window, while his shadow, crossing that of the iron balustrade, lay right along the carpet of the room almost to where the skirt of Miss Perry's light dress trailed back from the music stool.

The music grew in vehemence and force, in violence of discordant sounds; while the human figures it conjured up before me seemed to become more wanton in the passion of their dance.

The thing was unpleasant. I wished it would stop. It affected me uncomfortably, it agitated me. I could not remain quite still. I began fidgetting with the scalloped frills of good Mrs. Perry's puce silk pillows, while I meditated upon the extraordinary divergence of nature exhibited by the mother and daug hter. Kindly and estimable clock-moon! by what strange workings of heredity had she contrived to produce this young creature, possessed as she just now appeared to be, by the spirit of a *fin de siècle* Bacchante?

Just then Leversedge spoke. He was close to me. His voice was hoarse.—"Hammond," he said, "would you mind keeping your hand away from that cushion?"

I looked up at him in some surprise. He had turned sideways and the light took his profile. His face had changed notably in the last few minutes. It had grown thin, and, as once before, his lips stood away from his teeth.

"By all means, my dear fellow," I answered, "if you wish it. But why?

Is anything the matter?"

"The dog's the matter," Leversedge said quietly. "It's sitting on that cushion. It's just jumped up."

I glanced at the cushion and then back at Leversedge. For an instant I doubted whether he was chaffing; though, considering our former discourses upon this subject, it occurred to me as improbable he should indulge in so grim a joke at his own expense. But that one glance assured me very completely he was very far from chaffing. I debated inwardly what could be done—whether it was possible to demonstrate convincingly to Leversedge, once and for all, that he laboured under an hallucination. But the wicked spirit which infected Miss Perry's playing, and expressed itself in that chaotic clamour, still agitated me and rendered it difficult to me to think clearly. I am afraid I made a disastrous mistake. If I did so, let it be put down, in part at all events, to the Witches' Sabbath of sound assailing my ears and plaguing my brain, and not exclusively to my inborn stupidity.

"Believe me, you are dreaming," I said. "I give you my word there is nothing whatever upon that cushion."

"I am not lying, anyhow," Leversedge answered rather hastily. "You are behind it, so of course you can't see. Come round—stand here—now look."

So, to humour him I got up and stood beside him, while Charlotte Perry played, still played.

"There now," he went on,—"now you can see its eyes. You must see them; they're plain enough, I'm sure. And look how the silk of the cushion gives under the beast's haunches and under its forefeet."

And I stared obediently,—at what? Merely the little crumples left by the impress of good Mrs. Perry's solid shoulders—little wandering lines of light, that appeared to me as abundantly pathetic, abundantly absurd, taken in connection with the supernatural horror whose presence they were declared to indicate.

"Heaven forbid I should seem to call your veracity in question," I exclaimed; "but, indeed, I see nothing. My dear friend, you are the

victim of an optical or cerebral delusion—I suppose the two mean much the same thing—as I have told you all along. No dog, no nothing, is there, and I can prove it to you."

Certainly Leversedge never showed to better advantage than under extreme pressure. If his courtesy failed for an instant, he recovered speedily and very gracefully. Now his lips gave, and he smiled at me in that singularly longsuffering way of his.

"I am afraid not, though I wish to goodness you could," he said. "No, no; for mercy's sake don't touch it!" His voice dropped.—"It smells—the brute—to-night it smells—your hands will never feel clean again."

I own it required a little nerve, for I was shaken by that violent and ceaseless music, and Leversedge's tone and manner were calculated to produce faith in the most sceptical mind; still, I did sweep my hand down slowly over the surface of the cushion. And, of course, it encountered no resistance. How could it, since, as I had affirmed, nothing, absolutely nothing, was there?

"You see," I said.

He shook his head.

"It got away; it jumped down," he replied. "Anyhow, I am thankful you did not touch it."

Argument is wasted upon a man in this frame of mind. Yet I was pushed by the desire to convince him. I paused, asking myself what on earth I could do or say next. Meanwhile Miss Perry's playing became slower, more broken, full of wailing; as though the dance had changed to a *Danse Macabre*, and Death was breaking their ranks, bearing away or beating down those lawless dancers. Gerrard moved a little nearer, he bent over and talked to the girl, the occasionally shrill tones of his voice, which still appeared to be under insufficient control, mingling oddly with her playing.

Suddenly a cry—it was exceedingly dreadful, it turned me cold and sick—broke in through the rhythm of the music, and Leversedge rushed past me across the room. The train of Charlotte Perry's dress

lay out pale over the floor; and he kicked it, stamped on it, trampled it under foot. The music stopped with a harsh discord, and, without rising, the girl turned half round on the music stool, stretching out her hands as though to save herself and push him from her.

"Constantine, Constantine, what has happened? Pray calm yourself. What are you doing?" she demanded.

For all answer he took her up bodily in his arms,—I had no conception the man was so strong,—shook her, as you might shake out a handkerchief on which a spider or some other noxious insect was crawling; carried her right out on to the balcony into the full glare of the electric light; and stood there holding her close against him as he might have held a child.

"My sweet," I heard him say, his voice broken by emotion; "my sweet, forgive me. I am so rough, I must seem to you such a brute. But that vile thing took refuge beside you. It was upon your gown,—it was upon your knees. I saw its eyes here—oh! my God, my God, the unspeakable desecration of it—its hateful head was against your dear bosom."

Leversedge's voice sank away into a whisper. He kissed the girl's eyes, her throat, as she lay in his arms. And then suddenly, as it seemed, recollecting himself, he set her down very gently on her feet, and turned round with a terrible face upon Percy Gerrard, who stood nearest the window.

"Go," he said, "you are not wanted here. We have had too much of you all along."

The distinguished journalist retired in some haste; he was not by nature a fire-eater—save on paper. I followed him. The girl was safe, and, for the rest, I wanted neither to hear nor see more. Indeed, I had heard and seen too much already. It is hardly decent to witness the outcry of a fellow-creature in such awful straits. The joys of the Puritan, in heaven, are multiplied sevenfold by listening to the cries of the damned which reach him from across the Great Gulf; but I am not made of such iron stuff that my personal comfort is enchanced by

articulate misery on the part of others. I am afraid I advanced rather unceremoniously upon Percy Gerrard.

"Here are matches," I said; "for pity's sake help me light the candles, and then disappear as soon as possible."

Gerrard's nerves appeared to have suffered. His squat hands fumbled awkwardly with the box of matches as he tried to strike them, and his smooth hair looked positively dank.

"The man is insane," he quavered. "I told her so. I knew it."

"Mr. Hammond!"—Charlotte Perry clutched my arm.

During the extraordinary scene we had just assisted at she had behaved with really magnificent composure, neither calling out nor struggling. I could not but admire her courage. She was composed still; but she gripped me like a vice, the points of her fingers digging themselves into my arm, while her pretty face was blanched and sharpened. The maternal element was wholly banished. The rat had it all his own way; and what a rat—strong, astute, almost alarming!

"Remember you are bound to obey me," she said; "you have promised, and I hold you to your promise."

Gerrard came close to her.

"I was not mistaken, you see," he murmured.

Charlotte Perry looked at him for a moment with the strangest expression.

"Good-night," she said. Then she addressed me again. "My parents must know nothing of what has just taken place. You must be silent; you understand—absolutely silent. And you must leave us, please. You cannot help now except by being silent. Later, perhaps,—good-night."

PHASE THIRD

CHAPTER I

IT was not, I must admit, without a certain movement of relief I learned, on inquiry, from the head waiter—who graciously condescended himself to serve my breakfast on the verandah outside the *salle à manger*—next morning, that Leversedge had left for Geneva by the first train.

As I have remarked already, I adore drama. It is among the best of the several good things of life; but it is, I must add, among the good things of which it is quite possible to have enough. And I had really had about enough of it on the previous evening. I hailed a pause. I did more. I took an early boat to Evian, and refreshed my soul by a Platonic luncheon—in a delightfully cool atmosphere both physical and sentimental—in company with the friend who does not enter into this history, and whom, therefore, I have already expressed a desire to leave out of it. Coming back, since the afternoon was very charming, instead of crossing directly to Ouchy, I took the boat to the head of the lake. The chestnut woods above St. Gingolph held the sunshine in an enchanting manner, I remember. I wished to think about these woods, about the humours of my fellow-passengers, about the gossip of the fair friend from whom I had just parted; but, unfortunately, I found it impossible wholly to banish memories of, and speculations concerning, the Perry-Leversedge situation from my mind. The occasions upon which one witnesses strong emotion in real life are rare, and that which one does witness on such rare occasions is haunting. It was borne in upon me how very much more effective and penetrating strong emotion is off, than on, the stage; how nature, notwithstanding her obvious crudities, strikes home, as art, I deeply regret to allow it, never can.

Last night Leversedge had been fine. Charlotte Perry had been fine—with a difference. Even Gerrard had played a telling part, in his

own objectionable way. And there I paused. For my own action appeared to me wholly insipid. I had occupied the inglorious position of the "buffer state." Only once had I taken the initiative, and then with what disastrous results! I could not, moreover, acquit myself of a certain pusillanimity in leaving Miss Perry, though she did, I own, appear perfectly equal to managing her own affairs. No, I was not proud of myself. And then little incidents began to recur to me which were somewhat incomprehensible. In that matter of putting out the lights, now, was it a plant?—had there been any collusion between Percy Gerrard and Miss Perry?

I was busy with this difficult and not very pleasing problem when, on trans-shipping at Villeneuve, Mr. Perry himself hailed my advent upon the upper deck of the lake-boat.

"Well met!" he cried. "As ever the truly welcome friend."

There was, if I may put it so, an air of high-class-bank-holiday about Mr. Perry. It is an air calculated to render a hearty reception by the possessor of it peculiarly gratifying to one, specially when the said reception happens to take place in public. The occupants of the benches under the awning—the lean and active Americans; the large and affectionate Germans; the English clergy in mufti, surrounded by their harems; even those very superior persons, the schoolmasters in knickerbockers, bearing the impressive effect of universal proprietorship which covers them immediately upon crossing the channel, and remains so engagingly by them until they regain their native shore,—even these turned to gaze at Mr. Perry and my all too greatly honoured self. Mr. Perry had a courier bag slung across his shoulders; under one arm he carried a bulky white umbrella. He had field-glasses in his hand. To-day, alas! he wore a new hat. It was high, made of soft grey felt, and had a deep cleft, an absolute ravine, down the middle of the crown. Of all European countries known to me, Switzerland undoubtedly produces the most unholy headgear, both male and female. Mr. Perry's hat was of local manufacture. It was surrounded, moreover, by a black and white pugaree that had seen

service, the stringy ends of it streaming afar upon the breeze as the little man perambulated the deck.

Mr. Perry was full of conversation.

"I am here with my daughter," he told me. "She is unstrung, Mr. Hammond,—slightly unstrung. Perfect health, really perfect, I assure you; but a delicate, a highly nervous organisation. And marriage is a serious step; it is, I think I may even say, an arduous undertaking—for some of us, I am sure, very arduous. To leave home and kindred, to quit the dear old family roof"—(at *Château* Perry, one wondered, did they habitually camp out, catlike, among the chimney-pots?),—"must of necessity cause a pang,—aye, more than one—quite a number of pangs in fact, to any highly sensitive heart."

I expressed my regret for Miss Perry's indisposition, and added a hope it was but of a passing, character.

"I trust so," he replied. "But I cannot disguise from myself that my daughter appears depressed. These delicate young creatures are so full of feeling—

Fair English girl, whose mantling cheek
Forbids the words her lips would speak. Yes, yes—so I invited her to come out with me. And Mamma approved the plan, I am happy to state,—entirely approved it. The aspect of outward nature upon this truly glorious summer afternoon would, I felt convinced, prove an antidote to gloomy thoughts. And hence you find us here, Mr. Hammond,—hence you find us; and very happy indeed we are to be found, I can assure you."

While making these pleasing remarks, Mr. Perry pursued his course along the deck towards the stern of the boat. The wooded precipices behind Chillon fled away upon our left. Before us stretched out the immense, blue perspective of the Rhone Valley. Vast shadows lay across it, soft and misty; while here and there the flanks of the great hills, a row of balsam poplars on the flat, or the windows of a châlet caught the mellow brightness of the western sun. Everybody knows the view very well; still it remains delicious—

delicious even though Perry *père*, in the tones of one returning thanks for the bridesmaids at a suburban wedding-breakfast, prattles at one's side.

"I am myself aware," he continued, "how when harassed by the calls of business and by those anxieties which the fluctuations of the money market necessarily produce in the breast even of the most sanguine and the most solvent,—I am aware how a few hours, spent in one of the sequestered country spots, of which our dear sea-girt land supplies so many charming examples, will restore a measure of energy to the jaded nervous system, and promote a healthy, hopeful outlook upon our present form of existence. For though," cried Mr. Perry, drawing himself up in a bold and reckless manner, and slipping his disengaged hand in between the buttons of his insufficiently brushed waistcoat,—"though through circumstances I occupy the position of a peaceful citizen, I am by nature a roamer. These snowy summits seem to call me—"

Here he waved his field-glasses dramatically towards the circle of mountains closing in the head of the valley.

"I envy the agile chamois leaping from rock to rock with dilated nostril. I long to inhale the invigorating atmosphere of those amazing altitudes. And the ocean, again," added Mr. Perry; "the sound of it is, as I may say, positively in my blood. Often in my boyhood—

Dear bygone time when youth's enchanted hand
Smoothed the light curl, caressed the candid brow—"

Here he smiled with a kind of a noble coyness.—"Often in my boyhood, when pacing the arid London pavement, have I paused and picked up a whelk dropped from the barrow of the itinerant coster; and, holding the home of the humble mollusc to my ear, have found solace and sweet suggestion of liberty in the murmur of the shell. Poetry, my dear Mr. Hammond, believe me, in the end we must all come back to that,—and a very wholesome thing it is to come back to, I'm sure, very wholesome."

We turned, and I perceived the daughter of my eloquent

companion in the open space at the far end of the deck, beyond the shadow of the awning. She was seated upon a low camp-stool, at a distance from all the other passengers, a study in brown-holland, under a large black and yellow parasol. Nobody was in attendance. Miss Perry for once was alone.

"Mamma, now, is different," resumed Mr. Perry. "Travel for her has few attractions. A home-loving nature, the fireside, the bright flower border, the prolific vegetable garden,—these content the heart of Mamma, as does the round of her domestic duties.—'A wet sheet and a flowing sail'—fine old song that, Mr. Hammond, and full of the true British nautical spirit—exercise no fascination over her. And so we left her at the hotel this afternoon; we did not bring her with us. Indeed," he added, lowering his voice, "I may tell you, in confidence, Mr. Hammond,—you, are a man of the world, which is equivalent to saying that you know something of the feminine nature,—I was not altogether sorry to part my two ladies for a little while to-day, not altogether sorry to part them. A passing cloud, no more,—I am sure quite passing,—crossed the face, as I may say, o f our family happiness. Just a momentary lack of unanimity of sentiment between the child and her maternal parent. Mamma had heard rumours—the confused indiscretion of an officious chambermaid—the sex will gossip, as you know—of something that happened last night."

Mr. Perry looked sharply at me.

"Last night?—Indeed?" I said.

"A—in short—a scene—" repeated Mr. Perry.

"A scene?" I inquired.

"You were there, I believe, Mr. Hammond."

"Certainly, I was there all the time. Your daughter played to us as—well, as I really think only your daughter can play."

The boat slowed up at the *debarcadère* of Territet-Chillon, just below the extensive constructions of the *Grand Hôtel des Alpes* . Mr. Perry held on to the starboard railings and scrutinised the on-coming passengers. Among them chanced to be the retired Deputy Surgeon-

General of the Madras Army, his face showing leaden under his white solar topee. Mr. Perry leaned out over the starboard railing and signalled to him with his umbrella. Then he addressed me again.

"You relieve me of anxiety," he said,—"greatly relieve me. Mrs. Perry is slightly wanting in diplomacy at times; and she has, perhaps, views of the duties of a chaperon belonging to less advanced and cultivated social conditions than those in which it is the habit of our daughter to move. She questioned Charlotte."

Again Mr. Perry looked very sharply at me.

"A mistake," he added, "and one which I myself should have been incapable of committing—though not perhaps an unnatural one in an anxious mother. And—ah! here is our good friend the doctor. Botanising I see, as usual. No naughty poppies, I trust, annoying your eye in those delightful Alpine solitudes—ah! ha—eh, no naughty poppies?"

CHAPTER II

I APPROACHED Miss Perry. Her reception of me was not enthusiastic; in fact for some seconds she appeared unaware of my presence. She had taken off her large, lace hat and thrown it on the deck beside her. Her face and upper portion of her figure were shaded by her parasol; the yellow and black frills of which, like the short curly hair about her forehead and the nape of her neck, were uplifted and softly dropped again by the warm wind. Her head was turned away; I could only see the outline of her cheek. She had, I remember, unfastened the collar of her yellow silk blouse, thereby exposing rather more of her throat than is customary in morning dress. A bunch of buttercups was stuck in her waistband. They drooped with the heat, some were crushed and broken, as though in sympathy with their wearer. For Miss Perry drooped too, was crushed too. Her whole attitude betokened this in the most touching manner. To recognise in this withdrawn and pensive figure the player of the evil witch-music of last night, or the very capable woman who had bidden me, so peremptorily, leave her to manage her own affairs, was a heavy tax on my imagination. If change is essential to charm in woman, then Miss Perry was triumphantly charming, for her capacity of change was Protean.

As the steamer-bell ceased ringing and the decks began to vibrate with the working of the engines, Miss Perry turned her head. She gazed at me mutely. Her eyes were full of tears, her dark eyelashes were gathered into little points by those she had already shed.

"You do not care to talk," I said. "Your father tells me you are over-tired. You would rather have me go away."

"No," she replied. "There are things of which I must speak to you. I should not myself perhaps have chosen to-day, for I have hardly arranged my thought as yet. I can hardly see my trouble, or my action,

still less my future"—the girl paused, and two tears rolled slowly down over her pretty red-brown cheeks—"in perspective. It is all too close to me as yet. Still, perhaps this opportunity is given me purposely; I dare not reject it. It is improbable we shall often see each other alone again."

I had not been feeling altogether friendly towards Charlotte Perry. I had doubted her, and that on rather ugly grounds. And I had not the least proposed that our interview should be of a sentimental character. But listening to her modest hesitating speech, seeing her evident distress, of course I softened towards her and was moved to sympathy. I am not a stock or a stone, so, how the devil could I help it?

"Whatever course events may take," I protested, "it will not be my fault if we do not meet often hereafter."

"You are hopeful because to you it is a light matter," said Miss Perry.

"On the contrary, I am hopeful because I am in a normal condition, and am therefore qualified to judge of the probabilities of things. You are somewhat over-tired."

"Yes, I am cruelly tired," the girl assented.

"Then be advised, my dear young lady, and do not overtax yourself with the discussion of burning questions just now. Tell me whether you slept—no? Well, I almost feared as much,—and then let me do my poor best to entertain you. Let me talk to you about the weather; about our *compagnons de voyage*, whose voices reverberate so pleasingly under that truly beautiful tin awning; about our friend Clement Bartlett's new play, of which Carr writes me word that it is to be a brilliant success.—Picture that! The foolish things of this world do indeed confound the wise at times! Your memory happily cannot carry you back to that prehistoric period, but I well remember Clement's first appearance. Like the man in 'The Egoist,' he 'had a leg,' but this appeared to me to constitute the whole of his dramatic outfit. And now we are called upon to hail him as the coming play-wright!"

"Is it quite kind always to—to scoff?" Charlotte Perry asked very

softly.

"Poor dear Bartlett has survived so many smiles that one more will not greatly affect him—specially as he will remain serenely unaware of it. Moreover, I am past the appeals of friendship at this moment; I would ruthlessly offer up the reputation of my nearest and dearest to afford you a little amusement."

Whereat to my extreme embarrassment the girl bowed her head, dragged her handkerchief out of the bosom of her blouse, and fell to weeping in a perfectly audible manner.

"Pray, pray don't, my dear Miss Perry, this is too distressing; pray control yourself," I feebly entreated.

"It is always the same," she moaned—really my position was rather frightful!—"I had hoped that for once you would understand, and treat me seriously—after last night. But it is useless. Nothing makes any difference. You always play with me—because, at heart, you always despise me."

"Despise you?—good heavens! of what imbecility have I been guilty now, that you should imagine I despise you?"

"When I saw you coming," she sobbed, "I knew it would be very painful—I could not speak at first—but I thought that the opportunity had been given me, and that I should gain strength, and tell you; and that you would approve for once—just for once-and that would be my compensation—but—"

As fate would have it, there was a vacant camp-stool near by. I fetched it. I sat down beside Charlotte Perry. I took her parasol and held it over her. All of which was radically unwise; but under the circumstances what man of feeling could be a slave to discretion, that possibly better, but certainly very cold-blooded, part of valour? The sun was scorching, so that the Americans and Germans, the clergy with their feminine appendages, and even the possessive schoolmasters, preferred the shelter of the awning to the glare of the open deck. For this I returned heartfelt thanks. Close scrutiny would have been intolerably disconcerting just then.

"Now tell me anything and everything you like," I said recklessly. "I have been an idiot in trying to divert your attention t o indifferent matters."

Charlotte Perry turned to me with streaming eyes. She was among the very few women I have ever known who are not spoiled by crying. I instinctively tilted the parasol so as to shelter us both, not so much from the rays of the sun, as from the remark of possible observers.

"I asked bread of you, and you seemed to give me a stone. It was too hard. I lost myself—"

"No wonder, you are over-wrought," I answered. "You went through a most agitating experience last night, and behaved—you will not think me guilty of impertinence in referring to this?—with a courage beyond all praise."

The girl's mouth gathered into that strangely seductive sketch of a kiss.

"Ah! how precious it is to hear you say that!" she—I don't like the word, it has a suspicion of vulgarity about it, nevertheless I must employ it—she whispered.

I began to speak, I was on the edge of committing myself to statements of a vastly foolish description, but Miss Perry stopped me by raising her hand.

"Be silent, I implore you,—be silent. That was a slip. It would be unworthy of you to notice it, knowing that I am, as you said just now, over-wrought. Put it down to my sleepless night, and overlook it."

She paused, and I feared the tears would again break forth. But in a moment she continued, with really angelic gentleness—

"All that is closed, finished. After the events of last night, finished for ever. Only sometimes, for an instant, one forgets. If you have once dreamed very vividly of a great good, the dream comes back upon you, even in your most cruelly wakeful hours; don't you think so?"

"How can I answer you?" I inquired, feeling rather like a knave and most completely like a fool.

"Don't attempt to answer," she said. "Truly, it is kinder not to do so.

Listen, that is all I ask, and if you can, encourage and approve. The hope"—her voice sank away again in a caressing cadence—"the hope of your approval has, I am afraid,—for it is very weak of me,—been the mainspring of my action."

"You humiliate me," I protested.

The girl smiled at me through her tears in the most beguiling manner.

"Had the circumstances of our meeting been different," I said desperately,—"had you been free to listen to proposals, which I was equally and honourably free to make, the result of our acquaintance—"

"Don't," she cried, shutting her eyes, and pressing her hands to either side of her charming head. "This is a superfluous torture. Again I entreat you to be silent. I am bound irrevocably. I bound myself last night, after you went. Constantine was in a terrible condition. Upon his frenzy—which you witnessed—there followed an alarming prostration. In one and the same breath he told me—is it indelicate to tell you this?—that he should die without me, and implored me to break with him. He said it was wicked to marry me, and yet declared that without me he would die. Indeed, I feared he would destroy himself."

She waited, shuddering, closing her eyes, again pressing her hands against her head.

