Caroline Terrace

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CAROLINE TERRACE

ISABELLA came to Caroline Terrace, that select row of genteel houses perched high on the cliffs of South End, in the palmy days of the Victorian era. But Isabella did not enjoy the pleasures of the seaside, or the comfort of her home, for she was merely a governess to Mrs. Pankridge's two insufferable children, engaged at twenty pounds a year. And Isabella was also the daughter of a man hanged for murder, a fact which incurred her instant dismissal when the truth became known to Mrs. Pankridge. But, by that time, she had made a friend in the eccentric Miss Cripps who lived at No. 20. Miss Cripps had gone so far as to take her to a ball, where Isabella made a great impression on the men and especially on the handsome George Travers and the plain and clumsy parson, John Jordan. These two men shaped her destiny; the one brought her close to death, the other rescued her from self-destruction and, in the midst of the terror that struck South End, brought her a new meaning to life.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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BLIND MAN'S YEAR

NO HERO—THIS

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TWO IN A TRAIN

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THE OLD WORLD DIES

CAROLINE TERRACE

by

WARWICK DEEPING

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I

THE sea was old, the human stage colourful and new. Captain Bullard appeared upon the balcony of No. 3 Caroline Terrace, with a spy-glass under his arm, and his wooden leg tapping the timbered floor. A chair had been placed for him, and he sat down, starched as to collar and blue as to coat, his breeches superlatively white, his brass buttons gleaming. Trousers, those new conventions, might have concealed a wooden leg, but Captain Bullard would have none of those damned new-fangled bags. He had patrolled his quarter-deck in breeches, and breeches he would wear until a timber box engulfed him.

Captain Bullard surveyed the scene. He was fresh of colour and white of head, and he had the blue eyes of a seaman. The month was May, and the bathing season in. Below him the Shrubbery rose in bosky greenness, with three tall Lombardy poplars rising as high as the houses. The black-timbered pier jutted out into a satin sea, for the tide was in and the morning windless. On the beach below the hill two boats were setting their sails, and two bathing-machines had their wheels in the water, with their white hoods down. Three boatmen in long boots and white shirts were gossiping, with a black dog listening attentively. Above the toll-house of the pier the Marine Library displayed its double semicircular windows with green veranda roofs like the lace on the pendant drawers of immature young gentlewomen. The white façade of the Assembly Room was visible beyond the Royal Hotel.

A pleasant and a peaceful scene, and the little gardens of the Terrace were gay with stocks and sweet-williams. The green spires of the poplars gleamed like steeples. Doorsteps were immaculate; brass knockers shining. The balconies of the Terrace were contrasts in colour, some green, others brown, a few fresh cream. Captain Bullard sat and suffered the sun to warm his tummy.

Yes, a pleasant scene, decorous and perhaps to Captain Bullard slightly dull. He had an eye for a petticoat, and could still appreciate things feminine, not—indeed—as a lusty sailor whose gig had landed him at many ports, but as a mischievous old gentleman with a human liking for pretty faces.

Captain Bullard pulled out his telescope, and turned it upon the bathing-machine below the jetty. He had seen signs of movement under the great white hoods, and could postulate shy nymphs bobbing up and down in the salt water. Strange convention—this—that healthy girls should remain concealed beneath

those monstrous petticoats, and not dare either the eyes of man or the laughing sea. It had been rather different in those islands where dusky beauties had—ahem—yes!

But one of the water-nymphs had ventured into the light, swathed in blue, pleated flannel, and Captain Bullard focused his glass. Was this unexpected vision provocative? No, it was not. The youngest of the Lardner girls, Miss Caroline, was flouncing up and down, and Captain Bullard had no illusions about the Lardner ladies. They were known to their neighbours as Faith, Hope, and Charity, and Hope remained eternal, and Charity titteringly acid. As for Miss Faith the eldest, she was faithful to God and good works, and the lecturing of other people's children.

'Naughty, naughty!' said a female voice.

Captain Bullard telescoped his spy-glass, and grinned at the lady on the next balcony.

'Hullo, Jane. Like a peep?'

Miss Jane Massingbird shook her ringlets at him. She was a tall, lean, merry gentlewoman, who, as a gossip, could be genial and tolerant.

'The Lardner ladies, I think.'

'By my top-gallants, you have good eyesight. And Caroline has broken loose.'

'Poor wench—why not? Ah, someone has plucked her back under virtue's awning. Dear Faith, I presume. Young sisters should not stray.'

Captain Bullard produced a large, yellow bandanna, and blew his nose, and he blew it as though sounding a fog-horn.

'*Verbum sap.* I often wonder, Jane, if too much virtue is becoming.'

'Virtue is always becoming——'

'Aye—what?'

'A little too tight in the lacing.'

Miss Massingbird lodged at No. 4, Mrs. Boosey's apartment house, Captain Hector Bullard with Mrs. Trigg at No. 3. Taken in series the Terrace was a veritable chronicle of fashion. Beginning with a wing of the Royal Hotel it became at once superior in No. 1 where Sir Montague Merriman and family advertised a lean distinction and aloofness. Percival Tryte Esq. occupied No. 2, with a series of interesting ladies who followed each other like pictures of the Seasons. No. 3 was Mrs. Trigg's apartment house, No. 4, Mrs. Boosey's. No. 5

housed the Lardner family, and Mr. Lardner had been an eminent jurist, a gentleman who walked very head-in-air, with a long nose suggesting that it was offended by some unseemly smell. Mrs. Webber let lodgings at No. 6, Lawyer Lamb was at No. 7. No. 8 held Dr. William Rollinson, his wife Margaret, and a clutch of blond babies. At No. 9 Miss Bellamy sang sentimental songs, and twittered like a bird in a cage. No. 10 was rented by Humphrey Hapgood Esq., a jaunty gentleman distinguished solely by his waistcoats and his white topper. No. 11 was Mrs. Bumpus's apartment house. No. 12 held the Rev. Nicholas Parbury, a vicar of St. John's, a sporting parson and a complete quidnunc whose conversation was full of 'What-whats?' At No. 13 dwelt the Misses Megson; at No. 14 Mrs. Cardew let lodgings. Major Miller lived at No. 15, a mild and amiable gentleman who had fought at Waterloo, and who carried a fantastic and stalked wen on the crown of his head which bobbed and swayed like some strange fungus when it was not hatted. No. 16 housed Horatio Harbourn, the Nabob, known by the vulgar as Old White-belly. Mrs. Callow let apartments at No. 17. Sir Hugh Latimer and family represented Literature at No. 18. No. 19 was sacred to the stately Gages, handsome lords of much rich land. At No. 20 Miss Charlotte Cripps, the Terrace's she-dragon, observed humanity with beady black eyes, and scarified it with a caustic tongue.

Walled gardens joined Caroline Terrace to the stables and cottages of Caroline Mews. Here were housed the coachmen and cabmen who served the greater and the lesser great. Caroline Mews was Caroline Terrace in miniature, coarser in speech, prone to drunkenness and brawling. The Terrace would have suffered surprise had it heard what the Mews sometimes said of it, though good things were spoken of No. 8 and No. 19. Dr. Rollinson was beloved of the people because he happened to be a man who served the poor as sedulously as he served the rich, and the Gages were known as true gentlefolk, and handsome is as handsome does.

Captain Bullard let out a sudden 'Hallo', and opened up his spy-glass, and Miss Massingbird, turning to gaze, saw the London coach pulling up outside the Royal Hotel. The coach was blue, with yellow wheels, the four horses white, the coachman in scarlet, and its roof seats were flowing with coloured frocks and poke bonnets.

Captain Bullard turned his glass upon it, and Miss Massingbird observed him.

'Anything interesting, sir?'

‘No, damn it, the Pankridge crowd. But, wait a bit. Two girls up above.’

‘New speculations?’

‘H’m, yes, and those damned Pankridge children, and a gentleman with flowing locks. Looks like a poet.’

The coach was shedding its inward passengers. Mr. Pankridge was the first to emerge, large, full-fleshed, and pompous, to present a hand to the ladies. Mrs. Pankridge, holding her skirts, extruded a precise and deliberate foot. She was a halcyon blonde, bounteous in outline, and black of dress, Roman-nosed, cold of eye, and excessively genteel. She was the foredestined mistress of all the proprieties, and her hard blue eyes could stare forbiddingly upon the vulgar. Other ladies followed. Meanwhile the Pankridge children, Victoria and Albert, came scrambling to earth. The two maidens up above had no gallant hand to assist in their descent, for the gentleman with the flowing locks had most ungallantly left the coach before them, and was lugging a valise out of the boot.

The Pankridge children were scuttling for the Shrubbery, undeterred by their mother’s throaty admonitions.

‘Vic-tor-iah, Albert, come back imme-diately.’

Young legs scuttled all the faster, doubtless with the urge to stretch themselves after hours on a coach. One of the young gentlewomen up above had risen, and Mrs. Pankridge addressed her.

‘Miss Luce, I fear that you are neglecting your duties. Please oblige me by bringing the children back to the hotel.’

Meanwhile, Master Albert had sighted Captain Bullard on the balcony, and he and Captain Bullard had no affection for each other. Master Albert paused to spread a thumb and fingers at the Captain, and his sister, moved to emulation, put out a small pink tongue. Then, with giggles, they vanished into the Shrubbery’s shadows.

‘Sweet children,’ said Miss Massingbird.

‘Damned urchins! They need smacking twice a day.’

Miss Massingbird’s sharp eyes were on the coach.

‘A new governess, I think.’

‘Poor wretch!’

‘And rather pretty.’

The Captain raised his glass.

‘By Jove, yes. But looks delicate and gentle. Not the kind to cope with those young savages.’

‘Blame the mother,’ said Miss Jane.

The Captain lowered his glass.

‘Poof, that mass of snobbery and selfishness! A bumboat woman’s worth three of her. I’m sorry for the poor girl.’

A porter and a fat boy in buttons were unloading the luggage and carrying it into the hotel. Miss Luce and her new friend descended, and the coachman, expecting no largesse from them, raised a rude and ironic hat. The Pankridge governess stood a moment, looking lost and absent, rather like a child on the threshold of some strange and unfriendly school. She had a dark fragility, a piquant pallor, eyes and mouth suggesting inward silences. Slim and of medium height, she was dressed in black, and her white poke bonnet framed the sensitive oval of a sad, sweet face. Yet, it was not all sugar and sweetness, for the dark eyes under the delicate black eyebrows had a reflective watchfulness. Her lips were full but firm, her chin beautifully sculptured.

‘Well, my dear,’ said her blonde young friend, ‘are you going in search of the little angels?’

A sudden smile parted Isabella Luce’s lips. Her white teeth were perfect.

‘That—is my obligation.’

‘Well, don’t forget Fanny Gurney. I shall be at the old “Ship”.’

The porter touched a greased forelock and addressed the ladies.

‘Your luggage, miss?’

Isabella turned slowly, surveyed the baggage, and pointed deliberately to a shabby black trunk.

‘That—is mine.’

‘Nothing else, miss?’

‘No.’

‘Very good, miss. I think you are No. 13.’

Thirteen? How symbolical! It would be a back bedroom, no doubt, of a shrewd simplicity. She smiled and nodded at Miss Fanny Gurney, who, being an actress, was not socially recognizable, and moved towards the Shrubbery.

The dear children must be found and persuaded to obey somebody.

Captain Bullard had left the balcony. He appeared at the door of No. 3 in the act of donning a huge black beaver. His wooden leg stumped emphatically across the gravel of the roadway. He, too, was in pursuit of sense and sensibility.

Miss Luce did not find the children. They had escaped to the beach below the pier, and were employed in pitching pebbles at the two white bathing-machines. A stout old woman with a furious red face came pounding across the sand towards them.

'You stop that, you filthy little imps.'

The Pankridge children knew the lady, and fled. Old Mother Bugg of the bathing-machines had a hard red hand, and could use it if contact became possible.

But Captain Bullard met the governess wandering back up a steep path, and he raised his hat to her.

'I'll deputize, my dear.'

Her face had had a frightened frostiness, but suddenly she smiled. Kindness and courtesy were rare in her world.

'Thank you, sir, but——'

Captain Bullard stood holding his hat.

'I'm more limber on my leg than you would think, my dear. You have had a longish journey. A little rest might be indicated. My name is Bullard, Captain Bullard, and at your service.'

His words seemed to warm her fragile little face.

'Thank you, sir.'

She gave him a shy and grateful glance, and Captain Bullard resumed his hat. By his top-gallants this was a pretty creature, especially so when those douce dark eyes gleamed at you.

II

THE ROYAL HOTEL was all mahogany, gilding, and red plush. It welcomed its visitors with a white-pillared porch, bowed them into a pleasant dining-room, or up curving and carpeted stairs to an equally pleasant drawing-room with windows and balcony fronting upon the sea. The hotel might flatter itself with the knowledge that for one month it had housed royalty, but that did not deter it from greeting hungry visitors with culinary savours, odours of roast beef and rich gravy, the smell of good brown ale, and more subtle perfumes, the bouquet of wine and old port. The gentle world fed well here, and were served by waiters who were known by their Christian names, and were almost part of the furniture. The beds were feather mattressed for those who could command such comfort. An array of candles in brass sticks stood ready at night on a long mahogany table on the first-floor landing, and even slippers waited for those who desired them. It was all 'Yes, sir,' and 'Yes, madam,' to the elect, and chambermaids in lavender-coloured frocks and white mob caps curtsyed when they met a lady who rustled in satin or in silk.

Miss Luce made no such formal entry. Meeting the boy in buttons on the stairs she inquired for No. 13, and his response was casual. He was sucking a bull's-eye, and he did not attempt to conceal moist noises.

'Thirteen? Top floor back.'

Miss Luce climbed up and on, with a sensitive white hand on the polished rail. Top floor back! That was to be expected, but a sudden sense of weariness and of bitter languor ascended with her towards No. 13. Even the stair-carpet differed on the third flight, for it was foot-worn and blurred as to pattern, nor were the stair-rods of the same polish or quality. The bedroom doors were narrower than those below, and of a dull brownness, with their numbers painted in black. No. 13 was at the end of the passage, with a lavatory opposite it.

Miss Luce put a hand to the brass handle, and opened the door. The handle was slightly greasy, and her sensitive fingers reacted to the touch. No. 13 displayed itself, narrow and austere, with a strip of faded carpet beside the bed, and a small window draped with cheap chintz curtains. No plush or gilding here. One cane-bottomed chair, a chest of drawers, and a severe washhand-stand that displayed on a lower shelf a certain sanitary vessel that had lost its

handle, and three wooden pegs fastened by a board to the wall. Miss Luce closed the door, went to the window and looked out upon a vista of back gardens, stables, chimney-pots, and the grey cobbles of the Mews. Pink roses once had bloomed upon the wallpaper, but they were very faded flowers.

Isabella Luce sat down upon the bed. It was a hard bed, with a mattress that was not swansdown. She drooped. She took off her hat and laid it beside her, and put a white hand to her forehead. Assuredly she and the room were inevitably thirteen.

Her travelling trunk stood beside the cane-bottomed chair, and in regarding it she could remind herself that this black box contained all her worldly possessions. Yes, the trunk and her purse. Seven shillings or so, and some coppers. If she was capable of self-pity, the feeling was spiced with irony, for Isabella Luce was no mere sweet sad soul. Her quick dark eyes and lovely brow, her mobile mouth and firm chin were not those of a mere sentimental fool. She could speak both French and Italian, and was more than a moderate pianist, and yet in the genteel world she appeared to be worth about twenty pounds a year.

Why should she bear it? Could she bear it? That bully of a woman and those poisonous children! She had had three weeks of them, and the torture that certain little savages can inflict upon the sensitive. The ingenuity of the little brutes, their gloating cleverness in inflicting pain! She straightened her slim body, and gave a little flick of the head. ‘I will bear it,’ was her inward cry, ‘I will—because I must.’

She was about to rise when she heard footsteps, and they were heavily familiar. So was the voice that rallied her.

‘Miss Luce. What—are—you—doing?’

The door opened upon the Pankridge lady, florid and indignant.

‘What, just sitting on your bed! Where are the children?’

Isabella did not rise.

‘I could not find them.’

‘Indeed! Did you try?’

‘I did.’

‘My dear young woman, you must cultivate responsibility. I want you to unpack for me. I am a delicate subject, Miss Luce, and I count upon consideration and industry.’

Isabella rose slowly from the bed.

‘Which is your room, madam?’

‘No. 1, of course. And when you have unpacked for me you can unpack for the dear children. They are in No. 3.’

The long windows of No. 1 opened upon a balcony. The porter had unstrapped the Pankridge trunks, and Isabella, lifting a lid, discovered that this trunk was male. Was she expected to unpack for Mr. Pomposity? Hardly so, and the conventions might regard such activities as not quite decent. The new era had arrived, and Mrs. Pankridge was all for the proprieties. No longer were gentlemen expected to end the evening in a drunken stupor beneath the dining-room table, or to house pretty ladies in Mayfair. Maybe Mr. Pankridge, who had known the latitudes of Europe’s First Gentleman, regretted those more gorgeous days, but as the husband of Clarissa Pankridge, and the father of two dear children, he had become an outward conformer, and a pillar of the proprieties.

Miss Luce, carrying a clutch of silk petticoats towards a chest of drawers, saw for the first time that spacious sea and landscape, and stood to gaze. How was it that she had not seen it so before? How much of your vision was inward, and waiting upon the destined moment! Her dark eyes took in all that pleasant scene, the estuary, the white-sailed ships, the dim hills of Kent, the green growth at her feet. Almost, her face expressed a sudden tenderness. Yes, beauty could be consoling. No one could rend that front you, or scold all loveliness out of the world.

She was laying the silk garments in a drawer when the door opened, and Mr. Pankridge’s booming voice addressed her.

‘Ha, excuse me, I intrude.’

Her shoulders stiffened, and she did not turn her head.

‘I am unpacking, sir, for madam.’

Obviously so. Mr. Pankridge ran red fingers through a blond whisker, and became ponderously paternal.

‘My dear young lady, you must not tire yourself on my account.’

‘No, sir.’

‘I am quite capable of dealing with my own trunk. And after the journey—a little rest is indicated.’

He strolled to the window, admired the view, and something else. Assuredly, his wife had engaged a pretty governess, and Mr. Pankridge was so much married that his sentiments escaped—when they dared—into fatuous flirtations.

'I hope you are—er—happy with us, my dear?'

Isabella gave all her attention to the petticoats.

'Oh, quite happy, Mr. Pankridge, thank you.'

'I'm very glad, my dear,' and hearing voices in the passage he escaped to the respectable solitude of the balcony, sat down, and lit a cigar. Clarissa would not permit smoking within doors.

It was one of the hours when Caroline Terrace came out upon parade, and gathered at the Assembly Rooms or at the Marine Library for literature and social contacts. There were seats in the Shrubbery for those who preferred a more sylvan solitude, or the cliff paths or the pier for exercise. Mr. Pankridge sat and surveyed the scene, legs extended, waistcoat comfortably bulging. He could look and he could listen. Clarissa was in the bedroom.

'Tch, Miss Luce, be more careful with those bonnets. Lay them on the bed. The best straws crush so easily.'

Silence from Miss Luce.

Sir Montague and Lady Merriman were passing with serene sedateness, and Sir Montague had John Keats under his arm. Keats was permitted, but Shelley and Lord Byron were not considered socially knowable. Miss Jane Massingbird followed, carrying a Dickens. Humphrey Hapgood's white topper sailed out from No. 10, and was waylaid by Miss Bellamy's pink bonnet. Major Miller, with his waving wen concealed beneath a black beaver, found himself strolling with the Nabob. Dr. William Rollinson's gig rolled up from the other direction. The Lardner girls, fresh from bouncing in the sea, regained the sanctity of No. 5.

Mr. Pankridge heard an exclamation.

'Faugh, a horrid smell of smoke. Where can it come from?'

More silence from Miss Luce. Clarissa went to a window.

'Percival, I am surprised at you. You know how cigar smoke irritates my sensitive throat.'

'My dear,' said her husband, 'if that is so, why not shut the window?'

His wife both shut it and latched it, and Mr. Pankridge was marooned upon

the balcony.

The business of unpacking continued, and Mrs. Pankridge reclined in a padded chair, and directed the operations. She was a most didactic lady. ‘No, not in that drawer, Miss Luce, in the upper one. And the cupboard. Make sure it is not damp. I like my shoes in the cupboard. My jewellery case? Oh, yes, put it in that cabinet. I see there is a key.’ Came a rapping on a window. Mr. Pankridge wished to be released, but when Miss Luce made a movement in that direction, she was ordered to leave the window latched.

‘No, Miss Luce, I think Mr. Pankridge has yet to finish his cigar. He can remain there until it is finished. I cannot tolerate the smell of tobacco.’

Miss Luce refrained, with an enigmatic glance at the lady. Oh, delicate creature, strong as Juno, with a boisterous bust and legs that were too thick about the ankle! The weaker sex—indeed! Mr. Pankridge, having rattled the window, retreated somewhat flushed and rattled to the balcony chair, and Miss Luce was thinking that she would have preferred a husband who could put a fist or a foot through the glass, and perhaps smack that solid, stupid face.

The business of unpacking came to an end, and Miss Luce was dismissed to perform the same operation for the dear children.

‘Shall I open the window, madam?’

‘Certainly not. All in due season. I think I will rest on the bed for an hour. And—Miss Luce——’

‘Yes, madam?’

‘Order a maid to bring me a pot of tea.’

Isabella transferred herself to No. 3, and having dealt with the dear children’s belongings, went downstairs to order my lady’s tea. She was feeling tired and depressed. Oh, for a little peace and aloofness. She ascended to No. 13, put on her bonnet, and on her way downstairs she met the two dear children coming up. Master Albert was blubbing and snuffling, his sister somewhat subdued.

Miss Luce asked the obvious question.

‘What is the matter, my dear?’

Albert boo-hooed.

‘A horrid man smacked me.’

Isabella left it at that. Let Albert appeal to his mother. She escaped into the sunshine and, crossing the roadway, found herself in the green wilderness

where the young were not.

A broad path sheltered by a holly hedge stretched right and left like a miniature terrace. Seats were spaced here and there, but this holly walk was too public for Miss Luce's mood. She took a path which tunnelled downwards into the shade, and found a seat under the branches of two oak trees. A miniature glade gave her a view of the sea, all aglitter in the sunlight, with the wash of the miniature waves audible to her where she sat. The seat had a back to it, and, taking off her hat and laying it beside her, she let the nape of her neck rest on the seat's back and her gaze go up into the cool green gloom above. She closed her eyes, and her face went dreamy, yet with a poignant sharpness. Oh, to be alone, even for a few minutes in peace and solitude, not to be talked at, admonished, teased! Her philosophy, if she had any philosophy, was more questioning and pitiful than positive. Why did certain things happen to certain people? Tragedy, for which you were not responsible, the past deep in shadow, the future—a sort of slavery. She had had no real youth, no play, no romantic adventure, save in the books she read by candlelight. She had secrets to hide, human horror that could not be forgotten or confessed to. Why, oh why?

Isabella kept her eyes closed, and for a moment or two breathed deeply, as though drawing in relief and strength. To escape, even for a few minutes, was to be yourself, though your self might be but a troubled ghost of what it should be. She was so far away, so much in a trance, that she did not hear the stumping of Captain Bullard's timber leg. He paused, looked, and passed on with a comprehension that is natural to some worldly men. Poor, sweet thing, safe for a moment from the Pankridge *ménage*, and dreaming—dreaming. Well, let her dream in peace under the soft shadow of the trees.

Captain Bullard emerged upon the terrace to observe a restive gentleman rapping impatiently at a balcony window. Pankridge *père* marooned upon a balcony. And Captain Bullard chuckled, but there was the spice of human malice in the chuckle. Damned, pompous fool! Serve him right. His good lady wore the trousers. Yes, and what she needed was a man who would lower those garments and apply the business side of a hairbrush.

III

AT the Assembly Rooms gentlemen and gentlewomen held conversation; at the Marine Library they were supposed to be decently silent and with book; at the little theatre their obligation was to sit and listen, and yet these three situations were apt to become confused. There were occasions when no one listened and everybody talked.

At the Marine Library there were many volumes of sermons, poetry, biography, tremendous treatises upon natural science, and novels—of the proper flavour. You could read Gibbon and Hazlitt, and Dean Swift. Even some of the biographies dealt with makers of fiction, and these books were considered to be literature, yet, as the witty and mordant Marquis de Beaucourt expressed it: 'If you produce novels you are nothing, but if you write the life of a Fielding or a Dickens, you are literature.' Moreover, *Tom Jone*s was not quite 'Caroline Terrace'.

The latest papers, gazettes, and journals lay upon the table in one of the ground-floor rooms, nor was silence considered sacred here. Very naturally gentlemen wished to discuss the news, and comment upon the activities of kings, parliaments, and politicians. The gentlewomen of South End possessed a room of their own upon the first floor, and here the conversation was less elevated and more concerned with the social realities. In summer the ladies would gather at the great bow window, in winter about the massive brass fender, with a mirror reflecting their fans and their head-dresses, their fal-lals, and animated faces. The Marquise de Beaucourt, a lady who was as witty as her husband, declared that you could gauge the quality of the scandal in the air by the animation of the ladies' faces.

Two rooms constituted the library proper, or improper. The more solid works inhabited one room, the lighter literature the other. Belles-lettres and poetry sometimes hovered between the two. The Misses Megson, of No. 13, Caroline Terrace, presided as librarians, tall, lean, vibrant spinsters in perpetual black, who took literature with immense seriousness, and saw to it that young maidens never obtained a book that could cloud their innocent souls.

The Marquis and Marquise de Beaucourt, strolling down the hill, overtook Mr. and Mrs. Pankridge, who had paused to watch some ladies bathing. A white horse had drawn one machine well out into the water, and a figure in

white and blue was wading breast-deep into the sea. The figure spread itself and swam, and Mrs. Pankridge was shocked. Gentlewomen of breeding confined themselves to splashings beneath the great white hoods. The Marquis raised his hat. These French aristocrats had crossed from France after the affair of Charles the Tenth and, finding England peculiarly to their liking, had remained as exiles in Prospect House, which faced one wing of the Royal Hotel.

Mrs. Pankridge returned the Marquis's salute, and Mr. Pankridge swept a hat to the lady. The De Beaucourts belonged to the most aristocratic set, which included the Merrimans, the Gages, Sir Hereward Lancaster of Porter's Grange and the Neaths of Holywell Priory. Clarissa Pankridge had a way of waggling her posterior when social satisfactions were to be gathered. Monsieur le Marquis was so darkly distinguished, so pale and gracious. Madame was piquant and petite, and a mirror of fashion.

'Delightful weather we are having, monsieur.'

The Marquis agreed that the weather was all that it should be, and Mrs. Pankridge all that a woman should not be.

Madame was regarding the bathing-machines, with Mrs. Pankridge standing hatless beside her.

'Some bold girl swims. I wonder——'

Mrs. Pankridge caught the wrong reflection.

'Too bold, madame, if you ask me.'

Madame had not asked her.

'You think it—dangerous?'

Clarissa was still at sea.

'I do, madame, to a gentlewoman's modesty.'

The Marquise did not argue the point. She had somewhat advanced ideas upon feminine freedom, and Clarissa Pankridge was pure prig. She caught her husband's eye with a questioning twinkle. The Marquis flicked a speck of dust from the lapel of his blue coat.

'Shall we proceed?'

The party moved down and on to the green-roofed verandas and white door of the Marine Library, and Mr. Pankridge stood aside with his wife linked to his arm. He swept a hat.

‘After you, sir.’

Monsieur le Marquis gave him a little bow, and a glance that he did not understand.

‘Thank you, monsieur.’

And all the courtesies were satisfied.

‘What charming people!’ said Clarissa in a voice that was intended for hearing.

Madame pressed an elbow into the Marquis’s ribs. They exchanged oblique glances, but no words.

Monsieur de Beaucourt conducted his wife up the stairs to the ladies’ room, and then descended to join the gentlemen. Some political scandal was in the air, and a group by the bay window was tearing it to tatters. Mr. Horatio Harbourn, hands in pockets, stood leaning against a closed shutter, his white waistcoat bulging with indignation. Sir Montague Merriman was taking snuff. Captain Hector Bullard straddled a chair. Sir Hugh Latimer stood caressing reflective whiskers. Major Miller shook his head over some choleric statement by the Nabob, and the wen on his head waggled mild disapproval.

‘The Duke ought to be in. He’d give these scoundrels a dose of powder.’

Monsieur de Beaucourt, who had seen and very much misliked one revolution, laid his gloves and hat on a side-table, and with a little bow, accepted Sir Montague’s snuff-box. He took a pinch of the brown powder between a fine first finger and thumb, and, with a graceful gesture, inhaled the sharp savour of the snuff, and, without a wink or a sneeze, joined in the conversation.

‘You talk of revolution, gentlemen. I have seen one, and I did not like it.’

‘Ha, sir,’ said Horatio Harbourn, ‘your kind did not give the soldiers a lead ____’

‘Nor lead, sir. It should be easy to control the mob, before it becomes one.’

Sir Montague took more snuff.

‘You would suggest, Beaucourt, that these Chartist fellows should be pandered to?’

The Marquis rested his arms on the back of a Chinese Chippendale chair. He was smiling, but his smile was edged with irony.

‘Men, sir, can be made drunk with ideas, and such intoxications may be

dangerous. They may indicate a state of physical poverty which can provoke internal disorder. Bloody revolution need not happen.'

Captain Bullard let out a chuckle.

'You would make 'em so drunk, sir, that they would shout for King Bung and the Bishops?'

There was laughter, and when it subsided, the quiet voice of Major Miller was heard. His wen appeared in a state of agitation.

'Monsieur le Marquis is right, and means more than he said. Is not poverty the father of all discontent? These poor people have their grievances. I, gentlemen, have seen the common man in action. I should not be here but for the courage and devotion of a common man.'

Captain Bullard smacked a knee.

'Right, Miller, right. Fellows who stick to the guns when you are taking and giving broadsides are not just muck.'

The Nabob was ready to develop the argument.

'That's all very well, Bullard, but what of corn and circuses? Why did Rome not——?'

'Perhaps, because there were not enough Romans, sir.'

'Yes, my dear sir, only a debauched remnant. But if I were a parson——'

'What—what!' cried the voice of yet another gentleman arriving—and slapping his hat upon the table. 'Who wants to be buried or united in holy matrimony? I am here, gentlemen, I am here.'

More than one of the gentlemen present gave the Rev. Nicholas Parbury enigmatic glances. Mr. Parbury was the vicar of the new church of St. John's, and he liked to describe himself as a sporting parson. He rode to hounds, was a passable shot, and as cunning at cards as any old London club-man. Mr. Parbury did not know it, but the old town and Caroline Mews knew him as the Port-wine Parson. In fact, his beak of a nose was the colour of the rose, which, in winter, became an exquisite purple. He had a sharp chin, restless black eyes, a fine head of grizzled hair, and a collection of stories that were not fit for the ladies. As for gossip, he devoured it and republished it bound in the best calf.

'What—what,' said this quidnunc.

Sir Montague regarded him as he might have regarded a glass of corked wine. If the country was in an unhappy ferment, might not some of these disharmonies be due to clerics like Mr. Parbury?

‘We were discussing Chartism, sir.’

Mr. Parbury took snuff and his colourful nose responded.

‘A-tish-oo. Chartism. Poof! A-tish-oo. The fools need discipline.’

‘Or—sympathy,’ said the quiet voice of Major Miller.

‘Castor oil, sir.’

The group stirred uneasily as though the presence of Mr. Parbury had tied the conversation piece into a knot. Major Miller moved towards the door. Captain Bullard became interested in a yacht that was tacking beyond the pier.

Mr. Parbury took more snuff.

‘Let ’em shout, sir. The bigger the dung-heap the sooner it rots. By the way, can anyone recommend me a mild curate?’

There was silence.

‘I get no proper time for—exercise. The doctor says I should ride more.’

‘And drink less,’ said Captain Bullard *sotto voce*.

The Nabob was playing with his watch-chain.

‘Are there such creatures as mild curates, sir?’

‘All curates should be mild,’ said the vicar. ‘Yes, sir, a-tishoo.’

The Marquis de Beaucourt, with a fastidious and oblique look at the parson’s waistcoat, turned to the table, picked up a gazette, and sat down to read. Sir Montague and Captain Bullard went out arm in arm. Mr. Parbury was left with the Nabob, whom he buttonholed as the only sympathetic person present. A minute later they were joined by Mr. Pankridge, who had escaped from Clarissa and a little coterie of earnest ladies. Mr. Pankridge and the vicar of St. John’s got on very well together, especially so in the business of swapping smutty stories.

Miss Luce was out with the children, and the dear children, with sundry other playmates, were exploring the cliff paths. Isabella, accepting solitude and an interval of peace, found a seat and surveyed the scene. The sun was well in the west, and the tide on the turn, and the slanting light played upon the gleaming mud and glorified it. That which Mrs. Pankridge described as disgusting mud, had for Miss Luce’s eyes a strange garment of colour. It was black and it was purple: it gleamed and grew opalescent as the soft sea withdrew, and over yonder were the hills of Kent dimly green with young corn. Distant sand strips shone. The spacious scene spread eastwards to the

Nore. White sails and brown sails caught the light. The trees of the Shrubbery were serene and still.

How strange and mysterious was all this! It had for Isabella a kind of spiritual value. It was music and colour and secret dreaming. It consoled; it strengthened. And assuredly she needed both. Nature could be your friend, when you were friendless, and your life was a round of admonitions, lessons, attempts to persuade two hostile urchins into some interest in arithmetic, spelling, and elementary French. Most of her day was an essay in patience, and there were times when patience wore very thin.

Came yells from the steep slope below her. Albert and another small boy were in the midst of a tempestuous scuffle. Isabella's face lost its dreaminess. She rose, sat down, rose a second time. Was she responsible for urchin tempers? Assuredly she was. She went towards the cliff edge, and met Victoria.

'What's the matter, dear?'

Victoria was blubbing.

'Nasty boy took my whip.'

'What is Albert doing?'

'He's fighting, and his nose is bleeding.'

Oh, bother bleeding noses, and scuffling urchins. But she would be held responsible. She moved towards the cliff edge, but someone else relieved her of the problem. Captain Bullard came stumping up. She had not seen him crossing the grass towards her seat.

'Hullo, what's this?'

'I'm afraid the boys are fighting.'

'Let 'em, my dear, let 'em. Sit down and let one of 'em learn to be licked.'

Captain Bullard sat down and yanked Victoria on to his sound knee. She struggled and was suppressed. Captain Bullard began tickling her, knowing that even small girls must exhibit emotion which may be both negative and positive. In half a minute he had Victoria giggling, wriggling and smiling.

'Oo, you are a funny man.'

Then Master Albert appeared, bloody of nose and wet with grief and anger. Obviously he had been licked.

'Boo-hoo, Harold hit me.'

Captain Bullard was bouncing Victoria up and down.

‘Got a handkerchief, my lad? Blow your nose, and stop blubbing.’

And strange to say Albert did so.

Clarissa took her husband by the arm.

‘Percival, I have an idea.’

‘Is that so, my dear?’

‘Yes, quite an idea.’

Mr. Pankridge walked like a man going to the altar and making the best of it, for, when his wife announced an idea, her husband stiffened his back and prepared to receive cavalry. He might be a man of means, but some of Clarissa’s inspirations had cost him much money, and on one occasion had landed him in expensive litigation.

Clarissa was arch with him as they climbed the hill to Caroline Terrace.

‘Guess, Percival.’

Mr. Pankridge squared his shoulders, and prepared to play the man.

‘Feather, fish, or good red herring?’

‘Don’t be frivolous, dear.’

‘Well, well, out with it.’

‘The Misses Megson are going to live at the Library.’

Mr. Pankridge quite failed to discover any significance in the domicile of these earnest ladies.

‘Well, what of it, my dear?’

‘No. 13 will be vacant, Percival. We must take it. The air here agrees with me, and the society is so—er—chic.’

‘But—13?’

‘Don’t be silly and superstitious. We can re-christen it 12A.’

‘Yes, I suppose we could, my dear.’

‘And keep our carriage. I think it is an excellent idea, Percival.’

Mr. Pankridge realized that he would have to think so too.

IV

HAD MISS LUCE been something of a hussy she might have accepted the interested stares of Caroline Terrace, and perhaps turned them to good account, for a pretty wench can preen herself and collect these posies of gentlemanly appreciation; but Isabella Luce was not a hussy. She was profoundly unhappy, everything and nothing to herself, and even her mirror showed her a tragic face. One of those shrinking and super-sensitive moods which can afflict the finer spirits was accusing her of failure. As yet she could do nothing with the Pankridge children, and the little sadists, sensing her as an easy victim, were exploiting persecution. Mrs. Pankridge, full of her new idea, and the finishing and garnishing of No. 12A, was less admonitory for the moment, but her husband was betraying signs of amorous interest, and to Miss Luce such silliness was no salve, for vanity was dormant in her.

Yes, people stared, especially so that gaunt, distinguished, hawk-faced gentleman, Ludovic Lardner, Q.C. Mr. Lardner had retired from his profession; he had been a terror in the courts, especially to those who were ripe for the hangman, and he stared at Isabella as though she challenged some elusive memory. So did his daughters, but differently so. They stared Miss Luce out of countenance, and with a sardonic scorn that spilled itself into sisterly remarks. This governess girl was much too pretty, and as Miss Faith put it, ‘looked sly’. For Miss Faith Lardner was unable to distinguish between slyness and a wounded self-consciousness, and maybe she did not wish to make the distinction.

Miss Luce had been shopping—she needed new stockings—and, seeing the Terrace full of people, she had turned aside into Caroline Mews, a quite ridiculous piece of panic, for in passing along the Mews she would be no nearer home and solitude. In fact, she found herself in quite another situation. Mr. Harbourn’s coachman and Sam Pond, who drove a fly, were in the thick of a furious fight, and Caroline Mews had made a ring round them. Excited women shouted. Ginger Pond was getting the worst of it; his face was bloody, and two yellow teeth hung on his lower lip. Big, black Fred Childs could punch hard and had long been waiting for an excuse to thrash this bully. His wife was waving her arms and cheering him on.

‘Go it, Fred, go it, my man.’

This was too much for Mrs. Pond, and in another moment the two wives were fighting, tearing at each other's hair. Miss Luce, shocked by the unpleasant scene, hesitated, and then glided swiftly past doorways, face averted. No one noticed her. She was just nothing to Caroline Mews, merely the Pankridge governess, and somehow she was conscious of her nothingness.

Caroline Terrace had still to be dared. She turned into it by the Wilderness, the queer sunk garden which lay between Nos. 18 and 19. The Terrace appeared more empty. She was passing No. 5 when its door opened and Mr. Lardner emerged. He stood and stared at her, and she felt his hard glance following her along the terrace. But why? He was not of an age or temper to be piqued by a pretty girl.

There was a side door leading into the Royal Hotel, and she entered by it. A quiet passage led her to the main stairs. Peace and her bedroom. Those screaming, clawing women! Horrible! She was half-way up the stairs when Mrs. Pankridge rushed out from No. 1, a Mrs. Pankridge who was in a temper.

'Miss Luce, where have you been?'

'Shopping, madam.'

'Indeed! I expect to be consulted before you leave your duties.'

'I am sorry, madam, but I needed stockings.'

'Stockings! Do you know what the children have been doing?'

'No, madam.'

'Squirting water from the balcony over Sir Montague Merriman and her ladyship. I cannot have such things happening. You must exercise more control.'

Miss Luce was so agitated that she dropped the roll of stockings and they went bouncing down the stairs. Clarissa clucked.

'Really, pull yourself together, my good girl.'

Isabella went to recover the stockings, and she was in tears.

Again Clarissa clucked.

'Upon my word, Miss Luce, you must learn to control your emotions. You are old enough to know better. You had better go to your room, and recover your dignity. Such exhibitions are most unseemly.'

Isabella fled up the stairs to her shabby little room. She shut and locked the door, and sat down on the bed. Her window was open to the sounds from the

Mews, and she could hear a woman screaming hysterically, and other voices making a medley of human discords. Miss Luce, hands interlocked, sat breathing like a girl who was near the edge of an exhausted patience. More screams from the Mews. Was life all bullying and brutality? She rose, shut the window, and falling suddenly upon her knees, covered her face and tried to pray.

'Oh, God, give me strength to bear all this.'

She was not yet of a temper to ask why she should have to bear it.

Mr. Pankridge was upon his dignity. He had been instructed by his wife to call and apologize to the Merrimans, and to administer proper punishment to his children, and both adventures had not been to his liking. Sir Montague had been curt to him, and young Albert had fought his father and kicked the paternal shins. Mr. Pankridge came into dinner with his chin tucked into his collar. Their table in the dining-room was by one of the windows, and was laid for three. The children—in disgrace—had been sent to bed, and Miss Luce had failed to do her duty. Mrs. Pankridge had sent the page to No. 13, and the boy had brought her a most disrespectful answer.

Clarissa had clucked, and ascended angrily to No. 13, and rapped peremptorily upon Miss Luce's door.

'What's this nonsense, my good girl?'

'I am sorry, madam, but I have a racking headache.'

She should have said heartache, and Clarissa had tried the door, only to find it locked, and no response had been vouchsafed to further questions. So, Mrs. Pankridge had descended to seat herself opposite a silent and sulkily dignified husband.

'Really, I think we shall have to discharge Miss Luce.'

Percival grumped at her.

'What the devil's wrong now?'

'Percival!'

'My dear, I have indigestion. If a fellah can't eat in peace—— Isn't the girl coming down to dinner?'

'Certainly not. I should like you to remember that in my delicate state of health——'

Mr. Pankridge glanced at the next table, where people were listening with amused faces.

‘Tut-tut, my dear. Supposing we discuss it later. Ha, waiter, what’s on the list? Turtle soup—splendid. Try the turtle soup, my dear.’

Mrs. Pankridge put a handkerchief to her mouth, gulped, rose, and with a reproachful glare, left him. Mr. Pankridge combed his whiskers with restless fingers.

‘John.’

‘Yessir.’

‘Bring me a double brandy.’

‘Yessir.’

An oppressive day. High summer was in, or low summer, whichever you chose to call it. Dr. Rollinson and his groom—Bob Clements—had been out on a country round in the yellow-wheeled gig. There was dust on the hedges, and a glare upon the sea, and not a cloud in the sky, and no shade save where great elms lined the road. Even the wheat appeared to be feeling the heat and its million heads drowsed on throats that were turning blue. The distance was all soft haze, and the great grey tower of Holywell church rose like a ghost beyond the trees of the Priory.

Both doctor and groom were silent, Dr. Rollinson because he was worried and sad, Bob because he knew what troubled his master. Dr. William Rollinson was one of those little men with a great spirit housed in a small frail body. Beside the burly Bob he looked all head and top-hat, spectacles on nose, white stock immaculate, whiskers neatly trimmed, black-coated, elegantly prim. To the initiated he gave an impression of primness, and some irreverent souls had christened him ‘Old Mother Rollinson’, but his potency was proved by a bevy of seven bland children, and one of them was desperately sick.

Turning a corner, they were met by a giant of a man on a big bay horse, Canon Turnbull of Holywell. He was a handsome and hairy soul, somewhat given to shrewd silence, but turning upon frail humanity eyes of a peculiar blueness and of profound sagacity. Canon Turnbull did not wrestle with Satan when they met, but chaffed him, and made the Devil look such a sorry fool that even his horns drooped.

Canon Turnbull pulled up his horse, and so did the gig, and for a moment these two good men looked at each other in sympathetic silence.

‘Any good news, Rollinson?’

‘Not very good.’

‘Sorry, my friend.’

‘Thank you.’

That was sufficient in its simplicity and sincerity, and parson and doctor went their several ways.

As the gig rolled down South End’s incipient High Street Dr. Rollinson saw the sea and was moved to strange emotion and the thoughts which emerged from a wounded spirit. It was the same sea, and yet different, like a face that was all meretricious smirking glare, and not the friend of yesterday. Awnings were down over the Assembly Room windows, and the eyes of Prospect House were darkened. Parasols paraded over muslin frocks, pink, cream, and yellow. As the gig turned the Terrace corner Dr. Rollinson began to draw off his black gloves. He wore these gloves in all weathers, and as he peeled them off with moist hands he wondered whether their sombreness was significant.

The door of No. 8 stood open, and a face was watching at the dining-room window. The doctor was laying his hat and gloves on the hall table when Ruth —his eldest girl—came silently to join him. She was a gentle creature, wise beyond her years, and her father, taking off his spectacles to dust them with a white silk handkerchief, gave her one quick, short-sighted glance.

‘Mother upstairs?’

Ruth nodded, and Dr. Rollinson replaced his spectacles. The girl was watching him with solemn eyes, and as he moved towards the stairs, she went with him and put a hand in his. The doctor’s mouth twitched. He pressed the child’s hand, and when they reached the landing he kissed her on the forehead. She released his hand, and turned away. Her young sympathy had served.

Dr. Rollinson climbed on, conscious of the house’s silence. Suspense, shadows. He stood a moment before the nursery door, hesitant, slightly bent like a man in prayer. Then he opened the door.

He saw two women, a cot, the child, Rose—who had been so like a rose. Both women were weeping with that silence that is more moving than noisy grief. Margaret Rollinson held a spoon, and was trying to trickle some liquid food or medicine into the comatose child’s mouth. Her hand was steady, though the tears ran down her cheeks. Dr. Rollinson looked at the little pallid face on the pillow, and knew that there was no hope.

He slipped in silently and stood beside his wife. He laid a hand upon her shoulder, and her free hand rose and laid itself on his. The nurse, looking at them, tip-toed from the room. So, these two good comrades, hands touching, spoke not a word, but watched a dying child, and were nearer to each other than they had been at the altar.

A bell rang and insistently. A maid who had gone to the door came slowly up the stairs. She looked with half-frightened eyes at the two people by the cot.

‘A message, sir.’

Dr. Rollinson turned his head.

‘Yes, Florence.’

‘A call from Mrs. Pankridge, sir, and will you please go at once.’

That vulgar, stupid woman who was as healthy as sin! Dr. Rollinson put out a hand and laid it on the child’s head.

‘Very good, Florence. Say that I will call presently.’

The Pankridge family had moved into No. 12A, and Dr. Rollinson was about to ring the bell when the door was opened by Miss Luce. The unexpected confrontation moved both the doctor and the girl to inward comment, for the habit of observing faces was so habitual in Dr. Rollinson that Miss Luce’s pallor and unhappy eyes caused him to register the impression that the governess was looking ill. As for Isabella, she saw the little doctor’s face as a frozen mask.

‘Is it Mrs. Pankridge who wishes to see me?’

‘Yes, doctor, she is in bed.’

Dr. Rollinson was noted for being a swift climber of stairs, but on this sad day he did not hurry. A part of him had been left behind with his wife and the dead child. He saw a flushed face upon a pillow, a fat hand holding a lace handkerchief. Mrs. P. had been dabbing her forehead with eau-de-Cologne.

‘So glad you have come, doctor. I expected you sooner. I am afraid something has seriously disagreed with me.’

She gabbled at him, and he sat and listened with perfunctory attention. He felt her pulse, examined her tongue, palpated a voluble and uneasy abdomen. Diagnosis—obvious, as obvious as her flatulent egoism. He ordered her a milk

diet, and announced that he would send her medicine.

‘Mr. Pankridge is very worried about me.’

‘No need, madam. I will reassure him.’

Dr. Rollinson interviewed the husband, and departed to his surgery. He had left instructions with Mr. Pankridge that the powder should be taken at night, and a dose of the medicine in the morning.

‘I’ll see to it, doctor,’ said Mr. Pankridge, looking as grim as it was possible for him to look.

He did see to it. He gave his wife two powders instead of one and a double dose of mag. sulph. in the morning. And for two days the purging proved dramatic.

Dr. Rollinson, meeting the husband, asked after his patient.

‘Your treatment did all the good in the world, sir.’

‘I am glad to hear it.’

Dr. Rollinson looked absent, for he was on the way to see the spot where Rose would be buried.

At the Assembly Rooms opposite the Royal Hotel informally formal dances were now and again given in summer, very select affairs, the invitation being issued by the committee. The Marquis de Beaucourt, John Gage Esq., and Sir Montague Merriman decided who should attend and who should not, and on this particular summer evening Clarissa Pankridge was otherwise and so busily engaged that her presence would not grace the show. Clarissa was full of groans and indignation against her doctor. She had a new ball dress prepared in blue and gold silk, a sumptuous affair, but—as we have said—Clarissa was too busy. Nor would she permit her husband to leave the house, though Mr. P. had hoped for a flirtatious and free evening.

He had made a suggestion.

‘Why not let Miss Luce have your ticket?’

‘What—a governess! My dear Percival, do have some sense. These affairs are too—elegant—for a girl like Miss Luce. We should give offence.’

Mr. Pankridge was compelled to concur. He did not say that pretty girls were rare, and that Miss Luce was the best-looking girl in the place. So tactless a statement might have produced more spasms.

‘Oh, very well, my dear.’

‘I want you to see the doctor. He has not been since the morning, and he was most unsympathetic.’

Mr. Pankridge demurred.

‘Poor Rollinson has had trouble.’

‘Should that prevent him attending to a poor sick woman?’

‘There has been a death in the family, that pretty little daughter.’

‘I suppose you would not be concerned, Percival, if I told you I felt like dying?’

Mr. Pankridge left it at that, and went down to smoke a cigar on the balcony. It was Miss Luce’s hour when she was permitted to take the air in peace, before returning to her little back bedroom. She had put the children to bed after a wearying tussle with Victoria, for she had tried to persuade them to be good because their mother was unwell and must not be disturbed.

Mr. Pankridge watched Miss Luce cross the roadway to the Shrubbery, black-frocked in the twilight. A rather sweet creature. Now—if—Mr. Pankridge sucked his cigar, and resisted a certain temptation. Wanderings in the dusk might be sentimental and pleasant, but dear Clarissa was not bed-ridden. No, damn her!

A new moon crescented a blue-black sky. Isabella, weary both in spirit and in body, stood in the gateway to the gardens, a shadow shape almost concealed by the black hollies. The lighted windows of the terrace were like notes upon a sheet of music. Yes, some of those houses made music, others—like No. 12A—were tuneless discords. And then she heard actual music drifting to her from the night’s soft, dusky lips. Dance music. It came from the windows of the Assembly Rooms, for these dances began early and ended decorously before midnight. Isabella stood very still, a young woman whose youth vibrated with sudden poignant yearnings. A new moon, a lovely night, and a waltz by Waldteufel.

She passed along the wall of hollies, crossed the road, and saw the white façade of the bow-fronted building brilliant with lights. They spilled haunting music into the sweet air. She could see a swirl of figures within, colour, faces, exquisite movement. She drew near to a long window, looked, yearned, felt her starved self dancing.

Sudden silence, laughter, a flutter of fans. A couple approached her window, arms linked, eyes looking into eyes, the youngest Lardner girl in rose

pink, and a very handsome lad with tawny hair.

‘Yes, please open the window wide. It is so very oppressive. I feel quite faint.’

Her beau ogled her gallantly.

‘Faint? Forgive me, you danced like a dream.’

Miss Luce was caught, like a child surprised in some forbidden cupboard. The couple stared at her, the young man’s hand outstretched towards the window.

Isabella turned and hurried into the shadows.

‘Who was that?’

Miss Caroline tittered.

‘Oh, only—a governess.’

The young man frowned. He had been about to say that the governess was a comely creature, but he had thought better of it.

‘Don’t seem to have seen her before.’

‘She is governess to the Pankridge children.’

‘Those horrid little brats!’

Again Miss Caroline tittered and fluttered her fan.

V

WITH unexpected graciousness Mrs. Pankridge had given Miss Luce permission to play upon the drawing-room piano, and as Victoria was receiving her first lessons upon that instrument, no reasonable soul could refuse a music mistress the chance to keep her own fingers facile. Clarissa had not heard Miss Luce play upon the piano. She herself could pound out a polka with crude and crashing emphasis.

The balcony windows were open, Clarissa at a tea-party with the children, Mr. Pankridge taking saddle exercise. Isabella closed the door of that very garish room, sat down at the piano, and laid tentative hands upon the keyboard. For a minute or two she strummed, head back, white throat showing, waiting upon the music's mood. It came to her and with passion and tenderness.

Miss Luce played Chopin, the Nocturne in B, and then the Ballade in A Flat. She was lost in it, and the romantic pathos of the great Pole's music. Time and place were forgotten, and if she played brilliantly she did so without vain self-consciousness.

A gentleman had stopped to listen, the tawny-haired lad of the Waldteufel waltz. Another gentleman joined him, Captain Hector Bullard. Sir Montague Merriman, happening along, made the listening party a trio.

'Saints alive!' said the tawny-haired young man, whose name was George Travers. 'Who would have thought the Pankridge lady could perform like this?'

Captain Bullard silenced him with an upraised hand, and there was a caustic murmur from Sir Montague.

'She can't. It must be the governess.'

Major Miller appeared on the balcony of No. 15, and two ladies on that of the Bumpus apartment house. Isabella had her audience, and knew it not.

Then—a pause and the same waltz by Waldteufel. Mr. Travers's shoulders swayed gently to the rhythm, but he was not thinking of Miss Caroline Lardner. The girl at the piano had a face that you could waltz with, a dreamy face, eyes half-closed behind dark, drooping lashes. Captain Bullard followed the rhythm with a red forefinger. On the balcony of No. 15 Major Miller's wen

responded to the music.

This was the scene—pure opera—which revealed itself to Clarissa Pankridge returning from her tea-party with two smug and sullen children. They had behaved atrociously, fought each other over a slice of cake, and had had their ears boxed by an indignant mother. Albert and Victoria had failed to produce a good impression in the Beaucourt drawing-room, the very drawing-room whose elegance Clarissa had wished to propitiate.

Mrs. Pankridge's eyes set themselves in a blue stare. What were these gentlemen doing attached to her garden railings? And then she heard the music, and its rich abandonment, and exultant lilt. Miss Luce at the piano, and Caroline Terrace surprised and appreciative. Mrs. Pankridge, gripping a child with each hand, marched haughtily to the door of No. 12A. The gentlemen hatted her, and she gave them a glare and a nod.

The children were hustled into the dining-room, and Clarissa climbed the stairs. The gentlemen below heard the music die away abruptly. Mrs. Pankridge was speaking. The keyboard lid closed with a bang.

'Miss Luce, you will put the children to bed. They have behaved disgracefully. I must say that your tuition seems lamentably lacking in—results.'

Isabella's fingers had just missed being caught by the closing lid.

She rose, all the music gone from her, and moved towards the door.

'And—Miss Luce.'

'Yes, madam?'

'In the future you will not play so noisily, and you will close the windows. You disturb the neighbours. And no waltzes, please. Mozart or Handel.'

Canon Turnbull rode down to the bridge at the bottom of Holywell Hill. In the old days there had been a ford here, and Canon Turnbull might have posed for Sir Isumbras at the ford, but the monks of Holywell had built a bridge across the brook in the days before the Dissolution. The road dipped into the shadows of old trees, climbed and pointed like a white finger at a world that was all blue and gold. Harvest weather, and harvest fields, tawny wheat and azure sky, and Canon Turnbull, who lived as a countryman among countrymen, found the world good on this August morning.

Here and there great hedge-elms pocketed the scene with shadows. The

grass verges had been scythed; ditches were clean, and hedges in good order. England was still England here, a farmer's country, conserving the good earth and the fruits thereof, rich in handicrafts and country skill. Canon Turnbull, who came from the north, had seen the new world of machines, Lancashire mills, and had loathed them. Like Cobbett he preferred a horse of flesh and bone and blood to clanking Rockets and Puffing Billies.

Passing a coppice he came to a field where reapers were at work, smocks laid aside under a hedge, with a dog and a great stone jar of beer. Brown, sunburnt arms swung the scythes. One or two of the younger men were stripped to the waist, their breeches belted about their loins. The reapers were working towards the roadside hedge, and the Canon stopped his horse, and raised his hat to the men. He knew them all by name.

'Morning, Tom; morning, Elijah; morning, Sam. You have the luck of the weather.'

Their sun-tanned faces were friendly, for the burly rector was one of them. He could swing a scythe, and carry a sack of corn under each arm. He had christened some of them, married others, buried their dear dead. And this was a Neath property, and not a workhouse slave farm. There had been no rick-burning here, for James Neath was a modernist in his human philosophy, and paid his men a living wage, and had built new cottages. The case of the Dorset martyrs had shocked him, yet compassion should eschew patronage.

'It looks like a good yield, Elijah.'

'Eighteen to the acre, I reckon, sir.'

Old Elijah, walking towards the hedge, drew the stone from his belt, and set a new edge on his scythe.

'How is your wife?'

'Middlin', sir. She had the ague again, hot and cold shivers.'

'Has the doctor seen her?'

'Sure he has. He's a good man is the doctor.'

Elijah thrust the stone back into its sheath, spat on his hands and slouched back to the line of reapers, and the Canon rode on with a wave of the hand.

He had a sick parishioner to visit at Folly Farm, and Folly Farm was not Neath. The bald, red-brick house had sullen eyes, and so had the faces of two men whom the Canon met in the farm lane. They touched their hats to him, but without smiles. Potatoes and pig-meal were their portion, and their poor souls

were sour in them. The Canon found his parishioner in bed, a lean, sallow, melancholy woman whose pale lips were covered with grey spittle. She too, as a miser's wife, had known a world without laughing foolishness, and to such a creature it was not easy to bring comfort.

Canon Turnbull did his best. He had left his horse by the paddock gate, with the bridle over a post, and as he passed down the path of a neglected garden he met Cragg the farmer. The name fitted him, and Mr. Cragg's world was without flowers.

'Well, Simeon, harvest in?'

