# The Victim and The Worm

Phyllis Bottome

*Title:* The Victim and The Worm
*Date of first publication:* 1923
*Author:* Phyllis Bottome (1882-1963)
*Date first posted:* June 10, 2022
*Date last updated:* June 10, 2022
Faded Page eBook #20220617

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

# THE VICTIM
# *and* THE WORM

PHYLLIS BOTTOME

# THE VICTIM
# *and* THE WORM

BY
**PHYLLIS BOTTOME**

AUTHOR OF "THE KINGFISHER," "THE DARK TOWER," "A SERVANT OF REALITY," "THE SECOND FIDDLE," ETC.


NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

THE VICTIM *and* THE WORM. I

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# CONTENTS


| | PAGE |
|---|---|
| THE VICTIM | 7 |
| THE WORM | 177 |

# THE VICTIM

## CHAPTER I

Oliver P. Brett sat under the shade of a giant yew and regarded a hedge of red and purple fuchsias with thoughtful eyes.

"These bees," he said to himself, "(if they ain't wasps which is just as likely), make the calmest sound in the universe.

"They act brisk, but they hum as if they were dreaming. They're like the English.

"You could make a skipping run over the face of the earth and not find a quieter place to decline in than England, and yet while you're declining the English get things done. They're slow but they go on, and they go on after everything else has stopped.

"I put my flashiest into giving them a boost when they needed it most, and they tried hard to turn me down for showing them how. Mad! I was so mad that if I could have got my papers in a hurry I'd have gone out of this old country as fast as their kindergarten railway cars would have taken me. But they hung me up over my papers—just the same as they hung me up over my gas—and by the time they knew what my mother's maiden name was, and what made my great-aunt kick the bucket at 92, they'd decided to have a go at the gas after all. I'd have lost time if I'd gone elsewhere then, so I stayed.

"That ain't gas the Germans used to start off with—that was just a little parlour scent squirted out so as to surprise the troops that weren't looking for perfumes at the moment, but it looked bad. I admit it looked real bad. Those Canadians and all were splendid chaps, and it riles me to think they stood and died of it; they needn't have died of it, if they hadn't drunk it in wrong, and breathed too quick. Why, when I practised at it myself (after we got some over to experiment with) I sat kind of near the cylinder, and smoked a cigar right into it. I wasted that cigar, but I got no more harm than a turtle dove swallowing a gnat. *My* gas—well—it's a real gas! Thinking don't matter to it, any more than Christian Science matters to a jug of prussic acid half way down your throat.

“But gee! How long it took these English to see it! They just kinder felt they ought to be good about war.

“I guess they don’t feel that way now; it’s been submarined out of them.

“If we could have morally won this war—we wouldn’t have needed to have started it. We had all the morals in a row on our side sitting on the Belgian fence; but a good knock down blow at the fence kinder dispersed the morals.

“That’s the way war acts. You can have morals before, and you can have morals after; in between you want to study the swiftest kicks.”

Mr. Brett leaned back still further in his steamer chair, and drew his hat almost over his keen half shut eyes.

“I guess,” he continued to himself dreamily, “that I shall just sit here and watch the English till I pan out. America’s my home, but I don’t want to die in it. I should feel too lively. You can live just as dead here as you like. No newspaper men, no prominent citizens, no delegates, nothing to keep up, and no one thinking how many million dollars you own and trying to creep inside them.

“I’ve had my fight and Theodora’s dead; and I guess I feel played out. If there was a harp here I’d think I was in Heaven, but so long as Theodora’s in the next world I’m a good deal better off in this.”

Oliver P. Brett sighed retrospectively at a passing butterfly. There was something in the tilt of its white and flashing wings that reminded him of Theodora.

“It wiggle woggles to put you off,” said Mr. Brett thoughtfully, watching the insect’s tortuous approach to the fuchsias, which was causing much confusion to a more direct and simple minded bee, “but it knows what it’s about. That’s like Theodora too.

“She wanted to die, and she always had to do what she wanted, and on that occasion she hadn’t time to change her mind before she really *was* dead. The Almighty acted spry and took her at her word, which was more than I ever succeeded in doing.”

Mr. Brett’s thoughts at this point did not stop, but they ceased to take the form of words; they crystallized into pictures. For the first time for forty years he was resting.

In the quiet, old, creeper-covered, brick house behind him there was no one to thwart or work against him.

There were half a dozen perfectly trained English servants who knew nothing about him but his superficial tastes, which they studied as easily and

silently as possible to satisfy. And then there was Elise. Elise was his unmarried daughter; it made Mr. Brett's sardonic deep lined mouth smile tenderly when he thought of Elise. She slipped in and out of the big sweet rooms as if she were a shaft of travelling sunshine.

Elise was as pretty as a picture, and as gentle as the fall of dew on the wide emerald lawns.

She was generally to be found in the garden, and when she was in the house she never looked as if it belonged to her. She looked as if she were one of the flowers waiting on a side table to be arranged by the stiff backed parlour-maid.

Yet Elise could have had half a dozen houses if she had wanted them. She was dimly aware that her father would never set a limit to her desires, but it made it still simpler that she had very few, and that he satisfied them all without her asking him for anything. All except one.

Unfortunately, this one wish was a very strong and frequent wish, and all Papa ever said when Elise expressed it was, "Why, no, Elise. I guess I don't see my way to it."

It really did look as if Papa was cruel about Hermione.

Elise knew that it was not the fault of her beautiful and enchanting elder sister that her marriage with a Roumanian Prince had turned out a disastrous failure. In spite of her wit, her beauty and her charm, nobody had ever breathed a word against Hermione. Her virtue was as undisturbed as her complexion.

She was bereft of her husband (a comfort under the circumstances, but a comfort which could always be used as a grievance), and, by the wickedest of European laws, she was parted from her only child.

She lived (Papa no doubt gave her a great deal of money to live on) the life of a broken-hearted invalid in the best apartments that the Ritz could offer.

She wrote that she didn't like Paris, but Papa wouldn't have her come to stay at Mambles.

When the air raids became troublesome in Paris, Hermione was moved with an extraordinary amount of care and the best attentions of the highest officials in France and England, with all her papers especially signed and eased of their usual restrictions, to London.

Papa found two trained nurses for her and a house in one of the quietest of London squares, but he did not relax his inexplicable refusal to have Hermione at Mambles.

“Why, no, Elise,” he repeated. “You can go up to see Hermione (if she isn’t too ill to speak, and I don’t understand that her illnesses take that form), as long as you won’t make her any deathbed promises. I should object to that. But I don’t want her down here.

“You just tell her it’s a dull place and damp, unless you find she hankers after damp and wants it dull—then you tell her it’s lively and dry as a bone.

“You can take Whisket and go and stay at Claridge’s Hotel, stay there just as long as you want, and remember, if you stay after you’ve stopped wanting, I shall send John to bring you away.

“I notice John is as good as a rain gauge about your feelings, and I will say for John, though he has all the faults of the English that rile me most, if he puts his foot on a wasp he gets the wasp.

“Hermione will probably say it’ll kill her to have you leave her, but don’t you believe it. Hermione is so tough she can die that way 365 times in the year and start up all over again on New Year’s Day with resolutions of ill health that would weaken a hefty elephant.

“People who can stand dying as often as Hermione, don’t die—not under sixty.”

Elise flushed painfully, and set her delicate, weak little mouth into stiffness.

It was hard not to be angry with Papa, and she had to remind herself of his tragedy in order to forgive him.

Papa’s tragedy was that he had lost his only son in France and that the telegram announcing it had killed Mamma on the spot.

Mamma had opposed Arnold’s going from the first, and curiously enough, Papa, who always seemed so much more fond of Arnold than Mamma ever was, hadn’t stopped it. Mamma said that as long as his country wasn’t in, why should Arnold fight?

Mamma despised the English anyway. If Arnold had wanted to go in with the French, and taken a good staff appointment, not anywhere near the front, Mamma wouldn’t have minded.

The French were smart and Mamma adored Paris. She said if Papa chose to back Arnold and help the French Government, they’d be sure to give Arnold just the kind of job she wanted for him, and a lovely uniform. But Papa had just come right over to England with Arnold, and done unspoken of, mysterious things for the English Government, who didn’t appreciate him, or make any fuss over any of them; and after all Papa had done, Arnold

only got the plainest commission in a line regiment, and was killed before America came in.

Mamma had died with the whole household round her in the hall—they had all rushed in terrified at the scream she gave when she opened the telegram.

She screamed till they were all there, and then she said "My son!" like a person on the stage, and fell forward.

Papa had picked her up and laid her down on the sofa without looking at her.

When he did look at her, he found that she was dead.

Papa never said anything at all about Mamma's death, which showed how much he felt it. But that night when he was sitting up with Elise, who had fallen seriously ill from shock, he said to her quite cheerfully:

"I think we can feel happy about Arnold now. I used to think he'd live to carry out my plans—but he's done a better thing than that—he's died carrying out his own. I want you to remember that you've got a man in your family to be proud of Elise. Lots of men die for their country, but Arnold did a bigger thing than that—he died for the future. He was up against the best army in the world, because he felt that if we knocked it out, there wouldn't have to be any more armies.

"I guess I'll stay over here in England and see the thing through. They want petrol and I can raise petrol. But if you feel badly, honey, I'll see you safely home again. You've only got to say the word.

"You've got your life before you, and our own country is the finest in the world for young life—don't you worry any about me. I find England feels like a cushion in the small of my back, but you're too young to need a cushion."

"I'd rather stay with you, Papa," Elise asserted.

That had been her great decision, and she had never regretted it; even when Papa was most unkind about Hermione.

Mr. Brett's eyes lost their smile. His mind ceased to rest on the picture of Elise. They hardened a little as if what they rested on was the face of an enemy; then they became fixed. It was not wholly grief that held the imagination of Mr. Brett, though down whatever avenue of thought his fancy carried him, this one picture always met him at the end. The picture that held him was that of a small hillside near Ypres.

He had visited this sector of the front on one of his many silent unnoticeable missions. He wanted to see how his gas worked, and where his

son was buried.

When the officer conducting him had pointed out that on account of a promiscuous shell fire that morning, the situation was not a healthy one for the living, Mr. Brett had given a curious little laugh and replied, “Why, I guess I’ve been quite lately in a more unhealthy spot than this.”

The officer supposed that Mr. Brett was referring to the Chemin des Dames, in which quarter the quiet American had also had some business to transact. But Mr. Brett had not been thinking of that famous and precarious ridge—his mind had returned to a large south room in the Hotel Ritz in Paris where he had last watched Princess Girla drinking excellent chocolate before the air raids had persuaded her to leave for a more convenient spot.

“I guess,” Mr. Brett observed, regarding a shell-burst to the left of them with lacklustre eyes, “you men up here in the front don’t know what danger is.”

The young officer looked offended, but Mr. Brett patted him gently on the shoulder.

“Sure, you know all about death,” he said kindly, “but when you get away from here, you’ll have to start afresh and learn something about life, and as far as I can see the worry about life is—that it goes on. Death only stops.”

The A.D.C. pointed to a small stick in the ground.

“We think Captain Brett is buried here,” he explained. “We aren’t perfectly certain because, as you see, the place has been a good deal shelled lately and there are a lot of graves.”

“It’s near enough,” said Mr. Brett quietly, as if he were talking to himself. “He lies where good men lie. He’s had a short life and a clean death. I don’t need to worry any more about Arnold.”

Mr. Brett had gone on steadily with his inventions and his adaptations, but, when he sat under the yew tree and watched the bees in the fuchsia hedge, the sunshine and the flowers had a trick of fading out and leaving in their places a shell-swept muddy hillside under a low grey sky.

# CHAPTER II

Mr. Brett was aroused from his reverie by a firm, heavy tread along the brick path. He tilted his hat further back and watched the approaching figure with a kindly eye.

Mr. Brett liked John Sterling; he had chosen him three years previously out of fifty applicants to be his private secretary, and he had had no reason to regret it.

Mr. Brett had not been moved by sentimental reasons in his choice of a secretary, though John Sterling had distinguished himself by dogged pluck, where all were plucky, and lost an arm at Mons.

The reasons that decided the great inventor to take the unknown young Englishman were two. He explained them to one of his business friends afterwards.

"He knows what he doesn't know," Mr. Brett observed with satisfaction, "and he's not too sharp to learn.

"I don't want a sharp man. I'm kinder sharp myself. I had a brainy young secretary once who kept on having good ideas. He'd have 'em before breakfast and right on up to supper time. They kept him so busy, and me so busy listening to them, and pointing out from time to time where they wouldn't work, that none of my own ideas panned out. I had to bounce him. I said, 'Look here, my son, I paid you to carry out my notions, and I find I'm being loaded down with yours. Now I can stand quite a lot of other men's notions, in general conversation, or once a week when I'm preparing my soul for Heaven—but not over my desk in my office. I just kinder like to keep that desk for any little notions of my own.' Of course he was too sharp to see that, so he got bounced.

"Now John Sterling hasn't got any ideas except how to carry out mine.

"All the other candidates made pace by telling me what they could do. They ought all to have been Prime Ministers—and they knew it—they'd have been thrown away as private secretaries. But John sat there looking at me with those steady grey eyes of his, and all he said was, 'If you tell me what to do I think I can do it. I write a plain hand.'

"I guess the universe is going to remain just the way it was before John came into it. But that'll suit me all right. I haven't any quarrel with the universe."

“You’re earlier than usual, John,” observed Mr. Brett as his secretary reached him, “and you’ve overlooked your tea. Has anything in that little village of yours on the Thames discomposed you?”

“No, Sir, everything has gone straight,” said John Sterling, taking a seat opposite his chief and drawing out some notes.

“I just took down what some of the Committee said in case you wanted to run over it. They were very disappointed you couldn’t be there. Young Simpson the engineer has sent in his report. He said he’d been over some of that Cork country you mentioned and it didn’t look like petrol; but he admitted it hasn’t been tested.”

“Well, you write to young Simpson,” said Mr. Brett, “and ask him if a germ looks like typhoid. Tell him if it does, not to worry about testing for oil. I’ll find another engineer. I guess he’s mistaken his vocation, and thought I wanted an artist to paint me a cork tree.

“Did you make any statement to the Committee, John, or did you just sit there and hear it talk its hind legs off?”

“No, Sir, I didn’t make any statements,” replied John. “They weren’t deciding anything in particular, and I thought if I just put down their main points you’d say what you wanted done after considering them.”

“I could say it before as far as that goes,” said Mr. Brett wearily. “You’ve got to have a Committee same as you have to have an umbrella in case it rains—but I just naturally hate walking about with an umbrella—I’d rather have both hands free.

“You haven’t said yet, John, why you didn’t stop with Elise and have your tea?”

John Sterling drew a deep breath. He folded up his notes and met his employer’s eyes across them.

Mr. Brett had long dark eyes with no expression in them. All his expression was in his smile; but he very seldom smiled. He was smiling now with an encouraging friendliness.

“I wanted to speak to you before I saw Elise,” began John nervously. “You may feel you’d rather I didn’t see her afterwards. The fact is—I’m afraid Mr. Brett I want to marry her. I can’t help it. I have only two hundred a year besides my salary and I’m nobody in particular. I have no earthly business to ask for a millionaire’s daughter, but I don’t want her to have a penny except what I can make, and I’ve seen enough of her to know that she doesn’t care about money either!”

John stopped defensively.

Mr. Brett was laughing softly.

"Of course she don't care about money," he said. "That man that was fed by ravens in the wilderness didn't hanker after meat either. He had enough.

"See here, John, have you said anything to Elise?"

"No," said John Sterling. "That's why I didn't go in to tea. I know I shall the next time I am alone with her, unless you turn me down."

Mr. Brett laughed again.

"You're a good boy, John," he said, "and on this occasion I accept the European method of tackling the parent first.

"Elise is young. She's full young. Unless Theodora misdirected me, Elise was nineteen last birthday. It kinder goes against the grain with me to think of her marrying yet awhile.

"But maybe it would go against the grain later on too. Parents are apt to jib at their children for being made the same way as themselves. They'd like to check 'em with a little spiritual gin, and keep them down to clock-work dolls.

"Elise has always been a child to me, and for a long time she was a sick child.

"I kept her away from home at a Sanatorium by the sea for four years. I guess she's told you about it. There ain't anything organic the matter with Elise now, but she's frail."

"I'd take care of her," John interjected quietly and without emphasis; but his tone was convincing.

Mr. Brett nodded. "Sure you'd take care of her," he agreed. "But it won't be quite the kind of care you mean, John, that you'll have to take. It's a taller order.

"I see I'll have to go into this thing with you pretty thoroughly.

"I warned my first son-in-law, but he was a Roumanian, and he hadn't made much study of nervous temperaments. Roumanians sound kind of playful and romantic, but when they aren't pleased I understand they get rough. He said nobody in his family had ever had nerves, and as it was about fifteen hundred years old, it was what you might call an encouraging record. But Hermione broke it. She is a high-strung American woman and she showed that Roumanian family what nerves mean—she showed it them from start to finish."

Mr. Brett looked away from John Sterling and drew a long breath.

"Now John," he said, "I guess I've got to go into things deeper with you than I did with that Roumanian Prince. I'll go slow and you follow slow—there are things I can't say, and there are things I must.

"Did you know you're the first secretary I ever had in my house?"

John nodded.

"But you don't know why?" asked Mr. Brett. "I didn't have a secretary to live in till Theodora died. After that I had. It was more convenient. The reason I didn't have one before was that in two days he'd have been Theodora's secretary or he'd have been out of the house.

"I expect you know that Theodora means the gift of God?

"Well, Theodora was no slouch of a gift: she was what the French call a 'Maîtresse femme.' I presume that means a winner, don't it? Sometimes Theodora won because she'd extracted my kick—sometimes she won because she was at death's door, and made me feel the draught from under it—and sometimes she won because I didn't know what she was up to. But she always won.

"Now Elise isn't like her mother. She's got no nervous energy, but she's got no resistance to nervous energy either. I guess I used all the resistance up in my home life from day to day, and hadn't any to hand on to the child.

"Marriage is a queer thing, John, and the results of it are queerer.

"Most young people think marriage is going to set them free to do what they like. It doesn't. It ties them up to do what they like.

"There ain't any harm in being tied up, providing you like what you're tied up to, and go on liking it.

"If you don't marry you get tied up sooner or later, to your business, or your habits, or maybe to a dog.

"But they ain't quite so incessant. Nothing is so incessant as marriage. Even parents die sooner or later, and children grow up.

"It's not so easy to get rid of a contemporary, bar murder, and there's nothing, not even in the new divorce laws, to justify the murder of one married person by the other.

"Now don't run away with the idea that I'm against marriage. If there is a place where you can go most wrong, you can bank on it that it's the place where you can go most right.

"All I say is choose your partner and then look out for squalls. You get to know which way the wind's blowing and act according.

"Now you take Elise. Naturally she has to see her sister sometimes. And *that's* what's going to be the matter with your marriage.

"Hermione is her mother all over again. She's just full of nervous energy. You haven't met her but you will; and she won't like Elise's marrying. First thing she don't want Elise *to* marry—and second she's got a grudge against marriage. Well, when Hermione don't like things they very seldom happen."

John laughed reassuringly.

"I knew there would be a good many solid reasons against my marrying Elise, Sir," he said, "but I don't think I need worry about the influence of a sister-in-law. If Elise loves me, and I would never have dared to come to you if I hadn't hoped she did, the Princess Girla won't stand in my way."

Mr. Brett smoked in silence for a few minutes. He made no reply to this jaunty forecast; but he said, after a pause:

"Well, John—nothing else does. I like you. I trust you. It don't matter to me a row of pebbles whether you have money or not, or who your great-grandparents thought they were.

"I've got enough money for anything any of my family are likely to want this side of Judgment; and it's this generation I keep my eye on—not family vaults.

"You've got the kind of grit I'd like in Elise's husband. You have horse sense and you'll be gentle with her.

"But mind, Theodora and Hermione could get ill and recover conveniently to suit themselves. It won't be so with Elise.

"If she gets ill, it'll be because she can't help it, and she'll not be able to get better to suit either you or herself."

"I don't see why she should get ill," said John sturdily.

"She got ill before," said Mr. Brett, withdrawing his cigar and speaking slowly and impressively, "because her mother and Hermione couldn't get on. They pulled two ways and Elise loved them both—she was one of the ways they pulled. They all but tore her life out. I got her away and kept her away for four years, the doctors helping me; then mercifully Hermione married, and started in on that Roumanian Prince.

"Elise is all right under one influence; but she can't stand two. What you've got to see to, John, is that the influence is yours."

"Do you really mean, Sir," asked John, trembling for the first time in his life, with excitement and felicity, "that you give your consent to our marriage?"

Mr. Brett held out his hand unsmilingly, but with great heartiness.

"I'll back you, John, with the last ounce I've got," he said quietly. "Cut along now and get that cold tea."

"I can't thank you," John exclaimed. "It's too jolly fine of you." Then he hurried off to Elise.

Mr. Brett looked after his solid figure with a curious solemnity.

"All that talk of mine," he said to himself, "has been so much cotton batting. John only took out of it what he wanted.

"I bought my wisdom dear, but wisdom's a mighty cheap goods second hand and it don't hardly seem to pay for its keep."

# CHAPTER III

Elise sat in the big dark drawing-room with the tea things before her.

She knew that it was half an hour after John's usual time, but there was nothing expectant in her attitude. She was doing embroidery. As she bent her head over her work, the sun caught her light gold hair and made a glory of it. She was finishing the wing of a bee drawing honey from a larkspur. The design was her own and when it was finished she was going to give it to Hermione.

Sometimes Elise thought she ought to do war work, but on the whole she believed that making Papa comfortable was war work.

Papa invented wonderful things for the Allies, and he had diabetes.

The diet system of a famous Viennese doctor had saved Mr. Brett's life and might indefinitely prolong it. But a good deal depended on his keeping still and having his mind at rest. Elise knew that one of the things which rested Mr. Brett's mind most was seeing her at Mambles, and watching her come in and out of the long French windows to see if there were anything he wanted. Hermione had pointed out to Elise that she was wasting her life, and Elise had felt rather upset, but she had gone on wasting it.

From the age of fifteen Hermione had sat on piazzas black with young men. When she took a country excursion young men followed her as a string of ducks follow their leader across a field. When she was in town, she drew the young men away from other girls with the faultless placidity of a magnet.

Elise might not have achieved so long a line of ducks, or such responsive needles, but she could certainly draw young men. Hermione told her that she ought to go to America and draw them. She would literally have New York, or if she preferred it, Washington, at her feet. Elise had listened quietly to these dazzling pictures. It was difficult to tell Hermione without appearing unpatriotic that she did not want New York, or even Washington, at her feet. So she said a little vaguely that Europe was very interesting just now. Hermione skimmed the vagueness off the top of Elise's mind.

"Europe isn't Mambles," she said with some sharpness, and she offered Elise London; but the mere thought of London petrified Elise. She had a dread of its indiscriminate, sophisticated rabble, its precedences and pitfalls, its stiff old families and their lax young offshoots.

The life of a social circle had always petrified Elise, but Hermione, even when she was almost dead, thought of people in circles.

Mercifully Papa said that when Elise wanted London she could go to Harrod's Stores; he wasn't going to live in a place where you could get everything, including air raids, at first hand when he didn't need to. "If you want to be quick," he explained, "you go to a quick country and you naturally take the quickest place in it. But if you want to be slow, you go to a slow country and you go to the slowest place in it. I'll hunt about till I find the slowest place in England."

At length Papa had found Mambles. A very few country people called on the Bretts slowly and as if it didn't matter. They talked about wasps, and how the best plan was to get the milkman to bring your coal from the station on the milk cart. They were chiefly old ladies who called, and they seemed quite satisfied with being old ladies, indeed they made Elise feel as if she ought to be rather apologetic for being so young, but as if they would agree to overlook it on account of her not being at all noisy.

Elise was very quiet. She had no American accent, and only the faintest interrogative note at the end of her sentences, which sounded submissive.

In her loveliness and her quietness with her enormous expectations and her extraordinarily small claims, Elise won a place for herself in the neighbourhood which, if she had known it, was as rare as it was enviable.

Nobody who didn't play games had ever been so liked before.—When John came in at the window Elise looked up at him over her embroidery as if it were his usual time.

Her eyes were very wide and blue, as blue as the azure delphiniums in front of the drawing-room window.

They were set some distance apart, the shape of her small face was oval, and her little mouth was tenderly curved and very sensitive. It was without humour.

"It must have been very hot in London," Elise said gently. "Is Papa all right in the garden?"

"It's heavenly to be here," said John, "and anywhere that isn't here is as bad as London. I had to go first to Mr. Brett, but I came as soon as I could. Yes, he's all right. He says he can just sit in the sun without an overcoat, so he expects to read in the paper that the heat is tropical."

"I hope the tea isn't cold," said Elise, devoting herself to the tea table.

John didn't want any tea, but he watched her with fascinated eyes.

It seemed to him that no one ever had such small white hands or had so wonderfully manipulated tea cups and copper kettles. Elise never asked people twice what their tastes were; she persistently studied tastes, and she never forgot them. If she had had an analytical mind she would have known that there was nothing she enjoyed so much as supplying the wants of others, and that nothing so dismayed her as when those wants conflicted.

"I had to see Mr. Brett before I saw you," John repeated. He seemed unable to take his eyes off Elise's face, or to say anything which didn't explain why he hadn't been there before.

"Why certainly," agreed Elise, noting with disapproval but without reproof that John was neglecting his tea. "I know it's the greatest comfort to Papa your going up to town and seeing people for him, it saves him so much fatigue, and he relies so on your judgment. He says you're the only man who doesn't have to tell him all you said yourself in reply to what the other people said."

Elise broke off under John's supplicating eyes: he was looking at her as if he wanted more than she was giving him, more than either her attention or his tea. Elise's breath came quickly, and the heavy row of pink pearls round her small white throat rose and fell spasmodically.

"When I first saw you," said John irrelevantly, "you were wearing those pearls, and you had your hair up for the first time."

Elise smiled faintly. "I remember," she said. "Papa had just given them to me because Hermione said I ought only to wear white, and I wanted to wear pink. Of course Hermione was right—in America that summer girls were only wearing white; but Papa said it didn't matter what the other girls wore. You could have lilies and pinks in the same garden without any one's throat being cut. So he gave me these. And you said if I were an English girl and only sixteen years old I'd still be a flapper, and I didn't know what a flapper was, but I do now. I know lots of English things."

"Do you like England?" asked John earnestly, as if it were a personal question. "Does it seem like home to you now, Elise?"

She hesitated a moment, then she said gently, "I should think any country seems like home when the people you love are in it. You see what I like best is being with the people I like as long as I know which to attend to first." Elise gave the ghost of a sigh, then she smiled because she did not want John to know that she had voiced her only grief. She didn't want any one to be inconvenienced by knowing that she had a grief at all.

There are many people who love to spare others pain and enjoy carrying their brothers' burdens; but they do not mind an audience. Elise never

wanted any one to know that she was bearing anything.

"Elise," said John firmly, "do you know what I want? I want you to attend to me first?"

Elise drew a quick breath, her eyes lingered on John's, a little startled, but not at all distressed. She had long ago wanted to attend to John first. Her clear colourless skin became suffused with a deep rose blush. Elise knew that John loved her, but she had not known, she did not know now, what his love meant to her. John's love for her was three years old. Mambles was full of it, it was the background of her life; she had grown used to its protectiveness.

A little frown fixed itself between her tender brows.

