

The Company of Fools

Leslie Gordon Barnard

Illustrated by

John Holmgren

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The Company of Fools

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

Illustrated by John Holmgren

She was afraid for him. Geoffrey was one of the world's rebels. He would not conform. Marian liked him no less for that. But now he was growing sullen and bitter. And he was becoming too argumentative. She knew that there was already too much noise in the world. Now he had turned sour on old Jonathan Davis, too.

"He's another of the same breed." said Geoffrey. "Books, bread or bolts, it's all the same what they sell. There's no soul left in business."

Marian tried weakly to tell him these were difficult times, that a new era couldn't be built overnight. But when it came to old Jonathan, she had to admit he was queer lately. Something had happened to him. He seemed to be fighting some battle with himself or with the book business in which, all his life, he had been engaged. He had warned them that changes were

impending, that salary agreements could only be renewed as a day to day affair. Nothing seemed stable.

Then, yesterday, there was the affair with Mr. Purvis. Old Jonathan had walked right up to Mr. Purvis, who was putting a couple of rejected volumes back into stock.

“What was the trouble, Purvis?” he asked. “Hadn’t we what that gentleman wanted?”

Mr. Purvis looked up with a start. He seemed as surprised as if Mr. Davis had slapped his cheek.

“I couldn’t seem to satisfy him, sir. He’s off on a holiday and somehow—well, nothing suited him. I couldn’t suggest anything that—er—suited.”

Old Jonathan looked at him sharply, his big, clean-shaven face dour, his jowls pushed down into his wing collar, making him look more than ever like one of the elder statesmen.

“Purvis,” he said, “once upon a time you were uncanny at sizing up a man. Just what’s gone wrong?”

“I don’t know,” said Mr. Purvis. His face was paper white. He stammered: “You’ve nothing against my work I hope, Mr. Davis? I’ve tried hard.”

Jonathan was silent for a moment. He didn’t tell lies to bring easy comfort to anyone.

“I seem to remember,” he said at last, “that old Peabody—you remember him, of course, one of the best clients we ever had; don’t know why he had to go and die anyway, he used to say of you, Purvis, that when he came in and you served him it was like windows being opened for him. Hmf. Never mind.” He started off and came back. “By the way, Purvis, we’ll have a staff meeting at nine sharp tomorrow morning. Something’s got to be done. You might advise the staff.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m arranging,” said Jonathan Davis, “to have Miss Tappan and two of the girls who worked for us as extras at Christmas come in and take hold so we can thresh this thing out. Nine o’clock sharp. Pass the word around.”

Purvis had passed the word.

It lacked just five minutes to nine now.

As Geoffrey put it, they had the wind up properly that morning. Tardiff, the handy man who had oversight of deliveries and kept the store cleaned up, opened the door on as rare a day of early summer as Nature had ever produced. But when the staff began to arrive, one could see that sunlight didn't matter much. They went about their work as usual, but there was a certain tenseness and a disposition to gather in little groups. Marian watched them with sudden painful insight.

There was Colton, the bookkeeper—a thin, middle-aged man, who always jumped when old Jonathan spoke to him. Years and habits were confirming him in bachelordom, though in spring, regularly for a few weeks, a recrudescence of youth seemed to come to him and he would appear jauntily with a bud or small flower in his buttonhole; and little Miss Wilson, who handled the circulating library under the mezzanine, would look quite fluttery and hopeful about things.

There was Mr. Purvis, who always wore black and looked a bit like a professor—a bald professor with tufted hair about the rim—and knew books and literature, having lived his life with them.

There was Mrs. Jamieson. Henrietta Jamieson was a widow of years standing. She was a decisive character, almost masculine in her vigor, with five growing children. Old Jonathan had known her husband and offered her a chance here. She had been an asset to the store; rarely at a loss with a customer. Her brusqueness offended a few, but they came back. It is so comforting to have someone who knows your own mind for you. She was just over fifty, affected a slightly mannish dress, and had preserved her color without artifice. People from women's clubs and places like that always asked for Mrs. Jamieson.

There was Geoffrey Henderson. There was Marian herself. One did not include Mr. Davis's stenographer, a carmine-lipped young modern who had just come on a thirty-day trial because of Miss Wallace having left.

Geoffrey appeared at Marian's elbow.

"Hullo," he said. "You do look done in. Worrying?"

"Not for myself so much. It's the others. We're young, you and I; we'll make out. But—"

"I know."