The farmer gave him a leery look. No damn parsons were welcomed here.

'What d'yer think? Men without guts—these days.'

Which was hardly courteous, but characteristic, and the Canon could be candid—with courtesy.

'I remember a saying about workmen and tools, Simeon. The same saying may apply to men.'

The mean and hairy face grunted at him, and the grunt might have been translated into 'You mind your own bloody business.'

'Think it over, Simeon. Sermons in men and stones. Good bacon and beer in a man's belly may be helpful.' And Canon Turnbull passed on.

His next visit was to the Priory, a grey fantasy of a house with high gables and goblin chimneys, and windows peering at you from strange places. The great stew-ponds gleamed. Elms trailed a high frieze against the eastern sky. The Priory was a house of famous gardens, walled, formal, wild, and was as rich and productive as in its monkish days. A great tithe-barn spread a vast tiled roof to the sun.

Now Canon Turnbull had come to the Priory, not to administer comfort or counsel, but to inspect a new apple tree which James Neath had raised many years ago from an apple pip. It was now a grown tree, and bearing fruit for the first time, and James Neath was as excited about it as though he had produced a lovely daughter, but as the Canon came to the low wall of the garden he saw an unexpected sight. A gardener was pushing a queer, clattering machine across a lawn, with his master and two other men looking on. It was one of the first mowing machines that were to replace the swinging scythe.

One of the gardeners came to hold the Canon's horse, and Turnbull joined the group upon the lawn. James Neath Esq. was one of those oldish men with a boyish face, fresh-coloured, ardent, eager in its outlines, with quick eyes and a

generous mouth. In his young days he had been a noted athlete, and had walked his thirty miles in a day.

‘Well, rector, what do you think of it?’

Canon Turnbull was seeing more than a machine.

‘H’m, useful, I suppose. Leave a pattern on the grass.’

‘Patterns change,’ said his friend, with a twinkle.

The Canon nodded.

‘Cuts closer than a scythe—and any fool can use it.’

‘Tut-tut, Tom here will feel offended!’

‘I think not. I know Tom’s scything.’

The gardener grinned.

‘There be this to be said, sir. One can set a fool to it and save a wise man’s time.’

The rector could not counter this saying. That the crop of fools was and would always be abundant could not be denied, and even much education might turn fools into fact-crammed prigs. Meanwhile the new apple tree was the thing of the moment, and he and James Neath and Tom the head-gardener went off to the orchard to inspect it.

‘Christened yet, James?’

‘I might delegate that duty to you.’

The tree was waiting for them in a sheltered corner, a shapely tree with good broad leaves and polished bark. It carried a score or more of apples, pippin shaped and in colour primrose yellow, but on the sunny side some of the fruit was showing a lovely carmine flush.

Canon Turnbull surveyed it and smiled.

‘Pretty creature. It is going to blush like a girl. When will she be ripe?’

‘Should be—October.’

‘Dessert?’

‘Yes.’

‘If the flavour is as good as its colour you will have raised a beauty.’

James Neath touched one of the apples.

‘Well, what about the ceremony, my friend?’

‘Baptism! Let’s think. H’m. Rose Pippin, no. Why not Essex Sweeting?’

Tom smacked a thigh.

‘That’s a good christening, sir, if she’ll be sweet.’ His master laughed.

‘Well, my dear, hypothetically we’ll christen you by that name. Tom was always a cautious fellow.’

Wandering back and round the grey house they saw another visitor dismounting, the Rev. Nicholas Parbury, known at the Priory as Old Nick. James Neath and the Canon exchanged glances.

‘Guess the ulterior motive, rector.’

‘Is that quite—Christian?’

‘My partridges, and a share in the shooting next month.’

‘Possibly.’

‘I should say probably.’

Mr. Parbury joined them, after a curious look at the lawn-mower.

‘What-what? First specimen I’ve seen. Morning. Turnbull,’ and he took snuff.

James Neath eyed the powdered waistcoat, for though Mr. Parbury might be a good shot, he was a sloven. Also, there was a South End saying that when you got Mr. Parbury into the pulpit not even the Devil could get him out of it. And he talked much as he preached, round and round, and to and fro, and up the stairs and down the stairs, but never into my lady’s chamber. He was off now, but with a purpose concealed in circuitous verbiage; he talked of this, and he talked of that, with red-nosed animation, and no eyes for the boredom of his listeners. But, at last, the secret was out.

‘Ha—well—that’s what I said to him. *Verbum sap.*,’ and he took snuff, sneezed, and came to the point. ‘Well, well, how are birds, sir?’

James Neath gave the Canon a puckish look.

‘Plenty of promise, Parbury. I’ll send you a brace or two. I know you like ’em.’

Mr. Parbury blew his nose and looked huffed.

VI

No. 20, Caroline Terrace was a somewhat exceptional house, in that it had nothing but the cliffs and the meadows beyond it, and white posts and chains to prevent the donkey-boys galloping past it as they pleased, and also in the person of its owner, Miss Charlotte Cripps. Miss Cripps was no Venus, but a formidable old lady, rather like her pug-dog Sam, with bright, black beady eyes and an uncompromising mouth. Candour was Miss Cripps's principal characteristic, and a candour that flowered upon a stem of sardonic shrewdness. Much of Caroline Terrace lived in awe of Miss Cripps's tongue, and of the observant and sparkling intelligence behind it. Miss Cripps might march into the Marine Library and declare in her deep contralto: 'I want Malthus on population,' a controversial work that was considered rather shocking by married gentlewomen, but such latitude was just Cripps.

There was very little that Miss Charlotte did not see and digest, for she was a very observant old lady, and life was as good as fiction. Moreover, No. 20 had a peculiar little room built over its massive, out-jutting porch, like a priest's chamber, but not in Gothic. Miss Cripps would sit in a high-backed chair, and command through its three windows the Terrace, the cliffs, and the sea. Caroline Terrace might have been a living library from whose shelves many odd volumes could be taken down and studied.

Miss Cripps was a wealthy old lady with a reputation for carefulness. Being what she was she refused to be either exploited or imposed upon, but her coachman had been with her for twenty-three years, and her indoor staff was equally static. Miss Cripps loved good food, and was wise and generous in her understanding of other domestic tummies. Her butcher's bill was on the lavish side, and her servants sleek and rosy.

From her spy chamber Miss Charlotte observed many comings and goings, and human happenings that were not without significance. Her candid yet benign cynicism was impartial. She could classify her subjects and group them into Yes's and No's, the positive and the negative, according to her liking. Captain Bullard, Major Miller, and the Gages were particularly likeable; the Merrimans a little less so, the Lardners stale fish, the Pankridges more than stale fish. Dr. Rollinson was in a different category, being the beloved physician. The Rev. Nicholas Parbury she regarded as a braying ass.

Her interest at the moment was concentrated upon the Pankridge family, and the Pankridge governess. Mr. Pankridge amused her, a pompous joke in strapped trousers. Clarissa moved her to mordant disrelish. She called her a Pink Pig in a Poke. As for Albert and Victoria, Miss Cripps's fingers tingled with a passion to smack. Nasty little creatures, and their mother in miniature. As for the governess, Miss Charlotte saw her as a pretty and patient creature who suffered in secret from the Pankridge vulgarity.

To the intelligent this lack of spite against a pretty face on the part of an ugly old woman might have been incomprehensible, but Miss Cripps would have confessed with a twinkle that she had never felt competitive in the world of beauty.

'My dear, my face was never my fortune, and I have no regrets.' For, strange as it might seem, Miss Cripps had a feeling for beauty in pictures, precious stones, choice china, sleek furniture, and pleasant faces. She preferred a flower garden to a dung-pit, and the garden at the back of No. 20 was famous for its flowers, and roses in particular.

'I have never been a rose, my dear, not even a cabbage-rose, but I like 'em.'

So, Isabella, quite unaware of it, had become for the moment the centre-piece of Miss Cripps's picture. Miss Charlotte observed, and she inferred, and she sympathized. Certain incidents in the daily life of the Pankridge governess were seen by No. 20.

There was that morning when Albert and Victoria fell into a squabble outside No. 19. Albert pulled Victoria's hair, and Victoria tried to scratch him. Miss Luce, taking Albert by the collar, was well and promptly kicked on a shapely shin. Miss Cripps opened a window.

'Come here, young man.'

Albert pulled a face at her.

'Yes,' said Miss Charlotte, 'you are a very ugly boy, and pulling faces makes you uglier.'

'I'm not ugly. You are.'

'My dear, I know it, but you don't seem to know that your little face is as ugly as your manners.'

And strange to say Albert boo-hooed.

'I'll tell my mother.'

‘Splendid,’ said Miss Cripps, ‘go home at once and tell her.’

Isabella, looking up at that funny old pug-face topped by a white lace cap, smiled and responded with a little curtsy. Her ankle was hurting her, for the dear boy’s boot had caught the bone, but she took Albert by the hand and led the children back to No. 12A, feeling that Caroline Terrace must consider her a dreadful failure.

Miss Cripps was to observe other developments. Mr. George Travers appeared to have formed a habit of strolling along the Terrace with lingering leisureliness. Did he cast interested glances at No. 12A? He did. Now Miss Cripps had no high opinion of Handsome George, and no particular liking for him. Mr. Travers was the nephew of Mr. Jeremy Baxter, ex-wine-merchant, who had built the new white house where the incipient High Street met the fields, and he had put Mr. George into his London business. His nephew drove down once a fortnight in a smart curricle with a blood horse between the shafts, to spend a week-end with his uncle. Mr. George was handsome as far as his mouth, but the lower part of his face was weak and capricious. Moreover, he was too full of manners and was capable of buckish impertinence, and Miss Cripps did not like impertinent young men. George was a gadfly. And was George interested in the Pankridge’s pretty governess? Possibly.

Miss Cripps and Captain Bullard were very good friends, for Captain Bullard enjoyed the spice and flavour of Miss Charlotte’s conversation. Sometimes they sat on a seat together in the holly walk and were unashamedly scandalous, and this particular seat commanded a glimpse of the Terrace, for a gardener with original ideas had cut a round window in the holly hedge. Miss Cripps called it her peep-hole. It so happened that she and the Captain were seated here when Miss Luce came forth with the children for their morning walk, and Mr. Travers, who was taking a fortnight’s holiday, strolled along as a handsome coincidence in a blue coat and nankeen trousers. Miss Cripps nudged Captain Bullard’s elbow. Handsome George was smiling at the children. He chucked Victoria under the chin.

‘Hallo, my pretty.’

Then, with an apologetic charm he lifted his hat to Miss Luce.

‘Excuse me. I’m afraid I am rather fond of children. Yes, please excuse me.’

Victoria was ogling this nice and decorative gentleman, and Albert too was taken with Mr. Travers. Victoria offered a hand, while sucking the first finger of the other hand.

‘We’re going for a walk.’

‘So am I, my pretty.’

Victoria cooed.

‘Let’s walk with you.’

The invitation was opportune. Again, Mr. Travers raised his hat.

‘May I?’

Miss Luce smiled at him.

The two on the seat exchanged glances.

‘Enter—the villain,’ said Miss Cripps, more prophetically than she knew.

Had Handsome George been accused of villainy his weak mouth might have fallen open. He—a villain? Oh, no, sir; no, madam! He was just an amorous male with much experience of the erotic act, and if a pretty girl chose to share his satisfaction, what of it? Handsome George had gone to bed with sundry serving-wenches and ladies of the town. Moreover, he possessed a reassuring smile, manners, and some subtlety in the art of seduction.

Miss Luce, the children, and Mr. Travers wandered along the cliffs, and Mr. Travers held each child by the hand. He had surrendered his gold-topped cane to Albert. He made playful conversation, with challenging glances at Isabella. Albert and Victoria were smitten, and on their best behaviour, and for such mercies Miss Luce was grateful.

‘I have heard you play the piano. I adore Chopin.’

‘What’s that,’ said Victoria, ‘shopping?’

‘No, music, my dear.’

They dawdled, and Mr. Travers expatiated on the view. Why not sit and enjoy it? He seated himself on the grass, and took Victoria into his lap and tickled her. Ecstatic squirmings and giggles. Albert was twirling the hero’s cane. Miss Luce, after a moment’s hesitation, sat down and spread her skirts.

‘See me walk,’ said Albert.

He strutted, flourishing the cane like a swaggering drum-major. Victoria pulled at Mr. Travers’s cravat.

‘Go on tickling me.’

‘You forward young woman.’

He tickled her, and cast playful and appreciative glances at Isabella.

So, the scene was set for the gossips and the malicious, and the Misses Lardner, out for exercise, and walking three abreast, happened upon this pretty picture: Mr. Travers hatless and reclining upon one elbow and telling two children a fairy story, while a demure maiden listened. The Misses Lardner went by head in air, especially so Miss Caroline, who had hopes of making Mr. Travers her own. Handsome George did not see them, or hear the disapproving rustle of their skirts, but Miss Luce had seen them, and kept her head averted.

‘I thought so,’ said Miss Faith, ‘that young woman is sly.’

Miss Helen agreed with her; Miss Caroline was significantly silent.

‘Poor Mr. Travers. Such a simple young man. I hope he is not serious.’

Miss Luce, cast for the part of the designing female, watched the three graces dwindle into the distance. Mr. Travers was finishing his story, and it was a most moral story, fit for childish ears. The Prince was betrothed to Cinderella.

‘Did they get married?’ asked Victoria.

‘Of course they did, my dear. The hero and the heroine always get married.’

He gave Isabella a suggestive smile, and Miss Luce sat with clasped hands, her lashes lowered. She was rather taken with Mr. Travers. Almost he was the Prince of the Fairy Tale.

Albert supplied the anticlimax.

‘I know what happened afterwards.’

‘Do you, my lad?’

‘Yes, lots of babies.’

Mr. Travers let out a pleasant laugh, and fancied that Miss Luce blushed. Assuredly the precocity of Albert was disturbing to so sensitive a creature, and Handsome George was intrigued. It might be great fun to cause the pretty governess much more serious blushes.

Mrs. Lardner heard of the affair from her eldest daughter, and Mrs. Lardner was a lady who had run to fat, both physically and mentally. Comfortably lazy and fond of food, she reposed like a cat on a cushion, and suffered her somewhat distinguished husband and her dominant daughters to treat her like a

large infant. Mary Lardner had married at nineteen, and borne seven children, four of whom had died in infancy, and having been married so young she was puzzled by the prevarication of her daughters. The Lardner girls did not attract, perhaps because they resembled their gaunt and formidable father more than they did their Polly Peachum of a mother. Mary had been golden-curled, fresh-coloured, and saucy.

Yet, her daughters did—on occasions—use their mother as a receptacle for confidences. She was like a large basket that accepted anything and everything, for Mary Lardner was a good listener, since listening entailed no effort. It was Faith who described the scene on the cliff; her indignation was not wholly disinterested.

'I am sure it was quite a shock to poor Caroline to see that girl ogling Mr. Travers.'

'And Mr. Travers liking it?'

'Men are just—awful,' said Miss Faith.

Mary accepted the awfulness of man. Maybe she was a little disappointed, for three dormant daughters about the house could be something of an infliction. She had hoped that Caroline and Mr. Travers—— Well, yes, and yet there was a streak of naughtiness in fat Mrs. Mary. These daughters of hers were such superior young women; they patronized her; they talked down at her.

'Really, Mother, so-and-so isn't pronounced like that.'

Maybe Mrs. Mary allowed herself secret chuckles. She had married, but Faith, Hope, and Charity had failed to fascinate mere man.

Mr. Ludovic Lardner, Q.C., received the information in bed. In his dry way he was very fond of Mary; she was comfortable to sleep with, and never lectured him. Nor did she fidget or snore, or wake him with cold feet. She wore a pretty lace cap at night, decorated with pink or blue ribbons, and Mr. Lardner found her more sympathetic than his daughters.

Confound it, why did not the girls marry?

Mr. Lardner wore a night-cap with a red tassel, less dignified than a barrister's wig, but even in bed Mr. Lardner's dignity was impeccable.

'What's this about Caroline, my dear?'

'I had hoped that she and George Travers were making a match of it.'

Ludovic had no great liking for Handsome George.

‘Well, aren’t they? I am not so sure that it would be—advisable.’

‘But he will come in for his uncle’s money.’

‘And squander it—most probably. I rather fancy young Travers is a dissolute fellow.’

‘Well, what I was going to say was, Ludovic, George Travers seems to be making up to the Pankridge’s governess.’

‘Indeed. So much the worse for him.’

‘She’s rather pretty, isn’t she?’

Mr. Lardner rubbed his chin.

‘My dear, that girl puzzles me.’

‘Does she, Ludovic? How?’

‘I feel I have seen her before—somewhere, but I can’t place her.’

‘Perhaps it was in court?’

‘By Jove, my dear, that may be it. I’ll try and remember.’

VII

ISABELLA'S room was situated at the back of the house, neither up nor down, but recessed on a level of its own, half-way up the first flight of stairs. Two steps ascended to it. More like a glorified cupboard than a room, it was just capable of containing a jejune bed, and a minute dressing-table by the window. The wash-basin was a tripod affair tucked in between the dressing-table and the wall. There was no cupboard, but three wooden pegs on a board attached to the door. The mirror was cracked, all the furniture second-hand.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Miss Luce's possessions were so few that they could be housed in this meagre room. Her dozen or so books had taken refuge under the bed. The window gave on the slated roof of the kitchen and the backs of the stables of Caroline Mews. The garden was hidden by the kitchen roof. An old rug welcomed her feet when she got out of bed in the morning, and the bed itself was a cantankerous contraption.

But the room was hers. Here she could be sometimes and for short periods at peace, especially so when the children had gone to bed, and Mrs. Pankridge was not wanting someone to fetch her smelling salts or procure her slippers. Here, at night, by the light of a candle on a bracket, she could lie in bed and read her Shelley and her Keats, and Scott and Dickens. *Endymion* in a back bedroom, *Ivanhoe* splendid by candlelight. Yet, even her reading was limited, for Mrs. Pankridge was careful about other people's candles. Servants and governesses should not be wasteful.

Numbered among her books was one bound in red leather, the reflections of Marcus Aurelius, and on its title page its original owner had signed his name: 'David Hatherway.'

Sometimes she would take this book with her in her reticule with a piece of embroidery when she was out with the children, and could sit on a seat or the grass while they played. The original owner had marked certain passages or lines, and to Isabella the written words could become a voice. If there was tragedy here it could be translated into her own little world. She had ceased from shuddering over certain memories, though they could fill her with anxiety and fear. This red book was a secret relic, sacred to youth's tragedy. She would tuck it away under her skirts or in her reticule if anybody approached.

Then she had a mirror in her bedroom, even if that mirror was cracked. She

could look at her face and dream, as all women should dream. Did he find her comely? Did he like dark hair and eyes? Was her voice pleasing to him? For women, especially lonely women, can misread a man, and fall into some romantic infatuation in their hunger to be loved.

Mr. Travers was flitting around. The situation was complex. It was not easy to find Miss Luce alone, nor could she steal out and meet a lover as she pleased. Mrs. Pankridge was too particular, and, having heard rumours, knocked at Miss Luce's bedroom door at night to satisfy herself that Isabella was properly in bed. The Pankridge prudery was phenomenal. Miss Cripps, at the gazebo, could and did observe certain developments. Miss Luce took the children more often into the Shrubbery, and Mr. Travers was showing an inclination for sylvan retreats.

Isabella had the red book with her one morning on a seat in the holly walk. Mr. Travers had arrived, and been persuaded by Albert and Victoria into a game of hide-and-seek, and the children had to be propitiated. Isabella was wise in this respect. Why should not the world think that George had a passion for children? She heard ecstatic screams and laughter, and the sound of chasing feet.

A flight of steps faced with rough bricks led from the holly terrace to a shaded path. The chase was ascending. Miss Luce saw Victoria scurrying up. She reached the steps, stumbled, fell. Screams that were not playful. Miss Luce dashed for the child, leaving the red book on the seat. Victoria's face had made contact with a rough corner of brick. Her cheek and mouth were cut and bleeding.

Isabella, suddenly frightened, gathered the child up. Assuredly, this accident might be charged to her as carelessness. She was half-way across the Terrace before Mr. Travers and Albert overtook her.

'What happened? Let me take her.'

'She fell and hit her face on a step.'

'I'll take her.'

But Miss Luce would not surrender the screaming child to him. The burden and the onus were hers. Mr. Travers, having watched her vanish into the house, strolled cliffwards, looking a little peeved and sheepish, holding a sobered Albert by the hand.

Miss Luce, climbing the stairs with Victoria in her arms, a Victoria who was still screaming, saw the drawing-room door open.

‘Good heavens, Miss Luce, what has happened?’

Isabella was breathless.

‘I’m afraid she fell and hit her face.’

Victoria screamed ‘Mumma, mumma,’ and was reft from Miss Luce by a tempestuous mother.

‘Good heavens! Her poor little face! How could you let such a thing happen? Don’t stand gaping; run for the doctor.’

Isabella fled. So the guilt would be hers. She hurried to No. 8, and rang the bell. Most probably the doctor would be out. A maid appeared. No, the doctor was not at home. Could he be found? The girl did not know.

‘There has been an accident. Will you ask him to come to Mrs. Pankridge’s directly he returns?’

‘Of course, miss.’

No. 12A was in a state of turmoil. Mrs. Pankridge had tugged hysterically at the nursery bell, and then sat down on Albert’s bed, the child’s bleeding face pressed to her bosom. If there was to be a scene it would be a super-scene.

‘Ellen, I’m going to faint. My poor darling’s face.’

Ellen, the cook, attempted to take the child in her arms, but Victoria screamed and kicked.

‘Now, now, my pet——’

Mrs. Pankridge had no intention of fainting.

‘Where’s Miss Luce? It was all her fault. I sent her for Dr. Rollinson.’

‘I’m afraid he will be out, ma’am.’

‘He can’t be out; he mustn’t be out. Where’s Mr. Pankridge? Send someone to find the doctor. I must put my poor darling to bed. There—there, poppet. Where’s that girl? Hasn’t she come back yet?’

Isabella returned, to find Mrs. Pankridge half-collapsed in a chair, with handkerchief and smelling bottle, and the cook and the housemaid putting Victoria to bed.

‘Miss Luce, is the doctor coming?’

‘I am afraid he is out, madam. I left word.’

‘Good heavens, what use is that, girl? I want the doctor for my darling.

Where's Mr. Pankridge? Find my husband. My heart's not strong. Oh, dear, oh, dear! What gross carelessness! I am sure she will be disfigured for life. Don't stand there, girl. Find Mr. Pankridge. Tell him we—must—have the doctor.'

Once more Isabella fled. She appeared on the Terrace and stood looking helplessly up and down it. She saw a groom and a horse outside the garden of Major Miller's and she hurried towards them, just in time to catch the Major as he appeared.

'Oh, Major Miller, could you find the doctor? We've had an accident.'

'Of course. I'll do my best, Miss Luce. Someone been hurt?'

'Victoria.'

Major Miller mounted his horse.

'I'll call at the surgery and see if the dispenser can tell me where the doctor might be found.'

'Oh, thank you so much, sir, so very much,' and Miss Luce clung to the garden railings.

Major Miller trotted off, and the groom—one Howell—an elderly and fatherly fellow, stood looking at the lady, who was steadying herself against the railings. Was she going to faint?

'Are you all right, miss?'

'Yes, thank you. I'm a little out of breath.'

Benjamin Howell watched her return to No. 12A, and his eyes were kind. Caroline Mews had sat in judgment upon Clarissa Pankridge, and if sympathy was needed it would go to the governess. A pretty, gentle creature, much too good to be wasted on those turbulent and spoilt brats, and scolded by a dressed-up She-Dog. Caroline Mews could cultivate candour.

It so happened that Mr. Lardner came strolling along the holly walk some five minutes after this minor tragedy. He saw the red book on the seat, paused, turned aside, and picked the book up. Someone had forgotten it, and Mr. Lardner proposed to return it to the owner if that person could be identified.

He opened the book at the title page and saw the signature: 'David Hatherway.'

Mr. Lardner's grizzled eyebrows bristled. His whole face stiffened.

‘Good God! Hatherway! By all the prophets—now—I think I remember. The daughter. Had to cross-examine her in court. Poor creature.’

Mr. Lardner stood reflecting, with the red book in his hand. Then he closed it, and replaced it on the seat, and walking to the end of the holly walk sat down on another seat. It would be interesting to see if anyone came to recover the book, and if so—who that person was. Yes, a Judgment of Solomon. Leaning forward so that he could watch the holly walk, he waited.

Miss Luce was half-way up the stairs when she remembered the book. Her face went white and panic-stricken. Had she left the book on the Shrubbery seat for someone else to find? She dashed down and out across the road, a scurrying figure of fear. Turning into the holly walk she came to the seat, an empty seat, and saw the book lying there. Oh, God be thanked! She clutched at it and stood a moment holding the book to a breathless bosom. She saw nobody, for Mr. Lardner had sat back in the recess, and was invisible to her. He had seen that which he had waited to see.

‘Poor creature! Yes, I remember now. She must have taken her mother’s name.’

Isabella recrossed the roadway to the Pankridge house, climbed the stairs to her room, closed the door, and slid the red book under the bed. She sat down on the bed. Her heart was racing. She closed her eyes, and her shoulders drooped. Oh, thank God! How utterly foolish of her to forget that book!

A voice was calling.

‘Miss Luce, Miss Luce. Where has that girl got to?’

Isabella straightened, rose with a suggestion of effort, and opened her door. Mrs. Pankridge loomed on the landing, a fan in one hand, her smelling salts in the other.

‘Oh, there you are. What were you doing in your room? I sent you to find the doctor.’

‘Major Miller has gone to try and find him, madam.’

‘Indeed! And was I not to be told, to have my agony relieved?’

Miss Luce was mute, while Clarissa fanned a furious face. Anguish—indeed! But Isabella was wondering what Mrs. Pankridge would say and do were she to discover the secret of that book.

‘I did all I could, madam.’

‘Indeed. I would remind you that the accident was all due to your

carelessness. Where is Albert?'

'I think—with Mr. Travers.'

'Mr. Travers? So—you——'

'Mr. Travers was playing with the children.'

Mrs. Pankridge emitted a most unpleasant laugh, a vulgar laugh.

'Ah—yes. Mr. Travers was playing with the children. I—quite—understand. You had better go to your room, Miss Luce.'

Isabella turned, climbed the two steps, and closed the door after her. She sat down on the bed, groped for the red book, opened it, and tore out the title page. She gave one tragic glance at the familiar signature, and then crumpled the sheet and slipped it into a pocket. She would burn that piece of paper and let the ashes drift out of the window. Her bedroom candle would serve.

VIII

MAJOR MILLER, having been told that Dr. Rollinson had driven to Holywell, trotted in that direction. His horse was a speedy beast, and rounding a corner he saw ahead of him another rider jogging along, the Rev. Nicholas Parbury. Major Miller drew level with the parson, and hatted him. Respect for the cloth might outweigh dislike for the person.

‘Well, well, you seem in a hurry, Miller.’

‘Trying to catch Rollinson. There has been an accident.’

‘What, what! Anything serious?’

‘The Pankridge child. If you don’t mind I’ll get on.’

But Mr. Parbury dug his heels into his horse, and kept the Major company.

‘Anything serious, what?’

‘I don’t quite know. Their governess appealed to me.’

Mr. Parbury had somewhat of a lower-deck sense of humour.

‘Did she? Tut-tut, Major. A damned pretty girl. Why don’t you marry her?’

Major Miller looked straight ahead. Mr. Parbury was famous for his doubtful stories, and would blurt them out over the card-table on Saturday nights, and on one occasion the mild Major had protested.

‘How you can do this sort of thing, Parbury, before serving the sacrament passes my understanding.’

Mr. Parbury had squinted down his red nose.

‘My dear sir, I’m a man of the world, and not a tame curate.’

So they rode on between the harvest fields that were yellow stubble, and here and there gleaners were out. Mr. Parbury, full of himself and his affairs, chattered like a jackdaw.

‘Going to see Turnbull. Fact is I’m overworked. Think of getting a curate.’

Major Miller showed no sympathy, for the cure of souls in Mr. Parbury’s parish was a perfunctory affair.

‘Too much tied, you know. Can’t get about. Hallo, there’s the doctor’s gig. Excuse me if I push on.’

Major Miller did not reply. If a man wanted to waste words on you, you could leave it at that. He held up a white-gloved hand to halt the doctor, and to give him his message.

‘My dear fellow, you are wanted. The Pankridge house. I said I would try and find you.’

Dr. Rollinson and the Major were dear fellows to each other, but the doctor did not welcome the message.

‘Anything urgent? I’m busy.’

‘The child’s had a fall. The governess seemed to be in a state about it.’

‘Oh, well, I’ll look in. Thanks, Miller,’ and they parted.

Mr. Pankridge meanwhile had returned to an agitated house, and been stationed on the balcony to watch for the doctor. Clarissa had poured out her soul to him, with characteristic exaggeration. Mrs. Pankridge was convinced that Miss Luce had been flirting with Mr. Travers, and that while they had been carrying on together the accident had happened. Poor dear Victoria’s face might be terribly and permanently disfigured. Mr. Pankridge was hardened to his wife’s hurricanes, and he sat down and lit a cigar, and was not pleased with Miss Luce’s behaviour. He would have preferred to have been the recipient of tender glances. Impudent young pup, Mr. Travers.

‘Hullo, Pa!’ cried the voice of his son.

Mr. Pankridge had been looking towards the Royal Hotel and Mr. Travers and Albert had returned from the direction of the cliffs. Mr. Pankridge rose with some dignity to discover Handsome George holding the boy’s hand.

‘Ha, Mr. Travers. I fear we are all rather upset.’

‘I am afraid it was all my fault, sir.’

‘So I gather.’

‘The children and I had been playing “Chivy-Chase”.’

Mr. Pankridge became sarcastic.

‘And was Miss Luce also playing “Chivy-Chase”?’

‘Oh, no, sir. She was sitting on a seat, reading.’

Mr. Pankridge was somewhat mollified.

‘Ah—well, accidents will happen. We are waiting for the doctor. My wife —of course—is considerably upset.’

‘Please convey my sincere regrets to her. Hullo, here is the doctor’s gig. I am going to buy Victoria a paper of sweets.’

‘Me too,’ said Albert.

Mr. Pankridge disappeared from the balcony to reassure Clarissa and to meet Dr. Rollinson. He called to his wife: ‘The doctor is here, my dear.’ Then, with some speed, he took himself and his cigar down the stairs to the front door. It had been left open, and Dr. Rollinson was out of the gig and pulling off his gloves.

‘Very glad to see you, sir. You will find Mrs. Pankridge upstairs with the child.’

The little doctor did not like Mr. Pankridge, and he wasted no words on him, but deposited his hat and gloves on the hall table and trotted up the stairs. Clarissa was waiting for him.

‘Thank God you have come, doctor. My little darling has had a terrible fall.’

She swept him into the bedroom, and the little darling, propped up on pillows, greeted Dr. Rollinson with vigorous screams. She put her fists to her bruised face, and turned away from him. Miss Luce, sitting on her bed, could hear the uproar.

‘There, there, darling, the dear doctor has come to make you well. She has been so frightened. Now, darling, come to Mother.’

Victoria was in a fighting temper, and Dr. Rollinson in a hurry. He was a great lover of children, and humane in his handling of them, but the Victoria breed was not to his liking. He had been known to smack spoilt children into behaving as they should. The vigour of Miss Pankridge’s struggling fury did not suggest that her injuries were serious. He picked Victoria off the bed, and thrust her kicking and struggling at her mother.

‘Sit down and hold her, madam. I’m afraid I have a very busy morning.’

Clarissa gave him an astonished glare, but she obeyed him, and Victoria, after a few final kicks and yells, became sufficiently subdued for the doctor’s examination. Nor were her injuries very serious, a superficial cut on the cheek, a swollen lower lid, a bruised lip.

‘Put her to bed,’ said the doctor, ‘and keep her there for a day or two. I will

send you a soothing lotion, but keep it out of her eyes. Nothing serious, I am glad to say.'

Mrs. Pankridge cooed.

'Oh, what a relief! There, there, darling, you are soon going to be well. Will you wash her sweet little face, doctor?'

'I think, madam, I can leave that to you. Warm water and a clean flannel. I have an urgent case waiting for me.'

'You will come in again, doctor?'

'Yes, I will look in this evening,' and he patted Victoria's sound cheek, and Victoria smiled upon him. Tantrums have a way of surrendering to firmness.

Dr. Rollinson found Mr. Pankridge smoking his cigar and chatting with Joe Clements.

'Nothing very serious, I'm glad to say.'

Mr. Pankridge extended a pink fat hand.

'Very much obliged to you, doctor. A great relief, I'm sure.'

Mr. Parbury had arrived at the gate of the Turnbull rectory. The gate was a faded blue in colour and studded with Gothic nails, and it opened in one of those generous red Georgian walls with a string-course and a brick coping. Apple trees aglow with fruit showed above the wall, and the rectory windows looked out upon a peaceful world where man was not wholly vile.

Mr. Parbury did not appreciate the subtle virtues of walls. Why shut yourself in? Walls were unsympathetic to gapers and gossips. Mr. Parbury was all for a balcony over life's Grand Canal with gondolas laden with beauty and scandal passing to and fro below you. After all, gossip and scandal fell within a priest's orbit, and were part of his prerogative. The vicar of St. John's rode on to the stable gates, to find them open, and a groom washing the wheels of a carriage.

'Hullo, there! The rector in?'

The man touched a ginger forelock.

'He be, sir, or he was.'

'Take my horse.'

And Mr. Parbury dismounted.

Formal entries were not of his persuasion, and he passed from the stable yard into a walled garden, to discover the rector in his shirt-sleeves picking William pears from an old pear tree on a wall. The Canon was wearing a large straw hat with the brim turned down. He might have been a gardener and not a dignitary of the Church.

‘Morning, Turnbull.’

The Canon discovered his visitor, and no great pleasure in the discovery.

‘Good morning, Parbury. Have a pear.’

He lobbed one to Mr. Parbury, and Mr. Parbury fumbled the catch, and had to recover the pear from a thicket of lavender.

‘What’s the breed?’

‘William. Nothing to beat it, in my opinion. Well, what can I do for you?’

Mr. Parbury stood holding the pear as though he did not know what to do with it.

‘I want a curate.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes, I’m finding myself too tied by the leg.’

‘Which leg?’

‘Both, my dear fellow. You may know of a curate, a mild fellow who can trot around and save me some of the—routine.’

Canon Turnbull put his teeth into a pear. It was juicy, as juicy as his ironic and human approach to the occasion. So Parbury wanted a tame curate to function while he shot and hunted and played cards, and chattered here, there and everywhere. Canon Turnbull had been a wild youngster in his college days, and he was somewhat prejudiced in favour of guts and mischief, for they were the virile soil out of which good manhood might mature, and prigs and little swots were of no account in a harvest field or a ship when gales blew.

‘Find yourself overworked, Parbury? Maid of all work in God’s house?’

‘*Verbum sap.* I’d like a fellow who could scrub the floor, so to speak.’

The Canon caressed his beard, and there was mischief in him.

‘Well, as a matter of fact I do know of a young man. London cure. Not quite in sympathy with his vicar. Oh, yes, mild as milk. Desires a change.

Would you like me to approach him?'

'I should be much obliged.'

'He is not a looker, but he is a worker, name of John Jordan. Cambridge man.'

'A gentleman—then?'

'Oh, completely. He could come down and be interviewed.'

'Married?'

'No, no encumbrances.'

Mr. Parbury blew his nose.

'Sounds just what I want. He can come and see me.'

When Mr. Parbury had gone the Canon continued to pick pears, and he did so with chuckles. The Rev. John Jordan—what!—had been a broth of a boy. Sent down from Cambridge for uproarious ragging. But now Mr. Jordan was very much for Christ and in a vigorous fashion. Preached with his fists, if necessary. Mild? And Mr. Turnbull chuckled. Well, well, he would have to inoculate into John the virtues of mildness. Yes, John had a sense of humour and an appreciation of human values. He would write a letter to the Rev. John Jordan and invite him to stay at the rectory, and advise him as to the prejudices and peculiarities of Mr. Parbury.

That night, when the house had gone to bed, Miss Luce placed the candlestick in her basin, and held the torn-out page to the candle-flame. She held it until three-quarters of the page had been consumed, and then dropped the fluttery black ghost into the basin, and watched the last corner burn. But no fire could consume a bitter memory, and suddenly a spasm of contrition shook her. She put her hands to her face, and the wetness of tears showed between her fingers. Oh, silent and solitary anguish, sobbings that had had to be smothered lest some unfriendly ear should hear them. Never had she felt more alone than with that film of crumpled ash, and the dead hand that had penned a tragic name upon a piece of paper.

But that ash had to be disposed of. She opened the lower sash of her window, and, holding the bowl between the drawn curtains, put her face close and blew like a child blowing the white puff-bowl of a dandelion. The black ash floated out into the night, and, replacing the bowl and setting the candle on its bracket, she began to undress, strangely unconscious of the tears which still

ran down her cheeks.

IX

MR. LARDNER'S judicial mind contemplated with characteristic solemnity the problem of the red book. He was not a bad sort of man, despite his air of dry severity, and though his friends and acquaintances had never heard him give way to live laughter, he could produce on occasions a sound that resembled the wind in a reed-bed. Nor was this a case for laughter. Mr. Lardner remembered that scene, and with recovered vividness, a man of culture confronting the final sentence, the strange silence in court, two women with their faces covered. Poor Hatherway, driven to desperation by the leech that had sucked his blood, had committed murder, and David Hatherway had been hanged.

Mr. Lardner could conclude that the wife was dead, and the daughter alone in the world, living under her mother's name and as a social slave at the service of a family of snobs. Mr. Lardner had no liking for the Pankridges. Percival was a pompous bore, the wife a florid and vulgar harridan. As for the dear children, Mr. Lardner had on one occasion caught them raiding the flowers in his front garden, but they had escaped and avoided highly judicial cuffings. H'm, yes. Mr. Lardner could appreciate what Miss Luce's life might be were Mrs. Pankridge to discover that her governess was the daughter of a murderer.

So, for the time being, Mr. Lardner kept his own council, and did not so much as tell his wife, even though Miss Luce might be spoiling Caroline's chances with Mr. Travers. Three unmarried daughters were a serious expense, but matrimony and Handsome George did not impress Mr. Lardner's impartial mind. He was sorry for Isabella Luce, and he might be more sorry for her if—in her happiness—she could be deceived by the glamour of the promiscuous male. Mr. Lardner—like most men—was not uninfluenced by a pretty woman's looks, and Miss Luce seemed to be a gentle creature too much at the mercy of a family of snobs.

Mrs. Pankridge was tinting the rose, and it was not a beauteous flower, even though dear Victoria's face had suffered no lasting damage. Miss Luce had been remiss in her duties, and gossip was abroad about the governess and Mr. Travers.

Clarissa called Miss Luce into the drawing-room and, while fanning

herself, was sufficiently cool in the offensiveness of her exhortations.

‘Miss Luce, I wish to advise you. I know my dear children are sweet pets, but when a gentleman’—and Clarissa gave the title with irony—‘when a gentleman—is too—er—prevalent, I think you should ask yourself a question.’

Miss Luce stood rigid.

‘You infer, madam?’

‘I infer nothing, my good girl. Mr. Travers is a gay sort of beau with a liking for the ladies. I feel it my duty to warn you.’

Miss Luce held her breath, and her words.

‘Thank you, madam.’

‘Quite so. And perhaps you will realize that dear Victoria’s accident was due to your permitting a young man to be too familiar.’

‘Mr. Travers has never been familiar.’

‘Well, I have warned you, Miss Luce. I do not like gossip thrust into my household. In future you will please attend more carefully to your duties.’

Isabella was dismissed, and her inward reaction was to resent the attack upon poor Mr. Travers. After all, he had accepted the blame, and he was a young man with powers of persuasion. Miss Luce was no fool, but in her loneliness youth might turn to youth, especially so to a young man who could smile so pleasantly.

Mr. Travers had returned to London and the serious business of selling wine, and his uncle was very well satisfied with the facility his nephew had shown in educating a palate. Handsome George had enjoyed a wine-merchant’s Grand Tour, spending a year with exporters of port and claret and Rhine wine, and learning to distinguish the body and the bouquet of the various vintages. He had become passably fluent in French, and no small part of his inspiration had been things feminine. Mr. Jeremy Baxter’s business had been established for many years in Fenchurch Street, and his patrons were mostly city fathers, and Mr. Travers had manners and could convey to old gentlemen the impression that he was wholly and handsomely at their service. Patrons would be bowed into the solidly furnished and solemn tasting-room, and Mr. Travers himself would act as Ganymede, presenting glass that was Bristol to some eminent city father with a palate and a nose.

‘Try this claret, sir. Yes, a good year. I think you will agree that it has more

body than most Bordeaux wine. I can recommend it, sir. I know the vineyards where it was born, but—of course—I realize that no recommendation is needed to a connoisseur like yourself.'

Champagne too was in the fashion, and Mr. George had a particular liking for this golden, bubbling liquid. It was it; it was George himself; it had his sparkling sentiment. He kept a case at his lodgings in Guilford Street, and would share a bottle with the pretty lady who obliged him. Champagne was good for gay bed-fellows, and Mr. George was indeed a child of the grape.

His landlady, like the great Horatio, had one blind eye. All that she chose to see was a handsome and decorous young gentleman ascending the stairs to the first floor. Did petticoats rustle? Oh, no, sir; oh, no, madam. For Mr. Travers was lavish in laughter and cash and mischief, and could put an arm round a solid and matronly waist. Young gentlemen must be young gentlemen, and gallant and uproarious, especially in bed. Nor had the lady ever seen Mr. Travers the worse for wine. He could carry his liquor as he carried his clothes, with discrimination and distinction.

Handsome George had intimates who drank and gossiped with him, and Mr. Travers liked to give his friends the impression that he was a very devil of a fellow with the women, which indeed he was. To some of his cronies he was known vulgarly and in vulgar Latin as 'Georgius Semper Randide Primus', for in spite of a romantic exterior Mr. Travers had remained a spotty lout in his attitude towards women.

'Well, had a good holiday, George?'

He and a friend were drinking old brandy, and Mr. Travers held his glass to the light.

'Pretty good, old fellah. Found a comely wench. Somebody's governess.'

'Didn't know the breed ever had looks.'

'This one has. Dark, and juicy and romantic.'

'Any luck yet?'

'No. She's one of the shy sort. Have to play the game. But coy virgins are rather good when you get 'em.'

His crony guffawed.

Mr. Travers spread his legs, and they were shapely legs, and perfectly trousered. His complacency was as sleek as the brandy, and life just an amorous joke.

Autumn was in the air, and the tall poplars over the way were tinged with saffron. The sea was more grey than blue, and when the tide was out the mud-flats ceased to carry colour. The dim hills of Kent had lost their golden grain and were mere distant stubble. The gardens of Caroline Terrace were fading bouquets. Chimneys had begun to smoke, and winds to whisper and wail with winter melancholy. Apartment houses had become empty, and the bathing-machines had been drawn high up out of storm's way, with white hoods furled. The halyards on the flagstaff on the cliff flapped against the white pole. Gales came from the south-west, and rain bubbled up below window-sashes. Caroline Terrace had brought out its umbrellas, and Dr. Rollinson and his groom drove out in white storm-coats, their collars up, and the doctor's top-hat —his winter hat—had no summer gloss. Visitors gathered round the fires in the Marine Library. At night many of the windows of the Royal Hotel were blind eyes.

October and bitter memories. This was the month that wore for Isabella Luce the black cap of tragedy. She feared it, and its broken skies, and wailing winds, and moods of melancholy. Leaves turning yellow and falling, or scuttling restlessly about your feet; moanings in the chimney; unrest, vague dreads, a feeling of dark days closing down on you.

The routine of No. 12A seemed to become more difficult, the children fractious, Clarissa irritable with ennui. Her boredom and moods were those of a woman who was all vulgar artifice and idleness. She threw tempers in order to find excitement in such organic reactions. The balcony had ceased to be a refuge for Percival and his cigars. The maids had caught the vagaries of their mistress's temper. No. 12A became a house that suffered from emotional dyspepsia.

Isabella was reading by candlelight Keats's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*. She too was Isabella, but her romance had no fragrant herbs to savour it. Was she sick of love, poor fool, moony and sentimental about a young man with tawny hair and impeccable trousers? Sitting silent at meals, with eyes downcast, and so absent that even Mr. Pankridge noticed it.

'My dear, I think Miss Luce must be unwell.'

Clarissa scoffed at the notion.

'Sulky, I think. These dark young women are apt to be difficult.'

Victoria was sitting on a tuffet by the fire, nursing a doll, and she piped up in a shrill treble:

‘I know what is the matter with Miss Luce.’

‘Do you, dear?’

‘She’s sweet on Mr. Travers.’

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! But Victoria was one of those petticoated precocities that possess a horrid sharpness in the deciphering of the emotions.

‘Tut-tut, darling, you are too young to know about such things.’

Victoria giggled.

‘Mr. Travers kissed me, and I saw Miss Luce looking as though she would like to be me.’

Mr. and Mrs. Pankridge exchanged glances. Was it quite proper for genteel children to be cared for by a young woman who was ready to be kissed by a raffish beau like Mr. George Travers?

The first ball of the winter season was advertised at the Assembly Rooms. The Marquise de Beaucourt and Lady Merriman were the patronesses, and the names of those desiring to attend had to be submitted to these gentlewomen. Mr. Pankridge applied for two tickets, and when they were not forthcoming, Clarissa approached Lady Merriman after morning service at St. John’s Church.

‘Oh, dear Lady Merriman, excuse me, but I think there has been some oversight.’

Lady Merriman was not her dear lady, but a woman of looks and of breeding with a fastidious dislike of snobs and the vulgar.

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs. Pankridge.’

‘We have not yet received our tickets for the ball.’

Lady Merriman smiled sweetly.

‘That is so. Forgive me, but there has been no oversight,’ and Lady Merriman swept on.

The Pankridge fat was in the fire, and Clarissa went to the Sunday dinner table in a most un-Christian temper. She had been insulted; Percival must demand an apology from the Committee. If those tickets were not forthcoming, she, Clarissa Pankridge, would—raise bedlam. And who were those hoity-toity ladies, anyway? And then Mrs. P. burst into angry tears before Miss Luce and

the children, and over her plate of Yorkshire pudding and roast beef.

Mr. Pankridge tried to pacify her.

‘I expect the list is full, my dear. You see—the County is attending.’

‘Indeed! And what of it? I shall insist on an apology. Miss Luce, please fetch me my smelling salts.’

This incident was to cause Isabella other embarrassments. Dispatched to the Marine Library to procure a book for Clarissa, who needed soothing literature, she met in the doorway Miss Charlotte Cripps. Miss Luce stood aside to let the old lady pass, and her courtesy drew more than a smile from those black and mordant eyes. Miss Cripps laid a hand on Miss Luce’s arm.

‘Have you a moment, my dear? And shall we introduce ourselves? I think we ought to know each other.’

Isabella flushed with surprise and pleasure, and Miss Cripps admired her pretty colour.

‘Thank you—madam.’

‘Walk a little way with me. Beauty and the Beast, my dear. And don’t address me as madam.’

Miss Luce gave her a look of laughing protest.

‘I am procuring a book for Mrs. Pankridge.’

‘Books don’t run away.’ And Miss Cripps linked her arm in Isabella’s.

‘Let us stroll by the sea. Are you going to the Assembly Ball?’

‘I?’

‘Why not, my dear? I am, and I like to see pretty faces.’

‘No, I’m afraid not. You see——’

‘I see no reason why you should not come with me. I can play wallflower.’

Isabella looked bothered and frightened.

‘It is very kind of you, but—you see——’

‘Well, my dear?’

‘Mrs. Pankridge has not received an invitation.’

Miss Charlotte’s mordant eyes twinkled.

‘Yes, I am aware of that.’

‘Surely, in my position I am not eligible.’

‘I have two tickets, my dear, and the discretion in choosing a friend is very much mine.’

‘Oh, thank you. But I am afraid Mrs. Pankridge would be greatly offended.’

‘Drat Mrs. P.! Let her be.’

‘But I am sure she would refuse me permission.’

Miss Cripps pressed Isabella’s arm.

‘Listen, my dear. Why not pay less attention to furious petticoats? The lady was born a bully. Excuse me, but some faces need smacking. What if I approach Mrs. Pankridge in the matter?’

Again Miss Luce flushed a pretty colour. Did she desire to dance, perhaps with a certain person? She did.

‘I would love to go.’

‘That settles it. I will approach Mrs. Pankridge. And, by the way, my dear, the result may be other than you imagine.’

Miss Charlotte was shrewder than Miss Luce suspected, for it was possible that the snob in Clarissa Pankridge might be propitiated at the expense of *amour-propre*. Miss Cripps could make the request a part of a personal call and a favour, and she did so; and Miss Cripps, who had the reputation of being the most aloof lady in the place, could throw Mrs. P. into social flutters. And she did so. Mrs. Pankridge was whipped cream to Miss Charlotte, and when Miss Cripps suggested that the poor governess was lonely, poor thing, and might like to accompany Miss Cripps to the Assembly Rooms, Clarissa was gracious. Social recognition could be butter on stale bread.

‘It is very kind of you, I am sure, madam, to take such an interest in my governess. A nice creature, but not much spirit.’

Miss Cripps crumpled up her pug-face at Mrs. P.

‘You must permit Miss Luce to bring those sweet children to tea with me one day. And perhaps you will accompany them?’

Mrs. P.’s cream was sugared as well as whipped.

‘I am sure I shall be most pleased. The dears are somewhat mischievous at times, and Miss Luce has not quite the control that is necessary.’

‘No, a gentle creature. Besides, my dear Mrs. Pankridge, children will be

children. I cannot say that I like them smug.’

So, the matter was settled, and Mrs. Pankridge was so soothed by this social sillabub that she spoke of Miss Cripps as a most misjudged old lady, and accorded Miss Luce in person her gracious permission to attend the Assembly Ball.

‘Can you dance, Miss Luce?’

‘A little, madam, but I fear that I am very much out of practice. I shall be quite happy to sit by Miss Cripps and watch the dancing.’

A very creditable attitude.

‘I am sure Miss Cripps is a most charming old lady. I fear I got the wrong impression. We and the dear children are to go to tea with her some day soon.’

Isabella’s smile was tentative. Miss Cripps’s sudden friendliness puzzled her not a little, and her own vanity was so frail that it did not occur to her that old ladies might take a particular lilting to a pretty, daughterly creature. Age sometimes turns to youth, and the sweet texture and sparkle of a pretty and lovable face.

Then came the pertinent question—‘What have I to wear?’ That indeed was a problem, for Isabella possessed just two dresses, both of them black and pure utility. Moreover, South End did not supply luxury frocks, save to the wealthy few, and its one milliner and dressmaker was an expensive lady. The genteel world bought most of its dresses and fal-lals in London.

Miss Cripps was asking the same question, and when Isabella received a note from her, requesting her to call, Miss Charlotte put the question to Isabella.

‘What are you going to wear, my dear?’

Miss Luce’s embarrassed silence was sufficient answer, and Miss Cripps requested her to ring the bell.

‘It should be white, my dear. You would look lovely in white.’

Miss Cripps’s personal maid found the ladies sitting by the fire, her mistress’s face screened by a tambour frame.

‘Oh, Jane, you remember that white ball-dress I bought three years ago?’

‘Yes, madam, but you have never worn it.’

‘Quite so. Bring it. I think it might suit Miss Luce.’

Jane departed on her mission, and Miss Cripps crinkled up her eyes at

Isabella.

‘Just a peccadillo of mine, my dear. An old woman may like to buy a pretty costume just for fun. No, as Jane said, I have never worn it. And, by the way, I have a pair of satin shoes. You must try them.’

Jane returned with the white ball-dress over one arm. It was beautifully flounced, and trimmed with pink ribbons. Miss Luce held her breath when she saw it.

‘Go into my room, my dear, and try it on. Jane will help you.’

Miss Cripps sat by the fire, smiling to herself. Surely there was fun in making fun for a pretty creature like Miss Luce?

Isabella, standing before a long mirror with the candlelight behind her, looked at her own reflection, and was both wondering and frightened. Oh, soul of Cinderella! One night of music, and lights, and love, and then her back room and her black dress, and the importunities of Albert and Victoria. How was it that children were never still, but fidgeting and chattering and asking impossible questions, and plucking discords from the strings of your secret soul?—other people’s children.

‘How does it suit me, Jane?’

‘It hangs perfect, miss, and just your length.’

Isabella gave a little laugh.

‘It would be an insult to sit down in it.’

Jane had a pungent answer.

‘If I were the gentlemen, miss, there wouldn’t be much sitting down.’

So Isabella descended the stairs, holding up her sumptuous skirts lest perchance she should tread on them, and appeared with an air of charming coyness before Miss Cripps. She stood in silence before that shrewd old lady, slightly flushed and with lambent eyes, and Miss Charlotte nodded at her.

‘I am glad I bought that frock, my dear. And it’s a virgin—like you.’

Isabella swept softly to her like a sailing swan.

‘I don’t know why you should be so kind to me. May I kiss you?’

Miss Charlotte put up her pug-face. She was thinking that Isabella was fated to cause a sensation, and that watching the faces of some of the other ladies—and the faces of the gentlemen—might be absolute fun.

X

THE colours of the ballroom were sparrow's-egg blue and gold. The walls were panels of blue separated by gilded pilasters. A brown floor gleamed like glass. The two chandeliers were forests of candles. Brocaded settees and cane-seated benches were ranged about the dance-floor. The orchestra, piano, violin, flute and bassoon, occupied a low dais in an alcove.

Miss Charlotte had staged a somewhat late arrival. A quadrille had been danced, and the crowd was seated or standing, and the stage was set. Miss Cripps made her entry leaning upon Miss Luce's arm, and conducted her to the place where the Marquise and Lady Merriman were seated.

'May I present Miss Luce, Madame la Marquise and your ladyship?'

Both ladies smiled and rose, for they were in Miss Cripps's confidence, and both ladies were great gentlewomen.

'Very pleased to welcome you, Miss Luce.'

'Very pleased indeed.'

Isabella was blushing, and the whole room observing her with interest. Who was the lovely creature? Why, the Pankridge governess! Mr. Lardner, standing by his wife and three daughters, adjusted an eye-glass.

'Bless me, the girl has looks.'

Faith, Hope, and Charity did not agree with him.

'Shockingly overdressed. What can Miss Cripps be thinking of, bringing such a person here?'

Miss Cripps and Isabella moved to a vacant settee. They sat down. People stared, and so appreciatively on the part of the male section that Miss Luce spread her swan's-feather fan. The room was all eyes. And then, with a rush of blood from heart to cheeks, she saw Mr. Travers by the doorway, and Mr. Travers's eyes were upon hers.

He advanced across the polished floor, bowed to Miss Cripps, and bowed to Isabella.

'Madam, may I be permitted to ask Miss Luce for the next dance?'

Miss Charlotte's face was enigmatic.

'Ask her, young man.'

'May I have the honour, Miss Luce?'

Isabella fluttered her fan, and murmured a 'yes'.

The next dance was a waltz by Waldteufel, with one of those hesitant and plaintive openings which seem to tantalize and provoke like the sweet stammerings of a shy lover. Mr. Travers came striding across the floor in black tail-coat and trousers, his white waistcoat pearl-buttoned, an impeccable beau, a veritable tailor's model. He bowed to Miss Luce, one gloved hand over his heart. The floor was empty, and Isabella confused and conscious of interested eyes.

'Shall we dance?'

'May I wait until the others begin?'

Miss Cripps gave her a gentle push.

'Show them, my dear, your dress and your dancing.'

The waltz music had emerged from its musical prologue and was in full and swinging spate. Isabella rose, one hand meeting Mr. Travers's, her fan and left hand upon his shoulder. His arm was about her waist, and suddenly the sweet and sentimental rhythm was in Miss Luce's feet. They swung away, round and round, and the room dallied to watch them. They were both graceful creatures, and Isabella was once more seventeen, head slightly retracted, eyes downcast, her face charmingly flushed and mysteriously tender. The Misses Lardner sat rigid. No, they would refuse to take the floor with such a person, especially so when that person's dancing might make them look like wire-jointed marionettes.

Other couples joined in the dance, but the eyes of those who refrained watched the two sailing, circling figures who moved with such swirling ease.

'By Jove,' said Captain Bullard, 'that girl can dance. Wish I were ten years younger and without a timber leg.'

'Who is the girl?' asked a gentleman from the country.

'Somebody's governess.'

The other made a clucking noise.

'Did she get that dress in the course of tuition?'

Captain Bullard happened to be in the conspiracy, and Miss Cripps's

confidences.

‘Belay, sir. I know who provided the frock. Our Miss Cripps.’

‘Oh, Caustic Charlotte! The fellow dances well.’

‘Too well,’ said Captain Bullard.

‘Old Buck’s nephew, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, the damned young dude.’

‘Well, it looks to me as though the girl was liking dudes.’

The Captain blew his nose, and edged away to place himself beside Miss Cripps. She too was watching the dancers, and with the air of a pug-dog whose cushion was crumpled. She flicked the air with a black fan, and cast a quick glance at the Captain. This Travers’s dream was not quite in the programme.

‘Pretty sight,’ said Captain Bullard.

‘Ah, you think so?’

‘With reservations.’

Miss Cripps fluttered her fan.

‘My dear friend, I agree. Much too pretty for that young buck. Suppose you produce another partner.’

The Captain gave her a shrewd look.

‘Easy job, madam. I bet half the room—in trousers—is ready to cut George out.’

‘Well, stump around and do something.’

The Captain bowed to her.

‘Madam, I accept your orders. I will stump.’