"You wouldn't," she murmured, "if I did like you John, want me to ever give up Papa? You see he hasn't any one now—not Mamma, or Arnold, and just being wonderful must be so dull, if it only means outsiders."

John shook his head.

"Never," he said emphatically. "There isn't a man on earth I admire and like as I do your father. I consider it an honour to work for him. I don't ever want to take you away from him; but I do want to have you as well."

"More than this?" Elise asked gently.

"A great deal more than this," said John with unmistakable solidity.

Elise's eyes wavered; she wanted of course that John should have what he wanted. It would be lovely to make his eyes stop looking anxious, and smile. But, on the other hand, her mind was full of an apprehensive picture. How would Hermione bear it? She had seen Hermione bearing things she didn't like before. John would probably bear them very much better.

"But Hermione," Elise said under her breath, "you won't want me ever to give up Hermione?"

"I don't suppose for a moment I shall want you to give up your sister," John said in a more measured tone than he had used in referring to Mr. Brett. "Why should you, darling, have to give up anything? I only want you to have more."

Elise did not reply that in her small but deeply felt experience having more had invariably implied certain renunciations. She only said, "You don't know Hermione, John; but if you did, you'd feel the way I do about her, and you'd help me so that she and dear Papa could understand each other better. Hermione's heart is broken, that's what makes her so ill, and sometimes so —difficult.

“Don’t you think if your heart’s broken, you just have to act difficult at times? Papa’s so clever, but he’s been too happy himself to realise about Hermione. Why he and Mamma had just an ideal marriage. I never heard Papa say one sharp word to Mamma, so naturally he can’t feel the way I do about Hermione. I haven’t been able to *do* anything, but oh, John—don’t you think that perhaps you and I together could work it so that Papa could understand Hermione?”

John had a very great respect for Mr. Brett’s judgment, but he belonged to the younger generation, and he knew how misguided parents are apt to be about their children, and how wise children necessarily are about their parents. He decided to keep an open mind on the subject of Hermione.

“My dearest,” he said fervently, “I will always help you in whatever you want—all my strength is yours.”

Elise gave a soft sigh of relief. All John’s strength would do beautifully.

Very slowly she lifted her blue eyes again, and John knew that he had received his signal.

He kneeled down beside her and kissed her. There seemed to both of them to be nothing in the world so simple or so straightforward as their love.

# CHAPTER IV

John called twice upon Hermione in London. On each occasion he was told that the Princess was extremely sorry but she was too ill to receive visitors. However, Elise assured him that Hermione had been "perfectly lovely" about their marriage.

Everything was "perfectly lovely." Mr. Brett cracked jokes all day long; John had never looked so radiant; the neighbourhood rejoiced openly that it was to keep Elise, suitably attached to an Englishman who understood and respected the game laws; the servants showed a well bred toleration for John. John's relations (he turned out to have very few and they all lived in Yorkshire) wrote charming letters; but in spite of all these advantages there was a slight hitch somewhere.

It took John some time to discover, in all the flutter of delight around him, where the hitch was. Mr. Brett was unchanged. He moved as usual very slowly and carefully about the house and garden, reposed in long chairs, took the points in or out of schemes, and smiled more benevolently than usual at his secretary.

Elise continued to declare with obvious evasiveness that she was "too happy for words," but John, who had a persistent nature and was clear sighted where he loved, asked why, if she was too happy for words, her eyelids should be red?

Elise confessed at last, with tears, that there was just one thing she wanted most dreadfully and couldn't get.

Hermione wished to spend the last few weeks before their marriage at Mambles, and Papa wouldn't allow it. He was quite adamant, he had said: "After you're married this house is yours, you can have whom you like to it —including me—but until I hand you over to John, Hermione stays away. If she's tired of London she can hire in the country. England ain't full."

If Elise wanted, she could go to London and see Hermione; but that, Elise explained to John, wasn't what Hermione meant. Hermione was too sick to enjoy London. She had a feeling that if she could lie on a long chair in the garden and just watch Elise's happiness, it would make up for the loss of her own.

Hermione had been perfectly lovely about it.

Couldn't John make Papa change his mind?

It was awkward for John to try, for on that very morning Mr. Brett had presented him with Mambles.

"I shall settle Mambles on you, with an income on Elise," Mr. Brett had explained, with his eyes half shut, "and then if you and Elise want me to stay on as she says, I'll decline here. I may have years to decline in, I may only have months, or, according to one doctor, I may not decline at all, but go out splashless. But I want you and Elise to live in your own home here at Mambles, not mine—it don't do to start living in other people's homes. Dying can be done anywhere, it's not as important as it looks."

After this renunciation on the part of Mr. Brett it seemed ungracious to present him with a speedy request for another.

But Elise's tears overcame John's scruples. He found Mr. Brett in the library by the open door which led on to the south terrace. He was watching the birds fluttering about the edge of a stone bath.

"They're having the deuce of a time," he explained to John, without turning his eyes, "step quiet so as not to disturb them. A whole raft get round the rim together and shove—just like humans."

"Mr. Brett," said John resolutely, "I've been talking to Elise."

"Sure," agreed his father-in-law reassuringly. "As long as she don't fire you, let her talk: the great point with a woman is to have everything out on the carpet. Whatever she thinks you don't want her to say, she's got to say anyway; but if she puts it off, she gets cold-blooded about it, the way Jael felt to Sisera when she planted that nail, and palmed off the butter. If Jael had been encouraged to speak right out and tell Sisera what she thought of him when he first arrived, she wouldn't have driven in that nail, she'd have put it away for the first Hoodoo that made her keep things back."

"Elise and I haven't quarrelled," explained John, ignoring this unpleasant analogy, "but I have found her upset. It seems she wants Hermione to stay here before our marriage, and if you'll forgive me saying so, Sir, I don't see why she shouldn't have her."

"I'll forgive you right along, John," said Mr. Brett with a chuckle. "I'm prepared to forgive anybody anything once it's happened, but I'm not prepared to let things happen that I don't want to have to forgive. And I'm damned if I'll have Hermione inside this house before your marriage."

"I don't quite see why—" said John a little resentfully.

Mr. Brett pulled his lean slanting limbs together and sat up straight; he even stopped watching the birds. He looked at John attentively.

"Now, see here my son," he observed, "marriage is tough. It takes a lot of what you might call hand to hand breaking, with the law against you, to spoil a marriage. Engagements is just the opposite, they break as easily as a grasshopper's hind leg—I guess that's about the thinnest thing in nature. You just keep calm and wait. You'll have Mambles and Hermione too, soon enough."

"But Elise says," urged John, faithful but faint-hearted, "that her sister's been wonderful about our engagement. She's awfully keen for Elise to be happy, and she thinks—from what Elise has said—that I'm the man to make her so."

"John," said Mr. Brett grimly, "you're so innocent a white owl would get you! I've watched white owls, they show up in the dark, and that's against them, and they squeak before they've got their mouse, and that's against them too. I should reckon a white owl loses ten to one on each mouse, every doggone evening of its life; but you'd be the time it got home with the bacon.

"Of course Hermione is perfectly lovely about your marriage. She'd be perfectly lovely about your engagement, when she'd broken it. Perfect loveliness is Hermione's line. I've never once seen that girl get riled, and I've said things to her that'd make a lizard get on to its hind legs and roar.

"All she ever said back was, 'Dear Papa, I guess you've got the indigestion I had.' She'd given it to me."

"But are you quite sure," said John reflectively, "that you do full justice to her? Sometimes you sound to me as if you were prejudiced against Hermione."

Mr. Brett did not laugh at this ingenuous suggestion of John's. He remained silent for a moment or two, then he said gently,

"John, do you in general think I know what I'm about?"

"I've never known you wrong, Sir," said John with conviction. "You know I have implicit confidence in your judgment—only—"

"Only," interrupted Mr. Brett, holding up a warning forefinger and shooting a glance at John that was as sharp as the edge of a knife, "when it's about the happiness of the one creature in the world I care more for than one of those sparrows—you think I'm liable to judge wrong?"

John had never seen Mr. Brett roused before. In a flash he saw what his employer was like, and understood why, when he spoke even in his flattest voice, his committees and employees jumped to obey him. John was conscious that he was confronted by the power of a dynamic mind.

It was a benevolent power, but it was not the kind of power to gainsay. John felt suddenly convinced that Mr. Brett was right even if Elise thought he wasn't.

"I see I've made a mistake in pressing the matter, Sir," he muttered.

Mr. Brett nodded. "Never you mind, John," he said kindly, "a man who isn't liable to be made a fool of by the woman he's in love with would make a very bad husband. Maybe he'd remain a bachelor. I don't like to upset Elise any more than you like to see her upset—that's why I mean to keep the upsets down to a good limit. It's strain enough on a young girl getting married; she don't want to add not getting married on to the top of it."

Mr. Brett dismissed the subject and transferred his attention to the bird bath.

"There—" he said, "now those sparrows have had all the bath they want, but they sit on just the same: they're going to prevent any of the other birds having a dip—and they'll do it too—unless I shy a stone at 'em. They're the most high-strung birds I know. Hand me over a round pebble before you go, John."

The controversy ended in Elise and Mr. Brett going to Claridge's Hotel for a flying visit. London never suited Mr. Brett, and on this occasion it suited him less than usual. His long heavy-jawed face turned as grey as his light summer suit; but it was a great convenience for dressmakers and Hermione had been perfectly lovely about it, though she was afraid she was too ill to see John.

The Bretts had a large private sitting-room in which their meals were always served. Mr. Brett said he could never get over the feeling that it was unfriendly not to know people in public dining-rooms and pay for their food. It made him feel uncomfortable to think of their separate bills.

John had come to dine after a long day in the City. The table was beautifully set, and decorated with blue and purple sweet peas. He saw with a slight feeling of surprise that it was laid for four. No one was in the room when he entered, but after a few minutes the door opened softly behind him, and he turned to greet an unknown guest.

A woman stood quite still in the open doorway. A long white, chiffon velvet cloak hung over her shoulders and a white gauze wrap framed her head and face—out of its softness shone the hard glitter of diamonds. Her eyes were fixed on John. They were luminous grey eyes with exquisitely chiselled eyelids, and very long fair lashes.

Her features were cut as clear as the features on a coin; she had no colour in her face except for her lips, which were the deepest carmine. They

looked as if they were painted, but they were not painted. Hermione sometimes bit her lips before she came into a room, but she never used artificial aids, unless they looked perfectly natural.

As she glided forward into the room, her gauze wrap fell on to her shoulders, and revealed a crown of thick fair hair, as vivid as a sunbeam. She held out both her hands, and murmured softly:

"John, it *is* John?"

John had an absurd moment of sheer panic. Who was this lovely and perfectly strange woman who called him John?

He was a good young man, but for one awful moment he wondered if this lady had any previous right to his Christian name?

She held his hands, and it appeared as if she might be intending to kiss him. John looked as non-committal as only a man of his race and class can look in a moment of danger. Hermione did not kiss him: she pressed his hands, sighed deeply and sank gracefully into the easiest chair in the room.

"To think I have not seen you till to-night," she murmured. "I am Hermione."

John felt relieved, but guilty. He forgot that he had been twice turned away from the Princess Girla's door—and apologised.

Hermione smiled wistfully and forgivingly up at him.

"Oh, I know! I know!" she said, "I have been through it all. I have come out the other side now! But I can make allowances for lovers. Isn't it all too wonderful! And now I have seen you I can be glad. My dear little Elise! You won't take her wholly away from me, will you?"

John murmured that he shouldn't think of such a thing, and sought refuge by looking at his boots. There was a peculiarly thrilling tone to Hermione's voice which made him feel as if he were in church having his better feelings appealed to, and John always looked at his boots in an emotional crisis.

"Let us be quite frank with each other," Hermione said with great gentleness.

"The word marriage is hateful to me. It has the sound of death in it. Believe me, John—marriage can be as cruel as the grave."

John cleared his throat and prayed that Elise might come in. He had no idea that any one could speak so intimately to him in so short a time.

"Just at first," said Hermione, "I faltered—Elise is dearer to me than any other creature. I had hoped to spare her the bitterness of experience. I did not

want to see her as other women are—forgive my speaking in French—*une femme initiée*. But now I have seen you I feel a weight off my heart. You are a loyal, faithful Englishman—I think I can trust that dear child to you, John—I think I can say with an easy mind—'Take my child—' "

Hermione's voice quivered, but she kept her grave, controlled eyes on John. John felt profoundly uncomfortable, but he was also deeply touched. No one who listened to Hermione ever measured the sense of her words—her low silvery voice entrapped them like a magic flute. John forgot that Elise happened to be Mr. Brett's daughter—and that as Hermione had married very young and was considerably older than Elise, she had, as a matter of fact, seen very little of her. It seemed to him that he was receiving a sacred charge—and though he could not be eloquent in reply, the quick responsive look he gave his future sister-in-law was one of the finest tributes to her power which Hermione had ever received.

Before she had time to fix this impression any deeper the door opened again and Mr. Brett came in.

"Well, Hermione," he said, without a change of countenance, "your resurrections contradict the hymn—they don't come off in the morning."

Hermione said nothing: she waited until her father had walked the length of the room towards them, then with a little movement of grace and affection she threw herself into his arms.

"Dear, dear Papa," she murmured.

There was an instant of complete unresponsiveness on her parent's part before Hermione with equal grace disengaged herself and retook the easiest chair in the room.

"Dear Papa," she murmured, "how terribly aged and different you look. I must speak to darling Elise about it—these young people are perhaps a little blind in their great happiness. Suffering gives one eyes!"

Hermione spoke perfect English and when she said Papa she laid the stress on the last syllable.

"I must beg you not to worry your sister, Hermione," said Mr. Brett quietly. "If you think I look ill, I'd be obliged if you'd grieve in secret. I don't happen to be specially ill, so you don't need to grieve unless you want to."

"I shall have to depend on John, then," said Hermione, turning her beautiful magnetic gaze upon her future brother-in-law. "He must tell me everything—since I am exiled. I feel already as if I could depend on John!"

Mr. Brett's half closed eyes met his brilliant daughter's. Something passed between them as vivid and as antagonistic as the report of a pistol, but there was no explosion.

They looked at each other until Elise, flushed with excitement, came in to greet them. She gave a little cry of joy as she caught sight of her sister.

"How too perfectly sweet of you, Hermione!" she cried. "I hardly dared hope you'd come. I told them to set for you, but I was so afraid you'd be too sick—I didn't even warn John!"

Hermione closed the sentence with a kiss.

"Why, honey," she said, "did you suppose I wouldn't just be *alive* to please you?"

Hermione said this beautifully, with an exquisite maternal gentleness which hung about her like a sunny atmosphere.

John was unable to say afterwards what Hermione did with the situation, but she certainly transformed rather an awkward little family dinner party into a successful pageant.

All her challenges were soft as gossamer, but they made John sit up. He felt himself growing brilliant to meet them. He said some really neat things about the war, sound, sensible things with a flavour to them. He revised the Cabinet and explained the subtle points of allied diplomacy.

He saw that Elise was proud of him.

Elise was transformed also; she had more colour in her, and more life, and she was, strangely enough, more American. She sat up, very straight and slim, with a little triumphant flush on her cheeks. Her pink pearls were twisted round her throat and she wore a rest gown of pink and silver brocade. Nothing ever made Elise feel so sure of herself as the sight of those she loved appearing to their advantage.

Hermione leaned back in her easy chair, and every now and then the light caught the diamonds round her throat and in her hair; but they were the only things that shone about her.

A less clever woman than Hermione might have tried to impress John with her own personality and she would have failed. John was too deeply in love to notice any personality that did not contribute to the credit of his beloved.

Mr. Brett sat in impenetrable silence. He poured out their wine and handed cigarettes, and he ate with his usual indifference the small and regulated dishes which kept him alive.

When Elise tried to make him talk (and even in her finest flights Elise never forgot him) he responded to her with unvarying gentleness, but he never started a subject, and neither illustration nor analysis escaped him.

His silence made him look a little churlish, and Hermione added just the least edge to his churlishness by the careful manner in which she avoided rubbing it in. It was as if she silently conveyed to her companions, "Just see how careful I am not to show him up! I could, you know, by a turn of the wrist, make him look sulky, and even say something to me which would sound downright rude. But I sha'n't. I let him off. He *is* a bear with a sore head, but I won't even let you know how thoroughly I understand that the sore head is levelled solely at me."

The evening passed like a draught of southern wine. At last Hermione rose slowly to her feet, holding on to the armchair with her white, emaciated hand. John's eyes fell on it, and he realised with a shock of pity how thin Hermione was, and, as his eyes met hers, how suffering. She smiled an heroic, unflinching smile back at him.

"Honey," she said to Elise, "it's time your little old sister ran away."

In an instant Elise was by her side; the two sisters left the room with their arms round each other's waists. John held the door open for them to pass. He was about to accompany them to see if he could help Hermione, when Mr. Brett called him back.

"Well?" said Mr. Brett. He lifted a grey face in which the humour seemed curiously overlaid by pain. "Well, John Sterling," he said, "you've seen Hermione. What do you make of her?"

John hesitated. Mr. Brett's face was in shadow, he did not notice that Mr. Brett looked ill, because that was the way he usually looked. People were so accustomed to seeing Mr. Brett ill that they sometimes thought he must be accustomed to the sensation.

"Surely," John said at last a little uncomfortably, "she's very fond of her sister?"

"No she ain't," said Mr. Brett positively, "she's only fond of one person on God's earth, and that person is Hermione; and she's just a little mite, not as much as I should like, afraid of me."

Elise re-entered, exultant with happiness. She did not notice her father, who was half concealed by a heavy curtain. She threw her arms around her lover's neck.

"Oh, John," she cried breathlessly, "isn't Hermione perfect? Isn't she just too sweet? She says you're the *only* man in the world she could have

trusted me with."

"God help you John," said Mr. Brett under his breath. Neither of them heard him. He got up softly and crept out of the room.

# CHAPTER V

John had been married six weeks. Four of them had been spent with an Angel in Paradise, and two of them at Mambles with Elise.

John had had a hard and lonely young life. He had plodded seriously through an orphaned childhood and into the sharpest crisis in history.

He had seen and read of the death of all his friends and come out of the shambles with one arm, and no observable future.

Then without effort or warning he had been admitted into work that moved nations; and into a friendship that saved his heart.

For three years he had held Arcady against all the enemies of life. And now, young, poor and maimed, he was master of his happiness, and owner of Mambles. It was enough to turn the head of a young man of any imagination, but it had not turned John's. He behaved at Mambles as he had behaved at Mons. He looked about steadily for his duty and did it. Guns, disaster, and the sheer edge of danger had never deflected John at Mons; roses, young love, and luxury did not deflect him at Mambles. John felt that it was his plain duty to invite his sister-in-law to stay with his wife, and he invited her.

It was in the Dutch garden that John had seen and accepted the duty which in a fortnight had changed an angel into Elise, and Paradise into Mambles.

The moon shone big and yellow over the Dutch garden, it gave a haunting ghost light to the pale pink geraniums and the standard heliotrope rising in mauve clusters above the borders. The air was drunk with sweetness. It seemed as if time had consented to stand still and acknowledge the permanence of joy.

Elise leaning on John's arm said suddenly, "And John, when may I have Hermione to stay?"

John had felt a momentary pang at her words, because he was so happy that he felt it an inconvenience to recognise the existence of other people.

Then he readjusted himself to the more perfect pleasure of pleasing Elise.

"Whenever you like, dearest," he replied bravely if untruthfully. "Tell her we shall both be delighted to have her."

Then one of them sighed.

When John told Mr. Brett what he had done, his father-in-law took his cigar out of his mouth and said in measured accents, “Well, John Sterling, I guess you feel you’ve done your duty. When a man does the plumb foolishest thing he can lay his hands on, naturally he has to find the highest motives for doing it; and a high motive is as easy to find as a barn door fowl; but it won’t lay any eggs for you. You can run round expecting your conscience to applaud you, and maybe your conscience will. I notice a man’s conscience comes when he calls it as quick as a cat after milk, but don’t come round for the approval of Oliver P. Brett!

“No, Sir! I respect a lunatic because he’s dangerous—but I don’t respect a normal man when he starts whistling for trouble; he can get all he wants without whistling.”

John looked haughty and said nothing. He had been so much admired lately by Elise that he felt whatever he did must be right.

Neither John nor Elise objected to Mr. Brett’s presence in their household. Mr. Brett’s personality was a strong one, but it was singularly unobtrusive.

He lived in the library which was a room John didn’t like, and in odd corners of the garden where the lovers never saw him.

Mr. Brett possessed that quality of ease and complete detachment which is only to be found in strong people who go their own way and do not want other people to accompany them.

John had never found the yoke of his secretaryship heavy. The work was astonishingly interesting and it would have been difficult to say which of the two men cared for it most.

It was not his return to work after the most perfect month of his existence which had so suddenly changed the paces of time, and checked John’s visions. Still John was loth to put the change down to the arrival of his charming sister-in-law, although she had arrived rather more copiously than anybody had intended. Hermione appeared within five hours of Elise’s invitation. Her exhausted household might have explained the swiftness of her move, but it did not appear precipitate to Hermione. She lay on a sofa with eau de Cologne on her forehead and gave the most admirable orders. Elise’s message came at eleven o’clock in the morning and Hermione moved with ten boxes, two Pomeranians, a medicine chest, a confidential maid, and a trained nurse, by a three o’clock train. She looked wonderfully fresh on her arrival and had not forgotten to wire for the electric brougham to meet her, because she could not stand the jolting of an ordinary car. She

broke the news by telegram that she was bringing her maid and a trained nurse to save Elise trouble. The Pomeranians broke themselves.

A wild and harrowing few minutes was spent on the lawn by John, two gardeners and the chauffeur, in baffling Bodger, John's bull terrier, in his masterly attempt to account for both the Pomeranians.

The yap of a Pom irritated Bodger in the same manner that in classical tales the bleat of the kid is said to excite the tiger.

A persuasive kick from John, conveniently placed, temporarily relieved the situation. Bodger was led away foaming at the mouth.

Hermione said most sweetly to John as soon as a human voice could be heard above the canine din, "Dear John, how unfortunate that you have a bull terrier! But I daresay you will be able to get rid of it quite soon." It had not occurred to Hermione that John was not the kind of person to get rid of favourite bull terriers lightly.

Hermione came to Mambles with the best intentions. She liked John, and she felt, with all the tenderness of a whale for sprats, that if she could swallow John and Elise she would always be perfectly sweet to them. But whales do not like sprats who refuse to be swallowed. It took Hermione some days to realise that John, with every wish to please her superficially, would not change his habits to save her life. Hermione did not ask much of John, but she did expect him to be malleable. Elise had always been malleable. She had the habits which suited Hermione, but there was a change now. She had suddenly taken to having the habits that suited John.

Hermione was not rude to John, and she was tenderness itself to Elise, but slowly, with graceful and increasing tenacity, she began to put pressure on Elise. There was no open strife between her and her brother-in-law, but at the end of a fortnight John had said "Damn" to Elise. He had not meant to say it, but the previous evening had been an exceedingly trying one, and John had been more polite than his nature could sustain. The evening had culminated in John's trying to save the broken remnants of his remarkably good temper by starting an impersonal topic.

"I shall have the lawn mowed to-morrow," he observed as pleasantly as he could manage, and Hermione replied,

"What a pity to cut off the dear little daisies' heads!"

Elise said, "Yes, *must* it be mown, John?" and John had explained briefly, with an unfortunate edge to his voice, that English lawns were wholly incompatible with the heads of daisies. The subject a little abruptly withered, and if Elise had been married longer she would have known that

subjects which abruptly wither need very careful handling if they are to be revived in any satisfactory manner.

Elise came into John's dressing room while he was shaving, and announced quite cheerfully that the lawn mustn't be mown to-day on any account, because Hermione had a terrible headache and couldn't bear the sound of a mowing machine under her window.

John said "Damn" with his face all over lather, which made it sound fiercer, and Elise exclaimed,

"Why, John, I think you're real mean!"

Then they looked at each other aghast.

Elise wore her blue silk dressing gown and a lace cap covered with pink rosebuds. A fortnight ago John had told her that when she wore it he felt that he was entertaining the Madonna.

It was obvious that he was unprepared to give Elise a suitable entertainment in this character at present.

Elise retreated into her bedroom, and John continued shaving. He did not countermand the mowing machine.

It began ten minutes later and went on for a quarter of an hour. Every minute of that time John and Elise heard the lawn-mower, as if they had been the heads of the daisies expecting immediate execution.

Hermione heard it too, but she knew that she was not going on hearing it. She had never been in the position of a threatened daisy.

In a quarter of an hour John told the gardener to stop. The gardener pointed out that it would look rather queer, as he had only just had time to make a stripe across the lawn.

John used language which he could only have heard from a Cavalry General confronted by an ill-cooked meal, and retreated into the shrubbery. The gardener said, "My word! The new master has a tongue!" and went into the kitchen to tell the cook, trusting on the strength of his recital to be given a glass of cider.

John missed Bodger. There are moments in life when only a rather large white bull terrier, personally devoted, but publicly ferocious, can minister to a mind diseased. John had to go on missing Bodger because he was chained (for the first time in his life) in the stable yard, and if he was unchained there would have been no more Pomeranians.

John had never liked small dogs, and Bichon and Bichette had a strange craze for getting under his feet and tripping him up. They had not been trained to do this by Hermione; they had never been trained at all, with the

result that they got into everybody's way and on to everybody's nerves, except Hermione's. It sometimes seemed as if Hermione had very strong nerves.

John proceeded down the shrubbery path, frowning.

He had everything in the world that he wanted, including all that he could never have reasonably expected to obtain; and the only thing that he could think of was that the lawn was not properly mowed.

Elise, his honeymoon and Mambles became insignificant and obscure objects in the distant recesses of his brain.

Mambles lay outstretched before him, sunny, fruitful, silent, rich with the dews of the morning; but all John saw was an uneven strip of lawn without daisies, between broad spaces of green, insolently alive with daisies.

At the end of the shrubbery John found his father-in-law on a campstool doing a pen and ink drawing of some hollyhocks against a bit of sixteenth century wall.

Mr. Brett did exquisite pen and ink drawings, and if he had had no other faculty he could have made a living out of it.

John felt an access of irritation at the sight of the steady placidity of his father-in-law. It seemed to him it would have been more sympathetic of Mr. Brett to be doing nothing and to be in an irritated state of mind.

During the last two weeks Mr. Brett had remained bafflingly aloof from the domestic situation. He had not even seemed conscious that there was one, he had taken nobody's part and he had never corrected or restrained Hermione.

He had not avoided the society of his invalid daughter, he invariably offered her his chair when she came into a room, and helped to fetch some of the things she wanted. (No one person could have possibly fetched them all.)

John supposed that this was Mr. Brett's way of keeping the peace, but he thought he might have had more tacit support from his father-in-law.

Mr. Brett could not have failed to hear the approach of his son-in-law, because both Bichon and Bichette accompanied John by the simple process of hurling themselves between his legs and shrieking at irregular intervals.

When they reached the end of the shrubbery they caught sight of Mr. Brett, and burst into rapturous greetings a semi-tone higher up the scale and continuous.

Mr. Brett went on drawing his delicate fine lines and did not turn his head.

John puffed at his pipe and watched his father-in-law sulkily.

There were plenty of things for John to do, but John did not feel in the mood for doing any of them, and he resented the fact that Mr. Brett did not give him the provocation of suggesting that he should begin doing them.

"I thought," Mr. Brett observed by-and-bye, "that I heard the sound of a lawn mower about half an hour since, but I guess I was mistaken: it seems to have stopped."