They stared at each other for a moment, sharing the unspoken thing. The door opened and Jonathan Davis came in. He stalked through without his usual good-morning greeting. He looked grim and rather sardonic. Miss

Tappan and her two assistants arrived at the same time and took over. Mr. Purvis shot a half-frightened glance at the other members of the staff and started for the mezzanine. The others filed after him.

Jonathan Davis was seated at a table at the rear of the mezzanine, back of the regular offices. Shelves of extra stock gave forth a smell of paper and ink and leather. Old Jonathan riffled the pages of a publisher's catalogue and watched them assemble. Henrietta Jamieson occupied a seat defiantly in front, next her Marian Creighton, supported by Geoffrey. Miss Wilson from the circulating library, her face colorless, was at the other side. Mr. Purvis stood by preference, leaning against a shelf of familiar titles, as if rubbing shoulders with Byron and Blake and Shakespeare and Shaw gave him needed support. Mr. Cotton, the bookkeeper, stood also, although there was an empty chair; and Tardiff, the handy man, quietly chose an inconspicuous corner.

The business in hand this morning," old Jonathan said grimly, "won't take us long. You are all aware that things have not been as they should. We've been slipping. You all have. I need not rehearse all that. You're walking round as if you expected the heavens to fall. That affects sales. You may call it the depression if you will. Maybe it's just dry rot. Maybe it's fear." His eyes appraised their faces. "I had a mare once," he said. "She was scared of trains. Got jumpy if there was one within a mile. She had a tender mouth. So one day I walked her right up to a shunting locomotive, and made her stand there. She did some stunts, but she had to take it. After that she was used to it. I sold her later to a man who drove milk cans to the station every morning. She'd stand without hitching. She was a useful beast to him."

Henrietta Jamieson said crisply:

"Mr. Davis, will you please come to the point? I guess you know we're all upset this morning. If you don't mind."

Old Jonathan stroked his jowls and looked at her.

"If you want a cold interpretation of the parable," he said, "here it is. The way you people are now, you're not much use to me in this store. You're all afraid of being let out. Well, now it's come. Once you've faced it, it may help you in the next job you take on."

Mrs. Jamieson said in a dead voice:

"So we're fired?"

“I’m asking you to quit at once. Might as well grasp a nettle firmly. I shall be obliged,” said old Jonathan, “if you will get on your hats and things now.”

Geoffrey Henderson sprang to his feet.

“Mr. Davis,” he shouted, “that’s not fair. It’s utterly heartless. You can’t do that!”

“I which?”

“Of all people,” said Geoffrey, “we expected some half-way decent treatment from you. Well, you’ve got us. You gave us notice it was a day to day arrangement.”

“I was about to point that technicality out to you,” said old Jonathan ironically. “If you will be good enough to do as I say, I shall ask you all to report outside my office, ready to leave, in a quarter of an hour.”

He rose, nodded, and disappeared into his private office, closing the door tightly.

Geoffrey caught Marian’s arm.

“And that,” he said, “is that!” His eyes added: “I told you so.”

“But what’ll we do?” said little Miss Wilson.

“What everybody else is doing—face the music and sing,” said Mrs. Jamieson crisply.

“I wish I were brave like that. But how—how awful to put men out of work at a moment’s notice . . .” Her eyes wandered to Mr. Colton. Mr. Colton was taking off his lustre jacket and the cuffs that Miss Wilson had devised for him; folding the coat with great care.

Tardiff said he wished Mr. Davis well with a new staff, and where did the carmine-mouthed hussy in the office get off at? Was she to look after deliveries, too? Just what his missus would say to it all, was past him.

When they assembled within the quarter hour, outside Mr. Davis’s private office, they were silently mutinous as if the iron had entered too deeply into them. The door opened and old Jonathan came out. They stared at him. He had changed into plus fours. A tweed cap was pulled jauntily over one eye, and his face was much more like a boy’s than that of an elder statesman groaning under the intolerable weight of a difficult world.

“Well,” said old Jonathan, rubbing his hands and chuckling. “Here we all are. Let’s be going.”

Mrs. Jamieson spoke her mind.

“Mr. Davis.” she said, “are you out of your mind or what?”

“Mad,” he said. “Utterly mad, my dear lady! I’ve even fired myself. Let’s go.”

Down in the store, Miss Tappan and the two girls stared at the exodus, and a modicum of customers lapsed into pop-eyed unbelief. At the door two taxis were standing. Old Jonathan directed the division of forces—Geoffrey and Marian, Mrs. Jamieson and Mr. Purvis in one car; in the other, Mr. Colton, Miss Wilson, and a Tardiff who seemed alarmed lest this strange man should suddenly develop, out of this condition, a homicidal mania.

