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ALIVE—ALIVE OH!

AND OTHER STORIES BY

Osbert Sitwell

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Alive—Alive Oh!

and other stories

OSBERT SITWELL

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AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THIS EDITION

In this volume Pan Books present five stories of varying lengths, selected from my first two books of short stories, *Triple Fugue* and *Dumb Animal*, the first of which was written a quarter of a century ago. In the meantime—even, indeed, since the second of these books was published—militant and mighty empires have reared themselves up, only to be rolled in the dust, whole cultures have been renounced, entire social systems overturned. Authors are not by nature notoriously humble, and the present writer has to confess to a glow of satisfaction at finding some of the most delicate of his work surviving these cataclysms, and, further, taking on its own independent life. For, of course, the work itself alters with time. Not only does the surface weather, but the implications become plain, or perish, so that the emphasis alters; the comedy becomes more abstract in kind, divorced from association, and the period-interest visible in some of the stories has intensified, while in other places it has crept in of its own accord. Thus in "Charles and Charlemagne" and in "That Flesh is Heir To," the comedy seems more vivid now that the background to which these stories related as satire, has ceased to exist. With the second of them, however, because a bacillus, rather than a woman, is the heroine, and because the past seven years, in spite of the doctors' incantations of the new sulphur range of drugs and of penicillin, has proved a better time for germs than for men, the humour has gained in plainness and probability. Again, "Alive Alive Oh!" concerns a permanent English comic type, the poet who, albeit for decades moribund, manifests an unhappy knack of physical survival: and, because "The Greeting" is a murder story, and in the interval since it was written, killing became exalted to a national duty, it, too, has lost nothing in likelihood.

Finally we approach the story that pleases me most in the collection, "Low Tide"; a tale that lived with me in my head for many years before I wrote it, or began to write. In it, I attempted to give, as well as the direct narrative, the picture of a decaying civilisation, in which such a fate as that I described was implicit: I tried to show all the surroundings and customs to be full of ambient destiny, to portray people through their circumstances and belongings, for, in this differing from some of the writers of the day, it was human beings, and not the exquisitively civilised fire-irons they used which interested me.

Short stories are of several kinds; though all are—or should be—the result of inspiration in the first place (for that reason they constitute to my mind one of the most enjoyable mediums for a writer). "Low Tide" belongs to a type more common in France than England, the *nouvelle*: but, of whatever sort, that moment in which the story first assumes its garment of words is the most important, for, if that fails, it falls dead. The *idea* may assault a writer at any time. Thus, a rather celebrated story of mine, "Death of a God," attacked me in a crowded railway carriage, going down to Brighton in the great frost of February 1940: and, for the space of an hour or two—for the train was greatly delayed—, I became oblivious of fog, cold, and roaring children. . . . "Low Tide," on the other hand was the second piece of prose I ever wrote, and I recollect well the excitement and labour of writing the first draft of some twelve thousand words, which came to me in a single day, so fast, I could hardly cope with them: I worked at the tale, of course, for many weeks after, but that first day was unforgettable, my first experience of being, as it were, on the telephone, of all the artist's faculties being employed at once. There, the circumstances were ideal, for I wrote in a bedroom in Amalfi that had formerly been a monk's cell: outside, far below, gentle Mediterranean tides in blue, green and amethyst washed the foot of the dramatic, Leonardo-like rocks of limestone. This world, age-old, and the more temporary, no less tragic world I was describing, stood a whole universe apart, but met in that room. The story, too, was exceptional for me, in that it related to a time already past: but at least I can tell, as I read it again, that it, and the so different and much later tale, "That Flesh is Heir To," are by the same hand, filtered through identical senses.

OSBERT SITWELL

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CHARLES AND CHARLEMAGNE

> “What has not fired her bosom or her brain?
> Cæsar and Tall-boy, Charles and Charlemagne?”

About a month ago it must be now, since I was sitting in the glassed-in cage at the top of a motor-omnibus which had settled down amid an inanimate fleet of similar conveyances. It had sidled itself along and was anchored, apparently for all eternity, against the pavement in Park Lane. Only the gentle purring that pervaded the whole vast machine communicated any hope, announced to the passengers a mechanic conviction that sooner or later this stagnation would thaw, and it would be able again to roar its way along the streets like a red, armoured lion. The present passive state in which we found ourselves was rendered the more irritating because the other side of the road, by the Park railings, was completely unencumbered, and large, gondola-like cars were gliding, vans and omnibuses thundering, along its smooth water-coloured surface. Beyond, over the railings that divided up the green grass into rectangular, coffin-like compartments, I watched the listless afternoon life of the Park. The trees looked metallic as the green tin trees of a toyshop, and under them a few weary individuals rested on green tin seats. One or two crouching, whiskered horsemen, crowned with grey bowler-hats, and conscious enough of their obsoleteness to assume an air of defiant importance, trotted slowly along: and I reflected that in all probability the whole of this traffic block, in which we found ourselves thus frozen, was due to one solitary horse with a van, happily lumbering its way along somewhere in the heart of the City. Now there was a slight jolt: we moved on for a few yards, and then, tantalizingly enough, stopped again. My eye turned from the Park to the buildings which overshadowed it. Huge edifices were being improvised . . . buildings that resembled impregnable cliffs, full of luxurious caves in which the rich middle classes were encouraged to hide themselves before the coming of that Day of Judgment, so often invoked by communist orators nearby at Marble Arch, when with a loud-mouthed bellow of trumpets and running of blood the virtue of the workers would be recognized and rewarded. Sprinkled among these rocks, however, are still a few old-fashioned, bow-fronted houses: and suddenly I found myself looking down into one . . . staring down into the familiar, but now derelict, dining-room of Lady de Montfort’s house. Above the window, standing on a gibbet-like framework, two large black and white placards, that resembled in their angles the jutting-out prow of a ship, announced the sale of a 999-years' lease.

The room was, as I had last seen it, decorated as a grotto; but now that it was empty of furniture, now that dust had formed the thickest possible carpet and the windows were already dim from Time's hands, it was more realistic, seemed a cavern, crumbling and forgotten, from which the sea had receded and withdrawn its life. And I wondered whether her impersonal, lacquered but vivacious ghost—a ghost that would never, one felt certain, be clad in any of the multitudinous styles that had pertained to its lifetime, but would always be robed in the latest creation of the moment in which it materialized—did not sometimes roam among these artificial ruins of her earthly past? And then I thought of a cage built of steel and crystal, borne on the deep currents of a tropic sea, bumping and turning over and over, with a rattling of dry bones midway between air and ocean-bottom, an anonymous yet unique end from an anonymous beginning. . . and meditated how strange it was that a life which belonged essentially to its own day, which was responsible for some of the stir and gaiety, and much of the gossip of those hours, should, soonest of all, sink into oblivion: for that which is the most typical is often the most transitory. Herself, I felt, albeit she had cared little enough for public interest, would have been surprised at so evident a lack of it in so short a space. How strange, again I reflected. The travellers on each omnibus will look down into this empty room, and will consider it a grotesque and useless piece of decoration, nothing more; will entirely miss its significance, its very actual foundation in life. And I recalled the time, not so many months ago, when one glance from a passing omnibus at the decoration of Lady de Montfort's dining-room (the easiest room in the house to overlook) would reveal to the initiated a whole section of her life and the progress of a passionate and inquiring physical love.

Almost the first thing I can remember is one of my parents remarking to the other how astonishingly young Lady de Montfort looked. And if it was astonishing in 1896, it must have been very much more so in 1930. For though the art of looking young has in the meantime become a vocation like conjuring, and by that degree less rare, nevertheless when I saw her for the last time, it was clear that she remained at the top of a difficult, and even upon occasion dangerous, profession. In a sense, however, it still remains in the hands of the amateur, for though every suburb now has its beauty-parlour, yet only the rich can afford to indulge in the very real physical torture that beauty-worship imposes on its devotees.

Lady de Montfort, then, had been one of the pioneers of the Peter Pan movement; for that play, I fancy, popularized the notion that there was something glorious in never growing up. Peter Pan in fact was the child-father of face-lifting. The ethical side of the wish to remain young out of seasons is not easy to grasp, any more than is the practical. Alas, life must end in the same way for all. The full stop closes every sentence, whatever the joy or agony of its meaning. The anonymous death, the death of the rich, well-preserved nomad in a richly-appointed hotel, for example, has the same pathos as that of a wrinkled old woman of the same age in some pauper institution, and more, it seems to me, than the death of an old, rheumatic crone in a cottage. Much better is it to pass through the seven allotted stages, much better even to be cut off, as the phrase is, “in the flower of her youth” than in the artificial flower of a deceptive youth. Yet the sums of money spent on this pitiful aim are prodigious, while hints on the subject—(combined with details of free-insurance schemes and lists of the sums paid out, which point to a very regrettable mortality among the registered readers of daily newspapers; a mortality, indeed, so remarkable that it seems almost perilous to subscribe to these journals)—compose much of the Press to-day, so there must be an appeal in it to our natures.

But if Beauty is Truth (which, incidentally, it is not), certainly the results of beauty culture are a lie, and should therefore be recognized as ugly. To all those who can afford the best advice, false youth, when attained, imparts an identical appearance: the same corn-gold hair, the same angular, fashion-plate eyes, raised upward at the corner, the same straight nose and lips carved into a double curve, the same strained mouth, slightly open like the mouth of a Roman Mask of Tragedy, that the knife of the plastic surgeon dictates. They have the same figures, the same hands and finger-nails, more or less the same dresses, and the same impersonal, cosmopolitan accent, with, rising and falling smoothly within it, the concealed sound of an American elevator. They do not look young, except by convention, but, instead, they all look the same age: almost, indeed, the same person. And of these Adèle de Montfort was not the least.

But let not the reader conclude that Lady de Montfort’s character was after a similar standardized pattern. It was not. For notwithstanding that most of the Regiment who adopt the uniform and faith we have described, do so from a quite genuine desire to resemble one another, Lady de Montfort elected it as a deliberate disguise for a very natural, if rather varied, character. We must, then, lift up the mask, and peer for a little underneath, if only to understand the mask’s significance.

Originally, it must be assumed, she had been small and pretty and golden-haired, with a fair, almost pallid skin, behind which roses blushed from time to time, and the tiny hands and feet that are the birthright of every American woman. “Fresh” was the epithet often used to describe her, for in those days a naïve lack of artifice was much admired, and she was without any of the elegance which she ultimately evolved round herself. Somewhere in the early ’eighties this girl had materialized herself out of what was then the misty void of the great American Republic. She did not belong to any of the few families who at that time floated garishly on this dull, nebulous surface: but she was distantly related to various American women, well married in England, and her fortune, which was adequate to the game she meant to play, was all the more respectable for not being unwieldy. But of her parentage and upbringing, people in England knew nothing, while she speedily contrived to forget more about herself than others had ever known. Outwardly she bore no labels except a slight accent, which only manifested itself in moments of anger or excitement, when suddenly, too, she would fall back into the use of transatlantic idiom: inwardly none except a secret, and, in those days, most rare, lack of them, combined with an adventurous spirit. Indeed her own mind was so free of conventional prejudices that in others they positively attracted her. Thus she set out, like a female Dick Whittington, to seek her destiny: thus, like Venus fair and pale, she had risen from the billows. In fact, if it had not been for the anchor of her independent fortune, she might have passed as that free spirit of the air, an adventuress: and so by nature, and at heart, she was. For all adventuresses are not bold-looking and hard-mouthed. And a quiet adventuress is the one whom the world should fear.

Arrived in London, she sought the protection of her American relatives (who were then much older than she was, though forty years later all of them looked more or less the same age), and under their tutelage made an appearance in the world. They formed at once the guarantee of her character and the guardians of her secret; the almost sordid respectability of her origin. For, though each of these ladies allowed it to be known that in the land of her birth her own “social standing” had been exceptional, there was yet between them all a tacit, undefined agreement that no home secrets should be revealed. Adèle served her apprenticeship to this guild and learnt much that was of use to her: that, for example, although before marriage it was wise to dress as simply as possible, and look exactly like an English girl, after marriage she could reap the advantage of being an American. For while English women, with a singular obstinacy, persisted in buying their clothes in London, or even in the provinces, she, being of a less insular outlook, could obtain them from any of the great dressmaking houses in Paris: nor would she look *odd* in them. Paris clothes were in the American blood. At the worst, people would say she looked “rather foreign.” And the men liked it.

Adèle proved clever and adaptable. She was presented at Court, danced, hunted, played tennis, did all the right things and triumphantly concealed her possession of a sensuous intelligence, modern and acute, if rather apt to swing at random. This was a secret, too, which her preceptors respected. Apart, however, from a quiet but continual attendance at concerts, and a constant but hidden reading of poetry and novels—habits which, in her native country, she would have been forced to parade—her general behaviour undoubtedly entitled her to an honorary place among the English ruling class of that epoch. Yet she did not marry for several years: and when she did, though it was a sound marriage, it was scarcely as brilliant a one as her chaperons had hoped. Like her fortune, it was nevertheless all the more respectable for not being of a sensational order. A title was a title, even if it were only a baronetcy: and it attracted her by its strangeness, would add to life the zest and romance (until she became used to it) of a perpetual masquerade.

The name of Sir Simon de Montfort sounds almost too good to be true, and, in fact, was so. Old Solomon Mondfeldt, grandfather of the present baronet, had crept out of a German ghetto about ten years before the Battle of Waterloo, and, looking round, had very wisely decided to settle in the city of London. There he had established himself as a merchant and banker: more, he helped to found the whole edifice of international finance. For he, and a few friends in other countries, maintained at their own expense a reliable news-service, and whenever they heard of a victory for any country in which they were operating, they first announced a defeat, and then bought up all the shares that would be affected. Subsequently the news of the victory would be made public, the shares would rise, and they would sell out. Peace consolidated their efforts, and now he adhered to the more strictly legitimate side of his business, in which, as his obituary notice proclaimed many years later, “his native shrewdness and foresight, swiftly won him recognition.” (It was, perhaps, easier to have foresight then, when there were no possible dangers to foresee.) He was, in fact, a clever, vulgar, grasping, kindly old ruffian, very religious withal; a pillar of the Synagogue, always willing to help his co-religionists—even with large sums of money.

Despite a certain pride in his race—or, at any rate, a loud insistence on it —it was not long before the rough, Saxon syllables of Solomon Mondfeldt had melted into the chivalric enchantment of Simon de Montfort. Moreover, his eldest son, another Simon, was smuggled somehow or other into Eton without protest; though at that time it was a difficult school for a boy to enter if he did not conform to the nationality or religion of his comrades. Once installed at Eton, he was popular, for, since he was the only little Jew there, his schoolfellows did not recognize the genus, but appreciated that in the understanding of life in some aspects he was their superior. He bought more and better strawberries than they did, and paid less for them: and on them he forcibly fed his friends.—How intelligent in reality he was, who can tell? But it is certain that he very quickly seized on the principles of English public-school education, for he openly refused to learn anything, became maniac about cricket, exulted in the correct shibboleths of dress, speech and deportment and adopted ostentatiously the public-school-boy-code-of-honour; which, summed up, encourages bullying, but forbids "sneaking"—thereby assuring the bully of an absolute impunity. And a jolly good code it is, too, if you mean to be a bully.

By this time the family were in possession of a castle in Scotland, and a fine old "place" in the "Shires," with all its furniture, portraits, silver and tapestries intact, and its own chapel. A baronetcy followed. He had married at an advanced age, but even before the old man died the Christmas parties, when the house abounded with bounding young de Montforts, solidly eating their way through the week, were models of what gatherings should be. And after his death, the young baronet quietly slipped into the Christian faith. He put up several new armorial windows in the chapel, and it made one almost cry to hear him read the lessons every Sunday. Soon he married into an impoverished aristocratic family, so that his children were well connected. And, indeed, by the third generation, the conventional, unquestioning stupidity of the children was as genuine as formerly it had been assumed: one symptom of which was that themselves were entirely taken in by their own faked pedigree, and were even apt, when they talked about a cousin, to say of him, "Oh, of course he has the de Montfort eyes," or, worse, "he has the de Montfort nose." Entire books, connecting them with the ancient de Montforts, were written under the supervision of the elder members of the family, by specialist authors who found in it their living. Innocent outsiders, withal, were beginning to believe. Thus in two generations was built up a feudal house.

When the third Sir Simon, Adèle's husband, succeeded, the elder branch of the family had become, like so many great families, convincingly impoverished. The business had been allowed to pass into the hands of cadets, because they were more interested in it, and so that the Sir Simon of the day should always be free for country pursuits, engaged as he was, would and should be, in shootin', huntin' and fishin'. Our Sir Simon, therefore, spent the greater part of his young bachelordom, either in these sports, or in sitting, as befitted an English sportsman, in the smallest, ugliest room of a large, rather beautiful but very cold house, surrounded by stags' heads, an imported bison or two, fish in glass cases, fossils, pipes and cigar-boxes: and, in order to keep warm, even in this den, he had to drink a great quantity of port, which gradually undermined his constitution.

Brought into this, for her exotic environment, Adèle was an undoubted success. Her husband was devoted to her, while her fortune, too, was most welcome: since the prize-pigs and potatoes, the model dairies and cattle-breeding that were incumbent on the head of a historic family, combined with an iniquitous income-tax of a shilling or so in the pound, had made dreadful inroads into the estate. For Sir Simon, Lady de Montfort completed life: and for her, brought up as she had been, it must have been an experience that transcended reality. Nor was it, in any case at first, monotonous: for there were two sides to it. One was a miniature Royal-Family existence, spent in opening bazaars, sales of work and jumble-sales, mouthing at unknown and indistinguishable babies, and in giving or receiving prizes (it seemed to her afterwards that a large part of her early married life had been spent in giving or receiving prizes) for fruit, flowers, potatoes, onions, shorthorns and agriculture generally: while the other unfolded the whole pageant of a barbarous society. There were family parties and shooting parties; there were the "bloodings" and the "ratlings" ("No fun like rattin'," Sir Simon used to say), and innumerable other forms of well-meant cruelty to animals, which must have satisfied some primordial female instinct in her; and, best of all, there were the hunt-balls. Even now, reading over the lists of "those present," in some newspaper of the day, one can comprehend a little the ecstasy into which these festivities threw her. For far more than the Roll of Domesday do they sum up, by the very sound and rhythm of the names, the life of that time, and, even, the queer results of the Norman Conquest: moreover, apart from the odd juxtaposition of names essentially matter-of-fact with others so unusual as to be romantic, the lilt and rhythm is in itself fascinating, there are unexpected trills, and the vagaries of fortune are reflected in the inexplicable runs on names beginning with the same letter, the long and the short runs, comparable to those unexpected runs on one number or colour that are encountered on the gaming-tables. For example, on Jan. 18, 1888, we read in one of the leading London papers:

> About 350 guests attended the Hunminster Hunt ball, held at the Queen’s Hotel, Hunminster, last night. Godefroy’s Pink Hungarian Band, of Hunminster, supplied the music.
>
> In addition to the Master and Lady de Montfort, those present included the Earl and Countess of Hunminster, Viscount Humble, Miss Mowker, Miss Marcia Mowker, F.M. Lord Cummerbund and the Honble. Cycely Cuddle, Miss Moocombe, Miss Malcolm, Miss Mink, Miss Denyse Malpigian, Miss Myrtle Malpigian, Major McCorquodale, Lady Cundle, Miss Coote, Mr. Hartopp Hayter, Miss Hunt, Miss Handle, Mr. Handcock, Mrs. Haviour and Miss B. Haviour, Mrs. Bullamy, Miss Heather Hellebore, Major Colin Coldharbour and Lady Isabel Hamilton-Hootar.
>
> The Earl of Dunbobbin, the Honble. Doughty Dullwater, Miss Daphne Diddle, Colonel Haggas, Lady Hootman, Dr. Prettygole, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Plummer, Miss Plummer, Mr. Plymsoll, Captain Pymm, Miss Penelope Pitt-Pitts, Mr. Percy Pitman, Miss Frolick, Mr. Fumble, Miss Rowena Rowbotham, Miss Donkyn, Miss Dunderhead, Mr. Roger Randcock, Major Minney, Miss Dingle, Mr. Malcolm de Montmorency, Mrs. Slinkworthy, Captain Hercules Slowcoach, Lady Slaunder, Miss Slowcombe, Mr. Sleek, Miss Eager, Mrs. Stanley Stobart, Miss Serpent, Colonel Cooper-Copeland, Sir Joseph Slump, Miss Eileen Shrivel, Major Spiridion and Lady Muriel Portal-Pooter.

And then the rollicking aspect of the festivities captivated Adèle. She loved to watch the huge, thumping dowagers romping round in their bustles, covered from head to foot with jewels like Hindu idols and whirling round in the figures of the Lancers until they seemed to have as many vast, red arms as those deities. She liked to talk, or be silent, with these long-legged and languid men, with their drawling yet clipped talk and military moustaches. Certainly, then, she enjoyed herself at first. And all these people liked her, though, of course, to begin with they had thought the Parisian clothes, which she had now adopted, “quaint.” But soon they became accustomed to her, and would remark enthusiastically, “Nobody would ever take her for an American.”

So the first years passed . . . and then there were her children, three of them, born within the first seven years of their marriage. In her later period, one was astonished that anything as elemental as child-bearing should ever have formed part of Lady de Montfort’s life: but so it was. And there were short visits to London. She had never renounced her Guild, and corresponded regularly with her early preceptors, though seldom asking them to visit her. But she saw them in London, and this made the atmosphere different for her. She seemed contented enough, they thought: but she never really talked to them, never said anything except what the world expected of her. But in about 1890 a change came.

Being clever, as well as pretty, her ascendancy over her husband was complete. Now, suddenly, she insisted on spending half the year in London. He was in no position to object: she had taken an infinity of trouble with his friends and relatives, while much of the money was her own. But for him the reality was to be worse than the anticipation. His wife for the first time revealed an intense, American interest in the arts notwithstanding that Sir Simon had a wholly British prejudice against artists. The species positively invaded his London house at this period; but it never actually descended to blows. As he said about the matter to his friends, "After all, one must live and let live. . . ." and so, when it became too much for him, he would instinctively go back to the country and kill a fish or a bird instead. . . . Alas, there was worse to come. He could not be away from her always. And now there were—musicians in the house! She had always been musical; he had been forced in secret to recognize this—musical in a passive sense. But this was different, this was monstrous; amounted almost, he said, to deception, so little had he suspected it. . . . For all at once she produced a certain, if limited, executant ability; that is to say she installed two pianos, side by side, in the drawing-room, and upon them she loved to play duets with eminent musicians. This she did well and gracefully. On one piano, however, and, as it were, by herself, she floundered hopelessly and was lost; a dangerous symptom—if her husband had identified it—the symptom of a temperament that in spite of its native, American independence demanded, and relied on, continual masculine assistance. Notwithstanding, at present her behaviour grew no less conventional, her conversation not a whit more individual.

Sir Simon's troubles, if he had known it, were but beginning. Now was the first time she indulged a repressed desire for house-decoration; one which later, as we shall see, became unconsciously entangled with sex-expression, and almost developed into a mania. And innocent as it seems from this distance, her initial attempt annoyed Sir Simon quite as much as any of her subsequent ones. The Louis Quinze salons of the de Montfort mansion in Park Lane were scrapped from top to bottom; and, instead, oak beams squared white ceilings, Morris chintzes enwrapped the chairs and sofas, and a gothic wall-paper supplied a background of dim, golden nebulosity. The two pianos were draped in faded Japanese kimonos, but this could not muffle the thousand minute, clear-throated songs called out from countless blue-and-white china bowls and plates when any note was struck: for the whole room was a-clatter with willow-pattern porcelain. On the top of the wainscoting, even, fragile objects were perilously balanced. Then there were drawings by Simeon Solomon, and, in the place of honour, two large portraits of the master and mistress of the house, by Godwyn. (Poor de Montfort had particularly objected to sitting for his portrait, but had been forced into it by Adèle.) Lacquer was there too, of the Oriental, not the European variety, and many Oriental screens crept like angular, gigantic caterpillars across the floors. Oscar Wilde sometimes attended the musical parties which Lady de Montfort had now inaugurated, and these screens were the subject of a famous telegram. She had written to him, saying that she had received from the East a consignment of lacquer screens, and hoped he would give her the benefit of his advice as to their arrangement. In answer, she received a telegram: "Do not arrange them. Let them occur.—Oscar."[1]

Yet, though her parties became celebrated, the character of the hostess still seemed vague and diaphanous. At what precise age her appearance of youth first called for comment, I am unaware; but at these entertainments, I apprehend, guests were already saying to one another, "How wonderfully young our hostess looks to-night." After a few years, however, these gatherings came to an abrupt end. Sir Simon did not enjoy them, though he talked loudly, and without a moment's pause for breath, throughout every evening of music. But even when there was no music, he felt out of it, and as if they did not want to listen to him. The Wilde scandal occurred, and Sir Simon, who, furthermore, was aware of having sat, as it were, for one of that author's most applauded jokes,[2] insisted on having the decorations torn down. The house, as he said, must be "decently furnished again."

The change that took place was just as startling in its way as any of those subsequently organized by Adèle. The Godwyn portraits were removed, but preserved in a lumber-room in case they might some day become valuable, and hastily improvised likenesses by Herkomer were substituted. Armchairs in flowery chintzes, little gilded chairs, eighteenth-century footstools which tripped up every visitor who walked into the room, and Dutch, brass chandeliers soon restored the house to its accustomed worthiness; while to add a special touch of incontrovertible respectability, Sir Simon transported from the country several stags' heads and pike and salmon in long, glass-fronted cases, and personally superintended the sprinkling of these about the house. In all this, he was successful. Yet it was the cause of the first quarrel between Lady de Montfort and himself, and it is to be doubted whether she ever forgave him.

At the time, though, he scored a point. Visits to London were few, and Adèle relapsed from a metropolitan into a provincial life. In England, of course, this last is more exclusive, more difficult to enter, more the "right thing": but now it had lost for her its fascination. It must be remembered that by type she was an adventuress. And, having established one method of life so thoroughly and completely, the adventure was over, should be disposed of.

In the few years that were to pass before she was free, something happened to Lady de Montfort. Books no longer lent her their support, and though music retained its purely sensual attraction for her, she lost now the magic key which had enabled her in a moment to enter other worlds. Novels and poetry no longer disclosed enchanted avenues along which she might wander, and, instead, she welcomed romance on a more material plane. Presently, and for the first time in their married life of nearly fifteen years, Sir Simon had cause for jealousy. She was always to be seen in the company of a neighbouring, notoriously unfaithful peer. Sir Simon, with a touching ancestral belief in the word of a Gentile, made his wife sign a paper in which she undertook never to see Lord Dunbobbin again. Why she signed it, I do not know: but she did. Alas, she broke her promise.

Bicycling was now the rage, and strange as it may seem, though there were no motors-cars, people contrived to have serious accidents. Clad, therefore, in those peculiar clothes immortalized by the painter Seurat, those clothes which seem specially designed to bring out the miracle of the bicycle's spider-like feats of balance, for, regarded from the back, the whole line, from shoulder to wheel, forms an inverted pyramid, Lady de Montfort and her lover would speed down lanes that have never since been so leafy; propel themselves down the centre of these green tunnels at such a prodigious rate, as it seemed, that the little nuzzling winds of the spring would attack the mesh of her green, pointillist veil, and even push her round straw hat to the back of her formalized, fringed head. Such happiness could not endure. A governess-car was the machine planned by the gods for its destruction. The physical damage was not severe, but a lawsuit was threatened. The case would be reported, and Sir Simon must be told. He lost his temper, created a scene: tactics which, for the last year or two, had ever crowned him with success. But this time Lady de Montfort joined battle. At every point, he was defeated. He shouted "Divorce" at her. She replied that he had no evidence, but should her own action, based on his prolonged cruelty, fail, she should be delighted to supply it. But neither of them wished it in reality, for divorce was then, even so short a time ago, a step down into obscurity rather than up into fame. "For the sake of the children," they decided, "it must not be." So, for a year or two longer, the children were forced to know them together and quarrelsome rather than amiable and apart. During these months, though she lived in his house, Adèle behaved as she wished.

With King Edward on the throne, the whole atmosphere had changed, and now the relaxation began to be felt even in these fastnesses of an almost palaeolithic Society. In about 1906 a separation was arranged, and she took over the Park Lane mansion, while he continued to live in the country. From time to time, after this, they would meet pleasantly and without reproach, each delighted to be independent: nor did either strive to prevent the children from seeing the other parent, but, with good sense, encouraged it. And here, having mentioned the children, we can dispose of them. They grew up, as they should, into rich but deserving men and women. When with their mother in London, they spent as much time as they could out of it, on golf-course or tennis-court—in the evenings attended the right sort of musical comedy or revue, and could soon whistle every tune out of every "show," as they called it, with the ease and accuracy of an errand-boy. Moreover they could banter one another with a thousand memorable clichés culled from the repertory of their favourite comedians, enjoyed "fizz" and "bubbly," and believed, generally, in "having a good time."

Meanwhile their mother's life was assuming a new texture. This was a second, but transitional, period for her. The last adventure was over and complete. The next one must be to smash it and conquer a new world. Her pioneer blood was still in the ascendant. Edwardian days were in full, overfull, bloom: now she could avow her artistic proclivities, consort with people of her own type. Many of them, like herself, were American. She became a mote in new sunshine, whirled in a gilded, pointless activity, organized balls or tableaux in aid of any charity that asked her help, displayed real ability in selling the tickets. Her appearance in one of these enterprises, as Penelope spinning, will long be remembered. She dressed now in the exuberance of fashion, and created a stir—unrivalled by any horse—in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. Sheathed in a mauve Directoire dress, with a large silver bangle on one ankle, where the split in the dress revealed it, and balancing a vast picture-hat on her head, she attracted the Royal attention, as much by her clothes as by the well-enamelled spring of her complexion.

She prospered, achieved a reputation for beauty as much as for youth, and became sufficiently friendly with King Edward to ask for that signed photograph, which afterwards remained the one fixed star in an ever-changing sky: for, whatever the wild revolutions of her house which I shall describe later, this royal, bearded geniality continued to authorize her indiscretions. She gave musical parties, played duets with all the leading pianists. From having been unlabelled, a person, indeed, to whom it was impossible to attach a label, she now manufactured for herself a very recognizable one: so that it was easy for her many new friends to foretell exactly what she would say in any given circumstances. Thus they were enabled to mimic and, by so doing, to advertise her. She became, and remained for many years, a familiar, and therefore popular, landmark of London life. And the fox-hunting squires, as they looked at the weekly illustrated papers, would gulp their port, gape and roar with surprise as they gazed upon the likeness of this very young-looking, elegant spectre of the world of fashion, who, even then celebrated for her youth, had once moved so unostentatiously through their midst.

But her triumph was so quick, so easy in the more cosmopolitan life of the city, that for Lady de Montfort it lost its savour. Her next adventure must be to break this too; break it, if she could. But her popularity was almost too strong.

King Edward died, and there were many who would have liked, many more than one would have imagined, to move back the hands of the clock. People began to look forward with pleasure to a renewal of the Victorian era. But Adèle was not among them. Her heart had never accepted the Victorian fog of morality. Indeed had she been able to diagnose her misfortune, she would have known that she had been born thirty or forty years too early. She was a post-European-War type. Moreover, the predilection for monogamy, so strong a trait of many characters, was lacking in hers. To be true to one man was against her nature: but this very deprivation, which for so long she had undergone in order to play her part, full of the lure of the unknown, in the primitive society of the Shires, had, in fact, communicated to her for a time a rather perverse sensual enjoyment. But those days were finished.

Perhaps her attitude to love was rooted in her blood. The Americans run to extremes, oscillate violently, for instance, between Total Prohibition and Total Inebriation (and each makes the other an inevitable reaction). The Pilgrim Fathers, when they left England, were most surely essaying to run away from themselves, to elude the strength of their own passions, that, pent up, had distilled them into so gloomily bitter and cantankerous a minority, quite as much as to escape a problematic religious persecution. As well attempt to avoid your own shadow.

And when they reached the Land of Promise and had set up their rigid little gods, planted the altars firmly in this alien soil, perhaps they found it already possessed. It was almost as though the native gods of this continent, hidden far away under vast, dreary plains and huge, rocky mountains, had laid on this race that was to come a peculiar curse, had decreed that the descendants of these seekers after an iron-bound truth, these people who sought so hardly the things of the spirit, and despised the flesh and the fleshpots, should be endowed with every material blessing, every comfort that wealth and prosperity could give, and yet should always be restless, unable to achieve a spiritual consolation or any balance between the body and the spirit. The fruits have been twofold; one exemplified by Purity Leagues and book-bannings, the other by the enormous quantity of divorces in America, and the very free codes of behaviour that characterize life in the American (Bohemian) quarter of Paris. And it may be that Adèle was now unconsciously bent on exacting in one lifetime—rather late in it, too—an adequate compensation for all the repressions of her ancestors.

She began then—at first, quietly—to indulge in affairs of the heart. But, however discreet, she always loved with fervour. Meanwhile her mind, small, free, erratic, and original within the compass of its power, roamed at ease in the upper air, released from those dungeons of despair guarded by the twin Freudian ogres of Inhibition and Complex.

Soon she paraded her lovers a little more openly: and it was now that a second passion, to become inextricably entangled with the first, definitely manifested itself.

In the days of her tableaux, her home had been comfortable, exotic, full of incense, cushions, orchids and tuberoses. One room alone in all the house had been permeated by a gentle, phthisic pre-Raphaelitism: monochrome cartoons by Burne-Jones and a large painted cupboard by the same wistful hand figured in it. But the rest of the house had been conceived purely as an impersonal background, adjunct of scents, dresses, flowers. Little tables swarmed with the precious inutilities of Fabergé; miniature trees in gold and silver, flowers made of the wings of butterflies with emerald calyxes, jade toads, with ruby eyes, holding a lapis ash-tray, pink quartz rabbits, nibbling green blades of chrysoprase, that proved to be bells, crystal owls that were inkpots.

But now decoration obsessed her, though at first she exhibited no symptom of the virtuosity—for virtuosity, however ludicrous, it was—that she later displayed. Perhaps she did not personally supervise, left it to others in this first instance. Indeed it lacked the charm, even, of the house as she had dramatized it twenty years previously; seemed a pitiful example of that period-furnishing which was already laying waste her native land. A Mermaid Tavern ensued. There was much expensive German-oak panelling, while upon every ceiling, very obviously put up in squares, mermaids played their lutes, and the plaster roses of secrecy bloomed in the least expected places. Old oak settees, cupboards, dressers filled every room with a creaking, numskull woodenness, and there were oak armchairs, built up entirely of a sequence of hard, wooden protuberances, electric, unflickering candles, iron bolts of a truly lockjaw rustiness upon oak doors, wooden latches with strings attached and many other of the cruel, catch-finger devices of the Tudors: last, but not least, there was an Elizabethan lover. He was a pioneer of the waste-places (or is it spaces?), a man as much given to climbing mountains as any schoolmaster during his summer vacation, an explorer, a poet; but, like all his type, alas! his exploring was better than his poetry. The Elizabethan phase lasted for a year or so. But one day the lover left—or was dismissed—the house was dismantled, refurnished, and a Roman Prince reigned in his stead.

Far from wishing to drop her because of this indiscretion, people now gave her an instance of how staunch friends can be (for there is only one unforgivable sin in the eyes of such loyal, worldly friends, and that is loss of money). They flocked round her, eager to see every detail of the palace that had been born within this bellying, yellow-fronted Regency house. And they admired the Ispahan carpets and Genoese velvets, the tall, gilded chairs, the Venetian brocades, the hooded mantelpieces and torchieri, the bronzes on tables of Italian walnut, painted balustrades from churches, and fine pictures. It was effectively scenic. From a decorative, as probably from an amorous point of view, this was a successful moment in her life. The house looked well, had developed airy vistas, seemed bigger: the Prince was large, handsome, cultivated and attentive. Then, after many months, there was a sudden reversal. The Prince went back to Rome, and, as if by magic, an over-elegant young German, like a too-willowy, canary-coloured bulldog, was found in his place. Within a week or two, the de Montfort house had turned München, 1914. Its shiny black walls were now splashed with rich orange and pale yellow, there were divans of red and purple, black-glass bathrooms with sunk baths of malachite, and the whole place was filled with very excitable Munich glass and groups of Nymphenburg china; for the

Germans are a patriotic race, and German trade followed German love. Her friends had noticed, too, that the food varied with each *régime*, in accordance with style and lover. Plain Elizabethan fare of an overwhelming abundance, pies and puddings and oyster-and-lark patties, had given way to more elaborate and Machiavellian dishes, to ducks, for example, that were assassinated, torn limb from limb before your eyes, then pounded and boiled in brandy, and now yielded again to over-rich, German dishes. It seemed as if everything was stuffed with lobster and truffles, and served up with cream.

The young German stayed, month after month. But now the two processes, which were starting to work together, though not yet at an excessive rate, were arrested by the "Great" War. Upon the outbreak of it, Lady de Montfort was, I think, glad to intern her lover. At any rate, she "did up" her house as a hospital at great personal expense. She had forgotten, however, to consult the War Office before putting the work in hand, and when, now that it was completed, she offered it to them, coupled with an intimation that she did not desire rent for the premises, technical difficulties ensued. Various War Office departments played battledore and shuttlecock with the question for several years, but since the war ended before they were ready for its beginning, nothing was ever decided. And so Lady de Montfort had to be content with living there herself (as she said, it brought the war home to one) and with doing her own modest bit, by "giving the boys on leave a good time": though for this she was unrewarded, and received no recognition from an ungrateful country. The war stopped at last—and the next time I saw the house, the white paint, the white enamel furniture, the iron-rations laid by the place of each guest, as graceful, picturesque adjunct to a rationed diet and as remembrancer of mortality, the smell of chloroform with which during those years she had so modishly invested it, were gone, gone for ever: and the sober Park Lane shell now contained a Petit Trianon.

It was with this Petit-Trianon period, I consider, that Lady de Montfort entered on her grand period of beauty, youth and fame, and that the processes, which we have watched at work, grew together like two trees and culminated in monstrous blossom after monstrous blossom. From now onward, until she disappears out of this story—and it ends—the mask is the same, even though the clothes vary: the manifestations are, to all purposes, identical, and the flowering is mechanical. We have lifted up the mask a little, in order to understand how human features have grown into it. Just as in Soviet Russia it has recently been discovered that under the varnished ikons, which are so alike as to be indistinguishable, an original art and form lies hidden; and that to see them the restorer is forced, so thick and deep are the later coatings of paint with which the personal delineation of a true artist has been covered up year after year, to attack the outer surface with a chisel, so here we have attempted some such rather rough operation. But now it is finished. We must accept the appearance—and replace the mask.

Let the reader at this very moment picture Adèle for himself, but do not let him place this lacquered apparition in the dress of any one period: rather let him, instead, animate for himself a fashion-plate, the most fashionable fashion-plate he can find, from the illustrated papers of whatever week in whatever month of whatever year it may be in which he reads this story. Thus will he see for himself our heroine, as she looked, wished to look, would look—if she were alive. For, however different, the heights of fashion in a way resemble one another. It is the intensity of it that matters. We realize that this is the "latest thing." Even though she be dead, we must take her embalmed corpse and clothe it in the dress of the actual moment. In this manner she will most assuredly come to life . . . only the reader, for his part, must always remember to make her look "astonishingly young."

Whether I was the first, the only one at the moment, to watch the development of these strange traits, to comprehend the unfolding of these curious and perverse flowers, I do not know. Certainly myself discovered, quite by chance, how it was possible by riding past the front of Lady de Montfort's house on the top of a motor-omnibus to deduce the main outlines of the drama that was taking place within it. Just a glance from above through the dining-room window, as one was whirled along, and I could divine with tolerable precision, if not the name, at least the nature, of the favourite of the minute: notwithstanding, of course, there were moments of bewilderment, as the kaleidoscope revolved with ever-increasing swiftness. Still, as a rule, a single glance would be enough. "Hullo," one would exclaim, "the Spanish attaché has been dismissed, and by the look of the walls, it must be a Russian refugee now." Or, again, "So the Austrian dramatist has gone—I thought so. I imagine that macaw in the cage must mean a South American of some sort." And I found, even in these most transient attempts at decoration, a quality that was a little touching; the revolving of a primitive machinery, very unexpected in one so modern and removed from nature, which love alone can set into action . . . the instinct of a bird to build a nest. And this perpetual building and rebuilding of a nest that served no purpose was to me rather pitiful.

And now, lest it should be thought that this was the interfering, salacious curiosity of a stranger, let me try to explain the peculiar nature of the link that subsisted between Lady de Montfort and myself. It must be clearly understood that, while never familiar with her in the sense of an intimate exchange of sentiments, I was yet a certain amount in her company: that albeit rather seldom bidden to her house, except for large parties to which all the world was asked, yet from time to time I was, though not one of her very definite "set," so invited. Perhaps she felt obliged thus silently to enable me to watch her, thus tacitly to let me into her secrets, since doubtless she was aware, as I was, of an indissoluble tie.—Everybody is somebody's bore. (Nor need this for an instant be taken as a reflection on anybody's particular bore, for the boredom is contained, not in him, but in the relationship between him and the person he bores. In fact, with very few exceptions, it takes two to make a bore.) Moreover this relationship is a thing preordained by an inscrutable Providence. I, then, was Lady de Montfort's bore; recognized it, made the most of it—nay! gloried in it. To be, after this manner, a specially appointed bore by divine warrant, carries with it its duties as much as its privileges. In this story we are not dealing with her voyages. They pertain to one that is yet to be written. But she belonged to the floating pleasure-seekers of Europe. I travelled too. So that, whether I saw her in a London ballroom, in a Berlin concert-hall, at the Opera in Vienna, at the "Ritz" in Paris, bathing at Antibes, or whatever the fashionable beach of the moment might be, sitting at a table in the Piazza, at Venice, at a dance in New York, or in Fez, Cairo, Leningrad or Seville, I made a point of talking to her. . . or, if not talking, of remaining a little by her side. For what God hath joined together, let no man tear asunder: and we were, as it seemed through all eternity, bound helplessly together in the coils of an intolerable, though on my part interested and admiring, ennui.