The vials of John's wrath were unloosed.

"It has stopped," he said furiously, and then he gave a reproduction in a slightly milder form of what he had said to the gardener. He concluded by kicking Bichon into the nearest hedge. This broke off two handsome gladioli of which John had been justly proud, and did nothing to dishearten the vocal explosions of the Poms.

When their shrieks had died away into the distance, Mr. Brett spoke again.

"Does it matter seriously?" he asked, "about that old lawn?"

It seemed to John the weakest thing he had ever heard his father-in-law say. He tried to explain that the lawn was a symbol and mowing it a fixed religious principle, but it was always difficult to explain symbols to Mr. Brett.

"Well," said his father-in-law patiently, "I guess I wouldn't let a little thing like a principle worry me. If you want peace, John, you better let symbols rip. I never knew a man keep peaceful with a raft of symbols around him."

Then John broke down. He poured out the accumulated bitterness of the last fortnight.

"Now, John," said Mr. Brett gently, when John's category came to an end. "Let's give all those other things the go bye. When you get irritated, it helps a heap to stick to one fact. I get more comfort out of a solid fact than I get out of a whole pack of fine arguments.

"Let's get back to the mowing machine.

"Either you ought not to have started mowing that lawn, or else you should have gone on mowing it until it was finished."

"Yes, I know that," said John, whose temper was already a trifle soothed. "That stripe looks awful—just in front of the house too!"

"I wasn't thinking of the stripe," said Mr. Brett, starting on a fresh hollyhock. "I guess you and I could stand a stripe on a piece of grass as well

as a Zebra stands it on his back, if we had to. What I was thinking of was your future.

"I daresay you think I've been kind of tea-coseying out of your situation, sitting under an embroidered cushion and keeping warm, don't you, John? Well!—I was waiting for that symbol of yours to come along. It don't do to butt in before a man hollers. As long as you thought I had a prejudice against Hermione I should only have made things worse, and Hermione would have got in under my skin. Now I'll give you all I've got on the subject; and I'll go right on giving it to you.

"There's just two ways of treating Hermione. The best way—miles and miles the best way—is to have nothing at all to do with her. It's too late to think of that now. The other way is never to let her rile you.

"Give in to her when it don't cost any one else too much, and don't give in to her when it does, but never splutter.

"Now I don't want to be critical, but I reckon you spluttered about that lawn.

"Don't you splutter again, John, it gives her pleasure every time, and if I were you I should continue so that Hermione couldn't get any pleasure that way.

"It may seem to you a thin consolation—maybe it is—but at my age thin consolations count."

"I haven't told you everything," said John in a contrite voice. "This morning I upset Elise."

"That's bad," said Mr. Brett sympathetically. "That's too bad, John. For Elise'll have to get upset enough anyway."

"I wasn't fit to marry her," John groaned. "I never knew I had such a beast of a temper!"

"Don't you yield to remorse, John," said Mr. Brett with sudden emphasis. "I don't know anything as weakening to the moral fibre as remorse, it wears your nerves to a frazzle and takes all the lift out of your next kick. I expect you've the same kind of temper as anybody else has, when they're stung by a hornet.

"You asked for trouble when you invited Hermione to stay with you, and you've got trouble, but you don't need to double up under it. You keep on smiling and be sure you are right. You stick to the facts.

"This is your place, that lawn's your lawn. If Hermione don't like the sound of a mowing machine, you tell Elise how sorry you are the country don't suit Hermione. It's the smile Elise wants, and what Hermione wants

ain't coming her way at present. If retributive justice ever comes off I'd like to be there. I've tarried the Lord's leisure quite a while."

John laughed and wheeled towards the house. He felt reinvigorated, and almost unashamed.

He would kiss Elise and have the lawn mowed before lunch.

When Mr. Brett came in at lunch time, the lawn was mowed, the stripe had disappeared. Elise looked perfectly happy and Hermione had moved her room.

"She said," Elise explained a little apologetically to her father, "that your room was the only one in the house where she couldn't hear the lawn being mowed, and she was sure you wouldn't mind my putting her into it!"

John glanced quickly at his father-in-law, but Mr. Brett was calmly peeling a ripe tomato which, with a small, square piece of cheese, comprised his entire lunch.

"Sure, Elise," he said cheerfully. "I'm pleased as Punch to change that room. I kinder dislike the frogs moaning down by the pond in that guttural way they have—the same as if they were interned aliens. You tell Hermione I'm real pleased to pass her on those frogs—"

# CHAPTER VI

The Princess Girla had a very strong sense of duty; from her earliest years she had believed in doing right, and she had known that she ought to have what she wanted. There was a moral compulsion behind her simplest desires; and she never undertook anything without explaining to God what she expected from His co-operation.

She often saw with sympathy the suffering in which people were involved while carrying out her wishes.

This insight never deflected Hermione's will, but it made her charming to serve.

She was extremely generous in ways which caused her no inconvenience, and her manner in getting her wants made known was little short of exquisite. Hermione's confidential maid, who was a Roman Catholic, firmly believed that if the Princess could be led to embrace the true faith, she would eventually be canonised.

Hermione was of the stuff out of which the most perfect Mother Superiors are made. As a lady Abbess she would have been feared and adored by all her nuns, and no one except, perhaps, an impotent Father Confessor in a moment of rebellion, would have thought of deposing her.

The trained nurse believed that Hermione suffered from a mysterious disease not yet discovered by the doctors. Hermione had suggested to her that nurses really understood illness far more thoroughly than medical men; and she gave the nurse five guineas a week, and a series of beautiful hats.

Nurse Davies frequently told people that the Princess Girla often reminded her of Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc. Her body was pathetically frail but her spirit was indomitable.

Torture was nothing to her.

Hermione had an iron self-control even as a child. She had behaved faultlessly. No one had ever had to correct her manners. She had had a young and jealous mother, who first adored and spoiled her, and when Hermione reached the age of fifteen, had turned against her with an antagonism as fierce as it was secret. Hermione had for a time meditated a friendly alliance with her father, but she gave up the idea when she discovered that Mr. Brett refused to take her on her own valuation, and never permitted any criticism of his wife. Theodora fought her daughter for every human soul that came into the house. They both had beauty and wit,

Theodora had experience and Hermione youth. They were very evenly matched combatants, but the extra weight of authority possessed by Theodora weighed down the scale. Hermione decided at eighteen that she would leave her home. She gained her father's consent to travel with friends of his to Europe; but she went without her mother's approval.

Theodora resented Europe, except for clothes. She would have liked to rule in Paris but Mr. Brett had refused to give her any assistance. European countries were strange as well as illusory. They would not permit Theodora to rule without her husband. So she turned her back upon Europe and took up New York. But an instinct warned her that Hermione would conquer the old world, and leave her perpetually dissatisfied with the new.

When Hermione left America she decided never to return to it except as a visitor, and when she could take precedence of her mother.

She met Prince Girla in Paris, kept him on a tight rope for a year, and then married him. Her precedence was now assured, but she was disappointed when she discovered that in spite of Prince Girla's connection with the ruling family of Roumania, the fact that he belonged to a younger branch (quite precluding succession) gave her much less social importance than she had expected. They both spoke French perfectly, so that language was no barrier between them. Prince Girla had heavy debts, but he was madly in love with Hermione.

He would have shot himself if he had failed to win her, although it is improbable that he would have suggested marrying her if she had not been able to bring him a magnificent dowry.

At nineteen there was only one thing that Hermione did not know about life—and that was marriage. She had spent much time and ingenuity upon the subject, but marriage is the one experience upon which no correlation of facts, however careful, has much practical bearing.

It took Hermione three days of personal experience to understand married life, but it took her longer than this to teach her husband.

Hermione said afterwards, to her greatest friends, that she was afraid she was not material enough for marriage. In the Roman Catholic Church marriage is accepted as one of the lesser sacraments, but if Hermione had been the Pope she would have altered this definition.

Prince Girla did the best he could with a spiritual tie, but he had not been brought up on those principles, and he was very much in love.

The whole affair was disastrous, and it was complicated by the birth of a boy within a year of the marriage. The Girla family took this as a sign of grace, and not as an omen of destruction. Their rejoicing was premature.

Hermione went through her trial with an incredulous serenity. She could not believe that Providence really meant to play her such a trick, but when she found it had, she decided to make the occasion final.

She would never have another child, nor did she mean to be inconvenienced by the one she possessed.

Hermione did nothing to defy the marriage law; she would have thought it very wrong to defy a law as well as rather foolish when it could be so easily adapted to her convenience without defiance. She became seriously ill.

No doctor could quite understand the cause of the Princess's illness (its chief symptom was the enforced absence of her husband for two years), but of the fact itself there could be no reasonable doubt. Hermione barely ate enough to keep herself alive, she was as frail as a leaf, and suffered intensely, with heroic fortitude—but she chose her sufferings.

At the end of two years Prince Girla had had enough of it, he still admired Hermione but he wanted a wife. He insisted upon an interview and he told her in fluent French with the extreme clarity of the Latin mind what he thought of her.

Hermione lay on a sofa with her eyes shut, breathing softly. There were moments in his long and emphatic speeches when Prince Girla pulled himself up short and wondered if Hermione, who was as still as a statue, was really alive at all.

But Hermione was alive; she waited until the Prince had said all that had accumulated in his goaded and troubled spirit for the space of two years, then she slowly opened her eyes, and selecting a few gentle words which had occurred to her while he was stamping about the room, she uttered them. They were perfectly wifely phrases and they gave Prince Girla no justification whatever for what took place.

He struck Hermione.

This was the end of the marriage.

Prince Girla could not get a divorce on account of his religion, nor was Hermione anxious for one.

She preferred to keep her title, and she had had enough of marriage. Prince Girla apologised for the blow, and from time to time offered abject terms of reconciliation; but Hermione refused to see him again. She said she forgave him from the bottom of her heart and mentioned meeting him at the judgment seat of Heaven where there was—as she was thankful to reflect—

no marrying nor giving in marriage, but she would not meet him upon earth where the arrangements were less satisfactory.

Her relations-in-law wrote her letters which Hermione described as "terribly Roumanian," but they failed either to move her, or, as they subsequently attempted, to cause her social destruction.

Hermione despised the Roumanian court which she privately described as "potty," and in the larger field of Europe her character remained unblemished. She lived with perfect discretion; she was a Princess, and she had an enormous income. She made no complaints, and yet every one who mattered knew that Girla had beaten her black and blue continually.

Men raved against her ill-treatment and black-balled Girla out of their clubs; but Hermione's best and strongest supporters were those of her own sex. She accepted passively and up to a certain point the admiration of men; at this point she definitely checked it; but she made efforts to attract women, and their admiration never became inconvenient to her.

Hermione was said to have a purifying influence over young married women, and if they sometimes became very unhappy with their husbands, she became an increasing support to them.

It was with this theory in mind that the Princess Girla came to Mambles. If she had been able to help other young married women, how much more ought she not to help Elise?

In her first twenty-four hours Hermione had pointed out to her sister, with infinite tact and gentleness, that there is a selfishness of two, as well as a selfishness of one, and that Elise might very easily fall into it.

That evening Elise forbore to go out into the garden with John, and sang Gounod's "There Is a Green Hill Far Away" instead, in the presence of the assembled family. John had never appreciated sacred music, and he hated Gounod from that hour.

Hermione warned Elise how soon she could exhaust the affections of her husband by permitting a demonstrative regard.

"Do not rebuff him," she explained gently, "but evade him."

Elise tried to evade John, and neither of them liked it.

Hermione told Elise how difficult young married life is, and Elise, to whom it had come as easily as sunshine, began to see in it obstacles and perils to John's happiness and her own, which would have been exaggerated in a jungle exclusively tenanted by wild beasts.

It never occurred to Elise that Hermione could be wrong; because Hermione loved her so much and had been so unhappy herself, and only

wanted to save and shield Elise from a similar unhappiness.

Elise became pale with apprehension over the disasters and pitfalls which lay ahead of herself and John, and even for the gardener's wife who had been married the week before, and did not look as if it had made any difference.

Elise would have liked to ask her father's help but that might seem as if she had not perfect confidence in John, and she would have loved to talk to John about it, only that might seem as if she had not perfect confidence in Hermione, so that she decided to keep her anxieties to herself.

She struggled manfully on, evading John, and seeing that Mr. Brett was regularly and carefully attended to, even when he wanted to be left alone.

"I should never," Hermione carefully explained to Elise, "leave dear Papa to stroll about by himself, or even sit for any length of time, without running in to see if he is still alive. At any moment we may lose him."

Of course Hermione could not take this duty upon herself, partly because of Mr. Brett's inexplicable dislike to her company, brought on, no doubt, by a diseased state of mind; and partly because her own health required the utmost watchfulness and repose. But Elise could make a point of running in and out and following Mr. Brett up, without any grave consequences to anybody, and if it interrupted her persistent tête-à-tête with John, so much the more precious would she make this rare companionship.

"I do not want you ever to think of me," Hermione said tenderly, "if I never see your face from one day's end to the other, Childie, I shall not complain! All yesterday I sat alone, hour after hour, while you went fishing with John. I thought of Papa once or twice and I was anxious at your staying out so late—but for the rest, I want you to dismiss your little old sister from your mind. I am one of those whose path in life is cut out for loneliness."

Of course Hermione's path was very rarely lonely at Mambles. Elise made constant opportunities to be with her sister, her little feet grew weary with running to and fro, her heart beat fast with suppressed fears, and she often lay awake for hours haunted by remorse. Had she neglected Hermione? Would Papa die suddenly while she was out of the room? Was John's crossness when she left him quite the reward she had expected from her evasive tactfulness?

The cook, too, was difficult. She said she couldn't see the sense of the Princess's meals. She had no objection to Mr. Brett's, which were no trouble, and took place at the same time as other people's, though she wondered that he could keep alive on them, such stuff would kill a healthy rabbit if exclusively condemned to it! But the Princess liked her meals to be

ordered at different times on different days, so that nobody knew when they sat down how soon they would have to be up again, and they were all new-fangled dishes which had to be cooked just right—a slice off anything cold, even off a loaf of bread, was simply sent down again as so much rat poison.

Elise wrinkled her delicate eyebrows, and wondered distractedly if she ought to get an extra cook for Hermione, and if she did, wouldn't she (cooks' tempers being what they were) have to ask John to build an extra kitchen, and would John build an extra kitchen while there was a war on?

She would have liked to consult John about it, but Hermione had expressly told her, "Never take your domestic difficulties to your husband, many married lives are ruined by just that lack of self-control on the part of young wives. Always meet him with a smiling face and tell him that everything is perfectly easy."

Life became more and more complicated for Elise, and she often wondered if she would have been able to bear it at all if Hermione had not been there.

This state of tension was unexpectedly broken by Bodger.

One Sunday afternoon they were all sitting out on the lawn having tea. Mr. Brett had a glass of milk with digestive biscuits, Hermione had chocolate with whipped cream and savoury sandwiches, and John and Elise real tea with bread and butter. The Poms took what they could get from each table, and shrieked over it.

It was a lovely south-west day, high clouds sailed swiftly overhead, passing each other on different levels, in a clear blue sky. The garden was full of light movements, travelling scents and midsummer colours. John had moved the wind-screen five times for Hermione, quite good-naturedly. Elise was just wondering whether it would affect her married life irreparably if she should suggest a walk with John after tea, when Bodger, having gnawed through a substantial rope and missed the detaining hand of the stable boy by a fraction of a second, burst upon the scene.

The peaceful lawn rocked in chaos. There was a table between Bodger and one Pom: for a fleeting moment the rampart stood erect, and then in jangled pieces bestrewed the lawn.

Mr. Brett reached out an arm, seized the Pom nearest him, and stuffed it, screaming, into a capacious pocket; John ought to have caught the other Pom—he nearly caught it, but unfortunately the sight of Bodger passing imperturbably through hot chocolate and whipped cream (it was Hermione's table he had overturned) checked him, by a gust of laughter. The chuckle cost him the life of the Pom.

Bichon dived past him, making foolishly away from Hermione towards the open lawn. Hermione screamed and deflected Bodger from her chair. He was on the Pom's trail in a second and an instant later Bichon was painlessly shaken into Eternity.

John caught Bodger only a moment afterwards, but there was nothing left to catch of Bichon: he had entered upon the first unbroken silence of his career.

John beat Bodger sternly and without mercy, but Bodger merely licked his lips, writhed as a matter of form, and hunted for the other Pom, out of the corner of a wicked eye.

Bichette had hysterics in Mr. Brett's waistcoat.

Hermione missed a great opportunity. She should have fainted, probably she would have fainted, only a spontaneous faint comes off quicker than one which is premeditated. Before she had time to think of it, Elise had forestalled her.

Elise had spent a long hot day trying to make everybody happy and comfortable, and bloodshed upon the top of these efforts was more than she could stand.

"Now," said Hermione with her grey eyes cold with hatred, "perhaps John you will be content to part with that unspeakable monster, when you see what it has done to your poor wife!"

"Hermione," said Mr. Brett, suddenly depositing the remaining Pom upon her lap. "Quit this lawn and take this demented muff with you. You and your dogs between you have done enough mischief for one bright summer's day."

Hermione murmured that dear Papa was of course upset, but she did leave the lawn with Bichette under her arm, casting a glance of terror and aversion at the recumbent, contemplative form of Bodger.

John was on his knees beside his wife.

"She's round, John," said Mr. Brett very gently. "I guess the thing that will suit her best is for you to stay there quietly with her till dinner time."

Elise whispered that she was perfectly all right, but some one must go at once to help and comfort Hermione.

"Sure," agreed Mr. Brett with alacrity. "I'll go right in and see to Hermione. I've assisted her some already, but it ain't anything to what I *might* do if I put my mind to it."

Mr. Brett moved off with unusual quickness across the lawn, and in a fit of absent-mindedness called out "Good dog" as he passed Bodger.

# CHAPTER VII

When Mr. Brett reached the house his steps became slower. The look on his face was that of a man who foresees and dreads the weight of a task which he has already experienced.

He was not going to evade it, but he halted to measure his strength before he adjusted himself to the familiar yoke.

The large entrance hall of Mambles was a serene and sunny place.

It was filled with flowers and the still clear light of the retreating sun. A flight of shallow steps led to the upper regions of the house.

Mr. Brett stood still for a moment, resting unseeing eyes upon his collection of household treasures.

He had furnished Mambles to suit his taste and relinquished it to suit the tastes of others. There was nothing in it that had not the personal note of his selective mind, and there was nothing that he had regretted relinquishing to Elise and John.

He walked up the shallow stairs slowly and with effort.

"What I *can* take easy I will," he said to himself reflectively.

Hermione had moved into Mr. Brett's rooms in the left wing of the house. The rooms were neither as large nor as luxuriously furnished as those which had been prepared for her by Elise; but they had suited Mr. Brett.

Mr. Brett knocked at the sitting-room door, a rustle of starched petticoats and the reproving face of Nurse Davies answered him.

"The Princess is resting, and must not be disturbed," she said with low-voiced emphasis.

Mr. Brett's eyes narrowed a little and then became curiously fixed.

"You can go downstairs," he said quietly, "and stay there until I send for you."

Nurse Davies was spoilt and authoritative, her profession had raised her in the social scale with a jerk, and some of the jerk adhered to her manners. She opened her lips to bring Mr. Brett to his senses, and then shut them again with an impression that her own senses were suddenly needed elsewhere.

Mr. Brett was only an old man dying of diabetes, but as she explained afterwards downstairs to the housekeeper, his eyes were uncanny, and she had never been able to stand against anything at all queer.

Mr. Brett stood aside until she had passed him and then walked into Hermione's sitting room.

Hermione lay on the sofa by the open window. She had had time to change into a white satin dressing gown trimmed with swansdown, and to look very ill. She was surrounded by smelling salts and heart tonics, her eyes were closed, but she had heard what had taken place between her father and Nurse Davies outside her door, and she would have recalled the latter if she had not thought that it would be wiser to appear beyond the power of speech.

Mr. Brett looked at her speculatively, pulled forward a chair, hitched it backward, and picking up a yesterday's "Times" proceeded to rustle its leaves briskly.

Hermione's eyelids trembled nervously.

"Please Papa," she murmured faintly, "do not make that noise, my nerves are too unstrung to bear it."

"Very well, Hermione," said Mr. Brett slowly and distinctly, "if you want that I shall stop reading 'The Times' you can open your eyes and sit up. If you're too exhausted to speak I shall sit right here and rustle.

"Nobody has ever been known to suffer physically from the rustling of a newspaper and I'm going to see if maybe it won't revive you."

The Princess set her lips in a long thin line, which was unbecoming to her, and there was a long pause during which Mr. Brett rustled systematically, and Hermione was conscious of the afflicting sound in every nerve of her body.

An unwonted flush came over her countenance, she drew her cushions a little higher with a jerk, and opened her eyes.

"If you wish to speak to me, Papa," she said with dignity, "I should not dream of refusing to listen to you, however much pain it costs me."

Mr. Brett laid down "The Times" with satisfaction.

"That's the way I like to hear you talk, Hermione," he observed cheerfully, "because that's exactly what I've come up here to do. I've come up here to make things painful for you."

Hermione raised incredulous and exasperating eyebrows, but she made no comment on her father's preposterous project.

"When I was a young man," Mr. Brett continued in his slow unemotional drawl, "I made quite a study of mules. I had to drive 'em, and if you have to drive a mule you want to study it.

"Now the doggonest thing a mule can do to a human being is to baulk. You can light out from a kicking mule and you can drag a rearing mule down, but if a mule baulks, you want to revise the Catechism and put in a special clause to permit swearing. But I got wise to the mule's temperament after a bit. I used to give 'em something they liked just out of reach of their noses—say carrots—and if that didn't do, I put something behind them so unpleasant that it kinder induced them to prance forward unexpectedly in the direction I was wanting them to go. When I say unexpectedly, I mean unexpectedly to the mules.

"Can you think of anything you would like to have, Hermione?"

"Dear Papa," said his daughter sweetly, "I have lived so long abroad that I hardly understand your quaint way of putting things. I am sure you mean to be funny, but American humour escapes me."

Mr. Brett did not smile but his eyes lighted appreciatively.

"You don't lose anything, Hermione," he said gently. "I guess you have quite a wit of your own.

"Don't you think it's time you went back to Paris? There hasn't been an air raid for some while."

Hermione's flush deepened.

"I don't expect you to understand me," she said pathetically. "You never have, but I feel that my first duty is to Elise. I left Paris to come to her, not to escape air raids."

"If you want a house on the Champs Elysées," said Mr. Brett meditatively, "with a garden—say the word. I happen to know that I could procure one by wire."

"I should have thought you were clever enough not to offer me a bribe," said Hermione coldly. She had always wanted a house in the Champs Elysées big enough for entertaining on a large scale.

"I should refuse a palace rather than neglect a duty."

Mr. Brett pushed his chair back until the front legs of it waved dangerously in the air.

"I have known calls," he replied impressively, "to higher duties come out of palaces. In fact they generally do. Duties dwindle with the rent. I don't mean a bribe, but I suggest an opening. You have remarkable powers, Hermione, and there are opportunities in Europe just now which may not occur again, and which, if you hanker after celebrity, would pick and dry it for you while you waited. I might be able—if I saw the point of it—to push some of these opportunities your way."

Hermione looked at Mr. Brett. Something flashed into her eyes, and was gone again in a moment. She was an ambitious woman and hitherto she had had to practise her struggles in secret and alone.

No one had ever seen her struggle, but though she had retained an outward and gracious passivity, Hermione had felt the strain of her efforts, and there were heights to which, without assistance, she could not, however gracefully, climb.

Mr. Brett had never backed his family's social yearnings before. He had markedly refrained from using his extraordinary powers for any personal purposes.

He was making a great concession to his eldest daughter, and she knew it. Her heart beat faster than if she had been assisting at the process of a palpitation; then her innate violence of will reasserted itself. If she accepted any concession from her father, she must lay down her will as the price of it. Hermione shivered as if the room were cold. Her will was her religion—she called it for the moment, her cross.

Hermione was of the stuff out of which persecutors are made. It is very nearly the same stuff which creates martyrs, except that in the case of martyrs vindictiveness does not appear essential.

Hermione could bear much to keep her will intact, even the relinquishing of a life-long ambition; still she did not like relinquishing anything, and she breathed quickly; then she said with her voice a trifle strained and high,

"I daresay you do not believe me, but my desire to save and protect Elise is stronger than any personal wish of my own."

Mr. Brett let his chair descend slowly and carefully from its precarious angle.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "if that is so, Hermione, carrots is dead."

Mr. Brett could talk perfectly good grammar when he chose, but he avoided it in the presence of his eldest daughter. The perfection of her own manner, he often observed, was distinction enough for any family.

"I don't know what else you think you can do against me," said Hermione defensively, "but I warn you that if you attempt to drive me away from here I shall appeal to Elise, both against you—and against John!

"You have apparently succeeded in poisoning his not very acute intellect against me, but my poor darling little sister will stand by me—whatever you may choose to say or do."

"She might stand against me," agreed Mr. Brett reflectively. "I don't remember that I've ever done a thing to hurt her since she was born—still

that don't make any difference, but I don't advise you to calculate that Elise'll stand against John. You're her poor broken-hearted sister all right, all right, but John's her young husband. If she sees John's heart being cut into, yours won't have much of a chance.

"She knows she can't make you happy.

"You've chosen your sorrows and sit on them with the clinch of a domestic fowl, but Elise can make John happy, and I guess—take it by and large—she will.

"But I don't mind admitting to you, Hermione, that I don't want this tug of war to come off. Tugs of war suit some people—a frail, broken-hearted, high-brow like yourself finds nourishment in a tug of war; but normal people don't; and while the dust and the yells are heartening you all up, an unselfish, sensitive girl like Elise gets cut as thin as a wood shaving. I'd take some trouble to keep Elise happy.

"Say, Hermione, have you ever been happy? I don't mean top-dog happy—but *real* happy, like a field of buttercups in the sun?"

Hermione's lips quivered.

"Happiness," she said, "is not for me."

"Sunshine is for everybody," said Mr. Brett gently, "who'll let the sun alone, and like it.

"Before you came Elise was happy. She was just like a little open cup filled with gold; you never saw the child so gay; and John was happy; he is the quiet kind that has to hide itself to feel at home, but he sure *was* at home. They didn't need any saving—then.

"I used to take a power of comfort sitting out under the old yew tree, thinking of those two children off somewhere—with their happiness."

"It wouldn't have lasted," said Hermione hurriedly. "Unthinking happiness is the shutting out of life—it leads to selfishness and satiety."

"Don't you believe it, Hermione," said Mr. Brett impressively. "It's decayed teeth give us the toothache, not sweets. Happiness and unhappiness ain't selfish or unselfish, it depends on who's got them.

"Marie Antoinette was just as unhappy as she could live, but she kicked her throne over and got the guillotine into the family for a necklace of diamonds. You couldn't make Elise and John selfish, not if you set out and offered them Bond Street.

"I don't know much about religion, what with one thing and another I guess it's kept me dodging; but I remember being told that by their fruits ye

shall know them. Fruits Hermione—that sounds like good sense don't it, and good sense ought to make good religion. Well, how about your fruits?"

"I don't know what you mean—" said Hermione icily. She would have tossed her head if the pillows had not been too low for it.

"I do not think you can find that I have done anything wrong."

Mr. Brett ignored Hermione's negative standard.

