DORNFORD YATES

WIFE APPARENT

LADY IN WAITING

Rudland

Title: Wife Apparent
Date of first publication: 1956
Author: Cecil William Mercer (as Dornford Yates) (1885-1960)
Date first posted: Sep. 18, 2021
Date last updated: Sep. 18, 2021
Faded Page eBook #20210930

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

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WIFE APPARENT

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BY

DORNFORD YATES

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

Not until this book and its dust-cover had been printed was it discovered that another novel was shortly to appear bearing the title, LADY-IN-WAITING, which I had chosen.

In these days of expensive paper and high production costs, to "scrap" one whole edition was unthinkable. So we have done the best we can, and I must beg for the indulgence of my customers. The new title is by no means inappropriate. Indeed, it only means that my lady-in-waiting will no longer play the title-role.

Dornford Yates.

MADE IN ENGLAND

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

N. K. S.

Twenty-nine years ago, with his permission, I dedicated *Blind Corner* to Norman Kenneth Stephen of Harrow School. I cannot now seek his permission, for he is dead. But it was he who showed me how I could teach myself to master the English tongue. Judge, then, how great is my debt to that good man. Let these few words remember him. He came, as a master, to Harrow, when I was but three years old. A small boy, called Winston Churchill, was once in his form. A very fine classical scholar, he shewed forth the spirit and the meaning of polite letters: in his eyes, grammar ran third. He was a good-looking man, tall, perfectly groomed and always point device. Scrupulous to a hair, he commanded great respect. The soul of dignity, I never saw him hasten; yet he was never late. When he was over sixty, he looked forty-five. His ready wit was brilliant—there is no other word. Fate was rough with him: after a few years of marriage, he lost his beloved wife: his only son was killed in the first great war. But he looked Fate full in the face and went straight on. I will quote from one of his letters, written in 1944: "Hearing a noise overhead, I raised my eyes, to see approaching one of these flying bombs. It appeared to me to be faltering in its flight; so, with the greatest reluctance, I laid myself down in the road. The explosion which immediately followed is indescribable. Enough that I got to my feet and repaired to my hotel, there to order and consume one of the finest drinks that ever I had." He was then in his eightieth year. But N. K. S. was always young for his age.

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NOTE

Such as read this book will find that Part One is told in the first person, and Part Two in the third: but the continuity of the tale is not broken, for the play is two years long, but the curtain is only lowered for sixteen hours.

May I say that I am well aware that in 1955 the Royal Ascot meeting did not take place in June? But I had written the relevant pages before its postponement was announced and, since I have nowhere named the year in question, I hope that my plea of ‘author’s licence’ will be allowed.

In any event, it is all fiction, and the characters and circumstances of this book are wholly imaginary.

DORNFORD YATES

Part One
CORIDON'S TALE

CORIDON'S TALE

It was the lovely morning of a summer's day. Of this I became aware, as Florence was drawing the curtains that masked the aged panes.

For Florence spoils me. Rain or shine, she brings my tea every morning at eight o'clock: then she draws the curtains: then, brooking no denial, she adds two pillows to the two upon which I sleep: then she stands back, cups an elbow in one palm and her chin in the other and appraises me. After a little, she begins to talk. That is the drill—which we have evolved from experience—which ensures that, when she has gone, I shall not return to sleep.

To say that she was in form this morning would be misleading. Florence is always in form.

"Won't put on weight, will you?" she said. "I do 'ope it isn' worms. I 'ad a cousin once——"

I waved the reminiscence away.

"Later, Florence. Not now."

"P'raps you're right. Never min'. An' them pyjamas suits you. If your fans could see you now, they'd eat you up."

"Thank God they can't," I said.

"An' there you're wrong," said Florence. "We was talkin' of you las' Friday—Maimie Button an' me: outside Corner's the chemist's—the dirty dog 'asn' got your peroxide yet—an' that tall usherette comes by. Maimie grabs 'er arm. ' 'Ere, Eva,' she says, 'meet Mrs. Davey who does for Coridon Gore.' Talk about touchin' off a mine . . . The things she wanted to know. An' then, 'But why's he always so grave?' she says. 'In 'is pictures he looks so solemn.' 'That's 'is party face,' says I. 'You ought to see 'im in a towel, talkin' on the blower to one of 'is pin-up girls.' "

I sat up at that.

"Florence," I said, "how dare you——"

"Relax," said Florence. "I know what publicity's worth. She went all dreamy-like. If your publishers knew their job . . . Could you do with cold 'am to-day? I've got to nip out for an hour from nine to ten. The coffee 'll be on the stove."

Without waiting for a reply, Florence withdrew.

I seldom leave my bed before half past eight. I drink my tea, light a cigarette and do my best to improve some of the pages which I have lately composed. Then I make a thoughtful toilet, shaving and bathing in a bathroom of which I am very proud. However dismal the day, the flash of its tiles and its porcelain make glad the heart: but this morning, as I have hinted, the room was suffused with sunshine, although its little curtains were drawn.

Just before nine o'clock, I heard Florence call my name.

Sponge in hand, I put my head out of the casement.

"Lovely," said Florence. "Be good. I shan't be long."

I breakfast at half past nine, and, though I should keep no one waiting, I hate to be late. As the leisurely Westminster chime declared the half hour, I entered my dining-room. This is extremely small—just twelve feet square—but, thanks to Florence, it always looks very nice. As usual, the table itself was a sight for sore eyes. The aged silver was gleaming, the linen was snowy, a Venetian finger-bowl glowed. (I had purchased none of these things. It was my grand-father's silver, and the bowl was one of a set which was given to his parents on their marriage in the reign of William the Fourth. The linen had been a present from a very old aunt.)

On my napkin was lying a note.

Don't go and forget your coffee just because it isn't there.

That the caution was warranted, I must most frankly confess: that only a very sweet nature would have administered it goes without saying.

Presented upon the sideboard, the ham looked inviting indeed.

As I picked up the long, thin knife, the bell of the cottage was rung.

Swearing under my breath, I stood very still. Perhaps if they heard no sound, they would go away.

Somebody knocked with a stick on the iron-studded door. . . .

Then the latch was lifted, and somebody entered the hall.

With a sigh, I laid down the knife, passed to the door, which was open, and pulled it wide.

"Good morning," I said. "Can I help you? My name is Gore."

Two men swung about, to face me. One was stout and florid. The other was hatchet-faced. Both were expensively dressed. What a company-promoter looks like, I do not know; but had I been told that each had promoted half a dozen companies all of which were prosperous, I should not have been surprised.

The stout man was smiling. As he opened his mouth to speak, the other cut in.

"I fear we've intruded for nothing." I saw the other's smile fade. Well, not exactly fade. It seemed to become spectral and made me think of the grin of the Cheshire Cat, when the Cheshire Cat had gone. "We were charged to attend you one morning, precisely at half past nine. If we found you up *and* dressed, you, Major Gore, would inherit a certain sum. The testator was rather exacting. From what I know of your work, you would rather die than accept a dead man's money, when, by the merest chance, you had failed to fulfil the conditions which he imposed."

I put a hand to my head.

"Can you be more explicit?" I said.

The two of them laughed. Then the stout man put in his oar.

"You're at a disadvantage, of course. But as the executors, we had to obey the Will." He raised himself on his toes. "For that reason we could give you no notice. But now that we've paid our call, I think the lawyers may very well do the rest. I wonder if you would give us your solicitor's name and address."

"That would be best," I said. "My solicitor's Pompey Colbourne, of 17 Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"Of Colbourne, Winter and Colbourne. Very good, Major Gore. We'll get in touch with them, and they'll write to you."

"If you please."

"And pray forget this intrusion. We shan't forget it ourselves, because it's been a great pleasure to meet so distinguished a man. But now that our duty is done, the very least we can do is to leave you in peace."

I inclined my head and they bowed. Then they made their way out of the cottage, and I returned to my ham.

As I cut myself a slice, I wondered what I had done to be bothered like this. If only Florence had been there, to answer the bell. . . . I disliked and

distrusted the two: and the statement the spare man had made belonged to the screen. All rubbish, of course. '*And* dressed'. Well, wasn't I dressed? Clean shirt and slacks, laced shoes and a scarf at my throat. And a sleeveless cardigan. I was better dressed than they were: but I was dressed for the country, and they were dressed for the town. But not the West End. The whole thing was so much rubbish. The two had come to my cottage, to have a look round. But why? 'But what went ye out for to see?' If only Florence had been there. . . .

I had finished my ham, before I remembered her note. Guiltily, I made for the kitchen and fetched the coffee and milk. These were, of course, a great deal too hot to drink. However, I filled my cup and took a clean plate: but, when I sat down again, for once in a way I felt I had eaten enough, so I lighted a cigarette and waited for my coffee to cool. . . .

A step in the hall, and Florence swept into the room.

"What were them crooks doin' here?"

"I wish I knew," I said.

"Gawd, why wasn' I 'ere?" Florence glanced at my cup. "So you did forget your coffee. I give you up."

"It wasn't my fault," I said. "I was just going to get it, Florence, when they arrived."

"What did they say?"

I told her as best I could.

"All rubbish," I concluded. "They'll never ring up Mr. Pompey. What they wanted, I've no idea; but they were covering up."

"What were their names?"

"I didn't ask them," I said.

Florence covered her eyes.

"In course, you're dangerous. They 'ad your name; so why shouldn' you 'ave theirs? Still, Joe Gammon's got them. Flicked roun' Mab Corner, they did, slap into 'is truck. On their wrong side, of course, an' Joe goes up in the air. Done in 'is near fore proper. Snakeface must of said somethin' Joe didn' like, for when I comes up, 'is man was holdin' 'im back and the other pot-bellied bastard was fairly oozing oil. 'Now that's all right,' he says, 'you 'ave your vehicle repaired an' sen' me the bill.' 'All right be beed,' says Joe. 'What about my farm? I need this you-know truck. She does ten hours a

day.' ' 'Ire another,' says Grease-gun, 'an' shove it down in the bill.' Then he gives Joe a card. '*Pamlow an' Kitchen*,' reads Joe; 'an' which is you?' 'I'm Mr. Pamlow,' says Grease-gun. 'Yes, but you wasn't drivin',' says Joe. 'E looks Snakeface up an' down. 'I s'pose you're the chauffer,' he says. Snakeface looks ready to strike. 'I'm Mr. Kitchen,' 'e says in a shakin' voice. 'Right,' says Joe. 'Then you-know well write your name on the back o' this card.' Snakeface takes out a pencil an' does as he says. 'An' the number of yer car an' the date.' Snakeface didn' like that, but at last 'e did. As Joe takes the card, 'You'll 'ear from me,' 'e says. Then 'e calls across to me. 'You see this car, Mrs. Davey. 'Ow far would you say she was from 'er off-side bank?' I went round an' 'ad a good look. 'A foot an' a 'alf,' I says. 'That's not in dispute,' says Grease-gun. 'I know, I know,' says Joe. 'But I seen your shape before.' When I came away, 'e was checkin' the number of the car."

"Well, I can't say I'm sorry," said I. "They're not a nice pair."

"Couple of crooks," said Florence. "An' now it's your turn. What did they say about a Will?"

I told her again.

"There's dirty work 'ere," said Florence. "You mus' get Mr. Pompey on the blower."

"Not for this rubbish," said I. "He's a busy man."

Florence shrugged her shoulders and left the room.

Before sitting down at my table, I strolled out of doors. Like everything else, my garden is very small: but the lawn is old and cared for and the timber rising about it belongs to the golden world. And I have one elm of my own, a very 'reverend signior', full of years. I often talk to him and hope he has ears to hear. He must, I think, remember the bonfires for Blenheim. . . .

This morning we were speaking of rogues—for I know he remembers the gibbet that stood on Holystone Hill—when I heard the telephone-bell.

As I stepped into the study—

"Major Gore, please, to speak to Mr. Pompey."

"Florence!"

"Relax," said Florence. "You go an' do your stuff. This is my show. Oh, is that you, Mr. Pompey? This is Florence speaking. Can you come down

this evening? There's dirt bin done down 'ere, which you ought to know. . . . Well, while I was out this morning a couple of bastards blew in an' bluffed 'is nibs. . . . In an' out, jus' to tell 'im 'e'd lost a fortune. If I couldn' do better than that, I'd take the veil. But 'e laps it up, Mr. Pompey. . . . But in course you'll stay the night. . . . All right, about 'alf past six. I'll 'ave some beer on the ice."

Florence replaced the receiver and looked at me.

"I like Mr. Pompey," she said.

"So do I," I said. "But you shouldn't have roped him in. Besides, I don't want their money."

"P'raps you could buy a car."

"I don't want a car," I said. "I've just enough and I get along very well."

"You jus' make out," said Florence. "And look at the linen we need. An' that leak in the roof. An' supposin' your nex' book flops."

"A few more visits like this, and I think it will."

The gentlest expression repaired to Florence's eyes.

"You couldn't bear them, could you?"

"My one idea was to get them out of the house."

"D.S.O. an' Bar," said Florence. "Sweetie-pie, I'll 'ave to vet your wife."

Pompey inspected the card, kindly lent by Joe Gammon, at Florence's request.

Then he looked at Florence.

"How did you know they'd been here?"

"Saw the marks of their tires by the gate."

"Good for you," said Pompey.

He laid the card on the table and looked at me.

"How were you dressed?" he said.

Florence replied.

“ ’Xactly as ’e is now. I caught ’im goin’ to change, like ’e always must at six. ‘No you don’t,’ I says. ‘Mr. Pompey’s goin’ to see you eggsactly as you was when the bastards blew in.’ ”

“Florence,” said Pompey, “you’d make a damned good lawyer, and that’s the truth.”

“Not on your life,” said Florence. “Fancy me in a wig. I served on a jury once, but they never called me again.”

“I’ll bet they didn’t,” said Pompey. He looked me up and down. “Well, I think you look very nice—anyone would. And most appropriately attired for the countryside.”

“Everythin’ clean,” said Florence. “An’ sock-suspenders, too.”

“I’m sure of that,” said Pompey. “And you can think of no one who might have felt an urge to remember you in his Will?”

I shook my head.

“Might be someone,” said Florence, “who’s fallen for ’is books.”

“I don’t think so,” said Pompey. “If so, why the provision? Why the provision that he must be up and dressed by half past nine?”

“D’you really believe that?” said I.

“Most certainly I do,” said Pompey. “Its very eccentricity proves it true. If a man sets out to lie, he’ll do better than that. If they came, as you suggest, to have a look round, think of the thousands of excuses they might have made—reasonable excuses for their intrusion. Oh, no. There’s something in it. You’ve been left money all right, which they don’t want you to have.”

“But you’ll get it, Mr. Pompey, won’t you?”

“Oh, yes. I’ll get it,” said Pompey. “You know, I’m inclined to think that it’s quite a good sum. If it wasn’t something worth having, I hardly think the two principals would have rolled up.”

“Goody, goody,” said Florence, softly clapping her hands.

I began to feel faintly uneasy.

“There’s only my word,” I said, “to say how I was dressed.”

“An’ what about me?” said Florence.

“Keep it clean,” said Pompey. “You never saw him till later. Still, that doesn’t matter at all, for they couldn’t come into court. Directly they hear from me, they’ll know that their bluff has been called and they’ll crumple right up. You see. But I wish you could think of a possible benefactor. I know. What about god-parents?”

“I only remember one. But it wouldn’t be him.”

“Why not?” said Pompey.

“Well, I haven’t seen him for years and we weren’t on the best of terms.”

“How was that?”

“He didn’t at all approve of my writing books. He didn’t mince his words. As we parted, ‘Never forget, he said, ‘that before you became an author, you were a gentleman.’ ”

Florence was breathing through her nose.

“Wish I’d bin there,” she said darkly.

I smiled.

“He was very old-fashioned,” I said. “In his sight authors were rogues and actors were vagabonds. All he meant was that I should not keep bad company or fall into dissolute ways.”

“Name, please,” said Pompey.

“Admiral Colefax,” I said. “A very old friend of my father’s.”

“Sometime President of the M.C.C.?”

“That’s right.”

“Then he’s the benefactor,” said Pompey. “You ought to keep an eye on the papers. I read his obituary notice ten days ago. And I wonder who’s the residuary legatee?”

“Why, Mr. Pompey?” said Florence.

“Because,” said Pompey, “if Major Gore hadn’t been dressed at half past nine, whoever it is would have had the money, instead.”

More than a week had gone by, and I had just finished shaving when Florence gave tongue.

“There’s a letter from Mr. Pompey. Shall I bring it up?”

Such letters as come for me are laid on a table in the hall; but, though I was willing to wait, I had not the heart to deny such eagerness.

As I picked up a sponge—

“Bring it along,” I cried.

Florence was in my bedroom as soon as I.

I picked up a nail-file, slit the envelope open and took my seat on the bed.

“An’ there’s another thing,” said Florence. “You need a new dressin’-gown. That’s been a nice gown, that ’as; but you did ought to of scrapped it three years ago.”

“We’re not there yet,” I said. And then, “I’ll read it aloud.”

Florence assumed an attitude of prayer.

My dear Corin,

All is very well.

To use their own words, Messrs. Pamlow and Kitchen are ‘only too thankful that the misunderstanding which arose, no doubt, from mutual embarrassment, has been cleared up’. As soon as the Will has been proved, they will send me a cheque in your favour for ten thousand pounds.

For this happy issue, my curiosity is partly responsible, for in a postscript to the letter I sent them, I asked for the maiden name of the residuary legatee. The fellows ignored this question, as well they might. More. They knew that I knew the answer.

You see, the Admiral had made his nurse his residuary legatee —a Mrs. Frances Borehole, unpopular with the staff. Her maiden name was Kitchen.

Well, here’s luck, old fellow. Don’t spend it all at once.

Yours ever,
Pompey.

Her eyes tight shut—

“Ten thousand quid,” said Florence. “Gawd be praised. An’ I only prayed for five. Mr. Pompey’s eye’s not dim. I could smell it all right, but ’e knew where to dig. The dirty dogs! I’ll bet they came over queer when they read ’is note. Never min’. Ten thousan’ quid in the Bank! Jus’ what we want. I’ll get out a list of the linen this afternoon.”

With a hand to my head—

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I said.

“I should worry,” said Florence. “The money’s there. I’d like to telephone Burslem about the roof.”

“Wait till I’ve got it,” I said.

Florence shrugged her shoulders.

I got to my feet and put out my hand for hers. She gave it hesitatingly.

“Do what you like,” I said. “All three of us know that I owe all this to you. You’re very sweet to me, Florence.”

I put her hand to my lips.

Florence caught her breath.

Then—

“Take me for granted, luv. That’s all I ask.”

With that, she was gone.

It was only when I called on my elm to rejoice with me that I perceived the true measure of my amazing luck. Few people in England, no matter how wise or how brilliant, could pocket ten thousand pounds for a whole year’s work. But I had been given that sum. No tax collector could take one penny away. It was mine, as it stood; for it must be ‘free of all duty’, if Pamlow and Kitchen had promised to write such a cheque. It was just the backing I needed, for Florence was right when she said that I ‘just made out’. And if I fell sick or—or anything . . .

To be sure, the cottage was mine; but when everything had been paid, there was little left. And living was very expensive, and I was forty-one. In the old days, of course . . . Perhaps I lived too well, but, if ever I said so to Florence, she gave me one of her looks. The ham had been very expensive—it was an old-fashioned ham. I don’t really care what I eat: but I like to be able to ask a friend to a meal. And Florence exploits this failing: so my table, if plain, is good. I do have a lot of washing—that I know. But I’ve

always had clean linen, and my drink bill is very small. So is my cottage, of course: but some of the stuff from Peerage looks very well. (That was my Mother's home, a long time ago.) And the old-fashioned china and glass are Florence's pride. Florence . . .

What I should do without Florence, I do not know. I think she is thirty-nine, and her husband, a merchant-seaman, was killed in the war. She has her own home in the village: in return for her board and lodging, an aunt looks after that: so Florence is free to devote herself to my home. Except that she does not sleep there, it is, I think, as much her home as mine. She always gives *Elm Cottage* as her address. And she is a jealous warden: any attempt to trespass meets with a very short shrift. As for my personal convenience, cook-housekeeper, counsellor, valet—Florence fills all these roles.

Why I should be thus honoured, I cannot tell. I have little to recommend me. Since I was knocked out in 1945, my brain has worked very slowly and I only want to be quiet. I was good company once, but that is over and done. I am now a drug in the market. But Florence is very understanding. What I should do without her, I do not know.

An urchin zephyr ruffled my old elm's jacket and went his way. A runaway knock. But it brought me back to my fortune. Ten thousand pounds. Fifteen years ago, I should have thrown such a party as never was seen. But those days were over—for me. I decided to invest six thousand and keep four thousand loose. Not blow it, of course: but put the roof right and buy linen and—and other things.

✶ ✶ ✶

Six weeks had gone by, and my book was going well. Slowly, you know; but well. August was in and the holiday season was on. Pompey was arriving for luncheon, was going to spend the week-end.

Florence stole into the study.

"Sorry," she said. "It's urgent. Can I use the blower a minute?" She picked the receiver up. . . . "Is that Laden's? Give me the boss. Say it's Major Gore wants 'im. . . . That you, Mr. Laden? Started a new line, 'ave you? Well, when I want my 'ardware from you, I'll let you know. 'Alf a dozen lemons,' I said: not plastic Easter eggs. An' not even filled with sawdust. . . . Oo served me? That wall-eyed pansy that ought to change 'is sex. . . . Mistake my foot, Mr. Laden. She took 'em out of the crate you keep

for flats. Well, six more good uns, please—within the hour. You can 'ave the others back, to dress the window with. I should think they're everlastin'." She put the receiver back and peered out of doors. "I thought so. 'Ikers, now. Gawd, look at Gregory Peck." She swept out into the garden. "You've got your dates wrong. We don' show the mansion on Saturdays. . . . Oh, water, of course. Well, we don' keep the tap in the 'all. An' your shorts isn't short enough, Juliet—not with a leg like that. An' now if you still want water, get roun' to the back. But I *'ope* you want it to wash in. . . ."

The lift of her voice suggested that the hikers were in retreat.

Nearly two hours later, I heard Pompey's cheerful note.

"Florence, love, how are you? And how's his nibs?"

"Workin' too 'ard, Mr. Pompey. I'm glad you've come. You walk in on 'im. I'll be along with some beer."

As Florence filled the two tankards—

"Any noos of Snakeface, Mr. Pompey?"

Pompey laughed. Then—

"So far as we are concerned, Messrs. Pamlow and Kitchen are exactly where they belong. I received a letter yesterday, saying that probate had been granted and that I might expect the cheque in the course of next week. Of course, their luck was dead out. They practise in Burnish, the market-town near which your god-parent lived. Unhappily for them, our solicitor-agent in Burnish was coming to see me on business the very day I left you. When I mentioned Admiral Colefax, he nearly went through the roof. He used to be the Admiral's solicitor, and what he couldn't tell me would go on the back of a stamp. Kitchen's sister, the nurse, was planted to do her best. And she's done damned well. She got the old fellow to leave our agent's firm and go to Pamlow and Kitchen. Then he made a new Will, under which, except for you, she gets every penny piece. That woman'll net about forty-five thousand pounds."

"Not with a brother like Snakeface. I'll bet 'e gets his cut."

"No takers, Florence," said Pompey.

"Relatives?" I said.

"You need have no qualms. They're, all of them, well-to-do. That's not to say they're not mad. They can't do anything, of course: but we're on

velvet. All Pamlow and Kitchen want is to keep the whole thing quiet. I don't know that they'll succeed, for the Press will splash your show."

"Goody, goody," said Florence.

"Oh, hell," said I.

"My dear old Corin," said Geoffrey, "it's just what you need. If they come down here, Florence will deal with them. But say it with flowers, Florence."

"You bet," said Florence. "I'll have the darlings swooning before I'm through."

"That's the style."

When Pompey and I were alone—

"Look here," I said. "I want Florence to have a thousand. What's the best way?"

Pompey fingered his chin.

"I'll have to think that one out. An immediate annuity, perhaps. D'you know her age?"

"I think she's thirty-nine."

"I see. Well, I'll see our accountants about it and let you know. And now about you. Life is short: you mustn't tie all this up."

"I thought of investing six thousand."

"And blowing the rest?"

"Well, using it gradually."

"Good enough," said Pompey. "D'you know, if I were you, I'd buy a small car. You've got the garage waiting, and you'd find it useful, you know. And have Florence taught to drive. Then she can drive home at night and back the next day. Save her a lot in bad weather."

"What a brilliant idea," I said.

"Then from time to time you should come to London, Corin. Stay quietly at The Savoy. You don't have to entertain, but you will see life. Lunch at the Club, if you please: but dine in the Grill. It won't cost you very much, and you'll get it all back, because you'll be keeping in touch. Say, the inside of a week, every three or four months. Remember, whatever you do, you mustn't get out of date. The first time you'll find it strange; but then

you'll come to like it. The hotel will get to know you and will respect your ways. You can dine me of course, me lad, whenever you like."

"I dread the prospect," I said. "But I see your point."

"You needn't dread the prospect," said Pompey. "You'll be very well looked after, you won't be bothered at all and you'll see the world go by."

"I'll have to do London," I said. "It's years since I went to The Tower."

"Or the Coliseum," said Pompey. "Don't rule out the modern side."

The following Thursday morning was distinguished by two events. At least, they stand out as events from my quiet life.

At breakfast I opened a letter addressed to me by my Bank. This informed me that my account had been credited with the sum of ten thousand pounds. The news was received with explosive rapture by Florence, in amused silence by the elm. To the latter, of course, the sum was chicken-feed: he was accustomed to rent-rolls and half a million invested in the funds. "Times have changed," I said weakly. His silence was still more amused. After all, I was telling him.

Exactly an hour later, the door of the study was opened and Florence slid into the room.

"The Press for a dollar," she hissed. "You slip out o' the back, an' I'll take them on. Come in by the gate in five minutes, as if you'd been for a walk."

There was no time to argue, and Florence is usually right. As I whipped into the hall, the bell of the cottage was rung.

A few minutes later, I passed a car at rest, entered the garden and strolled towards the house. Two men emerged to meet me. . . .

Nobody could have been nicer. The interview, for me, was most enjoyable. They photographed me with the elm, whom they greatly admired.

"And you always dress like this—in the country, I mean?"

"In the summer, always," I said. "I have a weakness for shirt-sleeves."

"A failing we share, Major Gore."

"Pray indulge it at once," I said.

They did so gratefully. Then we went into the study, and Florence brought us some beer.

"A book on the stocks, Major Gore?"

"Yes."

"Same style as your last?"

"More or less."

"I'm very glad of that. I hope you'll disregard what some reviewers have said."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Some of them harp upon your nostalgia."

"Do they indeed?" I said. "I find that very surprising."

The other stared.

"But don't you see the reviews?"

I shook my head.

"I only take *The Telegraph*. Someone or other spoke very handsomely in that."

"But aren't press-cuttings sent you?"

I shook my head.

"I do the best I can, and I leave it there. But I wouldn't have said my writing was homesick."

"Nostalgic," said the other.

"But that *is* homesick," I said.

I rose and passed to a book-case, to return with a volume of the O.E.D. I found the word, and the two looked over my shoulder. When we had done—

"Well, I'm damned," said the elder. "Homesick, *and nothing else*. With a derivation like that, it *can't* mean anything else. So much for these damned vogue-words."

Then we talked about books and old silver and long-dead silver-smiths.

"You're a collector, Major Gore?"

"Good Lord, no," said I. "The little silver I have is all family stuff."

After, perhaps, half an hour they returned to the charge.

"Ten thousand pounds, free of tax, is a lot of money to-day."

"I think it's a fortune," I said.

"May we know what you'll do with the money?"

"I think the best answer is—it'll go to maintain this home. You see, this little place is all I've got. It's all I want, you know: I'm more than content. But—well, for instance, our linen is on its last legs. And then there's a leak in the roof." I hesitated. Then, "I expect you realize that, but for the devotion of my housekeeper, neither you nor I would be here to-day."

The elder of the two smiled.

"I'm equally sure, Major Gore, that she loves her job."

Then they got to their feet and said they must go. I walked with them to the gate, saw them into their car and hoped they would come again.

On my way back I stopped to have a word with the elm. "That's a new one on you," I said. "Two gentlemen of the Press. You and I shall appear together in one of the public prints." A rustle of disapproval was all the answer I got.

I may say I was faintly surprised and very greatly relieved that my friends had not referred to the visit of Pamlow and Kitchen which, so to speak, opened the ball. Frankly, I'd dreaded that; for I couldn't have told the truth.

Pompey rang me up the next morning.

"Corin lad," he said, "have you seen *The Daily* ——?"

"I don't take it," I said.

"Ask Florence to show you her copy."

"I'm sure she won't have one. Why?"

"Oh, yes, she will," said Pompey. "You do as I say."

With that, he rang off.

When I opened the door to call Florence, I found her waiting outside, salver in hand. In silence she offered me its burden. This was a copy of *The Daily* ——.

I confess that the headlines hit me between the eyes.

GODSON AUTHORS LEGACY
'I THINK IT'S A FORTUNE'
BUT SOLICITOR'S SISTER GETS FOUR TIMES
AS MUCH

'To my dear Godson, Coridon Gore, the sum of ten thousand pounds, free of all duty, provided that he is up and dressed when my executors call upon him at half past nine.'

Major Gore's housekeeper described the momentous occasion.

"*When I asked the gentlemen to wait, they said no, they must see him at once. The Major must have heard us arguing, for he left his breakfast and came to see what it was. Messrs. Pamlow and Kitchen took one look at him: then they began to laugh and clapped him upon the back. 'You've won' they kept crying. 'You've won ten thousand pounds' 'But I don't understand,' said the Major. So then they explained about the clause in the Will, and Mr. Pamlow offered their congratulations. 'Not so fast,' said the Major. 'This is a great deal of money. It's perfectly clear I'm depriving somebody else. Who would have had it, if I hadn't happened to be dressed?' The solicitors laughed more than ever. Then, 'My sister,' said Mr. Kitchen: 'and she's got more than enough. When everything's paid she'll have netted about forty thousand pounds.' 'Oh, well,' said the Major, 'in that case . . .' 'I should think so,' said Mr. Pamlow. The Major asked them if they wouldn't sit down and have a glass of sherry or something. But they said they'd got to get back. So they said goodbye and drove off. I think they were in a hurry, for they cut their second corner and hit a farmer for six.*"

There was a very good picture of me and the elm and, I hope, a very bad picture of Mrs. Borehole. Even so, her resemblance to her brother was unmistakable.

There was quite a lot more, but I read no further then.

I looked up to see Florence standing with folded hands. Her eyes were cast down; her expression was almost demure.

"Say it," she said.

"I can't," I said, laughing. "Words fail me. The emotions which you have enlarged will set Burnish on fire."

“Bombs for bastards,” said Florence. “That’ll learn ’em to rob the orphan. ’S a matter of fac’, I think I done them proud. Supposin’ I’d tole the truth.” She glanced at the clock. “I’ve got to nip up to the butcher’s. If Snakeface calls, ’old ’im until I’m back.”

“You bet I will,” I said.

“An’—an’ thank you, luv, for what you said about me.”

“When you talk like that,” I said, “I want to burst into tears.”

Florence gave me the sweetest smile.

Then—

“Shan’t be long,” she said, and left me alone.

August was nearly out, and I had ordered a car. A small one, of course; but that was expensive enough. I had ordered it through Fred Barley, who kept the only garage the village possessed. He hoped I should have it in October.

I was breaking the news to the elm on one of those exquisite mornings, when old houses sleek themselves and honey-bees take their time in the motionless, sun-drenched air. Suddenly some instinct told me that I was being watched.

Warily, I concluded my report.

“Well, there you are,” I said. “Better an equipage, of course. But beggars can’t be choosers, as you know as well as I.”

Then I turned to my right, as though to stroll to the gate.

“Your confidant?” said a girl.

“Yes,” I said. “A very comfortable genius.”

“I can believe it,” she said.

She was tall and slim and her head was well set on. She looked about nineteen, but I judged her older than that. The shape of her pretty face was that of a heart: but the keen, gray eyes were grave, and the mouth was short of a smile. Her look denied the gaiety of her curls. ‘The Pensive Bacchante’ describes her: I cannot do better than that. A pale-blue linen frock became her mightily. Between the slats of the wicket I saw that her legs were bare.

“I know you’re not hiking,” I said.

“A caravan,” she said, “is almost as bad. Only four days more, thank God.”

“Where does it rest?” I said.

“By a village called Cowlick, unworthy of its name.”

“Cowlick the Vulgar,” I said, “is fully five miles from here.”

“I hoped it was. I shall return in due course and say I got lost.”

“Why is the caravan so bad?”

“It’s ruled by a masterful woman who knows every blasted rope.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Exactly. As I am presentable, my job every other day is to cadge some milk and eggs. You go to a private house and ask if they can tell you where you can buy some milk. If they tell you, you’ve lost; so you try another dwelling. But if you swing ‘Beauty in Distress’, I’m told they’ll give you a pint. Same with the eggs. I won’t do it, of course. I buy the stuff in some shop, and, being a rotten liar, get cursed for my pains.”

“Can’t you withdraw?”

“If I do, I’ve nowhere to go. I’ve lent my rooms to a friend till Saturday next. Never mind. I talk to animals, when nobody’s there; but I’ve never got off with a tree.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “you’ve never met one like this. Come in, and I’ll introduce you.”

She opened the gate and came in, moving with the careless elegance of a well-bred cat. For a moment she stood, looking up—into the leafy kingdom of trembling green. Then she swept it the finest curtsey I ever saw.

I addressed the elm.

“Aren’t you lucky?” I said.

The girl raised her delicate eyebrows.

“Blood royal has its rights,” she said. And then, “Besides, I’m deeply impressed.”

“I think he has ears to hear.”

“I can believe it,” she said. She turned to regard the cottage. “You’re very lucky, you know. I’m country-bred, but I have to live in a mews. It might be worse, of course; and I’m out all day.”

“*Tout passe*,” said I. “You’ll come back one day, as I have.

“ ‘For Courts are full of flattery,
‘As hath too oft been tried.’ ”

To my surprise and delight, she caught and returned the ball. (Few young ladies, I think, could quote from *Coridon’s Song*.)

“ ‘The city full of wantonness,
‘And both are full of pride.’ ”

We rendered the refrain together.

“ ‘Then care away,
‘And wend along with me.’ ”

She sighed.

“It was easier then,” she said. “And I might be worse off. Wimpole Street isn’t sordid—that’s where I work.” She glanced at her wrist and turned. “Goodbye, Coridon.”

“Please come in,” I said. “I won’t offer you any milk.”

She threw a smile over her shoulder.

“One day, perhaps. Not now.”

“*Au revoir*, Maid of Honour,” I said.

Then she went on her way, and I saw her no more.

I looked at the elm.

“Wasn’t that nice?” I said.

With that, I re-entered the study, to pick up the threads of my tale.

At twelve o’clock Florence appeared with my beer.

As she poured this into the tankard—

“And ooze the girl-frien’?” she said.

“I’ve no idea,” I said. Florence nodded approval. “But I think she’s very charming,” I added.

"Class," said Florence. "Reel class. An' plenty of 'it'. An' can she do a curtsey? I wonder she wasn't eaten when she was presented at Court."

✶ ✶ ✶

Of the second week in October, I spent five nights in London, staying at The Savoy. As Pompey had predicted, I enjoyed myself very much. My bedroom and bathroom left nothing to be desired. Had I been a millionaire, I could not have been better served. I lunched each day at the Club, and Pompey dined with me twice. (Florence's annuity was arranged.) I entertained a young niece, just out of school. Everyone present, I think, enjoyed her company. Twice I visited Christie's. The second time I made bold to bid for four candlesticks. They were justly popular, but I was determined to have them for Pompey the Good. I left them at his office the following day. But the high spot was shopping *à deux*.

Before I left the cottage, I had arranged to meet Florence in London on Wednesday afternoon: for I know nothing of linen and she would not buy it alone.

"——'s is the place," she said. "I've found that out. I'll be waiting for you outside at three o'clock. Fanny Bowles will mind the 'ouse—she's a very reliable girl. She won't go nosin' about—bin well brought up. 'Er grandmother used to be in service at Orison 'All: still drawin' a pension, she is, though the family's gone."

"I shall be there," I said.

On Wednesday morning I spoke with the housekeeper of my floor—as nice a woman as ever I hope to meet. I told her what I should like.

"With very great pleasure, sir. But please let me give her tea."

I shook my head.

"That," I said, "is to be my privilege. About five o'clock?"

"Whenever you please, sir. You've only to ring me up."

In a gray tailor-made, Florence looked very smart. Her hat and gloves and shoes left nothing to be desired. Indeed, I was not surprised when, as I came up to her side, an officer—not of our Forces—met his doom.

"This is Oxford Street," said Florence: "not the Mile End Road. You might get off there, if you had a bath first." She greeted me with a smile. "Good afternoon, sir. Shall I lead the way?"

I followed her into the shop.

With the air of a marchioness—

"House linen, please," said Florence. . . .

At the counter sheets were produced.

Florence inspected and felt them. Then she turned to me.

"They're not good linen, sir. I shouldn't have these."

I looked at the assistant.

"Have you nothing better?" I said.

More expensive sheets were produced. But Florence shook her head.

"I can't advise these, sir. We'd better try somewhere else."

The assistant blenched. Then—

"If you'll wait a moment, madam, I'll see if the buyer's here."

As the fellow hastened away, Florence looked full at me and closed one eye. In a moment or two he returned—with another man and a parcel, the wrapping of which was clearly better paper than that we had seen till now.

As the contents were laid before her—

"This is more like it," said Florence. "Why didn't you show the Major these before?"

The buyer took up the running.

"These are rather exceptional, madam."

Florence examined the sheets. Then she turned to me.

"These are pre-war sheets of second-grade linen, sir. Not as good as ours, of course; but I think they'll do."

"Excuse me, madam, but these are first-grade sheets."

"They are to-day," said Florence. "They weren't when they were made."

"I leave it to you," said I.

"The price?" said Florence.

The buyer named an astronomical sum.

"Put down six pairs," said Florence. "Pillow-cases, please. Better quality, if you have it."

Pillow-cases were inspected and approved.

“Put down two dozen,” said Florence.

Face-towels and napkins followed.

“And how much is that?” said Florence.

When the items had been added up, the total came to more than one hundred and seventy pounds.

“You mustn’t pay that, sir,” said Florence. “It’s far too much.” She turned to the buyer. “This is all pre-war linen, at least sixteen years old. Before the war you’d have sold it for forty pounds. It’s all of it seconds, you know, and it may be box-rotten. But I’ll take a chance on that and recommend the Major to pay you eighty-five. He’ll write the cheque here and now, and you can send it along.”

The buyer protested—in vain.

“Rubbish,” said Florence, coldly. “It cost you less than thirty. I can’t advise the Major to go beyond ninety—cash. Two hundred per cent profit should be enough.”

In the end I made it guineas, and that was that. I wrote the cheque, and Florence took the invoice and put it into her bag. (The ‘box-rotten’ spectre undoubtedly pulled its weight. But for my faith in Florence, I should have been uneasy myself.)

I followed my principal out, as a man in a dream. I had not known you could bargain in such a house. My impulse was to do my housekeeper homage, but reason suggested that I should display no emotion until we were half a mile off.

As we reached the pavement—

“The Burlington Arcade,” said Florence. “You want a new dressing-gown.”

After what I had seen, I decided not to protest.

It was, of course, quite a short drive, but it gave me time to voice my grateful admiration in unmistakable terms.

“Florence,” I said, “you’ve got Napoleon beat. He never did anything greater in all his life.”

“Gur,” said Florence. “It was a piece o’ cake. They wanted to clear the stuff an’ they mightn’t of ’ad such an order for another ten years. An’ now a

reelly nice gown."

"Not—not too expensive," I faltered.

"Expensive be blowed," said Florence. "You aren't used to money yet."

I paid and dismissed the taxi, and we entered the old arcade.

Florence made straight for a shop at which, a long time ago, I had purchased a scarf. It had cost a great deal of money, but I was using it still.

I stopped her upon the threshold.

"No bargaining here," I murmured.

Florence shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

"A silk dressing-gown, please."

Some magnificent robes were produced.

Florence felt them carefully. Then she turned to me.

"These are not pure silk, sir," she said.

The assistant's hand flew to his mouth.

Then—

"The silk of to-day, madam, is not like yesterday's silk. It——"

"Pure silk's pure silk," said Florence, and left it there.

The assistant sought the manager of the shop.

"Good afternoon, madam. Good afternoon, sir. Madam is perfectly right. This silk is not wholly pure. But it will wear——"

"Won't be so warm," said Florence. "The Major's a dressing-gown now that he bought from you. And that is silk. It's lasted for twenty-five years. That's why he's come back."

"Excuse me, madam," said the manager. . . .

He returned with a dressing-gown which was as fine a garment as ever I saw. You could not describe it as wear. It was array.

"And this, madam?"

Florence examined it carefully.

"Yes, this is silk," she said. She turned to me. "If you'd take off your coat, sir, I'd like you to put it on."

I did as she said.

“D’you like it, sir?” said Florence. “I think it fits very well.”

“It’s very nice,” I said. I looked at the manager. “What’s its price?”

“There’s a pier-glass here, sir,” said the assistant.

I moved to the glass. The gown was superb—of dark blue, fretted with crimson. No stage dilettante was ever so handsomely dressed.

“What’s its price?” I repeated.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Florence. She looked at the manager. “Will you guarantee that this gown isn’t pre-war?”

The manager smiled.

“Yes, madam, I will. This silk was woven last year.”

Then he declared the price.

I took off the splendid garment and handed it back.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but it isn’t worth that to me.”

As Florence picked up my coat, the assistant darted round and took it out of her hands. As he slid it on to my shoulders—

“You do need a scarf, sir,” said Florence.

“D’you think I do?” I said.

But some special drawer had been opened and four or five flat, white boxes were in the manager’s hands.

As he lifted their lids—

“These are pure silk, sir,” he said. “They are all we have.”

Florence felt the material and nodded.

“Guaranteed?” she said.

The manager smiled.

“Woven this year, madam.”

I chose a magnificent yellow.

“How much is that?”

The price was very high, but I took my cheque-book out and wrote the cheque.

Florence lifted her voice.

"Major Coridon Gore, D.S.O., The Savoy Hotel."

The assistant wrote the words down.

The manager opened the door and bowed us out.

"Good day, sir, thank you. Good day, madam."

We smiled and wished him good day.

As we walked down the arcade—

"Sprat for a whale," murmured Florence. "Now that they've seen the cash, I'll lay they ring up to-morrow an' offer you ten per cent. Say you'll pay thirty guineas, an' if they like to take it, they'll find a cheque in the 'all. Oo-er, look at them strip-tease ties." She glanced at her watch. "I'll 'ave to be leaving you now to catch my train."

"Not just yet," I said.

"But Fanny Bowles——"

"Damn Fanny Bowles," I said.

We emerged into Piccadilly.

I put Florence into a cab, gave the address to the driver and got in myself.

"We're going to have tea," I said. "And then I want you to meet a friend of mine."

Florence protested, of course.

"No, luv, not at The Savoy. It's you all over, I know: but it isn't right."

For all that, she was so much excited that she could hardly sit still.

"Tell me one thing," I said. "You wouldn't have the linen, unless it was pre-war stuff: but you wouldn't have the silk, if it was."

Florence smiled.

"Silk goes box-rotten: linen 'll keep."

"I see. You're very shrewd. And you'd make your fortune at poker, and that's the truth. I can't get over that linen. You've saved us eighty pounds."

"As useful to us as them. But I do 'ope you get that gown. I could of got it, I know. We 'ad to buy the scarf, to let them 'ave the address."

We got a very nice table, against the wall: from there we could watch all the movement—people coming and going and meeting and stopping to speak: the murmur of light-hearted talk against the background of music pleased the ear: when a girl's laughter rang out, it was like the leap of a fish from a lazy stream. Florence drank her tea and said hardly a word: but her head was never still and her eyes were bright. I watched her pleasedly.

At length—

"I thought perhaps," I said, "you'd like to see some of the rooms; so the housekeeper of my floor is going to show you round. I think you'll like her, Florence: she's awfully nice."

Five minutes later I saw her into a lift.

"The second floor," I said, "and you are to take your time. I shall be over there somewhere when you come back."

After about half an hour I was called to the telephone.

"Your floor-housekeeper speaking, sir. Mrs. Davey feels that she ought to be getting back. Shall I send her down to the Embankment Entrance, sir?"

"If you please. I'm going there now."

Florence just smiled at me and turned to the door.

I followed her out and the carriage-man summoned a cab.

Florence was speaking jerkily.

"I can't ever thank you enough, sir. I'll never forget to-day. And Mrs. Winthrop was sweet. A lovely flat, she's got: and she showed me your rooms. She—she says she'll give me tea whenever I'm up in Town."

The carriage-man opened the door and I put out my hand.

"I've loved having you," I said.

"Thank you very much, sir," said Florence, respectfully.

At ten of the following morning the firm of hosiers rang up.

Was I still interested in the blue dressing-gown? I said I was just going out to try elsewhere. (This was untrue.) In that case, they said, they had a suggestion to make. I pulled myself together and said my piece.

"Look here," I said. "I want a dressing-gown, and I'll go to thirty guineas for one I like. But I won't pay a penny more. If you like to send that

one up, I'll write a cheque here and now and the porter will give it to the fellow that brings the parcel along."

There was a moment's silence.

Then—

"Very well, sir. We'll send it up."

So, thanks to Florence's wisdom, I won hands down. But I felt rather badly about it. And an hour later, when I was in Manchester Square, Franz Hals' young officer looked at me rather hard. "Damn it," I said, "I paid what they asked for the scarf." I will swear that, as I spoke, his expression changed: and then I saw that he had been pulling my leg.

On Friday morning a letter from Florence arrived.

Sir,

I want to thank you for being so sweet to me. Might of been your sister, the way you behaved. Fancy me having tea at The Savoy. You'll never guess what Fanny Bowles' granny said. If ever your sick, she said, I'll take Fanny with me and go and do for him. But I'll bet he don't take me to The Savoy. I do hope you got that gown.

Yours respectfully,
Florence.

PS.

Mr. Pompey's letters just come and knocked me flat. Just don't know what to say. Of course its not right. But its just like you, love.

Though I had enjoyed my visit, I was more than content to sleep again in my bed. London was peerless as ever; but the traffic was overwhelming and I noticed as never before the noise and the fumes. Such things do not suit my condition: by Friday evening my head had begun to ache. And so I was glad to come home on the following day. By Monday morning I was as good as new.

"It wouldn't suit you at all," I told the elm. "In fact, we're both very lucky to live where we do. It wasn't so bad, of course, when you were young, when Kensington was a village and all the best strawberries came from Ely Place. But you wouldn't like it to-day. Still, it's done me good, you

know. It's a great mistake for a man to get into a groove." The choirs above me quivered, although the air was still. "Oho," I said. "You question that statement, do you? Yes, you're right, of course. It depends on the man."

So it does. Many an admirable life has been led in a groove. What of Gilbert White of Selborne?

As though to deride this finding, my car, a nice-looking Vane, was delivered at the end of the week.

Florence was ravished.

"Not that it's what you should 'ave; but it's got a lot of 'em beat. Be a Rolls nex' time, I 'ope. Young Norris 'll come an' wash it—I've fixed that up."

To prove that I could still drive, I put Florence on the back seat, and after Fred Barley had shown me the way of the gears, I drove for a quarter of an hour, with him by my side.

Before he took her back to the garage, I told him that he must teach Florence to drive a car. He said that he would with pleasure.

"But not in this car, sir, to start with. She can learn on my little van. Then this 'll come very easy."

"It's up to you," I said.

But when I told Florence, she thanked me very sweetly—and flatly refused to learn.

"Not my job," she said. "You go an' ask Grannie Bowles an' see what she says. 'Ousekeepers don' swank about in the master's car. At leas', they didn't ought to. I know I'm free with my tongue, but I know my place."

"It would save you in the winter," I said.

"I like the walk," said Florence. "Rain or shine, it always does me good. An' I'd get soft, I would, boxed up in a car. There's plenty of bitches to-day as wouldn' come to you, unless they could use your car—an' sit down to table with you, as like as not. But I was brought up decent."

"There's no one like you," I said.

"Thank you, luv," said Florence. "That's 'ow I want you to feel."

I reported her words to the elm, who seemed very pleased. I made bold to remember a line from *As You Like It*, which, I am sure, must be his favourite play. " 'How well in *her* appears, The constant service of the

antique world.' " The elm nodded his accord. "Which shows," I added, "that, even in Shakespeare's day, the service generally rendered was not so good as it had been theretofore. I wonder why that was. It got very good again later. To-day of course . . ." I sighed. "The inferiority complex has much to answer for." This was a new one on him, so I did my best to explain. "B knows in his heart that A is his better. This truth he resents. In the hope of refuting it, he presumes—often to A's embarrassment. Such childish and unprofitable behaviour, which is by no means confined to individuals, is very prevalent to-day." The elm said nothing at all. I think he was gravelled. After all, one of his age and standing would find such a matter hard to appreciate.