"I realised clearly, for the first time, what a frightful future must inevitably lie before me," she continued, speaking slowly and in hesitating accents, while she gazed into the vague, over the glittering expanse of the great lake.—"I felt, and for the first time dreaded, the gloom which must for ever envelop us—I and he. We shall travel through life with this malign and supernatural companion; and what repose, what security, what possibility of spontaneous and fearless gladness can there be in such a life? For I shall be for ever face to face with the probability of a dark and swift catastrophe."

"Catastrophe?" I said.

"Assuredly," Miss Perry answered. "My nerves are not of ircn,

though I am strong. Eventually they will give under the strain put upon them. Even the most reasonable mind must be affected by constant contact with unreason. At last I may—I shall—be infected by the terror which haunts my husband. To me, also, it will take on bodily form, and then Constantine will kill—kill—either me or himself."

I was stricken by sudden compunction. After all, one human being is as good as another in a certain sense; each life is of supreme value to its possessor; all have equal rights. Why, in the eternal justice of things, should this pretty and clever girl be required to pay the price of her lover's singular misfortune? He adored her, I know; but did that create so tremendous an obligation on her side? It might be very fairly argued that he adored her to please himself.

"Leversedge is right. You must not marry him," I cried, with conviction. "Poor, dear fellow, it is tragic for him, horribly tragic; but you are in no degree responsible for that. You must not marry him; the risk is too great. You must cancel your engagement."

"No, no," she answered. "I must not cancel my engagement. It must stand. I must marry him—and at once."

In the excitement of the conversation we had both risen to our feet. We stood near each other, and for a perceptible space of time looked full at each other. The girl's cheeks were flushed; her eyes were swimming in tears, yet they danced. Charlotte Perry was brilliant just then,—the wind ruffling her abundant hair, while her hands plucked almost fiercely at the drooping buttercups in her belt.

"Are you afraid of your handiwork," she asked me; "afraid of it at last?"

"My handiwork?—I am very honestly afraid of your happiness being wrecked."

"Ah! that is wrecked already," she answered softly. "Now I am only trying to save what poor remnant is possible of saving from the wreck. —I do not reproach you, though it is your doing. No—don't protest; you told me you would listen. Keep your promise, that is only just. Listen—I perceive only one way to gain your respect, perhaps your

admiration. It is a bitter way—flesh and blood can hardly endure it—yet I take it. Constantine is your friend, not I. I am interesting to you, have been so from the first, merely on account of the relation in which I stand to him."

Miss Perry lowered her eyes; she picked the buttercups to pieces one by one, scattering their green stems and shining yellow petals upon the grey-drab planks of the deck.

"You think lightly of me—do not deny it. I know I speak the truth. You criticise me at every turn; you consider my breeding doubtful, my taste doubtful. You question my sincerity. You cheapen my talents—in your own mind—I do not say you do all this openly, you are too gentleman-like to fall into that error. But being idle, you amuse your leisure by casting me up and dividing me out. For Constantine you really care, so you do not sacrifice him to your rage for analysis; I understand that. —No—do not interrupt me. I must say it all, all this once. You think me worldly, scheming, a mere actress. By marrying Constantine, by yielding myself up unreservedly to the horror which encircles him, I can vindicate myself; I can prove to you that you have misjudged me, and that I am very far from being the cheap, artificial, half-hearted adventuress you have supposed me to be."

CHAPTER III

ONE does not, unfortunately, arrive at my time of life without having been in some tight places; but no place, I solemnly declare, that I have ever been in quite equalled this one for tightness. It pinched me most exceedingly shrewdly. For all that which Miss Perry had said was true—true, every word of it!—And we had passed the stage of acquaintance when one can successfully take refuge in denial. Not even lying of the most barefaced and unblushing character would extricate me from the very ungraceful predicament in which my companion's frankness had placed me.

I do not often lose my temper; but now a certain exasperation seized on me. For was it not really a little too bad that this charming person should thus lock the door on me and set her back against it? It is disgusting to me to be compelled to handle a woman other than courteously. Yet, unless I exercised something of brutal masculine force in removing her, how on earth was I to get the door open and make good my escape?

"My dear young lady,—my dear young lady, you cover me with shame and confusion!" I cried. "You appear to do me the unhappy compliment of attaching an importance to my possible, or rather impossible, opinion—for the opinion with which you accredit me is positively preposterous—quite deliriously above its value."

The girl pressed her hands to the sides of her head again.

"I am so tired," she said. "It is all finished, as I told you. I have burnt my ships, I have accepted my lot. Why then try to juggle with me? Why, above all, why be ungenerous and beg the question?"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, "it is not I who beg the question. It is you, dear Miss Perry, who beg it, while I am trying to introduce a trifle of common sense into the consideration of it."

She turned away, letting her arms drop at her sides, and stared

over the bows of the lake-boat, now heading in towards the row of great Lombardy poplars which line the gay little quay and marketplace of Montreux.

"I implore you, in the name of reason, to leave all thought of me out of the business."

For an instant Miss Perry looked at me.

"But how can I?"—I cannot actually assert that I heard those words, but her quivering lips appeared to form them.

"Granting, for the sake of argument, even," I went on, "that I have been idiot enough to think, in any degree, any one of the stupidities of which you accuse me, what does that signify as against the very real and serious matter of your marriage? You are—pardon my saying so—straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel with a vengeance. Bear with me if I speak plainly.—Marry Constantine Leversedge because he loves you, if you wish to do an heroic act of kindness. Still better, marry him because you love him, and pity carries the day over fear."

"Ah! how little you understand," murmured Miss Perry.

Really, I believe at times I have the right to congratulate myself on possessing miraculous strength of character. Or is it only the strength of alarm, not of character—the daring of the proverbial turning-worm, the valour of the proverbial mouse in a corner? I can't decide. Anyhow, I finished my address.

"But to marry him as proof to me that you are not the kind of person you imagine I imagine you possibly may be, is absurd and grotesque, an unspeakable and impossible folly. You cannot be guilty of it. I refuse to permit you to be guilty of it."

"And how will you prevent my being guilty of it?" the fair Charlotte asked, with rather astonishing composure.

The flower-like, the dewy, the early, early morning and exquisitely virginal effect seemed suddenly to have passed away from Miss Perry. The change in her was unseizable—to roughly translate an untranslatable Gallicism—but I was keenly aware of its presence.

"Tell my poor dear parents what you have just told me. At first they

will neither believe nor understand you. You will involve yourself in a series of silly wordy scenes, which will make our party the comedy of the whole hotel. Tell Constantine—that will be very simple—he will destroy himself."

She paused.

"And, meanwhile, you will have the inward satisfaction of continuing to think of me just what you have always thought. I do not propose to give you that satisfaction."

"Are you not slightly vindictive?" I inquired. "It was not nice of me. It was a lapse of good manners. But, upon my honour, I could not help it."

Miss Perry put one hand over her eyes, and threw back her head. Her throat was round, firm, the colour of it a warm, delicate brown—delicious in the sunshine, which—for I am afraid I was shamefully neglecting my office of umbrella bearer—enveloped her graceful figure from head to heel.

"You are certainly ungenerous," she retorted. "But all men are that, I believe, if an unhappy woman so far forgets conventionality as to obey the dictates of— No, pass that by. Forget what I was nearly betrayed into saying. I should be thankful to forget it myself. Let us reason together coldly and sensibly, since that is your pleasure; and I will show you why you cannot and must not seek to alter my resolution."

Again Charlotte Perry's bright eyes filled, again she spoke in modest, hesitating accents.

"You know how hard society is, how basely commonplace in its judgments, how blind to high purposes, how sceptical of pure and elevated motives. You know how it hates to have its imagination taxed by action that is touched by ideality. You are a poet, you must have suffered from all this at times, and so you must have seen how, if a woman—it is very painful to me to speak on this subject—if a woman leaves her home because the demands made upon her are degrading, or because her husband is wicked, or because, like the

heroine of Ibsen's wonderful drama, she revolts against the narrow conditions and paltry occupations of domestic life, society looks doubtfully upon her, other women flout her and draw aside their skirts. Even should she give herself to philanthropy or enter a religious house, she is still suspect. But if she leaves her home because she pleases some other man, society looks not so very hardly on her fault; often, in a little while, quite condones it. In the eyes of the great, coarse, everyday world we are your slaves yet. Success with a man, that a man should desire us, in a measure justifies even the most scandalous conduct."

Pausing in the midst of this surprising essay upon contemporary morals, Miss Perry stooped and picked up her hat. She straightened herself up again, and languidly drew the long pins out of the crown of it. Where was she coming to? I felt very nervous. The door of escape was by no means open yet.

"It is very much the same with a girl's engagement," she went on. "If she cancels it because she discovers that she and the man whom she has promised to marry are not calculated to realise what marriage might be—has sometimes been—in all its exquisite completeness, in its profound though hidden poetry; if she dreads to do violence to her own ideal of love, she is accused of cruelty and caprice. Women treat her with a mixture of pity and contempt. Men are familiar or surly with her. She is a failure, and society has no mercy for failure. But if she breaks it off because someone else cares for her, in obedience to his will, she is justified in the opinion of the world, of her friends, of her parents—in that even of her rejected admirer."

When Charlotte raised her eyes to mine again they were as stars of morning. No wonder poor Leversedge worshipped her if, at times, she looked at him thus! She was, indeed, of a quality to turn the steadiest head! At this moment, in the wind and sunshine, the blue lake behind her, the pale deck before, the gay little Swiss town—its quaintly carved gables and balconies, its rows of emerald-green

shutters and bright awnings, its line of magnificent, quivering, whispering poplars,—sliding by on our right as the steamer slowed up at the pier, Charlotte Perry had her moment of triumph, she was absolutely and distractingly lovely.

"She is a success. Society smiles on her, *fêtes* and applauds her. For has she not upon her the hall-mark which all will acknowledge? It is well to be loved by one man. It is just doubly well to be loved by two. And—"

The girl stretched out her hands. Thank heaven there was a movement o n board, passengers acquiring hand-bags, umbrellas, impedimenta in general, prior to disembarking, so nobody, I believed, —with relief, I believe so still,—specially noticed our proceedings.

"And she is very, very grateful, Mr. Hammond. Her happiness is secured. It is completed instead of being wrecked."

These are things to turn one's hair grey, even contemplating them after a lapse of years. Let me take breath!

So very much comes into this question of marriage that one's brain fairly reels under it. For a woman it is probably, as Perry *père* remarked, "an arduous undertaking"; but for one of us, oh my brothers, it is—well, what is it not? Personally, I am unfitted for a primitive state of society, I know that. Were you to take off my clothes and send me up a tree to pick nuts, I should go very hungry myself; while those dependent upon me would almost certainly starve. Yet I look back, not without yearning, to the epoch of primal innocence, when man and woman mated gaily, parted gaily, even as those most delectable of living creatures, the birds, do. For the bond of wedlock, as understood for many hundred years now by the more civilised nations—specially those of the Anglo-Saxon race—adds a terror to life. To pass two or three days in the Divorce Court would be about as much to my taste as passing them in the Old Fleet Ditch; yet how can a man of average sensibility be expected, at a given moment, to know and make up his mind finally and irrevocably in respect of womanhood and the affections? Aphrodite is a mighty and marvellous

goddess. Who that has once, in ever so small a degree, beheld her glory, shall dare worship her under a single aspect only, or in a single place?

Of course there is the ancient theory—does it not at least date from the days of Aristophanes?—of the One Man—the One Woman; and I have laboured valiantly to cherish it, since it appeared to offer a practical solution to my moral and emotional difficulties. Like the hero of a certain evil and exquisite romance, the title of which I refrain from mentioning, I set out early in quest of the One Woman who should satisfy all my aspirations, all my tastes, all—if you will have it—my latent masculine sensuality; who should dominate me at first sight, who should hold me then and ever after. I have sought her diligently, and—I admit it reluctantly, for it must sound most impertinently fastidious—I am seeking her yet. This quest, indeed, has become a fixed idea with me. It presents itself, as a matter of course, at sight of each new and charming face—and the number of new and charming faces which offer themselves for inspection is really delightfully great. It presents itself even in respect of faces already fairly well known to me, under circumstances of a peculiar or provocative character.

It presented itself very distinctly to me now, on the sunny deck of the lake-boat, as Miss Perry's soft voice faltered, and she stretched out her hands in that most moving action of appeal. She was so varied, so captivating, so uncommonly clever, at times so deliciously pretty; her prospects were of so dubiously hopeful and encouraging a sort. And then, had she by chance spoken the truth, not only in respect of my reading, but of my misreading, of her? Might not, by chance, her picture of herself be a more faithful one than that which I—with my wretched little habit of being too sharp by half in the ungracious business of picking my neighbours to pieces—had drawn of her? Surely it was very generous, after all my silent detraction and, at moments, my outspoken disagreement, thus to give me another chance! And then the coercive, the well-nigh irresistible, flattery of thus finding oneself the object of a young and lovely person's

affection! Is there anything on earth quite so agreeable?—(For a little while, at all events. After the first blush of the affair one usually becomes inconveniently sensible of make-weights and conceivable complications)—No! I protest there is not.

And so it came about that, for the space of at least twenty seconds, I asked myself quite seriously whether it was not possible that here, here in the daughter of Perry *père et mère*, of the lively rat and excellent clock-moon, improbable as it might appear at first sight, I had found that which I had sought so long and vainly—the complement of my nature, the comprehensively and perpetually seductive being, the, for me, One Woman?

Those twenty seconds were immensely pleasant, I would willingly have extended them indefinitely. But, alas! for that at once so consolatory and so detestable doctrine—the Doctrine of Perpetual Flux—twenty seconds were the limit; and then the delectable equilibrium in which my mind had hung was rudely disturbed. It went on working—I mean that eternal see-saw, which I call my mind, did. It suffered a barbarian invasion of rough doubts, tumultuous questions, inartistic moralities, which beat upon it as with heavy clubs. For, after all, when I came to consider it, no miraculous change had passed over Charlotte Perry, or her parents, or my friend Leversedge, or myself, or our mutual relations, or our prospects, or our antecedents, or our surroundings. All these stood precisely where they had stood. That which we had been, both in regard of ourselves and each other, that we still essentially and indubitably were. There was no squaring the circle. It was all, not otherwise, but just exactly so.

For how was I, who had never yet given myself away, of all men to give myself away thus recklessly? Bless my soul, contemplate the inevitable consequences! How was I, who had always plumed myself on maintaining a nice standard of taste in friendship, of all men to steal his *fiancée*, and play the part of a Bowdlerised King David to the Uriah of poor dear Leversedge? No, no; it was really a trifle tiresome, but, in truth, I had neither moral courage nor was I scoundrel

enough for all this.

And then, with a blush of shame I remember it, for it reflects small credit on either my head or heart, one of those trivial incidents occurred which so completely and immediately quench the fires of my not perhaps very strikingly volcanic nature.

Miss Perry, I apprehend, had found these twenty seconds longer than I did. She became restless; she grew—it was very excusable—somewhat impatient of my silence. The grey deck planks, where the hem of her brown holland skirt touched them, were strewn with the remnants of her bouquet of buttercups. She put out her right foot, and in a nervous, and—I am compelled to add—somewhat awkward, manner pushed the green stems aside and crushed the shining petals. Those women who are possessed of well-shaped feet, kindly permit one, in the present day, to be fully aware of that agreeable fact; and it occurred to me that, considering her pretensions to fashion, the opportunities afforded me of beholding the fair Charlotte's feet had been distinctly limited. Now I understood why. Whether Nature or her bootmaker was in fault, I cannot, of course, pretend to determine. I charitably trust the former. For with Nature clearly there is no arguing; whereas any human being, possessed of the powers of speech and volition, can remonstrate with and, in extreme cases, change their bootmaker. Miss Perry's boots or shoes—I think they were shoes—were wide, easy, trodden over, their square toes turned badly heavenward. I could write a pamphlet on the subject of boots—they are an awful revelation of personal character. Vulgarities otherwise skilfully concealed come out in the shape of a heel; sloth leaves indelible tracks across upper leathers. In moments of illumination I have detected gluttony in a lace and profligacy in a button. The Carissima's shoes did not betray the presence of any mortal sin, let me hasten to add. But since, judging by the rest of her costume, I could be in no doubt as to the sufficiency of her purse, they disclosed a vein of indolence, of insufficient pride, of lack of perception; they were the shoes of one whose promise is better than her performance,

of one capable of alarming lapses—briefly, they didn't do.

And in the theory of the One Woman it is imperatively necessary that the whole should please in detail, as well as in its completeness. And—what a relief (yes! I had reached that stage already!) to be able to pack the manifold pros and cons into the compass of a syllogism—here was a detail which radically displeased, therefore Miss Perry was not the One Woman.

It was undoubtedly soothing to have the matter thus definitely settled; but it was anything but a graceful pastime to convey the assurance of that settlement to my companion. Is it conceivable that women really enjoy refusing their admirers? If so, they are amazingly strong-minded, judging by my own—but I abstain from further comment. Suffice it to say, I am conscious that a certain ardour which must have been perceptible in my attitude and manner—though I am not endowed with a superfluity of what is technically known as "facial expression"—flickered and died. And Miss Perry—I was unspeakably ashamed, yet how, oh! how I blessed her—must have been aware of that waning of a fine flame.

"Please give me my parasol, Mr. Hammond," she said, suddenly, hastily. "The sun is very hot."

She sat down, drooped down, upon the camp stool again. I was horribly afraid she was crying, as I handed her her umbrella—but I am not sure. I avoided looking at her. I really had not the face to do so, for I knew I must appear utterly despicable to her. I appeared so to myself. In spirit I poured forth volumes of scathing invectives against myself, vials of contemptuous wrath upon my own devoted head. I found it in my heart to wish the lake-boat might incontinently strike upon a rock and founder, and that I might magnanimously sacrifice my life—I am a singularly poor swimmer—in saving that of Miss Perry. This was a cheap wish, since I was aware the Lake of Geneva is deep beyond all possibility of shipwreck from the above cause.

During these twenty seconds—and more, for the silence lasted—I certainly paid a heavy price for those other twenty seconds of

delightful mental equilibrium. To speak was of necessity to apologise; and to apologise was little short of an insult. I might have gone away; but to go away seemed to me a course of action at once uncourteous and inconclusive. So, in rich discomfort, I waited. The bell had rung, we were steaming westward once more, while Montreux and its poplars receded in the distance.

"The civil marriage will take place on Thursday, at Geneva," Charlotte Perry said, at last. "Constantine has gone there to-day to see the Consul and make all necessary arrangements. He has been resident in the district for a sufficient length of time, there will be no difficulty or—or delay. The religious ceremony will take place here on Friday."

The girl looked up. Our eyes met.

"You will be present?" she added softly.

"Unfortunately I cannot be," I replied. "I leave by the mail to-night. I shall be in Paris, on my way to England."

"No, no!" Miss Perry cried.

She rose to her feet and faced me imperiously. Her tearful mood had wholly vanished. She became that which she had been the night before, almost alarming, almost tremendous, notwithstanding her youth and remarkable good looks.

"You shall not escape so easily," she said. "I have borne much from you, but I refuse to bear that. You shall not slip away comfortably and amuse yourself—perhaps with some other friend—friend?"—her voice took a most disconcerting inflection of sarcasm—"elsewhere, while you leave me to lift the great burden which you—yes, you—have helped to force upon me, unaided and alone. I have a claim on you—we need not discuss the exact nature of it, since you, I think, hardly dare deny its existence—and I require you to meet that claim to the full. This is not revenge, this is justice—bare justice. You shall be witness of this business to the very end. You shall see what I do, hear what I say—I will leave you no loophole for disbelief, for doubt. You shall recognise my worth—you shall admire my conduct—I will compel

you to admire it."

Suddenly Charlotte Perry's eyes filled and her mouth gathered into that really delicious suggestion of a kiss. I was carried away in spite of myself.

"I admire you already," I exclaimed. "You are extraordinary, you are enchanting."

Again, for a moment, the girl's appearance grew absolutely dazzling.

"Ah!" she cried, "I have wrung that out of you at last—no, pray say no more. Do not spoil your admission either by exaggeration or by explanation. Leave it as it stands. Submit to be spontaneous for once!"—

Her tone changed, became pensive, modest, full of hesitation.

"You will remain, Mr. Hammond, and take part in the—the sad—for some of us it must be sad—ceremony of Friday. Constantine will ask you to be his best man, and you will accept. Meanwhile you will help me—I think you will? This is Tuesday, so after all the time is short—you will help me to prevent my poor dear parents arriving at any premature knowledge of the truth. They must think that I—am happy—that—that I am glad. And I fear they are growing suspicious. To-day Mamma—but I will not trouble you with all that. You must help me lull their fears to rest."

Miss Perry raised her hand, laid it upon her eyes.

"I am very tired," she said. "We have talked enough."

She turned her back upon me, so disposing her yellow and black parasol that it offered an insuperable barrier to further conversation.

And I strolled away to the stern of the boat, there lighting upon Perry *père* and the Deputy Surgeon-General in full session, discussing the enormities of the Opium Traffic and the still greater ones of our venerable, late Radical premier. While listening to their artless, though wordy conversation, I bowed low before the genius of Charlotte Perry. I could not fathom her, she was beyond me; consequently—for masculine vanity recoils instinctively from the

feminine creature it has not the wit to fathom—she was not, and never could be for me, the One Woman. Yet she was, I owned it, a woman of ten thousand, for she could play a losing game, she could show herself great in the hour of defeat.

CHAPTER IV

IT is really rather annoying to find how, having once, though for the most perfectly legitimate object, started a disturbing line of thought, that line of thought refuses to quit you, finds perpetual occasion for reproducing itself; hunts you, in short, as though it had started you instead of your starting it. For instance, I had been very thoroughly into the question of the One Man and the One Woman on the lake-boat that afternoon. It would have appeared that, having so satisfactorily closed the question, I ought also to have disposed of it, and have been—for a time, at all events—delivered from its hauntings. But it was not so, it was not so. I might have closed the question, but very certainly I had failed to dispose of it. I had relieved my feelings in a sonnet to an imaginary Uniquely Fair One, in the small hours of the night. Yet, notwithstanding this drastic remedy—the metrical difficulties of sonnet-construction I find extremely reducing to an enkindled imagination, no wonder this particular form of poetic outcry has been dear to the distracted lover of all ages—I discovered next morning that, in truth, the question still retained the very strongest disposition to dispose, if not of me, still of my time and thought.

I loitered on the verandah after breakfast. The morning was positively divine, the air having just that hint of an edge to it which agreeably convinced you, notwithstanding the heat haze dancing over the brilliant landscape, that glaciers and snow-fields were after all within easy reach. And that edge to the air, far from soothing a slightly heated fancy, is liable to produce *des éblouissements* and provoke a feverish restlessness. Across the startlingly green lawn, just below, the lithe young Russian lady of the scarlet silk blouse and black pigtail wandered bare-headed. She was innocently employed in picking ox-eyed daisies and clover heads from among the grass; and as she plucked them she indulged in snatches of song—sad with the sorrow

of long northern winters, as it seemed to me, and the endless monotony of the Steppe.

I do not attempt to trace out the association of ideas. It may have been a revolt against the melancholy of the folk-song; it may have been an effect of colour—vivid scarlet against vivid green, the strong note of black—heaven forgive me if I begin to talk like an art critic!—in skirt and hair, affecting my brain as a dram might; it may have been a certain fierceness in the action of the fine-made, angular figure, stooping and pulling at the flowers—I can't pretend to say. Suffice it that my soul was invaded by a crazy longing to live, to give myself away, to be dangerous. I went back upon the position of yesterday; and it was borne in upon me—it has often been so before—that I am but a paltry creature, the decadent product of a decadent age. I know so well what to avoid, I know so very ill what to do. I fell to envying Leversedge his diabolic dog; Charlotte Perry the courage of her perversions—that perhaps is the best way of stating it; even Perry *père* his enthusiasm for the Primrose League and rich enjoyment of the enunciation of platitudes; even Percy Gerrard his inherent grossness. Oh! to be positive for once, instead of tentative merely, or negative! When candid persons tell me so, I wish, of course, to beat them; but, in the privacy of that evil quarter of an hour, I accused myself of being thin; and Myself answered that in truth I was, morally emotionally, and in respect of all action, thin, very lamentably thin indeed.