"I don't say much about your childhood," he began impartially. "You took credit for what was given you in the way of looks and wit, you practised them up a lot, and then fought your mother with them, to take away from her what she'd been given, along the same lines. Maybe it was your fault, maybe it was hers. All I know is you fought.

"Later you fought me to get hold of Arnold, and make a pink sugar pet lamb of him. Well, you had me there; for quite a time you took the bones out of Arnold. I daresay you would have ruined him, but you had other fish to fry, and then the war came along, and Arnold headed right, and got his quittance.

"You fought your mother for Elise too, and you know what happens when two dogs get on to a bone? Well, that's what happened to Elise. Then I consented for you to go to Europe. It struck me people in Europe had always liked fighting, and you were getting wasted in a civilised country like America.

"You made a mistake in marrying a European, because European men expect to have a life of their own, but by gosh—Prince Girla made a greater mistake in marrying you!

"Hermione Brett, if that young man is put into a low place in the next world, make no mistake about it—you'll foot the bill! You've driven him towards vice more surely than any poor girl who gets a hardly earned living by it—and it wasn't your profession. You had money. Then you brought a child into the world and left it. There may be a shabbier trick to play on the universe than that, but I don't know it. I guess speculating with trust funds is a kind action compared with leaving a little child to grow up motherless."

"I did not leave my child!" cried Hermione passionately. "He was taken from me!"

"No, Hermione," said Mr. Brett inexorably. "Your husband said he wanted the child to grow up in his own country, but he would *not* separate it from you if you would live there, and let him come into the house for three months of the year, so that he could be with the child part of the time. You

could have kept it. He offered to draw up a deed of separation on those lines —and you refused."

"I couldn't live in Roumania," said Hermione sharply. "The climate would have killed me, and Girla's word was not to be trusted."

"His deed was," said Mr. Brett imperturbably. "Very large financial interests hung on his keeping his word. I drew it up myself, and I had guaranties."

There was a long silence. Mr. Brett sighed heavily. The dark pockets under his eyes looked deeper than ever.

"I think I'll die before you," he said, as if he were speaking to himself.

"I think I'll die pretty quick. I'd rather. There's lots of mistakes I've made; some of them lie on me pretty heavy at times, but I've come short of blasphemy. I haven't called what I wanted 'the will of God.' But what's going to pull you through when you come to the other side, Hermione, I don't know. You've lied to yourself so thick and bad, there isn't anything in you that ain't what you don't expect; and you've deceived a crowd of people! Your wits helped you, and your looks; and all the people who depended on you, or ought to have depended on you, you've let down.

"Well, I'm your father. Seeing what you are don't let me out of that. But I've told you the truth, and it don't let you out either.

"If you want to try to get the better of me now—start trying. I don't say you won't be able to do a cruel bit of harm before I down you, but I guess I'm going to down you, if that Viennese doctor was worth what I gave him to stiffen me up."

Mr. Brett rose wearily, as he spoke, and wandered to the south window; from it he could see Elise and John upon the lawn. John was reading out loud to her. John read out loud with great monotony, but no elocution could have sounded more impressive to Elise.

"I don't know, Hermione," said Mr. Brett unexpectedly, "that the person I'm not sorriest for after all, isn't yourself."

Hermione made no answer to this statement. She lay as still as a statue with her face turned to the wall.

Mr. Brett saw that the sun was in her eyes and he pulled the blind down gently to shield her face before he left the room.

# CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Brett was suddenly aroused from his sleep by the sight of John in a green dressing gown standing at the foot of his bed.

John had switched the light on and there was no more colour in his face than on a blank sheet of paper.

"Hermione's ill," he said urgently. "I hate to disturb you, but she's most awfully ill; we've got a doctor, he's with her now. Can't you hear her screaming?"

Mr. Brett listened. Mambles was a solid, deep-built house and his rooms were on the opposite wing to his daughter's, but he could distinctly hear a high travelling sound like the shriek of wind in a broken chimney.

"Well, she ain't dying from lung complaint," said Mr. Brett after a pause.

He made no effort to get up, he merely eyed John with sardonic thoughtfulness over the bedclothes.

"What do you want me to do about it?" he asked.

"The doctor thought I ought to tell you," said John a little reproachfully. "Nothing seems able to soothe her. Every now and then she screams for you. It's awful to see her, her eyes are nearly starting out of her head. She never stops screaming."

"I'll have to see the doctor before I get up," said Mr. Brett consideringly. "What's been done to soothe her anyway?"

John hesitated.

"The doctor gave her a powerful sedative," he explained, "and of course we kept saying everything we thought could help. I promised to get rid of Bodger."

Mr. Brett was suddenly contorted by a spasm of silent laughter.

"John," he murmured as soon as he could speak, "you're a good boy, but you don't show staying power. That bull terrier's a trump card: you don't want to throw him, in the first round. He's more of a symbol than a streaky lawn. Don't you do anything hasty with Bodger. You have him farmed out and we'll have him back some day bringing his sheaves with him. But I don't want to get up unless I have to, it'll disturb my digestion. You send that doctor man in to talk to me and get Elise back into her own room. Hermione has her nurse and she can scream just as well with her as she can with a crowd of people standing round gaping at her, but maybe she won't want to."

“I don’t think you understand, Sir, how ill she is,” said John gravely. “She is quite delirious; she doesn’t know whether we are there or not.”

Mr. Brett shook his head.

“I fancy she’s just as conscious as she needs to be to make her points,” he said drily. “Unconsciousness sets in with Hermione when other people want to make theirs. She won’t forget to ask what you’ve done about Bodger first thing to-morrow morning.”

John withdrew, unconvinced and shocked. As he opened the door a rush of sound passed into the room.

Mr. Brett lay perfectly still listening to it.

Theodora had suffered from screaming attacks when she was angry (and when she thought she was hurt she was always angry), but she had never been seriously frightened. There was something curious to Mr. Brett in the sound of his daughter’s voice. It was a note of fear, and as he was registering this new note, the doctor came hurriedly into the room.

Dr. Raymond had motored over from the nearest small town. He was a clever and keen young man who had overworked himself in France and been sent into the country to recuperate. Mr. Brett looked at him attentively.

“What do you think my daughter’s got an attack of?” he asked.

“To tell you the truth,” said Dr. Raymond, “I don’t know—there’s an hysterical element in it of course, but there was nothing to indicate this kind of seizure when I saw her before. Her temperature is 106 and her pulse is like a jig-saw puzzle—the attack may turn to meningitis or some other acute brain trouble, and I suppose it has been produced by shock. They tell me she saw her dog killed this afternoon. The seriousness of her condition is that she isn’t in a fit state to stand any additional illness. It may be the dog of course, but she keeps calling out for you.”

“No, it ain’t the dog,” said Mr. Brett reflectively. “What she’s got an attack of, is the truth. It’s rare, but I don’t believe that as a disease it’s fatal.

“I told her what I thought of her this afternoon, and what she wants now is for me to take it all back. Well! I don’t see it that way. I didn’t tell her for fun. I told her because I thought she right down needed it.

“The burnt child dreads the fire, but you don’t want to stop the child dreading it, you want to stop it being burned. Now what do you anticipate will happen if she’s left to scream?”

“Neither her heart nor her brain will stand much more of it,” said Dr. Raymond gravely. “I can’t answer for the consequences if she keeps calling for you and you don’t go—anything may happen. On the other hand she

may not recognise you even if you're there. Her brain is caught on one point and sticks there, the excitement keeps mounting and nothing I've been able to do has touched it."

"She'll recognise me all right," said Mr. Brett with conviction, "and she'll get off her point—when she's made it. If she was the only person concerned I'd leave things the way they are. But I've got my other daughter to consider, and that does me in. If I come along to the Princess Girla, I want you to undertake to get Mrs. Sterling back to bed and keep her there."

Dr. Raymond agreed with alacrity, and hurried back to his patient.

Mr. Brett got up slowly and put on his bedroom slippers with reluctance. He was by no means convinced that he was doing the right thing, but he felt that neither Elise nor John would have understood his running counter to the doctor.

The servants, white and trembling, were all assembled in the big hall listening to the acute and terrible sound that filled the house. Mr. Brett looked at them contemplatively over the banisters.

"You can all make tracks for bed," he said in his steady soothing drawl. "You can take my word for it—when there's that amount of noise in an illness there's no immediate danger. All except the cook, and she can send up some hot drinks to Mr. and Mrs. Sterling's apartments."

Then he opened Hermione's door and walked to the foot of her bed. Even Mr. Brett was momentarily impressed by Hermione's appearance. Her face was hardly human, it was wild and strained beyond recognition, her fixed eyes had an awful stare in them of blank terror. She had reached the acutest point of consciousness, beyond which the mind passes out of the power of personality.

"I'm not! I'm not! I'm not!" screamed Hermione.

In the absolute stillness of the room her tones gathered an incredible beating force: they neither changed their accent nor their sound, but swung on like the regular rise and fall of a piston rod in an engine.

Elise knelt in a crumpled heap on the floor by her sister's bed, trying to hold one of Hermione's burning, restless hands. The other clutched and plucked persistently at the counterpane.

Nurse Davies made ice packs by the bedside. John and Dr. Raymond clung together by the window as if their mutual impotence was a protection to them.

Mr. Brett faced his daughter consideringly. He fixed his quiet, dominating eyes upon hers, without anxiety. For one astonishing moment

the room emptied itself of sound. Mr. Brett said steadily and gently,

"Hermione, I guess you have me beat."

Nobody knew what he meant or guessed that in that instant's pause he had passed a life sentence upon himself.

His words hardly reached Hermione's maddened and excited brain, but something in his presence succeeded in breaking in upon the morbid concentration of her mind. The pupils of her eyes contracted suddenly: she had recognised him.

A few moments later the screaming began again, but it had lost its regularity, there were moments when it fell into vague mutterings.

Dr. Raymond stepped forward and felt her pulse again.

"I think the sedative is taking hold now," he said with satisfaction.

Mr. Brett drew an arm chair forward beside the bed.

"I'll stay here till morning," he said to the doctor. "You carry out your part of the programme now. I guess the Princess don't need an audience for a nap."

Dr. Raymond cleared the room except for Nurse Davies, and after giving her a few orders withdrew. It was a puzzling case, but there was no doubt the brain crisis was over.

Mr. Brett drew out of his dressing-gown pocket a small and much worn book. It was called "The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine," by Frank Stockton. Mr. Brett preferred it to any other novel.

Hermione still screamed at irregular intervals, but during one of her quieter moments Mr. Brett said to the Nurse,

"Now Nurse Davies it isn't going to do a mite of good the two of us Agag-ing round. You just go into the next room and get a little rest. If there's any change in the Princess's condition I'll wake you."

Nurse Davies hesitated, but to her surprise Hermione slowly opened her eyes and looked at her with apparent consciousness.

"Yes," she said, "leave me with my father." Then she closed her eyes again.

When Mr. Brett and Hermione were alone, Mr. Brett drew up the blind and opened the window near him, then he returned to his arm chair, pulled a thick rug over his knees, arranged the reading lamp, so that it shed a light over Hermione's face, and settled to his reading.

For an hour or more Hermione slept the deep sleep of intense exhaustion, then she woke with a start and fixed her strained eyes on her

father's face.

"Is that you Papa?" she asked quickly. "Am I going to die?"

Mr. Brett shook his head.

"No, Hermione," he said, "you'll live on yet a while. I'm not a betting man, but I'd take odds on it. Do you want that I should read out loud to you 'The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine'? I don't know a book more calculated to soothe the sick or enliven the down-hearted. I don't say it's like life—but it's the way life might be like if we took irregular things more regularly."

Hermione shook her head.

"No, I don't want to be read to," she whispered. "I want to talk to you. I think I can now. I can see what I want to say."

Mr. Brett leaned forward and lit a spirit lamp beside the bed.

"Well," he said, "let's have some soup first. You can talk all you like on soup, but if you start on an empty stomach there's no saying where you'll land up on."

Hermione drank the soup with perfect docility, and leaning back on her pillow began to speak in a low, fevered voice, with momentary pauses, but without intermission. Her eyes fixed themselves on Mr. Brett's face with the intensity of the Ancient Mariner.

Mr. Brett put down "The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine," and leaned forward so that he could catch her low, hurrying voice without effort. The night light cast weird shadows on his grey face and deep-set, patient eyes. He listened without attempting to interrupt Hermione. She began with the story of her childhood. In the long hours of her delirium her mind had built up and stored an attractive pageant of her character, set in the gloomy pitfalls of her life.

She told her father of the inner desolation of her childhood, her mother's neglect, her nurse's carelessness, his own inability to understand her or foster her affection for him.

"You said I was a fighter," she exclaimed bitterly, "this is what I had to fight."

She passed on swiftly to her girlhood, its outward triumphs and the shadowed internecine struggle between her beautiful young mother and herself. She struck again and again at the man beside her, pointing out to him his neglect, his lazy partisanship of his wife, chosen out of selfishness and fear.

"You never helped me," she said bitterly, "you only wanted peace."

She spoke of his careless consent to her European travels, the unsuitable chaperonage that had thrown her, young and inexperienced, into the fastest American set in Paris.

Without hesitation or restraint she gave him the story of her marriage. Mr. Brett had heard it before, but there were details she had spared him, moments of her dressed-up sacrifices and of her attitude of outraged womanhood, which convinced her of her own sincerity. He was spared nothing now. He was told of every physical brutality and of every irregular, inconsiderate word forced out of Prince Girla. Hermione had never forgotten a word that had displeased her, nor had she ever let his tenderness or repentance wash out a single stain.

There had never been a moment when Hermione was not in her own eyes an heroic, persecuted figure. She had kept her code unspotted from an alien and repulsive world. The mere facts of life were outrages upon her delicacy of temperament, and her rigid acceptance of propriety was a loophole by which she had escaped self-surrender.

Her low, exhausted voice moved on with the persistence of a gimlet. She stood surrounded by her negative virtues, covered with the insults of her foes, as St. Sebastian stands in old Tuscan pictures, imperturbable under a lacework of arrows.

Her eyes never left her father's face: this picture, this continuous exposition of herself, was her answer to him.

She had been horribly startled by the unveiling of his point of view; her self-control had been stabbed into an acute resistance.

Now with the force of her delirium behind her she pinned him against her own interpretation of herself. She dared him with her exhausted, fevered eyes not to believe that she was faultless.

In the grey shadows of the gathering dawn she seemed to threaten him with her death.

"Do you understand me?" she murmured at last. "Do you see now what I've had to bear and what I'm really like?"

"Why, yes, Hermione," said Mr. Brett patiently. "I guess I see what you're like."

Her eyes questioned him doubtfully, but there was nothing in his expression which revealed any latent sarcasm.

Mr. Brett had no expression in his face at all, beyond his grave attentiveness.

Hermione was completely exhausted now: she had spoken for nearly two hours without a pause. She closed her searching eyes and slept.

Mr. Brett looked out of the open window. It was a still dawn, full of the returning movements of arrested life.

Outside in the grey garden the stars were pale in a cloudy sky, the small battered moon was surrounded by an opalescent fiery ring.

The silence was broken by the scurry and hoot of hunting owls. A heavy mist swept over the garden and blotted out the shapes of the trees.

Mr. Brett did not take up again "The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine." Even that immortal classic failed to rouse any amusement in him.

Hermione breathed with the refreshing regularity of a child; her beauty slowly reasserted itself, but Mr. Brett did not see the beauty in her face: he noticed instead, with a pang at his heart, the lines of selfishness and unwavering vanity which her own character had engraved upon it.

"I reckon," he said to himself, "that 'the last enemy to be destroyed' *is* vanity. Murder isn't a habit, cruelty can't get on long without conceit. Lies run to it. I never knew a humble liar.

"Vanity is the toughest human quality there is—and it's the most vital. You take it out with a trowel and it gets back with a spade.

"It's trapped Hermione just the way it trapped Theodora.

"She just had to be thought smart, saint-like and brainy. She couldn't face a back seat. Hermione don't care a row of buttons what I think on any other subject, but she'd care what a roadside hog thought of the figure she made passing by. I cut into her because she saw I despised her. Then she lay and brooded till her vanity got so fire-heated it came mighty near burning her up. Poor child! She's got a lot of qualities put into that fire of hers, and there ain't any of 'em that'll come out again. I startled her but I won't have changed her. You can always startle a person out of themselves for a moment, and they thresh round and think they'll never go back again, but it's the same person threshing who was sitting quiet before the shock. Threshing don't change them. I had to do it, and I guess it'll turn out somehow the way I meant. Most things answer to a handle if you ain't afraid to turn it and will take the consequences. There was a dog's chance I could have squeezed out without having to pay all I had, but I wasn't the dog that had that chance."

Mr. Brett leaned back in his arm chair and turned his face towards the open window. The light was beating slowly through the white mist into the

room.

Hermione slept steadily; there was nothing further to do for her.

Death lay definitely behind her.

Death lay in front of Mr. Brett and it was the only thing that was still in front of him.

# CHAPTER IX

For several days after her attack, Hermione was very weak and prostrate.

She was able, however, on the following morning to refer indirectly to Bodger. She asked in a low, broken whisper if Bichette was perfectly safe. Bichette was full in view at the moment, noisily engaged in eating creamed chicken at the foot of Hermione's bed; and Hermione was instantly told that Bodger was no longer on the premises.

After this enquiry Hermione closed her eyes and retired into a state of even completer exhaustion.

She was physically prostrate but her mind was vividly alert. Hermione was thinking out several problems. She had her conscience to deal with, and her future life.

Her conscience was a comparatively easy affair: even in a high fever, she had been able to justify herself to her own complete satisfaction. Hermione had a little manual of "Self-Examination" questions which always lay beside her bed, and she could go through the whole list with perfect confidence day or night. But did her father sufficiently believe in her? And was it worth while that he should? Hermione did not put these two questions to herself as crudely as this—she saw them, as she would have expressed it, "on a higher plane." It was her duty to make her father realise that she was a power for good in the world, and he had not yet appeared to think so with sufficient conviction; if she had succeeded in convincing him, might she not, with him at her side, win moral successes upon a larger scale? Hermione told herself that she must not be ambitious about spiritual openings and she emptied her mind—with an effort of concentration and by the help of several ejaculatory prayers—of all memory of the house and garden in the Champs Elysées. But on the other hand she had been broken-hearted and helpful to young wives for several years; perhaps more was now asked of her. She could not, in justice to herself, change her ideal, but she might change the channel of her efforts. Perhaps Papa was right—he had distinctly spoken of a wider field—the time might have arrived for her to make fresh efforts. Papa was worldly, of course, and hideously astray if he expected her to give up her present situation for the sake of any material profit. But she had never intended to stay permanently with Elise and John, and her father was her first duty.

They might live in Paris, which was dryer than London, and therefore, no doubt, more suitable for diabetics. Papa could not really care for Mambles or he would not have given it to John.

Hermione was the person who really *ought* to make a home for her father. Perhaps this was what he had always felt, and the singular tone of misinformed bitterness with which he had addressed her had been caused by a feeling of neglect.

Hermione lay with her eyes shut, reconstructing the neglected past of Mr. Brett and the rose-coloured future with which she intended to present him. Yes—she was prepared to sacrifice Elise and John to give herself up to her ill and aged parent. The house in the Champs Elysées shot through her mind again, but would she have the physical strength to entertain properly? And how large was the garden? It was no use her undertaking what she could not carry through.

Hermione had had a long career full of excitements, and even perils; but she had foreseen the excitements and been able as a rule to terminate any dangers which had arisen from them. But the night of her attack she had neither foreseen how ill she would be, nor been able to control it. A sensation which she had not roused in herself had frightened her. She had suddenly felt that something might happen to her which she could not prevent.

Hermione shivered a little as she realised how very near she had been to that final trickster, Immortality.

She had often spoken of longing for death, and she had even experienced baffling moments of exasperation with human material, when she had thought of death as a supreme restfulness where she would be enshrined forever in the right, beyond the criticism of ignorant Roumanians; but these moments of longing had come to her when she knew she wasn't going to die. She had never been conscious of any desire for death when it was at all likely. At the birth of her child, for instance, the very idea of her own insecurity had shocked her, and she had neither forgotten nor forgiven those preposterous, precipitate hours.

The night of her attack reminded her of them: something had turned on her and forced her beyond her pace.

Might this happen again? And what steps should she take to prevent it?

She remembered that the doctor had been no use, but her father had.

The instant her eyes met his, this violent force in her had recognised a resistance stronger than her own, and had yielded to it. But she was not going to speak to her father about it.

He might be an asset for the future, and you do not tell assets that they have the power of control.

It would be a great help to have Papa with her, if he could influence her at a moment when she wished to be influenced, but Hermione felt that she must first make sure of her need. Perhaps she would have got better in any case; and she had a wholesome dread of undue personal influence.

Hermione decided to send for Dr. Raymond and ask him how ill she had been.

Hermione did not like Dr. Raymond; she had always been accustomed to make intimate friends with her doctors, and she had spared no pains to create a happy relationship. They admired her first, and they admired her symptoms afterwards. But Dr. Raymond had evaded his opportunities. He was a busy man who did not want hurried intimacies with attractive women patients.

He insisted from the first on only being told Hermione's symptoms, and he insisted upon them merely to assure her that they were not of much importance. He was a young man and he had come straight from a military hospital in France. Still, he was honest.

Hermione always realised the useful qualities of the people she disliked; and she knew that if she asked Dr. Raymond a straight question he would produce a straight answer, and keep both question and answer to himself.

It was difficult to Hermione to listen to what she did not wish to hear, and it very rarely occurred to her to be necessary; but when it did occur to her she had never been known to shirk it.

She waited till she felt she had sufficient physical strength to deal with the occasion successfully, and on the third day after her illness, she told Nurse Davies that she would see Dr. Raymond alone.

Dr. Raymond did not come immediately he was telephoned for, and when he did come he began their conversation by bluntly telling Hermione that she looked a great deal better.

He sat opposite her, waving his hat tiresomely in his hand, as if he wanted to go. Hermione ignored his clumsiness with difficulty.

"I should like you to tell me," she said quietly, "two things—then I need not detain you further. Was I dangerously ill the other night? And in your opinion could I ever become normally well?"

Dr. Raymond stopped swinging his hat and looked at her with sudden attention.

He had often wanted to speak straight to the Princess Girla, but she had never given him the least opportunity. Now that she had given him the

opportunity he felt that it would be brutal to take too great an advantage of it; besides he respected her for her frankness.

Hermione leaned back on her pillow, flushed, and with her grey eyes very wide open and steady. She knew exactly what effect her frankness would have upon Dr. Raymond and she realised that it would be easier to hear an unpalatable truth if it should be presented to her with respect.

"You were very ill indeed the other night," Dr. Raymond said after a short pause, meeting her eyes with equal steadiness. "I think it is possible you might have died, but I think it is more probable that you might have gone out of your mind. You have a very excitable brain, and it was keyed up on one point rather tighter than it could stand."

Hermione nodded.

"I know I am unduly sensitive," she murmured, "something had been said to me which I could not break away from in my mind, although I was conscious of its complete unfairness."

Dr. Raymond's eyes seemed to grow smaller and keener. He no longer desired to spare the Princess anything; it flashed across him that she would always spare herself.

"As to your future condition," he went on, "I must tell you frankly that it depends on you. There are people whose sensitiveness about their own sensations presupposes physical ill health.

"I do not wish to sound impertinent, but ill health when there is no organic cause for it is chiefly egoism.

"It comes from the fact that personal sensation is more interesting than outside facts. We all of us, even the strongest, have physical sensations which, if they interest us too much, become accentuated and may produce disease.

"You have a very powerful will, Princess Girla, and if your mind should become sufficiently interested on any outside line, I see no reason why you should not become normally strong, providing you pay attention to common sense, eat regular and healthy meals, and take enough fresh air and exercise.

"On the other hand, a few more such serious nerve and brain attacks will land you in a permanently bad physical condition out of which it would be practically impossible to break. You are an interesting invalid now, but as your ill health becomes chronic, you will become less and less interesting and more and more of an invalid.

"That is all I can tell you; the choice lies in your own hands."

Hermione's eyes remained steady, although they became a trifle glassy in expression.

"Thank you," she said gently, "and may I ask when you came to this conclusion about my case?"

"I think I thought so, more or less, the first time I saw you," said Dr. Raymond reflectively.

Hermione lowered her eyes. They became fixed upon Dr. Raymond's hat.

"How very curious," she said, "that you did not let me know what you thought on that first occasion. Let me see, I think this must be your twelfth visit?

"It will be perhaps unnecessary for you to call again as I understand that my case is in my own hands—and has always been so."

Dr. Raymond never knew how he got out of the Princess Girla's room. He felt profoundly uncomfortable and he was conscious that he looked a fool.

Hermione said nothing further to him, but she watched him step on his hat, and nearly overturn his chair. He carried away the impression that Hermione thought he had deliberately made a case out of her for money.

Hermione's quiet eyes could say a great deal, and Dr. Raymond forgot that he had told the Princess Girla that she was guilty of egoism in the shock of being considered not only an inefficient, but a dishonest practitioner.

Hermione saw with satisfaction the impression that she had produced. She did not even smile at Dr. Raymond's undignified exit. She was not easily amused, but she enjoyed it. Dr. Raymond had told her what she felt it necessary to know, and she had made him suffer for the inconvenience of truth.

Somebody has always to suffer in the cause of truth, and it is usually the person who attaches the greater importance to it.

# CHAPTER X

If you devote your life to studying the feelings of others you may get a little overtired, and see things out of proportion, but you are not likely to be mistaken in what these feelings are.

During Hermione's convalescence Elise discovered that there was an alteration in her father. Mr. Brett appeared superficially the same, but there was, so Elise fancied, an undercurrent of restlessness in him.

He did not walk any further than usual, and he was always to be found in his accustomed haunts, but behind his quiet eyes and his unperturbed domestic comments there was a strange new grip of attention.

He knew that he was seeing the fuchsia hedges and the bird bath for the last time. He would not often sit under the giant black yew, and watch the retreating harvest fields stretch yellow and pale to the Downs' edge.

He would not often see Elise standing at the top of a flight of steps, balancing a white parasol over her sunny hair.

Mr. Brett did not look at Elise with emotion, he was not an emotional man, but he looked at her with a prolonged attentiveness.

Elise did not ask him any questions, but she became daily more and more conscious that change was in the air.

She came out oftener to look at her father, to share his gentle prowls to the garden's edge, and sit with him in the last patches of the retreating sun.

Summer was drawing slowly to an end at Mambles, the colour of the garden had changed, the delicate, myriad shades of the flowers had singled and massed themselves into the hard and flaunting gold of sunflowers, dull mauves, and stalwart reds and browns. Only a bush of pale blue flax burned on as if it were still June.

The birds were all about the sky, practising unendingly their migratory flights. They broke and clustered and spread open fans above the garden hedges, crying instead of singing their last songs. The garden at Mambles was full of their agitated wings and leave-takings.

John alone noticed no sign of change, except in the weather, and Elise forbore to tell him of her premonitions.

She had discovered that John did not like changes and that it was better to let them happen to him of their own accord than to prepare him for them with a prevision that might look like consent. Elise was no doubt very bad for men because she always altered herself to suit their conveniences. She

never expected attention, and she made John feel that his wishes were a pleasure to her, and his tastes and habits part of the fixed laws of the universe.

Nothing must stand between John and Yorkshire pudding with beef. She felt the same about her father, only with Mr. Brett it was horse-radish sauce.