At the end of the month my sister and brother-in-law drove down to lunch with me. I love Cleopatra dearly—anyone would. Her husband's appeal is less obvious—although, I know, he has a heart of gold. But they shall speak for themselves.

I went to the gate to meet them.

My sister put her arms round my neck.

"Darling Corin, how are you? I suppose you know you're Ariel's patron saint. She can talk of nothing else but her evening at The Savoy. A girl of sixteen on the floor, and the band-leader coming to ask her what tunes she'd like him to play!" She kissed my nose. "You are a love, you know. When Ariel's very old, she'll still remember the rapture of which you made her free."

"Cleo sweet, I'm very proud of my niece. Would you like to go on in? Florence is certainly waiting to lead you upstairs."

Cleopatra and Florence are on the best of terms.

(Here, perhaps, I should say that, while Arthur is older than I, my sister is seven years younger. She exactly resembles the portrait of Sophie Arnould, painted by Greuze.)

As my sister sped up the path, I turned to see her husband regarding the elm. I watched him curiously. After a little he sighed and shook his head, as might the master of some form, whose answers to his questions left much to be desired.

Without looking at me, he spoke.

"You know," he said, "you'll have to get rid of that elm."

I tried not to feel that Arthur had lived long enough.

"Get rid of it?" I said slowly.

"Cut it down," said Arthur. "It's almost certainly diseased."

"I haven't that impression," I said.

"Ah, but it is," said Arthur. "They've had 'em all down in The Broad Walk, you know."

I had made a point of keeping this slaughter from the elm.

"So I've heard," I said shortly.

"Besides, they're treacherous things. Shed branches without warning, you know. If you take my advice, you'll arrange to have the brute felled without delay. It shouldn't cost you a penny, if you go to a decent firm. In fact, they'll down it for nothing and give you a fiver for the wood."

"Thirty pieces of silver," I said. Arthur stared at me. "That elm gave his name to this cottage a great many years ago: I think it would ill become me to take its godfather's life. Besides, to tell you the truth, I've never cared for destroying a specimen piece. Finally, I love that tree."

"Sentiment," said Arthur. "I'll tell you what. I happen to know a fellow in the Town Planning show. I'll ring him up on Monday and get him to send a wallah to see for himself."

"That's very good of you," I said. "In return—well, I happen to know a fellow at Somerset House. Helps me with my Income Tax return. I'll tell him of the difficulty you have with your Expense Account." Arthur started violently. "I know he'll be only too happy——"

"For God's sake, don't," mouthed Arthur. "I—I don't need any help."

I fought not to laugh.

"But he'll make it so easy," I said. "Just leave him alone with your figures, and he'll work everything out."

Arthur put a hand to his head.

"Look here, Corin," he said. "*I do not want any help from Somerset House.* If you give my name to anyone in that—that den of thieves, I shall be most seriously annoyed."

“But he won’t charge you,” I said. “He’ll do it gladly—for nothing.” Arthur let out a squeal. “Oh, well, if you won’t be helped . . . And now let me tell you this. Getting something for nothing is not at all to my taste. If you help me with my elm, I shall help you with your Expense Account. To put it more clearly still, the moment any official visits or writes to me about this tree, I shall ring up my friend at Somerset House.”

“I shan’t send him,” cried Arthur. “Not if you’d rather not. But supposing he comes on his own?”

I raised my eyebrows.

“That would be just too bad.”

“Oh my God,” said Arthur.

“That’s all right,” I said. “And now come and have a drink.”

“I—I don’t mind if I do,” said Arthur, brokenly. . . .

But he is very resilient.

As he dealt with a whiskey and soda—

“What you want,” said Arthur, “is a wife. A tight little body, with money and plenty of drive. She’d soon have you out of here.”

“I expect she would,” I said, slowly. “The trouble is I don’t want to be had out of here. I’m—more than content with my home.”

As though I had not spoken, Arthur developed his theme.

“ ’S a matter of fact, now that you’ve picked up a packet, you wouldn’t have to marry to leave this shack.” (I found myself thinking how well qualified Arthur was to receive a visitation of God.) “They’re converting some of those barracks in Lancaster Gate. Now a top-floor flat there——”

“Arthur,” I said, “I don’t want to spoil your fun, but you simply must get this straight. I have inherited ten thousand. If I had inherited a million, I should stay here—for no other place that I know would suit me half as well.”

Arthur stared upon me: then he looked over his shoulders as though to assure himself that no other being had heard my blasphemy: then he drank up his whiskey and soda and held out his glass.

“Then you’ll have to marry,” he said, “to save your soul.”

As I measured a dry Martini—

“Put your glass on the table,” I said. “I always do.”

Here the door was opened and Cleo entered the room.

“My sweet,” I said, “your husband seeks to improve me. Please convince him that I am an incorrigible rogue.”

“Isn’t he awful?” said Cleo. “He was broken up when we missed you in London last month. He wanted to tell you how to employ your prize. I said if he did it to-day, I’d order a Rolls.”

“I haven’t done it,” cried Arthur. “Bear me out.”

“No, he hasn’t,” said I. “But he finds Elm Cottage unsuited to my estate.”

“That,” said Cleo, “is because it isn’t within reach of a Club.”

“My dear——”

“In Arthur’s eyes,” said Cleo, “to be within reach of one or more good Clubs is to have the *entrée* to civilization. If he had to choose between indoor sanitation and the Club, he’d choose the Club.” I gave her a dry Martini. “A shaken cocktail! How lovely! They’re out of fashion now, like everything else that was good. And now take him up and see that he washes his hands.”

As we climbed the stair—

“She can’t help it,” said Arthur.

Florence’s luncheon was an immense success. The Madrilène soup, jugged hare and cheese soufflé went very well indeed. Even Arthur reconsidered his judgment.

“When I said what I did, Corin, I’d forgotten you lived like this. There’s a lot to be said for really good country food. I mean, it tastes quite different, doesn’t it, dear? And this Montrachet is superb.”

“All true,” said Cleo. “Florence, how do you do it?”

“Mother taught me, madam,” said Florence, “an’ she was a lovely cook. Maybe it’s in me blood. Sought after, Mother was: she’d go out an’ cook a dinner at ’ouses she knew. ’Er patty de Woodcock was famous: so was ’er potted venison. I’ll say you couldn’ ’elp eatin’ what she’d done up.”

“A worshipful woman,” said Arthur, reverently.

“But, Florence,” said Cleo, “it isn’t only the food which is quite the best I’ve eaten since I was here. You’ve served us perfectly.”

Florence closed one eye.

“I got Fanny Bowles in the kitchen. She’s dishing up an’ ’er grannie’s keepin’ ’er straight. Will you take coffee in the study, madam? Or shall I serve it here?”

“In the study for me,” said Cleo.

Florence removed the plates, set finger-bowls before us and left the room.

My sister sighed.

“All this, and sempstress, too. She dresses herself, of course?”

I nodded.

“Blue overalls in the morning, and black in the afternoon.”

“ ‘Black’,” said Cleo. “You men. No French maid was ever better turned out. Oh, and before I forget, d’you know what Florence would like?”

“You’ve only to tell me,” I said.

“A washing-machine. I dragged it out of her. She lets nothing go out of the house, except the sheets; and a washing-machine would be a tremendous help.”

“She shall have one, of course.”

“Would you like me to choose one, darling, and have it sent down?”

“I’d be very grateful,” I said.

“Expensive,” said Cleopatra. “Fifty to sixty pounds.”

“A bagatelle,” said I. “I’m one of the bloated rich. Have you seen my dressing-gown?”

“Of course. Florence produced it in triumph. You were a sweet to take her to The Savoy.”

“It was fun for two,” I said, rising. “Let’s go and try the coffee. And if Arthur’s very good, he shall have a glass of brandy which is at least pre-war.”

Arthur sat up.

“Not the Bay Morreys brandy?” he said.

"A very small glass," I said.

"God bless you," said Arthur. "God bless you. You know, you should call this cottage *The Chapon Fin*."

Whilst he dozed in the study, Cleopatra and I walked to and fro on the lawn and had a good talk.

"And you're never lonely, my darling?"

"Never," said I. "I don't know what it means."

My sister nodded approval.

"All the same, Pompey's right. You must come up to London again."

"Oh, yes. It did me good. And I know that I mustn't lose touch."

Cleopatra sighed.

"I'm not going to ask you to stay in Curzon Street, because I know that it wouldn't be the same. But we might do some things together."

"My sweet," I said, "you shall draw up the programme. I'll do whatever you please."

"What a husband you'd make," said Cleopatra. . . .

When I had seen them off, I turned to the elm.

"I deeply regret," I said, "that any guest of mine should have served you with an obscene libel, sauced with vulgar abuse. But he's very earthy, Arthur: and, as he goes with Cleo, what can I do? I expect you've seen these queer combinations before. And he's brave as a pride of lions. He got a G.C. for a show he put up in the blitz. So please forget his offences. And I can't help feeling that Cleo made up for him. As fine a lady, I'm sure, as ever you saw." As Virgil would say, the elm 'nodded his green'. "And very understanding. She's seven years younger than me, but we've always been very close. And now I must go. Two good-natured neighbours came in, to see Florence through. And I must see them and thank them before they leave. The name is Bowles—I expect you remember it well. You would remember John Bowles, the famous smith, who died and was buried in Halliard in seventeen hundred and ten. I think I'm right in saying he made the lodge-gates that hang at Pedigree Place. So he has his monument. That was the real England, as you will agree—when the squire and the smith got together to furnish a work of art."

I seemed to have said the right thing, for, while I stood looking up, the prettiest magic was made. The elm was quick with movement: all his leaves were alive: his fans and vaults and tracery trembled with one consent: before my eyes, his edifice was inspired.

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Within the week, as I was finishing breakfast, a washing-machine arrived.

Florence announced its appearance, with shining eyes.

"The washer's come!" she breathed. "An' a couple of Berties with it, to fix it up. Oh dear, oh dear! I 'aven't bin so excited since Auntie got the gapes."

"I'll be there in two minutes," I said.

It was an imposing machine.

When I had marked its bulwarks—

"They'd like to know, sir," said Florence, "where it had better be put."

"Well, you must say that," said I.

Between them, the Berties and Florence decided where it should stand. Once that point had been settled, the younger—an electrician—said his piece.

"It's most important, sir, to see that you've got a good earth. I'm going to test that now: and if that plug has no earth, with your permission I'm going to give it one."

"By all means," I said. "I won't have it used until it's perfectly safe."

"We never leave a machine, sir, unless we are satisfied that it's properly earthed."

The plug had no earth.

"I must cut off the current, sir. It won't be for very long."

"That's all right by me. When all is in order, I should like to see it at work."

The other replied:

“Most certainly, sir. When everything is ready, I shall ask the lady to let you know.”

Twenty minutes later Florence reported the truth.

“ ’S all ready to do its stuff.”

Again I repaired to the kitchen.

Before my wondering eyes, the time-honoured ritual of the laundry was faithfully performed. Washing, rinsing and wringing—all these things were done by electric power. Florence was ravished and I was deeply impressed. Behind the steady hum of the washing-machine, I seemed to hear the laughter of the laundry-maids of France, pounding their linen with stones from the river’s bed.

“Well, I’m greatly obliged,” I said. “Please tell my housekeeper all that she ought to know and arrange about regular service. Then I hope you’ll allow her to make you some tea. Or, if you’d rather drink beer, you’ve only to let her know.”

The Berties voiced their thanks, and I took my leave.

Half an hour later, Florence re-appeared.

“A you-know wizard,” she said, “an’ then you’re wrong. Feeds out of me ’and already. I really think next week it’ll come when I call.”

“So long as it does its job. . . .”

“It’s washed out the washin’,” said Florence. “Oh, what a lovely present. You’re very good to me, luv.”

“It was Mrs. Cleopatra’s idea.”

“I know. What a combination! You an’ she, you ought to be under glass.”

Standing at the foot of my bed, Florence regarded me gravely, finger to lip.

“I’d say you’d a cold,” she said.

“A very little one, perhaps.”

“Won’t stay in bed, I s’pose, an’ spoil its game.”

"Not on your life," said I. I peered at the driving rain. "If it goes on like this all day, I won't go out."

"It's a proper bastard," said Florence. "An' fairly strippin' the elm."

I sighed. Then—

"He can take it," I said.

"Mrs. Cleopatra," said Florence, "suggested Ovaltine." Of weaker vessels, Florence's mental agility makes the utmost demands. "So I got a tin an' a Thermos. Be a good time to start in, if you've got a bit of a cold."

Meekly enough—

"At what hour do I take it?" I said.

"Las' thing at night. Made with milk, of course. If that don' put some flesh on you, nothin' will."

"You're very solicitous, Florence."

"My job," said Florence, shortly. " 'Sides, I don' want you sick. I'll leave the tray on the bed."

"Why on the bed?" said I, pouring out my tea.

"So's you remember to take it. Anywhere else you'd forget."

"There's something in that," I said. "I never used to forget as I do to-day."

"You get wrapped up," said Florence. "Thinking of your old tale."

I shook my head.

"It's more than that. Things just don't stay in my mind."

This was unhappily true. My memory had grown disobedient. It seemed now to pick and choose. And its choice was not always mine.

"It's them blasted bombs," said Florence, savagely. "They 'owl about 'orror comics an' all the 'arm they do: but wot about all them clowns, muckin' about with science an' boastin' of 'ow they can blow the world to bits. They're the 'orror comics, if you ask me. No better than street-corner brats—'I'll make a bigger bang than you'. An' it's gettin' me, too. I never used to forget, but I do to-day. Meant to tell you yesterday mornin': it went right out of me mind. Mr. Paley wants to see you. I said you'd get on the blower an' give 'im a date. You don' mind 'im, do you? What about tea?"

"Of course he shall come. What's he want to see me about?"

" 'E's not after money," said Florence. "I asked 'im straight. I said you couldn' afford to air-condition the Sunday School. But 'e laughed 'is 'earty laugh. 'It's all right, Sheepdog,' he says. 'I only want his advice.' Can't 'elp but like 'im, you know."

"He's one of the best," said I. "I'll ask him to tea to-day. Though, if he's short of advice, I'm afraid he'll go empty away. Experts don't ask apprentices how to proceed."

"You know your world," said Florence. "Look at your books." She glanced at her wrist-watch. "I'll 'ave to be gettin' on. Got to go to the village this morning an' poke the butcher's snoot."

John Paley was the Vicar of Halliard. If more divines were like him . . . A rowing-blue of Oxford, he was a bachelor: as an Army-Chaplain, he had been wounded twice and had won an M.C. Soon after he had arrived, there was trouble one night at *The Crown*, and it came to his ears. The next night he entered the inn. He called for a pint of beer, took his seat on a settle and filled his pipe. He had the habitués laughing within five minutes of time. Then he began to talk of some of the things he'd seen. . . . When he got up to go, they begged him to stay. 'I've letters to write,' he said. 'But I'll come again and again—so long as I can be sure that this is the sort of house in which I don't mind being seen.' He was as good as his word—and the following Christmas the brewers who owned the house subscribed one hundred pounds to the Church Restoration Fund.

I count it a privilege to entertain such a man.

And so he came to tea at half past four.

"I ought," I said, "to have asked you to come at six and drink some alcohol. But, to tell you the truth, I work better about that time."

"I much prefer tea," he said. "My calling apart, if liquor was washed out to-morrow, I shouldn't give a damn. The beer isn't what it was. And now to business.

"Have you come across Robert Weighbridge?"

I shook my head.

"He's a retired N.O. Rank of Commander. Now raising pigs."

"That's the fellow," I said, "who's taken Bellwether Farm."

"It is. Three years ago he had to divorce his wife. Now he's found a very nice girl and he wants to marry again. He's come to me and asked if I'll see

him through."

"I know what I'd say," I said.

Paley sighed.

"I'm not a free agent," he said. "My instructions are painfully clear. I can defy them, of course. But I don't want to let down the Bishop—who fully agrees with us."

"That makes it awkward," I said. "What's biting the C. in C.?"

Paley shrugged his shoulders.

"*Quot homines*," he said. "And it is difficult for him to take so striking a step. But that is by no means all. Weighbridge has told me quite plainly that, if he and his girl cannot be properly married—by which he means married in Church—they will live together unmarried at Bellwether Farm. 'It'll come cheaper,' he said. 'We shall save on our Income Tax. But we're ready to let that go, if we can be married in Church.' "

"You know, I don't blame them," I said.

"Without playing the hypocrite, Major, how can I? He's coming to see me on Monday. What do I say?"

"You want the point of view of the man in the street?"

"If I did," said Paley, "I shouldn't have come to you. And pray let us do ourselves justice. The lord spiritual consults the lord temporal."

"Have some more tea," I said.

"If you please. May I help myself?"

"Of course."

I lighted a cigarette and stared at the fire.

After a little—

"His divorce on the level?" I said.

"No doubt about that. He produced a letter from his solicitors—a well-known London firm. He'd got it on purpose to show me. 'We have no hesitation in saying that you had no alternative but to divorce your wife. The latter was married to the co-respondent as soon as your decree was made absolute.' "

"That's good enough," I said. "Have you met the girl?"

“Just. I liked her at once. I think they’ll be very happy.”

I sighed. Then—

“A soldier, if he’s a true one, believes in discipline. I cannot, therefore, suggest that you disobey your orders and marry this man. But the fact that he desires to be married by you shows that he believes in ‘the holy Catholick Church’. Well, you don’t want to lose a sheep—as you very well may.”

“That’s very true.”

“In fact, it’s your duty not to.”

“I agree.”

“Can you go as far as this—that if he will be married by a registrar, you will give him the Sacrament, whenever he so desires?”

Paley stopped filling his pipe and looked into the fire.

Then—

“Yes,” he said, “I can. Anyway, I will. And I may as well point out that, unless he is legally married, I can do no such thing.”

“I’m bound to say this,” I said. “I think it very likely that such a man will come to Communion as soon after the civil ceremony as ever he can.”

“So much the better,” said Paley.

“Good for you,” I said.

But Paley shook his head.

“Why not illuminate the dingy letter of the law?” He turned, with his pleasant smile. “I knew you’d help me,” he said.

“To be honest,” I said, “I put myself in his place. I should respond to such a gesture. When a good man goes out of his ground—well, you must go to meet him, you know.”

“Quite right. By the way, don’t you think you should marry? Not necessarily, of course, a lady who’s been divorced.”

“And you?” I said.

“Oh, I’m a celibate. I’ve made the Church my wife. But your case is different.”

“I don’t know that it is. And marriage is a hell of a gamble.”

“It’s the natural state—for a man.”

“Are you sure? Polygamy is.”

“I can’t see you with two wives. Whatever would Florence say?”

“She’d keep them where they belonged.”

Paley laughed loud and long.

“You’d better marry,” he crowed. “Florence will make your bet safe.”

It was unusually mild on December the tenth. I actually strolled in the garden before I retired. That made me later than usual. I was not in bed and asleep before half past one.

I was awake again at ten minutes past two. Something, I knew, had awaked me. I lay extremely still, straining my ears. After, perhaps, two minutes, I heard a floor-board give tongue. I know my aged floors rather better than the palms of my hands. The board that had spoken lay in the dining-room.

By the light of my bedside torch, I slid my feet into my slippers and put on my dressing-gown. Then I eased open a drawer and took my pistol out. This, I may say, was loaded. I put back the safety-catch, for I am one of those men who see no point in confronting a desperate felon without being able to give as good as they get.

With my torch alight in my pocket, I passed down the stairs like a shadow, avoiding certain treads. . . .

A torch was being used in the dining-room. Standing in the doorway, I saw it resting on the Morland, of which I am very fond.

Using my left hand, I switched on the picture-lights.

“That’s better,” I said.

Without turning—

“Much better,” said a man. He stood back. “And this was no pot-boiler. It shows what Morland could do. What a tragedy was there! If his father had been less grasping . . .”

He sighed.

“Avarice,” I said, “has much to answer for. And now stay just as you are and lock your fingers behind the back of your head.”

"I——"

"*Move!*"

The fellow complied.

"I am unarmed," he said.

"I'm not," I snapped. I passed to where he was standing and ran my left hand over his jacket and hips. Then I stepped back. "Turn round." He did as I said. "Now walk out of this room, across the hall and through the doorway directly opposite."

As he entered the study I switched on the light.

"Take that chair on the right of the fireplace."

Again he obeyed.

I shut the door behind me, sat down on an arm of the sofa, slid my pistol into a pocket and lighted a cigarette.

"Before we talk," I said, "I think you should make up the fire."

My prisoner shrugged his shoulders and did as I said.

As he straightened his back—

"You take no chances," he said.

"I know. I'm funny like that. And now sit down as before. There are cigarettes between us, if you would care to smoke."

"I'm greatly obliged." He lighted a cigarette, leaned back and crossed his legs. "Say it," he added, quietly.

"I will in a moment," I said.

I surveyed him openly.

He was a nice-looking man, but his eyes were a shade too close. Clean-shaven, iron-gray hair, an intelligent countenance. His hands were sensitive. His country clothes were well cut. He might have been the Managing Director of a small, but prosperous firm.

"I'm bound to assume," I said, "that you came to steal."

"I'm afraid I did," he said.

"You don't look," I said, "as if you had Morland's excuse for your shortcomings."

"No, indeed," he said. "My father was kindness itself. It's just demoralization. I'm not in financial straits: but easy money's attraction is very strong to-day. It's all the taxation, I think. And few have such opportunities as I have. You see, I'm a dealer," he added, "a dealer in *objets d'art*. But I burgle a bit on the side. The concurrence of the two—er—professions can bring about brilliant results."

"Yes, I can see that," I said. "What did you come for to-night?"

"I came for a plate," he said. "A Chinese plate. I think it used to hang in your hall."

For once in a way, my brain was on the tips of its toes. *Pamlow had looked at that plate, as he left the house.*

"So it did," I said. "Above the front door. But it needed re-wiring, and so I took it to London last time I went up. Till then, I had no idea it was such a rare piece. And how's Mr. Pamlow?"

The dealer frowned.

"Pamlow?" he said. "I don't think I know the name."

I laughed.

"Never mind," I said. "Let's say you had reason to think that it hung in my hall. Why did you want it so much?"

"Because I've a buyer," he said, "for that particular plate. If it's as good as I have reason to think, he would have paid me in cash six hundred pounds."

"I'm beginning to understand. Deals like that do not appear in your books."

"Exactly. And six hundred pounds tax-free is a lot of money to-day."

"You're telling me," I said. "May I know how you entered the house?"

"By the pantry-window," he said. "It wasn't open, you know. But the lattice-window is easy—at least, I find it so. But these old floors are the devil. I really think they're the ideal burglar-alarm. You can't disconnect them, you see."

"I seem to be addressing an expert—not only in matters of art."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“One does one’s best,” he said. “Legal proceedings can be such a fearful bore.”

“Oscar Wilde calling,” I said, and both of us laughed.

Then—

“In defiance of tradition,” I said, “I’m not going to offer you a drink.”

“I can see no reason why you should. As a matter of fact, I never touch alcohol. That’s the only virtue I have.”

“Alas, poor Morland,” I said.

I saw him wince.

“Some comparisons are painful,” he said.

“I speak as a critic,” I said. “I don’t presume to judge. As a critic, I regret your unofficial calling.”

“That’s very kindly said. But once you begin, you know—well, you’ve put yourself out of court, so you may as well go on.”

“A sheep for a lamb?”

“I suppose it amounts to that.”

“What arrant rubbish,” I said.

There was a little silence.

At length—

“I’m at your disposal,” he said.

“But you’re nobody’s fool, are you?”

He made no answer to that, but the blood stole into his face.

“Exactly,” I said. “By confiding in me, you’ve effectually stopped my mouth. It’s called ‘a disarming frankness’. Never mind. I’m to blame, too. And in any event, unless you’d resisted arrest, I shouldn’t have rung up the police. But I must do something, you know—make a little demonstration, in the hope of stopping the rot. And so I shall write to Mr. Pamlow—and ask whether he can throw any light on the disappearance of my plate. There’s no breach of confidence there, as I’m sure you’ll agree.”

There was a pregnant silence.

At length—

“How will that help you?” said the man.

“It won’t,” I said lightly. “But, then, I don’t need any help. And now you must go, for I’ve got to get back to bed. By the way you came, please. I want to see how you got in.”

Three minutes later he bade me a mournful good night.

As I had said that I should, I wrote to Mr. Pamlow upon the following day. I marked the letter ‘Private and Confidential’ and I wrote it in my own hand. I also posted it myself. But I received no reply. I expect the art-dealer did. Not exactly a reply, of course. A verbal communication, from which no circumstance of obloquy was omitted. For I had dealt Mr. Pamlow a devastating hand. In fact, I like to think that relations between the two rogues became something more than strained. And it is written, ‘When thieves fall out, honest men come by their own.’

I told Florence some of the truth, of caution suppressing the part which Mr. Pamlow had played. Her reaction was savage enough.

“An’ you let the bastard go.” Audibly she breathed through her nose. “Gawd, I wish I’d bin ’ere. Breakin’ an’ enterin’ my pantry, an’ strollin’ about the place, to see what took ’is fancy. Talk about nerve. I s’pose the silver’s all right—’e may ’ave snaffled some spoons before you come down.”

“I don’t think he did,” I said. “I think the stuff he came for was bigger than that. He was very pleased with the Morland.”

“Was ’e indeed?” said Florence, bitterly. “An’ ’ow did ’e like the Cosway miniatures?” She cupped her face in her hands. “Gawd, why wasn’ I ’ere? Gimme the ole-fashion burglar—you knew where you was with ’im; but this patent-leather scum that wouldn’ dream of stealin’, but only ‘lives by its wits’ . . . Revolting I call it. An’, instead of shoppin’ the bastard, you sit ’im down in that chair an’ give ’im a cigarette.” She covered her eyes. “An’ pore Jim ’Olloway, watchin’ an’ waitin’ by the blower, with ’is tongue ’angin’ out for a job.”

“Listen, Florence,” I said. “The pleasure which I should have found in subscribing to the sergeant’s promotion would not have compensated me for the highly unpleasant inconvenience of attending first at the police-court at Moorhen and then at the Assizes at Brooch.”

“Couldn’t Mr. Pompey of——”

"No, he couldn't," I said. "I should have been the principal witness for the Crown."

"Bin lovely publicity," said Florence, dreamily. . . .

I told the elm all about it that afternoon. I will swear that, when I came to the Morland, the old fellow pricked up his ears.

"I might have known," I said, "that you would remember him. The perfect painter of the English scene. How Shakespeare would have loved him! But, through no fault of his own, he painted to live, when he should have lived to paint. I daresay he slept at Halliard—a pleasant-looking fellow, something absurdly dressed.

"To return to my gate-crasher—he was a cultivated man, talked well, knew how to behave. And he was not in want. Yet he entered my house to steal, at dead of night. . . . And fancy our Mr. Pamlow setting him on. A prosperous solicitor . . . looking to receive a commission on the proceeds of stolen goods. . . . Of course, there have always been rogues; but felony used to be confined to what was called 'the criminal class'. I hope you don't think that I should have called in the police. I trust that, by writing to Pamlow, I shall make them both reconsider the merits of crime. The prey of apprehension and fury, Pamlow will grind his teeth, while his natural, though baseless, strictures will send his helpless accomplice half out of his mind. But my judgment may have been bad. And I may wake up one morning, to find the Morland gone. . . ."

I send and receive a very few Christmas cards. Florence is in on this. She enjoys the custom far more than I.

"Oh, that's a peach. Sen' that to Mrs. Cleopatra. She won't 'alf like that sun." (The Venice of Canaletto.) "Oh, an' that to Mr. Pompey." (A Pollard Coaching Scene.) "You know, they do do them lovely. I'd like to frame the lot."

I picked up Constable's *Cornfield*.

"How's that for Mr. Paley?"

"Right down his street."

"D'you see the church in the distance?"

"So there is. An' look at that lovely corn. They can' paint like that to-day. An' all this modernis' slush! Slap an' Tickle School, if you ask me. School? I should of said Creche. Any kindergarten could give them points. An' you-know fools buy the rubbish. I reelly think 'alf the worl' 's mad. Oh, ain't she a little love?"

Reynolds' *Age of Innocence*.

"That do for Grannie Bowles?"

"I'll say it will. She'll talk about it for years. An' I don' blame 'er. So sweet an' simple, it makes you wan' to cry."

I posted the cards myself, the day before Christmas Eve. Three or four came for me on the following day. All were very nice, but one was exceptional. I can swear that it was unique: and that it was meant for me, though it did not bear my name.

The envelope bore this address:—

—— —— *Esq.,*
Elm Cottage,
Halliard,
Hants.

It had been posted in London, W.1.

It contained an original drawing in pen and ink: truly exquisitely done. This was a delicate picture of me and the elm. That it did me more than justice, I frankly admit: but it was just like the elm—at least, his first twenty feet.

Beneath the little illustration, the following legend was perfectly inscribed:—

Coridon and Friend.

When I showed it to Florence, she fairly cried out with delight.

"There's a girl-friend!" she said. "An' no address. Gosh, can she draw? But 'ow did she know your name?"

"She doesn't," I said. "The envelope proves that. But when we were talking, I quoted a line from a poem called *Coridon's Song*. And she recognized it. So now she gives me that name."

"Wot a queer go," said Florence. "Got it in one, an' she doesn't know 'er luck. 'S a lovely name," she added, dreamily. "Soun's like somethin' out of a fairy tale. Distanggy, too. 'Snicer than Leonard, I think."

"Yes. I—don't care about Leonard."

"Pansy," said Florence. "You wouldn' 'ardly believe it, but there was a boy at school ooze name was Sword-o'-the-Lord. I s'pose 'is parents wanted to cut a dash. I'll say 'is life was a burden. We called 'im Fell-i'-the-Muck." Florence returned to the card. "Only set eyes on you once, an' it's you to the life."

"We shall know who she is before long. Talent like this will out. I expect she illustrates books."

"The shiny papers," said Florence. "Show it to Mr. Pompey, an' see what 'e says."

"No," I said. "I'm not going to try and find out. If she'd wanted me to know who she was, she could have put her name. If she comes again, I'll ask her. But she may prefer to remain anonymous."

"Sez you," said Florence. "All right. But you must 'ave it framed."

"I'll see to that," I said.

I took its measurements—seven inches by five. When next I visited London, I purchased a photograph-frame. A silver frame. It cost me a lot of money, but I felt that the little picture deserved the very best.

January was a cold month; but the cottage was nice and warm. From what I know of Florence, I probably burned more coal than I was entitled to have: and the kitchen boiler was always going strong. For all that, I went down with 'flu, and Florence slept in the house and nursed me herself.

I felt ashamed of my behaviour: but the doctor was most insistent that I had succumbed to some germ.

"But I wish all my patients," he said, "were in equally excellent hands."

"I don't deserve such attention."

"Perhaps not. The point is—you get it. For that, I am very thankful, because I've too much to do. I needn't look in to-morrow, you're doing so well."

"When may I get up?"

"Not till I've seen you again. This 'flu is very tricky."

"You'll manage to come on Friday?"

"I promise you that."

He let me get up on Sunday for three or four hours. Thursday was fine and still, so I strolled on the lawn and paid my respects to the elm. I like to think he had wondered where I was.

"The influenza," I said. "*Influentia caeli.* It swept through Europe in *Coeur de Lion's* day. I do hope Brother John had it. London met it in 1890—that I know. An old doctor told me himself that he had to work day and night for week after week. It struck whole households down. Doors were not locked, for everyone was in bed. Mansions with eight or ten servants, and every soul down and out. At house after house, he used to take in the milk, which was left on the step. Of course, if they'd lived in the country . . . And now, if you will excuse me, I believe I ought to go in."

Once up and out, I was soon myself again.

Spring was in, and my book, for what it was worth, was in the printer's hands. I might expect galley proofs in the month of May. And I had started another. . . .

My simple luncheon was over, and I was in the study, drinking my coffee and smoking a cigarette.

"Could you go by the village?" said Florence.

"Of course."

"Would you min' pickin' up some eggs?"

"You know I wouldn't, Florence."

"I know. I don' like you shoppin'. Brenda Jasmin's got them."

"Strong Jem's daughter—the cottage beside the forge."

"That's right." Both of us heard the clack of the wicket's latch, and Florence side-stepped to peer through the open windows that gave to the lawn. "Lordy, here's Abraham's Bosom, as large as life. An' where do we go from 'ere?"

Florence's sobriquets are usually to the point. But this one had me beat.

"Advise me," I said, laughing.

“Come an’ ’ave a look-see,” said Florence. “They’ve stopped on the path.”

I rose and did as she said.

A very large lady indeed, with an arrogant air, was using her ebony cane to point to my cherry-tree. This was laden with blossom, presenting just such an image as Housman snared and set up, for us to kneel to. With a winning smile, an abject, brow-beaten companion was voicing ecstasy.

Regarding her monstrous employer, I found the latter wanting in almost every respect. Upholstered, rather than dressed, her vast, voluptuous figure had gone to seed; she took no measures at all to arrest or conceal its decline. But these things had not deterred her from deciding to hang the ruin in gay apple-green and white. Her face was rudely attired and her hair was gray. A pronounced moustache explored her long upper lip and the sides of her ruthless mouth.

Against my will—

“I’ll deal with this,” I said.

I dared not let Florence loose. If two such personalities clashed, violence might well be done.

I passed out into the garden and stepped towards the pair. . . .

“Can I be of any assistance?”

The woman measured me. Her survey would have been vulgar, if I had been a scullion, seeking to be engaged.

Then—

“I’m looking for a cottage,” she said. “This looks as if it might suit.”

The bare idea of her residence made me feel slightly sick.

“I regret to disappoint you. This is my home.”

“I desire to see the house. If I like it, I’ll make you an offer.”

“I’m sorry. The house is not shown.”

“I’m quite prepared to pay, if it’s what I like. I’m very well known, you know.”

I inclined my head again.

“This property is not for sale.”

“All things are for sale. Name your price, young man.”

“Madam,” I said, “I’m busy. If you will allow me, I’ll see you back to your car.”

“You don’t look busy. What are you?”

“I write.”

“Indeed.” She pointed to the cherry-tree. “Doesn’t that sight inspire you?”

I raised my eyebrows.

“It does me a great deal of good.”

She looked me up and down.

“And you call yourself an author.”

“I don’t think I did: but that is of no account. I regret that I cannot receive you.”

I bowed, turned on my heel and returned to the house.

As I re-entered the study—

“An offensive woman, Florence. If she doesn’t go, you’ll have to hit her for six.”

“You bet I will,” said Florence, and left the room for the hall.

I moved to a spot from which I could see what occurred.

The woman was pointing to the roof, indicating, I suppose, to her companion the improvements which should be made. The latter was painfully uneasy. After all, she had heard what I said. She seemed to be suggesting . . .

“I shall go when I please,” said her mistress.

The loudness of her voice was a challenge. So Goliath had challenged David a long time ago.

I heard the front door open.

Then Florence’s voice rang out.

“We’ve no old clothes, Mrs. Jacobs. I told you that las’ time. But I’ve got half a dozen bottles, if you’ll go round to the back. An’ you shouldn’t come in this way. If the master were to see you, he wouldn’t like it at all. I’ll put the bottles ready, an’ you tell Stop-me-and-’ave-one to drive you round.”

With that, she withdrew, and I heard the front door closed.

Talk about the hydrogen bomb. . . .

Shining red in the face, the woman stared straight before her, trembling with an emotion I dare not attempt to define. Then she turned her back and, to my great surprise, broke into a shambling run. The companion glanced over her shoulder: then she turned again to the cottage and, with a radiant smile, blew it a kiss: then she turned and ran in the other's wake.

"Done someone's 'eart good," murmured Florence. "Fancy Abraham's Bosom doin' the Bannister touch. Wan' to climb Everest nex'. I suppose she'd be safe with the Sherpas."

When I had finished laughing—

"Florence," I said, "I salute you. She'll write Hampshire off for years."

When the car had gone, I strolled out and up to the elm.

"So perish all traitors," I said.

He certainly seemed to me to be shaking with mirth.

Twenty minutes later I had collected the eggs and was having a word with Strong Jem, still a very fine figure in spite of his seventy years. A notable farrier, Strong Jem was engaged with his helper in making motor-car springs.

Then I drove forty miles to a village, whose church I had seen but once. It was very small, but it boasted a fine 'three-decker' and two large family pews. I wanted to see it again, for I needed just such a church for a scene in my book. And I had a foot-rule in my pocket, which shows what a pedant I am.

On the first of May a letter from Cleopatra made my heart glad.

Corin darling,

Greatly to his annoyance, Arthur must leave for Quebec at the end of the month. He'll be away for three weeks. Will you take your little sister to Ascot, just as you used to do? I'd like to go Wednesday and Thursday. If I stayed with you at Elm Cottage, we could drive up each morning and back in the afternoon. Jenkins can stay at The Crown.

Your very loving
Cleo.

PS. Don't forget to apply for a voucher.

Jenkins is Cleopatra's chauffeur—an excellent man.

When I told Florence, she almost jumped for joy.

"Oh, goody goody," she cried. "We've never 'ad 'er to stay. Luck we've got them new sheets. An' you an' she off to the Races, all dressed up. Gosh, I do 'ope it's fine. I'll love to maid 'er, of course. But say, if she'd like 'er own maid, I'll fix 'er up."

When I put the point to Cleopatra, her answer came pat.

Tell Florence the best is good enough for me.

I confess to becoming excited, as Ascot week approached. I worked hard, continually prayed for fair weather, left all the arrangements to Florence, steadfastly conferred with the elm. The proofs of my book arrived, were faithfully read and corrected and presently returned. My morning dress was discovered, and aired and pressed: my gray top-hat was inspected and found as good as new.

I had not attended Royal Ascot since 1939. To be perfectly honest, I had not had the money to spare. In reply to all suggestions that I should go out and about, I had always made the excuse that I could not do as I had done before the war. This was unhappily true. I have had to go very quietly since 1945. Still, a very occasional jaunt would have done me no harm. But if ever I was tempted, my lean-fleshed kine had uttered a warning low. Entertainment was incredibly expensive—far more than I could afford. But now, thanks to Admiral Colefax, ten well-favoured kine had eaten the lean-fleshed up.

On the Tuesday of Ascot Week, Cleopatra arrived at Elm Cottage in time for lunch: and with her coming, the festival began.

The weather was brilliant, the elm was in all his glory, the lawn had just been mown. The blackbirds were devouring my cherries, but paid very handsomely in kind. I think the excellent fruit must have been good for their throats. And at dusk the nightingales took over. . . .

But I am going too fast.

The luncheon which Florence gave us was simple enough—cold salmon, strawberries and cream: but there was enough for six, and we ate enough for four. Between house and garden, we fleeted the afternoon, reviewing the past and the present, letting the world slip, forgetting Time, but each engraving the date on the other's heart.

Just before tea, I remember, we heard the telephone-bell. We strolled towards the study, in time to hear Florence's voice.

"Your sister? Oh, very well. But she'll 'ave to be quick. Oh, an' while you're there, Mr. Corner, I thought that peroxide was comin' on Saturday las'. . . . Bin disappointed, 'ave you? Well, you'll be a sight more disappointed if I don't 'ave it to-morrow sure as a you-know gun. I know Bellings want our custom. . . . Yes, I know: but there's others as doesn't need it to put their face on the map. . . . Oh, 'owdyedo, Mrs. Punnet. . . . Yes, we 'ave a washin'-machine. . . . 'Ave to wear gum-boots, do you? Well, you see, ours is 'ouse-trained. Never a you-know drop. I could wear me bally shoes. . . . I should buy a ——, and sell the one you've got to the Fire Brigade. . . ."

Her eyes tight shut, Cleopatra clung to my arm.

"The very well of English, unrefined. Oh, Corin, isn't she a dream?"

It was after dinner that evening, when Florence had bade me good night, that I went to look for my sister and found her sitting on my bed, with a photograph-frame in her hand.

"What was she like, darling?"

"Her face was the shape of a heart."

"And she's never been back?"

I shook my head.

"But I'd like to see her again. She was very quiet and natural. Young enough to be my daughter, but old for her age. She was right in the picture at once: she just faded in—and out."

"I'd like to meet her," said Cleo, "if only to thank her for this." She stood up, moved to my table and set the drawing down. "Why do you keep it up here?"

"Because, if I kept it in the study, it would attract attention, and I should have to explain."

My sister nodded.

“And you can’t explain, can you, darling? Except at the cost of dissecting the fairy tale.”

I laughed.

“And what a dissection,” I said. “How many people have heard of *Coridon’s Song*?”

Cleopatra nodded.

“And a love-affair would be scented. For the average being, all the ingredients are there.”

“Which would be most embarrassing.”

“And unjust. ‘Because thou are virtuous’, shalt thou have no fairy tale?”

I kissed her for that.

Then we walked in the shadowy garden for half an hour, while the elm stood as still as sculpture and the nightingales made us music under the stars.

We set out in style the next morning, soon after eleven o’clock.

Cleopatra looked simply lovely—Florence had helped her to dress. And Fanny Bowles had to see her, when she was ready to leave. The child stood staring at Cleo, finger to lip.

“That,” said Florence, proudly, “is ’ow a lady should look, when she’s goin’ to meet the Queen.”

“Get along with you, Florence,” said Cleo. “And if ever you fire the Major, please come to me as a maid.”

I waved my hat to the elm, as we made for the car. He may have waved back. I think it more likely that he smiled. He had seen fine feathers before.

Ascot in glorious weather can be attractive indeed. We visited the paddock, watched that incomparable pageant—Her Majesty’s progress in state, saw the Royal Standard broken and lunched in the tent of my Club.

Cleopatra knew many people: happily, I knew very few: but the sight of so many fine thoroughbreds did my heart good. Not that I did not enjoy the company I kept: I found it a privilege to make one of such a throng. So much grace and goodwill and gaiety must have touched a Diogenes; and so often as I looked upon the Queen, as happy as glorious, Her Majesty’s royal charm brought the tears to my eyes. Between us, we backed three winners; but I was just down on the day.

When it was time to drive home, I was rather relieved. I had heartily enjoyed the function, but I was glad to relax. To withdraw to the peace of Elm Cottage just rounded my day. To my great delight, Cleopatra expressed the same pleasure in unmistakable terms.

She fairly danced down the lawn from the wicket-gate and threw her arms round Florence, who was coming to welcome us back.

"Oh, to come back to this, after all the fun of the fair! It's like one of Aesop's fables. I'm the prodigal daughter, Florence, and after my riotous living, I have come home."

"A cup o' tea, Mrs. Cleo, an' while you're drinkin' that, I'll run you a bath."

"Angel," said Cleopatra, and kicked off her shoes. . . .

While Florence was making the tea, the two of us stood arm in arm and addressed the elm.

"I think you'd have liked it," said Cleo. "Her Majesty drove up in state, with the Windsor Greys and postilions in caps and curls."

"I believe," I said, "that Queen Anne used to drive to Ascot in just the same way. King William the Fourth did, I know. Ascot became Royal Ascot during his reign."

"It's a very fine function," said Cleo: "and everyone wears their best to honour the Queen." She turned to me. "Describe her, darling, I'm sure he's burning to know."

"Our Sovereign Lady," I said, "is excelling. You can call her lovely and charming, and you will be speaking the truth. But not the whole truth; for there is about her a royalty which nobody can deny. By virtue of which, she diminishes everyone else—and that, unconsciously."

"It's perfectly true," said Cleo. "If she walked into this garden, all by herself, I'm perfectly sure you'd know at once who it was. And the horses you see at Ascot are, I think, the finest there are to be seen."

"So they are," I said. "But I'm glad to say that people don't bet as they did. They don't chuck family fortunes into the scales."

"It was very great fun," said Cleo, "but we're terribly glad to be back. For your little realm, sir, is incomparable."

The elm heaved a sigh of content.

We bathed and changed after tea and took our ease indoors and out, till Florence came to tell us that dinner was served.

So far as I was concerned, our second day at Ascot was fairer and richer than our first.

This was the way of it.

The last race but one was just over, and I was standing, looking for Cleo, when a voice that I remembered spoke very low.

"*For Courts are full of flattery,*
As hath too oft been tried."

I wheeled about, to see the Maid of Honour, looking extremely smart and wearing a reproachful smile.

"*Touché*," I said, laughing. "My sister 'gave me of the tree, and I did eat'. But I hope to be back at the cottage in less than an hour. And please thank you very much for my wonderful valentine."

"It was meant for a Christmas card."

"Dear me. And the elm was quite sure that it was a valentine. Please may I read your name?"

"Yes. I've already read yours—and am duly abashed."

"The familiarity bred nothing but content. Besides, it went to show that I was rightly named."

"Coridon never went racing."

"He never had a sister like mine." Here Cleopatra arrived. "Cleo, my sweet, this is Miss Niobe Coke. My sister, Mrs. Ruthven."

They smiled and said 'How d'ye do'.

"I know who you are," said Cleo. "Corin's description of you was very good. And I simply loved your picture of him and the elm. I'm so glad you're not anonymous any more."

"Thank you," said Niobe.

I looked at Cleopatra.

"Miss Coke is ahead of me. She knows where I live."

"Perhaps if you asked her nicely . . ."

"Seven Bruton Street Mews," said Miss Coke. "The 'Mews' rather lets it down."

Cleopatra shook her head.

"Bruton Street is invulnerable. Isn't there a pub . . ."

Miss Coke nodded.

"There is. I went in once. It's 'the glass of fashion' all right."

My sister wrinkled her nose.

I turned again to *Coridon's Song*.

"*And for our sweet refreshments*
The earth affords us bowers."

"Let me endorse that," said Cleo. "You see, I'm staying with Corin. And to-morrow Corin's coming to stay with me. For two or three nights only. Could you manage dinner one evening? We shall be quite alone."

"Thank you very much. Would Saturday do?"

"Sixty-four Curzon Street. Eight o'clock be all right?"

"Lovely. And now I must find my uncle and tell him he's got a niece. The unsaddling enclosure is the only enclosure he knows."

"He'd go well with my husband," said Cleo.

I raised my hat.

"May I give your love to the elm?"

"I don't want to presume," said Miss Coke.

"I think," said I, "I think he'd be very pleased. He loved your valentine."

"Christmas card," said Miss Coke. "Goodbye."

When she was gone, my sister turned to me.

"A lovely climax, darling. Shall we beat a leisurely retreat?"

When we turned to the right at *The Wheatsheaf*, I put my hat on the floor and Cleo took off her gloves and demanded a cigarette.

"I was sure you'd like her," I said.

"So was I," said Cleopatra. "But I little thought I should like her as much as I do. *Diner à trois.* I think I did very well."

“So you did, my darling. I desired to improve the occasion: but I couldn’t think how to do it. And then, all at once, you’d done it brilliantly.”

“I took a chance,” said Cleo, thoughtfully. “But she mustn’t know that you were not coming to stay.”

“No, indeed,” said I. “She’s mined her approaches all right.”

“You’re perfectly right, my darling. Because I was born a woman, I saw that in a flash. But very few men would have got it.”

“I think it was instinct,” I said. “The moment I saw her I knew that, if I put a foot wrong, I never should see her again. I hoped I should, you know.”

“I’m sure you did,” said Cleo. “She’s—most exceptional, Corin. She gives the impression of having been born out of time.”

“Yes, she does. I don’t quite know where she belongs. Last time she was grave: I’m so glad to have seen her gay.”

Cleopatra took my arm.

“You and I were born out of time. We don’t belong to this age. Call it the old school tie, but I think she’d be glad to be friends.”

What my sister said to Florence, I do not know, but the latter took my going as a matter of course.

“So you’re leavin’ with Mrs. Cleopatra an’ stayin’ two or three nights?”

“That’s the idea, Florence. I oughtn’t to do it, you know. I ought to get down to work.”

“An’ there you’re wrong,” said Florence. “You don’ take enough time off. You’ll be nice an’ quiet with ’er. Gawd, what a lovely sister! I’ll say she’s good for you.”

That was less than the truth. I owe Cleopatra my reason.

When the doctors had done with me in 1946, a psychologist took charge. . . . I shall never forget Cleopatra’s slapping his face. Left and right —two beauties. And I sat up on the couch and cheered her on. . . . That is why I have no pension. But I’d far rather have my brain.

“Besides,” continued Florence, “besides, it’ll give me a chance. I bin wantin’ to do your books for the las’ three months.”

“Please take it easy, Florence, while I’m away.”

“I’ll ’ave to, luv. No meals, no washin’ up.”