I observed Lady de Montfort with care, but there was no longer any actual need for it. The world now knew everything about her, except her age and the means by which she kept it secret. At first her friends, again, were startled by the quite brazen parade of her lovers which she affected, for she would never lunch or dine with them unless she were allowed to bring with her the man of the moment. (She always had a delightfully inappropriate phrase to explain the appeal he made to her.) And sometimes as though by a feat of prestidigitation, a new man would appear without warning in place of the one who had been expected, and a new phrase would surely be found ready to describe him. For, since her war experiences, another strongly racial quality had grown to inspire her passions; an insatiable demand for novelty. But she loved with an equal ferocity, with her body and her soul, whether it was for a year or a night. And her love affairs were very defined: the next began where, and when, the last had ended.

Yet, notwithstanding their infinite variety, there was at the same time now visible in her lovers—with one or two notable exceptions to which we shall revert—a quite evident line of descent. Heretofore they had not resembled one another; but now, of whatever shade, colour, creed or disposition, it was possible to reduce the majority of them to a common denominator, so that they ought perhaps to be considered, either as manifold expressions of some ideal lover, or as the persistent, identical expression which she called out from any miscellaneous sequence of men. Her lovers must amuse, as well as love her: they must learn to laugh, act, and "do stunts" in much the same manner, they must be able to mimic her friends. Above all, they must take as much interest in decoration as herself, and, finally, must play the piano sufficiently well for them to form a rock to which the delicate tendrils of her duets could cling: for now she had discarded the eminent musicians, and only desired to play duets with her lovers. But however much approximation to type there was in these men, yet, as one succeeded another, the spiritual differences remained so marked that her friends never lost their curiosity about them.

As for herself, Lady de Montfort had become a more amusing character than one would, twenty years before, have deemed possible. It would, perhaps, be incorrect to describe her mind as being fashioned on unconventional lines, since this would impute to it too much importance. But if on the whole conventional, there were yet ominous gaps that could never be filled, depths that it was impossible to plumb, unexpected corners of knowledge, and hidden trap-doors from which the most personal, puck-like of harlequins would leap out on a sudden and rap you with his baton.

She had, of course, long ago given up reading novels or poetry, things which had once supplied an element of beauty in her life: consequently, her thoughts were more original, in the sense that they were less borrowed, while at the same time the discovery that many years ago she had read this or that book, and that it had left this or that impress on her memory, brought into her conversation all the elements of surprise, pleasant surprise. And just as she had speeded up the tempo of her life, so had she allowed the engine of her mind to race. She had, in fact, torn off her label. Far from being able to predict, as in her middle period, exactly what she would say, now her friends never knew what she would say next: or, again, it would be more accurate to state that they knew now that they never knew what she would say next, so that after all, and despite herself, this very absence of labels amounted to a new one. She had wanted to smash her former mode of life, but all these things meant that her friends remained as much her friends as ever. She could not shock, she could only amuse them.

And then she was so energetic that, however much she had longed to destroy her creation, she did not want to give up her activities, being content to outrage the conventions without forgoing the pleasures they sheltered. She lived always in a whirl of activity. Even the ease, one suspected, with which she looked "astonishingly young" must have consumed an ever-increasing portion of those years left to her. For she who wishes to remain young out of season must now submit her body to an iron discipline, must be ready when least disposed for it—when, for example, still sleeping from the ball of a few hours before—to contort herself into the most unusual and ungraceful of postures, to be flung round and round her trainer's head like a lasso, to roll, undulate and writhe on the floor, to forfeit for ever the solace of good food and good drink, to go for days with nothing but half a cup of *consommé* to support the flesh, to sit through long and exquisite meals, eat nothing, and show no symptom of torture, to stand up for hours against a wall daily, while an attendant turns on her naked body a hose of battering, pommelling water, alternately ice-cold and boiling-hot, and finally at intervals to be carved about like a fowl, and without complaint or any reception of sympathy: because she must never admit how her days are engrossed, and least of all may she confess to the brutal knife of the "plastic surgeon." Suttee would teach these ladies nothing. But then women are more single-minded than men, and, though uncontrolled and uncontrollable, it was extraordinary to observe how serenely Adèle had disciplined herself in some directions, how, furthermore, she was willing to subordinate everything to one purpose, use everything she possessed toward an intensification of love.

And in addition to love, there was the rival passion, decoration; which, as we have said, now even extended to the food. She was at heart eclectic, I fancy, with no particular sympathy in her own mind for any one period. Out of each one she adopted, she brought very easily, very cleverly, its particular characteristics, and also added to it, perhaps, something of her own. And with the full flowering of this talent, however absurd, it was though she furnished a house with such skilful understanding that it actually materialized for her some ghost of the time she aimed at, or conjured up for her some dæmon of the element or machine, or whatever it might be, that at the moment she was attempting to paraphrase. For now she was no longer content with period-furnishing, but essayed things more difficult, elusive. And, incidentally, she showed real genius in the continual, recurrent disposal of the furniture. Expensive as the habit sounds, she often made, rather than lost, considerable sums of money over each unfurnishing. But then, she attended to it personally, bought the things herself. And often I would meet her in auction-rooms, bidding feverishly for her fetish of the hour, or would see her returning home, her smart, lacquered car loaded very inappropriately with all this new fuel for a new fire.

It is, indeed, impossible to say where love began and decoration ended. Did the man dictate the style, or the style the man? For ever could this point be argued, since it is comparable to the old question, not nearly so silly as it sounds, as to whether the hen lays the egg, or the egg the hen. Did the man keep pace with the house, or the house with the man: or did they keep pace together? It is a sequel impossible to drag apart. Sometimes there would be a lull of a few months, and then change would succeed change with an inconceivable, a stupefying, rapidity. Some of the men and houses, it may be, promised well, but were, in one way or another, in practice disappointing: or, again, it might be merely that she was in a fickle, uncertain mood. Then the Park Lane mansion would break into short, syncopated fits of decoration, that would serve to put anyone save a great detective on the wrong track. One day it would begin to assume a grand, *settecento* Italian air, on the second a prudent Biedemeyer, the third an elegant Chippendale, the fourth a fiery Magyar, the fifth a frigid Norwegian, full of painted furniture and Viking designs, the sixth it would be School of Fontainebleau, the seventh a solid Queen Anne. The alteration wrought within each of the earth's short transits would seem almost a miracle in its abrupt completeness.

During those frenetic hours of preparing, in which the work gathered momentum like a boulder rolling down a hill, Lady de Montfort would be present, in order personally to cheer the workmen on, or would occasionally herself mount a ladder and join in with a paint-brush: for the house must be finished before she wearied of the man . . . was that it? And I wondered if the honest British workmen to whom she gave such constant and diversified employment had formed any just idea as to the nature of the intrigues which they were thus called upon to assist. But Adèle herself had developed such a truly amazing technique of arranging her house, that it was quite possible that soon she would be able to dispense with their services altogether. One touch from her long fingers enabled even the most cumbrous objects to move as though affected by some occult process of levitation. Huge pianos, enormous cupboards, vast tables, all slid, ran or leapt upstairs with scarcely any assistance.

It is, of course, impossible to remember all the changes. The Petit-Trianon period endured for some little time. The cause of it was a young French diplomat of good but boring family, who was a skilful, rather skittish writer upon the gallantries of the period. He told amusing little stories, and played the piano well. Panels of old *toile-de-Jouy* lined the walls, the chairs and sofas were exquisite with their slight, gilded frames and *petit-point*, while tall, specially designed vitrines exhibited arrangements of pastoral skirts, shoes, shepherds' crooks and flat, ribboned hats of straw, and in smaller glass cases stood painted fans and snuff-boxes. The food was delicious, simple French food. But now there intervened a rather bad, late-Léon-Bakst fortnight of oriental lampshades, cushions covered with tassels, poppy-heads treated with gold paint, and arranged in wide, glass bowls, luxurious divans, incense of an oriental, unecclesiastical variety, while kebabs, yaghourt, and Turkish-delight were the only refreshments supplied. Sherbet was served with the coffee after dinner. This proved to be the necessary dramatization for a young Jewish musician. Then, suddenly, all such trumpery was swept away by a breeze from the great, open spaces of Empire. A rough lover from New Zealand (though he, too, adhered to type, played the piano and sang a little) succeeded, during which the high, plaster ceilings were hidden by wattle roofs, supported on carved totem-poles, and guests at luncheon and dinner openly complained that their salmon was tinned, their mutton frozen: but this fortunately for them proved as mutable an affair as the decoration indicated. A relapse into a Queen Anne style followed. This was occasioned by a young literary critic, who enjoyed excavating that period. Together Adèle and he played the composers of the time, and she offered to her guests good, plain, substantial English fare. But a surprise was in store. Without any warning the house in Park Lane broke out into the most complete and fantastic Chinoiserie; old Chinese papers, lacquer furniture, dragon tables and gold temple flowers. Adèle's old friends were really alarmed, for a rich young Chinese Prince had just arrived in London to be educated. Nevertheless, their fears proved groundless, and (did they feel rather disappointed?) the man who had inspired the decoration turned out to be a young German writer on art, a specialist in this style: but the chop-suey, the pickled shark's fins, bamboo shoots, lily-of-the-valley and narcissus bulbs soaked in white wine, the hundred-year-old eggs, so beautiful to look at when cut in slices, with their malachite-green yolks and polished, deep black, outer rings, and with their curious taste of all things buried in the earth, of truffles, mushrooms and their like, did not tend to make him popular with those who frequented the de Montfort house. This lover lapsed, and a young Frenchman succeeded to the position: a Frenchman whose family had sprung up under the shielding wings of the Imperial eagles. An airy Empire style, therefore, with plenty of gilded caryatids supporting branched candelabras, ensued. The walls were painted in bright colours, and the beautifully-made furniture of simple line suited the proportions of the rooms. A French chef was encouraged to do his best, and was not restricted by any fantastic rules. But there followed a reversion to Charles II, though on this occasion, without any Italian influence: a dignified, gilded Charles II.

The dæmon of this transformation was a writer again: a writer, moreover, upon gallantries, but of course upon those of the Stuart period. Nevertheless, he used for his work the same "devil" formerly employed by the Petit-Trianon lover; a poor, half-starved, religious, mild, grey-haired, Church-of-England, spectacled little woman, named Miss Teresa Tibbits, who was the last surviving descendant of a thousand curates, and who now, rigged-out with a green shade over her eyes, like a pirate with a bandaged forehead, was forced by her poverty thus for ever to grub away among the most intimate possible details of the love affairs of dead Duchesses in the Reading Room of the British Museum. And since she must be acquainted with the most scabrous minutiæ, she was continually forced to blush for herself by having to ask the attendants for the most daring and unexpected books; the most lurid of which, she was informed by them, with a look of intense disapprobation, could only be seen by someone duly armed with a certificate, which guaranteed moral rectitude and the fact that the bearer was a responsible person, autographed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and witnessed by all the trustees of the Museum. Miss Tibbits occasionally visited the house in Park Lane on business, and I wondered whether her trained eye observed the living material that waited for some unborn Miss Tibbits of the future.

The luxury, the gilding, the soft carpets of this Charles II epoch suddenly went, as the hair of someone struck with an appalling sorrow is said to turn white in one night. Everything was painted white. The furniture was stripped; beautiful old gilding and old paint were torn remorselessly from the objects to which they belonged; and ash-colour and mouse-colour were the only tints, however faint, grilled bones and peeled oranges the only food, however monotonous, that were permitted. This, again, was mysterious, seemed to her friends to indicate some fresh aberration. Lady de Montfort's phrase, to explain this favourite, too, was embarrassing. She would say, "Why, he's wonderful. One glance from him strips you bare." But, in the end, it was discovered that this denudation portended nothing more exciting than the fact that the new favourite was a psycho-analyst, who boasted that he could unravel and strip the soul.

Life never stops still, and soon colour came back to the house—rich, abundant colour. It was transformed into a Spanish palace. The 18th Duque de Bobadilla, 10th Grandee of the First Class, the 17th Duque de Miraflores e Mirador, the 15th Duque de Salamandar, the 12th Duque de los Nuevos Mondos, the 10th Duque de Alcama Alcarbareo, the 20th Marques de Carabas Viego, the 19th Marques de Guadalagahara, the 18th Marques de Rosina Media, the 28th Visconde de Nuestro Salvator, and 42nd Conde del Estramadura Esta, reigned over it in perfect unity, for they were one person. There were Sevillian, white-flashing patios with, white flower-pots and the inevitable jasmine and orange-blossom, and out of them led the saloons furnished with Spanish rugs and tapestries, Mudejar plates of a strange, gold bronze and cream intricacy, lovely cabinets of tortoise-shell, ivory and gilded wood, and deep sombre velvets. Pictures by Goya and Velasquez hung on the walls. And the food was tinged, too, with the prevailing fashion: there were such stuffed and pungent dishes as Huevos à la Flamenco, Arrozo Valenciana, Olla Podrida, Tortillas, Pollo Cubana, such soft melting sweets as Turron and Membrilla. And it was in this period that there took place an unfortunate incident which occasioned a lot of talk at the time, and even found its way into the Press: for example, "Dragoman" of the *Daily Express* reported it in full.

It is, of course, impossible for us to be certain whether the face-lifting operation of that summer—it would be about August, 1924—was the first that she had undergone, but, at any rate, if not the first, it was the most noticeable, tightening, as it did, all the lines of the face, and imparting to the mouth a strained pursing of the lips that prevented her from closing her mouth. The healing occupied some weeks, and she was ordered to go abroad in order to recuperate. Filled with enthusiasm for all things Spanish, she set out in September to visit Spain with Lady Robert Chickmuster, daughter of Mr. Silas Minkin, Third. This fascinating woman had recently suffered the same treatment at the hands of her plastic surgeon. Conversation cannot have been easy, for the actual muscular movement of the lips, which talking induces, still occasioned both of them great anguish, and, in addition, each was aware of, but must not mention, the fact of this identical agony. They motored to many places, including Seville, where they stayed with the Duque de Bobadilla. One morning the two ladies wanted to see the Cathedral, and while standing in the Capella Major, a verger approached them. This unfortunate man was afflicted with deafness and, looking at their faces, very naturally concluded from the shape of the sewn-up mouths that they were whistling. Explanation was impossible, and they were turned out of the Cathedral for sacrilege. . . . A most painful scene ensued. Tension mounted for weeks. The British Embassy made representations to the

Spanish Government and the Vatican: but the deaf verger stuck to his guns, and no apology to the two ladies was ever forthcoming.

Nor was this all the harm that so small an unpleasantness engendered. The Andalusian peace of the Casa de Bobadilla was shattered by a most bitter quarrel which broke out between Lady de Montfort and Lady Robert; a quarrel which rent London for more than six months. It must be remembered that both of them were doubtless much tired after several weeks of arduous sight-seeing, a very fruitful begetter of trouble, and that Lady Robert had in the near past been exacerbated by various matrimonial difficulties which had culminated in an annulment.

But such sudden tempests always arise out of a trifle. Lady de Montfort had said, "I think, dear, you should be more careful. Of course, knowing you as I do, the old man's suggestion is absurd. But since that last little illness of yours, before you came abroad, you do shape your mouth in a peculiar way, as though you were whistling."

"Is it *likely* I should whistle, Adèle? *I* can get all the attention I need without that sort of thing, thank you. *I* don't have to whistle, I assure you. I'm not as old as all that."

"I don't quite see, dear, what 'being old' has got to do with it. We're all as old as we look, they say."

"Well, I don't think what *you* did made *you* look any younger. You mustn't mind. Of course everybody knows you look 'astonishingly young,' Adèle. The papers are always telling us so."

"Well, I thought by the way you were talking to me you must be older than me. I don't know, I'm sure."

"But I wasn't whistling, and I saw no one."

"And if you had been whistling, nobody would have looked. . . . But I wish you'd stop lecturing."

"Well, dear, then that's all right, but—how do you mean, 'looked'?"

"Anyhow, Boo-boo, if you didn't whistle *then*, you needn't shout at me *now*."

"Shouting at you would be no use. It would be like shouting at an *image*. I don't know what's the matter with you. Your expression never changes."

"Well, yours is quite different, Boo-boo, to what it used to be. You used to look so smiling and good-tempered. All I meant was that it seemed kind of silly to whistle at that foolish verger."

"Verger yourself, Adèle. What d'you mean, 'verger'? I'd like to know. And if I am, is there anything wrong in it?"

"No, my dear, I didn't say that—you know I didn't. It's a misunderstanding. I said 'verger'—you know . . . the man in the Cathedral."

"Oh, then there *was* a man in the Cathedral, was there? I didn't see him, but I'm not a bit surprised. . . . I suppose now you'll have that house of yours done up as a Cathedral, won't you? . . . I can just see the gargoyles."

"Well, if I do, dear, I shall ask you to come and whistle in it."

At this moment, fortunately, the Duke de Bobadilla, his attention attracted by the noise, entered, and the ladies melted into tears.

Possibly this unpleasantness embittered Lady de Montfort against all things Spanish. In any case, on her return to England, the Spanish background was swept away, and there ensued, for a time, a quick, rattling succession of styles, culminating in an African house of little wooden stools and rice-bowls. "Queer . . ." people said, and personally, I received a shock, for one day I visited an auction-room, and was much perturbed to see Lady de Montfort, obviously in high spirits, herself openly bidding for negro fetishes, for ivory masks from Nigeria and wooden ones from Dahomey, for tusks of carved ivory and bronzes from Benin: while the fact which lent colour, if one may use the expression, to these black innuendoes was that the man of the moment now never appeared at luncheon or dinner, though everyone knew that a man there must be and was, and even as they wondered, the sound of a gurgling, jungle-like song would be heard from an upper storey. Relief, therefore, was general when before six weeks had elapsed Lady de Montfort fell in love with a hunting-man. This was a break-away from her usual type, for, unlike even the last invisible and anonymous ghost, he was unmusical: no jungle-song rolled deeply from under the roof-tops, and, only very occasionally, a fragment of "D'ye ken John Peel" would break what seemed almost the dumb silence of the animal world. But the foundations of this new affection must have been well and truly laid, for it endured six months. And though he seldom spoke, he had side-whiskers and a handsome face, and was quite happy for hours sucking a straw. Moreover, if he was not altogether at home in the world of men and women, Adèle found the means whereby he might feel less strange. Promptly she had her bedroom done up as a stable. All the chairs, even the bed itself, were re-stuffed—with horsehair. The curtains, too, were of box-cloth. The dining-room became an ostler's room, with bits and harness, and such other things, hanging from wooden pegs. Roast mutton, toasted cheese and ale were the order of the day for guests.

Next, as far as I can remember, came a famous Russian singer. Now she reverted to type. But, nevertheless, Lady de Montfort suffered a great shock. There is no doubt, I think, that they loved with passion. Moreover, each of these two, who in spite of certain tastes in common, appeared to be so different, idealized the other. In Lady de Montfort, he saw the perfect, English, liberty-loving aristocrat: when she looked into his eyes, it seemed to her as though she were gazing down into the dark depths of the Slav soul. He was, for her, the Slav soul personified. And when by chance they found that in reality they both hailed from the same home-town in the Middle West, on each side the disillusionment was utter, the upbraiding acrimonious. Each felt as though caught in the revolving, circular movement of maelstrom or whirlwind. However far we travel, we come back to our starting-point, whether we wish it or not.

Next morning the blood-red domes of the Kremlin faded out from every wall, and Park Lane went Mexican. High plumes, jade masks, crystal skulls, silver ornaments of a later period, and a young Mexican oil magnate of musical and artistic tastes, completed the effect. Followed soon a Charles X period; romantic, redolent of Balzac and Chopin. Fans, once more, littered the tables, and there were small walnuts, with white kid gloves folded up in them, to show how tiny the dead hand had been. Miss Tibbits reappeared from her lair in the British Museum, for, again, it was a young French writer who had evoked this change.

So the days passed. Take, for example, the chart for just a month or two from one of the later years. Where facts are uncertain, the space is left blank: where one must deduce one’s own conclusions, a question mark is substituted.

STYLE OF DECORATION AT PARK LANE

(and, where details are remembered, of food offered to guests)

1928		*Description of Man*
Jan. 1-22	German Baroque—silvered tables and chairs. Wiener Schnitzel and Moselle.	German Baroque Baron with grey hair.
Jan. 22-25	Roumanian. Painted boxes and painted clothes. Caviare and Roumanian sweets with every meal.	Roumanian Pianist.
Jan. 25 to March 3	Ceilings painted light blue or dark blue, with appropriate sun or stars. Furniture made of broken propellers, curtains of grey balloon silk.	Musical young Airman.
March 3-13	Moghul. Curries served with "Bombay duck."	?
March 13-26	Portuguese 18th century.	Dwarf Diplomat.
March 26 to April 28	Cinquecento Italian.	Italian Count.
April 28-30	Gypsy Caravan. Hedgehogs baked in clay.	?
May 1-10	Czecho-Slovak.	
May 10 to June 2	Toucan and parrots' feathers.	Peruvian Diplomat.

June 2-18	Dutch pictures and furniture. Tulips in bowls.	Dutch Novelist.
June 18-19	Norwegian painted furniture installed. Smoked salmon.	?
June 19-23	Mid-Victorian. Very long meals. “Roasts” of every description.	Young Photographer, English.
June 23-29	Persian 18th century. Tiles, carpets and silks. Two cypress trees in tubs outside the front door. Lamb, served with almonds and roots of lily-of-the-valley.	Young Persian Prince.

It was in 1932 that Adèle branched off very sensationally from the type she generally cultivated. She fell in love, desperately in love, with Thomas Cruikshank McFlecker, the famous deep-sea fisher; a man who for his own pleasure moved through the dangerous, undulating vegetation of tropic waters. Sometimes he would descend just for a few hours, in the outfit of a diver—that rare, armoured robot of the seas, attached by so slender an umbilical cord to his mother, Earth; or, perhaps, he would instead be lowered down into the depths in a device of his own invention, a large steel and glass cradle, and would there remain for days or weeks, dangling in front of the tantalized but ogling sharks and giant cuttlefish, until they gradually lost their appetites and wilted. Actually McFlecker had come to England on business, for he had placed the contract for one of these new and improved cradles (this one was to be as big as a small room) with a firm of shipbuilders, and was waiting until it was finished, and he could return to his work. Meanwhile he needed recreation.

Adèle let herself go thoroughly in every direction. She bought eight new ropes of pearls (for now, since the war, she was a very rich woman), and filled the house with dolphins, mermaids and seaweed; that is to say, chair and table assumed marine shapes, being supported by silver dolphins or mermaids, or a bearded Italian Neptune, with a rakish crown and a trident like a gigantic toasting-fork. The armchairs were all of them re-stuffed for the second time—on this occasion with seaweed, which, she said, was much more healthy, she was certain, than feathers, wool or horsehair. The mattress of her bed, of course, was filled with seaweed and enclosed in a gigantic shell; a real, not artificial one, from the South Seas. In all these rooms there were flat glass bowls in which were arranged shells, pearls and shark's teeth under shallow, flickering surfaces of water. Chinese goldfish, with three tails, goggled and performed their crinolined tangos up and down the length of their narrow, oblong tanks. The dining-room was now a grotto, a beautiful imaginative grotto, in which the chairs were modelled after open scallop-shells, and the table itself was made of nacre, while above it, over the heads of the guests, was suspended a vast sunfish which concealed a light. Here, during the whole of the season, she gave a series of fish-lunches and fish-dinners, which she would preface, when she sat down, with one of her explanatory phrases. Pointing at the deep-sea fisher, she would say in her voice, with its slightly rising inflection: "That is a very remarkable man. He teaches one all that there is to know about the ocean bed." In the drawing-room she had installed a sizzling machine that shot out sparks at unwary guests and filled the house with ozone, until, in consequence, it smelt like a night-club or tube-station (the only places in which ozone is ever consciously encountered). Furthermore, her face had again been lifted that spring, and the fresh tightening of the mouth had made it assume a very piscine expression.

The end was drawing near. . . . He must return to the islands. New and interesting studies awaited him there. The steel and crystal cradle was ready. She determined, which was unlike her, to accompany him. So, early in October, they set out, sailing first to the West Indies.

I met her the day before she left England, and never had she looked younger or more radiant. She was now a famous beauty, whose photograph, taken upside down from an airplane or from below by the photographer—who must lie flat on the floor while she was suspended head downwards, like the sunfish, from the ceiling—appeared in every week's illustrated papers, a renowned forcible-feeder whose food no one was enduring enough to refuse, a figure in the land, in spite of every mitigating circumstance, and one felt that her absence, even for a time, would make a gap, would sadden, not only her friends, but every gossip-writer in this country—of which gossip, gramophones and biscuits at the time seemed the only flourishing industries.

My readers know the rest. Arrived at the ocean-gardens of the Southern Seas, the cradle, which, like a submarine, manufactured its own air, was let down by steel cables. A terrible storm, unexpected by the Weather Bureau, and of an unequalled severity, blew up without warning. Something, we know not what, occurred to break the metal ropes. And so, deep-down, turning over and over, bumping on every current, the steel and crystal cage, devoid of any decoration, essentially stark in outline, now floats along with its two skeletons. She is still dressed in the fashions of 1932, and wears eight rows of pearls; a grotesque exhibit for the fishes that peer and point their cruel, sneering or sworded beaks at it, or lash at it in fury with their tails. Or, again, as though in mockery of an idyll that is over and yet is thus forced for ever to parade its continuance, the cradle settles for a while in some leafy, spring-like glade of the ocean bed, some watery glade that resembles a grove in England, with little flowers blowing from the rocks, and small highly-coloured fishes moving through the foliage, as birds move through the branches of the trees on land, and over all the refracted light plays in an illusional splendour of sunrise, patches falling here and there: and, sometimes, the light hits the glass of the cabin, and reveals within it the terrible white-fingered figures, knocked together by the rolling, until, as it were embracing, their mouths meet in a double, lipless grin. Then the swell comes, and the figures fall apart: and so for countless ages, these figures, in their barnacled hut, moving and tumbling on every tide, will dwell in a semi-eternity of endless green water, alone, and now forgotten. For though, at the time of their deaths, people could, as the phrase goes, talk of nothing else: though the memorial service was very largely attended, and letters and telegrams of condolence reached Sir Simon from all quarters and from every class, yet now, and after so long, there has come a generation that knew her not. The gossip-writers have passed to other and newer topics, and the house in Park Lane—that seems with its grottos, though emptied of its painted fish and oceanic effects, to mock her end—is dusty. And even at this very moment the vans may be calling to remove the furniture from the piled-up lumber-rooms . . . as they called so often in her lifetime.

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[1] Great letter-writers have been plentiful, but, as far as one can judge, Wilde was the only great telegram-writer that the world has seen as yet. A volume of his collected telegrams would make very good reading. And who, one may wonder, is the master of the long-distance spoken-word, the telephone—short, concise, witty?

[2] One day Sir Simon had led the esthete up to his portrait by Godwyn, and had said to him, “I don’t like that: my wife made me sit for it. But you’re supposed to know about that sort of thing. What do you think of it?”—And the author had replied, “Sir Simon, it is a speaking likeness . . . but there are occasions when silence is more welcome.”

ALIVE—ALIVE OH!

It has long been apparent to the discerning that in this country to be a poet—or, at any rate, a good one—is a rash, a hazardous, activity. It may be that there are critics who will object to this doctrine, who will urge that, for example, Byron, Keats and Shelley were not driven from their native land, but quitted it of their own accord, gladly even. Nevertheless it cannot be disputed that these three most remarkable Englishmen of their day preferred to spend their last years, or months, in a foreign country. Whether hounded out to die or themselves eager to go, they went: that is sufficient. Nor will it be disputed, one imagines, that since their passing weak health has come to be demanded as first token, an early death as final guarantee, of poetic genius.

Historically, the death of the three poets I have mentioned was divided by no very great interval of years from that of Nelson, who had first framed in burning words the national conception: "England expects that every man will do his duty." Once this doctrine had been formulated, the part of the poet in the community immediately became defined and acknowledged: it was to die young. Surely, too, he must be, not only willing, but anxious to aid those critics who spend so much of their time in helping him? A post-mortem is always more certain than diagnosis (vivisection, though it would be a more complete solving of the difficulty, is at present forbidden on human beings, even on artists), and it is inevitably easier to spot a dead poet than one alive and kicking. Moreover, once the man is removed, the critics, like so many calamaries, can surround the body of his work with such a cloud of ink that it soon becomes impossible to distinguish its essential features. Thus it must be admitted that more has been written about Shakespeare since his death than ever in his lifetime, albeit his plays are more seldom performed: and that the mass of critical footnotes that, much as parasites cling to an animal, encrust the text of every classic does not make it any the easier to read.

Yet when all these arguments have been stated, there are still to be found those willing—or, if not willing, obliged—to pay the penalty of genius. Perhaps, just as the great whales have, during the last century, transformed their tactics with the object of making the hunting of them the more perilous, so the poet may have become better, if more difficult, sport. I know not. But surely some facts of this kind can be deduced from the story of Joseph

Bundle, the Georgian poet, and of his untimely death; that true though tragic narrative, which, never before told in full, I now propose to relate.

There must, of course, be others who have survived these long years: there must be others who recall, as I do, the aureole of fame which once emanated from those four inspiring syllables—Joseph Bundle. It was some fifty years ago, toward the end of the First European War, and in the lustrum following its conclusion, that they reached their fullest effulgence. Yet even before that splendid culmination to diplomacy—one, of course, to which no Englishman can ever look back without experiencing a physical tingle of pride at the magnitude of the national efforts and its resultant losses—had been reached, the name Bundle was one of a growing celebrity, a sound seldom off the lisping lips of the more cultured. Nor was it difficult to comprehend why such a coruscation issued from the very music of these syllables. Everything about Bundle, everything that concerned him, was romantic, mysterious. Apart from his altogether exceptional knowledge of bird-life (the only other qualification, besides ill-health and its latent promise of an early decease, that is demanded by the public as essential in an English poet), it was understood from the very beginning that in some peculiar, almost mystic, way he was not only connected, but positively identified with the soil of Sussex, whether chalk or clay: that, like Venus arising from her shell, borne in by the racing, foam-flecked horses of the tides, so had Bundle been discovered by Mattie Dean[1] and other *literati*—though, of course, fully dressed and more conventionally educated—cradled in some half-hidden juniper-bush on the Downs.

And this impression of secret contact with Mother Earth that he induced was not misleading, for he was in reality—and he kept it skilfully concealed—the son of a prosperous doctor in Shoreham, and though he had been, as it were, born with a silver thermometer in his mouth, this was indeed due to the united action of the Sussex soil, and its faithful ally, Winter, upon the tubes, livers and lungs of wealthy old ladies in the neighbourhood. This same rich hibernal harvest it was that had supported the expense of his excellent education, and that had finally enabled him to study for a year at that Dramatic Academy where he had acquired the pleasant, rustic burr of his speech—a burr which never deserted him and much enhanced his popularity with those crowds of nature-lovers immured in cities—though I have heard a cavilling native purist denounce it as more Somerset than Sussex.

His appearance, too, fitted him admirably for the part he had so judiciously chosen. Its chief attribute, and that most responsible for his early success, was a perhaps deceptive effect of extreme physical delicacy. And then, hollow-cheeked and hollow-chested though he was, yet with the deepset brightness of his eyes, the curve of nose and chin, the long body and rather anomalous legs, he suggested—and what could be more appropriate?—a bird—the Bird of Wisdom, the Athenian Owl. At this period the old-fashioned poetic preciosity he exhibited was comparatively little. He to a greater degree cultivated, on the other hand, a you-don't-mind-if-I-slap-you-on-the-back-though-I've-just-been-cleaning-my-Ford-car heartiness of manner that must have been somewhat disconcerting at first to those esthetes accustomed to a more lilied artificiality. But this soon earned him a reputation for being simple, and unaffected. He encouraged his intimates, too, to call him "Joe" rather than Joseph, Joe Bundle, so that his name might link up with those of Will Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Kit Marlowe, and was wont to drink ale in almost too Mermaidenly a manner. In all he said or did there was a smack of the soil—a smack so pronounced as almost to constitute a "knock-out." Yet though at the beginning of his career he valiantly upheld what he conceived to be the Elizabethan ideals of beer, sweet and rich, full-mouthed, full-blooded, English—a girl, for example, was always to him a wench—yet he was capable of modifying his affectation to his environment. Thus, were one to inquire of those who remember him, one would be given many varying and apparently contradictory accounts of him. For the Mermaid Tavern rôle was only the chief of the several he could play: indeed, his appearance of ill-health tugged in an exactly contrary direction, never allowed him entirely to forget Keats, or Shelley either as for that: and often even in those days, working as it might be on a sort of spiritual second gear, he would open his collar romantically for a day or two and dart liquid fire out of his eyes: while in after years, when clamorous critics had so obviously given him his cue, and when he had at last come to realize the full significance of his destiny, he was seldom seen except in this other part.

Bundle's first volume of verse, which was published some time in the year preceding the War, had won for him a swift and gratifying recognition, for the poems combined many familiar and therefore delightful ingredients; a sound bottom of Cowper and Wordsworth (Clare was to come later), a little Marlowe, a hint of Shelley, a dash of Marvell, with Keats's beaded bubbles winking at the brim, all shaken together by the local village idiot and served up very cold with a plate of bird-seed to accompany it. The slight foaming which resulted was Bundle's own contribution. Yet in all this there was nothing to startle or affright, everything was soothing and of the kind to which one was accustomed. Indeed, the most sensational feature of the first book was its success. “The critics,” quoted the publishers, “are unanimous in hailing an English poet not unworthy of his forebears.” And Mattie Dean, who, since he did their reading for them by some process of substituted service, had long been the arbiter of things poetic in a thousand drawing-rooms, became so excited and overwrought by the book that he read two poems from it aloud after dinner to three Cabinet Ministers (two of whom had never heard a poem before); their wives, whose quarrelling was so suddenly stilled by this shrill, sweet piping that they even forgot, for a moment, how the score of the evening stood; a young priest singular for his journalistic wit—one, that is to say, the existence of which only journalists could perceive; an old lady who in her young days had been painted by Burne-Jones and had never since allowed anyone to forget it; a middle-aged woman who had sat to Sargent for her portrait thirteen times and had since been able to remember nothing else; two celebrated, serious-minded but dreadfully bad actresses of musical comedy, who said “sweet-sweet” and “I call that clever” throughout the recitation; an esthetic general with very white antennæ; a mad, canary-coloured hostess from Paris, the only possible explanation of whose appearance must have been that she had, by some obvious mistake, been interned in a home for lunatic children and had escaped with one of their dresses as her only wear; the literary editor of a literary weekly, very mousey, with the furtive eyes of the school-sneak and hair which had just greyed in time to impart an almost distinguished expression to his rather mean features; the actual editor, who more resembled another public-school type, the fat-boy-bully; two young artists, naïve and surprised; and the Burne-Jones’s lady’s athletic granddaughter, rather large and “out-of-it-all,” and whose only interest was in breeding dachshunds. “Eckthquithite,” pronounced Mattie, “thucth marvellouth understhanding of birdth.” And, indeed, his delicious twittering of the two poems had been so soft and feeling that it had sounded like a flight of young starlings. Everyone was glad to accept Mattie’s judgment.

The heralds went forth, and Bundle’s name was securely established in nature-loving Mayfair. For Mattie, as we have had occasion to point out before, when genuinely enthusiastic would spare himself—and others—no pains.

Then the War came, and to the recipe which he had already invented, Bundle now added a very personal brand of pseudo-maternity—as if there were not in the world at that moment already enough suffering mothers. He seemed to have appointed himself as a sort of literary *Marraine*, a synthetic Mother, not only to the men under him (he was a lieutenant now) but to all the troops everywhere. Oh, the hidden, the haunting, sob of Motherhood which convulses every line in these new poems! A few simple onomatopoeic devices were introduced, in addition, to produce an impression of the "real thing." The old gentlemen of literature—and all the old ladies too—went wild about his work. He became the Head Boy of the Younger School. Old women read his poems aloud to one another at sock-knitting parties, young ladies edited anthologies solely so as to have an excuse for writing to him, in various schools the masters made their pupils learn them by heart, and all of them were set to music, and sung whenever possible at every charity concert. And each time they were read, sung, or recited there was a glow at the heart. For Bundle was at the Front. There was something glorious, wasn't there, in giving of our best?

It can be imagined, then, that it was not without apprehension that the elders received tidings that their new favourite had been invalided back to England. There was almost a slump—but soon a firmer tone established itself. For he was in a bad way, it was said, a really bad way. Not only was he suffering from shell-shock, but he had broken his leg for the cause. Well—well—well. It was an inspiring example. "Always knew the boy would do us credit." But there was a certain vagueness as to the particulars of the valiant act responsible for this physical and mental damage.

Quite by chance, however, I was to learn the details. And here I should like to confess that from the very beginning I always felt about everything connected with the poet a singular curiosity, as though his career was in some way very specially my own affair. It was as if some prophetic instinct had warned me that alone of his contemporaries I should see this life, and see it whole. And as though he in his turn felt some responding chord he would, when I was present, often address to myself his remarks on life and literature.

One day, then, I was standing up at the bar, drinking a cocktail, when I noticed next to me an officer leaning with an air of negligent elegance across it, occasionally emitting a loud laugh, and jerking back his out-turned, angular arms with a marked effect of dalliance, as he flashed his eye-glass over the polished wood barrier that divided them at the rotund and purple lady, much powdered so that she seemed built in layers of white and purple Turkish-delight, who served the drinks. She, in her turn, was semaphoring back her pleasure at his sallies with a flashing, golden tooth. In spite of the no doubt numerous years she had spent behind the bar, heavy curls of farmyard laughter hung about her in the smoke-stained air, and struck answering notes out of the thousand bottles (each one stuck with an Allied flag) behind her, while from above the fat golden cupids of the 'nineties peered curiously down. “Well, you are a one,” she was pronouncing, “but still I always say that all you boys are like that naow. It’s the war ’as done it.” Watching them, as he began to speak I recognized in the jaunty figure at my side an officer whom I had known slightly in France, and who had belonged to that very unit to which Bundle had been attached as artillery-observer. Thus it was resolutely that I broke in on this gallant conversation, and after a few preliminary greetings, inquired about the poet. Those were heroic days, in which men had forged for themselves a language in keeping with their deeds. I therefore transcribe in his own words this eye-witness’s narrative, otherwise it may seem as though a certain savour had been allowed to evaporate from it. Moreover, though looked back on, it seems a queer, stern, concentrated tongue, it yet gives the atmosphere of reality more than can any words of mine. “I hear Bundle’s got shell-shock,” I said. “I’m so sorry.” “Doncher believe it, old bean,” my friend replied. “If he ever had, it must have been before the war—must have brought it with him. But I don’t mind telling you how he broke that damned lower-limb of his. We were billeted in an old farmhouse, a mile or two behind the lines. It was just before luncheon on Christmas Eve, about one pip-emma; Bundle was on the roof observing. All the rest of us were having sherry inside. The Colonel, not a bad old bird, had been having one or two lately: but that day he was quite cheery. He was just saying: ‘Well, boys, there’ll be no Father Christmas down the chimney this year to fill our stockings,’ when there was a blasted crash down the bloody chimney, and out of a blinking cloud of soot came that mingy blighter Bundle. My word, the Old Man was upset! Thought he’d got ’em again, he did. Knocked the blooming glass straight out of his funny old hand. My word, that was Tootaloo for Bundle—a fair tinkety-tonk, I assure you. What had happened was that the poor boy had seen one of those ruddy birds he pretends to be so fond of, and had stepped back suddenly and down the chimney without looking. We did have a Christmas-and-a-half, I can tell you. Well, chin-chin, cheerio, so long, old boy”—and delicately selecting a clove, he continued his interrupted conversation across the bar.

After this adventure, Bundle’s war-poems became more tenderly bloodthirsty than ever. A new volume soon made its appearance, for which it was claimed by the publishers in their advertisements—and rightly—“This little book of poems has swept the critics clean off their critical feet.” Nor were eye and brain for a moment allowed to enter in. They had been eagerly scanning the bloodshot horizon for a Great War Poet (only he must be after a certain model) and now they had found him. Just as, though Generals are always prepared for war, it is never the next, but always, alas! the last, one for which they are ready, so are critics invariably prepared for the reception of a great poet. In the days of Keats they had looked earnestly out from their high watch-towers, anxious to acclaim another Dryden: similarly, in 1917, they were determined not to allow Keats or Shelley to escape them. And now they had captured him. The sensitive feet grew weaker and weaker from enthusiasm. A week before they had proclaimed Bundle only as an embryonic Milton: to-day he was a full-fledged Keats.

Yet even now the young poet was as far as ever from seeing whither the path he trod, so blithely yet yearningly, would lead him. Milton, it is true, had lived out his span before the rule that immortal singers must die young had been established. Blindness was all that had been required of him. But when, amid the universal acclamations, Joe Bundle was compared to Keats, he ought to have searched diligently for the cause of such exceptional popularity: he ought, then, surely, to have understood the fate immanent in it. Had he read *The Golden Bough* all would have been plain to him. For in those pages we read much of a custom, a common custom more usual among the primitive races, but which was to be studied in its most extravagant development in the ancient civilization of Mexico. In that world of remote and fantastic beauty, where the great cities stood on lakes in the craters of the high mountains, and the white-clothed walkers in the streets, instead of leading dogs behind them on a chain, are said to have been accompanied by brilliantly-plumaged song-birds that fluttered and leapt and sang above, attached to the outstretched hand by a coloured ribbon; where the flowering was so intense that one blossom when it opened exploded with such violence that it even shattered the houses that gave it shelter; in that civilization so strange yet so pronounced, there were many features which strike us as revoltingly barbaric because we cannot at first find for them any parallel. Thus it is with a feeling of horror that we discover that one man, picked for his type of looks and for his talent, was chosen by the priests and elders each year for the purpose of human sacrifice: but first, for twelve long, golden months, he was Emperor and Dictator, was invested with powers of life and death, not merely over the nobles and the people, but also over the priests, those very persons who had appointed him to his fate. Unimaginable wealth, countless wives, were at his disposal, every whim of his must be obeyed, every wish gratified. But always underlying the beauty and power was the ineluctable condition—Death. Every morning that he rode out with falcons and a retinue to the chase, while the snowy summits of the mountain towered above to temper for him with their ice the heat of the crystal-clear days, every night that, wearing a golden or jade crown from which whirled the dyed plumes of Mexico, he feasted among the flowers, brought his terrible end so many hours the nearer. The gods were inexorable: and soon his young, red blood would spout into the blue air, stain the vast and garlanded stone altar, and drip down to the terraces below, while the crowds who now cheered his progress, would shout their joy to the heaven and struggle to dip a corner of their garments in his blood. So, too, it was to be for Joseph Bundle.