The waltz was over, and Captain Bullard went upon his mission, moving with caution, for the polished floor was perilous to his peg-leg. Young Tom Latimer was talking to Mr. Ludovic Lardner, and avoiding the eyes of the Lardner ladies, and the Captain buttonholed him.

‘Hallo, my lad, like to be introduced?’

Tom was not noted for his brightness.

‘To what?’

‘The prettiest girl in the room.’

The Lardner ladies bridled.

‘Which, sir?’

Captain Bullard could have smacked his head.

‘The lady in white.’

‘I don’t mind if I do.’

‘You ungallant idiot,’ thought the Captain, but he took Tom along to the Cripps party. Miss Luce was sitting beside Miss Charlotte, and Handsome George was stroking a blond moustache, and looking as though making conversation with Miss Cripps was a baffling business. Captain Bullard made the introduction, and Mr. Thomas Latimer gave the ladies a stilted bow.

‘Will you dance the next with me, Miss—er——?’

He had missed the name, and Captain Bullard supplied it a second time.

‘Miss Isabella Luce.’

‘Oh, yes—— I’m afraid I’m not much of a dancer.’

‘No,’ thought the Captain, ‘and your wits are as slow as your feet.’

Mr. Travers, fondling a moustache and looking supercilious, bowed and glided off towards the Lardner ladies. Why had that old ass produced a young ass who pranced like a ploughboy? Mr. Travers bent his back to the Lardner ladies.

‘Evening, madam. Will Miss Caroline favour me with the next?’

Mrs. Lardner looked haughty.

‘My daughters are not dancing this evening, Mr. Travers.’

Mr. Travers raised his eyebrows, bowed a second time, and wandered off and out to the buffet. When a fellow had attempted to do his duty, why should he be snubbed?

Canon Turnbull and his lady joined the assembly, and having watched the dancing—a quadrille—passed on into the card-room. Mrs. Turnbull was a buxom lady with a lively interest in life, and a bevy of very healthy children.

‘Who was the pretty young woman in white, James, dancing with young Latimer?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know, my dear.’

‘Looked as though she had breeding. And where—has—John got to?’

The Canon chuckled.

‘Ask me another. Smoking a pipe below stairs, perhaps.’

‘I really must persuade John to be more of a beau.’

‘Well, he is your nephew, but John is rather shy of the ladies, and of louts. Better at calming a back-street brawl.’

Sir Montague Merriman and Miss Massingbird, who were sitting at a table and wanting to complete a four, welcomed them to a game of whist, the Canon pairing with Miss Massingbird, the Canoness with Sir Montague. They cut for deal, and the task fell to Sir Montague.

Mrs. Turnbull put off her wrap.

‘Oh, Miss Massingbird, perhaps you can tell me who the girl in white is?’

‘The Belle of the Ball, my dear, otherwise—a Miss Luce, governess to people named Pankridge.’

‘A governess? Well, I should have said——’

‘Well, she may be, you know. Cinderella, my dear.’

‘And is there a prince?’

Miss Massingbird was conning her cards.

‘H’m. Perhaps. Rather a pantomime prince.’

‘Young Latimer?’

‘Hardly. A young gentleman whose trousers are too aristocratic, and his emblem a wine-bottle.’

‘Dear, dear. What did you call, Sir Montague? Oh, yes—hearts.’

The night was still, fine, and brilliant with stars, and the young man stood in the portico, smoking a pipe and looking at the white ghost-houses of the Terrace and the dark smother of trees below them. The sea was up, a vague star-mirror, and the air clear and cold. The sound of a waltz and a murmur of voices came from within.

A pleasant enough spot, this, with atmosphere and charm, the sea at your feet, a great sky overhead. The young man had seen it by daylight, and had thought it good, especially so after Shoreditch slums. He had seen the Rev. Nicholas Parbury, and thought otherwise. No, he did not feel suited to the part of tame curate.

But this lingering under the stars might be considered churlish and unclerical, and Mr. John Jordan knocked out his pipe, stuffed it into a trouser pocket, and passed in through the welcoming doorway. A mature, white-capped and black-dressed female presided over the cloakroom, and Mr. Jordan left his hat and cloak with her, and pocketed a bone token with No. 53 upon it. He strolled across the vestibule to the ballroom doorway, and stood there, watching the dancing.

He observed, and was observed. Mr. Travers, swinging Miss Luce in graceful swirls, saw the figure in the doorway and was moved to comment.

‘Hallo, who’s the ogre?’

Isabella, glowing, tender of face, gave him her dark eyes for a moment.

‘Where?’

‘In the doorway. Just like a black bull in a gateway. Looks like a parson.’

Isabella, as she was swept in circles on Mr. Travers’s arm, gave a series of glances at the young man in the doorway, and then lost interest in him. A very plain young man, and more than plain. He had a great squarish head with pale red hair, immense shoulders, and legs that were slightly bowed. His eyes, peculiarly blue in a bulldog face, were set in a solid stare. He stood there, feet well apart, a straddling, almost grotesque figure, his hands tucked under his coat-tails. Other people had observed him, and wondered. This very plain young man in a cleric’s clothes was strange to all of them.

But if Miss Luce in her dream dance had forgotten the man in the doorway, he—on the contrary—appeared suddenly absorbed in watching the figure in white. His very blue eyes followed her round and round the room, and with such obvious interest that it brought simpers from some of the ladies.

‘Who is he?’

‘I really don’t know, my dear. I did hear that Mr. Parbury was engaging a curate.’

Someone tittered.

‘A veritable Bull of Bashan.’

‘Do you see how he is staring at the Luce girl?’

‘I do. I hope Mr. Travers won’t persuade her into other loosenesses.’

The waltz swirled to a finish, and Mr. Travers armed Isabella back to a seat beside Miss Cripps. Miss Cripps too was interested in the young man in the doorway. The Beast bewitched by Beauty? Yes, such things did happen even

in a prosaic world. But the Rev. John Jordan appeared to wake suddenly from a stupor of staring, and to become conscious of the amused glances directed at him, for he flushed, frowned, and lumbered across the ballroom floor towards the doorway of the card-room. Miss Cripps had sat alert, wondering whether this very plain young man would dare to ask for an introduction and a dance, but Mr. Jordan's courage was not of that Lochinvar order.

He opened the card-room door, and stood, large and hesitant, looking at the groups at the tables. Mrs. Turnbull, waiting for a very deliberate partner to play a card, caught sight of Mr. Jordan, smiled, and waved her hand. Her nephew made his way to the Turnbull table.

'Why, John, not dancing?'

His chin was thrust out, his eyes full of a blue solemnity.

'No. Not much of a man on my feet. I—er——'

Canon Turnbull turned a head and looked up at him.

'Hallo, my lad.'

'Oh, Uncle James, I—er—have changed my mind.'

'The prerogative of the wise.'

'I think I'll take—the offer.'

Sir Montague was still pondering which card to play, and Miss Massingbird was eyeing John Jordan with droll interest. What a plain young man, what a very plain young man, but his face suggested that when he changed his mind, the decision—whatever it was—might be productive of forceful happenings.

XI

STARLIGHT, waltz music, and romance! Miss Luce had received instructions that she should be home before midnight, and Miss Cripps's carriage had been ordered for half-past eleven. The distance from the Assembly Rooms to No. 20, Caroline Terrace was not more than a hundred yards, but Miss Charlotte had strong views about hot rooms and chilly nights, and young men who might be proposing to arm the ball's belle to her door. Miss Cripps had seen enough of the evening's happenings to realize that Isabella was in danger of falling to the male persuasiveness of Handsome George, and Miss Cripps knew something of Mr. Travers's reputation. H'm—yes! And when a girl danced with dream music in her face and eyes, the eternal problem chose to present itself. To warn, or not to warn? Interference might be disastrous.

'Well, my dear, time for bed, I think.'

Mr. Travers was standing by, and his complacency was as trim as his trousers.

'Shall I see if your carriage is at the door, madam?'

'It will be. Don't bother,' said Miss Charlotte tartly.

They rose and, arm in arm, crossed the empty dance floor, and the assembly watched them. Mr. Travers followed as escort, and the Lardner ladies sat stiff and severe; for the moment they were neither Faith, Hope, nor Charity. Miss Cripps and Isabella collected their wraps, and Mr. Travers was ready to assist in the cloaking. They crossed the vestibule, to find the doorway blocked by a large body in black. Mr. Jordan surveying the stars and smoking his pipe. He appeared to be absorbed in profound meditation.

'Excuse me, mind moving, sir, for the ladies.'

Mr. Travers's voice was as tart as Miss Cripps's had been, and Mr. Jordan swung round, and plucked the pipe out of his mouth. He gave Mr. Travers a blue stare, and stepped out into the portico, but with an embarrassed clumsiness which brought him up with a bump against one of the portico pillars. Mr. Travers's teeth gave a white gleam. This clerical bumpkin had taken a bump!

Miss Cripps gave the plain young man a nod and a smile, but Miss Luce

did not so much as look at him.

‘Thank you, sir.’

Mr. Jordan, gripping his pipe in one fist, mumbled something. The carriage drew up, and Mr. Travers went to open the door. He bowed Miss Cripps into the carriage, and put out a quick hand to Isabella.

‘Good-night—Bella.’

Her hand went out to his. He bent, raised it to his lips, counting on Miss Cripps missing the salute, but Miss Cripps did not miss it. Mr. Travers closed the carriage door, and bent gracefully at the hips.

‘Right, coachman.’

Miss Cripps’s carriage moved off.

Mr. Travers watched it for a moment with a satisfied smirk, and then faced about to find Mr. Jordan standing plumb in the doorway, pipe in mouth, arms folded. It was as though a black boulder had rolled itself into the entrance, and did not mean to budge. Mr. Travers cocked his head, and his voice suggested sarcasm.

‘Mind moving?’

Mr. Jordan, with deliberation, lowered his pipe.

‘Certainly. Say—please.’

Mr. Travers stared at him.

‘On your dignity, what?’

‘Just a little. I don’t like sarcasm.’

And Mr. Travers laughed.

‘Well, well. May I request you to let me pass?’

Mr. Jordan nodded and stood aside.

‘That’s better. Good night, sir. Happy dreams.’

Miss Charlotte Cripps was being allowed just one minute in which to make up her mind upon the problem of interference, and when the carriage pulled up outside No. 12A, she had not arrived at a decision. Well, perhaps it was better so. She laid a hand on Miss Luce’s knee.

‘Enjoyed yourself, my dear?’

‘Utterly.’

Miss Cripps pulled a wry face in the darkness. Dear, dear, was the dream so serious? And was it true that romantic young women preferred cads?

‘Well, you can kiss me, my dear.’

Isabella’s kiss was tender.

‘Good night, and thank you—for everything. I will return you the dress to-morrow.’

‘Poof, you’ll do nothing of the sort. Keep it for the next occasion.’

‘You are too generous.’

‘No, my dear, and remember—don’t be too generous.’

Miss Luce alighted, and the carriage drove on, but Isabella remained for some seconds on the doorstep, supporting her right hand with the left. Had it really happened? It had. He had kissed that hand, and with sudden yearning she raised it and put her lips to the place that he had kissed.

Miss Cripps did not descend immediately from her carriage. She was frowning, and feeling fiercely responsible.

‘Tom.’

‘Yes, ma’am?’

‘I want a word with you.’

Tom descended and opened the carriage door. He had served his mistress for some twenty years, and she trusted him.

‘Tom, you are a man of sense, and I dare say you hear things that I don’t hear.’

‘Maybe I do, ma’am.’

‘Tell me, in confidence, what is Mr. Travers’s reputation in the place?’

Tom rubbed his bearded chin.

‘Well, ma’am, since you ask me, it ain’t what you would call pure milk.’

‘Exactly. The wine’s a bit corked. Thank you, Tom.’

And Miss Cripps emerged from the carriage, while Tom rang the bell for her. When the door had closed on his mistress Tom climbed back to the box and said, ‘Gee-up, my beauties,’ and with native wisdom wondered what Miss Charlotte was thinking about Beauty and Mr. Travers.

‘Randy young tyke. If I ’ad a girl I’d keep ’im off my doorstep.’

The Rev. John Jordan, who was staying at the Turnbull rectory, having washed and shaved and prayed, went down and out into the rectory garden. There had been a late autumn frost, and the grass was silver-rimed, the sky a pale, pellucid blue. Mr. Jordan was a great man for exercise, both in body and spirit, and he started to trot down the broad walk leading to the orchard, assuming that at this early hour the dignity of the cloth would be secure, but as he turned into the orchard he came upon a very old and bewhiskered man struggling with a ladder. Mr. Jordan pulled himself in, and the old man grinned.

'Hallo, Jude, out early.'

'Mornin', sir, so be you. I be out to pick the last of they Norfolk Beefings.' He grinned more broadly. 'You remember them, sir, I take it.'

'I do, Jude. They gave me a bad pain.'

'Thieving young roustabout you were, sir.'

'I was, Jude. And you caught me at it. Give me the ladder.'

He took it from the old gardener, and, handling it as though it was as light as a fishing rod, carried it towards a great old tree which still bore some of its autumn fruit. They were great red apples shining in the early sunlight, and almost the colour of blood. Mr. Jordan sloped the ladder against the tree, and he did it like an expert.

'A bit wet for picking, Jude?'

'Oh, I'll dry 'em off in the glasshouse before storing 'em. A lovely apple it be.'

'Yes, cooked, Jude, but not raw——'

'Ay, the belly-ache be a good teacher, sir.'

Jude had a hooked basket with him, and he took it with him up the ladder, and hung it on a rung when he was within picking distance of the fruit. Choosing a fine red apple, he turned and looked down with a grin at the Rev. John Jordan.

'Fancy you bein' a parson, sir, and me rememberin' you as the most mischievous young devil in the whole parish.'

'Now I fight the Devil, Jude.'

'And I reckon you can give he a danged fine thrashin'. 'Ere's luck, sir.

Catch.’

Jude tossed it in Mr. Jordan’s direction, and Mr. Jordan made a clean catch.

‘How’s that, umpire?’

‘Ay, you never did fumble a catch, sir. D’yer call to mind that time the village played them gents from Lonnon, and ’ow you caught their captain in the slips? Sick, ’e was. I can see ’is face now. Great, bustlin’ haw-haw fellow ’e was.’

Mr. Jordan laughed.

‘No more stomach-ache for me, Jude. Put Mr. Beefing in the basket. Catch.’

Mr. Jordan tossed the apple up to Jude. It slipped through his old fingers, and came to earth with a thud.

‘Cor, I ain’t what I used to be. That’s mucked it. No use storin’ a bruised apple.’

‘Bake it for dinner, Jude, with my blessing. I must get my run in before breakfast.’

Breakfast at the rectory was a solid meal, more cheerful than austere, flowing with milk and honey, and with a monster dish of bacon and eggs warming on a trivet by the fire. John Jordan, rosy from a quarter-mile trot, found his aunt behind the massive plated teapot, and the Canon spreading much butter on a round of toast. John kissed his aunt, and took his seat opposite the fire, closed his eyes, put his hands together, and murmured grace. The Canon gave him a benign twinkle. Like Jude he recalled the days when Master Jack had been somewhat of a curse to the community.

‘Bacon and eggs by the fire, John.’

Mr. Jordan rose.

‘Can I help anybody?’

‘Yes, our dear friend Parbury. Glad you have changed your mind.’

Mr. Jordan was squatting before the fire, and spooning eggs and bacon on to a hot plate. Was it mere fancy, or did his ears turn a brighter red?

‘I am going in to see him this morning.’

His aunt gave him a maternal look.

‘You can stay with us, John, while——’

John bent over and patted Aunt Mary's hand.

'I eat too much. I suppose there are lodgings to be had in South End.'

'Yes, my dear.'

'I'll ask old Parbury.'

John Jordan walked, and he walked with a slight roll, like a big ship or a sailor. The sun was shining and the morning was good, and plough teams were at work on the stubbles. Mr. Jordan remembered the part he was to play, that of the mild curate, and much less colourful than Mr. Parbury's nose. He was also remembering the strange magic of the previous night, a girl in a white dress, dancing.

Mr. Jeremy Baxter's house was the first building to greet him, a very new house in a very new garden. Mr. Travers was still in bed, and not dreaming dreams of romance, for his uncle's pretty parlour-maid had spent a part of the night with him, and after such exertions Handsome George slept late. Mr. Jordan saw the sea before him between the white cliffs of the Royal Hotel and Prospect House. A good scene this, spacious and wholesome. He stood for half a minute at the head of the hill, and looked at the portico and windows of the Assembly Rooms. Who was she, and where did she live, and was her name as lovely as her face?

The Rev. John Jordan turned the corner of Caroline Terrace on his way to call on Mr. Parbury at No. 12, and he was within ten yards of the house when the Pankridge door opened, and Miss Luce and the children appeared for an early morning walk. John Jordan stopped with the abruptness of a man who had collided with a lamp-post on a dark night.

The girl in the white dress! Was she married, and were these her children? Victoria and Albert had spotted him, and they giggled.

Mr. Jordan took two steps forward, and raised his hat.

'Good morning. Excuse me, but can you tell me which is Mr. Parbury's house?'

What a white lie! And she was not in white, but in black.

Miss Luce did not smile, but with complete composure gave him the information.

'No. 12.'

‘Thank you. Your children?’

She looked at him blankly, and the children giggled.

‘She’s our governess,’ said Albert.

Mr. Jordan looked foolish.

‘Apologies. What’s your name, my lad?’

‘Albert.’

‘And I’m Victoria.’

Mr. Jordan found a sudden smile.

‘And I’m John. Nice morning for a walk. I hope we shall——’

But Miss Luce gathered the children by their hands, and walked hurriedly on. Vicky and Albert might indulge in embarrassing personalities, nor had they gone ten yards before they did so.

‘What a funny man! Did you see his legs?’

Miss Luce said ‘Hush,’ for she guessed that the young man in clerical clothes was within hearing. She glanced back over a shrinking shoulder and saw him standing, bare-headed, and strange to say his very plain face was crumpled up with laughter. Miss Luce blushed, but somehow she blessed him for that laughter.

‘Candour from children. No apologies needed.’

J. J. put on his hat and walked towards the green door of No. 12. What funny legs! Was he sensitive about those curving members? He was, and the laughter he had produced was like the smile on the face of a boxer when his opponent has landed one full on the chin. Yes, smile—if you can—when you are hit. Never wince when life has smitten you.

Mr. Jordan put a big hand to the brass, lion-headed knocker, and as he did so he thought of a girl dancing with that long-legged young buck’s arm about her. No, his own legs were not made for waltzing. They were like oak struts, not willow.

‘Rat-at,’ said the knocker.

XII

THE REV. NICHOLAS PARBURY was at home. In fact he had just finished his breakfast, and was sprawling by the fire, smoking a pipe and reading yesterday's paper. Caroline Terrace had to be content with yesterday's papers, which arrived by the London coach and could be purchased at the Marine Library. Mr. Parbury and John Jordan had enjoyed one tentative interview, and the vicar had decided that though Mr. Jordan was a very plain young man, good brown bread might be good for the community, nor did Mr. Jordan look like a fellow who would collect a clique and cause competition.

The maid announced Mr. Jordan, and Mr. Parbury said, 'What, what,' and pushed his feet into his slippers and sat up for the sake of dignity.

'Come in, Jordan. You're early.'

'I get up early, sir. I like it. It isn't a virtue.'

'It is not one of my virtues. Sit down. Got a pipe on you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Smoke. Find the tobacco box on the mantelpiece.'

Mr. Jordan produced a short clay pipe, filled it, and lit it with a spill from the fire.

'Read the paper yet?'

'No, sir.'

'It says that this year's port is expected to be the worst vintage on record.'

'Is that so, sir?'

'Quite a disaster. By the way, do you drink, Jordan?'

'No. An occasional mug of ale.'

'Hum. And how do you feel about taking on the curacy?'

'I think I would like to take it, sir.'

'Good. The stipend isn't—exactly—Lombard Street.'

'I have a little money of my own.'

‘Splendid,’ said Mr. Parbury.

The Church of St. John was a very new creation, having been carved out of the parish of Holywell for the benefit of the growing watering-place—South End. Mr. Parbury was considered Broad Church, neither High nor Low, and in fact he might have been described as No Church, and a completely perfunctory parson. The nascent Oxford Movement would move him to shrugs and quidnunc cynicism. But before the fire on this autumn morning he catechized Mr. Jordan, and put him through his paces. Could Mr. Jordan preach? Well, modestly—and in a straightforward manner, yes. Was Mr. Jordan attracted by ritual? No, he was not. Did Mr. Jordan appreciate the virtue of tact, especially so in dealing with the eminent among the parishioners? He hoped so. Churchwardens were apt to be fussy. And the Sunday School? That would be Mr. Jordan’s responsibility, aided by sundry earnest ladies. Yes, and Mr. Jordan could relieve his vicar of visiting the poor.

J. J. listened with assumed mildness.

‘There is another point, my dear fellow. There is a rough element in the place. Too much drink at times and scallywaggery. I regret to say that I am not very tolerant of the lewd poor.’

Mr. Jordan smiled.

‘I have had some experience, sir.’

‘You have?’

‘Yes. You see I am rather large and simple, and I can insert my largeness between quarrelsome people, and persuade them towards peace.’

Mr. Parbury gave him a beady look.

‘H’m, yes. Mild persuasion, Mr. Jordan.’

‘Quite so, sir.’

Mr. Jordan had been glancing unobtrusively round the vicar’s dining-room, and it did not exhale an odour of sanctity. A wine-cooler stood below the Sheraton sideboard, and between the branched silver candlesticks on the sideboard itself sat decanters of port and of sherry. There were stuffed pheasants and a woodcock and a largish salmon in glass-fronted cases on the walls, and gilt-framed pictures of gentlemen engaged in sport. Certainly, a bookshelf in the chimney recess contained an assortment of solemn books proposing Piety, the sermons of ancient divines, and these too had their uses, for Mr. Parbury could cull sermons from them and save labour and time for recreational reading. Mr. Parbury did not offer Mr. Jordan a glass of sherry, for

it was too early in the morning, and young men should not be credited with palates.

‘So I may assume, sir, that you accept me as your curate?’

‘Yes, Mr. Jordan, provided my churchwardens approve. I will—er—introduce you to these gentlemen, Sir Montague Merriman and Major Miller.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘I think I can accept Canon Turnbull’s recommendation. I understand that you are a Cambridge man.’

‘Trinity, sir.’

‘Ah—I was at the other place, Magdalen. Perhaps you would like to look round the church?’

‘I should, sir.’

‘And engage lodgings for yourself. You might find accommodation during the winter at one of the apartment houses. In the summer—I fear—their terms would be beyond your pocket.’

Mr. Jordan nodded solemnly, and assumed that the examination was over.

‘Is the church locked, sir?’

‘It is. You will find a key hanging on a nail beside the hatstand. Please return it after your visit.’

‘I will, sir.’

Mr. Jordan was walking towards the Royal Hotel when Captain Bullard stumped out of No. 3, Caroline Terrace, buttoned up in a blue reefer coat. The Captain carried an ash-plant which he used in rough or steep places to supplement his peg-leg. Mr. Jordan, conscious of his new responsibilities, raised his hat to Captain Bullard and wished him good morning, and the Captain returned the salute and the greeting.

‘Mutual introduction, what!’

‘And welcome, sir.’

Captain Bullard had been watching Mr. Jordan’s rolling walk, and it and Mr. Jordan’s physical make-up had pleased him. Stout sort of fellow, this, to have with you on a boarding party.

‘My name is Bullard. Retired captain, R.N.’

‘And I, sir, am the new curate—name of John Jordan.’

‘Very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Jordan.’

‘Thank you, sir. Perhaps you can advise me.’

‘How?’

‘As to lodgings.’

‘Certainly. Why not join me in No. 3? Mrs. Trigg is a comfortable woman, and keeps a good table.’

‘And the terms, sir?’

‘Not too stiff in the winter. Besides, the good lady prefers permanencies. Go in and see her and say I sent you.’

‘Thank you, sir. I will. I am going to look over the church.’

‘Then I won’t detain you, Mr. Jordan. I hope we shall meet later.’

‘So do I, sir.’

Mr. Jordan crossed the brow of the pier hill, and saw the church before him, with its porch and twin gables and miniature belfry. It looked very new in its grey and red frock, as did the neat gravel drive, grass verges, and young holly hedges. A walled market-garden occupied the little plateau on the seaward side, and Mr. Jordan had a view of the austere back of the Marine Library. From the summit of the pier hill the view was splendid and spacious, a grey and glittering sea stretching to the Nore, and upon the pier John Jordan could distinguish three figures, Miss Luce and the two children. And as yet he did not know her name.

Mr. Jordan swung back a leaf of the iron gates and passed on towards the church. If she attended the church, which was probable, he would find himself preaching to her. And would her presence confuse him, or inspire him to eloquence? He unlocked the church door and entered. The ceiling of a gallery sloped above him. He saw the west window, the altar, and oak pews with their doors, the lectern—but no organ. Music was provided in the old-fashioned way by a viol, a cello, and a bassoon, in the gallery.

Mr. Jordan wandered up to the altar, and then turned towards the vestry door. The vestry was bare and chilly, and a surplice that was none too clean hung on a peg, and Mr. Jordan had a feeling that—as yet—there was no human warmth in this very new building. The builders had done their work, but no priest had sanctified it with an inspired and glowing godliness.

Passing back to the porch he was met by a queer little figure in black, a hunchback with one lame leg, Ethan Chigwell, the verger.

‘Good morning, sir.’

John Jordan held out a hand.

‘I am the new curate.’

The little man’s swarthy face lit up.

‘God be with you, sir: you will be very welcome.’

The churchyard was virgin turf, save for half a dozen headstones and little mounds, for God’s acre had received into its bosom few dead. Mr. Jordan found the gnome-like figure of the verger limping beside him, but if Ethan Chigwell’s body had suffered distortion, his spirit was otherwise. John Jordan, far more sensitive than he seemed, discovered human beauty in the little man’s face. He had live and gentle eyes. The two men stood side by side on the green grass, the oak and the little gnarled thorn.

‘Ships,’ said John Jordan, ‘ships that come and go. Cargoes from all over the world. Good for the fancy. This place is like a great window.’

‘I sit at a window most of the day, sir.’

‘At your work?’

‘Yes. I’m a cobbler, but I have my window.’

John Jordan smiled down at him.

‘The eyes behind the window, they matter.’

‘That’s very true, sir, and if you want to you can draw your own curtains.’

‘And shut out ugly things.’

‘Yes, sir, people who are cruel or who mock.’

Mr. Jordan, having returned the church key to the Parbury house, rang the bell of No. 3, and asked the maid who answered it if Mrs. Trigg was at home, and if so whether he could see her. The lady was at home, and Mr. Jordan was shown into her private room on the ground floor and at the back of the house. Mrs. Trigg was a little bouncing woman with a cheerful countenance under a lace cap, and she rose from her chair before the fire, and gave Mr. Jordan a curtsy. Captain Bullard had spoken of Matilda Trigg as a comfortable woman, and there was no niggardliness about the lady or her *ménage*.

Mr. Jordan bowed to her.

‘Madam, I am Mr. Parbury’s new curate, and Captain Bullard

recommended me to you. Perhaps you can oblige me?'

Mrs. Trigg appraised him with merry eyes. This very large young man who looked so plainly solemn might possess an equally large appetite, but no matter.

'I'm afraid I have only the second-floor back vacant, sir.'

'I am quite a simple soul, Mrs. Trigg.'

Was he? The shrewdness and experience of the landlady questioned his simplicity, but that broad, ugly face of his was good.

'Would you like to see the room, Mr.——?'

'Jordan, John Jordan. I should.'

The interview ended to their mutual satisfaction, and Jordan shook Mrs. Trigg by the hand, informed her that he would have his trunk sent from Canon Turnbull's, and walked out to meet—adventure. He saw Miss Luce and the children by the holly hedge, and Miss Luce was having trouble with Albert. Dear Albert had secreted a pea-shooter and had been proposing to use it upon Major Miller, who had been passing. Miss Luce had impounded the weapon, and Albert was being truculent.

'You give it to me—or I'll kick you.'

And kick her he did, and Mr. Jordan saw Isabella wince. He crossed the road, took Albert by the collar, made a knee, and putting Albert in the correct position, administered three hearty smacks to the Pankridge posterior.

Miss Luce stood dismayed. It was she who might suffer.

'Oh, please——'

Mr. Jordan replaced Albert on his feet, a strangely sobered Albert, who did not blub.

'My lad,' said Mr. Jordan, 'no gentleman kicks ladies.'

'She took my pea-shooter.'

'Yes. And I am taking you home. Come along.'

Victoria was regarding Mr. Jordan with evident respect.

'Albert's always naughty.'

Her brother pulled a face at her.

'Boo—sneak.'

Mr. Jordan laughed, and looked at Miss Luce. He picked up both children, one under each arm, and with a jocund air carried them to the door of No. 12A.

‘Here we are, you couple of baggages. And here’s sixpence for each of you.’

Then he raised his hat to Isabella and, looking suddenly self-conscious, marched off towards the cliffs.

Miss Cripps had witnessed the incident from her window. It had amused her, and set her thinking. This gallant ogre of a padre had intervened with convincing promptness. Did she prefer him to Mr. Travers? Most certainly she did. H’m, yes, but would Isabella Luce be of the same opinion? No, probably not. Young women could suffer such romantic illusions, but Mr. John Jordan was no illusion.

Meanwhile poor Isabella was in trouble. Mrs. Pankridge had observed the scene below, and had come rustling and bustling down the stairs.

‘Miss Luce, what is the meaning of this? How dare you let a man touch—my—children?’

Miss Luce stood mute, but the dear children had been strangely captivated by Mr. Jordan.

‘He smacked me,’ said Albert, ‘and I didn’t blub. He’s awful strong.’

‘Disgraceful. I shall demand an apology.’

Victoria giggled and displayed her sixpence.

‘I’ve got a sixpence, so has Albert.’

‘You will give them to me at once. I shall return them to that insolent, interfering person.’

Tumult! The children had no wish to surrender their sixpences, and there was a scene. Persuasion having failed, Clarissa tried more drastic methods. The coins were forced from reluctant palms, while Miss Luce looked on helplessly. Victoria was in angry tears, Albert rebellious.

‘It’s my sixpence. You’re thieving.’

His mother boxed his ears, and turned on Miss Luce.

‘Really, Miss Luce, your lack of control is deplorable. You will go to your rooms, both of you, and at once.’

The two children began to climb the stairs with sullen slowness, and their mother glanced at the offending article in Miss Luce’s hand.

‘What—have—you got there?’

‘A pea-shooter.’

‘My good girl, what——’

‘It belongs to Albert.’

Mrs. Pankridge took possession of it.

‘That will do, Miss Luce. You too had better go to your room.’

And did it occur to Isabella that Mr. Jordan’s method of castigation might have been applied with propriety to Clarissa Pankridge?

XIII

DENISE de Beaucourt, looking out of her drawing-room window at a wet world, saw Mr. Jordan daring the wind and the rain. It was blowing a gale, the wind slapping at the windows and the rain bubbling up beneath the sashes, but the new curate bowled along like a stout black brig whose bluff bows could take rough bufferings. He was hatless, and a heavy cloak swelled in the wind.

The Marquise, who was from the South and found wet weather *ennuyant*, watched Mr. Jordan with raised eyebrows. This young Bull of Bashan was full of surprises. South End had heard him preach his first sermon, and from that most plain face had come a voice of peculiar resonance and beauty.

'Pierre, come and look.'

The Marquis rose from his chair before the fire, and joined his wife at the window in time to see the Rev. John Jordan's cloak blown clean over his head.

'*Ma foi*, but it is droll.'

'Who is it, *chérie*?'

'The new *curé*. And out in such weather.'

Mr. Jordan's arms were up, reducing the offending garment to subjection, and the De Beaucourts saw two figures in heavy smocks and sou'westers running to join him. One of them was pointing seawards. They stood grouped together for a few seconds, and then hurried on down the pier hill.

'Perhaps there is a ship in trouble,' said the Marquis. He put his face close to the glass.

'Yes, over there. A small ship—with sails gone.'

'Where?'

'To the left of the pier.'

The Marquis possessed a spy-glass, and he fetched it and turned it upon the ship. She looked like a Dutch brig, and she appeared to be aground, with the waves breaking over her.

Half the Old Town was on the beach or at windows watching volunteers running a big black galley into the surf, and the Rev. John Jordan was heaving

with the best of them. In fact he was at the boat's bows, waist deep in water, and using his strength to help keep the bow of the boat pointing seawards. Men were tumbling into her, and getting out the oars, and Mr. Jordan floundered in, and took a seat on a thwart.

Old Bob Myall the coxswain stared hard at the interloper.

'This ain't no place for sky-pilots.'

Mr. Jordan grinned, unbuckled his cloak, bundled it under a thwart, and grabbed an oar.

'I disagree. Just the place for me, coxswain.'

The old ship's-galley was afloat and slapping her nose into the breakers as oars began to thrash the water. Mr. Jordan swung to it with the rest, and to Bob Myall it became obvious that the curate could pull a good oar. A cheer came from the beach as the boat made headway without shipping a dangerous sea.

'Can ye swim, sir?' asked a voice.

'I can. Heave ho, my hearties.'

The adventure was less perilous than it appeared, and the waves less menacing when the boat was well afloat. She had a quarter of a mile to go, and she did it without shipping too much water. Bob Myall worked her under the lee of the Dutchman, watched by half a dozen sailors who were clinging to the rigging. The galley swung up and down in the swell, but her crew kept her from grinding her timbers against the side of the black brig. The Dutchmen jumped for it and were lugged aboard, though the skipper misjudged his jump and had to be pulled in over the gunwale by Mr. Jordan.

The passage shorewards was easier. Bob Myall beached the galley prettily, and the crew and the Dutchmen tumbled out and pulled her clear of the waves. Mr. Jordan recovered his cloak, and found Bob Myall holding out a hand to him.

'I eat m' own words, sir. Better go and get into dry clothes.'

Mr. Jordan smiled at Bob Myall, and gripped hard.

'Aye, you've got some muscle, sir.'

As far as the Old Town was concerned Mr. Jordan's reputation was established.

There were faces at the windows of Prospect House, the Royal Hotel, and Caroline Terrace, and Mr. Jordan, trotting up the pier hill, was to be watched by many observers. His most provoking clash was with Mr. Travers, buttoned

up in a monstrous coat, and wearing a peaked cap, and sheltering at the end of the Shrubbery. Mr. Travers looked amused, and chose to be facetious.

'Hallo. Taken a ducking?'

Mr. Jordan grinned at him.

'Yes, my duckling.'

Offensive fellow! The Rev. John Jordan might be a heavy-weight, but he had a limber tongue.

Caroline Terrace observed him, soaked to the skin and with his reddish hair over his forehead. Captain Bullard came out on to a balcony in the wind and the rain. He had been watching the rescue. He put his hands to his mouth and trumpeted.

'Good work, my lad, worth a dozen sermons.'

John waved to him.

'Thanks, sir. I salute the quarter-deck.'

The Pankridge family were at the drawing-room windows, and Miss Luce was with them.

'Really,' said Clarissa, watching the soaked figure cross the road obliquely, 'what a ludicrous object! No dignity, I think.'

Mr. Pankridge pulled his whiskers.

'Well, I don't know, my dear.'

Victoria piped up.

'I think he must be very brave.'

Isabella was silent, her eyes upon the figure of Mr. George Travers, for—with her—illusion still lingered.

Men are jealous beasts, and the Rev. Nicholas Parbury was not pleased. He had engaged a tame curate, and the fellow was playing the stage hero, which was all very well at Drury Lane. Nor could Mr. Parbury say anything about it, or scold John Jordan for performing like Grace Darling. Moreover, Old Nick's displeasure was to be increased by the Sabbath reactions of the Old Town.

The congregation of St. John's Church had been—in the main—Caroline Terrace, and inadequate in the matter of pew-filling, and Mr. Parbury had been absent during Mr. Jordan's first sermon. 'Old Nick' was cunning. John Jordan

had not the appearance of an orator, and Mr. Parbury, with seeming graciousness, proposed that his curate should take the pulpit on the following Sunday at morning service. Popularity might be diluted by too much verbiage and ponderosity.

'The fellow looks as though he would preach with his boots.'

But Mr. Parbury was to be surprised and chagrined. Not only were the genteel pews full, but unaccustomed figures drifted somewhat diffidently into the church and packed back-benches that had known much emptiness. Boatmen, fishermen, and bargemen from the Old Town, dressed in their Sabbath clothes, sat in solemn rows, and sang lustily some of the good old hymns. These bewhiskered, bearded, hairy men brought with them into the Church of St. John an almost apostolic atmosphere. Mrs. Pankridge, who was sensitive to noise, and occupied a pew immediately in front of the first row of common men, shivered and hunched her shoulders against this hearty draught.

Miss Luce sat between the two children, and when they stood to sing 'Rock of Ages' Albert and Victoria faced about as though fascinated by all those hairy, vociferous faces. Miss Luce bent down and whispered, but without effect, and it fell to Clarissa to intervene. Albert was taken by the ear and turned in the right and proper direction. The singing was prodigious, and the musicians in the gallery above scraped and blew with fervour.

Mr. Parbury did not sing, but watched Mr. Jordan in the stall opposite. The fellow was bawling like one of those hairy fools down yonder. And would he preach with the same vulgar vehemence, red-faced and sweating? Miss Luce, with a controlling hand on a shoulder of each of her charges, was very conscious of an empty space in a particular pew, the Baxter pew. Mr. Jeremy was there, spectacles on nose, hymn-book held high, but no tawny head showed beside his baldness. Mr. Travers was not present. In fact, Mr. Travers had returned to London and the world of claret, port, and sherry.

The hymn was over, and the congregation rustled to its seats. Mr. Jordan climbed the pulpit stairs, knelt for ten seconds in silent prayer, and then rose to face his audience.

There was a pause. He looked about him, and then began his sermon. The words were deliberate and simple, and appeared to be directed over the heads of the gentry towards the hairy faces of the men in the back benches. His voice had a quiet resonance, and could be heard in every pew, nor was it sacerdotal and pompous, but the voice of a man speaking to other men. The message he gave was one of elemental candour. Do good things and do them with all your might. Every man's job when performed with pride and conscience was prayer

in action. All labour, however humble, could have dignity.

No snobbery here, no preaching down to the poor, and the men to whom he spoke listened attentively. The pulpit held a man, not a parson. Moreover, there were gentlemen in the congregation who inwardly applauded. Major Miller, Captain Bullard, John Cage, Sir Montague Merriman. Miss Charlotte Cripps was with the gentlemen. The Lardner ladies listened with the air of supercilious school-marms. Really—Mr. Jordan was a very elementary person! Mr. Parbury, head on hand, did not conceal a vague sneer.

Miss Luce watched the figure in the pulpit. How very plain was John Jordan, how different from the figure of her dreams. Miss Luce was coldly interested, dispassionate, aloof. She did allow that Mr. Jordan had a pleasing voice, but she was in too complex a mood to appreciate his directness and simplicity. His male ethics seemed so obvious, and his blue eyes were so singularly solemn. Now and again she met those eyes. They appeared to be directed at her, and they roused in her no emotion. Had that other seat been occupied and had a head been turned in her direction her own dark eyes might have met the glance with douce and shimmering tenderness.

The sermon came to an end. It had lasted just ten minutes, and most of the congregation would have liked it to have lasted longer. Mr. Jordan left the pulpit, and Mr. Parbury announced the final hymn in a voice that had a throaty petulance. The congregation rose and sang, and Mrs. Pankridge turned up the collar of her cloak. The hairy face behind her seemed to be singing draughtily down her neck.

Sir Montague Merriman, Sir Hugh Latimer, and Major Miller followed the two clergymen into the vestry. Mr. Parbury was removing his surplice, and—for Mr. Parbury—in unusual silence. His nose had a pinched look, and his eyes avoided the person of his curate. The three eminent gentlemen, being men of discrimination, sensed a definite chilliness, and Sir Montague and Sir Hugh, who were in Canon Turnbull's confidence, exchanged significant glances. Mr. Parbury's curate was not so tame.

It was Major Miller who said the tactless thing, if in all sincerity, and perhaps wilfully so.

'Congratulations, Mr. Jordan, on your sermon. Short, shrewd, and with no priggery.'

Mr. Jordan smiled, and looked embarrassed.

'Very simple, sir. You see—I—a young man—can feel young—before my elders.'

Mr. Parbury was taking snuff, and looking at the collection plate upon the vestry table.

‘I agree, sir; not bad for a beginner.’

Sir Montague and Sir Hugh smiled mischievously at each other.

‘I like your modesty, Mr. Jordan.’

Mr. Parbury sneezed with violence.

Mrs. Pankridge had attached herself to Miss Cripps; Mr. Pankridge was holding the hands of his children. Miss Luce followed in the rear.

‘Really, madam, I shall have a stiff neck after all that singing.’

Miss Cripps twinkled.

‘Quite like Boreas, was it not?’

Mrs. Pankridge was not a classical person.

‘Such a draught. The creature behind me had lungs like a blacksmith’s bellows. And—what a boyish sermon!’

‘I rather liked it, madam,’ said Miss Cripps.

‘Indeed! I found it so very elementary. You see, in London we were accustomed to more refinement.’

Miss Cripps gave a little chuckle.

The dear children were plying Mr. Pankridge with questions. Why had all those funny, hairy men crowded in to sing? So many persons and things appear funny to the barbarians, young and old. Mr. Pankridge supposed that the male population of the Old Town had come to church because it wanted to come to church. But why this sudden urge? It had not happened before. And if it happened again Mother said that they would have to change their pew. Miss Luce listened vaguely to these childish catechizings, while her dark eyes searched the little world ahead of them, but no George Travers was loitering to give poor Bella a gallant glance. Mr. Travers was thinking of her as ‘Poor Bella’. He had not told her that he was returning to town, and that the lights and the sights of London were more glamorous than a watering-place in winter.

Moreover, poor Bella—in the crude sense—was so unget-at-able, and Mr. Travers preferred easy and immediate results. The seduction of a young woman who was so cluttered up with children and Pankridge propriety might

be both more or less a labour of Hercules. London ladies were more facile and approachable, and Mr. Travers had discovered a new ‘lovely’ who was more than ready to take the coach to Brighton, and Brighton had a *cachet*.

XIV

CHILDREN were playing ‘touch-wood’ in the Shrubbery, and the playground was a little amphitheatre where the Lombardy poplars towered like Roman cypresses, save that their yellow leaves lay in drifts upon the ground. The Pankridge children had joined the party, and Miss Luce was sitting on a seat under the branches of a gnarled oak. Mr. John Jordan, hearing those merry voices, strolled down one of the steep paths to the playground.

An altercation had sprung up. Albert, who was a notorious cheat, had been touched by another boy, and was refusing to admit it.

‘I got to the tree first.’

‘No, you didn’t.’

‘Yes, I did. You’re a liar.’

Mr. Jordan arrived in time to see the two boys at grips, and Miss Luce standing and looking worried, and Mr. Jordan strode down and intervened, taking each lad gently but firmly by the collar.

‘If you can’t play a game without quarrelling, you shouldn’t play at all. Now, begin all over again. I’ll be umpire.’

‘He called me a liar, sir.’

‘Did he, indeed! Albert, you will apologize.’

Master Pankridge looked sulky.

‘He didn’t touch me.’

‘Yes, he did,’ said a girl.

‘The evidence seems to be against you, Albert. Say you’re sorry.’

‘All right, but I’m not sorry—really.’

‘Then you are no sportsman. I shall not be friends with you, Albert.’

‘All right, I’m sorry.’

The game was resumed. Miss Luce had returned to her seat, and Mr. Jordan walked towards her, and raised his hat.

‘I’m to be umpire. May I join you?’

She gave him an indeterminate glance, and a momentary one at that. She was feeling coldly unhappy, and somehow this vigorous creature repelled her.

‘Yes, if you wish to.’

He looked at her curiously, and then sat down.

‘I—do—wish to. Why shouldn’t that be allowed me?’

She was mute, frigid, irresponsive, and assuming an interest in the game that she did not feel. The children were racing from tree to tree, laughing and screaming. Why did children scream and shout when they played? John Jordan, suddenly as shy of her as she was of him, but very differently so, was sensitive to her air of self-conscious aloofness. This pinched, firm face, so coldly chiselled, was not the face of the girl who danced.

Was she in love with that fellow?

But as an umpire Mr. Jordan had been remiss. Albert was claiming a touch upon a pretty, flaxen-haired girl, and Mr. Jordan was compelled to hedge.

‘Yes, I’m not quite sure. A very near thing. Go at it again. And Albert, my son, give the doubt to the lady.’

The game went on, and Mr. Jordan watched it, while becoming increasingly aware of the silent creature beside him. Was he not wanted? Did she resent his attempt at friendliness?

‘I must respect my responsibility. Did you see what happened?’

Her voice was toneless.

‘Albert did touch Rose.’

‘Then I owe Albert an apology. Don’t you think so?’

‘Is it—necessary?’

Mr. Jordan winced. Assuredly he was being held at arm’s length.

‘No, perhaps not. Have you been—er—playing Chopin recently?’

‘No.’

How a monosyllable could repulse you! His attempt at conversation appeared to be completely negative.

‘Well, I think I had better be going. People to visit. I will leave the umpiring to you.’

He rose, lifted his hat, but her eyes were on the racing children, and did not lift to meet his.

Mr. Jordan, looking extremely serious and feeling something of a fool, was half-way to the holly walk when he found a gentleman leaning against a tree, the eminent Mr. Lardner. John might not suspect so serious a person of spying, nor did he know that the playground seat was visible from where Mr. Lardner was standing.

‘Good morning, sir.’

‘Ah, good morning, Mr. Jordan.’

Was there a tinge of pity in Mr. Ludovic Lardner’s affability? Pity and ironic amusement. The curate had been invited to dinner at No. 5, and he had experienced a very cultured evening, seated on Mrs. Lardner’s right, with Miss Caroline next to him, a very vivacious Caroline. The bachelor might be plain brown bread, but he was eligible. And here was the Rev. John Jordan attaching himself to a governess’s skirts, which was sheer foolishness. If Mr. Jordan only knew the truth. Moreover, Mrs. Lardner, in a fit of unusual petulance, had complained that—really—Miss Luce was a petticoated nuisance, and spoiling the marriage market for much more suitable young women.

Mr. Ludovic Lardner left his tree and climbed the path with Mr. Jordan.

‘I gather that you are fond of children, Mr. Jordan.’

‘Some children, sir.’

‘Ah, quite so.’

Mr. Lardner became paternal.

‘A responsibility and a blessing—h’m—yes. And I suppose, some day you will have children of your own.’

Mr. Jordan came out of a self-absorbed stare.

‘Oh, well, yes—I suppose so.’

‘I rather believe in holy matrimony for the clergy.’

‘You do, sir? Well, some day——’

‘Yes, my dear fellow, but not with too much impetuosity. The choice has to be adequate and final.’

There were occasions when John Jordan was moved to revert to his Cambridge days with the somewhat violent naughtiness of youth. Why this pomposity, this paternal patronage? Mr. Ludovic Lardner might be

jurisprudence *in excelsis*, but not Jack Jordan's solemn tutor.

'I presume, sir, you speak from experience.'

Mr. Lardner gave John a beady and suspicious glance. Was he being poked in the ribs, and irreverently so?

'My dear fellow, experience is vital. I may say—that—I have some experience of domestic tragedies.'

'Of course, sir, but man-traps and spring-guns are not inevitable.'

Mr. Lardner stiffened. There was a whisper of facetiousness in the autumn air.

'Well, I leave you to judge, Mr. Jordan.'

They parted company at the gate in the iron railings, and with caustic politeness. Mr. Jordan turned right, Mr. Lardner left. Mr. Lardner was accusing the curate of ironic impudence, and Mr. Jordan was questioning the great man's motives. Had this solemn pedant been postulating a personal problem? But what and why? Mr. Jordan, looking combative, proceeded down the pier hill upon an errand of human compassion, and became involved in an adventure that challenged the Church Militant.

A parishioner was drunk; he had been in that condition for two days, and it had culminated in a scene beside the inn of the 'Jolly Sailor'. The drunken gentleman, a bargee, was the Old Town's terror, and he had his wife by the hair and was proposing to chuck her in the sea. Tom Tooley was not a man to be crossed when he was berserker, and the spectators were eschewing interference. The woman was screaming. One of her eyes was blackened, and blood was running from a split lip.

Mr. Jordan intervened. Never mind the old tag of interfering between man and wife. This drunken blackguard had to be persuaded that such things should not be, and if possible with gentleness and humour.

' 'Elp, 'elp,' screamed the woman, ' 'e's goin' t' drown me.'

'Shut yer bloody mouth,' snarled the man.

Mr. Jordan, standing directly in the line of advance, spread his arms.

'Let go of the lady's hair, my friend.'

'And who the bloody 'ell are you?'

In fact the mad dog, sighting a new victim, let go of the woman and lurched straight at Mr. Jordan, for Mr. Jordan was no more than a figure in

black that had got in the mad dog's way. He lunged with a right fist, and Mr. Jordan dodged the blow and caught Mr. Tooley's wrist. John knew a trick or two. He twisted the fellow's arm, twirled him round, and then pinioned both arms behind Tom's back. The man cursed, struggled, yelped as Mr. Jordan applied more torsion, and then he tried stamping on the curate's toes.

'Stop that. You want cooling.'

'Let go of me, you bloody —— Can't you fight like a man?'

'With a woman—what?'

'I'll knock you——'

Mr. Jordan twisted harder, and drove a bony knee hard into the gentleman's posterior.

'Forward—march.'

So the spectators watched that strange procession, Tom being propelled seawards by the new curate. Down over the shingle they went, and the sand, to the water's edge, and on till they were knee deep. Then Mr. Jordan soused the wife-beater in the sea, and held his head under until there was no more breath or kick in him.

Laughter and cheers from the spectators.

'Licked at last.'

Mr. Jordan yanked the man up, and put an arm round him.

'Come along, home and dry clothes for you. We are going to know each other better after this.'

Mr. Tooley was coughing and spitting salt water. He was soused and sobered.

It was an astonished and admiring congregation that watched the Rev. John Jordan conduct the couple back to their cottage behind the 'Jolly Sailor'. Some person this, strong as a young bull, and quite fearless. The women were even more enthusiastic than the men. Tom Tooley had for years been a social nuisance, and wives had seen their men slink home the worse for the bargee's fists.

'Coo,' said one, 'if Tom gets nasty again, we can send for Mr. Jordan.'

'Bit of an improvement on old Parbury.'

'Raw-ther!'

Mr. Jordan was still in charge of the affair, and peaceably so. Mrs. Tooley, showing no prejudices, was left below with orders to brew her husband a concentrated cup of tea, while he assisted the soaked and deflated bargee up the stairs, and helped to undress him.

'A cup of hot tea, my lad, and sleep it off. I'll come and see you again this evening.'

The bargee gave him a sudden docile grin.

'Well, you gave it me proper.'

Mr. Jordan put out a hand.

'And we are going to be good friends, no doubt about that.'

When the report of this affair travelled along Caroline Terrace it had a varied reception. The Rev. Nicholas Parbury was not pleased. What kind of tame curate had Canon Turnbull imposed upon him? A fellow who brawled with common drunkards! The Lardner ladies pretended to be shocked, but in secret they admired this lusty parson. Captain Hector Bullard slapped Mr. Jordan on the back. The Church Militant and *in excelsis*. Miss Bellamy saw a sentimental picture in the hero rescuing a helpless woman. Miss Cripps asked Mr. Jordan to dine with her; Mrs. Pankridge considered that the curate had behaved with extreme vulgarity. Albert and Victoria were impressed. The Gages, the Merrimans, and the Latimers were in agreement with Captain Bullard. Dr. Rollinson, called in to attend Mrs. Tooley, was of the opinion that Mr. Jordan had administered a potent purge to the husband. The Marquis and the Marquise de Beaucourt thought the incident most piquant. Canon Turnbull returned home with the story and a chuckle.

'John must be giving old Parbury shocks. I'll wager that he is taking snuff every five minutes.'

Caroline Mews agreed with the Old Town. Mr. Jordan was a caution to snakes.

And Isabella? Muscular Christianity was not a part of her dream, and Miss Luce was feeling more and more unhappy. Mr. Travers had vanished without one tender word to her, and foolishly she had hoped for letters, but Handsome George was too worldly-wise to commit himself on paper. 'I love' and 'I do not love' are so near and yet as distant as the stars. John Jordan was just a plain male in trousers, with rebellious hair and a face that was not Don Juan. No Byronic hero, this, and maybe poor Bella had experienced so much ugliness

that physical beauty was more appealing than solid worthiness.

Yes, Miss Luce was unhappy. The Pankridge world was so vulgarly exacting. The children worried her, Clarissa worried her; Mr. Percival's propensity for things sentimental was also embarrassing. No peace, no privacy, save in her little back bedroom at night. 'Miss Luce—this'—'Miss Luce—that,' the attitude of the genteel towards an inferior person. Isabella had her flash of fancy, and it seemed to be no more than the flash of a shooting star. She had a strange feeling of growing older by day, and seeing the future as a series of impersonal slaveries, poverty, skin and hair growing shabby, eyes dimming, wrinkles in evidence.

'I cannot be myself, and never shall be. Such creatures as I am just wither and fade away.'

Sanity may be perilously poised, and easily overturned when the subject is hypersensitive, and Isabella Luce was tending towards a self-shadowed melancholy that could shrink from human contacts, even from the faces of potential friends. Her world was full of appraising eyes and patronizing voices. Her self-conscious spirit was moulding a mask which she wore, a chilled and shrinking aloofness. She was afraid—and of what? Vague shadows, imaginary humiliations, ghosts of her own creating? Even the children noticed the change in her. Miss Luce was a Snow Woman, with dark and lustreless pebbles for eyes.

XV

In spite of her toughness Miss Charlotte Cripps was both puzzled and perturbed, for she had found herself more than ready to be fond of Isabella Luce. Contrasts make for attraction, and Miss Cripps's pug-like face had no resemblance to Miss Luce's douce darkness. She had given the girl a white ball-dress and more than her favour, and Isabella was avoiding her, or meeting her with a strained formality.

Now—why? And why did Miss Luce hurry the children towards the cliffs when taking them for their morning walk, as though she was fleeing from human contacts? Was Isabella—in the old sentimental sense—love-sick? It might be so. Mr. George Travers had not visited his uncle, and appeared to be consistently engaged in the marketing of wine and brandy.

Moreover, on two occasions Miss Cripps had seen Mr. Jordan attempt to join Miss Luce and her charges, and Isabella had walked head in air, eyes looking straight before her, like a creature who was frozen. The children had been very ready to welcome Mr. Jordan, but their governess gave him less than encouragement, and John Jordan had not persisted in playing the walking and talking partner.

H'm—yes. Gossip, too, was busy. Miss Cripps was not the only person who had observed Mr. Jordan's inclination towards the Pankridge's pretty governess. Poor silly fellow! Had he not more eligible gentlewomen to pursue—young ladies, who were not so young, but who could stoop to be conquered by a curate? The Misses Lardner were politely sneering, and their father pondering a problem of his own.

Miss Cripps gave a party every winter in the ballroom of the Royal Hotel. It included juveniles and grown-ups; everybody danced and played 'oranges and lemons', and the affair finished with Sir Roger de Coverley. Miss Cripps despatched her invitations and the Pankridges were included, and Miss Luce received a special letter. Would she come to tea at No. 20, and talk the party over with Miss Cripps?

'I'm getting old, my dear, and you can help.'

Meeting the Rev. John Jordan on the terrace she gave him a personal invitation.

‘Will you come, Mr. Jordan? I shall want you for “oranges and lemons”.’

Mr. Jordan welcomed the obligation.

‘I am more of a lemon than an orange, madam.’

‘Nonsense,’ said she, ‘orange-blossom might be yours.’

And did Mr. Jordan blush?

Isabella was hesitant, and in a mood of negation. A crowd, critical faces, dancing? But she could not be rude and unfriendly to Miss Charlotte, and when she mentioned the matter to Mrs. P., Clarissa, who was mollified by Miss Cripps’s invitation, insisted that Miss Luce must humour the old lady.

‘Of course you must go, Miss Luce. Surely you realize that it is a compliment, and a very gracious one, if I may say so.’

So Isabella, strangely shy of possible confidences, rang the bell of No. 20, and was taken by a smiling Jane to Miss Cripps’s fireside. Miss Cripps, expecting to be kissed, was not given that salute, and was moved to inward comment.

‘Take off your bonnet and cloak, my dear, and get warm. We are having muffins. I adore muffins.’

Isabella looked as though she could adore nothing, not even a gorgeous fire and muffins. In fact the fire did not warm her face, but made it appear withdrawn and haggard. Miss Luce had lost her soft outlines; her profile had sharpened, and Miss Charlotte thought, ‘Holy Gemini, here are the makings of a shrew.’ And such was the fate of hundreds of young women whose emotional cravings were frustrated, and who never gave suck to a child.

‘Feeling the cold, my dear?’

For Miss Luce had shivered.

‘No, I am quite warm, thank you.’

More formalism, more inward shrinkings! Were the muffins to be cold and inadequately buttered?

Tea arrived and was set on a table by the fire, and within reach of Miss Charlotte. The cosy was removed, and Miss Cripps made a suggestion.

‘Supposing we put the muffins by the fire. On that trivet, my dear. Yes, that’s better.’

Miss Luce occupied a tuffet, with her plate in her lap, and her teacup on the floor beside her. She stared self-consciously at the cheerful blaze.

‘Oo,’ said Miss Cripps, ‘I do love it when butter runs down my chin. Does it, my dear?’

Isabella gave her a hurried glance.

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Now, about the party. You will help me, won’t you? Shy children have to be—mothered.’

Isabella bit tentatively at a muffin as though it might bite back at her in greasy protest.

