

THE BOOKS
OF BART



EDGAR
WALLACE



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POPULAR NOVELS

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

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In various editions

SANDERS OF THE RIVER

BONES

BOSAMBO OF THE RIVER

BONES IN LONDON

THE KEEPERS OF THE KING'S PEACE

THE COUNCIL OF JUSTICE

THE DUKE IN THE SUBURBS

THE PEOPLE OF THE RIVER

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BLUE HAND

GREY TIMOTHY

A DEBT DISCHARGED

THOSE FOLK OF BULBORO

THE MAN WHO WAS NOBODY

THE GREEN RUST

THE BOOKS OF BART

BY
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BOOK I

The Book of Arrangement

CHAPTER I

EVERYBODY agreed that a man of twenty-eight was a poor sort of guardian for a girl of sixteen—everybody, that is, except Bart.

It is doubtful whether Bart ever knew his age or reckoned it by years.

He had accepted his trust solemnly and with an exalted sense of responsibility, and went to Cheltenham carrying a Teddy Bear and huge boxes of chocolates. He found a self-possessed orphan reading Browning under a lime tree, and pretended that he had picked up the Teddy Bear in the street. He even advertised his find in the *Cheltenham Herald*. That was years ago, before Fay came to live with him in the house which had been left by her mother to the erratic Bart.

It was a condition of the will that Fay should so live until her twenty-fifth birthday. Bart thought it was an excellent arrangement, and when people, very correct people, murmured “chaperon,” Bart said “Tush!” out loud and pointed to a housekeeper, a cook, several maids and a respectable butler.

Nobody need be in any sort of doubt as to the kind of man Bart was. His room described and explained him. Its most striking feature said “genius,” loudly and defiantly. The six-sheet poster which mercifully hid an oblong of the egregious wallpaper was emphatic on this point. It demanded that all the world should see “Caught by Fate,” a drama “of love, romance and action” (the phrase is lifted bodily from such letterpress as adorned the advertisement) by Bartholomew Foreman, “author of ‘Shattered Fibres,’ etc.” The lithographic portion of the poster represented a soulful lady in the grip of a villain; and however much, or however loudly, Bartholomew Foreman might deny the fact, there is no question that the lady’s face resembled that of Agatha Tamarand. There was that baby-blueness of eye, the same droopy little mouth and obstinate chin, the same thinness of cheek, and air of general discontent which distinguished Agatha in the life. The artist might very well have been supplied with the newest (as it was then) of Agatha’s picture-photographs, and Bartholomew possessed so many, that he could very well have spared one, without anyone being the wiser.

Fay Milton, coming into her guardian’s study, never saw that poster without a little smile of amusement, and amusement salted with contempt, for she lived too near this genius to share the glamour of his large and lovable mind.

If the distressed heroine was Agatha, who else was the villain, with his heavy full moustache and his exaggerated vacuity, than Harold Tirrell? Harold had protested incoherently, indignantly, at the unauthorized portraiture, and had referred ominously to his solicitors.

This adherence to nature had been responsible for the failure of “Caught by Fate,” for, however interesting an Agatha-like heroine might be to Bartholomew, and however paltry and scoundrel-like Harold might seem to his eyes, the public, knowing neither Agatha nor Harold, and accustomed to heroines more tender, and villains less vacuous, had voted the play a bore, and it had run for exactly six nights.

Bartholomew had drawn his characters too faithfully, that was the trouble.

“Make him a baronet, turn the woman into something young and innocent, put in a scene on the Thames Embankment by night, and there’s enough in the play to give it a long run.”

This was the verdict of Ohlson, who assisted with the finances of the play—he had put up a third of the cost, but so hedged about with contingencies that Bartholomew discovered at the end he had to pay the whole cost of the production himself.

The poster was not a solitary representative of its kind. There was a smaller, but less arresting, example of the lithographer’s art upon the wall over the bookcase. It proclaimed the marvellous qualities of Bart’s Boot Burnisher.

Bartholomew had invented his Burnisher, during one fussy, smelly week, when the kitchen became a place of noisome stinks, and his desk a litter of unsavoury messes. Here again something had gone wrong. Possibly Bartholomew’s superintendence of the advertisements had been at fault. He had insisted upon a range of humorous announcements, and it is an axiom in the advertising world that comic announcements do not draw trade. Money is a very serious thing and shrinks from ribaldry. Twelve hundred pounds this venture had cost, some four hundred and fifty of which Fay had contributed.

She could have paid the whole amount without any trouble, for she, the favourite niece of John Banter—as her mother had been his favourite sister—had been the heiress, through her mother, of his quarter million, but there was a streak of John Banter in her composition—and she wanted to punish Bartholomew for having engaged in a speculation against her advice.

There was nothing of John Banter in Bartholomew. He had loathed his wealthy, unforgiving uncle, and from the day when Bart, after a furious family quarrel, had circulated the fatal limerick which began:

There was a curmudgeon named Banter
Who lived very near a decanter. . . .

his name had been anathema, and in the old man’s will was mentioned in a manner which afforded Bart almost as much glee as though he had been made heir to the

property. For Bart's legacy was that same decanter.

In the circumstances it was something of a tragedy that Mrs. Milton, dying a year after her brother, should have made Bart Foreman the sole executor of her estate, and co-trustee and guardian of her sixteen-year-old daughter. Bart was twenty-eight at the time, and in the eyes of the girl an aged man. At seventeen she respected him, at eighteen felt superior to him—at twenty she looked upon him with the contempt which capable youth has for middle-age failure. For Bart was not a success.

He had a thousand a year from his mother, and this, sufficient for his daily needs, was of little assistance to him in the crises which came so frequently in his life.

He wrote a novel and published it himself. He organized a lecture tour and financed it. He produced a new cure for neuralgia and put it on the market. The market, after an unconscionable period of reflection, had put it back on him. When the war broke out he offered his services, but was rejected on the eyesight test. Later, when that test was less rigid, he went to the Admiralty and did nothing in particular for two years.

In a score of ways you might trace the temperamental progress of Bartholomew Foreman by a careful examination of his room. It was a big apartment on the ground floor of 23, Colholm Place, Kensington. From the large, leaded windows on the north side there was a view of the garden, for Number 23 was one of those old-fashioned houses which boasted that bourgeoisie appendage.

From the east side you overlooked Colholm Place, and a parallelogram of tree-shaded green, entirely surrounded by railings, where, on sunny afternoons, nursemaids gossiped, whilst their diminutive charges either slept in their expensive perambulators, or toddled recklessly about so much of the world as the railings enclosed.

One wall of the study was occupied by bookshelves, in which had assembled a whole tatter-demalion army of books, ranging from the costly volumes which Bartholomew purchased at sales, in moments of mental aberration, to the paper-covered novels which were the relics of innumerable railway journeys, and were now preserved because they contained "ideas" which Bartholomew had indicated with conspicuous blue pencil marks, though he could never recall the ideas they suggested when he came to examine the books.

The pictures which hung upon the walls were in excellent taste, the engravings, if modern, were pleasing, and the great china bowls which were kept filled with flowers all the year round, condoned, to some extent, the bizarre character of the other decorations.

On the left of a large desk (built to his own design) stood a japanned dictaphone

into which, in moments of literary frenzy, Bartholomew might express the thoughts which arose in him.

Sometimes he forgot to pull the recording lever over, and the end of his efforts was a number of cylinders blandly blank and uncommunicative; whereupon he would write furious letters to the manufacturers, and they would send a pleasant young man to explain that unless the recording needle touched the wax it was impossible for the machine to do its work, since a dictaphone had no intuitions.

Picture this room, all speckled and flooded with the golden light of a sunny morning in May. Picture it in its tidiest aspect, with a desk clear of papers and a stretch of white blotting paper innocent of inky impression; with new nibs in agate pen-holders, a virgin jar of paste, the date of the month truthfully displayed in a red morocco case; with absolute serenity and quiet reigning in the house.

For Bartholomew Foreman was still in America offering a new life-saving boat to the Marine department—a boat which he had invented on the spur of the moment, whilst watching the children sail their little ships on the waters of Kensington Gardens.

He wrote a letter to Agatha Tamarand—one of many. It was addressed from the Manhattan Hotel, Forty-eighth Street and Fifth Avenue, to Mrs. Tamarand, 23, Penter Avenue, Chelsea, and ran:

“MY DEAREST,—

“I am back from Washington, after a terrible struggle to make those infernal American officials understand the immense advantages which my boat offers. They are considering the matter, they say, which means they will hold up my plans for ten years, at the end of which they will inform me that, under the conditions then existing, my invention is valueless. But I find compensation for such disappointment as mine in the thought that three weeks will bring me to you—my dearest dear.

“I must stay another fortnight because Malcolm Suggs, the theatrical person, is going to ‘try out’ that one-act play of mine—you remember, darling, the one in which—no, on second thought I remember you have not seen it. It is one I wrote on my way over. Think of it! I have been three months away! It hardly seems possible that I could have been so long without seeing you—without hearing your dear voice. What a fool you must think me sometimes! You are so calm and so wise, and so well-balanced. Do you ever see Fay? I want you to be good friends with her. She is a real good sort, though a cold-blooded little beggar. And please

let me have a cable about yourself—are you fit and well? Have you seen anything of that monstrous and bounding Tirrell? Does the brute still persist in sending you flowers? I shall end up by kicking him.

“All my love, dearest,

“Yours for everlasting,

“BART.”

Agatha Tamarand, a widow of singular attraction—she had lost her husband before they had lived together long enough to spoil her beauty—read the letter through, and with a thoughtful expression on her face put it away in her dainty little bag.

Three weeks. It brought a sense of respite to her. She had three weeks in which she could make up her mind. She had decided one thing, at any rate, that things could not go on as they had gone for three years.

Their friendship had run on conventional lines. Obviously Bart's thousand a year made marriage possible, but he had so profound a contempt for that sum, and was so confident in his ability to direct fate to his enrichment, that the question of marriage had never been considered as an immediate possibility. He was content to wait for the return of that ship which never made harbour. In the meantime she was (as she told herself) growing older, and Bart's monopoly was, to say the least, compromising.

She was fond of Bartholomew, tremendously fond of him; she even told herself that she loved him. Perhaps she did in her way, but her way was neither a fiery nor a reckless way. It was not altogether the way Bart desired, for he was one of those people who scoffed at the opinions of the Browns and Jones of life.

It was sufficient, he said, if two people loved one another dearly, that they should be content with one another, and let the world go hang. Such philosophy, however, did not satisfy Agatha. To her it was amazing that an impetuous person like Bart should want to wait until his fortune came—she did not know his dreams of magnificence, or sense the splendour he planned for her.

Agatha's little house was a model of what little houses should be. The furnishing was tasteful and quiet, the air of the home one of subdued refinement.

She was not a woman of any great intellectual capacity. She neither wrote nor read, and, beyond a taste for auction bridge, which developed and exercised an unsuspected mathematical talent in her, she had few occupations. She hated sewing. She disliked children, and she was easily bored.

That she had attracted Bart was a peculiar sense of the grotesque in him which

amused her. He was entertaining and prodigal. Mrs. Tamarand wanted to be entertained, and she was something of a spendthrift—a weakness that the meagre annuity to which she became entitled on her husband's death, gave little scope. Their friendship had developed with startling suddenness. Exactly how it happened she did not know. Bart was impetuous and big and plausible, and carried her off her feet. Before she knew where she was she was engaged to him.

Rather, she was “sort of” engaged—there had been no public announcement which would have implied obligations on the part of both—obligation which neither was anxious to incur. So she had waited whilst Bart's schemes grew and faded, and had waited with growing impatience.

In the meantime new factors had come into her life, and the most potent of these was Harold Tirrell, with his inconsequent speeches and his large and impressive bank balance. He was a Member of Parliament, and when his party returned to power he would be created a baronet, for he was a generous subscriber to the funds. He offered to Mrs. Tamarand opportunities which were at once dazzling and frightening. She was frightened in the main at the thought of Bart. Shallow as she undoubtedly was, she knew her man, for she was shrewd and was possessed of an insight into humanity which is denied to women much cleverer.

The wife of a popular M.P. and a baronet—that was as good as settled, for the Government of the day was wobbling horribly—one of the leaders of society, and rich . . .

She would not be dependent upon Bart's generosity for the little luxuries which came her way; her position would be assured and she might even help Bart in his schemes, because, though Harold hated him just now, this hatred was probably due to jealousy more than to any other cause.

The dislike was mutual, she knew, that was why it was so difficult for her to bring herself to make any definite decision. She sighed wearily, and picked up the other letter which awaited her attention.

It was from Fay Milton, and was short and pleasant. Could dear Agatha come to tea that afternoon? She had something of the greatest importance to discuss with her.

CHAPTER II

FAY MILTON was tall and dark. "A typical Rossetti girl," Bart had described her. Her hair, of which she had masses, was of that deepest shade of brown which nearest approaches black, and is indistinguishable from that colour at a short distance. Her eyebrows were pencilled, and here there was no compromise as to colour, for they were of jet. Black, too, were the long lashes which never showed to advantage, for she was one of the open-eyed sort. Nature had tinted her cheek with the clear pink and white of health, and her complexion was voted flawless. The shape of the face left something to be desired, yet it would be a captious and hypercritical person who ventured on the ungracious task of criticism. It was a thought too long, and the lips just a little too straight—but that was all. For the rest she was almost beautiful. Her eyes were violet blue, so dark as to appear black in some lights, her nose straight and well placed, her chin prettily moulded. When she laughed, which she rarely did—more's the pity!—you saw two straight rows of teeth unblemished and of a porcelain whiteness. Even in repose the face was pleasant to look upon, and people wondered amongst themselves why a woman possessed of such superlative qualities remained single. The answer was the very simple one which might be offered in a hundred such cases—she had never met anyone for whom she entertained the least affection.

She was something of a student of affairs, wrote clever articles in *The Woman's Age*, and was voted eccentric by some, as unwomanly by others, and as somewhat unapproachable by most people. Only in books and stories are very pretty women, who are also very rich, surrounded by crowds of suitors. Men, on the whole, are too vain to crowd a woman, however much in love, or in debt, they may be. Pique jerks the bridle of perseverance, and the haughty spirit of young manhood shrinks from the revelation of conscious rivalry. From the man's point of view, the "rival" is the other fellow—he never sees himself at any other place than at the apex of the triangle.

The main consequence, so far as Fay was concerned, was that she had had in her life two proposals: one from Andrew Gillboy, the "Car King," who was forty years her senior, and one from Bray Sunley, who drank whisky before breakfast, with breakfast, and, with intervals for sleep, until his next breakfast.

They were both wealthy men and were, from certain points of view, excellent matches, but Fay had the right of choice—and remained a spinster at twenty-three.

Her attitude toward her cousin requires explanation. Fay had inherited a large fortune—Bart had inherited nothing from their uncle's will. When he said he did not care he was sincere. There was neither envy nor meanness in his composition. She

did not know him well enough to believe him. She did not trust him—that was the impression she gave.

In the first year of his guardianship she had seen little of him; in the second year she had seen enough. When she was sixteen he was too old to be taken into her confidence—at twenty he was too young. She thought his appointment absurd, and longed for her twenty-fifth birthday which would free her from the obligation of sharing the same house—another absurd provision of her mother's will. He was quick to detect the antagonism, and his patience, never a limitless quantity, was as quickly exhausted. From being the tender and considerate guardian he became the casual friend. He treated her as he would treat a man with whom he had little in common, but respected. Curiously enough, he never thought of changing his abode. They had lived together since her mother died, and he had neither the desire nor the thought of changing his mode of life, for in some things he was conservative.

That they remained good friends was less a tribute to his self-discipline than to his marvellous power of shrugging his cares to the devil.

They had developed away from one another, as twin trees will develop, irrespective of prevailing winds. She made no attempt to come to any better understanding, though she gave much of her spare time to evolving a solution to her problem. He gave no time at all, considering the position insusceptible to improvement.

If she had learned to respect him, she might have revived the old affection between them, but he seemed determined to frustrate the growth of any such sentiment. She had been taught, first by her mother, and then by Uncle Banter, who had assumed responsibility for her on her father's death, that there were twenty shillings in every pound, and she had, at her fingers' tips, most of the familiar adages which go to the encouragement of thrift.

Since "thrift" was a word which Bart had deliberately ruled out of his lexicon, such adventures as she made into the mazy jungle of his finances were as irritating as they were bewildering. She helped him at times when financial depression made him unbearable, but she was helping herself more, for the gloom which came upon him in these moments of crisis was communicated to the rest of the household, and 23, Colholm Place produced in Fay a sensation which, paraphrasing a well-known advertisement, she described as "that Morgue feeling."

She admired him up to a point. There was a certain noisy chivalry about him which was effective. He made sacrifices, and explained them in such detail, yet withal with such modesty of language, that you might be deceived into the belief that you had discovered the measure of his altruism without aid.

He was generous and kindly, yet his generosity was never wholly uncontroversial, nor his kindness without injustice. He had a sense of humour, which enabled him to see his own shortcomings in a favourable light, and a breadth of vision which found something admirable even in his own faults. He was charitable to all who saw eye to eye with him, and he hated the intolerance of those dogmatists who found themselves in uncompromising opposition to his point of view.

Fay knew him for an egoist. He had no stability of purpose—this distressed her, as did a certain unscrupulousness where money was concerned. He had never asked her for money, and had resisted with solemn indignation her first effort to help him—it was after the failure of the Foreman Vacuum Pump. She had found an unusual pleasure in the thought that she could help him. She knew that in some way she had failed him; here was an opportunity to recover some of the ground she had lost. His refusal (accompanied by a long homily, elegantly phrased and punctuated) on the character of men who accept financial help from women, even though they were his sisters, had created a new sense of respect for him. She had left his study considerably impressed by the loftiness of his views. There was something particularly wholesome and clean about them, she told herself. When, two hours later, without any evidence of embarrassment, he came to her room and accepted her offer, justifying the *volte-face* in some twelve-hundred well-chosen words, she was a little bewildered.

Thereafter, in all matters of finance, there was a certain formula to be observed, the offer on her part, the refusal on his, and later the reconsideration. She timed her offers to follow certain exhibitions of pessimism on his part; the gloom which found expression in locked study doors and tragic silences.

To say that Fay was contemptuous of her guardian cousin, with his mad-hatter schemes, his wild inventions, and his frantic enthusiasms, would be to employ too strong a word to describe an emotion which was not amusement, pity nor derision. She was superior, that was all. From her heights she could afford a certain mental patronage, which would have been intolerable to him, had he paid her sufficient attention to be aware of her line of thought. Once she had come near to betraying her inward feeling. It was when Bart had suddenly conceived a violent distrust for the directors of Southern Properties. Much of her fortune was invested in this concern, which owned large blocks of flats and offices in various parts of London. They paid a steady ten per cent., and her interest in the concern was safeguarded by the fact that George Waterson represented her on the board.

George Waterson was an hereditary partner in the firm of Waterson, Gasby & Quale, and, though the youngest member of that eminent firm of solicitors, he was

for many reasons the dominant partner. He was a serious young man of thirty. He had been a serious young man of thirty ever since Fay could remember. When he was twenty-two and she was seventeen he had as much the air, the manner and the deliberation of thirty as he would have at forty.

He was a clean-shaven, long-faced man, of a peculiar pallor of countenance and a blackness of chin. That chin was big, and his nose was long and thin. His eyes were large and brown, and he dressed with exceptional care. Nobody had ever seen George Waterson smile, and nobody had ever expressed a desire to see him smile.

He was solid amongst solid men. His firm was so immensely respectable that nobody outside the profession and its own clientèle had ever heard of it. It was seldom mentioned in court, for it dealt, in the main, with those manifestations of law which do not figure in the daily Press, but are rather concerned with the sticking on of stamps and the signing of signatures, than with the more dramatic and alluring aspects of the legal game.

Bart hated and loathed George, with his attitude of polite antagonism, and his cold-blooded lack of enthusiasm for Bart's schemes. George Waterson was co-trustee of the Milton estate, and as such stood between Bart and his cousin. Waterson's main business in life seemed to be to prevent his client investing in the schemes which her cousin propounded.

Now Bart was a queer man, and in the course of his days collected a great deal of information, which was almost as queer. He heard whispers against the probity of certain directors of the Southern Properties. There was talk of their buying lands and buildings thereon, in which they were personally interested. Bart came with the revelation, and offered it dramatically to a startled Fay. If she followed his advice she would "get out" of her holdings, but she never followed his advice without consulting George, and so George had come, cold and sceptical, demanding facts which Bart was not in a position to give, names, particulars of purchase and locations of same. Bartholomew had said much, without adding greatly to the sum of Fay's knowledge.

"I am afraid you have discovered a mare's nest," George had said calmly, and there the matter ended. It was an impossible position, and Bart had dropped all interest in his cousin's affairs. He forgot her in the construction of a new three-act comedy. Then the life-saving boat had flashed across his vision, and he had hurried to America.

He had never been away so long from home, and she had time to think. She spent many hours considering his character, his life, his friends. It puzzled her to know what to do with him. Could he always be as he was now, the irresponsible hunter after chimerical fortunes? There was something in all his schemes—even

George Waterson admitted as much—but if they contained the germ of a possibility, they lacked the something which made that possibility an actuality. Bart, too, was deficient in a quality or two. “He wants a shock,” suggested George with the assurance of one who stood on perfectly safe ground—the ground of long friendship and unassailable business relationship. But what would shock Bart? Death might, but who would obligingly die on the off chance of bringing an erratic genius to his senses? Certainly Fay was not so inclined. That was the horrid part of it, Bart was so impregnable. You could not hurt him, nor reason with him; he stood aloof, his great soul permanently preoccupied and refusing to be unpleasantly impressed.

Fay, turning the subject over in her mind, was inspired by a spirit of mischief to further the cause of Harold Tirrell. She did not hope that she would succeed in penetrating the armour of her cousin’s indifference, but she might at least prick him—and even a wince would be welcome from this perfectly self-satisfied man. She wrote to Agatha to come to her, and had a pleasurable conspirator-like feeling when she had written the letter.

“I want this posted at once,” she said. Packer had come noiselessly to the room in answer to her bell.

“Yes, madam.”

He glanced furtively at the address, and a look of interest came into his eyes. The precious secrets whispered behind drawing-room, doors, and scarcely more than thought about in locked studies, are public property in the servants’ hall.

“Wait,” she said, as he was going from the room.

Should she post the letter? Would it not be better to let matters take their course? After all, Bart married would be a load off her mind. She had reached that point where she felt responsibility for Bart’s life. And he was her guardian. . . . But would he marry? If it were “an affair” . . . but Bart was not that kind. He was one of those quixotic persons, who could even walk through the fires of passion and come out in the end unscorched.

The obedient Packer stood, one eye upon the letter, conscious that “something was up” but not guessing what the something was.

Perhaps there was going to be a row. Packer loved the idea of rows—especially amongst his employers. They gave a servant certain liberties and certain freedom of expression. They even (on occasions) let the kitchen into the confidences of the boudoir. Sometimes they led to court and the joyous publicity of the evening papers. Packer would love to have seen his portrait in the *Evening World* as a witness in a *cause célèbre*.

“No,” she said, after a while, answering her unspoken question, “you may post

the letter.”

CHAPTER III

AGATHA came at Fay's invitation, without thinking that the visit was likely to have any far-reaching effect upon her life. On her way, she went into Golightly's and bought a big bunch of Maréchal Niel roses, telling the obliging tradesman to send the bill to her. After all, she thought, if she had to be civil to Fay, there was no reason in the world why Bart should not pay.

The women kissed one another affectionately; Fay was of the kissing sort, more so than Agatha, and Mrs. Tamarand produced her flowers.

"For me? How delightful!" Fay buried her face in the fragrant roses.

"They've just come up from Mentone—Harold Tirrell is staying there."

"How good of him," murmured Fay, and furtively removed the Golightly label, which she knew as well as Agatha, from one of the flower stems. "It is very curious that you should have mentioned Mr. Tirrell—I asked you to come this afternoon because I wanted to have a real long chat with you about that young man."

"With me—why on earth——?"

Fay shrugged her pretty shoulders. It was one of the few tricks she had picked up from her cousin.

"Let us have tea, shall we?" She crossed to the bell and rang it. Tea was laid, and they were alone again in an incredibly short space of time. Things happened like that in the Foreman *ménage*. There was not a better trained staff of servants anywhere in London than that which Fay ruled.

The two talked of many things, as, for instance, the extraordinary embarrassments of the coal strike; of taxi-cab drivers and their incivility; of plays and the unsuitability of certain actors to their parts. Then suddenly Fay came to her subject.

"You know of course that Harold is a very old friend of mine!"

Agatha smiled.

"I have reason to know that—he is never tired of talking about you—in fact, I met him at this house, did I not?"

"I rather think you did," said Fay slowly. "Bartholomew introduced him to you, I think. You see, I've known Harold—oh, ever so many years. We were good friends when we were children—it would hardly be fair to Harold to tell you how long ago."

"You were nearly engaged to him, weren't you?" asked Mrs. Tamarand calmly.

In many ways she was better trained than Fay; knew all the tricks of fence, could give an inviting parry that would lure the inexperienced to doom; but Fay, younger in years, was not exactly inexperienced. Bart was a wonderful fencing

master.

“No, I was not engaged to him,” smiled Fay, “but I might easily have been. It would have been a dreadful mistake from every point of view, and more particularly in view of developments. I was only nineteen at the time. You see, Harold is a man who is impressionable—in a nice way.”

Mrs. Tamarand bowed her head wisely.

“He was not in love with me—but he is——”

Fay hesitated, looking at the other seriously.

“He is——” encouraged Agatha.

“He is in love with you.” Fay finished the sentence awkwardly.

A flush, the faintest shade of pink in Agatha’s cheeks, and that to her annoyance. She had a curious consciousness of disloyalty to this girl. She felt that Fay had the right to be indignant with her, because she had deserted, or even contemplated the desertion of, Bartholomew. Most curious of all, she was perfectly satisfied in her mind that some such desertion had been under her consideration.

“Well?” she asked jerkily. “Why—why shouldn’t he—after all——”

“Why not, indeed?” smiled Fay, at her sweetest; her gentle eyes fixed somewhat urgently on her visitor’s face; “a most excellent match—only——”

She knit her brows and bunched herself in her chair. She was sitting forward, an elbow on her crossed knees, her chin on the palm of her hand.

“Only?”

“Only——” Again Fay hesitated. “You see, dear, I am in rather a quandary—I am quite fond of Harold and I like you immensely, and I don’t know whom I’d rather see happily married than you two nice people—but what about Bart?”

The eye above the palmed chin—above the resting elbow—flashed straight in Agatha’s direction and there was nothing to give her a lead. It was just a perfectly blank and expressionless stare. Mrs. Tamarand might be excused if she floundered, but she did not need excuse.

“Exactly—why—Bart?” she asked, with a little drawl. She spoke slowly because she was searching in her little bag for her handkerchief. Her search was without haste and without evidence of agitation. She found it, and dabbed her nose in a most unromantic way, then she replaced the handkerchief in the bag with great exactness, lingered for a moment, her hand speculatively touching the gold top of a little hair-pin case, as though the question of Bart had subsidiary, or, at most, equal importance with the question of her personal appearance at the moment.

“Exactly why Bart?” she repeated.

Fay was in no haste to explain. She was monstrously deliberate.

“Bart is a queer fellow.” She uttered the words in a tone which suggested at once conviction and wonder; it was as though the queerness of Bart had only just occurred to her and explained everything; she paused, as though to fit the explanation to his previously inexplicable conduct. “Bart is a very queer man.” She made her indictment even stronger. “He has a trick of assuming proprietary rights; I think it comes from too much imperial thinking. I am nervous whenever he sees a national treasure that he may not like it and give it away to somebody; he has a disconcerting habit of extending his despotism to his friends—I am so afraid——”

Another effective pause.

“That he regards one of his friends as his personal property,” suggested Agatha a little impatiently. “In fact, to put as blunt an edge upon the situation as possible, that Bart will not give me up?”

Fay slightly shifted her position and said she was afraid not. She said this with such a calm matter-of-factness that Agatha gasped.

“You see, dear Bart is so peculiar,” she explained. “Of course, it’s absurd and monstrous, but when he has put the mark of the lion upon anything, the jackals must not presume—you know.”

Agatha was dimly aware that the whole tendency of this discussion was uncomplimentary to herself, yet, for the life of her, she could find no phrase to which she could take exception. Nor yet any tone in the other’s voice which would offer an opening for protest. Fay was sympathetic, and Fay would be a very useful force if the question of Harold ever became a serious one; she would need a friend at court then, and instantly endowed Bart’s ward with an authority and an influence which she had hitherto denied her.

“I think I understand what you mean,” Agatha said, nodding her head. “It would hurt me if Bartholomew thought unkindly of me—you see, we have been such rare good pals. He *is* requiring, but since his requirements take a form which affect little more than one’s patience and forbearance, I have cheerfully paid the price.”

“And yet I think I would not advise you to consider Bart’s feelings in the matter,” Fay went on.

“You must consider yourself and you must consider Harold. You see, it isn’t what you are to-day, or what your immediate prospects are, or how perfectly satisfied you are—you have to imagine that ten years have passed and you have reached the age of—whatever age you will be. Only a woman who is settled can afford to postpone the future. It must be awfully nice having a friend like Bart, but Bart is—well, he’s Bart! A dear man, but somewhat undependable; and who, really, my dear Agatha, is distinctly *not* the man to centre one’s future upon.”

Her dark eyes examined Mrs. Tamarand very thoroughly, from her aigrette-plumed hat to her *suède* boots, but she conducted her scrutiny with such an agreeable and approving smile that only a churlish woman might resent the inspection.

“So you think——” invited Agatha. The girl was seven years her junior, but there was something very old and compelling about Fay.

“I think you should marry Harold—you will be Lady Tirrell one of these days and the mistress of a very nice house in Park Lane almost immediately, and half your daily worries will evaporate.” A sudden suspicion shot through Mrs. Tamarand’s mind, and Fay felt the chill of the unspoken doubt, and correctly analysed it.

“It doesn’t matter to me, so far as my personal comfort is concerned, whether you follow my advice or not,” she said carelessly. “I don’t want you to feel that I think your friendship for Bart is in any way injurious or annoying to me—because it isn’t. It is true that Bart will be furious if you marry Harold, and will probably never forgive you. No, my dear, I have no interest in this save your welfare and Harold’s wishes. What interest have I in Bart? In a year we shall be parted, and his ridiculous guardianship at an end. Frankly, we aren’t terrifically great friends—nor enemies for the matter of that.”