The priests of literature had selected him and now with varying degrees of patience awaited the end. Yet not for a moment did he feel the thorns clasping his brow under the very mutable roses with which he appeared to be crowned. He sometimes, it is true, had a queer lurking impression that something was expected of him: but what was it? He reached no conclusion. Meanwhile he still existed in the full glory of his brief reign, the full tide of his temporary infallibility.

Yet it would not be correct to think that the priests were entirely displeased at his return. Theirs was a far, far higher standard of culture and kindliness than that of their prototypes in ancient Mexico. From their point of view an early death from tuberculosis ranked higher than a mere name in the Roll of Honour (for that was a very common fate just then): while if peace were not too long delayed, a peacetime death would be more effective, and much more creditable to those who had sponsored him. Certainly if he could not die then he should have sought his end at the War. But luck favoured him: his appearance of frailty had accentuated itself, and now won for him a job in the Ministry of Propaganda. And here, too, the results were very satisfactory. As a casualty, he could, after all, only have been one in a million: but now his name was worked-up into that mysterious thing, a “clarion-call,” and through his hysterical advocacy thousands of boys of eighteen were induced to look on a war as a virtue and thus to meet their deaths happily.

His most famous poem (which was not only recited on every possible occasion in England, but was even read aloud to neutrals, whenever they could be induced to listen, in Sweden, Holland, and Denmark, as propaganda to impress them with our genius, to show them “what England is doing”) was that one—is it forgotten now?—in which a fortunately imaginary Mother carries on a quiet imaginary conversation with her dying son.

MOTHER:

Even such gentle things as birds and mice
Must pay the fair, the final sacrifice,
And, though the way be hard, you'll see it through
Remembering that Mother follows you.

SON:

But did I love you, Mother, had I love
Ever but that for brothers now above?
I have forgotten—ooh—ah—It is done.
(Rat-tat-tat of rifles—A bullet spun.
Rattery-tat-rattety-tat-tat of machine gun.)
Oh, Captain Donkyns—good-bye, Sir—the sun
Declines . . . I must away—is that a swallow
That blithely (chirrup) leaps and I must follow?

Such poems further endeared him to the great-big-baby-heart of the public. They sold by the thousand. He, though still ambitious, was content: while the literary hierarchs had what seemed the certainty of his death to look forward to at no very distant date. (Then, what junketings beside the tomb, what jubilant trumpetings through the Press, what perfumed bouquets to those who had discovered him!)

The War ended, and it was now that Bundle really proved his cleverness. Within a month or two of its conclusion, he had converted the large munition works over which his Muse had so long presided to peacetime service. He succeeded, as it were, in beating his literary sword back into a rusty ploughshare. Sussex came into its own again. He offered a special line in birds, fresh-water fish, and saying good-bye to bulldogs. Now that he was by circumstance compelled to abandon that maternal note toward the troops which he had adopted, his innate humanity directed itself instead toward the old people in alehouse and workhouse. In fact, he skipped a generation, and became a spiritual and synthetic grandmother. At times, too, the *vox humana* of sexual frenzy dying down to a deep roll of Byronic disappointment was allowed to make itself heard, but never *too* often or *too* obtrusively. The factory must have been working all hands and twenty-four hours a day. It issued continually new books of poems, received everywhere with the usual ecstasy. Then was announced the news that Mr. Joseph Bundle was at work on his First Prose Book. “For that England which cares for literature,” the paragraph added, “it is an event for which to wait with bated breath.” Critical feet must have been in a state of presumably almost painful suspended animation. The day came, the book appeared and was, just as I had expected, extremely, beautifully simple, though full of whimsey and rising, indeed, at the end to a climax of tragedy.

The story concerned Shelley. In it he was represented not, as in reality, drowning at sea (that was merely a ruse of his to escape from the world), but, instead, as going home to Sussex to become a shepherd on the Downs. He lived, it appeared, to a ripe old age, but eventually was made to lose his teeth. Anxious to preserve his looks, and not altogether to lose his power of conversation (he was always talking with the other shepherds, and had, as time passed, instinctively adopted the Sussex dialect), yet nervous, naturally enough, at having to face a local dentist after shunning the world for so long, he decided to contrive a false set for himself: thus, after killing a sheep, he took its jaws and adapted them to his own. But since sheep have some forty odd teeth to the human thirty-two, they were an ugly failure. Here the book ended.

As to the merits of this novel, the priests of literature were divided. Some critics were so enraged at the nasty idea of Shelley evading his fate—it was really tactless of Bundle—that, quite unmoved by poetic fantasy, they hinted that, judging by his conversations with his fellow-shepherds, the mind of the great poet had scarcely been improved by the new, free, open-air life of the Downs. Some, again, accused him of plagiarizing a story by Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith, while others found the discussions entrancing, and voted the book “a classic and a gem.” Yet it certainly did not achieve the success, measured by sales, that had been expected of it.

The hierarchs in private were much more disquieted at his behaviour, though they could not afford to let him down yet awhile. . . . It was nearly a year after the War—but, if anything, he looked stronger. But Bundle, though he noticed in their eyes an increased brightness of querying expectancy, still had no notion of what it was they awaited from him. Not for a moment did he notice the earnest examination of his features to which the literary elders subjected him, not the quiet prods, even, with which they sought to gauge the date of his impending doom. He had blundered through instinct, and with none of that intention of revolt which they imputed to him.

Fortunately, and again without intention, he followed up *Nameless Shepherd* with a book entitled *Dialogues on Parnassus*, which consisted of a series of discussions on life and literature between himself and the soul of

Keats. In it the spirit continually dwells on the beauty and advantages of an early death for a poet. And in a moment Bundle had recovered his lost prestige and was once more Head Boy.

"It is," wrote one of the high priests, "a singularly happy coincidence which has inspired Bundle to write a book of conversation with one with whom he has so much in common, both in mind, and, as many think—and have not been afraid to say—in outward appearance. A book crammed with insight and teeming with beauty, it is a book for which we have long been waiting."[2]

It was soon after the publication of his dialogues, when the halo of success blazed once again, and more radiantly, round his pale features, that I met Bundle for the first time since the War. The occasion was one of those artistic yet "chic" little parties given by Mr. and Mrs. St. Maur Murry in their charming small house in Chelsea. Anne Murry particularly cultivated those artists, poets, and musicians who were very advanced—so advanced, indeed, as to be out of sight altogether. By certain painters of this school she was much admired, and often served as their model: and, indeed, with her little, whitened face, smoothed back hair, lashless green eyes peering out from above her trim figure, rather as a snail from its shell, she had something essentially of the age about her. With these friends she would giggle feverishly at the dull ordinary lives of those other artists who occasionally do a little work: "Too queer and absurd," she would titter attractively, and the loose, grey lip and chin, the batik kerchief that half-strangled a stringy neck, would ripple with delicious laughter. Yet the tracks were there for one to examine, and if her inclination appeared to be toward advanced artists, she yet could never resist the famous ones. But this must not for a moment be known, so, when successful in kidnapping them to her parties, it was always to be assumed by her intimates that she had no idea of the identity of such guests (how like Anne, so unworldly, so artistic), but had taken a fancy to them for some obscure, capricious reason—a mole near the eye or a way of walking.

Meanwhile her method worked in smoothly with that of her husband: for St. Maur Murry, a wizened little man, always convulsed with a boisterous laughter which in itself passed for wit, aimed at fashion. Thus a party organized by his wife had all the mystery and attraction of a first-rate circus for *his* friends—who were, therefore, for the evening, civil to *hers*—while *her* friends in their turn regarded the "beau monde," as Anne called it, with a charming affectation of eighteenth-century *cliché*, in precisely the same light. "Simply too extraordinary," they would murmur in corners to one another. Meanwhile each menagerie, completely unconscious of its own tricks and mannerisms, stared with that blinking which is born of intelligence, or with the perfect assurance that lurks under plucked eyebrows, at the other, while the two trainers bravely cracked their whips.

This gave to the parties an atmosphere, at once stilted and over-familiar, that was all their own. As we have said, Bundle's celebrity was at this time at its height, and it was now that Anne, who had known him for many years, of a sudden took a fancy to his "funny little smile." She had contrived, withal, to make him feel that his own and her notion of his importance coincided.

She led me up to him. Bundle, I soon decided, had somewhat modified his style. The eighteen-twenties had gained at the expense of the Mermaid Tavern. He was in the highest degree affable, but his voice had taken on that bitter, broken cackle so widely recognized as one of the stigmata of greatness, while each time he looked at you, he now slightly opened his eyes, thereby just for a second revealing a flashing white under and above the iris, as though attempting some subtle species of hypnotism or one of the snake-with-rabbit tricks developed by Rasputin.

This new grimace served with most people to enhance the original impression of genius. He also limped a good deal. Yet the distant, almost tragic look of the eyes, when not thus in action, made me wonder afterwards, whether he was not already beginning to guess that which lay ahead of him. In any case it must be admitted that he made full use of the plenary powers which the irrevocability of his fate for so short a time bestowed on him. For the party was "going" beautifully, the preliminary surprised snigger of introduction had swelled into successful fits of tittering and giggling, when, without any invitation, Joe Bundle suddenly advanced into the centre of the room, and announced that he would read his poems aloud.

This, first heralding it with a little address on the principles of true poetry and what the War had taught him, he proceeded to do with immense effect until two o'clock. The two circuses, even the two trainers, were disgusted, resenting this rival one-man-show that had usurped their place; but nothing could be done, and no one even dared move, such was the compelling force of that poetic eye.

The only diversions were a maid, who obtained a sudden but violent popularity by upsetting a tray of plates outside just at the most effective passage in a poem, and an old lady who woke up with a start and began crying like a baby.

If the months that ensued were the greatest in his career, it is true that tragedy now ever mingled with his triumph. Even if Keats and Shelley found themselves every day more and more attached to the name of Bundle, on platforms, at prize-givings, in every literary column, and above all in the woolly pages of the *London Hermes*, bound captives, as it were, to the progress of his chariot; even if I heard, as I did, Professor Criscross say, as Bundle left the room, to Mr. Lympe: "There, Lympe, goes, perhaps, the most remarkable and gifted young man since the death of Keats," yet into the volume of this praise had crept so general, so unmistakable a note of macabresque but pretended apprehension, that Bundle could no longer misunderstand, pretend to misunderstand, or in any way resist the decrees of those who had made him. At last he comprehended fully the brutal determination that lay buried everywhere under the sweetness of the bedside manner, at long last he perceived the empty, the waiting coffin, under the piles of laurels, bays, and roses. And since he had delayed, sales were falling. Now he understood the anxious looks with which the elder *literati* scanned his face—not, as he had thought, to reassure themselves as to his health—but eagerly, to welcome the first sign of ailing lung or heart. (Sales were falling.)

The priests were impatient for their sacrifice, began to feel that his fame had been obtained on false pretences. Even Mattie, dear, mild Mattie Dean—he noticed—allowed his bird-like eye, incubated behind its monocle, to wander over him cruelly in search of symptoms. (Would he never be able to publish all those letters? Mattie was thinking.) Nor was it a happy time for the priests. After all, they reflected, he was nearly twenty-eight. But, and herein it seemed to the hierarchs lay the essential unfairness of their situation, it was difficult for them now to rend him. The trumps of praise must blare on, though the hollow, owl-like hooting of expectancy might be more emphasized.

Yet they possessed one mighty ally on whom they had not enough counted. Sales were falling, falling: and Joe Bundle knew it. For if the English public is thwarted of its rightful poetic prey by a strong constitution it soon turns nasty, demands its pound of flesh, endeavours to starve him in a garret. Nevertheless this great-big-baby-hearted public is a treacherous one, for if too long disappointed and kept waiting, it will turn even on those who feed it, the priests themselves, and devour them, just because they have misled it as to its feeding-time.

The elders were in danger, and therefore would soon be dangerous. Bundle saw it (and sales were falling, falling!).

It was true that he still had the good luck to look fairly delicate (this a little appeased them). But it was all very well for the high priests to say continually within his hearing that he was too good, too clever, too sensitive, to live. Himself was not so sure of it. The nature of his quandary, enough to crush a lesser man, was only too clear to him now. Something must be done, he knew. But to die is not necessarily an easy matter. Suicide was, as it were, a breach of rules. It made winning too easy. Even the death of Shelley, for example, was hardly playing fair (Keats's end was, from the critical point of view, the perfect score). Moreover, Bundle was young: possessed, despite his appearance, of much natural health. What was he to do? (Sales were falling.) And as he pondered, fretted and worried, fortune favoured him again; for so intense was his genuine love of life, that the prospect of the early death demanded of him nearly brought it about. Visibly he began to wilt and wither. No sooner had this process become noticeable than a glad shout arose from the watching priests. Every day the trumpets trumpeted more bravely, and jubilant whispers puffed out the grey moustaches of the hierarchs in their literary clubs. Bundle was all right; Bundle was "doing his bit." Once more they had backed a winner for the Parnassus Stakes. Always put your money on "Skull and Crossbones." In the smoking-room of the Lumley Club, old Sir Wardle Diddlum, Joe's publisher, dispensed a veritable fountain of port wine. A winner again. (Sales were mounting, mounting!)

Alas, Bundle could not bring himself to it. Again he held on a little too long. (Sales were falling, falling!) Through the notices of his last book of poems crept a horrid, malicious, menacing note. A chill wind enwrapped him, who so long had been tenderly treated in the literary nursery. When he showed himself at "the Lumley," where of old he had been eagerly welcomed, the hierarchs would hide behind their newspapers, or even put on a pair of black spectacles, presumably as a hint of that mourning which it was now their due to wear. This they would follow up by coughing in a death-like way, in intimation of what England expected from him. "How is your health, Bundle? We hear very favourable reports of it," they would say in the most mordacious manner. (Sales were falling.) One or two early turncoats began openly to announce in paragraphs that Mr. Bundle's later works had disappointed his many admirers, and poor old Sir Wardle, who was made to feel that the whole thing was his fault, had to adopt, by doctor's orders, a special diet to reduce his blood-pressure.

But now Bundle executed a really amazing piece of strategy, not unworthy of Fabius Cunctator, and by it succeeded in delaying his enemy. He realized undoubtedly, I think, at this point, that which was expected of him. He was aware, too, that the conditions of his past success were irrevocable, that he could not repudiate his bargain without bringing disaster on himself. But for a little while longer he was able, by his own cleverness, to remain dallying in the world he loved, his fame and repute ever increasing. For, all this time he had been preparing in secret a new book of poems. This was the moment to publish it. It was called *Farewell to Poesy*; each line was permeated with a wistful note of unmistakable self-elegy. The sob had deepened into a death-rattle. Pegasus had donned bat-like wings and was flying through these pages, decked out in considerable funereal pomp, for the last time. In this book Bundle boldly proclaimed who were his equals, for at this solemn moment who was to say him nay?

And how warmly Bundle was now taken back to the fold! Songs of sad, glad rapture echoed and re-echoed through the Press. The undertakers of literature dusted their top-hats, cleared their throats, allowed a tear to fall on their black-bordered handkerchiefs, while they measured the body with a practised eye and prepared for it their articles of obsequy. In the offices of every newspaper the obituarists nonchalantly whetted their nibs. (Sales were soaring, soaring!) It was the climax of Bundle's career. The chorus of praise never faltered, except that the mousey little literary editor described in an earlier page wrote, probably with unintentional ambiguity: "This book is one which you will want to give away," a phrase rather unfortunately quoted at once in every advertisement by Diddlum & Co. Nevertheless it obtained the greatest sale that any book of poems had achieved since the early days of Alfred Austin.

Yet, he realized it only too well, either himself or his sales must sink—they could no longer, soaring together, keep company, and herein, as Bundle must have reflected, lay the most cruel part of the poet's lot. For, should he die, his triumph would be more than ever broadcast through the Press: those who had first detected his talent would see to that. Money would, consequently, pour in—but he would not be there to receive it; indeed in this instance, unless he made a will, old Dr. Bundle, who had never for years been anything but unpleasant to him, who was already rich and whose very existence he had managed to disguise, would reap the benefit.

It was after the publication of *Farewell to Poesy*, after his ill-health had become more accentuated, that I met Bundle for the last time *before* his death. The occasion was a memorable one. And it seems to me that, for my young readers apparently eager to collect anecdotes that belong to the period as much as its paintings and furniture, a description of this party may convey a sense of the advanced scene of those days as vividly as would any picture of the old London Group, or the finding of a forgotten poem by some such author as Mr. Conrad Aitken or Mr. Maxwell Bodenheim delved for in the pages of a now dusty but then very up-to-date American journal; but to appreciate it, it must be remembered that at the time of which I write the great religious revival of the early-'thirties was as yet undreamed of, and that, for the intelligentsia, psycho-analysis had usurped the place of religion, and was treated with an awe and deference accorded to nothing else in this world or any other.

The setting was for Bundle in any case a new one, and, as a habitat, rather unsuitable. Spiritually, it was many thousands of miles removed from Sussex; in its style nearer to the jungles of Africa, with their zebra-striped flashes of light and darkness; nearer to the hot, moist, scented and voluptuous airs of the Brazilian forests, resonant with the xylophone-tongued cries of tropical birds—forests where even the sleek, snarling pumas that glide and sway stealthily through the undergrowth are too languorous to be of very much danger to mankind—than to his beloved Downs, forever swept by the steel-billed breezes of the northern seas.

But then this constant, though always unexpected, mingling of sects that proceeded in the London of my youth must be regarded as one of the chief delights the age afforded, for it imparted to life a great variety. Just as it was the first epoch in which it was possible to be comfortably nomadic, ever in luxurious flight from Cairo to Rio, from Rio to New York, from New York to Morocco, from Morocco to London, each journey taking up the space of but a few days, so in any great city was it possible mentally to traverse whole continents and centuries, to move from this to that civilization in as many seconds.

But in this perpetual migration Bundle took little part: he was one the boundaries of whose temporary kingdom were so defined by the tastes of his subjects that it made his appearance here a singularly gracious act. It is true that he would have told you—as would every other person in the room—that his predilections in art were all for the primitive: but lovers of the primitive, since they are apt to pride themselves on their sincerity, are thus wont to quarrel among themselves more than any other tribe, and between the rival lovers of the African kraal and of the Sussex cottage (however alike in their simplicity these may seem to outsiders) is fixed a deep chasm over which no rope-bridge may be thrown. In art it was not so much that Bundle knew what he liked, as that he liked what he knew. After the manner of all English-village-life-enthusiasts, he was as ignorant of everything outside his own county as he was misinformed about the village itself. Every architectural system devised seemed to him a decadence from the high art of thatching a cottage—of which he had read, though he had never seen it. Oast-houses, like comfortable red brewers sporting an incongruous witch's hat, and the flinty tower of any local village church, were also agreeable to him. In painting there was Cotman and Crome, but even these were a little beyond his taste in their range; in music, an old folk-tune, scratched out on what he would be careful to term a "fiddle," to which accompaniment a few whiskered and toothless octogenarian gaffers first carefully excavated and coached in their steps by horn-rimmed-spectacled young Jews from Oxford and Cambridge, would gaily foot a measure.

One did not, therefore, expect to encounter him among people who worshipped strange gods: gods among whom he was not numbered. The party was given by an acquaintance of mine, in conjunction with three or four other men, in a large room up in Hampstead. I had never been to the house before, and found it crammed with guests, their arms pinned to their sides, unable, perhaps fortunately, even to reach the little cup of dark green, searing coffee that was so hospitably provided for each of them. Gazing over the sea of heads, a whole new world was exhibited to me. Alas! myself in evening clothes, I felt rather uncomfortable, for most of the men present were dressed in the loose, floppy esthetic manner of the time, corduroys and bandanas, tweeds and pipes, while the only people attired in the conventional men's evening clothes of the period, black coat and starched white shirt, were a few heavily-shod, self-conscious but determined-looking middle-aged women, most of them with an eye-glass clinking against the buttons of their white waistcoats. It was obvious that, except for them, anyone in evening dress was regarded as an unpleasant anachronism. Luckily, the packing of our bodies was so close, that what I now began to regard as my shameful nudity might pass almost unnoticed. Wedged in as I was, my face only a few inches from other and unknown faces, I began to feel lonely, except that from time to time a shaggy head would drift up and —with some difficulty, for it was like trying to maintain one's place and balance in the middle of a football scrum—inquire, politely yet intimidatingly, if I had visited Dash's or Blank's last exhibition. Rather priding myself on my acquaintance with modern art, they mentioned—or, rather, for the noise was great, roared—these names with such reverence that I could not but be profoundly chagrined at my ignorance in being unaware of them. After confessing, then, one was left to stare this close-up of curious heads directly in the eye, always a rather confusing experience. My gaze wandered in search of rescue, over the jostling waves of faces. Who was there? Not far from me, rising up out of them like a jaunty if rather angular boulder, I observed a well-known lady novelist, the end of her long ear-rings swinging down in the crowd. Who else was there? Did I see a glossy white shirt flashing its kindred signal to mine? Was it—it was—Bundle!

At first, then, I was astonished to find him in a room painted with yellow, scarlet, and purple stripes, and further embellished with such innocent, unsophisticated ornaments as totem-poles from New Zealand, fetishes from Dahomey and the Congo, blood-bowls from the South Seas, and two or three wizened, black and dried human heads, hung up on the wall and swinging above us from their nails by a few remaining locks of coarse, lank hair. The explanation of his presence in these surroundings was to be found, I take it, more in the fact that he realized only too acutely how numbered were the weeks that now stretched in front of him, in which to play his kingly part, than it lay rooted in the essential eclecticism of the age. It was bold of him, too, one reflected, to venture thus far afield, for the immunity and infallibility bestowed upon him by his approaching fate was not, as a rule, recognized here among the grinning ogre-masks and phallic symbols of a different and alien superstition. Doubtless, though, he had been inducted hither by Mrs. St. Maur Murry, whom I now saw smiling subtly in a corner to a few very civilized devotees. The subtle smile was intensified soon into a shrill, frenetic giggle. He could here have found no more influential sponsor.

At this moment and as I thus studied the scene, a sudden, a very positive and ominous silence—all the more menacing in this tropical room—fell down upon it. It resembled that instant of dreadful calm that precedes an equatorial hurricane. The only person who did not immediately respond to this magic and infectious cessation of effort was the lady novelist, whose barking, busy, inquisitive voice hung dramatically in the air. Resolutely she finished her sentence to the little group of heads clustered round her shoulders. “I know it’s *true*,” she was saying, “for *he* told me *in confidence*.” After this little effort, she, too, became mute. And now the threat inherent in this silence materialized itself. The floor was cleared. “Something must be going to happen,” everyone said as they scurried away to the sides of the room, where those who could find them sprawled on cushions. Some went out, while others leant upon the mantelpiece, draped themselves limply round the doorway, or sat, even, in a bowl from the South Seas. Chatter subsided again. Somebody, wisely hidden behind it, struck up on a piano, and, into the centre of the floor, minced a very young but tousled and dishevelled zany of a young girl, with a tangled mop of flaxen hair hanging over a freckled, earnest, though at the minute smiling and rather, damp, face. Her feet were bare, and she was dressed in a classical, night-gown-like toga. Obviously, if only on account of her pretended timidity, she must be a favourite, one felt. Sure enough, after a preliminary rattle of starched cuffs, as the women in men's evening dress adjusted their monocles to see and applaud, there was a regular burst of enthusiasm. Now the piano broke into a regular rhythm, and the dancer began to caper, peer and prance round the room to the immense, if solemn and scientific, appreciation of the audience. Rather puzzled by the significance of some of her gestures, I turned to my shaggy, long-haired terrier type of neighbour, and asked: "Could you tell me exactly what she is dancing?" and he replied lightly: "Oh, just two rather jolly little things out of Kraft-Ebbing."[3] From these she passed on to interpret one of Freud's instances of the "Œdipus Rex Complex," which was generally held to be her finest achievement, both in conception and execution.

These dances were much encored. The artiste slunk out deprecatingly amid cheers and calls. Then, again, there seeped into the room the silence of expectation. One of our hosts came in with a reading-desk and announced that Mr. Joseph Bundle had kindly consented (alas! a euphemism, I fancied, for "insisted") to read some of his new poems, if his health would permit him to do so, from *Farewell to Poesy*. The guests at once began talking and looking angrily round. However, Bundle was not to be thwarted. He began by asking his audience to forgive and understand, should he be forced to break off during a poem. He was not, he said, very strong (as they might have heard) just now. And after this he put up such a good act of coughing, finding the place, and clearing his throat, that even this gathering of modernists was in spite of itself impressed. Anne Murry could be heard in a corner, saying hopefully: "Now, didn't I tell you—there is something in his odd little smile—it's like Blake."

He read on. It was the first time I had heard these poems, and one detected the invention of several new and poignant devices. In several of the verses Keats and Shelley are addressed personally, directly by name, as though they were boys in the sixth form and Bundle was the popular master in charge ("an awfully decent chap, and talks to the Pater about Footer"). The tone was one of "Smith Major, it's your turn now. What do you say?" I remember a couplet or two:

Shelley and Keats! By your example borne
I quaff the potion from the bitter horn.

My heaven will be where the sheep still bleats
Or Sussex: there I'll meet you, Shelley, Keats!

In others he would direct the boys, knowing his influence over them. This sentiment, for example, was beautifully contained in the little poem he wrote to his friend, and contemporary poet, Mr. Edward Shanks. It ran:

And when you go to brighten Heaven, Shanks,
Shelley and Keats will offer you their thanks.

However, to return to our party, his health permitted him to read to the end, though the lilt and dying fall, alternating with the bitter, broken cackle, of his voice took on a note that was a little wearied.

In spite of the original prejudice of his audience, Bundle achieved almost a triumph. At the end there was loud applause, and my neighbour said to me: "I must own I'm agreeably surprised. There's something positively Polynesian in their starkness."

After he had finished, Bundle came up to me, bringing a friend with him, and suggested that he should take us in his car to "the Lumley" for a drink. Much flattered, I consented. We sat in a large, empty room, red, with vast chandeliers. I examined the poet carefully. Though still sure of himself, he was certainly much changed. There were distressing signs of the internal conflict through which he must have been passing. In his eye there shone, too, the light of an heroic resolution. Looking back upon that night, I can see now that to him we were posterity. Much time he spent, almost as though he wished us to hand on his banner, in telling of his work and its aims, of early life on the Downs and of the message, of which he was, all too unworthily, as he said, the medium. Birds, birds, and again birds, he conveyed to us authoritatively, was the Message of life. And after them, bulldogs, and again bulldogs. And, of course, sheep. He spoke to us, too, of the names of poets: of how the very sound of them "smacked of the earth." "Let the words loll on the tongue, so that you get the full flavour of them," he advised us. "Drinkwater, Keats, Shanks, Noyes (pronounced, I then discovered for the first time, in no equivocal, facing-both-ways manner, but, boldly, to rhyme with 'cloys') and a hundred more." . . . "Think, too, on the names of the great double-barrelled women of fiction . . . Sackville-West . . . Kaye-Smith . . . Kean-Seymour." . . . "Even my own name, Joe Bundle," he said, "has something, perhaps, of Sussex in it." Now, again, the talk veered in its direction, and the Christian names of famous figures—though sometimes in an unusual and abbreviated style, which served both to cause you to ask whom it was he meant and to prove his intimacy with them—would trip easily off his lips. We were made the repository, perhaps owing to our appearance of health, of many little stories of the great, of which, years afterward, we were doubtless to inform the young: "I remember Bundle telling me in '23." A sigh of wonder, a new light in young eyes, and an awed voice, trembling out: "Do you mean to say that *you* knew Bundle?"

Now we had to leave him. He accompanied us to the door of the Club. Love, he confided on the way, had treated him as it always treats a poet. "It's the penalty we poets pay," he announced with amiable condescension. He coughed once or twice, a hollow, dramatic cough, put out his hand and shook mine in marked and morbid fashion, looked into my eyes, blinked his eyelids several times very widely, as though this was the last occasion on which the snake would fascinate the rabbit. The door swung to, and he was swallowed up in its blaze of light.

Rumour spread, evil rumour, that Bundle was ill, very ill indeed. The literary world was intent, waiting. Then came the news. Bundle was a dying man. He had been ordered to Italy, under the care of a nurse—gone thither, like those with whom he had so often been compared—gone there to die. The eyes of the elders glistened fondly as they though of that other corpse so soon to rest under the wistaria in the little English cemetery at Rome—stretched out there by the side of his peers. The obituarists even went so far as to get ready their captions and to turn down the corner of the page of Rupert Brooke's "There is a corner of a foreign field," for they must not be behindhand with appropriate quotation.

The dark horses could be heard taking a preliminary canter through the Press. The mutes chattered shrilly while they might.

"Lovers of English poetry," we read in *Gleanings*, "will hear with regret mingled with anxiety, that Mr. Joseph Bundle, perhaps better known as 'Bundle of Sussex,' and assuredly the leader of that striving young England that found itself in the War, has suffered a complete breakdown in health. Always of a rather frail physique that was the counterpart of a fiery spirit and a rare poetic intelligence, he never spared himself in Beauty's cause. It has long been an open secret that our leading critics and literary men, who had hailed him as heir and successor to Keats, were fearful of the strain that his genius—for such they deem it—might place upon his health, which must, indeed, in these days be regarded as a national asset." Or, again, the paragraph might be couched in language yet more grave: "There is always something singularly tragic," it would run, "in the delicacy of men of genius, and were it to force Bundle to relinquish his work at an early age, our literature would undergo a loss only comparable to that it sustained by the deaths of Marlowe, Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Rupert Brooke. . . . Bundle comes, of course, of Sussex stock, and is peculiarly identified in the minds of all lovers of poetry with the soil of London's favourite county. Nor is he the only Bundle to have attained national fame—for many will be interested to discover that he is a cousin of P. T. Bundle—'P. T. B.' as he is affectionately known to thousands in the football-world—England's foremost dribbler. Some readers may infer that the relationship between poet and athlete is no casual one. Both of them stand rooted in English earth. The famous poet is now far from the country he loves, for the doctors have ordered him to Italy—where in earlier days other English poets have sought solace—and many will be the good wishes he will take on his way with him." The paragraph ended "God speed!" though it did not enter into details of what, exactly, the writer wished sped.

These little notices—who knows but that perhaps they may not have been breathed into the ears of the paragraphists by a confiding publisher?—ran round the Press, and inspired, indeed, one regrettable error. The literary editor of the *Sunday Depress* had latterly been very much overworked. The owner of the paper had told him to praise, the editor to abuse, the same book. In addition, while reviewing a novel, he had mistaken a rather unfortunate passage quoted in it from the Bible for the work of the writer before him, and had called loudly on the Home Secretary for its suppression, and for the prosecution of the author. The Home Secretary had eagerly responded, but had inadvertently omitted to read the book: the publishers had kept their secret; and consequently, when it leaked out in court that the author of the passage in question was no less or younger a person than Moses, the prosecution had broken down. After it was over, the proprietor, himself a particular authority on the Holy Book, had sent for the literary editor and had reprimanded him. This had much shaken his nerve, and, soon after, since things never go wrong singly, he, owing to some slight confusion, published an article on Bundle, in which he treated Bundle as though he were already dead. After the inevitable comparison to Keats and Shelley, and congratulations to him on what was captioned as his "Sane Sex Viewpoint," he had hailed him as "Lord of Lyric Verse," and had proceeded to demand his interment in Westminster Abbey, "the National Valhalla." Moreover, he insisted violently that the Peers and Peeresses should be made to attend the service in their robes, for, he added, with one of his most picturesque touches, "only with passionate purple and screaming ermine can they do justice to the immortal singer now no more." This article had induced his chief to purchase a story by Bundle, to be run as a serial, under the idea that, now he was dead, people would stand it, however good it might be. It can be imagined, therefore, what were the feelings of proprietor and editor, when they discovered that Bundle still survived. They relapsed once more into insurance talk, their trump card. But meanwhile the rival journals were immensely enjoying themselves with talk of "a lamentable error of taste," and "ill-informed and wicked gossip."

Yet the impression was rife that the end could not be long delayed. All the old gentlemen of literature joined in the death-bed revels. The consequent rush on Bundle was immense. First editions soared to a price which only ghouls could afford to pay. So it was with the familiar waving of flags, beating of drums, and blare of trumpets that Bundle faded out into the azure horizon of Italy.

What was the precise nature of the drama enacted there, I know not. But it was a year or more before the awaited obituary notice actually materialized. Few details of the end were given. It ran, as he would have liked it, simply: "On October 27th, 1924, in Italy, Joseph Bundle, of Sussex, Poet, in his twenty-ninth year. Nursed through a long illness by his devoted wife." It was obvious, then, that Bundle had married his nurse; and this was all that could be deduced until the next day, when the more fully inspired, appreciatory notices began to appear.

Now even the most august papers thundered England's loss. We were treated to charming little stories of the death-bed ceremony, when Bundle was married to his nurse. Not one romantic detail was spared us. The literary editor of the *Sunday Depress*, spying an opportunity for rehabilitation, repeated his former obituary, clamoured for a burial in the Abbey, so that All should Take a Part. Other critics even went so far in their enthusiasm, and perhaps in the need they felt for a day's outing in good country air, as to demand that Bundle's ashes should be brought home and scattered over the Sussex Downs by the Prime Minister. But the inconsolable widow intimated that such junketings were not at all what her husband would have desired for himself. She communicated to one or two papers an intimate, but no doubt highly-paid, account of his wishes. One day, she had left him for a few minutes, it appeared, and when she returned, he sat up suddenly in bed, and with the utmost clarity of diction, so that there could be no mistake of his meaning or of his being fully conscious at the time, had said: "I remembered England in Her Need. She will remember me. Let no one meddle with my bones. Let me be laid down by the Man Keats. I shall be content. Where I am, there shall a smaller Sussex be." And though he had never reverted to the topic again in the few days which he had still to live, it was generally felt that in this touching idea there was much that was appropriate.

Many critics have pointed out how in *Frankenstein* it seems as if Shelley had been able to transfer some of his sombre genius to his wife's pen. It is as though, while he was with her, he had been able to infuse into her at least a little of his overwhelming power: yet even he had not been able to bestow enough genius for her to continue writing at this level after his death. But with Mrs. Bundle it was otherwise: it was as though some portion of her husband's magic mantle had descended on to the shoulders of his forlorn widow. In the numerous articles about him which she now contributed to every paper, there were whole phrases and turns of speech that, it seemed to me, bore his imprint. Yet though the stories of him, the diminutive tales and touches, were typical of the man, the mystery which had ever surrounded all he did still attended on him, even in death: for little was told us of its actual circumstances. Yet that description of him in his last moments, how true it rang, and how the actual writing of it reminded me of the deep, compassionate instinct of motherhood manifested, for example, in his war-poems!

"There he lay," Mrs. Bundle wrote, "ashen and listless under the ilexes, with the rich Italian sunlight drifting down to him through the branches and a wistful smile ever touching the pallor of his features. How poignant was the sight of that white bed upon the burnt-up grass! But never for a moment did he repine: never, never for an instant, did he allow himself in his suffering to forget or upbraid Nature. Always, racked and tormented though he might be, did he gladly suffer little birds to come unto him.

"There are some moments in life so peculiarly tender, so mystical, that they cannot be revealed. It may be, even, that there are those who will consider that it is not strictly the duty of a wife to reveal them. But Bundle belonged to England, and I shall tell, for only England (and, of course, the United States of America) could appreciate such a memory. Right up to the last, then, right up to the final, bitter hours, he would commune with the birds. It was pretty to see them together, for they, too, seemed to understand. Well, one day I heard a sound of twittering, and stealing up on tiptoe, so as not to disturb Joseph, found that he had, without telling me, sprinkled his moustache with hemp-seed, and that the tiny, feathered things were chirping and tweet-tweeting at his mouth. It was a sacred moment: one of such a kind that nobody who has experienced it would ever be able to forget.

"After this, it became a regular practice with him. And, one day, as thus he fed them, the end approached. Came a time when he was delirious, racing again over those Downs from which he had sprung, his boots, his clothes, all covered with the good earth of Sussex. He called the birds that still fluttered round him, addressed them by name, under the impression that they were his favourites of fifteen years before. His speech became once more the musical speech of the countryside. Again, again he was running merrily over the Downs, or climbing a juniper bush to help some little bird in travail. Now came the great events of his life: once more he was performing that valiant deed that won him honour in the War; once more he was batting for the *London Hermes* Eleven; and then, turning over on his side like a child in bed, gently sighing, he was at rest. . . ."

Bundle, I reflected on reading this account of him, had been very fortunate in finding birds in Italy, where they are more often to be found on a plate in front of you than singing in the bushes. The only bird one ever sees there is, in the mountains, an occasional eagle, and that, from the angle of the English bird-lover, scarcely counts as a bird at all.

Mrs. Bundle, of course, inherited all the dead poet's property and effects, and was also found to be his sole literary executor. In most ways she was, however, very easy to deal with. She appointed Mattie Dean to edit his letters and write his biography, only retaining a final veto as to what was or was not to be included. The letters had a great sale. The reviews transcended even expectation. The only critical exception came from Lady Richard Cressy, who in a letter to one paper stated that Mattie had cut out, in the letters from Bundle she had lent him for publication, several passages in which her poems had been warmly approved and commended and had substituted for them instead paragraphs, presumably written by himself, in praise of his own critical insight. In one of these, indeed, Bundle was made to hail him as first patron and discoverer. This allegation on the part of Lady Richard was never definitely either proved or disproved. But a certain amount of unpleasant bickering broke out in the Press from the hierarchy, each of whom was now publicly claiming to have singled out Bundle originally. All this, however, only served to heighten interest in all that pertained to him.

Mrs. Bundle continued to live in Italy. She was, it appeared, so overcome by the tragedy, of which she had been so close and intimate a witness, that only once after the death of her husband was she able to summon up the courage necessary to meet his friends. (Memories of him were both too dear and too painful.) It was for the opening of the "Bundle Bird Fountain," erected in Kensington Gardens to the memory of the dead poet some eighteen months or two years after his decease, that she made her sole, brief public appearance in England. Even then she was, it seemed, nervous and ill at ease, anxious to return, to be alone, to bear the burden of her recollections by herself: a phenomenon very sad in one still young.

The ceremony of inauguration was singularly simple, and gained much in interest from the presence of the widow. The elders had thought it advisable to capture a lay-figure for the chair, and had successfully contrived to entice old General Sir Blundell Bullough-Bloodworthy to occupy it for the occasion. As a speaker, he was effective and thoroughly in keeping with the proceedings, while he possessed in addition an undoubted talent for anecdote. First of all he blew out his red cheeks and white moustache as though inflating an invisible air-balloon, and then suddenly addressed his audience of bishops, old ladies, venerable critics, publishers and esthetes, as though he had them before him on the parade ground. "Not much of a poet-chap myself," he roared at us, "but I do know a bit about birds. Love 'em, I do. Know more about birds than poets. Positively love 'em. Never so happy as when shootin' 'em. (Birds, I mean, doncherno, what, what!) Shot thousands of 'em myself in my time. But getting old now, ha-ha" (and here he was convulsed with laughter for a minute or two). "Spent a great part of my life in India. Not many birds there—Vultures, of course, and plenty of 'em. After one of my victories, battlefield used to be a perfect sight. Bird-lovers would come for miles to see it, so my aide-de-camp told me. Tell you an extraordinary thing. Forget if I tolger: Lady Bloodworthy, doncherno, decided to give a tea-party at Government House. I was always against it—ha-ha! Well, there we were, all sitting in the garden in our topees—might have been in an English garden. Tea with silver kettles and scones and all that, when (would you believe it?) crash in the middle of it all fell a human leg and arm, ha-ha! What it was was a vulture was flying over from where a Tower of Silence was, doncherno, where a poor devil of a Parsee was, donchersee. Devilish clever bird, what! Wonderful things, birds' intelligence. Extraordinary, I said at the time, extraordinary, quite extraordinary it was. But nothing in India except vultures—and parrots: and minahs, cunning little devils they are, too, I tell you! Had a minah that imitated the Missus so as you simply couldn't tell. Used to answer it myself. Why, that minah can make a fool of *me*, I used to say to my aide-de-camp: remember it quite well, doncherno. Still, nothing comes up, in my opinion, to a good English bird. And I'll tell you another thing about birds. Some of 'em sing beautifully, by gad, what, what! Wouldn't have believed it till I heard 'em, ha-ha! Well, what I mean to say is, donchersee, is that poor fellow—Mumble—Trumble—Stumble (Thankee, Sir, thankee)—Bundle, knew about birds, too, I should say." And the General sat down amid prolonged cheering. After strength, came sweetness. Mr. Mattie Dean was called upon, rose, adjusted his monocle inquiringly, and, mildly beaming, said: "All thothe, I think, who love Thuthekth, all thothe who love poemth, will realithe only too thurely, that in Jotheph Bundle—'Joe,' ath thome of uth were privileged to call him—we have lotht a mathter. The thoughth of thome, it may be, will, like mythelf, turn to Keath and Thelley: two other gentle poeths lotht to uth." The speech continued for some time. The old lady who had been painted by Burne-Jones fainted from excitement and had to be helped out of the crowd; while her rival with the vacant eyes, who had sat thirteen times to Sargent, could be heard saying in a loud voice: "How true—So true! Just what Mr. Sargent used to tell me." At the end of it, an old gentleman like a foolish verger stood up and said: "La—dies and Gentle—men, I have now a lee—tle treat for you—Mrs. Bundle."