Elise went to Church regularly with Mr. Brett because he said he had come to the conclusion that religion should be like tobacco, got from an old firm and mild, but she told John quite truthfully that she loved to hear him read free-thinking books out loud on Sunday evenings. When John said that you could not be orthodox and honest simultaneously, Elise saw what he meant; and when Mr. Brett said very few men were honest anyway—even a first-class infidel rubbed all over by the higher criticisms could tell a lie at a pinch—Elise saw an equal significance in her father's opinion.

Nevertheless Elise had a mind of her own, she knew what was going to happen before anybody else did, and she never repeated facts which were inconvenient for other people to know unless it was absolutely necessary that they should know them.

If Elise was more with her father than she had been before Hermione's illness, John made up for it by being oftener with Hermione.

John had been extremely impressed by Hermione's illness. It struck him that nobody else realised how seriously ill she had been.

Elise had been temporarily alarmed, but having seen Hermione very ill before and known her to recover, she seemed to think that the process would reassert itself.

Mr. Brett went still further. He said:

"Why, John, she's *got* to recover—she wants to." It was only John who faithfully believed that Hermione's illness was the stroke of a Higher Power, and watched her convalescence with the painstaking anxiety which such a belief suggested.

Hermione made a steady and courageous recovery, she dismissed Nurse Davies with three new hats and a long list of errands to do for her in town, and then she proceeded to eat normally and assume the habits of other people.

It was not an easy task to undertake for any one who had been a dangerous invalid for five years, but Hermione did not only undertake it, she carried it out with fortitude and common sense.

A fortnight after her illness she came down to a meal and ate it without having ordered it beforehand. The cook was thunderstruck.

Afterwards Hermione went out into the garden. She expected Elise to accompany her, but Elise with her hand in her father's arm wandered off heartlessly in the direction of the village; she did not even say where she was going, and Hermione particularly resented the mysterious disappearances of other people. Elise was absorbed in Mr. Brett. Hermione, watching her with aggrieved eyes, felt that it was time this unreflecting intimacy was destroyed.

"If I let her," she said to herself, "I believe she would put Papa before John and ruin her life's happiness—Elise never had any judgment."

Elise and Mr. Brett had gone to see Bodger. He had been boarded out in the village with a thick chain and a large quantity of dog biscuits, but in the evening he was allowed to go for a walk by himself, and from his lack of appetite when he returned it was supposed he had, with gross lack of patriotism, accounted for many rabbits. On the whole Bodger had a happy life though he missed John.

When they returned, Mr. Brett went into the library and Hermione advanced across the lawn to meet Elise, carrying, with obvious difficulty, an enormous vegetable marrow.

"Dearest Hermione!" cried Elise. "What are you doing that for?"

Hermione laid the marrow reverently upon the grass and, with a lace pocket handkerchief, delicately wiped the dirt off her long, carefully manicured fingers.

"I did it to save you, dear," she said panting. "I did not wish you to be overtired after your walk—perhaps a long one—with Papa."

"Oh, but—" cried Elise aghast, "I never *do* pick marrows—Demster always does!"

"Not, I think," said Hermione gently but implacably, "for the soldiers' hospital. I understand from Demster that the vegetables for the hospital you always pick yourself."

"How *very, very* good of you," said Elise gratefully. "You must sit right down and rest."

Hermione sat down but she had no intention of resting. She took an erect, uncomfortable chair, the only one of the kind in the garden.

"Don't trouble about me, dear," she said meekly. "I do not mind discomfort; but promise me you will not go again into the marrow bed yourself?"

"Oh, why?" asked Elise remorsefully choosing the next most uncomfortable chair she could find, because it looked so awful to lounge in

the face of a full-fledged invalid determined on discomfort.

"There are adders there," said Hermione impressively. "It would not be safe. I have heard that the sting of an adder can easily prove fatal."

"Oh, but Hermione!" cried Elise. "You oughtn't to have gone there yourself. But are you sure there are adders? I thought—"

Hermione interrupted her smilingly.

"Dear," she said, "I don't grudge a personal risk to serve our splendid men. Think what they do for us!"

Elise bit her lips and looked into the laurel bush. John had investigated the marrow bed himself that morning and he had found there were no adders there, but one panic-stricken slow worm, which gave up its taste for marrows from that hour. But Elise was a generous soul. She saw that for dramatic reasons Hermione wanted adders and she forbore to replace them by a slow worm.

"Demster can easily take the marrow down to the hospital to-night," she said gently.

"Forgive me," said Hermione bitterly, "if I have been officious. You sometimes make me feel as if I were a little in the way."

Elise winced as if she had been struck.

"Oh, Hermione!" was all she said.

"Do not be distressed, dear," said Hermione kindly. "Young married people like to feel their new authority, I know; it is a punishment I deserve.

"I stepped out of my path to come here. I must now step back again." Hermione looked at the house and let her eyes wander across the garden to the hills. She would have liked a country house to be larger than Mambles. "It is all too simple and happy and peaceful for me here," she added. "You do not feel so deeply about it I know. Why should you? John is safe—and for you the cataclysm of nations is but a humming in the air. I cannot take it so calmly. I feel as if a knife were pressing against me every hour."

Elise looked conscience-stricken: she could not truthfully say she felt the war every hour. She felt it regularly after breakfast when the newspaper came, and from time to time during the day when there was something she could do about it; but it did not haunt her like the possibility of John's wet feet.

Hermione looked haunted.

She was suffering from severe indigestion caused by carrying a heavy marrow after an ordinary meal.

“I came to you,” Hermione said gravely, “because you called me.”

Elise did not deny this fact, but she wore a guilty air. She had called Hermione, but she remembered that she had felt she ought to.

“I cannot say that I am sorry that I came,” Hermione continued kindly. “I have seen your life for myself. Perhaps I have been able to remove from your path a few of the stumbling blocks of marriage.”

“Oh, yes!” Elise interrupted gratefully. “I never knew there were so many before!”

“But you know now,” said Hermione tenderly. “And I have seen something else besides, something which it is quite natural that in the first flush of your happiness you should have overlooked—Papa’s dire need.”

“His what?” cried Elise aghast.

“His need of me,” Hermione repeated briefly. Her eyes held Elise’s firmly. Elise could not have looked away if she had wanted to. She felt like a bird fascinated by something that is about to strike it.

“Oh,” she faltered, “I thought Papa was happy.”

“My dear!” said Hermione impatiently. “You never thought at all, your mind was—as it is even now—drugged by the miasma of marriage. Papa has been failing steadily. Mambles does not suit him. He needs a dry, bracing place with plenty of life in it. He has been living here alone with his double tragedy and there are five underground rivers in Sussex. I wonder he has not gone mad!”

“Does he—is he—thinking of going away?” asked Elise apprehensively.

“Yes, dear,” said Hermione impressively. “Papa is coming with me to Paris. I shall make his declining years the study of my life.”

Elise said nothing.

It was a hot, still day—not a leaf stirred in the garden, only above it the swallows took their circling, hurrying flights; they swept across the hedges, and through the red creepers that covered their nests beneath the eaves, with a speed which showed nothing but the quick-blown passage of their flight.

Outside in the fields there was an occasional sharp whir and click of a frightened partridge.

“I thought he liked quiet,” Elise murmured after a pause.

“I daresay we shall have a garden in the Champs Elysées,” said Hermione loftily, “that will be quiet enough for him.”

Mr. Brett appeared in the library door. He advanced slowly across the south terrace.

“Are you warm enough out there?” he asked. “It’s what they call the heat of the day over here, isn’t it? I guess I’ll bring a fur rug along.”

“It will be hotter in Paris,” said Hermione incisively.

Mr. Brett drew forward a long, low chair and made himself thoroughly comfortable.

“Why, yes,” he agreed leaning back and half closing his eyes to study the herbaceous borders at his ease. “I guess there’ll be hot moments over there and cold ones too, as far as that goes. Have you been telling Elise our little plans about Paris?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “I have told her, Papa.”

Elise said nothing; her eyes rested intently on her father’s face.

Mr. Brett drew his soft hat further forward over his eyes, and stretched out his legs in front of him.

“Hermione,” he said, “is going to devote herself to my declining years. Say, Hermione, I tell you what it is, I want some of that devotion right now. As you are going into the house, I’d like you to tell my man to bring me out an overcoat.

“Do you remember that hymn, Elise, played to a waltz tune, ‘The roseate hues of early dawn how fast they fade away—’? Well, I guess it’s accurate; anything to do with the sun over here is liable to pretty rapid fading.”

Hermione rose slowly and gracefully. She had not been going into the house. She opened her lips to speak, then she shut them again, and walked leisurely towards the open library door.

“Hermione has made a grand recovery,” said her father appreciatively. “She reminds me of Jonah’s gourd: as far as I remember it came up in the night and was powerful shady on the following day. But in the end it crossed Jonah by wilting when he least expected it. Jonah miscalculated that gourd —but he wasn’t much of a stayer as a lodger anyway.”

“Oh, Daddy!” said Elise. “Are you really going to Paris?”

Mr. Brett met her eyes; for a long time they neither of them spoke. Then Mr. Brett said with a gentleness which his voice never held for any one else.

“I guess you’re going to be all right here Elise—with John.”

# CHAPTER XI

John looked across from the mass of papers on his desk to his father-in-law's impassive face.

He was a young man with a generous share of self-control, but he could not help revealing that he was very much moved.

"You can't really mean, Sir," he said with a momentary trembling of his hand, as he turned over the mass of papers, "that *all* your work is to be left with me. The reconstruction work as well; that I am to have the regulation of all this and take the proceeds? It's a tremendous future—and a tremendous fortune!"

Mr. Brett lit a cigar in a leisurely way and tilted back his chair to his favourite angle.

"Yes," he agreed indifferently, "there's money in it, there's most usually money in what occurs to me, but it ain't anything to make a fuss about. Some people breed money, and some people breed dogs. I guess I'm what you might call a money-fancier. As for those old notes, I took 'em while I was prowling round this garden and the English Government has decided it wants to take them up. I made it my condition that you were to be managing director—that's all there is to it.

"I sha'n't be over here any more. I can't be in two places at once, and I've run that Channel passage during this war as faithfully as if I were a German submarine, and I guess I'm just about as tired of it as German submarines are going to be. I'll get along all right in Paris. Brains don't go bankrupt. What I have left will come in mighty useful in France. France wants new machinery a sight more than you do. She's commercially as flat as a plate, but she can be built up and she's got to be. There'll be plenty on the plate before France is through, and I'd like to be one of the men who put something there. Don't you worry about me."

John drew a deep breath. He could not keep still in his excitement. He walked up and down the long library at Mambles with his visions hot before him.

Mr. Brett looked at him with satisfaction. He liked John, and he liked pleasing him, but he knew that he wasn't going on pleasing him. He waited for his bad moment with the same unshaken placidity with which he waited for his good ones. There was no homely truth of which Mr. Brett was fonder, or more content to practise, than that of taking the rough with the smooth.

"If I come to pieces over it," John demanded, "or if I get cold feet, can I come over and see you? There's such a lot of things to plan and think of—you've given me such powers, and the plans themselves are so big—I almost hesitate to undertake them, and yet I'd rather do it than anything else in the world!"

"You can come over and see me as long as I'm there," said Mr. Brett cautiously. "But you won't need to. You go into your own brain and pick at that. You've got a-plenty.

"I've studied the English mind some, since I've been over here, and I guess I've spotted what's wrong with it. It's as lazy as a dog! You don't use what you've got: maybe you're frightened it would look showy, maybe you're so stuck on behaving the way you weren't made that you're afraid your wits will let you down into behaving the way you were made; but you've got wits.

"Look at your navy! When I read your newspapers I could cry. When I talk to your high-brows I could laugh—and when I hear the muddles your Government is liable to slide into, I wonder any of you are alive. But when I look at your navy I see the whole thing as clear as glass. Are there any folk—even the showiest broker in Wall Street, or the latest quick-thinking Jap—that acts more like a live wire than the lieutenant of one of your destroyers? Are there any men who see cooler and clearer than one of your young admirals? Or I might say, one of your infant middies—for they're all as clear-eyed and hard-headed as professional burglars! No, Sir, you can't find men in any country quicker or more spry than your naval officers. And why is it? I figure it out this way—they got to be. Sea fighting is like operatic singing, you haven't one thing to think of, you have half a dozen—pace, sight, signals, men, guns, the sea. The sea does it. Men need all their sap to face the sea. You can't soss down and get into a habit with it. You can't trust to a prejudice, you got to change your mind and your behaviour as quick as a north-east gale.

"Well, John—if a man *can* do a thing when he's got to—all you have to do is to apply the emergency and take away his props.

"I guess that's all you, or any other Englishman needs. This is a soft country and there are a lot of props in it for the well-to-do, and there ain't many emergencies. So the English have got used to saying, 'That'll do,' and 'Don't bother,' and 'It'll probably come out all right without much trouble.' But the war's taken away some of the props, and it's applied a pretty heavy pressure. So I reckon you *can* do jobs you never thought of now—and

follow trails you never heard of—and I'm banking on you to do it satisfactorily."

"Well, I can't do more than try," said John reflectively.

"Yes you can," said Mr. Brett incisively. "You can succeed. I never had any hankering for an 'also ran'."

John laughed and Mr. Brett gave a reluctant smile. Then he said, "And now, John, there's one more point we've got to go into, and then I think we're wound up. I want your help on a point of domestic policy. Before I leave here I want to be sure of one thing—"

John turned round and faced him attentively.

"Yes, Sir," he said, "is it about Elise?"

"It has to do with Elise," said Mr. Brett slowly. "I want your word, John, never to invite nor to accept the offer of a visit from Hermione. She has given me already her word that she will not suggest it, nor accept any such invitation from you or Elise, but Hermione's words are apt to be fluid. Facts don't worry her, and people who ain't worried by facts come through their promises like damp through an outside wall.

"Before my mind can be perfectly free I must have a solid word from you, John—and then I'll feel all right."

John flushed painfully.

"I really don't know, Sir," he said awkwardly, "that I can agree to give it. Of course I remember that the first part of Hermione's visit was not a success, and it did seem as if Elise was a little overstrained by it. But I am sure now that all those little difficulties were caused by Hermione's very serious ill health. Now that she is so much better, no one could be a more delightful guest."

John paused. Mr. Brett regarded him thoughtfully.

"Have you forgotten the lawn-mower, John?" he asked, with a slight lift of his heavy brows. "Or Bodger? I don't somehow feel as if they were the ordinary symptoms of a disease."

John moved restlessly to the window.

"Hermione is very sensitive," he said, with his back turned. "She felt at a great disadvantage when she first came down. She thought I was prejudiced against her. It is extraordinary how people will misunderstand each other under those circumstances."

"Sure," said Mr. Brett in a low voice. "Folks were made to misunderstand each other—but as far as I know, they weren't made to hit

out at every one who don't take them at their own valuation."

John let this pass. He did not understand what his father-in-law meant, but he knew that he did not wish to understand it. He was thinking of his last talk with Hermione, and their last talk had been an appeal from Hermione, not to his understanding, but to his emotion, and John did not find it easy to resist appeals to his emotion.

"It seems to me you are asking a great deal," he said after a pause, "and more than I ought to promise—at least without her free consent. If Hermione wishes me to promise—I will consent to do it, but I couldn't, as it were, do it behind her back."

"You show remarkably good feeling, John," said Mr. Brett cordially, "and remarkably poor sense. I've often noticed the way those two things hang together. However, you can send for Hermione and ask her in my presence what she does wish. I guess I'd rather see for myself how she tackles the subject. Sometimes it regulates the way a cat jumps if you're watching the cat. If you'll touch the bell we'll ask Humphreys to let the Princess know we'd like to see her here."

John obeyed reluctantly. He felt very up in arms about Hermione: he would stand by her whatever happened, even if it meant the loss of his future, but the worst of it was that it would not mean any such sacrifice and John knew it. Mr. Brett would never recall his generosities. Somehow or other whether John opposed him or not he would see that John didn't lose. It made fighting against Mr. Brett much more difficult when one realised that he attached no penalties to his opponent in the hour of defeat. He was not even put out with John for insisting on the presence of Hermione.

Hermione kept them waiting ten minutes. At the end of that time she sailed into the library as if she were leading a procession. She looked every inch a Princess.

She wore a dress of a soft black material wonderfully lightened by Venetian point lace. Round her neck was a long string of pearls which fell to her waist.

"I think you want me, Papa," she said without reproach, but as if it were strange that she had been sent for, and not sought.

"I can't say that I do," said Mr. Brett. "Accurately speaking John wants you; but I'm an interested party."

Hermione turned her beautiful lifted head towards John. She smiled at him, as it is possible that martyrs, if they had time to think of it, smiled at their rather cowardly fellow Christians who had not joined them at the stake.

John hesitated and stammered. He drew a chair forward for her, and then stood beside her as if he was there to protect and not to challenge her.

"Yes," he confessed, "I do want to ask you something. Your father has suggested that I should give him a promise from Elise and myself—and I am not prepared to do so unless I have your consent. He has asked me not to invite nor to accept a visit from you—I gather for the rest of our lives."

Hermione took it wonderfully. She did not lower her raised chin, or change the benevolent light of her clear grey eyes. She merely looked from one man to the other. John's eyes were fixed anxiously upon her face, but Mr. Brett regarded without concern, but without appreciation, the points of his patent leather slippers. He did not consider that English servants understood patent leather.

"For the rest of our lives?" repeated Hermione. Her voice did not break, but it literally wrung John's heart.

"You quite understand," he urged, "that I have made no such promise; it has only been put to me as a condition of your father's going with you to Paris, and what is more, I will not make it without your agreement."

Hermione rose to her feet, she gave an exquisite gesture of mingled surrender and protection in the direction of her father's unresponsive figure.

"Thank you, John," she said with heroic fortitude, "for having consulted me. I don't think we need go into the painfulness of the question—you will know, without my speaking of it, what it means to me. I must only urge that as far as possible Elise is spared; to put such a decision into her hands would torture her.

"As far as I am concerned the decision is already made. Since Papa makes it the express condition of our being together, I—consent."

She turned and without faltering walked towards the door.

John sprang to open it for her, and as she passed out of it, he took one of her hands in his and kissed it. It seemed to him that he had been present at the sacrifice of Iphigenia.

He was so moved that he could hardly force himself to return to Mr. Brett. When he spoke to his father-in-law all the friendliness and gratitude had gone out of his voice.

"I should like to know, Sir," he asked coldly, "how I am to explain this extraordinary arrangement to my wife?"

Mr. Brett raised his eyes and looked at John.

"Well," he said slowly, "my way would be *not* to explain it. Half the trouble in life comes from explanations. When they're honest they hurt, and

when they're dishonest, and most explanations are dishonest, they're a waste of breath.

"If the question has to come up you can tell Elise that the arrangement is mine, that you only agreed to it at Hermione's wish, and that she only agreed to it in order to succour the declining years of her hard-hearted old parent. That lets you out, that lets Hermione out—I guess that's all that's necessary."

"The fact remains," said John inexorably, "that by your action you deprive Hermione of her sister's companionship."

"Sure, Hermione can't have us both," said Mr. Brett with a sudden chuckle.

"And Elise can't have you both either," said John, ignoring his father-in-law's untimely mirth.

"It's wonderful how you put two and two together, John," said Mr. Brett mildly. "But don't you feel too bad about Elise; you can bring her over to Paris whenever you feel inclined. I don't want to put up any unnecessary barriers, and Hermione and I will always be pleased to see you."

John was silent. He loved his father-in-law, and he wanted him to justify himself. He waited expectantly for what Mr. Brett might have to say. But Mr. Brett made no attempt at self-justification. He too paused a little, but without expectation, and then he recalled John's attention to the question of the new chrysanthemums.

Two days were given over to packing and farewells, then the electric brougham once more drew up at the door, followed by a luggage cart for the Princess's ten boxes, the French maid and Bichette. Bichette's increasing clamour almost outbarked the ghost of Bichon, if indeed she was not privately reinforced by his spiritual tongue.

John and Elise stood at the gate and waved their handkerchiefs until the electric brougham glided in ease and security out of sight. Mr. Brett did not wave: he contented himself with a long grave look at Mambles as if he were running over in his mind some secret inventory. The Princess and the French maid bowed farewell and all the servants, handsomely tipped and generously inclined, stood at the windows appreciatively watching their departure.

"It's just too wonderful," said Elise, turning to her husband with sparkling eyes. "I can hardly believe it—and it's all due to you! You've brought them together just as I always hoped and prayed you would, and oh! John, isn't it too perfectly lovely to think that dear Papa has *got* Hermione?"

# THE WORM

## CHAPTER I

Miss Onoria Strickland lived in a semi-detached villa, and had no nonsense about her. Many women repose through life upon lesser attributes, they may have a handsome profile, a gift for putting on their clothes, a skilful tongue, or a kind heart. But Miss Strickland found rest in none of these minor alleviations of the spirit; she took her stand triumphantly upon her direct common sense.

No one could beat her there. “What,” she would ask herself as she came to any crisis in her life or in the lives of her neighbours, “is the most sensible thing to do?” And when she had answered this question, she did it; or in cases where an action of her own was not indicated, she ordered it to be done by others.

She had lived at Little Ticklington for forty-five years, and all this time she had had her eyes open and said whatever came into her head, under the impression that she was expressing a peculiarly pure form of truth.

Her friends depended upon her and feared her. When they didn’t want to depend upon her they got out of her way.

Miss Strickland was continually discovering the deceitfulness of human nature but she never laid her finger upon its cause.

She did not realise that the only way to keep on good terms with an aggressive personality is by the constant practice of evasion.

Miss Onoria Strickland was an exemplary citizen. She had earned her own living with talent and success from the age of twenty-one, and she had been a masterful but helpful daughter to her aged parents. They aged a little prematurely under this assistance, and died within a year of each other.

Opinion in Little Ticklington agreed that neither could support the full weight of Onoria’s attentions without the other.

She nursed them to the last with a rigid application of common sense, which took the wind out of the local doctor’s sails. There was nothing left for him to suggest but medicines, and these were ineffectual.

Onoria had never felt lonely during the lifetime of her parents.

She left home at nine o'clock every morning and returned at five o'clock in the afternoon, except on Saturday, when she came back to lunch.

No one could have had a fuller life; she managed her parents, did the household accounts, worked in the garden, or took Prendergast for a walk. Prendergast was a pug dog of a self-centred and exacting nature. He had been given to Mr. and Mrs. Strickland by an old friend of that name, and though Onoria had protested against the use of a surname for a pet dog, as unsuitable and even ridiculous, her father and mother had insisted querulously and unitedly that they wanted to call the pug "Prendergast" as a last tribute to their deceased friend; and as they were at this time feeble, and it was bad for them to insist, Onoria had wisely let her protest drop.

After her parents' death, Prendergast became the pivot upon which the household turned. Onoria was not sensible about Prendergast: she adored him. He was the one licensed folly of her ordered life.

It must not be supposed that Romance had passed Onoria by.

It had fallen at her feet early in life, and when she discovered how much nonsense it had about it, she had kicked it ruthlessly away.

No one will ever know why Peter Gubbins worshipped Miss Strickland. He was a gentle, inoffensive youth, with a weak chin and bottle-neck shoulders; his strongest tastes were for magazines and barley sugar, and though he was easily convinced that he was unsuitable, he continued to worship Onoria in a melancholy but resigned manner for twenty years.

Peter Gubbins was her next-door neighbour, and as the years went on a certain element of relief mingled with his melancholy.

Miss Strickland had a piercing voice which swept across the garden, over the wall which divided their retreats; but there was a wall.

Mr. Gubbins, who was extremely fond of poetry, often thought of those lines in "Maud" which assure her that if she were to pass near the final resting place of her lover: his "heart would hear her and beat," had he "lain for a century dead." Mr. Gubbins was under the impression that his own heart would act in a precisely similar manner should Onoria visit his grave. Mr. Gubbins had a large Tabby cat called Samson, of which he was inordinately proud.

Samson did not so much return, as passively accept, his master's nervous devotion.

He was inconsiderate about sleeping in a basket. Inflexible arrangements, when they were not his own, galled him; and though he knew

his name perfectly, he had never been known to answer to it, unless he had reason to believe that fish was at the other end.

Peter Gubbins was very fond of all small and reasonably gentle animals, and often took Prendergast for a walk if Miss Strickland hadn't time.

Prendergast accompanied Mr. Gubbins for the sake of the walk, but he made it perfectly plain from the first (just as Miss Strickland herself had done) that he thought nothing of Peter Gubbins as a companion.

Mr. Gubbins made himself useful in other ways. He really knew a great deal more about gardens than Onoria did, and he loved them—under his breath as it were—because Onoria was always pointing out to him how much rubbish was talked and written upon the subject of gardens. The Garden of Eden had started the topic, and no one had been able to let it alone since.

Peter Gubbins had a private income and wrote occasional articles and poems for magazines. The articles dealt with sweet peas, on which he was an expert, and Roman Catholicism, on which he was not, but by dint of studying the works of ex-nuns and monks, he had arrived at some very startling theories upon the Roman Catholic religion suitable for very low church magazines. The poems were on certain aspects of nature which have unfortunately occurred to other persons in search of poetic subjects; still they were occasionally published and Mr. Gubbins signed them "Sirius." (As he often wrote about stars, and always referred to them as "bright," his signature could not have been more appropriate.) Obviously "Peter Gubbins" applauding the universe would not do.

He never showed the poems to Onoria, but they shared the articles on Rome, and sometimes Onoria liked them, though she felt them to be too milk and watery to do real justice to the subject. It was inconsistent of Onoria to have such a decided bias against Rome, for she was very fond of law and order, and considered authority final. She said "This settles it" about a dozen times a day, and no Pope has ever made more ex-cathedra proclamations in the twenty-four hours.

Mr. Gubbins was by no means Onoria's greatest man friend; she merely saw him the most.

Men liked Onoria, and Onoria liked men.

Whether she had a secret passion for any of the more virile types of Little Ticklington will never be known.

Onoria did not shriek her emotional history upon house-tops, and as far as the relations of the sexes were concerned, she was not modern—that is to

say she thought there should be no relation except marriage; and even that should be concealed as far as possible.

Women she despised.

Men sought Onoria to tell her what they felt for other women, they talked politics with her, and they took a monstrous and secret pleasure in hearing her abuse her own sex; but with the exception of Mr. Gubbins they did not propose to share their lives with Onoria; they preferred the weaker sisters whom Onoria had relentlessly dissected for their special delectation.

They enjoyed watching this merciless analysis of a suspected sex, but in spite of their suspicions they married the subjects of the analysis.

Onoria hated women. It may have been because she had been an only girl in a family of five, and that certain limitations and inhibitions brought home to her early in life the disabilities of her sex without the compensating spiritual advantages which occur later; or it may have been that something in herself warned her that her most marked qualities were not those that succeed in attracting, where qualities less marked and perhaps less worthy of attention prevail. Each of her brothers in turn gave themselves over without reprieve to an incarnate devil.

This is not their own account of the transaction; they were under the impression that they had married singularly delightful types of womanhood, but Onoria found these women out, tried them in the furnace of her fraternal love and told them roundly what she thought of them.

The result of freedom of speech is often the separation of families. Onoria quarrelled bitterly and irretrievably with each of her sisters-in-law in turn, and never went near any of them again.

She referred to her brothers as “poor dear So-and-So”—in the manner of the pious whose dead are in the hands of the Lord. She sometimes saw them in neutral places, and she sent her nephews and nieces handsome presents at Christmas, especially her nephews.

When Onoria asserted that her family had been ruined by women, she firmly believed this to be the fact. People who invariably speak the truth are sometimes misled as to the nature of fact; it is so difficult for truthful natures to realise that they are not in possession of the whole of that evasive quality.