And just when I was touching the lowest deep of this unpleasant, but, no doubt, salutary depth of self-abasement, when I was becoming literally flattened out by the heavy weight of my own inadequacies, enter unto me Mrs. Perry. She emerged from the glass doors of the *salon* rotund and beaming.

"Dear me now, Mr. Hammond," she exclaimed, "this is what I really do call a piece of luck. I have been so wishing all the morning I had some lady-friend to talk it all over with; and you see I have nothing but acquaintances here, and I never can get over the feeling it isn't very

suitable to be intimate with the people you just meet travelling. You see, you don't really know anything about them, nor how they live, and how many servants they keep, and how they behave at home. It's so easy for anybody to look respectable on the Continent. And you're so afraid, if you take to them, it may make awkwardnesses afterwards,aren't you?"

All of which certainly did not come very much under the head of adventurous and vigorous living! Failing other female acquaintances, of well-accredited position, good Mrs. Perry took me. I was relegated to the modest position of the safe she-gossip, to that of the maiden aunt. For a moment the Eternal Masculine in me—for the Eternal Masculine does exist just as actually as the Eternal Feminine, though it happens at the present time not to have so fashionable a notoriety as the latter—arose in revolt. But in my present condition of self-abasement, it rebelled only for a moment. I had fallen very low in my own estimation. I was almost willing to regard myself as nothing better than an example of infructuous and hoary spinsterhood.

"You have always taken such a kind interest in our dear young people," she continued, "that I know you will be pleased to hear everything is so comfortably settled."

She confronted me bridling, her worthy moon-face suffused with smiles. But, unfortunately, the searching morning light did not suit my present companion as well as the scarlet-bloused figure that had been my late inspiration, and torment.

Mrs. Perry's matutinal appearance invariably suggested the thought that she was wearing out her last year's Sunday gown. The present example of that economical habit was green; enriched by steel and bugle ornaments, notably in the region of the waist, where they took the form of strings of pendants bearing an affinity to Papuan full dress. Her grey hair, smoothly banded on the brow, was greenish in hue from the too lavish application of some adhesive unguent. It was, moreover, surmounted by a lace and ribbon cap, in form and colour curiously resembling a poached egg. What remained to her of

her eyebrow, raised to a permanently surprised height, pushed her forehead up into innumerable horizontal lines. I found it impossible to dislike Mrs. Perry, she was too perfectly simple and genuine a being. Yet to me, just now, she proved confusing, for the tone of her profoundly insular voice, her comfortable and somewhat uncontrolled figure, even the last few words she had spoken, recalled irresistibly to my mind that mysterious functionary, the monthly nurse, whom, to my terror, I meet at the recurrent christening festivals which enliven the house of my excellent little married sister. Unable to divest my mind of this association of ideas, I answered Mrs. Perry slightly at random.

"I am delighted to hear it. I am to understand you, then, that they are both doing very well?"

"Oh, very well," Mrs. Perry replied with unction. "Indeed, Mr. Hammond, between ourselves, I think Charlotte's a very fortunate girl, for Constantine Leversedge has really being doing better than could have been expected."

The phrase was a little astonishing; but I retained my presence of mind.

"Good news upon good news!" I exclaimed. "This is capital."

"So it is; and I am sure I feel very thankful, and so does Mr. Perry."

Her eyebrows aspired still higher.

"For, of course, we've had our misgivings at times, Mr. Hammond. You see, we lost our dear little boy as an infant. So she's our only child."

The tenderness of the maternal passion found quite moving expression in Mrs. Perry's homely countenance.

"And being so remarkable and gifted as she is, we have sometimes wondered whether we ought to let things go on. Often and often, since we've been here, Mr. Perry's woke me in the night to talk about it—specially since Mrs. Mertyns came, and we couldn't help seeing what an interest Mr. Gerrard took in Lottie. Mr. Perry's a dreadfully poor sleeper when he has anything on his mind. I am sure if I've asked him once, I've asked him a dozen times,—'My dear, what

does make you so restless?' And he always answers,—'Charlotte's marriage, Mamma, Charlotte's marriage. It's not too late yet to interfere. She must not be permitted to throw herself away.'"

"A most proper sentiment on the part of your husband," I said.

"I am so pleased to know you think that, for sometimes I have been afraid Mr. Perry was inclined to place his hopes too high, and that it wouldn't bring a blessing. You see, there's a great deal said about not taking too much thought in the Bible, and—I daresay it is because I don't understand very quickly—these new translations do explain a great many of those difficulties in the Gospels, they tell me—but sometimes I was frightened lest we should be asking too much for Lottie."

Here Mrs. Perry placed herself in a chair. Hers was not the style of figure which can be described as gracefully permitting its possessor to sit down. I cannot pretend that Mrs. Perry was classic in her attitudes. She invariably sat up. Her smiles had waned rather beneath the disturbing influences of biblical criticism—now they shone forth again.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, "how pleasant it is to have a little chat! Though I don't know that I ought to be so confidential with you, Mr. Hammond. Only, as I say, you've always taken such a warm interest in our young people that I can't help feeling as if you were quite one of ourselves now. And then I always do think you can say things to a bachelor like you, you couldn't say to another gentleman. And you're older, you see," she added, heaping Pelion on Ossa in the matter of compliment. "I'm sure I don't know how I should have felt about leaving Charlotte alone the other night—particularly after what they told me afterwards—if I had not known you were there, Mr. Hammond."

Mrs. Perry beamed upon me while thus stabbing me. I seem to remember as a small boy discerning just such an air of complete and candid satisfaction upon the face of the hall clock, in our house at Brighton, when about to strike the dinner hour. I fear I was a greedy child, and may therefore have transferred the sensation of satisfaction

resident in my own breast to the face of the clock. I am sadder and wiser now. When satisfactions come I don't transfer them. They are too rare; I keep them for myself. Therefore I was very sure it was no reflected glory which now illuminated Mrs. Perry's countenance. And, repressing a recurring revolt of the Eternal Masculine in favour of the gratification of curiosity,—for a change had very evidently come over the spirit of the Perry-Leversedge dream since yesterday afternoon,—I sat down beside Mrs. Perry and tried by gentle arts to induce her to reveal more clearly the cause of jubilation.

CHAPTER V

"**WELL**, you see," said she, "what Mr. Perry felt was that Charlotte's marriage did not explain itself. I should have thought if the young people loved each other that was explanation enough. I am sure when Mr. Perry and I were engaged, our friends took for granted that was explanation enough, and so did dear father and mother too. But things move on so fast nowadays, Mr. Hammond, I'm sure I never quite know where I am—"

Mrs. Perry sighed.

"You are not alone. The pace is hot, and the Time-Spirit leaves many of us somewhat breathless," I remarked.

My companion probably knew as much about the Zeitgeist as about the theory of Palingenesis; but Mrs. Perry had a gracious habit of taking the will for the deed. She comprehended that my intention was consolation, she was therefore—in a measure, at all events—consoled.

"Yes, to be sure," she replied; "and Mr. Perry has kept on saying to me, 'We owe it to ourselves, Susan, and we owe it to Charlotte's very charming and cultivated circle of acquaintance, to show a really solid reason, to show sufficient cause—'"

(Ah! shade of M. de Voltaire!)

"For Mr. Perry always pointed out—though I never could quite understand why being clever should make so much difference—that in the case of such a talented girl as Charlotte, her friends wouldn't recognise affection as very much of a reason. It seems a pity, doesn't it?"

"So it does. Ten thousand pities," I rejoined very cordially.

The good woman beamed again.

"Dear me, with all your nice feelings—if it isn't too intimate to mention it—it does seem a loss you ain't married, Mr. Hammond.

There must be plenty of young ladies who would be so very willing, you know—indeed, I've more than once thought—if it hadn't been decided long ago—Mr. Perry and I—for there's no one I've seen for a long while I've taken so to—but then it is all decided, you see—and—"

I laid my hand on the arm of my companion's chair. I regarded her, as I believe, with an air of delicately mingled gratitude and restraint, for this was the very last road I wished to travel down with Mrs. Perry.

"It is all decided," I repeated. "And so, as to these settlements?"

"Ah yes,—I'm sure I shall always remember you as a very kind friend after to-day, Mr. Hammond. Well, when he'd seen the will, Mr. Perry said to me directly—and I was rather nervous Constantine overheard, but then he's very sensible, I don't think he's at all sensitive like some young men might be,—he said to me, 'It all lies here, Mamma, it all lies here! Everyone will admit this really fine income explains Charlotte's choice.'"

"Unquestionably wealth explains much to the mind of the modern world," I remarked.

"I am very pleased you agree with Mr. Perry," she said, with great cheerfulness. "I'll tell him you think Charlotte's friends will be satisfied; and I can't help hoping that may make him less excited than he has been lately. He is so very tenacious about her friends being satisfied."

After all, what is truth that we should be so desperately anxious to speak it? Absolute truth became unattainable, in all probability, many thousand centuries ago. Very distantly approximate truth is the utmost we can hope to arrive at in our present state of lamentable over-development, when the mist of unnumbered opinions has obscured every conceivable question of human conduct and of human relation. Is not the mere attempt to speak it, perhaps, a refined form of spiritual pride and self-seeking? Better, I think, rub a little emollient ointment of passing peace upon the soul of the brother or sister who happens to be nearest you, by endeavouring to take whatever view of things—not actually criminal—you perceive will yield them solace, however fleeting. So I begged Mrs. Perry to regard me as the mouthpiece of

the social gods; and bade her rest assured those high and holy divinities would unanimously applaud the wisdom of her daughter's choice, if the fortune Leversedge possessed, and the settlements he made, were really handsome.

"And they really are handsome?" I inquired.

"They seem so to me," she answered. "But then, Mr. Perry and I hadn't much to begin on at first, Mr. Hammond. We were in a very small way. He used to repeat beautiful lines about love in a cottage, which afforded the greatest pleasure to dear mother and father. I'm sure I can hear her kiss me now, upon my wedding-morning, just when she had done lacing my dress—it was very becoming to the figure, but a very inconvenient fashion, those day-dresses lacing up behind—and say to me,—'Thank God, Susie, you will have that in your husband which is better than riches, for Joseph has a truly good heart.'"

She paused, blushed a little, and her bosom heaved ominously. Ah, well, happy is the woman who has had her romance, even if it take the rat-like form of a Joseph Perry! I respectfully averted my eyes until such time as my companion should have recovered from too acute memories of those early enchantments, and they lighted upon the wearer of the scarlet blouse, reclining on the grass at the foot of a grey-green stemmed tulip tree. One of the debilitated young Russians stood before her haranguing her with impassioned gestures. Evidently she disagreed with him; and disagreement, so far, took the form of a silence quite hugely provoking. I watched them, I turned back to Mrs. Perry. That man, at least, touched something very like absolute truth who declared "it takes all sorts to make a world."

"But of course I was very different to Charlotte," my innocent companion continued. "I had not her requirements. I didn't mind makeshifts—"

She laughed a little apologetically.

"Between ourselves, I don't mind them much now. They make me feel easy. But they don't make Charlotte easy; they seem to mortify

her, and she points things out to me—her standard of taste is very high. And I should be the last person to undervalue that, still sometimes I do find it a little tiring. You see, you never do quite get over the way you were brought up, Mr. Hammond. And I do seem to have so many things to remember, people never troubled about when I was young, that when I have got hold of one I am pretty sure to forget some other; and, of course, I know that must be mortifying to Charlotte and her father."

"Alas! we must all pay the penalties of progress, my dear lady," I said, I trust not too abominably sententiously.

"I suppose we must"—Mrs. Perry sighed. "Still, it's a very troubling thing to feel what you do is a subject of mortification to others. Sometimes it makes me dreadfully low-spirited. I do try to feel it's just the cross that is laid upon me, Mr. Hammond; and to count the many undeserved blessings I have to set against it."

Simplicity is disarming.

"I am sure you do," I replied in tones of the sincerest conviction. "And among the blessings we are evidently to count these same settlements. Tell me about them, if it is not indiscreet to do so. I am profoundly curious in the matter."

"Well, yes, I'm sure you are; and I don't think it is indiscreet with you—at least, if it is, I believe I can trust you not to mention it, because I think you are one of those who really do like to give pleasure, and naturally you see it's a great pleasure to me to have a little chat over it all. And, you know, I wouldn't say a single word for anything, but I had been told something, and, the consequence was, dear Charlotte and I did fall out a little yesterday. Mr. Perry took her away on the lake afterwards. I daresay he acted all for the best, but I felt rather hurt, you know. I daresay I had been over anxious. But she keeps it up—Charlotte does keep things up a little sometimes. She's been distant with me this morning even, so that I haven't been able to have a nice comfortable gossip with her over it all as it would seem suitable I should have."

"All that will come later, dear Mrs. Perry," I asserted. "Just now your daughter is of necessity slightly self-absorbed, slightly *distraite*. Surely you can recall a kindred state of mind under kindred circumstances—on the eve of your own marriage?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I am afraid I cried a great deal at leaving mother—though I wouldn't have given up Joseph—Mr. Perry, I mean—on any account. Charlotte doesn't ever cry—she never has been given to crying since she was a child, you know. And I suppose I oughtn't to want her to. But then Charlotte and I are very different. My tears always came easily."

"Self-control is the order of the day," I rejoined. "And as to these settlements, if you will pardon my importunity?"

"I am afraid I do wander," Mrs. Perry said humbly. "They often tell me so. But, you see, I have had so much on my mind, and Mr. Perry has been very excitable,—really at times—let me see, he gives her—I mean Constantine does—a thousand a year for her separate use; that does seem to me very handsome. I'm sure I don't know what she can find to spend it on. I said to her she ought to put away more than half against a rainy day. But Constantine laughed—he has a very free, pleasant laugh has Constantine. But I don't feel quite easy about him. He looks very pulled and worn to me. I shouldn't like to think he'd anything on his mind, Mr. Hammond; but in those foreign places young men do lead very wild lives sometimes, I'm afraid."

"Take my word for it, Leversedge is a jewel of gold, Mrs. Perry," I asserted warmly.

"Well, I am sure I have often wished to ask you, only it didn't seem a proper thing to do. But just now it popped out before I could help it. And, of course, one does hear very sad stories now and then. But I suppose it's just his health then, the change, coming away from those very hot climates and everything. I think he wants care, and I am sure I should be very pleased to give it him. I often wish to make him nice little things to take, and look after his linen. If there's anything that goes to my heart it's that a young man should have to sew on his own

tapes and buttons. But I am always afraid he might resent anything like that as a liberty. Of course, there's so much a person of my age can do for a gentleman that wouldn't be suitable from a younger person. Perhaps when Charlotte's married I may seem to get nearer to him."

Mrs. Perry clasped and unclasped her hands nervously, upon that which had been her waist.

"It was a dreadful thing to lose our baby, Mr. Hammond," she said. "I always wished for a son, and though I did pray to be kept from being rebellious, I am afraid I have been envious of other women when I saw them with nice little boys of their own. His dying seemed to leave me with a sort of emptiness; and I have felt lately as if Constantine—or any husband Charlotte had, because, of course, she might have married otherwise—might come to fill it, if I could only get near him, you know."

The lady of the scarlet silk blouse had arisen from her couch upon the grass. She came slowly from under the dancing shade of the tulip-tree, and, passing with her companion along the sunny path, paused at the foot of the flight of steps below us. On either hand were wide beds of dwarf roses—pink, yellow, and red. Behind lay the long, downward slope of the great lawn to the alley by the shore—in which sauntered some ladies of our company, clothed in light summer dresses— overshadowed by poplars, chestnuts, and willows, between whose stems glittered the intense blue of the lake. The young woman had taken up her parable now, and the purrings and spittings of her curiously agitating Russian speech were as arresting to the attention as her vigorous angular gestures. My thoughts, I am ashamed to say, wandered. I did not hear the beginning of good Mrs. Perry's next remarks.

"—in case of his death—and I know it's wicked, Mr. Hammond, but I do so dislike death;—'I leave to my wife Charlotte, absolutely, all I die possessed of,' it said,—I mean, the will said."

"Yes! that is liberal," I exclaimed, half involuntarily. Poor

Leversedge, there were no reservations, no half measures in his dealing, anyhow. Such as his life was, he lived it to the full.

"So it is," Mrs. Perry agreed; "I really don't see how it could be more so. And there seems to be a great deal to leave in stocks and shares, and railways and land and mines, and so on. I didn't attempt to tot it up, for I felt a little overcome, you know; but Mr. Perry ran through it all in no time—Joseph always has been very noted for rapid calculation—and, of course, I know his face so well, after all these years, I could tell in an instant. Too, he did say to me, 'princely, positively princely,' under his breath, so I knew it must be something quite above the average, and that we all had reason to be very thankful. Still, I do wish nothing had been said about death, Mr. Hammond."

I pointed out at some length, and with, I trust, the utmost mildness, that the question of death has a frequent habit of entering into the question of a will.

"I suppose it has," Mrs. Perry said. "All the same, it does seem a very shocking thing for a young man like Constantine to be occupied about just when he's going to be married. Of course, it was very foolish, but it gave me a dreadful turn. It seemed somehow to bring back these last days when we lost our dear little boy; I am sure I don't know why, for Constantine is a grown man, and he was an infant. But I seemed to feel as if poor Charlotte was a widow before she was a wife, for the minute, if it isn't too familiar to say so, and that's enough to give anybody a turn, Mr Hammond, don't you think so?"

CHAPTER VI

DECIDEDLY the middle class should avoid high spirits. As a condition of mind and body, high spirits are questionably becoming, even in the young and noble; while in persons of mature age and unexalted, though maybe respectable, station, they are liable to degenerate into that which is really very terrible indeed.

All this was borne in upon me forcibly during the ensuing five minutes.

"Mamma!—where is Mrs. Perry? Mamma!"

And, as so frequently, in urgent pursuit of a missing member of his family, Perry *père* chased along the terrace below. Regardless of the evident fervour of their conversation, I beheld him draw up before the two Russians, raise the grey felt hat with its streaming pugaree, and inquire—Mr. Perry invariably appeared to entertain the idea that all foreigners are afflicted with deafness, so he bawled the said inquiry, smiling the while with a sort of voracious intensity—

"*Pardon, mademoiselle*, pray excuse me—*mais avez vous vu Madame Perry? Savez vous où elle est, où est, enfin, ma femme?*"

The young lady looked round in very evident surprise. Then her eyes lighted on me. And their expression was not without malice, as she extended her hand in the direction of the verandah with a sweeping gesture, which had the effect of enclosing Mrs. Perry and myself, of framing us for ever side by side.

"*Mais la voilà, monsieur*," she said. "*La voilà avèc monsieur son ámi*."

"Ah! ha! I see," cried Mr. Perry gaily. "*Mille fois merci, mademoiselle*."

And, dragging on a pair of purplish-brown kid gloves, he hurried up the steps.

"I see," he cried, shaking his two fingers archly, "I see. A sly flirtation with mamma. Naughty, very naughty,—

Billing and cooing together they sat,
Quite unaware they were watched by the cat."

I am not naturally of a bloodthirsty disposition, but there are hours when the mildest men become as furies. I could have massacred Perry *père* just then. An application of the wheel, the rack, the boot, or the thumb-screw would have given me rapture. I could have roasted him at a slow fire without a movement of compassion. All the more so, that I perceived her knowledge of the English language was quite sufficient to give the lady of the red silk blouse a strong sense of the inglorious comedy of my position. To kill is well. To be offended is often undignified, and always silly. It is not in my power to kill, so I smiled benignly upon Mr. Perry, and did my possible to meet him in a Christian spirit.

"Yes," I said, "Mrs. Perry has been more than kind, and we have had a, to me, delightful little talk. I congratulate you. I have been hearing capital news."

"Ah! ha! I understand," he replied. "She could not keep it to herself —

The brimming pitcher sure will overflow,
And spill the ruby liquor on the thirsty soil below.

Well, well, I own there are excuses for a tendency to garrulity on the part of some of us this morning! A difficult chapter in our family annals is happily concluded; a period of anxiety is past; a shadow is, as one may say, lifted from our parental hearts. But I trust, my love, you have not exaggerated?" he added, in sterner and more judicial accents. "I would not have a false impression created. We must not make too much of it, Mr. Hammond."

"Indeed, there appears to be a most agreeably heavy amount to make much of," I remarked.

"An elegant competence," Mr. Perry said airily,—"an elegant competence. Our daughter will be in a position to gratify her literary

and artistic tastes, to entertain her circle of friends in becoming style, and take that place in London society for which, as I at once proudly and gratefully asseverate, her talents so eminently fit her. This is the reward of my fostering care. I recognise it. Yes, yes, I own to-day you see in me a happy father, and a very nice thing that is to see, I'm sure. But now to business—my love, I am on my way to the boat. I mentioned to Charlotte, and she agreed with me, that after the flattering sympathy—really most flattering to all of us as a family—which she has exhibited, it was only due to Mrs. Mertyns that she should be early acquainted with the rosy hue which now, as I may say, flushes our daughter's future. There have been moments," said Mr. Perry darkly, drawing himself up and addressing me,—"as our charming friend Mrs. Mertyns well knows—only yesterday—but let that pass. I will not dwell on fears once entertained. Hope has now taken their place.—Yes, Mr. Hammond, our dear children will enjoy a very pretty little fortune—

Gold, much red gold, shall grace these nuptials
And cement the basis of domestic joys."

"Well, I am very willing Mrs. Mertyns should know," Mrs. Perry responded. "I thought of writing home myself to my cousins, and dear Aunt Trumbull at Brixton. They've always been very true to me, and—"

"Quite so, quite so, my dear—and therefore Charlotte has penned a brief note, and has commissioned me to be the bearer of it. I have it here"—he tapped the breast-pocket of his coat. "Yes, Mr. Hammond, without seeking to obtrude myself, I may just hint that practical experience has given me a not contemptible knowledge of such matters, and I have much pleasure in testifying to the excellent business capacity of our future son-in-law. Leversedge has done well, remarkably well, considering his age and opportunities. I could wish he had displayed less reticence regarding the amount of his income. Clear information under that head would have spared us many anxious hours,—wouldn't it, Mamma?"

"Leversedge is admirably modest," I said parenthetically.

This remark produced a really extraordinary expression of reflective wisdom on the part of Mr. Perry. He meditated visibly, as visibly roused himself from meditation.

"Most true," he replied. "I yield to no one in my appreciation of our dear boy Constantine—Mamma will bear me out in that. But, as one of our greatest poets observes,—

Let not your modesty outrun discretion
Lest, falling from fair favour to contempt,

You mask a greater by a lesser good. And there has been a touch of secretiveness, a hint, perhaps,—though far be it from me to be harsh,—of that pride which apes humility in Constantine's attitude."

"To be sure, I never thought of him as proud now," interposed Mrs. Perry.

"Ah! ah! my love, public life, the rub of the world—eh, Mr. Hammond?—teaches us men to read men—yes, very shrewdly indeed, to read them."

"It doesn't prevent most of you making mistakes over women, though, sometimes," the good creature said quite sharply. Then she repented, and looked very mildly at her husband.—"So you're going up by the boat then, Joseph," she added.

The fashion of a rat had become very apparent in Mr. Perry, but he controlled himself. Perhaps he meant to speak to Mrs. Perry quietly alone afterwards. This is one of the advantages of matrimony; let us be fair to that much-canvassed institution;—it gives excellent opportunities for the private, unwitnessed adjustment of small differences.