“Good. Mrs. Cleopatra tell you I met my girl-friend again?”

“ ’Deed she did. An’ thinks she’s a winner, like I do. I ’ope you get ’er down ’ere. Do you good to ’ave ’er all to yourself.”

“I should like it,” I said: “but she mayn’t want to come.”

“Gurr,” said Florence.

“Only us three,” said Cleo. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, indeed,” said Miss Coke, politely. “I’m not very good at parties, to tell you the truth.”

“Neither am I,” I said.

She was very simply dressed; but Cleo told me later that ‘it was a jolly good frock that she had on’. It was certainly of periwinkle blue, and it matched her eyes. A nice pearl necklace and a wrist-watch made up her jewellery.

“Don’t you get roped in?” said Cleo. “Corin escapes, because he lives out of Town. But you are available.”

“He’s in demand. I’m not. I’m not an artist, you know.”

“Your work denies that saying.”

“Thank you,” said Niobe. “I do it for my amusement, and nothing else.”

“May I say that I think that’s a pity?”

“From the papers I see—and I see all the ones that matter—I don’t think my kind of work would find a market to-day. Honestly, would Hugh Thomson’s? And he was a giant.”

“Alas!” I said. “And the silversmith’s day is done.”

“Exactly. I hope your books sell as they should.”

“I’m very lucky,” I said.

Cleopatra was speaking.

“Will you shake us a cocktail, darling? The shaker’s there.”

I looked at Miss Coke.

"A dry Martini all right?"

"I'd like one very much."

I rose and passed to the table. . . .

As I came back—

"My husband's away," said Cleo. "He's coming back next week. He's a rather popular director; so when some important deal has got to be done, they get him to go overseas and make their luckless opponents drop their guard."

Niobe laughed.

"I should become his pupil. I'm secretary to a physician. Receptionist, too. Often enough, I'm afraid, I run out of tact."

"You see human nature," I said.

She nodded.

"All sorts. Some patients are terribly sweet. Others, I like to think, are not at their best. Happily, my doctor's a most understanding man. He's a very old friend of my uncle's, which makes it nice."

"But not nice enough," said Cleopatra. "You have this exceptional talent. I think it's dreadful to bury it under the antechambers of Wimpole Street."

Miss Coke shrugged her shoulders and smiled. Then she looked at me.

"When and where did Shakespeare write his Songs?"

"On his journeys between Stratford and London. Riding alone through the greenwood and countryside, careless of what time he got in. . . . At least, that's my idea."

Niobe nodded.

"That's right. And after supper that night, he wrote them down."

"I suppose so. I can't believe he composed them, pen in hand." I hesitated. "Why did you ask me that?"

"I've always wanted to illustrate Shakespeare's Songs. I've studied the period and I shouldn't go wrong on the dress."

"Frontispiece—Shakespeare on horseback, taking a lane at a walk, with a happy smile on his face and his head in the air."

Niobe raised her glass.

"*Je vous remercie*," she said.

Dinner was announced. . . .

That Ascot should be discussed was natural enough.

"It's the first time Corin's been since 1939."

Niobe smiled.

"And he looked an *habitué*. I go one day—if I can. I love it so. My uncle and my doctor are both aware of my failing and are good and kind enough to help me to bring it off."

"I'd forgotten," I said, "how very pleasant it was."

"I love it, too," said my sister: "but I never go more than two days. You mustn't think I'm *blasée*. I have to go out a good deal."

"I did my first year," said Miss Coke. "Then Father and Mother died, and I couldn't go out any more. But, always excepting Ascot, I shouldn't care for it now."

"You don't miss very much," said Cleo. "I often think that my brother has the best of the deal. The groove has got a bad name. If anyone gets into one, he's supposed to get out. But, if the groove's to your liking, I don't quite see why you should."

"The elm made that point," I said, "not very long ago. He reminded me of White of *White's Selborne*."

"A leading case," said Miss Coke. "When was he born—your elm?"

"I think about two hundred and fifty years ago."

"Plenty of grooves in those days," said Cleopatra.

"Perforce," said I. "Travelling to London was no joke. And when you got there, desirable accommodation was very hard to obtain. Many a country gentleman stayed where he was for years."

"Yet the Wife of Bath had been to Rome and Jerusalem."

"No!" cried Cleo.

"It's true," I said. "But she was extremely tough."

Niobe was looking at Cleo.

“Don’t write me down a blue stocking. What general knowledge I have is purely picturesque. My father saw to that—I never went to school. I know that Wolsey had an orange and I think it was stuck with cloves: but I don’t know what he achieved—and I don’t really care.”

“I’m with you,” said Cleopatra. “To this day The Diet of Worms simply makes me feel sick.”

“Count me in,” I said. “Utrecht suggests a treaty, but it remembers Van Eyck.”

“Well, what are we?” said my sister. “We’re neither high-brows nor low-brows. There must be something in between.”

Niobe looked at me.

“Connoisseurs,” I said. “As knowing nothing, yet cognizant of all things.”

Cleopatra looked at her guest.

“Isn’t he quick?” she said. “ ‘Familiar as his garter’.”

Dinner became a meal of merriment, and the pensive Bacchante put off ‘her wonted state’. That she should be blithe was so proper—at least, I found it so. And so, I think, would have Romney.

I left them alone for ten minutes, when dinner was over and done. As I re-entered the little drawing-room—

“Corin,” said Cleopatra, “Niobe’s doctor’s Berserk.”

“The only one,” I said, smiling, “I wouldn’t mind seeing again. He did me nothing but good.”

Cleopatra regarded our guest.

“There you are,” she said.

Niobe looked at me.

“May I tell him I’ve met you?”

“If you please. And remember me gratefully.”

“I will.”

Then we talked of all manner of things, continually passing the ball, as will three of a kind.

Presently we spoke of Florence.

“She is unique,” said my sister. “I can’t attempt to describe her; but her devotion to Corin simply won’t go into words.”

“I don’t deserve her,” I said. “Shrewd, faithful and sweet, Florence is my Comptroller. We say of someone that he is the life of a party. Florence is more than that. She is the spice of life. On parade, her address is perfect—she knows her place: but when she and I are alone, no music-hall comedian has made me laugh so much. In her mouth, vulgarity becomes a virtue, familiarity a joy. With it all, she never presumes. She adores Cleopatra, of course. For you, I may say, she has the deepest regard.”

Miss Coke was greatly surprised.

“But we’ve never met,” she said.

“She saw you with me on the lawn—a long time ago. That was enough for Florence. As she herself would put it, she got you in one.”

“I can only hope she approved.”

“Highly,” said I. “She wondered why you hadn’t been eaten when you were presented at Court.”

Niobe laughed and laughed.

Then—

“Coridon on velvet, I think. Father taught me his song. Your sister tells me you’re not unacquainted with crime.”

I laughed.

“A well-spoken rogue,” I said. “He lent felony quite an air.”

“Tell her,” said Cleopatra.

I related the incident.

When I had done—

“I think,” said Niobe, “that you did awfully well. Pamlow, of course, is a monster. I’m so glad you shook him up. Whatever was the elm’s reaction?”

“He was inexpressibly shocked. That one who knew how to behave should play the common thief—well, it took his breath away.”

“As well it might,” said my sister.

“Well, don’t tell the elm,” said Miss Coke: “but listen to this. About three months ago I saw such a well-mannered woman just steal a bottle of scent. Case and all. It must have been worth ten pounds. She’d bought

something else, and the girl was getting her change. She had a Pekingese in her arms and she slipped it under the dog. When she'd done it, she looked to her right and met my eyes. 'That's how it's done,' she said, smiling. Then she received her change and faded away. D'you know, I felt quite faint."

"Shocking," said Cleopatra. "I can't think what I should have done."

"Can't you?" said Niobe. "I can. You would have taken her arm and said, 'Give it to me this instant, and I'll put it back.' And she would have done as you said."

Before my sister could protest—

"Niobe's right," I said. "She hasn't known you long, but, like Florence, she's got you in one. Your *aplomb*, my sweet, is most exceptional. And now here's a curious thing." I looked at Niobe. "In each case, yours and mine, the same technique was employed. My felon disarmed me by his frankness. Yours sought to do the same. How could you go into Court and tell them she'd smiled at you and said 'That's how it's done'? I suppose we should call it progress. When all other trades are advancing, why should crime stand still?"

"A solemn thought," said Cleopatra. "Tell me, Niobe, what do you do with your evenings?"

"I read and draw," said Miss Coke. "I don't very often go out, and I can't entertain. Let's say that my sociability ends with my day. A very cheerful old lady arrives at eight every morning to do my flat. I do very well, really. Small beer, of course, to Coridon's audit ale: but, taking it by and large, I can't complain." She glanced at her wrist. "May I have a taxi, please?"

"D'you really mean that?" said Cleo. "I mean, we're rather reluctant to let you go."

Niobe nodded and smiled.

"Please." I stepped to the house-telephone. "I—I don't know when I've enjoyed an evening so much."

Cleopatra looked at me.

"Niobe seems to be very easy to please."

Miss Coke shook her pretty head.

"I'm very exacting," she said.

Then the two of them rose, and Cleopatra put out her little hand.

"You're a very nice neighbour," she said. "And very soon I'm going to ask you again. *Au revoir*, Niobe."

"*Au revoir*, Cleopatra. And thank you very much."

As we reached the hall—

"May I see you home?" I said.

"Yes, if you please."

As we swung out of Curzon Street—

"Your sister's a darling," said Niobe.

"I'm glad you think so, too." I hesitated. "For entertainment, I'm rather badly placed. My visits to London are short and have to be carefully spaced."

Niobe nodded.

"I know. Cleopatra told me. I'm sorry, Coridon."

The words were so gently spoken they hit me hard. I tried and failed to make any decent reply. If I had known her better, I should have taken her hand and put it up to my lips.

I had meant to go on, of course, and ask if she'd come down to luncheon —say, Sunday week. But my tongue was awaiting orders which would not come. My brain was too busy to give them: bee-like, it was sucking honey from one of Shakespeare's Songs—'For beauty lives with kindness': at the same time it was receiving a precious report from my eyes, for Niobe's exquisite profile would not be denied.

As I made a desperate effort to bring the truant to heel, the taxi came to rest at the mouth of Bruton Street Mews.

I left the cab and handed Niobe out.

With the change of scene, my brain returned to duty.

As we walked towards Number Seven—

"Would you care to meet Florence, Niobe?"

Miss Coke put a hand to her mouth.

Then—

"Does she work on Sundays?" she said.

★ ★ ★

On the following evening I had a long talk with the elm. He was, as always, the perfect confidant. My confused and untidy reflections, I shuffled off upon him. And he heard me out in silence. Now and again a rustle, more easy to see than to hear, encouraged me to proceed. He was discretion itself. That he suffered fools gladly was clear.

"Well, here we go," I concluded. "It's been a great week for me. Since history repeats itself, I think it more than likely that you know what is to come. For me, that is 'still unsure', as Shakespeare says." I hesitated. "Nice to find someone to-day whose heart's desire is to illustrate his Songs."

Ablaze with the evening sunshine, the elm glowed with content.

At eight o'clock the next morning—

"Done you good," said Florence, from the foot of my bed. "When you went off on Friday I saw you was tired. Two days on en' gallivantin' 'ad you-know near knocked you up. But now you're lookin' a treat. Jus' what the Duchess was ordered, as the monkey said."

"Florence," I said, "I beg you will spare me quotations from——"

"Relax," said Florence. "It's only a figger o' speech. Forgot to tell you las' night—Gorblimy rang up on Friday after you'd gone."

"Oh, hell. Not another great-niece?"

"She didn' say. Called her 'a little filly'. Filly, my foot. The last one looked more like a goat. I said that you was away, but she'll ring up again all right. I'm afraid you'll 'ave to 'ave 'er; if not, she'll jus' blow in. No stoppin' Gorblimy. Crocodile's 'ide, an' born with the bit in 'er teeth."

I sighed.

"Sherry and biscuits 'll be the easiest way."

"That's right. At a quarter pas' twelve. I know she 'feeds' at one. An' now you drink your tea. I got to get on."

With no work by my side, I thought upon Gorblimy, as, thanks of course to Florence, the lady was locally known.

Years ago, Mrs. Alistair Cullaby-Rowe had come to Halliard from Melton, after the first great war. Her husband had died of wounds in 1917.

She was well over seventy now, but no one was allowed to forget that forty-five years ago she had hunted six days a week. In the only way she knew, she sought to maintain the tradition of those hard-riding times: but such fidelity was fatal: what she strove to exalt, she traduced. Her address, her apparel, her speech were designed to insist that cords were the only wear. I never saw her without a straw in her mouth. 'Huntin' was huntin',' she'd croak, 'when I was a gal. Born in the saddle, I was, when the grum knew his place. I shall always stink of the stable. Pas' mark of mouth now, but I never drop my bit.' Then she would quote from Surtees, whose works she knew by heart. I mentioned Beckford once, but she'd never heard of him. Poor, vain Gorblimy. She meant and did no harm. And she wouldn't last much longer. . . .

When she rang up later that morning, I asked her to come to tea.

When I broke the news to Florence, she closed her eyes.

"Gawd gimme strength," she said. "The silly ole clown 'll only wear you out."

"My dear, good Florence, I'm not so fragile as that."

" 'S a strain," said Florence. "If you 'ad someone to 'elp you, I wouldn' min': but they'll stay for an hour an' a 'alf—an' an hour an' a 'alf of Gorblimy 'd get a male nurse down. An' the 'filly' 'll sulk an' curse the spot on her nose. An' the Weighbridges comin' on Friday. . . ."

Her forebodings may have been just, but Destiny lifted a hand.

At a quarter to one on Wednesday, Florence brought me a note.

Dear Major Gore,

To our great disappointment, we shall be unable to be with you this afternoon.

This morning my cousin was taken suddenly ill, and by the time you get this note we shall be on our way by ambulance to The London Clinic.

I do not think she can survive the serious operation which must be immediately performed. But I should like you to know that this morning she has spoken constantly of you, always with real affection. 'Such perfect manners. I forgot I was an old fool, when I was talking to him.'

Yours sincerely,

When I gave it to Florence to read, the tears welled out of her eyes.

Gorblimy died that night—and was buried in Leicestershire.

I was so very thankful that I had asked her to tea.

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On Friday, as Florence had said, the Weighbridges lunched with me.

I had met them by chance in a lane and had backed my car to enable their truck to go by. So we became acquainted. Things would have gone no further, if Florence had not reported that they were being cold-shouldered right and left. I found such usage monstrous, for Paley had told me that they had been duly married and came on most Sundays to church. And they seemed so nice and unaffected, a very mannerly pair. When my sense of justice is outraged, I am apt to go out of my ground. It is, I think, a matter of self-respect. So I wrote and asked them to luncheon. I asked Lady Curtice to meet them. I told her as much as I knew, and she said she would gladly come.

The two arrived well before she did, but Lady Curtice is always the last to appear. We all heard her pleasant voice, before she had entered the house.

"Don't you dare say it, Florence. Besides, it's not my fault—I was a ten-months child. I hear you've gone all-electric. Before I go, you must show me the magic well. One moment. Is my hat straight? I mean the thing on my head."

Florence's reply was inaudible—to our distress; for it won a shriek of laughter from the lady to whom it was made. Then the study door was opened, and Florence announced her gossip as though she were some stranger of high degree.

At once the first *contretemps* occurred.

When I made to introduce them, I found myself unable to remember the Weighbridges' name.

"Commander and Mrs. . . ."

"Weighbridge," said Weighbridge, quietly.

"Of course. I'm so dreadfully sorry."

It would not really have mattered, if fifty minutes later I had not done it again.

Still, the party was a success—at least, I think it was. Lady Curtice was very charming and made us all laugh very much. And she asked the husband and wife to come and drink with her in the following week.

"No good asking Major Gore. He never attends such carousals. Prudence, of course: but he always explains that he works best about that time. The things he gets away with! The author's licence, you know."

When they were gone, I strolled to and fro on the lawn for half an hour. I felt ashamed to report my lapse to the elm. To be quite honest, lapses—an ugly word. I cared little that they had been witnessed: what I did not like was the fact that they had occurred. I found them disquieting. My last five minutes with Niobe fell into line with them—to make up a defaulters' parade which I could not dismiss. My brain, of course, was the culprit. Three times in the last six days my brain had refused to obey a lawful command. . . . I determined to go very quietly from now until Sunday week.

For I had written to Niobe, asking her to lunch at the cottage on Sunday the third of July. A fast train from Waterloo would set her down at Moorhen at twenty minutes to twelve. There I would meet her with the Vane, which meant that soon after mid-day she would be within my gates. (The village of Halliard did not figure in my itinerary. To set tongues wagging was the last thing that I desired.)

Her reply came on Monday morning.

> *Niobe has much pleasure in accepting Coridon's kind invitation to meet Florence on Sunday the third of July.*

Overleaf, an engaging pen-and-ink drawing presented the back of a man, who was wearing Ascot dress. The detail was very fine—race-glasses, slim umbrella, gray top-hat very slightly out of the straight.

Its legend was two words long.

The Apostate

I can only hope that I looked as elegant.

When I told Florence, she began to jump up and down.

"Oh, what a lovely summer! Firs' the Queen of 'Earts an' now the Fairy Princess. But you'll 'ave to 'ave a cole lunch. Fanny Bowles is all right, but we don't want 'er in on this. What about a show froy?"

“What could be better, Florence?”

“Please God it’s fine. She won’t stop for dinner, I s’pose?”

“I can’t expect that.”

“Oh, dear. Why can’ she stay ’ere? I’ll say she’s down your street. All wrong a peach like that livin’ up a mews.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.”

“An’ what a job! ’Oldin’ ole ’arridans down, while the doctor gives ’em a shot in the bull-dog’s dream.”

I shut my eyes tight. Even Hogarth never conceived so hideous an episode.

“Florence,” I said, “you appal me. Miss Coke can’t have to do that.”

“Course she does. ’S ’er duty. A doctor’s sec is always ’alf a nurse. Never min’. If she ’as a nice day out, she’ll forget all that.”

“We must do our best,” I said.

Cleopatra rang up on Friday. I was at luncheon, and Florence took the call. I could hear her talking to someone, but I could not hear what she said. Then she appeared in the doorway, with shining eyes.

“It’s Mrs. Cleopatra,” she said.

I left the table at once.

“Well, Cleo, my sweet.”

“How are you, darling?”

“I’m full of beans. Has Florence been saying she isn’t satisfied?”

“No, indeed. She gives you a very clean bill. Niobe tells me she’s lunching with you on Sunday.”

“That’s right. Been dining with you?”

“Last night. Corin, you know, she’s really a very sweet girl. Arthur’s quite crazy about her. It seems that he knows her uncle—plays cards with him at White’s. Name of George Medallion. So everything went very well. I sent her home in the car.”

“How nice of you, Cleo.”

“I don’t see why, my dear. She’s a valuable piece.”

“It’s nice to know that you feel about her as I do. Can’t you come down one day next week? And we could exchange reports. To luncheon, of course.”

“I’d love to, darling. One minute. . . . To-day week be all right?”

“I shall count the days,” I said.

“Corin, I do love you so.”

“Goodbye. My love to Arthur.”

“Goodbye.”

I was very glad she was coming. I wanted to tell her of my lapses, and see what she said. I had had another on Wednesday—of rather a different sort. I had driven into the Forest, berthed the Vane and wandered into the greenwood, which cannot have looked more lovely when William Rufus left it in Mr. Purkess’s cart.

As I emerged from a truly magnificent glade, something made me glance to my right; and there was a man of many summers, seated upon a cushion, with an open book on his knees.

In that moment he looked up and saw me.

When I gave him good afternoon, a jolly smile illumined his rugged face.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but I think you’re the very man.”

“What makes you think that?” I said, smiling.

“The cut of your jib, sir, if I may make so bold. Tell me, what does ‘sleave’ mean? A skein? You see, I’m reading *Macbeth*.”

“ ‘The ravelled sleave’,” I said, “is a tangled thread of silk.”

“There you are,” said the man. And then, “I’m much obliged.” He tapped the volume he held. “Precious writing, this. The more you dwell on it, the finer you see it is.”

I nodded.

“That’s perfectly true.”

He sighed.

"Never had time before. Worked like a slave for nearly fifty years. Always too tired to read, when I got home. Caught up with the news on Sundays. Got to the top all right, and thought that was life. Found I was wrong. Dead Sea Apples, sir, controlling a business to-day. And so I sold out. Only wish I'd done it before—I'm seventy-two. Still, I'm happy now. I'm told I should read *Pepys' Diary*. What would you say?"

"I believe you'd love it," I said, sitting down myself.

I offered him cigarettes, but he showed me his pipe.

Smoking together, we talked for about twenty minutes, and I made various suggestions, which he wrote carefully down. In return, he told me of himself.

A tanner by trade, he had started as an apprentice and had risen to be head of the firm. He had served in the first great war—four full years in France and a D.C.M. "They were good days. I often wished I was back in the years to come. I was only a sergeant, sir, but I had authority then." When I asked if he was married, he shook his head. "I'm not a gambler, sir. Just as well, I think, from what I've seen. I've hardly a married friend that doesn't envy me. I always have a quid on the Derby and on the St. Leger, too. But marriage, no. You stake your happiness on an even chance. Even? Well, let it go—I want to be fair." Again he shook his head. "That sort of play's a shade too high for me."

I bade him goodbye with regret. He was such a likable man.

Thoughtfully, I made my way back to where I had berthed the car. . . .

It was then that my lapse occurred.

The Vane was as I had left her, by the side of the way: but, when I had started the engine, I did not know which way to go.

I desired to return to Halliard, but how to reach that village I could not tell. Rack my brain as I would, I had no idea at all. I did not know the direction in which it lay. Reason suggested that I should turn the car, because it was surely facing the opposite way: but I could not remember the name of only one of the places by which I must have passed. Halliard was, I was sure, some forty or fifty miles off; so the neighbouring finger-posts would not bear its name. And it was so small and retired that no one I was likely to encounter would know the way. Yet my home was there . . . and the elm . . . and Florence would be waiting to serve my tea.

I decided to turn the Vane and proceed in the direction from which I had probably come: and then, at the first town I came to, to purchase a map. So I drove till I came to a by-road and there I turned about.

A few minutes later I saw cross roads ahead. And there stood a finger-post. . . .

Until I had reached the cross, I could not see the finger which was pointing my way. The other three conveyed nothing. Then the fourth came into view.

CADNAM, *ROMSEY*, it said.

"Romsey!" I cried. "That's right."

And then it came back to me—the way I had come and must go . . . from Romsey to Stockbridge and so to Basingstoke. . . .

I was very greatly relieved.

So all was well—except that for twenty minutes I had had no idea at all how to retrace the steps I had taken an hour before. And the way was familiar.

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I held the wicket-gate open, and Niobe passed in.

She went straight to the elm, made him a little curtsey and then stood still and looked up, with her feet together and her hands behind her back.

I can never say how very lovely she looked. She was very charmingly dressed in blue and white; but she was so beautifully made and she wore her clothes so well that, had they been rags and tatters, she would have lent them grace. Her little, blue court shoes became the excellence of her legs and feet. Her head was bare, and her curls glowed in the sunshine, as a Bacchante's should.

She addressed the elm.

"I'm very happy, sir, to see you again; for in you so well appear the power, the glory and the kindness of the English countryside."

I will swear that, when she had finished, the elm inclined his *panache*. A passing breeze may have nudged him to pay this compliment. Be that as it may, his plume swayed to and fro and then dipped handsomely downward towards the lawn.

Niobe was standing too close to see the stately gesture; but, when I cried out, “He bowed,” she turned a radiant face.

“How very sweet of him!”

“I think he wished to acknowledge a very elegant speech.”

“Let me confess that I made it up in the train.”

“It was damned good, anyway. And now let’s go in. What would you like to drink?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not very good at liquor except at meals. Could I just have some lime-juice?”

“Of course.”

“But first, if I may, I’d like to wash my hands. They hadn’t had time to clean the carriage I used.”

I ushered her into the cottage and raised my voice.

“Florence!”

A moment, and Florence appeared.

“Niobe, this is my housekeeper. Florence—Miss Niobe Coke.”

Niobe went to Florence and put out her hand.

“I’m so glad to know you,” she said.

“Thank you, madam. It’s good to see you again.”

“Florence,” I said, “Miss Coke would like to wash her hands.”

“Please follow me, madam,” said Florence, and led the way upstairs.

I entered the study, leaving the door ajar.

Perhaps five minutes went by. Then Niobe’s joyous laughter rang out like a bell. I smiled. The ice had been broken and Florence was off. I heard them talking as they descended the stairs.

Niobe entered the study and shut the door.

Then she spoke very low.

“Not Coridon, but Horace, I think. He knew how to live. I wonder what she gets, ‘one half so precious as the’ stuff she gives.”

“Good for Niobe,” I said—and meant it. The *mot* was *juste*.

Her eyes travelled round the room.

"The author's closet," I said.

"Some closet," said Niobe. "And a study's a smaller room. 'The little library', I think. May I look round?"

"Niobe," I said, "you are here to do as you please."

"The freedom of Elm Cottage. That's very nice of you."

She began to move round the walls. With my back to the fireplace, I watched her pleasedly.

Florence came in with lime-juice and a tankard of beer.

As Niobe came to the table—

"Shall I pour it out, madam?"

"Please. . . . Thank you, that's just about right."

"Ice, madam?"

"Please."

"Plain water or soda, madam?"

"Plain water, please."

Florence added the water and picked up a spoon.

"May I stir it, madam? It isn't properly mixed."

"Yes, if you will." The mixture was stirred and tasted. "Lovely. Thank you so much."

Florence withdrew.

"Oh, Coridon, are you lucky? It makes me all warm inside to be treated like that. And now I'm going on with my tour."

Glass in hand, she returned to the spot she had left. I drank some beer and lighted a cigarette.

Niobe spoke over her shoulder.

"Oh, you've got Father's *La Fontaine*—I'm sure it's the same."

I passed to her side, pulled one of the volumes down, took her glass and put the book into her hands.

“Yes, it’s the same. Oh dear, how it takes me back. I do love *Grandville’s* illustrations. I used to pore over them when I was a little girl.”

“If you’re very good, you shall pore over them after lunch.”

“May I? Just for ten minutes?”

“For half an hour if you like. I know what it means to recapture happier days.”

“You’re giving me another to remember.”

“That’s a very sweet saying,” I said.

She gave me back the volume and took her glass from my hand.

When I turned again from the shelf, she was standing before my Dutch Scene.

“Coridon, what a beauty! I ought to know who it’s by.”

“It’s attributed to Van der Heyden. I think there may be some doubt.”

“A great man painted that, whoever he was.”

After a lingering look, she continued her tour.

More books—my little Virgil by *Didot* and the mighty O.E.D., the Pentland Edition of Stevenson, Shipp’s *Flemish Masters* and *Gentlemen prefer Blondes* . . . my three miniatures and a snuff-box which had been fashioned when George the Fourth was young. . . . She had to see everything. And I escorted her progress, enjoying every moment, because she was Niobe.

Presently luncheon was served.

The *chaud-froid* was beautifully done, and Florence waited upon us as though her work were confined to the dining-room.

Coffee was served in ‘the little library’.

As I lighted her cigarette—

“I smoke very little,” she said. “I enjoy it with coffee, but that’s the only time. From what I see, I think I’m fortunate.”

“Indeed, you are,” I said. “I smoke far too much, but it’s second nature now. My work would suffer, if I had to give it up.”

“I can understand that. I’m sure you never smoke through a meal.”

“That’s vicious,” I said. “I’m not as bad as that.”

When we had finished our coffee, I brought the two volumes of Fables and laid them down on the sofa by Niobe's side.

As I made for my chair—

"If you would share it with me, I should like my treat better still."

So I took my seat by her side, and we spent the next twenty minutes with the fantastic brilliance of Aesop's interpreter.

Then Niobe said she would like to go into the garden and stroll on the lawn. . . .

Presently she pointed to the cherry-tree.

"Everything here is lovely. What a sight that must be in the spring!"

"I hope you'll see it next year. Even Abraham's Bosom was moved."

Niobe stared. Then she began to laugh.

"I scent an *histoire*," she said.

I related what had occurred. When I reached the *dénouement* a peal of laughter from Niobe warmed my heart. And I think that it loosened my tongue, for soon I was talking as if I had known her for years.

Naturally enough, we told each other a little of how we had lived and moved in the days before. In 1951 her world had crashed. Her father and mother had died, and her home and its contents were sold. Debts she had never dreamed of had had to be paid. When the sun had set on the terrible day of reckoning, she found herself left with two hundred and fifty a year.

"Much better than nothing," she said, "but not a great deal to-day. Uncle George would have helped, but it wasn't fair on him. He's over sixty now, and he's had to give up two-thirds of the fun he had. I'd meant to take up drawing, of course; but I didn't fancy the *Quartier* or Soho. So I do something useful, instead."

"Alas," I said, "the day of the patron has gone. I often think of them and how deep we are in their debt. But for Maecenas, the names of Virgil and Horace might well have never been heard. We happen to know his name, but think of all the patrons, the names of whose *protégés* have become household words. How many can you remember? I couldn't remember six. Let's hope they're written in heaven—they damned well ought to be."

"Coridon, I believe you're a high-brow."

"No, my dear. I'm a pedant, who gets ideas."

“Which is absurd. I know. You’re a working dilettante—a happy contradiction in terms.”

“I shall try and believe that’s true.” I glanced at my wrist. “Niobe, it’s half past three. Would you like to come for a drive? By lanes that are never used? I’d like to make you free of a reach of a Roman road that’s been off the map since the seventeenth century.”

“Not too far, my dear. I must catch the six forty-five.”

“Oh, no. We’ll be back for tea—at half past four. You—you feel you must leave so soon?”

Niobe nodded.

“I don’t want to get in late.”

“Oh dear,” I sighed, “it’s all wrong. I ought to be driving you back.”

“I never heard of such a thing.”

“I have. It’s frequently done. But the traffic’s too much for me now.”

“You keep good company. In the course of my duties, I met a racing driver not very long ago. A continental driver, of international fame. He said he wouldn’t drive in London for fifty pounds an hour.”

Comfortable words, but I felt ashamed of myself. For all my regard for her, I could not see Niobe home.

Five minutes later we took our seats in the Vane.

As I had predicted, we had the lanes to ourselves. All we encountered were three or four bicycles. And the Roman road was at peace—asleep in the afternoon sun. It had shrunk in width in fifteen hundred years: hedgerow and timber had trespassed upon its selvage on either side: but Nature had paid for the tort by hanging the walls with blossom and teaching oak and elm to make it a precious ceiling for most of its length. And it boasted an ancient window, made by a gray, old gate and commanding the prettiest prospect you ever saw; for sheep were tending a meadow of fine, sweet grass and, beyond a sudden valley, a cornfield lay like a coverlet over the slope of a hill: to the side, an order of beeches stood up in all its glory against the blue, and out of the valley were rising two rose-red chimneys and the sag of an aged roof.

When we came to the end of the road, I turned about. Then I drove back very slowly and came to rest at the window, now on Niobe’s left. When I switched the engine off, the silence was absolute.

Niobe gazed and gazed. Once she turned, to look down the dappled arcade of the aged way: then she returned to the little chapter of landscape, so simple, yet so superb. (Fable and eclogue—I never could make up my mind which of the two Titania would have liked best.)

I may, I think, be forgiven for gazing at Niobe. I could barely see her profile, but I marked how very well her head was set on and the careless elegance of her naturally curly hair.

As I leaned forward to see the side of her face, I saw a tear leave her eye and make its way down her cheek.

In a flash my arm was about her and was holding her close to my heart. She hid her face in my shoulder, as might have a weeping child.

So for two or three moments . . .

Then the baby sobs died away, and I let her go.

Niobe accepted my handkerchief simply enough.

"I'm sorry, Coridon. You've called back yesterday. And yesterday is so perfect it broke me down."

"Niobe's tears—the loveliest tribute that Time was ever paid."

"I lived up to my name."

"Ah, but you wept for joy."

With a final dab at each eye, she tilted her chin.

"My compact's still on your sofa. Do I look passable?"

"My dear, if Shakespeare could see you, he'd write another song."

With a shy smile, she gave me my handkerchief back.

Then—

"He'd only repeat himself. 'And Marian's nose looks red and raw.' "

I put up a hand and tilted the mirror down.

"Can you see yourself, Niobe?"

"A little bit more to the left. . . . That's right."

"Can you see your nose?"

"Yes."

" 'And those eyes, the break of day'?"

Rosy with pleasure, she threw back her head and laughed.

"That was terribly quick, my dear. I can't keep up with you."

I switched the engine on and let in the clutch. . . .

When we were finishing tea—

"When should we leave, Coridon?"

"About five minutes past six."

"Good. We've plenty of time. I'd like to see Florence again and I must say goodbye to the elm. Did I see a flea-bitten gray in a field over there?"

"You did. Light draught. He used to draw a small 'bus. Name of Ranger, I think."

"Could I have a look at him? I think he's the sort of horse that Shakespeare used to ride."

Florence sliced us some carrots, and off we went. The field was five minutes' walk.

Ranger was grazing quietly, close to a quickset hedge. With every circumstance of discretion, we made our approach. When we were ten paces off, he raised his head, suspended mastication and favoured us with a stare.

"Well, Ranger," I said.

Ranger routed a fly and fell to grazing again.

I was almost within carrot-range, when he made it perfectly clear that our closer acquaintance was something he did not desire. Without bestowing upon us so much as a glance, he snatched a last mouthful of herbage, swung round and trotted away.

"I thought that was coming," I said. "Niobe, stay by the hedge. As soon as I'm ready, I'll nod, and you will come quietly up, with your hands in front of you. Then he won't think you've a head-stall behind your back."

I strolled in Ranger's direction. Then I stood still and, in my old parade voice, uttered a welcome command.

"Fe-e-e-e-e-ed!"

Ranger started, flung up his head and looked round. His ears were pricked. Then, to my great delight, he whinnied heartily.

I approached him boldly, the little basket of carrots cupped in my hands.

Right at the last, he actually moved to meet me. . . .

I fear he was disappointed to find no corn. Still the carrots made a very agreeable snack. I gave him two or three slices, and whilst he was munching these, slid the basket up my arm and took hold of his mane.

Making much of the horse, I nodded to Niobe. . . .

He wanted the basket of course, but after a little wrangle, he made the best of my palm.

When Niobe was within earshot—

"It's quite all right now," I said. "You can go as you please."

"Coridon, I'm deeply impressed. Tell me, please, how you wrought the change of heart."

I laughed.

"I wasn't sure," I said, "but I thought that on one of his quarters I saw the Army brand. So I gave the command which the Army horse adores—the order to 'feed'. Between old soldiers, you know." Ranger was demanding my attention. "Gently, old fellow. One moment."

Whilst I continued to minister to his tooth, Niobe moved to and fro, surveying the horse from all angles, finger to lip. Presently she stood still before him, to see what he looked like head on, but until he was perfectly sure that all the carrots were gone, he would not stand. Then at last he became aware of her presence, to favour the girl with a steady, appraising stare. Then, once again, he lowered his head to graze. And I stood still beside him, with an arm about his neck. . . .

"All over," said Niobe. "Thank you both very much."

By the time we were back at the cottage, it was a quarter to six.

Niobe visited Florence. . . .

When she was back in the study—

"No 'one for the road'?"

Niobe shook her head, smiling.

"I think it's time I said goodbye to the elm."

"Very well."

Together we left the house, and she went straight to the tree. As before, she stood at his foot, looking up to the sumptuous fabric of vaults and choirs

and random galleries, glowing with tempered sunshine, trembling before the whisper of a wandering air. If she spoke, she spoke very low, and I never heard what she said.

And then, at last, she turned, and I ushered her out of the wicket and into the car.

We came to Moorhen quietly, with seven minutes to spare. For three of those minutes we sat where we were in the Vane.

"Niobe dear, please come again very soon."

"I will, indeed. I've had such a lovely day."

"I—I expect you're engaged next Sunday."

"May I say Sunday week?"

"Niobe, what do you think?" I hesitated. "I'm afraid the entertainment will be very much the same."

"What more can I ask?" It was her turn to hesitate. Then, "Coridon, thank you and thank you for being so sweet and gentle to me on the Roman road."

I could make no answer to that, but I picked up her little hand and put it up to my lips.

We left the car for the platform. As we arrived, I saw the signal fall.

I turned and looked at her.

"Oh, my dear, I don't want to let you go."

The smile which Niobe gave me was not of this world.

Then the train came in and carried her off.

"An' the res' nowhere," said Florence. "Gawd, what a lovely love! So sweet an' natural—an' easy as kiss your 'and. *An'* dignity. Breedin', that's what it is. Not one in a thousan' skirts 'as manners like that. An' if they 'ave, you can lay they'll 'ave a mug like a blood-'oun' that's lost its job. But jus' look at 'er. Face an' figger, she's out o' the fairy tales. 'Please, may I call you Florence? I don't know your other name.' I couldn' 'ardly answer—I wanted to cry. Oh dear, why can' she stay 'ere? I'd love to be 'er maid."

"Florence," I said, "she's a winner—and that's much less than the truth."

“An’ all these Beauty Queens! If she stepped up, she’d knock the lot of ’em flat. An’ can she wear ’er clothes?”

“You’ll have to tell Mrs. Cleo what she had on.”

“You bet I will. An’ the rest. Did Ranger do ’is stuff?”

“With a little encouragement.”

“Good. She’s the sort o’ young lady you wan’ to ’ave all she wants.”

“She’s promised to come down again on Sunday week.”

“Oh goody, goody,” cried Florence. “You know, I can’t ’ardly wait to see her again. An’ I’ll say she’s good for you. Gentle an’ quiet an’ laughin’ an’ likin’ the things you like. Lot o’ good this ’d be to nine out o’ ten to-day. Bored stiff, they’d be with it all. No swimmin’-pool, no strip-tease sun-bathin’—with a bunch of pawin’ Reggies with ’air all over their necks. Wouldn’ suit them a bit. But that’s not Miss Niobe’s way. She’s out of a drawer worth openin’—not out of the bargain basement where they belong.”

I felt that Florence’s strictures were too severe; for, when all was said and done, I had very little to offer to any young visitor. And I had been very gay, before the late war. We had not worn our hair long, and our more animal instincts were not paraded as they are paraded to-day; and a failure to carry one’s liquor was not condoned. But times have changed. . . . The point is that the young generation would justly rate my hospitality low. But Niobe had not done that. She had prized my scraps of tradition, valued my shreds and remnants of that incomparable texture woven in other days. Lovely herself, she had an eye to beauty. She liked the niceties of life, but worshipped the simple lore of the countryside. Had she lived in the days of Olympus, she would have been a nymph.

On the following morning, I had a long talk with the elm.

This, I shall not report, except for the last few words.

“. . . She’s terribly sweet to me, but that doesn’t mean she’s willing to be my wife. I mean, she could be a Duchess—no doubt about that. She likes this plot, of course: but so did Abraham’s Bosom. And the price of its occupation—the rent may be too high.

“ ‘Look at the other side’. You mean, if I do not ask her to be my wife . . .” I stood very still. “Well, if I don’t, I can’t go on having her down. I mean, I can’t stand it, sir. I’ll—I’ll have to cut her right out. . . .”

Thoughtfully, I returned to my table. At least the air had been cleared.

That afternoon I drove out—with a large-scale map in the car. On this I had ringed Halliard with red and blue chalk. A similar ring in the margin enclosed the words, WHERE I LIVE. I was taking no more chances. Still, since I had talked with the tanner, to my very great relief, I had not had another lapse. Uneasily I supposed that, such is the way of Fortune; the next lapse I had would assume a different guise.

My bourne that afternoon was a village cricket-ground. I had marked it more than once, but had never had time to stop. To-day I meant to survey it as it deserved, for I had seen enough to be sure that it had quality. In a word, it was just such a mansion as the spirit of village cricket would make its own. Sheltered by hanging woodland, attended by magnificent chestnuts and neighboured by the precincts of the gray, old church, the smooth, green acreage remembered all the rites of that unique freemasonry which only England knew. I used to play such cricket—oh, a long time ago.

I was there well within an hour, to find the ground empty and silent, for it was not a cricketing day. But I had not come for cricket and, since I should not be intruding, I berthed the Vane and made my way on to the turf.

Strolling beside the chestnuts, I began to compass the ground, thinking how goodly a part it had played in the English scene. I found it even fairer than I had thought . . . a plot to fight and die for . . . and then and there determined to come again—next time when a game was in progress, towards the close of play, when the shadows were long.

I had passed the bowlers' screen, when I noticed a man sitting, reading, on one of the low, oak benches which had been planted beside the churchyard wall. It occurred to me that he might be the groundsman: in which case, of course, he was, in a way, my host. Casually enough, I bent my steps towards him, still with my eyes on the pitch. When I was some thirty yards from him, I looked at him again—and stopped in my tracks. Then I put a hand to my head. If this was another lapse . . .

Here the tanner looked up and saw me.

For a moment we stared at each other. Then he began to laugh.

"Would you believe it?" he crowed. "Thirty odd miles from the Forest, and yet you run me to earth."

I began to laugh, too. I was immensely relieved.

"Another happy chance. I'm simply out for a run, and I happened to choose this spot. How do you come to be here?"

“Saw this place, sir, liked it and settled into the pub.” He waved a practical hand. “A beautiful reading-room. An’ I’m looking forward to the cricket on Saturday afternoon.” He pointed to the book on his lap. “I was thinking of you just now—you said Pepys ’d make me laugh. And were you right? We haven’t changed much, have we, in the last three hundred years?”

I took my seat by his side and lighted a cigarette.

“No need to ask if you’re happy.”

“No, indeed. Happy as the day is long, sir. My own master at last. Just move as the fancy takes me, like an old horse at grass. Now, if I had a wife, you know, I couldn’t do that.”

“She’d have to be considered,” I said.

“A euphemism, sir. I’d have to do as she said. I’ve nothing against the ladies. They’ve always been nice to me—much nicer than they are to their husbands. That makes you think. . . . I know it does come off; but I’m not a gambling man.”

“And in the winter?” I said.

“A nice little house, I’ve got—in Golders Green. Man and his wife take every care of me. Spare-room for my old friends. I’m never dull.” He began to laugh again. “I don’t think Pepys should have married.”

I laughed with him.

“He didn’t let it worry him much. And, with it all, he was very fond of his wife.”

We talked for a quarter of an hour, before I got to my feet.

As he rose, I put out my hand.

“To our next meeting,” I said.

“Thank you, sir. It’s nice to meet someone of standing who never talks down to you.”

I smiled.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I said. “I’ve learned of you, my friend, and it’s done me a world of good to see you again.”

He held my hand very tight.

“The best of luck, sir—always.”

“God bless,” I said.

I made my way back to the Vane and drove leisurely home, pondering the whim of Fortune that had brought us together again. He was a most healthy companion—no doubt about that. I truly valued his acquaintance. I found myself wishing that he could meet Niobe.

At eleven on Tuesday morning, Florence put her head round the door.

"Sorry," she said. "Would Mrs. Cleopatra like sweetbreads?"

"The way you do them," I said, "she'll overeat herself."

Here the telephone went.

Florence entered the study and picked the receiver up.

"Yes, this is Major Gore's house. Who is that? . . . Oh, I don't think so. Who's speaking? . . . Mrs. Edward Croucher?" Florence looked at me, and I shook my head. "What d'you want to speak to him for? . . . A private matter. I see. Well, I couldn't disturb him for that. . . . Oh, I understan' now—you love his books. Well, perhaps you'd write to him. . . . No, I'm sorry, madam, but if he was to see all the people who love his books—well, he wouldn' finish his new one for twenty years. So, if you'd like to help him, leave him alone. I'll see he has your name. Send him a letter, madam. You'll get an answer all right—I promise you that. . . . That's very nice of you, madam. Directly I heard your voice, I knew you'd understand. . . . Goodbye, and thank you, madam." Florence replaced the receiver. "An' don' miss your 'bus to Ealing, you smarmy ole toad. 'Appened to be passin', my foot. An' don' tell me she buys 'em."

"I should think she would now," I said. "She'll talk about this for months."

"Soap's cheap enough," said Florence, and made herself scarce.

Two days later, the lady's letter arrived.

Dear Major Gore,

I have now been able to complete my set of your works.

(Only three had so far appeared.)

I can hardly wait for your next one, which my bookseller says will be published late this year. What a long time to wait. . . .

Your charming housekeeper made me feel quite guilty, when I ventured to telephone. Is it too much to hope . . .

I should like to be able to add that her address was Ealing. Still, it was Acton, which was very nearly as good.

When I gave the letter to Florence, she read it with a grim smile.

"Slobbery Sophy," said Florence. "What did I say? Look at the letter you got the other day. *Please don't feel you've got to answer this. I only want you to know how much I've enjoyed your books. After all, it's only decent to say thank you to someone who's given you so much pleasure.*"

"That was very moving," I said. "I told the writer he'd far more than paid his debt. To return to Mrs. Croucher. You realize that you've stung her for thirty-seven and six?"

"An' you-know good value," said Florence. "An' think 'ow she'll put it across the other ole trouts. 'Unfortunately he was aht, so I spoke to his hahsekeeper. But, when he came in, he sent me the swaitest note. . . .' "

The heroic, as rendered by Florence, would have brought down any house. Before I had finished laughing, she had withdrawn.

Cleopatra's visit, as usual, had the quality of a masque.

She fell out of the car and flung her arms round my neck. Then she ran to the elm and bobbed delightfully.

"My humble duty, sir. Your Majesty is looking superb." The elm preened himself. "You have a new subject now, in Niobe Coke. I'm sure she has your approval. We can still produce fine ladies—she's one and I'm another, as you will agree. And you can't say you don't, can you? You know, I think my brother's a very fortunate man. Have you ever seen him dance? He's really quite good."

With that, she put a hand on my shoulder. . . .

We danced down the lawn and up to the study doors. Then she went off to greet Florence and I went after Jenkins and got us two tankards of beer.

"Here's your best, sir," said Jenkins.

"Hurray," said I. "You know, it's much better cold."

"You're telling me, sir. Refreshin'. An' tastes quite different, too."

"How's London, Jenkins?"

"Too much traffic, sir. Drivin' a car is so much 'ard labour to-day. I'm dreadin' the garden party. But you're never out of a queue, wherever you go. If I take madam to Sloane Street, you'd be surprised to see the way I go."

I shook my head.

"Progress, Jenkins," I said.

We chatted till Florence appeared, to say that Cleo was down. . . .

As I shook two dry Martinis—

"Ladies first," I said. "Besides, chronological order means much to me."

Cleopatra smiled.

"I've had bits and pieces from Florence, so you shall have your way.

"Well, as I told you, she dined with us yesterday week. I'd asked James Bowling on purpose: he's rather stuffy, you know, and I wanted to see how she would react to him. Corin, she was perfectly sweet. He's more than twice her age, but very soon she was listening to him on procedure, as if it was the one subject she'd always hoped to discuss. Arthur fell for her flat. I told you he knows her uncle—who used to have his own stable before the war. Soon after dinner James had to go to the House, and Arthur went with him—he wanted to hear the debate. So Niobe and I were able to have a long talk.

"For all her poise, she's beautifully simple, Corin, and quite unspoiled. You won't expect me to tell you all she said, but towards the end she said this: 'I often think, Cleo, that I was born out of time. I don't belong to this age. I can't subscribe to the manners and I can't see anything funny in about three-fifths of what passes for humour to-day. I'd love to laugh, but I can't. God knows I'm not a prude, but it embarrasses me when things which belong to the boudoir take place in the restaurant. I'm neither wise nor learned—I'll sit at the feet of a plumber who knows his job. But I can tell worth from rubbish and corn from chaff. So can you and Coridon. But very few of those of my age that I've met seem able or even willing to distinguish between the two.' "

There was a little silence.

Then—

“I’m so glad she likes us,” I said.

My sister accepted her glass. Then she put it down on a table, got to her feet and put her arms round my neck.

“I think you’re in love with her, darling.”

“I think so, too.”

“I’m terribly glad. She is so exactly right.”

“She may not play, my sweet. I’m not for all markets, you know.”

“You are for hers.”

I looked over her shoulder and up the lawn to the elm.

“For the moment, I can afford it: but books don’t pay very well and I can hardly expect another legacy.”

“She’s probably got a little; and two would really be no more expensive than one.”

“So I’ve heard. But I’ve always suspected that saying. And what of the days to come?”

“They will care for themselves, my darling.”

“And Florence?”

“Will praise God. The moment she saw her, she knew she was meant for you.”

“She’d have to have help.”

“It would be Niobe’s pride to pull her weight.”

“ ‘You’re full of pretty answers’,” I said. “Now riddle me this. Shall December wed May?”