At the High School Onoria taught nothing but girls. She taught them music and singing with bitterness and with boredom for over twenty years, and she taught them exceedingly well.

There is an excellent poem which asserts that “He who only rules by terror does a grievous wrong,” and there is no doubt a good deal to be said

for this theory.

All Onoria's pupils would have agreed to it with rapture; still you do not go down the path of least resistance often if you find lions in the way.

Even girls have the sense to make unusual efforts to avoid unusual inconveniences, and Miss Strickland's temper when roused was an unusual inconvenience. She said everything that came into her head against the girl who had failed her, and then, with the sting of a life-long prejudice behind her, everything against the sex which had evolved her.

Onoria firmly believed that all girls were deceitful, lazy and vain, and that the only way to deal with them was by repeated castigations of the spirit.

Some of her pupils would have done better without these reprisals; most people are supposed to work best under appreciation and do not begin to find themselves until they have the confidence and sympathy of their teachers. Such girls did not do their best work for Onoria; but they worked. All of them worked, feverishly or steadily, to avoid the deluge of her merciless tongue.

The level of Onoria's pupils was high, and as she did not believe in hidden depths, she never had to regret that she had failed to plumb them.

"I know exactly what each of my girls can do," she was fond of saying. What she did not know was what the girls could have done if they hadn't been hers.

"I have never made a friend out of a pupil yet, thank the Lord," she would end up by saying to her men friends, who spent Sunday afternoons in hearing Onoria undermine the position of women, "and what is more I never will!" The men shook their heads in delighted admiration; they knew they could not say as much for themselves; but they admired Onoria for her security.

# CHAPTER II

Elsie Andrews was exactly the kind of girl Miss Strickland disliked most. Nobody really liked Elsie very much because it is difficult to like a child who constantly squirms. She went, at school, by the name of "The Worm." The young have an unconscious preference for success or the materials of success, and no one could have imagined a success being made of Elsie.

She had long, greasy, dark hair which fell perfectly straight down her back, and was the colour of a wet haystack. Her eyes were small and rather weak, her chin receded, and her complexion was a pale fawn colour.

She came into a room as if she were holding herself together with difficulty, and was unpleasantly conscious of having broken the Ten Commandments. If she had really broken them there would have been some sense in it; but she never broke anything except the points of her pencils.

Miss Strickland did not notice her, except to tell her to sit up, or to get out of the way.

It came as a shock to the whole school when it learned that Elsie had petitioned to be allowed to take music lessons from Miss Strickland, instead of from the less accomplished but much milder teacher provided for the younger girls.

It was like asking to be led into a lion's den without having evinced the slightest aptitude for being a Daniel.

It was supposed that Miss Strickland would make short work of her, and that after the first or second music lesson Elsie's whitened bones would be left outside the music room door.

Miss Strickland herself, staring at the small bowed figure on the music stool, felt as a rose fancier might feel if asked to entertain the most noxious of the caterpillars.

Here was a true type of feminine nature—a prevaricating, vacillating, cowardly little girl; and Elsie was vain too, or how would she have dared to claim the best teacher in the school for presumably the worst pupil?

She so exemplified everything that Miss Strickland felt women in general were, without any of the attractions which, in the eyes of the undiscriminating, outweigh these disadvantages, that Miss Strickland felt a certain kindliness rise in her—the kindliness of a prophet who sees his worst prognostications blossom into disastrous facts.

“May I ask what you think you know about music?” she shot out at the child with a twist of her determined chin.

This was Miss Strickland’s usual preliminary to a campaign of slaughter, and all new pupils, even if she had a kindly feeling towards them, had to be slaughtered first.

Elsie choked, looked helplessly at her limp little fingers, and stammered, “Nothing, please!”

Miss Strickland did not appear in the least mollified by this collapse of confidence.

“Under the circumstances,” she replied with the easy smartness of a licensed bully, “can you tell me why the teacher for the younger girls was not considered sufficiently good for you?”

There was a breathless silence before Elsie, with an astonishing spasm of courage, answered,

“I shouldn’t have learned anything from her, please.”

“ ‘Couldn’t’ is no doubt what you mean,” said Miss Strickland with genial irony. “And ‘couldn’t’ will be no doubt the result of trying to learn from me. Not even the cleverest teacher can mate a good job with a bad tool. You are a very inefficient little girl. You don’t know how to sit on a music stool, or how to hold your hands. Your back is a disgrace, and your fingers are all thumbs. Let’s hear you play something. What have you got here—rubbish? Oh, I see—worse than rubbish—the usual Sonata by that poor Mozart—mercifully he is dead!

“Play it, and as I am not dead, pray do not make it any louder than is strictly necessary. Keep your feet off the pedals. Pupils who don’t know how to play their notes have an idea that they can fall back on the loud pedal to drown their incompetence. That is not the proper use of pedals. They were never put into a piano to reinforce blunders.”

Elsie dropped the Sonata on the floor, and in picking it up overturned the music stool.

Miss Strickland longed to slap her. Like all highly strung musical organisations, she loathed a sudden noise.

“Clumsy little animal!” she said under her breath.

Elsie heard her and turned a dull crimson. She arranged the Sonata with trembling fingers and started off solemnly upon its well-known track.

Every note she played was a mistake. She altered pace, she ignored rhythm. She tried for expression when the notes escaped her. She wallowed

desperately on through the thickening disapproval of Miss Strickland's portentous silence.

Miss Strickland considered that she was giving Elsie a chance.

Elsie knew exactly what the Sonata sounded like to Miss Strickland—she had the vision of the disciple into the mind of the master.

She knew she was inflicting torture upon her ideal human being—but still she inflicted it, having grasped that obedience is better than sacrifice, even the sacrifice of the feelings of the one you are bound to obey.

Blandina before the maddened cow in the Coliseum could not have shown a more desperate courage.

At the end Miss Strickland said with deceptive calm, "You cannot like music, it is impossible! What on earth persuaded you to suggest that I should teach you?"

For a long while Elsie said nothing; she seemed engrossed in folding up the Sonata. Then she lifted her rather weak eyes to Miss Strickland's face; she had no colour at all, her very lips were white—"Because I liked you—" she stammered. "I wanted you to speak to me—even if you were angry ——"

Miss Strickland was not an expert in Biblical language—but there was a quotation which attacked her mind at that moment, and which stuck in her memory for years afterwards: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

She was the first to look away.

If there was one thing Miss Strickland had always set her face against, it was school-girl devotions. If she had any reason for supposing that any particular girl was guilty of such a sentiment towards herself, she crushed it ruthlessly within the hour of its conception.

But there was something in Elsie's eyes which was different from anything she had seen in the eyes of other girls.

It would not be an easy act for a strong swimmer to deprive a drowning man of his straw. As far as life was concerned Miss Strickland was a strong swimmer, and Elsie was a drowning man, her hopeless, helpless eyes said it.

She had this one desire, this one strange, pitiful claim upon the Universe, and having made it, she was prepared to drown. She said no more.

She did not cry, she sat and trembled on her music stool, looking dumbly at Miss Strickland's face.

Miss Strickland hesitated. She had always worked on principle before—girls below a certain standard were Miss Saunders' pupils, girls above it

were hers. It is not easy to break a principle at one's own expense.

Then she said with conscious dryness, "Well—we must see what we can do with you." She had not taken away the straw. The small figure beside her gave a long sigh of relief.

"You quite understand," continued Miss Strickland with her usual firmness, "that I make no promises. If you work very hard and improve, I will try to keep you, but it will require all the work you have in you. Now I am going to tell you, not *all* the things that were wrong in your playing—that would be impossible in the short time that is left to us—but I shall point out a few of them which I shall expect you to overcome before the next lesson.

"As you play the Sonata all wrong, I should suggest your never touching it again and starting to learn properly something you have never seen before. Are you listening to me attentively?"

Elsie nodded, she tried to listen attentively, but she was hearing instead of Miss Strickland's words the music of the spheres. The sons of God were shouting together in a newly created world.

Her heart's desire had been granted to Elsie. She was not going to be abandoned by the one being on earth whom she truly loved.

It is unfortunate to have to confess at this point that both Elsie's parents were living.

Her father was a genial tradesman of the higher class of tradesmen; he did not serve in his own shop, and liked to romp with his children when he came home from business.

Mrs. Andrews was a flighty, pretentious little woman, who had overlaid the maternal instinct by a desire to get on in the world. She would have liked a pretty little girl to show off to her neighbours, but she preferred boys.

She had two of them, and she had brought them up to tease and tyrannise over their small sister. They did this without imagination or cruelty of intention, until they were old enough for school, when they ignored her.

There were little things she could do for them in the holidays, and if she did them all right she could live in peace.

It was a great relief to Elsie Andrews when nobody at home paid any attention to her, but it could not quite fill the whole horizon of youth. Miss Strickland filled the rest of it. Elsie believed in her as the wisest, most beautiful, and grandest of earthly beings. She sometimes wondered if Queen Victoria had ever been like her. Not in some ways; for Elsie hugged it to her heart as a golden but guilty secret that her goddess was "advanced." Elsie

would not have revealed it under torture, but she had seen Miss Strickland smoke a cigarette behind the shrubbery in the school garden. Probably Queen Victoria had never done this; she had lacked that final Napoleonic touch of audacity.

Miss Strickland's cigarette was the nearest thing to an adventure that Elsie had ever known.

It took the place in her imagination of "perilous seas in faery lands forlorn." She never passed a tobacco shop without a thrill of memory, and she saw, far down the vista of the years, a kindred moment for herself. It was with the aspect of Miss Strickland's light blue eyes and trim, erect figure (the rest of her appearance was not very impressive) that Elsie supposed Venus had arisen from the sea. (The blue serge coat and skirt which invariably accompanied Miss Strickland, no doubt adhered to her later.)

Miss Strickland was as beautiful as Venus, as grand as Queen Victoria, as wise as Minerva. As far as Elsie was concerned, wisdom would die with Miss Strickland. When Onoria said "That's settled," Elsie would rather have disputed the last trump.

It had taken two years of dumb and invisible worship before Elsie had dared to make this final bid for the notice of her goddess.

She knew it was final: if Miss Strickland had turned her away, she would have sunk like a stone to the bottom of her despair. She would never have attempted to move again. Life would have gone on all round her, but she would not have lived. She was living now; every breathless moment of her terrible lesson she had lived—ardour and agony combined in her. She felt that she was moving as swiftly as the Scotch express—sparks were flying out from the tension of her silence.

"Well," said Miss Strickland, "you've had over your hour—and I think I've told you enough to go on with. You haven't talent, but don't let that discourage you, I never believe in little girls with talent; work produces ability up to a certain point. There is no such thing as a woman genius and never will be."

Elsie looked at her in surprise.

"But you—" she murmured. "Surely you are a genius?"

"Nonsense," said Miss Strickland, flushing half with annoyance and half with a feeling that was not annoyance.

"I am nothing of the kind. I am merely a very hard-working person with the natural advantages of a good ear and light fingers."

Elsie could not believe this and she looked as if she could not believe it; but she said nothing.

"Now run along," said Miss Strickland briskly but not unkindly. You cannot be unkind to a person who will not believe that you are not a genius.

Elsie went out of the music room with her head held up and her eyes sparkling.

Miss Strickland did not immediately ring the bell to summon her next pupil. She felt unaccountably stirred.

"A very ordinary little girl," she said to herself reassuringly. "A *most* ordinary little girl. Still I will see if something can't be done with her. The poor child has been shamefully neglected by some woman no doubt. Women are the most destructive force in existence, or I should rather say weakness. Force is creative and appertains to man. Women are destructive because they have no force; they destroy by the conscious exercise of their weakness."

Then Miss Strickland rang the bell. She felt more natural after this little fling at her old enemy, and she had succeeded in hiding from herself why she had given way to Elsie, who should most certainly have been returned to Miss Saunders.

# CHAPTER III

Even a very dull person may achieve his aim if he has only one aim, and devotes his entire attention to it.

Elsie's aim in life was to please Miss Strickland. She thought of nothing else by day, and she dreamed of nothing else by night.

All the other teachers, and the objects of their efforts, slipped past her. She saw them vaguely as trees walking, and bumped into them from time to time with some severity. She was considered the dunce of the school.

The cream of her concentration was her work for the piano. She practised as the devotee prays. She did not think any more of the actual process than the devotee thinks of his prayers. It is the Deity which is the object of the devotee, and it was Miss Strickland who stood for Elsie beyond the five-finger exercises and chromatic scales; even as the vision of Beatrice leaned towards Dante out of Paradise.

Miss Strickland was amazed at the child's progress; she was the more amazed because she had seen from the first with an instinct practically unerring, that she was not dealing with talent. She still believed that it was not talent. It was something that baffled Miss Strickland—an ardour of obedience, a stake-like adherence to her least words, which produced odd blunders, and sudden advances, and finally a higher level of achievement than that of any pupil in the school.

For two years the intercourse between Miss Strickland and Elsie was limited to forty minutes a week in the music room.

Elsie accepted Miss Strickland's temper as the earth accepts the ministrations of climate. Sun and shower, heat and cold were part, no doubt, of a divine plan, and so were the sharpness and the comparative mildness of Miss Strickland's nerves.

Of course Elsie liked them to be mild, but when they were sharp they seemed to her like the magnetic lightnings of the Universe.

Miss Strickland had never had a pupil whom she could hurt more. She was often unscrupulous in the use of her power, but the absoluteness of it in Elsie's case stayed her hand.

Elsie had no defence against her, and she would have used none if she had had it.

One day Miss Strickland announced,

“There is to be a concert at the end of the term, Elsie. You have improved so much lately that I have told Miss Bretherton that you will play at it.”

Elsie squirmed. “Oh, if you please, Miss Strickland, I can’t!” she stammered. “I couldn’t—not before people—I’m too—I’m too afraid!”

“Nonsense,” said Miss Strickland firmly. “I am the best judge of whether you can play or not, and I have decided that you can. It is absurd to be afraid of people who know very little about music and have come prepared to be easily pleased. You are not afraid to play before me, and I don’t come prepared to be pleased, and do know a good deal about music.”

Elsie, if she could have explained, would have said, “That’s what I’m afraid of—not pleasing you. It’s you that will care about the people.”

But it was out of the question to make a statement of this kind to Miss Strickland, even if it had occurred to Elsie that it was the truth, and things seldom occurred to Elsie as the truth until after what she had been afraid of had happened.

She merely repeated in an agony, “Oh, please don’t make me play! I shall break down! I know I shall break down! It would terrify me to disappoint you!”

To which Miss Strickland replied, “Don’t be idiotic. I have decided upon Mendelssohn.”

The school at Little Ticklington gave particularly good concerts.

Besides the parents, the Mayor sometimes appeared with several Town Councillors, the Vicar, who was an Archdeacon, and various people in the neighbourhood who thought Education ought to be encouraged and that their presence at School Concerts encouraged it.

Miss Strickland sat at the back of the hall, so that she could hear if the songs carried.

She had prepared all the girls carefully, and Miss Saunders, who lived in the School, would supervise them on the platform.

Miss Strickland had not seen Elsie for three days. At her last lesson she had played the Mendelssohn uncommonly well, but she had annoyed Miss Strickland by opening and shutting her mouth like a fish. Miss Strickland had told her so, and Elsie had then shut her mouth and kept it shut, but Miss Strickland had still been annoyed. She was conscious of something in the child that was not consenting to her will, and this was very unusual.

Children must play at Concerts. Elsie was now fourteen, she was a great big girl, and the Mendelssohn was very easy.

Miss Strickland told herself these reassuring facts several times before the curtain swung vacillatingly back for the first girl to perform. “Besides,” Miss Strickland hastily informed herself, “I take no special interest in Elsie.”

The first girl performed as first girls generally do. She was chosen for her hardihood and she had a little over-estimated it. Still she banged pleasantly away, and while she was too nervous to remember any of the finer shades of Miss Strickland’s careful teaching, she played no wrong notes, and covered up the weakness of her execution with that merciful solvent of pianoforte puzzles, the loud pedal.

Miss Strickland mentally provided for this young criminal a castigation of the direst kind, short of direct profanity. Only men (who deserve it) may have the relief of an entire language to devote to wrath. Miss Strickland had to rely upon the fervency of her emotion. Then she listened, with the grim patience of a teacher who is not involved in the subject, to a bad recitation.

After this there were several excellent and charming songs with choruses. Miss Strickland had taught them to the school, and in one case written the song herself.

They went with a vim, and gave her a certain amount of very slight pleasure. And then Elsie appeared.

She was dressed in a heavy white muslin dress which revealed her thick ankles and pitilessly broad-toed shoes.

It was the wrong kind of muslin, trimmed with tawdry embroidery and girt about the untamed breadth of her waist by a harsh blue sash. Her hair lay lankly down her back, evading where it could the ministrations of a similarly harsh blue ribbon.

Elsie moved heavily and stared at the audience with the eyes of a sleep walker.

Miss Strickland had particularly told Elsie to keep her mouth shut, her head up and her chin in. The results of these attempts upon the figure are usually beneficial to young performers, but nothing could do much for Elsie’s figure; it remained thick and uncertain, with a tendency to bulge in the wrong places.

Miss Strickland felt an unusual pang of depression when she saw Elsie, followed by a much more usual one of rage.

Why had not Elsie’s mother chosen more suitable clothes for her? “Women again! They only think of clothes, and they show the value of their thought by a stupid result like this!” thought Miss Strickland sternly.

Elsie sat down clumsily on the music stool. It was lower than she had expected it to be. Miss Saunders, the young music teacher, adjusted the Mendelssohn.

It was "The Venetian Boat Song," the easiest and lightest of concert pieces.

Elsie played the first two bars quite faultlessly. Miss Strickland was about to breathe a sigh of relief, when, to her horror, the girl stopped abruptly and took her hands off the piano. Then she played the first two bars over again, and stopped once more.

There was a long silence in the hall, a breathless, inconvenient silence, and then Elsie turned slowly on her music stool away from the piano and faced the audience. She looked like some one delivering themselves into the hands of Red Indians for torture. She faced them with her hands in her lap and her eyes fixed, not so much appealingly as hopelessly, upon the audience.

She did not cry; it was the expression of an immovable despair. She neither stirred nor spoke, she only looked straight in front of her as if she saw the end of Hope.

Miss Strickland felt as if the child's gaze fixed itself upon her heart. Before she had time to move, Miss Saunders had stepped forward at a sign from Miss Bretherton, and led Elsie away.

It was obviously impossible for any one who looked like that to play "The Venetian Boat Song."

Miss Saunders (who wanted Elsie to enjoy the tea afterwards) led her to the back row of little girls.

Elsie went with her passively and sank into her seat like a thing frozen.

Miss Strickland had once watched a baby rabbit holding itself together to look like a leaf—its fear had fixed it into the landscape.

Elsie looked like that. She did not move for half an hour; she was as anxious as the baby rabbit to escape all observation.

A group of charmingly dressed girls came on to the stage and danced. There were no more hitches. Everything else was beautifully done; and when it was over Elsie asked if she might go and rest. She said she had a headache.

Miss Saunders, who was sympathetic and didn't know what else to say —agreed readily. The other girls stared at Elsie, but no one was cruel enough, or kind enough, to say anything to her. They all felt that she was

interesting to talk about, but uncomfortable to talk to, and they left her alone.

Miss Strickland decided to do the same. She took her tea on the lawn and ate some particularly good strawberries without enjoying them.

Then she went to look for Elsie. There were very few places where Elsie had any right to be. She wasn't in the empty school room, or in the small ante-room used by the teachers before they went into their classes. She was in the dressing room behind a curtain, lying on the boots and shoes.

It was only by the faintest of creaks that her presence was disclosed to Miss Strickland. She lay there in a crumpled heap of muslin and anguish, sobbing as if her heart would break.

It was very pitiful to see her. Miss Strickland knelt down by Elsie's side and tried to speak, but to her surprise she found it difficult. She said "My dear child," twice over, the first time her voice actually shook. Then she recovered herself.

"Stop grovelling among those boots!" she exclaimed sharply. This was better. Elsie sat up, and made an enormous effort to control herself, but the sobs had got possession of her: they shook her down among the boots again.

Miss Strickland frowned. "It's all my fault," she found herself saying. "I ought not to have made you play, and you really mustn't be so distressed about it. People often make mistakes. One can retrieve them. I daresay," said Miss Strickland mercifully, but without accuracy, "I daresay I've broken down myself before now, but I shouldn't give way about it. I know that it was not carelessness on your part. On the contrary, you were trying too hard!"

"Oh!" gasped Elsie, "don't you hate me? You must—I know you must! You see I can't—I'm no good. I never was any good! And I never will be! I'm like that!"

Miss Strickland was shocked. She disliked over-confidence (over-confident people always do) but this child's formidable hopelessness was worse than any over-confidence. She was behaving as if there were a flaw in the Universe; and in Miss Strickland's Universe there had never been a flaw. She had disliked many occurrences but she had felt equal to them, whether she disliked them or not. She did not feel equal to what was happening now. She said, "My dear, you mustn't be silly. If you weren't some good you wouldn't be here!"

Elsie replied, "But I know I'm not, and I don't want to be here, I'd rather be dead."

“That’s sillier still,” Miss Strickland answered doubtfully, “and it’s also very wrong.”

“What does it matter if it’s wrong or not—if you hate me—” sobbed Elsie. “Nothing matters to me except that!”

Miss Strickland stared at her uncomfortably. She still did not know what action was the most sensible to take.

An instinct told her what to do, but she was not used to instincts, and felt flurried by having one. Her instinct told her to take the child in her arms.

She compromised with it, and kissed Elsie, a little reluctantly, on the cheek.

“I don’t hate you at all, child,” she said kindly. “You’re a very good, painstaking little girl, and I am very fond of you.”

Then Miss Strickland arrived at the nearest she was ever likely to get to a miracle.

She saw a plain little girl, made plainer by a convulsive fit of crying, turn perfectly beautiful. It was like watching a black and windswept country yielding to the sun. Across Elsie’s face light spread: the light of an infinite gratitude, a preposterous faith, an overwhelming love.

Her eyes met Miss Strickland’s and held hers almost against her will.

“Then,” the child said slowly, “I’m glad I broke down.”

It was the truth, and Miss Strickland with her love of truth should have recognised it; but she had already recognised a great deal more than it was at all comfortable to recognise. She really couldn’t go on recognising things which were so far from sensible, whether they were true or not.

“Well, don’t let us have any more nonsense,” she said briskly. “Wipe your eyes, and brush, as far as you can, the dust off your frock. You really should not have lain down on boots and shoes, it was most unsuitable. You’d better come and see Miss Bretherton; she has been asking about you on the lawn, and she’s no more angry with you than I am.”

“Please may I go home?” Elsie pleaded. “I’m quite happy now, only I don’t want to see any one else. You see nobody else matters.”

Miss Strickland hesitated. Head mistresses always matter. Still she had pressed the point about Elsie’s playing and it had proved a mistake. Onoria made a point of learning from her mistakes, when she saw them. Perhaps it was better to waive the point. The child looked dreadful, she could make excuses for her to Miss Bretherton, and excuses are tidier and more malleable than tear-stained little girls.

“Very well,” Miss Strickland said at last, “you may go home if you want to—” But there was something in Elsie’s eyes which still held hers.

“If I might,” whispered Elsie bravely, “play you ‘The Venetian Boat Song’—before I go?”

Miss Strickland nodded. She led the way into a small practice room, out of reach of the festivities on the lawn. Then she sat down on a hard cane chair and listened to “The Venetian Boat Song” for perhaps the 500th time.

It did not sound at all familiar to her.

Elsie played it as Miss Strickland had never heard it played before. For the only time in her life music was captured by Elsie’s faithful, clumsy, little fingers. She played it dreamily, tenderly, with ardour and with grace, as Mendelssohn himself might have played it—who had the heart of a child.

There was a little silence after the last notes sounded.

“That,” Elsie explained as she turned round slowly on her music stool, “was the way I had meant to play it.”

# CHAPTER IV

Onoria Strickland had an imagination that centralised its own experiences.

She believed that for pure drama Little Ticklington outshone Paris. Its crimes were more lurid, its adventures more romantic, its types of character more truly representative of human nature. Her own career often seemed to Onoria Napoleonic, and her friends and her enemies were always larger than life.

At first she undertook Elsie Andrews as a conscientious educator undertakes bad material, but as the years passed and Elsie's affection stood solidly across Onoria's pathway as immovable as granite, she began to find in Elsie strange and exotic virtues.

"That girl," she would announce, "has the mind of the Fourteenth Century—mature and adventurous!

"She will do something one day. She is not like modern girls; she has character. Not that silly thing they call temperament, thank goodness!—temperament wobbles and stings like a jellyfish, and arrives nowhere—but good solid English character! Elsie won't set the Thames on fire perhaps, but she hasn't set out with any such theory. Mercifully she knows her limitations as a woman. What she has set out to do she will accomplish in spite of all obstacles—I call that dignified."

Elsie knew just what Onoria thought of her, because Onoria always told her friends exactly what she thought of them, even when it was nice.

(After her twenty-first birthday Miss Strickland became "Onoria" to Elsie.)

It was difficult for Elsie to believe that she was dignified, but she knew that she had a kind of strength.

She found in herself a fund of resistance enabling her to guard her friendship with Onoria. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Andrews liked it; Mrs. Andrews because, like many mothers, it seemed to her unnecessary that her children should form any ties outside their home; Mr. Andrews because he foresaw that this concentration of his daughter's heart might damage her future prospects.

"If she gets into tagging round for ever after an old maid," he explained to his wife, "she won't marry. Why don't you smarten her up a bit and take her out with you?"

But Elsie wouldn't be smartened up. She did not refuse new clothes, but she did not respond to them; and you cannot make a dead weight look chic. Mrs. Andrews tried. She would have liked a daughter she could take with her to tea parties, not one who practised Beethoven and read Shakespeare.

Elsie loathed tea parties. She followed her mother on those rare occasions when she had failed to elude her as one who follows a corpse to the grave. People soon stopped asking Mrs. Andrews to bring her daughter.

Then Mr. Andrews bought Elsie a tennis racket to play with the young people.

She went out after the house was locked up at night and broke it against an oak tree in the garden. It was this act that convinced Onoria that Elsie had in her the spirit of the Fourteenth Century.

If there was one thing Elsie disliked more than tea parties with her mother's friends, it was tennis with young people.

She could not play tennis and she disliked young people. They believed all the things Onoria said were not so—and they carried on conversations that were not solely for the sake of conversation. They seemed to wish to attract each other.

Elsie knew that the fault lay in the women and she would have talked to the young men if they had looked at her, but they did not seem to see that she was there; and you cannot carry on a conversation with young men who do not look at you—however great your respect may be for the masculine sex.

Onoria explained Elsie's position to her kindly but firmly.

"You are not a man's woman," she said to her, "and you had better make up your mind to it once and for all. I know men. They are hoodwinked and misled by appearances, owing no doubt to the false upbringing they receive from their mothers, but there it is—they rarely understand true merit until they have provided themselves with the contrary. You are not a marrying woman. Realise this and don't hanker. There are many other things in life."

Elsie sighed and said she supposed there were. She did not sigh very heavily because she was still quite young and there was Onoria. Besides, the only husband she knew anything about was Mr. Andrews. He was by no means a bad husband as husbands go, he sometimes called his wife "Pussy," and if no one did what he disliked, he was seldom cross; but he was not as interesting to Elsie as Onoria.