Amid tremendous applause the widow of the great man stood up. She was nice-looking, dressed in very fashionable black, but, to my mind, rather inappropriately covered with every possible assortment of dried fin, dead fur and dyed feather. She was a perfect riot of shark-skin bags and shagreen purses, sealskin coats and ermine trimmings, osprey feathers, tortoise-shell umbrella handles, and animal-skin gloves. Owing to nervousness, her speech was quite inaudible, but the gestures with her hands, her playing with a rope of false pearls, were all that could be desired. The silent opening and shutting of her mouth, as by a goldfish, the whole galaxy of tricks she displayed, was singularly moving: so much so, indeed, that at the close of the proceedings, the Committee of the Pecksniff Prize for English Literature, anxious not to omit so novel a turn from their platform, waited on her to inquire whether she would not present it for them at the Æolian Hall in a few days' time. It was always difficult to find something new, they said: though whether they referred to the book which would incur their prize, or to the stage debut of Mrs. Bundle, remained uncertain. But she refused, and left for Italy the next morning.

A few days later it was announced that Mrs. Bundle had been awarded, on account of the services of her dead husband to literature, a Civil List Pension of three times the customary amount. This served to mark definitely the apotheosis of Bundle. The Prime Minister of the day referred to him at a Guildhall banquet as one of the Future Glories of the English Heritage. Sir

Wardle Diddlum was advanced from a knighthood to a baronetcy. Mattie was given a K.C.B. It was rumoured that a Great Personage had bought 2,000 copies of *Farewell to Poesy* (Sir Wardle said that he had made a wonderful bargain, too) for distribution to his friends next winter in place of a Christmas card. The Archbishop quoted two touching lines about a robin in one of his sermons. A Bundle Society was formed, the members of which were to dine together twice a year—and once every summer must meet for a picnic luncheon on the Downs. Now the boom spread to America: a branch of the Bundle Society was formed there, and it was arranged that the American section should entertain the English one the following year. Yet there now entered into the cult that touch of exaggeration which many of our fellow-countrymen are apt to associate with the States: for example, several enterprising journalists started a "story" that the great poet was not dead at all, had been seen walking, apparently under the spell of some unbearable sorrow, by lonely stretches of the Italian coast. Soon, the English papers retorted, the American Press would announce that Bundle's poems had been written by Bacon! Such discussions, however, served but further to increase the enormous sales of his works: for the dead man's books now sold by their tens of thousands. Money poured in, and he no longer there to receive it! Such always is the way of the world. Still, it was a comfort to think that poor Mrs. Bundle would not now be entirely dependent on her pension. But gradually, very gradually, the interest died down. Even his widow's essays and articles on his work became less frequent, and then ceased altogether. As a topic at lunch or dinner Bundle was dead.

Little, I think, has been heard of Bundle for the past forty years. Yet during a recent visit—alas! it will probably prove to have been my last—to Rome, my thoughts wandered back to early days. I thought of Bundle as an old man thinks of those he has met in his youth. It seemed to me sad and pitiful that one who had been so sure of immortality, and indeed so famous in his day, should now be held, even by students of poetry, in so little esteem, and be by the world forgotten. Would it not be kind, I wondered, to visit his tomb in the English Cemetery? There, hemmed in by the dark blades of the cypresses, under those small bushes of pagan roses—not the big-headed darlings of the horticulturist, but loose-petalled pink roses with that faint and ancient smell which no visitor to Rome in May can ever forget—under the mauve rain of the wistaria (the only rain which, it seemed that spring, ever fell to cool the dry earth), while high up above them the bare branches of the paulovnias held their mauve torches toward the blue sky—lay those whom he had definitely adjudged his august compeers. But where, I wondered, was the grave of poor Joe Bundle? The sacristan disclaimed all knowledge. I could not find a tablet. To me this seemed to make his fate all the more tragic. A man famous in his generation; and now no stone, even, to mark his grave. And was Mrs. Bundle still alive? I could not remember.

Some weeks later I visited a little town on the southern coast of Calabria. Even now its exceptional beauty attracts no tourists. In these days of flying, people like, I suppose, to go farther away, to India, China, Africa; and though the great airplanes continually hum like a horde of wasps over this walled rock, clustered with white houses and set in so transparent a sea, not one stops here for its passengers to admire such miniature and intimate loveliness. It seemed to have been overlooked by the world since the time that, a thriving fortified town, it had defied first the enemies of the Hohenstaufens, and then the Turkish slave-raiders, or even since, many centuries before, it had been one of the great cities of Magna Græcia.

I had been here as a boy, and really it seemed to have changed not at all. The crumbling walls were yet as they had been in my youth, further guarded by an outer fortification of Indian fig-trees, some of the stalks thick as an olive-trunk, such as one might see growing round an African kraal. The golden, slender towers still rose like minarets above a town of dazzling whiteness—so white, that the sun glowing down on it threw up dancing lights like those given back by a mirror to play on the walls opposite. The kilted giant of a Roman Emperor still smiled cynically in the piazza, which rested heavily above the Roman theatre, while the harbour had yet lingering in its shelter one or two large sailing-boats. Out of the enormous cellars, natural caves deep in the rock, issued the heavy, acrid smell of southern wine. Over the cliffs still fell in formal swags the trailing, fleshy, green leaves of the mesembryanthemum (that flower the name of which has the sound of an extinct animal), sprinkled with magenta tinsel stars. The olive groves seemed no older—some of the trees were, it was said, above a thousand years of age—and the drifts of spring flowers still surged over the edges of the roads. Only one new feature did I notice in the landscape, a very large, white villa: modern, though it had been probably built within ten years of my previous visit. It looked well-kept, comfortable, and incongruous. Though created in a muddled southern style (Spanish-Italian-American), it lacked the flimsiness and squalor of modern construction in this neighbourhood. All round the garden, a large one, was a very high, solidly-built wall. It seemed, I thought, an odd place to choose for building. Though the town was enchanting enough to make anyone wish to live in it, the country outside was flat, and, in spite of the beauty of its groves, dull to live in, one would have supposed. There was, I reflected, a great deal to be said, after all, for English landscape (think of the Hog's Back, or the rolling Sussex Downs, with their delicious air). Probably, though, it was some emigrant to South America, at last returned to his native place, to which he was devoted as only an Italian can be, who had built this rather palatial dwelling, thereby also ridding himself of the inferiority-complex which early poverty begets. However, the whole matter intrigued me, challenged my curiosity to a degree that is rare when concerned with a matter so essentially unimportant and unconnected with oneself. It was very singular how interested I felt in it.

I decided, therefore, to make inquiries from the *padrone* of the inn in which I was staying. In spite of his numerous activities, talking, cooking, taking orders, bustling from one room to another with a plate of succulent soup in which little octopuses floated all too realistically, waving the napkin held in his other hand imperiously at the knock-kneed waiter who assisted him, and moving his vast bulk about with surprising ease considering the limited space, he had yet found time to pile up an amazing store of knowledge relating to local life.

Yes, he said, the villa had been built some thirty or forty years ago. The man who lived in it was a great English milord. Enormously rich. Lived in great style, with clean sheets every week, they said, and everything he wanted to eat. A great English milord, in disgrace, it was supposed. People knew very little about him—he was just known as "Il Milord Inglese," though his letters were addressed "Smithson." But there were very few of them. Nobody ever came to stay with him, and he never went outside the grounds. What the scandal could be, he did not know. Milord was respectably married. His wife was a very nice lady, and sometimes came into the town. But neither of them ever stayed a night away. He was, of course, eccentric, like all Englishmen. Not a soul was admitted into the house, and the servants were forbidden to answer any questions. (Still, they must like him, or they would not have stayed so long.) Very eccentric. For example, he had a curious dislike, more than dislike, a horror, of birds. And while all round in the countryside they were now trying to preserve them, prevent their extermination, any bird on his property was shot at sight—and he employed several men specially to guard him from them. And it was not that he liked to eat them. Never a thrush was put to his table, not one. No, it must be connected with this story—with the scandal. They reminded him of something he wished to forget, or else it was his wife, perhaps, who thought them bad companions for him. What it was, the *padrone* had never been able to make out.

How odd it was, I thought, this continual tradition of the eccentric Englishman living in some small Italian town, and how well justified one, always found it to be. (I remembered the English hermit I had once seen living in a cave near Ancona.) But what kind of sad story was it which had been responsible for making these two people, now old, and obviously, by their surroundings, very prosperous, stay here all these long thirty summers or more, never to go away, never to see anyone of their own kind? Even in that comfortable villa, the summer heats must have been very severe and trying to the health (think of this flat countryside under the blazing sun of July or August). Perhaps they had lived a long time in India. But, surely, then they would have been more frightened of snakes than of birds! Indeed, the bird-phobia was the most unusual, the most individual, feature of the entire story. How, I wondered, did it link up with the reasons which had forced them to come here to live? The whole thing was inexplicable, and the only answer possible to the queries one framed to oneself was to be found in the simple reply that he was just an "eccentric Englishman." That was probably all there was in it.

However, my interest did not in the least fade during the few remaining days I stayed there. Involuntarily, my mind would play about the facts, and try to find some solution. Several times, many times even, my feet led me past the smartly-painted and handsome iron gates, with their high spikes, past the stout, tall walls, their tops glittering with the varying angles of the broken glass that crowned them. And one evening, the last evening, my curiosity was rewarded. As I walked, screened from view by the shelter of the walls, towards the gates, I heard voices—English voices speaking. Somehow, I knew the tone (unconnected as I was with the whole affair, my heart was yet beating with excitement).—Surely I knew it—a hollow, rather impressive, but now very irate voice. I heard it ejaculate: "There, there! another beastly bullfinch! Why hasn't it been shot? What can the men be thinking of?" And the answering female cry: "Don't worry yourself, dear. Don't let it upset you. After all, the poor little thing can't do you any harm now." Carefully, soundlessly approaching, I looked round the corner at the gate. There, pressed close up against the bars, stood an old lady, with white hair, an old man, very carefully dressed, with a trim beard trained to mask rather cavernous cheeks. He saw me. A terrified glance of recognition darted out at me from his rather inspired eyes, that, as they gazed into mine, mechanically opened wider, and then narrowed, to give an effect of radiance. Hurriedly he turned away and shuffled behind the wall; but not before I had, in my turn, been able to identify the body of the dead poet, Joseph Bundle.

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[1] For full description of Mattie, though when he is some years older, see the name-story in *Triple Fugue*.

[2] This passage, subsequently quoted on the jacket of the second edition by the publisher, earned for poor Bundle his only bad review. So quickly had the first edition been sold out that this sentence caught the eye of Mr. Shins (another Georgian poet) before that gentle young man had finished his review of the book for a leading morning paper. For some years Mr. Shins had made a practice of sitting directly under the portrait of Keats—at the Poetry Bookshop, in his own room, or in any other place where he could find one—with his profile at a similar angle to emphasize what he believed to be a quite extraordinary resemblance: when, therefore, he saw the pretensions of his rival so boldly stated, he tore up his favourable review on which he had been at work, and made of it the full, furious use which the opportunity afforded him.

[3] Author of *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

THE GREETING

From outside the long, large windows fires could be seen flickering in many wide grates, while the comforting sense, more than smell, of warm food oozed out of the whole house, subduing the sharper scent of frosty air. The dining-room table, she noticed as she passed by, was laid for three persons, and decorated with four small silver vases, from which a few very rigid flowers drew themselves up into the light of the windows. The sideboard showed beyond, bearing various drab meats and some pieces of plate, its cold glitter tempered by the flames with patches of warm orange.

As soon as Nurse Gooch was shown into the drawing-room, almost, indeed, before she had shaken hands or remarked how nice it was to see a fire, they went in to luncheon. But seated before this white expanse, these three people could not succeed in materializing any conversation, that, as talk should, drawing its strength from the group but stronger than any individual member of it, would continue almost automatically, reproducing itself or taking on a fresh form from time to time. In the same way in which spiritualists claim that the presence of one sceptic at a séance is sufficient to prevent any manifestation, however hoped for and credited by the majority, here it was difficult for the talk to glow or prosper, when one of this small party was continually exerting her will to the utmost in order to produce a lasting and uncomfortable silence. The stagnant quiet of the room was seldom broken, then, except by the rather horse-like stepping of the footmen, or by the thin, stringy voice of the invalid projected through the mute air in querulous inquiry. And, in the very act of speaking herself, both by the purpose and calculated tone of her question, she enforced a silence on the others. Colonel Tonge tried to make conversation to the new-comer, placed between him and his sick wife, but his abrupt, pompous little sentences soon withered, frozen on the air by his wife's disapproval. Mrs Tonge, however, as we have said, permitted herself to ask a question occasionally—a question which, though it appeared innocent, was designed to convey to her new nurse the impression that she was an injured, ill-used woman. "When, Humphrey," she would ask, "do you intend to put electric light into the house? I have asked you to do it for so many years now. I am sure I should sleep better, and should not be such a worry to you or to Nurse," or "What about that summer-house, Humphrey? Will it be ready for me in the spring? If I am still with you, I intend going there every day when the weather is warmer. Perhaps I shall find a little peace there in the woods.

But I fear it hasn't been touched yet." To these questions the Colonel returned smooth, soothing answers, but ones which did not commit him in any way; but these, rather than conciliating the invalid, seemed only to vex her the more. But at this early period, before she understood her nurse, before she knew that anything she said would soon be pardoned, she did not actually as yet accuse her husband of doing all in his power to make and keep her ill, but was content to let this accusation remain implicate in her questions, and in the sound of her voice. Still, Nurse Gooch felt instinctively that Mrs Tonge did not want to hurt her, that she was not in reality ill-natured, but that this calculated putting-out of the social fire was the outcome of a thousand little injuries inflicted by an imagination warped by constant illness and want of sleep. But whether it was due to the atmosphere created by this friction between husband and wife, or to something in the surroundings—in the house itself—she did most certainly, at this first moment of her arrival, experience an uneasy feeling, a slight repulsion from the Grove, which passed as soon as she became better acquainted with it.

Tonge's Grove, a square house, lies like a box thrown down among hanging woods and open commons—a charming residence in many ways. Like a doll's house it seems, each room giving the correct proportion to the rather under-life-size figures it displays. A curiously inappropriate setting, certainly, for any drama, the protagonists of which must find themselves cramped in their action by the wealth of detail imposed. The very comfort and well-being of the place would give a grotesque air to any but an accustomed or trivial event. For here, long habit appears so much more important than the occasion or fact it originally enshrined, inanimate objects so much more actual, more active, than human beings, that it is upon the house, and not upon its owners, that our attention is first focused. It is this superfluity of things, combined with a rigorous pruning of reality, that gives a certain significance to any fact of life should it be strong enough to enter these gates, yet remain quick. For reality, which is usually unpleasant, seldom touches lives such as these except at birth, of which, fortunately, we are all ignorant, or at death, a latent, lurking fear (an ogre at the end of every passage), but one which it is our very human convention to ignore.

The Grove is not really a small house; the rooms in it are large and numerous; but, like a square toy thrown in among garden beds and stables, crinoline-shaped lime-trees and red-walled angular orchards, among, in fact, all the long-settled paraphernalia annexed to a prosperous, well-ordered way-of-life, it was endowed with a perfection such as at first to make it seem miniature, like some exquisite model seen through a glass-case.

Certainly there is beauty about an estate of this kind: that tamed country sentiment, so English in quality, clings to it, till even the bird-song that trickles down through the dripping blue shadows thrown by tall trees seems arranged, punctual, and correct as the mechanical chirping of one of those clock-work birds that lifts enamelled wings out of a square black box; and even the cuckoo, who makes so ominous a sound from the cool green fortifications of wood or hedgerow, here changes his note till it rings hollow and pure as a church bell. No sense of mystery broods in the green and open spaces bathed in yellow summer sunlight; here are no caves, grottos, or tumbling torrents: everything is neat, shallow as the clear, slightly-running streams that border the wood; yet surely such beauty is, in a way, more fantastic than any of Leonardo's piled-up rocks or those worlds of ogres and giants to which we are carried off by some of the primitive painters.

In the winter it is, that all these country places are seen in their best, their most typical, phase. Stout built for cold weather, these houses take on a new quality, upstanding among hoar-frost, glowing warmly through the crisp, grey air. The first impression of the Grove would be, we think, a childlike memory of potting-shed smells, full of the scents of hidden growth; an odour of bulbs, stoves, rich fibrous mould, and bass, mingles with the sharp aromatic smell of the bonfire that crackles outside. On the walls of the shed the bass is hung up like so many beards of old men—ritual beards, like those of Pharaoh or Egyptian priest, which, perhaps, the gardener will don for the great occasions of his year. This one he would put on for the opening of the first spring flower, coming up glazed and shrill, its petals folded as if in prayer, out of the cold brown earth, beneath the laced shadows woven by the bare branches of the trees; this he will wear for the brazen trumpet-like blowing of the tulip-tree; while that one he reserves for the virginal unfolding of the magnolia, or the gathering up of petals let drop by the last rose. But the gardener himself soon dispels these tender imaginings, as you see his burly form bent over various cruel tasks—the trapping of the soft mole, or in aiming at the fawn-coloured fluffy arcs of the rabbits, as they crouch in their green cradles, their ears well back, nibbling the tender white shoots that he has so carefully nurtured.

Outside the shed in many glass frames large violets, ranging in tone from a deep purple through magenta to an almost brick-red, their petals scintillating damply, glisten like crystallized fruit seen through a glass window, sweet but unapproachable. The ground of the kitchen garden is hard and shiny, starched with frost; trees, shrubs, and the very grass are stiff and brittle, sweeping down under the slight wind with a shrill, steely sound. But the orchard walls still glow as if stained with the juice of the ripe fruits that press against them in summer and autumn, red, purple, and bloomy, while the house beyond shows warmly through the trees whose topmost twigs pattern themselves about it, like cobwebs against the sky; soft it is, as if cut from red velvet. Out of its doors and windows sounds the monotonous, dry-throated rattle of pet dogs, setting up a comfortable yet irritating competition with the noises of stable and farmyard, where rosy-faced men bustle about, lumbering in heavy boots; or, leaning to one side, the right arm lifted and at an angle, blow loudly and whistle, as they polish still more the varnished horses, their breathing lingering on after them in the sharp air like dragon's-breath. Through the windows of the house each fireplace shows up, while the red flowers blaze in it, or die down to a yellow flicker, fighting ineffectually against the thin silver rapiers of the winter sun. But more than all these things would you notice here the bitter cackle of a green parrot, falling through the drawn-out air with a horrid clatter, tumbling all lesser sounds down like a pack of cards. Certainly that menacing silly sound of a parrot's laughter would be your most abiding memory.

On such a noon as this it was that Nurse Gooch had first driven up to the Grove; so that, even if her first impression was a rather uneasy one, she had at any rate seen it wearing its most pleasant, most comfortable, aspect; for at night the character of every house changes—and this one alters more than most. The smiling comfort of the surroundings is lost, fades out into utter blackness, and a curious sub-flavour, unnoticed in the day, manifests itself. There are places and moments when the assumptions, the lean conventions on which our lives are based, become transparent, while, for an instant, the world we have made rocks with them. It is, for example, usually assumed that there are no such creatures as sea-serpents, yet there are certain places in Europe, on our own placid coasts even, of such marvellous formation that we feel, suddenly, that the existence of these monsters is a certainty—that it would surprise us less to see a vast beast, such as those painted by Piero di Cosimo, with flame-forked tongue, gigantic head, and long writhing body, coming up out of the fathomless green depths, than to see a passing country cart, a clergyman, or anything to which our experience has accustomed us. There are moments, too, when death, which, as we have said, it is usually our custom to hide away in a dusty corner of our minds, peeps round at us, grimacing—and we realize it as one of the universal and most awful conditions upon which we are permitted to take up life. So it was with the Grove, when darkness coffined it round. The dwarf perfection which we have attempted to describe, would gradually disappear; for the very dimensions of the house seemed to alter as the rooms became swollen with darkness, full of inexplicable sound. Dead people walk here with more certain step than the living, their existence seems more substantial, their breathing more audible. The boarding of the floor yields under an invisible step, as if some strange memory stirs in it, and the panelling of the walls, the very furniture, make themselves heard with a hard, wooden creaking, which is magnified in these rooms now grown to the new proportions with which night endows them. And, in the darkness outside, everything moves, stirs, rustles.

It was therefore not to be wondered at that the Grove should have acquired the reputation of being haunted, though, really, the unhappy restless air that pervaded it at night may have been due more to its long association with a family of sad, unfortunate temperament—amounting in certain cases to something worse—than to the actual walking presence of any ghost. For ever since the present house was built, late in the seventeenth century, it had been in the possession of the Tonges and, until recently, until in fact the present owner had inherited the estate, there had been a long history connected with it of brooding melancholy, that must have been nearly allied to madness.

But Colonel Tonge, as we have seen, presented an ordinary enough character, with nerves unaffected, betraying no sign of hereditary disorder. Among the properties we have described—house, lawn, garden, farm, and stables—this not altogether unattractive figure emerges, strutting like a bantam. A proud little man, with a fairly distinguished military career, fond of hunting and shooting, he was much engaged in the business of an estate, the extent and importance of which he was apt to magnify in his own mind. In addition to these interests, he was involved in the affairs of every district committee, and, as became him in his dual capacity of squire and military man, was much to the fore in all those local philanthropic schemes which had for their object the welfare of the ex-soldier, or the helping of widow and children.

Yet in spite of this inherited make-up of country gentleman and the acquired one of soldier, there was about the Colonel on closer acquaintance some quality that removed him ever so little from the usual specimen of his class, just as there was something about the Grove that differentiated it from the run of English country houses. In what, then, did this difference consist? Partly, perhaps, in the stress that he laid upon the importance of his belongings, and therefore of himself; but more, surely, in the extraordinary calm that marked his demeanour—a quiet unruffled calm, not quite in accord with his bristling appearance and apparent character. One never saw him lose his temper, never even about trivialities, such as is the way of most military commanders; yet this restraint did not seem to arise so much from good nature as from the fear of losing his self-control even for a moment—suggesting that he was suppressing some instinct or emotion which must be very strong within him, if it was necessary continually to exert such an iron self-discipline. This contrast between nature and manner showed itself, too, in the difference between his uneasy, wandering eyes and the tightly-drawn mouth. But if Nurse Gooch had, with more than her normal sensitiveness, felt at first that there was a rather queer atmosphere about the house, she had at any rate detected nothing unusual in the look or manner of this amiable, rather pompous, little man, and, indeed, the only person who appreciated thoroughly these various subtle distinctions was Mrs Tonge. This poor lady had married her first cousin, and appeared to have inherited or acquired his, as well as her own, share of the peculiarly nervous temperament of this family. Thin, tall, and of that ash-grey colour which betokens constant sleeplessness, her rather sweet expression, while it was in direct contradiction to her restless, irritable soul, was the only remnant of a former prettiness. For, when first she married, she had been a good-looking, high-spirited girl, but had suddenly, swiftly, sunk into this state of perpetual and somewhat nagging melancholy. She was in reality a stupid woman, but her frayed nerves bestowed upon her an understanding of, and insight into, the unpleasant side of life that were alarming in the sureness of their judgment, and must have made of her a trying companion. She added to these heightened perceptions a sense of grievance, aggravated by an absolute lack of any interest or occupation, and by the fact that she was childless. She complained constantly, her chief lament being that there were only three creatures in the world that cared for her, two dogs—a Pomeranian and a Pekinese—and her beloved green parrot! Often she would add a remark to the effect that her husband would like—was, in fact, only waiting for—Polly to die. His triumph would then, apparently, be complete. And it must truthfully be said that the only thing which ever seemed to disturb the Colonel's calm was the idiot-laughter which the parrot would let fall through the darkened air of the sick woman's room. But though the slightest noise at any other time would strain Mrs Tonge's taut nerves almost to breaking-point, she appeared actually to enjoy her bird's head-splitting mirth; while the parrot, in return, seemed to acknowledge some bond of affection between his mistress and himself, for, were she more than usually ill, he would be ever so quiet, not venturing to exercise his marked mimetic gifts, even repressing his habitual laughter.

This love for her parrot and her pet dogs, together with a certain trust in, more than affection for, her young nurse—a trust which developed as the months passed—were all the assets of which Mrs Tonge was conscious in this life. For the rest she was lonely and frightened . . . very frightened. Her whole existence was spent in a continual state of fear—one of the worst symptoms, though quite a common one, of neurasthenia; she was afraid of her neighbours, her husband, her house, terrified by everything and everybody alike. But while frightened of everything, she was as consistently opposed to any plan for the alleviation of these imagined terrors.

Afraid, though seemingly without reason, of her husband, she was yet never able to refrain from making the fullest use of any opportunity to irritate, hurt, or annoy him. But he was very patient with her. She would taunt him with things big and little; she would attack him about his self-importance, or goad him before the nurse about his fondness for giving good advice to others, in a manner that must have made him feel the sting of truth. She would even accuse him of wishing to be rid of her—a poor invalid and one who was in his way—an accusation which, however, she could never really have believed for a moment. She would tell him that he had a cruel soul, and in her sick mind seemed to have fashioned a grotesque, caricatured little image of her husband, which, to her, had at last come to be the reality—an image, unlike yet in a way recognizable, of a queer, patient, cruel, rather wolf-like creature, hiding his true self beneath the usual qualities attached to the various very ordinary interests and pursuits in which his life was spent.

In spite of this extraordinary conception of him, Mrs Tonge was always calling for her husband. Her plaintive voice echoing through the square, lofty rooms would be answered by his gruff, military tones so often that one of the parrot's most ingenious tricks was a perfect rendering of "Humphrey, come here a minute!" and the answering call, "Yes, Mary, I'm coming," followed by the sound of hurrying footsteps. Thus, though frightened of him, though almost hating him, the invalid would hardly allow her husband to leave her, if only for a day.

Still more was Mrs Tonge frightened of her house—that home which she knew so intimately. But, in the same perverse manner, she would never quit it, even for a night. While suffering terribly from insomnia, and from that fear of darkness which, though it usually leaves us when our childhood is past, had never wholly left her, she was steadfast in her refusal to allow Nurse Gooch to sleep in the same room, thus lessening these nocturnal terrors by human companionship. On the contrary, the sick woman not only insisted on being alone, but was resolute in locking both the doors of her room, one of which led into her husband's bedroom, the other into the passage outside, so that had she been seized with sudden illness, which was not altogether unlikely, no help could have reached her. Thus, bolted securely within those four walls, she would indulge her broken spirit in an orgy of sleepless terror. The dogs slept downstairs: her only companion was Polly, noiseless now, but faithful as ever, sitting hunched up on his perch, his dome-like cage enveloped in a pall of grey felt; and, even had he sounded his bitter, head-splitting laughter, it would have seemed more sweet than the music of any Southern nightingales to the poor invalid, tossing about on her bed. For the parrot, alone of the animal world, could give his mistress some feeling of momentary security.

Day would come at last, to bring with it an hour or two of grey, unrefreshing sleep. The afternoon she would spend knitting, seated in a large armchair in front of the fire, in her over-heated boudoir, crowded with strong-smelling flowers. Photographs of friends—friends whom she had not seen for years and had perhaps never really cared for—littered all the furniture, and clambered up the walls, over the fireplace, in an endless formation, imbuing the room with that peculiar, morbid tone of old photographs, yellow and glazed as death itself. Bustles, bonnets, then straw hats and leg-of-mutton sleeves, showed grotesquely in these little squares of faded, polished cardboard, set off by a palm-tree in an art-pot, a balustraded terrace, a mountainous yet flat background, or one of those other queer properties of the old photographic world. The wistful smiles on these pretty faces were now gone like her own, the smoothness of the skin was now replaced by hundreds of ever so small wrinkles, the fruit of care, sorrow, or some seed of ill-nature or bad temper that, undreamt of then, had now blossomed. The rest of open space on table, piano, or writing-desk was taken up by diminutive unconnected vases of violets, freesias or jonquils, their heavy breath weighing on the air like a cloud, seeming among these photographs so many floral tributes to dead friendship, each one marking the grave of some pretended or genuine affection. The room was overloaded with these vases; the flowers lent no grace to the room, no sweetness to the overburdened air. The Pomeranian yapped at Mrs Tonge’s feet, the Pekinese lay curled up in a basket, while at her elbow the parrot picked at a large, white grape, the stale odour of the bird’s cage mingling with the already stifling atmosphere of the room, till it become almost intolerable. Here the invalid would sit for hours enjoying one of the thousand little grievances from which she was able to choose, turning it over and pecking at it like the parrot at his grape; or, perhaps she would be gripped by one of the manifold terrors of her life. Then that supreme horror, the fear of death (which, as she grew older, claimed an ever-greater part of her attention), grimaced at her from the scented shadows, till it seemed to her as if she sat there knitting endlessly her own shroud, and the vases of flowers transformed their shapes, rearranging themselves till they became wreaths and crosses, and the hot smell they exhaled became the very odour of death. Then she would ring again, calling for Nurse Gooch, but even that familiar footfall would make her shudder for an instant.

Her only pleasures now consisted in the tormenting of her even-tempered husband, or, in a lesser degree, of the poor young nurse—to whom she had now become attached in the same sense that a dog is attached to any object, such as a doll or an india-rubber ball, which it can worry. But Gooch, good and amiable, clean-looking rather than pretty, her face fully expressing that patience and kindness which were her two great qualities, won the affections not only of the invalid but of Colonel Tonge, and even of the servants—this latter no mean conquest when it is remembered that there is a traditional feud between servants and trained nurse, almost rivalling that other hereditary vendetta between nursery and schoolroom. Nurse Gooch was really fond of her patient, in spite of the maddening irritation of her ways: nor had she been unhappy during these eighteen months that had followed her luncheon at the Grove on that first winter day. For after the hardships of her own childhood, she appreciated this solid, very comfortable home, while it presented to her a full scope for the exercise of those protective instincts which were particularly deep-rooted in her nature. Often, in a way, she envied Mrs Tonge her kind husband and charming house, thinking how happy the invalid might have been had only her disposition been a different one. For in Colonel Tonge the young nurse could see nothing but consideration for his ill wife, and kindness indeed to everyone, till, slowly, she formed in her own mind an image of him very different from that fashioned by his wife. To Nurse Gooch he was a model of suffering chivalry; to her his stature and heart seemed great, his importance equal to his own estimate of it. In fact, he became that very appealing combination—one which always fascinates the English people—a hero in public, a martyr in private, life. And it was a source of great comfort for her to reflect that by keeping Mrs Tonge in as good a mood as possible, or, to borrow a military phrase, by intentionally drawing the fire on to herself, she was able to some small extent to alleviate the trials of the husband. Then she could feel, too, in some mysterious manner, that he was grateful for it, that he began to take a pleasure in her society, in the knowledge that she understood his difficulties, applauded his moderation. Often they used to sit together consulting with Dr. Maynard, a clever doctor, but one who lacked courage, and was in the habit of giving way to his patients. Gradually, therefore, if any new symptom showed itself, if any new problem arose regarding the invalid, it was with the nurse and not with the doctor that Colonel Tonge would first come to talk it over.

Existence at the Grove, though each day appeared to her encompassed in the span of an hour, so that she was continually finding herself landed, as if by some magic carpet of the Fourth Dimension, at the corresponding time of the next day, yet seemed eternal; even the state of the sick woman, though her nerves became ever more affected, appeared to be stationary. Outside there was the fat, placid life of the countryside to be watched, the punctual revolution of the seasons. First came the ice-green glitter of the snowdrops, frosting the grass of the park with their crystal constellations; then these faded, withered, turned yellow, deepened to the butter-colour of the daffodils that ousted them, flowers swaying their large heads under the spring winds, transparent, full of the very colour of the sun; and, almost before you had time to observe it, they would flush to a deep purple, would be transformed into anemones, the centre of their dusky blossoms powdered with pollen, black like charcoal dust, or would adopt that velvet softness of texture which distinguishes the rose from other flowers: and summer would be in its full flame. Then, inside the Grove, you found good food, punctual hours, a calm routine broken only by the outbursts of Mrs Tonge, or by the bitter cackle of the parrot, its feathers green with the depth of the tropical forest, its eyes wary and knowing. It looked cunning, as if in possession of some queer secret—some secret such as that of the parrot encountered in Mexico by the traveller Humboldt—a bird which alone in all the world possessed a tongue of its own, since it spoke a language now extinct. For the tribe who talked it had been killed to a man in the course of America becoming a Christian continent, while the bird had lived on for a century.

The summer was a particularly hot one, and as it burnt to its climax, Mrs Tonge's irritable nerves inflicted an increasing punishment on those around her. The Colonel, who was drawn away on various long-promised visits to old friends and taken to London several times on the business of his estate, left the Grove more than usual this July, so that the full brunt of any trouble in the house fell upon Nurse Gooch, who would often have to shut herself up in her room, and, strong-minded, well-trained woman though she was, cry like a hurt child, so intolerable was the strain imposed upon her by the invalid. The latter soon realized when she had made the tactical error of being too disagreeable—or, perhaps, one should say of concentrating a day's temper in one short hour, instead of spreading it thinly, evenly, over the whole of the sun's passage, so that, looked back upon, it should tinge the day with some unpleasant colour in the minds of her companions or servants. And being possessed of a certain charm or a false kindliness, which she could exert whenever it was necessary to her, she was soon able again to engage the nurse's pity and affection.

"Poor thing," Gooch would think to herself. "One can't blame her for it. Look how she suffers." But however true was this reflection, it was the sick woman who was still the chief opponent of any plan for the mitigation of her sufferings. Though her sleeplessness became worse, though the prospect of those long, dark hours threw a shadow blacker than the night itself over each day, yet she still refused to allow Nurse Gooch to rest in the room with her; while Dr. Maynard, who should have insisted on it, was, as usual, completely overborne by his patient.

It is difficult to describe, though, how much Mrs Tonge suffered, locked in her room during those sultry nights, for their darkness appeared to cover a period easily surpassing the length of any wintry night. As she lay there, her limbs twitching, memories dormant in her mind for forty years would rise up to torment her. Her parents, her old nurse (all dead how many summers past!) would return to her here in the silence. All the disappointments of her life would revive their former aching. Once more she would see the gas-lit ballrooms in which she had danced as a girl, and the faces of men she had forgotten half a lifetime ago. Then, again, she would see her wedding. All these memories would link up, and coalesce in feverish waking dreams of but a moment's duration, but which would yet seem to hold all eternity in their contorted perspectives. Wide awake now, she would recall her longing for children, or ponder upon one of her thousand little grievances, which took on new and greater dimensions in these hours. Here she was . . . with a parrot as her only friend. . . in this everlasting blackness. The thought of death would return to her, death that was at the end of each turning, making every life into a blind hopeless cul-de-sac. Long and hard she would fight this spectre of finality, against which no religion had the power to fortify her spirit. Then, after midnight, new terrors began, as the Grove woke up to its strange nocturnal life. Footsteps would sound outside, treading stealthily, stealthily on the black, hollow air; the furniture in the room, cumbersome old cupboards and chests of drawers, would suddenly tattoo a series of little but very definite hard sounds upon the silence, as if rapping out some unknown code. But when everything was swathed in quiet once more, this new absence of noise would be worse, more frightening than were the sounds themselves. It would smother everything with its blackness; everything would be still . . . waiting . . . listening! The silence, from having been merely a form of muffled sound, or perhaps a negation of it, became itself positive, active—could be felt and tested by the senses. There it was again, that creaking—as if someone was listening . . . someone certainly . . . someone standing on a loose board, crouching down in the darkness outside, afraid to tread for fear of waking one. Then would follow a distraction. A new code would be rapped out as something tapped on the window-pane . . . tap—tap—tap, like a mad thing. Only the wind with that branch of ivy, she supposed. There it was again . . . tap—tap . . . like a mad thing trying to get into her room . . . tap—tap . . . into her very head, it seemed! Outside the house a dog would bark once, menacingly, and then its rough voice would die suddenly, as if silenced. Footsteps would tread again down the long passages, footsteps more distinct than ever this time. And once or twice they lingered stealthily at the bolted door; the handle would creak, grasped very carefully, turned by an invisible hand; and was there not the sound of a smothered, animal-like breathing? The wolf-at-the door, the wolf-at-the-door, she says to herself in that fevered mind, where it seems as if people, two strangers, were carrying on a whispered conversation of interminable length. Then silence comes once more; an unequalled stillness pours into the room, and into the corridors outside, so that the tapping, when it returns, takes on a new quality, rippling this quiet blackness with enlarging circles of sound, as when a stone is cast into a small pool. Tap—tap—tap . . . again tap. Perhaps she is only dead, being fastened into her coffin. Tap—tap . . . they are nailing it down, tap—tap; and she lies dead in the silence for ever. Then far away the taps sound out again, and the coffin is unnailed. But this time it is the parrot rapping upon the bars of his dome-like cage with his hard beak; and she is reassured. Grey light clutches again the swathed windows, and the furniture of the room grows slowly into its accustomed shape; the things round her fall back again into their familiar contours, and are recognisable as themselves, for in the night they had assumed new positions, new shapes, strange attitudes . . . and the poor nervous creature lying on the rumpled bed falls asleep for an hour or two.

But as the light drips stealthily in, filling the black hollows of room and corridor, the housemaids, warned by Nurse Gooch to be more than usually quiet, scratch gently in the passage outside like so many mice, scratch with a gentle feeble sound that must inevitably rouse anyone—even a person who sleeps well by habit and is at that moment deep-rooted in slumber. For this timid, rodent-like noise is more irritating to the strongest nerves, will awaken more surely, than any of that loud, sudden music to which we are accustomed—that music of blows rained accidentally but with great force upon the fragile legs and corners of old furniture or brittle carving of ancient gilded frames—blows delivered with the back of an ever so light feathery brush. Thus Mrs Tonge would open her eyes upon one more hot and calm morning.

As she lay there, in the semi-darkness, she could hear faint voices sounding in the passage. Soon after she has rung her bell, Nurse Gooch comes in with the letters, as clean and kind as is possible for a human being to be, bright as are all trained nurses in the early morning; too bright, perhaps, too wide awake, and already making the best of it. Her hair has a dark golden colour in it under the light, and gleams very brightly under the cap she is wearing, while she talks in an even, soothing voice. As she goes down the corridor toward the invalid's room, the housemaids take her passing presence for a signal that they may resume that noisy bustle of cleanliness with which they salute each day. Suddenly motes of dust whirl up into the air beneath their brushes, turning under the already searching rays of the sun to columns and twisted pillars of sparkling glass that support this heavy firmament, pillars prism-like in the radiant array of their colour. As the housemaids, bent nearly double in their long white print dresses, move slowly over the carpet, brush in one hand, dust-pan in the other, their movements break up these columns, so that the atoms that compose them fall through the air like so many sequins, and are violently agitated; then these take on new shapes, and from pillars are converted into obelisks, pyramids, rectangles, and all the variety of glittering forms that, bound by the angles of straight lines, can be imposed upon this dull air and earth by the lance-like rays of the morning sun.

In the room she still lies in bed, turning over the unopened envelopes of her letters. Gooch goes to the window and talks to the parrot. As she uncovers the cage the bird breaks into its metallic laughter, that rattles down through the open window into the shrubbery, like so many brassy rings thrown down by a juggler, for they curve in again at the pantry-window, where John the footman is standing in an apron, cleaning the silver with a dirty-looking piece of old yellow leather and some gritty rose-pink paste. As he polishes the convex mirror formed by the flanks of the silver bowl, while his face reflected in one side assumes a grotesque appearance, the contorted trees and twisted perspective of lawn and garden show in the other. The second housemaid peeps in, "Oh, you do look a sight!" she cries, bridling with laughter, pointing to the bowl in his hand. "I may be a sight," he says, "or I may not, but I'm not a blarsted slave, am I?" "Well, you needn't answer so nasty," she says. "It's not that, it's that parrot—'ark at it now. I shall be glad when 'e comes back; one can't do no right in this place. Everything is wrong. First it's one damn thing, then another. Nurse sticks it like a soldier," he says, "but I stand up for my rights! I'm not a slave, I'm not, that I should stand there letting that blarsted parrot screech at me like a sergeant-major on a parade ground, and her talking a lot of nonsense. I'd like to wring its bloody neck, I would—they're a pair of them, they are!"

And certainly—Nurse Gooch herself had to admit it—the invalid was this summer more than ever exacting. For many months past she had worried her husband about a summer-house, for which she had formed one of those queer, urgent longings that sick people consider themselves free to indulge. The hut had stood there in the woods, year after year, unnoticed, falling to damp decay, when, as if given new eyes, Mrs Tonge saw it for the first time, and determined to make it her own. Here, she felt, it would be possible to sit quietly, rest peacefully, in an atmosphere different from that of the Grove, and perhaps find that sleep denied her in any other place. As the summer-house was in a very dilapidated condition, she asked her husband to have it repaired for her, but met with a very unexpected opposition. The Colonel, used as he was to furthering every plan of his sick wife, absolutely ignored this new entreaty. Which fact, unfortunately, only strengthened her determination, and made her persist in her caprice.

There was, in reality, some danger in letting Mrs Tonge remain alone for a long period in a spot so remote from the house—she refused, again, to allow anyone to wait with her in this solitude—for though, as is the habit of permanent invalids, she might live for many years, yet she was a nervous, delicate woman very liable to a sudden attack of illness, and here no help could reach her. But Dr. Maynard, with his customary inability to say "No" to a patient—or, perhaps, because he felt that the rest she hoped to obtain here would be more valuable to her than any unexpected attack of illness would be dangerous—gave his sanction to the new scheme. Colonel Tonge, however, still urged the doctor to forbid it, making a strong protest against what he considered this folly, and himself steadfastly refused to have the place touched up in any way, or even swept out. The invalid changed her tactics: from anger she passed to a mood of plaintive injury. "I know, Humphrey," she moaned at him, "that you only go on like that because you hate to think that I am having a peaceful moment. What harm *can* there be in going to the summer-house? It doesn't hurt you, does it?"