Here was crux in the life of Agatha Tamarand. With a little feeling of dismay, Fay recognized that her decision contained something of moment and significance for her also. Suppose Agatha declined the advice offered; suppose she retailed the story of this interview to Bartholomew on his return? Her own position would be strengthened by such a refusal, and a judiciously narrated account thereof—Agatha could tell a story to her own credit with greater force and subtlety than any other human being Fay had ever known. With a sense of panic Fay told herself she had not foreseen, nor allowed for the contingency. She had allowed her pleasant malice to lead her seriously astray. It was dawning upon her that this woman who sat cogitating the possibilities she had urged, was something more to Bart than she had realized. That she was a solid and important factor in his life, one not lightly to be disturbed. And yet, she asked herself, would Bart be shocked from his complacency? She wanted to see him shocked once . . . but——

“There is certainly much in what you have said,” Agatha broke in upon her thoughts. “I must not allow my friendship with Bart to blind me to your wisdom, dear; Harold wants me—I know—it is an awfully painful position to be in—about Bart, I mean—but I am sure it would be the best thing to do—I’m in rather a false position too——”

She took her leave that afternoon a little disjointedly, having made up her mind,

and being just a wee bit fearful of the consequences.

Fay, who saw her ideas bearing fruit, was not as happy with her success as she might have been. She was not afraid of Bart—he irritated her, that was all. And it was not his slackness or his instability that irritated her. What was it? She found it difficult to analyse her resentment.

CHAPTER IV

THE butler announced "Mrs. Roche," and Fay looked up with a smile of welcome at the florid woman who came fussily into the drawing-room.

"I can't stop a minute, my dear. I have to go on to that terrible Q woman," she said breathlessly; "only I was passing——"

Alma Roche was one of the things about Fay that Bart never could understand. Alma bored him to tears. In appearance she was a shapeless girl, always busily dressed. She gave you the impression that, on the way from her room to the street door, she had picked up odd articles of dress and had attached them to her person to save herself the bother of taking them back and putting them away in a drawer. Her face was frank and open and a little irregular; her mouth was an everlasting O of surprise. She had extraordinarily well-balanced views on the subject of the hour, a trait which impressed everybody but Bart, who discovered her guilty secret to her embarrassment, and incidentally made her an enemy for life.

For Alma's sane view was a paraphrase of the leading article in that morning's *Daily Megaphone*, which she not only read but assimilated. Fay had been to school with her and admired her, for Alma had many qualities which appealed to the simple hearted, and if her conversation was mainly confined to the startling items which the morning Press collected and detailed, she gave to cold print the charm of a personal rendering, and to her hearers the pleasant sensation that, be it murder or fire or royal marriage which formed the subject of her discourse, they were getting the news at first hand.

"I can't really stay a minute," she said, "but I thought I'd see you—haven't seen you for ever so long—Mr. Foreman away too, thank heaven—did you read about the new forty thousand tonner to be built? It's flying in the face of Providence after that *Lusitania* affair; it will be the biggest ship in the world; when is the great Bartholomew coming back?"

She said all this without pausing to take breath.

"In a fortnight or three weeks," said Fay lazily.

She had come upon a dull hour in a dull day and welcomed the sight of her friend with more than usual pleasure.

("Alma Roche is a standing note of interrogation against the judgment of Fay," said Bart, in despair, when deploring the existence of the friendship. "If Fay retains her as a foil, as you suggest, then by heavens she is the most conceited woman in the world, for only the blessed damoiselle could show a complete set of contrasts to Alma!")

“Did you hear about the strikers breaking Lord Corby’s windows?” asked Alma, settling herself down. “What they expect to gain by their violence, goodness knows! So ungentlemanly! And Corby is such a *charming* man and hasn’t a *great* deal of money and it costs an awful lot to get windows replaced—great plate-glass windows. I went into Eaton Place to look at them. They’ve done their cause so much harm, too.”

“Bartholomew doesn’t think so,” said Fay with intent.

“Bartholomew!”

Miss Roche’s large face puckered in contempt. Miss Roche’s *retroussé* nose rose heavenward.

“Goodness gracious, my dear lamb—Bartholomew!”

She went through a certain bodily exercise to indicate her opinion of Bartholomew and his views. She stiffened her back and hunched her shoulders and smiled, all in one second, and effectively squashed Bartholomew out of existence. Fay laughed. Alma was a safety valve, George Waterson was another; they both expressed themselves in their peculiar ways, on Bart and Bart’s opinions, and their points of view to some extent coincided with her own. She had no misgiving as to the propriety of her share in the criticism. Bart, in all probability, discussed her with Agatha with equal freedom, though the truth was that he never spoke of her save in terms of respect, even if he was not above employing the most violent terms in speaking of her friends. Alma saw Bart through no softening atmosphere of charity. She knew all that was unpleasant about him, and was honestly blind to his charm.

If Bart was the last man in the world she would never have married him, and in a moment of wrath she had confessed as much to him. Bart had fervently and significantly thanked her.

“Don’t let us talk of Bartholomew,” she said, shortly; “I can’t bear to think of you——” She sighed heavily, and changed the subject to the shamelessness of ball-room fashions.

But she was fated to return to Bart and his enormities, for half-way through the afternoon Mr. Josiah Stenton came.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Fay, rising from the settee on which she was lounging. “I asked him to call—do you feel equal to hearing all about Bart from one who regards him as being little less than the angels?”

She laughed aloud at Alma’s grimace.

“It will do you good,” she said, and nodded to the waiting maid. “Show him in here, Martha.”

Mr. Josiah Stenton was a very rich man and a very simple man. He was stout

and short and bald, and his big red face was curiously child-like in its freedom from the creases and wrinkles which usually mark the man of sixty. He had started life as an errand boy in his father's shop, and had, at the age of thirty, reached the position of first salesman at the Harrod Road branch of old Stenton's innumerable provision stores, when his father died and left him the dazed possessor of one and a half million pounds, thirty-eight shops, three warehouses, a tea plantation in Ceylon, a villa in Hampstead, and a capacity for living on thirty shillings a week.

Mr. Stenton, recovering from his bewilderment, had retired from active work, floated his shops as a limited liability company, and had plunged into a round of dissipation which included a trip to the Cornish Riviera, the purchase of a tricycle and—this is the only permanent feature of his new life—a suite of apartments at the Great Southern Hotel. The world was a wonderful place to Mr. Stenton. He looked upon life with surprise and benignity, but no more wonderful man occupied space on earth than Bartholomew Foreman, whom he had met at a convivial gathering at the Lambs Club.

He came into the drawing-room cautiously and a little fearfully, a plain, stout, genial man, easily embarrassed, and showed his large white teeth in an ingratiating smile.

"I'm glad you came, Mr. Stenton," said Fay, going forward to meet him. She was genuinely fond of this big-hearted, simple man. "This is my friend, Alma Roche, of whom you have heard me speak."

Mr. Stenton advanced his hand and as hastily withdrew it, remembering the injunction of *Manners for Men*, that gentlemen do not shake hands with ladies on introduction.

"Sit down, won't you, Mr. Stenton? Alma is so old a friend of mine, and is so much in my confidence, that we may have our usual little talk without reserve. Mr. Stenton, I find, has been interesting himself financially in some of Bart's schemes," explained Fay, turning to Alma.

"Oh!" said Alma, and smiled.

Such transparently honest souls as Josiah Stenton can detect antagonism instinctively. That "Oh!" was a sort of sniper which informed him that he was in an enemy's country.

"What weather we're havin'!" he said, inconsequently.

"Did you expect to see Bart?" smiled Fay.

"In a manner of speakin'—yes," said Mr. Stenton cautiously. "In a manner of speakin'—no. A rare clever gentleman, Mr. Foreman," he challenged. He coughed, and turned his starry eyes upon Alma.

“Very,” agreed Alma sarcastically, but the sarcasm was wasted.

“A genius! Ideas!” He made a motion with his hands to express rapidity. “Schemes! Thinks a thing out at nine o’clock—raises the money to work it by dinner time—that’s genius!”

Fay hid a smile. She wanted no information on Bart’s lightning finance.

“Look at that toothache thing!” Mr. Stenton, warming to his subject, waggled his head in an ecstasy of admiration. “Woke up in the night with the idea, didn’t he, miss?” Fay nodded—she had heard the story at first hand. “Jumps out of bed; jots it down, gets up in the mornin’—dashes down to the chemist and gets it made up. I put five hundred into the scheme—and gladly. It ain’t that I’m worryin’ about,” he went on hastily, “it’s the public,” he said with fierce energy; “they didn’t buy it—for why? Because, miss, the public don’t want an honest article, it wants advertisements and lies; it wants its leg pulled. The public—bah!”

“That is human nature,” said Fay. “We all like to have our—our legs pulled.”

“The same with the play,” he went on. “Brought tears to my eyes when he read it, it did. Especially that bit where the girl says”—he gave a heartrending imitation of a soprano *ingénue*—“‘If I cannot be your wife I will never be your’—um—er—you know the part I mean,” he added hastily. “A great play, miss, but how was it acted? Did Mr. Lydbrook Grove bring tears to my eyes, did Miss what-d’ye-call-her bring tears to my eyes? No, miss—to tell you the truth,” he lowered his voice confidentially, “she gave me the ’ump.”

“There were many things about that play that gave us all the hump,” said Fay dryly.

“But I believe in him, miss—don’t think I don’t, don’t think that a paltry matter of money is ever likely to come between me and him. He ain’t had my business training—why, he knows no more of business than a child. You ought to have seen his accounts, miss,” he chuckled, coughed, and became suddenly severe as he remembered Alma and her “Oh!” “You ought to have seen his accounts. ‘Credit side—Received £500. Debit side—Paid same.’ That’s his book-keeping. There, there, I suppose we ain’t all gifted with commercial ability. My father made his money by keepin’ the change. See what I mean? A sovereign always meant 240 pence to him.” Mr. Stenton nodded gravely. He suggested in that nod that he wasn’t so sure but that Bart was right and he was wrong. He stole an anxious glance at Alma. Yes, undoubtedly here was the evil influence working against Bartholomew Foreman, Esquire. Alma, turning her eyes in his direction, gasped, for Mr. Stenton was regarding her with a scowl of benevolent malignity, and the employment of this oxymoronic figure is well justified.

For it was not in Mr. Stenton's nature to be malignant.

"Some men," he said solemnly, "are different to others. There's no sense in judgin' racehorses by what cart-horses do. Cart-horses go clop-cloppin' along day in an' day out—at least they used to before motors come along—doin' their bit of work and earnin' their bit of corn. Racehorses ain't much good if you put 'em in a business dray; they've got to work in their own way or not at all; there's no sense in expectin' racehorses to pull wagons—it ain't the racehorses' fault if you expect 'em to, is it?"

Miss Alma Roche sniffed. She felt that a reproach was being levelled at her. She was not a sensitive woman and was not very easily hurt, but she resented anything like criticism from a stranger who occasionally found difficulty in remembering how many "h's" there were in a word like "horse."

"Racehorses, Mr. Stenton," said she, with an air of hauteur which was singularly absurd in one so untidy, "have sometimes failed to recognize their responsibility as racehorses. They sometimes—er—run both ways at once—what do you call them then?"

"Miracles," said Mr. Stenton, not without scorn.

Thereafter Alma could do no more than maintain a dignified and disconcerting silence, whilst Fay endeavoured to soothe this loyal and puzzled adherent of her guardian.

"You mustn't think we aren't all tremendous admirers of Mr. Foreman," she said gently, "only we see him in a different light from that in which you regard all his actions. Perhaps, knowing him better, we expect more and are a little critical when he falls short of our standards."

No wonder Alma sniffed again and found it convenient to consult her large wrist watch. She kissed Fay a laughing good-bye, bowed distantly to Mr. Stenton (when, unless *Manners for Men* was at fault, she most certainly should have shaken hands), and left the two to continue a discussion which had grown distasteful to her.

Mr. Stenton put both his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and glared balefully and defiantly after her, until the white and gold enamelled door closed behind her.

"Now we can have a quiet little chat," said Fay, suppressing a smile at the evidence of Mr. Stenton's unsuspected truculence. "I am afraid I have annoyed you, and I am afraid I am going to annoy you still further—exactly how much money does Bartholomew owe you?"

Josiah Stenton was shocked. Money was a subject which he never seriously discussed with women. He might, in his pride, claim to have invested this or that

amount in an enterprise which Bartholomew had provided, but he did so in the spirit of a man who might boast that a knighthood cost him a thousand or so. And the word “owe” was a hateful word. It put him—by his reasoning—in the sordid position of moneylender.

Worse; it made Bartholomew a vulgar borrower of money. He wriggled uneasily in his chair, and looked imploringly at the ceiling, pressing his lips tightly together as one who was about to suffer pain, and was anxious to acquit himself in the ordeal with credit.

“It is no use, Mr. Stenton,” smiled Fay, “we’ve got to have this question settled. You see, it isn’t fair to me that a—a relative should owe you money.”

“He owes me nothing, miss,” said Mr. Stenton defiantly. “I’ve taken shares in his concerns an’ I’ve taken partnership bonds—that is enough for me.”

“But, my dear Mr. Stenton!” protested the girl, her eyes alight with amusement.

“I mean it, Miss Milton,” he affirmed stoutly, “an’ here’s a point: suppose all these schemes turn up trumps; suppose they make a lot of money an’ I’ve transferred my interests elsewhere? Who’s goin’ to compensate me for my loss of profit?”

Here was a staggering line of argument.

“But—but——”

“I know you think it’s all bosh,” he said earnestly. “Yes, miss, if you’ll forgive the expression, I know you don’t think as much of Mr. Foreman as I do—he’s a young man, if you’ll excuse the expression, to have charge of a young lady like you, and naturally young people, who don’t even respect their elders—God forgive ’em!—don’t respect people who ain’t much older.” He was considerably agitated. “You think he’s a harum-scarum chap—and so he is; but there’s brains in all them schemes, an’ one day you’ll know it! He frightens me. He’s just like watchin’ one of them high-powered machines, the wheels a-flyin’ round an’ round at a tremendous speed; you’ve got a terror of it . . . want to get away from it as quick as you can before somethin’ breaks, that’s what I think about him. One of these days he’ll break loose,” he raised his forefinger warningly, and Fay, who had listened so far in quiet amusement, felt a strange, creepy thrill of apprehension as though this grotesque seer had conveyed something of his vision to her, “he’ll break loose, and there will be a hurry and a scurry to get out of his way, for he’ll hurt, m’m—hurt most horrible!”

He mopped his brow with a hand that shook. He had been carried away out of his placid and complacent self into a realm which was so foreign and unreal as to fill him with wonder at his own eccentricity. Also he became of a sudden conscious that *Manners for Men* made no allowance for a situation of this kind.

“If I’ve said anything that I didn’t ought to, Miss Milton,” he pleaded huskily, “I hope you will overlook it.”

She was looking at him strangely.

“Break loose, will he?” she said, speaking her thought aloud. “I wonder— anyway, he can’t hurt me.”

Mr. Stenton looked at her with a pained look in his faded blue eyes.

“It’s curious you should say that, miss,” he said almost humbly, “for you were the party I was thinking of when I said he’d hurt.”

CHAPTER V

IN Portugal Street, on the fourth floor of a great block of offices, was situated the firm of Waterson, Gasby & Quale, those important solicitors. They occupied a whole floor of the building, and some six and thirty clerks, of divers ages and in various degrees of shabbiness, laboured incessantly from morning till night, from Monday morning until Friday night and again from Saturday morning until two o'clock on Saturday afternoon, in the seemingly endless task of comparing one set of documents with other sets of documents, with copying some and filing others, with attaching forms and stamps, and with preparing long lists, which showed how the papers had been compared and filed and stamped and attached, and the cost thereof.

In the largest of the private rooms, doubly protected by a commonplace door and one more intimate and baize-covered, Mr. George Waterson lived before a large table, leather-topped and furnished with baskets, into which from time to time he would drop sheets of closely written foolscap. If they were dropped into one basket, they were compared and filed; into another, they were copied and stamped; into yet another, they were added to dossiers which reposed in the japanned tin boxes in the managing clerk's office. Mr. George Waterson, for the moment, had suspended his dreary occupation and was discussing the weather (in which he took a correct and impartial interest) with a well-built, florid man of military appearance. The visitor was scrupulously dressed, in garments of correct cut and hue, and wore a big yellow flower in the lapel of his well-fitting morning coat. His trousers were of shepherd's plaid, his spats were snowy white, and he showed just the right amount of shirt in the considered V of his vest opening. On the desk by his side was a silk hat which might have just been placed there by its reverent maker, so wonderfully shiny and unruffled it was.

His troubled face was turned to his solicitor, and George Waterson was returning the gaze with his studied melancholy.

"So you see?" asked Mr. Harold Tirrell.

"I see," replied George carefully.

"And what do you think?" demanded the other patiently.

"I should take my profits and get out; no man was ever ruined by taking small profits." Mr. Waterson was sententious because it was his business to be sententious.

"It looks like being a fine summer, and a fine summer means empty theatres; you have made as much profit out of your share of the New Century lease as you are entitled to make. If Gromberg will take over your share you will be relieved from all

the responsibility of the new piece—what is it, by the way?”

Mr. Harold Tirrell smiled.

“A new play by the great Bartholomew,” he said, and Mr. Waterson raised his eyebrows.

“Really?” He was incredulous. “After the failure of his—I always forget the titles of his ventures!”

Mr. Tirrell nodded.

“That is what has decided me more than the prospect of a hot summer,” he explained. “Of course, Gromberg is an awfully shrewd fellow, but Bart is as plausible as the devil. He’d talk an impresario into livening up grand opera with kinematograph pictures. Gromberg believes in the play—it is called ‘They,’ and is a sort of patriotic comedy.”

George Waterson’s face twitched nervously—a sign that he laboured under some emotion: on this occasion, of an agreeable kind.

“So long as he doesn’t persuade his ward to put money into it, I am not greatly affected,” he confessed. “I have no interest in his enterprises save an everlastingly opposing interest—you know that, so I am betraying no confidence in referring to my relationship to his schemes. I think in all the circumstances that you will be well advised to clear out. By the way,” he added with that air of indifference which invites the fullest confidence, “Mrs. Tamarand isn’t interested financially in any of Bartholomew Foreman’s sporadic ventures, is she?”

Tirrell blushed.

“I don’t know why you should ask me,” he said with heavy jocularly, “except of course you know she is a friend of mine. No, I think she is outside all these precious projects. Bart knows I—well, I wouldn’t stand any victimizing—that is to say, of course I have no right to speak on her behalf, but——”

Waterson let him flounder a little deeper before he came to his assistance.

“I understand perfectly,” he said, without understanding anything, save that Harold was an ass.

“I’m glad you do,” said the other eagerly. “You see, George—I can speak to you very frankly. I am very fond of Agatha Tamarand—more than fond, in fact—I hope that one of these days I shall ask you to fix things for me—a settlement and all that sort of thing. The fact is—I’ve asked her to marry me.”

He blushed again and was stammering like a schoolboy. All the moustache curling in the world could not hide his awkward joy in the contemplation of a victory.

“And?”

“Well, she’s going to give me an answer soon—in fact she’s as good as told me

—only not a soul must know, do you understand?—not a soul. If she finally decides in my favour—we shall just marry and pop off somewhere . . . Spain or Italy for a month. Anyway you can jot down a rough draft of the settlement now . . . the house in Park Lane and £10,000 in Argentine Tramways—they're a sure 5 per cent. stock and—perhaps I'd better give you a complete list later.”

George Waterson looked up suddenly.

“A slight change of view,” he said slowly. “Rather unexpected, isn't it?”

“I don't follow you.”

“I mean—forgive me if I pry into your private affairs—there was a lady upon whom you lavished your young affection. At a distance I grant you, and worshipfully, but still with a certain fire which was impressive.”

Harold caressed his moustache and a little cloud gathered on his face.

“Miss Masfield?” George Waterson nodded. “You know that's impossible—she's married and all that. Yes, she's married,” he repeated with a little sigh, “and I'm very fond of Agatha.”

“How many times has Miss Masfield been married?” asked the other carelessly, and Harold was obviously annoyed.

“Twice,” he said shortly. “You don't understand, George, so don't be so beastly sarcastic. An actress is different . . . broader and all that sort of thing. By Jove! she is a girl in a thousand; so is Agatha, for the matter of that, only—only she belongs to another thousand!”

He rose hurriedly and picked up his hat.

“Is it too early in the day to wish you joy?” asked George with the ghost of a smile.

The other pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“I hope not,” he said. “Anyway,” he paused, “anyway, I'll write.”

“Blind and stupid bat,” said George Waterson.

He did not say this till Harold Tirrell had left the room, and then, with habitual caution, only to himself.

CHAPTER VI

BARTHOLOMEW FOREMAN sat on a steam-winch, his head bare to wind and sun, and sang heartily, if somewhat tunelessly, the "Song of the Bow." It reveals the kink in him, that the song suggested itself by the fact that he was sitting on the fo'c'sle head of the *Mauretania*, above the high bows of the great Atlantic racer. There was a calm sea below, a blue sky, flecked with little white clouds, above, the roar and the rush of wind on his face, as the mail boat went shivering through the water at twenty knots an hour, and there was peace in Bartholomew's heart.

He was a tall man, somewhere in the neighbourhood of six feet. His hair was fair and curly, his eyes big and blue and wondering. His face lean and strong, with the mouth alone to put a note of interrogation against the strength of the chin. For the mouth was a little incoherent, might, by hasty judgment, be written "cruel." That mouth puzzled the physiognomists whom he numbered amongst his friends, for it said much that was in contradiction to all which was known of him. For example, nobody could say he was cruel. Careless perhaps: unthinking, and consequently unjust, but deliberately cruel? No. Even Fay, who knew his worst faults in the order of their appallingness, had no doubt on the subject.

A slight moustache covered his upper lip and gave the casual observer no opportunity for speculating upon his mouth, for the moustache was neat and golden, and in keeping with his lean tight face (the high cheek-bone suggested this latter adjective) and the mop of golden-brown curls, now dancing wildly in the twenty-knot breeze.

He sang of England, and extemporized a verse that, to the marching grimness of Doyle's song, might be added a stanza or two of love. A beckoning hand crooked a finger at him, right ahead of the heaving bows of the *Mauretania*, a shy, roguish smile, full of meaning and understanding, came from under lowered brows. He kissed his hand airily at the vision, and his fellow passengers on the windy deck stared at him.

Little did Bartholomew care. He was lazily and beautifully happy, for Fishguard was less than twenty-four hours ahead, and there was a blue line of Irish coast showing even now on the port bow. He was Home again. He sniffed the scent of the London streets, the asphalt and the boiling tar of the road menders, the damp greenness of the parks, the spiciness of the city. And there was a perfume like none other—the faint fragrance of Agatha's sitting-room—lavender and lilac which was the very soul-essence of Agatha, that quiet and lovely woman. No wonder that he sang, seeing her demurely challenging eyes, sniffing the gentle and far-borne balm of

land. The immense spaces of sea and sky were none too great to serve as thurible, whence incense was to burn before his deity, for she was a dominant and supreme being, ruling one who walked with the Gods.

A steward came across the deck with some difficulty.

“A marconi for you, sir,” he said, and he held a familiar form in his hand.

“For me——”

Bart snatched the wireless and opened it eagerly. He read and his face fell. It was merely a message from Gromberg.

“Play in active rehearsal; looking forward to your finishing touch; suggest strengthen second act.”

“All right, steward,” said Bart discontentedly. He watched the steward out of range, then turned to a contemplation of the sea ahead. A frown settled on his face and he shook his white fist at the distant cloud of land. “Oh, Agatha—oh, devil!” he apostrophized bitterly. “Oh, soulless and unworthy little beast! I must marry you, and the palace and the villa on Maggiore and the silken carpets for your feet . . . must come later!”

Then he laughed—at her, at himself, at the mad, merry world, at the leaping, white-crested seas, at all the joyous manifestations of life that surrounded him, for he was a happy lover and it seemed good to be alive.

Early morning, noon and night,
Praise God, said Theocrite.

He praised God in his inconsequent way, for those who did not love him, and for the woman who did. He praised God for his own bright spirits and for the land, which presently would come reluctantly out of the water, and where all happiness was centred in a woman’s heart. Two bells ringing close to his ear, and a bugle call from the hurricane deck, took him down to lunch.

“Come along, Foreman,” a gaunt man, with a short grey beard and pince-nez, growled at him as he made his way to a seat at the captain’s table. “We want to hear a few more of your fantastic views on America—this is one of the two remaining opportunities we have.”

“Senator,” said Bart, “I think America is a most delightful place, and the Marine Department the most intelligent and far-seeing public office I have ever encountered.”

The elder man smiled grimly.

“The air of Ireland has gotten into your head,” he grumbled. “Say that little piece

of yours on the land of liberty and enlightenment.”

Bart attacked his soup before replying.

“I’ve been thinking things over,” he said, “and perhaps I was wrong. There are some points about my boat which are not convincing—they do not even convince me. I have horrible moments of sanity—everybody has. Some people label those moments ‘depression,’ others call them ‘liver.’ I, of all creatures, know that I am just normal.”

Senator Dickson smiled again.

“Sacrifice for sacrifice,” he barked in that gruff old voice of his. “You shall praise the United States, and I will see your play.”

Bart made his conquests in unlikely places. If he liked a man or woman he liked them unreservedly. They had no faults, they were perfect beings, without blemish and without reproach. If he did not like them they had no existence, and were so many pale ghosts attached to visiting cards. If he disliked them, he hated them. He hated them so that they fretted him. As he was catholic in his likings, he was oecumenical in his animosities.

He disliked certain Cabinet Ministers and newspaper-sellers with equal fervidity. George Waterson did not stir him any more deeply than did a three-card trickster, who once lured him into a game of “Slippery Sam” on a railway journey to Exeter.

He liked Senator Dickson for his very reticence. You could make no impression upon this grim old man, he returned all shocks with interest, and with little distress to himself. He was all rubber-covered granite.

That afternoon when most of the passengers were on deck, looking toward an uninteresting strip of land fast receding from view on the port quarter of the ship, the old man linked his arm in Bart’s and walked him up and down the deck.

“You shall be an ancient man’s prop and stay,” he said, and Bart flashed all his teeth in a large mirthful smile.

“You hard old devil!” he said admiringly. “You’ll suggest that the Rock of Gibraltar wants the support of scaffolding next.”

“Why this elation of yours?” asked Mr. Dickson suddenly. “Home, I suppose, wife—children?”

“No—no,” replied Bart. “I have no wife—yet. I have a—a relation.”

The Senator looked at him sharply and changed the subject. There was no warmth in that word “relation.” It was as bleak and cheerless as the coast line they were leaving.

“Yes, I have a relation—in fact, a ward in England,” said Bart after a while. “A charming girl. I think you would like her.”

“Do you like her?” demanded the other bluntly.

“Yes,” said Bart after a pause. “She is very pleasing. I have other friends,” he went on almost immediately, “who, perhaps, occupy a larger portion of my life.”

“Well,” the Senator shrugged his shoulders, “it’s no business of mine, but I suppose the friends you mention include the ‘no wife yet?’”

Bart smiled.

“I’m thinking of getting married,” he said cautiously, “only thinking——”

The Senator shook his head. “That’s a pity.”

“Nothing is a pity that makes for happiness,” said Bart, his eyes fixed on the lazy wash of the sea. “Life is just what it brings. You can’t turn happiness on and off from any of the conventional taps: you can’t buy happiness, or get it automatically through the recitation of certain phrases. Because a man in a white surplice mumbles a few words over you as you kneel at the altar rails, it doesn’t necessarily follow that peace and satisfaction are to be included for the fee you pay. Marriage only gives you a fair chance of being happy. It isn’t a lottery—it only buys you a chance in a lottery—the lottery is life. You’ve got to take the happiness that comes to you, however it comes to you, so long as you aren’t hurting somebody pretty badly. I am sure I shall be happy—sure—sure. But somehow . . . why, marriage turns love into bricks and mortar and moving vans. It kills dreams, and I am happiest dreaming.”

“Humph!” said Senator Dickson, and lit a fresh cigar. He made no further reference to the matter of Bartholomew Foreman’s matrimonial plans, but at Fishguard, when they were standing together on the tender which was to carry them to land, he asked suddenly:

“What is your address in London? Mine will be Suite 1009, Savoy Court.”

Bartholomew never carried a card case or a card. He wrote down his address on the back of an envelope. He was a little depressed, and, as was usual in these circumstances, silent. No telegram from Agatha. He cursed her long and fluently all the time the tender was rolling its way to the quay. “Ungrateful, callous, selfish little brute!” he muttered savagely. “What a welcome—my God!” On the landing stage a telegraph boy displayed a number of buff envelopes on a little blackboard. One was addressed to him and he seized it and tore it open. It ran:

“Welcome home. Agatha.”

Before his amused, but tolerant, fellow passengers he kissed the buff form extravagantly, and went joyously to the customs, rallying sober officials with solemn hints of contraband, tipping porters munificently, making tremendous purchases of newspapers from small astonished boys and taking farewells of comparative strangers, with a warmth which was totally unjustified by his previous attitude of

indifference toward them. For four hours he filled his carriage with unmusical hummings, to the annoyance of at least two of his fellow passengers. The third was Senator Dickson, who had witnessed the episode of the telegram and knew it came from the Woman of Dreams.

CHAPTER VII

THOUGH, to all outward appearance, 23, Colholm Place was very much the same on the morning of Thursday as it had been on the evening of Wednesday, there was a distinct revolution internally. Mr. Packer, the butler, at such moments as he was visible to the denizens of the outside world, gave some indication of a strenuous domestic life.

His hair was ruffled, his face was hot and flushed and his usual urbanity had vanished. He was sharp to a point of rudeness to his servants, snappy to such representatives of the tradespeople who enjoyed the privilege of a personal interview, and despairing to those of his intimates who were able to secure his individual and uncritical attention.

“He’s back all right!” he panted, coming into the kitchen with a little tray. “Hurry up that coffee, Mrs. Cole—coffee at twelve o’clock! We shan’t know what peace is like now——”

“He seemed in a pretty good temper when I saw him this morning,” said Mrs. Cole hopefully.

“He’s a raging fiend now,” said the butler. “He has had a telegram from a Certain Party that hasn’t pleased his lordship.”

“Her?” Mrs. Cole’s eyebrows rose inquiringly.

“Her,” repeated the butler with gloomy satisfaction. “She had to go out of town this morning to see her aunt who’s ill. That’s put the tin hat on everything.”