What Elsie liked best in the world was sitting in Onoria's garden, and being told what to think.

Onoria was a well-informed woman with violent prejudices, and all her information was at the disposal of her prejudices.

Her opinions were pitched battles, and her views (she intensely disliked what she called ‘viewy’ people, but she had her own views) were like the approaches of a distant thunderstorm. It might pass over if nothing happened to bring it down.

To enjoy Onoria’s conversation was to confess to a taste for Punch and Judy Shows; and, as time hardened Onoria’s method of attack, Little Ticklington grew tired of her bludgeoning.

The men who had delighted in Onoria’s prowess had married, and with years of domesticity their delight in prowess had gradually faded out, or been transferred to the actions of their offspring.

Onoria disliked other people’s children and very wisely told them so. It relieved her of many tiresome obligations, but among them it relieved her of the presence of the parents. She had had to throw away the apple with the core.

Onoria had fewer and fewer objects for her affection. Prendergast had changed from being an elderly and morose Pug, into being very old and resentful of all claims upon his attention except in the shape of well chopped-up food. He liked the results of tenderness without its expression.

Peter Gubbins was just as faithful, but if you have been faddy and aggravating as a young man, you will infallibly become eccentric and exasperating when youth has left you.

Peter Gubbins was unaware that youth had left him; he sometimes had misgivings about Time and Onoria’s figure. Her complexion had always been a little hard and weather beaten, but her hair retained its colour and her voice its piercing quality; besides Onoria was three years older than Peter.

He knew Onoria was no longer young, but she was still very, very powerful.

Neither of them had had a severe illness, a great sorrow, or an unexpected good fortune; and it is very easy to believe that you have remained the same if everything else has.

Peter wrote less poetry and rather more articles, and he grew the finest sweet peas in the neighbourhood.

There was one event which might have awakened Peter to the lapse of years if it had not come on almost as gradually as his success with the sweet peas. This was the introduction of Elsie; but she had been introduced before

he could connect change with her, or receive the challenge to his personality which a young girl's friendship will cause the least self-conscious of men.

Elsie had not made friends with Peter at first, but after two or three years of speechless, tepid watchfulness upon both sides, a bond had been secretly and invisibly formed between them.

They could not have told why it was secret and they hardly knew that it was a bond; they only knew that in each other's society there was an absence of insistent racket, a blissful sense of not being at their best and liveliest, and not needing to be, which took the place of active pleasure.

There were very few of these harmonious moments. Usually Onoria was there, and they met under her eyes and with the volleyings of her wit, and the tremendous onslaught of her theories, thick upon them.

But there had been June evenings when Onoria had letters to write, or was playing over new sets of pieces with a view to her profession, when Elsie slipped out of the long French window on to the lawn to water the flowers, and found that Peter was watering his.

Peter joined her on these occasions and they hunted for slugs together with an effortless ardour rarely obtained upon their separate quests.

Sometimes they combined with desperate loyalty to try to save Onoria an exertion that they could not persuade her to give up, or planned to appease her with a suitable birthday present.

Their talk was full of Onoria. They quoted her most strident sayings with bursts of nervous laughter; they bulwarked their own opinions with the justice of her utterances; and sometimes with bated breath they confessed to each other the little difficulties which arose on their domestic hearths, when these hearths were confronted with Onoria.

Mr. Gubbins had a housekeeper who hated Onoria and was herself a redoubtable woman. Elsie's family sometimes stood up and raged against her intimacy with Onoria; they even curtailed it to music lesson days and Sundays. They couldn't quite destroy it because the most authoritative of families would shrink from forbidding one of its daughters from visiting a very respectable, middle-aged lady, who had been her music teacher since she was a child.

"I said," Elsie explained breathlessly behind the rhododendron bushes, "if you stop me going to see Miss Strickland, I'll tell the Vicar and Miss Bretherton. You know Father thinks the world of the Vicar since we've stopped going to Chapel; he's Onoria's second cousin too; and no one would like to have Miss Bretherton down on them, not even Mother—so they just glared. Glaring's awful, of course, still it can't do you any real harm."

"No," Mr. Gubbins murmured with a long sigh of regret. "It's not as if your parents *cooked* for you! If Mrs. Binns has been crossed, and whenever she sees Onoria she seems to get crossed, she pours pepper into everything I eat! And as I've often told you, I have a very delicate throat!"

Elsie looked uneasily over the tobacco plant they were spraying.

Onoria had laughed so hard and so long upon the subject of Mr. Gubbins' throat that it seemed to Elsie a disloyalty to let him talk about it.

What he was afraid of was cancer. He had an enlarged tonsil.

Mr. Gubbins could (as Onoria pointed out to him several times during the course of the winter when he was always catching colds) have it taken out. But Mr. Gubbins did not think it was bad enough for this heroic remedy; it was only bad enough to give rise occasionally to the question of whether the doctor really knew what he was talking about in assigning to a pain so severe a cause so insufficiently lurid.

"What I say is," explained Mr. Gubbins to Elsie (he never gave this explanation to Onoria), "if he *does* happen to be wrong and the trouble is, as I sometimes think, malignant, I shall have to pay in the end; he'll get out of it all right. Doctors always do."

"Hadn't you perhaps better consult another doctor?" asked Elsie timidly. She was always timid even with Mr. Gubbins, and even when she saw, as she frequently did, the plainest way out of his troubles; and Mr. Gubbins thought that timidity and sense were a delightful combination in a woman.

"It's not much use my doing that," said Mr. Gubbins moodily. "They all stand in together you know. Medical etiquette, as they call it, is neither more nor less than a conspiracy against the public.

"Besides, when you come to think of it, I've been to Jenkins on and off for thirty years, and I shouldn't like to hurt his feelings, especially as it may not be cancer after all."

"What are you two talking about, over there in the shrubbery?" shouted Onoria from the window.

Mr. Gubbins looked appealingly at Elsie.

They both trembled, but Mr. Gubbins trembled most.

"Slugs," said Elsie in a wavering voice.

Her eyes fell before the accusatory ones of Mr. Gubbins. He was thinking how true, how painfully true, Onoria's theory was, as to the prevarication of women.

Whatever the consequences might have been, he could not have told a lie to Onoria. He would not have dared.

# CHAPTER V

Jealousy is one of the faults which it is hardest for human beings to confess.

It is the least successful of the vices, for by its nature it implies that you find yourself less attractive than somebody else, and you are conscious that in the exercise of it, you become less attractive still. Fortunately righteous indignation often looks very like it.

Miss Onoria Strickland never dreamed that she suffered from jealousy. She considered it a slave vice confined to women and exceptionally feeble men.

She knew that her sisters-in-law were monsters of human iniquity; she realised that the other school teachers belonged to a bygone age and were unfortunate products even of that debased period. She saw that modernity and youth had lost alike their innocence and their ardour, at about the time when she herself had ceased to be young; and she despised women: but she did not realise that there was a connecting link between these criticisms, and that her own self-love was the connecting link.

She was taken completely by surprise when Peter Gubbins and Elsie Andrews conspired behind her back to make a fool of her.

This was her instant definition of their timid attempts to form a separate relation. Onoria might not have been so astonished if she had been a quicker hand at reading the silences of others. But like most great talkers, she was apt to take for granted, unless directly contradicted, that some form of agreement had taken place. She did not realise that the silence which gives consent is only one out of many others far less accommodating.

Neither Elsie nor Peter had ever openly disagreed with Onoria, but their souls had rebelled in a wordless determination—rather like that which precedes the back kick of a mule.

They could not, for instance, see the harm of Peter Gubbins singing, to Elsie's accompaniment, old Scotch ballads. Peter Gubbins had a great fancy for Scotch ballads, no knowledge of the dialect, and a tenor voice liable to those spasmodic interludes which sometimes take place upon a gramophone.

Onoria had, not without justice, decided that he ought not to sing in public. She had put it to him perfectly plainly. "You only make a painful noise," she had asserted, "disagreeable to listen to and bad for your weak

throat, and you live in a semi-detached villa. The sooner you break yourself of a bad habit like this, the better!"

Peter had broken himself of the habit, but he still indulged in occasional orgies which took place while Onoria was at school.

He could only pick out the air with one finger on the piano by himself; and to his great delight Elsie agreed to accompany him.

She arranged to come early to Onoria's before school hours were over and meet Peter in Onoria's music room.

When Onoria became due, Peter hurried out of the window into the garden, and crossed by the wall into his own domain. On Onoria's arrival, she found Elsie, punctual and passive, waiting for her usual rites upon the piano.

Ostriches would have known better than Peter and Elsie. They do not, when they plunge their heads in the sand to escape an enemy (even while exposing the rest of their person to view), sing Scotch dialect songs with voices like a damaged kettle.

Peter's voice carried, and on one still day it reached Onoria coming up the road. She had a faultless ear and she knew it was Peter's voice, and that it came, not out of his window, which would have been a misdemeanour, but out of her own, which was a crime; and she knew that Peter could not play his own accompaniments.

She hastened to the gate, but by the time she had reached it Peter had already vanished—he did not know what he was leaving his accomplice to face, but there is no reasonable doubt that if he had known he would still have left her.

Onoria rushed into the music room, breathless and terrific.

"What," she cried with piercing incisiveness, "are you doing here?"

Elsie was in the act of lifting her muff to her face—it was not much of a protection, but she had seized upon it when she heard the front door bang. She felt that it was the bang of a discovered crime. It took Elsie a long time to say "Nothing—" but at last she said it; and then she looked all round the room for a way of escape, but there was none.

It would be difficult to say which of the two criminals Onoria was angriest with. She had been angry with Peter Gubbins all her life—for being Peter Gubbins; his character irritated and at times eluded Onoria. Elsie she loved; probably she was angriest with Elsie.

"Please don't tell me lies," she exclaimed with deadly patience. "I heard perfectly well what you were doing, as I came up the road. I could no more

mistake Peter's voice than a donkey braying. It came from my room—and *you—you*, Elsie, were playing his accompaniments!"

Elsie bit a piece of fur out of her muff In anguish.

The situation was too large for her. She cowered under it, speechless and overwhelmed. But something at the bottom of her heart told her it was not fair and she would not be overwhelmed.

"What do you mean by such atrocious behaviour?" went on Onoria with fluent passion. "Using my house, behind my back, to do what you *know* I have forbidden? How *dared* you do such a thing, Elsie? How can you come here now and look me in the face with that treacherous secret upon you?"

Elsie made a gesture of despair: she put the muff down; it had protected her from nothing.

It was a late autumn evening, a river fog had crept into the room, everything was a little indistinct, like a scene in a nightmare; only the bitter, sharp voice of Onoria pelting at her was as distinct as a succession of stones flung against a wall.

"Oh," she gasped, "I didn't mean—we didn't think!"

"Mean! think!" cried Onoria. "What have you ever thought or meant, either of you? How can I tell now? How can I believe you? Don't you see what you've done? You've undermined my confidence! How many times have you played here without my knowledge? I don't believe this is the first!"

"He did like singing the Scotch ballads so," Elsie murmured defensively. "It was an accident the first time. We just tried them over: it didn't seem any harm. He had come in to dust your books for you and I was early, so we just tried them over."

Onoria changed her ground. She felt for a moment as if it was not so firm as she had expected.

The crime did not stand out well against the background of Peter's services.

"Of course," she said more mildly, "you mustn't think I mind for myself." (What jealous person has ever minded for themselves? It is the lowering of the beloved object which afflicts them most—and the beloved object is always lowered by a shared dominion.) "People do not as a rule care to have their houses used for other people's meetings, without their consent, but I overlook all that. Has it never occurred to you what a scandal such performances produce? No doubt you are being talked about all over Ticklington at this moment. If your parents knew of it they would very

rightly prevent your coming here again. And since it is my house I am in a sense responsible for you. I have never been placed in such an invidious position in my life—and by *you*, Elsie!"

Elsie was in tears now. She picked up the muff again, and wept bitterly into it. She was not an easy crier and the fur choked her.

"I didn't mean any harm," she sobbed. "We only played 'Over the Sea to Skye.' I don't see why people should talk about it."

"You were alone here with Peter in my absence," said Onoria coldly. "That is what they will talk about."

It was very unfair of Onoria to say this because she was constantly alone with Peter herself, and nobody in Little Ticklington had ever talked about it. Nobody in Little Ticklington thought any more about being alone with Peter than they would have thought of being alone with Prendergast.

"I am speaking for your own good," added Onoria, more gently and even less truthfully, for like most people who think they are speaking for the good of others, she was merely speaking to relieve her own spiteful feelings.

The sight of Elsie's tears softened her a little, but she mistook their meaning. They were not tears of penitence, as Onoria believed—they were the tears of an outraged sense of justice.

"I don't see what particular good you think this is going to do me!" Elsie observed between her sobs. Onoria opened her mouth to reply and then shut it again. It took time to produce any tangible advantage to Elsie out of the vortex of her own bad temper—finally, however, she did produce it.

"I hope it will check you!" she said with dignity. "Before you do something more compromising still.

"My advice to you is not to see Peter Gubbins again. I will deal with him later, and let him know what I think of him for taking advantage of a young and I *hope* innocent girl!"

"I don't see where the advantage comes," persisted Elsie, who had unaccountably stopped crying, "if he isn't to sing his songs any more."

"Don't be puerile!" said Onoria sharply. "You know perfectly well what I mean. None of your green girl prevarications with me!"

"No I don't," replied Elsie with astounding obstinacy.

"You've often told me, it was always women who took advantage of men, and dragged them into things, and then complained about them afterwards. Well, if it is—Peter couldn't have dragged me into anything, could he? And I'm *not* complaining!"

Nobody likes to be convicted out of his own mouth, and Onoria liked it less than most people.

"Please don't make such an absurd exhibition of yourself," she said, with heightened colour and reduced softness. "I have told you what I think, and how I intend to act. I am always perfectly direct and straightforward. It is a pity that you cannot be the same. We will discuss this question no further! Do you wish to take your music lesson or do you not?"

Of course Elsie did not wish to take her music lesson, but habit is very powerful, and the habit of surrender to a stronger will is probably more difficult to break than any other habit. She gasped, put her muff down and took her lesson, as if it were a dose of medicine.

She even kissed Onoria good-bye when she left—but if Onoria had been an adept in kisses (which she was not) she would have felt something wrong about it.

The complete kiss lingers—Elsie's was without warmth and swift.

It was not accompanied by any form of apology, but Onoria felt that she had the whip hand of the situation, and that those who hold the whip do not need to exact apologies. She patted Elsie on the back and told her to be a sensible girl. Elsie made a non-committal sound in her throat and vanished hurriedly into the fog.

The fog was very dense, and she may or she may not have met Peter Gubbins at the post box.

The scene between Peter and Onoria was far less drastic.

Onoria had quieted down before she saw him and she spoke as man to man. She pointed out to Peter that he had taken an unwarrantable liberty with her premises, and that he had acted in a compromising way with a girl very nearly thirty years younger than himself.

Peter did not tell her, as the more virile type of man whom Onoria admired might have told her, that she was a bad-minded old hen and was talking a pack of nonsense; he took what she said with extreme seriousness.

Peter quite saw her point about her premises and apologised.

He would not enter them again unless she were there herself.

He hoped that he had not done Elsie any harm: the practises had only taken place six times with interludes of a week, and it had never occurred to him that any one would dream of coupling their names together. The bare idea of it was painful to him. Still, he quite saw what Onoria meant. An unmarried man, even of his age, could not be too careful, and he hoped the

whole thing would blow over and not bring any further trouble to any of them.

Onoria was quite genial and they smoked several cigarettes together and discussed whether it was any use taking Prendergast to the vet. for a tonic or not. They came to the conclusion that it was not.

Then Peter went home.

It was quite true that he meant to be careful, very careful indeed; but the person of whom he meant to be careful was Onoria.

# CHAPTER VI

Peter Gubbins had always taken great care of his broken heart.

In a place like Little Ticklington full of marriageable women, it was a very important asset.

It played the part of a chaperone. No one could expect to marry a man whose heart was as steadily and obviously broken as Peter's.

It had never occurred to Peter to marry any one but Onoria.

He had a pleasant income for a single man, reinforced by certain small cheques for his articles.

He lived well under his income and his cheques went into the garden. As he often romantically said (when there was no danger of Onoria overhearing him), his ideas literally created flowers.

He would never have confessed it even to himself, but he knew he was a great deal better off as he was.

If he had had his heart's desire, he would never have been able to get rid of it afterwards, and this was equally the case with the few quiet twinges in the direction of domesticity which had assailed him since.

There was nothing in Elsie Andrews which led Peter to change this opinion.

At first he thought her a nice, quiet little girl; then when she shot up into long skirts, and grew half a head taller than Onoria, he thought of her as a sensible young woman, who never said things before you did, and did not know what you had not told her.

Elsie made no effort, conscious or unconscious, to attract Peter, and Peter (like many not very attractive men) was very suspicious of efforts made to attract him.

Elsie was simply there in a pleasant, non-committal way, like a table napkin or a bottle of ink. She was useful in the garden and sympathetic at the piano; Samson liked her.

Peter Gubbins did not very often grasp new subjects, but when he did his mind played upon them with the effect of a magnifying glass. It excited him to be told that he had compromised Elsie; he had never compromised any one before, and he was not quite sure what it involved.

Was he expected to act upon it? Or would it automatically react upon him? Would the Andrewses mind? If they did, what form would their

minding take?

Fortunately there was nothing in writing. He remembered that he had once sent Elsie a picture post card of a waterfall when he was away on a holiday, but there had been no space upon it for anything but the briefest allusion to the weather.

He hunted up old copies of an excellent magazine for which he had often written, "Answers to Gardeners," to see if upon another of its pages under the heading of "Questions of Etiquette" there might not be some case which would throw light upon his own.

But no one seemed to have gone quite so far. There was a suggestion that no man should propose to two girls at the same time, a feat of legerdemain perfectly foreign to Peter's tastes; but nothing was said as to the circumstances in which you are morally bound to propose to one.

Peter wished to continue to meet Elsie but he did not wish to be morally bound.

He gave the matter a great deal of quiet study and reflection, but he did nothing to precipitate the event of seeing Elsie again; he felt that if they met by chance it would rob their meeting of any dangerous intensity which it might otherwise have.

The meeting took place at the Post Office precisely a week later.

Elsie was standing with her back to Peter reading the notice of an oratorio which was to be performed at a neighbouring Cathedral town. Peter bought three ha'penny stamps and a packet of post cards before anything striking happened.

Then Elsie turned round and gasped "Oh, Mr. Gubbins!"

Peter kept his head and paid for the post cards before he answered her.

"Oh, it's you, Elsie, is it?" he remarked guardedly, having counted his change. "Have you ever heard the Messiah?"

Elsie said she hadn't, balancing first on one foot, and then on the other.

She didn't know whether to go out of the Post Office into the street where anything might happen, or to remain in the shelter of the Post Office where it would be more difficult to get away if anything did happen.

"Do you want any stamps?" Mr. Gubbins asked kindly. Elsie flew to the counter and bought six, then she opened her purse and found she had already purchased a shilling's worth.

Eventually they got into the street.

"It must be splendid," said Elsie, referring to the Messiah. "Only I believe Onoria said it wasn't, so of course it can't be. Have you ever heard it?"

"Oh, time and time again," said Mr. Gubbins lightly. "It is one of my favourite entertainments, the Messiah. As a young man I went regularly to hear it every Christmas Eve at the Albert Hall. I only gave it up after an attack of tonsillitis I had one winter—I may have told you about it? I date all my throat trouble from then."

He had told Elsie about it several times, but as she merely murmured sympathetically, he told her about it again.

After he had finished he came back to the Messiah.

"How would you like to go and hear it at the Cathedral?" he enquired. "The organist is a friend of mine—he is going to get the soloists from town, and I expect he'll have got quite a good chorus together. The Dean is allowing him to have it in the Cathedral."

"Like it!" exclaimed Elsie. "Oh, frightfully, but you see Mother and Father hate music, except bands on the beach, and Onoria says local renderings of oratorios should be put down by law."

"Well!" said Mr. Gubbins with unflinching courage. "Opinions differ about oratorios of course. How would it be if I took you myself? I daresay we could arrange something about it."

Elsie looked at him as if he had suggested an expedition to Central Africa. It was a most inspiriting look. Mr. Gubbins found it so, and a lukewarm desire to do something desperate took possession of him.

But he meant to be very careful about it. He stage-managed this plunge into the Forbidden Land with infinite precaution.

As human plans go it was perfect; there was nothing unarranged for except Fate. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews were to be told part of the truth.

Elsie was to break to them that she was going to hear the Messiah at Mellingham. Mr. Gubbins did not suggest a downright lie to Elsie, but when he said, "I daresay they'll suppose it means with Onoria?" he paved the way for a leakage in accuracy of which Elsie took full advantage.

Onoria was not to be told anything at all.

Elsie was to leave the Station of Little Ticklington by a one o'clock train, and Mr. Gubbins by a one-thirty.

The journey took half an hour.

Elsie was to wait for him in a baker's shop opposite the Cathedral; she could have a bun and milk while she waited.

They were to come back in the same train but in a different compartment.

Short of an unfavourable interposition on the part of Providence, they were safe.

But those who rely upon Providence to remain inactive in their favour should not tempt it by displaying any activity of their own.

Miss Bretherton, without consulting Onoria beforehand, arranged for her to take six pupils to the Messiah, whether she liked it or not.

She sprang this shabby trick upon her subordinate on the actual morning of the performance.

Forty girls, in white dresses with blue sashes, upon one side and twenty men in a variety of semi-evening clothes upon the other had scarcely sung through the first chorus a trifle raggedly (first choruses are apt to be a trifle ragged) before Elsie and Peter became aware of Onoria's eyes.

They knew they were Onoria's eyes although she was sitting at some little distance to the right of them, much as those who looked upon the Medusa's head must have been conscious that it was her head before they turned into stone. No fate so happy awaited Peter and Elsie—if they had been turned into stone they could have stared back. As it was they twitched and trembled under Onoria's ruthless gaze, conscious with a cowering intensity of their flesh and blood.

Peter sank from terror to terror, till from the lowest depth of cowardice, in which he contemplated leaving Elsie to her fate, he rose to a state of rage. He became as savage and determined as a very timid animal at bay. He would not be caught. That was what it came to. He set his lips firmly together—Onoria or no Onoria, he would simply *not* be caught. It was a free country and no one could stop you if you ran away fast enough. Of course there was Elsie; Elsie wept.

"Stop crying!" he hissed at Elsie with a snarl.

Elsie swallowed a sob abruptly and retreated into a large pocket handkerchief.

The people sitting next to her thought she had a sensitive musical temperament and admired her for it. They did not know what kind of a temperament Peter had, but they did not admire him nearly so much.

The six girls, followed by Onoria with the face of an awakened Fury, advanced down the aisle.

"We must get out of this!" said Peter hurriedly.

He grasped Elsie firmly by the arm and dragged her after him.

Onoria saw the action, and said "Elsie!" out loud in the Cathedral over the six girls' heads. Several people turned round. Elsie stiffened into instant obedience, but Peter's clutch of manly terror was greater than Elsie's power of womanly resistance. He had her out of the Cathedral and half way to the Railway Station before she could turn round.

Onoria could not run after them. She had her dignity to preserve, and the six girls to return intact.

Peter and Elsie had nothing to think of but their personal safety. They preserved this by the skin of their teeth, and by getting, without tickets, into a train destined for London.

They sat gasping and staring wild-eyed at each other, incapable of further speech even if they had dared to give utterance to what was in their hearts, in the presence of a clergyman, a market gardener, and two elderly ladies who looked at them as if they thought that people in such a hurry must have done something wrong.

When Elsie had got her breath again, she began to cry in gulps, as if she were swallowing tabloids without water.

Peter stared desperately out of the window. He was trying to make up his mind to the idea of never going back to his home, and he was remembering Samson and the sweet peas. Oh, how wise cats were! Samson was never involved in any social contacts beyond the point of a torn ear!

How gladly Mr. Gubbins would have let his ear be torn (in moderation) to escape from the weeping heap of femininity opposite to him!

What nonsense it was for a man to be expected to defend women, when they were always either the danger itself—like Onoria—or could melt out of it into a mist of tears—like Elsie?

Every one in the railway carriage was sorry for Elsie. No one was sorry for Mr. Gubbins. Indeed, the clergyman was beginning to be highly suspicious of him. He was not at all sure that he was not, for the first time in his well-chosen career, confronted by a Social Evil.

Several of our most prominent daily newspapers, during the early autumn before the opening of Parliament, had taken up the subject of the White Slave Traffic.

Mr. Gubbins looked ferocious, Elsie sobbed on.

The clergyman leaned forward and said tentatively, as it was surely his duty to do, "I am afraid this young lady is somewhat distressed?"

Peter Gubbins rose to the occasion; a flash of inspiration shot through him.

“She’s just had a tooth out,” he explained with unswerving duplicity.

Elsie stopped crying. She could not believe that Peter Gubbins had told a lie like that at a moment’s notice.

With the natural depravity of women, she had never admired him so much before. She gave a watery smile of affirmation.

The market gardener said sympathetically:

“Shock to the nerves, that’s what it is! I had an aunt once that had a tooth out, she never got over it. Had hysterics she had, one after the other, and died that day fortnight.”

“This,” said Mr. Gubbins, without moving a muscle of his face, “was only a wisdom tooth. They come out easier.”

# CHAPTER VII

Miss Strickland had great self-control, and she needed it. When her amazed eyes rested upon Elsie and Peter Gubbins, she could hardly believe them. Disobedience and deceit united for purposes of pleasure had never so flaunted themselves before her in the whole course of her career. For a week she had believed Elsie and Peter to be crushed. Crushed as flat as a black beetle under the heel of a self-respecting cook.

For a moment she was almost too astonished to be angry. How had they dared? They who in general dared so little—to rush upon the knife?

But her surprise was swiftly reinforced by anger. She was in a consecrated building and the oratorio had begun—so she remained perfectly still although her figure became charged like an electric battery. All the six pupils of Miss Bretherton received small invigorating shocks from it.

They knew something was wrong—and not with them. After all the Messiah was not going to be such a bore as they had feared.

They followed the direction of Miss Strickland's eyes and arrived at Elsie and Peter.

The opening chorus might have been a Salute to Adventurers. Solemnly and gloatingly the pupils gazed at the desperate couple. Peter and Elsie felt all these hostile eyes converging upon them, and they saw nothing else.

The tenderness of the massed violins in the Pastoral Symphony (they were not quite tender enough, but it is difficult for amateur violins to be tender, and it is even more difficult for them to be sufficiently massed) did nothing whatever to soften the atmosphere. It would have been as useful to try the effect of Handel's music upon terriers in a rat hunt.

The hunt went on from end to end of the Messiah. It was conducted in silence by seven pairs of eyes, led by Miss Strickland.

The girls ought to have been upon the side of the rats. They had no quarrel with Elsie Andrews, who had left School before their time, they knew Mr. Gubbins by sight and were without personal claims upon him even in the realms of fancy. All of them disliked Miss Strickland, and yet none of them refrained from the pursuit of the stricken quarry.

They could barely wait for the unearthly shrieks of the Hallelujah Chorus, the separate clauses of which went off like corks from a bottle, before they knelt for a respectful and non-committal moment in the direction

of the Altar, and proceeded to bear down upon the delinquents through the main aisle of the Cathedral.

They thrilled with ecstasy at the resonant and piercing voice of Miss Strickland when she said aloud in the sacred building "Elsie!" In another moment they would have been upon the culprits had not a remorseless family of nine interfered between them and their prey.