The Colonel, patient as ever, would show no sign of ill-temper, putting the case as reasonably as he could. "Mary, my dear, it is really very unwise and foolish of you. I know how much unemployment there is, how unsettled is the countryside. You should see some of the tramps that are brought up before me on the Bench. That summer-house may seem deep in the woods, but it is very near the high-road. You can never tell who will come into the park. Anyone can get in. There's no lodge near that gate. I tell you, my dear, it isn't safe. I can't think how you can be so silly. It's folly, sheer folly!"

Mrs Tonge cried a little: "I'm not afraid of tramps or motor-cars, or of anything on a road. But I know you'd do anything to prevent my getting any rest, Humphrey. I believe you'd like me to go without any sleep at all, as long as it didn't worry you. I know you're only waiting for me to die." . . . And the poor little man, discomfited, walked away. He was always so patient . . . like that . . . and kind, it made Nurse Gooch feel a great pity for him. But she thought he was wrong in this particular instance—wrong ever to oppose the invalid's wishes, however seldom he did so; and knowing her influence with him, she persuaded, the Colonel to say no more about it, though he still seemed a little uneasy. Yet so great had become his reliance on the young nurse's judgment, that she easily induced him to pretend to his wife that he now thought his opposition had been mistaken.

But Mrs Tonge could not be deceived. She knew perfectly well that he did not really approve, and it therefore gave her an increased pleasure to rest in the summer-house. Getting up later than ever in these hot months of the year, she would go there every afternoon. She forbade her two pets to be with her, so that a piteous, plaintive yapping filled the Grove each day after luncheon; only Polly, devoted Polly, was privileged to share this new solitude. Curiously enough, she did not feel frightened here. The rather ominous silence of the woods held no menace for her; she was happier among these dank shadows than in her own bedroom or placid flowering garden; and, whether from perversity or from some form of auto-suggestion, it was a fact that when the nurse walked out to the hut to bring the sick woman back to the house for tea, she often found her in a slumber more peaceful than any she had enjoyed for years.

Between two and three o'clock each fine afternoon a queer procession could be seen walking over the lawn, between the beds of flowers that lay like embossed embroidery among the sleek grass. First of all came Mrs Tonge, never glancing aside at flower or tree, her upright carriage and, slow-moving walk bestowing an almost ritual air on the proceedings; then followed the uniform-clad figure of the nurse, holding newspapers and a small cluster of three or four grapes for the parrot in one hand, while from the other dangled the sacred dome. The grapes transparent, jewel-like, catching the prevailing colour which was that of the penetrating glow of sunlight through green leaves, focused the eye as they moved along, till they seemed like some mystic regalia, even drawing the eye away from the more metallic colouring of the parrot, who, as he was borne along, shrieked continually, taking an obvious pleasure in scaring the poor timid birds of the English countryside by a display of flaming plumage and alien, rather acrid, laughter. Slowly they passed over the shrill, water-smooth lawns, where single high trees stood up fleecy against the sky, or, overburdened by the full weight of summer, trailed their branches right down upon the fragrant ground, into the dark woods cloudy with foliage and rank with the smell of tall nettles, elder-trees, bracken, and all those things that grow in unkept places. No bird-song sounded now in this ultimate unfolding of the seasons, and the little path that led winding through this wilderness lay like a curling green ribbon, of a brighter hue than the surrounding shrubs and velvety with moss, from which weeds sprouted up at the corners like small tufts of feathers. This untidy ribbon, lying without purpose across the woodland ground, led to the rustic hut which the caprice of some former mistress of the Grove had caused to be built here, rather pointlessly, some ninety years ago. Under a round roof, sloping down from its centre, and covered with the rough bark of trees, it lay mouldering beneath the structure of branches which hung motionless, as if cut from cardboard, on the heavy air. Sponge-like, it seemed, in its dampness, like some fungus lying about at the foot of a tree. Great knots of ivy clung to the upper part of the door, while, where the peeling bark had fallen away, were revealed arrangements of rusty nails, geometrical, but growing like thorns out of the wood. No view was framed in the pointed spaces of the two windows, except the light which trellised itself with the shadow of green leaves along the ground, or, flooding a stretch of bracken, played first on one leaf, then on another, bringing out unexpected patterns, making each bent-back leaf, as it was touched, the centre of some shifting arabesque design such as is woven in Eastern carpets.

The parrot would be placed on the dingy, bark-covered table; a grape would be half-peeled, and pressed, like a melting jewel, between the bars of the cage. The wire dome would then be draped ceremoniously with grey felt; the invalid would lie back in her long chair, a rug over her knees, the countless newspapers which it was her habit to read placed at her side; and Nurse Gooch would walk back briskly through the dark stillness of the wood out again into the droning odorous languor of the garden.

As Mrs Tonge rested in her long chair, she found, certainly, a peace otherwise denied to her in the grim world of a sick woman's fancy. No argument, she determined, should ever persuade her to give up this siesta. Day followed day, each warm and bright-coloured as the other; only the leaves became a little ranker in their scent, the woods yet more silent. But sometimes, as she was on the border of sleep, already seeing the queer avenues of that land which she could so seldom reach, while through its landscape she could still distinguish the more rational, familiar features of her real surroundings, a sound like a rushing wind, or as if gigantic wings were beating on the taut drum-like fabric of the air, would startle her for a moment, and, looking round, she would see the tall stiff trees lift up their canvas branches, caught by a false breeze, as a motor-car passed between the two high hedges that concealed the road. Above this hidden white scar a high whirling column of dust would dance for a few seconds, as if it were some jinn of the air made visible for the moment; or, again, she would be lulled by the kindly, cooing voices of the country people, which floated over to her, for, as her husband had pointed out, the road was in reality very near the summer-house. But these things did not appear unpleasant to her; and, in any case, how much better were these explicable sounds than that state of suspended animation, alternating with a sudden show of life, which she had grown to dread so much at night in her own room!

The hot weather continued, and with it the life of the Grove. Colonel Tonge, as we have remarked, was away this summer more than was his wont, but the routine of the invalid, the nurse, and the servants repeated itself almost automatically. Every afternoon Nurse Gooch would walk out with the patient to the hut and would leave her there, only returning in time to fetch her back to the house for tea. One afternoon, when the Colonel was expected home from a short visit to Major Morley, an old friend and brother-officer whom, though a near neighbour, he saw very seldom, Mrs Tonge suddenly made up her mind to stay out in the summer-house for tea, telling the nurse to bring it out to her at five o'clock. Now, though there was nothing very original or startling in this idea, Gooch, who in matters relating to an invalid did not lack a certain subtlety, at once expostulated—not, indeed, from any feeling of disapproval, but because she well knew that the sick woman would in reality be deeply disappointed if her nurse seemed pleased, or even satisfied, with this new break away from the normal programme. The nurse, therefore, succeeded in putting up a show of anxiety, saying such things as that the patient ought not to be too long alone, or that the Colonel would be hurt and annoyed at finding his wife absent on his return. Finally, pretending to be persuaded against her better judgment, she agreed to bring tea out to the summer-house at five o'clock; then, placing the parrot's cage on the table, she covered it up, completed her ritual, and walked back to the house through the hot, strangely sultry, afternoon.

Mrs Tonge felt an unaccustomed luxurious ease steal over her as she lay stretched out on her couch reading her papers, though perhaps perusing them less carefully to-day than was her custom. As a rule, she read them from cover to cover—births, deaths, marriages, sales, advertisements of all kinds; and while these journals represented every shade of political opinion, she was quite unmoved by their varying propaganda. She regarded them, in fact, as her one form of relaxation. This afternoon, however, she could not fix her attention on them. She peeled an amber, honey-scented grape for Polly, who mumbled back lovingly but softly. What a difference even an hour's sleep makes! She wondered when Humphrey was coming back, feeling that she had been rather hard with him lately—in fact, for some time past. With a sudden impulse of affection the image she had formed of him in her own mind was broken, and he became to her again the young man whom she had loved. She determined that she would be nicer to him; and certainly she felt a little better to-day. The afternoon in the summer-house seemed just warm enough . . . and quiet . . . nicely quiet she thought. Slowly, almost contentedly, and for the first time for many years without any fear, any nervous feeling, she stretched her limbs until every nerve in her body became quiet, and sighing gently, let sleep wash over her tired limbs, her worn-out mind, in soft delicious little waves.

But, though the dampness of the hut may have tempered the afternoon heat for Mrs Tonge, it seemed very breathless outside. Even Nurse Gooch, as she sat sewing in her usually cool room, felt rather overcome. Oh, how hot it was! And the house was very still. As a rule you heard the servants chattering, moving through the passages; the jingling of silver or the rattling clatter of plates would reach you from pantry or kitchen. But to-day there was no noise—not a sound, except the hot insect-like droning of the sewing-machine, as she bent over it, running the needle along the white edge of the new linen, which filled the room with a rather stifling scent. But directly she stopped, even for an instant, silence flooded the room. Well, one can't look after a case like this for eighteen months without feeling odd oneself sometimes, she supposed! Yet there was something queer about the stillness. There must be going to be a storm, she thought.

No sound came in from farm or stable at this high-up, open window, on a level with the motionless green cradles of the birds; but down below on the lawn a single leaf would suddenly burst out into a mad fluttering, as if trying to indicate the secret of this general alarm, and then be still, too still, as if it feared to be caught in an act of rebellion. . . . . In the flower-beds, then, a single violent-coloured blossom would wave out wildly, flicker for an instant like a tongue of flame, then float once more stiffly upon the glazed heat. She was quite glad to finish her sewing, get the tea ready, and leave the house. But the air outside was even hotter than within—suffocating—so that one could not breathe, and as she passed out into the furtive silence of the woods she seemed separated from the world she knew. If I go on like this, she said to herself, I shall soon be the next invalid! Yet the walk seemed longer than it ought to be, so that she was continually being confronted with little twistings in it which she did not remember, though she had trodden this path at least four times a day for several months past. Still she knew, of course, that it must be the right one. But, somehow or other, she was startled this afternoon by things that usually she would not notice—the ordinary, rather inexplicable rustlings of the woodland, for instance. Doubtless these were audible yesterday as to-day, but as a rule she did not heed them; and once or twice, certainly, it seemed to her that she heard a peculiar scampering, as of a hurrying through thickets, or the dragging crackle of twigs and brambles as they released their clinging hold on invisible garments. It was with a distinct feeling of relief, then, that after what seemed quite a long walk, she caught sight of the summer-house round the next turning. It had a very human, friendly look to her this afternoon; yet it belonged so much to these woods, this soil, that it was like a large mushroom growing out of a taller green tangle. The invalid did not call out to her, even the parrot was silent—an indication, usually, that its mistress was asleep. (How queer it is the way she can sleep here, and nowhere else!) Nurse Gooch cried out cheerfully, "Wake up, wake up! I've brought you your tea!" Still there was no answer, and, skirting the blind corner of the hut carrying the tray in front of her, she was already standing in the low doorway before she had even cast a glance at its dark interior. Thrown suddenly into the quiet smallness of the summer-house, where she was at such close quarters with everything, almost within an arm's span of each wall, she was unable to breathe for a moment. An overwhelming sensation of nausea took possession of her, so that she felt that she, too, would fall upon that terrible floor. Yet, though the whole universe swung round, her trained eye observed the slaughter-house details. There lay the murdered woman, her head on one side, her skull crushed by some ferocious blow, her face twisted to a mask of terror—that queer unreasoning terror which had never left her. Dumb, blinking in its overturned cage, the parrot was hunched up, its feathers clotted together with blood. Clutching the bird's cage as if to save it from some fresh disaster, Nurse Gooch rushed wildly out of the summer-house into the motionless woods.

As she approached the Grove, her own sense of discipline asserted itself, forcing her to slow down her pace, to set her mind a little more in order. But now it was, actually, that the full shock came to her, for in that sudden blind moment of fear, when her limbs had melted one into the other, when her heart had bounded to her very lips, she had been unable to think, had experienced no feeling except an endless surprise, pity, and disgust. Afterward curiosity, as well, intervened, and she began to wonder who had done this thing, and why such a brutal fate had engulfed the poor, timid, elderly woman. And then she was forced to steel her soul for the next ordeal: she would have need of every particle of strength in mind and body, since it devolved upon her to break the news. Through the library window she could see Colonel Tonge standing by the empty fireplace, and even while she was still labouring under the blow that had befallen her, she dreaded telling him of it as the not least awful incident in this terrible adventure—nearly as overwhelming, indeed, as had been the actual moment of discovery. Her respect, and fondness even, for him, her knowledge that his had not been a happy marriage, only made the task more difficult to face and endure.

With an unexpected nervous susceptibility the Colonel seemed to feel the burning, panting breath of tragedy almost before she had spoken. Perhaps something out of her control manifested itself in her face, in her air; but as she entered, he looked at her with eyes as fearful as her own, and it seemed as if he, too, were mastering his emotions to confront something that he dreaded. "Go on, go on," he said, "what is it?"

Month followed month, and he still shut himself up in his room, till he became so changed in looks, in manner, as hardly to appear the same man. All pride, all self-importance had left him. The spring had gone out of his walk, the jauntiness out of dress and carriage. Every hour of the day he loaded himself with reproaches—for not having been firmer, for not having absolutely refused to allow his wife to stay out there alone—for having been away at the time of the tragedy. Gooch would hear him, unable to sleep at night, walking about the passages, pacing up and down, up and down, till the first grey light crept in at the corners of blind and curtain. It was as if the spirit of sleepless terror that had haunted his wife had now transferred its temple to his body. Incapable of attending to the business of his estate, to which formerly he had devoted so much consideration, he now seldom left the house in the daytime, and, if he did, in whatever direction he might set out, his feet always led him sooner or later to the same place, and he would be startled, aghast to find himself in the woods again.

Anything that reminded him of his dead wife had to be hidden away. The two poor little dogs were removed by his married sister when she went home, after a quite unsuccessful attempt to cheer her brother and give him comfort. The parrot, now never laughing, never speaking, languished in an attic, attended only by Emily, the housemaid. The other servants, too, were kind to the bird, since it had for them a fatal attraction: not only was it connected with death, having about it the very odour of the cemetery, but was in itself the witness and only relic of a brutal crime, so that it possessed the charm popularly associated with a portion of hangman's rope, and, in addition, was a living thing possessed of a dreadful secret. But the parrot would never utter, and downstairs—where the conversation, however wide the circle of its origin, always in the end drew in on to one topic—they had to admit that Polly had never been the-same-like-since. Occasionally Emily would leave the door of the cage open, hoping that he would walk out or fly round as he used to do. But nothing could tempt him out of his battered dome. As for Colonel Tonge, he had never liked the bird, hating its harsh laughter, and this solitary, now silent, witness of his wife's end filled him at present with an unconquerable aversion.

Great sympathy was evinced everywhere for the poor widower, crushed under a catastrophe so unexpected and mysterious. But the public sympathy could do little to help him; and though some solution of the mystery might temporarily have distracted his mind, even if it could not have rallied his spirits, none was forthcoming. He went through all the sordid business associated with murder—inquest and interview; but the crime remained odd as ever in its total absence of warning, intention, or clue. Who, indeed, could have plotted to murder this invalid lady, possessed of few friends and no enemies? And what purpose was served by this intolerable brutality? It is true that, after a time, the police found a stained, blunt-headed club, obviously the weapon with which the fatal wound had been inflicted, buried deep in the bracken; but, in a sense, this discovery only removed the murder further from the public experience, in that the possible motive of theft was at the same time disposed of—for with this weapon were found the few rings, the gold watch, and small amount of money that the dead woman had about her, as she had lain asleep in the summer-house on that sultry August afternoon. The police, thinking it possible that these articles had been hidden from an impulse of fear, that the original motive had indeed been the ordinary one, arrested a tramp found wandering in the district, hiding himself at night under hedges and in the shelter of empty barns; but though he could not give a very detailed or convincing account of his doings on the day of the "Hut Murder"—as it was called—the evidence that connected him with the crime was not enough to secure his conviction. It remained, however, the impression of many people, among them of both Dr. Maynard and Nurse Gooch, that he was in reality guilty of the foul act of which he had been suspected. Colonel Tonge, though he followed every detail of the trial with a painful interest, could never be induced to discuss the possible guilt of the tramp, but it was noticeable that after the man's release his nervous condition became more than ever marked, which led them to conclude that, in his opinion too, the person accused should never have been acquitted.

The bereaved husband's insomnia troubled him sorely; he had no peace, no rest by day or night. The only person able to bring him relief, to lighten his burden even for a moment, was Nurse Gooch; so that Dr. Maynard felt it his duty, for once, to insist on her remaining at the Grove until the Colonel should display some sign of returning health and a reviving spirit. The nurse, for her part, had always liked, pitied, and admired him, while, by one of those curious human instincts, all the compassion, all the affection even, which she had given so freely to the dead woman, was now made over to her new patient. And then she, too, felt remorse, had things on her mind with which to reproach herself. How well she could understand and sympathize with his self-accusation! Why, conscious as she had been of her influence over him, had she not supported the Colonel's wise protest against his wife's use of the summer-house, instead of urging, as she had done, that it was a reasonable plan, and finally persuading him to withdraw his objection to it? Terribly she felt now the responsibility so foolishly incurred, that perhaps she was in part to blame for the tragedy, even in the matter of allowing the invalid to wait out in the summer-house for tea on that dreadful afternoon; and in the months that followed the murder it was one of the few pleasant things in her life to reflect that she could, by her presence and sympathetic understanding, lessen his misery ever so little, giving him for a little while a passing sense of comfort.

When, after many long, lonely months, he made her an offer of marriage, saying that life without her support would be to him an intolerable burden, she accepted his proposal, realizing that the interest she felt in him, the overwhelming pity that sometimes clutched at her heart, was but a disguise for love. Regardless of any difference in age or outlook, she hoped, by becoming his wife, to help and ease the remainder of a life, the unhappy tenor of which had now deepened into a more dreadful tone.

The honeymoon was spent in France, in order to make for them both a complete break from the background of their lives. But even among the lush meadows and rich trees of Normandy, away from any sting of association, Humphrey did not recover at once, as she had hoped, his old buoyancy.

Listless, uneasy, restless, he would for hours be silent, wrapped in a melancholy that did not ordinarily belong to his temperament, while, in his broken slumber and sudden awakenings, his wife could detect the existence of a great well of sorrow that even her anxious affection could not plumb, a grief her love could not solace. The discovery of the extent of his affliction caused her further worry, made her dread their return to the scene of his past life. But as time passed it was obvious that his spirits were returning; and when he told her that during their absence the Grove had been entirely repainted and redecorated, she began to feel happier, hoping that it would seem to him like the beginning of a new life.

Almost two years to a day after the crime, they returned from their honeymoon, but Colonel Tonge did not seem conscious of any sense of anniversary, while she, naturally, would not mention it to him. But it made her feel a little uneasy.

As they drove back from the station, the new chauffeur quite by chance, by one of those dreadful inspirations which are only given to stupid people, drove the newly-married couple down the concealed road near the summer-house, instead of taking them in by the near lodge. Colonel Tonge obviously experienced no emotion, but his wife felt for the moment as if she would be stifled between these two high hedges. How like was this afternoon to that other one! No leaf moved on any tree, no bird let its song trickle through the cloudy, too-dark leafage; the air was hot, motionless, and still, though through it ran those same secret tremors, inexplicable tremblings. For the new Mrs. Tonge the whole atmosphere was stained with memories.

Yet she soon forgot the uneasy promptings of her heart and mind in the pleasure she felt at the reception which awaited them. She had always been a favourite with the servants, and the latter could never forget the poor Colonel's sufferings, so that they had taken an especial care to give the newly-wedded pair an inspiriting welcome. The Colonel stopped to talk with them, while Mrs Tonge, eager to see what alterations had been made, stepped into the house alone. It looked charming, she thought, with the new paint smooth on the old walls; and, unable to repress a slight thrill of pleasure, which she felt to be wrong, though she could not quite exorcise it, at being for the first time mistress of a house—and such a lovely house—she walked on through the empty, gleaming rooms that led one into the other. The last room was the boudoir. She entered it softly, closing the door behind her, wishing to explore its impression to the full, for she wondered whether it would make her feel an usurper, a stranger in someone else's place. But no! it was a new room to her: gone was the feverish atmosphere of the sick-room, with its dead air, over-heated and scented with innumerable flowers; gone was that dead look imparted by the yellow glaze of countless old photographs and by the spreading litter of trivial objects. And while she bore toward the dead woman no feelings but those of pity and affection, yet, being of a practical nature, she was glad that nothing remained of the old mistress—nothing that could call up painful memories. The room was quiet and restful; the long windows stood wide open on to the pleasant water-cool spaces of the lawn, that unfolded up to the borders of the wood where stood tall fleecy green trees, while under their blue shadows ran the murmur of shallow streams. The healthy scents of tree and grass, the peaceful watery sounds, and honey-gathering, contented drone of the bees as they hung over the flowers, drifted into the house, diffusing an air of ease and comfort. This was *her* house, *her* garden, *her* home, and she now had a husband to whom she was devoted. Why, then, should she ever allow her mind to dwell on the tragedies of the past? Was it not better to forget utterly, to obliterate the memory in her husband, by offering him all her love, till gradually these possessions to which he had been so attached became dear to him again? . . . But just then, behind her, she heard the thin voice of the dead woman crying out—a voice grey with fear and breaking. "Humphrey," it sighed, "what is it? Oh, my God!" . . . And then the sound of a heavy dumb blow and low moaning, followed by burst after burst of idiot laughter, as with a fluttering whirl of flaming green feathers the parrot flew up again to its empty attic.

LOW TIDE

It was an entrance that, however unconscious, never failed of its effect, and one to which the eye could never become accustomed. The two little figures at the top of the steps, though put-in on a large and crowded canvas, inevitably and entirely dominated the scene at this precise moment of the day. Behind them under the pale blue canopy of the sky rose the intricate perspective of steep cliffs, trim but wind-cut trees, and dells of a cultivated wildness; while the sharp cries of the children, as they raced round these, falling down, laughing, and dropping wooden spade or metallic pail, gave a certain poignancy to the otherwise flat blur of the band wafted up from below. The staircase was the culmination of the garden. On to it led every dell, dingle, and asphalt path. With heavy stone balustrades, crushed-down beneath rows of weighty, clumsily-carved, stone vases overflowing with purple petunias and a new, very municipal variety of dwarf sweet-pea—salmon-pink in tone—it held its own with any other feature of the town. It competed successfully for the attention with funicular-trams, which by their movement continually caught the eye as they performed their geometrical operations up and down the cliff with the precision of a drill-sergeant; it outshone the flashing eyes of the bandstand, encased in panes of glass, and even outvied in interest the lion-coloured sands flecked with moving, gaily-dressed people, and spotted with trestles, centres of little groups, on which white-clad figures gesticulated, or opened and shut soundless mouths. On each side of this imposing structure, set in wide sloping surfaces of grass, smooth and green as baize, two enormous five-pointed stars—frilled out at the edges with variegated leaves of iodine-brown, ochre, green-white and lemon-yellow, lined again within by lobelias of a copper-sulphate blue that in their turn enclosed a round pupil of coral-pink begonias and red and purple fuchsias—glowered out to sea like two bloodshot eyes; one Cyclops guarding each side of the steps.

When the first terrace, overlooked by all this glory, was reached, the blur of the music sharpened into focus, settling into so many familiar and machine-made moulds, for its broad platform was level with the gilt knob of the circular cage from which rose all this sound. Under cover of that cage—or glass-case—alternately scorched on warm days and frozen on cool ones, the band discoursed the whiskered, military joviality of Waldteufel or in a sudden frenzied modernity hurled itself with ineffable vigour into the country dances of Edward German. Then, though the majority of residents were content with such a programme, the orchestra must also propitiate that select few who took pride in knowing "what was going on" in London almost before Londoners themselves had found out. This section of Newborough was, apparently, satisfied that the only important happening in the capital was the advent, and subsequent failure or success, of the latest musical comedy. Nothing else counted. For the Winter Garden band to be a fortnight late in their first reproduction of the strains which accompanied it —if it had proved a "hit" in London—would be, one understood, a local disaster of the first magnitude. Thus, for the benefit and edification of the select, the orchestra must rehearse feverishly, and perform quite soon, such favourites as *The Belle of New York*, *The Geisha*, *San Toy*, *The Country Girl*, *The Messenger Boy*, and innumerable other and equally popular variants of these masterpieces.

Distributed round the centre of music was a mathematical arrangement of seats; while beyond, on the deaf side of the bandstand—for it was glazed toward the sea—stretched a long terrace, its farther wall dropping, according to the tides, straight down on to sand or sea, rising out of them, shaded toward the bottom with dark, tough seaweed and well-plastered with limpets and barnacles. This final and most important promenade, from the whole length of which the steps above are visible, was crowded with young women of a provincial smartness, wearing dresses in such a height of fashion that they would have been unrecognized in Paris or London; light-coloured young women from Leeds or Halifax, with turquoise or false-pearl ear-rings jangling down hardly on diminutive gold chains or screwed tight into the unpierced ear. With them would stroll laughing young men in white-flannel trousers, crowned with straw hats, or, more imposingly, with panamas. The latter were a sign of grace and distinction but recently come into favour, entering hand in hand with ping-pong and the Boer War on a short but strenuous conquest of England. Cecil Rhodes had patronized them; and a good one, it is murmured, cost £100! Then there were the residents. Old military gentlemen, rather red and puffing, with long white mustachios, and heavy walking-sticks, are pacing up and down, their elbows out-turned, the two joints of the arm forming a right angle; they are continually pulling at their cuffs—stiff, white cuffs with coloured lines on them—as if on the point of conjuring, the verge of exhibiting, an alive but miraculous white rabbit. All the summer days they spend here, in-the-open-air-damn-it, and all the winter on the cliff above, with eyes fixed to the end of a gigantic telescope, pointed like a gun at the sea, in the bow-window of the commodious Gentlemen's Club, the exterior of which is painted a thick but appropriate magenta. Then, but sitting down more often than walking, there are groups of two or three old ladies, grey-haired, broad-based, who, if they move, sway a little from side to side like ducks on their way to the pond. There are always a few curates, thin, eager, and raven-coated, who have come down from the Ecclesiastical Rest Home on the West Cliff; while several bath-chairs are wheeled up and down or remain stationary—bath-chairs that, so near the sea, look like the gigantic shells of ocean snails, deposited and overturned by some fierce wave, their tenacious inhabitants, sadly out-of-element, stretching out wandering tentacles and adhesive surfaces. Finally, Newborough being a health resort, there is spread among the rest a whole cohort of infirm, elfin, and imbecile. As if in some nightmare drama, these men, women, and children loll and lollop about, with curious uncouth gait, blind or deaf or dumb, hunchbacked or idiot, or armless from birth. But none of these, as they move among the throng, attract much attention. It must, therefore, be taken as a tribute to the personality of the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey that they should invariably claim such a measure of public notice on their arrival.

Perhaps the best place from which to witness their triumph was from one of the seats on the upper terrace, though the spectacle was visible, actually, from nearly every chair in the gardens. The flight of steps, like all monuments of its period both mean and magnificent, looked theatrical as well, as if set for some very material but ridiculous ballet of the Second Empire, some startling and quite pointless convolution of blue muslin, yellow hair, and arms and legs of full muscular development. In place, though, of this ordered and golden whirlwind came down the steps, treading very gingerly, yet unable in their good-natured weakness to resist keeping time to the domineering rhythm of the Waldteufel that greeted them, these two little elderly ladies of the same height and dressed alike. Sisters obviously; indeed, such was the resemblance between them that they might have been taken for twins. Mild and timid in bearing, they yet boasted a singular bravery of apparel, in which, though the nineteen-hundred note was dominant, there were many recollections of past fashions. They were bedizened and a-jingle with little crinkling ornaments, ruby-bars, gold-bangles, slave-bracelets, small watches set with half-pearls hanging from enamelled-brooches shaped like true-lover’s knots; they were decked out with little pieces of lace, numerous ribbons and a thousand other joyous trifles. Regarded more as objects of virtu than as the covering or decoration of human beings, their dress had a certain beauty, a very intricate quality of design—design that, while outwardly unconnected, had in it a strange rhythm and logic of its own. It was as full of motifs as Burmese art, and as complicated. If the band stopped playing, if every voice in the garden sank down for an instant, the dress of the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey would, one felt, play its own accompaniment, announce the entrance of its wearers. All these small, shining ornaments, apparently meaningless, would tinkle, trill, and jingle sweetly, giving out a sound peaceful and silly as any cowbell heard in the Alps. But, alas! Waldteufel allowed no such opportunity.

If their dresses were individual, so were their faces; for, though the Age of Cosmetics had not yet returned to us, the cheeks of the two sisters, both of whom had surely seen sixty summers, were a blaze of Babylonish colour. The lips were of a cherry richness, and the hair, showing under the fashionable toque, was not so much golden or primrose as succulent scarlet. All this flaunting splendour was in rather quaint contrast to the gingerly tripping walk, the hair and cheek in direct contradiction to the pale but kindly timidity of their eyes—and, indeed, in the latter difference lay hidden the clue to their entire appearance. Determined to look young, they refused to wear glasses: and to insist on youth after it has passed requires sound eyesight as well as sound judgment. Resultantly, they looked like a pair of music-hall sisters, some popular variety turn of the late seventies, left over from that age but defiant of time—looked as though they had made up for their entertainment by the green, value-changing gaslight of mid-Victorian times, and after a Rip Van Winkle slumber, had woken to find themselves here, alone on the staircase, under the sunshine of the East Coast, in the hard dawn of a new, rather sinister, century.

Their appearance, in fact, as they descended the steps, was distinctly open to ridicule, yet so painfully lonely that it was with a feeling of relief that one saw them gain the upper terrace in safety, for the descent of these *opéra-bouffe* steps had taken a considerable time.

The numerous youths who were always to be found loitering on this platform, staring down at the people below, now turned round slowly, drew the knobs of their walking-sticks out of their mouths with a loud pop, as if a cork were being drawn, planted their backs firmly against the railings, and thus outlined against the sea, transferred the extreme vacancy of their gaze upon the two sisters, staring at them fixedly, and, after a time, smiling. The small boy selling programmes, and frilly-edged carnations of an ice-cream pink, made a ribald joke. But then, as the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey rounded the farther corner on to the steps that led below, the sensation on the first terrace began to die down. The youths once more pivoted round listlessly, their eyes following the bands of giggling young girls who strolled beneath them, staring in awe at the smartly-dressed visitors, or resting quietly beyond on the similar blue vacancy of the sea.

When the two sisters arrived on the lower terrace, where the band played, there was again a distinct sensation. As they progressed down the middle of the audience, glancing from side to side in the hope of securing adjacent chairs, with a loftiness of manner that was the disguise both for bad eyesight and an intense shyness, a small, rustling, tittering wind moved the heads of the flower-bright rows of people, and even the groups walking up and down the promenade beyond stopped to watch. On the other hand, a few elder members of the feminine section of the audience—residents, probably—far from being amused, appeared to disapprove, quite definitely to disapprove.

Pretty Mrs. Sibmarsh, the wife of Dr. Sibmarsh, was sitting with her back to the sea talking to her friend, Mrs. Merryweather. As the two sisters went by, her face was contracted with a spasm of absolute fury. "I don't know how they dare come down like that; I don't really!" she said in hard, even tones. "Perfect sights I call them! Twenty-eight, indeed! more like sixty-eight! If you'd seen them, Mabel, at the Hospital Ball at the Royal the other night, dressed like debutantes, with white feathers in their hair. I'm surprised they were let in. They've been here about fifteen years now, and know no one; and I always say that if people have no friends, it is their own fault. And odd, odd to a degree! I can't bear people who aren't like anybody else . . . a little too odd for my taste!" And Mrs. Sibmarsh looked severely at the band and tiers of greenery above, for it was before she had become artistic and psychic, before she had begun to cultivate originality, before the coralline stethoscope of Dr. Sibmarsh, which, like a conjurer, he produced out of his top-hat, had reaped its asthmatic harvest, and her house had become, as her friends said, "a perfect museum"—a wilderness of old oak and Staffordshire pottery. No, that story belongs to the subsequent development of Newborough, which one day we hope to relate. At present, then, oddity offended Mrs. Sibmarsh, and glancing at them once more with an intense disgust she completed her verdict: "Odd to a degree—rich—very rich: and mean into the bargain! And to look at them, it wouldn't surprise me if they drugged! They've got a very queer look in their eyes." And she sent up a shrill spiral of hard laughter into the blue air.

Owing to a fortunate concatenation of circumstances, it was some time before the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey discovered the disfavour with which they were regarded in the town. Indeed, at this period they were happy—more happy than they had ever been in their lives. Even their loneliness was not felt by them, so devoted was Miss Frederica to Miss Fanny, so devoted Miss Fanny to Miss Frederica. If they were both rather "odd," as Mrs. Sibmarsh stated, yet the accusation of being unlike everybody else was unjust. On the contrary, they were all too human. Nor did they drug, as was suggested, but found their release from a reality which at any rate was not too hard upon them in material matters, in the roseate view of life inherent in those gifted with the Romantic Temperament. In fact they still believed in the Age of Miracles. They felt young, to each other looked young, and when, however seldom, a doubt assailed them as to whether they appeared as youthful to others as to themselves, they found a refuge in cosmetics. The rouge and dye-pot they affected were only the methods through which a laudable, very respectable desire to keep up appearances found its vent. But, while growing ever more devoted, while hardly noticing their lack of friends, themselves accentuated their isolation by the extreme vividness of their exterior. Otherwise, loneliness was no such uncommon thing in Newborough as to have attracted all this attention. Through their own fault, alas! they had made themselves targets for ridicule; and the vision of the town, a vision sharp and narrow, could not pierce through this extraordinary outward aspect to the essential goodness and kindness within.

Apart from the childish vanity that prompted the extravagance of their appearance, and the simplicity which led them to believe that Newborough would accept their own conservative estimate of their age, not much oddity was evident in them. These facts would lead one to suppose that they had always led rather secluded lives. This, then, would account for their being unaware of their loneliness, for their rather painful gaiety, and the resolution with which they participated in every local function. Thus were they making up for a youth that had lacked diversions by extreme merry-making in their latter years.

The daughters of a country clergyman, whom they had worshipped, and on whose behalf both of them in their young days had made certain sacrifices—suffered certain disappointments, one understood—they had found themselves, some fifteen years before the time of which we are speaking, possessed of a considerable fortune and alone in the world. For, unlike most of his calling, old Mr. Cantrell-Cooksey had been a rich man. Furthermore, the sisters were undoubtedly “well connected”—a fact which, owing to their disposition, afforded them a more constant and considerable pleasure than the inheritance of wealth, since, in its milder forms, snobbery is but a symptom of the Romantic Temperament.

They had been pretty, with a surface prettiness of skin and eye, golden hair and round, pale blue eye. The Rector would never, of course, for a moment have condoned the use of cosmetics, so that it was only when at his death they emerged from some forty-five years of seclusion, that they adopted such methods of beautifying themselves—methods not meant so much to attract others as to calm themselves. And one consequence of the pavonine glory into which they then blossomed was to make those valuable connections of theirs seem rather frigid in manner. The more rosy grew their skins, the more golden their hair, to that extent the less friendly grew their relatives. One Season, the second summer after their father's death, they spent in London, but the neglect of their numerous cousins, the barren coldness of a great city in which they had no friends, were more than their sensitive hearts could bear for long: and sensitive their hearts undoubtedly were! It was a curious trait in their characters, pointing to some latent eccentricity in them, that while thus responsive, they should have still done nothing to tone down the intensity of their clothes and colouring. Surely they must have felt that there was some little connection between these and the coldness with which they were treated. Either their weak eyes must have prevented them from realizing the full oddity of their appearance, or else their romantic disposition must have already and for ever warped their judgment.

They were well-pleased to settle in the large red brick house overhanging the cliffs at Newborough. Their dear father had been fond of the town, and though they had not visited it for many years, they had often been taken there as children and, as a place to live in, it suited them exactly. The Red House, appropriately named, was large, and besides what was described by the agents who disposed of it as its "unique situation"—which consisted in the dangerous angle of the cliffs beneath—had the additional advantage of raking, enfilading indeed, the Promenade with its east-facing windows. In this new house the sisters began a life of peaceful happiness, and at the same time, contrasted with their former existence at the Rectory, of feverish excitement. They loved the house, and each one of the fifteen years they had spent in it had made it more dear to them. They liked the town—*like* is but a moderate term for the affection they felt for it—and were superbly unconscious of unfriendly eyes or cruel laughter. "We like Newborough," Misses Frederica and Fanny would say together, as if with one voice, "because there's always something going on—and then it's so pretty! We can never look out of our windows without being reminded of the Bay of Naples. In the summer there is always the band; and London is so *noisy* nowadays." And they loved the house. Yes, they *loved* it. It wasn't quite like anyone else's. Oh, no! Not, of course, that it was "queer" in any way—for the sisters, curiously enough, shared Mrs. Sibmarsh's horror of oddity. It was such a comfortable house, and had such a "nice" garden, too, on the other side—quite like being in the country. It was difficult to imagine, when one was in it, that one was in a town. The garden, edged with split-oak palings, was full of speckled laurel-bushes and dirty evergreens, graced in the spring by the spidery, thin mauve flowers of a few Indian lilacs, the dying fireworks of a laburnum-tree with a hollow in its centre which had at some time been filled with cement, and later by a few perfectly correct but rather scentless roses. And in the autumn, chrysanthemums ("they do so well here")—beds and beds of chrysanthemums! The garden acted as clock for the seasons. Laburnum pointed to full spring, roses to full summer, chrysanthemums to rich autumn. The climate of Newborough, though situated so far to the north, was, they thought, so mild—but very bracing, of course. The east winds were, perhaps, a little trying. Then everything had its disadvantages, hadn't it? And it was a source of the greatest pride to them that in the depths of winter, between Christmas and the New Year, it was usually possible to find one unfolded and frost-bitten rosebud, brown as if it had passed through the ordeal by fire, dank and dark as a drowned man—but a rose none the less—lurking in the garden. In fact this square space was a continual delight, so admirably suited for garden-party or church bazaar, just big enough but not too big, and so convenient! But no function of any sort ever took place there.

Nevertheless, the sisters were always remarking to each other that it was "so nice for entertaining one's friends."

In anything they did or proposed to do, this phrase was for ever on their tongues. Whatever they contemplated was considered only in the light of aid or hindrance to the entertainment of this imaginary army; an evidence of a need for friendship and of a hospitable disposition.

Beyond the garden, as far as the eye could see, rolled what in our childhood we were taught to regard as the "German Ocean," displaying its various shrill and strident moods, lapping, singing, shouting, roaring or moaning. And this music, so romantic and strange, was always the pleasantest of sounds to the two sisters.

In the summer, as we have seen, Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny Cantrell-Cooksey would, on each fine day, walk down by the carefully-preserved cliffs, through the trim woods, on to the terrace by the sea where the band played. They were due to arrive there between 11.15 and 11.30. In the afternoon—after lunch (at 1.15)—they would walk a little or sit in the garden. There were, of course, frequent rests, for one got tired doing all these things, and lying down freshens one up so. Tea at 4.30 with a large silver kettle, with a flame under it, silver teapot, and silver sugar-basin. Ceylon, *not* Indian tea. The milk must, naturally, be poured *first* into the teacup. So many people fail to do this. And one must make the tea *oneself*: servants never learn to do it properly, do they? Emily, for instance, though she had been there many years, had never learnt to use boiling water. It must be *boiling* water. Miss Fanny, in person, would pour the water from the kettle into the teapot; and, in due time, Miss Frederica, the elder sister, would pour out the tea.

Tea, regarded not as a beverage but as a social function, was one of their extravagances—for though few people came, unless Archdeacon Haddocriss looked in to tell them about one of his new funds, it was always prepared for ten people. Lots of little cakes; and scones, supported on a bowl filled with hot water. There were certain days, however, when, if the ladies felt the need for some unusual excitement, they would inform Emily that they would be out for tea, and would walk to one of those artistic and half-timbered cafés, which were becoming such a feature of the town, where, beneath Gothic canopies of fumed German oak, and by simple dressers of peasant and cottage crockery, in a stifling atmosphere of English coffee and strong tea, they would partake of a cup of chocolate—very dainty—with the white of an egg frothed on top of it to represent cream. This would appeal to their feelings, reminding them, as it did, of that visit to Germany, in company with their Dear Old Father, some fifteen—or was it fourteen?—years before he passed away. Thus stimulated, they would return home.

Dinner, the crown of the day for every respectable inhabitant of Newborough, was at 7.30 P.M. The Misses Cantrell-Cooksey had always been used to dinner at this hour, so for them it was nothing unusual. But for most of the well-to-do in the town, dinner was a shibboleth, its hour dividing mankind—not so much a meal as a Declaration of the Rights of Man. A whole revolution was fixed between those who enjoyed their dinner at midday, and those who dined in the evening. Between those addicted to late dinner and those who still revelled in the primitive simplicity of high-tea was fixed such a gap in the social ranks as could never be bridged. And for the former, two things were of the utmost importance. One of these was never, in any evil hour or by any unfortunate accident, to refer to the midday meal under any other title than "luncheon"—or perhaps the more familiar, more vulgar, "lunch." Dr. Sibmarsh had, for instance, once referred to it in public as "dinner"—and it took him long to live down. The other, and even more vital, thing to keep in mind, was the absolute necessity of "dressing" for dinner. Invariably, inevitably, one must "dress" for dinner—otherwise the nature of the meal might be mistaken! Once "dressed" one was secure, since no man "dresses" for high-tea.