A bell buzzed violently.

“That’s him—here, give me that coffee.”

He seized tray and coffee-pot, and made a dive for the passage which gave access to the upper part of the house.

Curse all aunts! thought Bart, and said as much. He was fuming up and down his study. He still wore his dressing gown over his pyjamas, for he did his best thinking without the constricting influence of stiff collars and formal clothes. What was an aunt? He hoped the relative of Agatha’s would die before her niece got as far as Crewe; he wished the aunt to the devil. He knew nothing about her aunt—never knew, in fact, that she possessed one. It came almost in the nature of a shock to him to realize that Agatha possessed any earthly ties save himself. True, he had never invited confidences on her family, though she had told him that both her parents were dead.

This would mean another two days before he saw her, perhaps three, and she had not sent him her address—oh, it was maddening!

He looked up the ABC, noted all the trains which had left Euston for Liverpool—that was her beastly aunt's abode according to the telegram—and despatched wires to Crewe addressed to her as a passenger of each separate train. He demanded her plans, the length of her absence, her Liverpool address. He would go to Liverpool that night and see her, and after the arrival of the coffee he made a hurried toilet and dressed in anticipation of the wire's arrival.

He had seen Fay, had dined with her the night before. She had been politely interested in the account of his adventures in Washington and New York.

He had been in excellent spirits, though she did not flatter herself that the sight of her was in any way responsible for his cheerfulness.

He looked handsomer than ever—the few weeks of absence had made a marked difference in his appearance. Perhaps it was that she noticed it more, because she had thought more about him in that period than ever she had done before in the course of their strange companionship. Whatever was the cause, he was certainly improved. She had never regarded him as a human man before, and she was interested. Curiously enough, he found himself approving of her. She was a beautiful woman, he thought, with her subtle air of refinement. She was dressed very plainly in black and white and pearl grey. She had an exquisite neck and perfect shoulders, and the soft lines of her figure were almost girlish in their perfection of outline. But he saw her through a mental transparency of Agatha—Agatha with the elusive eyes, Agatha with her spiritual face and her lips half parted in wonder at his love.

He had gone to bed happy, and had risen to a bright world—and a telegram. After that the sun went out and all things were black and sordid and mean.

Fay knocked at his study door, and the curt "Come in!" warned her of changed conditions. She was not unused to these lightning upsets of temper, but just now her conscience was pricking her, and she found a reason for his distraction—a reason near to the truth. It had something to do with Agatha, of that she was sure, and she wondered whether Mrs. Tamarand had taken a definite stand.

"Is everything as you wish, dear?" she asked. The "dear" was part of a daily convention, as also was the little kiss she pecked at his cheek.

He forced a smile.

"Everything that you can do is as I wish," he said with an air of gaiety, "only I had rather a disturbing message from people."

"Aren't you due at the New Century?" she asked, glancing at the clock upon the mantelpiece.

He rumbled his hair impatiently.

“Oh, hang the New Century!” he said irritably. “They must get on without me—I may have to go to Liverpool this afternoon—will you tell Packer to have my grip packed?”

“Grip?” She was puzzled.

“Bag,” he explained with a brief smile. “Grip is an Americanism and ever so much more expressive; I shall only want a change and my sleeping things.”

“What train will you catch?” she asked.

He threw out his hands helplessly.

“Now, how the dickens do I know?” he demanded testily, then: “I’m awfully sorry to be such a grump—but I’m rattled just now. I expect a wire; when I get it I shall be off.”

She stood by his writing table looking down and fidgeting with the little silver knives and scissors which were part of its furniture.

“I saw Agatha the other day,” she ventured.

“Did you?” He was studiously indifferent. “And how was she looking?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Very much the same—a little paler than usual, I thought.”

“Paler?” There was a note of anxiety in his voice. “Was she ill?”

She shook her head.

“No—just pale; perhaps it was something she was wearing—perhaps the orchids she had; those purple flowers make one look a little pale.”

“Orchids—she doesn’t usually wear orchids: they are beastly expensive things, too,” he said suspiciously.

“Anyway, she was wearing them,” she smiled in his face, “and really I didn’t think of asking her their cost: perhaps somebody sent them to her.”

“Somebody?” he demanded aggressively. “Who in the name of heaven—not that fool Tirrell?”

She made a little face of protest.

“Don’t be so violent, Bart,” she requested in mock alarm. “Harold isn’t a fool, and he is awfully fond of Agatha.”

“Bah!” he snarled, and walked to the other end of the room. “Fond! That gross beast! That woolly-headed dunce! Fond? Pigs eat the roots of lilies—they call the arum the pig-lily in South Africa—I suppose they’re fond too.”

There was a little pause.

“I never think of Agatha as a lily,” reflected Fay, “but that’s because I am a woman and see other women clearly. She has no mystery for me—that makes a difference. I never realized how enthusiastic you were about her.” She looked at him

with exasperating calmness as she said this, and he scowled.

"I'm keen on everything that I like," he said truthfully, and she nodded in agreement. She had a little twinge of something which was not exactly jealousy and not exactly resentment against Agatha. It would have been absurd to feel jealous in the circumstances. Agatha took nothing that she herself required: robbed her of nothing that she prized. Bart and she had never been friends exactly. But she had helped Bart—helped him generously. Agatha had done nothing—nothing. She told herself that she did not like Agatha, yet there had been a time when the other woman was one of her best friends. The change had been imperceptible, and was due in all probability to the fact that Fay had extended the attitude of mind she adopted toward Bart to the woman who was his best friend.

And yet she did not dislike Bart. Rather, she felt the shadow of a sympathy with him, and sometimes blamed herself for a permanent estrangement. Nor was the foundation for her dislike discoverable in the fact that Agatha was responsible for Bart's deflection. You could not lead Bart; he was a born leader.

Of late she had had the conviction that Bart had been given into her keeping. He was a great child, to be protected from the wiles of the world—a world made up of many Agathas—and Fay was a woman of strong religious convictions and saw a duty. Also she had a mischievous desire to upset his complacency.

She knew now that it would be wise of her to bring the present interview to an end. She was treading in very slippery places, and found a fearful joy in her temerity.

"I wonder what Harold's views are?" she mused aloud.

"So does everybody," said Bart sardonically; "so does Harold, I should imagine—if he ever thinks about himself. So do his unfortunate constituents and the less fortunate shareholders in his thrice-handicapped companies. Harold's views, by heaven! Harold is a simpering clothes-horse with the brains of a gnat and the vocabulary of a tongue-tied grasshopper!"

Bart was in his most irresponsible mood when he sought for illustration to disparage his enemies. "His views! On what in the name of Providence?"

"On Agatha," suggested the girl, unshaken by the storm of rhetoric she had aroused.

"On Agatha?" Bart was incredulous. "On Agatha? Why on Agatha? He has no right to have views on her or upon any other wholesome subject. It is an impertinence——"

"For goodness sake be rational, Bartholomew," she interrupted impatiently. "Harold is almost as old a friend of hers as you are—in fact, I think he knew her long before you met her. Why shouldn't he have views? He is fond of her."

He made no answer. He was white with anger, and she felt her heart beating a little faster as she recognized the storm signs. Only once before had she seen him in that condition, and then his wrath had been directed away from her.

What he might have allowed himself to say, she was not to know, for at that moment there came a tap at the door and Mr. Packer came in with a telegram.

Bart opened the envelope and read, and Fay saw the colour coming back to his face and the frown smooth away from his forehead. In the space of a second his whole demeanour had changed, and it was a smiling face he turned to the watching girl.

“Blow Harold,” he said, almost gaily.

“From Agatha?” asked the girl, her lips turning in scorn.

“From Agatha,” he repeated, and whistled a little tune.

She turned on her heel suddenly and went out of the room, slamming the door behind her. That afternoon she wrote to George:

“Is there no way by which I can upset that absurd clause in good, dear mother’s will—about living in the same house with Bart? Another year of this will reduce me to lunacy. . . .”

She read the letter and tore it up.

CHAPTER VIII

A WIRE had reached Agatha at Crewe, and she had replied a little petulantly:

“Shall be home to-morrow. Aunt staying at Adelphi. Please do not come.”

But happily the form of words conveyed nothing of her annoyance. A few months before she would not have been annoyed at the receipt of his peremptory demand for information. She would have smiled indulgently at the imperious “must’s” of the message. But now she was in a less benevolent mood. She was seeking extenuation for an act of treachery—for treachery it was even by her shallow code. And all that Bart did to make her feel uncomfortable or beholden or at his mercy went to justify her in her decision.

Aunt Margaret, confined to her room at the Adelphi and writing querulous letters on the subject of rheumatism, was a little astonished to learn by telegram from her favourite niece that she was starting from London on a visit. There had been nothing urgent in Aunt Margaret’s letter, but Agatha had seized upon it as an excuse to be away from London on Bart’s return. Her telegram to Fishguard represented a moment of contrition, her hasty flight to the North was more carefully considered. She wanted the few days she could snatch to make up her mind, finally. It would be impossible to decide in the atmosphere in which he would envelop her. His telegram with its “cannot understand why,” its “must,” its “insists” had decided her. She would go back and end everything. She wrote to Harold Tirrell from Liverpool—a very clear, definite and businesslike letter. He would not have understood any other kind.

Bart had met him on the day of Agatha’s return.

Harold was in his most resplendent outfit, and Bart, feeling for the moment in a genial and mischievous mood, would have given much to have tripped him into an inviting pool of mud which was lying by the kerb in the Strand as a joint result of a shower of rain and the street cleaners’ efforts.

“Well, Bart, and how is Bart?” asked Harold with irritating familiarity.

“You’re in a jovial mood,” said Bart suspiciously. “What section of the Companies Act have you been controverting?”

Harold guffawed. His pale blue eyes gleamed with unwonted conviviality, and he had reason.

“Everything is bright and beautiful,” he said, employing a stereotyped phrase. Harold’s conversations were largely made up of such phrases, which he deftly applied to all circumstances that arose.

“You’re disgustingly lovely this morning,” said Bart, eyeing the other from top to toe with an expression of curiosity. “Offensively so. Where have you come from?”

“To be perfectly candid,” this was Harold’s favourite opening, “I’ve just come from George Waterson.”

Bart nodded.

“What a combination!” he said admiringly. “And exactly how have you been employing this glorious morning with George Waterson—buying up a few more undesirable lots for Southern Properties?”

Harold was a director of Southern Properties, and rightly resented the criticism.

“Now, now!” he chided the other, playfully raising his yellow-gloved finger. “You know that that yarn was a disgraceful slander. I’m surprised that a man like you could give—er——”

“Credence,” suggested Bart obligingly.

“Exactly—credence to such rubbish. To be absolutely candid, I had never heard of the Streatham Estate Properties till they came into the market in the usual way and were purchased in the usual way.”

“At almost twice the price they would fetch in the open market—in the usual way,” said Bart with an angelic smile, “through an obscure firm of solicitors acting for unknown principals. If I had the energy to go into it, Harold Tirrell, sir, I would cause you the greatest unhappiness.”

Harold smiled. Not unused to the ways of discontented shareholders, and superior to awful threats of exposure, he could afford to be amused. He had a dim idea that if Bart knew what his business with George Waterson had been that morning, he would be much more interested than he was in the sale of Streatham Estates.

“I’ll be getting along,” he said, taking a firmer grip of his correctly furled umbrella. “I’ve a lot to do before I go away” he added carelessly.

If he imagined that Bart was curious as to his comings and goings he was mistaken. He might go to Timbuctoo, or this might be his final farewell ere he quitted the world, for aught Bart cared.

“Going away, are you?” said Bart absently. “Well, hop along, dear lad——”

“Be good,” enjoined Harold.

“Be honest,” was the natural retort.

He had gone a step or two when Bart called him back.

“By the way, I met a pal of yours in New York—Miss Masfield, the eminent actress.”

Mr. Tirrell reddened and was palpably perturbed.

“Oh, did you?—er—how was she?”

“She’s coming to England in the autumn—Gromberg is going to bag her for a play of mine.” He eyed the other keenly. “You used to be rather keen on May.”

All the geniality faded from Mr. Tirrell’s face.

“Don’t know what you mean by ‘rather keen,’” he said stiffly. “I respect Miss Masefield, and I have a very high opinion of her.”

“I should break that bit of news to her very gently,” suggested Bart dryly. “Gromberg told me you were always hanging about the theatre when she was at the ‘Friv’ and——”

“Gromberg is a dirty little Jew,” snapped Harold, “and if he talks about me, by Jove!”

“You’ll lam his head off him, by Jove!—quite right,” approved Bart. “The way the lower orders discuss Members of Parliament is too appalling for words—so long!”

Harold would have continued the conversation, because he had many things to say about Mr. Gromberg, but Bart had the imperious trick of dismissing people in such a manner that they had accepted dismissal before they rightly realized the extent of his impudence.

He had just come away from a rehearsal of his play “They” at the New Century Theatre. Even at this stage it was evident that the play lacked something. The producer, the manager, even the melancholy press agent who was paid only that he might see superlative good in everything, admitted that the play just wanted—something. The dialogue was good, the situations were good, the curtains, the plot, the whole thing was excellent—only it needed just a touch . . . somewhere . . . somehow . . . but what that touch was nobody knew.

Bart listened with amusement, but without offering to supply the deficiency. He had grown accustomed to the plaint, and had come to regard it as one of the excuses which interested people offered in advance for failure. His publishers had spoken vaguely about a “Something” which was missing in his book; there was “something” needed to make his unsuitable boat a success—even his wonderful blacking felt the need of that mysterious element, which in some manner he invariably left out of all his compositions, and, whilst doing all that he claimed for it, failed to perform certain necessary offices which purchasers demanded of the blacking of commerce.

Ordinarily, the gloom of a theatrical manager within ten days of opening would not affect his spirits, but something that the dumpy Gromberg had said had stuck in his memory.

“There’s a pocket in your mind somewhere, Mr. Foreman,” he said seriously, “one of those pockets that aviators find on a still day—you’re going on splendidly, and then without any reason at all you flop—if you can fill that pocket you’ll fill your own.”

It was the imagery that first caught his fancy, then the thought behind the picture. He puzzled out a solution. He was not lazy—he was tremendously energetic. Nor without stamina—he could carry a failure on his back and never regret the imposition. He was conscious of his shortcomings, and when he said his prayers at night—as he did whenever he wasn’t too tired—he demanded of his God that those shortcomings should be made up.

But behind the penalties of his temperament lay a serious fault—a subtle and elusive poison which no amount of self-analysis could discover or classify. He knew exactly what was within him, but found no helpful test to show him that which was absent from his mental and spiritual equipment.

He was lunching that day with Josiah Stenton, and found in his stout admirer a pleasant narcotic to his misgivings. Mr. Stenton as a host was fussy and nervous. Bart was fond of his “partner,” enjoyed his society, and the meal passed pleasantly, Bart relating to a wholly sympathetic ear the story of his unsuccessful effort to foist upon the government of a friendly nation his life-saving boat, which was perfect in so many particulars that it seemed ridiculous that it should be rejected—or at any rate shelved—because it lacked one of those mystic “somethings” without which none of Bart’s demonstrations of genius was complete—if the bull be permitted.

“I’ve thought a lot about that boat, Mr. Foreman, sir,” said Josiah seriously, “ever since you’ve been gone to America I’ve been thinkin’ about that boat. It’s a good boat. If I was wrecked I’d sooner get into that boat of yours than go aboard another ship—I would indeed. I’d rather be wrecked in your boat,” continued Mr. Stenton extravagantly, “than take my chance on some boats—there’s only one thing about it that I’d give a bit of thought to, if I were you, Mr. Foreman—how are a lot of people goin’ to get in if there’s a rush of people? They could get down the manhole one at a time——”

Bart looked at the other in astonishment.

“That is what they said in Washington,” he said slowly. “It is curious that I never thought of that.”

“Mind you, Mr. Foreman,” said the other hastily, and in some panic lest Bart should think he was essaying the daring task of improving on the work of genius, “mind you, it is as fine a boat as ever was invented. Edison couldn’t have thought that boat out, but——”

“But,” smiled Bart kindly, “but it is in need of just one thing—I’ll work it out in my mind.”

No such small matter occupied the exalted thoughts of Bartholomew Foreman that day: to-night he was to see Agatha after an absence of months—years it seemed. He went into Regent Street that afternoon and bought a ring. It was a big square emerald set in a square of white brilliants. He employed half the royalties which he had received in advance from Gromberg to the purpose.

With this in his pocket and a great bunch of flowers by his side he taxied to Agatha’s modest house in Chelsea. The flowers he chose, after some consideration, were orchids of a purple hue.

CHAPTER IX

HE felt the chill almost as soon as he entered the house: the empty drawing-room was stiff with formality, the very tone of the servant was forbidding. A sensitive man, readily susceptible to the influence of his environment, all the froth of his fervency sizzled to a stagnant flatness. Mrs. Tamarand was in her room resting; she would be down presently.

“Isn’t she well?” he asked anxiously. He hoped for a reply which would explain his reception in the only way soothing to his nerves and dignity. The admission of a headache would have been welcome, but her lady was well, said the girl grimly, but rather tired from her journey. She kept him waiting a quarter of an hour before she appeared, and then, to his amazement, she came down fully dressed for dinner.

“You’re not going out?” he half demanded, half asserted in his surprise.

He had never seen her look better. She was in white and gold, a plain gown, expensively simple. It was cut low at her breast, and about her throat she wore a single row of pearls. There was a danger signal in her face. She was unusually pale, and the sulky frown and the down-turned corners of her mouth were ominous. He forgot that he had been away for months, forgot all the longing and yearning which had filled his heart in those months of separation, forgot the monstrous inadequacy of her welcome, and was conscious only of his immediate responsibility to her and to himself. That frown had to be removed, that down-turned mouth uplifted, something of the old light of laughter lit in her eyes.

“What is wrong?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Where are you going?”

She still frowned, but met his eyes without as much as a blink.

“I am going out to dinner,” she said shortly.

“But I’m not dressed,” he protested. “I didn’t know you would want to go out to dinner to-night.”

“I am going out with some friends,” she said, steadily buttoning her gloves the while. “It is a long-standing engagement.”

“Who are the friends?” he demanded.

He was pale with anger, and she felt her courage oozing.

“You have no right to ask that,” she said, “but as you are interested, it is with George Waterson and Mr. Tirrell.”

He stared at her dumbfounded.

“To-night!” he said, hardly believing his ears. “To-night! Why, Agatha, you can’t

go!”

She raised her brows.

“Indeed!” she said coldly. “But I am going.”

He mastered his temper with a great effort.

“I have brought you a little present,” he said quietly. “I wanted to have a long talk with you—about our—our marriage.”

She looked at the tiny watch which hung with a dozen other trinkets from the loop of her gold bag.

“You had better see me to-morrow,” she said, speaking rapidly as the moment of crisis arrived; “and please don’t send me bullying telegrams, Bart. It was beastly of you, and I’m tired of all this sort of thing; it is worrying me to death. I’d sooner be a charwoman than be engaged to a man who doesn’t know his own mind—who has kept me looking like a fool for years. You are simply awful, Bart—and I’m not going to stand any more of it—so there!”

She was on the verge of tears, and she anticipated the arrival by the production of her handkerchief—ever a signal of her perturbation.

He was genuinely distressed.

“My poor child,” he said gently and would have taken her in his arms, but she slipped away from him. The gesture was sufficient to check any further demonstration on his part. A terribly sensitive man was Bartholomew Foreman. He drew back and opened the door for her.

“I hope you will enjoy yourself,” he said calmly, and she fluttered through the door, and he heard the pitter-patter of her shoes in the hall below.

He waited in the little drawing-room, standing where she had left him, stunned and dazed with the shock.

He looked round the room, and every article of furniture, every tiny ornament, every picture that hung upon its walls held a stab for him.

The servant came back to the room and stood hesitating in the doorway.

“Are you waiting for madam?” she asked.

He shook his head and went slowly down the stairs into the street.

CHAPTER X

BARTHOLOMEW FOREMAN woke from a restless night to confront a problem for which he could find neither explanation nor solution. He had spent the earlier part of the night in writing and destroying letters reflecting every degree of reproachfulness and contrition. He knew Agatha well enough to have no doubt about her imperviousness to appeal by letter. He must see her again. He sent a letter off by district messenger asking her to receive him that afternoon. It was disgraceful of her to treat him so, he who was so much to her, who had planned so great a setting for her beauty and talents. He always wanted to be married: it was only the desire to come to her laden with rich gifts—only the perfection of their friendship for so long that had made him postpone the actual fixing of a date. He had been careless, thoughtless, selfish; he had taken too much for granted, he was at fault; but she should have chosen some other time for her exhibition than the hour of his return. She was shallow—he progressed everlastingly in a circle which began at Agatha the victim and ended at Agatha the heartless.

Fay kept out of his way all the morning, but to her surprise he turned up to lunch. He was looking fagged and worried, and his conversation was mainly monosyllabic. She kept the trend of talk out of dangerous ways, for, so far, she was not aware how much he knew. During the meal a telegram came, and he brightened at the sight of the envelope.

“I think that is for me,” said Fay hurriedly, but he had opened it in his eagerness. “Thanks for congratulations, very happy, Harold,” it ran.

“I’m sorry,” he said and handed it to her.

Then, after a long silence:

“What is he happy about?” he asked fretfully. “Has he been buying new options or something?”

So he knew nothing, she thought, and fenced with the question.

“He’s just off to the Continent,” she said lightly.

“What shall we do without him?” he wondered aloud, and Fay smiled.

“You don’t like Harold—I’m sorry about that,” she said.

He looked at her suspiciously.

“Why this sudden regret?”

She hunched one shoulder.

“He is a friend of mine,” she said. “After all, I am entitled to friends—as well as a guardian. A woman needs distraction.”

He was in a mood for contradiction, and she supplied all the material necessary.

“Exactly why should you want more distraction than anybody else?” he asked blandly.

She looked at him with a long, speculative glance.

“Because I am compelled to live in the same house with a relative who is not interested in me and who does nothing”—he groaned—“does nothing to make life any easier for me.”

“If you’re set on ragging me I’m going,” said Bart wearily. “I am as sick of the arrangement as you are. You are always coming between me and my work.”

To his own astonishment he found himself unequal to carrying through the argument he had provoked. He was tired, physically and emotionally exhausted. He had no desire for a long discussion.

“That is one way of getting out of your troubles,” smiled Fay, “and it seems to me that it is your favourite method: but you can’t always run away.”

He rose from the table and folded his napkin. He also hummed a little air from *Carmen*, which was rude. It needed only this show of indifference to fan the smouldering anger in the girl’s heart to life. He saw the blood come surging into her face and the eyes brighten, and suspected hysteria. Therein he was not far wrong, for she was strung up to an utmost tension.

“You speak of your ‘work,’” she said quietly; “do you realize what you have made of your life? Do you recognize the failure of it through and through. You’re altogether unstable, Bart—there’s something that’s rotten and wrong in you.”

“Calm yourself,” he said with elaborate irony.

He was above her criticism, he felt, and she recognized how sincere he was in this belief. It stung her to madness. Why it should, save that she was human, with human weaknesses, it is difficult to say, for humanity is no more excuse for the emotion of humanity than is a vessel for its contents.

“It must be fine to be calm and superior as you are,” she said breathlessly, “to be outside all influence and all admonition; to be so godlike that one can afford to laugh at judgment; to be so aloof that nothing can wound and nothing can shock.”

“It is very fine indeed,” he agreed with mock gravity, and walked to the window.

He might have gone back to his study, but here was a new Fay to him; he saw a deeper mind than he knew. Her scorn of him was a volcanic fire which brought to the light, in an eruption of words, unsuspected strata of belief. And the artist in him told him that she was working for a climax. He was all the more curious to learn what that crisis was. A Chancery action perhaps—to upset a provision which brought him no pleasure, but which he had accepted in a magnificent moment as a sacred trust. He would not shrink from the ordeal. He had often wondered whether

matters would ever come to that stage—he had discussed the matter with Agatha, and she had been very sensible about it all.

“I do not complain,” Fay went on with a shrug, “that your life, judged by ordinary standards, is a selfish one—let Agatha complain of that!”

He glared at her. She was in a mood he loathed.

“Then for God’s sake what do you complain of?” he asked harshly.

“I complain of you.”

All the colour had gone out of her face now. She stood in the centre of the room, her hands clasped behind her, facing him squarely.

“I complain of you,” she said again in a low voice. “You so armoured against criticism that nothing shocks you.”

“Nothing,” he agreed.

There was a little pause, then she spoke.

“Agatha was married to Harold Tirrell by special licence this morning.”

He did not speak. He knew she spoke the truth, but he said nothing, standing with his back to her looking out of the window upon a street given up to tradesmen’s carts.

“I urged her to do it,” Fay went on relentlessly. “I showed her all the advantages. I wanted to wake you out of your drugged sleep. You’re drugged with self-esteem and self-satisfaction, Bart. I wanted to shock you and I didn’t care how I did it. So I told her to marry Harold—I helped her to make up her mind—the wire I had was from them both—they’re off to the Continent on their honeymoon.”

He turned slowly. She stepped back with a little gasp and her hand went to her eyes as if to shut out the vision of the anguish her words had caused. For in that moment of time she was speaking, his face had gone old and grey. She saw every line on it, every wrinkle as definitely marked as though it were drawn in pencil.

He was looking at her and through her, and the pain in his eyes was pathetic to see.

“Oh, Bart,” she sobbed.

He smiled.

“All right,” he mumbled. “Not feeling too good—that’s all.”

And he went stumbling out of the room like a blind man.

BOOK II

The Book of Adjustment

CHAPTER I

MR. PACKER had time to look about the office whilst his master read the letter. It was curious that Mr. Foreman should take himself to an office just like an ordinary City gentleman, Mr. Packer thought, but then Mr. Bartholomew Foreman was an unusual man, and his actions were not to be judged by the codes which ordinarily governed commonplace humanity.

Moreover (ruminated Mr. Packer, the idea occurring to him for the first time) Mr. Foreman had need of an office. Speaking for himself—as he was prepared to do the first time he found himself in the company of his peers—he had grown tired of answering the bell and ushering into the study the scores upon scores of people who had called upon business during the past three months.

A man who started work at half-past six in the morning, and did not leave his desk until nine or ten and sometimes twelve o'clock at night, was something more than a tyrant if he expected middle-aged domestic servants to give him their personal attention for the whole of that time. He would add a rider to the effect of Mr. Bartholomew Foreman at regular work being a more bearable person than Mr. Bartholomew Foreman of the old days. A quieter man, less given to frantic condemnation and as frantic remorse if he thought his strictures had wounded the unhappy recipient.

Yes, decided Packer, the office was a fine idea—it kept Mr. Foreman away from the house, and employed three respectable young men with a startling knowledge of shorthand and typewriting and book-keeping remarkably busy in the outer office through which Packer had passed.

Bart read the letter twice.

“Harold Tirrell and his wife are calling this afternoon. I thought I would let you know in case you thought of dropping in for tea.—F.”

He laid the letter down. It was very thoughtful of Fay. He turned to the waiting and attentive Mr. Packer.

“Sorry to bring you up, Packer—the 'phone is still out of order, I presume?”

“Yes, sir—it seems a great pity that something can't be done with the telephone to keep it working all the time.”

Bart smiled.

Four months ago Packer's words would have stimulated all the inventive faculties of Bartholomew Foreman's mind; would have reduced his study to a chaos of coiling wire and messy batteries, and moreover would have initiated a

correspondence with a great Government department calculated to last for years and to reach at the end a volume of startling magnitude.

“Never begin inventing, Packer,” he said good-humouredly. “Invention is a moving stairway to Bedlam.”

He dismissed his servant and addressed himself to the work at hand. After all, he thought, of all the people who were least entitled to discourage the budding inventor he was a shining example. Foreman’s unsinkable boat, patented in nine countries, adopted by three boards charged with the saving of life at sea, and already producing a competence in the shape of royalties to its inventor, was proof, if proof were needed, that an errant thought may find profitable expression.

He looked at the little clock on the desk. It wanted a few minutes to noon. He had a board meeting at twelve, but his fellow directors would not turn up till the stroke of the hour. He picked up Fay’s letter again.

So they were back!

He was strangely unperturbed and unmoved by the news. Four months! The groves of memory were burnt and charred wreckage in the gaunt wilderness of his heart. He had wrapped the fragrant debris of that sweet time in a wrapping of flame and had let the wind carry away its ashes. Work and rage, hard, grinding, maddening work, where every reserve of will had been called to keep his mind from wandering; ungovernable exhausting furies which had left him weak and sick. And here was the end of it. Agatha was coming to tea, bringing this gross husband of hers, and Bart could read of her intention without as much as a griping of heart.

Senator Dickson came with Mr. Josiah Stenton at five minutes after the hour, this tardiness being due to the Senator’s passion for hansom cabs.

“There is nothing much to do,” said Bart, taking a cigar from a box on the table, “except to confirm everything I have done, pass me a vote of thanks, and vote me a bonus.”

Mr. Stenton, who was not greatly gifted in the matter of humour, would have proposed a resolution to that effect then and there, oblivious to the restriction which articles of association place upon a director’s generosity, but the grey old Senator wrinkled his nose forbiddingly.

“You’re getting quite a financier, Bart,” he said dryly. “You’ll be running us all out of this business and dividing your profits between your two pockets. How is the play?”

Bart blew a ring of smoke.

“From time to time I am the recipient of cheques grossly inadequate, remembering that I am doing nothing to earn ’em,” he said. “I never knew there was

so much money in amusements. Gromberg must have made a fortune.”

“I hope he’s treating you right, Mr. Foreman,” Stenton asked anxiously. “It’s one of the most wonderful plays in London—I’ve seen it six times.”

“I’ve seen it once,” reflected the Senator, “a fair play with one stroke of genius in the last act—I suppose the whole thing was written round that unexpected arrival of the messenger?”

Bart shook his head.

“I put that in during the last rehearsals,” he said shortly.

He did not wish to think about those rehearsals. They represented a period which he would willingly have excised from his memory.

The Senator was looking at him curiously.

“All your money-making ideas seem to have occurred at the last minute—the improvements to the boat were afterthoughts,” he said. “What’s the dope?”

“Sanity,” said Bart, with an airy wave of his hand—“a sudden and profitable lapse to reason.”

There was half an hour’s work to be got through, and at the end of that time the Senator went away to keep an appointment, leaving Mr. Stenton.

“I wanted to see you alone,” said he mysteriously, “if you don’t mind givin’ me your advice, Mr. Foreman.”

