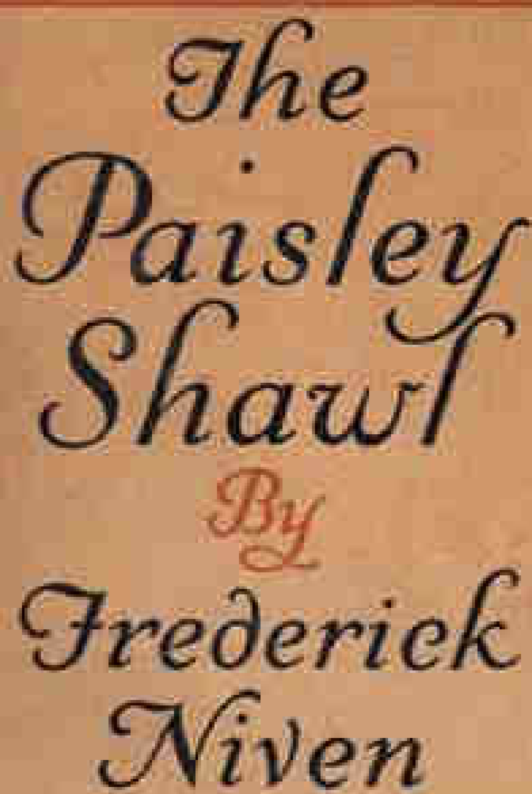
The
Paisley
Shawl
By
Frederick
Niven

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THE PAISLEY SHAWL

by

FREDERICK NIVEN

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TO
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

The Paisley Shawl

CHAPTER I

Peter Cunningham stood to one side of the hearth-rug, leaning backward against the mantel-piece, chin on chest, employed—although the story is post-war—upon loving his wife. She sat beyond the rug, a third of the way across the long blue and brown room, where she could look out through the tall French doors which were open to the Spring air. Reclining in a spacious chair, she gazed into distance, the expression in her eyes suggesting that her mind was not primarily occupied with consideration of what her gaze rested on, that she meditated through and beyond these leisurely hummocks and rolls of the drooping end of Elwin Hills.

Peter was a tallish fellow, of thirty-five, his hair the colour that extremists (according to the extreme they favoured) might speak of as "sort of towey" or "a golden nimbus." His eyes were violet. He gave the impression of a blend of rugged and tender, certainly no bully. The gospel of a "good callousness" was no work-a-day one for him. One could hazard him tolerant, or at need long-suffering, more than most perhaps, but, when his far limit was reached, granite. On the outbreak of war he had been on the staff of a Glasgow newspaper as interviewer and what was called "special." When that hole had been knocked in his life (he could never think of the war in terms of years, only as a long period of time filched from him, a gap) and he was again nominally free, he had embarked upon a bold endeavour. On half his capital he had bought this house by the roadside above Elwinfoot, not far from Edinburgh, and then sat down with the balance to the adventure of free-lancing for a living.

He was, by half his nature, of the tribe of Jefferies and Thomas. He had a passion for the observation of rural folk and rural things. A harrow in the drizzle of rain and dusk in the tangled corner of a field; a stack of peat divots in a slumbering highland glen; a bundle of prunings by an orchard's boundary, wrens jinking over it, had an inexplicable charm of appeal for him. *The Glasgow Herald* published his first border sketches; the *Dundee Courier* now and then took an article when there was a topical peg to hang it on. He sat on hills talking to shepherds, or at times stayed a night with one —Tod Jamieson by name—in a cottage that looked like a great mossy

boulder among the heather at the far end of a glen, the silence of which was but accentuated by the drumming of its draining burn and the bleating of sheep. The cost of living was high. There were raids into capital. Peter extended his markets. *The Nation* accepted his *Border Streams*; the London *Daily News*, on an August twelfth, published an article called *The Brown Birds*. When *The English Review* took his essay *A Scots Shepherd*, its editor encouraged him, in accepting, by saying it seemed to him a Scots pendant to some of George Bourne's Surrey labourer studies. He selected his material, it is true, but toward no coggling of facts for the sake of a Bonny Brier Bush legend any more than for the sake of a Green Shutters one. His years as a journalist had made him an observer and prevented him being a judge, but he had (objective—subjective; to be docketed neither as introvert nor extravert, should these words still be in currency when this record appears) to put something of himself into his work as well as of his subjects, tinge it with his own adorations and hopes.

When first we see him tilted back against the mantel-piece in that long blue and brown sitting-room, chin on chest, gazing at Helen, he had published two collections of his articles, the first entitled *Border Streams*, the second *A Scots Shepherd and Other Sketches*. Also he had published his first novel, *Heather Afire*. It was the well-known novelist, Harcourt Stead, who had jogged him to produce that. After reviewing *A Scots Shepherd* for *The Manchester Guardian* he wrote to Peter, asking him why he did not put what he had to say in novel form and thus, because of having a larger audience, Ring The Bell. That was an all-embracing phrase to Stead. It signified Honour and Pelf together. So Peter had written the novel, and dedicated it: *To H.S.* It had been on the market for close upon four months. The publisher's contract read: "That exact accounts of the sales of the said novel shall be made up every six months to the thirtieth day of June and the thirty-first day of December in each year, and the said accounts shall be delivered and settled in cash within three months thereafter." He had not yet heard how that effort was selling. A few articles were on offer to various journals (stamped addressed envelope enclosed for favour of return in event of rejection) and—there he leans against the mantel-piece.

Helen did not know that, propped there, he was employed as he was, she being far away, clear through the dropping end of Elwin Hills in reverie. She had a way, when meditating, as she was meditating then, of tucking in her under lip at one corner—the right corner—and holding it so with the pressure of one of her small teeth. That habit did not detract from the loveliness of her mouth. It but made her seem still, despite her thirty years, somewhat of a little girl—to whom any man had to be kind. She was not as

tall as Peter, her hair of a brown that yearly darkened, her eyes hazel and large, and what looked out of them was candid, unambiguous, gentle; that they were by no means close-set one need hardly say, her nature what it was. She was extremely sensitive but, desiring to give pain to none, must have most definite proof of malice aforethought before she would imagine that any cruel-sounding speech was cruel by intent, considered it an accident of faulty expression. It was certainly beyond her comprehension that there could exist those who take delight in cruelty, as it is beyond comprehension of some that any kindliness is not instigated but by ulterior motive. It has been said that the shrews and vixens in books stand out more sharply than the saints, that the good women, the sweet women, seem wishy-washy beside them. If so, it is so only, perhaps, as the smell of polecat is not only offensive but more pungent than the sweet odour of roses, or as one harridan in a women's club is more intrusive and prominent than a score of pleasant members round her who have no desire to create a fracas.

Cunningham wondered, propped there, what Helen was thinking. He presumed that her mind was vexed, as was his, with the question of finances, ways and means, making ends meet. He was certainly temporarily barren of ideas, subject, plot, theme, and sinking into the state which most writers have travailed through, of believing himself permanently barren. If he did not get an idea, subject, plot or theme soon there was no knowing what would happen. Well, the books they had collected, or at least his books—Helen's very own must not go—could be sold.

"Would that I," he thought to himself, "were a plumber—or better still a grocer. Burst pipes may leak on, but people must eat. Or a baker! People must have bread before all. 'Tis the staff of life. Man, alack, can live (or at least exist) on bread alone."

Suddenly, impulsively, he stepped to her and with a hand on each side of her face turned it toward him and upwards and very tenderly kissed that loved and lovely mouth.

"Cheer up," he said.

She looked at him with wide eyes. She looked out at him, wonderingly.

"Imagine any one thinking there is no such thing as a soul," he mused as she looked up and out at him so.

"I'm perfectly cheerful," she told him.

"Aren't you worrying?" he asked.

"Not at all," said she.

"Honour bright?"

"Ab-solutely. I was sitting here thinking of the happy years we have had together."

"Happy! I'm glad you've found them so. They have been hard."

"Oh, but Peter, haven't they seemed happy to you?" she asked, and caught him by a sleeve.

"Yes, indeed," he assured her. "But I can't always give you all I would like to. That stains the happiness."

"I have you," she said.

"I'd like to give you a motor-car," he replied slowly, accentuating how deeply he felt, "to match the colour of each of your frocks, and give you dozens of frocks."

She pealed with delight.

"That would be outdoing the *nouveaux riches* and the old war-profiteers. I don't want them. That little thing we have in the garage is enough for me. I love small quaint things."

"But, damn it, we have only about a quart of petrol left and I'm barren!"

"Then you must just lie fallow."

"I do not follow the argument," said he. "I think I should therefore be pollinated, and no pollen blows my way. The grocer and the baker will not lie fallow. I sometimes walk to and fro worrying about how they are to be paid."

"But I don't suppose they have started to walk to and fro about our bill yet."

He laughed a wry laugh, and continued to try to explain what he would do for her though he did not take, for evidence, "the heaven's embroidered cloths" as gifts he'd reach down.

"I wish I was rich enough to give you a whole purple shire for your own," said he.

"My dear man," she replied to that, "I wouldn't want even half a shire, all the inhabitants exiled to Canada save the few who'd remain to keep trespassers off my grass. This little house is good enough *pied-à-terre* for me." That allusion made a shadow pass on his face, reminder of one of the crying woes of his land, cried of in vain. There was worse now, much worse

now, than the bitterness of that old story of Bryce's Access to Mountains Bill. But what could he do to help? These increasing woes of his country from Caithness to Clydeside, that came into his head one after another, a sorry queue, he could no more prevent than he could have stopped the war that had taken a chunk out of his life.

"Don't worry, Peter," she said. "Your expression now makes me think of the lachrymose toper—*greetin' fou*—who sobbed over the National Debt."

"You're a heartening little woman," said he.

Kissing her on the forehead he left her and tramped across the room to the piano, but not for the consolation of music. Over one end of the instrument was draped an old Paisley shawl, one of these shawls in which there is background, space. There was inference of eternity as on a Chinese bowl instead of inference of congested, packed time, as on crowded Benares things. The ground of it was a lustrous black, lustrous still after many years, though the flowers, set wide apart, were fading. The fringe fascinated him. *Dripped* was the word for the way it hung. It made him think of seaweed heavy on rock ledges yet light in the swaying of a wave.

"These flowers," he said, "were once bright blue and red, and there was vivid green here. I always feel there is a story in this old shawl. Here is a Scots novel if only I could see how. It should be a story of three generations. It should link the years as the flying geese link the years in Hergesheimer's *The Three Black Pennys*. I would give my front teeth to have written that book."

She laughed again.

"People usually say their *back teeth*, you funny man."

"I know, but I possess my own back teeth. The front are crowned and nowadays a lot of dentists say crowned teeth should be removed anyhow. They would have to be consecutive generations, of course," he went on, returning to his theme. "This shawl is not old enough to dodge a generation. I suppose in this cynical age—or I should say decade, period, for the cynicism may not last long—I should have somebody lift the shawl and imagine happy things about it that did not happen. The reader should know by then not only that they did not happen but that bitter things did, instead. And the kick in the story would be in a sadistic chortle over that poor sentimentalist."

She had risen to look at the shawl as he held it up between wide-spread hands and he cast it over her shoulders. The flowers here splashed open;

there, curved to a fold, a faded petal peeped. He stepped away to admire it.

“Well, drape it in place again, dear,” he said at last. “It has not yet given me the plot.”

“Plot isn’t necessary,” Helen announced.

“No, that’s true, but if not plot there should be theme. You remember what Henry James said to Hugh Walpole about some book: ‘What is it about? What is the subject?’ ” He trod to and fro in long strides. “Perhaps an Airedale dog might help—or two,” he suggested. “Hergesheimer had two when he wrote his masterpiece. Hob and Marlowe they were called. I read about them in some gossip column.”

“Or we might get a goat,” said she, playing up to him. “The Welch Fusiliers have a goat.”

“And it would save the milk bill,” he pointed out.

“I wonder if what you need is a change,” said Helen. “A change might give you plot, theme, or subject.”

“I do. We both do. I’d like to go to the Canaries, and up the Amazon on that trip we got the circular about the other day, and through the South Seas, and then to the Mediterranean. A change might do the trick, but we’ve only got a little small change left, not enough for the expenses.”

She laughed gently again. That she had faith and hope was obvious. Here was no brave pretence. The shawl draped in place once more upon the piano-end, with peeping fading flowers (ebbing red, gold, and green), and dripping fringe, she leant against the tall window, it open, looking out at an elaborate cloud above Elwin Hills. Through a rent in it a lark, a trembling mote, was visible against the infinity of glittering blue beyond. That was a beautiful pose, as she leant there; and when she turned back again she saw in his eyes that he loved her.

“I meant a change to town, perhaps,” she defined, sitting down again in the big chair and resting an arm over its back. “The country I love, and it’s inspiring, but any one is the better for change. We might get a flat in Edinburgh for a few months and it would be handy for the libraries and old-bookshops, and you’d see people jostling round you, and we could go to a theatre and not come back here at night but remain in the crowds.”

“A flat!” he ejaculated.

He did not ask her where they would find the money for the rent of it. He only said, “A flat!” and shut his lips on the rest. But here was easy

thought-reading for her.

"The cash will come," said she with incorrigible faith.

She looked far ahead to the days when she would be ever so glad that they had shared the fight together. She was entirely content with him, with this house, and the Elwin Hills of changing colours under the changing sky, the ecstasy of the larks outside there over the shire, and the swallows lodging under the eaves.

"How would it be," she suggested, "if I were to run away with the man at the garage, and then you'd get a plot!"

He pictured the face of the man at the garage and laughed.

"I would," he said, "in the cemetery."

He stepped over to the corner cupboard, a family heirloom, and opened it. An ancient odour arrested him at the turning of the key. He fumbled with the contents, searching for a plot, a theme, or a subject. Anywhere he might come upon it. In this corner cupboard, peradventure. There was an old circular snuff-box with an engraved inscription: "To John Bryden Cunningham from his friends in Irvine," and a verse in script below:

> "A towzie tyke, black, grim and large,
> To gie them music was his charge:
> He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,
> Till roof and rafters a' did dirl."

That grandfather had been a musician. There was a Mull brooch that raised the ghost of some lost lady of old years, but she was gone ere he could seize more than a passing glance of sorrow, as at the transience of life. That must be in his book: a sense of eternity round the day's routine.

"There's the postman coming," said Helen.

He brought a letter from her sister, one from Peter's brother, and one in an unknown hand. They examined the writing together instead of opening it.

"Pretty writing," she remarked.

"A literary pusson," said he. "Yes, madam, a literary pusson by the calligraphy."

"Perhaps it is somebody offering you an idea."

"Yes, a plot, theme, or subject."

"Open it."

“Not a bad suggestion,” said he, and did so. “Dear Mr. Peter Cunningham,” he read, and then turned to the end. And—“Oh!” said he, and “Oh!” said she.

The signature was *Hilda Perry*. They possessed Hilda Perry’s volume of poems, and had read and re-read them; and her articles in the press, which doubtless kept the wolf from her door—for it is common knowledge that poetry can do much, but seldom that—they never failed to peruse.

“Hilda Perry!” Peter exclaimed. “The cleverest young woman penning poems and tapping out articles on a typewriter in these days. I read the other day that she is visiting the industrial cities of England and Scotland, looking into the conditions of women employed in factories and mills, for some London journal. What does she want of me?”

“Read and see,” advised Helen, and with her chin on his shoulder they read the letter, which was written on the note-paper of a Dundee hotel:

> “Dear Mr. Peter Cunningham:
>
> “I can’t begin with the more formal *Dear Mr. Cunningham*, Peter Cunningham being a name to many of us, and Mr. Cunningham not satisfying.
>
> “The editor of *Woman To-day* has commissioned me to write six articles on contemporary authors, and I am anxious to include one on you. The articles should be chiefly critical, or at least dealing primarily with the work of the writers, but the editor’s idea is that they should be in the nature of a union of the old-time interview and the critical article. It is not a case of getting you to commit yourself to any views on any subject from *What Has To Be Done With The Unemployed?* to *Should Women Grow Long Hair?*
>
> “I should be greatly obliged if you could do me this favour, and I shall make my plans fit in with yours if you would be good enough to fix a day for me to see you as you are. I very much want to mention, as well as your novel, your nature essays. I know this is the age of the novel, and that there is a tendency, when speaking of writers (especially, I admit, among women), to mean fiction-writers. Still, in your nature essays I for one think you have caught much of the essential spirit of your land. *Just* newspaper articles is not, to my mind, fair to them. It is as stupid as *just* rheumatism, or *only* nerves. But on that subject I’d like to have your own views

before beginning the article. On a visit I could get much in a sentence or two from you. I don't expect the editor will also be writing to you as evidence of my *bona fides*! He is an organiser, but averse to personal action.

"Yours sincerely,

"Hilda Perry."

CHAPTER II

From the window of his study to which he had mounted, Peter Cunningham watched his wife on her way to Elwinfoot.

She carried with her, to post there, his reply to Hilda Perry. It told her that he felt it an honour indeed that she was to write about his efforts; that both Helen and he were great admirers of her work; that the best plan, perhaps, would be for her, on arrival in Edinburgh, to telephone them and then arrangements could be made for her coming out to Elwinfoot.

Helen was walking down to the village for the exercise, not to save the dwindling petrol in case of an emergency call that might necessitate the use of the Marlboro-Midget. So she assured him, setting out, and no doubt truly. She had faith that, were it but at the eleventh hour, an article on offer—perhaps two, perhaps all the articles on offer—would be accepted and cheques arrive. Peter had intermittent glimpses of her on the road as she strode along, and her carriage seemed to him most genuinely of one buoyant and happy, not of one but courageous in face of anxiety. She was not anxious.

"God bless her," said he.

Had she a fault? Had she a failing? None to speak of that he could see! One little foible, he considered, just a foible she had that was but excess of a virtue. In the desire to live peaceably and avoid cause for altercation she would allow persons to whom converse meant offering instruction and information to instruct and inform her upon all those things which she had known from her youth up (as Scripture says), and but make murmuring sounds as of interest, and exclamations as of gratitude for enlightenment. Her point of view was that it sent them away happy and did her no harm, but in all his admiration for her, and pride, it galled him to observe her thus treated sometimes as she were the prize ninny. It did not occur to him that he did much the same sort of thing himself (with less unselfish and disinterested impulse) in his curiosity regarding humanity, often acting the gowk when he was but the chiel takin' notes. The same pleasant twist in her nature, however, she sometimes permitted to have its way in matters relating not to herself but to him. She had, for example, informed the parson of Elwinfoot, when he asked why her husband did not attend church, that Peter suffered from claustrophobia and so could not enter a church. The parson, of course, may have thought it odd that Peter could, nevertheless, go to cinema

house and concert hall, but he accepted the explanation in much the way that he stepped daintily over this or that article of his church that he did not believe. He inquired no further lest worse might befall and home-truths be, by persistence, elicited; and, wisely, he did not twit Peter with his alleged malady. So all was well, and to be a peacemaker, even to such extremes as inventing maladies for one's husband instead of reporting his views, or heresies, was, if a fault, an engaging one to Peter.

"God bless her," he murmured again as she was eclipsed by a hedge beyond which, he knew, he would have no further glimpse of her.

He had taken Hilda Perry's letter upstairs with him and placed it, open, upright in the letter-rack on his table.

The Paisley shawl, the corner cupboard, and its varied contents of which he had pled for a plot had, so far, failed him. He looked round for help. "The essential spirit of your land," he read again in the letter. His mind was moaning to work in the sense of "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter." There was no sound in the room, but his mind it may be said moaned and complained. Perhaps he was trying to force the grey matter into the wrong mould, but that did not occur to him then, obsessed by the impression that in the shawl was the germ or nucleus of his novel to be. Seated, he looked forth at the hills. They had three knobs atop that reminded him of the Eildons.

" 'Twilight and Tweed and Eildon Hill,' " he murmured, and his mind was suddenly off like a coursing whippet.

It was not off in the right direction for a novel, however—a novel that would give him, at one and the same time, pleasure to write (however much incidental agony in the pains of parturition) and some royalties that would pay the bills. "The essential spirit of your land." An essay began to boil in the essay-pot which he had put away to the back of the stove, intending to look into it later, after attention to the larger one. He saw the roads of Scotland winding from the Cheviots to the Grampians. He saw Scott in the high chamber where he died. Lockhart stood beside the bed, stooping, and heard the ebbing spirit speak: "My dear, be a good man—be virtuous—be religious—be a good man. Nothing else will give you any comfort when you come to lie here."

Though Peter was an absentee from church he was not irreligious. He had, like most of us, his own religion. He rose and paced the floor.

“The war has bust all that,” he said to the quiet room, and in tones of regret. “Imagine, in this derisive age, saying *Be good*.”

He recalled his student days and how, even before the war, the rot spread. In the alertness of their minds they asked *What is good? What is evil?* But a step it was to add *For all we know evil may be good*. But another step it was to *Evil be thou my good*. The general spirit of an essay in a recent *Nineteenth Century and After*, rather than any phrase of it, came into his mind, on the theme of diabolism in these days.

He dismissed these thoughts. What he had to do was to think out something to write—to live thereby; and the publisher of *Heather Afire* had asked him to write another novel—and why the dickens could he not just sit down and write it? The cheques for these articles of his did not go far. He felt as a man bailing a boat, the leaks in which give him no rest. Would a course of Little Pink Books or Little Grey Pills, he asked himself, teach him how to harness his mind and force it to go where, by all that was sensible, it ought to go?

Undisciplined, it went back to the roads of Scotland. He was as one disembodied. He took hold of the wings of memory and was in the uttermost parts of the land. It might almost be said that he was in many places, if not at the same time, within but seconds. He was in a boat off Charsaig Bay with Helen, on their honeymoon. She had on breeches and over them oilskins, and was helping him to pull an oar for a fisherman who was gathering in his buoyed lines in haste before a storm that made all Jura, beyond the wave-tops, a sombre and fearful hue, and its peaks smoking like volcanoes. He was tramping alone in Caithness, university days over, in that period when one feels like Columbus sailing west. A gamekeeper stopped him on the King’s highway, asked him who he was, where he had been, and where he was going to, and he refused any information, feeling like Garibaldi as he did so, and demanded instead the name of the man’s autocratic employer, telling him that this was a preposterous transcending of his rights. The boy in him was flattered by what he conceived as a look of admiration in the eyes of the other, who well knew he was exceeding his rights and did so only at the orders of his foreign master. That gamekeeper vanished like a wraith and Peter was in Appin, and had found a birch-wood that he had been seeking, and again its world of shivering discs, withered these years, crackled all together in a wind blowing from Mamore and rippled silver in the blue air. He was alighting—with his botanising and tramping sister (now employed by one of the botanical gardens of the land)—at King’s House. There was only a platform there. The guard had to be told in advance (at

Callander they spoke to him) if one wanted to alight, for it was not what is called a station, only a halt. It was a halt indeed. They dropped helter-skelter from the carriage. The train rolled on ere it had fairly stopped and they trudged into wet and shining Balquhidder, wet and purple and vivid green, and saw mountains (above a reed-edged loch that was all flakes of sullen silver) turn into clouds, and dun clouds solidify to mountains; and in distance, far off, was the sound of bagpipes. She said it was Alan Breck and Robin Oig matching their musical skill in the cottage of Duncan Dhu. He had dedicated his *Scots Shepherd* to that tramping and botanising sister, his first volume, *Border Streams*, to his wife.

The door opened and Helen entered. She must have been to Elwinfoot and back, thought he, and he had done nothing—nothing. It was as if he were playing at being a literary man, daydreaming!

"I've had a brain-wave!" she said.

"I wish I had one," said he.

Her gaze fell on Hilda Perry's letter propped before him, and——

"Pretty writing," said he, noting its direction, "pretty calligraphy, and she can write in the other sense too. I'm fumbling all round for help towards getting busy, like a drowning man clutching straws. It's as decorative as a Japanese print. But it hasn't helped, except to suggest an article on Highland Holidays. What's your brain-wave? Have you evolved a novel for me to write?"

"No, not that. But my brain-wave may get her here sooner than you expected. And a pow-wow with her may be as good as the change I was prescribing. If you don't agree I'll go back with the letter——"

"You haven't posted it!"

"I haven't been to the village," said she.

She had received her brain-wave, as she called it, just round that bend beyond which he could not have glimpsed her again and so had left the window. Had he remained there he would have seen her trudging back. All his Highland wanderings had been only in the space of time it had taken her to return that little way.

"It just occurred to me suddenly that though she wrote on Royal Hotel, Dundee, note-paper, the obliteration mark over the postage stamp was *Edinburgh*. I haven't lived with you these six years without getting to understand what may be called the erraticism of scribes. I don't pretend to

being able to explain why she wrote it in Dundee and posted it in Edinburgh. Perhaps she got her work done there sooner than she expected, and did not think to open the letter and give you an Edinburgh address.”

“She must be off her head!” said he.

“Not necessarily. Don’t you remember how you went to the station once to await your sister’s arrival, saw three trains come in, and came back saying she ought to have written if she could not come on the day you fixed—and then found, in your pocket, your letter telling her what day and train would suit?”

“I must be off my head, then!” said he.

“Not necessarily. But my brain-wave, anyhow, was that we should ring the hotels she’s likely to put up at and ask if she’s there.”

“She may be with friends, granted she’s in town.”

“True. But let’s try the Royal Stewart to start with.”

“All right. It’s a lark, anyway.”

They passed gaily downstairs together in bumping, bouncing steps, both like children. Perhaps they were. And perhaps they might manage to keep the child alive in them till death did them part, despite bills and taxes, and the insistent boat-bailing. Any tribulations on the way, seeming to a pessimist as evidence of a conspiracy to make love and youth fly out of the window, might but deepen their devotion, keep them wonderingly young, for it is in the way we take things that their influence is proved.

She sat on the third stair from the foot while he, instigated by her, made the preliminary connection. If he got in touch with Hilda Perry she would prompt him to invite her to come out straightway—that night. She would have Nelly Ray up to wait table. They would have an *hors-d’œuvre* of . . .

The telephone conversation became interesting.

“Miss Perry, I said.”

“Better say Miss *Hilda* Perry,” Helen murmured. “There may be others.”

“O my God, let me alone!” snapped Peter. “I’m sorry, Helen. I’m nearly crazy to-day. I sometimes think all I need is a few straws to complete—eh? Yes, Miss HILDA Perry, please.”

“Is she there?” asked Helen.

“Yes. He’s gone to look for her.”

"She is there, then!" and Helen clapped her hands together silently, shot her legs out and clicked her heels in delight over the proving of her brain-wave.

"I can hear feet clumping on the tiles," said Peter. "There's a car going past outside. This is like being in Princes Street. Ah! Here come her little feet tip-a-tap. Dear little feet tip-a-tap," he said, gaily. "Yes, please. Miss Hilda Perry? Speaking?"

Helen chortled quietly, sitting on the stairs nursing her knees, her body curved, in the attitude of a pantomime fairy on a mushroom.

"She'd hear your nonsense—dear little feet," she murmured.

"Oh! This is Peter Cunningham. We got your letter and my wife had a brain-wave to phone you. She noticed the obliteration stamp on the letter was *Edinburgh*, so she wondered——"

• • • • • • • • •

"Yes, she is rather clever. We were going to try one or two likely places for you and—yes, got you first shot!"

"Oh, I see. That was it! Well, we'd be delighted to see you."

"Could she come right away, to-night, for dinner?" prompted Helen, in a whisper.

"To-night, if you can. There's a train—just a minute." He clapped a hand to the mouthpiece. "Do you think," he whispered, "that garage man you are always thinking of running away with would let me have some petrol on tick?"

"*Sssh!* She may hear. Buy some. We have enough money for that."

"But suppose that some other bill——"

"Hope! A cheque will come from somewhere. Buy some."

"We could let her come by train," he suggested, "and meet her at the station."

"It would look more hospitable and so forth to squirt into town for her."

"Righto." He removed his hand from the telephone. "Hullo," said he. "I've been looking up trains, but you know, Miss Perry, I think I'd better run in for you and lift you out in the car."

"Not a bit of trouble. I'd love to. And I could bring you off the beaten track. It seems impossible, nowadays, but I can bring you along roads where, at a turn, if we slip round gently, you may see a heron standing on one leg by a waterside. And I can show you the white scar remaining of an old drove-road that was marked first by the Border rievers and later used to drive the herds over to Falkirk Tryst. If you are out for some sort of *genius loci* articles as well as your sociological ones I can——"

"Righto. I'll call for you in time to get you out here before dinner." He hung up the receiver.

"What did she say?" asked Helen.

"She'll be ready for me any time I get in for her. She thought it was clever of you to notice the obliteration stamp on the envelope. She wrote the letter in Dundee, where she's been getting some material for her articles on women in factories and mills for a London paper, and forgot to post it till she got here. Just like her, she said. She remembered a few minutes ago—perhaps you telepathed it!—and was going to drop a post-card giving her Edinburgh address. Never thought we'd be on the phone."

"I wonder if she heard your nonsense about her dear little feet."

"I think she did. She said at first, in the most puzzled way, 'I wear sixes,' and then, 'Who is speaking?' "

"Then she did hear you!"

"I expect she thought the lines had got tangled and was being genial about it."

"She'd recognise the same voice when you spoke on."

"Oh, well! As for voices—she has a lovely voice on the phone, anyhow."

"Why, Peter, you look better already. Perhaps the fillip of Hilda Perry's brain will do the trick for you, be as good as the change of scene that I suggested, and you'll turn back to your nebulous shawl idea seeing just how to treat it."

It was clear from the expression on his face that the idea was still baulking.

"Or," Helen continued, "you may even, refreshed, decide to discard it, and see something else all clear. I have noticed that when you have dolour over some theme it sometimes only means that you are on a wrong tack."

“That’s possible too,” he agreed.

“Well, I’ll have to go off to my shopping again,” said she. “One has to attend to these things, alas, as if they were equally real. I’ll drop in at the Rays’ to see about getting Nelly to come up and grace the occasion with her cap and apron.”

Nelly Ray was a servant who had been in residence with them before the encroachment upon capital. She had been perfectly willing to stay even when there were but desperate dregs of capital, she also, as Helen, endowed with faith. But the arrears of her wages troubled Peter more than they troubled his wife, and much more than they troubled her, so she had left them—on his request—temporarily she knew, permanently he feared. She had not yet found another “place”; she considered herself but resting. Anyhow, there she was at her home in the village, ever eager to come up to help and to wait table when they had what she called “company.”

CHAPTER III

The sunlight, twinkling on flakes as of oxidised silver in rugged granite fronts, was on Princes Street as Peter stepped out of his car—the car of which a certain rotund member of parliament wrote to the manufacturers, who had presented him with one in the hope of a word of approval: “It fits me like a glove.”

Sun-blinds were aslant over the windows of jewellers and costumiers, making the sheets of plate-glass in their shade look like strange amber ice. On either side of the door of the Royal Stewart stood a young dragoon of the Scots Greys regiment, selected, it would appear, for handsomeness. Must be some regimental function, marriage of an officer, or something of the sort afoot, thought Peter, as he passed in to inquire for that brilliant scribe, Hilda Perry. Soldiers and civilians lounged in the vestibule. There were blent scents and rustlings and loud voices that seemed less to be conveying thoughts than shouting down other voices, joining in a scrum of chatter.

A tall, self-possessed young woman, most fashionably dressed, strolled among the groups, circumventing them as easily as he had circumvented the huge drays that roared and droned in the Great North Road. She swung her blue silk legs leisurely. She looked at none of the people. They might not have been there; her eyes were blind to them. She was waiting for some one. And him she saw. At sight of Peter she smiled and hurried forward.

He had seen only one photograph of her, or a reproduction of a photograph, rather, in a magazine, and that was in profile. Now he had a swift impression of her in the life, and full face. Her cheek-bones were small but accentuated by a beautiful curve that took his fancy over what, he believed, anatomists called the antrum of Highmore. Her eyes were rare. They had the quality of opals; they were blue, or grey, or grey-blue, and there were flecks of green in them. Under the brim of her hat, that she wore low on her head, a fair curl was arranged in mock escape.