“Don’t be absurd, my sweet. You’re forty-two and Niobe’s twenty-six. Would you forbid the marriage of August to June?”

“When I am fifty, she will be thirty-four.”

“Sixteen years! How awful! Just the difference between Arthur and me.”

“Enough,” I said, laughing, and kissed her. “Unless you want a warm cocktail, we’d better go on after lunch.”

“Very well. Now tell me of Sunday. I want to hear everything.”

“She was *allegro*,” I said. “It—suited her very well.”

“I’ll bet it did,” said Cleo. “And I’ll spare you her frock, for Florence has told me exactly how she was dressed.”

Before I had nearly finished, luncheon was served—cold sweetbreads and gooseberry fool. Cleopatra was ravished.

“Florence, how do you do it? Mr. Ruthven will never forgive me for stealing such a march.”

“Country fare, madam. If only you’d come more often. . . .”

“If I did, I should put on weight: and I’m quite fat enough.”

“Fat,” said Florence. “That to me, when I’ve dressed you! Talk about the Sultan’s dream!”

Before our full-throated laughter, Florence withdrew.

It was when we had finished our coffee that I spoke, as I hoped, to the point.

“I’m mad about Niobe, Cleo. But I’m not sure that I have the right to ask her to be my wife.”

“Why not, my darling?”

“Because of my health.”

“Berserk will tell her of that. In any event, you could have a word with him. I’m perfectly sure he’d O.K. you. So long as you lead a quiet life, you’re perfectly sound. And that is all Niobe asks. If he could have seen you at Ascot . . .”

“Appearances are deceptive. My memory’s giving trouble.”

“So is that of everyone else. I think it’s radioaction. I have to write everything down.”

I braced myself.

“I’m afraid in my case it’s rather more than that. Listen to this.”

I told her of my two lapses—how twice, when they were my guests, I had been unable to recall the Weighbridges’ name; and then how having gone out, I found myself quite unable to make my way home.

Cleopatra listened in silence, finger to lip.

When I had done—

"Very disconcerting, my darling: but nothing to worry about. I mean, it's perfectly clear that your brain is as sound as a bell. Your memory's playing up—no doubt about that: but it's your brain that matters, and that is as sound as mine. Your very report proves that. When you found that you couldn't remember which way you'd come, you never panicked—as three out of four people would. Three out of four, Corin. And the fourth would have been hot and bothered. But you never turned a hair. You sat still and worked things out. You reasoned perfectly. And then you took your decision—as good a decision as any wise man could take. And so you had your reward. The moment you saw the sign-post, your memory came to heel. Now if you had got rattled or driven off, hell for leather—behaved like a desperate man, that would have been worrying, because it would have meant that you were not yourself."

I answered her thoughtfully.

"Yes, I see that," I said. "You're right. It can't be the brain, because I could cope with the lapse—as I should have dealt with my plight, if I had been driven out blindfold, and then left to make my way back."

"Exactly."

"Well, that's an immense relief. Still, it is disconcerting, you know."

"Of course it is, my darling. And of course it is the result of your being knocked out. A sort of delayed action. But, when all is said and done, it's very much less inconvenient than breaking a leg; while, as an objection to wedlock, it is of no account. Tell Niobe, of course: but, if she loves you at all, she'll only love you the more."

I laughed.

"Poor girl, she won't have a chance—what with you and me and Florence and Berserk, too."

"It's up to you, my darling."

"Say rather, it's up to her."

"I know," said Cleopatra, "I know what I should say."

On the following morning another valentine came.

It was a most beautiful drawing of Ranger and me. The horse was standing head on, ears pricked, looking straight ahead. And I, with a hand on

his withers, was looking at Niobe, too. And the legend was to the point—*Soldiers Two*.

I do know something of horses and how hard they are to draw. And I would not have believed that, making no sketch on the spot, anyone could have produced so finished and truthful a portrait as Niobe had. I went over it with a glass, but could find no fault. She had noticed every detail—and borne it in mind. That there was nothing the matter with her memory was incontestable.

I wrote her a letter of thanks on the following day. I had meant it to be a short note: but, as I took up my pen, I saw that here was a chance of telling her of the lapses which I had recently had. More than a chance. A most appropriate opportunity.

I laid down my pen and went out to consult the elm.

"You see," I said, "it's like this. On Sunday next I shall ask her to be my wife. I expect you knew that—as like as not, before I knew it myself. Now, between you and me, my memory's playing tricks. Some ten days ago, it played me a very bad one—for twenty minutes I'd no idea where I was. Well, that's not normal—you can't get away from that. And Niobe ought to know of this—this affliction of mine *before* I suggest to her that she should marry me. And not two hours before. It's a matter that she should sleep on—the heart mustn't rule the head. And the plain truth set out in a letter will give her every chance. Besides, she can show it to Berserk—she almost certainly will. So she will have his opinion before she comes down. There may be nothing doing: we both know that: but just in case there is, she's got to be told."

There was a breeze that Sunday, and the elm was nodding agreement with all I said. He could not, I fear, help himself.

I stood back and surveyed the elegant sway of his stature, the tremulous flutter and glance of his delicate mail. No words, no brush could have expressed their beauty. It was, I think, matter for music. Some great composer, perhaps, could have caught the stately measure and given the world his finest harmony.

I returned to my table, refreshed.

Niobe dear,

Thank you very much for another beautiful valentine. Of course I love it—but I am also immensely impressed. I don't know

about me, but it is Ranger to the life. More on Sunday next; but, that you may judge how much I envy your astonishing memory, just listen to this.

(I then reported the lapse which I had had not very far from Cadnam on the Wednesday before she came.)

I have been forgetful before, but never like that. When a man and his wife came to luncheon, I twice forgot their name and had to be told. So, you see, my envy is well-founded. No doubt my knock-out in 1945 is responsible, though it seems a long time to wait.

And a week seems a long time to wait before I shall see you again.

With my love,
Coridon.

On Tuesday morning the chimneys were to be swept.

When Florence had broached the matter—

"It's up to you," I had said.

"Sooner done, sooner over," said Florence. "I'll see Daddy Birling about it. I'm afraid 'e won't do them 'imself—'is arm's that bad: but I 'ear 'e's got a new man. Usual run o' wasters, I s'pose—tenner a week an' every afternoon off. Welfare State! 'Ome o' Rest for Washouts, if you ask me. An' talk about thieves . . . Only time 'alf of 'em work is over-time. 'Ere's 'opin' the new man's a sailor—they do get on with the job."

"It's a simple business for him: all the work falls upon you. Why don't you get Fanny Bowles?"

"No thank you, luv," said Florence. " 'S little enough, as long as 'e's up to time. 'S long as 'e's out of the 'ouse by seven o'clock . . . I could always count on Daddy. 'E used to be at the door at 'alf past five."

"And what time did you get up?"

"Once in a way," said Florence. " 'Sides, this sort o' weather, it does me good."

“It’d do me good,” I said. “But when I tried it—well, you remember that.”

“I’ll say I do,” said Florence. “Fast asleep at your table at six p.m. Head right down on your arms. When I come in an’ find you, it give me a proper turn. Come all over, I did. You can’ ’ave it both ways, luv.”

Monday night was sultry. Since my bathroom leads out of my bedroom, I left open its door and its windows, to add to the air which my bedroom windows let. Thanks to this precaution, I slept very well.

Florence’s voice aroused me at half past seven o’clock.

“Get out of my kitchen, you beast.”

I was out of bed in a flash. Only waiting to put on my slippers, I whipped downstairs. The service door was open, and I passed silently through.

His back to me, seated upon the table, an over-fat young man was combing his greasy hair and smoking a cigarette. Florence, breathing hard, with her eyes aflame, was standing, nursing her wrist, to one side of the kitchen door. She gave no sign that she saw me: instead, with her usual aplomb, she began to ‘give me the dope’.

“Six o’clock was your orders—I fixed it with Daddy, myself. I’d everythin’ ready an’ waitin’ at ’alf past five. You turn up at ’alf pas’ seven, you lazy slug. An’ when I tell you to ’op it, because you’ll take an hour an’ that won’ leave me time to do the rooms before the Major comes down, you ’as the blasted lip to sling me out of the way and shove your way in.”

The youth exhaled.

Then—

“I’m sweeping your —— chimneys. Show me the doin’s, you ——.”

I am very fond of Florence and I am still pretty strong.

I took the tough by the neck of his filthy shirt, jerked him backwards over the table, flung him down on his face on the flags and set my foot between his shoulder-blades.

The assault was over and done, before he had time to think. Then his cigarette claimed his attention. Since this was between his lips when he met the floor, the encounter changed its direction. . . . With a screech of agony, he managed to scoop it away. And then he began to yell.

“Lemme up, you ——. You’re breakin’ my —— neck.”

“Apologize to that lady,” I said.

His answer was an endeavour to raise himself up: but the pressure on his spine rose so sharply that he let himself go with a scream.

“Apologize to that lady.”

“Lemme up, you ——. I tell you, you’re . . .”

I looked at Florence.

“Is that cold water?” I said. Florence picked up a bucket. “Give it to me.”

“Don’ ——”

“Give it to me.”

Meekly enough, Florence put it into my hand.

I slammed the contents into the fellow’s face. Had they been boiling oil, his disapproval could scarcely have been more pronounced.

When he paused for breath—

“Apologize to that lady.”

“I—I beg yer pardon.”

“Madam,” I said.

“For gause sake, you’re breakin’——”

I held the bucket out.

“Fill it again.”

“No, no,” screamed my prisoner. “Madam!”

“Now say it all over again.”

“I beg yer pardon, madam.”

I took my foot from his back.

“Get up and get out,” I said.

Without even looking at me, he got to his feet and bolted out of the house.

I followed swiftly and watched him climb into a van. When he saw me moving towards him, he let in his clutch too fast. . . . With a frantic glance in

my direction, he started his engine again. This time he got into first. He put his foot right down and squirted out of the gateway—slap into Joe Gammon's truck. . . .

No one was hurt: but the farmer's long-suffering trusty was once again rudely immobilized. To judge from his howls of fury, its master took this ill. Stricture, menace, prediction streamed from his lips, while his savage descriptions of the delinquent and his hideous reflections upon the latter's parentage argued that the vials of his wrath were unbelievably capacious.

I haven't laughed so much for a very long time.

With tears hopping down her cheeks, Florence was shaking my arm.

"J—jam for us. Leave it to me, luv. They musn' see you."

I was glad to withdraw to the bathroom and wash my hands. Then I returned to my bed and began to revise the work I had done the day before.

Twenty minutes later Florence arrived with my tea. But before she could open her mouth, both of us heard the thresh of the telephone-bell.

"Daddy, for a dollar," said Florence, and fled from the room.

Several minutes went by before she re-appeared.

As she reached the foot of my bed—

"Well, that's tied up and posted. Daddy's so 'oppin' mad 'e can' talk straight. Wanted to know where 'is man was. . . . Oh dear, oh dear, what a party! When Joe Gammon sees my wris', he begins to take orf 'is coat. 'Relax,' I says, 'the bastard's drunk 'is grool—with the Major's foot on 'is neck. That's why he was rushin' orf.' 'Good for the Major,' says Joe. Then 'e turns on Borstal. 'Take your you-know van back,' 'e roars, 'an' lemme see what's what.' " Florence covered her mouth. "Worse than las' time, it was—the poor ole truck looked like a game. When 'e sees it, Joe couldn' speak. 'E couldn' get out the words. An' then 'e tells Borstal's fortune. . . . 'E gets so fierce that Borstal makes a move to get out o' the van on the opposite side: but, as he moves, 'e must of touched 'is lever an' shoved it in first, for the van jumps forward an' on to the truck again. . . ." Florence broke down there, to laugh till she cried. And I laughed with her—uncontrollably. The picture of the van resalient upon its helpless prey. . . . Florence continued, sobbing, "An' Joe Gammon's between the two and 'as to jump for 'is life. . . . Oh dear, oh dear. . . . An' when Borstal sees what 'e's done, 'e gives one squeal of terror an' legs it down the road, with Joe

Gammon's man be'ind. I don' think Daddy 'll see 'im. 'E'll be afraid to go back."

When order had been restored—

"And how's your wrist?" I said.

" 'S only bruised," said Florence.

It was bruised and scratched—I suppose by the blackguard's nails. Against her will, but under her reluctant direction, I put some ointment upon it and bound it up.

Florence looked down on the ground.

"An' thank you kindly, luv, for bein' so sweet to me. I never felt so proud as when you took my part an' put 'im down on 'is face."

"I've only one Florence," I said. "Who touches her, touches me."

Florence gave me the gentlest smile.

Then—

"Drink up your tea, luv. You don' want to let it get cold."

On the following morning a letter from Niobe came.

My dear silly Coridon,

I showed your letter to Berserk—I knew you wouldn't mind. He was most interested—and very pleased. He used many technical terms, which meant little enough to me and would mean nothing to you: but the gist of it was that this proves that your brain is as clear and as sound as ever it was. Only the faculty of remembering has been impaired; and in your, once critical, case, that is of comparative unimportance. You may, he said, have more lapses, but, since your brain is quite clear, they will be no more than inconvenient. 'Myself?' he said, 'I should find them most instructive. But then I'm a specialist, and I can't expect a layman to take the same point of view. Please ask him to let you know if he has one again.'

My humble duty to the elm, and please, please take me back to the Roman road. I promise to behave this time.

As well it might, that letter comforted me.

Four days later I met the lady herself—with a leaping heart.

It was after luncheon, when Florence had taken our cups, that Niobe turned from a book-case, with a question upon her lips. But when she saw the look on my face, she caught her breath.

I put out my arms.

She came to me quickly and let me hold her close.

"Will you marry me, Niobe darling?"

"Yes, I will, my blessed—with all my heart."

"You've seen all I have to offer. It's not very much."

"It's only—everything."

As I kissed her beautiful mouth, her arms went about my neck.

Presently—

"And Florence?" I said.

"Let me tell her alone, my darling. I hope and believe she'll rejoice: but I'm sure she'll cry."

"Very good," said I, and kissed her. "And while you're telling her, I'll announce the fact to the elm."

"Officially, my darling. He's known for nearly a year."

When she had left for the kitchen, I stepped out on to the lawn. . . .

I surveyed my magnificent gossip, my glorious counsellor.

For seven years he had been my confidant, had shared my joys and my troubles, had never failed to lift up my ready heart.

I found myself wondering why I had turned to him . . . how he had come to mean so much to me. . . .

As I marked well his perfection, the answer came into my head.

‘Because your elm is alive—a living being, as you are; subject, as you are, to the laws of Nature; obeying the seasons, as you do; welcoming Spring and roaring his protests against the winter winds. Salisbury Cathedral is a nonsuch: but it is not alive. It is an exquisite document. But your elm is a personage. He lives and moves and has his being—has had his splendid being for two hundred and fifty years. So long a lease of life must appeal to any man: to you, it presents a glorious nosegay of tradition—a nosegay made up of blossoms that cannot fade, each precious one of which *your elm has seen plucked*. . . .’

I looked up at him and smiled.

“You never fail me,” I said. “Fancy asking your king what it is about him you like. Never mind. I know you’ll forgive me. And Niobe will do better. Very soon she’s coming for good. I’m sure you’ll be happy to have her. For she’s not only lovely to look at: she’s wise and charming—most fit to be sworn of your Council and to adorn your Court.”

Niobe was coming towards me. . . .

“Darling, please will you take me back to the Roman road?”

“Of course. D’you want to go now?”

Niobe nodded. Then she took my arm and together we strolled to the house. Once within the study, I held her against my heart and she took my head in her hands.

“My darling,” she said, “it’s awful to be old-fashioned.”

“I know,” I said. “But that is how we were brought up. How soon can we be married?”

“I’ll have to think that one out. Berserk’s been good to me, and I mustn’t let him down.”

“No, indeed. What about your holiday?”

“I don’t know yet. But to-day I’d like to go back by the six forty-five.”

“So you shall, my beauty. And now for the Roman road. I’ll have the Vane at the gate in five minutes’ time.”

The Roman road . . . tea . . . Moorhen . . .

As we sat in the Vane, waiting—

“I’ll come up for a night, my sweet, if you’ll dine with me.”

"Don't, my darling. I'd rather think of you here. I'll be down next Sunday, of course—by an earlier train."

"Oh dear. Never mind. Can I ring you up, my love?"

"Let me do the ringing, darling. It's better so. It'll be between one and two."

"Time to go—and I can't kiss your beautiful mouth."

"Yes you can. We'll both get out of the car and both put our heads in to look for something we've dropped."

"I think I'm going to marry a beautiful child."

"I know I'm going to marry the very finest fellow I ever saw."

For the first time that I can remember, the cottage seemed empty and silent when I got back.

On my table was lying a note.

Sir,

I can't ever tell you how thankful and happy I am. I know if I tried I'd break down. Comes into my kitchen and puts out her hands for mine with the sweetest smile. 'Florence,' she says, 'I'm going to marry our darling. You'll have to help me to make him the wife he should have.' It's what I've prayed for for years and never dreamed we'd get. Oh dear, what a lovely show. God bless our home.

Yours respectfully,
Florence.

I visited London on Wednesday. I wanted to see Cleopatra and I wanted to buy a ring. And Christie's were selling 'fine jewels' that afternoon. By no means well off, I have my own ideas on the purchase of jewellery.

In the morning I visited Christie's.

After inspecting the cases, I asked if one of the partners could spare me a minute or two. Almost at once one of the auctioneers was by my side.

“And how can I help you?” he said.

“I like the look of that ring—lot 204. Would you be kind enough to tell me how much you think it will fetch?”

The other lifted the glass and took the ring from its place.

“They’re three very nice stones,” he said. “I ought to be able to sell it for —say three hundred and forty. I may be out, you know. One never can tell.”

“I’m afraid that’s rather more than I want to go to,” I said regretfully.

He nodded.

“Diamonds are fetching pretty good prices to-day. You fancy a half-hoop ring?”

“I do, rather,” I said.

“So do I. It’s classical.” He put the ring back. “I think there’s another here.” His eye roved over the cases. “Yes. Here we are.” He lifted another lid and abstracted another ring. “Now these stones are just as fine: but, as you see, they’re smaller. And so it won’t make so much.”

“It is very nice,” I said. And so it was.

“Very nice,” said the partner. He turned it about. “In size and quality, the stones are beautifully matched. I should say that would make two hundred: it may make a little less. An old-fashioned setting, of course.”

“I should have it reset,” I said.

“Quite so. And properly set, those stones will look as well again.” His eyes roved to and fro. “I don’t think there’s anything else in the way of a nice half-hoop.”

“I think,” I said, “I must do what I can about this.”

The partner nodded.

“I don’t think you’ll go far wrong if you get it for two hundred pounds. Lot 112. Would you like us to bid for you?”

“If you’d be so good. Two hundred.”

I followed him to an office and gave him my name and my Club.

“Will you be selling,” I said, “this afternoon?”

“I shall, Major Gore.”

“What time will it come up?”

“Between three and half past, I hope.”

“I’m only up for the day. If I should get it, I’d like to take it to a jeweller this afternoon. I’ll give you a cheque, of course.”

“That’s quite all right. Look in at a quarter to four and have a word with my clerk.”

“Thank you very much. You’ve been very kind.”

“Not at all. A pleasure.”

Luncheon in Curzon Street was a merry meal.

Cleopatra was radiant, whole-heartedly rejoicing with me and full of plans and ideas.

“October, I feel. That should be all right for Berserk.”

“A very quiet wedding, my sweet.”

“Oh, yes. Almost private, darling. We can’t have a fuss—the last thing Niobe wants. The engagement announced in September. I think you should go abroad. See how Niobe feels—she’s terribly sane. And the cottage must be got ready. Can you put in a second bathroom? And what of her holiday? I’ll have to find somewhere near you where she can stay. She’s coming to dine on Friday—we’ll have a go at it then. We tried to get George Medallion; but he’s out of Town.”

“She’s more than sane,” I said. “Already she’s thinking for me. I’d told her of Pompey, of course. When I spoke to her yesterday, she suggested that he should come down to stay the week-end.”

“I am so glad,” said my sister. “He’ll love her, of course: and he can drive her back.”

I sighed.

“Your two brains leave mine standing. By Friday night, all will be cut and dried. And I’m more than content, my sweet. And now just look at this.”

I gave her Florence’s note.

My sister read it through. Then she handed it back in silence, and whipped a tear from her cheek.

“I know,” I said. I picked up her hand and kissed it, and her fingers closed upon mine. “It makes me feel very humble. It’s one of those things that has a whiff of spikenard about it, ‘very precious’.”

The pressure on my fingers increased. Then—

"I think," said Cleopatra, "I think that you'd have got on with Hubert van Eyck."

When I told her about the ring, she cried out with delight.

"Oh, I do hope you get it, darling. May I come, too? And who will you take it to? Larkspurs'?"

"I think they'd be best. I take it George Millet's still there."

"I should think he was. He's the senior partner now. What about size?"

"I thought perhaps he'd lend me a stick."

Cleopatra shook her head.

"We'll ask him to send a man to Wimpole Street."

"There you are again. What a lovely idea!"

"And how many swains would have thought of going to Christie's? When George values that ring for insurance, he'll put it at twice what you paid." My sister glanced at her watch. "I've ordered the car for three. I've got to go somewhere first, and I'd like you to come."

Sharp at three o'clock we entered the car. Seven minutes later we came to Wimpole Street.

Cleopatra's expression was that of a shamefaced nun.

"Angels dance in," I said, smiling, "where fools are afraid to tread."

A cockney answered me.

" 'T's orl right, 'Erb. Rung 'er up before lunching. She says she'll slip aht fer two minutes, soon as she ken. I'm not going in, Jenkins. Just tell them to tell Miss Coke that Mrs. Ruthven is here."

"Very good, madam."

Five minutes later Niobe was sitting between us. We each had one of her hands.

"A nice lover, you've got," said Cleo. "He'd written Wimpole Street off."

"I'm a soldier," I said. "I have a respect for parade."

"So've I," said Niobe. "That's why Cleo's so very good for us both. And why are you up, my darling?"

"You'll know to-morrow, I hope."

"Oh, you brute," said Cleo. "He's come up to get you a ring."

Niobe held my hand tight.

"Oh, Corin, I love you so."

"My one contribution, my darling. You and Cleo are going to do everything else. The decisions will be taken on Friday."

"Submitted to you on Sunday and laid before the elm on the following day. Your women know their place. And now I must fly. Cleo, you are a darling. It's been lovely to see you both."

"Kiss her quickly," said Cleo. "The coast is clear."

I kissed her boldly enough, white coat and all.

"A record for Wimpole Street."

And then she was gone.

At twenty minutes to four Cleopatra and I stole into Christie's Great Rooms.

The quiet, incisive voice of the auctioneer was ruling the famous silence, quick with all manner of emotions, absolute as that of the tomb.

Four hundred and sixty . . . five hundred. Five hundred pounds. And twenty . . . thirty . . . fifty. Six hundred. Six hundred pounds. Six hundred pounds . . .

The hammer fell, and the rustle of relaxation seemed almost uproarious.

I left Cleopatra standing and moved very quietly round.

The auctioneer saw me and smiled—and leaned down to speak to his clerk.

Then—

Lot one hundred and twenty . . .

The clerk was whispering.

"Major Gore? Here you are, sir." He gave me the ring and a slip. "Just take it round to the office—one hundred and ninety pounds."

"Thank you very much."

Two hundred and fifty . . . three hundred . . . three hundred and fifty . . . Five hundred, thank you. And fifty . . .

Whilst I was writing the cheque, my sister was regarding the ring.

"They're beautiful stones, my darling. I can't think what ——'s would have asked you—reset, of course."

From Christie's we drove to Larkspurs'.

George Millet received us in state, in his private room.

"I've done it on you," I said, producing the ring. "And now I'd like it reset."

"Insult to injury," said George. "Happily, not everyone is as wise as you." Carefully, he inspected my purchase. "Yes, they deserve a nice setting. They'll look about twice as well. To you, in platinum, not more than thirty pounds."

"Good enough, George, and thank you very much."

"The lady," said Cleo, "is tied to Wimpole Street. Could you possibly send a man round to get the size?"

"Of course," said George. I gave Niobe's name and address, and he wrote them down. "I'll ring her up first and ask what would be a good time."

"You're very kind. And later on, please, George, a platinum wedding-ring."

"Quite plain?"

"Quite plain."

"Wait a moment." He rose, stepped to a safe and opened a drawer. Then he came back. "Like this?"

I looked at Cleopatra.

"I think she should see it, darling. I'm sure she'll say yes."

"Of course," said George. "I'll send it round with the stick, for her to approve."

"You're very good," I said. "Will you keep the wedding-ring and send the other to me, as soon as it's done?"

"I will. Would you like us to value for insurance?"

"If you please."

We chatted for five or six minutes before we left. . . .

Entering the cottage that evening, I felt I had had a good day.

Pompey arrived on Saturday, soon after twelve o'clock.

When Florence had brought us some beer, I told him my news.

"To-morrow, Pompey," I said, "you'll meet my future wife."

Pompey looked at me.

Then—

"She must be a winner," he said.

I laughed.

"You shall judge for yourself."

"O.K. by Florence?"

"Very much so," I said.

"She must be a winner," said Pompey.

"She lives in London," I said. "Coming down by train. Will you drive her back?"

"I'll drive a winner," said Pompey, "wherever she wishes to go. I do hope she's rich."

I shook my head.

Pompey sighed.

"Ah, well," he said. "You couldn't live on a wife. Still, I do hope she's got something."

"A little," I said. "We'll have to take a chance."

Pompey fingered his chin.

"I'm your lawyer," said Pompey. "As such, I have the licence which used to belong to the fool. I often think it's a pity that the Court Jester died out. He could be valuable. But that's by the way. As your lawyer, I speak my mind. A wife can prove—expensive. And I don't want to see you embarrassed. A close-up of the sordid side would do you no good at all."

"She'd hate it, too, Pompey."

"It's not a question, my boy, of likes and dislikes. If you met the sordid side, the quality of your work would disappear. That's a serious statement to make, but I'll try and prove what I say.

"Take the case of a race-horse. A race-horse isn't pampered, but he is comforted. He has his own box, his own lad, special rations and the rest. If he didn't have all that attention, he couldn't do his stuff. Now you are just like a race-horse—highly sensitive, willing, capable of great things. Though I don't suppose you know it, you have been hailed as the first novelist of the renaissance."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"Well, you have. But if you were to run into trouble—well, you wouldn't run any more races. You've got to have special treatment, to do your special stuff."

"I don't think you need worry," I said. "Niobe will be an investment from that point of view. She's very much wiser than I am and very practical. And here's another thing." I got to my feet, opened a drawer of my table and gave him the little drawing entitled *Soldiers Two*. "What do you think of that?"

Pompey considered the drawing. At last he looked up.

"But this is exquisite, Corin."

"Her stuff's never been on the market. When we are married, she'll give her talent rein."

Pompey returned to the drawing.

"I'm not worried now," he said. "Between you, the sordid side can be counted out." The door of the study was opened. "And here's Florence. Florence, the Major informs me that he is to take a wife."

Florence took a deep breath.

Then—

"I'm sayin' nothin', Mr. Pompey. I want you to see 'er first."

"Have a heart," said Pompey. "I don't even know what she looks like."

"She's got it all," said Florence. "Got every you-know thing. Looks, manners, smile. Born for the Major, she was. I can' 'ardly wait to 'ave the two of them 'ere. Talk about Adam an' Eve. An' now I've said more than I

meant. Seein's believin', Mr. Pompey. You wait till to-morrow mornin'. Watch 'er come in at the gate an' go up to the elm."

"I'm all agog," said Pompey. "There aren't so many winners in the paddocks to-day."

"And are you right?" said Florence. "Publicity don' make nymphs. 'The beautiful Lady Gawdelpus'—bandy legs and a lip like a rubber tube. But Miss Niobe's class."

Before we had finished laughing, Florence was gone.

Some twenty-two hours later Niobe entered the garden and turned to the elm.

I saw Pompey standing in the study, with his hand on the jamb of the doorway the windows kept.

Niobe dropped her curtsey. Then she stood still, looking up, with her little feet together and her small hands behind her back. For a moment she spoke very low: then she smiled up at the trembling treasury of plumage and turned away.

She saw Pompey leaving the study and glanced at me.

"Himself," I said.

Niobe moved to meet him.

"I know you're Mr. Colbourne."

Pompey bowed over her hand.

" 'Behold, the half was not told me,' " was all he said.

Niobe's head went down.

"This from his oldest friend."

"Yes."

"You think I'll do?"

"Much more than that. I can see neither of you married to anyone else."

Niobe turned to me.

"What do I say, Corin?"

"That three will always be company, when he can spare the time."

It was after a joyous luncheon that Pompey referred to her beautiful draughtsmanship.

"Corin tells me that you will draw while he writes."

"Yes."

"Any special subject in mind?"

"I've always wanted to illustrate Shakespeare's Songs."

"Very nice indeed." Pompey hesitated. "In these drab days I can't see them collected at once. That will come later—I've no doubt at all about that. But I'd like to see them appearing one by one."

"So," sighed Niobe, "should I. But what publication dare use such things to-day?"

"I'm sure it can be arranged. When you've done six, remember to let me know."

"But, Mr. Colbourne——"

"Pompey."

"But, Pompey, you're not an agent."

"In special cases, Niobe, a solicitor's very much better. This is a special case."

"You're terribly good."

"No, I'm not. I shall render a bill of costs."

"I'll bet you don't charge commission."

"No. That's not my way. And now, farewell to business. Looking upon you two, I want to shout."

The two of them stayed to dinner and left about nine o'clock.

Four days later Niobe's ring was delivered by registered post.

It really looked very well. When I read the 'replacement value', I felt that there must be some catch—three hundred and eighty-five pounds.

Florence, summoned to regard it, was overcome.

“Oh, what a beaut! Oh dear, what a lovely thing! Look at them glorious lights. Three true-blue sparklers, you’ve got ’er, an’ white as white. An’ platnum an’ all. Gawd, what a lovely treasure! An’ class. ’S a great lady’s ring. I can ’ardly wait till Sunday, to see it on ’er little ’and. Lock it up in the wall-safe, luv; you don’ want it stole.”

(Perhaps I should have said that my home had been what was known as ‘a week-end cottage’, before the war. I had been the owner’s best man and had stayed there two or three times, as a privileged guest. And when poor Tony was killed, three months before I was knocked out, his widow had asked me to buy it, and I had borrowed the money to do as she said.)

When I gave the ring to Niobe, I told her I had bought it at Christie’s and had the stones reset.

“There was another,” I concluded, “which I should have liked you to have: but the stones were rather bigger and so, they told me, it would have fetched much more.”

Niobe turned her head and looked up into my eyes.

“What a mercy you couldn’t afford it, you very honest man. If you had bought it, my blessed, I couldn’t have worn it as an engagement ring. You see, my darling, these are the largest stones that I, at my age, can possibly wear all the time. One day, when we’re terribly rich, you shall give me a solitaire: and the closer it comes to Cleo’s, the better I shall be pleased: but she only wore hers at Ascot—I’ve never seen it since.”

So all was very well.

And then, just three days later, I had another lapse.

On that handsome Wednesday morning a letter arrived from a motion-picture firm which bears a well-known name. It said, in other words, that the firm in question would very much like to acquire the motion-picture rights of one of my books.

With that letter, I dealt at once.

In my reply I said that I was sending their letter to Colbourne, Winter and Colbourne, of 17 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and that Mr. Pompey Colbourne would answer their letter in detail on my behalf.

I was just going to write to Pompey when it came to me with a shock that he was as yet unaware that I was proposing to marry Miss Niobe Coke. And Pompey was my best friend.

Aghast at my remissness, I set out the shining truth, consigning to a postscript the fact that I was enclosing an offer to purchase some valuable rights.

It then occurred to me that what would be best of all was that Pompey should come down and stay the next week-end; for so he would meet my darling and see for himself how excelling that lady was.

I decided to put this to Niobe, when she rang up, as she would, in her luncheon-hour. (She only rang up on Wednesdays, unless there was some special matter she or I wished to discuss.) So I laid my letter aside and took up my work.

As I was finishing luncheon, the telephone went. It was Niobe, sure enough.

After a moment or two, I told her what I proposed.

"I want you to meet him so much. He's the very best of good fellows, and it's right that you should be friends."

There was a little silence.

"Are you there, Niobe," I said.

"Yes, yes, Corin. I . . ."

"Would you rather wait a little? It only occurred to me that——"

"Corin dear, I think it's a splendid idea. And I'll simply love to meet him."

"I was sure you would. He may not be free next Sunday: but, if he can come, he'll make an excellent third."

After a little more talk, we said goodbye and I put my receiver back.

Then I returned to the table and finished my cheese.

When Florence appeared with my coffee, I told her of my proposal to ask Pompey down.

"Will next week-end be all right?"

Florence hesitated—rather as Niobe had. As she poured out my coffee, I saw that her hand was unsteady—a most unusual thing.

"What is it, Florence?" I said.

" 'S nothin', luv. You—you took me a bit by surprise. I—I ought to 'ave thought of Mr. Pompey."

"I don't see why. I should have, of course. He should have come down before."

"I—should 'ave reminded you."

"I don't agree, and I feel ashamed of myself. However . . . Will Saturday be all right? I've told Miss Niobe, and she thinks it's a good idea."

Florence swallowed.

Then—

"Yes," she said. "In course it'll be all right. Do me good to see Mr. Pompey again."

And then she was gone.

I picked up the paper, as usual—only to lay it down.

Something was out of joint. Florence had been upset. She had striven to cover it up; but Florence had been upset by what I had said. And Niobe had hesitated. I tried my best to think why. Where had I put a foot wrong? To ask Pompey down was natural—I ought to have done it before. There was nothing unseemly about it. When I came to be married, Pompey would be my best man, as a matter of course. Yet Niobe had faltered and Florence had been upset. . . .

I drank up my coffee and went out to stroll on the lawn. At the foot of the elm I paused, to look up at the hanging gardens I knew so well. The air was sultry and they were very still. Perhaps my old friend was dozing. When I was old, I should probably doze about now.

When I re-entered the study, my coffee-cup was gone.

I took my seat at my table, troubled in mind. There was my letter to Pompey, waiting to receive my suggestion that he should come to Elm Cottage on Saturday next. . . .

And then it occurred to me that in his last letter to me he had asked me to let him know something when next I wrote. Something about insurance. . . . I was really getting very forgetful.

I opened the drawer into which I put unanswered letters. There lay Pompey's—the first to meet my eye.

Monday.

My dear Corin,

Niobe will have told you that I saw her into her residence, safe and sound. What a wonderful creature she is! I can never tell you . . .

But that was more than enough to bring my memory back.

The faculty came bounding, exuberant, leaving no stone unturned to make amends. It made me think of a dog that has played truant, frolicking about its master and leaping to lick his face.

Poor Niobe. Poor Florence. I had startled them both—badly. Without the slightest warning, I had presented them with a cup of gall and wormwood, commended the same and begged them to drink with me. Little wonder that they had boggled at accepting the nauseous draught. Talk about looking up, to see a lion in the way. . . .

At once I went to find Florence; but she had gone out. So I tore up my letter to Pompey and composed a sensible note. Then I wrote to Niobe.

3.15 p.m., Wednesday.

My sweet,

I am so very sorry. I'm all right now. (I picked up a letter from Pompey in which he said he had seen you safely home.) I'm afraid I jolted you badly; but you covered up awfully well. At least I don't have to write and report this lapse. But I hope I don't get another, involving you: if I like to embarrass myself, that's my affair; but to upset you and Florence. . . . Poor Florence, she did her best, but I saw that something was wrong: I couldn't think what it was, and the elm didn't seem to know. I expect she thinks I've had it. She's out now and I'm waiting for her to come in, to make her well. Tell Berserk of course, my darling.

Oh, my love, d'you think I'm fit to be a husband? Would you like to wait a little? I think my heart would break, if I set a hunted look in your beautiful eyes.

Corin.

I had left the service door open and so I heard Florence come in.

I called her at once.

As she entered the study, I met her and took her hand.

“I’m sorry, Florence,” I said, “I’m afraid I shook you up. I ought to have told you before that two or three times lately my memory’s played me up. Dr. Berserk knows and he seems as pleased as Punch. He says it’s a healthy sign.”

Florence’s face was a study, and I began to laugh.

At the third attempt—

“I’m glad someone’s pleased,” said Florence. “You didn’ ’alf give me a turn. An’ when you said you’d tole Miss Niobe, I could of screamed, I could.” Here, to my distress, she fell on her knees and clasped my hand in both hers. “Oh, luv, you’re not ’avin’ me on? The doctor does say it’s O.K.?”

“Yes, Florence dear—I’d never lie to you. He says that these lapses prove that my brain is as sound as a bell. And what does my memory matter?”

“Not a you-know scrap,” cried Florence, with tears welling out of her eyes. “We’ll give you ours, Miss Niobe and I. And—— Oh, sweetie-pie, I’m so thankful.”

She broke down there and wept. And I sat on the floor beside her and patted her honest shoulder and told her about the occasion on which I had wholly forgotten the way I had come.

August was seven days old, and Niobe, curled on the sofa, was making a full report.

“In this last week, my darling, a lot of our linen has been ironed.”

“My love,” I said, “I deplore that metaphor. It suggests that the linen has been washed. And the fact that it has been washed suggests that it was not clean.”

“Not at all,” said Niobe, laughing. “You see our linen is not only fine, but new. And you always wash new linen, to take the dressing out.”

“Oh, very quick,” I said. “All the same, let’s call it silk. The figurative use of ‘linen’ is inevitably suggestive.”

“As you will, my lord. A lot of our silk has been ironed.”

"My mistake," I said. "That suggests underwear. We'd better go back to linen. Anyway, I've got it and I won't interrupt any more."

Niobe continued, smiling.

"Things are working out very well. Berserk is being most considerate. I offered to forgo my holiday, if I could leave for good on October the first. Of that, he wouldn't hear. I must have my fortnight, beginning on Sunday next. (I'll come back to that in a minute. I want to finish with Berserk, before I go on.) On the twenty-ninth of August, another girl is coming to work with me. I haven't seen her yet, but Berserk thinks she may do. Forty-eight hours will show me whether she's any good. If she is, I shall teach her to take my place. And after a month, she'll be as good as me. So I'm keeping my fingers crossed. From what Berserk says, she might take over my flat—which would be very convenient from my point of view.

"My fortnight's holiday, then, will start at the end of this week: and I don't have to tell you that Cleo's done the trick. No agents for Cleo—she just rings up the Staff College and asks some V.I.P. to 'help her out'. He shoves everything on one side and does it at once. Priority, Operation Cleopatra. Result, I'm to be a grass-widow's only paying guest. Very attractive, quite young, with a little boy. You mustn't get off with her. A little cottage, quite close to Camberley."

I lay back and closed my eyes.

"Half an hour's run. My darling, we'll 'have the world by the tail', as the troubadour says. When we break the glad news, Florence will burst into song. What did Berserk say to my latest?"

Niobe smiled.

"You ought to have gone to the Bar. But I've nothing to hide. His words were, 'As I expected. For me, it's excellent news. I'm not going to say any more, but I beg that you'll keep me informed'."

"He expects me to have some more lapses."

"He didn't say so, darling; but I think that was in his mind."

I sighed.

"Oh, well. . . . Let us hope that my failing confines its pleasantry to me. Shall we see if I have forgotten the way to the Roman road?"

"Yes, please."

“Poor child, what else can you say? One of your duties as a wife will be to develop my instinct of entertainment. One of my ancestors must have been a monk.”

“My sweet, you appal me,” laughed Niobe.

“It’s quite all right,” I said. “Why he entered the monastery is uncertain; but it was either to atone for his—er—indiscretion, or to avoid the vengeance of the husband he had betrayed. I need hardly add that it was the lady’s fault. Never mind. I’ll do better next week. I’ll drive you all over the place. We’ll remember Iseult at Tintagel—she was a forbear of yours, execrate Monmouth at Wells, sigh for Rupert’s folly at Edgehill and—*soyons communs*—dance on the pier at Brighton until we’re thrown out.”

Niobe rose, put her arms round my neck and laid her fair cheek against mine.

“And all the time,” she said, “our hearts will be here at Elm Cottage, with the elm and the lawn and the little library and Florence’s lively presence to garnish our home.”

I could think of only one answer to such a saying as that.

(Wishes never were horses—or horse-power, for the matter of that. A study of the map that evening ruled Tintagel and Wells out of our visiting list. When I had seen them last, it had been in a bigger car. And Brighton seemed hardly to warrant so lengthy a run.)

Two days had gone by, and Florence stood before me, wrinkling her nose.

“Go on. Let’s have it,” I said.

“It’s Joe Gammon,” she said. “ ’E wants to talk to you. ’E won’t say what it’s about. ‘A private matter’, ’e says, ‘between man an’ man’.”

My heart sank. Joe Gammon owned the meadow, which marched with my land to the East.

“Well, that’s all right, Florence. I’ve a great respect for Joe Gammon. His command of vituperation warms my heart. What about noon to-morrow? We can have it out over some beer.”

“Not in one of my silver tankards.”

"In two of your silver tankards. Why shouldn't Joe Gammon have a show?"

Florence raised her eyes to heaven. As she was turning to go, the telephone went.

Florence picked up the receiver.

"Yes. . . . Oh, good morning, madam. Yes, this is Florence. It's—— Get off the line, please. You're interruptin' a call. Are you there, madam? I was jus'— Will you get off the line? . . . No, it isn': nor Clapham Junction, neither. Sorry, madam. I was jus' goin' to— Will you get off of my line, you loose-lipped slob. What you want is the Labour Exchange. They're short o' fellow-travellers, I happen to know. . . . Ah, I thought that'd fix the bastard. . . . I beg your pardon, madam. Are you still there?" Florence gave me the receiver. Shriek upon shriek of laughter came to my ears. As she took the receiver back, "Well, I 'ad to do somethin', madam. . . . Yes, indeed I would. Would Corner's suit you? I've somethin' I want from 'im, an' 'e'll send it up. . . . Jus' what I wanted, madam—'ll do us a treat. . . . Very well, thank you, madam: but workin' more than I—— Oh my Gawd, you're back. They thrown you out already? 'Ad your number, I s'pose. . . . What? Shoved your money in the slot, 'ave you? Well, that's where you made your mistake. You shouldn't of put it in the slot—you should of put it where Boris kept 'is ties. . . ." A 'chunk' of lamentable violence was clearly audible: so were the anonymous lady's wails of mirth. As these subsided, "Are you still there, madam? Well, reelly I can' remember where we were. Oh, I know. I was jus' sayin' that the Major was workin' too hard. But then that's 'is way. An' you an' the Captain? . . . Good. Well, thank you again, madam. Goodbye."

Florence replaced the receiver and turned to me.

"I like Mrs. Weighbridge," she said.

As I wiped my eyes—

"I have a feeling," I said, "that Mrs. Weighbridge likes you."

"She always speaks very sweet. Got a nice duck for us. Jus' what I want for Sunday."

"Do we deal with them?" I said.

" 'Ave for six weeks now. Lovely eggs an' chickens—they do us proud. So they did ought to. You put them on the map. But not everyone's nice an' grateful."

“They’re a very nice pair,” I said. “You know, I’ve been thinking, Florence, that we’ll have to announce our engagement, Miss Niobe and I.”

“That’s ’ow I feel,” said Florence. “ ’S boun’ to be talk nex’ week, when she’s ’ere all the time.”

“Has the village got it?” I said.

Florence shrugged her shoulders.

“Butcher looked at me rather ole-fashioned the other day.”

“Well, there you are. This hush-hush business must stop. But I’m not going to trot her out. Lady Curtice and Mr. Paley to luncheon one day next week.”

“An’ ’er at the ’ead of the table. That’d be lovely, luv.”

“When she rings up to-morrow,” I said.

Florence’s announcement of Joe Gammon left nothing to be desired.

“Mr. Gammon to see you, sir.”

“Morning, Joe,” I said, rising. “You sit on the sofa: I’m going to sit here. Beer for two, please, Florence.”

“Very good, sir.”

Joe sat upon the edge of the sofa, holding his hat. With a little encouragement, he accepted a cigarette.

Till the beer had been brought, we talked of hay and of thatching to-day and yesterday.

With two tankards upon a salver, Florence re-entered the room. As she set one down by Joe Gammon, the farmer looked at the tankard and then at her face.

“Thank you kindly, Mrs. Davey,” he said.

With a charming smile, Florence inclined her head.

When she had given me the other, she left the room.

“Here’s your best, Joe,” I said. “And what can I do for you?”

The farmer toasted me and took a deep draught. Then his brows drew into a frown.

“Wife wants to be cremated,” he said. “Bin got ’old of, she ’as, sir. Makin’ me life a burden, tryin’ to make me promise I’ll see it done.”

“Mrs. Gammon’s not thinking of leaving us?”

“Strong as a gray mule, sir. I reckon she’ll see me out. It’s just in case.”

“I see,” I said. “And you don’t like the idea?”

“Can’t abide it,” said Joe. “An’ when it’s done, I’m to keep ’er in the parlour.”

“What, the ashes?” I said.

“That’s right. In an urn on the piano, sir. We got a plant there now.”

“Good God, no,” I said. “You can’t consent to that.”

“That’s what I say, sir. Supposin’ it was knock over. There she’d be, all spread all over the floor. Fancy sweepin’ up Mary Anne.”

By a superhuman effort I preserved my gravity.

“Shocking,” I said. “You’ll have to stick out on that. And now let’s go back. Why don’t you fancy cremation?”

“It isn’t proper, sir. The Gammons ’as always been buried—sunk in six foot of earth. ‘Dust to dust’ is what the prayer-book says. An’ I don’ ’old with burnin’—that’s what the niggers do.”

“I feel as you do, Joe.”

“Ah, I said you would, sir. I said——”

“Not so fast. I’d very much like to lie in Halliard’s churchyard. But I have no grave there. Have you?”

The farmer shook his head.

“We never ’ad no vault, like the ole squire did. Farm ’an’s an’ farmers we was. But eight of us lies in that yard.”

“I know. I’ve seen the head-stones. But you and I shan’t, Joe; for there isn’t any more room. And I don’t like the cemetery much.”

“ ’Tisn’t the same, sir,” said Joe. “I’ll give you that.”

“I’d hate to lie there,” I said. “It’s a pleasure to see the churchyard: but the cemetery gives me a pain.”

“No timber,” said the farmer. “Wind-swep’. The grass an’ the shrubs they’ve planted don’t seem to thrive.”

“That’s why I’ve chosen cremation.”

Joe Gammon started and stared.

“You’re goin’ to be cremated?”

I nodded.

“I’ve put it in my Will. I can’t face the cemetery, Joe. I thought of saying I wished to be buried at sea. But that’d be such a business. They’d have to charter a lugger, and if it was rough, they’d probably all be sick.”

Joe began to shake with laughter.

“Nice sort o’ funeral, I don’t think.”

“Exactly. And so I’ve chosen cremation. I’ve seen it done, and they do it awfully well.”

“I don’ like the burnin’, sir.”

I rose, stepped to a book-case and took down The Book of Common Prayer.

For a moment I turned the pages.

Then—

“Listen, Joe,” I said. “ ‘Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’.”

“Never,” said Joe.

“That’s out of The Burial Service. So the holy men who composed it must have had burning in mind. It’s a very ancient practice, you know.”

“ ‘Ashes to ashes’,” said Joe. “Fancy that bein’ in the prayer-book. You can’ get away from that. An’ you’re goin’ to be cremated.”

“I am, indeed.”

There was a little silence.

Then—

“Joe, I suggest you should meet your wife half-way. Say, if she wants to be cremated, you’ll see it’s done—on condition that her ashes are left in the building at, say, Golders Green, in which most urns are housed. It’s a lovely place, and every urn has its own memorial tablet—just as a grave has its head-stone. You can put on it what you like. I should think that, if you do that, she’ll give up the shocking idea of saddling you with the urn.”

“She might,” said Joe.

"She must," I said. "And here's an idea. When the harvest's in, take her up to London and out to Golders Green. It's a lovely place, and the keepers 'll show you round. And when she sees the columbarium—that's what they call the place where the urns are kept—I'm sure she'll like it better than the piano. I mean, it's dignified."

"Seein's believin'," said the farmer. "An' I think I might make it, once the 'arvest's in. Can I tell 'er that's where you're going?"

"Indeed, you can."

Joe Gammon nodded. Then he drank up his beer and got to his feet.

"Well, thank you kindly, sir. You done me a power of good."

"Let's hope it comes off," I said, and put out my hand.

" 'Ashes to ashes'. Fancy that bein' in the prayer-book. Does make it better, you know."

"That's how I see it," I said. "Let me know how you get on."

"I will that, sir." He shook my hand very hard. " 'Snice to 'ave you for a neighbour. I couldn' 'ave took it to the parson, an' there's nobody else."