“My advice will lead you to the devil,” replied Bart, twisting his chair round to face the other. “Yet I can do no less than give it to you.”

“It’s about some property of mine,” said Mr. Stenton. “I’ve got three blocks of model dwellings down Deptford way. Never brought in much profit an’ what with bad tenants an’ bad management, a blooming nuisance. I’ve had an offer for ’em.”

“Take it, my dear chap,” said Bart. “House property is a bad investment in these days. Do they offer a reasonable sum?”

Mr. Stenton nodded.

“But I don’t like the purchasers,” he said, shaking his head. “Figgett & Goodly—they’re a bit shady.”

“Figgett & Goodly?” repeated Bart with a frown. “And are they acting for undisclosed principals?”

Again Mr. Stenton nodded.

“What do they offer?” he asked.

“Twelve thousand five hundred,” was the reply. “You see, it’s rather a mix-up. I’m not known as the owner of the property. It belongs to a little syndicate—but I’m the syndicate.”

“Your name doesn’t appear,” said Bart. “That explains everything. I thought it

was rum that they should go to you. My advice is sell—but insist upon the money being paid in bank-notes. I’ve a reason for suggesting this,” he smiled, “and I shall have some reason for asking you to keep the numbers of all the notes for my information.”

Mr. Stenton looked at him wonderingly, eagerly.

“It ain’t a crime, is it?”

It was the stout little man’s ambition in life to figure in a great criminal trial—on the side of law and order. Such day-dreams as were his had to do with his remarkable success in the hands of cross-examining counsel. Then he would picture himself calm and unflustered before a baffled K.C., or moving a despairing Simon to tears of chagrin. He could, in his mind’s eye, read in the evening newspapers the staccato record of his triumph.

“You say you know the prisoner?”

“Yes.”

“And you once trusted him with £10,000?”

“Yes.”

“Now tell the court why, since you trust him with such an amount, you refused him the loan of £50.”

“Because I knew him.” (Laughter.)

Not once but a hundred times had Mr. Stenton visualized himself with one elbow leaning gracefully on the ledge of the box, the other hand toying carelessly with a pair of pince-nez. He did not wear pince-nez but he felt that for such an occasion he might adopt them, since all the best authorities agreed that the main embarrassment from which a man suffered on such public occasions was the difficulty of controlling his hands.

“Well,” smiled Bart cautiously, “that depends—anyway will you do this for me if you sell?”

“Sure,” said Mr. Stenton, who had not spent three months in association with an American Senator without acquiring a strong transatlantic accent and a plentiful sprinkling of American idioms.

CHAPTER II

AGATHA was obviously nervous. Fay noticed this as soon as they met. Harold was subdued too. He had lost something of his appalling self-confidence and was timidly watchful of his wife and anxious to anticipate her desires. Her nervousness took the form of extreme volubility. Nice—Monte Carlo—the beauties of the Grand Corniche—Naples—Florence—Monticattini—she rattled on about their separate and individual glories, employing her four superlatives “loveliest,” “most wonderful,” “exquisite,” and “most divine” without discrimination. Fay watched her with unusual interest.

Agatha had lost something of her fineness. Harold had been most generous in his gifts, and her fingers sparkled with big stoned rings. There was too, at her neck, a diamond brooch which Fay thought was not in the best of taste. There was an extraordinary change in her, an indefinable loss of something. Her beauty had cheapened, and she was without the reserve of manner which had served her so well in the days before her marriage.

She was a little rude to Harold, and he seemed in some fear of her. Decidedly marriage had not improved her.

“And how is guardian?” she asked jerkily. “We heard about his play, and Harold read that his boat has been approved by the French Government, and its adoption is to be made compulsory on all passenger-carrying steamers.”

“I am hardly in a position to tell you about that,” said Fay, busying herself with the tea-things. “I know that it has been very favourably reported on.”

“I always had faith in his schemes,” Agatha went on. “Sooner or later I knew that they would bear fruit.”

There was a hint of patronage in her tone which irritated Fay—she had already winced at the amused tone in which Agatha had employed the word “guardian.”

“He had faith at any rate,” she said, “and as soon as he confined his faith to inanimate things he proved their worth.”

“He’s a good chap,” broke in Harold, “rather flighty—but good. George Waterson tells me he is making a lot of money.”

Again Fay experienced an unaccountable spasm of anger. How dare these people sit in judgment and pronounce their views on Bart—Bart who had more brains in his little finger than the whole of them together. Somehow Harold seemed insufferable to her. The charity which had for so many years enabled her to look leniently upon her old friend and excuse his gaucheries was suddenly and unaccountably exhausted.

It was hateful of George Waterson to discuss Bart with that air of tolerant amusement which she felt sure he had adopted.

“Bart will be a very rich man,” she said shortly.

“I suppose so.” Agatha was thinking, and her voice betrayed a momentary abstraction. She wanted to see Bart—and yet feared to meet the reproach of those blue eyes of his.

Bart was the figure which loomed largest in her life. Strange it was to her, having no illusions about her own shortcomings, that she, shallow and selfish and wholly calculating, should nourish in the hard and stony soil of her heart so tender a plant as grew there in solitude and darkness.

That she, desiring most material things, had found no sedative in the bodily and mental comfort which affluence brought, for the ache which throbbed and throbbed everlastingly. All the beauties of southern lands could not obliterate the vision of him.

She told herself that she was naturally or chronically discontented, and that the need of him was only symptomatic of her desire for the unattainable. She dreamed fierce dreams of a swift flight from the dull man with whom she had mated herself for life. But she shrank from this. There were “people” who would “say” things, a disgrace to be faced. The spirit was willing, but between her and the man she loved was the upturned, gaping crowd of nobodies whose opinions of her were at once precious and appalling.

It was strange to be back again in his house—in this room, unchanged in its appearance from the day she had interviewed Fay. It seemed to her monstrous that the upheaval in her own life should not be reflected in some way. The big drawing-room with its white panelling, its soft-hued carpet and satinwood furniture, was as she had left it four months ago. The sight of its quiet comfort wiped out all the intervening days and nights, swept Harold and his heavy adoration from existence, and brought her back to the compass and sanctuary of Bart’s strong arms.

How much of her thoughts Fay could divine, she could not guess, but she became panic-stricken as she saw the other woman’s eyes fixed upon her; it was as though she had been speaking her mind aloud.

“What does Bartholomew find amusing in these days?” she drawled. Here was a question which she had intended putting with greater subtlety. A vital question to her. Had Bart transferred his affections elsewhere? He was erratic; she had never been wholly sure of him; but now she waited breathlessly for an answer.

“He has his work,” said Fay, and stopped, for Bart was standing in the doorway.

Agatha saw him too, and went hot and cold. Her heart almost stopped beating as he strolled across the room and offered his hand.

“Had a good time?” he asked, without any evidence of emotion.

CHAPTER III

HERE he was back again, in the circle of her life—unchanged. Unchanged? Had there been any grey in his hair before? she wondered. She could not remember. There was grey now—just the fine dust in the hair about his temples. The tiny lines under his eyes she had seen when he was very tired. Perhaps he was tired now. She hoped—she hoped he wasn't. Forgetful of all the caution which convention enjoined, forgetful of that tremendous fact that she was in the presence of the two people who must at all costs be kept in ignorance of her feelings, she fixed her eyes upon his face and did not withdraw them.

He saw her changed enough. Scrutinized her with greater calm than had Fay.

So this was Agatha—the new Agatha emerged from the furnace of his idyllism and his torment, an ordinary pretty woman with something wistful in her eyes and the mark of wear upon her face.

Harold did not see any change in him, and was conscious of no difference till he spoke. Then he came against a new force. The insouciant, insolently amusing Bart he knew. The company-promoting, stock-buying Bart was a stranger.

"They tell me you are minting money," said Harold jovially. "I shall have to beg a directorship."

"Thank you," said Bart significantly, "but I would much rather continue to mint money."

"He thinks I'm a fraud," the other man appealed to Fay in comic despair; "old Bart has never forgiven me for refusing to come into that black-lead business of his."

"Blacking," corrected Bart. "We have just taken a factory in Bermondsey—and you probably lost a lot of money by your refusal."

Harold raised his hands in mock amazement.

"You're a marvel, my boy," he said wonderingly, "a regular king what's-his-name—Midas, yes, that is the word. Everything you touch turns to gold."

"Tell me all you've been doing." Bart settled himself in a chair and took a cup of tea from Fay's hands with a little smile of thanks. "Begin at the very beginning and go right through the grisly story, where you were married, where you went to, and how you saw life through the rosiest of glasses."

Agatha got up from her chair and consulted her jewelled watch ostentatiously.

"I'm afraid we must go," she said, and held out her hand to her hostess. "We hope to see you in Park Lane," this comprehensively to Fay and Bart alike.

"I rather like Park Lane," said Bart thoughtfully; "it is somewhere near the tube, isn't it?"

Fay went to see them out, and Bart finished his tea at leisure. Presently the girl returned.

“Well?” she asked.

He looked up at her.

“Why ‘well’?”

“I was wondering what you thought of her—she has changed, it seemed to me.”

“Marriage does change people,” reflected Bart tritely; “but somehow I knew she was changed long before I saw her: she changed very suddenly to me. That is one of the advantages of possessing a vivid imagination,” he added smilingly.

“What do you think?” she persisted. Her dark eyes surveyed him gravely. She was wearing a grey dress, and grey suited her, even as it harmonized with the neutral tints of the room. It showed the splendid contours of her figure, and emphasized the clear softness of her skin.

“I think she is a very charming woman,” he said, and went on: “You made a good match there, Fay.”

She winced a little at the suspected scorn in his voice.

“I didn’t try to make a good match,” she said.

It was the first time they had referred to Agatha since the afternoon when she had broken the news of the marriage.

“I know,” he nodded. “You arranged it to do me a shot in the eye,” his smile was without malice, “and you succeeded, my dear child, beyond your wildest dreams. You ought to be a very happy woman.”

“Happy!” She flung the word at him disdainfully.

“Happy,” he repeated tranquilly. “You married off your Harold and my Agatha, you did me, as I say, a shot in the eye. What more do you want to make you happy?”

“There are many things a woman wants,” she said, half to herself. “She wants the—the respect of people—and their friendship.”

He laughed, not unkindly.

“I respect you very much. You are going abroad next week with no other chaperon than Alma Roche—I respect you so much that I do not ask you for any details of your plans,” he said. “I know you have all good qualities and most of the virtues. As to friendship,” he reflected, “that is a relative term which means anything you want it to mean. But it must mean the same to both parties to the contract. It will never mean the same to you and me.”

He looked her squarely in the face.

“I would like you to be happy, Fay,” he said, “and if you can find a means of

shortening the period of trial, and if that will supply happiness, you are welcome. I rather fancy Waterson could arrange a finish to my most incongruous guardianship without trouble.”

He had hurt her and he knew, but somehow the knowledge of her pain did not cause him any discomfort.

“I do not want that,” she said in a low voice. “You aren’t very sympathetic with me, Bart. The arrangement was grotesque, and I have been rather a pig, I know. I thought it was rather grand to patronize a man, and a clever man. You are punishing me for my ignorance.”

He shook his head.

“I have been punishing myself for your ignorance so long that perhaps I have inadvertently transferred some of my burden to you—I didn’t mean to,” he said gently. “You mustn’t deceive yourself about me—you don’t like me really; you are getting used to me. Why, if you’re not careful you’ll think you’re in love with me—there is a kind of love, the love which develops from propinquity and toleration. We must go our own ways. I have a lot of work to do, and a lot of arrears to make up—and a lot of old scores to pay.”

She saw his eyelids narrow and his lips tighten, and was startled. She had never seen him like this before. He was a new Bart, a little terrible to her.

“I—I suppose—you’ve a score to settle with me?” she asked jerkily.

Once before he had seen her standing there with her hands clasped behind her, and the memory supplied an explanation to her question.

“I have settled with you,” he said simply. “I have placed you in the category of people who hurt.”

“Bart!”

He nodded grimly.

“You know that I loved Agatha—not the Agatha that you knew or that she herself knew—but a dream Agatha that I conjured out of all the agglomerate goodness of women. And when for your sport you cut her out of my life, I went right through the very heart of hell.”

His voice shook a little.

“I suffered as, please God, you will never suffer. I pictured every maddening aspect of the marriage that imagination could bring to my eyes; I prayed God to kill me—and would have killed myself, but I was too much of a coward. For two months I fought with all the devilish forces of hate and jealousy, and I lifted myself out of the wreck by promising myself that some day I would make those who hurt me feel as I had felt.”

“You mean——?” she was white and shaking.

“I mean you hurt me once,” he said with his smile. “You and some of your friends, that is all.”

CHAPTER IV

OF late Mr. Stenton had changed his habitation from the suite in the Terminus Hotel which had sheltered him for so many years to a most pretentious flat in Whitehall Place. The change was a startling one for Mr. Stenton, and for some time an unhappy one. He was used to the Great Derbyshire with its Gothic archways, the church-like character of its doors and furnishing and its unintentionally comic wallpapers. He was used to the funereal gloom of an hotel especially designed to house god-fearing Scottish passengers and give the lie to the charge of gaiety which mistaken provincials have been known to level at the metropolis.

Outwardly it had an appearance which suggests that, though the design was intended originally for a cathedral, the architect was not averse from its being confounded with a city hall. It was built at the same time and as part of the railway station, a fact which relieved its designer of a great deal of responsibility, since that section of the wilderness which was derided as a station might be described as hotel, and all that was unlovely as hotel might be excused as being a portion of the station.

Mr. Stenton loved the great Derbyshire Hotel, and to him "home" signified the gloomy oaken doors which gave admission to his suite.

Whitehall Place was bright and airy, and comparatively sinful. It was full of new-fangled electric push-buttons and had lights concealed in its cornices. It offered encouragement to a man to toast his bread on the very table at which he sat by means of cunning electric toasters. Mr. Stenton was quite prepared to learn that by pushing a switch the room could be converted into an aeroplane.

The changed address had been insisted upon by Bart, who, paying an unusual visit to his friend, had been staggered by the meagreness of his life. Mr. Stenton was now getting used to what he described secretly to himself as "masher rooms"—for he had been at the most receptive period of his life in the eighties, and had never acquired a taste for modern slang.

More than this, he was growing to like his novel environment, to take a pride in its very complexity. At no time did he realize how absolutely necessary the change had been more than on the night following the board meeting, when he found himself called upon to entertain Mr. Harold Tirrell, a public character, a Member of Parliament and reputedly the best-dressed man in the House. Mr. Tirrell was self-invited. He knew Josiah Stenton slightly, for he had met him at Bartholomew's house.

Mr. Tirrell had not honoured him with any particular mark of attention, because Josiah did not look important. Later he was to learn that Mr. Stenton was not

without attractiveness, and in this he was assisted by the transference from the Great Derbyshire Hotel to Whitehall Court.

Mr. Stenton had a valet whom he invariably referred to as "my lad," and Caine (for such was his ominous name) had arranged a dinner which left his employer a little breathless, but which did no more than excite the murmured commendation of Harold and his companion. For at the last moment he had telephoned to ask whether he might bring a friend, "Mr. George Waterson—who is a friend of the Foremans."

Josiah Stenton ate nervously through the unaccustomed magnificence of a seven-course dinner, displaying visible apprehension as to the quality of each dish and its suitability to the taste of his guests.

He came to the coffee and old brandy stage with relief, and the tension which had prevented his taking an undivided interest in the bank rate, the engineer's report on the East Rand Mines and the generally unwholesome condition of the Kaffir market, was pleasantly relaxed.

"I don't go in for speculating," he apologized, "I've got most of my money in gilt-edged . . . you know?"

"You should invest a little in loans," said Mr. Waterson in that cultivated voice of his; "it is a most remunerative form of investment—for instance, take a client who has had a property offered to him. There are many reasons why he should not disturb his capital though he has a purchaser for the property—an immediate purchaser. He will borrow the money at, say, two per cent. for a month, buy—re-sell—repay the loan with two hundred pounds interest—make his profit—and there you are."

"It doesn't seem much of a profit to the lender," interposed Harold, drawing at his cigar, "but it is so absolutely safe, and twenty-four per cent. per annum is a splendid return."

Mr. Stenton was interested. He showed that interest by the eagerness with which he pursued the subject. What security would be offered? He was rather bored with the placidity of his five per cent. investment, and his adventurous soul, spurred thereto by the handsome profits which Bart's enterprises had returned to him, sought fields of financial daring, where a stolid man of business might experience all the thrill of speculation with none of its attendant disasters.

George Waterson had the client; Harold Tirrell, M.P., could vouch for his solidity; and Waterson, himself secretary and director of Investment Corporations, would negotiate the loan.

"We might have borrowed twenty thousand as easily," said Harold as he drove back to Park Lane that night.

“We may want to yet,” answered George Waterson shortly; “have you any news about Domousky?”

“They’re boring,” said Harold.

They drove without another word till the car stopped at the Park Lane house.

“I’ll go on to the city if you don’t mind,” said Waterson, declining the invitation of the other to come in. “I want to lock this cheque in the safe, and I have a letter to write to Fay Milton.”

“Did she——?”

Waterson shook his head.

“I thought she would come into the oil proposition, but she backed out—we’re taking a risk, Tirrell.”

“Pshaw!” scoffed the florid man jovially. “There’s oil there; it means enormous profits.”

He stood on the pavement, one foot on the step of the car, his elbow resting on the sash of the open door.

“We took risks with Bantjes Deep—but they turned out trumps. There is always a technical risk,” he went on lightly, “when one is speculating with a company’s money for one’s own profit, but you have a free hand, and the arrangements are so favourable that you can show the investment as being made on behalf of the company if things went wrong.”

George Waterson said nothing.

“Besides,” continued the optimistic Mr. Tirrell, “there’s a big profit looming immediately ahead—that will cover any deficiency the oil deal might show.”

“Tell him to go on to Lothbury,” said George abruptly. Mr. Tirrell walked up to his front door, a smile upon his cheerful face.

“Old George is getting rattled,” was his mental criticism of his friend’s misgivings.

Mr. Tirrell had plenty to occupy his mind that night and the next day. The cheque Josiah Stenton had given to George Waterson was an open one, there was an excellent reason why it should not be passed through a bank. George Waterson had a horror of “irregularities”—that is to say, unnecessary irregularities. He had drawn his ten thousand and had supplemented this with a further two thousand five hundred, when he remembered that Stenton might reasonably be expected to mention the loan to Bart. Here was a matter for cogitation. Yet there was no reason to suppose that Bart would associate a fairly commonplace transaction, one which occurred every day in the City of London, with any negotiation which George in his private or unofficial capacity might be engaged in carrying through.

Whatever doubts he might have had upon the subject were not echoed or

duplicated by Mr. Tirrell, who dismissed matters from his mind just as soon as the sum had been placed in the hands of his solicitors.

CHAPTER V

HAROLD TIRRELL lived in Park Lane, it is true, but to say more would be an exaggeration. If 971, Park Lane were lifted bodily and transported into the suburbs of, say, Lewisham, its blatant inadequacy would excite the derision of every knowledgeable housewife. It would be voted "poky," and its ten-by-twelve bedrooms, its fifteen-by-twelve drawing-room, its narrow hall and tortuous stairway would be all that was undesirable in accommodation. That it possessed three storeys did not add to its dignity, but rather emphasized its skimpiness. It was sandwiched between the palatial establishment of Mr. Issy Weltheim and the town house of Lord George Viseash—the latter dwelling sharing the peculiarity of other town houses in that it had the appearance of never being occupied.

You might easily miss 971, Park Lane, overshadowed and eclipsed as it was by its bloated neighbours—but the fact remains that it was in Park Lane, that stationery embossed with the legend might be dispatched from its twelve-by-ten library, and that post-cards and letters addressed thither were duly delivered by the persevering servants of the Postmaster-General, though site and habitation seemed to offer little more space than could be occupied by a telephone number.

It was necessary for Mr. Harold Tirrell that he should possess an address of this description. "Come and see me in Park Lane" might mean that all the other inhabitants of that thoroughfare were living there on sufferance, and that exclusiveness was centred at 971, and radiated outward.

He was a rich man—one of those rich men who are so common in the City of London.

About him it was said that nobody knew how much he was worth and that, in all probability, he did not know himself. In this latter respect the gossips were wrong. Mr. Tirrell had no doubt whatever as to his financial position. It cost him exactly four thousand a year to make four thousand. His stock-in-trade was his extensive wardrobe, his Park Lane address, his Membership of Parliament and his directorship. The world knew that he spent in the neighbourhood of four thousand and credited him with twelve. Therein, the world was in error, as the world usually is.

Agatha Tirrell was of this world, but she was not as readily deceived. She was, moreover, in an advantageous position, and she had been an inmate of 971 less than a week before she realized very clearly that there was very little difference between living from hand to mouth in Chelsea and living from hand to mouth in Park Lane.

It was a shock to her. She had imagined herself in a very safe financial haven, as indeed she was up to a point, for Harold had exhausted all his reserves for the

provision of her settlement.

Financially she was more secure than ever she had been in her life, but the mere fact that it fell short of her expectations was sufficient to cause her dismay. To add to her chagrin Harold hinted that it would be necessary, for a time at any rate, that she should use a portion of her income in the upkeep of the house, and she saw so plainly that such a course was essential if her life was to be free from housekeeping worries, that she had silently acquiesced.

From the very beginning the Park Lane *ménage* was an unhappy one. Agatha had never loved her husband, and he did not improve on acquaintance. His vanity, his meanness, his lack of scruple, all combined to widen the gulf between them.

As for Harold, he stood in some awe of his wife. She had a sharp and bitter tongue, and after his first encounter with her (it had occurred at Nice on their honeymoon) he had retired from the unequal contest, taking his place as a very definite second in the domestic system.

They sat at dinner, these two people, and since they were blessed by an absence of visitors, the meal had been a simple one.

“That fellow Foreman seems to be making headway,” he ventured, as he folded his napkin. “I can’t quite understand it—a man in the city told me to-day that he had made close on fifty thousand in the last six months.”

Agatha was interested. Money and the incidence of its acquisition were enormously important to her. Somehow in an indefinite way she had secured the impression on her visit to the Foremans that Bart was making money.

“With Fay’s income,” her husband went on, “they ought to launch out a little. I suppose Fay pays her share.”

“Launch out—how?” she asked curiously.

Harold seldom took a disinterested view of his neighbours’ business, and she was curious to learn how he hoped to benefit by their more expensive method of living—for such was the interpretation to be put upon her husband’s words.

He did not answer immediately; then:

“There is a house in Park Lane they might buy,” he said. “I’ve an option——”

“A commission,” she corrected. “You told me that Lord Fenderson wanted you to sell it for him.”

“I like the word option,” he said with a smile. “Not a bad word, old girl, especially amongst decent people. The other looks and sounds tradey, and——”

“You want to sell Mr. Foreman the house,” she interrupted, and he nodded then as a bright thought struck him.

“Look here, dearie—you’re a good friend of his—why don’t you . . . ? You

could help me enormously . . . upon my word, I'd share the commission with you . . .”

She rose, a smile of contempt hovering at the corners of her mouth. Never had he seemed so utterly despicable, so unpardonably common as he did at that moment. It seemed that in that one brief second of time all that was ever desirable in her marriage had disappeared. It was a pitifully slender thread of interest which linked their lives together: now even that had shrivelled and broken, and she stood aloof and apart. . . .

Then Bart came back to her, with his honest eyes and his lofty, quixotic principles, Bart altogether lovable and above the meannesses of life. The consciousness of his spiritual presence caught her breath so that she gasped. Bart was real and big. . . .

She felt a sudden crushing sense of loss. She had never so realized till that moment how firm a foundation she had stood upon in those Chelsea days.

Her husband saw the look in her face, and, dull a man as he was, he understood that some subtle change in their relationship had occurred in that brief time between his speech and her rising.

“Of course I don't want you to——” he began hastily, but she laughed, a hard and a bitter laugh it was that jarred upon the ears even of this insensitive soul.

“What's wrong?” he asked in alarm.

“Everything,” she said, and went out of the room unsteadily.

CHAPTER VI

BARTHOLOMEW FOREMAN was in his newest mood.

He sat at his table, the stem of a pipe between his teeth, and before him was a pad of paper, and behind, the model of a scene in the play he was writing for the Gromberg management.

There was reason for close application. The day before he had interviewed George Waterson, and the meeting had ended unsatisfactorily.

Fay was in Paris, and it was necessary that she should know how matters stood in relation to Southern Properties. He had written two letters and torn them up. In the end he had decided to pay a flying visit to Paris, and if necessary to Geneva (this was her objective). He had left himself three hours to put right the one scene of his new play which dissatisfied him.

He had rewritten the scene twice, and still felt the necessity for touching it up. A year ago, did a manager so much as hint at rewriting, Bart would have taken the manuscript, torn it into as many pieces as the strength of his thumb permitted, and stalked haughtily from the office in which such an outrage had occurred.

He was alone in the house, save for the waiting-maid on duty.

Packer with his staff were at that moment at the theatre approving the work of their master's hand.

Bart wanted quiet and a sense of loneliness for the construction of his new scene. Here again he was a changed man. He had done his best work in a crowd—his work needed the furious stimulant which companionship—even chattering companionship—afforded. Loneliness had first bored, then frightened him; the absence of human companionship had chilled and depressed him. He wanted, at any rate, the knowledge that somebody was near-by to whom he might go, manuscript in hand, for approval or friendly criticism. Now he welcomed utter isolation, and he was in the enjoyment of this state when Agatha was announced.

Bart looked up from his work at Martha, the waiting-maid, and made no reply to her request for instructions for the space of a minute.

“Show the lady in here,” he said at last.

He got up to meet her, half crossed the room with a smile of welcome, but it was no warmer, no more cordial, had no greater significance, than such a smile as he might have bestowed upon any other visitor who had the right to intrude upon his labours.

He pulled a chair forward, a deep, drowsy chair, but Agatha was content to sit upon the arm. She wore one of those vague, colourless dresses which was neither

black nor grey, and she was admirably suited. Her face was a thought more ethereal than he had known it, the hands from which she slowly slipped her gloves, watching him the while, were white and delicate, and viewing them you could do no less than conceive in their owner a fragility which called for considerate and tender treatment.

They lied, those hands of Agatha's, most outrageously. None knew this better than Bart, who was a subconscious storer of fact, though he might wilfully pull down the blinds of his storehouse lest he be influenced by the wisdom he had acquired.

"And what brings you to us on this fine evening?" asked Bart with a little smile.

"Inclination," she said laconically.

He waited, very sure of himself, no less sure of her, and the object of her visit.

"I have been worrying about you," she went on slowly, "and about—how you feel toward me."

He leant back against the padded rail of his desk-chair, his hands lightly clasped upon his crossed knees, and looked down at her, the ghost of good and tolerant humour in his face.

"How do you imagine I feel? You think I am hurt—or indifferent?"

She nodded.

"If I am indifferent you should be a happy woman. Let us go straight to the heart of things, Agatha. You deserted me for another man—that is putting it brutally. But you were mine as assuredly as though we had gone through the formality of a marriage ceremony. It wasn't an engagement—it was a covenant. You were mine so assuredly that I depended on you, and when you exercised your legal right of marriage to somebody else, you were guilty of as gross a piece of immorality as any errant wife might be in accepting a lover. Worse than this, you left a man you liked for a man you held in contempt, because you thought you would secure material advantage. There is an ugly word for a woman who does that. When people talk lightly of broken hearts, they have little conception of what anguish lies behind that glib phrase. I have been . . . in great pain, let me say—I will avoid superlatives—because you left me. I had to recover or die. I have recovered."

Her shaking fingers were playing with a sprawling ribbon from her waist, her eyes were downcast, and they did not come up to meet his, even when she spoke.

"I had my future to think about," she said in a low voice. "You never really asked me—fixed a time or anything—people were talking."

He inclined his head in agreement.

"I do not reproach you—I have exhausted myself in reproach. Nor do I blame myself—I have exhausted even my capacity for self-condemnation. It was as inevitable that a woman like you should seek a safe haven at all costs—save at cost

to yourself—as it was that I should suffer. Neither of us has been very noble—we were trapped by fate and temperament. Let us pass the blame to other shoulders; it is more comforting!”

“You don’t care now?”

It was half a question, half an assertion, with a note of pathetic helplessness which hinted at tragedy.

“I am living in the future,” he said.

“And I also.” She raised her eyes to his, eyes unusually bright and tender. “I have to choose now; I have been lured by the beauties of the kaleidoscope—I am seeing the shoddy pieces of coloured glass which went to make the pattern. I am leaving Harold Tirrell.”

She jerked out the last sentence, and a long silence followed.

“What are you going to do?” he asked quietly.

“Go back—to Chelsea.”

Their eyes met. In hers an appeal and a challenge, in his no more than the calm interest of one who saw an experiment in the course of evolution.

“Are you . . . well off?”

She shook her head.

“No better than I was financially,” she said, “a great deal worse off spiritually. I have a settlement which I shall renounce. I must do the best I can.”

She rose from the chair and began an idle perambulation of the room, stopping now and then as a picture or a book arrested her eye to offer cursory examination of the object. Bart watched her thoughtfully, his clasped hands at his chin, his head bent forward.

Presently she came back and stood by the side of the desk looking down at him.

“What a mess one makes of things, doesn’t one?” she asked, and laughed.

“One does.”

“And two do also,” she smiled. “Who was the Persian poet with the funny name—Rubaiyat or somebody—you were always quoting him: ‘The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on,’ et cetera.”

He did not answer her. A cautious man sits tight when a woman quotes poetry—even the poetry of FitzGerald. All he knew was that she was very beautiful, and that the subtle perfume which she affected might justify a momentary intoxication.

She came nearer to him and bent down, resting one elbow on the desk, so that there was no more than a foot of space between their faces.

“What do you do,” she asked softly, “when you find that you have made a mistake in one of your plays—do you . . . ‘try back’?”

"I start afresh in these days," he said quietly. "I tear up the old play and begin a new one."

"Is there nothing . . . of the old material you can find use for?" she persisted.

"Nothing." His voice sounded a little hard to her. "The old material too often dominates the new: it is too insidious to be admitted to the society of the fresher and . . . purer thought. The old material had its chance and would not fit. So out it goes."

She did not move. Her glorious eyes searched him earnestly.

"All that a woman could give—I was prepared to give," she breathed. "All—all!"

"Save loyalty—save faith."

He got up abruptly.