“Mr. Cunningham?” she asked.

“Miss Hilda Perry,” said he.

“I’m ready for you,” she said and, as they passed out—“I hope you appreciate the decorative sentries at the door for you.”

“For our meeting. Yes, I saw them. I realised it was fitting. That’s the way to treat us! Turn out the guard.”

As some dead and gone forefather of his, not blind to feminine grace, must have noted a featly moulded arm or so, he, as she slipped into the Midget, noted how graceful was a line that ran from her knee to instep; and the tapering of her high heels ended that line so quaintly that he smiled. A marionette, a puppet, a mannequin quality she was given by these ridiculous heels.

Sliding after her into his place behind the wheel he glanced over his shoulder to see that all was well for turning without having a wing grazed, and remarking to her as he did so that this was a great moment for him because of his delight in her work.

The tables were turned. She was here to interview him as an admirer of his work, and he was congratulating her upon hers.

“I’m terrifically glad you like it,” she said, and instanter, with a quivering motion of her shoulders that made the fur of some wild animal she wore lightly over them fall into perfect place, there was suggestion as of her nestling closer to him.

He had the emotion of having known her a long while. They settled down easily as blood-kin. They belonged, at any rate, he felt, to the same wild, strange country, if not to the same village of it. He wondered, as he held the Midget circumspectly purring along Princes Street, what the scent was that she used. Just powder perhaps, so faint it was. There were flower-odours from the gardens opposite and wafts of motor-car exhaust—and that faint perfume beside him. It suggested clean limbs and cared for.

In half an hour they were out of the ribbon of honkings and he had remission of the need to be alert for the halting hands of policemen, or for vacillating pedestrians at crossings.

“So you are doing some special articles,” he said.

“Yes. Factory conditions among women. Queer place, Dundee, the women tremendously outnumbering the men, with the results to be expected.”

“You didn’t study it in these clothes, did you?”

“Goodness, no!” she replied, and was pleased that he had noticed her attire and felt so speedily at home with her as to comment on it. “Yes, it’s a queer and oddly fascinating place. It has *danse macabre* quality, what with

that centuries-old grim graveyard they call the Howff in the midst of it, and a John Barleycorn response to the miseries of existence among its under-dogs—who retain, mark you, a sort of fierce pride despite all their rags and tatters and cramped quarters."

"I know. It's terrible, and it gets worse in our city slums. I'm glad you're doing some articles on the conditions."

"I'm interested in domestic economy, political economy, politics. Aren't you?" she asked.

"Y-e-s."

"Why the hesitation?"

"Oh, just as to politics I'm hesitant. There may be no ultimate right for any proposal in the view of all, and only compromise at best. There are always the two sides in politics, and sometimes more. Political thought ought to be for the general good, of course, but we can't easily live up to that ideal. Know a man's means of existence and it's a pretty safe guess what his politics are. Politics become party-politics, and one pulls an oar and another back-waters. And the other fellow may, after all, be as greatly right."

Her head flicked to one side in an involuntary, unconscious movement. It was jerky, like that of a bird alert at a faint sound of import. There was a swift triumphant expression in her eyes, kin with that in those of a trivially inquisitive village-gossip when it seems that some private item for public tittle-tattle has been dropped, and the giver unaware. That was really a *terrifically* interesting indicative revelation of himself, an illuminating peep into him, she thought. She did not realise that what he revealed was rather tolerance than an easy morality.

"I know what you mean," she said. "I've heard a politician praised for never speaking over the heads of his hearers, as though he wasn't simply doomed to talking down, thinking of the average intelligence—and often of the meanest—by the nature of his calling. And politicians often have to snare their followers by mere emotional special-pleading. Not that I'm at all a believer in cold reason."

He made no reply to that. Had he spoken of what he meditated then, the alliance of mind and heart, intellect and emotion—with a thought of the wide diversity between the minds of one and another, the hearts of one and another, as a rider in abeyance in that meditation—she would have given ardent response from her own angle of approach; but as, pondering, he remained silent, she changed the subject.

“I meant to ask you,” she said, as they came to where hedges instead of houses were on either side, “what happened on the phone when you called me up? Did you think you had got the number of a bootshop? It sounded the same voice as yours proved to be, talking about little feet.”

He chuckled.

“It was some nonsense I was talking to my wife. You said you wore sixes,” he reminded her.

“Well,” she explained, “one has to live up to the world’s nonsense with alacrity or one is called dated!”

“Those are the Pentland Hills dropping away there behind, and the ones ahead are the Elwins,” said Peter. “I love them.”

“I know you do,” she sighed. “That essay in your first book I’m terrifically fond of. The very title, *Thunder in the Hills*, the very words, seem to me rich music in themselves.”

“Yes. They suggest it all to any one who has lived it. But of course to get it down—convey it—make people feel it, in words, that’s the rub! I’m never satisfied. Are you?”

“Oh, never, never!” She turned her head, chanting the words at him. “But you have done it once or twice, nevertheless,” she added.

“And you too,” said he, and quoted her a line or two of her own.

“I can stand a lot of that,” she told him. “The way you say those lines makes them sound better than I had hoped when I wrote them. We live by admiration, hope, and love.”

He had left the high-road. He was returning home by old bye-ways, and very beautiful they were on that day of sun and small passing breezes. He wondered if she saw all that he saw, but did not play cicerone over his lesser beauty spots on the way, or indicate for her such trifles as six pine trees alone in the rocky triangle of a field-corner, very tall, and with a manner as of conferring together, whispering in their tops of esoteric things. But when they rounded a wide-swung bend, springing the surprise of a rippling river far below, he ran the car to the roadside and shut off.

“There’s the heron you promised!” she ejaculated; “standing on one leg like the sacred ibis of Egypt.”

“I arranged for it to be here,” he answered lightly.

She sat forward, hands palm to palm between her knees, and looked down into the gorge. On their side the declivity was all of heather with little ruts zigzagging down to the water. On the other were trees. The eternal prattle of the river came up to them. A bee hummed past.

"Well," said Peter, at last, "better get on, I suppose. My wife will wonder what's keeping us."

A transient frown showed between her brows, but it may have been only because of another lock of hair escaped and, in the wind, tickling her forehead. She tucked it away. The car moved slowly on. They crossed the river, the prolonged sigh of it under them, and through the wood upon the other side came to rolling moorland. Without stopping, he pointed to a hillside.

"See that rut?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's the scar of an old drove-road on which the flocks and herds were once driven from as far off as the Cheviots to the trysts at Falkirk, and the way was marked for them, according to the legend, by earlier flocks and herds driven by the old rievers. I hope that doesn't seem only of local or parochial interest."

"No, no," she said. "One gets the feeling of the passing generations—and all that you get into your work in such things."

A lapwing appeared ahead as if created in midair, tossed up there out of the heather when they were not looking, and balanced against a wind that skimmed the hill-crest, suddenly let the breeze take it, and slid past overhead, crying again and again *Pee-wee*! They crackled on to a top of the world and ran there a little way looking out on the patterned shire, squares and parallelograms of green and grey-green that trembled in fields of corn and of barley among smears of purple. On a road that lay almost straight along the valley below cars scurried, one after another, and now and then the blare of a horn came up to them. Peter gazed far beyond, at a low wavering streak of cobalt where a cloud trailed a hem and there was the hint of a segment of a rainbow.

" 'I saw rain falling and the rainbow drawn on Lammermuir,' " he murmured.

They dipped down from that height of land, swerved into the last streets of Elwinfoot, and then there was but a short purr uphill and they had arrived.

Helen came out to meet them and Hilda's eyes showed a quick, anxious inquiry—a keen appraising scrutiny of her hostess—followed by no smile, but a look almost as of regret. A shadow passed in them. But all that was momentary.

"Well, here you are," said Helen. "I am delighted to see you."

"I'm terrifically glad to be here," replied Hilda, and smiled. She had liked Peter's wife at first sight.

"You'll want a wash after the drive," said Helen.

She led their guest away, handed her over to the dainty Nelly Ray, and then hastened downstairs to scurry across and meet Peter as he came from the garage. She grabbed his elbow.

"There's an envelope of the right size and colour," she whispered. "Do open it."

She took it from the hall table where it lay awaiting his return and handed it to him. He opened it and drew forth a cheque—a cheque long waited for, long promised.

"Faith, hope, and charity," said she, "but the one you've to hang on to most ardently is Faith. You've got enough of Charity by nature."

"That's all right," he said. "Isn't she fascinating? I feel as if I've known her all my life."

Surprise showed in Helen's eyes, or it may have been that she blinked to the sun, the long rays of late afternoon lying from a notch of Elwin Hills through the doorway and resting on the floor. Or may the cause of it not be told, with the right we have to make such divulgements by the way? Helen felt not greatly, at first sight, delighted with Hilda Perry as Peter's tone suggested that he was. There seemed to her, in their guest, charm to be sure, fascination no doubt; but she had the impression of a tendency toward hectic adorations and as hectic abrogations. Insincere Helen would not call her—quibbling a little herself, perhaps, over a word for the sake of full fairness. She suspected Hilda would be sincere for a moment, for a day, for a season, in admirations and renouncements, but with a sincerity having instability for its partner. She'd bring the variableness of fashion, the idea of fashion, into matters of mind—even of heart too, perhaps! She belonged, thought Helen, not to Peter's province but served under another banner on which was inscribed, "The king is dead, long live the king." That was her instinctive summing-up of Hilda Perry: fascinating, yes; charming—oh, yes; but with these other characteristics also. And men are so apt, she considered, to

imagine women what they wish, when they are caught by their charm as by the colour of flowers. She hoped Peter would not be disappointed in Hilda Perry.

CHAPTER IV

The threesome dinner was entirely successful—the foursome dinner, indeed, one might say; for Nelly Ray, though not sitting down to meat with them but, instead, deftly waiting upon them, was party to the success of it.

Hilda Perry was not impervious to feminine charm in others.

“I really must say,” she remarked, dinner over, “that your fairy maid is as fascinating as the stems and curves of your wine-glasses.”

“And what’s inside her is as beautiful,” said Peter. “She’s a dear!”

Hilda smiled sweetly into his eyes as though he had called her so.

The fairy followed them with coffee into the sitting-room, and put on a table a cigarette-box, and a ginger-jar in which stood a sheaf of bamboo cigarette-holders.

“What a delightful idea!” Hilda exclaimed, “and material for the gossipy touches in my article. You provide holders as well as cigarettes for your guests. Well, I’ll carry mine away for a souvenir and use it when I’m baffled in pursuit of a subject—or how to treat it.”

“You get that way too!” said Peter.

She rolled her eyes, gazing into a ceiling-corner for all reply, and blew smoke with a sigh.

Helen was very happy. Straws, now, in Peter’s hair would have been no completion of effect, but straws out of place. By his manner he had reprieve from worry and would not care if it snowed. But as the evening wore on she began to have depressing thoughts born out of her awe at their guest’s erudition and brilliance, so wide, it seemed, was the net of her mind. What a limited woman Peter married, thought Helen, in comparison with this encyclopædic creature. When they talked of ways of reporting the spectacle of life her gamut of allusions was from Defoe to Proust. When they touched on the question of women at work—apropos of her late inquiries into the lives of the women of the mills and factories—she referred to Weininger (though with an aside that of course he was an old story), and quoted a troubling sentence from Spengler, not an old story but contemporary as that day’s paper, on what we might all be coming to with what we called our civilisation.

“I’m sure you play the piano,” said Helen in a lull.

“Why?” asked Hilda. “I’m equally sure you do.”

Helen held up her hands.

“Look,” she said. “I slept for years with corks between my fingers so as to stretch an octave at last.”

“Well, play,” said Hilda.

“Better toss for it,” Peter suggested. “Heads, Helen,—tails, Hilda Perry,” and he felt in his pocket. “Sorry! I have only a cheque,” he added, “and I haven’t cashed it yet.”

Hilda rose and catching Helen’s hands drew her to the piano, but there halted instead of thrusting her upon the stool.

“Oh, what a lovely shawl!” she exclaimed.

“Yes. An old Paisley shawl. My husband wants——”

Her husband interrupted.

“It has been in the family for three generations,” he said.

“Peter keeps looking at it and imploring it for——” Helen tried again.

“It was a gift from my grandad to my granny,” Peter said, interrupting a second time. “The flowers must once have been brilliant. I like the space in it. The old Paisley weaver who wrought it a hundred years ago had the idea.”

“Um,” said Hilda, and stroked with the back of her hand the dripping fringe. “It is hell how flowers fade, isn’t it?”

As she spoke her expression changed. They had seemed at dinner to have been entertaining, in turn, several different guests all in the same body, so mutable her expressions. She seemed now as if stricken with some pain. She seemed a woman who had known many agonies and sought in vain for the perdurable. She forgot that she had been leading Helen to the piano. She glided on to the stool and began to play.

“What’s that?” sighed Helen when it ended.

“I don’t know. A poor thing but mine own. I got it the other evening when I came home and saw some flowers had faded. I had forgotten to put water in the vase. My fault! As if I was in the conspiracy of change and decay instead of hurt by it. Now you play.”

Helen moved backward and sat down.

"Not after that," said she.

"Let us forget ourselves," declaimed Hilda Perry. "Let us drown out our agonies in the agony and frustrated aspirations of others."

She swept into the opening bars of a contemporary composer's "God Help Us All, If There Be A God."

"A queer engine this," thought Peter, "an agony to herself at times. I suppose she has—this is—what they call genius."

Helen sat curved in her chair, cheek on fist, listening. Even the rug on the floor on which her meditative gaze rested seemed to be changed by the playing, she thought, and then—"silly thought!" thought she. A dark rug does not become darker and more sombre with sombre music in the room. She looked up at Peter who sat erect, but with head a little forward, staring at Hilda Perry with an expression the significance of which his wife well knew. That was the look that came to him when he was in the position of what she called "the fly on the wall" in gatherings, and was wrapt in consideration of what was inside some person who talked. That was the expression with which, when he imagined himself not observed, he observed. Save that there was no malice in the keenness of his scrutiny it might have been described as like that of a lizard imitating a stone, gaze riveted at its prey drawing nigh, or as like that of a snake focusing on a bird. It made her laugh to herself. There's a way in which one can give a chuckle over a mannerism of those we love that is not laughing at them, but laughing with delight in them. That earnest, that intent, that searching scrutiny was what she also was wont to call to herself his X-ray look.

"He's studying her," thought she.

Hilda finished and turned from the piano.

"I must see your books," she said; "so as to get nearer to the man," she explained, rising, and stepped over to the shelves. "I've got to get to know you—for the article."

Her peregrinations along the book-lined wall brought her to a niche at the end where stood a small gilt clock.

"What!" she exclaimed. "That time! This clock has jumped, or did it stop this morning? No. It ticks! It lives! Does it lie?"

"No. That's the time. The night has flown," said Peter.

“When is the last train to town? It must be the last train now, not even the penultimate,” and she laughed.

“Last train has gone,” replied Peter. “I can run you in. There’s no hurry.”

Helen’s underlip was sucked in and she bit upon it. She looked across from one to the other. She did not want to lose Peter that night. She’d be desperately lonely if he left her for all that run into Edinburgh and back.

“I can give you a nice new suit of pyjamas,” she said, “with a lovely crease down the front of the trousers and the edges of the jacket, and you could stay the night.”

“You dear,” said Hilda. “I’ll stay.”

It was Helen who invited her to stay, and with no jog from Peter to do so. Make a prief of it in your note-book!

Hilda turned back to the shelves, drew forth a book here, a book there, dipping into them, handling them. Helen rose to attend her, educing a volume here, another there, to show her—special prized editions. Peter aided, bringing for inspection this and that autographed book.

“Well,” said Hilda Perry at last, “it has been a great night. I’m keeping you up. We must all go to bed.”

It needed no reference to a clock to know that the night was far spent, the ambient quiescence of the sleeping hills invading the room.

“I’ll come with you and show you your room,” said Helen.

Over her shoulder, lightly, Hilda tossed a smile to Peter.

“See you in the morning,” she said, easily.

In the corridor upstairs, Helen jabbed a pointing finger toward the bathroom door.

“You know that room already,” she said, “and there are fresh towels on the rack above the bath.”

She opened the door of the spare room and led the way into it.

“What a pretty little room,” said Hilda. “Is that a river I can hear?”

“No. That’s just the wind in the trees. Well, I’ll see you in the morning. I hope you sleep comfortably.”

She backed to the door. As she did so, Hilda levelled upon her a long inexplicable stare. It seemed uncanny. Then, abruptly, as on the urge of a

terrific impulse, Hilda stepped to her, flung an arm round her waist, and held her close a moment.

"I love you both," she said, releasing her, and turned away.

Helen smiled back at her, going out of the room. And why, she wondered, closing the door, did she feel revulsion to that embrace?

Below, Peter put away the books that had not been returned to their places in the shelves, seeing still that smile Hilda had tossed him on going upstairs. It seemed to imply that they were old friends though he had not met her twelve hours ago. The room tidied, he stepped out to see what was happening with the weather, and stayed out there some time with the sound of the wind in the trees in a wedge of darkness beyond the house and the million twinkling worlds overhead. And thoughts of Hilda Perry followed him there—tones of her voice, glances of eye lingering with him. She had excited him. When he came in again and closed the door and, turning out the light, mounted bedward, Hilda Perry had already had her bath.

"If you people are waiting for me to tub—I've tubbed," he heard her call gently.

"Oh, thank you," Helen answered quietly.

"Good-night again," said Hilda.

Peter entered their bedroom. Helen was sitting up in her cot massaging cold cream into her cheeks. She had a question to ask him when he sat down on the edge of his cot, and she nestled down in hers, but he spoke first.

"She's clever," said he. "She gives me a fillip."

"There seem to be several of her," remarked Helen.

"You noticed that?"

"Ab-solutely! One couldn't fail to. I seem to have seen six different Hilda Perrys to-night. How she does change from one to another. The whole expression changes. Even the colour of her eyes." And then came the question she wanted to ask: "I say, why did you deflect the talk every time I was about to tell her how you wanted to hang up that shawl in some story? She might have got an idea how to do it and passed it on to you."

"I don't quite know, dear. I just feel——" he hesitated. "I wanted a reservation, a reticence there. I can't tell exactly why. Sometimes one does act not by cold reason alone. I don't want to talk to her about the shawl notion. An impulse."

Helen, having sat up in her cot again to make that inquiry, elevated her brows and stared before her, bit her lip, and might have posed for a figure of wonder. She was deep in thought. Had Peter felt in their visitor something akin with what she had felt at that embrace—a warning? But she did not tell him of that, of how it affected her. Not always should every thought be spoken. And intensively to discuss one's guest—even were the discussion between a husband and wife—just after having entertained her, was not, somehow, pleasant. It gave one a sneaky feeling. She slapped down in bed again, tucked the sheets under her chin and bumped her head several times on the pillow to make it comfortable. It was time for sleep and an end to intensity. It had been an intense sort of an evening. Interesting that Peter had not wanted to talk over the shawl motif with Hilda Perry. She looked up at him.

"You do love me, Peter, don't you?" she asked.

"Don't be a silly ass," said he and, stooping, kissed her.

"Good-night. I'm glad she's bucked you up."

"Good-night."

CHAPTER V

Peter, as usual up betimes, had lit the kitchen-fire and was sweeping the sitting-room floor, his mind variously employed with the thought of Helen's head on her pillow as he had last seen it when drawing on his dressing-gown and slippering out of the room into which morning was creeping—with memory of that easy good-night tossed to him by Hilda Perry, implying much kinship between them—with consideration of a string of words that would convey the effect on one's heart of the early light beautifully and somewhat sadly seeping into the house, when he saw Nelly coming up from the road.

"All present and correct!" he greeted her, opening the tall French windows to give her entrance instead of going to the front door.

She beamed upon him in response to his gaiety.

"It's a rare morning," said she. Her cheeks were rosy with its tang.

"Lovely morning," he agreed.

"I heard Miss Perry playing before I went last night. I stopped a wee while to listen," she said. "She plays fine."

"She does; but my wife plays as well as that—and do you know, Nelly, she would not play after her!"

He folded his hands atop the handle of the sweeper and put a foot on its box to keep it from slipping away from him.

"Why not, sir?"

"Oh, she thought it would be a case of from the sublime to the ridiculous. Inferiority complex—that's what it is. She has spasms of it. It springs on her at times. It's maddening. And the damned thing is that if she had played then it would have been as if she was puzzling out a five-finger exercise."

"She plays beautiful, sir. She's ower humble, whiles."

"She is. It's absurd. Damn it, it's asking for trouble, bless her. Well, I must go up and tub and scrape. Carry on, Nelly. Take away this bauble!"

He tossed toward her the sweeper's handle which easily she caught, and went off in long strides, dressing-gown flapping round him.

Nelly had carried up the morning tea to Helen and their guest, and Helen was lurking in the corridor in her kimono, ready to dive into the bathroom as he made exit. When she came down he was pacing on the big flags before the sitting-room (that the house-agent had called The Terrace), breathing in the morning freshness, and his thoughts occupied with the haunting shawl—plus Hilda Perry. Why, he wondered, why, precisely, was he averse to discussing the shawl motif with her? Was it that he was, after all, that type of Scot who must be secretive about his plans till they are accomplished? There were people in Elwinfoot to whom that sort of thing was as a mania. They were absolutely clandestine. Funny thing, he considered, that these were so often the very ones who were always prying into the affairs of others, avid for the most minute and seemingly trivial detail. It had been said that he was not censorious, and that saying can stand though now he thanked God he was not as they were. But that was an aside. He returned: Helen had perhaps been right, he thought, when she said that Hilda Perry might be able to help with some suggestion.

It was then that his wife came down and out to him. They stood close a moment, his arm over her shoulder, her hip-bone pressed to his, her cheek against his sleeve, and then——

"I must go and help Nelly with breakfast," said she.

With a right-about turn she released herself from his hold. She looked up at the guest's bedroom—and there was Hilda at the window, in the act of fastening the buckle of her diminutive wrist-watch, but doing so by touch only, her gaze on them. There was that in her eyes, as she looked down so, that made Helen wonder for a moment if she had some secret malady. She seemed in pain. If it were not physical then she had, by that look, what is called a skeleton in her cupboard. But the expression instantly vanished.

"Good-morning, you love-birds!" she called.

"Good-morning," Helen called up to her, so that they chanted the greeting in duet.

Peter wheeled and looked up.

"Hullo!" he hailed. "Good-morning."

Helen danced away indoors and Hilda came slowly down and forth. She stood beside him where his wife had been standing. That faint scent was in his nostrils.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Beautifully. How quiet it is here. By the way, for my article, I've been thinking: some direct questions, please. Who is your favourite Scots writer?"

"Oh, why all this hankering to extol one boy in the class above the others?" he said. "It can't be done—because of the diversity of creatures, for one thing."

"I know," she said, "it can't be done yet it is being done all the time!"

"Of course one way out is to treat the question with a fine spirit of persiflage and tell you to say that your subject's favourite author, in prose or in verse, is McGonagall—Sir Topaz McGonagall—he whose autobiography begins with the words: 'I was born of poor but bibulous parents.' "

"Who was McGonagall, and what did he mean?" she cried out in delight.

"In answer to your first question—my favourite Scots author," he replied, "and in answer to your second, he explained the word himself to an anxious inquirer as meaning addicted to reading the Bible." He took a pace or two away from the thrill of her close presence and, pacing back, said he, his manner serious again: "There's a very fine Scots essayist and I don't give a hoot if he's called major or minor—he's big."

She looked in his eyes.

"Alexander Smith?" she asked, interrupting him.

It did not occur to him that he had twice mentioned Alexander Smith in his *Border Streams*. He took it for granted that Hilda Perry knew her Smith, and because of that knowledge and admiration had ventured to suggest his name as the one he had in mind.

"God, it's good to meet you!" he said, and looked delightedly at that face turned to him so radiantly, seemed to be examining it to memorise those little cheek-bones, those arched brows over the lambent eyes. "Too few people know Smith," he continued. "I think there is one of his essays that De Quincey would have been proud to have given us."

"*A Lark's Flight?*" she suggested. He had quoted from that in one of his essays.

"Oh, you dear!" he ejaculated, and before he knew what he was about he had put a hand to her shoulder and pressed it in joy.

What the leap in her eyes meant at that moment, who could tell? Astonishment? Triumph? Gratitude?

"Breakfast!" called Helen, swinging open the dining-room window.

Over breakfast, Helen asked Hilda if she could prolong her visit, have a forenoon tramp in the hills and not go back to Edinburgh till after lunch, but she thought she had better not, much though she would like to. She had a lot to do. She was going to make the Royal Stewart her headquarters till she got down, into articles, a vast bunch of notes.

"But if I could come and see you again I'd love to," she said. "In fact, I would like to bring out your article, when I get it done, for your personal censoring."

She made inquiries regarding trains to town. Helen glanced at her husband with a little elevation of brows. Peter, she realised, was being held from work without fret, and that's what was wanted. If only he could be held happily away a little longer from what she called "flogging a dead horse," have faith, lie fallow, he'd be working again the quicker, and satisfactorily. He'd swing back, seeing precisely how to treat the shawl motif—or, resolved to discard it, with another plot, theme, subject, clear in his restored mind.

Peter frowned at her, wondering what she would telegraph to him, not always alert to teamwork when there were only elevation of brows or small cryptic frowns to guide him.

"Peter will run you in," said Helen.

"Well—I don't want to take him away—— Perhaps you have to write?" she asked, turning to him.

"It would be all to the good for him to be taken away from thought of work," said Helen for him. "He keeps standing over the pot and waiting for it to boil. A watched kettle never boils, you know. Take him away and the kettle will be boiling when he comes back. You've no idea the good you are doing him."

"Then if it's like that, terrifically happily I'll rob him away from you," Hilda crooned.

As Peter went off to run the Midget out, she stood with Helen before the fire (there had to be a fire still, though it was June), one foot on the fender-rail, her head thrown back.

"I've got your home and atmosphere for the article now," she said.

Her gaze roved from one to another of the photographs standing on the mantel-shelf, one or two, autographed, of his fellow-writers, some, she surmised, of relatives.

"Peter has always admired your poems," said Helen.

"It has been wonderful for me to discover that," said Hilda. "I found I was very human when he spouted to me, on the way here, some of my own lines that he liked—and that I rather liked myself," she added, the frank, the candid, the very likeable Hilda Perry rising dominant then.

"Won't you let us have your photograph to add to that gallery?" said Helen. "It does him good on off-days to look at these when the people here he likes so much don't just suffice, despite all his liking for them, because they are not of his guild."

"How this woman dotes on him!" thought Hilda.

It seemed she had caught a little mannerism from her hostess, biting on her lip a moment and looking down at the twinkle of the fire, her eyes hidden by dropped lids—the Hilda Perry who could be tormented between benevolence and ruthlessness.

"Ready?" said Peter in the doorway.

At the parting the two women were just going to shake hands, it seemed. There was apparently to be no embrace from Hilda such as she had bestowed on Helen, last night, upstairs in the doorway of the spare room. They shook hands on the terrace, the strip of flags. Hilda tossed her head and that wild beast's pelt she wore on her shoulders fell into place just so. A wind going past roared in the stand of firs below, a melancholy sound, like the complaint of the sea on desolate beaches, heard far off.

Then Helen stepped toward Hilda and kissed her on the cheek. There was some interchange then—some feminine interchange. Some emotion inexplicably passed between them without speech. But why, having done that, did she do it, Helen wondered? Had she taken great liking to this clever visitor? Assuredly it was no Judas kiss. In some sort of response, Hilda pressed her arm and glided into the Midget, the door of which stood open.

Peter caught his wife's shoulders, trig shoulders that fitted into his cupped hands, and a light of love for him, and her thought for him, overwhelmed the trouble in her eyes.

"Take care of yourself," said he.

The little car whirled away and Helen went back into the house to help Nelly Ray, who expressed the opinion that their visitor was "extraordinarily attractive," had what she called "a magnetic personality." She wouldn't just

say she was pretty, she announced, prattling on. She was different from pretty. And then she repeated Peter's speech of annoyance of the morning.

"He says, 'Damn it,' he says, 'she's asking for trouble with her inferiority context. My wife can play as beautiful as her,' he says, 'damn it,' he says."

"Oh, I can't do that," said Helen, laughing.

"Well, so long as he thinks you can," said Nelly, out of her philosophy of connubial bliss, and without giving her vote one way or the other, "that's the main thing; that's all that matters."

CHAPTER VI

The road flickered under the car like a slow brook, and Hilda was pleased. Peter Cunningham, by the evidence, was not anxious to deposit her speedily at her destination.

She thought of his wife and that embrace at parting, and what had subtly entered her consciousness then. Helen had pled with her, pled with her in a kiss: thus she translated it. And she was aware by this and the other signal that she had not failed of some disturbing effect on Peter. And—for a deeper plunge into her thoughts—she was here because something had happened to her that might loosely be described as falling in love with him before sight.

This that came to her she had not laughed away. She had brooded upon it, harrowingly serious. She had told herself she was an exceptional woman (as no doubt she was), that she could not live according to the tame codes that the average accepted. She wanted something of the writer of *Border Streams* and *A Scots Shepherd*. She must have it. She must see him. His photograph in a literary journal when his novel, that Harcourt Stead had pled for, appeared added to her strange secret love or passion, her malady. What she wanted she must have. Walking down Kingsway one day, distressed by this trouble, she had seen a little flapper (with a foolish face as of one mentally deficient) steal a glance round and then, believing herself unobserved, lunge forward to kiss the portrait of her matinée idol hanging in a theatre-portico. The observing of that had not cured Hilda with any application to her own case, and she thirty-three instead of sixteen. And here she was now, thus far, sitting close to Peter Cunningham on a mission other than to procure material for an article—she and that flapper of Kingsway, in the eyes of any conceivable Observer upon Olympus, not, after all, very far apart.

"You know a tremendous lot," he said.

"In what way do you mean?" she asked with a start, drawn from her reverie.

"In many ways. I gather by asides that you don't have to wait for a translation to read in German or French or Italian. I gather that your Latin is not but tags. I can read in French, and fumble in Italian if I have a dictionary by me. My Greek——"

"Is like Shakespeare's?" she said.

He laughed.

"I do not only my Greek but my Latin in Loeb and Bohn," he confessed.

"Oh, well. You may get as much, through the agency of these, as many who go direct, perhaps more. I heard the last Greek play at Cambridge, and I have a strong suspicion that it would be, well, Greek to Euripides!"

Truly, thought he, she is erudite! And then she blundered.

"I hope," she said, "that your remarks about yourself don't mean that you—like your wife—have an inferiority complex?"

He did not relish the reference to Helen. He hoped it was spoken as he would have spoken it—tenderly.

"I think we can do without terms out of Vienna," he said. "Let's call it a sense of proportion. I have just learnt enough to know that I am ignorant."

"And one meets heaps of people so ignorant that they think they know all," she pursued him, aware that he had not liked her earlier remark, though there had not been so much as the flash of an eye to inform her. Perhaps his voice was a shade harder and his enunciation a degree slower.

He warmed to her at that, his enthusiasm renewed. She understood a great deal. To meet her when he was in the state in which all that remained was need of a few straws to put in his hair was almost too much. He held the wheel with one hand, casually to all appearance, held it by the upper edge, his arm across it, and with his free hand caught her elbow, pressed it. She but looked sidewise at him and smiled. She seemed to understand, yet——

"I had to do that," he explained. "I had to assure myself that you were here, and real, and that it is not a pleasant dream."

"As Wordsworth used to touch things, to be sure he was not a disembodied ghost—or they airy nothings," she said.

"That's that," said he, and the plucking hand that had sought for certainty went back to the wheel. "Anyhow, I know you are corporeal; I have now held a moment, for evidence, the actual what-you-may-call-it bone of the woman who wrote——" and once again he quoted some phrases of hers that had remained in his mind by their music.