‘I don’t know whether I am very good with children.’

‘Not with roustabouts, perhaps. I have trouble every year with shy small boys who huddle in corners. Some boys are much more shy than girls.’

‘Yes, I think they are.’

‘Well, you’ll make them polka. And wear your white dress. I’m sure that small boys will find you—irresistible.’

‘I—er—I’ll do my best.’

‘Splendid. I’d like another muffin. Thank you, my dear.’

To add to the *décor* a north-east wind brought snow, white roofs, white trees, and a sombre sky. The pier reached out like a great white pointing finger into the estuary. Birds came to back doors and on to balconies for crumbs. But on the night of Miss Cripps’s party the sky was clear, with a half moon sailing, and there was the muffled stillness as of a world padded with white wool.

It was a carriage night for most of the guests, and a man with a lantern stood outside the portico of the Royal Hotel to light the way. The snow had been swept from steps and pavement, and the hotel blazed with welcoming fires. Miss Cripps had sent her carriage for the Pankridge family and Miss Luce, a courtesy that put Clarissa in a pleasant temper, so much so that she was ready to forgive Miss Luce her London frock.

The ballroom was a blaze of candles, in the glass chandeliers and in sconces on the walls. The brown floor had a sheen. Two fires glowed. Three musicians were staged on the dais. Great curtains of red and gold splashed colour between the cream panelling. A refreshment table waited in one corner, and a vast cake decorated with candles. Miss Cripps stood by one of the fires; she was in black satin, and with a swansdown fan. There were red ribbons in

her lace cap.

All the world arrived. Children gathered somewhat self-consciously in shy groups. The party needed the spoon of music to stir it into life, and Miss Cripps flicked her fan at the musicians.

A polka. And with the music came Mr. Jordan to pay his respects to the hostess, a Mr. Jordan in pumps and black silk stockings and knee breeches, his hair less rebellious, his hands white-gloved. Knee breeches were out of date, save for a few obstinate fogies and the flunkey world, nor did they quite sympathize with Mr. Jordan's legs.

'I am afraid I am late, madam.'

Miss Cripps tapped him on the shoulder with her fan.

'Do you dance, sir?'

'Not very well, madam, but may I have the honour?'

Miss Cripps twinkled at him, and pointed with her fan.

'Melt the glue, Mr. Jordan. Get things going. Ask Miss Luce to dance, and set a good example.'

Isabella was seated with the Pankridge family, and Miss Cripps pointed her fan.

'I believe she is a beautiful dancer, Mr. Jordan.'

'I wish I could say the same of myself.'

So John Jordan crossed the floor, and bowed to Mrs. Pankridge and to Isabella.

'Miss Cripps wants us to show the way. May I have the pleasure?'

Miss Luce hesitated, and before she could rise Victoria bobbed up in front of Mr. Jordan.

'I'll dance wiv you.'

Did Mr. Jordan look relieved, or disappointed, or both?

'Splendid. Come along, young lady. One, two, three.'

Some of those present thought that Mr. Jordan looked ridiculous, a giant dancing with a gnome. He had to hold Victoria by the hands, and accommodate his massive legs to her small ones, but the exhibition set the room going, and grown-ups and children hopped around together. Mrs. P., watching the curate and her small daughter, remarked that Mr. Jordan seemed

to be such a good-natured creature. Albert had found a partner, and Mr. Pankridge, rising, asked Miss Luce to dance.

‘Mustn’t be a wallflower, must she, Clara?’

Clarissa condescended to be pleasant.

‘No, of course not. You may dance with Mr. Pankridge, Miss Luce.’

Mr. Pankridge and Isabella escaped a collision with Victoria and Mr. Jordan, and Mr. Jordan smiled at Miss Luce, but she looked at him as though he was not visible. Mr. Jordan’s smile vanished with surprised abruptness. An uncompromising coldness, this, and John Jordan, who was so capable of dealing with men, was so diffident in confronting women. Miss Luce must dislike him, or be supremely indifferent, but a snubbed smile was rather hurting.

Everybody danced, the Merrimans, the Gages, the Latimers, the Marquis and the Marquise, and a whole bevy of children. The great room and the party warmed themselves. Young Latimer danced with Miss Caroline. Faith and Hope danced severely with each other. Mr. Jordan, having polka’d with the daughter, requested the honour of going through a quadrille with the mother. At the other end of the room Miss Luce was gliding through the sets with the Marquis de Beaucourt. Mr. Jordan, casting occasional glances in her direction, was assailed by the horrid thought that Miss Luce might consider curates inferior creatures. He fumbled a set to partners and apologized.

‘I fear my dancing is rather rusty.’

Clarissa was gracious. Mr. Jordan was more of a gentleman than she had believed.

Came tea, and a crowd of children at the long table. Miss Cripps was there, and Miss Luce happened to be close to her.

‘My dear, will you cut the cake?’

Isabella looked bothered. A waiter handed her a knife, but the thick icing and the candles seemed to complicate the operation. She cut a slice that refused to emerge, save in a crumbling wedge. But help was at hand, bold man who was challenging more rebuffs. Mr. Jordan slipped in beside her.

‘Let me help.’

She coloured up and looked flustered, and would have surrendered the knife, but Mr. Jordan thought otherwise.

‘No. Two hands are better than one.’

In fact he laid a large hand on hers, and with the added strength and pressure the knife slid doucely through the icing and the rich brown matrix.

‘Better take away some of the candles, hadn’t we?’

Miss Luce nodded and seemed voiceless, while eager children waited upon the distribution.

Mr. Lardner, who happened to be standing near, watched the affair with an air of a legal Solomon faced by a grave problem. Was Miss Luce iced cake to the curate? Very possibly so. But then Mr. John Jordan did not know what an iced crust might conceal.

Miss Cripps, having considered the situation, slipped in beside Miss Luce and linked her by the arm. The cake was a mere remnant, and the children growing gay on other cakes and lemonade. Miss Cripps drew Isabella towards one of the fires, and as she did so, beckoned with her fan to Mr. Jordan.

‘Oh—Mr. Jordan, would you ask them to play a waltz?’

Did she close one eye at him, and point her fan at Isabella? Mr. Jordan stood in a momentary stare, and then walked off to do her bidding. Dared he risk another dose of indifference? Yet Miss Charlotte’s signal had been —‘Feeble heart never won fair lady.’

The musicians began to scrape their strings, and Mr. Jordan recrossed the room like a man about to storm a breach. He bowed to Isabella.

‘May I have the pleasure and the honour of a waltz?’

Miss Cripps nudged Miss Luce with her fan, and the maternal poke was positive. It said: ‘Do, my dear,’ and Isabella, looking confused, rose to her feet. But by some ironical chance the orchestra broke into the very waltz that she had danced with Mr. Travers.

It must be confessed that Mr. Jordan was not a graceful dancer. He swung Miss Luce round, but his feet seemed to fumble, and his rhythm was not that of a waltz dream.

‘I’m afraid I’m rather out of practice.’

He looked down into her face, but her dark eyes avoided his. There was no warmth in her towards him, and her movements were stiff and not melting to the music.

Then they bumped another couple, and Mr. Jordan apologized, and, in

attempting to restore their mutual balance, trod heavily on Miss Luce's foot. He saw her wince and draw a sharp breath, for Mr. Jordan's weight was considerable.

'Forgive me, clumsy ass. I'm afraid I have hurt you.'

'A little.'

'Would you like to sit down?'

'Yes, I think so.'

Mr. Jordan, wishing that he could kick himself, armed her back to Miss Cripps and the fire. His face looked crumpled and distressed.

'I'm a clumsy brute. I hope you will forgive me.'

Miss Luce, taking the chair beside Miss Charlotte, gave him a momentary and twinging smile.

John Jordan was mad with himself. Had it been possible for him to find his other ego with fists up, how he would have enjoyed punching his own face. Was the room amused? Possibly. He had reached the doorway when he was confronted by Captain Bullard, and Captain Bullard took Mr. Jordan by the arm.

'Come on, my lad. Damned hot in that room. And I have a thirst. Help me to quench it.'

Mr. Jordan gave him a grateful look.

'Thank you, sir.'

'Miss Charlotte's a great little woman. Elderly gentlemen and others provided for in the room across the passage.'

They walked off arm in arm, and into the room where the head-waiter presided behind a table dressed with glasses and decanters.

'Well, Charles, what have you?'

'Brandy, sherry, port, sir.'

'Give me a brandy. What for you, Jordan?'

'Ale, if there is any.'

'Yes, sir, I can send for some. Thomas, go down and fetch the gentleman a pint of our best.'

There were chairs against the wall, and Captain Bullard preferred to sit, for there were times when his stump ached. Mr. Jordan, provided with a silver tankard, raised it to the old sailor.

‘Your very good health, sir.’

‘And yours, my lad.’

J. J. gave Captain Hector a wry grin.

‘Here’s to a clumsy ass who trod on a lady’s foot.’

Captain Bullard sipped his brandy.

‘Better with your fists than your feet, John. I prefer it that way.’

‘Not in a ballroom, sir.’

‘I’m not so sure about that. And you made a good job of the cake.’

Mr. Jordan stood holding his tankard and looking pensive.

‘Do you think, sir, that a plain fellow should take his knocks, and persist?’

‘Most certainly I do, my lad.’

‘You see, I’m rather an oaf with women.’

‘Think so? Better to be a bit shy, John, than one of those smirking dudes who assumes that every girl will fall for him.’

Mr. Jordan gave a curt laugh.

‘Well, I’m not much of a smirking dude, sir.’

‘Thank God for it.’

When Mr. Jordan had recovered enough confidence to re-enter the ballroom, he found it preparing to play ‘oranges and lemons’. Miss Cripps had called for the game and chosen the fruit. Miss Luce was to be the orange, and Miss Caroline Lardner the lemon. Oh, naughty and conspiring old lady!

Miss Caroline and Isabella were holding hands, and facing each other with starched formality. Lemon—indeed! Miss Caroline felt hoity-toity. The children were forming a chain and preparing to be imprisoned by the ladies’ arms while they made their choice. And invidious was their choosing!

Three-quarters of the children voted orange, and when the tug came the result was inevitable. Orange won with ease, and Miss Luce smiled defensively at the stiff face of Miss Caroline Lardner. Would the youngest

Miss Lardner regard the children's choice as an insult? Gentlewoman rejected for governess! Caroline Lardner did produce a smile, even if it was tinged with a supercilious acidity.

'Thank you, Miss Luce,' and Miss Caroline plucked a lace handkerchief from her bosom and wiped her hands.

Miss Luce might have done likewise had she been less of a lady.

Mr. Ludovic Lardner had been watching his youngest daughter's defeat, and though the judicial mind is expected to be impartial, Mr. Lardner was man and father. He rubbed his legal chin, and, turning to his wife, bent and spoke in undertones.

'My dear, I think I shall have to confide in you. There is a matter upon which I should like your opinion.'

'Of course, Ludovic. Now?'

'No, no, later, when we are alone. I am perplexed by a problem which concerns the whole community.'

Sir Roger de Coverley. Mr. Jordan, stimulated by an aside from Captain Bullard, walked deliberately across the ballroom floor, and besought Miss Cripps to be his partner. She gave him an ogle and a flirt of the fan.

'No, my dear sir, I am rather fatigued, but I appreciate your gallantry. Isabella, my dear, dance with Mr. Jordan.'

For a moment Miss Luce sat as though frozen, then she rose, and without looking at Mr. Jordan gave him her hand. Everybody was preparing to dance this merry old measure, and precedence was served by Sir Montague and his lady performing as first couple. Hands clapped as pair after pair footed it between the rows of children and their elders. Mr. Jordan, with consummate tact, had led Miss Luce to the modest end of the clapping ranks, and they were the last to pass hand in hand up the living aisle. Mr. Jordan footed it with a shy yet jocund swagger, and Isabella's dark lashes were lowered over troubled eyes.

Captain Bullard had joined Miss Charlotte.

'Well, what about it, madam?'

'About what?'

'Now, now, you know what I mean just as well as I do.'

XVI

MR. LUDOVIC LARDNER belonged to a generation which did not cultivate fresh air. Curtains were drawn over closely shut windows. The bed was a four-poster, with the hangings drawn save on the side where a candle burned on a side-table. Mr. Lardner wore a night-cap, a ridiculous thing with a red tassel, and he had a shawl over his shoulders, yet his nose felt cold.

'My dear, I never intended to make this secret known, even to you, but there are certain issues concerned which, to my mind, alter the situation.'

Mrs. Lardner lay comfortably flat, with the clothes under her chin, and her pink bed-cap almost covering her eyebrows.

'You sound very serious, my dear.'

'It is a very serious problem. Did you observe that the poor curate appears to be enamoured of the Pankridge governess?'

'No, I cannot say that I did.'

'Ah, I have had to develop powers of observation. Besides, it is becoming talked about. And there was some scandal too about young Travers.'

'Miss Luce seems a modest girl.'

'Luce is not her real name, my dear. It is her mother's surname. Her real name is Hatherway.'

'Hatherway. But—Ludovic——'

'Perhaps you remember the case. Miss Luce's father was hanged for murder.'

Mrs. Lardner had been feeling sleepy, but this shocking piece of news brought her upright in bed.

'Good gracious! Surely the Pankridges cannot know that their children are in the care of a young woman with such a heritage?'

'Most certainly they cannot know.'

'But, are you sure, Ludovic?'

Then Mr. Lardner told her the whole story, including the incident of the red

book left upon a seat.

His wife gasped.

‘How—terrible!’

Mr. Lardner had created a sensation even in the domestic court, and he was pleased with it. He rubbed his cold nose.

‘I think, my dear, that for the time being we will keep the matter to ourselves. One does not wish to be unkind to the poor wretch.’

‘Of course not, Ludovic. You are always so humane. But those children ——’

‘Pretty tough propositions, both of them.’

‘Yes, but, if they were my children——’

‘I am very glad that they are not.’

‘And poor Mr. Jordan. It would be terrible if he became involved with a girl like Miss Luce.’

Mr. Lardner nodded, and the red tassel bobbed to and fro.

‘Quite so, my dear, but I think we should temporize. And now for reflection before sleep.’

And Mr. Lardner blew out the candle.

The snow lay three inches deep, and Mr. Lardner, setting out for the Marine Library, top-hatted and scarved, met Miss Luce and the Pankridge children. Albert had a full-sized snowball ready for any opportunity, and the temptation was too obvious. He waited until Mr. Lardner had passed with a cold glance at the governess, and then he took a pot-shot at Mr. Lardner’s topper. It was a lucky cast, and Mr. Lardner’s hat fell off into the snow.

He faced about with indignant dignity.

‘Disgraceful. May I remark, young woman, that you appear to have no control over your children.’

Miss Luce coloured up. She might have retorted that boys will be boys, but Mr. Lardner’s anger was too evident.

‘Albert, pick up the gentleman’s hat.’

Albert was grinning.

‘Shan’t.’

Mr. Lardner took two strides and administered a judicial cuff.

‘That’s what you need, young man.’

Albert pulled a face at him, and Mr. Lardner, recovering his own hat, clapped it on his head, and marched off head in air.

Mr. Jordan had witnessed the incident, and there was more to come. Albert was kneading another snowball, and he flung it at Isabella and caught her full in the face. She put up a sudden hand, for the snowball had hurt her. Mr. Jordan was out of the house, minus overcoat and hat. He gathered snow and with smiling grimness advanced upon Albert.

‘Now then, my lad, I’ll teach you to throw at ladies.’

Mr. Jordan’s ball, flung not too fiercely, broke full upon Albert’s nose and mouth, and Albert’s guns were silenced. For a second or so he looked like blubbing.

Mr. Jordan was concerned only with Miss Luce.

‘I am afraid it hurt you.’

‘Just for a moment.’

‘I’m so sorry. Albert, my son, if you ever pelt a lady again, I’ll smack you.’

There was one remarkable point about Miss Luce, only once or twice since her engagement by the Pankridges had she received a letter, and the address had been in very childish handwriting. Isabella had been able to produce testimonials, but as the months went by and Miss Luce appeared to exist in a state of mysterious isolation, Mrs. Pankridge was piqued by it. Her orders to the household were that all letters should come to her for inspection, even her husband’s, for Percival was so handsome and not immune from the attacks of designing females. Clarissa had pounced upon a certain sentimental correspondence, and ever afterwards she had played censor.

She had handled and conned Miss Luce’s letters, and been provoked to curiosity. The writing was childish, indisputably so, and Mrs. P., who had a knack of ascribing the worst motives to humanity, and of discovering interesting skeletons in other family cupboards, was moved to question Miss Luce’s social isolation.

‘Percival, has it ever occurred to you that Miss Luce is a peculiar person?’

‘No, my dear, I can’t say that it has.’

‘Now—I wonder.’

‘Do you, my dear?’

‘Is Miss Luce really a virgin?’

Mr. Pankridge raised bland eyebrows.

‘Really, my dear, I could not say.’

‘I have noticed that she has received only two or three letters since she has been with us, and they have all been in a very childish hand.’

Mr. Pankridge stroked his whiskers. At least he was not responsible for any lapse in chastity in Miss Luce’s past.

‘You are inferring, Clara——’

‘Quite so. Miss Luce may have had a child. I am convinced that there is some mystery about her.’

Mr. Pankridge looked anxious.

‘My dear, be careful. To accuse a young woman of having had illegitimate offspring—is—er—a very serious—mattah.’

His wife snubbed him.

‘Don’t be a fool, Percival. No one is more discreet or less of a gossip than I am.’

The Rev. Nicholas Parbury had not been accustomed to trouble himself about Christmas festivities, or the decorative dressing of his very new church. Mistletoe did not matter; Christmas dinner was the good pagan festival, cooked meats and opulent pudding and the oldest of port. There was one satisfaction in possessing a curate, however untamed he might be; Mr. Parbury could gorge himself and drink as much as he could carry, and go to sleep before the fire and delegate evening service to Mr. Jordan.

But there was to be more *décor* about this particular Christmas. Mr. Jordan’s Christianity possessed a spirit of jocund boyishness, and if he too had a healthy appetite, his feeling for the Sacred Feast could be symbolical. Christ in the manger, the mysterious Kings, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the patient ass, hymns and carols, holly, but not quite mistletoe. Mr. Jordan himself was playing the part of the patient ass, and eschewing the premature possibilities of the berry.

‘Let Christmas be a sacrament, and good fun.’

Mr. Jordan, having consulted Mr. Parbury, and been blessed in his endeavours, went about recruiting helpers in the good cause. The respectable newness of St. John’s should take on colour, and be garnished with green garlands. The ladies gathered to him. A cart-load of holly was contributed by John Gage Esq., and helping fingers were busy with white wool, and red and gold paper, evolving coloured shields and swags and chains, and crosses. Even the Misses Lardner joined with severe enthusiasm in the preparations.

And Isabella? Miss Cripps was contributing both material and help, and Miss Cripps called upon Mrs. Pankridge.

‘I have made myself responsible for the pulpit. I wonder if you could spare Miss Luce to help me?’

‘Why, yes, my dear Miss Cripps. Miss Luce seems unduly depressed. I cannot think why.’

Clarissa might have offered an explanation of her own, had she so chosen. If a young woman had an illegitimate child tucked away somewhere, well, so secret a stigma might very well produce melancholy.

Miss Luce received her instructions to join Miss Cripps at St. John’s, and the very first person she met in the church was Mr. Jordan carrying a step-ladder.

‘Coming to help us, Miss Luce?’

The glance she gave him was defensive, and John Jordan stepped out of her way.

‘Yes, Miss Cripps has asked me.’

‘You will find her up there. My job is decorating the front of the gallery.’

He made no attempt to delay her, for John Jordan had more understanding of the situation than she knew. Step out of the way, make the approach gradual, do not fuss your flower, tread delicately. There was some mystery here, and Mr. Jordan was more sensitive to mystery than his little world imagined. The patient ass might outlast the high-stepping blood-horse. If Miss Luce was still cherishing an illusion, let that illusion fade in its own sad way.

The Misses Lardner were dressing the altar, the rightful prerogative of the eminently genteel. They saw Miss Luce walk slowly up the aisle with the air of a penitent about to partake of the sacred blood and wine. Caroline sniffed, for she had a cold in the head, and the church was chilly. Other ladies were busy

swathing the pillars with garlands of ivy and holly, and Miss Luce was no more to them than the Pankridge governess.

Miss Cripps was sitting in a front pew in the midst of a mass of prickly foliage.

‘Well, well, my dear. Glad you’ve come. I hope you have gloves. This stuff is giving me pins and needles.’

Miss Luce edged into the pew and sat down with a self-consciousness that was as prickly as the holly. Was she imagining things, or were these other women, with the exception of this vital, pug-faced old lady, becoming actively hostile instead of displaying casual indifference? And what did it matter? For a moment or two she sat mute, motionless, a creature apart. She might not have heard Miss Charlotte’s voice.

Miss Cripps gave a tug to the green chain she was weaving. A difficult young woman, this, and perhaps steeped in bitter self-depreciation. Her very hands drooped. Had Mrs. Pankridge more than vexed her violet? How women could hurt and humiliate each other!

‘My dear——’

Isabella came out of her stare, and some emotional spasm winced in her eyes and mouth.

‘Oh, I am sorry. What are we——?’

‘Holly chains for dear Mr. Parbury.’

‘Oh, yes.’

She plucked at the holly sprigs as though her fingers had no association with her inward self.

‘Do we——?’

‘Fasten them on to this piece of cord.’

‘Yes.’

‘Here’s some twine. Did you bring scissors?’

‘No, I’m afraid I didn’t.’ And some secret shame might have grouped her with the Unwise Virgins.

‘Well, you can have mine. I’ll take a rest.’

Miss Luce set to work like a woman in some self-created penitentiary, eyes downcast, lips suggesting an incipient tremor. She fumbled with the inco-

ordinate eagerness of too much haste. Miss Cripps, watching those sensitive and hurrying hands, wondered at the facility with which some such lovable creature could be fooled and wounded by an amorous jackanapes. Was that the secret, the almost paltry cause of an aloof melancholy and self-humiliation?

Miss Charlotte made a tour of the church, pausing to chat with the various ladies. The Misses Lardner received her with polite chilliness, so much so that Miss Cripps became mischievous, more especially so when she discovered Caroline gazing disdainfully in the direction of Miss Luce.

'My dear, what a dreadful cold you have!'

'I habn't got a gold,' said Caroline.

'Oh, I see, just pride of the morning. I thought I heard you sneezing, and your nose is quite red.'

Impertinent and officious old woman!

But Miss Cripps's objective was Mr. Jordan. He had got his steps up and was tacking a picture of the Agnus Dei in white upon a red ground to a gallery panel, and at the foot of the steps lay coils of ivy worked in a great chain.

'Good morning, John.'

Mr. Jordan looked down at her.

'Oh, good morning.'

'Quite busy, I observe. And what are you going to do with all that greenery?'

'String it along the front of the gallery.'

'All by yourself. Not easy. Shall I ask one of the Misses Lardner to help you?'

Mr. Jordan grinned at her.

'Is it—necessary?'

'Not at all. Miss Caroline has a dreadful cold. You might catch it. Spoil your Christmas sermon. Why, of course, I'll ask Isabella to help you.'

Mr. Jordan's face went stiff and solemn.

'Well, er—Miss Luce—is——'

'Yes, my dear, I know. But people should learn to develop discrimination. I'll fetch her.'

Miss Cripps was gone before he could raise further objections, and Mr. Jordan's hammer resumed its tappings. Miss Charlotte walked slowly up the aisle, and spoke to Isabella.

'Oh, my dear, Mr. Jordan needs some assistance. Do go and help him.'

Isabella looked startled, frightened. Her hands sank into her lap, and the holly chain slipped down to her feet.

'But I mustn't leave—this.'

'Oh yes, you can, my dear. I can manage. Mr. Jordan needs someone to hand up the decorations to him. And those steps look very unsteady.'

Miss Cripps spoke with such decisiveness, and assumed with such confidence that Isabella would oblige her, that Miss Luce rose, and as she did so there was a crash. All heads were turned with startled suddenness. Miss Cripps, looking towards the gallery, saw nothing but gallery. Mr. Jordan and the step-ladder had disappeared.

'Gracious! He has fallen with the steps. Didn't I say——?'

Miss Cripps had Miss Luce by the arm, and drawing her with her, hurried down the central aisle. Other ladies followed. And there lay Mr. Jordan, with the broken steps on top of him on a bed of ivy, stunned, and with blood trickling from a cut on his forehead.

'Dear, dear. I was afraid of those steps. Can you hold his head, child?'

Miss Luce's frozen mood seemed to have melted. She knelt down, and got Mr. Jordan's head into her lap.

'The doctor——'

'Will someone go, and try to find him?'

One of the Miss Megsons volunteered. Miss Cripps was trying to loosen Mr. Jordan's cravat and collar. The Misses Lardner, standing calmly and critically by, considered the romantic tableau, and exchanged significant glances. Mr. Jordan's head reposing in that girl's lap!

Then, quite suddenly, John Jordan's eyes opened, and very revealingly so, upon the face above him.

'Hallo. What's all this?'

'You fell off the steps, sir,' said Miss Cripps. 'I think they are broken.'

Mr. Jordan did not attempt to sit up or to break the momentary spell of his magical situation.

‘My confounded weight. Sorry to make a scene like this.’

Mr. Jordan closed his eyes again for a second or two as though he doubted the reality of his position, and then re-opened them and saw the same face above him. Was he imagining things, or did Miss Luce’s face express more than calm compassion? Her dark lashes flickered, and her cheeks were delicately flushed. Mr. Jordan smiled up at her rather like a large and enthralled child.

‘I think I can get up now.’

He made the attempt, propping himself with his arms. Miss Cripps and another lady had removed the step-ladder. They saw his face go dazed and bloodless.

‘Sorry. I feel rather giddy.’

‘Lie down again, Mr. Jordan.’

Miss Luce was still kneeling, and Mr. Jordan’s head sank back into her lap.

‘Just a bit giddy, still.’

Miss Cripps smiled maternally. No doubt other emotion was mingled with his vertigo.

XVII

THE REV. JOHN JORDAN'S cerebral giddiness passed, but, as Miss Cripps suspected, some emotional giddiness remained after this sentimental incident. Certainly, Dr. Rollinson had to put two stitches into the curate's scalp, but Mr. Jordan was so little discouraged that he procured a short and more reliable ladder, and with Ethan Chigwell standing on the bottom rung, completed the dressing of the gallery.

He appeared in church on Christmas Day, with a head neatly bandaged, and he preached the evening sermon with a jocund and almost boisterous heartiness. Christ was risen, sacred love had been reborn, broken step-ladders could be mended, peace and goodwill should prevail upon earth, Glory to God in the highest. It was a trenchant, manly sermon, and the Old Town listened to it with simple attention. A part of Caroline Terrace was of the opinion that Mr. Jordan's oratory was too muscular. That crack on the head, or other happenings, appeared to have increased the curate's confidence and vigour.

People who permit themselves to suffer from an exaggerated sense of duty may have much to answer for, and Mr. Ludovic Lardner's judicial mind was not free from bias. In court he had displayed great forensic skill in proving black was white, or in clouding a plain issue, and maybe the habit lingered. Moreover, very few of us—if any—are without prejudice, and Mr. Lardner was prejudiced against Miss Luce, even while pretending to pity her, but a more potent pity took the stage in prompting Mr. Lardner to emphasize the peril in which poor Mr. Jordan stood.

Miss Luce had nursed his head in her lap. Mr. Lardner heard all about it from his daughters. Oh, shades of Christian ethics, could a pastor be permitted to stultify his position and his affection by falling in love with a young woman with such a heritage?

Mr. Lardner conceived it his duty to be gravely concerned. Those poor children—too! Miss Luce might be an innocent person, but she was concealing the past, and living on a false reputation. Surely something should be done about it?

'My dear, I think certain people should be warned.'

Mrs. Lardner agreed with him. She was one of those comfortable women

who always agree with their husbands.

‘Do you think I ought to tell the girls?’

‘In confidence, yes, my dear, while I give more consideration to the problem.’

The Misses Lardner were told, and afterwards huddled together in the library with gloating giggles. Well, well, their cynical mistrust of the lovely Luce had been justified. Isabella had interfered with Miss Caroline’s chance of charming either Mr. Travers or Mr. Jordan, and it was but natural that she should resent such spoliation. Jealousy is one of life’s prime movers, and platitudinously so in love, lust, and politics, and Miss Caroline was ready to plant her poisoned dart, should the opportunity be given her.

And Man was to act as the spark to tinder, and very much a spark in the person of Mr. George Travers. Mr. Travers had been sent for by his uncle, because it had come to Mr. Jeremy Baxter’s ears that George was neglecting wine for woman. George had been seen at Brighton with a very decorative lady, and since Regency morals had given way to Respectability, Mr. Baxter, who was cultivating the latter modest flower, had read George a lecture on godly horticulture.

‘It won’t do, my lad, it won’t do. Fornication butters no parsnips. The gentry don’t like it, sir. Times and trousers change.’

Mr. Travers was not a man of courage, and he was in his uncle’s pocket.

‘Perhaps I have been a little unwise, sir.’

‘Well, take it to heart, my lad. By the way, there has been some gossip about you and that governess girl.’

George laughed with reassuring complacency.

‘Oh—that Luce girl. Just a bit of flummery. I’ll soon stop that, if needs be.’

‘You had better.’

So, Isabella Luce’s tragedy was near its unpredictable climax, with the various figures in the play preparing to take their several places. The glamour-man appeared to have gone out of her life, and yet she could not bring herself to feel any romantic warmth for Mr. Jordan. A sisterly liking and respect. Ye gods, how pleasantly prosaic!

Miss Luce was out with the children in February sunshine, the sea aglitter, and the grass still hazed with frost. They were returning along the cliffs when that fatal figure appeared, and Miss Luce's face flushed, and her heart-beats quickened. Mr. George Travers, wearing a blue cloak and a grey topper, and looking comely and debonair. Miss Luce hesitated, and Victoria's voice piped up beside her.

'Oo—Mr. Travers.'

There was no hesitation in the gentleman's advance. He drew near, he raised a casual hat.

'Morning, kiddies, morning, Bella,' and he passed on with a superficial smile.

Miss Luce was holding Victoria's hand, and the small girl uttered a protesting squeak.

'Oo, you're hurting. You're squeezing my fingers.'

Miss Luce stood still, and released the child's hand. Both children turned and looked at the retreating figure.

'Why didn't he stop?' asked Albert.

Miss Luce moved on.

'I expect Mr. Travers is—busy.'

Incident No. 1. He had addressed her as Bella, much as he might have spoken to a housemaid. Miss Luce's face had flushed; now it was tense and white. She took Victoria's hand as though she needed something to hold.

'Don't squeeze again, will you?'

'No, dear.'

Albert giggled.

'I know why you squeezed her hand.'

'Do you?'

'Yes, because you'd like to squeeze Mr. Travers's.'

Incorrigible urchin! Miss Luce did not blush. She was conscious of sudden, acute humiliation.

They passed No. 20, and yet another confrontation was prepared for Isabella, the Misses Lardner emerging to take exercise and the air. Again, Miss Luce flushed, and stood for one second hesitant. Had she a premonition?

The moving trio approached, genteel and correct. Three pairs of eyes were concentrated upon Isabella Luce, but it was Miss Caroline who cast those poisoned words.

‘Good morning, Miss Hatherway. I hope you have enjoyed your walk?’

Miss Luce, having returned the children to the nursery, hurried to her own back room, locked the door, and threw herself upon her bed. She had heard voices as she had passed the drawing-room, and she had recognized one of them as Mr. Lardner’s.

So, her dreadful secret was out! She lay stone-still, hands clenched, listening to the thudding of her heart. Did all the world know of her tragic heritage? Had George Travers known? Oh, dear God, what was she to do? But what could she do? The inevitableness of the approaching crisis numbed her.

She lay and listened. She heard a door open, and the sudden loudness of voices, footsteps going down the stairs.

‘Thank you, Mr. Lardner. I deeply appreciate—what you have told us.’

Isabella held her breath. More footsteps, a knocking at her door.

‘Miss Luce, are you there?’

Her own voice sounded strange to her as she responded with the one word —‘Yes.’

‘Come into the drawing-room at once. Mr. Pankridge and I have very serious things to say to you.’

Isabella rose, sat on the edge of her bed for a second or two, eyes closed, trying to gather strength for what she felt to be coming.

‘Did you hear me, Miss Luce?’

‘Yes, I will be with you in a minute.’

She looked in her mirror, patted her hair, and then went forth to meet her crisis. The drawing-room door was open. Mr. Pankridge was standing, resting an elbow on the mantelpiece, a long figure posed to express domestic disapproval. Clarissa, skirts flounced out, hands folded, occupied a high-backed chair.

‘Please shut the door, Miss Luce.’

Isabella closed it, and remained by it. She was not invited to sit down.

‘Is it true, Miss Luce, that your real name is Hatherway?’

‘It was my father’s name. Luce was my mother’s maiden name.’

‘And is it true that your father was executed for murder?’

‘Yes.’

‘And in taking this situation and the care of innocent children, you concealed this terrible truth?’

Miss Luce moistened her lips.

‘My father had terrible provocation——’

‘Do you justify murder, woman?’

Miss Luce gave a little jerk of the head.

‘I do not judge. I——’

‘Yes, and you came to us under false pretences. The recommendations you supplied to me, were they genuine?’

‘No.’

‘Forgery, Miss Luce, a most serious offence. I regret that I did not trouble to investigate—those lies.’

Mr. Pankridge stirred uneasily. He was a sentimental and a soft-hearted man.

‘My dear, I think you have said enough.’

‘Will you please not interrupt. This woman—wormed her way into our household. I allowed her to associate with my dear children. Have you anything else to say, Miss Luce?’

‘Nothing, madam.’

‘Very good. You are discharged—at once. Go and pack. You will leave this house immediately.’

Isabella’s lips moved, but no words came.

Mr. Pankridge once again dared to intervene.

‘I think, my dear, we owe Miss Luce a month’s salary.’

Clarissa ignored him.

‘I consider that I have been sufficiently magnanimous. You can go and pack, Miss Luce. I have nothing more to say to you.’

Miss Luce returned to her room, but not to pack. She stood a moment as in deep thought, with a strange stillness of body, face, and eyes, one hand to her cheek. This was the chill of frozen emotion, for the tragic things of life have a profound stillness—like the silence of a windless and frosty night—for those who are sensitive. Tears and chatter and bodily contortions may be only for the folk of crude clay, and death itself comes like the noiseless dropping of a curtain.

Yes, death, escape, inviolable peace. Isabella's mute eyes were set in dark contemplation. Who and what had betrayed her? Did it matter? Did she want to live, to endure other humiliations? She had nowhere to go, and but little money to take her anywhere. She was an outcast in this comfortable, polished, and genteel world. Her glance fixed itself upon her cloak hanging like some dead thing on the door. She moved towards it, took the cloak and dragged it round her, and, hatless, hurried down the stairs.

Someone saw her pass in a dark flurry across the roadway towards the great holly hedge, and there in the gateway she suffered her final insult, Mr. Travers emerging, and blocking her way. He stared at her, and denied her entry.

'Hullo, Bella. Upset about something?'

She looked beyond him.

'Let me pass, please.'

'Oh, I say, you seem——'

'Let me pass, please.'

'Not leaving us, are you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, look here, I can find a place for you in town. You join up with me, my dear. A pretty thing like you needn't——'

He had the assurance to take her by the arm, and the reaction was instant. She struck him in the face, forced her way past him, and fled, and Mr. Travers, putting his hat straight, turned for a second to respond to her congee.

'Well, I shan't ask you again, my wench.'

Pure melodrama, this, with the hero taking the stage. Mr. Jordan was at Mr. Travers's elbow before Handsome George had visualized the attack. No blows were struck. With his face close to Travers's, Mr. Jordan caught him under the armpits, lifted him up, and hung him by his cloak and coat-tails on the spikes

of the high railings. Mr. Travers, suspended there, with his hat over his eyes, cursed helplessly.

‘Damn you—what the——’

But Mr. Jordan was gone, pursuing an unseen figure of tragedy, and somehow forewarned of whither Miss Luce was being blown by the gusts of cold anguish. Down through the winter trees and the green laurels and hollies, nor did he get sight of her until he was near the rough trackway above the beach. It was full tide, and John Jordan saw her black figure crossing the shingle. Tragedy was to end in the sea.

Mr. Jordan did not call to her, this was an occasion for rescuing hands, and not for the human voice. She was knee deep in the water, with her skirt clinging to her legs, before he reached the shingle. The stony clatter that he made caused her to turn her head, and for a second he saw the stricken defiance of her face. Then, she was struggling wildly into deeper water, as though the wilfulness of her anguish could elude her.

He saw her throw herself forward, her black skirt floating, her head below water. Poor, foolish, desperate darling, as though she could cheat his strength! He went wading in until he was waist deep, caught her, lifted her up.

Her wet face and streaming hair pleaded with him.

‘Please, please, let me——’

He gathered her closer, and then he kissed her, not on her poignant mouth, but upon her forehead.

Quite a number of people witnessed that dramatic scene and were reduced by it to shocked silence. Mr. Jordan reappeared at the gate in the holly hedge, and looked right and left like some large, fierce animal, defying God and man. Mr. Travers had disappeared and with some ignominy, having been rescued from the railings by a passing groom. He was somewhere near home, with large rents in his cloak and coat, and a still larger rent in his dignity.

Mr. Jordan looked right and left, for the problem was as savage as his compassion. Where——? And then he saw that little figure, Miss Cripps, on her way to the Marine Library, and if ever a figure was God-willed—it was in the person of that old pug-faced spinster. There were other faces at windows, Pankridge faces, and Mr. Percival was pulling distraught whiskers.

‘My dear, we must take her in. I’ll—call——’

‘You will do nothing of the sort, Percival. What a scandal!’

Mr. Jordan, more than defying the conventions, walked towards Miss Cripps with Isabella in his arms, wet skirt and black hair trailing. Her eyes were closed, her arms pendant. Was this the final ignominy, the public passing of a woman born to shame? Figures had appeared upon balconies. John Jordan saw them, but she did not.

Miss Cripps waited for them, somehow wise as to the significance of the scene. Pilgrim’s Progress, what, with the whole Terrace there to gape and shake heads and point a moral. She saw him give one glance at the Lardner balcony.

Miss Cripps did not speak, and her silence was wilful. Her eyes asked the needed question.

Mr. Jordan almost shouted his historic lie.

‘She fell into the sea, off one of the groins.’

There was a flash of inspired comprehension in the old lady’s eyes.

‘Bring her to my house, John. She must be chilled to death, poor dear.’

Mr. Jordan’s head gave a jerk, and his eyes saluted her.

‘Thank you, I will.’

Miss Cripps walked beside them, holding one of Isabella’s hands.

The Terrace waited. The three figures had passed into the porch of No. 20. What an imbroglio! Meanwhile, Mr. Jordan was carrying Miss Luce upstairs, Miss Cripps trotting before them.

‘In here, John.’

Mr. Jordan laid her gently on the bed, and, receiving from Miss Charlotte a nudge and a significant and sideways flick of the head, gave her another seraphic smile and left woman to woman.

The Terrace saw him reappear, and Mr. Jordan’s homeward march to shed soaked trousers was a provocative affair. Almost he swaggered, shoulders squared, head in air. Godly defiance, a ferocious cheerfulness, and to Hades with any Pharisees who happened to be cherishing the robes of self-righteous formalism.

Interpreted in the vulgar tongue Mr. Jordan’s parade was a challenge—‘To hell and damnation with any of you who dares to sneer. I am a better man than any of you, and the woman I have saved is worth the whole bunch of you

genteel bundles.’

As a matter of fact he was met by Captain Bullard, who stumped out with outstretched hand. Captain Bullard had seen Mr. Travers suspended on the railings, and had laughed his cravat crooked.

‘Jolly good job, my lad! Come in and have a brandy before you change those breeches.’

XVIII

ISABELLA LUCE lay in a warm feather bed. Its tester was of blue dusted with gold stars, a truly celestial bed. A lively fire leaped up the chimney, and a brass fender twinkled at her. The curtains, rose velvet, were half drawn, and the light considerate. Isabella's black hair—now dry—was spread in a cloud upon the pillow. She lay with hands folded, eyes closed.

What warmth, what comfort, what peace! Soft words and soft pillows, and those illuminating lies.

'She fell off one of the groins into the sea.'

And Miss Cripps's variant:

'You must have slipped on some seaweed, my dear. Now, you are going to stay with me, yes, for just as long as you please.'

Oh, blessed strength and kindness! Strong arms and an exquisite tenderness —after humiliation and despair. Had he kissed her? Yes, he had. And that thunderous lie! The door of her secret and tragic self had blown open to him in those few minutes. And George Travers? Proposing to make a private prostitute of her in her utter distress! What a sentimental fool she had been, deceived by a garish surface!

John Jordan. She would have to tell him the truth. But perhaps he knew it. Well, anyhow it would be her duty to tell him, and let him hear the truth from her own lips. Did she dread the ordeal? Yes and no.

The door opened softly and Miss Cripps's pug-face looked in, benign and mischievous under its correct lace cap.

'Asleep, my dear?'

'No. Just warmth and peace.'

Miss Cripps entered and closed the door, and sat down by the fire. She spread her hands to it, and the glow was in her eyes.

'Nothing to worry about—now, my dear.'

'Yes, but I have.'

'Want to tell me? No need——'

‘Yes, I do. You and he have been so wonderful to me.’

‘I don’t think either of us found it very difficult.’

Isabella drew two deep breaths.

‘Yes, I will tell you, and then I must tell him.’

Miss Cripps listened to the story before that cheerful fire. Poor darling, what a heritage, even though poor Hatherway had killed a thing that was evil. And what a delectable scandal for the Pankridge woman to roll under her tongue! Miss Cripps rubbed her hands before the fire. Like Jack Jordan, she was scenting the fray and preparing for much fun in playing Puck’s Poodle with the godly.

‘Would you like me to tell John?’

‘No—I must.’

‘I think you are right, my dear. By the way there will be muffins for tea, and you will have your tea in bed.’

Mr. George Travers did not consult a solicitor, though Mr. Theophilus Lamb of No. 7, Caroline Terrace was at his service. A case of common assault, h’m, yes. Mr. George Travers discovered that he had sudden and urgent business in London, and his gig was harnessed, and he departed, whip in hand, looking sullenly dandyish and dignified. Those rent garments could be healed by his tailor, but Mr. Travers’s vanity could not be mended by needle and thread.

Caroline Terrace, in the words of Mrs. P.’s cook, ‘was all of a flutter’, and reviewing the affair from every angle. What did it all mean? The inevitable truth was soon spread by the Misses Lardner. Not only was Miss Luce the daughter of a murderer, but it was reported that she had been Mr. Travers’s mistress.

Caroline Terrace prepared to range itself in the social game of ‘oranges and lemons’, and it must be confessed that the oranges preponderated. Miss Caroline once again was to play the part of a shrewish lemon.

The Rev. Nicholas Parbury had seen, heard, and digested, and taken much snuff. The heroic curate, what! Very much what-what! Mr. Parbury recognized an opportunity. He had begun to suspect that old Turnbull had played a trick on him. Tame curate—forsooth. A fellow who brawled, and picked wet wenches out of the sea, and hung the nephews of valuable parishioners on

spiked railings. No, sir—not on your life, sir! Here indeed was a God-sent opportunity, and Mr. Parbury despatched a curt note to No. 3.

Mr. Jordan responded. He found his vicar sitting with ominous gravity behind his desk, upon which lay the odds and ends of Mr. Parbury's forthcoming sermon. He told Mr. Jordan to shut the door, a needless precaution, though such an order might carry a prophetic finality.

'Mr. Jordan, I have certain serious things to say to you.'

John Jordan sat down astride a chair, which was no proper attitude for so serious an occasion.

'Yes, sir.'

'I will be brief. I am of the opinion that a young man of such—er—irresponsible habits is no fit person to serve in a parish such as this.'

'You may be right, sir.'

Mr. Parbury took snuff.

'Brawling, carrying young women about, a-tish-oo, does not consort with clerical dignity. I regret to say that I must discharge you from your cure.'

Mr. Jordan smiled at him and rose.

'Thank you for your candour, sir. Good morning.'

And as Mr. Jordan closed the door, his vale was another resounding sneeze.

Returning to No. 3, Caroline Terrace, Mr. Jordan found Captain Bullard and Miss Massingbird sitting by the fire with an air of bright and friendly expectancy. John, after asking Miss Jane's permission, filled and lit a pipe. If it was not the pipe of peace, it could associate itself with philosophical reflection.

Captain Bullard eyed him appreciatively, and Miss Massingbird with the perky affection of an admiring aunt.

'Well, what did Old Nick have to say, my lad?'

'That I am not a fit person to be his curate.'

Captain Bullard put his head back and chortled.

'I should say not. Much too boisterous. Gadzooks, I would like to have had you with me, John, on a cutting-out expedition, slicing up Frenchies with a cutlass.'

Mr. Jordan assumed an air of shocked humility.

‘Dear me, sir, remember my cloth.’

‘And young Travers’s coat-tails. Pity it wasn’t his breeches. Excuse me, madam.’

‘Perhaps it was,’ said Miss Massingbird brightly.

‘Well, what are you going to do, John? Most of us don’t want to lose you.’

Mr. Jordan pulled at his pipe and stared with very blue eyes at the fire.

‘See my uncle.’

‘Tell him about young Travers and he’ll kiss you.’

But Mr. Jordan’s face assumed a large and solid solemnity.

‘If you will forgive me, sir, the future is not mine alone.’

Captain Bullard nodded and was silent. The petticoat portion was profoundly Mr. Jordan’s, and no one should trespass upon it, for—to a lover—this was sacred ground.

Doubtless the Rev. Nicholas Parbury believed that he had Mr. Jordan on the horns of a dilemma, for Mr. Jordan’s stipend—modest though it was—had helped to keep him in genteel comfort, and John was left with nothing but a very modest private income. No marriage-money here, no largesse for romance, but Mr. Parbury, like many selfish and cunning old men, had under-estimated the vigour and elasticity of youth. Nor, perhaps, had he reckoned, upon the temperament of Canon Turnbull.

John Jordan walked over to Holywell, and found his aunt and uncle at tea. He was welcomed, given a seat by the fire, and presented with buttered toast.

‘How’s the world, John?’

Mr. Jordan smiled at his uncle.

‘Do you need a second gardener, sir? If so I would like to apply for the post.’

‘What’s all this? Quarrelled with Old Nick?’

‘He considers me unfit to be his curate.’

‘Oh, does he?’

‘I have been sent down. I’ll tell you all about it presently.’

He had glanced apologetically at his aunt, and Mrs. Turnbull protested. Was she not to be the recipient of interesting information?

‘Well, if you are shy of your own aunt, John——’

‘I am, because——’

‘Fudge,’ said she, ‘you have fallen in love, my dear, or something. I know the symptoms.’

‘I have.’

But the Canon, wise as to what might have to pass between man and man, took John Jordan into his study, and there—before the study fire and smoking his pipe—John told his uncle of the episode of the morning. Comedy and tragedy here, and Canon Turnbull was more concerned with the tragedy.

‘You think she was trying to drown herself, John?’

John Jordan nodded.

‘I am ready to shout another version in the welkin’s face. She must have been having—a terrible time—in that family, poor dear. And that Travers fellow had been persecuting her. I’m glad she slapped him in the face, and that I hung him up by his coat-tails.’

Canon Turnbull suppressed a human chuckle.

‘Well, the solution is obvious, John. You become my curate.’

‘But, sir——’

‘Yes—I can afford it. Glad to have you.’

John Jordan looked at his uncle with profound affection.

‘Thank you, sir. You see—I want to be near her, and help her—all I can.’

John Jordan had yet to hear the whole story, and Canon Turnbull was to discuss it most gravely with his wife, for such a marriage might be considered utterly unclerical, however well it might fit a layman. But all this was in the future, and the most devoted forbidder of the banns was to be Miss Luce herself.

The Rev. John had decided to pass three last days in the house of Mrs. Trigg before taking up his new curacy and moving to the Turnbull rectory, and during those three days much of significance was to happen. Caroline Terrace was preparing its various and final attitude to the imbroglio, and Mr. Jordan

was seen abroad with a most cheerful and impenitent countenance.

Yet, with a delicacy that was not Parbury, John Jordan was waiting for a gesture from Miss Cripps, and when her note reached him, he did not look in his mirror, but marched with solid deliberation to No. 20. His knock was an Open Sesame to a smiling Jane, who—being a woman of heart and discretion—had been taken into Miss Cripps's confidence, and Jane's smile was to typify the mass-face of the common people, those people who had howled at and pelted Royal George, and cheered his wife and daughter.

'Come in, sir. The ladies will be very glad to see you.'

That—perhaps—was a statement that did not apply in full to the younger of the ladies, but Jane took Mr. Jordan's cloak and hat and ushered him up the stairs into Miss Cripps's drawing-room.

And what a room of security and charm was this, with the dark curtains still undrawn, and the sunset glow over the estuary turning the sky into a red furnace. Miss Charlotte had both inherited and purchased many precious things, pictures, porcelain, furniture. A Romney hung opposite the great mirror over the mantelpiece, the portrait of a dark girl in a feathered hat and white dress, a girl who had a strange likeness to Isabella Luce, with a Cassandra look in mysterious eyes. Miss Cripps's china cabinet was like a great bouquet of flowers, and the sunset shone upon its many colours and the loveliness of Spode, Chelsea, blue Rockingham, Sèvres, Dresden. Lustre of purple and gold. Every Chippendale chair had the polish of glass. The Adam mantelpiece was painted cream. The great brass fender was a shining plinth. Yet, Miss Cripps had introduced two more comfortable chairs in pearwood and green velvet, with the tea-table between them, and one of these chairs was vacant, for Miss Luce had been poised on a tuffet before the fire.

'The Reverend Mr. Jordan, madam.'

Jane's formal announcement might have been the prelude to a quiet and conventional tea-party. The two ladies rose, and Mr. Jordan, with boyish homage, bent and kissed Miss Cripps's hand, for more than courtesy was due to her. Miss Luce was standing, half-turned towards the fire, her profile that of a creature whose loveliness lingered before it looked.

John Jordan turned to her, and she gave him a momentary and wincing smile which seemed to say—'Be gentle and patient with me, for that which may hurt you and me has not yet been suffered.' She sank slowly back upon the tuffet, her black skirts spread. The white fichu she was wearing rose and fell with a deep-drawn breath.

‘Take that chair, John.’

Mr. Jordan looked at Miss Luce, and Miss Cripps shook her head at him. A young woman might give you her back because her face might be too revealing, and John Jordan sat down in the chair.

Jane bustled in with the tea-tray, buttered toast, a fruit cake and muffins.

‘Shall I draw the curtains and light the candles, madam?’

‘Yes, Jane, I think you might. Isabella, my dear, we will put you in charge of the muffineer.’

Mr. Jordan passed the covered dish to Miss Luce as though serving some sacrament.

Miss Charlotte was very much mistress of the occasion, and of the conversation. She had set her stage like the tea-table, and it could be symbolized by muffins and fruit cake. A comfortable and normal atmosphere was needed in preparation for the difficult things these two might have to say to each other. Yes, Miss Cripps would preside over this testamentary tea-table.

‘Three lumps, John?’

‘Am I not too grossly sugared?’

‘Isabella, dear, the muffins.’

Miss Luce, in profile, passed the muffineer.

‘I have just been reading Dickens’s latest. Have you read it, John?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Well, that’s a pleasure to come. You know I do like a good story with plenty of sentiment, and a real live villain.’

Mr. Jordan agreed with her.

‘How about Fanny Trollope?’

‘The Vicar of Wivelsfield. What a dreadful person and parson! What would you do with him, John?’

Mr. Jordan appeared to reflect upon the question.

‘Well, I don’t quite know. A year in a coal-mine might have blackened out some of his hypocrisy.’

‘Not a bad idea. Isabella, darling, more muffin?’

Miss Luce’s hand seemed to linger, like the spirit that was pensive over a

problem.

‘I have had two,’ said Mr. Jordan. ‘May I try the cake?’

‘Help yourself, John. Isabella, dear, I think I will have another muffin. Is my chin well buttered?’

Miss Luce glanced at Miss Charlotte’s face.

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Well, here goes. Dr. Rollinson tells me that there is much bronchitis abroad. That doesn’t affect you, John.’

‘Not—personally.’

‘I wonder if Goliath ever suffered from bronchitis?’

‘History does not say, madam.’

‘History misses so much.’

When the cosy remained in final charge of the teapot, Miss Cripps requested Mr. Jordan to ring the bell for Jane, and Jane had been prompted to prompt her mistress.

‘Cook, madam, wanted to consult you on next week’s dinner-party.’

‘Bless me, what a memory I have! I had quite forgotten. Tell cook I will come down and see her in the dining-room.’

‘Very good, madam.’

‘Please excuse me, my dears.’

Mr. Jordan rose and received an admonishing grimace from her, while Miss Luce appeared to turn a more deliberate back upon the room and to confront the future in the fire.

XIX

JOHN JORDAN remained standing for some seconds, looking down at the dark head below him, and those most serious shoulders. Maybe he divined the devoted obduracy of that slim figure. Even the candle flames, standing still and straight, expressed a tenseness.

‘Won’t you smoke your pipe?’

Her voice sounded small and distant, and feeling its way towards some intimate quality that eluded her.

‘Thank you, no. Not in this room.’

He sat down deliberately in his chair, his eyes concentrated on the fire, yet he had the impression that her slender back was as sensitive as her face. For some moments there was silence, and it was she who broke the silence.

‘You told a lie for my sake.’

His deep voice responded.

‘I would tell any lie—for your sake.’

She spread her hands to the fire.

‘Will you listen to me, please. I cannot speak anything but the truth to you. You do not know yet why Mrs. Pankridge dismissed me.’

‘Need I know?’

‘You—must—know. My real name is Hatherway. Luce was my mother’s name.’

He waited.

‘My father—poor, unhappy man—had a tragedy of his own. Some lives go amiss, as though fate is cruel and inevitable. My father killed the man who had driven him into a kind of madness. My father was hanged.’

John Jordan sat rigid for a second or two, and then he put out a hand, but he did not touch her. He was conscious of the irony of the fact that many people may have known of her heritage, and he had known nothing. Scandal, irresponsible tongues! But his very ignorance was a challenge, and he could divine the question in her that waited to be answered. Would he—like some

ecclesiastical Pharisee—draw in his cloak and leave her socially to drown? Almost he was provoked to a gust of angry laughter, but neither anger nor laughter was what she needed.

‘That makes no difference to me.’

He spoke calmly, gently, for to him that slim back might have been raw and tender with the wounds life had whipped into it. He saw her hands open and close with the firelight on them. He wanted to take those hands, warm them in his own.

‘How can you be responsible, my dear, for such a tragedy?’

She gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

‘The sins of the fathers—are—visited upon the children.’

‘No,’ said he, ‘I do not subscribe to that doctrine.’

‘But it is true.’

‘The truth is what we make it. But will you tell me—how——?’

‘You mean about my—father?’

‘No, no. How people came to know.’

She hesitated.

‘I think it was Mr. Lardner. I gather—that he recognized me. You see, I was in court, at the trial, and he——’

‘The judicial censor, sleek with the lard of duty. There are people, my dear, who love to damn, because the real love is not in them.’

Her hands fluttered to her face, and with her elbows on her knees, she rested her chin in her cupped palms. There was no bowing of her head, and her whole figure seemed set to resist emotion.

‘You wish to be kind to me.’

‘My dear!’

‘The world is not kind. Don’t you see that I shall always be something of an outcast?’

This time he touched her, but she gave a little shiver, and seemed to shrug him off.

‘Forgive me, my dear. I——’

‘Oh, I forgive you. But won’t you realize that no one can help me—beyond

a certain point?'

'I disagree—and utterly so, Isabella. If malice and prejudice and all uncharitableness have to be fought, I'll fight them with you.'

She gave a helpless yet protesting sigh.

'Mr. Jordan, you are too quixotic. I thank you for it, and I can do no more. I have a living to earn, and it will not be easy.'

'My dear, why not stay here?'

'On—charity? She has been wonderful to me, and that makes it all the harder. Besides, this place and the people——'

'You make a mistake. There are plenty of good souls here, people who will be on your side.'

'Perhaps.'

'There is no perhaps about it. Will you marry me, Isabella?'

She remained rigid, silent, and when she spoke it was in a thin, smouldering voice.

'No, John, I cannot marry you.'

'I shall ask you again.'

'Please——'

'Oh yes, I shall.'

Maybe it was a relief to both of them when Miss Cripps returned to feel frustration in the room, and to suspect that these two young things had reached an impasse. Mr. Jordan was standing, with an elbow on the mantelshelf, Isabella on the tuffet, eyes fixed upon the fire. They had the air of two people who could find no more to say to each other now that the final and inevitable words had been spoken. Miss Charlotte bustled towards her chair with animation and brisk cheerfulness. If fog had descended, well—light the lamps and defy the gloom.

'Well, that's settled. Eight of us. John, I shall expect you on Friday, and you will have to say grace.'

Mr. Jordan smiled.

'Thank you. If I may——'

'Now, now, no reservations. I want you to meet Sir Hereward Lancaster of "Porters". And you will be responsible for Isabella.'

Miss Luce stirred like an uneasy bird on a nest. She was non-consenting, but shirking the issue, and she let it pass in silence. Mr. Jordan, glancing down at her, and sensing her shrinking from the social scene, pulled out his watch and held it in the palm of a big hand.

'What time will you expect me, madam?'

'At seven, John.'

'I'm afraid I must be going now.'

'Urgent affairs? I understand.'

He turned and glanced at Isabella.

'Good-bye, Miss Luce.'

Miss Luce did not move.

'Good-bye, Mr. Jordan.'