“Tardiff,” said Jonathan. “Stop and pick up your old lady en route. Make her go along. I’ll follow in my own car with the lunch.”



They all ran . . .

At the top of a high bluff, on a muddy, little-used road among the pines, the cars drew up. Below lay a beach white in the sunlight, and beyond that, motionless save for a faint lapping of waves, was the vast sweep of lake, without horizon like the sea.

Geoffrey with sudden enthusiasm caught Marian’s hand and pointed to a diagonal road down.

“Go ahead,” shouted old Jonathan. “The chauffeurs will bring the grub.”

So they ran down to the beach together; and behind them came Mr. Colton, the bookkeeper, diffidently helping little Miss Wilson of the circulating library; and Henrietta Jamieson, independently establishing her own footing but shouting back to Mr. Purvis to watch a certain slippery part; and behind them, Tardiff himself, in sudden, and unexpected gallantry, helping to ease down to a lower level the 200 pounds he had inveigled into matrimony in a moment he sometimes described as weak. They all looked back, and there were the two taxi drivers and the chauffeur bearing a motor

kit and boxes and thermos bottles and what not, which presently, under the direction of old Jonathan, were stowed in a shady spot behind a rock. The two taxi drivers, paid off, went away grinning.



. . . down to the beach together.

The sound of their cars died in the distance and, save for some small children far along the shore and a hammering in cottages quite well away, there was only the murmur of the waves to break the silence in which all of them stood staring at the lake as if it were something they had never seen before, as if perhaps it were a fairy tale from the Children's Section and at any moment the magic wand would become unable to bear the burden.

After a time the silence became almost frightening, and Jonathan coughed and said, "Won't you be seated, ladies and gentlemen?" and indicated the great white slabs of rock. So they all laughed, and the spell was broken, and it became safe to become human and enjoy the beach and the water.

One was comfortably aware that behind the big rock was a reservoir of food and drink, but it was too early to think of that yet. Most of them were content to sit on the flat stones and talk a little of this and that. Mr. Colton said suddenly, with an almost hysterical giggle, that he couldn't remember man or boy spending a business morning out of doors since he started work at thirteen. He said it made him feel almost guilty. And Mrs. Tardiff, who had found a patch of sand and looked as if derricks would be

needed eventually to remove her from it, said she couldn't help thinking of Margate on a still day. She said some people found Margate a trippy place, but for herself no other air did her so much good, and she'd had an aunt who took cramps at any other seaside place but put on weight something amazing at Margate.

Miss Wilson just sat looking out across the water, now and then finding her eyes wandering to Mr. Colton, who had begun, right near her, to make a sort of earthworks in the sand. It grew ambitious and developed into a castle, because if you dug down a little the sand was wet and packed well. Presently Tardiff put out an exploratory finger and deepened the moat on his side, and Miss Wilson on hers took a diffident part in it, and once as she grubbed in the sand her fingers accidentally met Mr. Colton's underground and she went quite red. At a little distance two children under school age played with handmade craft in the shallow water. They were utterly immersed in their adventures and partially immersed in the water. Old Jonathan pointed them out to Mrs. Jamieson:



Geoffrey with sudden enthusiasm caught Marian's hand.

“Sometimes I think we've got things all wrong,” he said. “Those kids don't know what time is. In a year or so time will grab at them. And for the best hours of the day they'll be shut inside four walls, learning things that'll qualify them to spend the rest of their days inside four other walls of factory or office—with God's sunlight out here for the taking.”

Mrs. Jamieson said:

“I know. Before Walter died I had a tutor for my youngsters. He could teach them more down on a beach like this than he ever did indoors. Maybe it couldn't all be done that way. But some of it could be.”

She looked up suddenly and smiled. Young Geoffrey Henderson and Marian were coming along the beach. They had been quite a distance. But it was not at them she was smiling.

Mr. Purvis, in his slightly old-fashioned black, was down on the shore, picking up something from the beach, bending his arm and body with amazing agility and watching with triumph the result out across the water. Mr. Purvis was skipping stones!