"Goodbye, Joe," I said, smiling.

Then I handed him over to Florence, and off he went.

(In the last week of September the farmer sent me a note.

Sir,

Just to let you know that me and the wife has been to G. G. Done the trick all right. She's like a dog with two tails. Can't talk about anything else. I quite liked it myself. Think I shall make her promise that I shall be done that way. Be together then. Good job I came to you.

Yours respectfully,
J. Gammon.

So that was all right.)

At half past ten on Sunday, the Vane stole into the drive of a good-looking bungalow, three miles from Camberley.

Two girls came running to greet me: one was Niobe; the other, the pretty young wife of a gunner who was gone on a mission to the United States. I was haled within and made much of. The son of the house, not quite eighteen months old, identified me as his father the moment he saw my face. When the shrieks of delight had subsided—

"As my betrothed," said Niobe, "what have you to say?"

I bowed to my hostess. Then—

"I ask, with confidence, for the discretion of the Court."

"Sheridan calling," said Niobe.

"Miss Linley should know."

Here some neighbour's 'wireless' burst into a jig, so we danced a *pas de trois* and I kissed them both.

After that, I was shown the house and my hostess was bidden to Halliard on Sunday next.

As the Vane slipped out of the by-road—

"I like showing you off," said Niobe, taking my arm. "I want you to meet Uncle George. But he's in Scotland now."

"I shall show you off on Thursday. I'm looking forward to that."

On Thursday Lady Curtice and Paley were coming to lunch.

"So'm I," said Niobe. "They sound such a very nice pair. What I like about Halliard is that people leave you alone."

"I think that's due to Florence. When you take up residence, they may show less restraint."

"I don't think they will. Curiosity doesn't last long."

"There are other emotions, my darling."

"Thank you, my blessed. But the couple cannot compare with that most desirable convenience, so crudely styled 'an odd man'."

"Ordinarily, no. But I can't help feeling that the opportunity of entertaining an angel well aware will prove an even stronger attraction. Never mind. In two several notes, each addressed to a prominent personality of 'Our Village', I have declared our betrothal. When do we commit this truth to the mercy of the public prints?"

“My dear lord,” said Niobe, “I suggest the last week of September. In that way, before your countless admirers have time to marshal their forces, the marriage will have taken place.”

“So be it,” said I. “But assuming my work has its public, why should the latter object?”

“They won’t exactly object, but, as worshippers at your shrine, they will naturally wish to be satisfied of—— Just look at that mammoth! The powder-closet houses the concert-grand.”

The comparison was just. The char-à-banc was gigantic. Efforts were being made to change its proportionally gigantic off-fore wheel. But the pretty way was so strait that the operation must be suspended whenever another vehicle wished to go by. Progress was therefore slow, and several of Leviathan’s souls had descended to stretch their legs.

I was waiting behind the monster for the oncoming traffic to scramble cautiously by, when somebody spoke in my ear.

“ ’Scuse me, but aren’t you Coridon Gore?”

In that moment I knew how feels the malefactor who has been picked out of a rank in a police-station yard.

I turned to survey the speaker—a buxom, bright-eyed young lady perhaps twenty-two years old, more appropriately clad for water than for dry land.

“I am,” I said.

“Yes, it is,” she cried to four or five companions, all similarly attired, huddled together and giggling a few feet away.

Thus reassured, the bunch advanced, twittering.

“Oh, hell,” I said, under my breath.

Niobe, beside me, began to shake with laughter.

“I was sure it was you,” said my friend.

“Full marks to my photographer,” I said.

“An’ the others dared me to ask.”

“Full marks to you.”

“ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘he can’t eat me.’ ”

"I shouldn't dream," I said, "of being so familiar." That went very well —with her companions. "Although," I added swiftly, "if you and I were alone, I might be tempted to try." Here the oncoming traffic failed. As I let in my clutch—"And now you must excuse me," I said. "We're late, as it is. But I'm very glad you came up—I always like making friends."

"You made six to-day," cried someone.

"That's very nice hearing," I said. "Goodbye and God bless."

A farewell chorus replied, and I put out my right hand and waved.

As the Vane made the open road—

"Darling," said Niobe, laughing, "you really did awfully well. Does this sort of thing often happen?"

"It's never happened before. I'm thankful that you were with me."

"So'm I. I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. I suppose you realize that I am now being dissected—with every circumstance of hostility. Their hate 'to me was wonderful', the hate of women for woman. We're really a dreadful lot."

"I feel you'll stand up to dissection."

"I may, as your wife. To-day I'm just an odd girl that you saw before you saw them. But then you'll have left the market, or, as they will put it, 'been snatched'. When they see the photographs—'That's her. She meant to have him. I told you so.' And now you see why I feel that our marriage should follow its announcement as soon as may be."

"I trust," I said, "that there will be no photographs."

"Optimist," said Niobe.

Two handsome weeks fled by, in love and idleness. The steady pursuit of pleasure occupied all my time. The weather was mostly superb, and the elm, our elder and better, beamed upon our attendance, as on our goings out and our comings in. We visited Oxford, lunched at *The Mitre*, proved the beauty of Magdalen and strolled down The Broad Walk: we lunched at a Dorsetshire village which squires a famous seat and, presenting a card at the door, were shown the house and the gardens with great civility: three times we wandered in the Forest, eating the ample fare which Florence had packed and cooling our *vin ordinaire* in some convenient brook. We discovered two

time-honoured inns, each more than a mile from a village, each half the size of Elm Cottage, each much as it must have been in the eighteenth century.

My little luncheon on Thursday went very well. As I walked with Lady Curtice down to the gate—

"Major Gore, I have yet to see a more charming and beautiful girl than your future wife. I had thought such a breed was extinct: but she has everything."

"I'm very lucky," I said.

"You're both very lucky, my dear. And so am I. I shall lunch out on this for weeks."

And Paley spoke very nicely. He had followed with Niobe.

"I'm sure Lady Curtice has said all there is to be said. I always hoped Major Gore would take a wife. And always I laid down that hope, because I could not believe that he would find the wife he deserved. But Miss Coke will distinguish a post which I never thought could be filled."

"Thank you," said Niobe, "for being so nice to me."

"Oh, you beautiful witch," said Lady Curtice. "Come away, Mr. Paley, or we shall be turned into swine."

The visit of Sarah and Simon resembled a joyous masque. Sarah's excited interest would have warmed any heart; and Simon got off with Florence the moment they met.

"Yes, this is where they'll live. . . . Why don' they live 'ere now? Well, they're not ready yet. . . . All right, if you will 'ave it, you'll 'ave two mummies then. . . . No, 'e isn't your daddy, Master Simon. . . . No, sonny boy, you can' pull that one on me. 'E never said no such thing. You come an' 'elp with the washer an' let your parentage go. . . . What's parentage? Oh, dear me. I ain't 'alf done it now. . . ."

Cleopatra and Arthur were proving the Italian Lakes; but their very splendid present was made before they left. A second bathroom for Elm Cottage. ——'s had been told to carry out our orders in every particular. 'And you're not to stint yourselves, for they want to do Arthur a favour and so they are out to please. Besides, I shall use it, and you know I like things just so.' The structural work was, happily, simple enough. ——'s proposed to begin before August was out and to finish three weeks later. It is, of course, a great thing to 'have a pull'.

Florence was at the very top of her bent. She truly rejoiced with us in all that we did. Never, I think, so happy as when we stayed at home, she always sped us gaily and lovingly welcomed us back. On the days which we passed at Elm Cottage, Niobe spent as much time with her as with me, discussing ways and means, the co-option of Fanny Bowles, the shape of the bathroom-to-be, the acquisition of bedding and bedroom furniture. Upon the last of these matters, the two sought my opinion—I fear, as a matter of form. They were to meet at ——'s in Niobe's luncheon hour.

"Mrs. Corner's brother's a buyer there, an' she's goin' to write to 'im. So I'll go there in the mornin' an' grease the wheels. I'll 'ave all the measurements with me an' a plan o' the room. So when you come, Miss Niobe, you'll just 'ave to make your choice. 'S better than 'is nibs comin' up. I want 'im to keep nice an' quiet after all this fun."

"Confess," I said, "that you've never seen me so fit."

"That I will," said Florence. "An' I wan' to keep you so."

"Florence," said Niobe, "I'm with you heart and soul." She turned to me. "Darling, obey your trainer—she's never failed you yet. And she wants you at the top of your form for the Marriage Stakes."

"In which," I said, "it is clear that I shall run third."

And so, on the following Monday, I took up my old, quiet life.

My work went steadily on, I strolled the Roman road, I listened to Florence's gossip, the elm and I held our councils as heretofore.

All Halliard knew, of course, that I was soon to be wed. Though few had seen her, Niobe's stock stood high. Everybody agreed that it was a very good thing.

The installation of the bathroom began on September the first. The workmen were most considerate. I was not at all inconvenienced and Florence enjoyed herself. Everything, of course, was done from the back of the cottage: often enough I forgot that such work was going on. When Niobe came down on Sunday, we chose the bath and the tiles—the first from a catalogue, the second from the samples the foreman had brought. And other requisites. And I made a plan to scale, which showed where we wished them to go.

Then Florence visited London and Fanny Bowles looked after me very well. But Florence served my dinner, as usual—and made me a full report.

"Oh, what a day! I did enjoy myself. But you're well out of London—no room on the pavements now. An' most of 'em foreigners. You never see such people—open-necks an' sweaters an' shirts like comic strips, plus fours an' corduroy trousers lookin' as if they bin slept in and draggin' along the groun', an' all of 'em shovin' an' strollin', as if they was down at the sea. I started up Bond Street an' 'ad to throw in me 'and: talk about 'ard labour . . . you'd be better off on the tread-mill—at leas' you'd 'ave that to yourself. I saw one woman go down—got 'er 'eel trod on, I think: so I took the firs' turnin' I came to. . . . I suppose it's all this fine weather. Only 'ope it breaks before you 'ave to go up.

"Well, I got to ——'s in good time, saw Mrs. Corner's brother an' got the dope. Sharp at a quarter pas' one Miss Niobe's there. Looked a treat, she did, so lovely an' dignified—I see people nudgin' each other, as she went by. An' not a follower. Nobody dare come up to a lady like that. An' just as sweet an' natural as ever she is down 'ere. Oh, luv, you got somethin' there—she's out of another world. . . . An' then we looks at the stuff. I see in a momen' there's only one suite for 'er: but she turns away an' looks at the other things. Then she comes back to 'er likin' an' asks the price. 'That's too expensive,' she says. 'It's a lot of money,' I says, 'but we'll see about that. You've got to 'ave what you like—the Major's orders, madam. An' if you choose anythin' else, 'e'll send it back.' Three 'undred and forty, they asked; so I said at once they could 'ave another think. By the time I'd finished, it was three 'undred dead: so Miss Niobe filled in your cheque, an' that was that. Luv', it's a you-know picture. An' none of your two-foot save-rooms. Three foot six each bed, 'xactly as yours is now. An' lovely mattresses. Box springs, you bet. I didn' leave nothin' out. After all, you're goin' to spen' 'alf your life there—people don' think of that. An' 'er dressin'-table's a dream. . . .

"An' then we 'as a light lunch—Miss Niobe would 'ave that. An' sweet as sweet to me, when I should of been servin' 'er. An' everyone's eyes on our table—I felt as proud as proud. But she didn' seem to notice. Then I puts 'er into a taxi an' goes off to see Mrs. Winthrop at The Savoy. When I tells 'er you'll be back before the end of the month, 'That's good,' she says. 'We're always ready for 'im. 'E's one of our favourite guests'."

"That's very kind of her. Will ——'s deliver the stuff?"

"They're only waitin' for the date. Deliver themselves an' put everythin' in place. Oh, an' a lovely carpet. But, as Miss Niobe says, the curtains can wait. She an' I'll make them together later on."

Happily, the very next morning, I had a letter from Pompey, to say he had sold my motion-picture rights. This, to my mind, for far more than they were worth.

> *. . . It's clearly capital: but Somerset House calls it income—it suits them better that way. However, I've done my best: so if you find the contract peculiar, you'll know what I had in mind.*

Did ever a man have such a good friend as Pompey? That cared for his neighbour more than he cared for himself?

I tried my best to thank him as he deserved.

Gradually all our arrangements fell into place.

A marriage has been arranged. . . . That would appear in *The Times* of September the twenty-eighth. On the next day, Thursday, I should remove to The Savoy. On Sunday, October the second, the marriage would be solemnized—in an old, quiet church in the City at two o'clock. Pompey would stand by my side and George Medallion would give his niece away. Ariel would attend Niobe. Arthur, Cleopatra and Florence would be the witnesses. We should pass that night in Paris and fly to the Italian Riviera on the following day. On the day after that, Tuesday, *The Times* would declare that we were man and wife.

So much for the things that mattered. Of our lesser engagements, perhaps I should set down two. On Friday I was to throw a party at The Savoy—Niobe, Cleopatra, Ariel, Arthur and George Medallion would be my guests. On Saturday Pompey and I would dine together alone.

That our wedding was by no means the wedding which Niobe should have had, I was painfully aware. And that is putting it low. But the devil was driving and so it could not be helped. I do not think that Niobe minded at all. Times had changed, and pomp and circumstance were ill supported to-day. Besides, their cost was appalling. 'Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and' *res angusta* therefrom. Still, a City of London church on a Sunday afternoon. . . .

“Our private chapel,” said Niobe; “in the sleeping heart of old London. . . . What more could anyone ask?”

I did not tell her that, by my express desire, there would be a profusion of flowers and the services of a first-class organist had been retained. The chancel would be brilliantly lit and the church would be quick with music at a quarter to two. Money can do such things—and I had sent Pompey a cheque for one hundred pounds.

The girl whom Niobe was teaching to take her place was doing admirably: and she was only too willing to take over Niobe’s flat.

“An immense relief,” said that lady, sitting on the arm of my sofa, with her coffee-cup in her hand. “Berserk has been so terribly nice to me that I simply couldn’t have borne to let him down.”

“Nice to us both, my beauty. He didn’t agree with the others about my case: but he was their junior then and they had their way. But I always had faith in him. They treated me as a patient: he treated me as a man.”

“He’s deeply interested in you—continually asks how you are. I asked if he’d like to see you: but he said, ‘No. The less he sees of doctors, the better for him. But let me know how he goes on.’ ”

“Nothing to report,” I said. “I’m as fit as fit: and I haven’t had a lapse since I frightened you out of your life. And I really think my brain’s clearer.”

“That,” said Niobe, “is associating with me. I’m a sort of whetstone, you see. Florence is incomparable: but you cannot whet your wit upon her. But I’m a fellow dilettante—out of a much lower drawer.”

“The same drawer, my darling. Make no mistake about that. I’ll never get over your quoting *Coridon’s Song*.”

“That,” said Niobe, “was a wonderful stroke of luck. In point of fact, that’s how I got off with you. You couldn’t forget the maiden who’d quoted *Coridon’s Song*.”

“I couldn’t forget the girl with the level gaze . . . the grave Bacchante, whose face was shaped like a heart, who moved and spoke like a queen.”

Niobe blew me a kiss.

Then—

“I kept it alive, though,” she said. “I sent you a valentine.”

“It was in no danger of death; but the valentine set my heart leaping. Why did you make that gesture, my darling girl?”

Niobe put down her cup and fell on her knees by my side. Then she took my face in her hands.

“Because I had to, my blessed. I had to do something to help me to be your wife.”

So passed our last Sunday, before we changed our estates.

The second bathroom was done, and the workmen were out of the house.

Cleopatra and her daughter drove down to lunch the next day.

Upon the style of the wedding, my sister was comforting.

“Darling, a full-dress wedding is the last thing that Niobe wants. I had to have one, of course, but I didn’t enjoy it at all; and you and she and I are three of a kind. And to-day such functions are unbelievably pinchbeck—to those who know. Nine out of ten of the men are wearing hired clothes—in St. George’s, Hanover Square. I don’t blame them at all, for they can’t afford to buy them, at fifty guineas or more. But that used to be the privilege of waiters. . . . And everything else is the same.

“If you don’t have a full-dress wedding, what are you going to do? You can’t be married here; George Medallion lives in chambers; Niobe’s home has gone. A second-class wedding is awful—wedding-dress, bridesmaids, ushers and thirty or forty strangers, *Lohengrin* pealing out in some hideous, empty church——”

“Oh, I can’t bear it,” I said.

“Exactly. But you have avoided that. St. Crispin’s is small and old and full of history. Great ghosts will be crowding about us—diplomats, merchants, Lord Mayors, sailors, judges, soldiers and one Lord Chancellor. It’s going to be a great occasion—something that we who are present will never forget. And the Vicar’s simply thrilled—he’s going to wear his vestments and do things in style.”

“Pompey?” I said.

“Pompey. He dined last night and gave me all the dope. We squabbled about the new bathroom. He says that, as your best man, he has a prescriptive right to use it first. I contended that, as it was my idea, I should take precedence of him. You and Niobe will have to work that one out. He’s immensely impressed with her talent. He’s shown *Soldiers Two* to ——,

who wouldn't believe she hadn't made sketches first. He wanted to take the drawing, but Pompey, of course, refused to let it go. When he wanted to know who'd done it, Pompey simply said, 'A client of mine'. As Pompey was going, he said, 'You'd better hang on to that drawing. If your client pursues his calling, one of these days that'll fetch a long price at one of Sotheby's sales.' "

"I'm not surprised," I said, "but I'm terribly proud."

"What a famous pair you'll be! When the Press gets hold of the fact that you're man and wife——"

"We must see that they don't," I said.

Ariel opened the door and whipped into the room.

"I do love Florence," she said, sitting down by my side and slipping an arm through mine.

"So do we all," I said. "You see, she's lovable."

"She's mad about Niobe."

"Why not?" I said. "I'm mad about her myself."

"I'm wild to see her. She's coming to dinner to-morrow."

"Don't forget Friday," I said.

"Corin, darling, it's all I'm living for. You will dance with me once, won't you?"

"If my guests will do me the honour, I shall dance with each in turn."

"Won't Niobe mind?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"I'm glad you're going to be married, because then I can come and stay."

"Good. Have you seen your bathroom?"

"Gorgeous. And Florence says she'll maid me."

"Does she, indeed?" said Cleo. "You have learned a lot in France. Niobe's got a char; but she doesn't arrive till after Niobe's up. And she won't let Florence maid her—I promise you that."

"I shall be her guest," said Ariel, loftily.

"As such, by my request, you will sleep in cotton sheets."

"Oh no, Mummy, please."

"Will you give me your word, if they ask you to stay, to go and help Florence wash up?"

"Of course, I will. I love Florence."

"And Florence loves you. But you're not to let her spoil you. It isn't fair."

Ariel ran to her mother, kissed her fingers first and then her cheek. And Cleo put an arm round her neck and held the fair head against hers. The acknowledgment of authority did my heart good. I felt that Ariel's days would be long in the land. And I thought of a lovely painting by Madame Lebrun.

Any man would have been sorry to let the pair go.

As Jenkins let in the clutch—

"Luncheon, darling, on Friday—just you and me."

"I shall come running," I said.

On Thursday morning I had a last word with the elm.

It was an unkind day, when a blustering winter wind rode roughshod over Autumn, to whip the smile from her face. The elm received this trespass with matchless dignity. Much as a full-rigged ship, he bowed before each assault, swaying with a stately precision, as though he were treading a measure at some Olympian court. And all his galleries took their cue from him, swaying and bowing to each other and shedding now and again reluctant leaves.

"I'm sorry," I said, "to see you so rudely used. Such gate-crashing is a scandal. Believe me, sir, I take it very ill. But the north-east wind was ever 'flown with insolence'. It's he that shakes 'the darling buds of May'. I can never understand why Aeolus employs such a tough. No manners at all. Happily, it would take more than a tempest to embarrass our communion. We have no need of speech.

"This afternoon I leave here for, I think, the space of two weeks. Hardly ever before have I been absent so long. But, as I think you know, I am to marry a wife. And to-day, when one marries a wife, for some strange reason, one must absent oneself, often at great inconvenience, always at great

expense. To this custom, I must conform. But, happy as I shall be, my joy will not be complete until Niobe and I stand before you as bride and groom, then turn to enter the dwelling to which you gave your name, which you saw built. Another man and maiden can mean but little to you—you've seen so many lovers in your long life. But I can't believe that you've had a more loving liegeman than I shall always be."

With that, I stepped to his foot and laid my palms on the trunk of my suzerain, for I wished to remember the feel of his aged armour and receive that touch of Nature that made us kin.

My last word was with Florence.

A thousand times we had talked, when she had brought me my coffee after my lunch. We had spoken of ways and means, of Halliard and neighbours, of Cleopatra and Pompey, of manners and habits and customs, of almost everything. And now we should do so alone for the very last time.

"Let's run through it again, to be sure there's no mistake. To-morrow the furniture's coming at half past two. On Sunday, you'll travel to London and be with Mrs. Cleo soon after twelve o'clock. You'll drive to the church with her and, when the show is over, she'll take you to The Savoy. There you'll find Mrs. Winthrop who's going to look after you and will show you your room."

"This kit all right for The Savoy?"

"It's perfect," I said. "You'll kill the ladies' maids dead. And you'll draw no undue attention, wherever you go. You'll be free of The Savoy, Florence, as Mrs. Gore's personal maid. And then you'll come back here on the following day."

"Oh, I'm that excited," said Florence, clasping her hands. "I 'ardly slep' las' night. 'Mrs. Gore's maid, off duty, at The Savoy.' Will they let me 'elp in the cloak-room? That's the place to see the dames—when they're puttin' themselves to rights, before they go out to kill."

I began to laugh.

"I should think they'd be thankful," I said. "You've only to ask Mrs. Winthrop. This visit's for you to get the hang of the place. You see, when we stay there in future, you'll come with us."

"No you don', luv," said Florence. "Can' waste money like that. Once in a while, perhaps. An' what price this lovely 'ome, lef' all by itself?" She shook her head. "Too many comin' convic's floatin' about to-day. 'S all

right if somebody's 'ere, for they got no guts: but once they found it empty, they'd 'elp themselves. Jus' look at *The Telegraph*. Every other day, 'Cat-burglar gets away with jools worth four thousan' quid.' 'Countess o' Stepponit's flat entered—Jool-case an' mink coats gone.' We'll be all right on Sunday, 'cause Fanny Bowles an' 'er grannie 'll be on duty till six. They'll lock up before they go, an' young Norris comes on outside. 'E stays till twelve, an' then Jim 'Olloway's nephew for the rest o' the night. An' Jim 'll be out 'imself, to see they pull their weight. If 'e's satisfied, they're goin' to 'ave ten bob each."

"Florence," I said, "you command my great admiration."

"Gurr," said Florence. "If our lovely 'ome was burgled, I'd never smile again. An' it might be—easy, you know. Some dirty bastard like Borstal 'appens to be at the station when I go off. ' 'Ere's jam,' 'e says. 'Silver mugs an' spoons for the pickin' up. An' no interferin' bitch to spoil my fun.' An' jam it is—for Borstal: 'e can' go wrong. But it's blood an' tears for us, when we find it's gone. An' the miniatures, too. Gawd, I'd scream with rage for the first 'alf-hour."

I began to feel something uneasy.

"The picture you paint," I said, "is more than disconcerting. Can those two lads be trusted to do their job?"

Florence nodded.

"Jim 'Olloway 'll see to that. 'E's goin' to pos' them 'imself an' show them 'ow to patrol. Roun' an' about the cottage, all the time—they'll 'ave your torch. An' an 'ammer out o' your tool-kit, in case of accidents. They're quite excited already. But young Norris says an 'ammer's too light, so 'e's bringin' a monkey-wrench. If anyone tries it on, 'e'll meet 'is Waterloo. Waterloo? He'll think it's Cannon Street, before 'e's through."

"That's more like it," I said. "I shan't worry now. Jim Holloway's very decent."

"So 'e should be," said Florence. " 'Oo sen's 'im a bottle o' Scotch on Christmas Eve?"

"Oh, well," I said, "one likes to remember one's friends." I put a hand to my brow. "I'd quite a lot to say, but it's all gone out of my head. I shan't see you again till Sunday, and then I shall have no time.

"It's strange to think that we shan't be alone any more. The future's so very dazzling that it tends to put the past in the shade. But, you and I,

Florence, we shan't forget the past. For the past belongs to us and to nobody else. We've given it to each other, and I shall treasure it for as long as I live. I hope and believe you've been happy—I know I have. I don't think I could have been happier—until Miss Niobe came. I don't think you owe me much: but I owe you everything. But for you, I couldn't have had this home: but for you, I could never have lived the lovely life I've led. You've carried me—and you know it, for seven years. You have been my rod and my staff." I got to my feet and took her hand in mine. "And I think that we love each other and always shall."

As Florence bowed her head, I put her hand to my lips.

Twice she tried to speak; but her lips were quivering, so that no words would come.

"I'll take it as said," I said, smiling.

With tears on her cheeks, Florence shook her head.

At last she spoke—jerkily.

"God bless you, sweetie-pie. We're goin' to be 'appier than ever. . . . But I—musn' call you that any more."

Half an hour later, Fred Barley drove me to Moorhen, to take the London train.

Part Two
MISTRESS CORIDON

MISTRESS CORIDON

Mrs. Arthur Ruthven was breaking her fast in bed. Tea and toast at eight—that was her rule. Her husband was in the bathroom. During her frugal meal she perused the morning paper, lifting her pretty voice from time to time, to make her lord free of some 'snappy' item of news.

Already the sunshine was slanting into the bedroom, as if to refute the menace of the day before. And the churlish wind had fallen—after a riotous night. Friday, the last day of September, promised to be a credit to Autumn's patronage.

"Arthur, just listen to this. 'For the second time in six months Bread Street has been the scene of a mail-bag robbery. Yesterday, in broad daylight ____' "

Here the bedside telephone rang.

Cleopatra picked up the receiver.

"Yes."

"Major Gore's housekeeper, madam."

"Put her through. . . . Hullo, Florence."

"Oh, madam, madam. . . ."

Cleopatra's brows drew into a frightened frown.

"What is it, Florence? What is it?"

"I don' know 'ow to tell you. . . . Oh, madam, it is so dreadful. . . . We'd a shockin' storm las' night, an' . . . an' the elm's blown down."

A burst of sobbing succeeded these simple words.

"Oh, my God," said Cleopatra. And then, again, "Oh, my God."

She began to tremble.

Florence was speaking again.

"Are you still there, madam?"

Somehow Cleopatra answered.

"Yes."

"Oh, madam, madam, I don't know what to do. I've never bin beaten before, but it's got me down. 'E'll never get over it. It'll break 'is lovely 'eart."

Cleopatra braced herself.

"Steady, Florence. Tell me, is the cottage all right?"

"Oh, yes. Fallen out o' the garden into Joe Gammon's field. An' there it lies, with all its poor roots in the air. . . . Oh, madam, madam, it's lived so long, why couldn' it see us out?"

"Listen, Florence. I must have time to think. Do nothing until I ring up. That'll be as soon as I can."

"But what *can* we do, madam? We'll never get it back. An' it's 'alf 'is life—that tree."

"We must do our best. Thank God, he wasn't there. Now put your receiver back, as I'm going to do. I'll talk to you again as soon as ever I can."

Mrs. Ruthven put her tray to one side and slipped out of bed. Then she fell on her knees and hid her face in her hands.

"O God, please help us," she prayed, with the tears running down her face. "O God, don't let it harm him. We'll do our bit, I swear, if you'll take care of his brain."

She got to her feet and picked up her dressing-gown.

Her husband entered the room, with a towel to his face.

"Nothing like soap and water and a good steel blade. These electric—— Why, Cleo, darling, what's wrong?"

He crossed the room, to gather his wife in his arms. For a moment she wept on his shoulder. Then she let him lift her back into bed.

As he covered her up—

"Listen, Arthur," she said. "Florence has just rung up. A dreadful thing has happened. The elm that Corin worshipped has been blown down."

"There you are," said Arthur. "I said——"

"Wait. Rightly or wrongly, Corin was mad about that tree. He's a poet's heart, you know, and, for him, it stood for the England that used to be. By the mercy of God, he's in London, and so far he doesn't know. And he

mustn't know, Arthur—until he gets back in about a fortnight's time. And when he gets back, all traces of it must be gone. That'll make it better—soften the blow. You see, it's his brain, Arthur, we've got to spare. Now, who are the people to do it?"

"Beestons'," said Arthur. "The show they put up at Chelsea was unbelievable."

"D'you know them at all?"

"Yes. I know James Pollitt—a very efficient chap."

"Can you get on to him at once? I mean, the sooner the better."

"Of course, m' dear." Arthur picked up the receiver. "The telephone directory, Mason."

Two minutes went by, while Cleo sat very still, with her pretty hands clasped together and her eyes on the foot of the bed. Arthur gave his instructions and then stood still by her side, fingering his clean-shaven chin.

Once again the telephone rang.

Cleo picked up the spare receiver.

"Beestons' here," said a voice.

"Mr. Arthur Ruthven to speak to Mr. Pollitt, if he's arrived."

"Just a moment please. . . ." Then, "Pollitt speaking," said a voice.

"Listen, Mr. Pollitt, Arthur Ruthven here."

"Good morning, Mr. Ruthven. And what can we do for you?"

"It's extremely urgent," said Arthur. "D'you know the village of Halliard?"

"Halliard. Wait a minute. Oh, yes, I know. Not far from Basingstoke. Some twenty odd miles from here."

"That's right. Now listen to me."

Arthur spoke for one minute—very much to the point.

"A special job," he concluded. "The account to me. And please remember this—a great man's brain is at stake. Keep that to yourself, of course: but I mean what I say. The job to be done as quick as ever you can."

"Sunk without trace," said Pollitt.

"Exactly. Turf back, wall rebuilt and the rest."

“I understand. I’ll take the foreman with me and I’ll leave in a quarter ’f an hour. Is there a telephone there? . . . Good. I’ll ring you up myself within the hour.”

“Thank you very much. Till then.”

Arthur put his receiver back.

His wife drew down his head and put her arms round his neck.

“God bless you, darling,” she said. “You’re the presentest help in trouble I’ve ever known.”

“That’s all right, little girl. Bit of luck getting Pollitt. It’s down his street. Will you put Florence wise?”

Fifty minutes later, Florence rang up.

“Mr. Pollitt, madam, to speak to Mr. Ruthven.”

Before Cleopatra could answer, she heard her husband’s voice.

“Arthur Ruthven here.”

“To report, Mr. Ruthven. First, we can’t get the elm back. I’d hoped, though I didn’t say so. But it’s too old. Very well. I’m leaving my foreman here, and a gang will leave to join him as soon as I get back. By to-night, the elm will have gone, and to-morrow we shall start in to make all good. I’m sparing no expense, but I think that’s what you want.”

“Quite right,” said Arthur.

“Very well. By to-morrow evening there will be nothing to show that a tree was ever there. The lawn will look as it did, the wall will have been repaired and lilac will be growing in the border where the old tree stood.”

“Very good indeed, Mr. Pollitt. I knew I could count on you.”

“Everyone’s been very helpful. We shall cut up the meadow next door, but the owner has said that, if it’ll help Major Gore, we can do what damage we like. We shall work from there, you see.”

“One more thing. Timber. Is it good wood?”

“Lovely wood, Mr. Ruthven—once it’s seasoned, you know.”

“Well, don’t let it go. I’ll tell you about that later. And thank you very much.”

“Not at all. Goodbye.”

"Goodbye."

A moment later—

"Did you get that, Cleo?"

"I did. I think it's marvellous."

"Might use the wood for a staircase in the cottage one day. Or panelling, or something."

"Arthur, you're very sweet."

"Nonsense, m' darling. I'm off now. Florence 'll keep you informed."

Mrs. Ruthven felt very much better. There were breakers ahead, of course; but action had been taken, and action always helped. While she was getting up—for, by Arthur's express desire, she had stayed in bed—she must try to make up her mind when would be the best moment to break the news. Niobe must be informed and consulted: to-morrow would do for that. No point in spoiling her party which Corin was throwing to-night. And Corin was coming to lunch and must suspect nothing at all. She had better speak to Florence and warn her not to ring up while he was there. . . .

Thoughtfully, she rang for her maid.

Just an hour and a half later a soldierly-looking man was standing in Piccadilly, regarding an omnibus. After passing a street on its left, this came to rest by the kerb some ten feet from where he stood.

The man was thinking aloud.

"Act Two," he said, smiling. "Enter a good-looking 'bus. An amusing thought. My new life begins with a 'bus. I wonder if I should get on it. Perhaps that's what I'm waiting for. But I don't think I shall. Besides, to be perfectly honest, I've no idea where I am. I'm sure this must be London, but . . ."

Here a very large man left the 'bus. He appeared to be wearing three coats—including his jacket, of course—all of which were open, thus making him larger still.

He addressed himself to the soldier.

"This Bond Street, chum?"

The other started and then looked helplessly round.

"I—I really couldn't tell you," he said.

"Yes, this is Bond Street," said someone, jerking his head at the street which the 'bus had passed by.

"That's better," said the soldier to himself. "Bond Street sounds familiar. Perhaps that's where I belong."

With that, he turned to move in the wake of the very large man.

The soldier was a good-looking man, of some forty years of age. Tall and well set up, inclined to be spare; clean-cut features enhanced by an aquiline nose; dark hair just touched with gray; unusually large brown eyes, set wide apart; a small, well-kept moustache. A distinguished air and a most engaging smile were among his attributes. He was quietly, but very well dressed in a gray, lounge suit, a carefully brushed bowler hat, well-polished black shoes. A rolled umbrella and gloves were his accessories.

The condition of Old Bond Street's pavement was conducing not so much to reflection as to an anxiety to avoid discomfiture. Though there was room to move, there was none to spare, and he who ventured to dally was instantly thrust to one side. It was easy to become dishevelled; and after a moment or two the soldier made up his mind to take the first exit he saw. With a sigh of relief, he turned into Burlington Gardens. . . .

Here there was much more room, so he set his back to a shop and continued to think aloud.

"If the worst should come to the worst, I suppose I must go to the police. But I don't much like that idea. From what I can see of myself, I come from a decent home and am clean in the house. It's rather more than likely that I belong to some Club. Mark you, I'm not complaining. This is a great adventure. I have been born again. Once I'm over this fence, I shall be in the straight. But I must try and clear it without praying in aid of the police. 'Please, Inspector, I don't know who I am.' So very humiliating. And unless I'm 'wanted' or an habitual criminal—and somehow I feel that's unlikely—well, the police won't know, either. But once I know where I belong . . . Well, it's no good standing still. I'd better get on."

A man was standing in the mouth of The Burlington Arcade—an elderly man, with a healthy, open face. He was tidily dressed in a suit of pepper and salt, and he wore his bowler hat, as though he had worn such a hat for fifty years. (As a matter of fact, he had.) He saw the soldier coming before the soldier saw him, and a start of recognition showed that he had seen him

before. With a broad smile of content, he made as though to step forward. Then he checked this impulse and stood his ground, still smiling, the light of expectancy kindling his keen, gray eyes.

The soldier saw him and, pleased to see someone smiling, smiled pleasantly in return. Then a dog on a trailing cord tittupped gaily across his bows—a puppy-dog full of fun, unaware of the toll of the street, proposing to lead his frantic owner a dance. In a flash the soldier had set his foot on the cord: as he picked up its end, a scented lady came pelting.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," she cried. She stooped to gather the puppy into her arms. "Thank the kind gentleman, Toby, for saving your precious life."

But the puppy was not attending. His eyes were fast on an Alsatian some fifteen times his size. He barked an uncertain defiance.

The soldier raised his hat, smiling, and made to go on his way. As he did so, he glanced at the spectator—the man with the pleasant smile. But the smile was no longer lighting the healthy, open face: as he met the soldier's eyes, he turned abruptly away.

The latter found this strange. A moment before, the spectator had been so full of goodwill. As he moved on, his brain put up an explanation, as a batsman puts up a catch.

"By God, he knows me," he cried.

He was round in a flash and had gained the spectator's side.

"Excuse me," he cried. "D'you know me?"

The other's face was a picture of pleased astonishment.

"I'll say I do, sir," he said. "But don't you know me?"

"I'm afraid I don't," said the soldier, drawing the other with him against the wall. "But you mustn't take that ill, for I've got a perfect excuse. I've lost my memory."

The other stared and stared.

At length—

"You mean, you . . ."

He broke off there to swallow, searching for words.

"I can remember nothing. The—the curtain came down about twenty minutes ago. I know that's Bond Street down there, because I heard someone say so. But that is the sum of my knowledge. I don't know who I am or why I'm here. And now, by the mercy of God, I've run into you. We'll have such a drink about this as never was seen."

The other put a hand to his head.

"Well, if this don't beat it," he said. Here a car backfired, to make the two of them jump. "Look here, sir. After a go like this, you ought to keep quiet. Besides, we can't talk here. There's a friend of mine in Cork Street will let us sit in his place an' give us a cup of tea."

"I'm in your hands," said the soldier.

The other set an arm beneath his.

"Straight across the road. Steady, sir: you don't want to get run over. The pace they drive to-day . . . Now then . . ." And as they gained the pavement —"That's all right."

Half-way up Cork Street, they stopped at a dark green door. The stranger rang the bell. This was presently answered by a cheerful man in his shirt-sleeves, with a cigarette in his mouth and a polishing cloth in his hand.

"Morning, Joe," said the stranger. "The governor in?"

"To you, Mr. Jordan," said the other. "But not to anyone else."

He shut the green door behind them, and they followed him up some stairs and into and through a handsomely furnished bar. Then he knocked on another door. On being ordered to enter, he opened the door a few inches and put in his head.

"Mr. Jordan an' someone to see you."

"Bring them in."

The room was small, but cosy. A slow fire burned in the grate; and a leather-covered sofa and three or four comfortable chairs denied the virtue of business, which a roll-top desk was doing its best to commend. On the walls were hanging some admirable sporting prints.

A staid-faced, clean-shaven man of some sixty to seventy summers was standing with his back to the fire and *The Times* in his hand.

"Well, Henry," he said, advancing and laying his paper down. "I'm glad to see you again." He turned to the soldier and bowed. "Very happy to see

any friend of Henry's, sir. Won't you sit down?"

"Yes, sit down, sir," said Jordan. "George, old man, could you do us a cup of tea?"

"Yes, indeed," said the host. "Is that what you fancy, sir? Because, if you'd——"

"I'd love a cup of tea," said the soldier, surrendering his hat and umbrella and sinking into a chair.

The host opened the door and raised his voice.

"Joe, ask Mrs. Bowlby to send up tea for three."

"Very good, Mr. Preston."

The latter shut the door and once more took his stand in front of the fire.

"An' now," said Henry Jordan.

"One moment," said the soldier. "May I smoke?"

"Certainly, sir," said his host. "May I offer you a cigar?"

The soldier had his case in his hand.

"Thank you very much, but I fancy a cigarette. May I offer you one of these?"

"Not now, sir, thank you."

"And you?"

But Jordan held up his pipe. Then—

"An' now," he said again. The others waited on him. "This gentleman here has lost his memory." The soldier was smiling: the staid-faced man betrayed no emotion at all. "Lost it this morning about half an hour ago. I saw him in Burlington Gardens. He didn't know me, of course; but I recognized him."

"To my great good fortune," said the soldier.

His host was regarding him squarely.

"You remember nothing, sir?"

"Nothing."

The other inclined his head.

“You have my sympathy, sir. I’ve heard of it happening, of course: but I never before encountered this predicament.”

The soldier laughed.

“Thank you,” he said. “But you mustn’t sympathize. I hail it as a great adventure. Now that I’m out of the wood—by which I mean I’ve been found—I’ve nothing to worry about. I’ve been granted a new lease of life: and how many men of my age would sell their souls for that? But I know that I’m terribly lucky to have fallen into such good hands.”

“I was lucky to be there, sir,” said Jordan. “You know, when I saw you last, I felt we should meet again.”

“Where was that?” said the soldier.

“At Dayspring—nice little Hampshire village, not far from Andover. First time we met was in The Forest, Cadnam way. You found me reading, and we had a talk about books. Ten days later I’m sitting all alone on a bench by Dayspring’s cricket-ground. Reading again. No cricket that day—I’ve got the place all to myself. And up you drive in your car, park it by the side of the way, come in by a little gate and start to stroll. Round the ground you go, till at last you come to me, quite close to the churchyard wall. Purest chance each time, sir. We had a good laugh about that. An’ now in Burlington Gardens. . . . But then, you know, that’s life.”

“Each time in Hampshire. I suppose that’s where I live. By the way, my friend, who am I? I know you’re Henry Jordan, because I’ve just been told. But what is my name?”

The other’s smile faded, and a hand went up to his mouth.

Then—

“I’ve—I’ve no idea, sir,” he stammered. “You never told me that.”

There was a dreadful silence.

Then, in undisguised indignation—

“But you represented,” said Preston, “you alleged that you knew this gentleman.”

“So I do,” cried poor Jordan. “I never said I knew who he was.”

With the air of an outraged cardinal, Preston averted his gaze.

The soldier threw back his head and laughed full-throatedly.

"That's Fortune all over," he said. "At least, I suppose it is. She gives with the right hand and takes away with the left." He got to his feet, stepped to the disconsolate Jordan and clapped him upon the back. "Don't be upset, my friend. It only means that you'll have to look after me for a few hours longer than you thought. Myself, I couldn't care less. But I don't want to be a nuisance."

The others cried out at that, and Preston spoke for them both.

"It will be our great privilege, sir, to help you all we can. Consider us both at your service, until you need us no more."

Here the door was opened and a bustling, pleasant-faced woman appeared with a tray.

As she set this down—

"Thank you, Mrs. Bowlby," said Preston.

With a charming smile, the soldier inclined his head.

"I'm giving a lot of trouble."

"No trouble at all, sir. A pleasure."

She bowed and withdrew.

Preston picked up the teapot.

"How do you like it, sir?"

The soldier looked at him. Then he began to laugh.

"I've no idea," he said. "I'd better leave it to you. Milk, I should think, but we'll try without sugar first. You know, this is going to be fun."

The cup was filled, and Jordan set it down by his side.

Preston was regarding the soldier.

"If I may make so bold, sir, you take this mishap very well."

"Mr. Preston, I decline to regard it as a mishap. It must be the biggest thing that's ever happened to me. Just consider my present position. I haven't a care in the world. I'm like the care-free beggar that laughed and laughed—and hadn't a shirt to his back. You see, I remember what matters. But my personal past doesn't matter. 'Present mirth hath present laughter.' That's out of *O Mistress Mine*. What does anything matter, so long as I can remember Shakespeare's Songs?"

“That’s you, sir,” cried Jordan. “That’s you. That’s how you talked in The Forest, the first time we met. I learned of you, I did.”

But Preston was frowning a little and holding his chin.

“I think, sir, if I may say so, that we should take some steps to find out who you are. I mean, if we don’t, others will take some action. And for this to get into the papers would be most distasteful to you.”

“Good God,” said the soldier. And then, “We can’t have that.”

“Precisely, sir. Now have you a wallet or note-case?”

The soldier felt in his pockets and shook his head. He produced his gold cigarette-case.

“Only that,” he said.

“No engraving inside, sir?”

The soldier flicked it open and regarded the left-hand leaf.

“Only a kind of cipher—two capital C’s entwined.”

He handed it to his host.

The friends considered it. Then Preston shook his head.

“And nothing else, sir?”

From his waistcoat pocket, the soldier produced half a dozen one-pound notes.

“I’m afraid that’s all.”

“In that case, sir, we shall have to approach your tailor. Unless I’m much mistaken, the tailor that you employ is Tendon’s of Savile Row. I’m ready to swear that those trousers were made by Mr. Philbeach. You see, sir, for twenty-nine years I was valet to the Marquess of Eyre. Not his present lordship—his uncle. And we used to go to Tendon’s for all our clothes. If you feel in your right-hand breast-pocket, I think you’ll find their tab.”

A moment later the soldier was in his shirt-sleeves, and the three men were peering at the label which told them the truth.

TENDON AND CO.
C. Gore Esq. 7/6/39
22 SAVILE ROW, LONDON.

“Gore,” said the soldier, quietly. “Gore. Well, it might have been worse. I suppose C stands for Charles. I do hope it isn’t Cecil.”

“Well, you’ll very soon know, sir,” said Preston. “From here to their shop is less than five minutes’ walk.”

“May I congratulate you on a truly beautiful piece of detective work?”

The ex-valet permitted himself a diffident smile.

“If you’ll pardon the expression, sir, such a matter was down my street.” As though to disown such licence, he cleared his throat. “You’re in Henry Jordan’s charge, sir: but if you would care for me to come with you to Savile Row . . .”

As Jordan slid him into his jacket—

“If you’ll be so good,” said the soldier, “Henry Jordan and I shall be greatly obliged. And now may I wash my hands before we go?”

Ten minutes later, squired by his two attendants, the soldier entered Tendon’s and stood looking down the length of the old-fashioned shop.

Six cutters, all in their shirt-sleeves, suspended their work and stared back. Then an elderly one left his counter, to make his way to the entrants with hurried steps.

He addressed himself to the soldier.

“Good morning, sir. Very nice to see you again.”

Here he glanced at Preston and smiled.

The latter addressed the soldier.

“Mr. Rathbone, sir—who probably made the coat which you’re wearing now.”

“That is so,” said the cutter, smiling. “You’ve taken good care of that, sir. It was a nice piece of cloth.”

The soldier smiled.

“I’ve little doubt I’ve a lot to thank you for. But, not content with that, I’m about to ask for more. Can you spare us a moment, Mr. Rathbone?”

“Of course, sir.” He pointed to a sofa. “Won’t you sit down?”

The soldier took his seat. The others stood by his side.

“Listen, Mr. Rathbone. These two kind gentlemen have been my rod and my staff. One, Mr. Jordan, found me; the other, Mr. Preston, has brought me to you.” The cutter blinked once or twice and then inclined his head. “You see, Mr. Rathbone, I’ve lost my memory.”

The cutter put a hand to his head and looked dazedly round.

“You—you mean you . . . Excuse me, sir, but I——”

“It’s a fact, Mr. Rathbone,” said Preston. “This gentleman’s memory left him an hour and a quarter ago. Mr. Jordan here, a very old friend of mine, encountered him in Burlington Gardens and, finding that he was in trouble, brought him to me. I recognized the cut of his clothes, and when we looked at your label we saw he was Mr. Gore.” He turned to address the soldier. “But that, sir, I think,” he concluded, “is as much as you know.”

“C. Gore,” said the soldier. “And but for you, Mr. Preston, I shouldn’t know that. D’you endorse that, Mr. Rathbone?”

The cutter smiled.

“I can go rather further, sir. Major Coridon Gore, D.S.O. and Bar, late of the Grenadier Guards. I had the honour, sir, of cutting your uniforms.”

“Coridon Gore!” cried Jordan. “Why, that’s the famous author!”

“Quite so,” said the cutter, quietly. “You took to writing, sir, when you retired from the Army, after the war.”

“A most handsome record,” murmured Preston.

“Dear me,” said Coridon. “I follow in the steps of Horace. After he’d—er—left the Army, he settled down to write.”

“You remembered that, sir,” said the cutter.

“Ah, yes. My fund of general knowledge seems to be safe and sound. But I can remember nothing which has to do with me. Where do I live, Mr. Rathbone?”

“At Halliard, sir. That’s a little village in Hampshire.”

“There you are,” said Jordan. “Hampshire it is.”

“Well, I’m glad I live in the country. London gives me the impression of accommodating rather more people than it was built to receive. Still, at the moment I’m there. Where should I be staying, Mr. Rathbone?”

“Some six months ago, sir, you were staying at The Savoy.”

“Dear me,” said Coridon. “That rings a golden bell. Don’t say I’m a millionaire.”

The others laughed.

“No, I wouldn’t say that, sir. But you always knew how to live.”

“An admirable trait, sir,” said Preston, “if I may make so bold.”

“There now!” cried Mr. Rathbone. “It’s just come into my head. You may be staying with your sister in Curzon Street.”

“My sister? We’re getting on. What’s she like, Mr. Rathbone? I charge you to tell me the truth.”

The cutter was smiling.

“You need have no fear, sir,” he said. “Mrs. Ruthven is a great beauty, and as gay and charming a lady as ever I saw. When she comes into this shop, she lights it up.”

“Oh, isn’t that nice?” said the Major. “Supposing she’d had flat feet and a broken nose. I mean, you must see my position. I’ve got to start to love her all over again. But if she’s as sweet as you say—well, I’m half-way home.”

As the laughter subsided—

“Mr. Rathbone,” said Preston, “from what you say I think you have the lady’s acquaintance.”

“A customer of ours, Mr. Preston. Not very long ago I made her a riding-coat. And Mr. Bursnell there made her a pair of jodhpurs.”