"Agatha, there is a crevasse between you and me which nothing can bridge: you cannot produce an earthquake and leave the landscape unchanged. All manner of cracks and fissures appear, all kinds of barriers are raised. The earthquake has left us on little isolated patches of ground. Had you loved me as I loved you, the earthquake might have come, would have come indeed; but it would have passed, leaving us isolated—but together. I am not blaming you—you were not the woman I thought you were. You haven't the capacity for the measure I gave you. Love implies something else than an automatic marriage and an automatic family, something more wonderful than ecstasy—it is a wearing, enduring, suffering thing."

She was breathing quickly: he saw the quick rise and fall of her bosom, and the parted lips and the eyes filled with hot tears, and was instantly sympathetic.

"Let us go our ways," he said gently. "If you cannot live with this man, return to Chelsea—the house is yours. If you will allow me I will take your finances in hand _____"

"I wish to God we'd been more than we were!" she burst forth in fierce sobbing abandon. "Oh, Bart! I wish we had! I wish I'd died before I married him. Oh, Bart, Bart!"

She came stumbling blindly toward him, and he caught her in his arms, and she sobbed herself to silence on his shoulder.

CHAPTER VII

PARIS was strangely intolerable to Fay Milton. The frantic hustle of the Champs Elysées, not less than such seclusion as she could find in the Bois, were alike a bore. Her journey's end was Geneva, and her suite was already booked at one of the great hotels which overlooked the lake, yet the very thought of the Gare de Lyons filled her with resentment.

She had arranged a holiday which would keep her out of England a month at the least, and scarcely two days of the month had passed and she was thinking out excuses to return to London.

Why, she could not understand, or, if she understood, refused to admit even to herself. All that she knew was that Paris was a selfish city where everybody was absorbed in his or her own business, and that she felt horribly lonely and that it was awful to feel that nobody in the world cared for one. She wondered why nobody had ever wanted to marry her. Only two impossible people, one of whom Bart had kicked from the house. She supposed she was hard, and really she had never seriously contemplated marriage. Then it came to her that she was a very unhappy woman. Not that she really wanted anybody's love—not Bart's certainly, she told herself quickly. She admired him immensely, she could in the old days afford to patronize him. It had been impossible lately to extend even the mildest form of patronage. Somehow the effort froze in the face of his growing superiority.

Bart! She laughed quietly at the thought. And yet she supposed lots of people, romantic people, thought it possible that Bart and she might marry.

She felt old and vinegary, though heads were turned at the gracious figure that took its walk abroad on the Avenue des Champs Elysées, and susceptible Frenchmen shot soulful glances under the turned brim of her hat.

With a long sigh, checked and let loose again to its natural end, she turned and went slowly back to the Place de la Concorde, crossed to the leafy Avenue, and made a pensive way back to her hotel.

There was a letter waiting for her; she looked at the superscription eagerly, and her face fell. For no reason at all she expected a letter from Bartholomew, but it was the precise handwriting of George Waterson which met her eye. The letter was marked "Private" and was sealed. She frowned as she tore open the package. Why these precautions? The first paragraph of the clearly written epistle told her.

"DEAR MISS MILTON,—

"I want you to treat this as confidential—the subject I am dealing with

is rather a delicate one. I had a visit from Mr. Foreman to-day, and without any preliminary he informed me that he understood that the directors of City Properties did not intend declaring a dividend this half year, and he demanded an explanation. It appears that he has come into possession of a number of shares (he registered the transfers on the occasion of this visit) and was entitled to know.

“It is an unfortunate fact that, owing to the absorption of our profits through large purchases of Domousky Oil Field Shares, a field which, as you may know, has proved a failure, we are forced to take the unusual course of holding up the dividend, though this need not alarm you. We have a surplus in hand which will be employed in the purchase of a large block of workmen’s flats in South London. The cost of these to the Company is something like £30,000, but we are satisfied that the purchase is a good one. We might not have concluded the deal in face of the Domousky losses, but we were virtually bound by agreement to Messrs. Figgitt & Goodly to take up our option. As you are the largest shareholder in Southern Properties, it is right that you should know; but I feel that I was interpreting your views when I informed Mr. Foreman that you were content to leave your interests in my hands. . . .”

The letter concluded with a polite hope that she was securing the very best weather for her holiday, and that she would continue in the possession of good and abundant health.

Fay read the letter again. It troubled her a little, for, although George Waterson had spoken the truth when he said that she was satisfied to leave the management of her affairs in his hands, she had an uncomfortable feeling that she had not been told everything, that something was being kept from her.

She was in Paris with Alma Roche, and Alma’s passion for Lafayette, the Louvre and Au Printemps, was in many ways a blessing. Somehow Alma, with her frank face and her scrappy costumes, was less amusing than she had been: her second-hand news, despite the quaint air of confidence with which it was retailed, was boring. Fay went to her sitting-room to think out this disquieting problem which George Waterson had presented. The loss of the dividend would not inconvenience her: she had a substantial sum with her bankers, and other investments, though these latter were insignificant compared with her holdings in Southern Properties.

Alma came bustling in before Fay Milton had decided exactly what step she should take. Alma had a maddening trick of maintaining a running commentary on

her actions as she performed them.

“Here I am, you see,” she said, as she exploded into the room, maintaining a frantic grip on twice as many brown-paper parcels as any one human being could reasonably hope to carry with dignity. “I’m simply worn out, my dear; ring for a cup of tea, Fay, will you, like an angel? I shall have to sort these out; I’ll put this one here, and I’ll put these three over here on the settee and—bless my heart, look at my hair! Have I been going about Paris——”

Fay cut short the flow of oratory by holding out the letter.

Alma took it in her hand.

“A letter from George Waterson,” she commented unnecessarily, as she proceeded. “Wants you to treat this as confidential. . . . Bart has been . . . really.” She looked up with her pained but tolerant smile. “I think Bart would be wise to let George manage his own affairs my dear.”

“Go on with the letter.” Alma glanced quickly at the girl, for she was unusually serious.

“. . . come into possession of a number of shares . . . entitled to know,” she read the extracts aloud, intoning the phrases in her low, booming voice. “Unfortunate fact. . . .”

She stopped and her face fell. Her meagre capital was invested in Southern Properties, and the loss of a half year’s dividend was a serious matter for her. Thereafter she read in silence, and when she had come to the end she handed it back.

“That is very awkward,” she said uneasily; “it is *very* awkward . . . for me, I mean. You don’t think that Bart’s putting his spoke in. . . .”

Fay’s face flushed pink with sudden wrath.

“For heaven’s sake leave Bart out of it,” she cried testily; “and do please remember, Alma, that I have the strongest aversion from your crediting Bart with all kinds of folly. . . . You forget that he is my—my very good friend, and that I have asked you not to speak unkindly of him.”

Then, ashamed of the outburst, and remembering how serious this stoppage of dividends was to the girl, she went on more mildly:

“You’re not to worry about this, Alma—I know enough of companies to understand these happenings are inevitable. I can help you over the half year without any difficulty, but it *is* a nuisance.”

“It has upset all my plans,” said Alma dismally. “I never expected anything like this—I hardly know what to do.” She sat down heavily in an arm-chair, suddenly conscious of an unaccountable weakness.

“It is really nothing to distress yourself about,” smiled Fay. “We could——” A bright light came to her, and with a sudden exhilaration and a lightening of heart as though a heavy weight had been removed, she cried gleefully: “We’ll go back to London!”

“When?” asked the startled Alma.

“To-morrow morning—I’ll wire George Waterson to meet us: we can leave our things here and come back the same night.”

It seemed a mad scheme to Alma, savouring of the Bart influence, but it would be comforting to receive Mr. Waterson’s personal reassurances. As for Fay, she regarded the excursion somewhat in the light of an adventure. She would have had the satisfaction of doing that which she most wanted to do, and for which she had had no excuse. She desired London and all that London contained. The homeliness of it; the companionship of familiar things . . . and Bart. She liked Bart, viewed him with a new-born respect.

She admired the qualities which had won him his surprising success—she employed the adjective advisedly, for no one was more surprised than she at his sudden spurt to affluence and fame. She would not see him—he would in all probability be engaged at the theatre on his new play, but somehow the prospect of his being around was pleasing . . . she might even write him a note, posting it in London before she went back to Paris.

It might pique him, too, that she had been in London, and had not bothered to so much as ring him up. At least she hoped he would be piqued, for Bart’s indifference was still a wounding factor in life, and she would not have been human if she had not wished to repay him in kind.

She arrived in London at five o’clock on the following evening, and George was at Charing Cross to meet her.

A fellow director in Harold Tirrell was with him, and the cheerfulness of the two men went far to restore the confidence of Alma Roche. She had seen her income vanish between Paris and Amiens, had filled in the remainder of the journey to Calais with a picture of herself acting as nursery governess, and had occupied the crossing and the final stage of the journey with picturesque views of herself in the direst straits.

They dined early at the Clarion Grill, a cheery little party.

“Do you think we were very, very foolish to come flying over?” asked Fay.

“No—I suppose Mr. Foreman’s account of the position was rather an alarming one,” said George languidly. “Of course, I opposed the audit he suggested—it is much too irregular a proceeding.”

“Bart? He told me nothing,” said Fay.

Mr. Waterson’s eyebrows rose.

“Told you nothing? Then I did him an injustice.”

But she was looking at him with serious eyes.

“I don’t understand—about the audit,” she said slowly. “Exactly why did Bart ask for this, and what is the objection?”

“The objection is obvious, Miss Milton,” Harold broke in. (Why had they both given up calling her “Fay,” she wondered.) “To call in the auditors at this moment, three months before the annual audit is due, would have a prejudicial effect upon the company. It would be immediately known all over the city, for our clerks would talk, and people would suspect something was wrong—it would be most damaging to the credit of Southern Properties.”

“But Bart knew that,” she insisted, “and I am sure he would never ask you to take any action which was likely to injure me. What do the other directors say?”

If George Waterson ever smiled, this was a moment when he had every excuse for indulging himself. There certainly were two other directors; but they were his own nominees. As Fay Milton’s agent he controlled the board.

“They agree with me,” he said gravely. “As for Mr. Foreman, I really do not know what his object was. You will remember that this is not the first time he has reflected upon the methods of the company. I don’t think we need go too closely into his reasons.”

There was the old contempt for Bart and Bart’s point of view in his tone, and Fay resented it. She grew suddenly obstinate and critical, and when Alma and Harold Tirrell endeavoured to draw the conversation into less urgent grooves, she steadfastly refused to second their efforts.

“I think we ought to have this matter settled definitely and finally,” she said with a determined tilt of her chin. She looked at her watch. “Bart may be at home—we will go along and see him.”

George Waterson made a little grimace.

“Really, Miss Milton,” he murmured protestingly, “is it worth while?”

“It is very much worth while,” she answered with decision. “You need not come, Alma. . . . I will meet you at Charing Cross and you will be able to collect your letters.”

Alma had spoken vaguely of visiting her flat for this purpose. She would much rather have accompanied the party to Colholm Gardens, if only to witness Bart’s discomfiture, but the tone which Fay employed did not admit of compromise.

“If you don’t mind I’ll come along too,” said Harold. He had great faith in his

own eloquence and the effect of his own personality upon Bart, or upon any other awkward subject.

His car was waiting, and ten minutes after they had left the grill, Gladys was ringing the bell of 21. She rang twice without securing any response. At that particular moment the one maid in the house was engaged in packing Bart's trunk preparatory to his departure.

Fay searched her little handbag and found a Yale key.

"I don't know what has happened to my household," she smiled, "unless Bart has given them all a holiday. . . . Come into his room."

She walked across the carpeted hall and turned the handle.

"Bart! Bart!" sobbed a voice.

She stood rooted in the open doorway.

Bart stood in the centre of the room, his arms about the weeping woman, her head upon his shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII

S UDDENLY from behind Fay came an inarticulate cry of rage and hate, and Harold Tirrell, his face livid with fury, pushed past her into the room.

“Damn you, Foreman! What does this mean?”

Bart put Agatha from him gently, and faced the intruders. He saw Waterson, and for the first time within memory the lawyer was smiling. He saw the white face of Fay and addressed himself to her.

“Mrs. Tirrell is rather upset. I wish you would look after her.”

The coolness of the request took the girl’s breath away, yet it was not bravado on his part. For a moment their eyes met; she had just that second of time to arrange her life. She must trust him now or range herself with his enemies. She must accept any explanation he offered or believe the overwhelming evidence of her eyes . . . she crossed the room to Agatha.

“You’re not going to bull-doze me!” stormed Harold, bringing his fist down on the desk. “I can see what this means—I’m not a fool. Waterson, you’re a witness to this! My wife in this man’s arms . . . alone in the house!”

“Sit down and shut up!” Bart almost snarled the words.

“Your wife came here because she was in trouble, because we’ve been good friends for years and years . . . because she could trust me to help her——”

Harold’s laugh was loud and bitter.

“What a tale to tell a man of the world!” he scoffed. “You’re not dealing with a fool of a woman now, Foreman—you’re dealing with a man.” He struck his chest with a thump. “A man. . . . You think I’m a fool——”

“In a sense, yes,” admitted the other; “in a sense, no.”

He was coolness itself, and his imperturbability communicated itself to the rest of the party. Rage, and jealous rage, dies hard, yet Harold Tirrell, no great hero, found his wrath cooling.

“You are justified in thinking the worst,” Bart went on calmly, “because you have one of those beastly minds which can think nothing else—you are entitled to know the significance of the somewhat suspicious-looking scene you have witnessed, and I am going to tell you.”

Red-eyed and fearful, Agatha lifted her head and stared at him.

“I am going to tell you,” repeated Bart, as he strolled to his desk and dropped into the chair, “because I think you ought to know.”

“I think, Mr. Foreman”—it was the even, caustic voice of George Waterson which interrupted—“I think you have at any rate managed to temporize long enough

to invent an excellent excuse, but I doubt very much whether you will convince anybody here.”

“That remains to be seen,” replied Bart carelessly. He turned to Harold Tirrell, shaking now from head to foot from the unusual demand upon his emotions. “Your wife came to ask me to save you.”

“Save me . . . ?”

“To save you,” nodded Bart. “Very naturally she does not wish to figure in the world as the wife of a swindling director and the associate of a thieving solicitor who embezzles money entrusted to his care to speculate in shaky oil companies.”

A long silence followed his words. George Waterson, white as death, put out an unsteady hand and caught the top of a chair.

“This is a serious and definite charge,” he said huskily.

Bart nodded.

“I intended it as such. You see, Waterson, you have overstepped the mark. When you and your fellow conspirator went in for a gamble in Bantjes Deep you had the good luck to make a profit. This went into your pockets, and apparently the finances of the Southern Properties were undisturbed. But your oils showed a big loss—you had to take the money from the company to make good. Then you purchased some model dwellings in South London. You paid £12,500 through your catspaws and borrowed the money from Stenton—or a part of it. As Stenton—unfortunately for you—was also the seller, he was able to trace the notes which came back to him. You resold his property to yourselves—as directors of Southern Properties, clearing an illicit profit of £17,500. In fact, you have been guilty of felony, and anything short of five years penal servitude is very unlikely to come your way.”

Fay gazed from one to the other in horror.

There was no mistaking the meaning of Harold Tirrell’s attitude. It seemed to her that he had wilted and shrunken in that moment. As for George Waterson, he stood stiffly like a soldier at attention, his pale face set and expressionless.

“I have been very thorough and very careful in my investigations,” Bart continued. “I have left nothing whatever to chance. I know the number of every share you purchased, both in regard to the Domousky stock and the more ancient matter of Bantjes Deep. It only remains for me now to put the matter in the hands of the police. Your wife,” he addressed Harold, “discovered that I was moving against you, and came to plead for you—that is all.”

“It’s a libel!” muttered Tirrell. “You’ve faked it, Foreman. . . . Do you think a man of my standing and Waterson’s standing—You’ve invented this . . . to save yourself.”

“That is a challenge,” said Bart, and pulled the telephone standard toward him. “If what I say is untrue, there is no harm—except for myself—if I call Scotland Yard and put the right people in possession of the facts.” He lifted the receiver from the hook suggestively. “Shall I call?” he asked.

Again a silence, then:

“No” said Waterson hoarsely. “I want to say——” He went on, but stopped. Then, without a word, he turned on his heel and left the room. They heard the front door slam behind him.

“I think I’ll go,” said Harold in a low voice. “I’m sorry, Foreman.”

“The apology is due to your wife,” said Bart.

Harold turned his swimming eyes upon the woman pleadingly.

“Will you . . . come along?” he asked.

She bowed her head.

“I’d rather go—alone,” she whispered.

Harold’s car still waited outside. Bart saw her into its roomy interior, and returned to his study in time to hear the tail end of an incoherent petition for forgiveness.

They were left alone at last, this ill-assorted ward and guardian, in the dusk of the room. Bart went back to his desk and switched on the light.

“Well?” He looked up at her.

“Bart,” she asked quietly, “was that true?”

“Which?”

“The reason . . . Mrs. Tirrell was here?”

He played with a paper knife, his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the blotting-pad.

“No,” he said at last. “Agatha came to ask for a friendship which I could not give. She wanted to begin all over again, and that was impossible.”

She crossed the room to him and held out her hand.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. “I—I feel like your friend!”

“What a weird feeling!” He smiled as he took the hand, and they laughed together.

CHAPTER IX

IN his big room in Lincoln's Inn, George Waterson sat down to consider his position. Fleet Street had awakened to the activities which distinguish the early hours of morning, but even the noises of Fleet Street were too remote to disturb a man who desired solitude.

For five hours on end he had sat in the darkness, his elbows resting on his open desk, his hands at his chin.

One o'clock tolled from a neighbouring church tower and he rose, cramped and numb from long sitting in one position, pulled down the blinds and turned on the electric light. Though it was a warm night, he set a match to the fire which had been laid, and for two hours he was engaged in examining and burning his private papers. A shrewd man, he guessed all that Fay now knew. Bart had not intended springing the revelation of the fraud upon his audience; it had served him well enough to screen Agatha Tirrell. He had another interpretation for that scene in Colholm Gardens and, as it happened, a wrong one. Agatha's presence was providential—it might change all Bartholomew Foreman's plans: Waterson was fairly sure that it would. But the fact remained that Bart knew and Fay knew. The money would have to be found and replaced, and neither he nor his fellow in fraud was in a position to produce £40,000, the sum involved.

It meant ruin unless Bart himself provided the money to make up the deficiency, and that he was most unlikely to do. Anyway, it was the end of all things for this taciturn man with the big jaw and the distrustful eyes.

As he sat at the desk, methodically turning over his papers, his heart was filled with cold rage against the man who had ruined him. Life was very sweet to George Waterson. There was a bungalow on the Thames, a shoot in Yorkshire, a little house in Mayfair, certain clubs where he inspired the respect and the confidence which were necessary to him.

There is a type of man to whom approval of a class is as lovely as the most tender of ladies. There was no woman in his life—he was too sane a man to walk into that bondage; not so sane that he could avoid the enmeshment of bonds more holding. He could stalk through Mayfair on terms of equality with the best; inspire awe in certain flighty bosoms by his very stability. To lose this meant the loss of everything worth having—and lost it he had. Bart had planned this—Bart whom he had never liked, who had guarded, consciously or unconsciously, the woman who might have given him the sure position he craved.

George Waterson tightened his lips at the thought of the other's triumph. He

pulled a sheet of paper toward him and wrote in his small, neat hand a letter in the course of which he dealt exhaustively with such particulars of the business of Quail, Gasby & Waterson as his partners might be unacquainted with. When he had finished it was broad daylight. He folded the letter and put it into his pocket, carefully tidied his desk, pulled down the roller top and made his way into the street. A taxicab carried him to his small house in Curzon Street—there were other documents which required burning.

He shaved, bathed and dressed himself with scrupulous care, then he went back to his study and from a little drawer at the side of his desk he took out a small Browning pistol. He balanced it for a moment in the palm of his hand before, with deft fingers, he inserted the black steel magazine which fitted into the butt.

There was a knock at the door, and he slipped the pistol into his trousers pocket.

It was his servant, who required orders for the day.

“Here is a letter,” said George Waterson. “If I do not return to-night, send this on to the office.”

“Are you going away, sir?”

“I am not sure,” said his master shortly.

“I shall not be in to-day for any meals; get Mr. Foreman on the telephone and ask him if I can see him at his office.”

The man went away and returned in a few minutes.

“Mr. Foreman is at his house, sir. He says he is quite alone. Miss Milton went back to Paris last night.”

“Will he see me there?”

“Yes, sir—he says he is not going to his office.”

“Very good—get me a taxi.”

George Waterson would not go out alone into the darkness of death. This man who had fashioned his ruin should go with him. From dislike to hate, so vehement, that death alone could assuage the fierce thirst for vengeance, is a short step for a man haggard from want of sleep, his nerves all frayed and tattered by the prospect of undreamt-of disaster. These quiet men, self-contained, unemotional, are ever the most deadly of enemies when they have been shocked out of their attitude of indifference. George Waterson had shifted his angle of vision so that he saw Bart blocking all the ways which led to safety and comfort.

CHAPTER X

“WON'T you sit down?”

The visitor pulled a chair forward so that he faced Bart across the wide space of desk.

Bart was smoking a cigarette through a long amber holder, and now he leant back as though in the enjoyment of a period of leisure stolen from his work.

“What is the weather like?” he asked lazily, “I thought of running down to Sevenoaks—I suppose I can't tempt you?”

It was as though the scene of last night had been wiped from his memory, and he were talking with a trusted friend. That was Bart's normal way. As a rule he harboured no animosities, was totally incapable of maintaining a vendetta, however sinister might be his hints at reprisal (it was the old Bart who spoke to Fay on that occasion when he had talked glibly of “hurting”).

He cleared up as he went along. His attitude, so far as the two men were concerned, was a perfectly unmoral one. He was prepared to condone the fraud, arguing that they were better men because of the awakening which had been theirs. He certainly never contemplated anything so cataclysmic as a public exposure. It was sufficient for him that he had justified his own views in the eyes of Fay, and that he had relieved Agatha Tirrell from an embarrassing situation.

George Waterson could not be expected to know all that was going on in the other's mind.

“I don't think you will go to Sevenoaks,” he said.

“Probably I shan't,” agreed Bart, “but your tone suggests that you know a reason why I shouldn't go.”

“You will be dead,” said Waterson, and laid his hand on the table.

Bart looked from the pistol to the face of its holder.

“It is curious,” he said, half to himself, “that I never conceived you in such a situation as this: domestic comedy I can see you in, but domestic drama—no.”

“There are many things which you may not be able to conceive,” said the man on the other side of the desk quietly; “you may not understand what all this means to me—this exposure.”

“I think I can.”

Bart still leant back in his chair, his amber holder between his teeth, his two hands clasped behind his head. “But I don't understand how killing me is going to help you.”

“I hate you, Foreman.”

There was no mistaking the thrill in the voice or the malignity of the words, though they were uttered evenly enough.

“There I am with you,” said Bart. “But how does wilful murder assist you—unless . . . oh, that is it!” He nodded. “You are going to shoot yourself, and it struck you that it would be an excellent scheme to shoot me first?”

George Waterson nodded.

“I think that’s an extremely silly idea,” said Bart frankly. “It makes things public which otherwise would never be known. It gives me a spurious martyrdom which annoys me even to think about. We should both be viewed respectfully by a jury of twelve Kensington tradesmen, and for two days all sorts of people would be discussing your most intimate affairs. I’ve got a portrait of you—and I suppose other people have too. That would appear in all the illustrated papers. I, on the contrary, have never been photographed, so I should have a tremendous pull over you in that respect. In fact, it seems to me, Waterson, that your plan is singularly ill-timed. If you had left it till to-morrow you could have destroyed the letter which I posted to you an hour before you rang me up. The existence of that letter worries me.”

He frowned and shook his head.

“No letter makes much difference, Foreman,” said the other, his voice cracked and hollow.

“But this does,” said Bart. “That is where my reference to martyrdom comes in. You see,” he went on, “in one of those soft, foolish moments to which I am liable I was overwhelmed this morning with a sense of your plight. You’ve got to find money, but where the devil are you going to get it from? So far as I can make out, you want £40,000 to put you right. A friend of mine and myself have joined forces to supply that £40,000. My letter was to that effect. What is more to the point, the cheque enclosed in my letter was also to that effect. Imagine the sensation the reading of that warmhearted epistle will have upon twelve sentimental jurymen and five or six millions of your fellow-countrymen. The least they could do would be to return a verdict of *felo-de-se*. Me, they will enshrine; you’ve made a mess of it, Waterson!”

But the lawyer was looking at him with open mouth, a ludicrous figure for so correct a man to cut.

“You . . . mean that . . . you sent . . . ? You’re lying to save your life.”

“That is one of the few things I should not do to save my life,” said Bart sharply. “Shoot if you want to shoot—but don’t annoy me with your beastly insults. I am going to write now, and you please yourself what you do. Shoot—or clear out.”

He jerked his chair forward and took up his pen.

“But . . . why?”

Waterson asked the question dully.

“Because you can’t go down alone—because you’re too good a workman at your job to lose—there are a hundred reasons,” said Bart impatiently. “Now don’t stand gassing, my dear chap—go home and sleep; you look as though you needed it.”

“I don’t know what to say.” George Waterson stood in the centre of the room shaking his head helplessly. “You are wonderful.”

He went out of the house like a man in a dream, and Bart picked up a small automatic pistol from the table where the other had left it, and examined it with a little grimace.

“Dirty-looking little devil!” he addressed it, and dropped it into his drawer.

BOOK III

The Book of Development

CHAPTER I

BART sat hunched up in the centre of the stalls, his feet on the back of a seat before him.

On the stage a number of people stood aimlessly whilst a stout man in shirt sleeves bent over the footlights carrying on an earnest conversation with a man by the orchestra rail.

By and by the man at the rail picked his way back to where Bart sat.

“She says she won’t go on unless you cut out the line,” said little Mr. Gromberg in despair. He was a small dumpling of a Hebrew with a clean, fresh face and a tiny stubble of moustache.

“As all the subsequent action of the play depends upon that line,” said Bart wearily, “I cannot see myself cutting it out—what does she object to in it? Dash it all! She has only to say——” He fumbled with the script book on his lap and read: “Enter Lady Quint R. . . . Lady Q. ‘I shan’t want you after this week, Mary. Sir George has the custody of the children—the court were awfully considerate.’ What is the matter with that, Gromberg?”

“Unfortunately,” said Mr. Gromberg, rubbing his nose, “Miss Masefield was divorced last week—and the court did give her husband the custody of the children.”

“The deuce it did!” said Bart, aghast. “That’s awkward.”

“We are supposed to open to-morrow night,” the manager went on with quiet resignation.

“Put on the understudy,” suggested Bart, but the other shook his head.

“The understudy is about as useful to the piece as feathers to a frog,” he said briefly. “We can’t open with an understudy—and we can’t change the line: I’ve done my best with her—she’s sulking in her dressing-room.”

Bart got up and walked down to the orchestra rails.

“Go on with the act please—let the understudy read through the part of Lady Quint—put some more light in three—a ruby please . . . we are supposed to be in a country drawing-room at sunset.”

He went round to find Miss May Masefield in her dressing-room, holding forth to a select audience on her position in the theatrical hierocracy.

“Well, Mr. Foreman,” she said tartly as he came in, “I hope you understand that I do not go on with this piece unless those lines of mine are changed. I am not going to advertise my errors on the stage. I occupy a position in the theatrical world that entitles me to ask——”

“If you will send your friends away,” said Bart patiently, “I will talk to you. I also occupy some sort of position which makes a public exchange of views between you and me extremely undesirable.”

She was a round-faced girl with sleepy eyes and a discontented mouth. Pretty in a way and clever, too.

When the reluctant audience had departed Bart told her so without shame, because he was used to dealing with people who preferred flattery without subtlety and praise without reservation.

“I shouldn’t mind your objection to the lines,” he said, seating himself on the edge of the table and smiling down at her, “because from a bourgeoisie point of view they are most uncomfortable lines—for any of us who have had matrimonial difficulties.”

She looked at him with a new interest.

“When I say ‘us,’” he went on without haste, “you understand that I am not referring particularly to myself. I am speaking of the great human brotherhood of which you and I are members. But you are not bourgeoisie, Miss Masfield—you are an artist. You are perhaps a unique artist in this line of work. You are fortunately in such a position in the theatrical world that you are superior to the criticism of small people. I dare say,” he shrugged his shoulders and his smile broadened, “I dare say that there will be scores of poor, disappointed souls in your own profession who will sniff, but the big folk—the Syndhams, the Brouches, the Vanbers—they will realize the artistry, the courage, and—if you will allow me to say so—the boldness of the work.”

She would indeed allow him to say as much. He might talk for the rest of the day in the same strain, and she would be no nearer boredom than she was that moment. Mr. Foreman had neglected her since her arrival in the theatre; had hardly as much as exchanged two words with her; had treated her as though she were some wretched provincial actress dragged from a No. 2 town to fill a gap.

Therein lay her grievance. Bart had met her on the first occasion with an absent-minded “How d’ye do?” and had scarcely responded to her nod at their second meeting. Somehow Bart knew instinctively that in his lack of friendliness lay all the trouble.

“But don’t you think the line is a little——?” She hesitated.

He shook his head slowly.

“You don’t either,” he said in his brightest manner. “You are too much of an artist to think anything so absurd. I know exactly how you feel—shall I speak frankly?”

“If you please.”

She tightened her lips and prepared for the worst.

“You see how tremendous a line this is, and you imagine that we take a lot for granted in expecting you to say it—am I right?”

She nodded. She needed a little more light on her refusal herself before she committed herself to speech.

It is easy enough to deceive oneself with pleasant interpretations of one's own pettiness; to justify pique by the disclosure of fine feelings lacerated and noble principles trampled under foot. She was enough of an artist to enter into the part she was playing. There came to her face the stern but melancholy expression which the moment demanded.

“And so,” concluded Bart, “you chose this method of bringing the urgency of the line to our notice: for that we owe you thanks. Yet I had doubts about the line—I knew it would require somebody out of the ordinary run to put it across. I might have rewritten the play—I chose a simpler method—I selected you to play it!”

The girl slowly slipped off her sealskin coat.

“You can blarney all right,” she challenged, but the smile had vanished from Bart's face.

“If you think what I have said to you is blarney,” he said quietly, “throw up the part—I have no wish to retain you either as a friend or as a colleague if you have so low an opinion of me.”

“You're awfully touchy, Mr. Foreman,” smiled the girl as she took down the brown-paper covered script of her part from the mantelpiece (she had flung it there a few minutes before Bart's arrival). “Lead me to the vile work!” she added dramatically.