"Yes, yes," he cried,—

"With thee, my bark, I swiftly speed

Across the foaming brine— call on Mrs. Mertyns; communicate the information, which I am convinced she will cordially welcome, and return here in time for the midday meal, unless she should ask me to remain. I do not think I could very well refuse, you know. I think we owe it to Mrs. Mertyns to accept any invitation of hers. You will not

therefore feel anxious, my love, should my return be delayed. Make my apologies to our end of the table."

Here Mr. Perry struggled violently, almost showily, for all his playfulness had returned, with the fingers of his kid gloves.

"Oblige me by holding my umbrella, Mamma, while I reduce these offenders to order. New? Yes, Mr. Hammond; and they are a little wayward, a little, as I may say, recalcitrant. Patience, always patience —even the trivialities of existence call that godlike virtue into exercise at times.—Which reminds me of what I was saying to Constantine just now, and I am convinced you will endorse it. A fortune must not only be made, it must be guarded, be increased. Is there, indeed, any reason why it should not be doubled? A wife, as I pointed out to him (for it is only prudent to reckon with these little possible accidents beforehand), not infrequently implies a family. It is therefore his duty not to relax his efforts. Children are costly commodities in these days, extremely costly. Let him therefore look forward, and continue to apply himself to business. As I told him, neither Mrs. Perry nor myself would ever stand in his way, if the state of his affairs pointed to the desirability of his taking a three or six months' trip to the southern confines of the Dark Continent. During his absence, his home should be ours. With perfect security he could leave his Charlotte under the protection of her natural guardians. Mamma and I would join her at her house in town at any moment. Ah, and that reminds me, we must consult you upon a knotty point,—a knotty point, Mr. Hammond! In favour of which locality is your vote given? Where shall they reside? Mamma inclines to the north side of the park; eh, my love? But I maintain she is in error. A young *ménage* should be *en evidence*. So give me Mayfair or Belgravia," exclaimed Mr. Perry daringly, "for preference, Belgravia."

"Well, I always shall say people are much more neighbourly in the suburbs or out Bayswater way than down in the squares," Mrs. Perry asserted, with a certain mild obstinacy.

"Neighbourly!" cried her husband, as he might have cried 'murder.'

"My dear, there are social distinctions which I fear your mind will never—here, give me, if you please, my umbrella."

The chunking sound of the engines of the approaching lake-boat claimed the speaker's attention and restored his good humour.

"Farewell," he added—"I must away. Remember, I may be detained. I may be unable to join you at *déjeûner*. Your kindest regards, I am sure, to our charming friends, Mr. Hammond."

And, with flying pugaree and waving umbrella, he fled down the steps and across the sunny lawn in the direction of the panting steamer. In even the best trained wives, the most thoroughly domesticated—as the advertisements put it—of women, domesticity will wear a trifle thread-bare now and again. Mrs. Perry adjusted her cap, around the lace and ribbons of which the wind had frolicked somewhat too freely, with dignity.

"You see, Mr. Perry is rather excited," she said. "I suppose everybody forgets themselves sometimes under excitement, and of course he has been very troubled about Charlotte's future, and now that everything's so comfortably settled he feels the—"

She so evidently searched about for a word that I suggested "reaction."

"Yes, reaction. That's just it, and thank you. And I am sure I shall always be grateful to you for our pleasant chat, and for letting me be so confidential."

She executed a movement as of rising from her chair.

"Permit me," I said, offering my hand as a pulley.

I experienced a sensation of dead weight, followed—Mrs. Perry being on her feet—by one of the most affectionate pressure. She had a motherly hand, and a motherly hand is still among the dearest things of experience, by whoever possessed, even when one acknowledges to the fatal age of forty.

"My dear lady," I repeated, "the gratitude should be mine. I am honoured by your confidence in me."

She smiled, blinked, choked a little.

"I suppose when you're getting on in life, like I am, you always feel a little lonely. And then, kindness, and somebody who'll listen, does go to your heart somehow."

She arranged herself, smoothed down the Papuan full dress.

"Well, I'll go up and write to Aunt Trumbull," she said. "The post's at twelve, and, I'm sorry to say, I never was very quick over letters."

CHAPTER VII

SO Charlottle Perry never cried,—never, from a child, had been given to the weakness of weeping. Among the many enlightening pieces of information I had recently received, this struck me as one of the most interesting. I found myself repeating it over and over as I loitered down the garden. Perplexing young person! And the copious tears of yesterday, what then did they indicate? A breaking down of stoicism; the heart of the woman fairly touched at last; or merely a pose more elaborate, more realistically developed, than all former poses?

In the days of my youth and my vanity, I thought I knew a great deal about human nature; I fancied myself an adept in the reading of character. But as I grow older I grow less and less confident of my own astuteness. My slowness in "catching on" indeed appears to me positively abysmal. The comprehension—in the true sense of that word—of even the most fatuous of one's fellow-mortals demands, not only a patience almost superhuman, but a lifetime of observation. One thing among all the perplexities, however,was quite certain, namely, that I had not got to the end of Charlotte Perry yet.

Meanwhile, I own, I kept a look-out for the scarlet silk blouse. Not only did I need a change from the Perry atmosphere to a less depressing climate and wider horizon, but I owed the owner of that brilliant garment one, to put it vulgarly. "Discipline must be maintained," as observed the immortal Sergeant Bagnet. She had been malicious. She must pay for her malice—somehow—were it only indirectly by acting as an antidote to the insularity of good Mrs. Perry. But the offender had become invisible. I searched for her, but I searched vainly. She and her dyspeptic cavalier had disappeared. Finally, hearing a sound of voices from the place of gnats, I turned my footsteps thither.

Alas! under the sharp-edged shadow of the plane-trees only two English nurses and their charges were visible.—A small boy and girl,—two wildly active blue and white little beings, apparently in imminent risk of immersion, jumping from gunwale to gunwale of the pack of rowing-boats that were drawn up half out of the water on the paved slope at the near end of the little harbour. And a lusty infant of tender age, armed with a wooden spade, and suffering permanent eclipse, as to its face, from the vast proportions of a flapping white linen hat, who made staggering rushes in unexpected directions; indulging, meanwhile, in that wordless and wholly unrelated description of vocalisation, which should delight the heart of the evolutionary philologist, since it points so distinctly to the conclusion that the utterances of the primæval savage are heard over again in the earliest notes of the contemporary Christian child.

It was uncommonly warm under the plane-trees. Owing to the turn of the coast-line the whole of the little bay was sheltered from the breeze; so that the gay-coloured flags of the rowing-boats, among which the stars and stripes predominated, hung limp and flaccid from the white stern-posts. The length of the stone pier lay in a blaze of sunshine. And at the extreme end of it, raised high above the quay by a flight of steep steps, stood, not the accentuated black and red figure of my coveted young Russian, but Leversedge,—tall, gaunt, curiously unsubstantial looking, in a pale brown shooting-coat and white trousers.

His back was towards me, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders rounded, as he gazed down into the blue water ridged with slow, smooth undulations from the wash of the lately passed steamer. He was absolutely still—a modern St. Simeon Stylites upon his lonely pillar—victim, even as this last was, allowing for the difference of outlook brought about by the lapse of fifteen centuries, of the strange torments of a fixed idea.

I walked nearly the length of the pier before hailing him (the stones, I remember, struck quite hot even through the soles of my

boots), and when, in response to my greeting, he turned round, it was in the slow, dazed manner of a man half asleep.

"My dear fellow," I said, "the effect of you up there is finely statuesque, and most appropriately so. I have been holding converse with Mrs. Perry—who, by the same token, is as dear and kind a soul as ever stepped—and I find you are very much the hero of the hour. But I have had no speech of you for two days. Descend, therefore, oh great man, from your pedestal, and account for yourself. Tell me how you are."

Thus admonished, Leversedge stepped down to the level of the quay.

"She told you about it all, and they're pleased?" he said. "That's a good thing, anyhow. I'm immensely glad."

As he spoke, I took a steady look at Leversedge, and that which I saw, upon my word, I should not be sorry to forget. His eyes were sunk in his head, and circled by a bluish-black stain. His face was very thin and positively grey in colour, causing his close brown beard to seem unnaturally dark and bright. And this had a ghastly effect somehow, as though the man's hair alone was alive, the rest of him, though he moved and spoke, already dead. His appearance was so startling that I could not help commenting on it.

"You're not well," I said.

Leversedge raised his eyebrows, and smiled at me in his curiously patient way.

"I'm sure I don't know. On the whole I imagine not," he replied. "But really I begin to forget. Was I ever well? Is anybody ever well? Isn't it all a matter of degrees, after all? Some cheerful old johnny once declared the beginning of living was, rightly understood, merely the beginning of dying, didn't he? And as you get older the process of dissolution merely gets more way on, I suppose. The pace quickens when you're nearing the post."

"But, my dear friend, at your age one by no means necessarily nears the post. There are ways and means. Something can and must

be done to prevent it."

"Make me warm, then," said Leversedge. "I am so dismally and infernally cold. I don't believe I am more cowardly than most men, but the cold frightens me. I am always seeing a picture, I once came across somewhere, of men and women frozen into a great sea of ice. I fancy it was an illustration of Dante,—mean, spiteful sort of thing it always struck me, to stick all the people who annoyed you into the wrong place like that, in a poem, for themselves and everybody else to read. I came down here," he added, "to try to bake the shivers out of me. But it's no good. This European sun of yours is a miserably one-horse concern. It gives out about as much heat as a square foot of looking-glass."

I was greatly concerned for Leversedge.—"Is it the old story?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I've been spending a happy night with my faithful dog," he said. "Nine hours of uninterrupted enjoyment."

And then, as by mutual consent, we looked very hard at each other; while the lusty infant under the plane-trees, filled by the sense of its own well-being, upraised its voice in still louder shoutings, and the empty boats bumped against one another, with soft gurglings and suckings of water, as the little boy and girl skirmished about them playing some game of wild adventure.

"No, Hammond, I am not mad. Appearances are frightfully against me; but, before God, I don't believe I am mad," Leversedge said solemnly. "What it all is, and why it all is, I don't know. I have gone back through everything, as far as I can remember, and my record,—it isn't perfectly clean; whose is, after all, you know?—but it is not worse than most men's. So I can't make out that I have done anything to bring this upon myself. I suppose it's folly ever to try to go behind the fact. What is, is; and there's the beginning and end of it. And, as I told you, in that dead camp I saw the Thing-too-Much. Still, one would always like to know why. It occurs to one Somebody must be

accountable, and one would be obliged if They'd kindly explain,—that's all."

Leversedge's dead face smiled pathetically upon me.

"But They don't explain," he added. "I don't want to be blasphemous, but it occurs to one sometimes that perhaps They're not so very much to blame,—perhaps They can't explain."

"Ah! there you touch bottom," I said. "You can get no lower. You have reached the land of Outer Darkness, where reigns the Everlasting Despair. Come out of that. It, anyhow, is absolutely no good. Put it away from you. If it had been proved up to the hilt,—which, remember, it never yet has been, or, as far as I can see, ever can be,—still it would be the part of the wise man to deny it, to ignore it, to refuse utterly to think of it."

"Since when have you turned preacher, Hammond?" Leversedge asked. Then he added almost immediately,—"I beg your pardon. I am an ass. One may be in a pretty bad way, but it is superfluous to be uncivil."

"Perpetrate incivilities of the most aggravated character, and I will endure them like a lamb, like a sucking-dove, like that unpardonably-irritating creature, 'patient Grizel' herself, only, don't lose heart."

There was a silence. Leversedge's eyes rested on the children playing in the sunshine in the gaily painted boats.

"That must be awfully jolly," he said presently. "One would be glad to go back. And yet one would merely have to do it all over again, which would be—"

He shivered.

"I drove it away four or five times last night," he added. "But it only went round and curled itself into my back. That was the finish. I was so absurdly tired,—that little bit of business with the Consul yesterday regularly knocked me up—I don't know what I am coming to,—but I hadn't the energy to get up and move about, so I lay still and let it lie. And it chilled me clean through."

Not my worst enemy has ever accused me of an intemperate

passion for physical exercise; but there are times when one must do violence even to one's highest virtues.

"Come and drink," I said, "and then come and walk. Even a salamander might find some of the vineyard paths on the hillside agreeably sultry. You may get warm there in time—heaven knows, I shall get so soon enough. We can but try."

Under the plane-trees the lusty infant, backing away from its own spadeful of pebbles, came into violent collision with my companion's long legs. Involuntarily it assumed a sitting position with, to itself, unexpected rapidity and force. Leversedge stooped down and picked up the baby, which, by no means disconcerted by its sudden elevation, continued to send forth prehistoric cries of unalloyed cheerfulness.

"You're a nice, promising little chap," Leversedge remarked.

Whereat the baby ceased its calling, contemplated him from under its flapping sun-hat with owl-like solemnity, decided in his favour, and pouted out a round moist mouth for a kiss. I own to a movement of accentuated embarrassment in the face of such frank infantile advances. Not so Leversedge. He planted a very square kiss on the pouting lips.

"Dear little chap, kind little chap," he murmured.

The nurse advanced flurried and apologetic.

"Master So-and-so," for this creature, a span long, already apparently possessed both a name and rank of its own—"never minded where he was going."

"Oh! well, he went most uncommonly right this time, anyhow," Leversedge answered, as he gave the child carefully back into her arms.

He walked on at rather a breathless pace.

"Hammond," he said presently, "you know we're to be married to-morrow. That is, half-married—before the Consul at Geneva. I'm almost ashamed to ask you; it will be a long way there and back, and I am afraid you'll be awfully bored, but, look here, I should be

tremendously grateful to you if you'd come."

"Of course," I replied, "I will come."

"That's very good of you," he said. "I know Charlotte will be immensely pleased at your coming. She told me she'd spoken to you about it. She had a little talk with you yesterday."

"So she did, so she had," I answered. And, good gracious, about how many surprisingly other matters had she not spoken in the course of that same little talk? Amazing Charlotte Perry, who from her childhood, as her mother reported, had "never cried"! In spirit I yearned over Leversedge. How, in the name of fortune, would it all turn out?

We went for our walk. The paths between the vineyard walls were basting. I have reason to believe that I lost many pounds during that walk. And Leversedge talked of South Africa; of elephants, ostriches, and diamond fields; of Imperial Federation; of the very nasty habits of the noble savage. He was really amusing upon the latter subject. Of all practical jokers the savage, upon his showing, is the most professional, the most advanced. During the whole time he mentioned (putting, as I fancied, a pretty strong force upon himself) neither his approaching marriage nor his diabolic dog.

To luncheon, Perry *père*—who, it may be noted in passing, had, by the exercise of some diplomacy, secured to himself the seat at the head of the long *table-d'hôte*—did not return; and Leversedge, in obedience of a gentle command on the part of the Carissima, occupied his place. The spaces between the windows of the great, cool dining-room, and the inside wall of it, were freely incrusted with plaques of looking-glass. From my station halfway down the room—I invariably indulge myself with a separate table when staying in hotels—I could see Leversedge's bright dark head and beard and somewhat deathly profile reflected back and forth, apparently endlessly, to right and left; on one side of him the charming face and brilliant colouring of his *fiancée*, on the other the worthy clock-moon countenance of his future mother-in-law.

Miss Perry talked softly to him; her manner was delicious, most engaging, winning, and modest; and he listened to her, watched her, with a sort of rapture. He also, I believe, drank a whole bottle of champagne; but, so far as I could discover, he ate nothing, and I knew he was still cold, cold as a corpse.

PHASE FOURTH

CHAPTER I

"**THIS** is jocund," cried Mr. Perry, when I met him in the hall next morning.

In honour of impending events he was clothed distinctly as a citizen, in a shiny black-cloth frock coat and a tall hat—which last he put on and took off again with rather feverish uncertainty. This might be jocund, yet I am bound to confess I found his appearance highly suggestive of that of a successful undertaker. In manner he was varied, spry in the main, but lapsing into reticence, self-recollection, even austerity.

"My ladies will be with us directly. At least, if they're not I'll just run up in the lift and fetch them. The fair sex is too often a little, just a little deficient in that strict observance of the virtue of punctuality, Mr. Hammond, which the sterner public duties falling to our lot compel us so rigidly to practise. Well, well, we must pardon them—

'Tis theirs to note the passing of the hour,
Reclined at ease upon the low divan,
But by the sunshine's waxing, waning power,
But by the opening, closing of the flower,
The lute's faint echo and the faltering fan
As sleep invades the drooping eyelids' delicate span," recited Mr. Perry, suddenly becoming quite voluptuous and eastern.—"And on an auspicious occasion such as this, we all know how it is," he added indulgently,—"a bow of ribbon here, a trinket there; just those supplementary, those fancy touches, which the mirror provokes and from the multiplication of which every true woman finds it so hard to tear herself away. Even Mamma is vain. I am happy to say so—upon my word, I am proud to say so. For, that a woman should continue to desire to please after three decades of married life—though 'tis hardly fair on Mamma to let cats out of bags as to the lapse of time in

this way, eh?—shows a marvellous freshness of sentiment, of what I may call a wholesomeness of disposition, doesn't it, Mr. Hammond?"

"Mrs. Perry increasingly claims my respectful admiration," I replied, with perfect sincerity.

"Good," he murmured, "good, good. Occasions such as that which brings us together this morning—and most happy I am, I'm sure, to be brought together—inevitably carry us back in thought and unseal the fount of tender memories. Yes, I am glad to record my hearty conviction that I was not in error when I invited her, whom you now know as Susan Perry, to become the partner of my mortal course. And it's not every husband who can say as much as that at the end of thirty years, Mr. Hammond. Little ups and downs," he added archly, —"little ups and downs, as a matter of course; but on the whole the ups have it."

Here the arrival of the hotel omnibus at the wide-open door of the portico, with much grating of the brake and the jingling of the fat horses' collar bells, claimed Mr. Perry's attention. He glanced at his watch in an important, high-official sort of manner, then relaxed genially.

"Time yet—time yet," he said. "We can still afford our ladies five more minutes in which to complete the mysteries of the toilette.—Constantine has preceded us on foot to the station. I have had a word with him this morning. He appears serious; but that is as it should be. I, for one, would not have it otherwise. For, indeed, I have not abstained from pressing home upon him frequently, in familiar conversation, the very heavy responsibility which he undertakes in undertaking my daughter's future happiness.—But our fair companions tarry. I must see to it.—A moment to fetch Charlotte and Mamma and I will be with you again, Mr. Hammond. *Au revoir—a bientôt*."

And, humming strange melodies, which I imagine were intended to represent Mendelssohn's time-honoured Wedding March, Mr. Perry bestowed himself within the painted cage of the lift, and was borne

aloft, vanishing god-like in the upper regions of the atmosphere.

Yet, after all, was it jocund? I asked myself this question many times as we set forth, a self-conscious and ill-assorted little band, upon the morning of that particularly grilling September day. For clearly, to my thinking, it would have been far better had we proceeded in detachments—Leversedge and myself by boat and the others by train, or *vice versâ*. I cannot think it fair to keep a man constantly under inspection when he is just about to condemn himself to that form of life-sentence commonly known as marriage. And the disadvantages of the bridegroom's position were aggravated, in the present instance, by the fact that this was but a dress rehearsal, the production of the piece not really taking place until to-morrow. I had ventured to submit that it would be a more merciful arrangement did the religious marriage follow hard on the heels of the civil one; and did we—Perry *père et mère* and myself—say farewell to the happy pair at Geneva, leaving them to set forth promptly upon their wedding journey.

But the wisdom of the Perry family decided otherwise, and I fancy the proprietor of the *Grand Hôtel*, foreseeing custom, fortified them in their decision. It was to be a *fête*, a gala. The little grey English Church, which stands in such agitatingly close proximity to the railway that passing trains take a very active part in the service, was to be turned into St. George's, Hanover Square, for the event. All would be there, friends and enemies alike—for what pretty and popular woman but is bound to number a few of the latter among her acquaintance, specially in the restricted society of a summer hotel?

"I could have wished to give my daughter away," Mr. Perry had said to me, "within the hallowed precincts of one of our fine, old, historic piles. But, since that pious satisfaction is denied me, we must make the most we can of what we have,—make the most of it. A foreign land, an alien tongue, but still a rally of warm English hearts about our blushing bride. This our sojourn at the *Grand Hôtel* will have secured us. We can count on it, I am happy to say,—count on it."

So we set forth for Geneva, a self-conscious and ill-assorted little band, as I have already stated; and should doubtless have returned thence in the same order, or disorder, save for an unexpected turn of feeling on the part of Charlotte Perry.

And here let me pause to render a tribute to a lady of whom I have so far, I am afraid, spoken with but moderate enthusiasm, viz., Mrs. Mertyns, who, on this memorable day, certainly did her possible to mitigate the embarrassments of the situation.

It fell to my lot to convey Mrs. Perry across the many lines of metals intervening between the platform and the train for Geneva. Have you ever happened to drive a tender-hearted stray sheep and a loitering lamb? I never have; yet after my experience with Mrs. Perry I seem to possess a quite professional knowledge of such driving. For it required all the authority, let alone all the persuasive arts, of which I am master to compel the dear, good woman—glorious in a purple poplin costume, plentifully "relieved" with gold sequins—across those many lines of rails. With the greatest activity I had to head her off to right and left, as she turned and doubled, greatly flustered, afraid of non-existent trains, afraid of possible disaster to Mr. Perry, supremely afraid of parting with her lamb, the Carissima; afraid that innocent creature would be left behind, lost, never bestowed safely within the matrimonial fold after all. And it was with sincere relief, after prolonged struggles, that I beheld the grim form and cast-iron countenance of the great Septimus Mertyns advancing upon us. Two might attain where one had failed. To begin with, he assured my agitated charge that there was plenty of time; to go on with, that he had secured seats for us all in a first-class carriage. He proceeded, with my assistance, kindly but firmly to hoist the panting lady up the narrow iron steps on to the back platform of the said carriage, promising that he would go and find the other members of the party and bring them to her.

In the doorway Mrs. Mertyns met us. Forgive me if I fall into the style of contemporary fiction—for truly Mrs. Mertyns is nothing if not

contemporary—and describe her as a long, diaphanous dream of a woman, clothed in slightly faded mauve and white. Her head was crowned by a large white chip hat, embowered in shaded mauve carnations, and smothered in a vast white net veil tied in a bow high at the back. Her rather thin throat was surrounded by several rows of very good pearls. I understand that pearls, like germinating seeds or hatching chickens, need a tender and steady warmth to bring them to perfection. To secure this, Mrs. Mertyns invariably wore her pearls. My imagination fails to picture her without them.

As of course you know, her looks, in certain circles, have afforded a perennial subject of controversy. Some persons assert that she is washed out, sandy, her features meaningless, her figure quite uncomfortably attenuated, her arms of a length and leanness almost distressing. They amiably add, as a rule, that she is unpardonably self-conscious both in speech and bearing; while other, and no doubt more enlightened, critics find in each of the above peculiarities an added note of beauty. Not the robust flesh-and-blood beauty, well understood, which the mistaken Greek loved to sculpture or the mistaken Venetian to paint; but a beauty altogether refined and spiritual—a joy to the imagination rather than the eye, a sentiment rather than a sight, a flavour rather than a feeling, a face and form, in short, redolent of infinite suggestion. These critics usually wind up their discourse with a reference to Septimus Q.C., and murmur—"But, how **could** she?"—in faltering voices.

For my own part, I have always held Mrs. Mertyns to be a very clever person; clever to the point of possessing all the effect of a pretty woman, while being, in point of fact, a plain one. This is among the very highest of social arts. The successful professor of it commands my applause. The more so, probably, that our own well-beloved country-women are somewhat incapable in the exercise of it. They need to be really quite pretty before they know how to appear so. Such conduct is weakly realistic. Neither their French nor American sisters are much handicapped by such obviously false

modesties.