“Then, with the Major’s permission, you go and ring her up.” Mr. Rathbone started. “Someone has got to tell her—the Major can’t just turn up. And, as his blood relation, the lady should be informed as soon as may be.”

“Oh, dear,” said Mr. Rathbone.

“Mr. Rathbone,” said Coridon, smiling, “you have my sympathy. But if you do it as gently as you have dealt with me, I can’t imagine a better go-between.

“The Major’s right,” said Jordan. “You’re just the man to do it. You’ve got such a gentle way.”

Such flattery was toothsome: but it was not jumping-powder, and the elderly cutter disliked the look of the course. He was not made for such

things. Indeed, he was on the point of begging to be excused, when he met the ex-valet's eye. . . . To withstand the imperious direction issuing from that orb called for a much stronger will than poor Mr. Rathbone possessed. His protests died unlodged; and, without another word, he hastened the length of the shop and disappeared.

Cleopatra was arranging some flowers in the little drawing-room.

"I know," she said, thinking aloud, "I'll send her a note. Jenkins can take it to-morrow at eight o'clock. 'I simply must see you, darling, some time to-day. Luncheon, of course, if you'd like. But just whenever you please. Don't write your answer. Tell Jenkins.' Yes, that'll do. Oh, damn these roses. I thought that bowl was all right, and it looks like hell."

Here the telephone rang.

Cleopatra picked up the receiver.

"Mr. Rathbone of Tendon's, madam, to speak to you."

Cleopatra's brows drew into a frown.

Then—

"All right. Put him through," she said. "Hullo, Mr. Rathbone. Mrs. Ruthven here."

"Good morning, madam. I'm really ringing up for the Major—Major Gore."

"Oh, yes. He's lunching with me. Does this mean he's going to be late?"

"Not—not exactly, madam."

A frightened look repaired to Cleo's eyes.

"What's wrong, Mr. Rathbone?"

Beads of sweat were standing on Mr. Rathbone's brow.

"There's nothing wrong, madam. Please let me assure you of that. The Major's wonderful, madam—the picture of health, and more. I haven't seen him like this since before he was wounded, madam. So gay and laughing—just as he used to be."

"You didn't ring me up, Mr. Rathbone, to tell me that."

"No, madam, I didn't. But please bear that in mind. The Major's himself again."

"Go on."

"Well, madam, here it is. He's lost his memory."

There was a long silence.

Shaking all over, Cleo took a step sideways to reach a chair. When again she put the receiver up to her ear, she had to use both her hands to hold it still.

"Are you there, madam?"

"Yes," said Cleo, faintly. "I'll be all right in a moment. Don't go away."

She laid the receiver down and leaned forward and down herself, till her head was between her knees. So for perhaps twenty seconds. . . . Then she sat up, leaned back and picked up the receiver again.

"Are you there, Mr. Rathbone? I'm sorry. I'm all right now. . . . D'you mean he remembers nothing?"

"Nothing, madam. He didn't know who he was. But, happily, madam, someone who knew him encountered him in the street. But he only knew him to talk to—he didn't know his name. So he took him to the house of a friend where he could sit down. And, to cut a long story short, they thought to look in his coat for the tailor's tab or label. And so they came here. He's in excellent hands, madam. Two most respectable people are looking after him. One, a Mr. Preston, I've known for years. He used to be valet, madam, to the Marquess of Eyre. So he's taking care of the Major. Not that he needs any care—he's like a boy out of school. But he can remember nothing."

"I understand. And you told him of me. Did he ask you to ring me up?"

"Yes, madam, he did. He'd no idea he'd a sister. And when I told him of you, he—he made us all laugh."

"What did he say?" said Cleopatra.

"He expressed the hope, madam, that you were beautiful."

In spite of herself, Cleo smiled.

"And what did you say, Mr. Rathbone?"

"Madam, I had the great pleasure to tell him the truth."

"Thank you. Now let's get this clear. He remembers nothing at all?"

"Nothing of himself, madam. He didn't know he'd been in the Army. But his general knowledge seems to be quite all right. So's his intelligence, madam. No one would ever dream there was anything wrong."

"I see. Now listen to me. I must have time to think. No matter why, *I must have time to think*. He was to have lunched with me, but that must be off. So don't tell him, Mr. Rathbone. Very big issues are at stake, and we've got to play for time. For one thing only, his doctor must be consulted. And there are other things, with which I cannot deal, if he is here with me. You say he's in very good hands. Will his friends be prepared to keep him this afternoon?"

"They'll be only too happy, madam. I'm sure of that."

"They must keep him very quiet. This is his brain, Mr. Rathbone, as I think you probably know. He's staying at The Savoy, but don't let him go back. If he could lie down after luncheon and get some sleep . . ."

"I'm sure that can be arranged."

"And as soon as I can, I'll ring up and come and get him myself. But I must have time, Mr. Rathbone. . . . And now I'll speak to him. Will you go and get him, please?"

"Certainly, madam. One moment."

With immense relief, wiping the sweat from his face, the cutter hastened back to the shop.

"Mrs. Ruthven would be much obliged if you would speak to her, sir."

"Of course," said Coridon, rising. . . .

A few seconds later, he picked the receiver up.

"Er, hullo."

"Corin, darling, how nice to hear your voice. I hear you've had a bereavement."

"That's right—er—darling."

"Name of Cleopatra. Cleo, for short."

"Thank you, Cleo, my sweet. I'm told you're lovely to look at. When can we meet? Oh, what a delightful laugh! Bereavement, perhaps: but I'm not going into mourning. I'm looking forward to life."

"It's going to be fun, Corin. I envy you. We've always been very happy and now we're going to be happy all over again. And now please listen, darling. As you will believe, I wasn't expecting this."

"I wasn't, either, my love. You have my sympathy."

"But you feel all right, Corin darling?"

"On the top of the world, my sweet. How could I feel anything else, when I'm talking to you? Oh, dear, I do want to see you. You sound so very good."

"Rathbone swears that you are in excellent hands."

"Salt of the earth, Cleo. You know, we're very lucky to have two such excellent names. Mine appeared as C on the tailor's tab. And I was *en tous les états*, in case I was Cecil Gore. But Coridon is *chic*. *Coridon's Song*, by John Chalkhill. Isn't that right?"

"I've no doubt it is, Corin darling. But you're much wiser than me. And now let's come back to earth. My impulse is to rush to Savile Row and throw myself into your arms. But I mustn't do it, darling. I've things I simply must see to this afternoon. And so we must wait till this evening, when I shall come and get you—not later than six o'clock. Till then, I beg and pray you to keep very quiet. Such a thing as this must be a shock to the system. And London's no health resort."

"I'm with you there. I'm thankful I live in the country. I mean, so Rathbone says."

"We'll get you back there as soon as ever we can. But, Corin, lie down after lunch and take some rest."

"I will. I promise. I'm sure they'll let me do that. Do you know where to find me?"

"Not yet. Let me speak to your host."

"I'll get him. Goodbye, Cleo, darling. Till six o'clock."

"Earlier, perhaps. Goodbye."

Cleopatra leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath.

Thirty seconds later—

"George Preston, at your service, madam."

"Mr. Preston, I'm wild to meet you and thank you for all you've done. And so I shall—this evening. But this is for your private ear. My brother was badly wounded in 1945. A head wound. His reason was saved, thank God: but he's had to go very quietly ever since. He's had a few lapses, and this, I suppose, will be the last. But before I see him, I simply must find his doctor and take his advice. My brother must not suspect this. But that is why I can't see him this afternoon. Please tell me your telephone-number and where you live."

The information passed and Cleo wrote it down.

"And your number, madam?"

"Quite right. Here you are." She gave the particulars slowly, and Preston took them down. "Very well. I shall be with you not later than six o'clock. Please keep my brother most quiet. I'm thankful to think he's with you."

"Madam, I give you my word, Major Gore will be safe with me."

"God bless you," said Cleo. "Goodbye."

She put the receiver back, rose and passed to a sofa, lay back and closed her eyes.

"Oh, my God," she wailed, clasping her head in her hands. "First the elm, and now this. Shall I ever forget to-day? His memory gone—just now. Talk about chucking a spanner into the works. No party to-night, no marriage, no trip to Italy. He'll have to go back to Halliard as soon as ever he can. But not before Sunday. He won't remember the elm, but it's better that no trace should appear. I suppose—I *suppose* that this is a permanent loss. That's where Berserk can help. And what of Niobe? She can take it, of course, but what a shattering blow! Oh, my God, it's too dreadful. And Florence . . ." Cleopatra sat up very straight and put her hands in her lap. "No good going on thinking, or I shall go mad. The point is what do I do?"

After a moment's reflection, she rose, passed to the table, drew a pad towards her and picked up a pen.

She began to write:—

1 See Berserk

On further reflection, however, she struck that out.

1 See Niobe
2 Berserk
3 Telephone Arthur

4 Tell Pompey
5 The Savoy—collect his things
6 Put off George Medallion
7 Telephone Florence
8 Fetch Corin

"I think that's all for the moment. All. I suppose I can do it. I've got to. For twopence I'd drive to Cork Street, sit by his blessed side and let everything rip. But I can't do that. Whatever must he think of his sister? 'I've got things I must see to.' More important things than my darling. . . ."

Cleopatra burst into tears. . . .

After a minute, perhaps, she dried her eyes.

Then she knelt down and prayed.

"O God, you helped me this morning. Please help me again. I'm sure you know best and I'm sure that all will be well. But my burden is rather heavy. Please give me strength to carry it as I should."

Then she stood up and turned to the telephone.

"Dr. Berserk's consulting rooms, Mason."

"Very good, madam."

The connection was made.

"Dr. Berserk's secretary speaking."

"Mrs. Ruthven here. I rather think that's Miss Railton."

"That's right, Mrs. Ruthven. Niobe's with the doctor."

"Will you ask her to give me a ring as soon as she's free?"

"Of course."

"One thing more. Strictly between you and me, is the doctor deeply engaged?"

"He's twenty minutes behind. I don't think he will be through before half past one."

"And after that?"

"I expect he'll have lunch sent in and start on his letters at two. His next appointment's at three."

"I see. Thank you very much."

“Were you wanting to see him, Mrs. Ruthven?”

“Most urgently. But don’t tell Niobe.”

“I won’t: but I’ll bear it in mind.”

“I’m terribly grateful. Goodbye.”

Her upper lip caught in her teeth, Cleopatra thought very hard.

Five minutes later, perhaps, the telephone rang.

“Miss Coke, madam.”

“Put her through. . . . Well, Niobe, darling.”

“O virtual sister-in-law, what can I do for you?”

“I want a word with you, darling, at two o’clock.”

“Could you make it five minutes to?”

“Of course.”

“Will Corin be with you?”

“No, he’s not in on this. He’ll wait outside.”

“Give him my love. Goodbye.”

Cleopatra glanced at her watch.

Five and twenty to one.

She decided to ring up Pompey before she did anything else.

One minute later—

“Colbourne, Winter and Colbourne.”

“Mrs. Arthur Ruthven to speak to Mr. Pompey.”

“One moment, please. . . . Pompey Colbourne here.”

“Cleo, Pompey. Am I interrupting? Or have you five minutes to spare?”

“Have I time for a pretty lady? Go on, my dear.”

“Hold on to something, Pompey. I’ve been through it, and it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“I can take it, Cleo. Say on.”

“Our blessed Corin has lost his memory.”

There was a deathly silence.

After a moment or two—

"Are you still there?" said Cleo.

"Yes, my dear. Your statement took a little digesting. No doubt about this?"

"None. I've spoken with him, and he's right at the top of his bent. His brain is clearer than ever. He's like he used to be, Pompey, before he met it in 1945."

"Well, that's a great mercy. But where do we go from here? Sorry, Cleo, but I'm still a little bit dazed."

"Of course you are, Pompey dear. So listen to me, and I'll tell you as much as I know."

When her report had been made—

"So there we are," she concluded. "He is in most excellent hands and I'm going to Cork Street to fetch him not later than six. At two I see Niobe at Berserk's. Pity me, Pompey, for then I must break it to her. Then we shall see Berserk together—I'm going to force my way in. We simply must have his counsel."

"I entirely agree," said Pompey.

"I've no idea what he will say, but I think he'll advise that Corin returns to the cottage as soon as he can. I mean, there must be a reaction to such a—such a convulsion as this."

"I entirely agree. And—his marriage?"

"Must be postponed. I mean, how can it take place?"

"It can't, of course. But I waited for you to say it. Oh dear, what a nightmare business! And now tell me how I can help."

"First, The Savoy, Pompey. I want his stuff brought here, for of course he'll stay here to-night."

"Consider that done, Cleo. They know me well and they know I'm a friend of his. And I'll settle his bill and cancel his dinner to-night."

"Good. Can you get hold of George Medallion?"

"I will, if you like. But I haven't met him, Cleo. If I may say so, Arthur's the man for that. Is Arthur aware of what's happened?"

"I'm just going to ring him up."

"Shall I do that for you?"

"Oh, Pompey, if you would. I wish you could come to-night; but——"

"Oh, no. The fewer, the better. We mustn't rush the lad. From what you say, he's doing terribly well: but the sooner he's back at the cottage—— Oh, my God, Florence!"

"She's last on my list, Pompey. I suppose I shall still be alive by the time I get to her."

"My poor, dear Cleo. I am so terribly sorry. It isn't fair."

"I'll manage somehow, Pompey. I knew I could count on you."

"I'll have his gear packed and I'll bring it along myself. If you're in and you want to see me, you've only to say the word. Except for that, I shall be at the office till six. After that, at home till all hours. You've only to ring me up."

"Pray for us, Pompey. Goodbye."

The receiver went back, and Cleo shot a glance at her wrist.

A quarter to one.

"The idea of lunch makes me sick, but if I don't swallow some food, I suppose I shall faint. A tray up here would be best."

Once more to the telephone.

"Yes, madam."

"I shan't lunch downstairs, Mason. Please serve me something here. A tray will do. Oh, and a brandy and soda."

"Certainly, madam. At once?"

"As soon as you can. And Mason."

"Madam."

"Tell Jenkins I want the car at twenty minutes to two."

"Very good, madam."

Cleo put back the receiver and looked at her list. Then she crossed off four items and added one.

Tell Jenkins and Mason.

★ ★ ★

Back in the snuggery in Cork Street, Coridon sank into a chair and lighted a cigarette.

"What should I have done without you two good men? Before we go any further, promise me this—that when I'm back in my home and have got the hang of the place, you two will come down and see me and let me entertain you."

"Indeed we will, sir," cried Jordan; and Preston smiled a very respectful assent.

"And we'll talk of old times," said Corin. "Of our visit to Savile Row and of keeping poor Mr. Rathbone up to the bit. I saw you fix him, Mr. Preston."

The latter covered his eyes and began to laugh.

"You don't miss much, sir," he said. "But something had to be done."

"So it had. Fate had cast him for that particular part: and I have no doubt that he played it extremely well. But you forced him on to the stage. Hasn't my sister got an attractive voice?"

"Most charming, sir. Reminded me of Lady Mary's—she's now the Duchess of Wells. Such a beautiful little girl."

"What memories you must have!"

For the next twenty minutes, the ex-valet held the stage. Then Jordan must describe in detail the first and the second occasions on which Corin and he had met. That, in the course of such relation, he should commend celibacy was natural enough. And Preston added his sanction.

"If I were married, sir, I shouldn't be here. No woman would be content to help me to run my bar. She'd want to have her friends looking in and her nieces to stay."

"There's a lot in that," said Corin. There his expression changed and a hand went up to his mouth. "God in heaven!" he cried. "I can't be married, can I? Oh, what a shocking thought!"

"I'm sure, sir," said Jordan, "I'm sure you weren't when we met. I mean, sir, when we were conversing, I told you how I felt about marriage: and if you'd been married, I think you'd have taken me on."

"Very true," said Coridon. "So I should."

"I think, sir," said Preston, "that Mrs. Ruthven would surely have mentioned the fact."

"So she would have," said Coridon. "To you, if not to me." He drew a deep breath. "You two will well appreciate my relief. With a sister, a man can deal: if she's not too good, poor dear, he's happy to do what he can to make up for her lack of charm. But a wife's a very different matter. Fancy a wife of your bosom you've never met!" As though to shut out such a vision, he covered his eyes. "She *might* be an Amaryllis: but then—she might not. Supposing I'd married out of pity. . . . Well, now the incentive would have gone. Oh dear, oh dear!"

The ex-valet cleared his throat.

"I shouldn't concern yourself, sir. I feel it is most unlikely. But, if you had happened to marry, with such a sister before you, I think you'd have chosen well."

"That's a good point," said Corin.

"Indeed, sir, if I may say so, I think such a notion may very well be dismissed. And now about some luncheon. What would you like to eat? Something light, perhaps. May I suggest some oysters?"

"What could be better? And how appropriate! To-day 'the world's mine oyster'. I have an idea that's out of *The Merry Wives*. Er, *absit omen*," he added, under his breath.

"And a pint of draught stout, sir. I wouldn't advise wine or spirits, if I may make so bold. Your case is akin to concussion: and I've always understood that, in a case of concussion, all stimulants should be avoided for twenty-four hours."

Coridon smiled.

"You're very solicitous."

The ex-valet inclined his head.

"It's our privilege, sir, to have you in our charge. And I feel that, after luncheon, you would be well advised to take some rest."

"My sister made me promise that I would lie down."

"I had that in mind, sir. A bedroom will be at your disposal."

Coridon looked at Jordan.

“He thinks of everything. I understood this was a bar: I find it a nursing-home. And now please let me say this. You two have given me your morning: please do not feel you must give me your afternoon. If Mr. Preston will keep me until my sister comes——”

“Sir,” said Jordan, “I give you my solemn word, we’ll be sorry to let you go.”

“That’s very true, sir,” said Preston. “Neither Henry nor I will ever forget to-day.”

Coridon smiled.

“You two good fellows,” he said. “Neither shall I. By the way, what’s the date?”

“The last day of September, sir, 195—”

“Well, every last day of September we’ll meet again. Next year you shall be my guests.”

Henry Jordan was smiling.

“You may be married by then, sir.”

Coridon shook his head.

“My sister shall do the honours. I think she ought to be there. She’s been in on this to-day.”

At precisely two minutes to two, Cleopatra rang the bell of 66 Wimpole Street.

Almost at once a servant opened the door, and she entered the hall.

As she did so, Niobe appeared.

The two women kissed.

“Darling, I’ve only a moment. I did say five minutes to.”

“What’s happening at two o’clock?”

“I’m taking his letters. Old cases, with which I’m familiar. Freda will deal with the new. Oh my God, there’s his buzzer. Cleo, you’ll have to wait. I’ve got to fly.”

“I can’t wait. Tell him I’m here and I’d love a word with him. Only a word, my darling—as much to thank him for his interest as anything else.”

“Come along. I’m sure he’ll see you. But only a moment, darling. He’s full right up.”

Cleopatra was standing without the mahogany door. This was not quite shut. Niobe’s delicate fingers were holding its edge.

Niobe’s voice was a murmur.

Then Berserk spoke out.

“Just for a minute, then. I’d like to see her again.”

Niobe swung the door open, and Cleopatra entered the room.

The physician rose and came forward.

“How d’ye do, Mrs. Ruthven. Very nice to see you again. Pray sit down.” Cleopatra heard the door close. “So your brother proposes to rob me in two days’ time.”

Still standing, Cleopatra shook her head.

Berserk stiffened.

“What’s happened?”

“He’s lost his memory.”

The two stood still as statues, each looking upon the other, but saying nothing at all.

So, for perhaps ten seconds.

Then—

“Sit down,” said Berserk, and took the chair he had left. Cleopatra sat down on a sofa. “Does Niobe know?”

“No,” said Cleopatra. “D’you think we could have her in?”

Berserk reflected.

Then—

“Yes,” he said. “She’s got to be told and I’d like her to hear what I say.”

He pressed the push on his table.

Niobe appeared and stood waiting.

“Shut the door and sit down by Mrs. Ruthven.”

Niobe obeyed.

Berserk nodded, and Cleopatra took a deep breath.

“Listen, Niobe,” she said. “Corin is terribly well and right at the top of his bent. But—hold on to me, darling—he’s lost his memory.”

Slowly the blood drained out of Niobe’s face.

Her lips a little apart, the girl stared straight before her, not seeming to breathe. She gave the impression of having been turned into stone. Then she swayed, put a hand to her head and fainted.

Berserk took charge. . . .

After a minute or two—

“Drink it up,” said Berserk. “You know the drill.”

Niobe drained the glass and handed it back.

As she wiped her lips—

“Sorry,” she said. And then, “I’m all right now.”

Berserk stepped to a basin and rinsed the glass.

As he returned to his table—

“Sit where you are,” he said, “and listen to me.”

He took his seat.

“When and where did this happen, Mrs. Ruthven?”

“At eleven o’clock this morning, in the West End.”

“Have you seen him?”

“No. But he and I have talked on the telephone. He’s wonderful, Dr. Berserk. Finds it a great adventure. He actually made me laugh. He’s just as he used to be before the crash.”

“Where is he now?”

“In Cork Street. In excellent hands. A retired valet has taken charge of him. An elderly man, of course, who’s been in very good service for many years. I spoke to him, too, and he’s promised to keep him quiet and see that he rests. I hope and believe he’s asleep at the present time.”

“Very good,” said Berserk, nodding.

"And I am going to fetch him not later than six o'clock."

"I see. Now, first, I'll deal with his condition: and then we'll all three consider the line you must take.

"When Niobe mentioned him first, I turned up my notes on his case. As I think you suspect, I didn't agree with my colleagues; but that's neither here nor there. At the end of my notes I wrote my opinion down.

"Before I give it to you, let me say this. It is right that you should know what has happened: but, if you are to understand, I must speak in parable—not even in metaphor. Please bear that in mind.

"Very well. This is what I wrote.

> *This brain is unimpaired, but it is out of alignment. It has been, so to speak, unseated by what occurred. If for the next few years he leads a quiet, regular life, I think it possible that one day it will go back.*

"That is what I wrote down. And when Niobe told me of his lapses, I felt quite sure I was right. The brain had at last begun to return to its proper bed."

"Will you both come here for a moment?" The two rose and stood before him. "You see this inkstand. The cut-glass bottle is sunk in a shallow, silver well." He moved it a very little out of its well. "Now it's not properly seated, for one of its edges is resting upon the rim." He touched it lightly. "That's its first movement back: that movement occasioned Major Gore's first lapse." He touched it again. "That occasioned his second lapse." He touched it once more, and it fell, with a click, into place. "And that more important movement has occasioned his third and last. Don't forget that this is a parable. Brains don't really do that.

"And now sit down again."

The two obeyed.

"If I am right, all his troubles are over. But the final movement was a considerable shock to his brain. That member is now back in its seat—and he is himself again. But the price he has had to pay is the loss of his memory."

Cleopatra spoke.

"Will it return, Dr. Berserk?"

“That I can’t possibly say. But, if it does return, it won’t return for some time. And now for the line you must take.

“For the next six months he should lead a very quiet life. No excitement, no visits to London, no racing, no noisy parties—nothing like that. In fact, he should lead the quiet life which I gather he’s always led. And then, at the end of six months, he can do what he likes.

“Now it’s easy for me to prescribe. Any fool can do that. So I’m not going to leave it there. Together, we three must consider the best way out.

“I’m afraid we must all be agreed that the marriage, which had been arranged, cannot take place, as it was to, in two days’ time.”

“I appreciate that,” said Niobe, firmly enough.

Cleopatra covered her eyes.

“The excitement of making new friends—for every one will be new—will be quite enough. That he should be required to enter the married state with a girl he’s only just met is quite unthinkable.”

“If only . . .” said Cleopatra.

“Ah,” said Berserk. “How many million tragedies lie behind those words. If this had occurred a month later—even a week. . . .” He left his chair and started to pace the room. “A month would have been quite perfect—for he’d have been settled in his cottage, with Niobe by his side. And there’s a thing I don’t like. I don’t like his living alone for the next six months. His housekeeper may be devoted—she’ll see that he comes to no harm. But he ought to have a companion—someone of his own class. You see, he’ll be wild to talk—to learn all about his past, to discuss his ‘great adventure’. But he can’t change hats with a servant—he should have a familiar friend. Can you go and stay, Mrs. Ruthven—for two or three weeks? I think you can see what I mean. It won’t be ’a great adventure’, if he is to take it alone.”

“I’ll go,” said Niobe.

The others were staring at her.

“Darling,” said Cleo, “you——”

“Does he know he isn’t married?”

“No. He never asked.”

"Tell him he is. Keep him in Curzon Street till Sunday. Then drive him down. And I shall be there to put my arms about him and bring him into our home."

"My sweet," said Cleopatra. . . .

"I know I'm taking a risk. He may not—take to me. I shall know at once, if he doesn't; and then, after three or four days, I can be called away and we can wash it out."

"He'll fall for you," said Berserk. "He fell for you once, so he'll fall for you again. It's the perfect solution, of course. But think what you are proposing. One day you can tell him the truth: and then he will marry you. But until then, my dear, you will be Major Gore's mistress. . . ."

"I'd rather be his mistress than anyone else's wife."

"I can't let you do it," wailed Cleopatra. "It isn't fair."

"I'm going to do it, darling. You'd do it—you know you would. Corin's the biggest thing in both of our lives. I'm only helping myself to my heart's desire."

"Think it over, darling. He will be staking nothing: you're staking all you've got."

"Cleo, Cleo, how could I do anything else? Fancy sitting here and thinking of Corin lonely—for lack of a mate. And just when he needs one most."

Berserk lifted his voice.

"Her mind's made up, Mrs. Ruthven. Take her away with you. You can settle the details together this afternoon. Fetch him at six, as arranged; and I will come round at seven—that will be natural enough—and say he's to keep his bed for twenty-four hours. That'll give Niobe time to get to Hampshire and take her place in his home. D'you think the housekeeper will play?"

"Yes. She'd give her life for him and she worships Niobe."

"Good. And now—" he glanced at his wrist—"I'm going to dismiss you two very charming ladies."

"Your letters," cried Niobe.

"Don't be absurd, my dear, but send Miss Railton in. Take her away, Mrs. Ruthven—you've got a lot to arrange. And I shall be with you again at

seven o'clock."

"I hope," said Cleopatra, somehow, "I hope I shall find the words to thank you then."

Berserk stepped to the door.

"All's very well," he said, quietly. " 'Jack shall have Jill, Nought shall go ill.' Shakespeare is always right."

With that, he swung the door open.

As Niobe followed Cleopatra, she hung on her heel.

Then she put up her face and kissed his cheek.

An hour and a quarter later—

"Reservations?" said Niobe.

"All cancelled," said Pompey.

"And Arthur?" said Cleopatra.

"Arthur will find George Medallion and put him wise. I ventured to suggest that he shouldn't come back before seven. He entirely agreed, but said he would sit at White's and you'd only to ring him up."

"Admirable." The telephone rang. "That'll be Florence." Cleopatra picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Major Gore's housekeeper, madam."

At a gesture from Cleopatra, Niobe listened in.

"Put her through. . . . That you, Florence? How's everything going on?"

"They're doin' wonders, madam. 'As to be seen to be believed. The garden's clear; the 'ole's bin all filled up, an' a lovely rhododendron growin' instead."

"Very good indeed. Now listen, Florence. I've told Mr. Pompey, and he's coming down to-morrow, to see for himself. He'll be with you soon after half past ten."

"An' will I be glad to see 'im? 'S God's mercy the Major was away, but I do want someone to talk to who knows what it means."

"Poor Florence, of course you do."

“An’ I’ve been thinkin’, madam, I don’ feel like leavin’ now. I’d love to be there on Sunday: but, after this, I wouldn’ be ’appy away. An’ I’d ’ave to play up an’ pretend that all was well. An’ all the time this dreadful cloud above us that ’e can’ see.”

Florence burst into tears.

“Don’t cry, Florence dear. We’re doing all we can and it—it’s going to be quite all right.”

“But we can’ bring it back,” sobbed Florence. “ ’Is lovely tree.”

“I know. But I know Corin. You needn’t worry, Florence. All will be well. And now about your not coming up. I understand how you feel. I should feel exactly the same. Talk it over with Mr. Pompey and see what he says.”

“I will, indeed, madam. I’m so thankful ’e’s comin’ down.”

“Everything else all right?”

“Yes; an’ the furniture’s come. Looks a treat, it does—I was sure it would. Mr. Pompey ’ll stay to lunch?”

“I quite expect so, Florence. And now I’ve got to rush.”

“Goodbye, madam.”

“Goodbye.”

Cleopatra replaced the receiver.

“One mercy, Pompey,” she said. “Florence suggests she should give the wedding a miss.”

“So I gathered. What could be better? More. If I know Florence, she won’t discuss it with me, for her mind is already made up. She won’t leave the cottage now. What is more to the point, she’ll tell her deputies that their services won’t be required. What about Ariel?”

Cleopatra glanced at her watch.

“Back any minute now. I don’t know what to do.”

“You must tell her the truth,” said Pompey. “She’s too deep in. After all, she’s seventeen. And she’ll think it’s marvellous.”

The two women regarded each other. Then they began to laugh.

“That’s better,” said Pompey. “Now only one thing more.” He held up an envelope. “This was with two or three papers of which I have taken charge.

It is addressed to *The Times*. Corin had it all ready. I think he meant to post it on Sunday afternoon."

"The announcement," said Niobe.

Cleopatra covered her mouth.

The solicitor nodded. Then he uncovered the sheet and began to read.

> *Please insert the following in the appropriate column of your issue of Tuesday, October 4th. GORE-COKE. On October 2nd, quietly in London. . . .*

He stopped reading there and looked up.

"You'd better keep it," said Niobe. "It's evidence of his intention at any rate."

"With your consent," said Pompey, "I can do better than that. It doesn't say *at St. Crispin's*. Why shouldn't I post it on Sunday and let it go in?"

"No," said Niobe. "That's evidence of his marriage. And if he doesn't like me, I'm going to fade away."

"My darling . . . " said Cleopatra.

"Of course I am. I hope and believe he will—I shall know at once. But ____"

"You will ring me up," said Pompey, "on Sunday at four o'clock. If it's not convenient for you, Florence can make the call. Just 'Yes' or 'No'. Myself I've no fear. I know which the message will be. But I do most sincerely advise that you do as I say."

"Complications?" said Cleopatra.

"I can see none. With a little luck and care, no one but Florence will know that Niobe slept at Elm Cottage on Saturday night. On Monday Halliard will learn that the two have been quietly married and are in residence.

"And pray remember this—that few will see the announcement and none will question it. But there it will be."

"And Corin?"

"Corin will never see it. He doesn't take *The Times*."

"Pompey," said Cleopatra, "I think it's a good idea."

The two looked at Niobe.

"I don't care for myself," she said. "But I couldn't bear it if mud was thrown at him."

"Then ring me up on Sunday—just as a matter of form."

So another matter was settled. Pompey put it down on his list and Niobe added to hers, 'Florence to ring up Pompey on Sunday at four'.

The lawyer looked up.

"I expect you've tied up this end—but just in case. Where's Niobe now?"

"That's fixed," said Niobe. "I'm staying with my great-aunt in Shropshire—Uncle George Medallion's mother: she really does exist. Cleo can't get through, for the lines are down: but I shall be back at the cottage to-morrow afternoon."

"When Cleo will ring you up. Very good indeed."

"George Millet," said Cleopatra. "I'd better get on to him now."

"If you would," said Pompey.

The call was made.

"One thing more," said Pompey. "You say you're expecting Ariel any minute now."

"Oh, my God. That's right. She's been staying two nights with the Boltons. I've remembered her, only to forget her, all day long."

"Well, you can't have her round your neck until after seven o'clock." He looked at his watch. "Meet her when she arrives and send her to change. Tea at The Dorchester. Good, kind Uncle Pompey will call for her not later than twenty to five."

"Pompey, you are an angel."

"I'll tell her the dinner's off and I'll tell her why. And I'll say that Corin is staying here to-night. I strongly advise that you tell her the rest to-morrow, while Corin's lying abed. And now I must go."

He kissed Cleopatra's fingers. Then he took Niobe's hand and held it tight.

"*Au revoir*, great heart," he said. "I'll call for you to-morrow at half past nine."

Then he drove to Larkspurs' and, after a word with George Millet, was given the wedding-ring.

Cleopatra glanced again at her wrist.

A quarter past five.

"Now I'll read it right through," she said.

My dear Florence,

The Major is in great form—in better form than I've seen him since 1945. But a dreadful thing has happened. HE'S LOST HIS MEMORY. He can remember nothing. He didn't even know who he was. By the mercy of God he was found and I've got him safe. But he didn't know me, Florence, and I know that he won't know you. But he is so gay and charming that it doesn't seem to matter at all. As for himself, he thinks it's the greatest fun.

Well, the marriage is off, of course. But we're, all of us, going to pretend that it's taken place. It's the best thing for him, Florence. So Miss Niobe's coming down to take up the role of his wife. Mr. Pompey's coming with her, to help you both.

I shall bring the Major back on Sunday, so you will have twenty-four hours in which to fix things up. He will believe that he's married, that he went up to London on business, while she went to visit an aunt. Now please remember this—Till Sunday afternoon, no one must see her or know that she is there.

She and Mr. Pompey will tell you all the rest.

I know this will be a great shock; but, if you can't take it, Florence, nobody can. And, at least, we need worry no longer about the elm. For he remembers nothing.

Yours affectionately,
Cleopatra Ruthven.

"I shan't read you the postscript; so wait while I read it myself."

PS. No words of mine can express my love and admiration for Miss Niobe. You see Dr. Berserk said he must go at once to the cottage and stay there very quietly for the next six months: but he

also said that a man in his condition ought not to live alone. Miss Niobe suggested this solution and flatly refused to consider anything else. She is throwing her name in the dust and is risking all she has, for the sake of our darling's health. For remember, Florence, he hasn't seen her yet. . . . I'm sure he'll love her—I'm sure. How can he do anything else?

Cleopatra covered the sheet.

"Seal the envelope, darling. It's better so."

"Very well."

Niobe dropped the envelope into her bag.

"And now I think you ought to be going. Drop me on your way."

"Oh, Niobe, Niobe."

The two clung together, as children that fear the dark.

Five minutes later they passed downstairs together and into the waiting car.

"Go on, Mr. Jordan," said Coridon. "You interest me no end. But you mustn't say 'only a tanner'. William the Conqueror's grandfather followed your trade."

"What? Not the great King of England?"

"To whom we owe The Forest in which we met. His mother was a tanner's daughter."

"God bless my soul," said Jordan. "I never knew that."

"And now continue, my friend. What we know as 'kid gloves', you say, are not made from the skin of a kid. . . ."

Whilst the two were conversing, Preston was busy next door. His very private bar would be opened at six. He was urging his three bar-tenders and 'seeing to things himself'.

"Joe, rub up this table. A damp cloth first. . . . Charlie, a new bulb here. That light's too dim. . . . Let me look at that coat, Percy. There you are—you've got a button undone. . . . Then go and get one from Mrs. Bowlby. . . ."

He stopped to inspect the dial of his pocket-watch.

Twenty minutes to six.

Mrs. Arthur Ruthven would have to pass through the bar: he hoped very much she would be before her time.

He raised his eyebrows, returned his watch to its pocket and straightened a chair.

In that moment, the front-door bell was rung.

"That'll be the lady, Joe."

"Very good, Mr. Preston," said Joe. He tossed his cloths to Charlie and left the bar.

When Joe swung open the door, the ex-valet was on the stairs.

Cleopatra entered the hall.

"George Preston, madam, at your service. Please come this way."

Cleopatra ascended the staircase, and Preston bowed.

"The Major, madam, is in an adjoining room." They began to cross the floor of the bar. "He's in splendid form, madam. He had a light lunch and he slept for more than two hours. Then he had some tea; and now he's with Henry Jordan: it was he who recognized him and brought him to me."

Cleopatra stopped.

"Give me your hand, Mr. Preston."

"Madam?"

"Give me your hand."

With a bow, the ex-valet obeyed.

Cleopatra took it and held it.

"I want to tell you something, which you will keep to yourself, which I can't tell him. He was to have been married on Sunday—two days from now."

"Good God," said Preston. And then, "Excuse me, madam, but what a terrible thing."

"That will explain, Mr. Preston, why I have been—rather busy this afternoon. But please remember this. From the moment I'd spoken with you, I knew that, till six o'clock, I could count my brother out. I knew he was

safe in your hands. And that left me free, Mr. Preston, to—to see those most closely concerned and generally do what I could to straighten things out. But for you, I couldn't have done it. As things are, I may not be able to talk to Mr. Jordan, as I am talking to you. So when I've gone, please tell him how terribly grateful I am for all he's done."

"Madam," said Preston, "it's been a great day for us both. He's a very great gentleman, madam, and he has treated us both as his familiar friends." He released Cleopatra's hand. "Would you like to come in now, madam?"

"Yes, please."

Preston stepped to the snuggery's door and opened it wide.

"Mrs. Ruthven, sir."

Coridon leapt to his feet.

"Well, Corin darling," said Cleo, and put out her arms.

Her brother regarded her, smiling.

"What a lovely picture," he said.

Two steps and his arms were about her, and hers were about his neck.

With her cheek against his—

"Kissing strange women," she said. "I can't believe you've ever done that before."

"My sweet," said Coridon, "that is but one of the many privileges which I am about to enjoy. I suppose it's all true. I haven't been translated, or something. I mean, I've had a heavenly day." He let Cleopatra go. "By the way, this is Mr. Jordan, who found the lost sheep straying, constituted himself its shepherd and brought it into the fold. Mr. Preston is the master of the fold. They're friends worth having, my darling."

"You're telling me. And now, beloved, I'm going to take you away. You're staying in Curzon Street—that's where I live. We shall have an hour together before my husband comes in. I think you'll like him, darling. He couldn't be spared to serve, but he got a G.C."

"That's rare. You must be proud of him."

"I'm proud of you both."

"And both are proud of you. How lovely you are, my sweet. You're like some beautiful portrait. . . ." He lifted his head, and a hand went up to his

mouth. “Some very famous picture, painted a long time ago.” The three were watching him closely. “Now who was it by? Not Romney. . . .” His head came down, and he smiled. “No, I must give it up: but I’m sure I’m right. She’s wearing a plumed hat and a maddening smile.”

Cleopatra was laughing.

“Darling, we must be going. I want to get you home. Thank the kind gentlemen nicely.”

Farewells were said: further meetings were agreed. Then the two were in the car which was heading West.

“Oh, my God,” said Coridon. “There’s a question I’ve got to ask. I meant to ask it at once; but your charm is so very dazzling, it went right out of my head.” His sister’s hand stole into his. “I’m sure it’s quite all right, but I’ve got to know. Don’t say I’m married, my darling.”

“Of course you’re married,” said Cleo. “I vetted the girl myself.”

“God Almighty,” said Corin.

“It’s quite all right,” said Cleo. “She’s better than me.”

“Impossible,” said her brother.

“She is indeed. She is a grave Bacchante. Not grave all the time, you know. Her laughter’s so lovely, it makes you want to shout. I’ve been trying to get her the whole of this afternoon.”

“So she—doesn’t know?”

“Not yet, my love. You’ll have to make do with me.”

“ ‘Make do’. Oh, Cleopatra. But is she really a winner?”

“I should never have passed her, Corin, if she hadn’t been up to your weight.”

“Oh, well. . . . Don’t say I’ve got seven children.”

“No, no children, darling.”

“Thank God for that.”

“She’s got a good name, too. Niobe.”

“Oh, sweet,” said Coridon. “What a gifted lot we are! Cleopatra, Niobe, Coridon. Our parents knew their job.”

“And your best friend is called Pompey.”

"Gorgeous," said Coridon. "Gorgeous. 'What's in a name?' said Shakespeare. I think that's the only mistake he ever made."

"I don't believe you've lost your memory."

"My general knowledge, my sweet, seems to have survived intact. That, to my great relief. It would have been so awful to be an ignorant fool." Here Coridon looked out of the car and to and fro. "But I don't seem to know my way. Where are we now?"

"In B-Bruton Street, my darling."

"Bruton Street. Once enriched by Horace Walpole—and later on, I believe, by Billy Pitt. Curzon Street sounds opulent. Do you and Arthur belong to the idle rich?"

"He's anything but idle," said Cleo. "He does a good deal of directing: and, as he's unusually honest, the Government very often seeks his advice. I may say he's refused a Knighthood—with my most full consent."

"I look forward to making his acquaintance. To return to my—my wife, Cleo dear. I can't get the fact that I'm married out of my head. Are you sure she's down my street? I mean, it would be so awful . . ."

"I've no fear at all, my darling. *Charmante, sérieuse, spirituelle.* Pallas Athene gone gay, with her helmet on the back of her head. Romney would have loved her."

"She must be a paragon."

"She is."

"Oh, well. . . . By the way, I'm told I'm an author."

"A well-known author, darling. Your books are highly commended and very popular."

"Dear me. I shall have to read them. Does the paragon toil or spin?"

"She draws—most terribly well. I think she's going to illustrate Shakespeare's Songs."

"I like the sound of that. Er, does she have to wear glasses?"

"No," said Cleo, laughing. "No artificial aids."

"Good. I hear that I—we live in Hampshire."

"In an eighteenth-century cottage. Two reception, three bed, two bath."

"Some cottage, my love. And the staff?"

“A devoted housekeeper and a village girl.”

“The simple life *de luxe*. Why did I leave the Regiment?”

(Careful here.)

“When the war was over, you wanted a quieter life. Besides, it was too expensive. You make out all right, my darling, but you haven’t got money to burn. And here we are.”

Corin handed his sister out. Then he turned to Jenkins.

“I must say good evening,” he said. “I’m sure I always did. In fact, I should like to think that we were old friends.”

“So we are, sir,” said the chauffeur.

“Isn’t that nice? And you know the way to my home?”

“Backwards, sir.”

“Good. The oftener you take it in future, the better pleased I shall be.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And bring Mrs. Ruthven with you.”

“You can depend upon that, sir.”

“Good night.”

And he had a word with Mason, before he followed Cleo upstairs.

“My brother, Major Gore—Dr. Berserk.”

The two men shook hands.

Then—

“You don’t look much like a patient.”

“I don’t feel like one,” said Corin. “But I’ve little doubt that you know what sisters are.”

“Major Gore, your sister’s instinct told her to call me in. Few women would have done so—because, you see, you’re so patently perfectly well. But about eleven this morning your system had a great shock. A man of your high intelligence must see that. From what I hear, you dealt with it perfectly. You didn’t panic: you rose to the occasion—laughed in the face of

Fate. Though you're not aware of it, that entailed no ordinary effort. You made it, as a matter of course—as a man of your outlook would. But efforts have to be paid for—as well as shocks. . . . Then again, this has, for you, been a most exciting day—emotionally exciting. Such excitement has to be paid for. . . . Happily, in each case, the payment is easy to make and ready to hand. It goes by the name of *rest*."

"I quite see that, sir," said Corin. "But, by my sister's desire, I rested this afternoon. In fact, I went to sleep for a couple of hours."

"You've a sister worth having, Major Gore. And now, if you please, I'm going to give you my counsel. Whether or no you take it is a matter for you. But I very much hope you will.

"First, no wine or spirits for twenty-four hours."

"Consider it done."

"Good. Secondly, as soon as I'm gone, I want you to take a hot bath and retire to bed. You can have a light dinner in bed. And I want you to stay in bed for twenty-four hours." Coridon bit his lip. "Yes, I know. You're impatient to open your oyster. Such impatience is natural: but you are a soldier and, your sister tells me, you're forty-two. In view of your performance to-day, I'm sure you can put your impatience where it belongs."

Corin began to laugh.

"You're 'a man of much blandishment', sir."

"Unlike Mr. Facey Romford. You know, I always consider that *Mr. Facey Romford's Hounds* is Surtees' best."

Cleopatra put in her oar.

"You've always maintained that, darling."

"Have I really? Well, now I shall know that I'm right."

The doctor smiled. Then he took out a tiny pill-box and laid it down.

"There's only one tablet there. If you should make up your mind to take my advice——"

"I've made it up, sir," said Corin. "I may get up to dinner to-morrow?"

"You may. And drink a glass of champagne—it'll do you good. Take this tablet this evening, about half an hour before you put out your light.

“And now for the future. I’m told that you live in the country. Very good. For the next six months, I want you to go very quietly. No visits to London: no race-meetings: no parties. A quiet, regular life—for the next six months. And then you can go as you please.”

“An order,” said Coridon, “which I shall cheerfully obey. London is rather exacting—at least, I find it so. I hope my wife won’t mind—I’m told that I’ve got a wife.”

“So I understand. From what your sister tells me, she’ll certainly aid and abet me.”

“I do hope she’s all right. You know. Not just ‘a nice girl’.”

“I’m sure you’d be very kind to any ‘nice girl’. But I don’t think you’d marry one.”

“Good,” said Coridon.

“Well, that’s all,” said Berserk, rising. “I shall not examine you, for that would be waste of time. And I shan’t come and see you again.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” said Corin. “Some Sunday, perhaps. In the eighteenth-century cottage, in which I am told that I dwell. You see, this is my birthday. I’ve just been born again. And you are one of the three or four kind people who have assisted at the *accouchement*.”

Berserk began to laugh.

“You’ll do,” he said. “Did you do as the others advised?”

“I ate out of their hand.”

“Then eat out of mine. I mean you very well.”

“You’re very kind, Dr. Berserk. Consider it done.”

The two shook hands, and the doctor took his leave.

At a quarter to eleven the next morning, Pompey brought his Bentley to rest just short of the wicket-gate. Under Niobe’s direction, they had come by a roundabout way—in fact, by the Roman road. And had encountered no one.

Pompey left the car and closed his door.

“Reconnaissance,” he said. “I’ll be back.”

For a moment he stood at the wicket, regarding the meticulous work which was being done on the lawn. Then his eyes turned to where the elm had stood. There was nothing whatever to suggest that a tree had ever been rising at that particular spot. The handsome clump of rhododendron might have been there for years. The occasional ring of a trowel declared that the wall behind it was being rebuilt.

"Magical," murmured Pompey.

Then he opened the gate and made his way to the cottage quickly enough.

He rang the bell and stood waiting. A moment, and Florence appeared.

"Oh, Mr. Pompey. An' am I thankful to see you? I was expectin' you to come in at the back."

"As I always do, Florence dear. Now listen to me. Are you alone in the house?"

Florence's eyes widened.

"That I am, Mr. Pompey," she said.

"And nobody on the way?"

Florence shook her head.

"That's all washed out. I'm not goin'."

"Very good. Now that I know the coast's clear, I'll drive round to the yard. You see, I've Miss Niobe with me."

"Miss Niobe here? God bless 'er lovely face! Oh, if that isn' jus' like 'er —to feel she mus' see for 'erself."

"Very hush-hush," said Pompey, finger to lip. "See you in two minutes' time."

He was as good as his word.

As the car stole into the yard—

"Good luck, great heart," he said. "I'm going to shut the gate and start getting the luggage in."

"Come in soon, dear Pompey. . . . Well, Florence. I had to come down."

"Lovely to see you, madam. With you an' Mr. Pompey, it does make it better, you know."

“May we go through to the study? I’ve got to talk to you.”

“Of course. Excuse me, madam.”

Florence led the way and opened the study door. When Niobe had passed in, she entered herself.

As she shut the door—

“You ’aven’ told ’im?” she said. “ ’E doesn’ know?”

Niobe put an arm about her.

“Our darling, dear Florence, is terribly, terribly well. Better than we’ve ever seen him. And God has answered our prayers, for when he comes back, he won’t remember the elm. He’s lost his memory.”

Florence looked dazedly round.

Then—

“Lost ’is . . . Oh, but that’s overdoin’ it, madam. You don’ mean——”

“He remembers nothing, Florence. Here’s a letter from Mrs. Cleopatra. Sit down and read it right through.”

With starting eyes Florence did as Niobe said. As she progressed, tears began to course down her cheeks. When she had finished, she laid the letter down, fell on her knees, sought and found Niobe’s hand and clasped it in both of hers.

“Oh, madam, madam. I’ll love an’ honour you always for what you’re goin’ to do. It takes a queen to do a thing like that.”

The door opened, and Pompey slid into the room.

Florence sat back on her heels, with a wrist to her eyes.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” she sobbed. “Firs’ the elm, an’ now this.” She lifted a piteous face. “But didn’ ’e know Mrs. Cleo?”

Pompey shook his head.

“I spoke to her last night. He’s just as he used to be—you’ve never seen him like that. But he can remember nothing. He doesn’t remember this cottage. He won’t remember you. Until he was told, he’d no idea who he was.”

Florence closed her eyes and put a hand to her head.

“An’ I s’pose you’ll tell me the doctor’s ’uggin’ ’imself.”

Niobe and Pompey collapsed.