Bart went back to the stalls to Gromberg.

“Did you persuade her?” he asked anxiously.

Bart nodded. He was not in the mood to boast of his victory. There was something rather pathetic in the gullibility of these strange people. He did not think himself especially noble that he should profit by their vanity, though his guile in this case was a weapon of self-defence.

He watched the rehearsal silently, save now and then to interject a suggestion, and when the shirt-sleeved manager crouched over the footlights, his hand raised to shield the glare of the lamps, asked: “Will that do for the day?” he nodded, rose stiffly and made his way into the sun-bathed street. He stood for a time in the shade of the vestibule, watching the procession that swept left and right. Then he remembered that Miss Masefield would be expectantly waiting his congratulations, and he walked round to the stage door to do his duty.

“Splendid . . . just the right thing,” he said mechanically. Somehow he had no heart for simulation. It was all so inexpressibly mean and tawdry. She was well paid for her work—received £50 a week and a bonus at the end of the run. Why could she not do her work without the additional titillation and praise?

They walked out of the theatre together.

“Mr. Foreman,” she said unexpectedly, “you were talking about domestic trouble. . . . I feel you’ve a sympathetic soul, so to speak. . . . I want your advice.”

He groaned inwardly. He wasn’t feeling in the least degree sympathetic, but he could do no less than take her to tea somewhere and resign himself to an inevitable period of boredom. He found an alcove in Mullers which offered them a certain seclusion.

“I was divorced last week,” she began jerkily as soon as they were seated. “The man doesn’t matter, anyway. He’s a rotter—not my husband, but the other man. If it had been anybody but him! But George was always a mean devil, so he fixed on Heatherboy—a perfect rotter—really. But it’s the other man, Mr. Foreman——”

“A third man, I presume,” said Bart paternally.

“That’s right. . . . Oh, you’ve no idea how sweet he has been to me; a perfect angel, Mr. Foreman, and nothing wrong between us if I perished at this moment!”

She raised her dramatic eyes to the ceiling.

“I’m sure of that,” murmured Bart agreeably.

“He’s—well, I oughtn’t to say it myself, but he’s mad about me, Mr. Foreman, and I’m crazy about him.”

“It sounds like the making of a nice eugenic union,” smiled Bart. “I suppose you will marry?”

She shook her head; there were tears in her sleepy eyes, but Bart was not scared. He knew just how far she would abandon herself in a public place.

“He’s married,” she said briefly.

“That’s certainly rather awkward,” said Bart.

“Married to a woman who doesn’t understand him, doesn’t appreciate him, a woman who makes his life a perfect misery with her temper and extravagance.”

“They always do,” agreed Bart cheerfully. “The wife of the other man invariably possesses these qualities, just as the husband of the other woman drinks, is brutal and is monstrously unfeeling. What are you going to do about it?”

She hesitated.

“I don’t know that I ought to tell you,” she answered, looking at him thoughtfully. “He doesn’t like you.”

Bartholomew Foreman raised his eyebrows.

“What the deuce does he know about me?” he asked. “Surely I am not such a public character that unknown people dislike me! Who is he?”

But she shook her head.

“I can’t tell you that—yet. He thinks he might get a divorce, but he didn’t want to divorce her because, being an M.P., he naturally——”

“M.P.!”

“There! I’ve let the cat out of the bag!” she protested, but with amusement. “Anyways, there are thousands of M.P.’s, aren’t there?”

He smiled. “There seem to be, but as a matter of fact, there are only a few hundred. So he thinks of divorcing?”

She nodded vigorously.

“He says it’s different now. I met him long and long ago—he wants to marry me. You see, he didn’t know what love was then—you don’t mind my telling you this?” Bart shook his head. “Didn’t know what love was. . . . I’m awfully keen on him. . . . I don’t know why I tell you this, but somehow you’re so kind and you understand . . . and I thought you might help me.”

Exactly what help she wanted she did not say, because in reality she did not know. She needed a confidant, and if that confidant was an influential person who would be impressed by the implied splendours of her entanglement with a Member of Parliament, so much the better.

“And when are you seeing Mr. Tirrell again?” he asked blandly.

She stared across the table at him.

“Mr. Tirrell—then you know?”

“I know everything,” he boasted lightly.

He left her that afternoon to drive straight away to his solicitor’s office.

“The writ hasn’t been served,” said George Waterson quietly, “but I do not disguise from you the likelihood of its appearance. What will you do?”

“What can I do? I’m at his mercy.”

Waterson played with a pen on his desk and did not raise his eyes.

“He is depending upon . . . me,” he said in a low voice. “He thinks you will not use your knowledge of—certain things to retaliate . . . in fact, he told me so.”

“The devil he did!”

“I don’t know what you will do, Foreman.” George lifted his head with a jerk as though to face a disagreeable vision. “But if I were you . . . I’d tell. Yes, I think I should put the law in operation even though it would ruin—me.”

“Not on your life.”

Bart sat on the edge of a desk and stared out into Portugal Street, whistling a

doleful and tuneless stave.

“If I kicked the cove he’d squeal,” he said, “and if he squealed the unpleasant publicity would be transferred from the Divorce Court to the police court. Does he really care for this girl?”

George Waterson assented.

“He’s really enthusiastic. I never knew how much he liked her. She’s rather commonplace, but she has a fascination which particularly appeals to Harold.”

“I wonder,” said Bart under his breath.

“What do you wonder?”

“Nothing much. I’ll see you again the day after to-morrow.”

CHAPTER II

MR. JOSIAH STENTON was by nature romantic and by inclination an idealist. Romance caused him to endow all women with superhuman qualities, to array them in a niveous livery. He had profound views on the sex, which he had evolved out of his own head, and had written down in a showy little book, between the cover edges of which was a brass lock, and the key of which was generally lost. And all these sayings, often sententious, frequently the crude truisms which the wits of the ages had anticipated and given to the world in polished phrases, were to the effect that women were very wonderful.

A rich man, he might have married well, but his idealism kept him single. He was too conscious of his own defects, his own shortcomings—too keen a sense of the ludicrous where he himself was concerned. He was, in fine, too great a gentleman to risk the hurt which might come to a refined woman of the type he dreamt about, by tempting her with his wealth to take a step which might eventually lower her in her own eyes. A far-fetched and fantastic explanation, perhaps, but that was the main reason why Josiah Stenton remained a bachelor, contenting himself with expressing his views on women in the locked pages of his private book, which contained also certain verses of Josiah's own composition, which it would be unfair to quote.

At the moment he was troubled, and the trouble was, unfortunately, not of the character which he himself by his own efforts could put right.

Of what everybody else in the world knew he had been in complete ignorance. It had never occurred to this worthy man that Bart Foreman and his ward were anything but the dearest friends. More than this, he saw an end to that friendship which was not only logical, but desirable. Believing this, he had feared for the result of Bart's suave temperament, and on one occasion had uttered a notable prophecy. He had told Fay that one day Bart would break loose and hurt. He felt, in telling her this, that he was preparing her for revelation of Bartholomew's character, though, as to this, she was in no doubt whatever.

Exactly how he came to learn of the true state of affairs in the Foreman *ménage* he himself, for the life of him, could not have explained. Only the knowledge arrived in a rush and knocked him all of a heap—so he described the shock to himself.

This idealist, obeying his natural impulses, would have blamed the man, but here the man was above criticism from the prejudiced viewpoint of Mr. Stenton.

He numbered amongst his literary treasures three stout scrap-books in which he had pasted from time to time those gems of current poesy which, adorning the columns of the periodical press, had won his approval and envy.

He read this press carefully week by week, and such a verse as:

A baby's hand with soft caress
Can soothe the wounded heart;
Its velvet touch can ease the stress
Of every aching smart,

was certain of inclusion amongst his national treasures. Generally speaking, his collected verse was of a more lugubrious and touching character. His favourite may be quoted as showing the trend of Mr. Stenton's literary tastes:

Put away baby's cradle
Up in attic high.
Heaven has called our loved one
To rest in the bright blue sky.

It was to his scrap-books that Mr. Stenton invariably went in those hours of need when the sordid commonplace factors in life overpowered him. Yet he turned the cartridge paper leaves of his storehouse without discovering the merest suggestion of help or inspiration for his present circumstances. Periodic literature, primly edited with an eye to the maiden cheek of Streatham, was wilfully blind to romantic possibilities of an estrangement between guardian and ward. Guardians were, as a rule, gruff old gentlemen, bald and irascible, who sternly forbade the bold but penniless lover to darken doors again. They were seldom of the flighty sort—never of the Bart sort. They sometimes fell in love with their wards, but ended by going off to Africa to shoot lions, leaving the field clear for a younger rival who was called by his first name. Guardians, Mr. Stenton noticed, were always "Misters"—but Bart was "Bart."

Yet the failure of Bart and Fay to act normally was a source of great sadness to Mr. Stenton. They were not behaving as hero and heroine should behave. Marriage was the climax for which his earnest authors worked, and with the chiming of old church bells and with the picture of the heroine as a bride, pale but happy, traversing the rose-strewn path to the waiting carriage (or motor-car as it was in all up-to-date stories) the story ended, and the author asked leave to presume the future happiness of all concerned.

Mr. Stenton, who knew nothing of the causes, but was gloomily apprehensive of the effect of the estrangement, rolled his umbrella very fiercely and very untidily one morning, and strode forth to Colholm Gardens determined to sacrifice something for peace.

His "cuttings" which, as he was wont to boast, met every difficulty of life, had failed him miserably, and he must needs evolve a solution from his inner

consciousness.

Fay, in a mood ill fitted to the occasion, was hot from a recent encounter with a peccant dressmaker, who had relied rather upon his client's wealth than upon her memory when rendering his account.

"Whatever brings you so early in the morning?" she smiled.

Mr. Stenton looked round cautiously and mysteriously.

"Where is Bartholomew?" he asked, lowering his voice.

The girl was a little alarmed.

"What is wrong?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing—and everything," said Mr. Stenton in a tremble of triumph, for what better opening to his rhetoric could the mind of man conceive than that which she had given him?

She stared down at him, a film of colour in her cheeks, anxious inquiry in her eyes.

"Can I speak plainly?" asked Mr. Stenton, master of the situation as he felt, and she nodded.

"I've known Bartholomew for a long time." He had seated himself at a gesture from the girl. "Him an' me, so to speak, have been associated for years. His brains, my capital it was—now he's a capital-ist an' brainy too. That man's ideas," said Mr. Stenton solemnly, "are something wonderful—dramas . . . corn cures . . . everything. Look at the play he produced last night! Papers full of it—I've got the press cuttin's here;" he tapped his chest. "Life! That's what that play is—Life as he sees it. . . . A man to be proud of." He paused guiltily and added huskily, for he was assailed by a sudden panic, "as a friend and—and—a young man."

These last two words defiantly.

"Oh!" remarked Fay, trying not to smile. "So you've an idea that I'm not proud of Bart, and you've come to point out my duty?"

"God forbid!" said Mr. Stenton huskily. "I wouldn't take that liberty, Miss Milton . . . but I'm takin' what I might term a more worldly view of life—I live in Whitehall Court now . . . sort of more central and in the heart of things—*that* knocks a lot of nonsense out of you. No, what I want to say is——"

Unfortunately he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to say, and must pause here.

For a moment Fay thought that this little man with his shining face and polished head was an ambassador . . . but that would not be Bart's way. It was altogether a ridiculous conception of his character. Bart would come without allies and hurl all his forces at the barriers—if barriers there were. That he wished for nothing of the sort was painfully evident. She heaved a little sigh. Now she understood why Josiah

Stenton had called. This good, generous little man was seeing possibilities which had only been apparent to him during the past few months. "A young man" to Josiah meant a lover, a companion—a possible husband. She was at once sympathetic and uncomfortable. There was discomfort for her, and a little hurting, in Josiah's Stenton's visible dismay.

"What you want to say," she said gently, "is that you don't think Bart is very fond of me—isn't that it?"

He nodded, made a stammering noise as though a hundred words were fighting for expression at once, and nodded again.

"You ought not to let this bother you, Mr. Stenton. Bart and I are quite good friends. We shall always be that, I hope. We have grown up almost like brother and sister, and brothers and sisters aren't always on the best of terms."

She was descending to banalities, but she was very anxious to allay his obvious distress.

"Perhaps," he boggled, "faults on . . . both sides. . . . Miss Milton . . . marriage . . . and children . . . nothin' like children's 'ands to soothe away dull care, as the saying goes."

He meant so well, the sweating, grimacing little man who stood first on one foot and then on the other in an agony of fear.

As for Fay, she went red and white; experienced at one and the same time anger at the impertinence and a profound hopelessness at the prospect which life offered.

Upon this group, intruding into a variety of emotions, too absorbed in his own affairs to receive impressions, came Bart.

CHAPTER III

HE nodded briskly to a confused Stenton, who covered up his embarrassment by gathering and dropping again his umbrella, his newspaper and his gloves.

"I want to see you," he addressed Fay.

"Won't you stay to lunch?" the girl addressed Mr. Stenton, making awkward signals of farewell.

Mr. Stenton had a man to meet . . . he had to catch a train to Brighton (he desired most passionately an underground exit to oblivion), and went out of the room crab-wise, waving his claws, for Josiah Stenton was agitated and abashed, and, having no other gesture than that which the city man affects when hailing a cab, was ever at a loss for effective pantomime.

"What is it?"

She knew that something unusual was afoot to bring Bart home in the middle of the day and in such a serious mood.

"Sit down—I'll tell you."

He strode up and down the room, his hands thrust into his pockets, his chin on his breast; then he stopped and raised his head with a jerk.

"Tirrell is divorcing his wife and citing me as the co-respondent," he said.

There was a dead silence.

She looked thoughtfully out of the window. She was more interested than shocked, being in the happy position of having a vague grievance without grieving.

"You wouldn't think he'd dare," he went on, "after all that is past, but he depends on my keeping my mouth shut about his frauds for the sake of Waterson. I've just seen Waterson. I saw him two days ago when I received the first hint of the proceedings—now he says that the writs are out—poor George is as frantic as a self-contained man can be."

"But why—now?" she asked, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"He seems to be in love with a lady—at the theatre. Head over heels, like the calf he is. George says he hasn't a leg to stand on if I speak out, but the brute pretty well knows that I'm shut up."

"Is he fond of this—woman?"

Bart nodded.

"She told me so, but that's nothing: they say these things, women of that kind, without meaning anything. But I've more solid foundation to go upon. He has been spending enormous sums upon her . . . jewellery and that sort of trash. A significant sign with a mean skunk like Tirrell. It's pretty tough on you, Fay. Guardian in the

divorce court and all that sort of thing. I was a selfish brute not to get a chaperon for you years ago.”

“It is tougher on you,” she said almost lightheartedly. His confidences were so precious to her that she could forget all that was implied by his present news. “What are you going to do?”

He thought awhile.

“If this is going to bring you into contempt,” he said, “the proceedings must be stopped at all costs. I can’t betray Waterson—I have pledged myself there.”

“What is the alternative?” she asked curiously.

Bart threw out his hands in an expressive gesture.

“That I take Harold Tirrell and smother him,” he said helplessly. “What a rascal the man is!”

Fay felt an unaccountable irritation, the cause of which was difficult to define. Really, Bart and his affair was a nuisance, she told herself, but was conscious that the good-humoured and half-contemptuous tolerance which had made the position possible and bearable was no longer to be counted upon. She did not see any humour in the position, and might be excused her sudden tolerance. Even the old contempt for him, the mothering instinct which found excuses, these had vanished from the scheme of adjustment.

She passed from curiosity and the beginning of grievance to very real anger. She was inconsistent, irrational, human. It came upon her suddenly that she was a very ill-used girl, that Bart was monstrously selfish, and that very few women in the world would have endured her position with such patience.

“I’m so tired of it all!” She stamped her foot in her anger, and her voice rose to an indignant treble. “I’m weary of it, Bart! Why should I have all this disgrace . . . to have my name dragged through the mud . . . people will say . . . isn’t it unfair? It will be in all the papers and people will pity me . . . it’s hateful.”

“They may also pity Agatha,” he said coolly. Reproach invariably raised the devil of flippancy in him. “They might possibly pity me—rising young playwright, threshold of his career and all that sort of thing——”

He was looking at her interestedly, a gleam of sinful merriment in his eyes. She had not seen him like this for a long time, and she was not sure whether she liked or disliked him most in his present mood.

“You’re not helping me, you know,” he reminded her, “by ragging me at this juncture, by telling me that you don’t care for me and that you’re worried about what people will say. I’m doing all the worrying for you. There’s no problem in the situation *but* you. Help me if you can, not by pointing out the rottenness of the

position from your point of view, because I know all that without being told.”

“Stop the proceedings,” she demanded. “That is the only way you can help—I don’t care how you do it; make a few sacrifices yourself. you can’t always be deputizing your martyrdom!”

He did not speak for a moment. There was a long interval of silence, his eyes fixed reflectively upon her pretty, rebellious face.

“All right,” he said at length, and went out of the room to his study. Ten minutes later she heard the front door slam behind him.

CHAPTER IV

BART did not go to the theatre that night till the third act was on its way. The attendant in the vestibule came forward eagerly, touching his cap.

“Mr. Gromberg has been looking for you everywhere, sir,” he said.

“I haven’t been there,” said Bart. “What’s wrong?”

“Miss Masefield is out of the bill to-night, sir—understudy doin’ well, sir.”

But Bart was half-way up the marble stairs. He paused at the back of the dress circle and “felt” the house. It was a good house, packed from gallery to stalls, and there was the quietness which spoke of the “punch” which the play had for its hearers.

If Bart hated one thing more than another it was witnessing his own productions, but now he stopped to listen, fascinated by the smoothness of the understudy’s presentation. He had expected an average performance played by an understudy who gulped her lines and learnt the “business” *en route*, so to speak—but this performance was rather admirable. He breathed a sigh of relief, and went in search of Mr. Gromberg.

“I’ve been ringing you up——” began the manager.

“What is wrong with Masefield?” interrupted the other.

Mr. Gromberg smiled hopelessly.

“What is wrong with any actress cursed with a swollen head and something soft to fall back upon?” he asked. “She was all right till four o’clock. I put up a ‘call’ for principals to go through the second act—she didn’t turn up. I got this note instead.”

He produced a sheet of mauve paper, heavily scented, and Bart read—

“DEAR MR. GROMBERG,—

“I am not well enough to come to the theatre to-night. My doctor says I must take a complete rest for a fortnight.

“Sincerely,

“MAY MASEFIELD.”

“28, Gilboro’ Mansions,” said Bart, reading the address. “She can get a doctor’s certificate, of course—there never was an actress who couldn’t. The funny thing is——”

“The funny thing is——” repeated Mr. Gromberg.

Bart had been on the point of saying that Harold Tirrell was out of town—was, in fact, in Paris. Harold’s movements were a matter of interest to Bart just then, and the M.P. had, he discovered, been called away to Paris to ratify an electric lighting

contract in which he was concerned both as concession holder and director of a supply corporation.

The two men exchanged notes about the acting. Gromberg was evidently pleased with the understudy, whom, in his haste, he had condemned in uncompromising language only a few days before. But that is the way of managers who look upon understudies as some men regard insurance premiums, representing as they do expenditure made in view of a contingency, remote, unthinkable and without profit to themselves.

Bart looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock—not too late for such a call as he contemplated. The commissionaire whistled a taxi, and ten minutes after Bart was ringing the electric bell at 28, Gilboro' Mansions with some confidence.

A trim, sharp-featured girl opened the door.

"Miss Masefield is very ill, sir," she said, with all the street arab's shrewd appreciation of the visitor's business. "She can't see no one owing to the doctor's orders. . . ."

"Mar-gret!"

A most healthy voice hailed the girl from an inner room.

"If that's the waiter tell him I'll have a Surrey chicken and—wait a minute, I'll see the menu."

A shuffling of slippers and feet and Miss May Masefield, gracefully kimonoed and smoking a cigarette, came into view round the corner of the passage.

"Oh!" she said, and her face dropped.

"You and your Surrey chickens," scoffed Bart smilingly. "How are you?"

"Well," said the girl awkwardly, "I'm feeling a little bit better to-night—won't you come in? I'm not fit to be seen, but you must take me as you find me. If you *will* come calling on invalids at 10 p.m. you've got to put up with a few shocks."

"You couldn't shock me," said Bart, following her to the luxurious little drawing-room, ablaze with lights and filled with the blue smoke of scented tobacco.

"I know you think it's rotten of me," she went on rapidly, "leaving you in the lurch and all that—but I've been doubled up with pain all day and my doctor—I've got a certificate." She reached for her *moiré* bag from the top of a baby grand piano. "Here it is: 'Absolutely unfit to make a public appearance!'" she read triumphantly, and Bart smiled in sympathy. "I suppose I've let the play down . . . being the second night was very awkward for you—but you see how I'm placed?"

Bart saw very well. How well he might not say without hopelessly offending her.

"Don't bother about the theatre," he said easily. "May I smoke? Thanks. . . . We shall have to do as well as we can. The understudy isn't bad, but of course she isn't

you. Nobody is quite like you, May—nobody.”

He had never called her “May” before. Gromberg had as a matter of course. He would have been amused if anybody had suggested that he should have called her anything else: other managers were equally familiar, and a score of authors, pressmen and folk associated with the theatre were entitled in the terms of the sudden and often violent intimacy which the theatre begets to address her so.

But Bart was different.

An aloof, courteous man, he moved on a plane which did not encourage familiarity, and this unexpected evidence of friendliness brought a little colour to the girl’s cheeks and a new light of interest in her tired eyes.

“You take all the rest you can—come back just when you want. The play may have to come off—because you *are* the play! But your health is ever so much more important to me—to us, I mean—than the success or non-success of the best play in the world.”

He said this, knowing in his heart that the woman before him had deliberately, perhaps maliciously, certainly without caring for the consequence, deserted her part at a period when she might have been necessary to the play’s success. That this half-educated, wholly unscrupulous woman, the obedient servant of caprices, had jeopardized an undertaking in which thousands of pounds had been sunk and upon which the livelihood of some twenty of her fellows depended.

There was Bart at his worst, a cold devil of a man, grimly amused and as grimly disgusted. Yet of all the schemes which ever engaged his erratic fancy in the days when the novelty of a project counted more to him than its ultimate success, none so appealed as the scheme which now absorbed him. Fay should be served, mire should be plastered on mire, and offence screened by a worse offence.

May Masefield sat herself more squarely in the big lounge chair and tilted her chin, looking under her lashes at this new creature who had flown into her ken. She had to readjust many estimates, for you cannot place a man or woman in any conspicuous place in your mind without disturbing the permanent images and valuations—permanence being a relative term.

He was a handsome man—she had always thought that, she told herself with satisfaction. A gentleman and a kindly man. Moreover, one endowed (or green-room gossip lied) with an overwhelming supply of this world’s goods. Not a light man either. You never saw him at the night clubs or at Roddy’s supping with a lot of chorus girls, and one heard no stories of those adventures which usually were attached to the name of people in the theatrical world.

She had hated him a little because he was so standoffish. The very qualities

which now impressed her in his favour were those which in the early stages of their acquaintance had roused her most bitter resentment. She had often wondered in idle moments what he found to do with himself in his spare time, what were his amusements . . . who were his friends . . . and here he was, a thin amber holder between his even teeth, smoking calmly and amicably in her drawing-room.

She had all the admiration for culture which women of her class secretly cherish. It was an admiration which sometimes found expression in derision. She was scornful of clever people, who seemed born into the world with the object of making her feel a fool, and if she usually associated learning with weariness, it was because it was her invariable rule, when brought into contact with the clever ones, to maintain a tight-lipped silence. "Shut up and you won't be found out," was her motto. But these silences implied one-sided conversations and minutes of boredom from which she would escape with thankfulness. Bart had never overwhelmed her with his cleverness. Nor had he too ostentatiously descended to her intellectual level, so that she had an open mind about him, having neither the memory of boredom nor offence.

"By the way, when is this marriage of yours coming off?"

She shook her head, quiet laughter in her eyes.

"You forget there's a divorce first . . . six months before it's made absolute," she sighed heavily. "I know," she added significantly, for she had been twice divorced. "My boy is in Paris just now," she went on, and Bart preserved a straight countenance in face of this description of the florid Harold. "He won't be back for a week—we have a long talk morning and evening, when the telephone wires aren't too busy. He's a dear."

Bart inclined his head gravely, but showed some hesitation.

"Don't you think so?" she asked quickly.

"It would be impertinent of me to offer an opinion," he said.

"Do you know him?"

"I guess," he replied. "His initials, I think, are H. T."

"That's right—I wondered if you knew him. Who is the Man in the Case? He won't tell me that—yet. But it is somebody of position, I know. I'm telling you all this, Mr. Foreman—as—as though you were my own brother."

Her smile, appealing and a little pathetic, did not impress Bart. Too often had he instructed his heroines to "Move up stage to c. and look appealingly at hero R.C." to be overcome by the conventional expressions of pathos.

"Don't you like him?" she asked quickly.

"I don't like him in the rôle of your husband," he answered frankly. "You want

the truth—and you have it. You see, May, you’re an artist—Tirrell . . . !” He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, Tirrell is not an artist—of course he’s in love with you. Anybody would be in love with you—I could be in love with you if I didn’t keep a tight hold on my impressionable heart,” he laughed. “There’s no credit in loving you—but the man who has you must have imagination——”

“Would you think me awful if I showed you one of his letters?” she interrupted.

Only for one moment did Bartholomew Foreman hesitate.

“I don’t think . . . it would be fair . . . to you,” he hesitated. “You might regret it.”

“I only meant,” she said hurriedly and in a little confusion, “you said . . . about imagination—they are beautiful letters . . . really. I wouldn’t do anything common, you know that, Mr. Foreman. Whatever people may say about me, I’m a lady . . . my father was an officer in the army, and my mother was the daughter of the Bishop of Milchester—I wouldn’t have asked you to see them——”

“May!” He lifted a solemn hand; “I think you understand that”—a pause—“that there may be a good reason why I do not wish to read the letters of . . . another man.”

Her heart gave a little flutter, and downcast eyes were a natural consequence to the pleasant little shock which traversed her being. There was no mistaking the ardour, however artistically suppressed, that underlay his words.

“Tirrell is all right,” he said as he rose to go. “Personally I do not trust him, and he doesn’t like me—by the way, you will be well advised not to mention our little conversation. He is a very jealous man and rather inclined to be bossy. I hope I’m not speaking disparagingly of the chap——”

“I don’t mind,” she smiled. “He’s a nice boy, and I’m very fond of him, but I’m not blind to his faults.”

“Well,” he continued, “I only wanted to say that he’s rather—fond of himself—thinks he’s good enough for anybody and too good for most people.”

She acknowledged with a smile of proprietorship this failing of her slave. Then, with an arresting word, she went out of the room and came back in a few seconds with a sheet of paper.

“Read this,” she commanded.

Bart took the sheet and under the light read—

When I am parted, dear, from thee
By many leagues of land and sea,
My heart is heavy and my soul
Is as the severing waves that roll,
Troubled and fretted with the strife
Of all the woes and cares of life.
Till, like a sunbeam from above,
There fall the rays of Maisie's love.

“What do you think of that?” she asked nervously.

“The author?”

“No—tell me first what you think of it—is it clever? I think it's awfully clever—that's what I like about him,” she continued rapidly, apologetically, defiantly, making her last stand against a confidence-shattering enemy. “You talk about imagination! Yes, I want it . . . but a man who can write——”

“Look here.” He took a gold pencil from his pocket and wrote, using the palm of his hand as a desk:

As dawns the day from out a restless sea,
Lighting the waste with ever-changing rays,
So came your presence, bringing light to me,
Casting a radiance on my dreary ways.

“Did you write that . . . right off?” she asked in an awestricken voice.

He shook his head with a smile.

“I wrote both those verses,” he said simply. “Don't you think it is rather rotten of Harold to make love to you with my youthful poetry?”

He was gone before she thought to ask him who was the original inspirer of the verses, and how they came into the possession of Harold.

As to this, Bart, a frown on his gloomy face as his car whirled him eastward, might have given a fairly accurate explanation.

Harold Tirrell had been inspecting Agatha's desk.

CHAPTER V

“WELL, my successful friend, you’ve managed to make good again.”

Senator Dickson, newly arrived from the United States, had buttonholed Bart, and carried him off to lunch at the Majestic. His kindly grey eyes surveyed the other in something of wonder and admiration.

“Which particular success are you thinking about?” asked Bart. “The play? Yes, it is sure of a run.”

“You are starring a countrywoman of mine, I see—May Masefield.”

“A countrywoman of yours?” said Bart in surprise. “I knew that she had played in America, but I thought she was pure—” he nearly said “cockney,” but amended the ungracious appellation to “British.”

“She’s American all right,” said the Senator. “I don’t suppose it is necessary to warn you, because you’re rather wise: but she has broken more men than any two women I have ever heard about.”

“She never struck me as being mercenary,” said Bart thoughtfully.

“She’s mercenary all right—I guess she’s one of the richest women on the stage. I could tick you off a dozen men who have contributed to her magnificence.”

“Tick a few,” invited an interested Bart, and the Senator, who was also a lawyer with a large and variegated clientèle, retailed, in the simple and cautious language which age and the law alike induce, the story of May.

It was a story not to be told in one sitting in all its fullness, and even summarized as it was, it lasted till the coffee-cups were replenished.

“And that is our May,” concluded Senator Dickson.

Bart heaved a long and happy sigh, and, reaching out his hand, grasped that of the astounded Senator.

“Thank you,” he said. “You’ve taken a great weight off my mind—until I met you to-day I was feeling the meanest, most despicable pup that ever sneaked out of a lethal chamber when the head executioner wasn’t looking! As a matter of fact,” he went on, without offering any explanation for the outburst to his mystified host, “May isn’t in the bill. She’s ill.”

The grey eyes of the other man twinkled.

“That’s May—I had a lot to do with her contracts: they were generally suffering from compound fracture when I took them in hand—but why this extraordinary combination of *Te Deum* and *Mea Culpa* on your part?”

“I will not satisfy your unnatural curiosity,” said Bart, and in his exuberance paid the bill for himself and his host.

“What are you doing now—this afternoon?” asked the Senator.

“I have a date,” said Bart vulgarly, and the Senator frowned and shook his head. Bart was a long time reforming.

“I don’t know what your scheme is,” said the Senator after a pause, “but if it has anything to do with May and you have the slightest misgiving—I’ll send you along a portrait.”