Mrs. Mertyns, standing just inside the railway carriage, took good flustered Mrs. Perry's thick warm hand tenderly in her long thin one.

"I am so truly glad you are the first to come," she said, with gentle haste, "because if you object, or if you think darling Charlotte would object, you can tell me so at once—we are old enough friends, dear Mrs. Perry, to dare to be truthful, are we not?—and I will disappear immediately."

She crossed her left hand over her right, and, with raised elbow and drooping wrist, took my left hand and held it.

"Ah! so you are admitted," she added brightly. "That is delightful. It gives me hope that I am not intrusive, after all, in thus coming."

Then she swayed over Mrs. Perry with renewed tenderness.

"You know how close Charlotte's and my intercourse has been, and how deeply I value her friendship—"

"I'm sure you've always tried to behave most kindly by her," put in Mrs. Perry.

"Kindly?—no, dear Mrs. Perry, the word, the idea, is out of place between your Charlotte and myself. I shall always feel it has been one of the truest privileges of my life to be so much with her, to watch her growing powers. Her charm is very, very great—you feel it so, don't you, Mr. Hammond?"

"It is unique," I replied.

Mrs. Perry stared at me.

"Well, I suppose I never shall understand you clever people," she remarked in tones of slight dejection. "As I said, I'm sure there's no one—though I'm sure Charlotte's a very fortunate girl in having Mr. Leversedge care so much about her—that Mr. Perry and I would sooner have—"

I cast an agonised glance upon Mrs. Mertyns. If she possessed tact, in heaven's name let her use it!

"Ah yes," she said, rising nobly to the occasion, "Mr. Leversedge is so good and unaffected—so honest, and English. Everyone must

see that. But he is very, very fortunate too, dear Mrs. Perry. Charlotte's friends, of course, cannot help dwelling very much in thought on that. To be her constant companion would be so truly elevating for any man. Think of the delight of her brightness and depth of character! The combination is extraordinary—"

Mrs. Mertyns paused, looking up, smiling at the roof of the railway carriage, her shoulders slightly raised and her long wrists crossed just below her bosom. Then she swayed over Mrs. Perry again in sudden anxiety.

"But you are sure you do not think my coming to-day an intrusion?" she said. "I felt so strongly about it. I felt I really must come. And yet I was diffident. We discussed the question yesterday evening all through dinner. I think all my people would have liked to come. But I could not allow that. I know your Charlotte so well. I know and respect her instinctive shrinking from publicity. And so I said I would just slip away quietly with my husband. We would take a little Darby and Joan day's holiday. We could efface ourselves immediately if i t seemed better to do so. But I thought it possible Septimus might be useful, for I gathered from what Mr. Perry told me there were papers to be witnessed, and my husband is so utterly dependable and so accustomed—ah! dear friend," she cried, making a little rustling rush forward with both arms outstretched.

"Well, then, here's Lottie at last! And I'm sure I'm as thankful as possible, Mr. Hammond, for I was as nervous as could be something would happen to some of them."

This parenthetically from Mrs. Perry.

Charlotte looked exceedingly pretty, standing there framed by the dark lines of the doorway. She wore a biscuit-coloured dress with very large pink sleeves to it; and a hat to match, garlanded with pink roses, the broad brim of which, turning up, formed a pale straw-coloured nimbus about her head. The girl's mouth gathered, quivered; her eyes were adorably dewy. She and Mrs. Mertyns held each other's hands, looked at each other, sighed, kissed with a sort of

chastened rapture, murmuring simultaneously—

"Dear, dear friend!"

"I have not done wrong in coming?"

It seemed as if Charlotte Perry could not answer. She threw back her head, smiled, bit her lip. Then suddenly she seemed to become aware of my presence. Her breath caught, as though in pain. This appeared to me a quite uncalled-for demonstration, for had we not come down together inside the omnibus to the station?

Mrs. Mertyns took the place by the window—drew Miss Perry down on the one next to her. I think it had been her intention I should occupy the vacant place opposite,—upon the seat of the other she had piled parasols, dust cloaks, and a large basket of fruit and flowers,—but if such was her intention it was frustrated by the advent of our active Perry, who whipped into the empty place, rubbing his hands.

"Delightful surprise!" he cried. "I am sure, most delightful. A display of sympathy, of spontaneous solicitude, altogether flattering to myself and my family; adding one more to an already long list of charming acts of courtesy. We are in your debt, and how to pay," said Mr. Perry, with sudden solemnity, "passes me. I ransack the chambers of my brain, but they are empty of any suggestion of a possible means of payment. Yet," he continued, brightening, "who knows, a time may come, an opportunity may be granted me, and then—

The faithful heart bound fast to thine by gracious friendly deeds,
Will rouse to stalwart action interpreting thy needs."

Charlotte Perry looked hard at the speaker. Then she addressed her friend in low and hurried accents.

CHAPTER II

JUST then the door opened at the far end of the car and admitted Leversedge. He came down the narrow gangway between the seats, lifting his hat to two athletic Englishwomen of the High School variety, whose overflowing hold-alls he slightly displaced in passing.

"Oh, here you all are," he said. "How d'ye do, Mrs. Mertyns? No, pray, don't anybody move. I see you're all settled."—Mrs. Perry and Septimus, it may be remarked, occupied the single seats the other side of the gangway.—"I can just as well find a place farther up the carriage."

All the same he loitered, gazing at Charlotte Perry; hoping, as I thought, that she would make some sign. But she made none. Leversedge turned away. I followed him. And so it happened that we journeyed towards Geneva, sitting opposite to each other, rather cut off from the rest of the company. It was extremely hot, and we had to pull down the canvas blinds and half close the windows to keep out sun and dust. The train roared along; the vineyards reeling past on one hand, the rocks, white with fluttering *mouettes* and lapped by clear little green waves, on the other. It need hardly be stated that the two athletic Englishwomen had left all windows down and blinds up in their compartment, thus supplying us with a liberal measure of glare, cinders, and engine smoke. Above the noise of the train, from time to time, I heard Mrs. Mertyns' somewhat senseless and soulless laugh. Like many women in society, she had a tendency to laugh, not in proportion as she was amused, but in proportion as she was bored. I could well believe Perry *père's* style was finely irritating in all this heat. The more excellent of her, then, to have come! I have never entertained a better opinion of Mrs. Mertyns.

Leversedge, meanwhile, sat silent, his long legs outstretched beneath the little iron table between us, his head bent, his mind busy,

judging by his expression, with rather gloomy thoughts.

"Sometimes it strikes me we men are awful brutes when it comes to marriage," he said suddenly. "We want so much. We must have everything. Nothing less than the whole will satisfy us."

"Upon my word, I think we give a good deal in return," I replied. "The counter-demand is considerable, a matter by no means to be sneezed at—so considerable, in my estimation, that, as you see, I have never yet found myself equal to meeting it, and so remain, to the present hour, at once hugging and deploring my state of single blessedness. Oh, I'm all on the man's side, believe me, in marriage. In my eyes the bridegroom, the husband, is the leader of a forlorn hope—at once a noodle and a hero."

"Thank you," Leversedge said; "you are encouraging. But the truth is, you don't understand, you're out of it."

I am afraid I made use of an expletive which had better not be repeated. Leversedge regarded me with an expression both humorous and dogged.

"Yes, you're out of it," he repeated. "It's not that you are unequal to meeting the demand. You've never felt the thing. You've never been knocked out of time by a woman. Bless me, you don't stop to calculate the amount of giving and taking then; you don't weigh things; you don't speculate. When a man meets his fate, he meets it. The whole matter is outside argument. It is just so,—he may be a noodle, but he doesn't stop to care about that."

Leversedge paused a moment, shifted his position, laid hold with both hands of the woodwork of the back of the seat high above his head.

"No, the man doesn't give much in proportion to the woman, to the girl, to the good woman," he said. "For the man knows the ropes, after all; he has a precious clear idea of what he is driving at. He knows what he wants quite well, shame- lessly well, in too many cases. But hers is an act of faith almost divine. God in heaven! it seems to me there is no limit to the gratitude, to the reverence,

Hammond, with which we should regard an innocent girl who is willing to marry any one of us."

He smiled at me.

"I beg your pardon for prosing like this. But it's borne in upon me to-day that I am a wretchedly selfish animal. And I suppose something of the cheap old superstition clings to me that in confessing your sins you rid yourself of them, to a certain extent at all events. A better man than I, under all the circumstances, would have talked less and done something practical. Old Perry's income, such as it is, pretty well dies with him. And she ought to have money, she can use it—it is necessary to a woman with her gifts, and it is miserable to think of her wanting it, now or any when. A better man than I would have seen to all that, provided against any bother that way—and then set her free, given her up, whether she would or not."

Leversedge threw himself forward, and for once the blood rushed into his face.

"But I can't," he said huskily,—"I can't. Before God, I have tried; but I have not the pluck. I want her. I must have her—for a little while—just for a little while—and then—"

At that moment I perceived Mrs. Mertyns standing up and waving to me, across the backs of the intervening seats. It was as well. Leversedge had given himself away rather completely. The conversation could not continue at that level of emotion; and one always has a sense of bathos in struggling towards the surface after such a plunge into the deep sea of feeling. Women hold hands, and kiss each other, and cry a little, on the way up to the surface, which must be a great help. But to us, to whom these tender modifications of the situation are denied, the ascent is extremely embarrassing. So I, not unwillingly, obeyed Mrs. Mertyns' summons, leaving that dear fool, Leversedge, to recover his equanimity in private.

Mrs. Mertyns looked slightly distracted.

"Do come, Mr. Hammond," she exclaimed as I approached. "See, there is a place for you. Mr. Perry will kindly put my odds and ends on

to the table. Yes—thanks, so.—I am just starting that delightful thinking game dear Hattie St. John taught us the other day after luncheon. And we want a sixth—we really must have you."

Mrs. Mertyns leaned her elbow upon the table; she flapped at me with her long narrow hand. Her eyes expressed a more direct sentiment than was at all their wont. They intimated that something really had to be done, they took me into their confidence.

"Mr. Perry quite surpassed himself, quite excelled in it," she continued. "He gave us the most interesting examples. And Charlotte must learn it. I am devoted to thinking games; they fill in so many stray minutes when otherwise"—she laughed. "It will prevent our feeling this oppressive heat. Now, Mr. Hammond, you shall give us a subject—an event or a character in history or fiction (really it is an excellent exercise of memory)—while I count twelve, do you see? Then in twelve words describe it; and then we have twelve guesses between us, in turn, you understand. And you answer in numbers as we get more or less near it. Twelve, of course, means game. Now, remember, we all have to speak as quick as possible."

And we played that thinking game. Oh yes, indeed we played it, as the train rushed on, past Rolle, past Nyon, past Coppet. We had the burning of Jeanne d'Arc in twelve words; and the Relief of Lucknow in twelve words; and the battle of Cannæ, and the interviewing of the Sphinx by OEdipus, and the Reform Bill of '32—this last naturally from Septimus Mertyns.

"A bloodstained deck," said Mr. Perry.

"One, two, three, four," counted Mrs. Mertyns.

"No—no, three, but three," he cried. "Blood-stained is one, only one, joined by the ever-welcome hyphen.—Torn canvas."

"Dear me," put in Mrs. Perry, "I always have disliked shipwrecks. I suppose it's the Princess Alice pleasure steamer—poor creatures, an acquaintance of Aunt Trumbull had relatives on board—going down in the river. I wish Mr. Perry wouldn't allude to such things, on a wedding-day, too."

"Four, five," cried Mrs. Mertyns.

"Noble commander laid low,—my love, you are entirely mistaken, —in victory."

"*Coppet—trois minutes d'arrêt*," this from the platform as the train slowed up.

I rose, leaving Nelson extended upon the gory deck, with Perry *père*, so to speak, waving the British flag over his honoured and prostrate form, and went to look after Leversedge. He lay back in his place fast asleep. His face was singularly peaceful, almost childlike in its simple serenity. But he held his hard brown hat stiffly with both hands, and worked it slowly up and down his knees even in sleeping. And that was not at all pleasant to see, somehow.

CHAPTER III

THE joyless little ceremony was over, and Leversedge had got his wife as far as civil law could give her to him. His will was signed and witnessed by Mertyns and myself. Then we turned from business to the courting of pleasure. We ate a smart luncheon at a smart hotel, towards the end of which entertainment Mr. Perry was with difficulty restrained from making a speech. Finally we went for a walk. At this point Mrs. Mertyns' courage ran out; she departed, with many protestations of sorrow, to seek for some distinguished Genevan *littérateur* whom she suddenly felt an overwhelming necessity to call upon. She went away in a cab, with a white awning to it like the tester of a four-post bed. She left us Septimus.

Perry *père et mère* clung to each other through that dreadful walk, clung to the Carissima, clung to the rest of us. Escape was impossible. Like Wordsworth's cloud, "we moved together, if we moved at all." It was hot and dusty, and the horror of being "out for the day" was most sensibly upon us.

Returning from the farther shore of the Rhone by the broad *Pont des Bergues*,—to the middle of which Rousseau's Island is moored by a little iron suspension bridge,—good Mrs. Perry made a sudden diversion. There was yet a weary hour before our train started. She begged plaintively to be taken on to the island. Not that she was filled by the spirit of pilgrimage, by memories of the delightful pages of the *Confessions*, or the disintegrating ones of the *Social Contract*. She saw trees, and green benches whereon she might rest a while, and seek relief from the fatigues and trampings of this very peripatetic day.

Leversedge took care of her, found her a cool spot, sat by her saying, I am sure, an infinity of nice kind things. Mr. Perry and Mr.

Mertyns drifted into a ponderous conversation on the affairs of the nation at home and abroad. While I found myself standing under the narrow shimmering shade of the great poplars with the fair Charlotte,—the sapphire waters of the Rhone rushing down between the white piers of the bridges at the pace of a galloping horse; the façades of the solid square houses, fronting the quay and its rows of round-headed plane trees, lying in strong sunshine and blue shadow; the city piled up behind to the stern mass of the Romanesque cathedral, the two squat towers of which showed hard and dark against the pale lilac limestone terraces of the *Grand Salève*.

The girl's pretty eyes had been reproachful whenever they chanced to meet mine during that deadly day. They were reproachful still. I perceived that the atmosphere was electric, I feared we were on the verge of an explanation, and I cordially detest explanations. So I talked, I did more, I chattered. I gave my companion a really rather witty description of a sentimental journey I had once made—in company with the friend who shall be nameless-from Geneva, *via* Aix les Bains, to Annecy, for the purpose of visiting *Les Charmettes* —sacred to the memory of that most charming victim of every conceivable false philosophy, Madame de Warens.

Suddenly the girl stopped me.

"You go too far," she said, "for I cannot believe you are utterly heartless, and so you must be aware, in a measure, of all I am feeling. —Oh! I know you are talking well—you usually do that. But, just now, that you should be agreeable is of very slight moment to me."

She raised her hand and pointed to the dark high-shouldered cathedral.

"You remember they burnt people up there, once upon a time," she said. "Well, I feel towards your talk much as those people must have felt towards the grasshoppers—listen to them now—singing gaily in the sunshine while the flames leapt up that—"

"No, no, no, pardon me," I cried. "It is you who go very much too far. For goodness' sake don't souse us thus suddenly in a sea of

tragedy right up to the neck. Forgive my remarking that your illustration is a wild exaggeration, altogether beyond the facts of the case."

"You know what I have done, you know why I have done it, and you make agreeable conversation. You have no word of recognition, of admission. Does not your sense of justice compel you to own my sincerity at last?"

"Oh, quarrel with me as much as you like," I said. "That is healthy enough. But don't lose sight of the proportion of things, and indulge in distorted comparisons. It is unworthy of your intelligence to do so, to go thus madly beyond the facts of the case."

The girl clasped her hands and moved a couple of steps aside, with one of those swift movements which would look so excellently upon the stage.

"But can anything really go beyond the facts of the case?" she asked in tones of sharp, thin distress.

Upon my word, I was very much provoked with the Carissima, provoked to the point of being greatly minded to tell her, once and for all, that she was a goose.

"Yes, most emphatically many things can," I answered. "Does a man's love carry so little weight with you that you dare speak as though to be the sole and supreme object of it was a dire misfortune? Moreover, Leversedge comes to you with his hands by no means empty. He does not merely offer you the trivial matter of his whole heart, but the exceedingly substantial matter of his whole fortune."

The girl's colour had faded. She regarded me with some amazement. She had often surprised me; now I proposed to have my turn.

"You cannot suppose money matters to me?" she faltered.

"Indeed," I returned, "I can very readily suppose it. Money matters vitally to every one of us who is in his, or her, sober senses. Miseries come whether one is rich or whether one is poor; but, I own, I never encountered any form of misery yet which money could not do a good

deal to alleviate. But that is not the main point; the main point is your very limited appreciation of the affection of the man you are marrying."

"Are you aware that you are simply scolding me?" my companion inquired sweetly.

"Yes, I am perfectly well aware of it, my dear young lady," I replied genially. "And unless you actually run away from me, or call for help, I am fully prepared to continue the process. I am not nearly through with the business yet; and it is all for your good—all, believe me. See now, you have done me the honour to be very confidential with me. You have confided to me dreams of an ideal affection."

The colour rushed into the fair Charlotte's face again. She closed her charming eyes, and raised her hand as though to ward off a blow. But the vision of Leversedge was upon me; Leversedge in that basting railway carriage, and the broken passion of his utterance. I would not relent.

"Bear with me while I point out to you that those dreams are but pale and ghostly fictions, beside the real, the very full-blooded, romance of Leversedge's affection. All that you have vaguely imagined yourself feeling regarding some possible, conceivable, but non-existent being, he positively and actually feels regarding you. Don't you understand, you are the last word of poetry, of art, of religion—even—to him. And is that nothing? Is it a slight matter to be to a man the incarnation, the ultimate expression, of all enchantments, all delights—that in you he finds the realisation of his highest aspirations—finds it there or nowhere?"

I paused, somewhat out of breath from my own—most unusual—flight of eloquence. I am not often thus loudly didactic. To be so is to be crude, and I shudder at crudity. Even now I dared not pause long, lest a quite opposite side of the case should present itself to me, and I should begin to fear not only that my enthusiasm was slightly ridiculous, but that I might, after all, be presenting my hearer with a garbled edition. Garbled or not, it appeared to work upon her. She

stood silent; and her pretty face, set in the aureole of her wide-brimmed, rose-garlanded hat, wore a questioning expression somewhat—so I flattered myself—new to it. And this encouraged me. I held a brief for Leversedge—well, then, I would strike while the iron was hot, I would go on, I would plead his cause yet further.

"My dear young lady, you have been bewitched by much talk, by much reading, by all manner of ingenious hair-splittings regarding the emotions, regarding the relation of men and women. Do come back out of all that, all those misleading generalisations and fanciful interpretations, and deal with the matter in hand. You have just married a man who adores you, to whom you—briefly—represent rapture; well, lend yourself a little to the situation. It is not a contemptible one. For, to how many women do you suppose it happens, in their whole lifetime, ever to represent that to any member of our sex?"

The Carissima's lips quivered. She looked very young just then; and, queerly enough, I saw in her a strong likeness to her mother—to a clock-moon of long ago, paradisaic rather than suburban. I had an angelic moment, wherein my spirit yearned in purest and most praiseworthy pity and hope over Charlotte Perry. A little more and I could have prayed—to "whatever gods there be"—for the salvation of her.

"Constantine should tell me all this himself," she said.

"Wait," I replied, the angelic humour strong in me. "He will do more than tell you—only give him time. Remember, Leversedge is one of those who live ballads, not one of those who merely sit at home and write them. Only don't frighten him by narrow criticism, and quarrel with him because he does not conform altogether to fashionable standards. Give him room. Then he will not disappoint you. He has rather magnificent stuff in him. And he is yours to make or to break. Make him—believe me, he's worth it—make him, and for you, also, life shall be sweet."

The girl came close to me.—"And that hideous hallucination?" she

whispered.

"Will vanish into the nothingness out of which it came," I answered.

The narrow shadow of the poplars had shifted, so that Charlotte, pink-sleeved and rose-crowned, stood in the full gaiety of the sunshine, above the rushing blue river.

"If I make him, will you believe in me, at last?" she asked.

"Down to the ground. I will hail you as the dearest and most sacred thing on earth,—a clever and beautiful woman who is not above giving happiness, who is not ashamed of being something of an angel into the bargain—"

Ah! Lydia Castern, why does the remembrance of you invariably return upon me in moments of exaltation such as these, when—for a little while—I harbour the notion that the practice of certain old-fashioned virtues, so patiently and faithfully practised by you, may, after all, be the surest way of pleasantness and directest path of peace?

But here the voice of Perry *père*, raised in playful admonition, put a stop to further conversation.

"Come, come," he cried, "'tis time to move, though I regret to quit this interesting spot—to the student of literature, I'm sure, most interesting. Not that the writings of the 'self-torturing sophist' have ever greatly appealed to me. No, no, as an Englishman, as a husband and father, I say—and must always say—give me something manly, give me something sound, give me, in short, sentiments which, without the most fugitive movement of apology, I can permit to lie open upon my wife's drawing-room table."

Leversedge had sauntered up to us. He stood near Charlotte.

"Tired?" I heard him ask her quietly.

"I own it," continued Mr. Perry, with lofty humility, "for 'tis, no doubt, a reflection on my culture; yet I own that the genius of the French, as a nation, is foreign to me. A want of grit, Mr. Hammond, a lack of the substantial. Too many kickshaws, eh? just a trifle too many kickshaws and sauces."

The girl hesitated a moment, then she looked very charmingly at Leversedge.

"Yes," she said, "I am rather tired. To tell the truth, I dread the noise and dust of the train."

She glanced at me, her eyes swam in possible tears, her lips sketched a possible and all-seductive kiss. Then she turned swiftly to Leversedge again.

"Shall we desert the others?" she asked him. "Shall we leave them to encounter the miseries of the railway without us? Will you go back with me—alone—by boat?"

Leversedge's head went up with a sudden jerk. His breath caught in his throat. I fancy he did not see anything very distinctly for a second or two, though there was an immense gladness in his face. It was rather moving; and I addressed myself to Perry *père*, in haste, regarding the flimsy, the gilt-gingerbread character of the literature of the French nation—the lack of humour of Molière, general cheapness of M. de Voltaire, and, to come down to our own day, the deplorable want of style in such men as Flaubert and Gautier. I took my examples, perhaps, slightly at random. Meanwhile I heard Leversedge laugh a little—almost as a child laughs.

" Will I?" he said. "Do you really mean it?—Will I—will I not?"

Mrs. Perry talked to me all the way to the station, along the flaming *Rue du Mont Blanc*.

"I suppose there's no objection to their going off alone together like that, Mr. Hammond," she said. "Mr. Perry made no objection, and, of course, we all know Joseph is very tenacious of appearances. But it does seem to me strange, only half married as they are. But then everything does seem strange to-day somehow; and, you see, it is so very warm, and I get such giddy turns. Dear me, I'm sure up at the Consul's, when all those papers were signing, the room turned right round with me, and I thought I should have fallen, which made me dreadfully nervous, because, of course, it would have been most mortifying for Charlotte and Mr. Perry. But, you see, I can't help feeling

a little upset somehow, with all the marrying twice over. I'm sure none of my relations were ever married like that, nor any of Mr. Perry's either. And I really don't feel I know who Charlotte is for the rest of to-day. I've been worrying about whether she is Mrs. Leversedge yet, or only our daughter, just as usual; and I can't make out anyhow. I've been thinking if anything was to happen before to-morrow—which I'm sure I hope it won't—to make her name appear in the papers, whatever would they call her? I don't know. And it makes me quite nervous. It seems almost a scandalous thing not to be sure about your own daughter's name, now doesn't it, Mr. Hammond."