Hilda was more than content that he should suffer no inhibition, imagined prohibition, interdiction of his wish to make sure of her actuality in that way.

“Well,” she said, swimming back to the springboard; “let’s call it sense of proportion. But, my dear man, you don’t know how some of your things move me. I’d like to get inside your head instead of just your house—or merely pluck your elbow for assurance. Inchoate thoughts in my mind cohere and get congruity when I read some lines of yours, the way a certain sort of arc-lamps sizzle and light up when the current is put on. I’d like to make a welding of our minds,” and if he had been looking at her instead of at the road he would have seen a fiery glint in her eyes then. She was being very daring.

“A collaboration! Oh, no!” he said. “You are away ahead of me. Time will show it. And you can call that inferiority complex if you like, but to do so will only prove that you suffer from it.”

“It is not collaboration I meant,” she replied. “Don’t take me so literally. I wish I could produce what I dream.”

“How old are you?” he asked.

Taken by surprise, this seemed to her the sort of question a man should not ask a woman; for this bright creature, though proud that she was not dated—that is to say that she was nineteen-thirtyish—was in many ways much like the New Woman of the eighteen-nineties and the Old Woman of the eighteen-eighties. But to show him that nothing could shock her she answered as promptly as she could; and, answering thus promptly, answered truly.

“Thirty-three,” she said.

“Ah, then you are younger than I,” he pointed out. “By the time you are my age you’ll have produced——”

“I may have burned myself up by then,” she interrupted with passionate solemnity.

His fun, that would persist in bobbing up, bobbed up then.

“You’ll only have two years to do it in, then,” he said.

But she was too serious for fun. She could be painfully serious. She but continued:

“I feel so terrifically, as well as think. And what I feel I wreck myself trying to get down. Oh, don’t talk! Just let us glide along quiet for a mile.”

But it was she who broke the silence within a hundred yards, looking at the scene on either hand.

“You are not going back the same way,” she remarked.

“Did you want specially to go back the same way?” he asked.

“I wanted to live again with that twist of river and the heron. Never mind! The heron will be flown; and it will be other water going past.”

“I have a notion of taking you to see the hill above Bonaly,” said he. “Our talk about Alexander Smith gave me the idea.”

“What is the link?” she asked.

“Delving into the records of Smith some time ago,” he said, “I read about a Saturday afternoon tramp he had taken with some men to that hill—the hill above Bonaly. One of them reported a remark he made about a birch-wood there, and it struck me as familiar. Smith must have thought it good himself for he put it into a poem later.”

“And the remark?”

“It sounds a little extreme to me, I must admit, Smith idolater though I am. Helen and I planned making a pilgrimage there one day, in the right season of the year, to see if it was—or wasn’t—extreme, and for the sentiment too.”

“I really must blue-pencil and sub-edit you,” said Hilda. “For God’s sake, get to your muttons before I scream. Let me have the sentence.” She was jealous, furiously jealous of Helen going on a sentimental pilgrimage with him.

“Well, it was something to the effect of: ‘Look at these birch trees between us and the sky. Don’t they look as if they would drip purple wine on us?’ ”

“Perhaps seeing will be believing,” she suggested.

“Shall we go and see them, then?”

“I’d adore to!”

She sat closer to him and then, turning her head, looked down between them, raising an elbow.

“Lost something?” he asked.

“No. But there’s something sharp in your pocket and it jabbed me! Why, it’s the corner of a book.”

"I have a volume of Smith with me," he explained, and withdrawing it, put it behind him. "Just grabbed it when I was leaving."

"You intended to take me on this pilgrimage before you left home," she stated. It did not seem a question.

"Yes," and he accelerated so that the road ran under like a scurrying grey river.

She thought then that he, too, could plan, look ahead, and had the courage of his impulses. That knowledge created a new commotion about her heart. She, too, had her plan, here at the urge of a turbulent impulse, one predating this relatively calm one of his by—she was not sure how long. His might be looked upon as but born of a normal desire to entertain a visitor in a way she had shown she might care to be entertained.

A strange troubling creature, troubling to herself, disquieting to others on occasion, was Hilda Perry. As a little girl, thwarted, she would stamp and scream till she had what she cried "I want!" over—or till the police came to discover if there was a case of cruelty to children to be reported. Woman grown, she was thrilled—with a thrill possibly questionable she knew—when she first came upon Napoleon's "France, and my Destiny, demand it." The ruthlessness of that moved her. The anti-inhibition theory she drew from the psycho-analysts excited her. There were other tendencies during these post-war years, at least in coteries she touched, if not generally accepted, that she pondered: The gospel of a good callousness and to the devil with sentimentality, for example—a gospel more fitted for those who had had none too hard a time than for those who had had a grim struggle. For though some there may be who are made arid of heart by arid struggle, its effect is often (perhaps more frequently) toward the creation of a capacity to be stoic for one's self yet sympathetic towards others in their battle. There was that in Hilda Perry (evidence of it could be found in her work, despite its beauty, and even in its passages of ardent feeling in which a heart, in the wonted sense, showed) which might cause her, catching hold of the current idea of non-sentimentality, to use it lopsidedly as one who, voicing the need for ruthlessness, really means not ruthlessness towards himself but ruthlessness to others.

"Here's Colinton beginning," said Peter. "We take a turn to right and one more twist and we're there."

They had a glimpse, through an iron gate, of a weather-stained turret and ivy gleaming green on old dark stones; and a little way farther on he stopped

the car beside a high wall over which branches drooped, a field-gate before them.

There they alighted and he led her on to the base of a hill that had only a low flounce of trees. Beyond their midmost branches were glimpses of hill-crest, humps of heather and grass against a dun and forbidding cloud.

"There used to be no fences on either side here when I was a boy," he said, as they passed beyond the rustling of the leaves to the slopes. "There was just the streak of the right-of-way twisting up into the saddle, but——"

"I hate fences," she interjected.

"——one can't blame the land-owners for putting up the fences," he continued. "It is not as if they had tried to block out the ancient track. People were not content with the freedom of the right-of-way. They had to wander over the hills. They thought liberty meant unlimited license."

She halted. She frowned. She looked up the long slope with an expression in her eyes as though the summit of that "hill above Bonaly" seemed as high as Everest to her.

"How far have we to climb to see the birches of this sentimental pilgrimage?" she asked.

He did not answer at once. He was lost in contemplation of the scene—a thin vapour like steam rising to the sun; the colours of a stream that whirled down, dropping from pool to pool, tossing spatterings of spray that kept overhanging fronds of bracken bowing and bowing to it. Suddenly he realised she had spoken.

"I don't know," he replied. "We'll just have to climb and keep looking for them."

She thought: "Men are just like children!" The expedition seemed absurd. The scene, described in words, might please her no doubt—art, in these matters, much more to her than nature—but in actuality the hill was damp and he seemed, at that moment, to be infinitely more in love with it than even so much as aware of her.

They came to a hummock of the general rise and there he paused, turned about. Edinburgh, in the distant carse, was as a coloured print seen through tissue paper. A spire punctured it here and there. There were gleaming spots, sunlight on glass cupolas. The university dome was like a bubble adrift in the mist. He was deflected from his search for a birch-tree, or birch-trees,

with or without the purple effect. He was more engrossed in the view of "Auld Reekie" than in being here with Hilda Perry.

"I see no purple tree," said she, as with the levity of a crass Philistine; and in her mind, derisively, was a rhyme she knew about a purple cow.

Then suddenly the ominous cloud that had been trailing along the crests began to spatter them with rain, great gleaming drops that came every second more swiftly.

"Back to the car!" he exclaimed. "You'll be drenched."

He caught her arm and they ploughed downhill. She slid and he supported her. She laughed like a romping schoolgirl.

"What a girl she is," thought he.

They ran on, with the momentum from the descent, across the plashy level at the hill's base. He dropped behind to close the gate, and when he slipped into the Midget beside her she had dried her hands and was putting a cigarette into a long bamboo holder.

"I brought one for a souvenir," said she, and smiled into his eyes as he held a match for her.

"Don't close the windows," she begged. "We're dry here and I love listening to the rain."

The remark counteracted for him any feeling of doubt he may have had in her appreciation of what for him was always adorable—rolling hills and tumbling streams swirling colours in rock crannies and making bracken fronds bow and bow with the patterings of spray. The smoke swerved to the window and there hurried out, the rain beating it down.

"What a queer thing," she said, "is the sense of sanctuary. I love broad eaves. Swallows' nests under broad eaves always make me envious. It must be wonderful to poke one's head out of a nest and see Niagara pouring off the roof and all comfy and secluded."

"Yes, very fascinating," he said, "listening to the rain." He stretched back. "It's good to relax instead of fretting and fretting and fuming round trying to get something to put one's self out on and not finding it."

"Speaking personally?" she asked. "Are you in that state? Yes, of course you are—you're looking for a theme to relieve your creative gifts on and can't find one. Poor man! Perhaps you are looking in the wrong direction."

Perhaps he was, thought he. Helen had made a similar suggestion. Perhaps he should let the Paisley shawl motif go.

"Queer thing sex," said she. "The sex urge—queer thing. One deflects it to many uses. I sometimes think it is at the back of almost all we do. We build power plants on the brink and dam it and harness it, and——" she flicked ash off her cigarette through the window.

Peter turned and looked at her, and was immediately overwhelmed by a sense of her close physical personality. The sudden hot disturbance scared him. He had a feeling comparable with that of a swimmer suddenly caught in the pull of a whirlpool-current, but not with that swimmer's fear only. There was an abandon, an ecstasy. Meeting his, her eyes did not waver. In another moment he'd be in the whirlpool. She stretched her arm forth and back as though the sleeve on her wrist irked her and in the motion touched him lightly. There was a blindness in his eyes, looking into hers, and then with an effort he deflected his gaze. He looked to left and right of the car. The downpour had stopped. The sound outside was but of dripping trees. The dun cloud was gone. There were great spaces of vivid blue, above high white clouds like whipped cream towering overhead.

"Shall we look for the birch-trees now?" he suggested. "They certainly will be dripping!" he added, and his voice sounded to him as not his.

He stepped out of the car but she made no effort to follow him.

"I don't like turning back," said she. "We went to look for our purple tree, and now"—she spoke plaintively—"I'd rather remember slithering down that hill atilt to you than climb again and perhaps be disappointed."

"*Très bien!*" he replied with a little bow of acquiescence.

But as for himself, it appeared, he was going to see. He strolled back to the field-gate, opened it, passed on across the sward beyond. This time, climbing upward alone, his eyes roving the scene, he found the trees. Yes, there no doubt was the birch-clump Smith had seen in other light, perhaps in a late afternoon of a summer day when dusk, creeping under them, gave the effect he noted. But he had not written "purple tree." A shred of annoyance at Hilda Perry over that (twice she had said it) helped him to feel glad that he had not given way to his impulse to take her impetuously in his arms—whatever the result of such an action might have been. He looked at the trees, slenderly poised, their branches swaying like maidenhair fern and dripping gold after that deluge.

He walked slowly on up the hill, picked a leaf from a drooping bough and returned, holding the stem between thumb and forefinger, twirling it to and fro. He came back leisurely, for the commotion of his heart to be stilled. He stretched a hand into the car and taking up the volume he had brought with him dropped the leaf into it at the title page and clapped it shut, to press it, Hilda, without comment, watching him.

"We'd better be getting on, I think," he said. "My wife will wonder what's keeping me."

"I love sitting here," she answered.

"It's a delightful nook," he agreed lightly, casually.

Getting into the car he started it and in two movements had it turned. He drove at high speed now, and there was little talk, only an occasional comment on the scene.

"You can spin along when you want to," she remarked.

They came to the suburban villas, to the streets with their traffic. When they reached Princes Street rain was falling again. People who had been in the gardens were hurrying across to cluster in doorways. The rain-drops leapt an inch from the pavements in silver splashes. Peter drew up at the edge of the pavement before her hotel and stepped out, holding the door open for her. Laughing, she curved to alight, as though unaccustomed to extricating her length from such a sprat of a car, extending a long silken leg, fumbling with a toe for footing, wriggling out into the downpour; and an attendant darted across the pavement, opening an umbrella.

"Well, good-bye," said Peter.

"Oh! Oh, you're not—won't you come in? It will soon be lunch-time."

"Thank you, I'd love to, but I must get back," he replied.

He thought they must look the most awful fools, he hunched there to the rain, and to evade being prodded on the head by the umbrella, the attendant trying to hold it over both, she looking horrified as at some calamity and saying, "Oh—oh—you're not—oh, do stay to lunch——!"

"Let's get into the porch, anyhow," he suggested.

In the porch the porter, free of what always did seem indeed to him rather an embarrassing task and somewhat menial (as he were a flunkey of an Indian sahib, a low-caste punkah-wallah, a duster-away of flies with a

feather broom from the brows of napping potentates in turbans), left them, with a salaam.

“Now will you stay and have lunch?” she begged, having got him thus far.

“It’s awfully sweet of you, but my wife——”

She pouted. She frowned.

“Oh, well, I’ve something for you to take back to her,” she said. “You’ve just got to wait for that. I promised to let her have it. You’d better come up with me.”

“I’ll just wait here,” he said. “See where I’ve left the car, bang in front of the door. I think it’s ag’in the law, and certainly ag’in the conventions.”

“Damn both the law and conventions!” she exclaimed.

Then with a laugh, without further argument, she ran away, and returned quite another Hilda, tip-tapping over the tiles, seeing no one on either hand, seen by all—a lady of poise and control and not *difficult* now. She carried a large envelope.

“There!” said she. “I promised that to your wife. Would you like me to phone her and tell her you’re homeward bound now?”

“Better not. I might have a puncture, or something, on the way and she’d worry then. As it is, she’ll expect me any time.”

“All right. Bye-bye!” She gave him a little wave of dismissal, as she were lightly finished with him, and sped away.

CHAPTER VII

When, with dancing steps, Helen ran to the garage door for Peter's embrace of reunion, he was glad that he had vetoed the impulse of that dizzy moment in the car, by Bonaly.

"Here's something for you," said he and gave her the photograph, which was less of the composite Hilda Perry, said Helen, drawing it from the envelope and studying it as they passed to the house, than of a girlish, somewhat pensive Hilda.

"I began to wonder," she went on, entering the hall with him, "if something had detained you and you would lunch in town. But I knew you would phone in that case."

She moved on toward the kitchen and he, going upstairs three steps to a stride, marched along the corridor and into the bathroom to wash. The ablution done, he passed into his writing-room, before descending, to return the volume of Smith's essays to its place. And lo—there on the shelf above his table was the photograph he had brought home. Helen must have come up and set it there while he was washing. It startled him.

He descended slowly, with furrowed brows, as one who has been propounded a conundrum. Helen was trotting from the kitchen to the dining-room with a laden tray and, following her, he inquired:

"Why didn't you put that photograph with the others downstairs, in the living-room mantel-piece gallery?"

Why indeed! Could she have told herself precisely why? There are often two reasons for an action; there are, in fact, sometimes many. She offered one explanation, and it, genuinely, the topmost one.

"I thought it might help a bit with the inspiration," she said, taking the dishes from the tray and setting them in place, "remind you that your work is admired."

She did not treat his inquiry as more than a trifling one. It was answered —and dismissed. She sat down.

"Did you run her into town the same way that you brought her out?" she asked.

"No," Peter replied, seating himself.

"You took her to see the hill above Bonaly," said Helen passing him a plate.

He stared at her with somewhat the same look of inquiry that he had launched at the photograph over his desk.

"You witch of a guesser!" he exclaimed. "Who told you? Have you suddenly developed the mind-reading gift of Rebecca West's Harriet Hume? Good God, can you read my thoughts?" and he laughed.

She heard a note in that laugh of something besides gaiety—even as he at times could tell when her gaiety was assumed instead of exuberant. For when Helen was hurt there were signs—albeit unwitting signs to her—for those who happened to know her well. When she was hurt she did not pout, for to sulk was a sin to her. She donned radiance, a lightsomeness of manner, and only those who knew her well might wonder what it hid, recognising it as a super-lightsomeness, a makeshift, a pinchbeck gaiety.

"I noticed," said she, laughing in her turn, "that you had taken away a volume of Smith's essays with you, the one in the preface to which there is mention of the hill above Bonaly. I saw the gap when I was sweeping and dusting upstairs. Nothing sibylline here! You had the idea to go there before you left," she added.

"Yes, I had." (And in his voice there was an accent that she might have heard had she been one of those hyper-sensitive to intonations, that she might have realised as inferring an unspoken addition of, "And why shouldn't I?") "When you and she were talking here as I got the car ready I just thought I'd run her in with a detour to Bonaly and look for those birches—seeing that she knows Smith's work." He paused. "You should be a detective. You noticed her letter from Dundee had the Edinburgh post-mark and now—Smith out of place, a clue! Enough! You tracked us down!"

Her eyebrows rose slightly. Even one with so little propensity as she to find acerbity in an intonation could not fail to note that he was not being jocund. He was as one annoyed. It was almost as if they were but acquaintances and he thought her as inquisitive, as prying into his affairs. But he could not mean his remark that way, not as it sounded!

"Did one very sudden storm plump down on you at Bonaly or was it only local here?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, it poured," said he. And then—"I'm not quite sure of her."

"In what way?" said Helen.

His appearance of annoyance with her, thought Helen, might be due to something that had irritated him in his expedition with Hilda, though it was not like him to be snappy to the wrong person!

"I don't know," he answered. "I think she plays up a bit. She did not seem to give a damn whether we found Smith's birches or not when we got there. But of course it is embarrassing sometimes to make pilgrimages. All one can say is, 'Well, here we are,' and go away again. And she had on shoes with stilts of heels. Perhaps they made her lukewarm about the search. The hill is steep. The rain came on while we were climbing the hill from the car and I had to—she had to dash back. I left her in the car and returned to look for them myself."

"You did! And got drenched! Just like you, Peter."

"No. I waited in the car till the rain took off before I went back."

"You won't think me a silly goose," she said, "but I am sort of glad that after all you found that birch copse alone. That was to have been one of our pilgrimages. When it came to me that you were off with some one else to see it—oh, Peter, I am such a fool! I've been a perfect idiot this morning! That was to have been a day off for us and now, after all, you've done it alone really, and some day you'll take me to see it, having spotted it. I don't think I'm jealous. It was only that we planned it, and I do love sharing everything with you."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," said he, and wagged his head at her to enforce the telling. "She wanted me to stay to lunch at the Royal Stewart, and I said no, you'd be worrying."

"That was nice of her."

What he had tried to convey to Helen was evidence of his thought for her, rather than of Miss Perry's hospitality! And he frowned slightly.

"Yes," said he. "And she asked, when I said I could not, that I'd have to get back, if she should phone you and tell you I'd started. I begged her not to in case I got a puncture or something on the way, and then you would worry indeed."

Helen was again puzzled by his voice, and his manner too. The combination conveyed, beyond peradventure, an effect as of one putting up a defence. And she could not think what for.

"I'll just go and see if the coffee is perking," she said, and rose.

"I'll go," he said, but she ran off. On her return, as soon as she was seated, said he: "I do wish you had played last night. This humility of yours that overcomes you at times is really a dangerous thing."

"Dangerous?" she repeated. "How can it be dangerous, granted I am humble?"

"I don't know how, but I feel it is. If ever we have any children I'm going to train them up to imagine that all they do is IT. They may be laughed at for it by some; people may call them conceited, but they'll not make the same mess of things with a superiority complex than can be made with an inferiority."

"It's not inferiority complex," she contradicted, replying to him as he had replied to Hilda Perry when she charged him with the same fault—if fault it be. "It's knowledge. It's sense of proportion. It's freedom from superiority complex. I can't touch her. I could not throw discords on the air after such playing as hers. Nelly told me," she went on, "how annoyed you were about it. She shares your view. She thinks no one can play like me. It is very flattering but does not change the facts."

Yet, after lunch, when he was in his workshop (which might as well, thought he, for all the work he did there these days, be called his rest-room), there came such music from below that he had, when it ceased, to go down.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I made it up," said Helen sitting as one tranced before the piano.

"It is very beautiful," he said. "But as music does not convey one thing only, isn't definite like a time-table, says different things to different people, I must ask you: What did you mean to convey?"

"What did it convey to you?" she inquired, instead of answering his question.

"Oh, everything—everything. Just life, and death, and the hope, if there be a hereafter, of one in which we can gather up the 'sweeter moments of our broken dreams.' It conveyed a lot to me. That's why I had to come down and ask what it was." Suddenly his mood changed. "And you say you can't play!" he ejaculated.

She did not reply with the defence that came to her lips: "I only said I could not play like Hilda Perry." That would have been captious. The indignation in his voice was but evidence of his admiration for her. That was the tone in which he snorted remarks about those (afore-mentioned) who

had to be informative at all costs and inform her, with great air of superior wisdom, of what she knew while she wore the air of one happily acquiring knowledge. Yes, she knew Peter pretty well, she thought; and she loved him, and she admired him—and something he had not told her about had upset him to-day, perhaps only an insolent passing remark of a motorist who wanted all the road!

"It's lovely," he said. "You should write it down, or at least memorise these things you compose when you are in the mood."

"I had a feeling," she explained, "of everything being so mysterious—whelmed about by unknown powers."

His eyes suddenly felt as though tears were behind them, so deeply she moved him sitting there with a rapt expression in her hazel eyes. Here was something far beyond passion. Here was no urge to a hot embrace, but a deep tenderness of love. Here were the thoughts too deep for tears.

He went upstairs again and sat there examining his tentative notes that were by way of making straight the path for a new novel, a sort of equivalent, in his profession, to the inquiries that advance engineers make into mountain gashes, prying for a way through. But between him and these notes came the face of Hilda Perry turned to him in the car, her eyes unblinking to his gaze. He drew a quivering breath.

"Queer thing, sex," he said to himself.

But what held him from concentration on his notes was the insistence of a question—as though made by the Devil—the question being this: why did he not follow the impulse of that moment? Why thwart such impulses? They came, as well as other impulses, very urgent.

"Well, damn it all," said he, arguing this and that with himself, "when it comes to that we have also the impulse to object to the impulse!"

He thought of a certain lady of Elwinfoot, prone to psychic—or pseudo-psychic—research. "People," she would say with regret, with grief in her voice, "will bring their reason, their intellect, to bear." His trouble, in this matter that prevented concentration on his work, was not only that he brought his intellect to bear. An emotion had wrestled with an emotion in him, in that car beside the dripping trees, and one of these had won. Why now, though intellect gave the casting vote in favour of the winning emotion, should he not be able to dismiss the memory of that incident? Why could he not prevent her eyes from holding him again in memory? Why

should he still be disquieted, distraught, by the pull of that whirlpool's current? Impossible to work at anything! He passed downstairs again.

He'd go out for a tramp on the hills, look in at the cottage of Tod Jamieson, his shepherd friend. Sometimes Helen accompanied him on such tramps, sometimes he went alone. She had learnt to know by his manner, when he hovered in the hall and took up his stick, and took down his hat, whether he wanted her or but the Muse as it were. Clearly that afternoon he wanted, at any rate, to be alone. It seemed to Helen that the visit of Hilda Perry had been only as a palliative, not a cure. He was getting back to the state for straws in his hair. Whatever work he had been employed on upstairs had not pleased him.

He returned just before dinner and helped in the laying of the table, but as with a divided mind, one half elsewhere. Dinner over, he rolled up his sleeves and washed the dishes but might have been handing them to her across a mile of space—with elastic arm. Was it, she wondered, the Paisley shawl? Or had that been discarded?

The sun was going down like a gold coin in the slot beyond Elwin Hills. It was still warm before the house. The low bassoon note of bees was in the flowers that bordered the lawn. And now, when he walked out to the terrace and she heard the creak of a chair there, it became a certainty to Helen that he surely had some other troubles on him than those of his profession, which has trouble enough in itself in that one follows it because it seems he can do naught else without a feeling of running contrary to the will of God, and yet, despite his fealty, is not served with inspiration all the while, has to wait for the spark from heaven to fall.

It is possible that too much may have, relatively, been reported of comments on Hilda Perry's composite nature, as though she alone of all humanity had infinite variety. The point of such comments, however, was that she seemed less a variable creature to Helen and Peter than a vessel variously inhabited, not only her expressions changing to the moment's mood, but the very contours of her face. She left the impression, when she went, that they had actually met in her several distinct persons, not but one who was many-sided. To Helen also there was more than one side, but the effect she gave was of a whole as near to harmonious as can be hoped for in this world. Once or twice during this day she had wondered if there was something worrying Peter more than the technical difficulties of his exacting job. Money? Well, he had received a cheque that at least must have lightened financial worry, and others would arrive—for, of a certainty, not all the articles that were a long time on offer to editors would be returned

with a letter of regret, or with the more formal printed form that she called "the crocodile's tear." She had, on more than one occasion had evidence, that could be taken in any court as such, of their telepathic contacts. She did not know how to accomplish them. There were no little handles in front of a polished box to twist this way and that, bringing first a crackling noise as of a cricket and then a definite voice. Telepathy just happened, now and then.

All the while that Peter had been out this afternoon, Helen had felt a desire to go up to his workroom and see if the volume of Smith's essays had been put back in place, if he had brought that little volume home. But why? Because she wondered if he had given it to Hilda as a souvenir of their visit to the hill above Bonaly. Halfway up the stairs to settle the matter at last it had seemed that it would be like prying upon him to do so, and she had turned back. But now she followed him on to the terrace. The upper part of the house behind them was all aglow, the lower in shadow that was only shadow by comparison, luminous, fronting a proud sunset. She sat down beside him and—that there might be no secrecy between them—asked him easily, lightly, frankly, all above-board:

"Did you give her the copy of the essays you took with you as a souvenir of your day?"

"Give who?" he inquired, humbugging. It was of Hilda he had been thinking at that moment. Then—"No!" he snapped, yes—snapped. He pulled out his pipe and tobacco-pouch.

"What have I said to annoy you?" she asked.

"Said? Nothing. What the devil's the matter with you, Helen?"

She slipped her hand under his forearm and held it close, but she did not tell him what ailed her. When she opened the window to announce breakfast that morning, she had seen the swift, impulsive pressure of his hand on their guest's shoulder. And his manner, since his return, whenever Hilda Perry was mentioned brought it back again to her mind. At the time it had seemed nothing of consequence, just an example of Peter's demonstrative un-Scotsman-like way. Now she could not exorcise it. Memory of it had haunted her increasingly since his return.

"God knows," she told herself, "I don't want to be jealous. I want him to be happy. Hilda Perry—or one of her—is much after his heart, with his interests. She understands the sounds he makes when he opens his mouth. She can give the correct answers. These last days he has been in the throes of parturition. A woman in that state, if she craves for tomatoes or plovers'

eggs, or any queer exotic out-of-season thing, has to be placated if possible. And I must say that recently he's had a lot of little village-gossip, too small for use, so small as to be atrophying, and only his books and my music and his hills and burns to atone. Why! Hilda Perry may have come as an answer to prayer."

"A penny for your thoughts," he said.

She did not reply, "Making defences for you—for us both." She thought quickly. She changed her thoughts, kept these a secret from him, and answered: "I was thinking of a title for that thing I made up this afternoon that you liked."

"What is it?"

" 'Happy End.' "

"It seemed to me rather sad," he said, "like life, sad and happy blent. The end was not as triumphant as I'd have hoped."

"Well, it was at least a hopeful end," she replied, "and sometimes, somehow, I feel as if that's all we can do—have hopeful ends. Oh, dear, I'm so depressed!"

"It's perhaps because of that too splendid sky, that sunset," he declared.

"I've been that way all day," she admitted, "ever since you went away—and when you were out for your tramp again."

Then he knew that her gaiety on his return had been of the pinchbeck sort. And also he wondered if, unaware, there had been telepathic cause for her melancholy. Not but what sometimes people give to telepathy the credit that should be given to deduction, conscious or unconscious.

"I am looking forward to seeing what Hilda Perry will write for *Woman To-Day* about you," she said.

He felt enraged at mention of Hilda again. She was at the back of his mind—her voice, her lithe movements, her presence—but she was being talked of too much. Her photograph had been put on his desk. He had been tracked, by deduction, to Bonaly, asked if he had been there before he had a chance to tell of going there. It was as if Helen mauled about his thoughts of Hilda.

When the chill of the day's end sent them in from the terrace he passed up to his study for the photograph and, descending with it, set it up on the

mantel-piece in the sitting-room. Helen, curved to a book before the fire, looked over her shoulder.

“I thought,” she said, “by the subdued, meditative way you went upstairs you had stolen off to note something that you had thought of out there. I thought perhaps your day off with Hilda Perry——”

“For God’s sake, enough of Hilda Perry!” he exclaimed. And then—“Forgive me, dear.”

“You’ve put her photograph up here!” said she and with no look of either anger or pain at his explosion, for had he not asked forgiveness in the same breath?

“Yes. It was for you. She sent it to you. I don’t want it up in my workshop.”

At that, Helen thought there must have been something said by Hilda Perry during the drive that had annoyed him. Perhaps she had derided one of his gods. But she did not ask if anything had been said to exasperate him. By the evidence now, Helen decided, Hilda must surely have done so. It was too bad, especially when she had hoped that the visit would be as good as a change to him and set him happily to work, seeing that in work was his deepest joy. Perhaps later he would tell her just what Hilda had done to irritate him so.

CHAPTER VIII

By the morning post came a request for a certain sort of article from a certain sort of magazine, part of the policy of which was to offer to its readers a paper in each issue by some one socially, in politics, or in the arts, at least momentarily prominent. (Perhaps, thought Peter, aware of that policy, *Heather Afire* has done this.) The prominence, at least momentary, of the writers of the solicited contributions was, however, only one detail of that policy. As the editor stated in his letter, the article would have to be—his secretary using the force of emphasis on her typewriter—*of wide interest*. For example, he had recently published one entitled *Why I Refuse Proposals of Marriage* by Winnifreth Noble, the well-known social worker, which was in the nature of a counterblast, or a least a pendant, to another called *My Wife Has Made Me What I Am* by Jacob Johnson, M.P.; also *Why I am an Atheist* by Madame Ganges and *I Believe in God* by Canon Calvin had recently been more serious yet widely interesting subjects "featured."

"Featured!" thought Peter, and visualised the pages of the magazine. The titles could be long because they were splashed across two pages, and the features of their authors loomed out in a way that suggested close-ups on the silver screen.

To Peter an article was suggested on the question *Can A Man Be In Love With Two Women At Once?*

"What the devil!" muttered Peter, and felt a stab as of guilt. It was as though some one made a jeering remark and added: "If the cap fits, wear it!"

He handed the letter to Helen and, staring out of the window, played a tattoo on the chair arms. She read it through.

"Can a man be in love with two women at once?" quoth she.

"Ab-solutely!" he whooped, gaily.

"Oh, Peter!"

"A man can be in love with a whole bevy of them," he declared.

"Well, there's safety in numbers," she agreed with a laugh.

Peter pored over an additional sheet of paper enclosed with the letter. It was to give further indication of the sort of thing the editor wanted, believing that his public wanted, and that he had procured or was about to

procure. Professor Earnest, the Egyptologist, back from his last excavating expedition, had already written on *When Mummies Were Lovers*; Milton Moore, who had made some sort of sensation with an epic poem (Peter had a copy of it on his shelves) was considering *Why Poets Wear Long Hair*.

Peter sighed over that sheet of further exemplifications.

“To save the price of a hair-cut,” he murmured. “Though as a matter of fact most of them don’t nowadays. And he craves pardon, does poor Hard-up Milton Moore, on his knees craves pardon, of the Muse that he has to write the article. Perhaps he’ll turn it down in the end. Every man has his price?” he inquired. “I ha’e ma doots!”

That accompanying sheet he also handed to Helen.

“Good God!” he exclaimed. “Good God! Here, old man, be a sport, be sociable. Come to the fair with us and show that you are human! Stick your head in the horse’s collar and pull faces for our delectation.”