“A portrait?”

“The portrait of a young man of whose life . . . well, I guess May helped a lot to send him to the insane asylum. A weak boy, but a good boy, mud in her hands . . . she broke the mother’s heart, did May. . . .”

“I’d like that portrait,” said Bart, interested. “I don’t want to be mean with May.”

“You couldn’t be,” said the other.

Bart met Miss Masefield by appointment at Victoria, and a little more than an hour later was walking by the side of her bath chair on Brighton front. He found an unholy joy in the occupation.

May was willing to be an invalid under such charming auspices, and accepted his attention with the languid gratitude which so admirably went with her rôle. She talked freely of Harold, of the telephoned conversations and the letters (two every day), of the telegrams and, very indiscreetly, of his success. For he had concluded a most profitable deal.

“He used to have a partner—a lawyer,” she said, “but he robbed him—perhaps I oughtn’t to say that?” she added quickly.

There was so much that she ought not to say that Bart had given up the task of checking her.

“I can trust you.” She shot a sly glance up at the man by her side.

(“Heroine walks L. and glances shyly at hero c.,” said Bart mentally.)

“Up to a point,” he warned her.

“Lawyers are always thieves, aren’t they,” she continued, “and this fellow put poor Harold in an awful mess—with the very man . . . you know . . . the correspondent?”

“I know,” said Bart sadly.

“It was so awkward for Harold——”

“I’m tired of hearing about Harold.”

For once he could create a false impression by speaking truthfully, and the girl laughed.

“If I didn’t know,” she said with playful severity, “I should think you were

jealous.”

“If you didn’t know—what?”

“If I didn’t know that you . . . well, you didn’t care for me.”

A little silence as the bath chair negotiated a section of the front unusually populated.

“How do you know what I feel,” he asked.

“Not—I mean—not like *that!*”

Another pause, longer than before, then—

“I’m not such a fool,” he said, “as to go out after unhappiness for myself, by desiring the impossible.”

She sighed, fingered the big rings which covered one white and delicate hand, then raised her eyes again.

“Do you believe in Plato?” she asked daringly, then, detecting something amiss with the question, amended it in haste: “I mean platonic friendship . . . men and women . . . *you* know!”

He shook his head.

“I believed in old Plato,” he said flippantly, “till I discovered that he had a very particular lady friend. After that I regarded Plato as a humbug.”

This human presentation of the philosopher appealed to her. She dared to ask for information, and found herself listening to a simple dissertation upon the character and the thoughts of the man who had given the world a philosophy which it did not practise, and a catchword which it misapplied.

They came back to London that evening by the Pullman, and she felt that she had known Bart all her life. More than this, she missed him dreadfully that evening and found no consolation in the perfervid epistle which Harold addressed her from the Meurice.

“Bart!” she lingered on the word. “I shall call him Bart—such a nice, brainy boy—I wonder how much stuff he’s got.”

As it happened, Bart had quite a lot of “stuff,” augmented by a draft received that morning from America on account of patent royalties.

CHAPTER VI

MR. STENTON, a mild and inoffensive man usually, hated Alma Roche with all the malignity which he could summon to the process. Alma was possessed of the idiosyncrasies which Josiah Stenton detested. She was fat, she was smug, she was untidy. These faults he might have forgiven, because he was a large-hearted and generous man and himself was not above indictment on the score of fatness.

But she disliked Bart and made no secret of the dislike, and moreover she “jawed.” He profoundly distrusted people who “jawed.” He carried with him a dazed impression of a human talking-machine that never tired and never ceased. She probably talked in her sleep, he thought, and only an innate sense of delicacy prevented him satisfying his curiosity on this point by pursuing investigations amongst her friends.

He hated her large, comfortable face, her self-satisfied and disbelieving smile. If ever the ambition of his life were achieved and he stood, a picturesque figure, in a witness-box testifying to the truth, he felt that it would be all to the good if incidentally the case were discreditable to Miss Roche.

“Do you know the accused (or the deceased)?”

“Slightly.”

“What estimate have you formed of her character?”

“She was a great jawer.” (Laughter.)

There was a time when his dislike for Alma Roche was heartily reciprocated. She had referred to him as a “fat person,” following the instinct which compels our black brethren to style their enemies “niggers,” and had made no secret of her boredom whenever he came upon the scene.

But now a longer acquaintance with the little man had softened her feelings toward Mr. Stenton, for Alma was growing out of the age in which she could afford to classify men as “good” and “bad,” and was perilously near to the period of criticism in which the male branch of the human family were to be laxly differentiated as “good men” and “men.”

But the years had made no difference in Josiah’s feelings, because he could not, in reason, be expected to read her mind.

Her visit to Whitehall Court came as a shock to him.

He was engaged in cutting out the gems of poesy which are usually to be found nowadays in journals devoted to woman’s interests, and hastily concealing the evidence of his sentimentality, he adjusted his gold-rimmed pince-nez—a hindrance to vision, but immensely imposing—and asked that the lady should be shown in.

A first glance at her face told Mr. Stenton that something out of the ordinary had happened.

He waved her to a seat, and stood in a severe and judicial attitude by the fireplace, one foot upon a polished fender, one elbow tilted uncomfortably to rest upon the mantelpiece.

“To what good fortune do I owe the honour of this meeting?” he asked.

It was the first time he had ever got through the sentence without a stumble, and he felt absurdly pleased with himself.

Alma Roche, hot of face and bewilderingly clad, fanned herself with an evening paper.

“Mr. Stenton,” she said, “you are a friend of Bart’s?”

He bowed at some risk, and with no little pain, for the mantelpiece was certainly much too high for his elbow.

“But you like Fay Milton, don’t you?” she appealed.

He wisely removed his elbow and bowed again.

“Then how,” demanded Alma with dramatic gesture, “how can you stand by and see her life shattered?”

“Like which?” asked Mr. Stenton hazily. “I mean like what—explain yourself, woman.”

She overlooked the impertinence in her agitation. Josiah himself overlooked the lapse. He had so often addressed her as “woman” in the imaginary dialogues he had had with her—dialogues from which he invariably emerged in triumph, that it seemed the natural thing to say.

“He isn’t satisfied with carrying on with Mrs. That and Mrs. This,” she went on volubly, “but now it’s an actress, if you please! An Actress!” she mimicked a tragedienne, unknown, “as bold as brass—I’ve seen ’em at Brighton two days running this week. Talk about the sins of Society! We don’t expect our own friends to go on that way, Mr. Stenton, it gets everybody a bad name, and Fay is the sweetest girl in the world, and it’s disgraceful. That’s her guardian!”

Mr. Stenton adjusted his glasses for the tenth time.

“Do not go casting aspersions, Miss Roche,” he commanded, “until you know. My friend Foreman is a lore to himself, as the good book says, ‘Honi swor ke mally pence,’ Miss Roche. Why shouldn’t he talk to a lady in Brighton? There’s just as good people in Brighton as London. I often go there on Sundays—a most respectable place.”

“Do you take a girl there?” asked the exasperated Alma. “Do you come sneaking down in the afternoon and sneaking back in the evening with an actress?”

“I may have done,” answered the little man loudly and defiantly.

“Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself,” stormed Alma, her hat askew in her indignation.

“Ho, indeed!” said the sarcastic Mr. Stenton. “A fat lot you know about it. It’s life—that’s what it is.”

“You’ve never done it,” said Alma scornfully.

“You’re only screening Bart. You! I’d like to see you taking an actress to Brighton!”

Mr. Stenton’s face went from pink to purple at the insult.

“I’m takin’ a party on Sunday,” he boasted, “all actresses—twenty of ’em; that shows what you know about it!”

“I hoped you’d be able to help me,” said Alma, straightening her hat without shame by the aid of Mr. Stenton’s mirrored overmantel, “but you men all hang together.”

Josiah crossed the room to his desk, opened a heavy looking book, running his thumb down the index till he came to the letter S.

“Listen, Miss Roche,” he said solemnly. “‘Suspicion’—this is all about suspicion. I’m goin’ to read to you: ‘Suspicion,’ says Byron——”

“Pooh! Byron!” snorted Alma, as she flounced from the room. “He’s a pretty beauty to talk about suspicion!”

“I wonder what Byron got up to,” thought Mr. Stenton after the outraged lady had gone, leaving no more evidence of her call than a big magenta bow which had become detached in her eloquence. “I’ll have to get a book about Byron; he must have been a bit ’ot!”

CHAPTER VII

ENRAGED as she was, bursting with news, and that news serious to at least two people, Alma was shy of communicating with her friend. She drove straight from Whitehall Court to George Waterson's office, and that taciturn man listened in silence to her impassioned denunciations of Bart.

"How do you know she is an actress? And if she is, he may only be showing her the merest civility," he said. "Every man who takes an actress to Brighton isn't *ipso facto* immoral. I think, Alma you have been rather hasty in your judgment."

"Have I?" she answered truculently. "As far as the actress is concerned, everybody knows Miss Masefield—she was in the papers the other day, and her portrait too!"

"May Masefield?" George sat up straight.

"May Masefield," repeated Alma, proud of the sensation she had made. "That is the lady. I tell you, George, there's very little escapes my notice!"

"Very little indeed!" he answered dryly. He looked at his watch. "I know you will excuse me," he said, raising and pulling down the roll top of his desk, "I am catching the 4.20 for Paris."

Alma, voluble to the last, accompanied him to the cab.

"I only ask," he said at parting, "that you should not speak of your suspicions to Fay. Bart has done nothing wrong——"

"This is a new attitude for you to take," she said in surprise, "defending Bart, I mean."

"He has been very good to me," he said simply.

He caught his train by the barest margin. He had had no intention of making the trip to Paris that day; Harold had wired him to come, and he had replied fixing the morrow as the date of his departure, but now there was a good reason why he should see his sometime friend.

Harold, to whom he had wired from Dover, met him at the Gare du Nord.

"Awfully glad you were able to come . . . now, what is this nonsense about not being able to act for me?"

George Waterson nodded.

"There isn't any nonsense about it," he said. "I cannot act for you both—I suggest you get Kelly's to look after you; they are very good people. I suppose you are going on with this case."

"Going on? Of course I am, my dear chap . . . do you think I'm going to be a laughing stock . . . Agatha with her contempt . . . I'll humble her—besides," his

strident tones softened, "I know what the real thing is now, George . . . love, I mean. You're a hard-headed man of the world and you probably despise me, but May is the very breath of life to me. It's that that makes me take the risk—not that Bart would do anything. I've got him!" he said triumphantly.

"I wonder if Bart knows?" reflected George.

"Knows what?"

"That if it wasn't for the—the love of the other girl you wouldn't take the risk. A very shrewd man is Bart," he said, half to himself, "and a very cruel man in some ways."

They drove to Harold's hotel, and in the big sitting-room which the M.P. had engaged for his friend, Harold returned to the question.

"What did you mean when you said that Bart was cruel?" he asked, and George Waterson thought he detected a tinge of anxiety in the other's voice.

"You know him as well as I," he evaded. "I tell you, Tirrell, exactly how I feel about the matter. I think you are doing a blackguardly thing—no, no—don't interrupt me until I have finished. You are depending on Bart keeping quiet about our theft—there's no other word for it—because he wouldn't hurt me by exposing the part we both played. Yet, if he changed his mind, I tell you frankly that I would go into the witness-box and testify against you."

"Good God! You're not in earnest?" gasped Tirrell, turning pale at the thought.

"I am thoroughly in earnest," insisted the other, "but I tell you this, both as his friend and his lawyer, that I do not think he will take so drastic a step until he has exhausted every means to prevent this case coming into court. I don't think," he went on slowly, "that you are going to be very happy, Tirrell. I repeat that, underneath that irresponsibility, that charming sangfroid of Bart's, there is a hard and remorseless man. You can't afford to have him as an enemy, and I strongly advise you to drop the proceedings."

"I dare say you do, by Jove!" sneered the other. "A jolly fine lawyer he's got—but you can't kid me, old man! I'm a tougher kind of nut, not to be broken by threats. She's worth it, George—worth it, I tell you! She's a revelation to me—a woman with all her life story behind her, with the experience and all that sort of thing, and she turns to me! By the lord, it's wonderful!"

There was a fire in his ordinarily colourless eyes, tears almost, tears of pride and love. Here was a man of middle age, a cynical, selfish, unscrupulous man who was ready to weep at the thought of a soiled woman whose name was a byword in two continents. His sincerity was shiningly obvious. If so tender and wistful a thing as love could come to him—it had come now.

“I used to know her years ago; she was married to a brute of a chap; she divorced him . . . used to strike her . . . it’s awful to think about . . .” He wiped his beaded forehead, “and we got on like one o’clock, and then she went back to America and I lost sight of her and met Agatha. . . . You know all about that,” he said shortly. “Then when Agatha was treating me so badly I met May and she was—well, she knocked me over, old man . . . she’s divine, George—no nonsense about her, and she loves me, that’s the main thing. And do you think I’m going to let Bart’s feelings stand in my way, or Fay’s or anybody’s else? I want her!” He almost hissed the words through his clenched teeth. “And I’ll sacrifice anything—you, George, myself, Bart—everybody, sooner than give her up!”

George Waterson listened and saw. And hearing and seeing, he marvelled. This man was feeling as he never thought it possible that so phlegmatic, so unimaginative a man could feel.

And during the next day, before George made his departure for London, he had further revelations of the human soul.

For Harold told him many things, showed him sonnets (he blushed as he produced them, but he was filled with ridiculous pride none the less) which he had composed, inviting George Waterson’s criticism with naïve gravity as though he were asking an opinion on the validity of his contracts—an opinion, by the way, which George had come to Paris to offer.

“I think you will want me sooner or later,” said George from the window of his compartment, “not as a lawyer but as a friend.”

The train pulled out of the Gare du Nord, leaving Harold to supply his own interpretation of that cryptic prophecy.

CHAPTER VIII

AGATHA TIRRELL was back in her Chelsea house, a much relieved and grateful woman; for if Cheyne Gardens held memories of dead and gone happiness, and if there were dim and solemn hours when the ghost of slaughtered love stalked tragically through the little print-hung passage, up the narrow stairs to rest in the dark places of her empty heart, there were solid material comforts to the life, and Agatha was on the side of the materialists.

That aunt of hers—a convenient aunt she had been in her lifetime on more occasions than one—had died to such purpose that Agatha could afford to refuse the help Bart had offered, and which he renewed just as soon as he learnt she had left her husband. Agatha was independent too of any help which her husband might offer; she did not require so much as the fulfilment of his lawful obligations in the matter of settlement—to his relief and chagrin—for he was a mean, vain man.

Here in her lavender house where quiet was, and soft, sweet fragrances, and sober, restful colourings, life could slip past in oiled grooves, but for the insistent ghosts. They must come at the oddest moments, as tangible in the sunlight as in the dimness of evening—if they had moaned and wrung their hands, Agatha would have grown bored and relieved the tension by repapering the drawing-room.

But they laughed, little chuckling laughs that bubbled and fizzled like wine; they assumed no skeleton shapes, drooped no dank draperies, showed to her shrinking vision neither sockets of eyes nor grinning teeth. Blue-eyed ghosts with little lines of laughter about them, trim-moustached and perfectly-dressed ghosts who maintained a babble of talk about schemes—schemes—schemes! Ghosts that sprawled on chintz-covered lounges and drew pictures of wonderful weddings. . . .

Sometimes Agatha would spring up from whatever she was doing and go out of the house short of breath and white and ill-looking.

Yet, being on the side of the materialists, she must come back to dinner and eventually to bed, where the ghosts left her in peace, for imagination was checked by a certain primness, and Agatha was all for the proprieties. Turning out an old trunk, she came upon a portrait of Harold—one of those efforts of the artistic photographer which appear to be focused by an amateur and retouched by a spiritualist. She looked at it for a long time, kneeling by the box, both hands occupied with the big picture.

And all that Agatha thought was expressed in her subsequent action, for she tore the photograph into small pieces. She tore it slowly, thoughtfully, deliberately, without anger and without regret, and all the time she was staring straight ahead of her,

blinking in the strong light of the morning, stretching imagination to its utmost limits. Later she found a portrait of Bart, but must burn this. Harold could be buried in the wickerwork grave of a wastepaper basket, but it was cremation or nothing with the ghost.

Her maid brought her a cup of tea at eleven—a habit of life which Bart had introduced.

“Will you see Mr. Stenton?” the girl asked, for Josiah had arrived providentially with the tea.

“Stenton? Oh, yes—yes!”

Agatha, realizing suddenly the identity of the visitor, was eager to see Mr. Stenton though he came enveloped in the atmosphere of the family ghost.

Josiah arrived importantly, a monument of tact primed with strange inapposite aphorisms, umbrella tightly furled by a master hand (his valet’s), immensely chrysanthemum’d.

“Two lumps,” he said thankfully, being quite at home so long as he could lay hold of a tea-cup handle. “It seems to me, Mrs. Tamarand——” he begun with a preliminary cough.

“Tirrell,” she smiled.

Josiah bowed and grew incoherent. It seemed to him, he at last stated plainly, that he was doomed by malignant Fate to act the part of peacemaker (Agatha went hot and cold and trembled) between friends and relatives. (Agatha stiffened and surveyed the little man with an unfriendly eye.)

“You’re a friend of his,” Mr. Stenton claimed appealingly; “that’s why I’ve come. The friendly touch, the soothin’ voice, makes hearts unite an’ souls rejoice.”

“Who is he?” she asked.

“Bart,” said Mr. Stenton soberly. “I’ve been investigating all the stuff that job-lot woman told me. Went in disguise to Brighton—well, not exactly disguised but wearin’ a cap—an’ what the neighbours at Whitehall Court thought of me I *don’t* know, but Mrs. Tamarand, you’re a woman—I mean a lady of the world. You’re a friend of his——”

She groped desperately for the loose ends of the story as he proceeded, and failed. She might, amongst those strings, find a live wire to shock her, but she was desperately anxious for enlightenment, though she felt that the story which was coming held little credit for Bart.

“Now, Mr. Stenton,” she warned him with a smile, “you have to remember that I am living in a backwater, and all news is new news to me. Tell me everything from the beginning.”

So he told her of Alma, that untidy woman; of how she had called at his flat ("in Whitehall Court," he added), of how he had received her, of his dignity, his repartee and her final discomfiture.

"But it's true, Mrs. Tamarand" (he insisted upon calling her that, and after his first lapse she ceased to correct him). "Every bit—it's an actress named Masefield—a fat-headed sort of girl I call her," he said unromantically.

Agatha could have sneered, and indeed her lips took that shape. Oh, noble ghost that lends only memories to a dainty home in Cheyne Gardens and stalks in the flesh on the Brighton front, tame cat to a glorified chorus girl!

"But what do you expect me to do, Mr. Stenton? I am not even a very close friend of Mr. Foreman's any more. If Miss Milton knows, as you suggest she does, she is quite competent to deal with the situation. There are many reasons," she went on haltingly, "why I cannot even discuss the matter. . . ."

He nodded vigorously. That she regarded Harold's threat of a divorce as so much idle bluster how was he to know? That the divorce was threatened, George Waterson had told him at Bart's request.

"I know," he said mysteriously, "a certain action pendin' or comin' on," and when she frowned a little he hastened to shock her still further. "That's why—Mr. Tirrell's girl——"

She half rose from her seat.

"What do you mean, Mr. Stenton?" Her voice was sharp and resentful. "Mr. Tirrell's girl? Not Miss Masefield? She isn't—Mr. Tirrell's girl—oh!"

Her clenched hand went up to her face and she stared open-mouthed at him.

"Mr. Tirrell's girl," he repeated happily. "I found that out, went round to her flat in—I've got the address somewhere—after I saw her off to Brighton. I interviewed the servant—very wild that girl was over some asparagus that wasn't to my lady's taste—ten pounds I paid her," he boasted, "and she told me everything. Letters every day . . . poems . . . pictures . . . telegrams, telephones, flowers, chocolates, everything. They're goin' to be married, Mr. T. and Miss M.—she isn't really a miss but a Mrs., but being an actress she naturally——"

She could have laughed. Harold was really serious then, there was another woman, and he was proud of her. She remembered how he had spoken of the woman once or twice and had put up her portrait in his study. And in his desperation he was really citing Bart; but why was Bart being so foolish? What object had he in paying court to such a woman, hopelessly entangling himself with one whom she knew he must despise? If Harold loved May Masefield, there would be a reason.

Did he love her?

She could not conceive Harold so much in love that he was prepared to risk everything—position, freedom perhaps, yet if he took such a risk he must indeed be far gone along the road of infatuation.

“Where is Mr. Foreman now?” she asked.

The little man shook his head anxiously.

“Don’t do anything,” he said; “leave everything to me—I’ve got the thing in me hands now.”

A little later he stood in the doorway hurling impassioned injunctions at her. She was not to tell Bart and not to tell Fay; she was not to mention to anybody that he had subpoenaed the evidence of Miss Masefield’s servant . . . he retreated covering himself at all points.

CHAPTER IX

IT was a pleasant October afternoon, warm and sunny, and Bart found office work rather a trial. He would have welcomed any excuse for making his escape, yet, strangely enough, he felt a little twinge of dismay when his secretary brought him a sheet of paper bearing May Masefield's name written in her own sprawling handwriting.

He rose and went out to her, ushering her into his sanctum.

"This is an unexpected joy," he said. "I had not hoped to see you until to-night—still, your coming is rather providential."

He opened a drawer of his desk and took out a flat case and handed it to her without a word.

She opened it with a little squeak of joy and stood open-mouthed at its contents.

"For me!" she gasped, and he nodded.

"For your very own," he said.

"But, Mr. Foreman—really—I oughtn't to take this."

He was busy fastening the pearls about her neck, but her sparkling eyes discounted the reproach in her tone.

"Why not?" he asked in surprise. "Goodness gracious, May, if I can't give you jewellery, who can?"

She reached out and squeezed his arm.

"Any more poetry to hand?" he asked flippantly.

"Now—now!" she warned him with a smile. "Leave that poor dear man's poetry alone—he's coming back on Sunday."

"Sunday!"

This was unwelcome news. Bart had banked upon another day of grace—and opportunity.

"I thought you'd like to know," she said as she strolled about the room after the manner of women in strange surroundings. "I shall miss—who—who is that?"

She pointed to a portrait which hung on the wall: a small portrait of a young man painted by a master. The weak face had borrowed some austerity from the painter's art.

"That?" said Bart carelessly. "That belongs to a friend of mine—Senator Dickson. It is the picture of a young man, a client of his, who came a cropper: it is a Sargent, from which you may gather that the portrait was painted at a period when the young man was especially affluent."

Her eyes did not leave the picture.

“Senator Dickson, eh?” She laughed a short, hard laugh, and turned suddenly to Bart. “I suppose the Senator has told you some pretty tales about me?”

Bart shook his head.

“I can truthfully say that he hasn’t,” he smiled, and before she grasped the evasion he led her to another subject. But she was morose and sulky, unwilling to be tempted to side issues.

She went back to the portrait, pulled it away from the wall to straighten it—it was hanging a little askew—and a slip of paper fluttered from the canvas back to the ground.

She stooped and picked it up.

Bart did not observe the action; he was looking a little wistfully from the window, and turned when she spoke to him.

“I couldn’t help seeing this,” she said slowly.

“A letter?” he smiled. “My dear child, you can read any letters you find in this establishment—we have no secrets from our friends; who is it from?”

“Senator Dickson,” she answered in a muffled voice, and put the sheet of paper in his hand.

Oh, unwise Senator, grey of head though you be, and full of knowledge of the ways of women and men! How was Bart to know that you would stick the corner of your note between frame and canvas? Bart, with no other idea in his head than to find a convenient nail to hang the portrait.

“Here is the picture,” said the note. “Keep your eye fixed on that if you feel the slightest compunction about May Masfield. You can’t hurt her—but she can hurt you. I wish you luck with your scheme.”

Bart put the letter on the table.

“This is where we foul the points and skip the line,” said he to himself, and braced his shoulders to meet the catastrophe.

“So that is why you keep the beastly thing in your office?” she asked with sudden passion, clenching her fists tightly and almost blurting the words. “I know what it means, you and your confounded Senator! He’s been telling you about Porky an’ me, I guess. Well, there’s nothin’ to it, Bart. It’s all stale stuff, that affair. It was after I met Waltheim. You can’t understand what a life I led—an’ why I led it. I had a mother and an invalid sister to keep: had ’em on my hands since I was a kid. Waltheim did more for me than any man; he sent me to Lausanne to be educated—but that trash!” she pointed her scornful finger at the portrait—“with his million-dollar yacht—he never did anything for me except give beastly parties that bored me, and waste millions on things I hated. They’ll tell you I ruined him, but that’s a lie. Women

don't ruin men. The worst they can do is to care so much for 'em that they don't stop 'em ruinin' themselves. Did I teach him to give monkey parties at the Waldorf, an' gondola parties an' every crazy fool party that a man without brains could give? You betcher life I didn't! But he was mad on spendin' money somehow, an' I had to find ways to turn the shower of gold on to me. He was making people rich by his fool tricks—hotel proprietors, costumiers, millions of suckers who got on to him. He was growin' poor under my eyes—why shouldn't some of his money come to me? I worked for every cent I got—suffered hells that men like you would sooner die than suffer. Think of the mean life I led, drinking—oh, it was horrible! And men like you and the Senator, who've never been hungry in your lives, who've never had to think twice before you spent two cents on a stamp—you! you! Stand and criticize me! Call me an adventuress an' worse! Spit at me as I pass an' sneer at me when I'm gone. Put pictures up in your office to remind you that I'm a designin' woman—ha! You can't deny that!"

Bart denied nothing. He stood by his desk, white of face and shaking.

"I don't know what you're after—you've been makin' love to me for a week, and I've got to kinder like you—but I guess there's something behind all this: there's a reason why I should drop Tirrell—is that it?"

He nodded.

"It doesn't matter to you," she said bitterly, "that I might suffer. I'm nothing—a light woman without friends—except my bank-balance. Doctors take dogs on the operatin' table and carve their poor bodies for the same reason. You'll tell me that I'm to suffer because I'll give somebody else pain. Who? Tirrell? I guess not. You couldn't do that for a man. I'm to be vivisected because—of another woman! Does she feel pain any more than I? Has she suffered—more than I? Is she entitled to more consideration than her sister who has climbed up through the mud? Bart Foreman, who are you that sit in judgment and condemn me to sorrow? You're sacrificing me to spare a worse woman than me, as like as not. I don't mean in the—the way you mean when you talk about 'badness.' There are women too mean to be bad—as you call it. Hard-hearted, cold-hearted women without a cent's worth of generosity in their miserable bodies, without desire, without sacrifice; is it for one of these I am to be put on the rack—for this woman?"

She stuffed her finger toward the door. Agatha Tirrell stood there, a dainty figure in grey.

"Agatha!"

Bart stared at her with wide-open eyes.

She closed the door behind her carefully, her eyes never leaving the tear-stained

face of May.

“You’re Mrs. Tirrell,” said the girl slowly, “and he—” she pointed to Bart—“he is the other man.”

Agatha nodded.

May wiped her eyes with a shaking hand and her lips tightened.

“So you’re the Schemer—that’s what Harold always called you. The man with the schemes. I didn’t think I’d come into your schemes. I see,” she said again, and started to pull on her gloves deliberately.

“I think you’re under some misapprehension,” said Agatha quietly. “You imagine that Mr. Foreman did—what he did to save me. There you are wrong. Mr. Foreman is trying to save his ward.”

“His ward!” May laughed viciously. “Well, I guess his ward, whoever she may be, must be prepared for all that is coming to her. I wish you good morning, Bart Foreman.”

He had been busily scribbling at his desk; now he handed a slip of paper across to her.

She took it in both hands and read.

Then she looked across at Bart, and for a moment their eyes met.

She had but to tear that oblong of paper into shreds to justify all that she had said, to humiliate him as he had never been humiliated before in his life, and so to shift the angle of things that he must change his viewpoints.

For a second or two it seemed that she would tear it across, then she looked at the paper again.

“What is this for?” she asked.

“Damages awarded by the Court of Honour,” said Bart flippantly. “If you marry, this will be my wedding present.”

“You’re a queer man,” she said with a smile, and slipped the cheque for five thousand pounds into her handbag as she made for the door.

CHAPTER X

“THAT lets me out,” said Bart. He had climbed up to the window ledge, and sat there surveying Agatha through the thin haze of smoke he had created.

“Why did you give her all that money?”

“Compensation for my wounded feelings,” he answered. “I was hurt more than she—hurt because I had to listen to much that was true, and much that was uncomplimentary to myself. May is rather convincing: would convince me more but for the fact that she played for two hundred nights in a play in which she had to deliver a speech resembling very closely that delivered by her before your arrival. I forget the name of the play, but I saw it when I was in New York. She might have been speaking the truth, but my information is that she wasn’t.”

Agatha regarded him seriously.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Bart decisively. “I have done my little chore—angels can do no more. Your husband will go ahead now with greater vigour. The writs will be served to-morrow, and the case will be in the list after the next vacation. When it is all over, I shall sit down here in this little office and ruin Harold.”

He puffed a little cloud of smoke through the open window.

“He will go out like that,” he said. “I shall libel him in his constituency, I shall publicly brand him a thief, and let him initiate action. I have already taken preparatory steps, and to-morrow he will be asked to resign from two of his most important directorships.”

“What about me—and Fay?” she asked.

He looked at her with the faintest smile, then he stretched slowly down to the floor level.

“I am sick of you and Fay,” he said simply. “I am tired of you both; I have tried to be considerate, tried without success to be heroic. You both sold me at a moment when I wanted your help. We have all been horribly selfish, with intervals of altruism on my part. Now I am going to run amok. For consider this, Agatha,” he tapped his desk emphatically, “I have no moral hold on life: you were my sheet anchor and you parted. Fay,” he shrugged, “well, Fay is just a responsibility. In July next we part, my promise to her mother fulfilled. I have been singularly unfortunate in my women friends. Don’t wince, and remember that there never was another woman in the world whom I wanted to marry. Life is a devil of a short experience, Agatha. I’ve wasted all the bloom of it on you. That’s hard, isn’t it? But it’s true.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked again, unflattered and unmoved by his

phase. She had had experience of him in such a mood before.

“I shall go abroad,” he said, “and have a jolly good time. I’ve one or two schemes to work out and the rest will be welcome. I shall go into the witness-box, of course, and lie like a gentleman, but Harold will be waving muddy hands in the air and uttering exultant cries to advertise the result of his gropings——”

He laughed.