CHAPTER IV

AS though the day had not already been long I enough, we broke out into extensive festivity at the *Grand Hôtel* that evening. We had indulged in small dances before, when the gold and crimson chairs and sofas fled back against the walls of the *salon*, while the band brayed lustily upon the verandah. But to-night—whether by request of Perry *père*, I know not—proceedings were upon a grander scale. The neighbouring hotels and pensions had sent us their contingent of English and American youth, English and American maturity; while even the native population had subscribed precious specimens, with those petticoats disproportionately short in the one sex and ties disproportionately narrow in the other, those necks quite unnecessarily large and uncovered in both, which are so characteristic of the descendants of William Tell, and of the conquerors of Morat and Grandson. In honour of these guests the hotel was lighted from end to end; there were even rumours of supper to be obtained in the *salle à-manger*. The rooms were really crowded. We were nothing, indeed, if not gay that evening.

On our return from Geneva, I had dined with Leversedge and the Perry family in the restaurant. Dined? rather say feasted! And Perry *père* had been horribly profuse in anecdote; but I capped his vilest quotations, I applauded his stalest stories. For the Carissima was gentle, natural, wholly captivating; while Leversedge held himself gallantly, and had a light in his eyes good to see. And these things produced in me an amiability little short of divine. I so very seldom am overtaken with charitable activities in respect of my fellow-men, I so seldom do anything—in the least burdensome to myself—to promote their welfare, that I was really quite overcome by my own successful altruism. If, thanks to me—for had I not, overruling the distaste of the

one, and scruples of the other, pushed these two into each other's arms, thus finally and irrevocably?—if, I say, the half marriage went so merrily, might not the whole marriage go to perfection? For the time I enjoyed all the proud pleasures of the preacher, the evangelist, the director. I comprehended the fascinations of the sacerdotal position. I had "played with souls" for their good, temporal and eternal; and had won them, though the odds against such winning were extremely heavy. I had saved Leversedge's reason, probably his life into the bargain. I had converted the Carissima. And, for the time, I own it, my conceit of myself was colossal—rampantly, gloriously blatant.

It was in this spirit of profound self-congratulation that I beheld Leversedge and his bride pass out into the dusky brightness of the garden, and that I conducted Mrs. Perry to a gilded chair in the *salon*, whence she could witness the humours of the dance; while Mr. Perry, full of dinner, hilarity, and parental pride, instituted himself Leader of the Revels, encouraging the musicians, and inducing the wildest confusion by introducing young ladies, of whose names and nationalities he was quite uncertain, to gentlemen, whom he did not in the very least know.

Then the sweet influences of accomplished duty pervaded me—a large, digestive calm, subtly mingled with the blissful serenity of one upon whose undertakings the gods have smiled, so that he finds himself both a better and abler man than he had ever imagined himself to be. I retired into the hall, to a secluded corner behind one of the groups of pillars supporting the first-floor gallery. There I sat and smoked, and thought—as I invariably do think when I am feeling very good—of the white rectory house away in slumberous Midlandshire, of the old ecclesiastical historian (his living interest in things long dead, his deadly indifference regarding things still living), and of the woman I ought to have married, the only woman, as I firmly believe (when I am feeling very good), that I ever really loved, the woman I never make the slightest effort to see—sweet Lydia Castern.—And meanwhile I watched the passing crowd, and, since the double doors

of the *salon*, facing me, stood wide open, caught passing glimpses of the dancers, my senses pleasantly dulled by the sound of many footsteps, many voices, the rustle of women's garments, across all which, advantageously tempered by distance, came the strains of the band.

Surely I might take my ease. Was not everything going to admiration? Out there, under the stars, amid the magic of the fair September night, was not Constantine Leversedge making love, his soul delivered from the grotesque and ghastly dream of the diabolic dog? And was not Charlotte, *née* Perry, listening, her soul delivered from dreams hardly less grotesque and ghastly—from false standards of taste, of fashion, from false refinements, false intellectualities, from a silly pursuit of decadent eccentricities? Was she not beginning to comprehend what an exquisite, yet very simple solution—notwithstanding the prurient purities of contemporary feminine novelists and reformers—true-love offers to the much-vexed question of the sexes? Beginning to comprehend how deep-rooted and terrible, yet how exceedingly pretty a pastime, is the love of an honest man—and many men are honest, after all, you know—for an honest woman?

My soul expanded under these charming meditations. For was I not the *deus ex machina*, was not this good work mainly of my making? Had I yielded to the Carissima's thoughtless coquetries, and involved myself in any intimate relation to her, how different the result! It was the cut of her shoes that saved me? Perish the thought!—it was my own high-mindedness, my own self-forgetting appreciation of the justice of the situation. Had I counselled Leversedge weakly to withdraw, instead of bravely to remain, again how different the result! I beheld the vision of two wasted lives. The Carissima, moreover, let loose upon society, possibly to entangle me—yes, me, after all, in the end. Instead of which, here I sat, replete with the perfect peace of conscious impeccability. Verily, how delightful are the leisures of the righteous, how inspiring the repose of him who seeks the advantage

of others rather than advantage of his own! Five minutes more, and I might have added a hundred and fifty-first to the hundred and fifty Psalms of King David, with a difference—a difference possibly somewhat in the direction of M. Tartufe. But I was saved from any such disaster by the sound of a low grunt.

As I have already stated, I am—I thankfully affirm—acquainted with but one human being who testifies to the fact of his presence in this primitive manner. It is a little introductory habit of Mr. Percy Gerrard; and he often employs it as a preface to observations the reverse of agreeable—so I fancy, but then I own to a prejudice against Percy Gerrard.

On the present occasion he had "stolen upon me softly"; and his manner struck me as less intolerably superior than usual. He really seemed to wish to make himself agreeable.

"'Evening, Hammond," he murmured affably, as he dropped into a neighbouring chair. "Dancing? How superfluous! You are very right to remain out here. The modern *bourgeois* ballroom—and this, I imagine, is pre-eminently *bourgeois*—is a revolting spectacle. Few sights, indeed, can be more repulsive than a herd of both sexes, underbred and perspiring, clasping each other's waists, and revolving, with prolonged and boisterous fatuity, in time to some wholly imbecile tune such as offends my ear at the present moment."

Nevertheless, Gerrard pushed his chair farther to the left, with the evident desire to gain a clearer view of the festivities going forward in the *salon*. But a good many persons stood about the doorway, and it was only at intervals that one obtained full sight of the dancers.

"An exhibition of untamed animality!" he mur- mured in tones of disgust. "I hold it proof of the skin-deep quality of our vaunted civilisation that performances of this description are countenanced, nay, encouraged—it is humiliating to think of—by really very decently educated people."

"From the Perfectly Ordered State, then, dancing is excluded?" I inquired.

For I was still at peace with all mankind, and even Gerrard's unlovely humours failed to ruffle me. I even played up to him, indulged him. In the columns of *The Present Day* he had lately been sketching Arcadias and Utopias according to his graceful fancy. He was not slow to observe the allusion, and turned to me with a gleam of gratified vanity in his dull eyes.

"Ah! you read those little things of mine!" he said. "They had merit—I knew it."

"Of course you knew it. It is the most abject of exploded fictions that a man can write a masterpiece without knowing it."

He directed his slow glance upon the crowd round the door of the *salon* again.

"Yes; I agree with you. I knew those articles had merit, and the best critics confirmed my judgment. I have been asked to reprint them."

"Do so," I said. "The world will be the gainer."

Gerrard gathered himself up in his chair—planting his small square feet on the top rung of it—into a sort of spiderlike blob. What an immensely displeasing creature he was!

"Yes, I think I shall reprint them," he said. "That is the worst of journalism—really beautiful things are too often lost, forgotten along with the day that gave them birth. But, since you are interested in my visions, in the Perfectly Ordered State, which, as I devoutly trust, is equivalent to saying, in the Coming Civilisation, woman will resume her natural position, that from which the moral and intellectual barbarism of the last few centuries has ousted her with such deplorable results. In the Coming Civilisation there will be a very hard-and-fast line drawn between the public and the private life. For we have ceased most lamentably to appreciate the decencies of the high wall, the heavy curtain, the locked door. The Democratic Spirit, rightly understood, is disgustingly immodest. It has done its best to murder secrecy and concealment, which are necessary elements in all really exquisite living."

The crowd opened to give passage to the American *prima-donna*

, her well-preserved mother, and her stout poodle; and, for the moment, the glistening floor of the ballroom and its racing couples were disclosed to observation.

"And so I take it," Gerrard continued, "in the Perfect State, woman will again dance with all the grace of richly developed suggestion—behind closed doors—for the delectation of man, who will sit still and just watch her, lending her the emotional support of a profoundly sympathetic admiration, not the brutally material one of an encircling arm."

"The coming civilisation has a little Oriental turn to it then?" I remarked.

"How should it be otherwise?" he replied. "In many matters the Oriental has always continued true to the light that was in him. His mind has remained unconfused by those weak notions of abstract justice, which war against the life of sense and of society."

Gerrard drew his hand over his moist, uncomfortably smooth hair. I may add that it partially concealed his ears. Why does one instinctively distrust a man whose ears are partially concealed by his hair?

"The pendulum has swung far enough now, in all conscience, in the western 'Hail Columbia!' direction; with unalloyed gladness I hail indications of the return, the eastern beat.—And that reminds me—talking of dancing, of course you know that most exquisite place, Palewell Friars? I was down there at Whitsuntide this year. They like to have me. You remember the view from the cedar drawing-room? That delightful Italian garden and the river flowing just below it, the lime avenues, and the broken ground in the deer-park studded with the old Spanish chestnuts, composes as entirely a lovely home scene as—"

He stopped. Again the crowd had broken up about the door, disclosing a view of the ballroom.

"A civil marriage is perfectly valid, perfectly sound in law?" Gerrard asked, with curious abruptness, his voice cracking up queerly at the

end of the sentence.

"Unquestionably," I said.

"Precisely—of course," he spread himself in his chair.—"I know most of our fine English country houses, from the inside, I am happy to say. But Palewell always strikes me as unique, nothing jars, nothing obtrudes itself. Its charm is a solicitation, not a demand; while there is the inimitable flavour of an intensely aristocratic atmosphere pervading the whole scene, the whole life."

"Which exactly suits you?" I suggested. Gerrard turned his head, and I perceived a singularly insolent gleam in his eyes.

"It does," he replied; "you are perfectly right, it certainly does. I draw breath there with the emotion of perfect and natural well-being, with which, as I conceive, the Blest draw breath in the translucent air of Paradise—I am at home."

He paused and sighed.

"We all have intimations, at times, of that which is utterly in harmony with the best of our own being—a delicious satisfaction of both the religious and artistic instincts. I had attended mass one morning in that little gem of a chapel; and later, in the richly toned and shadowed cedar drawing-room, while the sunlight yet caressed the grey stone mullions of that range of vast windows, Lady Clare danced to us.—You know her? *Petite* but *svelte*, sherry-coloured eyes and hair, with a dark pencilling of eyelash and eyebrow. A skin like cream —yet that illustration hardly gratifies me. It is a little disgustingly suggestive of the cow, and the farm-girl, and a rude first-hand relation to nature."

Gerrard lounged sideways in his chair, and flattened down his hair again.

"Think, therefore, I beseech you, only of cream in some delectable golden jug of Renaissance workmanship, about the delicately turned body of which fauns and naïads toy amorously, in a wonder of subtly interlacing lines. Yes, I think that fairly renders the immediate sentiment of her appearance. It was all very beautiful. The magnificent

room, the high-bred woman, her bare neck and arms braving the sunlight, on which those historic rubies—you know them?—glowed and shone as she passed from the voluptuous monotony of the Nautch to the frank *gaminerie* of the *Café Chantant*."

"Innocent alike of the intention of either?" I remarked.

"I really can't tell," he said, with an effort at candour. "But I hope so; of course I hope so, for it would go far to carry out my cherished theory of woman.—And there were contrasts in the setting of the scene which, emotionally speaking, were wonderfully helpful. The other women present wore shirts and sailor hats, the men were in breeches and dirty shooting-boots. *Pour comble de bonheur* little Freddy Hellard lighted cigarettes, and no one chid him. Ah, I shall long remember that morning, it was big with—"

Gerrard rose to his feet, peering in the direction of the ballroom. Again the crowd had opened, drifting to right and left, while Leversedge and the Carissima were revealed standing in the doorway. Evidently they had been valsing. The girl's abundant hair was slightly disordered; she carried the train of her soft peach-bloom coloured muslin dress over her arm. Leversedge faced her. He was laughing a little, fanning her, talking to her. Things went well, then? Verily, they went most exceedingly well. I thanked the gods. I approved my own conduct in this business afresh. Yet I almost regretted to see these lovers in the commonplace hurley-burley of a ball. I could not find it in my heart to think it the very best taste in the world that they should thus appear so conspicuously in public. Moreover, I wished earnestly to believe them in that state of mind in which solitude, and the repetition of certain sweet nothings, are so adorably full of high illumination, high delight. That they should tolerate the close contact of their fellow-creatures, that they should have any desire for activity, disappointed me. Or, might I trust this pointed to t h e light-heartedness that comes of complete happiness, the exuberant gaiety which is born of fulness of content? There is a stage of mental as well as physical well-being which, in all living things,

expresses itself in playfulness, skittishness, a disposition, as you may say frankly, to jump about. Could it be—but oh, dear me, for that were indeed a notable conversion!—that Charlotte, *née* Perry, had reached the stage of innocent rapture in which all young and wholesome creatures develop this disposition to jump about? Yet the peace of the—to themselves, unexpectedly—virtuous being still upon me, I was disposed to press a point in the direction of cheerfulness; t o endure all things, in the shape of that most unsavoury animal, Gerrard; to hope all things for the salvation of Leversedge's mind; to believe all things, concerning its purification from fashionable frivolities, of the Carissima's spirit. And as to a questionableness of taste in thus appearing in public, well, after all, what is Taste? The hedge from behind which the feeble shoot at the strong; the refuge of the unproductive; the cloak under which the unsuccessful try to cover the blackness of their envy; the spangles with which talent tries so to dazzle the eyes of the commonplace multitude, that it shall fail to see the stars of true genius shining on quietly very far above its head. My metaphors might be confused, but my determination of conviction was great. Constantine and Charlotte were right to dance, it meant everything most promising that they should dance. Taste?—who in the moment of honest gladness, or honest misery, ever stops to think about taste?

Thus did I reason with myself, while Gerrard paused beside me, curiously spiderlike. I quite thought he intended advancing upon the couple in the doorway. But the crowd, to my relief, speedily closed up again, and he sank back into his chair with a grunt.

"Poor girl," he murmured, "I have a regard for her. It is painful. She was worthy of a better fate than the embraces of that —. But let us turn to something pleasanter, Hammond. I felt very thankful during that scene at Palewell; for I recognised that my prayers had been answered, and that I had not misread the signs of the times. I recognised that the reaction has set in, in very truth; that the degrading fiction of the equality of the sexes is already exploded; that

education, doing its worst, has still failed to do any abiding injury, since the *fin de siècle* woman, true in instinct, though false in idea, mistakes the badge of her servitude for the brevet of her emancipation, and, to prove the completeness of her liberty, dances, like any slave-girl of the harem, for the entertainment of her hereditary masters. A cynic might sneer at this, as a last and crowning example of the illogic of the feminine mind. I cannot sneer. To me the matter is solemnly glad from the bigness of its promise. 'Woman never civilises,'—thank God for that."

I loathed Gerrard. But what was the good of relieving my feelings by being rude to him, and telling him so? I had a growing conviction that he was here for a set purpose, that he harboured designs of some sort against the peace of mind of Leversedge and the Carissima. If I was rude to him, he would go away and carry out his purpose—perhaps—all the sooner. Let them dance—let them dance; meanwhile I would, greatly enduring, continue the conversation.

"How about the suffrage, then," I asked, as one greedy of information, "to which, as a good Conservative, your organ—that is the technical term, I believe—your organ, has devoted so many eloquent pages?"

"Assuredly, Hammond, you are not taken in by that little *blague* ?" he said, turning his head slowly and looking at me. "We need it for the protection of our own property, of course, menaced as it is by the rapacity of the masses. Not one woman in a million is public-spirited—the vast majority have a savage rage for their own little possessions. We give it as the rope, the enough of rope, which will enable these dear foolish female creatures very effectually to hang themselves. Don't you see?"

"Most emphatically I do see," I said.

Something in my tone, I suppose, conveyed to my hearer that I had had about enough. Ah! how stupid is it ever to lose one's temper, even in a good cause! Gerrard grunted, again rose to his feet. He stood, smoothing down his hair, and looking intently at the open door

of the ballroom.

"By the way," he said, "you know, I suppose, whether this story of Mrs. Mertyns' is true about that lunatic Leversedge's money?"

"What story?" I asked.

"Oh! that there is really a great deal of it, and that he has left it unconditionally to his wife?"

I got up too, and pushed my chair aside to let the apostolic-looking Russian poet and his daughters pass. They stopped a moment; we talked. I hoped Gerrard would go. But he remained at my elbow.

"You signed the will, I understand," he said. "Of course you know all about it."

"Upon my word," I replied, "I do not see—if you will excuse my saying so—that whatever I do know or don't know is any particular concern of yours."

Percy Gerrard is not constitutionally brave. I was delighted to note that he backed away from me a little, that he was distinctly uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"Oh! of course I don't want details," he said hastily. "Pray, don't misunderstand my motives in asking. I have, as I told you just now, a regard for the poor girl. She is clever; in good hands something might be made of her. I am aware, just as you are aware, and everybody else is aware, that the man she is marrying is insane. And I own, I should be glad to know that when her husband retires into the enforced seclusion which is already, in my humble opinion, so desirable for the comfort and safety of other people, she, poor thing, will at least be decently provided for."

"Make your charitable mind easy," I replied. "Mrs. Leversedge will be by no means destitute."

"So I understood. It is a relief to have you confirm the report."

Gerrard gazed meditatively at me. He had regained all his habitual insolence of demeanour.

"Thanks, Hammond," he said. "You are really very obliging. That is all I wanted to know."

And he pushed his way through the crowd into the brilliantly-lighted *salon*.

CHAPTER V

IT was the misfortune of Percy Gerrard that he had dirty fingers, and smirched everything he touched. Those dirty fingers of his had broken up the fulness of my self-complacency; I began to misdoubt the efficacy of the gospel which I had so lately preached with such success. My mental atmosphere changed, and for the worse; my whole outlook was affected. The hall, for instance, which had only been pleasantly warm half an hour ago, grew stuffy. The crowd, which had been amusing, grew oppressive. I had seen handsome couples, nice young couples; I had noted gay little flirtations. Now there seemed to start into disquieting prominence all sorts of queer people; people one could not quite place, people who from their general appearance suggested the idea that they had retired from active service—whether of business or pleasure—and were just "stopping over," without much either of name or local habitation, making out the time till the cemetery should claim them and the very little they still were should utterly cease to be. A watering-place or hotel population always contains figures of this sort. Women of uncertain nationality, in strange garments, whose purses are light, whose eyes are hungry for social or any other sort of recognition, and whose day, such as it may have been, is very clearly over. Men of more than middle age, who once no doubt held distinguished positions in distant lands; but who now grumble away a purposeless existence on a pension or annuity, play a fractious game of whist, and air imaginary grievances of gigantic proportions.

Within the last half-hour these melancholy figures seemed to have multiplied exceedingly in the hall of the *Grand Hôtel*. And their near neighbourhood was depressing. For is it not more or less thus that we all, every one of us, end, alas! Platitudes regarding the brevity of things gay and pleasant, the certainty of the ultimate arrival of things

altogether the reverse, began to form themselves on my lips. I recognised that I needed change of air, and that speedily.

Just within the great door of the portico I paused. The night was clear and sweet. In the basin of the little dribbling fountain, frogs were croaking—not the sonorous, full-throated chant of the southern frogs, but a modest tinkling note as of tiny bells. Great bats were hawking over the shrubberies in the dim garden. The stars were very large and keen. While from the wine-shop of some hamlet, far up among the vineyards, came the sound of a rude chorus of men's voices and the thumping of a drum. Figures passed along the wide carriage-drive, slipping out of the half darkness on the one hand and vanishing into it again on the other, as figures pass across the stage in some interlude of a play. First the lady of the scarlet silk blouse went swiftly by, talking excitedly to her two companions, the debilitated Russian young men. She had a white lace handkerchief thrown over her head, and it gleamed far down the avenue of pollarded chestnuts long after her figure, and those of her cavaliers, had been swallowed up in the shadow of the thick trees. Then a cheery lad in evening dress, a typical British subaltern, with the shortest of red hair and honestest of sunburnt faces, went by. He escorted a trim American maiden, to whom, in the last week, he had very obviously and completely lost his heart. The two were laughing, evidently the joke was a first-rate one. Almost immediately after, Perry *père* fled across the scene, a lopsided stripe of hurrying blackness.

I let him get to a safe distance, then I went out and followed the path along the left of the big hotel, under the long row of dining-room windows. All the chandeliers were lighted within, and a confused noise of talk and of feasting reached me. Who paid, I wondered—not those who ate and drank, not the hotel proprietor, very certainly, nor yet Mr. Perry. Leversedge, I supposed; that was his *rôle*.—Yes, Percy Gerrard's dirty fingers had decidedly spoilt the evening for me! Leversedge, I feared, was doomed to pay for most things, whoever happened to consume them.

And just as I had reached this somewhat disheartening conclusion, at the turn of the terrace, in the full glare of the great cluster of electric lights fixed flowerlike against the corner of the huge building, I came upon Leversedge himself.

He lounged, with his hands in his pockets, staring up at the soft night-moths, that fluttered around the bulbs of hard white light. I felt troubled, I therefore became weakly vapid—in speech.

"You here? The gay and giddy dance is over then," I said.

Leversedge's eyes met mine in vague inquiry for an instant.

"Oh! we've had some splendid turns," he said. "Charlotte dances divinely."

"Does she not do all things divinely?"

"Pretty nearly," he answered, smiling.

All went well still, then; my soul received comfort, my faith in my own gospel revived. Yea, these lovers should yet find complete salvation and—sustaining thought—through me.

Leversedge was staring at the upward flying night-moths again.

"Poor, silly fools," he said slowly, "they're a little too much of a parable."

But my cheerfulness had returned.

"My dear fellow," I replied, "they 'needs must love the highest when they see it,' like the rest of us. But the highest is perfectly safe in this case, and will not do them any injury. They can't singe themselves. The globes are sealed."

Leversedge's mildly distracted brow gathered into a frown for a moment, and he raised his shoulders the least bit in the world.

"No, they can't singe themselves," he said, "but they can bash their silly heads in, which will answer much the same purpose." Then he added, quickly and courteously—"I beg your pardon, Hammond; I am an ass, and like an ass I am a little bit out of temper."

Just then, somewhere down in the direction of the little harbour, a dog yelped. I saw Leversedge start.

"What's that?" he said, under his breath.

His face straightened. He listened. I listened too, somehow. It was exceedingly stupid of me, for I ought to have talked; but I could not help myself. I had to listen. The sounds of revelry from the dining-room had grown faint; a breath of air had stirred the surface of the bank of shrubs on our right. And again, down by the harbour, a dog, evidently a small dog, yelped and whimpered.

"Let us come round to the front of the house," Leversedge said, rather hurriedly. "That set of Lancers must be over by now, I should think, and she told me to meet her at the steps."

As we went along the terrace, he added—

"That greasy animal, Gerrard, has turned up again to-night. He insisted upon Charlotte's sitting out this square dance with him, which bored her, and annoyed me rather. Of course I know, I'm rather out of it, Hammond, from having been away so long; but if that fellow's not a bad lot, I never saw any man that was."

"Briefly, he is a beast!" I exclaimed.