“Perhaps,” suggested Helen, thinking of how he worried over unpaid bills, “you could do it decently;” she gave a wry little laugh, “serve God and Mammon, so to speak. You could stick up Hilda Perry’s photograph over your table again and imagine you were in love with her——”

“I could imagine,” Peter interrupted, still staring out of the window, “that you have run off with the garage man, and write on *How A Man Feels When His Wife Elopes*. Oh, to hell with it!”

“I don’t mind,” she said, grinning. “I only consider it at all because of the way the bills bother you.”

“What did I ever write,” he demanded of her, “that should make this editor imagine I have a flair for discussing such a theme?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “That’s not the point. The point is, evidently, that your work has begun to be heard of, got to his ears, and so he wants——”

“Wants me to do a turn in his circus and offers a tempting price. Well,” and he rose, “I’ll go and see if I can make a genuflexion in the House of Rimmon without falling down on both knees and grovelling.”

Up in his room, however, he paced to and fro. He looked out of the window there. Waves of wind were running, he noticed, in the corn-fields below the dropping end of Elwin Hills. Not smoking himself, he was aware of the faint odour of tobacco. He thought of a title, *I Hate Like Hell To See My Wife Smoking Before The Sun Is Over The Yard Arm*. That would get one-third of the way down both pages and so his agony might be short, say

eight hundred instead of a thousand words. He paced the room again. He brought up before the bookshelves and took out a volume of Richard Jefferies and read a passage of beauty. He put it back and opened his Gilbert White, and read the passage about the tortoise, which he had read often before.

He replaced that and recalled Harcourt Stead's kindly reminder, which had resulted in *Heather Afire*, that novels were more remunerative than nature studies. After all, even Gilbert White did not live—while alive!—on his notes upon such things as swallows and old oak-trees. He thought of the Paisley shawl. Perhaps he had better dismiss his hope of weaving it into a novel and tempt his mind with something else. His eyes roved round the room. He saw the copy of Smith's essays that he had taken with him on the prior day, and opened it to see how the leaf had pressed. It had pressed well.

"God help me," quoth he, "this is not inditing a lucrative article on *Can A Man Be In Love With Two Women At Once?*" and, "Oh-hi-ho!" he sighed.

Dipping his pen in ink he began to write. Now and then he rose from his table to consult a book in the shelves, for this or that quotation he required and must have textually. At last he sat back, said, "Oh-hi-hum!" and "Oh-hi-hum-hum-ho!" filled his pipe, and put his feet on the table.

The door opened and Helen entered gently.

"Time for you to knock off if you are to digest your lunch," said she.

"Got it done!" he chanted.

"Done! And what have you said about it? Let me read."

"It's just the first draft," he told her. "I'll have to go over it and titivate it a bit."

He jabbed a paper-fastener through the pages and held them to her, and she subsided on the window-seat to read.

"You've given me the wrong one," she said. "This is an article on Alexander Smith, not on Can A Man Be In Love With——"

"Wrong one? No, no."

"But this, Peter, is about Alexander Smith."

"Yes," he said. "Surely. Ab-solutely! Nothing else would come."

"I see," said Helen, thinking of how he fretted over bills unpaid and considering how large a fee he had been offered for something quite

different, the price promised him for stating his views on the possibility of a man being in love with two women at once.

She read the article all through. She finished and looked up. He was smoking easily, heels on table. The smoke moved sluggishly above her head and then, caught in a draught of air, undulated over the window-top, like a blue snake suddenly in a hurry.

"It's splendid," she said. "I think it could go as it is."

"All right. But I'll have a look at it again this afternoon."

"And how about a man being in love with——"

He evaded his eyes from the innocent inquiry of hers as though he had smoke in his.

"To hell with that!" he said. "I'll drop a note acknowledging receipt of the letter, and announce myself honoured by the request, and tell 'em that when I can manage to finish my present work I hope to—er—consider some poppycock that may be suitable. Or words to that effect."

"What a man!" exclaimed Helen and, laughing, rose. "Lunch must be ready."

They went downstairs together like two children at play, left-right, left-right, in gay, dropping steps.

CHAPTER IX

After lunch he rested half an hour, trimmed a hedge for half an hour, and then went upstairs to read his article and trim it, put a period where a semi-colon had been before, change the swerve of one sentence, here and there, into the staccato of two, in concession to the current fashion, as he wanted to sell the article promptly; and then, said he, "That's that." To be sure it was but a trifle in length, of the size of a daily's column or a weekly's page, but it was work and it had given him pleasure in the doing, and somewhere it would see print, no doubt. This day he had not been behaving like a diletante. He had been adread of even the appearance of diletantism ever since reading some brief but vital words by Arnold Bennett on the author's job.

"I've got to learn how to do it," he considered, "put my watch on the table at five to ten a.m. and on the tick of ten begin, write till a quarter to twelve, shut the shop and go down to lunch, rest awhile—but only a measured and short while—and then, on the stroke of whatever I decide has to be the moment, get at it again and write till four."

He put his watch on the table as to make a test of the method, but the sound of ticking on the wood was as that of a small sledge-hammer.

"This is all very well," said he, "but the fact of the matter is, my lad, that you are not Bennett. He may airily inform us how he does it, but he omits to add: 'Of course, as well as practising all these methods, I am a bit of a genius!' "

He heard Helen outside, her heels in the gravel rasping a quick-step rhythm across to the garage. He looked out of the window.

"Hullo!" he hailed her.

She looked up.

"Oh, Peter, I forgot to tell you. I've to go out to tea. I've put everything ready in the kitchen on a tray, cake on a plate with a bowl over it, and tea in the pot, and all set."

"Right-o!"

As he had stood there two days before watching her figure dwindle to puppet-size along the road, he now watched the car till it was eclipsed. Then

he went down into the sitting-room and looked at the shawl. It should, in his story, be a shawl of human history. It had been a love gift. It had been worn to balls. It had perhaps been used as a pall. It had wrapped a child to keep it warm, all life before it. It had hung on the bowed shoulders of some old woman, remembering. Life and love and death were in that shawl—and beauty. The background of it was eternity. The flowers were stars on a dark, glimmering sky.

There came thoughts of Hilda Perry: Did she realise, he wondered, all the commotion in his blood as he sat in the car with her yesterday, listening to the rain? How much did a woman understand, without being told, of such commotions in a man who sat beside her? Nothing had happened. Certainly she could not know to the full what he had passed through in those moments before he stepped out of the car and left her, ostensibly to look for his trees, but actually to gain control, swim out of the suck of the whirlpool. And that led him to the consideration that she may have thought him abrupt—even rude, perhaps—rude when, on his return, despite her announcement of pleasure in sitting there listening to the drip of the trees, he sped away. For one who observed the ways of humanity all this may seem a little innocent, perhaps imbecile, in Peter. But to look on at others in their tragicomedies is different from being involved oneself.

He thought he would go out into the garden—seeing he had worked that day to the extent of a thousand words—and practise a little putting on a flat space of the lawn. In the hall the telephone looked mutely and invitingly up at him. Proximity influenced him—the telephone's proximity. Lest he had seemed, toward the end, odd to her, he thought it would be courteous at least to call up and ask if she were none the worse of her wetting. He lifted the receiver and got through to the hotel.

"Is Miss Hilda Perry there?" he asked.

"I'll see. What's the name?"

"Cunningham."

"Hullo!" It was her voice.

"Hullo," said he.

And then there was silence. There seemed to be something disturbing in that silence. Can emotions be wordlessly transmitted by telephone? They were in touch—and not a word. It was as if they sat again, by the wall over which the lower branches of great trees hung, listening to the rain on leaves.

Almost it was as if that faint scent, of the powder she used, was in his nostrils.

"Do you know who it is?" he asked.

"Yes. The porter gave me your name, and I know your voice even in *Hullo*—one word."

He was aware of strange disturbance again. Her tones implied more than the mere words.

"I don't quite know what I rang you up for," said he. "I think to ask if you were none the worse of getting wet yesterday."

A long silence again and then, instead of assurance of health unimpaired by the outing——

"I was almost ringing you," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Just for the assistance of hearing you speak, so as to get a preliminary jog for the article. I can't get it started to please me. I suppose I'm too anxious to make a good job of it. I believe I am self-conscious."

"Ah!" he exclaimed.

"Why *ah*?"

"Perhaps that's what is wrong with me. Helen says it is only that I never lie fallow, don't take a decent rest between jobs. But I say I'm not playing at being a lit'ry gent. I've to keep the wolf from the door with my fountain pen. Arnold Bennett proclaims that a fellow should walk into his study like a woodsman approaching a tree, sit down and begin, as the woodsman whangs his axe into a tree—or views to that effect. I must say he pulls it off. The damn thing is I have no tree at present."

"Of course you can't just smite away with an axe at empty air. There's got to be a tree. I wish I could give you one. I'd give you a forest if I could."

"Oh, talking of that: I've got a bush if not a tree, but I don't know how to tackle it. The editor of ——*'s Magazine* has sent me a request for an article."

"Not for a nature study!"

"No. Not exactly. He suggests a theme."

"He does? What?"

"Can a man be in love with two women at once?"

“I hope so,” she replied promptly.

Having said that, Hilda Perry awaited his response and there was another long silence while at his house by Elwin Hills he sat with receiver to ear, and in that hotel in Edinburgh she sat with another in hand, and the wire between waited.

“The women might not like it,” said he at last.

“It’s a man’s nature,” she spoke back to him. “You are not dated. *Nous avons changé tout cela.* It’s atrophying—stultifying to go ag’in’ it. There are men who should not be asked to.”

Again the wire waited between them, all the way along the roadsides, skirting moors and fields.

“I’m inclined not to tackle the subject,” he declared.

“You could reply telling the editor that you can’t speak from experience,” she said lightly.

“Yes. Or I could make it a comic article. But tell me this: Can a woman be in love with more than one man at one and the same time?”

“It’s not as usual,” she replied, “but there are exceptional women. One would not say it of the gross masses, but among one’s own one may admit that even laws, or codes, or usages that have become as second nature to some, and in the large quite excellent, are not for all, not—for us, as it were.”

There was a step outside, a step in his porch.

“Called away!” he said. “I’ll have to go. I just noticed the phone here and thought I’d ring you up and ask if you were none the worse of the ducking.”

She laughed, oddly.

“Not a bit,” she assured him. “Ring me up again any time the spirit moves you.”

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, dear.”

There was the click of receiver set on its rest where she was.

Did she say that? Did she say, “Good-bye, dear?” However, he had the visitor to attend to.

“Come in, Hislop,” he hailed, rising from the phone. And to himself, “It was perhaps ‘Good-bye, *then*,’ she said.”

“Well, how are we?” bellowed Hislop, a massive man with a grand manner. “All alone? Memsahib not in?”

“No. She’s out somewhere. You’re just in time for tea.”

“Splendid. I hoped I would be, to tell you the truth. Jolly to have a telephone. We’re too poor to have one. It is the sort of thing a gentleman does feel, not having a phone, but one takes it as a gentleman. The war has robbed even the phones out of some houses and put them into others. Great to have a telephone to talk to when the memsahib is out and you get lonely.”

He threw three books down on the hall table and one glissaded off and fell to the floor. Cunningham stooped to pick up, as anxious of manner as it were a child that had fallen by the way. They were books that Hislop had borrowed on his last visit.

“Awful rot these books you lent me,” he growled. “Must see if I can’t get something better from you to-day. I’ll have a look round your shelves while you get the tea.”

“Yes, you go in, get a book and take a pew. I’ll be only a minute.”

“Great rag to-day,” said Hislop as Peter carried in the tea. “Great rag. Kitchen floor has to be stained. I offered the missus to toss her for who would do it. She was dying anxious to get out, but she’s a sport and she tossed. I won! Left her on her knees, staining. Nuisance not being able to afford a skivvey.”

“Yes, your wife must feel it,” remarked Peter.

“Oh, we get in a char occasionally. Two sugars, please. Yes, the wealth has all changed hands. All the bounders are living like gentlemen. Still, we make a brave front.”

“Yes, you do that.”

“Jolly good cake this. Memsahib make it?”

“Yes.”

“Good egg.”

Peter’s gaze became absent.

“Did she,” he wondered, “say, ‘Good-bye, dear,’?”

“Have some more cake,” he said to his guest.

“No, but I’ll have more tea. Two sugars. I say, that’s a new photograph up there, isn’t it?” and Hislop rose, charging to the hearth-rug to thrust out his beard at Hilda Perry.

“Yes.”

“Thought I had not seen it there before. Who is it—relative, or another of your fellow-crafts-women, so to speak?”

“Hilda Perry,” replied Peter. “You’ll come across her work——”

“Oh, yes, I believe I have, though I don’t read that sort of stuff myself. That’s how her face is familiar to me. Writes for *Woman To-Day*, eh?”

“Yes.”

“My misses takes it. That photo is reproduced in the last number. I must read the article when I get home.”

“Well, you need not rush back here all the way to-day to tell me it’s rot,” said Peter. “That will keep till your next visit.”

Hislop cleared his throat violently several times, then laughed boisterously. He did not know whether that reply signified that he could cry “*touché*” over Cunningham or should cry it over himself. He swerved away to the bookshelves, found three volumes (he had, as it were, a three-volume subscription, free, at Cunningham’s) and then, wheeling, said, “Well, awfully glad to see you again, old chap,” took up his hat and stick and waddled to the door, chanting as he went, “Thanks for the tea! Thanks for the tea!”

Peter accompanied him to the terrace. Halfway down to the road he flourished the books over his head and, looking back—not over his shoulder but on a level with it in a whimsical way he had of twisting round himself that never failed to make Peter wish he could draw—shouted, “I’ll drop in when I’ve read ’em and give you my opinion on ’em.”

“Thanks. I’ll look forward to that,” said Peter.

They exchanged waves of adieu. At the gate Hislop turned again.

“Give my regards to the memsahib,” he bellowed.

“Thank you, I will.”

“Bye-bye. Take care of yourself, old man. Don’t overwork. Await the divine afflatus, eh?”

In the hall Peter remained for some time twisting his mouth to and fro, puckering it, as though his face were one of these India-rubber ones that children amuse themselves over by squeezing between thumb and forefinger.

“I believe I’m in labour,” he spoke. “Imagine Hislop playing midwife!”

He walked, did not dash, walking upstairs calmly, calmly and controlled, trying to imitate Arnold Bennett on the stroke of the hour sitting down and taking up his scalpel—his pen. He stretched for paper and wrote: *Characters*. They had all suddenly bobbed up before him. Then——

“Damn!” said he.

He must see to the kitchen-fire. It was a quarter to six. Hislop was right. A “skivvey” would be a blessing. Well, he might yet have that (and butlers and footmen, should Helen want them; he did not) if he wrote a novel the public took to. Not that money was all. He went down to tend the kitchen-fire so that Helen would not have to light it, on return, for the preparation of dinner; and as he passed from the kitchen to the hall again he heard the car purring up to the door. He continued on his way upstairs, pausing but to call “Hullo!” at the window as his wife came from the garage.

“You’re working!” she exclaimed, nodding her head. “I know the signs—and sound. Your voice is on a lower key!”

“Yes. I’ve got a start, I think, on the new novel. Had a good time?” he asked.

“It passed,” she replied. “Anybody call while I was out?”

“Only Regards To Memsahib.”

“Oh.”

He returned to his table and made diagrams upon a sheet of paper, full of significance to himself, no doubt, with names written among them, and cobweb lines connecting them. When the chart was drawn he fumbled a drawing-pin from a little box that held nibs and pins and tacks and rubber-bands and paper-fasteners, and stabbed the paper to the wall.

“That’s that,” he said.

He went downstairs; for now, having made a start, the next step was to fend off the people he had noted in the diagram. The longer he could hold them at arm’s length the more ardently would they desire to begin their career. He had pleaded with them to come to him. They had come; and now

the stratagem was, having taken a note of their names, ages, and occupations, to tell them to wait, keep them kicking their heels in an anteroom till they refused to be treated thus cavalierly by him, burst in upon him, and in a body took him by the neck and said, “Write!” William James has explained all this in one of his books. But Henry James could have explained it equally well. Novelists are often advised to study the psychologists, but the psychologists can learn much by studying the novelists.

He descended to see if he could help with dinner preparations; and there was Helen sitting down to the telephone.

“It came to me,” said she, over her shoulder, “during bridge, that I had not thanked—hullo!” and she gave a number.

Peter knew that number—and frowned. He strolled out into the garden and stared before him. How serene was the long dip of the end of Elwin Hills, a line of tranquillity, a line of peace.

“Might I speak to Miss Perry, Miss Hilda Perry, please?”

• • • • • • • • •

“Helen Cunningham speaking. I say, I wanted to thank you for sending that photograph. I think it was sweet of you. I wanted Peter to have it in his workroom to inspire him; he admires your poems so. But he has put it up in the sitting-room with his other literary idols.”

• • • • • • • • •

“Ye-es, he is. He has started it he tells me.”

• • • • • • • • •

“No, not that. The new novel that has been appearing and disappearing like a Jack-a-Lanthorn. How did you know of——”

(Peter looked over his shoulder at her, frowning still, moved into the house and, sidling past her, entered the sitting-room. Dropping into a chair there he filled his pipe.)

“Oh. Did he? No, it does not appeal to him. No, as you say, no personal experience. I think he loves lots of people. Well, thank you again. It was sweet of you.”

The phone-call accomplished, Helen followed Peter to the sitting-room. As she came into the room he reached for a magazine from the low table beside him.

“She’d be pleased you phoned to thank her,” said he.

“Yes, she was,” and Helen walked to the piano.

“I phoned her this afternoon,” said Peter.

“So she mentioned,” replied Helen.

“To ask her if she was any worse of getting wet,” he explained.

Helen began to turn the pages of some music.

She played the piano at any time of day. There were those in Elwinfoot who could not either play or listen to music except in the evenings, and in the proper clothes; but she would play while a pot of potatoes was boiling before lunch, to say naught of dinner. She spread a sheet upon the rack, smoothed it with her hand.

“Quite a talk we had too,” he persisted. “I told her about that silly season title——”

“Yes, she said you told her,” said Helen. “I do want to see if I can get the chords in this lyric to sound less like a runaway horse and more like music.”

It struck him that he, in his turn, was saying a great deal too much about Hilda Perry. Good heavens, it was as if he was trying to explain something, or explain it away! He rose and paced the room softly. He had not, he acknowledged, won the battle when he left Hilda in the car and walked off alone to still the tumult in him. And there sat Helen, whom he loved, unaware of his distress, unsuspecting. Some women would have asked why he was so explanatory and reportorial about his telephone call when, obviously, by what he had overheard, there was no need to mention it. What implicit faith she had in him, he cogitated, not to question why, precisely, he harped on upon the subject. He moved out of the room on to the terrace and looked again at the drooping end, the leisurely lines of Elwin Hills, Grieg’s *Auf der Frühling* pursuing him, hurting him, stabbing his heart. He loved it as a rule. Half of his hopes and dreams seemed in it, and he was glad to remember that Grieg was half a Scot. But now. Now it tortured him.

He was back in the car by that wall listening to the rain with Hilda Perry. He saw her hand resting on her knee, the long cigarette-holder between her graceful fingers, the smoke of the cigarette fluttering up and then vaulting out into the rain. He saw her little definite cheek-bones, her long silken legs outstretched. That subtle scent was in his nostrils. And listening to Helen’s playing he knew that her—his dear wife—he loved with a deep love. Her clear hazel eyes he mused upon, and what lay behind, so adorable to him

that any who could ever give her pain, thought he, would be despicable indeed.

There was that letter, unanswered, lying on his table upstairs.

“Can a man be in love with two women at once?” it inquired of him.

“Hell!” he muttered, evading a reply in affirmative or negative.

In Helen’s mind also, as she played, the question probed.

CHAPTER X

Peter sat on the edge of his cot looking at Helen in hers. To see her asleep was intolerable to him; sleep was too near akin to death, and the thought of life without her was unendurable.

As well as loving her, deeply did he admire her. To say she had natural sweetness was not to say all, he mused, regarding that sweetness. She was one of those who can coax kindliness out of the cruel, draw dormant goodness out of the evil, at the other end of the scale from those who are alert for cause of contention. Her attitude to life, were one able to look into her and discover it, might almost convince one that not all the truth is in remarks (though they may seem not only truth but platitude) to the effect that it is impossible to cope with an evil, or end it, by shutting the eyes to it. Certainly she knew that it takes two to make a quarrel. In matters provocative of discord, when she appeared to be unaware, she might only be ignoring—though often, to be sure, she was unaware where some others might have been plotting retaliation.

Peter had a sense of dread of the future. He wished he could tell her of the immensity of his love for her. Before getting into bed he bent and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"Good-night," she murmured.

"Good-night," he answered. "God bless you." He almost added: "God help you."

For years his first waking thought had been of her but now, in the morning when he awakened, his first thought was not of her alone. He awoke to a sense of trouble, two women before him: Helen and Hilda. That startled him, because his love for his wife was deep. Stealthily he rose, drawing on his dressing-gown, and slipped away to his self-appointed morning duties.

By the time he had her cup of tea, biscuit in the saucer, ready to take up, there came a sound on the stairs. She was descending. He listened. Yes, on the morning that he woke to thoughts of two women, his single allegiance lapsing, Helen did not await his arrival, playing maid to her. He was in the hall-way, tray in hand, as she came down.

"Hullo!" he said. "What's the idea? I was just bringing up your tea."

“I thought I’d get up this morning,” she replied.

As he had wondered to what extent Hilda was aware of the emotions, violent in him, hardly to be restrained, sitting in the car with her day before yesterday, now he wondered how much Helen surmised. Oh, what a plague it was—this that had come on him! From her irregular descent this morning, though there was not so much as sign of glumness, he drew an implication. She had no doubt been surprised that he should have been so solicitous regarding Hilda Perry’s health, phoning her the day after their expedition—and while alone in the house. And why the devil had he phoned? To ask how she was? That was only an excuse. His natural disposition to honesty had in fact caused him practically to admit it so to Hilda. He had told her he did not know precisely why he rang her up. And he had behaved, after his wife spoke to her, like some naïve child who, by its protestations before inquiry, reveals what naughtiness it has been secretly employed upon. His explanatory chatter had been enough to create suspicion of something—as the Scots say—by-ordinary.

Well he knew Helen—to a certain point. She would not pout; she would not sulk; but she could feel. She had not been asleep last night when he thought she was; she had been lying there, he decided, puzzled over—over what? Over what he had suggested to her by his chatter that had been in the nature of Protesting Too Much? He would not mention Hilda Perry again—that he resolved; further, he would forget her—though that would not be so easy. Here must not be the beginning of one of these bitter triangular stories that ended, invariably—invariably he believed—in distress for all concerned: Ideals shattered for one; remorse for one; acrimony for one.

“Where will you have your tea?” he asked.

“Just put it back in the kitchen,” said she. “I can drink it while I’m getting breakfast ready.” She walked into the kitchen after him. “Where’s yours?” she inquired.

“I don’t have tea in the morning before breakfast.”

“I didn’t know that, never knew that. You just make it for me?”

“Ab-solutely!” said he and passed out of the kitchen. “I’m pretty fond of you, you know,” he added. “I wish I could give you umpteen servants, but, in lack of ’em, I play maid to you in the morning with the greatest of pleasure.”

He was ascending the stairs to shave.

“But I don’t want umpteen servants, Peter,” she called after him. “I only want——”

“Well, what?” he asked, halting, she having paused in the midst of this declaration of her sole desire.

“Your love,” her voice came up to him.

“You’ve got that,” he responded cheerily, bending over the banisters to say it—the result being that, when he continued his ascent, he bumped his head against the ceiling of the hall.

She came out at the thud, and its complement of profanity.

“What did you do?” she asked.

He was rubbing his head.

“Served me right,” he said. “Hit my head on the ceiling there. You must look out that you never do that, Helen—never talk over the banisters on the way up without stopping. Crashed my bally cranium on the ceiling.” He felt it. “A bantam’s egg,” he announced, and held it. “It rises. ’Tis now a hen’s egg. I must go and bathe it before it becomes an ostrich’s or a great auk’s,” and he went on his way.

He remained so long in the bathroom, or so it seemed to Helen, that she grew worried, and came upstairs listening for sounds of ablution. Hearing none——

“Are you all right, Peter?” she hailed.

“Ab-solutely,” he called back.

“I wondered if that smash on your head had laid you out.”

A pity it would be (if one may be allowed an old-fashioned Thackerayan comment) if Hilda Perry upset this innocent ménage of these Babes in the Wood.

After breakfast they lingered at the table over discussion of a subject which he prefaced by the announcement that he had been wondering if his work, so far, had not been “a sort of fiddling while Rome is burning.” Reason for casting on it that slur he had to produce in response to her expression as of one shocked, perturbed by it. Wouldn’t it, he asked of her, be doing something more worth while if he were to write a novel of the slums? The idea had come to him with a title, it seemed, or a choice of titles. *Rags and Tatters* he suggested; *Maggie of the Tenements* was another. They discussed the question, with pro and con, of the Novel with a Purpose.

Leaving final judgment on that pending, they talked of recent national dilemmas, dilemmas intensified by foreign competition, made more perplexing by various embarrassments that were part of the war’s legacy, dilemmas between capital and labour in the land. And of certain disseminated pronouncements, apropos of these considerations, they discussed whether or no they were of alarmists. If they were not but of alarmists delighting to alarm, then it was a pity, that those who voiced such views seemed at times too selective with statistics and thereby suspect of the disingenuous. As they talked over the many-sided theme, the morning light in the room drifted through its subtle tones into the glow of forenoon.

It was in Helen’s mind that Hilda Perry’s talk on her visit, regarding her sociological explorations, had sent him questing in these regions to find outlet for his creative urge. And Hilda Perry, thought she, could help him with much information on the conditions. When her articles appeared they would be of great assistance. Next to her love for Peter, in Helen’s heart, was her love for his work and her desire to see him win the hard fight. A feeling she had of doubt in that brilliant woman she must exorcise for his sake. Hilda Perry could aid him were he to decide to pursue this new theme. And surely she had faith in Peter! Not to have faith in him would be as an infidelity to him.

The telephone ringing then, it was to the adage regarding speaking of angels that she thought, “Hilda Perry!”

“Will you answer it?” she asked.

“Oh, you go, dear. It will probably be for you,” said he.

She went out to the hall and——

“Hullo?” she said, and after a pause, “I’ll get him to come and speak himself.”

She ran back to the dining-room.

“It’s Scanlan,” she said. “Harcourt Stead is lecturing in town to-morrow evening. He’s staying with friends at Linlithgow and will be in Edinburgh to-day to a little lunch at Scanlan’s club. Scanlan wants you to join them.”

Peter went out to the phone as she spoke.

“Good-morning, Scanlan,” he said.

This Scanlan was the Scots portrait painter, Tom Scanlan, who was not painter only but somewhat of a bibliophile, with a library of choice, and a

famous host of the city in the minds of visiting writers, artists, musicians, actors and actresses.

Peter came back from his talk.

"It's a stag lunch, old woman," he said.

"Yes, I gathered that."

"I don't like leaving you to-day, somehow."

But to miss his lunch with Stead who had jogged him to his first novel would never do. And he would have to be getting ready. So the nebulous Maggie of the Tenements drew her shawl over her shoulders and disappeared into a close. Peter stood by the table watching her go.

"Oh, well," he said, "some plot, some theme, some subject will come. And I'd love to meet Harcourt Stead. He can write." And then again—"I hate leaving you to-day," he said.

"I am very glad you are going to meet Stead," she told him. "Perhaps you'll manage to bring him out here for a night and then I'll see him too."

"I'll try to arrange it."

When he was leaving, going to town by train instead of by car, he drew her to him and gazed down in her face, searching there for sign of peace and happiness without alloy. She raised her head, opening her eyes wide as though to show him all within.

"God bless you, my darling," he said. "Don't worry. You are worrying about something, I think."

"I've nothing to worry about," she answered, and added, "It is you who are worrying—because you can't get a start on a new job of work," and she laughed.

He took all the reassurance that laugh offered, and set off.

It was a very happy lunch, in fact at moments hilarious, and Stead, for all his public acclaim, remained fraternal of manner. He knew that what to-day is praised is often, to-morrow, cast into the oven. He knew that "What's next?" was the motto of the intelligentsia of his age. He was having his innings, a big seller, but he had not lost sense of proportion thereby. The total of his readers, he had once observed to himself, even allowing that ten borrow a book for one who buys, was but a small proportion of the population of the city of London.

To meet him, Scanlan had called a man from a publishing house, two brother painters, a journalist, and Peter Cunningham.

After lunch they had coffee in the recess of the big bay window, in the smoking-room, that looked down on a secluded square. As they talked, sipping their coffee and liqueurs, puffing smoke, they could see people passing in the square, and sparrows pottering there. One, Peter noticed, flew through the small circle of one of the iron railings opposite.

"If I were a sparrow I'd have to do that," said Stead, who had, observing it, glanced at Peter to see if he had also.

That aside somehow drew them closer.

"Gentleman of the name of Cunningham here?" asked a waiter, approaching the group after a furtive colloquy with the smoke-room attendant.

"Yes," said Scanlan, and jabbed a pointing arm toward Peter.

"There's a telephone call for you, sir."

Peter jumped up with a look of anxiety. Something wrong with Helen, thought he. He murmured an apology to his host and hurried away to the telephone box, at the foot of the stairs, indicated by the waiter who had summoned him.

"Hullo," he said anxiously.

"Hullo," came Hilda Perry's voice.

"Oh!" he said. "Oh, it's you!"

"Yes. I say, I——"

He lost the beginning because of a club member opening the front door and letting in the departing crackle of the taxi which had brought him. Peter had not shut the booth-door behind him.

"What—what?" he said, stretching back to close the door.

"I just heard," went on her voice, "of the little lunch to Harcourt Stead —" he lost again some words—"I wondered if you could spare a few minutes after the lunch to come along here. I must explain. The editor wants terrifically to get that article on you in very soon. If you could read the typescript and pass it to-day I'd be terrifically obliged. I could get it off this evening."

“Why, ab-solutely. I wonder when I can get along. I think we are breaking up pretty soon.”

“Well, I’ll be here all day. I won’t be going out. Suit yourself. There’s a dear. And I’ll get the thing off.”

When he returned to the bay window there were but Scanlan and Stead left beside the big round polished table in its wide recess. Empty glasses, empty coffee-cups, debris of ash trays alone told of the recent gathering there. The last guest was moving away, nodding backwards, clapping his side pockets to assure himself that he had not forgotten his pipe.

Stead, on his feet, neck taut back in his collar, slightly flushed, twinkled at Peter.

“There you are!” said he. “I began to be worried about you.” He extended both arms in a lunge and held Peter’s shoulders and—“Couldn’t we have a little potter round your ain familiar toon, so to speak? Scanlan here has an appointment for an hour or two before he can carry me off again.”

“I’d be delighted,” replied Peter.

Hilda could wait. To have a little potter round with Harcourt Stead was all important. What a talk they’d have! He’d have to memorise it all so as to be able to recount it to Helen.

He mentioned his wife as they took their way along Princes Street. He mentioned her again as they crawled up the twist of the Mound. Stead said it was one of the most entrancing approaches to the old city he knew, like a thing imagined by Maxfield Parrish.

“That’s what my wife thinks,” said Peter.

And along George IVth. Bridge, when they paused to look down into Cowgate, there was again an allusion to Helen. He had been discussing with her, that morning, Peter informed Stead, some shreds of an idea for a novel of the slums. Stead, standing beside him, slewed his neck round stiffly, tucked his chin in and twinkled at him. Yes, he must have a character in his next book who was always saying, “That’s what my wife says——” or, “My wife said one day——” And why does he mention her so often? wondered Stead. Is it due to an overflowing of devotion, or is it a declaration to himself that he is faithful to her when he is not? Stead was always prying, prying. Curiosity regarding his fellows had made him a novelist, his books but outpourings of gossip talked colloquially down on to the pages.