“We’re in it, Agatha—you and I! And poor Fay is in it—though she somehow doesn’t fit. George is in it and Harold, and we all most desperately desired to keep out of it! What will people say about us, Agatha? Doesn’t that keep you awake at nights? Innocent you and innocent me compromised to everlasting, just because you dropped your head upon my shoulder and grizzled! What will people think?—that used to be your long suit.”

“It is still my long suit,” she interrupted calmly, “only it isn’t what people will think about me that worries—it is—what they will say of you.”

He stared at her.

“Good Lord!” he said. “Are you ill?”

She was tapping her chin thoughtfully, her gaze directed through the open window.

“Women make big sacrifices for the men they love,” she said slowly.

“So I’ve been told,” he answered with a little grimace. “Really, Agatha, you shouldn’t say these things!”

She ignored the sarcasm, and suddenly held out her hand.

“There is no one in the world who cares for me,” she said with a catch in her voice.

“There is one,” said Bart gravely, as he took her hand.

She looked up at his face quickly.

“Who?”

“Agatha Tirrell,” said he, with so pleasant a laugh that she could do no less than smile against her will.

CHAPTER XI

HAROLD was back in England, and had had interviews with people. Bart gathered as much when one morning he received some twenty pages of excited writing with such words as “cad,” “hound,” and “horsewhip” strongly underlined. He read the underlined parts and threw the letter into the fire.

“A stupid thing to do, if you don’t mind my offering my criticism,” said George Waterson.

Bart shrugged his shoulders.

“He has probably kept a copy,” he said.

He walked up and down the library, coming to the desk now and then to examine the imposing documents which George had spread out for his inspection.

“As Fay is affected, I think she had better know.”

“I suppose we cannot keep her out,” hesitated George.

“Keep whom out?” demanded Bart in surprise.

“Why Fay, of course,” said the other. “Whom did you think I meant?”

“I was not thinking of Fay,” admitted Bart with a sniff. “After all, she plays a very unimportant part in the trial. Harold has subpoenaed her, of course. No, the person I am sorry for in this matter is Agatha. You see, she has always been a stickler as to the proprieties, always in a sweat as to what people would think about her. The case will bear very hard upon her.”

“And upon Fay?” asked George with a little frown. For he also was a stickler for convention, and his sympathies were invariably with the law-abiding.

“Fay will be hurt,” said Bart, “but she will find pleasure in her hurt. All the Alma Roches will gather around and mingle their tears with hers. There will be an orgy of commiseration—perhaps the Court of Chancery will intervene and declare me to be no fit and proper guardian of the young and innocent——”

“I think you are a little hard,” said George quietly, “and just a little unfair.”

Fay came in at that moment, and the retort which trembled on Bart’s lips was left unsaid. She bowed to George with a smile, and greeted Bart with steady courtesy.

“Sit down, Fay, won’t you?” nodded Bart. “Here”—he spread his hands to the table like a dealer displaying his wares—“we have the documents of this interesting dispute to which I am a party. Mr. Tirrell is breathing fire and slaughter, and there seems to be no possible way by which I can evade persecution.”

He used the word willfully, mischievously, as though he wished to provoke her to protest; but she passed over the challenge.

“What do you wish me to do?” she asked. “I have been called as a witness.”

“I think the best thing you can do,” said Bart flippantly, “is to go abroad when the case comes on for trial; commit contempt of court and take the consequences.”

There was a little silence.

“Shall you defend it?” she asked.

“Of course I shall defend it,” said Bart in surprise.

“I shall stay in London until after the trial,” said Fay quietly. “I shall go abroad the night the case is ended. I shall be in Switzerland during the winter, and I shall endeavour to choose a place to which English newspapers are not accessible.”

“You look like having a grisly winter,” was Bart’s only comment.

She exchanged a few commonplaces with George Waterson before she left the room, and Bart watched her departure with a thoughtful little smile.

He had plenty of work to occupy his mind. Senator Dickson was in Paris, and had wired him to come over, and Bart spent two quiet days in the French capital. He had the splendid faculty of forgetting; could draw down the shutters over every compartment in his mind, or, as the working bees will encase the reckless intruder to their hives in a waxen tomb, so Bart would cover his troubles with a shroud of forgetfulness. He motored from Paris to Boulogne in the Senator’s car, and found the journey a pleasant one, though it was no advantage to arrive on Boulogne’s quay in time to see the stern of the mail steamer receding beyond the end of the pier. But Boulogne, even to the commonplace tourist character of its huddled shopping centre, offered sufficient attraction until he strolled back to see the English boat come in and to order his dinner at the station buffet.

It was whilst he was standing upon the pier watching the incoming boat discharge, that he reached the conclusion that there would be no divorce proceedings.

He was naturally quick-witted and imaginative, and needed no more than the end of a thread for a clue to the fabric from which that thread had strayed.

He went back to London preoccupied, and dined at home.

The attitude Fay adopted was one of benevolent hospitality. She had all the advantages which her rectitude and her sense of grievance gave her.

She could afford to be so magnanimous as to offer polite observations upon the weather and the comfort of his journey. But Bart was absent-minded that night and answered shortly. She could procure no more than a sprinkling of sentences half a dozen words in length from him, and grew weary of her perseverance, adding yet another notch to her tale of grievances.

Then, when dinner was nearly at an end, her maid came, flushed as one who bears important news, but may not disclose her knowledge before the world.

“Miss Roche to speak to you, miss, on the telephone,” said the girl, all aquiver with excitement, and speaking rapidly and incoherently.

“Miss Roche?” repeated Fay in surprise. “What on earth does she want? I thought she was abroad.”

She rose and folded her napkin methodically.

“It is very important, miss,” said the girl in agitation.

Something in the maid’s face startled Fay, and she went swiftly from the room, followed by the girl.

Bart was amused; he could imagine Alma almost beside herself with excitement, bursting with the news, unable to contain herself and wishing to bring it across the width of London to her friend, yet from sheer urgency pressing to her aid the telephone, about which she had so frequently spoken in terms of disparagement.

Presently the door opened again, and Fay came in, white of face.

She closed the door carefully behind her, and walked to the table, her eyes fixed upon the ground.

She seemed to find some difficulty in telling her news; she formed her lips to say the words, then straightened them again. He looked up at her steadily.

“Well?” he asked.

“Agatha—Agatha Tirrell is dead,” she jerked. “They have found her cloak on the towingpath between Putney and Mortlake—and a letter.”

He did not speak.

“Between Putney and Mortlake,” he said at last, “and the letter, I suppose, was to announce the fact that she was tired of her life?”

Fay nodded, her lips trembling.

“How very interesting!” said Bart, and, reaching out for an apple, he began to peel it with a steady hand. “I saw it in the evening papers on my way to the house, but they did not say anything about the letter.”

She stared down at him, horrified at the callous indifference he displayed.

“But don’t you think it is horrible?” she asked in a strained voice. “Isn’t it terrible, Bart?”

“It all depends upon the way you look at it,” said Bart Foreman, and mechanically sliced the apple in half.

BOOK IV

The Book of Enlightenment

CHAPTER I

BART shut the long French windows carefully behind him, and stepped from the grey, unnatural silence of the closed room into the morning stillness of the garden.

The sunlight was faint and still rosy from the dawn. He stood on the grass, cool and dewy under his feet, and looked out beyond the thick hedges, where a few hawthorn blossoms still lingered, to the blue sea that creamed and dimpled below. A long grey cloud or two hung low on the horizon, and a light haze hovered over the sunlit water. But in the garden the sun began to drink up the mist, and to lie warm upon the lawn.

He stood thus for a minute or two in the shadow of the sleeping house, breathing the light air that was already warm with garden scents.

He lit a pipe, and puffed at it with satisfaction—it smelt good in the clean dawn. Then he strolled down the path to the wall at the end of the garden that offered itself as a suitable resting-place for an idle early riser, being broad enough and low enough to sit upon with comfort, and commanding an excellent prospect on either hand. If he turned his head to the left there was the summer sea, blue and smooth and sparkling at the foot of the white cliffs, where the sand martens wheeled about their early morning business. To the right stretched the garden, the bright colour of it subdued in the shadow, but rioting in the sun with a carnival gaiety, bright and busy with the stir of birds.

He sat for some time, and was lazily content to think of nothing at all but the fine morning, and the start that he had of the rest of the world, still asleep, and missing the best hour of the day. Then, as the air warmed about him, and the shadows dwindled on the lawn, he began to think.

He reflected that his life had brought him to a pleasant place, and that while he had enough youth left to enjoy it utterly. This was better than the struggle and discouragement of his early years, those years when he was trying to force a reluctant world to take him at his own valuation. He looked back at that strenuous, bitter time with a grim satisfaction at having lived through it, in spite of them all—with a stout pride in his own strength, that had carried him through much without suffering his spirit to be quite daunted.

And then, some chance wind that was heavy with the scent of lilac brushed his face, and he thought, suddenly, of the woman who had made those lean, hungry years worth the living. The fragrance of the lilac brought her back to him as nothing but a scent can; she was there beside him, her warm, white face close to his, her

deep eyes, so austere, so filled with fugitive tenderness, looked into his eyes; he could almost hear the rustle of her dress thrill again as he touched her hand.

It was strange. She had not been in his mind, and now, at the call of a waft of sweetness from those lavender flowers that swung in the summer wind against the wall, she was with him again, she was his, who could never be his any more.

Why had she done it? How could she do it? He asked himself the same old, weary questions over again, as the same pain burned in his heart that had shrivelled it, he thought, so that it could never know pain again.

He walked through the garden gate, crossed the road to the little strip of ground spangled with daisies, and so the edge of the cliff. Down below, white and gleaming, were the sands of Oddicombe Beach. To the right, and out of sight, around the grey shoulder of the cliff, was Torquay. He glanced back at the house ruefully. Those two white blinds drawn down over the opened windows at one angle of the house marked Fay's room. He had been horribly domestic, unaccountably so, yet had found a certain impish delight in the experience. They had waited in town until the sensational disappearance of Mrs. Tirrell had been forgotten by the press, and until Harold Tirrell himself had withdrawn his petition.

Harold at least had had the decency to keep from the prying reporters the fact that he had cited his wife as respondent in a divorce suit, and Fay, with a prim, serious air which was at once disapproving and protective, had suggested with some gravity that it would be best for all concerned, and for Agatha's memory, in particular, if she and Bart went away from London together.

It was all so very much like Fay, and yet so amusing withal, that Bart consented.

And here he was at Babbacombe in the spring of the year, bored to death already by his great trial, and seeking in his mind some way of escape.

He was deeply conscious of the fact that he was in disgrace all round. He felt that for the first time in his life he had really hurt Fay. His indifference or his simulation of indifference in the face of the tragedy which had overtaken Agatha Tirrell had shown her a Bart she had never suspected. The latent cruelty in the man about whom she had been weaving secret dreams was exposed. It justified the words of warning the bold Mr. Stenton had uttered nearly a year before.

So this was Bart.

Then she discovered an amazing truth: that she had idealized him! Yes, through all this period of strain, through all this contempt of hers, she had been looking up to him, seeing in him an almost godlike being, despite his defects, despite his obvious weaknesses. The granite in him was close to the surface all the time; the brutality in the new Bart shocked her. Nor was Fay the only person who shook a sad head

over Bart and his failure to maintain himself in the niche which idealism had carved for him.

George Waterson thought he knew his Foreman; old Stenton was equally certain, though it may be said that the Bart he knew was altogether a stranger to that which George knew. He had fallen tremendously short of expectation where poor Agatha was concerned; indeed, he had refused point-blank to discuss her, and had met a tremulous Josiah Stenton, whose drooping mouth told the extent of his suspicions, with a display of flippancy which left Mr. Stenton gasping.

Oh, yes, he was unpopular all right.

He grinned to himself as he walked along the strip of grass, his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, his grey felt hat tilted upon the back of his head.

A year or so ago such unpopularity would have distressed him, now he was frankly indifferent. Now and again he found himself wondering curiously what Fay would do next month. He was as much interested in his own plans. One thing was certain: the present relationship between himself and the girl could not continue. She must go her way and he must go his. He frowned a little. He had thought, after her return from Paris and that one delicious moment of intimacy of understanding, that they might become good pals.

He shrugged his shoulders, and turned back to the house. Next month the ridiculous arrangement ended . . . he was glad.

The maids were about and had seen him coming through the garden, for the tray with his early morning coffee and roll was awaiting him in his study. He settled himself at his desk and tried to work, but since he had sat down with the feeling of certainty that his efforts in this direction were foredoomed to failure, it was not surprising that Fay should come down to find that he had made no further progress in the construction of his new comedy than a fanciful pen-and-ink sketch of an elephant upon his blotting-pad.

"I am bored, Fay," he said suddenly.

She was taking her light breakfast in the room which served both as sitting-room and den.

"What do you want to do?" she asked quickly, folding her hands on her lap with resignation.

"I think we might go on the Continent," suggested Bart.

"Where would you like to go?" she asked without partiality.

"What is the good of asking me that?" he replied irritably. "I want you to suggest somewhere."

"Paris," she said at a venture.

Bart could have damned Paris at that moment; it was the sort of fool place that Fay would suggest.

“Or Rome,” she added.

“Or Madrid,” said he fretfully, “or Stockholm, or Copenhagen, or Lisbon, or Jerusalem! Cannot you think of anywhere original?”

“I think this is an original sort of place,” she said after a pause.

“It is so original,” said Bart with a faint smile, “that it is marked in all the guide-books of Europe as the beauty spot of England. It is not quite so original as Margate would be, and infinitely less original than Matlock Wells.”

“Would you like to go somewhere by yourself?” she asked, looking across at him gravely.

“Would you?” he challenged.

She shook her head, and pressed her lips tighter together.

“This is our last month,” she said. “I don’t suppose we’ll be seeing much of one another—after. And people would misconstrue my action if I went away—after . . .” She did not complete the sentence.

“You mean that you would be failing in your duty,” said Bart, at once annoyed and amused, “if you did not show people that whatever the outside world may think about me you will stand by me in my hour of need. Do I read you aright?”

“I think you read me as horribly as you possibly can,” she said quietly.

“For heaven’s sake drop it, Fay,” he said. “I am tired of this studied reserve of yours, this meek, enduring spirit. If you want to come abroad and have a good time we will go from Weymouth to-morrow morning; if you do not, go back to London and let the world think what it pleases. As you say, there is only a month, and anyway, why not end it now?”

She thought awhile, then:

“I will go abroad,” she said. “I feel that it is the least I can do for you.”

Bart rose and put his fingers in his ears.

“Do not say it, Fay,” he said solemnly. “It makes me feel as though I were married to you, and that is the one folly which all my life I have been trying to avoid.”

CHAPTER II

IT was not an auspicious start to a continental tour, and Bart spent two days in an atmosphere of irritation which he himself had created. After an evening spent in discussion of the most likely and impossible places they had fixed lamely upon Paris, excusing their feeble choice with the agreement that Paris at any rate was a good stepping-off place.

Bart had been bored at Babbacombe; he was no less bored in Paris.

At Babbacombe, however, he had concealed his boredom; here, in this gay city, he threw off all disguise of ennui and was openly and unrestrainedly wearied. Paris had nothing to show him, and he had nothing of Paris to reveal to Fay. He had a feeling too that she was a sort of punishment to which she had condemned him in a fit of super-virtue.

They drifted from Paris to Geneva, from Geneva to Chamonix, from Chamonix to Nice, from Nice to Rome, the patient Fay neither complaining of his restlessness nor offering a sedative to his razor-edged nerves.

Bart passed from the stage of the good-natured irritation to one of frank querulousness.

He quarrelled desperately whenever excuse offered; not with Fay, but with such public servants as came his way—with the *wagon-lit* conductor, with the head waiter at the Pallazzo, with Cook's agents in Naples, and all the time Fay realized that he was venting upon these unoffending officials the wrath which she had engendered.

The end of that uncomfortable tour came at Rome with one of those explosive outbursts on her part which had become, so Bart told her in tones of aggravating reproof, far too frequent of late ("and mark," said he, with exasperating calmness, "a stage of life at which girlhood and the buoyancy of youth were dropped for ever in the rear").

They left Rome for London by the Limited Express—unexpectedly.

"A wise plan," said Bart when she announced her intention.

"Nothing will move you," she said bitterly, "neither devotion nor friendship. Poor Agatha died for a miserable cause."

Bart laughed.

"All this present trouble and recrimination," he said suavely, "has come about because you and I disagreed as to the hotel we should stay at."

"I cannot be everlastingly victimized by your caprices," she answered hotly. "You said this was the best hotel in Rome, and no sooner had we settled here than you

want all your traps re-packed and taken to the Select.”

“I changed my mind,” he said with a cheerful smile. “It is a man’s privilege—besides, there are reasons why I should not stay here.”

She looked at him with a queer smile.

“I dare say there are,” she said dryly.

“Nothing of that sort,” shrugged Bart. “Most of my adventures have occurred in my own dear native land, and precious few that ‘most’ has been, I assure you, and precious heavy is the price I have been called upon to pay for them.”

“The train leaves at nine to-night,” she said, turning to leave the room.

“You were saying,” he went on, as though he had not noticed her move, “that the poor dear Agatha made her sacrifice in vain. I do not agree with you. After all, Fay, let us look facts very squarely in the face. All that Agatha hoped to accomplish by her sacrifice she did accomplish. The divorce proceedings were dropped, her husband would have married the charming Miss Masfield but for the fact that the charming Miss Masfield had already quarrelled with him and returned to America; our names and incidentally Agatha’s were relieved of the publicity which would have been ours had the case gone for trial. What more could you wish for?”

“I could wish for some exhibition of gratitude on your part,” she said, “some decency of feeling, some sense of the awfulness of poor Agatha’s end. But you take that as you have taken everything, as part of your right.”

They did not discuss Agatha again until the next morning, as they were sitting at breakfast—the train was standing in the station at Lausanne. He leant across the table, lowering his voice.

“Oddly enough,” he said, “you raised two subjects last night in the same breath. My caprice in wishing to change my hotel and my heartless attitude towards Agatha’s sacrifice.”

She was a little surprised that he should introduce the subject at such a prosaic hour.

“I think it is only right to tell you,” he went on carefully, “that I changed my hotel because I had no desire that you should meet Agatha.”

“What do you mean?” she gasped, and for an instant thought that his brain was turned.

“I mean this,” he said, as he sliced off the top of an egg; “Agatha was staying in the hotel.”

“What?” She half rose from her chair. “Do you mean that Agatha is still alive?”

He nodded, too busy with his egg for coherent articulation.

“Very much alive,” he said after a while. “Fortunately for my peace of mind I

happened to be at Boulogne the day she was ‘drowned’ and saw her land there. I have done Agatha a great injustice,” he went on, shaking his head. “I thought she had no imagination.”

CHAPTER III

MR. STENTON kept a canary in his flat at Whitehall Court—a proceeding which, whilst it was hardly in keeping with the known character of those superior chambers, was not regarded as reprehensible even by the gallant young officer of the Irish Guards whose flat was above Mr. Stenton's, and who woke every morning of his life to the frantic piping of Josiah's pet.

Mr. Stenton had been anxious to know whether it was "the thing" to hang his bird-cages outside of his window, and took the commissionaire's opinion on the subject. The commissionaire was cautious, and said that, so far as he was concerned, he liked to see a canary and to hear a canary, which reminded him (so he stated) of the country, though which country he was careful not to explain. But . . . There *was* a but in the matter. Canaries weren't exactly low, but they were common. If Mr. Stenton hung a hawk or an owl from his window he might have passed notably as an eccentric; but canaries were—canaries. The consultation ended in Josiah retaining a vague impression that canaries were low and that nothing short of a brace of golden eagles would satisfy the rigid proprieties of Whitehall Court.

Now if Bart were here——

Mr. Stenton sighed. He always sighed nowadays when he thought of Bart. The amiable little man could not see the end of the business—glimpsed not so much as a spark of happy ending to Bart's stories, and happy endings were as the breath of his nostrils.

He was a lover of romance, and held a reputation in certain circles as a literary critic. So may any man who has a consistent point of view, and Mr. Stenton's point of view was that novels that ended "They buried Victor at sunset, leaving a rough-hewn cross to mark the place of his sleep, and Mildred, sitting in far-off Claybury, heard the news dry-eyed," should be banished from the reading lists of normal people.

Fay Milton had come back to town alone. This Josiah learnt from Alma Roche, who had developed of late into an intelligent woman, and kept up a regular and methodical correspondence with the bachelor of Whitehall Court. For Josiah had learnt, by accident, that Miss Roche was appreciative of the printed wisdom which he collected with such pains. The friendship began unpromisingly over a view of life expressed by Josiah on a chance meeting in the Embankment Gardens (he could do no less than be civil) and combated sharply by the lady. Thence, after mutual glarings, Josiah had slowly and impressively quoted his authority—Asmodeus in *Topical Chat*.

She (a confessed admirer of Asmodeus) had doubted the correctness of the quotation, and they had adjourned to Whitehall Court, where Josiah won his shilling—that being the wager she had recklessly laid upon her certainty that Asmodeus couldn't be such a fool.

Somehow there was nothing improper in Miss Roche's visits—and they were frequent—to Whitehall Court. No more, in fact, than had an aeroplane called upon a motor-bus. Once Mr. Stenton had qualms as to whether the amiable Alma had designs upon his fortune, but the qualm dissolved into a pleasant speculation, and from speculation into hope.

It is doubtful whether Miss Roche had so much as a qualm.

“Fay is back—come back alone: Bart is returning to-morrow. A parade of the London troops has been cancelled, and there has been another strike.”

All this breathlessly, for Alma had received her friend's letter in the midst of her perusal of the morning newspaper, and was not quite certain which item of news was the most vital.

There was no reason why Mr. Stenton should call upon Fay, for it was inconceivable that she should be an authority upon canary manners; yet eventually, when he had debated matters in his mind and had turned over every artful gambit—if one can turn over a gambit—and carefully rehearsed many speeches, he came to a certain conclusion, and sallied forth in the afternoon with a large, square, brown-paper parcel in his hand—a parcel carried gingerly and punctured at odd intervals with holes, and a parcel, moreover, which inconveniently and embarrassingly began to trill loudly and defiantly as it descended in the lift with a smiling young guardsman.

Mr. Stenton had arranged the interview to his satisfaction. It would run somehow like this:

FAY. How do you do, Mr. Stenton? I am very glad to see you again.

JOSIAH (*easily*). Delighted to see you, my dear Miss Milton.

FAY. What have you there?

JOSIAH (*with an affable smile*). A little present I've brought you.

FAY (*opening parcel*). A canary! How delightful! What made you bring it?

JOSIAH (*gravely*).

The song of a little singing bird
Shall fill your heart with glee.
The sweetest music ever heard
It brings back hope to me.
So let it sing your cares away,
And free you from despair,
And in your heart for ever play
A tune—for love is there.

Thus would he at one and the same time artfully dispose of an embarrassment, and secure the confidence of a friend. The interviews that Josiah planned were never fulfilled to the letter—but that was not his fault.

Fay was writing letters when Mr. Stenton came in, and her greeting was absent and a thought cold.

“I’ve brought you a canary,” he blurted. “I thought perhaps—as a matter of fact, Miss Milton——”

“A canary—a bird?” she asked in amazed surprise.

He nodded and fumbled at the paper covering.

“It is awfully good of you.” She smiled again, and rang the bell. Packer came and greeted Mr. Stenton with a respectful little bow.

“Take the bird to the kitchen,” she said, “and tell cook to get some seed for it—poor little thing, he’s moulting. You’re not going, Mr. Stenton?”

“Got an engagement,” he stammered. “How’s Bart?”

“Bart? Oh, Bart is bright and cheery—he’ll be in town to-morrow.”

Mr. Stenton assumed his most melancholy air.

“I don’t know what to make of Bart,” he said, and waited for encouragement. None was offered, however.

“He’s the best chap in the world,” he went on earnestly. “People don’t know him so well as I do, an’ when I say I don’t know what to make of him, I mean, I trust him up to the hilt, though me ears an’ me eyes tell me he’s not—well, not——”

“Playing the game?” she suggested, and he nodded.

“But I’d trust him sooner than eyes and sooner than ears,” he said eagerly. “When Bart does things that look—well, that look rotten, if you’ll pardon the expression, I know, here,” he thumped his chest, “that I’m wrong an’ he’s right, an’ time after time I’ve known the truth.”

She winced a little. It seemed as though he claimed a faith which should have been hers, that this short, bald little man was robbing her of a right. He trusted Bart, had trusted him when “trust” spelt money advanced on dubious security.

As for Fay, she had never trusted. She had not trusted Bart’s brain or Bart’s

heart—she had not the right to defend him, save with the unpleasant feeling that she was being despicably hypocritical. All that men or women might say of Bartholomew Foreman, she herself had thought.

She dismissed Mr. Stenton somewhat abruptly at a moment when he anticipated (and reasonably) an invitation to tea.

CHAPTER IV

IT was eleven o'clock when Bart reached home the following night, and he was in gay spirits, for he had played piquet in the Pullman from Dover and had won many points.

Also Fay had left him in Paris on good terms—almost, it seemed, as if they had come back to the standard of comradeship which had been reached on one other occasion. Fay opened the door to him.

He was surprised to see her in this service, for she was a stickler for small domestic etiquette.

"I suppose you have had your supper?" she asked.

He looked at her in surprise.

She was in evening dress, that deep blue chiffon velvet he had admired at Monte Carlo. It suited her with her clear skin, her delicate modelling of face, her beautiful eyes and hair.

"You're a devil of a swell to-night, Fay," he said. "Have you been dining somewhere? Where is your newly acquired chaperon?"

"Gone to bed; it is rather late for chaperons," she answered with mock gravity.

A little table had been laid for him, a table scrupulously set with silver and flowers and bright glass.

"Is this your birthday or something?" he asked. Then: "Where is Packer?"

"I've given him a day off; his sister is ill."

"His sister is always ill," said Bart. "Where was the racing to-day—at Kempton?"

"Besides," she went on, "there wasn't much bother getting this ready—Alma Roche helped me before she went to bed."

He helped himself daintily to some galantine—Bart was a small and fastidious eater—and was inclined to return to his exploits of the night.

"The cards ran pretty evenly, but he wasn't such a wise bird in his discards as I—aren't there any servants around?"

She shook her head, her grave eyes fixed on him.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Everything is here."

She rose from her place opposite to him, and walked to the fireplace. He saw the gleam of a silver bucket, and watched her with a wondering smile as she deftly nipped the wires about the champagne cork.

He did not speak as she creamed the golden wine into a glass by his side.

"Ain't mother going to have none?" he asked vulgarly.

She made a little grimace.

“I suppose that is the theatrical influence,” she said resignedly, but she poured her own glass full.

He sipped his wine.

“This is the most impressive home-coming I’ve had,” he said.

“Don’t be silly, Bart—I have often given you supper—Mr. Stenton was here yesterday. He brought a canary. He wrote to-day to tell me that he wanted me to hang it in my room. Poor little man, I am afraid he thought I was relegating it to the kitchen. It happened I anticipated his wishes.”

“Wine,” said Bart, and held out his glass.

“I have never seen you take wine before,” said Fay with a little smile. “By the way,” she went on, quickly checking his indignant protest, “did you finish your business in Paris?”

He nodded.

“I got into communication with Agatha, Madame Agatha, as she calls herself—I spotted the name in the visitors’ book at the Continental—and she is perfectly satisfied with herself. She wants to be left alone, is quite happy, and is planning a visit to Japan.”

There was a long silence after this.

“How—how do you feel about—Agatha?”

No one knows what effort was required to frame those words, or what it cost Fay Milton to put everything to stake in one question.

“Agatha?” He looked up at the ceiling, then round the room at the familiar objects just traceable in the half lights which escaped from the shaded electric lamp on the table. “Agatha—is unreal now: you have a tooth out—and it is painful. Afterwards you can hardly remember . . .”

“And your young affections?” she asked flippantly with the freedom of a confidante. “Where are they placed?”

If her voice was strained and unnatural she could only pray that he did not notice the fact. To outward showing, with the curl of red lip and the laughter in her fine eyes, she was all good fellowship and kindly interest.

For once in his life Bart felt at a disadvantage with his ward, and laughed uncomfortably.

“My young affections are placed where they have always been,” he said, “on myself.”

He opened his cigarette case, and she reached out and helped herself.

Again he surveyed her with a look of wonder.

"I didn't know that you smoked," he said.

"I have many vices of which you are ignorant," she replied coolly. "It is difficult to live in the same house as you for ever so many years and retain one's snow-white purity of habit."

He chuckled as he held the blazing match toward her.

"It only needs a hearty damn or two," he said, "from those unsullied lips to turn my conception of things inside out."

"Even that may not be denied you," she laughed.

Then she added:

"You talk of this as a home-coming. Doesn't it strike you as likely that this is a farewell banquet?"

He looked up quickly and smacked his knee.

"Good heavens, yes! To-morrow is your twenty-fifth birthday! Do I get out or do you? It is so long since I went into things that I forget whether this house is your property or mine."

"Yours, of course," she said. "It was one of the conditions of the will."

"So you are going?"

He put down his wine untasted and pushed back his chair. A little frown gathered between his eyes, and she knew he was troubled.

"Well," he said at last, "it was a crazy scheme. I was no more fit to be your guardian than you were to be a respectful and obedient ward. You've passed through all the active stages of regard, Fay, awe——"

"That didn't last long," she interrupted.

"Suspicion, dislike, contempt, half-reluctant admiration——"

She laughed at his egotism.

"And I've been through 'em all too," he said, "all and one more. There was one moment when——"

She held her breath as he hesitated.

"When I loved you. It was the time when you came back from Paris and found Agatha and me . . . it was the sweetest, most wonderful feeling I had ever had. A warm sense of comradeship that had been missing from—the other affair. Yes, I loved you . . . but I was scared out of it later."

He looked at her gravely.

"I hope you'll be happy, Fay," he said. "Maybe clear of my blighting influence the Man will come along."

"He can't," she said, and her voice shook; "he's been here—all along, Bart—only I've been too selfish and narrow and small to understand him, and all the

opportunities have gone.”

She rose quickly to her feet and passed to the door.

“Good night, Bart!” she said in a muffled voice.

“Wait, Fay—will you bring down Josiah’s little bird?”

Tearful of face though she was, he surprised her into turning.

“W-why?” she gulped.

“Because,” said Bart, moving toward and taking her by the shoulders, “because I’m going to love you to death, and I think you should have a chaperon.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Books of Bart* by Edgar Wallace]