When he had mastered his voice—

"You're quite right, Florence," said the latter. "He says that now at last the Major's himself again."

"Gimme strength," said Florence. " 'E ain't got to welcome 'im 'ome. 'I think you must be my housekeeper.' That, from 'im! . . . I s'pose I can do it."

"What of Miss Niobe? 'I think you must be my wife'."

Florence made a noise like a cat.

"Mrs. Cleo's done it," wailed Niobe. "And I'll lay any money she had an immense success."

"I know she had," said Pompey.

"Oh, Mrs. Cleo," said Florence. "She'd walk up to a lion an' tell 'im 'is tongue's 'angin' out—an' a 'undred to one 'e'd shove it back in 'is mouth." She wiped the tears from her face and got to her feet. "Some tea for you, madam?"

"And for you, Florence. I think it'd do us good."

"And me," said Pompey. "I'd rather have it than beer."

When all was said and done, there was not a great deal to arrange. Niobe's wardrobe was not elaborate. By packing till three in the morning, she had 'got everything in'. The new luggage which she had purchased had made this possible. A few possessions, loose, were on the floor of the car—among them, a drawing-board.

At two Pompey spoke to Cleopatra.

"All well in Curzon Street?"

"All well."

"Good. All very well here. I shall leave in a quarter of an hour. And now *je vais parler en chiffre*. Is that quite clear?"

"I'm there, Pompey."

"There's a date I'm worried about. Neither Florence nor I can remember. The date, more or less, of the nuptials of Helen of Troy. Have you any ideas about that? Which for some strange reason reminds me of Melbourne's words to his Cabinet. (It mayn't have been Melbourne, but I have a feeling it

was.) ‘It doesn’t matter a damn what we say, so long as . . .’—you know the rest.”

“I’m there, Pompey. But the question hasn’t arisen. It may any moment, of course. What’s your idea?”

“Well, I have a kind of feeling that it was in July.”

“If I get a chance, I’ll confirm that.”

“Good for you. And Abana and Pharpar proved more attractive than all the waters of Israel.”

“Wait a minute. . . . Yes, I’ve got that. No excursion was made.”

“You’re very quick. I shall report in person at four o’clock.”

“Pompey dear, you seem to make everything smooth.”

“That is the object of a lawyer. Sometimes it is attained. Goodbye, O Queen.”

“Goodbye.”

Pompey replaced the receiver and looked at Niobe.

“Last July,” he said. “And you came straight back to the cottage. No honeymoon.”

Niobe looked at Florence.

“That all right?”

“I s’pose so, madam,” said Florence. “I’ll be like a cat on ’ot bricks for the firs’ few days.”

“Florence,” said Pompey, “we can but do our best. And, if I know the Major at all, he’ll be far too well content with his nice, new life, to think about anything else. From the moment he sees Miss Niobe——”

“Mrs. Niobe, sir.”

“Well done. Mrs. Niobe. From the moment he sees Mrs. Niobe, he won’t have eyes or ears for anything else.”

“Oh, Pompey, be careful.”

“Great heart,” said Pompey, “Penelope, Circe, Calypso—Odysseus fell for the lot. With the three in one, poor Corin hasn’t a hope. Don’t you love her wedding-ring, Florence?”

“ ’S a peach,” said Florence. “An’ does it go with ’er ring?”

"And now is there anything else?"

"If there is," said Niobe, "I cannot think of it now."

"You won' leave Town, Mr. Pompey?"

"No, indeed. If any crisis arises, you've only to ring me up."

"And you will come down very soon?"

"As soon as you think he's fit to stand the shock."

"Oh, Pompey, Pompey, what should we do without you?"

"Ah," said Florence. "I've often wondered that. Mr. Pompey's a rock of ages."

"That's putting it high," said Pompey. "I respond to beauty and kindness. Let's leave it there. And now one final exhortation. Try very hard not to worry. If you see a fence ahead, don't rush it: you'll find you'll get over all right. Above all, bear this in mind—his heart and his soul will both be far too busy to be at all critical. A hundred to one he won't notice any slip. And to-morrow afternoon, you or Florence are going to give me a ring."

"Understood," said Niobe.

Five minutes later the lawyer took his leave.

On the driving seat of his car he found a small, flat package, reasonably heavy for its size. On the outside of this had been written the following words:—

Please see and take care of this, Pompey.

Niobe.

He opened the package that evening.

Within was a silver frame: in this was an exquisite drawing of Coridon and the elm.

Florence started, and a hand went up to her mouth.

Then—

"They're here, Miss—Mrs. Niobe."

"Ah. Well, give them a chance, Florence. I'll tell you when to go."

Florence repaired to the hall and stood waiting, with a hand to her throat.

"Oh, dear," she breathed. "I do wish I 'ad 'er nerve. Calm as a duck in a larder. Gawd, what a dame!"

Niobe, deep in the study, was watching the wicket-gate.

Coridon, hatless and smiling, had handed his sister out, and the two were standing together on the other side of the gate.

Niobe saw Cleopatra glance to her right, but Coridon's eyes were fastened upon the cottage, gay in the morning sun.

"Oh dear, how Lamb would have loved it! An author's paradise. How very lucky I am! It's really mine, is it, Cleo? Not held on a lease."

"No, it's your own, darling."

"I'm glad of that."

He opened the wicket-gate and ushered his sister in.

Cleopatra took his arm.

"That's your study on the right, Corin—with the open *portes-fenêtres*. On the left, the dining-room."

Niobe raised her voice.

"Carry on, Florence dear."

Florence took a deep breath. Then she opened the massive front-door and sped down the path.

Cleopatra ran to meet her and caught her hands in hers.

"Florence, Florence!" She turned to Coridon. "Darling, this is Florence, who's been your rod and your staff for more than seven years."

Coridon put out his hand. When Florence had given him hers, he covered it with his left and smiled into her eyes.

"No need of words between us. Whenever I want to look back, I shall come to you."

Somehow or other, Florence mastered her voice.

"Thank you, sir." She swallowed. "Madam's on the telephone, sir. She called to me to go on."

Quick as a flash, Cleopatra picked up her cue.

“Go and find her—in the study, darling.”

“I will.”

A soldier strode down the lawn—to meet his fate. I dare not set down his emotions. But he meant to do his duty, whatever befell.

As he approached the window, he could hear Niobe’s voice.

“Mr. Austen, I’m very sorry, but I have got to fly. I will give Major Gore your message, but I cannot disturb him now. . . .”

Coridon was standing on the threshold, his lips a little parted, his eyes ablaze.

Niobe, looking at a book-case, could see him with the tail of her eye. His eyes were fast on her profile. . . .

Sitting half on and half off his table, Niobe laughed a very musical laugh. Then—

“That’s very nice of you. I’ll tell him that you are writing and I’ll see that you get an answer before very long. Goodbye, Mr. Austen.”

With a gesture, half of amusement and half resigned, she put the receiver back and turned to Coridon.

“Hullo, darling,” she said.

Coridon entered the room and put out his arms.

“ ‘O mistress mine,’ ” he said quietly. And then, “My glorious love.”

A wave of relief engulfed them, close in each other’s arms. . . .

Then Coridon held her off and looked her up and down.

“You exquisite thing,” he said, “it’s well worth losing one’s memory to re-discover you. How did I find the courage to ask you to be my wife?”

“I don’t think you did, my darling. We were standing in this room and I spoke over my shoulder. You never answered and I looked round to see why. And then you opened your arms, as you did just now.”

“A habit of mine?”

“I think it must be. It’s a very eloquent gesture. Did Florence break down?”

“Not in my presence. Discipline was maintained. Cleopatra tells me that she is of the salt of the earth. But I’m not here to talk of Florence.” He drew

her into his arms and kissed her mouth. “Oh, Niobe, Niobe, have you the faintest idea how very lovely you are?”

The maid was exalted. Always excelling, her beauty issued a radiance, as never before. Her heart was leaping. Her eyes, like stars, gloried in Coridon’s homage. Love, helped of his blindness, had settled in.

“How could I ever have gone to London alone? You see what happens when I do.”

“Never again, my blessed.”

“That’s right. Besides, what a risk! Supposing Zeus had assumed the guise of a silver draught.”

They laughed together.

Then—

“Darling, I hate to remind you that we have a guest.”

“So we have. One more kiss. . . .” Coridon let the girl go and smoothed back his hair. “Niobe, what a sister! Until I saw you, I thought she had everything.”

“I’ll go and find her, darling. You must consider your little library.”

“Very well. But come back soon—or I shall suppose that I have dreamed a dream.”

As the girl entered the kitchen, Cleopatra rose and Florence caught her breath. The eyes of both were fast on Niobe’s face. Her beautiful mouth was working. . . .

Then—

“My—my heart’s desire,” she quavered, and burst into tears. . . .

And then she was sitting down, with Cleo’s arms about her and Florence kneeling beside her, in tears herself.

The awful strain had been loosened, and nothing now seemed to matter. The way was clear.

Coridon’s heart was singing, as he moved along his shelves, noting titles and sometimes withdrawing a book. *Military Operations*, *Pepys’s Diary*,

Orpen's *Outline of Art*; *Shakespeare's England*, *The Van Eycks*, *The Age of Elegance*; *Thomson's Seasons* and *Surtees* and *Stevenson*. . . .

What more could any man ask?

"All this," he kept saying, "all this—and Niobe, too."

The latter was in her bedroom, 'putting her face to rights'. Cleopatra was in the bathroom, washing her hands.

"One thing, Cleo," said Niobe, "how did you come?"

"Miles out of the way," said Cleo. "That's why we were late. I made no secret of the fact—'We mustn't go through the village, till people have been put wise. It might be awkward.' Of course, he was only too thankful, poor innocent lamb. Best of all, we hardly encountered a soul."

"Very well and good. I think on Tuesday I'll write to Lady Curtice—you know who she is—telling her what has occurred. I'll ask her to tell the Vicar and say that, as a result, he must keep very quiet for a while."

"I think that's very sane."

"She'll ask no questions, of course, but Florence can fill in the gaps. All she will know is that his memory failed in London this afternoon and we came to the cottage this evening, instead of going abroad."

"And *The Times* will do its bit. It's going to be water-tight, darling."

"For his beloved sake, I hope and pray it is."

Florence appeared.

"The tea's in the library, madam."

"Oh, thank you, Florence. Mrs. Cleo and I are just coming down. The Major all right?"

"Wonderful, madam. He'd hardly let me go. An' the questions he asked! 'Was I very tiresome, Florence? Or did I eat out of your hand?' 'Good as gold, sir,' I says. 'I'm glad of that,' 'e says. 'Not cross when you called me in the morning?' 'Never,' says I. 'You got the sweetest temper I ever met.' 'I'm glad o' that,' 'e says. 'An' now tell me this. However did I have the good fortune to find Mrs. Gore?' 'You may well ask that, sir,' I says. 'I think the fairies must 'ave left 'er outside the gate—for that's where you saw 'er first.' 'I can well believe it,' 'e says, 'for she's out of the golden world. We're very lucky, aren't we? I mean, she's got everything.' 'I'll say we are, sir,' I says. 'Good,' says 'e. 'An' I 'ereby appoint you my gossip.' (That was

a new one on me, but of course I didn' let on.) 'The talks we'll 'ave about the ole days. . . .' 'E's more than 'imself, madam. I never seen 'im like this."

"Come on," said Niobe, smiling. . . .

But the study was empty.

Coridon was in the kitchen, seated upon the table, talking to Jenkins and making the chauffeur laugh.

At two minutes to eight the next morning Niobe sat up in bed and looked upon Coridon fast asleep by her side—looked upon him and loved him, as never before. After a moment or two, she put a hand to her mouth. . . .

Coridon was dreaming. In his dream he could hear the song of a thrush. So much to his liking was this, he began to smile in his sleep. Then he opened his eyes—and, behold, it was not a dream. Somewhere within the bedroom a thrush was singing his song. The better to resolve the paradox, he propped himself on an elbow. . . . And then he perceived that the thrush was Niobe.

"Oh my exquisite love! So Psyche used to wake Eros . . . a long time ago. I suppose she gave you the tip."

As he made to leave his bed, Niobe stopped him with a gesture.

Then—

"Cuckoo," she fluted—the softest, distant note. "Cuckoo."

Respectfully smiling, Florence entered with the tea.

"Florence," said Coridon, "you never told me we had a singing bird."

"I'll say you're right, sir," said Florence, setting down the tray. "Firs' time Mrs. Niobe done it, I couldn't believe me ears. Done it in the bathroom, she did: an' I come out of the kitchen an' stood lookin' everywhere. An' she leans out o' the window. 'Did you 'ear that, Florence?' she says. 'Did I not?' I says. 'That bird's got a nerve to sing so close to the 'ouse.' An' then she does the cuckoo. . . . Oh dear, oh dear. . . ."

Coridon nodded.

"I think she must be a nymph. I hope the gods don't get jealous and try to take her away."

“I’d like to see ’em,” said Florence.

She took two pillows and set them behind his back.

The attention was acknowledged with a smile.

“Florence,” said Niobe.

“Madam?”

“I suppose it’s true that he’s lost his memory.”

“There now,” said Florence. “Madam, I’m jus’ the same. I keep on ’avin’ to remember—an’ that’s the truth.”

“Let me remind you,” said Coridon. “Do we use the same bathroom, my love? And when do we break our fast?”

“Yes. And at half past nine. Is that all right by the new boy?”

As Florence drew the curtains—

“Very much to his taste, my darling. By the way, shaving-water?”

Quick as a flash—

“You ’eat it yourself, sir,” said Florence. “The shaving-pot’s in the bathroom. You always fill that from the tap and plug it into this plug.”

Niobe breathed again.

“Admirable,” said Coridon. “Your idea or mine?”

“Yours, sir. To save me trouble.”

“Dear me. A well-meaning man. Have I any other pretty ways?”

“Quite a lot,” said Niobe, pouring out tea. “By the way, you have the first bath and I follow on. In our use of the bathroom we always overlap and continually interrupt each other’s toilet with the minimum of consideration. In this connection, I think I’m the worse of the two.”

Coridon inclined his head.

“To be so interrupted by a nymph, who is also one’s love, is to be exalted.”

“Florence,” said Niobe, “I’ve got off.”

“Once for all,” said Florence, “a long time ago. ’Ow would you like your eggs?”

Niobe looked at Coridon.

"What about scrambled?" he said. "Would that be all right by you?"

"I never mind, my darling."

"What's an omelet done?" said Florence.

"Am I partial to the omelet, Florence?"

"In the autumn an' winter, you are. Not every day, of course."

"The omelet has it," said Coridon.

Florence smiled and withdrew.

On the following morning, Tuesday, point-device as usual, Mr. Preston was standing in his snuggery, reading *The Times*. He had acquired this habit, while serving the Marquess of Eyre. About *The Times*, there was nothing common or unclean. He found much of its matter dull: but it was never sensational. Sensation, for Mr. Preston, was beneath all contempt. *The Times* was still the organ of such as knew how to behave.

Faithfully, every day, he read the Court page and the Births, Marriages and Deaths. He was reading them now.

Suddenly his eyes widened and he suppressed a start.

> *GORE-COKE. On October 2nd, quietly in London, CORIDON GORE, of Elm Cottage, Halliard, to NIOBE COKE, late of Chasuble Place, Shropshire.*

"Good God," said Mr. Preston. He lowered the paper and stared across the room. "The instructions to insert in the paper must have been sent in advance, and in the confusion they were never cancelled. Oh dear me, what a kettle of fish!"

Sitting in bed, Cleopatra read the announcement—and was faintly perturbed. Had Pompey's advice been good? And then she perceived what that astute lawyer had done. He had chosen the lesser evil. He knew that the announcement's appearance was bound to entail some risks: but it would choke any whisper that no marriage had taken place. If the incumbent of St. Crispin's saw it, he would assume—as had Mr. Preston—that a failure to cancel instructions was solely to blame.

Pompey, himself, read it and fingered his chin. “Signed in good faith,” he murmured, “and given to someone to post. And I don’t care what happens. I’m sure I was right.”

George Medallion read it and, likewise, spoke to himself. “That’s better. Something behind her now. But I’m glad I didn’t put it in.”

Lady Curtice read it—and started.

“There now,” she said. “It’s all over. No doubt they were very wise to keep it quiet. All the same . . . I wonder if Florence was there.”

Here her letters arrived. One was from Niobe.

Dear Lady Curtice,

This, I fear, must be a sensational note.

Within an hour of our marriage, my darling husband lost his memory. And when I say ‘lost’ it, I mean it. He’d no idea who he was. So we came quietly back here, and here we shall stay very quietly for, certainly, several months.

The merciful thing is that he doesn’t mind in the least. As Florence will tell you, he’s right at the top of his form—better than she has ever seen him. He finds it a great adventure: and, because he does, she and I find it one, too. His gaiety is infectious. But, of course, neighbours must be told.

I shall ask you to come and see us before very long: but the doctor is insistent that for the present he should lead a very quiet life.

Yours sincerely,
Niobe Gore.

Lady Curtice laid down the letter and looked round dazedly. Seldom, if ever gravelled, she could think of nothing to say.

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Coridon had given his word not to answer the telephone. This, gladly enough. Indeed, it had been agreed that the instrument should be removed to the dining-room. Florence had ascertained that application for such a removal must be made on a special form—which Coridon must sign. Well, that was all right, but the duty made Niobe think. Cheques would have to be

signed: and, if they were to be honoured, unless new arrangements were made, the signature must be the same as it had been for twenty years.

She was thankful when Pompey rang up at eleven o'clock.

It was Florence who took the call.

"Ah, Florence."

"Oh, Mr. Pompey, I'm glad to 'ear your voice."

"All well on the Hampshire front?"

"A you-know dream, Mr. Pompey. 'Appy as the day is long."

" 'Now thank we all our God.' Mrs. Niobe there?"

" 'Old on, an' I'll get 'er, Mr. Pompey."

A moment later—

"Pompey dear, I must have rubbed my lamp."

"Your slave awaits your commands."

"Well, what about cheques, Pompey?"

"We think alike, my dear. I've no desire to intrude, but I feel that I ought to come down. You see, it's not only cheques: as his solicitor, I see to a lot of things."

"You see to everything, Pompey."

"Let's say I'm half an agent. Don't be too grateful. It all goes down in the bill."

"I know that one. Never mind. We don't want to rush him, Pompey. Could you come down for two nights?"

"Business with pleasure. As it happens, my dear, a long week-end can be done. I'll bring some money with me. Can you get through till Friday?"

"Yes, indeed."

"I'll be down on Friday evening. To-morrow I'll see his bankers and put them wise."

"He'd like to speak to you, Pompey."

"His lawyer will be honoured; his crony of many years' standing, more than content."

"Hold on," said Niobe, laughing.

She repeated his words to her lord: then she gave him the receiver and left the room.

"Hullo—er—Pompey," said Coridon.

"Hullo, old cock," said Pompey, "I understand you're compounding the felony."

Coridon laughed and laughed.

"Very good indeed," he said. "I thought I'd employed every metaphor there was. But yours is double-barrelled. And you're perfectly right. I commend the theft all day long. I want to see you, Pompey."

"You shall, my son, on Friday. So far as I am concerned, the reunion will be cordial in the extreme. That's journalese or jargon. A very favourite *cliché*—invariably used of politicians who are compelled to meet, who hate one another's guts. And how do you like your books?"

"I'm deep in the first one now. I think it's rather good."

"You share the general opinion."

"I'm glad of that."

"Runs the Roman road where it did?"

"Indeed, it does. We went there yesterday. I like the sound of you, Pompey."

"I'm not too bad, old fellow. Earthy, you know, earthy: but clean in the house."

"I'm strolling in Wonderland. You'll have to lead me out."

"Stroll there for me, my bully. I'll always bridge the gulf."

"You don't sound at all like a lawyer."

"To the distress of my partners, who really do. But I tell them that Shakespeare's clowns had a big success. I've nothing to go on, of course; but they take my word. After all, it's a poor heart that never rejoices. And now I must go. Till Friday."

"Till Friday, Pompey. Goodbye."

Coridon went to find Niobe, out on the lawn.

"Not Pompey, but Touchstone," he said, taking her arm. "This must be a reincarnation. I can't believe I was ever so lucky before."

“A nice, new life, beloved. By the way, I want to see Ranger—another friend of yours. But a handful of sliced carrots is all the introduction you’ll need. He’s a great opinion of you.”

“A model of yours?”

“Yes. I think he’s Elizabethan. If he’s at home, he’s only five minutes’ walk.”

“I know. He’s the other soldier.”

“Yes.”

“I stamp to make his acquaintance. While you get ready to go, I’ll have the handsel prepared.”

As Niobe passed upstairs, he opened the service door.

“Florence.”

“Sir.”

“May I have some sliced carrots?”

“Of course, sir. I’ll do them at once.”

As Coridon entered the kitchen, Fanny Bowles lowered her head.

Coridon looked at Florence.

“Is this Fanny Bowles?” he said.

“Yes, sir. She’s rather shy.”

Coridon passed to the side of the little maid.

“Why, Fanny,” he said, “I’m glad to see you here. I take it you’re helping Florence?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. There’s no one like Florence, Fanny. And how is your grandmother?”

“She’s very well, thank you, sir.”

“Please give her my respects and say that I hope to see her before very long. I think she comes sometimes just to see that all’s well.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’ve very nice manners, Fanny. Please tell your grandmother that. Will Ranger be available, Florence?”

"I think so, sir. 'E's stabled at night, of course; but I think 'e'll be out to-day."

"Do they work him still?"

"Not so often now. But Joe Gammon's fond of Ranger an' says 'e's earned 'is rest."

"Good for Joe Gammon," said Coridon. The little basket passed. "Thank you, Florence. That's lovely. Like old times, I expect."

"You've said it, sir," said Florence, and Coridon laughed.

As the door closed behind him—

" 'E isn' 'alf nice," said Fanny.

Three halcyon months sped by. Life at Elm Cottage was joyous—there is no other word. A shepherd and shepherdess danced hand-in-hand down their 'sequestered vale'; and their lady-in-waiting followed, treading a measure of her own. Never did bridal pair enjoy such a honeymoon.

Coridon had written no letters in all this time. He had passed his word not to do so for full three months. This was Niobe's doing.

"I want you to wash out the world that lies beyond our realm. Pompey and Florence and I will be your A.D.C.s. But when the New Year comes in, you shall do as you please. Of course, if you should get bored. . . ."

"There spoke the immortal. My love, you must realize that mortals don't get bored with the golden world."

"Then 'fleet the time carelessly', darling. We'll never have such a wonderful chance again."

Coridon was more than content.

He was writing again now, and on five mornings out of six man and maid sat at work in 'the little library'. Coridon worked at his table, as he had always done: Niobe in the bay-window, which added so much to the room. It was an elegant bay and might have been styled a baby oriel: it certainly framed her beauty in the most charming of ways.

Florence found the two 'lovely and pleasant in their lives'. Reporting to Cleopatra—

"Oh dear, madam, it's like some beautiful dream. Jus' to look into the study an' see them at work—the Major so gay an' smilin' at somethin' 'e's jus' wrote down, an' Mrs. Niobe 'alf-grave, with 'er lovely 'ead on one side an' addin' a touch to 'er drawin' before she sits back. An' then she looks up an' smiles an' a lump comes into me throat. 'Yes, Florence, dear,' she says, 'an' what do you know?' I tell you, madam, it's perfect. The Major was always 'appy, but now 'e's come into 'is own."

Cleopatra had stayed with them once and Pompey twice—and been far more than relieved. The passage of the coach and six through the rigid code of Convention was proving an immense success.

But all, except Coridon, were very faintly uneasy about the state of affairs. Not one of them would have said so: but every one was aware of the cloud upon the horizon, no larger than a man's hand. Niobe cared least of all: but she knew that the cloud was there.

Pompey Colbourne peered at the future, saw certain gates ahead and decided that they could be opened, to let the coach pass through: but, being a man of the world, he knew that at any moment some gate which could not be opened might lift up its head.

The truth obtruded itself.

A God-fearing man and maid were doing as God-fearing persons do not do. A well-bred, clean-living pair were behaving as well-bred, clean-living people do not behave. For this lapse from grace, they had the best of reasons: but, except under seal, that reason could not be declared.

Pompey, who would have cheerfully laid down his life for Coridon or Niobe, began to consider the procedure for procuring a special licence.

The New Year was three days old, when Coridon signed a letter and looked at Niobe. Niobe smiled back, for she had been watching him. But she did not feel like smiling, because she did not know how the letter ran. To her relief—

"How will this do?" said Corin, and picked up the sheet.

"Proceed, my dear lord," said Niobe, sitting back.

Coridon read aloud.

Dear Mr. Preston,

It is right and proper that the very first letter which I have written for three months should be addressed to you.

An hour after I left you in Cork Street the doctor sent me to bed for twenty-four hours. After that, I was driven straight home to Elm Cottage, from which I write. There, to my heart's delight, I found my adorable wife. (You see, we were quite wrong. I was well and truly married all the time. But she was down in Shropshire and out of touch.)

My life, ever since, has had the quality of a dream. I really don't think I can have been so happy before.

For another three months I am to stay where I am and to lead a very quiet life. Then I shall come to London for three or four days. The very first call I shall pay will be upon you and I shall bring with me my wife, for she is most anxious to meet you and Henry Jordan and to thank you for all you did.

Pray remember me most kindly to him, but for whom I should certainly have spent a day in some police-station, instead of in that good company which I look forward so much to keeping again.

Believe me,
Yours very sincerely,
Coridon Gore.

"Admirable," said Niobe.

She dared not say anything else. From Coridon's point of view, the letter was impeccable. And his point of view must on no account be disturbed. All the same. . . . If only the letter could be sent to Cleopatra to vet. She had seen and spoken with Preston, and she would know in an instant whether it ought to be sent. And yet, it must be sent—for Corin would expect a reply. And if no reply were to come . . .

You see, we were quite wrong.

That was the sentence which Niobe did not like.

She told herself not to be a fool and sought to thrust anxiety out of her heart.

The New Year was five days old, and Cleopatra, breakfasting in bed, was reading another letter with her underlip caught in her teeth.

Madam,

You may remember that I had the privilege of caring for your dear brother, Major Gore, when he had lost his memory on September 30th last.

I have now received from him the very handsome letter which I enclose.

In the ordinary way, I should, of course, have answered this letter by return of post; but in view of what you told me, certain statements he makes cause me considerable concern; and I feel it to be my duty to submit it to you at once.

I need hardly say, Madam, that I hope and trust that my misgivings are without foundation and I should very much value your assurance to this effect.

You may rest assured, Madam, that I shall keep this matter entirely to myself.

Yours very respectfully,
George Preston.

Cleopatra read the enclosure with starting eyes.

Then she put a hand to her head.

"Oh my God," she said. "Of course he thinks Corin's lost his reason or else been victimized. What a mercy he's such a nice man. I shall have to see him, of course: but I must see Pompey first."

She was relieved, because it might have been worse: she was disquieted, because this had the look of writing upon the wall.

At half past three that day Jenkins set her down at 17 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Pompey read through the letters. Then he sat back in his chair.

"This is the ex-valet," he said.

"Yes."

"Well, that's all right. I'm perfectly sure you can trust such a man with the truth. You're going to Cork Street from here?"

"Yes. I said a quarter to five."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

“I’d love it, Pompey. But I think I must do it alone.”

“It would be better,” said Pompey, “for reasons we both can see.”

“Shall I tell him everything?”

“I think you must, Cleo. You see, in less than three months Corin is going to see him, sure as a gun. And he must be ready for him.”

“He’ll want to see the other one, too.”

“Oh dear, so he will,” said Pompey. “Preston, of course, has been trained to watch his tongue; so it’s second nature to him. But the other, though full of goodwill, might easily put a foot wrong. I should raise that point with Preston.”

There was a little silence.

Then—

“Pompey,” said Cleopatra, “I’ve always been afraid of something like this.”

“So, my dear Cleo, have I. It’s never been out of my mind. And whatever way I take, I arrive at the same conclusion every time.”

“And that?” said Cleopatra.

“Is unattractive,” said Pompey.

“I’m afraid I know what you mean.”

“I’m sure you do. However, let’s say it right out. The sooner our blessed Corin is told the truth, the better for all concerned.”

Cleopatra covered her eyes.

“You’re right, of course. But . . . D’you think I’d better see Berserk?”

“I don’t know that he can help, but I think I should. I mean, I think he’ll say it’s for us to judge. Niobe, of course, must decide. We can recommend; but she must decide.”

“Yes, it’s up to her. D’you think I can make some excuse to get her to London alone?”

“I do. Give her the tip on the blower: then send her a cryptic letter which Corin can see.”

“That’s an idea. Oh, Pompey, how odious it is to have to resort to such shifts.”

"I know, my precious Cleo. That's why I feel that we simply must clear the air. We're all of us treading ground that people like us don't tread. If we were so many crooks, we should fly every fence that came and simply romp home: but, as things are, we're carrying too much weight. This letter of Preston's has shocked us. In fact, we can deal with it—at least, I'm sure that you can. But if Corin had written to—to——"

"Jordan," said Cleopatra. "I've just remembered his name."

"Jordan," said Pompey. "Well, if he'd written to Jordan, it might not have been too good. And for Corin to stumble upon the truth would be—disastrous, Cleo. I decline to believe that it would affect his brain: but his confidence in us would be shaken. He'd always be wondering if there was anything else—a skeleton in some other cupboard, which we were keeping locked. But if Niobe feels she can tell him, all will be well. I'm sure he'll take it from her."

"And when he's been told, Pompey?"

"I *think* that, with Berserk's help, I can get a special licence. I mean, if he will swear that it was by his advice that we have done as we have."

"And a special licence?"

"Will permit them to be married anywhere at any time, without notice. They can drive to some little village a long way off, present it to the parish priest, and he will marry them quietly then and there. But I don't say that I can get it. I'll go all out, but the C. in C. has to grant it, and he may not play. But that's for later. You're going to see George Preston and tell him the truth. Don't forget that he may have seen the notice in *The Times*."

"What shall I say about that?"

"Say we saw it, too: and that we can only assume that Corin had written it out and given it to someone to post. Then, as soon as you can, you're going to see Berserk. Assuming he says go ahead, you're going to see Niobe."

"That's right."

"One thing. When you see Berserk, ask him if he will support an application for a special licence. If so, I'll get out a letter for him to sign. Better still, I'll send you a draft of the letter to-morrow night. Then you can take it with you. He can alter it as he likes and return it to me. Then I shall be ready to apply. But I wish I knew of some priest that would hold his

tongue. You don't know some absent-minded, celibate clerk, who would marry them one day and forget all about it the next?"

Cleopatra shook her head.

"But there must be dozens, Pompey."

"I know. Oh, I'll find one somehow, if I have to advertise. Still, if I know Corin, once he knows that Niobe and he are not married, he won't want to wait. I mean, any sort of delay will really worry him."

"There you're quite right, Pompey."

"Well, as I've said before, we must do our best. May I give you some tea and buttered toast?"

"No, thank you, Pompey dear. Preston will offer me tea and I shall say yes. He'll like that, you know."

"You're very wise. I've noticed that before."

"I'm out of my depth here, Pompey."

"So are we all, my dear. But don't forget that it might be very much worse. Supposing, for instance, he'd never lost his memory. Who would have broken the news about the elm?" Cleopatra shut her eyes and drew in her breath. "Exactly. That would have been a fence and a half to clear. But he ran out just in time."

Cleopatra was whispering.

"The very same day, Pompey."

"I know. It's very strange. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, *Cleopatra*' . . . And Corin had an affinity with that tree. Never mind. If you will see Berserk, I will get Niobe up. Cunning is more in my line. When you've made your appointment with Berserk, let me know. Then we can fix the day on which I shall ask her to come. She can lunch with you, and I'd like you to bring her here."

"Of course I will."

"Good." Pompey glanced at his watch. "And now you should go." The two of them rose. "Let me know how you get on with Preston. What a godsend the gentleman is!"

Forty minutes later, Mr. Preston more than justified the solicitor's estimate.

Over two cups of good tea and a muffin whose gentle addresses she had been unable to reject, Cleopatra had said her piece. The ex-valet had proved the perfect confidant.

When she had done—

"Madam, pray believe that I am immensely relieved. When I read the Major's letter, I didn't know what to think and I was deeply concerned. But now, of course, I understand everything." The ex-valet hesitated. "May I venture a suggestion, madam?"

"Mr. Preston, I shall value your advice."

The ex-valet bowed.

Then—

"You spoke, madam, of a special licence—only obtainable, I believe, from His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury."

"I did, Mr. Preston."

"I remember one such case when I was with the Marquess of Eyre. His lordship was instrumental in obtaining one, madam, on behalf of a relative. If I may say so, if publicity is to be avoided, the—er—holy edifice must be remote and the—er—incumbent very discreet."

"I entirely agree, Mr. Preston."

"Well, madam, the private chapel at Legacy stands in the park. Legacy was his lordship's favourite seat. It lies in Wiltshire, madam, as no doubt you know. The great house is closed now, but the chapel is not. The Vicar of Purse is the chaplain. We were in the parish of Purse, madam, a little village, a mile and a half away. Now I have known the chaplain for many years, and, if I were to explain the position, I'm sure that he would be most happy to assist. He's a bachelor, madam, and keeps very much to himself."

"Mr. Preston, how marvellous!"

"It would be private, madam. That I can guarantee. If the idea were to appeal to the parties, I could see to everything. If the licence can be obtained, they've only to fix the date and let me know. Legacy can't be more than fifty or sixty miles from where they live. And if they would drive over one morning, they would find the lodge-gates open and the chaplain ready and waiting to perform the ceremony."

Cleopatra cupped her face in her hands.

“Mr. Preston, it would be perfect. There is no other word.”

“There would have to be witnesses, madam. If they liked, I could be one: the other, perhaps, could come with them in the car. What is in my mind, madam, is that one car would attract no attention. The chaplain and I would walk from the village of Purse.”

“How can I ever thank you?”

Mr. Preston inclined his head.

“If, madam, they would accept my offices, I should regard it as a great privilege.”

That night Cleopatra remembered George Preston in her prayers.

On the following Tuesday morning, Niobe travelled to London with four pen-and-ink illustrations of Shakespeare’s Songs.

On her return, she reported to Coridon.

“Pompey is most astute. The idea, of course, is to get my stuff remarked. Among his firm’s clients are ——’s, who advertise every month in *Country Life*. A full-page advertisement, always: you can’t miss that. Pompey suggests that, if they are willing to play, I shall allow them to reproduce each of my drawings once in *Country Life*. For a nominal sum, only: and they are to give me the block. No copyright would pass. But before he makes a move, he would like two more.

“It’s a brilliant suggestion, Corin: for people who matter always see *Country Life*. And it is most beautifully produced, so the drawings will have every chance. He’d like a little text to go with them. He thought we might do that together. You’d write it, of course: but I’d tell you my ideas.”

“My sweet, I ask no more than to go down to posterity as your accompanyist.”

“Don’t be absurd, *Maître*.”

So all was very well.

So much for Tuesday.

Thursday morning was so brilliant that the two, with one consent, set work aside for the morning—if not, for the day.

It was cold, of course; but the radiant air was as still as that of a painting by Claude, and the sun, in all his glory, was ruling a flawless sky. And Earth was subscribing to the canticle, for Nature had painted her face and had tired her head. In a word, there was a hoar frost.

Coridon and Niobe drove through the countryside, avoiding main roads, scarcely exchanging a word, absorbing in grateful silence the magical beauty of every dazzling mile. Wayside tree and hedgerow, pasture and wood—there was nothing that was not exquisite, whose virtue had not been magnified upon this January day. The world went clad in jewellery—every twig, every blade of grass was wearing a wedding-garment.

As the Vane stole out of a wood, the road fell down to a little old, stone bridge, to rise as sharply again to re-enter a second wood. The dip was drenched with sunshine, and, seen from the bridge, the woods were fretted with brilliance, presenting a haunting mystery of black and dazzling white.

Just short of the bridge, Coridon slowed down and stopped; and the two got out of the car and stood looking round.

"I feel," whispered Niobe, "as I have felt in some church."

"We are in church, my darling. Our little world is observing *The Benedicite*. 'O ye Dews, and Frosts, bless ye the Lord.' "

"Of course. 'O all ye Green Things upon the Earth, bless ye the Lord.' "

" 'Praise him, and magnify him for ever.' "

For a moment they stood in silence.

Then—

"Let's walk and talk," said Niobe. "It's very peaceful here." She took the man's arm. "I want to tell you something it's time you knew."

"Proceed," said Coridon.

"You remember the day you lost your memory?"

"Do I remember my birthday? I'll say I do."

"You spoke to Cleo—from Tendon's in Savile Row."

"An unforgettable experience. I remember thinking she had the tongue of an angel."

"So she has. But that's by the way. When you spoke to her, it was just about mid-day. Didn't you wonder why she never came to get you till six

o'clock?"

"It did just cross my mind. I assumed that she had engagements she couldn't break. Anyway, I was too excited to give it more than a thought."

"The only engagement she had was to entertain you at lunch." Coridon stopped. Then he turned to look upon Niobe, whose eyes were fast on the trees. "Cleo, who loves you, as I do, far more than life itself——"

"Niobe, Niobe."

The man took the girl in his arms and kissed her eyes and her mouth. For a moment they clung together.

Then—

"Let me go, beloved. I've got quite a lot to say. . . ."

Coridon released her, and they resumed their stroll.

"Well, Cleo kept you waiting—left you with utter strangers for six long hours. And now I'm going to account for her most unnatural conduct—with her most full consent. To do that, I've got to throw back. . . .

"You served right through the War and you got two D.S.O.s. In March, 1945, when the War, more than five years old, had three months to run, your unit was heavily shelled and you were knocked out. You were very nearly killed, but they pulled you through. You lay unconscious for ages—your brain had been shocked. The war was over before you were out of the home. Three very eminent doctors . . ."

The recital continued quietly. Coridon listened intently, hardly saying a word, but holding Niobe's arm close to his side.

". . . When I told Berserk of these lapses, he was profoundly interested—not to say, pleased. You see, they were proving him right: the way you dealt with them proved that your brain was as sound as a bell; the lapses themselves proved that your brain, which had been unseated, was seating itself again. He never said so, of course, but I think he thought it likely that when your brain made its last movement, you'd lose your memory.

"Preparations for our wedding went on. It was to be very quiet—in a church in the City one Sunday afternoon. Pompey arranged it all, because we didn't want you to spend too long in London. The traffic gave you headaches. So you never went up till the Thursday, three days before. That night you slept at The Savoy. . . ."

"Go on," said Coridon.

Niobe took a deep breath.

"On the next day, Friday, you were to lunch with Cleo. But you never got there, darling . . . because at eleven o'clock you lost your memory."

His lips a little apart, Coridon stood still as death. Then, very slowly, a hand stole up to his head.

Niobe stood still and watched him, with her heart in her mouth.

Suddenly he swung round, to face her.

"D'you mean to say we're not married?"

The girl shook her head.

"But you said we were married in July."

"I know. We agreed to tell you that, darling."

"Who's we?"

"Cleo, Pompey and I."

"But why . . ." A sudden frantic expression possessed the man's face: and Niobe's loving heart failed her for fear. Then he caught the girl to his breast and held her tight. "Don't say," he cried, "don't tell me you're married to somebody else. I don't care if you are. I'll never let you go."

Niobe, half-way to tears, drew down his head and kissed his lips.

"No, my very darling. There's never been anyone but you."

"Then why have I done you this dishonour?" Coridon let her go, and the hand went back to his head. "How could I ever have consented——"

"You never consented, my darling. If you'll let me go on with my tale, I'll tell you everything."

"All right. But we must be married."

"Any time now, my blessed. I had to tell you first."

"That's better. Oh, Niobe, Niobe. That I should have harmed my darling, my glorious love!"

"You haven't harmed me, my sweet. And now, before I go on, I—I'd like to sit down in the car."

Coridon picked her up and carried her to the Vane.

For this attention, she was thankful. She had very nearly fainted two or three moments before. Then relief had come flooding, to leave her shaken and weak. She lay back against the cushion, drawing deep breaths.

Coridon entered the car and took his seat by her side. With his arm about her—

"I shook you up, my darling. I shouldn't have interrupted."

"Oh, Corin love, I don't think you would have been human, if you had done anything else."

"I confess I was startled," smiling. "I still am a little, you know. How soon can I repair this—this outrage?"

"You've done me no wrong, beloved. The honour you meant to do me was just postponed. And now I'm going straight on.

"We were to have been married on Sunday. Your memory left you on Friday—two days before. Cleo got the news just about mid-day."

"That's right. Mr. Rathbone broke it, greatly against his will. And then I —made her acquaintance, over the telephone."

Niobe nodded.

"And she said she would come and get you not later than six o'clock. You see, before she could fetch you, she had—quite a lot to do. She had to see me—*and tell me*. She had to consult Berserk. She had to see Pompey and ask him to call the whole thing off. She had to tell Florence. Arthur had to be told, and Uncle George. And Ariel was due any minute. . . . So now you will understand why it was she kept you waiting till six o'clock."

"God Almighty," said Coridon. . . .

"A busy afternoon, my darling. You see——"

"One moment," said the man. "If the marriage never took place, how do you come to be here? I mean, we're living together. We have been living together for more than three months."

"I know, beloved. Please let me go on—and tell you in my own way."

"Go on, my darling. I feel most deeply ashamed, but let that pass."

"Oh, Corin, Corin. The world believes us to be married. Only eight people know the truth, and they'll never talk."

"It's not that, Niobe. If for one moment I'd dreamed——"

"I know, I know. Please let me go on, darling. It's better so. You shall ask any questions you like, when once I've done."

"All right, my love. I won't interrupt again."

"Well, Cleo came to see Berserk at two o'clock. No good her coming before, for he was seeing patients till half past one. She'd no appointment, of course: she forced her way in.

"Well, she told Berserk. At once Berserk asked if she had told me. When she said no, Berserk called me in and Cleo broke the news. In accordance with tradition, I fainted; but Berserk's used to that and he pulled me round. Then he began to talk.

"He said that you were now well—that Nature's cure was complete: that your brain was back in its seat and that you were yourself again—that is to say, as you were before 1945. (So you are, you know: Cleo will tell you that.) But he said you must take great care for the next six months, because, though you might not feel it, the loss of your memory was a considerable shock."

"That night he told me the same."

"I know. But to us he said rather more. He said you must return to the cottage, *but that it would be really bad for you to live there alone*. He looked at me. Then—'If only,' he said, 'if only your marriage had taken place.' Then he looked at Cleo. 'Could you go down, Mrs. Ruthven? You see, he'll be wild to talk—and he must have someone to talk to of his own class. He finds this a great adventure: but it won't be a great adventure, if he has to take it alone.'

"Of course I said I should go. If you had been in my place, you'd have done exactly the same. Cleo tried to stop me: but Berserk backed me up. Anyway, my mind was made up. . . .

"Well, it took a lot of arranging. That's why he kept you in bed for twenty-four hours—to give us a chance. Pompey drove me down the next morning. We went by a roundabout way, and nobody saw us arrive. We broke it to Florence at once, and, once she was over the shock, she made us laugh. That was the first time I'd smiled since I knew the truth.

"And so with Florence's help I settled in. And when Cleo brought you on Sunday, there I was, waiting for you—your loving wife.

"I think that's all, Corin darling. I took a risk, of course. But you'd liked me once, and I hoped you'd like me again. If you hadn't—well, I should

have known, and faded away."

Coridon's eyes were shut tight.

"You hoped I'd like you again. If I hadn't . . . Oh, Niobe, Niobe. I didn't believe I could love you more than I did. But now my love's magnified. And I am not only your lover—I am your subject, too. I shall say no more of marriage. It is for you to propose."

Niobe laughed delightedly.

"Will you make an honest woman of me, my dear lord?"

"I'd do it to-day, if I could. And not for your sake—for mine. I want to tie you up tight."

"Pompey is in the slips. I've only to ring him up and he'll go for a special licence with all his might. Berserk will back his application. Myself, I believe he'll get it. But we shall see."

"And then?"

"Mr. Preston will take charge. He'll provide the priest and the private chapel, which stands by itself in a park about fifty miles off."

"Preston? You've roped him in?"

"You roped him in, my darling, by writing that letter to him. You see, when she went to fetch you that Friday, Cleo told him that you were to have been married on Sunday, but that that, of course, was all off."

The man put a hand to his head.

"And then I wrote and told him of 'my adorable wife'!"

Niobe nodded.

"And, being the perfect servant, he sent your letter to Cleo and asked what to do. Cleo went to see him and told him the truth. When she mentioned the special licence we hoped to get, he said he'd seen one such marriage when he was with Lord Eyre—and asked if we'd like ours done in the same very private way. Same chapel, same priest. He's going to be one of the witnesses, if Pompey can pull it off."

"What a man!" said Coridon. "I don't wonder Eyre stuck to him for twenty-nine years."

"He's out of the books," said Niobe. "And now let's drive home, my darling, and give our faithful Pompey the signal to go ahead."

It was Dr. Berserk's letter that did the trick. Pompey Colbourne had composed it, of course: but Berserk was now a very eminent man.

Exactly a week later, Coridon, Niobe and Florence went for a drive. Since it was cold, though fine, they were 'well rugged up'. Nobody could have told that the girl's fur-coat was hiding the frock which, four months before, she had bought for her wedding-day, or that the suit-case on which Florence had her feet was containing two small, smart hats and a looking-glass.

Two days before, Jack and Jill had reconnoitred the way. They had compassed Legacy's park and had marked the two lodge-gates and the chapel standing alone, squired by elms and chestnuts, now, of course, bare.

As the Vane swept into the drive by the southern gate, Niobe drew off her ring.

"I hate doing this," she said: "but it won't be for long."

Florence sat forward.

"I should worry, madam. 'Is nibs never put it on. Besides, re'earsals don' count."

"Florence, d'you wonder we love you? Of course, you're right."

Preston's directions admitted of no mistake.

> *The southern entrance. Keep left where the drive forks. When you enter the second plantation, leave the car on the road and continue on foot. As you leave the plantation, you will see the chapel on your left, and a few paces further on you will find a little path which leads to its door. I shall be there, sir, waiting, from ten o'clock on.*

Within the shelter of the trees, Coridon brought the Vane to the side of the drive, switched her engine off and opened his door. Niobe and Florence emerged, and, Coridon holding the mirror, put on and adjusted their hats. Two minutes later, the three set out on foot, Coridon a little ahead, and Niobe, walking with Florence, three paces behind.

The chapel's door was open and, as they approached the building, Mr. George Preston appeared.

Smiling, the two men shook hands.

With a hand on the other's shoulder, Coridon turned.

"Niobe, this is Mr. Preston, to whom we owe so much. Mr. Preston—my future wife."

The ex-valet bowed low. Then he took Niobe's hand.

"I have no words, Mr. Preston."

"Madam, the honour is mine."

Still holding his hand, Niobe turned.

"Mr. Preston—Mrs. Davey, our loving housekeeper."

The two bowed and smiled.

Coridon spoke.

"You're the starter, Mr. Preston. We're under your orders now."

The ex-valet smiled. Then—

"Very good, sir. The Chaplain is in the vestry, already robed—The Reverend Seneca Birch, a silent gentleman, but very punctilious. If madam will forgive me, he wishes me to give her away. And Mrs. Davey to attend her. After the ceremony, you, sir, and madam will follow him into the vestry, and Mrs. Davey and I will come after, to sign the register."

Coridon took off his great coat.

"Perfect, Mr. Preston. I like doing things in style."

"Allow me, sir." Mr. Preston took the coat. "I'll put it just inside. On the left, Mrs. Davey. When you take madam's coat, will you put it down as you pass?"

"I will," said Florence.

"Here," said Niobe, "who's being married to-day?"

"Oh, I'm not safe," said Florence. "Good thing we're not on television. I'd better wait outside."

"Don't you dare," said Niobe, laughing.

Coridon turned to Mr. Preston.

"You see for yourself," he said, "that our spirits are high."

"Very right and proper, sir. Will you lead the way?"

Coridon squared his shoulders and passed through the open door.

"Your arm, Mr. Preston," said Niobe.

"That is not necessary, madam."

"I insist on my privilege."

Mr. Preston bowed low. Then he handed the great coat to Florence and offered his arm to her mistress with matchless courtesy.

So Jill passed up the aisle, to take her place beside Jack at the foot of the chancel steps.

The priest was standing at their head—a dignified, grave-faced man, with dreaming blue eyes and unusually thick, white hair, which was carefully brushed and was shining, as white hair sometimes will. He had the mien of a prelate whose mind is not concerned with 'this workaday world' and would, I am sure, have found favour with Raphael.

Shafts of mote-ridden sunshine were slanting into the chapel, so that it was not dim. One was striking the altar, setting the cross and the candlesticks afire and enriching the beautiful reredos, the work of some long-dead master of bas-relief.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God . . .