They stopped to examine the dips of the second-hand booksellers', drawing near Greyfriars. And then Peter, who, during lunch, had avoided giving an example of what Helen called his X-ray examination, took the opportunity of Stead's engagement over a volume to study him. A big fellow, clean-shaven, with the shrewdest grey eyes behind his pince-nez, large pince-nez with slender tortoise-shell rims. A bank manager—in fact, THE bank manager, one might say he was, at a casual glance, thought Peter; or a railroad magnate from America, who, if you took a closer look at him, you'd hazard, as well as owning railroads, probably collects first editions and has a glass-covered table of original manuscripts in his Park Avenue mansion. He looked so important and affluent and proprietorial that if he but paused to glance at a building—were it the town hall—the impression conveyed was that he was thinking of buying it. He was the oddest blend of an elderly and discriminating man of the world and of a greedy boy beaming on his way to the tuck-shop.

Hilda Perry could wait. Stead having purchased some books, they strolled on. Neither had said one word about the other's work. Neither—apart from that passing reference on George IVth. Bridge to the hazy notion for a slum story—had spoken of his own. They walked on, held amicably together by their craft, without talk of their own contributions to it, as no men have walked, thought Peter, since the Guilds came to an end and Trade Unions granted no meet substitute for what they gave. Peter led his companion from second-hand bookshop to second-hand bookshop. Yes, Hilda Perry could wait.

"I wish you could meet my wife," he said. "How about slipping in a night at Elwinfoot?"

From his superior height, achieved by keeping his back very straight and tucking his neck into his collar and elevating his chin, Harcourt Stead glittered down on him, quizzically.

"I'd love to," he replied. "Scanlan's to-night. Lecture to-morrow night. Then back to my friends at Linlithgow. Then to Glasgow—I've to lecture there. I'd love to fix up a visit to your home. What's your wife like?"

Peter stared at him and then a smile spread. Stead boomed a joyous laugh.

"Yes, it was a damn silly question I admit," he said. "How can a man describe his wife? Oh, I must meet her and tell her how you grinned when I asked what she was like! Well, where do we go from here?"

He was laden with books by the time they came out of a side street, a grubby street of discarded orange peel and banana skins, odours of beer and bacon, and still more second-hand bookshops, to a thronged artery of the city in the shadow of the university's dome. The name of another street caught Stead's eye there, reminding him of something. What was it? Yes. It was mentioned in a letter written by Stevenson in the South Seas, aboard the schooner *Casco* if he remembered rightly. There was the corner where, wrote Stevenson, fain would he place, or have placed for him, a plaque addressing cheering words to the students suffering tribulations in his old haunts, telling them that one did, after all, pull through.

The shuffle and beat of feet were all around them, to and fro in the crowded main thoroughfare of that part of the city. A bell rang and a spate of students passed under the arch of the university, and it seemed to both Stead and Peter that with them came the ghosts of all who had once passed under that echoing arch.

"Life," muttered Stead, "life, dear God, is queer! People on their journey are interesting, fascinating. If we could always have at the back of our minds a sense of the pity of it all—here to-day, gone to-morrow—how easily we would go with everybody!" And then—"What a hell of a pity it is," he said, "that the baser lures of life should be so fascinating! Of course, if they were not, nobody would make a mess of things."

That speech made a look as of one haunted by a troubling thought pass on Peter's sensitive face.

"Well——" Stead looked at his watch and they turned back toward Princes Street, where they were to meet Scanlan.

On the way was much talk of many things, and never had the distance seemed so short to Peter—though they walked slowly. As they came to Princes Street——

"I hope you tackle another novel," said Stead. "Your nature studies are lovely stuff, and your rural character sketches are the goods. But how are you going to catch the crowd with them? You can sing and ripple the Tweed into words. You can give us Ben Cruachan smoking into a cloud, and a cloud solidifying into Cruachan, and the colour of an adder in the heather. You put before us a ploughman or a shepherd like a modern Sir Thomas Overbury. But who cares? Few—either for the themes or the manner. Novels are the thing to-day."

“I’m hunting for a theme for a new one and can’t quite catch it,” Peter told him again. “I get a certain length in schemes and then stick.”

“Oh, it will come, it will come,” declared Stead, “Or you’ll discard it and get another. I wondered what was the cause of a certain occasional fleeting haunted look I’ve surprised on you,” he added, laughing.

They crossed Princes Street and there was Scanlan dashing along to meet them at the appointed corner. Stead tautened his head back to watch him approach and file him away in his portrait gallery.

“Good God,” he exclaimed, “you don’t look like a man.”

“I don’t look——” began Scanlan, glaring.

“No. You look like the Charge of the MacDonalds at Killiecrankie, or Scotland for Ever!”

“Oh, I see,” said Scanlan, flattered, after having been told he did not look like a man. “Well?” he said, and—

“Well?” said Peter, and—

“Well?” said Harcourt Stead.

“Here, Harry now, and you, Cunningham, just before we part—just a little one,” suggested Scanlan, “A wee *deoch-an-doris*, eh?”

They glanced one to another. Neither Peter nor Stead felt in need of even a little one, unless in the way of celebration, but Scanlan led the way to a polished alcove and a gleaming round table off Princes Street somewhere, and charged glasses appeared before them in response to an order he must have cabalistically given on entering.

“A toast,” said the painter, looking at Stead.

Stead thought it over, gazing into his glass as it were a crystal and he a crystal-gazer. He looked at Peter.

“To your wife,” said he.

“God blesh her,” added Scanlan, who, it would appear, must have had a large *deoch-an-doris* on leaving the person of his other appointment.

Stead stared at him as one surprised. They elevated their glasses and drank.

“Another little one,” said Scanlan eagerly. “A li’l’ postscript.”

“No, no, my dear fellow,” replied Stead.

Temperately and authoritatively he led the way to safety. Peter saw them off in a taxi.

“To-morrow night!”

“To-morrow night!”

And there he was, very happy, on the pavement but a stone’s-throw from the Royal Stewart Hotel.

CHAPTER XI

He had but to turn upon a heel and enter. As he did so he caught the eye of the decorative liveried attendant at the door.

“That fellow,” he considered, “by a deferentially obliterated twinkle when he saluted me, seems to think I am a little bit merry—alcoholically.”

What had he taken? Some wine to the lunch, perhaps half a bottle; a liqueur with his coffee; a *deoch-an-doris* with Stead and Scanlan. Nothing! He was elated, and knew it; but might not a man be so after happy peregrinations and discourses with a member of his guild without being suspect of vinous gladness? For two pins he could have turned back and announced: “No, my boy, ’tis not what you imagine. ’Tis not a wee drappie in my e’e, but the gladness resulting from happy companionship!” Thus warned, however, with dignity he inquired within for Miss Perry.

“Oh, yes, certainly Mr. Cunningham. Miss Perry expects you.”

He was led to the writing-room, a long blue room in which, on segregated tables that stood at the base of its cream-coloured pillars, lay blue note-paper and inviting pewter ink-pots, each with a blue plume pen in it. Hilda was there and—

“All right. I see her,” said Peter, and advanced alone to her.

She turned as if expecting a messenger and finding it was he who stood at her elbow, leapt up lithe and eager to give him, with seeming impulsive demonstration of pleasure at his arrival, both her hands. There was nothing for it but to take them, her left in his right, her right in his left, as though they were about to play ring-a-ring-o’-roses. And Peter’s impulse was to draw her to him and kiss her—which of course she knew. It was proclaimed in his eyes.

“I’ve just been reading a book of Harcourt Stead’s,” said she, inclining her head to the volume she had dropped in the chair on rising. “He turns them out so terrifically quickly I have not been keeping pace. There are so many excellent writers nowadays that it takes one all one’s time to keep pace with even one’s selected few. In case of meeting him to-morrow after the lecture I thought I had better be conversant with his last.”

Still they held hands while she stood, in fact one might say flaunted before him. She made him think of exotic flowers. Drawing her hands at last

gently from his—

“Have you had tea?” she asked.

On the edge of the table beside her chair was a very small tray on which were a dainty teapot, a cup and saucer, and a plate with but the crumbs of cake.

“Well—yes.”

“You haven’t?”

“Oh, yes, indeed, or its alternative,” he assured her.

She laughed.

“I’ll go up for the article. Oh!” she turned back, “you might as well come with me. I’ve a room facing the front. You can look out over the gardens to the cliffs of the old town.”

Slowly they moved out of the writing-room, she carrying her volume of Stead.

“Let us walk up,” she suggested, “and we can see the view on each floor as we ascend. I’m on the third.”

So they walked up, slowly and soundlessly on the heavy carpet, past the big framed prints from the old masters on the landings. The peaceful light in Van der Meer’s mirror picture he noted, the tranquil hands in a Holbein.

“What a lovely bowl!” he exclaimed on the third landing. On a small round table in a corner there it gave an accent of beauty. “Too pretty to make a receptacle for torn letters and squeezed-out cigarette-ends,” he added.

She glanced back at it.

“A wonder nobody steals it,” she remarked. “It seems to radiate a light of its own.”

“Well, I suppose one does, willy-nilly, confuse—if confuse is the word,” said he, “art and morality. One can’t steal a sacred thing. Talking of that: I once read a symposium by several librarians on the subject of what books people had filched from their libraries. One wrote that he had never known a book purloined from his, save once—and that was a Bible.”

She laughed.

“Probably bought for sale,” she said, “by an unbeliever in its contents, a Breeches Bible, or some such curiosity, had he only stated the fact—and so

slightly spoiled his story."

"Yes, no doubt. But no—I may covet that lustre bowl," he looked over his shoulder at it as they progressed along the corridor, at the end of which was the picture of the old town, framed in the window, hung in air, "but there it must stay, even if I have to make a pilgrimage up here to look at it now I have discovered where it lives. Were one to steal it and carry it home its beauty would be only a grave indictment. One would have no pleasure in its art because of the immoral manner of possession. There would be no peace till one had carried it back and put it in its place again."

"Conscience is a nuisance," she replied lightly.

A chambermaid drifted ghostly from a tributary corridor, startling them, stepped aside with a rustle of starch (as to proclaim herself no spectre), and vanished. Hilda found her key in her faintly-scented vanity-bag, and throwing open the door of her room entered, Peter following. With a smooth click the door shut.

"Now, there you are," she said and pointed to the window. "I'll get the article for you."

She took it from a side table while he walked towards the window and a chair she indicated.

"I'll be as quiet as a mouse," she promised, "so that you can concentrate. Remember, anything you don't like, say so."

He sat down to read and she moved behind him quietly. It was not very easy to concentrate. He could hear a little clock on the marble mantel-shelf ticking—both furtively and hurriedly, it seemed. He was aware of her near him. He did not look round to see where she was, what she was about. But soon he read enthralled. Even her most casual journalistic work had her stamp upon it. Some wondered, who had not seen her, if she had Hebrew blood in her veins. There were sensuous outbursts, sensual even, in her choice of words. She stuck orchids in her prose as in her poems. She set words in alliance not usually allied, that excited in contact or by contrast. Once he lifted his eyes from the page to ponder a thought. She could agitate in a sentence as she agitated him with her presence. It was the best thing by far that he had ever read about his poor prose: that was how he felt then. Talk of inferiority complex! She had, in fact, *done him proud*.

He dropped the hand that held the typescript but did not turn round to tell her his pleasure. Chin on chest he looked out over the gardens. An intermittent clank came up to him—of a swing-gate, of iron, opening and

closing as people left the street for the gardens, the gardens for the pavement. The old city he stared at, the battlemented sky-line with the late afternoon light spread on it. A window twinkled to the late sun in an angle, a corrie of that cliff-front, as if lit from within.

"Well?" came her voice. She sat in a great saddle-bag behind him, leaning back, hands on chair arms, awaiting the verdict.

"What can I say?" he asked.

"It is all right?"

"All right!" he ejaculated.

"I'm so glad. I wanted terrifically to do my best on that;" and she rose.

He rose also; and having returned the pages to her he put forth both hands and caught her elbows, pressed them.

"To make sure I'm true again," she asked, smiling in his eyes, "as you did on the way to Bonaly?"

"Yes."

She stepped closer. Something happened then, inexplicable, something such as had happened to him when they were miles apart with but a wire strung across the landscape between them. Something happened then such as had happened in the car by the base of the tree-flounced hill beside Bonaly. Their eyes met, and in behind the eyes was a fusing, a glow. This time, drawn to the vortex, to swim free was impossible. He drew her to him and she, with a look of triumph, gave herself to his embrace. He bent to kiss her cheek but her face turned under his and their lips met.

Hilda gave a great sigh. He stood back and was about to say, "I should not have done that," but she was before him.

"You wanted to do that downstairs and did not," said she.

Helen then he thought of. Here was another mind-reader.

For a man who had produced not only these terse studies of character (gathered together, among the nature papers, in *Border Streams* and *A Scots Shepherd*) but a novel of character, who had some deep understanding of men and women, who had examined the tides of emotion on which they often moved, he was surely innocent. Thought of Helen made his expression troubled, and she saw the trouble.

"I'm sorry," he said.

“What for?” she murmured, gently.

“This.”

“Why?” she asked, gently.

His eyes evaded hers but she knew he thought of his wife.

“Oh, you moralist!” she exclaimed. “Don’t vex your heart. You cannot tell me that kiss was evil. That little blaze must be our private own. It is private. It is ours.”

He expelled a long breath and—

“I’d better go,” he said.

“Why? There is no need,” Her countenance was expressive of seriousness and tenderness blent. “Can’t you stay? We’ll go down and have dinner where, if you get worked up, all will be well,” and she laughed, but not in cruel raillery.

“I’ve been away from Helen all day,” said he, speaking as to a corner of the room while she watched his face; and there they stood without any reply to that remark of hers.

Then, abruptly—

“I won’t keep you,” she told him, “seeing you feel that way. I know you love her,” and she looked away from him.

“I do love her,” he answered vehemently.

He found his hat and stick and walked deliberately to the door, looking at her again. She turned her head, met his eyes a moment, fire in hers, and then her lids, drooping, hid them.

To the door she accompanied him step for step, her presence disturbing again, and he acutely aware of that subtle scent. He opened the door and stood back, expecting her to descend with him.

“It’s so near dinner-time,” she said. “I’ll just stay up here and titivate a bit.”

“Well,” he said, and held out his hand.

His desire, at that moment, was for an understanding of a large friendship with her, a friendship that would condone all this, let it be as it had not been, look upon it as an accident comprehensible to those who know that emotion—that passion—is part of life, but an accident not to be

repeated. Yet when she took his extended hand and animal magnetism, or what you will, thrilled him, and her eyes, with a meshed excitement in their depths, met his, he stepped back incontinently into the room, shut the door, cast down his hat and stick, and gathered her in his arms again. Her body was pressed to his. Her face close to his. He thrust her backwards; but her moment was not ripe.

"No, no!" she sighed. "No, no!" It must be clear in his mind, beyond all doubt, that she had not sued him, that she had no blame in what this man would call evil if it befell. She wanted him; but he must realise—he must believe—that she had not in any wise invited him.

"No, no!" she cried again in a low voice. There might be another starched wraith within hearing were she to cry louder.

He released her. He grabbed up his hat and stick and again put hand to the door-knob, turned a moment and gave her a long look as of one harrowed, in agony rather than ecstasy, and stepped out, hurrying away then along the corridor.

Hilda stood at her door watching him go. On the landing he looked back. What could she think of him? What sort of sense of honour had he in her estimation? She had met his wife. She had dipped into their happy life. What would she think of his love for Helen?

She was waiting, aware that he would turn there; and she gave him the succour that she knew (in these matters, at least, men are as children before women) he craved. Her hand went to her lips, then fluttered toward him and, wheeling, she passed back into her room. It was a gesture that seemed to convey, "I understand!" He heard that smooth click of the latch as he had heard it on entering—ages gone—less than half an hour earlier.

So a man, thought he, can (alack and alas—and oh, the ecstasy and sorrow of it!) be in love with two women at once.

In a daze he descended. He found himself on the pavement of Princes Street. He did not recall coming down those stairs nor his transit of the tiled hall and portico.

CHAPTER XII

Alone in a compartment of the Elwinfoot train he called for views on the case. It would seem that he desired, if possible, a consensus of opinion, from the various selves that made the composite man, that would warrant him in seeing it as a pardonable accident by the time he reached home. He was not, he now decided, in love with Hilda Perry. He succeeded in getting the roll of the wheels to ratify that: "Of course you're not! Of course you're not!" they rumbled under the carriage floor.

"Not to put too fine a point upon it, she arouses my sexual passions," he announced, he being the only occupant of the carriage!

He told himself that he had not for some time met one belonging to his country of the mind; that long before meeting her he had admired her work; and to find her, in the flesh, so adorable, had bowled him over. But he had for long admired Stead's work. He had, meeting Stead, found his personality magnetic. Yet on leaving him he had not been impelled to busk him as he were a Frenchman!

"Queer thing, sex," he echoed an exclamation of Hilda Perry's. " 'Morality is a matter of geography,' " he quoted to himself for further help.

And then he found himself deep in admiration of the large, the tolerant, the catholic attitude of Hilda to his—well, passion; yes, passion. That wave from her doorway as he passed downstairs was one of the kindest gestures imaginable. Helen would never know of what had happened—and it would never happen again. It would remain as that understanding woman said, their secret: "That little blaze must just be our private own. It is private. It is ours."

But what would Helen think if she knew? He shared all with her. Could he share this? Could he tell her the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth? "For who knows not that truth is strong, next to the Almighty?" he thought. Would she understand?

"Elwinfoot! Elwinfoot!"

No, he would not tell Helen, but he swung up the hill, homeward, eager to be with her. A late lark, high in the blue and gold drizzle of afternoon, was piercingly ecstatic overhead.

She came out to meet him on the terrace and it seemed to him that behind the look of welcome in her eyes was a shadow of inquiry and concern. He stooped to kiss her and, doing so, felt shame.

"It's good to be back to you," he said. "Have you had dinner?"

"No. I waited. I could not eat. I felt too lonely. I had a horrible feeling that something was wrong with you," she replied.

"Not a thing. We had a great time."

"You had tea with Scanlan and Stead as well as lunch?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Stead and I wandered round the bookshops after lunch and the only afternoon tea we had was a whisky with Scanlan, whom we met again later."

"I must see to dinner," she exclaimed. "I left it at the back of the stove to keep warm, hoping you'd come home in time," and she ran off to the kitchen.

Over dinner she wanted to hear his news.

"Tell me all about your day," said she.

"Stead may be able to fit in a night here with us later on," Peter replied. "We'll see him to-morrow night after the lecture, and he'll know definitely then if he can arrange it."

"You like him?"

"I love him," said he, spontaneously, and then thought he: "There you are! You love him! One can say one loves lots of people."

"Yes? What's the thought? A reservation?" Helen asked.

"Not a bit. I like him very much. Oh, I daresay if he believed in something generally considered heretical he would not voice his belief till at least there were signs that it was on the verge of being considered orthodox. He is correct in deportment. He'd hate to be unfashionable." He paused, and added, "I like him—immensely."

"Who else did you see?"

His eyelids drooped, as he were remembering, considering. He gave her the names of the men who had been at the lunch and of those who later had joined the circle in the smoking-room window and then, like a boy recounting a happy day, told of how the admired, bonhomous Stead, the

genial Stead, had benignly plucked him away for a *tête-à-tête* ramble among the bookshops.

"So that's why you did not get back earlier!" she said. "I hoped you would have a little while with him alone. I'm so glad you had. It was stupid of me to worry, but, oh, Peter, about tea-time I worried so much that I nearly phoned the club to ask if you were still there."

That gave him the opportunity to tell her of Hilda's call, but he discarded it. He felt he could not meet her eyes. She lit her after-dinner cigarette and he filled his pipe. Fingering the tobacco from the pouch into the bowl, he had the remote expression of a man who does one thing while pondering another.

With a thin thread of smoke flying over her shoulder, Helen carried away some dishes and still he sat there instead of helping her. She came back for the rest and she shot him a sidelong glance, wondering what deep thoughts held him there. Usually he assisted with the table-clearing. When she returned he had risen and passed into the blue and brown sitting-room that was suffused then with a golden and ruddy glow of sunset. He could not take the plunge. He could not begin to tell her of his visit to Hilda Perry's hotel. But she had to be told, she must know that he had read the article. Hilda had promised that she would come out to Elwinfoot with it for him to read. The sooner he could talk of Hilda, without showing confusion, the better. Sooner or later, Helen would know of the visit, and then how could he explain his omission to mention it? But still did he funk the telling.

"What's your news?" he asked. "Any one called?"

"Only Remember Me To The Sahib."

"Two days running!"

"Yes. He said he was just passing and popped in to see you, and I was to be sure to tell you he had read an article by Hilda Perry and, 'I thought it—well, er——' " she imitated Hislop's amusingly heavy manner, humped herself in her chair, putting hands on knees and bowing forward, " 'good, yes. I'd say good. Good, I'd say. I mean I would not say superlatively good. But not too bad—in fact, quite good.' "

Peter emitted two chesty chuckles.

"That's because I got ahead of him," he said. "He mentioned her yesterday, asking whose photograph it was we had added to the mantel-piece gallery, and said he must read a thing of hers he'd seen in *Woman To-Day*. I

remarked he'd no doubt find it rotten, but need not come back specially to tell me so. He goes by contraries. Queer fellow!"

There, incidentally, was opportunity to broach the shelved subject, ever so easily, with a, "That reminds me——" but he did not accept it.

"Nobody else called?" he asked.

"No."

"Did you have a game of tennis?"

"No. I did not go out at all, except on to the lawn when it was warm. Hislop and I had tea there. Oh, Hilda Perry phoned me just after you left."

"She did?"

"Yes. She wanted to know if you were at home. I told her that you were in town at a lunch to Stead."

"That's what she said on the phone," thought Peter; "the bit I lost. It was Helen told her where to find me."

He had not thought of that, had imagined, from the preliminary scrap of explanation that he had only partially caught, that Hilda had heard of the lunch otherwise. And any small curiosity as to how she had known, or guessed, where to find him, was far from his mind during that tense hour with her.

"Why, of course," said he, feeling very miserable over being dissembler to Helen even in the moment of dissembling, "that's something else I have to tell you. She rang me up at the club." And then, as balm to himself, as evidence of how he remembered his wife, he had to tell her: "I got quite a fright when a waiter came and told me there was a phone-call for me. I got it into my head that something was wrong with you. It was only that she found there was not much time left to get the article in by the time her editor wanted, and wondered if she could catch me when I was in town to read it."

"Did she bring it along to the club?" Helen asked.

"No," he replied. He felt annoyed at what seemed cross-examination, and, at the same time, relief that he was well embarked on his narration. "I went to her hotel after lunch, or I should say after my amble round with Stead and after I left Stead and Scanlan. She's made a mighty good job of it. You'll love it."

Once he had talked garrulously about Hilda in such an explanatory manner that surely any third person (had a third person been present) might

have been suspicious, if not of his relations with that disturbing lady, at least of the state of his heart toward her. And now his reticence, his long delay in telling of having seen her this day, might, to that postulated third person, be further cause for curiosity. Nothing must happen! Nothing further must happen, or even his truthful and confident Helen would know all was not as it should be. Memory would serve her with blazing evidence that was at the moment but smouldering.

Helen was wondering why he had not spoken sooner of his visit to Hilda. Something had been said again, she told herself, to displease him. He had been so enthusiastic over their late visitor to begin with that, disappointed in her for some reason, he could not bring himself to talk about it: so she decided.

"Did you have tea with her?" she asked, in as casual a tone as she could summon. Perhaps over tea there had been a depressing hitch.

"No. I told you I did not have tea anywhere," he said, and in so combative a voice that she almost inquired: "Why so snappy, Peter?" But instead—

"Yes, so you did," she said. "I forgot. She might have given you tea."

"She did offer it, but she'd had hers by the time I managed to get along there, and I wanted just to read the article and get off again—to tell you all about Stead."

"You are not really very well pleased with the article," Helen suggested.

"I am. What makes you think I'm not?"

"I just wondered," she replied, "seeing you did not tell me about it sooner. Your meeting with Stead must have seemed much more important."

"By God, it was!" he exclaimed.

She sat with head lowered, gazing before her, and let the smoke trickle slowly from her lips. She said nothing. But he could not leave well alone.

"She wanted me to stay to dinner," said he, "but I told her that was impossible, that I had to be home."

Helen sat motionless, toying with the long cigarette-holder, trickling smoke. And he was again annoyed. He was annoyed because he suddenly felt shackled, restrained, bound, in a position to be heckled—curtain-lectured! These people who talk of marriage as fettering he had always turned away from, bored by them. Where love is there are no fetters, he had

said. His eyes puckered. He stared at nothing before him, and wondered if he should out with it. Should he tell her the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Impossible!

"What are you thinking of?" she said. "Those are long, long thoughts."

He was fretful. He wanted to cry out: "Is there no privacy for a man even in the innermost recesses of his mind?" And all she wished at that moment was that, if Hilda Perry had somehow vexed him, he would relieve himself by telling her the cause.

He did not answer. He rose and, opening the tall doors, stood out on the narrow terrace, the strip of flags above the sloping lawn. She watched him pass into the whelming night, then went away to wash the dishes, and he did not come to help her as was his usage. That morning she had not waited abed for her early tea. That evening he let her wash and dry the dishes while he tramped to and fro on the narrow terrace, all the little blinking or unwinking worlds spinning in air above him in their eternal courses. Much import in these two lapses from ancient custom!

Alone in the kitchen, tears ran down Helen's cheeks and dropped into the dish-water. Something was wrong. Then it was that suspicions of the sort called jealous disturbed her. Well, she must oust them!

Item: A visit paid by Peter to Bonaly with Hilda Perry, that had been a little expedition looked forward to by her:—and what more natural, considering their mutual interest in Alexander Smith? (Hilda's alleged, pretended interest, she might have put it, had she only known.) *Item*: He had not told her, before starting out that day, of his intention to make a detour thither with their departing guest:—yet, of course, he had only thought of it at the last moment when he had the car out and Hilda was ready to go. *Item*: His hand dropping on Hilda's shoulder with an emotional pressure:—well, he had not met one of his own tribe for a blue moon, and, sanely to consider, the wonder was that he had not roundly kissed her! *Item*: He had not told her to-night of the phone-call and the visit to the hotel till he was long home:—well, that meant that he relegated Hilda to a minor place, his afternoon with Harcourt Stead much more worth talking of.

What ailed her, what ailed her? she asked herself. Was her true place in that stratum of society in which, after marriage, a man might not even say "Good-evening" to his neighbour's wife over the fence without bringing a scowl to the brow of his own wife, nor a woman smile to another's husband without rousing jealous dudgeon in the heart of her own husband?

She hung up the dish-towel. She passed back into the sitting-room. No Peter there! He was still outside in the dark. And in her perturbed and contrite state the emptiness of the room distressed her. What would she do without her dear loved man? She crossed to the windows and saw him, a dark silhouette, staring up at the stars. She stepped out beside him and slipped her hand into his.

His fingers closed on hers with such intensity that he hurt her; but the pain was good, for by the intensity of that grasp she had assurance that he needed her.

CHAPTER XIII

Peter lay awake while in her cot close to his Helen slept. Through the open window the rain murmured to him in the immensity of night.

Was he in love with two women at once? Even in passionate proximity to Hilda Perry, holding her ardently to him, there had remained knowledge of his great love for Helen. Absence from her caused no change in his thought of her. Presume he lost her! That murmur of the rain moved him to that consideration. He knew it falling over all his shire, lisping among elms, dripping from birch copses in which there would be a sudden additional spattering sound when a breeze, shaking the branches, went past, striking metallic notes from harrows lying in field corners, drumming loud on the slate roofs of the village and muffled on the thatches of sequestered farms, hissing round the stone cottage of that shepherd he sometimes visited in the wild end of a lonely glen, and infinitesimally but surely deepening the pock-marks of the centuries on the time-worn gravestones round the old church of Elwinfoot.

Presume—the idea made his heart quail—that she were to die, what would life be, lacking her? Would he turn to Hilda Perry? No! He would wish never to see Hilda again. Were she to come to him then, his heart would cry for Helen. He rose on an elbow and listened. The room seemed utterly silent, save for tenuous echoes of the rustle of rain in its corners. He held breath, giving ear. He tiptoed from his bed, listening. When he heard her regular breathing he drew a long shuddering sigh of relief and returned to bed again. He had the desire to waken her that he might tell her of his devotion—and lay very still not to disturb her slumber. Valiantly—no, in serene belief; it was he who required to be valiant—she faced with him the uncertain future of this life. If after death there were another life for disembodied spirits, fain would he live that also with her. And, as for that subject: though he could not honestly respond to "I believe in the resurrection of the body" he could readily conceive as possible (and let the question of probable or improbable go) a spiritual continuance, and that as much, despite the "Nay" of a large section of the intelligentsia at the moment in office, by consideration of recent discoveries of science and ponderings upon their implications as by aid of recent psychical research.

In the largeness of her nature, he decided, Hilda had been unbelievably good regarding that hot occurrence, thought of which, regret for which, kept

him awake. She had said it would have to be their secret; she had even told him, to comfort him, thought he, that there was no evil in their kiss; but he had not been able to agree with her. To him, lying there, what had befallen was sin. To him it was sin. To another it might not be. To him it was, for the reason that he could not tell Helen of it. That Hilda Perry had been so understanding, so tolerant, so kind, must not be cause for a repetition of the event, should chance set them alone together again.

He felt, also, that he should be merciful to her. Had he not realised how flame-like was her nature, how she could be inhabited by fleeting emotions so ardently that it seemed even her personality changed at their urge? Such as she suffer enough with the fires of their own ardours.

So he pondered, lying there with the rain in the night. But what he called his love for Hilda was limited. In the clutch of it he was merely chiefly moved by a stratagem of that Nature which seeks to keep the world peopled. His love for his wife was of other quality, wider, deeper, something utterly different. Eternity touched it. In his love for Helen he lived more in eternity than in time. To the murmur of that rain he fell asleep.

When he awoke the creases of Elwin Hills were sending up pearly vapours to a blue sky, and the leaves in the hedges were leaves of light, and blackbirds volubly chattered of the wet freshness. He was going to begin afresh. He had the resolute bearing of a man who has taken a resolve and repudiated indecision.

When he went up to his workshop after breakfast, Helen, communing with herself, was ashamed that she had allowed thoughts she must perforce call jealous to create disorder in her. She, too, was herself again. Without laying the blame upon him for what she described as her foolishness, she considered that perhaps, telepathic as they were, his recent restlessness had affected her. Truly a demented man he had been of late, glooming into the sitting-room (only straws lacking to complete the picture of derangement), opening the corner cupboard, fingering the snuff-box, the old fob, the hair-locket, the collet-ring, the ancient Mull brooch, sighing and locking it; puckering his mouth over the Paisley shawl; going out on to the lawn, coming in, going upstairs—and coming down again; taking up his golf-clubs, then changing his mind and putting them back in their corner; flinging off for a walk on Elwin Hills, alone with his distress of themelessness and returning obviously still themeless, subjectless, plotless. But now—now it seemed he was at last calmly in the process of deliverance, and Helen shared his calm.

It occurred to her that to Hilda Perry she should be grateful for the change. Her arrival had given him, Helen thought, the necessary fillip. Harcourt Stead had helped, no doubt; and Stead he would see again this very evening. Peter had told her, as he went upstairs, that when he had written what he called a decent number of words, instead of working on, he would desist and wash the car against their run into Edinburgh that evening. She heard him come down, go out. She heard his cheery whistling over at the garage.

Her face was radiant with the arrival of a happy thought. The brain-wave, as she'd call it, made the kitchen brighten as though a cloud had passed from the sun, the blue and white of plates in their racks above the dresser gleam anew, the range seem new-polished, in fact, brightened her spirit, that had been contrite over its smallness, with a suggestion for atonement. To Peter she would atone for her expression of petulant regret to him that he had carried off Hilda on a pilgrimage upon which she was to have accompanied him; and for her puerile jealousy toward Hilda Perry (though, to be sure, Miss Perry was unaware of it) Helen would make *amende honorable*.