Leversedge chuckled audibly.

"Thanks, I feel better," he said. "Charlotte doesn't fancy him either, I know; but she's seen a good deal of him at Mrs. Mertyns', and she can't be uncivil, you see. As to this dance, she couldn't civilly get out of it."

As we moved forward the air became positively heavy with the rich, aromatic scent of the magnolia blossoms, while the sound of the band came upon us with a sudden gush, in the light tuneful music of *La Cigale*.

"We shall get away from all these people tomorrow," Leversedge said. "Till then I strive to possess my soul in patience."

He smiled very charmingly, looked half proudly, half shyly at me.

"I'm awfully grateful to you, Hammond," he said. "But for you I might not have dared go on. Thanks to you, the supreme good is near, is very near."

Just then we reached the foot of the marble steps, crossed by broad spaces of golden brightness from the windows of the *salon* —

against which last the band, fiddling and blowing under the vine-embowered verandah, showed as a company of grotesque silhouettes. Halfway down the flight stood the Deputy Surgeon-General discoursing earnestly to Perry *père et mère*.

"Oh! hang it, they've not done yet," Leversedge said.

At the sound of his voice Mr. Perry turned, and perceiving us, ran playfully down to join us.

"Ah, ha!" he cried; "I see, I see. Damon and Pythias, David and Jonathan—as usual, inseparable companions— Divorced for a brief space
And then together flowing, impelled by friendship,
As severed drops upon the petals of the dewy rose. Upon my word, I begin to suspect Charlotte has a rival in that naughty boy's affections, eh, Mr. Ham- mond? Ladies have been known before now to grow jealous of their husband's friends. You must be nice to Charlotte, very, very nice to Charlotte, or who can tell—eh?"

"It's a beautiful night," Leversedge remarked, with a certain irritation in his tone; "all the same, I don't care to stand still here. Shall we take a turn, Hammond, and come back?"

"By all means," I said.

Was Leversedge only restless, anxious to shake off Perry *père* , or was he cold? Really I was becoming very sentimental over Leversedge. I would sacrifice myself to an almost unlimited extent in the way of pedestrianism to prevent his feeling cold.—But if his intention was to shake off his father-in-law, that end was not to be attained by such simple methods.

"Yes, by all means," echoed Mr. Perry; "I am with you."

And he trotted gaily beside us.

"A beautiful night, as you observe, Constantine, truly a beautiful night. Really, I may say, without exaggeration, a sublime night. I have just been calling my wife's and our good friend, the doctor's, attention to the expanse of the starry heavens as presented to us this evening —

Worlds upon worlds displayed
To awe the human eye,
In majesty arrayed,
Go slowly rolling by."

Here Mr. Perry became extremely noble.

"If my youth had not been necessarily devoted to pursuits of a practical character, and if the virtue of patriotism had not become the master passion of my maturer years, I should certainly have been an astronomer. Most elevating branch of science, Mr. Hammond, I am sure,—most elevating. The silent night, the lonely observatory, the burnished brass tube turned in humble inquiry upon unnumbered universes! Ah yes, 'the undevout astronomer is mad,'—must be, you know, 'tis perfectly obvious. Yet, as I often remind myself, the busy bee has its place in nature, its little duty to fulfil, as well as the soaring eagle. And I trust I do not neglect my own honey cells, as we may say, d o not neglect them. I am proud to think our local branch of the Primrose League, for instance, owes much to my efforts and to those o f Mamma—for we must never forget the gentle hand of women, which rocking the cradle still rules the world—ah ha! rules us, and, therefore, of necessity, the world."

We had walked the length of the terrace. Before us lay the garden, blotted by trees and masses of shrubbery, spreading away to a flat stretch of vineyards intersected by the pale gleam of a long straight road. Then the scattered lights of the little town—points of silver clustered along the edge of a blue-purple abyss of lake and mountain.

Mr. Perry drew himself up. He was quite detestably full-blown just then. He carried his head on one side, and shook his finger waggishly at the constellations—which, again, were points of silver clustered in that other blue-purple abyss of the night sky.

"Yes, yes," he cried, "you heavenly bodies must indeed pursue your immemorial way without me! Hearth and home, wife and child, man and brother, Church and State, our revered Queen, our glorious Constitution,—these, after all, Mr. Hammond, twine themselves more

closely about the heart-strings of the true Briton than even the most august of scientific studies. he affections must be satisfied, must be so, 'tis absolutely necessary. Constantine is in a position to bear witness to that truth just now; eh, Constantine?—

He left his books

For ladies' looks. Account-books, in the case of Constantine. Ledgers, yes, ledgers—and very well-kept ones, too, as I can testify. Most creditable entries in those ledgers.—Dear me, what's this—what's this? Amid all our charming conversation and light musical gaiety the plaint of some inferior animal in pain!"

The dog was yelping again. The sound had shifted, was nearer. It seemed to come from the chestnut avenue, into the dark shadow of which the scarlet-bloused Russian and her companions had disappeared.

Leversedge touched me on the shoulder, speaking quickly.

"Let's turn, Hammond. That dance must be over by now, and I don't want to keep her waiting."

"Right, right!" cried Mr. Perry genially. "I approve the sentiment. The Fair may sometimes delay us, but let us never delay the Fair. For 'tis the little foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the grapes. And how often the surface of domestic happiness is ruffled, and the peace of its depths endangered, I'm sure I may say positively endangered, by the omission of small courtesies—

Those trifling, trivial tributes of our love,

Which still the heart's complete devotion prove. These are too often ignored by us members of the sterner sex; yet they are foundational, I protest foundational, as the basis of sweet agreement in the matrimonial state."

At the foot of the steps stood Mrs. Perry.

"Dear me!" she said as we approached, "I'm sure it's a very shocking thing we should be benefiting so by those poor black people's bad habits, and I really don't see how we do,—and I'm sure it ought all to be put a stop to at once by the Queen, or the Parliament,

or anybody in a position to do it.—Oh, well, here you all are; the doctor here's been explaining to me all about those poor Indians and the opium, and it does seem all very dreadful. And there's been a dog howling so; I've just been asking him to go and see what is the matter with it. It always upsets me,—doesn't it you, Mr. Hammond?—to hear anything crying about like that when you don't know what's wrong with it."

The set of Lancers were clearly over, for the band was well away with a valse again. The Carissima, in her trailing peach-bloom skirts, stood just outside the central window of the ballroom. Gerrard's squat figure was behind her. He was talking to her, insisting upon something. The girl moved forward impatiently, as though wishing to escape from him. But he followed her to the head of the steps. He was very close to her, still speaking, still insisting. I saw him, to emphasise his words—whatever they might be—touch her arm with his hand.

Leversedge saw it too. His mouth opened a little, and a dangerous light came into his eyes.

"Damn your impudence! I should like to settle with you once and for all," he said under his breath.

"Yes, to be sure, there it is howling again," Mrs. Perry chimed in. "But, dear me, I don't want the poor thing done away with altogether, if that's what you mean, Constantine. I only want it turned out of the garden, you know, or taken back where it belongs."

Charlotte came swiftly down the marble steps. She pressed her left hand against the side of her charming head; and the up-draught, as she moved, taking the lace of her open sleeve blew it back, showing her arm almost to the shoulder. The great diamonds, which Leversedge had brought her, glittered upon her third finger and upraised wrist. And the band played softly, I remember, a die-away passage of the valse,—it was one arranged from that pretty, silly song of Caminada's, "Ashes of love are as ashes of roses,"—and, down by the lake shore, once more a dog whimpered and yelped.

CHAPTER VI

"***APRÈS*** *le bal*," cried Mr. Perry, addressing his daughter in rallying tones,—"*après le bal*! Surely you young people stand in need of a little light refreshment? A plan, a plan, I have a charming plan—eh, Mamma? Let's offer our friends here an *al fresco* entertainment, before we part at the close of this auspicious day, to meet again to-morrow morning. Ah yes, meet at the church door at half-past ten o'clock. I look for many friendly faces to be gathered at the church door, I'm sure, quite a number of friendly faces.—But now to supper."

In speaking, Mr. Perry waved us towards a table, by one of the large magnolias, at the farther side of the terrace. The rough zinc top of the table, I remember, caught the light, as did the white balustrade parallel to which it stood, over which pink climbing roses, set in the flower-border below, had thrown long trails of leaf and blossom. Beyond lay a quarter of an acre of lawn sloping away into a darkness of trees, bordering the lake shore.

The Carissima passed us without speaking. She went quickly across the wide gravel terrace, and dropped into a chair at the head of the table. It appeared to me the young lady's whole manner and bearing was curiously concentrated; it held no hint of hesitancy now, or of deprecating mildness. She swept by, indeed, with a certain violence; and, as I followed with Mrs. Perry, the effect of her struck me as really impressive—her head and bare throat, her slim figure to the waist, in its pale draperies, standing out in profile, clean cut, from the multitudinous background of glossy magnolia leaves. And, thereupon, a suspicion overtook me, that, even now, for good or evil, I had not come to the end of Charlotte *née* Perry. I took my place at the little table in a spirit of expectation; a rather weariful sense upon me—really this day was an unconscionably long one!—that, in respect of drama, there might even now be a considerable amount ahead.

As for the rest of the party—Mr. Perry had skirmished off in search of supper; Percy Gerrard still lingered, wrapped in august abstraction, under the verandah; while Leversedge, passing round, perched himself on the balustrade near his bride—his back towards the dimness of the garden, his face towards the illuminated *façade* of the great hotel. He bent down and spoke in a low voice to the girl.

Mrs. Perry sat next me, and proceeded to engage my attention by artless discourse. She was gorgeously attired this evening in a rich silk gown of sanguine hue. Moreover, I distinctly recall her cap. It was of the usual respectable upper-housemaid order, so much affected by elderly ladies of our modest nation; but, as sign of full dress, curious little golden acorns depended from the lower lace frill of it, as wind-bells from the roofs of a pagoda. They waggled as she moved her head, and the affect was amusing, somehow.

"I'm sure this is all very pleasant," she said, looking round with evident satisfaction. "And no doubt it's very right and proper of Dr. Moorcock to be so busy about the bad habits of those poor blacks. But hearing him talk seems to make you very anxious, you know. Of course I was always brought up to believe those in authority—governors and generals and Members of Parliament, and all those sort of gentlemen, did know best, so that one wasn't called upon to trouble. And then, of course, when somebody like Dr. Moorcock comes and explains to you they're always making dreadful mistakes, why, you can't help being very upset and uneasy, you know—you really don't feel as if anything was safe anywhere."

"My dear child," I heard Leversedge saying, very gently, "if you'd only tell me what's gone wrong—half an hour ago everything seemed as right as—"

"And then it's so beautiful sitting out of doors like this," Mrs. Perry continued, folding her hands contentedly over the centre of her person. "Of course that was all very different, quite in a small private sort of way, you know; but still it does remind me of the first year Mr. Perry and I were married. We had a house at Brixton—semi-

detached, and a nice bow-window to the sitting-room,—I know Aunt Trumbull gave me red rep curtains for it and they never would quite meet, there was a mistake about half a breadth, somewhere—it was a disappointment, but I tried never to let them be drawn when she came in, for fear it should mortify her,—well, and there was a garden at the back. It had walls all round, and, of course, it wasn't very much; but there was a black-plum tree in one corner, and when Joseph used to come back from the office early, we would take our chairs out there and sit."

Then Leversedge's voice reached me again.

"Oh," he was saying, "if you would like the plans altered any way, there's nothing easier."

He plucked off the head of a rose absently, and pulled the petals apart.

"The world's before us where to choose, after all, you see. We'll go where you like, and stay where you like. Whatever you like, I like—down to the ground, I like it."

"It was very close that summer," Mrs. Perry went on; "and—perhaps it's not quite a thing to mention before a gentleman, but, you see, you do seem to be such an old friend now, Mr. Hammond—I felt the heat very much just then, not being quite strong—"

What the girl had answered him I do not know, but I saw Leversedge turn away rather hastily. Then something must have arrested his attention, for he paused, leaning sideways over the balustrade, one arm outstretched towards the trailing roses, looking out over the great lawn. He was very still for a moment; and a dog howled again, down in the direction of the harbour.

"Poor thing, the doctor hasn't caught it, then," Mrs. Perry put in parenthetically.

Leversedge pulled off another rose with rather laboured indifference, and, facing round, threw back his head with a jerk. The content had died out of his face. His brow was distracted, and the hunted look had come once again into his eyes. He bent very tenderly

over Charlotte.

"Whatever you please and wherever you please, my sweet," he said softly,—"if only you will be pleased. Surely you know, you know, I just live for that?"

"You see, it was just a few months before dear Lottie's birth," continued my excellent com- panion. "We weren't very well off at that time, Mr. Hammond, and I made all my own baby-linen. It's very pretty work baby-linen, I always have thought that. And I used to sew as long as it was light, and then sometimes Mr. Perry would play to me. I am afraid the people next door objected rather, which seemed to me very illiberal, for I am sure I always found it sweetly pretty—Joseph used to practise quite a number of nice tunes, at that time, upon the flute."

Meanwhile Leversedge went on speaking, pleading, as it appeared to me; but he spoke very low, I did not hear what he said.

"You know, Mr. Perry doesn't quite care to hear me refer to that time; he gets rather excited when I do, and says it's not fair upon Charlotte to recall our early married life. And perhaps it isn't. Of course, it all was very obscure. But I never knew how obscure it was then; and, you see, I was very happy somehow—"

Mrs. Perry sighed.

"I know it's all much better now, and that Charlotte and Mr. Perry move in society much more suitable to them both; but a woman's thoughts will go back to the time she was very happy, even if she sees afterwards that it was all a mistake and that she oughtn't to have been so, you know, Mr. Hammond."

Here the Carissima made a sudden movement— threw up her hands, clasped them before her face. She stayed so a minute, showing like a cameo against the screen of foliage.

"Wait,—pray, pray, wait," she said. "Presently, when my parents are gone—not now—I can't explain before them. Indeed, I hardly know my own thought yet. Wait—I implore you, wait."

"The last thing I wish is to distress you, God knows," Leversedge said slowly and sadly.

Hearing which, the remnants of my lately recovered cheerfulness began to vanish, smokelike, in deepening disquiet. For I recognised that I had gloried without sufficient cause, that this conversion remained distinctly incomplete.

Leversedge stared away across the lawn again, and as I watched him his figure gradually stiffened and straightened. He, too, was watching anxiously, unwillingly, yet with a sort of fascination something —something which I did not see. I suppose I really was very tired, for his attitude affected me strangely. The feeling returned upon me which had oppressed me earlier in the evening, as I worked my way out of the crowded hall, namely, that there was an abnormal, a malign element in my surroundings. It was absurd, of course, yet increasingly the Spirit of Fear—fear of I know not quite what—whether a perception of something supernatural, or merely a heightened perception of the ever-present possibility of tragedy in mortal existence, seemed to haunt the whispering trees and dusky garden, to diffuse itself through the blue-purple abyss of the lake and mountains, and the clear, impassive, starlit night.

Just then arrived to us Mr. Perry, followed by a waiter carrying a tray, shoulder high. If there was any abnormal influence abroad, it had not affected Perry *père* as yet, save in the way of an astonishing and altogether disproportionate hilarity.

"Ah ha!" he cried, "I bring you varied cates—
Each to his taste, enough alike for all. Coffee and ices for the slighter appetites; champagne for the more solid, accompanied by a lobster mayonnaise. Mamma was ever partial to a salad composed of that somewhat deleterious crustacean —weren't you, Mamma?—*Ici*, put the things on the table, don't you see, *comme ça, garçon. Et maintenant ôtez le plateau*, and you can go, *allez,—vous comprenez*."

This to the waiter.

Whether attracted by the sight of food, or impelled by some more subtle form of desire, I know not, but here Percy Gerrard descended

the steps and joined us. He drew up at the corner of the table, between Charlotte and myself; and the girl looked up at him with a strange expression, half dependence, half disgust—as it seemed to me. As once before, I suspected collusion between these two persons, and I didn't in the least like it. At all events, it was a satisfaction to note that, along with dependence, Charlotte Perry's extremely pretty and mobile face did express disgust.

"Lobster?—no, thank you. Champagne?—yes," he said, in response to an invitation on the part of Mr. Perry,—"that is, if it is dry; I take for granted it's dry."

Gerrard's voice was not under complete control; it came hard and sudden. He emptied his glass, and then, setting it down, rested his hand on the table, bending forward over the girl.

"Have you remarked the glow-worms to-night?" he asked her. "Out there, upon the grass, they are really very wonderful."

He raised his hand and pointed down over the lawn. And that hand must have been disagreeably damp; for it left, dark on the grey zinc table-top, a distinct impression of a flat palm, four squat fingers and a thumb to match.

"Fairylike?—yes, I'm sure, positively fairylike," broke in Perry *père* enthusiastically. "Titania and her frisky train are all abroad this evening. I have called my wife's attention to their merry manoeuvres already—haven't I, Mamma?"

Leversedge, at the mention of the glow-worms, glanced sharply at the speaker. Then he seemed to gather himself together, with a certain determination, and sat, his head bent, his back to the garden and his face to the light, laying hold, very hard—so I fancied—of the edge of the stone balustrade on either side of him.

Gerrard went on speaking, his voice cracking up and down queerly.

"You see them? There must be some peculiar atmospheric conditions to account for the extreme brilliancy of those delicate jewels."

He paused, apparently trying to steady his unruly voice. The dance was over; the bandsmen were putting up their instruments. The *concierge* turned out the clusters of electric lights one by one, leaving but a gas-jet here and there, in compliment to the few guests who still loitered in the grounds. The lady of the red silk blouse passed us with her attendants, as usual deep in excited talk. The fresh-faced subaltern and his trim partner lingered, bidding each other a protracted farewell at the foot of the steps.

"Ah! how extraordinary!" cried Gerrard suddenly. "Look—look at those in the centre of the lawn, two discs of lambent living green. Singular! They move together rapidly, and towards us."

The Carissima pushed her chair violently back making the stiff leaves of the magnolia shatter together behind her.

"No, no, not that way!" she cried,—"not that way! I dare not. It is too wicked. I cannot."

Leversedge had taken one glance over his shoulder into the dimness. Then he wrenched himself round, wrenched himself on to his feet. And once again I could have sworn his hair bristled, while his lips stood away from his teeth.

"You lie," he said, "and you know it. You lie,—so help me God."

A silence followed; even Perry *père*, for once, amazed out of all articulate expression. And a dog yelped and howled, quite near us this time, on the left. While one of the bandsmen, a tow-headed young German, mocked it, howling an echo; whereupon all his companions laughed rather boisterously, as they moved away into the darkness, round the corner of the huge house.

When Gerrard answered, his voice rose into a positive scream.

"You are insolent, Mr. Leversedge, and your language is gross; but let that pass. I appeal to Miss Perry—to your wife. Ask her what she saw just now."

The girl stood up between the two men—Leversedge on her right, Gerrard on her left. But she looked at neither of them. She looked full at me—for a most disintegrating, delectable, detestable minute. Her

expression was of supreme appeal. Her lips gathered, quivered, with that delicious sketch of a kiss. I knew—don't write me down an unpardonably fatuous ass—I knew she was mine, to have if I would. I had only to speak five words to claim her, and she would come, regardless of all obstacles, joyfully, nay, triumphantly. And, dear me, was she not seductive just then, radiant with an amazing mingling of demand and of innocence? She asked me silently, yet with dominating force, she knew not what—for Charlotte Perry's passion was (pray, let us never forget that), as is the passion of so many modern young women, rightly considered, a matter of the head, of the imagination only, and not really one bit of the heart. And I answered her, whether as a man of honour, whether merely as a selfish craven, I shall never know. To the end of my foolish days, here on this foolish earth, the problem will haunt me, will remain unsolved by me. Did I behave as a perfect gentleman, or merely as a very thorough-paced poltroon? I cannot tell. Anyhow, silently, I did answer. Whereupon the girl threw herself down in her chair, and flung her arms out across the table, scattering the ice-plates and coffee-cups to right and left, making a swamp of Perry *père's* poor little supper.

"Oh dear!" moaned Mrs. Perry,—"oh dear! whatever is the matter? Everything seems to have turned off so very dreadful all of a sudden. And,I'm sure I can't tell what it's all about—can you, Mr. Hammond?"

"About death and damnation!" I exclaimed under my breath.

Leversedge bent forward across the corner of the table.

"Charlotte," he said hoarsely, yet authoritatively, "tell me, did you see anything? What did you see?"

There was a breathless pause; and a dog whimpered close to us, quite close, down among the rose bushes, just below the balustrade. Then the Carissima raised her head, and her face was sharp, astute, terrible.

"Yes," she said, "I did see something."

She looked at Gerrard, she looked at me again, she turned straight to Leversedge.

"I did see something. I saw it."

Percy Gerrard slapped his hands together and moved back a couple of steps from the table, making an ugly noise in his throat, between a cough and a grunt; while good Mrs. Perry broke into an hysterical sobbing.

"Oh dear me! I don't understand,—won't anybody tell me?—I don't understand," she said.

And Leversedge remained quite still, his back to the wide dusky garden; his face and figure seeming to grow thinner, more corpse-like, as the *concierge*, passing the length of the terrace, extinguished another and yet another of the lights. When at last he spoke, he was fine, he was admirable—he had, indeed, risen to something of majesty. For he was master of himself, perfectly self-restrained, and calm—with the bitter self-restraint, the cruel calm, of one whose feet are set in the Valley of Tribulation, journeying through which a man's spirit is too deeply laden for him to strive or cry, but who moves forward, with the stoicism which, in strong and simple natures, utter desolation is—thank heaven—almost sure to give.

"This is not the end," he said,—"not quite the end,—and with the end the rest of you have nothing to do. Go, you cur," he added, addressing Gerrard. "Just how much I owe you I don't yet know, but be very sure I'll do my best to pay you all I do owe."

He came round the table and stood by Mrs. Perry's chair.

"Go away too, my dear good woman," he said very gently. "You have always been very kind to me; but I am beyond the point now where kindness like yours is of much avail."

"I am at a loss," broke in Perry *père* suddenly; "I protest, I am altogether at a loss—I am at sea, positively at sea. The wordy scene, the untasted refreshments—really, Constantine—"

"There, there, there," answered Leversedge. "You shall know the result all in good time, and that must be enough for you."

"But my daughter," protested Mr. Perry.

Charlotte had sat rigid, her arms still out- stretched upon the table,

her face hard and set. Now she turned, almost contemptuously, upon her father.

"Go, Papa," she said. "I do not want you; you can't help me, and you may make me ridiculous. I can play my own game. And," she added,—"and—you needn't be afraid. There will be a witness—Mr. Hammond shall stay."

Percy Gerrard, whose courage was never of the militant order, had fled hurriedly up the marble stairway into the hotel. And now Perry *père et mère* followed him quite meekly—she weeping in a broken-spirited manner piteous to hear.

"I don't understand," she said, "and I was just growing so fond of Constantine, too. He seemed to recall our dear little boy to me so—though as he died quite an infant and Constantine's a grown man, I'm sure I don't know why."

And for once in his life Mr. Perry was too cowed to scold her; he merely gave her his arm, and led her humbly away.

CHAPTER VI

SO we three were left alone. To form one of that trinity was not an honour, very certainly, which I coveted. But there was no way to avoid it; so, inwardly protesting, and feeling, I confess, ignominiously nervous, I remained.