Thus in every red-brick villa in Newborough at 7.30 on a summer evening the dining-room would be illuminated; the electric light would show splendidly in its mounting of chased or wrought copper through shades, bell-like shades, of opalescent glass; and, though it was still daylight without, if one were lucky enough to walk down Prince of Wales's Avenue or Albemarle Road at this hour, one would see row after row of these glowing interiors, the very pageant of Late Victorian and Early Edwardian prosperity. Beneath the golden lustre of four lights that hung from the ceiling, seated before a white table, in the centre of which was usually a large doily composed of lace over a ground of dead-orange silk, upon which would stand four little trumpet-shaped silver vases, with frilled edges like sharks' teeth, each displaying at this season three or four yellow poppies, four or five sweet-peas, and misty bunches of that nameless though universal white blossom that is more like white muslin than a flower, the diners would be sitting, carefully dressed. The hostess, in a pretty gown of pink satin, low at the bosom and with puffy sleeves, wearing an amethyst or aquamarine brooch, would be talking amiably and sweetly—wearing that charming smile that made such a difference to her face, "lit it up," as the phrase was—to the gentleman on her right, while at the same time directing a glance of such flaming contempt at her maid-servant for falling into those very mistakes of service about which she had warned her all day—and, as for that, just a moment before dinner—striking her dead with a look of such awful, such diabolical hatred that any other mortal, except this girl accustomed to it, would on the spot have perished and sunk down. The earth itself might well open beneath such vehement passion—so well disguised.

The rules-of-the-game, too, were very strict. It was not, even, an easy affair to get into the dining-room; for again in this it was necessary to disprove the possible if unspoken allegation of transcendentalized high-tea. If there were more than four or five guests, a regular and courtly procession would walk across the small space from drawing-room to dining-room: arm-in-arm: lady on right, gentleman on left: polite, but easy, conversation. If, however, there were but a few people, three or four, the same effect could be produced by saying in a careless, Bohemian way: "Oh, don't let's bother. Can't we go in as we are?"

Fortunately Emily was seldom forgetful and, unfortunately, it was seldom that Miss Frederica or Miss Fanny Cantrell-Cooksey was able to sweep in to dinner on the arm of a cavalier. If, though, one was alone for dinner—and had not got a headache—one could go down to hear the band again. When the evenings were cool, the orchestra, escaped from their glass-case, were sure to be playing "inside." "Inside" indicated an enormous hall near the bandstand, built to look as if it were part of the Louvre—Newborough architecture was both informed and cosmopolitan—and tastefully decorated within, in a Second Empire scheme of chocolate, turquoise-blue, and gold—all by now very faded and dry-looking, like an old sugared biscuit. Round the frieze, high up, were inscribed on scrolls the names of composers at the height of their fame when this hall was constructed. A queer medley it was, and one that would be an interesting footnote to that *History of Taste* which is now waiting to be written—for these names, considered then of equal value, represented the judgment of a generation . . . MENDELSSOHN . . . HANDEL . . . SPOHR . . . BEETHOVEN . . . GOUNOD . . . VERDI . . . SCHUMANN . . . WEBER . . . DONIZETTI . . . BERLIOZ . . . LISZT.

Unfortunately, though specially built for music, the acoustic properties of the hall were such that not a note could be heard properly, except from the roof, where the sound was as nearly perfect as possible, but there were no chairs! The concerts were nevertheless much appreciated. Every evening the bandsmen became suddenly transformed into individuals, escaping from a sober uniform into evening-dress; became definitely recognizable as persons. This, again, affected their playing, making it more individual, less a composite whole. The two ladies had in some mysterious way conceived a great passion for the music of Wagner; and since in the evening performances the conductor, who prided himself on being catholic and modern, was allowed more to please himself than in the mornings, they were often able to gratify this passion. Perhaps this Wagner-worship was one of the oddities to which Mrs. Sibmarsh had alluded: it was a curious phenomenon certainly, for otherwise they were devoid of any musical appreciation. But there is no doubt that, as much as anything in Newborough, they enjoyed sitting here in the evenings and wallowing in the sensual melodies of that master, as in a hot bath.

In addition to these concerts there were, in the season, other entertainments. Touring companies would come down for six nights to the two theatres, the “Royal” and the “Ghoolingham.” Our two heroines did not often visit these, except during the annual appearance of the D’Oyly-Carte Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Company. For this event, to which all the year they looked forward, it was their habit to book a box on the opening night, and a stall for each subsequent performance. Such pretty music, and oh! how witty and amusing. And nothing in bad taste, nothing that anybody need be offended at! Even the Rector, who had not much cared for festivities, had thoroughly enjoyed *The Gondoliers*. Otherwise they did not go much to the theatre unless it was something special. Then, out of curiosity, they would book seats. Once, for instance, they had been to hear Sousa's Band, which paid a flying visit to the Ghoolingham. What an extraordinary man! how extraordinary it all was, so noisy and vulgar! Still, the marches were most inspiriting, one must say, and so patriotic! He had, had he not, a true gift of melody?

Then there were the occasional appearances at a special performance of famous but ageing actresses—Lady Bancroft and Mrs Kendal—or of indomitable but ageless beauties such as Mrs Langtry. It would be a pity to miss such a treat. Thus there was always something going on.

This continual round of diversion was broken every seventh day by churchgoing, the event of the week. Now that the Rector was no longer with them they went to church only *once* on a Sunday (churches are so badly ventilated); in the morning. After church ensued church-parade. This took place on the promenade overlooked by the Red House, and lasted until the luncheon hour.

Clasping a black-bound Prayer Book, divided by a vivid blue or purple watered-silk marker, in a well-gloved hand, and gorgeous as the Queen of Sheba, Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny Cantrell-Cooksey would walk—though "walk" hardly describes such stately progress . . . march . . . saunter . . . up and down, as would all the other respectable inhabitants and worthy visitors. It was, consciously, one of the "prettiest" sights of the town, and, what was of more importance, an observance that helped to keep up appearances.

Innumerable people walked up and down, up and down—individuals for a moment, then dovetailing into the crowd. Most of them were elderly—though there were a few children—and looked incongruous in clothes of such elaboration, as must all people of over middle-age who adopt a minutely decorated style. For a surfeit of decoration is no more suitable to the elderly than a surfeit of food. Up and down they paced, under the hard northern sunlight, anthropoids that having massacred a diverse regiment of beasts-of-the-field now masquerade in their pitiable skins; to the latter they have added the feathers raped from the osprey, and now look as though decorated for some primitive, some awful, rite. Up and down they progress, past cream-painted houses, roofed with damp-blue slates; on each sill is a box of red geraniums, before each house a stretch of green, prim grass. Far below, constant companion to their march, rolls the steely northern sea: the prospect on the other side varies. The cream-painted houses give way to golden lawns, the colour of which is enhanced by an artistic green-painted cab-shelter covered-in by red tiles, a recent inspiration of the municipal architect: then, again, follow Gothic stone drinking-troughs for beasts, and portentous stone houses for men. Not all the people walk. A few drive in large, open cabs, that rumble slowly; while others, ladies of fabulous age, with trembling blue lips and palely purple faces, with hairy growths on the chin, and black bonnets nodding on the top of their helpless heads, are being drawn along in bath-chairs that are so many black insects. As they are rolled past, in a flutter of bugles, heliotrope-velvet ribbons, and black kid gloves, there is a trilling of jet-like petrified laughter. Each venerable image, thus trundled, would be accompanied by a niece or daughter, pale, flat-looking women with vague but crucified expressions, like the female saints whose tortures are depicted by German Primitives. The aunts and mothers in their bath-chairs look happy though grim ("poor old things," the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey would say, rather nervously) as they clasp a Prayer Book tightly in their gloved hands, as if it were a passport for that equally tedious Heaven which they had prepared for themselves. Already there sounded from them the characteristic music of their Heaven, asthmatic and wheezy; so old were they that when through blue lips they murmured, their voices sounded like harmoniums played at a distance; and when their faces were in repose, the bones would show under the sagging parchment, for the skull was already asserting its lordship over the flesh.

In this setting our heroines showed almost to advantage. Yet as they went by, while other promenaders would be continually stopped by friends, and would stand talking together in little groups, they would never be greeted. The old ladies would stretch out tentacles from their shells in welcome to others; but our two friends would never be hailed by them. Indeed, the old ladies would be galvanized into life by the sight of them, looking at them as sourly as any younger members of the community. The burden of their complaint was the same as that uttered by Mrs. Sibmarsh. "Perfect sights! How they can get themselves up like that I can't think! And they were properly brought up too. Twenty-eight, indeed! they'll never see sixty-eight again, I should say! Real Aunt Sallies!" And after some such declamatory effort their voices would ooze back to a whisper.

In among the promenaders and listening groups Mrs. Sibmarsh herself was continually imparting information. "Have you heard the latest, Mrs. Spirechurch? What do you think those two old bundles have done now?" And many a macabre march was halted for an instant in order to hear a recital of the latest Cantrell-Cooksey folly. About three years before, the two ladies had, undoubtedly, given their age in the census returns as twenty-eight and twenty-six respectively. By 7.30 the next night every dining-room in the town was discussing this lamentably absurd lapse from verity. It became, this topic, another thing that divided dinner from high-tea. It lightened the life of Newborough; and ever since, each movement or saying of the sisters had become an object of mingled interest and contempt.

On wet Sundays—which were almost as enjoyable as fine—Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny would drive to and from church in their heraldic “Lonsdale Wagonette.” This vehicle, of which they were intensely proud, was regarded by others almost as the symptom of original sin. It was, in truth, an odd conveyance: a large, long, polished, black, roomy affair, lined with railway-carriage-blue material; indeed the interior was not unlike a railway carriage, except that the windows were above the seats, one narrow end turned toward the horses. Whichever seat one occupied, one’s back shut out the view, while the view opposite was likewise obscured by some person. When the door shut, the step shut with it; when the door opened, the step precipitated one upon the pavement. How either of the two ladies ever got in or out of their conveyance, with their weak eyes and faltering footsteps, remains one of the mysteries of the past! The coachman, smartly dressed in a buff coat, sat—immense—on the box, while the door had emblazoned on it the very rampant arms of Cantrell-Cooksey. The wagonette was, really, an extraordinary creation; one of the last, most imbecile inventions of equine traffic, originally intended to aid the more rapid and complete incarceration of guests in various country houses. Its owners, however, were very content, regarding it as the supreme achievement of civilization. It was neater and more unusual-looking than a brougham or victoria; not so “fast”—in any sense—as a tandem; and how much nicer than those horrible, snorting motor-cars that were coming in! Not that they would ever be seen in one of those things; so trippery. And then the “Lonsdale,” most important quality, was so hospitable. There was room in it for one’s friends. It would hold at least eight people, where a brougham would hold three, and it would be so useful for picnics in the Sherbourn Woods. In fact this lumbering conveyance made a special appeal to the Romantic Temperament.

Sunday afternoons in the season were also very pleasant, for there were concerts in the Winter Gardens at 3.30. The band, discarding its uniform, would adopt frock-coats, while the conductor would walk round the corner into his glass-case, curling a waxed military moustache, and sporting a top-hat. When securely within the shelter, the bandsmen would stand up to greet him; he would take off his hat, turn round, and bow. *God Save the King*—for it was Sunday—would then be played. Usually a *vocalist* would come down from London for these concerts (a vocalist is a very different thing from a singer—more sabbatical). The vocalist, running to extremes, was generally a very young girl or very old man. The programmes of these concerts were, of course, composed of sacred music, and were regarded by the town as being “very classical.” Some, even, took objection to them on this score, for not all Newborough enjoyed “classical” music. The adjective had a special significance. For the town divided all sounds made by piano, orchestra, or human voice into two categories: “classical” music and—just music! Music meant *The Country Girl*, *The Belle of New York*, Offenbach, Waldteufel and, generally, anything that had “a tune in it”; Sullivan—except for *The Lost Chord*, acknowledged as sacred—was an exception, belonging to both worlds, pagan and “classical,” but universally popular. Then came the “classical” division, comprising any composers who had comprehended and used the rules of counterpoint, the laws of harmony, and at the same time any mid-Victorian composer, who, neglecting both, had written anthems or oratorios. For sacred music was the inner and spiritual core of “classical” music. Furthermore, it was understood that any music played on a organ became transmuted in some mysterious fashion into sacred music. And, by virtue of this, Wagner had crept into the Sunday Afternoon Concerts, as a sort of Honorary Sacred Composer; for it was well known that the organist at Holy Trinity—the best organist in all Newborough—played Wagner at his recitals. Thus our two ladies were privileged to bathe in those luscious strains each Sunday.

After music, came tea again, at 5 o’clock, half an hour later than usual. It was always nice to have a cup of tea.

This routine continued through their fifteen years of prosperity, from about the 24th May till the 27th September. About this latter date, every year, it would occur simultaneously to many that the evenings were drawing in. Chrysanthemums would strike a rich note of gloom and warning in many gardens, and through the windows of the Red House, especially, would be wafted-in their peculiarly muffed and musty smell, mildewed and damp as the air of the tomb. Poor old Miss Waddington—whom they saw from time to time—would inaugurate the winter season with one of those cyclone colds that were her unique gift. Bath-chairs would disappear from the Promenade and Winter Gardens. The band would be dispersed, its members drifting away to London or to various theatre-orchestras elsewhere, and soon the whole town would be echoing with the more wintry music of howling gale, roaring sea, and their domestic equivalents, wheezing, sneezing, snoring, and coughing. Blinds would be drawn down for tea. There would be comfortable fires; the yellow wall-paper of the drawing-room would take on a warmer tone, the large oil-picture of *Sunset Egypt*, of which old Mr. Cantrell-Cooksey had been so fond, a richer glow; and all would burn more brightly again in the various items of the silver equipment on the tea-table. Christmas, it would be felt—in the Red House, and universally—will soon be here again. Already the shops would be getting ready for it, with an ever-increasing number of imbecile “novelties” and a great display of red-flannel and cotton-wool snow.

The winter festivities would start in mid-November. Every five weeks there would be a hospital ball, a hunt ball even—so picturesque with all the red coats and bits of foxes and things—or perhaps a concert in aid of the local lifeboat, or the performance of the Newborough Philharmonic Society, which took place every six months; these concerts were also very picturesque—quite a sight indeed—with all the girls in white dresses, and all the men in black and white evening clothes. In every one of these gaieties Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny Cantrell-Cooksey would, for a varying payment, participate. Yet at the most spirited and exhilarating of these functions it may be surmised that though clad in a low-cut glory unequalled by any other ladies present, though boasting diamond constellations fixed in their hair like those stars that twinkle so brightly above the head of the Queen of the Fairies in a pantomime, the two ladies were more lonely even than in their unfrequented house. Not, one imagines, that they realized quite what it was they felt; for as the only form of human companionship to which they were accustomed was to be together but otherwise alone, or else to be together in a crowd but equally alone, since few spoke to them or acknowledged their presence, they were not so much aware of the separation from their kind as to let it altogether spoil their pleasure. In order fully to appreciate the honour of being sent to Coventry, it is necessary to have experience of other countrysides and towns. Such had never been the lot of our heroines. Nevertheless, as they left concert or ball, as, wrapped in filmy, feathery cloaks, they waited outside on the doorstep for the arrival of their Lonsdale—which, in spite of their constant generosity to the commissionaire, was always the last to be ushered up to the door—an inexplicable and terrible feeling of depression would assail them. Perhaps, they thought, it was only the reaction that follows on intense enjoyment. It was curious, though, for in the Rectory they had experienced no such feelings. But then life at the Rectory had not been so full of pleasure and excitement, had it, dear?

When the Carnival Ball (Costume Voluntary) took place in February, in aid of the Children’s Convalescent Home, a riot was very nearly provoked in fashionable circles by the two sisters. Few people wore fancy dress. The arrival, therefore, of Miss Frederica as a Dresden Shepherdess and Miss Fanny as Carmen was all the more noticeable. Miss Frederica wore a white-powdered wig, a sprigged-muslin dress, carried a crook, and had one very captivating black patch near the chin; while Miss Fanny, particularly alluring in a bright red gown on which sequins sparkled like a rainbow, and with an orange Spanish shawl flung jauntily round her shoulders, cast sparkling glances over her fan from those weak, pale eyes. It was rather an appalling spectacle, this *danse macabre*, though they enjoyed it thoroughly, quite unaware of the sensation caused. They stood among the waiting groups of young girls at the ballroom door, or sat together by one of the walls. But Newborough never forgot: it ranked as an event, as a topic, with that census return.

In the winter, too, there were countless bazaars in aid of various charities—not so important as those that took place in the summer, but more of them, and, in a sense, more exciting, more personal. The great lady of the district, Lady Ghoolingham, let it be understood that though willing to open an infinity of bazaars and sales of work in July or August, nothing and no one would, or ever should, induce her to face the harsh winter winds of Newborough, the cold of the railway carriage that would take her there from London, or the over-heated atmosphere of the restaurant car, full of the mysterious and emetic scent of cabbage that haunts it always in the winter. It became necessary, then, for the organizers of good works to find continual substitutes for Lady Ghoolingham. And the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey would often remark to each other that they could not—no, they could not—think what they would do if Archdeacon Haddocriss should ask them to perform some such ceremony on his behalf. You see, it must be quite twenty years since Miss Frederica had opened that one for her father at Hubbard Stanton, and that was only a jumble sale! But Miss Fanny had seen the Archdeacon out that morning, and thought he had looked rather as if he wanted to ask something. No, she wouldn't be at all surprised; and if Frederica was asked, it would hardly be graceful to refuse. . . . Alas! the venerable gentleman knew that if out of respect for their wealth and generosity he invited one of "those two gaudy old scarecrows"—as he had heard them termed in his presence—to open any function, or even so much as to appear on the platform, the parish would be rent in twain. There would be civil war. If he wanted trouble of that sort, he might just as well introduce ritualism at once.

We have noticed, in passing, some of the minor eccentricities of the two sisters, which might possibly justify the charge brought against them of "oddness," but now we come to other, more marked, peculiarities. Every fine morning or afternoon in the winter they would, like most other respectable inhabitants of the town, call at the lending-library to exchange their novels. There was nothing very unusual in this, except that little Mr.

Garrett, behind the counter, founder of the establishment, had become almost a friend. He was more friendly to them than were most of the townsfolk. Like other habituals of the library, they would demand a new novel every day—something "amusing" and "light"—an E. F. Benson, for example—and, unlike them, would actually get it. Mr. Garrett was such a nice polite little man. A pity he was so untidy! They would then leave the library, exchanging its warm smell of cloves, sealing-wax and thumbed volumes, for the salt air outside. Coming out into the air was, indeed, like being hit in the face, at this time of year. And now they would turn their steps towards the sea-front! This was considered an extraordinary thing to do. Of all the wealthier members of the community, they were the only two who did not conspire to regard the sea as non-existent except in the summer months. All the rest of them forgot the ocean till the first spring day, and preferred to walk in the streets, among the shops, away from the fierce white wings of spray that fluttered and flapped up over the stout stone walls below. Every day in the winter, when it was not actually raining, our heroines, with that love of extremes—great light and great shadow, sun and black cloud—which is the portion of those afflicted with the Romantic Temperament, would walk by the cold, tumbling brown cliffs along the tawny sands, away, even, from the humanized sea-front. Especially after a storm would they enjoy walking along the lonely winter sands. Their scarlet hair, their faces so badly made-up that the expression of each side would vary as if one half of the mask were tragic, the other comic, their absurd and complicated dresses, looked all the more fantastic for this submarine setting; and such it seemed after a storm, some strange undersea view. The sloping, pebbly border of sand and sea would be littered with a wild disarray of broken glass, worn down to round gleaming jewels by the constant fret and foaming of the breakers, of starfish, sea-urchins and queer-shaped monstrosities, or heaped up with seaweed like small brown palm-trees the long black matted hair of mermaids. There were so few people about, and the few there were would haunt the sands each day. There was always a tramp, keeping-in to the shelter of the rocks, a little bent man with a thin red beard, a battered bowler-hat and a torn frock-coat, a queer parody of prosperity. Then there were the gatherers of limpets and winkles, who would pile up their salt harvest in scaly baskets. One of these men, especially, they noticed—a broad bacchanalian character, with huge northern physique, who ought to have found work harder and more remunerative than this. Him they would see bent nearly double over the flat rocks that were covered by the sea at high tide, as with a knife he removed the molluscs and threw them into the deep basket at his side.

And, most interesting of all, after a storm there would gather together those men who make a living by combing the golden sands. What profession they followed in between the gales, or where they came from, it was impossible to find out. The bacchanalian character would join them, deserting his limpets and winkles for this more profitable and entertaining employment. They would rake over the slope of pebbles and the sands beneath, just at that point where the high tide deposited its hostages. It was a gentle but fascinating exercise, and one requiring very competent eyesight and a certain agility of mind. The sisters would stand there for many minutes watching the alternately romantic and prosaic treasury which the storm had precipitated on these bleak sands. As the men combed, they would find silver pennies of the Plantagenets, old biscuit tins full of sea-biscuits, gold coins from Spain, a piece of rusty armour that had been gnawed by the waves for centuries, coppers that had been thrown to the pierrots in the summer, a glass bottle with a faded message in it—the family to which this agonized scrawl was addressed had been dead these ten years!—a bit of a weighing-machine that had stood on the sands in the summer, a Dutch cheese still round and fresh and cherry-coloured, a long clasp-knife with a curious tortoise-shell handle—all the trifles that time and the cruel tides had left over. Really Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny felt that they could stand here for hours watching, if it was not for the cold. Even when they had walked away a little they would return for a last glimpse. Gradually, a bond grew up between them and these strange diggers for treasure. To the latter there was such a break in the surface of the world between themselves and the dwellers on the West Cliff, that these two queerly-caparisoned elderly women, with their dyed hair and painted faces, seemed no further removed from everyday experience than any others of their class. They were a funny lot, ladies and gentlemen! But these two, though they asked constantly to which parish the treasure-seekers belonged, also distributed shillings. Suspicion was allayed. "It was meant kindly," the men thought, and in the presence of Miss Fanny and Miss Frederica the very living language of the fish-market was stifled by unexpected better feelings.

In short, to watch these men at their work was, to the two sisters, like looking on at gambling. And here we have the second secret. This was the spark of passion that burned in them. In spite of the quiet orderliness of home and upbringing, these two ladies were, by nature, born gamblers. But for many years timidity, not of the possible consequences—for these held no terrors for them—but of the means and methods by which gambling could respectably be effected, had deterred them from rash action. They must not do anything "fast." Horse-racing was out of the question, since their father would never have countenanced the smallest bet. It must be very absorbing, though, they thought. Monte Carlo, too, was a dreadful place, full of *queer* people: never a morning went by—the Rector had told them—except a revolver shot rang out a life. One did not always see these tragedies reported in the Press, because the Casino authorities hushed them up. It was disgraceful—a blot on Europe; but then, of course, queer people *would* do queer things. And foreigners were so queer, what with Monte Carlo and bull-fighting and things like that!

Their own method of gambling would not be gambling, so much as speculation; quite a different matter. And for them an unfortunate sequel to their actions was incredible. Security had ever stood by them. Their world was not subject to these chances, these accidents, but was a solid affair of Law-and-Order, Church-and-State, governed for sixty years by Queen Victoria and now inherited by her worthy and popular son ("God Save the Queen" . . . somehow they felt they would never get used to "God Save the King" . . . it sounded so funny, didn't it? . . .). Investments were not like gambling at Monte Carlo, but part of an ordered and stately society. "The very life-blood of commerce," they had read in a *Times* leading article, not long ago. No ill would befall them, for they, too, were part of an ordering of the world. It had pleased God to call them to their position. And things were going on as well as could be expected, considering that the Queen was dead. The Income Tax, though deprecated by all Newborough, was negligible; and the pale spectres of disaster and revolution were still stalking the outer confines of the world, to which they had been banished by the general prosperity, unable as yet to make a sufficiently imposing reappearance on the modern stage after such long exile. The Boer War was dreadful, but apart from the revelation of human brutality and degradation offered by the obstinate desire to fight on behalf of their country shown by those brutal, bearded farmers, there had never been really much reason for worry. After all, we were an island, and brute force had never won yet! And we had the Navy, and our generals too. Of course it was true that there were "cranks" at large in London, "Fabians" who wished to overturn the whole system of civilized society. But one did not hear much of them now at Newborough. And since the ordering of the world had been ordained by God, it could hardly be upset except by the Devil himself: and even he would not prevail for long.

If they gambled, being part of the ordering of this world, they would win. Of course they would win! Their temperament assured them of success, and urged them to find the means. Ever since the death of their father they had been able to gratify every desire within a limited circle—that wagonette, for example! If they could find some method of gambling which—since success was inevitable—meant if they could double or treble their income, two birds would be killed by one stone. For, while it would satisfy their need for excitement, the extra wealth accruing to them would thus enable them to buy more “Lonsdales”—taking “Lonsdales” as the symbol of worldly ambition. It never occurred to them that there was a penalty attached to possible failure. They had not the nervousness of the very rich. Yet the absence to them of danger did not make the game any less exciting.

Some years before the time of which we are writing, Miss Frederica had, after a period of study, found the way. Her conclusion was that herself and her sister should sell out of Consols, which now only brought in 2½ per cent, part with their other gilt-edged securities, and invest in one of her own discoveries. Miss Fanny, implicit believer in Frederica’s genius, at once concurred.

The elder lady, like many of her generation, had been greatly impressed by the towering genius of Cecil Rhodes—a millionaire was then regarded as a being of high romance, a Napoleon of Finance, a Cæsar of Commerce—and by his roseate views of the future in store for South Africa. With utter faith in his views, and in the solidity of wealth, Miss Frederica invested most of their joint fortunes in South African Mines and other speculative concerns. Their trustees, in this case powerless to forbid, implored them not to alter their old investments. But Miss Frederica knew better. She knew—for the newspapers had told her—that one must Think Imperially. What were those lines of Kipling’s?

She wrote a severe, identical letter to trustees and lawyer, in which she pointed out that one must cease “thinking in a *narrow* little way,” adjured them to put away notions inherited from the past, and to realize that we were, all of us, treading (and how true were her words) the path that would lead us to an Imperial To-morrow.

Not one single word of these unusual developments reached Newborough, and for some time the ladies prospered almost as much as they had anticipated. Soon, though, the first cracks appeared in the ice upon which they were skating; but warnings held no meaning for them, and were not heeded. Another year passed. Nothing exceptional transpired. The summer passed, and they were a little behindhand with their accounts. The winter began, and the storms raged.

One afternoon they had been down to the sands, as was their custom, to watch the disentangling of that irrelevant treasure accumulated by the northern waves. As they walked along the Promenade they noticed that the storm was dying down. The lamp-lighter was pursuing his magic calling, and as he touched the lamps with his tall wand there was no flicker of wind and light. The blinds were already down at home. But a rich glow showed through them. It looked so comfortable.

The postman had been, too. And a letter was waiting for them. Their to-morrow had come, and they were ruined.

So rooted were they in material prosperity, so protected had been every thought in all their lives from any frosty breath of reality, that at first they were not so much worried, as excited. But then, suddenly, the world began to take on the most unexpected and unpleasant contours. Action, for the first time, came into touch with them. Their loss unlocked the gate, and all the aversion and contempt in which they were held came pouring out, overwhelming them in a filthy, muddy torrent. Little pity showed in any face. Even those who had greatly prospered by the worldly possessions of the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey, tradesmen and their like, could not now see any further reason to disguise their feelings, however carefully they had concealed them before. People became offhand, and so rude. Some had always disliked them for their "oddness" (they had never been like other ladies), while the rest were jealous, feeling that to be ruined was a luxury of the rich. Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny felt that they could stand anything but rudeness, for even yet our two heroines could not envisage the full consequences. Their instinct was to keep up appearances; and this was their courage. Not one word of reproach passed between them, not by one syllable would either admit that the world had changed. Everything now depended on keeping up appearances, on seeming not to mind. The fear was there, buried and smothered, but the material pinch was as yet absent.

They were perhaps a little more excitable now in their manner—on the verge of a breakdown, I thought. Miss Fanny, the injured one, had nothing but soothing and heartfelt compassion for her sister, who, though she would not discuss their calamities, would sit alone, silent, and trembling. Before Miss Fanny she was different, more talkative, more uneasy, for in truth she felt too ashamed and remorseful in front of her handiwork to utter, but she must keep up appearances.

In every shuttered red-brick villa, in every avenue and terrace in the town, the Cantrell-Cooksey affair was discussed at 7.30 each night. Folly of this sort was felt, generally, to be equal to villainy. It was, Mrs. Sibmarsh opined, more than a personal disgrace on the two painted old hags; it was a blot on the fair name of the town. What would tradesmen think that Newborough was coming to? Running up bills with no intention of paying them. An absolute disgrace! But then one only had to look at their eyes. . . .

Other people were kind but rather inquisitive. Old Miss Waddington, who happened to be laid up with a bronchial cold that was bad enough to prevent her leaving the house, even on such a visit of commiseration as this one would be, sent her niece across to them at once. The latter returned to her aunt in a marvellously short time with a full budget of information, and Miss Waddington seemed really to be "more herself" that evening, and had a glass of port after dinner, which she seldom did—invalid port, of course. The Archdeacon, too, was kind, very kind. Directly he heard of the affair he came round to the Red House (the sisters were still in it) and offered to say a prayer with them. Afterwards he addressed a few solemn words to them on secret vices, and, arising out of this, on the particular iniquity of avarice and gambling. But his words served no purpose, because, even if the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey had wished to continue such a career, they had now nothing with which to feed their passion. Avarice would be henceforth a difficult vice for them to practise.

The house was sold. The horses were sold. Everything went, and was lost to them beneath the ghastly sound of the hammer. The Lonsdale fetched but seven pounds. Even the silver teapot, kettle and equipment were taken from them. Nothing remained except a few of their old clothes—which did not prove very attractive items at the sale—and some photographs. The servants had left, two by two, as if leaving the ark on an excursion, laughing, happy, and without leave-taking, a few days before the Public Examination.

This event was the wonder of all Newborough, and the charge of "oddness," so often brought against the sisters, was fully borne out by their demeanour in court. The suggestion that they drugged—for drink was too trite an explanation of such behaviour—was widely accepted by that more temporal section of the community which, although it existed in a seaside town, was alive to all that was going on in London, knew every musical comedy success, had visited all the large hotels there for dinner on Sunday night, and had thus acquired a thorough knowledge of the greater and more wicked world. No secret vice could for long be hidden from them.

Rouged, dyed, and a-rattle with little ornaments, Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny arrived in court. Their answers were mostly inaudible, except that when Miss Frederica was asked where she was born, she replied that she did not know, and, in answer to the next question, gave her age as twenty-eight; and then broke down.

The total outcome of the affair was that the Misses Cantrell-Cooksey of the Red House were now left homeless, with twenty-six pounds a year between them. With unexpected generosity a few distant but notable relatives, to whom the Archdeacon sent a written appeal, came forward and made up the sum to fifty-two pounds a year—on the condition that the extra twenty-six pounds per annum should be divided into a fortnightly allowance of one pound, and given to them personally, every other Saturday, by a responsible individual. For the relatives were determined that there should be no more extravagance, no more gambling. Finally, dear old Miss Waddington, in spite of growing infirmity and advancing age, volunteered for the office of bursar. She was fond of good works.

The relatives considered that the two sisters should now find some work to do, and perhaps in time relinquish their allowance. They ought to make an EFFORT, they ought to DO SOMETHING. People must learn to support themselves. However, even Archdeacon Haddocriss, sensible man as he was, had to admit to himself that it was difficult to know for what exact profession the two ladies were fitted.

Now, indeed, the pinch had come and the excitement had gone. But the two sisters kept up appearances to each other—for no one else was taken in! "The worst of it is," they would say, "that we shall never be able to entertain our friends again." Though the physical deprivations, to which they were condemned from this time forward, became gradually manifest, and must, after such a comfortable life, have seemed more cruel, neither of them ever mentioned these. Cold and hunger, even less than mental torture, should not be allowed by respectable members of society. Once their presence was admitted, even tacitly admitted, self-respect would go out of the window.

At any rate it looked very clean. That was a comfort! Their room was right at the top.

The tall boarding-house, fronted with that particular white brick which is only to be encountered at seaside resorts, rose like a tower of ice, with blue shadows, from beside a suspension-bridge. The Gothic doorway, carved with cast-iron ivy leaves, had a crooked notice, "Apartments," stuck against the glass above the door, like a rakish patch over a very Wesleyan eye. The white side of the house, fronting the street which was a continuation of the bridge, was only five storeys high; but the back of the house went down another two storeys: here the brown brick of which it was built showed undisguised, and rising among tall, green trees and slopes of grass—for the back looked out on the Dale, a public pleasure-ground—it lost some of its horror, becoming merely a high brown tower. The Misses Cantrell-Cooksey's room was the top one on the street side, under the tall gable covered with rain-blue slates. The window, from the street, looked like a sinister eye. Inside, the bottom of the window was on a level with the floor, while the top of it was so low down that it was necessary to bend in order to get the view from it. The vista it disclosed was made up of a large asphalt playground flanked by a red school-building, with lines of cinder-coloured brick inset in the façade. Away on the right, rose the stone dock-tower of the railway station, modelled on eighteenth-century Dresden architecture, for the architect of the railway company had been a man of wide knowledge and appreciation. On the left was the bridge, with a few tree-tops showing above it. In the daytime, especially in the summer, it was quite lively. The sound of traffic, the vibration of the bridge, the clanging of trains, cawing of rooks, and cries of the children as they tumbled round their playground, came in at the high window. For some reason or other Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny found the noise made by the children very irritating—upsetting, indeed. In the winter the days were quieter; but the evenings were so long—and the nights!

It had been March when they had moved in: very cold, but the warmer weather would come soon. At first the change was so abrupt, the contrast to their past life so fantastic, as to be equally unreal. It was like playing a game, a childish game of house-keeping or Red Indians. It must, surely, be only make-believe, and at any moment they would find themselves back in the Red House, able to resume their old life. The last few days there had been—though they would never admit it—very bitter. Everyone on the West Cliff knew them; and if they moved out of their home, people stared so. Here they had not been so well known in the days of their prosperity.

They missed their bedrooms more than anything else. In this house they occupied just one room, sleeping in one hard bed. There were a few rickety pieces of yellow furniture, an empty fireplace, a tin basin to wash in. Of course, in the summer, the house was full of visitors, and it was not dark till nine. But the winter evenings were very long. They had no novels to read, and it was very cold—no fire, and nothing to do except go to bed—not even a hot-water bottle. They thought they could not be very well—so chilly and stiff, with a funny sinking feeling inside. It might, Miss Fanny thought, it might be the food. It was not quite what they were used to. Meat, for instance, only twice a week. Still, some people thought meat-eating bad for one, and in the end one might feel all the better for the absence of it . . . when one had got used to it. And no dinner at all seemed strange, didn't it? And then, that horrid Indian tea. She was sure she would never get to like that!

Yes, the nights were long, especially the winter nights, and so cold, but they had never before moved in a real world; and if now it had become painfully real, it should yet be kept at a distance! Never would they admit to each other their fear of the winter. They might complain themselves of small things—of the tea, for instance—but they must never voice to each other any mortal dread. Yet though they never mentioned it, each knew that the other did not sleep for long through those interminable winter nights. It was too cold, so near the roof. Outside the bare branches would be swaying and creaking in the wind. The bridge would surely be blown away one night. At about ten a cab would rumble over it in a leisurely manner. And then for hours there would be no sound except that of the striking clocks—it would be too quiet except for that icy sound. The sound was so cold, it was like touching iron rails in a frost. It almost froze the ears, and the brain within. Certainly it gave them a headache. The station clock would start first: the four quarters, and then the hour; but a fairly cheerful, business-like sound. Then would toll out the others in a sequence, each following at an interval of a few seconds. Each one would strike the four quarters and then the hour; and for all the clocks audible in the town to strike midnight took up a full quarter of an hour. St. Catherine's would knell eastward with its deep bell; Christchurch would sound near by, scolding and shrewish. St. Thomas would be angry and foreboding, Holy Trinity, surprised. The hour was tolled out as if in sorrow: perhaps a worse one was coming in. Sleep was at an infinite distance, beyond the sound of bells and the touch of cold iron bars. Their minds were waking. They were living, and it was cold.

Then the winter days, though actually so short, seemed both long and cold; and the landlady was not at all a nice woman, very impolite. In time they grew to avoid Mrs Snaggs whenever it was possible. When they passed by they would hear her laughing and giggling. She was not respectful, "Goodness, what sights!" they would hear her say.

No longer could they go to concerts or bazaars, nor were they ever asked to knit anything for the Christchurch sale of work. It was too tiring to go out for a long walk, and too cold to stay in. They had been forced to give up the lending-library: thus that stroll, which would have given them something to do, was barred to them; and if they stayed at home, they had no books to read. Except that Mrs. Snaggs had once lent them a copy of *The Family*

Herald. And Mr. Garrett was very kind and had offered to continue their subscription until better times came. But they could not accept his offer; it would not be the right thing to do. And then Mr. Garrett was altering; his waxed moustache was very untidy, his hair dishevelled, he had a vacant eye. Things were going badly with him, too. Newborough was altering. The new big chemist's at the corner had started a lending-library; and things were not prospering with the smaller shops. Drink was a dreadful thing, but they could understand it. Poor little man! He had always been so kind and respectful. No, it was no good staying in unless the weather forced them to do so. A little walk in the streets, but not in the main streets. People stared so.

Alas! there was some excuse for the staring. Now that there was no one to look after their clothes, hats, and boots, the two sisters presented a more than ever extraordinary spectacle. The dresses, getting daily more antiquated in their design, were yet as gorgeous in colour, and were still fluttering with torn ribbons and cobweb-like lace, but draggled, torn, and untidy. Their hats had acquired shapes that could only be described as grotesque; their bronze buttoned boots were dirty and worn down; but cheek and hair still burnt with an unnatural and unsteady flame.

One day two little boys followed them right up to Miss Waddington's door, making fun of them. It was too bad! Every fortnight they paid this, their only visit in the town, to old Miss Waddington. They would arrive in time for tea. At first, going so near their old house was very painful to them. They would ring the bell, and the maid, Elsie, would open the door, leave them waiting in the small hall between the two doors for some little time, and then usher them into the drawing-room. In the winter, when the blinds were drawn, it reminded them so much of the drawing-room at the Red House. A fire burnt brightly under a solid white-marble mantelpiece, on which were several photographs in rococo silver frames and a solid white-marble clock. On each side of this were a Dresden shepherd and shepherdess. But the old lady was "artistic," and there were several ferns, especially little ones, in art-pots, green merging into yellow-ochre. There was usually, in the winter, a silver vase, shaped like a small trumpet with a crinkled edge, full of jonquils, so pretty, and bright, like the spring; nice comfortable armchairs, and a sofa, full of dark green silk cushions, with large frills.

Sometimes Miss Waddington would not be well enough to come down herself, and her niece would give them tea instead—such good Ceylon tea. The niece was not exactly pretty, but bright-looking: yes, that was the word, bright-looking: people said she was “clever.” “Aunt Hester is not so well to-day,” she would say as she came in, “and has asked me to entertain you for her”; and then, before they answered, as if entering a preliminary defence, she would add quickly: “How well you both look. I am sure they must make you very comfortable in your lodgings. I saw Mrs Snaggs the other day, such a clean, sensible, respectable-looking woman!” Tea would be brought in, many small cakes and scones. And finally, after a visit lasting from half-an-hour to three-quarters, they would get up to go, and would be handed an envelope containing a cheque for one pound. No other visitors ever disturbed these tea-parties.

As a rule, though, Miss Waddington would make a special effort to be there herself to talk to them. She thought that she really must be getting quite fond of the two Misses Cantrell-Cooksey; at any rate she enjoyed their visits. Perhaps they were nicer since their misfortunes—but they were certainly rather odd. She was, therefore, not “at home” to other friends. No, Emily.

There would be a preliminary coughing and wheezing upstairs and in the hall. The door would open, and the dear old lady, with a white shawl round her shoulders, would totter in, shivering as if it were very cold. Miss Frederica and Miss Fanny found it rather difficult to talk to her. Indeed, the former lady seldom spoke now, even to her younger sister. Besides, what was there to talk about? They had seen so little and done so little. There remained in the summer the weather and the visitors, in the winter the weather. Or Miss Waddington would try to impart a little religious consolation to them, endeavour to make them go to church again, for latterly they had given up going to Christchurch. Certainly, Miss Waddington reflected, as they left the house with their envelope, they were getting very odd, very odd indeed. But after they left she felt better than she had done all day. Kindly and charitable; and at the same time the room had grown brighter, the fire warmer. It was a terrible thing, to gamble!

And the two Misses Cantrell-Cooksey would be walking, under cover of the winter darkness, back across the suspension-bridge to their high black window in the tall white house.

Apart from their fortnightly call, the chief thing they looked forward to in the winter was their walk on the sands, away from the town. They grew to look forward to this event of the day with more and more pleasure. Even when the north-east wind blew straight from the top of Norway, they would sit on a rock, impervious to any chill, and converse with their friends, who would, if there had not been a storm, be gathering their winkles and limpets.

If there had been a gale, on the other hand, they would be engaged in the more exciting task of combing the gold sands. Excitement would flare up again in the eyes of the two old ladies as they watched the sea hoard being uncovered. And, though they were now no longer able to distribute shillings, the men who lived by this strange employment were, even when a little the worse for drink, so kind and respectful. They treated these two poor old bundles of bones, decked out in their torn fine feathers, as if they still lived on the West Cliff. They even appeared to regard them as human beings. And, to the men's great credit, they never allowed their pity to obtrude itself.

The summer was not so difficult. The town was full of visitors and cheerful sounds; while, at low tide, they could walk under the wall of the terrace where the band played, and hear it quite well. And if they kept close to the wall they could not be recognized from above by people leaning over—though once Mrs. Sibmarsh caught a glimpse of them from one the gaps—like the intervals between battlements—in the wall. It gave her quite a turn. Still pretending to be young—and to be rich, she supposed—dressed up like that. They didn't behave like poor people; so stuck up; and one ought to cut one's cloth . . . oughtn't one? Their eyes were worse than ever. There could be no doubt about it. They must drug . . . morphia . . . cocaine . . . though how they could get it without money, she didn't know. It was positively disgraceful.