She stepped happily into the hall and took up the receiver. She would prepare a pleasant surprise for Peter. Yes, Miss Perry was in and would be called. A brief interval and Hilda's voice was in her ear.

"Would you care to join us in town at dinner to-night before the lecture?" asked Helen.

A pause, and then—

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Cunningham. I'd love to—terrifically!"

"All right. We'll call for you about six—or a little after."

She sped over to the garage and the whistling.

"Hullo!" said Peter. "I've just had a notion. How would it be if we had dinner in town before the lecture? Make an evening of it. It's due to us to change a leg."

"Goodness, we are telepathic!" Helen ejaculated. "Did you read my thoughts or did I read yours?"

"Elucidate," said he.

"Well, I was just thinking it was due to you, anyhow, after all these days of chasing elusive plots and puppets."

“Days! It seems like months.”

“I believe change did it for you—change and talks with your own folk: Hilda Perry, Harcourt Stead. You’ll see Stead to-night, anyway. And—I’ve made sure you’ll see Hilda!”

His face lengthened. His jaw dropped.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve phoned and asked her to join us at dinner before the lecture,” she explained.

He was on the point of saying: “Good God! You’ve telephoned Hilda Perry! Can’t we manage a bit of team work, you and I? Why the dickens did you not call a conference first?” But the troubled look on her face—it was as if she wailed to herself, *sotto voce*, “What have I done now?”—the look of perplexity, awakened by his so evident lack of spontaneous pleasure, caused him mercifully to restrain that rush of carping words. How young she looked, and as a little eager child nonplussed!

“That will be splendid,” he chanted.

He tried to throw the ring of joyous acquiescence into his voice, but only succeeded in sounding very formal. This was the tone in which he was wont to accept plaguy invitations that he saw no way of rejecting.

Helen really knew him fairly well.

“You don’t say that very heartily,” she commented, though less woe-begone of aspect.

“Well,” he explained, “I was just thinking I had seen her yesterday.”

He had indeed!

“But she inspires you, Peter. She’s brilliant. You love her poems and she loves your essays. And for some time you have been seeing only the least inspiring of the local people. I thought it would be a happy surprise for you if I could arrange it.”

“Quite,” he agreed. “I think it is a grand notion,” and that time he managed to speak with a ring as of sincerity. “But I was not perhaps as enthusiastic over it as I might have been because, you see, I’d been planning a little dinner—just oor ain twa selves.”

“O—h!” she sighed, and her candid hazel eyes lit with quick pleasure because of his intention, and were shadowed with regret that she had spoiled

it. “I can’t put her off now. I don’t see how I can. What excuse——”

“No, no. That’s all right. You can’t do that. Don’t worry! We’ve got all eternity before us—and all time for dining out alone. It was a charming thought you had. Any lack of evidence of immediate delight was because I’d planned a dinner with you alone—and because, as I say, I saw her yesterday, and—” (an inspiration) “you know, ‘Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour’s house; lest he weary of thee, and so hate thee.’ Sound advice!”

“She’s exceptional, though, Peter,” said Helen. “She lives apart from the common or garden rules and laws for life. She won’t hate you.”

He gave an odd little laugh in response to that and went on with his car-cleaning—and his whistling. But the quality of the whistling had changed from loud and carefree to tenuous. It was after the manner of the hissing sounds with which such men as remain to attend to what horses remain in these days accompany the scrapes of their currycombs.

CHAPTER XIV

How the meeting was to be negotiated was an anxiety to Peter, and perturbation accompanied him as they entered the portico of the Royal Stewart. Lights were not lit in the streets, but in the hall of the hotel were already aglow; and there was Hilda strolling over their reflections in the dark brown tiles, with that manner of seeing no one, yet seeing them the moment they entered.

“There she is!” said Helen, and “There you are!” as she fluttered to them.

“My dear,” Hilda crooned, giving a hand to each on the word, “how sweet of you.” She embraced and released Helen in a quick movement. “Whose lovely idea was this?” she asked.

“It was my own,” Helen replied. “Peter was working when I had the brain-wave.”

Thus, in the instant of meeting, Hilda had a question that had been of considerable import to her lightly asked and lightly answered—and answered truthfully she knew.

The meeting was, after all, accomplished without any marked embarrassment for Peter, and the convention that turns the man at such times to attendant aided him to seem entirely at ease.

“We’re taking you elsewhere for dinner, as a change for you,” said Helen, and the women fell in step toward the door, he dodging behind them. “It is only a stone’s-throw we have to go. We’ve left the car round the corner. We could all squeeze in but——”

Peter lost the rest of that preliminary small-talk as they insinuated themselves through the crowd in the entrance. On the pavement they walked together, Helen very glad that she had given way to her brain-wave, so clearly had it brought pleasure to this admirer of Peter’s work. Anytime, as he had said, they could have a little dinner out—just their ain twa selves. She liked Hilda Perry more near to wholeheartedly on this meeting. Even that quick embrace had not given her anything in the nature of the shudder produced by a former one. Here was the girlish, the effervescent Hilda Perry; and she liked her.

“Don’t you adore these little paper-cutters with a cairngorm handle?” said Hilda, nodding towards a shop window and, chattering, they passed along the street, Peter but in attendance.

Hilda was thinking, “What was her idea?” Ulterior motive was something she understood and was somewhat prone to look for. A deed apparently charitable, or an action seemingly friendly in impulse, she would examine secretly. She’d turn it over, as it were, for a peep at the carat-mark. She knew (what Peter did not know) that Helen had seen his demonstrative caress out on the terrace when they awaited breakfast, and she suspected that she now had her eye upon them, with jealousy, proprietorial toward him. By the evidence she had lightly culled at the moment of meeting she knew that he had not suggested this dinner to-night. What, then, was Mrs. Cunningham up to? Did she desire an opportunity to watch them together? Had Peter, perhaps, in the way of transparent foolish men, let out, unaware, some sufficient hint to his wife that something dubious had happened on his visit to her yesterday? Was Helen, by any chance, doing what’s called “throwing them together,” under the impression that in that would be speediest remedy? There was a little flash in Hilda’s eyes at that suspicion. If such were her impression—she’d show her! The thoughts in Helen’s mind, that morning, that had moved her to telephone the surprising invitation, were outside of Hilda’s comprehension. She weighed all corn in her own bushel, had a tendency to be satisfied, wondering how others would act in this or that contretemps, by considering how she would act in their shoes, had still some way to go before realising the diversity of creatures. Fumbling for a reason for this invitation she could not stumble on the true one.

But there came a moment as they waited, arriving at their destination, for Peter to surrender his hat and coat, when, meeting Helen’s eyes, Hilda had a stab at the heart, seeing their expression of sheer friendliness. That secret sense of hurt, that she had experienced at first sight of Peter’s wife, again she felt then, and her eyelids sagged to hide, lest it might show in her eyes, as sudden a sense of shame. She dismissed it, and raised and tossed her head.

At the dining-room door the head-waiter, in the arrested first motion of a bow, had his eye on the slowly advancing ladies, ready, when Peter strode after them pocketing his identification disc, to complete the bow.

“Good-evening. Table reserved for three,” said Helen.

“Ah, yes, Mrs. Cunningham. Good-evening, M. Cunningham. Good-evening, madam,” he added to their guest with a still deeper obeisance, and

led the way, with extended arm indicating the table reserved for them, as in some ritual.

Seated safely, though thus far all was well, Peter wished again, most ardently, that Helen had not had her brain-wave for this night or, having it, had put it to the vote of the house. What would she think if she knew that yesterday this guest of theirs, so radiant, so self-possessed, had been in his arms, turning her face to his, greedy for his kiss, agitated by his passion? Had Hilda, he wondered, been as shocked on receiving the invitation to dine with them as he when Helen told him what she had done? He wished he could get inside her head and discover what her private emotions were as, with ease, she chatted, calling his wife "my dear." Though, to be sure, he considered, he had more reason than she to feel guilty qualms.

As the dinner progressed he came to the conclusion that clearly she had condoned. Clearly she was still of the same mind as yesterday—and as merciful. She had addressed herself chiefly to Helen to begin with. Evidently she would let him see that she was minded to be in love with his wife, appreciating her charm, her sweetness. The ordeal was not so terrible as he had expected it would be. He felt, in fact, as the evening went on, a sense of gratefulness to Hilda and was able to meet her eyes, accept a smile she offered him, an encouraging smile, a smile that shot him, he believed, a glint of gentle raillery: she would tell him all was well. When she interjected an exclamation, in a lull between talk of this and that, "It is nice to be with you two dears," he was content, making the discovery that even out of the bitter might come forth sweetness and, out of agony, ease. Hilda Perry was a friend now who knew him, accepted him as he was; and—once his preliminary heaviness had lifted—it was obvious to him that they were both her friends, that they were now equally her friends. That interjection ratified his impression. So he was able to admire again her grace, her vivacity, her changing eyes that made him think of opals. He admired her anew, admiring now her self-possession that was added to her tolerant worldly-wisdom. The sense of ordeal was over, though still there lurked in his mind the dread of what Helen would think if she knew the truth, the whole truth of that visit to the hotel to read and pass Hilda's article. What would she think? What would she feel?

"What's your new novel to be about?" Hilda asked, turning to Peter who, by the haze in his eyes, had lapsed into reverie.

But there was no immediate answer. He came back from wherever he had remissly been, though still with a look as of divided attention in these violet eyes of his (that disturbed her as greatly as her changing and opal ones

troubled him), and his brows puckered as he sought to compress the reply into a sentence. He had diffidence with any—Helen excepted—in talking of his own work, above all when it was only in the stage of fermentation.

Helen almost said, "Peter, Miss Perry is speaking to you," and then remembered that, for reasons he had not been able to explain, he had not been desirous to talk, on her visit to Elwinfoot, of the Paisley shawl as related to his nebulous notion for that next novel. But as he still did not answer, she did so for him, with the wifely intention then to satisfy Hilda with a reply in the vague, the general.

"It is just taking shape so far. He was telling me, on the way in, about his day's work and that he thought to-morrow he'd have to go into the library to hunt up some books on costume."

"Ah! It's a costume novel!" said Hilda, and Helen thought the intonation was of interest, and Peter thought it was as of one triumphing that she had got a foot inside a door marked "Private." He seemed to be sinking into a mood almost taciturn, cantankerous. To veil it, he tried to look intelligent and genial.

"Not exactly," replied Helen. "He's been haunted by the wish to do a story of several generations. I think he knows pretty well the history of the period he wants to begin with. But he was telling me he can't just see the characters. It struck him that if he pored over some good costume books it might start them moving."

"Absolutely!" agreed Hilda. "There are lines in great Shakespeare that may be taken as evidence that the apparel and trappings of his people fitted into the general scheme terrifically, and were party to some of his best passages. Most volumes of history give the facts—or the fable agreed upon—but they don't show the people moving about, in their habit, as they lived."

Peter felt self-conscious with both of them discussing his plans while he sat mute. He was like a little boy hearing his school-efforts talked about by his elders, and trying to look intelligent and humble and succeeding only in seeming put out. He glanced at his watch.

"By Jove! We'll have to be going," said he.

They rose, and he leapt to his wife's chair to help her on with the coat that she had slipped from her shoulders. Their waiter promptly hurried to Hilda to assist with hers.

“You should have helped Miss Perry,” murmured Helen as she half-turned, slipping her arm into a sleeve.

Yes, to be sure, that might have been the courteous thing to do; but he was giving evidence—was he not?—upon which of the twain he loved! This was symbolic to himself—and a signal to Hilda if she cared to note it. Did not his wife come first? The waiter could serve the guest. He raised his head and frowned. The little correction annoyed him. Why had she not asked him if he’d like to dine with Hilda Perry instead of arranging the evening without conference? His frown brought the head-waiter solicitously to the table.

“Everything all right, Mr. Cunningham?” he asked, with a glance at the one who had attended to them.

“Ab-solutely,” said Peter. “Edibles, liquids, and service all beyond reproach,” which caused the head-waiter to add a smile to his bow of satisfaction.

Arrived at the lecture-hall, following the usher to their seats, Helen caught Hilda’s arm.

“Won’t you sit between us?” she suggested. “I’ll go in first.” She glanced at Peter. “Or, better still, you sit between us, Peter, and I’ll come last.”

“As you please,” said Peter.

He was annoyed at her further ordering because, if she had not ordered the evening to begin with, he’d not have been here. But there must be no exterior evidence of such small carping. For a man who spoils an evening for others because of petty fretfulness it should be possible somehow to put the clock back and return him to the years in which he could be spanked. He squared his shoulders, and looked pleasant.

“Yes, let him sit in the middle,” agreed Hilda, “unless it is terrifically wrong according to the conventions in Edinburgh, at a chamber-lecture, for a man to sit between his women. His wife on one side and his devoted admirer on the other, if he will. Men hate being ordered,” she added over her shoulder to Helen as they moved into their seats in that order—Hilda first, Peter following, Helen coming last.

When they were comfortably seated, Hilda leant before Peter and remarked: “Quite a crowd.”

“What did you say?” asked Helen, and they bent head to head before him, his wife’s right hand laid on his knee in the motion, Hilda’s left arm

pressed to him.

And at that came a new attitude to his knowledge of the secret between them. “We share a secret, she and I,” thought he.

“There’s going to be quite a crowd,” said Hilda.

“Yes, indeed.”

“Excuse me.” An usher bent between the Cunninghams. “It is Mr. Cunningham, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“A note for you, sir.”

It was a thrice-folded fragment of paper with a spidery scrawl: “How would this day week do? Could arrive at your place about lunch-time. Rushing off to-night as soon as this thing is over. Affectionately, H. S.”

Peter held the note to his wife and she read it.

“Will it suit?” he asked.

“That’s for you to say, dear,” she answered. She had taken rather weightily to heart Hilda’s light comment about ordering.

“Good God!” thought Peter. “She can arrange the evening. She can tell us where to sit. And when I ask her if this will suit, it’s for me to say!”

He looked over his shoulder. The bearer of the note had moved away, but tarried in the aisle.

“Haven’t got pencil or pen to write a reply,” said Peter. “Please say, Yes, delighted.”

Stealthily the messenger tiptoed away; for the chairman had crept on to the platform, nervously, ushering in Harcourt Stead, self-possessed, and a thin applause greeted them, quickly suppressed when the clapping minority realised that the majority remained impassive. It was not the thing to be profuse in welcome. The lecturer here had to prove that he deserved ovation, was on trial, however successful elsewhere.

Peter sat bolt erect with divided mind, greatly divided. He admired Stead’s platform manner, his way of casting back his head to draw his hearers’ attention, his impeccable deportment, what he did with his hands and his voice. But he was hindered from perfect concentration on the lecture by commotion within him. To right sat a woman who had lured him physically, against his mind, against his will. To left sat a woman whose

spirit he loved. (To be sure, sure that there was no continuance for the spirit when the flesh failed, seemed to have been a step on the way toward deriding the belief in an inhabiting spirit; and but another step it was to seeing love as only the sexual urge, only physical. To those who had taken all these steps Peter's love for Helen would be as "bunk." There was a growing body of those who would look upon him, by reason of the quality of his love for Helen, as old-fashioned, outmoded, "dated," idiotic, they being, in their own estimation, the people with whom understanding and wisdom would die. But he would not be true to them. He had to be true to himself. There were times even, thinking how life would be changed were he to lose her companionship in it, when he quoted quietly to himself: " 'And all is dross that is not Helena.' ")

His hand encountered hers and he caught it and held it, pressed it for a moment. He glanced at the clock. In an hour they'd be spinning home through the night.

He sat bolt erect, staring at Stead, it seemed lost in his smooth, his genial discourse, and was suddenly aware that it had ended and that the chairman was making a speech; and then, in the fashion of these functions (function was the word for this) the intelligentsia were all upon their feet and hurrying out of the hall as if each were under the impression that to make exit last was an unpardonable sin: devil take the hindmost. No applause to speak of—a formal little clapping and then that haste to be gone. He recovered from thoughts of himself sufficiently to hope that some one would tell Stead that was just the usage, the correct thing, here, and did not signify that they all thought the lecture was a *dud*.

They were outside. They were in the street. Gamins slithered from one to the other offering boxes of matches, importuning, "Get ye a taxi? Get ye a taxi?" They came to the hotel door and there they stopped.

"Won't you come in and have some coffee and cigarettes?" asked Hilda.

"I think we must be going," said Peter before Helen could accept. "We have a longish way to go home, you know."

There was an expression as of pain on Hilda's face—the same that Helen had remarked on it when, from the spare room at Elwinfoot, she had looked down at them. Impulsively she caught Helen's right hand in both of hers.

"Good-night, dear," she said. "It was sweet of you."

She smiled to Peter and whirled away.

"D'you know," said Helen when they were in the car, "I think she was hurt that we did not stay for coffee and cigarettes as she asked."

"Do you think so? Well, we can't go back now."

"Oh, no. But I think she was. I was going to say we'd be delighted when you——"

"I thought you'd be tired and wanting to get home."

"Still, I wouldn't hurt her. She's very sensitive, and d'you know, I think she likes us both immensely. I hate hurting people who like me. I'm awfully grateful for affection."

"Uh-hu. I know."

The car purred on out of the streets to roads, and in place of houses on either hand were hedges and trees created by their headlights and tossed away, as soon as created, into the ambient darkness.

Suddenly she turned her head and peered at his face in the thin spray of radiance from the dash-light.

"Peter," she said, in a voice as of one who had made a terrible discovery.

"Yes?" and he waited.

"Tell me——"

"Tell you what?"

"The new novel isn't going well after all," said she.

That was a relief. He had thought something else was coming.

"No," he admitted, "it is not."

"Oh," she sighed, "that explains all."

He did not ask what she meant. He was learning the value of reticence, of leaving well alone. Something unwonted in his manner this evening, no doubt, was the meaning of that "all;" his helping her on with her coat instead of attending first to their guest, his quick refusal of the invitation to go in with Hilda for coffee and cigarettes part of the bill-of-lading of that momentous deep-freighted "all."

"I'm glad all is explained," he said.

Having thus spoken he lapsed into silence again. He had not taken the long by-pass, but now he swerved into a side-road to enjoy at least part of the secluded country lying aloof from the highway, the headlights, at the

bend, creating a gnarled pear-tree in the obscurity of the lower night and sending its pattern dancing over a gable. It was as if they intruded with a lamp into the inmost places of sleep and forgetfulness. A quick spinning of the wheel and pear-tree and patterned gable were tossed away. The car chirred on.

“Perhaps you should discard the Paisley shawl as a *motif*,” she said, “and turn to something else altogether.”

They were at another bend. In place of road ahead a great bouquet of thistles with all their royal crowns—that soon would be purple—and encirclement of spears, rose up. Peter chanted, “Lovely, lovely!” in an ecstasy. That flaunt of the cohort of thistles surprised him out of his troubles. By links of suggestion, following the surprise, they filled him with a sense of love for his land. There swept through his mind, pricked by these thistles, many memories of his intimacy with it. He remembered the play of waves with rocky Moidart’s fringes of seaweed as he had seen it all a bright and breezy summer day, tramping there on a path that coasted clamorous beaches and climbed over the bases of rugged promontories. He heard again the birches of the wood of Lettervore, whither he had once made pilgrimage, like a thunder of tissue paper, agitated in a sudden wind. He remembered a corner of Bute where, to the passive cooing of wood-pigeons high in the columned quiet of a wood of firs and pines, relics of Norsemen and monks were smoothed into equality under velvet moss. He had the urge to get all these things into words, set upon paper, for those who cared, even though there were others who would say his fervent aim was but fribbling and that he should be using his pen—that was the phrase, using his pen—to proclaim the story of the parlous state of his land in the sphere of domestic and political economy. He had to do what he could. He had to do what he must. He thought of the smell of peat and of wet tweeds, sensuous and robust.

Helen had looked away beyond the battalion of thistles at the bend. The lights, rippling over them, had bobbed a moment, as he spun the wheel, away up the hill and showed the rut of the ancient drove-road, a white scar, white as a chalk smear on the slope in their rays.

Recovering of his ecstasy, and returning from these swift reveries, Peter harked back to her remarks regarding the possible advisability of vexing himself no longer over the Paisley shawl. Certainly, so far, it had given him no more than innuendoes for a story of the passing generations.

“I’ll tell you a novel that would be popular, anyhow,” he growled; “a change from the wife and mistress theme, or the husband and paramour one.

Odd, by the way," he interjected, "that in these yarns one can say 'mistress' but 'paramour' is not right. It's got to be 'lover.' Well, look here—a man with three women: one for ethical discussions; one for golf and tramps; and one for the love that in French novels seems to be the sole meaning of the word, the love by which Mother Nature lures us to her assistance toward the continuance of the species. What?"

"It doesn't sound like a story for you, old man," she said. "Do you know, when the headlights flickered up on the scar of the old drove-road I thought that there you could get a subject that would give you scope for what you want—a story of the passing generations."

"*The Drove-Road! The Drove-Road!*" He mouthed it over. And she knew him well enough to realise by his voice that he was captivated by her suggestion.

The car ran on, patted by a night wind, on a low roof of the world to which they had climbed. It seemed that they were among the stars. The shire lay below them dark as an unseen ocean, might indeed have been ocean were it not for small spears of light, spear chasing spear, across it where, they knew, the main road lay on the plain.

Peter was again reckless artist, heedless of the importunate troubles of life. Debts to be paid, vexing personal emotional tangles, were trifling, side-issue, compared with all the ecstasy that had come to him at the sight of one clump of wild thistles, weeds, in a bend of the road; in the rush of memories that followed; in three words—*The Drove-Road*—that might, or might not, be the title of an alternative new novel, but that sent a moving pageant of the Border generations through his mind.

CHAPTER XV

In the morning, so tempestuous that it was a marvel how the flowers were not whirled away from their stalks, and from the stand of pines down the road came an uproar that made him think of the Atlantic shouting on Jura, Peter came near to changing his plan for the day. The new idea that Helen had tossed him on the way home haunted him. From an invigorating tramp with her round the hills, turning it over in his mind the while, he might return with no anxiety or trouble in all his world, save to know that his fountain pen was full, and clamp him down gaily and tingling to the drafting of the chapters.

But whether the Paisley shawl or the drove-road was to make the world in his mind more real than the world round him, the book would be one of the passing generations. And to delve into these costume volumes was equally valuable, whichever he decided upon. Further, hating himself for his vacillation, his instability, revealed to him all too clearly, he would not plan and retract. Wherefore he set off after breakfast.

In town, Hilda did not stir abroad all morning. She had, as Helen feared, been hurt by Peter's almost brusque refusal of a further hour with her over coffee and cigarettes in her hotel. But by the time she had reached her room on the third floor the chagrin at that had given way to exultation. Her subtle mind found reason for it. She recalled certain glances he cast upon her during the dinner, she thought of the sudden catch of his breath when she leant before him to speak to his wife. He had been, she decided, only making sure that Helen would not suspect his passion—and had somewhat overacted the lying evidence. She had had other experiences, in which had been duplicity. She believed she had but to await his coming.

That knowledge did not interfere with her work. Over her notes she sat all morning, and her work went well. That all creative labour was but the sexual urge deflected she was certain. She worked best, she had found, when under the influence of sexual stir. An affair did more for her than all the advertised brain-foods accredited with the autographs of prolific and prominent scribes. She was sure, or all but sure—and the flick of uncertainty was in itself stimulating—there would be a phone-call for her sometime in the forenoon, and there would be his voice to tell her he was in town and ask if he might lunch with her.

But lunch-hour came and neither phone-call from Peter Cunningham nor Peter Cunningham announced by the little boy in buttons as arrived. As she sat down to lunch alone she decided that he had not come to Edinburgh that morning but would do so in the afternoon. Wherever she moved that day she left word where she was to be found, so that she could be summoned quickly, and she did not move beyond the door. The clerk in the office wondered what was the cause of her anxiety. Some relative ill in hospital, perhaps, explained it, he hazarded. ("I'll be in the writing-room if a phone-call comes."—"I'll be up in my room if a phone-call comes."—"I'm having afternoon tea, if any one arrives and asks for me."—"Very good, madam.") He was very gracious and tender in manner to the lovely creature whose eyes were, as the day advanced, immensely troubled.

Dining alone, glances of those at the neighbouring tables rested a moment on her, so aloof she seemed, and in her eyes an intense introspection. Her temperament could indeed make torment for herself. Her knowledge, her certainty—or all but certainty—of what would befall that day, thus shaken, there were flecks of anger among her distress. But it is no revelation that in the ardently sexual what they call love may blend with hate, or alternate with hate. Many-sided she had seemed to Peter and Helen, on her visit to Elwinfoot, so markedly as to give at times the impression less of a woman of infinite variety than of a vessel variably and variously inhabited, possessed. But Peter had not been given a glimpse of this facet of the woman whose proximity had so greatly affected him.

At any rate, he was home again then at the round table in the happy house at Elwinfoot, over dinner with Helen, deep in discussion of what manner of mould he should make into which to pour—what he wanted to pour, a story, a pageant, of the Border generations. Next to his devotion to his land, that devotion which had caused him first to be remarked as what's called a nature writer, he was intensely interested in its old history, steeped in it, as they say. Whatever was to be the outcome of all this heady ferment, the costume volumes he knew, by the symptoms, were what he wanted at the moment. He would go again next day to the library and continue his quest among the old wardrobes, and suddenly the dry bones would live, the lively puppets would be attired and would move through his mind, playing their parts, more real to him than the people around him.

"Hilda Perry caught the idea at once," said Helen. "She realised how the puppets might turn almost to real living creatures that way."

"Yes," he said, and thought not of Hilda Perry then, saw only the wraith of a lost lady of old years toss over her shoulders a shawl of dark, lustrous

background, patterned with flowers gold and green and blue, and on the drove-road a dust rising, and heard voices calling out of the past.

"Nobody," remarked Helen when his eyes focused back to the room and the table, "who does not write, has any faintest idea of the extraordinary preliminary troubles."

"Nor of the later troubles even," he replied. "Ah, but there are moments of ecstasy as well as of——" he was about to say *travail* but did not want to be high-falutin, showing his heart on his sleeve regarding his work, so he amended, "bally purgatory!" and set off again to town and the library.

Arrived in Edinburgh that morning he was about to go up the broad flight of stairs to Princes Street when he was intercepted by two slowly-moving luggage trucks. He turned the other way and made exit up the sloping pavement beside the vehicular entrance. Thus he missed Hilda, who awaited him, or lay in wait for him on information received, as shall be duly explained, at the top of the Waverley Steps, on which most climb from the station.

The muffled thud of the one o'clock gun brought a period to his investigations and explorations in the quiet of the book-lined reference room. He passed slowly to the street, all his little people walking with him, generations of them, whether eventually to deepen the scar of the drove-road in their passing or to wear the shawl he did not know, but he saw them, in their habit, as they lived.

"Oh, there you are!"

There was Hilda Perry, who had been extraordinarily comprehending to him regarding his unrestrained turmoil in a moment that, by her frank gaze now, was taken as pardonably human, condoned, forgotten. In his violet eyes as they came from their dreams and looked into hers there was certainly no hatred. She felt assured then, as he took her hand, that he had been distant at parting, night before last, merely warily, to hide from his wife his passion for herself. Had she waited a little longer for him she felt sure he would have come to her. But she had been unable to wait.

She cast back her head against a wind that shrilled in the bleached street, hummed in the chimney-pots and telephone wires, and in a gesture that he had noted before raised a lissome arm and with the flat of her hand pressed down upon the crown of her hat.

"What windy days we are having," she said.

"Yes. Yesterday was a corker. But I love them. There is a sense of up and doing even if it takes the breath from one sometimes at a corner."

"I love them too;" and then she explained her presence there: "I rang you up this morning," she said, "to ask if by any chance you were to be in town, as I wanted to consult you about something. And your wife told me you were going to the library. I thought I'd come and waylay you and see if you could come and have lunch with me. I've something to ask your opinion about, if you don't mind."

"I'd be delighted," he said, "if I can be of any help."

Tall, almost, as he, erect, vigorous, she swung along beside him, the wind hilarious in the chimney-pots high aloft.

"What's the problem or trouble you want to discuss?" he asked.

"Oh, after lunch."

"Good!"

CHAPTER XVI

The waiter departed with their order and there was a lapse in her vivacity. She was absent in thought, staring beyond him with eyes wide-open but unseeing. He let her have her reverie uninterrupted. But when, after a lowering of her eyelids and the drawing of so deep a breath that it seemed she must have been holding it during her abstraction, she focused her gaze back to him, and smiled, he had an inquiry.

“It’s something rather worrying?” he asked.

“Oh, bless you, no!” she replied. “I wasn’t thinking of that. Forgive my wool-gathering.” But to reassure him she explained then, instead of delaying till after lunch, that she had wanted to consult him over an offer she had received for further work. “Though now,” she told him, “I don’t believe it was advice I wanted. I believe I only wanted ratification of my reply. I haven’t posted it yet. I’ll show it to you later;” and she changed the subject.

She set a theme, one warranted to bring response from him even in midst of earthquake and eclipse. For the theme was their craft. In talk of that, certainly, they met at ease. A sentence, in their ears, could ring a peal of bells. If only, he thought, in the midst of this talk, their friendship could be held thenceforward in equilibrium all would be well. True, he knew from observation that where passion (or the sort of passion her presence had roused in him) has entered it is sometimes hard to recover equilibrium, such passion seeming to be averse to the static. Yet could not this friendship remain as it is now? he mused.

As he was thus considering, she found a link to lead to more intimate discussion. She was launched upon a dissertation on the Zeitgeist—or what she called, believed to be, the Zeitgeist.

“I hate sentimentality,” she said. “I think it is absurd to harass oneself with ideals that can’t be lived up to. I believe in the following of impulse. I sometimes think the only sin is frustration of impulse.”

“The trouble is,” remarked Peter, feeling somewhat of a hypocrite as he spoke, or as one clinging to ideals he did not always live up to, recalling their secret, “that impulse is at strife with impulse. I once was clutched by a very violent one—when I was in digs at Garnethill in Glasgow, and trying to write an article—to go out and slay three children who were amusing themselves by dragging sticks across the area railings. I am glad I did not! I

would have been rather unhappy, you know, if I had murdered three little children;" and he laughed, but she remained very serious. She was upon a subject, to her, beyond humorous comment. "So I just had to concentrate afresh," he went on. "Anyhow, the din gave me a notion of what the sound of the old tirling-pins must have been like—worse than the more recent knockers."

And then he had an abstracted moment, his mind, at the jog of tirling-pins straying to thoughts of work. Hilda tilted her coffee-cup up and set it down empty, and he glanced at his watch. He'd have to be going, he thought.

"Well," said he, "do you really still want me to see that correspondence and give an opinion, or——"

"Perhaps you'd better. And we seem to be about the last at the tables. Several others have come and gone while we've been here. I have my reply written, though not posted. But I warn you, I feel like the man who tossed a coin to decide a course of action and then went contrary to the fall of the coin to show he had a will of his own. I think I only want you to agree that I am doing the right thing. However——" she rose. "Come up with me and I'll get the letters. You can read them on the settee beside your lustre bowl. It will be a good excuse for you to see it again."

But when they came to the third landing they found the settee occupied. An elderly white-haired woman, an elderly brindle-haired man, sat there in deep and seemingly forlorn converse.

"We'll have to go to my room," said Hilda. "Sometimes they don't get it cleaned by this time if I have not come down early. I'll see if it's tidy."

As she stepped toward the door it opened and a maid came out, almost colliding with her. Hilda, at that, remembered that on Peter's former visit to her room they had passed a witnessing chambermaid in the corridor; and there came to her mind a text, whence she knew not, to the effect that nothing is done in secret that is not made manifest. But——

"All clear for us to go in?" she asked pleasantly.