Miss Cripps, listening to Mr. Jordan's footsteps on the stairs, decided that a stilted formalism was not suggestive of emotional rapture. She bent down and poked the fire with vigour. What a pity you could not stir other fires into comfortable action! Isabella, chin in hands, sat like some crystal-gazer, aloof, faintly frowning.

Miss Cripps did not favour indirect tactics on this occasion.

'Well, my dear, how did you and John get on together?'

Miss Luce remained rigid, all profile to Miss Charlotte.

'He asked me to marry him.'

'And you said no.'

Isabella nodded.

March winds and grey and scuffling seas, yet almond blossom was pink-tipped in the Turnbull garden, and a few yellow daffodils nodded in the spring. Mr. Jordan, having taken up his new duties, walked or rode over the whole parish, sometimes meeting broad smiles and quizzical looks from ancients who had known him as a boisterous boy. But Mr. Jordan was welcome to these farmers and their men; he was Turnbull stuff, and gossip had spread from the sea to the sprouting fields. Jackie Jordan, the boy, had grown into Mr. John Jordan, very much man, who could command a righteous and potent fist, and preach a stirring and simple sermon.

For the cry of the countryman is ‘What can ’ee do, lad?’ not ‘What can ’ee cackle about?’, and if Mr. Jordan could display an impressive dualism, that was so much more to his credit. Tales were to be told about him—how he had handled a flail with the best of them when Farmer Rankin lay sick, and how he had crawled under one of Bob Ransome’s tumbrils which had got bogged and heaved it out with a helpful back.

But to revert to Miss Cripps’s dinner-party; Mr. Jordan walked to it, encouraged by a stupendous sunset. Miss Luce, suddenly assuming a headache, proposed to go to bed. Panic or perversity? Miss Cripps climbed the stairs and indulged in stimulating admonition.

‘Tut-tut, my dear. You can’t run away from life. Get up and play the woman.’

Miss Luce held her head between her hands.

‘I really—have——’

‘Oh, yes, but is it heartache or headache? I’ll send you up a cup of strong tea. I can’t have an odd number at my table.’

And suddenly Isabella Luce did what as yet she had failed to do; she dissolved into tears, a weeping that was agonized and uncontrollable. She lay face downwards on the bed, and her shakings were transmitted to it with spasmodic tremors. Miss Cripps, more moved than she would have admitted, ceased to be the improver of occasions, nor chose to observe this one with wise compassion. She sat down on the bed, a hand on Isabella’s shoulder.

‘Have a good cry, my dear. That’s the best thing a woman can do when she is congealed inside. You can remain upstairs if you wish to.’

The reaction was instant and passionate. Miss Luce turned over and struggled up, and, still weeping, flared into wet courage.

‘I’m sorry. You’ve been so good to me. I’ll not be a coward. I’ll come down.’

‘That’s the spirit, my dear. No need to be afraid of any people who dine at my table.’

‘No, but——’

‘Not even of Parson John.’

In truth it was so, for Miss Charlotte had chosen to invite friends who were

her intimates, people who would take no pleasure in treating a forlorn young woman like a feminine freak in a travelling show. Moreover, they were not unwise as to the occasion, and the courtesy and kindness that it should provoke. No Pankridge or Lardner party—this.

Sir Hereward Lancaster was a gentleman of the old school, much travelled, a bibliophile, and of a cultured courtesy that charmed without condescension. A bachelor, he cultivated at 'Porter's Grange' a Jacobean picturesqueness without any corresponding coarseness. He wrote poetry, was an enthusiastic rosarian, and possessed a passion for Dutch tulips. With a head of wavy white hair, a high colour, a Wellingtonian nose, and a slight limp, his was one of those arrestive figures that transcend self-display.

Miss Luce, wearing her white dress, was presented to Sir Hereward, and Sir Hereward, having bowed to her, saw her as a lovely flower with shy and humid eyes. What a pretty creature, and how tragic in her history! Sir Hereward had been prompted, and there was no need for further promptings, for sufficient unto the evening was the comeliness of woman. He engaged Miss Luce in conversation, and the subject was music. John Gage and his wife, the Merrimans, and Captain Bullard completed the party.

The Rev. John Jordan, the last to arrive, discovered that Sir Hereward Lancaster was creating a monopoly. In fact, when the dinner bell sounded, and Sir Montague gave his arm to his hostess, Sir Hereward, after a whispered aside to Lady Merriman, presented himself with a little bow to Miss Luce. Isabella looked confused. Surely Lady Merriman or Mrs. Gage should precede her? But she caught friendly smiles from both ladies.

'Sir Hereward is a mad musician, Miss Luce.'

'I plead guilty,' said the baronet, 'for I have heard that Miss Luce can play Chopin.'

Captain Bullard gave Mr. Jordan a quizzical look, and crooked his arm for Lady Merriman, and Mr. Jordan, with a dry smile at John Gage Esq., stood aside and waited.

'Do your duty, my dear fellow. I will bring up myself and the rearguard.'

Mrs. John Gage was a buxom blonde, with the reputation of being the best-tempered creature in the town.

'Shall we—follow the others, Mr. Jordan?'

John gave her his arm, and did not resent Sir Hereward's thieving of his partner. Homage to the fair, and to a woman who needed such chivalry.

The dinner was a Cripps dinner and therefore excellent. Miss Charlotte provided sherry, champagne, and the conversation did not falter. John Jordan observed that Miss Luce drank no wine, and in this kind gathering she had no need of it. In due course the gentlemen were left to their port and cigars, and Sir Hereward, digging Mr. Jordan gently in the ribs, smiled at Captain Bullard.

'Here we have the local Samson, gentlemen. Is it true, sir, that you suspended young Travers on the Shrubbery railings?'

Captain Bullard chuckled, and replied for Mr. Jordan.

'Well and truly, sir. He had to be taken off the hook like a side of beef.'

Mr. Jordan was not Parbury, but he had no reason to blush for his cloth, since none of these gentlemen had a penchant for prurient stories. The talk was a countryman's talk, of horses and hunting, shooting and fishing, the new Corn Laws and the Poor Law, flowers, fruit, and feminine fancies. Sir Hereward and Sir Montague were both witty talkers, and John Gage a pithy commentator upon world affairs. Captain Bullard was somewhat the Silent Service, and enjoying his port and his cigar, but now and again he would let off a broadside. As for Mr. Jordan, he listened placidly to his elders, while his thoughts were upstairs with a particular lady.

When they adjourned to Miss Charlotte's dining-room, Mr. Jordan saw that the lid of the piano's keyboard was up. Sir Hereward glanced at the instrument, and then at Miss Cripps and her companion.

'Perhaps Miss Luce will favour us?'

Isabella blushed, with Mr. Jordan standing beside her chair, and on this occasion Mr. Jordan outpaced Sir Hereward. It was he who armed her to the piano. Miss Cripps had provided the score, and Mr. Jordan remained by Miss Luce's chair.

'May I turn over for you?'

She gave him a douce look, and said, 'Yes.'

That the human spirit may discover itself in expressing that which some other spirit has created is but a half-truth, for the mystery of music lies in a universality that is also individual. It may spell escape or sudden intimate realities, moonlight and mulled wine, the infinite and the instant. Isabella and the Nocturne in B were—to begin with—tentative and hesitant in their dualism. She fumbled a note or two, and looked troubled, and John Jordan, standing beside her, was loving her the more for her fears and her fortitude. He wanted to say to her—'Forget, forget. All of us are friends. Lose yourself, my

dear, and may I not fumble when I turn the pages.' In fact, he bent down and whispered to her, 'I'm not good at reading music. Will you nod your head when I must turn?'

Lose herself she did, but she remembered to give him that signal. She was away, dream-faced, her slim body swaying slightly, her eyes strangely and darkly tender, and John Jordan, watching her hands, was moved to wonder at them and to marvel at the intricate pattern of sound which came from nowhere and became—just what? Like the voice of God in the Garden? Star-dust translated into the music of the spheres. There could be a harmony of hands and of hearts. And suddenly his hand went out. Almost he had missed that little movement of her head, but he did not fumble. Also, he was conscious of the silence of those others, and exulted over it for her sake. There was no humiliation here, no sly sneers or pompous patronage. Music was in the air, and suffusing itself like some sweet perfume through this pleasant room.

Isabella's hands came to rest upon the keyboard. Then, they slipped to her lap. She sat motionless, lashes lowered, her face strangely tranquil. And for a moment or two the room was silent before sounds of applause were heard, murmurs of appreciation, a soft clapping of hands.

Miss Luce appeared to come out of a dream. She rose, a transient smile upon her lips. John Jordan was standing like a partner waiting to conduct her to her seat. Her hand, with a kind of consenting inevitableness, lay upon his arm. Sir Hereward Lancaster had risen, and he made her a little bow.

'Thank you, Miss Luce. You have given us all very great pleasure.'

XX

‘COMMEND me to the good,’ said Captain Hector Bullard, stumping along the terrace with Major Miller. ‘They are like cream ices, all pink froth on the top, and solid freeze within.’

Major Miller was a gentle and uncensorious soul. A man of his age, he had wept over the death of Little Nell, and yet on active service had stuck his sword into a Frenchman’s belly. No generation is adequately self-critical or wise as to its own foibles. The portrait is too near and too familiar, the social costume too conventional, and yet—on that spring morning Major Miller made a redoubtable remark.

‘Women can be damned hard on each other, Bullard.’

The Captain blew out bluff checks. The statement was not so remarkable in itself, but only so because it emanated from so benign a bachelor.

‘It’s all a matter of Face.’

Major Miller smiled one of his gentle smiles.

‘Precious china.’

‘Ex-actly. A woman doesn’t like her face put in the shade by some other lovely. Nor her daughter’s faces. We are hard, Joe, and we are sentimental. Crowd to see a public execution, and then blub over some urchin in a book. Yes, my dear fellah, the sweetest date has a stone inside it. My solution? Well, damn it, persuade people to spit out the stone.’

‘But the date stone is the seed, sir, and its hardness is a virtue.’

‘True, Miller, true. Can’t get on without the seed, can we? We seem to have slipped off our course.’

John Jordan, swinging down towards the head of the pier hill, fell in with these two elderly gentlemen, and hatted them. Both gentlemen acknowledged his salute, and youth’s courtesy to its elders. Old Parbury never so much as raised a hat, but touched its brim with two casual fingers.

‘Good morning, John. How’s the road? Pretty dusty?’

‘I came by the fields, sir.’

Major Miller, who had uncovered to the curate, replaced his hat over his wobbling wen. There was strange humour in that stalked excrescence. The poor thing came to life indoors, but when its master took the air, darkness descended upon it. Gossips wondered why the Major did not allow Dr. Rollinson to remove it, but—maybe—wens have a virtue of their own, and Major Miller may have had an affection for it. Moreover, he was a man of strange, spiritual simplicities. If God had given you a wen, it was your sacred duty to suffer it.

John Jordan passed on, leaving the two gentlemen to exchange benign confidences. The sun was shining, and with such warmth and cheerfulness that Caroline Terrace had appeared on balconies, as though for an airing after the winter's stuffiness, and as Mr. Jordan walked towards No. 20 he was very much aware of interested humanity. You might air your bed-linen on balconies, and also your prejudices and opinions, and opinions may be nothing but prejudice.

Now, what was Mr. Jordan doing in South End? Had he not been discharged from his cure as a person most unsuited to the care of genteel souls? Caroline Terrace had begun to collect a part of its seasonable population, and the apartment houses of Mrs. Trigg, Mrs. Boosey, Mrs. Webber, Mrs. Bumpus, and Mrs. Callow could add to the curious and critical congregation. The minor epic of Miss Luce was public property, and two young women on Mrs. Bumpus's balcony watched Mr. Jordan passing.

One young lady was fair and vapid, and punctuated her conversation with giggles. She had the cold eyes of a seagull and a little perky pink face; her companion was dark and farouche, and so devilish well-informed that when any subject was mentioned she would give you a dissertation upon it. Captain Bullard had christened her the 'Petticoat Dictionary'.

Said Giggles—'There he goes, poor man. I wonder if it is true—that she—hasn't been seen yet outside old Crippie's garden?'

Miss Minerva, swarthily Greek, suffered from a slight squint.

'Gardens, my dear, in Latin *hortus*—that's the singular—have served so many purposes. Herbs preceded flowers——'

'Look. He has stopped at No. 20.'

'There may be a significance in numbers. Seven and nine have a particular meaning for me.'

Miss Giggles twitched her curls.

‘I’d always be No. 1.’

‘Undoubtedly. If you consider that number one follows a cypher, and that if you transpose that cypher——’

Her priggery was suddenly interrupted by an object that stung her cheek. She clapped a hand to her face, turned sharply and in time to catch Master Albert Pankridge dodging in through a balcony window. That was pretty good shooting with a pea-shooter, and the subject of cyphers was pursued no further.

‘That horrid child!’

‘Did he hit you?’

The offending pea lay on the balcony floor and Minerva bent a long back and picked up the pea between thumb and finger.

‘I shall complain. I shall produce my evidence.’

Miss Giggles giggled.

No. 20 Caroline Terrace had indulged itself in a three-acre garden, for the Mews did not extend beyond No. 18. Cripps and Gage stables were set apart, and Miss Charlotte’s garden was very much her pride. Here were lawns and flower-beds gay with tulips and wallflowers, for after the hard winter the spring had danced in like a lovely and precocious nymph. A group of old Austrian firs built a dark centre-piece, and beyond the lawns were banks of ilex, holly, and laurestinus. And to Isabella in her strangely celibate mood the place was a retreat where no eyes stared nor voices whispered like hissing snakes. Moreover, there was a defensive uniqueness in a part of Miss Cripps’s garden, the nut walk, a broad path enclosing the open spaces where fruit and vegetables were grown. The cobs and filberts were trained in great hoops, and in summer the walk was a green and shady tunnel. As yet the leaves were minute green fans, but the faded catkins still hung upon the branches, and the minute red lady-flowers were there to be mated. The orchard which this secret walk enclosed showed the pears and plums incipiently white, though the apple-blossom was not yet pink-budded. A seven-foot wall enclosed this pleasaunce, and beyond the wall was a paddock where horses were turned out to graze.

Caroline Terrace had not yet seen Miss Luce dare to pass its waiting windows, and No. 20 might have been a house of retreat, nor—as yet—had Miss Cripps attempted interference. Let Isabella have her way, and sit and read or play the piano, and wander under the nut trees. For there was a sensitive remoteness in Isabella’s mood. She wanted to be apart and in peace, and here

were no pestering children or Pankridge persecution. Some things were real to her, others passive shadows. That which she felt and experienced was almost beyond reason, for a woman may not be a reasoning creature where the problems of errant emotions are involved. Life was strangely hazed for her, and all prospects dim and tending towards a vague twilight. Sometimes her inward self suffered from a kind of numbness; she might have been Lot's wife, though capable of gliding on passive feet. Maybe she had felt so much that she was afraid of all feeling, and shivered when emotion threatened. Miss Cripps's two old gardeners might give her a 'Good morning, miss,' and, bending to their work, present her with considerate backsides. Sometimes she would sit in the nut-arbour facing the orchard, and look with hazed eyes at the burgeoning blossom of the fruit trees. With a kind of inward breathlessness she drew in the silence and the peace. She did not want to think or feel, but to be apart, or a part of the things that grew silently and without effort. The culmination of her tragedy had produced a consenting apathy, somnambulism, the solace of being nothing.

Did Miss Cripps understand all this? She did. Old women may possess memories that can slip keys into mysterious doors. Miss Cripps had had her tragedy, and though its poignancies were no more than faint perfumes, the significance of such faded flowers remained with her. Let the girl be at peace, and wander as she pleased in the dim alleys of a temperamental self. Life should not be all glare and sunlight. Half-lights had their virtues, soft glooms and shady places where tired eyes need not focus the glitter and the pangs of too much objectivity.

Miss Cripps did not call in Dr. Rollinson, nor did she believe that this was a case of heart-break. Such soft melancholy might be like one of the seasons, a recessional in the year's rhythm. She did not say 'Go out, my dear, and face it,' for some skins may be too sensitive to certain unkind winds. Miss Cripps could remember those days when she had shirked all human contacts, and condolences that might be spiteful and inquisitive and cruel. Let wounds glaze over before you exposed them to the rub of the world's realities.

Mr. Jordan, ushered into Miss Cripps's morning-room, stood at a window and looked at the sea. It had an easy glitter on this spring morning, and out yonder ships passed homewards or to distant lands. Mr. Jordan's hands were folded behind his back, fingers interlocked.

'Well, John, fine weather.'

He turned and bowed to the indomitable old lady, and his eyes were questioning.

‘Very fine weather. Am I—out of place?’

‘Sit down, my dear. Isabella is in the garden. What shall I say about it?’

‘Just what you think.’

Miss Cripps gave him a little grimace.

‘That’s one of life’s illusions, thinking things into place. It isn’t so easy as that. Does anyone think music?’

John Jordan nodded.

‘I know what you mean. The wind bloweth where it listeth. He who would hear—music—must wait—in patience.’

She gave him a look of shrewd affection, and the pucker of a smile.

‘You seem to be both Goliath and David, my dear. I am growing rather fond of you. Well, I suppose even your patience has a plan.’

‘It has. Has she——?’

‘Been out yet?’

‘Yes.’

‘No. She keeps to the garden, and her piano and her books.’

‘Do you—approve?’

‘My dear, music and moods play as they please.’

‘I know. But——’

‘Then you——’

He turned again to the window, and was silent for some seconds.

‘This terrace of yours. It is a fragment of life and humanity. Eyes, ears, voices. I can understand that, after what she has suffered, she shrinks from what may seem an ordeal.’

‘Yes, John.’

‘Well, if she would let me—go out with her. I mean—that together——’

‘You could ask her.’

‘Is she—ready?’

‘You could ask her.’

He had his hands clasped behind his back, and Miss Cripps saw the

contraction of his fingers. Big John Jordan was more frightened than a girl scared by a mouse.

‘You will find her in the garden, John.’

He turned slowly.

‘I’m——’

‘Yes, I know. Bumptious lovers are not always to a woman’s liking.’

Isabella, sitting on the seat in the nut-walk, heard footsteps, and they were not feminine in their emphasis. The two old gardeners were busy over yonder with their hoes, and the inference was obvious. Man—but who? She seemed to stiffen as though to meet something that she feared, and for a moment a cloud covered the sun and gave to her face a blanched dimness.

The footsteps came nearer. They were very near to her now. Her sudden impulse was to rise, but the will-force failed her. She remained rigid, waiting.

‘Forgive me—for—disturbing you.’

Forgive? And suddenly she seemed to know that he too was as frightened as she was.

‘Oh, it is you.’

‘Yes, just me.’

He came round the seat, hat in hand, and his eyes were on the two old men. He appeared afraid to look at her. And what eloquence had touched their lips, but not like facile tongues of flame! ‘Oh, it is you,’ and ‘Yes, just me.’ The disjointed blurtings of two coy creatures who fumbled for their words. And suddenly and surprisingly it was she who laughed, and her soft and impulsive laughter posed him.

‘I’m afraid my grammar is not what it should be.’

The two old gardeners turned to look and then discreetly continued with their hoeing.

‘Does one need grammar?’

John Jordan’s eyes lost their troubled stare.

‘On particular occasions? Yes. May I sit down?’

She moved along the seat, and the acceptance of his presence was like an outstretched hand. There was a space between them, and a moment of silence.

They watched the old men with their hoes.

John Jordan's hands were caressing his hat.

'Lovely morning. Those old fellows must be liking it. You know, I think there's—solace—in using one's hands.'

'There must be.'

'A steamboat has just come in to the pier head.'

'Has it?'

'Yes, and the sun's on the sea. I feel like walking to the pier head.'

'Do you?'

'Yes, if you will come with me.'

Her stillness was absolute. All laughter had gone from her, and her face had a soft severity, but it was against herself that the decision rested.

'Would that be—right? I mean—I——'

He looked at her steadfastly.

'Utterly right, so far as I am concerned. It will hurt me if you do not come.'

And suddenly she smiled.

'You are the one man, Mr. Jordan, whom I would not hurt.'

Miss Cripps, standing at her own particular window, saw them go out together, and with twinkling eyes murmured 'Lady Godiva,' but Miss Luce's nakedness was not cloaked by a cloud of hair, but walked in sober black. Black, too, were her bonnet and her gloves. So, courage had come to Isabella, and with a comrade who was like some great gunned ship escorting a graceful yacht. Miss Cripps saw Mr. Jordan offer her an arm, and the glance she gave him as she refused it. Linked arms were not yet, if ever they would be so, and Miss Charlotte wondered if there was some profound understanding between them, a sensitive nexus that might be beyond the comprehension of the vulgar. Isabella and John Jordan were confronting their ordeal, if ordeal it was to be, and Miss Cripps said—'Bless you, my dears, and damnation to all prudes and prejudices.'

Coincidences were to arrive for their possible confusion. Almost it would seem that Caroline Terrace had been waiting for this public parade. Doors opened, and figures appeared as in a puppet snow. First—the Latimers, who,

when hatted jovially by Mr. Jordan, responded with surprised stares. Then, Mr. and Mrs. Pankridge, whom Mr. Jordan did not salute, and who passed the pair as though some unseemly odour was to be ignored. Mr. Jordan's head went up, and his shoulders swaggered. He glanced at the pale profile of his partner and, with sudden boyishness, emitted a soft whistle. Did the human and ironic message hearten her? Perhaps. Then, of all people, came Mr. Nicholas Parbury, who seemed to fluff up his feathers like an outraged cock. And Mr. Jordan hatted him.

'Good morning, sir.'

Mr. Parbury grunted.

But the grand finale was provided by the Lardner ladies, Matrona, and Faith, Hope, and Charity. The approach was direct and mutual, and threatened actual collision, and Mr. Jordan, with discourteous insolence, suddenly took Miss Luce's arm, and marched straight for the embattled virtues. Someone had to give way, and Mr. Jordan sailed on like a full-rigged ship bearing down on mere bumboats. The Lardner ladies were compelled to side-step an incredible collision.

Their verdict was vocal.

'Well—really!'

'What manners!'

Mr. Jordan held on firmly to Isabella's arm.

'I enjoyed that.'

She gave a little shudder, and her eyes were poignant.

'Won't you let my arm go?'

'I—will—not.'

Miss Giggles and Miss Minerva, viewing these confrontations from above, misread the situation as too confident critics often do.

'She's got him.'

Miss Minerva played with the old saying—'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.'

'And such a blackbird! Isn't he ugly? And he has such funny legs.' And she finished Mr. Jordan with a chuckle.

Yet, coincidental people were not all to be unkind and caustic, or corrosively contemptuous. On the pier hill they met the two veterans, and hats

came off with ardour, and Major Miller's wen bobbed and glistened in salutation. The Navy and the Army were all for virtue that had looks. The gentlemen bowed over Miss Luce's hand and were fatherly.

'Very glad to see you out again, my dear, after your—indisposition.'

Captain Bullard 'my deared' all young things that were lookable, and if his aged courtesy did not always produce blushes, it brought colour to Isabella's cheeks. Mr. Jordan stood looking at her with profound and loverly appreciation.

'Just out for a stroll on the pier.'

'And just the weather for it, my lad.'

Major Miller murmured vague congratulations and re-hatted an agitated wen.

'Well, we won't detain you. My compliments to Miss Cripps, my dear.'

Each pair passed on, mutually refreshed in the matter of human well-feeling, but half-way down the pier hill Isabella wavered.

'I think I would rather go down to the sea.'

'Your wishes are—orders.'

She gave him a quick smile in which there was a flicker of fun.

'Holy orders?'

'Any orders.'

The solace of the sea. These very words came to John Jordan as they sat side by side on the sun-warmed shingle, and watched the little wayward plash of minute and polished waves. The sea's breathing was tranquil. These gentle splurges sucked softly at the shingle, and then slipped back to meet and mingle with the next soft surge. The sunlight glittered in a sparkling trackway, silver in a sea of greenish blue. Two gulls winged their way overhead, and white sails shone on the horizon. Some twenty yards away an old salt was tarring the bottom of an upturned boat, and the smell of the tar had a seaworthy savour.

The Rev. John Jordan tossed three pebbles one after the other into the spring-tide sea. They made a little plash and ripples that spread and died away.

'Good place to come to if you are feeling bothered.'

She sat and looked at the distant sails, and her eyes were tranquil.

'It doesn't—criticize.'

‘No, my dear, or set up artificial standards. A good south-wester can blow convention to tatters. Men who go down to the sea in ships—aren’t much troubled with priggery.’

He picked up another pebble, but refrained, and it lay in his big hand.

‘May I ask you that question—again?’

She looked troubled, and her lashes trembled.

‘I can never marry, John.’

‘Oh, my dear!’

‘How could I? Don’t you realize——’

‘Your trouble is, Isabella, that you are much too sensitive and generous. I have a thicker skin.’

‘I don’t think so, John.’

‘Well, wait and see.’

The old seaman had been watching them over the black bottom of his boat. He hesitated, rubbed his beard, shouldered his tar brush, and came crunching over the shingle.

‘Morning, miss, morning, sir. Glad to see you about ’ere, I am. And so are all of us.’

Mr. Jordan smiled at him.

‘Thank you, Tom.’

‘Maybe you and the lady ’ul like a row one day. I’ll be proud to take you.’

‘We should be glad to come with you, Tom. Wouldn’t we, Isabella?’

Miss Luce looked up into the tanned and hairy old face, with its kind, shrewd eyes, and answered ‘Yes.’

XXI

THE REV. NICHOLAS PARBURY was not the only person to notice that the Cripps pew remained unoccupied on Sundays. The inference was obvious. It would appear that Miss Charlotte did not approve of Mr. Parbury's brand of Christian ethics, or of some of the gentlefolk who sat under him. Caroline Terrace could see Miss Cripps's carriage roll past their windows at half-past ten on Sabbath mornings, bound for Holywell and Canon Turnbull's church and the ministrations of two most muscular Christians. Miss Luce sat beside Miss Cripps, and Miss Luce was looking happier in health; her loveliness had a sedate serenity, and a portion of the Terrace was not pleased. The should-be penitent had a complexion of fresh milk and roses, and according to the conventions her spirit should have been soused in vinegar or whey.

Hence a situation that might have appeared ridiculous to any person whose self-complacency was not seethed in super self-satisfaction. The community was to become Montague and Capulet about an obscure ex-governess. Those who did not approve made a high moral issue of the matter, convinced that dissimulation was not genteel, and that those who chose to be complaisant were not quite nice and knowable. Caroline Terrace split upon the issue. Respectable gentlewomen passed each other by with severe and formal salutations.

Ridiculous but actual. Captain Bullard might guffaw over it, and slap a timber leg, but the prides and prejudices of the refined world are both calculable and incalculable. The Lardner ladies were convinced that they had always recognized a vulgar streak in Miss Charlotte Cripps. She was one of those bouncing besoms whose appreciation of the social niceties are too richly sauced and greasy. Mrs. Pankridge, of course—with a shrug of shocked shoulders—was sure that Miss Luce was no better than she should be.

'Such a heritage, my dear. What—can—you expect? Thank heaven her secret came out before she had tainted my dear children.'

Mr. Pankridge was less assured. Clarissa had engaged a new governess, a lady of constipated and acid correctness, who, so far as the sentimental reactions were concerned, made Mr. Percival swear in secret that he sat down daily to a dose of emotional indigestion. As for the dear children—there was no very noticeable improvement in their manners. They pulled faces at Miss

Peabody behind her most unsentimental back.

St. Mary's, Holywell—unlike its younger cousin by the sea—had stature, tradition, dignity. If sacred edifices can be compared, St. John's, South End, was like a precocious pup beside this grey, Gothic stag-hound. There was beauty, spaciousness here, a silence that was more solid and profound, or a resonance that ascended to the groined roof. Old glass in the windows, rose and green, gold and azure, old oak, old stones and brasses, tablets upon the walls, masons' marks upon its pillars. If buildings have souls and are symbolical, then this grey, glorious country church had for Isabella Luce something that all other churches had lacked, a oneness with her feelings and her moods, a semblance of comprehension. Nay she might be to man's desire, her secret integrity a thing precious and sacrificial, and this old church seemed to sanctify that which she might deny herself.

She felt so very little and ephemeral in this great building, and somehow resigned in her gentle abnegation. Strange but real, her feeling about present, past, and future. She could sit and listen to a man's voice and feel calm and good in calling him no more than brother. Suffering may produce a kind of quietism, passionless passion, and as yet no tumultuous urge had rushed like a wild wind into her almost celibate self. She had been a fool, if only an illusionary fool, about one man, but this other man was different. She could kneel and pray for him, but not with him, for the subtleties of feminine feeling may be beyond the wit of the chatterers and the shallow.

This old church had been consecrated through all the centuries. It had christened, married, buried thousands of its obscure country folk. So, too—and mysteriously so—the men who served as priests in it were—to Isabella Luce—somehow consecrated. John Jordan was other than John Jordan as she knelt or sat or stood, and sang in a low sweet voice or repeated prayers. John Jordan was no mere mortal man, but a Christ creature, translated by her new emotions into the semblance of God.

How would Clarissa Pankridge have explained such strange self-abnegation, the sheen of inward mystifications? She would have shrugged, and called it incomprehensible humbug. The Luce girl had religious vapours.

Bells ringing across the fields, eight bells in chorus, and the horses' hoofs making a merry clatter. Miss Cripps, wearing a new bonnet, could compare her elderly gaiety with the serious black figure at her side. Surely, Isabella might allow herself more colour? And what was the colour of this silent creature's secret mood? Miss Cripps remembered that they were to lunch at the Priory after morning service, and that John Jordan might be present. Meanwhile the bells in that great grey tower rang out their changes, and the lilacs in the

churchyard would be smelling sweet. Canon Turnbull had ideas of his own about God's Acre, and had planted lilacs, laburnums, and red thorns amid the graves to lighten the solemnity of old yews.

'My dear, why not buy a new bonnet?'

The serene face smiled remotely.

'Why should I?'

Why should she indeed? With the spring in blossom and the young year flowering. Economy? Miss Cripps had persuaded Isabella to accept the salary of a companion. Economy? No, but rather a wilful and austere self-sanctification, a calm refusal to be woman.

The Rev. John Jordan preached the morning sermon, a very simple sermon, suited to country minds, but its simplicity lacked smoothness. More than once he fumbled for words, and had to consult his manuscript, and his voice had a more formal throatiness. Miss Cripps noticed that Mr. Jordan's eyes avoided their pew. Poor man, he had the air of a big boy put up to declaim a prize oration, and feeling shy and flustered, and pushed into a forced pomposity. No, Mr. Jordan was not his buxom, easy, two-fisted self, and there were times when his voice and perhaps his spirit seemed to go down into his boots.

Miss Cripps glanced consideringly at Isabella. Did this self-dedicated nymph suspect that a man's religion might be in rough water just because a pretty woman had taken too much celibacy into her soul? There was a remoteness, a sweet coldness about this slim figure in black. She listened with bowed head, and downcast eyes, and Miss Cripps wondered whether she divined the love-stammer in the man up yonder.

Mr. Jordan finished rather abruptly, and with a pealing 'And now to God the Father' which suggested relief. Actually he stumbled on the pulpit steps and had to clasp the rail. Miss Cripps had risen with a rustle of protesting skirts. Strange, that so big and strong a creature could be flustered by too virginal a face. The devout lover was being bothered by too much devoutness in the Mary of his choice.

The congregation gathered in the churchyard. The Neaths and Sir Hereward Lancaster were in conversation with the Canon and his wife. The gentlemen raised their hats to Miss Cripps and her companion. Mr. Jordan did not appear. He was in the vestry, drinking a glass of water, and telling himself that he had been a braying ass in St. Mary's pulpit.

Farmers talked of crops, and their wives of pigs, butter, children, and what-not. The labouring men gathered apart and waited for the gentry to go to their

carriages. Sir Hereward was conversing with Miss Luce and shedding the light of his distinguished countenance upon her. Canon Turnbull was beginning to fidget for his dinner, and to ask himself why John had so muffed his sermon. The Neaths and Miss Cripps moved between the sentinel yews towards the lych-gate, and Isabella and her elderly swain followed them.

Miss Cripps paused at the gate. What had become of John Jordan? If he, too, was lunching at the Priory she could give him a seat in her carriage. No Mr. Jordan was visible, but she saw Sir Hereward holding Isabella's hand, and regarding her with gallant appreciation. Ye gods and little fishes, was the superb old bachelor smitten?

'My dear young lady, would it interest you to see my gardens and my books?'

Miss Luce looked just a little bothered.

'I am sure, sir, I should be—honoured.'

'Oh, no, my dear, the honour would be mine.'

Still no John Jordan, and the carriages were waiting. Miss Cripps called to Isabella.

'My dear, we must be going.'

The Neaths were entering their carriage, and Sir Hereward insisted upon handing Miss Cripps and her companion into theirs. He stood bare-headed, the very soul of courtesy.

'I hope, Miss Charlotte, that you will bring Miss Luce to see my garden.'

Almost, Miss Cripps pulled a face at him.

'Delighted, I'm sure. How are the tulips?'

'Quite unique—this spring.'

And still John Jordan tarried.

They drove off without him, following the Neath equipage with its pair of greys. Miss Cripps sat up very straight, and with an air of digesting some preposterous problem. What had become of the clerical gentleman who had lapsed into pulpit pomposity?

John Jordan was still in the vestry, suffering from one of those attacks of self-depreciation and angry humility which can afflict the stoutest of men. He had disposed of his surplice, and surveyed himself in the funny little mirror which hung upon the wall. Did his face please him? It did not. You buffoon!

His insurgent, ginger-coloured hair was no glamorous fleece. The mirror was no flattering piece of glass and mercury, but a mischievous old hag of a mirror that delighted in distorting reality. Mr. Jordan stared at himself with eyes that appeared to bulge. How could he expect any girl as lovely as Isabella to discover romance in that vast phiz? Damn the mirror! And John lapsed into a most unclerical and undignified fit of shameful wrath. He plucked the mirror off its hook, and was about to send it crashing, when a voice restrained him.

'Is anything wrong, sir?'

Mr. Smith, the verger, was at the door, a most sedate and punctilious person, and Mr. Jordan, caught with the mirror in his hand, recovered himself and his significance as priest and man. But he had to assume purpose and dignity to justify this ridiculous and shocking situation.

'No, Mr. Smith. I was thinking that this thing—er—needs—resilvering.'

'It is rather old, sir. Shall I——?'

'Oh, no. It serves its purpose. By the way, have you the time on you?'

Mr. Smith produced a silver turnip watch.

'Ten minutes to one, sir.'

'Good heavens! I must be going. I am due at the Priory. Have the carriages gone?'

'I'm afraid they have, sir.'

So Mr. Jordan walked, returning the salutations of such parishioners as were still abroad with exaggerated emphasis. His inward self-shame might have kicked him down the hill. Dignity, dignity! Great Scott and all the hosts of Marmion, he had fallen into a foul pit of unregenerate loutishness. Dignity, dignity! What sort of devout lover was he who behaved like a boiling pot full of seething and incorrigible flesh? Was such behaviour credible? It was, and it was not.

Mr. John arrived at the grey porch of the Priory. He was perspiring in spirit and in skin. He consulted his own watch. Ten minutes past one. He rang the bell. And when he had rung it he became for a moment a creature of panic. Could he face that dinner table? But the footman was at the door, and the ordeal inevitable.

'I'm afraid I'm a little late.'

'They have only just sat down, sir. Shall I take your hat?'

Mr. Jordan said 'Thank you.'

There are houses that are so steeped in the spirit of all time, and have grown so gracious and serene that they can put the shyest of strangers at their ease and pass a velvet glove over the most irritable skins. It was said that were the worst-tempered woman in the world to enter the Priory she would—in five minutes—be like a cat lapping cream. Doubtless the world exaggerated, and this old house must have known carnal and violent souls, Tudor ruffians and Georgian bullies, but in the beginning it had been a saintly house and the very essence of that sanctity had lingered. No disharmonies and no noise were suffered here. The Neaths were happy, gracious people, artists in the art of living, well served and even loved by those who served them. John Jordan, passing through a groined and pillared hall whose vaulting was coloured a soft blue and dusted with silver stars, felt that the word he had been uttering was more than valid here. Dignity. Some houses do not blow ostentation in a guest's face, or offer a patronizing hand. Even the footman's steps made no noise on the rich carpet, and his very movements were easy and liquid.

The man threw open a door and John Jordan saw sunlight, colour, three arched windows, old pictures, old china, flowers, an interior that was both soft and vivid.

'The Reverend Mr. Jordan.'

Was he that? Had he been that, and not a tempestuous, love-sick lout? He was aware of James Neath rising.

'I must apologize, sir, for being late.'

'Better late than never, Mr. Jordan. You must excuse us for sitting down without you.'

'Of course, sir.'

His hostess had turned in her chair and was holding out her hand and smiling.

'I am very glad you could join us, Mr. Jordan. Will you sit by Miss Luce?'

Miss Cripps had to have her say.

'You have missed the soup, young man, and it was real turtle.'

John Jordan rediscovered the good broth in himself at her challenge.

'I should be in it, madam.'

'My dear Charlotte, he has not missed it. Mr. Jordan's soup, Thomas.'

'Yes, madam.'

John sat down beside Miss Luce, and Isabella was pure profile. How remote a man could feel beside beauty, even at a dinner table! Mr. Jordan put his hands together and said his own grace to his silent self, and maybe he prayed for it. But his hostess was there on his left, one of those white-haired women with a girl's complexion, and eyes as bright and as full of potential humour as Miss Cripps's. Mr. Jordan had his duty to her and to his soup, for while he spooned it the table waited. Eulalia Neath divined this dual duty and Mr. Jordan's air of urgent haste in spooning, and in attempting conversation.

'Please don't hurry. Shall I talk for both of us while you catch up?'

John Jordan gave her a grateful grin. Eulalia! Assuredly her comprehension was as melodious as her name.

'I can only apologize, madam, but not to the soup.'

Miss Cripps nodded at him across the table, and the nod was a commendation.

'*Noblesse oblige*, even over soup spoons, John.'

'True, madam. I am trying to restrain my solo, and keep it—well—what shall we say——?'

His host supplied an appreciative chuckle and the word.

'*Pianissimo*, Mr. Jordan.'

'The very word, sir.'

So the soup was disposed of, and no ice left in the atmosphere. Mr. Jordan smiled at his hostess, and felt that dignity could be discovered even in a soup-spoon. He glanced at the bowl of tulips on the table, and tentatively at Isabella, but Miss Luce was still all profile. And just how should he open the conversation with his hostess? But it was she who rescued him from all embarrassment.

'You must find our village rather different from Whitechapel, Mr. Jordan.'

'Oh, very. Though we did have some flowers.'

'Cockney tulips?'

'Yes, in window-boxes. Though—East End slums don't grow much in the way of roses.'

'No Attar of Roses,' from his host.

The second course was being served, and John Jordan looked with some seriousness at his plate. London slums were serious affairs, social stigmata

which could not be joked about. And John, conscious of the girl at his side, remembered that he had played the renegade—yes—for the sake of a silent profile. Here in this peaceful and gracious house he felt both near to her, and yet utterly remote. What did she know of slums, and lice and fleas and smells, and drunken brawls, frowsy women and sickly children? His silence seemed to challenge his hostess to accept his seriousness at its face value.

'What would you do about it, Mr. Jordan?'

John picked up his knife and fork. Was he a Hercules to clean up such Augean stables?

'That is not easy to answer. I think the whole country has to try to supply the answer.'

'You infer—that—all of us are both guilty and responsible?'

'The country way of life is so different, sir.'

'We have blots of our own.'

John nodded. Yes, the Hungry Forties.

'Well, sir, one word, too much Mammon. One should put men before—commerce.'

How was it that he got the feeling that the girl beside him had become less remote? He glanced at her, met her eyes, and found in them a sudden soft lustre like light in deep water. And had he offended these others in being too frank? His host's voice was to reassure him.

'I agree with you, Mr. Jordan. Men like Dickens may be doing more good than all the politicians.'

'Yes,' said Miss Cripps, 'even though he is sometimes all slobber and sentiment.'

The table laughed, but James Neath had more to say.

'I think man managed better when he marched on his own legs. Now—iron legs have run away with him. And there are too many of us, far too many, like cattle in pens.'

Mr. Jordan nodded, and glanced again at Miss Luce. Had she opinions upon population, commerce, Chartism, the overworked and the underfed? But Isabella was mute.

Mr. Jordan had a Lads' Class to take in the vestry at three o'clock that

afternoon, but he was to be given the adventure of a walk with Miss Luce in the Priory garden. James Neath took them out to show them some of his treasures, and then remembered that he had urgent letters to write. Was their host in the conspiracy? Mr. Jordan found himself very much alone with Isabella and contemplating a display of daffodils flowering in the grass near one of the great stew-ponds. The yellow flowers nodded at him with jocund friendliness, but John Jordan was not feeling jocund. Miss Luce had the air of a shy nymph who had been abandoned to the mercies of a male monster, and the monster was feeling anything but savage.

He looked at her deprecatingly, and she looked at the flowers with eyes that concealed some inward irk. What inspiration was there in the landscape or the heart-scape? Mr. Jordan felt a baffled boor.

‘Butter and eggs. Not a bad name.’

That was all he could blurt, and the effort struck him as being suggestive of the flesh-pots, and quite inadequate on the lips of a lover. Why had not the wretched flowers been christened otherwise? Some of the old country names were far more romantic.

‘Perhaps you can think of something—better?’

She stood, head slightly slanted to one side, her glance oblique, one hand to her cheek.

‘Why did you leave—London?’

What a poser! Mr. Jordan goggled over it.

‘I? Well—perhaps I shouldn’t have done. I think I was rather stale, and wanted to wash——’

‘In Jordan?’

He looked at her with tender suspicion. Was this play upon names quite sporting, and was there unsuspected raillery in her enigmatic self?

‘Well, shall I tell you? I saw you dancing.’

Her hand fell from her cheek.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I ought not to be responsible.’

Mr. Jordan was looking more like the monster that he should have been.

‘Shall I go back to London?’

She was silent for some seconds, and then—once again—she surprised him.

‘I have a strange feeling, John, that you will be needed here.’

‘Thank you. By—er——?’

‘No, I can’t say why or when or how.’

And then she turned about with a queer and remote smile.

‘Miss Cripps must be waiting. I know the carriage was ordered for half-past two.’

And Mr. Jordan very nearly said—‘Damn the carriage!’

XXII

THOSE complacent people who pride themselves upon knowing all that there is to be known about woman and her ways might have advised Mr. Jordan most unadvisedly. They could have assured him that a man who had played the hero, fished a sweet suicidal creature out of the sea and carried her to succour and safety, might claim some sentimental intimacy. He who had been so near in moments of tragic and passionate despair might expect to remain more than a mere muscular male in sober black.

Mr. Jordan was perturbed and puzzled. Assuredly Isabella Luce did not feel as he felt. What of that peculiar question? Why had he not gone back to London and his slums and the semi-savages who needed him? Had his blurting of the truth repelled her? And those strange words of hers, mysterious, visionary, and oracular. Somehow he would be needed here, but not by her.

Whom could he consult upon so delicate and personal a problem? Man or woman? And could so intimate and personal a secret be confessed to any other creature? Yet so provoking a problem was to be remedied by a coincidence that caught John Jordan utterly unprepared for it, and the wise words were spoken by man, and not by woman.

Mr. Jordan, bound for a cottage where a carter was laid up with a broken leg, came to another cottage under the shade of two great elms. He was about to pass it when he heard a sudden uproar, screams, a man's voice loud and urgent, the sound of a struggle. The cottage door stood open, and John Jordan saw a young woman appear there, half-dressed, hair flying, hands clenched, wild of face. Her eyes had a blind and unseeing terror in them. She came running down the path to the gate, her mouth open, hands clawing the air. She did not appear to be conscious of the figure at the gate.

John saw a man in the doorway, a man with blood upon his face.

'Stop her, sir, stop her.'

The woman dashed the gate open and Mr. Jordan spread his arms, only to have a wild hand thrust into his face. He staggered and his hat fell off, and the girl flashed past him. By this time the man with the bloody face was at the gate.

'She's mad, sir. For the love of God—catch her. She nearly knocked I

silly.’

The wild thing was flying down the lane.

‘Stop her. She be making for the big pond.’

Someone else was to take a hand in the chase, Dr. Rollinson driving alone in his gig to visit the carter with a broken leg. He whipped up his horse, and with the two running men went in pursuit of the flying girl. Mr. Jordan was within a yard of her when she turned suddenly, tossed her arms into the air, and flung herself face downwards in the long grass below a hedge.

John Jordan stood still. The husband was down on his knees beside his wife, and trying to turn her over with work-worn and importunate hands.

‘Come on, my girl. What’s the matter with ’ee?’

She rolled to and fro, her body convulsed.

‘Let me be.’

‘Come on, Nell. I’ll carry ’ee home.’

But Dr. Rollinson was out of his gig, a little man full of spectacled authority.

‘Hold my horse, Mr. Jordan, will you? Get up, Porter. Leave your wife to me. What happened?’

The man got up, looking dazed and miserable.

‘Oh, just a bit of a squabble, sir.’

‘Go back home.’

‘Well, sir, she’s carryin’ her first. About two months gone, I guess.’

‘Go back home and leave her to me.’

The man shambled off, putting a hand to a bloody forehead, and then staring at the blood on his fingers with an air of obfuscated wonder. Dr. Rollinson knelt down beside the prone figure. She was twitching spasmodically, her fingers clawing at the grass. Mr. Jordan, his head resting against the horse’s neck, stood and watched the scene.

It was to surprise him. Dr. Rollinson was a little man of a bespectacled mildness, and not suggesting in his person any mesmeric potency or dominant maleness. Mr. Jordan saw him put his hands very gently on the woman’s head, and let them rest there for half a minute.

‘Lie still, Nellie, quite still. Breathe gently. Let your head lie easily. That’s

better. Lie quite still.'

Then the doctor's hands began to make slow, soothing movements over her shoulders and her back, and John Jordan was astonished to see the spasmodic twitchings die away, and the clutching hands relax. Her breathing became quiet and relaxed. It was like stroking some terrified animal into a trance.

'That's better. Just let yourself go limp. Everything will soon be right and good. You have been overwrought, Nellie. Just feel that you are going to sleep.'

And go to sleep she did, and the doctor, after observing her, turned and glanced up at John Jordan.

'You are stronger than I am. Will you carry her to the cottage?'

Mr. Jordan gathered her up, and carried her like a child to the cottage, Dr. Rollinson walking beside him. Even the horse appeared to become a creature of human comprehension, for he swung the gig round and quietly followed his master.

'We will put her to bed, John.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Can I give you a lift anywhere?'

'I was going to visit Johnson's carter.'

'So am I. We can go together.'

The husband was waiting by the gate, and his eyes bulged when he saw that somnolent figure in Mr. Jordan's arms. He opened the gate and stood aside.

'Has she fainted, sir?'

'No, Tom. Just gone to sleep. Let her sleep. No more storms, my lad.'

'No, sir.'

'Some women, Tom, are like flighty horses. Don't tug at the reins.'

At the carter's cottage the broken leg was doing well. The man lay abed in a little poky room on the ground floor and so small was it that Mr. Jordan paid his call through the open lattice window, leaving all the available space to the doctor. Once again he watched those rather frail hands at work with meticulous care. Were the splints as they should be? Was there any swelling of the foot?

The man was both comfortable and grateful, and in no pain.

‘That’s gone, doctor. Gosh, but that first night I felt like a fox in a spring-trap.’

Mr. Jordan, with his arms resting on the windowsill, and the sun shining on his back, was digesting the pregnant words Dr. Rollinson had uttered, and the profound significance they might have for man the lover. ‘Some women are like flighty horses. Don’t tug at the reins.’ Was that applicable in his case, and to a creature who was as sensitive as Isabella Luce, and who had suffered as she had suffered? Why not? Her aloofness might be a veil dimming and softening light that could be too glaring. Maybe she flinched from tempestuous emotion, and, like that hysterical girl, needed the soft touch of soothing hands and a spirit that was healing. Was the lover in him to play physician?

Seated beside Dr. Rollinson in the gig, with the young green growth of the year insurgent in trees and crops and hedgerows, he was moved to ask the doctor a particular question.

‘Was that just a case of hysteria, sir?’

Dr. Rollinson replied with a question.

‘What is hysteria, Mr. Jordan?’

There was silence for a few seconds.

‘Some—troubling of the spirit, sir?’

‘Not a bad answer. A doctor has to remember the spirit as well as the flesh. The mysteries of medicine are not mere manifestations of the body. That is my profound belief.’

John Jordan nodded. Dr. Rollinson was a soul-doctor as well as sawbones, and that may have accounted for his success as a healer. The horse rattled them along at a cheerful trot, and John, glancing at the doctor’s face, saw his spectacles glimmering and his mouth mobile with sudden mischief.

‘One of our fallacies, Mr. Jordan, is to assume that when we have coined some solemn and Latinized word—we have explained everything.’

John Jordan laughed.

‘Life takes a good deal of explaining, sir.’

‘Quite so. When you are young you are apt to think that you know everything. With maturity comes the increasing conviction that you know nothing, or very little.’

‘That little, sir, seems to have sufficed in both those cases.’

Dr. Rollinson gave his horse a gentle and playful flick with the whip.

‘There is a quality called—intuition, Jordan. Every craftsman should have it, or be nothing but a botcher.’

‘Am I included, sir?’

‘My dear fellow, you know that. From what I hear you too are a man of your hands.’

John Jordan glanced at those massive members.

‘Am I? I am wondering whether—at times—they are not a little clumsy.’

The sun was warm upon them, more warm than was usual for the time of year, and the young wheat was green and forward. Dr. Rollinson, driving out in all weathers, was weather wise. Cold winters, rich springs, sultry summers. Good for the body of man. H’m, yes, but not always. Dr. Rollinson could remember one such blazing summer, and the peril it had produced, and deep down in him was the fear that some such horror might be repeated. That was many years ago, but the menace had not been scotched. Some fool man might infect a whole community.

‘Hot summer likely, I think.’

‘Good for the crops.’

‘Yes, but I do not always welcome dry, hot summers. Water short and apt to be polluted. And men can be careless and dirty creatures. Ever experienced a cholera epidemic, Mr. Jordan?’

‘I? No, sir.’

‘I have. I hope you never will.’

‘Not likely with us, sir.’

‘That might depend. We have our nice new deep well and reservoir. So clever of us.’

‘But, surely, that is better than a lot of shallow wells?’

‘Again—that might depend——’

Then Dr. Rollinson’s horse shied at some strange object, and the doctor had to regain control.

‘Hold up, Bob. Scared of a heap of stone? Steady, my lad.’

With the horse back into a spanking trot, Dr. Rollinson smiled at his neighbour.

‘Shying at imaginary dangers—like a horse, Mr. Jordan. My hands must have lost their grip.’

‘And the horse—felt it?’

‘Maybe he did. Reins between hands and mouth. Some beasts are sometimes wiser than we are.’

Mr. Jordan sat and pondered that saying.

Canon Turnbull’s curate had no official summons from South End, but he chose to remain in Dr. Rollinson’s gig as far as the doctor’s stables. Dr. Rollinson’s groom had been given half a day off to dig his garden, but he was back and waiting for his master’s return. Mr. Jordan walked with the doctor to his surgery and dispensary in a small house in the High Street, and as they reached it a large and hairy countryman came out, wiping his mouth on the back of a brown hand. He touched his hat and grinned at the doctor.

‘Just had a nip at the old bottle, sir.’

‘Needing it, Francis?’

‘Well, ’e do keep the ague away. I’ve got Mister King to give I a dram or two to take a’ nights.’

‘Not too much of it, Francis.’

‘Sure, sir, I know that.’

The man touched his hat again and ambled off, and Dr. Rollinson held Mr. Jordan by the arm. His spectacles glimmered.

‘Probably not what you would infer. A nip at the old bottle. Give you one guess.’

‘In London, sir, most probably—gin.’

Dr. Rollinson nodded.

‘Yes. When I was a student at Guy’s. Well, never mind. The drink was opium. We still get ague in the marshes.’

‘Opium, sir! Isn’t that rather—dangerous?’

‘Not to the wise. King and I allow it only to the wise.’

Dr. Rollinson entered his surgery, and Mr. Jordan, after hatting the little doctor, passed on and down to the pier hill. Gin or opium? Stimulant or sedative? All the incidents of the morning associated themselves with a lover's problem. He strolled to the beach below the Shrubbery just as old Tom Elliot was unloading a boatload of parents and children. Old Elliot's boat was white with blue gunwales and seats, its tarred bottom below water level.

Old Elliot hailed Mr. Jordan.

'Good day to 'ee, sir. When be you bringing the lady for a row?'

'Some day soon, I hope, Tom.'

Tom Elliot looked sly.

'I be'n't a chap as stares too hard. I can row and mind my business.'

Mr. Jordan laughed, but rather forcedly so, for the inference was obvious.

'Well, why not half an hour's row now, Tom?'

'Werry good, sir. Step in.'

Tom took the blue and white boat eastwards and about fifty yards or so from the beach. They passed under the pier, the old boatman pulling placidly, and his sculls making a mild chunking sound in the rowlocks. It was a calm day, and mere ripples plashed against the boat's timbers. On shore the bathing-machines were receiving a coat of black paint, and at the jetty further east a dirty black brig and two barges were lying. Tom, glancing over his shoulder, saw the brig, and spat into the water.

'One o' they darned furriners.'

To Mr. Jordan, on this sunny morning, South End appeared different, for he saw it whole and yet in detail. It hung there like a picture framed by the blues of the sea and of the sky, the pale sand, the russet-coloured shingle, the varying greens of the Shrubbery, Caroline Terrace sedate and charming, and somehow remote and more mysterious. Red chimney-pots; white walls and cornices; blue, green, and brown balconies, placid windows. Then the Old Town, more multifarious, trailing away towards the jetty, a huddle of odd little houses, with the white bulges of the Marine Library separating the new from the old. Mr. Jordan sat in contemplation, with old Tom's blades spacing out a pleasant rhythm, and the water lapping lazily against the boat's flanks. It had been a significant morning, a strangely productive morning, and this jaunt in Tom Elliot's boat seemed to provide a fitting finale. Mr. Jordan gazed at one

particular house, solid and white and final, and Dr. Rollinson's words remained with him.

'Don't tug at the reins.'

Mr. Jordan pulled out his watch.

'What about your dinner, Tom?'

'What be the time, sir?'

'Nearly half past twelve. Better pull in.'

Tom did so, and the brilliant little picture enlarged itself, green foliage, the soaring houses, the very blue sky. Mr. Jordan had remembered Tom's dinner, but forgotten his own. On such a morning as this his heart and his head made the mere belly of man seem superfluous.

Tom Elliot ran the bows of the boat up on to the shingle, shipped his oars and climbed out.

'What do I owe you, Tom?'

'Not a penny, sir.'

'That won't do, Tom.'

'If I want to give 'ee a free row in m' own boat, can't I do it?'

'All right, Tom, and thank you. I hope you will enjoy your dinner.'

Mr. Jordan left this unmercenary old fellow, and, taking a path through the Shrubbery, arrived at the holly walk, where the petticoat portion of Caroline Terrace was taking the sun and the air before going in to dinner. Mr. Jordan came face to face with the four Lardner ladies, ranged like the Fates on a green seat. He hesitated and then raised his hat to them, but their faces remained frigid and unseeing. And at the iron gate he clashed with Mr. Parbury, who fluffed up like a fighting cock.

'What are you doing in my parish, Mr. Jordan?'

Mr. Jordan grinned at him.

'Oh, I have just remembered, sir. Looking for a dinner.'

Mr. Parbury gave him a beady glare, which—translated into unclerical language—said 'Damned impudent lout,' nor did Mr. Parbury offer to fill the stomach's void. He stalked off and across to his own doorway and dinner.

John Jordan rubbed his chin. Did he need food on so provocative and eloquent a morning? Most of Caroline Terrace ate to super-repletion, while

those who laboured to provide the food might have to be content with pig-meal, potatoes, or a turnip. Mr. Jordan walked off towards the Royal Hotel, but with no intention of eating there. His large legs carried him homewards, but not in one spell of walking, for John Jordan was attracted by a field gate and a hay-field, and he climbed the gate and lay on his back in the sun. A vast thorn hedge was promising to flower, and very soon the hay would be a medley of buttercups, ox-eyed daisies, and red sorrel, and Mr. Jordan, hands clasped on his empty stomach, contemplated the symbolic happenings of the morning, and fell happily asleep.

XXIII

No. 20, Caroline Terrace possessed an ample balcony, its sloping roof and iron work painted laurel green, nor was it one of those stilted structures with space just sufficient for a straight-backed chair. It could accommodate armchairs and window-boxes. Miss Luce had made herself responsible for the window-boxes and watered them daily with a green can. They contained musk and pelargonium and that new South African plant—lobelia, not yet in flower, but promising much gaiety and colour. Maybe the flowers were gayer in mood than the lady with the can, whose face combined tenderness with austerity.

Caroline Terrace could observe Miss Luce tending these window-boxes or sitting sewing, and exhibiting to a critical or friendly world a remote serenity. Miss Luce had become less the shy nymph of the nut walk and more Isabella of the balcony, and there were those who applauded the transformation, others who condemned it. How dared the wench display herself so openly in public? Some day silly old Charlotte Cripps might discover what sort of baggage she had allowed into her rumble.

Yet the panorama was not complete. The censorious portion of the Terrace was to receive social shocks, and to raise its eyebrows over other aspects of senility. A gentleman began to appear on horseback, followed by a mounted groom, and he made a habit of arriving at about the hour when Miss Luce sat down to her knitting or embroidery, and this cavalier was no other than Sir Hereward Lancaster, blue coated, white hatted, and with a flower in his buttonhole. Moreover, the groom carried a posy, and Sir Hereward would dismount and appear later upon balcony, complete with bouquet. If Miss Cripps happened to be there she was the recipient; otherwise the favour was handed to Miss Luce.