Breathless, they hacked their way to the door, only to see Elsie and Peter arm-in-arm disappearing round a corner.

Then Miss Strickland reined them in.

She said with perfect self-control and extreme unfairness, "I don't know what you girls are hurrying for. There is plenty of time to catch the train. Please walk at your usual pace and in your usual order."

Miss Strickland never spoke twice. She had only once said "Elsie." When this command failed, her lips and her heart had simultaneously closed.

She had made a mistake in tactics. She saw in a flash, too late to rectify her action, that she should have called "Peter!" not "Elsie!" Peter had had the strength to deny her claim upon Elsie, but he would never have had strength to deny a direct command made to himself, in a Cathedral. Onoria knew theoretically that it is always wisest to tackle the strongest of two culprits first. It was indeed her invariable and most successful practise, but her heart had betrayed her, she had struck out at her Beloved—and her Beloved had in consequence got clean away.

Onoria pulled herself together when she reached the street, and made no more mistakes.

Her duty was to her pupils, and she did it.

Methodically, though with a heart on fire, she arranged their return tickets and marshalled them into the train. If Elsie and Peter had been on the Station, Onoria would have seen them but she would not have noticed them.

She put her charges into a third class carriage marked "Ladies Only," took a corner seat by the window, and proceeded to bone "the Messiah" for the delectation of her pupils.

Her trained ear had after all enabled her to listen to it sufficiently for her to be capable of stating its faults.

Onoria had no great passion for Handel at the best of times and the average grasp of a Local Orchestral Society is not the best of times for Handel, but on this occasion she was vitriolic.

The girls heard her with awe.

Somebody was catching it, even if they were great and dead. They would have preferred to see Elsie and Peter catching it because they were alive and lived at Little Ticklington, but they could not have everything.

Destruction always appeals to the young, and on the whole they had a far better time than they had had any right to expect at an oratorio in a Cathedral.

Miss Strickland saw them safely back to their respective homes. Two of the girls were boarders and these she dropped at the School gates.

Then she turned hastily homewards.

Samson was at her door. He was a gloomy and outraged cat, wet by the autumn mist and deprived of his invariable tea, with Mr. Gubbins' share of cream, and a fire-warmed knee to rest up against afterwards.

He did not so much miss Mr. Gubbins as actively resent him. He miaued coarsely. Miss Strickland subdued a temptation to hit him sharply on the head with her umbrella.

It was quite open to her to hit him and it would serve Peter right. But Miss Strickland was a just woman; she reminded herself that the soul that sinneth it shall die.

Samson was not an accessory either before or after the fact, and it was a fact which had postponed his tea, and to which he would therefore have definitely refused his consent if consulted.

She opened the door and Samson flew past her and consumed loudly and without hesitation Prendergast's neglected dinner.

Prendergast had not wanted his dinner, and he did not want it now, but still less did he wish to see a low cat indulging itself with his sacred rites. There had always been a state of armed neutrality between the two animals: neither was strong enough to wholly destroy the other, so they wisely avoided combat, but they were not friends.

Prendergast growled feebly from his basket, and gazed at his mistress expecting her instant and effectual intervention, but Miss Strickland sank down on a chair beside him with all her things on and her hands in her lap.

Bridget had let the fire go out and Prendergast shivered sharply to remind Onoria to relight it. What had she come home for if not to relight the fire and restore comfort? But still she did not raise her eyes—she murmured "There, there," and "Poor old Prendie—" but her mind was not on him. She was sitting in a curiously bowed position, as if something within her was refusing to fight.

Samson finished the last mouthful of Prendergast's meal, wiped his whiskers ostentatiously in front of the basket and disappeared lightly through a back window. He was quite willing to eat a meal in Miss Strickland's house but he had no intention of giving her the benefit of his company in return.

A person who kept a moribund pug in a basket was hardly the kind of society a cat of Samson's standing in the neighbourhood would care to choose as a friend.

Miss Strickland did not notice the defection of Samson; she did not for a long while notice anything. There was an inward drama in her heart which held her whole attention.

Something implored her to let her pride go, and keep her friends. It told her that she was getting old and had few earthly ties, that Elsie was dearer to her than she knew, and even Peter was a treasured habit left over from the richer years, and that if she used her anger too ruthlessly against them she would be condemning herself to perpetual loneliness.

One cannot make new ties at fifty-three, too much of life has gone, too many hopes have passed into too many memories.

One cannot explain oneself to new friends, and they cannot know how the early generosities and charms of our characters have staled and wearied with the weight of time.

They do not excuse our scars or realise our finished struggles. How can they dream that our egoism was once a winged idealism set to reach the stars? That our irritability was a vivacity of intellect condemned to a provincial vocabulary, that even our dogmatism is but an old loyalty stiffened into bad temper?

It is in middle age that we most need the mercy of a contemporary, and the memory of a friend.

Onoria really wanted Elsie to be happy. She didn't want her to grow up into a dull, lonely old woman with a pet animal. But it was hard to give her up to Peter.

If Peter had only been a *man*! It wasn't, Onoria assured herself, that she minded about her old relation to Peter. After all she never had valued it; still he was the only man it would have been any use Onoria's minding.

She despised Peter, and the worst of it was that Elsie, whom she loved, cared more for this Peter whom Onoria despised than she did for Onoria's opinion of him. That was the sting of stings.

Onoria had laid out Peter on the dissecting table of her wit over and over again before Elsie, and Elsie had connived at these spiritual post-mortems without a qualm, and all the while she planned this hideous treachery!

Miss Strickland looked facts in the face: if she gave in, Elsie and Peter would come back to her. They would come gladly into her sphere again. There would be no bitterness and no reproaches. They would just—all three of them—settle down.

But there would be one difference, one fatal difference to Onoria's pride. They would both of them know that they had got the better of her.

They would give her love and even respect, but it would never be "glad, confident morning" again.

If they wanted something else which Onoria disapproved of their having, they would combine to get it.

They might marry or not—Onoria was above the petty sting of wincing at the legal ceremony—but they would combine—that was what she winced at.

She must choose once and for all. There are moments in life when choice is within our own hands—though they are very rare—when we can decide with the finality of an earthquake or a volcano what we intend to do with our future. Pride pushed Onoria into resistance and love drew her towards surrender.

Love urged that she would be glad to see Elsie happy, that she could not want to hurt Elsie, that nothing but not hurting Elsie really mattered. Love is always immoral. It slays pride, it urges that law is only a letter and possession a bitter illusion of the senses, and that only Freedom—the freedom to serve the beloved—counts in the eternal scheme of things.

Love ignored Peter Gubbins and how necessary it was to give him a lesson; it made specious excuses for Elsie's flagrant treachery; it said "She only deceived you because she didn't want to hurt you—she only disobeyed you to be happy, and after all that is what you want, isn't it? You want Elsie to be happy?"

Miss Strickland wavered under the pressure of love; but she only wavered. Righteousness and self-respect rose up afresh in her. Self-respect at the touch of which Love always dwindles out of sight and Righteousness which so often consists in carrying out our own will, in an imagined connection with the Deity.

"I shall do right, whatever it costs me," Onoria said to herself at last, and she did not know that she might as well have said, "I shall do what I like,

whatever it costs anybody else."

It would have meant precisely the same thing.

# CHAPTER VIII

It was at this point in her meditations that Prendergast moved. He wanted attention and at last he received it. Miss Strickland made up the fire and brought him a little warm milk with a dash of brandy in it. Prendergast responded to the stimulant and began to wander restlessly about the room. He could not make up his mind what he wanted. He moved about vaguely and stiffly as one who is practising the art of walking. His desires broke in him; and Miss Strickland, with a divine patience gratified in turn and without hurry, each of his passing fancies.

No one who knew Onoria Strickland as she was to the world, to her pupils, or even to her friends, could have believed in this tender, ministering Onoria, carrying out with anxious solicitude the whims of an old dog.

She did not leave Prendergast till he had finally decided on a return to his basket. When his feeble snores told her that he was at rest, she groped her way to the mantelpiece for matches, and tidied herself for going out once more.

Miss Strickland had never in her life looked untidy and she was not going to begin now.

She had decided to make an appeal to Elsie's parents.

Hitherto she had considered parents unreasonable and obstructive people who paid the piper and considered themselves entitled to call for inappropriate tunes.

Miss Bretherton and Miss Strickland together railed and laughed in turn at the delinquencies of parents—their ineffectual hankerings, their odd explosions of indignation and their ineradicable faith in the production of figs from thistles.

None of them knew what their children were really like, and all of them thought they did. Nevertheless, Providence had provided parents with a little brief authority, and there were moments when it came in very usefully.

It had flashed through Onoria's mind, at the first instant when she saw her will defied by the truant couple, that perhaps Mrs. Andrews might be able to do something with Elsie.

Miss Strickland did not know the Andrewses very well. She often said that they were like glass to her and that she could read them like a book; but Mrs. Andrews only came to tea with Miss Strickland once a year; and Miss Strickland returned her call within a fortnight.

She had met Mr. Andrews twice, and they had had on both these occasions acrimonious disputes on politics.

Mr. Andrews described Miss Strickland as a "strong-minded female for whom he had no manner of use," and Miss Strickland said Mr. Andrews was "nothing but a hen-headed old grocer."

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews were eating their supper when Miss Strickland was announced.

They were not surprised that Elsie was late as they neither of them knew how long oratorios lasted; but they were frightened when they saw that Miss Strickland was alone.

Mrs. Andrews exclaimed at once, "Where's Elsie? Has she been run over?" and Mr. Andrews said, "Nonsense, Mother! Of course not. Where *is* the child, Miss Strickland? We hold you responsible you know! We hold you *strictly* responsible!"

"I don't know," said Onoria firmly.

She took an armchair and faced the questioning parents with her usual deliberate self-assurance. "That is what I came to ask you."

"But surely—" Mr. and Mrs. Andrews began together. "Surely you took Elsie to the oratorio?—she said, didn't she, she was going this afternoon over to Mellingham?"

"I was," said Miss Strickland, "at the oratorio in Mellingham this afternoon, and so was Elsie, but she was not with me."

"Well I never!" said Mr. Andrews. "Fancy her going off like that all by herself! It's certainly time she was back. Girls are so independent nowadays."

"She was *not* alone," Miss Strickland said significantly.

Mr. Andrews leaned forward, "Who was she with?" he asked truculently.

"She was with Peter Gubbins," said Miss Strickland, leaning back in her chair.

If she had intended to create a sensation she had succeeded beyond her wildest dreams; but the incredible part of it was the type of sensation she had created. She had expected shame, indignation and alarm. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews were quite obviously pleased.

Once more Onoria was confronted by the inexplicable nature of parents.

They did not wish to show their satisfaction too plainly, but the tone in which Elsie's mother said, "Well I never!" was one of flattered maternal pride, and Mr. Andrews, when he had drawn a long breath, exclaimed, "I

never would have thought it!" in much the way in which he would have greeted a smart trick of the trade.

"You can never tell with the quiet kind," Mrs. Andrews continued reminiscently. "I was like that myself as a girl, I never went out of my way to attract anybody, and as to mentioning it at home—well—I'd have been ashamed! I just let things take their course as it were—and here I am! Dear me!"

"Shouldn't you say Peter Gubbins was a warm man?" enquired Mr. Andrews, ignoring this revelation of his wife's tactics. "I've always understood he had a tidy little sum put by."

"I couldn't possibly tell you," said Miss Strickland, who had, during this outburst of vulgarity, recovered her secret poise. "To tell the truth, the idea of Elsie's having arrived at any notion of matrimony had not occurred to me. I merely thought that it was unfortunate she should appear in public unchaperoned with a man who is old enough to be her father, but who is not her father."

"Oh, well, you know," said Mr. Andrews, "young people will be young people, won't they Mother? And we all know Peter Gubbins about here. Peter Gubbins is as safe as the Bank of England. I don't call fifty old for a man."

"Appearances," said Miss Strickland coldly, "are never safe. I had not intended to mention it, but I see I had better put you in command of all the facts.

"Peter Gubbins has been in the habit of meeting Elsie at my house, in my absence, without my knowledge or consent."

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews looked at each other. Mr. Andrews whistled.

"Dear! dear!" said Mr. Andrews after an awkward pause.

"I'm sure we're very sorry, Miss Strickland. Elsie oughtn't to have done it, I allow, but if you won't mind my saying so, you should have thought of it before! What I mean to say is—it's a little late in the day, isn't it—for you to mind what Peter Gubbins does?"

"It's only natural," interposed Mrs. Andrews, "for him to take to a young girl like Elsie. We each have our turn, you know, Miss Strickland, and then we have to stand aside and let the young ones have theirs! It's hard lines I know, but there it is——"

"You quite misunderstand me," said Onoria, who had turned brick red under this last onslaught of a parent's imagination.

"What Peter Gubbins does, or what he fancies, is, and always has been, a matter of perfect indifference to me. In this case, my sole concern has been Elsie and the compromising position to which such clandestine meetings give rise."

It was a good sentence with a swing that took the wind out of Mr. Andrews' sails. Still, Miss Strickland would have preferred to fling the vulgar truth upon the table. She wanted to say:

"My dear good people, I've refused Peter Gubbins dozens of times, and Elsie is merely taking my leavings, if she does take them, but that seems to me no good reason for carrying on behind my back!"

But education takes from us our most effective weapons. It would have been ill-bred to make this statement, and Miss Strickland, though she never minded being rude, did not wish to appear ill-bred; and in spite of the excellence of her sentence she knew that the Andrewses, still believed that Elsie had cut her out.

"Since you are not alarmed at Elsie's having failed to return at the termination of the oratorio," she said, rising to her feet, "or at the fact that she has apparently vanished into space with Peter Gubbins at eight o'clock at night—there is nothing further to be said. I can only congratulate you on the strength of your nerves."

"It is a *little* late," Mrs. Andrews admitted. "Still——"

There was a sound at the garden gate; a moment later a loud knock heralded the telegraph boy.

Mr. Andrews put on his glasses and read out loud: "Missed train after oratorio—too late to return—staying with Aunt Anne—Elsie."

"Her Aunt Anne," explained Mr. Andrews with restored satisfaction, "is a clergyman's widow, who lives at Clapham. Elsie won't come to any harm staying with her Aunt Anne—Peter Gubbins or no Peter Gubbins."

"Probably he's come home," said Mrs. Andrews comfortably. "He never was much of a gadabout. I'm sure we're just as grateful to you, Miss Strickland, for coming in to tell us what you knew. You couldn't have been kinder if you'd been a parent yourself."

"Thank God I'm not!" Miss Strickland energetically and rather shockingly declared (though in a sense it would have been more shocking had she wished to be a parent). "If I *were* I should hardly take my responsibilities as lightly as you do."

"I shall write to my sister to-morrow," said Mr. Andrews with dignity, "and my wife will write to Elsie."

Miss Strickland walked to the door. Her last hope had flickered out with the mention of Aunt Anne at Clapham. A situation occupied by Aunt Anne was impregnable.

Onoria knew herself outwitted by the ponderous stupidity of facts.

It was a cold, foggy evening, the streets of Little Ticklington were badly lighted and empty.

It seemed a long way home. A curious stifling sense of dread overtook Onoria. She told herself sharply that when a thing has already happened it is silly to be afraid of its happening again.

Nevertheless she hurried, as if she might by hurrying escape what was to overtake her.

Bridget had lit the gas in the hall, and the fire in the drawing room burnt brightly.

Prendergast lay a little on one side in his basket.

He was not snoring as he usually did. Miss Strickland leaned over him anxiously. He did not open his eyes or turn his head to look at her, and then she saw that he never would again. He had made up his mind what he wanted.

A wild impulse to rush across and tell Peter Gubbins shook Miss Strickland.

Nobody else loved Prendergast, but Peter had loved him. He had loved him nearly as much as he loved Samson.

Miss Strickland looked down with quivering lips at the obese form of the dead pug. He was all she had in the world, and he had taken this opportunity to slip out of it.

Miss Strickland was a fighter. She was a very fine fighter and up till this moment no wave of disaster had ever been beyond her power to surmount. But you cannot fight the memory of a dead dog.

Prendergast overwhelmed Miss Strickland. She sank on the floor beside his basket sobbing as if her heart, which was already broken, could break again.

“They might have left me this!” she said between her sobs.

She spoke as if Elsie and Peter between them had killed Prendergast, although she knew that this was nonsense.

# CHAPTER IX

Peter Gubbins had the type of mind which invariably sees danger in the most unlikely places.

He apprehended it from every wayside flower. Nothing was too trivial or too transitory for Peter to snatch from it in passing a whiff of disaster.

He never mounted a tram without expecting to break his leg, and he never ate a meal in a strange place without anticipating typhoid.

And yet the mere sound of Onoria's voice had driven him helter skelter towards the abyss of matrimony.

He raced from the Cathedral to the Station as a man flees from a burning building: his one idea was not to be caught by Onoria. Even if he had envisaged Onoria's face at one end of the race and matrimony at the other, it is probable he would have continued running in the direction of matrimony. The true coward can only see one danger at a time, and falls light-heartedly into any other which lies in the opposite direction.

It says a great deal for Peter Gubbins' heart that even in that awful moment of panic he dragged Elsie after him.

It was not till they were safe in the train that he began to wonder how on earth he was going to get rid of her.

The chief obstacle to murder has always been the disposal of the body—and the problem of rescue is very similar to it; but it is easier to dispose of a victim than to dispose of a sacred charge; villains, not knight errants, escape the due reward of their deeds.

Peter wished with a burning longing that he could deposit Elsie in the Cloak Room at Paddington Station, even if it involved his paying twopence a day on her for ever.

After the tooth episode it was wonderful how Elsie cheered up.

She had found in Mr. Gubbins a prop and stay and that was all she wanted. A flower grows without the support of a stick—but its carriage depends on being tied to one.

Elsie held her head up, and her mind (which if timorous was always practical) turned to Aunt Anne at Clapham.

They had a late tea in the Station and sent off Elsie's telegram; and then they took a taxi to Clapham.

They could have gone as conveniently and more cheaply by train, but a taxi appealed to them both, as more buccaneerish.

Peter enjoyed feeling buccaneerish until they reached the Common; then he began to tremble before the idea of explaining things to Aunt Anne. He knew that he had done right, but he was aware that flight and guilt are to many people synonymous; and few men like to explain that they found it safer to run away.

Elsie with incredible finesse relieved him of this difficulty. She said she thought it would be better if he left her at the door, and came back next day. "You'll have time then," she explained, "to think things over, and I know authors and people think of their plots better alone. Whatever you decide is sure to be wonderful, and Aunt Anne will be more likely to listen to me if you're not there."

Peter gave a sigh of relief. "Yes—yes," he agreed, "perhaps the explanation had better come from you direct. I know from personal experience that the way to tackle a difficult situation is easier to me if I am left alone face to face with it, as it were. Perhaps this is merely because I am a man. Onoria would say so—but roughly speaking, I should say that women have the same gift."

"I don't know if it's a gift," said Elise modestly, "but I can't say anything if other people are there—and I can't say much if they aren't; but I'll do what I can."

Aunt Anne required a good many explanations. She had never received a niece before at seven o'clock in the evening without a tooth-brush.

It would have been difficult for her to grasp that the survivors of earthquakes are denuded of this effective article of toilette, and she knew that Little Ticklington was not an earthquake district.

She followed every explanation given by Elsie with—"Still I can't quite see, dear, how you have arrived without your night things. I am very glad to see you, of course, but it all sounds so precipitate."

It was on the edge of this precipice that Elsie fell asleep.

She wisely kept Mr. Gubbins for breakfast. When they were eating kidneys and bacon—after porridge, but before marmalade—she confessed to her Aunt Anne that she had not only run away from the oratorio because Miss Strickland did not like oratorios, but because Mr. Gubbins was with her and Miss Strickland would have liked his presence even less than an oratorio.

Aunt Anne laid down her knife and fork and gazed at Elsie—the mystery was solved. It had been a mystery—it was now simply a crime. Aunt Anne had not understood before why Miss Strickland should object to certain parts of the Bible set to music. She was herself doubtful of Opera, even if it had not been so expensive; but sacred music was surely both educational and devout, and not even very interesting. It was unreasonable for a high school teacher to object to such a performance—but a young man!

Her gaze was awful, and Elsie shuddered under it, and swallowing her tea too hurriedly, choked.

When she had stopped choking, Aunt Anne said portentously, "Is Mr. Gubbins a young man, Elsie?"

Elsie said that that depended on what you meant by young; she had known him for years and years, and he had grey hair and wore spectacles.

"Spectacles," said Aunt Anne solemnly, "do not prevent youth though they may disguise it. Grey hair is neither here nor there. Am I to gather that there is some understanding between you and this—this Mr. Gubbins, Elsie—perhaps unknown to your dear parents?"

Elsie wriggled and twisted. "They wouldn't mind him," she murmured forlornly. "At least I don't think so. Of course we understand each other in a way. I play his accompaniments."

"Elsie, you are hedging!" exclaimed Aunt Anne majestically. "I must see this young man for myself."

Elsie was not really hedging; if she had seen a hedge she would most certainly have taken shelter under it, but she was not aware of the exact danger her aunt supposed her to be avoiding.

She felt that there was something ominous in the air connected with Mr. Gubbins, and she wriggled to appease it.

The idea of marriage conveyed nothing personal to Elsie. Marriage was merely something that happened to other people—with a cake. She helped herself to marmalade and hoped that Peter Gubbins would blow over.

Her aunt pursed up her lips and said, "This is dreadful!" but as Elsie refused to fall into the trap of asking what was dreadful, she could not follow it up in any way, except by telling Mary, the parlour-maid, to show Mr. Gubbins, when he arrived, into her dead husband's study.

The study of a dead clergyman is not usually an invigorating spot.

Aunt Anne was a massive lady and she sat between Peter and the door. All the windows were closed as if on purpose. Even if Peter had had the courage to try to escape it would have been very difficult. You cannot get

out of dead people's rooms briskly without appearing heartless; besides he had not the courage.

Peter was not as surprised at Aunt Anne's attitude as Elsie would have been, but he was more frightened.

He saw in Aunt Anne's eye that matrimony had fallen upon him like a bolt from the blue.

You cannot put bolts back into the blue when they have fallen, and you could not dislodge the idea of matrimony from Aunt Anne's mind once it had taken root there. If young people would go to oratorios together they ought to be married—she saw that quite plainly, even without the lawless journey at the other end, which made the prospect, as she explained to Peter, "simply compulsory."

"You see," she explained, "Elsie arrived here literally without a tooth-brush—need I say more?"

Peter assured her that there really was no need. It contained the case against them in a nutshell.

On the whole he was not averse to being frightened into marriage with Elsie. One or two things had to be made perfectly plain before he would consent to it. One was that they should not go back to Little Ticklington on any account, and the other that the marriage should take place as quietly as possible without wedding guests. They might have relatives, but not friends.

It was all terribly uncertain and disintegrating, but it was not as terrible as having to face Onoria.

Peter's own plan had been the idea of going abroad alone, assisted by Thomas Cook.

Of course it was a very dangerous plan, open to obvious disasters at practically every turn, still Cook's was a most reliable agency, and many people had been known to return alive from trips to the Continent. He could take a hot water bottle, Keating's, and a small medicine chest. But marriage would be less complicated, and it would have the advantage of including Elsie.

Peter proposed to Elsie quite easily. He simply said, "On the whole, I think the best way out for both of us is to be married. For a long time I have been feeling Little Ticklington too restricted for me mentally. One needs to be nearer the great pulse of life—not too near, of course! I thought somewhere in the suburbs—Chiswick, for instance—there are some nice little houses in that direction, or Turnham Green.

“I could cultivate sweet peas there, and yet attend literary causeries in London. Of course it’s a great upheaval for both of us, especially at my age, but looking at it all round, it appears to me the wisest course to take—what do you feel about it?”

Elsie nodded, she wasn’t looking at it all round. She was seeing that it involved her not having to meet Onoria just yet.

She said, yes, she thought it was the best plan, if Peter didn’t mind.

Peter said, “You must take the rough with the smooth.” Of course he had not contemplated such a step for many years, but he thought if they were very careful and took things quietly they might be able to manage.

He understood from Aunt Anne that you wrote to the Bishop’s Chaplain for a license, and did not have to see the Bishop.

The conversation came to an abrupt pause, their eyes met guiltily, and they looked away from each other.

What were they going to do about Onoria?

Peter hummed and Elsie twiddled her fingers. Onoria never allowed these physical mitigations of self-control to take place. It was a great relief to them.

They decided—in silence—to do nothing. It was as if they had been married already.

Peter said he had one or two little things to do, and left her.

Aunt Anne came in and wept on Elsie’s neck; and they decided to go out and do a little shopping.

Everything went quite smoothly. Elsie’s parents came up to town and were very pleased when they discovered that Peter had six hundred a year in trust funds without counting what he made by his articles.

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews privately thought that marriage from Clapham was absurd, but Peter was unexpectedly firm upon the subject.

He simply asserted that at Little Ticklington no such marriage would ever take place.

He would marry Elsie at Clapham or he would not marry Elsie at all.

Mrs. Binns (Peter’s former housekeeper) brought Samson up to town in a basket. Samson would not speak to Peter for several days, but he ate heartily.

It was the night before the wedding that Peter and Elsie heard of the death of Prendergast.

Mrs. Binns had bought Peter a China dog as a wedding present and it put it into her head.

Elsie and Peter concealed their emotion until they were alone, then they gazed at each other in sympathetic anguish—they could no longer keep silence about Onoria.

"Oh!" said Elsie, "if only we could give Onoria another pug. Perhaps she would see then that we aren't really doing anything to upset her—and besides she wouldn't mind so much if she had something—you know what I mean—something of her own to fall back upon."

"I was thinking the same thing myself," agreed Peter. "Between you and me, Onoria never had quite the subtlety for cats—Samson would never look at her—but dogs she knew through and through. I think she would appreciate our getting her a dog. It might heal any little breach that our—our coming together—may have appeared to cause."

They bought a pug puppy directly after the marriage—on the way to Chiswick. (Peter had always understood honeymoons were dangerous, so they had decided to avoid one.)

It was an expensive animal and it relieved their feelings very much.

Onoria would have returned it to them, had she not discovered on opening the basket that, with their usual inefficiency, they had sent the poor little creature to her in a most deplorable condition.

First it had to be fed, and then a carbolic bath was more than indicated, and after Onoria had spent several hours over the puppy with a fine tooth comb and a large bath sheet, she began to feel that it would be cruelty to send it back. It was obvious that neither of the Gubbinses could take proper care of a dog.

Onoria never altogether lost touch with Peter and Elsie. She told them what she thought of them when she acknowledged the pug; but letters do not carry sound. They became used to the idea of what Onoria thought of them; it seemed less significant at Chiswick.

Onoria spent a night with them every now and then, and once a year they visited her for a week-end at Little Ticklington.

Of course it was not the same thing. Onoria was just the same and the Gubbinses were not really very different; but they were more critical of Onoria.

They did not stand up to her before her face, but they stood up to her behind her back quite easily.

When Onoria got the better of them in argument, as she invariably did, they would wait until she was out of earshot. Then they would smile and say to each other with the secret consciousness of superior achievement,

"It stands to reason that an unmarried woman like Onoria can't understand things as we do. She hasn't had the experience."

THE END

---

## Transcriber's Notes:

A few obvious punctuation and typesetting errors have been corrected without note. When multiple spellings occurred, majority use has been employed.

[The end of *The Victim and The Worm* by Phyllis Bottome]