The short ceremony was over.

The register was signed in the vestry, and the Vicar of Purse very gravely shook hands with man and wife.

Niobe kissed Florence, and Coridon did the same. Then they shook hands with Mr. Preston.

Niobe and Florence withdrew and Coridon addressed Mr. Birch.

"Mr. Preston tells me, sir, that you're a great classical scholar. I have a copy of *Euterpe*, Herodotus' second book. Done into English in 1584."

The chaplain's eyes lighted.

"Not by B. R.?"

"By B. R., whoever he was: edited by Andrew Lang."

"Upon my soul. I've tried to obtain it for years."

"My copy will reach you shortly, by registered post. I beg that you will accept it, as from my wife and myself."

"You're very kind. I shall value it as it deserves. It's—it's been a great pleasure to be of service to you."

"Thank you very much."

"One moment. You're sure you can spare this—this very rare book? They only printed five hundred in 1888."

"It'll only change homes, sir. I'd rather you had it than I."

"You're very kind. It—it will mean a great deal to me." The chaplain turned away. "I shall unrobe now, Mr. Preston. Will you lock up?"

"I will, sir."

With his back to the others, the chaplain removed his hood.

Coridon smiled at Mr. Preston and led the way into the chapel and so to the park.

As the latter slid the former into his coat—

"You've seen for yourself, sir, how very forgetful he is."

"Abstracted," said Coridon. "The moment he turned away, he forgot I was there. Out of sight, out of mind. Which is, of course, precisely what we desire. Mr. Preston, you have made a fine art of efficiency. Your staff-work to-day commands my great admiration."

The ex-valet coloured with pleasure.

Then—

"Just one thing, sir. You could hardly have made the chaplain a more appropriate gift: but, if you please, send it to me—you know my address. I will unpack and repack it and send it to him. Thus the postmark will tell no tale. He wouldn't notice such a thing; but his housekeeper might. And now I must take my leave."

As he bowed over Niobe's hand—

"How can we ever thank you for all you've done?"

"It has been a great honour, madam, to serve you both."

Coridon held his hand tight.

"Goodbye, Mr. Preston. We shall come to see you in April, as soon as I'm free to move. God bless you, my dear fellow, for all you have done this day."

Visibly moved, the ex-valet bowed to Florence, and Florence bowed in return. Then he turned, to hasten back to the chapel and shut the door.

"Gawd, what a man!" said Florence. "Must of bin born on a Toosday. 'E makes me feel like a twopenny mother's 'elp."

"How dare you, Florence?" said Niobe, taking her arm. "He's acquired most beautiful manners, because for twenty-nine years he was with the Marquess of Eyre. But you were 'born on the Sabbath day', for you're 'bonny and blithe and good and gay'."

That there should be no celebration went against Coridon's grain; but Niobe and Florence had firmly opposed the idea. He raised the point again, as they gained the Queen's highway.

"Couldn't we just lunch out? Pot luck, of course. Yesterday's fish-cakes, perhaps, and prunes and blancmange. But it would be a little gesture."

Niobe spoke over her shoulder.

"What does Florence think?"

"Not on your life, sir," said Florence. "We done so well up to now. Nothin' out o' the common so far, except my riding with you. An' Fanny Bowles thinks you've took me to see an electric cooker in somebody's private 'ouse. 'Ad to dress up, to go in the car with you. We don' want no eyes on to-day, except our own. Mr. Preston's safe as a 'ouse; an' Glory Be will forget it this afternoon. Nice ole duck, I'd say, an' suited us down to the socks: but talk about lapses: if you ask me, he 'ad one twenty years ago—an' it ain't over yet."

"Florence," said Niobe, laughing, "you're perfectly right. To-day is the nineteenth of January. But we have all got to remember that that is a dream. It is really the second of October; for that was the day we were married, my very dear lord."

Coridon sighed.

"Let me confess that I haven't a leg to stand on. All the same, I'm sure you know how I feel. But we must drink champagne to-night. I've still got three bottles of Roederer 1928."

"That's all right," said Florence. "Fanny Bowles 'll be out o' the way."

And so champagne was served at dinner that night; and when they had left the table, Florence came into the study and drank a glass with Major and Mrs. Gore.

Coridon looked at Florence.

"Only one toast, Florence. I give you Mrs. Niobe." He raised his glass, with his eyes on his beautiful wife. "To a very great lady," he said.

Florence raised her glass.

"To you, madam—God bless you." She swallowed some wine. "An' now to you both. I don' know 'ow I'm so lucky. I'm not in service at all. I'm livin' with lovely frien's."

Two letters, presently written, shall speak for themselves.

February.

Dear Mr. Preston,

To-morrow Rodshams' have promised to deliver to you the hunter-watch, number 08634, which they made for my father in or about the year nineteen hundred and one.

This watch, which of course I inherited, has always been a worry to me. I never wear a pocket-watch, and, because it is a hunter, I cannot have it mounted as a bedside clock. To sell it was unthinkable. But now, once again, it has come into its own. I have had your name engraved upon the inside of the cap, and my wife and I hope you will wear it in memory of that great day which we three may remember only in our hearts.

Yours very sincerely,
Coridon Gore.

The reply came, naturally enough, by return of post.

Sir,

Had you not had my name engraved upon the cap, I should have asked your leave to decline your magnificent gift.

It is a finer watch than any the late Marquess wore, and, though it is now in my pocket, I feel and shall always feel that it is

too good for me. However, as everything is now over and done, I can never tell you the great joy which I derive from the possession and employment of so lovely a timepiece.

I was more than recompensed for anything I was able to do by the very handsome reception which you and Madam accorded my efforts on the happy occasion to which you refer. And I can only conclude by thanking you most deeply for this most generous recognition of a service which, believe me, my dear Sir, it was an honour and a pleasure to render.

Yours respectfully,
George Preston.

PS. I have heard nothing from his reverence, which, I think, goes to show that he has wholly forgotten how he came by your valuable book.

But Pompey's present was even better still.

"Come and look, darling," said Niobe.

Her husband left his table and passed to her side.

The pen-and-ink drawing measured almost exactly ten inches by eight. Pompey—seated at his table in Lincoln's Inn Fields . . . sitting back in his chair, with a pleasant smile on his face and a hand to his chin. It was the man to the life. And his cheerful personality, that precious fountain that always seemed to play, was welling out of the portrait, for all to feel.

Coridon studied it in silence.

Then—

"You're a very great artist, my love. To those who know not Pompey, it is a brilliant piece of work. To those who do, it is a masterpiece."

"I'll pretend it is, my darling. And now please think of a title."

"I've just given you one—an adaptation of Shakespeare. 'O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome, Knew you not Pompey?' "

" 'Know you not Pompey?' Splendid. That is exactly right. And I'd like to sign it, darling: but I don't quite know how to do it."

"A grave decision to take. For, as you sign this, so you must sign your drawings for the rest of your life."

“I know. What d’you think of N. C.—a small N inside a big C? Rather like this.” The girl laid aside the drawing and picked up her pen. For a moment or two this moved. Then, “D’you think that would do?”

“Yes,” said Coridon. “I don’t think you’ll better that. After Albert Durer.”

“So it is. I never thought of that. What was good enough for him should be good enough for me.” She laid her fair head against her husband’s sleeve. “Oh dear, the relief of having you to consult!”

Coridon stooped to set his cheek against hers.

“And what of me? Who gave me the one word I wanted two days ago? But you mustn’t trust this to the post.”

“I can give it to him next week. Done up, you know. ‘To be undone at home.’ ”

“Pompey and Preston,” said Corin. “What a pair! We’ve been very lucky, my sweet.”

“And Cleo, darling—the mainspring.”

“Cleo, my sweet, is the heart or mainspring of every enterprise in which she is concerned. Take away her drive, and much action would stop and the rest would grow sluggish.”

Niobe nodded.

“It’s true. If you could have seen her the day your memory went. She was stunned by the news, Corin. She told me she almost fainted—as I did, of course. But, before two minutes were past, she was talking to you.”

“And laughing,” said Corin. “I’d never have thought she had a care in the world.”

“She was really beside herself. Then she put her receiver back, picked up those terrible reins and began to drive. And all that fearful day she never made a mistake.”

“We’re not lucky in Cleo. We’re blest.”

“A very true saying,” said Mrs. Coridon Gore. . . .

“There’s only one thing,” said Corin. “I’m uneasy about Henry Jordan. I’ve ignored his existence, you know. And it was he that found me. Besides, he’s a very nice man.”

“But less discreet than Preston—isn’t that right?”

Coridon nodded.

“ ‘In whom is no guile.’ A more simple type.”

“Let’s wait till April and see what Preston says.”

“I don’t like that,” said the man; “but I don’t know what else to do.”

He could not know that Preston was giving the matter much thought.

On the eighteenth day of March, London was not at her best. A bitter wind was raking her helpless streets and sleet was driving before it, to sting the face, overlie the carriage-ways and pavements and add to the pains and perils of the unhappy wayfarer.

The snuggery, however, in Cork Street was agreeably peaceful and warm. A jolly fire was burning, the curtains were drawn, the shaded lamps were lit, and Messrs. Preston and Jordan were enjoying an old-fashioned tea. The day being Sunday, Preston’s bar would not open for twenty-five hours.

“Tell me, George,” said Jordan, “what about Major Gore? I’ve often thought of him, but—never a word. Have you had any news?”

Preston emptied his mouth and wiped his lips.

“I should have told you,” he said. “When I had no word, I began to get anxious, too. So I ventured to write to Mrs. Ruthven. There’s a lady for you. The day she received my letter she came to see me here.”

“Very handsome,” said Jordan. “Just what her brother would have done.”

“She says he’s in splendid form, but he has to stay quiet for six months. That period has nearly expired. I quite expect we shall hear from him next month.”

“That explains why he hasn’t written?”

“Precisely. When I say ‘quiet’, I mean it. He wished to write, of course: but he was—er—discouraged from writing any letters until the six months were up. He’s—he’s married, Henry.”

“Never!”

Preston nodded his head.

“To a most charming lady—his sister says.”

“There now! And he was so outspoken about the married state.”

The ex-valet frowned.

“No, Henry,” he said. “He was afraid that, if he was already married, he might not take to the lady a second time.”

“Ah, yes. That’s right. He was very amusing about it. Still, I find it very surprising that he should have married so soon.”

Preston cleared his throat.

“Though he didn’t know it, Henry, when he was here he was engaged to be married: and as soon as he saw the lady, he fell in love with her again.”

“I see,” said Jordan. “Still——”

“It was essential,” said Preston, “that they should be married at once.”

Jordan’s eyes were wide.

“No!”

“Essential,” repeated Preston: “but not for the usual reason—the reason you think. The specialist who was called in said he must retire to the country and stay very quiet for six months. Very well. But he went further than that. He said that on no account must Major Gore live alone—as, of course, he had been living for several years. Well, the obvious solution was that he should marry the lady as soon as might be. And so he did . . . of course, very quietly indeed.”

“I see,” said Jordan, “I see.”

The ex-valet leaned forward.

“Mrs. Ruthven told me these things in the strictest confidence. I tell them to you in the same. And I trust you, Henry, never to mention them or even refer to them, even when speaking to him.”

“I give you my solemn word.”

“You see, Henry, the Major is an eminent man. And if the Press were to learn that his marriage had taken place so quietly and in such haste, certain papers would—er—broadcast these facts in big type, in order to cause a sensation—as, of course, such queer news would.”

“Wicked,” said Jordan.

"Wicked," said the ex-valet. "But that's what they'd do. So not a word must be breathed. He's married—that's all we know. How or when or where is nothing to do with us."

"Or to anyone else."

"Precisely."

Jordan sighed.

"Well, I hope it turns out all right. 'Marry in haste', you know. And the Major never struck me as a marrying man."

Preston was devoting his attention to the lighting of a cigar.

At length—

"From what Mrs. Ruthven said, I think we need harbour no fears on that account. According to her, the lady is in every way desirable. Anyway, there it is: and when next you see him, Henry, be careful to watch your step."

"You bet I will, old man. But fancy him being engaged. And we were all so sure that he wasn't tied up."

"And another thing, Henry. I think it more than likely that very soon the Major will come to London for two or three nights. And I'm sure he'll want to see us and to introduce us to his wife. That will be most enjoyable. But if they should ask us to visit them in Hampshire, I think that we should refuse. Had the Major been a bachelor, that would have been quite different: but I should be most reluctant to sit down to table with such a man *and his wife*."

"All wrong," said Jordan. "All wrong."

"I was sure you'd agree. If he likes to step out of his ground—well, that's very nice of him. But we mustn't step out of ours."

"You're perfectly right, George. You always are." Henry Jordan sighed. "There's marriage for you, again. If only he'd stayed single, we could have gone to lunch."

Using great self-control, the ex-valet left it there. He would have loved to tell Jordan how very rare and excelling was Coridon's wife. 'Your arm, Mr. Preston . . . I insist on my privilege. . . .' George Preston would never forget those words. But his object had been accomplished—Jordan would hold his peace. And now the less said, the better.

So long as his crony was with him, he was extremely careful not to consult his watch.

On the second day of April, Major and Mrs. Gore repaired to The Savoy Hotel, and Florence with them. The three were to stay for four nights. Before twenty-four hours had gone by, ‘Mrs. Gore’s maid’ was a favourite with all the staff.

On the third day of April, Coridon spoke to Preston upon the telephone.

“Coridon Gore, Mr. Preston.”

“A very great pleasure, sir, to hear your voice.”

“May we come to Cork Street to see you at three o’clock?”

“Delighted, sir. I’ll do my best to have Henry Jordan here. That I may say, sir, will be quite all right.”

“Well done indeed, Mr. Preston.”

“I shall be very happy, sir, to make madam’s acquaintance. And so, of course, will he.”

“As before, you command my great admiration.”

George Preston smiled.

“At three o’clock, sir, you said.”

“We shall be there. Goodbye.”

The reunion was a great success. An invitation to Elm Cottage was most politely received, but no date was fixed. Jordan’s movements were uncertain. ‘Some day, of course.’ But on one point, Coridon was firm.

“I have already reserved an alcove at Scott’s for the last day of September. That is a Sunday, Mr. Preston, so you will be free. If you please, you and Mr. Jordan and I shall dine there together that evening, dressed as we are. For the sake of old times, I think we might start with oysters. . . .”

“You’re very good, sir,” smiled Preston. “If madam can spare you that evening, Henry Jordan and I——”

“—will take every care of me.”

Amid laughter the meeting broke up.

Preceded by Coridon and Jordan, Niobe and her host moved slowly across the bar.

“You do all things well, Mr. Preston. I’m sure you sometimes remember what we have sworn to forget.”

The ex-valet smiled.

“You and the Major, madam, have seen to that.”

When Niobe looked at him, he was consulting his watch. . . .

Coridon threw his party the following night. Pompey, of course, was included and pulled far more than his weight. It was a great occasion.

George Medallion—too old, he maintained, to dance—was sitting at the table alone, when a friend of his came up.

“No, I won’t sit down, George: but have you done well to-night?”

“Three beauties, aren’t they? That’s my niece dancing with Ruthven.”

“We can’t keep our eyes off your table—I don’t think anyone can. Three. What a pleasure it is to see such lovely creatures.”

“Does you good, don’t it, Philip?”

“I’ll say it does. See you at Newmarket. . . .”

Cleopatra was dancing with Pompey.

“The relief, Pompey, of knowing that everything’s straightened out!”

“We’ve a lot to be thankful for, Cleo. When we remember the havoc of six months ago . . .”

“Oh, wasn’t it awful, Pompey?”

“It was. There’s no other word. You bore the brunt, of course; but I think it took a month from my life.”

“Order again, out of chaos. I’m ready to dance till dawn. You know they’ve brought Florence up?”

“So Niobe told me. She thinks she’s in the cloak-room. That was her great ambition—to be allowed to help in the cloak-room of The Savoy.”

“She’s there—in the ladies’ room. I wanted to burst with laughter. I was just in time to stop Ariel from putting her arms round her neck.”

“The report she presently renders will be above all price.”

“And quite unprintable. ‘An’ the beautiful Duchess of ——. ‘Ammer toes an’ a mug that’s been lifted twice’.”

Pompey laughed so much that they had to abandon the dance.

Pompey's news was reported on the following day. This was of considerable importance. Niobe went to see him in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

——'s had shown a great interest in Niobe's work and were very well content to reproduce her drawings in *Country Life*. With Pompey's conditions, however, they were not content. They desired to purchase the pictures and were prepared to pay a very good price.

"I can't advise it," said Pompey. "The offer is very attractive—and I think they'd go higher still. But I do not think you should let such drawings go. They swear they'd be easy with you, and so, I am sure, they would. But directors retire, you know, and Pharaohs sometimes arise 'who knew not Joseph'."

"I'm in your hands," said the girl.

"Very well. Now if we are to get what we want, we shall have to move towards them a little way. Could you do another six?"

"Of Shakespeare's Songs? Oh, yes."

"Well, they would like twelve very much—that's one a month for a year. Secondly, they'd like them signed."

"I'm ready to do that, too."

"Very well. I propose to lay our cards on the table: to say you're not out for money, but you do want your work to be seen: to add that you've picked their window as being the best you could see, but if they don't want the honour of being remembered as your patron in days to come . . ."

"You're very clever, Pompey."

"It's all true, my dear. If only you've got clean hands, you can get a long way with the truth."

(By May the contract was signed. The payment was nominal, but Pompey had had his way. Five drawings remained to be delivered. The first of the twelve would appear in the special Christmas Number of *Country Life*.)

After their visit to London, the two returned to their home, in all content. (Florence, by her desire, had returned the day before. 'I've 'ad the lovelies' time, but I couldn' bear not to be there to welcome you 'ome. 'Sides, Fanny Bowles is all right, but I'd like to give things the once over before you come back.') As always, the peace of Elm Cottage entered into their souls. After the roar of London, the swirl and din of the traffic, the reek of burned petrol, the pavements swarming with people that had no time to smile, Jack and Jill found their messuage a truly 'blessed plot'.

"My God, are we lucky?" said Niobe, washing her hands, while Florence was getting tea. "Bruton Street Mews wasn't bad—mainly because it might have been so much worse. And Wimpole Street wasn't sordid. But, much as I love London, it's no place for me to-day."

"Or me," said Coridon. "If I had to live in London, I don't think I should live very long. I'm terribly sorry for the millions who have to be there."

"Most of them love it, my sweet. We're a most unusual pair. But we do seem to fit rather well."

"I think we do, my darling. I'm very fortunate. To return to your comfortable theme. The Savoy, The Club, an outstanding film or show—I enjoy them all very much: but if I had to choose between them and the Roman road, I shouldn't hesitate."

"What about the Wallace Collection?"

"Ah, yes. And The Abbey and Christie's and all the other shrines. That's a very difficult question. The work of men's hands can be irreplaceable."

"Nature has done much work on the Roman road."

"I know. I must think this out. There's room for an essay here. Perhaps the answer will come, when we've stood on the lawn of Elm Cottage . . . at eleven on Midsummer Eve . . . when all the winds are still . . . and all the world is asleep, except the nightingales. . . ."

They were really very happy: and the morrow did seem to be taking thought for itself. Niobe's seventh drawing promised to diminish the six that had gone before; and the book which her husband was writing was moving extremely well. Each exalting the other, the two dilettantes were going from strength to strength.

Old friends became new.

Joe Gammon was encountered and accosted—to admit, with pride and pleasure, that 'you and I, sir, used to be very good friends'.

“So we are and shall be.” Coridon took his hand. “Niobe, this is Mr. Gammon, a neighbour of ours.” The two bowed and smiled. “Worth losing my memory, Mr. Gammon, to find such a wife.”

“ ’Ard to believe you’ve lost it, talking to you.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

As once before, Lady Curtice and Paley came to lunch. The Weighbridges were invited, but were not going about: Mrs. Gore took tea with the lady one May afternoon. As Coridon drove her home—

“My sweet,” she said, “I can’t have you ferrying me. You’ll have to teach me to drive.”

“I was thinking the same, my darling. Supposing I were to go sick.”

“Which God forbid. All the same . . .”

Niobe had her first lesson the following afternoon.

When it was over and they were driving home—

“Now,” said Corin, “at least you know the controls: and you know what happens when you move them. But have you any idea why, when you let in the clutch, the car begins to move?”

Niobe thought.

Then—

“Honestly, no,” she said. “I can’t say I have.”

“Or what, in fact, takes place, when you change up or down?”

The girl shook her head.

“Well, you don’t have to know, my darling: but you’ll never be a really good driver, unless you do.”

“Good or bad, I think that, if I am to drive, I ought to know.”

“I warn you, you may find it boring.”

“I don’t think I shall.”

“Well, I’ll tell you when we get back. We’ll find a diagram. The engine provides the power, and the rear wheels propel the car: what I think you should understand is how the power is transmitted from the engine to the wheels. Once you understand that, you’ll never abuse a car—as thousands of people do out of nothing but ignorance.”

Niobe proved an apt pupil. ‘L’ plates were obtained and fitted, and ‘The Highway Code’ was procured. In three weeks’ time she was driving extremely well.

“The freedom of the road,” said her husband.

“Thanks entirely to you, my lord.”

“Be fair to yourself. As the French say, you have ‘the hand’. And I very much like being driven—by somebody I can trust.”

“I love it,” said Niobe. “The child with a nice new toy. I’ll drive you whenever you like—but you must ask me to.”

“What a wife!” said Coridon.

George Medallion drove down to luncheon, enjoyed himself very much and begged to be asked again.

“I won’t come to stay: at my age, you know, one likes to sleep in one’s bed: but I’d like to drive down again—some Sunday, perhaps. You’ve got something here, Ni, that you seldom see to-day. Takes me back many years. No sort of fuss, but everything very well done. That’s a very nice Morland you’ve got: I’ve got a Hogarth, warehoused: I’ll have it cleaned and sent down. I never gave you a present, and I’d like to think of it here.”

“You’re very kind, Uncle George.”

“I’m pleasing myself. This is the right kind of setting. You going to Ascot this year?”

“One day, I think. I don’t want him to do too much.”

“Quite right. He’s a very nice fellow—I wish I’d known him before. Very glad it’s worked out so well. When shall we see your work?”

“Not for six months, Uncle George. Then look at the Christmas Number of *Country Life*.”

“That’s good.”

“Not so good as it sounds. Still, my work will appear in ——s’ advertisement. The idea is a nice shop-window.”

“Very shrewd. The Christmas Number. I must remember that.”

“But please don’t give me away. I want to stay anonymous for a while.”

“Your secret is safe, my dear.”

And Ariel came down to stay—and, wise in her generation, made friends with Fanny Bowles. The latter waited upon her, hand and foot. Cleo and Arthur drove down to carry their daughter back.

While the women were yet upstairs—

"You wouldn't remember," said Arthur, "but about two years ago, sitting in this very room, I advised you to take a wife."

"Did you indeed? It was very good counsel," said Corin.

"It was what you needed," said Arthur. "You know, you're quite different now."

"That I can well believe. But I'm very lucky, Arthur. Niobe's out of a very special drawer."

"Very special," said Arthur. "She and Cleo are a most exceptional pair. They're not like ordinary women: there's nothing petty about them: I don't believe they know how to bite and scratch."

"You're perfectly right, Arthur. And yet they're most feminine."

"Yes, indeed. . . . Saw George Medallion on Thursday—you've got a friend there. He's told Longmans' to get out his silver and send it down to you."

"That's very kind of him."

"Says he'd much rather it went to a decent house. I think he's quite right. Besides, it's family stuff. And what with Death Duties to-day . . . But you keep quiet about it; for if he doesn't last five years and the Treasury smells it out, they'll come down on you for Estate Duty, sure as a gun."

"Really? Can they do that?"

His brother-in-law laughed an exceeding bitter laugh.

"The widow and orphan, Corin, are down the Treasury's street." Here the door was opened and his daughter slid into the room. "Hullo, my darling. I'll bet you want to stay on."

"Daddy darling, how did you know?"

"Because I'm sure they've spoiled you, and everyone likes being spoiled."

"I don't think we have," said Corin. "And she's been a delightful guest."

Ariel kissed her father and then sat down by Corin and kissed him, too.

“Niobe’s asked me to come again in July. If I do, Corin darling, please will you take me to Tintagel? I’m mad about Tristram and Iseult.”

“Too far,” said Arthur.

“My sweet,” said Corin, “you shall sleep a night at Tintagel.” Ariel threw her arms round his neck. “And you and Niobe shall see ‘The fleeces of the flock that knows no fold.’ ”

“I said they spoiled you,” said Arthur.

Royal Ascot Week was at hand.

With one consent, the two had arranged to attend the function on Thursday—the day upon which they had met the year before.

“Tell me again,” said Coridon, lighting a cigarette.

The two were strolling the lawn, before going to bed. Except for the study, the gray, old cottage was dark; but a mellow radiance issued from the tall french window, which might have been some doorway, set in a fairy tale.

Niobe took his arm.

“I never expected to see you, but I was always ready in case you should appear. And then—there you were all alone, looking very nice, surveying your fellow revellers with a quiet, grave smile. You wouldn’t look at me, so I had to do something about it. So I moved to just behind you and quoted *Coridon’s Song*. . . . And you were round in a flash, and—and my heart leaped up, my sweet, for you looked so very pleased.”

“I drank to you with my eyes.”

“Not quite. You kept that for later on. But I knew you were very happy to see me again. And then good fairy Cleopatra appeared and made our path smooth.”

“The high gods were good to us.”

“I think that they heard my prayers.”

The man took his wife in his arms and kissed her lips.

Thursday promised to be a magnificent day.

After breakfasting in his shirt-sleeves, Coridon brought the Vane to the wicket-gate. Then he withdrew, to complete his formal dress.

Florence was fussing over Niobe, lovely in powder blue.

"A you-know dream, an' that's no more than the truth. Oh, what a lovely picture! I'd love to see 'er cuttin' the Duchesses down. An' I've ordered the picture papers. If they don' shove 'er in, I'll never smile again."

"Oh, dear," said Niobe.

Her husband smiled.

"You're asking for it, my darling."

" 'S right an' proper, madam. Mrs. Cleo was in last year, an' now it's your turn. An' think o' the pleasure it gives. Grannie Bowles 'as got 'er picture up on the mantel-shelf."

"I wish you could see it all, Florence."

"Not my line," said Florence. "An' I never did fancy the races. I went to The Derby once—with my brother Bert an' 'is wife. 'Ampstead 'Eath with knobs on, if you ask me. An' the bookies roarin' an' yellin', until I couldn' think straight. *An'* the 'eat. . . . We 'ad our lunch in a basket, an' found a bit of shade at the back of a tent. Bert goes off to get our money on, an' Mabel and I was glad to take off our shoes. An' when I looks round—Gawblimy, the basket's gone. 'Course it was some leper inside the tent. But when I got roun' to the front, they wanted to charge me sixpence to see a dog-faced man. 'Dog-bellied bastard,' I says. ' 'E's pinched my lunch.' 'Oh, 'e's not like that,' says the showman. 'An' 'e knows 'e ain't allowed meat till the sun goes down.' An' then he shows me 'is picture. Soon as I could speak, ' 'E'd better keep it,' I says. 'I don' wan' rabies.' By the time we'd got something to eat, it was nearly time for the race. 'Come on,' says Bert, 'we'll see it from Tattenham Corner.' What a 'ope! About five thousan' 'ad 'ad the same idea. Then everyone shouts 'They're off!' An' so they were. Off the you-know map, as far as I was concerned. I saw the jockeys' caps go by in a bunch, but I never see an 'orse the 'ole of that day, excep' on the roundabouts. Just as well, I think, for ours went down the drain."

The handsome pair were sped by Florence and Fanny Bowles. . . .

Side by side in the Vane, with twenty-eight miles before them, they took to the open road. The last two miles were crowded. Still, they reached the course in time to see the famous procession and the Royal Standard broken over Her Majesty's box.

Luncheon with George Medallion in his Club tent: Cleopatra and Arthur were also his guests. When the champagne was served, Cleopatra raised her

glass.

"Your anniversary, darlings. Many most happy returns."

And Medallion drank to Corin, and Arthur to Niobe.

It was very great fun, but the day was tremendously hot. 'Flaming June' was determined to justify her name.

As Arthur re-entered the paddock, he wiped his throat.

"Thunder for a monkey," he murmured, "before the day is out."

Corin and Niobe left before the last race. Very many people seemed to be doing the same. By the time they had extracted the Vane and had left *The Wheatsheaf* behind, the man was thankful to relax.

Niobe shot him a faintly uneasy glance.

"Tired, my darling?"

"Not exactly tired, my sweet; but I shall be glad to get home. In fine feathers men feel the heat: between the two, the grasshopper can be a burden."

"Head aching?"

"It is a little. I'm getting soft, of course, but a chauffeur would be a convenience upon an occasion like this. Besides, this heat is oppressive."

The man was looking jaded—to Niobe's concern. Still, the atmosphere was trying and the Vane had made one of a welter of stopping and starting cars.

Wishing very much they had left the course before—

"It's getting cooler, my darling. We're leaving the thunder behind."

"It's strange," said Coridon. "Thunder seems to like Ascot. I remember the first time I went—in 'thirty-three, I think—they had the most awful storm. I was staying with the Boltons, and, happily, we'd just left."

Niobe sat like an image. The girl was petrified. His brain had had another convulsion—*of which he was unaware*. The shock would not come until he perceived the truth. This might be at any moment. If only they were at home—instead of toiling along the Southampton road.

She pulled herself together.

"That was before my time. But it—it must have caused havoc, when it broke."

“Havoc,” said Coridon, quietly, “exactly describes the scene. Walter Lefevre stayed on and he told us when he got in. He had to wade about the Enclosure, taking unfortunate women pick-a-back.”

Havoc.

Beside herself with anxiety, Niobe tried to think.

He ought to be resting at Elm Cottage, and here he was at the wheel, with twenty-five miles to go. And his head was aching, and the colour was out of his face. She would have given the world for Cleo’s lightning brain.

“Would you like me to drive, my darling?”

“Oh, no, my sweet. I’m not as bad as that. But junkets like this are tiring and the oppressive heat has made itself felt. Next year we’ll splurge and take a driver. But every mile is bringing us nearer to the cottage . . . and the elm . . . and Florence . . . to our humble little realm, where we can relax.”

For a moment Niobe thought that she was going to faint.

And the elm . . .

Coridon’s words had hit her over the heart.

Oh, God, why hadn’t they told him? It would have been so easy to tell him the truth. That there had been an elm of which he was very fond: but that this had been blown down, while he was away. And he would have thought nothing of it. But now . . . in his present condition . . .

Somehow or other—somehow, she continued to converse.

“You’re—quite right about taking a driver. I’m sure Fred Barley would simply love to come.”

“And when we can, we must get a bigger car. The Vane’s done us very well; but a bigger car is less tiring. Before the war I had an eight-cylinder Delage: I bought her from David Shardeloe—he was killed at Boulogne. The dealers offered him two hundred; but, after a good day at Epsom, I offered him three. You see, I knew the car—and a lovely lady she was. English coachwork, of course. And did she sit down? I took Cleo down in her to the South of France—five hundred miles in the day, and we weren’t a bit tired.”

“Wonderful,” said Niobe, somehow.

And the elm . . .

The words seemed to have been branded upon her brain. Her brain? What of the shock to Coridon's, when he got out of the car? Besides, there was something wrong. He was taking her presence for granted—must be aware that they were man and wife: yet the elm had not been there for the last nine months. A thousand times he had trodden the turf which it used to shade, commended the rhododendron that grew where it used to rise. And yet he thought it was there—was looking forward to hailing his well beloved . . .

Frantically, Niobe sought to marshal her frightened wits.

Three things stood out. First, of governing importance, his suspicions must not be aroused. Secondly, by hook or by crook, he must be made to lie down and take his rest. Thirdly, at any cost, the truth about the elm must be told him, before he found it out for himself.

They drove in a merciful silence for several miles.

Bagshot and Camberley were gone, and before very long they would turn.

"I'll tell you what," said the girl; "let's come in at the back. Then you won't have the business of putting the Vane away."

"That's an idea," said Corin. "Not the sort of entrance that such a fine lady should make—as Florence will be sure to observe. But, at least, the car will be done with. I suppose I can't have got a touch of the sun."

"Head very bad, my darling?"

"Less painful than heavy, my sweet. The spirit, believe me, is willing, but the flesh is unaccountably embarrassed."

"I wish you'd let me drive."

"Not worth it now, my darling. We'll soon be home."

"Promise me this, Corin—that, when we get in, you'll go straight upstairs, take off your things, lie down on your bed and relax."

"All right, my lady. I promise." The man knitted his brows. "I can't understand this business. I didn't drink much champagne."

"It's the thunderous heat, my darling, on the top of everything else."

"Trooping the Colour one year was just as hot as this. And I was on parade, and couldn't let up for an instant for hour after hour. My God, how I envied Tony, because he was in the Blues. He had our cottage then; and

when he was killed, poor Daphne begged me to buy it, and somehow I raised the money and brought it off. I wish you'd known them: they were the grandest pair."

Niobe listened to his words with her heart in her mouth.

Very conscious of the bathos of her answer—

"The—the war cost you dear, my darling."

"Yes," said the man. "I lost two-thirds of my friends."

How long would it be now, before they got in? Twenty minutes—say twenty-five. Twenty-five crawling minutes, in any one of which Coridon might discover the prank which his brain had played.

She began to pray in silence.

"O God, just let him get home. And then, while he's sleeping, Florence and I can consider——"

"Oh, dear, here's a smash," said Corin, feeling his brake. "Oh, it's all right: the police are there. But keep your eyes on your lap—it doesn't look too good."

Niobe did as she was bid.

Coridon slowed right down; and then, in response to signals, drove carefully by.

As the Vane gathered speed—

"All clear, my sweet. As it never was, but shall be. I don't care what anyone says, it's the pace that kills. I remember . . ."

Niobe wanted to scream.

Another reminiscence and another. Coridon's brain was roving, as a beast that has been enlarged—ranging over the region from which it had been excluded for nine long months, finding familiar pastures, pausing to taste their sweetness and then pushing on . . . on to its favourite haunt—a sheltered Horatian lawn, at the foot of a time-honoured elm. . . .

They were nearing Halliard now. In a moment or two the venerable tower of the church would be rising against the chestnuts which kept the vicarage. Yes, there was the weathercock, glinting in the afternoon sun.

"An attractive approach," said Corin. "I remember the first time I saw it. Tony drove me down one Friday—I was the first guest they had."

“As his best man?”

“Yes. A full-dress wedding, of course. St. Margaret’s, Guard of Honour, reception in Grosvenor Square. That was in ‘thirty-seven, just after the Coronation. I’ve got on the same clothes to-day.”

The Vane slipped through the village. . . .

And then they were in the lane and were coming up to their gate.

As they entered the yard—

“You will come straight up and lie down?”

“I promise—to sleep it off.” Coridon stopped the car. “You get out, my sweet; and I’ll put her away.”

As Niobe left the car, Florence appeared.

“There now. An’ Fanny Bowles is out by the wicket-gate, ready to run an’ call me the momen’ she sees the car.”

“Listen, Florence, listen. He’s not too good and he’s going straight up to lie down.”

Florence clapped her hands to her face.

“Oh, my Gawd, not again?”

“I’ll tell you once he’s asleep. Behave quite normally. But don’t show any surprise, whatever he says.”

Coridon emerged from the garage.

“And Florence and all. My God, I’m glad to be back.”

“Upstairs, my darling. Come on.”

“Florence, I’m over at the knees. Have we had any thunder here?”

“You don’ look too good, do you? No, we ’aven’t ’ad no thunder: but ’as it bin ’ot? Mrs. Niobe’s right—you wan’ to go an’ lie down. Las’ year you was driven, you know.”

“I know.” Florence, by now behind him, suppressed a start. “Besides, there was no thunder either day.”

Somehow Florence made answer.

“An’ yet you was glad to get ’ome. Go on, luv. Soon as I seen you settled, I’ll make some tea.”

“I’d love a glass of cold water.”

“I’ll bring it up.”

All its windows and doors being open, the cottage was agreeably cool and full of air.

Coridon passed up the staircase, drawing deep breaths.

After the burden of the day, the bedroom had the look of a bower.

“Don’t sit down, my darling. Just rip off your things.”

“Very well.”

The coverlet was off, and Niobe was in the bathroom, seeking his dressing-gown. . . .

Stripped to his shirt and shorts—

“I’ll just wash my head and hands.”

“All right; but put this on.”

A knock fell upon the door.

“Can I come in, madam? I’ve got some ice water here.”

“One moment, Florence.” Coridon entered the bathroom and put the door to. “Come in.”

Finger to lip, mistress regarded maid. Then—

“The Major thinks he may have a touch of the sun. He may be right—I don’t know. But I should be finished, Florence, if I’d had to drive a car in that push to-day.”

“An’ then drive ’ome, watchin’ out the ’ole o’ the way. An’ you don’ look too good. Sit down, madam, an’ let me take off your shoes.”

Niobe was glad to obey.

As Florence fitted her slippers, Corin came out of the bathroom, wiping his head and face.

“I deplore my behaviour,” he said. “But let me confess that I like the look of that bed. And the look of this water still more.” He picked up the glass and drank deep. “And a jug. How provident of you, Florence. Cold water for sunstroke, I’m sure.”

As he swung himself on to the bed—

“What about aspirin, darling?”

Coridon wrinkled his nose.

“Put them beside me, my sweet. And if I don’t sleep, I’ll take one.” He took a deep breath. “That’s what I want—my lungs full of cool, clean air.”

Florence refilled the glass and set the jug by his side. Then she drew the curtains and opened the wardrobe’s doors.

“Nex’ time you’ll ’ave Fred Barley, to take you there an’ back. Why didn’ I think o’ that? All dressed up an’ yankin’ the Vane about. Enough to do anyone in. An’ then this ’eat. We ’aven’t ’ad no thunder, but ’as it bin ’ot?”

“We had one very hot spell—oh, three or four years ago. You must remember that, Florence. One evening you served my dinner out on the lawn.”

Busy at a drawer, Florence spoke over her shoulder.

“Yes. It was—very ’ot then.”

Niobe stooped to lay her face against Corin’s.

“We’re going to leave you, darling, to sleep in peace.”

The man started up.

“But you’ve got to change and bathe. I’m not going to——”

“Florence is getting my things, and I shall use the spare bathroom, as soon as I’ve had some tea. If you want to make me happy, go fast to sleep.”

Florence plucked a frock from a cupboard, and shoes to match.

“An’ now your sponges an’ gown.”

Niobe opened the door. As Florence went by with her things, she blew her husband a kiss.

“Sleep well, beloved.”

Then she shut the door, and Coridon was alone.

Florence was looking at her.

“Put them in the spare room, Florence, and come downstairs.”

Alone in the study, the two women stood in silence, eyes meeting eyes.

“ ’Is memory’s back,” whispered Florence.

Niobe nodded.

"All of a sudden . . . twenty-five miles from here. . . . But he doesn't know it, Florence." The girl began to tremble. "I've been in hell ever since."

Florence's arms went about her, as Niobe burst into tears.

And then she was on the sofa and Florence was on her knees.

"All over now, luv."

"No," sobbed Niobe. "It isn't. He—*he thinks the elm's still there*."

Ten minutes later, Florence took off her shoes and crept upstairs. After a moment or two she retraced her steps.

As she re-entered the study—

"Fast asleep," she said. "You stay quiet there, luv, an' I'll get some tea. Oh my Gawd, an' Fanny Bowles still watchin' out i' the lane. I'll 'ave to fetch 'er in, before I do anythin' else."

She left the room for the hall. Then she sped up the flagged path to the wicket-gate. . . .

"An' put the chain on the wicket—don' forget that. An' min' you come in like a mouse, or you'll wake 'im up."

While Florence was making the tea, Niobe crept upstairs on her stocking-feet. With an ear to the key-hole, she could hear no sort of sound. The man was undoubtedly asleep.

Florence appeared with a tray.

"And another cup, Florence. You're going to have some, too."

"Fanny Bowles——"

"Fanny Bowles can think what she likes. Go and get a cup for yourself. I won't drink mine, till you do."

The strong tea did them both good.

"I wish to God," said the girl, "that Mrs. Cleo was here."

"Jus' to talk to, madam. She couldn' do no more than you."

"She's quicker-witted, Florence. Never mind. We must do our best. I hope and pray he's now sleeping off the shock. If he is, we're over that

fence. But before he comes down, I must tell him about the elm. That's all that really matters. . . . It's very strange, Florence. As you've seen, his memory's back. All the way home he was talking about the old days—long before I knew him . . . before the war."

"An' you 'ad to play up," said Florence, cupping her face in her hands. "For twenty-five bleedin' miles."

"What else could I do, Florence? But listen. It looks as if he'd forgotten the last nine months. But if he has, why does he take me for granted—as being his wife?"

" 'E can't 'ave, madam. 'E never foun' the furniture strange—or the two twin beds."

Niobe was thinking aloud.

"It looks as though his brain, in making the last of its movements, had got hitched up on the elm. Yes, I'm sure I'm right. You see, we never told him—as, of course, we ought to have done—told him that an elm-tree had stood there and had been blown down. And when he came back that Sunday, all traces had disappeared. No one would ever have dreamed that there'd been a tree there. He remembers that the elm was there. He simply doesn't remember that it isn't there now. You see, he's got nothing to make him remember a negative. Oh, I'm sure I'm right. And when he does know that it's gone, then he will realize that his memory has come back."

There was a little silence.

Then—

"Why didn' we tell 'im?" wailed Florence. "Gawd, I could cut me throat. Easy as kiss yer 'and. An' 'e'd never 've given it a thought."

"We're both to blame," said Niobe. "I'm more to blame than you. But repining's no earthly use. I've got to go up and tell him, before he comes down."

Florence passed through the open door and stood at the foot of the stairs.

"I can't hear nothing, madam. I'm sure he's asleep. You go up now an' 'ave your bath an' get changed. An' I'll sit on the stairs an' listen, just in case."

"D'you think I dare, Florence?"

"Course you can, luv. An' a bath 'll do you good."

So it fell out.

While Fanny Bowles took the tea things and washed them and put them away, Florence sat at the head of the stairs and Niobe bathed and changed.

Then Niobe returned to the study, and Florence followed her down.

“Fast asleep,” said Florence. “ ’E might go right on, you know, after a go like this.”

“He might,” said Niobe.

It was still immensely hot. There was no evening breeze. The air was still.

Florence moved to and fro, between the study and kitchen, preparing the evening meal. This was to be all cold. Madrilène soup, chicken, salad and strawberries.

But eight o’clock went by, and still the man slept.

At a quarter past eight—

“Send Fanny Bowles home,” said Niobe. “Just as well to have her out of the way.”

“I was jus’ goin’ to say it,” said Florence. “All I’ve told ’er is that the Major’s got a touch o’ the sun an’ you’re very anxious for ’im to sleep it off.”

“That’s natural enough, Florence.”

“All right. I’ll see ’er out.”

Fanny Bowles was sped and the table was laid.

Florence crept upstairs, listened and then crept back.

“Still sleeping, madam. It mus’ be doin’ ’im good.”

“I’m sure of that, Florence.”

“P’raps, when ’e wakes, ’e’ll remember the elm’s not there.”

“He may. But that’s a risk I can’t take. I’ve got to tell him somehow, before he comes down.” Niobe looked at her watch. “Getting on for nine, Florence. You’ll have to be going soon.”

“What, an’ leave you ’ere to take it? Not likely, luv. If ’e sleeps till noon to-morrow, I shall be ’ere.”

Niobe was half-way to tears.

"Oh, Florence, Florence, what should we do without you?"

"There, there, luv," crooned Florence, half-way to tears herself. "You an' 'e's all I've got—an' all I want. And i' course you ought to be sleepin'—same as 'im. Look at the doin' you've 'ad. Twenty-five miles by 'is side, an' 'im in a lapse. I 'ad it for two minutes once, an' I thought I was goin' to faint. An' what about some dinner? You'd nothin' to eat with your tea, an' you must 'ave somethin' inside you or you'll go down."

"I don't feel like anything, Florence."

"I know. But you ought to eat. Nex' to no lunch, I'll bet. Dash o' lobster salad, as like as not. An' that mixed the night before and brought down in a van. I know these do's. What's a cup o' Madrilène done? I've got it ice cold an' jellied."

"Yes, I'd like that. Could I have it here, Florence?"

"In course."

Florence withdrew.

Niobe stepped to the window and looked at the lawn.

Having run his handsome course, the sun was going down. If the elm had been there, his plume would have been afire—and he himself 'brow-bound with burning gold', a glorious sight. She had seen it twice last year, when she was on holiday . . . before all these things had happened, to shake her soul. Glorious care-free days—with no hint of the havoc to come. Those lovely mornings, when Corin had picked her up at the Camberley bungalow, and Sarah, rejoicing with her, had sped them so gaily, with Simon waving goodbye. . . . Those exquisite afternoons, when they had gone as they pleased, proving the promise of lanes that belonged to The Nursery Rhymes, discovering the peace of a mill-pool, the whisper of shallow water, keeping a gravelled ford, and other surviving beauties of the English scene. . . . And then . . .

A footfall, and Florence was there, with a tray in her hands.

Niobe left the window, as Florence set down the tray.

"An' a 'alf-bottle o' Barsac. It's come straight out o' the frig, an'——"

Niobe, facing Florence, saw her face change. She was staring out of the window which Niobe had just left. Her mouth was open and Terror himself was looking out of her eyes.

Niobe was round in a flash.

Wearing a shirt and gray trousers, Coridon was standing on the lawn, perhaps ten paces from where the elm had stood.

As they watched, transfixed with horror, a hand went very slowly up to his head. Then his head began to tilt backward, as though he were looking up, as he had so often looked up, to measure the majestic proportions of the nonsuch no longer there. Then his head went down and he stared at the rhododendron. . . .

Suddenly he turned to the cottage.

"Florence!" he cried, "Florence! Where's the elm?"

The frantic note in his voice tore Niobe's heart.

Florence was out of the study and was flying across the turf, her hands outstretched, as are those of a suppliant.

So she stood before him.

Before he could speak again—

"The day you lost your memory, 'e blew down. 'E couldn' bear, sweetie-pie, that you shouldn' know 'im again."

Coridon stared upon her. Then, very slowly, he put out his hands for hers. And then he began to speak, not looking at her, but looking over her shoulder with sightless eyes.

"That's right . . . My memory went . . . And when I came back . . . he was gone. I never missed him, of course, for I never knew he'd been there. The very same day, you say." Coridon let her hands go and turned to regard the spot where the elm had stood. "My good old friend, 'how well in thee appeared The *loving-kindness* of the antique world'." He sighed. "He was like an old hound, Florence, that follows his master to the grave. He knew, as you say, that things wouldn't be the same. And he was full of years. What a good thing I never knew it—it would have broken my heart. But now the lapse of time has softened the blow." He took the housekeeper's arm, put it under his own and held her hand. "God's very wise, Florence. My brain was not too good, as both of us know. And the shock of his loss would have hit me uncommonly hard. . . . But all that belongs to the past; and at last I'm back as I was. Where's Mrs. Niobe?"

"I'll go and get her, sir."

Niobe was standing in the study, with tears running down her cheeks.

“Oh, madam, madam, he’s splendid. ’E knows ’is memory’s back an’ ’e’s right as rain.”

“Come here, Florence,” said Niobe.

Florence obeyed.

The girl put her arms about her and held her close.

“God bless you, Florence darling. My limbs were turned to water: but your loving instinct told you the line to take. I’d like you to know that every night I always thank God for you.”

Florence began to weep.

“Oh, dear, it’s my turn now. Go out an’ find ’im, luv. ’E’s askin’ for you. An’—an’ I’ll get the dinner in.”

Niobe left the study and stood on the lawn.

Coridon turned and saw her. Then he hastened towards her, took his wife in his arms and kissed her lips.

Then he looked into her eyes.

“I warned you,” he said, smiling. “I remember the words I wrote. ‘D’you think I’m fit to be a husband? I think my heart would break, if I set a hunted look in those beautiful eyes.’ Though you’ve never let me see it, I fear that I must have done that again and again. But it’s all over now, my darling. ‘Richard’s himself again.’ As he hasn’t been for—for more than eleven years. I know that I’m all right now. If Berserk said I wasn’t, I’d laugh in his face. I suppose you realize that you replaced the elm. One Privy Counsellor died, and another was sworn in his stead—a far more attractive one. Not so old, of course: but just as wise and gentle and far more lovable. . . . Oh, and please, my sweet, may I have my valentine back? You put it away, of course.”

“It wasn’t a valentine,” said Niobe.

“Yes, I know that one,” said Coridon.

“I don’t think you do. It was a love-letter.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Wife Apparent* by Cecil William Mercer (as Dornford Yates)]