Leversedge came on along the side of the table, and dropped into the chair which I, in the moment of the catastrophe, had vacated. The girl did not look at him; she continued in the same rigid attitude, her arms still flung out across the table amid the wreck of the supper; her fingers doubling and undoubling convulsively—the only sign she gave of her agitation. And Leversedge laid his hand on her bare arm just below the elbow. It was rather ghastly to think how her muscles working like that, right under his fingers, must have affected him. For a little space he sat silent, trying to force back a rising tide of very vital emotion—while, I remember, the coffee from an overturned cup dripped slowly, slowly from the farther edge of the table on to the gravel below. At last he said—

"My sweet, this is bad—very bad. This is the one thing I have implored mightn't happen; that I have prayed against—by day when I was free, by night when I was cursed. I have fought against the terror of its happening as one fights for life itself. I could not think it could be allowed to be—I trusted God—whatever God is—to be more just than that."

His voice broke. Again he was silent, trying to recover himself.

"As for that brute Gerrard," he went on presently, "I believe, as I told him, that he lied. But you—you—you," cried Leversedge,—"you couldn't lie."

He bent his head and kissed the hollow of the girl's arm again and again.

All this was indescribably painful; and I most genuinely detest what

i s painful—at close quarters. I wanted to go away, I wanted desperately to go away. But the Carissima raised her eyes to mine. Her pretty face was still set and fierce; but, as far as I could judge in the dim light, it was fierce with alarm now, rather than with resolve. Her eyes entreated me, commanded me not to desert her. I obeyed.

"See," Leversedge said, "I have no words in which to tell you of my shame, of my self-loathing in having brought this horror on you. I have been hideously, damnably selfish in tying up your life to mine, with the possibility of that happening which has happened. But—but—oh! I am a scoundrel to have let it come to this pass—you see, we've gone too far to turn back—you see, we belong to each other now."

Leversedge paused, a perfect agony of prayer, of love in his expression. It became almost unbearable. If she would only give some sign! But she continued absolutely impassive, save for the doubling and undoubling of her fingers as they rested on the table.

"You see—it's a vile thing to remind you of like this—but we are married. We can't cancel that except by death. And don't, don't want me to die," he cried,—"not yet, not just yet. I have cared so long, dreamed so long, waited so long for this—for our marriage—for what to-morrow brings. Oh! my sweet, my sweet, try to put it out of your mind, try to forget what you saw. You may never see it again, it may never come back. Only be merciful, and try, just try. Give me a week, a month, just a little while, in which to be happy. And the torment will cease, the cloud will pass. I know it will. It must. I will compel it to—it must. And, listen—I will love you as never yet woman was loved; for you will have done for me more than any woman ever yet did for any man."

Leversedge's head sank down upon his hand on the girl's arm, and I saw that his whole frame was shaken with great sobs.

"Forgive me," he said, just audibly. "Forgive me,—try to forget."

Then for a minute, I confess, I lost my head and called out loud to her—

"Speak to him! Say something, anything. God in heaven! what are

you made of? Speak to him, I say."

The girl straightened herself up, with a long shuddering sigh—a ghostly image of desperation against the dark multitudinous background of magnolia leaves.

"You—you of all people in the world, Antony Hammond!" she said very bitterly.

And Leversedge repeated his prayer, just audibly again.

"Forgive me—and for a little while, try, only try."

"I have tried," she answered at last.

"You have been to me as an angel."

"I have tried," she repeated, addressing me, not Leversedge. "You can bear witness to that—who better?"

She dragged her arm away from under his hand.

"And I have failed, failed miserably and contemptibly. Just in the very moment of success I break down—"

She rose to her feet, speaking violently, passion- ately, pelting me with words, as she might have with stones.

"No, I don't care what I admit. I have been mad to convince you, to prove to you that I was what I desire to be and am not. I thought I was sufficiently strong to carry it through long enough, at all events, to disprove your suspicions, to master you. I didn't care what came later. I should have won that which I wanted. But I am not sufficiently strong. You triumph, after all. You were right in your estimate of me. I am cheap, flimsy, insincere—an actress. My learning is mere cram, my talents mere imitation. I am a sham—colourless, characterless, a mere reflection of other people's thoughts, fashions, affectations. Yes, you are right, you have been right all along. I am a fraud. But I hoped against hope. I thought if I played at being something else long enough, I might deceive even myself, and really become that which I simulated. And, remember, I gave you the chance to help me, not once, not twice. But you were relentless; you forced me back on myself; you dragged aside the veil with which I tried to conceal my nothingness. I gave you the chance to help, and you were too lazy, too

selfish, too fine, to trouble to take it. Then I turned to someone else. Ah! I am grateful to you—in very truth we have all cause to be grateful to you."

Leversedge was standing up too. He looked utterly amazed and bewildered. More than once he had tried to stay the torrent of her speech, unsuccessfully; but, to my immense relief, I perceived that he was far too much absorbed in his own side of the drama to comprehend the purport of the girl's words. He supposed—poor dear Leversedge—it was the terror of the diabolic dog which had thus unhinged her mind; and he, of course, was responsible for that also!

"Charlotte, my poor child, my poor darling," he implored, "don't go on like this, pray don't. You'll break my heart. I don't know what to do for you."

He held out his arms to her, tried to take hold of her, to draw her to him; but she backed away, violently, round the corner of the table. A trailing spray of roses caught the folds of her dress and dragged them sideways.

"No," she cried, "I will not come. It is useless to ask me. Don't you understand, I break with you? Ah! how thick-witted you are! Don't you understand, what you offer me isn't enough, since—since—you yourself go with it?"

Leversedge stared at her, for a minute, across the table, and still the coffee from the overturned cup dripped slowly, very slowly, upon the gravel. Then languor and tenderness alike passed away from him. He drew himself up, and it struck me what a big man—notwithstanding his spare make—Leversedge was.

"Isn't it a trifle late to think of that?" he asked her very quietly.

There was a silence, while a dog yelped and whimpered again, close to us, down among the roses below the balustrade.

"I do not love you," the girl said.

Leversedge looked at her and laughed harshly, and for an instant the devil of desire leapt into his eyes.

"That is rather unfortunate," he replied, "for I love you—very much."

I turned away. Really they must settle the matter themselves. The presence of a third person had ceased to be admissible. But the girl called to me imperiously to remain.

"Stay," she cried, "stay—you're a poor enough creature, Mr. Hammond, but you shall stay. I demand that you do so. I refuse to be left alone here, unprotected, with this madman."

Leversedge staggered—then steadied himself, resting his hands on the table.

"But—you—you saw it yourself," he said, with a sort of indignation.

Then Charlotte *née* Perry, that unheroic daughter of unheroic parents, played her last card. It was a very foul card, unfortunately.

"I saw nothing, just now. Listen, attend to that which I tell you, I saw nothing but what I should see this moment, if I turned my head—nothing but the glow-worms in the grass."

"But—but—" Leversedge murmured wildly.

"It was a plan," she went on, "a plot to rid myself of you—do you not understand?—to get rid of you."

She made a strange downward and outward movement of her hands, as though stripping away some garment, some covering.

"Wake up," she cried, "Constantine Leversedge; see things as they are, clearly, at last, though too late; for I am utterly weary of this long comedy. You have worshipped a delusion. Know me at last as I am. Mr. Hammond will be delighted to draw out the points of the lesson. Learn of what I am capable. I lied to you—do you hear me?—I lied."

Then she slipped round the end of the table—while the rose spray, catching her dress, rent the muslin and tore at the silk of it with a sort of lingering shriek; and a small whitish dog, a mangy, half-starved, quivering little wretch, his tail between his legs, and a dirty tag of rope round his neck, crawled out from between the pillars of the balustrade, and ran, limping and yapping, behind her, across the terrace, as she fled up the marble steps into the vast hotel.

CHAPTER VIII

SOME ten minutes later Leversedge got up from beside the little table. He had made no outcry. He was quiet, desolatingly quiet, almost apathetic; and he was shaking all over, shaking, so that instinctively I put out my hand to support him.

"Thanks," he said. "There's nothing that I know of to wait for now. Perhaps we may as well go in, Hammond; don't you think so?"

But on the threshold of the glass door of the *salon* he paused, shaking too violently to go farther. The ballroom was dark, silent, empty—only lights, as one saw through the open doors, beyond in the hall.

"I think I must have got a bit of a chill," Leversedge remarked. "I expect there's a lot of damp at night off the lake, and if you've once had a touch of fever it's likely to lay hold of you."

Then we went on across the *salon* into the hall, and up the great staircase, slowly, waiting now and then, because he shook so badly, to Lever- sedge's room on the first floor. I remember the impression made on me as I opened the door of it. The effect within was striking; for there were candles everywhere,—on the chimneypiece, the writing-table, the chest of drawers, by the bedside,—a positive blaze of light, turning this bachelor bedchamber into something curiously suggestive of a *chapelle ardente*.

I suppose Leversedge noticed my surprise.

"Candles? Oh yes," he said; "I always tell them to light a good many like that, now—it's pleasanter, you know, at night."

He gazed round the room in a dazed, vacant kind of way. Upon the writing-table stood a folding, leather photograph frame, somewhat worn and travel-stained with much packing. It contained a series of pictures of Charlotte Perry, covering quite a number of years, judging by the changing fashion of her costume. The last photograph was of

very recent date; the girl's charming face set in the aureole of the wide-brimmed, rose-garlanded hat which she had worn that morning. Leversedge's wandering glance lighted on these pictures; and a terrible emotion gripped his very vitals.

"My love!" he cried out loud,—"my love!"

His apathy passed away, and in a moment he had turned and spoke to me courteously, and with a certain stateliness.

"You're extremely kind, Hammond," he said, "and I believe you have always done your very best for me. Most likely I shall make use of your kindness again later; but just now, for the present, I should be glad to be alone. I feel I am rather a poor companion, I have not much talk in me, and I have two or three little matters to attend to. I'm awfully obliged to you—thanks—goodnight."

I leaned for a long while out of the window of my bedroom, downstairs, on the ground floor, filled with a vast pity and discontent. The air was very still, an impalpable gloom covered the garden, the stars were very large, very many, very bright. The miserable little dog still yelped and howled. The Spirit of Fear was still abroad; it agitated, it distressed me. I had seen two people wrecked; had contributed, precisely how far I knew not, myself, to their wrecking. And in so doing had I, too, seen that Thing-too-Much, of which Leversedge had once spoken? Had I, too, been "to the end of the world and looked over the wall," got to the place from which there is no way out? These were not agreeable reflections. The hopeless diversity of human character, the hopeless complexity of human relations staggered me. Is there absolutely no limit to our misunderstanding of each other, to our torturing of each other, to our boring of each other? Is there absolutely no safety? Is every connection, every friendship, every love, liable to reel away, thus, into disaster?

And then, besides these abstract and general fears, very concrete and close ones oppressed me. What would the issue of this business be between Leversedge and the Carissima? What would to-morrow bring—what, even, to-night? Suddenly I was overtaken by a certain

very definite alarm for Leversedge, which forced me to leave my room, and go forth, down long passages, across the vacant hall, and up the wide staircase once more. Strange vague noises and vague odours saluted me, the clinging quiet of the great house wrapped me about. And a penetrating sense possessed me of the common things, the pitiful things, the base things, the delicious things—the unholy revelations, the mystic initiations—which must be taking place, to-night, as every night, behind these ranges of closely closed doors. The Spirit of Fear was abroad here too, with a suggestion of secrets which might not lawfully be looked into. The crowd had broken up into units. Darkness and silence shrouded all. Yet the tragedy, the comedy, the ecstasy, of human life went forward just the same; all the more strongly and directly, indeed, because now it was hidden and concentrated, because each individual had, practically, the whole stage to himself.

I waited outside Leversedge's room, but there was no sound within. The candles were still burning brightly, for a line of vivid light showed beneath the door. Perhaps, worn-out with emotion and fatigue, he slept. I could but hope so. To wake him, if he slept, would b e cruel; to intrude upon him unasked, if he waked, would be impertinent. I realised that my journey had been a piece of folly. I was an idiot to have come. Refreshingly conscious of that fact, I turned about and went back.

Where were the proud pleasures now, of preacher, director, evangelist, which had but so lately puffed up my silly soul? On my own lines I too had failed—failed as completely as broken-hearted Leversedge on his, as the heartless Carissima on hers. We had all played, and we had all lost. Destiny had swept our stakes into her lap, as is Destiny's habit; and left us, each in our several ways, penniless. We had each, in our several ways, asked the impossible of the other, with this inevitable, this very gratifying result! And I—I, at least, from my detached standpoint ought to have known better, seen clearer. For, what the devil is the use of standing aside from the battle of life,

unless by so doing you keep a steady enough head and lively enough perceptions, to see how the battle is going, and to be able to foresee the result? My conceit of myself was wounded to the death.

It is an humiliating confession to make, since I perceive it brings my habitual light-mindedness into rather lurid prominence, but I don't think I had ever felt actively and personally miserable, until now, as I shut the great casements of my window together, and reflected that there was no help to be given either to the sinned against or the sinning; that there was positively nothing more to be done save to wait the event.

Ah! is it not a pity, after all, we have grown so wise, in these latter days, that we regard religion merely as a subject of interesting speculation; that we have ceased to have faith in the demigods, who were agreeably accessible, comfortably near to us; and have retained only a barren, because only a controversial, belief in the Great God who sits behind the Creeds? For the adept, no doubt, He represents the final rest, the final beatitude; but, for the rank and file of us, He is chillingly far away, too unthinkably great to be of much immediate use in poor little twopenny-halfpenny human extremity. I would so thankfully have said a prayer, for my unworthy and futile self; for my poor dear friend Leversedge; even for Charlotte *née* Perry, that most unheroic daughter of a voracious rat and excellent suburban clock-moon, in this her hour of self-knowledge, conscious nakedness and nothingness. But how could I, in reason, do so? Who was I that I should be heard? What my petitions, that they should obtain to change the course of history? What would be, would be. My pitiful wishes weighed as a feather against the push of Fate.

No doubt such meditations are healthful for the soul, rich with wholesome discipline; but, ye powers! they are quite detestably unpleasant all the same.

And so, realising the futility of myself and my endeavours, I declined upon bathos. I went to bed. Still worse, I, being most abominably tired, went to sleep.

I suppose I slept heavily, yet I remember the yapping and howling of a dog mingling with my dreams, now taking on an almost human sound of appeal and reproachful lamentation, now passing into a cry of mere animal distress. I was roused at last by a very real and definite outcry under my window, emphasised by a shower of little pebbles against the shutters.

The dawn had just warmed into sunrise. The lawns were drenched with dew. The whole panorama of lake and mountain was softened, etherealised by a veil of silver mist. And immediately below, on the terrace, stood the red-headed subaltern, arrayed in the most surprising suit of pink-and-yellow-checked pyjamas, a roll of bathing-towels under his arm and his honest face blanched, for all its freckles and sunburn, by emotion.

"Mr. Hammond," he stammered apologetically, "I'm awfully sorry to disturb you, but I can't very well help it. Something awful's happened, and people ought to know. But I did not want to raise an alarm and frighten the ladies. And you and he were friends, I thought I'd best let you know first."

"Quite right," I said. "And what has happened?"

The boy looked very sick. He also looked absurdly young.

"Why—Mr. Leversedge," he stammered again. "I was going down to bathe, you see—and I came upon him suddenly."

He pointed over his shoulder.

"Just against the pier, in the water—dead."

His eyes filled with tears.

"It's awfully foolish, but I never saw anyone dead before, and I felt as if I didn't want it to be him. He was such a ripping good sort."

By the time I reached the little harbour the sun had cleared the top of the vineyard-covered hills behind the hotel. Long shafts of delicate light pierced the silvery mist. The pale shadow of the great building lay obliquely across the garden. The pale shadow of the trees, along the shore, lay obliquely across the surface of the water of the harbour. With raised wings and ruffled plumage the two swans sailed in, in

stateliest fashion, round the head of the grey pier; while, along the top of the wide stone wall of it, dark against the vast gleaming steel-coloured levels of the lake, limped the wretched little dog, its tail between its legs, and a tag of dirty rope still dangling from its scraggy neck.

The boy went on ahead. The *concierge* and the boatman, whom, in passing, we had called from the cottage in the corner under the pollarded plane trees, followed me. About a third of the distance along the pier the boy stopped.

"Come here, Mr. Hammond," he said in an awe-stricken voice. "Look, you can see him."

And there, beneath some eight feet of divinely clear water, lay Leversedge, flat on his back. Fluffy green water-weed rising around him, swayed by the force of some otherwise imperceptible current, blurred the outline of his body. He was still in evening dress, and his shirt-front showed a wide heart-shaped patch of white; across which, at the top of the water, swam a shoal of very small fishes, all their heads one way—lambent green—as the fatal glow-worms, or the eyes of the non-existent yet truly diabolic dog, which had combined to cause the martyrdom of the man dead, there, among the weed below—when they moved away towards the farther shore, and blood-red—when they turned, altogether, rapidly, making a tiny ripple on the surface of the water, and swam back towards the little pier.

The matter was to raise the body at once, before the hotel was awake, and either curiosity or alarm were aroused.

Some Savoy sailors, off one of the lateen-sailed lake-boats, helped us. It was a rather hideous business, such as I sincerely hope it may never fall to my lot to take part in again. I spare you the details. Suffice it to say that we carried that which had been Leversedge up through the sunny garden. The waiters had neglected to clear away the remains of Mr. Perry's supper, and a flight of sparrows and chaffinches rose, squeaking and chirruping, off the table from among the wet ice-plates and remnants of lobster salad, as we passed by.

The spare young Russian woman, very much *en déshabille*, her magnificent hair all over her angular shoulders, hung out of a fourth-floor window, crooning one of those infinitely pathetic folk-songs which seem so full of the sadness of long snow-bound winters and the hopeless monotony of the Steppe. Otherwise we happily met no one, saw no one—save the yawning lift-boy—till we reached Leversedge's room and laid him on his bed.

Some of the many candles were still burning. They flared low in the socket. The window had been left partly open behind the wooden shutters, and the draught had taken them, so that they had guttered from the edge of the candlesticks into great shrouds. The air was heavy—notwithstanding the partly open window—with an acrid smell of burnt paper, burnt leather. As we opened the door I observed a whirl of tinder fly up from the hearthstone, and settle back slowly, in black hovering flakes, on the furniture and the white counterpane of the bed. The folding-screen and all the photographs of the Carissima had disappeared.

On the writing-table a copy of *Vanity Fair* lay open at that pathetic page of the last chapter of the book, wherein Major Dobbin—after long waiting—at last has his desire, and leanness withal, as one fears, in his soul. And upon the page was a half-sheet of notepaper, with a few lines on it in Leversedge's rather laboured business hand.

"**I HAVE** thought it all out, and this is the only way to meet the difficulty, so I take it. I do not blame her. She was pressed beyond endurance, and she was badly advised. She is safe against the future, moreover, so my main end is secured. Also, I am delivered, at last, and for ever, from the power of the dog."

It was signed, and in the left-hand corner was written carefully—

"To Antony Hammond, Esq.," and the date.

EPILOGUE

SUCH was the story Hammond told me that wet afternoon in the smoking-room of a certain country-house.

"Take it," he said; "and, exercising a sufficient amount of discretion to prevent its being positively libellous, make what use of it you like. Add to the sum of human despair—as is the amiable habit of all you writers of fiction at the present time—by drawing out the underlying agony of it at full length, by crossing all the **t**'s very plainly, and dotting all the **i**'s. The fate of most men is tame enough. Actually they grow and ripen and decay,—die even, with a good-tempered dulness quite soothing to contemplate. Extreme wretchedness in an Anglo-Saxon community is as rare as extreme rapture. But, since extremes make for drama, and drama is—if you will pardon my stating the matter thus baldly—your means of livelihood, you writers ignore this capital fact."

Happy is the people that has no history! But, as I pointed out to Hammond in self-defence, how shall one write the history of those that have none?

"I know, I know," he replied genially; "and you poor dear novelists, like the rest of us, must contrive to live somehow, I suppose. Only, I protest it is just this which, in one's puritanic moments, when—to one's own immense discomfort—the conscience of earlier and mere morally-strenuous generations awakens in one,—it is just this which renders Art so radically suspect. For, there is no denying, Art does fix the mind, unwholesomely, unscientifically, upon extremes, upon all that which lies outside ordinary experience. It runs alternately to the Golden Houses of the Gods and the Newgate Calendar, to the lives of the saints and the *chronique scandaleuse* for its subject-matter; and with none of these things, when you come soberly to think of it, have we, most of us, anything more than a bowing acquaintance. It

accentuates every side of the great human problem almost to the verge of lunacy. It persistently exalts the abnormal as against the normal, the individual as against the race, the variation as against the type. At times, I own, it seems to me all wrong, utterly pernicious and misleading. And yet," added Hammond, "I ask you, how on earth are we to do without it? For it sends just that draught of fresh air through the stagnant atmosphere breathed by the commonplace majority which makes romance still possible. It and Religion,—which, I take it, is merely Art in a higher manifestation—alone keep the ideal alive, and so prevent humanity from becoming altogether sordid and bestial. Still I doubt if it, any more than religion, makes for happiness. For contentment I am very sure it does not make.—But let us descend from the contemplation of these high matters," he went on. "I become heated, therefore I inevitably speak foolishness. You want to know something more about the Carissima? Why, surely you remember that little affair of Percy Gerrard's, how he retired from the editorship of the *Present Day* on the strength of his engagement to a rich and pretty widow? How he prepared to realise all his noble visions of seigneurial splendour, and ransacked England from the Channel to the Tweed to find some fair demesne, some feudal castle, Elizabethan mansion, or eighteenth-century pseudo-Italian villa, costly enough to be a not wholly unworthy setting to so unique a jewel as himself? Gerrard's head was slightly turned by his approaching glories. He gave himself away rather too freely on the subject of his coming magnificence. And then, at the eleventh hour, the lady jilted him, causing him to cut a most exceedingly sorry figure; while the world, before which he had bragged so noisily, put its tongue in its cheek. Gerrard is not a brave man, and it takes a very great deal of courage to survive being made a fool of. Socially speaking, Gerrard has not survived. He has tried various things since then, but his efforts have not prospered very brilliantly. Last time I saw him he was giving itinerant lectures, in continental towns, to companies of specially selected British and American tourists. I met him on the immense

crumbling steps of St. John Lateran, fat and greasy, looking like a particularly undesirable *valet de place*. A troupe of anxious and dowdy sightseers crowded around him; it was not a pretty or cheerful spectacle. And then, after a time, last year, in fact, the Carissima married Sylvester—you must have often met him—the painter who was Director of the Connop Trust School before the brief and brilliant reign of that strangely lurid being, James Colthurst."

"And the Sylvesters come here to-morrow!" I exclaimed.

"Precisely," Hammond said. "The fair Charlotte is making a great reputation in country-houses just now, I understand. Well, she was charming, she was clever—no one should know that better than I. Only, when she comes, I go. Relations are likely to be somewhat strained between us even yet. We have, neither of us, any great craving after that re-living of the past which must needs take place did we meet. When you have once looked on the face of the naked self of either man or woman, you will be wise carefully to avoid ever seeing them again, unless—"

Hammond paused, and the rain drifted rather drearily against the window.

"Unless, and that happens but rarely in a lifetime, you are lucky enough to love them very much indeed."

And then, thinking over the story of Leversedge and the power of the Thing-too-Much, over all that he had told me, I asked Hammond what he made of it all?—what he took it to mean? Whereon he smiled very benignly upon me, and whirled the silver string of his eye-glass round his forefinger.

"Ah, my dear friend," he cried, "are you still in that embryonic stage of thought wherein you still feel about after a reason, still have the youthful hopefulness to ask 'Why?'—Cease to do so. It will only make you irritable, for you will receive no answer. In nine hundred and ninety cases out of every thousand, if there is a 'why' at all, it is among the secret things, absolutely beyond the range of the understanding of purblind man. Therefore lay to heart that profound saying of a great

artist and great novelist—'*ineptie consiste à vouloir conclure*.'—There is the dressing-bell,—we must go.—A modest acquiescence in the actual,—that, in my humble opinion, is the only workable philosophy of life."