The sands themselves were so crowded with mothers and children, nurses and children, donkeys and pierrots and ice-cream carts, so vibrating under the reflected lights of sea and pool and sky, that the presence of the two sisters attracted but little attention there, except once; when, advancing near a group waiting round an empty platform, they were asked what time the performance began. After that they began to avoid the sands, until the winter brought loneliness back to them. Yet, curiously enough, they made no effort to quieten their clothes, or to subdue the colouring of hair and cheek. Though cosmetics were costly, they clung to them. For, once they let these pretences die, with them would perish the last vestige of self-respect. Their eccentricity had turned into this extreme patience, and into the final agonizing pretence that all was as it should be.

They had almost lost count of time. How many years was it? The most definite fact in their lives was a continual dread of the coming winter, the cold, the cold! The long winter nights closed round them. And there was nothing to do but lie awake, for they had no books, and they must save the cost of lighting.

And this November Miss Fanny began, suddenly, to notice a change in Frederica, something vague in her manner. All one night she muttered to herself, and the next day, coming up from downstairs, Miss Fanny found her crying. She did not feel very well, that was all. Appearances were a heavy burden, a difficult load. How was she to keep it up?

It was an extravagance, she knew, but would Fanny mind fetching her a small bottle of sal-volatile from the chemist? Yes, it was only a headache, but a rather severe one. It would be gone by dinner. Miss Fanny walked out with the money to Hoare & Blunt, the chemists. Mrs. Snaggs, downstairs in the empty house—for in the winter there were no guests—heard Miss Frederica calling her. It was really too bad! one might be a slave, running up and downstairs with nothing to do except look after those two. Miss Fanny, indeed! For Miss Cantrell-Cooksey had asked Mrs Snaggs to tell Miss Fanny, when she returned, not to worry. She was just going out for a walk, and might not be back for a little time. She was fully decorated, a-jingle with ribbons and ornaments, while a hat, gorgeous but flattened and out of shape, crowned it all. Under her arm was a brown-paper parcel. Mrs Snaggs looked at her in amazement, and then went back to the kitchen. She did not actually hear her go out, but, though angry, when Miss Fanny came in, gave her the message, but muttered and made the most of the two flights of stairs she had been forced to come up by panting in a hollow, owl-like way. Miss Fanny stood with her back to the door, talking to Mrs Snaggs for a few seconds. Just then there was the sound of a gathering crowd outside on the bridge, and looking back out of the door Miss Fanny saw a murmuring circle of black-coated men and a few women backing away toward the other side of the road, with white, mask-like faces. Within the circle Miss Frederica's clothes were lying in a heap. She had gone out for her last walk. She had stepped, fully dressed, with a brown-paper parcel under her arm, straight out of that high window on to the stone pavement below. She must have had to bend down to get out of it. In the parcel were a black-bound Prayer Book and a few old photographs that belonged to her. But she had kept up appearances.

Miss Fanny did not really feel it much. There was the inquest, and then the funeral; a great deal of activity! Mrs. Snaggs had given her the message. And she often sits up quite late expecting Frederica to return, till the light in her eyes equals the flame of cheek and hair.

I last saw her at low tide, one winter morning, dressed in a white-flannel costume (a new departure for her) and very much made-up. She must really be old by now. There had been a storm, and she was sitting on a rock talking to the men who were raking over the pebbly edges of the sands and watching them capture their strange treasure. They found that morning a William-and-Mary gold piece; a small chest covered with rusty iron nails and green with age, with nothing in it; a small box, hermetically sealed, of China tea; a straw ship in a glass bottle, and two George IV four-shilling pieces.

THAT FLESH IS HEIR TO . . .

OR

THE HISTORY OF A BACILLUS

> ". . . Disease, then, represents this struggle for life, and it is in this sense an advantage: for without 'diseases' man would quickly fall victim to the injurious agents which surround him. Man is essentially a potential invalid, since he is a potential battleground in his struggle for existence. Disease is the chance of victory."—Alan Moncrieff in an article entitled "The Nature of Disease" in the *Nation and Athenæum*, March 16, 1929.

> ". . . Man may be a potential invalid, but he is not an invalid by choice."—*Ibid.*

I

Whereas a man can only die and be born once, the race of microbes suffers a thousand grievous deaths in each human recovery and is born anew, a million times triumphing, in each corpse for which it has hungered, and as I hope to show, planned. But this very wealth, this plethora of energy, makes it hard to compress the birth, the upbringing, the career of a germ within the space of a short story: more difficult, indeed, than to force into the same compass the span and achievements of a human life. There are other reasons, too, that force me to regard the task as a piece of work not lightly to be undertaken. This story is essentially one of adventure, and it would not be easy, for example, even with the aid of a map, to concentrate so much picturesque geography, so much tragic social-history as it demands, into a few pages. Nevertheless it seemed, in spite of all obstacles, that the experiment was worth attempting, if only because I would fain place my little offering of personal observation as a tribute upon the altar of science.

Yet, being no professor, I am not compelled to take up with this subject a whole volume, however well it might be filled. All that duty imposes on me is to state the story, and to indicate, for the benefit of those who specialize in such things—but who, not having the imaginative-writer's outfit, cannot detect for themselves the connection between these footprints in the sand—its subsequent and certain developments. If one were to write a life of that

Count of the Empire under Charlemagne who was the founder of the Este family, it would be well, as throwing light upon his destiny, to indicate that he was the common ancestor of the royal houses of England, Saxony and Ferrara: but it would be obligatory on one neither to prove their descent, nor to write the history of every later member of the family. So, too, I shall not essay to correlate the microbe, which is the invisible but most potent hero of my story, with his obvious descendants, interesting as such a digression would be, nor to dwell upon the more crucial and public stages of that career of conquest which found its culmination in the dengue-fever epidemic that devastated Greece in the autumn of 1928 and in the influenza outbreak of the winter of 1928-9: a wave which swept across the whole world. That is the business of those who come after, and whose calling lies in such research.

A microbe, I have said, is the hero of the tale which follows: and this necessitates that, when it so suits the author, the hero should be regarded as both singular and plural, as an individual and a tribe, as a great general and a mighty army in one: nor is this all that one is forced to demand of the gentle reader, for, since microbes neither marry nor are given in marriage, the hero is also heroine, is masculine and feminine as well as singular and plural: for such licence I must crave the reader’s indulgence, asking him to consider and weigh the difficulties of my task.

So enormous, then, is the subject to be imprisoned within these limits, that one is forced to be ruthless, to prune the Mediterranean cities of their tingling life, their hoarse shouts and shuddering glamour, the desert of its beauty born of solitude, the blue, transparent sea of its dolphins leaping up and down through the waters in segments of circles as though they were swift wheels, revolving partly above and partly below the surface, and of its strange fish that at night carry their own illuminations through the glassy depths. Moreover, apart from the protagonists, who will, whether one wishes it or not, most surely demonstrate their characters, the minor figures—our companions on this odyssey, or the royal victims, the attendant train of diplomats and consuls, the crews of ships and staffs of hotels, who are the *dramatis personæ*—should as far as possible be puppets, nine-pins to be knocked over at very rhythmic but ever shorter intervals by the overwhelmingly simple, yet accurate and terrible, machinery invented by our super-germ.

To the working of this engine I now hold the secret. And as, with, it must be confessed, no little pride, I reflect upon this discovery of mine, my mind goes back once more to that dark winter's night of two years ago, and to how little then I expected the curious developments that were so near me.

II

I hurried away from the paraphernalia of polite leave-taking, from the clustered top-hats and walking-sticks, down the steps gilded by the light of the open door, into the dead November square. Each lamp-post bore aloft a wavering halo of golden drizzle, and the tall, contorted red-brick houses had assumed a tone of purple, until, beneath the uncertain and swinging illumination of this windy month, they seemed but a faint discoloration, an opaque deepening of the night itself. What a charming, rather mysterious woman Mrs. Chitty was, with that indefinable and enigmatic smile and the glowing intensity of her brown eyes! (Fitful and anonymous farewells still pursued me from the gaping mouth of her mansion: cars began to purr, and keen patches of light sped over the muddy wastes of the road.) I hurried, hurried on, for I was not feeling well—rather shivery—and hoped the walk would warm me. . . . Charming woman, but a little mysterious . . . unusual. How peculiar, for instance, was the composition of her dinner-parties: the human ingredients never varied. Why should a woman, whose interests in life were mainly musical, artistic and literary, thus live almost entirely in the company of diplomats, Foreign Office officials and scientists? Even though it might be that this choice imparted to her house an atmosphere distinctive and rather cosmopolitan, what was there in her mind to make her thus yoke the scientist with the diplomat? Yet I enjoyed these gatherings, for the diplomats lisped to one another in undertones or babbled in foreign languages, and thus I was left to listen to the scientists, whose theories one needs must love for their wealth of fantasy, intense but serious.

That night, for some reason, the conversation had mainly turned upon the influenza epidemic of 1918: a scourge that, it will be remembered, helped to enwrap the final phases of the "Great" War in a blaze of glory—for glory is ever strictly in proportion to the number of dead bodies upon which it is fed, and this particular wave of illness had made the war-casualties appear almost minute. Seven million people, it was roughly calculated, had perished of it in six months. By christening it *Spanish Influenza*, however, instead of bestowing upon it some picturesque, gothic title such as the *Black Death*, the doctors reduced for us both its terror and romance, even if it cannot be pretended that this castanetted euphemism in any way diminished the death-rate or revealed the cause of the pestilence. And, though nine years had now passed since the outbreak, little more light could be thrown upon its origin. Climatic conditions could not much enter into the matter, for in India, glowing under the tropical heat like an ember, entire communities had been wiped out in a few hours. Mrs. Chitty, who was fond of travelling, had been there when it started, and told us that often by the time the nearest medical aid could be rushed up to some distant village, the cruel, dusty red sunlight glared down on houses in which there was no human movement, no sound, not even a cry.

I had, at the time of this plague, formed about it my own opinion: which was that Nature—who often must be regarded as the Goddess of Reason, a divinity, that is to say, indulging in anthropopathic flights of logic, and only differing in kind from man because of her greater power—had, as she watched the war, very justifiably concluded that since men were so plainly bent on their own extermination, herself had better have her fling and join in the fun. After all, killing people had always been her divine monopoly as well as her chief hobby (thorough good sportsman, Nature!). In England, before a cygnet is killed and eaten, the Royal sanction must be obtained: so, too, Nature expected that before any human being died, before, even, a doctor was allowed to slaughter a patient, her aid and permission should be invoked. It might only be a formality nowadays; but why, she asked herself, should she sit there quietly—especially considering all the new, untried microbes in her possession—and see her prerogative usurped by man, an animal she had never much cared for? Of the many beasts she had created, he was the only one that had become discontented, then mutinous; had attacked her rights and privileges, attempting to curb her supreme power and to degrade her rank from that of Goddess-Autocrat down to a mere constitutional monarch. Indeed in every direction this pitiable creature had challenged her authority. She had given him a skin of his own for his covering, and he had chosen to wear that of others (often murdering a fellow-beast to get it): she had provided him with plain, simple food to eat, and he had chosen to warm it and burn out of it its virtue; with caves in which to live, and he had built huts and houses; she had given him rain to wash him, and he had collected the water, cooked it and taken unto himself soap! But her little influenza-germ would soon put things to rights, for this latest-evolved pet was house-trained, most flourished exactly in those circumstances man had rebelliously contrived for himself.

Thus, I imagined, had Nature argued and plotted in her own mind. But, since 1918, influenza had periodically returned, and one had been forced to abandon such a theory. Now, in the winter of 1927, a season singularly exempt from this particular evil, as I walked home—feeling rather odd and cold—I was just as much in the dark about its origin as any of our scientists could be. (How icy it was, and my eyes were beginning to ache; a curious sensation as though the eyeballs did not belong to their sockets, square eyeballs in round holes. However, one should never encourage pains by thinking of them, and resolutely I focused my thoughts back again on to the conversation at dinner.) We had been informed that, ever since the close of the great epidemic, the medical and scientific authorities had kept constant watch for this criminal bacillus, who even now might be moving unidentified among us: for influenza was peculiarly difficult to cope with, in that, upon each new and considerable outbreak, it assumed a fresh disguise. Like Charley Peace, it was able after every crime entirely to alter its outward appearance, while leaving invariably some novel and obscure disease in its wake. Thus the name "influenza" was merely a courtesy-title conferred by popular consent upon an anonymous and dangerous microbe (here Mrs. Chitty had smiled her curious, enigmatic smile), just as the author of the terrible Whitechapel murders had been known far and wide as "Jack the Ripper." Attempts had been made to fix the responsibility for these recent outrages in many quarters, but so far without success. A million germs had been caught and kept under observation for long periods, only, in the end, to demonstrate unmistakably their innocence.

The stories that Professor Chilcott and Dr. Bidham had told us only served to confirm my impression that science had lately grown a little wild, somewhat apt to overlook and overleap the obvious. They admitted that, in their nervous eagerness to solve the problems of this illness, they had kidnapped an enormous quantity of the free field-mice of Great Britain, and were keeping them captive all the winter in order to observe the various infections which they might breed. This, I had thought, was surely going too far (the dark, furry and whiskered tribe, thus, to its surprise, comfortably installed in winter-quarters, had, as a matter of fact, never since ailed, but had thriven and increased like the seed of Abraham) . . . and, even if it has now been established that pneumonic plague is engendered by starving squirrels in Central Asia, which, in dying of famine, pass on the fleas that live upon them to the black rat; and that, when the black rat, travelling all over the world, dies of the pestilence, the flea then attacks human beings and infects them, yet why attempt to lay the blame for influenza upon the poor little English mouse, a harmless and quite different creature? I had thought myself bound, in fair play, to protest. A suspect tribe, the rodents: and for a little I had tried to arouse pity and interest on their behalf among these icy, calculating hearts by drawing attention to the extraordinary and romantic vicissitudes of fortune which had lately been their lot. Think on the piebald and downy guinea-pig, I had urged, hailing originally from the suffocating forests of South America, brought across all those leagues of ocean to become a pampered pet. I had seen its image lolling or frolicking among roses or exotic flowers, set over the elaborately carved doors of Prince Eugène's winter palace in Vienna. Then, subsequently, it had become the playmate of wealthy children, its ears flopping freely upon the honest English breeze. But, suddenly sinking into poverty and obscurity once more, it now only exists here as a subject for medical experiments, a beast upon which to practise operations not yet made perfect, upon which to test numberless germs, to be infected, whenever possible, with every disease not yet fully understood, as well as to be inoculated with all the more authentic and recognized microbes of typhoid, malaria, anthrax, paralysis, diphtheria and the like. On the other hand, the common household-rat, long one of the chief enemies of mankind, the Ishmael of the animal world, outcast and driven from door to door, a creature to whom no law of charity applied, to be killed in any manner possible, poisoned, shot, or burned alive, now found itself enjoying in scientific circles an unexpected popularity. Once on the operating table, and nothing was too good for it. Gland operations and graftings were performed, the only object of which was to prolong its valuable life, and one of biology's chief boasts up to the present was that it had succeeded in extending the lifetime of a male rat to three times the normal span. But my scientist friends had sternly refused to be moved to compassion by any such eloquent expositions of these strange reversals of fortune. Mrs. Chitty had again smiled mysteriously, as though in the possession of some secret happiness or cause for amusement. Perhaps, I was to think in after years, it was because to her, too, it seemed as though the scientists, while indulging in countless fantasies, extravagant as those they played upon mice, rats and guinea-pigs, were inclined to overlook the obvious—had, in fact, overlooked Mrs. Chitty.

They would continually dine in her house, give her all the latest expert information in their possession as to the progress of new crusades against disease. Never did they entertain the slightest suspicion. . . . It certainly was a very bad attack of influenza from which they were recovering, they would decide, ten or twelve days later—no doubt they had caught the germ in a bus or in the tube—or, perhaps, from one of those horrid, hypocritical little field-mice (that would be a matter worth going into, when they were better, in another week or two)—and then there had been that cold night air—so damp—after Mrs. Chitty's dinner-party. They remembered quite well how chilly they had felt going home after it. Mrs. Chitty! There was a brave woman—nice of her to come and see them like that, with grapes and calves'-foot jelly, in the middle of the infection, and to take such an interest in the children, to play with them in her charming way (poor little mites, what a shame that they should now have influenza, too: and after so many precautions had been taken)—a remarkable, as well as brave, woman. Think of how she had nursed the troops through that really terrible epidemic of 1918! As though guided by some special instinct she had always gone straight to the spot where the death-roll was to be worst—and yet she had never caught it herself, albeit she was a nervous, delicate woman upon whom any effort was a strain. Though never well, she had not broken down, but had stuck to her post. And then, straight to India after that—in the epidemic there, too, where it was ever so much worse.

And when, a few days after the dinner-party, Mrs. Chitty called on me, though my temperature was very high and I was in no mood for seeing most people, similar emotions of gratitude and respect beset me. She had heard I was ill, she said, and had come to see for herself "how I was getting on." She was really extremely kind, visiting me several times during my convalescence. For a long while I had been growing to like her, and now I more than ever appreciated her character, for I had learnt to estimate at their true worth her many admirable qualities, while, indeed, no one could fail to come under the sway of her charm.

Muriel Chitty was, in fact, all that had been said of her, and much more. She inspired any company, however dull, in which she found herself, with a curious, usually agreeable, feeling of nervous tension, as though something were about to happen. Her beautiful, rather haggard face had the sallow asceticism, her dark, large, slanting eyes, where lingered many an unshed tear, had the fire, her spare figure, the taut and gaunt expressiveness, that distinguishes the saints evoked against bare grey and purple rocks by El Greco. Her clothes, too, were in keeping with this conception: sombre and severe, with an occasional Spanish accent of deep, rich colour. There had gone to her making, one felt, something of the religious bigot, something of the musician, much of the actress. She possessed a subtle but keen sense of humour, and was, when the mood for such frivolity descended upon her, an exceptionally acute mimic. Nevertheless, as one watched her, observed her vehement gestures and flashing eyes, or listened to the earnest and hollow notes of her voice, a voice that was yet altogether persuasive, it was less of Sarah Bernhardt than of Savonarola that one was reminded, although mimicry was the last, and most genial, vice which one would have imputed to that cavernous-eyed and dreary burn-book. It seemed as though in everything she did there was concealed a religious, if unfathomable, intention. Yet not for a moment was she priggish, redeemed from it by many unexpectedly human frailties. She was, for instance, feminine in an almost extinct, Victorian way. Passionately devoted to all other animals, she hated mice and cried if she saw one. Then she had developed a special technique of dropping and forgetting things, so that they must be picked up or fetched for her by her men friends thus enslaved—for this mechanism was calculated, I apprehend, to deal out either reward or punishment according to the manner in which the request for help was made—and was always a little late for everything. These superficially-clinging characteristics, however, cloaked a will that was Napoleonic in strength and purpose: indeed the dropping and forgetting of things was, perhaps, but one of the means she had devised for getting her own way. It showed her men friends how helpless, how dependent on them she was, and that, in consequence, it was thus cruel to oppose her. Yet all her failings, all her devices, quite genuinely and without her being aware of it, only helped to throw into relief her essential mystery and attraction.

She was, one understood, a rare, very sensitive, and in many ways delightful character. And much there was about her that charmed while it eluded one. Even her worship of diplomats was intriguing—not, of course, that I am suggesting that there is anything peculiarly bizarre in choosing them as companions, but that she seemed to bear toward them a devotion that was almost fanatical. A party at the Foreign Office, to be received at the top of those marble stairs under the allegorical, monster-patriotic paintings of Mr. Goetze, would be her translation into a temporary, but none the less heavenly, heaven. She was aware of the exact position of every member of His Majesty's Diplomatic Service abroad at any given moment of any day, for her life's supreme interest was in the news of the latest swops, the promotions or occasional degradations. These she followed with the same passionate attention that a schoolboy devotes to the cricket averages of the paladins of his chosen county, or with which a retired official of the Indian Civil Service, now living in England, regards the vagaries of the barometer in his draughty hall. Yes, she was a remarkable and curious woman, I decided. Under her manner, which displayed the identical combination of flaring pride and meek submission that in the animal world distinguishes the camel from other beasts, there was something really interesting, something that matched her obscure and haunting beauty. Further, there was nothing that she did not—or rather could not—comprehend, and, when it pleased her, she was both witty and subtle.

It was with definite pleasure, therefore, that in the spring of 1928 I heard that Mrs. Chitty was to be of the same party as ourselves. Seven of us had already decided to travel together and visit various Mediterranean towns. We were to start on a liner, which was setting out for a pleasure cruise: and it had been arranged that where we wished to stay longer than the other passengers, we could wait behind and catch the next boat. The tour we had planned was rather extensive and would occupy some two to three months. Our proposed itinerary was Genoa, Palermo, Athens, Constantinople, Rhodes, Cyprus and Beirut. There we were to disembark and visit Damascus and Jerusalem: after which, returning to Beirut, we hoped to catch a boat for Alexandria. We were determined to spend some time in Egypt, seeing everything that it was possible to see. We were to ride on camels out into the desert, and to sail up the Nile on a dahabeeah. From Egypt we were to go by car to Libya, that enormous and fascinating country which has only so recently been opened up, thence return to Italy, visiting the various places of interest that lay on our road back to England.

The party in all was to consist of Mrs. Rammond, Frank Lancing, Mrs. Jocelyn, Ruth Marlow, Julian Thackwray, Mrs. Chitty, my brother and myself. This, as it afterwards turned out, was to be the human material for Mrs. Chitty's experiments: but in our innocence at the time it was about Muriel Chitty, rather than the others, that we felt anxious, for though we all knew that she was an expert traveller, she was rather delicate, and we feared that so strenuous and prolonged a tour might fatigue her.

A letter from her, that reached me a few days before we were to sail, disturbed us still further. In it she said that for some time she had been unwell. She was staying with an old friend—Robert Sutledge, the novelist—on the Riviera. She had not actually remained in bed, she explained, for her host had made so many engagements for her, and she had resolved, whatever happened, not to disappoint him. Fortunately she did not think that he had realized how ill she had been, with a high temperature, and feeling altogether wretched; and, of course, she had not let him observe it. Dreadful headaches she had been afflicted with, but then she had been sad and grieving, for—had I noticed?—the death of Professor Chilcott. Did I remember meeting him? An *extraordinary* coincidence—he had dined with her alone only a week before he died, and he had been quite well then. It had been so sudden, and, naturally, a shock for her, such an old friend—and it seemed so ironical—to die of influenza like that, when the whole of the last years of his wonderful life had been given up to trying to discover its origin, and thus to find a way of rendering humanity immune from its ravages. Yes, that had, of course, upset her. The Riviera was very gay this year, the letter went on, Opera and Ballet, and parties every night. But she wondered, she wrote, whether there would be much illness along the coast this year? (It was an odd question to ask me, I thought, for how was I to know?) But, in any case, ill or well herself, she would join us at Genoa, for she was determined not to fail us.

We met safely, and dined together the night before we were to start. Muriel Chitty looked ill and austere, I judged, and I felt sorry for her, and worried at the prospect of the constant travelling and sight-seeing (always most exhausting) which was ahead of her. In her eyes, added to their accustomed and rather lovely fanatic fire, I thought there was to be discerned, too, another and unwonted expression (my brother remarked it also); one, as it were, of conscious guilt; the look so often to be observed in the eye of a dog aware that he has transgressed the canine code, but that his sin has not yet been brought home to him—a look that pleads, saying, "I believe *you* know, but *don't* give me away." . . . It was puzzling. . . . She seemed cheerful in herself, and had brought with her a countless number of introductions, and visiting cards with recommendations scribbled on them, from friends in the Foreign Office. Indeed it seemed as though there were at least one or two letters apiece for every Ambassador, Minister, Consul-General and Consul in the Near East, Syria and North Africa; not altogether, the rest of our group secretly agreed, a blessing, for our days were limited in number considering how much there was for us to do in them, and the mere personal delivery of this script must occupy, one would hazard, a solid month of time.

The whole journey, despite its adventures, seems in retrospect to have passed very quickly and in a succession of cinema-like flashes. The next morning we embarked. Genoa, frost-bitten in the early February wind, piled itself up dustily behind us on its terraces, amid the clanking of trams and hooting of trains and liners, and we were soon heading for the undulating serpents of the sea, that here and there lifted a white-crested, venomous head. Notwithstanding how rough it was, and that the remainder of our party stayed below until we reached Sicily, Mrs. Chitty sat on deck and talked to me. She made of her deck-chair a little nest of her own and everybody else's fur-coats, and in this remained snug and warm—like one of those mice, I thought, for whom the scientists had prepared such comfortable winter-quarters. But our conversation was not in the least monotonous, for she would banish any chance of this by indulging in occasional frantic pantomime. Here all her latent powers of acting found an outlet. She carried with her—and they must always be near her—a great number of large, brightly-coloured, leather hand-trunks, each filled with a different species of railway-ticket and foreign money, for she never believed, she said, in putting all her eggs into one basket. Thus, if by any mischance, she lost the miniature portmanteau which contained her ticket to Damascus, she might still have that which held her ticket to Cairo, or if she lost her Greek money, she would still have Syrian or Egyptian.

First, and as prelude to the play, she would strike an attitude, which at once and most expressively conveyed to all in her neighbourhood the idea that she thought she had lost one of these "little bags." There would be a moment's dramatic, tragic pause: and then a wild scene would ensue. Rugs and rainbow-lined fur-coats would execute mad furlanas and jotas in the air as they were feverishly searched in turn. All the men on deck would soon be bent double or would be crawling on all fours to examine obscure crannies between the wet and slippery boards, until it looked as if a game of "animal-dumb-crambo" was in progress, or again, taking Mrs. Chitty and one of these figures as a separate group, the detached spectator, if mortal so hardened could exist, was reminded of that moment in the bull-fight when the matador, drawing himself up tautly, waves a flaming scarlet banner, behind which he shelters long, agonizing darts, or his knife ready for the blow, in the very face of the charging bull. But now it might be, there would be a triumphant gesture of discovery, and the miming would cease, for, as suddenly as it had vanished, the "little bag" had materialized once more. She had been sitting on it, it appeared, or it had perhaps been in her hand the whole time, or even inside another "little bag." But this was by no means all her repertory, albeit it was the piece in which she most frequently presented herself. Sometimes, for instance, when in really high spirits, Mrs. Chitty would explode, as though it were a gigantic bomb, a special "little bag," full of letters of introduction and visiting cards. A miniature snowstorm of whirling white envelopes and squares of cardboard would zigzag up above us on an eddy of salt wind, and for several minutes the whole ship's company, and all the passengers well enough to be out, led by Mrs. Chitty herself, would be running along the deck together, with a frequent rhythmic halting and leaping high up into the air, until, in example of her art, this time they resembled a well-drilled corps-de-ballet under the guidance of its prima-ballerina.

Indeed, so practised did all on board become at both these games, that the deck appeared to have become the sports-gound on which a number of celebrated athletes were rehearsing for some great occasion. Mrs. Chitty would make the initiatory gesture, equivalent to the revolver-shot that opens such mysteries. Before that, and quite automatically, all the men had crouched down, their bodies thrown forward, ready to start. *One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Go*! and now they were off! There would be a sound of rushing, a tremendous scuffling and scrambling, as they sped past. But soon the referee would make another familiar gesture and we would await the next event.

Whenever, during the course of this story, we are on board ship, the reader must conjure up for himself these constantly recurring pantomimes. They were a feature of our tour.

In the interval of such games as these, Mrs. Chitty would talk to me . . . talk with her face rather close to mine, otherwise, no doubt, the words would have been lost on the disinfectant wind. She dwelt much on her illness at the Villa Sutledge (I wondered, for her eyes glowed as she spoke of it, whether she might not still boast a slight fever?). She had, she said, in spite of that queer attack, enjoyed the visit enormously, though the Riviera did not usually appeal to her. But the garden was delightful, and he was such a wonderful host. Her chief difficulty, really, had been that he was so kind, far *too* kind. She had not taken many frocks with her, for she knew that we would not want her to bring too much luggage on her travels, and, besides, dressmakers were so expensive now, and one had to be careful in these days about money. (At this point a "little bag" broke open with the tinkling sound of a musical box, and a torrent of Greek drachmas, Turkish piastres, or Syrian silver coins bounced, rolled and spun about the deck. Eventually, and by the united efforts of all in the vicinity, this particular currency was stabilized again, and Mrs. Chitty was able to continue.) About money, careful about money—Oh, yes! she remembered now. She had been going to say—but Robert would insist on carrying her off to royal dinner-parties: and it was so awkward having to attend them without the proper clothes. She was surprised that a genius like Robert cared for that sort of entertainment. Personally, she would much have preferred to sit quietly in the garden—though, of course, it became cold at night—talking to him, or playing the piano—a little Beethoven. . . . Now she *had* enjoyed seeing the Russian dancers at Montibes—but, after all, it was not as though it amused her to meet the Grand Duke Gabriel, the ex-King of Milesia (who couldn't talk in any language, but instead barked like a dog), or the old Duchess of Chester, that guttural Guelph Amazon, however wonderful she might be for her age. . . .

Yet, as she mentioned these royal names, her whole face was illumined . . . and this, again, what could this mean, I wondered. For assuredly she was no snob. What, then, did this light of pleasure signify? I tried to trace it, by analogy. It might, it seemed to me, have glowed in the face of a burglar after some unprecedentedly large haul, or have played round the stern, ascetic features of a missionary, who one day to his overwhelming surprise discovers that he has converted an entire tribe of natives, led by the Princes of the Blood—a tribe of which for many years now he had despaired.

We arrived at Palermo in the lime-green early morning. Then the sun came up, first gilding the two horns of the Concha d'Oro. Trucks of oranges and lemons stood near the docks, and the gaudily painted carts, drawn by straining mules, were jingling over the cobbles. We dawdled about: and after luncheon, Mrs. Chitty elaborately organized herself for a call on the Consul, while the remainder of us went up to Monreale. On the way I bought a Continental edition of the *Daily Tribune*, and opened it as the tram slowly screamed up a sharp hill through a tunnel of giant red geraniums. At once my eye was caught by a heading:

SERIOUS ILLNESS OF WORLD-FAMED NOVELIST

CRITICAL CONDITION OF ROBERT SUTLEDGE IN RIVIERA HOME.

As, an hour or so later, we were still staring up at the vast gold mosaics, subtle and mysterious as Mrs. Chitty, and not unlike her in their personal style, we heard a dramatic, hollow voice, and turned round to find that she had driven up to join us. I broke to her the sad news about her friend, but she showed less surprise and dismay than I had feared. He had looked ill for some time, she said: and she imagined that his constitution was a very strong one. He did not catch things easily, she knew . . . yes, she was sure of that. Incidentally, she added, the Consul was charming. She wished we had come with her: we should have liked him. . . . He was rather a delicate-looking man (she had taken quite a fancy to him), but he had told her that Palermo was a very healthy place—practically no illness there ever.

For the next few mornings I neglected to buy a paper, and did not indeed see one for several days, since we soon set out on that wonderful journey to the Piraeus. The sun set and rose in Homeric splendour, and the purple shadows of the Greek islands fell down upon us. Mrs. Chitty was very cheerful, appeared to be enjoying herself, I thought. From the Piraeus we drove straight to our hotel in Athens. The city lay white and dusty beneath its primrose-coloured sunshine, even the bare bones up on the hill almost guttered, so strong and pulsing was the light. I tried to persuade her to come with us to the Acropolis, but she declined. She *must* call both on the British Minister and the Consul-General, she said, or Gerry Flitmouse, who had given her the letters, might be offended. He was always rather easily hurt, and snuffled terribly for months if one annoyed him. A dear boy, but delicate.

We walked up the steps that lead to the Acropolis, hot and dazed with the beauty of the light that seemed actually to glow through the tawny marble, and lingered among the huge, broken drums of the overthrown columns that litter the ground about the Parthenon. But, as we approached the great temple, our attention was drawn away from it by the sound of scampering feet, and we looked round to find a strange procession, a ribald frieze from a Greek vase come to life. It was, in fact, merely the arrival of the "Friends of Greece" off their steamer, the *Dionysus*.

Twice a year these tours are arranged, at very high prices. The boat sets out from London, with a select list of passengers, and its own staff attendant lecturers on board, for a course of intensive culture. They anchor for a day or two at all the places of Hellenic interest, Sicily, Corfu, the islands, on their way to Athens, and then on to Constantinople and Asia Minor. Never a morning, afternoon or evening passes without at least one instructive lecture. Most of the passengers are rich and ignorant: while others are enthusiasts who have saved up toward this trip for half a lifetime.

As they drew nearer us, the noise increased. First came a running battery of cameras, held by eager, whistling schoolboys under wide grey felt hats; then followed a succession of hatless schoolmasters—some of whom I remembered from Eton—tripping swiftly across the boulders with a curious lurching, lumbering gait as through still dribbling across the football fields: then a famous dean, with two sprained ankles, supported on the arms of numberless admirers; then an esthetic Duchess caught in a cloud of gauze; now again, several deaf clergymen, a rather dingy lecturer, and finally a bevy of rich ladies, while two men wearing sun-helmets, in unspoken opposition to the schoolmasters, wound up the whole thing with an exotic flourish. To my surprise, Mrs. Chitty, looking very beautiful, with, as it seemed, an expression of religious ecstasy, only softened by her charming smile, stepped out suddenly from the middle of them. It was unlike her, for she detested crowds. . . . But she explained that she could not resist it—there were old friends of hers among them, and soon they would be leaving Athens, moving off toward numberless islands. No doubt the ship was comfortable. But it must be a rough life. . . There was no doctor on the *Dionysus*, she was told, and not a medical man, not a single one in all those lonely isles which they were about to visit. . . .

Then she took me up to introduce me to Lady Richborough, who exuded a pale, esthetic, clipped muddle-headedness. "Love Athens," she was saying, "delightful place. Like it even more than what's-the-name, you know, Muriel, that place we stopped at—but of course you weren't with us—with the large old buildings on it. And then there was that lovely island too. . . . I shall never forget it—and the Greek exchange is so good—I never can remember quite how much you get—but such a lot for a pound—better than the French exchange. . . . Do you suppose our own exchange will *ever* be so good?" After which, still pondering the possibilities disclosed by this question, we turned away.

As we left what is perhaps the most venerated skeleton in the world, I heard a delightfully modern sound. A Greek child of about seven, but with, already, an enormous scimitar of a nose, and black eyes that sparkled like new boot-buttons, was shouting, "*Dily Mile* an *Dily Tribeune* on sile—*Dily Mile* an *Dily Tribeune*." I bought a paper. On the first page was the photograph of a familiar royal face, an iconic and dignified countenance.

SERIOUS ILLNESS OF GRAND DUKE

I read; and again:

> The Grand Duke Gabriel's countless friends in England, and indeed all over the globe, will hear with full measure of sorrow that he is the victim of a new and obscure disease, which is causing the doctors grave anxiety. In its simpler aspects, it somewhat resembles influenza. Several people in the neighbourhood have recently been attacked by it, but so far there have been few fatal cases, though the illness is not one to be treated lightly.
>
> The Grand Duchess, four nurses, and His Imperial Highness's six physicians-in-ordinary are in constant attendance, day and night. Letters and telegrams of inquiry, many of them from Great Britain, and requests for the latest bulletin of the distinguished patient, arrive without intermission at the door of Nishkynashdom, his palatial Riviera residence. The Grand Duchess, who has been a tower of strength in the sick-room, has helped the doctors in countless ways, though it is not as yet generally known that Her Royal Highness has adopted the uniform of a nurse and has abandoned her proposed exhibition of water-colours.
>
> His Imperial Highness, who has been a well-known and popular figure on the Côte d'Azur for half a century, is seventy-eight years of age, and married in 1871 a Princess of Mannheim-Düsseldorf. He is also President of the Mont-Ferrat Golf Club and

the Société Anonyme des Agronomes de Nice, the corporation responsible for running the New Casino outside the town.

Further down, in a chat-column, I read:

> Hopes are still entertained, Delilah writes me from the Riviera, that Robert Sutledge, England's most famous novelist, will be well enough to come home in two or three weeks' time. It would be little less than a tragedy for his friends were he obliged to abandon his famous annual visit, for which an immense amount of entertaining takes place: but it is, alas, no secret to them that, for the past ten days, he has been very seriously ill.

I drew Mrs. Chitty's attention to the illness of the Grand Duke Gabriel.

"How very odd," she said to me, with a bayonet-like glint in her usually warm eye. "So soon after poor Robert, too. It looks almost as if they must have caught the same germ, doesn't it? Perhaps I had it also. I felt very ill at the time, but wouldn't give up. I've always said, 'If you want people to be ill, go with them to the Riviera.' By the way, I think I must have had a slight temperature again last night."

The next few days in Athens passed very swiftly and without event, except that Muriel Chitty, who insisted, apparently, on sleeping without a mosquito-net, was, in consequence, very badly bitten. It was curious, for usually she was so careful, even fussy about herself; and we had advised her to be on her guard . . . yet she was the only one of us to suffer in this way.

The passage to Constantinople was ideal. We arrived safely, and were duly astonished at the number of bowler-hats: but even that could not destroy our excitement, or the beauty of the setting: the water on every side, and the silhouette of numberless, grey, spider-like domes, very squat under their needle-shaped minarets, that crept over every hill, and crowned the lower ones.

Mrs. Chitty decided that she felt too tired to visit Santa Sofia, and that, instead, she would rest a little and then leave letters for, and call on, the British Representatives. She might, perhaps, meet us afterwards—somewhere in the town—perhaps near the Delphic Serpent. . . . And, indeed, as, later, we looked at its lost in wonder at its long and marvellous history, a hollow, oracular voice, with all the ecstasy of divination in its tones, woke us from our reveries by exclaiming just behind us:

“Well, here I am. . . . But you none of you look very well . . . I hope you’re all right?”

It was Mrs. Chitty, fresh from consular triumphs.

While I was waiting in the hotel before dinner I saw, lying on a table, a new copy of the *Daily Tribune*, just arrived. I opened it.

SUDDEN ILLNESS OF EX-KING BORIS OF MILESIA

was the caption that met my eye.

ALL ENGAGEMENTS CANCELLED

> His Ex-Majesty was suddenly seized with illness after attending, as is his wont, the Friday “Diner Fleuri” at the Hôtel de Bordeaux. His companion, Mile Donescu, immediately summoned a doctor.

On the next page I read:

SEVERANCE OF LAST LINK WITH GEORGE III
DEATH OF H.R.H. THE DUCHESS OF CHESTER

> We regret to announce the death of H.R.H. the Duchess of Chester, who passed away peacefully in the presence of her family during the early hours of this morning. The sad event took place in her marine residence, the Villa Britannique. Her Royal Highness, who was in her 92nd year, was the last surviving granddaughter of George III, and with her passing, a notable link with the past is forever severed. The Duchess, always one of the most beloved of English princesses, was a wonderful specimen of English grit of the Old School. During the war, though then in her eighty-first year, she spent several days in the trenches, distributing chocolates to the men, and even in the tightest corners contrived to keep a stiff upper lip. Deservedly popular with all classes, it was Her Royal Highness who popularized the word *Schweinhunds* for the German troops during the war.
>
> It is worth recording, as an instance of this wonderful old lady’s undiminished activity and interest in all that pertained to literature up to the last, that only weeks ago she attended a dinner-party in her honour given by Mr. Robert Sutledge, the novelist (now, unfortunately, himself an invalid). During the evening, Her Royal Highness, who loved everything modern, gave an exhibition

> of her skill on the saxophone. Accompanied, on the piano, by her Lady-in-Waiting, she played Liszt's *Liebestraume*, Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, and ended up, amid great applause, with *You're the Whitest White I know*, and her own rendering of the *Black Bottom*. Two days later Her Royal Highness was suddenly taken ill, and the doctors, seeing that the end could not long be delayed, summoned the family.

I showed these two paragraphs to Mrs. Chitty, when she came down.

"Quite a coincidence," she observed bitterly. . . .

And these words, it seemed to me, were addressed to myself rather than to my companions; were spoken, moreover, as though she thought they might convey to me an inner significance hidden from others.

"No wonder you were ill, Muriel darling," I heard Mrs. Rammond say to her. "I've always maintained that the Riviera was unhealthy: a perfect deathtrap. Think of the microbes there must be hanging about those hotels and villas, not to mention casinos! It's extraordinary, though, this year. Absolutely everybody there seems to be ill."

But at this, though it did not very much differ from the sentiment herself had expressed at Athens only a few days before, Mrs. Chitty suddenly became cross. (Perhaps, one thought, the mosquito-bites were still irritating her, making her sleepless.) She dropped two bags, half an earring and a diamond pendant, and so, for a time, her conversation was lost to me. As, however, we emerged from under our various tables, she was saying very decisively, and in a tone of voice which suggested that she considered herself slighted: "Well, all I can tell you is, there was no one ill there before I arrived: no one. I was the first—and probably most of them aren't ill even now. They are a regular pack of old *malades imaginaires*: that's what *they* are. If they were to become really ill, goodness knows what would happen to them!"

Our time at Constantinople fled past us, with little personal to record except that it seemed to me that every day, as she was further removed in hours and miles from home, Mrs. Chitty became ever more feminine—but in a distinctly Victorian, rather than modern, way. It was there, too, and more specially in Brousa, that she first began to parade her ardent love for animals. There were several vociferous and vituperative differences between herself and the drivers of donkeys. The Turkish language won, for its throaty sounds suggested, even to those who could not understand them, a wealth of obloquy not to be attempted in English or French. But Mrs. Chitty was left with that comforting, unimpeachable serenity which comes to all those who defend dumb brutes.