Sir Hereward was still a personable man at sixty-two, if lame in one leg, and white as to hair. He had wealth, manners, culture, a reputation for generous integrity, and he was a bachelor. Obviously, Miss Cripps could not be the charmer, for her charms had been hypothetical and actual for twenty or more years. Had Sir Hereward fallen for the Murderer’s Daughter? For that was how a part of Caroline Terrace had labelled Miss Luce. If so, the wretched girl was a social nuisance, for she appeared to attract both the young and the old.

Mr. Ludovic Lardner, dry and judicial, represented the reactions of the anti-bodies.

‘Well, no fool like an old fool.’

Sir Hereward Lancaster might be bewitched by the prospect of taking a pretty young wife to ‘Porters’, where she would suffer his amorous activities until such a time as the sap ceased to rise, and Sir Hereward would resign himself to being cosseted by a complaisant nurse.

‘Perhaps,’ said Mrs. Lardner, who was more sentimental than her daughters, ‘he thinks he is being kind to the poor girl.’

Miss Faith was scornful.

‘Mother, don’t be silly!’

‘I’m not silly. And I won’t be called silly by you, Faith. You always were the worst-tempered child I had. I believe you were born with a sneer.’

Faith gave her mother the look she might have given the village idiot.

‘Well, I must thank Father for any brains I have. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Will she marry him?’

Miss Caroline sniggered.

‘Marry him? She’ll jump down his silly old throat.’

And that was the verdict of the younger Lardner ladies.

No piece of news was so unimportant that it failed to circulate in so circumscribed a community, but the last person to hear of this sentimental affair was Mr. John Jordan. Canon Turnbull and his wife had the news from the Neaths, who had received it from the Gages, and John Gage happened to be a Lancaster intimate. Sir Hereward was making no bones about the matter. Both he and ‘Porters’ needed a mistress, and at sixty-two Sir Hereward was as much in love as a boy of twenty. Moreover, he could be impressive, and carry his infatuation with a nice dignity.

‘Does John know?’

Canon Turnbull rubbed his beard.

‘I think not.’

‘Well, what should be done about it? He really is—terribly in earnest.’

‘So is old Lancaster, it seems.’

‘But you don’t think she will——?’

‘My dear, the temptation might be considerable. Socially it would be a triumph for a girl—with such a heritage. On the other hand—were she to marry John it might not be socially good for a young parson.’

Mary Turnbull shook her head at him.

‘My dear, that is not like you. I must confess I have taken a fancy to the girl. Would you have selected one of the Lardner ladies?’

‘Sarcasm, my dear, sarcasm! Are you thinking of talking like a mother to John?’

Mary Turnbull, having refilled her cup, replaced the tea-cosy.

‘I might. As a matter of fact I believe he has put the question to her.’

‘And she refused him?’

‘Obviously.’

The Canon sipped his tea.

‘I think it is John’s problem—more than ours. I am not much of a believer in interference. The girl is old enough to know her own mind.’

His wife regarded him with affectionate tolerance.

‘Does a woman ever know her own mind—when——?’

‘When what, my dear?’

‘Well, never mind.’

At this time John Jordan was lodged at Mrs. Beckwith’s, next to Bragg’s cabinet-shop where North Street and South Street, West Street and East Street met. Old red brick and white weather-boarded houses enclosed a spacious square, with the shadow of the church tower falling across it when the sun was rising. A row of old pollarded lime trees trailed green shadows outside Mr. Jordan’s window, and opposite him were the benches and yew arbour of the ‘George’ Inn, where besmocked carters would pull in to water their horses and drink mugs of ale. The life of the village was insistent here: playing, shouting children, rumbling wheels, women with baskets bosom to bosom in solemn gossip, the varied tool-chorus from Mr. Bragg’s workshop in the white-timbered building next door, the snoring of saws, the thud of mallets upon chisels, the purring of planes. The old cabinet craft persisted here, and John Bragg’s furniture had spread itself over a third of the county. His very name inspired his favourite quip—‘I’m John Bragg, but I don’t need to brag about

it.’

Mrs. Beckwith was a fresh-coloured, busy little widow, with a sparrow’s beak of a nose and very bright brown eyes. She was very ready to mother Mr. Jordan and even to wonder how he could sit at an upper window and compose his sermons with all the noise of the crossroads and the village about him. She would sometimes dash out and shoo off the children who were playing tiggy-touch round the lime trees, but the hearty symphony of saws and chisels and mallets was as inevitable as wind in the chimneys, and not to be gainsaid.

‘I do hope all that clatter doesn’t disturb you, sir?’

‘I like it,’ said Mr. Jordan, which was true.

For John Jordan was becoming very much part of the village world, a human element in a human chorus, and when man is absorbed in his environment, noise is not noise to him. Was Christ troubled by the sounds of the carpenter’s craft? Hardly so. And then the smell of chips and sawdust, oak, elm, pearwood, walnut, and mahogany, wholesome savours, like the warm, sweet smell of green growth in the spring. John Jordan liked to stroll into the workshops, and watch the cunning of the craft, chairs, tables, and chests of drawers taking shape. John Bragg worked with his men. He had a white head, ruddy cheeks, and jocund blue eyes.

‘Try that drawer, sir. That’s how a drawer should be. Runs like butter.’

John Jordan could agree. No perfunctory ‘That’s good enough’ text here. John Bragg was a master of craft and of craftsmen with a conscience and an ebullient pride.

Moreover, John Jordan the lover had become for these weeks a sedulous and happy quietist. Let life simmer. Do not play the importunate lout. He could understand, or thought that he could, the withdrawal of a woman’s self into selfness and contemplation. Solace and solitude after stormy seas. Life should have its interludes, its pauses. Past and present may flow graciously into the future.

Then, a somewhat enigmatic letter from Miss Cripps moved him to action.

‘Have you gone into retreat, John? Or have you the mumps or the measles?’

How like Miss Charlotte! Did she reject the saying that absence makes the heart grow fonder? So, one day late in May, Mr. Jordan put on a clean shirt and collar, as though the simplicity of such ritual was symbolical, and had his hair trimmed by the village barber, and set out to walk seawards. For the first

half-mile his mood was one of sturdy confidence, and then an absurd shyness waylaid him, a diffidence that might have been prophetic. Was he afraid of a pair of dark eyes? He was, and furiously so.

For a month he had not seen the sea or Caroline Terrace, and the little gardens would have their coloured aprons spread, and the balconies be floriferous. Absence, by making a certain heart grow fonder, might surprise you with sudden panic. Mr. Jordan could have dared the most lousy and sinister London alley without a qualm, but Caroline Terrace had for him sudden strange terrors. Did he suspect that quite a number of people had been intrigued by his absence and were questioning its significance? He did not, nor that some good ladies were of the opinion that he had been shed for the sake of a rich and elderly beau. The glamour of 'Porters' might have made a mere curate appear dull and dusty. So, this scared young man turned the corner by the Royal Hotel, and saw the familiar scene, green hollies, broad gravel way, gay gardens, and coloured railings, and all the sunlit sedateness of the Georgian houses. He hesitated. Almost he flinched from the adventure, but squaring his shoulders bade himself be priest and man. He walked down the middle of the road, looking neither to the right nor to the left, yet absurdly conscious of windows, balconies, spectators.

Then, a girl giggled. Just a giggle, but it made Mr. Jordan's ears go red. Had he inspired that mocking sound? He had.

'There—he—is. I wonder if he knows?'

Mr. Jordan saw a carriage and pair waiting at the far end of the terrace, two black horses, and a coachman in plum-coloured livery. Oh, well, someone was calling on the Gages, but as he drew nearer he realized that the carriage was waiting outside No. 20. Visitors? Would he intrude? His shyness became challenging and acute. The balcony was empty. Mr. Jordan gave one glance at it, and at the carriage. It displayed a crest in gold upon the black panel of a door, a mailed fist grasping a truncheon. Mr. Jordan happened to know that crest. Sir Hereward Lancaster's. He did not feel competent to confront that very stately, talkative, and dominant gentleman. Why not call later? And John Jordan walked on.

The cliffs welcomed him, the grassy plateau ending in a tumult of gorse, bramble, and wild thorn. A familiar seat looked seawards, and it was empty, but Mr. Jordan eschewed the seat, and, scrambling a little way down the slope, lay down on a patch of grass under the shelter of a bank of gorse. His hat reposed beside him. He stared at the sky and the sailing clouds, and made an effort to laugh at his own shyness. No tugging at the reins in this case. Could man make such a romantic mystery of love that a mere house could become a

terrifying sanctuary before whose door his courage and his feet faltered?

John Jordan closed his eyes, and suffered the sun to warm both spirit and flesh. He would wait another ten minutes, and then return to the attack. Sir Hereward might have gone, and if not—what was there to fear in an elderly gentleman with white hair, distinguished manners, and a lame leg? The true philosopher should learn to laugh at himself at the particular and proper moment.

Mr. Jordan was in the act of sitting up when he heard voices, feminine voices. They came towards the seat.

'Shall we sit a moment?'

'Yes, let's. The view is lovely to-day.'

Someone giggled.

'I wonder if—he—will think her so lovely?'

'You mean Mr. Jordan?'

'Of course. I suppose she'll marry her old gentleman.'

'My dear, why shouldn't she? He really is very handsome, and young for his age. Personally, I could not bear to be touched by that ogre.'

'Poor Mr. Jordan, so very plain.'

'More than plain. I find him quite repulsive. There are some men, my dear, whom a sensitive creature cannot stomach. Well, shall we stroll on?'

The voices died away, and Mr. Jordan sat with his head between his hands, staring at the sea. There was no anger in him, but a sense of scarifying shame. Plain he might be—but repulsive! The word had smitten him like some sling-stone bringing pain and then a kind of numbness. Was that the secret cause of her aloofness, gratitude contending with physical repulsion? She had tried not to hurt him, but to console him with considered friendship. And her new suitor was an old man with much money?

John Jordan got to his feet. He climbed the cliff, and, cramming his hat on his head, turned towards Caroline Terrace. Had all the manhood been knocked out of him? Should he fear God and woman? The Lancaster carriage had gone, but John Jordan saw something else that halted him, a party on the balcony of No. 20. Sir Hereward was seated between Miss Cripps and Isabella, and the ladies were laughing. Sir Hereward appeared to be very much the man of the moment, exercising a jocund wit, and in command of the day and the conversation.

Mr. Jordan faced about, praying that none of the party up above had seen him. Caroline Terrace was a galaxy of mocking windows. Poor, plain Mr. Jordan! He walked westwards, and, taking a field path that he knew of, left the sea and an illusion behind him.

He met no one but two dirty-looking tramps heading towards the chimney of the new Waterworks, and a lane that led Leighwards. One of the scallawags was picking his nose, the other scratching a patched posterior. They took no notice of the parson. South End had not proved either profitable or welcoming, and at one particular house they had been threatened with the attentions of the local constable. So much for genteel charity.

XXIV

It was the Marquis de Beaucourt who, dangling a gold-rimmed eye-glass, made the pertinent remark that in this age of the new hygiene the Priest was abdicating to the Plumber. Caroline Terrace had been endowed with the new sanitation. That such new possessions should inspire malice and envy in the human heart may seem strange, but the two scallawags who had been warned off from the doors of the new elect were moved to coarse protest. Coming to that symbol of the age, the new Waterworks, they stood and gazed and growled aggressively. Nothing but a young hedge of laurels protected the green bank of the new reservoir. Authority had not yet risen to railings, nor was any official warden to be seen. The new engine and the pump were silent, and the younger of the two tramps, pushing through the hedge, climbed the bank and spat into the water.

The Rev. John Jordan saw nothing of this act, which, as a pollution that might promise other and more perilous happenings, should have warned a community not yet wise as to the minuter menaces of Nature. People still spoke of miasmas, evil vapours, humours, effluvia. Fresh air could be considered dangerous. Fevers assailed you: consumption rotted your lungs, the smallpox brought pustules and scars if you survived. Plague no longer decimated English cities, and the pox was not so prevalent as it had been, but as yet the Priests of the Serpent knew of no Pasteur.

Mr. Jordan, following the field path homewards, came upon a grim and solitary house standing aloof among weeds and brambles. It was of bald red brick, with casement windows that had a sinister and bleary blindness. A rotting fence had subsided in a smother of green growth, and the hatch and winch of a well were crusted with moss and lichen. John Jordan, in a mood of acute self-depreciation, paused to look at this melancholy building, and to question its significance. And then he remembered, and knew it for what it was or had been. This was the old Pest House standing aloof and alone, a symbol of those days when Fear had rushed infectious bodies into a living charnel-house. Humanity had rotted here, and been tumbled hurriedly into the saving soil.

A leper-house or pox-house, and John Jordan pushed open a sagging gate and walked up what had been a path to a paintless door. He tried it and found it locked, and moving to a window, looked in through a peep-hole where a glass lozenge had fallen from the leaded frame. He saw a dirty floor, walls that were

shedding plaster, a rusty grate. This shabby room somehow toned with his own mood of self-humiliation. Repulsive? There was neither anger nor self-scarifying laughter in him. Ugliness that no woman could stomach?

The Pest House faced north, and Mr. Jordan was conscious of standing in its shadow. Poor, fatuous, romantic fool! Why in the name of God had he fallen for a sentimental fancy, and left the labour that had been his? A live London slum was less sinister than this dead building. He waded back through the tall weeds to the path and the lane that linked it, and across the fields he saw the great grey tower of the church sunning itself against a cloudless sky.

Then, standing there with his back to the Pest House, and his eyes on the tower of the church, he felt his mood veer like a vane to a changing wind. He, plain John Jordan, had caught himself out in the long field, and young wenches might well giggle at him. Oh, the vanity of man, solemnly concealed, and then betraying you in a moment of angry humiliation! Had a woman no right to her fancy, even though you had pulled her out of the sea? And suddenly, John Jordan laughed, and with this laughter there came to him a new sweet sanity and an all-revealing tenderness. What a poor thing was love if it could not look its own love in the face with candour and compassion!

Some impulse made him raise his hat to the grey tower over yonder. Ring out you bells, and hail Christ crucified and Christ reborn. Assuredly the first duty of man was to preach at himself, if he must preach at all, nor need the face of your inner man be ugly.

The field path had become a lane, and the lane met the main road, and John Jordan, walking hat in hand, head up, and shoulders squared, might have considered whether Providence had set a stage for him and prepared a public parade. Half the parish seemed out and about to pass the time of day with him, or to persuade him to stop and gossip. Two small girls, solemn and adoring, stood before him and sucked fingers, and made goo-goo eyes at him. ‘Oh, Mr. Jordan, our cat’s got kittens.’ Had she, and how many? They trailed along with him, and Mr. Jordan held hands, a sentimental picture. Even the Neath carriage was on the road, and Mr. Jordan had to release a hand and raise a hat and smile, and the smile did him credit.

Said Eulalia Neath to her husband—‘You know, I like that young man, James. He’s such a happy, wholesome creature. Never throaty and parsonic.’

The village saw Mr. Jordan in charge of the two children. He was being taken to inspect the kittens, and all faces were friendly. Women smiled upon him; plain men touched their hats.

‘Good day to ’ee, sir.’

‘Good weather for the hay, John.’

An old rustic exercised his wit upon the curate.

‘Be you taking the children out, sir, or be they taking you?’

Mr. Jordan laughed.

‘Both—I think, Jim. I am going to meet some kittens.’

Friendly folk these, and more than friendly, not greeting an ugly face, but the countenance of a man who was trusted, and whose stout simplicity made him one with them.

Mr. Jordan, having paid his respects to Mother Cat and her progeny, and purchased a bag of sweets for the children, was waylaid by three lads with a cricket bat and a shabby old ball. Mr. Jordan was the captain of the village club, and cricket was a serious business. These youngsters were out for some practice on Parson’s Green, with the trunk of a young chestnut tree for a wicket. Would Mr. Jordan bowl them a few balls? He would. Such sport was good for a sore spirit. Mr. Jordan took off his coat and set about the practice seriously, and clean bowled the first lad with a leg-break.

‘Oo, sir, that was a nasty one.’

‘A twister, Charlie. You must learn to spot twisters. Your turn, Tom.’

He bowled Tom an easy one, and Tom smote it, and so lustily that the ball went through a cobbler’s window.

‘Coo, sir, that’s done it.’

‘It has,’ and Mr. Jordan had to apologize to the cobbler, and feel in his pocket to pay for the damage.

Canon Turnbull, topping Holywell Hill, and turning the corner by the old white-timbered houses, saw his nephew bowling to these lads. The Canon pulled in and sat in the saddle, watching. Charlie was in charge of the bat, and Mr. Jordan admonished him.

‘Now, watch it, my lad.’

This time Mr. Jordan spun him a break from the off, and once again he had Charlie guessing.

‘Coo, sir, I thought it was coming t’other way.’

Mr. Jordan laughed, and gathered the ball that was flung back to him. For

the moment, maybe, he had forgotten repulsive faces, and stately old gentlemen, and giggling girls. He was about to bowl Charles another ball, when his uncle, who had dismounted, joined in the fun.

‘Hold my horse, Jim. I’ll bowl you one, John.’

Mr. Jordan grinned at his uncle.

‘One of your sneakers, sir?’

‘We’ll see. Mustn’t be too cocky.’

And Mr. Jordan’s face grew suddenly and problematically serious. He—cocky? *Absit omen!* Meanwhile, a number of spectators had gathered on the edge of the green. No gentleman or parson lost dignity by handling a bat or a ball.

Mr. Jordan took his place by the tree, and Canon Turnbull prepared to bowl to him, and the eyes of these two big men met across the green space. Good Christians and good cricketers, but the Canon could impart a devil’s spin to an underhand sneaker. It looked the mildest of balls, and Mr. Jordan, with a sudden gust of bravado, smote at it, missed it, and was bowled. The three lads cheered.

‘Got you, sir.’

Mr. Jordan tossed his bat in the air, and caught it neatly.

‘Clean as a whistle.’

He grinned at his uncle.

‘All cockiness is chastened. Thank you, sir.’

And the village was right in thinking that Mr. Jordan was both a Christian and a sportsman.

When a woman walks alone with a little secret smile upon her lips and in her eyes, mere man must be prepared for mischief and mystery. Miss Luce’s elderly gallant had departed, after gracefully kissing hands upon the Cripps balcony, nor had this public salute been missed by certain people who were passing. Well—really! Sir Hereward kissing the fingers of an ex-governess! Poor, silly old man! But the obvious conclusion could be drawn. Miss Luce had decided to become Lady Lancaster.

And had she? No one knew but Isabella, and Isabella was walking alone in Miss Charlotte’s nut-alley. Prestige, flowing tributes, social acclamation, the

choice of riding in her own carriage and of regarding Mrs. Pankridge as a lady of inferior status. The sunlight flickered through the foliage upon Isabella's face, a face that was luminous with secret laughter. For Miss Luce might have been ten years younger, a girl in her first douce bloom, with a virginal vanity toying with life's flattering chances. She could say—'I will' and 'I will not'. She could feel warmed by the sun of an amorous opportunity. Caroline Terrace could be at her feet, and what woman does not welcome such a bouquet?

Miss Cripps, fussing about the drawing-room, and putting things in order where no order was needed, grimaced at herself in the mantelpiece mirror. Confound it all, but life and Isabella had her fooled for the moment. Was the girl going to accept that sententious and stately old popinjay? And what, in the name of Eros, was Mr. Jordan doing, or not doing? Miss Cripps was feeling a little peeved with both her protégés. She, too, went to walk in the garden, and in the nut-alley she clashed with Isabella.

'Well, my dear, is it to be or not to be?'

Miss Luce looked demure, and assumed a lack of comprehension.

'You mean——?'

But Miss Cripps was all for candour, even though it might be rather irritable candour. She was a downright person and would have smacked the hypersensitive Prince of Denmark.

'Don't prevaricate. You know quite well what I mean.'

Miss Luce smiled a dreamy smile. Of course she knew, but wasn't it pleasant to play with such golden possibilities, and feel yourself to be a basket of peaches instead of yesterday's mutton?

'I really don't quite know yet.'

'Oh, yes you do, or should do.'

'Darling, I am rather enjoying myself,' and she embraced Miss Charlotte and gave her a sudden kiss.

Miss Cripps could not help being mollified, but she chose to continue severe.

'I think it is quite disgraceful.'

'But do you really think—he—is serious?'

'Who? Old Hereward?'

'Yes.'

‘My dear, when a bachelor of sixty-two is prepared to go down on his knees——’

Isabella turned away, but kept hold of one of Miss Charlotte’s hands.

‘One’s head should be a little—turned? Well, it is. You see——’

‘My dear, don’t tell me you are going to accept the old gentleman?’

‘He is—so good-looking, and so charming. After all——’

Miss Cripps swung her round, and looked her grimly in the face.

‘Stop playing. Orange-blossom seems to have gone to your head.’

Miss Luce let out a musical sound that was very like a rapturous giggle.

‘Perhaps. Perhaps not. May I not be seriously unserious?’

Miss Cripps grinned at her.

‘Well, I don’t want to have to smack you.’

Mr. Jordan, assuming that he had buried his lover’s vanity and said a prayer over it, remembered that he had not acknowledged Miss Cripps’s letter. Was he to appear in person at No. 20, or write a polite note excusing himself on the pretence that parochial duties were very pressing? And would Miss Cripps be deceived by the excuse? Hardly so. Surely he should be man enough to face the bowling, and display a courage that was not repulsive.

Moreover, John Jordan had to confess that he was not cured of his malady. It was like the ague, recurring periodically with feverish shivers. He was both yea and nay, and arguing for himself and against himself, for no one can be more of a sophist than a frustrated lover. He might have remained in this state of indecision had not a second letter arrived from Miss Charlotte Cripps.

DEAR JOHN,

Are you dead and buried? If so, I think you should consider—resurrection.

Blasphemous old lady! Her sense of humour might be somewhat acrid, potent smelling-salts applied to the nostrils of pusillanimous man, but John Jordan did realize that Miss Cripps was no fool, and that her intervention might possess a significance of its own. In a grossly sentimental age Miss Cripps had retained a pungent sanity. She had not wept over the death of Little Nell, or been touched by the pious priggery of Tiny Tim. Scrooges remained

Scrooges, and beneath the Victorian veneer seethed a vast sepsis which was more like wholesome muck than sugar-candy. Super-sentiment was for the few; the many cursed and belched and went unwashed, and if they shed tears they were mostly the lachrymose product of bad alcohol. Miss Cripps preferred William Makepeace Thackeray, a gentleman who retained the spice of Georgian realism, and was not for ever bursting into tears and damping a florid waistcoat.

Mr. Jordan, who was more man than mountebank, did come to the conclusion that Miss Cripps might be good for his soul. At least he would hear the truth from her, though those who fear the truth are often the philosophers who dole it out with unction to the world at large, and grow queasy when the unpleasant medicine is offered them in a spoon. Mr. Jordan, soberly resigned, took his courage and his hat, and set out upon the adventure, remembering that he was a very plain young man and without much money in his pocket.

XXV

NEVER had Caroline Terrace displayed a more serene and sunny face, and the lovely virtue of being alone with its own gay gardens. For some mysterious reason balconies were empty and the roadway unvexed by perturbing petticoats. Mr. Jordan, having cast an apprehensive glance along the line of white houses with the buxom balconies, and found a blessed emptiness there, drew a breath of relief and passed on with no giggling chorus to disconcert him. He was abreast of No. 16, when some other sound came to him, music in the air, music that had colour and an almost joyous exultation. He could imagine the flowers in the small gardens rising and waltzing to it, and birds perching on the balcony railings to join in the spring rhapsody.

Whence did it come? Could he not guess? Who else but Isabella could make such music? His feet might be large and massive, but the lilt seemed to impart to them a romantic rhythm. So, with a feeling of mysterious rightness, he came to the space below the windows of No. 20, and stood to lean against the green railings by the holly hedge. The sound poured out and down upon him, a waltz, and one of those waltzes that are love and life and dewy eyes and swirling skirts and tenderness *in excelsis*. There was a recklessness in the music, passionate abandonment, colour, light, and perfume, and the exquisite semblance of laughing, sparkling love.

Some impulse made John Jordan take off his hat. The reckless rapture of the waltz got into his feet, and made his heart beat like a bronze bell. It was in his blood and brain. What was making her play like this, with such lovely and joyous abandonment?

Good God, did it mean that she had said yes to Sir Hereward Lancaster, and was exulting in her happy choice and blessed fortune? Could such music be inspired by an old gentleman of sixty-two, however stately and endowed with riches? Mr. Jordan pressed his broad back against the railings, and refused to believe it. Perhaps it was possible for a sensitive creature like Isabella Luce to escape into and exult in lovely sounds without either sacred or profane love being postulated.

Then, quite suddenly, the music ceased, and the open windows up above became mute. Mr. Jordan put on his hat and, with arms spread, gripped the railings. He was tense with a poignant feeling of expectancy. Was he to see as

well as hear?

A curtain moved. A coloured figure showed in the frame of a long window. It stood poised and hesitant for a second or two, and then it floated out on to the balcony. Isabella in a saffron-coloured dress, her black hair gleaming. Her hands came to rest upon the balcony rail.

Mr. Jordan's arm fell. Then he lifted his hat. She saw him, she raised a hand. Her distant face smiled down upon him.

'Welcome, Mr. Stranger.'

John Jordan left the railings and stood below the balcony. If he was confused and inarticulate, and questioning the playfulness of the challenge, she was not. Her serenity seemed to sun itself above him, and her eyes held secret deeps of laughter. Actually Mr. Jordan's stout legs were shaking and his mouth was dry. Never had he felt so frightened in a pulpit.

'Is—er—Miss Cripps at home?'

'I think so.'

'May I come in and see her?'

'Why yes. I am sure she will be very pleased to see you, Mr. Jordan.'

Mr. Jordan indeed! This formalism sent John Jordan's courage down into his boots, for it suggested that the dream was over, so far as he was concerned. Orange-blossom and triumphal music! Lady Lancaster driving in her carriage, and bending gracefully and coldly to acknowledge the hat-doffing of a mere curate. Mr. Jordan found himself at Miss Cripps's door with his hand on the bell. Should he or should he not ring the bell? Dash it, was he in such a moithered funk? He gave the handle a vigorous jerk, and could hear a distant bell protesting.

A maid appeared, demure yet sly of eye.

'Is—er—Miss Cripps at home?'

'Yes, sir. Won't you come in?'

Mr. Jordan entered. His diffidence was quite ridiculous.

'Please ask Miss Cripps if she will see me. I won't keep her long if she is busy.'

The girl closed the door. Poor dear gentleman! Mr. Jordan might have been a large and terrified bull being inveigled into the slaughter-house. He was conducted upstairs and ushered into the drawing-room. It was empty. So was

the balcony when he dared to poke a head through one of the open windows. Mr. Jordan turned and glanced at the open keyboard of the piano. Had the magic departed from it, and the maker of music abandoned him to the mercies of a mordant old lady?

'Well, John, resurrected at last.'

Mr. Jordan had not heard her enter, and he turned to give Miss Cripps a startled stare and a somewhat apologetic grin.

'Yes, I hope I'm not—in the way?'

'You might be. Sit down, and don't stand gawking at me.'

Gawking at her? Mr. Jordan might have been some blundering boy, boasting an incipient beard but no self-assurance, and completely at the mercy of two merry wives of Windsor. But Mr. Jordan did not sit down; he stood upon his dignity and two very muscular legs.

'I won't keep you more than a minute, madam.'

Miss Cripps sat down, and her pug-face was inscrutable.

'I am quite at your service, my dear John. I said don't gawk at me. I apologize, if it caused you to feel huffy.'

Mr. Jordan shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and tried to make his voice sound un-parsonic.

'My hostess is privileged. I received your letter and conceived it my duty to respond—in person.'

Miss Cripps pulled a face.

'My dear, you are pure Parbury to-day. I am glad you have responded to my invitation.'

Mr. Jordan swallowed.

'I had another—reason—for coming.'

'Of course you had, or should have had.'

'I—er—wished to congratulate Miss Luce—upon her—engagement. I hope and am sure that she must be very—er—happy.'

Miss Cripps poked her chin at him. She was beginning to be sorry for Mr. Jordan.

'Are you not just a little previous?'

Again, Mr. Jordan swallowed.

‘I was given to understand, madam——’

‘My dear,’ said she, ‘if you madam me again I’ll smack you. Sit down and forget to be throaty.’

Mr. Jordan, looking flushed and a little nonplussed, sat down rather carefully on the edge of a chair. He had a feeling that he was playing ‘blind-man’s-buff’ with two mischievous girls whose emotional antics eluded him, and left him blundering about in the darkness without the hope of grasping solid flesh. There are different ways in which a man can make an ass of himself, and the most fatal form is that in which the victim is not conscious of having joined donkeydom, but John Jordan did stumble upon the knowledge that he was growing long ears.

He grinned. He had been nursing his hat, and he plopped it abruptly on the floor.

‘Good God, I must have got into the pulpit on the wrong day and on the wrong foot. But, you see, you ladies are somewhat—baffling.’

‘Are we, John?’

‘Considerably so—to mere man. I heard Miss Luce playing the piano and playing it in a way that made me think, well——’

‘Or feel, my dear?’

‘Yes, that that which I had heard must be true.’

Miss Cripps did not laugh at him, for this poor, large, simple creature was not a subject for laughter. Being in love is so desperately personal, and all the world of colour and scent and sound is impregnated with an emotional significance.

‘My dear, a girl can make music and delight in it, but that does not mean that she is ripe for orange-blossom.’

Mr. Jordan looked at her with sudden, blue-eyed eagerness.

‘I’m afraid I’m a jealous beast. *Mea culpa.*’

‘And why not? Lukewarm languor is not to a woman’s liking. Don’t be tepid.’

‘But—you see—I was so afraid of putting my large foot on a very sensitive flower.’

‘Well put, John. I am not sure that you were not wise. But—now—a little

less diffidence, more punch. I think Isabella is in the garden.’

Mr. Jordan reached for his hat, and sat forward on the edge of his chair.

‘I have your—blessing?’

‘Yes, my dear, you have.’

To John Jordan, Miss Cripps’s garden was very much Eden, smelling of roses, and suggesting mystery, and the Tree of Knowledge, and Eve among the apples. And where were God and the Serpent? Was man’s fool-jealousy the Devil clad in the skin of a snake? J. J. found himself upon a gravel path and hearing it crunch beneath his feet he stepped aside on to the grass. Perhaps he would find Isabella upon the nut-walk seat, or walking in the shade of cobs and filberts.

The lawn ended in a grassy glade sheltered by yews, thorns, laburnum, and lilac. The flowers had fallen, and the glade was all greenness, partly in sun and partly in shadow. Suddenly John Jordan stood still. He saw a figure in a saffron frock circling over the grass, arms outstretched, hands drooping, a dancing figure alone and moving to music of its own. John Jordan stood spell-bound, feeling like carnal man who has surprised some young priestess dancing in a sacred grove. Did he dare to commit sacrilege, for—almost—it would be sacrilege to burst in upon her rapturous remoteness. Should he sneak away? And yet the grace and loveliness of that waltzing figure held him, while vexing him with the knowledge of his unlikeness. Could he—the repulsive male—cope with her wounding comeliness?

Then—in the midst of one sweeping gyration—she saw him, and her arms fell. She stood quite still, head up, dark eyes enigmatic. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Mr. Jordan’s knees felt like wax.

‘I’m sorry. Shall I go away?’

Her face came alive, and with secret laughter.

‘Hallo, John. Sometimes one feels—foolish, more feet than head.’

He said: ‘It was a very beautiful foolishness.’

Her dark lashes flickered.

‘Do you ever feel—foolish and irresponsible?’

‘Yes—but I’m afraid I am a clumsy beast. I have no music in me.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘All that I may feel—never gets into my feet. You will have to forgive me that, if you can.’

It was she who moved with deliberate steps towards him. She held out a hand, and her eyes had ceased to be two dark enigmas. Her sensitive red lips parted in a smile.

‘I have something to tell you, John.’

He put out a hand to meet hers.

‘Perhaps I know.’

‘How can you know—when I alone know?’

Her hand remained in his. Well, he would have to face the inevitable, and try not to flinch from it.

‘Let’s go and sit on the seat.’

Still holding hands they passed on to the shade of the nut-walk. Her grip was firmer than his, and then she realized that he was trembling. How strange and moving—in a man of such strength and courage!

‘John——’

‘Yes, Isabella.’

‘Someone has asked me to marry him.’

John Jordan held his breath, and then found the words he knew he should utter.

‘May you be very happy, and may——’

They were by the seat. She sat down and still holding his hand, looked up with serene shyness.

‘But—I am not going to marry, John. I am never going to marry. There are some things a man may not understand. Sit down, my dear. I feel good to have a friend near me.’

John sat down beside her. He had let go of her hand. Had he not heard Miss Cripps say only a few minutes ago that women could not abide a tepid lover? And Isabella was not to become Lady Lancaster. Yet why this prejudice against marriage? His momentary exultation had come up against frustration in that one word—friend. Friend? Was that as far as she could go with him? If so, was it not obvious that no man as yet had piqued her into considering

marriage? And—assuredly—plain John Jordan was no more than an ugly brother.

He glanced at her sitting there beside him, so near and yet so far, seemingly serene and undisturbed by his own nearness. Her hands were folded in her lap. Her profile had a pale purity, her mouth so kissable, and yet not wishing to be kissed.

The provocation was sudden and passionate and John Jordan became mere man. In for a penny—in for a pound! Was he so emasculate a creature? His arm went round her waist.

'I can't help it, Isabella. I am going to kiss you.'

He was conscious of astonishment, for she did not resist him. Her mouth met his, and with no shirking shyness. Mr. Jordan drew one deep breath and held her close.

'I had to, darling. I wanted—just—— You see I love you so terribly.'

'Yes, John, dear.'

'Yet—you can't marry me?'

'No, John.'

Mr. Jordan gave it up. He had kissed her, and her lips had answered his. Did she love him, or did she not? Was there some fastidious and virginal spirit in her which shrank from emotion and the ultimate intimacies? His appeal to her as man might be inadequate—but what a word!

He stood up.

'May I ask that question again?'

'No, John.'

'Very well. I'll keep faith. But if you ever need me——'

She gave him an upward, wincing look.

'Thank you, John. Please go now.'

He left her, a man painfully puzzled, half-exultant, half-soured in secret self-humiliation. He—was—not the man to persuade her into marriage. She had turned to watch him go, and her eyes were laughing. Poor dear man, how innocent he was! Did he not know that a woman may love the yea and the nay, and sometimes cling to the privilege of negation? Her nay might be a yea in the disguise of a sensitive and testing waywardness.

Mr. Jordan left No. 20 by the garden door, and without paying further respects to Miss Cripps, or confessing that as an untepid lover he had been baffled and a failure. He had no desire to display his plain face to Caroline Terrace, and it has to be confessed that this hero sneaked most unheroically into the Shrubbery, and its protective green gloom. He found a solitary seat and sat down there.

His meditations were unresignedly dejected, and the humiliating words he had overheard upon the cliffs were like a text suspended above a family portrait. She could not bring herself to love him as a man should be loved. Dear brother! That was the limit of her tenderness. But Mr. Jordan's meditation ended in an almost manly and unpriestly protest.

'Well, damn it all, she did kiss me.'

XXVI

JUNE heat, windows open wide, blinds shading balconies, gay parasols in bloom, the sea like glaring glass. The bathing-machines squatted like strange white birds in the shallows, hoods lowered, with little squirls of laughter and splashings coming from beneath their pleated awnings. Mothers and nursemaids sat on the sands and watched children paddling, or building sand castles. A steamer had put in to the pier-head, and was unloading trippers from London, Cockneys who were unashamedly vulgar, and smelling of *esprit de corps*. The manure-pits in Caroline Mews exhaled steaming odours. Gardeners had got out their watering-cans. The first strawberries were being offered for sale in round white chip-baskets. Ladies sought the shade of the Marine Library's green-topped veranda. Dr. Rollinson was out and about, combating an epidemic of summer diarrhœa.

In the fields behind the cliffs farmers were cutting hay, and tossing it to dry, and the silvery swathes filled the air with their perfume. Boats crawled over the sea-glitter like coloured beetles with oars for legs. Donkey-boys were busy in the Old Town. Miss Cripps sat on her balcony, producing a sampler, and wondering whether Sir Hereward Lancaster would accept Miss Luce's refusal, or appear below with yet another bouquet.

And what of Mr. Jordan and that lovers' meeting in the garden? Isabella had displayed an airy reticence on the subject which had provoked Miss Cripps to pungent comment, and Isabella had gone on her knees and put her head in Miss Charlotte's lap.

'Please don't be hard on me. I'm trying so hard to do what is right.'

'Girl, don't prevaricate. Did John ask you——?'

'Yes.'

'Well, there seems to be a glut of romance, and you go and refuse two offers in a week.'

'I know, darling, but I can't bring myself—to——'

'Bed sense.'

'Isn't that rather——?'

'Coarse? Well, a dose of coarse common sense may be good medicine.'

Miss Cripps had given the dark head a gentle smack.

‘The fact is, my dear, all this emotion has gone to your head. You have been waltzing about and liking it, like some naughty nymph.’

Isabella had lifted an almost passionate face.

‘No, it is not quite like that. I’m not so selfish. Forgive me, but you don’t understand.’

‘Well, I’d like to.’

‘Think of what I was and am, the daughter of a man—— Some people may be too generous, and I have to remember——’

Miss Cripps had put her lips to Miss Luce’s forehead.

‘Is that it? You are still afraid of the self-righteous and the snobs, my dear.’

‘Not for myself. If I could feel—that—I had done something to show—that I’m not just—a woman who might be exploiting——’

‘A pretty face?’

‘A designing hussy.’

Miss Cripps had patted her head.

‘I see. You want to wear pride as your flower.’

Mrs. Pankridge, taking the dear children to play on the beach, found herself surrounded by a most vulgar crowd, a crowd which might have symbolized the insurgent and howling ‘Forties’. Beer was being drunk out of bottles, and stimulants that were more potent than beer, and a somewhat hilarious tripper accosted Clarissa. ‘ ’Ave a suck, old dear.’ Maybe her frozen and supercilious face had provoked the creature to impudence, and Mrs. Pankridge, gathering her offspring, marched off head in air. What disgusting insolence! What was the world coming to? The world is always coming to something that must cause Pankridge noses to grow thin. Clarissa retired to the Shrubbery, which was unfouled by the new democracy, and, meeting the Lardner ladies, recounted her experience. Just imagine it, a common wretch proffering her a bottle before two innocent children! And had the Misses Lardner seen the dirty London feet which soiled the genteel sea?

The Misses Lardner were sympathetic. They could quote their father, who was of the opinion that mobocracy was endangering the social scheme, especially so upon the Continent. Sedition and indiscipline were the prevalent

pestilences. The common man was growing arrogant, and needed a whiff of grape-shot.

Albert piped up suddenly with disconcerting curiosity.

‘What was in the bottle, Ma?’

His mother snubbed him.

‘Little boys shouldn’t ask such questions.’

But Albert had another question.

‘Did you hear what one of the men said, Ma?’

‘I did not listen to such *canaille*.’

‘But he called somebody a yellow-haired tart. How can a tart have yellow hair?’

His mother boxed his ears, and the Lardner ladies could not repress a titter.

Someone guffawed, and dodged behind a clump of laurels in order to avoid the ladies and conceal so gross a humour. Captain Bullard’s timber leg punctuated his rapid passing. Albert was blubbing, for his mother’s smack had been vigorous. A yellow-haired tart, indeed! What insolence! Captain Bullard, having reached a place of safety, faced about and grinned at his companion.

‘Answer that one, Miller. How can a tart have yellow hair?’

Captain Bullard and the Major descended to the beach and, turning towards the Old Town and passing under the pier, found a grass bank below the Marine Library. The bathing-machines appeared to be out of action, and the elderly dame who presided over them was standing with hands on hips, glaring at the new vulgarians, for a number of coarse fellows and rude wenches had crowded down to exercise a Cockney wit upon the ladies who had been bathing, and gentility—shocked and angry—had dressed, packed up, and departed. Old Mother Miles had every right to stand there like an indignant bundle, for her livelihood was menaced by this coarse crowd.

Captain Bullard and Major Miller stretched themselves on the bank of turf. The tide was full, and the narrowed beach crowded with paddle-boat visitors, for two steamers had visited the pier-head on this particular day. The pubs were busy, and had inspired some of the younger folk to song and dance, and the dance floor was the roadway. The crowd had brought its children with it and, like most children when playing, they screamed and squabbled and shouted. A fight boiled up over someone’s sand castle, and the brawl embroiled its elders. Four hatless men stood up to punch each other, while

their wives yelled encouragement. And the strange thing was nobody paid much attention to the fracas, but accepted it as a normal demonstration of guts and manliness.

Captain Bullard and the Major heard Dame Miles curse the new world like some raging prophetess.

‘Nice, ignorant, lousy lot—aren’t yer? Can’t even behave yerselves on a ’oliday. All you want is a gin-palace and a knocking-shop. Why do you want to come and spoil my sea?’

Captain Bullard chuckled.

‘Here we have the new democracy, Miller. Gentlemen and ladies from jam and blacking factories and what not. How do you like ’em?’

There was no sarcasm in Major Miller.

‘My dear fellow, they need—educating. What opportunity has life given them?’

‘Yes, that’s all very well. And what sort of educating? If this were a country crowd—it would have more manners and sense. Towns breed a sort of cabbage world. There is nothing humanly different to make ’em think.’

‘Save—the parson and the doctors, Bullard.’

‘That gives me an idea. Our friend John Jordan is the kind of sky-pilot for this crowd. If preaching did not work on occasions—he could punch ’em into piety, or, at least, into behaving themselves.’

‘My dear fellow, you are an autocrat.’

‘Maybe I am. Take a ship through the Roaring Forties and you’ll find you need an autocrat. The crowd will always need discipline and a master.’

Major Miller was not an argumentative soul, but given to reflecting with humility upon other people’s dogmatisms. He could and did observe that the family-fight had assuaged itself, and that men with bleeding noses and incipient black eyes were shaking hands. ‘Come and ’ave a wet, old sport,’ and they and their wives moved off in a body to one of the pubs. This was a very British characteristic. Punch the other fellow and then shake hands. No vendetta, no knife stuck in an unsuspecting back.

‘Did you see that, Bullard?’

The sailor grinned at him.

‘Not dago, my dear fellow.’

Major Miller rubbed his chin.

‘You know, Bullard, I have seen rapscallions in my regiment do brave and unselfish things.’

‘I bet you have. And so have I.’

‘Can there be much wrong—fundamentally—with the common man when he can go and rescue a wounded comrade under fire, or rush into a burning house to save children?’

‘You may be a little sentimental, Miller, but I take off my hat to you.’

Major Miller looked coy.

‘Oh, I’m a very ordinary old fellow. I always found men good chaps if you were just and considerate.’

‘I bet you did,’ said his friend—‘and they followed you to hell.’

The Old Town on these summer days could be redolent of other human happenings, and a cause of concern and much labour to Dr. William Rollinson. Gentlemen from London, after much beer and beef, would feel the urge to swim in the sea, and having arrived at a state of nudity, with some boat or groin for a screen, would dare the deep. Modesty had cause to forbid ladies, nursemaids, and children to venture eastwards of the pier when London took its yearly wash. Then some hearty fellow with a bulging tummy would be attacked by cramp and—if seen—rescued, and be lugged shorewards for resuscitation, surrounded by an impotent, staring, goggling crowd. And someone would go running for the little doctor, who—in a moment of irritation—would christen the season ‘All Fools’ day’.

A yacht had glided in and was lying about a furlong from the shore, just keeping her distance as she beat about with fluttering sails. Captain Bullard eyed her appreciatively.

‘Pretty creature. She’s new to me. Know her, Miller?’

‘No.’

‘Looks as though she had put in for a passenger.’

Behind them a carriage was coming down the hill, to stop below the Marine Library; Sir Hereward Lancaster’s carriage. Two watermen were running out a boat close to the bathing-machines, and a man-servant was lifting luggage out of the carriage. Sir Hereward himself stepped from it, and Captain Bullard, turning his head, saw the great man.

‘What ho, Miller! Is it an elopement?’

But it was no such romantic occasion, but an elderly gentleman's reaction to frustration. Sir Hereward, carrying a blue cloak, and wearing a yachtsman's cap, descended the steps leading to the beach, followed by his man-servant with a load of luggage. He passed close to Captain Bullard and Major Miller, but chose not to see them. The watermen assisted him into their boat, took in the luggage and pushed off and rowed to the yacht.

Captain Bullard chuckled.

'Get it, Miller?'

'You mean——'

'The yacht was to have served for the honeymoon, and the old Bart. is having to cruise—*solus*. Well, I'm damned glad.'

'You think he expected——'

'Absolutely. What a feather in the lady's hat! And she has withstood the temptation.'

Major Miller nodded.

'I'm rather glad of that, my dear fellow. Youth shouldn't mate with bedroom slippers and a night-cap.'

Captain Bullard smacked him on the back.

'Pithily put. Now—for John Jordan.'

Isabella Luce, leaning upon the balcony rail of No. 20, watched the white sails of Sir Hereward's yacht grow dim and small in a haze of heat. Her reticule held his last letter, a sentimental yet paternal letter, with none of an old man's peevishness. Was she sorry for her white-headed beau, or sorry for herself? Had she said yes to him, she too would have been on that yacht, with France and Spain and Italy, and even the Isles of Greece, at her service. Bordeaux, Bayonne, Lisbon, Cadiz, Naples, Capri, Athens. Maybe she was conscious of little pangs of regret. So much beauty and strangeness had waited upon her whim. She watched the white sails die away like the wings of a gull.

A transient smile was tremulous on her lips. The woman in her, self-regarding and garlanded with new vanity, could stoop to conquer and possess. There was always John Jordan!

XXVII

BEHIND his round spectacles the eyes of Dr. Rollinson saw much that other men did not see, and the minutiæ which he observed were pondered on and remembered. Summer heat, odours, and a plague of flies. Assuredly it was a Beelzebub season. Never had Dr. Rollinson known the pests so prevalent, houseflies and bluebottles. The foul creatures came swarming into kitchens and larders, and settled on the food in your dining-room, and pursued you in your garden.

The whole of Caroline Terrace was complaining, and Sir Montague Merriman, strolling into the Mews, was assailed by the reek of horse-dung. The manure pits were seething with flies, and crawling with white maggots. Sir Montague, who was a fastidious person, called on Dr. Rollinson, and complained of the plague.

Dr. Rollinson went and looked, and spoke to the grooms and coachmen. Why had all this manurial mess been allowed to accumulate? Well, Farmer Ingram had been busy with his hay and his turnips, and two of his men had been sick. Dr. Rollinson knew Mr. Ingram, and Mr. Ingram's prejudices and temperament and mucky manners, but Dr. Rollinson's word carried weight and he had the courage of a gentleman with a conscience. On his very next round he called at Mr. Ingram's farm, and found a very sweaty and rubicund gentleman drinking much beer to make good his loss of moisture. Mr. Ingram was a very English type: he had a face like a cross cow, a neck as thick as his head, and a belly that looked too big for his breeches. He was very much of the soil, laconic and completely candid, and boasting that he called a spade a spade, and he belched at you if nature willed it.

Mr. Ingram was not in a good temper.

'Dung? The more there is of it, doctor, the quicker it rots.'

Dr. Rollinson explained—with patience—that the dung-heaps were producing a plague of flies, and that Caroline Terrace was protesting.

'Well, let 'em,' said Mr. Ingram. 'They don't grow nothin' or make anythin'. I've had two chaps sick, and a horse lame. Good dung don't hurt anybody.'

'No, my friend, but it smells and breeds flies.'

‘ ’Aven’t the ladies got scent bottles? Too fussy and finicky, that’s what’s the matter with them.’

Dr. Rollinson persisted.

‘I don’t want to be unfriendly, Ingram, but if that stuff is not moved I shall have to put the matter before the Vestry. We can make an order to have it sold to someone else. I give you three days, Ingram. If the stuff is not cleared by then I shall get the Vestry to move in the matter.’

Nothing happened. The curmudgeon was feeling contumacious, and the flies exulted. They crawled over sugar-bowls and sucked at the jam. Caroline Terrace’s reactions to the pests were various. Major Miller sat with a yellow silk handkerchief over his wen. Clarissa Pankridge, delicately indignant, soused herself with scent. Miss Cripps, more practical, smeared treacle upon sheets of paper, and had them hung in kitchen and dining-room with much success. The most indignant resident was the Rev. Nicholas Parbury, who, moved to frenzy, rushed about the room, swatting the brutes with a folded journal, and so fierce were his smitings that he broke a pane of glass in a balcony window. Meanwhile, Dr. Rollinson watched and waited, and when the dung heaps continued unmoved to breed flies, he took action. The members of the Vestry met and supported the little doctor. Mr. Ingram, receiving curt instructions to deal with the nuisance, continued contumacious. So two other farming gentlemen were approached, one of them John Gage, and their muck-carts removed the dung. Then Mr. Ingram came and saw and cursed. The muck was his muck, and he would sue everybody concerned in this act of piracy. He appeared in Dr. Rollinson’s surgery and bellowed.

‘It’s my muck.’

‘Just so,’ said the doctor icily. ‘I’m busy, Mr. Ingram. There are people who can be public nuisances. I advise you to act differently in the future.’

‘I mind my own business. You mind yours.’

‘Oh, get out, man, and don’t be such a shouting fool.’

Mr. Ingram got out, but still shouting, and in the doorway he collided with John Jordan. The farmer shouldered roughly past him, but Mr. Jordan caught and held him by the shoulder.

‘Manners maketh man, Ingram.’

‘Mister to you, young fellow.’

Mr. Jordan smiled at him.

‘As you please.’

But Mr. Jordan had serious news, and a message for the doctor. A man, a casual labourer who had been lodging for a week or two in the Old Town, had been found lying in a ditch on the outskirts of Holywell. Mr. Jordan had been called to him, and Mr. Jordan had not liked the look of the fellow, nor had Canon Turnbull.

‘We wish you would come and look at him, doctor. The fellow is only half-conscious, and grey as a corpse.’

‘Not—just drink, John?’

Mr. Jordan shook his head.

‘No. The man—stinks. Acute diarrhœa. And he had been vomiting all over the place.’

Dr. Rollinson’s spectacles glimmered. He, too, looked infinitely serious.

‘I’ll come at once. I’ll drive you.’

‘I rode in. My horse is outside. I got a lad to hold him.’

The doctor sent for his gig, and Mr. Jordan rode ahead of him. The place where the man was lying was in the lane not far from the old Pest House. He had rolled into a deep ditch, and when the doctor got out of his gig and looked at him, his face was as solemn as an owl’s. He saw vomit on the grass, and as John Jordan had said—you could smell other foulnesses. A farm-hand from a nearby cottage was standing on the edge of the ditch.

Dr. Rollinson stepped down, looked the man over, and felt his pulse. He was almost pulseless, and semi-conscious, ash-grey, eyeballs sunk, nose pinched, hands blue, and to the doctor the picture was immeasurably grim. Here was the thing he had feared in a hot and droughty summer, with water short and flies swarming. In fact there were flies trying to settle on the man’s face, and feeding on his vomit.

Dr. Rollinson turned to the labourer.

‘Do you know anything about him, Rawlins?’

‘No, sir. He could talk a bit when I fust found he. Said as ’ow ’e’d been in lodgin’s after workin’ on one of they coal-brigs, or a furrin’ ship.’

‘I see.’

The doctor got out of the ditch, and taking John Jordan by the arm, walked him off down the lane.

‘Typical case, I’m afraid. Yes, cholera. Don’t want that fellow to hear. People get frightened, and fear helps to make them more—vulnerable.’

John Jordan repeated that one word—‘Cholera!’

Dr. Rollinson took off his spectacles and polished them as though the act would help him to focus the problem more clearly.

‘It may be an isolated case. I hope to God it is so. The question is—what to do with him? Nobody would take him in, and one wouldn’t want them exposed to the danger, or to spread infection.’

Mr. Jordan, looking down the lane, saw the stunted chimneys and red-brown roof of a particular building showing above the green of a high hedge.

‘There’s the old Pest House, sir.’

‘So there is. I had forgotten it. That fellow won’t last long, but one can’t leave him to die in a ditch. Besides’—the doctor hesitated and fumbled with his glasses—‘besides, who is going to look after him? One can’t leave the poor brute alone.’

John Jordan, in a quiet voice, answered that question.

‘I—could.’

‘You—John?’

‘Why not? I might consider it part of my calling. And I’m a healthy subject.’

Dr. Rollinson adjusted his glasses, and looked John Jordan in the face.

‘That’s a brave man’s offer.’

‘I mean it, sir. I suppose I should have to camp there—as a contact under suspicion?’

‘It would be as well. But there is nothing in that old house.’

‘I could manage. It wouldn’t be fair to go back to my lodgings until I was proved safe.’

‘That is so, my lad. And—no gossip. We should try to keep the thing as secret as possible until we know. But I don’t like the idea—for your sake.’

John Jordan gave a little laugh.

‘One’s job shouldn’t be just preaching. Let me do it, sir. My uncle and aunt would fit me out with what’s necessary.’

‘You are a good man, John.’

‘Well, I’m a volunteer, sir.’

It was John Jordan who picked the dying man out of the ditch and carried him to the Pest House, and the poor brute’s stench was in his nostrils. Dr. Rollinson had gone on ahead of him, to find the paintless door locked, but Mr. Jordan, laying his burden on the grass, put a shoulder to the door, and it flew open with a squawk of rusty hinges. They went in to explore, and found a heap of ancient straw in one room, and into this room John Jordan carried the fellow, and laid him on the straw.

‘John.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘I’m afraid you will have to have a bonfire when the business is over, and burn the man’s clothes, and—yours.’

‘All right, sir.’

The doctor rubbed his chin, and stood looking at the thing which would soon be a corpse.

‘You’ll need equipment here. I had better go and see the Canon. They will have to fit you out. I’m afraid you will have to play Robinson Crusoe.’

John Jordan nodded.

‘And I shall be Good Man Friday. I will come over twice a day, walk it. We will try and keep the business as secret as possible and pray to God that it is an isolated case.’

John Jordan smiled at him.

‘Well, I shall have to pretend that I am away on a holiday.’

‘It may be only a day or two.’

‘And when the poor chap—passes?’

‘Better bury him here. That was what they did in the old days, I believe. There is a piece of consecrated ground at the back.’

‘I can be both nurse and parson.’

‘You can, John. Now, I had better go and see your uncle.’

Mr. Jordan, left alone, waded out and round the building through a welter

of weeds, docks, thistles, and fat-hen, to discover a few old rotten wooden crosses. Some of them had fallen; others stood in grotesque attitudes, and any inscription on them had worn away. The poor, nameless dead! Well, a spade would be needed, and the Canon would have to supply it. Mr. Jordan, attempting to straighten one of the crosses, caused it to fall flat in the tangle of weeds.

His offer to serve in the emergency had been a matter of impulse, and when he returned to that sinister house and the room where the man lay dying, he was conscious of qualms and a disgust that brought fear with it. Was he to be shut up alone here with death, and a death that might possess a personal peril? Rude health is sometimes revolted by disease, and John Jordan went to open a window. The lattice had not been opened for years, and the catch was rusted up, and in forcing it he sent glass clattering. Well, no matter. He was adjusting the iron stay over the pin on the sill when he was startled by a voice, husky and feeble, and for the moment it scared him. Was there someone else in this doleful house?

He faced about, and met the eyes of the man on the straw. They had become live eyes, and John Jordan saw the bleached lips moving. As sometimes happened in these cases, life and consciousness were giving a last flicker before fading out like a guttering candle.

‘Where be—I?’

John Jordan forgot his fear, and felt sudden compassion for that dreadful face which was like the face of a man already dead. And what was he to say to the poor thing? What could he say? He walked across the bare floor, and kneeled down.

‘With a friend, my friend.’

The sunken eyes stared at him.

‘Who be you?’

‘I’m a clergyman. I’m here to look after you.’

A kind of bitter grin iced the bleached face.

‘What? A bloody sky-pilot? Gawd——’

The body squirmed for a second or two. The cyanosed and dirty hands were pressed against its belly. And then, with strange suddenness, consciousness faded out again. The lids closed over the starved eyes. The man lay quite still, but faintly breathing.

John Jordan, struggling with physical disgust, put his hands together and closed his eyes. He prayed for the man who was dying, and he prayed for himself and the power to transcend fear.

Dr. Rollinson had returned to the labourer who was holding the two horses.

‘Rawlins, I want a word with you.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Keep this business under your hat. Don’t chatter. I don’t want people frightened.’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘And take that horse back to the parsonage. I am driving on to see the Canon.’

Men of mean stature are usually more courageous than their larger and more lusty brothers, but Dr. Rollinson had a grave and frightened face. He was not thinking of himself, but of his wife and children, for the selflessness of the inspired physician may drop from him on his own doorstep. Pray God that this filthy disease had manifested itself in a solitary case and would end there, and thank God for John Jordan! A healthier hero could not have been found for such an emergency. Dr. Rollinson whipped up his horse, and with dust flying from the gig’s wheels, he came to the great red house with its gates and garden wall and orchard, and at the main gate stood the man he needed. To Canon Turnbull the doctor’s face had some of the greyness of dust. He came and stood by the gig.

‘Seen the fellow, Rollinson?’

‘I have. Cholera.’

‘Good God! What’s to be done with him?’

‘We have put him in the old Pest House.’

‘We?’

‘Yes, John carried him there. He is staying with the man. The poor devil won’t last long.’