The Davis chauffeur was a man of resource, but Miss Wilson and Mrs. Jamieson helped him spread the cloth on a suitable spot, and Mrs. Tardiff, with a breadboard parked on her knees, cut fresh loaves of bread with a hearty hand. Marian came hurrying to lend her aid and, kneeling on the sand, put out the salads on picnic plates—chicken, with lettuce, parsley and a stuffed olive on top. A large thermos bottle surprised them by yielding ice cream, and the cake was plentiful. By the time coffee topped off the meal, even Mrs. Tardiff was compelled to admit that if she took another crumb she'd not be responsible for what'd happen. The sun was now hotter, and it was pleasant to find a tree that jutted in a great spread above a portion of the beach.

They stretched themselves out luxuriously, and Jonathan Davis said:

“Will you read to us, Purvis? I brought along a few things to dip into.”

Mr. Purvis looked as if he had won on the Irish Sweepstakes. He said modestly if nobody minded he would. His voice got between him and the lines at first, but then he forgot his lessons in elocution and remembered only the voices that spoke through him. He read quite at random, interspersing poetry with prose, that which was new with works that had stood the test of time. Marian, sitting companionably near Geoffrey, felt suddenly within her a sweep of exultant pain. She glanced at him. She thought:

“Does he see it, too? Does he feel it?”

But, as if to reduce her to humility, Mr. Purvis turned to lighter verse, and there tripped before them a maid, punished with scorn for a presumptuous love.

The voice of Mr. Purvis died away; he said suddenly:

“My word. I have read a lot! I hope I haven't—”

“No, no!” cried little Miss Wilson; the others echoed her.

Mr. Purvis looked gratified.

“It’s wonderful,” said Mrs. Tardiff, “I’m sure. My, what a deal there is in books! I ain’t read so much since I married. But before that well, I don’t know that I’ve ever enjoyed as good a cry as over the Elsie books.”

Mr. Purvis looked less gratified. But Marian understood. Mrs. Tardiff was not untouched. Marian seemed to see her before Tardiff had materialized a girl at Margate, with the sand and the donkeys and the bathing machines and the lachrymose luxury of the adventures of Elsie. Mr. Purvis, when pressed, said he’d read one or two more, and from a contemporary younger poet came lines that somehow seemed to fit.

Old Jonathan stood up and said, now they had digested the salad and ice cream he shouldn’t wonder if some activity would be good, and by-the-by, if they cared to bathe, he’d got together some bathing suits belonging to his son’s family and maybe they’d manage a fit. They could dress in turn, up in the car with the shades drawn. Mrs. Tardiff hastily thanked him and said she had never bathed since her marriage. Sea water was different and at Margate she went in regular twice a day, but fresh water gave her cramps, which she fancied ran in the family.

Most of the others went in, even old Jonathan himself, who insisted they make a ring and dance around in it; and Miss Wilson found herself next to Mr. Colton, and Marian next to Geoffrey, clinging to each other’s hands tightly as they circled, splashing, shouting. Tardiff said he was no swimmer, but he took off his shoes and socks and paddled his feet, and Mrs. Tardiff, watching them all, said it made her fair homesick, it did.

To lie in the sun was an utter luxury; and the far cry of children’s voices and the near lapping of the waves, and an occasional movement of wind in the trees above the bluff, made one almost doze off deliciously, nothing else mattering.

When they were dressed, Marian and Geoffrey walked again, exploring the bluff, climbing to the top and discovering on a pine-clad knoll a wooden cottage, slightly dilapidated but of good lines. It was for rent. The key, so the sign declared, might be had next door.

Marian wanted above all things to see inside. But she did not even glance at Geoffrey. She started to go on.

He said:

“Let’s have a look in it. Shall we?”

“Of course.”

Once inside, one could see the possibilities. She forgot any reservation, running here and there, exclaiming: “Just look at this! There could be a built-in seat in that bow window, and the view—Geoffrey, the view!”

“The whole place wants doing over,” he said. He added: “I’ve sometimes wanted to have a go at fixing up an old place. I’m not unhandy that way. One could fix it up easily to sell.”

“To sell?” She caught the words back from her tongue.

Voices from outside reached them.

“Why, it’s open.”

“Shall we,” said Mr. Colton, “shall we all step inside and observe?”

Marian went to the head of the stairs.

“Yo-hoo!” she called. “Hullo, people. We’re up here. Come on up. Isn’t it a ducky place?”

They came on up. Miss Wilson made ecstatic little cluckings. Marian, with a sudden sense that only Miss Wilson of all of them there mattered, began to take her around and share the possibilities. The two men stood talking.

“There’s only one thing,” said Miss Wilson. “Wouldn’t it be just a little lonely evenings, say?”

“Lonely!”