"All right, ma'am," replied the maid with perfect blankness, and moved away carrying her dustpan.

After all, Hilda Perry believed not only in the gospel of impulse, but had decided that in the following of impulse one had to be ruthless, which meant, perhaps, ruthless rather toward others than with oneself. If she had what she desired and in the end it was made manifest, and Peter's wife (as

one reads in the account of divorce proceedings) had but to collect evidence —well, she would have had her desire, and one has to be ruthless and not sentimental, and the cardinal sin is falsifying self: which was a very different point of view from that of Peter on the day after the visit to the hill above Bonaly when he thought of how, in what are called triangular stories, the end was invariably—invariably, he was sure—illusions shattered for one, remorse for one, acrimony for one, wherefore was it well to eschew any part in them. There were great differences between these two despite many tastes in common. For him, impulse clashed with impulse, and he was chary of those that were as runaway horses to which one was lashed Mazeppa-like.

She led the way into her room. The maid had left the blinds half-down and it was cool and dusky.

“Sit down,” she said, “and I’ll get you the letters.”

Peter seated himself in one of the large saddlebags with a feeling as of time having turned back.

“Here they are!” she exclaimed.

He read the correspondence and gave his opinion, agreeing with the wisdom of her reply; but as he looked up and their eyes met, and he said, “I quite agree,” her eyelids drooped. There seemed no need, he was thinking, to ask his opinion. She was a woman with sufficient brains and sufficient self-reliance, and surely sufficient knowledge of such matters (as experienced as his), to decide for herself. The suspicion flickered through his mind—a suspicion disagreeable to a man because of its inference of fatuous conceit—that to have his verdict on this correspondence was but a ruse to bring him here.

She took the sheets from him and having sealed the envelope containing the reply she had written but delayed to post, she set it on the mantel-piece. Then she turned and looked at him, aware that he had been following her movements; but there was no passion in his eyes. She was nonplussed. She had believed in her power over him.

“Well, I must *git*!” said he, rising.

Hilda suspected a note of pseudo-nonchalance in his voice. She drew closer to him. On his last visit here was it not at the moment of going that suddenly, in a whirl of abandon, he had closed the door and returned to her? But her moment had not been ripe then. He must know—know—that she had played no part in what, later, he might, because of a residue of old-fashioned ideals in him, repent of. He must not have evidence on which to

plead, “The woman tempted me.” But now there was a difference. His aspect was of one controlled. He had risen to go. It seemed as though the woman would have to tempt him again.

“Before you go, Peter Cunningham,” said she, abruptly, “tell me. I’ve wondered. What restrained you?”

“Restrained me?”

“Yes. The other day, here.”

“You, thank God!”

“Sit down,” she said. “I want to tell you something—before you go.”

He sat down and she leant against the mantel-piece, talking.

“I’ve a confession to make,” said she. “I wrote in my letter to you that the editor of *Woman To-day* suggested that I should come and interview you. He did not. I suggested it to him. I wanted to meet you.”

She paused, but he did not help her with any comment.

“I once saw a flapper in Kingsway,” she went on, “stop at a theatre-portico in which hung the portrait of a matinée idol. She gave a quick look round and then, thinking she was not seen, dived forward and kissed the portrait. Silly little idiot, I thought her. I’m afraid now that I’m a silly little idiot too.”

It seemed she abased herself in that simile and Peter was ill at ease as though sharing her abasement.

“I’ve cut your photograph from magazines and stuck them in your books,” she said, “and sometimes before I begin to write I’ll prop one of them open and sit and look at it for—oh, I don’t know how long—to get an inspiration.”

This declaration (rather painfully ironic from one who had so recently declared herself a hater of sentimentality) had been very near to embarrassing Peter although she was apparently unembarrassed herself in the telling. But he had done the same sort of thing himself. It was not beyond his comprehension.

“That’s awfully nice of you,” he said, trying to appear as though he looked upon her grangerising of his books as an ordinary proceeding, merely pleasing to hear of (despite the deeper implication she had put on it by likening herself to the silly flapper in Kingsway), and concentrating on the end of her confession instead of on the beginning. The thought was in his

mind again: “Yes. And to-day she inveigled me up here with this excuse that she wanted my advice on a correspondence she needed no advice upon.” He tried to help with a little badinage, but not derision. He did not find her ludicrous. There was no cruelty in him. “A pity,” said he, “that when you saw me in actuality you did not take what the Scots call a *scunner* at me!”

But she could not be drawn from her seriousness; it could not be leavened by so much as a smile. She went on, ruthlessly.

“I’ve got to tell you all this—just got to tell you,” she said, “to relieve myself. You’ve got to know;” and her face changed. It seemed clouded with anxieties, strained.

She made a movement of her shoulders, a quivering motion of her neck, as of shaking her hair into place, walked to and fro before him as in consuming restlessness. And he watched her, lithe of limb, saw the suave contours of her shoulders, her hips slightly swaying, her silken calves tautened by the high heels of her shoes. She delighted the eye like a piece of porcelain bric-à-brac or the bronze of a pacing tiger. She disturbed like scents of flowers. But there was also sensual disturbance in these movements, as well as sensuous. He felt pity for such a passionate creature, realising her as passionate then. She was no ordinary woman. She was too many in one. She was self-tortured. Her eyes were blinded, her eyelids were heavy with her strange passion.

Suddenly she swerved in her pacing and threw herself against his knees, succumbed there and laid her head on his shoulder. All her ardour was throbbing against him.

“I believe what restrained you, the other day,” she whispered, “was only fealty to—to your wife’s ideals.”

He resented mention of Helen. He felt a stab of anger. She must not say too much about his wife. But that remark need not be taken as depreciatory, so he doused the smoulder of rage.

“I want you, I want you!” she told him. “And I don’t feel a bit ashamed.”

He launched, at last, a scrutiny on this case in which he was involved, as keen—or almost as keen—as if it were one in which he was not involved, one with which he had no connection save that of the curious interest of a chiel objectively takin’ notes. He had no stricture, no condemnation in his heart. He had even pity. But he knew his own mind regarding his own part. Deeply he regretted that outbreak of his passion four days ago in this room, without any inquiry as to whether the woman had subtly tempted then or

not, and without any curiosity as to why she had cried, “No, no,” to what she pled for now. These considerations, that might occur to him in retrospect, were outside his immediate sense of the pity of it. So far as he was concerned, there was no longer need hastily to flee either from her or from himself.

“Good God!” he exclaimed. “You are a brain as well as a body. This is all wrong. I am not going to let old Mother Nature use us. She doesn’t care how it is done; but I’m not going to.”

“Aren’t you? I’m in league with her. I’ve no puritanic smear.”

“No, nor I, nor I. It’s not that.”

Her blouse sagging, he saw the quality of her skin, milky and shot with pink. Her face was close to his and her netted eyes looked into his.

“You do love me,” she sighed; “you love me, not your Helen!”

Abruptly he rose with a strength that communicated itself to her as an ecstasy. She thrust out a leg to support herself in the sudden movement, and her glance was on it with admiration, with pride in her alluring lines and grace. How could he resist her! But he set her upon her feet and held her away from him with rigid arms.

“No,” he said. “Put your mind right on that. Whatever I think of myself because of what happened here the other day—I love Helen.”

“But you began it. And now—when I’m willing—you—oh, I want you, I want you!” she cried. “I’m perfectly content to let old Mother Nature give her hands a flick”—she flicked her hands at him; she rubbed them together, palm to palm before him, he still holding her from him—“and say, ‘That’s that!’ Oh, my dear, you said ‘brain.’ My brain and yours—what might come of that! And don’t tell me one has to think of the child. I don’t belong to a past epoch of silly pretences. What’s the good of ideals one can’t live up to? They only torture one. They spoil life. From your brain and mine what might come!”

His brows puckered as he still held her away with rigid arms. There was in this passion something unnatural, something wrong, to him. A look as of antipathy was in his eyes. Feverishly then she regretted refusing him, four days earlier, that there might be no recrimination, no blaming of her in his mind later, but only a censuring of himself, if that traditional conscience of his, passion past, became active. And now she who had strategically restrained him, to prevent a thought in his mind that she had in any wise invited him, lost control.

“I want you, I want you!” she cried over and over again, and laughed and cried, and laughed and cried.

“Sit down and be quiet!” he rasped at her.

“I’m sitting down,” she answered. “I’m sitting down,” she pled, and stepping backward sat down.

“Control yourself!” he ordered.

She folded her hands in her lap.

“Don’t be angry with me. Oh, don’t be angry with me,” she implored, and began to sob quietly.

“Stop crying!”

She stopped, and sat there staring at him. And then another Hilda Perry was disclosed to him. The gem-like eyes were suddenly fiery with hate.

“You are an anachronism!” she said. “You are of a lost age that will never return. And fittingly wed,” she ended.

He was glad indeed that he had kept control before the lure of her lovely body, anger in his eyes then. He caught up his hat and stick and stepped to the door.

“I just want to say,” he spoke, fingers on the door-handle, “that I am very sorry—very sorry for my part in all this. I’m ashamed of myself. I treated you damnably the other day, like a cad.”

A quick shadow, as of fleeting shame, passed on her face, and then—

“Wait, wait! I can’t let you go like that,” she said, and turned distractedly to look for her hat, which she had thrown on the bed on entering.

She put it on, raising an arm in air, extending the long fingers, bringing them down on the back of the crown, then with a final pressure putting it on at the perfect angle. She opened her vanity-bag and took out her compact, dabbing her face with powder.

“I’ll come down with you,” she said.

Peter held the door wide open, and as she passed him slowly, very slowly, her head drooped as in great sorrow. But it seemed that he was unmoved. She stepped out and he followed, closing the door. She tossed her head.

“Let us take the lift,” she said. “You have no need for another sight of your bowl, so we won’t walk down. You don’t need it to preach morality to you!”

He accepted the sneer without comment. She pressed the bell.

“Down, please,” she said, and entered the cage with him.

They descended to the hall, turned toward the street. Hilda walked beside him, as a friendly hostess accompanying her guest to the door.

“Well——” she halted and faced him. “Forgive me,” she said. Always there was another turn to her unexpectedness. “You do forgive me, don’t you, for that horrid thing I said—about your wife? I didn’t mean it. Honestly, I didn’t mean it. You do forgive me?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you do. Still——” she held out her hand. And then there was another fresh turn to make him realise what a complex engine he had tampered with. “You can give me a parting kiss just here,” she tapped her cheek where it deserved, he had once thought (his mind taken up with the fashions of earlier years, when Paisley shawls were worn on graceful shoulders to balls, not draped over pianos), the comment of a patch. “And if your wife came along she would not mind a bit, she’d realise it was all in order, perfectly decorous;” which might have been taken as a slighting remark, though made so soon after a request for forgiveness for a “horrid” one. But his mind was not of the sort wontedly prone to niggling inspections, and at the moment, with a certain pity, he was troubled over her.

He looked at her closely.

“You won’t go back upstairs and cry?” he asked.

“No, no. You’ve done me the most terrific good.”

She held her cheek to him and he bent to kiss her on the spot she had gaily indicated; but, by a quick movement that she made, their lips met for a moment. With a tiny laugh, she immediately wheeled away, dropped him a little parting wave, and went tip-tapping along the entrance-hall while he marched out into the street.

CHAPTER XVII

The roll of the wheels under the carriage floor reiterated his assurance to himself that his thraldom was over and done with. Only a few days before (though ages ago it seemed) the effect upon him of proximity to that urgent and disturbing creature had made him think of a cockle-shell skiff in the tug of Corrievrechan. The day after the pilgrimage to the hill above Bonaly he had to make a resolve of imperviousness to her physical appeal, as a toper signs the pledge. Now he needed no resolves, no pledges with himself. All was over. That was the only way.

Into his head there came, from the war years, remembrance of Kitchener's admonition to the expeditionary troops that they be courteous, and not more than courteous, to women. Though, to be sure, all knew what Lord Kitchener meant, it was an advisory apothegm that had provoked much merry dialectics at mess for a day or two. The inquiry had been gaily propounded: If one were more than courteous with a damozel, was one then familiar? "Be courteous and not less than courteous with women," one had suggested as a variant. Memories of these dissertations passed and he thought of stories he had read of connubial tangles in which the reader was left with the husband loving his mistress, the wife loving her paramour—or "lover"—and the suggestion of the author that they had made the best of a bad job. But why didn't they get a divorce so that the husband, divorced, might marry his mistress, the wife, divorced, her paramour—or "lover"? Were they afraid that if they did they would, later, have to find them a fresh mistress, a fresh paramour? Did they (or the author who invented them) think that the mere possession of a little oblong piece of paper or parchment, a licence that did not have to be renewed annually like a bothering dog-licence or car-licence, was inimical to fealty, to continuance of affection? The implication was that merely being married could blight a love-affair! Was the only lasting alliance between a man and a maid one not so much as whispered to a registrar? Why, he could run uphill at Elwinfoot and burst in upon Helen and ask her to come and be married again—the oftener the merrier. He recalled the limpid sincerity in her great hazel eyes. Might they never be blurred by tears shed because of aught he did. They would grow old together, Helen and he, and look back on the fight they had shared, still young of heart.

Alighting from the railway carriage at Elwinfoot, he thought he had never known the air so fresh and gracious. The long shadows of afternoon

were in the village street. The sound of Elwin Burn under the bridge was melody. A tall buxom beech-tree that towered a little way beyond the last gable, at the beginning of the brae, was part of the joy in this home-coming. It was as a pillared world all to itself, with its thousands of leaves, trembling promontories of them so lit by the afternoon sun that they were as splinters of beaten gold, and some as though they might be transparent; and it had caves of darker gold in it with final caverns of dark shadowed green spotted with gold through chinks of the foliage. He looked up into the immensity and the spread and the height of it, his admiring gaze following the branches to their ends. The windy days were over, but a little breeze passed in it and the million sequins quivered, and the quake of the sequins and the ruffle and sigh went into his heart.

When he passed beyond that glorious tree, climbing the hill, a cuckoo was calling far off. It was good to be back here among the sights and sounds of his sanctuary. His recent fever was over, all over save for the forgetting of it. He wanted to forget it. A secret he could not share with Helen was best forgotten. Even if he could bring himself to tell her the truth, the whole truth, to do so now would be—well, caddish toward Hilda.

"All over, all over, all over," he said to himself, accompanying the chant with passes of his stick at protruding tufts of grass by the hedge-side.

As he walked up the path to the house the sound of music came to him. Helen was at the piano. What she could *put into it*! What she could *get out of it*! The tall French windows were open and he advanced to them, and still she played. He looked in at her, and it was as if he looked in at his own life. There she was, his loved Helen, unaware that she was not alone. Her rapt expression moved him. He stood there—loving his wife.

Suddenly it struck him that, if she were to glance up and see him, in that rapt mood she would be startled; so he walked away, went tiptoeing down the path, and then, turning about, waited till she had stopped—and approached whistling *The Campbells Are Coming* before she could begin again.

She ran out to meet him. He had known her ten years and been married for six, and she seemed not a day older than when they first met. She executed a hop, skip, and jump to meet him and whirled into the crook of his arm.

"Well, dear," he said, "I'd have been home sooner, but Hilda Perry waylaid me for lunch when I was leaving the library. She had some

correspondence she wanted me to look over and advise about, and of course we chatted on and on," which was the truth if not the whole truth.

"Is she in some difficulty, Peter? I wondered, when she rang up, if it was anything serious. She just said she wanted to see you rather urgently about a letter she had received."

"No, nothing serious. It was about an offer for articles. She knows as much about such matters as I. She really wanted me to confirm her own decision."

Helen laughed.

"That shows she's only human," she said. "There's a letter for you."

He opened it, and—"Ah-ha!" he exclaimed as he read.

"What?"

It was from the publisher of *Heather Afire* to inform Peter of the amount of sales from date of publication to end of June. The cheque that would follow, "on or before the last day of September," would be larger than he, if not Helen, had dared to hope.

"Read, read," quoth he. "Read, mark, and inwardly digest. It means that you are no more going to be servantless, with only a mere occasional keeping-up appearances maid when there are visitors."

She looked up from the letter.

"Must you always think of me, Peter?" she said. "Why, thousands of women since the war, who had a retinue of servants before, have had to be their own cooks and parlour-maids. You always think of me first! What's a little potato-peeling? What even are a few tears over onion-peeling? If these are all my tears through life, am I not a fortunate and happy woman?"

He gave her a look so odd that the wonder is she did not ask what it signified. And what answer could he have given to that inquiry? The truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth? He evaded his eyes from hers and looked out at the dropping end of Elwin Hills, their creases, where the sun could no longer reach, dusky blue, their crests gilt-edged, the last sun-rays lipping over them.

"That's over and done with," he thought, regarding his secret with another woman.

And close at hand, through the open door, came the cry, startling, so close it was: "Cuckoo!"

CHAPTER XVIII

On the stroke of ten next morning, inspired by his exemplar of method and professional efficiency, he sat down to his desk. As a matter of fact a thought of Hilda Perry intruded, but he thrust it from his mind and turned to his note-books. He was going to make tentative assault upon another theme, leaving the Paisley shawl in abeyance.

By a quarter to twelve he had a row of identification papers on the wall, affixed there by drawing-pins—short biographies of the people who might play a part in an alternative story. It was a great aid to him that he did not only know what manner of men and women they were, but could visualise them in the costume of their time, cap-à-pie. The object of noting these biographies was to have in his mind as clear comprehension of his characters as possible. Even if they were not to enter his book till they were thirty, forty, fifty years of age, realisation of their circumstance and lives before that entrance, and knowledge of what had gone to the shaping of them, were necessary that he might gauge how they would act on coming in contact, one with another, and with the others in his story. Such had been his method, turning from nature-studies and character-sketches to attempt a novel, in preliminaries for writing *Heather Afire*.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated, getting up to pin another sheet of paper to the wall—upon which was a family tree showing all its ramifications over three generations, "I'll be making this wall look as if it had chicken-pox."

Helen expected that he would be going to town again that day and had accepted an invitation for afternoon tea.

"I don't think I'll go," she said, as they sat over lunch. "You'll keep working all day if I don't stay to lug you away for half an hour at tea-time. If I go will you promise that you'll let up for the engine to cool a bit in the afternoon?"

"If you go I'll have to come down and make tea for myself, and so have perhaps three-quarters of an hour off," he pointed out. "And, by the way—you'll be sure to drop in at the Rays' and see if you can arrange for Nelly to come back."

"All right, I will."

It was close upon half-past four when Peter, rising from his table, thinking to himself that Arnold Bennett would surely be knocking off then, looked out to see what sort of weather the day was having. And——

“My God!” he exclaimed, fervently. “It shouldn’t be! She ought to have let things *stay put*.”

For there was Hilda Perry at the gate. She had opened it and was in the act of closing it. She advanced toward the house carrying a parcel.

“What on earth brings her back?” thought he. “Ten years hence—yes, a visit if in the neighbourhood. But to-day! After yesterday! Oh, no!”

Odd that he, when looking on at life, could see so much, and not only observe actions but, inquiring for their motives, judicially and without imputations, discover them, and now, involved himself, be so naïf, finding opacity instead of transparency.

She looked up and saw him at the window. The face she raised to him was stamped with plaintive regret. And when, descending, he opened the door to her—

“I just had to come out,” she said. “I do hope I don’t intrude.”

“Not a bit,” he replied in pleasant and somewhat formal tones. “Not a bit. Delighted to see you.”

“You’re alone?” she asked, turning to him in the sitting-room to which he ushered her.

“Yes. Helen will be in later. Do sit down and I’ll get tea,” said he, courteous and not more than courteous. “You’ll be ready for tea after your walk from the station.”

She did not follow him, remained there till he came back with a cloth and opened a small gate-legged table. He set it with taste. Like a footman he retired without a word and returned carrying thinly cut bread-and-butter and cake. Hilda was leaning against the wall then, beside the opened French windows. As he came and went she but glanced over her shoulder, watching the progress of his preparations. It was an arresting pose. It was a pose that could mean what one would—like music. Somewhere in the category of pensive it seemed to be to Peter. Right shoulder to the wall she leant, her weight on her left foot, her left hand on her hip, the long fingers curved to it. The right leg was at ease in a foreshortening that revealed the sole of the shoe.

When she looked over her shoulder at the progress of Peter's comings and goings he could not but realise, she considered, that it was a lovely pose of a lovely body. Fain would she have moved his heart by a suggestion of melancholy, brought him to her on one of his entrances with an inquiry of why she was so sad, and perhaps a comforting hand on her arm. But he merely played the dual rôle of courteous host and footman. He went off on what, by the evidence, would be his final visit to the kitchen, for the teapot and its accompaniment of hot water, cream, and sugar; and when he came back she had taken the wrappings from the parcel and set upon the table a lustre bowl.

Seeing it, he nearly dropped the tray he carried, but not with a shock of pleasure at sight of it.

She lifted it from the table in both hands, as a priestess in some rite, so that he might put the tray down.

"I found where they got theirs and bought another," she explained. "I've brought it as a peace-offering, and I want to tell you again I am ever so sorry for what I said—horrid—about your wife. I couldn't sleep all night for thinking of it. You know I didn't mean it? You know I didn't mean it? I've got to tell you, I must tell you, that the moment I saw her I liked her terrifically—at first sight. You know, oh, you know I didn't mean what I said about her? I hope you understand that. We women sometimes say things we don't mean at all."

It was not for him to say that if she had liked Helen at first sight she might have been moved, thereby, to call off her strange, passionate siege upon him to which she had confessed. He had more than liked Helen, these many years; and yet he had—— He could not bear to think of that now. There was something in him wanted to take the bowl from her, urgently wrap it in the paper again, thrust it into her hands, and then thrust her out of the door. But, of course, he did not allow himself to be carried away on that impulse.

"It is very sweet of you," he said, "very sweet of you. She'll love to have it. You can't tell her you've brought it as a peace-offering because of what you said; for she does not know you said it. But it will make you happy to give it to her."

She looked at him with the expression of one crestfallen. Did he not understand it was for him? Had he no place for sentiment in his heart at all? Was he utterly hard, ruthless, for the sake of his ideals? Were his devotions fickle, momentary, and had he no pity even? Though she thus criticised him

in her erratic and illogical mind, her strange hectic passion for him, nurtured, brooded upon, was unquenched.

"But it's for you," she began, and then, because of a stern set to the lines of his mouth at that, "both," she ended.

He stooped and took it from her. In the motion their finger-tips touched.

"This is all very well," he thought to himself, "but things remain as they were. *Status quo ante* is the motto."

He moved away to find a place for the bowl. He cleared a space for it on the mantel's centre, did not like that, and put it to one end.

"That will surprise her when she comes back," he said.

"I'm glad you've forgiven me," murmured Hilda.

"That's all right," he answered, sitting down.

"You do forgive me, don't you?"

"Ab-solutely," he declared, cheerily.

"I'm sorry I said it," she repeated.

"Oh, just forget that. Sugar?"

"Yes. One," she said over the wall he had erected between them. And then, to be chatty—"Where's that pretty little baggage of a maid of yours?" she asked. "Not left you, I hope?"

"She's not a baggage," he replied, handing her a cup. "She's a dear. She's just like a sister to Helen."

It seemed she had to go easily even in comment on his servitors!

"It is one of her days off," he explained.

A few days earlier he might have confessed to Hilda that they'd had to retrench on service and explain that they only got Nelly to come up to help upon occasions; but Hilda Perry had now receded from the position in which she might be made a confidante for even such little items of domestic economy.

"You have it in you to love lots of people," she said, to lead him whither she would lead him.

"Well, loving is better than hating," he replied; and the light that remark kindled in her eyes, as she looked full on him for all reply, made him wish he could promptly think of something to say that would bring a burst of

laughter, laughter of the sort called Homeric, that routs humorless intensity. But the robustiously happy inspiration did not come. All he could say was: “Have another slice of bread.” And then, the inspiration still lacking, even for the whimsical or for so much as a flick of helpful persiflage—“When I feel myself getting to hate any one I try to turn it to contempt,” he told her. “There’s a silly ass comes to see me often—a dropper-in. I used to hate him. Then I managed to make it contempt. And—queer thing!—I’ve almost got to like the blighter.”

It cannot be said that all this bettered the trend of the conversation.

“Your national bard,” she said, “your Burns, once said something to the effect that he could batter himself into an affection with any one.”

He evaded the point.

“I’ve got into the way of considering Burns a subject taboo,” said he. “He can’t be talked about, for some reason, without giving offence. When Andrew Lang wrote about him, and did not write what was requisite for some of his admirers, he had even jealousy imputed to him. That only showed their small minds. It does not matter what any one says about Burns, dourly dissatisfied remain the idolators—who admire him to the absolute eclipsing of all others, from Dunbar to Lady Nairne and Jane Elliot, from the eighteenth century Robert Fergusson to the twentieth century John Ferguson. Most of these idolators I’ve met read no other bard—and many of them haven’t even read him.”

“Yes,” she said, returning to the point, “it is stupid to be so bigoted and single in one’s devotions. One can love lots of people. Heaps of what one hears about love is just tosh. Nowadays we look things in the face. We don’t go and suffer from terrific inhibitions just for the sake of toshy beliefs.” Her eyes looked sadly into his. “We’re experimenting now. We’re facing problems. The new writers are knocking the old into cocked hats and showing that they knew nothing about life at all.”

He was on the verge of saying, “Do you tell me so?” But the object was not to be rude to his guest but to be courteous—and not more, not less than courteous—to her. Yet there was a part of him that wanted to shout loud laughter over this new situation that seemed to him, at one and the same time, pitiable, absurd, comical. He continued in the literary discussion.

“Oh, come now!” he exclaimed. “Take Burns for example. I’m not one of the infatuated idolators. I know verses of his that could go into an anthology of bad verse, easily. There are people who jeer at the efforts of the

contemporary ballad clubs, but the worst things produced by them are not as painful as Burns's worst. But as for his best—that's a different matter! I often think how wonderfully he got down the life of what's called the people. *Whistle, and I'll come to ye, my lad*—you can see it all still being enacted in these little places, despite all you hear about the old order changing."

She frowned. She wondered (not knowing that the oblique thrust was one he never practised) if he was mocking her, she seriously aware that he had but to whistle once at the gable-end, ever so softly, and she'd hear and hurry out—and into the barn with him—and be content if he'd call her his *Deary-O*, or woo her with any other nonsensical term of blandishment.

"But don't you think people are changing and that it's less typical now?" she asked, with a look of bafflement in her eyes.

"No, I don't. I think people in Homer's day were, in big essentials, much as in Whoever's day you think this is. And *Whistle, and I'll come to ye, my lad* is——" he laughed. "Oh, Lord," he said, "I must not behave like the very Burnsites I've been censuring! I'm not going to shove even one example of my finical selection down your throat."

She had lost him again. He was clean away. He was not being deliberately formal, but he was talking literature; he had escaped in literature.

"There are those," he went on, "who can't face a poem nowadays if it holds a *'tis* or a *'twas* or a *thou*, or an apostrophe where a current bard would let the letter stand instead of dropping it out to replace it with what Stevenson called a dropped letter's gravestone. Well, we change a bit. We move along. But I think the changes in life that seem so tremendous to us just now are often little different from *it is* for *'tis*, and *you* for *thou* in literature. And we're so anxious to belong to the intelligentsia that we sacrifice a good deal of breadth to attain height in our brows!" and he laughed again.

She put out a hand and laid it on his.

"Now I know you really have forgiven me," she said. "You would not talk like this, so easily, about all sorts of things, if you didn't know I'd just been horrid for a moment only, and didn't mean it. You don't hate me, do you?" and she ran her smooth palm over the back of his hand. She had an inspiration. "Can you understand that I admire your work so much I just

want to touch you—to feel I've touched the actual man who wrote those essays I have loved so?" she asked.

Talk of embarrassment! He knew it then. Had he not said much the same to her on that visit to Bonaly? Was it possible she had forgotten? Certainly he could understand! And yet he wondered if he had sounded as foolish to her then as she sounded foolish now. Circumstances alter cases. What on one occasion may create a thrill of ecstasy, on another may make one—squirm. He experienced embarrassment as though both on behalf of her and for himself.

"Yes, I can," said he, and felt very foolish.

He longed for succour—and it came. For it was then that there were voices without, and happy laughter. Helen had returned and brought Nelly Ray with her. He jumped up, and going to the door called: "Hullo! A visitor to see you, darling."

"Oh," cried Helen, entering, "it's you! How lovely, keeping him company while I was out."

"Look," said Peter, and pointed to the mantel-shelf.

"What a beautiful thing!" exclaimed Helen. "But what—where——"

"Miss Perry came out with it, on a special errand," he said.

"Your husband was so taken with one like it in my hotel," Hilda explained, "that I made inquiries where I could get one. You don't mind my giving him a little gift all to himself—before I go?" she asked. "You're not jealous, are you?"

"A little gift all to himself," thought Peter. "That wasn't what she said to me. She's really rather serpentine."

"Jealous! Why, I love everybody who love's Peter's work," Helen assured her. "You'll stay to dinner, of course? Then I can see something of you."

"I'd just terrifically love to," replied Hilda Perry.

CHAPTER XIX

There had been no faintest element of task in the entertainment of Hilda Perry on her prior visit. On this one, Helen found that she had to exert herself to entertain and at last, her efforts not highly successful, she suggested a tramp on the hills before dinner. The reply to that was only a small but definite grimace of distaste for such a project.

Having thus dismissed it, Hilda rose and paraded in the room before them. She was as the woman in possession and they but onlookers, intruding. When she halted in these pacings and decided to deflect her steps to the terrace, her host and hostess followed her, both bravely trying to wear the expression of persons so well accustomed to oddness of behaviour as to be oblivious of it. This poetess, thought Peter's wife, was giving manifestation of the temperamental quality and liability to the onslaught of ambiguous moods that, by the popular opinion, were prerogative, or curse, of the Muse's followers.

Suddenly this difficult guest flopped into one of the garden-chairs that stood there and, chin on hand, stared before her, silent, till down the road three people, arrayed in flannels and carrying racquets, went past with springing steps. Then—

"I'm not keeping you from your tennis, am I?" she asked, without looking round.

"No," Helen assured her, "we seldom play in the evening. But if you'd like to watch a game, or play—the courts are no more than ten minutes' walk away."

"No! Rather not!"

If any one were to arrive now, pondered Peter, the impression would be of a somewhat handsome but taciturn caller irking her host and hostess in attempts to amuse her, refusing to be amused. He had no brief biographical record of her, with information relating to her life before it impinged against his, to pin on his wall. He did not know that as a child she had cried, "I want!" till what she wanted (whether good or ill for her) was given to prevent a visit from the police, surmising by the uproar a case of cruelty to children. He did not know that she, older, had learnt the value of hysterics, that if abroad with her relatives in public places her desires ran counter to theirs, at a certain expression on her face there would be a whisper of, "Let

her have her way, for goodness' sake, and avoid a scene." Nor did he know that excellent imitations of hysterics also she could give, hardly to be distinguished from examples of the real thing which was, apparently, unpreventable as epileptic seizure.

He wished that his wife had not invited her to stay to dinner; but even without the invitation, no doubt, she would have stayed, he considered. It was a pity that he was indebted to her for that splendid article on his work, though, to be sure, she had herself informed him that it had been but in the nature of a foot in the door. A great pity—a thousand pities—that he had not been courteous and not more, not less, than courteous!

"I must go and have a chat with Nelly about dinner," said Helen, and left them.