‘But—John——?’

‘Yes, brave lad, that. But he will need things. I suppose you can arrange it?’

‘Of course. What things?’

‘Food, bedding, a spare suit of clothes. He will have to burn his, and the bedding, I’m afraid. And he will have to stay there until we are sure he hasn’t contracted the disease.’

The Canon stroked his beard.

‘I hope to God, Rollinson, it does not mean an epidemic.’

‘Amen to that, sir. I have my round to do. I shall be over again—later.’

‘I will see to everything. Leave it to me.’

‘And keep it as secret as you can, sir. We don’t want panic.’

‘I will.’

The doctor drove off, and Canon Turnbull went in to consult his wife. Here were problems, how to get the necessaries to the Pest House without the whole neighbourhood hearing of it, and to explain John Jordan’s disappearance. Mrs. Mary, shocked into momentary silence, sat down at a window, and smoothed her skirts.

‘Poor dear John. I’ll make up a basket. And you say the bedding may have to be burned?’

‘I’m afraid so, my dear.’

‘Why not ask the Neaths to help?’

‘Good idea. James could drive me, and he can keep a secret. I shall have to call at John’s lodgings and tell a white lie.’

‘Say he has been called away to see a sick friend——’

‘Yes, that would do. We shall have to smuggle the things out, somehow, without the servants suspecting.’

‘The Neaths might arrange it.’

‘I’ll go to the Priory at once.’

James Neath, when he heard the news, offered to turn out his dog-cart and drive it himself. Moreover, they could supply much that was needed, and a few more white lies might serve. The two gentlemen did the job themselves, loading a mattress, blankets, and a pillow into the back of the cart. They drove off together and, calling at the rectory, collected food and crockery which Mrs. Mary had packed surreptitiously, and with a bland explanation to the cook. Someone was ill at a farm cottage and needed help.

John Jordan, looking out of a window, saw the dog-cart arrive with James Neath and his uncle. He went to the door, but the Canon waved him back.

‘Keep inside, John. You are supposed to have gone away for a few days.’

‘Right, sir.’

‘We’ll do the unloading. Luckily this is a pretty lonely place. How is the fellow?’

‘Just breathing. Have you brought a spade?’

‘A spade?’

‘Yes, the doctor suggested burying him here. I can do that, as grave-digger and parson.’

Neath and the Canon removed a rug and proceeded to unload the gear, and John Jordan persuaded them to leave it on the weedy path. He could carry it in without their entering the house. James Neath gave him a look that another man might cherish and remember.

‘This is pretty—Christian—of you, John.’

John Jordan smiled.

‘Well, I haven’t a wife and children, and I’m a pretty healthy subject.’

‘More than that, I think.’

When the job was done, Canon Turnbull remembered the spade.

‘I’ll walk back with one, John, under my coat. By the way, there is brandy in the basket, if you need it.’

‘I don’t feel like brandy, sir. I suppose that was Aunt Mary’s thought.’

‘It was.’

‘Thank her. And—oh—by the way, I shall have to change all my clothes.’

‘I’ll lend you some of mine, John. We are much of a size.’

XXVIII

JOHN JORDAN chose to occupy one of the upper rooms. They were cleaner and more airy, and he carried his gear up the dusty, cobwebbed stairs, and spread his mattress on the floor. Unpacking the food basket, he discovered that Aunt Mary had packed him candles and matches, a superfluity of thoughtfulness that reminded him that he would have to go lightless, or rouse curiosity. Well, the long summer evenings were with him, and the sunlight was patterning the floor with the diamonds of the lattice window.

Canon Turnbull did not forget the spade, and John Jordan found it standing stuck in the soil beside the gate, and for better concealment he carried it into the house. About six o'clock Dr. Rollinson arrived, having walked from South End through the fields, for the distance was not much more than a mile. Mr. Jordan noticed that he was wearing an old alpaca coat, frayed at the wrists and ripe for a garden bonfire. He stood and looked at the unconscious man, whose breathing was now hardly perceptible. The death-grin slimed the starved grey face, showing the gaps in the fellow's foul and yellow teeth.

'He won't last the night, John.'

The doctor picked his snuff-box from a vest pocket, opened it, and offered it to John Jordan.

'Got a pipe and tobacco with you?'

'Enough for a day or so, sir.'

'I'll bring you some more to-morrow.'

Dr. Rollinson took snuff, and appeared to be contending with the disgust this human mess roused in him. Accustomed he might be to the realities of disease, but this foul thing nauseated him, and nausea was bad for morale.

'Get him buried as soon as you can, John. If he dies in the night, do it at night, if possible. I will take all responsibility. I shall be with you to-morrow.'

The little doctor looked sharply and steadfastly into the younger man's face, and then put out a hand.

'Some day, John, our people will know of this, and thank you. Keep your belly full and your pipe going. I am more grateful to you than you may realize.'

John Jordan was blowing his nose after the snuff, and he did not feel heroic. A night alone with that thing on the floor would not be productive of sweet sleep and happy dreams.

‘I shall be all right, sir.’

‘And don’t spare the brandy.’

John went to the door with the doctor, and when he had closed it after him, this sinister house seemed to clasp him in a slimy silence. Did houses possess souls, both evil and good, ghost souls which could make you sweat with the aliveness of old horrors and agonies? And suddenly he was afraid of the silence and the solitude, and like some Catholic devotee he crossed himself. Yes, a pipe was indicated. Mr. Jordan drew a deep breath and put his pipe between his teeth. He bit hard on it, and passing into the room where the man lay, was startled by an utter silence. There was no sound of breathing. The mouth had fallen open, and his sunken eyes were set in a stare. He was dead.

Deliberately and softly Mr. Jordan laid his pipe on the floor, kneeled down and prayed, and part of the prayer was for himself.

Dusk. John Jordan stood at a window, and watched the light fade, and the world go grey. Was he, a strong man, scared of this silent house? He felt a chilly tremor trickle down his spine. The sky was clear, the night warm, and suddenly he was moved by an impulse to escape into the clean air. A night in this house with that dead thing! No, better to bed down under the stars in clean green growth. He climbed the stairs, gathered up his bedding and carried it down and out, and, noticing an old yew tree at one corner, he spread his mattress under the shelter of the yew. The ground was dry here and protected from the dew, and Mr. Jordan ate his supper under the yew tree, and did not forget the brandy.

Sleep he did in the clothes he wore, but minus collar and shoes, and covered by one blanket, but not before he had let his thoughts go errant, and in search of the beauty and the tenderness thereof. Oh, the live and lovely face of woman, after that horror in that stinking and darkened room! But where was his Christian spirit, the courage that dared to touch a leper and call him brother? John Jordan, with the black spread of the yew branches above him, and the stars showing, found himself sinking into sleepy serenity. He had been both man and priest. He could say to himself ‘I have not shirked it. People can say good things of me.’ And when—she—heard of it—as one day she would, she might, if she cared, feel proud. With that thought he fell asleep.

He woke just before dawn. Not that any sound or movement disturbed him, but the clock of an inevitable duty had been set inside him. He sat up, conscious of a faint glow in the east, and the promise of a brilliant day. The yew boughs might have stretched beneficent hands above him. He got on his knees and prayed.

He had to dig that grave and bury the dead man before the world was awake and moving, and, going for the spade, and hanging his coat on a yew bough, he set to work among the weeds where no crosses had stood.

The sun was up in a cloudless sky when Dr. Rollinson reached the Pest House. The world, if it saw him, might have concluded that the little doctor was out for an early walk in the cool and pride of the morning. There had been a heavy dew, and the weeds were silvered with it, and under the yew tree John Jordan was breaking his fast.

Dr. Rollinson saw the green sods in the grave, and his spectacles seemed to glimmer with relief. The poor, pestilent thing was safe in Mother Earth.

‘All over, John?’

‘Yes. I buried him at dawn.’

‘Thank God.’

The doctor joined John Jordan under the yew, and, producing a pipe of his own, filled and lit it. John Jordan’s meal was of the simplest and cold at that, bread, butter, and cheese, home-made cake and beer. Dr. Rollinson, looking at him with warm affection, was comparing him with the Rev. Nicholas Parbury, whose religion appeared to end in cards and snuff.

‘Well, what next, John?’

‘What you wish, sir.’

‘I could wish you in a feather-bed, with a hot breakfast on a tray, but can you bear another day—in retreat?’

‘I can.’

‘Good. I shall have to take my groom into the secret. He can keep one. You will need a change of clothes—after you have done what I shall ask you to do.’

‘Go ahead, sir.’

‘Clean out that room, bring the old straw and the bedding and your clothes,

spread lime wherever the body has been, burn sulphur. You could fumigate at night. And then to-morrow, if you are as hale and hearty as I expect you to be, go back to your lodgings.'

John Jordan nodded, and drank more beer. The weedy burial ground behind the house was screened by a high and overgrown thorn hedge, and no one was likely to come playing Peeping Tom.

'When can I begin, doctor?'

'I will bring my gig round presently, and pick up some clothes on the way. And to-morrow the Canon could collect you, drive you a few miles, provide a travelling bag, and drop you at your lodgings. People would think you had been on a visit. Anything else, John?'

'I can't think of anything, sir. Must I change everything I'm wearing?'

'No, only the outer clothes, I think.'

'You think of everything, sir.'

'I try to. That's part of my profession.'

When the doctor had gone John Jordan dug a second shallow grave for the straw and bedding and his outer garments. How wasteful was disease in things human and material, and how thorough was William Rollinson! As a country physician he was far ahead of his times. Then, with pipe alight, and using the knife Aunt Mary had put into the provision basket, Mr. Jordan hacked off a yew bough, and, using it as an improvised broom, swept the old straw out into the burial ground, and into the trench. Outer clothes and bedding would have to follow, and J. J. wondered whether Aunt Mary could spare another blanket and mattress. More waste, more sacrifice on her part. Well, he could contribute to the cost.

Dr. Rollinson kept his word. His gig pulled up in the lane, and his groom came carrying half a sack of lime which should have been spread in the doctor's garden. Dr. Rollinson himself appeared with a bag containing a suit of the Canon's, and more food. A bundle made up of a second mattress and a blanket followed.

'We will leave all this by the gate, John. I have a pan and a lamp, and a packet of sulphur.'

The doctor and his man drove off, and John Jordan set about his task, dusting the lime all over the floor of the room where the man had died, and also in the passage down which he had dragged him. His own hands were white with lime, and he washed them with the dew of the weedy garden. Next

—for his own outer garments. He carried the bundle up the stairs to an upper room.

Isabella Luce went walking. On this perfect morning the country drew her, sleek fields where the hay had been cut, high-hedged paths, wild roses in flower, and Miss Luce was in a mood that could play with sentimental fancies. How pleasant to be able to say either yea or nay, and to assume the proud privilege of being a beauty. Never before had life suffered her to flower, and the honey in the flower was sweetly intoxicating. She had received a most courtly letter from her elderly beau, posted somewhere in France, and written with a savour of stately and intimate candour. Yes, he had seen Beau Brummel's grave, and the Gothic dignity of Caen, and he was once more at sea, and even more at sea in his affections. He would stand and wait upon her further reflection, and, should she deign to change her mind, he would consider himself of all men the most flattered and fortunate.

Isabella was feeling just a little sentimental about her comely and stately old gentleman. The summer grasses played about her idle feet, and realities were far from her. She had experienced so much reality that her impulse was to escape from it, and to enjoy the first bloom of conscious girlishness, and the irresponsible romantics which had been denied her. Lady Lancaster riding in her carriage; Lady Lancaster in Rome; Lady Lancaster bowing condescendingly to the Pankridge world.

She followed a field path past a farm, and a cow gazed at her over a gate. More wild roses in the hedges, more romantic day-dreaming, phantasy and green summer.

So Miss Luce came to a queer, lonely house with a broken gate and curtainless casements, and an air of drab desolation. Its windows were like eyes blurred with cobwebs. Weeds, weeds, weeds, tumultuous, overgrown hedges. She was intrigued. What a queer, lonely, macabre place! She hesitated, turned in at the gate.

Mr. Jordan, busy in an upper room, happened to look out of a window, and stood paralysed. He was in his underclothing, and minus his trousers, and here was woman where she should not be. His undignified dishabille may have exaggerated his alarm. What a situation, man and lover surprised minus his pants!

Had he forgotten to bolt the door? He could not remember or be sure. But she must not be suffered to—— He opened the casement, and, kneeling, showed a head and face.

‘Miss Luce——’

The voice and the formal method of address startled her considerably. She looked up, saw the face of John Jordan, and her astonishment was obvious.

‘John——!’

‘Yes. Please don’t stay here. I—I—er—can’t explain just now.’

Her eyes seemed to darken, and her face to grow pale and serious under the shadow of her black bonnet.

‘Am I—trespassing?’

‘No, but—— I’ll explain to you some time. Don’t come any further.’

Her gaze fell. She turned about and walked slowly back to the broken gate, and John Jordan, feeling a consummate fool, got the impression that she was more than puzzled. Which was true. She ventured no further and retraced her steps, and while John Jordan hurried into one of the Canon’s discarded suits, Miss Luce was pondering this extraordinary incident. What could Mr. Jordan be doing in that mysterious house, and why had he been so perturbed, and why had he peered at her over the windowsill? Phantasy had passed, and reality or a semblance of it was at her feet. Surely, Mr. Jordan was not involved in some—ahem—adventure? Had that been so, would he have showed himself at a window? The whole picture was inexplicable, a human rebus which she could not read.

XXIX

CANON TURNBULL brought his dog-cart to the gate, and under the seat reposed a large black bag. He found John Jordan restlessly walking up and down the weedy path. His curate's face was ruddy, but serious and perplexed.

'Well, John, now for more innocent deceit.'

Mrs. Mary's basket lay by the gate. John Jordan picked it up and with a last glance at that sinister house, climbed up beside the Canon.

'I'm glad you have come, sir.'

'No wonder. Feeling—fit?'

'Quite, sir.'

'Well, we'll drive as far as Basildon, and hope for no embarrassing—encounters. Then we can turn back, and you shall reappear—in the village.'

They had driven—perhaps—half a mile before John Jordan let forth anything but bold commonplaces. How were the strawberries doing? Had the Smith's girl had her baby yet? What changes were to be rung on Sunday? So patent was his nephew's conversational shallowness that Canon Turnbull wondered whether J. J. had reason for feeling troubled. Was he concealing physical qualms, the first symptoms of sickness?

Canon Turnbull glanced obliquely at John Jordan's solemn face. It was ruddy, and normal in its vigorous plainness.

'What's bothering you, John?'

'Bothering me?'

'Not feeling—sick?'

'No, sir. The fact is—something awkward happened.'

'What?'

'I saw Miss Luce coming in at that gate. Just natural curiosity, I suppose. I had to warn her.'

'Well, what of it?'

'I was only half dressed—I couldn't tell her the why or the wherefore.'

His uncle smothered a chuckle.

‘Why she had caught you—in——?’

‘No, why the place was not good for her. Of course I could not give her a reason.’

‘And she walked off?’

‘Yes. But I wonder what she thought.’

‘What should she think?’

Mr. Jordan looked rather like a boy who had been caught in the jam-cupboard.

‘Well, it must have seemed very extraordinary to her.’

The Canon rubbed his beard. He was beginning to understand, but his benign chuckle was internal.

‘I think I understand you, John. I happen to be driving into South End this afternoon to see Parbury about a diocesan meeting. I might call on Miss Cripps and tell her the truth. She is an old lady not easily frightened.’

John Jordan looked greatly relieved.

‘But—what of—Miss Luce, sir?’

‘Supposing we leave that to Miss Cripps. After all, John, you have a right to be regarded as a hero.’

That there were various lacunae in the pattern of the story, and peculiar perspectives in the picture, Canon Turnbull was well aware, but if the Pest House kept its secret for a week or two and this case of cholera proved to be solitary, then no more deception would be needed. Mr. Jordan was driven out and driven back, and deposited with his black bag at his lodgings beside Mr. Bragg’s workshop. The Canon’s clothes fitted him adequately, and would suffice for the moment, but there were details that Mrs. Beckwith’s bright eyes did not miss. Why had Mr. Jordan disappeared with such suddenness without warning her, and without taking luggage with him? The black bag with which he returned was an alien creature, and recognized as such. The two good gentlemen might have adequate reasons of their own for this mysterious behaviour, for mysterious it was.

But John’s landlady had a welcoming face.

‘Glad to see you back, sir.’

‘I am very glad to be back.’

Which was particularly true, but not as Mrs. Beckwith understood it. Mr. Jordan looked reassuringly Mr. Jordan. No escapade could be postulated. Mr. Jordan, unlike one curate in the past, had not been whisked away in a state of intoxication, to be kept in camera until he was once more fit to meet the eyes of his parishioners, but Mrs. Beckwith was a woman with a curiosity that had not been satisfied. Mr. Jordan's first request was for hot water, much hot water, and a hip bath, and Mrs. Beckwith was helpful.

'Wash and be clean.'

The sacred river—Jordan! Mrs. Beckwith, who retained a woman's passion for realist romance, was convinced that Mr. Jordan had been away upon some human and helpful adventure. What of the story of the sick friend? His landlady was ready to make a song of the Rev. John Jordan. What a gentleman, so simple and considerate, but with no nonsense, mark you! Even the local louts, were being tamed and taught manners by Mrs. Beckwith's perfect gentleman.

So Mrs. Beckwith lit a fire under her copper, though it was not washing day, and carried up two buckets of hot water, and refused to be relieved of them when Mr. Jordan met her on the stairs.

'No, sir, it's a pleasure, sir.'

She heard him splashing in his bath, and those moist activities moved her to maternal sympathy.

'Bless him. I never knew a gentleman so fond o' washing.'

Canon Turnbull walked to South End for the sake of exercise, for Mrs. Mary was hinting at a spreading waistcoat. He found the Rev. Nicholas Parbury at home, and in one of his moods of irritating verbosity. Mr. Parbury disapproved of this, and that, and everything. He 'what-whatted' the Canon, and took snuff, and gabbled until the rector of Holywell became puckish. Mr. Parbury needed a pill, or a stout dose of calomel, and Canon Turnbull administered it verbally.

'I shouldn't moan too much, Parbury. We may be blessed in calling ourselves—lucky.'

'What—what?'

'There has been a case of cholera in your parish.'

Mr. Parbury's port-wine nose seemed to go blue.

‘Cholera!’

‘Yes. Keep it to yourself. Only two or three people know, and we don’t want the news getting about. Panic, you know. We hope the case is a solitary one.’

Mr. Parbury took more snuff, much snuff.

‘Does Rollinson know?’

‘Of course he knows. And there is one particular person who has shown courage and devotion.’

‘Hey, what! Who?’

‘Your late curate, John Jordan.’

There Canon Turnbull left it, after emphasizing—with irony—the need for holding one’s tongue. Though it did not need saying that a man in Mr. Parbury’s position, and responsible for the care of genteel souls, could not be the victim of panic.

‘If the worst should happen, Parbury, I know you will set an example—to us all.’

The Canon passed out and on, leaving Mr. Parbury very much exercised in spirit, and trying to decide whether he could take his summer holiday immediately, and persuade some obliging and mobile priest to deputize for him.

Miss Cripps was at home, and visible upon her balcony. Miss Luce had a headache and was lying down, which suited the Canon’s purpose. He was still chuckling over the pill he had administered to Mr. Parbury, for James Turnbull was not a gentleman whose stomach flopped when danger threatened. The Turnbulls had been famous Border folk, and ready for any fracas with the Scots, tough and solid gentlemen, and a Turnbull had helped to crash the spears at Flodden.

He was shown on to the balcony; he pressed Miss Cripps’s hand. A chair creaked as he sat down.

‘You, madam, and the opportunity are propitious.’

Miss Cripps puckered up her pug-face.

‘What an adjective to apply to a lady!’

‘I could apply—others.’

‘Keep them for Miss Luce. I have a face like a cauliflower.’

‘I hope Miss Luce is not—indisposed.’

‘Just a headache.’

The Canon paused, stroked his beard, and looked out to sea.

‘May I ask you a question, madam?’

‘As many as you please.’

‘Has Miss Luce mentioned to you any peculiar incident?’

Now, as a matter of fact Isabella Luce had mentioned the matter of the strange house and its strange inhabitant to Miss Cripps, for the incident had been more than disturbing to Isabella. When the Devil tempts woman with the suggestion that her good man is less than good, Satan may shock the sensitive creature, or, on the contrary, make a Don Juan of her hero, and inflame her interest. Miss Cripps had recognized the house from Isabella’s description of it.

‘Why, my dear, that—is the old Pest House.’

‘Pest House?’

‘Yes, it has not been used for years. What on earth could John have been doing there?’

And then Miss Cripps had suddenly divined the unholy implication. Had Mr. Jordan made of that solitary and sinister house a meeting-place for Eros?

So Isabella cared, more than Isabella would allow!

The day was sultry, and Miss Charlotte had been using a fan. She snapped it to, and tapped her chin with it.

‘As a matter of fact she has, sir.’

‘Something connected with the old Pest House?’

‘Yes.’

Canon Turnbull fanned himself with his hat.

‘Well, madam, I know that you can keep a secret. It is a most serious secret, and we do not want it spread abroad. There has been a case of cholera, a fatal case, some casual labourer.’

‘I see.’

‘Dr. Rollinson wanted the man isolated. He was found lying in a ditch. John Jordan volunteered. He carried the man to the Pest House, and stayed

with him, buried him.'

Miss Cripps's eyes glittered.

'Did he? How—like—John! Yes, I will keep your secret, if I may pass it on to one person.'

'I think you may, madam.'

'I rather imagine that it will be of interest to her.'

Miss Luce was sufficiently recovered to come down to tea behind the protective blinds of the balcony. She was looking pale and vaguely unhappy, and her face did not ask to be studied too closely. It was the heat, of course, which had given her a headache, and the glare of the sun on the sea.

'Will you pour out, my dear?'

Miss Luce's lashes were like the blinds, half-lowered and softening other glares. Her hands moved languidly. Did the teapot need its red cosy on such a day as this?

'Canon Turnbull has been here.'

Isabella's response was a conventional 'Oh'.

Miss Charlotte fanned herself.

'He had something very serious to tell me. He gave me permission to tell you, provided you promise to keep it secret.'

Isabella was filling Miss Cripps's cup, and the teapot wobbled slightly and dribbled into the saucer.

'How silly of me! I will give you the other cup.'

'You remember seeing John—at that house?'

Isabella was concentrating on Miss Cripps's cup.

'Yes.'

'Canon Turnbull has told me. There has been a case of cholera. It was John who carried the poor wretch to that dreadful house, and stayed with him till he died.'

Miss Luce replaced the teapot and sat stone-still.

'Cholera!'

‘Yes, and John buried the man. Very brave of him, don’t you agree?’

Isabella nodded and put out her hand for the milk jug.

‘I do. I understand. And is—John—in any danger?’

‘We hope not. Every precaution has been taken. And if no other cases occur we shall know who to thank for it, John and Dr. Rollinson.’

Isabella added milk and sugar to Miss Cripps’s tea.

‘How very brave of him! I—I—should like to tell him so. But if it is a secret——’

‘Quite so, my dear. But you can think of John as a man who was ready to sacrifice himself for others.’

XXX

To the credit of all concerned the secret was kept until more tragic happenings made secrecy superfluous. Dr. Rollinson had discovered where the dead man had lodged, and he kept an anxious eye upon the cottage. It was one of a row, with small gardens and privies at the back. Its name was ‘Rose Cottage’, and the doctor could hope that it would retain the savour of a flower, and not become the symbol of a garden of death. A lane ran behind the gardens and the privies, and once or twice Dr. Rollinson walked down that lane. Odour, yes, and flies. Could he persuade the landlord to tip bushels of lime into those pits, and—if so—would not that rouse curiosity?

One afternoon, passing that way, he saw a man digging a shallow hole amid his young cabbages. Dr. Rollinson stopped and spoke over the fence. He knew the man well.

‘What, digging for treasure-trove, Giggins?’

The man straightened, and, resting his hands on the handle of the spade, smiled at the doctor.

‘No, sir, it’s treasure which a dirty tyke left me. We had a lodger for a week or two, and I tell you we were glad to be rid of ’im.’

‘Casual labourer?’

‘ ’E came off one o’ them brigs. Went off all of a sudden owin’ my missus the lodgin’ money. And ’e left us a mess ’ere. I only found it to-day, covered with flies. I’m burying it.’

Dr. Rollinson was looking very grave. The foul mess must have been lying there for days to infect the feet and suckers of hordes of flies.

‘Nobody sick in the row, Giggins?’

‘No, sir.’

Dr. Rollinson passed on with a feeling of deep disquietude. It hardly seemed possible for South End to escape infection, for all the conditions for food poisoning had been ideal, summer heat, tainted ordure, hordes of flies. No one in those days knew of the cholera bacillus, and the world of medicine spoke of it as a poison, some secret and deadly substance which tainted water, milk, food, clothing, even the hands of those who nursed. Dr. Rollinson, in his

hospital days, had experienced one of London's most fatal epidemics, and the sinister memories of it lingered. Filth, foulness, men and women turned into bleached, starved corpses, institutional treatment utterly inadequate; a panic like that of an historic London plague.

Dr. Rollinson saw the summer sea, and the crowded beach, and boats busy, and he heard the voices of children. How unsuspecting was this noisy summer crowd! And if the horror came, how was it to be met by one man, with no help save from two or three old midwives and women who called themselves nurses? No hospital here, no means of isolation. The doctor took off his spectacles and polished them, a characteristic gesture when he was bothered. Dr. Rollinson was both worried and a little afraid.

Caroline Terrace, sunning itself serenely, with gay gardens and coloured blinds, confronted the green Shrubbery and the sea like a woman who finds life pleasant and secure. How would this little world behave were death to threaten it? People with cash and carriages could fly elsewhere; the poor could not escape, for they were without the means, and had no refuge to escape to. Dr. Rollinson could remember reading the history of the Plague, and how towns and villages had instituted armed patrols to drive back any refugees who had fled from the cities. Grim selfishness, but somehow justifiable.

Dr. Rollinson felt the need for comradeship, some other man to whom he could talk, someone with courage. The Rev. Nicholas Parbury? No. John Gage? Perhaps. Mr. Jordan? Yes. But John Jordan was not to hand. And then the doctor saw Major Miller and Captain Bullard coming towards him arm in arm, men who had served their country, gentlemen of courage and with a tradition.

He went to meet them.

'May I have a few words with you both?'

'Anything wrong, Rollinson?'

'It may be—desperately serious. I don't want to be overheard.'

Captain Bullard pointed with his cane.

'In there. Find a quiet seat. You look pretty serious, Rollinson.'

'I am feeling serious.'

They found a solitary seat overlooking the sea, and Dr. Rollinson, sitting between them, broke the news.

'Cholera, gentlemen. We have had a fatal case, and kept it secret. And

from what I have seen to-day we may have an epidemic.'

'Good Lord, doctor! Can't it be prevented?'

Then Dr. Rollinson gave them the whole story, with John Jordan's devotion, and the incident behind Rose Cottage. Major Miller, who had passed through an epidemic while on service in India, could comprehend the doctor's acute anxiety. England was not India, where people died like the flies who poisoned them, and in this peaceful spot on a day in summer such a catastrophe seemed unreal and remote.

'Jolly fine of John Jordan,' said the seaman, tapping his wooden leg. 'Fancy old Nicholas alone in a Pest House! But, surely—something can be done?'

Dr. Rollinson smiled a thin dry smile.

'All we can do at present is to wait and see. Better not frighten people.'

Major Miller nodded, and his wen quivered under his hat.

'Quite right, Rollinson. I have seen panic and I know. But, we could prepare for possibilities.'

'Yes, what do you need?'

'Partly what I am getting, gentlemen, understanding and sympathy. And what does not exist—a hospital.'

Captain Bullard tapped his leg.

'I see. Of course. Something that could be used in that way. Wait a bit. There is that old warehouse of Bannister's down beyond the Old Town. It has been almost empty since the old man died.'

Dr. Rollinson's spectacles glimmered.

'Yes. It might serve. But there is more than that.'

'Helpers, nurses,' said the Major.

'Just so, sir, and all of them would have to be volunteers.'

The old soldier smiled.

'Well, put me down, Rollinson. I'm an old man but I might be of some use on the male side.'

'I think you would be more than that, sir. An example.'

'Good for you, Miller. The senior service can't be left out. The Navy, the

Army, and the medical profession. And where will the Church be?'

None of them responded vocally to that question, but each one of them had a probable answer.

Here were two people eager to come face to face, and yet avoiding each other with a shyness that was as much in contrast as their faces. Twice John Jordan walked as far as the Royal Hotel, turned the corner, looked at Caroline Terrace, and shirked the issue, or left it in the wayward hands of chance. He strolled and sat in the Shrubbery, and joined old Elliot in his boat, and took a turn on the pier, but no confrontation was vouchsafed to him. Isabella Luce's aloofness was more complex in its promptings and negations. Her urge was to tell John Jordan, not that she loved him, but that his courage and devotion had seemed to her splendid. Yet, if she told him that, might he not infer that he might hope for more than she was prepared to give? Isabella was not sure, and maybe she was secretly delighting in unsureness, the tender prerogative of woman, the power of saying I will or I will not. The pursuit was not hers, but the shy delight of the pursued. Let man be confused, stand before her in dumb awe, perhaps dare to kiss her hand, but not her mouth. Miss Luce was the wayward nymph, and John Jordan not quite the skilled and admirable lover. He could be abrupt, almost clumsy, and inordinately conscious of personal plainness, and of woman's frightening loveliness. Had he combined George Travers's externals with his own internals, a handsome way with him, plus courage and integrity, the issue might have been more certain.

For Isabella Luce had yet to learn much about loving. In the late flowering of her self, she was loving her self too much. Life had many things to make good to her, and no desperate and tragic moment had sent a flame through her new, virginal self-sleekness. Love should be pleasantly serious, but not too much so. The yea and the nay in her played like two birds in the spring.

Returning from a walk upon the pier John Jordan met Dr. Rollinson in his gig, walking his horse up the pier hill. The doctor pulled up, passed the reins to his groom, and descended.

'I would like a few words with you, John.'

He may have given John Jordan a diagnostic look, but John's ruddy face was consolingly healthy.

'Not much wrong with you, my lad.'

Mr. Jordan gave him a self-conscious grin. Heart-trouble, emotional tachycardia that could not be diagnosed!

‘I hope all is well, sir?’

‘For the moment, yes—but I’m worried.’

And then he told John Jordan of Rose Cottage and the sinister significance of flies and infective ordure.

‘I seem to be waiting, John, for a door-bell to ring, and a message calling me down there.’

‘May the bell not ring, sir. If it does—I am one who might help.’

‘I think you have done enough, Jordan.’

‘Perhaps, perhaps not.’

The doctor returned to his gig, and John Jordan, somehow inspired by this grave news, was moved to call upon Miss Cripps. He was passing along the Terrace when he heard a rapping on a window, and turning his head, saw the red nose and white head of Mr. Parbury. His former vicar threw up the lower sash and made a friendly gesture.

‘Come in a moment, Mr. Jordan. I should like a few words with you, if you can spare the time.’

Why this sudden friendliness? Mr. Jordan turned aside and approached the green door. Mr. Parbury opened it in person, and extended a welcoming hand.

‘Come in, my dear fellow. Got a pipe with you? Good. And try a glass of my port.’

Why such obsequiousness, and eager hospitality? Mr. Jordan found himself in the Parbury dining-room sitting in a comfortable chair, while Mr. Parbury took a decanter of port from the sideboard, and glasses from a cupboard. He filled both glasses, and handed one to John.

‘Light your pipe, my dear fellow.’

‘Won’t that spoil the port, sir?’

Mr. Parbury gave an eager chuckle.

‘Port first then, pipe to follow. Well, well, how’s our good friend the Canon?’

Mr. Jordan sipped his port reflectively. What was the ulterior motive here? Only a few months ago Mr. Parbury had found good reasons for ridding himself of his tame curate, and now he was presenting him with port, politeness, and the best chair. Had Mr. Parbury been told of the Pest House affair, and had he suddenly conceived respect and affection for Mr. John

Jordan? J. J. might be a somewhat simple soul, but he was not so swollen with clerical conceit as to accept this explanation.

Yes, Canon Turnbull was very well, and would be taking a holiday later in the summer. The Border Country, and much tramping and riding. Mr. Parbury's little black eyes lit up. Here indeed was his opportunity. He too needed a holiday, and seriously so, for his heart had been troubling him, and he had been sleeping indifferently. And would Mr. Jordan consider taking charge of the parish while Mr. Parbury rested a tired heart?

'I think I owe you an apology, my dear fellow. I was somewhat hasty. A jumpy heart makes one irritable.'

Mr. Jordan had lit his pipe, and he watched the smoke rise from it, and he wondered.

'That can be forgotten, sir.'

'Very magnanimous of you, Jordan. Of course this house would be at your service, and the staff. My cook is an excellent cook. And the usual fees, of course. I really do need a rest very badly.'

John Jordan finished his port and refused a second glass.

'I should have to obtain Canon Turnbull's consent, sir.'

'Of course. Naturally, my dear fellow. But you are willing to consider the offer? It will be a most Christian act.'

Mr. Jordan nodded.

'Yes, I will ask my uncle.'

'I am extremely grateful, my dear Jordan. I deeply appreciate your breadth of mind.'

'Oh, not at all, sir. Would you be going at once?'

'I hope so. And so my absence would not clash with your uncle's holiday.'

John Jordan puffed steadily at his pipe. Was it possible that old Parbury had heard of the Pest House and Rose Cottage and was running away? Such clerical cowardice seemed incredible. A gentleman with so high a colour and gipsy eyes that kindled so quickly should have more spunk in him.

Mr. Parbury accompanied his late curate to the door, laid an intimate and almost caressing hand upon his shoulder, and expressed the gratitude of a man with a 'heart'. Would John take the matter up immediately with his uncle? He would do so.

Mr. Jordan, out again in the sunlight, crossed the road to the Shrubbery, and sat down on an empty seat. He was sufficiently mature to have discovered man's passion to blame and criticize, and often to blame before criticizing. Judgment was so tangled up with man's self-love and his conceit, and so permeated with jealousy and malice that a blind Solomon might well hold the scales. But Mr. Jordan was tempted, and for romantic reasons. He would be in the midst of things and near to the woman he loved.

Well, now for No. 20. He shook himself into shape, and took to the road, walking solidly and deliberately like a man conscious of new strength and dignity. He was seen, not by Miss Cripps, but by a young woman whose mood was tending towards romance. Isabella Luce, sitting on Miss Cripps's balcony, with that lady's spy-glass in her lap, saw the man who had gathered the faint halo of a potential hero. Isabella had felt a gradual and growing tenderness for John Jordan, and on this summer day her mood was more yea than nay.

A girlish playfulness persuaded her to turn the glass upon the approaching figure. She focused two stout legs, and then a massive torso, and lastly a serious and ruddy face. John Jordan was unconscious of being spied upon, nor, poor man, could he divine the reaction of romantic woman.

Isabella, with a little sigh, let the spy-glass lapse into her lap.

How very plain he was! Such a good face, but so discouragingly ugly!

XXXI

MISS CHARLOTTE CRIPPS, who had been enjoying a little nap, was roused with the news that the Rev. John Jordan had called and was on the balcony.

'Very good, Jane. Is Miss Luce there?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Miss Cripps said to herself—'Let 'em talk. No need to hurry,' for Miss Cripps, as a privileged and prejudiced match-maker, was growing a little impatient with Isabella. Could not Isabella appreciate the solid and secure reality of John Jordan? Had she gone dreamy-dreamy, and was she still regretting a beautiful young rascally beau like George Travers? Drat the girl! She was no young thing of twenty to play with sentimental illusions. Her chance was now, and she might be missing it, and laying up for herself spinsterhood, loneliness, sterility. Why could she not accept a man whom no normal woman could fail to love as a comrade and a husband, and with an increasing and confident love that would have its roots in faith and integrity, and the business of being wife and mother? Miss Cripps knew all that there was to be known about spinsterhood and emotional isolation. Only her indomitable spirit and a kind of acid zest in life had saved her from bitterness and cynicism.

Yes, Miss Cripps could suppose that Isabella might protest that Mr. Jordan did not pique her, that he was cold pork, and not even roast veal, and Miss Charlotte could allow the protest. Isabella, after all that she had experienced, was suffering from an attack of girlishness. She wanted to fall in love in a hopelessly irrational way. She had every reason to be grateful to John Jordan, but gratitude may be like a girdle of chastity repressing emotional freedom and virginal raptures. Yes, Isabella had a case. Poor John did not pique her as she wished to be piqued.

Miss Cripps climbed the stairs, and slipped noiselessly and shamelessly into the empty drawing-room, and sat down to listen. She could, of course, pretend that she did not wish to play gooseberry; and her eavesdropping presented her with what she considered to be a most extraordinary conversation.

The two voices were in utter contrast, and Miss Cripps might have likened

Mr. Jordan's voice to that of an elephant attempting to catch an elusive canary.

'You remember old Elliot?'

'Old Elliot?'

'Yes, the boatman.'

'Oh, yes, I think I do.'

'He wants to take—us—for a row.'

'How nice of him!'

'Perhaps—you will fix a day.'

'Yes, perhaps I will.'

Well, really! Nothing about Pest Houses, and a man's courage, and the shadow of death; just perfunctory and embarrassed chatter. Miss Cripps grimaced. Mr. Jordan's voice was almost deprecating, and hesitant, and most unmuscular. Why didn't he catch the girl round the waist, and administer in public a manly kiss? But perhaps he was wise in his humility. Isabella might close up like a sensitive plant at too vigorous a contact.

Mr. Jordan floundered into more conversation. Had Miss Luce crossed over into Kent and visited Chatham and Rochester? No, she had not. And had Mr. Jordan? No, not yet. Well, why broach the subject? Mr. Jordan, feeling foolish, went on to dilate upon Rochester Cathedral and the Norman keep, and Dickens's association with the city. Was Miss Luce yawning in secret? No, but maybe she was wishing that John Jordan was less like porridge and more like simnel cake. There was no mastery here, and Isabella, though she might have resented the crude conclusion, was ripe for mastery, if man could move her to romance.

Miss Cripps pulled another grimace. Well, with Mr. Jordan so patently stuck in the mind, it behoved her to intervene. She rose, crossed to the door, opened it, re-closed it with sufficient emphasis, and walked to the balcony window. Mr. Jordan saw her and stood up. Poor dear man, he appeared to more than welcome her arrival.

'Well, my dears, having a good gossip? Yes, we want another chair. Don't move, Bella.'

Mr. Jordan carried out a chair, and was glad of something active and manly to do. The idle words of two chattering girls were very much with him. That which was repulsive might suffer eternal and inevitable repulse.

Miss Cripps sat between them, vivacious and positive. How did Mr. Jordan

fancy the new invasion, and South End becoming Whitechapel by the sea? Mr. Jordan appeared to be at a loss for an opinion, and remembering his conference with Mr. Parbury, remarked that he might be in charge of the parish for a month. Miss Cripps pricked up her ears.

'What-what, John! Is Mr. Parbury what-whatting off somewhere?'

'Yes, a holiday.'

'Indeed! Overwork, I suppose?'

'He says that he has an irritable heart.'

'Irritable fuzz-buzz! Does not any other explanation occur to you, John?'

'It has—occurred to me, but—er——'

'Quite so, to a man of your build and courage it lacks—validity.'

Isabella Luce had become silent and distrait, and it was she who saw a man come running over the crest of the pier hill. Her eyes registered the incident casually, like some object seen by chance in a mirror, and yet there was drama in that white-shirted figure. It paused for a moment on the crest of the hill with a suggestion of breathlessness and heart-hurry, arms hanging, head thrown back. Then it took a few staggering steps, appeared to pull itself together, and come trotting along the Terrace. Isabella Luce watched it, perhaps because she was not insensitive to its obvious and breathless haste. She saw it stop at No. 8, lean on the railings for a second or two, and then flop forward towards the door.

An urgent call for Dr. Rollinson? Obviously so. But what Isabella did not know was that the man she had been watching came from Rose Cottage and that his breathlessness and semi-exhaustion were not wholly the results of running uphill. Miss Cripps and Mr. Jordan were discussing the contrasting merits of Dickens and Thackeray, but Miss Charlotte became conscious of Isabella's absence from the conversation.

'Dreaming dreams, Bella?'

Miss Luce replied almost languidly.

'Oh, I was just watching something.'

'Man or beast?'

'Someone has just run to the doctor's. Perhaps there has been an accident.'

Literature passed from the picture, and the eyes of all three became fixed upon the space between the little flowery gardens and the doorway of No. 8.

The man was leaning against the wall, his head against a bare forearm. They saw the doctor come out to him, and the leaning figure straighten. It was speaking, but very few words were necessary. The doctor disappeared for three seconds, and reappeared wearing his hat. He and the man went off together, their figures vanishing below the slope of the pier hill.

Mr. Jordan and Miss Cripps looked at each other, and Mr. Jordan rose.

‘I think I will go and see.’

Miss Cripps nodded.

‘Yes, John. Come back and tell us.’

‘I will.’

Dr. William Rollinson entered Rose Cottage with more than a feeling of foreboding, for Giggins’s bleached and frightened face and his obvious exhaustion were more than prophetic. Nor had the doctor crossed the threshold before he was aware of a sickly smell, an odour that brought back sinister memories of London slums during a cholera summer.

‘Where is your wife?’

‘I carried ’er upstairs. And then I went all funny myself, and——’

‘Yes, yes, Giggins. I’ll go up at once.’

Dr. Rollinson, as he climbed the steep and narrow stairs, heard sounds of vomiting. The woman was lying fully dressed upon the bed, ash-grey, nose pinched, the vomit coming from her uncontrollably and running down her chin and breast. She was shaking. Her terrified eyes stared at the doctor.

‘Oh, sir, excuse me, I can’t ’elp it.’

‘Yes, yes, Mrs. Giggins, I know you can’t.’

She put out a beseeching hand.

‘What’s wrong with me, doctor? It isn’t that cholera, is it?’

‘We shall have to see about that, Mrs. Giggins. Is there much pain?’

‘Terrible gripes, sir.’

The diagnosis was only too obvious. Dr. Rollinson felt her pulse, thready and rapid, and while he did so he was thinking—thinking and finding the dark possibilities crowding upon him and bringing a palsy of mental confusion. It was not fear for himself that almost overwhelmed him, but fear for the future

and his power to cope with it. And what could he say to this woman with the bleached face and terrified eyes?

She was being sick again, and there were other sounds, and the doctor's impulse was to escape, to think, to plan. There would be so much to do, and so little to do it with, and he knew that stark ignorance and blundering slovenliness would be all about him.

'I'll bring you some medicine, Mrs. Giggins,' and he escaped down the stairs, only to hear the man retching in the garden at the back of the cottage.

But immediate escape was not to be his. He met a woman at the door.

'Oh, doctor, will you come to my man? He's terrible sick in the stomach.'

Dr. Rollinson escaped from the third cottage—for he had been summoned to a third—with a face almost as bleached as those of the sick he had visited. Five cases of acute cholera, and more to come unless he was very much mistaken. Fouled clothes, fouled floors, fouled soil, and flies. These cottages had swarmed with flies, and the creatures had pestered the doctor while he had examined his patients. A sinister, humming chorus of winged death! And, perhaps for the first time in his professional life, Dr. Rollinson experienced fear. If he were to have scores of sick upon his hands, how was he to cope with such an epidemic, nurse and isolate the sick, burn infected clothes, clean up foulness, and defeat those infernal flies? Moreover, he would have to issue a warning to the whole community, and panic might result, to make the problem even more difficult.

The doctor took off his hat, and wiped a sweating forehead, and even here in the open the flies buzzed round him. He flicked a flustered handkerchief at the pests, and it was like a signal of distress. Oh, for some strong and courageous comrade upon whose shoulders he might lay some of the burden and the fear! And then he saw John Jordan coming down the hill towards him, and his heart seemed to give a throb of relief.

'Well met, John.'

John Jordan looked at the doctor's face, and was shocked by it.

'Bad news, sir?'

'The worst that could be. Five cases, acute cases, and more to come, unless I am very much mistaken. I tell you, my dear fellow, I'm frightened. So much to do, and so little to do it with.'

Mr. Jordan stood with his feet planted well apart, and his fists clenched, his blue eyes on the doctor's face.

'I'm with you, sir, for any use I can be.'

Dr. Rollinson gave him a glimmer of a smile.

'I think you are God's own angel, my lad.'

The doctor was on his way to his surgery to obtain a supply of the only drug used in those days to alleviate the pain and the bowel spasms, opium, and John Jordan walked with him. Caroline Terrace, and the Royal Hotel, and the Assembly Rooms were like the serene and self-satisfied faces of comfortable people, who were in happy ignorance of the danger which threatened them. Dr. Rollinson paused for a moment with the look of a man who was tired.

'John.'

'Yes, sir.'

'This is a matter for the whole community. I think a council of war is indicated. Will you try and get hold of Major Miller and Captain Bullard? Ask them to join us in my consulting-room in an hour.'

'I will.'

'And Mr. Parbury.'

John Jordan did not smile.

'The vicar is off on a holiday. As a matter of fact he has asked me to deputize.'

'But he can't go—now.'

'I rather think he will, sir.'

'Well, if he does, John, he had better not show his face again here.'

They parted, and Mr. Jordan went in search of the Navy and the Army, and the doctor for a supply of opium pills. He took the box from a drawer, filled half a dozen chip boxes, and, realizing that his dispenser was watching him, he spoke quietly.

'Cholera, King. Yes, in the Old Town. Boil your milk and your water, and try to keep the flies off your food.'

Mr. King was a laconic person with a large, brown, walrus moustache.

'I'm not surprised, sir.'

‘Have we plenty of Tinct. Opii and pills?’

‘Yes.’

‘Keep quiet about things until I tell you.’

Dr. Rollinson returned to the Old Town, carrying a little black bag which might have postulated child-birth. He was happier than when he had climbed the hill, for no longer was he feeling the whole horror on his shoulders. And yet he was to receive more bad news. The Ship Inn needed him urgently. The epidemic appeared to be spreading like a heath fire out of control.

Mr. Jordan called at No. 3, Caroline Terrace, but Captain Bullard was out, watching shipping from the pier-head. John had better luck at No. 15, finding Major Miller reading on his balcony. The interview was brief, the Major offering to go in search of Captain Bullard, and bring him back. John Jordan was half-way through the french window when Major Miller asked a question.

‘I gather, Mr. Jordan, that you too are a volunteer?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You would be, my dear fellow. And where—if I may ask—are you putting up?’

‘Mr. Parbury, who expects to go on a holiday, offered me accommodation there.’

‘Does Parbury know?’

‘I’m not sure, sir. He asked me to look after the parish while he was absent.’

‘He can’t go—now. I can put you up here, Jordan.’

‘It’s very good of you, sir, but if I am helping down yonder I may be—infectious.’

‘I hope that—I—shall be in the same situation.’

‘But your servants, sir?’

‘If they run—they run. I’m not a stranger to active service, and roughing it.’

‘Then—I accept.’

‘Good, my dear fellow. Move in when you please.’

Mr. Jordan had his duty to No. 20, and what a duty it was! The two ladies were still upon the balcony, and they had seen Mr. Jordan call at Nos. 3 and

15, and to Miss Cripps the inference might be more than obvious. She sat placidly knitting, and flicking an occasional quick glance at Isabella, who had a book upon her knees, and Miss Cripps suspected that literature and Miss Luce were not at the moment profoundly interested in each other. The stage was set for a very macabre piece of drama, and already Miss Cripps was projecting the pattern of the various human reactions. How much of Caroline Terrace would remain? Was it reasonable to expect people who could afford carriages and horses to stay in what might prove a charnel-house and a stink-pot? Salubrious reasons! But was there not a foolish pride which sometimes transcended reason? The poor would remain, not because they were more heroic than the rich, but because they had not the means for flight, or anywhere to fly to. Miss Cripps was not fooled by panegyrics upon the noble working-man.

Mr. Jordan's deliberate and steady feet crunched the gravel below them. No panic rhythm here. He disappeared into the porch, and a distant bell rang. Miss Cripps glanced at Isabella.

'John is back.'

'Yes.'

There was a little frown on Miss Luce's face, and her eyes looked inward.

A maid came to a balcony window.

'Mr. Jordan, madam. He would like to speak to you in the dining-room.'

Miss Cripps laid her knitting aside on a table, rose, and left Isabella alone upon the balcony.

She found John Jordan standing at a window, and looking at the sea and its ships hung like a picture in a framing of green branches. Miss Cripps closed the door, after a backward glance into the hall, and Mr. Jordan turned to confront her. He gave her a transient smile.

'What we all—suspected, John?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. It looks as though we are in for a bad epidemic.'

Miss Cripps sat down and folded her hands. In this serene and sunny room she had no fear.

'Well, John?'

'I'm staying. I have to let my uncle know.'

'And where?'

‘At Major Miller’s. We are having a conference at Dr. Rollinson’s in half an hour.’

Miss Cripps nodded, and watched John Jordan’s face, for she divined other urgencies in him. He had turned again to the window and that cameo of blue sea and white sails.

‘People who can leave—should do so.’

‘Does that apply to me, John?’

‘As you please.’

‘No, my dear, I’m not running away. And if I stay, Isabella will, I am sure, stay with me.’

‘Is it wise?’

‘Perhaps not, John, but we will not desert our friends.’

‘Then—may God protect you both!’

XXXII

FOUR very solemn gentlemen gathered in Dr. Rollinson's consulting-room, and the room was as solemn as their faces, with its austere furniture, its books, and its high, arched window filled with frosted glass. The doctor had sent urgent notes to John Gage, Sir Montague Merriman and the Rev. Nicholas Parbury, and John Gage joined them, but neither Sir Montague nor the vicar appeared. Dr. Rollinson, seated behind his desk, summed up the situation in eight brief words.

'Urgency, gentlemen. We have no time to waste.'

Both Captain Bullard and Major Miller had been men of action, with some experience of sick-bays and field-hospitals, and John Gage had the high colour of a man of courage. Bannister's empty warehouse was the obvious building which could be transformed into an emergency hospital. It stood on the edge of the saltings, a couple of hundred yards or more from the nearest house, which was a fisherman's cottage, and, though it was a barn of a place, with improvisation it might serve.

Dr. Rollinson, with pencil and paper, jotted down details as these five gentlemen discussed them.

Straw, blankets, sail cloth or sails to divide the place into male and female sections, the children to be cared for with the women. Helpers, who must volunteer. Linen. Water. A sullage pit which could be dressed with lime. An incinerator for the burning of fouled clothes and bedding. Crockery. An improvised kitchen, made fly-proof if possible. All the equipment would have to be given, and regarded as so much waste. Stretchers. Strong men who would not be afraid to deal with the poor dead. Yes, for dead there would be.

John Gage Esq., being a respecter of property, raised the question of the Bannister widow's consent. She was somewhat of a she-curmudgeon.

'My dear sir,' said Bullard, 'this is like war. We have to take what we need, and pay up afterwards.'

'Well, we can at least ask the old lady.'

'Certainly. Will you do it?'

'I will.'

Dr. Rollinson was still scribbling down notes.

‘I think we ought to have warning notices posted up, gentlemen.’

‘Certainly.’

‘On the church door, at the Assembly Rooms, and the Library. Would someone see to it?’

‘I will, doctor,’ said Major Miller.

‘And we shall have to appeal for help and equipment, house-to-house visits. And we shall need cartage.’

John Gage offered horses, and a couple of wagons and straw from his farm, and Captain Bullard volunteered to tour the place for gifts. Dr. Rollinson, glancing at John Jordan, chose his man for the most difficult task of all.

‘John.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Will you appeal for volunteers? The people know what kind of a man you are.’

‘Thank you, sir. I will. And what about the warehouse door—if it happens to be locked?’

‘Use your shoulder, my lad, or a crowbar, if we are slow with the key. You are made for that sort of job.’

Again Mr. Jordan said ‘Thank you, sir.’

Dr. Rollinson and his co-operators went their several ways, but before leaving the doctor’s consulting-room John Jordan sat down at the desk and wrote two letters, one to his uncle, the other to Miss Charlotte Cripps. The letter to Canon Turnbull he despatched by a local lad, with sixpence for pocket-money, though Mr. Jordan was one of those men to whom lads ran with flushed pride and pleasure when he hailed them for his service. Miss Cripps’s letter he delivered in person, pushing it into the letter-box, and going out into the roadway to speak to the two ladies, who were still upon the balcony. Mr. Jordan raised his hat to them.

‘I have left a letter. It will explain itself.’

Miss Cripps asked Miss Luce to fetch the letter, while she watched John Jordan’s broad back and stout legs passing away towards duty. Isabella, a little breathless, returned with the letter, and Miss Cripps opened and read it.

‘I am going to help with the sick. I shall not be able to visit you again, lest

I might bring you infection. My love to Isabella. Take care of her for me.'

Miss Cripps smiled, rubbed her chin, and then passed the letter to Miss Luce.

'I think you might read it.'

Isabella read it, and her eyes were darkly luminous. She refolded it, and her fingers seemed to linger.

'May I keep it?'

'Yes, my dear. It's the letter of a man who is brave and unselfish.'

Caroline Terrace saw Dr. Rollinson in person fastening a sheet of white cardboard on the Shrubbery gate. Mrs. Pankridge, with natural curiosity, sent her husband to investigate, and Mr. Pankridge returned to No. 13 with a look of bleached solemnity. Was not 13 an unlucky number?

'Well, what's it all mean?'

Mr. Pankridge pulled his whiskers.

'Cholera, my dear; a warning.'

'Cholera!'

'Yes.'

'Good gracious! How—disgusting! Those dirty people in the Old Town, I suppose?'

Her husband nodded blankly.

'An epidemic.'

'Good gracious! We must leave at once. Think of our poor dear children.'

Mr. Jordan, in search of volunteer helpers, was experiencing those human revelations which make history. The response to his first appeal was sullenly negative.

'Me? I couldn't do that, sir. It ain't my job. And I've got to think of m' wife and kids.'

Mr. Jordan accepted the first frightened refusals with solid gentleness, but when they continued his temper began to rise. Was human nature so selfish and cowardly, and he a failure in persuading other men to face danger, disease,

and death? Sighting a group of watermen bunched together on the beach, he crossed the roadway and spoke to Tom Myall, a man with a big black beard.

‘Tom, may I have a word with you?’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

They stood a little apart, watched in silence by the others. Tom Myall looked straight and steadily into Mr. Jordan’s eyes, and listened to those challenging words of his.

‘Tom, you know what we are facing, a terrible disease, and death. Things have to be done, and done quickly. It’s natural for man to feel fear, but I seem to have struck nothing but cowardice.’

‘What do you want of me, sir?’

‘Help. An example,’ and Mr. Jordan went on to explain what had to be done and the danger it might entail, and all the while Tom Myall’s eyes were on him.

‘We have to turn Bannister’s warehouse into an emergency hospital, and get the sick moved there. If we don’t scotch this plague we may find half the place down with it.’

Tom nodded.

‘I see, sir.’

Tom turned without another word and rejoined the group of men.

‘Come on, you chaps. Mr. Jordan wants us. Lifeboat service.’

There was a moment’s hesitation.

‘What’s the game?’

‘Well, if you want t’ know, risking your own bloody lives for the sake of all of us. I’m ready to go with a man who ’as guts like Mr. Jordan.’

There was a shuffling of feet and an exchange of glances. Then the simple goodness of the common man in the face of some human challenge set them moving in a group towards their leader.

‘We’re on the job, sir.’

Mr. Jordan took off his hat to them.

‘I’m proud of you, gentlemen. Let us get to it.’

Bannister's warehouse was a red brick, slate-roofed building sitting on the edge of the saltings rather like a large bird on a nest. Old Bannister had been a kind of general merchant, supplying the countryside and its village shops; his goods had come by sea, to be unloaded at the Old Town jetty. A weedy track led to the building, and when Mr. Jordan and his volunteers approached it, they found John Gage there and the door unlocked. The men touched the peaks of their caps to him. Here was another gentleman who had spunk in him.

'I'm afraid the place is in a pretty bad mess, Jordan.'

It was, its windows cobwebbed and dirty or shuttered, and its dim interior a litter of old packing-cases, tousled straw, ragged sacks, and what not. Its floor was boarded, and in one corner an office had been built in, and closed by a half-glazed door.

'Clear out and clear up, Jordan, what? I have sent for two loads of clean straw.'

'Yes, coats off, sir.'

'Shall we burn the rubbish?'

'Hadn't we better stack it outside, sir? It may be useful for burning—what we shall have to burn.'

Mr. Jordan peeled off his coat and led his squad into action. It was a hot and dusty business and sweating faces became grey and grimed. The rubbish was cleared and Tom Myall sent two of his fellows for brooms and buckets. There was no well, but the sea would serve. A step-ladder lay in a corner and could be used for window-cleaning. John Gage, watching the work, was making mental notes.

'Jordan.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Water needed. I have a water-cart which can be used. It could be filled daily at the pumping station.'

'Good idea, sir.'

'And rope—to hang the screen. I'll send some along. By the way, that office might be turned into a kitchen. We have a portable stove at the farm which we use at harvest-time. The cook-house might be gauzed off against flies.'

'We ought to have some sort of accommodation for the helpers.'

'There is the cricket club marquee. We'll have it brought down here.'

John Gage had gone upon other quests, and Mr. Jordan, coatless, sleeves turned up, his face shining with dusty sweat, was carrying a last sackful of debris out of the building when he saw a carriage and pair rolling over the saltings. Miss Cripps's carriage! Tom Myall, arriving with two buckets full of sea-water, set them down with a black-bearded grin at Mr. Jordan, for Tom Myall had seen that which had been concealed from John Jordan. There were two ladies in the carriage.