Marian was seeing night coming over the lake—the present brilliance subdued, the evening quiet, the slow pageant of sunset, the dusk-enveloped waters, the lights lit here in the house, and out on the darkening porch, screened against insects, herself and Geoffrey.

“I’m a one for bright lights,” said Miss Wilson. “I do love plenty of neighbors.”

They returned from their round of inspection. The men were still talking. Mr. Colton had lit up a pipe—quite an amazing sort of pipe, big and decorated, the gift of his lodge—and stood, legs apart, quite sure of himself, like a man of the world laying down the law.

“Still, an apartment . . .” he was saying. “I have always felt an apartment has advantages. Preferably with a small verandah of its own.” Mr. Colton lived in a back upstairs room of a boarding house, nursing a small nest egg

against some day of need. One could imagine from his voice he would almost sign the lease if he could get the right thing. "I like life, Henderson," he said. "I'm rather a man for the—er—bright lights."

Miss Wilson made a queer little noise in her throat. She was heard. The men turned. Marian searched her wits for humor and was rewarded with general laughter, which got them all downstairs and out into the safety of open air. Tardiff was standing looking at the house.

"Oh, there you are," he said. "The boss wants us to gather on the beach."

Geoffrey returned the key, and they all followed Tardiff. His feet made a gargantuan impression on the moist ground under the pine trees.

A glow of color now rested on the water, premonitory to sunset. Mr. Purvis, having gathered bits of driftwood and some larger pieces, had a fire crackling. He said it would keep away insects, but Marian smiled, knowing that Mr. Purvis was renewing his boyhood. Besides, the fire looked cheerful, and every once in so often a drift of smoke came, pleasantly aromatic, to one's nostrils, and the sense unlocked a score of memories. Mrs. Jamieson came up with more sticks for the blaze, and Mrs. Tardiff said that, of course, fires on the beach at Margate weren't allowed but they often carried bits of wood up to the boarding house, and Mrs. Bibbs—she remembered the name now, or was it Bibber?—was that pleased. She said as a girl she had been taught to pick up things that might be useful.

Old Jonathan, seated on a projection of rock, coughed and they gave him attention.

"I'm not," he said, "by way of being a speaker, but there are one or two things I'd like to say while we're all here. I think we may fairly say that our—our picnic—has been a success?"

Little noises of assent ran around. Mrs. Tardiff spoke up to say she thought there ought to be three cheers and if Tardiff wasn't man enough to propose it, she—but old Jonathan waved that aside and went on.

"Now we must get down to business. We're all, may I remind you, out of jobs? In a few minutes now the store in which we all employed our daylight hours will close. It will not reopen."

Mr. Colton's jaw dropped. Miss Wilson gave a little repressed cry. Tardiff pulled at his mustache. Mrs. Jamieson sat up, then relaxed again and looked out across the lake. Marian glanced quickly at Geoffrey. He was poking with a little stick into the sand. Then he tossed the stick into the fire.

“It will not reopen,” said old Jonathan deliberately, “on the old basis. There’ll be carry over; all that was solid and fine in the old will be preserved. But it will be new otherwise. The new business won’t demand of anyone supersalesmanship. It’ll be much simpler and harder than that. If there are empty cisterns and our pipes are well laid and our reservoir high enough, then—well, water’ll find its own level. The new business,” said Jonathan Davis, “won’t primarily be built on the old foundations of profit percentages or annual turnover. Those things will have to look after themselves.”

He paused. In the silence the fire crackled; the colors over the lake deepened. He put out a hand in an inclusive gesture.

“I’m probably an old fool, but I still believe I’m not too old to learn new tricks.” He swung suddenly back on the group. “I’ve got openings,” he said, “for a few kindred fools. If—if Mr. Purvis here can feel, when customers come to him for guidance and he shows ’em round, that he’s got a more important job than a guide in Westminster Abbey, I want him on the staff. There’s The Poets’ Corner there, you know. I’ve stood and looked at the cold stones and felt moved. But, Purvis, we’ve got something better. We’ve got the men themselves, still speaking in the printed lines . . .

“If—if Miss Wilson can see in her circulating library something more than so many books out and so many in at two cents per diem; if she can see all the people of the district who pass our doors or come in to us as people starving for some of the things we’ve had today—beauty, companionship, jollity, recreation—and who can find some satisfaction in the books they can take out, then two cents a day won’t be the primary thing and I shall want Miss Wilson in her accustomed place under the mezzanine.”

His eyes went round the circle.