Borne on by blue, phenariot breezes, that yet hardly ruffled the surface, we visited in turn Rhodes and Cyprus. Here, again, there was little to record. At Rhodes, an island that rises from a sea paved with medieval stone cannon-balls, we found great activity among the restorers and strippers of ancient buildings, while huge white peonies, like water-lilies, were in bloom under the darkest shade of cedars. Furthermore, as we approached this much-conquered island, we heard an American lady summing up the confusion of our epoch by inquiring of her companion in a plaintive voice, “Tell me, dear, where *used* this to be?”

At Cyprus, on the contrary, we discovered a British island, full of discontented, undersized Levantines, gorged on honest British beef and suet. No building had been restored, but there were hill-stations and topees, and the ponderous red shadow of India brooded over the western hills and streams.

But the journey seemed to suit our health. We all felt peculiarly well—generally a bad omen—and even Mrs. Chitty’s mosquito-bites were healing. She liked the place, and while calling on various officials, had met the Anglican Bishop and made great friends with him, she said.

Sailing from Famagusta to Beirut, however, the sea suddenly began to grow rough again: and soon Mrs. Chitty, my brother and myself were once more the only members of our party to venture on deck. But, on this occasion, she was not so communicative, seemed lost in her own thoughts. Yet we could not help being impressed, and rather intimidated, by a new and singular manner of looking at one which at this time she developed. It was a steady, unfaltering brown gaze that united the watchfulness of a doctor expectant of symptoms with the frigid, measuring, detached glance of an undertaker: a gaze that one could never afterwards forget.

When, though rarely, she talked, she would tell us of the South of France. Perpetually she reverted to it: to the kindness and subsequent illness of Mr. Sutledge, to the dinner-parties she had attended, the Royal Personages she had met. It was unlike her. César Franck or changes in the Foreign Office would have been more usual, more in style. . . . But no! Back we would go to the Riviera. Really, I said to myself, it was as though she had committed some murder there, among the planted-out and varnished palm-trees, the carefully manicured carnations (each one was stated to be given its own hot-water bottle at night), and must ever return in spirit to haunt the scene of it. She resembled those poisoners who, though their guilt has passed quite unsuspected at the time, inevitably attract attention and are in the end caught, because they insist on revisiting of their own free will the spot where their evil deed was perpetrated, to inquire, too innocently, of the police whether anyone had died in the neighbourhood? Or again, one said, she behaved as if, with some atrocious crime on her conscience, she thought that I had guessed her share in it: and so, partly out of bravado, partly because it was a subject that quite genuinely she could never banish from her mind for an instant, and partly moreover to test how much I knew, and to try to trap me into some speech, look, or action which would betray that knowledge, she would, and with a show of indifference, continually persist in talking of the lonely village where it had taken place, boasting how often she had been there and how well she knew it.

At Beirut we had intended only to spend an hour or two, just long enough for Mrs. Chitty to call on the Consul (how *could* it amuse her, I wondered, for she was very tired?) and then to drive on at once to Damascus. Nevertheless, we were delayed a little, for since she was determined to see him personally, in the end we were all invited to tea. The conversation was rather formal: but I heard her ask him in anxious tones whether there was much illness in Syria at this season. None at all, he replied.

In Damascus, on arrival, I bought a copy of the *Daily Tribune*, despatched by air from Paris. There was nothing very new in it. The body of H.R.H. the Duchess of Chester had been carried on board an English battleship, with the customary honours, and was to be conveyed to a final resting-place in her native land. Another column informed us that Ex-King Boris of Milesia was making a plucky fight against an insidious and treacherous foe. He had now been ill for many days. His pulse was feeble, his temperature high. Robert Sutledge was, it appeared, still in bed: in fact, had experienced a slight relapse, and his friends continued to suffer much anxiety for him. About the condition of H.I.H. the Grand Duke Gabriel there was an ominous silence.

Mrs. Chitty had been somewhat dejected, and had complained of feeling ill in Damascus (though I think she enjoyed seeing the ruins which mark the French occupation of that city): so I did not show her the paper until we were on board the steamer bound for Alexandria. I had feared the news in it would depress her still further, but she took it well, and became quite cheerful.

One morning, while we were on the boat, she turned to me, and with an intensity of emphatic meaning in her voice, asked, “Do you know Valaise?” I replied, no, I didn’t. “Well, that’s a pity, a great pity,” she rejoined. “It’s such a lovely little place, on the hills just above Beaulieu. I drove there several times with Robert Sutledge. An old Saracen village; just a duster of white houses with flattened domes. You’d adore it. . . . But I shouldn’t say it was healthy . . . a lot of illness there, I’m sure.” And suddenly she laughed, looking at me as though she expected me to join in her cryptic mirth.

It was this significant confidence, as a matter of fact, which finally gave me the clue. We disembarked at Alexandria and, as soon as Mrs. Chitty had left her letters of introduction, proceeded to Cairo. The next morning I remembered to buy a copy of the *Daily Tribune*. I opened it and read—right across the top of the paper:

RIVIERA VILLAGE DECIMATED

OUTBREAK OF MYSTERY DISEASE AT VALAISE

For a moment all the things that in bad novels are said to happen at such a crisis, happened to me together. I was struck speechless: the print danced before my eyes: my teeth chattered: my hair stood on end: I felt I had an iron band round my forehead: there were icy shivers down my spine: and the very blood in my veins ran cold—for at last I understood. Everything explained itself; I understood only too well. Mrs. Chitty was no longer a woman, but merely the living vessel that contained a microbe, a versatile master-microbe who never repeated himself. She was the fully-disciplined, loyal slave of this ferocious and tyrannical germ; the medium for a single-purposed and evil control. She was a person possessed, not, as in the old sense, by a demon, but instead by a bacillus—albeit one of very phenomenal power and completeness. It was thus a physical, not a spiritual possession. The only aim of the governing organism within, and of its innumerable progeny, was to procreate and spread still further. Toward this one purpose, every cough, every movement, every decision that Mrs. Chitty made was calculated: but though to every act she imparted the appearance of free will, all she did depended, in reality, on the secret wishes and plans of this inner and invisible dictator. Why, her very resolve to join us on this journey, what was that but another scheme for propagation? For this tour was no ordinary one, but the brave missionary voyage of a militant and proselytizing microbe; a journey equivalent to the first Mediterranean mission of St. Paul.

And of course . . . I realized it now: she was, from this point of view, at once the ideal means of transit, the best possible laboratory for experiment, and a model breeding-ground and nursery for young germs. Delicate enough always to harbour them, she was yet too weak, too thin and nervous, her blood too impoverished, to afford continual sustenance for so mighty and immeasurable a tribe. An imperialist bacillus, ambitious for the future of his race, could find no land that would offer so perfect an upbringing and training-place for the young as did Mrs. Chitty. Just as the sparse diet, hard work and meagre earnings which Nature enforces there, compel the Japanese nation, heaped up on its rocky, barren and picturesque isles, to seek fresh lands for its surplus but very hardy population, so Mrs. Chitty's spare and bony frame, though unable to support the countless progeny of microbes it had raised so frugally, taught them to be all the more self-reliant and courageous. They were forced to find a new outlet for their energy, and became adventurous, crusading, piratical as our forefathers of Queen Elizabeth's reign, would execute with gusto the most daring raids on stronger and more active people, would seize colonies, found an empire. But here all parallels stop short, and the microbes clearly have the advantage of men. For Mrs. Chitty was their magic carpet as well as Motherland. While the English and the Japanese are forced to emigrate from their emerald isles set in the sapphire sea, are forced to go long journeys by boat, the microbes are conveyed to the very portals of each promised land, not by a ship, but by their own country itself. Think of what that must mean. How little compared with us, will they feel the severance of home-ties! Imagine the interest and change implied for the entire population, if England could travel each year to Canada and India! Mrs. Chitty was truly the land in which to raise a breed of heroes, an imperial race.

Nor need this moving, living Motherland ever fear revolution, be afraid lest her children should turn against or seek to harm her. Even if they attempted it, they could not kill her, for she was not full-blooded enough to kill. Moreover, brought up within her, they cherished a true sentiment of loyalty toward their home and must be aware, withal, that her every thought was for the furtherance of their cause since she still placed herself at the entire disposal of the governing germ.

And now every idiosyncrasy in her character, every action of hers, notwithstanding that it may have seemed erratic and without purpose at the moment, became clear and rational under this sudden apocalyptic illumination, declared itself beyond doubt as part of the wily and Machiavellian scheming from which the hidden control never ceased, for it worked remorselessly day and night. In the same way that the painted ceilings of certain Italian eighteenth-century churches—such as San Pantaleoni in Venice or Sant'Ignacio in Rome—at first appear to the stranger as a meaningless muddle of distorted architecture, puffy clouds and inflated goddesses, until he is led to one small circle in the centre of the marble floor, and looking up, is now able to behold the roof opening up like a flower, blossoming into a strange, miraculous, but yet quite logical and lovely world of its own, so, once one had gained the clue to its perspective, the planning and arrangement of Mrs. Chitty's life became quite simple and easily comprehended. For example, if you were a modern-minded, rather hustling germ (a real "go-getter" or "pep-fan" as the American phrase is) who wanted to get about the world a bit, and quicker than Mrs. Chitty could take you, what better instrument could you find for this constant voyaging than a member of His Majesty's Diplomatic or Consular Services? No wonder that Mrs. Chitty loved those that dwell in Foreign Offices and took so lively an interest in every swop and promotion: no wonder that she called on every Minister and every Consul in each town abroad she visited, and, in addition, left on them letters, the envelopes of which she had fastened, sticking down the flap, and thus personally infecting them, with her own tongue! Then, too, I recalled the talk at her dinner-parties—conversations that so often turned on the newest mode of combating, and, if possible, extirpating, the influenza and kindred microbes. And, all the time, these methods, and the experiments that led up to them, things on which science had concentrated so much time and hope, were being explained to one who was not only Mother, home and country to these actual microbes, but, as well, an immense and living testing-ground for their researches, a laboratory in which they were continually engaged in the most lively counter-experiments.

III

The position was in all truth serious enough. For several days two members of our party had been ill, though their symptoms differed. Ruth Marlow had a temperature that raced up and down continually, and was forced to live entirely on orange juice. Julian Thackwray complained that he had a headache that nearly blinded him, that he could only see half of the palm-trees and pyramids, that his right arm was quite numb and that he had lost the use of the index finger of his left hand. Obviously, then, the germs were in active and experimental mood, and who could tell what novel and acute diseases they would not leave in their wake after the first alarm had subsided? The doctor, called in, pronounced it to be "only influenza." "Only," indeed!

I took precautions, bought cinnamon, bottles and bottles of it, eucalyptus oil, gargles of every description, quinine, and a thousand disinfectants. And thenceforth it seemed to me that Mrs. Chitty's Theotocopulos-like and lachrymose eye reflected very clearly the new consciousness of her protean master-microbe within that myself was his chief enemy, and that, in so far as I was concerned, he was in for the battle of a lifetime, a fight to a finish. I cannot think that this was conceit, or that I was in any way exaggerating my own importance. No, he was a good sportsman, and recognized that by nature, as much as now of intention, I was going to be a particularly rare and difficult bag . . . indeed, he had foreseen it long before I had discovered Mrs. Chitty's mission . . . and that was, no doubt, why she had so often sat on deck with me and talked: for to be heard above the winds that, born from its speed, leap and play like dolphins round any ship, it is necessary for those who converse to bring their heads near together; a splendid opportunity for infection.

Meanwhile one must not despair. The news in the paper the day after my revelation a little allayed concern. The account of the progress of the Grand Duke Gabriel was reassuring. I read:

> H.I.H. THE GRAND DUKE GABRIEL
>
> His Imperial Highness's many friends will be relieved to hear that his medical advisers are confident that, should no new complications arise (and, of course, it must be remembered that even now it is impossible to rule out such possibilities; that to estimate the likelihood of such developments, the length of time during which the Royal patient has been ill must always be borne in mind), His Imperial Highness should be out of danger in another two months' time. A week ago he recognized the Grand Duchess for the first time (she was in nurse's uniform), and though still suffering from shock, he was well enough yesterday to be propped up in bed, and to enjoy the broadcasting of his favourite song, Tosti's *Good-bye*. He also received the latest shipping-signals from Rio de Janeiro and Vladivostok. His Imperial Highness is now encouraged to take proper nourishment, and was yesterday ordered half a glass of hot milk with a dash of the national beverage, vodka, in it.

One was glad to see, too, that Robert Sutledge had survived his relapse and was now really "making headway." It was hoped that in another week or two, if he continued to recuperate with the same speed as heretofore, and if the present fine weather held, he might be allowed to sit out in the garden for half an hour.

On the other hand the mystery epidemic at Valaise showed no sign of abating, and the Rockefeller Institute had despatched scientists to study the outbreak on the spot and draw up a report upon it. The remains of H.R.H. the Duchess of Chester, borne on a battleship, escorted by four cruisers, had arrived at Southampton, and there was a description of the Municipal Brass Band playing the *Last Post* as the Death Ship drew in to the harbour of a city hung with funebrial purple.

What was to be done? There was no time to be lost. . . . I determined to confide in Mrs. Rammond and my brother. They were the ones I most wished to save from the holocaust. At first they did not take my discovery very seriously, terming it “ridiculous” and “fantastic.” Ruth and Julian were soon able to move about again, and it was now supposed that they had caught a “mere chill.” But both of them protested that they were still desperately ill, and almost paralysed. Mrs. Chitty herself had not been idle. She, too, had achieved a racing temperature but, though she owned that she felt desperate, was determined to see everything, and not to “*give up*”: quite a new development on her part, for hitherto she had absented herself from any sight-seeing expeditions and had harboured all her strength for calling on Consuls. But now she tramped tirelessly through the heat, while, in addition, continuing to visit every possible British Representative, diplomatic, consular, military, or naval.

Ruth and Julian seemed well enough to accompany us, and we were just about to start our trip up the Nile in the dahabeeah, when Mrs. Jocelyn and Frank Lancing collapsed, and were taken to the British Hospital. But as soon as we had seen the new invalids comfortably established there and had been assured that they were at present in no actual danger, we thought it best to proceed with our original plan. However, the fate of our two friends depressed the party considerably, and Mrs. Rammond and my brother began to treat more seriously the theory I had advanced to them.

On the dahabeeah the situation became acute. Since Mrs. Chitty now fully recognized in me her microbe’s chief antagonist, she sat by me whenever possible . . . and still there were no signs of my ailing. Obviously the new offensive, to the preparation of which her germ had devoted so many anxious months of careful experiment and audacious imagination, was failing, was breaking down. (So it must have seemed to her.) The microbe was not, after all, invincible: and a bitter sense of disappointment must have swept down on her. Certain it is that under the charm, of which she could not divest herself, fear and hatred could be seen mingling in her poignant glance and that the prolonged and cheerful sound of gargling which ostentatiously issued from my cabin constituted to her ears a most melancholy and distressing music. Perhaps the best thing she could do, she must have thought, was to turn her attention to my brother. But, here again, she was checked and, apparently, crushed. There we sat, under brown awnings that never stirred, and watched each sunset unroll its panorama of coloured-picture-postcard tints; palm-trees, springing lithely, several stalks from one root, camels silhouetting themselves vulgarly against an oily red-yellow sunset—a sunset that had never progressed since the oriental paintings popular during the Second Empire—or else narrow-waisted figures moving through a fertile field in short white tunics and with long, shaven heads, performing against it their second-rate hieroglyphs and bas-reliefs, while the alligators thawed to movement in the sticky yellow water beneath us. . . . But as each sunset died away in cheap flames, and then remained for an instant a stain upon the luminous canopy, faded away, as it were, with the last self-conscious, if well-practised bow, of a famous prima-donna acknowledging her applause, Mrs. Chitty, though not yet giving up hope, became sadder and ever more sad. . . . But, since fortune is so fickle, one who does not admit defeat is never defeated. Now a change occurred, and Fate unmistakably declared itself for her. The crew suddenly fell ill, and, being natives, unused to any such northern infection, with them it took a much more severe form.

At one moment it looked as if we might have to work the ship back to Cairo ourselves. The invalid members of the crew now lay on the deck, under canopies, with Mrs. Chitty looking after them, while we sweated in the miniature engine-room and were instructed by a survivor or two in their hot and oily trade. We began to grow nervous. Cut off from the outside world as we were, and overwhelmed by the microbe's unexpected and very decisive victory, we could not help wondering what new developments might not be taking place, might not greet us on our somewhat problematic return? But, in sweet content, Mrs. Chitty sat on deck, gently tending the sick, and smiling. It was, indeed, a smile altogether beautiful to behold, a smile of pure, kindly joy, of a spirit uplifted, such, one would have said, as might have lighted up the austere features of Florence Nightingale when, rustling through the wards at night, shading the lamp with her hands, she looked down on all those whom she had saved. And near the surface of the thick yellow water, the alligators, too, bared their sharp teeth in a subtle but appreciative grin, and played and tumbled quite lustily.

The crew behaved, as it turned out, very well, and contrived to get us back to Cairo. There we found the two patients out of hospital. It was true that they were so weak they could scarcely drag themselves along, so tired that they could see and understand nothing, so poisoned after their illness that even cigarettes were no solace to them, but they were alive: that was the important thing. And as—for it was, naturally enough, at that moment the only thing that interested them—they discussed how possibly, and where, they could have contracted this infection and, without any suspicion of the identity of the link that connected the two things, happened to observe that they had read in the newspapers at the hospital that there was a good deal of this same sort of odd illness on the Riviera, once again I saw a smile, but of a different kind from that we have just described, play quietly round Mrs. Chitty's ascetic and thoughtful countenance. It was the smile that had so often perplexed me in the past; an enigmatic and beautiful curling of the mouth, which seemed as though, after the manner of the Gioconda's, it had been summoned up by the sound of hidden and distant flutes.

For many days I had seen no newspaper, and it was evident, directly I bought one, that in the meantime the situation had developed. For the first item that caught my eye was

MEMORIAL SERVICE AT NICE FOR EX-KING BORIS OF MILESIA

> A memorial service was held yesterday afternoon at the Orthodox Church at Nice for His Majesty, Ex-King Boris of Milesia. Nearly every European Royal House was personally represented. Among the congregation were the Ex-King and Ex-Queen of Ruritania, with Ex-Crown Prince Danilo, the Ex-King and Ex-Queen of Carolia with Ex-Crown Prince Paul, the Ex-King of . . .

So another one was gone, I reflected sadly . . . and then looking at the next page I noticed that the four principal Russian dancers of the Opera at Montibes had been taken seriously ill, and that, in consequence, all future performances had been abandoned. Further, the Rockefeller Institute had sent four more specialists to Valaise, the first two having fallen ill, forty-eight hours after their arrival, of the same mysterious disease that was mowing down the villagers. All fountains and streams in the neighbourhood had been sprayed with paraffin on their advice, and the force of the epidemic had a little abated, although isolated cases of this illness had been identified in seven other widely removed mountain villages. H.I.H. the Grand Duke Gabriel was said to be progressing steadily.

We spent a few more days in Cairo. But now the party began to break up. Julian and Ruth fell ill again (she had a slight temperature), and Frank and Mrs. Jocelyn maintained that they were too weak to take any risks. The remaining four of us, therefore, set out into the desert alone.

Mrs. Chitty, though we had urged that the fatigue might prove too much for her, had insisted on accompanying us. But, once in the sandy wastes, she began to complain of feeling unwell. Nestling in furs, again, she went to bed very early each night, while Mrs. Rammond, my brother and myself, wildly caroused on cinnamon beneath stars crystal-bright in their blue firmament; caroused, as it were, with something of the defiant and boisterous recklessness that inspired those rakish Restoration nobles who remained in London during the Great Plague: for such a scourge, it is said, always affects profoundly the moral outlook. "Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die," was the motto engraved on our, as on their, hearts. There, then, we sat on, recklessly quaffing the flowing bowl of quinine, and wantonly sprinkling our cubes of sugar with camphor and eucalyptus, until the early hours of the morning—notwithstanding that the feathers of the palm-trees which lay motionless on the air above us were the only plumes, and the sound of the heavy and inexorable snoring that issued from Mrs. Chitty's tent was the sole and rather menacing music, afforded us for our feasting. Indeed this rhythmic rising and falling announced all too plainly that the germ was still on the march; almost amounted to a solemn declaration of new hostilities.

The days passed, and still we held on. Mrs. Chitty perhaps now felt genuinely ill, for she was again becoming desperate. As we advanced further into the desert, her Victorian helplessness was manifested more and more often. It was no easy matter to find the English or Libyan coins that she scattered in such thoughtless profusion among the golden grains which lay spread round us for hundreds of miles: and many an hour we passed, hot and tired, scratching and grubbing in the sand like so many animals burrowing, until a miniature sandstorm was raised about us, while Muriel Chitty sat a little way off, continually repining. . . .

The weather, she said, was cold. She had always expected the desert to be hot. She wished she had brought another fur-coat with her (just a little one, like the one I was holding): except that she thought the desert must be full of moths, for, she added with a slightly malicious smile, she continually smelt camphor—she supposed it must be against moths, for it was entirely useless against anything else. . . . The palm-trees were ugly, the sunsets monotonous, the camels lazy—they were always lying down—and greedy; though she had always felt sorry for them hitherto, because they looked so long-legged, round-backed and awkward: and she was sure they were badly treated. She didn't like the faces of the camel-drivers, wouldn't trust them, wouldn't trust them an inch, herself. Perhaps it was as well that one did not understand what they were talking about. For what did all the natives eat? One couldn't eat dates for ever. And then the water—she was sure that the drinking water in the oases was not *reliable*: but she could not drink mineral water because it contained no vitamins. If the Arabs wouldn't mind—and, after all, they couldn't, could they?—she would like to pour a whole lot of disinfectants down the spring. Oh, but she forgot, she hadn't brought any with her. Might she have ours—they would do just as well—? (And only just in time we stopped her: for, with extraordinary skill, agility and presence of mind, she here made a dash for our row of bottles, gargles and the like—our only safeguard and refuge—intending to empty them down the well.) All right, she wouldn't, then. But she was sure that there would be an epidemic one day—still, of course, if *we* didn't worry about that, it didn't matter. . . . The Arabs couldn't care for music, or they wouldn't make those extraordinary noises at the camels. . . . She was *certain*, now, that they treated the camels brutally. It was terrible to see them, they looked so bony and emaciated. Although they were not animals she cared for, she really would like to buy one, if only to get it away from those awful men (terrible faces). The camels looked as if a good graze on green, English grass would do them all the good in the world: but, then, if she bought one, where could she put it? . . . And, besides, perhaps she oughtn't to buy one, really. It would be, after all, an extravagance. She knew the trustees would say that. Carriage was so expensive, too—and taxation was going up all the time (at least she supposed it was, but one couldn't tell, for there were never any letters or newspapers in a place like this). Where could she put it? Of course, she might keep it somewhere here, and have grass sent out to it—but, then, that wouldn't be the same thing, not at all the same. And even that would cost money. And then the desert was so big, that if one did put it somewhere here, one might not be able to find it when it was wanted, for when one had discovered places here, places in which to put things, often one could never find them again. Oh, dear! she believed that after all, she had lost her "little bag"—the one with her Libyan money in it. Where did she think she had left it? Oh, but she was certain—she knew quite well—she was sure she had put it down, just for a moment—somewhere in the desert. . . .

But now Fortune, turning once more, smiled on Mrs. Chitty, and she smiled back. The tragedy was mounting to its inevitable climax. My brother, in spite of all our carefully thought-out methods of prevention, in spite of cinnamon, camphor and quinine, began to fail for a day or two—and then fell victim. Like a hero he stuck to his post. Even when finally overwhelmed, he refused to acknowledge defeat. Mrs. Chitty was, naturally, the first of us to notice the symptoms. To her it was like watching a race with the prospect of an exciting finish. Her colours were ahead now. Daily she became more worked up. It was certain, too, she must have supposed, that Mrs. Rammond and I would catch it. . . . The desert: the *wonderful, wonderful* desert! There was, she reflected, something incredibly beautiful and romantic about it—what glamour! Doughty, and all those slow, eternal camels, and the Arabs, such dignity, and palm-trees and Colonel Lawrence and all that. . . . Wonderful. . . . But Mrs. Rammond and I were without hope and drank cinnamon without end.

In the few, recurrent lucid moments which his illness granted him every day, my brother explained to us the precise nature of the microbe's ravages. The sensation, he told us, was comparable to being knocked on the head and drowned simultaneously. Only for about five minutes a day, just long enough to realize how sweet life could have been was he permitted to come up to the surface, take a few breaths, and then, once more, he was sent spinning down again into the depths. He could walk, even talk a little—but automatically, as though he were in a trance. For the rest, there was an intense aching in the roots of his hair, shooting pains in the eyes, slight deafness, acute anguish between the vertebræ, pain in the toes, a perfect agony in the lobe of each ear and a sense of partial paralysis in the left hand. This journey was something to which for a whole decade he had eagerly looked forward, as to something, transcendent and unattainable, and here he was being whirled through the desert (for at Sidi-ben-Sidi we had met our car) in a state of unconsciousness, or, at best, of semi-consciousness.

Her horse, Mrs. Chitty must have thought, was just rounding Tattenham Corner; but on the contrary, the invalid came to, suddenly after a week, to find himself in the large native city of Abu-ben-Kalab. We were staying in a little white hotel, owned by a Greek. It was very clean, and had a quite pretty garden which, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, was planted with such trees and shrubs as eucalyptus, camphor and castor-oil. Moreover, in one corner of it there even flourished a cinnamon-bush. Out of this shady and restful grey-greenness, aromatic and health-giving breaths were wafted on every slightest, fluttering breeze. From the first moment Mrs. Chitty evinced a particular aversion to this spot, declaring that when she was in a garden, she liked to *feel* she was in one, and not in a chemist's shop.

The town itself was fascinating, I thought. For hours you could wander round the souks—the light falling through the branches that roofed them to dapple and splash the bearded, bartering figures beside the stalls—without feeling a moment's fatigue, so new and alive was the scene. In the public places one could listen to poetry being declaimed, with an accompaniment of gourds and gongs, to an entranced circle of yellow-faced, squatting figures. And sometimes, too, one could hear tall, lank Senegalese minstrels, the colour of black-lead and wearing necklaces of cowrie shells, singing their high-pitched songs, see dancers, belonging to the unknown tribes that inhabit the interior of the continent, whirling round feverishly in a cloud of white dust, or watch the dark mountebanks from distant Marakeesh performing their grotesque and epicene antics. Such was the fascination of the city, strange and varied. But Mrs. Chitty liked it no better than the garden. There was not a Minister in the place—not even a consul; no European shops, no papers (so that it was impossible, she said, to tell what was going on. Everyone in England might have the plague itself, and one would not know about it).

It was a complete transformation. This subtle lady, who at home was intensely cosmopolitan, eschewing English phrases wherever possible, and substituting for them Foreign Office *clichés* in French, German and Italian, was each day becoming more English, more Victorian. As though in an effort to sum up her own tendencies, she asked me one day to go into the town and find her a bottle of Rowland's Macassar Oil—the very sound of which conjured up in my imagination ottomans, crinolines, double-jointed little parasols edged with black lace, beaded flowers, plush chairs, draped table-legs, soft, sentimental whiskers and curling, pomaded locks. . . . Assuredly this was not the place to choose for such a whimsey. Nor, perhaps, ought one to have encouraged a caprice so exotic in this place and century, unless one was certain (and this was improbable) that it was comparable to the longing for a "dish of apricocks" entertained by Webster's "Duchess of Malfi." However, Mrs. Chitty's eagerness was so pathetic, that, though fully aware of the futility of my errand, I tramped up and down the souks for hours, searching for this strange and ancient elixir. And hereafter at every village, however small, and even if entirely composed of wattle-huts, I was asked to get out and look for it.

At Abu-ben-Kalab, it was, withal, that the ever-increasing feeling of fondness for animals that she paraded reached a point that was unpleasant and even dangerous in its consequences, as much for them as for ourselves.

It cannot, I am afraid, be disputed that the natives of these regions ill-treat their animals, though I do know to what extent this neglect or brutality can be palliated by the fact that there live, not so far away, great numbers of dangerous and disagreeable beasts—lions, tigers, apes and crocodiles—and that the men themselves, or their not far distant ancestors, have suffered cruelly at their paws and teeth. Meanwhile in the interior of the continent the dusky brothers of these men—and the brothers of these animals—still wage against one another a grim and endless warfare. This must, if one comes to think of it, alter the human attitude toward other creatures. In England, it is the animal which has to be afraid: all the ferocious creatures of our country, fox, stag and otter, hares, pheasants, rabbits, ordinary field-mice and guinea-pigs, must by now have learnt their lesson. But to ignorant Africans an animal, even a domestic animal living among them, is regarded much as an interned German was regarded in England during the war. Not a word it says is understood, and its every action ought to be regarded with suspicion, as part of a plot: nor would it seem fair, they might urge in conversation with us, to be too kind, too generous with food to these brutes, whose brothers and cousins are killing our relatives and co-religionists the other side of the Atlas.

Mrs. Chitty naturally did not share or indeed comprehend these feelings, so different from our own. Apart from mice, she had no enemies or rivals in the animal world, and was horrified at the African outlook on brute-beasts. She therefore secretly resolved to buy a few of the worst-treated animals, and undertook a self-appointed pilgrimage of pity round the town, guided and advised by a black and evil interpreter. Unfortunately, as we learnt afterward, whereas she never made an offer for a whole, unmaimed, unscarred and well-fed animal, she was willing to offer comparatively fabulous sums for any halt, maimed, starved, wounded, scarred, or diseased mule or donkey. This was disastrous. Even those Arabs who had hitherto been kind to their animals, had been governed in this rather by financial than moral principles. A healthy, well-fed brute had been, up till Mrs. Chitty's advent, a paying proposition. But now it was so no longer. Her motives eluded them, and they very logically concluded that here was a mad-millionaire-white-woman with an unhealthy passion for seeing animals suffer. And since their faith taught them that, while both women and animals have no souls, Allah inspires the insane, and because life had taught them that gold was necessary to men, it seemed only right—and certainly good business—to gratify her curious desires. Thus, it appears, all night they would sit up, ill-treating their unfortunate beasts, kicking and beating them, inflicting hellish and ingenious tortures upon them, in order to be able in the morning to extort a good price from her. A suffering mule was now worth ten, twenty times even, a healthy, happy one. Acute speculation in sick animals set in: there were, of course, fluctuations, but, on the whole, it was a steady, rising market. The results were lamentable and heartrending.

Ignorant of that which had been in progress, we returned to the hotel one day, after an expedition, to find it besieged by a mob of eager, shouting natives, determined to sell Mrs. Chitty their tortured beasts; for it had somehow become known that we were leaving the next morning. Flocks and flocks of suffering and ill-tempered creatures, including a number of gigantic, knock-kneed and macerated camels, and crowds of jostling, bargaining, jabbering, quarrelling natives, all wrapped in a suffocating cloud of thick, white dust, surrounded the building. The proprietor was at the same time both furious and in a panic. He protested that all the guests were leaving, his business was ruined, and the authorities accused him of attempting to stir up sedition among the natives. Mrs. Chitty began, in her turn, to grow equally angry. (That Rowland's Macassar Oil was unattainable only made matters worse.) Moreover we were forced to speak to her, however gently, about the suffering to dumb animals that her kindness was causing. And personally, though I did not permit myself to tell her so, when I considered how little she allowed the ills of human beings to count with her as against the welfare of her microbe, when I reflected on her indiscriminate massacres in the South of France, her attitude genuinely shocked me.

Nothing we could say would melt that heart. She only grew more resolute, more obstinate. And even if, on this occasion, the very abundance of the sick beasts defeated her, she never subsequently lost a chance of repeating her conduct. Only their price limited her opportunities of well-doing: for each day their cost increased. It is surprising how swiftly news travels in these dark, intuitive lands, and all round Africa spread the legend, ever more exaggerated, of the immensely rich, mad, white woman, with her strange penchant: until in Guinea and the Gold Coast, Dahomey, Ashanti, Benin and the Congo it was rumoured that she was on her way, and the naked, grinning figures dancing round the fire, spared the last missionary, abandoned their cannibal feasts, in order that they might rush to their kraals and prepare their animals for her coming. It might be, even, that she would give them a string of glass beads, a bottle of whisky or a pocket-knife in exchange! And they set to work with a will. Thus, perhaps, some may consider that in the end she did good: for in the excitement many human beings were saved, though the animals suffered.

As my brother grew stronger, and Mrs. Rammond and myself remained immune, Mrs. Chitty began visibly to pine. Her respect for us had, I think, increased. She would now take the greatest trouble to prevent one from discovering what plans she was maturing, what manœuvres she had already carried out. Her craving for Macassar continued unabated, but she found out how to make a use of it. Let us assume that, without my knowledge, she had effected some tremendous bargain—a donkey, perhaps so ill that it had died in the night—and that, in her anxiety to dispose of the body, she had reached the conclusion that the best thing for her to do was to have it tied on with the luggage at the back of the car. Before we started, then, she would lament the Macassar famine, and would be so charming (and her charm was ever irresistible), would allow such a wealth of pathos to creep into the hollow but musical tones of her voice, and such a deep well of tears unshed to shine in her eyes, that of my own accord, and without the slightest suspicion of what was on hand, I would volunteer to search the village for the magic Macassar. Tired, hot and footsore, I would limp back to find the car ready, Mrs. Chitty, swathed in veils and rugs, comfortably enshrined there, and behind it, neatly rolled and folded up on the top of the luggage, a grey and furry carcase.

"I thought we might leave it somewhere on the way," she would urge. "Perhaps, if we could find a pretty spot, you wouldn't mind digging a grave for it? Nothing elaborate, just a plain grave. It's very good exercise, and you don't look too well. They have no proper animal cemeteries here. It's a disgrace!"

We passed a night or two on the way and then arrived—truly it was one of the chief attractions of the whole of our long journey—at Ali-Sid-Ali, that great native city only recently opened up to tourists. Capital, shrine and trading centre in one, it is a place of pilgrimage for all Mohammedan Africa, yet this sanctity is not allowed to interfere with the ever-growing volume of business transacted with Europe. The hotel, too, is a fine and new one, and after so much rough travelling, it was most agreeable to be in such comfortable quarters. But, alas, worry returned with civilization, for we found a telegram waiting for us to announce that our four friends in Cairo were back in hospital, seriously ill.

Though she had brought with her a letter of introduction to the British Consul-General, Mrs. Chitty, to our surprise, for once failed to deliver it in person. She, or rather her microbe, was evidently engaged in devising a different system of tactics. . . . Mrs. Rammond and myself were still in good health, my brother was fully recovered. Such a state of things could not be allowed to go on. Something *must* be done. Accordingly, she went to bed, immediately evolved one of her racing temperatures, and during several days made brave endeavours to consume our whole stock of medicines. This, doubtless she felt, would put her in a better position for developing her new offensive. But I had a hidden reserve of cinnamon and quinine, and thus she found herself unable to exhaust our supplies. Indeed, I think that so great was the quantity of these drugs which her new scheme of tactics forced her to swallow, that in all truth she began to feel ill. Certainly her temperature touched unprecedented heights. Meanwhile, she had posted her letter of introduction to the Consul-General and had explained in a letter of her own, enclosing it, that she was unwell, most unwell.

The atmosphere of Ali-Sid-Ali at this season was most fanatic. It was the fast of Ramadan, and the Mussulmans could be heard, in every direction, knocking their muffled heads against the marble floors of the Mosques, while the holy dancers gyrated wildly round the street corners. The Muezzin singers were in most formidable, if beautiful, voice: and at night, all night, a sonorous music, a deep, bass chanting that was ominous and extremely impressive, conveyed continually the glory of Allah to every nook of the city, and floated above the flat roofs up in a stream toward his sacred garden.

Mrs. Chitty seemed to gather unto herself some of this surrounding fanaticism. As she sat in her large, airy room, decorated with Saracenic icicles, painted bright red and blue, it was easy to detect in her eye the kindling of a new religious fire. More than ever did she resemble Savonarola, but there was, too, now more than a touch of the dancing dervish, a suggestion, even, of the Mad Mullah himself. Her voice sounded a note of doom that was menacing and unmistakable.

Her bedroom faced a Mussulman cemetery, and tethered in this was a little white kid which frisked and gambolled so prettily that the children used to come and play with it. But Mrs. Chitty, seeing them hugging it, maintained that they were ill-treating the poor creature, and after much bargaining, succeeded, behind our backs, in buying it.

There was an uproar in the hotel. Every manager and director came and shouted at us, until eventually we understood one of them, who said that only yesterday he had been obliged to ask an English lady to send away her pet pekinese, and that, therefore, he was very sorry, but he must quite definitely refuse to have a goat brought to live in the hotel. No doubt it was usual in Europe, but here people did not understand that sort of thing, he added.

Mrs. Chitty, securely established in bed, refused to give way, and the kid was tethered in the corridor outside. The authorities became yet more frantic. They had heard about the lady before: a guide from Abu-ben-Kalab had told them about her behaviour there. The hotel proprietor in that town, they understood, was in consequence of it a ruined man. Well, she could not repeat that sort of thing in Ali-Sid-Ali. It wouldn't do here, and they weren't going to stand it. . . . Perhaps the police could arrange matters. . . .

It was an *impasse*, a deadlock. We began to fear race-riots, so intense was the feeling. But, by the greatest good fortune, at this very moment a note was brought round to Mrs. Chitty from Lady McAlister, the wife of the Consul-General. In it she invited the invalid to stay at her house, saying that she and her husband would only be too pleased to nurse and look after any friend of Gerry Flitmouse. Mrs. Chitty at once accepted, scenting new victims for her germ. And then, too, there would be Foreign Office talks and every sort of delight.

When she went to pay her bill, she took the kid down to the desk with her, and, still accompanied by it, walked through the hall with great dignity. She then bore it off in triumph to the McAlisters. Lady McAlister, we heard afterward, was sympathetic: but Sir William, an old gentleman with white corkscrew moustaches, a Vandyke beard, and an eye-glass, drew the line at such a guest, and made his wife explain that it would be difficult to find suitable food for it. Mrs. Chitty now (I thought rather brutally) abandoned the little thing, and sent it back to the cemetery whence it had come. And there, since it was now ownerless, it would quickly have starved to death had we not been informed by the vindictive hotel-manager of its plight and decided to make it a small allowance in perpetuity.

Mrs. Chitty remained in bed for several days, "having a rest," and being waited on and made much of. Soon, however, her interest was aroused by the news that Forling, the explorer, was coming to stay, and she decided to get up to meet him. Lady McAlister kindly asked us to luncheon the same day, and I thought I had never seen Mrs. Chitty look more beautiful, nor ever had her charm impressed me more.

One of Forling's chief assets, the thing which had perhaps aided this great man in his wonderful career more than anything else, was his remarkable constitution. Moreover, he was, like so many persons of immense achievement, extremely modest: and his only boast was that, though now seventy-three years of age, he could walk as far and do as much as a boy of twenty, and, above all, that he had never spent a single day of his life in bed. Very foolishly (but then, how was he to know?) he mentioned this at luncheon . . . and once more I saw Mrs. Chitty smile her dark, enigmatic smile. At tea-time she had a relapse, and was forced to go to bed again.

Mrs. Rammond, my brother and myself felt that we must return to Cairo in order to look after our four invalids there. We went to Muriel Chitty's bedroom to talk with her. She did not feel well enough to travel, she said, and decided to stay on with the McAlisters. They were very kind, so hospitable, and, besides, she would like to see more of Forling: an exceptional man, that. . . .

We said good-bye to Muriel, but with real regret. It was impossible not to admire, not to be fascinated by her; indeed her faults only accentuated her strange charm and beauty, and the subtle wit and understanding that, though they were not always with her, often came to surprise and please one. . . .

But forty-eight hours afterwards the explorer began to feel unwell. The following morning, just as we were leaving Ali-Sid-Ali, we were told that he was very seriously ill, and the Consul-General had felt himself compelled to wire to Cairo for a specialist. He was expected to arrive that night by air. Alas, the rest of the story is known. The specialist arrived, but it was too late. Forling had spent his first, and last, day in bed, and the microbe had won a notable victory. . . .

In Cairo, a few days later, I bought a copy of the *Daily Tribune*.

Mr. Robert Sutledge, it read, had been ordered a sea-voyage for three months. One of the Russian dancers was dead. His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Gabriel had been allowed out in the garden of Nishkynashdom for the first time since his illness. He was said to be looking very frail, and was supported on each side by a hospital nurse. A memorial plaque had been erected to the memory of Ex-King Boris of Milesia in the foyer of the Folies Bergères at Monte Carlo, and a bronze statue, life-size, of H.R.H. the Duchess of Chester had been unveiled on the sea-front at Montibes. . . . The summer was coming on, and the epidemic at Valaise was dying down. . . . That was all. . . . But was it?. . . . I read on.

There was, I noticed, a curious outbreak of illness at Palermo and Constantinople. . . . The French General in Command at Damascus had retired, pleading ill-health. The Governor of Rhodes was indisposed. The Anglican Bishop of Cyprus was on his way home after several weeks of illness. At Alexandria our Representative had been granted sick-leave: the Sultan of Libya had abandoned his first levee. . . . Stop press: "Liner *Dionysus* with Friends of Greece on board in quarantine Gibraltar, owing to mystery outbreak. Notable invalids on board include Lady Richborough and Dean Squirrel."

The future, too, held its sequels. In Greece, dengue fever, which had doubtless been gathering strength for months, broke out as an epidemic in August. It was stated, at the end of September, that there had been 300,000 cases in Athens alone—Athens, where, it will be remembered, Mrs. Chitty had been so badly bitten by mosquitoes. During the winter months of the year a great wave of influenza spread over Europe. But Mrs. Chitty had gone again to the East . . . the unknown East, which is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of every religion, every mystery, every disease. . . . Who knows what may not again come out of the East, the unchanging East, or what the year may bring? . . .

And even as I have sat writing this story, a ghostly influenza, conjured up out of its pages, has attended me, and I have not the strength to pick up my pen. *Absit omen*: let me pray that the reader of it will not be similarly afflicted.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Alive--Alive Oh!* by Osbert Sitwell]