'Miss Cripps, sir, and Miss Luce. She's a sticker, she is.'

Mr. Jordan got rid of his sack, and looked like a shy lad at Tom Myall.

'Is my face very dirty, Tom?'

Bless him, what did it matter!

'Nothing to speak of, sir.'

Mr. Jordan stood waiting, and watching the nice stepping of the two greys. Miss Cripps's coachman touched his hat to the coatless curate. Mr. Jordan might be soused in sweat and dirt, but to the common man he was no figure of fun. As the carriage swung sideways towards the red-brick building, Mr. Jordan saw the two ladies under cream and rose parasols. The front seat was piled high with blankets, but Mr. Jordan did not look at these bundles. Beauty even in beastliness! The simple inevitableness of love and of loving! He had no hat to raise, and a tuft of hair streaked his glistening forehead. He looked at Miss Cripps, and then at Isabella.

Was it mere fancy, or were her eyes somehow more his? Green saltings, blue sea and sky, a pale face under a rose-coloured parasol. Tom Myall had put down his buckets and touched his cap to the ladies. Mr. Jordan's love affair had become common gossip, and Tom Myall watched Miss Luce's face.

'Well, John, we have brought a contribution.'

'Thank you. We have been hard at work clearing up.'

'So I see.'

Mr. Jordan pushed back his lock of hair, and glanced again at Isabella.

'Yes, I'm afraid we are a bit dusty.'

'Dirty but unbowed.'

'I'll unload your offering. Tom, give me a hand.'

Isabella Luce had been sitting like a figure in a *tableau vivant*, and suddenly she closed her parasol, laid it beside her, and bending forward, lifted a bundle of blankets. She passed them to John Jordan and in taking them his hands touched hers. Her eyes were on his, steadfastly, unsmilingly, as though she had discovered some profound significance both in herself and in him. Not a word passed between them, but John Jordan seemed for a moment to forget the white bundle which both their arms supported. Their hands remained in contact, eyes looking into eyes.

Death might be in the air, but Miss Charlotte was capable of an inward chuckle. The bundle might have been a baby placed by its mother in priestly hands for a christening. Well, why not? If John Jordan became a father, could he baptize his own baby, and Isabella's child? Well, why not?

At last their hands slipped apart. Isabella sat back, with lashes lowered, and the face of a virgin mother. Mr. Jordan, luminous behind his sweat and dirt, walked off with his burden, holding it with a suggestion of paternal care! Tom Myall, with a sly grin at Miss Cripps, reached in for a second load, and carried it into the red-brick building, and there he surprised Mr. Jordan standing in a shaft of sunlight, the white bundle clasped in his arms, and his face the face of an incredulous yet exultant lover.

Tom Myall looked about him for a patch of clear floor, and then with deliberate solemnity deposited his burden there. Mr. Jordan was still standing like some self-conscious father holding his first child, and Tom Myall, with a grin of affection, left him there and went out for more blankets.

The Marquis and the Marquise de Beaucourt were on a holiday in France, and Sir Hereward Lancaster sailing in southern seas, so that no high and stately example could be set by these comely *aristos*. Caroline Terrace, placid and complacent, was self-revealing in this septic crisis. Miss Cripps and Miss Luce, returning after a country round, saw straws blowing in the wind, if somewhat solid straws. John Gage's wagons were unloading their tawny trusses at Bannister's warehouse, and Mr. Jordan had straw in his hair and high and romantic courage in his heart, but the symbolic straws upon the terrace front caused Miss Cripps to register hot scorn.

Behold, the Rev. Nicholas Parbury toddling in great haste behind a fellow with a hand-cart loaded with luggage. Mr. Parbury was making for the pier, and the London steamer, which could call there without disbursing its passengers, for Captain Bullard had scrawled a large notice in chalk upon a blackboard and had had the storm cone hoisted.

‘Keep away. We have cholera.’

The Lardner carriage was waiting outside No. 5, and a hired vehicle outside the Pankridge house, but No. 1 had produced the most lamentable surprise. Sir Montague Merriman and her ladyship were in flight, piling into the family coach, and watched by a group of common people from the Mews, people who were sullenly and silently critical. Were the gentry running away?

Miss Cripps’s carriage drew up beside the somewhat shabby vehicle into which the Pankridge party was cramming itself. Clarissa and the children and the governess were seated in it, but Mr. Pankridge, hatless and heated, appeared to be involved in a heated argument with Mrs. Pankridge’s cook and parlour-maid. They were to be left behind in care of the house, and were being most vocally candid upon the matter.

‘What’s going to happen to us?’

Mr. Pankridge was trying to explain that they were amply provided for, and that they could run up bills.

‘Run up bills, can we?’ shouted the cook. ‘And who’s doing the running, I should like to know?’

Vulgar, impudent creatures! Mrs. Pankridge called to her husband.

‘Tell them they can go home, and stay at home. And don’t waste time arguing.’

Mr. Pankridge put on his hat, and prepared to enter the carriage, only to find Miss Cripps’s equipage lying gun-to-gun with his. Miss Cripps fired a broadside at No. 12A.

‘Happy journey, Mrs. Pankridge. May I congratulate you on the example you are setting?’

Clarissa, pinched, and nose in air, ignored the insult, and her husband, collecting his coat-tails, addressed himself to the driver.

‘Right, my man, move on.’

But Miss Cripps had not completed her campaign.

‘No. 5, James.’

Her greys, following in the wake of the Pankridge party, drew up beside the Lardner carriage. The ladies were seated, and Mr. Lardner about to join them. The Lardner ladies were all stiff profiles to her, and Miss Cripps fired yet another broadside.

‘On circuit, I presume. Congratulations. How considerate of you, Mr. Ludovic, to take your family with you.’

Mr. Lardner gave her an icy stare.

‘Kindly mind your own business, madam.’

‘Minding one’s own business, sir, may mean staying at home.’

XXXIII

SUMMER heat, flies, filth. Seventeen cases of cholera lying upon straw pallets in that gloomy building, five women and twelve men. Seven dead and buried in the new burial ground of St. John's. Fear abroad, and the selfishness that fear breeds. Tom Myall and two other men alone had stood the test, with Major Miller and Captain Bullard. Dr. Rollinson looking grey and tired. Two working-women taking turns in caring for the female sick. Foul straw and bedding to be burned, water carried in, broth prepared, opium given. Moanings, stench, human beings who looked like grey corpses. Flies everywhere; a glaring sun and sea.

John Jordan, waking after a short sleep in the white marquee, some fifty yards from the warehouse, sat up and with hot eyes saw through the open flap a round red-gold sun swelling out of a glassy sea. He rubbed his eyes, yawned, stretched himself, and getting on his knees, prayed, and his prayer was personal.

'Oh, God, has any man the right to feel tired? Give me strength and guts, and a stomach that does not heave.'

He was in shirt and breeches, and as he rose and stood in the open air and felt the coolness of the morning, the same old biblical words came to him:

'Wash in Jordan, wash and be clean.'

The calm sea called to him, and the deserted foreshore; and crossing the green space and crunching over the shingle he stripped himself, waded in, and swam, after sousing his head in the salt water. He struck out westwards, and as he swam he saw the rising sun shining upon Caroline Terrace and the green growth below it. The white houses looked serene, though most of them were empty, and as John Jordan swam, he was conscious of something that was lacking. He felt no hero, but was poignantly aware of human fear and failure. Those houses were like white teeth flashing an ironic grin over the poltroonery of those who should have served and in serving shown a Christian courage.

And how solitary was the shore. These lesser people had shut themselves into their houses, as in the old plague days. Not a visitor remained in the Royal Hotel, or in any of the lodging-houses. Panic, emptiness, cowardice.

John Jordan, chin just above the water, his tousled head alight, looked at

that particular house. She—was still there, and in reasonable safety. And yet? What did he ask of her? Something for himself, or something that transcended self? He turned on his back and floated, and watched the sky grow more blue.

As he turned shorewards a sudden inspiration came to him. God in Heaven, why had it not come to him before? The water lapped his chin, a chin that needed the razor, and yonder he saw a figure in white ducks striding across the saltings, Major Miller coming on duty. Grand old man, Miller, gentle, fearless, devoted. The early sunlight shone upon his wobbling wen and made a gold knob of it. John Jordan would have said it should have been a halo.

Miller saw the swimmer and turned towards the shore, and Mr. Jordan, rising from the sea like some nude deity, waded to meet the old soldier.

‘Morning, sir.’

‘Had some sleep, John?’

‘Yes, and an idea.’

He climbed the shingle bank, and standing unashamedly naked, swung his arms, and flicked the sea-water from his hair.

‘May I know the idea, John?’

‘You will—hear it, sir.’

Major Miller smiled with tired eyes.

‘We need more courage, John.’

‘A tocsin, sir. I wish——’

‘Ah, yes, many things, my lad. How are the poor sick?’

‘Pretty bad, I’m afraid. Dr. Rollinson was down at midnight. Tom and I shared duty.’

John Jordan reached for his shirt. His body was moist, but no matter.

‘No eyes to see, sir. There should be eyes. Fear blinds people.’

He stooped for his trousers.

‘Can you manage, for an hour?’

‘Yes, John.’

‘Your men must have loved you, sir.’

‘That—perhaps, John—is the only thing in life that matters.’

So Major Miller went upon duty, and Mr. Jordan followed his inspiration, with fear-stricken window's and closed doors watching him. He climbed the pier hill, and, turning towards the church, saw the little crooked figure of Ethan Chigwell, the verger, standing in the porch. Was this a sign and a symbol? The man with the key, the key that might unlock the doors of courage?

'Morning to you, Ethan. You and I must have heard the same voice.'

The swarthy little cripple looked at John Jordan with eyes of affection.

'Something in me, sir, said go to the church early.'

'I need you. Ring the church bell, ring it as loudly as you can. Let the welkin ring, Ethan.'

Isabella Luce saw the dawn rise. She had not been happy in her sleeping, or happy in herself. This was no waltz dream, no coloured fancy, no playing with secret whims and vanities. No. 20, Caroline Terrace might have been a castle secure and stately, and she an idle creature, dressed in dreams and shod in strange perversities. She was at her window. What a lovely dawn, but down yonder there was no loveliness, but fear and death and courage. She was not liking herself, and why? Fastidiousness—yes. Fear—perhaps? True, she had not fled like all those others, but she had no share in others' sufferings.

She dressed; she put on a black bonnet. She would go down to the sea and listen for anything it might say to her. She slipped down the stairs, and from a house that was silent. She eased the bolts of the green door, and turned the key, and as she opened it that sudden sound smote her.

A bell, the church bell, clanging like some valiant voice.

'Come, come, all ye craven and ye faithful. I am the voice of God. Come, come.'

She closed the door gently and with deliberate stealth. Her eyes were wide, and like the eyes of a visionary. She passed the silent houses steeped in the horizontal glow, and came to the iron gates and the holly hedges. The bell was swinging, and her heart beat with it.

She came to the church door, and stood at gaze. She saw a kneeling figure at the altar. So it was he who had bade the bell ring, and was praying there. She too knelt down on the stones of the porch, and she felt neither the chill nor the hardness of them. Up above, in the little belfry, the bell still called, but not another soul joined in that silent intercession.

Isabella's eyes were closed, her hands together. The little vanities and whimsies of woman were lost in a moment of exaltation. The voice of the bell sounded in her like the thrill of an unborn child. And it dominated all other sounds, and muffled John Jordan's footsteps.

He saw her as a dark figure against the light, framed by the porch, pale-faced, eyes closed, head bowed. God in Heaven, had his prayer been answered? What more wonderful thing could have happened to him on this summer morning? He stood still, with the light from the east window about him. And suddenly the bell was silent, and her eyes opened. She saw him.

She did not move, but her eyes smiled. There was an ineffable muteness in their meeting. Then, John Jordan came and kneeled down beside her. So, Ethan found them, kneeling hand in hand.

They had reached the gates before either of them spoke. The whole broad estuary lay surrendered to the sun. The windows of the Terrace glinted; the little gardens spread carpets of many colours.

'I am coming with you, John.'

Her eyes were on the sea, his on her face.

'My dear, I would not have you in danger. There is no loveliness down there.'

'No? Are you sure?'

He raised her hand and kissed it.

'Only—the loveliness of courage and of doing things—that must be done.'

'I am not afraid now.'

'But—I—may be.'

'Are you, John? But may not the same fear be mine?'

Again he bent and kissed her hand.

'Nothing could make me braver than to share that fear.'

'So, let us share it, John. Will you come and wait for me? I must leave a letter for dear Charlotte.'

Miss Cripps, sitting alone at the breakfast table, with that simple message lying beside her cup, nodded her head at it, and smiled.

‘So, Bella, my dear, you have found yourself. May you not lose that which you have found.’

Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise.

That might have been the screed that welcomed Isabella Luce into Bannister’s warehouse.

She had put aside a curtain to see five objects which looked like corpses lying on pallets of straw, and not only could she see them, but smell them. Odours of vomit and of purgings. A woman was kneeling by one bed, holding a spoon to a bleached mouth, an old woman with a ruddy face and white hair.

Isabella Luce, holding the curtain aside, shivered with the physical shock of these horrors. Here was life as she had never known it, in all its pitiful and foul reality, and her first reaction was one of nausea. She dropped the curtain, and turned back towards the doorway and the sunlight, and leaning against the wall put a hand over her mouth. Could she bear it; had she the courage and the stomach for such horrors, like that white-haired old woman? She was trembling, and all her fastidious, sensitive self was shaken.

Another curtain moved and to her appeared a figure in white drill carrying a basin, Major Miller, somehow serene and unafraid. He saw the shrinking shape of her, the bleached face and frightened eyes, and he understood.

‘You here, my dear. That’s splendid.’

Splendid? She straightened, compelled her legs to stiffen.

‘I’ve come to help.’

The old soldier smiled.

‘I rather thought you would. Terrible at first. Yes, I know.’

She looked at his calm old face, and then at the basin.

‘Can I take that—for you?’

He answered that question by passing her the basin.

‘I’ll show you, my dear. There is a pit—where we empty—— Yes, over there. I’ll show you.’

He went with her, watching as she carried the thing, head up, eyes averted. A heap of lime and a spade waited beside the dark hole in the ground. He saw her hesitate, and then will herself to look at what she carried before she emptied the thing. It was he who took the spade and flung in lime.

‘Have you met old Sally?’

‘I—I’ve seen her.’

‘A grand old woman. She will be glad of your help. We have too few helpers.’

He took the empty basin from her.

‘Wash your hands, my dear. Wash often. We keep clean water ready.’

Dr. Rollinson’s gig came trundling over the saltings, and Dr. Rollinson was a somewhat sad and disillusioned and tired man. Tiredness may mean cynicism but there was no cynicism in the little doctor. In his young days he had taken the vow of the young physician, a vow that may be sworn so lightheartedly, but he had kept it and strengthened it through the years. In all weathers and at all hours and sometimes in pain he had served at his particular altar, nor was there any gloating now over human selfishness and cowardice. These things had saddened him, that people in whom he had believed should have run away or shut themselves up against pity. Dr. Rollinson might know fear and he had sent his own children into the country, but his wife was with him, and two loyal maids.

A man on horseback overtook the doctor, Canon Turnbull, a veritable Sir Isumbras.

‘Hallo, Rollinson, how are things going?’

‘Not too well. Too many deaths.’

‘John all right?’

‘He has a constitution, sir, and no fear.’

‘Is any man without fear?’

Dr. Rollinson did not answer that question. They were nearing Bannister’s warehouse, and they saw a figure appear in the doorway, a girl in black, with her sleeves turned up, and her face curiously calm. Isabella Luce. The Canon rubbed his beard, and his eyes stared hard at her.

‘Another helper. John’s——’

‘Yes. She has been with us two days now. Frightened and squeamish at first.’

‘I don’t wonder.’

They saw Isabella Luce go to the deep pit and empty the basin that she carried, and Canon Turnbull lifted his hat.

‘Good girl. I’m glad. That means, I think——’

Dr. Rollinson nodded.

‘They should make a splendid pair,’ and he added to himself, ‘if nothing happens.’

Canon Turnbull dismounted, and left his horse to graze, for the grass was lush and sweet here in spite of summer heat. Dr. Rollinson’s nag followed his neighbour’s example. The doctor looked at the blue bowl of the sky. Would it never rain or blow? And then he looked at the serene yet inwardly exalted face of Isabella Luce.

‘How is the Lucking girl, my dear?’

‘I’m afraid she is dying.’

‘Poor creature! And she was to be married next month.’

Isabella’s eyes were gazing past him, for she saw two men appear on the green plain carrying something on a stretcher.

‘Another case, Dr. Rollinson.’

The doctor turned and blinked tired, red-lidded eyes. Again, his comment was inward.

‘Will this horror never cease?’

Isabella stood waiting.

‘I will see to it, Dr. Rollinson. We have one spare bed, if it is a woman.’

‘Thank you, my dear. Is John there?’

‘Yes. He is always there, save when he sleeps, or when he swims, or when the church bell tolls in the morning.’

Dr. Rollinson passed in, somehow uplifted by that serene and lovely face over which love and compassion had diffused a superhuman radiance. He found John Jordan kneeling by a man’s bed, and, like some stout nurse, feeding him with a spoon. The man’s eyes were on Mr. Jordan’s face, and they were dog’s eyes.

‘Clements, you look better.’

‘I be, sir. Thanks to you and Mr. Jordan.’

‘Good. I’m more than glad.’

On the next pallet a man lay comatose, breathing in short and shallow gasps. Doomed, poor devil, and Mr. Jordan would have to read the Burial Service over him.

‘Not so many flies, John.’

‘No. Not so much for the brutes to feed on, and Miss Cripps’s invention has thinned them out.’

For on the walls were pinned sheets of paper plastered with treacle and grease, and these sheets were stippled with carcasses.

XXXIV

THE church bell was ringing, Ethan's crooked back bending as he pulled, his thin forearms browned with hair, and as the bell pealed out the verger's lips moved with it.

'They come, they come.'

A small white tent stood near the cricket marquee, and from it came Isabella Luce, to find John Jordan waiting for her. John was looking at a grey and hurrying sky, and the wind playing with the grasses.

'Rain coming.'

O blessed rain! And to both of them as they mounted the pier hill and saw the Lombardy poplars bending to the wind, and the grey ruffling of the sea, the church bell had a more joyous note. Nor were they to be alone. These early intercession services had begun to persuade people from their scared seclusion, and little groups of working men and women were moving towards the church. Hats were raised to Mr. Jordan and Miss Luce, and the salutations came from the heart.

'Morning, sir; morning, miss.'

Nor did plain men mince their words.

'He's the parson for us.'

'That old stinker, Parbury! Let 'im try to come back 'ere, and we'll 'oot 'im off the earth.'

The bell rang them in, Isabella going to the Cripps's pew, where she found Miss Charlotte. Major Miller joined them. They heard Captain Bullard's timber leg stumping up the aisle. John Jordan put on no surplice, nor was the service formal. He stood by the altar with one arm raised.

'Lift up your hearts. Fight the good fight, and God be with you.'

They sang a hymn; Mr. Jordan repeated a short prayer, and standing by the altar and in no pulpit voice, spoke a few simple words to them. Old Elliot's white head and Tom Myall's black jowl were side by side. John Gage and his wife sat in a front pew with Captain Bullard, whose hymn singing and Amens were stentorian. And on this grey morning Mr. Jordan had a message of good

cheer. There was more than hope that the worst was over.

This little gathering waited for Mr. Jordan to pass down the aisle between oak pens of pews, a gesture of courtesy and honour. Miss Cripps and Isabella walked arm in arm, yet another gesture of courage, and Miss Cripps had done the arming.

'You are coming to breakfast with me, both of you.'

'Is that wise?'

'Wise? What is wisdom without—pluck, my dear? Just an ice house.'

Captain Bullard overheard the words, and lifted his hat to her.

'True, madam. Mere cleverness butters no parsnips.'

The first raindrops fell as they passed towards the pier hill, and John Jordan, head uncovered, let them wet his face. The little gardens were all ruffled colour, and the trees bending to the wind. Caroline Terrace knew these summer gales when sash-windows had to be plugged with towels, but on this stormy morning the terrace windows chattered like live things, talking windows with no humans to heed them.

Captain Bullard stumped into No. 3. Mrs. Trigg, stout lady, had not fled like so many of the others. Major Miller walked on with them as far as No. 20, and gravely uncovered his wen to the wind.

'No need to hurry, John. I shall be on duty till you come.'

Miss Cripps's eyes sparkled.

'You should have been christened Horatio, my dear Major.'

And Major Miller blushed.

No sentimental journey this, even in an age that has been bitterly slandered because it set so high a standard, a standard which was too steep and slippery for the many. A man may fall like Adam, and yet be neither prig nor hypocrite, and those who mock at the chance frailties of the devoted few may be damned for having shed all the buttons on their breeches. Dr. Rollinson took a cold hip-bath each morning before going down on his knees in prayer, a double cleaning of the flesh and spirit, and with a wet west wind blowing he could towel himself and look out of a window and exclaim:

'Thanks be to God, no fresh cases yesterday.'

Soon he could hope to have his children about him, for the solemn little

doctor had his childish moments. James Neath had surprised him one wet day, crawling about the ground floor with a hairy rug over him, and playing the growling bear with his three youngest. Nor was Dr. Rollinson incapable of other playfulness that could be mordant and spiced with bitters. When this tragic business had run its course, and the stage was set for the return of the uncourageous, more than mere irony might salute their fugitive faces. What of the Rev. Nicholas Parbury, who had played the craven Peter? Would Mr. Parbury pretend that he had departed in innocent ignorance of the community's ordeal? And if Mr. Parbury dared to appear in the pulpit, might not the scorn of the common people make the pulpit a pillory? And what of the superior and supercilious Mr. Lardner, and the loud Pankridges, and the stately Sir Montague? Dr. Rollinson, towelling himself after his bath, dared to dower the future with its possibilities of ironic fun.

For a man must laugh to keep his sanity, even in the face of hell, and on this grey summer morning, Dr. Rollinson heard a sick man laugh, and a woman's laugh answer it beyond the canvas screen. He saw John Jordan helping a bearded fellow to sit up, and the man's starved face wore a cracked grin.

'Lord love you, sir, was that my girl laughin' in there?'

'Laugh again, Robinson, and see if you get any answer.'

Robinson let out a weak cackle, and a woman's laughter came back to him.

'That you, Joe?'

'God—Lizzie, it's me. 'Scuse me, sir.'

John Jordan, one arm supporting him, chucked him under his hairy chin.

'Good to hear someone laugh, Joe, especially a particular someone.'

'Gosh, sir, yes.'

Dr. Rollinson took off his spectacles and polished them. Laughter—at last—in this house of death, life and happy fun, and human hunger. Miss Luce appeared. She had a bunch of flowers in one hand, and with a mysterious smile, she carried them to the man's bed.

'From Lizzie to Joe.'

The man put out a claw of a hand.

'Could you blow 'er a kiss from me, miss?'

'I think I could, Joe.'

The man, turning his head and letting out a frail chuckle, looked at Mr. Jordan, for Mr. Jordan was looking up at Isabella Luce. Lord love you, weren't other kisses indicated? That lovely mouth and deep dark eyes should be safe for Mr. Jordan.

Dr. Rollinson resumed his spectacles. He saw Isabella turn away, and turn again to glance at John Jordan. Assuredly she looked like Lizzie to his Joe.

Grey skies gone, the sea calm and blue, and once more a summer sea. No more new cases, only one more death, and but seven sick left in Bannister's warehouse. Canon Turnbull was talking of coming over to hold a service of thanksgiving. Captain Bullard was proposing a celebration at the Royal Hotel.

'A salute to courage, my lad,' he said, slapping Major Miller on the back, and causing his wen to waggle. 'Do you know that before an action I have known men play sick, and men who were sick get up for duty?'

Major Miller smiled and nodded.

'Fear and faith, Bullard. We have been lucky. Only two of our helpers went down, and both are living.'

'You and I were too tough and old, my lad, for the damned disease to feed on us.'

'One thing I do give thanks for. John Jordan and Miss Luce.'

'Yes, Miller. Even the Devil might look at her and refrain. Hallo, here's the doctor.'

Dr. Rollinson joined them outside No. 3. He had a letter in his hand, and his expression was whimsical.

'You might like to read this.'

Major Miller needed spectacles for reading, and the duty fell to Captain Bullard, and when he had perused the letter he let out a loud guffaw.

'Well, I'm damned! Who do you think it comes from, Miller?'

'Read it aloud, my dear fellow.'

'Here goes. Prepare to receive cavalry.'

DEAR DR. ROLLINSON,

A rumour has reached me in this peaceful place that South End has suffered from a slight outbreak of cholera. I shall be greatly

obliged if you will inform me of the facts. As your vicar I shall greatly regret having been absent from my parish, and if needs be I shall return immediately to the post of duty.

Most truly yours,

NICHOLAS PARBURY.

Captain Bullard flourished the letter at Major Miller.

‘So, he has heard a rumour! Damned old white-livered humbug! He will return to the post of duty. Will he, by God? We may have something to say about that. What—what!’

Major Miller looked pensive.

‘He may not have known.’

‘Oh, yes, he knew. And he writes from—Penzance. Scuttled about as far as he could. What are you going to say to him, doctor?’

Dr. Rollinson stroked a sly chin.

‘I think I shall suggest that he should remain at Penzance, and ensure his most precious safety.’

Captain Bullard smote the earth with his timber leg.

‘That’s it, by gad! Tell him the place won’t be salubrious for him, yet, if ever. And I would add that we who didn’t run away prefer Mr. Jordan.’

Isabella Luce was taking night duty as the lady of the lamp, but Bannister’s warehouse had become a very different institution. The women’s ward had a table with flowers upon it, and china candlesticks, and the flies had been chastened by cleanliness and the rough weather. Other and sweeter odours had replaced the pristine stinks. Someone, probably Miss Cripps, had provided an armchair for the nurse on duty, and the beds of the three remaining patients had gay coverlets. Miss Luce, in black with white collar and cuffs, could sit back in that chair and listen to quiet breathing, and hear music in the air. ‘Juanita, Juanita’ and ‘Drink to me only with thine eyes’. Viennese waltzes. Old and familiar hymns. She was at peace with herself, and with her gradual love, and the eyes of the women whom she nursed were loving her.

Daybreak without heartache. She had been reading or knitting, but now she put both book and work away, and with a tremor of inward laughter recalled the Pankridge days, so near and yet so far. She, Isabella Luce, had become a

person, almost a little queen among other women, and saluted with reverence by labouring men. She rose from her chair, and, finding one of the women awake, bent over her, smiling.

‘How are you feeling, Sarah?’

‘Oh, fine, miss. Ain’t you tired?’

‘No, I’m rather happy, Sarah.’

‘You should be, miss.’

Isabella Luce went to the door. Major Miller had been on duty with the men, and he joined her there to see the amiable bundle that was stout, white-haired Mary Parsons crossing the greenway to relieve Miss Luce. The sea was in and like grey-blue glass, and the sun shining upon the white houses up yonder.

‘Good morning, Mary. Never late.’

‘It’s going to be a lovely day, miss.’

Major Miller smiled upon them, for both these women were lovely in the good things they had done.

‘Hullo. There’s John going on his morning swim.’

They saw John Jordan, decorously dressed in a blue bathing-suit, emerge from the marquee, and stand gazing at the sea. He appeared to hesitate, nor did he look in their direction, but walked slowly over the turf of the saltings towards the beach. His muscular legs caught the sunlight, and Major Miller, who had watched him morning after morning, was somehow puzzled by those legs. They seemed to lack their normal verve and vigour, and even suggested a tired flabbiness. Well, John Jordan had endured a month of exhausting labour, and had never spared himself.

They saw John Jordan reach the shingle and stand there, with arms hanging almost like a man shirking the plunge. Why this hesitation on so perfect a morning? But now he was crossing the shingle slowly and heavily. He reached the sea, waded in, fell forward, swam a few strokes, and then—suddenly—his head vanished. Major Miller’s muscles stiffened. Was this his habitual sousing? Then two hands appeared, inco-ordinate, fluttering hands, and Major Miller with one glance at Isabella shot forward on his long, thin legs.

‘Something wrong with John.’

A boatman busy on the shore had seen what the Major had seen, and was running along the sand. Mr. Jordan was floating, half-submerged, and the man

had waded in and got his hands under John Jordan's shoulders, when the old soldier splashed in to join him.

'Cramp, sir.'

Major Miller was thinking other things, for John Jordan's face was crumpled with a spasm of inward anguish, nor were his eyes the unseeing eyes of a man about to drown. They drew him ashore and placed him on the sand, and he lay there with his hands pressed to his belly, his face contorted.

'Run for the doctor, Higgins.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

John Jordan's eyes were looking up at Major Miller.

'Afraid—I've got it. So sudden. Couldn't help myself.'

Isabella Luce, slithering down over the shingle bank, overheard those words.

As Mr. Ludovic Lardner was to phrase it—'In a sentimental story, my dear sir, the hero should, of course, die in the arms of the weeping maiden, or be nursed by her back to orange-blossom and the marriage bed.' Mr. Lardner, being a supercilious gentleman, did not like heroes and romantic emotion, even though the particular hero might be a particularly plain specimen. The cold vanity of the intellectual prig can be offended by some simple fool's popularity, and Mr. Lardner was the complete critic.

Indeed, in the days that were to come, Mr. Lardner condescended to give a series of lectures on contemporary literature at the Marine Library, and Captain Bullard, happening to stroll in, heard the great man refer to his favourite novelist as 'all waistcoat and gizzard'. Captain Bullard, not being a tame lap-dog, allowed himself to bark a protest.

'Is that so, sir? Well, give me a man with some gizzard.'

As though to complete a coincidence, Dr. Rollinson had been up half the night with a difficult maternity case, and in the cool of the dawn he carried his black bag to the surgery, unlocked the door, and entered. Instantly he was met by the familiar perfume of the place, a sweet vinous odour which had been shut up by itself all night, and waited for its high priest to enter. Dr. Rollinson placed his black bag on the dispensary counter, which itself was black-brown from use and age, and scarred in places where hot sealing-wax had fallen.

Shelves, row upon row, rose to the ceiling with their multitude of bottles and jars labelled Vinum This, or Tinct. That, or Pulv. or Unguent. Something Else. The woodwork was painted a soft green as though to suggest young foliage in the spring of the year. A high desk with ledgers upon it, and a drawer below for labels, stood where the light from the great sash-window fell upon it. A muslin screen veiled the lower three feet of the window.

Dr. Rollinson was tired and sleepy, yet happily so, for he had saved both child and mother. He hung up his hat on a wooden peg, took off his spectacles and polished them, and then—by force of habit—ran a duster over the dispensary counter. This so familiar and friendly niche in his active world had a peculiar beauty for him, the beauty of a peaceful and bounteous workshop. All those bottles and drawers with their inscriptions in black and gold were little friendly faces, consoling and cheering.

Dr. Rollinson glanced at a big stock-bottle on the counter, an opium mixture which had done high service. Thank God, that stuff would not be needed now. Dr. Rollinson laid a caressing hand upon it, and then—stood still. In the stillness of the early morning sudden sounds of significant haste came to him, the pulsations of running feet.

He waited. He heard the clangour of the bell and the faint chatter of the wire. He went to the door, and saw the breathless messenger.

‘What is it, Higgins?’

‘Another case, sir.’

‘Who?’

‘Mr. Jordan.’

XXXV

WHEN MISS CHARLOTTE CRIPPS heard the news, and the extreme seriousness of it, she was driven to the saltings, and, finding Dr. Rollinson there, issued her ultimatum.

‘Can he be moved? Of course he can. Bring him to No. 20. What, stairs? I’ll turn the dining-room into a sick room.’

Dr. Rollinson demurred, and for tragic reasons.

‘I don’t think it would be wise to move him. And another centre of infection.’

‘My maids can go to their homes. Bella and I can manage. Tell me the truth, is he——?’

Dr. Rollinson shook his head.

‘A savage attack. One of the worst I have seen. I doubt whether he will recover.’

Miss Cripps grimaced.

‘Not recover? He—must—recover. Could he be laid on the floor of my carriage?’

‘He could be. We should need four men and a stretcher. He is heavy, and quite helpless.’

‘I’ll find four men in as many minutes. And where is Isabella?’

‘With him.’

‘That’s as it should be.’

Miss Cripps was driven back up the hill and into Caroline Mews. There were women here, and one or two men, and Miss Cripps stood up in her carriage and made her appeal.

‘I want volunteers to carry Mr. Jordan to my carriage. He has cholera, and he of all men needs our help. Will any of you come with me?’

In sixty seconds she had her volunteers.

‘Get in, my lads. Yes, we are the rescue party. I want Mr. Jordan in my

house.’

Miss Cripps and her helpers entered the white marquee to see Isabella Luce on her knees beside a man who was but partly conscious. Dr. Rollinson was standing by. A stretcher was found and Mr. Jordan placed upon it, and the stretcher laid crosswise on the floor of the carriage. It was a walking procession, Miss Cripps and Isabella leading the way, and at the top of the pier hill a little crowd was waiting, women and two or three old men, silent, charged with the common people’s stricken respect and affection. The women did not stare at Miss Luce, for Isabella’s face did not ask to be stared at. They looked at the man on the stretcher as the last man in their little world who deserved to die.

So, past the white houses with their bright balconies and flowery aprons the carriage came to the portentous porch of No. 20. Somebody had been watching, for the door was open, and in the doorway stood Miss Charlotte’s staff.

‘Why—Jane, Emily, Rose, aren’t you packing?’

‘We’re staying, madam, not running away like those others.’

Miss Cripps’s pug-face flashed pride.

‘Good women. We want a bed in the dining-room.’

‘Yes, madam.’

The women looked with compassion at the figure on the stretcher, and the only one to flinch was Rose, the youngest. Isabella was watching the four men draw the stretcher from the carriage. Mr. Jordan’s eyes were closed, his face pinched and deathly. A blanket had been laid over him and it had slipped slightly to one side, and Isabella straightened it, and as she did so his eyes opened, strange blurred eyes. She saw a hand stir under the blanket, and she laid her hand upon it. Neither of them spoke, but her eyes said—‘John, I love you.’

Miss Cripps, coming down the stairs with a candle in her hand, met Isabella Luce emerging from the sick-room with a basin. Her face was as white as the thing she carried, utterly calm, and set in a kind of proud severity. A little lamp was burning on the hall table like a speck of hope in the prevailing darkness.

‘How is he?’

Isabella stood still.

‘Oh—Charlotte—I’m afraid. Go, go in and speak to him. He is frightened—about me.’

Miss Cripps went in with her candle, and placed it on the sideboard, for there were other candles. She saw a blazing fire, the bed, and John Jordan, and a face that was urgently conscious, though it had the starved, bleached ghastliness of a death-mask. Miss Cripps felt a chilly trickle between her shoulders. Thank God for the fire, even in summer, for almost she felt the coldness of death stagnating in this familiar room. She sat down on Isabella’s chair between the bed and the fire.

‘Well, John dear——’

He put out a feeble hand, and it shocked her to see this strong and ruddy man reduced to the likeness of a corpse. His voice was little more than a whisper.

‘Don’t let her come to me.’

‘My dear——!’

‘It’s the danger. And, oh, God, something more than that. Vanity—even in me. The—the filthiness.’

Miss Cripps bent forward and held his hand.

‘John, don’t you understand, my dear? She loves you.’

‘Oh, God—I’m horrible. That she should——’

‘I said—she loves you. Nothing is horrible when a woman loves in that way. Ugliness can become—beauty, John. It would be cruel to keep her from you.’

‘Cruel?’

‘Yes, my dear, cruel.’

He closed his eyes, but his hand remained in hers.

‘You women are wonderful. I’m horrible to myself, and I’m so afraid of being horrible to her.’

‘Nothing is horrible when one loves—very dearly. Haven’t you heard, John, of labours of love?’

He drew a sighing breath.

‘Yes, I’m weak, cowardly.’

‘Nonsense. The whole place is waiting for you to get well. Now, no more talking, no more worrying. Keep your strength, my dear; keep it for her.’

He opened his eyes again, and his eyes seemed to face the inevitable.

‘I’m not going to get well. I—I want to leave her a good memory.’

Miss Cripps repressed a shiver.

‘You must not talk like that. She wants—you, not a memory.’

The two women stood in the dim hall, the one with a candle, the other with a clean basin. They spoke in whispers.

‘I ought to change his sheets.’

‘Wait, my dear, there is more than that.’

‘More——?’

‘Have you told him how much——’

‘But he must know.’

‘Go in and tell him.’

Miss Cripps watched her open the door and enter, and then she slid away silently and up the stairs. Exhaustion, opium, the stimulus of love! And was there anything else? The wisest of physicians might be too orthodox. Miss Cripps climbed the stairs with one hand to her cheek.

Isabella put down her basin, returned to her chair, and, bending, put her face close to his.

‘John, I love you so much. I feel I shall die if you don’t live.’

His half-glazed eyes became luminous.

‘I—I—want to live, oh—so much.’

‘You will, you must. If not—I shall be sorry you saved me that day. Oh, my darling, I love you, I love you.’

‘Even—as I am—a foul——’

‘How can you speak like that? I can do anything, everything, for you. Wouldn’t you do it for me?’

‘Yes.’

She kissed him.

Miss Charlotte Cripps sat alone with her candle in the drawing-room. The windows were open, and she could see the lights of the ships in the estuary. She had a closed fan in her hand, and she tapped her somewhat prominent teeth with it, a habit of hers when she was moved to thought or emotion. Was John Jordan's life to pass like the lights of one of the ships out yonder? What could one do that Dr. Rollinson had not done? Stimulants? And then Miss Cripps coined or copied a new title. 'Women and Wine. Love and Alcohol.'

She opened her ivory fan with a sharp flick. Yes, Dr. Rollinson was the most thorough and capable of physicians, but he had one prejudice, an almost fanatical detestation of strong drink. Well, could you wonder, when his father and grandfather had drunk themselves sodden and under the table? But if Dr. Rollinson's skill had passed its limit, and John Jordan lay dying, was not some unorthodox and desperate remedy worth trying?

Miss Cripps jumped up, went to her bureau, found a particular key, and, taking her candle, went below stairs. Her maids were in their beds, and Miss Cripps unlocked the wine-cellar door. Racks full of dusty, cobwebbed bottles. She drew one from a bin, looked at it and smiled. Prime old brandy. She relocked the door, carried the bottle into the butler's pantry, though No. 20 did not indulge in male servants, found a corkscrew. The cork refused to budge, and red in the face she cursed it and struggled.

'Damn you, come out.'

Maybe her language surprised the cork, for it came out with a consenting pop.

Miss Cripps replaced it, found a glass, and re-ascended the stairs to knock at the dining-room door. She heard quick footsteps, and when the door opened she saw Isabella Luce in tears.

'Oh, he's—he's dying.'

Miss Cripps pushed the glass and bottle at her.

'Try this, plenty of it. Desperate cases—desperate remedies. Try and get him to swallow, plenty of it.'

'What is it?'

'Good old brandy, my dear. Stop that stuff of the doctor's, and say nothing about it.'

'I'll try. I'll try anything.'

Miss Cripps did not go to bed, but after removing her lace cap and crowning a Chinese vase with it, lay down upon a sofa. There was a great stillness everywhere, the sea soundless, the trees across the way unruffled by any wind. Miss Cripps had placed a fresh candle ready, and capped its fellow with a brass extinguisher. She folded her hands over her comfortable little paunch, and prayed—'Thou, O Lord, who turned water into wine, grant that my strong medicine may have Thy blessing.' She lay awake for some time, listening, but no sound came to her from the room below, and presently she fell asleep.

The grandfather clock in the hall had struck three when Miss Charlotte woke with a start. Isabella was standing beside her with a candle, and in her eyes the candlelight seemed to shine.

'Hallo, my dear. I've been asleep. Any news?'

'I believe he is better.'

'Thank God for that. He has rallied?'

'Yes. I kept giving him brandy, and now he's asleep.'

'Splendid. Let him sleep. And you lie down here, and let me sit by him. You must be tired out.'

Isabella smiled down at her candle.

'No. I'm so—so strung up.'

Miss Cripps sat up suddenly and looked at Isabella. Had she too shared the magic fluid with him? Well, no matter. If that dusty old bottle had worked a miracle, she would set it up on her mantelpiece in a place of honour.

Dr. Rollinson came toddling along the Terrace at six o'clock in the morning, a somewhat tired and gloomy man, yet conforming to the conventions, his flat-brimmed hat upon his head, and his gold watch in his waistcoat pocket. What a gem of a morning, with the flowers sparkling with dew and the white sails of the ships catching the sunlight! The tall houses were serene and stately, with no smoke as yet floating from their chimneys. Dr. Rollinson, good Christian that he was, felt the provocation of life's irony. His last visit had convinced him that John Jordan was a dying man—and the one man in the community whom death should have spared.

Isabella, hearing the bell ring, made haste to hide a particular article in the wine-cooler below the sideboard, and with one glance at the sleeping figure,

hastened to admit the doctor. His kind eyes scrutinized her from behind his spectacles, and the question he had not dared to ask was answered by her flushed face and shimmering eyes.

‘He is sleeping, he is better.’

Dr. Rollinson was a little incredulous. Might not this sleep be the final coma? He left his hat in the hall, and followed Miss Luce into the sunlit room. His glance went eagerly and instantly to the man on the bed, and what he saw astonished him, more colour in the face, tranquil breathing.

He crossed to the bed, sat down, and laid his fingers gently on a wrist. Pulse steady and regular, and the volume good. Dr. Rollinson blinked, and, as he did so, John Jordan’s eyes opened.

‘Hallo, doctor; I have been asleep.’

‘So I see, my lad. How are you feeling?’

‘Much better.’

Dr. Rollinson remembered Isabella. He turned to look and saw her by a window with the early sunlight on her face, and tears upon her cheeks. Well, what miracle was this? He turned again to the man on the bed.

‘I think the verdict is good, John. Yes, and as it should be.’

Mr. Jordan smiled at him.

XXXVI

Miss Cripps, in her first interview with Dr. Rollinson—she had descended in her dressing-gown and with a lace cap on her head—divined in him a puzzled and interrogative scepticism. They had retired to the library, and the doctor stood at the window, hands clasped behind him, his spectacles solemn and pensive. Miss Cripps, the guilty saviour of the situation, for—undoubtedly—Isabella had so dosed Mr. Jordan as to make him mildly drunk, wondered whether Dr. Rollinson suspected, and had savoured the smell of alcohol.

'May I congratulate you, my dear friend?'

The doctor rubbed his chin, and remembered that he had yet to shave.

'I—er—deserve no credit, dear lady. I must confess that I feared the worst.'

'My dear sir, all the credit is yours.'

'I—er—wonder,' said he. 'Nature—mysteriously—can make a fool of one.'

'Well, were I God's own fool—I would give the credit to the physician.'

For, during these dreadful weeks, Dr. Rollinson had established himself inevitably as the beloved physician, and even a mischievous old woman had no intention of giving away a secret, or shocking the doctor's prejudices. And yet she wondered. Were she to confess that the Rev. John Jordan's life appeared to have been saved by generous doses of alcohol, would the physician or the pietist in Dr. Rollinson hold the stage? Meanwhile, they were all of them both exultant and weary, and the poor flesh deserved consideration.

'Sit down, my dear friend. Even at this hour we can drink strong tea.'

The new Indian tea—in full strength—was the doctor's one weakness, and Miss Cripps rose, and putting her head into the dining-room, saw Isabella sitting by John Jordan's bed, and holding his hand.

'Bella, my dear, a good strong cup of tea would do us all good. Let's go down and make it ourselves.'

Mr. Jordan turned his head on the pillow.

'I wish I could join you. I shall never forget——'

‘Tut-tut, my dear. You will soon be waltzing with someone.’

‘Not much good at that.’

‘Well, you are good at plenty of other things.’

John Jordan crossed his hands.

‘I feel most strangely at peace. I suppose it is that last medicine. The doctor must have——’

‘Ssht,’ said Miss Cripps, putting a first finger to her lips. ‘That’s a secret. Keep it to yourself. I’ll explain later.’

So, Miss Charlotte and Isabella went below, and put a match to the fire, and got out the best Spode, and brewed tea. Freshly made scones were included, fat with butter, and the doctor was served in the library by two devoted women who made it plain to him that he was the one little Jove upon Olympus. And Dr. Rollinson lapped up both the tea and the flattery, which was as it should be, though no Ganymede was present to shock him with the juice of the grape.

‘I will have another look at John before I go.’

He had his look, and another feel of the pulse. Amazing transformation!

‘Splendid! No more pains or spasms?’

‘No. I feel like a calm sea.’

‘My dear fellow, there will be many who will be glad.’

Dr. Rollinson departed to shave and spread the good news, and the first friends to hear it were Major Miller and Captain Bullard, and little Ethan Chigwell. The hunchback had been haunting the Terrace like a devoted dog, and when he heard the good tidings he threw up his hands and scampered off to ring the church bell, quite without authority. John Jordan heard it, and wondered.

‘Isn’t that the church bell?’

‘Yes, darling.’

‘But—who——?’

Isabella bent over him and smoothed his hair.

‘I can guess, and why.’

‘Why?’

‘I expect it is little Ethan, and he is ringing out the good news.’

‘What news?’

‘Darling, how innocent you are! You—are the news.’

Isabella was at the piano, nor was she playing the more solemn music of Beethoven, Mozart, or Handel, but some frivolous thing from Vienna. John was out of danger; John was able to sit up in bed, and to look in his mirror without beholding a Bill Sykes chin, and other enormities. Moreover, Mr. Jordan could look into another mirror, a woman’s face, a radiant and accepting face, and marvel at it, for John Jordan possessed that rare and happy quality, wonder at being loved by someone who was wonderful. Innocent he was of all physical vanity, because in the body he was like some stumpy, rugged oak, and no graceful cypress or towering pine. The complacency of the concupiscent male was absent from him, and such innocence makes loving like a stroll on a perfect morning in May, birds singing, lilac in flower, everything mysterious and wonderful. He lay and listened to the waltz music overhead, and saw Isabella floating to it, but with no George Travers. Her music danced for plain John Jordan.

Miss Cripps had driven over to take tea with the Neaths, and when Isabella’s music was interrupted by a strange hubbub outside No. 20, her hands came to rest on the keyboard. For a moment her dark eyes looked frightened. People were cheering, people were calling for the principal actors in the community’s tragedy.

‘Three cheers for Mr. Jordan.’

‘We want Miss Luce; we want Miss Cripps.’

Isabella rose from the piano, and, with a hand to her cheek, went to a balcony window. She saw all those upturned faces, men, women, children. The whole place appeared to have crowded before the windows of No. 20. She saw Tom Myall, and Ethan Chigwell, and even women whom she had nursed back into life. A sudden shyness possessed her, and then—reacting to the scene below—she stepped out on to the balcony, and looked down upon those friendly faces.

She held up a hand, and the people were silent.

‘I am afraid Miss Cripps is not at home. I am sure we are all very happy. Please forgive me if I can’t make you a speech.’

There was laughter, cheers, a waving of hands. Did she know how much

more eloquent she was in her loveliness and her shyness—for lovely she was, and the crowd knew it.

Said a voice—'No need to make a speech, lady. It's good enough to look at you.'

Which was rank flattery, and the little crowd cheered what was obvious. Miss Luce stood there blushing and smiling, with her hands on the balcony rail. Her lips moved, and the crowd gave her silence.

'Thank you, all of you. I'm so happy to-day. I am going down now to bring you a message from Mr. Jordan.'

More cheers. She vanished, and during the interlude the crowd indulged in flattering comments. Then they saw her reappear upon the balcony.

'Mr. Jordan says—"Bless you all." He—er—says too that he is the happiest man on earth.'

'We know why, miss. He should be.'

More blushes from Isabella.

'He says too—he hopes soon to be playing cricket.'

Said another voice—'And hit old Parbury for six.'

Isabella smiled down upon them.

'Yes, bless you all.'

And then the most incongruous thought popped up in her like a jack-in-the-box.

'And bless that bottle of brandy.'

The little watering-place's ordeal was over, and Dr. Rollinson was able to give it a clean bill of health. Diseases mysteriously come and mysteriously go, but the doctor had been engaged in much thinking, though the translation of thought into action was more than to-morrow's problem. Man, when the danger is over, is apt to forget, and to slip back into cheerful inertia, and to make excuses for himself and for nature. It was not South End which had sinned, but the casual and septic creature who had passed through it and left the poison behind him.

'Yes,' said the doctor, 'but if there is no dung heap and no privy for Beelzebub, and clean water is at man's service, disease may be baffled. Those who are unclean may get what they deserve.'

How many years were to pass before Dr. Rollinson and those who believed in him were to see the enlightened conscience of the community in action. That is another story, for men must eat and drink, and make love, and collect hard cash, and bear with their wives' tongues, and this business of living may put the business of dying out of their heads. Caroline Terrace would remain Caroline Terrace for more than another generation, comfortably superior and apart from the crowd, complacently successful, and regarding poverty and ignorance as the prerogatives of the common people, and a dispensation ordered by Providence or God.

Yet, there were to be other alarms and excursions before peace settled upon South End. Mr. Parbury lingered upon a prolonged holiday, and the Lardners and Pankridges and others had not yet returned to their homes. Mr. Jordan, though looking a little less ruddy and robust, was deputizing for the absent vicar, and the seats of the unmighty were well filled. Miss Cripps and Miss Luce attended both morning and evening service, and their many friends were expecting and waiting to welcome a romantic announcement.

It was Ethan Chigwell who spread the news. Mr. Parbury was back, and not by public coach. He had arrived towards dusk in a hired carriage. The news came to the Ship Inn and spread like a panic.

'Back, is 'e? We'll give him a welcome.'

It was Miss Cripps who, seated upon her balcony, saw and heard the procession top the pier hill, men, women, and children. It was a pot and pan procession, with some jangling bells added. Two or three of the male members carried sacks slung over their shoulders, and these sacks contained a nice selection of oversized pebbles from the beach. The procession poured along the terrace, and for the moment it was silent, and ominously silent. Big Tom Myall was acting as drum-major. The crowd spread itself outside No. 12, and Tom Myall walked to the door and handled the knocker.

A scared little maid answered the summons.

'Go and tell your master, my dear, that we've come to welcome him home.'

Mr. Parbury may have been a credulous person, or capable of more courage than he had shown in the crisis, for he appeared upon the balcony, and waved a hand. Then—hell was let loose. Pots and pans clattered; the children booed, and male hands, diving into sacks, opened the fusillade. Glass crashed; the paint of Mr. Parbury's door showed bruises. Mr. Parbury himself, pelted from below, disappeared through a fractured french window. Nor was a single pane of glass left unbroken, while the crowd cheered and gave for their finale

gusts of roistering laughter.

Mr. Jordan was still lodging with Major Miller, and Miss Cripps saw him appear and walk towards the crowd, raise an arm and speak to them. They gave him silence, and then more laughter and cheers. Had Mr. Jordan appealed to them for Mr. Parbury? It might be so, for John Jordan could allow himself a secret chuckle and some indulgence in magnanimity.

Mr. Parbury, very red in the face, and peeking from a bedroom window, was so incensed by this intervention and by his tame curate's patent popularity, that his indignation acted like red pepper. He descended the stairs, opened the scarred front door, and confronted the mob.

'That will do, thank you, Mr. Jordan. You will be so good as to allow me to manage my own parish.'

Mr. Jordan smiled at him.

'Very good, sir. I hope you had a good holiday.'

But the crowd was not smiling. Some vulgar fellow was heard to shout —'Look at the old black rat.' Tom Myall, stepping forward, stared Mr. Parbury in the face.

'If you are a wise man, sir, you'll go indoors and stay indoors. There's not a man, woman or child in the place who wants to see you in the pulpit.'

Mr. Parbury felt for his snuff-box, but in his angry agitation he dropped it on the doorstep. A hurtling stone, flung by a small boy, just missed him, and again Mr. Jordan intervened. Actually, he took Mr. Parbury by the shoulders, turned him round, and pushed him into the house.

'You will be happier inside, sir.'

Mr. Jordan pulled the door to, and seeing Mr. Parbury's snuff-box lying abandoned, he picked it up and slipped it through the flap of the letter-box.

Someone guffawed.

'Let the old geezer have it out with his damned red nose.'

Mr. Jordan did not appear to catch the remark. He turned and smiled at the crowd.

'Now, my friends, let us all go home.'

XXXVII

MAJOR MILLER, who took his duties as churchwarden with Christian seriousness, opened the iron gate leading into the churchyard of St. John's, and, catching sight of a most unexpected figure, stood hesitant, with the gate half-closed behind him. The poor dead lay buried in a far corner of the burial ground, and the graves were marked by mounds of turf which had been browned by the sun. There were some thirty of these graves, and standing, hat in hand, before them was the Rev. Nicholas Parbury. Major Miller, removing his own hat, and uncovering his wen to the sun, hesitated for a few seconds, and then walked slowly towards the flock of graves. Amazing sight, Mr. Parbury was in tears, and with a yellow silk handkerchief applied to his Roman nose.

Not until the old soldier had joined him did Mr. Parbury show any consciousness of his presence, and then he blew his nose loudly, and in a moist voice asked a question.

'Are all these graves—the result——?'

Major Miller regarded him with compassion.

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

Mr. Parbury made a choking noise.

'Miller, I—I—er—failed people. I didn't realize—— I'm ashamed, Miller, bitterly ashamed.'

Major Miller, much moved, laid a hand on the other man's shoulder.

'My dear fellow, we all do that—sometimes. I did—once, and it taught me—much.'

'You?'

'Yes, it was in India. I was just a raw boy, and I played the coward. No one knew but myself.'

Mr. Parbury wiped his nose.

'But in my case—everybody knows. There is only one decent thing left for me to do, Miller. I shall apply for a transfer, and ask the bishop to appoint—Jordan—in my place.'

Major Miller patted Mr. Parbury's shoulder.

'Er, I rather think, my dear fellow, you would be doing right. Of course, you might—er——'

'Live it down, Miller, live it down? No. I should never feel—faith in myself here, because the people would have no faith in me. I think I will go home and write that letter.'

But here Mr. Parbury's courage ended. He did not go into the pulpit as he might have done to make a candid confession of his lack of faith, an act which might have restored him to favour, for Mr. Parbury was a weak man, given to sudden selfish rages and equally sudden and secret lapses into self-abasement. He wrote his letter to the bishop, and he left behind him letters to Mr. Jordan and his churchwardens. Being a man of some private means he could go and live where he pleased. In fact he accepted an English chaplaincy abroad, and died many years later in an odour of port-wine and snuff.

The Rev. John Jordan was inevitably his successor, for the living of St. John's was in no patron's gift, and the choice rested with authority, and since the community whom Mr. Jordan would serve claimed him vigorously as their pastor, authority concurred. And when the news was out, Ethan Chigwell, with no authority, but with the town's applause, rang the church bell with more zeal than solemnity. In fact it was a laughing bell that shouted 'Ha-ha', and danced a jig in the belfry.

Miss Cripps, who had heard the news, and now heard the bell, routed out a Union Jack and hung it on the balcony, nor was it the only flag to be hoisted. The Old Town was beflagged, and a deputation, arriving to congratulate Mr. Jordan, passed decorously along the Terrace. The Lardner family had returned to No. 5, and were now decorating its balcony, but for some reason or another they retreated through the french windows, and the passing crowd laughed good-humouredly. Once again Mr. Ludovic & Co. had refused to face the music.

Mr. Jordan was at No. 20. Being called for by his friends below, he appeared upon the balcony holding Miss Luce by the hand. There were cheers, and someone bellowed 'Speech, speech,' and the voice sounded like Captain Bullard's.

Mr. Jordan responded, and with no suggestion of shyness.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you—all of you. I am a very happy and a very fortunate man. I need not introduce to you the lady who has consented to

marry me.’

Vigorous applause.

Said a voice—‘You’re a pair, sir. Lord love a duck, she’s as good to look at as the things she did for all of us.’

Laughter and more applause, and Mr. Jordan turned and bowed to the lady.

‘I agree—whole-heartedly—with the speaker.’

‘Kiss her, sir,’ said the same voice, and Mr. Jordan showed neither embarrassment nor disinclination.

Isabella was married from No. 20, Caroline Terrace, and Miss Cripps provided the wedding-feast.

Canon Turnbull conducted the marriage service, and Major Miller gave away the bride.

Miss Cripps’s carriage waited for them, but without its horses. The town had removed the familiar greys, and sent them back to the stable. Twenty or more men from the Old Town manned the traces, and drew Mr. and Mrs. John Jordan to No. 20, Caroline Terrace.

Nor could Miss Charlotte refrain from a last piece of puckishness. On the table beside a monumental wedding-cake stood a bottle adorned with a white bow. Dr. Rollinson, who sat close to this strange exhibit, peered at it through his glasses. A brandy bottle with a white bow! What esoteric significance lurked in that glass object?

Mr. Jordan, who knew the truth, and could admit that he had been saved by strong liquor and not by prayer, could yet be sensitive in his feelings for the good doctor’s professional pride. He shook his head at his hostess, and rising, removed the bottle after giving it a cursory glance.

‘Empty, I think.’

‘Dear, dear,’ said Miss Cripps. ‘What a foolish mistake! I fear that all of us have been a little over-excited.’

Mr. Jordan placed the bottle on the mantelpiece and returned to his chair beside his wife. Their hands met under the table and remained clasped for a second or two.

Champagne glasses were being filled, and Mr. Jordan got on his feet and raised his glass.

‘Forgive me, but I should like to drink a toast to the friend who—gave me this happy day.’

He bowed to Dr. Rollinson, and then, as a courteous after-thought, to Miss Cripps, and all who were present joined him in drinking that toast.

‘Dr. Rollinson! Dr. Rollinson!’

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover.

[The end of *Caroline Terrace* by Warwick Deeping]