At once Hilda turned her back on Peter with a petulant slewing motion of her shoulders, whereupon he strolled away to the garage. Hearing his departing steps she looked after him with a glum air that spoiled her beauty. He returned (she promptly looking away again when he reappeared) with a dandelion-puller, the garage serving also as a tool-shed, and began to put it to its use on the lawn. The plopping sounds as he extracted root after root caused her to look round to ascertain in what manner he chose to employ himself instead of observing her sulk. And she realised that the petulant pose had failed of effect. Instead of standing solicitously over her to ask what ailed her he pulled dandelion roots! She watched him, but he continued with his uprootings of the beautiful but proscribed yellow weeds, as though insensible to her presence. When at last he did glance at her, instead of again offering him a survey of contumelious back she raised her head, giving him the underside of her chin for examination, and began to hum. This clever lady and Judy O'Grady were at least, it would appear, cousinly under their skins.

"Anybody looking on," Peter opined, "would think I had insulted her. An elderly person might suspect that I had been what's called familiar; an up-to-date young person that I had not!"

That reflection struck him as clever—whether it was so or not—and made him grin to himself; and obliquely Hilda saw that fatuous grin.

But here came Helen back again.

"I do hope you are not making a special fuss over dinner for me," said Hilda, smiling up at her and extending a hand to press her wrist.

Helen gave the requisite little laugh that avoids the search for the right thing to say and, staring at her husband, thought it very odd of him to be pulling dandelion-roots, and that he had either slightly lapsed from his usual amenity toward visitors or was treating this one very much as one of the family, accepting her moodiness, leaving her to get to the bottom of it and climb out again undisturbed. She sat down and cheerily announced, hoping that the welcoming pressure on her wrist signified that the temperamental megrims were passing and that a buoyant manner on her part might help toward complete recovery:

"Well, the dinner is a-cooking, and here we be for a little *crack*, as we Scots say."

And happily they fell a-cracking, so happily that Helen decided she had been too greatly put out by what had no doubt been only one of these moods of silence, without contempt or any spleen, that may come upon even the most lively conversationalists. Soon all was going well, guest and hostess in easy converse in the gathering blue dusk, and at last the host was drawn into the talk (and, as a matter of fact, drawn by Hilda, recently so aloof), root-puller laid aside. Where swallows had veered in pursuit of flies, bats, pursuing moths in the light then cast from the dining-room windows, suddenly flittering there, suddenly eerily lost, made Hilda uneasy.

"I loathe these damned things," she said.

So they moved indoors again. Over dinner there was no cause for upsetting of the gastric juices. Hilda was herself again, her girlish self—the charming Hilda Perry of enthusiasms without intensities.

"There is one thing I want you to do," said Helen, when they were again in the blue and brown book-lined sitting-room. "I want you to autograph our volume of your poems, if you will."

She looked at her husband for his seconding of that request, but he was abstracted in a search for matches.

"I'd love to," Hilda responded, and, Mrs. Peter producing the volume, sat down at the table, took pen in hand, then leant back in thought, her lips close-set, her lids drooped as she were memorising the pattern of the carpet. She might have been going to write a poem instead of her autograph, so meditative was she. She sagged askew in her chair in an angular yet graceful pose. And—"I don't know what to write," she declared, evidently contemplating an inscription in addition to her signature. Then: "I know!" she exclaimed. She bent to the table and wrote. "There!"

She held the book open to Helen for inspection. It bore but a date, and her autograph. And it would appear that she was as little to be relied upon as Peter to remember the day's date. If there did not happen to be a copy of the morning paper handy in his room when he had correspondence to attend to he had to content himself with writing only month and year at the head of the sheet.

The inscribed date was five days old.

"Thank you. We'll prize it, I assure you," said Helen, but made no comment on the error.

"You know how we both love them;" and she handed the book to Peter.

He looked; he frowned; he consulted, with a puckering of his eyes, a tiny calendar across the room, which his wife turned every morning as part of the day's routine. For once, apparently, he knew the date and but looked for ratification. And he also made no comment on the error. Leaning back in her chair, Hilda was watching him. He gave her a bow.

"Thank you," said he, and handed the volume back to his wife.

Well he realised that here it was turned to a reminder of their secret, a souvenir of that moment in her room (on the afternoon of the day he had lunched with Stead) when he held her passionately in his arms and she had refused him—why, he did not know; why, he had wondered, in view of more recent events. But that was the date she had inscribed—why, he did not know. Perhaps as a last plea? Perhaps as a taunt? Perhaps but as in memoriam? Thus he cogitated, wondering what was in her heart or mind—and then dismissed his cogitations, knowing his own heart and mind. No matter; there it was, and by intent, not accident.

And as for Hilda Perry—did she know herself why she had thus written? Was there but a single explanation? Might there not be more than one reason, hard to tell which predominated? She had come, in fact, to a point at which no more than the smallest breeze was between passion of love and passion of hate.

Helen having found a new place for the book on the shelf reserved for autographed volumes, that little incident successfully over, Hilda rose from her seat by the table and, with a marked jauntiness of step, moved across the room.

There's another story in the Connubial Infidelity order besides the one Cunningham had recently deliberated upon, the one to the tune of Making the Best of a Bad Job: There's the story of the unfaithful husband who, after

a season, renounces his mistress and returns to his wife. Peter had had initiation into that plot, but had returned to his wife (to speak after the fashion of an Irish bull) before he had left her. Loss of illusions for one; remorse for one; acrimony for one was not the theme of his own experience. Helen had lost no illusions, though he had already known a measure of remorse in keeping with the amount of Hilda Perry's more recent bitterness.

CHAPTER XX

Hilda moved across the room and casting herself down in an easy-chair took charge of the conversation. An hour or two before dinner, Helen had found her as temperamental as the temperamental grocer of Elwinfoot, as difficult as the intense plumber who had installed the tall boiler in the bathroom. And now, as the talk—the monologue progressed, he saw her, despite all her erudition, the wide net of her knowledge (displayed on her former visit in allusions from Plato to Proust) as vehement a gossip as those of Elwinfoot for whom converse was only scandal, their minds unhampered by aught else. Hilda Perry revealed herself suddenly sib with them, and beat them in the sphere in which they specialised. For soon she was in full flow, without any apparent link from their dinner-chatter, as in an inspiration, upon revelations regarding those in the larger world that reduced the scandal-mongerings of Elwinfoot, by comparison, to ingenuous and innocent prattle.

As an active journalist she had, no doubt, opportunity to cull much inside information of a sort that is not published, sometimes the publication withheld to avoid suits for defamation of character (perhaps even by those with emancipated ideas on what is defamatory), sometimes because the information is not considered to be what the public wants to hear, upsetting to a cherished legend of the majority regarding the person concerned. In addition to having these professional opportunities she was evidently a very sleuth, at sight of the smallest indication that might elude most, in the discovery of marital infidelity. She had a flair—one might say perhaps a mania—for achieving such unveilings.

In one point she was unlike the gossips of Elwinfoot: she narrated without censorious comment, though with an equal relish. And there was certainly an air as of lighting the darkness of these Babes in the Wood as she progressed with a sequence of stories, revelations of secrets, all upon the theme of polyandry and polygamy as practised by persons in the public eye. A pretty society leader, a prominent business organiser and company promoter, a popular novelist, a celebrated portrait painter, a member of Parliament: Of these she talked, and the impression conveyed was that all, as Jezebel Pettyfer would have said, were indubitably “loose in dese affections.”

Peter, with folded arms, chin on chest, settled down in his chair and stared steadily at her. His wife, in the aside of a glance, noticed that he had what she called the X-ray scrutiny in his eyes. A strangely ardent monologue it was. There was a little red glitter in Hilda's eyes, as of combat or challenge, which reminded Peter of the local dipsomaniac whose conversation, whenever possible, was upon the Great Drunkards, or alleged drunkards of history. "Ay. It's always the best that fa' under the spell of John Barleycorn," was the burden of his babblings. It would seem, according to him, that certainly no one who never looked upon the wine when it was red, and hardly any one who could always carry his liquor, had risen to any eminence. Odd juxtaposition this, thought Peter: There sat Hilda Perry, spick and span, well-groomed, handsome, if a trifle hard of expression at the moment, the light above her revealing the copper glints in her hair, one shapely leg cast over the other and ever and again extended at them, as though she pointed with a toe; and he had vivid memory of Elwinfoot's grubby dipsomaniac, with stains of food upon his waistcoat, unclean, sitting puffy, dropsical, in a corner of the inn, beads of alcoholic sweat upon his putty-hued forehead as, roused by exasperation over a word of doubt cast upon his theory, he wheezed: "Even the great Saint Paul, by the evidence, if ye'll read your scriptures carefully, was a believer in a dram. And Noah—Noah, wha built the Ark—one of the most proaminent men of auld times, frequently was fu' as a neep!"

Cunningham realised that memory of this man had come to him because there was a light in his eyes, as he promulgated his theory, kin with that in Hilda Perry's as she (without comment, apparently promulgating no theory) gossiped her stories of polyandry and polygamy among the eminent. A look of doubt began to show on Helen's face and of settled amusement on Peter's. He became sceptical, for the uninterrupted, unquestioned narrator proffered details in at least two cases—those of the company promoter and the popular novelist—that hardly could she have known unless she had the capacity, disembodying herself, to enter rooms through the keyhole or by the thin crack under the door. The climax was reached when she came, in the unhampered flow of her talk, to the member of Parliament. When the wife of that eminent gentleman was with child, said Hilda, she discovered her parlour-maid was in the same condition—by him; and not only that, she went on, but his cook was in the same case.

"Not also by him?" gasped Helen.

"By him," replied Hilda.

“But really,” said Peter, “the effect to any visitor must have been rather whimsical;” and laughter shook him, rising from a chuckle to a peal in which Helen joined, so that they made a duet of it.

In the lull following that laughter a stubborn expression, as of one baulked, showed on Hilda’s face, and Peter, recovered from his hilarity, thought it much less attractive than once it had seemed to him. Those cheek-bones, the contours of which he had admired, were then somewhat—well, primitive. She looked from one to the other, glum. She had talked too much, she suspected, on that theme—and did not care though she had. Her mien was one of rebellious, combative. She wished she had not praised Peter’s work so much, so that she might, changing the talk to it, suggest that, good though she had found it, it was lacking in this, or that, that it should possess. In this sullen aspect her intimates would have read a warning of hysterics. She rose and again paced the room.

Suddenly Peter was on tenter-hooks, deeply mistrusting the object of his recent hot infatuation. She had too many sides to her nature. At any moment, he felt, might she ruthlessly rap out an illuminating word or two that would open Helen’s eyes. Even he, without any biographical note on her, saw signs of hysterics imminent, having seen her once hysterical. Fain would he be rid of her before, in a shrill outburst of revelations his story was one of remorse for one (himself); acrimonious vengeance for one (Hilda); and loss of illusions regarding him for Helen. Misery began to enfold him, fold on fold, granting the wrapping quality of misery. And with the misery was exasperation.

“I hope Helen does not ask her to stay the night,” he thought.

Helen looked at the lustre bowl, considering to herself how sweet it was of Hilda to bring it, and Peter, noting her gaze, damned the bowl. He stepped across to the tall doors and opening them looked out.

“Lovely night,” he remarked. “Would you like me to run you in the car to the station or how would it be to start a little earlier and walk down? Helen and I often take a little ramble round in the evening on nights like this.”

“It was long enough walking up,” replied Hilda, smiling at him—sweetly, thought Helen, devilishly, thought Peter. “The car, if you don’t mind. When exactly is there a train?”

“The penultimate train,” said he gaily, “went an hour ago, and the last one puffs off half an hour from now.”

“Then there’s lots of time,” said she.

She looked round the room. She glanced at Helen. She glanced at Peter. She walked over to the mantel-piece and examined the photographs there, smiled at her own cryptically, seemed lost in thought. Then raising her head and tossing it as though to arrange her hair, she crossed to the piano. There she stretched a hand to the Paisley shawl.

“Lovely thing,” she murmured, and with the back of her hand stroked the heavy dripping fringe.

She took it from its place, shook it out and with a graceful swing of her arms flung it round her. Tossing her head again she looked over her shoulder at its draping beauty.

“It’s very old,” she said, “must be a hundred years old. What lovely things they made then.”

“Yes, they did,” agreed Peter. “We make few things like that now. A shoddy age! The idea now is for things that won’t last.” He seemed, by his tones, incensed at his period.

He was incensed at her. A deep rage possessed him against her for handling the shawl. It was as if she had smirched it for him! He would never, never now, write it into a story. He would have to try to forget that she had ever touched it. Inwardly he was violent in his annoyance. He had to restrain himself from snatching it from her and ordering her to leave it alone. The moment of that impulse and restraint was brief. With this treasured and lovely belonging, his and Helen’s, there must be no violence. It must return to its former state of a beautiful decoration in the room, a thing for private reveries devoid of personal, painful association, with hints in its folds of tranquillity after the ferments and troubles that assail the happiness of life.

So he stood by in seeming perfect equipoise, his face a mask of aloof suavity. His wife might wear it, cast it over her shoulders (as he had seen her do), but this intruder—“I do hope I don’t intrude,” she had said—went too far! Oh, yes, she intruded. This story of these three might be called *The Intruder* instead of *The Paisley Shawl*, were it not that thus to entitle it would give leading place to Hilda Perry, and it is doubtful if that place is hers. Leading place is, in fact, perhaps with the Disturbance of the lives of these, the intrusive disturbance.

Be that as it may, beneath that mask, that smooth surface, we may look, pry into Peter as he stands there, heels together, a little bent toward Hilda as in a set bow, and know that this rage within him was not over the

comparatively small and single incident of her strutting in the room, draped in the Paisley shawl. To the pitch of rage had come now his chagrin that ever there had been between them what had been between them.

She was tenacious. She echoed back to him, then, as they were her own, thoughts of his that he had voiced on an earlier occasion, though the fact that she might be but echoing back, playing up to him, he considered only lightly, in no more than a mental aside. So far as he was concerned, all was over between them: that was now the dominating and quieting, the appeasing, ameliorating, consolatory thought in his mind.

"You should put it in a novel," she told him, with a look more in his direction than at him. "All the people who have worn it could figure in the story, and all the while the flowers on it would be slowly fading."

Helen turned with a radiant face to her husband at that, waiting for him to cry out that such was his aim. Once he had not wanted to talk to Hilda Perry of the shawl motif; but now, with such accord of mind shown, surely he would. She left it to him to do so. Instead, he passed from the room. They heard the car hum over at the garage as Hilda, the shawl removed, was trying to fold it as it had been folded when she took it from the piano's end.

"I'll have to let you do it," she said.

"The carriage waits!"

There was Peter in the doorway, beaming upon them pleasantly. Hilda met his eye, then suddenly dashed at Helen, embraced her, held her close.

"Where's my hat?" she demanded.

They were out in the hall, at the door.

"Come on, Helen," said Peter. "Pop in with us and see her off."

"Is there room?" asked Hilda.

"We'll never catch the train," began Helen; "you'd better——"

"Come on!" he whooped as though it were a great game.

Helen scurried away for hat and coat, and then they were in the car, jammed tight, Hilda Perry in centre.

But as they chased their lights into the village street, and slackened pace there, over the roofs beyond came the guard's whistle and the preliminary quick blasts of steam that signified the locomotive's start, a staccato rattle.

"Train's gone!" exclaimed Helen.

“It has puffed off,” said Hilda.

“We’ll just turn round and you——” commenced Helen, and left the rest in the air, so suddenly did Peter accelerate.

It seemed he was then, just for the fun of it, going to see if he could speed level with the train as it rolled out on the embankment. The little car whizzed along on the parallel road till they were abreast of the engine and, looking up, could see the driver and fireman in the glow from the opened furnace door. But Cunningham did not slacken speed. He drew level with the train; he passed it; and when at last he slowed down it was only because, road and railway no farther keeping company, he had to take a bend and pass under the track which leapt the curving road there on a bridge. As they crackled under the arch the train roared overhead, deafening.

“After all,” said he, the car rushing on, “you’ll be in your hotel ahead of it.”

The rays of the headlamps ran before them in over-lapping cones and Helen felt delight in the motion, in the trees created round them, great towers of silver discs that swerved away to one side and, fluttering, passed. She turned to Hilda.

“Any one would think we were glad to get rid of you,” she said.

It had not only been their guest who had behaved oddly that evening, or at least for part of the evening. Peter, she felt, had been a trifle dry at times—though well she realised there were excuses for him, remembering how difficult Hilda had been before dinner. The long period of gossip later had no doubt bored him. For all his written gossip of birds and wild creatures of the hills and hedges, and his studies of men and women round him who still held communion with the earth and the changing weather, a little verbal gossip sufficed for him, continuance of it bored him. It had seldom any quality save that of rancour.

Hilda, deep in meditation, pensive meditation, did not hear.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I said any one would think we were glad to be rid of you.”

“Any one would,” replied Hilda in so crestfallen a tone that Helen—at an impulse—dropped her hand on her knee and pressed it. She had an emotion of pity for this woman without being able to explain satisfactorily why.

At that Hilda's head turned slowly. She could see Helen's face in the sprayed light from the dash-board. There was puzzlement in her eyes. There was a stare as of incredulity, but now she did not sneer at the innocence of Peter's wife, who, all unconscious, was heaping coals of fire on her head—yes, all unconscious. Then, with a look of tenderness suffusing her mobile face, she locked her fingers with Helen's.

"What a dear you are," she said. "I don't wonder he is crazy about you."

For all reply to that, Helen's fingers tightened round hers.

They were on the main road, no bye-ways for Peter that night. The rear window of a car ahead reflected their lights in agitated flickerings. With a warning honk they sped past it, and slipped into place again. A great long-distance bus rushed to meet them and hummed by.

" 'Romance brought up the nine-fifteen,' " murmured Hilda.

"Romance brought up these queer descendants of the old coaches on the Great North Road," said Helen, "chirring along like big sewing-machines, with the passengers snoozing in their little berths instead of wrapped in shawls nod-nodding."

"Yes," said Hilda, "just what I was thinking. And, oh, my dear, it is all romance. It's so short, our life, and one wants so much—to have and to hold."

"Yes."

"That's me."

Still Helen's hand was on her knee, and still their fingers were locked. Moths were pressed to the wind-shield, fluttering, and suddenly whisked away at a bend, their silver perturbation ended. They came to the streets; they came to Princes Street; to the hotel. Peter stepped out and looked at his watch.

"You'd only have been getting into the station now," he said.

"I'd ask you to come in for coffee and cigarettes," said Hilda, "but you have all that way to go home. So this is good-bye. I'm leaving Edinburgh to-morrow. My dear," she still held Helen's hand, "if ever you come across anything approaching a duplicate of your husband—let me know. Though I must tell you," she added, "that-you-are-too-good-for-him," running the words together. Helen laughed, but there were tears in her eyes as Hilda kissed her. "I loved you at first sight," she ended.

Then she surveyed Peter, who, cap in hand all this while, waited on the pavement. She glided gracefully out of the car and stood beside him. She raised her head.

"You can kiss me too—just here," she said and, smiling, indicated precisely where, in her subtlety thus reminding him of an earlier occasion.

He glanced at Helen who watched them, smiling too, but with that moistness in her eyes, then bent to Hilda Perry and kissed her. She gave a little rippling laugh as she sped across the pavement, and with a sudden backward swerve waved a hand to Helen again.

The porter at the entrance, who had been on the point of hurrying to open the car door when Peter, in his celerity, forestalled him, had returned to decorate the portico with his inches and his uniform. As Hilda entered he clicked his heels together and came to the salute, reminding Cunningham of the day he went there first to meet her and found a sentry of the Scots Greys on either side of the door.

He slipped back into the car.

"A happy ending," he thought to himself. "A happy end!"

He had been tormented, these last days, with intrusive plots, themes, subjects, for a novel not of the order he wanted to write. They were subconsciously conceived, he knew, out of his own immediate plight. They ended in separation and remorse. They ended in agonies. His heart cried out for the happy end. In his own stories never could he, for the sake of a pessimistic outlook, twist the probabilities of a happy end. Rather would he err the other way and, in the name of optimism and hope, give the benefit of a doubt to joy and at least an end serene, biased that way if biased at all. He would continue to see, even through a seeming unending darkness, an ultimate and abiding light.

"Isn't she an amazing woman and, despite all her troubling temperament, very lovable?" said Helen.

He did not hear. He was giving thanks for a happy end.

"She moves me, somehow," persisted Helen a little later, still thinking of Hilda Perry.

"She's a clever woman," said Peter.

He turned the car from the high-road.

"This way?"

“Yes, we have all eternity before us. Nothing calls us back in a hurry.”

“That’s so,” she agreed. “We get into the habit of thinking we’re tied when really we are not.”

When they came to a place (that high bank above the river) where he had halted to show Hilda his view, with a promised heron awaiting them, he halted now, running the car to the roadside so abruptly that Helen gasped. There he stopped and the headlights, in the rays of which little moths flickered like sparks, shone across the river, blazing as a spot-light on a slope of trees, surprising them in their night-peace. Below, the river lapsed and murmured. He felt that he would like time to stand still a while then and let them sit there at peace together with just the stars and the ceaseless river.

CHAPTER XXI

Though one of the least superstitious of men, Peter was not immune from at least a momentary consideration, over breakfast next morning, that in the closure—happy closure—of the Hilda Perry chapter in his life his luck had turned. There was a feeling of beginning anew. Here was Nelly Ray back again; and no less than three cheques had arrived by the first post.

To Helen it seemed that even the glow of sunlight through the gable-window of the dining-room, on the burnished table in between the islands of mats, was somehow specially adorable that morning.

This was the day on which she had to go to Clovenfords; for once a month, by established custom, she visited her married sister there, had lunch with her and stayed till tea-time. Though she was no more a creature of habit than Peter, her sister was; and Helen, as she'd have said, had concessed to that arrangement. By the look of him, calm, controlled and masterful, Peter, in her absence, would labour at his desk, contented.

When she had gone in the car, he went into the sitting-room for a volume of history which he required for his projected forenoon's work. The lustre bowl, as he entered, winked at him, a gleaming wink. He had an impulse to take it up and, going out on to the terrace, pose as a disc-thrower on a Grecian frieze and spin it—to the devil! But, at furthest, it would probably only have landed on the road and, shattered there, punctured the tyres of wholly innocent unimplicated people.

He was shocked to discover in himself an emotion almost as of hate for the giver, atop of his disappointment in himself. He who found impulse conflicting with impulse, and the pursuit of impulse not nearly so simple a creed as Hilda would have it, found also emotion conflicting with emotion, and with intelligence. His mind did not fuse to all emotions. He hated not much except Hatred of others and its little brother, Scorn. He was enraged at her for having come with a gift—that damned bowl—to reopen a door that had been closed. His eye fell upon her photograph. That was in a different category. Helen had asked for it, and by a little skilful arrangement it could be partially eclipsed by the others. A pity he was indebted to her for that article, feeling as he did! Of the volume in which she had inscribed a certain date, to remain there like a scar, he did not think. It was not in blatant evidence like the bowl. Damn the bowl, thought he yet again and left the room, the book he had come for in hand, and mounted to his workshop.

As motif or title for his new effort in fiction he had discarded the Paisley shawl. When Hilda Perry cast it over her shoulders and posed before them his long ponderings, his switherings over it, had come to an end; to discard it so had been settled. These characters at the back of his mind waiting the peaceful moment to begin their play would have nothing to do with the shawl.

He was in the midst of rearranging the stage for them, and pinning to his wall more of these notes that for certain no one who might chance to enter and examine them could make head or tail of, when came a ring at the door-bell, and a few minutes later Nelly announced that Mr. Harcourt Stead was below.

"And will he be staying for lunch?" she whispered. "It's a quarter to twelve now, sir."

"Yes, surely," Peter told her, and ran downstairs gaily.

Stead stood in the middle of the sitting-room with the air of one who had come to lease the house, furnished.

"Hullo, Cunningham! Didn't expect me so soon? Did not expect to be here myself so soon. My time-table is all skew-whiff. I found myself back in Edinburgh this morning and have to go off to London to-night, so I thought the best plan would be to run out on chance of your being at home. I noticed in the hall you're on the telephone. Never thought you'd be on the telephone away out here in the wilds."

"O Lord, yes, and we have indoor sanitation, and a bath. Take a pew. I'm delighted to see you. I'm sorry my wife is not at home to-day."

"I'm sorry, too. Nice little place you have."

But he did not take a pew. He continued with the making of the inventory he had been engaged upon when Peter came in. Chesterfield settee; large easy-chairs; small writing-table; old folded gate-legged table; blue and brown the dominant hues; carpet blue; shelves and panels brown; cushions, here and there, blue and brown with gold tassels; piano with a beautiful old Paisley shawl draped on it. Thus far he had got; and, thrusting out his chin at the books, he executed the motion known to soldiers as "closing in" along the shelves, to discover what book-company was kept in this house. He strutted to the mantel-piece.

"Pretty bowl," he remarked. "These lustre things seem to emanate a light of their own on grey days. One does not really get their full value except on

a grey day." He studied the photographs. "You know Hilda Perry?" he asked.

"I can't say I *know* her. I met her quite recently; about a week ago. She came out here to gather stuff for an article on my work. You know—some chatty personal stuff to mix with criticism."

"Yes. They like gossip. I like it myself."

"Didn't you notice her sitting with us at your lecture?"

"Of course! I thought I knew the face, but a woman disguises herself with her hats. I wondered which was your wife. Now I know. Did she present you with this photograph or did you ask for it as a souvenir?" he inquired, insatiably inquisitive. To be inquisitive was habitual with him. It was by being inquisitive that he came by his stories.

"My wife asked her for it," said Peter.

"Your wife liked her?"

"Yes, very much. Quite in love with her."

"Well, it's a dam' good thing you weren't;" and Stead laughed easily. "Brilliant woman," he went on, "but needs a man back of her all the time, yes, even in her poems, which are purely emotional. One can tell when she has not a man back of her by the sudden flops, as of Humpty Dumpty, in her work, awful jars, and all the worse by contrast with her best high level. Well, lots of men need the inspiration of a woman. But she does not need only the inspiration or the editing of a man; she's got to possess him." He turned back from the mantel-piece and, sitting down, considered again the photograph, which he had set well to the fore, leaning against the lustre bowl. "Poor Hilda. Oh, well! *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*, no doubt. Poor Hilda! She's one of these hag-rid with all this current nervousness over the problems of the age—meaning, of course, chiefly sexual problems. The subjects they worry over are not really so problematic as they make them by feverishly refusing to admit that two and two make four. A phallic age it is for them. And The Phallic Age I think it may be called in years to come, because of them. Old Mother Nature can give the answer to some of their problems! I gather that with her the sex-urge effects a sort of metabolism. She's not unique nowadays. She's mentally sexual—mentally."

Peter stared. He remembered, "My brain and yours—what might come of that?" Stead, at that moment, renounced his intensive scrutiny of the portrait that he might glance at his host to discover if he understood. The

look that he surprised on Peter's face made him tauten his neck back in his collar. His eyes were like those of a ferret for a moment. It seemed even the lenses of his glasses glittered.

"What are you thinking?" he demanded.

"I was just thinking how queer it is," replied Peter promptly, "that the impression my wife and I had was that she was half a dozen people all in one. Her face changed all the time, so tremendously that she looked actually like different people, alternating. She was a happy little girl, and she was an excited woman. She looked like one in the depths of some introspective agony, and then her face would glow like a saint's. My wife thought she seemed like a vessel variously inhabited."

"Ah! You saw all that. You did not see the vindictive inhabitant?"

"No."

"Of course you may not have said or done anything to have that one revealed. She had an affair with a man I know that bust up his home. When he recovered he tried to shake her, God help him! She's all for being Modern, with a capital, but the text for what happened then comes from as far back as Congreve. She surely showed the fury of a woman scorned. She had caught him with the equality of sexes and emancipation from old-fashioned fetishes of morality stuff, and all that; but when he tired of her (they usually do), and wanted to go back to his wife, then she was the weaker vessel he had ill-treated. She made an awful shindy to the tune of The Woman Pays. He paid, by the way. It's too dam' bad really, but his wife came off worst of the three. She'll never be the same again. She's been sort of cracked ever since. The thing that made me sick with the Perry wasn't a question of immorality, but the bad taste of the derisive way she used to talk about his wife, sort of adding insult to injury. Heartless, pitiless! She was jealous of her. Now there's a plot for you!"

Nelly entered to announce that lunch was served.

"Thank you," said Peter, in a voice of infinite gratitude.

Lunch over, Stead drained his coffee-cup, crushed out in the ash-tray the cigarette that had accompanied it, stuck the long bamboo holder in a waistcoat pocket, with a nod and a smile, and looked at his watch. There was a clock in the room but it might be unreliable, for all he knew.

"Good heavens, you're not looking at your watch!" exclaimed Peter.

“That’s what I’m doing. My train—I looked ’em up—leaves Elwinfoot for town at three-five. It’s now two. I want you to take me an hour’s walk that will let me have some sort of impression of where you collect these nature studies of yours, watch the hawks and the bunnies, and meet—or invent—your characters.”

He glittered a genial smile which his eye-glasses seemed to share.

“You couldn’t stay to dinner? The missus will be home a little after tea-time.”

“Dinner! My dear man, I’ll have dinner spinning down through the Borders in the train. That’s a pleasure we’ll have to defer. Not but what I’m very sorry not to see her.” He rose. “We’ll have a smoke now,” and he produced his pipe.

As he ordered, so it was done; and at three o’clock—after as much of a survey of Peter’s local habitation as a flying hour would allow, that notch of the hills, called Rickle Slap, pointed out to him; the whereabouts of the shepherd’s cottage in the glen’s mauve apex at least indicated from far off; a short-cut made to Elwinfoot by Piper’s Wood, and a chat with a poaching friend encountered there—he stood on the station-platform wearing a smile of satisfaction.

“I’ve seen you, and your home, and your home-scene,” said he as the train came in. “And you will explain to Mrs. Cunningham—won’t you?—how I had to change my plans, and give her my duty and my apologies. And good luck with your new novel.”

Out in the High Street, Peter made up on his shepherd friend, Tod Jamieson, long and lean, bony and powerful, with his two dogs at heel. To walk with him was to be aware of the odour of tweeds and heather, aromatic mint and bog-myrtle, the savour of the hills, and to remember distant lonely glens where still, though the honk of the motors is heard in the land, the sheep bleat and lapwings call in the quiet. Together they trudged as far as to the bridge over Elwin Burn and leant on the low parapet, looking down at the water.

“Well, I maun be going. Come up and see me;” and Tod took the path up the burnside, while Peter walked on.

With him went Tod’s forebears, three generations of them, for unseen company. He needed no brief biographies pinned to his wall at home. He looked up at his great beech at the foot of the brae, and heard its ancient

rustle, as they had heard it, and swung on up the hill, all these people with him.

In the doorway he was aware of a wraith—Nelly coming to meet him, less clear than those who accompanied him then and whom she did not see. Her look of woe drew him back to what's called realities.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, and of course thought that something grievous had happened to Helen, that there had been an accident, that the police had phoned of it while he was out.

"The new bowl, sir," she said. "I thought I'd fill it with flowers, and my hands were wet and it just slippit out of them and lies shattered tae smithereens in the sink."

He went back to his realities.

"That's all right," he said, and moved on, up the stairs.

"Oh, sir, I hope Mrs. Cunningham will tak' it as weel."

He felt that perhaps he had not eased her sufficiently. He bent over the banisters.

"It was a present to me," he said. "If I don't bother, she needn't. It's nothing. It's nothing at all. Oh, Nelly, my lass, don't—bother—me—with—trifles!"

And he came near to bumping his head again on the hall-ceiling, drew back not a moment too soon, and passed on to his workshop, all the people Nelly had not seen entering with him.

He sat down at his table, the smell of tweeds and of the hills still in his nostrils. It was his habit to write in exercise-books such as the children use in school. He took a new one from a row of them on a shelf. His hair was rumpled and he looked like a big little boy humped to the table over the exercise-book.

With a decisive sweep of his big right hand he flattened down the cover and wrote: *The Drove-Road*. He turned a page and wrote, *Dedicated to Helen*, and then, turning to the next, *Chapter One*—and began.

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.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the eBook edition.

[The end of *The Paisley Shawl* by Frederick John Niven]