“If you, Mrs. Jamieson, can see yourself not as a saleswoman promoting a business but rather as a liaison officer between women’s clubs, and girls’ institutes and the rest of ’em, ready to facilitate the hurrying up of ammunition in their fight against ignorance and apathy and intolerance, I shall be glad to have your application for that position.

“If Geoffrey Henderson can, even occasionally in the midst of his days, take some harassed business man aside and show him that perhaps what he needs isn’t two seats in the bald-headed row of fiction but a return visit down the rabbit hole into Wonderland with Alice; that, in fact, he needs to get out and skip stones and build sand castles and light fires of driftwood—

then, Geoffrey, I should like to see you coming in at eight-thirty every morning.”

Old Jonathan halted, let his eyes wander again, then went on.

“And you, Colton—I should want in the new business an accountant who can see behind the figures. If you can really feel that, important as it is to keep using black ink rather than red, you’re just the treasury department of an enterprise in human service, then your desk and your ledger and your pen are waiting for you.

“And—er—Tardiff, we shall need somebody to sweep us out and keep us spick and span, and open and close us at the proper hours and supervise deliveries. If you think you could feel that to open the doors of a bookshop in the morning is not a duty but an adventure, we’d like you to join the honorable company of fools.” He paused. “I think that’s all,” he said.

Marian felt her world suddenly stand still. She had been forgotten. The hurt was unbearable.

“Mr. Davis,” she said. “You—you overlooked me.”

Old Jonathan met her glance.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t, my dear. I don’t think the others will mind if I say what I do now. I think, my dear, you’re the only one who’s really seen this right along. Your election to office is *ipso facto*.”

He got up.

“We should be going,” he said. “It’ll be getting chilly soon. Tardiff will perhaps help Mr. Purvis make sure the fire is properly out. I’ll see you all, then, tomorrow at the usual time? You won’t mind, I hope, finding your own ways home. You can catch a bus or street car.”

Presently the sound of the motor came to the picnickers. It died away. The beach was empty except for themselves. No children remained now; they had been called in for supper. A violet light was on the waters, edging up to a lemon-colored sky. Mr. Purvis said he’d walk up as far as the car with Mrs. Jamieson. Tardiff said if he could ever get his missus hoisted up the bank they’d move along, too. Geoffrey lent a hand in the enterprise. Mrs. Tardiff stood on the top waving to them, shouting that if ever they wanted that address at Margate, to be sure and let her know. Little Miss Wilson said she must be going, but of course it was hard to leave the beach at such a lovely time of early evening. Mr. Colton said he shouldn’t be surprised if

he'd just walk along a bit by the water and strike up to the car line farther on; and of course if Miss Wilson cared to go that way . . .

Marian and Geoffrey were left alone by the sanded-over fire. He was still silent, absorbed.

"Well?" she said almost timidly.

"All right," he said, "let's go."

He offered her his hand, hauling her to the top of the bluff. He turned, looking back across the beach and the water, then along the curve of shoreline to where the city shot its towers into the evening mist. The sun, dropping below a ridge of cloud, fell fully upon the office buildings. They stood out, white and ethereal, against the smoky haze. She did not interrupt him with speech, but his face was an answer to certain questions. There was a new eagerness in his face, a glow. But a sudden pang ran in her. He was lost in the city. He was on a new crusade. He was of the honorable company of fools. He had forgotten her. Then he turned, and they started together across the rough grass and the muddy road to where the sidewalk ran straight up to the car line.

"Wait," he said. "Do you mind waiting here a minute? I want to get the address of the agent who has that house. It certainly could be fixed over."

"To sell?" She couldn't help that.

He looked at her squarely.

"Marian," he said, "I've been an awful dub. You shouldn't tie up with a chap like me. But if—if you would—"

"I would," said Marian.

"With a small car," he said. "I could come in and out to business . . . Will you please consider yourself kissed. Promissory note. There are people round . . . But I don't know what old Jonathan will do without you. You were the only one that saw the thing before."

"A woman's influence," said Marian.

"My dear, you'll be like putty in my hands."

"Putty," she thought, as he left her. It was a word not even to be spoken in jest; unfair to Geoffrey. He hadn't conformed. He had refused the standard mold. He was one of the world's rebels. Well, they'd see the thing through together. The birth pangs of a new age must be endured. If they lost perspective or got bitter they would go and lie on the beach and hear the

water and watch the first falling of the leaves, or go down the rabbit hole with Alice, or listen to a poet finding for them, in all the clamor of life, the one importance of acorns and wind and the fulfillment of summer.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Company of Fools* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]